

Political Implication in “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”

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Abstract

This research is a study of the political implications in the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”. It aims to provide an explanation on the political implications, which appeared in the text and the context, and the political agenda that prompted the revision and publication of this literature in 1917 by utilising detailed interpretation of the text and contextual analysis. This research shows that the body of the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” can be portrayed as a social reality that highlights the correlation between the people of different classes in the social hierarchy. The literature also covers the concept of loyalty, especially that of the government officials to the royal institute. Furthermore, once the status and role of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the then president of the Vajirayan Royal Library, and the Thai State’s context at that time into account, it reveals a hypothesis suggesting that the creation of this book was not by the reason “to preserve a well-versed Thai literature permanently” as the prince stated, but instead by a political reason which purposefully intended to foster people’s loyalty to the royal institute by using the aforementioned portrayal as a model.

Keywords: Loyalty, Palace Revolt of 1912, Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen

1. Introduction

Amongst Thai literature, from the past to the present, “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is widely acknowledged as a masterpiece and ranked relatively high on the measure of popularity (Fine Arts Department, 2002: Introduction). Due to said popularity, “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” has been adapted into a number of different mediums, including plays, short proses, novels, films, television plays, cartoons, etc. (Sornjai, 2005: 72). And because of its uniqueness as almost all of the main characters were commoners (Choocheun, 2000: 6), not princes and princesses, unlike ordinary traditional dramas in the same era, which were full of “lords” and “ladies” (Boonnak, 1975: 1-2) or had the king as the lead role (Limapichart & Kittikhunserree, 2008: 47), it is hardly a surprise why “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is extensively acclaimed, as it can reflect Thai livelihoods, traditions and visions in the beginning of Rattanakosin Era wholly (Khantanu, 1998: 128) to the degree that it is rightfully believed as a symbol of the true characteristics of Thai life (Boonnak, 1975: 5).

Considering the positive remark Kukrit Pramoj (1989: 434-435) has stated on how the literature was valuable to learning about Thailand and the way of Thai people in an era in the same fashion as many scholars, masterminds, and writers did: “It is a record of Thai customs, traditions and the way of life perhaps from Ayutthaya Era to the time of King Rama IV of Rattanakosin Era. And this record is a great value to education as it contains almost every aspects of Thai life, from the forms of government, social systems, customs and traditions to minor details about how Thai people lived their lives, thus makes “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” a literature worth conserving. Also, when the literature is well conserved, it is wise to seek out knowledge and understanding from this particular work as much as possible like it is a treasure trove of knowledge”. So, it can be safely assumed that “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is something alike to an important resource of academic matters, especially in the social and humanities aspects, which can be expanded to numerous corners of education.

However, provided that related documents and researches have been studied, it would reveal that nearly all of the results of the researches on this literature were the products of scholars and masters of Thai language, focusing specifically on the “text” (Suwanchompu, 1991) such as themes (Nuanprakob 1999), socio-cultural conditions (Aksornpong, 1973; Suksawang, 1992; Honwichit, 2003), values (Sawangpong, 1987; Chuenpraparnusorn, 1995), belief (Sujeenapong, 1973; Nittayarerk 2000), literary appreciation (Pannengpetch, 1974) and the art of literature (Pengpongsa 2000, Ruengrong 2000), including personalities and behaviours of the characters (Praphaphitthayakon, 1984; Sorat, 1977; Chanwimaluang & Thongpromrat, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d; Sattayawattana, 1977), in the literature “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”. But, despite of that, it has not yet been known that there ever was an attentive study on either the original “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” or its Vajirayan Royal Library counterpart directly in the aspect of political science before.

