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**A HISTORY OF THE THET MAHA CHAT
AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO A THAI POLITICAL CULTURE**

by

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of The Australian National University**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the thet maha chat, the ritual recitation of the Vessantara Jataka, in Thai cultural history. The two primary questions the thesis addresses are: why the Vessantara Jataka and the form in which it was disseminated, the thet maha chat, were so popular throughout the Thai world; and why this popularity began to decline from the latter part of the nineteenth century.

It begins by examining the Vessantara Jataka (known in Thai as the maha chat, literally, the ‘great life’) as a performative text. It is clear that one of the most important reasons for the story’s historical popularity among the Thai was the fact that unlike much Buddhist scripture, it was a text that was written for the express purpose of recitation to a lay audience.

The thesis traces the history of the thet maha chat among the Tai peoples influenced by Theravada Buddhism, focussing mainly on its popularity among the ethnic Thai and their kingdoms. The historical record clearly shows that the Vessantara Jataka has long been popular both with Thai rulers and their rural subjects. The popularity of the thet maha chat with Thai rulers is especially evident at periods of political integration, best illustrated in the period directly after the resurrection of the Thai state following the fall of Ayuthaya to the Burmese in 1767. This would suggest that the ideas contained in the Vessantara Jataka played a role in Thai state formation. The thesis argues that the reason that the Vessantara Jataka was favoured by Thai rulers was because it exemplified in the form of religious narrative notions about authority and social order that lay at the heart of premodern Thai political culture.

Both Thai and Western scholarship has depicted the Vessantara Jataka, and the genre of Jatakas generally, as folklore, religious parables, and legends. However, this interpretation of the Jatakas as tales is a recent one. It originated in the Buddhist scholarship of both Western and Thai court scholars towards the end of the nineteenth century. This interpretation of the Jatakas has hindered the recognition of their real significance to Thai political culture. For the Western Buddhist scholars the Jatakas were irrational tales, indicative of a later ‘corrupted’ form of Buddhism, as distinct from an earlier, ‘purer’ Buddhism. For the Thai court, the Jatakas and associated religious scripture were not only outdated in their epistemology but the ideology they articulated and disseminated rendered them, in the age of European imperialism, also potentially threatening to the continued independence of the Thai kingdom and the survival of the monarchy.

Performances of the thet maha chat continue to be held annually in temples throughout Thailand, although the ceremony’s popularity has long been on the wane. Despite the decline of the story, vestiges of its influence are clearly recognizable in

contemporary Thai society and political culture, bearing witness to the intimate association between the Maha chat and the Thai over the last seven centuries.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the history of the Vessantara Jataka among the Thai people.¹ The Vessantara Jataka² is the final of the five hundred and fifty Jatakas, or stories of the Buddha's former lives, contained in the Theravada Buddhist scriptures. It is the story of the Buddha's last life before the one in which he achieves enlightenment. This is also a study of the history of the thet maha chat, literally the 'recitation of the 'Great Life'. The 'Great Life' is the name by which the story of the Buddha's incarnation as Vessantara is more commonly known. It was through the thet maha chat that the Vessantara Jataka became better known than any other Jataka. The primary questions this study addresses are, why the story was so popular among the Thai for so long, and why it began to lose favour at the Thai court from around the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Popularity of the Vessantara Jataka

It has been said that the Vessantara Jataka is the 'most famous story in the Buddhist world'.³ Historically the story has been known in various forms in almost every area influenced by Buddhist culture, including Southeast Asia, China, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka, even in places as far as modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁴ Scenes from the Vessantara Jataka are depicted at the great Buddhist monuments of classical Southeast

¹ This thesis covers six centuries of the history of the thet maha chat from documents deriving from the kingdoms of Sukhothai, Lanna, Ayuthaya, and particularly Bangkok. This time frame and regional scope raises the issue of the categorization of the communities I am studying. Since the thesis' main focus (Chapters 3-7) is on the Bangkok kingdom I have generally limited my remarks to the 'Thai'. As an ethnic category, however, the term 'Thai' is problematic. 'Thai' or 'Siamese' usually refers to the ethnic group of central Thailand, as opposed to the linguistic category 'Tai', which connotes speakers of a large variety of languages of the Tai language family found throughout mainland Southeast Asia (see Charles F. Keyes, 'Who are the Tai? Reflections on the Inventions of Identities', in Lola Romanucci-Ross and George DeVos, eds., Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict and Accomodation, SAGE, London, 1995, pp. 136-160). It is clear from this thesis that the thet maha chat was popular amongst many Tai-language speaking communities which had been influenced by Theravada Buddhism, including the Lao, the Yuan, and the Khoen. Indeed, from the nineteenth century onwards, when there is much more documentary material, the evidence for the tremendous popularity of the story amongst the Yuan and Lao is overwhelming. For this reason I have felt it appropriate in places to refer to the 'Tai Buddhists' in order to avoid the assumption that the story and its ideas were limited to the ethnic Thai.

² In Thai, wetsandom chadok. The plot of the Vessantara Jataka is outlined in brief in the Appendix.

³ Introduction, The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara, A Buddhist Epic, translated from the Pali and illustrated by unpublished paintings from Sinhalese temples by Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. xv.

⁴ Ibid., pp. xxxv-xliv.

Asia, including Pagan, Borobodur, and the Angkor Wat complex.⁵ Yet the story seems to have been particularly popular in the regions and among the peoples historically under the influence of the succession of kingdoms and dynasties which are the ancestors of the modern Thai nation-state.

