

## The Ramakian Play by His Majesty the King of Thonburi (Review) | บทละครเรื่องรามเกียรติ์

พระราชนิพนธ์สมเด็จพระเจ้ากรุงธนบุรี (บทวิจารณ์)

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### Abstract

Book review of บทละครเรื่องรามเกียรติ์ พระราชนิพนธ์สมเด็จพระเจ้ากรุงธนบุรี [The Ramakian Dramatic Play – A Royal Composition of His Majesty the King of Thonburi] by Siworaphot et al., Fine Arts Department 2018

**Keywords:** Thai Literature, Thonburi Period, Ramayana, East-West Encounters, Collecting and Provenance Research

### Introduction

Adaptions of the Indian Ramayana epic into vernacular literatures (e.g. dramatic plays) stand out among the cultural heritage of Southeast Asian nations as an almost universally shared feature (Ohno 2003). The oldest preserved witness of a Ramayana adaption into a Siamese dramatic play, commonly referred to in Thai as Ramakian, dates to the year 1770. This remarkably late date is most certainly the result of the destruction of the Siamese capital Ayutthaya in 1767, in the wake of which the

literary heritage of the Siamese kingdom suffered tremendous losses. It was then under the leadership of the designated governor of Tak province that the Burmese forces of occupation were expelled and the fragmented pieces of the former Ayutthaya kingdom reunited.

The man, who would gain perpetual fame as King Taksin (r. 1767-82), soon afterwards abandoned the old capital and in 1768 moved the seat of power downstream to Thonburi. Despite being remembered principally for his military prowess and colourful personality, the new ruler also lay the foundation for the revival of Siamese historiography and court literature. From the very beginning of his reign the ever victorious warlord seems to have participated in this endeavour by, for instance, personally re-creating a new version of the Siamese Ramakian play, which however, much like his project of national reconstruction, remained fragmentary and ultimately unfinished.

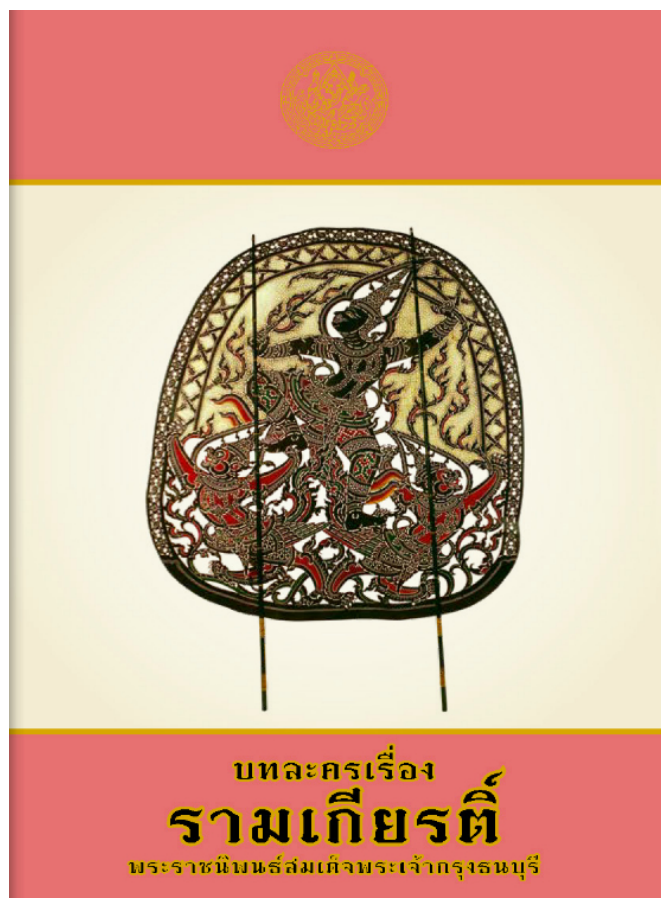


Fig 1. The 2018 edition of the Thonburi Ramakian. Source: Fine Arts Department

In 2018 the 250th anniversary of the establishment of Thonburi as the capital of Siam provided the Fine Arts Department with an opportunity to entrust the re-edition of this Thonburi era Ramakian to Mr Buntuean Siworaphot, a renowned senior scholar of Thai literature and former head of the Office of Literature and History (a subunit of the Fine Arts Department).

