

## Chapter 4

### Background Information on the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani*

The verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* is a literature that has enjoyed popularity up till the present. It has been recognized as the king of the verse tales. Before presenting the research findings, it would be helpful for the readers to know the background of this verse to have the bases for understanding the story. There are 4 set of background information as follows:

1. The synopsis of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* for the readers to get the general idea of the whole story of the verse tale.
2. *Sunthorn-Phu* and his creation of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* which would include part of *Sunthorn-Phu*'s biography which relates to his plot and character creation to obtain some perspectives for increasing understanding of both *Sunthorn-Phu* and his work - *Phra Abhaimani*.
3. The causes of popularity to realize the value and outstanding of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* and literary talent of *Sunthorn-Phu*.
4. The context of the society during *Sunthorn-Phu*'s period which would include the social condition of early Bangkok period when the poet lived leading the understanding of the knowledge and thought of *Sunthorn-Phu* appearing in the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani*.

#### 1. Synopsis of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani*

The verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* of *Sunthorn-Phu* was originally composed of 64 episodes starting from when episodes *Phra Abhaimani* and *Srisuwan* travelled to take the study until the episode in which *Phra Abhaimani*, *Nang Suwanmalee*, and *Nang Lawengwanla* had been ordained. Later, there was a request for *Sunthorn-Phu* to extend his tale to cover 132 episodes. Most publishers often published the tale only from episodes 1 to 64. It was speculated that the rest episodes were created not only by the poet but there were some other writers joining in (Awut Ngerchuklin, 2001, Preface). *Sunthorn-Phu* could have assigned someone else to finish some episodes started by him (Chonlada Ruengraklikit, 2005, page 171). These literature experts explained that the melodiousness of the verse, word choice, and verse phrases differed sharply from those in volumes 1 and 2. The edition of *Phra Abhaimani* used in this study was chosen from the one published by Silapabannakhan in 2001 in 4 volumes each of which has about the same length or contains about 30 episodes. The content in brief in each of the episodes of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* is as follows:

##### Volume 1

The volume includes episodes 1 to 35 covering the story of Thaw Suthat and Nang Pathumkesorn who ruled Ratana Kingdom and had 2 sons *Phra Abhaimani*, 15 years old, and *Srisuwan*, 13 years old. The two sons had studied with a brahmana. *Phra Abhaimani* took the course in wind blowing and his brother took the bamboo sword fighting. The choice of their study disappointed their father – Thawsuthat who expected them to study ruling course. The two sons were then driven out from the Kingdom. On their way out, they met 3 brahmanas – Wichian, Mora, and Sanon. Each of them had expertise on certain thing. On their meet, *Phra Abhaimani* demonstrated his wind blowing talent putting the three knowledgeable persons dropping of to sleep.

Meanwhile, the wind blowing noise had attracted Nang Phisua Samut, a woman giant, who followed the song and had a chance to get close to *Phra Abhaimani* with whom she fell in love at the first sight. She decided to abduct and brought him to her place.

Srisuwan and the 3 brahmanas, after their conscious returned only to find *Phra Abhaimani* having been abducted, had rush to find him. They arrived at Rommachark and had taken part in fighting with the enemy and could finally protect the Kingdom. Srisuwan was rewarded with his marrying to Nang Kesara. They had a daughter by the name Arunrasami. In other place, *Phra Abhaimani* had stayed with the woman giant for 8 years and had a son by the name Sin-samuth. Later on, a mermaid had helped *Phra Abhaimani* and Sinsamuth to flee from the woman giant. They stayed with a rusi at the Kawkaew Pisadan, an island. Staying there, *Phra Abhaimani* had met Nang Suwanmalee, the daughter of King Silaraj at Phluek Kingdom. Their boat had lost the way and finally arrived at Kaw Kaew Pisadan. King Silaraj had helped *Phra Abhaimani* and Sin-Samuth to return to home kingdom but the boat was sunk by the woman giant. *Phra Abhaimani* played his wind whose noise had disturbed the woman giant to the point of heart cease and died. Sin-Samuth and Nang Suwanmalee had met the a English pirate thief by the name Surang who was later killed by Sin-Sumuth. He also took over the pirate ship and led the troop. His pirate ship had begun the search *Phra Abhaimani*. On the way, he had met his uncle Srisuwan.

At that time, Usaren, the son of Laka King, who had English descent, had travelled to find Nang Suwanmalee who was his fiancé. He met *Phra Abhaimani* and let him travelling along. Usaren met Sin-Samuth's troop and had a fight with him to steal Nang Suwanmalee. Usaren and his King father were killed. *Phra Abhaimani* and Nang Swanmalee had married and assumes the reign of Phluek Kingdome at last.

The mermaid at Kawkaew Pisadan had given birth to son with *Phra Abhaimani*. She named him Sudsakorn who, after having been grown up, had studied with a rusi. He had acquired Ma Nin Mangkorn or a blue sapphire dragon-horse, a magical horse who was born with a dragon father and horse mother. Susakorn drove on the dragon-horse to find *Phra Abhaimani*. On his way, he had encountered with a lot adventured could survive and had lived in Karawek Kingdom for one year before continuing the search for *Phra Abhaimani* and finally met him at Phluek Kingdom.

