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Phra Malai Texts–Telling them apart: Preface or Performance[1]

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Abstract

The story of Phra Malai, the magical monk who traveled to hell and heaven, exists in many different versions in Thailand. The differences lie in language, poetic form and the ritual context in which the text is recited. The storyline is essentially the same in all versions, except that *Phra Malai Klon Suat* (*PMKS*), which is written on accordion-folded illustrated paper manuscripts (*samut khoi*), contains much repetition and a more detailed description of the suffering hell beings and their sins. This article has two purposes. The first is to clarify the characteristics of the different *Phra Malai* texts, as scholars frequently are not careful to differentiate them and consequently write things that are incorrect. The second purpose is to provide information about the social context in which *PMKS* was popular for the purpose of shedding light on the meaning of certain miniature paintings that appear in these manuscripts.

Keywords: *Phra Malai Klon Suat, suat kharuehat, samut khoi,* funeral wakes, performance

บทคัดย่อ

เรื่องพระมาลัย พระอรหันต์ผู้มีฤทธิ์มากผู้เคยไปยังนรกและสวรรค์ ปรากฏอยู่หลายสำนวนในประเทศไทย โดยมีความแตกต่างในด้านภาษา ลักษณะคำประพันธ์ และบริบทของพิธีกรรมในการสวดพระมาลัย ทั้งนี้โครงเรื่องหลักจะมีลักษณะเดียวกันในทุกสำนวน แต่พระมาลัยกลอนสวดซึ่งมักเขียนลงในสมุดข่อยจะมีเนื้อหาที่มีความซ้ำซ้อนมากกว่า และมีการบรรยายถึงผู้ที่กำลังทุกข์ทรมานอยู่ในนรกด้วยบาปต่าง ๆ มากกว่า บทความนี้

[1] This article is based in part on a paper, "Those Strange-Looking Monks in Phra Malai Manuscript Paintings: Voices of The Text," presented at the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies in Chiang Mai, 2017.

มีวัตถุประสงค์ 2 ประการ ประการแรกคือการชี้ให้เห็นถึงลักษณะของเรื่องพระมาลัยในสำนวนต่างๆ เนื่องจากที่ผ่านมานักวิชาการมักมิได้ระมัดระวังในการจำแนกความแตกต่างอันนำไปสู่การเขียนที่ผิดพลาด วัตถุประสงค์ประการที่สองคือการให้ข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับบริบททางสังคมซึ่งพระมาลัยกลอนสวดเป็นที่นิยม เพื่อสร้างความเข้าใจที่ชัดเจนขึ้นเกี่ยวกับความหมายของภาพวาดขนาดเล็กบางภาพที่ปรากฏอยู่ในเอกสารเหล่านี้

คำสำคัญ: พระมาลัยกลอนสวด สวดคฤหัสถ์ สมุดข่อย การเฝ้าศพ การแสดง

Introduction

The story of Phra Malai, which is known to Buddhists throughout Thailand, exists in numerous versions or "tellings," (Brereton, 1992; 1995), a term originally used by A.K. Ramanujan (1991) in reference to the many different *Ramayana* versions. While all Phra Malai tellings share the same basic sequence of events and are usually written as poetry, it is important to note that they differ in numerous ways, including language/dialect/region, the ritual setting in which they are recited, poetic form, and literary level. Key scenes from the narrative are depicted in sculpture, temple murals and the accordion-folded manuscripts known as *samut khoi.*

Figure 1 Phra Malai flying to heaven. Phra Malai manuscript in the New York Public Library, # Thai MS. 22, from Ginsburg (2000), p. 100.

The Phra Malai Story[2]

The gist of the story is as follows. Long ago on the island of Lanka there lived a saintly monk named Malai. Through merit accrued in past lives, he had supernatural powers like those of the Buddha's disciple Moggallana that enabled him to fly to the hells to relieve the sufferings of the beings there and then return to the human realm to report on their conditions to their relatives.

