

# Exploring Naga Images: Textual Analysis of Thailand's Narratives

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## Abstract

Naga, the guardian of the Buddhist Three Gems, dominates the waters, and is an important cultural image in Thailand, as well as an auspicious symbol in ordinary life. This article uses nine Thai stories as texts to explore images of the Naga. The results show that the Naga images of Thailand's narratives can be divided into two types: images from Buddhist stories and those from indigenous stories. The main difference between the two types is the Naga's behavior after converting to Buddhism. The findings also imply that serpent worship probably existed before Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Folktale, local wisdom, Naga, serpent worship

## บทคัดย่อ

พญานาคเป็นภาพทางวัฒนธรรมไทยและเป็นสัญลักษณ์ที่สำคัญแห่งมงคลในชีวิตของชาวไทย ความเชื่อเรื่องพญานาคมีทั้งเชื่อว่าพญานาคเป็นทวารบาลของพระรัตนตรัยในพุทธศาสนาและเป็นผู้เป็นใหญ่เหนือท้องน้ำ บทความนี้ใช้นิทานไทย 9 เรื่องเป็นตัวอย่างในการวิเคราะห์ภาพลักษณ์ของพญานาค ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าภาพลักษณ์ของพญานาคสามารถจำแนกออกเป็นสองแบบคือ ภาพลักษณ์ของพญานาคในนิทานชาดกในพุทธศาสนาและภาพลักษณ์ของพญานาคในนิทานพื้นบ้านไทย ความแตกต่างที่สำคัญของภาพลักษณ์ทั้งสองแบบคือพฤติกรรมของพญานาคภายหลังจากการสมาทานพุทธศาสนา ความแตกต่างของภาพลักษณ์ในนิทานทั้งสองแบบนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงระบบวัฒนธรรมสองระบบที่อยู่เบื้องหลังคือวัฒนธรรมแบบพุทธและแบบลัทธิขงจื้อ อีกนัยหนึ่งผลการวิจัยบ่งบอกว่าก่อนที่ศาสนาพราหมณ์และพุทธศาสนาแบบเถรวาทจะเข้ามาสู่อาณาจักร ก็อาจมีลัทธิขงจื้ออยู่ในอาณาจักรบริเวณนี้แล้ว

**คำสำคัญ:** นิทาน ภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น พญานาค ลัทธิขงจื้อ

## **Introduction**

The last decade has seen growing research about the Naga, including Naga images in Thailand (Chang, 2016). The Naga is a kind of magical animal in religious mythology, and therefore, Naga images can be explored through Thailand's folktales. Folktales can help us to understand how Thais lived in ancient times, and what they thought of the Naga. Naga images can also provide insight into people's imagination from generation to generation.

Where did the Naga of Thailand come from?-A review of literatures

Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought about the origin of the Naga: the Indianized school and the local school. The Indianized school suggests that the Naga came from Indian mythology, as argued by the following scholars: Sasanka Sekhar Panda (2004), Sumet Jumsai (1997), Siripot Laomanajareern (2003), and Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana (2009). Several studies in various disciplines have noted Thai-Indian cultural linkages through the Naga. Panda (2004) discusses Naga images in Indian literature and Naga sculptures in Indian temples as examples, and describes how Nagas have been presented in Indian culture through various forms, including the snake, half-human half-snake, and human images. From Panda's study, we know that the images of India's Nagas have the following characteristics: Nagas are the leaders of the oceans, live under the earth, bear a jewel on their heads, and some have an odd number (such as 3,5,7,9) of serpent hoods above their head (Panda, 2004: 17-18). The Indian Nagas are similar to those in Thailand. Because the Indian Naga appeared earlier, the Indianized school suggests that the prototype of Thailand's Naga came from India.

However, the local school stresses indigenous serpent worship of Southeast Asia, and notes that serpent worship probably existed before Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia. Wongthes (2003: 1) takes as evidence snake-wrapped graphics of archaeological artifacts, such as those at Ban Chiang, Udon Thani province and Ban Kao, Kanchana Buri province as evidence that serpent

worship probably existed in prehistoric times in Southeast Asia. Wongthes explains, “Indigenous serpent worship existed when Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia. Later, serpent worship combined with Indian religions and was transformed into new beliefs” (Wongthes, 2003: 5-6).