Later, Nang Lawengwanla, Usaren's sister, was thinking of taking a revenge against the killer of her brother. She decided to declare the war with Phluek Kingdom with the assistance of a Christian priest. *Phra Abhaimani* led the Phluek Kingdom troop to invade Lanka. He met Nang Laweng and fell in love with her and finally followed her to Lanka. Volume 1 of the tale stop at this point.

### Volume 2

Volume 2 started from 36 and ended at episode 64. The story continued from when *Phra Abhaimani* had followed Nang Laweng to the court. Then there was a war between Phluek and Lanka Kingdoms to steal *Phra Abhaimani*. The rusi at Kawkaew Pisadan had come in between to lure the two sides' fighting cease. The two sides took the advice resulting a cease-fire and a good relationship. However, Nang Sawakhon, the daughter of Karawek King asked the King of Lanka to mine for the source diamond of Kanka Kingdom and brought it back to Karawek. When time had passed, *Phra Abhaimani* and Nang Suwanmalee had given birth to a twin daughters named Soi Suwan and Chan Suda. Nang Laweng also gave birth to a son named Mangala. Nang Rampasari and Srisuwan had given birth to a son names Walayuda. Sin-Samuth

and Nang Yupapaka gave birth to a boy named Wayupat. Nang Sulaleewan and Sudsakorn had given birth to a son name Hasakan. During the time *Phra Abhaimani*, Srisuwan, and Sin-Samuth had travelled to Ratana Kingdom for the funeral of King Suthat, Mangala had ruled Lanka and led the troop to steal back the source diamond resulting a war between Lanka and *Phra Abhaimani* one more time. However, Mangala was defeated and fled along with his advisor priest. *Phra Abhaimani*, Nang Suwanmalee, and Nang Lawengwanla had entered the ordination as rusi at Singkhut Mountain in Lanka. This is the last event of 64.

### Volume 3

This volume started from episode 65 until episode 100 when *Phra Abhaimani*, Nang Suwanmalle, Nang Suwanmalee, and Nang Lawengwanla became ordained. The three traveled to take part in the funeral for Nang Montha at Phluek Kingdom. Later on, Phra Mangala, Walayuda, Wayuphat, and Husakan who had fled away to various places came up into power at various kingdoms. Phra Mangala had led a troop to attack Lanka one more time but was defeated and had to move back to the sea. Later Walayuda, Wayuphat, and Husakan had reconsidered not to help Phra Mangala to launch the war with the relatives and decided to turn to Srisuwan.

Phra Mangala who had fled away had traveled to many towns. He could collect strong troops and led them to attack Lanka but in vain. Finally, he had been bored with the war causing the Phra Bathluang's angry. At last, the troops of Phra Bathluang was defeated back by Lanka. Everyone tried to save himself by fleeing away. Phra Bathluang, however, kept on the fight with Lanka but never succeeded. The story of *Phra Abhaimani* in this volume stopped right here.

### Volume 4

The story in this volume started from episode 101 and ended at episode 132. Phra Bathluang tried to launch many more wars with Lanka but could not win it. He also had the war with Phra Mangala causing Phra Mangala changed his mind to restore good relationship with the relatives and helped them to resist Phra Bathluang. Finally, Phra Bathluang gave up his attempt to take over Lanka. Later, *Phra Abhaimani* and Srisuwan had appointed Narinrat, the son of Sudsakorn, to rule Ratana Kingdom and Rames, the youngest son of Phra Mangala to be the assistant governor. Meanwhile, Nang Suwannamatcha had begged the quest to be born as human in every life. Her quest was responded by Thaw Makhawan who cut off her tail and equipped her with human legs. Sudsakorn returned to her to bring her along to stay with his in Lanka. There he appointed her Phra Chanthawadee Phan Pee Luang. A big ceremony was set for her. *Phra Abhaimani*, Nang Suwanmalee, and Nang Lawengwanla as well as other relatives were taking part in it. Afterward, they all splited home and lived happily.

From all these details, one can see that the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* had the core story of adventures of the main character- *Phra Abhaimani* and others surround him including the conflict between Nang Suwanmalee, the major wife and Nang Lawengwanla, another wife who was a Caucasian. All these stories were the product of *Sunthorn-Phu's* imagination and his literary talents making his work forever popular in Thai society.

## 2. *Sunthorn-Phu* and the Creation of the Verse Tale *Phra Abhaimani*

The verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* was similarly hypothesized by Prince Damrong Rajanupab (1970, pages 17 – 18) and Chonlada Ruengraklikit (2005, page 170) that *Sunthorn-Phu* could have created the work during his imprisonment in the reign of King Rama 2<sup>nd</sup> or between 1803-1832. He would have not worked continuously on it but only on certain periods and could manage to finish it in around 1845 taking more than 20 years. His real motive for creating this work has not yet been concluded.