One morning as he was going on his alms rounds, Phra Malai encountered a poor man who took care of his mother and made a living by cutting grass.[3] The man went to bathe in a pond, where he picked eight lotuses and presented them to the monk, asking that through this offering he would never again be born poor. After accepting the offering, Phra Malai flew to Tavatimsa Heaven to present the lotuses at the Culamani Cetiya, where the hair relic of the Buddha is enshrined.[4] There he met the god Indra, who had built the cetiya, and witnessed the arrival of a series of deities coming to worship the relic, each surrounded by progressively larger and larger retinues.[5] In each case, Indra told Phra Malai how that deity had earned sufficient merit to be born in heaven. Each had practiced a specific act of *dana* (generosity), such as giving all of his rice to a starving crow, presenting offerings to a monk, sponsoring cremations, planting bodhi trees, cleaning the temple grounds, building a sand cetiya, etc.

Eventually the bodhisatta Metteya arrived from his abode in Tusita Heaven to worship the relic. He asked Phra Malai about the characteristics of the inhabitants of the human realm (the Jambu continent or Chomphudipa) and the monk replied that they lived in

[2] For a discussion of the sources upon which the basic Phra Malai texts are based see Brereton, 1992 and 1995; Collins, 1993; Denis, 1963 and 1965; and Makchang, 1978 and 1981.

[3] Ginsburg identified the poor man as a "wood-cutter" because a bundle of wood is often seen in *samut khoi* paintings, but most of the versions of *Phra Malai* identify him simply as a poor man who supported his mother and wanted to avoid rebirth as a poor man. In *PMKS*, he gathers wild vegetables and cuts wood.

[4] Some versions of the story mention the Buddha's tooth relic as well a hair relic.

[5] Note that the deities are all male, while their retinues consist of females, an interesting topic for future research.

diverse circumstances and made merit in diverse ways, all in the hope of meeting Metteyya when he attained enlightenment as the next Buddha. The bodhisatta then gave Phra Malai the following message: those who wished to meet him should participate fully in the *Vessantara Jataka* festival by listening to the recitation and presenting various kinds of offerings, each numbering a thousand. They should also avoid committing sins and practice *dana*. Metteyya then described a serious of tumultuous events that will precede his coming: the disappearance of Gotama Buddha's teachings,[6] followed by the degeneration of morality and a period of violence during which the vast majority of people will kill each other. A small number, however, will retreat into caves and emerge when the carnage is over to form a new society based on morality. Eventually because of the gradual accumulation of merit made by virtuous people, the world will regenerate and flourish. A utopian age will follow, characterized by perfection in nature and human society. At that time Metteyya will accept the invitation of celestials to be born in the human realm, where he will become enlightened and preach the dhamma.

Then the bodhisatta described the various acts he had performed in previous lives that earned him sufficient merit to become the next Buddha. Each was an act of *dana* that would have a specific benefit for humankind in the future. For example, because Metteyya had listened and responded to a beggar requesting alms, no one would be deaf or mute. Because he had radiated loving kindness, everyone would be gentle and compassionate. Finally, Metteyya described how he would help all beings transcend *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth, by freeing them from the fetters of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The text ends with Phra Malai's return to the human realm to deliver this message to the people, who responded by making merit. And the poor man who had presented Phra Malai with eight lotuses,

[6] The teachings are predicted to disappear after they had been in existence for five thousand years. This prophecy is mentioned in earlier sources, both the 14th century King Luethai of Sukhothai and earlier remarks by the great fifth century commentator Buddhaghosa (Coedes, 1957).

after his death, was born in Tavtimsa Heaven with lotuses that sprang up to receive each footstep.