The closest relation to such field that has ever existed could be the study on “values” of the absolute monarchy government scribed in the sepha by analysing power interactions between the king and the commoners (Yeemassa, 1998; Thephusdin Na Ayutthaya, 1998), which the outcomes, for the most part, were in accord to the

idea Kukrit Pramoj (1971: 121) has already expressed: “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen is a political tale which highlights the power of the king. The author(s) intentionally embedded the thoughts that Phra Phan Watsa was the absolute monarch, ruling everyone from the elders to great-grandsons. Even Khun Phaen’s family which practiced mantras and spells and were second to none in Ayutthaya still have to compel to surrender to the king’s supreme authority. Khun Krai who had supernatural abilities got his head lopped by Phra Phan Watsa. The one who was even more powerful like Khun Phaen was eventually imprisoned nonetheless and Wanthong, the sole lover of Khun Phaen, was punished to death by royal decree. And no matter how powerful Khun Phaen’s children and grandchildren were, they still had to use their abilities for the good of the kingdom and remain loyal in order to survive under the king’s influence. If they were to think of defying, they would all certainly meet their fate.”

Nevertheless, the products of such fashion were still being questioned by many scholars in the field of social studies, from Somkiat Wanthana (1981: 421) to Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (2008: 136), regarding Abbot Kong’s dialogue, which didn’t express any degree of loyalty nor respect to the monarch, during the time novice Kaew visit him at Wat Khae, as follows (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 120-121):

“I’m still disappointed that he died without putting up a fight. He must have lost his knowledge. Why didn’t he come to see me? If anyone dared come after me, there’d be no match. ... For the late Khun Krai’s sake and likeness, I would teach you of all knowledge. Make certain the same fate won’t catch you.”

Furthermore, when considering the modern body of knowledge of this literature’s “context”, it would reveal that most of the researches had a tendency to base on the remark of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab manifested in the “History of Sepha” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 1-42), the “Annotation of Sepha Volume Two” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 43-48), and the “Annotation of Sepha Volume Three” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 49-52) mainly as a means to annotate the processes of revising the sepha and publishing the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” in 1917 and 1918. And it was generally believed that the events occurred in the literature were actually real historical incidents from the time of King Ramathibodi II, during 1491 - 1529, or before the reign of King Narai the Great at the least, as evidence was discovered in the Testimony of the Inhabitants of the Old Capital’s “The Story of Somdet Phra Phan Watsa” (Fine Arts Department, 1968). As the time passed, that particular story evolved into a tale and eventually adopted by poets, versing it into poems to be recited in the style of sepha afterwards. But, unfortunately, during the war of the second fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, the literary works of sepha that (might have) existed back then were all burnt and exterminated. In consequence of that, during the time of King Rama II, attempts to restore those works and compose new pieces were made by the poets laureate. And then those works were compiled and written down in the format of Thai scrolls during the next reign of future King Rama III (Note 1) and were printed for the first time by Dr Smith’s printing house in the year of 1972 (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 14-33)

Due to the “disorderly” quality of the sepha at that time (1915), that is, the wording and versing styles of each chapter of the sepha were greatly different, so the committee of the Vajirayan Royal Library, chiefly Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Bovorn Vichaichan, made a decision to revise those variants and publish “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”, Vajirayan Royal Library version, in 1917 (Volume One and Two) and 1918 (Volume Three) as a “canonical printed edition” (Baker, 2008: 3), with the purpose of: “only to preserve a well-versed Thai literature permanently and that’s more important than keeping the body of ‘Khun Chang - Khun Phaen’” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 36-40).

In the modern time, such concept has received the status of widespread acceptance and belief that it was the right thing to do, and thus makes no researches nor scholars question about his reasons or motives to revise and publish a book which were deliberately promoted as “a model to general population and government officials, or a model of an ultimate form of loyalty with no condition, so to speak. Any degree of royal punishments doesn’t diminish one’s loyalty to the throne. They continue to remain loyal. (Pramoj, 1989: 20)”, regardless of the fact that it was published specifically in such time that many literature and books originating at that time were being published mainly in response to national policies and national security, especially to the royal institution (Sturm, 2006: 144-149).

Additionally, upon considering the historical context of that period (1915), from the trend of establishing “Thai nation-state”, which had been there since King Rama IV’s reign until the emergence of a very significant word “nation” in the reign of King Rama VI (Reynolds, 2005: 27; Anderson, 2006: 101), to significant contemporary political events that had made such an extensive impact then and later on, such as The Palace Revolt of 1912 (Kamutpissamai, 1999: 220-236; Noomnon, 2002: 171-192), given that they all had been main political concerns and agenda of Thai State, it was found that there has never been any mentioning nor consideration in any results of the researches on this particular book, even though there were concepts and theories that could imply and explain the relation between the socio-political conditions and the creation of literature in those certain periods (Negash, 2004).