During the reign of King Rama the 2<sup>nd</sup>, *Sunthorn-Phu* had devoted himself as a servant close to his feet. He was promoted “Khun Sunthorn-Wohan” but was often referred by the name “*Sunthorn-Phu* .” He has served the King as the advisor on literature to help during the King’s composing literary works. He had gained a big flavor from the King as he was always able to help the King getting out of the literary difficult time. The story of his role on this was composed in verse by Prince Damrong Rajanupab (1970, pages 16 – 23). At the time, King Rama 2<sup>nd</sup> was creating a verse starting like this:

The royal cart  
Was with the seat looking so elegant,  
With dimension of the universe mountain,  
As if it was a heaven,  
The wheels were so gigantic,  
With the speed driven by ten thousands lions on both sides.  
The driver drove it across the big jungle,  
Cutting across the land with soil dusting around.

At this point, the composer King got stuck. He could not continue to describe the elegance of the royal cart of Tossakan, a ten-face giant monster in Ramayana. Other poets could not help him out. *Sunthorn-Phu*, however, had helped continue the verse as follows:

The sea bet itself up,  
With currents attacking bank with noise and muddy tides,  
The mountains leaned down,  
The big fish Anon moved generating a big quake,  
The troops cheered up in great noise,  
The land slid and shook up.  
The cart hid away the sun and the moon,  
With the four gigantic wheels, the cart moved right up ahead.

His correction and add-ons had tremendously pleased the King. Consequently, *Sunthorn-Phu* had been appointed at the poetic advisor to King Rama 2<sup>nd</sup> and also to the royal princes and princesses who were involved in the poetic construction. His talent and quick sense sometimes had led him into conflict with some royal personalities. The known one was when *Sunthorn-Phu* corrected the poem composed by Prince Tab or the future King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup> since he was entitled Krommuen Jesadabodin. The event was in front of the King Rama the 2<sup>nd</sup> costing

Prince Jesadabodin a big face loss. The Prince kept his anger within. Some academics like had linked this cause to the resign of *Sunthorn-Phu* when the Prince came up on the thorn as King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup> as he might have feared of the revenge. (Sombat Plynoi, 1986, page 46). Lom Pengkaeo (2004, page 69 – 75), another academic, had new perspective on the situation. He proposed that the resign of the great poet might have come from the internal politics in the court at the time. This was because *Sunthorn-Phu* originally served the Prince of the Rear Palace. When the new ruler came, he had to resign. Whatever cause it may be, the situation had put *Sunthorn-Phu* back to common people. He later became ordained.

Some of the characters created by *Phra Abhaimani* reflected the life of *Sunthorn-Phu* himself. *Phra Abhaimani* used to be happily lived in the court and had to become an adventurer facing a lot of obstacles which is like that of *Sunthorn-Phu* who had to travelled to various places. *Phra Abhaimani* finally had to become ordained to have strong held in Buddhism just like *Sunthorn-Phu* who had to become monk after his resign from the royal service. It could be said that in composing the tale *Phra Abhaimani*, *Sunthorn-Phu* had created up some parts and used his life in others to convey his life experience in the imaginative story.

Moreover, the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* could also serve as the truth of life derived from the poet's experience. *Sunthorn-Phu* had come to realize that the forgiving or kindness were the morals to help people live happily in harmony. In Thai, the term *Abhaimani* itself means forgiving. *Sunthorn-Phu* might have wanted to advocate this moral and asserted that forgivingness was of a great value. If people in the society practice it, they would be able to co-exist in peace without chaos. Other values are also embedded in the tale which could be used in compatible with the individuals who have to co-exist with others of various social ranks as in the present society.

On the other hand, in creating *Phra Abhaimani*, *Sunthorn-Phu* could have had the aim at telling the events happening in the Thai society including new knowledge known at that time. *Sunthorn-Phu* himself used to be a royal servant in the court who would have had some interest in the political affairs. He then would have wanted to diffuse the situations and experiences on to the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani*. Nonetheless, as the verse tale was composed along the poet's imagination for the entertaining purpose, it would not be certain to pin down confidently his real purpose. All the speculation was done through the story and character of the poet *Sunthorn-Phu*.

As *Sunthorn-Phu* was the verse composer who was talented on many aspects, had deep imagination, well-informed about many things, and had good observation, he could neatly create the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* and had it become the king of Thai verse tales favored by Thai people up till now. When one mentions the name *Sunthorn-Phu*, the listeners would right away think about *Phra Abhaimani*. Likewise, when one mentions the top ranking literary work *Phra Abhaimani*, the first thing people would of was *Sunthorn-Phu*.

### **3. Explanatory Factors of the Popularity of the Verse Tale *Phra Abhaimani***

The reasons for *Phra Abhaimani* to have become the tale in mind of many Thai all along are many including the novelty of the story, the melodiousness of the verse, the realism of the plot, and the relevance to beliefs and way of life of Thai people.

**3.1 Novelty of the Story:** *Phra Abhaimani* is the tale created through the sole imagination of *Sunthorn-Phu* himself. He created it for the entertaining purpose with the novelty of the plot that had the main actor who was not all talent nor competent in all aspects. *Phra Abhaimani* was a musician who played only the wind. This might have reflected the philosophical principle of *Sunthorn-Phu* who wanted to assert that any knowledge would be valuable if the person had expertise on it (Nithi Eawsriwong, 1992, page 67) and the use of intelligence than the physical force. *Phra Abhaimani* is then universal in its content and various thoughts inserted in the story.

