

Wanthong forgiven

The best thing about the exhibition 'Rereading Khun Chang Khun Phaen' is the affection shown for the woman between them



A costume for Khun Phaen



And one for Wanthong

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THE NATION ON SUNDAY

If you take home one thing from the exhibition "Rereading Khun Chang Khun Phaen", it ought to be that Wanthong – the woman who stood between the two men in the title of the beloved epic poem – was not "a bitch".

It's a harsh word, but that's the common perception of the woman who plays such a vital role in the saga that her name should be in the title too.

Regardless, it's unfair, the exhibition at the Jim Thompson Art Centre suggests. The story was rewritten once too often, with socio-political intent, and a forthright woman became an immoral harpy.

A story shared orally long before it was written down and constantly expanded since the Ayutthaya Period, "Khun Chang Khun Phaen" has been revised and extrapolated on by court poets and authors including Khru Janeg, Sunthorn Phu, King Rama II and Prince Damrong.

Most recently Chris Baker and his wife Pasuk Phongpaichit published an English translation entitled "The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen".

Their illustrated 1,430-page edition in two volumes dense with footnotes came out late last year, and now the authors have put together various artistic depictions of the saga and its characters – books, comics, films, paintings, *likay* and other stage presentations, photography and animation.

The Thompson Centre's curatorial team – director Gridthiya Gawee Wong, Somsuda Piamsumrit and Yuwadee Srithuyyod – presents a multimedia show that provides a fresh accounting of an age-old tale.

The centrepiece is a long panel bearing the timeline of revisions since Ayutthaya's kings ruled the region.

"Khun Chang Khun Phaen" has had many incarnations, some quite divergent from what's considered "the original". Following the chronological panel is a ride on a time machine, from fireside storytelling to electronic downloads. You end up wearing headphones and watching an LCD television, and you're still learning new things about the story.

There's a side-education in the

development of visual art in illustration and painting, and how artists have interpreted the characters according to their own beliefs.

The disparate episodes of the poem were first collated in writing in 1850, in the court of King Rama IV. It was swiftly adapted into other art forms – as musical drama for royal viewers and as *phleng choi* for commoners.

It was first presented as a novel in 1932 with an adaptation by Malai Chuphinit called "Chai Chatri" ("The Hero"). Recounted in abridged form for generations of schoolchildren, the story made it to television in the 1970s, with Channel 7 airing no fewer than 500 episodes. It was the most popular TV series of the day.

But even a hit series leaves Wanthong open to interpretation.

One wall at the show has rare, extraordinary illustrations by the late Hem Vejakorn, who also did the murals in the Anandahsamakom Throne Hall. You see the simple life in old Siam, the classic architecture, the Buddhist ceremonies and the superstitions that loom so vividly in the story.

Hem's wonderful silhouettes



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Husband-and-wife translators Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit

come from Boonchai Bencharongkul's collection, soon to be on view at the new Thai Contemporary Art Museum.

Wanthong herself appears in a beautiful "neo-traditional" painting by National Artist Chakrabhand Posayakrit. She's on horseback with Khun Phaen nearby, standing against a forest backdrop. The brushstrokes form gentle contours.

American photographer Bruce Gundersen offers a different way of seeing the story with his digital images printed on silk.

"*Ajarn* Chakrabhand portrays Khun Khaen and Wanthong from the perspective of an artist of the court," Pasuk points out, "while Gundersen shows them the way normal people see them."

Another wall is filled with pages from literature, in both Thai and English, and the main characters' family trees.

And here, fascinatingly, you can see the different editions' shifting perceptions of women.

"The court version portrays them as Victorian ladies – polite, shy and discrete about their inner thoughts, especially sexual," Pasuk notes. "Other versions show men and women as equals and able to express their feelings of love."

Wanthong has been cast as a shrew, opportunistic, indecisive – and immoral. She had two husbands, after all! The multiple wives of Khun Phaen and his son Phlai Ngam don't seem to earn them the same disdain.

"If anyone criticises Wanthong for having two lovers, they have to blame Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam, too!" Baker laughs.

Elsewhere, Kornkrit Jianpinidnan's photographs and a map trace Khun Phaen's journeys from Ayutthaya to Suphan Buri, Kanchanaburi and Phichit. He took pictures of the shrines, temple murals, the Tha Chin River and Wanthong's purported grave at Wat Takrai in Ayutthaya.

Kornkrit shot in colour but shows the prints in black and white "to play with the black-and-white perception that many people have of this tale", he says.