And for the reasons that the above issues were in accordance to controversial political concepts appeared in

“Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” and that the book was lack of contextual body of knowledge, especially in the dimension of political science, the purpose of this research was set to present a framework and provide an explanation on the political implications of the literature, both in the aspects of political thoughts appeared in the text as well as the context and the political agenda that may have prompted the revision and publication of the book in 1917, in such a manner that would inspire continuing research, rather than delivering a complete piece of work or any definitive answers.

2. Research Methodology

This research is a documentary research, employing the total 43 chapters of the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” (from Chapter One: The Birth of Khun Chang and Khun Phaen through Chapter Forty-Three: Thera Kwart Crocodile) as its principal subject and other related documents as supplement to the analysis by meticulously interpreting the text while simultaneously performing contextual analysis. The findings of this research are presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

3. Research Result

3.1 “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”, “Loyalty” and “Rebellion”

The analysis found that the text persistently emphasised the abilities of the key characters, namely Khun Krai, Phlai Ngam and Phlai Chumphon, for example, Khun Krai was depicted as “brave, invincible, fearless of battles, skilled in combat, unafraid of many, troublesome to directorate, confident to all, fond of being Ayutthaya warrior, and poised in Suphanburi” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 2), and Khun Phaen San Sanit as “being second to none” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 364), capable of killing Khun Pethindra, Khun Ramindra, and an army of 4,550 altogether single-handedly, gaining Phlai Ngarm’s admiration as: “Father is expert in spells and wisdoms. Even tens of thousands Laotians came, did not startle. Chanting spells vigorously, laid waste all the many foes” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 884). Phlai Ngarm, when volunteering to lead an army to Chiang Mai, asked the king for only Khun Phaen as his counsellor and 35 prisoners to aid him in the forthcoming battle, and then easily won a glorious victory, and Phlai Chumphon, in the incident of disguising as a Mon, was able to conjured an army of puppets camping at Bang Derm by himself, striking fear throughout the city. He also was the one who could beat Thera Kwart Crocodile, which others deemed it was impossible to defeat.

With such extent of abilities in Khun Phaen’s family, the “loyalty” of those characters was accentuated, that is, even though these characters had to face severe royal punishment throughout the story, from the grandfather’s generation to grandson’s; Khun Krai was sentenced to death and had his properties confiscated just for stabbing rampaging buffaloes that were killing many people; therefore, the condemnation put Phlai Kaew under threat from the throne and had to flee from place to place since he was still young; Khun Phaen himself was sent away for 15 years, Wanthong, his first wife, was executed, and Laothong, his third wife, was taken and confined in the royal palace. As for Phlai Ngarm, despite the fact that Somdet Phra Phan Watsa had sentenced his mother to death to his face, he, along with the other two characters, eventually gave in to their sentences, albeit they had total command of supernatural powers at their disposals to help them escape the death penalty or imprisonment. So, that how it could be said that these royal wills were like tests that could flawlessly reflect their loyalty “without condition” to Somdet Phra Phan Watsa.

Regarding the preceding controversy that was caused by selecting only certain parts to be interpreted in political senses, which eventually led to the deductions that this book was either a book of loyalty or conversely a book of supremacy and rebellion, after considering the sequence and relationship of each of the incidents and the background rationales that drove the plots through their specific courses, it brought to light that every incident, reflecting both loyalty or rebellion, was all relatable and rational to each other. That is, apart from emphasising the strength of the leading characters in the story, all the incidents reflecting rebellion or defiance to Somdet Phra Phan Watsa’s orders would also have the quality of showing that the character was in fact totally capable to opt out of the royal punishment, of which the details are as follows:

In the case of Khun Krai, to show that he “let” himself be executed in the name of loyalty, not because he was “overpowered”, the text must bring up the circumstance that if Khun Krai had “put up a fight”, he wouldn’t have died. And yet the text did not fail to bring forth such issue, but also provided Khun Krai with not only one but up to three ways to escape his death:

1) By using his ability to render himself “invulnerable”. Thong Prasi once mentioned that “It grieves me that you did not use your power to become invulnerable. Otherwise, no one could have injured you”, enlightened the fact that, if Khun Krai had not given in, the execution would have done naught to him.

