

Highlanders as Portrayed in Thai Penny-horribles*

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In 1979, a Dutch anthropologist deemed it necessary to rectify the image of the Akha who had been portrayed as rather barbarious people in Vichit Kounavudi's film: *khon phu khao* (The Mountain People)¹. This was not the only film to feature the ethnic minorities of northern Thailand; as a result of the success of *khon phu khao* many more films of the same type were made, and in particular Phaitun Ratanon's *ido*, 1984, which offered an even more stereotyped vision of the same Akha people.

The Thai media have always attached importance to these ethnic minorities. Films featuring the highlanders are the Westerns of Thai cinema². Many novels, works for the general public and numerous articles published in Thai newspapers and magazines have been devoted to them. One can include here the recent popularity of hill tribe singers, the Hmong in particular (or groups which dress in traditional Hmong costumes at any rate), like Noklae and The Hmong.

* The author and editors acknowledge, with gratitude, the assistance of Mrs. Diana-Lee Simon who translated this article from French.

1. Leo Alting von Geusau, "Akhas not Depicted Accurately on Screen", *The Bangkok Post*, 30 September 1979.
2. I found twenty-two Thai films featuring highlanders but since there is no existing repertoire of Thai cinema to date, one can assume that there are many more.

One-baht comics in Thailand

In this article I will discuss one of the most neglected media in Thailand, the comic, and more precisely what the Thais call *nangsu katun lem la bat*, one-baht comics.

It is estimated that since 1979 at least five thousand one-baht comics have been published by about twenty-five publishers. Between 25,000 and 70,000 copies of each have been printed which means that perhaps two hundred million one-baht comics have been circulated throughout Thailand over the past eight years³. When one considers that each comic is read by several people and that there is a great demand for second-hand comics, the relevance of making a study of these comics goes without saying.

No survey undertaken up until now reveals exactly who the readers of these comics are. However, it is accepted that the readers are mainly children, but also vendors, workers, bus and *samlor* drivers, fishermen, agricultural workers, masseuses and prostitutes⁴. This indicates that a large proportion of the population reads comics, and in particular the poor and least educated. Many students and university lecturers are not even aware of their existence.

Comics measure 13 × 18.5 cm. They take the form of small, 16 - or 24 -page booklets, each page comprising between one and six drawings. The front cover which is always carefully designed, is in colour: generally speaking the main scene or scenes of the story are depicted here, in much the same way as on posters advertising films in Thai cinema. See Plate 94,95,96,97⁵.

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3. *Phalang Num* July, 1979: 34 ; *Matichon* 22 June, 1980: 9
 4. *Phalang Num* May, 1979: 52-53 and *Phalang Num* July, 1979:33.
 5. With regard to comparison with the cinema, I would like to acknowledge the information furnished by M. Gerard Fouquet, who is working on a doctoral thesis on contemporary Thai cinema entitled "Le Cinema Thailandais Contemporain", at Paris 7 University.

Seven stories out of five thousand

A great many Thai penny-horribles (perhaps 40% of the total) are *phi* stories (about spirits, ghosts or genii). Next come stories of gangs, crime and vendetta. However, a great variety of different themes have been chosen, some dealing with historical subjects, others with popular tales and yet others about the very rich, or the *sethi*, drugs or prostitution. One would have difficulty in isolating a theme as yet untackled.

The ethnic minorities are no exception. Chinese stories are relatively abundant, but they very often take the form of historical tales. Sometimes one even comes across comics depicting Malays, Vietnamese, Burmese and Mons.

Out of all the comics we were able to find, only seven feature the ethnic minorities of northern Thailand. They are the following:

1 *khao mai liso* (The New Rice of the Lisu), illustrated by Phot Chaiya, vol. No.655, ed. Bangkoksan, 24 pages. As suggested by the title, the story is set in a Lisu Village.

2 *tao phu khao* (The Old Highlander), illustrated by "Lomnua", series No.8 ed. Aksonwiwat, 16 pages. The old highlander in question is a Hmong who comes to grips with the Chinese *haw*.

3 *doi phi fa* (The Mountain of the Genie of the Heavens), illustrated by Seri Rawi, series No.40, ed. Nakhonsan, 16 pages. The action is set amongst the Lisu.

4 "*talap manut*" (The Humans' Box), the first story in a collection titled *ruammit'tun* (sold for an exceptional five baht) illustrated by Raphi Phuwong, ed. Chakkarasan, 16 pages, The Mlabri, or *phi tong luang* are the heroes.