"Many people believe Wanthong wasn't a good lady," he explains. "In fact, what we see is in colour, but what we perceive is portrayed in two tones."

On videotape, performance artist Pradit Prasarthong envisions "The Return of Wanthong". You can see him do this live next Saturday. He focuses on the later episode in which her son Phlai Ngam encounters her spirit.

Wanthong was executed while Phlai Ngam was away at war. He has memories of her that he can't erase, so her spirit appears to him – and suggests a new dimension of the tale



WAT KO PRESS printed an edition of the story in 1898, selling it for a quarter of a baht per instalment.

LEFT: Hem Vejakorn's illustration of Wanthong and Khun Phaen as the young Nang Pim and Plai Kaew.

to modern Thai society.

Khun Phaen and Wanthong are "embodied" in the exhibition as traditional costumes based on depictions expressed in *sepha*, the form of poetic recitation accompanied by percussion.

Anyone who's read Baker and Pasuk's edition – or begun to, because it's a daunting undertaking – will appreciate a section of the show that recreates their workroom. It's packed with books, videos and related documents, including photocopies of the various texts in Thai with their handwritten English translations.

"This is the way we worked," Baker says.

"We kept reading, proof-reading and checking, over and over," Pasuk adds. "We took the pages with us everywhere, like our 'child'."

"And every time we read the chapter about Wanthong's murder, we cried."

MORE TO DO

■ "Re-Reading Khun Chang Khun Phaen" continues until September 30. The following activities at the Jim Thompson Art Centre are part of it, all free unless otherwise stated:

May 28 and 29, 2pm and 7.30pm

■ Director-actor Pradit Prasartthong presents the stage play "The Return of Wanthong". Tickets cost Bt350. Seating is limited.

June 11, 2pm

■ Mahidol University's Noppakhun Sudprasert and Watit Duriangkul present a free *sepha* recitation of the "Khun Phaen Abducts Wanthong" episode. *Sepha* is a venerable form of poetic storytelling accompanied by percussive effects.

June 25, 2pm

■ American Bruce Gundersen presents "Khun Chang Khun Phaen in a Foreigner's Perspectives" in the context of his paintings on show, including his artistic process and interest in the folktales of Southeast Asia.

July 30, 2pm

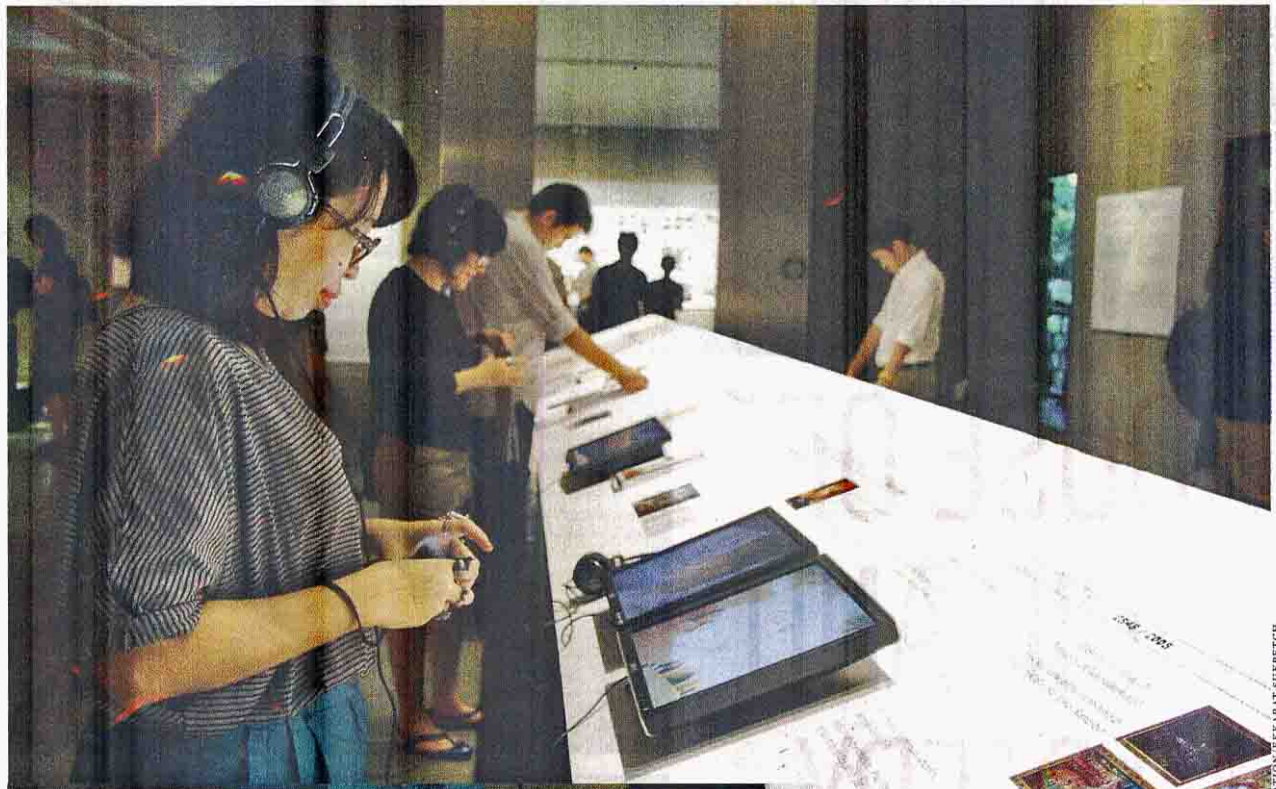
■ Mahidol lecturer Narongsak Sonjai discusses "Khun Chang Khun Phaen in Modern Media: Reproduction and Re-interpretation".