Those traditional style black folding books, which have been preserved until the present day, suggest that during the reign of King Taksin at least two sets of manuscripts of the Ramakian play were manufactured. Those written in yellow ink probably served for reference purposes at an early stage in the play's composition, while the final copying process of those Ramakian episodes completed by 1780 involved the use of golden ink. When the Thonburi Ramakian was first prepared for publication in 1941, one manuscript of the former category and four of the latter, more precious kind, were available to provide testimony of the play's text. Since then an additional volume of the gilded set once prepared for King Taksin was rediscovered and identified among the collection of oriental manuscripts held by the State Library of Berlin (Germany). For the 2018 edition of the Thonburi Ramakian reviewed here all traceable manuscripts were thoroughly re-examined by Siworaphot and his assistants.

### Summary

The book can be divided into four parts; a work report and introductory essay by Buntuean Siworaphot, a similar analysis by the editor of the first edition of 1941, Thanit Yupho, an updated edition of the play's text and a complete set of photographic reproductions of all available manuscripts.

In his short introduction (pp. 9-21) the chief editor, Siworaphot, provides an overview of the subject matter of the publication, the written witnesses of the play in their various forms, as well as its editorial and publishing history.

According to the editor, the first four volumes of black books from the gilded set were purchased by the National Library of Thailand from a member of the Supradit family (descendants of the King of Thonburi) in 1936, from what conceivably formed part of this noble family's inherited property. The transfer of these manuscripts into public ownership paved the way for the first edition and publication by of what had remained of the Thonburi Ramakian in 1941. Once reconstituted, this text was to remain the basis of all subsequent editions. The situation became more complex when in 2014 photographs of yet another volume of the gilded set held by a public library in Berlin were brought to the editor's attention. Further investigation revealed that the additional manuscript's content seamlessly compliments the fragmentary text of the Thonburi Ramakian as it is preserved in the manuscripts in the custody of the National Library of Thailand.

After summarising all parts of the play, Siworaphot ends his introduction with the disclosure of the editorial principles adopted, as well as the reasons for his decision to preserve the manuscripts' original orthography in some cases and to moderately modify the spelling in others.

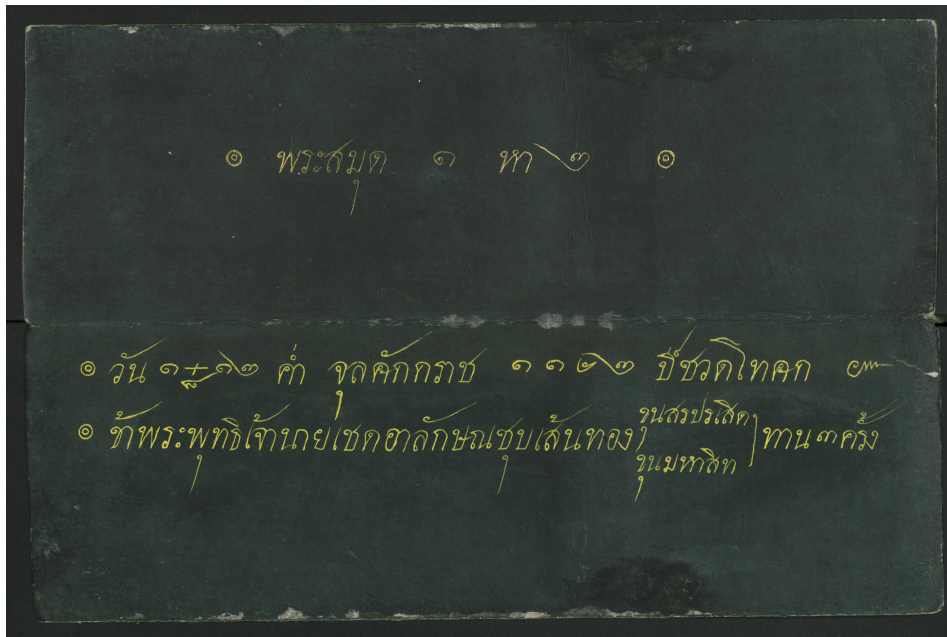


Fig 2. The Berlin manuscript's last page mentioning the date of copying: Sunday, 19 November 1780.

Source: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Ms. or. fol. 333)

<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN716261413>

The book's second part (pp. 22-36), consisting of a short examination of the Thonburi Ramakian from a substantive and contextual viewpoint, was written by the first editor of the dramatic play, Thanit Yupho, for the occasion of its first publication in 1941. Thanit provides the readership with an historical and political background to the early years of the Taksin regime to which the composition of the play can be attributed. Concerning the question of authorship, Thanit emphasises the quality of the Thonburi Ramakian as a work written by King Taksin himself. This is in contrast to the Ramakian text composed during the reign of his immediate successor, King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), which, despite being likewise termed a *ratchaniphon* (royal composition), was most certainly a collaborative accomplishment by poetically gifted members of the royal family and courtiers.

