



Book Review

Rujeeluck Seelakate*

Suphasit Son Ying Phinit

Author Wanwivat Rattanam,
Ph.D.

First Edition September 2022.

224 pages, 165 baht

Bangkok, Thailand: Sathaporn
Books.

ISBN 978-616-00-4607-2

*Suphasit Son Ying Phinit*¹, literally “*Reflection on Women Etiquette Book*”, is an essay by Dr. Wanwivat Rattanam treating *Suphasit Sorn Ying* (*Women Etiquette Book*) as corpus. This 224 page book presents itself as a literature study companion and also amuch-detailed reading response of *Suphasit Son Ying*. The treatise *Suphasit* is divided into five main chapters, the writer’s acknowledgements and forewords written by the publishing house’s editorial team; Dr. Cholada Ruengruglikit, professor

* Ph.D. candidate, Doctoral School of French and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Arts, Sorbonne University.

¹ In order to avoid confusion, *Suphasitsit Son Ying Pinit* will be referred to as *Suphasit* from thus.

emerita of Thai language, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University and Rattanam's lecturer in her alma mater; and Ratipol Opascharoenkit, the illustrator, explaining the book cover design and his interpretation of *Suphasit* and *Suphasit Son Ying* (quite a novelty for Thai publications to include this part). It is worth mentioning that the book annex is very rich in information such as references, the writer's bio-bibliography and *Suphasit Son Ying* in full text with a special permission from the Department of Fine Arts, Ministry of Culture.

Analysis

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the introduction, Rattanam justifies the importance of her work by stating that *Suphasit Son Ying* is falsely attributed to Sunthorn Phu - a famous poet during the early Rattanakosin period recognized by UNESCO. She explains that this misunderstanding is due to the extreme popularity of Sunthorn Phu and a marketing strategy, and has thus become an enduring traditional interpretation of *Suphasit Son Ying*. To refute the claim, she presents various historical contexts including Sunthorn Phu biography timeline as evidence that *Suphasit Son Ying* was most likely written by a younger poet with the identical first name, Phu Nokkrajab. Moreover, as Sunthorn Phu never used an angry tone to address women in his other works, it was highly unlikely that *Suphasit Son Ying* was his. (Rattanam 2022: 17 - 19)

Chapter 2: Suphasit Son Ying's background

This chapter discusses the book title, its meter, the authorship, the time of writing and the socio-historical background about women in the early Rattanakosin period. Findings are as follows:

2.1 The title: The title *Suphasit Son Ying* (*Women Etiquette Book*)

was given by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab upon his publication of a scholarly biography of Sunthorn Phu. So the title does not correspond to the traditional literary norm of Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin to name a literary work by its genre. Since *Suphasit Son Ying* belongs to didactic poetry genre (*wannakadee kam son*), the word “*suphasit*” (moral teachings) could be considered a misnomer (as Rattanamalam qualifies it “vague”) because many moral teachings described as “*suphasit*” are written in a shorter form like proverbs. According to Rattanamalam, the book was renamed several times depending on publishers’ decisions. (Rattanamalam 2022: 26 - 29)

2.2 The meter: *Suphasit Son Ying* was written in 8-10 syllables per verse and has 201 quatrains in total.

2.3 The authorship: This part is a literature review of previous studies of Sunthorn Phu authorship of *Suphasit Son Ying* by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Patchanee I-yarawong and Nawaporn Kammueng. (Rattanamalam 2022: 33 - 37) Rattanamalam also elaborates that Sunthorn Phu had several disciples when he was in the monkhood and his literary style was so popular that it was replicated by his younger peers, creating confusion to this day about the authorship of *Suphasit Son Ying* as well as some other works.

2.4 Time of the writing: The biggest clue found in the poetic work was the name of “Chao Grub”, the dance troupe that rose to fame during late King Rama III’s and IV’s reigns. This also serves as another evidence to refute Sunthorn Phu’s authorship of *Suphasit Son Ying* because Sunthorn Phu passed away before Chao Grub’s rising popularity.

2.5 The context: The author states that forced marriages were

the norm especially for women in nobility. Thai men, in general, had complete authority over women socially, legally and financially. Though only hinted at, it can be deduced that *Suphasit Son Ying* is contradictorily not a helpful guide for female audience in choosing a good husband because most women during the period of the text writing did not have the right to choose their own spouses.

Chapter 3: Contents in *Suphasit Son Ying*

This chapter defines contents in *Suphasit Son Ying*. Rattalam summarizes, analyzes and regroups the structure of the corpus as follows: acknowledgments, introduction, etiquette contents and conclusion. The etiquette contents are divided into a) teachings or remarks for young girls; b) seven types of ‘bad women’; and c) four types of ‘good wives.’ What should have been mentioned in this section is that *Suphasit Son Ying* proposes many contradicting and victim-blaming ideas. For examples, ‘bad women’ are those who unknowingly choose morally-corrupt men as husbands, as if the spouse’s virtues were inseparable. Yet, the poet strongly criticizes women who talk, meet, laugh, smile or even look at men because they might appear too “unbecoming” and at the same time encourages women to choose well-accomplished persons as their husbands. The poet also advises women to take good care of their own and their husband's hygiene, upkeep pristine appearance and good posture at all times even in their sleep but ought not to be so “vain” such as spending too much time before the mirror.

