

## The Evolution and Transformation of Rama's Character Across Narrative Phases in the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok*

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### Abstract

This thesis was supported by a research and innovation grant from the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) under Contract No. N43A680476. The project is titled “*The Role of Rama in the Isan Phra Ram Chadok Toward the Creation of a Performance.*” The financial support from NRCT has played an essential role in facilitating the research process, including field data collection, textual analysis, and the development of creative performance interpretations based on the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok* tradition. The research focuses on examining the development and transformation of the character of Rama in the early narrative stage of the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok*, particularly the Roi Et narrative version compiled by Luang Si Amornyan and Phra Sarapasoe. Through documentary research, field surveys, and interviews with literary experts and cultural practitioners, the study investigates how the narrative structure and character portrayal have evolved within the socio-cultural context of Isan society. The findings suggest that the representation of Rama in the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok* reflects a significant process of cultural reinterpretation. Rather than being portrayed primarily as a divine incarnation in the Hindu cosmological framework, Rama is gradually constructed as a moral exemplar aligned with Theravāda Buddhist ethical principles. This transformation demonstrates how regional literary traditions adapt transregional epic narratives by integrating local cultural values, vernacular belief systems, and historical imagination within the Mekong cultural sphere. Furthermore, the study contributes to the understanding of how literary narratives can serve as a foundation for creative performance development. By analyzing the transformation of Rama's character and its cultural significance within the Isan tradition, the research provides insights into the relationship between literary heritage and contemporary artistic expression. The findings highlight the importance of *Phra Ram Chadok* not only as a literary text but also as a cultural resource that can inspire new forms of artistic interpretation while preserving the cultural identity of the region.

### 1. Introduction

Isan society and culture are largely rooted in rural communities whose livelihoods traditionally depend on natural conditions and agricultural practices. Although the general social and cultural structures of communities across the region share many similarities, certain differences emerge in the form of local cultural expressions such as dialects, ways of life, and specific customary practices of particular cultural groups. The languages spoken in the region are generally similar, with most communities using the Isan language or Lao-Thai dialects as the primary means of communication. Nevertheless, Isan society possesses distinctive cultural characteristics shaped by environmental factors and patterns of everyday life. Compared with other regions of Thailand, the sociocultural structure of the Isan region exhibits unique features that have been discussed and defined from various scholarly perspectives. A central principle of Isan community life is often summarized through the concept of **Heet Sip Song–Khleng Sip See**, which refers to the twelve annual traditions and the fourteen codes of social conduct guiding community life. These principles function as a framework for social behavior throughout the year. In practice, however, many additional customs are observed depending on specific life-cycle events such as birth ceremonies, ordination rituals, marriage traditions, and funeral practices. Within this cultural framework, Buddhism plays a crucial role in shaping community identity, while customary beliefs and traditions serve to bind social groups together. The **Khleng Sip See** functions similarly to a customary legal code that regulates social order, defining the responsibilities of local leaders and prescribing expected conduct for community members. Individuals are expected to follow the guidance of elders, respect monks, and honor local authorities according to established cultural roles and responsibilities within Isan society (Thawat Punnothok, 1999). Religious literature refers to literary works composed on the basis of religious teachings, doctrines, and narratives concerning important figures within a religious tradition, including the Buddha, disciples, and other associated individuals. Such literature may also involve newly composed narratives modeled after religious themes. These works appear in various literary forms, including sacred scriptures, biographies, legends, folktales, and creative literary forms such as novels and dramatic works. In the context of Buddhist literature, texts can generally be classified into two main categories. The first includes works derived directly from the *Tipiṭaka* or other canonical scriptures, which are translated or adapted while incorporating Buddhist teachings and moral principles. The second category consists of literary works inspired by Buddhist philosophical concepts that express devotion to Buddhism or record particular events, while also incorporating the author's imagination and interpretation.

Another related category is **Jātaka literature**, in which narratives from Jātaka texts are adapted and re-composed into various poetic or literary forms. Jātaka literature may be divided into two main types. The first consists of works translated or adapted from the *Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā*, such as *Mahachat Kham Luang*, *Kap Mahachat*, and *Rai Yao Mahawessandon Chadok*. The second type derives from the *Paññāsa Jātaka*, which includes works such as *Samutthakos Khamchan*, *Suea Kho Khamchan*, *Sapphasit Khamchan*, *Kolabot Siriwibunkit*, *Sangthong*, and *Rotsen*. In the Isan region, a large number of non-canonical Jātaka narratives have been recorded in local literary traditions, one of which is *Phra Ram Chadok* (Prasit Srisamut, 2003).