Comparing parallel passages from these two versions of the Ramakian, Thanit claims that the former indeed provided a textual foundation for the latter. After his attempt at establishing the personal authorship of King Taksin, the first editor of the Thonburi Ramakian then traces manifestations of certain of the king's supposed character traits, such as a preoccupation with Buddhist spirituality, individual valour and a sense of humour, in the design of various characters of the play.

The third part of the book (pp. 40-166) combines the re-examined and newly edited textual material from previous printed editions and all currently available Thonburi Ramakian manuscripts. This comprises the still fragmentary text of the Ramakian play itself, as well as accompanying para-texts such as information concerning the date of composition by the king (at the beginning of the manuscripts) and the date of copying and proofreading (usually at their end). The very few footnotes are

principally devoted to the explanation of instances of irregular orthography, as well as terms and concepts of Buddhist philosophy.

Graphic reproductions of the entire collection of Thonburi Ramakian manuscripts held in Bangkok and Berlin form a separate, fourth part of the book. While the few colour photographs (pp. 1, 9-16) unfortunately cannot adequately recreate the radiant splendour of the manuscripts' inner and outer gilding, the remainder of the 152 pages contain black and white images, which, due to their sharpness and high contrast, facilitate the reading of these comparatively old but well preserved examples of Siamese cultural heritage.

### **Missed Opportunities**

The double-sided design of the publication, in which the illustrative fourth part of the book is printed upside down, is also one of its unnecessary weaknesses. An inquisitive reader, who intends to compare a passage of the edited text with the corresponding pages in the original manuscript, cannot simply flip back and forth, but has to turn the book upside down at every instance. A serious issue related to this double-sided design is the numbering of pages; since in the fourth part the page count was made to begin anew, pages 1-152 appear twice in this single publication, thereby defeating attempts at unambiguously referencing particular pages. Exemplary in contrast is the *Bot lakhon rueang ramakian samai Krung Si Ayutthaya*, a comparable text edition published by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in 1998, which, due to its reader-friendly formatting, allows for an unobstructed comparison between the edited text and its manuscript source.

The reviewer would have appreciated the inclusion of a more thorough and contemporary literary critique of the play also, if necessary at the expense of superfluous decorative elements. The most regrettable shortcoming of this 2018 edition however is the fact that the Office of Literature and History neglected to gather readily available information on the history of the manuscript kept in Berlin, the inclusion of which distinguishes this edition from all previous ones. To the detriment of the reading public the account of the Thonburi Ramakian manuscripts' transmission included in Siworaphot's introduction is rather incomplete. The chief editor's conjecture, however, that the Berlin manuscript had most likely left the country before the purchase of the remaining volumes by the National Library of Thailand in 1936, is demonstrably correct.

### **Lost & Found**

While indeed nothing is known – yet – about the whereabouts of the Thonburi Ramakian manuscripts from the time of their manufacture in 1780 until the Third Reign, the Berlin manuscript's journey to Prussia is remarkably well documented. The long overseas journey of this particular manuscript began in May 1834 when two protestant missionaries of German origin and operating in East and Southeast Asia, Karl Gützlaff and Eberhard Hermann Röttger, met in Singapore. On this occasion Gützlaff, who in his missionary capacity had spent almost three years in Siam between 1828-31, handed over a number of leporello and palm leaf manuscripts of Southeast Asian origin to Röttger, leaving the task of sending these off to Berlin to his

fellow missionary. Among these manuscripts was one outstanding traditional Siamese black folding book with a text written in golden ink. On 29 May 1834, Röttger handed over a box filled with oriental manuscripts and prints, together with the Siamese manuscripts he had received from Gützlaff, to Captain Schildknecht, who safely carried them to Europe aboard his ship *Matador*.

The single volume of the Thonburi Ramakian, together with the other Southeast Asian manuscripts Gützlaff had obtained during his missionary work, were delivered to the Royal Library in Berlin on 4 November 1834, where they received proper accession numbers soon afterwards. The Royal Library thankfully acknowledged the delivery of the cargo and requested Gützlaff and Röttger to provide more Asian manuscripts, which the library pledged to pay for. The news about the receipt of these oriental manuscripts and the service rendered by the two missionaries was subsequently brought to the attention of Karl vom Stein zum Altenstein, the Prussian Minister of Education, and Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia (Staatsbibliothek Berlin, III E 17a 1834-1857; Röttger 1844: 266; Wesselmann 2008: 59-60).