Different "Tellings"[7]

The summary above is what I call the "classical" telling, as found in the following versions: 1) the Pali *Maleyyadevatthera-vatthu,* 2) the Lao language *Malai Muen-Malai Saen* (recited in Lao PDR and Isan), and 3) the Northern Thai language *Malai Ton-Malai Plai*.[8] The latter two paired texts are recited as a preface to the *Vessantara Jataka* at annual festivals in the northeast and north, respectively.[9] In physical form, they were traditionally incised on palm leaf manuscripts, without illustrations. It is important to point out that: 1) these texts relate the story in a straightforward way, without humor or embellishment, and 2) they are not associated with funerals.[10] The classical telling is also found in the poetically elaborate "royal version," *Phra Malai Kham Luang* (*PMKL*), attributed to the Ayutthayan Prince Thammathibet and written in the Central Thai language.[11] In addition to these older tellings, there numerous others that were written later. Most of these contain more detailed descriptions of the hells.[12]

[7] "Tellings" in this sense is not the same as "tales." The Phra Malai story is told in many different forms, most of them various forms of poetry, some more detailed than others, but the story is always the same. Thus, there is only one tale, and it is incorrect to say "Phra Malai tales."

[8] Northern Thai is also known as Phasa Nuea, Kam Mueang, and Thai Yuan.

[9] The people of north and northeast Thailand are historically, ethnically and culturally more similar to each other-and different from those in the central region and south.

[10] However, still another Northern Thai text, Malai prot lok, [Malai assists the world] a concise, dry account of the monk's visit to hell, is often recited at funerals in the north.

[11] The Pali, Lao and Northern Thai versions belong to an entirely different ritual tradition than the *Klon Suat* version and are inscribed on palm leaf and not on *samut khoi. PMKL* is found on black paper manuscripts written in Thai (*samut thai dam).* The *PMKS* texts vary little from one manuscript to another, with the only differences being in words or syllables (Kuanpoonpol, 1995:188).

[12] Among the many others are, for example, Phra Malai sut sam thammat. [The Phra Malai Sutta in three lessons]. (1972). Bangkok: Sophit Thammakhon; and Phunsak Sakdanuwat (1977). Malai phu poet pratu narok-sawan [Phra Malai: The one who opens the doors of hell and heaven]. Bangkok: Thamma Bannakhan Press.

Figure 2 Monks or perhaps *kharuehat* chanters. Phra Malai manuscript in the British Library, #Or.14838, from Ginsburg (2000), p. 106.

Phra Malai Klon Suat as a Play

By contrast, the Central Thai *PMKS*–the version found in illustrated manuscripts–is associated with funeral wakes in the central and southern regions and not in the north or northeast, which are culturally different in many ways. It contains greatly expanded descriptions of the hells, the sufferings of the hell beings,[13] and the sins that led to these karmic results. In fact, *PMKS* contains two sections early in the text describing the hell beings. The first is a concise list of sins and karmic results.[14] The second immediately follows the first and contains the same information, but with an emphasis on the horrific sufferings of the hell beings, which

[13] In *PMKS*, the word *preta* is used to refer to hell beings even though the word usually refers to a specific variety of suffering being with a small mouth and large stomach who has an insatiable appetite.

[14] It is interesting that one of the first sins mentioned is that of offering food to monks and then forcing them to work in farming and constructing buildings. This misdeed is not mentioned in any other version of Phra Malai and may have been added to an earlier text to refer to some actual local practices in existence after the fall of Auytthaya in 1767, when many monasteries had been destroyed, food supplies diminished and the synergistic relationship between the Sangha and laity disrupted.

are described in vivid detail, followed by a reference to the corresponding sin. For example, "There was a *preta* who was a hideous-looking woman. Her body was completely covered with boils, decayed and putrid. Her toenails and fingernails were rotten, with no way to cure them. The boils oozed out pus constantly…, etc." and so the text goes on, telling not only of how the woman scratched the boils, but also how vultures, crows and cranes swopped down on and pecked at her. Her sin was that of tricking people into believing she had powers of spirit possession and sorcery.