*Phra Ram Chadok* is a literary work traditionally used by Buddhist monks in the Isan region as a sermon text and is regarded as a Jātaka narrative within the Buddhist tradition. The version widely known today was transcribed into Central Thai script by Luang Si Amornyan from earlier palm-leaf manuscripts written in northern Thai script. The narrative is divided into two main parts: the early section and the concluding section. The early section follows a narrative structure similar to that of *Sang Sin Chai* and bears resemblance to the Lao narrative *Phra Lak–Phra Lam*, although the details of individual episodes differ. The narrative of *Phra Ram Chadok*, which is closely related to the broader *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, is not significant only within the Indian cultural sphere. Rather, the story has spread widely throughout regions influenced by Indian civilization, including Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Each of these regions has developed its own version of the Rama narrative. Although the central plot generally remains consistent—depicting the heroic deeds of Rama, who defeats forces of evil, with the abduction of Sita serving as the primary cause of conflict—the narrative details, subplots, and character behaviors have been adapted according to the cultural values and social environments of each society. Beyond its role as a literary adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Phra Ram Chadok* also functions as a cultural record reflecting aspects of Lao social life in earlier periods. Among the various Rama traditions that developed in regions influenced by Indian culture, this version is particularly distinctive in its ability to integrate the roles and statuses of major characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* with figures who resemble national heroes within the local cultural context. As a result, the literary character structure evolves in a manner that differs from the original epic. In addition, the ideological framework of the narrative shifts from the praise of Hindu deities to the depiction of heroic deeds associated with the Bodhisattva concept within Theravāda Buddhist belief (Niyada Laosunthon, 2005).

Although the storyline of *Phra Ram Chadok* shares certain similarities with the *Ramakien* tradition, the narrative structure and sequence of events differ considerably from both the Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Thai *Ramakien*. This suggests that the text was not derived directly from either of those traditions. Instead, scholars have proposed that the narrative may have entered the region through cultural transmission from neighboring areas such as Cambodia and Champa, which themselves had earlier connections with Malay cultural traditions. Within this process of transmission, the narrative was subsequently adapted to align with Buddhist cosmology. Consequently, references to

Hindu deities such as Shiva are largely absent, while figures such as Indra and Brahma appear in accordance with Buddhist cosmological beliefs. Some narrative elements also appear to derive from local folklore and indigenous traditions. As a result, the narrative of *Phra Ram Chadok* diverges significantly from the classical *Rāmāyana*. Nevertheless, the text retains the structural characteristics of a Jātaka narrative, including an introductory episode explaining the origin of the story, the narrative body of the tale, and the concluding section known as the **Jātaka identification**, which links characters in the story to individuals in the time of the Buddha. The content of *Phra Ram Chadok*, particularly in its early narrative section, differs substantially from other Rama narratives found in Laos and other cultural traditions (Sathian Koses, 2007).

## 2. Objective

2.1 To investigate the developmental transformation of the character of Rama across narrative phases in the early section of the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok* tradition.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine the development and transformation of the character of Rama across narrative periods in the Isan Ramachadok tradition. The research focused on both textual interpretation and contextual understanding of performance-related elements associated with the narrative. The participants consisted of two primary groups. The first group included literary scholars specializing in the Isan Ramachadok tradition. The second group comprised key informants with expertise in Isan performing arts and related cultural practices, including specialists in Isan folk dance, instructors responsible for portraying the Rama character, experts in traditional Isan music, stage design specialists, and costume experts. Additional participants included experts involved in validating research instruments and audience members who observed the performances. Data were collected through documentary research and fieldwork. Documentary data were obtained from relevant literary texts and academic sources related to the Isan Ramachadok tradition. Field data were gathered through interviews, observations, and performance evaluations using semi-structured interview forms, observation records, and evaluation forms. The research process was conducted in four stages: preparation, data collection, data processing and analysis, and the writing and dissemination of research findings. The collected data were analyzed through systematic categorization, data verification, and interpretative analysis and synthesis in order to identify patterns of character transformation within the narrative tradition.

