



BAN MAHA PHAI AND PHRAE DAM: FROM SILENT MOVIE TO NOVEL?

David Smyth

Abstract

Luang Saranupraphan was one of the most prominent figures in the Thai literary world of the early 1920s, both on account of his own writings and his editorship of two journals, *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat* and *Saranukun*, which attracted many famous writers of the day. As a novelist, he is remembered chiefly for *Phrae Dam* and *Na Phi*. While both of these works are regularly mentioned in biographical entries on Luang Saranupraphan and in literary histories, they are not readily accessible and probably few people today have read them.

Following the publication of Suphanni Waratho'n's *Prawat kan praphan nawaniyai thai* in 1976, it has been widely assumed that Luang Saranupraphan took the plot of *Phrae Dam* from a western movie, 'The House of Hate' which was shown in Bangkok a few years earlier. Since Luang Saranupraphan was vociferous in promoting his own novel as being an entirely original work, and emphasizing that it was 'not a translation, nor a transposition nor an adaptation, in any way whatsoever,' the link between *Phrae Dam* and 'The House of Hate', or *Ban Maha Phai* as it was called in Thai, is worth examining in more detail.

From an examination of the novel *Phrae Dam*, a 'House of Hate' press booklet produced by Pathé for trade distribution in England, and the *Ban Maha Phai* set of film-books by 'Khon Than', it can be concluded that despite some superficial similarities, *Phrae Dam* and the 'House of Hate' are very different works and Luang Saranupraphan's claims to originality perfectly reasonable.

This paper sets out firstly to restore Luang Saranupraphan's integrity and discourage literary historians from repeating the claim that *Phrae Dam* is copied from a foreign movie, and secondly to awaken interest in the career of Luang Saranupraphan and his role in the development and promotion of the early Thai novel.

Introduction*

In December 1922 the Editor's Page of *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat* drew readers' attention to a new serial appearing in that issue, called *Phrae Dam* ('Black Silk'):

'It can be said that there are few original Thai works of fiction being written which do not take their plot from foreign fiction, for reasons we discussed in detail in the Editor's Page of volume 6 part 4. However, the fact that the author of *Phrae Dam* devised this story himself, without copying the plot from any other story, is likely to be criticized by many who disagree with this approach. But the author says that he is happy to submit himself fully to the criticisms of all those who do not like it, without making any excuse whatsoever. This is because the author merely has the hope of creating a memorial to himself as having written one long Thai story (*Serial*) in his writing career.¹

The lack of 'original Thai works of fiction' (*ru'ang thai thae*) was something that vexed the editor of *Sena su'ksa* ... and was a recurrent theme in his columns. Now, in *Phrae Dam*, however, it seemed he had found a rare example, so it was not surprising, therefore, that he was prepared to promote it with some enthusiasm. In March 1923, after devoting considerable space to explaining why the author, Luang Saranupraphan, had been unable to deliver the fourth episode on time, he issued a forceful reminder to readers of the uniqueness of this work:

'But *Phrae Dam* is not like Chinese works of fiction. It is very far removed indeed, because *Phrae Dam* is not a translation, nor a transposition, nor adaptation, in any way whatsoever. There was no pre-existing manuscript; it is, genuinely, a new piece. The author

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¹ *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 6 pt. 12, 1922, p. 1494. The novel *Phrae Dam* published in *Sena su'ksa* ... is unrelated to the 1961 Ratana Pestonji film of the same name. The author of *Phrae Dam*'s defiant attitude towards those who would criticize him for *not* copying his plot from elsewhere has to be seen in the context of the period, when translations and adaptations of foreign stories were automatically deemed superior to original Thai works, and Thai authors even resorted to disguising the originality of their work by giving their characters Western names.

says that if he had not written it with his own hand, *Phrae Dam* would simply not be *Phrae Dam*.²

If the anonymous editor appeared hyper-protective of *Phrae Dam*, the reason became apparent three months later, when he revealed that he and the author of *Phrae Dam* were one and the same person—Luang Saranupraphan. But the revelation of his identity did nothing to dampen Luang Saranupraphan's enthusiasm for proclaiming the merits of his own work, and for the next few months, even after the serial had ended, he could often find a reason to mention *Phrae Dam* in his editorials. In the July 1923 issue, he offered reassurance that the story had no basis in fact and expressed delight at the response of his readers:

'Talking specifically about *Phrae Dam*, my (your editor's) own story, the concluding episode of which is published here, I would like personally (and not in my role as editor) to declare that I feel very pleased to know that you all enjoyed reading it. I have, moreover, received many letters from satisfied subscribers overseas. I bow my head in humble and sincere acceptance of their words of praise and will keep their opinions of *Phrae Dam* as a lasting memory.'³

The following month found Luang Saranupraphan vigorously refuting an alleged suggestion from some readers, that a *Sena su'ksa* ... without a story like *Phrae Dam* was 'bland', and insisting that he regarded himself as merely one of the journal's 'team'. In the December issue of the same year he announced a new story with the line, 'You liked *Phrae Dam* so much, you won't be able to put this one down'.⁴ It was emphasized that, like *Phrae Dam*, this new story was neither translation nor adaptation; and at the end of the paragraph, it was revealed that this story, too, was written by Luang Saranupraphan.

