

Japanese Folklore in Thai Modern Literature: The Intertextuality in *Kon Kimono*

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Abstract

Kon Kimono, or *The Kimono Trap*, is a Thai novel written by Pongsakorn. It was published in 2014 and was quickly adapted into a TV series in 2015. As the title suggests, readers can expect some connections with Japan in this literary work, especially something about how Japanese kimono has crossed national boundaries. This article primarily attempts to scrutinize the Japanese elements in *Kon Kimono* by drawing on the theory of intertextuality. The main objective is to examine how Japanese folklore, specifically symbolized by the word kimono, is presented and becomes incorporated into a Thai novel. The intertextual analysis leads to the conclusion that intertextuality plays an important role both in the structure and the contents of the story through direct and indirect references. Four major sources that work as the core are Tanabata, crane, fox, and snow woman.

I Introduction

Japanese culture has enjoyed international recognition for quite some time. Not only is modern Japanese popular culture—*manga*, games, and fashion—the object of attention, but folklore in a more general sense, such as art and craft, also has its place. Japan has a long, rich history of folklore, and its influence can be seen in many forms including literature, *inter alia*, outside Japan.

Folklore is common in all societies and exists in many forms ranging from folktales, legends, and folk songs to proverbs and omens. Folktales, in particular, may cross societal boundaries, especially nowadays with the Internet, and become quite universal. A classic example is *Aesop's Fables*, which are well-known all over the world. Likewise, some of the Japanese folktales, apart from other types of folklore, are appreciated across national borders.

The scope of the Japanese folktales transferred to other countries is not limited to the direct conveyance of the stories as such, but extends to other literary forms. Such works include recent examples of the English novel *The Crane Wife* (2013) by Patrick Ness and the Thai novel *Kon Kimono*, or *The Kimono Trap* (2014) by Pongsakorn. Given that Japanese folktales are presented in novels written in the local languages of foreign countries, intertextuality is

expected in those literary works. To put it simply, intertextuality is the relation of texts that are deemed dependent on other texts and is said to be present in any literary text regardless of its author's intentions (Lodge 1992).

From that perspective, the current research attempts to examine the intertextuality in Thai literature by putting emphasis upon the connections with Japanese folklore. The literary work for the analysis is the aforementioned novel *Kon Kimono* by Pongsorn. The purpose is to address, by delving into the layers of the texts, such important issues as the levels of intertextuality and the techniques of intertextual representation employed in the work with a supernatural theme that relies heavily on Japanese materials. Reasons for the selection of *Kon Kimono* are twofold. Firstly, this novel was well received in Thailand as soon as it was published in 2014 and was even more popularized by its adaptation into a TV series the following year. Secondly, while *Kon Kimono* was written in Thai, rendering difficult access to the text for most of the non-Thai readers, an analysis through an intertextual lens is expected to lead to an interesting discovery regarding how texts from two cultures are intertwined.

This analysis is a challenge because although the theory of intertextuality has long prevailed in literary study internationally, it is relatively new to Thai literature and has rarely been applied to modern novels, especially ones with foreign backgrounds. Out of a small set of studies on intertextuality in Thai literature, there is still much room for analyses, and a cross-cultural examination, Japanese and Thai texts in this case, is expected to yield some interesting findings.

After the introduction, the literature review is presented, shedding light upon how intertextuality has been introduced to Thai literature. Sections III and IV examine the plot and scenes in *Kon Kimono*, follow the analytical guidelines for the identification of intertextuality outlined by Bazerman (2004). Section V will conclude the research.

II Literature review: Intertextuality in Thai literature

The notion of intertextuality was proposed by the French poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s in her essays written in French, such as "The Bounded Text" and "Word, Dialogue, and Novel." The premise, as the term *inter* suggests, is that the interpretation of a text invariably involves the discovery of meanings and tracing those relations; thus, the text becomes an intertext (Allen 2000). Intertextuality has been used extensively worldwide as a tool to analyze texts in various forms, including literary works. However, its application to Thai literature is a comparatively rare move (Sukhum 2010; Saengthong 2012).

The English term *intertextuality* has been translated into the Thai words *sahabot* or *samphanthabot*, both of which have been interchangeably used in academic circles. The pioneer and pivotal work that applied intertextual analysis to Thai literature was Trisilpa Boonkhachorn's doctoral dissertation "Intertextuality in Thai Literary and Social Context:

A Study of Contemporary Poets” (Boonkhachorn 1992). Boonkhachorn analyzed Thai contemporary poems in which melody is still highly valued and observed various intertextual characteristics including one of the most thought-provoking points that the present Thai text in question contains consent and challenges tone simultaneously, as well as the incapability of escaping the influence of Buddhism. Parts of her work, originally written in English, were later published in Thai and introduced the word *sahabot*, before *samphanthabot* was later coined.

In addition, there are two similar studies worth considering; Duangmon Chitchamnong’s research article “A Study of Thai Literature in Intertextually” (2006) and Chatchai Sukhum’s master’s thesis “Intertextuality in the Novel *Rush Out* of Paretas Hutanggura” (2010). Chitchamnong did not truly produce a different perspective concerning Thai literature and the validity of intertextual analysis; rather, her conclusion was quite similar to that of Boonkhachorn in that cultural intertextuality could be found in all of the more recent Thai literary works and that the Buddhist influence was prevalent in some of the works. On other hand, Sukhum’s analysis of a more contemporary novel, *Rush Out*, pointed out types of intertextual representation in, for instance, movies, art, historical storytelling, individual utterances, and songs that served specific purposes, especially to give clearer images of characters.