In *PMKS* performances, such gory descriptions were relayed through catchy, sometimes cheerful melodies and extensive repetition. The description of another *preta*, a male "with testicles as large as water jugs that hung down to the ground like a yam shoulder bag," reflects some of the bits of earthy humor found in the text. *PMKS* also contains an expanded description of the sins that people will commit during the time of the decline of the religion, with a particular emphasis on incest, listing virtually every kind of incestuous situation. Moreover, the text is filled with admonitions urging the people to observe the Buddhist precepts, avoid sin, and practice generosity. It is important to note that this version of Phra Malai was meant to be performed, that is, sung in a variety of melodies and rhythms. *PMKS* is written in three varieties of a verse form known as *kap* (a term derived from the Sanskrit *kavya*) which developed out of Cambodian forms based on Sanskrit models.[15] These varieties of *kap* vary in the number of syllables per line, ranging from eleven to thirty-two, and provide a variety of rhythms suitable for narration, description and conversation. Moreover, cue words or stage directions similar to the cue words found in the *Ramakian* appear in front of the stanzas where the verse form changes, attesting to the performative role of *PMKS*.

This version of Phra Malai began to appear in manuscripts in the late 18th century and became the most prevalent subject in the 19th century (Ginsburg, 1989: 72). In these manuscripts, the text is written

[15] The forms are *yani*, with eleven syllables per line; *chabang*, with sixteen; and *surang khanang*, with twenty-eight or thirty-two.

in the Thai language but in Cambodian letters. Paintings illustrating key scenes from the narrative, such as the poor man presenting the lotuses to Phra Malai, as well as vignettes of funerary settings are found on either side of the text on roughly 5-10 percent of the pages.[16] Another pair of paintings depicts two monks in each frame. In some paintings they are seated serenely with legs crossed in the lotus position, holding a *talabat* (preaching fan) in front of them**.** In others, however, they are seated with one knee raised, or less commonly, standing in what appears to be a comic dance pose. Moreover, in the latter case, they are often unshaven and appear to be exhausted from chanting all night, or perhaps simply drunk.

What Some Western Scholars Say

Few Western scholars have written anything in detail about Phra Malai and fewer than a handful have attempted to explain who these strange-looking monks are and why they appear in the paintings. Anthropologist Barend J. Terwiel (2012: 12) offers this rather sensational explanation:

> [These monks] indulged in drugs, sat with women, they chanted in ecstasy, they went into trance and, like Phra Malai, and uncounted generations of shamans before them, they travelled in trance to the other worlds, thereby accompanying the spirit of the deceased to the world of the dead. The monks shown in the pre-1850 manuscripts are, I propose, ritual specialists in trance, they travelled to the unseen worlds for their community, they assisted souls, and (presumably) they also predicted the future.

[16] The paintings usually include the following pairs, sequentially: 1) deities or other heavenly beings; 2) grotesque hell beings, sometimes with the heads of animals, or climbing a thorn tree; 3) a man clad in a loin cloth picking lotuses in a pond, and the same man offering the lotuses to Phra Malai; 4) the monk seated next to Indra in front of the Cūḷāmaṇi Cetiya and groups of flying deities; 5) people viciously fighting each other, and other people making offerings to monks; 6) devout laypeople listening to Phra Malai, and people surrounding a wishing tree laden with jewelry and elegant cloth. Some manuscripts also include wake scenes, such as laypeople bathing the corpse or playing board games (See Ginsburg, 2000 for examples).

While this explanation is not surprising given Terweil's interest in ritual, magic, and traditional beliefs, it does not hold up here as he offers no evidence, apart from recalling that in the late 60s and early 70s he lived in a village where a monk told him that "in former times Buddhist monks drank alcohol and danced at ceremonies for the dead, but that this practice had been abandoned."

Art historians, on the other hand, have tended to focus on the miniature paintings in the *samut khoi* and on artistic trends. Jana Igunma, the Henry Ginsburg curator at the British Library, in a recent article deems the monks to be "naughty" and questions whether the paintings "are a result of …artistic realism in Thai painting, …..growing freedom of artistic expression, …. or the use of manuscript art as propaganda" (Igunma, 2016: 31). Using numerous examples of *samut khoi* paintings as evidence, she carefully explores each of these possibilities, but essentially echoes the ideas her mentor, the late Henry Ginsburg, who conducted pioneering work on Thai manuscripts at the British Library. He first suggested that the scenes were used to contrast "pious monks" with "lax ones" (Ginsburg, 1989: 77). Eleven years later, however, he concluded that the strange-looking ones were "false monks" who recited the Phra Malai text after ordained monks were forbidden to do so (Ginsburg, 2000: 107). He was referring to laypeople known by Thais as *suat kharuehat* (lay chanters), who were former monks who continued the funerary practice chanting of *PMKS* after the royal reforms began to have an impact on the practices of current monks.