The missionary Karl Gützlaff, long known in the West, is no stranger to Thai students of Siamese history either. In fact, already in 1990 the Office of Literature and History had introduced the German missionary to the Thai audience in a publication dedicated to foreign nationals whose journey through life had brought them into contact with premodern Siam (Nantha et al. 1990 [2533]: 19-25).

### **The Missionary and Siam**

Karl Gützlaff was born on 8 July 1803 in Pyritz (then a part of Prussia) into a family of modest means, a station in life which did not predestine him to spend most of his adult life in East and Southeast Asia. After finishing elementary schooling he began to learn the craft of a saddler. An opportunity to change his fate arose when Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia, visited the city of Stettin in 1820. In an unsolicited display of patriotism and loyalty to his king, young Gützlaff presented the monarch with a poem penned by himself with the aid of a friend, an act which earned him the attention and financial patronage of the higher authorities. With this support Gützlaff took up further education at the Missionary Institute of Johannes Jänicke in Berlin and later moved on to Rotterdam, where he continued his linguistic studies (in Dutch and Malay) between 1823 and 1826 in order to prepare himself for missionary work in the Dutch East Indies. Soon afterwards, in 1827, Gützlaff arrived in Batavia where, besides his religious work, he started to study Chinese as well. In late August 1828 he went further to Siam and took up residence in Bangkok until June 1831.

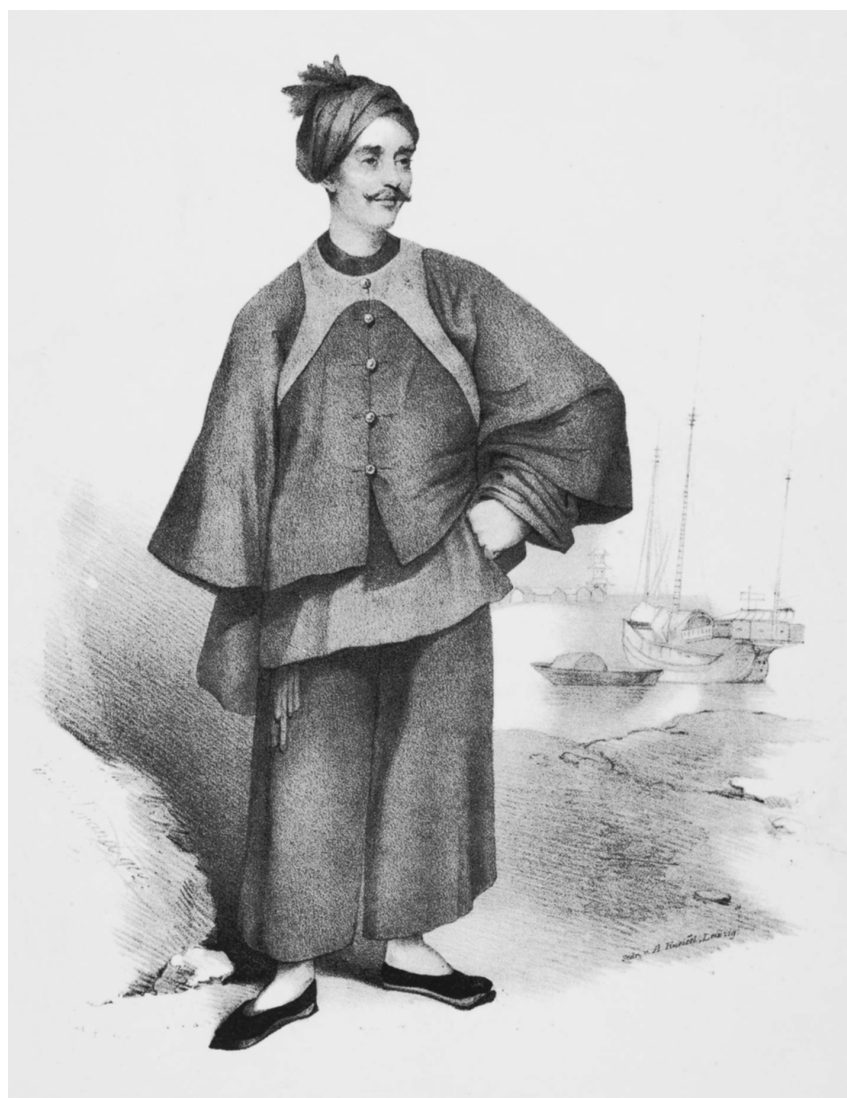


Fig 3. Karl Gützlaff wearing the garment of a Fujianese sailor. Source: Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel  
<http://diglib.hab.de/?portrait=a-08479>

