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**Hybridising Na(rra)tion:  
The Reinvention and Embodiment of  
'Thainess' in Thai Literature after 2006**

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Centre for Cultural, Literary, and Postcolonial Studies

SOAS, University of London

For my parents  
who have given me all the best they can.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the reinvention of Thainess (*khwam pen Thai*) or national Thai identity in Thai literature after 2006, the year of the coup which overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra and led to decades-long political and ideological clashes. At the same time, the impact of globalisation and new telecommunication technology have changed the Thai political and socio-cultural landscapes. Arguably, the monopoly from the state-constructed discourse of being Thai has been contested and negotiated. Signs of Thainess recreated in popular fiction exhibit cultural hybridisation beyond the national border. Accordingly, this thesis questions the ways in which reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006 are represented and hybridised in relation to political contestation and globalisation including the impact of the Internet. This thesis deploys the interdisciplinary framework of reinvention, hybridity, embodiment, and Thainess to conduct textual and contextual analyses. Primary data is selected from four signs of Thainess reinvented into four genres: (1) National history in the historical romance novel ;(2) The classical literature in Boys Love fanfiction ;(3) Folklore in the fantasy novel; and (4) Thai language in the dystopian novel.

The findings reveal that the reinventions of Thainess present a notion of ‘hybridised Thainess.’ All texts showcase the hybridisation of traditional knowledge with new features from transnational flows. This hybridisation of narration reveals the hybridisation of the nation. These mixtures open up a ‘Third Space’ challenging the authenticity and authority of discursive Thainess and allowing playful voices to accept, contest, and negotiate with national culture influenced by both internal and international factors. For internal political conflict, the hybridity of Thainess resonates with political polarisation which demands that a ‘good person’ (*khon di*) calls for national unity (*khwam samakkhi*). These values are simultaneously challenged by the process of decentralisation and the empowerment of marginalised people in terms of gender, age, and ideology. For international factors, the strong ties of globalisation embedded as part of Thai culture are undeniable. The Internet and new media have disrupted the dissemination of literary works and created innovative forms and genres of Thai literature.

**Keywords:** Thainess, Thai literature, Hybridity, Thai Politics, Reinvention, Embodiment

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### **Notes on Transliteration and Referencing**

There is no agreed system of representing Thai in Roman script. The Roman systems have some limitations because the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet are insufficient to represent all the consonants, vowels, diphthongs, and tones of Thai. In this thesis, I have adopted the Royal Institute system of romanising Thai where there is no distinction between long and short vowels, and the tones are not represented. However, I have followed the Thai authors' preferred spelling of their own names in English when known, rather than romanising them to maintain consistency. For example, I write the author name 'Rompaeng' as she uses to refer to herself rather than Romphaeng according to the Romanisation system. As for some Thai words which are now commonly used in the anglophone-speaking world, I will use these commonly used words.

For referencing, I have followed the Thai reference system for Thai authors by using given names before surnames. The citation of Thai authors, both in-text and in the bibliography, is therefore alphabetised by the author's first name.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

On that night, I was watching a soap opera that usually airs after the nightly royal news on a free-to-air TV channel. Suddenly, the show was interrupted by royal songs and nationalist anthems. I tried to switch to other free TV channels, but the programmes were all the same. When I asked my mother what was wrong with the TV, she said, ‘Oh, this is a coup d’état!’

That night of September 19, 2006, was my first encounter with a coup d’état. Since I had grown up with the democratic movement in Thailand such as the 1997 constitution and continual elections without military interruption, I had never understood the real meaning of the words *patiwat* (revolution) and *ratthaprahan* (coup d’état). Even though I had learned about these concepts in school and had always been taught that our country is democratic, I could not imagine how, in reality, the military could seize power.

That night, I was excited to witness and experience a ‘new thing’ – at least for me and my generation - since the last coup happened in the year I was born. I also felt relief and hoped that the coup would eradicate the so-called corrupt prime minister – Thaksin Shinawatra - and end the conflict with protest groups. I also understood that it would protect the king. These thoughts and feelings were not only felt by me but shared widely during this time. For example, people from Bangkok came to take photos with tanks and some gave roses to thank the soldiers the day after the coup. When these images were shared in the media, it made me feel positively towards the coup as a solution for the country’s problems.

A few months before that night, Thailand had held a grand ceremony for the king. On June 9, 2006, King Rama IX (r. 1946-2016), or as Thais called him *nai luang*, was celebrating his 60<sup>th</sup> year on the throne, making him the longest-reigning monarch in both Thailand and the world at that time. The government hosted majestic events and year-long activities like inviting people to wear yellow shirts and wristbands that stated ‘we love the king’ (*rao rak nai luang*). The finale of this event was the attendance of monarchs

as well as their representatives from around the globe at the celebration, a rare occasion in Thai history. The chant ‘long live the king’ (*song phra charoen*) was also repeated throughout the year. This event, of course, showed the royalist and nationalist sentiment that peaked in that year along with the coup also taking place on that night.

That night is the starting point of this thesis. The following chapters discuss Thai politics and society in the aftermath of the 2006 coup intertwined with Thai literature. I will demonstrate how Thailand has evolved in the almost two decades since that night, and how cultural products like literature have been shaped in this context. Arguably, literature contains not only the ‘personal’ imagination of a writer but also the ‘collective’ thoughts, feelings, worldview, and so on of that time. Similarly to my thoughts and feelings about the coup, these were not only ‘personal’ but were also shared among many people and were prevalent in contemporary mainstream media.

Though Thailand is globalised in terms of modes of communication and has heightened connection to the world, in 2006, all of the free TV channels were controlled by the junta as I did not know about this incident until they provided an official announcement and the portrayal of the junta televised on TV. In contrast, the Internet and social media, which have rapidly developed since 2006, have shaped new ways of consuming and spreading information. This is only one example of the rapid changes in recent decades which have affected Thai national identity or Thainess (*khwam pen Thai*).

Thainess is a highly ambiguous term to define, yet it plays a central role in Thai nationalism, shaping Thai individuals, establishing norms of behaviour and thinking, and legitimising moral standards for ethical judgment. Thainess does not spring up from a vacuum. Rather, the discourse has been socially and politically constructed through varied facets over centuries. Literature is an essential sign of Thainess. Contemporary Thai literature, such as novels, still revolves around Thainess, consciously or unconsciously.

One way of playing with Thainess in contemporary Thai literature is through recreation in new contexts, as I did earlier with re-narrating the history of the 2006 coup through my own point of view: I positioned

myself as the protagonist to depict what I saw and felt. I also created the I-narrator in two senses: one is the 'I' who is currently writing the thesis; and another is the past I-narrator of 2006. The two I-narrators have different aims. While the later 'I' reconsiders the past as an omniscient narrator, the earlier 'I' has a limited point of view.

Likewise, many literary forms use different literary techniques to recreate the past to serve a new purpose in the contemporary world. In newly created stories, Thainess is not simply retold, rather it is hybridised to present a new agenda, new context, and new ways of writing. Hybridity here does not mean only what is adapted and combined in the text but also the way in which Thainess represents neither new nor old. This 'in-between' representation of Thainess in literature should be analysed in depth to understand Thailand at a specific time. Rather than focusing on my narrativised personal experiences, this research attempts to explore the collective experiences of many presented through literary texts of several genres. While I use 'that night' as the opening story, the following analyses will touch upon the story 'after that night.'

## **Research Rationale**

Since the coup in 2006, Thailand has fallen into political polarisation, leading in turn to a constant process of contestation and negotiation of Thainess. In addition to this, the impact of globalisation and of the Internet have further demonopolised and hybridised Thainess. This phenomenon can be seen in the political arena, interpersonal conflicts, and cultural artifacts. In this thesis, I refer to Thai literature, especially popular fiction, as my primary source of data to explore the embedded and contested ideologies of this period. What I take as 'signs' or 'emblems' of Thainess, such as historical narratives, classical myths, and traditional literary works, have been reinvented in this period in contemporary literature. These literary texts serve to voice new values while challenging the traditional discourse of Thainess. Accordingly, the connection between the reinvention of Thainess in literary texts and the political and social backdrop of the post-2006 coup form the backbone of this thesis.

In terms of the wider context of this research agenda, this decades-long societal division can be simplified into two main groups: royalist and progressive. The ideology of royalism was represented by the Yellow Shirts (*suea lueang*) in 2005-2006, a movement which can also be referred to as anti-Thaksin because their aim was to overthrow Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) and call for political reform in the face of ‘business politics’ and corruption. More importantly, royalists perceived Thaksin as a threat to King Rama IX, meaning it is more accurate to call them Bhumibolists rather than royalists (Ruth 2021). The colour yellow was adopted from the auspicious colour of the king, while protest leaders claimed that this was a fight on behalf of the king (*su phuea nai luang*). The king’s picture was also used in demonstrations organised by the movement. In addition, the accusation that Thaksin and his companies were plotting to abolish the monarchy (*lom chao*) drove the mass of mostly middle-class people from Bangkok and other urban cities to join together to protect and ‘restore the nation’ (*ku chat*) (Figure 1). This large demonstration blocked main official places, which placed the elected government in deadlock and allowed the Thai military to sanction a coup d’état in September 2006.



Figure 1 Yellow-Shirt protesters with national and king flags, and sporting the term *ku chat*.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-56036510>

Although Thaksin’s party won the election in 2008 and formed a new government, the Yellow Shirts gathered again, followed by the end of governments within a few months. Again, his party won the election in 2011 and Thaksin’s younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra became the first female prime minister (2011-2014). Nevertheless, the cycle was repeated. From 2013 to 2014, the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC; *Ko Po Po So*) gathered to oppose Yingluck’s government using the three colours of the

Thai national flag as a symbol of resistance and reiterated the discourse of fighting for the king. More importantly, the leaders of this movement referred to themselves as ‘good people’ (*khon di*) whose role it was to protect the nation and the monarchy from villainous corrupt politicians (Prajak 2022). This movement gained huge support for shutting down Bangkok and other provinces for many months, aiming to disrupt the government and reform the nation by ousting the Shinawatra family from politics (Figure 2). This demonstration then led to another coup in May 2014 followed by almost a decade of military rule.



Figure 2 Thai national flag used as the key symbol of PDRC protesters .

Source: <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/399807>

On the opposite side, progressive groups were formed to fight back against the Yellow Shirts. Between 2009 and 2010, the Red Shirts (*suea daeng*) gathered large demonstrations in Bangkok and many provinces. The key participants in this movement were from rural areas, especially the north and northeastern regions, the home of the majority of voters for Thaksin’s parties. In contrast to well-educated urban middle-class people who supported the Yellow Shirts, this movement was looked down upon because of its supporters’ rural backgrounds, low education, and low economic status. More importantly, their intentions were viewed as ‘stupid’, and ‘easy to buy with a little money.’ They were called ‘red buffalos’ (*khwai daeng*) – with the animal connoting stupidity in Thai culture - while positing Thaksin as the capitalist who feeds them (Figure 3). In other words, the Red-Shirt movement was positioned in direct contrast to the ‘good people.’



Figure 3 Cartoon of a Red Buffalo fed by a person who looks like Thaksin.

Source: <https://mgronline.com/pjkkuan/detail/9590000066222>

Following the 2014 coup and subsequent military rule, support rose for the new Future Forward Party, a progressive party formed in 2018 and led by a new generation of younger leaders. This caused widespread anxiety, resulting in the recurrence of nationalist sentiment driven by ‘good people’. After the general election in 2019, followed by the ban of the Future Forward Party from politics, there was anger and resistance among its supporters who were made up of the younger generation who had grown up amidst political polarisation. In 2020-2021, an active and vibrant Youth Movement was subjected to similar dehumanisation and demonisation for its attempts to challenge many of the ‘core values’ of Thai culture, especially in its call for the reform of the monarchy.

It is not the case, however, that the Red Shirts and the Youth Movement were simply passive victims of the discourse of the so-called ‘good people’. For instance, the Red Shirts branded elite politics as an *ammat* system (a reference to the term used for royal elites in the Thai court), whereas they saw themselves as *phrai*, or ‘commoners’ who carry a sense of inferiority and discrimination against them. They argued from the position of commoners who dared to challenge the hierarchical power of Thai society to bring democracy and justice by repeating the concept of ‘double standards’ (*song matrathan*). As a result of this tension, polarisation between the two groups has been unending. Amidst this crisis, a long-idealised notion of unity was spread widely.

In this thesis I argue that such political polarisation is centred around the discourse of Thainess, which has been propagated by Bangkok elites since the era of the threat of colonisation by the West and of the subsequent nation-building project. According to Saichol Sattayanurak (2002; 2005), the discourse of Thainess was constructed in order to identify what is Thai and what is un-Thai in the colonial context to maintain national independence while legitimising the powerful in Bangkok to govern the entire nation through the construction of a ‘good country’ (*mueang Thai ni di*) (see Chapter 3). Although this spanned a century, the state-constructed definition of Thainess revolves around the monarchy and Buddhism as the core values of Thai identity, meaning hierarchical social order is preserved. It is clear that royalism during the post-2006 coup clings to the signs of Thainess, such as the monarchy, and claims its morality in order to protect the nation through Buddhist concepts. According to Nicholas Farrelly (2016: 332), this narrative “has given the Thai people a narrower sense of their place in a time of unprecedented digital enrichment and global connection. They have been told to defend Thainess during a moment when its universal appeal is perceived to be in a danger.” Moreover, Farrelly argues that this definition of Thainess has been emphasised by the military since the 2014 coup via 12 core values (*khaniyom sipsong prakan*) to gain legitimacy through their status as the defender of the monarchy and protector of social unity. Despite this being a historical discourse, it has become central to modern social and cultural oppositions over the decades of political chaos.

Thai literature provides key evidence of the contestation and negotiation of Thainess following the 2006 coup and authors proffered contrasting ideologies during this period of political polarisation. Comparing Red-Shirt and Yellow-Shirt poems, Saowanit Chulawong (2018: 235-241) observes that although poets on both sides were shaped by similar backgrounds in the progressive movements of the 1960s onwards, they supported different groups and had contrasting interpretations of the political conflict. Yellow-Shirt poets such as Naowarat Phongphaiboon, Angkarn Kalyanaphong, and Khomtuan Khantanu voiced their nationalism by focusing on national interests and the protection of the monarchy. Though they still wrote about democracy, their works highlight ‘pure democracy’ through the governance of honest and ‘good

people.’ Likewise, Pichet Saengthong (2018) confirms how Buddhist discourses fuelled conservative poetry during 2006-2010 by legitimising poets to criticise the political networks and supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra. Conversely, Red-Shirt poets such as Wisa Khantap and Mainueng Ko Kunthi used Marxist concepts to present the theme of class struggle and stress the clash between the elite class and commoners, using terms such as *ammatt* and *phrai*. Moreover, they underline the importance of the role of democracy by focusing on respect for elected governments along with the concept of equality. They criticise the military-backed government and the misconduct of law used against people, Saowanit argues.

The crackdown on Red-Shirt demonstrators in May 2010 was the prime catalyst for division among Thai poets and showed a reversal in the stance of once-progressive poets. Chusak Pattarakulvanit (2023: 112-119) points out that several anti-Thaksin poets viewed the Red Shirts as completely different from their previous themes of disenfranchised people fighting against dictatorship. Their works of that time seem not to include individuals who died in the Red-Shirt movement. A key example is the poetry collection *Phloeng Phruetsapha (May Fire)* edited by Kaew Laithong in which famous poets joined together to write about their memories of May 2010. Chusak (2023: 120-121) contends that these poets avoided mentioning the deaths of individuals while underlining the destruction of buildings. Although they touched upon the deaths, they composed a narrative that placed no blame on the government of the time. This reversed situation can be understood through the lens of the dominant discourse of ‘good people’ perpetuated by conservative groups. Morality, which is intertwined with Buddhism and royalism, is the logic behind this poetry.

Due to Thailand’s divisive society, hope for compromise between the two political sides was another main focus of literary works. From analysing short stories published in literary magazines, Wuttinan Chaisri (2015: 540-545) found that many authors present political conflict using the imagery of two-coloured shirts and attempts to compromise. For example, *Khon Si Arai (What Colour Are You?)* by Sirisak Aphisakmontri depicts two villages that were once united before political polarisation led them to fight. This work tries to give a balanced view of both sides and suggests a way to end the conflict peacefully. Another interesting work is *Phom Kap Muak Kan Nok (My Helmet and I)* (2011) by Jirat Prasertsup. The story centres on two



men and one woman who live together, where one man is a Red-Shirt supporter and the woman a Yellow-Shirt, while the second man is neutral. Areeya Hutinta (2015: 439-443) posits that the story shows the deep presence of political tension in individuals' lives, forcing people to declare their position. The neutral character is looked down on as a coward and has no standing in society. Overall, both short stories show the consequences of political crisis on everyday life, with hope for reconciliation as the subtext.

Not only was politics polarised, but Thai cultures representing Thainess were also demonopolised. The rise of globalisation sped up the processes of hybridising Thainess in cultural production and negotiated state-constructed Thainess with transnational trends like Western popular culture and values. Accordingly, globalisation drives greater engagement with themes of cosmopolitanism and individual life in Thai literature, under the new world order of borderless space and time. Susan Kepner (2009: 27) states that, having been heavily dominated by the 'literature for life' movement for decades, realistic styles of Thai short stories, together with an exploration of social problems, were no longer features of mainstream fiction in the 21st century. Instead, individualism and alternative genres gradually rose. Similarly, Chusak (2023: 95-100) contends that the birth of 'experimental literature' in the 1990s – seen especially in the works of Win Lyovarin - transgressed traditional ways of writing by using visual arts, layout, and symbols, marking the end of 'literature for life' and opening the door to new themes in Thai literary circles. Subsequently, individualism, urbanism, and political conflict came to be discussed widely in Thai novels and short stories after 2000 as emphasised in several articles by Suradech Chotiudompant (2009; 2014; 2017). In addition, Suradech suggests that magical realism, along with other postmodern techniques, were widely deployed, particularly for the purpose of presenting the complexity of individual emotions.

Moreover, the Internet transforms methods of communication and shapes individuals' worldviews, fostering notions of democracy and highlighting the voices of people that have previously been silenced (Hayles 2008; Hammond 2016). Literature has also emerged in the new online space. Significantly, internet literature changes the relationship between participants in the literary sphere, as authors, readers, and publishers can have direct interactions. As a result of its freedom and rapidity, the Internet is now a space

for the formation of many kinds of hybridity. National borders are blurred, whereas the flow and contact of people from different nations is clear (see further in Suradech 2014). Soranut (2016) refers to this as ‘borderless literature’ (*wannakam rai phrom daen*), which connotes not only a physical border but also a new theme of the interaction and reaction of people to cyberspace.

Along with the rise of East Asian cultural exports in the 2000s resulting in the rapid and dominant impact of K-Pop, new types of Thai literature emerged such as fan fiction, or ‘fanfic’. This refers to fans of well-known fiction utilising details and characters from original texts to create their own new stories. Although the fanfic form originated in the West, Asian popular culture is the source of inspiration of this genre. Several authors are also inspired by Korean pop stars and dramas (Ruenruthai 2016; 2017; Natthanai 2019a; 2019b). More essentially, the relationships of the main couples in this kind of fiction are not limited to heterosexuality but also include homosexual romances, such as the Boy Love or Yaoi genre.

Although these new types and themes of Thai literature have played significant roles in defining and redefining Thainess, according to my literature review in Chapter 2, a large academic gap remains. There is limited research linking the field of Thai literature (especially in English) to the political conflict after 2006 including the rapid transformation of societal and literary trends. Since this is a huge topic to explore, one way to understand these intertwined phenomena in literature is to examine the discourse of Thainess as this has been the centre of the contestation and negotiation in recent decades, from the political arena to cultural milieu. The way in which the signs representing Thainess are used to reinvent and perform in a new setting is one approach to understanding how Thainess is contested and negotiated by various ideologies.

In doing so, as extensively demonstrated in Chapter 3, my research framework takes literary reinvention and hybridity as the main theoretical lens along with the concept of embodiment to analyse the reinvention of Thainess in the selected texts. Reading through interdisciplinary research methodologies referred to in Chapter 4, my research does not only illustrate how Thainess is hybridised by different cultural references,

but also scrutinises the contestation and negotiation of power structures. Arguably, these hybrid narrations represent ‘hybridised Thainess’ in which national identity is not simply a top-down creation but rather encapsulates a renegotiated Thainess from the bottom-up. It achieves this by challenging the old order and suggesting new meanings, serving as a backdrop to the lengthy political conflict of this globalised era.

## **Research Questions**

This thesis asks three main questions to illustrate my argument, as shown below:

1. In what ways are reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006 hybridised?
2. How and why does political contestation in Thailand after 2006 relate to the hybridisation of reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature in the period?
3. How and why has globalisation and the impact of the internet shaped and influenced the reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006?

## **Research Data and Structure**

### *Data*

In this thesis, I have collected data from popular fiction and emerging genres from the year of the coup in 2006 to the year I conducted fieldwork in 2022. The reason for using popular fiction as the prime data rather than using so-called ‘serious literature’ is to examine how state ideology like Thainess and the larger context of Thailand are embedded and performed consciously and unconsciously in everyday life through popular fiction. This perspective is based on cultural studies which focuses on power relations in everyday life, which are constituted by the broader social structure (Barker and Jane 2016).

Additionally, as Tim Edensor (2002) writes in *National Identity, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life*, popular culture is a prime site to explore how national identity is presented in different ways, which sometimes contests the signification of the state meaning. As Edensor (2002: 17) contends, the “term ‘popular’ conveys how the cultural ingredients of national identity are increasingly mediated, polysemic,

contested and subject to change [...] Popular culture, then, has subsumed and represented, reformulated and reproduced cultural forms in a process of ‘de-differentiation’ ... so that forms of national cultural authority are no longer clearly identifiable.” I take popular fiction as a similar strand from this argument to investigate the sense of contest and negotiation of the meaning of Thai national identity during the time that the discourse of Thainess is demonopolised. Moreover, this can be seen in the power relations in the texts which are juxtaposed with internal politics and external transnational cultures, as globalisation and new media have clearly shaped popular Thai fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For the data selection, I choose four genres: historical romance, fanfiction, fantasy, and dystopia. These have grown in popularity over recent decades, in contrast to realism and literature for life in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Chapter 2). Historical romance is the foremost genre used to promote Thainess by revivifying the past of Thailand for contemporary audiences. In addition, I use fanfiction as one example of literature which has increased due to the growth of the Internet and the popularity of the Korean Wave. Furthermore, fantasy and dystopia are playing increasingly popular roles in the Thai literary scene with the influence of globalisation and translation of foreign works. After this, I select one story in each genre to analyse, using the theory of the selected genre along with the reinvention of Thainess.

I am aware that this thesis has a limitation as I cannot include all genres and literary works of published after 2006 to study. I thus prioritise the selected genres while acknowledging that some emerging writings like the regional writers, such as Isan writers, ethnic writers, and so forth, are not included in this study as topics like regionalism and ethnicity can be studied separately. In other words, this work is interested in the mainstream discourse of Thainess, which touches upon the middle class along with urbanised authors and readers since they are the key groups dominated by state-constructed Thainess while reproducing it in the wider space through publishers, websites, and media.

In this body of work, I look at signs of Thainess which authors have adapted into new stories. Here I choose four sources: history, classical literature, folklore, and language. These four sources are crucial to underpin

Thainess. While historical narratives define Thainess, language and classical literature serve as national treasures, showing the sophistication and civilisation of Thai culture. Folklore, such as myths and folktales, moreover, also circulate across time and space as an embedded way of life at both local and national levels. These four sources are repeatedly used in contemporary Thai novels and their essential roles as part of Thainess will be elaborated upon in Chapter 3 and the analytical chapters.

### *Structure*

This thesis is divided into nine chapters, which can be separated into two parts: the research background parts and the analytical parts. In the first part of the thesis, the current chapter – Chapter 1 - comprises my research rationale, research questions, and research data and structure. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review of a discussion of Thai politics and social context along with the phenomenon in Thai literature. Existing studies of Thai literature during the period of study will also be explored. Following this, Chapter 3 will discuss the theoretical framework used in the thesis. The key terms, which are reinvention, hybridity, Thainess, and embodiment, will be elaborated on with theoretical concepts to build the argument and framework I use in this research. Then, the abstract ideas will be implemented in Chapter 4 as I undertake the research methodology and method in the thesis.

The analytical chapter constitutes chapters 5 to 8. Each chapter is divided from the perspective of time: past (Chapter 5), present (Chapter 6), future (Chapter 7); and a combination of all tenses in the last chapter (Chapter 8). I examine how Thainess is used in constructing the imagined world of Thai society in the past, as in the historical novel. Present-day Thailand is further represented as a magical world where characters from literature come to meet the real world. Additionally, the future of Thai society is projected in fantasy as a new world beginning after our current one is destroyed. Lastly, another future is composed as a dystopian world, yet this world shows the past, present, and future coming together.

The reasons for ordering the chapters in this way is to show how Thainess is imagined and reconstructed in different temporalities, raising the question of hybridity not only across cultures but also across time (see

more in Chapter 3). In Chapter 5, I examine reinventions of mainstream Thai history in a historical romance novel through the trope of time-travel. This chapter analyses *Buppesannivas (Love Destiny)* (2010) by Rompaeng to explore how history is used to reconstruct the past in contemporary Thailand. In Chapter 6, I analyse the reuse of a classical Thai work, the *Ramakien*, in Internet Boys Love fanfiction called *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN (The Heart of Thotsakan KAIHUN)* (2016-2017) by Holyspace. Apart from using K-pop idols as a point of reference, the novel reconstructs the *Ramakien* by setting it in the contemporary world with new relationships by shifting the focus from Phra Ram to Thotsakan and developing homosexual relations between Thotsakan and another man, who is the reincarnation of Sida. I frame this story as the intersection of past and present, as well as of the literary and real worlds.

In Chapter 7, I examine a fantasy serial novel named *Nawa Himmaphan (New Himmaphan)* (2013-2018) by Alina, which creates a post-apocalyptic society. Himmaphan, a mythical forest derived from Indian mythology, is reinvented as a new world through the coalition between gods and demons called Thep and Asun. Thus, this future is a renewal of past Thainess while new meaning is created. I closely analyse one text from the series *Trinethip*, in terms of how the hopes and fears of past and present conflict collide and embody a futuristic imagination. In Chapter 8, I use the dystopian novel *Susan Siam* (2020) by Prapt for my main analysis. Although termed dystopian futurism, *Susan Siam* mimics current anxieties and conflicts in Thailand. The story also parodies the past in a future in which language and state ideology are key elements used to create a dystopian Thailand. I analyse how the novel intersects these times and presents Thainess as mimicry against the backdrop of the late 2010s to early 2020s.

Lastly, Chapter 9 provides a summary of the entire thesis and provides a cohesive overview of answers to the research questions presented in each chapter, framing them together to present common trends and differences. It then builds a wider explanation of the Thai literary movement by considering it in the context of the post-2006 period.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Historical Background and Literature Review**

This chapter provides the historical background of Thailand in both political and social contexts. I will illustrate existing works on political polarisation and the influence of globalisation along with new media since it directly connects to the main research questions. Here, I will conceptualise only the key issues, while details in chronological order and further information will be provided in Appendix 2-3. In addition, the study of Thai literature during this period will be discussed alongside gaps in knowledge about the study of literature. Lastly, the study of literature within the frame of reinvention and hybridity will be explored.

#### **Thai Political Crisis, Good People, Demonisation, and Unity**

This section provides the political landscape for understanding Thailand's political turmoil after 2006. Yet the prior period and its consequences should also be outlined. I begin with 1997 – the year of the Asian financial crisis and the new 'people's constitution' legislation. This change in the landscape of Thai politics benefitted businessman-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra allowing him to win the general election in 2001. After this, the aftermath of Thaksin's premiership will be demonstrated through the concept of good people, the demonisation of the Other, and the quest for unity.

#### *The Political and Social Transformation in 1997 and its Consequences*

1997 was a milestone year in contemporary Thai history. The Asian financial crisis, or the Tom Yum Kung Crisis, destroyed Thailand's goal of becoming a leading economic power in Asia. Consequently, nationalist sentiment became prevalent, and this crisis was interpreted as economic 'neo-colonialism' (Baker and Pasuk 2022). Many studies emphasise the post-1997 crisis as the catalyst of the nostalgic sense of Thainess against globalisation and the West. Films, dramas, and literature during this time vivified the glorious past of Thailand and asked Thais to protect Thailand from its national enemy, implied as being the West (see Amporn 2003; Harrison 2010a; May Adadol 2006). The core values of Thai identity were emphasised by

going back to local knowledge (Reynolds 2006), and the concept of a self-sufficiency economy from King Rama IX was widely accepted (Baker and Pasuk 2022; Jory 2016).

Regarding politics, the 1997 constitution was launched causing a vast transformation of the political landscape. Prajak Kongkirati (2024) illustrates that the new constitution attempted to tackle corruption among local politicians and to lessen their power on the national stage. However, it became advantageous for rising businessmen who turned into politicians like Thaksin Shinawatra (Figure 4). Thaksin formed a new party called the Thai Rak Thai party - literally means Thais Love Thais - and proposed exciting policies, especially for people in rural areas. While the influence of local political families was controlled, Thaksin gained a landslide victory under the new political system in the general election in 2001. His premiership then caused a huge change in Thailand's political structure, such as bureaucratic reformation, making him more powerful and popular. In 2005, Thaksin was re-elected for his second term with a landslide victory. In contrast to other civil governments, Prajak asserts that his huge success and powerful leadership caused anxiety and challenged the traditional political structure, which revolves around the military-monarchy-bureaucratic system and catalysing the beginning of anti-Thaksin sentiment in 2005.



Figure 4 Thaksin Shinawatra during the election campaign in 2005.

Source: <https://thestandard.co/onthisday06022548/>



At the same time, the new constitution and the rise of Thaksin transformed political awareness, especially among people in rural areas. Again, Prajak (2024: 39) demonstrates that the economic crisis “made poor people distressed and changed the power balance within the elite. The new constitution provided advantages to whoever could build a large party with a policy-based campaign, an expansive political network, and major resources. Decentralization empowered local constituencies and made them aware of the power of the ballot.” Accordingly, this formed the support groups for Thaksin, especially people from rural areas who benefitted from his policies and became the main supporters of Thaksin in the Red Shirt movement.

In brief, changes after 1997 leading to the rise of Thaksin showcase contestation around what ‘good politics’ means between anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin groups after 2006. According to Thannapat Jarernpanit (2019: 670), the Yellow Shirts “refers to a moral politics shaped by the charismatic power of the monarchy and Buddhist morality,” whereas the Red Shirts emphasise “the notion of an edible democracy representing their capitalist desires and hopes for a better life. They defined politics in its linkage to their everyday lives, seeking a liberal democracy based on the rule of law, equality, justice and freedom.” This clash of ideology was clear during the political polarisation in which morality was related to the discourse of Thainess.

### ***The Discourse of a ‘Good Person’, Demonisation, and Resistance***

The ideology of royalism, which calls for a ‘good person/people’ (*khon di*), can be traced back to the main discourse in Thai history, which Thongchai Winichakul (2016) calls ‘Royal-Nationalism’ (*rachachatniyom*). This is because Thai nationalist sentiment centralises the king, with the nation and monarch embodying one another. This is based on historical discourse propagated during the colonial period by Bangkok’s elites, focusing on kings and their difficulties in protecting and gaining independent territories from the enemy. Accordingly, it has repeatedly been used to motivate such anxieties, resulting in the widespread encouragement of individuals to protect the nation from any threat. Under this logic, the Thai nation cannot survive without a monarchy, and threats such as colonialism and communism are constructed in contrast to Thainess which is centred around pride in the nation, religion, and the king (Figure 5)

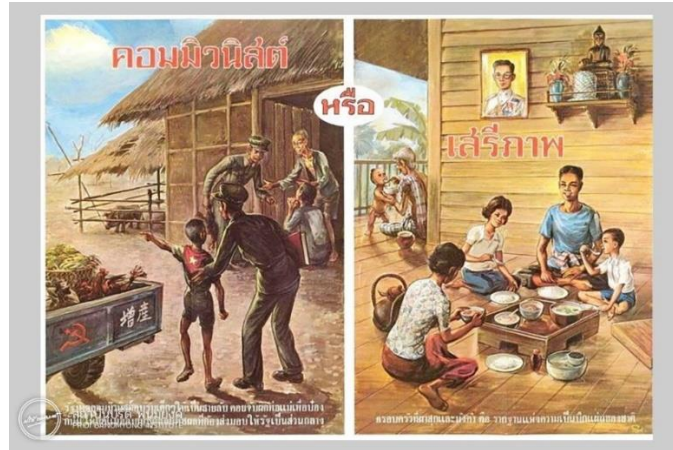


Figure 5 Poster during the Cold War contrasting Communism (left) with Freedom (right) and portraying King Rama IX as aligning with Buddhism.

Source: <https://pridi.or.th/th/content/2023/10/1730>

Regarding the Yellow Shirts and PDRC, it is understandable that both movements place Thaksin and his circles as a threat to the nation which could destabilise Thainess. Historians (e.g., Ruth 2021; Baker and Pasuk 2022; Terwiel 2011) demonstrate that his progressive and populist policies changing the bureaucratic structure and political landscape after the financial crisis caused fear of rapid change in the Thai hierarchical structure. His metaphor that the ‘country is a company, and politics is a business’ compares owning the country for his benefit. Furthermore, the more excuses for corruption and conflicts of interest appear, the wider anger and fear spread because it implies the country being used for an individual’s sake. More importantly, anger and anxiety toward Thaksin was ignited further when his actions were interpreted as challenging King Rama IX. The accusation of an “abolishing the monarchy movement” (*khabuankan lom chao*) allegedly led by Thaksin was widely circulated by the Yellow-Shirt movement (Ruth 2021; Baker and Pasuk 2022).

Additionally, ‘selling the nation’ (*khai chat*) was another controversy levelled against Thaksin. The sale of Shin Cooperation belonging to Thaksin’s family to Singapore’s Temasek Holding in 2006, was interpreted as the selling of the nation since this telecommunication company recorded national security data which was then sold to a foreign owner. Furthermore, the borderland conflict between Thailand and Cambodia

over Preah Vihear Temple came back into focus in 2008. The government on Thaksin's side was blamed by the Yellow Shirts for trying to sell the country to Cambodia, which rested on the close personal relationship between Thaksin and the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (Strate 2015). Accordingly, the phrase *for/to the king* (*phuea nai luang*) became central to the royalist movement, emphasising the crisis of the nation through a corrupt politician and threats to the king.

This logic is tied in with the concept of goodness embodied in King Rama IX. According to Baker and Pasuk (2022: 265-268), his representation transformed around the 1980s when the threat of communism declined. His image moved from rural to urban sites, touching more on the middle class in cities. His birthday speech became a sermon focusing on unity and being a 'good person', while an aura of divinity and magic was cultivated around him. Subsequently, along with economic growth and the new urban middle class, the king symbolised the modern virtuous monarch (*thammaracha*) and an icon of morality embodying hope, unity, and national stability. Patrick Jory (2016) similarly argues that the king combined the traditional figure of an ideal Buddhist king and modernity. The monarch's well-publicised theory of the 'Sufficiency Economy' (*setthakit pho phiang*) after 1997 is a prime example. In contrast to the rapid ups and downs of past economic states, the king advised the nation of moderation (*pho praman*) based on Buddhist concepts and emphasising reason and immunity along with knowledge and 'morality.'

Understandably, royalist movements and military governments adopted the meaning embodied through the figure of the king to define what a good person was. Baker and Pasuk (2022: 327) argue that "[h]is moral authority became available for others to claim and deploy" and so royalist movements align themselves with the morality attached to King Rama IX, even though his reign has already passed. This ideology can be seen in various cultural artifacts. In architecture, Chatri Prakitnonthakan (2020) claims that 'ultra-Thai architecture' became an influential ideology behind the design of major buildings such as the new parliament and the Supreme Court after 2006. This refers to Thai classical cosmology and monarchical symbolism which have deep connections to the suppression of democratic ideology by ultra-royalist logic. In addition, Pasoot Lasuka (2015) finds that films about historical heroes, self-made businessmen or singers

reflect the political ideology of the middle class. Royal-nationalist opposition to greedy politicians is presented in such works, while Buddhism remains the core value. Similar trends are found in several types of contemporary films as Veluree (2015) and Natthanai (2017) found.

Conversely, ‘the Other’ is dehumanised and demonised. According to Prajak (2022), royalists repeatedly quoted the king’s speech of 1969 with reference to a good person governing the country (*hai khon di pokkhrong ban mueang*). The key message is that the mixture of good and bad people in society is common, yet it is essential to promote good people to govern and suppress bad people. Analysing the words used by the PDRC protestors, Prajak finds that they claim themselves as being ‘good people’ who love and show gratitude to the nation and protect the monarchy and Buddhism. They are honest and hate corrupt people and gather to protect the nation for future generations. The opposite to this is bad, eccentric, and vulgar people who betray and sell the nation, plan to abolish the monarchy and lack good minds. These were said to be the characteristics of Yingluck’s government and supporters (Prajak 2022: 75-76).

Furthermore, Prajak identifies ‘exclusionary nationalism’ and authoritarian culture as one of the most significant legacies of Thailand’s political and social landscape. This can be seen from the late 2010s onwards through the discourse of anti-patriotism or ‘hating the nation’ (*chang chat*) especially after increasing backlash from the new generation. Evidently, the discourse of ‘hating the nation’ revolved around the new generation and youth movement in the early 2020s. The same dehumanisation and demonisation was recycled and highlighted. Because they used a three-finger salute, they were called a ‘three-hoof mob’ (*mob sam kip*) - using animal feet to represent human fingers - similar to the ‘red buffalo’ insult used against the Red Shirts.

### ***The Quest for Unity***

Unity or *khvam samakkhi* is a repeated and generally accepted notion used when a crisis arises in Thai society. During political polarisation, the notion of national unity is referenced both in official media and popular culture. Words and phrases like reconciliation (*samannachan*), ‘we are all Thai’ (*khon Thai duay*

*kan*), ‘we can be different, yet not divided’ (*taek tang mai taek yak*) have been underlined for decades. For instance, Abhisit Vejjajiva’s government (2008-2011) launched the key campaign ‘United Thai, Strong Thai’ (*Thai Samakkhi, Thai Khem Khaeng*) in 2009 by gathering people to sing the national anthem at 6pm and televising it nationwide (*MGR Online* 2009). With the ‘to restore not to revenge’ (*kho kae khai mai kae khaen*) campaign, Yingluck’s government attempted to issue the Bill of Reconciliation (*prong dong*). After the PDRC, unity returned as one of the essential campaigns of the 2014 junta. ‘Bringing Happiness Back’ is a song released by the junta calling for ‘bringing love back to the country’ which implies a lack of unity. After this, a song named ‘Tomorrow’ (*wan phrungni*) was launched in 2016 sung by children’s voices to remind adults about unity and bringing peace back to the country.

The repeated notion of unity has played a vital role in Thai history. Adopted from the Buddhist term - *samaggi* - which means concord, unity, harmony, unanimity, and union (P.A. Payutto 1985: 410), the discourse has come to be the dominant narrative for national independence and vice versa. Again, Royalist-Nationalist history emphasises unity among Thais as a key action to protect the nation from threat. The downfall of the Ayutthaya kingdom in 1767 was a critical incident referring to the lack of unity resulting in the occupation of other countries. This narrative has hugely influenced and been widely promoted by the authorities from the period of absolute monarchy to the present day. King Rama V, for instance, wrote *Phraborom Rachathibai Rueang Samakkhi (The King’s Explanation of Unity)* (1903) discussing why this concept mattered and asking for concord to ensure Siam’s survival under colonial politics. During King Rama IX’s reign, *samakkhi* was commonly referenced and the king himself was the symbol of unity during the national crises. Additionally, his name Bhumibol, which means ‘power of the land’, was interpreted as his strengthening the nation by gathering Thais together. When internal crises occurred, moreover, the king was used as a symbol by all groups as ‘we are under the same King.’ When he died, thousands of people came to pay respect to his body and gathered during the royal cremation since ‘we have the same father.’

Although it is undeniable that *samakkhi* can be viewed as a top-down means to unite the nation through a shared identity with one king and one nationality, this notion has become a ‘common sense’ reaction and

solution in Thai society to crises. The discourse of ‘unity is power’ (*samakkhi khue phalang*) is central. Undoubtedly, during times of political polarisation, unity has thus been underlined as a crucial policy of the authorities to push for national reconciliation and peace. Nonetheless, in reality it is not an easy task to reconcile deep divides. Societal monopolisation from state-constructed ideology and mainstream media has also been disrupted by the Internet and new media, as Thailand has an increasingly intimate entanglement with the rest of the world.

### **Thailand’s Entanglement with the Globe and the Demonopolisation of Thainess**

After 2006, Thailand was transformed by an entanglement with the global through technology. Thai life has become more and more inseparable from the Internet and transnational flows. New media has allowed once-marginalised groups to voice their identity and call for equal rights. Thainess, as shaped by the state-constructed ideology, is demonopolised. Instead, fragmentation and a lack of consensus can be found along with political polarisation.

#### ***The Internet and Political and Social Movements***

The Internet emerged in Thailand in the late 1980s, yet it took a while before it became part of individual life around the early 2000s and it has seen consistent growth over two decades. According to the World Bank (Figure 6), there were no Thai individuals who used the Internet in 1997 before this gradually rose to around 10% of the population in 2004. An increased proportion of users can then be found over the 2000s. Interestingly, this figure rocketed in the 2010s. From 2013, growing numbers can be seen and a steep curve is exhibited during the late 2010s, and a rise in the number of users per year can be seen from 2018 – 2021. In 2022, almost 90% of Thai citizens use the Internet as part of their daily lives.

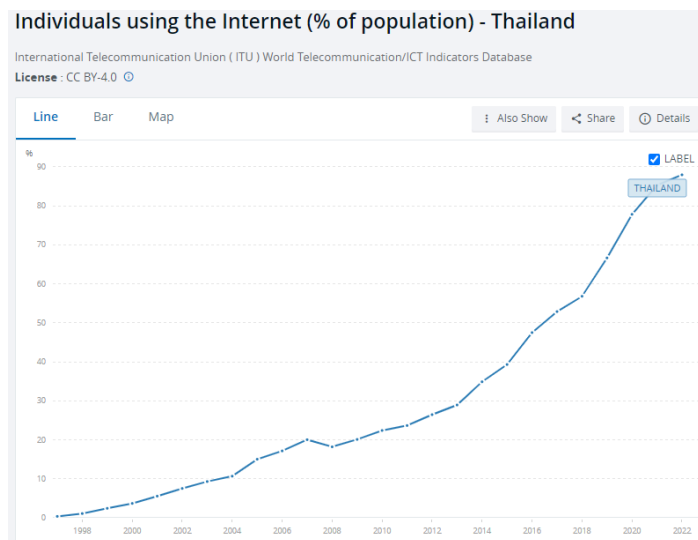


Figure 6 The graph showing individual use of the Internet in Thailand from 1997 to 2022.

source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?end=2022&locations=TH&start=1997>

Thus, it is undeniable that the Internet is part of Thai life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has become more influential over time. The technology has created a new space for individuals to share interests which sometimes cannot be discussed widely in the traditional media due to censorship. This allows political discussions on subjects like the monarchy - a taboo topic in Thai society and against *lèse-majesté* law - to appear on the Internet. For example, the website ‘Same Sky’ (*fa diaw kan*) started in 2006 as a space to radically discuss the monarchy, emerging amidst the high popularity of King Rama IX. After the 2006 coup, this site saw high participation especially during the two-colour demonstrations from 2008-2009 (Metta 2021).

In addition, social media has become a key tool for political critics and demonstrations. Aim Sinpeng (2021b: 167-169) proposes that social media platforms, especially Facebook, were game changers for the PDRC in the 2010s, because that time was crucial for the growth of social media in Thailand. In turn, this supported the shifting representation of the PDRC leader, Suthep Thaugsuban, who went from being an unpopular politician to a ‘top influencer.’ Twitter was another key platform during the 2020 youth movement, with Aim (2021a) calling it ‘hashtag activism’ because they used the hashtag #FreeYouth to promote the physical demonstrations for voicing youth rights and redefining state-constructed citizenship.

With the growth of the Internet and social movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, once suppressed groups and ethnicities were able to find a platform. Firstly, several ethnicities which were once suppressed under assimilation to become Thai and treated as ‘minority groups’ (*chon klum noi*) can now present their own identities. Siraporn Nathalang (2016: 230) points out that globalisation and the cultural diversity paradigm makes it possible for Tai ethnicities including overseas Chinese people to access information and present themselves equally. Furthermore, transnational movements and international organisations play a key role in ‘becoming Indigenous People’ (*chon pao phuen mueang*). Prasit Leepracha (2019) argues that the ethnoscape and ideoscape of globalisation makes ethnicities collaborate beyond a nation's boundary.

Aside from ethnicity, gender issues underwent a predominant change. Baker and Pasuk (2022: 301-302) point out that gender and sexuality diversity are markers of an essential shift in Thai society in the new millennium. From hidden gendered identities and stigmatisation from HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ+ life has become widely displayed along with many terms for sexual diversity. A significant shift took place after 2006. In 2007, the term *phet* connoted both sex and gender while the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people was reflected in the report of the National Human Rights Commission. In the same year, the classic Boys Love film *Love of Siam* was widely released. Although, as Atit Pongpanit (2011) shows, in the plot love between the two schoolboys remains impossible under heterosexual norms and the prioritisation of family values, but happy endings have since become possible, especially in the Boys Love series released a decade later. Additionally, LGBTQ+ rights became more significant nationally. The term ‘persons of diverse sexualities’ was first used in 2012 before the enforcement of the Gender Equality Act in 2015 (Baker and Pasuk 2022: 301-302). The movement to draft a civil partnership bill was in progress in the 2020s and this issue became a key policy for political parties before the same-sex marriage bill was passed into law in 2024.

Another group that deserves attention is the 2020 youth movement. The Thai youth formed a key group in Thai politics during the student movement in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the role of student activists was weakened after the October 6<sup>th</sup> massacre in 1976. Kanokrat Lertchusakul (2021: 208) illustrates that student activism began again after the 2014 coup which can be seen from the cultural and symbolic adoption of



dystopian novels and films. Unlike previous large demonstrations, the youth movement organised flash mobs and launched a campaign against conservative norms, feeling suppressed by the nation, school, and family. Here, Baker and Pasuk (2022: 329) underline that from 2020 “age became a factor in Thai politics as never before.” While the younger generation under 25 are ‘digital natives’ who grew up with political polarisation, economic struggle, and an urbanised and globalised Thailand, the senior generation grew up with strong anti-communism policy as well as the active role of King Rama IX during the Cold War. The senior citizen ‘receives’ the media like television whereas the younger generation ‘participates’ in accessing, sharing, and exchanging media through the Internet.

### *Intertwining with the Korean Wave*

In Thailand, the 1997 financial crisis stimulated Thai nationalist sentiment and paved the way for the rise of Thaksin. In South Korea, the ‘IMF Crisis’, as it was called, led the country to the new dawn of the Korean Wave focusing on exporting Korean popular culture (see further in Jin 2024). China and Southeast Asia are strategic locations for this policy, and its success has been clear across Southeast Asia since the early 2000s. In August 2019, Jung Joo-ri and Lee Jihae (2019) captured the trend of K-pop viewers across the globe (Figure 7), finding that Southeast Asia is the leading region for the consumption of K-pop. Bangkok is reported as of the highest viewerships of K-pop across the globe.



Figure 7 Consumption map of K-Pop across the globe in 2019.

Source: <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=174587>

Accordingly, the Korean Wave has arguably shaped and transformed culture in the region. *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia*, edited by Mary J. Ainslie and Joanne B.Y. Lim (2015), shows the intertwining of K-Pop with Southeast Asian films and dramas and the emergence of hit tourism and transnational networks among fans. In Thailand, K-dramas became part of Thai free TV in the early 2000s. Moreover, K-music and K-idol individuals gained popularity in Thailand from the 2000s to 2010s. A key milestone for K-pop in Thai society was around 2005 to 2006 when the historical drama *Dae Jang Geum* or *Jewel of the Palace* aired via the main free TV channel 3 (Figure 8) (Ubonrat and Shin 2007; Ainslie 2016). Noticeably, this national hit of Korean culture in Thailand coincided with the political crisis in 2006.



Figure 8 The Poster of Dae Jung Geum Drama on Channel 3.

Source: [https://www.facebook.com/Ch3Thailand/photos/a.1330600120362703/1381887261900655/?type=3&locale=ja\\_JP](https://www.facebook.com/Ch3Thailand/photos/a.1330600120362703/1381887261900655/?type=3&locale=ja_JP)

The popularity of K-culture posits South Korea as a modernised and desirable country among Thais, resulting in the rise of tourism to Korea and aspects of Koreanness (Ubonrat and Shin 2007; Kamon 2020; Jirathorn 2019). Features from famous dramas and idols have also come to shape Thai audiences and adapted to Thai lifestyle. A prime example is the photo pose of a ‘mini heart’ which was introduced and is now famous among Thais. The Thai authorities also adopt the pose to communicate their modern credentials and proximity to the people (Figure 9). Moreover, the aesthetic of Thai stars has also shifted from a Westernised look in the 1980s to 1990s to a Korean appearance resembling K-pop idols (Figure 10).



Figure 9 Prayut's profile picture with a mini heart gesture on his official Facebook page in 2019.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=519372555225031&set=a.433482224815296>



Figure 10 Famous Thai boy and girl bands K-OTIC (left) and Fay Fang Kaew (right) in 2010.

Source: <https://musicstation.kapook.com/view19724.html>

More essentially, the interwoven Korean Wave has made a new space for the imagination and negotiation between transnational cultures and Thai culture. According to Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Shin Hyunjoon (2007: 125), the Korean Wave leads Thai audiences, mainly middle-class youth, to organise transnational activities connecting Thai youth to several nations. Critically, K-culture has been adopted as a means of social critique by several groups to contest and negotiate their status because K-Pop is regarded as a new type of modernity that is different, being neither from the West nor a modernised project from Bangkok. Mary J. Ainslie (2016: 12) proffers a comparison between audiences of K-drama in Bangkok and in Isan or the Northeastern region, whereby Thai K-Pop audiences are freely able to imagine their identities beyond the official hierarchical definition of Thainess, regardless of their locations. This means that urban and rural divisions within Bangkok's hierarchical modernity are disrupted while individuals can assert themselves with transnational culture and criticise their own culture through a comparative lens.

The Korean Wave also voices queer identity. For Megan Sinnott (2012) and Dredge Byung'chu Kang (2014), K-Pop provides a space for Thai gay and lesbian people to showcase their new status and identity. K-Pop's aesthetic of soft masculinity and ambiguous gender combine to create a new category and identity for queer females or *tom/dee* (Sinnott 2012: 471). Meanwhile, Kang (2014: 567) focuses on the Thai gay cover dance of the Korean 'Girl Generation', as this transnational phenomenon creates new possibilities for the imagination and embodiment of Thai gay people. In all cases, K-culture is not only a 'liminal space' wherein queer individuals negotiate their identity with Korean modernity but also a site of contestation for existing norms of Thainess.

### **Thai Literature during the Political and Social Change after 2006**

Thai literature is an essential example that encapsulates political and social change during the almost two decades after 2006. Political polarisation has divided poets, while the theme of unity has been emphasised. This has also disrupted absolute political autonomy, making several groups that might once have been suppressed increasingly able to speak for themselves, supported by new technology and globalisation.

#### ***Thai Literature Amid National Political Crisis***

As mentioned in Chapter 1, intense political violence has shaped the development of Thai literature by dividing Thai poets. Likewise, the themes of 'good people,' 'bad politicians,' and unity are repeatedly found in the aftermath of 2006 in popular fiction. For instance, from the study of the 'collective forgetting' of the 1932 *khana ratsadorn* or the People's Party in Thai historical novels, Rachod Nusen (2023) finds that the authorities in 1946 suppressed and demonised the role of the party leading to a sense of collective forgetting. During the political crisis in 2006, historical novels like *Nam-ngoen Thae (The True-Blue Blood)* (2015) and *16 Ongsa Nuea (16th Parallel North)* (2017) by Win Lyovarin criticise the People's Party for causing social division, meanwhile depicting the party as coldblooded and obsessed with power. Interestingly, the dictatorial image of the party changed from the figure of a military dictator to an untrustworthy politician; meanwhile, the unreadiness of people for democracy is repeated.

Though popular literature and the media widely promoted conservative ideology, critiques of conservative norms were founded mostly among award-winning books, such as the winners of the SEA-Write Award, along with short stories from new authors from the 2000s to 2010s. These works have been composed in various styles while criticising conservatism both explicitly and subtly. A short story collection named *Korani Sueksa Rueang Lukkae Fan Phu (A Case Study of a Lamb that has a Decayed Tooth)* by Chatwut Boonyarak won the Seven Book Award in 2007. The titular short story talks about a man with colour blindness which is juxtaposed with the ceremony of the 60th year of King Rama IX's reign in 2006. Thais are 'invited' to wear yellow shirts, the man wears the wrong colour getting him into trouble with royalists. The story ends with the question of what 'goodness' is, through an interesting interplay with blindness as well as the word 'lamb' which can invoke the figure of a black sheep and a victim.

The question of the discourse of 'good people' can also be found. The best illustration of this is the short story *Nai Lok Thi Thuk Khon Yak Pen Khon Di (In the World where Everyone Wants to be a Good Person)* in the 2017 SEA Write Award-winning short story collection *Singto Nok Kok (Unorthodox Lion)* by the youngest-ever awardee – Jidanun Lueangpiansamut. This dystopian narrative illustrates a society in which everyone is born with one card. If they are found guilty of deviating from or questioning social norms, their cards will turn from white to black and allow everyone around them to kill them in the name of goodness. This questions moral standards as imposed by the authorities and exposes the absurdity of this norm, ending with the wider question of how one can live in this kind of world.

### ***Empowering and Embracing Voices from the Margin***

Since the conflict has invaded personal relationships in everyday life, Ruenruthai Sujjapun (2015: 56) proposes that a democratic spirit established from the student movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 incident to 2014 has deeply touched individuals' lives and spans from the macro level to domestic relationships. Appearing in hundreds of short stories about human rights, freedom, and equality, marginal groups play a key role in Thai political short stories as many authors show the otherness and struggles of these groups

against dominant powers (Ruenruthai 2015: 62-63). Even though Ruenruthai's research does not pinpoint when this topic became more evident, Soranut Tailanga (2016: (7)41) gives a broad picture of Thai literature between 1997 and 2010 finding that marginalised groups have grown and become more accepted. This trend is apparent from negotiations between the centre and the margin, gender issues, and various representations of the Other Within.

Firstly, the contestation and negotiation of rural individuals underlining their power struggles against the central powers can be seen in Isan, the Northeastern region. This tension is a dominant theme in Isan writings from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and impacted the literature for life movement and regionalism, highlighting the dichotomies of the urban/rural, Bangkok/Isan, and the centre/region during the 1980s and 1990s (Platt 2013: 230). In the 2010s, nonetheless, a 'new wave' of Isan writers tried to contest stereotypes and negotiate Isan identity. Phu Kradart is an important author whose work challenges the norms of using standard Thai language by mixing Thai, Lao, and Isan dialects. The novel *Nerathet (Exile)* (2014) is a prime example of these issues relayed through an Isan protagonist journeying back home. Kongkrit Triyawong (2015) argues that the linguistic choices elucidate the incompleteness of Isan identity under Thainess, under which people from Isan are stereotyped as being naïve and a tool for politicians. Moreover, using Isan folklore, the novel criticises national history and touches upon the 2006 coup and the crackdown on the Red Shirts in 2010.

Secondly, LGBTQ+ is an increasingly apparent theme in novels from the late 2000s, along with the active social movement. Interestingly, changing gender representation has become a the hugely popular element of Thai Boys Love (hereafter BL) stories in Thailand which have gained international recognition from the mid-2010s. As Natthanai Prasannam (2019b) explicates, this type of popular fiction aimed at younger generations is taken from Japanese Yaoi fiction, and this term has since been adapted into the Thai term 'Y fiction' (*niyai wai*). BL explores romantic relationships between young male couples and is in high demand not only among gay male readers but from female teenagers too. Though Natthanai (2020) contends that this genre is different from gay literature, it marks subcultures being exposed to wider audiences.

Lastly, the representation of the Other Within has been actively contested and negotiated since the 2010s. SEA-Write Award books are key illustrations of this trajectory. The 2011 Collected Short Story awardee *Daet Chao Ron Koen Kwa Cha Jip Kafae (When Morning Sunlight is Too Hot to Sip Coffee)* by Jadet Kamjorndet, for example, tells of several marginal groups and their struggles against nationalist and political conflict. The book's name comes from one short story in the collection which showcases conflict in the southern provinces and the lives of both soldiers and civilians. Additionally, marginal voices, self-alienation, and oppression from dominant discourse are evident themes from characters with overseas Chinese identities in the 2018 Winning Novel *Phutthasakkarat Atsadong Kap Songjam Khong Songjam Khong Maeo Kulap Dam (Memories of the Memories of the Black Rose Cat)* by Veeraporn Nitiprapha. Instead of focusing on a successful tycoon family from 'one mat and one pillow' (*suea phuen mon bai*) who are well-integrated into Thai society (see this discussion in Thak 2018), the novel tells of the trauma of individuals in a Chinese family.

### ***Encountering Globalisation and New Media***

Globalisation not only makes themes in Thai literature more engaged with cosmopolitanism under the new world order, but also diversifies genres in Thai literature. Thai fantasy fiction has become an increasingly popular genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century dominated by the global hit *Harry Potter* from 2001. Translated works then inspired adaptations of Thai fantasy fiction which are found in juvenile literature. Koraya Techawongstien (2020) asserts that there was a mass production of youth fantasy translation around the early 2000s along with the reproduction of fantasy works by local writers. This trend can be seen among young writers on the Internet. *The White Rose* by Dr. Pop and *Huakhamoi Haeng Baramos (The Thief of Baramos)* by Rabbit in the early 2000s are prime examples as these fantasy and adventure stories were created by teenage writers and are widely popular among young readers, becoming best sellers nationwide (Ruenruthai 2017: 59-62).

Another wave is young adult (YA) dystopia fiction which has gained popularity among young Thai audiences following success in the West. Key examples are *The Hunger Games* trilogy by American writer Suzanne Collins, *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner, and the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth. All of these works became major Hollywood films and were popularised among young adult audiences around the world including in Thailand in the 2010s. Along with the coup in 2014, the emergence of so-called ‘Thai dystopian fiction’ grew, especially in the late 2010s to 2020s, ushered in by the common themes of futuristic worlds under dictatorial regimes (see Chapter 8).

Apart from this, there has been a growth in fan fiction (hereafter fanfic). Ruenruthai (2016) shows that Japanese and Korean boybands, girl groups, dramas, and so on have given rise to this novel type among young readers. Interestingly, there are many works combining classical Thai stories like the *Ramakien* with youth fan culture. For example, in Figure 11, K-pop idols appear along with Hanuman, the key character from the *Ramakien* (Figure 11). Aside from that, several fanfics are composed with BL convention while hybridising with diverse signs of Thainess.

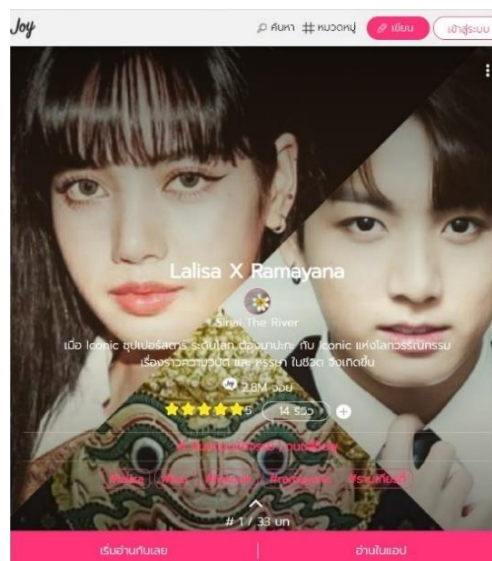


Figure 11 Fanfiction using Korean Idols along with the *Ramakien* on Joylada.

Source: <https://www.joylada.com/story/5e4b7d1c0087d60001140389-Lalisa%20X%20Ramayana>



Additionally, the Internet provided a new medium changing the consumption of literature from reading paper pages to digital device screens. Internet literature launched and gained popularity in the early 2000s. The first well-known Thai work is *AID Diary* by Kaew which was composed on her blog before being published in 2001 and securing more than 10 reprints. The Internet has also provided a space for readers to share interests and group together as part of communities, unlike with print. According to Pan Nilphan (2006), online communities like Web Board gathered fans of the serial novel *Phet Phra Uma* by Phanomthian allowing readers of different ages, jobs, and backgrounds to share and construct their identity and their common interests around the novel.

Internet literature goes hand in hand with younger generations. Dek-D which means ‘good children’ is a website that shows the transformative creation and consumption of literature. Dek-D was launched by a group of university students in 1999. From an interview with Waroros Rojana, the co-founder and chief executive of the website, Dek-D was started with the intention to create a space for adolescents which was rare at that time. The fiction component originated from the creator’s friend who loved to write, and the fiction on Dek-D or *niyai dekdi* appeared in 2000. Fiction is presented as a web novel with one long passage of text divided into different chapters. In 2002, the website hit a milestone when the fantasy story *The White Rose* became a national hit (Interview with Waroros Rojana 2022).

Accordingly, young and amateur writers have since used the free space on Dek-D to publish and when their stories become popular, publishers contact them to publish their works in printed form. Many famous writers like Rompaeng and Prapt have emerged through the website. From data taken from my interviews conducted in 2022, there are more than 1.2 million fictional works on the database and around 100,000 stories are created each year. As for the users, approximately three million engage with the site per month, ranging from high school students to professionals in their early thirties. Romance and fantasy are consistently the most popular genres while the popularity of BL and Chinese stories has recently risen significantly (Interview with Waroros Rojana 2022).

While online media has rapidly increased, print media gradually declined in the mid-2010s. Printed platforms have shaped the trajectory of Thai literature since the late 19th century alongside the domination of the colonial West. Periodical magazines were a key medium in modern Thai literature. Nevertheless, as Ruenruthai (2020) remarks, several longstanding and reputable magazines in Thailand closed around 2015 due to disruption imposed by online platforms. The result of this is that authors both young and old have had to move onto online spaces to create novels. Several e-book websites like *Meb* and *Okbee* emerged for the creation and dissemination of such literature.

