



Similarities and Differences between Thai Narrative Poetry in Vietnam and Thai Narrative Poetry in Some Southeast Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT:

Translational Study

Narrative poetry represents the pinnacle of Thai ethnic literature in Vietnam and other countries worldwide. When comparing Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam with other Southeast Asian countries, we observe many similarities and differences. These distinctions result from both the creative literary process and the cultural exchange and adaptation among Thai communities across nations, including Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

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INTRODUCTION

The Thai people represent a large ethnic group residing in numerous countries worldwide. Throughout their formation and development, the Thai people have created a unique culture with values rich in identity; among these, narrative poetry stands as a premier literary genre, achieving many significant accomplishments. Thai narrative poetry provides a vivid, authentic reflection of the material and spiritual life of the Thai people, encompassing aspects such as food, clothing, housing, customs, traditions, beliefs, and customary laws. The profound and comprehensive portrayal of cultural values in these poems has given life to the genre, establishing Thai narrative poetry as an essential form of intangible cultural heritage that warrants preservation and protection.

With this approach in mind, this study seeks to identify the characteristics of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam and compare it with Thai narrative poetry in several Southeast Asian countries (specifically Laos and Thailand). We selected Thai narrative poetry from Laos and Thailand for comparison because these two countries have the largest Thai populations (with Thai groups making up 74% of the population¹ in Thailand and nearly 70% in Laos²), where Thai people are central and dominant in these nations. Notably, in Laos and Thailand, Thai narrative poetry has flourished, yielding significant accomplishments and greatly contributing to the development of each country's literature. Examining Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam alongside that of Laos and Thailand will provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the development of Thai narrative poetry in Southeast Asia and reveal the diversity and uniqueness of the genre in each country within the broader picture of Southeast Asian literature.

RUSULTS

Overview of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand

It can be affirmed that narrative poetry is the foremost literary genre among the Thai people in Southeast Asia and globally. The genre's significance in Thai literature is evidenced not only by its rich diversity and abundance of works but also by its deep-rooted presence in the spiritual lives of each individual.

For the Thai people in Vietnam, narrative poetry holds a prominent position, second in volume only to Tay narrative poetry. Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam boasts an extensive collection of works, including: *Xống chụ xon xao*, *Khun Lú nàng Ủa*, *Khăm Panh*, *Tổng Đón Ấm Ca*, *Hiến Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Ú Thê*, *Tạo Hoàng Tíu and nàng Công chúa*, *Làng Chang Nguyên*, *Tạo An Đức and nàng Chiêu Công* ...

Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam reflects various aspects of ethnic social life, focusing primarily on three major themes: love, social struggle, and history. Works on the theme of love include: *Xống chụ xon xao*, *Khun Lú nàng Ủa*, *Hiến Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Tạo Hùn Lu nang Ủa Piêm*, *Tạo Sông Ca nàng Si Cáy*, *Tạo An Đức and nàng Chiêu Công*, *Tạo Xam Lương and nàng Anh Đài*... with content primarily revolving around the tragic lives of lovers in the old society. This group of narrative poems includes several works created based on the content of folk songs, while most of the poems are inspired by the plots of traditional folk tales. The narrative poems within the theme of social struggles primarily inherit their plots from folk tales. Therefore, these poems bear strong

imprints of folk tales in various aspects, including central characters, themes, and structure. The content of this group of narrative poems reflects various relationships: between younger and older siblings (as in *Tình anh em*), between stepchildren and stepparents (as in *The Story of Ý Nại Nàng Xưa* and *Cầu Tô Cốc*), and between the earthly realm, the heavenly realm, and the water realm (as in *Khùn Tình* and *Nàng Cầm Chàng Ấn*). In narrative poems with historical themes, a prominent feature is that the names of characters and places are associated with one or more historical events of the Thai people. However, in this group, these characters, places, and historical events have been fictionalized and creatively adapted by folklore to align with the people's perception of history. As a result, this group of narrative poems is less influenced by the genre of traditional folk tales compared to the group focusing on themes of social struggles. Notable works in this group include *Khảm Panh*, *Út Ô Goes to the Capital*, and *Tổng Đón Ấm Ca*. The relatively small number of historical-themed narrative poems compared to other groups is understandable. This genre originated and developed from folk literature and gradually evolved to closely reflect historical realities and everyday life, capturing the emotions and aspirations of the people during specific historical contexts. Thus, along with its realistic elements, the group of historical-themed narrative poems also embodies profound national and populist characteristics.

Thai narrative poetry began to emerge during the reign of King Tray Lokanat, with the first work being *Mahā Xat*. King Tray Lokanat was a devout Buddhist and played a key role in restoring the traditional relationship between the royal court and the high-ranking Buddhist clergy. This created favorable conditions for the development of Buddhism, which laid the foundation for the introduction of Indian literary works rich in Buddhist themes, such as the *Jataka* tales and the *Ramayana* epic, into Thailand. By the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, narrative poetry flourished, marked by the creation of numerous works by reigning monarchs and highly talented poets. Among these were narrative poems considered the pinnacle of Thai literature, such as *Rama Kiên*, *Khùn Chang Khùn Peng*, *Phra Loo*, *I nầu*...