Another novelty was the proceeding of the story which was adventure of the major character who got involved with other characters who were created as ordinary people who had love, greed, anger, and attachment. They were created to have various feelings as those of human beings. The readers could follow the story more easily than with other poetic works which were typically full of difficult terms and used for some particular situation such as in the court or ceremony such as Lilit Ongkan Chaengnam, Maha-chart Kham-Luang, or even Ramakien, for example.

**3.2 Melodiousness:** This was the outstanding talent of *Sunthorn-Phu* in choosing the words to compose his verses depending on only simple ones but producing melodious verses (Nithi Eawsriwong, 1992, page 69 ; Phinyo Srijumlong, 2003, page 95). Even when he came up with the complex word usage of analogy, he did not fail in making it melodious as well.

**3.3 Realism of the Story:** If one has a close look at the verse tale, he should see *Sunthorn-Phu*'s ways of integrating his thoughts and the real events of the society at that time and inserted the combination on to the story in harmonious manner. One example is the story about the emergence of a woman giant, the legend of rice origin at Ko Kaeo Pisadan, for example. Besides, there were some political situations such as when *Sunthorn-Phu* created the people of Lanka as Caucasian and the Kingdom had woman as the leader which was real at the time. Great Britain at that time was headed by Queen Victoria and the British had colonized Lanka (or the present Sri Lanka). Places used in the story were found in existence such as Kuntang, Phraram Road, and Nakawaree Island in Andaman Sea (Suchit Wongthed, 1995, page 141 – 145 ; Ganjanakapan, 1999) making the tale *Phra Abhaimani* more real and sounds like a real story than simply an imaginative one.

**3.4 Relevance to Beliefs and Thai Way of Life:** In analyzing the work, it was also found that *Sunthorn-Phu* could get at the taste and way of life of Thai people. Some instructions used in the story could then be relevant to the present life maintenance (Nithi Eawsriwong, 1992, page 58). In certain part of the tale, there were mottos. Yet in other parts there were some beliefs that touched a lot of people's mind such the ghosts which have long been with Thai people. The play and entertainment mentioned by *Sunthorn-Phu* in the story such as Khon, drama, Mon dancing, etc. if traced back to the time of *Sunthorn-Phu* were practiced and enjoyed popularity.

All of these reasons put the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* of *Sunthorn-Phu* on top of popularity among Thai people at the time. At the present, however, things have tremendously changed, but the work still has high literary values. The readers could learn to appreciate Thai culture through it. The imagination on the part of *Sunthorn-Phu* has made the tale worth following. It also helps enhance the readers' imagination.

The popularity of the verse tale *Phra Abhaimani* has not been limited within Siam at the time but also occurred in the kingdoms surrounding Ratakosin (Santi

Pakdeekham, 2007, page 97 - 101). In Cambodia, for example, it was found that the tale was translated into Khmer. In Lanna Kingdom, the tale *Phra Abhaimani* was used as the plot for the Khawsaw, a northern style of singing, by Phaya Promwoharn (1802 – 1887). At Maung Nakhon Si Thammarat, a southern town, the manuscript of *Phra Abhaimani* was found. At the time, all towns and territories were only peripheral states and colonies (Wimon Chirothaphan, et al., 2005, 279 – 280). It is possible that people of all these areas were interested in the literature and had adopted the culture of the power center to be integrated with their own one.

#### **4. Social Context at *Sunthorn-Phu*'s Time**

*Sunthorn-Phu* was born at the end of the Reign of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> or Phrabaht Somdej Phra Buddhayodfajulaloke of Chakri Dynasty in 1786. He lived up to the Reign of Phrabaht Somdej Phra Chomklao Chaoyuhua or King Rama the 4<sup>th</sup> which was of early Ratanakosin period. He died in 1855 with the age of 70. At the time, it was a transitional period for Siam as King Taksin, the King of Thonburi, who came before the emergence of Ratanakosin, had fought away the Burmese troops from Ayuthaya territory. Afterward, he established Thonburi Kingdom on the west bank of Chao Phraya River. After the end of King Taksin Reign, King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had move the capital city to the east bank of the river and names “Kung Ratanakosin” or “Bangkok” in 1782 (Wimon Chirothaphan, et al., 2005, page 274).

Regarding the social context of Thai society during the time of *Sunthorn-Phu*, the researcher would describe it on 6 subtopics as follows:

##### **4.1 Social Conditions of Thai Society During the Reigns of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup>.**

The general condition of Thai society at early period of Ratanakosin was full of solidarity affecting the later period of political stability which could be attributed to the people's morale enhanced by being ruled by the Kings who were keen at war and government.

**Reign of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup>:** It was the period of restoration of the kingdom in all aspects after the period of King Taksin. Meanwhile, Siam was still at war with Burma, e.g. the Nine-Troops War in 1785 in which King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had to set up 9 troops commanded by the King himself to the point of succeeding in defending the Kingdom in 1786. (Wimon Chirothaphan, et al., 2005, pages 310 – 315). The result of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> running the country, led to the strength and security of the Kingdom, opening the condition for cultural restoration besides the economic one after the Kingdom had started commercial relationship with foreign countries.