The thet maha chat⁶ or ceremonial recitation of the Vessantara Jataka in its entirety, is the form in which the story is best known to the people of Thailand. The ceremony, which in some villages once lasted up to seven days, has traditionally been held annually in every region of the country and amongst all of the kingdom's ethnic minorities with the exception of the non-Buddhist communities. The thet maha chat is popular beyond the kingdom's present borders, including among the Shan and the Khoen peoples of northeastern Burma,⁷ some speakers of Tai languages in southern China, the Lao⁸ and the Khmer.⁹ The ceremony continues to be held by emigré Thai, Lao and Khmer communities in the USA, Australia, and in other countries where there are significant numbers of these peoples.

Recently completed surveys of manuscript literature in the kingdom's various regions indicate the historical popularity of the Vessantara Jataka and of the Jataka genre generally. Since 1978 the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University has been surveying and recording palm leaf manuscripts found in northern Thai temples on

⁵ L. McClung, 'The Vessantara Jataka: Paradigm for a Buddhist Utopian Ideal', PhD Thesis, Princeton, 1975, pp. 78-9.

⁶ The recitation of the Vessantara Jataka is known in the central and Southern regions as thet maha chat, 'recitation of the Great Life'; in the Lao regions as bun pa wet, 'the Merit-Making Ceremony of Vessantara', or thet pa wet, 'Sermon on Vessantara'; and in the Northern region as part of the tang tham luang ritual, 'Set Out the Great Dhamma'.

⁷ See Anatole-Roger Peltier, Wannakam thai khoen/ La Littérature Tai khoeun/ Tai khoeun literature, École Française d'Extrême Orient, & Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, 1987.

⁸ See Sila Wirawong, Hit sip song (The Twelve Customary Festivals), Transcribed into Thai by Udom Phornprasoet, edited by Phichai Siphufai, Ubon Ratchathani Arts and Cultural Centre, Ubon Ratchathani, 1986, pp. 68-72.

⁹ For a nineteenth-century Khmer version of the Vessantara Jataka published in Thai see Thet maha chat kham khamen. kan mahaphon (Khmer Version of the Great Life Sermon, the Great Forest Episode), Cremation Volume, Phra Sanit Somkhun (Ngoen), Bangkok, 1920. For a Khmer version of the Vessantara Jataka used by a Khmer community in Thailand today see Khamphi maha chat kan nang matsi phra khatha 90 khatha (The Great Life Text: the Maddi Chapter with 90 Verses) translated from the Original Khmer Manuscript Used for Recitations in the Lower Northeastern Region, by Sangop Bunkloi, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Teachers College, Buriram, 1981. For a description of the Khmer recitation of the Vessantara Jataka see A. Leclère, Cambodge, Fêtes Civiles et Religieuses, Paris, 1947, pp. 415-8.

microfilm.¹⁰ By 1991 the results of the survey showed that of those manuscripts dealing with Buddhist subjects (about 90% of the total), the Jatakas made up over a third of the total. In terms of the number of bundles (phuk) of palm leaves collected and microfilmed, the Jatakas comprised over two thirds of the total. Of all the Jatakas the Vessantara Jataka was by far the most popular. There were ten times more manuscripts of the Vessantara Jataka than the other nine 'thotsachat' Jatakas¹¹ put together, and at over four hundred manuscript versions there were far more copies of the Vessantara Jataka than of any other single story in the catalogue.¹² Because of the great length of the Vessantara Jataka story, it accounted for over 40% of the *total* number of bundles of palm leaves recorded by the Institute on microfilm.¹³ The dates of composition of the manuscripts in this collection vary from the mid-eighteenth century to well after the Second World War.¹⁴ This suggests the consistency of the story's popularity in the region over at least two hundred years. Few palm leaf manuscripts from before this time have survived.

In the northeast of the country there is a similar picture. Since 1981 a joint project has been carried out by teachers colleges and a university in the northeast Thailand to survey the contents of temple libraries in the provinces of that region of the country.¹⁵ Once again the Jatakas are one of the largest categories of palm leaf literature

¹⁰ Rai chu nangsue boran lanna ekasan microfilm khorng sathaban wichai sangkhom, mahawithayalai chiang mai phor sor 2521-2533 (Catalogue of Ancient Lanna Literature on Microfilm, University of Chiang Mai Social Research Institute, 1978-1990), Chiang Mai, 1991.

¹¹ The thotsachat Jatakas (literally 'ten lives') are the final ten of the canonical collection of five hundred and fifty Jatakas, which appear in the Khuddaka Nikaya section of the Theravada Buddhist canon, the Tripitaka.

¹² Ibid., p. 14. Although it is true that two other categories, 'Jatakas' and 'Dhamma', were each of greater size than the Vessantara Jataka category - 24% and 17% of the total number of manuscripts respectively - these categories are very broad and each includes a great number of different texts brought together under the one title.

¹³ Those manuscripts selected for microfilming came from over six hundred temples 'with some reputation for scholarship in the past'. Manuscripts in these temples which were in poor condition or 'carelessly copied' were not microfilmed; Wannakam Lanna/ Lanna Literature: Catalogue of Palm Leaf Texts on Microfilm, Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1986, "Foreword".

¹⁴ A recently published catalogue of the literature popular among the Kham peoples of Northwestern Burma (who are culturally closely related to the 'kham muang' peoples of Northern Thailand), is also dominated by what the collectors categorise as 'folk jatakas', and includes the Vessantara Jataka; see Peltier, Wannakam thai khoen/ La Littérature Tai khoeun/ Tai khoeun literature.

¹⁵ Banchi samruat ekasan boran (Catalogue of Surveyed Ancient Literature), 14 Vols., Northeastern Teachers Colleges and Khon Kaen University, led by Maha Sarakham Teachers College, Maha Sarakham, 1981-1990.

extant in most temples. Virtually every temple surveyed possessed a Vessantara Jataka (recitation version) manuscript, and in terms of the number of palm leaves this manuscript comprised one of the largest holdings in most collections. Although for this survey manuscripts were not dated, the fact that almost all manuscripts were written in the aksorn tham script and in the Isan/Lao dialect means that many would have predated the use of the Thai script and language, which gained momentum in the 1930s with the development of the state education system.