An-owl or [www.anowl.co](http://www.anowl.co) is one example of the survival of writers from media disruption. From my interviews with Pongsakorn and Alina – co-founders of the website – the platform was created by a collaboration of authors who previously published their stories periodically in magazines. The disruption of printed media stopped this. They thus attempted to keep their readers and find a space to create their novels. The website was officially launched through self-financing in 2018. Interestingly, An-owl works like a magazine as there are editors who screen the work and each chapter is published individually before being printed. This new media benefits the connection between authors and readers as comments from readers can affect the direction of the story (Interview with Pongsakorn and Alina 2022)

New forms of literature have emerged along with increased internet access and the proliferation of digital devices. For example, Joylada is a platform for stories created by chats between users (Figure 12). According to Joylada Community Manager, the site was launched as a chat fiction platform in 2017. Joylada is the first chat literature platform to imitate the mode of communication in LINE, a Japanese chat application widely used in Thai society. Joylada creates a story in a chat room format and narrates the story through dialogue as readers read each other's messages. It became a popular site among young users, and especially school to university students in their mid-20s. There is an average of three million monthly users and the most famous stories are romantic (Interview with Pornnapat Chaisingthong 2022).



Regarding reinventions, the conventions of Thai literary creation have been transmitted from one generation to the next. Although Western forms like novels and short stories were introduced to Thai literary circles in the late 19th century, Thai writers still adapt old traditions and hybridise them with the addition of new stories and forms (see Chapter 3). In modern works, revisionary stories of classical literature are commonly found by hybridising old features with new contexts. *Lilit Phra Lo* is a key example as the story has been adapted over the centuries from Ayutthaya to Bangkok poetry and reconstructed for contemporary novels (see Soison 2003). Kaewkao is a famous author from around the 1980s who adapted and hybridised classical literature and folklore such as *Sangthong*, and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* in her novels (see Jeeranat 2007). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are other authors such as Pongsakorn and Prapt, to name but a few, who hybridise classical literature and folklore, adding in new elements to serve contemporary readers (e.g., Saranpat 2015; Ratchaneekorn 2018).

Additionally, grand historical narratives, including folk narratives passed down through memory, are still retold. Interestingly, these elements in contemporary works serve not only the purpose of national identity but also have their own specific objectives. For instance, there are two papers focusing on folk narratives in Daen-Aran Saengthong's work entitled 'Sao Hai.' Wanrug Suwanwattana (2015) argues that retelling local narratives through classical tale-telling might initially seem to appropriate folk culture, but in fact it further serves royalist-nationalist narratives. While largely agreeing with Wanrug, Phacharawan Boonpromkul (2019) suggests an ecocritical interpretation of Sao Hai, noting the ways in which it reflects how natural resources have been invaded by human civilisation. However, from my literature reviews, there are limited studies bridging the backdrop of the post-2006 period and reinvention in Thai literature.

Nonetheless, there are few applications of hybridity theory in the analysis of Thai literature, especially in 21<sup>st</sup>-century texts. There are studies of the hybridity of Thai literature along with the colonial influence and hybridity of Western literature in early Thai prose writing during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century like *Nithan Thong-In* (*The Tale of Mr Thong-In*) which King Rama VI adapted from *Sherlock Holmes* and the creation of fantasy fiction in Egypt in *Nang Neramit* (*Divine Nymphs*) by Khru Liam. From Harrison's (2009; 2014b)

studies, these adaptations of Western writing hybridise Thai culture, revealing how knowledge and power are embedded in texts linked to the semicoloniality of Siam. Regarding King Rama VI's adaptation of *Sherlock Holmes*, rationalism grounded in *Nithan Thong-In* shows the elites' taste for new Thai literary conventions. Meanwhile, *Nang Neramit*, adapted from the late-Victorian Orientalist adventures to Egypt, presents irrational, hypersexual, premodern, and supernatural features. Harrison's works show how one hybridity can be interrogated and promoted, whereas another type of hybridity can be suppressed, thus elucidating the landscape of cultural politics during semicolonial Siam.

Additionally, Chusak Pattarakulvanit (2015) analyses *Pisat (The Spectre)* (1953) by Seni Saowaphong in terms of hybridity. Chusak argues that the novel establishes the protagonist, Sai Seema, who is from a lower class rural background, as a spectre haunting the Bangkok elites because of his hybrid identity. While Sai's background is rural and poor, he adopts an upper-middle class identity through education. His hybrid identity disrupts the status of elite people through the threat of mimicry. So, the hybrid embodiment of the protagonist contests and negotiates the status quo of the elite.

There are studies of the reinventions of Thai literature in other media. In the work of Siriporn Phakdeephasuk (2005), the hybridity of Disney, Japanese cartoons, and Thai classical literature is examined in a TV animation adapted from the *Ramakien* named *Hanuman Chansamon* to serve a new context of young audiences. Moreover, the cultural hybridisation of Thai literature and folktales appears in 'edutainment' cartoon books which serve notions of educational competitiveness and the desire to cultivate 'bilingual' or 'international' children (Siriporn 2015).

Including all of the abovementioned works, in-depth studies of hybridity in 21st-century Thai literary texts are rare, despite a shared recognition of cultural hybridisation (see Ruenruthai 2017; Nittaya 2023). In contrast, hybridity is used widely as a framework to study in different fields connecting to the political and social context of a particular time in Thailand. Several works discuss the impact of globalisation on media, especially after the economic crackdown in 1997. Amporn Jirattikorn (2003) points out that the film

*Suriyothai* (2001; dir. M.C. Chatree Chalerm Yukol), about the sacrifice of the Ayutthaya Queen Suriyothai, presents Thainess through the hybridisation of economic crisis, neo-nationalism, and global forces. Apart from myth-making and the creation of a heroine to restabilise national identity in the face of globalisation, *Suriyothai* combines local and global features and is commodified to local and global audiences.

Moreover, during the Cold War, the action film *Insi Thong* (1970) is argued by Rachel Harrison (2010b) to be a hybridised film used to serve the political agenda of promoting anti-communism and to show the paranoia of Thai authorities during the Cold War. The hero embodies hybridised Thainess to protect the nation from communism. Likewise, Krittaya Na Nongkhai and Siriporn Phakdeephassook (2017) propose that the protagonists in 30 Thai action-adventure films from 1997 to 2010 shows are 'hybrid heroes', of three different kinds: cowboys, martial arts fighters, and necromancers. These represent, they argue, the cultural hybridisation of Western film heroes and Thai beliefs, responding to the fuzziness of globalisation.

Aside from Western influence, the Korean Wave has brought hybridity to Thai media. Isaya Sinpongsporn (2018) studies the remaking of Korean dramas into Thai dramas in the 2010s and finds that features of Thainess, such as Buddhism, Thai foods and Thai values, are hybridised to serve Thai audiences, even though the original stories came from Korea. Interestingly, Thainess as defined by government ideology rarely presents such media forms. Rather, these dramas are hybridised depending on both the directors and the audiences who are middle class and range from teenagers to working adult professionals.

Regarding anthropological studies, hybridity is discussed in terms of popular religion and the flow of capitalism and globalisation in Thailand from the 1990s onwards. Anthropologist Pattana Kittiarasa (2005) argues that Thai religions and beliefs are beyond 'syncretic.' Spirit mediums and other beliefs in contemporary Thai society are clear examples of religious hybridity and the commodification of beliefs. Pattana elucidates this further in another essay (2012), concluding that the hybridity of beliefs in Thai society between 1990s and 2000s is dominated by three factors: money, media, and multiple belief systems.

Arguably, the lack of studies on hybridity in Thai literature stems from two causes. The first is the nationalist perspective of Thai literature. The paradigm perceives literature as works of national treasures and high culture and asks Thais to ‘protect’ literature as part of Thainess. Rachel Harrison (2014a) stresses that criticism of Thai literature is not strongly encouraged. Close readings of poetic aesthetics has been the predominant methodology in the Thai literary field; while ‘Western theories’ are considered to be ‘the beast.’ Secondly, traditional readings of adapted classical works are regarded as a Thai literary convention (*khanop*). Despite the ‘hybrid nature’ of Thai literature, it is usually deployed to link to nationalist ideas of the long-standing dynamics of Thai literature (see Chapter 3). Cultural hybridisation is thus seen as one phenomenon of the process of the creative perpetuation of Thai literary cultures as they adapt to the globalised world (Nittaya 2023).

Overall, there are some studies of hybridity and reinvention in Thai literature and their political and cultural dimensions. However, only colonial conditions and the periods of World War II and the Cold War attract scholarly interest, meaning there is still a large gap in research on recent phenomenon in Thailand, particularly the chaotic period of Thai politics from 2006 up to the present. Moreover, there remains a lack of exploration into the major trends of Thai fiction which adopt and adapt features of Thailand into contemporary works. Accordingly, it is the principal aim of this research project to supplement this knowledge and understand this phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the 2006 coup, Thai politics became polarised into different ideologies which was then followed by strong suppression from the junta for almost a decade. While the conservatives intensified the concept of the ‘good person’ along with promoting unity, the progressives asked for justice and fair standards. In this context, the Internet and globalisation have made it possible for different groups to make demands in everyday politics. The monopolisation of state-constructed Thainess has thus become hard to control while marginalised groups play an active role in provoking societal powers for their status and

rights. With inseparability from global trends, new types of culture like the Korean Wave have shaped Thai life along with the contestation and negotiation of Thai identity and culture.

Thai literature as a cultural product depicts a similar trend. While one perspective blames bad politicians as a threat and propagates the concept of ‘good people’, another questions the absurdity of such norms and the consequences of injustice. Unity is then posited as a solution for breaking this cycle. In addition, varied voices calling for identities and rights of marginal groups from their region, ethnicity, and gender are actively promoted. Meanwhile, the new lifestyle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has pushed Thai writing forwards. Waves of global popular genres like fantasy, fanfic, and dystopias have come to shape new types of writing which is possible via new mediums. Writing on the Internet increased throughout the decades disrupting longstanding print culture by providing a free space for writers and readers and allowing new forms of literature to emerge.

Nonetheless, there are limited studies that link these contexts and literary texts. New trends in literature are underrepresented in mainstream studies of Thai literature. This thesis thus uses types of literature as its main data, as outlined in Chapter 1, to closely examine the political and social context during the post-2006 crisis through reinvention and hybridity. I elaborate on these frameworks alongside the concept of Thainess and embodiment in the following chapter.



## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis consists of interdisciplinary research that employs several concepts in literary and cultural studies. Overall, the theories I use are grounded in diverse ideas from structuralism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism on the same strand of social construction rather than essentialism. This means that my research does not treat units of analysis, such as objects, the body, and the nation, as static or of natural existence. Instead, influenced by structuralism to the post-structuralism movement, the thesis discusses these cases and their social construction through discursive ideology and power relations in particular time and space. In addition, postcolonial studies applies an understanding of power struggles by inventing the notion of us and the Other, as well as the contestation and negotiation of power between centre and margin.

In doing so, I group these theories under four keywords: reinvention, hybridity, embodiment, and Thainess. Rather than strictly using a single theory for the entire thesis, I will combine diverse discussions under a particular keyword to show the nuances and understanding of a phenomenon. Moreover, from a decolonising standpoint, most of the grand theories are based on Western intellectual and Eurocentric points of view. Most of the analyses and examples used by key thinkers are from European and American societies, whereas Thailand is mostly dismissed. Accordingly, I aim to move beyond Eurocentric epistemology to interrogate it using Thai cases in which several scholars propose theories based on Thai society.

#### **Reinvention**

Reinvention plays a central role as the main research question of the thesis. The *Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.) defines this word as “the act of producing something new based on something that already exists, or the new thing that is produced.” From this definition, it can be seen at first that reinvention deals with the notion of ‘new’ and ‘old’, which are inseparable because reinvention involves adapting, adjusting, and transforming old features to look new. Interestingly, this term touches upon not only objects but is also related to self-definition, nationhood, and the construction of the Other.

### *Reinvention of Self, Nation, and the Other*

Reinvention can start with the body and personal identity. Sociologist Anthony Elliott (2021) argues that reinvention seems desirable for contemporary people in our daily lives from 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerism and capitalism that is “inextricably interwoven with the dream of ‘something else’” (Elliott 2021: 6). He gives examples such as bodily surgery and life-coaches which come to shape people as they reinvent their self-representation. In this sense, reinvention deals not only with old and new things but also with the desire to become something or someone.

As for societies, when social change occurs old traditions are reinvented to serve it, which Eric Hobsbawm (2013 [1983]: 1) calls ‘invented tradition’ - “taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Hobsbawm views the claim of ‘old’ tradition as recent or invented after an abrupt change in society, especially in the case of the Industrial Revolution. The reinvention of traditions is found to secure continuity in three ways: (1) it establishes or symbolises social cohesion, (2) legitimises institutions and constructs social relations, and (3) becomes a tool for socialisation.

The idea of invented tradition is inseparable from the nation. Hobsbawm (2013: 14) states that the nation needs to rely on invented traditions to construct nationhood among people who share some root of traditions and continuity. It also comes along with legitimacy and explanations of relationships in the nation like the monarch and people. Here, existing customs and rituals from religion or folklore “took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes” (Hobsbawm 2013: 5), like becoming the national anthem and national or state customs. As a consequence, invented tradition becomes the sign of a nation that preserves the origin of the past and secures the sense of continuity to the present and future.

Similarly, the invented tradition is an essential part of an ‘imagined community’ as proposed by Benedict Anderson (2016 [1983]). For Anderson (2016: 6), a nation “is an imagined political community – and

imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each other lives the image of their communion.” With limited land and independence, a nation is imagined as having deep and horizontal comradeship from common cultural roots and national consciousness among individuals in different spaces within the national border. Here, the transformation of cultural systems becomes the foundation of imagining the nation. Like Hobsbawm, Anderson is majorly concerned with language. He contends that the nation can be imagined when a national language emerges, which he views as reinvented from a religious language like Latin and local languages, founding national consciousness. Benefiting from printed technology, a so-called national language connects to nationalism in three aspects. Firstly, the national language creates a sense of unity of exchange and communication. Secondly, print media makes the language fixed or standardised in contrast to orality. Finally, this language gains status as a language-of-power linking to the new political system of the nation (Anderson 2016: 44-45).

While Anderson focuses on the construction of ‘us’ as the nation, Edward Said (1979) states the way in which the ‘Other’ was invented. In *Orientalism*, Said (1979: 1) argues that “[t]he Orient was almost a European invention” as geographical lands like East and West signify not only physical space but also the thoughts, feelings, and relationship towards the Other. Here, Said does not see the images and perception of the Orient, or non-West, as merely imagined. Rather, it “has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence” (Said 1979: 5). For example, several British writings portray Asia and Africa with imagery of madness, exotic beauty, and inferior power to the West. These images are unchanged and link them to a traditional society, whereas the West is modernised. Accordingly, the discourse of Orientalism inherits traditions from the West to define it as superior to the non-West. Then, this imbalanced power of knowledge reproduces stereotypes and becomes the reality.

Therefore, reinvention appears not only as the process and product of transforming old things into new things but also connects to temporal consciousness, a sense of belonging to a particular social and political unit, and the perspective toward self and the Other. Here, cultural and literary settings are key to represent

how these notions of self, nation, and the Other were reinvented.

### *Reinvention in Literary and Cultural Settings*

Reinvention is commonly found in literary and cultural settings across the globe, and several studies attempt to theorise the process and components of it. Richard Pfefferman (2013) proposes the ‘strategic reinvention’ theory as an ‘encore impulse’ based on American popular culture. He argues that reinvention is “strategically designed to start with the ‘encore impulse’ of an original, retain the core of its inherent value, and add value of its own by infusing meaning for a reconceived audience” (Pfefferman 2013: 3). Pfefferman argues that the successful reinventions of film and drama rely on the original while needing to define its own existence to make sense in the present time. This can be summarised in five components starting with (1) identifying the essence of the original version before and (2) considering a new place and time for recreating, of which new context should be aware. After this, (3) the reinvented version must be presented as authentic and different from the original - and (4) to convey relevant meaning. Lastly, (5) it taps into universal themes and classical schemes.

Another prime example can be seen in the folklore field with the concept of ‘folkloresque.’ Michael Dylan Foster (2016: 5) proposes that this is “popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g., films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions.” Folkloresque is able to mix different elements and present them in the folklore style and connect to existing tradition while showing authenticity derived from folkloric value, despite an indirect link. Additionally, Foster proposes three categories for looking at folkloresque: integration, portrayal, and parody. Firstly, integration is the way in which popular culture consciously and unconsciously uses folkloric motifs such as characters, items, or structures via the allusion and pastiche of the tradition. Secondly, the portrayal is how the image of folklore is represented in newer media and how this is perceived. This aspect revolves around the values, assumptions, and world views of producers and

audiences about folklore. Lastly, parody means commentary on the original source used in the newer version. This refers to the critique of folkloric elements in popular culture.

This reinvention of folklore can also be found in fiction, especially fantasy fiction. Folklorists and fantasy scholars (e.g., Sullivan 2001; Matthew 2011; Attebery 2022) commonly agree that fantasy fiction is grounded in folk traditions. According to CW Sullivan, III (2001), fantasy fiction reinvents folklore in three senses. Firstly, fantasy adopts mythic motifs, such as dragons, witches, or creatures, to make sense of things in the imaginative world. These motifs allow readers to link a new experience in fantasy fiction to their existing knowledge. Secondly, fantasy fiction plots are widely formed from archetypal structures. This means that folk narratives share a common formula which fantasy works still use to plot new stories. Lastly, modern fantasy works inherit not only elements or structures but also cultural worldviews that are embedded in traditional societies. Perceptions such as good or bad and hope or fear from the past revolve around the use of folklore in the new context.

In short, reinventions in these settings are based on old stories before adopting, adapting, transforming, criticising, and so on, occurs to create newer versions of popular cultures and fiction. This makes sense for the new version and shows the continuity of revisionary versions. More importantly, the reinvented version needs to be seen as different from the old one to serve a new context. Here, this opens a space where old worldviews, values, and perceptions from the past appear with new values, which can show the contestation and negotiation of meaning including the sense of reinvention of self, nation, and the Other as mentioned above. Therefore, the cultural and historical context of reinvention is crucial to examine.

### ***Thai Literary and Cultural Reinvention***

Reinvention in Thailand, like other Southeast Asian contexts, can be found in traditional literary and cultural artifacts. The Thai *Ramakien* adapted from the Indian *Ramayana*, for example, has been circulated as versions of a tale for several centuries before being reinvented as a drama play for the establishment of the Bangkok kingdom to serve the political agenda of its new rulers (see Chapter 6). As Hobsbawm says,

the invented tradition of the *Ramakien* came during rapid change to serve the new context affirming the continuity of Ayutthaya. After this, modernity and the influence of colonialism were subsequent factors provoking the reinvention of tradition. Still, Harrison (2001) views that the trend of reinvented Thai literature, including Southeast Asian texts, remains by reception, adaptation, and reinvention. She explains the process and element of how Southeast Asian texts encounter Western canons and create new types of local texts by the selective reception of Western form and content adapted to respond to local writings. Some stories are reinvented by localisation to the Thai context like *Nithan Thong-In*.

Essentially, the literary and cultural reinvention of modern Siam to globalised Thailand cannot be separated from nation-building and the quest for national identity. Since the nation has become the central concern of Siamese elites, respond to the disruptive change from colonialism to construct an imagined community by inventing tradition. In doing so, Harrison and Jackson (2009: 336), building from Hobsbawm, state that the cultural reinvention of Siam is to “assimilate external influences, and do so with agency, selecting those that resonate and inspire, while rejecting those that do not.” In the case of literature, Harrison (2010a) contends that reinvention in Thai modern literature not only processes replication but also reinvention and reinterpretation. It has a double process of interpreting and creating new things and comes with a transgression of power.

Apart from discussions in anglophone academia, the reinvention of Thai literature is one of the key frameworks used by Thai literary scholars. Yet the approach is different as it is mostly dominated by the idea of continuity or transmitting (*kan suepthot*) and creativity (*kan sangsan*) or creative perpetuation (*kan suepsan*). These terms are commonly found in Thai academic literature to explain the ‘literary root’ of Thai literature which has been transmitted from past convention (*khanop*) and poets in the latter period must view convention as a teacher (*khru*) for creating new versions by referencing older ones (e.g. Nittaya 2023). The study in this approach asks how and what conventions are transmitted and how this created the newer texts. Indeed, it proves the sense of continuity of Thai literary convention and affirms the ‘traditional root’ that continues in the present.

In addition, the reinvention of Thai folklore is relevant to note here. Influenced by the creative economy, folklorist Siraporn Nathalang (2018) coined ‘creative folklore’ (*khaticchon sangsan*) to include “the transmission and application of traditional folklore in new social contexts with new purposes: the re-interpretation of meaning of folklore, the use of folklore in order to add value to a local product or tradition; and/or the use of folklore to express local and ethnic identity in contemporary social context.” (Siraporn 2018: 7). Here, the reinvention of folklore does not belong only to folk communities but also becomes the tool of authorities or larger participants to serve new purposes like tourism, consumerism, and globalisation. Interestingly, Siraporn (2018: 130-131) concludes that creative folklore is reconstructed regarding certain old beliefs and traditions, which show the strong cultural roots of the ‘Thai tree’ in the form of ‘hybrid fruits.’ The sense of continuity of the nation is embedded in this concept.

In summary, Thai literary and cultural reinvention, especially from modernisation up to the globalisation period, is a response to the nation and national identity. Although they have different foci and standpoints, both Thai and anglophone academia agree on the critical aspects of reinvention, which shows a sense of continuity from the past of the Thai nation. Interestingly, this reinvention can unseal the way in which self, nation, and the Other are embodied since reinvention uses old Thai tradition to mix and match with new cultures from the Other. The new presentation thus links to the portrayal of national identity, in which the context of its reinvention is important. Temporality is another issue because reinvention concerns the linkage of time from the past to the present and can resonate with future desires.

Thus, in this thesis, I frame reinvention in Thai literature as adhering to Thainess, while the context of post-2006 will be used to elaborate on how Thainess is presented. Furthermore, I use the time—past, present, and future—to illustrate each analytical chapter based on the importance of the temporality of reinvention. I will explore how the so-called ‘old’ traditions interact with present-day features and project the past, present, and future of Thailand.

## Hybridity

Hybridity is the main framework for analysing reinvention in Thai literature. Here, hybridity does not only mean the mixing of products from different cultures but also the theory regarding the power behind it. Originally from the field of biology, hybridity became a key theory in postcolonial studies, globalisation, and literary studies to look at how differences encounter and open spaces of political contestation and negotiation.

### *Hybridity in Postcolonial Studies*

Hybridity is one of the most critical debates in postcolonial studies. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2013: 135), “hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.” Robert Young (1995) explains that the discourse of hybridity can be traced to the 19th century when the negative and anxious meaning of racial hybridity threatened the purity of race, especially for white colonisers, because “wherever it emerges it suggests the impossibility of essentialism.” (Young 1995: 27). Then, hybridity moves from racial theory to cultural politics in a postcolonial context, which the anti-essentialism and antithetical structure of culture between the colonisers and colonised are demonstrated. Homi Bhabha is a key thinker behind hybridity.

Generally, as David Huddart (2006: 4-6) summarises, Bhabha’s theory focuses on ‘cultural difference based on post-structuralism’. Developed from Said’s *Orientalism*, Bhabha applies psychoanalysis, especially uncanny, to see power in a relationship through a colonial discourse beyond binary opposition. Hybridity is then the key term to explain cultural differences as in his canonical book, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha (2004 [1994]) argues that hybridity is defined as the political tension between colonisers and the colonised because it deals with ‘mimicry’ as a tactic of the colonised, through which they imitate the colonisers, and thus both cultures become hybridised. As a result, the colonisers become anxious as the superiority and purity of their culture are threatened. The stage that is culturally hybridised provides an ‘in-between’ space where not only different cultures are mixed, but which also allows many forms of power to be negotiated.



The in-betweenness is referred to as the 'Third Space of Enunciation.' Drawing on an architectural term, Bhabha calls the space a 'liminal space' like "[t]he stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (Bhabha 2004: 5). In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990), Bhabha further clarifies that "[t]his third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford 1990: 211). Here, liminal space is the in-between space, blurring the line between binaries to negotiate new forms of power. Accordingly, the Third Space can be regarded as a metaphor for hybridity, as it illustrates the hybridised process leading to the disturbance of old conventions and the creation of new ones.

Hybridity thus illustrates the 'ambivalence' of colonial discourse. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2013: 13-15) conclude this term, as derived from psychoanalysis, means to want one thing and want its opposite. This state of "ambivalence disrupts the clear-cut authority of colonial domination because it disturbs the simple relationship between coloniser and colonised." Hybridity links to this state as it blurs the line between two groups while decentring the authority of colonisers. Taking this point, Young (1995: 26) further demonstrates that "hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the difference no longer difference." In short, hybridity is a subversive process and product used against colonisers' authority which clings to the superiority of purity and authenticity of culture as it is the same but not quite, or 'similar but not white', as Bhabha identifies.

Regarding Siam/Thailand, although the country has never been officially colonised, hybridity was a key strategy for Siam to survive colonialism. Underlining the 'semicoloniality' of Siam, Peter Jackson (2010) applies the hybridity framework to demonstrate how Siamese elites resist colonial power and legitimise their power to govern the nation. On the one hand, Jackson elucidates that Siamese elites from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially from King Rama IV to Rama VI's reigns, adopted, adapted, and reinvented the so-called

Western ‘civilised’ manner, object, and so forth to present themselves as civilised people similar to the Western colonisers. At the same time, Siamese elites also portrayed their similarities with differences to the West as they contested and negotiated their identity as Siamese from elements of Thainess, which combined in new cultural forms, such as King Rama V, who presented himself as a modernised king who was well-dressed and well-mannered with Western etiquette as he visited Europe.

At the same time, hybridity became the strategy for the Bangkok elites to rule internally. Jackson applies the hybridity of Latin American scholar Néstor García Canclini to illustrate this. In short, García Canclini views hybridity as “helping elite groups integrate memory and the cultural artifacts reminiscent of the past into a hegemonic national framework” (Kraidy 2005: 65). Regarding Siam, Jackson views hybridity as underpinning the superior status of Bangkok elites as they presented themselves as civilised group to rule the nation using the cultural hybridisation of the West. This legitimacy links to the nation-building project also managed by the Bangkok elites. Interestingly, Thainess was propagated by hybridising and reinventing cultural memory like folklore and history to be part of national culture, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, for Thongchai Winichakul (2000), this process of civilising by Bangkok elites creates the ‘Other Within’ who are viewed as having inferior status such as people who live in the countryside, marginal spaces, and have non-Thai ethnicity, while the definition of modernity belongs to Bangkok. Hybridity in the Thai context thus links clearly to the nation and national identity, especially the contestation and negotiation of power when encountering colonial threat.

### ***Hybridity in Globalisation Studies***

When the world is rapidly and intimately connected, hybridity becomes a central framework for understanding the logic of globalisation. In fact, globalisation at its earliest point was viewed negatively as a process of cultural homogenisation led by the imperial West, which some called Westernisation or Americanisation. The opposition contends that globalisation is cultural hybridisation, which makes new cultures from cultural encounters on global and local scales. Interestingly, this kind of cultural hybridisation

goes beyond national borders. Arjun Appadurai (2010 [1996]) argues that cultural practices in globalisation operate under five ‘scapes’: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, financescaples, mediascaples, and ideoscaples. Global cultural flows can occur freely in these scapes, including the flow of people, ideas, media like the Internet and social media. For example, the connection of the Internet (mediascaples) can make the flow of ideas (ideoscaples) like LGBTQ+ and human rights possible and make people from different places meet (ethnoscaples) and share their ideas more easily.

Since globalisation allows new cultures to emerge beyond national borders, it challenges the essentialism of national cultures and nationalism itself. This is due to the fact that nationhood relies on invented traditions for the imagination of common roots, as Hobsbawm and Anderson argue. Globalisation, in contrast, imports new kinds of cultures to hybridise with national ones as well as exporting national cultures to displace them. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2020 [2003]) calls this phenomenon a ‘global *mélange*’ as the development of technologies - especially telecommunication –empowers cultural hybridisation led by the middle classes through a borderless world of technology and easily connected transportation. Cultural hybridisation then “subverts nationalism because it privileges border crossing. It subverts identity politics such as ethnic or other claims to purity and authenticity because it starts out from the fuzziness of boundaries.” (Pieterse 2020: 57).

Moreover, Pieterse contends that the centre of cultural hybridisation in a globalised context is plural. The West, particularly America, is not the only one influencing the entire globe. Pieterse sees China as a globalising force, as the balance of world order has gradually shifted to Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alongside the rise of East Asia, Japan and Korea are also key players in cultural hybridisation in many regions, such as Southeast Asia. Indeed, Woongjae Ryoo (2009) emphasises that J-pop, K-Pop and other national cultural exports significantly increase Japan and Korea’s roles within other Asian cultures.

### *Hybridity in Literary Studies*

Like postcolonial and globalisation studies, hybridity in literature regards politics outside the texts embedded within the text via cultural mixing. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (2007: 2) capture this critical concept of hybridity in literary reading, stating that it “implies a markedly unbalanced relationship” rather than focusing on “any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities.” This is upheld by the formalist structure theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. His approach called ‘polyphony’ examines linguistics mixing in literary texts through both intentional and unconscious usages. He views hybrid language in texts as decentring and disunifying monopolistic voices (see Young 1995; Kuortti 2024).

Bhabha’s hybridity is then an influential frame for studying literature. His key terms like mimicry, Third Space, and ambivalence have been used to analyse several literary texts from a postcolonial perspective. For example, Bhabha (2004) applies the Third Space to hybrid identity in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* showing unhomeliness as a contradiction of colonial and postcolonial conditions as the in-between identity of colonisers, colonised, migrants, and other subjects. Additionally, Kuortti and Nyman (2007) give several examples of applying hybridity, such as the contestation of the monopolistic racial discourse in colonial power. In Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli does not belong to either human or animal, colonisers or colonised; his hybrid identity challenges and opens a new space to negotiate colonial relations.

Hybridity is subsequently discussed beyond the postcolonial context. For Kuortti (2024: 14-15), hybridity in contemporary literary discussions “share(s) a critical stance towards the idea of monoculturalism and aspire for ethical interpretations.” In his co-edited book (Kuortti, Nyman, and Ghasemi 2024) he engages hybridity to examine literature about topics such as borders, races, migrations, and postmodernism. Vanessa Guignery (2011) provides a different approach to hybridity in literature in her edited book, covering language, form, styles, and modes. For example, the study of how literary texts present people with hybrid identities from races, identities, backgrounds, and so on concerning a particular place and time.

In summary, Young's statement (1995: 21) - "hybridity is thus itself a hybrid concept" - is a useful summation. Since hybridity revolves around a wide range of cultural phenomena and artifacts from various times, this theory connects hybridisation from the smallest units like language mixing, hybrid identity, or the way of writing in literature to imbalanced power relations in the larger backdrop of colonial discourse, national culture, and global entanglement. Although hybridity allows for varied approaches, it centres around power contestation and negotiation when differences encounter each other. This process and hybrid product disrupt the hegemonic perspective of authenticity and singularity of culture by making the Third Space 'similar but not the same.' This in-betweenness becomes a political tactic of subversion and reconstruction. From this perspective, the politics of hybridity will be my main approach to examining reinvention in Thai literature in order to shed light on power contestation and negotiation in relation to internal forces like political polarisation and external flows of globalisation, which link to Thainess.

### **Thainess**

The definition of Thainess is multifaceted and its ambiguousness has been contested throughout time. Accordingly, to cover the broad range of Thainess from concrete objects to norms and ideologies, I use Bhabha's argument called 'DissemiNation' as my foundation. In short, a nation needs narration to underpin its origin and continuity; meanwhile, this narration needs people to perform the nation's signs. More importantly, the narration of a nation has double nodes of representation: pedagogical and performative. Bhabha (2004: 209) argues that "[i]n production of the nation as narration there is spilt between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative." On the one hand, pedagogical discourse "finds its narrative authority in a tradition of the people ... encapsulated in a succession of historical moments that represents an eternity produced by self-generation" (Bhabha 2004: 211). This means that discourse from authorities is pedagogical in narrating the continuity of the national history and the common origin of people in the nation. People are the object of this pedagogical representation as the narrative of the nation constructed and shaped how people are supposed to be.

On the other hand, the performative node is the practice of pedagogical discourse in contemporary times. People act as subjects to perform the sign of the nation, such as singing national anthems or blowing national flags, to show the continuous history of the nation. Nevertheless, this performance exposes the limitation of singularity from difference within the nation. For example, although nationalist narrative emphasises the shared origin of its people, migrants and ethnicities perform as a disruptive group to this narration. Accordingly, as McLeod (2010: 142) summarises Bhabha's idea, "the nation remains a site of heterogeneity and difference...nationalist discourses are *ultimately* illiberal and must *always* be challenged."

Subsequently, I apply this framework to conceptualise Thainess as discourse and performative to unpack how Thainess works. I also add another facet of Thainess called a sign, such as the national flag and anthem, since this is a medium that translates abstract discourse into imaginable materials for performative representation. Hence, I frame Thainess in three facets: discourse, sign, and performative, as below.

### *Thainess as Discourse*

The first facet of Thainess is the discourse of national identity. Compared to several national identities, as Chris Barker and Emma A Jane (2016: 301) state, Thainess is "a form of imaginative identification with symbols and discourses of the nation-state" that "narrate and create the idea of origins, continuity, and tradition." Thainess as pedagogical discourse, as Bhabha calls it, plays a key role for the authorities in underpinning the stability of the Thai nation since Siam/Thailand faced colonial threat. Anderson (2016: 99-100) demonstrates that King Rama V (r.1868-1910) introduced official nationalism to the Siamese court in the form of a dynastic state and ruled the country in the same way as the Western colonisers. This is supported by modern geographical knowledge presented in maps, promoting the concept of being Thai or un-Thai through the establishment of borderlines (Thongchai 1994). Later, King Rama VI (r.1910-1925) propagated nationalism by adopting and adapting the motto from the British Empire 'nation, God, and the King' to 'nation, religion, and monarchy' (*chat, satsana, phra mahakasat*) presented in the new national flag.

During this nation-building project, Prince Damrong Rajanupab, a half-brother of King Rama V, was a key figure who created and influenced the disseminated definition of Thainess. Saichol (2002) summaries that the prince utilised history to construct Thai identity emphasising three distinctive characteristics of Thais: the love of the nation's independence, the absence of persecution, and the cleverness at integrating benefits. For Saichol, these remain unchanged, though the nation's circumstances have changed. More essentially, his historiography highlights the monarch's status and role in national independence and development. Praised as the father of Thai history, Prince Damrong's Thainess is a crucial legacy of the latter period.

Following the end of the Absolute Monarchy in 1932, the World War II government led by Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram (hereafter Phibul) (1938-1944) enacted cultural mandates to define Thainess. Instead of promoting the monarchy, the definition of Thainess was replaced by a chauvinistic view of the purity of Thai ethnicity. According to Craig Reynolds (2006), the campaign promoting Thai ethnicity was invented by appealing to the glorious past of Thai ancestors. To emphasise the purity of race, 'un-Thai people' such as the Chinese were either assimilated into being Thai or were completely excluded. The legacy of Phibul can be seen in the name of the country, Thailand, which highlights the Thai race as the dominant race and emphasises patriotic practices such as standing to attention during the national anthem.

However, with the decline of Phibul's power alongside the beginning of the Cold War era, the discourse of Thainess shifted yet again. Anxieties over communism led to the return of the royalist definition of Thainess. According to Baker and Pasuk (2022), the restoration of the monarchy juxtaposed American imperialism in Thailand with the fight against communism. The ideology of nation, religion, and monarchy then returned to the national stage. School textbooks became a prime tool to serve this aim. As Chanokporn Chutikamoltham (2015) explains, school textbooks in this period intensified a sense of Thainess by excluding elements of the 'Other.' M.R.Kukrit Pramoj, who was a prime minister and the reputed writer of *Si Phaendin (Four Reigns)*, is a crucial figure in shaping the understanding of Thainess during this time. Saichol (2005) stresses that the success of Kukrit's writings from the 1940s returned Thainess to the concept of traditional politics, in which the king and Buddhism are the heart of the system leading loyalty, unity,

social hierarchy, and traditional Thai arts and cultures to stand at the centre of defining Thainess.

Throughout the three phases, Thainess was defined in relation to Buddhism and the monarchy via top-down official authorities. The two institutions have an inseparable connection even in the 21st century. Patrick Jory (2016) argues that the *Vessantara Jataka*, the story of the last life before becoming the Buddha, was used as a legitimising force for Thai leaders for centuries, especially during the reign of King Rama IX. Popular religions also legitimise the monarchy. As Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) notes from spirit mediumship during the 1990s, the previous kings and royal members are reintroduced in the form of deities who serve the wishes of individuals. Thainess thus blurred the boundaries between the secular and spiritual worlds, a view which was disseminated and accepted both in political ideologies and everyday life.

More essentially, this discourse of Thainess leads to the Thais' understanding of Thai society as a 'non-political society', as Saichol (2005) argues. This creates political silence and strengthens the dictatorship regimes because this concept prefers leaders to align with the two key institutions of Thainess, rather than democratic politicians. The concept of 'good people' used to govern the nation is accepted while social problems, human rights, and democracy are covered up. Apart from maintaining the hierarchical order of Thai society, this discourse results in the perspective that 'Thailand is a great country' (*mueangthai ni di*) as a Buddhist land where mercy and kindness are found in a united nation under the king. This discourse allows dictatorships to gain power if they follow that expectation and call for unity from individuals to maintain the greatness of Thailand.

Nevertheless, the static and top-down definition of Thainess has been challenged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by peripheral voices, transnational culture, and political polarisation. Firstly, the voices of the periphery are louder. At the end of the Cold War, the decline of anti-communism resulted in the rise of a discourse of ethnic pluralism and the idea of the 'ASEAN community.' Each ethnic group could maintain their identities rather than be assimilated into being Thai (Saichol 2020). Meanwhile, local knowledge and regional identities began to play a significant role on the national stage. Especially after the 1997 financial crisis,



local knowledge was seen as Thai wisdom against globalisation (Reynolds 2002).

This relates to the second point, which is that widespread globalisation and digital media have challenged Thainess. The growth of transnational cultures, such as human rights and LGBTQ+ movements, have played a critical role in disturbing the monopoly of Thainess, and a ‘cultural diversity’ paradigm is now more accepted. Against this backdrop, the Internet and new media have allowed diverse groups to share their identities rather than suppress them under a monolithic identity (Baker and Pasuk 2022: 330). Lastly, the political polarisation of the late 2000s onwards is the biggest challenge in uniting Thainess. Since the downfall of Thaksin in 2006, political ideology and conflicts have been represented in many cultural forms, as demonstrated in Chapter 1 and 2.

### *Thainess as Sign*

The sign of the nation is another integral part of translating discursive national identity into everyday life. According to Edensor (2002: 33), national identity “is constituted by innumerable pathways, connections, and sources ... (and) is found in a bewilderingly dense profusion of signifiers, objects, practices and spaces.” Appadurai (2006: 25) calls this a ‘vertebrate structure’ which marks the modern system of the nation-state as “a system of semiotic recognition and communication.”, from simple items such as flags, stamps, and airlines to more complex symbols. From this perspective, I propose calling this facet of Thainess a sign as an umbrella term to cover all aspects of the signification of national Thai identity.

National signs are important to construct and make sense of discursive Thainess. In official buildings in Thailand, pictures of the king and queen are the centre of that setting. In Thai school classrooms, pictures representing the three pillars of Thainess are commonly found in the front of the classroom at the highest height. Thai language is another essential sign of Thainess, as in Anderson’s argument of national language. As linguist William Smalley (1994: 14) notes, “Standard Thai is not only an official language, but is also the national language, a symbol of identification for the Thai nation. Next to the king along with the Buddhist religion, Standard Thai may be the strongest such symbol.” This perception is commonly voiced

among Thai elites, aristocrats, and Thai language scholars. M.L. Pin Malakul, a key figure in the Thai education system, posited in his legendary poem ‘Is there any true Thai in the world?’ (*nai lok ni mi arai pen Thai thae*) and the answer is the Thai language. Moreover, Kanchana Naksakul (1984: 261-262) states that the Thai language is a sign of Thainess by showing national independence. In contrast to many colonised countries, having a unique language signifies the survival of national identity.

Narratives of the Thai nation and its people are other signs of Thainess. History is a predominant element of Thainess, like Bhabha's emphasis on history being used to disseminate pedagogical discourse. As Thongchai (2016) called ‘Royal-Nationalist History’ as mainstream history, this narrative explains the origin, threat, and survival of the Thai nation throughout time centred by good leaders. This, of course, highlights the king as the heart of Thainess. Apart from national history, folkloric narratives and practices are also integrated into national stages. For example, King Rama VI actively engaged with the invented tradition of local folklore of Phra Ruang in central Thailand to be a national hero. Believed to be the first Thai king to proclaim independence from a foreign power, King Rama VI wrote several drama plays and the first Thai warship during WWI carried his name.

Additionally, literature, especially classical Thai literature, is one of the most critical signs used to propagate Thainess. Thai literature has been emphasised and promoted as ‘high culture’ by mainstream authorities, which was an official process to canonise Thai literary works through the Royal Academy of Literature (*wannakhadi samoson*), established in 1914. One of the most influential legacies of this institution was the terminology of ‘Thai literature’ or *wannakhadi Thai*. According to David Smyth (2000: 173-174), this term implies verse rather than prose as well as containing an implicit value judgement, suggesting to most Thais a high level of artistic creativity. The canonisation and promotion of Thai literature as an aspect of Thainess occurred in the following periods. Reynolds (2006) points out that Phibul’s government during WWII promoted nationalist narratives as well as many strict rules that controlled authors’ creations. Even after the end of Phibul’s regime, the notion of nationalist literature remained in Thai literary academia, which viewed Thai literature as a cultural discourse for supporting national identity,

as Manas Chitakasem (1995) explains. Thai literary works were selected for inclusion in student textbooks for all Thais to promote Thainess, which is mostly related to the monarchy and Buddhism.

Nevertheless, these signs of Thainess have changed in the contemporary world, especially in the globalisation era. In this context, Edensor (2002: 33) states that “national identity continually reconstitutes itself, becomes re-embedded, reterritorialises spaces, cultural forms and practices” and it “has become decentred but has also been recentred.” Similar to what Kasian Tejapira (2002) calls the ‘postmodernisation of Thainess’, the influence of capitalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand, the definition of Thainess is deliberated only from a top-down regime discourse. Rather, the sign of Thainess thus “is now able...to roam freely around the commodified globe, to coexist and copulate with ... any un-Thai commodities and sundries” (Kasian 2002: 205). So, Thainess is viewed as a vaporised sign which can combine with other elements to become a solid sign presenting Thainess as it responds to consumerism and a globalised world.

Thainess here does not signify the official definition; rather, it can be ethnicities, local cultures, or popular cultures in every Thai life. Pracha Suveeranont (2011) calls these signs of Thainess ‘vernacular Thai’, which was a phenomenon in arts and design productions around the 1990s. He proposes that this term shows the sense of Thainess presented in these signs as dilute and unhistorical in contrast to official signs of Thainess. However, it responded to the nostalgic sense of the Thai middle class during the economic boom to escape from modern life, while postmodernism came to shape the new way of design. Similar to Kasian, these types of Thainess become part of consumerism rather than state control. In 21<sup>st</sup> century Thailand, these trends are still relevant. As Siraporn notes on Creative Folklore, for instance, several local and vernacular cultures become cultural capital and are treated as products for tourism. In addition, beauty pageant competitions use vaporised signs of Thainess like Tuk-tuks, elephants, and Muay Thai presented in Thai national costume for international audiences. From this phenomenon, not only have signs changed, but the way to perform these signs has also transformed.

### *Thainess as Performative*

Signs cannot fulfil the notion of nationhood without action. Thainess as performative, as adopted from Bhabha, is an action that uses the sign of Thainess to present the discourse of Thainess. Although Bhabha highlights people as the subject that performs to show the rupture of the pedagogical, I would stress that performative Thainess should be looked at from both sides: the authorities and common people.

For the Thai authorities, the performative state is important no less than pedagogical discourse constructed in official knowledge, while individuals in this state can align or stand against what those in power want. Jackson (2004a) called the ‘performative state’ - applied from Clifford Geertz’s ‘Theatre State’ in Bali. Jackson highlights the refashioned appearance of *siwilai* from King Rama V formed the cultural hegemony of Thainess via the performativeness of the Bangkok authorities, which “remains one of the Thai bureaucracy's central preoccupations, and the structure of power that brought the modern regime of images into being remains a key feature of all expressions of national culture and identity” (Jackson 2004a: 242). Yet performative Thainess cannot be completed without an audience and people are a key part. For Nidhi Eoseewong (2024 [2017]), the Thai performative state (*ratnattakam*) is a stage that asks people to watch a performance and be involved in that setting, like royal ceremonies. The performative state not only conveys the message from its rituals but also maintains the social hierarchy and power (*barami*) of the performers. Subsequently, the abstract ideas about monarchy and religion are still ‘true’ in the contemporary world.

It can be said that this performative state starts from bodily representation and the embodiment of Thainess. Kanjana Thepboriruk (2020) notes that dressing is one obvious way to perform Thainess, propagated and regulated by the state since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even nowadays, the government still ‘invite’ people to dress up for some special events, such as wearing different coloured shirts on royal birthdays. This kind of practice shows that individuals’ bodies are in service to nation-building projects. This activity links to the politics of coloured shirts in Thai politics since the colour code performs different ideologies. More importantly, bodily presentation shows how the discourse of Thainess is embodied in individuals.

For example, the Yellow Shirt, including the PDRC movement, performed in their demonstrations as ‘good people’, reflecting what ‘goodness’ is according to state-constructed Thainess. At the same time, this imposes social control onto those defined as the Other from Thainess. Woratep Wongsappakan (2019) illustrates that the PDRC movement caused abusive actions against opposing groups by claiming their performance of good Thai individuals aligning with Thainess. In other words, Thainess as a discourse allows and makes sense of the performance of a group who embody that ideology.

To summarise, Thainess in this thesis is approached in three facets: discourse, sign, and performative. The discourse of Thainess is embedded as a powerful knowledge underpinning the Thai nation through signs and performativeness. Accordingly, the main question of what and how Thainess is reinvented in relation to the post-2006 context will be examined in two layers: the discourse and practice. Thus, the thesis begins by exploring the reinvention of Thainess through the concepts of signs and the performative before examining these practices in relation to the power struggle of discursive Thainess against that context. As for signs, as mentioned in Chapter 1, history, literature, folklore, and language are selected as the main foci to showcase reinvention and hybridisation. Performative Thainess will be analysed by looking at how these signs are narrated and acted in the selected texts. The encounter of Thainess as discourse will be further demonstrated.

### **The Body and Embodiment**

The body and embodiment are the last key framework in this thesis along with signs and performative Thainess representing the discursive. Bodily representation in literature can be viewed as a sign showing Thainess on the surface, while the embodiment of that ideology unseals how discursive Thainess governs the individual body and mind. This framework does not treat the body as a collection of physical organs but rather the representation of different ideologies from the government to the religious to the political, linking to a power network in a particular time and space.

### *The Body as Social Construction and Representation*

Taken from the domain of nature, the body is perceived as one of the social constructions from the rise of post-structuralism in the 1970s. Michel Foucault was influential in viewing the body as the site of governmentality from discipline. Barker and Jane (2016: 134-135) summarise that Foucault underlines the mechanism from institutional organisations to govern individuals' bodies through practicing, training, and standardisation operating via medicine, education, social reform, demography, and criminology. Therefore, "the body is both material entity and a set of cultural signs that categorize, train and cultivate people."

Embodiment is subsequently a key term related to the social construction of the body. Bryan Turner and Zheng Yangwen (2009: 7) define embodiment as "the practices we perform in order to accomplish various tasks ...the product or effect of training and discipline." For example, dance requires performers to act in particular ways and represents the aesthetics of a specific society. Moreover, this practice and discipline involves the power of conforming and confronting embodied experiences. Again, Barker and Jane (2016: 134) define embodiment as the process which is "on the one hand, the passive consequence of disciplinary power, and, on the other hand, an active project of identity construction." The tattooed body is a prime example of how embodiment signifies the contestation and the negotiation of self-identification.

Literature, including media, is a critical site that represents and investigates the embodiment of several discourses. According to Paul Bowman (2019), embodiment is an embodied discourse which always involves discursive factors and forces. It means that forces like words, pictures, or audiovisuals are performative and associated with the discursive factor of a particular set of ideas, norms, and desires. The body described and performed via media is translated and transformed from discourses. Bowman (2019: 75) argues that embodiment should be regarded as the embodiment of something else - "the performative and interpretive elaboration of something other that is received, perceived, felt, constructed, believed, assumed or otherwise lived as being either an aim, ideal, desire, objective, fantasy, or as a norm, or indeed as the warding off of something undesired or feared."

Hence, while the performative body is embodied by abstract ideas, emotions, knowledge, and so on, embodiment can be assessed as the process of how these factors are constructed and reconstructed. In their edited volume, *The Body in Literature*, David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (2015) state that the complexities of embodied life can be understood by literary texts since it is embodied by ambivalent experiences beyond simple definition in everyday life and raise nuanced representations for readers to consider. Their approach in the volume is to analyse and assess the representation of the body, and the process of embodiment construction via language. This volume, moreover, draws attention to diverse bodies such as disabled aging, and technological bodies, which express their engagement with the societal consciousness of a particular time like ideology, discipline, desire, and anxiety.

### ***The Religious Body, Buddhist Disciplines, and Thai Embodiment***

Religion is an essential discourse for embodying individuals from traditional to contemporary times. In his influential book *The Body and Society*, Bryan Turner (1996 [1984]) emphasises the role of religion as the foundational governmentality of individuals across cultures to practice and perform the body. One critical idea based on religious thought in Asia is the resurrection of the body, Turner and Zheng (2009) argue. In contrast to the Christian West's concept of time, which is arguably linear, Buddhist time, for example, is cyclical. So, there is the Jataka that relays the stories of Siddharta Gautama's many lives before becoming Buddha. The discipline and training of the body in many lives embodied the Buddha as the perfect man, representing power or *barami* and providing moral lessons for individuals to follow.

Focusing on Southeast Asian culture, according to Michael Peletz (2017), embodiment in this region is pluralist since "many Southeast Asian systems of myth, ritual, and cosmology encourage imaginative play conducive to the creation of implicit cultural models valorizing relativism, pluralism, and different ways of being in the world" (Peletz 2017: 53). Thailand exemplifies this because although Buddhism is the dominant religion, vernacular beliefs remain potent in contemporary Thailand (Pattana 2005; 2012). One crucial perception of Buddhism is that the body and mind are not separated. Rather these two components

are embodied in an individual's personality and behaviour linked to the concept of karma, which refers to taking an action and the result of said action, as the main teaching. This teaching is the key explanation of everything being based on individual actions and not that of a God. Making good or bad karma is based on three elements: the body (*kaya karma*), speech (*vaji karma*), and mind (*mano karma*). From this perspective, the physical body is only one component of a person, since there are 'inner elements' reflected through speech and the mind. As represented through the Thai idiom 'mind is master, body is servant' (*chit pen nai kai pen bao*), this logic underlines that the inner mind is more important than the outer body; at the same time, the physical body can expose the individual mind.

To embody a good person, the body, speech, and mind need to be controlled. In Thai terms, there are common phrases such as 'doing a good thing (*tham di*), saying a good word (*phut di*), and thinking a good thought (*khit di*).' Although Theravada Buddhism is comprised of thousands of *dhamma*, the five *silas* (*sin ha*) are basic teachings to avoid killing others, stealing others' things, sexually misbehaving, lying to others, and losing self-control from drinking alcohol. Although this *dhamma* highlights action and words, many lessons about good mentalities link to the *silas*. For example, to be honest (*sue sat*) is emphasised for avoiding lying to others and maintaining good sexual behaviour. Thus, body, speech, and mind are inseparable in the personal self-discipline required to be a 'good person.'

Another crucial perspective in Buddhism is that of the cyclical worldview. The basic concept of Buddhism lies in the perception that every life is born and reborn in the *samsara* cycle, which causes endless suffering (*thuk; dukkha*). So, the highest aim of Buddhism is to break this endless cycle and reach absolute happiness (*suk; sukha*) called *nirvana*. The ideal path to success is through meditation and by abandoning illusions such as wealth and honour. Gautama Buddha is the prime example of this great achievement of reaching *nirvana* after being reborn for several lives. This cyclical worldview validates the rule of karma and encourages people to make merit (*bun*) for better lives, not only in this life (*chat ni*) but also in following lives (*chat na*). The rule of karma explains why a person was born as a king, a monk, a rich person, or a slave; moreover, it clarifies why good and bad things happen in their lives.



Subsequently, this worldview shapes how Buddhists perceive the ‘perfect body’ and forms disciplines related to the body. Firstly, the body is the site representing morality and social status. Surface appearance through the physical body reflects a person’s morals and merits in this life and past lives. While the perfect body depicts the result of great merit derived from good karma, unwanted bodies like those with disabilities or ugliness represent bad karma. The image of a good person is then normally portrayed by a beautiful or handsome body. Furthermore, this perception of the perfect body connects to social class as with the monarchy and nobility’s sacred status, since the reasons as to how and why people were born into different classes in society are justified by the logic of karma. The monarchy, royalty, and nobility are thus a group of people who have great merit (*mi bun*).

Heroes and heroines in Thai classical literature are prime examples of this perfect body. For instance, *Lilit Phra Lo*, a classical poem of the Ayutthaya period about the tragic love between the king and princesses from two enemy kingdoms, depicts the ideal aesthetic between three main protagonists - Phra Lo, Phra Phuean, and Phra Phaeng – via beautiful bodies which reflect their high status as royalty. Many verses in this story praise their perfect bodies along with emphasising their great merit. Moreover, *Inao*, a royal drama derived from a Javanese Panji story, presents characters with perfect beauty which is related to the status of the characters. Inao and Busaba, who are the main characters of this story, are praised for having incomparable beauty since they are from the greatest royal family. Conversely, Joraka, a prince from a peripheral kingdom, is portrayed as ugly, having dark skin, and being of a low rank (*rup chua tua dam tam sak*). Beauty and honour are inseparable issues since one’s appearance and social status are derived from merit and the result of karma.

In short, Theravada Buddhism systematically defines what ‘good people’ are and how to become one. The body, speech, and mind are inseparable components of that definition as the physical body and speech depict a person’s ‘inner morals’ and vice versa. In addition, the rule of karma, including the cyclical worldview of Buddhism, exhibits the Buddhist concept of merit and power through the body. This links to Thai embodiment in the political and social landscapes of Thailand.

### *The Embodiment of the Thai Nation*

While the nation is an abstract concept, the human body is tangible. The body is a site to imagine what the nation looks like and who belongs to it, as Bryan (2012) argues, the human body is the basic metaphor for the nation. For embodying the Thai nation, I focus on two concepts: the ‘geo-body’ and ‘the regime of images.’ Firstly, in *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai (1994: 17) proposes that “[t]he geo-body of a nation is merely an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map.” As the nation needs signs, maps are a key innovation from the colonial period used to construct a sense of imagined community and to give a clear-cut image of the nation. This means that “knowledge about Siamese nationhood has been created by our conception of Siam-on-the-map.” Hence, the boundary of Siam was drawn on a map to identify what the geo-body of the nation looked like and what was not included.

As a result, this innovation makes the discourse of nationalism led by the Bangkok elite possible through the sense of lost territories (*sia dindaen*). They rely on the narrative that Siam was a great nation and many kingdoms had to submit to its power, but Siam was forced to ‘give’ these territories to the Western colonisers to maintain national independence. Here, the metaphorical word ‘geo-body’ evinces the relationship between the geographical nation and the human body. In this respect, when the nation is invaded by enemies during wartime, it provokes individuals to feel hurt while encouraging them to die for the nation as their bodies and the geo-body are one.

Secondly, the governmentality of the individual body by the national authority is evident since the body represents the nation and vice versa. Proposed by Jackson (2004b), the ‘Thai regime of images’ is a relevant concept in the governing of individual Thai bodies. Jackson argues that image (*phap lak*) or self-representation to other people and foreign countries is a serious concern among Thais, leading Thai authorities to try to control images of the country by governing the individual body. Building from Penny Van Esterik (2000), Jackson theorises the Thai term *kalathesa*, which means having a sense of time and place to do the right thing at the right time, into two key domains: public and private. In the private domain,

one can do almost anything one wants, whereas there are many restrictions on how to behave in the public domain. One example can be seen from the sexual domain which Thai law allows men to marry monogamously, yet cases of minor wives (*mia noi*) still exist. Similarly, sex work remains prohibited by Thai law, even though it is visibly widespread. The reason for this is that both can exist if they are limited to private space. Otherwise, when they transgress beyond public space, it disturbs the stability of society. Overall, self-representation in the public domain is of serious concern as it is linked to social order.

Additionally, when Siam/Thailand has to present itself on the international stage, this can be regarded as a public space. The Thai authorities are highly concerned about showing their country in a positive light to an international audience, leading the Thai regime of images to govern the individual body. The regime of images also appears in the field of literature, especially in the process of translation from Thai to foreign languages. According to Koraya Techawongstien (2016), in the process of selecting texts for translation, the sense of ‘appropriateness’ (*khwam mosom*) plays a key role among translation agencies. This is because translation is not only a literary process but also an international interaction that presents Thainess to others.

It is also worth noting that the regime of images could be seen as parallel to the human body because Thai terms related to personal images revolve around ‘face’ (*na*) and ‘name’ (*chue*). In the Thai language, face and name refer not only to the part of the human body or personal identity, but also have connotations of honour and reputation. There are many words in compounds with *na* which imply honour, such as *dai na* which literally means to ‘receive face’ and therefore to be honoured, and *sia na* which literally means ‘to lose face’, implying humiliation. Similarly, *mi chue* means ‘to have a name’ and connotes a good reputation. In contrast, *sia chue* literally means ‘to lose name’ and have a bad reputation. This link between the notion of dignity (*saksi*) and shame (*khwam ap-ai*) and the human body can be seen widely in Thai literature from classical to modern works (see further in Kusuma, Saiwarun, and Saowanit 2007).

Interestingly, these words can be transferred from personal reputation to national dignity. For instance, Thailand will *khai na* – which means ‘selling face’ and connotes humiliation - if Thai leaders do something

unwise. Given that Thais gather to promote something positive, Thailand will gain a good reputation among international countries (*mi chue siang*). Interestingly, there is a Thai phrase, ‘*sia ngeon mai wa, sia na mai dai*’, which means ‘it is acceptable to lose money but unacceptable to lose face.’ So, face and name are both critical discursive tools for Thais on both a personal and national level, especially in the public domain.

One way to gain positive images is via manners and civility. According to Patrick Jory (2021: 8), “manners in Thailand in the modern period are better understood as binding, state-sanctioned codes of normative behaviour.” Linking to the regime of images and the geo-body, manners used to portray a good person imply a great country. Jory draws attention to the notion of the ‘gentle person’ or *phu di* and the ‘good person’ or *khon di* in 21st-century Thailand, as these terms were connected and widely used in the political conflict during the rise and fall of Thaksin. A gentle person adheres to normative behaviour such as being calm (*on nom*), showing respect to elders, and behaving properly depending on *kalathesa*. This type of manner normally refers to royal court manners and the royal family. From the 1960s, under development projects and the vast expansion of bureaucratic systems, manners were embedded through the education system, and by extension the middle classes, who are the products of the development schemes. This manner becomes ‘common sense’ when it comes to acting like a good Thai. More essentially, as with the inseparable body and mind from Buddhism, a gentle person could connote being a good person.

### ***Gender and the Embodiment of Thai Nation***

The nation is linked to the body because both are gendered. According to Said (1979), in Orientalist thought the female is the representation of the ‘non-West’, encoding the meaning of exotic beauty and spirituality, while the West is constructed through the image of white men with rational thinking. In addition, Young (2020) highlights that nationalism is gendered male since nationalism is mostly related to wars and male leaders. Women from the East thus become ‘double colonised’ by the external Western dominant and internal patriarchal structure. However, this does not mean that women and the nation are not interrelated. Rather, women can be regarded as nationalist agents, though they act in different ways from men.

Arguably, the representations of Thailand that have circulated through foreign and Thai media for several decades are mostly gendered female. In Harrison's (2010a) work, the representation of Thailand in Western media through prostitution is still being reproduced caused by the legacy of the Cold War period. Suradech Chotiudompant (2016) also points out that Bangkok's representations in Western novels and films are full of mystery, drug smugglers, and prostitutes. Despite this, Thai representations of the female are in complete contrast to this because Thai females in Thai media are related to the concept of *kunlasatri* or 'gentlewoman.' The term *kunlasatri* commonly refers to a woman wearing proper clothing, avoiding showing her bare body in public, and behaving in a gentle manner such as being calm and sweet.

Based on the Thai regime of images and manners, the representations of the female body in Thai cultural texts are highly governed, especially the expression of sexual desire. While positive representations depict the role of women as decent wives, mothers, and daughters with an absent or lessened emphasis on sexual desire, the negative version commonly highlights their sexual desire such as enjoying erotic relationships, having many husbands, and ignoring their duties as mothers, wives, and daughters for their own selfish needs. The first type of woman is regarded as the role model for decent Thai women who support the Thai nation. This perfect beauty of female protagonists is apparent in classical Thai literature embodied as her couple's power or *barami*. In the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhist text the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* (hereafter *Traiphum*), should the king be regarded as the great king of the universe called Phra Chakkraphat, he must possess seven magical objects. And one of which is the greatest wife (*nang kaew*). Additionally, the female body can also reflect the level of civilisation of a country. During the chauvinistic campaign of the Phibul regime, for example, one of the most influential mottos was that 'women are the flower of the nation' (*phuying khue dokmai khong chat*). Here, women can be seen as an allegorical representation of the nation wherein the beauty of the women is stressed that can represent Thai civilisation.