Igunma assumes that Ginsburg came to this conclusion after his first book was published, when he had access to many more Phra Malai manuscripts. It was then that he realized that most manuscripts containing illustrations of the "naughty monks" were created after the reforms of Rama I and Rama IV when it should have become more difficult for monks to misbehave or break the rules of the Vinaya Pitaka" (Igunma, 2016: 31).[17]

[17] It is also possible–and more likely–that Ginsburg got this idea from my 1995 book on Phra Malai, where I discuss in detail the change from recitations by monks to recitations by lay groups.

The reforms, forbade among other things, eating after the pre-noon meal, drinking alcohol, and participating in comic performances of Phra Malai "in Cambodian, Chinese, Farang, and Mon melodies" (Surapone, 1980: 38-43). These "melodies" refer to a kind of comic skit known as "*ok phasa*" (performance in a foreign language) in which the chanters would parody the various nationalities known in Siam at the time, including Chinese, Malay, *farangs* (westerners) and others. Dhanit Yupho describes such a performance below.

> During the priest-chanters' heyday, there were various paraphernalia for the performance in their [yam] (bags), such as makeup, earrings, a Malay hat, a Chinese hat, and a mirror. They sat with their knees up and hid their faces behind their fans, holding the handles in their toes. The bags were laid in front of them to support the small mirrors. The audience in those days did not feel that this was out of place. On the contrary, they appreciated and supported the performance in competitions with other entertainments. The priest usually won because they gained a greater audience. (cited in Surapone, 1980:39)

Igunma (2016: 31) dismisses such descriptions as "far-fetched" and argues that "historical eye-witness reports [by foreigners] of Thai [funeral ceremonies] fail to mention any involvement of misbehaving monks." It is unfortunate that so much importance is placed on lack of reports by foreigners, while at the same time the writings of Thais are ignored.[18] In the end, she concludes,

> [t]he trend in 19th century Thai manuscript painting to include more frequently contrasting illustrations of "good" and "bad" monks within one manuscript may point toward an educational or propagandistic purpose of the paintings directed at monks and novices, which seems even more probable in the light of the Dhammayutika reform movement that opposed older or local/ethnic Tai Buddhist traditions. (Igunma, 2016:48)

[18] Moreover, Igunma neglects to consider the possibility that foreign visitors would not be escorted by their hosts to funerals where monks performed the comic routines described above. Such routines are more likely to have been performed in village settings than in the famous temples supported by royalty.

Historical Circumstances

While Igunma, like Ginsburg, views the paintings of the strange chanting figures in *samut khoi* as a way to teach the difference between "good" and "bad" monks following the reforms of Kings Rama I and IV, they fail to mention social conditions following the sacking of Ayutthaya which preceded the reign of the former monarch. This is a serious omission, as the city's destruction had a devastating effect on the life of the survivors. Baker and Phongpaichit in their recent volume of the history of Ayutthaya (2017: 261) quote a Thai source describing the conditions:

> There were only tree leaves, grass, creepers, roots, bark, flowers, and fruit for food. Many people were separated, and wandered about the villages… Everybody joined together in bands, stealing paddy, rice, and salt. Some found food, but some did not, and became emaciated, just skin and bones. They huddled together in great suffering. Some died, some survived. (Fine Arts Department, 1993: 240)

This devastating event, according to John Butt (1978:35), "had a profoundly disastrous impact on everyday practices of Buddhism, particularly lay support for the Sangha. This together with a severe shortage of food disrupted traditional alms-giving by the laity to the Sangha. As a result, some monks disrobed while others tried to survive on their own." It is worth noting that in *PMKS*, one of the first sins mentioned in a series of offences committed by hell beings in their former lives is that of using monks to work in gardens. Adherence to the Vinaya, as Craig Reynolds points out, depends on "prosperous laypeople whose alms…allow monks to live free from care for their livelihood" (1973:38). Thus, it is likely that some monks would have used their skills in reciting *PMKS* in an entertaining way in order to survive. As for the idea of monks playing roles in religious drama, Katherine Bowie's book on northern *Vessantara Jataka* recitations provides numerous examples of the use of earthy jokes and role-playing, especially by monks playing the role of Chuchok (Jujaka), the brahmin beggar (Bowie, 2017).