2) By “fleeing” in the same manner as Thong Prasi and Phlai Kaew, as the text comprised of certain loopholes in legal execution, specifically the lack of effort in making an arrest; there was a time when Thong Prasi and Phlai Kaew fled from Suphanburi to Kanchanaburi, but no attempt to pursue and make an arrest was made even though Kanchanaburi was only a day away.

3) By asking “Abbot Kong” for help. This would certainly ensure Khun Krai’s survival. But, it was also allowed Khun Krai to display his loyalty again, as choosing not to resist his execution while having such certainty of escaping death would greatly intensify the significance of his death and his allegiance to Somdet Phra Phan Watsa.

In another case of Khun Phaen, he chose to carry his 15-year imprisonment sentence while the foundation of his power was clearly stated throughout the text: from the beginning point which he sought his three teachers to learn spells and mantras; to the point he sought to equip himself with mystical objects such as a golden child, a magic sword, and the mist-coloured horse; until he was capable of easily defeating a royal army as large as the one that sacked Chiang Thong and casting spells that unlocked keys or rendered him invisible. In short, Khun Phaen could break out of prison whenever he wanted, yet he chose to be confined in the prison until Somdet Phra Phan Watsa granted him a royal pardon.

Like Khun Krai, the Khun Phaen’s opportunity to turn his back on his “submission” to be imprisoned was later highlighted in the text, in this case, by using his own abilities. During Phlai Ngarm’s top knot-cutting ceremony, Abbot Gerd criticised on why Khun Phaen did not escape from jail when he had taught him of countless of skills, that is, if Khun Phaen had chosen to “resist”, he would not have been put in jail for lengthy fifteen years. And that was how Khun Phaen’s loyalty was accentuated. Even the abilities he had were more than enough to guard him from the royal punishment since the beginning, yet he chose to show his allegiance by “submitting” to the king’s will without any condition.

The event of Wanthong’s execution was another incident that presented the characters with choices whether to remain “loyal” to Somdet Phra Phan Watsa’s authority or not. No matter how powerful Phlai Ngarm and Khun Phaen were, neither of them was willing to defy the royal will and that eventually led to Wanthong’s death, followed by Phlai Ngarm’s grievance (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 884):

“Mother’s passing sure brings forth sorrow. Why? My sorcerous father, who knew plentiful spells, Why? My sorcerous father, who reduced hundreds of thousands Laotians, Why? Why didn’t you put off the slayer? So mother would not perish. Or was it the passing of your command?”

On top of the efforts to analyse the text as stated earlier by the researcher, the fact that Prince Damrong Rajanubhab has made a regard on an outline that was the root of the political concept appeared in the text as an exceptional quality of Khun Chang - Khun Phaen was fundamentally enough to prove the existence of loyalty concept, as he believed so.

The thing we cannot possibly overlook when speaking of the “main message” of loyalty or disloyalty of a book which underwent a transitional period from being a “folk” to a “court” mode by the ruling class of Thailand since the reign of King Rama II, specifically the thorough revision for two years with the aim “to preserve a well-versed Thai literature permanently rather than keeping the body of Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”, that eventually led to an appraisal by The Royal Literary Club as an excellent literature in the genteel verse category, like the Vajirayan Royal Library version of Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen in accordance to the terms of the royal edict to establish The Royal Literary Club 1914, article 8: definition and reviewing literature that should be endorsed by the club, and the regulation of The Royal Literary Club 1917, category 2: qualities to be considered, which clearly states what quality a literature should possess and which literature should be endorsed by the club, is that it has to be approved by “most of the members” as “not a disturbance to political stability”. (Vallbhotama, 1981: 649)

Considering that the status of being regarded by such a conservative ruling class who also had the utmost duty of reviewing and revising literature to comply to the political concepts and policies, which was like filtering this literature through “fine mesh netting” over and over again, to ensure there would not be any flaws that could lead to political instability by the issue of disloyalty that still remained should have had more other meanings or any advantages, the researcher found that the repetition of speech or the behaviours that projected disloyalty, on the contrary, was actually to highlight the abilities of each of the characters who must eventually face various royal punishments while showing that it was, in fact, by “submission”, not being “overpowered”, and intensifying their degree of the loyalty further.