Forty years after the appearance of *Phrae Dam*, in the first attempt to chronicle the history of the Thai novel, Yot Watcharasathian wrote:

'The honour of being the first person to write genuine Thai mystery stories goes to Luang Saranupraphan (Nuan Pachinphayak) with *Phrae Dam* being the first work and *Na Phi*, the second. They were published consecutively in the magazine *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat* and proved hugely popular with readers. Everyone called him 'Luang Sara Phrae Dam'... Following Luang Saranupra-

² *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 7 pt. 3, 1923, p. 401.

³ *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol 7 pt 7, 1923, pp. 910-11.

⁴ *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol 7 pt 12, 1923, pp. 1562-3.

phan's great success with these two mystery stories, many others with a genius for writing turned to producing this kind of story.⁵

Other early writers on the novel, such as Prakat Watcharapho'n and Chu'a Satawethin were quick to follow Yot in identifying *Phrae Dam* as a pioneering work in the history of the Thai novel, and Luang Saranupraphan's position as the major Thai novelist of the early 1920s thus seemed secure.⁶ But from the mid-1970s, following the publication of a book entitled, *Prawat kan praphan nawaniyai thai* ('History of the Writing of the Thai Novel'), Luang Saranupraphan's proud—and not infrequent—claims about the originality of his work began to sound a little hollow.⁷ In this book, the author, Suphanni Waratho'n, argued that there was a more than coincidental similarity between *Phrae Dam* and a foreign silent movie called *Ban Maha Phai*, which had been shown in Bangkok some years before the appearance of Luang Saranupraphan's novel. From the evidence she put forward, it was difficult not to conclude that Luang Saranupraphan had simply transplanted the plot of a foreign movie to a Thai setting; and that is, indeed, the conclusion that a number of literary historians, textbook writers and cinema historians have subsequently drawn. This paper looks more closely at the relationship between the movie *Ban Maha Phai* and the novel *Phrae Dam*.

Early cinema in Siam and 'film books'

The first commercial cinema show in Siam took place on 10 June 1897, scarcely 18 months after the Lumière brothers had staged the world's first public moving picture show in Paris.⁸ The country's first permanent cinema was built in 1905 at Wat Tuk on Charoen Krung Road, where Tomoyori Watanabe, a Japanese film entrepreneur, screened nightly shows from 20:15 to 22:45; the popularity of this venture led to the use of the term *nang yipun* ('Japanese shadow theatre') to

⁵ Yot Watcharasathian, *Khwam pen ma khong kan praphan lae nak praphan thai*. Bangkok: Phrae phitthaya, 1963, p.174.

⁶ P. Watcharapho'n, *Thamniap nak praphan*. Bangkok: Do'k Ya, 1989, pp. 295-302 (1st edition, Bangkok: Phadung su'ksa, 1963); Chu'a Satawethin, *Prawat nawaniyai thai*. Bangkok: Suthisan kan phim, 1974, p. 35.

⁷ Suphanni Waratho'n. *Prawat kan praphan nawaniyai thai*. Bangkok: Munnithi khrongkan tamra sangkhomsat lae manutsayasat, 1976.

⁸ For further details of early cinema in Siam, see Chamroenlak Thanawangnoi. *Prawatisat phapphayon thai tangtae reak roem chon sin samai songkhram lok khrang thi so'ng*. Bangkok: Samnakphim Mahawitthayalai Thammasat, 2001; Dome Sukwong. *Kamnoet nang thai*. Bangkok: Matichon, 1996; and Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak, *A Century of Thai Cinema*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2001. The latter includes numerous old photographs and reproductions of newspaper announcements.

describe any moving picture show.⁹ From then, the cinema grew rapidly in popularity, with Siamese entrepreneurs setting up companies to build cinemas and distribute imported films.

