

## PHRA LAK-PHRA LAM

Vo Thu Tinh's Introduction to the *Cultural Survey of Laos* edition of 1972

The Phra Lak-Phra Lam is a Lao version of the Indian Ramayana. Over the centuries, this Lao masterpiece has acquired great fame throughout the Kingdom. But foreigners are still unaware of it, for there have been almost no available documents printed in Western languages about the Phra Lak-Phra Lam; only a short summary was published by P. B. Lafont in a roneotyped paper in 1957. Nevertheless, some attempts to study this Lao version have been related. And recently, while translating a manuscript of the Vat Kang Tha in Ban Kang, Tasseng Bo-O, Muong Say Fong, Khoueng Vientiane, I discovered from another document of Deydier's that a mural fresco illustrating the stories in this version can be seen at the Vat Up-Mung [changed to *Wat Oup Mong* hereafter] in Vientiane. I found this mural fresco still in the same state as Deydier recorded in his book, in 1952.<sup>1</sup>

The Wat Oup Mong is one of the oldest pagodas in the Capital. Its *sim* (temple) is in the “style of Vientiane”<sup>2</sup> measuring 11.20 m long x 5.30 m wide. Access to the *sim* is provided by a central door under a gable. In both the right and left walls, at regular intervals, from the main entrance to the other gable, there are three windows and a small door. Opposite the main entrance, against the “back wall” and on a masonry pedestal, a bronze statue of a seated Buddha is seen touching the Earth in the *Bhumiparsa mudra* attitude.<sup>3</sup> The interior walls of the *sim* are divided horizontally into four bands which I name from top to bottom bands “A, B, C, and D” to facilitate description.

The lower-most band (D) and each of the three others are respectively 1.00 m and 1.70 m high. The topmost band (A) and the ceiling are decorated with floral motifs including images of Buddha which have no connection with Valmiki's epic poem.

The mural fresco illustrating the stories in the Lao version of the Ramayana covers entirely the two other bands (B, C). On band B from the extreme corner of the side wall to the right of the main entrance these stories run around the *sim*, then pass on to band C and end at the panel on the front wall to the left of the main entrance. Though some of these pictures are faded and the incidents are not painted in chronological order, the main themes of the story can be easily followed. *Sim Plan and Key*

According to the Venerable Phra Achan Thong Kham Vichitathammo, the Chief of this pagoda, this mural fresco was painted by a Lao artist called Thit Panh. I have met this painter at his frame house, on the Mekhong bank, about 1 km North of the Wat Oup Mong.

He was quite surprised that there was someone who paid attention to his work.

“My parents were too poor to send me to high school”, he said, “and I had never learnt how to draw.”



**Thit Panh, ca. 1970:  
thirty years after painting the Oup Mong frescoes**

“But in 1938 when I was a monk in the Wat Oup Mong, Achan Si, the chief of the pagoda at that time, asked me to draw a mural fresco. I tried to do my best, and

with the help of seven *Ai Chua* (novices) I managed to finish them in two weeks. We had not enough money, so we used house paint bought in Thai shops. One of these *Ai Chua*'s daily jobs was to remind me of the proper sequence of the episodes to be drawn. Their failure has involved some breaks in the chronological order of the incidents of the story.<sup>4</sup> I told Achan Si about these mistakes, the old monk said philosophically that it was not important."

"When the whole mural fresco was finished, he was so glad that, taking a brush, he drew a butterfly at the top of one of the pictures (picture N° 17) but he told no-one the reasons for which he had put that design on the fresco. After the fashion of the Chief, one of these seven *Ai Chua* added an aeroplane at the top of the final panel (picture N° 34); probably he thought that would give much more solemnity to Phra Lam's troops on their way home."

Thit Panh is now a staff member of the Drawing Section of the Office of Public Works in Vientiane. In his spare time he is asked to decorate coffins with

traditional Lao designs, and he has acquired a reputation throughout the city as a talented artist.

Another work of this painter can be found at the same Wat Oup Mong: a canvas of 38.0 m long and about 2.00 m wide, illustrating the Vessantara Jataka, which I mean to present to our readers in one of my next works.

In the meantime, one of our collaborators, Mr. Raymond Guerin, whom I had notified of the existence of this mural fresco, came to the Wat Oup Mong, and took 34 photographs of the various episodes of this Lao version of the Ramayana. *[All of the Oup Mong imagery was re-photographed in May, 1998.]*

While presenting those photos to illustrate a summary of the Phra Lak–Phra Lam [elsewhere on this CD], it would be useful to provide an outline of the great epic poem whose tremendous influence had, through many a dark century, regulated the life of religion, art and literature even in countries outside India.

