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## RESEARCH

# Prayoon Chanyawongse's Cartoon Likay: Amalgamating Likay Theatrical Form and Comics into a Unique Thai Genre

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By launching in 1938 a series of adaptations of folktales in comics form, Thai cartoonist Prayoon Chanyawongse established the *Cartoon Likay* genre which places the reader as a member of an audience attending a *Likay* performance. The local theatrical form frames his graphic narratives where scenes of a play performed on a stage continuously alternate with sequences taking place in the vast realms of epics set in the Ayutthaya period. By introducing key *Likay* conventions such as recurring humorous interruptions and asides, Chanyawongse could effectively address contemporary social issues and political topics within traditional folktales. This paper explores several *Cartoon Likay* narratives in the context of the *Likay* theatrical form and the local folktale repertoire to discuss the nature and development of Chanyawongse's signature comics genre.

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**Keywords:** comics; Cartoon Likay; folktale; Likay; Thailand; theatre

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## Introduction: Prayoon Chanyawongse, the King of Thai Cartoon

Even though Prayoon Chanyawongse [1915–1992] is considered in his homeland as the “King of Thai Cartoon” and is “perhaps the most celebrated cartoonist in the early period of Thai cartooning” (Karuchit 2014: 79), the unique *Cartoon Likay* genre he established remains without any international scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> English language sources of

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<sup>1</sup> The term *cartoon* will be used to refer to a stand-alone drawing usually intended for caricature, satire, or humour. *Comics* will be used to refer to a series of pictures juxtaposed in sequences to form strips or longer narratives. *Cartoon Likay*, or its Thai denomination *Katun Likay*, designates a *comics* genre established by Prayoon Chanyawongse. In Thailand, the word *katun*—as the Thai Romanization of the English loanword *cartoon* according to the Royal Thai General System (Katun, n.d.)—usually refers to the comics form and not to a stand-alone drawing.

information on Prayoon Chanyawongse remain scarce: a brief presentation in two academic papers on Thai cartooning by John A. Lent (1997) and Warat Karuchit (2014) and the short yet valuable biographical vignette by Ruben G. Alabastro (2007). The attention Prayoon Chanyawongse has received outside of Thailand focuses primarily on his editorial cartooning which earned the Thai artist international recognition. Prayoon Chanyawongse won the first prize of the International Cartoon for Peace Competition in New York in 1960 for his editorial cartoon entitled *The Last Nuclear Test* (Alabastro 2007), a depiction of Earth breaking apart under a gigantic mushroom cloud. Eleven years later, he was granted the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts in the Philippines for “his use of pictorial satire and humor for over three decades in unswerving defense of the public interest” (Alabastro 2007: 244). Before we explore more closely the *Cartoon Likay* comics genre, a brief overview of Prayoon Chanyawongse's editorial cartooning will provide context on the issue of political censorship which affected all aspects of the graphic production of the socially-engaged Thai cartoonist.

Fully embracing his career of political cartoonist in 1946 (Karuchit 2014; Tanapollerd 1979), Prayoon Chanyawongse regularly addressed the issue of the enormous gap between rich and poor in Thailand, denounced the corruption and abuse of power of local officials, and protested against the misuse of government properties and outdated laws (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). His concern for the welfare of the *ChaoBan* (Thai common folks)—expressed daily in numerous newspapers with wit and humour—resonated with a wide and diverse readership.

At the height of his popularity in the 1950s and 60s (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication), Chanyawongse gained a following which “was said to be larger than the combined circulations of the big publications in Thailand” (Alabastro 2007: 242) as it was common for a village to buy a single issue of a newspaper and to pass it from hand to hand among all villagers (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). But his success gained him the unwelcome attention of the Thai government. On January 31, 1972, the government of self-promoted Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn ordered Chanyawongse to bring an end to his series of cartoons criticizing the military dictatorship in the pages of the *Thai Rath* newspaper

(Chanyavongs 1989). Prayoon Chanyawongse didn't comply. Instead, as an act of resistance, the artist drew Sooklek, his popular and recurring cartoon alter-ego, with his mouth sewn shut in his daily cartoons (Karuchit 2014; Lent 1997). On February 10, 1972, the government ordered an immediate halt to the publication of Prayoon Chanyawongse's political cartoons under penalty of shutting down the *Thai Rath* newspaper. Concerned for the future of his colleagues, Prayoon Chanyawongse stopped creating his political cartoons (Chanyavongs 1989). On February 11, 1972, Prayoon Chanyawongse therefore drew a cartoon explaining various techniques of grafting trees (reproduced in Chanyavongs 1989: 53). As Prayoon Chanyawongse was forced to avoid any overt political criticism until the end of the Thanom martial law period in October 1973, more cartoons—based on his personal experiences in horticulture, fishing or farming—followed on a daily basis, except on Sundays (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication).