Surveys conducted into the manuscript literature of Laos in the 1950s and 1960s reveal a situation similar to that of the manuscript literature of the ethnic Lao in northeast Thailand. The Jatakas predominate in Lao literature, and the Vessantara Jataka is one of the most popular stories in terms of bundles of palm leaves.¹⁶ In 1971 Mizuno wrote that in one northeastern village the story of Vessantara was better known than that of the Buddha.¹⁷ In Roi Et province the governor recently made the thet maha chat the official annual festival celebrating the identity (ngan ekalak pracham pi) of Roi Et province.¹⁸ Perhaps because the northeast remains Thailand's least modernized region where traditional cultural forms are still largely intact, the thet maha chat continues to be more popular there than in any other part of the country.

In southern Thailand the largest collection of local literature (housed at the Institute of Southern Studies in Songkhla province) contains a considerable proportion of manuscripts of Jatakas or Jataka-inspired literature.¹⁹ A recent doctoral thesis highlighting the popularity of the Jatakas in local religious literature in the south, states

¹⁶ See 'Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Littérature du Laos', Recueilles par Thao Kéne, Membre du Comité Littérature, Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, Comité Littérature Lao, 1958; 'Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Littérature Lao Vientiane', Thao Kéne, 1960; and 'Inventaire des Manuscrits des Pagodes du Laos' par Pierre-Bernard Lafont, 1959; all contained in Samana bai lan thua pathet khang thi nung (First National Conference on Palm Leaf Manuscripts), Vientiane, 10-13 March, 1988.

¹⁷ Mizuno Koichi, "Social System of Don Daeng Village: A Community Study in Northeast Thailand", Discussion Paper No.28, The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Japan, March 1971, p. 171.

¹⁸ Ruangsak Lathaynin, 'Kin khao pun bun pha wet lae fang thet maha chat thi bung planchai roi et' (Eating Vessantara Merit-making Rice Noodles and Listening to the Recitation of the Great Life at Bung Planchai, Roi Et Province), Sakun thai, 33, March 1991.

¹⁹ See the collection of manuscripts at the horng wannakam thornng thin (Local Literature Room) at the Sathaban thaksin khadi sukxa (Institute of Southern Studies), in Songkhla province. In the Southern and Central regions of the kingdom local texts have not survived to the extent they have in the North and the Northeast. This is partly due to the fact that in the southern and central regions the same scripts were used - Thai, and 'Khorm' for religious texts - as in literary works produced by the court. When the Thai court began to use the technology of print for the purpose of national integration, printed texts using Thai script which emanated from the court overwhelmed local literature in the Central and Southern regions much earlier than it did in those parts of the country which used different scripts.

that the Vessantara Jataka, along with the Ramayana, exercised the greatest influence of any story in southern Thai culture.²⁰

In temple art all over the Thai kingdom the Vessantara Jataka is by far the most popular story represented.²¹ From remote rural preaching halls to temples in the Grand Palace, scenes from the story are depicted around the inside walls of the buildings (in the manner of the Christian Stations of the Cross), either together with scenes from other Jataka stories (especially the thotsachat or last ten Jatakas), or from each of the thirteen chapters of the Vessantara Jataka alone. It is often in temples illustrated with the Vessantara Jataka that the thet maha chat ceremony is held.

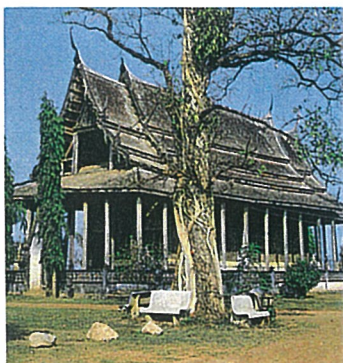
At one time a state ceremony attended by the king, high ranking aristocracy and the nobility, the thet maha chat has, since the turn of the century, been predominantly a phenomenon of rural communities. In recent years, however, there have been attempts to revive the thet maha chat as a state function, apparently with the support of Princess Sirindhorn, in the interests of the preservation of 'Thai culture'.²² In the Supreme Patriarch's address on the occasion in 1991 (in honour of the Princess' thirty-sixth birthday) he declared that 'the thet maha chat is an old tradition of the Thai people...and is part of Thai life...'²³ In this 'state ceremony' of the thet maha chat each of the

²⁰ Supphong Thammachat, 'Kan suksa wikhro wannakam chadok phak tai chak nangsut but' ('Analysis of Jataka Literature in Southern Thailand from 'But' Manuscripts'), PhD thesis, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1991, p. 533.