Another proponent of the local school is Phan Anh Tu, who observes that serpent stories were very popular among the various ethnic groups in Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. That is, indigenous serpent worship has long existed in Southeast Asia. Buddhism peacefully fused with indigenous animism, integrated serpent worship and transformed it into Naga beliefs (Phan Anh Tu, 2007: 2, 17; Klangprapan, 2014: 92). Chih-Hung Yen (2005: 17-18) mentions Dvaravati (สมัยทวารวดี) as possibly the first area where Buddha appears in Southeast Asia in the mudra of *Pang Nak Prok* (ปางนาคปรก), that is, seated in meditation upon a coiled Naga whose hood protects him from the rain. This posture could relate to serpent worship at that time.

As mentioned above, Thailand's Naga developed out of multiple sources, and is not fully Indianized. It must be noted that although the prototype of the Thai Naga comes from India, indigenous serpent worship has also long been present in Southeast Asia. Simply stated, Buddhism integrated serpent worship and transformed it into Naga belief. For example, Virapaksa (ท้าววิรุฬ্পกษ), one of the four great kings in Buddhism, was the leader of Nagas (Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana, 2009: 1; Brahmaganabhorn, 2014: 199; Laomanajarearn, 2003: 152).

### Diversity of Naga images

The word “Naga” comes from Sanskrit and its pronunciation changed in the various Tai dialects where it is found. For example, the pronunciations *Ngan*, *Ngua*, *Nam Ngu Ak-ngu*, and *Nam Ngum* can be found in Thailand and Laos (Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana, 2009: 6). Nagas are depicted in a variety of forms, such as the water Naga in Ahom, the crocodile among the Shan, water snake among the White

T'ai, the dragon among the Pa-yi, and the mermaid/serpent among the Siamese (Davis, 1984: 212). Therefore, the names, pronunciations and images of Nagas vary from one ethnic group to another.

### Naga folktales of Thailand

Stories of Naga are commonly found in Buddhist literature in Thailand. The most well-known is the *Bhuridatta Jataka* (ภุริทัตชาตก), one of the *Ten Jatas*. Prince Bhuridatta is the son of the Naga king, but he hopes to break away from the Naga's shape, and no longer have to crawl on his stomach. He wishes to accumulate more and more merit by keeping the Eight Precepts. Although he encounters numerous difficulties, he has firm conviction to achieve his aspiration and is never been discouraged. The main image of the Thai Naga comes from Thai literature, especially in references to the Himaphan forest (ป่าหิมพานต์). According to the Three Worlds or *Traiphum* (ไตรภูมิ), the Himaphan forest is located at the foot of Mount Meru, where there are a variety of magical animals, including the Naga. Among the Thai people, the Naga resembles a serpent with a crest (หงอน) (Phlainoi, 2009: 202). The Naga image in Theravada Buddhist *Suttas* that are part of the *Tripitaka* will be described in detail below.

What is the local image of the Naga? There are several articles discussing it, including a dissertation by Saipan, which mentions the cultural meanings of Nagas: creator and destroyer, ancestor, water, guardian spirit and dharma practitioner, etc. (Saipan, 1996: 67-79). Saipan also mentions some local images of the Naga. Another work is that of Bamrunghak, who analyzed four magical animal images: the serpent (*phaya ngu yai* - พญางูใหญ่), the Naga, *phaya luang* (พญาลวง) and the dragon, as well as the common image of Naga (Bamrunghak, 2014: 82-84). In addition, Hongsuwan (2011: 33) has written extensively about the Naga, including a discussion of the relationship between the Mekong River and folk Buddhism through folk narratives. Hongsuwan explains the sacralization of the Mekong River through folk narratives on the following four topics: the origin and characteristics of the Mekong River, sacred objects and sacred places, sacred animals and sacred trees,

and rituals and traditions (Hongsuwan, 2011:33). This article also refers to the relationship between the Naga image and folk stories in the Mekong River region, for instance, the story of Naga as protector of La Nong Stupa in Nong Khai province (Hongsuwan, 2011:38). Although these studies mention some Naga images, they do not discuss the subject extensively. Overall, little research has been done on Naga images in folktales. This study attempts to fill this research gap.

### Folktales and coding

Many stories featuring Nagas are recorded in the *Jatakas*, which are part of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the *Sutta Pitaka*, one of the three books of the *Tripitaka*. This study used four *Jataka* stories in Thai and five local stories as texts for exploring Naga images. Category-coding is presented in Table 1; nine Thailand narratives are divided into type A--Buddhist stories (A1-A4) and type B-- local stories (B1-B5). The purpose of classification is to compare the views of Buddhism with indigenous Naga belief. In Table 1, key sentences of stories are encoded (such as 01); thus “A1-01” indicates the first story of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* (A1) and the first key-sentence coding (01).