Conversely, the dystopian representation of women connects with the notion of national threat. The main contrast between good and bad women is differentiated by sexual desire, as virginity is a key feature of the perfect female body. Hence, prostitution is the prime example of the opposite representation of the ideal

Thai woman. Harrison (1999) argues that good women might be regarded as virginal, whereas ‘whores’ are stigmatised as bad women, which is why prostitutes in Thai literature are never depicted as mothers. In addition, this trajectory can be seen in 21<sup>st</sup> century middle-class ideology portrayed in Thai mainstream films. As Jiratorn Sakulwattana (2019) looks at the ‘Feel-Good’ film genre, she points out that the ‘desexualised body’ is the key feature of female protagonists in these movies, while the sexualised body is presented as a rival to the middle-class heroine. It is evident that a wide range of Thai literature and media depicts the desirous female body as controversial, as with erotic fiction, where such these women are led to tragic endings or clash with Buddhist dhamma (Harrison 2002; 2004; Orathai 2005).

It can be argued, therefore, that the presence or absence of sexual desire marks the key division between good and bad. While the duties of an ideal mother, wife, and daughter with little to no reference to sexual desire are embodied in good women, the bad is emphasised by that desire. As the nation is led by patriarchy, the portrayal of good women maintains the stability of the Thai nation. The woman’s role thus revolves around being a ‘supporter’ or ‘follower’ to make the man’s mission possible. Moreover, in some cases, the heroine can ‘protect’ the nation, under patriarchal logic. On the other hand, bad women can disrupt the nation since these women cannot follow patriarchal norms or submit to embodiment within those social norms. Thus, while bad women transgress the regime of images, the good manners of women are stressed to show social stability. This is a prime example of the interrelationship between gender, body, and nation.

Overall, the body and embodiment are practical signs and actions from the abstract discourse of ideologies covering belief, religion, and the nation. In this thesis, the body and embodiment will be highlighted as crucial signs and performative Thainess, along with other aforementioned signs. This is due to the fact that the body and embodiment cannot be separated from the construction and defining of the Thai nation. Furthermore, the context of the post-2006 political conflict relates to individual embodiment, especially the discourse of ‘good people.’ So, the representation of the body in selected texts will be closely analysed to understand discursive Thainess governs and shows the contestation and negotiation of Thainess.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provides the theoretical framework, which is the foundation for the analysis and how the object of the study is perceived. Reinvention is the first strand, as the thesis focuses on what and how Thainess as a sign and performance can transform, recreate, reconstruct Thai literature as connected to the discursive Thainess. Moreover, as this thesis emphasises how the reinvention of Thainess links to the context of the post-2006 period, the theory of hybridity is used to analyse the process and product of that reinvention of Thainess by focusing on the politics of cultural hybridisation connected to the political and social landscape of Thai society. Moreover, as Thainess is ambiguous and difficult to define, I distinguish three facets used in the thesis. Thainess as a discourse is powerful knowledge initially constructed by the Thai authorities as pedagogical discourse to narrate the origin and continuity of Thailand and defining what is Thai and un-Thai. This discourse can be found in the signs performed by the state and people. Four signs, and their performativeness – history, literature, folklore, and language, are selected to see how they have been reinvented and hybridised to reflect Thainess as a discourse. Lastly, the body and embodiment are highlighted for study along with these signs and performances in each text to understand the discourse of Thainess more deeply. In the following chapter, I will illustrate the research methodologies and methods, turning these frameworks into the body of analysis.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Methodologies and Methods**

This chapter aims to demonstrate the application of the abstract ideas detailed in the previous chapter with sets of analysis. My main method comprises two analyses: textual and contextual. For textual analysis, my approach to literary texts is grounded in close reading along with genre context. I also undertake discourse analysis from the literary components in the texts by reading them as semiotics and representations. Regarding contextual analysis, I contextualise my analysis of the texts with the political and social context of Thailand by employing a new historicism approach along with an in-depth interview. Additionally, a postcolonial reading on power struggles, the centre and margin, stereotypes, and decentralisation is also applied to examine the interplay between the text and social context. Aside from these methodologies, I apply hyper, surface, and paratext readings for internet literature, which requires the use of different approaches for understanding, which I elaborate on in Chapter 6.

#### **Textual Analysis**

This work's textual analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach, using close reading and a discussion of genre. The key foci are the discourse, power, semiotics, and representation embedded in the text.

#### *Close Reading within Genre Context*

Close reading is the fundamental methodology of literary studies, which involves investigating one text closely and seriously to find meanings constructed from literary features used in the texts. In prose writing, the literary components that construct the story—plot, character, setting, narrator, voice, and language usage—are the primary concern of close reading to examine the theme of the story and other meanings embodied by those elements. Close reading is also interested in the interpretation of symbols and connotations that appear in the text. Moreover, since each novel is composed of different conventions serving different readers, the genre context of the text should be considered. In general, genre groups types



of work together through common characteristics while leaving room for imagination and creativity. Close reading with genre context is thus the approach used to analysing the literary text by closely examining the meaning from literary components in a particular text with regard to convention built from a particular or hybrid genre context.

Accordingly, this thesis uses close reading to analyse the literary components in the selected texts, focusing on the plot, characters, settings, and narrators. For interpretation, specific genres will be discussed to highlight how these components are constructed to serve that genre. More particularly, the reinvention of the sign and the performance of Thainess, which appears across those components, will be the central focus to answer what and how Thainess was reinvented in Thai literature after 2006 and how it interplays with that genre. For example, in Chapter 5, the plot, setting, and characters in *Buppe* will be discussed alongside the historical romance genre. The chapter also connects to the discourse of Thainess embedded in Thai mainstream history to examine how *Buppe* was used to be reinvented to serve that genre.

### ***Discourse Analysis by Semiotic and Representation Reading***

The literary components, as mentioned earlier, can also be read with semiotic and representation approaches to analyse the formation and practice of discourse. The term discourse has been applied in various methods in different fields. In this thesis, discourse is based on Foucault's argument and its use in cultural studies. Stuart Hall (2003) explains that discourse is the production of knowledge through language, which constitutes social aspects that embody meaning and shape what we do and think. Discourse does not appear in one statement or a single text but can be found across texts, conducts, and intuitions. Grounded in social constructionism, the discursive formation, which forms the reality we perceive, connects to the issue of power since our understanding is constructed from sources of institutional knowledge like schools and state media. Accordingly, the dominant discourse is formed by hegemonic power, especially from the institutionalised knowledge that allows individuals to understand the world.

To unpack discourse, semiotic and representation reading are used in this thesis. Firstly, semiotics is, according to Daniel Chandler (2002), the study of signs, which can be visual signs as well as words, sounds, and body language. Sign here is examined as part of the semiotic system, which represents something else. Thus, the semiotic study involves seeing how meanings are made and how reality is represented. This concept is influenced by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure wherein the sign system consists of the signified and signifier. In short, language signs like the word ‘flag’ are signifier parts as it becomes a word by combining f-l-a-g alphabets, while the idea of a piece of cloth, which is used to represent the nation, is a signified part. Roland Barthes develops this sign system using his term ‘myth.’ For Barthes, signs have not only denotation meanings but also connotations linking to some ideologies or discourses, which he calls the second level of signification as myth. For example, a flag is not only a piece of cloth to present the nation but also connotes the sense of nationalism, patriotism, and unity among people in the nation. Indeed, this level of meaning is part of the sign system that stems from discourse. Accordingly, “semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the ‘discourse’ involved in media texts, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning” (Chandler 2002: 7-8).

Secondly, representation reading is applied along with signs. For Hall, representation is the production of meaning which needs signs to represent reality. One way to approach representation is the ‘constructionist approach’ which believes that “[t]hings don’t mean: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs” (Hall 2003: 25). Here, there are two components to operate a system of representation: conceptual maps and language which constitute a shared meaning of things. Conceptual maps are a set of correspondences between objects, people, events, or abstract ideas and our concept of things. Meanwhile, language is the component that represents conceptual maps. The relationship between things, concepts, and signs is central to producing meaning as representation.

Like semiotics, discourse practices deal with a system of representation. However, Hall views representation as a more historical approach than a semiotic reading. Influenced by Foucault, representation does not stop at the level of language but touches upon many other elements of practices, power, and

knowledge in specific spaces and times. Representation also connects with issues of identity, consumption, production, and regulation (see Hall 2003). In this sense, reading representation is able to unpack what discourse is governing representation, which links to identity, and so on.

This thesis utilises both semiotics and representation to read selected texts by approaching the signs of Thainess as part of the semiotic system constituted by the discourses of Thainess and others in society. Although these signs, such as the Thai language and literature, denote and present the sense of being Thai, the selected texts have been reinvented into new versions which hybridise, adapt, and transform. This reinvention and hybridisation of signs are thus able to connote the shift of meaning and the contestation and negotiation between Thainess and other discourses circulated in society. For example, in Chapter 6, the *Ramakien* is a sign presented as national literature and representing Thainess, yet the hybridisation of this with the Korean Wave and BL genre can uncover how the discourse of Thainess is reconstructed.

In addition, I focus on performative Thainess and embodiment in the chosen texts as part of representation. This means that the bodily representation and actions narrated use signs of Thainess in the stories and are treated as representations of Thainess. These representations therefore examine how the meaning of Thainess is represented and how the discourse of Thainess is regulated, contested, and negotiated. For example, the bodily representation in each chapter of the novels is analysed as the embodiment of Thainess. My discussion will focus on how embodiment is represented in texts and how these unpack the ideology and discourse regulated to form that representation. Indeed, this perspective cannot be considered without context. Contextual analysis is thus used together with textual evidence, as discussed in the next section.

### **Contextual Analysis**

Since this thesis asks its central questions by positing literature within a specific timeframe, contextual analysis is the key method used. I employ three methodologies: interview, a new historicism approach, and postcolonial reading to analyse these within the context of the post-2006 coup.

### *Interview*

The first contextual analysis is based on data collected from my interviews. Although some scholars like Roland Barthes deny the role of the author as ‘the death of the author’ in order to treat texts as open spaces for interpretation rather than restricting the author, I continue to consider the texts with the author’s background. This is due to the fact that this information can support my analysis to understand how they were inspired to compose the story, their style of writing, and the sources they used to write the novels.

In doing so, I conducted online interviews with Rompaeng, Alina, and Prapt, who authored *Buppesannivas*, *Nawa Himmaphan*, and *Susan Siam*, respectively, in April 2022 (see specific date in references). Yet I did not interview the author of *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN* since I could not reach to the author at that time of conducting fieldwork. The main questions for all authors are set below.

- 1) Please explain the background of your writing and the journey of your penname, Rompaeng/Alina/Prapt?
- 2) Why do you use ‘Thainess’ in your works in general, and what is your inspiration?
- 3) What is the context of using Thainess in *Buppesannivas/Nawa Himmaphan/ Susan Siam*?
- 4) Why do you use Thainess in *Buppesannivas/Nawa Himmaphan/ Susan Siam*?
- 5) What is Thainess, in your opinion?
- 6) What sources did you use to create the works?
- 7) What is the response from readers about the works?

Aside from authors, my interviews included the founder and executive administrators of online writing platforms for in-depth information about the history of the sites, the statistical data of writers, audiences, trends, and their popularity. I conducted interviews on three platforms: Dek-D, Joylada, and An-owl, since these are the most dominant and active sites in Thai internet literature (see Chapter 2). I completed online interviews in April 2022 with Waroros Rojana, co-founder of Dek-D, Pornnapat Chaisingthong, Joylada

Community Manager, and Pongsakorn Chindawatana and Alina (Parichat Salicupt), two of three co-founders of An-owl. The main questions from the interviews are below.

- 1) Why did Dek-D/Joylada/An-owl emerge? What is the main purpose of this site?
- 2) Who are the key participants of this site?
- 3) What are the popular writing trends on this site?
- 4) What role does this site play for authors, readers, and the literary field?

I use the combined answers from those questions as a primary source to broadly analyse the context of the selected texts and the sociology of Thai literature. In each analytical chapter, I include some part of an interview with the authors in the introductory part, which is used as the point of departure for my interpretation. For Chapter 6, in which I did not interview the author, the interviews with the platform founders and administrators are instead key to interpret the data of internet literature on these sites. Nevertheless, my contextual analysis does not rely on interviews since I treat these as primary sources that examines the author/producer's points of view closely along with other documents and academic studies.

### ***Interpreting with New Historicism Approach***

New historicism, which emerged around the 1980s, is an approach to framing literature alongside history. Peter Barry (2017: 175) summarises it as “a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period.” This means that literary texts are not privileged as the foreground, and non-literary texts are treated as the background. Instead, the new historicism juxtaposes different texts together to find their meaning.

In addition, new historicism focuses on the history in question, influenced by post-structuralism, and especially Foucault. Hans Bertens (2024: 133) states that “[t]he new historicists see literature as actively involving in the making of history through its participation in discursive practices.” In other words, discourse and power are key interests since “the historical period in question is seen as a network of intersections, including economic relations, whose various discursive manifestations – all the texts that have

come down to us – need details attention and need to be brought into contact with each other” (Bertens 2024: 134). This approach is thus associated with the discursive practice of literary texts linked to non-literary texts from a particular period. More essentially, new historicism highlights the issue of the state's power and the voice of marginalised groups. Influenced by Foucault and Derrida, it looks at how dominant power, such state authorities or colonisation, maintains, circulates, and perpetuates. At the same time, as it questions so-called history, it empowers unheard voices to be heard. In other words, it challenges the traditional view of canonical texts and re-examines them with other sources.

For this thesis, I apply this methodology to contextualise the selected texts because new historicism attempts to read literary texts and non-literary texts equally, which can be historical sources and academic discussions. This is due to the fact that my research questions are highly concerned with Thainess and the context of Thailand after 2006, which demonstrates not only political but also transnational flows. This approach thus allows me to include a wide range of sources, discussions, and previously mentioned interviews, revolving around the literary texts to interpret and answer the questions thoroughly.

In each analytical chapter, I provide several sources revolving around the literary texts, which covers not only the authors and period of writing but also academic discussions, news, and others for analysis linking to the discourse. For example, in Chapter 8, I analyse *Susan Siam* by combining several contemporary news stories, which reflects what happens in the novel. Furthermore, discussions of elements appearing in the novel, such as zombies in different cultures, are included in the chapter to sharpen my analysis. At the end, I synthesise my analysis in the conclusion by examining all of the texts together to interpret the discourse of Thainess and the way in which this discourse is contested and negotiated from different voices.

### ***Analysing Power Relations with Postcolonial Reading***

To bridge the power relations in the novels to their social context, I include postcolonial reading to stress the politics of hybridity as well as the power relations among cultural differences in Thai society after 2006. This is based on the fact that Siam/Thailand has never been colonised by the West, though the semicolonial

logic used to construct the discourse of Thainess dominated Thai society for centuries (see Chapter 3). This discourse constructs the notion of us and the Other, the imbalanced power relationship between Bangkok centre and marginal spaces and cultures and illustrates power contestation and negotiation via cultural hybridisation. Subsequently, this thesis deploys the methodologies from postcolonial reading to underline the imbalanced power relationship between Thainess and other discourses via the reinvention of signs and performative Thainess produced as signs alongside representation in the literary texts.

The relationship between us and the Other will be used to define what being Thai and un-Thai means in the discourse of Thainess since this is the crucial goal of that discourse and continues to be used in many political events in Thailand. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the post-2006 coup highlights narratives in which good people are aligned with Thainess while the Other is demonised and dehumanised. In doing so, central and marginal discourse in the chosen stories will be located. Then, each chapter will look at how these relationships are formed from the relationship between characters in the stories. Moreover, the bodily representation of the characters will be linked to how the discourse of Thainess governs the body and mind and how to portray people as us or the Other.

However, as with Bhabha proposal of the ambivalence of colonial discourse and the Third Space (see Chapter 3), postcolonial reading here does not draw power relations as a simple binary opposition. Instead, the case of us and the Other will be discussed as a dynamic rather than a static division from the contestation and negotiation of power between them. This means that the power relationship here does not simply view one as the dominant force that suppresses the Other without resistance. Instead, the analysis will shed light on how the Other or the marginal group works to establish their voices and negotiate their place in the centre. The thesis will examine this power relationship by emphasising the representation of marginal characters, including their roles, such as women, disabled figures, and so forth, who voice their status and identity against the dominant discourse in the story. The politics of the marginal voice will be interpreted along with the contestation and negotiation revolving around Thainess and the political and social context of Thai society.

Another major point of postcolonial reading is the approach to hybridity. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this thesis will closely analyse hybridity in literary texts by focusing on political aspects appearing from hybrid signs and representations. Focusing on Thainess, these hybrid signs and representations are read in tandem with the contestation and negotiation of power between the discourse of Thainess and the Other. In other words, the hybridity represented in the texts connects to the politics embedded in cultural differences, from which the concept of the Third Space or in-betweenness is utilised for analysis. Furthermore, the politics of the hybrid representation of objects, body, genre, and so on in the texts link to the larger context.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the way in which this research is conducted using the theoretical framework by focusing on the textual analysis of literary texts supported by contextual examination. Although working with two methods, it combines several methodologies that provide a means to view the texts from traditional approaches, like close reading and genre context, to the complexities and interwoven meanings of representation and signs. Meanwhile, the context in the thesis starts from the primary source of interviews to a broad range of sources which can be interpreted via new historicism. As power relations and discourse are the main foci, postcolonial reading thus serves as a crucial way to interpret us, the Other, and hybridity. In the following analytical chapters, I will use this method to read, analyse, and interpret the concept of reinvention, hybridity, Thainess, and the body and embodiment appearing in the literary texts along with the context after 2006.



## Chapter 5

### Going Back to the Past: Reimagining National History in the Historical Romance Novel

#### Introduction

On the night of the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 2008, all Thai Free TV channels televised a special programme live from Chitralada Royal Villa on the occasion of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit (currently the Queen Mother)'s birthday. Traditionally, King Rama IX and Queen Sirikit gave speeches to audiences of high-ranking officers on the eves of their birthdays that were broadcast throughout the country. In that year, the queen focused on national history since she was concerned that the subject of history had disappeared from school curricula, in contrast to national histories being mandatory in foreign schools. She also expressed her disappointment that Thailand has a glorious past and Thai ancestors sacrificed themselves to save the country, yet the younger generation has had no chance to know their national roots and share in this pride. Following her speech, the government responded to Her Majesty's concerns. Since then, history has been set apart from social studies subjects as one of the compulsory subjects in Thai schools until the present.

Two interrelated topics are highlighted in this case: history and women. While history plays a critical role in penetrating nationalist sentiments, mostly from male-centred stories, women also play an essential part. History and the stories of great men have been used by nationalists, politicians, and authorities to promote notions of nationalism. History not only appears in official tools like school textbooks but is also apparent in forms of popular culture like fictional books and films. A wide range of Thai historical popular stories highlight the essential role of women and in particular that of the female body. A prime example is *Suriyothai*, a historical film revolving around the life of Queen Suriyothai in the Ayutthaya kingdom, who sacrificed herself to protect the king on the battlefield (see Chapter 2). Another clear example is *Si Phaendin*; as mentioned in Chapter 3, the body and mind of the female protagonist, Ploy, run parallel to historical events from the reigns of King Rama V to King Rama VIII (r. 1935-1946) as a metaphor for the nation.

During the post-2006 period, *Buppesanivas*<sup>1</sup> (*Love Destiny*) (hereafter *Buppe*) written by Rompaeng in 2009-2010 is another influential story. This story revolves around the journey of Ketsurang, a university archaeology lecturer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who dies in a car crash before her spirit travels back in time to possess Karaket's body in the late Ayutthaya era. Although this main plot focuses on the romance between this woman and Dech, a bureaucrat serving in King Narai's court, this backdrop combines key figures and events during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century of Ayutthaya. For example, it details the historical events of a Siamese diplomat's visit to King Louis XIV in France and the revolution in 1688 which overthrew the Prasat Thong dynasty and established the last dynasty, Banpluluang (see appendix 1). It also utilises hybrid genres, combining historical, romance, and comedy features. When the novel was adapted into TV dramas via Channel 3 in 2018, the story was accepted nationwide and the phenomenon was labelled 'Buppesanivas Fever.' This encouraged Thais to wear Thai traditional costumes in public and boosted tourism in Ayutthaya (see more examples in the next section).

Regarding its academic reception, Patrick Jory (2018) points out many interesting elements of the *Buppe* TV version. He illustrates that the story represents a clash of manners between middle-class and traditional Thai ideology while engendering a view of history through a female character's journey. Jory also looks at politics in Ayutthaya in this story such as a coup which overthrows the king and the power of *farang* or Westerners reflecting the anxieties of the period after the end of King Rama IX's reign in 2016. Irene Stengs (2020: 265) claims that *Buppe* demonstrates "an inherent dimension of a cultural politics geared at promoting Thai moral values and cultures, with a pivotal role for love for the king/monarchy and the national unity." Stengs also uses the *Buppe* drama to support her argument on the recreation of Thai narratives of monarchy and nationalism 'being independent' from the colonial period in popular media.

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<sup>1</sup> There are different romanisations of this novel and drama in English. I use this spelling from the title of the English translation of the novel since I use quotations based on this version.

Despite this story dominating Thai society when it was on air in 2018, and there are some academic discussions of *Buppe* so far (e.g., Sorarat 2019; Patcharee and Thanasin 2021), little mention of the original text appears. Composed almost a decade before the TV version, I found that the majority of works focused on the *Buppe* drama version, rather than the novel. I therefore argue that the novel should be re-examined because the context of the text in 2009-2010 is closely linked to the politics of polarisation especially the Red Shirts demonstration during those years when national history was emphasised as seen from Queen Sirikit's speech in 2008.

Therefore, this chapter aims to answer the main research questions of the thesis by focusing on reinventions of a critical sign of Thainess - national history - into historical romance fiction. I argue that *Buppe* (2010) brings the mainstream royalist-nationalist narrative of a glorious past into dialogue with the question of national crisis. It thus reflects the anxiety of the post-2006 coup period that led to political polarisation and the discourse of the 'good person.' The main characters in *Buppe* are embodied as idealised or undesirable Thainess. The *farang* body and mind constitute an accumulation of the characteristics of a 'bad person', encapsulating a threat to the Thai nation. Conversely, the good individual operates within female bodies and minds by retaining a link to traditional Thainess, while simultaneously adapting to modernity.

To demonstrate my argument, I begin this section with a brief background of the text to position it in a wider context. In addition, I will provide examples of how and why this story is important to consider. After this, I will utilise a hybridity framework to analyse the novel in two respects. Firstly, I will examine the hybridity of genre and illustrate how these elements represent the contemporary context of the novel. Secondly, hybridity will be again used along with the bodily representation of the characters in the story to explore the discourse of Thainess.

### ***Bupesannivas (Love Destiny): From Internet Literature to a National Phenomenon***

*Buppe* was been widely accepted in urban areas when the story was adapted into TV drama. In 2018, the word *or-chao* - an old-fashioned Thai word translated to 'you' founded during the Ayutthaya period -

became fashionable when the *Buppe* drama aired. The ‘*or-chao* phenomenon’ (*praktokan or-chao*) made Rompaeng one of the most influential authors in Thailand, and revived Ayutthaya Studies both in terms of the tourism industry and academia.

### ***The Journey of Rompaeng and the Buppesannivas Novel***

Rompaeng is the pen name of Janyavee Sompreeda, or Oui (Figure 13). Born in 1977 and raised in Nakhon Si Thammarat in southern Thailand, her interest in ancient history and cultures made her choose an art history major in the faculty of archaeology at Silpakorn University in Bangkok. She also applied to study as a postgraduate in the history department at Chulalongkorn University. Although she later left academia, she used various materials and ideas to compose many historical novels. Rompaeng started her early career as an ‘internet writer’ around 2006 after she worked at eleven different jobs unrelated to writing (*Time Out Bangkok* 2018; *Mathichon Weekly* 2018). As a full-time writer, she used the penname Rompaeng, meaning the beloved woman and derived from a female character in the novel of Thommayanti, which is by a famous nationalist female author in the contemporary Thai literary field (*Komchadluek* 2021). She began to write romantic novels and posted them on [www.pantip.com](http://www.pantip.com) in 2006 before publishing her work under Happy Banana Publishing.



Figure 13 Rompaeng and her masterpiece work *Buppe*.

Source: [https://www.khaosod.co.th/entertainment/news\\_3052107](https://www.khaosod.co.th/entertainment/news_3052107)

Until now, Rompaeng has consistently produced approximately 30 novels. Her style of writing covers a wide range of genres such as romantic-comedy, history, and fantasy. From these books, she became a well-known author as her work was adapted into TV dramas, which is a common way to become a popular novelist in Thailand to serve wider audiences. However, none of her works have reached the success of *Buppe*. In my personal interview with Rompaeng, she related that she got the idea to write this novel in 2006 from her interest in history and her hobby of reading historical novels. Despite this, she wanted to write it as a comedy. At that time, she had a broad plot of a time-travelling female protagonist journeying to King Narai's reign, which was chosen as a few novels were already set in this period. Moreover, she tried to write about Ayutthaya from a different angle as historical novels about Ayutthaya normally deal with the war with Burma. As there are many historical sources of this in both Thai and foreign records, she then decided to set *Buppe* in the late King Narai period, around the 1680s. She researched for three years before writing the novel in a one month period in late 2009 on the internet platforms Dek-D and Pantip. She revealed that *Buppe* received positive feedback on both websites and gained popularity (Interview with Rompaeng 2022). The novel was then published by Happy Banana Publishing in 2010, and the book won the Seven Book Award in the same year.

Interestingly, *Buppe* reflects Rompaeng's personal experiences in many ways. Again, she told me that this novel was inspired by what she wanted to see and wanted to be if she could travel back to the Ayutthaya period (Interview with Rompaeng 2022). A clear example of this is seen in Ketsurang, a female character who travels back to the past. Ketsurang studies in the faculty of archaeology at Silpakorn University where Rompaeng herself graduated. Her interest in Ayutthaya history is also apparent as the last place Ketsurang visits before she dies and possesses Karaket's body is an Ayutthaya temple. When she becomes Karaket, she is eager to travel to Ayutthaya to witness the history she learnt about in university. Rompaeng herself admitted that traits of her personality such as her sense of humor and self-reliance are similar to Ketsurang. Thus, *Buppe* is not only derived from national history but also from the author's own background.

It is worth noting that when *Buppe* was introduced to the public in the form of a novel, it was not widely considered to be a national phenomenon because it was limited to a specific readership. It did not gain popularity until the story was adapted into a TV drama almost a decade later. Rompaeng's life has changed as a result of the TV drama and her career has peaked. Accordingly, *Buppe* has been reprinted almost 30 times in more than 120,000 copies. There was then a translation of *Buppe* in English in 2020 for an international audience, translated by Nopamat Veohong (Figure 14).

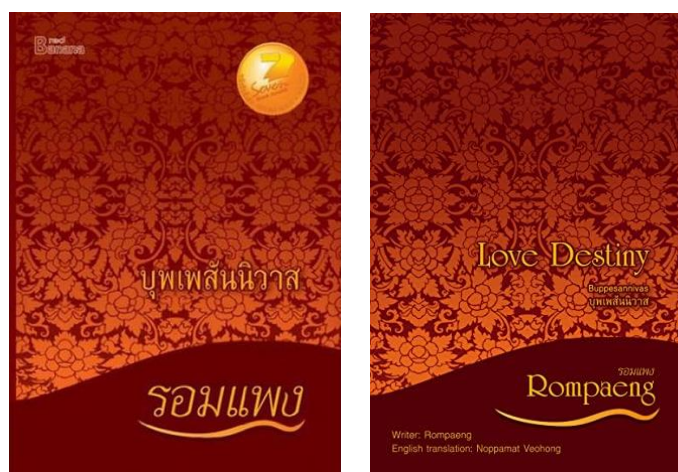


Figure 14 *Buppe* novel's cover in Thai (left) and English Translation (right).

Source: <https://rb.gy/0bo9ki>

### ***Buppesannivas TV Drama and National Phenomenon***

*Buppe* was adapted into a TV drama which aired on Channel 3 by the Broadcast Thai Television company. The drama comprised of fifteen episodes released every Wednesday and Thursday night from 21<sup>st</sup> of February to the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2018. The leading characters are Ranee Campen or 'Bella' as Karaket/Ketsurang and Thanavat Vattthanaputi or 'Pope' as 'Dech'. The cast also featured many leading Thai actors/actresses. After the first 3-4 episodes aired it became a nationwide hit as seen from the average statistics across Thailand in Figure 15.

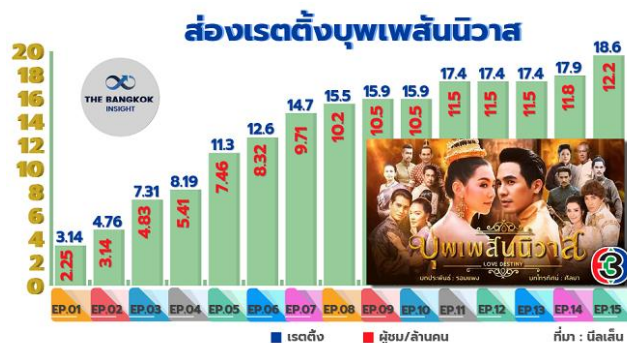


Figure 15 National ratings of *Buppe* with the blue number showing the rating score and the red number showing the audience figures per million.

Source: <https://www.thebangkokinsight.com/news/lifestyle/6059/>

This chart illustrates that *Buppe*'s ratings rocketed threefold from the first episode to the fifth episode; moreover, there were more than 10 million viewers watching halfway through its broadcast. The rating then reached its peak at 18.6 or around 12.2 million in the final episode. Additionally, the ratings in Bangkok and urban areas were higher than average. As mentioned earlier, *or-chao* became a buzzword in Thai society, and in addition, whatever the characters (especially Ketsurang) ate or did in the drama then became a 'fever' among Thais who followed the trend. According to Pornrapat Kittimahachok and Patchanee Cheyjunya (2018), *Buppe* created various types of real-time marketing in both direct and indirect ways. As surveyed by Ad Addict (2018), a Thai Facebook page about advertising, there were almost 30 ads referencing *Buppe*. Moreover, the newspaper, *Thairath* (2018) reported that due to *or-chao* fever, around 6,000 tourists went to Ayutthaya per day. This unexpected figure was mainly driven by visitors to Wat Chaiwatthanaram, the main setting of the drama. Some tourists wore Thai traditional costume to imitate the main characters in *Buppe* (Figure 16). This cultural tourism success story then became an issue of discussion in academic circles using this drama, with suggestions that the drama was selling Thainess through soft power like K-Pop (e.g. Treethawat 2020; Venussarin 2020; Walaiporn 2021).



Figure 16 Thai tourists visiting Ayutthaya and wearing Thai costumes inspired by *Buppe*. The caption reads ‘People deeply involve themselves with the drama.’

Source: <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/central/1225252>

Furthermore, *Buppe*'s success stimulated public interest in Ayutthayan history again. During and after *Buppe* aired, seminars and lectures about Ayutthayan history took place, which mostly referenced the events and characters mentioned in *Buppe*. There were also comments and articles from historians like Thanet Aphornsuvan who said *Buppe* made history during King Narai more tangible for the public and made people turn towards learning history (Matichon 2018). In addition, Nidhi Eoseewong (2018) comments that *Buppe* fever is one example of commodifying Thainess as a ‘clown’ (*cham-uat*) and entertainment, yet he views that audiences can learn from the past portrayed in the drama, especially regarding how to live with ethnic diversity and solve conflict.

The success of *Buppe* in 2018 then stimulated the production of *Buppe* franchise films, dramas, and cartoons both in Thailand and the international media. In July 2022, the movie *Buppesannivas 2 (Love Destiny the Movie)* was launched with the same lead actor and actress but a different setting in the time of King Rama III (r. 1824-1851) in Bangkok. Again, this film was profitable, although it took many years to be released after the first episode. In the same year, *Buppe* was adapted as a graphic novel by the famous Korean website ‘Webtoon.’ Furthermore, the drama *Phromlikhit (Love Destiny 2)* was aired on Channel 3 in late 2023. With the same lead couples, the drama tells the story of Karaket and Dech's children in King Thai Sa's



reign (r.1709-1733) (see Appendix 1), and the time travel of a female character from the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the Ayutthaya period remains the key conflict. Again, this story gained high ratings while it aired.

Although *Buppe* can be referred to as a national phenomenon among Thais since this sort of ‘fever’ rarely occurs in the digital age, there are some analyses of *Buppe* as a literary text (such as Sumalee 2020; Teavakorn 2020), but no work links the concept of hybridity and the context of the aftermath of the 2006 coup, which I unpack in the following sections.

### **Reinventing National History in *Buppesannivas*: Hybrid Narration during Political Polarisation**

The historical novel, as Sarah Johnson (2005) conceptualises, is defined as a fiction set before the time and life of the author, which was normally before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author also creates the story based on research rather than personal experience. For Thai historical novels, the common theme deals with nationalism based on royalist-nationalist history. *Buppe* not only follows this grand narrative, but also hybridises many features from various genres. The novel can be seen as speculative fiction, comprising the concepts of reincarnation, mantras, spirits, and so on. While Thai historical fiction normally engages with critical events in a serious manner, *Buppe* reinvents this through a romantic comedy. Importantly, this hybrid narration resonates with Thai society as the coup at the end of King Narai’s reign parallels the 2006 coup, especially with the anxiety of the loss of the nation and national identity.

#### ***Retelling History through Speculative Fiction under Hybrid Beliefs***

*Buppe* uses ‘unreal’ elements to link the past and the present through the time travelling female protagonist. Here, *Buppe* can be defined as speculative fiction since many of its features are beyond the realist logic of the present day. According to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, Marek Oziewicz (2017) summarises that speculative fiction is a broad term covering a wide range of subgenres such as fantasy, horror, dystopia, science fiction, and so on. This is a non-mimetic story that departs from imitating

consensus reality, emerging against the Enlightenment movement in the West to embrace other possibilities and truths. While contemporary historical fiction is more blended with other genres (Johnson 2005: 4-5), creating a speculative storyline is another way to present new possibilities with existing historical data.

*Buppe* combines historical events with an acceptable logic among Thais derived from Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism. The conflict in *Buppe* starts with the death of two heroines. When Ketsurang dies in a car crash, her spirit travels back to the past and she possesses Karaket's body. The reason for this is first demonstrated by a woman in the past who pleads with her to do it. Karaket, who is a so-called beauty but also a cruel woman, accidentally kills a person out of envy. Without confessing, Dech, who is Karaket's fiancé as arranged by their parents and who personally hates her, then chants a mantra called Kritsanakali, aiming to prove who committed the crime. Accordingly, the mantra attacks Karaket until she dies. As spirits, they meet each other, and Karaket needs Ketsurang's help to redress her wrongs. Therefore, Ketsurang wakes up again in Karaket's body and makes everyone around her wonder how this woman has rapidly changed from a bad woman to a misbehaving and ill-mannered one. She is then viewed as a lunatic (*mae-ying wipalat*) resulting from the mantra.

The true reason behind Ketsurang's journey gradually reveals whether there is the call of love destiny or *buppesannivas*, the title of the novel, between her and Dech. As they are soulmates but live in different times, this destiny thus leads them to meet each other across time. This belief can be found both in Buddhism and Thai belief in general. According to the *Dictionary of Buddhism* by Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto 1985: 387), *buppesannivas*, which correlates with *pubbesannivāsa* in Pali, means 'living together in the past; previous association; cohabitation in a previous life'. Similarly, according to the *Dictionary of the Royal Institute of Thailand* (n.d.), this word means 'living together in past lives; being a soulmate.' Hence, this perception becomes the essential logic to establish the main plot and demonstrate how a couple living in different times could meet.

Furthermore, magic plays a role in uniting the separated couple while a magician acts as a mentor who

explains the character's destiny. As mentioned earlier, the Kritsanakali mantra, which is created from the author's imagination, is the means through which Karaket dies and Ketsurang's spirit is called to possess the body. This mantra also continues the conflict in the climax of the story when Ketsurang in Karaket's body accidentally touches the written text of the mantra. Her spirit then leaves her body. In that time, she travels back to her departed world, seeing her mother and grandmother before realising that she has already died in the present world. Importantly, she realises that Rueang-rit, her love interest in the present, and Dech, are actually the same person. Thus, all the questions in her mind are answered and she can fully accept Dech as her soulmate. Finally, Dech enchants the mantra again to call her back, and she returns to the past waking up with a clearer understanding of her situation.

The role of the magician should be taken into consideration. Apart from Dech who is a temporary magician when he enchants the mantra, Chi-pa-khao, a brahmin ascetic, plays a supporting role as a mentor who guides the characters' decisions and answers their questions. For instance, when he meets Ketsurang in Karaket's body, he knows that she comes from a faraway time and place, helping her to live in the past by giving her advice and an amulet. In addition, when Ketsurang's spirit is accidentally separated from Karaket's body, she as a spirit meets Chi-pa-khao who, as an omniscient person, tells her about her situation and answers her questions. In this sense, Chi-pa-khao is a mentor who can communicate between the supernatural world and common people. As speculative fiction, therefore, *Buppe* combines these beliefs which rely on a cyclical worldview, as mentioned in Chapter 3. The novel emphasises the rule of karma together with making merit or *bun* and ends with the conclusion that all of these become a love destiny.

### *Nostalgia for the Glorious Past with a 'Feel-Good' Storyline*

As historical fiction, *Buppe* relies on actual events and records from historical sources. Yet, the way in which this novel presents these is different from mainstream Thai historical narratives, as with the romantic elements and comical tone. The hybrid narration thus brings contemporary readers back to 'the glorious past' of one of the golden ages of Thai history with a so-called 'feel-good' storyline.

*Ayutthaya Kingdom and King Narai's Reign as the Golden Era*

*Buppe* revives Ayutthayan history and intertwines it with a nostalgic sense of the past. As a four-century-long kingdom, Ayutthaya is generally perceived to be central to the glorious past of Thailand. Ayutthayan traditions dominated Thai culture in the subsequent Thonburi and Bangkok periods. As for Bangkok elites, they saw themselves as Ayutthayan people. King Rama I, for example, established Bangkok as the capital city in 1782 by imitating the style of the grand palace and royal temple from Ayutthaya. Ayutthaya's history also dominated the nation-building agenda as well as the colonial tensions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century within Royal-Nationalist history (hereafter RNH) logic (see Chapter 2). The version of King Narai that appears in *Buppe* is not only regarded as one of the greatest kings in Thai history, but also marks the golden age of Thai commerce, international relations, and literature.

Historically speaking, Ayutthaya was ruled by five dynasties and 34 kings. King Narai from the house of Prasatthong, the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty, ruled the kingdom between 1656-1688 (Wyatt 2003: 313). Though Ayutthaya's kings normally sat on the throne for a short period due to the instability of court politics, King Narai ruled the kingdom for more than 32 years and commercial and foreign affairs reached their peak. In a broader context, Anthony Reid (1988) called this century of Southeast Asia 'the age of commerce' which is one of the successful eras of 'the land under the wind.' As there were many foreign merchants and companies like the Dutch VOC and the East India Company of Britain, Ayutthaya was a prosperous city as a result of international trade, especially with the West. David Wyatt (2003) points out that 17<sup>th</sup> century Ayutthaya developed as a strong political kingdom among its neighbours and became a wealthy state due to international commerce. So, "European travellers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries placed Ayutthaya or Siam among the three great powers of Asia alongside China and India" (Chris and Pasuk 2017: ix).

The relationship between Ayutthaya and the West reached its climax towards the end of King Narai's reign. The king successfully sent envoys led by Kosa Pan to meet King Louis XIV in Paris in 1686 (Figure 17). The French king warmly received Ayutthaya and sent French diplomats back to visit King Narai in turn.

This event shows the intimate relationship between Ayutthaya and France, and thereafter this event has been highlighted in the master narrative of Thai history. Apart from King Narai, the head of the Ayutthaya envoy, Kosa Pan, became a national hero and is featured in many Thai historical textbooks and documents which praise his success.

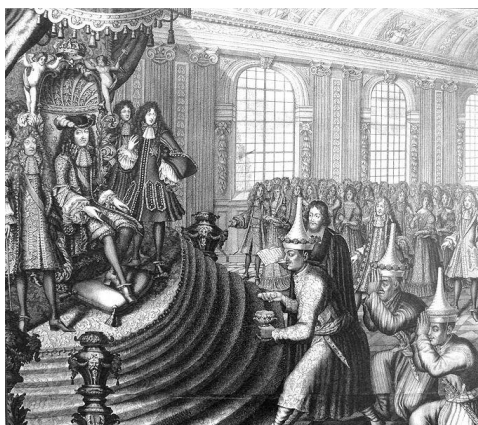


Figure 17 Ayutthayan diplomats led by Kosa Pan who visited King Louis XIV in 1686.

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SiameseEmbassyToLouisXIV1686NicolasLarmessin.jpg>

Another perspective on the so-called glorious past of the King Narai era can be considered in terms of arts and culture. This period is regarded as one of the golden ages of Thai literature since many masterpieces were produced during this reign. For example, *Chindamani*, the first Thai language textbook, was composed by a royal poet, Phra Horathibodi, under the king's command. *Samuttakhot Khamchan* is another instance of a masterpiece composed in this era. Moreover, there is an assumption that Si Prat, who is praised as a great Thai poet, also lived in this period. Even though the existence of Si Prat is dismissed in present academia, his story is an example of King Narai's reign being emphasised as a great period in Thai literature. In addition, as a consequence of foreign influences, diverse new cultural artifacts emerged from this reign, such as the Narai palace in Lopburi and desserts such as *foi thong* and *thong yip* originating from a mixing of cultures which then became known as 'Thai dessert'. Without a doubt, King Narai is regarded as one of 'the great' kings in Thai history, and these achievements continually circulate in the collective Thai memory, through historical textbooks, popular culture, and monuments (Figure 18).



Figure 18 King Narai (the third from left) is selected as one of the seven great kings to stand at Rajabhakdi Park which opened in 2015. This park functions as a royalty park and tourist attraction.

Source: <https://travel.trueid.net/detail/jvVe1dxkrVj>

Contrary to the RNH narrative, more recent historical studies share critical views of King Narai. The king is not portrayed as a static figure in comparison to RNH logic. For instance, Nidhi (2006 [1980]) takes a controversial stance in ‘*Kanmueang Thai Samai Phranarai*’ (*Thai Politics in the King Narai Era*). His argument challenges the master narrative as he contends that King Narai was not a beloved king and may not have been a *dhamaraja* or a virtuous king. This is because political chaos in his reign is found through records of frequent protests and rebellions. Moreover, the king made people anxious about war at all times of his reign, especially against the West (Nidhi 2006: 42-43). Critically, warfare has become a source for nationalist historians to praise him as a successful king who protected and stabilised the country.

### *Reinventing History into Feel-Good Story*

The late King Narai’s reign in the 1680s appears as the main setting in *Buppe* and mostly follows the RNH narrative. Rompaeng uses a wide range of historical sources which are shown in the reference section, including *A Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya*, *Recording of Foreigners*, and secondary sources about key figures in history. Ayutthaya in *Buppe* is exhibited as an international trade centre and a melting pot of multinationals. The main setting of *Buppe* is located in downtown Ayutthaya. As Ketsurang lives in a high-ranking bureaucratic house, she lives near the grand palace and many other historically key places. Markets, for example, are crucial places since Ketsurang visits Portuguese, Chinese, and other local multicultural

markets. Here, markets can be seen as commercial centres consisting of international people living in Ayutthaya. Also, as an archaeologist graduate, Rompaeng utilises Ketsurang's views and voices to illustrate what those places are and how they are important. The journey of Ketsurang through the city is thus the way in which the author revives the glorious past of Ayutthaya through a knowledgeable woman in the globalised era describing a wealthy and so-called 'globalised city' before globalisation.

Historical characters are, moreover, key elements used in *Buppe* to reimagine national heroes. As King Narai's reign is considered to be the golden age of relations with Western countries and Thai literature, key characters from history appear in Ketsurang's circle. Starting from her household, she lives with Phra Horathibodi who is a close friend of Karaket's father that is waiting to be married to his son, Dech. As mentioned earlier, Phra Horathibodi is a real historical figure who composed key Thai textbooks and literature was the King's teacher. *Buppe* not only introduces scenes such as Phra Horathibodi writing a textbook as well as composing *Samuttakhot Khamchan*, but the story also includes scenes within which the main characters gather to compose and play a verse. This story also portrays Si Prat's character as Phra Horathibodi's son and Dech's elder brother.

Owing to Ketsurang living with one of the principal servants of the king, her life is hence surrounded by many characters who are historically recorded in the master narratives. Kosa Pan is a prime example and his trip to France is included as one of the essential events of *Buppe*. Interestingly, Ketsurang's fiancé is also a member of this diplomat journey. In the beginning, Dech works as a servant in the royal court as Muen Sunthon Thewa before being promoted to Khun Si Wisan Wacha.<sup>2</sup> The latter title is derived from the role of the 3<sup>rd</sup> rank diplomat in Kosa Pan's trip to France (Figure 19). However, Khun Si Wisan Wacha is

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<sup>2</sup> These terms are noble titles given by the king to his servants for their duties and career achievements. It consists of eight ranks starting from the lowest one Nai followed by Pan, Muen, Khun, Luang, Phra, Phraya, with Chaophaya being the highest rank. Normally, Thais refer to a person by their titles such as Phra Horathibodi as Ok-Phra, Phraya Kosathibodi (Pan) as Ok-(Phra)Ya.

mentioned in only a few sentences in the chronicle as a young man of around 25-30, who is the son of a high-ranking officer. He was a diplomat to Portugal and to the Moghuls (*Prachum Pongsawadan*, Vol. 20 1963: 143). Thus, a few lines in history inspired the author to imagine this fully-fledged character, and this person becomes the main character of Dech who is the son of Phra Horathibodi instead of an unnamed high-ranking officer.



Figure 19 The portrait of leading Ayutthayan diplomats visiting France in 1686. Kosa Pan is at the centre, Luang Kanlaya Na Maitri on the left and Khun Si Wisan Wacha on the right.

Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84543563>

More importantly, the way in which Rompaeng creates this character as Ketsurang's fiancé links to national pride. This character taking an active role in a significant national mission not only makes Ketsurang proud of him as his future wife, but also disseminates this sense of pride to contemporary readers. The text describes Dech preparing very hard to learn French for this trip because "[t]he mission I will be dispatched for is for the affairs of the state. Whatever I can do on behalf of the country I shall do to the best of my



ability” (Rompaeng 2020: 334)<sup>3</sup>. Here, Karaket feels that “no wonder Siam’s diplomatic mission has been highly regarded up until her modern times” (Rompaeng 2020: 334). In this way, national pride is shared through romance as an important component of *Buppe*.

Although romantic features might be generally found in novels of the historical genre, comical tones are rare in Thai historical novels. *Buppe* is thus a clear example of the different ways Thailand’s glorious past can be portrayed. Broadly speaking, RNH shapes the perspective of history among Thais through notions of national independence and warfare. The main theme of this history revolves around a national crisis which emphasises Thai leaders. Therefore, the trope of Thai historical narratives is a means through which national heroes and heroines can be praised. This popular narration is seen both in Thai films and novels such as *Suriyothai*, *The Legend of King Naresuan*, *Sai Lohit*, *Thawipob*, and so forth. In contrast, RNH in *Buppe* is narrated using romantic-comedy elements constructing the glorious past of Thailand through a so-called ‘feel-good’ mood instead.

Ketsurang, for example, is a central character around whom the comic scenes in *Buppe* revolve. As she comes from another time, she does things differently from Ayutthayan people and consequently shocks those around her. For example, she uses many slang words from her time, making everyone confused as to what she is saying. Moreover, she introduces many food dishes from her time, such as *mu kratha*, a Thai style BBQ, making the people around her believe she is a lunatic. Furthermore, while Ketsurang is a lively and energetic figure who transgresses the social norms of Ayutthayan women, Dech is portrayed as a well-mannered member of the elite with prudent characteristics. So, when they speak or go out together, many scenes portray the clash of their different personalities, creating both comedy and romance.

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<sup>3</sup> For the quotation in this paper, I use the English version of *Buppe* translated by Nopamat Veohong published in 2020 as an e-book via Amazon Kindle and Meb. Some of the spellings in the novel like specific names are different such as the translation using Dej and Kate rather than Dech and Ketsurang. Moreover, Ayodhya is used in the translation rather than Ayutthaya. To avoid confusion, I change the spelling of specific names from the translation to align with the Romanisation I used in this paper, yet other spellings remain from the original text.

These romantic-comedy features in *Buppe* can be seen in parallel to post-1997 Thai films. One of the rising genres during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is that of ‘feel-good’ films, especially films produced by GTH studio (later GDH) such as *Faen Chan* (My Girl) in 2003 and *Season Change* in 2006. According to Jirathorn Sakulwattana, this genre became popular among middle-class Thais. She defines the films “as ‘feel-good’ on two levels. First, they are films of the feel-good genre due to their light-hearted storytelling with an uplifting denouement; and second, with such a narrative condition, the films are able to render feel-good as a viewing mode to viewers.” (Jirathorn 2019: 213). *Buppe* can also be viewed as a ‘feel-good’ story since it revolves around ‘light-hearted storytelling with an uplifting denouement’ between Ketsurang and Dech. Unlike typical examples of historical fiction which emphasise warfare (Apirak 2004), peace, and the prosperity of Ayutthaya in the period of King Narai, the floor is instead opened up for a middle-class woman from the present and a high-status male of Ayutthaya to develop their love. Also, the political instability in the final year of Narai’s reign marks the point when their love becomes stable. Hence, both the comical and romantic elements turn what is serious content in RNH history into a ‘feel-good’ mode of reading.

Given that ‘feel-good’ films operate within Thai middle-class ideologies, *Buppe* as feel-good fiction likewise demonstrates middle-class culture. As the novel was first composed as internet literature on [www.dek-d.com](http://www.dek-d.com), the story must respond to online readers who are part of the younger generation and can access the internet. More essentially, *Buppe* consists of many elements that meet middle-class expectations. The most obvious evidence can be seen in the romance of the main couple because it resonates with the logic of monogamy among the Thai middle-class. While Ayutthayan society allowed men to have more than one wife, the love affair between Ketsurang and Dech follows the current logic of monogamy in Thai society. The text describes Dech as being “unlike most men of this era, he doesn’t see servants and slaves as roadside flowers that he can pick and discard at will” (Rompaeng 2020: 277). Furthermore, Ketsurang can be read as representative of middle-class Thai women who do not surrender to ancient norms of being only a decent wife and daughter since ‘beauty and brains’ and an individualist personality are embodied through Karaket.

### *The Anxiety of ‘Loss’ during the Period of Political Polarisation*

The hybrid narrative of *Buppe* mirrors the contemporary political conflict in the aftermath of the 2006 coup. Political conflict in the late King Narai’s reign in *Buppe* parallels Thai society from the time of writing, linking to the notion of ‘good people.’ *Buppe* was composed between 2009-2010, which was a critical period because Red Shirt demonstrators gathered to prevent the ASEAN summit hosted by the Thai government in 2009. Moreover, they seized essential parts of Bangkok in mid-2010 before being disbanded by the government (see Chapter 2 and Appendix 3). This political chaos caused anxiety for Thais, especially Bangkokians, as they were faced with the prospect of ‘civil war’ at the heart of the nation. Interestingly, the fire which burnt the Central World department store in the heart of Bangkok recalled the historical event of the fall of Ayutthaya (Figure 20) in 1767, when Burmese soldiers burnt the capital city of Ayutthaya, turning the glorious kingdom into a wreckage site. Following this logic, the discourse of ‘burning the nation’ (*phao ban phao mueang*) recurred and shifted from an external enemy to an internal threat, with the blame aimed at a group of people accused of destroying their own nation.



Figure 20 Central World Department Store, located in the business district of Rachaprasong Junction, was burnt down in May 2010.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-52614304>

Consequently, the uncertain situation heightened collective anxiety about the loss of the nation since the master narrative of Thai history revolves around ‘the lost territories.’ According to Thongchai (2016), after Siam was forced by France to surrender the left side of the Mekong river’s lands in the 1893 Paknam

incident, the loss and restoration of the nation became the main themes within the master narrative. Shane Strate (2015) calls ‘the lost territories’ discourse a ‘chosen trauma’ and contends that the discourse is repeated frequently to rouse nationalism in critical periods of the Thai nation. During the post-2006 coup, Strate argues that the conflict over Preah Vihear, a temple located between the Thai and Cambodian border, was contemporary practice of the lost territories discourse, which stimulated nationalist notion among the Yellow Shirts to demonstrate on claiming the land.

When a national enemy appears, subsequently, national heroes are needed. As for RNH, heroes mostly refer to great leaders like the king who save and restore the country. After Ayutthaya submitted to Burma, King Naresuan and King Taksin, for example, were regarded as national heroes since they defeated the enemy and brought national independence back. Similarly, after the coup against Thaksin, the government appointed by the junta and royalist ideology asked people to be a ‘good person’ and called for this kind of people to be leaders (see Chapter 2). *Buppe* encapsulates this discourse and practice of the crisis.

#### *Anxiety of the Loss, Nostalgia, and Politics of a National Hero*

Composed in the heated years of 2009-2010, *Buppe* reflects contemporary conflicts into two ways: by using both nostalgia and a feel-good narrative as an escape from the difficult present; and through a reinvention of the national hero. Firstly, the temporal setting of a glorious past with a romantic and comic atmosphere promotes a sense of nostalgia and a romanticisation of the past. Nostalgia is not only an individual imagination of the past but is socially constructed. Thai scholars (such as Pattana (ed.) 2003; Suwannamas 2019), see nostalgic notions reappearing to heighten insecurity among Thais, especially when they are faced with the anxieties of the present time. Essentially, the constructed past is not necessarily real, but is manufactured as a romanticised past which individuals want to recall. In this respect, *Buppe* can be read as a case study of the nostalgia phenomenon in contemporary Thailand as a response to political uncertainty. *Buppe* glorifies a peaceful past which is a narrative that is rare during modern political conflict. Romantic and comic elements support the story and its escapism from political fragility.

Secondly, the coup that takes place in the resolution of *Buppe* can be examined in relation to the politics of the post-2006 coup. Following historical facts, Rompaeng deploys the revolution in 1688 led by Phra Phetracha, a high-ranking and powerful bureaucrat in King Narai's court, at the climax of *Buppe*. After the romantic relationship between the main couple stabilises, a destabilising event takes place in the conclusion, leading Ketsurang and her fiancé to become involved in revolution. Phra Phetracha is another real figure who appears in this novel in the close circle of Ketsurang. Dech also positions himself closely to Phra Phetracha and his son, Luang Sorasak. As the storyline leads to the climax, uncertainty in King Narai's court increases as a foreign bureaucrat, Constantine Phaulkon, another real figure in history, dominates the king and rapidly gains the highest rank among Ayutthayan noble titles as Chao Phraya Wichai Yen. The story also shows that Phaulkon's character tries to convert Ayutthaya into a Christian kingdom with the support of France's government. Due to King Narai's terminal illness, this figure rises in power over Ayutthaya, resulting in implications of xenophobia; and the need arises for someone who can maintain the independence of Ayutthaya and return the kingdom to peace again.

Accordingly, Phra Phetracha (both in the novel and in history) seizes power and sentences Phaulkon to death and becomes king. He assumes the throne in July 1688, eliminating the old power of the Prasatthong dynasty as well as establishing the house of Banpluluang, the last dynasty of Ayutthaya. With regards to *Buppe*, Dech is one of the members of the Phra Phetracha movement. He is promoted after the coup and at the end of the story he becomes Phaya, the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest noble title, which automatically turns Ketsurang into a noble lady called Khunying. Interestingly, the protagonist characters are aligned with the so-called 'junta' side in maintaining and restoring the peace and order of Ayutthaya again after the figure of the 'bad and un-Thai politician' of Phaulkon attempts to take over the kingdom. In this respect, Phaulkon is considered a national enemy whereas Phra Phetracha becomes a national hero.

In fact, the so-called national heroes in *Buppe*, like Phra Phetracha, are controversial figures in Thai history due to many paradoxical sources and interpretations. Many chronicles identify his actions during King Narai's reign as rebellious. For instance, the *Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya by Somdet Phra Phanarat* posits

that since King Narai was severely ill, Phra Phetracha along with Luang Sorasak took control of the palace and presented himself as the king regent. During that time, he also sentenced Phaulkon to death without the permission of King Narai. Finally, accompanied by his son, he visited the king in his final hours before the king realised a rebellion was underway and subsequently died under its victory (Phanarat 1972: 487-492). Moreover, according to *A European version of the revolution in Siam at the end of the reign of King Phra Narayana, 1688 AD*, which is translated and included in the 81<sup>st</sup> part of *Collection of Chronicle (prachum phongsawadan phak thi 81)* (Chinda Sahakit 1966), Phra Phetracha is portrayed as a villain due to his brutal crackdown and the severe sentences he metes out on to his opponents, especially to foreigners. From this perspective, Phra Phetracha is seen as an insurgent acting against King Narai and causing fear and uncertainty in the kingdom.

Nevertheless, there are alternative interpretations which present Phra Phetracha as a national hero. Chanvit Kasetsiri (1999: 76-78) says that Phra Phetracha is regarded as a nationalist who was at the centre of the resistance to Western and Christian influence during the rise of Phaulkon. This perspective can be viewed through a more recent nationalist interpretation. For example, there is a book series by Prayun Phitnakha collecting the biography of kings and key figures of Thailand, and some passages were aired on the radio by the Thai royal air force. The book *Somdet Phra Phetracha* was included in this series and aired nationwide, praising him as a national hero (Prayun 1970). Aside from historical texts, the representation of Phra Phetracha in recent popular media is more positive. After *Buppe*'s TV drama aired, a key scene featuring Phra Phetracha, played by Sarut Wichitranont, made an actor become famous nationwide despite being a veteran in the industry (Komchadluek 2018), and this character opened up discussion about the figure of Phra Phetracha in public discourse. Jory (2018: 451) argues that according to the strong nationalist and xenophobic themes, this character, along with his son, is thus presented to promote this message. In short, Phra Phetracha becomes a national hero when nationalist ideas are highlighted.

The 'true story' of Phra Phetracha is irrelevant given that the politics behind his representation are more crucial and *Buppe* is another key example which shows the politics behind the recreation of this figure. As

discussed previously, *Buppe* was composed amidst the societal anxiety of loss that required a national hero to secure an uncertain situation. According to the text, Karaket's perspective toward Phra Phetracha changes from "reprehensible" to "an intelligent, thoughtful man ... he is a rather open-minded and generous man" (Rompaeng 2020: 484). Although the text shows Ketsurang's reluctance as "she and her husband are part of history in the making. They are part of the Siamese nobleman making an unrighteous claim to power" (Rompaeng 2020: 647-648), Dech explains that "in this place and time, our life is to survive and keep our family intact, even if we are somewhat tainted. The country needs strong leadership. I think Phra Phetracha is a strong leader" (Rompaeng 2020: 648).

The logic of supporting Phra Phetracha as national hero is associated with the discourse of 'good people' circulated by royalist ideology. In the text, when Ketsurang suggests to Phra Phetracha what a 'good' leader means, she "is reminded of King Bhumibol in her present time. She is so overwhelmed by his magnanimity that she continues citing endless examples of the Ten Kingly Virtues" (Rompaeng 2020: 483). Indeed, this scene clearly demonstrates the role model of a 'good person' connected to King Rama IX and the expectation of Phra Phetracha who is the soon-to-be national leader, responding to the current logic of a 'good person.' Phra Phetracha thus reappears as a national hero in *Buppe*, fighting against corrupt politicians and so-called un-Thai people who cause turbulence in the kingdom.

Compared to other controversial monarchs such as King Maha Thammaracha (r.1569-1590), the portrayal of the king is noteworthy. Wanchana Tongkhampao (2011) surveys literature related to King Maha Thammaracha from Ayutthayan literature to recent novels which provide a paradoxical representation of him. Wanchana demonstrates that nationalist-royalism as well as the perception of King Rama IX as 'the father of the nation' are interrelated discourses, leading all kings in Thai history to be regarded as good kings. Similarly, these discourses then prevent the creation of a negative image of Phra Phetracha. Phra Phetracha's character, as illustrated in *Buppe*, is therefore embodied by the anxiety of loss, the need for a national hero, and the discourses of good kings.

*Buddhist Theme and the Creation of a Good Person*

*Buppe* also emphasises Buddhist didacticism through hybrid beliefs through the speculative genre. Even though Christopher Peterson (2018: 183-184) suggests that this genre in the Southeast Asian context responds to its own censorship and pluralism, I posit that these issues appear in *Buppe* in the opposite way. *Buppe* is not directly against censorship in Thailand. The notion of a good person is a key theme within this novel as a way of maintaining individuals' self-control and stabilising social and political norms. Although the plurality of beliefs is presented, the novel stresses that all beliefs are in response to Buddhist morality.

To understand this, it is important to see the trajectory of Thai literary culture as *Buppe* is part of Thai literary traditions that expect moral and Buddhist didacticism from literary activity. This means that Thai literature from the past is inseparable from Buddhist texts and didacticism. A crucial genre in Thai literature is called 'didactic literature' (*wannakhadi kham son*), the content of which revolves around how to become a good person and live peacefully with others. Even if Thais engage with modern forms of writing such as novels, short stories or poems, the content of moral conduct dominated by Buddhist thought remains. Therefore, content related to Buddhist thought is a key feature of Thai literary convention which is transmitted and transformed in diverse forms of Thai literature. Besides, in the contemporary context, children's tales in Thai society normally end with the phrase 'this tale teaches us that...' (*nithan rueang ni son hai ru wa...*). Furthermore, the study of literature in school commonly asks students to search for 'moral values' in a story. So, consuming literature in Thai society adheres to moral teachings.

Accordingly, *Buppe* is positioned within these conventions since the story ends with the moral lesson of being a good person in both mind and body. I highlight here that the beliefs shaping the logic of this novel as speculative fiction carry the main function of supporting the Buddhist teaching of being a good person. The main didactic lesson of *Buppe* deals with the rule of karma because everything that takes place in this story, such as love destiny, demonstrates the rule of karma which makes these things possible. In addition, the rule of karma is also used to encourage readers to maintain good conduct in their actions, mind, and



speech, as presented through Ketsurang in Karaket's body. Meanwhile, *Buppe* depicts that a bad person must be sentenced either from social regulations, as with Phaulkon's character, or supernatural power in the form of Karaket's spirit. To stimulate the notion of self-control from Buddhist discipline is another main objective of *Buppe* in addition to its historical and romantic themes.

