

Historical Writings, Historical Novels and Period Movies and Dramas: An Observation Concerning Burma in Thai Perception and Understanding

Most modern Thais are more familiar with period movies and dramas than serious historical works written by professional historians. This leads me to make some observations concerning historical movies and dramas.

In the movie, *The King and I*, Yul Brynner plays the lead role of King Mongkut (Rama IV), the first Bangkok king in the modern era. This film has long been banned in Thailand because it falsifies Thai history. Moreover, from the Thai point of view, the movie also treats King Mongkut with a lack of respect.

This movie, and the Broadway play which preceded it, dealt with the purported romance between King Mongkut and Mrs. Anna Harriette Leonowens, an English governess. Both were based on Margaret Landon's famous historical novel, *Anna and the King of Siam*, which was first published in 1945. This novel was in turn based on two controversial books by Anna Harriette Leonowens: *An English Governess at the Siamese Court* [1870] and *The Romance of the Harem* [1873]. These books concern her private life in the Siamese court during the reign of King Mongkut.

I contend that there are similarities between *The King and I* and the image of the Burmese in

Thai perception and understanding.

The King and I provides us with many lessons. First, period movies and dramas do not emerge spontaneously. Such pieces generally emerge from historical novels while such a novel is created from historical works. Second, in every such "invention", the author, the scriptwriter, the producer, and the performers, invariably use their imagination to creatively interpret the story. Thus stories shown in movies inevitably differ from the original novels or the works of history. Although historical accounts are not always reliable, when these stories appear as movies or on television or the stage, they can have a great impact on the audience. Westerners have come to know King Mongkut from Broadway and the cinema rather than from serious historical writings.

Here is where the similarity comes with the image of the Burmese in Thai perception.

From November 1996 until February 1997, a popular historical drama called *Nai Khanom Tom* was serialized on Thai television. This told the story of a Thai boxer who was captured by the Burmese after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. He was able to preserve the Kingdom's reputation by defeating several Burmese and

Mon boxers before the eyes of the king of Burma and his court. *Khanom Tom* literally means a round-shaped Thai sweet made from sticky rice, sugar and coconut, which is tightly wrapped with bamboo twine and banana leaf. Naming the boxer after this Thai sweet reflected his appearance, that is, short and muscular. Strangely, Thailand's Olympian boxer, Somruak Mamsing, who played the role of Khanom Tom, is tall and thin. The producers were more interested in capitalizing on the popularity of Somluck, who is the only Thai ever to have won an Olympic gold medal, than on portraying Khanom Tom accurately. There are other such examples.

This TV drama is based on a novel, also entitled *Nai Khanom Tom*, written by the SEAWrite award winner, Khomthuan Khanthanu. This novel itself is not historically accurate. Drawing on his vivid imagination, the author created a new story of this heroic boxer starting with a childhood made tragic by Burmese invaders in an earlier attack on Ayutthaya. In the story they rape and murder his older sister and kill his parents. As might be typical of a Chinese Kung Fu movie, after Nai Khanom Tom became an adult, he went from village to village searching for a famous boxing master. Finally he finds a mysterious martial arts guru with a name known to no one who teaches Nai Khanom Tom the art of boxing. Eventually, the Burmese capture Ayutthaya and destroy the capital. They take many prisoners of war, including Nai Khanom Tom, back with them to Burma. The accounts in the novel are not based on any historical records but are a product of Khomthuan's creative writing.

The actual account in the Thai chronicles is short and precise.

During the time that the King of Ava stayed in Yangon and participated in the royal ceremony of placing the golden umbrella atop the Shwedagon Pagoda, a Burmese minister informed him that a skillful Thai boxer lived in the city. The king then ordered the minister to bring him in. Nai Khanom Tom, a talented boxer from the old capital [Ayutthaya] was brought before the King of Myanmar who immediately delivered an order to arrange for a Burmese boxer to fight his Thai counterpart. Nai Khanom Tom knocked him

down before the end of the first round. Then 9–10 boxers were quickly sent into the ring one after another just to be defeated by the Thai boxer. The King of Ava, in great surprise, placed his hand against his chest, and complimented him with words saying the Thai boxer had a powerful charm over his entire body. This enabled Nai Khanom Tom, without any weapons, to knock down 9–10 challengers. The reasons that the kingdom had been lost to the enemy were due to the fact that their rulers were not good. If they had proved to be good, the Thais would not have lost Ayutthaya. He then gave Nai Khanom Tom some rewards.