Hence, his cartoon production took a new and unique form coined as “verse editorial” (Lent 1997: 93) described as “a montage of drawings within one large panel, which campaigned or instructed in verse on subjects such as plants, gardening, nutrition [or] cooking” (Lent 1997: 93). Entitled *Kabuan Karn Gae Jon* [Mission to Overcome Poverty], his new cartoon series became highly popular during its almost uninterrupted run from 1972 till 1992 (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). A “treasure of local wisdom on food and agriculture” (Charan Homtienthong, as quoted in Srimeekulroj 2015: para. 16) aimed at promoting a self-sufficient living for the poorest Thais, the *Kabuan Karn Gae Jon* series was also unconventional “because of [its] poetic element and the mixture of numerous drawings inside one frame, as well as their sometimes *risqué* nature” (Lent 1997: 93, italic in original). Furthermore, Chanyavongs notes narration in the *Kabuan Karn Gae Jon* cartoons is “done in a folk play improvisation style (Cartoon Li-Kay)” (Chanyavongs 1989: no pagination, abstract in English). Recurring main character of the *Kabuan Karn Gae Jon* cartoon series, Sooklek addresses indeed the readers directly in a presentational style, and with witty wordplays and humorous asides, reminiscent of the popular Thai theatrical form and of the *Cartoon Likay* genre established by Prayoon Chanyawongse in 1938.

Little scholarly attention has been paid to Prayoon Chanyawongse's *Cartoon Likay* narratives resulting from a creative and sophisticated amalgamation with the *Likay* theatrical form whose particular presentational style—facilitating political commentaries—also permeated the artist's editorial cartooning. As literature in English language on Thai history and politics is substantial and readily available, this paper therefore focuses primarily on introducing readers to the lesser-known key cultural elements such as the *Likay* performing art and its specific conventions through a comprehensive literature review (Bowers 1956; Carkin 1984; Possakrisana 1995; Smithies 1975; Sompiboon 2012; Virulrak 1980). As a second step, research explored the existing Thai-language literature on the history and aesthetics of Thai cartooning, including publications on Thai comics (Amornvej 2001; Kurathong 2010; Palitpongpanim 2013) and on Prayoon Chanyawongse (Chanyavongs 1989; Chanyavongs and Chanyavongse 2015; Tanapollerd 1979; Wechanukhroh 1990). The translations in English of Thai-language sources were made predominately by the Translation Services Unit, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, as well as by research assistants. Two direct interviews with Soodrak Chanyavongs, daughter of Prayoon Chanyawongse and secretary of the Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation, were conducted in Bangkok; the first on September 7, 2016 and the second on October 6, 2017.

### ***Likay* Theater, a Thai Performing Art**

*Likay* is a “well-known folk (popular) theatre style in Thailand [whose] performance combines spoken text, dance, song, music, ornate costumes, and decorations” (Sompiboon 2012: 13). The form evolved over several centuries. *Likay* has its roots in *Dikir*, a Muslim chant possibly introduced to Thailand by Muslim immigrants during the Ayutthaya period (Virulrak 1980: 286). The *Dikir* chant was then combined with a Buddhist chant to take on a new form of secular and improvised sketches portraying foreign (to Thailand) mannerisms under the name *Dikay*. After developing into a simple dramatic form known as *yikay sipsonghasa* in the last decade of the 19th century (Virulrak 1980), *Likay* reached its maturity in the first half of the 20th century when it became amalgamated with classical and folk elements of Thai dance-drama (Carkin 1984). *Likay* performances are commonly offered in connection with

Thai traditional celebrations such as funerals, fairs, and special religious ceremonies (Carkin 1984), or at the request of a private individual.

A highly eclectic form of theatre, *Likay* is first and foremost “an improvisational theatre in which improvisation [...] permeates the various performance elements” (Virulrak 1980: 210). The troupe, usually composed of eight to ten actors, meet shortly before the performance begins with the stage manager, or a story teller, who will present them with the outline of the play and their assigned characters (Sompiboon 2012). Drawing upon their specialization in standard role-type characters and upon plots usually based on famous folktales from the *Chakchak Wongwong* repertoire, performers promptly compose their roles and their first lines of dialogue while putting on their make-up and glittering costumes. In the meantime, on the left side of the stage, a five piece orchestra—or *piphat* orchestra—plays a musical prelude to attract and welcome the audience. Whether temporarily erected outdoors for a specific event or part of a formal theatre house, the stage is a standard floor plan on which the only necessary prop is a bench big enough for three people to sit on. The bench is always placed at stage centre, against a backdrop that usually depicts a throne hall (Virulrak 1980) or a forest. Given the relative emptiness of the stage, pantomime also plays an important part in *Likay* performances (Virulrak 1980). Hand props are numerous and might serve a comical purpose like those usually used by clowns. For instance, the clowns might use a toy lightsaber in place of a traditional Ayutthaya-era sword (Sompiboon 2012). This integration of “contemporary themes and modern situations and characters [...] within the basic plot settings of ancient city-states” (Sompiboon 2012: 49) is another key feature to the highly adaptable and constantly evolving theatrical form since the first half of the 20th century.