²¹ Cf. Sombat Plainoi, Mural Paintings, trans. Panit Boonyawatana, ed. Malithat Pramathattavedi, National Culture Commission, Ministry of Education (no date given); Sing faeng ren yu nai chitrakam fa phanang isan (Things Hidden in Isan Wall Paintings), Khon Kaen University, 1981; Khong sang chitrakam fa phanang lanna (The Structure of Lanna Wall Murals), Chiang Mai, 1981; Saengarun Kanonkphongchai, 'Khati khwam chuan ruang maha chat chadok: kan plian plaeng lae kan sup nuang sathorn chak phap chitrakam fa phanang' (Beliefs and Customs Related to the Great Life Jataka: Change and Continuity Reflected in Temple Murals: A Case Study of the Murals in the Chanting Hall of Wat Suwannaram), Masters Thesis, Silapakorn University, Bangkok, 1989; see also the 'Muang Boran' series of published temple art from well-known temples in the Thai kingdom such as Wat Chongnonsi, Mural Paintings of Thailand Series, Bangkok, Muang Boran, 1982. See also the intricate carvings of scenes from the Vessantara Jataka on the *outside* teak walls of Wat Kut in Phetburi Province, in Wat kut bang khem: bot mai sak cham lak lai (Wat Kut Bang Khem: Carvings in a Teak Chapel), Office for the Promotion of National Identity, Bangkok, 1990. Finally, a recent archaeological excavation in northern Thailand found a number of bricks which had been inscribed with scenes from the Vessantara Jataka. The bricks had originally been used to construct a building, which had hid the inscribed scenes until now; see Winai Tankittikorn, 'Wetsandorn chadok bon phaen it' (The Vessantara Jataka Depicted on Building Bricks), Khwaam ru khu prathip (Knowledge is a Lantarn), 2, 32, April - June, 1989, pp. 28 - 31.

²² Thet maha chat chaloem phra kiat somdet phrathep ratanaratchasuda sayamboromaratchakumari (Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka in Honour of Crown Princess Sirindhorn), 4-6 October 1991, Phutthamonthon, Department of Religious Affairs, Bangkok, 1991. In 1992 the same government-sponsored thet maha chat was held as part of the year-long celebrations in honour of the sixtieth birthday (fifth cycle) of Queen Sirikit.

²³ Ibid., 'Phra owat'.



Scenes from the Maha chat carved into the outside walls of the preaching hall at Wat Kut, Phetchaburi province; from Wat kut bang khem: bot mai sak cham lak lai (Wat Kut Bang Khem: Carvings in a Teak Chapel), Office for the Promotion of National Identity, Bangkok, 1990.

government ministries is invited to 'sponsor' the recitation of one of the thirteen chapters which make up the Vessantara Jataka.²⁴ During my fieldwork in 1992 parts of the ceremony were nationally televised in a live broadcast.

Studies of the Vessantara Jataka in the Thai Kingdom

It is a strange anomaly that despite the enormous popularity of the Vessantara Jataka among the Thai, a popularity which historical evidence suggests dates back at least seven centuries, relatively few scholarly works have been written on the subject. Most studies, moreover, tend to be empirical accounts of the story and its recitation via the thet maha chat ceremony, with little consideration given to the significance of the story in its political and social context. This applies both to studies by Thai scholars as well as to the little Western scholarship that exists on the subject.

One of the main reasons behind the dearth of Western scholarship is the comparative neglect of Thai studies owing to the Thai kingdom's avoidance of direct European colonization. There were simply fewer Western scholars working there. The Thai kingdom lacked the great scholars of colonial Southeast Asia in the first decades of this century, who, writing in European languages, created a new field of study by setting up, translating and publishing a canon of works through which the history, culture and civilization of the region and its peoples could be known. While scholars of the Thai court were engaged in a similar activity with the kingdom's historical and literary traditions, the accessibility of this indigenous scholarship was hindered by the fact that few Thai scholars published in European languages.

The neglect of the Vessantara Jataka by Western scholarship contrasts markedly with the attention given to the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two Indic epics which were quickly recognised as being among the master narratives of Southeast Asian culture. European scholarship was already familiar with these stories owing to the British colonization of India, where the stories still thrived. Also, these tales are not unlike their Western counterparts of classical times. The Ramayana, in particular, bears similarities to the Iliad and the Odyssey in areas such as the plot of the abduction of a queen and the attempts to win her back, and the emphasis on martial prowess. By contrast, there is little in the European tradition to compare with the Vessantara Jataka.

²⁴ In 1991 the Office of the Prime Minister sponsored the khatha phan or canonical verses of the Vessantara Jataka; Industry - thotsaphorn; Defence - himaphan; Foreign Affairs - thankan; Treasury - wanaprawet; Agriculture and Cooperatives - chuchok; Transport and Communications - chulaphorn; Princess Sirindhorn - mahaphon; Commerce - kuman; the Interior - matsi; Public Health - sakkabap; Science and Technology - maharat; Bureau of University Affairs - chokasat; and Industry - nakhornkan; Thet maha chat chaloem phrakiat, preface.

Indeed, the foreignness of the story and, to the Western mind, its seemingly aberrant morality, made it less appealing to scholars. How could one appreciate the story of a man who gave away his two children and his wife for spiritual gain? Despite great Western interest in Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Vessantara Jataka was all but ignored. In the work of Western Buddhist scholars Rhys Davids, Fausbøll, Müller, Cowell and others the Jatakas tended to be categorized as 'folklore', and were considered to be a later accretion to the Buddhist religion, alien to the original purity of the Buddhist message.²⁵ Moreover, most early Western religious scholarship of Thai Buddhism was textually oriented (with particular attention given to the Buddhist canonical texts), and little attempt was made to study the religious beliefs and practices among the rural population of the Thai kingdom where the story and its ritual recitation still held its own. Finally, by the time European scholars began their researches on the culture and religion of the Thai kingdom the Vessantara Jataka had lost its place at the Thai court as an influential religious text. What little Western scholarship on religion in the Thai kingdom there was rarely mentioned the story.²⁶ In Thai scholarship today the Ramayana is much better known than the Vessantara Jataka, despite the fact the latter story was undoubtedly more widespread in Thai literary and popular culture.

An important exception to this rule is the work of Colonel Gerini. Gerini was an Italian who was employed in the Thai royal bureaucracy, could read Thai, and had access to historical records and to the leading scholars of the Thai court. In 1892 Gerini published the first study in English of the thet maha chat, which was checked with corrections added by the King of Siam himself.²⁷ Gerini gives a short account of the history of the thet maha chat showing the importance of the ceremony as both an aristocratic and a popular ceremony. While he identifies a decrease in the popularity of the thet maha chat there is no explanation as to the reason for the custom's decline. Gerini's study remains to this day the only significant Western work on the thet maha chat.