Narrative poetry in Thailand draws its storylines from three main sources: folk literature, foreign literature, and contemporary historical realities of the time. The group of narrative poems based on folk literature is relatively small, with two notable works being *Phra Loo*, *I nầu*. The group inspired by contemporary historical realities is also limited in number, with the work *Khùn Chang Khùn Peng* standing out. According to the authors of the *Dictionary of Southeast Asian Literature*, this narrative poem was based on “a true story about a military officer during the reign of King Naresuan (1590–1605).”³ However, there is still much debate regarding the specific period reflected in the work. This is understandable, as the poem contains “a blending of past settings and the time of its composition,”⁴ and since the authors lived in the 19th century, they inevitably incorporated elements of their contemporary era into the work's depiction of reality. The group of narrative poems derived from foreign literature—specifically Indian literature—makes up the majority, with prominent works such as *Rama Kiên*, *Phra Lắc Phra Lam*, *Mahā Xat*, *Samutakhôt*, *Anirút*,... While borrowing storylines from Indian literature, Thai authors successfully “Thai-ized” these works. Although modeled after Indian Buddhist literature, Thai literature does not rigidly imitate or copy it “retains its unique identity through Thai-ization, incorporating traditional descriptions and expressing emotions such as sorrow, regret, and love in ways that are entirely aligned with the Thai character”⁵.

Narrative poetry in Laos emerged and flourished brilliantly from the 14th to the 17th century, during the golden age of the Lạn Xạng Kingdom. Narrative poetry became the most dynamic and successful genre in the history of Lao literature, producing a wealth of works such as *Xulivông*, *Kalakêt*, *Nàng Tềng On*, *Lup bo xún*, *Chămpaxitôn*, *Lin Thoong*, *Xín xay*, *Phavêtxăndon*, *Phalắc Phalam*... Lao narrative poetry is categorized into three groups: those based on folk literature, those inspired by historical realities, and those influenced by Indian literature. The group of narrative poems that inherited elements from folk literature includes notable works such as *Nàng Tềng On*, *Xulivông*.... These poems are adaptations of traditional folktales, retelling the same stories in poetic form with significant changes to the plot and some details. The group of narrative poems influenced by Indian literature features a series of works, including: *Xín xay*, *Kalakêt*, *Phavêtxăndon*, *Phalắc Phalam*, *Chămpaxithôn*, *Lin Thoong*... Thus, the narrative poetry of the Thai people in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand is rich and diverse. Although the genre develops differently in each country, they share a commonality in that they vividly reflect the cultural life of their respective ethnic groups. This characteristic contributes to the value of narrative poetry within the literature of the Thai people in each nation and solidifies its position as a leading genre in Southeast Asia. The content of literary works originating from India is primarily directly or indirectly related to Buddhism and emphasizes the virtue of goodness as upheld in Buddhist teachings. This is reflected in the depiction of the main characters. The life of the protagonist in narrative poetry is always portrayed as a journey of self-development, self-struggle against all dark forces in various circumstances, self-perfection, and achieving an ideal state in the mundane world. This approach to character development closely mirrors the process of cultivation and self-enlightenment of the Buddha across cycles of reincarnation. Although borrowing themes and plots from Indian literature, Lao narrative poetry has been “Lao-ized” to reflect the character, spirit, and historical context of Laos. As a result, these works are regarded by the Lao people as cultural products of their own nation. The group of historical-themed narrative poems includes the notable work *Lup bo xún*. This poem addresses the dark realities of Laos in the 18th century through the depiction of a profound love story between a young couple. The heroic and tragic historical events of the Lao people during the 18th century serve as the backdrop for *Lup bo xún*.

Thus, the genre of narrative poetry among the Thai people in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand is rich and diverse. Although the genre has developed differently in each country, it shares a common feature: a vivid reflection of the cultural life of the ethnic

group. This characteristic establishes the value of narrative poetry within the literature of the Thai people in each nation and ensures that this genre maintains its prominent position in Southeast Asian literature.

Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand - Some similarities and differences

Sources of themes

In the process of formation and development, the narrative poetry of the Thai people in Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos shares a fundamental similarity: it draws its themes from three main sources—folk literature, foreign literature, and contemporary historical and social realities.

The primary source of folk literature that Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam, and Southeast Asia in general, draws upon is folktales. These serve as the "direct and profound influence on the formation and development of the narrative poetry genre."⁶ Most narrative poems are created based on folktales of the same name. For instance, in Laos, the narrative poem *Nàng Tềng On* is based on the folktale of the same name; in Thailand, *Phra Loo* is derived from a folk story passed down in northern Thailand. In Vietnam, numerous narrative poems have been adapted and created from folktales, such as *Hiền Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Khun Lú nàng Ủa*, *Khùn Tinh*, *Tinh anh em*.... To create narrative poems, Thai folk authors in Vietnam, as well as those in Laos and Thailand, employed techniques of adaptation and revision, modifying certain details of traditional folktales to craft works in the new genre. However, regardless of how much they were altered or innovated, the themes reflected in narrative poetry remain those originally conveyed in the folktales.