When the performers are ready, the *ok khaek*—an introductory opening and a specific convention to *Likay*—is performed. An actor puts on a fanciful Indian costume and “uses hand gestures and movements similar to those used in Indian dance” (Sompiboon 2012: 86). This stereotyped Indian character—having a high nose, black hair, beard and moustache—is known as the *khaek*. During the *ok khaek*, the troupe leader also “greet[s] his sponsor and the audience and advertises his troupe” (Virulrak 1980: 297). The play proper then begins. The performers of the first scene appear on the stage and sit on the couch after they had paid their respects to the spectators.

Accompanied by the *piphat* orchestra, the actors introduce their characters, improvise the lyrics in verse on *Likay's* signature melody known as *Ranikloeng*, and act out their song through dance (Possakrisana 1995). Singing and rhyming *ad lib* the performers are also busy thinking of what twist they can next give the plot (Smithies 1975). After each song, the performers then repeat the information from the song in simple speech in order to clarify “what may have been hurried or compressed [...] because of the poetic constraints of verse-making” (Carkin 1984: 145).

The play continues in a rapid succession of short and active scenes (Bowers 1956). The action of a *Likay* play can be interrupted at any time and in several ways. At times, members of the audience will shout suggestions to actors about what they should do next in a scene. The *mae yok*, a matron sponsoring male stars, can also interrupt a scene in order to present monetary rewards and garlands to her favourite performer. Clown characters can make humorous interruptions and “speak directly to audience, both following a script but also making asides on topics such as politics, economics, entertainment and miscellaneous issues in their locality” (Sompiboon 2012: 62). The constant interaction between the audience and the performers—breaking the fourth wall—and the “dialog between established tradition and contemporary concerns” (Carkin 1984: 144) are integral parts of a *Likay* performance. As Sompiboon points out, “[serious] social commentary, such as on politics, economics, sanitation and safe driving, can be made through the semi-improvised, humorous actions in *likay* performances” (Sompiboon 2012: 137, *italic in original*). Sompiboon also mentions how, in the early 1950s, the Thai “government chose to use *likay* as a tool in its anti-communist campaign because of *likay's* loose structure and subversiveness, which can be used to impart political messages, and because *likay* was commoners' favourite form of entertainment” (Sompiboon 2012: 133, *italic in original*).

After the Pacific War, *Likay* suffered from the competition of films and television but regained some popularity in the provinces in the mid 1970s (Carkin 1984). While suffering another low point in the early 1990s, *Likay* regained popularity in 1995 (Sompiboon 2012) and “during the period of Thai classical/traditional theatre revitalization” (Sompiboon 2012: 107) which occurred through the 2000s.

### **From Sawas Jutharop to *Cartoon Likay***

Created by Sawas Jutharop [1911–1950] and published in 1932 and 1933 in the *Siam Rath* newspaper, *Sang Thong* is the first serialized long-form comics in Thailand (Karuchit 2014: 77). *Sang Thong* is an adaptation of the eponymous folktale considered as “one of the most popular [Thai] folktales [and] perhaps the best-known among Thai people” (Nathalang 2000: 9). In his *Sang Thong* comics, Sawas Jutharop recreates—with great liberty—his own version of the tale of prince Sang Thong who gained a golden skin complexion in an enchanted pond (Chadchaidee 2009; Jumsai 2000). *Sang Thong* is a Thai folktale from the *ChakChak WongWong* repertoire, whose stories are “about adventurous and polygynous life of princely heroes” (Nathalang 2000: 1) involving forced exiles, separations, transformations, magical items, conflicts with in-laws and happy endings. Centred “around beings – spirits, gods, or supermen – who, according to legend, lived in an actual area of Thailand” (Carkin 1984: 65), these tales are usually set during the Ayutthaya period [1350–1767 CE] and the numerous wars between the Mon, Burmese and Siamese kingdoms (Smithies 1975). Sawas Jutharop's adaptations of *ChakChak WongWong* tales in comics form introduced elements—such as specific dance positions performed by the characters to underpin their spoken delivery—borrowed from a type of classical dance drama known as *Lakhon* (Palitponganpim 2013). They also starred the popular and recurring character Khun Muen inspired by E.C. Segar's Popeye (Palitponganpim 2013). Even though he kept the closed-eye, the pipe and the jutting chin of Popeye, Jutharop's Khun Muen wore Thai period costume, “with ancient military headgear, and played the role of the clown” (Nawigamune 2000: 139) in the comics of Sawas Jutharop.

