

Dragons and Nagas: Mythical Creatures in English and Thai Contemporary Literature

มังกรและพญานาค: สัตว์ในตำนานในงานวรรณกรรมร่วมสมัยของไทยและอังกฤษ

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the roles of mythical creatures: dragons and nagas, as well as to compare the differences and similarities between the two creatures in the selected contemporary literature based on the External and Internal Quality Framework. Dragons are well-known in western myths as being evil, fierce and possessive of treasures while nagas are sacred beings associated with Buddhists' beliefs and ways of life and are respectful in Thai culture. Even though dragons and nagas originate from different cultures, they are both described as reptile or serpent-like beings. This study was conducted by developing a framework called the External and Internal Quality Framework to analyze six selected mythical creature characters in six contemporary works of fiction: three English novels and three Thai novels. The results show a trend of using and adapting details of dragons from the original myths in the selected English novels but there is tendency of preservation of original features of the nagas in the selected Thai novels.

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาบทบาทของสัตว์ในตำนานซึ่งคือมังกรและพญานาค รวมทั้งความเหมือนและความแตกต่างระหว่างสัตว์ทั้งสองชนิดซึ่งปรากฏในงานวรรณกรรมร่วมสมัยโดยอิงจากเครื่องมือซึ่งเรียกว่า External and Internal Quality Framework มังกรนั้นเป็นสัตว์ในตำนานซึ่งเป็นที่รู้จักกันดีในวัฒนธรรมตะวันตกกว่าเป็นสัตว์ที่ชั่วร้าย กราดเกรี้ยว และหวงสมบัติ ส่วนพญานาคนั้นเป็นตัวแทนศักดิ์สิทธิ์ซึ่งมีความเกี่ยวข้องกับศาสนาพุทธ วิถีชีวิตและเป็นที่เคารพนับถือของคนไทย ถึงแม้สัตว์ในตำนานทั้งสองจะมาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมกันแต่ทั้งสองก็มีจุดร่วมคือมีลักษณะคล้ายสัตว์เลื้อยคลานหรือ งู งานวิจัยนี้ดำเนินการโดยสร้าง framework ขึ้นมาใช้ในงานวิเคราะห์ ซึ่งมีชื่อว่า External and Internal Quality Framework เพื่อใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ตัวละครเป้าหมายในนิยายภาษาอังกฤษร่วมสมัยสามเรื่องและนิยายไทยร่วมสมัย

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สามเรื่อง ซึ่งผลจากการวิจัยพบแนวโน้มในการเลือกใช้สัตว์ในตำนานในงานวรรณกรรมรวมทั้งการดัดแปลงเนื้อหาของมังกรจากตำนานต้นฉบับในนิยายตะวันตกแต่พญานาคในนิยายไทยนั้นมีแนวโน้มไปในการรักษาลักษณะตามตำนานต้นฉบับ

Key Words: Contemporary literature, Dragon, Naga

คำสำคัญ: วรรณกรรมร่วมสมัย มังกร พญานาค

Introduction

Myths are stories which appear in various forms, such as epics, poems and dramas. These stories about heroes, gods, mythical creatures, magical items, and fantastic places have been told since primitive times, and they still continue existing until today [1]. Ancient stories, especially Greek and Roman stories, were often claimed to originate from myths. This is also true in some contemporary novels, such as *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, where mythical elements are found. However, in modern novels with mythical elements, writers tend to adapt the original myths in their literary works, such as changing some details from the original stories to suit the new plot and the story, or using the mythical names to symbolize certain ideas [2]. After the discovery of the similarities between different myths from different regions, studying myth or mythology has become quite popular [1]. Studies about myths do not only focus on comparing myths, but there are also studies about comparing the use of myths in literary works.