Without any intention, the image projected in the Thai TV drama represents a fixed set of ideas about the Thai perception of what Burmese are like. In this, the producer has emphasized the negative image of the Burmese. He dehumanized them, depicting them as monsters who plunder, kill, and rape Thai people.

Everyone in my family understands me as a Burmese expert and a representative of the Burmese. When this TV drama was aired, members of my family, my wife, my children, and even my old mother, attacked me at almost every intermission as being as dehumanized as the Burmese on television. This caused me to realize the impact of this period drama and that the negative image the Thai have towards the Burmese is centuries old.

Nai Khanom Tom is not the only TV drama showing the dark side of the Burmese. Within the two months prior to the showing of *Nai Khanom Tom*, two other period dramas concerning the Burmese attack on Ayutthaya were broadcast. One was entitled *Ruan Mayura* meaning "Peacock House". This told the story of a beautiful lady-in-waiting for a family of nobility in the late-Ayutthaya period. Through the magical power of her father who covered his house with magical charms, the household survived the Burmese attack. The house and life of the lady persisted until the present day when she managed at last to find her true love. In his previous life he had been a Thai soldier who was killed in battle as Ayutthaya fell in 1767.

Almost all the period dramas are based on historical novels. In Thailand, the novel had its

roots in the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), who reigned from 1910–1925. During this time, many novels written in Thai as well as novels translated from other languages were published in newspapers and magazines. Such periodicals as *Lak Withaya* and *Si Krung* were popular in and around Bangkok. Published historical fiction included *Dap Lek Namphi* (The Iron Sword) by Ayannakot and *Thahan Phrachao Krung Thon* (King Taksin's Soldiers) by Siwasariyanon. Most of the novels concerned national heroes. The authors used these works to show adoration for the three pillars of the country: nation, religion, and monarchy. But the zenith of Thai historical novels was not to occur until after 1932.

The most influential historical novels written in the first half of the twentieth century were *Bang Rachan* and *Khun Suk* by Mai Muangdoem (Kan Phungbun na Ayutthaya). *Bang Rachan* tells about the Bang Rachan villagers who fought to their death against a much larger Burmese force. Mai Muangdoem's vivid imagination as well as his knowledge of Thai history portrays the Burmese as the most evil enemies of the Thai. Here is an example of a theater of battle in this novel:

Numerous houses, cabins, and barns were burned to ashes leaving behind many corpses in the fire and on the ground when the Burmese came to sack [the village]. Babies died because their mothers died. The number of old and young slaughtered by the swords of the Burmese was uncountable. The villagers' wives and daughters were robbed and carried off on horseback back to the central fort. Wisetchaichan was abandoned People left their houses and villages to go to Bang Rachan.

Mai Muangdoem had a great talent for recreating history in novels. His works capture the interest and feelings of people of all ages. *Bang Rachan*, for example, has been reproduced frequently in drama and movie form. Even better known that this, however, is his novel *Khun Suk*. This tells of a blacksmith named Sema who was exceptionally skilled in using two-hand swords against the Burmese. He fought his way to becoming one of the best soldiers of King Naresuan (reigned 1590–1605). This story

characterized the Burmese as the archenemy of the Thai nation, the kings, and, in particular, the commoners. Like *Bang Rachan*, *Khun Suk* has been reproduced frequently on the stage, a radio or television drama, and a motion picture since World War II. People have been known to become just as addicted to *Khun Suk* as others are addicted to opium.

Many more historical novels on Siamese-Burmese warfare have been written since 1945. No less than the pioneer novels discussed above, these later works depict the Burmese as a powerful and unjust enemy of the Thai.