The earliest cinema programmes were announced in newspapers. But competition between rival cinemas and distribution companies quickly emerged and new advertising ploys had to be found. These included the use of billboard announcements on horse-drawn carts, and leaflets, printed in Thai, Chinese and English, with details of forthcoming programmes and sometimes brief summaries of the films to be shown. As the plots of the imported silent movies became more complex, and with the growth in popularity of serials shown over a period of several weeks, three to four line summaries no longer offered audiences sufficient clarification of events unfolding on screen. Unlike in China and Japan, early Thai cinema did not employ an interpreter to stand alongside the screen to shout out a running commentary for the benefit of the audience. Instead, longer, more detailed abridgements of the plots began to appear in daily newspapers, such collaboration boosting the sales of both cinema tickets and newspapers.¹⁰ Cinema-owners went a step further in commissioning small paperback booklets, known as *nangsu' phapphayon* ('film-books'), which were sold to cinema-goers. A single volume would suffice for a short film, but for serials, eight or nine volumes was not uncommon. Film-books quickly became so popular that publishers would bid for the right to print them; publication dates were timed to coincide with a film's release for maximum mutual publicity, and by 1923, print-runs of 8,000 copies were not unexceptional.¹¹

The primary aim of film books was, of course, to provide the audience with a clearer understanding of what they were about to see, had just seen, or in the case of a serial, an episode they had perhaps missed. But they had a much wider and more lasting significance, in that they encouraged a reading and book-buying habit among the public, particularly the younger generation.¹² Film books were popular

⁹ The programme would typically consist of 12 to 14 items, some of which changed nightly, while others ran for several consecutive nights. Admission prices were 30 satang for 3rd class seats, 1 baht for 2nd class and 2 baht for 1st class.

¹⁰ Perhaps the idea was copied from America, where Rufus McCormick, is said to have increased the readership of the Chicago Tribune by 50,000 in December 1913 by publishing abridged versions of each episode of the serial, 'The Adventures of Kathlyn'; his rival, William Randolph Hearst, was quick to follow, with the Pearl White serial, 'The Perils of Pauline', being simultaneously serialized in his newspapers in 1914.

¹¹ S. Bunsanoe *Tam roi lai su' thai*. Bangkok: Phi Wathin Publication, 1988, p. 99.

¹² The writer Sao Bunsanoe recalled borrowing or renting film books as a schoolboy and later saving his lunch money in order to buy them. *ibid.* pp. 94-5.

for only a few years. Their demise was linked closely to the decline of the foreign-made serial film, the birth of a local film industry and the coming of sound and dubbing.¹³ But in stimulating a demand for light reading material, and awakening both aspiring writers and publishers alike to the commercial possibilities of prose fiction, film-books paved the way for the rapid growth in popularity of the novel towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century; indeed, many of the novelists who emerged at this time had begun their career producing film-books.

Ban Maha Phai and ‘The House of Hate’

One of the most popular films showing in Bangkok cinemas in 1919 was a twenty-part Pathé serial called ‘The House of Hate’, renamed *Ban Maha Phai* (literally, ‘house of great danger’) in Thai.¹⁴ No copies of the film appear still to exist, books on cinema history offer only scant references to it, and even contemporary reviews give little impression of what happened on screen. By chance, however, a small piece of cinema ephemera, a ‘House of Hate’ press booklet, produced by Pathé for trade distribution, has survived and is now kept in the Library of the British Film Institute in London. This provides page-long summaries for all but the last episode, each accompanied by four or five still photographs from the film; the page for the final episode consists of a crude drawing of ‘The Hooded Terror’ with a question mark superimposed, and a rhymed invitation to guess his identity.

This press booklet conveys something of the intricacy of the plot, non-stop action and daring stunts that led a contemporary reviewer to comment that this ‘latest serial may readily be welcomed as the best yet.’¹⁵ The plot basically involves a conflict over who should assume control of the family-owned ordnance works, once the elderly patriarch relinquishes power. His sudden murder by a hooded figure, who is determined to harm the heroine, introduces the element of mystery, and the challenge for audiences was to guess the identity of the villain. After fourteen episodes had been shown in Bangkok, the local distributor even offered cinema-goers a very substantial prize of 200 baht for guessing correctly, a strategy

¹³ Siam’s first home-produced film, *Chok so’ng chan* (‘Double Luck’) was shown in July 1927, followed in September by *Mai khit loei* (‘Unexpected’); the country’s first ‘talkie’, *Long thang* (‘Gone Astray’) was released in April 1932.

¹⁴ First released in Hollywood in late 1918, it was directed by George B. Seitz and starred Pearl White, famous for her daring stunts in earlier Pathé serials, such as ‘The Exploits of Elaine’ and ‘The Perils of Pauline’, with Antonio Moreno as leading man.

¹⁵ *The Bioscope*, vol. 40, n. 627, 17 October, 1918, p. 32.

which doubtless encouraged sales of both ticket and film-books.¹⁶ Episodes of 'The House of Hate' see-saw through a catalogue of attempts on the heroine's life, dramatic escapes or rescues by the hero, and apparently imminent revelations of the identity of the 'Hooded Terror'. The setting of a number of scenes in a munitions factory, the heroine's sale of arms to a French army officer, the unmasking of a spy called Baron von Rath, and the testing of flame throwers and biological weapons provide a contemporary background.