**Reign of King Rama the 2<sup>nd</sup>:** The impact of suppressing the uprising of various prime colonial Kingdoms around Siam under the Reign of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had led Siam during the Reign of King Rama the 2<sup>nd</sup> the peace and happiness as well as the good morale of the people. It was the time the society was prosperous. This condition could be derived from the works of *Sunthorn-Phu* at his young age. There were a high degree and kinds of entertainments both in the court and other societal sectors. It has been regarded as the golden period of Thai literature and plays (Ruengsin, 1974, page 164; Phaladisai Sitthithanyakit, 2551, page 180) which could have formed the foundation of the present Thai culture in the aspects of literature, music, and drama.

**Reign of King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup>:** This was the period when Siam had less war with neighboring countries. At this time, Burma was in conflict with Britain and was attacked by the British huge naval troops into Yangon and many other towns in 1824 (Suchit Wongthed, 2005, page 100; Phaladisai Sitthithanyakit, 2551, page 240). This could explain why the Burmese had no longer been in battle with Siam. The situation in Bangkok was in peace. The trade through Samphao ships was at its peak bringing in economic prosperity. Westerners began to enter the country for trading and diplomatic purposes. New innovations poured in to the society. In the surrounding kingdoms, there were invasions of the Western colonizers who finally took control of most of them. Britain, for example, conquered Pinang in 1805 and Singapore which was the sea trade center 1819. It successfully took over Burma in 1824 and won the Opium War over China in 1842 (Suchit Wongthed, 2005, pages 98 – 104), for example.

**Reign of King Rama the 4<sup>th</sup>:** The King had appointed his brother – Prince Juthamani to become Phrabaht Somdej Phra Pinklao Jawyuhua as the 2<sup>nd</sup> King. There was very few wars. The society had adopted many cultural practices of the West leading to the big socio-cultural changes. The self-presentation at face of the King, uniform dressing of the soldiers, architecture of public buildings, and new technology, for example, had been clearly changed. King Rama the 4<sup>th</sup> himself had studied Western knowledge some time before he came on the throne and could accurately forecast the happening of the total eclipse of the sun on August 18, 1898 (Wimon Chirothaphan, et al., 2005, page 350)

#### **4.2 Political Condition**

The government during Ratanakosin period was under the absolute monarchy in which the king and aristocrats had absolute power. The king commanded the troops and led them in the war. The government was divided in three sectors: (1) the central administration divided into various ministries, (2) regional administration divided into towns in all regions of the country, and (3) colony administration which permitted the colonial state's leader to have self-government but had to submit the บรรณาการ to Bangkok. All people had freedom until they were 18 years old when they had to be under the patronage of an aristocrat. The males had to be drafted and served in the army for some period of time. They had to take turn in serving a set of aristocratic missions. They belonged to a type of phrai, a non-aristocratic class. They also had to pay tax to the rule regime (Chai Ruengsin, 1998, page 50 – 53; Wimon Chirothaphan, et al., 2005, pages 286 – 288)

#### **4.3 Socio-cultural Condition**

The socio-cultural condition of Siam at early Ratanakosin period could be described through the social condition, groups of people, and their living. The details are as follows:

**Social Condition:** People in those days stayed in their house built along the river banks as most the transportation was mostly via rivers and canals. Besides, staying near water facilitated the people life by the convenient access of water for both consumption and agriculture. At certain spot along the river, there were some rafted store selling goods most of which were imported and luxurious. Their owners were always foreign particularly the Chinese (Nithi Eawsriwong, 2002, pages 21 – 22). In some areas of Bangkok and its vicinities such as Muang Non, a folk term referring to the present Nonthaburi Province were full of orchards and paddy fields.

When the merit making period arrived, people came out to watch the entertainments. All these scenes clearly show the peace and happiness of the society at that period.

**Mode of Living:** At this period, the royal family members and the aristocrats had the whole power to direct various government departments and divisions (Chai Ruengsin, 1974, page 86). The royal family members had regular incomes that could be used to support those under their patronage which was an effective strategy to obtain the society security. The hobbies of the court members included the forming of a music or drama groups, composing literary works, etc.

The royal servants served as the assistant to the King. They were promoted by being appointed at a certain rank of the aristocracy. They were also entitled to have a certain number of Phrai to serve them. They had the privilege of collecting rental fees from the farmers who were Phrai and had no rights to own land. They also collected tax for the government. All these incomes made them more well to do than the common men. The royal servants' hobbies were similar to those of the royal family members but included some common people activities such as collecting chinaware, keeping dwarfed trees, forming music and drama groups. Sometimes, some of them might also create literary work as did the royal family members.

The common men are those middle class people in the society maintaining their living through various occupations such as being merchants, clerks, attorney, or business owners. These people had a chance to be promoted by the government if they had contributed something to the regime. Most of these people were those with Chinese or Indian descents. Their economic well being helped put them closer to the royal family members who sometimes rewarded them with aristocratic ranks.

The lower echelon of people in the society was of the farmers who was called Phrai. These people had to depend on the climate condition for maintaining their livelihood. They often faced the economic problems and sometimes the problem of epidemic too.

