

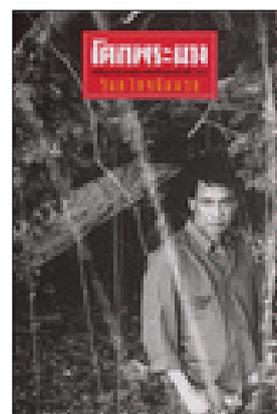
ThaiFiction

khoak phranang

WIMON SAINIMNUAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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At the end of the tenth lunar month, the water from upstream rose as the wind turned cold. At first, it flew languidly, yet looked mighty. Then the stream grew stronger and murky with mud. By the middle of the eleventh month, the water from the sea surged too and the water level rose steadily until the river overflowed its banks and water crept under the houses on stilts and spread out over the fields.

The villagers looked at the river and could but sigh. Even though this year the current wasn't very strong, they weren't sure it wouldn't be stronger than in previous years. They got ready to move things to higher land. Some proceeded to enlarge existing hillocks to accommodate the animals they would confine there until the waters receded. They did this because after a year's tenancy, the abbot of the Khoak Phranang temple had forbidden anyone to bring their animals to the temple grounds. He feared the temple would be littered with their droppings and become redolent of unhappy smells and present a mess to the guests who came from everywhere to visit it.

The abbot told the villagers that 'the temple is not a refugee centre for animals' and 'those pigs and dogs and

cows and buffalos are messy and would damage the prestige of the temple. Our guests would say we people of Khoak Phranang don't know how to keep things in order, we don't know how to ensure public health...'

The year Abbot Nian made that announcement, the water from upstream was so fierce that several villagers didn't react in time. Among them was Kharm. He had no other option than to shift his pigs and buffalos to the hillock of the banyan tree, a sacred place, and this was taken as an insult to its guardian spirit. The guardian spirit punished him by having his four-year-old son drown in front of his eyes. But then eventually Kharm saw the error of his ways and became the medium of the spirit of the banyan tree, and from then on he had prospered and earned the respect of almost everyone up until now.

The story of Kharm or *Jao Phor* Kharm was a good lesson for everybody to learn about how to win over natural calamities and over the calamities that come from defying the guardian spirits.

In later years, all the villagers had thus taken their precautions against flooding without too much worry, except when too much or too little water ruined or destroyed the rice crop.

Bualoy, a young man with a thickset body, a dark complexion and a sharp face, was in a similar position. He had a hillock at the end of his rice field just like many other families and on it grew a banyan tree, whose seeds some bird had dropped there, just as in the case of Jao

Phor Kharm's. But, luckily for him, there was no resident spirit in it to get him into trouble. As soon as the water rose, he got ready to transfer his domestic animals there without further ado.

He looked at the watercourse and reckoned that this year the water would be unpredictable, that is, he wasn't sure how much of it there would be. He and the other villagers had the same chance to lose their crops as to have them bountiful on the years when there wasn't too much water.

He prayed there wouldn't be too much water. If the rice was spared this year, his family's situation would improve somewhat after several years of ups and downs, ever since he had married Fueangfa.

It should be a good omen, he thought with pleasure: this year, his female buffalo was pregnant and would give birth in the first lunar month; and what was even better, he himself would have a second child – let it be a boy, he thought agreeably. Fueangfa was due next month. Let it happen, any day. He had already asked for medicine from Jao Phor Kharm and queued up for half a day at the Reverend Man-eater's shrine for a bottle of consecrated water. He was ready and, believing in spirits and monks as he did, there shouldn't be any disaster to strike his family for sure.

Now everything was ready.

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***Khoak Phranang* is the third volume of Wimon Sainimnuan's masterful quartet of the same name that pits fraudulent practitioners of religion and magic against one another to better exploit popular credulity.**

Wimon, born 1958, is a foremost, if controversial, Buddhism-inspired Thai novelist and short story writer. Through his punchy writings, he pursues a double reflection on the nature of the individual and the social forces that mould and maim it. His novel on cloning, *Immortal*, won him the SEA Write Award in the year 2000. All of these novels are available in English on thaifiction.com only.