

# Challenging *Traiphum*: Sunthorn-phu's *Phra Aphaimanee*

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Until concepts of geographical reality emerged in Bangkok in the first half of the nineteenth century in the wake of the more intensive interactions with westerners, Siamese perceptions of space were predominantly informed by a cosmology expressed in the *Traiphum* (literally: the three worlds), a cosmography that was, at once, confirmed and challenged by ideas of local guardians, mountain spirits and ancestor spirits. In circles of the successive courts, *Traiphum* had been regarded one of the most important sacred texts; its composition, changing shape several times, had been overseen by kings since the thirteenth century through the eighteenth century. Knowledge of space that was, directly or indirectly, grounded on the *Traiphum* must have been widespread in all levels of society, witness, for instance, the mural paintings in many temples.

*Traiphum* texts are of various forms, yet they remain within the distinct genre of Buddhist cosmography, focusing on the assumptions that the cosmos is a space consisting of three worlds and that the beings in each of the three levels are there based on their karma in their previous lives. In terms of authority the most significant *Traiphums* are *Samutphap traiphum chabap krung Thonburi* (Illustrated Manuscript of the *Traiphum*:Thonburi version) supervised by King Taksin (in 1776 and 1778) and *Traiphum* commissioned by King Rama I (in 1802). King Taksin's versions present a number of maps of the cosmos, illustrated by longer and shorter descriptions and toponyms. King Rama I's version is the most detailed one, consisting of long narratives; the King wanted the *Traiphum* to present the definite (and hence authoritative) cosmology to his subjects.

However, some 70 years later, in 1867, i.e. at the end of the rule of Rama IV, Siamese knowledge of space as prescribed and laid down in *Traiphum* was replaced by another cosmography, the *Kitjanukit*: *Traiphum* could no longer answer the questions and issues raised by the Siamese elite (intellectuals) and was unable to account for the new insights of space, time and power that had been developed in Bangkok and beyond. These new insights were the result of the intensive contacts which Siamese courtiers – political as well as religious leaders - entertained with westerners, who also inspired the Siamese literati who managed to operate more or less outside of court circles.

How did the shift from *Traiphum* to *Kitjanukit* take place? How to describe this paradigm shift? How to analyze and describe the movements towards a new authoritative cosmography, representation of a cosmology that is held together by some central concepts of space and time in spite of a great heterogeneity?

Among the contemporary texts, *Phra Aphaimanee*, composed by Sunthorn-phu (he started the first few chapters around 1821, continued the rest around 1837), is one of

the most distinctive narratives that, clearly written under the umbrella of *Traiphum*, showed that there is more on this earth than the explanations in the cosmography of *Traiphum*. Laying out the space of the world in which the protagonists of *Phra Aphaimanee* are wandering around, the narrative tries to come to terms with the British presence in particular. In its presentation, the British operated from a place called Langka - and Langka is a place with heavy connotations in Siamese cosmology: it has been the center of Buddhism since Sukhothai, and it is the dwelling place of Ravana, the demonic enemy of Rama, the main hero in *Ramakien*, the 'national epic' of the Siamese. This very Langka is now ruled by the British - a group of people who are not even mentioned in the *Traiphum* - and has become the center of life in this world. Obviously, the British presence in Langka affected Sunthorn-phu's perception of the world, the cosmos. A description and an analysis of his explorations and redefinitions of space in *Phra Aphaimanee* should serve as a concrete illustration of how the Siamese elite and literati were forced to challenge the authority of the cosmography laid out in *Traiphum* and how Rama I's prestigious presentation of the world was bound to be replaced by *Kitjanukit*.