Moreover, even seven decades ago the lines between Sangha and laity were much less rigid than today. My 85-year-old friend and colleague, Ajan Sommai Premchit, who grew up in an Isan village, recalls that laymen who had been monks earlier in their lives would join monks in chanting if more voices were needed, and that monks would regularly put their robes aside and don sarongs to help their elders during the rice harvest (Premchit, 2017). In short, social practices and ideas of propriety have changed over time and space, depending on local contingencies. Thus, it is possible that in the late 18th century, when viewed from the ground-level perspective of local needs and tastes, the monks who performed comical chanting of *PMKS* were not so much "naughty" as resourceful, in seeking ways to survive during hard times and providing a much-needed service to those experiencing the grief that accompanies death.

What Thai Experts in Literature Say

Thai scholars specializing in Thai literature have a much different perspective from that of Ginsburg, Ignuma and Terweil and consistently refer to *PMKS* in a positive way. Trisilpa Boonkachorn, an expert on Thai literature now retired from Chulalongkorn University in her epic 400-page book, *Klon Suat Phak Klang,* explains that the term *klon suat* refers to poetic works that have melodies and are concerned with the wat and with Buddhism. Its main goals were to teach the dharma while providing entertainment and fun. A common theme was that of connecting ideas of sin and merit to the everyday life of villagers (Boonkhachorn, 2004:3). *PMKS*, the most famous *klon suat* work, was chanted far and wide at funeral wakes with the goals of not only teaching about merit and demerit, reward and punishment but also providing lively entertainment to relieve the grief and sorrow of those mourning the deceased (Boonkhachorn, 2004:5). The genre's popularity began to wane only during the time of King Rama IV, when Western civilization had a great impact on Thai culture.[19]

[19] Trisilpa Boonkachorn cites Phraya Uppakit Silapasan, 1964: 102 and 1909, Introduction.

Boonkhachorn (2004:7, citing Sathit Senanil, 1978:38-39) writes that another kind of chanting was "*chamuatphra*," a comical chanting by monks in front of the deceased. Following the death of a person, she explains, relatives would invite monks to chant the Abhidhamma at the wake. Afterwards the wake's sponsor would feel obligated to provide some entertainment to those who had come and, therefore the monks, after chanting the Abhidhamma, would perform comedy routines, often using double entendre expressions with obscene meanings. Dhanit Yupho notes that the audience appreciated such performances. To provide variety and prevent boredom, *suat kharuehat* groups also performed segments from famous works of Thai literature, including *Krai Thong* and *Phra Aphai Mani* among others. Similar accounts appear in the writings of other experts, including Nandha Khunphakdee (1987: 44-71), retired professor of Thai language from Silapakorn University at Nakhon Pathom, and Anake Nawigamue, renowned writer on Thai culture who organized performances at the Bangkok Bank Musical Art Center for 23 years (Nawigamune (1979:73-77; personal communication June 5, 2017).

Similarly, anthropologist and literature scholar Cholthira Satyawadhna rejects the issue as one of "good" versus "bad" monks, but sees it as folk theater staged by local monks.

> *Suat Malai* [*PMKS*] is a play, in other words, a Buddhistic ritual performance. Theatre art, in my view, should have a green light for role-playing, like poetic license to play with language puns. Unfortunately, the Siam royal house did not have fun with this sort of folk theatre art, ruled by local monks and staged by monks (Satyawadhna, personal communication May 20, 2017).

Monks or *Kharuehat*–Does it Matter?