The lowest echelon of the people was that of the slaves which included those acquired from the war, the redemption slaves who were sold or had non-repayable debt and had to sell themselves or were sold to redeem the debt by parents, the born to be slaves or *Khrok* whose parents were slaves, etc. These slaves and to do whatever ordered by their master. They had no freedom and could be passed over to the descendants of the master. Nonetheless, the master could provide certain livelihood to them each of which had their own price. Should they collect enough money or valuable thing like gold, they could redeem themselves or were redeemed by someone to buy out for the freedom. The war slaves, however, were exempted from the redemption. They had to serve their master for all of their life.

**Clothing:** The clothing of Thai people at the time was hypothesized by Chai Ruengsin (1974, page 185) that men could have had *Mahadthai* style of hair, the style of hair with a parted topknot and the women wore Peek hair style which had to be cut off and set on regular basis. Men wore a piece of cloth to cover their lower part with out any cloth on the body above their waist. When presenting themselves to the King, they would dress up in uniform. At winter time, they also wore cloth all over the body to protect themselves from the cold weather. Women wore *Phasabai* or piece of cloth to cover their breasts in addition to the *sin* skirt. They might wear blouse when they had to take part in a socializing event but still had the *Phasabai* on

top of it. The farmers did not wear shirt or blouse but the hat to protect themselves from the sun when working in the board field.

**Eduation:** Education at that time had to depend mostly on the monks to teach in the temple. The core competences were literacy and basic mathematics. *Sunthorn-Phu* himself had learned from Samnak Cheepakhaw or the present Wat Srisudaram. During *Sunthorn-Phu*'s time, the monks were exclusively knowledgeable both of the material and Dhamma worlds.

People during this period had knowledge, ideas, and beliefs on super-natural things (Nithi Eawsriwong, 2002, pages 36 – 37) and had strong hold in Buddha's instructions kept in *Phra Tripidok* or otherwise Brahmana. All these affected their cosmological concept such as the belief of the plane-earth, heaven and hell, and law of kamma, etc. Besides, they also believed in the magic of spells. These beliefs clearly stood out in the verse tale *Khun Chang Khun* (Sowalak Anantasant, 1974, page 177) which was the literary work of the same period as of *Phra Abhaimani*. Moreover, the people also believed in fortune which was clearly shown in *Swasdiraksa*, a literary work also created by *Sunthorn-Phu* who himself believed in alchemy to search the medicine to keep the people forever young (Nithi Eawsriwong, 2002, page 36) and sacred objects - one of the hits at the time was also "Palord" or Mercury (Chomnard Sewikul, no-dated, page 87).

It is evident that Thai people during the time of *Sunthorn-Phu* strongly held in Buddhism and Brahmana. The royal family members and aristocrats had to be well informed about the Dhamma and laws and regulations. They also believed in super-natural thing, fortune, magic of sacred objects, and the law of kamma. Some of these have base in Buddhism.

**Groups of People in the Society:** In early Ratanakosin period, there were classes of people divided into the classes of the royal family members, aristocrats, common people, and slaves, the lowest echelon of the society at the time (Chai Ruengsin, 1974, page 81). Besides Thai people, there were other nationalities the major of whom were:

"Chinese" – King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> was granting the permission for the Chinese immigrants to reside at Sampeng (Chai Ruengsin, 1998, pages 34 – 35; Suchit Wongthed, 2005, page 95). The Chinese were the people who had big influence of the commerce and government of the country in early Ratanakosin period.

"Mon" – The Mon neighborhood was at Pakkred in Nonthaburi. There were some Mon immigrants fled from Burma to seek the patronage of the King in 1815 (Suchit Wongthed, 2005, page 99).

"Yuan"- King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had granted the permission for the Yuan – the term used by Thais to call Vietnamese, to reside along the bank down Talad Noi Sub-district (Chai Ruengsin, 1998, page 36; Phaladisai Sitthithanyakit, 2008, pages 121 – 122). There was also another group of Vietnamese who resided at Bangpoe.

"Thawai" – These people were the Mon fled from Burma to Thailand during the wreck of Ayutthaya. King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had granted permission for them to reside around Wat Yannawa (Chai Ruengsin, 1998, page 36; วิมล จิโรพันธุ์ and กฤษณะ, 2005, page 319 – 320)

"Khmer"- King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had allowed them to reside at Khorkkrabue Sub-district and Wat Samorai (Chai Ruengsin, 1998, page 36).

“Khaek” were those who believed in Muslim resided along the banks of Khlong Bangluang. They had significant roles in Siamese government since Ayuthaya period. They had contributed to the trade via Samphao ship with their people in the original countries and helped push for economic prosperity of the Kingdom. Some of their leaders was promoted to Phraya Chek-Amut Ratana Setthi, Chaokrom Tha Khwa, and Chula Rajamontri during early Ratanakosin period (Chai Ruengsin, 1974, pages 30 – 31; Wimon Chirothaphan et al., 2005, page 321; Phimpraphai Phisanbut, 2001, pages 57 – 58).

