‘Creative Ramayana’ for the Value Adding of Thai Products and Tourism: A Study of ‘Creative Folklore’¹

Abstract

“Creative economy” has played a significant role in globalized Thailand since the past decade. In the commercial world, many narratives are used extensively to add value to products, including the tale of Ramayana, which is a very prominent story in Thai society. The story was transformed into many local tales and legends. This article is an attempt to consider the tale of Ramayana as ‘creative folklore’, to examine how the tale of Ramayana persists and is reproduced in the creative economy to add value to local products and to promote Thai tourism by using folkloric methods in combination with the concept of creative economy.

The study reveals that the tale of Ramayana is a very important “cultural capital” and is “reproduced” to add value to products and cultural tourist activities, especially in the places where the tale of Ramayana is told as a local legend. The reproduction of Ramayana not only reflects the dynamism of the tale in Thai society but also becomes an eminent example for the creative use of narrative or folklore in the value adding of products and services in other cases.

Keywords: Thai folklore, folktales, Ramayana, creative economy, cultural reproduction

Introduction

In the past decades, folklore data were widely collected for the sake of study. Most of them were at risk to dissolve and their cultural valued were examined delicately. However, since the era of capitalism, these

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The term “creative folklore” is invented by Professor Dr. Siraporn Nathalang, a famous Thai folklorist and the head of the serial research mentioned above, from the term “creative economy” to explain the use of folklore in creative economy.
folklore data, which used to be ‘cultural data’, have been commercially valued as ‘cultural capitals’ in the process of transforming ‘culture’ into ‘product’. This is also the result of the decline of the previous development strategy which has science and technology as its main instrument. Due to the decay of natural resource and the equality of manufacturing technologies, prosperity therefore belongs to those who own the ‘creative ideas’ to invent new distinctive products and services which have capability to satisfy the need of people. 

The process of transforming culture into commercial product becomes known as “creative economy” or “creative industries”. The terms were first governmentally accepted in United Kingdom when the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, in 2001, defined that creative industries are “Those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.”

In 2003, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) marked out on creative economy as “industries that include the cultural industries plus all cultural or artistic production, whether live or produced as an individual unit. The creative industries are those in which the product or service contains a substantial element of artistic or creative endeavor.”

Afterwards, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described on United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) that “industries originated from creativity, comprehension and potential ability in afford making from the making and the usage of intangible intellectual properties” are creative economy. (Akhom Teomphithayaphaisit, 2010)

Anyway, creative economy was redefined in details in Creative Economy Report 2008 by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development:

"The creative economy is an evolving concept based on creative assets potentially generating economic growth and development. It can foster income generation, job creation and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development. It embraces economic, cultural and social aspects interacting with technology, intellectual property and tourism objectives. It is a set of knowledge-based economic activities with a development dimension and cross-cutting linkages at macro and micro levels to the overall economy. It is a feasible development option calling for innovative multidisciplinary policy responses and interministerial action. At the heart of the creative economy are the creative industries.”

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3  Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001 , p. 04
In all the above definitions, both national and international organizations mentioned that creative development of cultural resources going along with technological ways of lives brings to commercial profits for services and products. At present, ‘creative economy’ plays significant roles in Thai society, and many local narratives are widely used in creative commerce.

In the case of Ramayana, one of the important Thai literatures adopted from Indian great epic, it is interesting how this “Thainized” story persists and is reproduced. Therefore, examination of creative Ramayana usage through folkloric eyes is mainly concerned in the three points below.

1. Popularity of the tale of Ramayana in Thai Society
2. From Ayodhaya to the World of Free Trade: Thai Tale of Ramayana for the Value Adding of Local Products
3. Creation for Recreation: the Tale of Ramayana and the promotion of Thai Cultural Tourism

1. Popularity of the tale of Ramayana in Thai Society

Ramayana or the tale of King Rama (an incarnation of Vishnu) is venerated as a great epic of India which are known all around the world together with Mahabharata, so the large amount of different versions have been composed for a very long time and then spread out with the ascendency of Indian civilization into Southeast Asia. The adoption and transmission of Ramayana in Southeast Asian countries depend on the original sources and the way the tale was carried out to surrounding regions. The first inscription of Sukhothai period (12th Centuries C.E.) mentioned a cave called “Rama cave”, this is evidence demonstrating that Thai have been familiar with the tale of King Rama since then.