Importantly, given that being a good individual means that one supports the strength of the nation, the Buddhist themes in this novel represent the need for a good person in the contemporary context and exhibit which groups of people are regarded as such. *Buppe* is similar to other general narratives as the author establishes a group of protagonists and antagonists, with the former representing good people and the latter serving as a contrastive presence. The novel aligns Ketsurang with Dech on the side of Phra Phetracha, while setting Phaulkon on the opposite side. At the end, as mentioned earlier, Dech is successfully promoted in his career and Ketsurang becomes a noble lady as a result of Phra Phetracha's coup. In this respect, the narrative not only illuminates the result of good karma for Ketsurang and her husband, but also implies that the definition of a good person belongs to those who maintain peace, restore order, and eliminate a national enemy. The concept of a 'good person' in the Buddhist sense is therefore interrelated with political ideology to solve a so-called 'civil war.' In short, a good individual has close ties to the nation and vice versa.

In summary, *Buppe* does not use supernatural features merely to teach the law of karma and the concept of a 'good person'. Rather, a good individual becomes part of the definition of the secured nation and this notion of a 'good person' is directly linked to political ideology, especially groups of good individuals who stand against those seizing power by maintaining peace and restoring order. In this sense, the good person in *Buppe* undeniably resonates with ideologies circulating during the contemporary period, since the characters embody notions which contest and negotiate definitions of the discourse of Thainess. Therefore, in the following section, I further explore the bodies of characters across the categories of female, *farang*, and *luk khrueng* (a mixed-race person) characters to understand the embodiment of that discourse.

### **Hybrid Bodies: The Embodiment of Desirable and Undesirable Thainess**

Given that the individual body parallels the nation, as mentioned in Chapter 3, *Buppe* evidently represents the discourse of Thainess and definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ through the embodiment of the three main characters: the heroines Karaket/Ketsurang, the main antagonist Phaulkon, and the supporting female character of Mali or Marie Guimar. In this section, I deploy the concept of the body along with ideas of hybridity to further illuminate how the body encapsulates the definition of the nation and how these bodies mirror discourses circulating in Thai society, especially in the post-2006 coup period.

#### ***Becoming a Perfect Person: The ‘Good’ Modern Mind in the Traditionally Body***

The body of Karaket is a key feature in *Buppe*, which encapsulates the meaning of a ‘good person’ in both mind and body and in the person who protects the past while also being knowledgeable about modern society. This embodiment can be seen as the ideal discourse of Thainess from that time.

#### ***Hybridising Good Mind in Good Body***

First and foremost, the possession of Ketsurang’s spirit is a process by which Karaket’s body is transformed into that of a ‘good person’ in both body and mind (*ngam thang kai lae chai*). This, therefore, represents an ideal moral conduct via the heroines’ body. In doing so, *Buppe* establishes Ketsurang as an overweight woman who enjoys eating and does not conform to mainstream norms of beauty. The text explains that, “As a little girl, it was adorable to be fat... But as an adult, compliments about her endearing overweight cuteness have been replaced by humorous chides and pathetic looks [...] she feels abject and self-resentful every time she looks at herself in the mirror. In her reflection, all she sees is her obesity with the layers of fat covering over any other appealing personality traits” (Rompaeng 2020: 21).

While the text underlines her lack of confidence about her body at the beginning, the story moves to the first time that Ketsurang meets Karaket’s spirit, which does not only scare her but also stuns Ketsurang with her idealised beauty. After this, she contemplates “[i]f only she could be half as slim, half as pretty,

and half as graceful as this spirit of the past, she would live happily ever after and die in peace!” (Rompaeng 2020: 27). Suddenly, Ketsurang dies in a car crash before her spirit travels back to possess Karaket’s body, the body that she was envious of before she died.

Nevertheless, this pretty and slim body is not the ideal beauty that Ketsurang considered it to be, because this body undergoes various difficulties before passing away. So, when she becomes Karaket, it places her in a difficult position as everyone around her either hates or fears her. Accordingly, Ketsurang has to prove herself throughout the story to make people around her change their minds and accept her. She does many kind and empathetic things for others, especially her servants. Moreover, she shows her sincerity to people around her without jealousy or anger. These personality traits, which stand in contrast to Karaket, lead people around her to gradually see her in a positive light.

The crucial success of the transformation from ‘bad Karaket’ to ‘good Karaket’ is apparent in the happy ending between her and Dech. The story hints that Dech continually realises that Karaket’s body does not belong to the same mind. As he falls into river and drowns and Ketsurang helps him, in this critical time, Dech sees the overlapping image of another person in Karaket’s body. This makes him gradually believe that Karaket’s body and mind are not the same. Finally, when they marry, the couple jokes that if Ketsurang becomes a fat woman, Dech might not be interested in her anymore. Conversely, he says that “[w]hat is inside you is what binds me to you, not outer appearance ... [e]ven if you look different and not as attractive as how you look now, fatter than I can wrap my arms around, to me you shall be my Karaket always” (Rompaeng 2020: 627). This scene is crucial as Ketsurang, who is introduced as an insecure woman with a fat body, is now satisfied with her life and has resolved her inner conflict.

*Buppe* thus underlines the significance of the individual mind, which is established as more crucial than the physical body. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the novel reveals the influence of Buddhist didacticism, which teaches that the mind and body are inseparable and that the governing of the human body stems from the individual mind. To be a good person is thus achieved through having a good mind and being kind,

empathetic and sincere, as portrayed through Ketsurang's mind in Karaket's body. It is undeniable that Ketsurang is ultimately satisfied with her new body in contrast to her fat body, while Karaket also benefits from Ketsurang as the latter uses the former's body to make merit. This mutually beneficial situation corroborates the fact that *Buppe* promotes the notion of a good person that has the perfect body and mind.

### *Hybridisation of Tradition and Modernity*

The combination of Karaket's body and Ketsurang's mind could be interpreted as a hybrid of tradition and modernity, which is another expectation stemming from middle-class ideology. Due to the atmosphere of contemporary Thai society, which is anxious about the loss of Thainess, the glorious past is recaptured as Ketsurang travels back to the past to be a part of traditional Thainess. At the same time, she still retains her modernity in her ways of thinking and behaviour. Although others consequently regard her as insane in the beginning, Ketsurang is gradually accepted due to her intelligence, especially when she introduces innovations from her modern time to the people in Ayutthaya, as well as her knowledge about history. These two contrastive features can be seen as the ideal way to protect Thainess alongside modernisation.

To illustrate this idea, I argue that *Buppe* portrays the 'clash of manners and civility' – according to Jory (2018) – constructing the deviation from social norms in Ketsurang who transgresses *kalathesa* (the appropriate of space and time). Linking back to Peter Jackson's concept of regime of images (see Chapter 3), Ketsurang challenges the order of the traditional Thai regime of images that is expected from a noble lady. For instance, when Ketsurang helps Dech after he has fallen into the water by performing CPR in public, without understanding what CPR is, witnesses perceive this practice as kissing in public. More importantly, it is a female who plays an active role in this situation. Since the definition of a 'good' female is tied up with the notion of a 'desexualised body', this scene transgresses the regime of images of a 'good' woman and disrupts social norms. As a result, she is shamed for being a dishonourable woman making Dech's family (as the family taking care of her) lose their dignity (*sia na*). As a stigmatised woman, Dech's family decides to speed up the wedding to restore honour to themselves and to Ketsurang as well.

Aside from this example, calm (*riaproi*) and sweet (*on nom, on wan*) manners are expected from Thai women, and especially women of higher status. However, Ketsurang breaks this ideal regime of images again when she goes to a Chinese market without permission. As it is known as a place for prostitutes, Ketsurang challenges expectation again by entering a controversial site not meant for ‘good’ women. Moreover, she meets a group of men who threaten to abuse her. Instead of playing the passive role of a victim, she uses her skill in martial arts to protect herself and attacks the men. This scene provides a clear example of how she breaks from the image of a good noble woman (*kulasatri*) who is supposed to be calm and display sweet manners. Her actions lead to gossip and the family losing face again, resulting in her punishment. These examples go against the belief that female bodies must be desexualised and fit the image of a ‘decent’ woman. When Ketsurang crosses the boundary of ‘decency’ in this way, it causes trouble since ‘losing face’ is a crucial concern for elites like Dech’s family. Also, as the image of ‘good’ woman is tied to the stability of the nation, Ketsurang’s behaviour disrupts the stability of social norms. It is evident that she is repeatedly patronised and punished in the narrative.

Even though Ketsurang might not be regarded as a ‘decent’ woman at first, her body becomes a site of negotiation for the definition of the ‘good’ woman. Her ability to serve political and social needs is heavily emphasised. As she comes from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ketsurang has unique abilities beyond those of other women in the Ayutthaya period, making her a valuable figure both in the household and for the country. This is evident in the scene in which Ketsurang introduces a water filter to her household as she realises that the health and hygiene practices of Ayutthaya are behind the standards of her time, and that the water used in her house from a nearby river might cause sickness. She then asks the servants to make a hand-made water filter. In this key scene, everyone in the house gathers to witness her taking charge of the process. Although there is an epidemic in Ayutthaya due to unclean water, Phra Horathibodi’s household is the only one unaffected by this epidemic as a result of Ketsurang’s water filter. Ketsurang thus becomes a heroine by saving the lives of individuals through her ‘modern innovation’. As such, modernity is represented by Ketsurang, who can protect traditional life when it is asserted as part of Thainess.

Furthermore, Ketsurang's modern knowledge plays an essential role in her becoming a respected woman especially when her abilities are recognised by the authorities. Her knowledge leads her to take part in the male domain by working for and serving the state. For instance, her ability to speak French leads her to become a French tutor to Ayutthaya's diplomats such as Kosa Pan and Dech who must prepare themselves before going abroad. This shows Ketsurang's shifting role as she can be a high-ranking officer's teacher and the only woman who can insert herself into the patriarchal bureaucratic system. Moreover, her knowledge of Thai history in the period that she lives in allows her to warn people around her about future events. As Phra Phetracha prepares for his coup, Ketsurang hints at the success of this movement and when she is proven right, her social status improves. In summary, due to Ketsurang's modern knowledge, which serves the agenda of the authorities, she becomes a key figure and negotiates the definition of a 'good' woman. In other words, modern knowledge presented through Ketsurang is accepted and praised on the condition that it serves national interests and restores peace and order.

Similar to the Buddhist perspective, the heroine's body sheds light on an ideal person who can protect Thainess as well as adapt modern knowledge as part of Thainess. Ketsurang in Karaket's body is thus an example of the notion of 'hybridising Thainess' within which a 'good' Thai person should hybridise traditional ways such as Buddhist perspectives with modernity especially from Western knowledge, for the sake of national interest and stability.

### ***The Farang as a Threat: The Interplay between Thainess and the 'West Within'***

If Ketsurang is the figure who follows the expectations of a 'good person', Constantine Phaulkon stands in extreme opposition to her character. Since *Buppe* initially portrays him as an antagonist who is a racialised 'other' as a *farang*, the way in which he is represented both physically and mentally opposes the notion of a good person in both public and private spaces. His practices thus become a threat to the Thai nation, and so his eventual death can be regarded as the social control of Thainess over a bad foreigner who causes national disorder.

*An Undesirable Figure in Public and Private Spheres*

In historical terms, the life and role of Phaulkon appears widely in both Thai and foreign records due to his dominant role in the Ayutthayan court during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, including many Western visitors and diplomats who came to the court because of him. Born in Greece, the young Phaulkon departed from Europe as a voyager to many places before settling down in Ayutthaya. In this kingdom, he meets powerful authorities leading to his role in King Narai's court. His background and experience as a *farang* voyager responded to the needs of the court at that time and satisfied the king. He then became the first foreigner to serve the Ayutthaya court and rapidly grew in his career from being Luang, to Phra, to Phraya, and finally Chao Phaya, the highest rank of an Ayutthayan noble title in this period. He was also recognised as the close and favourite servant of King Narai and he influenced many policies launched during that time (see Baker and Pasuk 2017; Nidhi 2006). In this perspective, Phaulkon is viewed as a successful self-made person who excelled beyond his peers, especially other Thai bureaucrats. On the other hand, Phaulkon is similar to Phra Phetracha in being a of hisotircal debate. Many historical records narrate and interpret him through his actions and motivations as being a corrupt person who attempted to 'sell the nation' (*khai chat*) to France to take control of Ayutthaya and convert the kingdom from a Buddhist state into a Christian one.

As a fictional character in *Buppe*, Phaulkon is highlighted as a threat to social order as a result of his misbehaviour and immorality. In opposition to the main protagonists like Dech, *Buppe* highlights the feature of this figure of an unfaithful husband as he has many wives and his relationship with his major wife, Mali, is tumultuous and not founded on love. Following middle-class expectations, monogamous and romantic relationships are key features in this novel as seen with the main couple, in contrast to the historical realities of Ayutthaya's social norms. Within this discourse, Dech thus becomes a good male character who has only one wife and their marriage is a loving one. In contrast, Phaulkon and his counterparts break the expectations of contemporary readers. As a *farang* he is not included in Ayutthaya's norm of polygamy, yet he exploits this norm to have many wives. Moreover, when he falls in love with Mali, he tries to coerce her to become his wife instead of pursuing a romantic affair. Thus, the novel reveals their rough relationship

after their wedding, leading to a tragic end. Even though the text emphasises that Phaulkon truly loves Mali, the representation of him as a wrongful husband breaks the norm that is constructed based on contemporary ideology. Thus, in the private sphere, Phaulkon is the symbol of an unethical husband who stands in opposition to the male hero and the ideal couple.

In terms of the public sphere, Phaulkon is also portrayed as a corrupt bureaucrat who betrays his lord for his own sake. Again, this stands in contrast to Dech and his companion in Phra Phetracha's movement. The first scene in which Phaulkon appears in the novel follows him and his companions to a market where they meet Mali, whereupon he shows his power as a favourite servant of the king before Ketsurang accidentally meets and debates with him. This practice of bullying local people reappears in many scenes. He also competes with other Thai bureaucrats making the Thai elites feel uncomfortable and lose their dignity (*sia na*) to the foreigner, which can be read as a commentary on the imagined inferiority of the Thais to the West. In the text, Ketsurang describes her realisation toward Phra Phetracha who "does not harbour a treasonous plan. He seems to hate the *farangs* to the bones" (Rompaeng 2020: 478).

During the climax of the story, *Buppe* exposes Phaulkon's hidden agenda to submit Ayutthaya to France's domination since King Narai is suffering from a terminal illness. The text describes Phaulkon's plan as "once this mission is accomplished, he is sure to have glory, material and immaterial, showered on him by the grace of God" (Rompaeng 2020: 421). Although he claims it for God, the novel contrasts him with his wife, who is a good Christian, as "my husband has no true faith in God. He merely acts out of greed for power and wealth" (Rompaeng 2020: 511). His death marks the resolution of the conflicts within the novel, and the story comes to a happy end. Therefore, the elimination of Phaulkon can be interpreted as the solution to protect the kingdom from an immoral and corrupt bureaucrat. In other words, the legitimacy of the coup could not be accepted without the antagonism of the 'bad' person, in contrast to the protagonists.



*Embodying Farang as the Threat*

The embodiment of negative representations in the *farang* body should be taken into account. Due to the ‘Occidentalism of Siam/Thailand’ – according to Pattana Kittiaras’s term, he conceives “*farang* as an expression of Siamese/Thai Occidentalism, that is, an historically and culturally constructed way of knowing, dealing with, criticizing, condemning, consuming and imagining the West as a powerful and suspicious Other” (Pattana 2010: 58). In 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ayutthaya, Pattana (2010: 63) contends that the *farang* was seen as a ‘suspicious stranger’ before anti-foreign sentiments heightened during the 1688 revolution, and Phaulkon became a key figure of xenophobia.

Yet, the *farang* as portrayed in this novel does not necessarily represent the actual 17<sup>th</sup> century perception of *farangs*. Arguably, the embodiment of Phaulkon’s character is the product of globalisation because *Buppe* highlights Ayutthaya as a globalised city. The novel shows the intimacy of the West living within Thai society alongside multicultural communities in Ayutthaya. Through Phaulkon, the *farang* becomes part of Thai society and is not presented as being on the periphery of the social structure. Rather, he assimilates himself within Ayutthaya’s hierarchy and reaches the centre of power. In this sense, the character symbolises the dominant power of the West which impacts Thai society and mirrors contemporary Thai society, similar to Ketsurang/Karaket who displays a Western embodiment of modernity.

It is crucial to note that the embodiment of the *farang* encapsules the anxiety of losing Thainess and presents the opposite definition of a ‘good person.’ *Buppe* voices anxiety toward the West by mixing it with colonial threat as Phaulkon’s attempt to submit Siam to France mirrors RNH’s focus on lost territories, especially the Franco-Siamese Crisis in 1893. In *Buppe*, Dech tells Ketsurang that “[n]either the French nor the British mean well for us ... [t]hey only come in to take advantage for themselves ... all the farangs may intend to colonise Siam, every one of them” (Rompaeng 2020: 286). Though this character tries to conform to Thai culture, his intentions are not guided by loyalty to the country, and he attempts to make the country lose its independence. Thus, the *farang* constitutes what Thongchai (2000) refers to as ‘the Other within’ – one

who is un-Thai by race and is disloyal to the country. This embodiment mirrors the master discourse of RNH concerning ‘the lost territories’ since the character is a national ‘enemy within’ who can ‘sell the nation.’ This representation can be seen along with the perception of ‘smart but corrupt and unroyal politicians’ during political polarisation as embodied in Phaulkon (see Chapter 2).

Hence, the construction of this meaning through a *farang* character makes sense within the contemporary context as society calls for unity through nationalist notions. As the body is based on racial difference, the *farang* body comes to oppose the ideal definition of Thainess. Thai readers might then relate to the Thai characters as ‘us’, whereas the *farang* becomes ‘the Other’. Ultimately, Phaulkon as a fictional character in *Buppe* is constructed through his *farang* body to interplay with definitions of Thainess, which reflects the fear of loss as well as the dichotomy of a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ person in the contemporary context.

### ***Luk Khrueng Loves the Nation: An Ideal Hybridisation of Foreignness and Thainess***

*Buppe* includes another crucial character - Mali or Marie Guimar - the major wife of Phaulkon, but who posits a different definition of foreignness since her race is neither Thai nor *farang*. Rompaeng creates this fictional character from the factual figure recorded in history who is renowned for inventing the Thai desserts *thong yip*, *thong yot*, and *foi-thong*. I argue that Mali is a character that embodies an ideal person who is not Thai but still supports Thainess through her mixed-race body. Moreover, her *luk khrueng* body resonates with the notion of ‘hybridised Thainess’ and the ideology of adopted Thainess which includes adapting aspects of foreign civilisations.

#### *Luk Khrueng as the Hybrid Identities*

*Luk khrueng* translates as half-child or mixed-race and normally refers to Thai-*farang* children. Again, Pattana (2010: 71-72) contends that even though *luk khrueng* can be traced to the Ayutthaya period, the discourse surrounding *luk khrueng* has amplified since the Cold War around 1960s-1970s until the present. This is because there was an increase in the number of *luk khrueng* who were also so-called ‘GIs children’

from the American air force bases in Thailand. Following this, *luk khrueng* became dominant figures in mainstream media from the 1980s onwards, including successful actors and actresses, and contestants in beauty pageants. Interestingly, *luk khrueng* became sites of modernity which reflect both Thainess and an international outlook. Weisman (2000: 336 cited in Pattana 2010: 72) proposes that, “[m]odern Thainess, presented in the form of *luk khrueng*, is constructed as being cosmopolitan and self-confident, successful and beautiful, prepared to take its place alongside other ‘modernities’ on the global stage.” Accordingly, the embodiment of *luk khrueng* responds to the notion of ideal Thainess which explicates the need to become modern while retaining Thai identity.

In *Buppe*, Mali is a fictional character derived from the real figure of Marie Guimar. Thais commonly recognise her from the noble title Thao Thong-kip-mat, the title of a woman who serves in the royal court and cooks for the king and other royals. According to Sansani Wirasinchai (2003), Marie Guimar in French or Maria Guyomar de Pinha in Portuguese was mixed-race as her ancestors on her father’s side were both Japanese and Portuguese and her mother was Japanese. However, some sources, as Sansani points out, say that her father, Phanik, had black ancestry. Although she was mixed-race, her family settled in Ayutthaya before she was born. As a Catholic she was a religious woman who clung to Christianity. Since she married Phaulkon, she successfully converted her husband to Catholicism. Her relationship with her husband was not smooth and once her husband was sentenced to die in the revolution, she became impoverished. However, she went back to the royal court again under King Thai Sa, and during this time she became renowned as the creator of new desserts made from eggs and sugar.

While her race was not recognised as Thai, her entire life was closely tied to Ayutthaya, especially her contributions to Thai culture. In *Buppe*, Rompaeng appropriates this woman to create the character of Mali. Notably, the novel consistently refers to her by the Thai name Mali, meaning jasmine, instead of her real name. So, when Ketsurang meets her and they become good friends, she never recognises that Mali is Thao Thong-kip-ma, until she marries Phaulkon. Here, the Thai name of this character, which is not mentioned in historical sources, lends the features of being Thai to this figure.

Furthermore, the regime of images of ‘good’ Thai women also governs Mali’s body. In the private space, she is a good daughter and wife as she sacrifices her personal wishes in order to enter a loveless marriage with Phaulkon. And she behaves as a good wife to her husband, despite never loving him. Her character is not sexualised, in contrast to that of her husband and his concubines. The desserts that she invents also tie her to the role of a good wife in the domestic sphere. For example, the scene in which Mali prepares dessert with Ketsurang demonstrates the role of Mali as an ideal wife in the domestic space; and reinvents a root of Thai culture for contemporary readers. Even though this cuisine is historically claimed as the invention of Marie, the novel allows Ketsurang to take part in originating this dish. This means that when Ketsurang sees desserts which are different from the present day, she tries to guide what ingredients should be added or what they should be called. She accidentally adapts the features of a dessert dish leading Mali to say “without you, I would not have this beautiful-looking dessert”, making Ketsurang “blush with embarrassment. Has the accident resulting from her gluttony spurred the now well-known shape of this famous dessert?” (Rompaeng 2020: 442). In short, this scene combines the discourse of a decent woman and Thainess embodied in Mali, while Thainess is still preserved for Thai individuals to fulfill. It also connotes that Thai identity is not a wholly foreign invention but is a process of hybridity between Thai and foreign cultures.

#### *The Ideal Support of the Thai Nation*

In the public sphere, Mali is a clear example of the definition of a good foreigner in Thailand. Her husband poses a threat to the nation, whereas she is the ideal person to support Thainess by showing sincere love and loyalty to Ayutthaya. Mali’s body further connotes the sense of being a ‘good’ foreigner who is ‘grateful to the land’ (*ru khun phaen din*). As she is a mixed-race and not Thai, the text repeatedly emphasises that she appreciates and is happy to live in Ayutthaya, and she regards the country as her homeland. As a result, when she marries Phaulkon whom she suspects of not being loyal to Ayutthaya, she tells Ketsurang that “although I am marrying a *farang* under French extraterritorial jurisdiction, I was born and raised in the land of the Siamese. I shall never forget it and betray Siam” (Rompaeng 2020: 366).

After this, she tries to convince her husband to also be ‘grateful to the land’ as she asks him “do you not know that Ayutthaya is so good to us? The King is generous and broad-minded. He does not discriminate against *farangs* and expatriates whatever their faiths are. [...] we expatriates should be grateful to this land of our refuge.” (Rompaeng 2020: 560). Finally, when Phaulkon moves to seize power over Ayutthaya alongside the French military, she repeats her words by clearly stating that, “Siam has given you refuge and livelihood. Were they not enough for you, Phaulkon? [...] France is not your birth country, nor the land of your refuge.” (Rompaeng 2020: 629-630).

Interestingly, Phaulkon changes his mind at the last minute as he says that “the King of Siam has been very kind to me. It is a kindness I have never received from anyone. I took advantage of his benevolence with swaggering hubris. I now feel a deep gratitude for him like I never did before [...] I should never be vicious to the only friend I have in this exotic kingdom” (Rompaeng 2020: 642-643). His repentance before deciding not to collaborate with the French army to seize power comes too late, as he is killed. However, this transformation is a key element in redeeming this character, as he can become a ‘good *farang*’ with a good mind under the guidance of Mali.

Since Mali voices the master narrative of RNH which applies not only to Thais but all people living in the kingdom, her *luk khrueng* body does not only mean that she is mixed-race but is also a mixture of a Thai mind that supports the official discourse of Thainess. Given that the body is less important than the mind, to be a good person with a Thai mind is more important than any ethnically Thai body. Here, the embodiment of Mali is comparable to the contemporary Thai context. Unlike the past, globalisation allows different ethnicities and marginalised groups in Thai society to express their identity, yet the expectation of loyalty to the king and the nation remains central.

This discourse, I argue, stems from the concept that the happiness of refugees in the kingdom is caused by royal protection and relying on the king’s power or *Bodhisombara* (*phueng phraborom maphothisomphan*). This concept is repeated in the grand narrative of Thai history to illustrate how well Thai kings treat

foreigners and refugees in the country by rescuing them from migration to become happy citizens in Thai society. The country also gives them a chance to live peacefully and gain prosperity as well as liberty for every belief system. Overseas Chinese is the prime example that appeared in Thai literature (see Thak 2018). So, this concept not only emphasises the power of the kings as they are lords of the land, but also calls for these groups to be ‘grateful to the land’, which further implies gratefulness to the king.

In parallel to the polarised politics, in the Yellow-Shirt movement, the phrase ‘Overseas Chinese love the nation’ (*luk chin rak chat*) was used to claim that even though their ancestors were Chinese migrants living in Thailand, they are ‘grateful to the land’ as Thais. Moreover, many ethnicities joined conservative movements while underlining their backgrounds such as people from hill tribes and Thai Muslims and highlighting their loyalty to the land: ‘Thai Muslims love the King’, for instance. Overall, Mali is a fictional character taken from the master ideology about the ‘good Other within’, in contrast to her husband. Her *luk khrueng* body is an ideal person representing ‘hybridised Thainess’, similar to the embodiment of Karaket/Ketsurang.

## **Conclusion**

*Buppe* reinvents signs of Thainess, which is RNH serving middle-class ideology and political legitimacy after 2006, via two main features: hybrid narration and the embodiment of the characters. Firstly, *Buppe* is a so-called hybrid narrative since the novel hybridises a wide range of elements across literary genres. Apart from the revival of the ‘good old days’ from Thai RNH, the novel’s tone of romance and comic narration amuse and pave the way for readers to perceive history and the past with a ‘feel-good’ mode of engagement with the text. At the same time, *Buppe* as speculative fiction underlines the key role of Buddhist teachings on being a good person. In the context of the post-2006 coup, *Buppe* echoes the loss of Thainess as well as the discourse of being a ‘good person’. *Buppe* fulfils readers who are experiencing unstable political situations by reimagining the nation’s glorious past. Moreover, the text adds scenes which parallel political polarisation, and so a hero is needed to ‘restore the nation’ (*ku chat*). Accordingly, Buddhist didacticism

becomes part of the definition of the 'good' individual along with conservative ideology to support a group of 'good' individuals who are leading a coup against corrupt people. In short, the story results from the mainstream discourse of the RNH narrative responding to political turbulence during the contestation of two poles, and the novel legitimates the notion of a group of 'good' people who can save the nation.

Secondly, the embodiment of the main characters in *Buppe* presents sites of either idealised or undesirable figures responding to the discourse of Thainess during the post-2006 crisis. As the female body represents the nation, *Buppe* serves as a prime case study to demonstrate how the notion of the good individual operates for female characters. The definition of a 'good' Thai woman is contested and negotiated. The female body of heroines as well as the *luk khrueng* characters reflects ideal Thainess in contemporary Thailand in which a person must retain traditional ways of Thainess while adapting themselves to modernity derived from foreign cultures, especially the West. In contrast, the *farang* body encapsulates a fear of the loss of the nation as well as the threat of Thainess. The depiction of the *farang* is an accumulation of many definitions of a 'bad' person and is posited in absolute opposition to Thainess as the 'Other.' In this respect, *Buppe* projects an idealised notion in which so-called 'hybridised Thainess' maintains traditional Thainess with modernised foreignness. This hybridisation mirrors the political and socio-cultural context of Thailand in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is driven by external factors such as the impact of globalisation as well as internal security from political conflict. So, to be a 'good person' who successfully lives in this era, one should adapt aspects of Thainess such as Buddhism and nationalism. The assertion of having a globalised mindset and promoting innovation appears through the characters of Ketsurang and Mali, whereas being completely un-Thai is represented by Phaulkon, who is a threat to the nation and must be eradicated to restore stability to the country.

Ultimately, *Buppe* effectively demonstrates how signs of Thainess are adapted to respond to the present-day context. At the same time, it reflects that history is not the story of the finished past but a narrative used to support ongoing events, which are inseparable from embodiment as performative Thainess, especially from that of women.

## Chapter 6

### Intersecting with the Present Times: The Recreation of National Literature through Transnational Culture in Fan Fiction

#### Introduction

A heated debate in Thailand occurred when a music video to promote Thai tourism called ‘Thailand is Awesome’ (*Thiao Thai Mi He*) was launched in September 2016 by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. A senior cultural officer stated that the content was ‘inappropriate’ (*mai mo-som*) because the clip presents characters from the *Ramakien*, a Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, wearing a *khon* mask (from a traditional royal mask performance) travelling to famous places in Thailand and doing different types of activities such as making the Thai dessert *khanom khrok*, and driving a Go-cart (Figure 21). The criticisms held that Thotsakan, a Thai version of demon king Ravana who plays a main role in this music video, should not do these kinds of activities as he is a king and these activities are inappropriate for his status as they belong to the ‘lower class.’ Although the producer finally deleted the controversial scenes, this issue raised a debate across the nation as many disagreed, and more than 70,000 people signed a Change.org petition against the censorship of the MV. It also raised questions of how Thainess should adapt to the modern world and the ‘boundary’ of adaptation in a wider context.



Figure 21 some controversial scenes from ‘Thailand is Awesome’ portraying Thotsakan in a khon mask doing ‘inappropriate activities.’

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvVdWKcqYK4>



In fact, ‘Thailand is Awesome’ is one of hundreds of disputed cases reoccurring in Thai society when signs of Thainess are reinvented in the contemporary context, leading to contestation and negotiation in terms of high and popular culture as well as tradition and modernisation. Yet, this MV is a useful example to start my discussion in this chapter since the video shows interesting features of the ‘in-between-space’ between the ‘literary world’ and ‘real world.’ Literary characters from the *Ramakien* appear in contemporary Thai society and act like individuals in the present time, therefore, causing the clash of different values and views when the two separated spaces overlap. So, when the literary world coexists with the contemporary real world, it creates the ‘Third Space’ of hybridity as denoted by Bhabha.

Therefore, I will unpack the second sign of Thainess which is classical Thai literature that has been adapted into Thai contemporary fiction after 2006. In doing so, I select the *Ramakien* as my case study since this story is inseparable from the discourse of Thainess. Since the rise of online fiction from the 2000s as mentioned in Chapter 2, the *Ramakien* has remained key material for internet writers to link to their interests, such as Japanese Manga and K-Pop cultures. Yet there is limited in-depth research on this topic. In this chapter, I will explore how the *Ramakien* is reinvented as internet literature on two popular online platforms – Dek-D ([www.dek-d.com](http://www.dek-d.com)) and Joylada ([www.joylada.com](http://www.joylada.com)) by analysing the paratext through hyper reading and surface reading. Following this, I select one BL fanfic called *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN* (*The Heart of Thotsakan KAIHUN*) to analyse through a close reading of genre in the context of the political and sociocultural backdrop of the post-2006 period.

My argument is that the *Ramakien* recreated on the Internet presents hybridisation between Thai literature and globalised phenomena, especially the hybridity of East Asian popular culture and the impact of fan culture on young writers and readers. Though these stories challenge the discourse of Thainess by reconstructing the *Ramakien* through their voices, this resonates with the notion of ‘protecting Thainess’, especially by ‘internationalising’ it. Interestingly, *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN* connects to the atmosphere in Thailand since 2006 following the empowerment of marginalised groups and the transformation of conflict between polarised groups towards an emphasis on reconciliation.

### **The *Ramakien* in Thai Culture: Kingship, Folklore, and Popular Culture**

The *Ramakien* evidences the relationship between South and Southeast Asia as this story is derived from the *Ramayana* epic in Indian culture and was shared across Southeast Asian countries. The main plot of the story is the war between Rama and the demon king Ravana, and the conflict is caused by Sita who was abducted by the demon king. During wartime, Hanuman, a monkey soldier of Rama, plays an essential role in fighting Ravana. Though Rama wins and sentences the demon king to death before reuniting with Sita, Rama mistrusts Sita, leading to the separation of the couple before their reunion.

In Thai culture, the plotline and details are diversified across time and space and are inseparable from Thai culture at all levels. Firstly, the *Ramakien* is connected to kingship, especially the Chakri Dynasty. The *Ramakien* means the honour or dignity (*kien; kiat; kirati*) of Rama, which the Thai version calls Phra Ram. He is an avatar of the Hindu god Narai or Vishnu who is the protector of the world's peace and order. Though Thai culture appears to be dominated by Buddhism, Hinduism also plays a critical role in the political agenda of the ruling class, as the avatar of Narai is implied to be the king who protects the land. Hence, Phra Ram is implied to be the king, and his honour in the story connects to the power (*barami*) of Thai kings. In this respect, the *Ramakien* legitimates kingship. Evidently, Rama is one component in the names of Thai kings such as King Ramkhamhaeng the Great of the Sukhothai kingdom (r. 1279? - 1298). Needless to say, Ayutthaya's name derives from Ayodhya, the city of Rama in the *Ramakien*, and the first king is known as King Ramathibodi (r. 1351-1369) followed by the many Ramathibodi repeated in the names of Ayutthaya's kings (see Appendix 1 for further examples).

After the fall of Ayutthaya in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, King Rama I of the Bangkok era not only marched to war to stabilise the new capital, but also collected and edited the *Ramakien* after the texts disappeared during wartime. The *Ramakien of King Rama I*, which was composed as a traditional drama play (*bot lakhon*), is the official version referenced in the latter period and is claimed to be the most complete version of the *Ramakien*. According to Wyatt (2003: 137), "the characters and setting of the *Ramakien*, no less than the

language, are clearly Siamese.” Similarly, Maneepin Phromsuthirak (2004) stresses that literature reflects King Rama I’s reign as well as showing the political agenda behind the story. The *Ramakien of King Rama I* is localised to comply with existing literary conventions as well as the political and sociocultural conditions of the time and is different from the original version of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

Essentially, the *Ramakien of King Rama I* does not follow Hindu tradition which emphasises the sacred figure of Rama as a god. Instead, the story creates characters like Phra Ram and Thotsakan who are similar to normal humans and have both good and bad sides. Furthermore, the main theme of the *Ramakien* is virtue (*thamma*) winning over the villain (*a-tham*), in response to Buddhist concepts rather than Hinduism (e.g. Anuman Rajadhon 1973; Srisurang 2006; Ruenruthai 2020). Although Cholada Ruengruglikit (2016) contends that the main theme of the story should be ‘delusion’ (*khvam long*), her argument still highlights the role of Buddhist didacticism. The theme of the *Ramakien* is thus tied closely to Buddhist concepts rather than Hindu beliefs, yet the status of the king links to the Hindu god, as Ruenruthai (2020) claims that the *Ramakien* is eulogy literature from the Chakri Dynasty.

As a result, all of the kings in the House of Chakri perpetuate this function by being great patrons of the story through literature, arts, and performance. *Khon* is one significant example which performs the *Ramakien*. The actors must wear a *khon* mask and dance in a traditional style, while the verse from the text is played as the backdrop. In the past, *khon* was regarded as a performance preserved for the king and only played in the court; however, it was later performed for common people. In the royal cremation ceremony of King Rama IX in 2017, for example, *khon* was performed before the body of the late king was cremated. It represents that the king, who was the avatar of Narai, will be reborn in heaven, as the backdrop of the royal crematorium imitates Mount Sumeru, the centre of the universe and the venue of gods from Buddhist and Hindu beliefs (Figure 22). In short, *khon* is not only a form of entertainment but is also a medium which turns abstract kingship into a real practice as part of a performative state, mentioned in Chapter 3.



Figure 22 *Khon* performance during the royal cremation ceremony of King Rama IX.

Source: [https://www.matichon.co.th/court-news/news\\_722133](https://www.matichon.co.th/court-news/news_722133)

Secondly, the *Ramakien* is also embedded in folk cultures as folktales about Phra Rama or *Nithan Phra Ram* circulate in every region of Thailand. This tale is shared across several cultures in Southeast Asia and localised with folk tradition. According to Prakong Nimmanahaeminda (2011), the *Ramakien* became the jataka (*chadok*) story called *Phra Ram Jataka* and was influenced by local Buddhist convention. Furthermore, Siraporn Thitathan (1979) illustrates that characters like Phra Ram, Phra Lak, and Hanuman were transformed into local heroes. The names of places such as mountains, rivers, lakes, and so forth derive from those tales. In addition, characters from the *Ramakien* like Hanuman are transformed into sacred spirits who become a guardian spirits, resulting in the creation of folk rituals even today (see Rattanaphon 2022). In short, the *Ramakien* plays an important role as folklore as it is localised and adapted for traditions and provides amusement and spiritual teaching.

Lastly, the *Ramakien* remains in contemporary society through popular culture. I argue that this is stimulated by the national curriculum and textbooks. Literature is a critical part of the subject of Thai language which all Thai students learn from elementary to high school, and the *Ramakien* is the main story selected for school textbooks across many levels of education. So, it is understandable that the main group who read and study the *Ramakien* are school students, and this group is also expected to appreciate the

gloriousness and sophistication of Thainess for the sake of protecting national heritage. To pass exams and get good grades, Thai students must study this subject in-depth, which leads to the recreation of supporting material to help students to learn about literature. This is one reason for the recreation of the *Ramakien* in prose and picture books for which students are the main target audience.

Additionally, the familiarity of the *Ramakien* then makes it easy for audiences to create reinventions. This inspires several recreations adapted from the work and released into popular culture which are highly diverse and deviate from the original story. Ruenruthai (2017) has collected reinventions of the *Ramakien*, especially those created for Generation Z audiences. She found a wide range of adaptations in children's literature, animated films, online stories, and computer games. In my view, this is an underrepresented group which should be further explored to understand how the so-called signs of Thainess like the *Ramakien* can be reinvented for new purposes and how this interacts with global phenomena.

### ***Ramakien* Internet Literature: Reading Methods and its Hybridity**

The *Ramakien* circulates on the Internet through diverse genres as many stories are hybridised with the Japanese manga aesthetic, while others mix with fan culture and Korean popular culture leading to different versions of the original *Ramakien*. In this section, I will 'read' *Ramakien* internet literature from two major sites: Dek-D and Joylada. As mentioned in Chapter 4, this section is not conducted as a close reading. Rather, I will deploy the reading methods of 'hyper reading', 'surface reading', and 'paratext', to analyse online works about the *Ramakien* on both sites.

#### ***'How Do We Read?': Reading Strategies for Online Texts***

The aesthetics and perception of online texts are different. Internetwork is 'digitally born' and freely edited while the singularity in terms of form, authorship, and participation are all blurred. Internet literature is constructed from various different sources outside of only words and sentences (Hayles 2008). Adam Hammond (2016: 13) proposes that online sites make two-way traffic and provide a channel through which

authors and readers can directly participate and collaborate. Apart from close reading, therefore, different approaches to perceiving internet texts should be explored. In doing so, I utilise three approaches: hyper reading as proposed by James Sosnoski (1999) and further developed by N. Katherine Hayles (2012), surface reading as proposed by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) and the concept of paratext as suggested by Gérard Genette (1997).

### *Hyper Reading and Surface Reading*

Hyper reading is a pioneering strategy which aligns with the emergence of the ‘hypertext’. In 1999, Sosnoski speculated that the way of perceiving texts would shift from paper to screen devices to shape a new kind of reading practice and interaction between individual and text. His proposal of hyper reading has become a common method for people in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adopting the term hypertext as a text linking different texts through the World Wide Web, hyper reading is similar to hypertexts in which the process of reading is an analytic tool for readers to actively select and read through particular details, which differs from experiences with printed texts.

With regards to reading methods, Sosnoski suggests eight stages. These begin with (1) ‘filtering’, which means using a search engine to select a specific text to look at before (2) ‘skimming’ for the main topics and key features in the selected text; then (3) ‘pecking’ is included to read roughly through some interesting sections. In addition, (4) ‘imposing’ is the understanding of the literary meaning of the specific section, along with (5) ‘filming’ or looking at the pictures and media combined with the text. This is followed by processes of simultaneous reading and writing as (6) ‘trespassing’ refers to reading and rewriting like copy and pasting, while (7) ‘de-authorising’ is when the role of the author is dismissed in the online text and is easy to duplicate. Finally, as reading long passages is not easily done online, (8) ‘fragmenting’ is the process that breaks the text down for reading and recreation.

Subsequently, Hayles (2012) adds two other stages: juxtaposing and scanning. In her book *How We Think:*

*Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* as I adopted the title of this section title, Hayles examines approaches to reading literature as the world has entered the digital age. In doing so, she uses Sosnoski's proposal to understand novel literature along with traditional ways of close reading. Accordingly, she develops the (9) juxtaposing and (10) scanning stages. Juxtaposing is the process of reading via multiple sites like opening two windows as well as reading from one site and writing on another page at the same time. Furthermore, scanning is the process of 'reading rapidly through a blog to identify items of interest' (Hayles 2012: 61). In brief, this strategy proposes ways to select and deal with fragmented texts serving readers' specific purposes of reading and writing simultaneously.

Surface reading is another relevant term. Best and Marcus (2009: 9) propose that "taking surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts [...] A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through." In this sense, surface reading takes the evident features presented through the text to consider the message of the text rather than digging through the hidden meanings as in close reading. As for analytical methods, Best and Marcus (2009: 9-13) propose six meanings for surface reading. Firstly, 'surface as materiality' is to see the text as an object and examine what is presented, like the cover photo and how individuals perceive it. Secondly, 'surface as the intricate verbal structure of literary language' is to look at linguistic density and verbal complexity such as the word count. Thirdly, 'embracing of the surface as an affective and ethical stance' is to accept and defer to what the text literally says rather than interpreting it. Fourthly, 'attention to surface as a practice of critical description' is to indicate what the text literally says about itself. Next, 'surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts' is to break down the structure of the text like the narratology, genre, and discourse, yet it is limited to the obvious components rather than interpretations by critical theories. Finally, 'surface as literal meaning' is to examine the text by 'just reading' and avoiding overinterpretation.

Accordingly, surface reading, in my view, attempts to step back from the conventions of textual analysis and interpretation in literary fields dominated by critical theories. Best and Marcus's proposal emphasises literal meaning and the apparent components of a text which are evident and suggest that readers believe

what the text says, in contrast to what Roland Barthes calls ‘the death of the author.’ Though this seems to stand against the tradition of critical interpretation, surface reading highlights the role of what is actually exhibited on the surface such as cover, length and word count which are normally dismissed.

### *Paratext*

Paratext provides another concept for making sense of what surface readers look for. Introduced by Gérard Genette, this theory shifts focus from textual analysis to things surrounding the text, which “enables a text become a book and to be offered as such to its readers, and more generally, to the public” (Genette 1997: 1). In other words, Genette’s work looks at the marginal components of a text which are ignored or dismissed in literary academia. His concept lies in elements which allow the readers and public to initially understand the text such as covers, acknowledgements, table of contents, all of which he calls the ‘peritext.’ Moreover, he identifies the ‘epitext’ as things related to the text like interviews or readers comments.

Although Genette’s concept primarily discusses printed texts, paratext has been further developed in digital media. For media studies, Jonathan Gray (2010: 26) emphasises that “paratextual study not only promises to tell us how a text creates meaning for its consumers; it also promises to tell us how a text creates meaning in popular culture and society more generally.” Gray suggests two approaches to analyse paratexts: ‘entryway paratexts’ and ‘*in medias res* paratexts’. For entryway paratexts, things like movie teasers, posters, and ads are key components for audiences to frame their reception about a movie whether it is a romance, horror, or comedy. *In medias res* paratexts relates to paratexts in action like the criticism of a work or an adaptation by a fan club in another media.

Similarly, for digital text, Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ (2013: 67-68) suggest three functions of paratext: interpretative, commercial, and navigational functions. This means that paratext suggests ways to interpret a text while promoting the text in a commercial sense along with navigating or guiding the readers’ perception. Additionally, paratext is developed to cover more categories. Yra van Dijk (2014) includes



things surrounding a text like search engine called metatext as part of paratext. Dijk emphasises the role of search engines like Google because they frame and contextualise how the text is discovered.

In short, paratext revolves around readers making sense of the text by leading them to either approach or buy the text, together with demonstrating practices towards the text after it has been consumed. Interestingly, the possibilities of a paratext can cover search-engine results to other metatexts which contextualise a text more widely. In the following analysis, I adopt the paratext along with hyper reading and surface reading to identify the target of reading as in the model in Table 1. Overall, I suggest four stages of searching, seeing, capturing, and reading and interpreting. In each stage, I combine the rationale across different concepts which is demonstrated in the following table.

*Table 1 Model of Reading Internet Literature from hyper and surface reading along with paratext*

Stage	Process(es)	Methods	Concept and rationale
1	Searching	1.1 Filter in a search engine 1.2 Look at the results as paratext 1.3 Try searching with different keywords 1.4 Survey the overall trend	This stage lies on the notion of filtering, with the first step as hyper reading. It also uses Dijk's suggestion of seeing search engine results as paratext. Moreover, this stage responds to the function of paratext as the entryway to the text. Overall, all methods in this process focus on how the text appears through a search engine.
2	Seeing	2.1 Enter some selective texts 2.2 Skim and scan the verbal and media features 2.3 Try to make sense of the text from its description and aligning features 2.4 Compare and contrast text among juxtaposed sites	This stage roughly surveys selected texts by skimming, scanning, imposing, pecking, and filming according to a hyper reading approach. It relies on the concept of surface reading as well through seeing what the text says to itself from its verbal and other media. It thus links to the paratext concept since elements appearing on the surface lead the reader as to how to interpret and navigate them to particular ways of reading. At the same time, features like comments or similar texts in different tabs/windows might suggest how the text is perceived in the larger context.

Stage	Process(es)	Methods	Concept and rationale
3	Capturing	3.1 Capture screenshots or copy interested features of text 3.2 Open a juxtaposed window to paste or rewrite	As hyper reading turns readers into writers, this stage sees the process of reading and writing as trespassing, fragmenting, de-authoring. In other words, this stage reads for a specific purpose by selecting intended fragments to see. Moreover, it reflects juxtapositions since it relies on more than one tab/window to move from the origin to the target site.
4	Reading and interpreting	4.1 Read from selected parts to see what appears on the surface 4.2 Identify the profound components e.g. genre, character, cover, 4.3 Interpret from all that appears on the surface linking to outer contexts	The last stage deals with reading and interpreting which still focuses on superficial features. Based on surface reading, this stage is to 'just read' profound components and analyse the verbal and literal meaning of the features. This stage also combines with the concept of paratext as an object to look at the things surrounding the text. Moreover, the way of the text presented in the particular site can be viewed from the paratext perspective that helps to interpret that element and its position in the wider context.

From the above table, I apply these four stages to read stories adapted from the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada. These two sites have been popular platforms for internet literature in Thailand since the early 2000s and late 2010s respectively.

### ***The Ramakien in Dek-D and Joylada: Hybridisation and Interpretation***

When looking through both sites, there are several literary works adapted in these spaces, of which the *Ramakien* is one. I apply the four-stage model to read internet literature on Dek-D and Joylada, with the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Application of the model with the Ramakien Stories on Dek.D and Joylada

Stage	Process(es)	Methods	Applying	Result
1	Searching	<p>1.1 Filter in a search engine</p> <p>1.2 Look at the results as paratext</p> <p>1.3 Try searching with different keywords</p> <p>1.4 Survey the overall trend</p>	<p>I filter keywords related to the <i>Ramakien</i> in Thai starting from ‘<i>Ramakien</i>’. Then I look roughly through the results before changing to other related terms such as Thotsakan, Hanuman, Phra Ram.</p>	<p>The obvious features are the cover picture of the story and the title. Overall, <i>khon</i> as well as mural paintings are key elements to show that the story is linked to the <i>Ramakien</i>. Interestingly, there are various pop star idols from BL and K-Pop on the covers, yet the story is about the <i>Ramakien</i>. Some covers are presented like Japanese manga by drawing characters from the <i>Ramakien</i>. As for genre, the most popular genres are romance, BL, fantasy, and time travel.</p>
2	Seeing	<p>2.1 Enter some selective texts</p> <p>2.2 Skim and scan the verbal and media features</p> <p>2.3 Try to make sense of the text from its description and aligning features</p> <p>2.4 Compare and contrast the text across juxtaposed sites</p>	<p>I click on some stories, especially the most viewed, by filtering from search engine options. I open different stories in both Dek-D and Joylada in a multiwindow before skimming and scanning. I also compare and contrast to make sense of what meaning writers want to show.</p>	<p>The story page comprises common features which are further descriptions and an introduction to the story which normally includes pictures and clips. Interestingly, while some pages cite verses from the <i>Ramakien</i> to emphasise the link to the story, some elements like pop stars' photos and contemporary songs are juxtaposed on the site. Another interesting feature is that many writers give a disclaimer that the story does not aim to show disrespect (<i>loplu</i>) to the literature, yet they reconstruct new</p>

Stage	Process(es)	Methods	Applying	Result
				stories from the original one by creating a present-time character along with the <i>Ramakien</i> 's characters.
3	Capturing	<p>3.1 Capture screenshots or copy interesting features of text</p> <p>3.2 Open a juxtaposed window to paste or rewrite</p>	<p>I capture screenshots from search engine results at first to further analyse the overall trend.</p> <p>Moreover, I copy and capture some interesting elements mentioned in the previous stage in another file for close reading.</p>	<p>Screenshots I take comprise of key components to analyse, such as cover photos, words, and media portrayed on the sites. It is interesting to note that Dek-D has a detector to avoid capture screenshots.</p>
4	Reading and interpreting	<p>4.1 Read selected parts to see what appears on the surface</p> <p>4.2 Identify the profound components e.g. genre, character, cover,</p> <p>4.3 Interpret the superficial elements linking to external contexts</p>	<p>I read more closely through the screenshots and some text copied from the sites. I then contextualise and interpret from the surface features.</p>	<p>Hybridity is the most profound characteristic which appears on the surface of all texts. Hybridisation is exemplified in terms of the variety of forms; in relation to the porosity of national identities; in the crossover between the notions of time and space, both traditional and modern; and in connection with the nature of institutions, such as educational, monarchical, political and so forth. Further analysis will be discussed in the following section.</p>

From Table 2, hybridity is a useful term to conceptualise the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada after reading surface meanings. I found that hybridisation can be interpreted from four perspectives - media, nation, institution, and time - from the most concrete features to an abstract concept. This means that *Ramakien* internet literature is not exhibited through particular media, but rather the hybridity of media such as literary texts and chat forms on Joylada. In addition, the paratext of those texts especially the pictures, titles, names, and pennames of writers show hybridisation across the different national cultures of both Western and East Asian popular culture. Moreover, the texts show the hybridisation of the educational institution of the *Ramakien* that is transmitted through schools or high culture like *khon* to create popular trends and individual meaning. Lastly, it presents the hybridity of time between objects and stories from classical and contemporary periods. These issues are elaborated upon with examples below.

#### *The Hybridisation of Forms*

One of the salient characteristics of literature in digital media is the convergence of modalities. As Hayles (2008: 4) claims, internet literature is ‘hybrid by nature’, consisting of a ‘trading zone’ in which “different vocabularies, expertise, and expectations come together to see what might emerge from their intercourse.” Likewise, the stories of the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada are presented through the hybridisation of media, ranging from static photos to the cover photo of the story. Some texts also include songs and clips from YouTube, as well as emojis and stickers. Specifically, Joylada demonstrates the hybridity of forms since it deploys a medium of digital communication through chat to present a story along with key elements of the chat, such as profile pictures and stickers.

Starting with Dek-D, when I search for the *Ramakien* in the search engine, it shows more than 200 results. Then when I click to see and read a summary of the stories, it shows that the literary works are not only composed of written texts, but also virtual and multimedia features, which can be seen in Figure 23 below.

The screenshot shows a Dek-D article page for 'หัวใจศกัณฐ์ KAIHUN'. The page features a cover photo of a person in traditional Thai attire. The title is 'หัวใจศกัณฐ์ KAIHUN' by 'ทีมรวมและแปลของซา'. The article is categorized under 'ซีรีส์ใหม่' and 'ซีรีส์'. The page includes a sidebar with statistics: 79,544 views, 1,716 likes, and 3,043 comments. There are also buttons for 'Favorite', 'ติดตาม', and 'แชร์'. The page is in Thai and includes a search bar and navigation menu at the top.

The image shows two panels of promotional content for 'หัวใจศกัณฐ์'. The left panel features a large image of a person in traditional Thai attire with the title 'หัวใจศกัณฐ์' in red and white text. Below the image are several lines of text in Thai, including 'เตรียมปรางสีดาภิเษก' and 'เตรียมเนตรนศรคณสมสิน'. The right panel shows three small images of a person in different poses, followed by a block of Thai text. The text describes the story as a mix of genres and mentions a 70% fan rating. At the bottom of the right panel, there is a YouTube video player showing a scene from the story, with the title 'OPV หัวใจศกัณฐ์' and a 'Watch on YouTube' link.

Figure 23 The introduction of the story *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN*.

Source: [https://writer.dek-d.com/Pingu\\_Pingu/writer/view.php?id=1409422](https://writer.dek-d.com/Pingu_Pingu/writer/view.php?id=1409422)

As presented for *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN*, the story is mixed with varied media on a single page starting from the cover photo. Interestingly, this is evidence of internet literature as a hypertext since different types of hyperlinks are included on the page. For example, hashtags and links to share and review the story are provided around the cover photos. In addition, pop star pictures and YouTube clips are

enclosed in the introduction. As this mirrors the preface of the book to introduce readers to the text, it can frame the way in which readers make sense of the text. On one hand, there are texts outlining the writers' inspiration from the *Ramakien* through a traditional verse referring to Sida, along with a picture of a man wearing a *khon* mask and costume. All of these link the readers back to the story of the *Ramakien*. On the other hand, there are also pictures of contemporary idols and songs. This implies that the story is not old fashioned and writers are hybridising the *Ramakien* with contemporary features to serve young readers as well as reflect their own interests.

Turning to Joylada, I focus on one story entitled *Long Miti Pai Yu Lok Ramakien (Lost in the Ramakien World)*. Figure 24 illustrates the dialogues between Phra Ram and his younger brother Phra Lak, through chat form. Unlike Dek-D, the text is not divided by paragraphs; rather, it duplicates a chat room and the story runs through the characters' short replies. Their conversation narrates the story in contemporary prose language instead of a classical poem. Another essential feature is the profile pictures representing each character. Importantly, despite the story and characters being named from the *Ramakien*, the writer leads the reader to perceive them differently because the profiles representing Phra Ram and Phra Lak are from Japanese manga. Although the background of the chat deploys characters with *khon* masks, it reflects a new type of story as Japanese-style anime characters are holding *khon* masks. In short, the *Ramakien* in Joylada hybridises different kinds of media to create fiction by shifting the mode of communication of literature from long text in a blank space to using a chat room along with other features which propel the story forward. It frames a different perspective on the *Ramakien* that attempts to align the story with contemporary society.

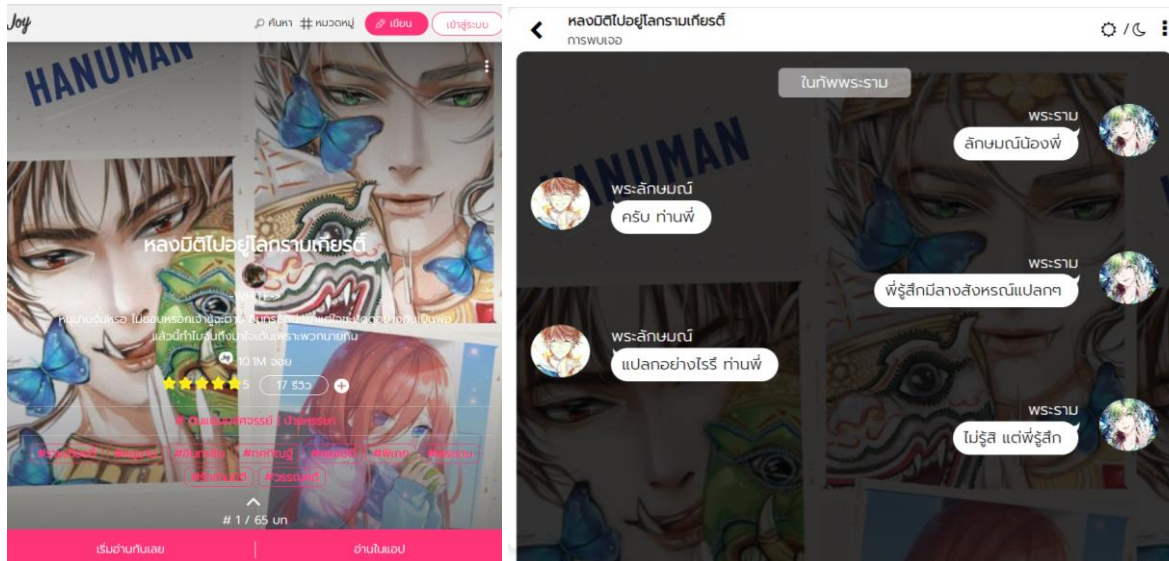


Figure 24 Long Miti Pai Yu Lok Ramakien (*Lost in Ramakien World*).

Source: <https://www.joylada.com/story/5d62b14916117f000120b33f-หลงมิติไปอยู่โลกรามเกียรติ์>

### *The Porosity of National Identities*

One attempt to make the Ramakien relevant to current society is to hybridise it with transnational cultures. Reinventions of the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada show the hybridisation of transnational culture, especially East Asian popular culture from Japan and Korea. This is evident from the searching stage when I inputted ‘Ramakien’ in the search engines on both sites. The results present the cover photo of each story, which mainly exhibits Japanese anime and Korean pop stars together with the *khon* and mural paintings as presented in Figure 25 below.



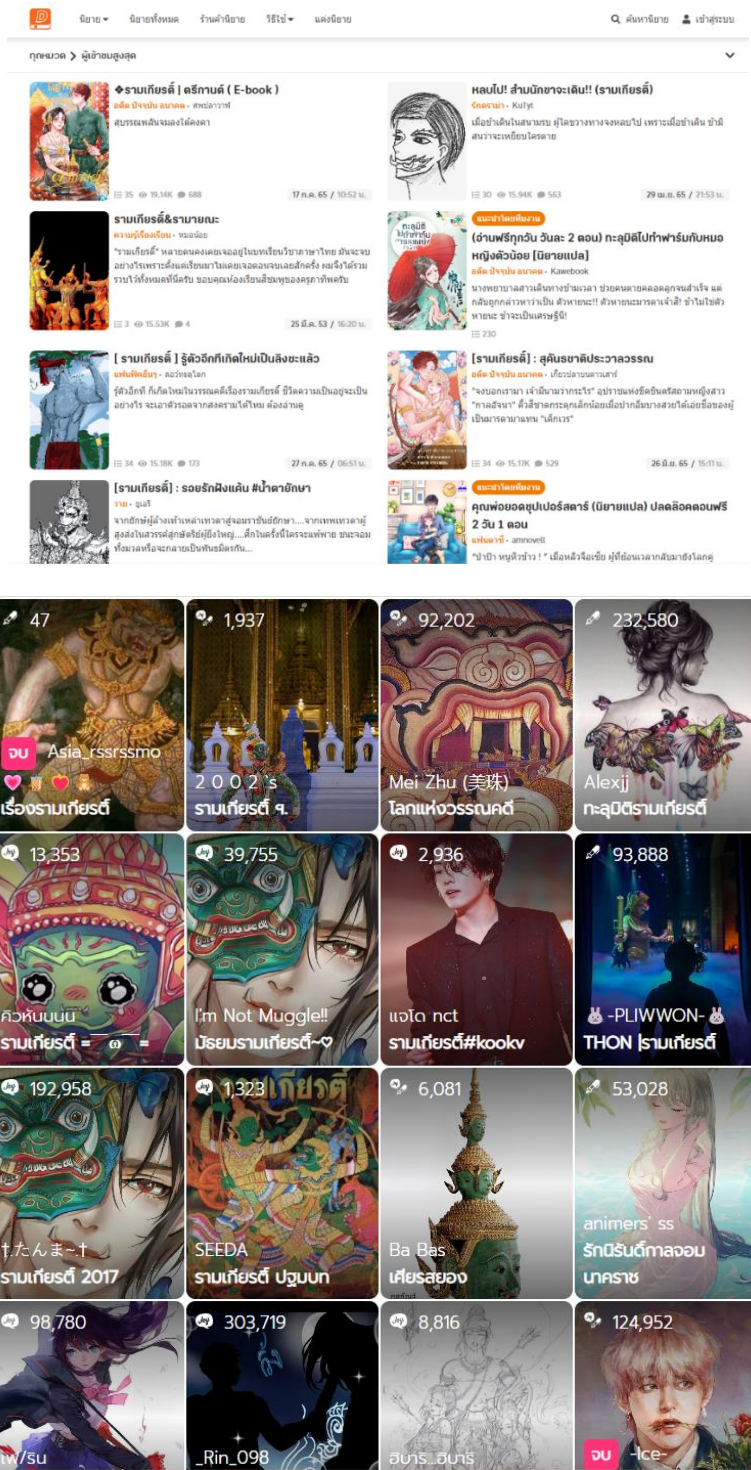


Figure 25 Search results of the *Ramakien* from Dek-D (top) and Joylada (bottom).