The Vessantara Jataka became an object of modern Thai scholarship (as opposed to the older monastic religious scholarship) in the late nineteenth century. The first work of modern Thai scholarship on the thet maha chat ritual followed soon after Gerini's

²⁵ The studies by these writers are listed in the bibliography.

²⁶ See, for example, Henry Alabaster, The Wheel of the Law: Buddhism Illustrated from Siamese Sources by The Modern Buddhist. A Life of Buddha and an Account of the Phra Bat, London, Trübner & Co., 1871 (Republished by Gregg International Publishers Ltd, 1971).

²⁷ Gerini, G.E., A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Thet Maha Chat Ceremony, Bangkok, 1892.

study. The short essay, published in 1893, is believed to have been written by Prince Narathip Praphanphong, a senior member of the Thai court and brother to King Chulalongkorn. The theme of the essay is the great importance of the thet maha chat as a merit-making ceremony among the Thai peoples.²⁸ Narathip attributes the popularity of the ceremony to three factors: (i) the belief that the story contains the words of the Buddha and to listen to it is therefore meritorious; (ii) the millenarian belief attributed to the legendary 'saint' Phra Malai that listening to the story's one thousand verse would ensure rebirth in the time of the future Buddha; and (iii) the beauty of the monks' melodic rendition of the story, which was a verbal art not unlike Western operatic singing.²⁹

The most influential works on the Vessantara Jataka in the Thai tradition come from the pen of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, half-brother of King Chulalongkorn, long-time head of the powerful Ministry of the Interior, and the court's most prolific and influential scholar. From 1916 the Wachirayan Library (later renamed the 'National Library'), which was then headed by Damrong, began editing and publishing for the first time the various royal recitation versions of the Vessantara Jataka from the original manuscripts held by the Library. Each of these publications was accompanied by a short preface written by Damrong 'explaining' the origin and particular qualities of each work, and in some cases describing the thet maha chat ceremony. But whereas Prince Narathip's essay had focussed on the thet maha chat as a popular festival among the kingdom's rural communities, Damrong's work on the Vessantara Jataka tends to treat the story as an historical and literary artefact of the Thai court. In the 1917 publication of the Maha chat kham luang, the version composed in the reign of the fifteenth century king Boromatrailokanat, Damrong commented that the Vessantara Jataka had been written in more poetic forms than any other Thai story.³⁰ The Library eventually published all the major court versions of the story including those versions attributed to King Boromatrailokanat, King Songtham, King Mongkut, and to the court poets of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1920 the Wachirayan Library published the five chapters (kan) of the version of the Maha chat written by King Mongkut between

²⁸ "Nor.Por.", 'Prapheni Thet Maha Chat' (The Custom of the Recitation of the Vessantara Jataka), Ratanakosin Sok 112 (1893), in Maha wetsandorn chadok samnuan thesana 13 kan (Thirteen Chapter Recitation Version of the Vessantara Jataka), In Commemoration of the Ninetieth Birthday of Phra Ratchaphatharachan (Pleng Kuwamathera), Wat Ratchabophitsathitamahasimaram, Bangkok, Monday, 29 April, 1991 pp. 5-15. The initials "Nor. Por." are generally considered to be those of Prince Narathip Praphanphong.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

³⁰ "Kham nam" (Introduction), Maha chat kham luang (Royal Version of the Great Life), Bangkok, Khlang Withaya, 1973 (1st publ.1917), p. 6.

1866 and 1868. In the preface to this book Damrong noted that almost every prince of the somdet phra chao luk thoe and phra chao luk thoe rank who had been a novice in the monkhood during the Fourth and Fifth Reigns (1851-1910) had recited a chapter from Mongkut's version of the Maha chat.³¹ However, Damrong had little to say about why the story was so popular. In all his work there are only a few brief comments regarding the fact that it dealt with the Theravada Buddhist doctrine of the 'Ten Perfections', and that listening to it was a powerful form of merit-making.³² In Damrong's work the Vessantara Jataka is presented primarily as a classic of Thai literature, notable principally for the aesthetic qualities of its poetry, with an underlying but unstated sense that the story belongs to a different age. The socio-cultural importance of the Vessantara Jataka is entirely ignored. Why?

The main reason is that, at the time Damrong was writing, the thet maha chat no longer enjoyed the popularity at the Thai court it once had. Indeed, as this thesis will show, from the mid-nineteenth century the court made deliberate attempts to expunge the story from Thai Buddhism. By the turn of this century it is no longer true to say that the Maha chat was a cultural artefact shared by elite and popular sections of Thai society. Because the story was no longer a living part of court culture, scholars of the Thai court, starting from Damrong, tended to downplay its influence. As far as the Thai court was concerned, the Vessantara Jataka and the ideas it expressed did belong to a bygone era. Yet at the same time it was clear that the thet maha chat still enjoyed immense popularity outside the Thai court. Because court scholarship on Thai history, literature, religion and culture tended to focus on the Thai elite, the issue of the story's continued influence in the kingdom's hinterland was never really addressed.

Damrong's work on the Maha chat has influenced generations of readers of Thai literature, not least because of the repeated publication of Damrong's explanations with many subsequent publications of court versions of the Maha chat. Some of these publications have become texts for study in school and university literature courses.³³

³¹ "Kham athibai", (Explanation), Maha chat phra ratchaniphon nai ratchakan thi 4 (Rama IV's Version of the Great Life), Cremation Volume, Morm Chao Chongkonni Wathanawong, Bangkok, 1965, p. kor.

