The Influence of the Ramayana on Thai Culture: Kingship, Literature, Fine Arts and Performing Arts*

Abstract

The epic Ramayana of India gave birth to the Ramakien of Thailand. The story of the Ramayana or the Rama story has been known in Thailand since the 13th century if not earlier. References to the Rama story have been made in inscriptions and literary works. There are also Thai folklores and place names based on the Rama story. The origin of Khon (masked dance drama) which performs exclusively the Ramakien is traced back from the Ayudhya period to the present. The impact of the Ramakien on Thai Culture is quite great. The concept of kingship is influenced by the Ramakien. In literature, there are many versions of the Ramakien, the Thai story of the Ramayana. In fine arts, the Ramakien inspires painting, sculpture, architecture, and handicrafts. In performing arts, there are Khon, Nang Yai, Nang Talung and various kinds of puppets that perform the Ramakien. There are also arts derived from the Ramakien performance. These are drama, dance, music, singing, recitation, choreography, costumes, mask-making, setting, and puppet-making. The worshipping of the masters before learning the art or performing is an elaborate ceremony and also an art in itself.

The Ramayana or Ramakien is particularly appealing to the Thai people because it presents the image of an ideal king, Rama, who symbolizes the force of virtue or dharma while Thotsakan (Ravana) represents the force of evil. Eventually the force of good prevails. Being Buddhists, the Thai poets bring into the story the Buddhist philosophy of transitoriness. Nothing is permanent except the law of cause and effect. Though an old story, the Ramakien is still relevant to the present day. The use of force without moral back-ups is destructive as well as futile. Only those who rely on virtue will triumph.

Key words: Ramayana and Thai Culture

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** Professor Emeritus
The Ramakien in Thailand

The Ramayana which is based on the Indian epic Ramayana is known in Thailand as the Ramakien (Ramakian). The Ramayana story may have been well-known in Thailand since the 13th century if not earlier. In the Sukhothai Kingdom, mentions were made of Ram cave in King Ram Kamhaeng’s Stone Inscription No. 1, of Rama as the god Narayana in the Stone Inscription No. 2 from Sri Chum temple, and also the very name of King Ram Kamhaeng shows that the Rama story was well-known at that time and possibly before.

In various literary works of the Ayudhya period (A.D. 1351-1767), there are frequent references to the Rama story. For example, the “ten-headed” demon king (Ravana), Rama and Lakshman are mentioned in Kloong Prakat Chaeng Nam composed in the reign of King Uthong (A.D. 1351-1369) who was also called King Ramadhipati I. Similes and metaphors referring to the Rama story abound. The king’s power in Lilit Yuan Phai is compared to the might of Rama who subdued Ravana. In the Ayudhya version of Manohra, a drama in verse, the story of Sita is briefly told. Unquestionably, the Ramakien must have been composed and become quite popular in the Kingdom of Ayudhya. Unfortunately, just fragments of the Ramakien during the Ayudhya period are found. Only some parts starting from the punishment of Samanakha (Surpanakha) up to the death of Kumbhakarna in the form of recitation (Kham Phak) remain at present.

There is also evidence that entertainments related to the Ramakien also existed in the Ayudhya period. Nang Yai or the grand shadow play must have been one of the first forms of entertainment in Ayudhya. Nang Yai at that time presented many stories including the Ramakien. It is believed that Nang Yai existed before the reign of King Narai Maharaj (A.D. 1657-1688). For it was King Narai’s intention to use the existing Nang Yai as the means to instil the Buddhist belief among Thai people through the story of Samudraghosa Kham Chanda composed during his reign for Nang Yai performances.

It is possible that the Thai Nang Yai was adapted from the Javanese shadow play because the performers hold the leather figures in front of the screen in the same way. The narrator (Dalang in Javanese) plays the most important part in both Nang Yai and the Javanese shadow play. The masked dance drama or Khon might originate in the Ayudhya period from Nang Yai. The footworks of Nang Yai performers who manipulate the leather figures are rather similar to those of the Khon performers. Yet Khon might originate in the reign of King Ramadhipati II (A.D. 1491-1529). In Indrabhisek Ceremony of that time there was a performance of the churning of the milk ocean to obtain the Amrita (ambrosia) which gives immortality to the drinkers. It was called “Chak Nag Duk Damba” which means the ancient ceremony of pulling Vasuki naga (the divine serpent) which was tied to Mount Mandara used for churning the cosmic ocean. This story demonstrates Vishnu’s power who reincarnated as a giant tortoise supporting Mount Mandara. When the goddess Lakshmi was born from the ceremony, Vishnu took her to be his consort. The giant tortoise is Vishnu’s second reincarnation while Rama is Vishnu’s seventh reincarnation. Lakshmi also reincarnated as Sita.