While protagonists in the mythical stories are either human heroes or gods, mythical creatures also play an important role

as the story progresses. Mythical creatures are believed to have been real animals in the past but their descriptions have become distorted [3]. One example is Behemoth, a mythical creature that is very strong, dangerous, lives near a river, and is believed to be derived from the hippopotamus [4]. Dragons, the focus of this study, are one of the most well-known mythical creatures in the world. Stories about dragons are believed to originate in the Ancient Near East and later enter Greek and Christian mythology. In prehistoric Indo-European mythology, there is comparative -based evidence suggesting that fire-breathing dragon motif may originate from the image of the spitting cobra [5]. Another suggestion is that dragons might have been used to explain the discovery of dinosaur fossils. Generally, dragons in the original myth look like reptiles or serpents, with scales in various colors, bat-like wings, fangs, and the ability to spit fire. Dragons are seen as evil, fierce, and possessive of treasures [6]. Dragons are found in many cultures both in the West and in the East: Greek, European, Norse (Scandinavian), Chinese, and Japanese. Some examples of dragons are Wyvern from English folklore, Python from Greek mythology, Jormungand

from Norse mythology, and Yamata no Orochi from Japanese mythology [5].

For nagas, they are sacred beings in Buddhism that, according to the original myth, look like serpents with green scales, large long bodies, fangs, red crests, and red eyes, and have supernatural power. The origin of nagas is believed to be the Indian mythology *Mahabharata*. Another possibility is that the serpent cults which are found in many parts of the world, especially in Southeast Asia where people's lives are usually associated with water and rivers where serpents are commonly found, might have led to the myths about nagas [7]. In Thailand, nagas are respected because they were described in Buddhist teachings as being supportive of Buddha. One of the most well known nagas in Thai mythical stories is Mucalinda, a naga who protected Buddha from the storm; another well known naga is the one who wanted to become a Buddhist monk but failed because only humans are allowed to become monks [7, 8]. From this information, it can be seen clearly that dragons and nagas share two similarities: they are serpent-like creatures, and they are important creatures in their respective cultures and beliefs. This similarity; hence, are what lead to this study comparing these two mythical creatures in contemporary literature.

In this paper, previous studies of mythical creatures are reviewed. There are two main approaches to mythical studies. The first is a comparative study of certain focal myths aiming to compare two similar mythical creatures; the work of Zeng Ling-cai

(2008) [9], *Western Dragons and Chinese Long*, is a clear example of this type of study. Zeng found that western dragons look very different from Chinese dragons; Western ones are perceived as evil creatures whereas Chinese dragons are respected as gods. Zeng suggested that people call Chinese dragons by the Chinese word 'Loonge' not 'dragon' [9]. The second example is Nili Wazana's work (2008)[10], *Anzu and Ziz: Great Mythical Birds in Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Rabbinic Traditions*. Both Anzu from Akkadian myth and Ziz from Jewish myth are mythical birds that share five similarities: being cosmic birds, having the theme of struggle and combat, being primitive mythical creature, having giant size, and trying to reverse the world order in their respective myths. The hypothesized explanations of these similarities are the Mesopotamian influence to Jewish literature, and influence from the ancient Near East [10]. The third study was performed by Gary G. Stanfield (2000)[14], titled *Giants in Teutonic Religion*. There are similarities between Norse and English giants in terms of physical appearances and being powerful, but they differ in other details. The Norse giants relate to deities but not humans. Contrarily, English folklore does not relate giants to deities but to humans [11].

The second approach to mythical studies focuses on the study of the application and adaptation of original myths in new contemporary literature. An example of this is the study of Isaraporn Prompreingpun (2000)[12], *Mara and Satan*, which found

that two religious beings, Mara and Satan, were used as a tool to distinguish the good from the bad, as well as to be an obstacle for the protagonist to fight against in the story [12]. Another study is *Aphrodite: From Myth to Literature* by Noree Pakpibul (2007)[13]. In this paper, seven literary works containing different adaptations of myths about the goddess Aphrodite (or Venus) were analyzed. The findings showed that there were many influences which affected how the writers used the original myth in his or her work. Such influences included the personal experience of the writer, trend at the time of publishing, and belief in religion[13]. The last example to be examined is Susan Elizabeth Trigg's (2002)[14] *Mermaids and Sirens as Myth Fragments in Contemporary Literature*. The two mythical creatures, Mermaids and Sirens, were analyzed in three novels. The results revealed that the two creatures were used to illustrate 'bad women' but the writer also hinted at the intention to deconstruct the disadvantages of women as well as to promote a female category of literature [14].