## 4. Result

### 4.1 The Development and Transformation of Rama's Character Across Narrative Stages in the Early Section of the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok*

Based on data collected through documentary research, field surveys, and interviews related to the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok*, particularly the Roi Et narrative version compiled by Luang Si Amornyan and Phra Saraprasoet in 1932, the study focuses on the early narrative section (*ban ton*). The analysis also incorporates insights from literary scholars and academic experts whose research and publications are associated with the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok* tradition.

Accordingly, the researcher organizes the analysis of the development and transformation of Rama's character in the early narrative phase according to the following thematic issues.

*Rama Jātaka* (*Phra Ram Chadok*) is a vernacular literary tradition widely used by monks in Northeast Thailand (Isan) as a sermon text and treated as a Buddhist *jātaka*. A major Thai-language rendering was produced when Luang Si Amornyan (Sri Amorn) transcribed and adapted earlier palm-leaf manuscripts, originally recorded in northern Thai script, into Central Thai. The narrative is commonly described as comprising an "opening" and a "concluding" part. The opening section follows a storyline comparable to *Sang Sin Chai* and shares a broad narrative contour with *Phra Lak-Phra Lam* traditions, though it differs in many episode-level details.

Beyond its local significance, the Rama narrative—known widely as the *Rāmāyana* cycle—has circulated across regions influenced historically by Indian cultural currents, including Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Although these traditions maintain a shared core plot centered on the heroic deeds of Rama and the conflict arising from Sita/Sida (or her counterpart) as the principal cause of war, each region reshapes subplots, character behaviors, and episode structures in ways that reflect local values, environments, and social expectations (Niyada Laosunthon, 2005). In this broader comparative landscape, the Isan-Lao *Rama Jātaka* tradition is often considered distinctive for its capacity to integrate major roles and statuses from the Indian epic into local heroic imaginaries, thereby producing character configurations that resonate with local historical consciousness. Notably, this transformation also shifts the genre's ideological orientation: rather than functioning primarily as a hymn of Hindu divinities, the narrative becomes framed as the heroic career of a Bodhisattva within Theravāda Buddhist belief.

Such localization is not unique to Isan or Laos. When societies incorporate Rama narratives into their own literary repertoires, the materials are typically reworked to align with local tastes and moral frameworks, sometimes explicitly connecting narrative geography and history to their own territories. The central ethical principle—"dharma prevails over adharma"—is largely retained, yet it is refracted through local religious and cultural logics. Comparative study of Thai and non-Thai Rama traditions, when grounded in shared interpretive frameworks, is therefore valuable not only for language and literary scholarship but also for fostering intercultural understanding.

A key publication in this tradition is *Phra Ram Chadok* (a prose rendering from sermon books), associated with Phra Saraprasoet (Tri Nakapradip) and issued in a commemorative edition in 1893. The vernacular source materials for this book were gathered by Phraya Sunthonthepkitcharak (Thong Chantharangsū) during his tenure as governor of Roi Et (1926–1928), after which the text was entrusted to Phra Saraprasoet for translation into Central Thai. In his explanatory notes, Phra Saraprasoet also described cross-Mekong religious practices and sermon culture, drawing on accounts attributed to Somdet Phra Mahavirawong (Auan Tisso) of Wat Boromniwas. These descriptions emphasize communal evening sermon attendance—women and men, youth and elders—bringing flowers, incense, and candles to temple sermons. Such a vibrant sermonic culture, delivered regularly in the evenings, implies the existence of extensive sermon manuscripts. Importantly, *jātaka* narratives and locally composed stories framed as *jātaka* were favored because audiences could easily follow the content and wished to continue listening on subsequent days. Among these, *Rama Jātaka* is singled out as particularly popular, understood to confer both merit and practical knowledge, with embedded local lore such as legends of city foundations. The tradition is commonly estimated to have been composed roughly two centuries prior to these records, possibly near the period before or after the fall of Vientiane.

Another notable dimension of the Isan-Lao *Phra Lak-Phra Lam / Phra Lam Jātaka* corpus concerns language. Readers encounter a textual world that feels simultaneously familiar and distinctive, demonstrating both the proximity and divergence between Thai and Lao linguistic forms. Translators and editors often provide explanatory footnotes to clarify idioms and lexical items, reflecting an awareness that the tradition's aesthetic and cultural value is inseparable from its vernacular expression.