**Table 1** Key-sentence coding of folktales

Number	Story	Story source	Data source	Key-sentence coding
A1	<i>Manikantha Jataka</i> 253 ( <i>wa duai kaan khaw sing thi mai khuan khaw- ว่าด้วยการขอสิ่งที่ไม่ควรขอ</i> )	<i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>	Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003, V.58: 22-29	01. The Naga king Manikantha becomes a man. 02. The Naga made a daily visit and their friendship became close. 03. Manikantha stood with his great hood spread over the ascetic. 04. Manikantha would lie for a few moments with the ascetic inside his coils. 05. Naga lives under the water. 06. The Bodhisatta suggested that his brother should ask for the jewel (แก้วมณี) that the Naga wore around his neck. 07. The Naga says: everything of mine comes from the jewel (แก้วมณี) around my neck. 08. The beautiful Naga.

Number	Story	Story source	Data source	Key-sentence coding
A2	<i>Uruga Jataka</i> 154 (อรรคกถาอรรคชาดกที่ 154)	<i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>	Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003, V.57: 22-26	01. The Naga is pursued by the Garuda. 02. The Naga becomes a jewel (แก้วมณี). 03. The Naga hid in the Bodhisatta's bark garment. 04. The Garuda would not attack the Naga out of respect for the ascetic.
A3	<i>Bhuridatta Jataka</i> 543 (ภุริทัตชาดก)	<i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>	Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003, V.64: 1-27	01. Prince Bhuridatta is wise and clever. 02. I wish to accumulate more and more merit by keeping the Eight Precepts. 03. To keep the precepts. 04. Prince Bhuridatta hoped to break away from the Naga's shape, and no longer crawl on his stomach. 05. He would rather die than break his precepts. 06. Whatever Alambayana wanted Prince Bhuridatta to change into, Prince Bhuridatta always could change his own appearance. 07. I am Phaya Naga possessing great celestial powers. 08. If Prince Bhuridatta looked at Alambayana with vengeance then Alambayana would be burned into cinder.
A4	<i>Muccalinda Sutta</i> : About Muccalinda ( <i>wa duai kwamsuk thi yod yiam nai lok</i> – ว่าด้วยความสุขที่ยอดเยี่ยมในโลก)	<i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>	Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003, V.44: 161-162	01. There was a great rainstorm and for seven days, there were rain clouds, cold winds, and unsettled weather. 02. Mucalinda, the Naga king, encircled the Buddha's body seven times with his coils, and he stood with his great hood spread over the Buddha's head. 03. To protect the Buddha from cold and heat, from flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and the touch of creeping things. 04. The Naga changed his own appearance and assumed that of a youth. 05. He stood in front of the Buddha with his hands folded together venerating him.
B1	Collapsed City ( <i>Muang Thalom</i> -เมืองถลอม)	Northern Thailand	Samphan, 2010: 80-82	01. The people of the city shared the meat of a big silver eel. 02. Continuous strong earthquakes. 03. The Naga turned into a large silver eel. 04. The Naga's curse.

Number	Story	Story source	Data source	Key-sentence coding
B2	<i>Padaeng and Nang Ai</i> (ผานตงนางไฉ่)	Northeast Thailand	Samphan, 2010: 97-100	01. The Naga Prince Suthonak (สุทโธษนาค) <sup>1</sup> had magical power to change his own appearance. 02. Naga Prince Suthonak fell in love with Princess Nang Ai at first sight. 03. Naga Prince Suthonak became an albino squirrel to attract the attention of Nang Ai. 04. The albino squirrel wore the jewel around its neck. 05. The albino squirrel was shot by a poisoned arrow; people of the city shared its meat. 06. The Naga King Thao Suwan Phangkhi (ท้าวสุวรรณภังคีพญานาค) avenged the death of his son. 07. Eating the meat of the Naga would lead to misfortune. 08. Nagas killed all the people of the city. 09. The war between ghosts and Nagas.
B3	Fields of the Crying Kula ( <i>Thung kula ronghai-</i> ทุ่งกุลาร้องไห้)	Northeast Thailand	Samphan, 2010: 101-106	01. Naga helped the villagers. 02. The king summoned the Naga king Nakburi (นาคบุรีพญานาค) by beating the drum. 03. The Naga king Nakburi prepared an army of Nagas in the water. 04. The Naga king Nakburi had magic power. 05. The river was sucked down into the mouth of the Naga king Nakburi.
B4	oral literature	Lao, Northeast Thailand	Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana, 2009: 3	01. The Naga transformed himself into a human being. 02. The Naga wanted to be ordained as a monk. 03. The Naga asked the Buddha if through pre-ordination rites, a man being ordained as a monk could be called “Naga” in the future to remember the Naga’s faith in the Buddha’s teachings. 04. The Naga has great faith in the Buddha’s teachings.
B5	oral literature	Northeast Thailand	Suwanwatthana, 2008: 5	01. Among some Isan people there is a belief that the Naga is the embodiment of Phra Upakut. (พระอุปกุต) 02. It is said that he was the son of the Buddha and a mermaid. <sup>2</sup> Naga is familiar with water.