The Khon performance in the Ayudhya period was probably of Khon Roong Nok type which was performed outside the building on a built-up stage for the purpose. It was performed with narrations and dialogues only, with no singing. It was commonly known as Khon Nang Rao for the performers sat on a bamboo bar (nang - sit, rao = bar). In the reign of King Narai, Monsieur de La Loubère, French ambassador to Siam, wrote about the Khon performance in which performers wore masks. So Khon was already known in King Narai’s reign.

The Ramakien which means the glory of Rama must have
become a part of Thai heritage since the Ayudhya period. When Ayudhya was sacked by the Burmese, the Thais tried to preserve the Ramakien. Although King Taksin of Thonburi (A.D. 1767-1782) was busy pushing back the invading Burmese, he spared the time to compose a few episodes of the Ramakien.

In the Rattanakosin (Rattanakosindra) or Bangkok period (A.D. 1782-present) many versions of the Ramakien were composed. The most notable ones are those composed by King Rama I, Rama II and Rama VI. The Rama I Ramakien is most important because it is the only version that tells the complete Rama story. The Rama II Ramakien is generally used for stage because the dramatic and exciting episodes were written especially for Khon performances. The Rama VI Ramakien has some episodes very close to the Valmiki Ramayana, for example, Vibhishana in this version is a brave warrior whereas in Rama I and II versions he is an astrologer, medicine man and a coward. He becomes a comic figure when he acts cowardly, being scared of his powerful brothers and nephew.

The Influence of the Ramayana (Ramakien) on Thai Culture: Kingship

Before the 1932 revolution, Thailand or Siam was ruled by absolute monarchs. Yet absolute monarchy in Thailand was not totally absolute. It was modified by the Buddhist concept of Dharmaraja who must rule by dharma or righteousness. A king should possess ten kingly virtues such as generosity, self-sacrifice, justice. In addition to Buddhist virtues, the king should strive to make his rule resemble Ramarajya or the ideal reign of Rama regarded as the golden age. This explains why many kings have the word Ram as part of their names such as Ram Khamhaeng, Ramadhipati and Ramesvar. Especially the Thai kings of the present Chakri dynasty have long names beginning with the word “Ramadhipati”. The sixth king of the Chakri dynasty started the tradition of calling himself Rama. Thus posthumously the 5 kings before him became King Rama I, Rama II, Rama III and so on. Our present King Bhumibol is regarded as King Rama IX. This is not just a mere name. The idea behind it is that the king is divine like Rama in the Ramayana and the Ramakien and he must strive to be as good as Rama, the reincarnation of the god Vishnu. Therefore, the king must use his absolute power only for the benefit of his people, not for his own personal gain. Now the Thai King is a constitutional monarch and his power derives from his dedicated work for the benefit of the Thai people.

Literature

There are many folk tales based on the Ramakien. Various towns have folk tales connected with the Ramakien. In Lop Buri there are many folk tales of this kind. In one tale, Rama returned to Ayudhya after the end of the war. Wishing to reward Hanuman, Rama shot an arrow and told Hanuman to follow it. The place where the arrow fell would be Hanuman’s city to rule. The arrow fell on Lop Buri where the earth turned white because of the heat of the arrow’s impact. This story explains the white earth which Lop Buri people use for making talcum powder.

In Chainat there is a mountain called Khao Sapaya where Hanuman collected a medicinal plant called Sangkoranitrijava. The top of this mountain is flat and smooth because Hanuman enlarged his body and used his huge tail to sweep the mountain to obtain the wanted plant.

In Saraburi there is a mountain where there is a big hole right through one side. The tale tells how Thotsakan (Ravana) carried Sita in his chariot. While he was rushing past the mountain, the axle of the chariot wheel hit the mountain and made a big hole.