In Laos, *Phra Lak-Phra Lam* exists in multiple versions and circulates widely across temples. Bosaengkham Vongdala (2008) notes that the narrative appears in numerous manuscripts and is distributed in temples across nearly every Lao city. Consistent with this, survey and microfilm documentation undertaken by the Lao-German "Palm Leaf Manuscript Preservation Project" compiled extensive listings preserved today at the National Library of Laos in Vientiane. Based on these inventories, the researcher identified 99 versions from 27 cities across 11 provinces. The principal text examined in the present study follows the edition compiled by Sachchidanand Sahai, based primarily on the Wat Ban Na Son Tai manuscript (43 bundles), complemented by cross-checking with manuscripts from Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Kang Tha (Ban Bo-O), Wat Ban Hom, Wat Nong Bon, and a Roi Et (Thailand) version to repair omissions and incomplete passages. This edited Lao-script publication appeared in 1973 under the title *Phra Lak-Phra Lam or Phra Lam Jātaka*, organized into two parts.

Scholarly debates regarding the origins of Lao-Isan *Phra Lak-Phra Lam* and related *Rama Jātaka* traditions can be grouped into two broad positions. The first argues for direct inheritance from the Indian *Rāmāyana*, with localized elaboration of detail rather than replacement of the central plot. Kamala Ratnam (1980) emphasizes that Southeast Asian Rama traditions share core narrative events with Vālmīki's epic but

possess distinct local features, and that Lao versions maintain a recognizable identity even while resembling Thai and Cambodian variants. Similarly, Preecha Nunsuk (1985) proposes that Rama narratives entered mainland Southeast Asia primarily through oral transmission or performance rather than direct translation of written texts. This mode of transmission, he argues, helps explain the extensive adaptation, condensation, and expansion observed in regional traditions while preserving an overall narrative frame. A second position suggests that Lao–Isan *Phra Lak–Phra Lam* did not derive directly from Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, but arrived through intermediary Southeast Asian pathways—especially via Khmer and Cham cultural zones, potentially linked further to Javanese–Malay traditions. Sethian Kose (2007) argues that Isan sermon texts titled *Phra Ram Chadok* resemble the Rama cycle but diverge significantly in organization and thematic framing, especially in their Buddhist orientation, which foregrounds deities such as Indra and Brahmā rather than the Hindu triad. Related observations appear in the writings of Prince Pidthayalaphrueyikorn (1974), who suggests affinities between *Phra Ram Chadok* and Malay Sri Rama traditions. Sahai (1973) further complicates the debate by proposing that while parts of the second section show clearer correspondences to Indian materials (with some episodes possibly drawn directly from Vālmiki), other sections remain difficult to trace to a single source. Isan literary scholars also point to a complex process in which poets adopted a broad framework but significantly re-authored scenes, settings, and episodes, potentially drawing from Lan Na, Khmer, or Thai intermediaries (Thawat Punnothok, 1979). Chadarat Sunthorntham (1985) argues that Isan-local Rama traditions likely absorbed materials from Malay, Khmer, and Thai Rama cycles, while Siraporn Thitathan na Thalang (1994) emphasizes how character and place names were localized to match familiar geography—e.g., associating Ayodhya with Vientiane (Si Sattanak) and identifying Lanka with Indapat (Khmer space). These debates converge on a shared conclusion: regardless of whether transmission was direct from India or mediated through Southeast Asian circuits, the Lao–Isan tradition underwent substantial adaptation to fit Buddhist moral discourse and local historical imagination. In some contexts, the transformation of Rama from a Viṣṇu avatāra into a Bodhisattva-like figure illustrates how narrative meaning shifts alongside religious change, particularly as societies consolidated Theravāda Buddhist worldviews. One striking feature of Lao–Isan *Phra Lak–Phra Lam* is the reconfiguration of key characters and their origins. Certain antagonists are not represented as multi-headed demons as in many epic versions, but as human figures shaped by moral failure and social transgression. For example, Thao Rapphanasuan is described not as the ten-headed Ravana but as a handsome, intelligent prince whose arrogance and violation of customary ethics positions him as an antagonist (Sahai, 1973; Bosaengkham Vongdala et al., 2008). Similarly, some characters—such as Sangkhip and Phalichan—are portrayed as ordinary humans rather than demons. Another distinctive element concerns the role of Hulalamaan, who appears not only as an elite warrior but, in this tradition, as the son of Phra Lam—a configuration that differs from most regional versions except certain Malay traditions, albeit with different narrative details. Moreover, the narrative elevates the figure of Ma Mani Kap, who remains close to Phra Lam throughout the story as adviser, problem-solver, and constant companion, at times taking on a more central functional role than Hulalamaan. Interpreted through functionalist perspectives such as those associated with Malinowski, these adaptations can be read as cultural responses to social and psychological needs, with mythic and legendary materials serving meaningful roles within local socio-cultural contexts (Yot Santasombat, 1997). In sum, *Phra Ram Chadok* and the broader *Phra Lak–Phra Lam* tradition can be understood as simultaneously (1) a local tale, (2) a *jātaka*-framed Buddhist narrative, and (3) a form of “historical literature” or *phuen suep* that integrates local geography, legends, and identity. Although the tradition draws upon the wider *Rāmāyaṇa* family, Lao and Isan authors preserve local distinctiveness by fusing regional beliefs, moral reasoning, and historical imagination into a narrative world that is recognizably their own.