Source: collated by the author

<sup>1</sup> Tambiah transliterated Suthonak into “Sirisutho,” also known as “Pangkee.” (Tambiah, 1970: 295)

<sup>2</sup> According to a Lao story, the Buddha, when taunted by one of his disciples about his virility, threw his sperm into the Mekong, which was swallowed by Nang Matsa, the fish goddess, who happened to be swimming by. Several months later she gave birth to Upaguta (Strong, 1992: 220).

## Types of folktales and representation of Nagas

As shown in Table 1, Naga images of type A stories (Buddhist stories) are those described below.

Nagas are beautiful magical animals, and they wear jewel (*kaewmani*-แก้วมณี) on their necks. Although the Naga's natural enemies are the Garuda, a Naga can escape from the Garuda's pursuit with the help of an ascetic. The Naga became a follower of the Buddha, and he frequently encircles Buddha or ascetics' bodies seven times with its coils, standing with a great hood spread over the Buddha or the ascetics' head. To sum up, "protection" and "jewel" (*kaewmani*-แก้วมณี), which mean guardians and wealth, respectively, are very important symbolic images for Naga in Theravada Buddhism.



The *Pang Nak Prok* mural of Wat Pho Chai, Nong Khai Province.

Photo: Ya-Liang Chang

In addition, Naga images in type B stories (local stories) are as follows. Nagas dominate the waters and can be summoned by human kings to help mankind. At the same time, Nagas have various emotions just as people do and magical power to change their appearance. Nagas can fight ghosts. If people eat the animals which Nagas have changed into, Nagas will take revenge and bring misfortune. Local stories



emphasize that Nagas have human emotions. If people disrespect Nagas, they will take revenge and cause disasters.



ตำนานผาแดงนางไอ่

*Padaeng and Nang Ai, Northeast Thailand.*

Photo: The Department of Cultural Promotion (2011: 8)

These two types of stories are clearly different, particularly as Naga images change from serpent worship to Buddhism. In type B stories, Nagas have great power to fight ghosts and protect human kings. If people do not respect them, they will encounter misfortune. The link between Nagas and human kings is often found in local stories because Nagas could help human kings to establish city-states (Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana, 2009: 2). At the same time, human kings might use Naga legends to maintain their authority, as in the Cambodian origin myth (Keyes, 1995: 66-67). Some of the local chiefs of Southeast Asia, according to Keyes, must have come to perceive that Indian culture offered a new basis for their power. For example, the story, “Kaundinya and the Naga Princess,” used Naga legends to help the local chief to maintain his authority. According to the myth, an Indian Brahman named Kaundinya arrived in Southeast Asian and married a local princess, Soma, the daughter of the Naga king. Kaundinya and Soma then founded the ruling line of Funan and Champa. Later, they became the ancestors of Cambodians.

In other words, when Brahmanism and especially Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia, it integrated serpent worship,

transforming the Naga belief. Naga images also were changed. The image of the Naga protecting the Buddha means that the Naga converted to Buddhism, and it shows that the status of Buddhism is higher than that of serpent worship.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study continues by classifying Table 1 in Table 2, resulting in 10 Naga images. We can sum up the five characteristics of Naga images to be presented as follows:

1) The Naga has a beautiful appearance and wears the jewel.

Type A stories mention that “Everything of the Naga comes from the jewel.” Thus, the Naga’s jewel is very precious. Thai people believe that the Naga is in charge of treasure, so the neck or chest of Naga sculptures are almost always decorated with gem-like patterns. It is worth noting that the images of Naga wearing the jewel almost all come from type A stories on Table 2. The jewel is a precious treasure which can clean water, cure all diseases and satisfy a variety of desires.

2) The Naga is the king of waters and has the magical power to change his own appearance.