Chapter 4: (*Suphasit Son Ying*’s) Values and relevance

In this chapter Rattalam presents in each subsection *Suphasit Son Ying*’s values and relevances through the lens of Thai literary history, stylistic point of view and cultural appreciation. She underlines

some good advice which is still practical nowadays such as loyalty between husband and wife as well as many extremities such as “Women should pay respect to their husband and massage the husband’s feet.” She then explains that the reason behind the extreme devotion towards one’s husband is the socio-economic vulnerability of women in premodern era, completely under their husbands’ thumb. The author also points out that the poet misuses “Sita” from *Ramayana* as a model of “exemplary selfless woman who will be richly rewarded by her husband” because after much hardship endured, Sita was almost killed by her jealous and paranoid husband, Rama. Using Sita as a role model of marital devotion is a nuisance to women’s well-being.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this chapter, Rattanam gives quick reminders of what she was saying and a diplomatic conclusion about the problematic nature of the corpus by saying that *Suphasit Son Ying* holds the “timeless and useful, universal advice for women” and that the corpus has “great value” in the national literature until today.

Relevance and intended audience

Published in 2022 by Sataporn Books, one of the biggest leading non-academic publishing houses in Thailand, *Suphasit Son Ying Phinit* is ensured of its literary value as well as a greater reach to the general public. As *Suphasit Son Ying* is one of the most-enduring literature in the Thai national corpus, *Suphasit* can be regarded as a useful and must-have short companion for any students, researchers and general public wishing to explore the subject in greater details. The polite, semi-casual prose of Rattanam can be enjoyed by readers at any

level. The methodology presented and references provided at the end of the book are evidence of her rigorous research and invite further readings to the subject.

Methodology and sources

The author presents a clear and thorough methodology, technical explanation and personal reading experience of the text. Sources mentioned in references in *Suphasit* vary and are mostly academic. All sources are in Thai, however. This implies that even though *Suphasit Sorn Ying* is known nationally, the text has never been translated nor studied at international level.

Critiques and recommendation

Five critiques are as follows;

A. Lack of Phu Nokkrajab's biography:

It is interesting to note that despite adamantly refuting Sunthorn Phu's authorship, Rattanam does not present the profile of Phu Nokkrajab, the true writer of *Suphasit Sorn Ying*. The biographic details of Phu Nokkarajab are sorely missed in *Suphasit*. Even though Rattanam declares that this study is more of a textual commentary and the question of authorship is not the focal point, the book strongly refutes Sunthorn Phu's authorship. The social and historical backgrounds as well as academic literature review in Rattanam's study are used only to prove how Sunthorn Phu is not the author of *Suphasit Son Ying* the thesis about Phu Nokkrajab's true authorship is not discussed. While in other sources like the Thai Literature Directory from The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Center, it is

written that Phu Nokkrajab is the author of *Suphasit Son Ying* and also a disciple of Sunthorn Phu. Although Rattanam shares the same ideas as other scholars that the literary style of Sunthorn Phu is much revered and copied during that time and Sunthorn Phu has many disciples (Rattanam 2022: 35), she never clearly defines what makes Sunthorn Phu's style unique in the first place, only stating that he was very courteous with women and very different from the poet in *Suphasit Son Ying* (Rattanam 2022: 18 - 19). Interestingly, *Suphasit* does not give clear examples of how close the writing style of Sunthorn Phu and Phu Nokkrajab is, to the point of confusion to the general public. Furthermore, it does not provide enough information about what makes Sunthorn Phu's style different from others in his time.

B) A much-needed critique by a female scholar:

Rattanam, as a female lecturer, understandably appears conflicted in analyzing *Suphasit Son Ying*, as the text is steeped in patriarchal views and misogynistic remarks. She also provides the readers with the socio-historical context of the early Rattanakosin era for a better understanding of the society in which the poet lived. However, this context should not be used to minimize nor desensitize the biased and women-hating narrative of the poet. The fact that Rattanam unrelentlessly concludes every chapter that there still are some values from *Suphasit Son Ying* relevant to people nowadays, especially for women — is confusing and contradicting to the women-blaming text itself and her own analysis. Furthermore, it depends on the reader's own judgment that any set of morals or teachings is worth consideration or application in his/her own situation. By stating that there are some universal truths in the poet's observation, the author might come across as perpetuating the condescending tone of the poet

and normalizing the strict, unforgiving and conservative view found in the corpus.