Four years younger than Sawas Jutharop, Prayoon Chanyawongse considered the creator of Khun Muen as his ‘big brother’ in the field of comics (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). At the age of 16 or 17, Prayoon Chanyawongse first discovered Sawas Jutharop's comic strips in the newspaper pages used to wrap goods on the market (Chanyavongs 2016, personal communication). He subsequently developed a passion for comics, drawing Sawas Jutharop's character Khun Muen at the request of his classmates (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). After graduating

secondary school and facing rejections from various newspapers, 19-year old Prayoon Chanyawongse saw his first cartoon published in the *Dao Nakorn* newspaper in 1934. Three years later, he was hired as a headline writer for the *Prachamit* newspaper (Alabastro 2007), producing illustrations for various columns (Chanyavongs 2016, personal communication).

With the guidance of his former teacher Ob Jayavas, an influential writer and humorist of the time, Prayoon Chanyawongse entered a circle of prominent Thai journalists, poets, illustrators and cartoonists that included Sawas Jutharop. According to Chanyavongs (2016, personal communication), his mentor Ob Jayavas recommended the young artist in 1938 to Malai Chupinit, editor of the newly founded *Suphaphurut* newspaper. Prayoon Chanyawongse then started his first long-form comics, an adaptation of the local folktale *Chanthakorop* serialized in *Suphaphurut* in late 1938 and early 1939 (Srimaneekulroj 2015). Even though Prayoon Chanyawongse adapted a popular folktale in comics form on the model set by Sawas Jutharop six years earlier, he wished to propose something different. Whereas Sawas Jutharop incorporated some *Lakhon* theatrical elements in his long-form comics, Prayoon Chanyawongse opted for a complete amalgamation of his graphic narratives with the *Likay* theatrical form as *Likay* was highly popular at the time (Chanyavongs 2016, personal communication).

### ***Chanthakorop* and the Establishment of the *Cartoon Likay* Genre**

Prayoon's first long-form comics narrative presents itself as a *Likay* performance of the folktale of Prince Chanthakhorop (Chanyavongs 2016, personal communication) to which the reader is invited to attend, facing the stage as if sharing the point of view of the intradiegetic audience. Each instalment of the long-form comic strip series was usually composed of two tiers of panels; the first tier formed by three panels and the second tier by two panels (Chanyawongse & Chanyavongs 2015). The first panel of the upper tier usually introduced the title *Chanthakarop* and, more interestingly, had at times a member of the *Likay* troupe directly addressing the reader—and the fictional audience—to make a humorous comment, replicating one of the most important conventions of the *Likay* theatrical form.

The inaugural strip (reproduced in Tanapollerd 1979: 83) is composed of two tiers. In the first panel, the *ok khaek* is performed next to an introductory caption (**Figure 1**). The *khaek* swirls on stage while addressing his lines towards the reader, and the still invisible intradiegetic audience. Only later in the graphic narrative will the intradiegetic audience be shown; a group of *mae yok* are portrayed crying over the fate of Chanthakorop (Chanyavongs 2016, personal communication). In the third panel, the character of Sooklek appears, sitting on a bench in front of a tree. Sooklek, who will later become Prayoon Chanyawongse's popular and recurring alter-ego in his cartoon production, is introduced in *Chanthakorop* as the leader of the *Likay* troupe (Tanapollerd 1979: 190). With his lips and eyelashes apparently accentuated with make-up and wearing a *Likay* costume and a headband with feather, he introduces the play as an intradiegetic narrator, facing reader and audience. Shifting from presentational address to representational acting, Sooklek leaves his bench in the second tier and walks in a naturalistic rural landscape far too vast to fit on a



**Figure 1:** Inaugural strip of the *Cartoon Likay* adaptation of *Chanthakorop* by Thai cartoonist Prayoon Chanyawongse, published in late 1938 in the newspaper *Suphaphburut*. Reproduced from the 1940 collection *Katun Likay Rueang Chanthakorop Phak 1*, Samnak Ngan Nai Metta, Bangkok. Illustration provided to the author by Soodrak Chanyavongs. © Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation.

stage; he enters the fantasy realms of the folktale. While walking in the direction of an isolated hermitage, he performs dance gestures as he starts to play his role of prince Chanthakorop.