Both types of stories depict Naga as the king of waters. The Naga is depicted in a variety of images, such as water Naga, crocodile, water snake, dragon, serpent, etc. There are different images in various regions of Thailand. One thing these images share is that the Naga lives under water.

3) The Naga has human emotions and a vengeful heart, according to serpent worship.

In Table 2, Naga images about “emotion,” “fighting” and “curses” all come from type B stories, but the most common images come primarily from type A stories. That is, the main difference between two types is the Naga’s behavior after converting to Buddhism.

4) The Naga is the guardian of the Three Gems in Theravada Buddhism. The Naga’s role as a protector of the Three Gems is symbolically significant in Theravada Buddhism. In particular, images

of the Buddha in the posture of being protected by the Naga, *Pang Nak Prok* (ปางนาคปรก), are common in Dvaravati sculpture. This could be related to serpent worship at the time. The *Pang Nak Prok* theme has had a great impact in Khmer / Cambodian and Thailand. According to Jermasawatdi (1979: 123-125) the Naga is prominent in Khmer and Thai architecture, such as during the Angkor Vat and the Bayon periods, and the Buddha image is seated under the Naga and this style was adopted by the artists of the Lopburi school. In Thailand, Naga images were transformed into the guardians of the Three Gems, temples and pagodas. In addition, it is believed that when the Buddha came back to the human world from Tusita Heaven, where he had gone to preach a sermon to his mother, he walked on a ladder made of the Naga's body. Therefore, people believe Nagas are not only guardians but also the ladder between earth and heaven. In Thai Buddhist temple buildings, ladders (*bandai-บันได*), gables (*najua-หน้าจั่ว*), and *hanghong* (หางหงส์, a mythical goose), are usually decorated with Naga patterns, which are associated with the characteristics and legends of Nagas (Pritasuwan, 2014: 5; Phan Anh Tu, 2007: 9).

5) The Naga's natural enemy is the Garuda.

The stories of Naga and Garuda are recorded in Indian mythology and Theravada Buddhist *Suttas* and the theme is sometimes presented in Thai Buddhist art, such as temple murals.

**Table 2** The description of Naga images

Naga images	Description
appearance	<p>A1-06. The Bodhisatta suggested that his brother should ask for the (<i>kaewmani-แก้วมณี</i>) the Naga wore around his neck.</p> <p>A1-07. The Naga says: everything of mine comes from the jewel around my neck.</p> <p>A1-08. The beautiful Naga.</p> <p>A3-04. Prince Bhuridatta hoped to break out of the Naga's shape, so that he would no longer have to crawl on his stomach.</p> <p>B2-04. The albino squirrel wore the jewel around its neck.</p>

Naga images	Description
residence	<p>A1-05. Naga lives under the water.</p> <p>A4-01. There was a great rainstorm for seven days.</p> <p>B3-05. The river was sucked down into the mouth of the Naga king Nakburi.</p> <p>B5-03. The Naga is familiar with water.</p>
magic power	<p>A1-01. The Naga king Manikantha becomes a man.</p> <p>A2-02. The Naga becomes a jewel.</p> <p>A3-06. Prince Bhuridatta always could change his own appearance.</p> <p>A3-07. I am Phaya Naga possessing great celestial powers.</p> <p>A3-08. If Prince Bhuridatta looked at Alambayana with vengeance, then Alambayana would be burned to a cinder.</p> <p>A4-04. The Naga changed his own appearance and assumed the appearance of a youth.</p> <p>B1-03. The Naga changed into a big silver eel.</p> <p>B2-01. Prince Naga Suthonak had the magic power to change his own appearance.</p> <p>B2-03. Prince Naga Suthonak became an albino squirrel.</p> <p>B3-04. The Naga king Nakburi had magic power.</p> <p>B4-01. Naga transformed himself into a human being.</p>
emotion	<p>B2-02. Prince Naga Suthonak fell in love with Princess Nang Ai at first sight.</p> <p>B2-06. The Naga king Thao Suwan Phangkhi avenged his dead son.</p>
fighting	<p>B2-09. The war between ghosts and Nagas.</p> <p>B3-01. Naga helped the villagers.</p> <p>B3-03. The Naga king Nakburi prepared an army of Nagas in the water.</p>
curses	<p>B1-01. The people of the city shared the meat of the big silver eel.</p> <p>B1-02. Continuous strong earthquakes.</p> <p>B1-04. The Naga's curse.</p> <p>B2-05. The people of the city shared the meat of the albino squirrel.</p> <p>B2-07. Eating the meat of the Naga would lead to misfortunes.</p> <p>B2-08. Nagas killed all the people of the city.</p>

