

## ***Ching Phra Chan Collection: A Reflection to Theravāda Buddhist Legend***

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### **Abstract**

It is undeniable that Thai classical music has played a significant role in ritual contexts in Thai society since ancient times, especially during the arrival, meal, and farewell of Buddhist monks. *Ching Phra Chan* (CPC) is the special collection of songs played during the meal. The objective of this article is to answer the question ‘Why are these songs collected together?’. Until the present day there has been only one example of research that involved this issue. However, the answer remains unclear. In this article, the author considers Buddhist legend to interpret the above-mentioned phenomenon. According to *Theravāda* Buddhist legend, Prince *Siddhartha* received the first meal from the first female follower, namely *Sujātā*, and then, after a period of severe asceticism, he went to the *Nerañjarā* River and floated a vessel for enlightenment. When considering the connection with water and the last song with a farewell, *Phra Chao Loy Thaat*, ‘Buddha floating the vessel’, could be the reason for Thai composers to select and create a collection of songs for Buddhist ritual contexts in order to remember the special meal before the enlightenment of *Buddha*. This study shows not just the reinterpretation of Thai classical music, but also the possibility to integrate knowledge about legends to make Thai classical music more meaningful.

**Keywords:** Theravāda Buddhism, Thai Classical Music, Buddhist Legend

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## Introduction

In culture worldwide, music is used in rituals and ceremonies, which are important contexts that determine and affect the musical performance. The essential role of music in a ritual context is to make the audience feel relaxed, peaceful, well-prepared, and sometimes uplifted in preparation for the ensuing ceremony.

In regard to Thai culture, Thai classical music renders an important role in Buddhist ceremonies. Thai people who want to make merit on an occasion of remembrance for deceased relatives or yearly merit making at home normally invite a group of Buddhist monks to perform a ceremony and have breakfast or lunch because *Theravāda* Buddhists have the precept not to have dinner. Music is normally played at every step from the arrival to the farewell of the Buddhist monks. The songs played during the ceremony include *Rap Phra* ‘welcoming the monk’, and *Song Phra* ‘sending the monk’.

*Ching Phra Chan* (CPC) is a special collection of songs played during the meal that were composed during the *Ayudhya* period around 300 years ago in the central part of the lowland of the *Chao Phraya* River. CPC is traditionally categorized in the genre of *Pleng Ruang*, which means the songs in the collection have some similar melodies which can be found in the introduction or the end of each part of the songs. The songs were collected to continue the oral tradition that is still evident amongst Thai classical musicians. CPC comprises many songs in the same way as the *Pleng Ruang* collection. There may be variations in the selection of songs by different groups of musicians but the structure of *Pleng Ruang* creation remains largely the same.

It is noteworthy that the names of the songs in CPC mostly show some connection to water such as *Ok Thale* ‘the heart of the sea’, *Fang Nam* ‘the riverbank’, *Fong Nam* ‘the water foam’; and so on. Pornprasit (2002) conducted the only research on PDC in the form of analyses of musicology for CPC. Although the researcher examined the names of the songs, it remains unclear why these songs are collected together and there is no explanation of the connection to water or other background reasons.

It comes to my objective to explore the above connection in CPC, which may explain why these songs are collected together. It is necessary to establish whether the songs were collected together because of their melodic similarity or for another reason.

On account of the fact that CPC is played at Buddhist ceremonies, it is possible to regard *Theravāda* Buddhist legend as the methodology to study and interpret the names of the songs in the CPC collection. This research will provide a contextual interpretation which links CPC to the oral traditions of Thai society.

## Results

*Theravāda* Buddhism is the mainstream religious belief in Thai society. According to the biography of Buddha in the *Theravāda* Buddhist legend, before enlightenment to become Buddha, Prince *Siddhartha* willingly obtained his first meal from the first female follower, namely *Sujātā*, after his severe asceticism. He then went to the *Nerañjarā* River and floated the vessel. He thought if he could achieve enlightenment, the vessel would sink into the river, but if not, it would float along the stream. The

vessel sank into the *Pātāla*, the underworld in Hindu myth occupied by *Nāga*-the great serpent.

The story is narrated in *Tipiṭaka*, the most important *Theravāda* Buddhist canon, and is considered as important because this was the last meal before enlightenment and becoming Buddha. In the legend, starting to eat at that time represents the change of mind to emphasize the middle way as the only and appropriate way to enlightenment, not by extreme happiness or self-torture.

The above-mentioned Buddha biography may have some connection to CPC because this is an important episode that is connected with food service, which is the core of the ceremony in Thai culture that precedes preaching by the monks and the pouring of ceremonial water as a sign of dedication to the departed.

When considering the name of the songs in the CPC, it is noteworthy that most of the songs are related to water as follows<sup>1</sup>:

CPC played during the monks' breakfast

1. Ton Pleng Ching 'Prologue to Ching series'
2. Charakhe Hang Yao 'long-tailed alligator'
3. Charakhe Kwang Klong 'the alligator blocked a canal'
4. Tuang Phra That 'measuring Buddha's bones'
5. Toi Lang Khao Klong 'back to the canal'
6. Ching Yai 'big Ching'
7. Ching Nok 'outside Ching'
8. Ching Klang 'middle Ching'
9. Ching Sanan 'Ching for taking a bath'
10. Ching Chandiaw 'fast songs as epilogue-no specific name'

CPC played during the monks' lunch

1. Krabok Nguen 'silver bamboo flask for containing water'
2. Krabok Nag 'copper bamboo flask for containing water'
3. Malangwan Tong 'golden fly'
4. Krabok Tong 'golden bamboo flask for containing water'
5. Tuang Phra That 'measuring Buddha's bones'
6. Sansern Phra Barami 'glory of the charisma'
7. Fang Nam 'riverbank'
8. Fong Nam 'the waterfoam'
9. Tha Nam 'the waterside'
10. Ta Tha ra 'meaning not clear'
11. Klueu Tai Nam 'waves under the water'
12. Tha Le Baa 'the insane sea'
13. Praya Pai Rue 'the master paddling the boat'
14. Rua 'shaking-as the symbol to end the series'

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<sup>1</sup> The following names of songs are summarized according to the list in the research by Pornprasit (2002) and from the memory of those who have been trained to be traditional musicians by oral tradition. The difference in the number and name of songs at each school of Thai traditional music is not mentioned in the article.

The meaning of many songs is obviously related to water, which reflects that the compiler may have selected them according to the legend. As a result, it is possible to interpret the series of songs in ways that go beyond the scope of musicology.

Furthermore, *Song Phra* ('sending the monk') is the last song to be played. This song is called *Phra Chao Loy Tat*, which means 'Buddha floats the vessel'. The meaning of the song is a connection to the above mentioned story. This could be the reason for Thai composers to select the songs about water (if the song pre-dated CPC) or compose the song (if the songs were written for CPC).

The collections of *Pleng Ruang* are normally based on melodic similarities and CPC is not an exception. If we consider each song in the CPC series, it can be found that the end of each part in each song is similar to one another. However, it is clear that we can recognize CPC not only from the song itself, but also from the relation to other functions, where a spiritual atmosphere is created in the music for rituals.

To conclude, this shows that the meaning does not exist in isolation, but might depend on or pertain to something else. The meaning of the text cannot exist without context such as, in this case, the legend. Such analysis may help in future comparative and extended study of Thai classical music.

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