5 *pla ra wok* (The Monkey *pla ra*), illustrated by Ottanoi, series No.21, ed. Chakkarasan, 16 pages. The author chooses deliberately not to set the story in any particular group, but states that it could have taken place amongst any one of the ethnic minorities. However, the costumes remind one of those worn by the Akha, whilst the headdresses look more like those worn by Lisu women.

6 *pu chong ai phi ba* (The Mad *pu chong* Phantom), illustrated by Phot Chaiya, vol. No.544, ed. Bangkoksan, 24 pages. The *pu chong* is the young Akha girls' love instructor.

7. *sao doi tao* (The Maiden of Turtle Mountain), illustrated by Suwit Sitthichok, series No.21, ed. Siam Sarn, 16 pages. Although never directly stated by the author, the costumes worn are those of the Yao.

Seven out of several thousand is few indeed⁶, and one cannot make out a case which credits these with having much of an influence on the reading public. I will concentrate simply on the tribal image portrayed through these comics.

Drawing Highlanders

It is not difficult to explain why the theme "highlanders" is so rarely chosen as a topic. Naturally if the author aspires to a certain authenticity, he is obliged to carry out some research in order to select the subject and the texts. Illustrations require even more research. This of course may not always seem profitable for a seventeen-page comic which will be sold for one baht.

A comic is usually defined as "a story told through pictures". However, as it is not my intention to examine the

6. I have chosen to exclude some comics depicting scenes which take place amongst imaginary tribes which sometimes resemble American Indians, Melanesians or West-Africans.

Thai comic in its own right, I shall concern myself with neither the quality of the drawings nor the techniques involved. It is worthwhile nonetheless to examine the ways in which the different authors have depicted the highlanders in their drawings.

The *phi tong luang* illustrated by Raphi Phuwong are almost nude (Plate 94). This no doubt facilitates the author's task, but corresponds to the image of the Mlabri as they appeared to Thai people in the series of photographs published in May 1984 by the press (in particular the daily *Thai Rath*, which has a turnover of 900,000 copies) and in the film *tawan yim chaeng* (The Grinning Sun) in 1985. Ngong-ngaeng, the Mlabri heroine of "*talap manut*" does, however, wear earrings and necklaces similar to those worn by the Lahu, Meo and Yao; and on the front cover she has a very light complexion and wears a panther skin draped around her hips. No iconographic research seems to have been undertaken for *doi phi fa*. The only detail which leads us to believe that the story is set amongst the Lisu is the pointed bonnet worn by Amiyo, the heroine, but this hat, which on the front cover reminds one of the head-dress of the Akha women with their characteristic coins, is not identifiable.

If one excludes *pla ra wok*, the story in which the author depicts an imaginary tribe by integrating certain details pertaining to existing tribes and inventing others, we are left with four comics which, from a graphic point of view, are relatively accurate. Strictly speaking, the young Yao girl's costume has been simplified, no doubt to facilitate the drawing, the Hmong bonnets in *tao phu khao* seem to have been borrowed from the Lahu or Yao, and the Lisu "witch-doctor"⁷ is almost identical to the Akha "witch-

7. The Thai word "*mo phi*" literally means "spirit doctor". The word "witch-doctor" is used here in full understanding of its pejorative meaning because a "tribal magician of a primitive people" is what is meant by the authors of the comics.

doctor" in *pu chong ai phi ba*, both having been drawn by Phot Chaiya, but on the whole these liberties in no way detract from the reader's ability to recognise the characters as highlanders.

Violence, Eroticism and Ghosts

In the comics we have selected, we come across themes which are very common in Thai comics and also in films for the masses⁸. Bearing this in mind, setting the narrative amongst the Lisu or the Yao is simply a matter of changing the decor or finding a new setting for classical subjects.

Violence.

There are two heroes in *tao phu khao*, the old Hmong (Meo of course in the Thai text) and the M 16 rifle. It is a story about old Lao Tang's family. His son is killed in his poppy field. Then, his wife poisons herself in despair. Lao Tang and his daughter-in-law remain, the latter being pledged to a *haw* merchant in exchange for the money needed to harvest the opium. But when the harvest is over, four Chinese *haw*, armed with M 16 rifles come and steal the opium. Lao Tang cunningly thinks of a trick, snaps up the opportunity and makes off with one of the M 16s before killing the four thieves (Plate 91).