Source: <https://novel.dek-d.com/search/?textMode=title&text=รามเกียรติ์&sortBy=VISITOR> and

<https://www.joylada.com/search> (data on July 27, 2022)

These pictures represent the hybridisation of multinational cultures on both sites. The common features of the two spaces are the cover photos of each story mostly exhibited through cartoon or comic images. Interestingly, *khon* is the most profound element embedded in various pictures as it is largely transformed into cartoon pictures. The Thai dress style is another demonstration of the relationship between the story and the *Ramakien*. While there are features representing Thainess like *khon* or dress style, the stories look different from the common recognition of the *Ramakien* as transnational popular cultures from East Asia like Japanese anime, manga and Korean pop stars are hybridised with the sign of Thainess.

Apart from the cover photos, the title and caption of each story combines signs of Thainess and East Asian popular culture. *Lalisa x Ramayana* on Joylada (see Figure 11 in Chapter 2) is a prime example because the story title shows the hybridisation of two incongruities. While Lalisa, or Lisa Blackpink, a Thai-born singer who has a successful career in the Korean girl group BLACKPINK, is used as the main title along with her photo as the background, the *Ramayana* coexists with her name in the title. More importantly, the caption tells readers that ‘when an iconic global superstar meets an iconic character in literature, a furious and funny story comes.’ The background of the front page also portrays Korean pop star idols like Lisa BLACKPINK and BTS in alignment with the *khon* mask of Hanuman. Indeed, this demonstrates that the *Ramakien* goes beyond the presentation of Thainess as it showcases the hybridisation of various cultures.

In short, the *Ramakien* on both Dek-D and Joylada are a result of globalisation, which is not limited to Western media but rather highlights East Asian transnational media in such adaptations. On the one hand, those stories challenge the ways in which the *Ramakien* is perceived in Thai society as a symbol of Thainess through combining diverse foreign cultures. On the other hand, it can be interpreted that the coexistence of the *Ramakien* with contemporary popular cultures is one way to ‘modernise’ and ‘protect’ Thainess in current society instead of seeing it as part of high and untouchable culture. Additionally, it reflects the interests of the younger generation who have grown up during the vast impacts of globalisation. As the dominant audience on these sites, they can freely adopt and adapt different fragments from diverse sources to respond to their own needs. Unlike printed books and official scenarios, the stories of the *Ramakien* are

not censored and are freely adapted in various ways. Yet the key elements from institutional knowledge like *khon*, mural paintings, and some stories from school textbooks remain part of this hybridity.

### *Connections with Institutionalised Knowledge*

Since the *Ramakien* plays a vital part in constructing and representing Thai identity, the story has thus penetrated institutional knowledge via school curricula and textbooks along with the patronage of the *Ramakien* performance from authorities such as the royal foundation and the Ministry of Culture. This ‘official’ version of the *Ramakien* dominates Thai society at large and it is undeniable that many features in adaptations of the *Ramakien* refer back to that institutional knowledge. To demonstrate, the selected scenes and characters in Thai textbooks are important to recreations of the *Ramakien* on the Internet. As the *Ramakien of King Rama I* is around 4 volumes as a present-day book, only some critical scenes are chosen for Thai textbooks. As for the present 2008 national curriculum, ‘the war of Maiyarap’ (*Suek Maiyarap*) and ‘Narai suppresses Nonthok’ (*Narai Prap Nonthok*) are selected for years 6 and 8 respectively and these scenes are a key part of the creation of adaptations on Dek-D and Joylada.

Thus, when I search on Dek-D by looking for the most-read content, the findings in Figure 26 show that the most-read stories are related to textbooks which help school children easily understand the *Ramakien*. There are translations of the verse texts from the ‘Narai suppresses Nonthok’ chapter in school textbooks with easy prose language for school children to read and use as a source for homework. Moreover, there are also two stories directly related to the *Ramakien* by retelling miscellaneous content.

ค้นหา รามเกียรติ์

หมวดหมู่: ทั้งหมด สถานะ: ทั้งหมด ประเภทนิยาย: ทั้งหมด จัดเรียงตาม: ผู้เข้าชมสูงสุด

ชื่อเรื่อง เรื่องย่อ ผู้แต่ง แท็ก คอลเล็กชัน

จำนวนทั้งหมด 241 รายการ อัปเดตทุก 10 นาที

**ถอดคำประพันธ์ เรื่อง รามเกียรติ์ ตอน นารายณ์ปราบหนก (ม.๒)**  
 ความรู้เรื่องราม · SaikimM  
 ถอดความ รามเกียรติ์ ตอน นารายณ์ปราบหนก ม.๒ (ฉบับปี ๒๕๕๑) ตั้งค่าให้ copy ได้นะละ เขาเข้าใจทุกคน ฮ่าๆๆ  
 38 เรื่องสั้น 305.41K 65 7 ก.ย. 57 / 11:14 น.

**รามเกียรติ์**  
 ความรู้เรื่องราม · Luk-maew-noy  
 เราสนใจในวรรณกรรมเรื่องนี้ "รามเกียรติ์" เลยอยากจะทำขึ้นมาเพื่อแม่ เพื่อนในลัดดี ก็คิดว่าจะมีใครต้องการ หรืออาจจะมีประโยชน์สำหรับคนที่ต้องการทำงานนะละ  
 42 238.12K 323 21 เม.ย. 52 / 15:52 น.

**กลอนรามเกียรติ์**  
 พริศไฉฉันท · จักร์สิงห์  
 จากเรื่องรามเกียรติ์  
 1 เรื่องสั้น 1.1K 1 11 ก.ย. 57 / 11:14 น.

**[รามเกียรติ์] จันทรเจ้าอวย (อสุรผัด)**  
 จักร์สิงห์ · เกลลา  
 อยู่ ที่ไปโผล่กลางป่า ไม่พอ ยังโดนตัวอะไรก็ไม่รู้จับไว้ เรียกพระแม่ลีดาฯ แหมขอปฎิเสกก็ถูกท้าวบ้า พ้อเชื่อว่าไม่ใช่ลีดาจริงๆ ถึงถูกท้าวเป็นยักษ์มาทำกลศึกอีก "จันทรน้อยคืออะไร" วะ?!

Figure 26 The search results of Ramakien on Dek-D showing the impact of school textbooks.

Source: <https://novel.dek-d.com/search/?textMode=title&text=รามเกียรติ์&sortBy=VISITOR> (data on July 27, 2022)

Scenes and characters reproduced through educational and official institutions are recreated on both sites. Apart from commonly found characters like Hanuman, Thotsakan, Phra Ram, and Sida, some stories on Dek-D and Joylada include minor characters in the story such as Matchanu, the son of Hanuman and Suphanmatcha, and Nonthok, a giant who is reborn as Thotsakan. This shows the influence of textbooks as these characters play a key role in the selected story as seen, for example, in Figure 27 from *Adventures in Ramakien World (Talui Lok Ramakien)* on Joylada. The story caption states: “We are expected to accomplish one mission, which is to transmit the *Ramakien* to subsequent generations. What should we do?” The story provides details of the authors and key concepts of the war of Maiyarap scene along with other works of Thai literature. So, it is obvious that the story transforms institutional knowledge into a new story along with new media and ways of communication.

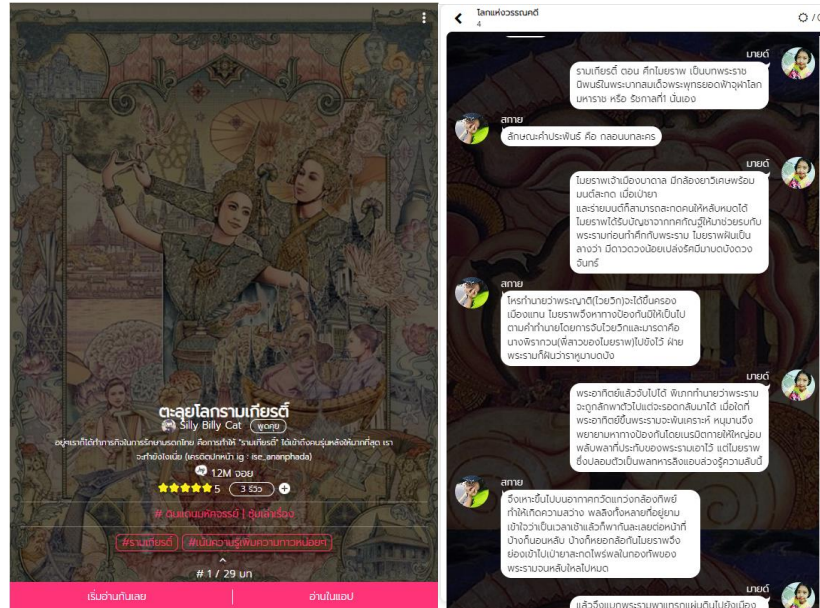


Figure 27 The Story *Adventures in Ramakien World (Talui Lok Ramakien)*.

Source: <https://www.joylada.com/story/5dd74858cb091f0001b6536d-ตะลุยโลกรามเกียรติ์>

To sum up, since the majority of Dek-D and Joylada users are schoolchildren and university students, the *Ramakien* is part of their lessons together with the authorities and senior people wanting to transmit this story to them as part of an appreciation of national legacy. As a result, the stories mirror the influence of their formal education on the *Ramakien* which initially appears on both sites through *khon* along with scenes and characters taken from the chapters they learn about in school. In addition, some adaptations are not only for entertainment purposes but also for academic objectives, to support writers' learning in school. This kind of story might be called 'edutainment' which is a combination of education and entertainment media. In this respect, the *Ramakien* in both spaces hybridises official knowledge and their imagination and interests. The implication is that they try to reread and make sense of the 'old story' by setting it in 'modern times' and communicating it through their language.

*The Crossover between Notions of Time and Space*

Reinventions of the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada reflect the hybridisation of classical and contemporary times. This means that varied adaptations use contemporary components like present-day settings, or a person from the modern world hybridising classical features like alluding to scenes and characters from the *Ramakien*. For instance, the selected scene from the story *Long Miti Pai Yu Lok Ramakien (Lost in Ramakien World)* in Figure 28 clearly shows the juxtaposition between a character from the contemporary world named Nicha on the right-hand side chat and characters from the *Ramakien* like Phra Lak, Hanuman, and Phra Ram respectively on the left-hand side. Notably, the profile pictures of characters are presented in Japanese-style manga, and so the characters of the classical story are reimagined and recreated as contemporary figures.



Figure 28 Dialogue between characters in *Long Miti Pai Yu Lok Ramakien*.

Source: <https://www.joylada.com/story/5d62b14916117f000120b333f-หลงมิติไปอยู่โลกรามเกียรติ์>

Aside from this, many stories appearing on the surface connect two different time periods through a shared plot of protagonists travelling across different worlds. It can be either the *Ramakien* characters meeting people in the present-day, or a person in the contemporary period becoming part of the *Ramakien* story. Moreover, the concept of reincarnation and *samsara* from Buddhist belief is linked to the *Ramakien* as the past life of a given contemporary character is reborn in the current time. There are also stories focusing only on the contemporary world, yet the names and personalities of each character allude to the *Ramakien* characters. These kinds of stories are evident in the cover photos presenting contemporary characters from pop star idols or anime along with the captions.

In short, new versions of the *Ramakien* in internet literature neither strictly rely on classical convention nor use completely modern tropes without any concern for tradition. Instead, these stories are recreated through hybridity, which both link and juxtapose classical and modern features. Several stories use a different time period to open up new possibilities leading characters from the literary and real worlds to meet each other. This sort of story is widely found on both sites, which I further analyse by close reading in the following section. This is based on the view that although paratext and new types of reading open a new space to see texts in a wider context, as Hayles (2012) reminds us, close reading remains useful. To answer my research questions and support my argument, textual analysis of a particular text can expose deeper meanings, which paratexts, hyper, and surface reading cannot achieve alone.

### ***Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN (The Heart of Thotsakan KAIHUN): The Recreation of the Ramakien in Boys Love Fan Fiction***

The web novel from Dek-D entitled *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN*, hereafter *HT* was composed by Holyspace during 2016 – 2018. The story originated in 2016, yet there were ongoing revisions of the content, as shown in the edited dates on the webpage until 2018 (taken from my survey in July 2022). The work has almost 80,000 views in total and more than 3,000 followers along with 1,700 comments. The paratext in the first page of the story shows that *HT* is fanfic of the K-Pop boy band ‘Exo’, which is evident

from the pictures of Exo’s members as well as the story’s trailer (Figure 23). Moreover, the name of the story ‘KAIHUN’ is also the name of two members of Exo – ‘Kai’ or Kim Jong-in and ‘Sehun’ or Oh Se-hun - who are an ‘imaginary couple’ (*khu jin*) of the fan club (Figure 29).



Figure 29 KAIHUN - Kai’ or Kim Jong-in (left) and ‘Sehun’ or Oh Se-hun (right).

Source: [https://aminoapps.com/c/exo/page/blog/kaihun/YjK3\\_6bEtbu0JkB8XvZxWlr6gmmPwWg4GWD](https://aminoapps.com/c/exo/page/blog/kaihun/YjK3_6bEtbu0JkB8XvZxWlr6gmmPwWg4GWD)

The story later became an e-book available on Meb, a leading e-book seller in Thailand, and the novel is more than 700-pages-long, separated into 2 volumes. Interestingly, while *HT* on Dek-D clearly markets itself as fanfic of KAIHUN, the *HT* on e-book portrays it differently. The later version seemingly represents a sign of Thainess with the traditional artwork, as seen in the cover photo in Figure 30. Furthermore, there is no sign of the fanfic on the e-book version since there is no ‘KAIHUN’ in the title of *HT* together with the removal of pictures and elements related to the pop stars. Consequently, once the e-book version *HT* is read separately, its fanfic form disappears.



Figure 30 *HT*’s cover volumes 1 and 2 on Meb, the Thai e-book website.

Source: [https://www.mebmarket.com/index.php?action=search\\_book&type=all&search=หัวใจที่นิ่ง&auto\\_search\\_id=&page\\_no=1](https://www.mebmarket.com/index.php?action=search_book&type=all&search=หัวใจที่นิ่ง&auto_search_id=&page_no=1)



However, as I compare the story on two platforms, the main story and the literary components of *HT* such as its plot, characters, and setting are similar. *HT* features the main characters from the *Ramakien* which are Thotsakan, Sida and Phra Ram who live in the contemporary world. The immortal Thotsakan and Phra Ram come from the past, whereas Sida died and is reborn in many lives. This leads Thotsakan and Phra Ram to fight against each other to win Sida's heart every time she is reborn, and Phra Ram continually beats Thotsakan. However, in the main plot of *HT*, Sida was reborn as a young man named Premthat, or Prem. He is invited to become a *khon* dancer playing Sida's role in a new interpretation of a *khon* performance entitled 'The Heart of Thotsakan' (*Haruethai Thotsakan*). The reason why Prem was chosen to play this role is due to the demand of Asuren or Thot, the current name of Thotsakan, who is now a successful businessman and the owner of the performance. This is because he knows that Prem is the reincarnation of Sida. Ultimately, he uses the performance to show his true love against the negative images of Thotsakan.

While Thot becomes the protagonist, the story exposes Ramen (Rama's name with a changed end sound) or Phra Ram, as an antagonist. Ramen is the business rival of Thot and competes with him to win Prem's heart. The main plot of the story is the competition between two men to win one man's love, with support from other characters who are derived from the *Ramakien* like Intharachit, Phiphek, Phra Lak, Hanuman and Montho. Finally, Thot and Prem marry and have their own children, while the battle between Phra Ram and Thotsakan concludes as they become friends instead of enemies and forgive the past.

*HT* is interesting in its reinvention of the *Ramakien*, allowing the demon king to become a protagonist whereas Phra Ram is turned into an antagonist. Moreover, the story hybridises different transnational phenomena which are part of fan culture resulting from the Korean Wave in a new form of fanfic. In addition, the story is constructed through BL conventions which challenge the heterosexual relationships in the *Ramakien*. Thus, the discourse of Thainess in this story is highly contested, though there are many negotiations of meanings and identities via signs of Thainess. This text can also be interpreted in alignment with the context of Thai society after the 2006 coup.

### *Hybridising the Ramakien Tradition: Thainess and Transnational Trends*

Key elements of the *Ramakien* appear in *HT* in the forms of *khon* as a performance guiding the characters to meet each other and start the conflict of the story. Moreover, *HT* deploys the conventions of *bot*, *lakhon* and *bot atsachan*. These conventions hybridise BL and fanfic conventions using K-Pop stars as the main characters and tropes from Kai-Hun and BL.

#### *Adopting Khon and Bot Lakhon Conventions*

*Khon* is a predominant element in the connection between the *Ramakien* and its reinterpretation in *HT*. The story begins with finding a person to play Sida in a *khon* performance. Thot, who is the owner of the show, wants to prove how Thotsakan's heart is misunderstood and reveal his true love for Sida. As the reincarnation of Sida, Prem is selected to play the role. As Thot approaches Prem in various ways, Ramen tries to obstruct their love by creating misunderstandings, turning Prem into Ramen's lover. This leads to the battle between Thotsakan and Phra Ram in the contemporary world. The conflict comes to a climax and Prem returns to the *khon* stage once again. This time, Thot uses the performance as a tool to express his true love, wanting Prem to return to him. He thus plays Thotsakan himself in the performance, while Prem plays Sida. In the climax, Prem tries to commit suicide on the stage to end the conflict. Nevertheless, he survives through Thot sacrificing his eternal power to cure Prem.

From this plotline, *khon* is not only a means of linking the new reinvention back to the *Ramakien* but is also a key component in resolving the conflict. Importantly, the *khon* performance in *HT* is reconstructed from Thotsakan's perspective as a medium to express his love rather than in the traditional way of telling the story of Phra Ram. Consequently, although *HT* adopts *khon*, this version challenges the status of the performance as high culture that supports kingship through Phra Ram. On the one hand, *khon* performance and *Ramakien* both eulogise Phra Ram and demonise Thotsakan. On the other hand, *khon* in *HT* is used to defend the past while Thot, who is Thotsakan, owns the *khon* instead of Ramen.

Apart from *khon*, the conventions of *lakhon* are depicted in *HT*. *Lakhon* is another traditional drama performance in which the script (*bot lakhon*) is composed in a verse form called *klon*. This type of poetry was highly popular in the early Bangkok period, yet can be traced back to late Ayutthaya. For a royal performance called *lakhon nai*, the *Ramakien* is one of four stories used to perform. In Thai literary convention, *bot lakhon* not only narrates the story of royalty, but also depicts conventional scenes such as *bot chom chom*, *bot chom mueang*, and *bot atsachan*. Most traditional Thai poetry requires this scene to be a mandatory part of the story through which poets can showcase their capabilities with sophisticated compositions. *Bot atsachan* is a clear example because this scene allegorises sexual intercourse by using natural metaphors. For instance, femininity is normally represented by flowers, while masculinity is referred to by bees. Moreover, the metaphor of the climax scene could be a storm or thunderstorm ending with rain. Regarding *HT*, there are many romantic and sexual scenes compared to *bot atsachan*. The writer uses various metaphors to imply these actions, in keeping with the conventions in *bot lakhon*.

*HT* exhibits romantic and sexual scenes as in *bot atsachan* quoted from the text to show that it has a sexual rating applied to internet literature called 'NC'. Even though internet literature is technically free to compose and consume, some websites have censors preventing sensitive content such as sex, drugs, and illegal conduct. Dek-D is one such website which has strong censorship for kids and young adults and so the rating scheme NC which stands for No Children Under 17 is implemented to prevent access to underage children. Therefore, *bot atsachan* has sexual content that is not too explicit, making it possible for it to remain uncensored. Yet, it presumably allows Thai audiences to know how to decode it.

#### *The Hybridity of the Ramakien in Fanfic and Thai BL Conventions*

*HT* can be perceived as both a fanfic and a BL because the text is created by fans for fans of Exo especially the fandom of Kai-Hun while the romance occurs between two male characters. Firstly, according to Hellekson and Busse (2014: 5-6), fanfic is "derivative amateur writing—that is, texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication" and it is a "rewriting of shared media, in particular TV

texts, then media fan fiction.” In the West, the genre of fanfic can be traced back to the late 1960s when the TV programme *Star Trek* was popular and fans made stories for other fans (including themselves). The transformation of the Internet in the 1990s to the present has shaped fan culture from being a subculture to becoming mainstream and a subject of scholarly analysis (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007). As for Thai fanfic, it is relatively new in academia. Ruenruthai (2017) notes that the term fanfic was introduced by the rise of the Internet and internet literature among young audiences. She classifies five groups of Thai fanfic which are (1) pop star idols such as K-Pop singers and Thai bands (2) Western literature such as *Harry Potter*, (3) Japanese anime such as *Naruto*, (4) Thai novels such as *Phet Phra Uma*, and (5) Thai classical literature such as the *Ramakien*.

The most notable group within the genre is BL fanfic. BL has become increasingly popular in Thailand since the late 2000s as a result of the development of digital platforms. This genre was once part of underground subcultures influenced by Japanese Yaoi fiction around the 1990s before it gradually entered mainstream media in the late 2000s and boomed both nationally and internationally from the mid-2010s onwards (Natthanai 2019b; Baudinette 2019). The stories are commonly about romances between young men created by female writers. Many stories reference boy bands, singers, or actors by ‘imagining’ their relationship, which is shortened to ‘shipping’ such as the aforementioned Kai-Hun of Exo. As such, BL fiction is closely linked to fanfic as fans use their favourite couples to create and consume BL narratives. Despite the narratives dealing with homosexuality, they are different from typical gay or queer literature. Natthanai Prasannam (2019a; 2020) analyses Thai BL fiction and contends that the genre does not follow realist fiction. Rather, it provides escapism by responding to the fantasies of writers and readers, who are mainly young female fans of boy idols. As BL fiction is not created for queer readers in the first place, it therefore differs from queer literature which aims to express the lives of queer people.

It is noteworthy that Thai classical literature is a major source of material that is hybridised with Thai BL fanfic. Again, Ruenruthai (2017) states that young writers use readers’ familiarity with classical heroes and heroines in romance narratives. Within this sphere, the *Ramakien* is one of the stories most referenced in

BL fanfics. A survey by Jackkrit Duangpattra (2023: 113) shows that 177 stories have been adapted from the *Ramakien* into ‘same-gender literature’<sup>4</sup> on the Internet, which is in clear contrast to other works of classical literature from the same era. The adapted stories vastly change the original version through transforming the roles and names of characters and their relationships, such as Thotsakan becoming Phra Ram’s lover. Furthermore, Sirinthon Jiragoon (2018: 68) shows that BL fanfic stories adapted from the *Ramakien* commonly refer to main characters like Thotsakan and Phra Ram. Thotsakan is typically a masculine hero, whereas Phra Ram plays either the feminine hero or the antagonist who becomes good in the end. Sirinthon (2018: 78) also notes that characters from Phra Ram’s side such as Phra Lak or Sida are established as feminine heroes while characters from Thotsakan’s side are masculine heroes.

Undoubtedly, masculinity and femininity in *Ramakien* BL fanfics rely on the perception of power in the *Ramakien* since the demon king Thotsakan represents hyper-masculinity through his appearance as a giant and role as a villain. Meanwhile, humans like Phra Ram have less power and are consequently more feminine. This is similar to several Thai BL works and TV series wherein masculine heroes mostly present their strong power and hyper-masculinity through their careers or social positions. It can be said that the convention of BL emphasises the leading role and power of masculine heroes and their domination of another hero, so it is understandable that when adopting characters from the *Ramakien*, this convention is emphasised and Thotsakan therefore becomes the hero instead of Phra Ram.

Accordingly, *HT* represents hybridity among the *Ramakien*, BL and fanfic. This fiction focuses on the developing love between Thot and Prem instead of exploring their problems or discussing the challenges faced by homosexual couples. *HT* treats the couple like any normative heterosexual couple by highlighting the masculinity of Thot as a hero who is also a powerful and successful businessman and has magical powers to protect Prem. Prem, in contrast, is depicted as a feminine hero as the result of his womanly

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<sup>4</sup> Jackkrit uses this term to include all homosexual relationships wherein BL is a subset. However, his findings predominantly focus on BL, and female-female relationships adapted from classical literature are rare.

appearance and role as a female dancer. Towards the end of the story, several obstacles emerge between Thot and Prem. Prem encounters danger while Thot plays the essential role of his protector, sacrificing himself to save Prem's life. Therefore, the story adapts the *Ramakien* to serve BL conventions by highlighting the romance of the main couple. Although polygamy is embedded in the *Ramakien*, *HT* emphasises monogamous logic as Thotsakan is shown to truly love Sida.

The characters' appearances are crucial in serving the fans' pleasure. As fanfic, *HT* recreates characters from the *Ramakien* by referencing Exo along with describing all of the characters as good-looking young men. In the website version of *HT*, the writer introduces each character by providing pictures and names referring to Exo singers. While Prem is portrayed as Sehun or Oh Se-hun, Thot is referred to as Kai or Kim Jong-in (Figure 31). Accordingly, Thotsakan transforms from a terrifying giant who has ten faces and 20 arms to a handsome young man with a strong body and powerful masculinity. At the same time, Prem is imagined as a feminine and sweet male character.



Figure 31 Prem (left) and Thot (right) compared to KAI and HUN.

Source: <https://writer.dek-d.com/dekdee/writer/viewlongc.php?id=1409422&chapter=3>

Apart from their appearance, all of the characters are 'modernised' in relation to the traditional story. Thot shifts from being a king to owning of a *khon* performance business that is marketed successfully to international audiences. His son Ronnapak or Intharachit, in addition, finishes his studies in a foreign

country, while his former wife Montho lives abroad. However, the writer also links them to traditional Thai culture. For example, That's business is *khon* while Prem is good at performing *khon* and lives with his extended family as his grandparents are famous *khon* teachers. Prem's house is a traditional Thai house by the side of the river. Overall, the text represents itself as a reinvention of the *Ramakien*, which makes the story seemingly retain its Thainess, whereas the story is adapted with diverse transnational elements. Here, the body is an interesting feature appearing in *HT* as it shows that the characters are different from those in the *Ramakien*, linking to notions of the ideal body and fantasies about BL relationships.

***(Un)gendering the Body and Mind: The Embodiment of the Ramakien and Boys Love***

The aesthetic surfaces and the way in which masculinity is defined in *HT* confirm the hybridity of Thai masculinity as constructed through the lens of BL fanfic conventions. The text shows the change in the traditional bodies of heroes in the *Ramakien* as they are shaped to fit the requirements of the K-Pop fandom. There is also a link between the minds of the characters in the *Ramakien* and the bodies of the characters in *HT* in the contemporary world that can be further analysed. Simultaneously, the notion of gender distancing is apparent, in which it does not matter for homosexual couples whether the body is male or female whereas conflict caused by non-normative genders is dismissed. This leads to a complicated issue which I refer to as an 'in-between body' wherein the body is gendered and desexualised by romantic BL conventions while the mind constitutes a means to make sense of that relationship.

*Hybridised Thai Heroes*

Generally speaking, Thai heroes from classical literature are regarded as both warriors (*nak rop*) and lovers (*nak rak*). This means that the main male protagonists play the warrior role to defeat the enemy using their war skills as well as supernatural powers. At the same time, they are charming characters who can win many women's hearts or overcome rivals who are fighting for the same woman. For example, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, a renowned folk epic originating from the Ayutthaya period, portrays Khun Phaen, the main

protagonist who is an attractive man and a great soldier. Nevertheless, many literary works depict heroes from different perspectives. In the *Ramakien*, Phra Ram is a clear example since he is an avatar of Vishnu, and so is an idealised man. As a warrior, he is portrayed as a commander king who uses servants like Phra Lak and Hanuman to defeat the enemy, unless it is an important rival like Thotsakan. Moreover, as Sida is also an avatar of Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, the role of Phra Ram as a husband who only loves Sida is obviously different from other examples of classical literature in which heroes have several wives. As Phra Ram has sacred status, the roles of active warrior and lover are not stressed. Accordingly, Hanuman plays the role of warrior and lover rather than Phra Ram.

Although *HT* does not construct the story as a traditional war, the role of the warrior is still exhibited by the main characters in the story, especially the masculine protagonists. As a great warrior represents unusual power in traditional society, a millionaire presents a man's power under capitalist logic. Both Thot and Ramen are successful businessmen and the story depicts them as high-class celebrities. They are also described as handsome and strong with contemporary muscular bodies, which includes not only Thot and Ramen but all characters derived from the *Ramakien* to serve a new aesthetic purpose for fans. Additionally, supernatural magic is linked to the traditional warrior body. Though they live in the contemporary world, they still have magic in reference to their lives as Thotsakan and Phra Ram. These elements empower the masculine protagonists by stressing their roles as the protectors of feminine protagonists. It can therefore be argued that traditional power is still embodied in the contemporary male body of a rich male celebrity and related to a protective and masculine power. Arguably, this kind of masculine and feminine relationship is linked to BL convention with hyper-masculine characteristics and a sense of protection being emphasised.

Though the notion of power resonates with the traditional warrior, the logic of modern monogamic romance diminishes the image of the womaniser. Thot is a central character who transforms from a Casanova giant to a loyal man who truly loves Prem. The story presents Thot's change in contrast to the negative characterisation of Thotsakan as he goes through many challenges to prove his love to Prem. A key example of this is when Montho, a major wife of Thotsakan, meets Thot again. *HT* does not mention Montho earlier



in the story until Ramen plots to pull Thot and Prem apart. He asks Montho, who is depicted here as a modern woman, to break up their relationship. Following Ramen's plan, Montho meets Thot again, yet he is no longer interested in her. However, they have made love, which Prem witnesses directly, and this leads to conflict between the couple. Thot denies having met Montho again and tries to apologise to Prem. The next essential scene is when Prem tries to commit suicide, and Thot dedicates his immortal power to save Prem from death. It can be argued that this reflects the values of a monogamous society in contrast to the *Ramakien* where polygamy is fully accepted. As a romance story, moreover, the conflict and main plot revolves around the key couple, resulting in a monogamous romance. In other words, the hero as a great lover does not equate with a womaniser, but rather implies a man who truly loves only one person.

Another crucial point to raise is the aesthetic signification of the male body. As discussed in Chapter 3, the body in traditional Thai concepts relates to the belief of merit (*bun*) and charismatic power (*barami*), and the bodies of the king or royalty are thus presented as having a perfect shape and unique beauty in every single element. Nopporn Prachakul (2009) interprets the ideal beauty of Phra Lo from *Lilit Phra Lo* as the embodiment of the perfection of *bun* and *barami*. Interestingly, Saharot Kittimahachareon (2020) points out that the ideal softness of bodies belonging to royalty in classical Thai literature signifies their class because they do not perform manual labour, unlike commoners. Accordingly, their bodies present a soft appearance outside while encasing a strong internal power. Conversely, the depiction of antagonists is presented through having an abnormal appearance, dark skin, or an altogether non-human body.

In the *Ramakien*, Thotsakan is an essential character who presents abnormal characteristics in that he is a giant who has 10 faces and 20 hands. Meanwhile, the bodies of Phra Ram and his brother Phra Lak exhibit a god-like status with soft beauty. This bodily aesthetic in the *Ramakien* illustrates the sense of ideal beauty that divides good and bad, and gods and demons, whereas the bodily aesthetics of the characters in *HT* do not represent the notion of good and bad. Rather, they link to fan pleasure by transforming to represent the contemporary beauty of idolised men. Overall, all of the characters in *HT* have good-looking bodies in accordance with Korean idols as the writer compares the characters to Exo members (Figure 31).

As a consequence, the representation of Thotsakan via Thot not only shifts him from being the antagonist to the protagonist, but also turns an unpleasant giant king into a good-looking man. In this sense, the binary opposition of good and bad taken from beauty ideals cannot be applied to the story. I raise that the ideal Thai hero aesthetic merges with fan pleasure to adopt the ideal beauty standards of Korean pop stars and describe characters from the *Ramakien*. Rather, the role of the ‘mind’ has a great impact on defining which characters are good or bad.

#### *Gender Distancing and Interplay with Past and Present Minds*

The characters in the *Ramakien* recognise themselves in their own minds as Thotsakan, Phra Ram, and so on, and this closely links to the construction of their roles and bodies. This is because past minds come to lead relationships in the present day. Interestingly, past minds impact fantasies about love between the main couple, regardless of their gender and sexuality. At the same time, the past minds of Thotsakan or Sida clash with their present minds as new people. This leads characters to choose to follow the past or make new decisions for their love in the present. These issues revolve around gender distancing and the interplay between past and present minds.

BL reveals a paradoxical mode of gender politics, as it provides stories of gay couples with happy endings, yet it originates from female fans. Thus, its production and circulation outside of gay communities makes the work avoid the politics of homosexuality (Mizoguchi 2003). Natthanai (2020) coins the term ‘gender distancing’ (*kan wen raya hang thang phet*) to discuss this phenomenon as a paradoxical representation of a character’s identity and expected gender identity. Male characters in these narratives deviate from the norms of both straight and gay men (Natthanai 2020: 165). In other words, male characters in BL are neither typically gay nor straight guys showcasing different aspects of queer literature. This is because the relationships between gay couples in BL do not revolve around gay-centric culture since they are created by female writers and audiences. So, this type of fiction neither embraces nor denies both heteronormativity and homonormativity, Natthanai claims.

Gender distancing revolves around the characterisation of the body and mind in *HT*. The novel avoids calling the relationship between the two men homosexual while adopting the romantic conventions of heteronormative narratives to construct the gender roles and sexuality of the main protagonists. Critically, the *Ramakien* shows the destiny of masculine and feminine protagonists as they unite and prove their love. In this respect, there are two types of minds operating over the characters' bodies – past and present – as the past minds of Thotsakan and Sida lead them to meet, while the present minds of Thot and Prem are the key reason for their love, regardless of their gendered bodies.

To illustrate, *HT* initially attempts to neutralise the gender and sexuality of all the characters as the story emphasises the theme of true love over that of gendered bodies. Both Thot and Ramen claim that they are not gay but love other people, regardless of their gender and sexuality. There are several scenes in the story in which other characters ask Thot or Ramen whether they are gay or not since they try to approach and have affairs with Prem. They repeatedly deny this and stress that they are just people who love with no care for gender. Although the story seems to highlight the theme of love beyond gender and sexuality, it can be viewed as an attempt to avoid incorporating the debates of gay life into the relationships. Against the backdrop of the politics of homosexuality in Thailand, *HT* dismisses the difficulties of gay rights such as legal marriage and family acceptance. On the other hand, the novel presents the acceptance of the protagonists' family leading to Thot and Prem's marriage and parenthood. So, the disapproval of the family, which is a significant issue for gay people in Thailand and many Asian contexts, is not of any consequence in the story compared to the challenge of the couple's misunderstandings and proving their love. Thot and Prem are given a happy ending as homosexuality is normalised through romantic themes.

Secondly, *HT* uses societal ideals of womanhood as the feminine characters are good wives and mothers who are passive and must be protected. While the masculine men have their role as protector underlined, the feminine male protagonist is presented as the opposite. Prem is depicted as a sensitive man who resembles a woman, which is repeated in the text. He has a "sharp and sweet face like a woman with

charming slender eyes and fingers” (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 17)<sup>5</sup> making everyone agree that he is an ideal fit to perform Sida’s role. Even in his family, Prem’s grandfather says “Look! do any women want to be in a couple with this kind of man who has this beautiful face? It is prettier than them. He will not be a wife in this or the next life. Who dares to be his wife? Except, he should have a same-sex partner” (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 62-63). While he is also portrayed as an ideal Thai woman who is soft, sweet, and has a desexualised body, Montho is established through her modernised and sexualised appearance.

Accordingly, the role of Prem convinces the masculine men to become protectors and fall in love. A prime example is seen in two events. When Thot initially commits sexual assault against Prem, he reacts like a woman losing his virginity. The text highlights his virginity and that the situation makes him angry towards Thot. In a typical Thai TV drama or novel, the male protagonist feels sorry for his misbehaviour and so tries to ask for the woman’s forgiveness, leading to their love. Similarly, Thot and Prem turn to understanding and forgiveness. After this, the intimate sexual scenes are described as in *bot atsachan*, comparing Prem to a woman in literary conventions. A further example is the role of the wife and mother. After having a wedding and living together, Prem becomes miraculously pregnant before giving birth to twins who are Sida’s children in a past life. Undoubtedly, this shows heteronormative expectations within a homosexual relationship, and Prem is the embodiment of an ideal Thai woman who serves in this role.

Lastly, *HT* connects to the *Ramakien* through past minds by linking characters together like ‘love destiny’, but the happy ending of the present day is caused by their ‘free will.’ In comparison to Natthanai (2020)’s analysis of the reincarnation romance *Dai Daeng (The Red Thread)*, he views that apart from true love as a main theme in Thai BL fiction, this type of story refers to past lives which cause characters to meet again under the logic of love destiny or *buppesannivas*, as discussed in Chapter 5. This means that the conflict or tragic end of the couple in their previous lives allows them to meet again with a sense of familiarity in the

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations from both novels were written in Thai and the translations are mine. I quote the text from the e-book version as it is more convenient for referencing.

present. However, there is also an attempt to separate past identity from the present, which shows their free will to love people in the present day and not the past. Applying the analysis of Prem Suansamut (2009), Natthanai argues that free will in Thai popular media is combined with the love destiny concept. Rather than serving Buddhist philosophy, the notion of free will responds to serving consumerism by giving hope to people that they have choices in life. For BL, reincarnation links characters with past lives through love destiny, yet it still provides a sense of free will for the couple to continue or end a previous tragic love. Here, the identity of the past is less important than decisions in the present.

Following this interpretation, the concepts of body and mind are useful to make sense of *HT* and the function of the *Ramakien* as it uses the past lives of Thot, Ramen, and Prem. Their relationships in the *Ramakien* story are centred around love destiny, leading them to meet again. As for the body and mind, all of the characters from the *Ramakien* abandon their traditional bodies through their new embodiment with contemporary aesthetics and sexualities. So, what connects them to the past is their minds. Interestingly, though Thot and Ramen are aware that they are Thotsakan and Phra Ram, Prem does not know she is Sida because Sida died and was reborn whereas the other characters remain eternal. Thus, Prem's mind is complex as he does not regard himself as Sida, while the others know their dual identities as a result of their magical powers. In a critical moment when Prem falls unconscious, his mind travels to meet Sida's soul which leads him to recall his past. After this, he chooses to end the conflict inherited from the past by trying to commit suicide, although the attempt is unsuccessful. Along with Prem's recognition, Thot gradually realises that he loves the present Prem who is not Sida anymore. Toward the end of the story, the text underlines that Thot is interested in Prem as his present self, not due to his past identity.

This demonstrates an interplay of the body and mind in three stages. At first, the minds taken from the *Ramakien* are applied to present-day characters causing love destiny as they meet again. In the following stage, the minds of the present day and past stand in conflict with one another. The past lies in the conflict of their relationship such as Sida having to belong to Phra Ram instead of Thotsakan, yet the other needs to fulfil and reverse the past, as with Thot trying to make Prem his partner. The final stage demonstrates

their free will as they leave their past identity, conflicts, and tragic love from the *Ramakien* behind. At the same moment, they use their present minds to govern their choices. So, it is understandable why Thot emphasises his decision to pursue Prem as Prem is not Sida any more since the present mind of the contemporary person wins in this inner conflict. In other words, *HT* provides the characters with the free will to determine their lives by emphasising the present mind, not love destiny derived from the past. All of this is essential to support the theme of pure love that past conflicts cannot hinder in the present.

***The Politics of Romance: Marginal Voices, Reconciliation, and the Political Polarisation Period***

Even though *HT* focuses on the theme of pure love, reading the story against the political and social backdrop of Thailand can reveal the deep meanings within the text in relation to its context. Romance fiction in Thai literary circles, like in many cultures, is generally not regarded as part of the literary canon and is undervalued in comparison to realist fiction. Yet Natthanai (2019a) tries to underline that the most productive way to perceive romance in BL is through not comparing its value to other genres. He also proposes that Thai BL fiction tends to ‘escape from realism’ more than representing or imitating realist worlds. This is a notable point because if BL provides escapism, the stories can illustrate the socio-cultural context of the time from which the novel is trying to escape. As demonstrated in Natthanai’s work (2021) on *Nithan Phan Dao (A Tale of Thousand Stars)* (2016), the romance between the Thai soldier at the borderland and the rural teacher from Bangkok resonates with concepts of nationhood and especially the role of the military after the 2014 coup. The strong body and status of a masculine soldier protagonist embodies nationhood which has to protect the feminine protagonist, who represents his loyalty to the nation.

Following this, escapist fiction implicitly reveals socio-cultural contexts which are embedded in the text, although this is not explicitly shown. I argue that the polarisation period after the 2006 coup mirrors the reconciliation in this story and resonates with the notion of national unity which reflects the restructuring of power in the *Ramakien* through new endings.

*Decentring the Divine God and the Shifting Role of the Demon*

*HT* not only changes the story to fit BL conventions but also shifts its focus from Phra Ram to Thotsakan. The story reconstructs the ending of the *Ramakien* while depicting Phra Ram and his fellows as antagonists. This can be seen as an example of what Harrison (ed.) (2014) refers to as a ‘disturbing convention’. The concept of ‘decentring’ is useful to analyse the politics behind the shifting focus of *HT*. The novel, therefore, recreates the narrative by shifting the centre to the margins. That shift resonates with Thai politics wherein many political groups contest and negotiate their statuses during the period of political polarisation.

The *Ramakien* traditionally revolves around Phra Ram as a divine god. The royal version of King Rama I and others in court culture centralise the role of Phra Ram as the figure reflects kingship. Broadly speaking, Phra Ram’s side is regarded as good, whereas Thotsakan is bad. Since both are symbols of opposite sides, other characters who align with either will be generally identified as good or bad accordingly. By way of illustration, Duangmon Chitchamnong (2019) gives an example using the role of Hanuman. While Hanuman commits acts of violence such as burning Thotsakan’s city, he is regarded as a good soldier since he serves the divine god. Another example is Phipek, the younger brother of Thotsakan who is exiled from the city and joins Phra Ram. Although he is blamed by Thotsakan’s side for his betrayal, an emphasis on his goodness is made clear in the *Ramakien* by serving the avatar of Vishnu. Thus, the *Ramakien* defines people according to the side to which they belong, which of course links to Phra Ram. Duangmon argues that this perspective resonates with contemporary politics in which the meanings of groups are defined.

Ultimately, the *Ramakien* revolves around ‘good people’ fighting ‘bad people’: Phra Ram and his supporters are shown to undertake tasks for the public interest rather than their personal desires. According to a critical analysis by Saowanit Chulawong (2016), this division in the *Ramakien of King Rama I* uncovers two main values: public (*suan ruam*) and private (*suan tua*). She contends that the notion of serving the public interest to stabilise political order is underlined by the role of Phra Ram who is a good individual, while Thotsakan is only aligned with personal need. Thus, the notion of self-sacrifice and selflessness is

linked to the definition of a good person. Importantly, the acceptance of the legitimacy of a good person is embodied through Phra Ram, as Saowanit points out. Consequently, the centre of the *Ramakien* is defined by Phra Ram being a good person while others are pushed to the ‘periphery.’

Since the *Ramakien* has underpinned the perception of good and bad in Thai society across many centuries, this literary work is still relevant when viewed against the backdrop of the political polarisation period. As the central definition of a good person embodied through Phra Ram, many conservative groups have tried to imitate this definition of a good person through loyalty towards the nation instead. The Yellow Shirts claimed righteousness from their links to royalty and a nationalist sense of restoring the nation from corrupt politicians. The military leader and former Prime Minister, General Prayut Chan-O-Cha, for example, identified himself as Phra Ram in February 2022 during a debate in the House of Parliament remarking that the opposite side were like Thotsakan, who would be destroyed in the end (*Dailynews* 2022). However, this meaning of Thotsakan is contested as well. One speech by the Red Shirt’s leader Nattawut Saikua in 2010, for instance, used the *Ramakien* as an example of high literature that oppresses marginal people. He interpreted that when small people try to challenge great men, it is undoubtedly blamed on bad figures like Thotsakan who challenged Phra Ram as a divine god (Nattawut Saikua 2022).

Outside of politics, depictions of Phra Ram, Thotsakan, and Sida are negotiated in several examples of popular media. Songs are prime examples of this since the voices of Thotsakan and Sida as marginalised people are constantly being reinterpreted. For example, Thai hip hop singer Joey Boy debuted ‘Rai Ko Rak’ in 2006 with the lyric ‘who knows Thotsakan might love Sida more than Phra Ram,’ which caused controversy. In 2016, a pop band named ‘The Rube’ released the song ‘I’m Sorry [Sida]’ which voiced the apologies of Phra Ram to Sida for his misunderstanding and untrust in her which led her to walk through fire. Furthermore, the singer Keng Thachaya debuted ‘Huachai Thotsakan’ (Devil’s Heart) which talked about the emotions of a person who is a so-called devil and is not different from others, as Thotsakan has a heart which can love and hurt too. Overall, this presents the shifting meaning of perceptions of the *Ramakien* which come from marginal voices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



In comparison to *HT*, the novel does not implicitly reference political groups but rather challenges meanings from the *Ramakien* implying contestation and negotiation in society at large. In the preface of the novel, the writer says that the story was inspired by the song ‘Huachai Thotsakan’ by Keng Thachaya which led to the story being named after the song (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: preface). As in the song, *HT* challenges perceptions of the demon king who represents evil. That’s body and mind, which has long been stigmatised, embodies the meaning of a good person. Regarding the body, his appearance conforms to the aesthetics of contemporary masculinity rather than that of a horrible giant. Applying the regime of images, an attractive appearance connotes goodness and *barami*. So, it is undeniable that the new look of Thotsakan can change the perception of his character.

As for the mind, the story demonstrates that his mind links to the concept of the ‘good person’ through his loyalty and selflessness. This is due to the monogamous romance which emphasises the role of That who ultimately only loves Prem and dismisses the past Thotsakan as a womaniser who causes war as a result of his desires. The trope of proving pure love in this story also resonates with the notion of self-sacrifice for the public interest. When Prem faces several difficulties, That comes to save him and sacrifices his life to protect Prem. This reflects nationalist sentiments which ask people to die for their nation. So, the self-sacrifice of That links to the meaning of a ‘good person’ who acts for the good of the public.

In contrast, *HT* reconstructs Phra Ram by positing him as an antagonist who takes benefits for himself through unethical means. Unlike the *Ramakien*, *HT* shift the point of view from Phra Ram to Thotsakan to establish the story from a different angle. This literary technique changes the readers’ perception as they now have to follow Thotsakan’s perspective. Additionally, the omniscient point of view expresses the emotions and thoughts of the characters clearly. In this sense, Ramen is projected as a competitor of the protagonist whom the readers follow. This sense of competition links to several plans in which Ramen plots to overcome That. Most of these are amoral plans, such as sending That’s former wife Montho to blackmail him and using this to break That and Prem apart.

Moreover, Ramen's misbehaviour and mindset also echo many characters around him, among whom Phipek is a clear example. Whereas he plays a key role in emphasising the right and legitimacy of Phra Ram in the *Ramakien*, *HT* changes his role as he comes back to Thot's side. The story shows that Phipek finishes his duty to serve Phra Ram and comes to help Thotsakan rule the company (the metaphor for the kingdom). In *HT*, Phipek reflects on Phra Ram as he "has never thought that Ramen, who was Phra Ram and the man he respected for his goodness and justice, would become immortal. Oh love! Can one turn a somersault like this? Such a pity, a real pity" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 176). Furthermore, as Phipek embodies an upright person who serves the side of the good, Phipek's changing sides implies the righteousness of Thot in contrast to Ramen. Consequently, the embodiment of Ramen is governed by his dishonesty and self-centredness in opposition to Thot.

#### *Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and National Unity*

Despite *HT*'s attempts to reconstruct the *Ramakien* and disturb the traditional conventions of Phra Ram and Thotsakan and their connotations, the story ends with reconciliation between the two sides. Forgiveness and self-recognition are emphasised, leading to a happy ending. This ending promotes the notion that reconciliation can and should be the result of long-term conflict. Emphasising the pure-love trope from romance conventions, I propose that the love theme in *HT* is linked to social reconciliation during the period of Thailand's political polarisation. My analysis here is inspired by Pasuk and Chris's (2019) interpretation of love in classical literature which they link to the broader context of age. They illustrate that the tragic love in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* parallels the lives of people who are forced to live under dictatorial power, while *Lilit Phra Lo* mirrors tragic love which can lead to reconciliation.

Compared to *HT*, the ending echoes romance themes which serve to resolve conflict by underlining the notion of forgiveness (*kan hai aphai*) in relation to the quest for unity. This interpretation is based on the ending of the novel, which emphasises forgiveness through the power of the love between Thot and Prem, as Thot's self-sacrifice leads Ramen to realise his wrongdoings. In the end, Ramen is ordained as a Buddhist

monk. Thot and Prem, along with their children, come to pay their respects to Ramen as a monk in the temple after they reconcile and Ramen tells them that now he has devoted himself to religion and has abandoned mundane affairs. Thot praises him for his aim to reach nirvana. Ramen thanks him and the narrative ends with the thought that “whatever the past was, friend or enemy, the present is more important for letting it go and stopping with the dhamma of forgiveness” (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 2]: 277).

In addition to this, the closing scene of the novel underlines pure love and Buddhist concepts as the “tragic love story of Phra Ram, Thotsakan, and Sida fades as a soft memory like morning fog. Neither with revenge nor envy and no attachment remains. The only existing thing is the pure heart of Asuren (Thot) for Premthat, forever” (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 2]: 283). Apart from this love triangle, *HT* sets up other major characters from different sides as romantic couples. Here, Intrachit, Thotsakan’s son and Phra Lak, Phra Ram’s younger brother, are established as ex-boyfriends. During the development of the story, they end up reuniting as a romantic couple who support the main couple.

Another reason for drawing this conclusion relates to male embodiment. Firstly, since *HT* attempts to keep gender distancing, the ungendered body can be viewed as a means to go beyond the binary opposition of traditional separation and static categories of gender. In this sense, *HT* tries to avoid divisions in gender and sexuality since the writer underlines the role of love to emphasise unpolarised gender. Secondly, the embodiment of the ideal female through feminine male characters like Prem can stand as a metaphor for the nation. Similarly to *Buppe*, the meaning of the nation is closely associated with the depiction of the female body, mirroring the embodiment of the nation. Although there are no main female characters in this novel, the feminine male character adopts the sense of the ideal Thai woman who is a good mother and wife. Prem, thereby, plays the role that female protagonists do in heterosexual romance fiction. Comparing the embodiment of Prem to a sense of nationhood, this character establishes the core conflict causing polarisation between Thot and Ramen.

At the same time, the competition between both sides elucidates the notion of true love, sacrifice, and protection as Prem showcases that individuals should devote these to the nation. Given that Prem represents the nation, the battle mirrors the contestation of two poles within one nation by emphasising and redefining their 'love' over their rival. The nation is also depicted through the vulnerable body of Prem which requires protection, leading the two rivals to act as protectors. As Thot plays a sincere man who devotes himself to others, he thus wins Prem's heart in the end. In contrast, as a self-centred and corrupt man, Ramen cannot be a good protector. All in all, this tragic love affair can be compared to national confrontation between two opposing sides, each wrestling for the Thai nation at the heart of the conflict. Ultimately, good people who love, sacrifice, and protect the nation are needed.

Thirdly, the ending of Ramen showcases social unity and the untouchability of Phra Ram. *HT* challenges the status of Phra Ram which links to traditional heroes and the monarchy, albeit his role is to be a good person, as defined by Buddhism. Within this resolution, the story tries to avoid repeating the same conflict by positing Thotsakan and Phra Ram as rivals again. Rather, the story aims to end their war and make enemies become allies. This ending clearly parallels the polarised age in which the discourse of unity or *samakki* is repeated. In other words, changing Ramen to be a good person and an ally of the protagonist is governed by the discourse of unity, which calls for individuals to be good people and to assimilate to the norms of national reconciliation rather than causing conflict.

Since Ramen embodies Phra Ram, the portrayal of Ramen thus challenges the hierarchical status of this traditional character. Hence, it can be assumed that the final development of this character must negotiate with this history before closing the story by repositioning Phra Ram as a hero again, in alignment with Buddhism. The embodiment of the character mirrors the contestation and negotiation of traditional values. Yet, Phra Ram's character is aligned with untouchable figures like the monarch, and so the challenge is that this character thus cannot go beyond that boundary. So, uniting with others and turning into a good person might in the end present a solution to conform to sacred meaning.

Finally, the minds of the characters are full of hopes for ending past conflict and looking forward to a united future. This demonstrates a hope for love under capitalist logic wherein individuals can choose their love, as discussed previously. Arguably, even if individuals are governed by the past, the present day is changed from their new decisions in a larger context and political polarisation is one such context which reflects this notion. This is because *HT* plays with the past and present through the characters' minds and emphasises the latter more than the former. Like political unrest, this situation of decision-making parallels national unity which wishes for individuals to try to move the country beyond its polarised past towards a reunited present. To stop the wheel of conflict is to focus on the present by making the right choice. This is presented by the interplay of romance between past and present minds in *HT* as polarised conflict is left behind.

## **Conclusion**

The *Ramakien* provides a critical example demonstrating the reinvention of discourse of Thainess drawing on signs from Thai classical literature. Despite the fact that it originates from a foreign epic, the *Ramakien* undeniably serves a political agenda for Thai kings and is still relevant for the current period. As a result, reconstructions of the story intentionally and unintentionally challenge that power and raise sensitive issues like the 'Thailand is awesome' slogan which I discuss in the opening of this chapter. As further noted, globalisation along with the Internet are vital factors for recreating the *Ramakien* in diverse ways beyond traditional meanings. With less censorship and a specific audience, writers adapted the *Ramakien* by adding playful features on the Internet and thus avoided an outright ban. Accordingly, reinventions of the *Ramakien* for the Internet illustrate what Bhabha (2004) refers to as the 'Third Space' where varied features are mixed, contested, and negotiated. It leads to in-between states in which authentic or pure sentiments are challenged while notions of the old and new are negotiated. While the *Ramakien* represents traditional Thai culture, many reinventions show attempts to connect the classical and traditional worlds and make the story relevant to contemporary society. This can be viewed as a way of protecting Thainess among the Thai youth by hybridising modernity and identity and making sense of it during the globalised period.

While *Buppe*, discussed in Chapter 5, reimagines the past through time travel, several of the *Ramakien* stories on the Internet intersect with the world of the present time. Many characters from the *Ramakien* are taken from tradition to exist in the contemporary world. The case study of *HT* shows the classical and modern worlds intersecting with each other before this becomes a contested space when different values align with each other. *HT* not only challenges the tradition of the *Ramakien* by turning it into a BL story but also disturbs conventions around Phra Ram. Transnational flows like Korean aesthetics negotiate the traditional meaning of the *Ramakien* through bodily presentation, power, and their relationships. *HT* shifts the central role from Phra Ram to the periphery and moves Thotsakan to the centre. Meanwhile, it highlights the role of pure love over conflict and ends with forgiveness, rather than the victory of one side. This resonates with the empowerment of marginalised groups in Thailand and the notion of social reconciliation by forgiving the past and moving forward. In other words, the meaning of peace and world order in the *Ramakien* has shifted from the championship of Phra Ram to the reconciliation of all groups in response to wider political polarisation and the quest for unity.

## Chapter 7

### Toward the Future: Remaking Folklore in the Fantasy Novel

#### Introduction

2012 was a year that caused fear around the globe due to a South American Mayan prophecy about the end of the world or Doomsday. Although Thailand is officially seen as a Buddhist society and is culturally distant from South American folklore, the myth entered Thai society through the popularity of global flows like Hollywood films such as *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich 2009) and new media. One clear example of the 2012 myth in Thai society is seen in the TV programme ‘Woody Talk’ by Woody Milintachinda. In April 2011, Woody gained access to one of the senior royal members, HRH Princess Chulabhorn, the youngest daughter of King Rama IX and the youngest sister of King Rama X. In one part of the interview, Woody asked for her opinion on the 2012 myth since she works as a scientist. Interestingly, the princess contended that the myth was not true. Using Buddhist belief as an explanation, she emphasised that the world will end 5,000 years after the death of Gautama Buddha. Under this belief, when this time comes the world will enter into chaos, leading the new Buddha Sri Ariya Metri or Phra Sri An to restore a new world order.

Indeed, we all know that the myth was just that because the world survived that year. However, I start this chapter with the 2012 myth without the intention of finding answers or explanations. Rather, I begin my discussion on the interconnected issues of folklore from the past which still cause anxiety within present society about the unpredictability of the future. The aforementioned interview is a useful source to reflect the complicated ideologies underlying Thai society from foreign myth to Buddhist worldview and a culturally divine figure working as a scientist. Moreover, globalisation translates myths from different cultures through mass media before they encounter local cultures.

For literature, the series of fantasy novels *Nawa Himmaphan* (hereafter *NH*) by ‘Alina’ - the penname of a female author who is famous under another penname ‘Kingchat’ - is embedded with hope and fear for the

future of Thailand. Creating a new world after an apocalypse in 2012, this series comprises six volumes published in the 2010s: *Trinethip* (2014), *Thutiya Asun* (2015), *Ekathep* (2016), *Phet Raksot* (2016), *Wiwa Phitthayathon* (2017), and *Ninnakhin* (2018) (Figure 32). *NH* narrates the new world within which mythic non-human characters like ‘Thep’ and ‘Asun’<sup>6</sup> (or *deva* and *asura*) escape from a forest named ‘Himmaphan’ to build a new world together with various non-human species. The Himmaphan forest is derived from the Indic mythical Himavanta, wherein Mount Sumeru is the centre of the universe. The name of *NH* evinces the links to folk beliefs because *nawa* as a prefix of Himmaphan means new. Despite *NH* illustrating the aftermath of 2012 through an innovative and peaceful society, this series stresses that conflict between different races, especially Thep and Asun in the Nawa society<sup>7</sup> is centred on distrust and unfriendly relationships.



Figure 32 The covers of six volumes from the *NH* series by Alina.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/lookangoon/photos/a.666854730027593/2044477552265297/?type=3>

<sup>6</sup> I use Thep and Asun from Thai words with reference to the name of the race in the *NH* series. I also use Theps and Asuns as plural nouns to refer them as groups.

<sup>7</sup> For differentiation between *Nawa Himmaphan* as the name of the novel series I use *NH* and for the society in the novels with the same name, I thus use ‘the Nawa society’.



In this chapter, therefore, I discuss another sign of Thainess which is folkloric tales about Himmaphan, including related religious mythologies like Thep and Asun and the reinvention of these mythic features in contemporary fantasy fiction, using *NH* as a case study. My argument is that the *NH* series reinvents folklore by reconstructing the power structures within the old myth for a futuristic setting. The binary of good and bad from Thep and Asun is decentred. Meanwhile, the work underlines the role of the ‘hybrid body’ through the female heroine as hope of social reconciliation. The future in the story also embodies the hope and fear of the present time symbolising conflict between different ideologies during the post-2006 coup and the quest for unity during divided discourse. Before exploring this point, I will begin the following section by discussing concepts of folklore, fantasy, the future and their relationships to each other in Thai literature.

### **Folklore, Fantasy, and the Future: Theoretical Frameworks and the Thai Context**

In this section, I conceptualise ideas of folklore, fantasy, and the future and explore them in the Thai context. The aim is to use them as the grounded concepts for analysing *NH* and the social aspect of using folklore in a fantasy future.

#### ***The Future in Folklore: The Thai Cyclical Future from Buddhist and Mythical Narratives***

The future is projected by the imagination and desire of the past and present. In *Histories of Future*, Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding (2005: 4) argue that “the future is not, and has never been, an empty category. [...] Our lives are constructed around knowledges of future that are as full (and flawed) as our knowledge the past.” Furthermore, Marc Augé (2014) reminds us that perceptions of the future can be individual and collective, which depend on each other. While the individual ‘constructs’ their future such as being successful in a profession and getting married, the future links to the collective perception of a particular society and time. The future, therefore, is ‘Other’ time and space, imagined from the individual and collective desire of existing knowledge up to the present. Additionally, the future can be viewed as containing the hopes and fears of the past and present time. On the one hand, hope might be presented in

terms of ‘wish fulfilment’ building upon that lack in the imagined future time and space. On the other hand, fear can lead to the construction of a dystopian future such as the collapse of human civilisation or the world’s end. Although scientific revolution has shaped modern futurity, prophesising futurity does not vanish, Rosenberg and Harding claim. The 2012 Mayan myth is a good example of this.

Regarding literature, works about social crises and anxiety referred to as ‘apocalyptic’ narrate the world coming to an end. This sort of literature unfolds anxiety and the worldview of individuals from the past to present to construct the end of world as we know it. Motoko Tanaka (2014: 24), who studies the discourse of apocalyptic literature from the West and in contemporary Japanese science fiction, defines apocalyptic literature as “a story of facing a destructive end [...] the story includes a catastrophic moment of ending caused by unknown Others, or by unexperienced changes. Apocalypse is formed when we feel a sense of crisis toward things or events we have never experienced.” Thus, an apocalyptic narrative encapsulates anxieties from crises in particular periods and societies while portraying it as a speculation of the catastrophic ending of the world or universe.

As for Thai culture, apocalyptic stories can be traced back to Buddhist narratives. Unlike a linear future in the Western worldview, traditional perceptions of the future in Thai culture dominated by a Buddhist worldview are cyclical since everything is ruled by karma in the *samsara* wheel (see Chapter 3). This includes the world and universe which are also repeatedly created and destroyed. In the crucial Buddhist literary text, the *Traiphum*, the apocalypse is described thoroughly. People’s morals are shown to be in decline and the world comes to an end starting with fire from seven suns, followed by a large flood and wind. All continents are destroyed and all *devas* thus escape to the higher realms. After this, the world is reborn again and the fragrant soil from the earth invites deities to taste it, making them human, and the human world returns (see Lithai 1982).

The creation and destruction of the world have been shared in mythical narratives across mainland Southeast Asia. According to Siraporn Nathalang (2000), the myth of the origin of Tai-speaking groups and

Laotian people commonly begins with changes in the existing world due to flooding, destructive fire or wind, all caused by the immorality of humans. After this, the new world welcomes a new group of people. Some tales deal with the vernacular god as the sky god called Thaen, who sends either the first pair of humans named Sangkasa and Sangkasi, or a giant gourd (*namtao*) containing people. Another type of narrative relates to Buddhist deities like in the *Traiphum* who come down to eat the fragrant soil, but then cannot return to heaven. In short, natural disasters are important explanations for the destruction of the world resulting from immoral acts, and the post-apocalyptic becomes the hope of a new beginning of life and an improved society.