In addition to drawing from traditional folk literature, the narrative poetry of the Thai people in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand also incorporates themes and storylines from foreign literature, primarily Indian literature. This phenomenon arose from historical circumstances, as Southeast Asian countries and China were heavily influenced by Indian culture from the early Common Era through the medieval period. Indian influences brought religions such as Brahmanism and Buddhism, as well as various cultural forms, including literature, with significant works like the *Ramayana* epic and the *Jataka* tales. The *Ramayana*, a monumental Indian epic, became the basis for famous narrative poems in Southeast Asia, such as *Phalác Phalam* in Laos, *Ramakien* and *Phra Lắc Phra Lam* in Thailand, and *Riêm Kê* in Cambodia. Similarly, the *Jataka* tales provided a rich and diverse source of themes for Southeast Asian narrative poetry. Numerous narrative poems in the region are derived from this collection. In Laos, notable examples include *Kalakêt*, *Lin Thoong*, *Phayêtxảđon*, *Xỉn xay*, *Xulivông*, *Chămpaxithôn*, *Thạo Xi Thôn*.... In Thailand, works such as *Mahà Xát*, *Samutakhôt*, *Anirút* emerged. In Vietnam, narrative poems like: *Pha Mệt*, *U Thén*, *Tạo Thi Thón*, *Ú Thém*... were inspired by Indian sources. When adopting Indian literary influences, the Thai people in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand creatively adapted them through a process of localization and cultural integration, aligning these works with their own traditions and identities.

Historical and social realities have also served as a compelling source of inspiration for the narrative poetry of the Thai people in Southeast Asia. In Laos, there is the narrative poem *Lup bo xủn*; in Thailand, *Khùn Chang Khùn Peng*; and in Vietnam, works such as *Khăm Panh*, *Út Ổ về Kinh*, *Tóng Đón Ấm Ca*. The narrative poem *Lup bo xủn* addresses the dark reality of Laos in the 18th century, marked by the decline of the Lao monarchy and the power struggles among feudal aristocratic factions. *Khùn Chang Khùn Peng* reflects the life of the Thai people during the late Ayutthaya period, roughly from the late 16th to early 18th century. The king in the poem represents one of the monarchs of late Ayutthaya, while Khun Phaen is depicted as a talented military commander serving the king. The Vietnamese narrative poem *Khăm Panh* is based on historical events during the Later Lê dynasty. It portrays the power struggle between the Thai noble families Lo Kham and Ha Cong. This poem also offers a broad depiction of the life of the Thai people, including their customs, beliefs, and social views. While these narrative poems draw their themes from historical realities, Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam, as well as in Southeast Asia "does not directly and concretely reflect historical events. Instead, it serves as an echo of the social realities of its time. Consequently, the societal impact of these works carries both diachronic and synchronic dimensions"⁶.

Another similarity between Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam and that in Laos and Thailand is that, regardless of whether the themes are drawn from folklore, foreign literature, or contemporary social realities, love remains the most prevalent theme. It is a fundamental and overarching topic in most narrative poems. Even in poems that explore themes rooted in historical realities, the issue of free marriage ultimately becomes a central focus. For instance, the narrative poem *Lup bo xủn* addresses the dark realities of 18th-century Laos through the portrayal of a profound love between a young couple. In Thailand, the narrative poem *Khùn Chang Khùn Peng* tells a local love story between Wan Thong, the daughter of a chief minister, and her two childhood friends, Khùn Chang and Khùn Peng, culminating in Wan Thoong's tragic death. Similarly, the narrative poem in Vietnam *Khăm Panh* recounts the beautiful love story between Mún and Khăm Panh—a love that becomes the source of strength for the people of Muong Khoong in their fight against invaders...

Although Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam shares similarities with that of the Thai ethnic group in Thailand and Laos in certain aspects, it also has distinct differences. While the Thai ethnic groups in Thailand and Laos directly absorbed Indian literary influences, in Vietnam, this absorption occurred indirectly through various intermediary countries. One clear example is the adaptation of story types such as "the queens blinded by a demoness and later cured by the youngest son's journey to the demon realm" and "a mortal man marrying a celestial wife." According to Nguyễn Tấn Đắc in his article *Tracing the Origins of the U Thém Story of the Thai People in Vietnam*, the narrative poem *Ú Thém* is a direct adaptation from Southeast Asian sources. It combines