Ramayana in Thailand is called “Ramakian”, which means “the honor of King Rama”. Sathian Koset, an important Thai scholar, argued that Thai Ramakian was the integration of Valmiki’s Ramayana and other Rama tales from several sources. Some thoughts and details in all versions are adjusted by “Thainized” methods and are adjusted to suit Thai culture. The story of Ramayana was then presented in various literary forms. The most popular version is King Rama I’s Ramakian Verse Play in Rattanakosin period. Such popularity caused the reproduction of Ramayana texts, as well as other artistic branches: performance, musical art and fine art.

Since the ancient Thai believed that some episodes of Thai Ramayana (Ramakian) once occurred in their locality, each of them has been brought about oral historical accounts. In Lopburi Province of the central part of Thailand known as “the city of Hanuman”, there are many places in which the names are connected to

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the story of Ramayana, such as King Rama cave, Queen Sita cave, Phali cave, King Rama road, Prince Lakshaman road. Here are some interesting examples:

1) **The legend of Lopburi Province**: After conquered Thossakan (Ravana in Thai version), king Rama built a city for Hanuman by an arrow-shot cast. The name “the land of Phrommat” was given to the place that his arrow named Phrommat fell into. A lake nearby was called “Arrow dipping Lake”. Hanuman built a city wall which has become “three-peaked mountain”. The heat of the arrow created white chalk soil. Phrommat arrow was too hot to keep away from water and can cause some cases of fire, as well. So the shrine with water bowl was built to keep such arrow.

2) **The legend of Thap Kwai Mountain**: The monkey king Phali, Hanuman's uncle, killed Thoraphi the Buffalo in a cave of a mountain. Its head was thrown away to a lake called “Buffalo’s head lake”. While Thoraphi's head was throwing, it hit a part of the cave to crack into a rock that fled to “Headrock Village”. The monkey king also destroyed the cave entrance to avoid other rascal buffalos, so the mountain was named Thap Kwai (hidden from buffalo) Mountain. The near place that flooded with Thoraphi's blood found red metallic ore from its blood color.

3) **The legend of Samo Khon Mountain**: Prince Lakshaman (king Rama’s Brother) was pricked by Mokkhsak spear, so Hanuman fled to take the divine medicine plant on “the mountain of drugs” or Sapphaya Mountain which is believed that situated in Chainat Province today. Reached at the mountain of drugs, Hanuman pulled up the whole mountain and then carried it in hurry. While he was flying over Lopburi province, he saw the divine medicine plant from the light of the big fire. (Hanuman made that fire himself since the city had just built). So he took only the medicine plant and dropped the mountain in flame. The burned mountain became Samo Khon Mountain.

Apart from Lopburi, in Nakhon Pathom province, the story of Phali and Thoraphi fighting also existed and became a place name legend of “Buffalo Horns village” or Thambon Khao Kwai in Thai. In Udon Thani province in the northeastern part, an ancient site called “Rama and Lakshaman town”.

In the divine absolute monarchy in the past, Thai kings were regarded as ‘the incarnation of Vishnu”, so their names were entitled with the word “Rama”, the name of Rama’s city “Ayodhaya” became the name of the former capital city, and the name of an ancient pond in Ayutthaya city “Nong Sano” was changed to “the lake of Rama”.

The popularity and veneration of Ramayana in Thai society also spread out to all parts and classes, some localities accepted and adapted this popular narrative to be their own sacred jatakas (the previous lives of Buddha stories) or place name legends.

2. From Ayodhaya to the World of Free Trade: Thai Tale of *Ramayana* for the Value Adding of Local Products

For decades, with several ways to reproduce *Ramayana* tale, especially by localizing and linking them with localities, this famous story has been used along with creative economy ideas to create many fascinating new products and to add more commercial value to the old-made ones.

2.1 Traditional Thai *Ramakian* and the making of Commercial Profits

This method is the creation of both conventional-formed and trendy products from traditional versions of Thai *Ramayana*.