All in all, six of the seven covers depict an explicit act of violence. In *khao mai liso* a fight between two *phi* is depicted, in *doi phi fa* it is the fight between a Thai, versed in the art of Thai Boxing, and a Lisu armed with a knife. In *sao doi tao*, a Yao wields a sword, stabbing a man who has raped his girlfriend. On the cover *ruammit'tun*, of which "talap manut" is a part, the jealous Mlabri husband kills his young wife with a rock, and on that of *pla ra wok* the

8. These are mostly films for provincial people, Bangkokians' taste being apparently rather different in this regard.

massacre of the monkeys is depicted see Plate 95. As for the seventh comic, *pu chong ai phi ba*, whilst the author has chosen to depict themes of eroticism and ghosts, on the front cover, the theme of violence can be found on the first page of the story, which is in fact like a second cover: one sees a nasty ghost devouring the entrails of a young Akha virgin he had just disembowled. Three or four of the covers are bloody, and in each of the seven stories man or animals die. Violence and cruelty are the major themes in hill tribe stories in Thai comics. Needless to say this theme is not very original.

Eroticism.

Not many Thai comics are based on the theme of eroticism and in fact none of those surveyed feature highlanders. However, suggestive illustrations are commonly found. The covers of *pu chong ai phi ba* and "*talap manut*" feature an Akha woman and Mlabri woman half nude, and next to the scene of vengeance depicted on the cover of *sao doi tao* there is a kissing scene between the two Yao heroes. Scenes of love and eroticism are totally absent only from *khao mai liso* and *tao phu khao*.





Quite frequently a rather “natural” eroticism is depicted. The Mlabri in “*talap manut*” are naturally very scantily clad (Plate 94), the very sexy mini-skirts worn by the *pla ra wok* women are evidently part of their ethnic costume (Plate 95) whilst in *pu chong ai phi ba* the author undresses the young Akha girls in order to explain one of the customs of this tribe to us (Plate 97). It is difficult not to draw a comparison with

certain magazine articles like those published in *National Geographic*, which offer readers “ethnographic” nudes in an academic context and have thus contributed to the sexual education of generations of Americans.

Sao doi tao feature both themes of sex and violence. The story begins like a Yao version of “Romeo and Juliette”. Meyfin is in love with Sali, but their fathers are arch enemies. One day two opium merchants who have come to talk business with Meyfin’s father are struck by the girl’s beauty. At nightfall, Meyfin goes into the forest to meet Sali with whom she has decided to elope. But on the way she passes the merchants’ camp and they make off with her and rape her. Alarmed by her cries Sali comes running to her aid, but too late. He kills the two merchants (above). At the end of the story, Meyfin commits suicide, thinking that Sali would want nothing more to do with her. This comic seems to portray a particularly Thai conception of good morals as some of the less well informed books on the hill tribes likely to have

been consulted by a conscientious author maintain that “Yao people are very free and open in sexual matters and such a word as “rape” has no place in their language”⁹

Ghosts.

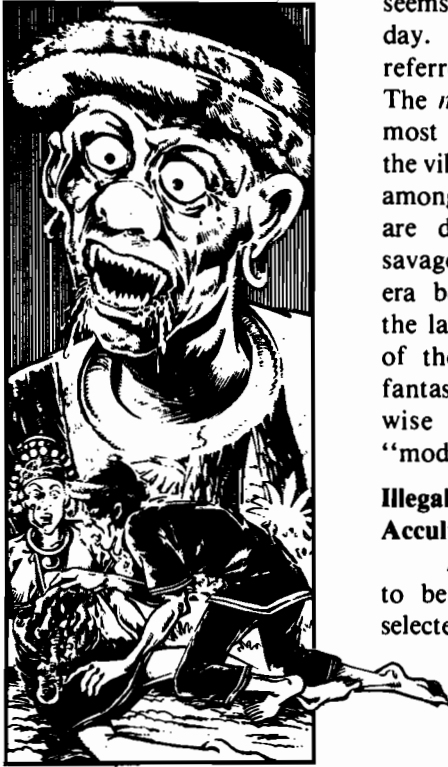
The third theme represented in Thai penny-horribles is that of *phi* (ghosts, spirits or genie). *Khao mai liso* and *pu chong ai phi ba* are two ghost stories. Whilst *doi phi fa* (The Mountain of the Genie of the Heavens) is a story of love and jealousy, the author has chosen-no doubt to attract his readers-to place a *phi* both in the title and on the cover. Magic does come into it: the jealous Lisu goes to consult the *mo phi* (“witch-doctor”) who gives him a small pieces of malefic leather to enable him to get rid of his rival.

Khao mai liso is the story of a rather individualistic Lisu who omits to bring the rice he has just harvested to the ceremony organised by the village for the rice spirit. The spirit punishes the Lisu who becomes half-man half-*phi*. During a fight with other Lisu, he bites a villager who turns into a *phi*. But the two possessed spirits end up by becoming men once again.