two story types: the *Rothisen* type (or *The Twelve Maidens*) and the *Xithon* type (a mortal man marrying a celestial wife). The *Xithon* story type is found in the Jataka collections of four countries: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. In Thailand, it is Jataka No. 2, titled *Sudhana*; in Cambodia, it is also Jataka No. 2, called *Sudhanakumara*; in Laos, it is Jataka No. 3, named *Sudhana*; and in Myanmar, it is Jataka No. 11, titled *Sudhanakumara*. This story type also exists in folk narratives, such as *Phra Suthon and Nang Manora* in Thailand, *Thao Xi Thôn* in Laos, and *Phoocaculcôma* in Cambodia. Regarding the origins of this story type, Nguyễn Tấn Đắc cites the observations of Fickle, who notes: "*The origins of this Jataka have been studied by Jaini. He concluded that this story has two original sources: one in the Mahavastu of the Mahasanghika sect of Theravāda Buddhism or its sub-sect Lokottaravāda, and the other in the Divyavadana, a text from Khotan, as well as in the Pannasa Jataka of Southeast Asia.*"⁷. The *Rothisen* story type is also prevalent in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. According to the "*Aarne-Thompson Type Index*, the story type involving sisters whose eyes are gouged out by a demoness and later restored by the youngest son, who ventures into the demon's realm, is categorized as Type 302A. This type is titled *The Boy Who Went to the Demon's Realm* and has the following summary: "*A boy is sent to the demon's realm by his stepmother, who is a demoness. A letter instructing his murder is altered. The boy discovers where the demon's life force is hidden (often in bees) and destroys it. He returns home and kills the stepmother.*" Researchers identify this type as originating from India, often forming part of type 462"⁷. Thus, the *Rothisen* and *Xithon* story types both originate from India and were directly introduced to Laos and Thailand. In Vietnam, however, these story types were indirectly adopted through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, facilitated by the spread of Theravāda Buddhism.

However, while Laos and Thailand largely retained the type, motifs, and plot elements along with the distinctive features of Indian cultural cosmology, the Thai people in Vietnam actively modified or omitted these elements. For the *Rothisen* type, compared to versions from Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, the Thai in Vietnam removed the episode involving the marriage between a human and a demon, replacing it with a marriage between a human and a celestial maiden. Similarly, when the *Xithon* type was introduced to Vietnam, the Thai people there omitted certain episodes, such as the divine birth of *Xithon* with the characteristics of a Bodhisattva, the enemies' plot involving Brahmin priests to kill the protective deity of the realm, and the hunter killing the Brahmin and being rewarded. They also altered the ending of the type: while the versions from Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar conclude with *Xithon* (*Sudhana*) finding his wife and ascending the throne, the *Ú Thên* narrative of the Thai in Vietnam continues with *Xi Thuần* (*Ú Thên*) battling the Heavenly Realm and concludes with the tragic separation of husband and wife, father and son, and mother and child. This demonstrates that, although the type was adopted from India, the Thai people in Laos and Thailand preserved the Indian cultural cosmology almost intact, along with the structure and motifs of each story type. In contrast, the Thai people in Vietnam tended to modify the stories by omitting certain details and adding new ones to better align with the cultural characteristics of Vietnam.

While the epic poetry of the Thai people in Thailand and Laos primarily drew from Indian literature, the Thai epic poetry in Vietnam mainly incorporated influences from Chinese literature. Chinese literature provided a substantial number of themes and plots for this genre in Vietnam. Many Thai epic poems in Vietnam were adapted from the content and storylines of Chinese literature, such as *Tạo Xam Luong and nàng Anh Đài* (*Tao Sam Luong and Lady Anh Dai*), *Linh Y* (*Ling Yi*), and *Càn Long* (*Qianlong*).... When adopting Chinese literature, Thai epic poetry in Vietnam underwent certain creative modifications to align with the soul, character, and worldview of the Vietnamese people. For example, in the Chinese story *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the narrative ends with the tragic death of the lovers, Shanbo and Yingtai, who transform into butterflies and fly away. In contrast, in the Thai Vietnamese narrative poem *Tạo Xam Luong and nàng Anh Đài*, the story extends beyond this point. The folk authors depict *Tạo Chai Lang* (*Ma Wencai*) dying in bitterness and ascending to the heavens, where his resentment remains unresolved. *Chai Lang's* spirit approaches *Then* (the heavenly king) to accuse *Xam Luong* and *Anh Dai*. *Then* summons everyone for questioning and delivers a fair judgment. *Then* allows all three to return to the mortal world, but *Xam Luong* and *Anh Dai* must endure eight years of separation. During these eight years, they face numerous hardships and tribulations but are ultimately reunited. Compared to the Chinese tale *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the Thai Vietnamese epic poem *Tạo Xam Luong and nàng Anh Đài* offers a more complete and optimistic ending, providing a sense of fulfillment and resolution.