³² See 'kham nam', Maha chat kham luang, p. 2.

³³ Some textbooks for the study of the Maha chat in Thai schools include, Nangsu khu mu wichakawiniphon thai: maha wetsandorn chadok (Manual for Thai Poetry Classes: The Great Vessantara Jataka), (for Upper Secondary School), by Khun Wirupcharaya, Upper Secondary Thai Language Teacher, Suan Kulap School, Bangkok, 1934; Baep rian wannakhadi thai ruang wetsandorn chadok chabap 5 kan samrap prayok triam udom suksa (Textbook for Thai Literature: the Vessantara Jataka, 5 Kan Version, for Primary School), Bangkok, Education Department, 1950; Chua Satewethin, Wetsandorn chadok samrap sarp chut phasa thai, por.mor., lae naksuksa wannakhadi tua pai (The Vessantara Jataka for Thai Language Examinations, for Primary and Secondary Students and Students of Literature Generally), Bangkok, Burisuksa, 1965.

Damrong's influence is clearly evident in references to the Maha chat in studies of Thai religious literature.³⁴

A new approach to the study of the thet maha chat was initiated by the works of one of the pioneers of Thai anthropology, Phya Anuman Rajadhon (also known by his pen-name 'Sathiarakoset'). Writing in the 1950s and 1960s and influenced by Western anthropologists, Phya Anuman wrote extensively on folk customs and religious festivals of the Thai peasantry at a time when traditional forms of social organization were being increasingly disrupted by economic modernization. Phya Anuman's work was partly responsible for the emergence of interest in folk culture among the Thai middle class after decades of, at best, disregard for and at worst, hostility towards those elements of local culture perceived to be 'backward'. His studies on the thet maha chat retain the positivistic and descriptive modes of earlier Thai scholarship, but depict the ceremony as a valuable cultural artefact of the Thai people. The thet maha chat is portrayed as an example of an idealised folk culture characterised by deeply held spiritual beliefs and gay community festivals at the heart of 'Thai' cultural identity - precisely the characteristics of Thai peasant culture which modernization was breaking down.³⁵ Thus Phya Anuman's interest in the thet maha chat and in folk culture is largely nostalgic.

Phya Anuman's work did help to spark off a new scholarly interest in folk culture. But whereas his work was written from the perspective of a Bangkok based academic scholar, a new body of scholarship was emerging based in the regional and provincial areas. The tumultuous events of 1973 and the political openness of the following three years were the most important factors behind the rapid growth in local scholarly inquiry.³⁶ Locally-based 'amateur' scholars (often with a monastic background), monks, and Bangkok-trained academics teaching in the newly established regional teachers colleges and universities, increasingly turned their attention to the study of local history, literature, and culture. Even more importantly they began to publish their studies (albeit often with a rather narrow circulation because of limited

³⁴ Such as Chua Satawethin, Wannakhadi Phutthasasana (Buddhist Literature), Part 1, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1971; Thawisak Yanapraphip, Wannakam sasana (Religious Literature), Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, 1975; and Sap Prakorpsuk, Wannakhadi chadok (Jataka Literature), Srinakharinwirot University, Pathumwan Campus, Bangkok, 1984.

³⁵ See Sathiarakoset (Phya Anuman Rajadhon), Prapheni thai nuang nai thetsakan trut sat (Thai Customs Related to the Sat Festival), Bangkok, Social Science Association of Thailand, 1963; and Rajadhon, Phya Anuman, Thet Maha Chat, Thai Culture New Series, Bangkok, 1990. The latter work was first published in English in 1969 by the Fine Arts Department for the benefit of foreigners wishing to 'understand and appreciate Thai culture'; *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand Since 1973', Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 26, 1 (March 1995), p. 110.

resources³⁷), in Thai, making such locally produced scholarship accessible to the wider public. While this local discourse shared the same positivistic orientation of the Bangkok-based scholarship, the subject matter differed significantly. Increasingly, studies of 'local culture' (wathanatham thornngthin) saw folk culture as emblematic of local identity, rather than a mere reflection of court culture or part of a state-defined Thai cultural identity. Studies of local thet maha chat ceremonies began to appear, still mainly descriptive in form, but tending to highlight local variations in, for example, the way the ceremony was carried out. These studies are also somewhat nostalgic in regard to folk culture and often make a case for the need to 'preserve' such cultural treasures in the face of the decline of traditional local culture. So despite acknowledging the ceremony's popularity, it was, nevertheless, seen to be in a state of decline.

In the late 1970s and through the 1980s the study of local culture in Thailand became increasingly mainstream, gaining the support of the Education Department and the established Bangkok universities. There are a number of valuable Masters Degree theses and monographs on regional versions of the Vessantara Jataka, most of which were completed at Bangkok universities.³⁸ These studies differ from those mentioned above in terms of increased conformity with academic conventions and methodologies. A number of them are textual analyses of locally composed versions of the Maha chat, in which the variations between the local versions and those used at the Thai court are highlighted. Such variations consist mainly of descriptions of local flora and fauna, forms of speech, architectural styles, kinds of food, styles of clothing, names of minor

³⁷ A number of these studies, like Sura Unawong's Bun phra wet (The Vessantara Merit-Making Festival), Ubon Ratchathani Teachers College, Ubon Ratchathani, 1980, were reproduced by Roneo.