To rush to a conclusion that the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is a tool to demonstrate the great loyalty of Khun Phaen and family as the royal guards like it is being done at the present time may somehow be acceptable at some degree. However, its conciseness would reveal that there are many points those conclusions failed to address and, thus, makes it controversial and challengeable to itself. And, likewise, to rush to a conclusion that the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is a story of rebellion would certainly be somewhat wastefully ignorant of the environmental context which should be taken into account, since, when considering thoroughly, it would reveal the underlying rationales behind the variety of details which appeared to promote and support “loyalty”, the key concept of this literature.

3.2 “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” and the foundation of Thai Nation-State

In consideration of the time Prince Damrong Rajanubhab began to gather portions of “Sepha Khun Chang -

Khun Phaen” to be revised and published into the Vajirayan Royal Library version of Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen, it was found that it is in fact the same year Prince Damrong Rajanubhab resigned from his post at the Ministry of Interior, thus by default relieving him of the power to implement his plan to revolutionise the country which had not taken shape yet. The only power he had left with was to commandeer a Royal Library.

Though he did not hold the authority of a chancellor of the Ministry of Interior anymore and even the power he previously had in the Ministry was all scattered, the realisation of his duty as a “statesman” and King Rama V’s addressing that told him “to stay on helping this nation” (Khanjanasthiti, 1989: 356), still kept him going and never to think of giving up on his intentions to improve this nation as he intended to (Noranitipadungkarn, 2002: 512).

Under the process of centralisation by the municipal provincial system, the kingdoms governed by the city-state system were unified within a “nation-state” government, and that made territory integrity and individuality became significant. If, with that logic, the population of the state still had no unity amongst themselves, the only path left to choose would be to establish it, either by centralisation, uniting every class under the king without differentiation, or by creating the mutual sense of “being Thai” in the majority of population that once were called foreign (Wanthana, 1987: 79).

In the situation where the population was liberated, the people would begin to think of governing themselves (Khanjanasthiti, 2002: 356), and some questions regarding “Who will be governing whom? Who is liberating whom?” would arise (Winichakul, 2008: 98). That plus Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s own intentions which had not had a chance to form in during his time as a chancellor of the Ministry of Interior, the compilation, revision, and publication of the book that was already popular among the people like “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” were like a great opportunity to draw a vision that could depict the reality of “individuality” of Thai cultures and society as an explanation to who we were, and how we were going to be.

That depiction of reality would be used as a framework to assign status, duties, power relations as well as other social behaviours of the people who had just been liberated and had their statuses changed from “peasant” and “slave” to freemen, including the inhabitants of provincial territories who never felt like they were the people of Thailand or they were partially the owner of this country like the people in Bangkok in the ways that would make these people feel like they were on the right course. Especially when the tool he chose was a literature as an “agent” that would encourage mutual feelings and was easier to comply than the instructional manuals, the main message of this book should be able to teach “loyalty” among the people without uttering the word “loyalty” directly, but by depicting “idealised” identities or conducts of the lead characters who were highly regarded by the people, so this should properly affect the inhabitants to realise their identities and “imagination community” as well as their duties in said imagination community.

3.3 “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” and the Palace Revolt of 1912

Apart from the advantage of influencing people to be a part of the imagination community establishment and to realise their duties in the community, the “main message” on “loyalty” embedded in the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” were found to be also in accord with the makeshift political agenda that the government worried it would cause an uprising among officials in 1912 as well as the increasing intensity in criticising upon the governing system, especially on the topic of criticising on how the government was doing their job, as it was not worth putting trust in and paying taxes. The demand continued to spread (Kamutpissamai, 1999: 236) until there were some groups of people believed to be involved this kind of conspiracies again in 1917 (Chakrabongse, 1971: 590) which was the same year this book was published.

