

Thai literary epic in new English translation

By Vaudine England

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One of Thailand's most famous stories of love and war has been translated into English for the first time. *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* features a beautiful woman, a heroic young man - Thailand's answer to Casanova - and another, richer suitor. The tale is hundreds of years old, and was first recited in open-air performances to village crowds, and passed on by word-of-mouth. This first, full English translation fills two volumes and over 1,000 pages. The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen is Thailand's version of Romeo and Juliet mixed up with Robin Hood.

It tackles the eternal themes of a woman torn between two lovers, the struggle between rich and poor, and the idea of revolt against the monarch. The dialogue is passionate, moving, even funny - as co-translators Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit have demonstrated.

"I fear the strong wind and fierce sun will spoil your fair face. You must be stiff and weary from walking... I followed you here because I love you," says the handsome young lover, Khun Phaen. "I've been missing you and moping without any relief. At night my eyes are awake through all four watches. "I feel a fire is licking after me and I can't escape. I'm sick with desolation and yearning. "How is it with you?" The fair Nang Wanthong replies: "You've come to pour out your heart. You're talking in the hope I'll soften up. "I think I do care for you a little so I won't reject your feelings completely."

A written version of the tale was developed by court poets and two Thai kings. Streets, artworks, TV shows and even children are named after the characters to this day. Thai schoolchildren learn excerpts from it. "It is about the plight of women where the warrior is supreme and men dominate all kinds of things," said Ms Pasuk, a leading Thai intellectual.

Over the years, of course, Thailand has changed a lot. Village and court life have evolved, perhaps more than the current ruling class would care to admit. Chris Baker said there was no political motive behind this translation - even though elements of the story reflect directly on the exercise of power. "There's the theme about revolt, of everyman. He has his wife taken away from him, suffers other injustices and eventually becomes an outlaw. And in fact the king fears very much that he's gone into revolt. "The sentence that is imposed upon the heroine is actually in the law code a sentence for revolt, which somehow has been imposed on her not him.

"And I think the way to understand that is that the two themes - the position of women in a society that gives all the power to men, and the little man up against wealth and power - have got totally wrapped around one another," said Mr Baker, a Cambridge-trained historian. One more explanation of the tale's enduring popularity may be the illustrations - this new edition's cover features a luscious beauty reclining semi-naked beneath the gaze of a handsome young man.