

The Princess of Saenwi: A Tragic Romance of a Shan Princess

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Abstract

The paper is a study of a Thai play *The Princess of Saenwi* written by Luang Wichitwathakarn in BE 2481. The play portrays a tragic romance between a Shan princess and a Thai prince of two ancient states: *Saenwi* and *Khemarat*. The story tells of a romance set in the exotic past, ending with the death of the two lovers whose love is destroyed by the political conflict of the states. Although the content of the play conveys the power of true love that could lead to the sacrifice of one's self, the hidden 'message' is the greater power of 'patriotism' or love for one's nation. The Shan princess refuses to give up her country even to her most beloved prince and is willing to die proudly protecting her country.

The play with its lyrical songs about love and patriotism was very popular in Thailand around BE 2500. The lyrics in the play were widely sung and remembered even among those who did not have the opportunity to see the play. The writer, Luang Wichitwathakarn stated in the preface of the play that the play was intended to illustrate eternal love and friendship between Thai and Shan people as they all in fact share the same Tai cultural heritage. Seen in this light, the play belongs to a special 'genre' of literacy works of the period propagating 'patriotism' and 'pride' of Thai-Tai people. The reference to Shan state and the 'passionate' and 'courageous' characters of the Shan princess clearly reflect the 'image' of the Shan in the mind of Thais.

On the other hand, the 'tragic' theme of the story enhances the 'charm' of the play, echoing the well-known Thai poetry *Lilit Phra Lo*, or the equivalent of *Chao Sam Lo* of the Shan. As a 'literary work' the play is a crystallization of the mutual acceptance and admiration of Thai-Tai culture of the modern time.

The Princess of Saenwi as a Tragic Romance

The Princess of Saenwi is a Thai play written by Luang Wichitwathakarn in B.E.2481. The text is a ‘modern’ play in prose with 10 lyrical ‘songs’, the lyrics and melodies of which are composed by Luang Wichitwathakarn.

The play is divided into 10 scenes with a ‘prelude’ scene portraying the play as a ‘story’ told by a teacher to her students explaining the ‘myth’ of tragic love between the princess of Saenwi and the prince of Khemarat in the exotic past of around B.E. 1700.

According to the play, the two states represent a relationship between Thai-Shan states, Saenwi is a Shan state whereas Khemarat or Chiengtung is a Thai state.

The story follows a theme of love and war between the two states. The Prince of Khemarat visited Saenwi as a diplomat in order to improve the troubled relationship with the state of Saenwi and fell in love with the princess of Saenwi who was already engaged to the prince of Pugan. This passionate love proved disastrous for both the state of Saenwi and Khemarat.

The prince of Khemarat was forced by his father to attack and fight with Saenwi whereas Saenwi lost their king and the princess of Saenwi resumed the responsibility of the head of the state. The princess defended her country courageously and refused to give in even to her beloved prince of Khemarat. She evacuated the city and finally killed herself rather than gave in to her enemy and became a prisoner of war. The prince of Khemarat could not stand this heartbreaking separation from his beloved princess and decided to die in order to join his loved one in eternal heaven.

The story ends with this moving scene of the two lovers joyously reunited in the beautiful royal garden of Saenwi.

The tragic ending of the play seems to appear almost a ‘happy’ one because of the joyous reunion of the two lovers.

The Success of the Play as a Literary Text

From a literary point of view, *The Princess of Saenwi* was a great success both from the tragic story and the impressive lyrics of the play. A tragic romance of the lover of two states in conflict is already well known in Thai literary culture as the beautiful classical poetry ‘Lilit Phra Lo.’ Besides, *The Princess of Saenwi* was presented as a ‘modern’ play with lyrical songs and dance. Amongst the well-known lyrics in the play are those in the second scene when Prince of Khemarat was given a grand reception. This scene is a scene where the princess of Saenwi and the prince of Khemarat first met.

Please Come, Enjoy the Roses

Come, please come
 Enjoy these flowers
 Roses so sweet,
 So tempting, they melt your heart
 See how they are blossoming
 And untouched!
 Come, please come
 These are love flowers
 Those who come first
 Will get them
 If you are hesitant
 Your love flower will fade
 Hurry, come and pick your flower!

