

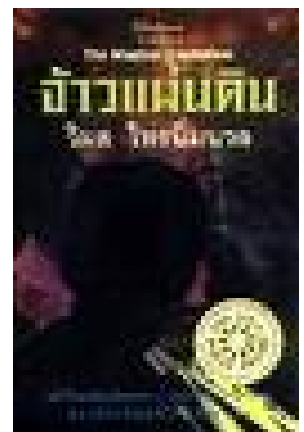
Thai Fiction

lord of the land

WIMON SAINIMNUAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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For three days now the sky had been dark with rain clouds. There had been no sign of rain when the strangers had come to see Kharm, medium of the Khoak Phranang district, but now, at past two in the morning, it was more humid by the hour. There was no wind. Leaves didn't stir. Even the chickens didn't sleep.

In the darkness of night, the headlights of a car swept the road leading to the district temple. Just past the big banyan tree, the car reduced speed then turned into a narrow shortcut to the left.

'There, that's the banyan tree where the spirit lives,' said the sixty-year-old monk.

'It looks mysterious,' replied the much younger car driver.

'That's why people believe there's something sacred about it I suppose.'

'What about you, Father? Do you believe in it too?'

The monk was quiet, searching for an enlightened answer for himself, which once again proved to be elusive. 'Hard to say... What about you, Kamhaeng?'

'I think it depends on what people believe. If they believe there's a spirit, then there is. If not, there isn't.'

'But is it true?' the monk asked.

Kamhaeng was quiet, thinking of an answer, but felt that the world was too ambiguous to allow for any certainty.

‘I’m not from here. I don’t know much besides what you’ve told me, so I don’t know what to say. It doesn’t hurt to believe there is a spirit,’ he answered, initially to agree with what he thought was the monk’s point of view, but then added: ‘If we don’t interfere with what others believe, there’s no harm done, is there?’

The monk stifled a sigh and mumbled almost to himself, ‘I’m not sure about that at all.’

‘Why not?’

‘Even if we don’t interfere with what others believe, in my personal experience it isn’t for sure that there’s no harm done.’

The driver laughed dismissively. ‘Maybe you’re right, Father. Sometimes doing nothing brings trouble. Believing or not believing isn’t important, what’s important is to behave as most people do, and take advantage of the situation as best you can. I think Kharm the medium is rather good at that sort of thing, don’t you think, Father?’

The monk, feeling increasingly annoyed, didn’t answer.

The car drove on. As it reached the hillock where the banyan tree stood it had to stop because a strange creature emerged from the roadside and stood in front of the car as if it knew no one would dare harm it.

‘What’s that?’ the monk asked as he stared ahead.

Kamhaeng peered ahead. ‘Looks like a monitor lizard to me,’ he answered.

‘They’re brave these days aren’t they?’

Kamhaeng gave a toot on his horn. The lizard lifted its head and flicked out its tongue in challenge.

‘Must be a sacred lizard if it’s not afraid of us!’ the monk said resentfully. Kamhaeng laughed, amused. ‘There’s such a thing as a sacred lizard?’

‘Why not? There are sacred snakes. Why not sacred lizards?’

‘That’s the first I’ve heard about it,’ Kamhaeng said, laughing. ‘A medium raising lizards...’

‘They’re the same thing I suppose.’

‘But who’d kneel down to such a creature?’

‘Kneel down or not, I see the medium is bloated with all sorts of offerings. Didn’t you notice it when you made an appointment for me?’

Kamhaeng smiled and said jokingly, ‘I reckon I’m a believer already. People in this district are like nobody else and nobody else is like them either.’

‘They don’t know how to use their heads, this lot,’ the monk uttered. ‘Just use them to grow hair. They blindly believe anything, always ready to prostrate themselves, no matter what, even to a monitor lizard.’

‘No harm done,’ Kamhaeng said genially. ‘Just hoping for some reward, some good luck, it’s worth it...’

‘It’s the same with that damn medium! His mask must be torn away and he must be exposed,’ the monk said wrathfully, ‘otherwise he’ll keep on making himself fat by deceiving the village folks.’

The car drove by some warehouses and workers’ shacks, past huge cattle sheds and a wide expanse of lawn, and came to the thick concrete wall surrounding the medium’s house. The car headlights showed marble columns bearing on top the impressive inscription ‘Residence of Jao Phor Kharm’.

‘So he calls himself *jao phor*^{*}, now, does he?’ the monk remarked with a note of envy.

Kamhaeng didn’t want to interfere in personal matters. He drove through the gate and stopped the car on the concrete drive in front of the house.

As soon as the engine stopped, the monk took a deep breath, looked up at the platform of the house and after a while said, ‘Let’s go.’ They stood in front of the car. Kamhaeng was a tall, lanky man of about thirty, with angular features and a two-inch scar at the corner of his mouth. He wore jeans, a t-shirt and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and shiny leather shoes. The monk was thickset but looked gaunt, his robes wound tight around him. They stood waiting for a man coming down from the house.

The man was of medium build, with short hair and a t-shirt, kaki trousers and a belt with a police buckle. ‘Upstairs, please,’ he said.

The visitors followed him. Before going up the stairs, they saw another man reclining in a rocking chair under the platform of the house, with one leg resting on a small bench. The space below the house was unlit, so it wasn’t possible to see whether he was asleep or awake, but his stillness and that of the rocking chair seemed to indicate the former.

The monk felt he knew him and couldn’t help turning around.

‘You go on by yourself, Father, you can talk more freely,’ said Kamhaeng.

‘I have no secrets,’ Father Thongma answered.

* Guardian spirit; also, very influential person of a district

‘Let me stretch my limbs for a while, I’ll join you later,’ Kamhaeng told him.

The monk nodded, then turned to look at the young man in the rocking chair with curiosity just as the young man lit up a match. In the glare he saw a dark sad face but still couldn’t place the man.

The monk followed the other man upstairs, walked across the large outer balcony to an inner landing on the left. Here stood a set of mother-of-pearl sofas glittering under the candlelight. The monk was motioned to sit.



Lord of the land completes Wimon Sainimnuan’s masterful quartet *Khoak Phranang* 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.