As seen from examining these previous studies, there are almost no studies directly related to dragons and nagas, which highlights the significance of this study. Nevertheless, there is indeed useful information on how the studies about mythology and literature are conducted, which provides a framework for the current study.

Purposes of the Study

1. To investigate the external and internal qualities of dragons and nagas in

the contemporary English and Thai novels respectively.

2. To compare the external and internal qualities of contemporary dragons and nagas with the original dragon and naga respectively.

Methodology

The methods used when studying mythology and literature vary depending on what the researchers want to focus on. Generally, there are no exact patterns or models for the analysis of myths and literature. For most studies regarding myths in literature, the focus is placed on certain elements in the story, such as characters, mythical names, and symbols, in order to find out at how they are used and explain the results academically. Other studies may focus on comparing the use of the target elements across different literary works, such as the use of the goddess Aphrodite in the seven novels that are analyzed by Pakpibul [13]. Sometimes two versions of the same myth are compared as found in "*Kresnik*", a study of Kresnik, the Slavic god of fire and storms, by Šmitek (1998)[15]. He uses atwo-column table to compare the two versions of Kresnik to uncover the similarities and differences in the details of elements found in the two versions [15]. The second example is Prompreingpun's(2000)[12] study which compared the role of Mara and Satan [12]. The study was done by introducing certain quotes from the selected literary works and analyzing the details in a linear pattern, then comparing and discussing the results.

The primary elements of focus for analyzing dragons and nagas in this study are external and internal qualities. To adapt the methods from previous studies and develop a more organized approach or research tool, tables are used to show the external qualities of each target character, including physical appearances and supernatural abilities (Appendix 1). Psychological theories are necessary for internal qualities. Since the target characters are not human, growth-related state of mind, or complex psyche like the ability to recognize one's status in his or her society as well as the relationships between that person and other people or objects, is not required in analyzing non-human characters. Consequently, personality theory by Gordon Allport [16], which focuses on the distinct traits of each person, is chosen to analyze the internal quality of the target mystical characters (Appendix 1). As mentioned earlier, Gordon Allport's personality theory focuses on one's distinct traits. This theory does not look at complex psychological features found in humans; therefore, this theory is most suitable for studying creature characters.

The selected English novels which use dragons include: *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien (1937), *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende (1979), and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling (2000). The selected Thai novels which use nagas include: *Maneesawat* (lit. Jewel of Affection) by Jintawee Wiwat (1986), *Shan* (lit. Supraconscious) by Thommayanti (1989),

and *Mekong* by Pongpol Adireksarn (1997). The criteria used in selecting these works are as follows: the literary works are published in the 20th–21st century, English literary works are in English, Thai literary works are in Thai, all the series are complete works with no continuation, the target mythical creature characters in the story must have a solid role in the story, and they can be main or supporting characters.

Results

The first finding regarding dragons by using the External and Internal Quality Framework involves their similarities in the external qualities. The dragons from the three novels are described differently and are different from the traditional original mythical dragon. Differences in the dragons' external qualities are that the two dragons from *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* both look like large reptiles with enormous wings but their bodies are different colors. The dragon in *The Hobbit* looks like giant reptile with wings, red scales, and fangs. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the target dragon is one of the many species described in the story, the Hungarian Horntail, which looks like a large black reptile with bat wings, yellow eyes, and a spiked tail. The dragon from *The Neverending Story* looks like a serpent without wings, which is similar to Chinese dragons. Regarding their abilities, all three dragons can fly and spit fire. Only the dragon in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* cannot speak; however, as it was

illustrated in the story as a protected rare-breed animal (like wildlife reserve in the real world). For internal qualities, similarities include fierceness and possessiveness of treasures shared by both dragons from *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. However, these two dragons were different in their roles, as the dragon in *The Hobbit* was evil because it robbed treasure from other characters and even killed them. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the dragon was more neutral because it did not show any intention to help or to interfere with the protagonist's acts like the villains in the story did. In addition, the dragon in *The Neverending Story* was on the good side, as it always supported and helped one of the protagonists in the story.