Essentially, both Buddhist and folk narratives align the origin of the world with the origin of the king. With reference to Tai speaking groups and Lao myths, Prakong Nimmanahaeminda (2011) claims that the origin of a ruler is inseparable from the origin of the destroyed world since an ideal ruler is selected or sent from the supernatural world to maintain new world order. Likewise, the king in the *Traiphum* is also sent from heaven to rule the land after conflict occurs between people in the newly established world. Therefore, these narratives are political tools used to legitimise rulers and their successors, as Prakong concludes. The stories framing the ideal concept of a ruler who protects the kingdom and people while their role of being a great patron to Buddhism is obvious. These origin myths influence later literature and traditions, and *Ongkan Chaeng Nam* was the first literary work from Ayutthaya to claim that the first Ayutthaya king U-Thong is legitimate as he succeeded the first king who arrived when the world was renewed.

Moreover, the political function of the myth of origin is associated with new prophets. As noted in the opening section of this chapter, Maitreya, known in Thai as Phra Sri An or Phra Sri Ariya Metri, is another popular narrative in Thai society about a new Buddha who will be born 5,000 years after the Gautama Buddha's death. The essential plot of Phra Sri An depicts the world ending due to the immorality of individuals. When the world has decayed to its lowest point, a nobleman, Phra Sri An, will be born and restore the world. His era is depicted as a utopian world, encouraging Buddhists to dream of being born in Phra Sri An's age in their next lives. Aphilak Kasempolkul (2009) analyses the function of this eschatology

which seeks to assure Buddhists that the religion will remain for 5,000 years, creating hope for a better future. At the same time, it applies to political agendas both for authorities and resistance groups who each interpret the myth in their own ways. For example, Charles Keyes (1977) highlights the way in which people from Isan were against the reforms imposed by King Rama V's bureaucracy by calling themselves 'a person who has merit' (*phu mi bun*) against the central authorities. This incident illustrates how traditional knowledge about the future comes up against modernity and authority.

I argue that the notion of the future in Thai traditional perspectives is an 'alternative present' in a 'collective unit' with an 'ideal leader.' Firstly, when thinking about the future, the condition of the present time cannot be dismissed. More importantly, grounded by a cyclical worldview, the future is imagined through hope in and fear of the present by repeating and recreating a new time and space. Secondly, like many Asian cultures, Thai society emphasises collectivism rather individualism. This sense also stems from an imagination of the future as the collective impact of the morality or immorality of individuals which can lead to either a utopian or dystopian society. It achieves this by describing a group of people originating, living, and coming to their end together.

Living as a group resonates with the third concept, that of an ideal leader. A utopian future from the Thai perspective deals with a great man who can become a great king or deliver a new prophecy. This means that collective communities might have conflict between members, including people who might deviate from 'good' norms. Thus, an ideal leader is sent down from a supernatural power (rather than selected by the people) to maintain peace and order. All in all, the presence of the future in traditional Thai culture is undeniable from the political function of the story to either legitimise or resist a ruler or to establish norms to create hope and fear in the present. This kind of narrative is still relevant and has been reinterpreted over the centuries. It is also relevant to the primary text discussed in this chapter.

*Making Fantasy: From Western Convention to Thai Fantasy Fiction*

Fantasy fiction revolves around perceptions of ‘hesitation’, ‘unreality’, ‘marvellousness’, ‘supernatural elements’, the ‘imagination’, and so forth. Tzvetan Todorov (1975) argues that the fantasy text must portray the literary world like the readers’ everyday world while supernatural events cause hesitation in characters inviting readers to follow the beliefs and suspicions of the characters. This supernatural world is important as Rosemary Jackson (1981: 2) holds that fantasy is literature that liberates imagination and desire because this genre is capable of ‘transcending’ reality, ‘escaping’ the human condition and constructing a superior, alternate, ‘secondary’ world.”

Despite fantasy being seen as unrealistic, the genre is shaped by realist conventions. While narratives such as fairy tales are far away in both time and space, the fantastic is an unreal experience occurring in the logic of the present day, and the exact time and space can be identified. Richard Matthew (2011) explains that the modern form of Western fantasy developed during the 18<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup> century against the backdrop of the Victorian era in the British Empire when the scientific and industrial revolutions had reached their peak. This can be also seen in Brian Attebery's definition of fantasy:

Fantasy is a form of fiction that evolved in response to realism, using such novelistic techniques as represented thought, detailed social settings, and manipulation of time and point of view to revisit pre-rationalist world views and traditional motifs and storylines (Attebery 2022: 45)

As seen from the *Traiphum* and other folk narratives, it is undeniable that classical Thai literary works deal with ‘unreal’ rather than realistic events. Nonetheless, the fantasy genre, as part of realist convention, was introduced into Thai society along with the influx of colonial influence. For folk Thai literature, the stories are set in distant times and places, far from daily life and using magical motifs. One sub-genre of Thai folktales called *chak chak wong wong* or Thai fairy tales, for instance, comprises key plots of a king or prince having an affair with a giant’s daughter, before they run away together and return to kill the giant-

father-in-law. The story also presents the main characters as having unique characteristics and unusual abilities like being unnaturally born and having otherworldly weapons or magic (see Siraporn 1994; Pitchayane 1999).

The need for more realist stories and literary works can be found during the early Bangkok period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Following the downfall of Ayutthaya, the elite of newly established Bangkok was not derived from the old royal family. Rather, they were high-ranking soldiers who lived through both the success and ruin of the great kingdom. The cultural artifacts of the early Bangkok elite's worldview became more humanistic with a realistic worldview. According to Kannikar Sartraproong (1998), King Rama I's project of translating Chinese and Mon chronicles into *Samkok*, *Rachathirat*, and *Saihan* elucidates the image of ideal leaders who can protect the kingdom along with the wisdom of the individual, rather than the divine god. After that, notions of humanism and realism developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and were presented through literature. Nidhi Eoseewong (2005) contends that the rise of bourgeois culture (*wattanatham kradumph*), such as that of merchants from the growth of exports, transformed the literary landscape. Subsequently, during the context of colonialism, the form of novels and short stories were introduced to Thai literary circles and translation and realist conventions came to dominate the Thai literary landscape for a century. Phrae Chittiphalangsri's (2014) discussion of 'the emergence of literariness' claims that translation changed the Thai literary repertoire since early translations penetrated a new literary aesthetic called 'verisimilitude', meaning they were persuasive and stood to gain readers' credulity. Following this, the notion of mirroring real life and society spread widely throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which can be seen from the dominance of 'Literature for Life' in literary circles.

Despite fantasy fiction having been introduced along with the development of Thai novels and short stories, fantastical stories still stood at the periphery of literary fields. Since realism became the dominant approach to writing, it is understandable that literary value aligned with imitating the real world and proposing social problems in the Thai context. The case of early Thai fantasy, *Nang Neramit (A Divine Nymph)* by Khru Liam in 1916 is a prime example of how fantasy novels were placed on the periphery. From Harrison's

study (2014b), this novel gained financial success, but is not regarded as a ‘good book’ in Thai literary circles. Depicting the adventures of characters from the British Empire on an exotic journey in Egypt, this story seems not to be ‘Thai’ from its setting, characters, and so on. Apparently, *Nang Neramit* was excluded from the elite’s norms of good literature as the story comprises features including magic and sex.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of Thai literature from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century stands in contrast to what happened a century ago. As for globalisation, translations of Western novels in the 21<sup>st</sup> century changed literary circles once more. Translations did not come with a realistic aesthetic. Rather, they moved the aesthetic of the fantastical from a liminal space to play a more important role in the Thai literary field. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the achievement of the serial novels of *Harry Potter* and the emergence of internet literature gave a new space for fantasy. Koraya Techawongstien (2020) asserts that around the early 2000s, publishers seemed to translate juvenile novels into Thai before Thai writers attempted to write with this style to then publish Thai fantasy literature during the mid and late 2000s.

Importantly, one of the key elements of adapting fantasy Western fantasy to the Thai context is derived from and aligned with folklore. As discussed in Chapter 3, fantasy fiction is one example of the reinvention of folklore in a newer context. Fantasy fiction allows writers and readers to understand the logic, place, and values of an unfamiliar land and period by linking them back to cultural roots. Similarly, in Thai fantasy fiction like *NH*, Alina stated that this is the reason why using folklore is common knowledge for readers in Thai society, as it makes it easy for them to understand what is happening in the story (Interview with Alina 2022). Moreover, fantasy provides a space to play with the meaning of old myths. My previous work about folklore and Pongsakorn’s novels during the 2000s (Saranpat 2015) demonstrates that environmental problems like climate change are discussed by using folklore to raise such concerns. *Khacha Pura* (2009) and *Nakhon Aiyara* (2009) - both novels which literally mean *The City of Elephant* -, for instance, use a flood myth from the Bible and Tai mythologies and link it to climate change through the theme of the apocalypse along with the creation of a utopian city. This reminds the reader of the anxiety of the apocalypse by referring to scientific reasoning while also using folklore to link back to the past and predict the future.

### *Folklore and Fantasy: The Social Function of Imagination*

Arguably, folklore and fantasy share the key feature of the liberation of the human imagination beyond the realistic world. Both genres voice social and cultural needs and reflect individuals' minds. Folklorist William Bascom (1954) underlines the four functions of folklore which are: amusement, validating culture, education, and maintaining conformity. This means that folklore in traditional society not only allows individuals to escape from daily life into a fairy tale world, but also educates people as to the norms of their society and explains why and how things around them happen, such as where they come from or natural phenomena or disasters. In this respect, folklore encapsulates wish fulfilment, anxiety, social norms, and so on to drive particular communities towards supernatural or unreal narratives and rituals.

Similarly, fantasy responds to the real world in different respects, meaning it cannot be separated from social contexts. Jackson's proposal of fantasy (1981) as an 'art of subversion' is a clear illustration of this as the genre transcends reality by escaping the human condition and constructing superior alternative worlds. According to Jackson, fantasy can tell of, as well as expel, individuals or collective desires. In other words, fantasy does not only deal with what individuals' need to construct an alternative world, but also encapsulates cultural limits in terms of loss and absence. Here, Jackson argues that fantasy has a subversive function because it invents an 'Other' world, which inverts the common world into something strange. In this regard, it disturbs the artistic form of realism and the reproduction of the real. So, fantasy literature relies on the reality of social context by representing it in the unreal imagination. The story is also grounded in desire, which is related to cultural limits or realist restrictions before presenting itself as 'Other.'

Fantasy also portrays the transgression of social norms and allows unsaid things in the real world to appear in the literary world. Again, Jackson points out that fantasy liberates the transgressive features of cultural limits. Many fantastical literary works comprise cultural taboos or violence embodied in creatures like monsters, ghosts, or devils. These link to the transgression of social values such as cannibalism, incest, and present the good and bad embedded in a particular society. It is thus inevitable that Attebery (2022: 9) starts



his book with the statement that “[f]antasy is the lie that speaks truth”, since fantasy creates an ‘unreal’ world in response to reality.

Fantasy is one way to present a future which represents the hopes and fears of the past and present time. To create a future space and time, the story links back to what is familiar to the readers so they can make sense of the story, as with folklore. Not only do folk motifs or structures play a role in future space and time, but cultural worldviews or ideologies from the past also allow for the interpretation of a new world. Thus, hope and fear interplay in the imagined future responding back to the present world in which we live, especially in fantasy fiction, because it is a genre of liberation from reality, subverting it and also raising controversial issues. I will therefore spotlight *NH* to link all of the above discussions to explore layers of meaning from reinventing folklore to the future and unpacking the contemporary Thai contexts in a fantastical world.

### **From Himmaphan to *Nawa Himmaphan*: Reconstructing Myths and Meanings in the Upside-Down Future World**

Alina recreates folklore about the Himmaphan forest and many narratives and beliefs which circulate in Thai society in *NH*. Arguably, the reinvention of folklore in *NH* reconstructs power structures from the old myth by using a futuristic setting which resonates as a theme with contemporary Thailand. Decentring stereotypical images and archaic power structures are key approaches in *NH*. Meanwhile, the story sheds light on cultural limits and desire as Jackson (1981) suggests, and social problems are highlighted by an alignment with ancient myths. I focus on three components and their signifiers: space and time, plot, and characterisation. Before this, the background of the author should be briefly explored.

#### ***The Roads of Romance, Detective, and Fantasy Fictions of Alina***

Alina is the penname of Parichat Salicupt (Figure 33), a leading authors of Thai romance novels for over 30 years writing under her penname Kingchat, while Alina has recently been used for fantasy and cosy detective novels. Raised in Bangkok, Alina was inspired to become a writer as a result of her love of reading,

after which she studied journalism and mass media at Thammasat University in Bangkok. In her last year at university, she began writing under the penname Kingchat for her first novel - *Phon Phrom Onlaweng*, which is about a female spirit leaving her body after a car crash to possess a 5-year-old girl's body, before a love conflict revolves around her relationship with the girl's uncle. Her popularity rose after her novel was adapted into a TV drama in 1992 and was remade twice in 2003 and 2013 (Jirat 2019). After this, Kingchat became a famous author of romantic novels. Many works were then adapted into TV dramas, and some were remade several times, such as *Duai Raeng Athitthan* (1995) and *Buang Hong* (1998).



Figure 33 Alina with her first novel in the *NH* series, *Trinethip*.

Source: <https://readthecloud.co/kingchat/>

Alina's romance fiction usually includes detective elements and social issues. According to Penvisa Wattanapreechanont (2007), Kingchat's detective novels do not only comprise romance, but also criticise and shed light on illegal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, prostitution, bullying against children and women, and sexual abuse. Gender is one of the key issues discussed in her work and most of the female protagonists play an active role in Kingchat's novels. In my interview, I asked her why she largely used narration from a female rather than male perspective. Apart from serving her readers who are mostly women, she said "I think Thai society has been a patriarchal society and women have been suppressed under male power for a long time. As a female, I want to share the perspectives of females." (Interview with Alina 2022). This issue reflects an analysis by Sasinee Khuankaew (2015) of Kingchat's

*Buang Hong* in comparison to other two 20<sup>th</sup> century Thai romance. Sasinee finds the reshaping of women who are more progressive than the norm of the ‘good woman’ in the texts. Interestingly, a homosexual character is also presented in Kingchat’s novel in a deviation from the conventions of the genre.

Supernatural elements commonly form part of Kingchat’s works, such as the switching of body and spirit mentioned in *Phon Phrom Onlaweng* and, as Penvisa notes in her detective novels, they combine supernatural characters like a person who can recall their past lives or has some magic powers. Yet the works under Kingchat’s penname are mostly about the romances of middle-class individuals in daily life. Meanwhile, Alina’s penname illustrates new fantastical worlds like *NH* as well as some magical stories like the *Chomrom Khon Mi Samphat Phiset (The Club of People who Have Six Senses)* series. Here, Alina’s key features of gender and social problems remain. More importantly, she combines signs of Thainess, such as literature and folklore, to create her works. For *NH*, new portrayals of mythical characters from the Himmaphan forest challenge cultural meanings embedded in Thai society, which is interesting to unpack.

### ***From the Forest to the Modern and Magical City: Cultural Limits and Desires through Space and Time***

Although Himmaphan is known as a forest, *NH* adapts into modern space in a future setting. The Nawa society is a ‘civilised city’ with advanced technology and magical motifs can be found in stories. Arguably, this space is characterised by the concept of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ which resonates with the desire of Thainess beyond the limitations of the present time. To understand this change, I will demonstrate the background of Himmaphan in Thai culture followed by its changes.

#### *Himmaphan in Thai Cultures*

The mythical forest Himmaphan are familiar among Thais since it appears repeatedly in folktales and literary works. In the *Traiphum*, the forest is mentioned as part of the cosmological description of the four continents in the universe. This forest is, in fact, a mountain in the north of Chomphu Thawip or Jampu

Dvipa, which is the human continent. Phraya Anuman Rajadhon (1965: 54-55) views this mountain as suggestive of the Himalayas from an Indian perspective, and it can be compared to a mythical land in Western folklore. Rather than being covered by snow like the Himalayas, the Thai Himmaphan is described as a green space surrounded by a spectacular view and magical creatures. The key site of this forest is the Anodat pond, or Sa Anodat, which is the habitat of different creatures such as the Kinnari, a half-bird and half-human, Norasing, a half-lion and half-human, and Nak or Naga, a sacred snake (Figure 34).



Figure 34 Paintings of Himmaphan forest from different periods. In the left picture is the modern art work of the *Traiphum* cosmology from a collaboration by many Thai artists in 2011, while the right picture is from a manuscript which depicts the Anodat pond and animals.

Source: Ministry of Culture of Thailand (2012: 206-207) and Royal Institution of Thailand (2001: (25))

Accordingly, most magical creatures in Thai belief also refer to this forest and it can commonly be found in many Thai artifacts, such as Buddhist temples, mural paintings, and allusions in classical literature. The apparent recreation of this myth is made concrete through royal cremation from the late Ayutthaya period to the present day. As the crematorium is the imitation of Mount Sumeru as the centre of the universe, the forest, including the pond and animals, are key decorations for the crematorium. This myth was exhibited as part of the Royal Crematorium of King Rama IX in 2017 (Figure 35 and 36).

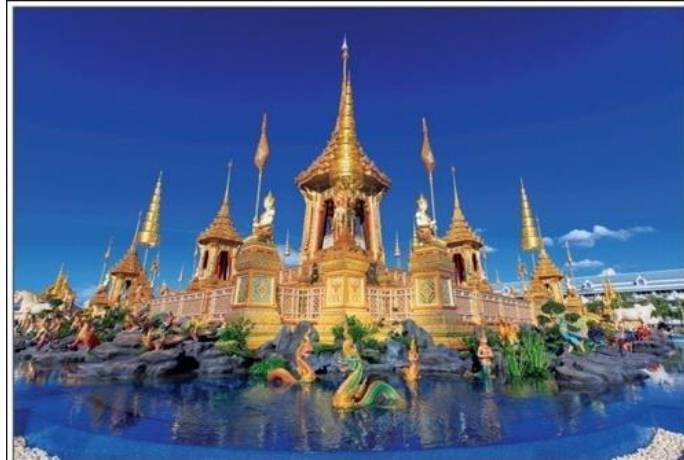


Figure 35 Postcard from King Rama IX's cremation ceremony presenting the Anodat Pond which is the dwelling place for Himmaphan's creatures at the base of the Royal Crematorium.

Source: <https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/267576>



Figure 36 Some sculptures of Himmaphan's creatures surrounding the Royal Crematorium (Kinnari, left; Singha middle; Nak right).

Source: [https://www.matichon.co.th/education/news\\_706057](https://www.matichon.co.th/education/news_706057)

Nevertheless, there are several kinds of animals for which it is hard to find the original references. According to So Plainoi (1991), his book *Himmaphan's Animals* consists of almost 80 species. He illustrates the fact that Himmaphan is a faraway land that common people can recognise, so it creates a new myth and is transmitted through oral tradition since Himmaphan is preached as being part of the Jataka tale. Interestingly, animals in Himmaphan from several artworks do not only come from Indian sources, as there are different animals in Thai belief that are derived from Chinese myth like dragons and Qilin or Kilen in Thai which appear in the forest. Furthermore, So Plainoi writes, since Himmaphan's forest is unreachable

for humans, artists that create paintings or models of these animals only have limited information from literary texts. Thus, they can adapt from prior works including creating their own.

Therefore, it might be said that the Himmaphan forest is an ‘open space’ where imagination and the experiences of people of different ages have shaped and reconstructed the appearance and characteristics of the forest and its animals. Of course, creatures from Himmaphan can be compared to magical creatures such as mermaids, unicorns, giants, dragons, and so on in many folk cultures which are repeatedly adapted into contemporary fiction and media as well. Similar to *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Fantastic Beasts*, or Walt Disney’s animations, past Thai literature has used this forest and its creatures to situate new stories. For example, the main setting in the *Vessantara Jataka*, Kan Himmaphan, is the name of the second chapter of the story which tells of the early life of Prince Vessantara and ends with his exile in the Himmaphan forest with his family. With reference to modern novels, Nittaya Kaewkallana (2023: 137-140) provides some examples wherein Himmaphan is used by several authors to create new representations like a realistic forest, a modern forest, or destroyed land, depending on the theme and messages in the text.

As for *NH*, the series is not solely based on Himmaphan. Rather, it combines several folk motifs found in Thai folktales and myths as well as popular fairy tales from the West. According to Siraporn Nathalang (2020), *NH* comprises a lot of motifs such as world destruction, world creation, transformation, deities, mythical animals, magical objects, and so on. Alina picks different motifs and plays with tradition in the Nawa society, opening a hybrid space that challenges tradition and places it in a new context.

#### *Hybridisation of Tradition and Modernity*

The futuristic space of the Nawa society is imagined by the combination of present-day modernity and past tradition. Since fantasy is a genre of unreal stories which rely on realistic convention, this allows the story to deploy unreal features to meet realistic modernity. Here, folklore is used to reference magical power and the details of characters in a particular group. Interestingly, they appear in the modernised city which is

more advanced compared to other lands. In doing so, *Trinethip* (hereafter *Trinet*), the first volume of *NH*, frames the new world order by beginning with the world being destroyed by a tsunami, flood, earthquake, and fire which burns the land and creatures alive according to the Mayan prophecy. The harsh land turns into the mythical forest Himmaphan which is located upside down to replace the world of humankind. However, Himmaphan is burnt too when it appears on the earth's surface. Thep and Asun thus abandon their enmity to make a magic wall to prevent the great fire. Accordingly, the magic wall separates the destructive Himmaphan and the new world, which they call Nawa Himmaphan or New Himmaphan.

Noticeably, the starting point of *NH* links back to Thai folklore and Buddhist notions of cyclical futures since the destruction of the world starts with a natural disaster followed by the creation of new civilisation with magical powers. Like Thai mythical beliefs, ideal rulers are part of the new world creation, whereas *NH* provides two groups led by Thep and Asun rather than assigning power to only one character or dynasty. The story also gives details as to how two groups can make the Nawa society progress throughout time without conflict. In contrast to other lands, the Nawa society occupies the most developed space which becomes the capital of the new world. It is depicted as a modernised city with skyscrapers, cars, and electronic devices, whereas other cities are described as peripheral spaces. This can be compared to the notion of rural and urban space wherein the Nawa society is the centre of political and economic development. Meanwhile, the magic inherited from Himmaphan is still embodied by different creatures. Thus, Thep and Asun occupy the developed city together, along with their incomparable magic.

A prime instance of how the Nawa society is created as the most civilised space is seen from comparisons with other lands. The comparison appears throughout the *NH* series because the main plot of almost all volumes (except *Pret Raksot*) is about the departure of the main characters from the Nawa society to other lands to undertake various missions before returning. Similarly to the travel writing genre, the journey illustrates the sense of self-reflection and identity when the character shifts from one place to another. Indeed, the story sheds light on the perspective of the Nawa society's individuals like Thep and Asun to travel through a so-called peripheral land. For example, in the second volume - *Thutiya Asun* - the journey

takes place in Udonphana, which is the northern forest and the residence of Kinnari. While the Nawa society is established as a modern city, Udonphana is a faraway forest and mysterious land. They have their own independent traditions, which incites curiosity and a sense of ‘Otherness’ when main characters such as Thep and Asun travel in the land.

Moreover, *NH* also demonstrates the clear contrast between the old and new Himmaphan. Though the beginning of the story opens with the old world being completely ruined, the subsequent detail surprises the reader as the old Himmaphan still exists. Yet a magic wall prevents the two worlds from meeting each other. In *Trinet*, the main characters from the Nawa society cross the wall to the old Himmaphan, which is portrayed as a wild forest containing unknown trees, animals, and creatures that repeatedly attack the heroes and heroines. Moreover, as the textbook in the Nawa society glorifies the old Himmaphan, the heroine realises that this is completely wrong as the Himmaphan is a destructive forest that is less developed than they expect.

Evidently, modernity and tradition are hybridised to construct an ideal space through depictions of the Nawa society. Given that fantasy is the literature of desire and cultural limits as Jackson (1981) has said, this land resonates with the desires of Thai society. Similar to the female body in *Buppe* (see Chapter 5), the ideal space reflects the notion of the hybridity of Thainess and modernity. While the future is projected as being more modernised and civilised than the present, traditional features through fantastical powers from folklore remain. It can be interpreted as the ideal desire since the Nawa society is a combination of both elements and is underlined as the greatest land. This hybrid space thereby depicts the desire for an ideal future of Thailand through the embodiment of modernised Thainess by fulfilling the limitations of reality.

#### *Decentring the West and Making Thailand the Centre*

*NH* elucidates the notion of decentring the real world’s order as well as decolonising the knowledge of the West. *NH* posits the Nawa society city as the centre in both a geographical and political sense. Alina names



her lands according to direction, such as Udonphana (the northern forest) and Ko Tai (the southern island). Needless to say, this implies that the Nawa society is the centre. Furthermore, after the destruction, Mueang Ok Taek, once a wealthy and powerful country, collapses and becomes more backward than the Nawa society. The city is also prohibited for Thep and Asun to visit as their magical powers would malfunction. Moreover, the language of Mueang Ok Taek (which refers to English) is not widely used. This is the reason why Alina creates new words in *NH* referring to Sanskrit or Thai words rather than English.

A clear illustration of the exploded city can be found in the third volume, *Ekathep*. This novel narrates the journey of the leader of the Thep hero and Asun heroine to the city as they are kidnapped together and put onto a ship sailing to the West. During their journey, the novel depicts Mueang Ok Taek in greater detail as the city is not civilised as a result of the world's destruction. The couple from the Nawa society arrive at the beach and walk through the forest, unable to use their magical powers to survive in this land. They meet villagers and stay for a few nights. The portrayal of villagers and their lifestyle contrasts with the urbanised couple since the village does not have advanced technology such as having to use candles instead of electricity. The language barrier is another issue because Mueang Ok Taek's language is no longer the dominant language and the heroine cannot therefore communicate with the locals. Although there is another part of the land which is more developed, it is still far behind the Nawa society. This city is thus exoticised by protagonists from a modernised city and the removed from centre of the new world's civilisation.

Hence, the novel decentralises the present-day world order of the US while situating Thailand as the central power. This unpacks the desires and limits of the real-world power structure as the US has continued to play a dominant role in terms of global politics and culture for a long time. At the same time, the series also creates a decolonised world in which the inferior culture can stand over the superior power as a result of the hybridisation of tradition and modernity. This resonates with the concept of 'mimicry' as suggested by Bhabha (see Chapter 3). The Nawa society tries to contest and negotiate with Western civilisation by combining modern and magical features to challenge modernity from the once great power of the exploded city. The hybridity of 'local wisdom' and the mimicry of modernity in the Nawa society makes this land

superior to the West. This hybrid space in the future, therefore, resonates with the lack of power in the present-day and with desires for the future through a hybridised Thainess.

***Tradition and Transgression: Reviving Archaic Violence through a Fantastical Plot***

The plot of *NH* closely links to the repertoire of both Thai and foreign folklore and is not limited to the myth of Himmaphan. Rather, it combines folk motifs commonly known among Thais. Overall, the main conflicts in all six volumes are grounded in family conflict since the journey of heroes and heroines in *NH* unmask the violence and taboos of the Nawa society, especially transgression in the family such as parricide, fratricide, and filicide. This can be interpreted as social and political conflict at large.

*Reviving Family Conflict from Folk Narratives*

The *NH* series is based on a love affair between a hero and heroine from different races such as Thep and Asun, Asun and a mixed-race character, Asun and Nak, and so on. Their taboo of transgressing race relations comes along with the family conflict experienced by either the male or female protagonist. For example, in the sixth volume, *Ninnakhin*, the hero is the prince of Nak in the old Himmaphan kingdom, but was abducted and sent away to the Nawa society when he was a boy. He then met Asun who became his friend and lover. This volume begins when the hero's twin brother comes from the old Himmaphan to search for him. Meanwhile, many people are killed by the Nak. As the heroine is a doctor, she is involved in this incident and reunites with the hero as he is one of the suspects. As the story develops, the hero and heroine travel back to the hero's homeland. In Nak's kingdom, where they live with their large extended family, the couple gradually develop their relationship. However, they face challenges. Firstly, love between different races of the Asun and Nak is socially unacceptable. The reappearance of the long-lost heir then destabilises the kingdom resulting in several attacks against the protagonists. Finally, the story unmask the real plotters are close relatives of the hero. This causes jealousy among the siblings in his extended family. In short, the abduction, murder, and attacks is based on conflict in the hero's family.

More interestingly, family conflict covers taboos like killing fathers, mothers, and children while some volumes also imply incestuous affairs. The most profound example of these is seen in the shared conflict in the first to third volumes which are *Trinet*, *Thutiya Asun*, and *Ekathep*. The conflict gives rise to an attempt by the father to kill both his son and grandchild because he believes in a prophecy that his offspring will return to kill him. The first volume, *Trinet*, relates this conflict from the perspective of Phokhin, the senior Thep, who decides to murder his grandchild, who was born mixed-race, and his son, to make sure that they cannot abuse him. As the Nawa society has a strict rule against killing family members, Phokhin cuts off his son's legs instead of killing him and sends him to live alone in the old Himmaphan, while keeping an eye on his grandchild. After Phokhin is unmasked and sentenced to life-long imprisonment, the story ends with a plot twist as Phokhin is killed in jail by his secret son. Thus, Phokhin does die by his offspring's hand, fulfilling the prophecy.

Another case in which a father tries to kill his son can be found in *Thutiya Asun*. The story begins when Pitthayathon, the vice leader of Asun, and Sawini, the high class Thep, accidentally find the stolen golden egg of Kinnari. They then decide to return this egg to Kinnari's kingdom to avoid conflict between the races. However, a new-born Kinnari hatches from that egg leading them to become his father and mother. When they arrive at Kinnari's kingdom, they realise that their adopted child is the heir to the throne, and he was abandoned since his egg was misshapen, causing him to have a disabled foot. While his unusual birth is interpreted as unlucky for the kingdom, some believe that he will be a great leader in the future. As the story develops, many attacks are levied against the infant Kinnari, such as giving him poisoned food. The main suspect is the queen of the kingdom because everyone knows that this boy is the son of the king and his concubine, whereas the queen, who hates the boy, has an inferior daughter. Again, Alina surprises readers with a plot twist as this boy is the queen's son, and she pretends to protect her son before unmasking the real plotter. Incredibly, the king is the real criminal who attempts to get rid of his son's egg and tries to kill him when he returns. The reason for this is that the king is not the rightful leader and he fears that his wife and son will usurp him.

Incest is another conflict presented in *NH*. The fourth volume, *Pret Raksot*, is the only volume in which Alina tells a solo story separate from Thep and Asun in the Nawa society. This story is about a creature called Raksot, who looks like a giant and lives on the southern island. This land has internal political instability as Kan, the current leader of Raksot, seizes power to rule the land from the old leader who is both his uncle and his father-in-law. After this coup, Kan still faces resistance as he believes that the heir of the old leader is still alive and he attempts to enact revenge. The novel also utilises the gothic fiction genre, wherein the main setting takes place in a large, mysterious, and isolated castle, leading the female protagonist to learn the secrets of this place and of the male protagonist. The heroine gradually suspects many things in this castle from the hero's siblings. She is then captured in the castle once she realises the truth of this family. The real culprit is Kan's half-sister who has been in love with Kan for a long time and wants to get rid of any rivals, such as the hero's ex-wife who died mysteriously, and the female protagonist.

In fact, the cases of filicide and incest and attempts to kill blood relatives in *NH* can be compared to fantasy fiction works from different cultures and echoes folklore and archaic conflict in myths and literature from the past, such as the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King*. With regards to Thai culture, violence and taboo in the family are common. Some stupas and temples in Isan and Central Thailand have legends explaining their origin from parricide narratives. As parricide is one of the most severe sins according to Buddhism, building a religious statue is an act of showing atonement for this. In royal Thai literature, the *Ramakien of King Rama I*, for instance, comprises many scenes about parricide and incest. Thotsakan and Sida are a key best illustration. As Thotsakan is Sida's father, his desire to abduct her from another man to become his wife connotes incest. Moreover, the reason why he abandoned her at first deals with the anxiety of parricide as Sida was born to uproot her family. Noticeably, the war was caused by her leading to the death of her father and relatives.

Thai folktales consist of conflicts caused by jealousy and prophecies of misfortune. According to Siraporn Thitathan Nathang (1994), Thai fairytales or *nithan chak chak wong wong* present material conflict in Thai culture between the major wife (*mia luang*) and minor wife (*mia noi*). The competition for power between

son and father-in-law is widely found too. Because Thais live in extended and polygamous families, this leads to the contestation and negotiation of the leading family members' power in the household. Referring to this point, Pitchayane Chengkeeree (1999) compares Vladimir Propp's morphology of Russian tales and *nithan chak chak wong wong* and illustrates that although the journey of the hero shows some similar patterns, the cultural specificity of Thai folktales is jealousy, especially in the family, causing the departure of heroes from their land as the beginning point of their journey. Accordingly, the *NH* series contains a vivid connection to mythical narratives embedded in Thai society and archetypical conflict across cultures.

#### *From Family to National Conflict*

The case of violence and taboo among family members in *NH*'s plot can be seen as a reinvention of traditional conflict in a new context. As this conflict is established in a future space, it can be argued that anxiety from the past is revived and remains throughout time in the future. This shows the perception of a cyclical future in which the future world cannot be reimagined out of this past anxiety. In addition, it underlines the role of a collective future society grounded by the family unit. If the family collapses, this suggests the destruction of society.

Situating *NH* in the post-2006 environment, family conflict mirrors the notion of internal conflict within a particular group. *NH* brings archaic conflict between family members back into a futuristic space and time. Arguably, this conflict is still relevant to the present and paving the way towards a better future. The conflict within the family thus subverts that ideal society since the family is the smallest unit of happiness and peace within collective Thai society. Familial conflict then becomes intertwined with the instability of society as it shows a 'lack of unity' within the smallest unit. The portrayal of transgression among fathers, parents, and siblings destabilises not only their own family but also society at large as seen through the representation of the family conflict resulting in the chaos of the entire Nawa society. This interpretation is seen from the beginning as *NH* starts with the destruction of the world before the world is recreated by the unity of different races. Therefore, united groups imply a utopian future.

Additionally, family violence and taboos can be interpreted as the anxiety of losing individuality and identity. This is arguably connected to the loss of national identity at large. The reason for this is that cases of parricide, filicide, and so on mainly deal with the continuity of individual identity. Cases of parricide when fathers and mothers try to kill their offspring, lead to the fear of losing their inheritors. At the same time, when children commit a crime against their parents, it can be viewed as the destruction of their roots from their shared ancestors.

All of this therefore depicts the fear of the discontinuity of identity from one generation to another. The discontinuity, of course, contrasts the nationalist sentiment of never having been colonised and enjoying continuing independence, as discussed in Chapter 3. Accordingly, transgressions from family taboos imply the loss of and disconnect from national roots. Though each text comprises this sort of taboo, it is important to note that the story mostly ends up with only attempted or failed plans, rather than successful killings. In this sense, the hope for unity remains, alongside the anxiety of identity loss.

### ***Decentring Conventions: Traditional Characters in a Reconstructed World***

One fascinating point in the *NH* series is the decentring of the perception of sacred figures from mythology, including the empowerment of marginal characters. This shift of tradition, I argue, reflects decentring conventions by criticising the surface image of a ‘good person.’ Meanwhile, the *NH* series allows the suppressed group to play a leading role and some volumes carve out space for marginalised people to become ideal leaders, in contrast to common perception.

### *Decentring Goodness*

Traditionally, They encapsulate not only sacred deities who live in heaven and are of high-status, but also a sense of ‘goodness.’ In Thai belief, which takes many deities from Indian myths, They can be the creator, protector, and destroyer. As in the previous chapters, love destiny in *Buppe* refers to the cause of Phra Prohm while the war between Phra Ram and Thotsakan in the *Ramakien* links to the avatar of Phra Narai

who restores world order. On the other hand, Asun are the opposite of Thep, depicted as brutal and villainous spirits who try to challenge Thep and social order. Asun thus embody badness and cruelty. Accordingly, there is a common belief in and didactic emphasis on the role of the Thep as the model of goodness, whereas the Asun are demonised. A battle ending with the victory of the Thep over the Asun is frequently seen in Thai literature, such as in the *Ramakien*, as it symbolises the value of goodness or *thamma* which always wins against *atham* or evil (see Chapter 6).

Nonetheless, the *NH* series challenges this common belief. Alina shifts the role of the Asun as being equal to Thep in the Nawa society, and makes Asun the protagonist. In my interview with her, Alina revealed that she realised that “the things we have learned are lies” when she did research about the Thep and Asun to form the story. The Asun are actually unjustly blamed, while the Thep are granted higher and more powerful status. She felt that the Thep can be untrustworthy and exploitative of Asun. Consequently, she decided to voice the Asun perspective in *NH*, while putting the Thep in a different light (Interview with Alina 2022). Alina’s comment about injustice between the Thep and Asun is linked to the Hindu mythical narrative, which has been inserted into many Thai literary works and folklore called *Kuan Kasian Samut* or ‘The churning of the ocean of milk.’ In brief, this myth illustrates devas losing their power and having to churn ocean milk to produce magical water or ‘Amarita water’, which can boost their power. Yet the devas cannot achieve this on their own, and so they invite asuras to help with the promise to give half of their Amarita objects from this ritual to the asuras (Figure 37). Nevertheless, the devas exploit all the precious water and treasures at the end. This myth is common knowledge for Thais, and Nidhi Eoseewong (2014) comments that it is a prime identifier of class and power structures. The Thep are the ruling class while the Asun are lower-class, and the implication of the myth is for people to learn about power structures to maintain this social order.



Figure 37 The art of Kuan Kasian Samut at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Thailand, portrays the Asun on the left collaborating with Thep on the right, while Narai is at the centre.

Source: my personal photo

In a subversion of these stereotypes, *NH* depicts the Asun as a force for good, narrated through the eyes of other races, in almost every volume. *Trinet* is the prime example of using Phokhin as a high class Thep who is the antagonist who transgresses all good norms. In addition, in *Phet Raksot*, the Raksot, who are the main race within this volume, describe their negative feelings towards the Thep because they have long been suppressed and looked down on by the Thep. Accordingly, in Raksot's land, the Thep are thus perceived as the most disgusting race compared to the other races in the Nawa society. The story illustrates cases from the discrimination of the Thep including Awika, the heroine of the volume. She is a mixed-race woman with Raksot and Thep lineage who lives with her stepmother and siblings. Similar to Cinderella's plot, she is treated as a servant in her stepmother's bar due to her 'low class' Thep blood. When she marries the leader of the Raksot, her Thep blood remains a problem in gaining acceptance. Nevertheless, true love wins out against racial prejudice. In this respect, the Thep are no longer the most sacred race of the Nawa society.

#### *Empowering Marginal Voices*

Since the Thep lose their central status as representing the meaning of 'goodness,' Alina empowers other groups to embody that meaning like the Asun who come to play a protagonist role and have an equal status to the Thep. Meanwhile, various marginal figures are also empowered, two key interesting groups of which are women and disabled characters. Alina shifts their piteous and oppressed status into that of great leaders.



With reference to women, *Thutiya Asun* provides a key example. Since the story's conflict revolves around the heir of Kinnari's kingdom, Rani Salaiphokhin, the Queen of the Kinnari, is initially portrayed as bad since she seems to be a threat to the king and the heir. However, the story unmasks the real criminal and reveals all the reasons behind this crime. The queen is the rightful heir as she has a gold feather which is the symbol of the leader of the Kinnari. As a woman, however, she cannot rule her land and has to have an arranged marriage. Her husband has a gold feather as well, yet it is revealed at the end to be a fake and he tries to maintain his power. Thus, the king is punished, and the queen becomes the sovereign leader ruling the land with legitimacy. Essentially, *Thutiya Asun* voices her oppression under the patriarchy before she secures leadership, which can be interpreted as an ideal solution for women.

Disability is another obvious issue that is tackled in *NH*. Alina creates key characters with imperfect bodies like the handicapped characters, but they are not lacking in power vis à vis others. Rather, they are powerful figures who are mostly leaders or future leaders. In *Thutiya Asun* again, the heir of Kinnari's egg was born with a gold feather, yet one leg is twisted, leading to the negative implication that he cannot be a great leader as legs are a sign of strength and power for this half-bird, half-human creature. Nevertheless, the novel proves that he is more powerful than anyone could imagine and his misshapen leg cannot prevent him from his mission. Thus, apart from his mother who can rule the country in her own right, this young Kinnari proves himself to be the righteous heir of the kingdom.

In conclusion, *NH* can be seen as a literary work written from and for the margins. This series uses the genre of fantasy to create a new world order in a future space and time. Indeed, it allows for anything to be possible. Alina builds a new world order beyond present-day conditions with the common theme of decentring traditional perspectives and allowing the margin to become the centre. Of course, the up-side-down world underpins several meanings against the Thai social context of the 2010s. As the bodies of different races in *NH* are very important links to class and lead to conflicts, I unpack embodiment in *NH* and connections to the discourse of Thainess and Thai society of that time in the following sections.

## **The Embodied Future with Present Ideologies: Embodiment in *Trinethip* and Political Polarisation**

*Trinet*, the first volume of NH, was published chapter by chapter in *Sakun Thai* magazine between 2013 and 2014 before being reprinted as a complete novel in 2014 by Look-a-ngoong publishing (owned by Alina herself). The period in which this novel appears coincides with the uprising of the PDRC against Yingluck's government, followed by the coup of May 2014. *Trinet* tells the story of the tragic life of Thip-apha who is part of the mixed race of Thep, Asun, and humans. The volume's title - *Trinethip* – relates to her since *tri* from Sanskrit means 'three' or 'third' followed by Thip-apha's status as someone with *netthip* (magical eyes), who can see into the future. As a result of her unique mix of race and power, Thip-apha is seen as a threat. Her village was burnt down when she was young, and she hides her real identity and lives in fear with her single mother while knowing little about her father other than that he is a Thep.

The main story starts when she fails to hide her identity, causing the Nawa society descend into chaos. However, this time she is taken care of by the leader of the Asun, Ruth, who later becomes her partner. To complete the mission, they are called to cross over to the old Himmaphan. The adventure reunites her with her missing father who loses his legs and becomes stuck in the old Himmaphan because Phokhin, her grandfather and a senior Thep, has learned from the prophecy that one of his offspring will kill him. Finally, Phokhin is sentenced to life-long arrest before being killed in jail by his secret mixed-race son. Arguably, the future setting of the story embodies the hope and fear of political polarisation in Thai society through the politics of the 'pure race' bodies of the Thep and Asun, the 'disabled body', and the 'hybrid body' of the female heroine.

### ***The Pure Race Body, Past Conflict, and the Threat of Unity***

On the surface, the Nawa society seems to promote happiness and people living without confrontation, but the notion of separation is hidden. Race is the most essential aspect of separation in the Nawa society, as well as class. Alina depicts each race living together, yet avoiding mixing with other races. This means that

the Theps live among their own group and do not interact with the Asuns and vice versa except when it comes to critical problems which require a solution from the leaders of both groups. Inequality and hierarchy are noticeable norms, allowing the Thep and Asun to be the leading races of the Nawa society, whereas other creatures are inferior. Furthermore, the status of the Thep and Asun is hierarchical and divides different classes into their own groups. There are differences between the high-class and low-class among the Thep and Asun, with the former being the family of a leader who is supernaturally selected.

Grounded on this norm, *Trinet* underlines conflict from racial clashes by emphasising the roles of the Thep and Asun. Although they are legally equal, the Thep still claim their privilege by linking back to the past myth. The Thep consider themselves sacred deities in the old world who inherited the new world. As a result, they are supposed to be superior to other races, especially the Asun, who used to be demons. Accordingly, the notion of race is used to glorify them and prevent mixing with other races. For instance, the heroine, Thip-apha, describes a situation wherein two leaders of Thep, Siwa Naruebodin (herein Siwa), along with an Asun, Ruth, have to meet in her cloth shop. She feels that the “power of both leaders makes her uncomfortable. Although they are in different poles of power, the men are not enemies ... and nor are they friends either. One is watchful of the other”<sup>8</sup> (Alina 2014: 168). The reason for this is gradually revealed, as the Thep and Asun are traditional enemies linking back to the myth of the devas and demons, as stated by Ruth: “Thep and Asun have been enemies since ancient times. There is no way to unite us. We have watched each other cautiously throughout 700 years. But the law prevents us from killing each other” (Alina 2014: 211-212). It means that many laws were written to prevent war. So, the lives of the leaders of the Thep and Asun are deeply connected. If one side dies, so will the other; to kill the other is to kill oneself. Hence, the Thep and Asun are inseparable from each other, and yet they cannot blend together.

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from this novel were written in Thai and translations throughout this chapter are my own.

The pride and prejudice between the Thep and Asun races is strong since they are proud of their ‘pure body.’ Propagated by authorities, the concept of a pure race is a top-down political discourse used to preserve the status quo of the leading races, as referred to in the text.

Both Thep and Asun used to select humans to be part of their race, but it was around 700 years or, more accurately, 770 years ago [...] However, each race has since then married within only their own race in order to produce ‘pure blood’ heirs. Actually, there is no way to be pure blood for either Thep or Asun. Yet since this is claimed by the absolute authorities, no one can argue and everyone has to automatically accept this hierarchy (Alina 2014: 9)

*Trinet* points out the notion of purity as a problematic discourse causing conflict in society at large by underlining the privileged status of the Thep. *Trinet* emphasises Thip-apha’s point of view that myth and their duty give privileged status and the meaning of ‘goodness’ to the Thep.

She is like most people who admire the Thep. It is caused by the traditional belief that an individual will be reborn in heaven or actually Himmaphan as it is given that Thep are good people, whereas Asun are the opposite. Although this belief is proven wrong [...], this stereotypical idea is unresolved [...] Thus, individuals fear Asun while admiring Thep (Alina 2014: 36-37).

*Trinet* then uses the embodiment of Phokhin to unmask this problematic discourse since his senior, high-class Thep body is governed by an unacceptable mind. As discussed earlier, Phokhin attempts to kill both his son and grandson. He cuts his own son’s legs off and exiles him to the old Himmaphan. Apart from this being due to a prophecy, *Trinet* illustrates that the decision is caused by Phokhin’s pride and prejudice towards his pure blood. At first, *Trinet* introduces Phokhin as arrogant and proud of his purerace and strict about the glorious past of Thep, “but when the world destructs [...] Thep has no way but to migrate from their land to be contaminated by Asun and humans. Thep also have to ‘reconcile’ and rule the land with Asun. Thep have to submit to equal power with those ignoble Asun” (Alina 2014: 52). Moreover, when the

leaders of Thep and Asun have to work together, Phokhin feels “so shameful that he (Siwa) is the leader of Thep, yet he must downgrade himself to work with Asun and allow them to claim equal status. Why doesn’t he think about his superior status?” (Alina 2014: 253).

Given that Thep is superior to other races according to Phokhin, this idea allows him to commit unacceptable actions like attempting to get rid of his son since he has affairs with other races. Because the notion of purity leads to the construction of the ‘superior us’ who look down on the ‘inferior other’, this discourse is undoubtedly inherited from traditional beliefs and prevents reconciliation by causing polarisation between the two races. Needless to say, Thip-apha, who is mixed-race between Thep, Asun, and a human, is the most shameful figure in Phokhin’s belief system. Hence, he decides to get rid of his heirs who could lessen his status. In contrast to his body as a high-class Thep who expects ‘goodness,’ the taboo he commits presents his ‘bad mind’ and questions, as Thip-apha argues: “What kind of Thep! Isn’t it the race of goodness?” (Alina 2014: 389).

### ***The Disabled Body as Empowering the Margins***

The disabled body of Nakhin is a prime depiction of how the pure race discourse ruins the smallest unit of personal relationships in the family. To demonstrate, Nakhin is the heir with the most potential to become the new leader of the Thep. Nevertheless, he falls in love with Manithip, a mixed-raced Asun and human. This affair creates Thip-apha, who is a mixture of three races. Due to the division between races in this society, along with his father’s pride and prejudice, Nakhin is the skeleton in the closet of the ‘pure’ and ‘high-class’ Thep family. Unlike his father, Nakhin does not want to hand this idea down to the next generation. The argument between father and son becomes tragic when Nakhin angrily says that through the prophecy Phokhin will be killed by his heir. Thus, this is the beginning of violence.

*Trinet* describes the shock of the other characters when they learn of Nakhin’s tragic story. As Alina writes, “both Thep and Asun leaders are shocked and speechless. Despite this, they know that Phokhin is decisive and can do everything for his own profit, such as cutting of the legs of his youngest son and waiting for him

to die, which is brutal. It is unbelievable that a person who is a father could do this” (Alina 2014: 389). However, Nakhin explains that actually Phokhin loves him, yet “he loves himself and believes in the myth transmitted through generations more” (Alina 2014: 390). Therefore, the disabled body becomes empirical evidence of a racial discourse which causes violence against people in society.

Nonetheless, Nakhin does not surrender to his disabled condition since he comes to improve and develop this destructive Himmaphan. He also has strong powers as a Thep and special power as a prophet, so he can create peace and order over the land. Thus, he resembles the leader of Himmaphan in a way that is similar to the leader of the Nawa society. He knows that only the old Himmaphan allows him to be as he is. He tells his daughter that he does not want to go back to Nawa society because “I am like the leader of the Thep in Himmaphan. I have power and everything. On the other hand, I am only a poor no-legged Thep in the Nawa society. I have no power. I cannot think about the leader of the Thep, as I might be homeless” (Alina 2014: 456). In other words, the old Himmaphan can empower this marginal figure of the Nawa society and position him at the centre.

Interestingly, his body opposes the concept of the strong and perfect body of a leader in Thai traditional beliefs about the charismatic power of *barami* (see Chapters 3 and 6). Even if a beautiful body and perfect shape are essential elements to identify a ‘person who has merit’, Nakhin is the opposite of this. To understand this, it is important to underline the space of the land over which he rules. The old Himmaphan is backward compared to the remote rural areas which are ruined by a great fire. As a result, the arrival of Nakhin from Nawa society introduces order and prosperity to this land. *Trinet* elucidates that “creatures from different races live separately here, without trust. He spent around 10 years with his prophetic Thep power to gather all races to live together” (Alina 2014: 402). In other words, “if he does not appear in the Himmaphan, this land could not have progressed as it has today [...] Without Nakhin, Himmaphan is like a boat without a rudder. It must float without direction. And it might lack someone to lean on” (Alina 2014: 404). Therefore, regardless of his imperfect body, the power and project of Nakhin to develop Himmaphan is more important to the land and people. He is similar to ideal rulers from mythical narratives when the

world ends because, after the new creation of the world, a new leader is either sent down or selected from heaven. In this sense, Nakhin is sent to rule this destructive land.

It is noteworthy that *Trinet* empowers the disabled body within the past and destructive space, while this body cannot fit into a so-called futuristic space. The novel aligns marginal figures and space with each other. Since the Nawa society is a space wherein the complicated sense of the perfect and pure body cannot provide room for a disabled Thep, the old Himmaphan is more open for Nakhin. Furthermore, when characters from the Nawa society visit this land and meet him, both space and body reveal oppression from the peripheral perspective: space that is destroyed and underdeveloped as well as disability suppressed from the norms of the Nawa society. At the same time, the novel empowers these elements to show that they can stand independently of each other.

Hence, the disabled body comes to signify a powerful and good leader, in contrast to the discourse of purity. Nakhin breaks this rule and activates the notion of hybridity, which challenges the norms of his own race, especially in the case of his father. The disability and leadership of Nakhin are features used to criticise the main discourse of purity as he is initially insulted by that discourse. The appearance of Nakhin among visitors from the Nawa society proves that a marginal person can be an ideal leader. Meanwhile, it scrutinises the notion of the separation and judgement of bodies in the Nawa society. Though Thep in general is depicted as being ‘good’ outside and ‘bad’ inside, Nakhin is an inversion because his imperfect body encapsulates many admirable qualities.

### ***The Hybrid Body, an Ideal Future, and Hope for Reconciliation***

Given Nakhin represents the past land embodied by past conflict, hope for the future is embodied in the hybrid body of his daughter who changes Nawa society. *Trinet* describes Thip-apha from her hybridised physical characteristics. Since she has to hide her real identity from her attacker, she wears a magical accessory to keep her real body. However, the novel starts the conflict through her loss of that accessory, making other people recognise her change. At first, she is a normal human without an outstanding

appearance. Then she becomes a unique beauty. *Trinet* emphasises her physical appearance as a mixture of all races along with her profound beauty. It can be interpreted as a positive change on the surface from hiding her real identity to accepting her mixed-race status. Her beautiful body also foreshadows the positive implications of hybridity, as depicted below.

The female...who is perfectly beautiful, makes her jaw drop and disbelieve what she sees. She never thinks that anyone could have a fully perfect shaped face [...] The female... has one dark black eye like the darkest night while another eye is bluish grey like the sky with little cloud. The female... is not human, Asun, or Thep. Rather, she is a mixture of all (Alina 2014: 22-23).

In addition, Thip-apha's body is embedded with a notion of the future in two dimensions: the person who can see the future and the person who represents hope for a better future. This is because the embodiment of Thip-apha as a mixture of all races does not only give her beauty, it also comes with the gift of clairvoyance, allowing her to see the future or things that others cannot see. Since there is a prophecy in the Nawa society that the Netthip will change the destiny of this land forever, her accurate predictions and status as a Netthip upgrades Thip-apha's life from a common person to that of a powerful figure. Her power is confirmed by Nakhin, who points out that "even though Thep and Asun seem to be the most powerful, you are actually more powerful than them" (Alina 2014: 433-434). In this sense, seeing into the future is a source of power that can be used to control the present time since this is beyond the capabilities of others in the story.

Thip-apha is also the symbol of a better future due to her hybrid body. Because the old prophecy states that Netthip will be the one who leads the Nawa society into a new era, it establishes Thip-apha as a rival for Phokhin who wants to gain absolute power. Nonetheless, *Trinet* proves that she does not have ambitions to control all lands. Rather, she wants to see a united society as her father claims that "you are the one who can make it happen" (Alina 2014: 434). This means that she can change the future of the land by herself. Therefore, when the story creates a binary opposition between the Thep and Asun, supported by the



discourse of purity and mythical beliefs, the *trinet* or third eye Thip-apha is the ‘Third Space’ which contests that ideology and constructs new meanings for the future beyond binaries.

Finally, as a female raised by a single mother from a lower-background, Thip-apha also embodies the notion of the peripheral who is empowered by her hybrid body to be at the centre. Her hybrid condition also depicts an ideal future in which hybridity becomes the superior discourse over purity. As demonstrated, Alina tends to use female characters as key figures in her novels, and *NH* emphasises the oppression of women who challenge patriarchal norms. In this sense, Thip-apha provides another crucial example of a heroine who is a key figure making great change. She has to move from place to place to escape Phokhin’s attack and hide her real power. Her mother, Manithip, is mentally damaged and raises Thip-apha with difficulty. She has a normal education at a rural school before going to work in the city. Her work as a designer does not go smoothly and she is looked down upon. This all abruptly changes when everyone recognises her as a Netthip. She then possesses the highest status and the leaders of the Thep and Asun have to ask for her help and listen to her advice.

When her hybrid body transforms from a woman from the margins to standing at the centre and encapsulating the meaning of a better future, Thip-apha can be interpreted as an ideal leader who appears in post-apocalyptic stories in mythical and religious texts. Despite the Nawa society not coming to an end, the city is created with turmoil and instability under Phokhin’s plan. The discourse of polarisation, moreover, is depicted as deep tension, which can destroy society at any time. Thip-apha thus symbolises ‘the new world order’ from her hybrid body and the embodied meaning of reconciliation. It can be seen that the future is brightened by women rather than men, while giving hope that peripheral figures can be powerful. In short, this hybrid body in *Trinet* provides the ‘Third Space’ wherein small individuals can speak in a world turned upside down. Marginal woman like Thip-apha resemble her disabled father who can be an ideal leader, in contrast to social norms. The futuristic meanings of her body are thus channels to scrutinise existing norms and ideal perceptions. All of this can be read against the backdrop of the polarisation period in Thailand.

***Bodies in Trinethip and Thainess: From Polarisation to Social Reconciliation***

*Trinet* was composed during one of the most critical periods of Thai politics as it appeared in the midst of the PDRC movement and ended at the same time as the coup, between 2013-2014. Though *Trinet* might not be a so-called ‘political novel’ for contesting or supporting political change, the contents of the novel resonate with political notions in a broader sense through the embodiment of hope and fear in a fantasy world. Arguably, the hope and fear present in the novel relate to real-life crises and are constructed through future space and time. From the earlier analysis of purity, disability, and hybrid bodies, these bodies collect different abstract meanings which can be separated into two categories: the anxiety of ‘losing the nation’ and the hope for reconciliation.

*The Anxiety of the Losing the Nation*

Firstly, the anxiety of losing as a result of polarisation is predominant in *NH*. Theoretically speaking, the apocalyptic narrative not only reveals the crisis but also unpacks how to cope with the aftermath of the catastrophe (see Tanaka 2014). *NH*, especially *Trinet*, is set in a post-apocalyptic world wherein a new relationship occurs in the aftermath of world destruction in 2012. The opening scene, in which the world collapses, connects to the conflict in the latter story, and the conflict in the family from different generations is a clear point of losing individual roots and heirs. Thus, the starting point of the novel and the development of the story are intertwined with the notion of loss, even though this land seems to be an ideal space. *Trinet* illustrates that a polarised society among races must lead to the decline of the world while attempting to suggest ways to prevent that loss. Here, bodies are constructed and embedded with the abstract hope of reconciliation and fear of polarisation. The novel criticises the dominant discourse of the pure race body by demonstrating the trauma of disability. The hybrid body then comes to resolve society and move it beyond conflict to a reconciled future.

This anxiety can be read against the backdrop of Thai society. At first, *Trinet* illustrates familiar signs of Thainess which remind Thai readers of their shared cultural knowledge, and many scenes reflect conflict

outside of the text. For example, the text mentions the current year of the Nawa society which is around 770 years after the destruction of the world. Interestingly, this number is familiar in the mainstream history of Thailand which starts from the Sukhothai kingdom around the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thailand is believed to be a continuous nation, which has passed down through different kingdoms for over 770 years. By using this year, it is apparent that the establishment and existence of the Nawa society mirrors the emergence and continuity of the Thai kingdom over more than 700 years.

Moreover, *Trinet* shows that the norms of society from the dominant discourse cause separation and can lead to the end of that continuity. This resonates with the post-2006 atmosphere and the embodiment of Phokhin and Nakhin is a prime example. Phokhin's representation of a high-class Thep who is supposed to be a 'good person' unmasks the oppression of the conservative wing, and that oppression leads to social separation at large. The notion of purity and traditional beliefs through the embodiment of a bad Thep like Phokhin are thus criticised because the discourse of a 'superior us' prevents the notion of reconciliation. Indeed, Nakhin's disability was caused by violence from that discourse which is not only an effect of larger society, but also destroys intimate relationships in the family.

Likewise, as discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of being a 'good person' or *khon di* introduced by the conservative wing dominates Thai society at large, as can be seen from the PDRC movement in their claim to be a 'good person mob' while at the same time demonising the Other. This concept relies on the traditional value of goodness derived from Buddhism, as well as being linked to the official discourse of Thainess. As with Phokhin, this traditional value makes people who claim to be good superior to others and therefore legitimises their actions. On the other hand, the appearance of Nakhin together with the early life of Thip-apha provides a means of circumventing this discourse. This shows that there are different people - who are marginalised - who are offended by being subjected to the monopolistic definition of goodness.

In short, *Trinet* identifies the root of social separation from traditional beliefs which gives one group superiority over others, causing the pride and prejudice of a particular race. This can ruin the entire society,

including the lives of each individual. Given that the sense of lack of unity and separation is viewed as the cause of losing the nation, as stated in mainstream Thai narratives, the polarisation of ideology in *Trinet* is viewed as the way to lead to the deconstruction of the Nawa society, as compared with the loss of the nation.

### *Hope for Social Reconciliation*

Owing to preventing that loss, the hope for reconciliation through hybridity in *Trinet* shares a common solution to be ‘politically neutral’ (*pen klang thang kan-mueang*) during that time. The embodiment of Thip-apha can be interpreted as neutral and in the middle of all ideologies. The construction of her body aligns with the concept of negotiation wherein contrasting ideologies can meet and create a beautiful outcome. Her powerful status that surpasses others, including the leaders of the Thep and Asun, reveals the positive impact of dismissing the extreme ideologies of each side, along with underlining the utmost power resulting from the good elements of people all being mixed together as one. This notion mirrors Thai society because unity has repeatedly been underlined to move the country away from crises. The sense of toleration and of not being part of conflict relates to the sense of the ‘in-between’, like Thip-apha who embodies the meaning of a better future.

Furthermore, *NH* attempts to embrace diversity in Thai society by giving voice to peripheral figures. The text stresses that peace and order can lead to success for the ‘little’ people in society from the bottom up, rather than top-down from the position of authority. This point can be seen from the overall atmosphere in *NH* in which Alina decentralises the Thep and guides the reader to the side of the Asun. This is the way to make the suppressed group heard over traditional values. Focusing on *Trinet*, the tragic early life of both Nakhin and Thip-apha, followed by their superior status, can be seen as a voice from the margins which is suppressed at first becoming empowered. This resonates with the rise of cultural diversity and the rights of marginal groups in Thailand (see chapter 2). Disability, for instance, is a shifting paradigm. Thanomnuan Hiranthep (2008), who studies disability discourse in Thai fiction from 1932 to 2004, summarises that the discourse on disability has shifted in recent years. In earlier periods, karma provided a key explanation of

the way people treated disabled people to cure and restore them as ‘normal.’ However, in Thai fiction from the late 1990s onward, diversity discourse comes to change this, showing disabled people as normal people who can live full lives and are not different from others. The case of Nakhin, who can be a great leader without legs, is a good illustration of this paradigm.