It may be impossible to determine whether the strange-looking chanters dressed in monks' robes depicted in *samut khoi* paintings were intended to represent monks or *khraruehat.* In either case, Thai sources say these chanters were appreciated by those attending the wakes as they provided

a source of comic relief and a way to avoid dwelling on sadness during the long nights and days before the cremation. In the end, it may not matter.

PMKS Performances Today

Today, despite the claims of some Western scholars that *PMKS* is no longer chanted, the text, in fact, is still performed by monks at several wats in the Bangkok area, including Wat Daowadueng and Wat Laksi Don Muang, as well as by laypeople's groups in numerous villages in certain provinces in the central region and the south. The monks' performances are solemn and have the majestic quality of Gregorian chant, while those of laypeople are lively and entertaining. One example is that of current *kharuehat* practices in Ban Nong Khao, Tha Muang district, Kanchanaburi province, studied by Poramin Jaruworn (1998) a Chulalongkorn University Thai language and folklore professor. He believes that factors contributing to the strength of the tradition include the village's long history, the bond of mutual help that still exists there, and the villagers' belief in the same ancestral spirits as well as in the efficacy of "the Malai chanting [in helping] the spirits go to heaven."

PMKS performances can also be found on the Facebook page Phra Malai (Phra Malai, 2012), which has informative and richly illustrated postings of a *kharuehat* group called Khana Nai Kaew located in Nakhon Si Thammarat and links to its performances on Youtube. The group has received awards for its efforts to preserve local culture. Its last posting was in 2012 when it consisted of 12 people, some of them quite elderly, two of whom were women. In addition to singers, each with specific roles in the chanting chorus, there were musicians who played various instruments, including the *ramana* (drum), *saw* (spiked fiddle), *klui* (flute), and *ching* (finger cymbals). Chanters used a script in the Thai alphabet based on a text written in Khom letters copied from a *samut khoi* in a local temple.

There are also other *suat kharuehat* groups on YouTube from villages in central region provinces, including Kanchanaburi, Chonburi, Nontaburi, Ratburi, Phetburi, Suphanburi, and others. When I contacted a man who had uploaded one of the clips, he became my Facebook friend and explained in a message,

> When my father died they prayed to achieve a sense of fun and a not-too quiet funeral. You can find chanting in many villages of Bang Lamung district, Chonburi province. This is our tradition. The chanting is not available to all of the old people who died, but only those who were respected. (Markjan, personal communication May 15, 2017)

The *suat kharuehat* groups posted on YouTube vary in composition from male-only groups to those that include women. The melodies, chanting rhythms and instrumental accompaniment are also quite diverse. While most groups are composed of people of middle age or older, there are some groups whose members appear to be less than 40 years old. Members sit on the floor directly in front of the coffin holding the deceased and read from the modern folded paper facsimile printed by So. Thammaphakdi. Some groups use a *talabat* and have various arm movements and postures, while others merely sit in a circle.

Conclusion

This article has pointed out the differences between the various Phra Malai texts in the hope that scholars will be more careful in citing the specific text they are referring to rather than just calling it by the generic, but not helpful name, *Phra Malai Sutta.* Moreover, the article has shown that while there are various versions or "tellings" of Phra Malai, the basic story line in all tellings remains the same, so there is only one Phra Malai tale.

It also pointed out the difference between the Isan and Northern Phra Malai texts which serve as a preface to recitations of the Vessantara Jataka and the performative role that *Phra Malai Klon Suat* played and still plays today at funeral wakes in central and southern Thailand. This latter text served as a script for a kind of variety show that was both

didactic and entertaining. Evidence supports the idea that the chanters/performers, whether they were monks or laypeople, were appreciated by those who attended the wakes and sponsored the creation of the manuscripts–rather than being criticized, satirized or made into examples of "good" and "bad." This conclusion is based on the writings of Thai scholars who have studied *PMKS*, the *klon suat* genre and the phenomenon of *suat kharuehat.* I would also propose that paintings of the chanters were included in *samut khoi* because of their vital role in bringing the text to life. Finally, it is important to emphasize that this text is still recited at funeral wakes in contemporary society for the same reason as in the past: it provides a sense of comfort and solace to those attending the wake.

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