The results from the comparison of the naga side are very different from dragons. In terms of external qualities, nagas from *Shan* and *Mekong* looked exactly like what has been described in the original myth: a giant snake with green scales, fangs, a red crest, and red eyes. All three of the nagas could use supernatural powers, such as telepathy, creating things at will, and the power to use poisons. Furthermore, all three of the nagas are illustrated as being good and showing respect to Buddhism. Differences, on the other hand, include the appearance of the naga in *Maneesawat* which was beautiful lady in its upper-half and serpent in its lower-half of its body (as she was a female naga, or nagini), and only the naga in *Mekong* could not use supernatural power to transform himself into a human because it was his wish to not be able to do so. Regarding their internal qualities,

all three nagas show respect to Buddhism and their roles are on the positive side, similar to that of Thai Buddhist's image of nagas.

For ultimate goal in life for each character (or cardinal disposition traits, which is part of internal qualities, see Appendix 1), all of the characters displayed this trait in their respective stories, except for the dragon from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. For functional autonomy (Appendix 1), the actions of the dragon from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* were not influenced by its past events or experience. This is quite similar to the dragon from *The Hobbit*, whose action of continuing protecting the treasures after robbing them was just an unstoppable habit.

Conclusion and Discussion

Although dragons and nagas shared the similarities of looking like reptiles or serpents and being very well-known in the regions where their myths are told, an analysis of these two mythical creatures showed a very different trend of using dragons and nagas in the selected contemporary literary works. Characters of dragons can be portrayed as good, bad, and neutral characters; this is very different from the original myths in which dragons were mostly painted as evil villains. The dragon in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* was displayed like a protected animal or as a member of the wildlife reserve, making a distinction for all dragons in the *Harry Potter* series. *The Neverending Story*, although being written by an author from

western culture, has a dragon whose physical appearance is similar to that of Chinese dragons. This might be because the writer wanted to highlight the character's goodness and its supportive role of the hero in the story since Chinese dragons are considered to be gods in China. Contrarily, in *The Hobbit*, the dragon's role was very traditional and similar to those found in the original myths: doing bad things, protecting treasures, and getting killed at the end. This may be due to the fact that this particular novel is in the juvenile literature category and is meant for young readers, so the plot and storyline of the story should be unobscure and easy to follow. Nevertheless, it is widely criticized for many of the words in the story which are very hard for young children to understand.

The trend of using nagas in the selected Thai contemporary works seems to present only one pattern, not like dragons. All three nagas resemble the image of nagas that appears in Buddhist Jataka tales, in terms of both appearances and role. In Thai culture, nagas are sacred beings and highly respected. This might have influenced on how the writers portrayed naga characters in their stories, which mostly presented the characters in a conservative way. Although the nagas in *Mekong* and *Maneesawat* killed humans, it was explained in the story that those humans' karma (bad deeds that they did in the past or even in their past lives) caused them to get punished by the nagas, justifying the nagas' actions.

To conclude, External and Internal Quality Framework was developed for studying literature-related topics, especially characters, and showed satisfying results. This study also compared dragons and nagas which appear in the selected English and Thai literary works, and found a trend of adapting dragons' roles from the original myths, while there tends to be preservation of original myth features of nagas in Thai literary works. The results; therefore, are hoped to contribute to literature-related field of study.

Recommendations

The primary limitation of this study was that there were not a significant number of previous studies focusing on mythical creatures in literature as well as the exact models to use as the framework. Therefore, the External and Internal Quality Framework can still be improved or adapted for future studies that analyze non-human characters in literary works. Also, the sample size might be too small to completely generalize trend of using dragons and nagas in contemporary literature. Moreover, the finding that all the nagas are good characters might not always be true in other Thai novels. More samplings are necessary in future studies to generalize these findings to the entire field of study of myths and literature.

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APPENDIX

The External and Internal Quality Framework**Table 1** Example of using the External and Internal Quality Framework on one of target dragon characters*The Hobbit* – Character's name: Smaug**1. External qualities**

a. Appearance – any external features which are described in the chosen literary works, such as, size, shape, color etc.
b. Abilities – any personal skills or abilities, such as being able to fly, spitting fire, body transformation, becoming invisible etc.

