

Folklore and Folklife of Thailand

Foreword

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Thailand's strategic location on the borderline of East Asia and Southeast Asia has, since the past, given it a unique position as a crossroads of many Asian cultures. While Theravada Buddhism functions importantly in the spiritual and the secular lives of 94% of its population, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanism, Christianity, and other belief systems of several ethnic and tribal groups have introduced other ideational and cultural traditions, making Thailand a multiethnic and multi-cultural society. Just as the Indian epic, "The Rāmāyaṇa," and Chinese novel "The Three Kingdoms," and the Javanese literary hero, Panji, have become parts of the Thai literary and artistic traditions, so are the folklore and folklife of Thailand enriched by the mosaic of these diverse cultural traditions.

The materials and analyses presented in this issue represent only a fragment of Thai and ethnic folklore and folklife materials in existence. They serve, however, to indicate some of the directions in folklore and folklife researches that Thai scholars and Western scholars have undertaken. Within Thai universities and colleges, folklore and folklife were introduced only in the last decade as academic topics and courses of study. Although an independent Department of Folklore or Department of Folklore and Folklife does not yet exist, folklore and folklife courses have been integrated into the curriculum of the Department of Anthropology at some universities and the Thai Department or the Faculty of Education at others. Dissertations, theses, and articles, ranging from the studies of folktales, folk beliefs, folk arts and crafts, traditional play, games and sports, children's lullabies, proverbs, and folk speech, to folksong and folk architecture, have begun to

appear. These provide stimulation as well as theoretical models for Thai folklore students to carry their own inquiries further into other regions or ethnic groups.

The first article, Siraporn Thitathan's "Different Family Roles, Different Interpretations of Thai Folktales," presents an anthropological study of folktale tradition in a Buddhist village in Central Thailand. To understand the folktales' popularity, Thitathan investigated listeners' interpretations of family roles and family conflicts as presented in a folktale. Her clear analysis shows that the meanings of a tale vary greatly with the listeners' life experiences and identifications with characters or episodes in the story. Her findings also emphasize the importance of the cultural context in folklore study, and that to fully understand the lore, one must understand the folk.

Pranee Wongthet's article, "The Jataka Stories and Laopuan Worldview," is based on the author's field research in Eastern Thailand among an ethnic group, the Laopuan. Wongthet traces the roles these Buddha's Birth Stories had in Laos for the Laopuans and the new roles they hold in Thailand as a linkage to the past and as a symbol of shared cultural values, worldviews, and the Laopuan identity. The Jataka stories also shaped Laopuan personality. Wongthet's view is that through these newly defined roles, the Laopuan prisoners of war and their descendents have been able to maintain Laotian cultural continuity, forge their group identity, spiritual strength, and adapt to life in the new land.

Paritta Chalermkao Koanantakool's research centers on the genre of folk performance. In "Relevance of the Textual and Contextual Analyses in Understanding Folk Performance in Modern Society: A Case of Southern Thai Shadow Puppet Theatre," she analyses factors which contribute to the dynamism of this folk performance as it keeps in step with social and political changes. Each puppeteer as an artist, teacher, and performer differently manipulates the content of the text as well as the visual form to fit the social context of the performance, the type of audience present and in one case analysed, also the social and political concerns at the time. To understand the development of the shadow puppet theatre as it exists today in southern Thailand, one has to understand therefore the interaction between the text and the context.

Folklore of tribal peoples in northern Thailand is here represented by Nicholas Tapp's work with the White Hmong. Tapp's article, "Hmong Religion" provides rich information on the White Hmong belief system, myths, shamanism, healing rituals, and mortuary rites. Since the Hmong religious world is ordered as oppositions between

the wild and the tame, men and spirits, life and death, this world and the other world, the shaman's role as mediator between the human world and the spiritual world is significant. Shamanism is, in Tapp's view, a psychodrama and its ultimate goal is the restoration of the balance of the psyche of the afflicted individual.

An aspect of Thai folklife is taken up in Pornchai Suchitta's article, "Mental Template: The Case of the Thai Lao *Pha Sin*." Suchitta points out the correlation between man-made material culture and his behavior, his products, and his ideas. The item of material culture Suchitta selected as the focus of his study is the four types of *pha sin* (the tubular skirts) of two ethnic groups, the Thai Lao and the Thai Lue of Northern Thailand. His analysis shows that differing as well as shared mental templates contribute toward the selection of certain *pha sin*-making technologies, fabrics, colors, and designs.

The last article, Kasem Nakornkhet's "Cultures and Sports Preference" provides a combination of cross-cultural and the sociology of sports perspectives to the study of sports. East-West and intra-Asian comparisons of sports preferences are presented through the analysis of questionnaire responses of American, Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, Malaysian, and Thai students. While the findings on the American students' preference for the risk and thrill aspects of sport may appear puzzling, the results of the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul appear to support Nakornkhet's findings on the emphasis on high discipline in East Asian cultures.

The compilation of this special issue on folklore and folklife in Thailand coincides with the centennial of Phya Anuman Rajadhon, a prominent Thai scholar and professor of Thai literature and culture. Phya Anuman Rajadhon's interests and writings extended into the domain of Thai folklore, and his book *Essays on Thai Folklore* (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1968) stands as a monumental work. Two decades have passed since then. The articles in this issue represent some of the developing trends in Thai folklore and folklife scholarship. As a field of study, it has indeed added new dimensions to the understanding of the peoples and cultures of Thailand.