Naga images	Description
the relationship among the Buddha, ascetics and human kings	<p>A1-02. The Naga made a daily visit and their friendship ended.</p> <p>A1-04. Manikantha would lie for a few moments with the ascetic inside his coils.</p> <p>A2-03. The Naga hid in the Bodhisatta's bark garment.</p> <p>A4-03. To protect the Buddha from cold and heat, gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and the touch of creeping things.</p> <p>A4-05. He stood in front of the Buddha with his hands together venerating him.</p> <p>B3-02. The king summoned the Naga king Nakhuri by beating the drum.</p> <p>B4-03. The Naga asked the Buddha if in pre-ordination rites a man being ordained as a monk could be called "Naga" in the future, as a way of remembering the Naga's faith in the Buddha's teachings.</p> <p>B5-01. There is a belief among Isan people that Naga is the embodiment of Phra Upakhut.</p> <p>B5-02. It is said that Upakhut was the son of the Buddha and a serpent.</p>
the image of protecting Buddha and ascetics	<p>A1-03. Manikantha stood with his great hood spread over the ascetic.</p> <p>A4-02. He stood with his great hood spread over the Buddha's head.</p> <p>B4-04. The Naga has great faith in Buddha's teachings.</p>
practicing Buddhism	<p>A3-05. Prince Bhuridatta is wise and clever.</p> <p>A3-02. I wish to accumulate more and more merit by keeping the Eight Precepts.</p> <p>A3-03. To keep the precepts.</p> <p>A3-05. He would rather die than break his precepts.</p> <p>B4-02. The Naga wanted to be ordained as a monk.</p>
natural enemy	<p>A2-01. The Naga is pursued by the Garuda.</p> <p>A2-04. The Garuda would not attack the Naga out of respect for the ascetic.</p>

Source: Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003, V.58: 22-29, V.57: 22-26, V.64: 1-27, V.44: 161-162; Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana, 2009: 3; Samphan, 2010: 80-82, 97-100, 101-106; Suwanwatthana, 2008: 5

## Conclusion

This article used nine Thai narratives as texts for exploring Naga images. The results indicate that the Naga images in Thai narratives can be divided into two types, based on two cultural systems: images based on Buddhist stories and those based on local stories. These two systems present different representations of Naga images. The main difference between the two types is the Naga's behavior after converting to Buddhism. This implies that serpent worship probably existed before Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia. Thus, local Naga legends in Southeast Asia spread from generation to generation through people's imagination. This conclusion is similar to that of Tambiah, who analyzed the Naga symbol in Northeast Thailand, and wrote that the Naga had different cultural meanings and beliefs in various Buddhist rituals (such as *Bun Phra Wet*) and the cult of the guardian spirits (such as *Bun bang fai*) (Tambiah, 1970: 300-301). In short, three of these findings are worth summarizing.

First, the Naga images from Thailand stories can be divided into two types: images from Buddhist stories and those from local stories. The main difference between the two types is the Naga's behavior after converting to Buddhism.

Second, two cultural systems are behind Naga folk tales, and the images depicted by these systems are different. This means serpent worship probably existed before Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia. This conclusion is consistent with local school, which is exemplified by Wongthes's opinion (2003: 5-6). This indicates the existence of the local cultural system and shows the local wisdom of Thailand. The folktales reflect indigenous ideas which were the result of people living close to nature (Nathalang, 2009). Nathalang (2013: 3) also stresses that folk narratives and the social context were closely related each other. Furthermore, Klangprapan points out that beliefs and religions are part of the cultural life that has an overlapping "power" in the cultural dimension (Klangprapan, 2014: 92). That is, the Naga provided a tie connecting the communities and the cultural life of

the local people and gradually evolved into local wisdom. Although the prototype of Thailand's Naga came from India, indigenous serpent worship had a great influence on it. After these traditions became integrated, Thai Naga images were gradually transformed.

Third, Naga images of type B stories (local stories) show that the ancient Thai feared the power of serpents (or Nagas). They believed that the serpents had great power to change their appearance, exorcise ghosts, protect humans from harm and bring rain and wealth to the people. If the serpents were not respected, however, they would seek revenge and bring misfortune. Therefore, the Naga was chosen as the guardian of the Buddha. Since the ancient Thai believed in serpent worship, they combined it with Buddhism, thereby helping to spread Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

As this article is a basic survey of Naga images, further in-depth research is recommended.

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