

Arts & culture

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When Kukrit was young, his mother and his relatives liked to call him in and tell him to read stories or old Thai literature for them. Kukrit would read "Khun Chang Khun Phan", a well-known story about the life and times of the late Ayutthaya period. He read out loud, without really understanding its meaning.

"I just recited it like a parrot. Only when I grew up did I come to appreciate its significance and beauty," he once said. "If you are born a Thai but have not yet read 'Khun Chang Khun Phan' your Thainess is incomplete."

The language from "Khun Chang Khun Phan" sank into his memory so that he was able to write beautiful prose later on. A chapter of "Khun Chang Khun Phan" called "Kamnerd Phlai-ngarm" (The Birth of Phlai-ngarm) is recognised as one of the most beautiful writings in the Thai language.

Later he was inspired to write a book about "Khun Chang Khun Phan", explaining its plot and its meaning in verse.

Thai life and culture had not changed much between the late Ayutthaya era and the reign of King Mongkut, a period spanning more than 200 years.

As a result, as Kukrit explained in his book, if one read "Khun Chang Khun Phan", one would be able to understand everything that was Thai during the late Ayutthaya period and the earlier Rattanakosin period.

Life started to change during the reign of King Chulalongkorn when Western influences began to have an impact on Thai society. Kukrit undertook to depict this change between the late 19th century and the early 20th century with his classic work, "The Four Reigns".

It was Kukrit, former prime minister and a staunch royalist, who pointed out that the old Thai people identified their life span with the reign of the Thai kings, not with any other particular epoch. By comparison, Bill Clinton, the former United States president, identifies himself with the generation of "baby-boomers" born after World War II.

In "The Four Reigns", Kukrit chronicled the life of a Thai lady, Ploi, whose life spanned the reigns of King Chulalongkorn, King Vajiravuth, King Prajadipok and King Ananda.



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Ploi witnessed the changes in the different reigns, which helped formed her thinking and values. It was an order that kept Thai life together.

The novel, based on a true story, ends with Ploi receiving the news of the sudden demise of King Ananda. Completely shattered by the loss of this old order, she cannot cope and passes away shortly afterward.

Kukrit would not attempt to use his literary skill until he was in his forties.

He wrote "The Four Reigns" as a series published in *Siam Rath*, the newspaper he founded, in the 1940s. His language flowed freely with Thai idioms and a Thai frame of thought. When he wrote "The Four Reigns", he said it was like somebody was whispering the story in his ear.

Kukrit was inspired to write "Lai Chivit" (The Many Lives), another literary classic, while having a drink with friends. The idea was to write about the lives of different people who end up in the same boat, which capsizes, bringing about their deaths.

Before Kukrit wrote his novels, he went back to the old classics such as Chao Phya Phrakhang's "Sam Kok" (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and "Rajathiraj" (The King of All Kings). He would read passages from these works out loud until he understood their style, their expressions, their temperament and their rhythm, before embarking on writing of his own. Kukrit felt his best novel was "When the Burmese Lost Their Country". It was this work that gave him his place as Thailand's foremost prose stylist.

Kukrit's writing is full of life and highly entertaining. More importantly, as a writer, he has a sense of humour. When he wrote "Jo Cho, The Ever-Lasting Prime Minister", he sought to write a version of "The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms" of his own, but it was also clear that he was making fun of Field Marshall Plaek Phibulsongkhram, the prime minister at the time, in a subtle way. He could make a difficult subject easy to understand for the common reader.

More than a decade after his death, Kukrit's books are still available in every bookstore, with a constant rollout of reprints and new editions. ■