Moreover, there were many other groups of foreigners who came in to the Kingdom. The Westerners who came for diplomatic relationship with Siam at the time were with many nationalities such as:

“British” came in the Kingdom for diplomatic purpose since Ayuthaya. Some of them had served in the royal affairs during the Reign of King Narai and promoted, for example, to Chao Phraya Wichayen. At Ratanakosin period, there were many British coming in to build up the commercial relationship with Siam.

“Portuguese” were the first wave of Westerners who came in to build relationship with Siam during Ayuthaya in 1511 and returned again in the Reign of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> in 1786.

“Dutch” came in for diplomatic relationship since the Reign of King Naresuan The Great.

“French” came in to contact with Siam during the Reign of King Narai The Great.

“Japanese” had contacted with Siam since Ayuthaya period by exchanging present between the Japanese Emperor and the Siamese King. During the Reign of Phra Chao Songtham, a Japanese was promoted up to Ok Ya Senaphimuk, for example.

It is clear that there were many foreigners staying in Siam by the permission granted by the King to reside in various neighborhoods as mentioned above.

#### **The Socio-Cultural Changes During the Time of *Sunthorn-Phu*:**

During this period, the socio-cultural condition had been changed from that of late Ayuthaya period. The literature too had also changed. During the late Ayuthaya period, most of the literatures were created in the royal court to satisfy the high class people. At Ratanakosin period, however, the royal court literatures had been increasingly influenced as well by the folk counterparts. Nithi Eawsriwong (2002, pages 4 – 5) noted that at the time there were many literatures created for the purposes of entertaining, reading, and listening. The well-known historian further pointed out that those literatures were created to respond to the consumers’ tastes and life styles. Literatures of *Sunthorn-Phu* were the works that clearly reflected the changes in the society including the residential condition, livelihood, world views, and the likes. Nithi Eawsriwong reasoned that as *Sunthorn-Phu* had time particularly after he resigned from the royal service in the Reign of King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup>, he could transmitted his knowledge, ideas, experiences, and could reflect the societal conditions in his works to a great extent. He also had the chance of building works along his imagination about things making his literary works different from other literatures of the same period.

Besides the literatures of this period had changed, people in this period also changed. As said above, this period was the prosperous period of Samphao Ship trade between Siam and China. People of high echelons, had started their investment in, for example, the cane-sugar industry, Samphao trade, etc. The aristocrats also had similar interest in investing in commerce as well. The Chinese also expanded their enterprises and had increasing roles in the government. Other less well to do Chinese, however, had roles as hired laborers. All these economic changes had increased the role of currency in the people's way of life. People cultivated for the growing industry. They grew sugar-cane to feed the sugar producing factories, for instance.

#### **4.4 Economic Condition**

At the time, Siam had become the center for contacting between western world like Europe and Persia with the East such as China, Vietnam, and Japan since ancient time (Suchit Wongthed, 2005, page 24). Siam then was a major trade center of Asian region. It served itself as the seaport of both Andaman and South China Seas leading the expanded Samphao ship trade, particularly that with the Chinese and the Persians. During early Ratanakosin period, Siam had higher degree of trade with the West. The commerce was under the supervision of Phraya Phrakhleng who divided departments into 2 divisions. Krom Thai Khwa or "Right-hand Port Authority" was under Phra Chula Raja Montri who had the responsibility to take care of the trade from and diplomacy with the countries on the right hand of the peninsular, from the view of Bangkok southward, which include Malaysians, Javanese, Indians, and Caucasians. On the other side, Krom Tha Sai was designated to be under the administration of Phraya Chodokrachasetthi. His mission was to deal with the trade from and diplomacy with the foreigner from the left-hand side of the peninsular which included Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, etc. He had to take care of the royal Samphao trade enterprise as well.

Besides the income from the Samphao ship trading, the palace had also obtained the income and trade tax from foreigners and the international trade (Chai Ruengsin, 1974, page 82; Wimon Chirothaphan and et al., 2005, pages 286- 288). Other than these, there had been investment in sugar industry, the sugar-cane farming to feed the factory, other agricultural production, as well as the wild gatherings. All these activities required more laborers leading to expansion of foreign laborers, particularly the Chinese. Some Chinese had accumulated their wealth and had high buying power. Some of them were promoted with aristocratic ranks. All of the factors helped increased the Chinese roles in Siamese economy. Currency which had just been initiated in the country had its very significant roles in the economic circulation.

#### **4.5 Natural Condition**

At the time of of *Sunthorn-Phu*, Ratanakorsin and its vicinities were still the field mixed with some forest. The land was fertile. Transportation depended mostly on water. There were some communities on the river banks emerged. Other communities such as those of the new comers as mentioned above – Mon, Vietnamese, and Chinese. On this point, Nithi Eawsriwong (2002, page 9) observed the types the goods exported via the Samphao ship trade often included agricultural produces, and wild gathering items well reflecting the prosperity of the Kingdom during early Ratanakosin period

Moreover, many Niras works – the journey oriented literature, of *Sunthorn-Phus* had reflected the physical condition of the places at early Ratanakorsin

period portraying communities with river and canals serving as the major transportation mode. Along both banks of the canals and rivers in Bangkok and its vicinities were full of orchard and flower plants. Further in the land on both side were paddy, crop fields, and forest in which some wild animals lived. In other regions, there were some sea-sides, forests, and mountains.