The Siamese distributor would almost certainly have received a copy of the press booklet, but in its bare outline of the major events in each episode, it needed much more than a straight translation to turn it into a film-book of the appropriate length and quality. The man commissioned to do the job was Chup Chakhaphirom, a well-known writer of the period, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Khon Than'. He duly produced ten film books to accompany the serial, each containing two episodes of approximately 20 pages. More by luck than design, a complete set of his *Ban Maha Phai* film books has survived and is now housed in the Thai Film Foundation at Salaya, Nakhorn Pathom, where it represents one of the best-preserved examples of the genre.¹⁷ Like most film books, the *Ban Maha Phai* books are approximately 5 x 7 inches in size, around 40 pages in length, printed on paper of modest quality, and cost 25 satang each.¹⁸ The covers, printed in three colours, are identical for all ten volumes, with photographic reproductions of the two leading stars portrayed beneath an image of the masked villain, dagger in hand. The title of most of the twenty episodes are accurate translations from the English (e.g. Episode 4 'The Man from Java' - *Butkhon phu ma chak ko' chawa*; Episode 7 'The Germ Menace' - *Chu'a rok an raikat*; Episode 11 'Haunts of Evil' - *So'ng ai wai rai*) or occasionally, an intelligent alternative (e.g. Episode 6 'A Live Target' - *Gresham klai pen pao*; Episode 17 'The Death Switch' - *Nak thot phu to'ng prahan*).

Film book writers, such as 'Khon Than', had to have a good command of English and the ability to write well to tight deadlines; they were usually paid

¹⁶ 'Khon Than', *Ban Maha Phai*, vol. 7. There were, of course, a couple of let-out clauses: if the winner failed to collect his prize within seven days, it would be donated in his name to the Municipal Fire Brigade; and if a number of people guessed correctly, the prize money would be shared equally, unless there were more than 20 winners, in which case, again, the prize money would be donated to the Municipal Fire Brigade.

¹⁷ This is a second 'revised' edition, dated 1919.

¹⁸ Chusri Kalavantavanich, *Phattanakan kho'ng nangsū' pok o'n nai prathet thai*. Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Library Science, Chulalongkorn University, 1975, p. 81–3. Examples of film book covers appear in Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak., op. cit. p. 30–31, and Anake Nawigamune. *A Century of Thai Graphic Design*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 102–3.

30-40 baht per story by cinema-owners, roughly what an ordinary worker might expect to make in a month.¹⁹ Their work began with a preview of the film, before it went on general release, in a room specially set aside for the purpose. In a room on an upper floor of the Siam Cinema Company office, for example, there were three screens lined up close against the wall and three small projectors permanently set up and manned by projectionists. Films were normally previewed at night, since most of the writers had daytime jobs, and each would be allocated the kind of film that reflected their strengths as a writer. When the film reached a point where there were English inter-titles, the writer would tell the projectionist to stop the film so that he could translate what was on screen; this involved an element of risk, since the heat from the projector could cause the film to go up in flames.²⁰

When 'Khon Than' began drafting episodes one and two for the first volume of *Ban Maha Phai*, he probably had no idea how the film would turn out. His task was simply to stick closely to what was happening on the screen, as it occurred, and set it down on paper, complete with translations of the inter-titles. As a result, we have a very detailed impression of what 'The House of Hate' was like. At the same time, some of the limitations of film-books as a literary genre are readily apparent. Since they were written with the assumption that readers already had, or soon would have, a clear visual image in their mind as they read, detailed descriptive passages were unnecessary. The writer's task was essentially to record the often-complex comings and goings of characters, major and minor, and to faithfully translate the inter-titles, and all within a limited number of pages. One problem was the switches between scenes on screen, conventionally used to portray simultaneous action, which produced a clumsy and disjointed narrative when transferred to the page. Another, bigger, problem was that there was sometimes just too much happening on screen, in too short a space of time, to do events full justice with the written word, as the following two-page account of the kidnap of the heroine of *Ban Maha Phai* and the car/motorcycle chase that followed illustrates:

At the same time, Pearl was getting ready for bed. As she approached the door of her room, the black-garbed villain, who was hiding, gave a sharp tug on the curtain hanging from the door. It fell, engulfing Pearl. Bravely, she tried to put up a fight. They rolled back and forth in the room. Eventually the villain carried Pearl down the stairs into the living room, where Pearl began to struggle again.

¹⁹ According to the *Statistical Year Book of the Kingdom of Siam* (1922) daily wages for a cook between 1918–21 were roughly one baht a day, for an engineer, three baht a day, and for an Indian watchman 28 baht a month.

²⁰ S. Bunsanoe. *op. cit.* pp. 100–1.