All three themes of violence, eroticism and ghosts are intermingled in *pu chong ai phi ba*. In some of the literature about the Akha, there is said to be a *pu chong* (or *khachirada*) whose role it is to deflower young virgins and to teach them the art of love. To establish the truth of this is another matter but in the village in which the story is set, the *pu chong* has just died a strange death. Mayo is chosen to take his place. He immediately gets down to work. But each time he goes into the forest with a young maiden, he becomes possessed by the spirit of the preceding *pu chong*; he then changes himself into a *phi*, kills the maiden, disembowels her and devours her liver and other viscera.

9. Preecha Chaturabhand, *People of the Hills*, Bangkok Editions Duang Kamol, (1980: 27). See also Samnakngan Saranithet, Kong Banchakan Tahan Sungsut, *chaokhao phao yao*, Krungthep, (2520: 31) and Gordon Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 4th Edition, (1969: 50-51)

Whilst violence, sex and the supernatural are common themes in popular Thai comics, films and literature, they are sometimes treated very differently in a highlander context. Hill people are seen to be devoid of any feeling of guilt with regard to the law, morals and official religion. Thus, the Mlabri husband who kills his wife appears to have the right to do so, and the old Hmong will not be questioned for having bumped off the four Chinese *haw*. Amongst the Akha a stereotype of sexual freedom



northern Thailand.

seems to be the order of the day. The only religion referred to is that of the *phi*. The *mo phi* seems to be the most important member of the village. Setting the action amongst the highlanders, who are depicted as “innocent savages” of a pre-Buddhist era before censure and the law, enables the authors of these comics to express fantasies which would otherwise be condemned by “modern” Thai society.

Illegality, Exotism and Acculturation

A few other themes are to be found in the comics selected, these being more directly linked to the position of the ethnic minorities of

Illegality.

The highlanders in the comics are involved in illegal activities. The Hmong in *tao phu khao* and the Yao in *sao doi*

tao produce opium, the Lisu in *doi phi fa* make a living from illegally felling trees in the forest, or are *mu pun* (hired gunmen). There are of course exceptions to these examples: the Lisu in *khao mai liso* simply cultivate rice. In *pla ra wok* we



are told that the mixed ethnic group in question used to make a living from opium poppy cultivation, but that nowadays in line with Thai policy, they cultivate pumpkins, melons, watermelons, cucumbers etc. But it is highly unlikely that the massacre of hundreds of monkeys by the villagers would meet with the approval of the Wildlife Conservation Division of the Royal Forestry Department. As for the Mlabri in “*talap manut*”, it is evident that they in no way conform to any legality outside of their group since they pack up and move out as soon as any foreigners are sighted.

Exotism.

Exotism describes the environmental landscapes, the costumes worn by the highlanders and most particularly the strange and sometimes imaginary practices and customs presented.

In *tao phu khao* we are shown in some detail how the Hmong cultivate the opium poppy and collect the opium before selling it. The beginning of *khao mai liso* is an illustrated manual showing how the Lisu cultivate rice in the mountains using a bamboo rod and their feet. The beautiful Mlabri heroine in “*talap manut*” climbs trees and hunts wild boars with a spear. We have already made mention of the custom pertaining to the *pu chong* (or *khachirada*), the Akha’s love instructor, which is the subject of *pu chong ai phi ba*.

The funerary customs of the highlanders which are so very different from those of Thai Buddhists, are frequently described or alluded to. Amiyo, the young Lisu girl in *doi phi fa* is interred in the manner customary to her tribe. Chuni, the Hmong mother in *tao phu khao* is buried at the foot of a great tree. The funerary customs of the Mlabri are even more original: the body, wrapped in a rattan mat, is suspended from a tree. Once the flesh has completely decomposed leaving only the skeleton, the parents return to share out the bones which they preserve with great care.¹⁰

Few of the rites are described in detail; the Lisu ceremony in honour of the new rice spirit in *khao mai liso*, is an exception to the rule even if the mere glimpse we are given of it still leaves us guessing. As for the recipe in *pla ra wok* - the only “comical” comic - there is a chance that it has been invented. The *pla ra* is a sort of fish which has been fermented in saumure. It is a very popular dish in north-east Thailand and Laos. The author of *pla ra wok* explains that the highlanders who have difficulty in getting fish, prepare their *pla ra* using animals of the forest, and in particular monkeys. The story is about the cunning way in which the highlanders manage to kill hundreds

10. It appears that the author has imagined this custom. See Surin Phukhachon, “*kanfangsop khong klumchon phi tong luang*” (Mlabri burials) *Phuandoenthang* (February 2526) 4:38 pp. 77-9 and Surin Phukachon et.al. *chonklumnoi phao “phi tong luang” nai prathet Thai* (The Mlabri Ethnic Minority in Thailand). The Ethno-Archeological Research Project, Silapakorn University (2525-26: 53-55).

of mondys which periodically ravage their vegetable gardens. The preparation of the *pla ra* is described on the last three pages, the monkey skins being preserved as *pla ra* stock.