Lastly, the connection between women as representing compromise and a hope for a better future through Thip-apha’s body links to the prophecy of an ideal female leader which was widespread in Thai society during the early 2010s - especially when Yingluck became the first Thai female prime minister in 2011. The key part of this prophecy stated that the land would separate into two poles and chaos would appear. Until the great time comes, there is one woman who will ride a white horse to bring back hope. This myth of the *nari khi ma khao* or ‘the woman riding a white horse’ became part of the contemporary political agenda. Referring back to that forecast, Yingluck was named as that woman when she was introduced into politics in the middle of 2011 to run as prime minister. Then, Yingluck was claimed by her supporters to be the woman from the myth who brought hope to the country which had been in conflict for many years (Figure 38). Nevertheless, the royalists denied this interpretation and tried instead to apply the myth to female royal members.



Figure 38 Images of Yingluck Shinawatra with the claim that she is the ‘woman riding the white horse.’

Source: <https://pantip.com/topic/30894580> and <https://www.naiin.com/product/detail/19870>

Nonetheless, the answer of who actually is the woman riding the horse is not important to my analysis. Rather, it is crucial in terms of presenting the definition and redefinition of a woman as a point of hope for compromise. Thip-apha, in this sense, can be the woman riding the white horse since she comes to combine the polarised races into one. More importantly, the use of a female character goes beyond present social conflict led by the patriarchy because it represents the hope of standing up to male-dominated society. In short, the embodiment of *Trinet*'s heroine symbolises a sense of hope for a better future, resonating with the popular myth in the 2010s.

In summary, *Trinet* encapsulates a polarised society and the fear of losing the nation, while offering hope for a better future within a united country. All three types of bodies discussed here are representations of the past, present, and future from three generations. A grandfather character like Phokhin symbolises purity and an abusive past, and Nakhin as the second generation is the product of past conflict and is relevant to the present day. Finally, the embodiment of Thip-apha goes beyond past conflict with monopolistic discourses, symbolising the future of a united society which embraces diversity and has space for once marginal figures to be seen and heard. It is undeniable that this notion mirrors the polarisation in Thailand in the aftermath of the 2006-coup and a collective hope for a better future.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the way in which folklore has been reinvented into fantasy novels through the portrayal of a new world in the future. Using *NH* as a case study, the series aligns with cyclical futuristic notions in Thai narratives and collective society followed by the emergence of the ideal ruler. More importantly, the story uses this folklore in challenging ways. Himmaphan is no longer a forest since it is hybridised as a modern and magical space. At the same time, goodness and badness from traditional characters are overturned. In addition, conflict from folktales is relevant, especially taboo acts and conflict in the family.

Reading this text in the context of the aftermath of the 2006 coup, *NH* encapsulates the fear of losing the nation as well as hope for a better society. The conflict between different races implies that ideology is deeply embedded into a prosperous society, and an unequal power structure between the different races based on traditional belief. Thus, the use of folklore comes in the form of decentring traditional values, followed by a shift in its meaning. Asun, women, and disabled people can be essential characters, who voice their suppression in mainstream discourse. This reflects the marginal groups - who are oppressed by social norms within a polarised society - and the political and social movements outside the text. Finally, the pure race body in *Trinet* is linked to conservative ideology which promotes them as being superior to others. This discourse comes to oppress the person who is viewed as a threat even within their own group. The disabled body is thus the representation of the violence of past conflict and attacking people who think differently or stand on the other side. *Trinet* gives them the chance to be powerful and challenge past conflict, so that marginal voices can be heard. While both pure and disabled bodies are the cause and result of separation and violence, the hybrid body in the female form is the symbol of a reunited society and implies a better future of compromise. Hence, it is clear that all elements of the novel mirror the ongoing conflict in Thailand and voice its hope in the form of the future with hybridity rather than purity or the monopolising discourse of national identity.

## Chapter 8

### ‘In-Between’ Past, Present, and Future: Reconstructing Language and State Ideology in the Dystopian Novel

#### Introduction

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic was one of several issues challenging Thailand. Youth protests were also prevalent, featuring the ‘three fingers salute’ as a symbol of protest against the long-serving junta under prime minister General Prayut Chan-O-Cha. Taken from the serial popular fiction and adapted films *The Hunger Games*, classic works of Western dystopian fiction like *1984* and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell were also used as symbols of resistance against the military junta after the 2014 coup (Figure 39). Here, the language of resistance in the real world was deployed using fictional dystopian worlds as a source of analogy. Thai politics, especially the movement against military regimes since the 2014 coup, is intertwined with the development of Thai dystopian fiction.



Figure 39 The Three Finger Salute from *The Hunger Games* and ‘Thailand 1984’ from Orwell’s *1984* as symbols of protest in Bangkok after the 2014 coup.

Source: <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/thailands-hunger-games-salute-idJPRTR3S21O/>

This chapter will discuss the interplay between protest, literature and the COVID-19 pandemic in dystopian novels, the use of which has increased in both political and literary arenas. During the period of political turmoil and pandemic, a future vision of Thailand was performed as a dystopia through the many signs of



Thainess in *Susan Siam (A Siam Crematory)* by ‘Prapt’ published in 2020 (Figure 40). Different from the ideal world of the Nawa Society in the previous chapter, *Susan Siam* (hereafter *Susan*) recreates post-apocalyptic Thai society after a great war called Siam Alangkan. *Susan* equates the country with a factory in which the class order, which divides the elites and the lowest class, is named by types of rubbish: recycled, wet, and general rubbish. Meanwhile, the ruler is the lid of the bin and can monitor everyone. The conflict in *Susan* revolves around a group of high school teenagers in their final year who are planning to take admission exams to get into university. However, their lives are affected by a crisis in national security when one student becomes a zombie. The government tries to delete their memory of the zombies and hide this incident from the public to maintain peace and order, while students fight against totalitarianism and survive the zombie apocalypse.

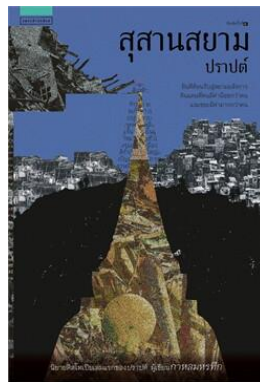


Figure 40 The cover of *Susan Siam* by Prapt published by Nai-In in 2020.

Source: <https://www.naiin.com/product/detail/506421>

Though *Susan* exposes the future of a made-up land, the story is closely related to present-day Thailand as several events in the novel are taken from real incidents that took place during the time of writing. More essentially, *Susan* links back to old Thai society through signs of Thainess like the title of officers which are Khun, Phra, Phraya (see footnote 2 in Chapter 5), and the name Siam Alangkan which is used as the old name of Thailand, Siam, to create a future Thailand. Among these, standardised language is a key element as the author mimics the way in which the authorities coin Thai terms from foreign languages - especially from English to Thai. *Susan* depicts Siam Alangkan's society which strongly censors ‘foreign’ languages

since it shows resistance to national culture and authority. Furthermore, the reinvention of Thainess in *Susan* is presented through Siam Alangkan's ideology about the concept of national identity transmitted through the educational system and adolescent characters.

Therefore, this chapter analyses *Susan* against the backdrop of Thai politics and society during the late 2010s to early 2020s. I argue that the discourse of Thainess revolves around Thai language as national language is reinvented in *Susan*. The author mimics the way in which Thai authorities translate Western words to be registered in the Thai language and parodies this for the purpose of criticism. Moreover, the story depicts the language of resistance from common people who reject using standard language. The embodiment of characters in *Susan* is another clear example of the clashing discourse of Thainess between the elites and commoners by emphasising the role of the 'new generation' in questioning the definition of Thainess in a changing world. Meanwhile, the zombies are further evidence of embodiment with the hybridity of a transnational figure playing the role of a political symbol.

By way of demonstration, I will discuss the dystopia genre as a form of resistance before surveying dystopian fiction in the Thai literary scene. I then focus on *Susan* as well as other works by Prapt to illustrate the reinvention of Thainess through language before moving on to Thainess being adapted as a state ideology in the novel and how it deals with the embodiment of its main characters.

### **A Dystopian World: From Resistance in the West to Thailand**

In this section, I provide a definition of dystopia and discuss the trajectories of dystopias as a literary genre in the West along with utopias before analysing Thai dystopias respectively, especially during the late 2010s to early 2020s.

#### ***Dystopian Writing: Definition and Trajectories in the West***

Dystopias cannot be separated from utopias since both share similarities in prediction, criticism, and hope. In general, a utopia is an idealistic world in the future that is better than the current world of the writer's

time. A prime example of a utopian world is from the Greek philosopher, Plato, who dreams of an ideal state in *Republic*, and in the work of key British thinker Thomas More, titled *Utopia* (1516). According to Lyman Tower Sargent (1994), utopia or eutopia literally means ‘no’ or ‘not place’, yet More’s *Utopia* recreates this word as a ‘good place.’ Sargent views that both utopian and dystopian narratives are under an umbrella of what he calls ‘Utopianism’ - a ‘social dreaming’, which puts dreams and nightmares together, as shown in the following table.

Utopianism – social dreaming				
Utopia (literature) – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.				
Eutopia or Positive eutopia	Dystopia or Negative eutopia	Utopia Satire	Anti-Utopia	Critical Utopia
Considerably better than the society in which the reader lives.	Considerably worse than the society in which the reader lives.	A criticism of that contemporary society.	A criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.	Better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the Utopian genre.

Table 3 The definition of different types of Utopia literature by Sargent (1994: 9)

which I have adapted for this Table

From the given table, it is clear that utopia shows the nuances of its genre through non-existent time and space. While utopia, utopia satire, anti-utopia, and critical utopia create a better world (but might have different intentions and styles), a dystopia is a negative utopia within a time and space that is worse than the contemporary world. In fact, both types have an ideal world in mind, yet present this in opposite ways. Utopian writing shows an ideal future as a ‘reward’ for what contemporary individuals endure in the present

day. This means contemporary time is still imperfect and its need for improvement is flagged by an idealistic society. Meanwhile, a dystopia ‘warns’ of the worst version of the world by criticising past and present-day issues which can lead society to that terrible world (Sargent 1994). Moreover, the emotion of hope appears in both works, but in different respects. While a utopia creates hope via the construction of a perfect future ‘within’ the text, hope in dystopia resonates with readers ‘without’ the text to avoid bad practices which can lead to a worse-off society. Therefore, dystopia is a work that predicts the future world by criticising contemporary society, including the past. Indeed, there is hope for a utopian world encapsulated within a dystopian narrative, yet it illustrates another side of the same coin.

Although dystopias can be viewed as part of utopias, the genre has its own literary conventions. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (2003) highlight that dystopian writing often depicts a hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance. There are main characters (including readers) who realise an abnormal social structure and alienate themselves from that society. This becomes an act of resistance against absolute power. Here, society in dystopian writing is thus ruled by a dictatorship that has absolute power over an individual’s body and mind. The practices of dystopian citizens are also monitored by the authority. Moreover, in these stories it is common to find settings consisting of imposing architecture, avant-garde technologies, and a destructive environment. Accordingly, this genre is seen as “a form of political and politicised writing”, as Adam Stock (2018: 2) claims, because dystopian writing is “grounded in anxieties of their present, these political engaged narratives mobilise knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future” (Stock 2018: 2-3).

Modern Western dystopian fiction developed from anxieties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, Moylan and Baccolini give trajectories of dystopian worlds which closely connect to the age of science and the enlightenment, World War I and II, the Cold War, followed by the postmodern movement and the expansion of capitalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *1984* (1949) by George Orwell is a key illustration since Orwell imagines the near future against the backdrop of the end of WWII and the early stages of the Cold War. Totalitarianism during WWII is seen through surveillance from Big Brother. Moreover, the media control

the state through propaganda, reflecting the contextual development of mass media and its usage for political agendas especially during the Cold War. In addition, according to Peter Stillman (2016), the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopia story tends to deal with more complex power issues rather than the state as a single agency. The no-limit market and over-commercialisation manipulate individuals in the new world. Gregory Claeys (2016) also suggests a trend of dystopias in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that deals with new threats from climate change, global warming, overpopulation, and the anxiety of war.

Another interesting trend is the mixture of dystopian and young adult literature (YA). During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dystopias merged with YA and found popularity among young audiences and readers. These stories allow children or teenage protagonists to fight against abusive authoritarian powers. A key example is the trilogy of *The Hunger Games* by American writer Suzanne Collins, which are individually titled *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010). This series was adapted into films that were released from 2012-2015. There are many more YA dystopian series such as *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner written from 2009-2016, and 2022 as well as the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth published from 2011-2014, and 2018. All of these works became major Hollywood films and are popular among young adult audiences around the world, including in Thailand.

### ***Thai Dystopia Literature: Morality, Political Unrest, Corrupt Society, and the Crisis of Humanity***

This section will provide a brief survey of the Thai dystopian imagination from pre-modern times. The rise of dystopian fiction during the late 2010s will then be discussed along with the political context and my selections from major authors and awarded works.

#### *Buddhist Utopia and Dystopia*

The earliest known Thai dystopian narrative appeared in the *Traiphum*. Apart from describing the destruction and recreation of the new world as discussed in the last chapter, the *Traiphum* clearly contrasts

utopian and dystopian worlds through the illustration of heaven and hell. The structure of the *Traiphum* begins with a description of a terrible place underneath the universe, referred to as *narok* or hell before moving to better places such as human land and heaven. While the text depicts creatures in several hells suffering from different types of punishment depending on their levels of bad karma, the six levels of heaven are presented through happiness and peace. Hell and heaven in the *Traiphum* can be seen as ‘social dreaming’ of a better or worse place which teaches individuals to fear the dystopian world and hope to exist in a utopian future in their next lives.

The *Traiphum* suggests another utopia in a human world called ‘Uttarakuru Thawip’, the continent located in the north of the universe, as the most desirable place. For example, people in Uttarakura Thawip live for 1,000 years and do not age. Women do not get hurt when they deliver a child and do not struggle with childcare as there are groups of people who raise their children. Furthermore, food in Uttarakura Thawip is plentiful and comes automatically to individuals when they want it rather than people needing to gather food and farm. Uttarakura Thawip thus is called a utopian world constructed by the desires of people in Thai classical beliefs compared to the utopian concept of the West (Chontira 2007; Thanya 2013). Nevertheless, it differs from Western civilisation because Uttarakuru Thawip does not suggest an ideal state. Rather, Utopia in classical Thai texts is presented as a social dream of high morality.

#### *Political Unrest and an Ideal Land*

Utopian work as political critique was introduced in the Thai literary scene around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after the 1932 revolution. So-called Thai utopian writing appeared during a period of political chaos when M.R. Nimitramongkhon Nawarat, a minor member of the royal family and a political prisoner under Phibul’s government (1938-1944), wrote *Mueang Nimit (The Dreams of an Idealist)* in 1938. Written while the author was imprisoned, the novel creates an ideal world within a perfect political system allowing people from all backgrounds to receive an education under a real ‘democracy.’ Indeed, this book criticises the current government as a dictatorship rather than a democracy, leading the manuscript to be burnt before it

was recomposed later. *Mueang Nimit* is treated as a Thai political utopia like More's *Utopia* (Trisilpa 2017; Ruenruthai 2018). Importantly, this book clearly shows the function of a utopian work which criticises, predicts, and provides political hope.

While utopian works were present in the late 1930s, dystopian fiction was rare. Nevertheless, there are some works which bear comparison to dystopian fiction. *Pattaya* is a novel written by Daohang which changes the real city in Chonburi into a made-up town which descends from peace into chaos when socialist monks move into the city. This novel parodies the clash of socialism and fascism while combining Phibun's policies in the story. Trisilpa Boonkachon (2017) asserts that *Pattaya* is the first political parody novel to present the anxiety of the new system which might lead the country from democracy to socialism or fascism. Although this book does not fall under so-called utopian and dystopian fiction, the imagination of a terrible made-up state is evidently used to criticise the politics of that time.

#### *Sci-Fi Fiction and Dystopian Imagination*

For several decades from the 1950s onwards, Thai dystopian fiction as a genre has been underrepresented and is rarely discussed in academia. However, imagined dystopian worlds appeared in different genres and science fiction or sci-fi is one evident genre. For the Western development of dystopias, Moylan and Baccolini (2003) state that dystopian fiction developed from sci-fi due to the Age of Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. This is why innovative technology and avant-garde cities are common elements of this genre. For Thai sci-fi, Phattharanit Kiatthanawit (2022) notes that this genre emerged around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, Thai sci-fi fiction around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mirrors suppression from several coups along with the development schemes introduced by Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat. Sci-fi authors like Juntree Siriboonrod and Jintawee Wiwat wrote about the dystopian world of dictatorship, the dark side of development, especially the urban and rural divide and the threat from outsiders. This reflects Thailand under the Cold War politics and the struggle under military.

The theme of the crisis of humanity can also be found in science fiction, especially during the new millennium when the advancement of technology widely shaped personal lives. A prime example is *Amata (Immortal)* by Wimon Sainimnuan, the SEA-Write Award-winning novel in 2000. This story projects a future world where people can clone their bodies and change some organs, causing conflict by making the lives of clones resemble those of humans. Many questions are posed, such as whether it is a sin to use the clone's body, whether clones are like us, or whether it is good to be immortal. The story puts technology in dialogue with Buddhist philosophy by narrating the life of a clone who is treated like the son of a powerful tycoon. Yet, the father wants to use his son for his new body, leading to the main conflict of the story and bringing to debate the principles of Buddhism.

Another example is the novel *Kanlapawasan (Eternity)* by Pongsakorn, published in 2011. The story uses the time-travel plot of a woman in the present-day freezing in a time-capsule before she wakes up a thousand years in the future when human civilisation has collapsed and robots rule the world. The heroine's journey presents a new hope for humankind as her body can strengthen the human body of the future. Moreover, she provides hope for the 'decolonisation' of robots over humans. Though the novel narrates humans fighting against the robots, the story presents the possibility of love between humans and robots as well as the 'human mind' in robots. In the end, the novel emphasises a universal and timeless truth based on Buddhism of the obsession of power which is relevant even for robots. Although these works are not called dystopian fiction, varied dystopian elements are clear. Interestingly, signs of Thainess through Buddhism are still relevant. Similar to Phattharanit's argument about 'Siam sci-fi,' Buddhist morality remains an essential element.

#### *Post-2014 Coup and the Rise of Dystopian Writing*

The political conflict in Thailand during the 2010s is another predominant factor in the emergence of so-called 'Thai dystopian fiction.' This trend can be seen along with the influence of Western dystopias from the global hits of many YA dystopian movies like *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* as



mentioned earlier. These stories' common themes are about future worlds under dictatorial regimes and the main characters are children or teenagers who have to fight for a better world. *The Hunger Games*, for example, created the country of 'Panem' which consists of 13 districts. Every year each district has to send a pair of tributes to play in the Hunger Games in the Capitol, in which they have to kill the others to win. The story follows a girl and boy from District 12 who are selected to be tributes and fight to the death. The girl, Katniss Everdeen, becomes a symbol of resistance and leads the rebellion of all districts against the Capitol. The dictator president is overthrown and the country turns to a new era. The three-finger salute is a key sign of rebellion (Figure 41).



Figure 41 Three-finger salute showed in *The Hunger Games* film.

Source: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/thai-protestors-adopt-hunger-games-salute-as-symbol-of-defiance-4080290/>

The international popularity of dystopian works coincided with political tensions in Thailand over the decade after the 2006 coup, especially when the coup led by General Prayut took place in May 2014. Unlike the coup in 2006, the 2014 coup leader held power for more than a decade with severe control (see Prajak 2024). The question of suppression under a dictatorship as in dystopian narratives is thus apparent. Dystopian works therefore play an essential role in the movement against dictatorship in Thailand, especially the popular use of the three-finger salute in the 2020 youth movement (figure 42). It is worth noting that the youth movement in 2020 was formed by a generation who grew up with such media. The boom of YA dystopia in the early 2010s is still culturally and politically relevant almost a decade later.



Figure 42 The three-finger salute adapted from *The Hunger Games* used during a 2020 youth movement protest at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok.

Source: <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/08/whats-happening-in-thailand-youth-activists-rally-to-protect-democracy-freedom-of-speech/>

The popularity of dystopian films and the Thai political context led to the rise of Thai dystopian writing. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, the dystopian short story entitled *Singto Nok Khok (Unorthodox Lion)* by Jidanun Lueangpiansamut won the 2017 SEA-Write Award and led to ‘dystopian literature’ (*wannakam dystopia*) becoming mainstream on the Thai literary scene. Since then, there has been an increasing number of dystopian books appearing for Thai readers. Jidanun released another book entitled *Yuk Samai Haeng Khwam Sin Wang (Generation of Hopelessness)* in 2019. The story is similar to *Singto Nok Khok* in terms of presenting a dystopian setting far away from Thailand, which resembles Victorian England. At the same time, the city has innovative technology while people experience class struggle and injustice in society. While this story might not be an explicit portrayal of Thai society, it can be read alongside political developments in Thailand.

Apart from new-generation writers, some prolific Thai writers have also turned to writing dystopian fiction. One of them is Prabda Yoon, a SEA-Write awardee in 2002. In 2018, Prabda published *Basement Moon*, which is set in a dystopian future in the year 2069 with Sci-Fi elements such as AI and avant-garde technology. Although there is much scientific progress, society remains ruled by totalitarianism (Prabda 2018). Moreover, Anusorn Tipayanon, known as the ‘Thai Murakami’ for his magical realism, released

*Mueang Nai Mok (The City in Fog)* in 2021. Amidst the crisis of air pollution called PM2.5 covering urban cities in Thailand like Bangkok and Chiang Mai, the story depicts a dystopian future where an impenetrable urban fog poisons people's lives, and the protagonists try to find love and hope in a hopeless society. An increasing number of dystopian works have appeared in literary awards as in the case of the SEA-Write Award. For example, the committee for the Chommanard Book Prize, which awards female authors, points out that dystopian fiction was the main genre submitted to the competition in 2021 (*Matichon* 2021). In the same year, *Susan* also won the best book prize from the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education and was shortlisted for the SEA-Write Award in 2021. Thai dystopian fiction is thus regarded as a standalone genre and has played an increasingly key role in the Thai literary scene.

The prevalence of utopias and dystopias in classical Thai literature ultimately demonstrates a lack of and desire for moral standards. It then interplayed with politics when the Siamese revolution took place in 1932 as utopian fiction served as political and social critique. As for dystopias, there were few Thai literary works categorised as such before the late 2010s. Yet dystopian visions of terrible versions of Thailand have been depicted through different genres like sci-fi. Since the coup in 2014, Thailand has paralleled a dystopian state within Western dystopias. The role of the dystopian genre thus rose in the political and literary scenes. Interestingly, when Thailand is compared to a dystopian world, there are many methods of distancing the narrative from the real Thailand while also leading readers to interpret this land as reflecting Thailand. Unlike many Thai authors using 'foreignness', Thainess is explicitly presented in Prapt's *Susan* establishing what Bhabha called a 'liminal space.'

### **Prapt and *Susan Siam*: The Reinvention of Thainess and Dark Side of Thai Society**

Prapt represents the so-called new generation from the mid-2010s known for using Thainess in his fictions, including *Susan*. This section will introduce Prapt and analyse *Susan* to show how signs of Thainess are used to challenge the discourse of Thainess.

***Prapt: The ‘Thai Dan Brown’ and The Reinvention of Thainess***

Prapt is a penname taken from the end of the author’s full name, Chairat Pipitpattanaprap. He was born and raised in a Chinese-Thai family in Bangkok and his writing career bloomed from reading stories in magazines and many kinds of books. His dream job was always to be a writer and he began writing internet novels on Dek-D when he was in high school during 2004-2005. The early stages of his writing mainly centred on a young adult romantic theme, yet his early career was not as successful as he expected. Moreover, due to the status and financial situation of being a writer, he ended up with a bachelor's degree in business administration from Thammasat University. He then worked in this field for several years. Nevertheless, he attempted to keep his writing as a part-time job until he almost gave it up (Interview with Prapt 2022). Fortunately, he became a rising star when his detective fiction work named *Kahon Mahoratum* (hereafter *Kahon*) won the Nai-in Book Award in 2014 when he was 28 (Figure 43). As Nai-in is one of the largest publishers and bookstore operators across Thailand, this award gained Prapt a wide readership. *Kahon* was also recognised for other major literary prizes during 2014-2015 and was also adapted into a TV drama in 2018. The book has been reprinted more than 20 times and is included in many universities’ syllabi. *Kahon* thus was the key milestone of Prapt’s career and he left his business officer post to become a full-time writer a few years after its success (Interview with Prapt 2022).



Figure 43 Prapt with his awarded novel *Kahon Mahoratum*.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1556557317957433&set=a.543523364475695>

Set in Bangkok during WWII, *Kahon* uses a literary convention called *kon khlung*, taken from a stone inscription in Wat Pho, a temple in Bangkok, as a hint for the investigation of the serial murders. The story opens with a dead body inscribed with five words in different positions on the body's skin. It becomes a serial murder when others are killed and also have this message on their bodies. The policeman protagonist realises that the way to solve this is to read the message in the same way as *khlung*, a type of classical Thai prosody. From this narrative construction, Prapt was proclaimed the 'Thai Dan Brown' by the Nai-in award committee and this was used as a slogan to promote his work. Rather than using Christian symbols like Dan Brown did in *The Davinci Code*, a sign of Thainess is used in his crime fiction.

Accordingly, signs of Thainess have become Prapt's signature such as adapting classical literature in crime fiction, sci-fi, and horror fiction. As a former marketing professional, he has used this opportunity to create his commercial brand within the competitive novel market (Interview with Prapt 2022). This relates to what Kasien Tejapira (2002) refers to as 'Thainess as commodity' which is obvious in Prapt's works (see Chapter 3). For instance, *Nirat Mahannop* (2015) combines *nirat*, a classical genre for travelogue poems, with a thriller, sci-fi, and crime fiction plots. Similar to *Kahon*, the elements derived from classical poetry become a means to solve the mystery along with the main setting of the temple. This type of serial murder is also found in *Ling Phat Klon* (2018) in which Prapt uses the law during the period of King Rama I called *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang* or the *Three Seals Code* to design a serial murder. Moreover, *Asok Sang* (2021) uses scenes and quotations from *Nithan Wetan*, a Thai translation of the Hindu mythology *Vetala Tale* by No Mo So (the penname of Prince Bidyalongkorn). The novel refers to the scene of someone dying in *Nithan Wetan* and links it with the serial killings. These are all new ways of using signs of Thainess, especially for creating crime fiction. These works have subsequently received multiple literary prizes.

Prapt does not limit himself only to crime fiction but writes in a wide range of genres like horror, comedy, romance, and BL. Interestingly, social critique and marginal voices are also Prapt's signature, appearing in all of the novels he writes. This allows him to work with different publishers and reach different readers. His works continue to criticise social problems like family conflict, class struggle, political tension, gender

issues, minority groups, mental health, and so forth. This is the consensus among studies of his novels (e.g., Suradech 2017; Nadruja *at el.* 2021). In short, Prapt inserts his signature ‘hard message’ in his works which seem to be a ‘light novel’ with a ‘dark’ theme. Thainess is used in Prapt’s novels as a ‘dark’ theme as well. This implies that Thainess is a source of abusive power which can lead to violence. The reinvention of Thainess here thus contests the discourse of goodness, glory, and beauty while negotiating its meaning to present social struggle, especially for marginal groups. The combination of Thainess and heavy social critiques is represented in his work *Susan* too.

### ***The Dark Side of Thainess in a Dystopian Future***

*Susan* is Prapt’s first and only dystopian novel up to the present. The idea for this story originated when he was a full-time officer working in Sala Daeng, one of the main businesses in Bangkok. Though he dreamt of being a writer, he had to work in business and do a routine job to earn a salary. He felt that it was a ‘death inside’ in which the body works for a reason while the mind rebels. He found that the notion of hopelessness was felt not only by him, but also the people around him as everyone’s dream gradually disappears. He thus planned to use the name ‘Susan Sala Daeng’ at first referring to the cemetery of Sala Daeng which buried the office workers’ lives and dreams. Nonetheless, he did not have a chance to write until 2019 when he was inspired by both the Thai general election and the failure of a new university admission system called TCAS, which affected final year students across the country. He saw a parallel between the hope of a new beginning against the hopelessness in these two situations on an individual and national scale. Accordingly, he changed the title from *Susan Sala Daeng* to ‘*Susan Siam*’ as Siam in this sense reflects two meanings: Siam as a popular area for teenagers in Bangkok, and Siam as the country.

Inspired by *1984* and *The Hunger Games*, Prapt created *Susan* in the dystopian mold, based on his perception that Thailand itself was a dystopia. This stemmed from widespread nationalist sentiment as well as the corrupt behaviour of ‘adults’ (*phu yai*), which can mean both adults and, more widely, people in power. This genre is suitable for criticising politics as well as portraying Thailand in a darker way to present

his theme. More importantly, this topic would be safer to write through referencing a made-up land because the story criticises many issues in Thai society, making the real meaning obvious to Thai readers. Prapt wrote *Susan* chapter by chapter and released it via an online platform first in June 2019 before it was published as a book in June 2020. Set over one year, he combines news and viral issues, especially on Thai social media in his made-up land. The symbols, incidents, and words used are still obvious to readers, even if Prapt adapted them to the fictional Siam Alangkan society.

More essentially, the dark side of Thainess is presented in *Susan* rather than in the glorious past. Arguably, *Susan* was written using the sign of Thainess to ‘write back’ to the status quo by mimicking real events, people, and places in Thai society in a dystopian world. This strategy resembles what Bhabha calls ‘mimicry’ which challenges superior status from narratives of purity and turns power upside down so marginal voices can negotiate their new ‘location of culture’ (see Chapter 3). In *Susan*, the dystopian land becomes a liminal space that looks similar to, but is not exactly the same as, Thailand. Prapt mimics Thainess to construct an inverted Thailand in a non-existent space and time. The signs of Thainess are exaggerated in extreme ways alongside nonsense situations and ironic actions or words.

For instance, comparing the country to a crematory in the title, the description of space in Siam Alangkan establishes a clear border between different classes. The lid class lives in the wealthy areas with fertile food and nature at the centre of the capital where there is a tall wall separating other areas, while the dwellings of other rubbish classes and their lives are portrayed as disgusting through imagery of contaminated food and water within a destructive environment. In fact, the name Siam Alangkan is ironic because the word *Alangkan* means magnificent or attractive decoration, yet the contrast between the name and the narrative’s setting constructs a satire of the glory of Siam.

Despite this narrative potentially recreating many dystopian features with extreme contrasts between rulers and subjects’, *Susan* explains the reason and legitimacy of Siam Alangkan’s history, which resembles Thai history. To illustrate this point, the main protagonist, Khun Rabeng, inherits his ‘security guard’ job from

his grandfather. “This job is an honour since his grandfather worked as a factory security guard during the great war between two major powers. The war devastated the Southeast Asia region including Thailand. Yet Thailand won the war, avoiding being part of ‘the great eradication of rubbish’ or Holocaust. Since Thailand won, with great diplomacy, the allied powers asked Thais to eradicate the rubbish in the regions”<sup>9</sup> (Prapt 2020: 33-34). Obviously, *Susan* mimics the history of Thailand from WWII to the Cold War which ended with the fight against communism in Thailand and Southeast Asia, led by the US. Additionally, the security guard is a parody of the military while the narration of the nation’s glorious history, from the elite’s perspective, thus emphasises the special status of the security guard in maintaining peace and order.

As with state-constructed discourse, Siam Alangkan’s elite history and high culture represents ways to dominate individuals’ thoughts and frame their perceptions of the world. *Susan* depicts that the lid class expects people to follow their norms amid contestation from the younger generation. One clear example of this is Khun Rabeng’s thought that “I want to carry a baby and point out the destroyed places, which tells of the long history of the nation and ancestors and make them as proud as I am. Given that we have no roots or no pride in our roots, how can we be a complete person?” (Prapt 2020: 264). He believes that the strongest root is to hold identity against the winds of change. Interestingly, “although I do not like it, it should remain! Even if we love only half, our children might fully love it. How can we tell them that it disappears and exists only in photos on a mobile phone?” (Prapt 2020: 264). This resonates with debates surrounding the discourse of Thainess which the authorities try to promote as the root of the nation and its maintenance for new generations. The thoughts and feelings of this elite character voices anxieties that have revolved around the national identity for a long time, which focus on maintaining it during change and not letting it vanish. Ironically, it must be protected, even though it might not be relevant to one’s life.

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<sup>9</sup> All quotations from this novel were written in Thai and translations throughout this chapter are mine.



Noticeably, the mimicry of the common knowledge and narrative of Thainess in *Susan* occurs in conjunction with the past, present, and future times. Stock (2018) argues, as mentioned earlier, that *Susan* attempts to create a future world; however, almost all elements are based on the trauma of the past as with the great war history, which is presented as a class struggle leading to a dystopian world. Furthermore, the present anxiety, like the elite's fear of national culture and history being challenged, is also juxtaposed with the past against future space and time.

### **The Politics of Language: Language in *Susan Siam* and the Standardisation of Thainess**

Language is an essential element that Prapt mimics in conjunction with the past, present, and future. In this section, I unpack how Prapt plays with Thai language in *Susan* and discuss it along with the process and autonomy of the standardisation of the Thai language and the contestation and negotiation of the discourse of Thainess using this sign.

#### ***The Play of Thai Language***

The language that Prapt uses to tell the future is actually taken from old Thai language as shown in Figure 44. To demonstrate, the text begins by locating time in the imaginary Buddhist year 2,6xx (around the mid-21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> century) along with the Chinese calendar year, identifying with Thai lunar calendar time. It then tells the story of great men who control the rebellion in the country and bring peace and order before legitimising the ruling class. They launched their master plan called 'Siam Ting Satiwat' which individuals must follow for peace. The text also warns that if someone suspects the master plan, they should look at the destruction of the country, infertility, and environmental collapse because this destruction is caused by traitors.

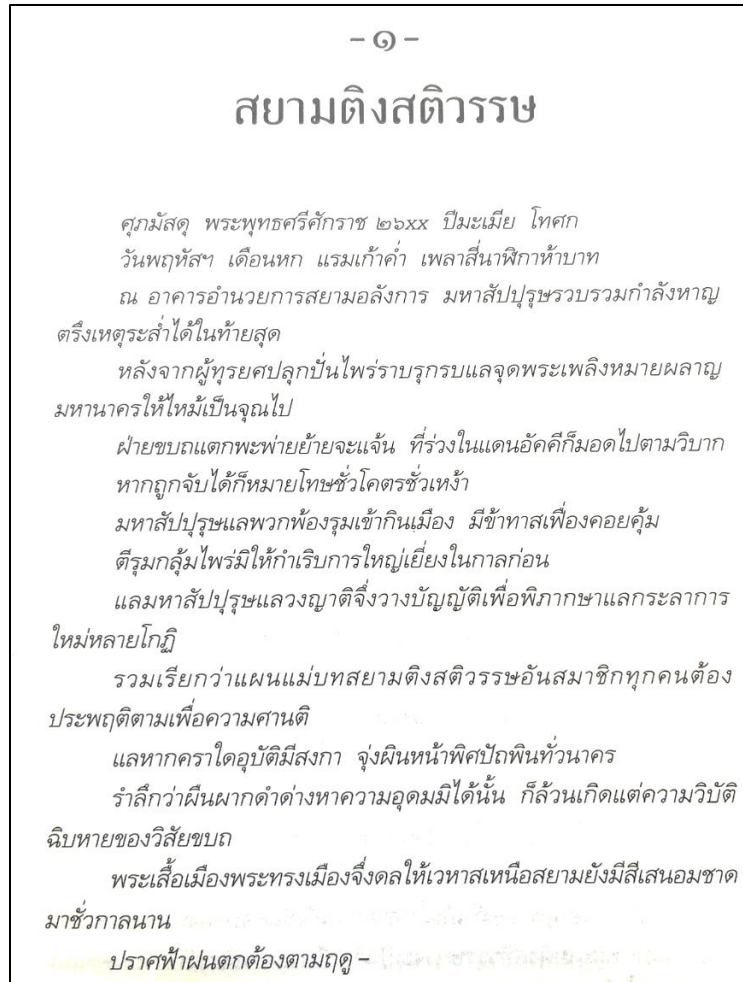


Figure 44 The opening text of *Susan*. Source: Prapt (2020: 1)

The language and content in Figure 44 echoes Thai historical texts. For example, the phrases in line 7 remind readers of King Ramkhamhaeng's inscription in the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the Sukhothai era. Moreover, the way the text starts in the first two lines is similar to the linguistic register of the Thai royal chronicles along with the royal announcements from the Ayutthaya court onwards. At the same time, this content is typically seen in Thai history and folk belief with great men coming to restore peace and order before emphasising their legitimacy as the ruling class (see Chapter 7). Interestingly, the rebellion and the master plan can be viewed as paralleling the protests and introduction of a new constitution in 2017 in modern Thailand. This is the first and foremost instance of how Thai language is mimicked in conjunction with the past, present, and future from the beginning of the story.

Prapt invents this language in *Susan* as a new language system launched by the ruling class in Siam Alangkan. In my interview, Prapt acknowledged that this type of language was inspired by Orwell's *1984*. While *1984* establishes the Newspeak system launched by the state which leads to the control of the individual mind, Prapt adapts this idea and combines it with loaned words and the process of coining words from foreign languages in Thai language (Interview with Prapt 2022). Firstly, *Susan* coins Thai words from meanings in English rather than using transliterated terms from English. For example, the story uses the term *sunok*, which is an old Thai word that means bird, in reference to the social media platform Twitter's logo (before Twitter was changed to X in 2023). *Susan* also uses the term *kradan faifa* (electronic board) to refer to the mobile phone. Secondly, some original English words are changed to Thai words by replacing similar sounds such as *aep prakhen chan* from application, *on lai* from online, and *kra tik koe* from the word sticker. This use of language appears throughout the novel and Prapt provides an appendix at the end as shown in Figure 45.

ภาคผนวก	
พจนานุกรมคำทับศัพท์สยามอลังการ ฉบับมหันตบัณฑิต	
<b>ก</b>	
กระดิกแก้อ	Sticker
กะลาฟีน	Graphene
กาด	Guard
เกีย	Gear
โกโก้	Cocoa
<b>ค</b>	
คมน์	Com
คอทีก	Cortex
คอนกรีต	Concrete
คุกกี	Cookie
เคมีมี	Chemistry/Chemical
โคตรตัน	Coding
โควา	Quota
<b>ช</b>	
เชีย	Cheer
<b>ซ</b>	
ซัพพรายเอ้อ	Supplier
เซเรบร้า	Cerebral
เซโรโทนิน	Serotonin
เซ็นเซอร์	Censor
เซลล์	Cell
<b>ด</b>	
ดอต	Dot
ดาวโหลด	Download
ดราม่า	Drama
ดิจิตัล	Digital
<b>ต</b>	
ตัน	Ton
<b>ถ</b>	
ถึกโนเรอียี่	Technology
<b>ท</b>	
ทริพโตเฟน	Tryptophan

Figure 45 Appendix of Siam Alangkan's Language comparing Thai transliteration and English.

Source: Prapt (2020: 413-414)

As in the quotation below, the novel gives the reason for using this new language system for the master plan of Siam Alangkan for standardisation and control by the authorities. Importantly, *Susan* uses a satirical tone for the way in which the ruling class in Siam Alangkan wants to promote Thai culture and show its glorious civilisation as a suggestion. However, it would be a serious crime if people were to avoid using it. Thus, language is depicted as a form of political control by the authorities over individuals.

The master plan Siam Ting Satiwat ‘suggests’ is for factory members to use polite written and spoken language. This language is composed of beautiful words and rhythms reflecting the richness of Thai civilisation. Although many foreign words have no translation, transliteration is adapted into Thai by preserving Thai ways [...] It is known that a ruler’s authority used to be powerful to surveil all of the *on lai* world. Given that members seem to resist ‘the suggestion’ of the master plan, they will be invited to recall their consciousness.

Of course, the deviated use of language is one of those. (Prapt 2020: 4)

Hierarchical language is another point in *Susan* that interplays between language and politics. As Siam Alangkan clearly classifies people according to types of rubbish, one marker of different classes is the different ways in which language is used. Individuals in the ruling class as well as those from elite backgrounds in Siam Alangkan speak poetically with sophisticated language. A prime instance of this is the hospital scene showing a conversation between a doctor from the elite class and a middle-class female protagonist. While the protagonist uses the words of a commoner, the doctor uses the *klon* prosody as well as word choices which are mostly from old Thai language. The reason for this is because “using prosody is the way of speaking like the factory’s high-class members to show their wisdom, abilities, and good educational profiles. If speech is composed with sophisticated prosody, the speaker will gain more respect. If one can speak with the rhythm of prose (*thamnong sano*), it is more superior” (Prapt 2020: 17).

This sense of superiority is seen in another scene in which Yia-rayong, the female protagonist and her family, are set to be interviewed on TV to propagate the ruling class’s idea of a good child of the factory. Yet she deviates from the script, making a teacher of the ruling class, Karuna, come to warn her and her

family. Rather than using rude words, “teacher Karuna complains to her family with many verses of *khlóng si suphap*. Yia-rayong knows that her father and mother cannot understand all of them, yet they might catch the theme [...] After being satisfied, Karuna turns to use normal language with a patronising tone” (Prapt 2020: 139). From this example, it is apparent that speaking with prosody is the way to depict the imbalance of power between the ruling class and others. In other words, the status quo and hierarchy in *Susan* are maintained through language.

Arguably, the politics of language in *Susan* sheds light on the politics of Thai language and Thainess in the real world in two dimensions: language standardisation from the authorities and class struggle through language. Generally, dystopian fiction uses language as a key weapon to criticise power structures. Within many dystopian works, language control is a tool for maintaining the status quo (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 5-6). Similarly, Prapt mimics the transliteration and coining of English words to Thai that can be traced back to colonial tensions up to the present day through the Royal Institute of Thailand (*Ratchabandittaya Sapha*). At the same time, Prapt exaggerates the discourse of Thainess by using poetry in spoken language to criticise the conservative perspective of Thainess and Thai nationalism. More importantly, both issues are based on the State using its agency to govern people through language.

### ***Standardising Language and Thainess***

As discussed in Chapter 3, Thai language is the primary sign of Thainess, showing the continuity and independence of the Thai nation. While the chosen myth of never having been colonised serves to glorify the Thai language, the chosen trauma of ‘losing territories’ (see Chapter 2 and 5) leads to a discourse of decline and anxiety of losing the national language. This has been an enduring concern of the Bangkok authorities, leading to the standard use of Thai language. For example, using Standard Thai language is preferable to using English words in daily conversation. Slang and chat languages are a concern, as the ‘wrong’ language could become popular, which might result in the decline of Thai language (*phasa wibat*). Thus, the problem of using Thai language has been a perennial topic of discussion.

Standardisation is one ongoing method used to maintain the Thai language by the Siamese elites from the colonial period right up to the Thai Royal Institution today. Along with the growth of print media in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, King Rama IV published his concerns in a royal announcement about the use of incorrect language such as misspellings. After this, King Rama VI coined many terms from English words using Thai, Pali, and Sanskrit languages rather than transliterating English words into Thai. Moreover, he reformed the Thai writing system and set up a literary society to standardise Thai language along with the use of a specific Romanisation system to transliterate Thai into English. The process of coining Thai words from English became more pronounced after the 1932 revolution because there were several new terms and ideas which had to be translated into Thai, such as democracy, constitution, and prime minister. There was also a reformation of language during WWII as Phibul's government tried to simplify Thai language for it to be easier to write and study by using only a few characters. Although this policy ended after his premiership, some words and terms like *sawatdi* to say hello or the use of pronouns like *chan* (I) and *khun* (you) can still be found in Thailand today (Amara 2002: 151-153).

Interestingly, a national word-coining committee was set up in 1942. A key person within this project was Wan Waithayakon, normally referred to as 'Prince Wan.' Apart from his prolific diplomatic role, Prince Wan coined a number of Thai terms that are still used today for such things as countries, oceans, cities, and scientific terms. In 1961, the mission of coining words was moved to the jurisdiction of the Royal Institute, where Prince Wan was a consultant and Phraya Anuman Rajadhon was the chair (see further in *Naradhip Bongsprabandh* 1976). After that, this organisation undertook its key missions of establishing a Thai dictionary and coining words, especially for new knowledge in a particular field. The *Royal Institute Dictionary* is regarded as the official reference text for correct meanings, pronunciation, and spellings for standard Thai language.

In short, the process of standardisation of Thai language has been a top-down policy from the authorities related directly to the nation-building project. Saichol Sattayanurak (2008) explains that the standardisation of Thai language presents cultural politics through language as it was emphasised during the modernisation

of Siam. It not only translates new terms into Thai, but with it a ruling class ideology. Standard Thai is thus closely related to the Bangkok elites. Similarly, Manita Srisitanont Luangkrajang (2022) claims that the *Royal Institute Dictionary* is a tool used for nation-building because it shapes the meaning of concepts among Thais such as those of the nation, monarchy and religion. Despite the fact that Thailand is actually linguistically diverse, as Smalley (1994) argues, the construction of the meaning of Thainess and the standardisation of Thai language from the central Thai authority dominates throughout.

In relation to *Susan*, the novel plays with the concept of national language by emphasising it as a political tool to maintain the Siam Alangkan identity. Given that English is an external language representing foreignness, the language system introduced by the ruling class represents Thainess. Even though not all English words have to be coined in reality, *Susan* exaggerates this as a norm of the language which avoids English. In addition, using the English language is illegal. This makes it clear that *Susan* attempts to mimic the paradigm of language standardisation to underline Thainess. Indeed, it unfolds the politics of language embedded in Standard Thai language by making fun of the transliteration and word coining undertaken by the state. From the appendix in picture 45, for example, Prapt collects all of the invented terms, calling it the 'Dictionary of Siam Alangkan's Word Coin by The Mahanta Bandit' which parodies the name of the *Royal Institute* called Ratcha Bandit.

Furthermore, *Susan* mocks the hierarchical structure of language in Thailand. Prapt uses different language registers to differentiate between classes. This means that the national language itself has a different purpose, as with news language, mass media language, legal language, and literary language. These types of registers are used in specific contexts and are different from spoken language, which is more flexible and playful. Prapt uses prosody and poetry which are used only in classical literature as the spoken language of the elite class in *Susan*. This transgressive use of literary language here not only aims to intensify the language hierarchy but also presents the absurdity of society. The absurdity then highlights the notion of hyper-Thainess in Siam Alangkan as it exposes Thainess in an ironic way.

Lastly, the sense of superiority felt by the elite classes who use poetic language against the commoners portrays the power of language that suppresses both other languages and other language users. This implies that Thainess used in *Susan* is the cause of oppression by the state and elites since it maintains their status quo and hegemonic power to govern individuals' minds. This idea parallels the language standardisation and hierarchy of languages in Thailand. At the same time, *Susan* also portrays the resistance of the invented language which can be read alongside the state of Thai politics from that time.

### *The Language of Resistance and Thai Politics*

*Susan* presents the contestation between state power and the individual through the language of resistance used among younger generation characters. *Susan's* language of resistance can be illustrated on two levels: the politics of resistance to hierarchical Thainess in general and the politics of language in the youth movement of 2019-2020.

#### *The Politics of Resistance to Hierarchical Thainess*

Firstly, *Susan* narrates acts of resistance in which the youth are the key group that stand against the state. Language is an obvious way for them to show their resistance and online spaces are key mediums to escape the state's ideology. The first example is presented when the authorities try to investigate the act of 'anti-nationalism' activists (*chang thang*) who spread news through social media about zombies which the state is trying to hide. The scene describes that "at the end, we can find the *clip* as evidence--" The use of transliteration out of Thai language sounds obviously represents the strong rebellious sense of extreme anti-nationalism. 'Please *share* this as much as you can... this is a hidden agenda from the state which we, as Siam Alangkan citizens, should know" (Prapt 2020: 88-89). The words 'clip' and 'share' in the original text are written in italics to highlight that these two words are spelled along with English sounds rather than the language policy of Siam Alangkan. This scene is also explained by authorities who see this message as the threat of the nation and 'anti-nationalism.'



Another example is the language used by students who try to oppose the state's ideology which comes from state education. *Susan* describes a regular morning in a school when students must line up in front of the national flag, which imitates the reality in Thailand as students in schools have to sing the national anthem at 8 am and show respect to the national flag. This activity is presented in *Susan* as more intense as students must wear a uniform adapted from Thai dress. Moreover, the students sing a national song in which Prapt quotes the lyrics of the old version of the Thai national anthem as Siam Alangkan's anthem. During this scene, Suralai, a female student, shows her disagreement with the norm of lining up to respect the national flag and wearing uniform. She is introduced by her misbehaviour and her use of English words as "Suralai opposes the way in which the master plan suggests the use of transliteration to Thai" (Prapt 2020: 97).

Thanalop is another student who acts against state ideology and avoids using standard language. This Chinese-Thai male student is portrayed as an outsider since he cannot conform to Chinese tradition and questions the existence of the cultural practices of his family. He also seems to study a lot of information about so-called 'anti-nationalism' group through social media. In one scene, he attempts to persuade a new friend to engage with the alternative story of Siam Alangkan on social media. He introduces the argument that "do you hear the kind of people who speak in *klon* or *khlong*? And attempt to be a model wearing Thai dress? But when some people want to do the same, there is a committee to investigate the appropriation. The car they use is a 'supercar' which has a private parking lot in contrast to civilised countries that try to treat people with equal standards" (Prapt 2020: 160). This message not only criticises the discourse of elite norms such as the use of superior poetic language, but also uses 'supercar' as an English word rather than changing it to a Thai sound. Thanalop then talks about the social gap by using the terms 'vat', 'motorcycle', 'percent', and 'model' which are wrong in standard language. In the end, he summarises that "we are brainwashed from the lid of the bin class as we always owe them merit (*bun khun*). We are then brainwashed again by a single standard of goodness as well as gratitude (*katanyu*). We are then an ungrateful person when we start to question this norm" (Prapt 2020: 162). He thus questions the standards set by the ruling class while using language that is free from state censorship.

The theme of language as resistance here can be discussed along with overarching debates in Thai society. Firstly, the resistance of language revolves around the tension of defining national identity between top-down and bottom-up meanings. *Susan* amplifies the severe problem of using English terms as a restriction and depicts the way in which the state comes to control national identity by using the glorious past discourse of Thainess through old Thai sounds and words translating foreign words and cultures in Siam Alangkan. This means that language standardisation and word-coining are less intense in reality than in the novel. The reception of word-coining by the authorities is sometimes not accepted by the entire society, and the Royal Institute cannot force individuals to use the coined terms they suggest. A fellow of the institute, Nitaya Kanchanawan (1992), says that some terms are widely accepted whereas some are likely to be accepted; meanwhile, many words are unacceptable to people and disappear.

Secondly, *Susan* exaggerates the case of the decline of language as a serious crime. In Thai society, concerns about standard language can be traced back to colonial tensions and are commonly caused for two reasons: modernisation and the media. First, the influence of modernity, followed by the development project during the Cold War and the era of globalisation, have impacted knowledge, technology, and culture which need new words to keep pace. Media has changed from oral culture and printed culture as the internet era shifted ways of using language, especially the revolution of information technology (IT) in the 1980s which created ways of using Thai language like slang and chat language on the Internet (Nitaya 2012). For example, ‘555’ means laughing, as 5 is pronounced *ha* in Thai, and if more 5s are added, it communicates more intense laughter (*hahaha*). In addition, the word *khap* is used instead of *khrap* with the removal of ‘r.’ These examples are widely seen on the Internet and have turned many conservatives against their use, causing anxiety that the Thai language as they know it will decline or come to a complete end. As language symbolised the maintenance of the status quo of the nation, this is thus countered with an attempt to maintain the standardised language, as mentioned earlier.

In fact, arguments about the decline of language are denied by Thai academics, the linguistics field and even the Royal Institution itself. Thai linguists mostly argue that language change is a common

phenomenon and language usages in particular contexts like news, law, or chatrooms are different and cannot be imposed onto by societal norms (see more in Amara 2002). Furthermore, English influence in Thai language has become more acceptable than in the past and is now embedded in the Thai language in terms of grammar, stylistics, word loans, and register. According to Amara Prasithrathasin (2019), a passive voice sentence using the word *thuk* is commonly acceptable in Thai grammar in many official settings, in contrast to the past, when it was regarded as a grammatical error. Besides, the combination of Thai and English words in one sentence no longer causes heated debate as it once did. Here, the decline of language is not a serious offence as it is treated as language change and the use of language for a specific purpose.

Nonetheless, *Susan* makes this case by using English words and chat language in a more extreme sense. The reason for this is that in Prapt's own experience, many senior people like to show their superiority over the younger generation through language usage, such as composing poetry to criticise the ways of the younger generation who transgress societal norms (Interview with Prapt 2022). Therefore, the hyper-conservative Thai language in *Susan* presents not only the debate of using English words, but also symbolises the hierarchical structure of Thainess which is controlled top-down through language. This, of course, satirises the intensification of Thainess and censoring all that is considered to be 'un-Thai.' Consequently, using Anderson's term (see Chapter 3), the language system authorised by the state in *Susan* creates an 'imagined community' from the top down to define what should be included and excluded from the nation. Conversely, *Susan* depicts another aspect of the 'imagined community' which is the formation of a different language via a social media space. Here, people can express themselves free from state control and negotiate their identity from the bottom up. Subsequently, language resistance is the clash of the discourse of Thainess and is negotiated by individuals who are mostly from the younger generation.

### *The Politics of Language and the Youth Movement*

This negotiation of Thainess through language in *Susan* is connected to the Thai youth movement that have come of age during the late 2010s to early 2020s. Generally, language is a key weapon used by protesters

to construct critical discourse against the Thai political scene during the polarisation period up to that of the youth movement in 2020 (see Chapter 1-2). Interestingly, the growth of the youth movement has flourished through several political languages which are different from standard language both in a verbal and non-verbal form. In the non-verbal form, as mentioned earlier, the three-finger salute shows their stance against the authorities. During the heated period of mid-2020, students showed their three-finger salute during the national anthem to protest against state authority (Figure 46). They also wore white ribbons, changing its meaning to become an act of resistance.



Figure 46 Students show the three-finger salute during the national anthem and wear white ribbons on their wrists.

Sources: <https://regional.kachon.com/354755> and <https://tlhr2014.com/en/archives/20794>

Regarding verbal language, there are various words to which the youth movement gave new meanings as a language code for communicating within their groups and to hide from the authorities. Importantly, these words avoid unspeakable issues and parody dominant power at the same time. In Figure 47, starting from the left as an example, a Buddhist monk who wears an orange robe is referred to as a ‘carrot.’ Secondly, the green uniform of soldiers is compared to ‘broccoli.’ Apart from this, the protestor uses intertextuality from popular culture in the same way as adapting the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games*. In the third and last picture, an animated *Minion* and the character Natasha Romanoff, a female spy from the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, are referred to as the group of people protesting. As a yellow creature with bald hair, *Minion* refers to groups of authorities which could be soldiers or the police wearing yellow shirts trying to exert control by pretending to be common people. Yet their bald heads make it obvious that they

are part of the authorities. The Natasha character refers to people who look like conservatives, yet actually support the protesters. Thus, they are called the spies of the youth movement. These references are also seen from protesters on the street, such as the cosplay of *Harry Potter* characters as well as adapting songs from the Japanese animation *Hamtaro* which was played during street protests (Figure 48).



Figure 47 Language codes used in the youth movement.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/LIVStyleofficial/posts/970974243397319>



Figure 48 References to *Harry Potter* and *Hamtaro* used in the protestors.

Sources: <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53555953> and <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53668228>

Overall, these terms challenge the hierarchical structure of Thai society expressed, for example, through the military and through religious institutions. The use of collective stories from popular culture also builds a common identity through this language. Yukti Mukdawijitra (2020) suggests that youth language is full of symbolism and ambiguity to parody people in power through a language of their own which is hard for the authorities to understand. He also calls this language a ‘hidden transcript’, a term used by James C Scott, as a secret code deployed by powerless people to openly challenge official powers by avoiding the language of authority. Additionally, this kind of language constructs a shared political identity.

In conclusion, language as youth resistance in the real world parallels rebellion through the language of the student characters in *Susan*. The novel captures this phenomenon by combining the dystopian trope of language control to exaggerate Thai language standardisation and word-coining from English as a criminal offense. This becomes a form of attack against the hyper-conservatives who aim to protect Thainess and refuse foreignness. Moreover, the politics of powerless people like the youth parallels the real scenario of the youth movement in Thailand. To avoid using standard language is to oppose the top-down definition of identity by creating their own ‘imagined community.’

### **A Good Child, Youth Zombies, and Failed Men: The Embodiment of State Ideology and its Resistance**

Aside from language, the contestation and negotiation between authority and the youth can be seen from the embodiment of state ideology and its resistance among the main characters. While *Susan* creates the notion of ‘a good child of Siam’, this leads to the question of what goodness is. *Susan*, moreover, utilises zombies in correlation as the embodied revenge of suppressed groups. Meanwhile, the novel portrays nationalist sentiments through male official authorities which also shows the failure of identity.

#### ***A Good Child of Siam: Embodying ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Children of the State***

*Susan* plays with the notion of a ‘good child’ (*dek di*), which is linked to the discourse of a ‘good person’ propagated by the state. *Susan* attempts to challenge this discourse through the representation of two female school students: Yia-rayong and Lertha-ngai. Firstly, Yia-rayong is promoted as ‘a good child of Siam’ (*dek di haeng Siam*) after she witnesses a schoolgirl turning into a zombie. Since this incident cannot be fully hidden, the authorities turn her into the model of a good child of Siam Alangkan aiming to take her and her family under their control, with the goal of making children not resist authority. Teacher Karuna, a representative of authority, goes to school and announces Yia-rayong’s goodness which Siam Alangkan’s students are told to follow. The Teacher praises Yia-rayong as a good student who has good grades and behaves according to societal norms, in contrast to the schoolgirl who turns out to be a lunatic zombie.

Accordingly, Yia-rayong is given the title of a good child of Siam as a spokesperson of the state ideology. Although she does not intend to follow this, “Yia-rayong can behave in the norm of ‘goodness’ (according to the Siam Ting Satawat Master Plan in the subject (1) about the good practices of factory’s citizen) without attempting to do so. Maybe her family nurtures her in this way, or maybe she was born with this quality” (Prapt 2020: 49). After being designated as a good child of Siam, Yia-rayong becomes a figure of interest in society. Coming from a low-class background, she enjoys being given special status.

While Yia-rayong is embodied as a good child of Siam, *Susan* parallels her this with her peer, Lertha-ngai. The text shows the contrast between both characters as quoted in the last paragraph about Yia-rayong’s goodness, though they are neighbours and school classmates.

This quality does not exist in Lertha-ngai. A former classmate of Yia-rayong has always been named in the report to teachers as a misbehaved child ... she hates reading and being patronised making her parents punish her. In school, teachers are fed up and students also avoid making friends with her. Yet this naughty girl does not really care [...] Before completing year 6 according to the master plan, she left school to the relief of teachers and friends. No one cares about her disappearance. She seems to be condemned as an unused object which should be thrown into the bin (Prapt 2020: 49).

More importantly, *Susan* not only narrates Lertha-ngai as ‘a bad child’ who does not conform to the authority’s norms, but the text also voices her perspective about the absurdity of social norms — “Why do adults not admit the state of reality?” ... when she tries to critique it, she is stigmatised as a bad child, and ungrateful person. So, she runs away from home to rely on herself and try to find the true answer of what a ‘good person’ is” (Prapt 2020: 110). In addition, her role in questioning the concept of a ‘good person’ is also revealed through her online activism. She plays an active role in convincing her generation to rethink the norms of Siam Alangkan. Thus, it puts her in danger from the state and leads to her death. Indeed, Lertha-ngai is created as the voice of stigmatised people who are marginalised by the dominant ideology. Her role is to ‘write back’ regarding the definition of a good and bad person by the state. Through this

embodiment, Lertha-ngai questions social norms, especially in relation to what constitutes a good child.

Interestingly, *Susan* also unmask the concept of a good person from state control via the ironic representation of Yia-rayong. Although Yia-rayong is seen as a good child, she pretends to conform at first for her own sake and then deviates from morality. The novel demonstrates that the more she gets recognised, the worse her behaviour and mental state becomes. That power gradually changes a person to become one of the authorities. One clear example can be seen in the climax of *Susan*, when Yia-rayong reveals her lack of concern for morality and friendship. This is when all of the students have to take a university admission exam, yet there is chaos in the exam room due to gangsters attacking the schools. They disturb the exams which makes the students turn into zombies due to their depression and stress. Yia-rayong and Suralai attempt to run away from the zombies, but they become stuck with one zombie. The text describes how Yia-rayong's exam paper blows up near the zombie and she worries about that more than the deadly situation she is in: "This is not just a score; it is my future!" (Prapt 2020: 386). Then, Yia-rayong plots to make the zombie eat Suralai instead. In this scene, "Yia-rayong stops on a firm footing to look into the shocked and unbelieving eyes of her friend. In contrast, her eyes have no pain or sorrow, there is only distance and ignorance." (Prapt 2020: 390). Indeed, this scene transgresses morality and reveals Yia-rayong's selfishness to not only save her own life but also her own future, which involves condemning her friend to her death to ensure her own survival. Her lack of guilt for this leads to the question of not only what a 'good child' is but also the question of 'being human'.

The embodiment of Yia-rayong thus challenges the discourse of a 'good child' as mandated by the state by uncovering the surface meaning of goodness that contrasts with the individual mind. In other words, *Susan* plays with the mind and body and internal and external images. The mind governs the body and true goodness stems from internal thoughts and feelings (see Chapter 3). Perfect goodness is supposed to encapsulate a good mind and body like the embodiment of Karaket/Ketsurang in *Buppe* (see Chapter 5). Yet the embodiment of Yia-rayong is different. She is officially regarded as a good child of Siam which governs her identity and she can serve this role by submitting to societal norms, whereas her mind stands



in contrast to her expected role. In the end, her immorality raises the question of what a good person is embodied in the notion of a good child of Siam. Arguably, when Yia-rayong shows her true colours, this is a moment which unmasks the discourse of goodness created by the state, showing that it is only superficial and does not reflect the desired morality of human beings.

### ***Youth Zombies: The Demonisation of the State and its Revenge***

*Susan's* conflicts stem from the zombie transformation of one student before others are infected and transform into zombies. The embodiment of a zombie also challenges the concept of a 'good person' since the key scenes of adolescent characters transforming into zombies are aligned negatively with signs of Thainess.