But it was in vain. The villain held her firmly and carried her down into the secret cavern beneath the building.

Gresham went to examine the car and found there was no one there. He was about to return, when he turned and saw the villain carry Pearl out from a door in the wall, which was the entrance to the cavern, and hand her over to a waiting accomplice. Gresham ran up and became involved in a fierce fight, but he was hit in a vital part and fell senseless to the ground. The villain's henchman was thus able to make his get-away with Pearl, but his boss returned to the cavern.

The henchman placed Pearl in the car but had no time to drive away. A policeman, who had learned of events from Herrick over the telephone, arrived on a motorcycle and immediately engaged him in a fight. The policeman fired a bullet, but instead it pierced the radiator at the front of the car, and water ran out. A fierce struggle continued for a while and then the policeman was floored. The henchman quickly picked up Pearl, who had been lying unconscious in the car, and placed her on the policeman's motorcycle and drove off quickly.

Before the motorcycle had gone very far, another police car arrived at the scene of the incident. The policeman who had been knocked down, quickly got up and gave instructions to follow the henchman.

The henchman drove quickly. When he turned the motorcycle into the compound of Mr Winthrop Waldon's weapons factory, he was struck by a piece of wood that had been placed across the road. He and Pearl fell off the vehicle and lay by the side of the road. Despite this, he still tried to carry Pearl through a shortcut into the factory compound. But if the car in which the police were following in hot pursuit had not had to stop because of a train passing, there would have been no question as to whether he would have been able to make his getaway.²¹

But whatever shortcomings may be apparent to the reader in the twenty-first century, it has to be remembered that, in the 1920s, reading material in Thailand was still limited and books such as *Ban Maha Phai* were a welcome break from stodgy school textbooks. 'Khon Than's' efforts received sufficient popular approval for it to go into a second, revised edition.

²¹ 'Khon Than', *Ban Maha Phai*, 1919. vol. 1, pp. 21–3.

Suphanni and the link between *Ban Maha Phai* and *Phrae Dam*

Published in 1976, Suphanni Waratho'n's *Prawat kan praphan nawaniyai thai* ('History of the Writing of the Thai Novel') first saw the light of day as an MA thesis at Chulalongkorn University in 1973. This was a time when there was a growing interest among writers, critics and academics in twentieth century Thai writers and their works, and when the map of modern literary history was beginning to be plotted.²² Most MA theses get a nod of approval from an examining committee and then lie forgotten, shelved with hundreds of other identically-bound volumes in a dusty corner of a university library, to be disturbed only rarely, if at all, by the occasional diligent graduate student. But Suphanni had addressed a gaping void in Thai literary history, and with the quality of her research readily apparent, her thesis was chosen for publication as part of a programme to improve the quality of academic textbooks. Since then, and despite the shameful fact that it has never been reprinted after the first run of 3,000 copies, it has remained the best, and most widely-quoted source on the early Thai novel.

In discussing the influence of foreign films on the Thai novel, Suphanni cites the film *Ban Maha Phai* and the novel *Phrae Dam* as an example, devoting ten pages to comparing the plot and characters.²³ She notes that apart from the fact that both are mystery stories with hooded villains, there are a number of striking similarities, such as the abduction of the heroine, disputed legacies, houses with secret passageways and similar casts of characters; and to back this up, she quotes descriptions of the abductions of the heroines and the deaths of the villains' accomplices from the film-book and the novel for comparison.²⁴ Suphanni concludes,

'All these points of comparison between the film *Ban Maha Phai* and the crime novel *Phrae Dam* which I have cited, show their strong similarities in structure, incident and characterization. Such similarities are unlikely to have been coincidental, but rather through the one undoubtedly influencing the other. In this instance, the film and film-book *Ban Maha Phai* must have been the inspiration for Luang Saranupraphan to write *Phrae Dam*, because they existed

²² Smyth, David. 'Towards the canonizing of the Thai novel'. In Smyth, David (ed.) *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 172–82.

²³ Suphanni pp. 104–114. When Suphanni refers to the 'film' *Ban Maha Phai*, she really means the 'film book' by 'Khon Than', as is apparent from her footnotes.