Towards Acculturation.

Only the Akha in *pu chong ai phi ba* and the Lisu in *kho mai liso* by the same author, Phot Chaiya, do not seem to have any contact with other ethnic groups. In *tao phu khao*, *sao doi tao* and *pla ra wok*, the foreigners are merchants and bandits who come to buy or steal the highlanders' opium and vegetables. In *tao phu khao*, they are quoted as being Chinese *haw*.

In *doi phi fa*, the foreigner is a young Thai of the Royal Forestry Department by the name of Rawin. He was been wounded by bandits whilst carrying out a survey on the illegal felling of trees when Amiyo, a Lisu girl, comes across him and falls in love with him. But Sime, Amiyo's cousin, a bandit, is jealous and feels threatened. He tries to eliminate the Thai in various ways, but in the end it is Amiyo who is killed by the bullet which was meant for Rawin.

Whilst the story of Rawin and Amiyo appears to be inspired by a Thai film¹¹, the subject of "*talap manut*" reminds us of the theme in the Botswanan film, "The Gods Must Be Crazy", by the South-African producer, Jamie Uys (1980) : an empty Coca-Cola bottle thrown by an aviator out of the aeroplane window over the Kalahari, disrupts the life of a Bushman family. In the "*talap manut*" story about the Mirabri, a lady's powder-box takes the place of the coke bottle. A *phi tong luang* family is living quite peacefully until some smoke in the distance indicates the presence of strangers. The group decides to move further away, but while the men are away looking for a suitable new spot a young women Ngong-ngaeng, goes towards the smoke to see what these "humans" (*phuak manut*), so often spoken about by her husband and father, look like. When she gets there,

11. The film *suphaburut thoranong* (The Haughty Gentleman) by Phairoi Sangworibut (1985) is a love story about a young Yao girl and a civil servant of the Royal Forestry Department.

the camp is deserted, but she finds a powder-box. She sees her reflection in the mirror and imagines that is where the “humans” are hiding. Some time afterwards, Ngong-ngaeng’s husband takes his wife by surprise as she is laughing and talking to the powder-box. He snatches it from her and looks to see a man’s reflection in the mirror. Thinking that it is his wife’s lover hiding in the box, he kills Ngong-ngaeng (Plate 94).

In “*talap manut*” foreigners (members of another ethnic group, Thais, tourists, European ethnologists?) are the source of evil, even if they do not come into direct contact with the Mlabri. Ngong-ngaeng’s father had already told his daughter of “a piece of metal which makes a noise” causing the death of several members of the tribe - the gun, which suggests the possi-



bility of a violent extermination, but the powder-box - another symbol of a foreign culture - shows that even the most banal objects can be mortal. The “Meechai” condoms which the *plara wok* vendor tries to exchange for a hill tribe woman’s watermelons, introduce a peril of a different nature. If we add that the Lisu murderer in *doi phi fa* ends up in prison, one can only conclude that it is primarily the negative aspects of cultural contact which are evoked in comics.

Similar but Different

The *phi tong luang* in the comic “*talap manut*” of the same name, find that the “humans” have monkey-like faces, yet they concede that “humans” and *phi tong luang* have common origins. The reader of Thai comics is undoubtedly convinced that he is different from the highlanders. This enables the author to push violence, sex, immorality and the bizarre. In the same way, whereas Buddhism forbids the taking of an animals life hill tribe men, women and children who believe only in spirits, can take pleasure in the massacre of hundreds of monkeys.

As opposed to certain constraints imposed by the illustrations (not withstanding in fact that one can always, as is the case in *doi phi fa*, dress the Lisu like Thai peasants), the author gains freedom of expression in depicting violence, sex and exotism in particular in their various forms.

At an exhibition on the *phi tong luang* at the “*pata*” Commercial Centre of Phra Pinklao, Bangkok, featuring real Mlabri people brought all the way from Nan, a Thai commented aloud: “After all, they look like us, and if they were dressed like us they could be mistaken for Thais”¹². Naturally enough highlanders do look very much like Thais, but creators of penny-horribles are more interested in depicting their differences, and this no doubt provides the spice their many readers are after.

12. An observation made by a bystander, 19 October, 1984 during my visit to the exhibition.