September 24, 2pm

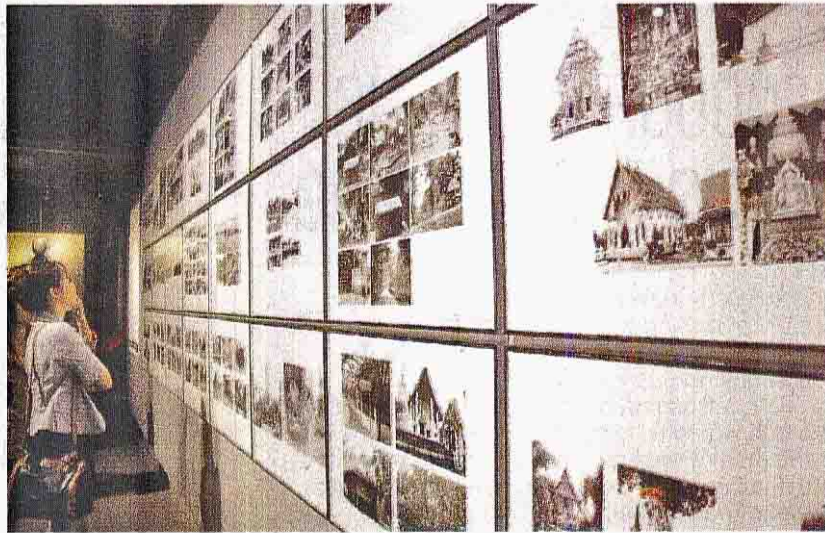
■ Outspoken writer and social critic Kam Paka discusses "Kam Paka on Khun Chang Khun Phaen", highlighting changing perspectives on woman's role in Thai society.



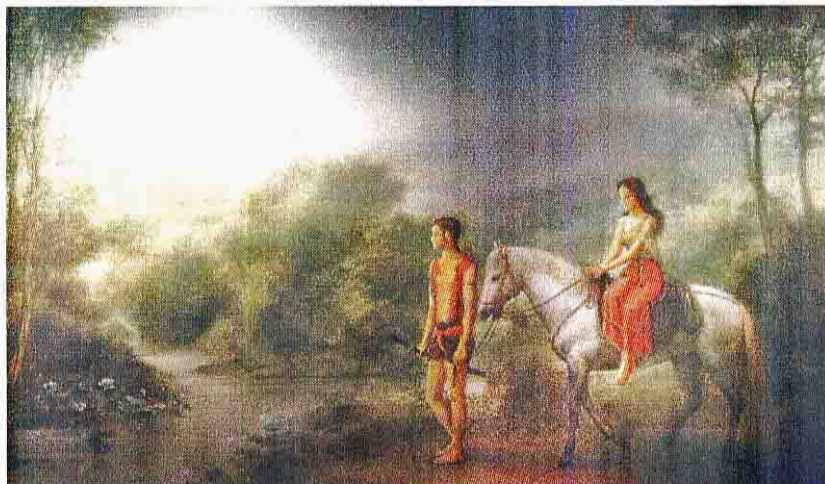
A digitally printed painting by Bruce Gundersen



THE KHUN CHANG-KHUN PHAEN timeline extends to videos and animation.



KORNKRIT JIANPINIDNAN'S photographs retrace Khun Phaen's travels.



CHAKRABHAND POSAYAKRIT'S painting of the central characters.