²⁴ Suphanni's footnotes do not indicate which volume of *Ban Maha Phai* she is quoting from, but her first two quotes are from volume 1 and the third from episode 19 in volume 10 (which should read 'pp. 373–4' and not '73–4').

before and had been very popular at the time. Apart from that, the words of one of the characters in *Phrae Dam* who says of ‘The Hooded Fiend’, ‘I’ve only ever seen such a thing in a movie’, makes this hypothesis the more reasonable.’²⁵

Suphanni’s views on the connection between *Ban Maha Phai* and *Phrae Dam* have subsequently been quoted or echoed by, among others, Roengchai Puttharo, writing on Luang Saranupraphan, Dome Sukwong, on early Thai cinema, and Jacqueline de Fels on the early history of the novel.²⁶

Luang Saranupraphan and *Phrae Dam*

Luang Saranupraphan was born on 24 August, 1896. His father, the owner of a school in Bangkok, gave him the personal name ‘Nuan’ and following a royal decree on surnames in 1913, the family name became ‘Pachinphayak. He was an outstanding pupil, coming top in the secondary school examinations of 1910, but he did not accept a King’s Scholarship to study abroad. He started a career as a teacher at Suan Kulap School at the age of 15, transferring in 1916, at the request of the Ministry of Defence, to the Army Officer Cadet School to teach Thai and English. He soon became heavily involved as an assistant editor on the newly established journal, *Sena su’ksa lae phae wittayasat*, published by the Department of Strategic Studies. In 1921 he was promoted to the post of editor and given the title ‘Luang Saranupraphan’.

As editor, Luang Saranupraphan, invited some of the country’s best-known writers to contribute, broadening the readership of *Sena su’ksa* ... beyond military circles, and establishing it as one of the most important literary journals of the day. He himself was also a prolific contributor, with his translation of William Le Queux’s ‘Rasputin, the Minister of Evil’, *Phachon Phai Chiangmai* (‘Chiangmai Adventure’) and, best-known of all, *Phrae Dam* and *Na Phi* (‘Ghost Face’) which all appeared between 1921 and 1924. When the Director General of the Department of Strategic Affairs was suddenly transferred to a provincial post, Luang Saranupraphan, perhaps in protest, failed to submit the final episode of *Na Phi* and, as a result, was imprisoned for 15 days, and dismissed from government service, for damaging sales of *Sena su’ksa*

²⁵ Suphanni p. 114.

²⁶ Roengchai Puttharo. *Nak khian thai*. Bangkok: Saengdao, 1998, p.134; Dome Sukwong. *Kamnoet nang thai*. Bangkok: Matichon, 1996, p. 4; De Fels, Jacqueline. *Promotion de la Littérature en Thaïlande* (2 vols.). Paris: INALCO, 1993, pp. 248–9.

Luang Saranupraphan subsequently published the complete *Na Phi* as a single volume.²⁷ In February 1925 he launched a weekly magazine, *Saranukun*, which with its combination of factual articles and fiction became enormously popular. It had a claimed circulation of 3,000 copies a week, and many of the leading writers of the day at some time contributed to it; his own contributions included the mystery stories, *Phrae Dam II* and *Mu' Mu't* ('The Dark Hand') and translations of Sherlock Holmes. After the demise of *Saranukun* in 1929, Luang Saranupraphan became involved in political journalism, as editor of the *Bangkok Daily Mail*. He returned to government service in 1931, and as a loyal supporter of Phibun, he was made Director General of the Department of Religious Affairs in 1942. His fortunes subsequently rose and fell with Phibun's, but after the latter's return to power in 1948, Luang Saranupraphan was appointed Director General of the Department of Public Relations. He died in 1954.

Phrae Dam is one of those books that everyone interested in the early Thai novel has heard of, but which no one has actually read. It appears that the seven serialized episodes in *Sena su'ksa ...*, were in fact once printed as a single volume, but such copies have long since disappeared from memory and the only way of gaining access to it today is through copies of the journal preserved in libraries.²⁸ While there are plenty of references to *Phrae Dam* in literary histories, biographies and textbooks, where it is typically cited as an example of a 'mystery story' or a 'famous early novel', or 'Luang Saranupraphan's most famous work', no summary exists to convey some idea of the content, nor, with the exception of Suphanni, is there any critical comment on the work. With a growing interest in earlier writers and their works over the last twenty years, it is a curious omission and it is difficult not to suspect that some literary historians may now see *Phrae Dam* as something of an embarrassment, something not quite genuine, something that claimed to be more than it really was. Indeed, even Roengchai, who has written at greatest length about Luang Saranupraphan, could find only half a page to say about this, the author's most famous work, and then his main point was merely to reiterate Suphanni's claim about the link between *Ban Maha Phai* and *Phrae Dam*.²⁹

²⁷ Like Thailand's first novel, *Khvam mai phayabat* ('Non-Vendetta'), published in 1915, but which subsequently disappeared from public view for decades, this is another famous book that has fallen victim to a lack of national policy on collecting and preserving the country's literary heritage. If anyone knows of the existence of a copy of the book, please make it known.

²⁸ *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 7 pt 12, 1923, p. 1561.

²⁹ Roengchai, op. cit. pp. 134-5. The reproduction of pages from *Sena Su'ksa ...* show that Roengchai had tracked down *Phrae Dam*, so his reticence about the novel cannot be attributed to a lack of access to the work.