The art of plot construction

Through surveys and research, we have observed that the epic poetry of the Thai people in Vietnam, as well as that of the Thai people in Laos and Thailand, exhibits a diverse narrative structure. Specifically, these works feature both "happy-ending" plot structures and "tragic-ending" plot structures. The epic poems with "happy-ending" structures include *Tóng Đón Ấm Ca*, *Kén Kéo*, *Xống chụ xon xao*, and *Tạo Xam Luong and nàng Anh Đài* (Vietnam); *Kalakêt*, *Nàng Tềng On*, *Chămpaxithôn*, and *Phalắc Phalam* (Laos); *Anirút*, *Mahà Xat*, *I nầu*, *Rama Kiên*, and *Aphaymani* (Thailand). These stories share several fundamental elements: *A young man and woman meet and fall in love* → *Parents, malevolent courtiers, or secondary wives conspire to separate the couple* → *With the help of supernatural forces, the couple reunites and lives happily together*. On the other hand, epic poems with "tragic-ending" structures are found in works like *Phra Loo* and *Khún Chang Khún Peng* (Thailand) as well as *Hiển Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Khun Lú nàng Ủa*, *Tạo Hùn Lu nang Ủa Piêm*, and *Ú Thên* (Vietnam). These narrative poems are similar in their basic narrative elements: *A young man and woman meet and fall in love* → *Parents, friends, or relatives attempt to separate the couple* → *One or both lovers ultimately die*.

The similarity in the narrative structures of the epic poetry of the Thai people in Vietnam and that of the Thai people in Laos and Thailand is also evident in the use of the “mortal marries celestial maiden” story type. This type of story, characteristic of Indian literature, has had a profound influence and widespread appeal among the Thai communities in various countries. Almost every Thai community, regardless of the country, incorporates this story type into their creative works. In Laos, this is represented by the tale *Thao Xi Thôn*; in Thailand, by *Phra Suthôn*, *Nang Manora*; and in Vietnam, by *Tạo Thi Thôn* and *Ú Thên (Part 2)*. The widespread presence of this story type across nations with Thai populations reflects a shared cultural reception of external influences, despite their geographical differences. The general framework of epic poems following this story type can be outlined as follows: *Celestial maidens descend to the mortal world to bathe → A young man captures one and marries her → The celestial maiden returns to the heavens, and the man embarks on a quest to find her → The couple reunites and lives together again*. Although they share the same narrative structure, each ethnic group has creatively adapted the story type in different ways, influenced by whether they received it directly or indirectly from Indian literature.

Another similarity in the narrative structure of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam and those in Laos and Thailand is the use of magical elements as a significant artistic device. The magical elements in Thai narrative poetry are rich and diverse. The group of deities includes figures such as Fairy Da Xưa (from *Kén Kẻo*), the Luong Dragon God (from *Tổng Đón Ấm Ca*), Master Kéo Bằng Nong (from *Ú Thên*), Master Thiên (from *Tạo An Đức and Nàng Chiêu Công*), and Then Bun (from *Chàng Đông Vinh and Nàng Tiên Út*) in Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry. In Lao narrative poetry, there are gods such as Indra (*Lin Thoong*), Lặxi, Pha Khao (*Chămpaxithôn*), PhaIn (*Xulivông*), and Khựt (*Kalakết*), along with the Mountain God and PhaIn (*Xin Xay*). In Thai narrative poetry from Thailand, deities include Rishi (*Rama Kiên*), Indra (*Mahà Xat*), Krishana (*Anirút*), Narai, and Lakshmi (*Rama Kiên*). The group of magical animals and objects also frequently appears in these epics, such as the prized horse Milicáp and the divine bow (*Kalakết*), as well as the divine bow (*Xin Xay*) in Lao narrative poetry. In Vietnamese narrative poetry, magical items include the elixir of life (*Kén Kẻo*), tree sap (*Lang Chang Nguyên*), and divine medicine (*Tạo An Đức and Nàng Chiêu Công*). In Thai narrative poetry from Thailand, magical objects include the divine staff (*Aphaymani*) and the celestial bird (*Anirút*). In addition to using magical forces, the narrative poetry incorporate fantastical details such as children growing at an extraordinary pace, unparalleled strength, miraculous transformations, traveling on clouds, performing extraordinary feats, resurrection, and granting miracles...

Although there are some similarities as mentioned above, the plot structure of Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry exhibits notable differences from that of Thai narrative poetry in Laos and Thailand. Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry often feature love-themed stories, with a range of works such as *Xống Chụ Xon Xao*, *Khun Lú Nàng Ủa*, *Hiển Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Tạo Sông Ca and Nàng Si Cây*.... The general model of the love-themed type can be outlined as follows: *Meeting and falling in love → Facing obstacles and separation → Reuniting or permanent separation*. The beginning of the story typically depicts a romantic meeting and a pledge of love between a young man and woman. This is followed by numerous challenges that obstruct their relationship. In the end, after much effort, the couple either reunites and lives happily ever after, or they are permanently separated (with one or both meeting a tragic end). Stories in this form often include elements such as: meeting and making a pledge, forming a marital bond, being forced into arranged marriages by parents, separation due to ill intentions, the young man often leaving for trade or seeking livelihood far from home, the young woman resorting to death as an escape, and finally, the couple either reuniting and living happily or being permanently parted....

While Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry commonly revolve around love-themed story types, Thai narrative poetry in Laos and Thailand tend to focus on the heroic story type (though these epics may include love as a secondary theme). In Laos, a plethora of works such as *Kalakết*, *Xin Xay*, *Lin Thoong*, *Nang Teng On*, *Phalak Phalam*, and *Xulivong* are prominent. Similarly, in Thailand, works like *Inao*, *Aphaymani*, and *Rama Kien* dominate. The general model of the heroic story type can be outlined as follows: *The hero's birth and upbringing → Encountering hardships and being rescued → Marriage → Participation in war or battle against enemies → Victory and a grand reunion*⁸. The grand reunion is a characteristic ending of heroic epics, widely adopted by the Thai in Laos and Thailand as a prevalent artistic structure. After enduring numerous trials and challenges, the hero reunites with their beloved wife(s) and family, ascends the throne, and lives happily ever after. Stories in this form often feature elements such as: the Buddha reincarnating on Earth, a childhood filled with hardships, exile and asceticism, learning martial arts or magic, defeating monsters or evildoers, divine assistance, rescuing loved ones, family reunification, and ascending the throne. For example, the Lao epic *Kalakết* narrates the tale of Prince Kalakết (the reincarnation of the god Indra). Kalakết falls in love with Princess Malicang, but his father, the king, becomes enraged and kills him. Kalakết is revived by the god Indra and learns magic from a renowned hermit. He battles the king's army and later fights the demon Mithilat to rescue the princess. Eventually, Kalakết, the princess, and the demon Mithilat's daughter return to the palace, where the king abdicates the throne to Kalakết, and they live happily ever after. Similarly, in Thailand, heroic narrative poetry like *Rama Kien* is widely celebrated. *Rama Kien* tells the story of Prince Phra Lam (the reincarnation of the god Na Rai) and his brother Phra Lắc. Upon reaching adulthood, Phra Lam marries Xi Đa. However, due to the schemes of a wicked stepmother, Phra Lam, Xi Đa, and Phra Lắc are forced to flee into the deep forest. There, Phra Lam learns divine powers from Rư Xi (a sage). Meanwhile, the demon Thốt Xa Răn attempts to abduct Xi Đa. An intense and unrelenting

battle ensues between Phra Lam and Thốt Xa Răn. With the help of his brother Phra Lắc and an army of monkeys, Phra Lam ultimately rescues Xi Đa and returns to the palace, where they reunite and live joyfully in their kingdom.

A distinct difference between Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam and those in other countries is the unique narrative structure found in Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry. This structure follows a pattern as follows: *Meeting and falling in love* -> *Facing obstacles and separation* -> *One or both characters die* -> *Continuing to love each other (after death)* -> *Further obstacles arise* -> *Eternal separation or eventual reunion*. This is precisely the type of narrative structure characterized by "tragedy-following-tragedy" endings, which is distinctive and representative of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam, because: The first, this narrative structure is exclusive to Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam. In contrast, epics from other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, such as the Tày, Mường, and Mông, typically conclude with a simpler tragic ending: *Meeting and falling in love* -> *Facing obstacles and separation* -> *One or both characters die*; the second, this unique structure reflects the Vietnamese Thai's distinct worldview and perspective on life and existence. While Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam feature at least four works with this "tragedy-following-tragedy" structure, Thai narrative poetry in Thailand have very few examples (notably *Phra Loo* and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*), and according to our research, Lao narrative poetry do not contain any works with this structure. Interestingly, even the few Thai narrative poetry in Thailand that adopt a tragic ending only follow the first part of the structure. For instance, *Phra Loo* concludes with the tragic deaths of Prince Phra Loo and two princesses, which leads to the reconciliation of their warring families. Similarly, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* ends with the death of Wan Thong, bringing an end to the tragic love triangle involving Khun Chang, Khun Phaen, and Wan Thong. The narrative poetry *Hiển Hom Cầm Đôi*, *Khun Lú Nàng Ủa*, and *Ú Thềm* of the Thai ethnic group in Vietnam do not end with the death of the main characters as seen in similar stories. Instead, they continue to develop the love story of the couple in the realms of *muờng ma* (the spirit world) and *muờng trời* (the heavenly world), where their love remains forbidden, leading to new tragedies. This creates a narrative structure characterized by "tragedy following tragedy." As a result, the endings of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam are significantly more tragic, and the "tragedy-following-tragedy" structure has become a distinctive feature of Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam.