The first part of the original folktale tells the adventure of prince Chanthakorop who went to study under a hermit. His formation completed and before heading back home, Chanthakorop receives a casket from the sage who urges the prince to keep it closed till he reaches his palace. On his way home, Chanthakorop breaks his vow and opens the casket in the forest. A beautiful woman named Mora suddenly appears out of the box. The prince falls in love with her and asks Mora to marry him. Nearby, a bandit is struck by the beauty of Mora and decides to kill Chanthakorop. During the fight, the prince asks Mora to hand him his sword. Undecided as to who she prefers between the prince and the thief, she places the sword between them. With the handle pointing towards the robber, the latter grabs the sword with ease and kills Chanthakorop (Chadchaidee 2009).

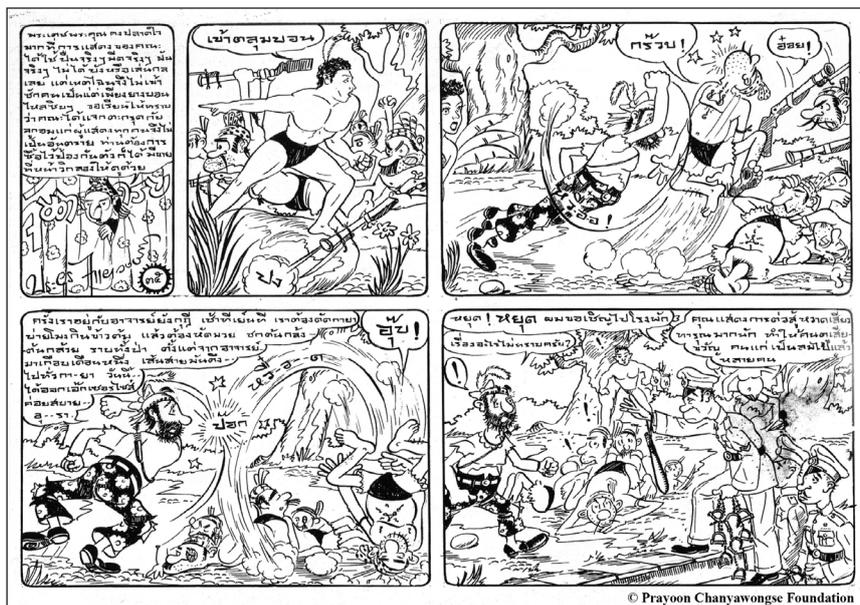
Prayoon Chanyawongse faithfully adapts the storyline of the first part of the *ChakChak WongWong* folktale which was a "favorite *Likay* story" (Virulrak 1980: 60) for many Thais. He also introduces many humorous elements with the assistance of his former teacher Ob Jayvasu (Wechanukhroh 1990) as well as *risqué* elements such as Mora appearing in what could be a modern 'drop back bandeau swimsuit' in the twelfth strip (reproduced in Chanyavongs and Chanyavongse 2015: 17).<sup>2</sup> The comics adaptation features predominantly the adventures of Chanthakorop set in the vast and fictional realms of the *Chanthakorop* folktale, as a framed story. Throughout the narrative, Prayoon Chanyawongse plays with important conventions of *Likay*, constantly breaking the (intradiegetic) fourth wall. For instance, in the thirteenth strip (reproduced in Chanyavongs and Chanyavongse 2015: 17), the first panel shows

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<sup>2</sup> The book *Sooklek/Prayoon Chanyawongse* (2015) is edited as a tumble format. The first half of the book is dedicated to the character Sooklek and the second half, inverted, to his creator Prayoon Chanyawongse. The page numbers of the latter half are italicized while page numbers of the former are not. I will use the same system in this paper in order to locate the pages properly. Let's also note that Prayoon Chanyawongse was numbering his strips, numbers I'm referring to when I mention, for instance, "the twelfth strip."

a presenter in front of a stage curtain, facing the reader, and announcing that the ticket costs 3 *satang* [a *satang* is one-hundredth of a Thai baht] and that the electric fan will be turned on, free of charge. The second panel of the tier brings us back to the meeting between Mora and Chanthakorop in the fictitious world of the folktale.