There are also many other period movies and plays that are not based on historical novels. To serve the immediate demand of certain governments which aimed to create a sense of national unity in Thailand, movie and drama producers were obliged to produce works based on ready-made scripts prepared by hired authors. Interestingly, Thai critics of fiction, accord little value to such dramas and movies. Sometimes the critics do not even consider such writings as a literary work at all.

But from the point of view of the historian, these scripts possess exceptional value in terms of historical sources. The authors of these scripts have brought many heroes in history back to life in their dramas and movies. One of the best-known script writers is Luang Vichit Vathakan. He played a decisive role in Thai politics after the change of the government's political structure on 24 June 1932. He worked in the new government to legitimize its authority and create a sense of national unity from 1933–1938. Although Luang Vichit supervised many areas of the government's work, his primary concern was promoting the performing arts. He especially extolled the past glory of the Thai nation as well as the life and achievements of national heroes and heroines who fought the Burmese. His most influential historical drama, *Luat Suphan* [The Blood of Suphanburi] was a musical Luang Vichit wrote without the help of a historical novel. The play, which is set at the end of the Ayutthaya period, describes an attack by the Burmese on the capital and nearby towns. The story tells how a group of villagers from Suphanburi taken by the Burmese as prisoners-of-war, took strong and violent action against their captors. All were killed in their fight against

overwhelming numbers of Burmese. When this drama is played on the stage, the audience often has a strong emotional response. *Luat Suphan* has also been reproduced frequently as a stage play, on radio, television, and as a motion picture.

There are quite a few other plays and historical music written by this author. One is the well-known play, *Maha Devi* (The Great Queen), about a Chiang Mai woman who in reality fought against both the Burmese and the Thai of Ayutthaya in the sixteenth century. Luang Vichit's play, however, depicts her as helping to unify Siam into one great country.

When I was about 10–15 years old, I was a television star. Through this I gained direct experience with how TV scripts were written and the programs produced. I learned that the script is of utmost importance to the director and producer. Unlike historical novels, scripts are created to facilitate the producer's attempt to transform the abstract and imaginative into a performing art that will not only be visualized but also appreciated by audiences from different walks of life. The script generally manifests the ideas of a writer but can also represent the ideology of a government or society or the preconceptions of the era during which the script was written.

Before each episode of the drama is performed, the script was distributed to the performers so that they could memorize their lines. However, more than half the performers failed to do this. Instead they had to rely on people off stage who, even in live broadcasts, verbally cue the actors as to what they should say.

Many of the historical novels, dramas, and movies are created within the formal framework of Thai national history. As it was recorded in the past, Thai history is basically a record of continual warfare to gain and regain independence as well as to protect the country from invasion. Research by Western scholars has helped nationalist historians to complete the long history of a Thai people once believed to have been a mighty race that migrated from China. W.C. Dodd proposed, for example, that the predecessors of the Thai, known as Tai, moved southwards out of what is now Yunnan province because of attacks on their kingdom by the Chinese. Prince Damrong Rachanubhab, the

father of modern Thai historical scholarship, believed that the Tai, in order to establish an independent kingdom in what is now Thailand, broke with the Khmer who had ruled in this region prior to that. To do that, Prince Damrong believed that the Tai had to fight a war of emancipation against the Khmer rulers. A history of Thailand written completely within the framework of nationalist history is W.A.R. Wood's *A History of Siam* [Bangkok 1926]. Like Thai nationalist historians, Wood explained how the Tai built up the nation despite oppression by powerful neighbors:

It will, I think be frankly admitted that the Siamese have some right to feel a pride in the history of their country. It is the story of a collection of more or less uncultivated immigrants from southern China, who settled in the country now known as Siam, overcoming a mighty empire, and establishing a number of free states, which became finally fused into the Siam of today. We see them humbled to the dust again and again by a more powerful neighbor, yet always rising up and regaining their freedom. A hundred years ago there were dozens of independent states in South-Eastern Asia. Today there remains but one: Siam.