Due to the strong influence of Buddhist philosophy and Indian culture, the narrative poetry of the Thai people in Laos and Thailand also include story types about the past lives of the Buddha, such as *Mahā Xat* (Thailand), *Xin Xay*, and *Phạvếtxăndon* (Laos). The narrative poetry *Phạvếtxăndon* (Laos) and *Mahā Xat* (Thailand) both narrate the life of Prince Vệtxăndon, a compassionate individual willing to help everyone, endure all suffering, and undergo countless reincarnations, ultimately achieving enlightenment and becoming the Buddha. In Thailand, the epic *Mahā Xat* has become a doctrinal text for Thai Buddhists, and to this day, reciting *Mahā Xat* is considered an important Buddhist ritual. In Laos, annual festivals are held at temples to honor Buddha Vệtxăndon (also known as the BunPhạVệt festival), commemorating the Buddha and inspiring greater admiration and devotion among the Buddhist community. Meanwhile, this type of story is entirely absent in Vietnam.

The art of character development

Through our survey and research, we found that Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam and those of the Thai people in Laos and Thailand share similarities in the artistic construction of characters.

The character systems in these epics are rich and diverse. The characters encompass various types: earthly beings, celestial beings, spirits and demons, and servants. They span all ages, social classes, and genders, each with distinct physical traits, actions, and personalities. This character world is divided into two opposing lines: protagonists and antagonists. The protagonists are loyal and steadfast individuals in love who fight against evil to protect their loved ones and families. Examples from Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry include Tống Đón and Âm Ca (*Tống Đón Âm Ca*), Anh Yêu and Em Yêu (*Xống Chụ Xon Xao*), Khun Lú and Nàng Ủa (*Khun Lú Nàng Ủa*), and Khăm Ấn and Xi Thuần (*Ú Thềm*). From Lao narrative poetry, we see Kalakết and Nàng Malicăng (*Kalakết*), Lin Thoong (*Lin Thoong*), the four children (*Chămpaxithôn*), and Xin Xay (*Xin Xay*). Thai narrative poetry feature Prince Anirút (*Anirút*), Prince Phra Loo and the two princesses (*Phra Loo*), Phra Lam and Nàng Xi Đa (*Rama Kiên*), and I Nầu (*I Nầu*). These characters embody the finest virtues of ancient society. Male characters are often depicted as handsome, brave, and exceptionally strong, with an unwavering determination to eliminate evil. Female characters are typically portrayed as beautiful, gentle, virtuous, intelligent, and faithful. The positive traits of the protagonists in this narrative poetry are often idealized rather than realistically depicted.

The antagonists in Thai narrative poetry from Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand are also quite diverse. In Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry, antagonistic characters include: Stepmother Tống Lang (*Ý Nội Nàng Xua*), the stepfather (*Cầu Tô Cóp*), Nái Pa Xấu (*Tạo Sóng Ca Nàng Si Cây*), Khun Chai (*Khun Lú Nàng Ủa*), the enemies Phăng Đô, Xo Nôm, Khăm Ca and the demons (*Ú Thềm*), Khun Ha (*Khăm Panh*), and Chai Lang (*Tạo Xam Luong and Nàng Anh Đai*). In Thai narrative poetry, notable antagonists include: the missionary Pipô (*Aphaymani*), Khun Chang (*Khun Chang Khun Peng*), the demon Thốt Xa Răn (*Rama Kiên*), and the grandmother of the two princesses (*Phra Loo*). In Lao narrative poetry, antagonistic characters include: the demon Mithilát (*Kalakết*), Queen Ackhi and her servant Xithoong (*Chămpaxithôn*), the demon Buttaman (*Lin Thoong*), the witch Vaynhaka (*Nàng Tềng On*), and the demon lord Nhắccumphăn and the six elder sisters (*Xin Xay*). Antagonists are often characterized by traits such as greed, cunning, deceit, cruelty, baseness, wickedness, and malice. In a single epic, there may be one or several antagonists, all serving the common role of harming the protagonists and pushing them into adversity and peril. Alongside protagonists and

antagonists, Thai narrative poetry from Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand also feature a system of supporting characters. These can include ordinary humans, such as the raft man (*Khăm Panh*) or Mák Hổ Súk (*Tạo Sông Ca Nàng Si Cây*), or divine figures, such as the god Kéo Bằng Nong (*Ú Thém*) or Indra (*Lin Thoong, Nàng Tềng On*). Supporting characters play an essential role in aiding the protagonists to achieve victory, and their presence significantly influences the resolution of the narrative.

The characters in Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry and those of the Thai ethnic group in Laos and Thailand are fundamentally functional figures. They appear across various stories in similar roles and with nearly identical fates. Protagonists often face adversity and misfortune but, through their strength, intelligence, and the assistance of supernatural forces, ultimately overcome difficulties and challenges to achieve a happy life. Antagonists, after numerous schemes and wrongdoings, eventually face a grim fate as their comeuppance. Most characters in these epics can change their roles, statuses, or professions, but their core personalities seem unchanging. Their qualities and characteristics are predetermined and remain constant, regardless of the events and challenges they encounter. Characters are typically depicted with a broad scope of action but lack psychological depth, showing little inner conflict or emotional struggle. This characteristic imbues Vietnamese Thai narrative poetry, as well as those of the Thai ethnic group in Laos and Thailand, with a strong resemblance to traditional folktales.