Apart from these presentational panels regularly reminding the intradiegetic audience—and the reader—of the theatrical nature of the narrative, “actors” in the comics also can be interrupted during their performance by other intradiegetic characters who aren't members of the troupe. The twenty-fifth strip (reproduced in Chanyavongs and Chanyavongse 2015: 12) depicts the violent fight between Chanthakorop and the bandit who, in Prayoon Chanyawongse's version, is assisted by half a dozen henchmen (Figure 2). Thanks to powerful punches evocative of Popeye's blows, Chanthakorop dominates the struggle until the performance is suddenly interrupted by policemen in the last panel of the second tier. In the lower right corner of the panel, three policemen in 1930s uniforms climb on the



**Figure 2:** The twenty-fifth strip of the *Cartoon Likay* adaptation of *Chanthakorop* by Thai cartoonist Prayoon Chanyawongse, published in the late 1938 in the newspaper *Suphaphurut*. Reproduced from *Sooklek/Prayoon Chanyawongse* (Chanyavongs and Chanyavongse 2015: 12). © Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation.

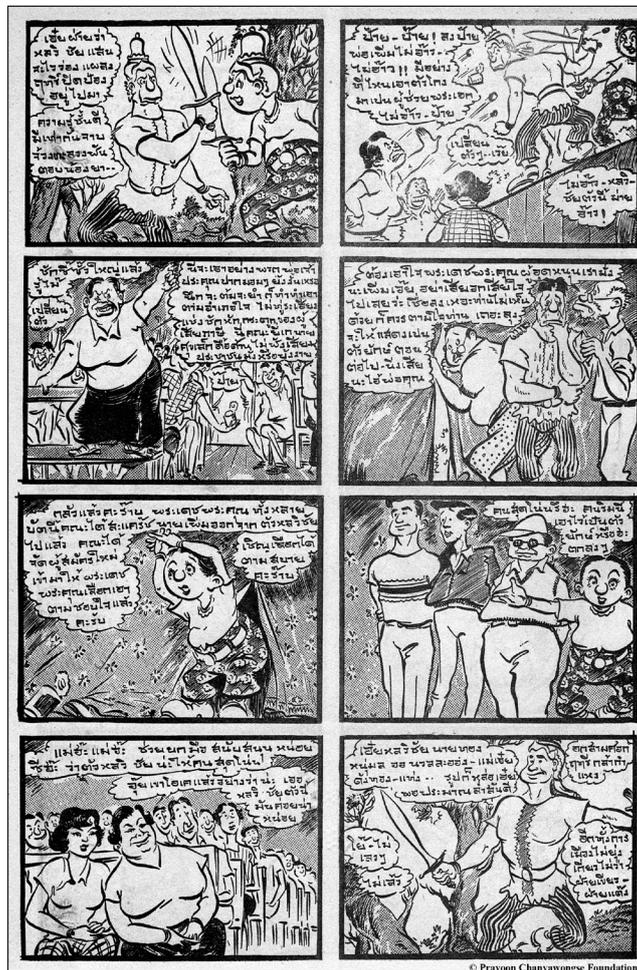
exposed stage on which the fantasy realms of the folktale—a deep forest with trees and bushes—seem to be laid. Sooklek and the other actors wonder why the policemen urge them to stop the performance. An officer, holding numerous handcuffs, answers that the turmoil of the fight caused the fainting of elderly members of the (intradiegetic) audience.

According to Soodrak Chanyavongs (2016, personal communication), the comics adaptation of *Chanthakorop* quickly grew in popularity during its serialization in the *Suphaphurut* newspaper in early 1939. Keeping the momentum going and establishing a comics genre where adventurous folktales are framed by a *Likay* performance, Prayoon went on to adapt dozens of other works from Thai traditional literature (Tanapollerd 1979) in *Cartoon Likay* series which “became hits, especially among people in the provinces” (Alabastro 2007: 243). Chanyavongs (2017, personal communication) points out that *Cartoon Likay* narratives were popular within all sections of the Thai population, including the working class and the elite. Readers were eager to discover, with each new installment of his comics series, which social and political issues would be tackled by Prayoon Chanyawongse. Critical to their success was the sophisticated use of *Likay* rhymes and versification because readers wanted to see “how he would use *Likay* poetry and wordplays to make comments about politics in an indirect and humorous way” (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication).

### **Development of the *Cartoon Likay* Genre and of its Political Commentary**

Building on the model set by Sawas Jutharop with his character Khun Muen, Prayoon Chanyawongse uses Sooklek as a recurring intradiegetic narrator and *Likay* performer from one tale to the next. Prayoon Chanyawongse, like E. C. Segar in his pre-Popeye *Thimble Theatre*, also maintained a recurring cast of actors to perform in his various *Cartoon Likay* stories as the members of Sooklek's troupe. Physical appearances and personality traits of the troupe's members are based directly on Prayoon's friends, most of them journalists (Wechanukhroh 1990). The character of Mae Jew—a *mae yok* sponsoring Sooklek with whom she fell in love—became a favourite recurring character (Tanapollerd 1979). As part of the intradiegetic audience assisting the *Likay* performances by the troupe of Sooklek, Mae Jew will regularly interrupt the play to offer garlands to her beloved actor.