Phrae Dam is set in contemporary (i.e. 1922) Bangkok and the plot is built on a police investigation into a money-counterfeiting operation being run from the home of an aristocrat. The title of the novel refers to the sinister hooded figure who, dressed head-to-toe in black, makes frequent appearances at the house, terrorizing the owner's adopted daughter. *Phrae Dam* is the kind of early novel in which characterization counts for little and action everything. The writer is concerned with creating suspense and excitement within the framework of a logical plot, and at the end of each chapter, he focuses readers' thoughts with the question, 'Who is 'Phrae Dam'?' printed in large letters. Luang Saranupraphan demonstrates considerable skill and ingenuity in keeping the reader guessing right through to the final episode. He starts by making Prasit, the unpleasant son of the household, the most obvious candidate; but then almost immediately the heroine, Prayun, voices reasonable suspicions about her sister, while the investigating police officer, Lt. Chamnun's line of questioning, appears to point the finger at the owner of the house, Phraya Khamnun. Later, after the circumstantial evidence against Prasit has accumulated to the point where it appears incontrovertible, the reader's expectations are suddenly confounded, when Prasit is killed by 'Phrae Dam'. 'Phrae Dam' removes his mask in the penultimate chapter, but is then confronted by another 'Phrae Dam', whose identity emerges in the final chapter, where the puzzle of the existence of two 'Phrae Dams' – and, apparently, two Phraya Khamnuns – is resolved. The pace throughout is fast, with conversations constantly interrupted by footsteps on staircases, knocks on doors, screams, sounds of fighting and so on; there are several fights, a car chase, and an array of secret rooms, passageways and trapdoors through which characters can conveniently appear and disappear. But the author, remarkably, given that episodes were written to meet the monthly publishing deadline, never allows readers to lose sight of the plot, often slipping in reminders of significant details at appropriate points.³⁰

The first episode of *Phrae Dam* appeared in December 1922, under a striking graphic heading, which included an illustration of a hooded figure with raised dagger, surrounded by a huge question mark. Beneath the title, the work was described as 'a mystery, detective, adventure and love story'. Although masked or hooded villains were by no means uncommon in films of the period, anyone who had seen either the film or the film-book of *Ban Maha Phai* could scarcely have failed to notice the visual similarity.³¹ This is the first of several references to the film; but on the Editor's Page, the still anonymous Luang Saranupraphan teased

³⁰ For example, in Chapter 5, when Phraya Khamnun asks for six armed police, he reminds readers of Phraya Khamnun's earlier insistence (in Chapter 3) on not involving the police at any cost.

³¹ In 1913, for example, the French film 'Fantomas' starred an identically-clad master villain. Karney, Robyn (ed). *Chronicle of the Cinema*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 1995, p. 101.

readers about jumping to the wrong conclusion about *Phrae Dam*:

‘The story, when you look at it superficially appears to be a ‘*nang chai*’ (‘movie’) or ‘*phapphayon*’ (‘film’) story. In fact, the author confessed that he intended that readers should think this. But once they come to the final part of the story, every reader will know the plot and agree with the author that it is really just a normal piece of fiction (*ru’ang an len thammada*) ...³²

So confident was Luang Saranupraphan in the originality of *Phrae Dam*—and that he could not be accused of adapting or imitating a foreign work—that he proceeded to drop deliberate references to the film *Ban Maha Phai* into the text of his novel. In the second episode, for example, one of the characters describes the hooded villain like this:

‘Black, he was, blacker than ink. Dressed just like in a *nang yipun* (movie). I saw one once. They said it was called ‘*Ban Maha Phai*’, or something. I can’t remember.’³³

In the same episode, one of the supporting characters remarks, after listening to the heroine’s account of her encounter with the hooded figure,

‘It’s strange. I’ve never heard of this kind of thing in Thailand before. I’ve only ever seen it in movies.’³⁴

In Episode 5, the description of the hooded villain as, ‘*ai tua maha phai*’ (‘That creature of great danger’) consciously echoes the earlier film title;³⁵ while in Episode 6, the villain reveals where the idea for his disguise came from:

‘I would always try to come down to Bangkok and come and have a chat with him [Prasit] at this house. Then, one day, he took me to see a movie at a cinema near Wat Tuk. It was a really good film that night and the place was packed. What the title was, I don’t really remember. It was a long movie that ran to dozens of reels, but that night there were only two episodes in four reels. There was one thing that made an impression on me and was to be the source of the

³² *Sena su’ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 6 pt. 12, 1922, p. 1484.

³³ *Sena su’ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 7 pt. 1, 1923, p. 88.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.96; Suphanni, (*op.cit.* p.114) also quotes part of this line.