The underlying causes behind the uprising were that a commissioned officer, a soldier of the nation, was punished by whipping without proper reasons and that the rebels thought the conduct of King Rama VI, who seemed to be interested only in entertainment but not his duty as a king, was one of the major causes that made the country worse (Amorndarunarak, 1974: 27) Such dispute eventually led to a comparison between the King Rama VI to the then ruler of Germany; that he always cared for the soldiers and sought opportunities to sleep with them in the barrack for a week per month but our King liked to play drama, not doing his duties (National Archives of Thailand 1911).

Comparing the inevitable uprising to the text of Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”, it was found that the causes as well as the feelings of the people, especially that of the rebels, to the king were no different than what happened in the Sepha, that is, Somdet Phra Phan Watsa was also not the king who took an interest in his duties. The story portrayed him as a king who severely punished his officials, especially Khun Phaen’s family, and there were many times that he gave a punishment too severe than he should because of a brief temper, even the ones who got punished were very important to the thrones.

Taking the rebels’ background into account, it would reveal that they were surprisingly alike to the characters in the Vajirayan Royal Library’s “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen”, that is, these characters were “military officials” who were “commoners” but had the capabilities above average, which could be used as a tool to “defy”. Still, those characters were also respected as “heroic warriors” by many Thai people, as they “became

loyal” without any condition.

Likewise, the education background of the 1912 rebels were from military academies, for the most part, and law schools and that was the root of how they had more advanced belief than the other groups at the time (Kamutpissamai, 1999: 161) and confided in their own powers and concepts as the ones who would protect and serve the society (Kamutpissamai, 1999: 159)

The “main message” emphasised in the Vajirayan Royal Library’s “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” throughout was “loyalty” without conditions, no matter how capable or how just the king was. That kind of loyalty was like a model that officials, especially “military”, should conform to, as it was something respectable since long before and something that should be continued doing. So, there certainly were many connections to this revolt.

Especially when considering Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s statements, which people deemed they were not intended to prove other’s people opinions wrong, like the one he presented King Rama VI as the king who had an appreciation and tradition in establishing conceptual thoughts of the modern west, and how Prince Damrong Rajanubhab chose to embed his statements in many forms of literature, where each of the “main messages” conformed and supported each other until they became a powerful thought that would influence people to change their minds or behaviours (Sattayanurak, 2003: 17-18), similarly to the concept he expressed in 1906 as: “The government has a power to manipulate the people by writing books that will be used to teach young students” (O-satharom, 1981: 108), it was possible that the Vajirayan Royal Library’s “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” was actually published as a reaction to the incident of 1912 Palace Revolt with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s intentions as Thailand’s father of “history” and “Ministry of Interior”.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1 Conclusion

The Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” is undoubtedly a significant literature to Thai society as it is “a treasure trove” of knowledge in every dimensions of Thai life, whether in Ayutthaya era or early Bangkok era. However, there are many things in this literature that still influence the modern Thai society, both in the way we understand and the way we don’t understand.

This research was an analysis of the political implications in the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” in dimensions of text and context concurrently, as well as finding the relationship between the two to answer the important question regarding the motives or factors that prompted the revisions of this literature at certain periods in the form of suggestions.

As for the text, a debate that still remained in the academic circles was in regard to whether the main message or political implications embedded in this over-a-thousand-page literature were actually to exhibit “loyalty” conveying through individuals and the conducts of major characters like Khun Phaen’s family, or just a way to convey the frustration of people as in the original version that made the text became a story of power and “rebellion”.

The findings and researches on related documents on said issue revealed that the text led to the deductions of the two groups, both the ones that approved the Vajirayan Royal Library’s “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen as a story of “loyalty” and the ones that opposed as it was a story about “power and rebellion”, was actually portions of text that were trimmed down to support their analyses and reject considering any text that the opposing group picked to make an argument, like those opposing ideas in the text did not exist. In spite of that, this research has gone through many observations and considerations on many factors as well as an analysis on conformation and rationale of the text without trimming any portions as mentioned, and that led this research to have reached a different conclusion.