In the perspective of nationalist history, the Burmese, no less than the Chinese and the Khmer, are characterized as an important enemy of the Thai. The Burmese were in fact even worse because they were the only nation that could capture and destroy the most important Thai seat of power in history, Ayutthaya.

In the perspective of nationalist history, the wars between Siam and Burma have been shown as wars of national independence. Furthermore, this perspective clearly characterizes the Burmese as an enemy of the Thai nation.

It should be noted that the concept of "Thai national history" emerged only a century ago during a period in which many countries in Asia were being colonized by such Western powers as France and Great Britain. The idea of Thailand being a nation state belonging to the Thai people with Bangkok as its only center was established in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), who reigned from 1868–1910. He was the son of King Mongkut or the King in *The King and I*.

From the reign of King Chulalongkorn, many historical texts and books were written in the tradition of nationalist history. Two important works were *Phongsawadan Chabap Phra-ratchahatlekha* [The Royal Autograph Chronicle] and *Thai Rop Phama* [Our Wars with the Burmese]. These and many other similar works have had a great impact on the perception and understanding of the Thai people, including authors of historical novels and producers of historical dramas.

Historical writings since the era of “nation building” did not emerge out of thin air. On the contrary, there were what I call the “original elements” in which those writings took root. These included ancient or classical historical works and books of poetry composed shortly after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767.

These works show that it was not until Ayutthaya was totally destroyed in 1767 that Thai political leaders and intellectuals came to recognize the danger of the Burmese and to take an interest in rewriting the past regarding their relations with Burma. Chronicles written and revised after 1767, for example, gave special attention and glory to great kings such as Naresuan who triumphed over the Burmese. This king in fact was the only Thai ruler who was frequently able to defeat the Burmese and who also led two expeditions into the Burmese heartland.

Chronicles from the early-Bangkok era not only modified and colorfully painted the existing accounts of the Siamese-Burmese wars written in the Ayutthayan chronicles, but also explicitly expressed antagonism towards the Burmese. The *Sangkhitayawansa* (Chronicle of Buddhist Councils), written by a learned Bangkok monk in 1789, compared for example the situation after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 with the Buddhist dark age, the Kali Yuga. Krom Phraratchawangbowon Mahasurasihanat, the Prince of the Front Palace during the reign of King Rama I, (founder of the Bangkok Dynasty, reigning from 1782–1809), described the times as calamitous:

The sinful Burmese ravaged our villages and cities. A great number of our citizens were killed and many temples were ruined. Our peaceful kingdom was abandoned and turned into forest. The Burmese showed no mercy on the Thai and felt no shame for all the sins they had committed.

Even more influential was the historical poem, now considered as a Thai literary classic, *Lilit Talaeng Phai* [Defeat of the Burmese] which was written in 1832 by a high-ranking Buddhist monk named Krom Phra Paramanuchit Chinorot. *Lilit* is a literary form comprising various types of poems. *Lilit Talaeng Phai* describes in detail the celebrated battle between King Naresuan and the Crown Prince of Burma, Uparacha. According to the story this battle consisted of single combat on elephant back and ending when Naresuan beheaded Uparacha. This classical poem was written to commemorate King Naresuan's victory. *Lilit Talaeng Phai* has since become a popular text in Thai literature classes. Students are required to learn it by heart or memorize the section concerning the elephant back combat:

The elephant which King Naresuan rode is comparable to the vehicle of the God Indra while the one that Uparacha, the prince of Burma sat upon, is no less than the elephant of the King of Demons named Kirimack Monkala.

During the early Bangkok period, the Burmese, as Thai rulers and intellectuals understood them, were the enemy of Buddhism, the Thai people, and the Kingdom. They were not yet pictured as the enemy of the Thai nation since the concept of nationhood was only introduced as a consequence of the colonial impact on Thailand decades later.

In conclusion, the image of the Burmese as an enemy of the Thai since the fall of Ayutthaya has never faded from the memory of the Thai people. What has changed is the ways in which the image is portrayed and made understood in each political and social circumstance.