³⁵ *Sena su’ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol . 7 pt. 5, 1923, p. 658.

career I have followed until now. In the film there was a mysterious figure, completely dressed in black. He went around in this disguise, so no one could recognize him, doing whatever he wanted. I tell you frankly that I really liked that film. When we got back home, Prasit and I talked about it and decided we'd have a bit of fun.³⁶

Phrae Dam and Ban Maha Phai

To what extent, then, did *Phrae Dam* borrow from *Ban Maha Phai*/'The House of Hate'? The two works belong to the same mystery/adventure genre, which climaxes with the unmasking of a hooded villain, they share several common features and incidents, and *Phrae Dam* includes a number of deliberate and open references to *Ban Maha Phai*. Suphanni, is, without doubt, correct in claiming that the similarities are more than coincidental.³⁷ So why, then, did Luang Saranupraphan make such loud and repeated claims to originality? If he was going to appropriate a foreign work and rewrite it in a Thai setting, would it not have been wiser, first, not to boast about its originality, in case anybody chanced upon the original, and, second, not to draw attention to that original source through repeated references to it? We can either conclude that Luang Saranupraphan was an arrogant liar, who thought all his readers stupid, or that the link between *Ban Maha Phai* and *Phrae Dam* is not quite as it has hitherto been assumed.

A fairly cursory comparison of *Phrae Dam* and the film-book *Ban Maha Phai* will quickly reveal two things: firstly, that they are a world apart in terms of structure, and secondly, that the superficial similarities between the two works are largely confined to the first of the twenty episodes of *Ban Maha Phai*. Where Luang Saranupraphan's novel consists of a unified and well-constructed plot, with tightly-linked chapters and carefully-laid clues, *Ban Maha Phai* spins out its basic plot with gratuitous, meandering episodes, that involve unlikely and barely relevant characters, such as Patch-Eye Pete, and increasingly less plausible situations, such as the heroine's impersonation of a condemned prisoner. Where Luang Saranupraphan set out to engage readers intellectually by laying a path of clues, the film *Ban Maha Phai* aimed to thrill cinema-goers visually, through a succession of daring stunts, which could only be inadequately conveyed on the pages of the

³⁶ *Sena su'ksa lae phae withhayasat*, vol. 7 pt. 6, 1923, p. 761.

³⁷ If my conclusions about *Ban Maha Phai* and *Phrae Dam* differ in emphasis from those of Suphanni, this is in no way intended to challenge the overall authority of her work, which remains a major landmark in Thai literary historiography.

film-book.³⁸ More than eighty years after the two works appeared, *Phrae Dam* still appears a competently-written mystery story, while the *Ban Maha Phai* film-books today seem crude and unsophisticated by comparison.

From his editorials in *Sena su'ksa* ... it is clear that Luang Saranupraphan cared deeply about the newly-emerging prose fiction, using his position to promote original Thai work, and to encourage writers to move away from adaptations and translations from foreign works. His decision to take deliberately and openly some elements from the foreign-created *Ban Maha Phai*, was not due to a failure of imagination, nor the desire to get away with writing a novel with minimum effort; nor was it simply an attempt to promote his work by linking it with a successful movie. Rather, in developing those elements into his own, more-tightly constructed framework, he was demonstrating to readers of *Sena su'ksa* ... that Thai writers were capable of producing good original work of their own, and providing a lesson in plot-construction. If he stopped short of openly inviting readers to compare *Phrae Dam* with the film-book that 'Khon Than' had produced, and notice the vast superiority of his own creation, his references to *Ban Maha Phai* could not help but draw them in that direction. Ironically, however, two generations later, it is only the *similarities* between the two works that are noted, when Luang Saranupraphan expected contemporary readers to recognize the *differences*; he would, undoubtedly, have been amazed and shocked that, years later, *Phrae Dam* could be so completely mis-read.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that, despite some obvious intentional superficial similarities between *Phrae Dam* and *Ban Maha Phai* 'The House of Hate', *Phrae Dam* is quite clearly not a plagiarized work, nor the author's claim to originality fraudulent. Since *Phrae Dam* was written more than eighty years ago, and nobody reads it nowadays, should it be of any concern to us today? Yes, indeed: firstly, and most obviously, because Luang Saranupraphan's own reputation has suffered unfairly, for many will have been led to the conclusion that the plot of his best-known work was copied from a foreign film; and secondly, as a result of doubts about his integrity, Luang Saranupraphan's importance in the Thai literary world, particularly in the promotion of the novel, has been neither fully recognized nor properly researched, so that a crucial period in Thai literary history has remained obscured. This paper will, I hope, contribute to a greater awareness of and interest in Luang Saranupraphan and the Thai novel of the early 1920s and bring an end to repeated claims that *Phrae Dam* was copied from a foreign movie.

³⁸ *Sena su'ksa lae phae wittayasat*, vol. 7 pt. 8, 1923, pp. 1041-1042.