The original Sanskrit Ramayana was written by Valmiki in the 3rd century B.C. Kamban wrote a beautiful long poem putting this legend into Tamil<sup>5</sup> song, and Tulsida has similarly rendered the epic into Hindi.<sup>6</sup> Both Kamban and Tulsida have made some variations in the legend but the main story is as Valmiki related:

“The King of the Solar dynasty, Desaratha, ruled Ayodhya and was overlord of the India of his time. He is said to have lived and ruled for many thousands years. Having no issue, in his old age, he performed a special sacrifice, the result of which was that his wives bore him sons. The oldest queen Kausalya gave birth to Rama. His youngest wife Kaikeyi had a son, Bharata. Sumitra, the second of his three queens, bore twins named Lakshmana and Satrughna.

Rama and Lakshmana were taken out when very young by the great sage Visvamitra to his hermitage, where the *rakshasas* (demon tribes) were troubling the sages. Rama killed and drove away all the trespassers and helped the holy men to perform their sacrifices undisturbed. Visvamitra then took Rama to the court of Janaka in Mithila. The king of Mithila offered his daughter, Sita, in marriage to any one who could band and string the great bow of Siva which was left by the gods with his ancestors.

Rama succeeded in doing this and obtained Sita in marriage. Desaratha, realizing that his end was near, desired to install Rama as *Yuvaraja* (prince regent). But Kaikeyi insisted that Bharata should be crowned king and Rama be banished to the forest for fourteen years. Rama willingly left the palace to obey his father's command. With him went his loving wife, Sita, and his brother Lakshmana. Their going upset Desaratha so much that he died of grief.

Bharata, who was absent in his uncle's house in the distant country of Kekaya, was sent for. He found Ayodhya in desolation as a result of his mother's doing. He declined to be installed as *Yuvaraja* and went out to meet Rama in the forest to persuade him to return. Rama refused and preferred to carry out his father's sacred behest and asked Bharata to act as regent during his exile.

In the forest, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana led a very hard life, and fought many *rakshasas*.

Surpanakha, sister of the demon king Ravana of Lanka, saw Lakshmana and liked him so much that she wanted him to marry her. Lakshmana was so angry that he cut off her nose. Ravana was mad with rage at hearing this, and thought of a plan to take revenge. He sent his uncle, Mareecha, to Rama's hut, disguised as a golden deer. Sita was so charmed by the

deer that she asked Rama to capture it for her. Rama went after the deer, telling Lakshmana to stay and guard Sita. Then by some magic, Lakshmana heard Rama calling for help. He did not know whether he should go to help his brother or stay and guard Sita as he had been ordered to do. At last, he went, Mareecha had tricked Lakshmana by imitating Rama's voice. This was the chance Ravana had been waiting for. He disguised himself as a *sannyasi* and came to Sita's hut. He seized her and carried her off to the island of Lanka.

Rama returned to the hut empty handed, because there had been no real deer. When he found Sita gone, he was heart-broken. He set out at once in search of her. And as before, his devoted brother Lakshmana went with him. The two brothers were helped by Sugriva, the king of the monkeys, and his minister Hanuman. The army of monkeys hurled rocks and mountains into the sea to build a bridge so that Rama could cross over into Lanka.

There Rama fought Ravana and killed him. Sita was rescued. The fourteen years of Rama's banishment were now over. He returned to Ayodhya with Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. Bharata had kept the throne for him during all the fourteen years. Rama was now crowned king. His reign was so just and good that people even to-day speak of *Ramajya* as the ideal of government."

No masterpiece has exerted such great influence on the domain of religion, art and literature in the South-East of Asia as did the Ramayana:

The *Cult of Valmiki*, referred to [in] a record of King Prakasadharm of Champa, clearly indicates that the Great Epic was well known in the kingdom of Champa during the seventh century A. D.

The ancient Khmers were quite familiar with the Ramayana. According to a Cambodian epigraph, the "Brahmana Somasar man offered the texts of the

Ramayana to a temple and made a provision for their daily and regular recitation” in the seventh century A. D.



Khmer relief from the Ramayana, 11th-12th centuries, A.D., Prasat Phimai (now in Thailand). Photo by [Michael Freeman](#).

In Java, galleries of reliefs illustrating the stories of the Ramayana can be found in the majestic monuments of the Prambanan group built by King Daka in the early years of the tenth century A.D. And “although the first introduction of Ramayanic influence into Thailand can be traced back to a date as far as 13th century A.D., it is nevertheless not until the beginning of the *Ratnakosindra Period* (about 1781 A.D.), [that] the Epic was dramatised by the King Rama II (1809–1824 A.D.) and began to be played as a masque.”