Besides preaching, distributing Christian pamphlets and translating parts of the Bible into Siamese, he devoted a great amount of time to the nursing of the sick from all walks of life. In his condensed and popular report on his missionary work in Asia (Gützlaff 1840), Gützlaff summarised the observations he made during the three years he lived among the subjects of the King of Siam. Touching upon many different topics, such as religion, different ethnic groups (Mon, Burmese, Lao, Cambodians and Siamese) and their characteristics, various historical events, and the Chinese junk trade, Gützlaff's contribution to the knowledge about culture and history of Siam during the early Third Reign is considerable.

As a protestant missionary, however, Gützlaff had to face almost complete failure among the Siamese population. Buddhist clergymen, he observed, while being inclined to religious dialogue, remained unshakeably steadfast in what he considered a system of false beliefs, which, as Gützlaff dared to admit, had the potential of gaining appreciation even among certain European scholars. In his dual capacity as a

missionary and physician he was consulted not only by ordinary citizens but by members of the high nobility and officialdom as well. Among his acquaintances he could count the princes Mongkut and Chutamani, the exiled Cambodian princes Nak Ong Im and Nak Ong Duang, aristocrats of *krom* rank and their relations, as well as high ranking officials.

Before his departure for Asia Gützlaff had already been requested by the Royal Library in Berlin to collect oriental manuscripts (Wesselmann 2008: 59). Enjoying access to the highest orders of Siamese society and performing medical services whenever called upon, one can surmise that he might have had a chance to obtain truly valuable manuscripts, such as a volume of the royal set of the Ramakian, from these quarters of premodern Siamese society.

After leaving Siam in 1831 Gützlaff travelled widely in East Asia (China, Korea) and offered his services as interpreter, physician and preacher to various commercial companies as well as the British authorities. It was during this early stage of his work in East Asia when Gützlaff met his fellow missionary Hermann Röttger in Singapore in May 1834 and handed over the written material of Southeast Asian origin, including the gilded Thonburi Ramakian manuscript, destined for Berlin.

Despite his early setback among the Buddhist faithful of Siam, Gützlaff never lost his religious zeal and gained an impeccable personal reputation as a missionary among the Chinese. Between 1849 and 1850 he travelled around Europe, now a famous man commonly referred to as the “Apostle of the Chinese”. After his return to Asia he soon died in Hong Kong on 9 August 1851 (Gutzlaff 1840: 49-57, 65-89; Anonymous 1851).

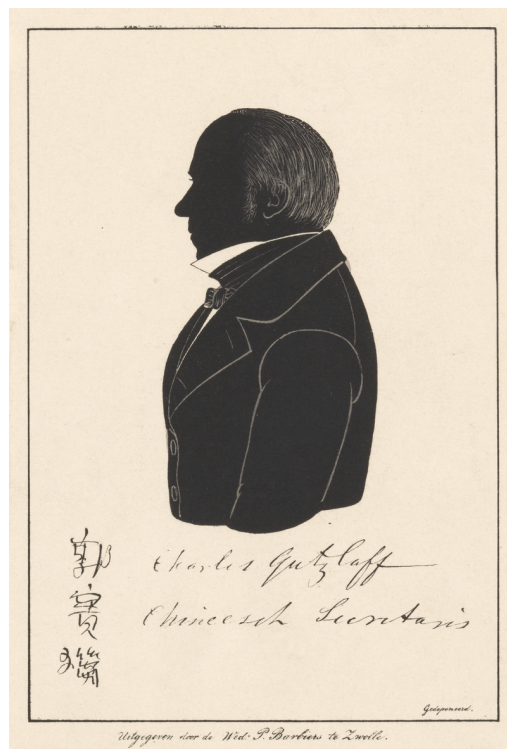


Fig 4. Silhouette portrait of Karl Gützlaff at an advanced age. Source: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.666096>



Unlike editions of historiographical sources and administrative records, which cater to the needs of a purely academic audience, publications of classical literature have a certain potential to attract a wider readership. The 2018 edition of the Thonburi Ramakian reviewed here offers an introduction to the text and its history, the text of the drama in a modestly modernised orthography, as well as a complete set of photographic reproductions, which allow for a thorough study of the development of the Siamese language and traditional Siamese craftsmanship of manuscript making. The Office of Literature and History has thus achieved a balance between the expectations of its various audiences concerning readability and reliability.

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