Both Chonburi and Phatthalung claim to be the place where Bali (Vali) fought with the buffalo named Thoraphi (Dundhubi) because the earth around the caves in both places is red like the buffalo’s
blood. All the folk tales above prove the popularity of the Ramakien as well as the imaginative mind of the local people who try to explain the outstanding phenomena of their town or city by referring to the Ramakien.

There are more than 10 versions of the Ramakien existing in Thai literary forms, a few of which already referred to in the history of the Ramakien. Most of them are written in various verse forms, rich in imageries, similes and metaphors, a source of inspiration for poets and writers of every generation. Thai customs, traditions, philosophy, belief and all kinds of knowledge are so much interwoven into the Ramakien that it has become important not only in the field of literature but also in the fields of history, geography, sociology and anthropology. The Ramakien in regional dialects are Horaman and Brahmachakra in Northern Thailand (Lanna), Phalak Phalam and Phra Ram Jataka from Northeastern Thailand and Laos. The study of these texts helps the understanding of Thai regional culture.

There are similes, metaphors and expressions that derive from the Ramakien. For example, Hanuman in the Ramakien served Rama faithfully and performed difficult tasks but Hanuman often incurred Rama’s displeasure. Once Rama promised to reward Hanuman whatever he was wearing when Hanuman brought him the news of Sita. Hanuman happened to arrive with the news while Rama was bathing in the river, wearing just a loin cloth which he gave to Hanuman as promised. As Hanuman acted beyond Rama’s order, burning Lanka, Rama was displeased with him. So there is a simile “ill-fated like Hanuman.” An ungrateful son is called “Thoraphi” because the buffalo Thoraphi killed his own father. The expression “amorous demon” (Chao Chu Yak) conjures up the image of Thotsakan who tried to use force to obtain Sita’s love.

Fine Art

The Ramakien inspires painters, sculptors and architects to express their artistic expressions. The Ramakien is one of the favorite themes because it challenges the skill and imagination with its various characters and scenes. Mural paintings or frescoes often depict the Ramakien, especially in temples and palaces. There are mural paintings of the whole story of Ramakien along the galleries of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. In Wat Pho (Bodhi Temple) nearby, various scenes of the Ramakien are depicted both in paintings and bas-reliefs. On old Tripitaka cabinets, Ramakien scenes are often depicted. In modern buildings such as big hotels and banks, depictions of the Ramakien can also be found in the galleries.

There are numerous sculptures and woodcarvings of different characters in the Ramakien, the favorites are demons, monkeys, Nang Suphanamatcha (half-maiden, half fish character) and of course, Rama, Sita and Lakshman. Lintels and other architectural parts of the temples and palaces often made use of the Ramakien motifs. Supporting figures in stupa structures, pavilions and altars are quite often Ramakien characters such as demons or monkeys. Huge demon statues such as Ravana and his relatives and friends become part of the architectural designs, for they stand guard at the temple gates or doorways such as in the Temple of Dawn (Wat Arun), the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and Wat Pho.

Performing Arts

Khon and Nang Yai in the Bangkok period perform the Ramakien exclusively. Nang Talung performs the Ramakien and also other stories. Khon is considered the most artistic of the performing arts and the most difficult to learn.

There are many kinds of Khon according to the forms of the stage and special effects used.

Khon Klang Plaeng is historically the oldest kind. It is an open-air performance staged on the lawn or any open space. It is suitable for performing battle episodes. Perhaps due to a big space, it requires 2 orchestras or more. There are only recitation or recitative voice and dialogue but no
singing. The staging is similar to “Chak Nag Duk Damban” of the Ayudhya period.8

**Khon Rong Nok or Khon Nang Rao** is performed on a raised platform with a long big bamboo bar for the royal male characters to sit on while royal female characters sit on a large bench. There is usually a roof above this kind of stage. There are two orchestras, one on the left and one on the right of the stage. Like Khon Klang Plaeng, there are only the recitation and dialogue.

**Khon Na Jaw** is adapted from Nang Yai or the grand shadow play. There is a white screen like in Nang Yai. The performers perform in front of the screen. Formerly Khon Na Jaw was played alternately with Nang Yai. Later, as people prefer watching Khon only, Nang Yai is not performed with it. The dialogue, recitation and music of Khon Na Jaw are similar to those of Nang Yai. There is only one orchestra at one side below the stage.