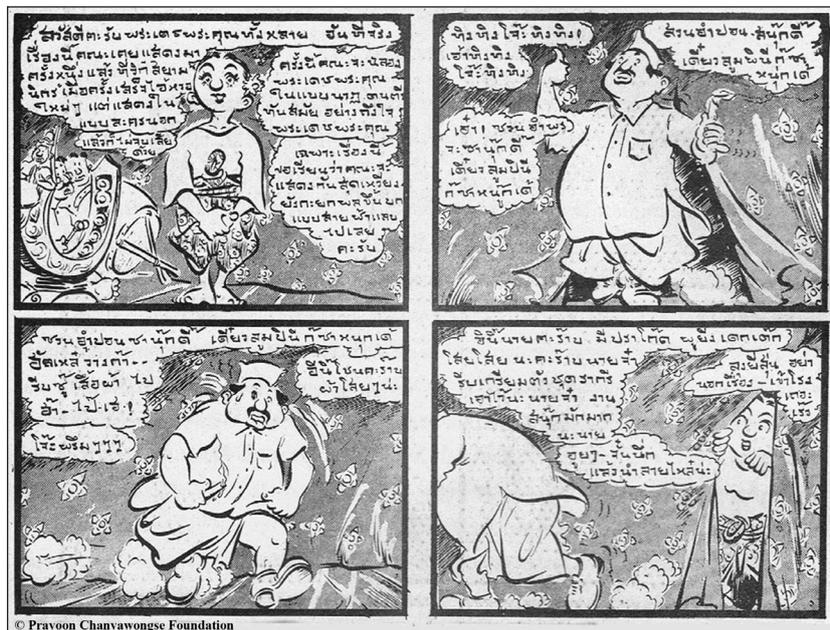
The intradiegetic audience sometimes interrupts the play when it is not pleased by the casting. For instance, in the *Cartoon Likay* titled *Honwichai Kawi* first serialized in the early 1950s, members of the audience interrupts the performance because they consider that the actor playing the part of Honwichai doesn't look handsome enough to portray the hero (**Figure 3**). Sooklek, as the troupe leader, decides to dismiss the actor and to present the audience with a line-up of male performers. Meanwhile, troupe members comfort the ousted actor backstage, an area where *Cartoon Likay* readers are invited on occasion. A good-looking man is selected by the



**Figure 3:** Forty-fifth and forty-sixth strips of the *Cartoon Likay* adaptation of *Honwichai Kawi* by Thai cartoonist Prayoon Chanyawongse, published in the newspaper *Pim Thai* circa 1950. Reproduced from the collection of *Honwichai Kawi* (Chanyawongse 1985: 24). © Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation.

audience and the play resumes from the scene where it had stopped, returning to the fantasy realms of the folktale *Honwichai Kawi*. The dismissed actor will reappear later in the performance, playing the part of a terrifying giant.

Serialized in the newspaper *Pim Thai* in 1950 and 1951 (Tanapollerd 1979: 192), the *Honwichai Kawi* comics narrative falls into the *Cartoon Likay* genre, incorporating the following elements: a piphat orchestra in the first panel, the introduction of the *Likay* play by troupe manager Sooklek, the *ok khaek* introductory opening (**Figure 4**), the constant shift from presentational and representational acting, the aesthetic of interruption, and the use of *Bot Rong Likay* [*Likay* lyrics] and versification (Wechanukhroh 1990). Sixteenth long-form comics of Prayoon Chanyawongse, *Honwichai Kawi* merges the *Suakho Khamchan* dramatic poem composed during the second part of the seventeenth century (Bee, Brown, Chitkasem and Herbert 1989; Jumsai 2000) with a later version written by King Rama II [r. 1809–1824] as a *Lakhon* dance drama under the title *Honwichai Kawi*. The tale recounts the friendship between an orphan tiger cub named Honwichai and an orphan calf named Kawi.



**Figure 4:** Inaugural strip of the *Cartoon Likay* adaptation of *Honwichai Kawi* by Thai cartoonist Prayoon Chanyawongse, published in the newspaper *Pim Thai* in 1950. Reproduced from the collection of *Honwichai Kawi* (Chanyawongse 1985: 2). © Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation.