2.1.1 Traditional Versions and the making of Traditional Products

For a very long time, the Thai have creatively taken some prominent motifs\(^\text{10}\) from the *Ramakian*, up to their needs or appropriation, to name many things in cultural lives. It is noticed that *Hanuman* and *Hanuman in his star-spring yawn*\(^\text{11}\) motifs are always selected to make sacred religious objects such as *Hanuman* sacred tattoo or sacred objects in “*Hanuman-like*” shape. Other interest examples are:

**Thai boxing gestures:** *Hanuman* presenting the ring (punching by both hands together), Cutting *Thossakan*’s head (neck kicking), *Montho*, (*Thossakan*’s queen), sitting on the throne (jumping then putting the elbow on the opponent’s head), *Hiranya*\(^\text{12}\) rolling the earth (striking back by the elbow), King *Rama* wandering in the forest (punching and kicking at the same side of the opponent’s body), Throwing the *Mokkhasak* spear (putting the elbow over the head then hitting on the opponent’s face), etc.

**Thai dancing gestures:** *Hanuman* courting Lady *Suphanna Matcha*\(^\text{13}\), *Hanuman* courting Lady *Benyakai*\(^\text{14}\), King rama following the golden deer.

**Thai plants:** *Phiphek*’s fruit (beleric myrobalan), *Hanuman* sitting on a throne (jatropha), *Sita*’s robe (staghorn fern)

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\(^{10}\) In folklore, the term “motifs” means smallest distinctive elements in each narratives which can be divided into 1) characters 2) objects 3) behaviors or incidents.

\(^{11}\) In Thai *Ramayana* tales, the star-spring yawn was the most distinctive character of Hanuman. He often used this manner to prove who he was.

\(^{12}\) A fierce org mentioned in an early episode of Thai *Ramakian*

\(^{13}\) A mermaid, *Thossakan*’s daughter

\(^{14}\) A daughter of *Phiphek*, *Thossakan*’s youngest brother
Moreover, for decades, characters’ names are picked out for some dishes to call for attention. An outstanding case mentioned here is “Rama taking a bath”, a new-invented recipe made from rice with cooked pork and Thai morning glory in gravy. Green color of Thai morning glory is correlated with King Rama’s green skin acknowledged in Thai Ramakian, and the gravy is compared to the bathing water. This dish is so favorite that two alike menus have been invented, which are “Lakshaman taking a bath” (noodle) and “Sita taking a bath” (pure vegetable and gravy).

As for Hanuman, this significant character is used as commercial brands such as “Hanuman battery” (Hanuman in his star-spring yawn character), “Hanuman match” (flying Hanuman) or “Hanuman rice pack” that can be seen in the picture below.
2.1.2 The Traditional Versions and New-Invented Products

Sometime traditional Ramayana tales are reproduced as brand new stuffs that are suitable for technological development and modern world preference like Ramayana comics, online games, card games or animations. All bring to related stuffs: color books, models, etc. Hanuman, again, is emphasized and concerned as an animal character to catch children’s attention.

2.2 Local Ramayana Tale and the Commercial Value Adding

In some places where the tale of Ramayana is localized as legends or oral histories, the value adding of local outputs come from local Ramayana elements. For example, Tha Hin village in Lopburi province stands from times to times the famous homemade chalk soil industry that has included in “One Tambon One Product” project (OTOP)\(^\text{15}\) . People there promote their chalk soil industry by the “belonging” Ramayana tales: King Rama’s arrow fell in Lopburi land then the soil there became white chalk soil. The aforesaid can be calculated as creative ways to turn cultural capital to commercial profits.

2.3 New-Invented Ramayana Tales and Cotemporary Commerce

From original Thai Ramayana some “extra stories” can be invented. A distinctive example is the movie “Hanuman Meets Seven Heroes” by Chaiyo Film (Thailand) and Tsuburaya Production (Japan) in 1974, which created by mixing both Hanuman character as King Rama’s great soldier with Japanese hero character.

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\(^{15}\) Thai governmental commercial project that a village has to have at least one product for sale started in 2002.
This movie told about “Kho”, a boy who was shot to dead by an antique smuggler gang. Lady Ultra, female head of Ultra Men, summoned his soul into Hanuman Body. Disguised as Hanuman, Kho protected good persons and distinguished the bad ones. One day five monsters from a scientific error were rampaging and destroying Thailand. Hanuman had lost in his sole combat, so He Ultra Brothers fought together then overcame. Main characters were: Hanuman, Ultra Man, Lady Ultra, Ultra Seven Ultra Man Sophie, Ultra Man Jack, Ultra Man H and Ultra Man Taro. ¹⁶ This Hanumanic-super heroic film was very popular in this period. So two years later, the movie “Hanuman Meets Eleven Heroes” modified from the former version with four new characters (Lord Ultra, Ultra Man Leo, Ultra Man Astra and Ultra Man King) and “Hanuman Meets Five Mask Riders” were produced.