2. Internal qualities

- a. Personal disposition traits – the uniqueness of each individual as proposed by Gordon Allport. There are three types of personal disposition traits:

a-1 Cardinal disposition traits – the most distinct trait, or ultimate goal in life of the character. This type may or may not develop in some characters.
a-2 Central disposition traits – traits which are consistent in a character's behaviors, for example, loyalty, competitiveness, punctuality, ambitiousness etc.
a-3 Secondary traits – traits which depend on certain situations, preference, or attitudes.

- b. Functional autonomy – the motives of present behaviors or habits of the target characters may or may not be influenced by the past. If they are not, Allport divided functional autonomy into two types:

b-1 Perseverative functional autonomy – the present habits no longer serve the original purpose, but the character cannot stop such behaviors.
b-2 Propriate functional autonomy – the present habits are quite different from what the character has done in the past. It can be said that the past events or behaviors do not influence character's present actions.
b-3 Irrelevant to functional autonomy – if the habits shown in the story are still influenced by the past, this term will be used instead of the previous two functional autonomy.

Dragons in *the Hobbit* usually loved treasure and they would do anything to protect their possession. Smaug robbed the treasure and the kingdom from the dwarves and continued guarding them for a long time until the hero and his friends came to take everything back. Smaug was very wicked but he was too arrogant and fond of flattery that he unintentionally revealed his weakest spot to the protagonist. It was added that Smaug did not like water. If he fell into the lake, it could be his demise. Later, the dragon was shot with an arrow into its weakest spot on the left side of its chest, leading to greedy Smaug's death.

Table 2 Example of using External and Internal Quality Framework on one of target naga characters

Maneesawat – Character's name: Chao Urakha

External qualities

a. Appearance	Enormous red-golden scales, huge coiled tail, bat-like wings, glowing eyes
b. Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Able to spit fire ● Able to fly ● Able to speak ● Scales could repel any attack ● Able to sense if any of its treasure was gone

Internal qualities

a. Personal disposition traits

a-1 Cardinal disposition traits	Continue guarding the robbed treasure as long as he lives
a-2 Central disposition traits	greedy, wicked, arrogant, fond of flattery
a-3 Secondary traits	get mad easily when its treasure was stolen

Functional autonomy type: b-1 Perseverative functional autonomy

Smaug robbed the dwarves' kingdom with all the treasure and took it as his own property. After that, however, he just kept guarding the treasure without any intention to use it. Being so obsessive with treasure is this one of the dragon's characteristics portrayed in many fictions.

Chao Urakha, a high-ranked nagini (female naga), came to human world to get revenge on the antagonist, named Suban, who was a garuda in his past life. The garuda killed her best friend and injured her body as well as her pride for being unable to protect her friend. Chao Urakha tried to kill the antagonist many times, but all her schemes were interfered by a death reaper, saying that only karmic law could judge one's action. So, she had to wait to see the antagonist's death resulted from his own karma. When she was with the male protagonist Pusshakin, Chao Urakha was very kind and caring because he was her deceased friend in his past life. She usually spoke ambiguously when being asked about her personal information. After her success in watching the antagonist's last moment, her new goal was to wait for the Pusshakin to reincarnate into a naga again because the two realized that their feelings for each other was not just as friends but lovers.

External qualities

a. Appearance	Human form: tall and beautiful lady with reddish skin Naga form: upper-half was beautiful lady with ancient Thai ornament and jewel accessories, lower-half was giant snake torso with green sparkling scale
b. Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Power to give command to lower-ranked nagas and humans ● Teleportation ● Able to read other people's minds ● Able to create things as pleased

Internal qualities

a. Personal disposition traits

a-1 Cardinal disposition traits	Get revenge
a-2 Central disposition traits	mysterious, intelligent, arrogant, stubborn
a-3 Secondary traits	kind to the male protagonist, Pusshakin, as he was her old friend (in his past life), acting childish when being with her close friend Yommana (the death reaper)

Functional autonomy type: b-3 Irrelevant to functional autonomy

Chao Urakha wanted to get revenge on the antagonist because his past life self as a garuda had insulted her pride. Chao Urakha's actions in the story still showed her resentment towards the antagonist until the end.