**Khon Na Fai** is the outdoor performance of Khon in front of the cremation site at the temple. In the old days, a well-to-do family would provide a Khon Na Fai at the funeral of the deceased one. This practice is rare now. The performance usually resembles that of Khon Rong Nai except for the fact that it is not performed inside a theatre. The episode chosen is often a short one with few characters because of the limited space and time. When the cremation ceremony is over, the performance may be continued on a highly raised open-air stage, playing a longer episode that may last the whole night to honor the deceased person. This later performance is not called Khon Na Fai because the “Fai” or fire of the funeral pyre is already burnt out.

**Khon Chak Rok** is believed to be performed since the Ayudhya period. The characters who can fly actually float in the air by the use of pulleys. The actor attaches a big strong string with a hook behind his back and he will be pulled up in the air to give the impression of flying. The acrobatic skill is needed. Apart from this, it is the same as Khon Na Jaw.

**Khon Chak** means the modern Khon performance which is performed in a theatre with settings (chak) and modern stage techniques. There are dancing, singing, recitation and dialogue. There is only one orchestra at one side below the stage.

**Khon Sod** is the folk version of Khon. In some areas, it is called Nang Sod because the characters sing their own parts and use the songs resembling those of the shadow play or Nang Talung. Their dancing gestures also resemble Nang Talung. The masks are not worn completely like those of Khon performers but they are worn perched on top of the head above the eyebrows so that they can recite and speak for themselves while the other kinds of Khon characters never recite nor speak except for the comic characters who also wear their masks perched on top of the head. The word “Sod” means “simultaneous” or “in the flesh” for the characters are men in the flesh who recite, sing or speak their own parts without waiting for the narrator or chorus to do for them.

The art of Khon performance gives rise to various art forms:

In the field of performing arts, it is believed that Khon gives birth to at least 4 forms of puppets or “Hun” in Thai.

**Hun Yai** or large full figure puppets are dressed up exactly like the Khon characters, they are one metre tall and have hidden mechanisms to make them move through various strings inside the body parts and the pole in the middle of the body. The mechanisms enable the Hun Yai to dance, make finger movements, roll the eyes and so on. The costumes can be changed and the masks can
also be removed. These puppets or Hun Yai are real works of art. Hun Yai was performed in the Ayudhya period, possibly from the reign of King Baromakot (A.D. 1733-1748) if not earlier.

As these Hun Yai are quite difficult and expensive to make and the movements are not as beautiful as the Khon performers that they try to imitate, the Hun Yai performance is not popular. No private performing troupe performs this kind of puppetry. It was only performed as part of the entertainment for a royal celebration in Ayudhya and early Bangkok periods. As they are presented during royal functions, they are also called Hun Luang as “Luang” means “royal”. Now “Hun Luang” is no longer performed.

During the reign of King Rama V, Hun Chin from China came into fashion. It inspired the creation of a new Hun of the same size as Hun Chin which is only one foot tall. It has also the same mechanisms as Hun Yai and the difference is only in the size. This new Hun or puppet is smaller, therefore it is called Hun Lek as “Lek” means “small”. It is used for performing the Ramakien and other kinds of dramas. Hun Lek, now called Hun Lakhon Lek is at present perfected by a troupe called Jo Louis. The Thai artist-teacher Sakhon Yangkheosod, nick-named Jo Louis, has three artists to manipulate each puppet: one holding the pole in the middle of the puppet body and manipulating the head and the right hand, one manipulating the left hand and the third one manipulating the feet. The three artists’ feet also dance to the music. In this way, the puppet can dance exactly like the Khon character while the audience can see and admire the skill of the artists manipulating the puppets.

Hun Krabok is another kind of puppet. It is so called because it uses a small bamboo trunk, which is called Krabok in Thai, to hold the puppet. Hun Krabok also originated during the reign of King Rama V. It is only a half-figure puppet showing the head, hands and costume but no feet. The puppeteer can control its movements much better than Hun Yai and Hun Lek. The puppeteer uses his hands to manipulate the puppet behind a semi-transparent screen. He also speaks the puppet’s part. Hun Krabok performs the Ramakien as well as other classical dramas.