Transformed into humans by a hermit, the unlikely duo sets off on an adventure that will lead them to slay a giant, save a princess hidden in a drum, and ultimately kill an evil king and defeat the army of Waiyathat, the widowed queen's revengeful nephew (Chadchaidee 2009). In the *Cartoon Likay* version drawn by Prayoon Chanyawongse, the cruel nephew Waiyathat is played by an actor that is drawn to look like Adolf Hitler. Indeed, with themes of solidarity, bravery, integrity, morality and authoritarian power, the folktale *Chanthakorop* offers itself as a propitious metaphor of the dark years of Second World War.

In his introduction to the 1985 collection of *Honwichai Kawi*, Prayoon Chanyawongse (1985: 1) writes that he wished to evoke events which occurred between 1935 and 1947 in this specific *Cartoon Likay* narrative. Prasert Palitponganpim (2013: 37) notes that the *Cartoon Likay* adaptation of *Honwichai Kawi* provides a good picture of Thailand in that era by evoking the 1932 Siamese Revolution and the establishment of the parliamentary constitution, problems of corruption and censorship, political issues, and price increases related to the Pacific War. For instance, in the sequence where the hermit shelters the starving cub and calf, the sage addresses the question of the corruption of politicians who take money from impoverished people. After another sequence where the calf and cub are portrayed in a pathetic condition, Sooklek interrupts the play to address concurrently reader and audience (Chanyawongse 1985: 13). Sooklek mentions that the Ministry of Propaganda made the request for *Likay* troupes to avoid performances of sad stories during these troubled times. The Ministry, he says, suggests performing only light-hearted and funny plays with a moral content. After considering the Ministry of Propaganda's request, the performance resumes but at the hermit's hut. Starting with a more light-hearted tone, the sequence soon shifts to an overtly melodramatic scene opposing—with wit and playfulness—the request made by the Ministry a dozen panels before. An independent spirit who refused “to be paid a salary for being a cartoonist [as he preferred] to be freelancer” (Alabastro 2007: 242), Prayoon Chanyawongse declared: “No one can give me orders under any circumstances. No one can change my idea” (as quoted in Alabastro 2007: 242). It's only when he faced the menace of the closure of the *Thai Rath* newspaper that he preferred to stop overt political criticism until the end of the Thanom martial law period in October 1973.

With Thailand thrown into turmoil by dictatorship and violent crackdowns throughout the 1970s, Prayoon Chanyawongse decreased his production of *Cartoon Likay* narratives to dedicate himself to political cartooning and his *Kabuan Karn Gae Jon* series which he considered particularly necessary in those troubled times (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). If Prayoon Chanyawongse created 34 long-form comics—most of these stories serialized in newspapers and written in the *Cartoon Likay* genre—from 1938 till 1977 (Tanapoller 1979), the Thai cartoonist created only few other long-form comics between 1977 and his passing in 1992 (Chayavongs, personal communication, 2017). As *Likay's* popularity suffered from competition of films and television in the 1960s and early 1970s, the appeal for the *Cartoon Likay* genre slowly suffered the same fate (Chanyavongs 2017, personal communication). Ultimately the *Cartoon Likay* genre and the particular form of the *verse editorial* didn't outlive their inventive and prolific creator.

## Conclusions

Prayoon Chanyawongse adapted dozens of works from Thai traditional literature in highly successful long-form comics series from the late 1930s until his passing in 1992. Essential to the success of his adaptations was the artist's novel choice to frame most of his graphic narratives as *Likay* plays. The popularity of *Likay* in the mid-twentieth century, the rapid succession of short and active scenes fitting the episodic publication of the narrative as newspaper strips, and *Likay's* aesthetic of interruption allowing the constant back and forth between period adventurous folktales and contemporary social issues, can be seen as key elements which appealed to the creative cartoonist. The sophisticated use of *Likay* rhymes also appealed to readers eager to discover how the satirical artist would use *Likay* poetry and humorous wordplays to make comments about politics in an indirect way. If in the early 1950s the Thai "government chose to use *likay* as a tool in its anti-communist campaign because of *likay's* loose structure and subversiveness" (Sompiboon 2012: 133), Prayoon Chanyawongse similarly used the specific theatrical form in his graphic narratives to tackle political and social issues with wit.

Through his *Cartoon Likay* stories, he expressed his views on the enormous gap between rich and poor in Thailand and his concern for the welfare of his underprivileged compatriots. He also denounced the corruption and abuse of power of local officials. Furthermore, by adapting the *Likay* version of the *Honwichai Kawi* folktale into an apt allegory of the dark years of Second World War, Prayoon Chanyawongse offered a vivid depiction of the then-recent history of his country. The conventions of the eclectic theatrical form—which “allows many performances elements from various entertainments to co-exist” (Virulrak 1980: 290)—were amalgamated into a comics hybrid form to give birth to a unique and remarkable genre under the playful mind of Prayoon Chanyawongse.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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