Seanwi

We the Seanwi people
 Are so glad to receive you
 The prince of Khemarat
 We are celebrating your visit here
 You have to leave your glorious city
 To visit a modest countryside

We the Seanwi people
 Are so glad to receive you
 We ask for your pardon
 If our reception is not grand enough
 Please enjoy your stay
 In good health and safety!

We the Seanwi people
 Are so glad to receive you
 Please enjoy yourself
 May all your wishes come true
 May your stay be full of blessing!

Khemarat

We the Khemarat people
 Strangers to your land
 We have travelled so far
 Just to admire the glory of Saenwi
 The perfect beauty
 We dream of and intend to see!

We the Khemarat people
 Strangers to your land,
 Saenwi is a city of joy
 Like being in heaven
 The flowers and the people
 Are all divine!
 May we ask to stay
 For the rest of our life?

We the Khemarat people
 Strangers to your land
 If we do anything wrong
 Please pardon us
 Even after we leave Seanwi
 We will never forget her glory!

The meeting at the reception was a chance of 'love at first sight' for the prince of Khemarat and there are two lyrical songs describing the sweet pain of love.

Seen from afar

Morning till evening
 I can see you from afar
 How I wish to be near you
 Yet I do not dare!
 Just seeing you
 My heart is overjoyed
 Now you are gone
 My heart is painful!

Morning till evening
 I can see you from afar
 How I wish to be near you
 Yet I do not dare!
 Like a little bird
 Floating in the air
 All my pain is kept
 Deep in the heart

Morning till evening
 I can see you from afar
 How lonely and painful
 O my poor heart!
 Admiring just your shadow
 My heart is trembling so
 Will I ever can be
 Really near you in reality?

Night

When night is here
 My heart is so lonely
 The cold wind
 Brings your fragrance to me
 My sad heart cries
 Longing for you all night!

No joy of night for me
 When I look at the sky
 The moon is happy
 With all the stars
 Only me, I am all alone
 My sad heart cries
 Longing for you all night!

We can say that the play follows the ‘convention’ of a romance, especially Thai romance of love at first sight and the lamentation of love. Yet the most ‘memorable’ song in the play is about ‘Love for the country’, reflecting the ‘hidden’ message of the play as a means of propagating ‘patriotism’.

Love for the country

No matter how great is our love
 It can always change
 A passionate love for a lover
 Can easily turn bitter!
 Yet love for our country
 Is much more passionate
 Much more powerful
 So powerful we can sacrifice
 Even our own lives!

No regrets for our lives
 When we die, our bodies are cremated
 Truly we can be parted with everything
 But our beloved country!

It is obvious from the story that the ‘passionate’ love of the princess of Saenwi for her country is more valued than her ‘passionate’ love for the prince of Khemarat. This song is widely known amongst the Thai especially during the time of the play from BE 2481-2500.

The Princess of Saenwi as a ‘Propaganda’ Text

The death of the two lovers appears so moving and powerful for the audience of the play and thus the play serves the purpose of a ‘literary’ text. Yet in the ‘words’ of the author, this moving and ‘tragic’ ending has a more ‘political’ aspect.

In the ‘preface’ of the play the author states clearly the ‘political’ aspect of the play.

“The story of *The Princess of Saenwi* ends in tragedy. This tragedy still will be a great reminder of a strong bondage between Tai Noi and Tai Yai (Thai and Shan¹)...”

“Moreover, there will remain an undeniable fact of love in the heart of Tai Noi and Tai Yai. These two branches of Tai people will forever be the closest of friends and relatives. As can be seen from the play *The Princess of Saenwi*, the hearts and souls of Tai Noi and Tai Yai are bound together in the same place...”²

In order to understand why a ‘tragic romance’ should be regarded as a suitable means of promoting ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’ for Thai society at that time, one has to understand the ‘historical’ context of the text as well as the ‘motivation’ of the author.