Lakhon Lek is another kind of puppet. It has a full figure with supple moving joints. It needs two to three puppeteers to manipulate each character. Apart from the bamboo trunk, this Lakhon Lek figure also has small sticks attached to the hands and feet of the puppet. While the sticks help make movements more lifelike and smooth, the audience who can see the sticks cannot forget that it is a mere puppet. Lakhon Lek is almost like Hun Lakhon Lek except that the latter shows the manipulators on stage while the former has the manipulator hidden behind the screen.

Nowadays Hun Krabok and Lakhon Lek are rarely performed but they are revived in academic institutions such as colleges and universities as courses in the theatre arts curriculum or as extra-curricular activities. Now the use of plastic poles instead of bamboo makes the puppets lighter and more manageable. They are also performed for tourists interested in Thai arts.

Arts derived from various forms of the performing arts

It can be seen from above that the Ramakien performance gives rise to various arts: drama, dance, music, singing and recitation, choreography, the making of costumes, various kinds of puppets, leather puppets for shadow plays, stage set, special effects and techniques.

The dancing, music, tunes, singing and recitation must combine and compliment one another. Besides the masks and costumes which differentiate one character from another, the dance movements of human characters, demons and monkeys are distinctive. Masks or headdresses with high pointed tops signify royalty or kingship. Each mask is different in its details such as
the eyes and mouth, the color, the top or peak of the crown. A demon dances differently from a man or a monkey. As the mask can not show emotions or moods, and does not allow a character to speak, the dance gestures, musical tunes and songs must convey the feelings and moods instead. Real human gestures are conventionalized into dance gestures which, once understood by the audience, become effective dramatically. Each tune of music has its meaning; hearing the music, the audience knows what is happening. For example, one tune means the character is weeping, another means he is transforming himself from a demon into a deer or a human being.

The costumes of Khon and Hun may look too rich with its gold and glitters. This is necessary especially in the olden days when spotlights had not yet been invented. In the glow of oil lamps and burning torches, the costumes needed to be bright and glittering to be seen properly from the farthest audience.

The carved coloured leather puppets used for Nang Yai are a combined art of painting, portraiture and graphic design. The leather figures become alive both in front and behind the screen. The play between light and colours is very artistic. It is a pity that the conservation work started rather late in the last century. Some old and invaluable leather puppets disappeared or remain damaged. Many were sold to foreign collectors. The few remaining are mostly preserved by the monks of Khanon temple in Ratchaburi province. However, the art of making leather puppet is still alive and promoted in Thailand by H.M. the Queen.

**The art involved in the worship of the master**

In connection with the performances and studies of Khon, Nang and Hun which present the episodes from the Ramakien, the ceremony of worshipping the masters or Wai Khrue must be performed. The masters or teachers of old must be worshipped properly and asked for blessings. There are special verses for invocation, special offerings and dances for the masters. Neither performers nor students dare perform or learn without taking part in the Wai Khrue ceremony first. This shows the ancient Thai tradition of obedience and gratitude to their art teachers. The tradition helps preserve the invaluable art and culture of Thailand.

In the ceremony, the important masks or all the masks must be displayed. Those of the sages (rishis) and Birap (a benign demon) are especially sacred. Food, flowers and incense sticks are offered to the masters represented by the Khon masks. In Nang Yai performance, the worshipping ceremony starts off by placing the Nang figures of Narayana, rishi, and Shiva in front of the screen. Each figure is garlanded and the head of the troupe lights 3 candles to begin the worship.

**The reasons for the appeal of the Ramakien**

The Rama story is a very appealing story in itself. More than a story of love and sacrifice, it presents the image of an ideal king Rama who symbolizes the force of virtue or dharma while Thotsakan (Ravana) symbolizes the force of evil. In the long struggle between the two, Rama eventually wins. The Ramakien is, therefore, the symbol of victory of the good over the evil. Rama is also the symbol of good kingship, of sacred power of the king whom everyone must obey, serve, and show absolute loyalty. The absolute devotion and loyalty of Rama’s brothers and generals are stressed, so is Sita’s faithfulness in spite of her long stay in Lanka.

The performance of Ramakien instils many ideals and much knowledge while it entertains: moral obligation, bravery, gratitude, the Buddhist philosophy of transitoriness and Buddhist law of cause and effect, war strategy, discipline and many other virtues necessary for a nation. The Ramakien is one of the most successful form of moral and political education for the courtiers, officials.
and the common people before the arrival of formal education from the West.