C) Relevance and legacy of *Suphasit Son Ying*:

It would be more objective to present the relevance of the corpus in literary history in detail. Although the author states that *Suphasit Son Ying*, a book of didactic poetry from the early-Rattanakosin period, is well-known among Thai people because many people believe that it was written by the eminent poet Suthorn Phu, thus publishing it in funeral anthology books (*Nang Sue Ngan Sop*), she somehow did not mention one of the most important factors of its constant presence in Thai culture. A selected national textbook for Thai students, *Suphasit Son Ying* should not be carelessly presented as an ordinary text that happened to be read by more than half of the Thai population for decades. Brief comparisons with other Women Courtesy books from the same period or more contemporary epoch should have been made to provide more concise analysis of traditions or evolution of morals in Thai society. *Suphasit* is hyper-focused on *Suphasit Son Ying*, which presents its strengths and weaknesses in writing choice. Reader responses from the same period of the poet though might prove highly difficult to find, should also be included to offer a more holistic point of view about the book. But all in all, this research presents a thorough introduction to *Suphasit Son Ying* (*Women Etiquette Book*), the social norms, as well as Thai didactic genre during the first period of Rattanakosin.

D) Lack of a comparative study about other Thai Women

Etiquette books

It is a missed opportunity that Rattanam does not include the latest publication about *Suphasit Son Ying* by Chomdee and Kamonsujja (2022) released several months before *Suphasit*'s publication in September 2022. In the article "The Expectation towards women: from the didactic literature for women to the play "Perfect Wife"", Chomdee and Kamonsujja present a detailed comparative study about gender roles from 3 famous Thai Women Etiquette literatures: *Kritsana Son Nong Khamchan* (Thonburi era), *Suphasit Son Ying* (by Phu Nokkrajab) and *Suphasit Son Ying* (King Rama VI's era) compared to a Thai television show "The Perfect Wife". The author should have made a much more comprehensive analysis about *Suphasit Son Ying* by making a comparative study about *Suphasit Son Ying* and Thai Courtesy Books from the same or different periods, no matter how brief. The reader could learn more about Phu Nokkrajab's writings and how he reflected the decorum of his time.

E) Lack of critique about the public reception:

It is also interesting to note that in 2022, *The Spectrum*, the online magazine and Facebook page about social and cultural commentary heavily criticized misogynistic and patriarchal phrases found in many famous Thai literature and sparked an on-line debate by netizens (Spectrum Magazine 2021). One of the literary works attacked was none other than *Suphasit Son Ying* and false attribution that the book was written by Sunthorn Phu - an enduring misconception rightly raised by Rattanam. Though it is quite a shame that the contemporary public reception of the book was not included in this study, the writer does use her own reaction as the starting point of her work. In the 4th chapter and the conclusion of *Suphasit*, Rattanam also diplomatically states that

although many ideas from *Suphasit Sorn Ying* are out-dated, several teachings are still relevant.

In conclusion, *Suphasit* by Rattanamalam can be considered as one of the most valuable studies about *Suphasit Son Ying*. As the question about Gender is never out-of-date but more relevant than ever, this book offers a brief but necessary introduction about *Suphasit Son Ying* as well as a literature review refuting Sunthorn Phu's long-misunderstood authorship. A clear, precise prose with references by Rattanamalam is undoubtedly beneficial for beginners and advanced learners about Thai literature.

References

- Chayanon Ch. & Wichetchay K. (2022). The Expectation towards women: from the didactic literature for women to the play “Perfect Wife”. *Journal of Liberal Art of Rajamangala University of Technology Suvarnabhumi*, 4(1), 143 - 157.
- I-yarawong, P. (1978) *The ethical study of Thai women in Subhasit Son Ying Kham Klon*. (Master’s Thesis, Chulalongkorn University).
- Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. (n.d.). *ภู่ จุลละภมร ฐานข้อมูลนามานุกรมวรรณคดีไทย: Thai Literature Directory* [Phu Chullaphamorn: Thai Literature Directory]. Retrieved July 27, 2023, from https://www.sac.or.th/databases/thailitdir/cre_det.php?cr_id=119.
- Rattanam, W. (2022). *Suphasit Son Ying Pinit*. Bangkok: Sathaporn Books.
- Spectrum Magazine Editorial. (2021). *รวม 10 ข้อคิดทางเพศจากบทประพันธ์ “สุนทรภู่”* [10 Sexist Remarks from Sunthorn Phu]. Retrieved July 27, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/showyourspectrum/posts/786697012021971/>.
- Thetthong U. (2021). อิทธิพลของสุภาษิตสอนหญิงไทยในสุภาษิตฉบับสตรีเขมร [Influence of Thai Women Etiquette Literature in Cambodian’s Women Etiquette Literature]. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University*, 23(1), 156 - 175.