## 5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the early narrative phase of the Isan *Phra Ram Chadok* presents a distinctive characterization of Rama that differs in several important aspects from the classical Indian *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the early episodes of the narrative, Rama is not primarily portrayed as a divine incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, but rather as a morally exemplary figure whose identity is gradually framed within a Buddhist ethical worldview. This transformation reflects the process through which transregional epics were localized and adapted to a lign with the Theravāda Buddhist context of mainland Southeast Asia (Pollock, 1998; Ramanujan, 1991).

In the early section of the narrative, Rama’s character is depicted with qualities that emphasize human virtues rather than divine omnipotence. The narrative places strong emphasis on moral conduct, compassion, and the fulfillment of social duties, which correspond to the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva path. Such characterization suggests that the adaptation of the Rama narrative into *Phra Ram Chadok* involved a reinterpretation of the hero’s identity so that he functions as a moral exemplar within Buddhist didactic literature. This shift supports the argument that Southeast Asian versions of the Rama tradition often reinterpret the hero in accordance with local religious frameworks rather than preserving the original Hindu theological context (Richman, 1991).

Another important finding concerns the narrative structure in the early phase of the story, where the development of Rama’s character is closely associated with local cultural and geographical references. The incorporation of local place names, social customs, and regional symbolic meanings indicates that the narrative was reshaped to resonate with audiences in the Mekong cultural region. Such localization demonstrates the process of vernacularization in which cosmopolitan literary traditions are reinterpreted through local languages and cultural systems (Pollock, 1998). As a result, Rama’s character becomes not merely a hero of a distant epic tradition but a figure embedded within the cultural imagination of the Isan–Lao community. The transformation of Rama’s character in the early narrative phase can also be interpreted through functionalist perspectives in anthropology. According to Malinowski, myths and traditional narratives serve practical cultural functions by reinforcing moral values and social norms within a community (Malinowski, 1926). In the case of *Phra Ram Chadok*, the early portrayal of Rama emphasizes ethical leadership, humility, and adherence to moral order. These attributes correspond to the values promoted within Buddhist sermon traditions, suggesting that the narrative was shaped to function as a pedagogical tool within religious teaching contexts. Furthermore, the gradual development of Rama’s character throughout the early narrative stage illustrates a narrative strategy that allows the audience to observe the hero’s moral maturation. Rather than presenting Rama as a fully formed divine figure from the beginning, the story introduces him through a sequence of experiences that reveal his ethical qualities and leadership abilities. This narrative technique reinforces the didactic purpose of the text, allowing listeners or readers to engage with the character as a model of moral development. Such narrative transformation is consistent with the broader pattern of Southeast Asian Rama traditions, where the epic framework is retained but the characterization and thematic emphasis are adjusted to reflect local cultural priorities (Ramanujan, 1991; Richman, 1991). Overall, the early narrative phase of *Phra Ram Chadok* demonstrates that the character of Rama undergoes a significant reinterpretation within the Isan literary tradition. Instead of functioning primarily as a divine hero within a Hindu cosmological framework, Rama becomes a morally exemplary human figure whose actions embody Buddhist ethical ideals. This transformation illustrates how the Rama narrative was adapted and integrated into local religious and cultural systems, thereby enabling the story to function both as a literary tradition and as a medium for moral instruction within the Isan Buddhist context.

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