Since the creation of the original outlines that was the origin of this literature, which modern scholars believed it was around 200 years long of establishing this literature as a “court” literature and limited political concepts to the way it should be, directly and indirectly, by the ruling class in the name of “poets laureate”, counting from the moment King Rama II decided to revise this sepha and recorded it as a court edition or “standard edition”, whether it was intentionally or unintentionally, certainly the consequence of that decision made the folk version of sepha, or “Chaloeisak”, which was rather untamed and filled with political thoughts potentially causing instability to the national security, especially to the royal institute, that Komtuan Khantanu (1998: 130) or Jit Phumsak (Limapichart 2002) claimed its existence eventually vanished.

By the reign of King Rama IV, the expansion of printing press technology as well as the freedom of the press, especially printed press like the newspaper, had influenced both directly and indirectly the ruling class to limit the political movements that could jeopardise the stability of national security and the royal institute under the definition of “political disturbances”, which included literature as in article 8 of the Royal Decree of The Royal Literary Club. But, fact that The Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” was especially revised by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, a significant person who established the traditional concept

of refining centralised governing system, was like using “fine mesh netting” to filter potentially disturbing political thoughts out of the sepha and eventually eradicate them.

Even so, parts of the text scattered throughout this epic literature were still able to be “trimmed down” and led to a deduction in the sense of potential political disturbance to the extent of defiance and eventually “rebellious”. These trimmed text, if consider lightly or at the capabilities of the group of many people acting as “fine mesh netting”, it could be said that these were the fragments left of the folk version, but, when taking the insecurity and the policies of the ruling class in the absolute monarch era as well as the 100-year process of establishing this standard version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” into account, it raised significant doubts regarding Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s intentions to allow these texts to remain, not properly eliminated as they should be.

When considering the text in general and analysing its rationale, it was found that, throughout the story, the text stressed the capabilities of the four people in Khun Phaen’s family as talented, knowledgeable, invulnerable and invincible. The capabilities of those characters were highlighted from end to end of the story, either through describing each of their own unique abilities or through stressing other characters’ inabilities. For example, whenever a war was imminent, there would not be anyone volunteering to go to war, except Khun Phaen’s family, who perform their duties as if they were “the pillars of the throne” of Somdet Phra Phan Watsa. Furthermore, the commanders and captains of the enemies of the king also played a part in emphasising their capabilities since they were always defeated by armies that led by one of Khun Phaen’s family.

It was particularly the last part that ensured that this research was able to hypothesise that Prince Damrong Rajanubhab could “intentionally” left the controversial portions for this particular reason, such portions that exhibited the ability to defy Somdet Phra Phan Watsa. Ultimately speaking, these characters were portrayed in the text as fully capable to dethrone the king, but the text also framed their capabilities with “loyalty” and “karma” through royal punishment that the character could have eluded without any difficulties through plotted circumstances, had they wanted to. Be that as it might, these characters chose to “submit” to the royal punishment, which somehow implied their obedience to the king’s authority as a means to display their “allegiance” and receive their “karma”, not that they were “succumbed” to the punishment.

Apart from “loyalty”, religious explanations like “karma” and “impermanence” also played their part well in comforting Khun Phaen’s family who had to face many losses from royal punishment over and over without finding anyone responsible or any reasons to justify their losses, which almost always caused by the injustice and immoderation of the superiors, and that would mean instability to national security and the ruling class in an absolute monarchy if anyone were to question about said injustice or immoderation.

Such led to a proposition of the researcher on the political implications appeared on the Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” that it was a literature that emphasise “loyalty”, and, on top of that, it was also emphasising the “ultimate” loyalty without condition, not that the characters were “succumbed”.

Contextually speaking, as in the current situation where people only believed in the causes to revise and publish The Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” stated in “History of Sepha” as “to preserve a well-versed Thai literature permanently”, it seemed that historical context was neglected, especially politics in the period, which had significantly made an impact to Thailand’s policies of the ruling class.