In addition to these similarities, the art of character construction in the narrative poetry of the Thai ethnic group in Vietnam and those in Laos and Thailand exhibits notable differences, as follows:

Due to the strong influence of Indian literature, the narrative poetry of the Thai ethnic group in Laos and Thailand frequently feature a system of aristocratic characters, including princesses, princes, crown princes, kings, and queens. These characters are often depicted within a mystical space reminiscent of Indian literature, complete with palaces and castles. In Lao narrative poetry, such characters include King and Queen Xurivoong, King Phimôn, Princess Manichăn, and Prince Kalakê (*Kalakê*); Princess Pathuma, King Chunlani, Queen Ackhi, and the four princes (*Chămpaxithôn*); King of Xôlôtxa and Prince Lin Thoong (*Lin Thoong*); Queen Tềng On, King Mahavông, and Prince Xulinhông (*Nàng Tềng On*); and King Cútalat, Princess Xumuntha, the six princes, and Prince Xin Xay (*Xin Xay*). In Thai narrative poetry, notable aristocratic characters include Prince Aphaymani, Prince Xi Xư Vãn, and Princess Xu Vãn Va Ly (*Aphaymani*); King of Ku Rê Păn, King Đa Hả, Prince I Nầu, and Princess Bụt Xa Ba (*I Nầu*); King of Xixăttanakha, Prince Phra Lắc, Prince Phra Lam, Princess Xi Đa, and King Habamanaxuôn (*Phra Lắc Phra Lam*); and King Phisay, Prince Phra Loo, Princess Phuron, and Princess Pheng (*Phra Loo*). These characters, whether named or unnamed, are often conventional and symbolic in nature. In contrast, the narrative poetry of the Thai ethnic group in Vietnam rarely feature such characters. Instead, Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam portray characters that are more closely aligned with the realities of daily life. These may include individuals of ordinary or impoverished origins, such as Hiễn Hom (*Hiễn Hom Cầm Đôi*), Anh Yêu and Em Yêu (*Xống Chụ Xon Xao*), or Tồng Đón (*Tồng Đón Ấm Ca*). Alternatively, they may come from higher social strata, such as Tạo Khun Lú, Nàng Ủa, Tạo Khun Chai, Nàng Ủa's parents, and Khun Lú's parents (*Khun Lú Nàng Ủa*), Tạo Cầm Đôi (*Hiễn Hom Cầm Đôi*), or Nàng Ấm Ca (*Tồng Đón Ấm Ca*). These characters, regardless of their social class, are depicted within realistic settings that reflect the distinctive culture of the Thai people in Vietnam. Some Thai narrative poetry even establish specific geographical contexts where the characters lived, acted, and left traces after their deaths. For example, Hiễn Hom and Cầm Đôi (*Hiễn Hom Cầm Đôi*) left their marks in Thuận Châu, Sơn La, while Khăm Panh and Nàng Mún (*Khăm Panh*) left traces in Mường Khoòng, Cổ Lũng Commune, Bá Thước District, Thanh Hóa Province.

Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam rarely feature monk or hermit characters, whereas such figures are quite common in the narrative poetry of the Thai ethnic group in Laos and Thailand. Examples include the hermit Rừ Xi (*Aphaymani*) and characters from stories like *Kalakê*, *Lin Thoong*, *Chămpaxithôn* (Laos), and *Phra Abhai* (Thailand). These characters typically serve as spiritual guides or teach the protagonists magical powers, enabling them to gain the strength needed to confront their adversaries. The inclusion of monk or hermit characters in these stories is rooted in the religious and spiritual practices of each ethnic group. While the Thai ethnic groups in Laos and Thailand have been profoundly influenced by Buddhism and Brahmanism, the Thai people in Vietnam have not adopted any major external religion (apart from their indigenous polytheistic beliefs).

CONCLUSION

In the literature of the Thai people, the genre of narrative poetry holds an important position and represents a folklore product rich in ethnic cultural identity. When comparing the narrative poetry of the Thai ethnic group in Vietnam with that of the Thai ethnic groups in Laos and Thailand, we find that while there are many similarities and close ties, there are also unique and distinctive features. These characteristics result from the literary creation processes in each country, as well as from the cultural exchange and transformation among the Thai ethnic groups across these nations. Studying Thai narrative poetry in Vietnam within the cultural context of Southeast Asian Thai communities helps us understand the evolution of the genre within the broader landscape of Southeast Asian literature. This understanding is significant not only in literary terms but also in the context of preserving and maintaining the cultural heritage of humanity.

In some respects, our research only addresses a few issues and perspectives regarding the genre of Thai narrative poetry in Southeast Asia (specifically Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand) within the limits of the published and translated works into a common

language. We hope that our findings will directly contribute to the preservation and promotion of the cultural values of the Thai ethnic group in Vietnam, as well as those of the broader Thai language family around the world.

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