As far as Laos is concerned, no one can state when and how the first influences of Valmiki's epic poem appeared in the kingdom. However, at present, three different Lao versions of the Ramayana can be found:

- I. The version of Muong Sing
- II. The version of Luang Prabang
- III. The version of Vientiane

I. In 1957, a manuscript of the Vat Xieng Chay in Muong Sing (North Laos) entitled *Phommachack* (Ravana), was condensed by P.B. Lafont (roneotyped document, op. cit.) and according to his statement, this version has a lesser degree of fame throughout *Sipsongphanna*; it is very likely that the “Phommachack” is just an adaptation of a foreign version for religious purposes; which would justify the condensed feature and the shortage of developed details in this version (Ibid. Introduction, p. 1).

II. Published recently by the National Library (ed. 1971, 142 pages) the version of Luang Prabang, entitled “Phra Lak–Phra Lam” is a poem of 1,823 verses. This version is a copy of the manuscript found at the vicinity of Luang Prabang. From an identification with other summaries of the *Ramakien*, it may be said that this work is a condensed adaptation of the Thai version of the Ramayana. Unlike the Sanskrit Epic which begins with a question of Valmiki to Narada, the

*Ramakien* and the Lao version of Luang Prabang take up the foundation of Ayodhya as the starting point.

III. The Vientiane version entitled “Phra Lak–Phra Lam” is composed of two manuscripts which can be found at Vat Phra Keo, in the Capital, and another at the Vat Kang Tha as related above. The former was condensed by P. B. Lafont in 1957 (*Ibid.*, pps. 6-17).

The manuscript of the latter (of Vat Kang Tha) is one of 44 *phouk* (chapters) divided into 4 *mad* (sheaves), of anonymous [authorship], copied by a man called Chansa Keung and offered to the Vat by Me Chanh Intha in 2476 B.E. (1933 A.D.). Unfortunately, some of these *phouk* have been lost so that from time to time I had to refer to Lafont's summary to present incidents in the right sequence.

As far as the plot is concerned, the Lao version of Vientiane coincides with the main story, the details nevertheless are so different from the original that we induce ourselves to think we are reading a quite different narration of Rama.

The peculiarity in the version of Vat Kang Tha is that this manuscript presents an illuminative documentary on the beliefs and usages on the idioms and proverbs, on the sentimental and social life of the Ancient Kingdom of Lan Xang—that listeners while following the numerous marvellous incidents of the endless Epic, can enjoy from time to time, for a change, poetic lovers dialogues rendered into harmonious verses...

As it would be too pretentious to put a complete study of the peculiarities in the few lines of a preface, I therefore refrain from fully treating the subject here, which I mean to do in another article. The only object in view of this article is to furnish our readers with a clear narration of the Lao Ramayana and with a

concrete display of one of the interesting works of the Lao Fine Arts: the mural fresco of the Wat Oup Mong in Vientiane.

In conclusion, I must acknowledge that this article owes to the Venerable Achan Thong Kham Vichitathammo for his kind permission to take photographs of the mural fresco in the Wat Oup Mong; the Venerable Achan Boun Keung Huong for his benevolent authorization to translate the manuscript of the Phra Lak-Phra Lam at the Vat Kang Tha, Mr. Kykeo Oudom, Maha Choum Chittaphot, at Vientiane, Chankhou Praseut, Thit Noy at Bo-O, for their assistance to decipher some passages in the manuscript, Mr. Prachit Sourisak, Vice-Director of the National Library; the Doctor Sachchidananda Sahai, visiting Professor of Southeast Asian Civilizations at *Ecole Superieure de Pedagogie* at Dongdok, Vientiane, for their valuable information and suggestions.

## NOTES

1. See “Introduction a la Connaissance du Laos” by Henri Deydier, Saigon, 1952; p. 100.

2. See “L’Art Lao” by Pierre-Marie Gagneux. Roneotyped publication of the Mission d’Enseignement et de Cooperation, Ambassade de France, Vientiane, 1969; p. 8.

2. *Bhumisparsa-mudra*. When Gautama took his seat on the *vajrasana*, determined not to leave it until he was perfectly enlightened, Mara, the Evil One, tried his best to thwart his purpose and attacked him with a mighty army. But Gautama remained immovable on his seat and invoked the Earth to bear witness to his right to the *vajrasana*.

4. When visiting this mural fresco at the Wat Oup Mong, our readers can check the new numbering on this scheme, which will enable them to follow the incidents of the legend in the right sequence.

5. Tamil: One of the principal languages of India spoken by thirty million in the Southern peninsula and in the Northern part of the island of Ceylon. It is one of the "Dravidian" languages and possesses a rich and varied literature.

6. Hindi: The language of the larger part of North India. It is one of the Sanskrit group of languages. A variation of it is called Urdu.