### *The Origin and Spread of Zombies*

Culturally speaking, a zombie was an 'imported demon' in the Thai ghost universe before the figure became more widely accepted due to the transnational popularity of zombie stories. Originating in Caribbean folklore, the zombie is related to voodoo magic and belief in the walking-dead of historical slaves in Haiti. This myth has been reproduced in global media, especially in Hollywood movies during the late 1960s from George Romero's *Living Dead* series, causing a shift in the representation of zombies. As we understand them today, zombies are defined as 'aggressors, people-eating ghouls' in contrast to the Haitian zombie who is a prototypical victim (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2016: 5).

Though zombie movies were regularly produced before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the 9/11 attacks catalysed anxieties of terrorism and embodiment through zombie narratives across the globe. Especially in the 2010s, zombie narratives were not limited to Western media, but were also found in Asian cultures. South Korea has played a major role in producing this genre, according to Khorapin Phuaphansawat (2023) in Figure 49. The zombie has thus been transformed into a global demon which hybridises with plots and narratives in particular times and spaces.

Table 1. Popular Zombie Films and Television Series Since 2000.

Year	Title	Movie (M)/TV Series(T)	Country of production
2002	<i>28 Days Later</i>	M	UK
2002	<i>Resident Evil</i>	M	Germany
2004	<i>Shaun of the Dead</i>	M	UK
			UK
			France
2004	<i>Dawn of the Dead</i>	M	USA
			USA
2004	<i>Khun krabi phirabat (SARS Wars)</i>	M	Thailand
2007	<i>28 Weeks Later</i>	M	UK
			USA
2007	<i>I am Legend</i>	M	Spain
			USA
2007	<i>REC</i>	M	Spain
2009	<i>Ha Phraeng (Phobia 2): Backpacker</i>	M	Thailand
2009	<i>Zombieland</i>	M	USA
2010-2022	<i>The Walking Dead</i>	T	USA
2013	<i>Warm Bodies</i>	M	USA
2013	<i>World War Z</i>	M	USA
2015-2019	<i>iZombie</i>	T	USA
2016	<i>Seoul Station</i>	M	South Korea
2016	<i>I am a Hero</i>	M	Japan
2016	<i>Train to Busan</i>	M	South Korea
2016	<i>The Girl with All the Gifts</i>	M	UK
2017	<i>Ravenous</i>	M	Canada
2017	<i>Cargo</i>	M	Australia
2018	<i>Rampant</i>	M	South Korea
2018	<i>Overlord</i>	M	USA
2019-Present	<i>Kingdom</i>	T	South Korea
2019	<i>The Dead Don't Die</i>	M	USA
2019	<i>Little Monsters</i>	M	Australia
			USA
2020	<i>Peninsula</i>	M	UK
			South Korea
2020	<i>Alive</i>	M	South Korea
2022	<i>All of Us are Dead</i>	T	South Korea

Figure 49 Zombie films and series across the globe. Source Koraphin (2023: 2)

Nonetheless, zombies as awkward non-human creatures do not match closely with Thai ghosts or *phi*. Despite Justin McDaniel's attempt (2021) to trace the Thai zombie and identify Wetan in *Nithan Wetan (The Tale of Vetala)*<sup>10</sup> as zombies, the speaking-and-movable-corpse of Wetan is far from the understanding of zombies, as mentioned above. Accordingly, Katarzyna Ancuta (2016) argues that the lack of a concept and a specific Thai word for a zombie makes it difficult to insert this creature in Thai films in contrast to the popularity of Thai ghost movies. Until the 2000s, there were Thai films about zombies as they were understood in transnational media. *Backpacker*, as part of *Phobia 2* (2009), for example, portrays zombies as mass walking-dead and cannibal aggressors who spread their infection by biting others. It is evident that

<sup>10</sup> The story talks about King Vikramaditya's mission in the forest in which he has to take Wetan, the corpse of a monster hanging on a tree, with him. Yet the corpse can talk and move. He gives a condition that if the king can answer his questions from his tales, then he will go along with the king. The story thus consists of many tales from Wetan before the king can answer correctly.

zombies from global popular culture have registered in Thai society and there are now many zombie stories adapted into Thai popular culture in games, comics, films, and music videos (see Chanaya 2016).

Significantly, during the late 2010s to early 2020s, which is when *Susan* was composed, South Korean zombie narratives were frequently produced and successfully transmitted around the globe such as *Train to Busan* (2016), *Kingdom* (2019-2021), and *Alive* (2020) (see Figure 49), including in Thailand. Many of them, like *Kingdom*, were released through streaming platforms such as Netflix during lockdown in the global pandemic in 2020. This context is evident in Prapt's work too. From my interview, one reason he chose to use zombies in *Susan* is due to its easy sell to readers in relation to the notion of death (Interview with Prapt 2022). It is worth pointing out that his depiction of zombies that is 'easy to sell' for mass audiences elucidates the paradigm shift of zombies from the previous decades in which these non-human creatures could not emulate Thai ghosts and were viewed as unrealistic, as seen in Ancuta's (2016) interviews with filmmakers. Zombies in Thailand in recent years can therefore be argued to stand as transnational portrayals rather than relating to local belief.

#### *Zombies as Political and Social Critiques*

Zombies play a salient role as political metaphors and social critiques applied across cultures such as threats of terrorism, pandemics, war, migration, and capitalism. Zombies are thus linked to the dystopian world as a warning by portraying the extremes of the contemporary world. For example, in South Korea, zombie films show the trauma of Koreans who are invaded by outsiders and suppressed under dictatorships for long periods before submitting to capitalism (Lee 2019). In Thailand, Chananya Prasarthai (2016: 124) argues that zombies represent and critique government power, the education system, and other types of people like politicians, students, and shopaholics. Besides this, zombies can represent a foreign threat, as portrayed in *SARS War* and the viral outbreak from *farangs* (Ancuta 2016). Meanwhile, Burmese worker zombies in *Backpacker* are a foreign threat, yet the film critiques their suppression in Thailand and so zombification becomes a metaphor for the revenge of the oppressed (Ancuta 2016; Koraphin 2023).

In relation to *Susan*, the embodiment of zombies can be interpreted as an ‘Other Within,’ with zombification caused by State suppression. The demonisation of oppressors empowers them to fight back against the central power. As for the viral outbreak, the zombies represent an ‘unconscious mass movement’ which is hard to control. This reflects the anxiety of the state, which aims to take control of this viral disease, which means submitting to unorthodox thoughts and practices. Moreover, the ‘in-between’ body of the zombie changes an individual into an unknown creature which was once familiar. This means that when parents, friends, and familiar people are infected, they change into someone who is ‘familiar but not the same’. Thus, the embodiment of a zombie represents an identity change from a person who is one of us becoming unknown and who must be eradicated. This mirrors the tactic of ‘demonising’ the Other by forgetting their humanity and legitimising destructive power to maintain peace and order.

#### *Thainess and Zombies*

Thainess is used in *Susan* as a discursive knowledge and hierarchical ideology promoted by the state which leads to the suppression of youth, resulting in the zombie transformation. Indeed, zombification represents the notion of a ‘bad child’ which challenges the norms of a good child of Siam. The first example can be seen with the transformation of Wannao, a schoolgirl who becomes the first zombie in the novel. Wannao feels unwell and has overheard criticism from an upper-class middle-aged woman about the ongoing protestors – “I am really satisfied... our factory has prospered, why do they have to protest to cancel the master plan? ... Yes, they all deserve to be sent to jail!” (Prapt 2020:13). Suddenly, Wannao cannot control herself and her body transforms to aggressively attack the woman. Although the authorities attempt to hide the disease, clips shared of the incident go viral. This forces the state to explain why Wannao transformed – “the student is ... an unpleasant child as she is lazy, fails exams [...] She also bullies others and uses underground applications and websites. You see, what she has done seems to be lunacy at first” (Prapt 2020: 107). Her name is then stigmatised as these symptoms are subsequently referred to as the ‘Wannao disease.’

The predominant alignment of the sign of Thainess and zombification is then seen when Yia-rayong and Thanalop go to Soi Phichai, a famous area for Thai dance and arts. They find that this area is in chaos as three Thai dance students have become wild like Wannao. Interestingly, the three students wear *khon* masks and give a *khon* performance wherein they appear to be dead (see more about *khon* in Chapter 6). The text quotes the *Ramakien of King Rama I* along with their play, before the *khon* teacher comes to scold them for being unorthodox students. This is because they create an unconventional ‘teacher respect tray’ (*phan wai khru*)<sup>11</sup> and denigrate the normal established relationship between teacher and student. The teacher punishes them cruelly, but this makes the students fight back by using the flame of a candle on the altar to burn the school down. Then, Yia-rayong, who witnesses this situation, reminds readers of the scene of the burning of Longka, Thotsakan’s homeland in the *Ramakien*. Hence, this scene not only shows how the ‘bad student’ is represented by zombies, but also presents the oppressed youth from within discursive Thainess being out for revenge via several signs of Thainess. This clearly presents the dark side of Thainess, which includes a clear hierarchy used to suppress others before showing the rebellion of a new generation.

Furthermore, zombie-transformation and Thainess are clearly linked in the climax of the ordination ceremony. *Susan* underlines the fact that the national university examination is a key time for all students and that this day is the climax of their education thus far. An ordination ceremony takes place beside the exam venue and there are loud noises and disturbances in that area, leading the school to warn those participating in the ceremony. Gangsters, especially the soon-to-be-monks, are angered and come to attack the school with a full set of weapons. They invade the exam venue, destroy the exam room, and take the students hostage. The school is then in chaos, not just from the attack by the gangsters, but now also from zombies. The scene arguably raises the question of the goodness of Thainess through the sign of religious rituals. *Susan* portrays the ironic situation of an ordination ceremony which is supposed to be a transition

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<sup>11</sup> A ‘teacher respect tray’ or *phan wai khru* is a symbol whereby students show their respect to teachers by combining symbolic elements such as flowers and candles in the tray. In Thai schools every year, students create the tray and give it to their teacher on teacher appreciation day (*wan wai khru*).

from being an ordinary man to becoming a sacred and respected monk. Instead of being calm and following the Buddha's teaching, the person becomes a gangster and disrupts the school's students at a crucial time. This transgresses societal norms and makes readers see the incongruity of goodness embedded in Buddhist rituals.

In fact, the scene described is based on a true incident which happened on February, 24<sup>th</sup> 2019. While students were doing the GAT/PAT examination for university entry at Mathayom Wat Sing School in Bangkok, an ordained gangster burst into the school, as in the novel, injuring several teachers, students, and the school director (*The Matter* 2019). Unlike the real incident, *Susan* empowers students to become zombies and take their revenge. Zombification, thereby, can be considered as a form of 'poetic justice' for the victims which was not available to them in real life. The zombie transformation here reveals the abuse suffered by the school students who not only struggle with the educational system but also with cultural power as part of Thainess, which is supposed to be a symbol of goodness but is the opposite.

In summary, *Susan* deploys the popular transnational figure like a zombie as a political metaphor and as a social critique of the 'good' norm that is propagated by the authorities. As the hybrid body, the zombie signifies the 'Other', the 'in-between' - neither alive nor dead and a figure who was once 'us' or human. This can be likened to children who once submitted to societal norms before changing their identity to become what are seen as uncontrollable demons when they transgress or question these norms. Accordingly, the process of transforming from a 'good' to 'bad' child changes them from being part of 'us' to the 'other', and a threat to the peace and order of society. The widespread disease carried by zombies symbolises thoughts - which are seen as unconscious or insane - leading the authorities to conceal and control them. Meanwhile, the unconscious mind in the walking dead body implies the 'dead inside' of youth. The sign of Thainess is employed here as a symbol of discursive and oppressive Thainess and zombies become a way to enact revenge.

### *Failed Men: The Collapse of the Nationalist Narrative*

Male characters in *Susan* represent state authorities and embody nationalist narratives. As their identities cannot be separated from state ideology, *Susan* makes them ‘failed men’ who are betrayed by the values they cling to. In doing so, *Susan* introduces two main male characters, Khun Rabeng (herein Rabeng) and Yanyong, who are in the military. Serving the authorities, their bodies and minds are inseparable from state ideology, especially in their sense of pride and duty to protect the peace and order of their land. With the rise of the underground movement and viral disease, they are required to control and suppress the ‘enemy within’. However, they realise the plans of the authority which leads them to feel ‘lost’ in their identity and shakes their beliefs and worldview.

Rabeng is an essential illustration of how nationalist history is embodied in an individual mind and body. He grew up with the story of the greatness of his ancestors since his grandfather and father were key figures behind the origin of the factory. This “pride is inscribed in his heart. It embodies him and is tangible” (Prapt 2020: 164). An appreciation of the factory’s history can be found in him because “this is the essence of history. When we understand and appreciate it, we will have a power source that we will not find anywhere else” (Prapt 2020: 164). Accordingly, Rabeng embodies state ideology and represents the voice of authority. *Susan* portrays Rabeng unconditionally, believing in the ruler – “whatever they think it should be, it will be like that... though the world changes, we need to keep it as beautiful as the same. We need to find new strategies to save this goodness as long as we can” (Prapt 2020: 96). This means his status will remain under this social hierarchy as he asks “how can we be equal? The ruler must be at the apex because they work harder and are more responsible. We also owe them a debt (*bun khun*)” (Prapt 2020: 86). So, Rabeng’s duty does not only protect the ruler but also his identity.

The critical turning point for Rabeng which destroys his sense of identity is caused by the counter-narrative revealed by his mother. *Susan* reveals at first that he does not get along with his mother, Than Phuying Chattamadi, who is a high-society and highly sexualised woman. In contrast, he glorifies his father who

died in the war against the rebellion before Rabeng was born. In an intense scene with his mother, he realises that the story of his family is a lie. Rabeng's mother shows evidence that his father and grandfather helped the rebel movement. This truth subsequently ruins Rabeng's sense of self as the state narrative that defined who he is as "the respected and protected class is actually fake. They are the enemies of his father and grandfather who tried to destroy them for justice and the lives of all the factory's people" (Prapt 2020: 358). In the end, *Susan* shows the deep sense of loss and confusion in Rabeng's mind. Then, when another person argues this fact with Rabeng, it makes him more depressed before he becomes a zombie. At this point, Rabeng transforms from a powerful and confident man into the opposite, since he realises that the values he has been clinging to all his life are a lie. The truth collapses his selfhood and instead transforms him into 'the Other' as a zombie.

Arguably, the embodiment of Rabeng resonates with the implementation of discursive Thainess via grand Thai nationalist history. The character of Rabeng represents nationalist sentiment by glorifying war heroes as national heroes as well as emphasising the continuity of the nation in blood. The glorified narrative of Rabeng's ancestors reflects the grand narrative of RNH which emphasises that great men can save the nation from crisis. The depiction of Rabeng as the descendant of this story attaches him to national history and his identity cannot be separated from the nation. The destruction of his identity unmasks nationalist narratives that are taken from individuals to protect the status quo of the elites.

While Rabeng carries nationalist narrative in his blood, Yanyong illustrates how the discourse of Thainess works through state mechanisms to suppress the Other. Unlike Rabeng, Yanyong, a lower-ranked security guard, does not inherit any family pride and has to work hard to uplift his family's status. Yanyong's situation changes once his younger sister, Yia-rayong, is involved in the zombie incident. *Susan* underlines his and his sister's role of serving the state resulting in his forced devotion and reflecting the discourse of RNH in maintaining peace and order. However, Yanyong experiences an inner conflict between his duty and his personal feelings in relation to his affair with Lertha-ngai, as she is stigmatised as a bad child as mentioned earlier.



In doing so, *Susan* demonstrates how Yanyong allows state power to exploit his life and family as a tool to propagate official narratives, before gradually realising that the authorities have double-crossed him for their own ends. Yanyong reaches the point of no return when Lertha-ngai dies, opening his eyes: “He is such an idiot. He does not only kneel before them but also serves as their tool for further oppressing people like him. Until now, he still supports this oppression. The oppression does not allow a person to love oneself or even to choose to love family rather than the ruler” (Prapt 2020: 260). Following this, he becomes aggressive and fights his boss, Rabeng, after which Yanyong intends to go overseas with the ruler’s entourage and plans to escape from Siam Alangkan. However, a fight breaks out on board and *Susan* concludes with a cliffhanger in which a zombie bites the hand of Yanyong.

In this aspect, Yanyong’s tragic life mirrors another aspect of state control by a grand narrative embodied in individuals, especially when state officers prioritise the nation over themselves. Even though Yanyong and Rabeng differ in terms of class and background, *Susan* illustrates their common fate, which is to be ‘broken-hearted’ because of the values they have clung to, leading them each to their tragic ends. Ultimately, *Susan* presents the dystopian world as unchanged, but Yanyong and Rabeng refuse to accept it and continue to question the state ideology, making them zombies. This implies that they turn into the Other Within like youth zombies which are demonic and should be suppressed by the state.

It is worth noting that the nationalist sentiment expressed by the male characters could imply patriarchal nationalism, which privileges the role of male over female characters in the representation of national history. Accordingly, *Susan* unfolds another layer of gender-based injustice which is doubled in a dystopian society. In comparison with other dystopian narratives, there are common depictions of the main protagonist revealing the face of the mastermind who controls the state. Yet *Susan* does not show who the real enemy is. This reflects the political situation in Thailand in which no single player dominates the field. Several political studies, such as Duncan McCargo’s ‘Network Monarchy’ (2006) and Eugénie Mérieau’s ‘Deep State’ (2016), show the complex power relations that persist in Thai politics which cannot be attributed to a single figure. Hence, the figure of the final boss in *Susan* remains invisible, while the ideology of the elite,

such as Thainess, is highlighted and depicted as an active symbol of state control.

Lastly, reading *Susan* in the context of 2019-2020, a viral outbreak like COVID-19 which is presented in the form of zombification exposes Siam Alangkan's mythology and mirrors protests against the authorities, especially those led by students. More importantly, *Susan* presents all of the main characters as so-called 'anti-heroes' in relation to discursive Thainess to highlight a single value and discrimination against the Other. Critically, although all of the anti-heroes play different roles, they still present a common theme, which is to contest the credibility and legitimacy of the grand narrative and to negotiate by using voices from the margins. This amplifies the voice of the younger generation who are suppressed at many levels of the social structure and hence represent the oppressed in Thai society.

## **Conclusion**

Dystopian fiction is significantly intertwined with Thai politics and the 2014 coup has been deployed as a point of reference in the resistance to state power for almost a decade since. Amid the rise of youth protests and the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, *Susan's* appearance on the literary scene resonated with this wider context and the intersection of the past and present in the dystopian future of Thailand. Several signs of Thainess are mixed into Siam Alangkan and hybridised through reference to Western dystopian elements. Thainess no longer refers to a glorious past narrative to emphasise nationalist sentiment but is instead challenged by Prapt as having a dark side, as demonstrated by satirising and exaggerating controversial issues. As people's practices and thoughts are heavily controlled by totalitarianism, Thainess is presented as the authority's weapon to suppress 'the Other' and maintain political and social peace and order, which is actually for the purpose of maintaining the status quo of the ruling class. The case of language control in Siam Alangkan is reinvented from hierarchical language and transliteration from English to standard Thai language. *Susan* also plays with the status of the national language while exposing the resistance of standard language by youthful characters.

Furthermore, state ideology and national history are represented through the main characters and especially the younger generation. *Susan* establishes all characters with human failings, exploring the notion of the anti-hero. It thus unmasks state discourse and history as unreliable. The ironic negotiation of goodness and badness, as well as the demonisation of students as zombies, challenges the propagated idea of authority. Meanwhile, the collapse of nationalist men and the awakening of state officials questions the legitimacy of the ruler and the real intentions behind maintaining the ruler's power. *Susan* therefore clearly reflects dystopian Thailand under Prayut's government and the discourse of Thainess circulating in society. The dystopian and fantastical narrative in *Susan* is a political manifestation that appears in a 'liminal space' as the story does not reflect Thailand exactly, yet speaks directly to Thai politics during the significant challenge of internal battles and of the external pandemic.

Evidently, while most of the texts discussed in this thesis continue to speak about Thainess in a positive and nostalgic tone, along with playing on untouchable issues that are resolved through compromise, *Susan* strongly criticises the discourse of Thainess and strikes at the heart of this discourses on which Thai society is grounded.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

Almost two decades after the coup in 2006, the general election in May 2023 marked another milestone in the Thai political landscape. The opposition groups who had fought against each other for decades became allies. This phenomenon, referred to in Thai as ‘crossing poles’ (*kham khua/salai khua*), shocked the nation, not only because it heralded the unexpected end of the battle between the Yellow and Red Shirts, but also because it implied an attempt to fight a new common enemy (see Appendix 2-3). This could be regarded as a new chapter in Thai politics after a long period of political polarisation and two coup d’états. This new chapter provides a good conclusion to my thesis because it summarises the development of Thailand along with international influences through a literary lens during and after the post-2006 coup.

Focusing on reinventing Thainess in Thai literature through the lens of hybridity and including the embodiment of the nation shows clear cultural hybridisation between Thai and transnational cultures. This can be identified in hybrid literary features and the contestation and negotiation of discursive Thainess revolving around the notion of a ‘good person,’ unity, and social reconciliation. Hybridity also shows the reinvention of signs of Thainess by the playful mixing of different tropes used as a tool to voice the preferences of some groups and speak on behalf of forgotten groups.

This can be further explained by answers to the three main questions of this thesis: (1) in what ways are reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006 hybridised?; (2) how and why does political contestation in Thailand after 2006 relate to the hybridisation of reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature; (3) how and why has globalisation and the impact of the Internet shaped and influenced inventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006? The contribution of knowledge from these findings, limitations, and further suggestions for future research will be summarised at the end.

## The Hybridisation of Reinventions of Thainess in Thai literature after 2006

This thesis examines four main signs of Thainess from national history and literature to folklore and national language. My study sheds light on the playful ways these signs are reinvented in literary texts as performative Thainess. All texts showcase the hybridisation of traditional knowledge - such as the common plot of RNH found in *Buppe* and *Susan* and well-known stories like the *Ramakien* in *HT* and the Himmaphan forest along with the Thep and Asun in *NH*. Meanwhile, new features ranging from Western popular fiction like dystopian novels and the Korean Wave can be seen along with other transnational flows such as apocalyptic prophecies, zombies, human rights, and gender politics. These mixtures open up a 'Third Space', which Bhabha argues to be a zone of that which is 'similar but not the same' and challenges the authenticity and authority of the monopoly of discursive Thainess from above. Accordingly, the hybridity of Thainess here presents the power of authors who can rearrange circulating signs of Thainess into dialogue with contemporary Thailand. These characteristics illustrate the ways in which national Thai identities are used, recreated, and reconstructed from the bottom up.

Inevitably, the key function of the signs of Thainess in all texts is as a bridge transporting existing stories and values to meet new agendas. This means that traditional knowledge is reinvented as the foundation of familiar stories to create unfamiliar worlds. Although readers might not know what the future of the country looks like, the folklore genre in *NH* enables writers and readers to imagine how the relationship between individuals and groups is supposed to be. Moreover, the conflict between Ramen and Thot in *HT* can be understood by the *Ramakien*'s plotline, though they live in the contemporary world. More importantly, the recreation of Thainess does not only come with concrete elements like the deployment of characters, settings, plots, and events from the prior stories, but also the abstract values embedded in these stories. For instance, the nationalist sentiments in RNH glorify the past of Thailand, as found in *Buppe*, whereas they are presented as sites of suppression in *Susan*. Hence, shifting meaning in newer versions comes with the contestation and negotiation of discursive Thainess.

The contestation of traditional values can be found in all texts, even if the depiction in almost all cases, except for *Susan*, is more positive as a ‘utopian Thainess.’ This can be examined in the post-2006 coup context. For example, Rompaeng recreates King Narai’s reign with a nostalgic sense of past glory, while Alina turns myths in a modern city into the Nawa Society which becomes the centre, replacing the West. Such portrayals seem to draw Thailand into better versions outside the limitations of the time in which they are written in a society rife with crises and conflicts. Nevertheless, these stories contest the traditional definition of Thainess. The texts open the floor for negotiation through marginal individuals who challenge such norms. In *Buppe*, the role of women posits a key challenge to nationalist narratives which mostly privilege male heroes. Furthermore, the hybridisation of the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada demonstrates the negotiation of youth rewriting national literature for themselves by mixing it with subjects which are meaningful to them.

Subsequently, hierarchies are contested and meanings are changed. *HT* provides a clear example of how the Korean Wave disrupts good and bad societal norms and BL fanfiction challenges heteronormativity. Significantly, the role of Phra Ram is decentralised while the antagonist Thotsakan becomes central. The politics of decentring and shifting the marginal voice can also be found in the Nawa Society as *NH* switches the narrative roles of the Thep and Asun in defiance of traditional perceptions. In this respect, although signs of Thainess are reimagined positively on the surface, the texts contest and negotiate this by empowering the voices of a group or individual that are not included in the grand narrative to have a place in this Third Space.

As for *Susan*, this narrative portrays signs of Thainess as ‘dystopian’, in contrast to other texts. *Susan* turns history, state ideology, and language into tools of power and control by the authorities and creates a negative version of contemporary Thailand. Therefore, the notion of a challenge to the power structure of discursive Thainess is grounded in Siam Alangkan’s society along with individual conflict. The voice of the margin is stronger compared to the other texts. The youth are key to the novel which explicitly resists state-constructed norms alongside the embodiment of zombies which come to both resist and enact revenge on

the official discourse of Thainess.

Apart from cross-cultural hybridisation, my data shows temporal hybridisation. Using the past, present, and future to organise the thesis chapters, the reinvention of Thainess in the past, present, and future cannot be disassociated from each other. The past in *Buppe* cannot be solely constructed from historical sources, but contemporary desires combine with it, as in the journey of Ketsurang to Ayutthaya with her advanced knowledge. Likewise, the future is not completely alienated from space and time in *NH* and *Susan* as elements from the past and present are shown in that future. As for *HT*, the novel makes the present-day intersect with the past through the *Ramakien*. In this respect, hybridity in literature does not come from different spaces but rather elucidates ‘temporal hybridity’ in which signs of Thainess from different times are performed together and interdependent. This result can be seen parallel with a sense of continuity to refer back to common societal roots and an imagined collective future grounded in the discourse of Thainess.

Lastly, the texts show unchallengeable features of Thainess which are mainly the monarchy and Buddhism. *Buppe* and *HT* deal with history and literature linking to the monarchy and kingship. *Buppe* shows the notion of supporting the monarchy and embodying the meaning of a good person according to RNH. As for *HT*, the story ends with Phra Ram being a bad and then good person, although the novel seems to challenge the role of Phra Ram initially. These attempts either show support for RNH or demonstrate self-censorship to avoid perceived criticism of the monarchy, which is one of the strongest legal and cultural taboos in Thai society. Furthermore, didactics and logic derived from Buddhism are deployed as the foundation of creating texts. A cyclical worldview and moral justice are widely deployed, and when the story reaches its peak or resolution, the Buddhist logic of karma and forgiveness comes to explain and resolve the situation.

In relation to the official discourse of Thainess as ‘nation, religion, and the king’, the definition of the nation is the most contested and negotiated compared to the other two institutions. This is understandable since

the nation is the most abstract and hard-to-define, and changes its definition throughout time. In this thesis, I conclude that the monopolistic definition of Thainess and rules regarding how one should be Thai are disrupted. Diverse versions of Thainess show how national identity is recreated by different voices. Importantly, the hybridisation of Thainess as a liminal space allows marginal people to imagine their identity with existing signs of Thainess from the bottom up. This phenomenon does not spring from a vacuum as it relates to movements in the nation's political and social landscapes.

### **The Relationship between Thai politics, Thai literature, and Thainess after 2006**

This thesis began with the question of how the decades-long political contestation in Thailand after 2006 relates to Thai literature and Thainess. My answers can be divided into two categories: politics in the narrow term of national political conflict; and politics in the broader sense of everyday power struggles. Overall, the hybridity of Thainess resonates with political polarisation in the aftermath of the 2006 coup which called for good conservative people to make peace and order in society and unity to avoid new conflict. These values are simultaneously challenged by processes of decentralisation and the empowerment of marginalised people through demonstrating how they can be suppressed and demonised as the Other Within. Moreover, national politics can be read along with the cultural politics of the gender movement which aims to make space for women and LGBTQ+ people, expose the politics of language and power struggles in the education system, and politics of the youth movement.

Firstly, national politics in Thailand after the coup in 2006 materialised as a battle between two main groups. Goodness was linked to the state-constructed discourse of the nation, religion, and the king, with special emphasis on the request for people to be 'good' by loving and being loyal to the monarchy. In contrast, the demonisation of the Other is embodied by the opposite side. During conflict, the quest for unity is posited as an ideal solution which individuals look towards. As this discourse circulated widely and was mostly adopted among the middle-class and urban people, the popular fiction texts I referenced exemplify the product of that process. *Buppe* is a prime showcase of the strong sentiment of nationalism and the notion



of a good person, while the bad person is established as being ‘un-Thai.’ An analysis of embodiment in *Buppe* exposes the use of female bodies as conduits for idealised Thainess in both mind and body, while the *farang* is posited as an undesirable figure and a threat to the nation. Interestingly, it is not a Westerner, but rather an ‘un-Thai’ mind who wants to ‘sell the nation’ and betray Thailand. This links to the widely accepted discourse in the early years after the 2006 coup of good people suppressing bad politicians.

Conversely, when the 2006 coup passed and another coup followed in 2014, the discourse of the ‘good person’ and the demonisation of the other were re-examined, while acts of resistance were further highlighted, as seen in *Susan*. Of the selected texts, *Buppe* is the novel in my selection that is most contemporaneous to the coup of 2006, while *Susan* was published years after. Moreover, the political context of the youth movement, the pandemic, and active new agents such as the Future Forward Party challenged several structures of Thai society. Accordingly, *Susan* imagines Thailand as a future dystopian land, in contrast to *Buppe*’s nostalgic glorified past. The novel turned the discourse of a ‘good person’ into an oppressive notion wielded to maintain the status quo of the elites. Interestingly, *Susan* illustrates demonisation clearly through zombies, yet they are not typically passive monsters since they resist and take revenge against suppression. Along with the widespread change, *Susan* is the best illustration of how the discourse of Thai history, being a ‘good person’, and demonisation have shifted their meanings. This is in contrast to *Buppe*, with a comparative timeframe of only one decade between 2010 and 2020.

In addition, the quest for unity or *samakkhi* remains prevalent in my data. The prime sources for this are in *HT* and *NH* in which compromise and social reconciliation are significant themes. Both stories are grounded in traditional conflicts as in the *Ramakien* as well as between the Thep and Asun. The two novels share an attempt to avoid that conflict in the present time as shown in *HT* and the future in *NH* since their conclusions display social reconciliation or compromise between two opposing groups who become allies rather than enemies. More importantly, both novels spotlight traditional villains who become the centre of the story, whereas the heroic characters are decentralised. This negotiates typical power structures by questioning established norms of goodness while empowering marginal voices. It reflects the politics of good and bad

from the post-2006 coup period. Ultimately, both *HT* and *NH* promote a dream for hope and *samakkhi* by stopping the traditional wheel of conflict. The struggle of Thai society during the 2010s is clearly presented, as Thailand experienced several demonstrations that led to violence and death.

Secondly, my data elucidates the politics of gender and marginal groups in Thailand. As for gender politics, the majority of literary works used in this thesis highlight the role of women (including Prem from *HT* as a feminine male protagonist). Drawing on my analyses, the Thai nation is embodied by women, both physically and mentally. An idealised nation is presented through the perfect combination of tradition and modernity as well as morality in the beautiful body of Karaket, while the combination of all ideologies and hope for a better future is embodied by Thip-apha. Similarly, Prem, as the reborn Sida, resolves the battle between two opposite groups. Even for critiques of Thainess, Yia-rayong embodies state ideology and is used to unmask the irony behind it.

The usage of women to represent the nation cannot be heralded as a new phenomenon because this has long been seen in Thai literature and popular media. Nevertheless, my results can be read against the backdrop of women's roles from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century wherein women can assert themselves in politics and society as progressive roles since they connect the past, present, and future of the nation. The characters of Karaket/Ketsurang, Prem, Thip-apha, and Yia-rayong embody either the past with the present or the present day with the future. They become symbols of compromise and the future of the nation. Thus, rather than patriarchal nationalism, these novels give space for women to actively build a better (or worse in the case of Yia-rayong) version of Thailand rather than focusing on a war instigated by men or male-dominated politics. This is seen in reality from women entering Thai politics and the promotion of gender equality in Thailand that has not previously been seen.

Regarding marginal groups, all texts reflect the rise of social movements of once suppressed groups like the LGBTQ+ community, or even the Red Shirts who are demonised as the Other Within. LGBTQ+ elements are mirrored in BL fanfic of the *Ramakien*. Despite debates around the role of BL in supporting

gay people, the trend has undoubtedly made homosexuality more visible in the public domain and the notion of ‘Love Wins’ is emphasised rather than stigma against homosexuality. Moreover, the centralisation and empowerment of marginal figures in most of the selected texts parallel the political divide between central Thainess from Bangkok and other groups in Thailand. *HT*, *NH*, and *Susan* reconstruct the meaning of Thainess by using the voices of powerless people to ‘write back’ to the central values of Thainess as propagated by mainstream discourse. This reflects the way different groups of people demand for better positions in Thai society and inclusion in the redefinition of Thainess.

### **The Impact of Globalisation and the Internet on the Hybridity of Thai Literature after 2006**

Given that globalisation and the Internet have changed political, social, and cultural landscapes across the world, including Thailand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my results show the impact of these two factors which have also come to shape the Thai literary landscape. In brief, trends from transnational flows hybridise Thainess and show the undeniably deep and strong ties of globalisation embedded in Thai culture. Again, this is a liminal space contesting and negotiating Thai literary conventions and challenging the discourse of purity and hierarchy within national culture. Additionally, the new media has disrupted the dissemination of literary works and moved modern Thai literature from being grounded in print culture onto online spaces. This new platform creates innovative types and genres of Thai literature.

First, my study displays the implicit and explicit cultural hybridisation of global trends and Thainess. The most obvious feature appears in the recreation of the *Ramakien* from which fan cultures, K-pop idols, Japanese manga, and so on are aligned with the classical stories within internet writings. The paratext of the *Ramakien* on the Internet, such as cover photos, the title, and other elements on Dek-D and Joylada are prime evidence of this. Furthermore, the trope of dystopian narratives from Western popular media along with popular characters across the globe like zombies have been adopted and adapted in *Susan* while the context in Siam Alangkan is seemingly that of Thai society. Like zombies, the Mayan prophecy of the

world ending in 2012 has been transmitted through transnational flows and came to be the foundation of the *NH* series before being mixed with traditional Thai folklore.

My analyses illustrate the deep impact of globalisation on the construction of space as well as the body and mind of the characters in the novels. *Buppe* is a clear instance of the recreation of Ayutthayan space with a globalised backdrop of multiculturalism and the diversity of races in the city as well as the creation of a kingdom that is closely connected to reality. Alongside this, the interplay between the body and mind of Ketsurang/Karaket presents an ideal meaning of contemporary Thainess wherein tradition meets modernity. As Ketsurang's mind comes from a globalised Thai setting in 2010, the possession of Karaket's body can be seen as a metaphor for making the past of the nation 'alive' again and 'being a better' person by using present-day knowledge. Interestingly, the trope of the relationship between a so-called 'sassy girl' like Karaket/Ketsurang and a well-behaved man like Dech is also apparent alongside the trope of Korean romance dramas popular in Thailand in the early 2000s like *Full House* and *Princess Hours*. These transnational trends are implicitly embedded in the historical novel of Ayutthaya and RNH on the surface.

Globalisation does not only disrupt the discourse of purity in national culture but also provides suggestions and critiques of the role and position of Thainess in the contemporary world. Aside from *Buppe*, *NH* creates a future society wherein tradition is intertwined with modernity. Yet, it shows the sense of superiority that Thailand asserts over the West from such tradition. Moreover, characters from the *Ramakien* can live in and adjust themselves to the present world and be open to homosexual relationships. Although these stories appear to be 'social dreams' rather than reflecting reality, they present hope for a Thai society wherein national Thai identity still exists in a changing world. Indeed, the notion of nationalism is still relevant, yet cannot stand alone. Globalisation is thus used to manifest new ways of moving Thainess as discourse, sign, and performance forward.

On the other hand, globalisation is also used to critique and negotiate discursive Thainess. *Susan* is the best illustration of adopting dystopian conventions to critique state control by mimicking and exaggerating

language control. The dystopian genre supports the theme of suppression and reveals the dark side of Thainess. Similarly, Korean aesthetics in *HT* transgress traditional perceptions of Thai masculine bodies which stem from religious beliefs and stereotypes. Koreanness here can be viewed as a challenge to traditional values before the recreation of the characters of Thotsakan and Phra Ram. In this respect, transnational flows play a crucial role in contesting values and suggesting new iterations of being Thai.

With regard to the dissemination of Thai literature, the Internet has shaped new approaches to writing, reading, and transmitting stories and has played an increasingly significant role in the literary landscape. Almost all of the writers I study here have benefited from the Internet. Apart from the writers of the *Ramakien* on Dek-D and Joylada, who clearly use the online site to compose their works, Rompaeng and Prapt are famous authors who grew up with the rise of internet literature, especially on Dek-D. Although Alina was a well-established author before the boom of internet novels, her recent works, including *NH*, use the online platform to reach wider audiences before they become printed books. This is important to point out since so-called ‘modern’ Thai literature is commonly evaluated from the introduction of print media in Siam around the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After this, the Thai literary field was dominated by print culture and reading culture. Close reading became the main method to understand literature in contrast to orality and the performance of classical Thai literature. The shift to the Internet era can be seen as another key milestone in Thai literary authorship and readership. Accordingly, methods of analysing texts go beyond close reading and in Chapter 6 I suggest an alternative approach to understand this phenomenon.

Additionally, the Internet creates hybrid forms of literature and diversifies the themes of stories which are in turn entangled with globalised trends. Firstly, internet literature is not composed solely as a written text. Rather, it combines songs, images, and graphics which makes these ‘digital-born’ stories different from printed media. More importantly, the case of Joylada shows the transformation of writing in paragraphs by adopting dialogue imitating chat application technology used in daily life. Thus, the Internet creates new types of literature, along with new practices of producing and consuming texts on screen rather than paper. Secondly, with less censorship, the online space allows for a diversity of stories which risk being banned if

published on the mainstream channels. BL fanfic of the *Ramakien* offers essential examples of how transnational trends become entangled with Thainess in literature and the Internet makes it possible to compose and circulate such works. In other words, the Internet can be regarded as a space allowing the reinvention of Thainess in the hands of common people using their imaginations beyond censorship in the public domain while democratising the meaning of the nation and Thai identity.

In conclusion, my study demonstrates that the hybridisation of narration reveals the hybridisation of the nation. Trajectories of discursive Thainess in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not solid and static, nor do they stagnate under definitions set by the authorities. Rather, the meaning of national identity dynamically shifts at the hands of Thais from diverse groups and does not fall under a single definition. Hybrid narrations allow voices to accept, contest, and negotiate with national culture influenced by both internal and international factors. Lastly, although the democracy of the country has been interrupted by coups several times, as I indicate at the starting point of this thesis, literary works – at least from my results - are key evidence of the right of Thai people to write and to imagine their identities, including what the nation and the world they would like to live in might look like in more dynamic and democratic ways.

### **Contribution to Knowledge, Limitations, and Further Suggestions**

This thesis contributes to existing knowledge about Thai literature, Thainess, and the understanding of Thailand in the last two decades from literary and cultural perspectives both in the body of knowledge and methodology. As for the literature field, this work can build the body of knowledge explaining the interaction between reinvention and hybridity in popular fiction and the national crisis after 2006, which I identified as a gap in Chapters 1 and 2. The results unpack the implicit ideology clash embedded in popular fiction, which was undermined in academia, in multi-layers, and from complicated factors beyond the Thai nation-state, and connects them to the larger context of national identity. This thesis also surveys and creates dialogues with underrated genres, yet growing works in the Thai literary field leave plenty of room for future research.

In addition, this thesis focuses mainly on national identity from the bottom-up, which differs from previous knowledge about Thainess as most discussion heavily relies on state ideology and the elite, as mentioned in Chapter 3. This thesis, therefore, sheds light on the nuances of the politics of Thainess beyond the authorities' perspective. My conclusion clearly demonstrates the power of the voices of common people in playfully reinventing Thainess and how this resonates with individual life in the globalisation era, as opposed to most previous studies which emphasise the formation of national identity and the nation-building project. This result can increase understanding of changes in Thai society and Thai politics in last few decades for cultural and literary studies whereas many discussions of these issues come from fields like political science. This body of knowledge, in this aspect, fulfils the explanation of phenomenon in Thai society not from institutional actors or larger structures in Thai society. Rather, it identifies collective imaginations and experience embedded in literary texts as a means to voice hope and fear against a particular time. Indeed, this case of the reinvention of Thainess in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be modelled to explore national identity in other countries in relation to internal politics and transnational flows to understand a given society thoroughly.

Regarding research framework and methodologies, this thesis proposes novel ways to combine theoretical frameworks from different fields into dialogue by weighing the Eurocentric perspective with theories on Thailand in particular. In chapter 4, I theorise the key terms, especially the concept of reinvention, from various angles to examine this process and products of reinvention. In addition, Thainess is theorised as discursive, based on signs, and performative to avoid ambiguity. These frameworks can be applied to further work for discussion on reinvention in Thai literary and cultural contexts and examples in other cultures too. As for Thainess, this term can be expanded upon in other contexts as well.

In the case of methodology, this thesis explores ways to read texts, from traditional close reading to post-structural and postcolonial analysis, along with genre and a new historicism approach. This thesis shows the benefits of using different sources along with literary texts to understanding the work and its context thoroughly. These methodologies integrate well since they examine the deeper meanings of a text and

supporting arguments. Some methodologies, like postcolonial reading, also open new discussions about power relations in Thai society which have historically been undermined due to the mainstream discourse of Thailand never-being-colonised. Indeed, this analysis can bring Thai literature into dialogue with international academia through some common topics. Aside from this, I also suggest a novel way to analyse internet literature in Chapter 6. The stages of reading, combining paratext, hyper reading, and surface reading can be further developed to examine digital-born literature along with the traditional close reading of Thai texts and beyond.

Nonetheless, this thesis still has limitations that need further work to fill in future gaps. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the data selection is limited only to popular fiction dealing with middle-class and youth writers and audiences. This can be a starting point for further research on different genres apart from this thesis like Isan writers or creative writers dealing with Thai identity in their works in the same period. In addition, as the thesis uses a single text from a selected genre, this dismisses other texts that can voice similar or different angles. The collection of works of particular genres, like dystopian, historical novels of the post-2006 period, can be studied separately to see the trajectory and nuances of a given genre. Otherwise, new approaches to reading texts could be used to understand the time period as a huge number were produced at that time. Distant reading, as well as technology-assisted methods to survey and analyse a text, can be combined with deep analysis. In addition, this research cannot cover all the factors of the long-term conflict for almost two decades. The in-depth analysis of literary text, in particular milestones like the post-2014 coup and youth movement, can be conducted for further understanding. Finally, although this thesis deals with in-depth studies of Thai literature and Thai society, this research shows transnational entanglement in the contemporary era. Some topics found in the thesis, such as the Korean Wave, can be examined separately or compared with literary works from different cultures.



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*Journal of Anthropology, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (JASAC) 3(2): 204–209.*

### **Interview**

Alina (Parichat Salicupt), author, 20 April 2022, Online

Pongsakorn Chindawatana and Alina (Parichat Salicupt), co-founder of An-owl, 20 April 2022, Online

Pornnapat Chaisingthong, Joylada Community Manager, 28 April 2022, Online

Prapt (Chairat Pipitpattanaprap), author, 21 April 2022, Online

Rompaeng (Janyavee Sompreeda), author, 27 April 2022, Online

Waroros Rojana, co-founder of Dek-D, 28 April 2022, Online

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 List of Monarchs of Siam/Thailand

#### Sukhothai Kingdom

##### *Phra Ruang Dynasty*

Order	Name	Reigning period
1	Si Inthrahit (also spelt Sri Indraditya)	1239? – 1259?
2	Ban Mueang	1259? – 1279?
3	Ramkhamhaeng (the Great)	1279? – 1298?
4	Loe Thai	1298? – 1346/47
5	Ngua Nam Thum	1346/47
6	Maha Thammaracha I (Lithai)	1346/47 – 1368/74?
7	Maha Thammaracha II (Lue Thai)	1368/74? – 1398?
8	Maha Thammaracha II (Sai Luethai)	1398-1419
9	Maha Thammaracha IV (Borommaban)	1419-1438

#### Ayutthaya Kingdom

##### *U-thong dynasty (1<sup>st</sup> Rule)*

Order	Name	Reigning period
1	Ramathibodi I (U-thong)	1351 - 1369
2	Ramesuan	1369 – 1370

##### *Suphannaphum dynasty (1<sup>st</sup> Rule)*

Order	Name	Reigning period
3	Borommachathirat I (Pha Ngua)	1370 - 1388
4	Thong Lan (Thong Chan)	1388

*U-thong dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup> Rule)*

Order	Name	Reigning period
-	Ramesuan	1388 - 1395
5	Ramracha	1395 - 1409

*Suphannaphum dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup> Rule)*

Order	Name	Reigning period
6	Intharacha (Nakhon In)	1409 - 1424
7	Borommaracha II (Sam Phraya)	1424 – 1448
8	Borommatrailokkanat	1448 – 1488
9	Borommaracha III / Intharacha II	1488 – 1491
10	Ramathibodi II	1491 – 1529
11	Borommaracha IV	1529 – 1533
12	Ratsada	1533 – 1534
13	Chairacha	1534 – 1547
14	Yotfa	1547 – 1548
15	Worawongsa (U-Thong Dynasty)	1548
16	Maha Chakkraphat	1548 – 1569
17	Mahinthra	1569

*Sukhothai Dynasty*

Order	Name	Reigning period
18	Maha Thammaracha	1569 - 1590
19	Naresuan (the Great)	1590 – 1605
20	Ekathotsarot	1605 – 1610/11
21	Si Saowaphak	1610/11?
22	Songtham	1610 – 1628

Order	Name	Reigning period
23	Chettha	1628 – 1629
24	Athittayawong	1629

*Prasat Thong Dynasty*

Order	Name	Reigning period
25	Prasat Thong	1629 – 1656
26	Chai	1656
27	Si Suthammaracha	1656
28	Narai (the Great)	1656 - 1688

*Ban Phlu Luang Dynasty*

Order	Name	Reigning period
29	Phra Phetracha	1688 – 1703
30	Seua	1703 – 1709
31	Thai Sa	1709 – 1733
32	Borommakot	1733 – 1758
33	Uthumphon	1758 – 1758
34	Ekkathat	1758 - 1767

**Thonburi Kingdom**

Order	Name	Reigning period
-	Taksin (the Great)	1767 - 1782

## Bangkok (Rattanakosin) Kingdom / Siam / Thailand

### *Chakri Dynasty*

Order	Name	Reigning period
1	Rama I (Phutthayotfa) (the Great)	1782 – 1809
2	Rama II (Phutthaloetla)	1809 – 1824
3	Rama III (Nangklao)	1824 – 1851
4	Rama IV (Mongkut) (the Great)*	1851 – 1868
5	Rama V (Chulalongkorn) (the Great)	1868 – 1910
6	Rama VI (Vajiravudh)	1910 – 1925
7	Rama VII (Prajadhipok)	1925 – 1935
8	Rama VIII (Ananda Mahidol)	1935 - 1946
9	Rama IX (Bhumibol Adulyadej) (the Great)	1946 – 2016*
10*	Rama X (Vajiralongkorn)	2016 – present

**Note** The reigning years are based on David Wyatt’s data (2003: 309–313). As some royal names may differ, I have used the commonly recognised Thai names. Additionally, I have marked updated information with an asterisk (\*) and included the names of dynasties, alternative names of monarchs, and their designation as “the Great” in the bracket. This is intended to highlight the discussion in the body of the thesis. For further details, see Wyatt (2003) and Baker and Pasuk (2017; 2022).



## Appendix 2

### Prime Ministers of Thailand and Significant Events Since the Rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001

Prime minister	Party	Time in Office	Coming to power	Opponent group(s)	Ending the premiership
Thaksin Shinawatra	Thai Rak Thai	Feb 2001 – Sep 2006	Winner of the general election in 2001 and re-elected by a landslide in 2005.	Yellow Shirt or People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) led by Sondhi Limthongkul started in 2005.	Coup d'état on 19 September 2006 by the military led by General Sonthi Boonratklin. Then, he had been in overseas countries before returning to Thailand in 2023.
General Surayud Chulanont	-	Sep 2006 – Jan 2008	Appointed by the junta to head an interim government leading to a new constitution and election	-	The new constitution was enforced and a general election took place in December 2007.

<b>Prime minister</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Time in Office</b>	<b>Coming to power</b>	<b>Opponent group(s)</b>	<b>Ending the premiership</b>
Samak Sundaravej	People's Power Party (inherited from Thai Rak Thai Party)	Jan 2008 – Sep 2008	Ran for and won the election as the 'nominee of Thaksin' and formed a coalition government.	Yellow Shirts led by Sondhi Limthongkul. They regrouped to protest the Thaksin regime by blocking roads and occupying strategic locations.	The Constitutional Court finds Samak guilty of a conflict of interest for his TV cooking show during the heated period of Yellow Shirt protests.
Somchai Wongsawat	People's Power Party (inherited from Thai Rak Thai Party)	Sep 2008 – Dec 2008	Was voted in the National Assembly after Samak was terminated as prime minister. He is also known as Thaksin's brother-in-law.	Yellow Shirts continued to occupy strategic locations like airports and the government house.	The People's Power Party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court. It led Somchai and other members to be banned from politics for 5 years.

<b>Prime minister</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Time in Office</b>	<b>Coming to power</b>	<b>Opponent group(s)</b>	<b>Ending the premiership</b>
Abhisit Vejjajiva	Democrat Party	Dec 2008 – Aug 2011	Formed a coalition government in the House of Representatives after the People's Power Party was dissolved.	Red Shirts or United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) supported Thaksin. They gathered in 2009 and 2010 to occupy the main districts in Bangkok.	Lost in the general election in 2011
Yingluck Shinawatra	Pheu Thai Party (inherited from Thai Rak Thai and People's Power Party)	Aug 2011 – May 2014	Won the election in 2011. She is the first female prime minister and is known as Thaksin's youngest sister.	People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) led by Suthep Thaugsuban from the Democrat Party. They 'shut down' Bangkok and blocked the new election.	The Constitutional Court dismissed Yingluck from office on 7 May 2014. Then coups d'état took place on 22 May 2014 led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha.

<b>Prime minister</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Time in Office</b>	<b>Coming to power</b>	<b>Opponent group(s)</b>	<b>Ending the premiership</b>
General Prayut Chan-O-Cha	(1) National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) (2) Palang Pracharat Party	May 2014 – Aug 2023	Seized power in 2014 and became prime minister. After the general election in 2019, he was voted to be prime minister again.	(1) Pheu Thai Party as the opposition party. (2) Future Forward Party (dissolved in 2019) and then Moving Forward Party. (3) Youth Movement protestors in 2020-2021.	Lost in the general election in 2023.
Srettha Travisin	Pheu Thai Party	Aug 2023 – Aug 2024	After the Moving Forward Party was blocked, he was voted as prime minister.	Moving Forward Party as the leading opposition party.	The Constitutional Court dismissed Srettha from office on gross ethics violations.
Paetongtarn Shinawatra	Pheu Thai Party	Aug 2024 – present	Voted in the parliament as the prime minister after Srettha was sacked by the court.	People's Party, which transformed from the Moving Forward Party, as the leading opposition.	-

Data on October 2024

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Brief Historical Timeline after the 2006 Coup**

#### **2006 – 2007: Coup, Interim Government, and New Constitution and Election**

After the coup on 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2006, the junta-appointed Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont became an interim civilian government on 1<sup>st</sup> of October. In contrast to Thaksin's government, Surayud's cabinets were mostly comprised of retired high-ranking bureaucrats with military backgrounds including Surayud himself who was a soldier and the king's privy council. The main mission of this interim government was to draft a new constitution and lead a new election as soon as possible. At the same time, legal enforcement against Thaksin continued. In May 2007, the Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved and 111 politicians in the party were banned from politics for 10 years; meanwhile, Thaksin was exiled. Yet the former Thai Rak Thai transformed into the People's Power Party and went to the ballot under the new 2007 constitution. The first election was held on 23 December 2007 with a clear victory of Thaksin's new party making the 'nominee' prime minister – as he was called during Thaksin's election campaign- Samak Sundaravej become a new prime minister in January 2008. Since the coup could not eradicate Thaksin's power and allowed his companions back on the stage, the 2006 coup was regarded as a 'waste' (*sia khong*).

#### **2008 – 2010: Political Polarisation and Protestors**

Although the reason for the coup was to prevent division in society among pro and anti-Thaksin groups, this polarisation was not solved and remained deeply divided in the aftermath of the 2006 coup. The return of Thaksin's party in 2008 caused a years-long crisis. As the nominee prime minister, Samak faced difficulties from the Yellow Shirts or People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The Yellow Shirts gathered to pressure the newly appointed prime minister to resign and the movement mobilised to shut down key symbolic places such as Suvarnabhumi Airport and the House of Government.

Even though Samak rejected their proposal, he was forced to stop his premiership by the court as he was found guilty of a conflict of interest with his TV cooking programme. After this, the parliament voted for new prime minister Somchai Wongsawat, an educational minister and acting prime minister of Samak's government in September 2008. However, the Yellow Shirts continued their demonstrations as Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law. The protesters carried on occupying many places and the government escalated the enforcement during October. The violence caused several deaths and injuries. On 2<sup>nd</sup> December, Somchai – like Samak - was removed from his premiership by the court and the People's Power party was dissolved too. The crackdown twice on the People's Power Party made the second party in the parliament, the Democrat Party, form a coalition government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva on 17<sup>th</sup> December. As the anti-Thaksin forces like the Democrat Party could form a government, the Yellow Shirts announced the end of their movement. Overall, 2008 was the year that Thailand had 4 prime ministers and Thai politics was intensified by the anti-Thaksin group as well as the domination of the court in removing two prime ministers, which was then called 'judicial activism' (*tulakan-phiwat*)

Similar to the People's Power government, the fading of the Democrat government was not easily caused by the protesters called the Red Shirts. Backed by the military, Abhisit's government was viewed as lacking legitimacy as the party did not gain the majority vote. Meanwhile, there were several actions which were seen as destroying Thaksin and his party. Abhisit's premiership started from the challenges posed by the pro-Thaksin group and came to fruition between 2009 and 2010. In April 2009, the Red Shirts formed and went to cancel the ASEAN summit meeting by occupying the conference venue in Pattaya. This event made the ASEAN leaders escape by helicopter or boat, which radically ruined the Thai government's credibility among international leaders. Again, in March 2010, the Red Shirts gathered in the central district of Bangkok by blocking the main junction – Ratchaprasong – for months. The incident reached its peak in May when the government needed to clear the space. It became a battle between the authorities and protestors. Many places like Central World Department Store and Siam Square in that area were burnt. It ended with a crackdown by authorities.

### **2011 – 2014: The First Female Prime Minister, PDRC protestors, and another coup**

In July 2011, the general election brought the Pheu Thai Party – a new party that succeeded Thai Rak Thai and People’s Power - to power under the first female prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who is Thaksin’s youngest sister. The landslide victory made a strong government, despite Yingluck jumping into politics only 49 days before holding the highest job. Yingluck ran the campaign ‘to restore, not to revenge’ (*kho kaekhai mai kaekhaenan*) and built relationships with the army and privy council. Even though she was continuously criticised and bullied by opponent groups for her lack of political experience and public mistakes in her speech, her government carried on without large demonstrations for more than 2 years.

Yet the cycle continued when parliament passed the amnesty bill which included finding Thaksin guilty in November 2013. This led the country into a political crisis again through vast demonstrations led by Democrat Party member, Suthep Thaugsuban, called the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). A large demonstration was formed against the bill first before extending to abolish Yingluck’s government, and to reform Thailand from ‘Thaksinocracy’ (*rabop Thaksin*). Although Yingluck dissolved parliament on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013 and called for a new election on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2014, the PDRC was not satisfied with this since they felt that the election would legitimise Thaksin’s party back into power. This led the masses to block the election venues and caused a clash among people who wanted to vote; moreover, the Democrat Party also boycotted the election. As a result, the election was found invalid by the court and extended the power of the acting government while PDRC remained on the street. Until early May 2014, Yingluck, like Samak and Somchai, was found guilty by the court and removed from her premiership. Then, the existing acting cabinet seized power from the military on 22 May 2014 led by General Prayut Chan-O-Cha.

### **2014 – 2023 Prayut’s Regime, New Disruptors, and ‘Three Finger Salute’**

Given that the 2006 coup was viewed as a ‘waste’, the 2014 coup was different and used intensified measures to suppress power (Baker and Pasuk, 2022: 315-316). Prayut sat as a new prime minister along

with his coup leader and took strict measures against large demonstrations through Article 44 which gave absolute power to the prime minister. Prayut also launched 12 main values for Thai students to recite in schools along with educational content that emphasises the role of the monarchy. This juxtaposed with King Rama IX passing away on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2016. After year-long mourning, the king was cremated in October 2017, the same year the new constitution was launched. However, Prayut's government still held power until a general election took place in March 2019, almost 5 years after the coup. It should be noted that resistance against Prayut's government was present throughout his time after the coup, yet it did not appear as large as the demonstrations of the Yellow Shirts, Red Shirts, and PDRC movement. The state of emergency and Article 44 banned mass gatherings. Yet forms of resistance played out differently. When the first election after the 2014 coup came, a similar trend was reflected in the result: Phue Thai Party gained the majority vote, yet it was close to Prayut's party. This time Prayut's Palang Pracharat Party could continue his premiership through a coalition government.

In contrast to the previous elections, a new political player called the Future Forward Party ran to the ballot with unexpected success as the third majority in the parliament. The Future Forward Party is led by a young leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and was popular among the young generation who was fed up with polarised politics for decades. 'Future Forward' or in Thai 'new future' promotes a vision of carving a new path in Thai politics. Nevertheless, this party became a new threat to conservative power as the party seemed to occupy a radical position. After the election, Future Forward was – like Thai Rak Thai and People's Power - dissolved, and its key leaders were banned from politics for 10 years. Although the existing members formed a new party called the 'Moving Forward Party' under the new leader Pita Limchareonrat, the repeated dissolution of the opponent party by the state power incited many who were disappointed with the election and the ban of the party.

Even if Prayut clung to power after the 2019 election, the landscape was different according to the rule of law and constitution in contrast to when he had absolute power. Mass demonstrations came back to the Thai political arena again in 2020 coinciding with the global COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the previous



mobilities, the new resistance group was youth protesters from university to school students. They were the generation who grew up with political polarisation from the late 2000s who felt that their life, dreams, and opportunities were thwarted by the conflict caused by precedent generations. Stimulated by the pandemic, Prayut's government caused further anger from the mismanagement and corrupt practices of the vaccine roll-out. Youth protestors gathered as flash mobs and used social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to act against the government. The youth movement played a dominant role after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party and political bans for its leaders in February 2020. Perceived as the symbol of hope for new generation, student demonstrations grew widely in several universities leading to larger demonstrations and more radical proposals to reform the monarchy. Importantly, these protesters escalated their resistance to breaking taboos by touching upon the monarchy.

### **2023 onwards: Moving Forward Party Winning and The Shift of Political Power**

Even if the government remained in power after the protests, the landscape of Thai politics had changed and erupted in the May 2023 election. The 'new generation' (*khon run mai*) and the idea to change the country led the Moving Forward Party to surprisingly win the election beating Phue Thai Party who had succeeded in elections for the past two decades. Nonetheless, the Moving Forward Party could not reach its aim of forming a government as it was blocked by the junta-appointed senators which was one of the legacies of Prayut's constitution. This not only disappointed people once again about the election result but also shocked the country from the coalition between the Phue Thai Party and the former junta parties. It resulted in Srettha Travin, a tycoon and successful businessman, to become a new prime minister after 9 years under Prayut's regime. Moreover, this formation of an unexpected government allowed Thaksin to return to the country after several years in exile. Meanwhile, a new chapter of Thai politics has begun as the once-decades-long enemies become allies with new common rivals.

**Sources:** Baker and Phasuk (2022); Ruth (2021); Terwiel (2011); Prajak (2024)

## Appendix 4

### List of Abbreviations used in the Thesis

BL	Boys Love; Yaoi Fiction	นิยายวาย
<i>Buppe</i>	<i>Buppesannivas</i>	บุพเพสันนิวาส
Fanfic	Fan Fiction	แฟนฟิก
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hauchai ThotsaEdkon KAIHUN</i>	หัวใจทศกัณฐ์ <i>KAIHUN</i>
<i>Kahon</i>	<i>Kahon Mahoraturuk</i>	กาหลมหรทึก
M.C.	Mom Chao	หม่อมเจ้า; ม.จ. (the title for a minor member/decendent of the royal family)
M.L.	Mom Laung	หม่อมหลวง; ม.ล. (the title for a minor member/decendent of the royal family)
M.R.	Mom Rajawongse	หม่อมราชวงศ์; ม.ร.ว. (the title for a minor member/decendent of the royal family)
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order	คณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ (คสช.)
<i>NH</i>	<i>Nawa Himmaphan</i>	นวมิมพานต์
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy	พันธมิตรประชาชนเพื่อประชาธิปไตย (พันธมิตรฯ); Yellow Shirt เสื้อเหลือง
PDRC	People's Democratic Reform Committee	คณะกรรมการประชาชนเพื่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงประเทศไทยให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยที่สมบูรณ์ อันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข (กปปส.)
RNH	Royal-Nationalist History	ประวัติศาสตร์ราชาชาตินิยม
<i>Susan</i>	<i>Susan Siam</i>	สุสานสยาม
<i>Traiphum</i>	<i>Thraiphum Phra Ruang</i>	ไตรภูมิพระร่วง ; ไตรภูมิภค
<i>Trinet</i>	<i>Trinethip</i>	ตรีเนตรทิพย์
UDD	United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship	แนวร่วมประชาธิปไตยต่อต้านเผด็จการแห่งชาติ (นปช.); Red Shirt เสื้อแดง