Considering Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s statement “The government has a power to manipulate the people by writing books that will be used to teach young students” and his earlier intentions to revolutionise the country but never had a chance to do properly because of his resignation from the Ministry of Interior so the only duty he had then was to commandeer the royal library, literature was the only tool he had that could help him to continue as intended.

The researcher also found that, in the context of Thai state at the time, “loyalty” was deemed to be a political agenda and a need of the ruling class, as in the same fashion as Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s intentions, which had never been done properly since he were a minister, to instil among people the individuality and mutual realisation of themselves and their duties, positions as well as their duties as the people of the country under absolute monarchy, as the ruling class wanted it to be, and cooperation with the state.

Another makeshift political agenda that still remained and worried the ruling class then was the Palace Revolt of 1912, which was like a signal to warn the royal institute or a “loyalty crisis”, since the officials and intellectuals who were the product of national development began to realise their potentials and see the concerning governing system as something which did not meet their needs or was not suitable anymore. As the “main message” and the text of the story were well-conformed to each other, it could be said that there was a high possibility that Prince Damrong intended this literature as a model code of ethics to the officials, especially the “military”. If so, the creation of this Vajirayan Royal Library version of “Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen” might not only due to the reason stated in History of Sepha, but also due to his intention to use political implications to create mutual respect amongst the people in the country, or, most importantly, it possibly was a reaction to the 1912 revolt.

4.2 Recommendation

The researcher was fully aware of the manner to conduct this research was reasonably full of subjectivity, that is, however, it was difficult to forego the existence as well as avoiding the use of “basic feelings” or existing “historical context” in the process of text consideration, since the researcher could never have known what were in the mind of the subjects of this research or what their statements were actually made for. The only route possible was to estimate the “possibilities” of those thoughts through considering text, writings, or works of those many people as well as environmental context, meaning all other circumstances and factors, which the researcher had to use his imagination and conclusively consider about as thorough as possible to construct the overall image in due course.

Even so, as this research might not be an “absolution” that was “precise”, the researcher was hopeful that this research would light any inspirations to question or study this nationally significant literature in greater extent for the time to come.

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Note

Note 1. The current understanding about the first time the literature "Khun Chang - Khun Phaen" was compiled, mostly, roots from the remark of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab manifested in "History of Sepha", which was published to annotate the revision and publication of the Vajirayan Royal Library version of "Sepha Khun Chang - Khun Phaen" in 1917, as follows: "The court version of sepha was rather complete since King Rama III composed and introduced new chapters throughout Khun Chang - Khun Phaen. And, as it was complete, there seemed to follow a royalty, or maybe a noble, who recited sepha and played in a piphat ensemble in his reign,

thought of compiling and rearranging the portions of sepha into one continuous piece of work, like the one we have today” (Fine Arts Department, 2002: 29-30). However, not many people seem to take note of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab’s comment that was added later as follows: “While writing the History of Sepha in 1917, I happened to mention that the court sepha was a handiwork of the King Rama III, but that does not seem to be accurate. Upon looking into the matter more closely, I recognised that it was actually the handiwork of King Rama IV, so I need to make a correction that the sepha was not compiled in the reign of King Rama III” (Rajanubhab, 1954: 43)

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Kittisak Jermittiparsert was born on April 26, 1985 in Phetchaburi, Thailand. He is studying a doctoral degree in social sciences with a major in political science at Kasetsart University, where he received his Bachelor and Master of Arts in political science in 2006 and 2008 respectively. In addition, he is studying a bachelor degree in public administration with a major in local administration at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, where he earned a Bachelor of Political Science in international relations and comparative government and politics in 2010. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of Political Science, College of Government and Public Governance at Rangsit University, an academic committee of the Political Science Association of Kasetsart University, a columnist for Siamrath, Thailand’s oldest vernacular newspaper, and also be a member of the International of Economic Development and Research Center, Hong Kong. Furthermore, he serves as an editor, editorial board member, and reviewer on a number of social sciences and humanities related conference proceedings and journals in the United States of America, Canada, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore, India, and Thailand. His published research papers are in the areas of comparative politics and government, empirical discourse analysis, environmental politics, history of political thought, international political economy, politics in cultural space, and public policy.

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