³⁸ Such Masters Degree studies include those by Mani Phayormyong, "Kan Wikhro Lae Priap Thiap Maha Chat Chabab Phak Klang, Phak Nua, Phak Isan Lae Phak Tai" (Analysis and Comparison of Central, Northern, Northeastern and Southern versions of the Maha Chat), M.A. thesis, Srinakharinwirot University, 1976; Prathum Suwannakhangkha, "Kan Suksa Maha Wetsandorn Chadok Chabap Wat Machimawat Songkhla" (A Study of Songkhla's Wat Machimawat Version of the Vessantara Jataka), M.A. thesis, Silapakorn University, 1983; Saman Sohem, "Maha Chat Chabap Muang Phetburi Kan Chuchok: Kan Suksa Choeng Wikhro" (The Chuchok Chapter of the Phetburi Version of the Maha Chat: An Analysis), M.A. thesis, Eastern Languages, Silapakorn University, 1985; Sinchana Chirakiat, "Kan Suksa Maha Chat Chabap Muang Phetburi Kan Mahaphon" (A Study of the Mahaphon Chapter of the Phetburi Version of the Maha Chat), M.A. thesis, Eastern Languages, Silapakorn University, 1988; Anupha Asawapiyanon, "Kan Suksa Maha Wetsandorn Chadok Chabap Thorng Thin Isan Chak Ton Chabap Wat Klang Khok Kho Changwat Kalasin" (A Study of a Northeastern Local Version of the Vessantara Jataka from a Manuscript in Wat Klang Khok Kho, Kalasin Province) M.A. thesis, Eastern Languages, Silapakorn University, 1989; and Supphong Thammachat, "Kan Suksa Wikhro Wannakam Chadok Phak Tai Chak Nang Su But" (Analysis of Jataka Literature in Southern Thailand from 'But' Manuscripts), PhD thesis, Department of Thai Language, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1991. Prakhornng Nimmanhemmin's Maha chat lanna: kan suksa nai thana thi pen wannakhadi thornng thin (The Lanna Great Life: A Study of Its Status as Local Literature), Foundation for the Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, Bangkok, 1983, is the best monograph on the northern version of the Maha chat.

characters, and an 'earthier' style of composition. There do not appear to be any marked differences between the local versions of the Maha chat and court versions in the crucial areas of plot, structure, and the major themes of the narrative. Indeed, the consistency of the story's form wherever it is found is one of its distinctive characteristics.

Few works of Western scholarship specifically dealing with the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand have been written. McClung's thesis of 1975 looks at the story in its cultural context as 'a Buddhist utopian ideal'.³⁹ While recognising the popularity of the story and its historical influence at the Thai court, McClung's study is limited by the lack of Thai language sources, an appreciation of the story's significance beyond the soteriological, and an historical perspective on the decline of the story. Since the 1960s there have been a number of anthropological studies of rural culture in Thailand in which the ceremony has been covered.⁴⁰ These studies highlight the importance of the ceremony as a merit-making festival, as well as locating the story within the traditional Buddhist world view held by village communities.

In summary, then, studies of the Vessantara Jataka and the thet maha chat fall into two broad groups. The studies done by the early Thai scholars on the Maha chat such as those written by Damrong and others emphasise the story's long and close association with Thai rulers and its influence in the culture of the Thai court. On the other hand the works which have come out of the local studies movement highlight the enormous popularity of the thet maha chat at the village level in every region of the country. What these two streams of scholarship suggest, therefore, is that unlike many cultural traditions of Southeast Asia, the Maha chat is a cultural artefact that is at the same time both popular and elitist. As to how and why the Vessantara Jataka came to enjoy this status, and why the story was dropped from court culture at the very time that Buddhism was being mobilised by the court for the purposes of national integration, the existing scholarship offers very little explanation. Nor has there been any genuine attempt to explain what this enormous influence meant for the socio-cultural life of the Tai Buddhist peoples.

³⁹ McClung, L., "The Vessantara Jataka: Paradigm for a Buddhist Utopian Ideal", PhD. thesis, Department of Religion, Princeton University, 1975.

⁴⁰ Some examples are S.J. Tambiah, Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970; Mizuno Koichi, "Social System of Don Daeng Village: A Community Study in Northeast Thailand", Discussion Paper No.28, The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Japan, March 1971; G.W. Skinner, and A.T.Hirsch, (ed.), Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975; Kingshill, K., Ku Daeng: The Red Tomb A Village Study in Northern Thailand, Bangkok, Bangkok Christian College, 1965; and R.B. Davis, Muang Metaphysics, Bangkok, Pandora, 1984.

The thet maha chat and Thai Political Culture

One of the principal reasons behind the neglect of the thet maha chat as an historical source and the limitations in the existing scholarship lies in the way the Vessantara Jataka has been viewed by modern scholarship. Both Thai and Western commentators have tended to interpret the Vessantara Jataka within a framework dictated by the categories into which they have already placed the story. These categories are most often religious parable, folktale, legend, or literary artefact. One of the arguments in this thesis is that this process of categorization is responsible for the lack of understanding of the influence of the Vessantara Jataka in Thai history. The categorization of the story as religious parable, folktale, or literary classic, has led to a disregard for the story's socio-political significance. Yet the fact that the story was a performative text, that the thet maha chat was specifically designed to propagate the ideas contained in the Vessantara Jataka to a mass audience, that the story was popular both at the courts of rulers and in rural villages, suggests that the story had a political use in the premodern Tai Buddhist world. This thesis, then, proposes that the Vessantara Jataka was more than a tale for literary enjoyment or religious edification, but that it contained the basic elements of what modern academic discourse would call 'political theory'.