The play *The Princess of Saenwi* was written in B.E. 2481 which was in the Field Marshall Phibulsongkram’s regime. It was the period when the government was trying to promote national power. This policy was executed with great success through the effort of Luang Vichitwathakarn who served in many prominent positions in Field Marshall Phibulsongkram’s regime³

The policy of propagating the ‘greatness’ of Tai race and emphasizing the true ‘bondage’ of all the Tai peoples was strongly recommended by Luang Wichitwathakarn.

Nevertheless, from a point of view of a scholar, Luang Wichitwathakarn could be credited with an academic enthusiasm in his research work on the Tai race from various resources of Western scholars. He compiled and translated into Thai various research works on Tai people, for example; *The Tai Race* by Dr. William Clifton Dodd, *The Shans* by W.W. Cochrane, *Tai or Shan Race* by Holt S. Hallet, *Yunnan* by Major Davies, *Ethnologies de l’Union Française* by Andre-Gourhan et Jean Piorier, *L’Indochine* by Charles Robequain, *Histoire de L’Indochine* by Andre Masson, *Peuple Siamois ou Thai* by Leon de Rosny⁴

***The Princess of Saenwi* as a ‘Representation of Shaness’ in Thai Perception**

Another important aspect of the play *The Princess of Saenwi* is that the play is a ‘representation’ of ‘Shaness’ in Thai perception. Judging from its popularity and success as a play, one could be certain that the two main characters of the play are well-remembered in the mind of Thai audience. Nevertheless it’s worth noting that the title of the play emphasizes the female character, ‘The Princess of Saenwi’

Therefore, we could say that the author seems to give a more significant role to the princess of Saenwi who represents ‘Saenwi’ or Shan in the play.

¹ Wichitwathakarn, Luang. ‘The Princess of Saenwi’ in **Wichit Wannakadi: Immortal Plays**, Bangkok, 1993 p. 163

² Ibid, p. 164

³ See details in Pra-Ornrat Buranamat, **The analysis of Luang Vichit Vadakan’s Historical Plays**, unpublished thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1980

⁴ See more details in Wichitwathakarn, Luang. **The Research of Tai Race**. Bangkok. 2006

Apart from the perfect beauty of a princess, the princess of Saenwi is portrayed as a proud and defiant princess who is also a great warrior and a determined patriot. The tragic ending of the play reflects the admirable courage and determination of the princess whose love for her country is dearer to her than her first love and even her own life!

The outstanding quality of her courage and pride is much emphasized in the play. One can say that this quality has made the princess of Saenwi one of the most memorable 'heroines' in Thai mind.

Moreover, it has set up a 'classic representation' of Shaness in Thai literary culture, influencing a creation of a similar quality in historical novels on Thai, Shans, and Lanna by one of the most famous novelists of modern time, Krisana Asoksin.

From BE 2543-2547, Krisana Asoksin has written a trilogy of very popular novels on Thai, Shan and Lanna. Especially, the last book of the trilogy, *Khun Ho Kam*, is mainly about the turbulent period of the wars between the Shan and the British.

Eventhough the trilogy novels are very well researched historical novels, most of the 'Shan' characters created by Krisana Asoksin seem to show the characteristic traits of being proud, courageous and patriotic as portrayed in the play *The Princess of Saenwi* by Luang Vichitwathakarn.

Thus we can say that to a certain degree, 'Shaness' in modern Thai perception is still influenced by this successful literary text.

Pride & Perception of Tai heritage: A Conclusion

As we have considered the significance of the text *The Princess of Saenwi* in various aspects so far, we should be able to see more clearly how the 'perception' of the greatness of Tai heritage has been successfully formed through literary culture in Thai society from BE 2481 up to the present time.

Even though a literary scholar could feel resentful in admitting that a good literary text should be used for political purpose, one could not reject the value of the text and its impact on society.

Fortunately, in the case of *The Princess of Saenwi*, it seems that the various aspects and 'hidden' purpose of the text have been intertwined into a 'magical' harmony.

This 'magical' harmony has transcended time and resulted in a proud and positive perception of Tai cultural heritage.

In the modern time of 'cultural chaos' this 'perception' could be of the utmost strength in maintaining a spiritual balance between persistence and change in the world of reality.

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