Both Hanuman and Ultra Men were regarded as hero characters, so the cross-cultural and cross-periodic meeting of the two heroes was possible in imaginative boundary. Such creative idea and presentation beyond traditional frame make this movie highly interesting. The identity of Hanuman, however, was conventionally kept in traditional costume, flirtatious deeds (with Lady Ultra) and dramatic Thai monkey-like manners while Ultra Man were manifested as popular Japanese heroes. This incongruity turned to uniqueness and brought about money.

From the aforesaid, Thai Ramayana tales effectively work in contemporary markets from the stuffs made or marked by the original-versioned tales and the imaginative-invented ones. Localities with Ramayana legends commercially apply these “cultural capitals” to establish oldness and incredibility for their goods.

Nevertheless, it is notable that Hanuman in creative economical application is seen more often than other characters, even King Rama or Prince Lakshamana. King Rama character is mentioned in royal activities since he represents Thai kingship in absolutely high status. Hanuman, on the contrary, exists with excellent fighting ability as King Rama’s great soldier and recognized as an animal character which Thai children usually love.

3. Creation for Recreation: the Tale of Ramayana and the promotion of Thai Cultural Tourism

According to the familiarity with Ramakian that has been repeatedly localized, the relationship between the tale of Ramayana and localities is recounted for creative cultural tourism. An attractive traditional Thai performance about Ramakian may be likewise regarded as a part of a tourist program.

3.1 Visiting the Places believed to be from Ramayana

Since Ramakian is localized and well-known among the Thai, not only exotic natural sceneries but also “Ramayana battle scenes” make tourists impressed. Today visiting the sites related to Ramayana is promoted, especially in Lopburi province where Tourism Thailand Organization (TTO) set traveling programs to see the places mentioned in local Ramakian (for examples: Samo Khon Mountain, The Rama’s Arrow Shrine, Sappaya Mountain).

The promotion of cultural tourism by using the tale of Ramayana indicates dynamism of modern world tourism. Different from traveling just for entertainment in the past, enjoyable and knowledgeable tours attract contemporary Thai middle class.

Picture 5: The Rama’s Arrow Shrine, Lopburi Province.
3.2 Establishing Enduring Objects from Ramayana Stories in Related Sites

A concrete way to emphasize the Ramayana tales belonging to local places is to build up statues of some attractive characters like Hanuman statues on “Hanuman Peak” of Samo Khon Mountain and in front of a hotel in Lopburi province. Also, in some sites, information boards about a Ramayana event that “once occurred” there are usually situated for tourists.

3.3 Playing Traditional Thai Ramayana Performance for Tour Promotion

To promote cultural tourism in Thailand by setting a traditional performance programs becomes very popular among the Thai and foreigners. Conventional Ramayana Performances: khon, shadow play, puppet, which used to be performed only in the royal court in the past, play a significant role today in appropriate occasions.

It is sighted that Ramayana tales are widely and variously applied for cultural tourism. One of the most interesting points is to travel “follow King Rama’s paths” in meaningful sites related with local Ramakian where are believed once the real scene of the great. Besides, traditional Ramayana performances not only publicize Thai culture but also support and make affords for local artists, who are encouraged to preserve all these artistic branches.

Concluding Remarks

The study of Thai Ramayana tales from creative folklore aspect is an example to show how local narratives are used as cultural capitals, especially among people in the central part of Thailand who take their own inherited and new-invented tales, myths, legends or even oral histories. The local tale of Ramayana is colored, then transformed into several products, souvenirs, new entertainment (like movies, comics or animations) and cultural tour programs to support modern market and recreation. These outstanding phenomena bring about academic interests in backgrounds, concepts, methods to create services and products from local accounts, and commercial functions of folklore in contemporary world.

To transfigure local sources for commercial profits, however, needs careful consideration in various aspects for appropriation and highest benefits. Sukanya Sutchaya, Thai famous folklorist and one of the scholars who has initiated creative folklore study in Thailand, gave an important point of view that what and how to apply cultural heritage in free trade society, to whom “benefit” and “profit” belong, must be considerably concerned.\footnote{Sukanya Sutchaya. “Creative Economy and Cultural management”, Document in Ubon Wattanatham National Academic Conference on Culture: Man, Trade and Rice in Maekhong Region (23\textsuperscript{rd}-25\textsuperscript{th} December 2010) (in Thai)}
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