One study stands out in its recognition of the ideological content of the Vessantara Jataka. An article by political scientist Sombat Chanthornwong on the Maha chat kham luang, published in 1980, is the first study to explore the political use of the Vessantara Jataka.⁴¹ Sombat looks at a fifteenth century version of the story attributed to the expansionist king of Ayuthaya, Boromatrailokanat (1448-88). He argues that the Maha chat kham luang can be viewed as a 'political' text, in terms of the way in which it conflates the concepts of Buddhahood and kingship.⁴² Sombat's study comes out of a revisionist critique of elite Thai literature popular in the 1970s, which saw such literature as servant of the interests of the 'ruling class'. Today this explanation appears too mechanistic. While it recognises the 'political content' of religious literature, it fails to account for why this kind of literature achieved the widespread popularity it did. Also, Sombat's study focusses on a single text produced by the court of the kingdom of Ayuthaya. Yet it is clear that from very early times there were countless texts of the

⁴¹ This article first appears in Thai as 'Maha chat kham luang: khwam mai thang kan muang' (Royal Version of the Great Life: Its Political Meaning), in Sombat Chantornwong lae Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Khwam khit thang kan muang lae sangkhom thai (Political Thought and Thai Society), Thai Studies Centre, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1980; and in English as "Religious Literature in Thai Political Perspective: The Case of the Maha Chat Kham Luang" in Tham Seong Chee (ed.) Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Social Perspectives, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1981.

⁴² Sombat, 'Religious Literature in Thai Political Perspective', pp. 188, 196.

Vessantara Jataka circulating among the various Tai Buddhist peoples throughout the region, far outside the control of their rulers. Sombat sees the Maha chat kham luang as a text that enhanced the power of a particular fifteenth century king. But given the widespread popularity of the thet maha chat and the decentralised nature of political control in premodern Thai kingdoms, it is more likely that the Vessantara Jataka contributed to ideas about authority generally, rather than enhancing the power of a particular Ayuthayan king.

Why then, did the Vessantara Jataka appeal to the Thai, and what was the nature of the conception of authority that it articulated?

To answer the first question we must recall the medium through which the Vessantara Jataka was popularised, the thet maha chat. Given the fact that a large proportion of the population was semi-literate or illiterate the performative text greatly enhanced the story's reach in premodern Thai society. It is worth bearing in mind that of the huge corpus of Buddhist teaching contained in the Tripitaka and the Commentaries, only a very small part was made available to an audience in this way. By the eighteenth century (and almost certainly well before this) we know that recitation of the Maha chat had reached the status of a verbal art form, not unlike that of Western opera. Monks skilled in the art of the thet maha chat could move audiences to tears - or laughter - by their recitation of the story. They were aided by the vernacular translations of the Pali Vessantara Jataka which were deliberately designed for oral rendition, and which allowed full use of the wide range of arts of composition for verbal performance.

The content of the Vessantara Jataka story gave it a wide appeal. It is not a dry treatise on statecraft, nor is it cynical propaganda designed by Machiavellian princes to deceive the people into submitting to autocratic rulers. Rather, it is a gripping narrative, full of action, suspense, humour and especially pathos. Although the Maha chat was elitist in the sense that it was about kings, queens and princes, it was at the same time a story which dealt with an institution fundamental to Thai society, the family. There are few stories that have a greater emotional effect on Thai people, even today, and this is largely because the story deals very intimately with family relationships. Especially moving are the episodes when Vessantara is exiled from the royal city and must be separated from his parents; when Matsi searches desperately for her missing children; or when Vessantara watches on as the Brahman beats his own children:

*suan somdet phra borom phothisat
trat dai song fang phra surasiang kaew kanha
siaw phra sakonkaya yen krayor
sao salot rathot thor phra thai thoe thoi lang
phra nasik eut tang atsatspatsat*

*nam phra net thoe lai yat yot pen sai luat
mai wen wai hai huat sung soka⁴³*

The great bodhisatta
Heard the cries of his dear Kanha and a shiver shook his whole body
Shocked and distressed, his heart taken aback
He took a deep breath
Tears as if of blood fell from his eyes
Still his sorrow did not abate.

The story is structured around the progressive breakup of the (extended) family, the separation of its members and their final happy reunion. Within this narrative structure the Maha chat expresses clear notions concerning order in the family. It provides models which have become moral norms in Thai familial organization: the caring mother, the virtuous and dutiful wife, obedient children, and the father as head of the family as well as the morally and spiritually superior being. Matsi, Kanha and Chali are the possessions of Vessantara, for only as possessions can they be his to give away. The Maha chat enunciated a code of hierarchical relations within the family. Authority in Thai society started at the level of the family.

The Maha chat is the classic work in Thai culture on the practice and morality of giving. It is a story about a man who gives everything he owns, until he has no more to give. Throughout the story there are exhortations on the great virtue of giving, such as this one from Vessantara's speech to Indra, who is disguised as a Brahman:

*O than phram oei
wa thung than kan kusun yai
nam chai rao mai chuan choei yor thor
sing rai than hak ork park khor kap tua rao nai khrang ni
rao kor mi khwam yin di yorm yok hai
mai wan wai duai khwam alai nai panraya ru wa khwam trani
sapsin sing thi mi yu nai amnat tua rao at pen chao khorng khrorng khrorng wai
ru cha borichak hai kae phu un
rao khor wa yang yun mankhong trong tam atayasai
rao mai dai khit pit bang sorn wai mi hai yachok hen lae ru
phro samoe yu pen nit nam chit khorng rao yorm yindi mi aphirom
yu tae nai thi cha bamphen than dang rao patiyani lae⁴⁴*

O Brahman
As for giving, the great form of merit-making
My generosity does not hesitate or waver
Anything you ask of me now
I am glad to give to you
I will neither pine for my wife or be slow in giving
All the things that are in my power and possession

⁴³ From kan kuman, Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap 13 kan (Thirteen Chapter Version of the Great Vessantara Jataka), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1988, p. 227.

⁴⁴ From kan sakkabap, Maha wetsandorn chadok chabap 13 kan, pp. 264-5.