In early Ratanakosin period, livelihood, war, and careers had to highly depend on nature. In the war time, for example, the army could began their launching only after the rainy season or about the second or third month of the Lunar year. This was because the soil at this time was too muddy and full of diseases that might get on the people making them sick. The Samphao ship trade too had to be scheduled along the season. The ship needed constant wind to sail. They always scheduled to leave the port in Southeast Asia between May to September and return from the destination between November and March. This was because the ship required the Southwestern wind to push their ships up to China but the Northeastern wind on the way back. If the wind fluctuated, it might delay the ship journey or even wreck down the ships in the serious cases.

#### **4.6 World Situation**

During early period of Ratanakosin, Europe was trying to expand its influence to Southeast Asia led by Portuguese who conquered Malaga since 1510 and they were the first foreigner to contact Ayuthaya. After that Spanish had colonized the Philippines in 1572 followed by the British and Dutch. Since 1639, the British started trading with India. In the case of Siam, in early Ratanakosin, the British and the French had intensive roles in Southeast Asia. In this research, the situation of these two colonial powers' roles is described in brief basing on the sources (Suchit Wongthed, 2005, pages 93 – 107; D.E.G. Hall, 2006; ; Wimon Chirothchaphan and et al., 2005; Chai Ruengsin, 1998) as follows:

In 1783, or one year after King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup> had founded Ratanakosin Kingdom, the British had conquered India. At this time, there were already many textile factories in Great Britain.

In 1786, the year in which *Sunthorn-Phu* was born, these Western powers' representatives had negotiated with various Asian countries to rent the land for the trade benefit or natural resources utilization as in the case of Penang – or Khor Mark or Kedah island from Sultan of Saiburi.

In 1787, the French had began to show up in Southeast Asia. They came in to take in one side of the civil war in Vietnam and had been permitted to station their army in Vietnam.

In 1795, the British took over Sri Lanka. Few years after that, the steam engine was invented and used in textile, mining, and sugar producing industries in The Great Britain.

In 1804, the British conquered Pinang.

In 1807, the gas lamps were set up along the side-walks in London and the Americans were successful in inventing the fire-powered ship for the first time.

In 1811, the British took over Jahor or later Malaysis and took away Java and Sumatra from the Dutch the block the French from using them as their force base. At this time, the British were successful in building the steam-engine train.

In 1819, the British took over Singapore.

In 1825, the British took over Burma.

In 1828, the first Protestant missionaries arrived at Bangkok.

In 1830, the fire-powered ship sailed across the Atlantic for the first time. The Catholic missionaries lead by Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix had arrived at Bangkok.

In 1836, Thais led by Nai Sith or later Somdet Chao Phraya Borom Maha Srisuriyawongse (Chuang Bunnag) were successful in constructing the first western-style ship which was named “Arie” or “Klaew Klang Samut” in Thai.

In 1837, Queen Victoria had come to the throne.

In 1840, the British took over New Zealand.

In 1842 The British won over the Chinese in the Opium War.

The trade via Samphao ship took over the sea at the time both in the Andaman and the South China Sea including the Siamese Gulf. The pirates of various nationalities including Chinese, Vietnamese, Malay, as well as other indigenous peoples in the areas were all over looking forward for the chance to rob the ships.

Such condition had impact on political situation in early Ratanakosin Kingdom, particularly in the Reign of King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup> onward. At the time the British had expanded their commercial influence all over Southeast Asia and had conquered many areas, specifically on the west and south of the Kingdom while the French had expanded their influence at the east of the Kingdom. These conditions had deeply affected the political and economic stabilities of Siam.

### **Conclusion**

It could be concluded that the societal situation of early Ratanakosin period when *Sunthorn-Phu* had lived was in peace and with security and unity. During the Reign of King Rama the 1<sup>st</sup>, there was a restoration in all aspects. The period of the Reign of King Rama the 2<sup>nd</sup> was regarded the golden period of art and culture, particularly literature as it was the peaceful time. The trade with foreigners as well as the internal trade was prosperous. The period of the Reign of King Rama the 3<sup>rd</sup> was the golden period of trade as the Samphao trade had reached the peak leading to an economic expansion. Meanwhile, the external world had more substantial impact on the country. At this period, the West had expanded its influences both in commercial and military terms. Britain was the most powerful nation in Southeast Asian and the French had followed suit. During the Reign of King Rama the 4<sup>th</sup>, Siam had entered new era of opening the country to external world. She adopted western civilization and adapted herself along. There were changes in almost all aspects, namely, military, architecture, culture, for example.

It was apparent that *Sunthorn-Phu* was born at the time Siamese society was in peace and had reached the prosperity in art and culture. Natural condition was full of resources on which people could depend. At his middle age time, *Sunthorn-Phu* had gone through many changes in Southeast Asia and in Ratanakosin Kingdom itself. Consequently, *Sunthorn-Phu* had had experiences both from serving in the royal court and his travelling to many places. He also benefited from living in the political situation of the Kingdom at the time, the condition in which Siam had to survive from the colonization and yet had to adapt to the changes. He had lived to see the changes continuing through the Reign of King Rama the 4<sup>th</sup>.