The Khon performance is associated with the state celebrations and ceremonies as well as any grand occasions. The dance and costumes are elaborate and refined. It is only performed from time to time. Therefore, whenever a Khon performance is presented, people flock to see it and enjoy the rare spectacle.

As the Rama story is also well-known to other countries in Southeast Asia, it serves as the common background of culture and the common ground among the Southeast Asian countries to build up understanding and friendship through literary and dramatic activities. Most of all, the Ramakien links Thailand to India which is the ancient and main source of Thai culture. The Ramakien helps the Thai people understand and appreciate the greatness of the Ramayana of India.

In the past, many Thai kings and poets tried their hand at composing the Ramakien in various verse forms. As the ideals expressed in the Ramakien are immortal, they still inspire modern poets, writers, dramatists and artists. The message in the Ramakien can be studied and applied in the modern society. The use of force should be denounced as destructive and futile. For the powerful but evil Thotsakan or Ravana will finally fall while a mere human-being who relies on virtue like Rama will always survive.

Footnotes
1. Composed in the reign of King Barommathai (A.D. 1448-1488)
10. Ibid., p. 47.

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ราชบัณฑิต สานักศิลปกรรม ราชบัณฑิตยสถาน, ศาสตราจารย์เกียรติคุณ

ภาษาสุภาษิตของอินเดียได้ก่อให้เกิดความเกี่ยวข้องไทย เรื่องพระรามเป็นที่รู้จักในเพียงไทยด้วย
แล้ววิสัยนี้ความที่ 13 หรือกลับหน้าหนึ่ง มีการสื่อสารเรื่องพระรามในศิลปะบริเวณและงานวรรณกรรม ที่
นักพันธ์บุรีและซูฟุกุฮูที่เชื่อมปกครองเรื่องราวเกี่ยวกับ ไทยซึ่งแสดงเฉพาะเรื่องราวเกี่ยวกับที่นั่นเกิด
ขึ้นในสมัยยุคอาณาภูมิเกี่ยวกับการเกี่ยวกับภาษาสุภาษิตและลักษณะเป็นวัฒนธรรมไทยที่มีผลกระทบ
ทั้งหมดถูกสถาปนาเป็นทรัพย์ทางวัฒนธรรมไทยได้รับการพัฒนาจากภาษาสุภาษิต
หลายฉบับ ได้สาขาวิจารณ์ซึ่งใช้แรงบันดาลใจของวัฒนธรรม ประเพณีการบูชาสุภาษิตและ
ทั้งหมดในด้านศิลปะการแสดงไทย หนังสือหนังสือหนังสือและหนูประเภทต่าง ๆ แสดงเรื่องราวเกี่ยวกับ ศิลปะ
สันนิษฐานภาษาสุภาษิตได้แก่ การละเมิด นำที่มา ตนเป็น การขับร้อง การพิทักษ์ และหน้าใหญ่
การจัดทำแต่ละภาค การทำวัสดุ การจัดทำที่ การประดิษฐ์ขึ้น ที่หนึ่งในศิลป์เรียกเป็นศิลป์พื้นบ้าน

ภาษาสุภาษิตวัววัฒนธรรมไทยเป็นที่นิยมในรัฐไทยเพราะได้直接影响 Nhưเดื่อไทยในลุ่มคลอง พระราม
เป็นสัญลักษณ์ของประเทศที่ อันที่ใหญ่ที่สุดเป็นสัญลักษณ์ของภูมิภาคนี้ ไทยซึ่งนั่นเกี่ยวกับทุกศาสนา
ได้นำปรารถนาความเชื่อมทุกสอดส่วนในเรื่องเกี่ยวกับ ที่สำคัญคือความเป็นองค์กรและกฎหมายที่เจริญ แม้จะ
เป็นเรื่องที่เกี่ยวกับเรื่องที่เกี่ยวกับ การใช้กล่องโดยปราศจากคือธรรมเป็นอันตรายและโทษ ผู้ที่ชื่น
หน้าในคือธรรมจะเป็นผู้ช่วยในที่สุด

คำสั่ง : ภาษาและวัฒนธรรมไทย