III *Kon Kimono* and the levels of intertextuality

(1) Pongsakorn and story of *Kon Kimono*

Pongsakorn, the pen name used by physician-writer Pongsakorn Chindawatana, published *Kon Kimono*, or *The Kimono Trap*, in 2014. Pongsakorn is one of the best known modern novelists in Thailand, particularly with his series of novels that present ghosts in connection with traditional cloth, including *Sab Phusa (The Curse of the Cloth)*, *Roy Mai (The Silk Trail)* and *Kon Kimono (The Kimono Trap)*. Maintaining his profession as a physician even after his fame as a writer, he is a prolific novelist who has become a household name in recent years. Although a part-time novelist, Pongsakorn has written more than thirty novels and several short stories. His works are widely read and many of them have been adapted into television series.

As for *Kon Kimono*, after the publication, it was quickly adapted into a TV series in 2015 and drew national attention, mainly due to the fantastical characters, connections with the Japanese background, and performance by some Thai superstars such as singer-actor Thongchai McIntyre and actress Araya A. Hargate. *Kon Kimono* tells the story of Rindara, a young Thai woman who goes to study in Japan on a scholarship. However, troubled by unexpected happenings, she is not able to finish her study within the designated period, but decides to continue without the scholarship. One day when she tries to help a girl who cannot walk, she gets a chance to know the girl’s family. She is asked to work for that Japanese family

in Kyoto where she meets Hoshi, a mysterious gentleman who lives with the family. Hoshi is actually the Crane God and seems to have been waiting for Rindara for a long time, while, at the same time, trying to keep his host family safe from its rival, the caretaker of the Shrine of Fox God.

The story reveals that hundreds years ago the Crane God and the Fox God came from heaven for their usual blessing of the villagers of Tsuki during Tanaba (Star Festival), only to meet with the grudge of snow woman who has fallen in love with the gracious Crane God. The two gods decide to fight against snow woman who tries to destroy the village. The confrontation leads to the total physical ruin of the Fox God and partial damage of the Crane God's golden kimono, necessary for his return to heaven. The Crane God is forced to stay in the human world, awaiting his lover Myojo who would later mend the kimono for centuries until he meets Rindara, the avatar of his heavenly lover Myojo. Finally, Rindara succeeds in helping Hoshi get back to heaven by seeking fabric made of out the golden crane to mend Hoshi's precious kimono.

From the plot of this novel, even readers who hardly know Japanese culture would simply envision Japanese atmosphere from the very first encounter with the title. Pongsakorn does not disappoint his readers in that aspect. He extensively incorporates Japanese folklore into the story by utilizing some major forms of intertextual representation, which will be discussed in the next section. However, the re-contextualization of Japanese folklore may disquiet the general reader as to which part is the original Japanese material and which part is the author's imagination. It would certainly be difficult for a non-expert to identify those divisions. That is where the analysis through an intertextual lens plays a part as it locates the relation of any text with its background to see "how it positions itself in respect to those other words" (Bazerman 2004).

(2) The levels of intertextuality

According to Bazerman (2004), there is no standard shared analytic vocabulary for considering the elements and kinds of intertextuality. However, some significant points are summarized as items to look for when analyzing intertextuality. The following discussions, namely structure and source, are the adjusted version of what Bazerman proposed as the framework, which can be called levels of intertextuality.

The role of intertextuality in the structure

Japanese folklore, beliefs as well as folktales, works chiefly as the motif and as the plot device in the form of backstory. The intertextuality begins from the outset. The readers are introduced to Japanese craft from the first encounter with the title *Kon Kimono*. *Kimono* is a well-known Japanese word in Thailand and tends to invoke the image of Japaneseness when heard. The title points obviously to the connection with Japan. Subsequently, as soon

as the story starts, the first group of characters—the Crane God, the Fox God, and snow woman—appear in a Japanese setting. Even uninformed readers would be able to relate these characters with Japanese folktales one way or another, although without the exact knowledge of where they originated. The love, revenge, and mystery inextricably interwoven in the scene on that Tanabata Day of July 7 casts shadows over Rindara’s and Hoshi’s lives well into the present world. Such motifs are suggested throughout the work through the unknown past that repeatedly jeopardizes Rindara until her unfinished work as a savior for Hoshi is fulfilled at the end of the story.

Taking the readers into the Japanese gateway, the narrative structure, reinforced by the technique of embodying another older story of some retold critical supernatural events, highlights the transformation of the older Japanese text and environment into a modern text with the opening phrase of “Once upon a time” (7). It is presented twice, both in italics; one as a prologue to the opening scene, apparently utilizing exotic Japanese folktale device to grab the attention of the reader; and the other around the middle of the novel after the reader has been kept curious about the true reasons behind the conflict between the patronages of the Crane God and the Fox God. Both parts are essentially the continuation of a scene, but are intentionally interrupted to hold back information, thus arousing the readers’ curiosity. After the opening paragraphs mentioning Tanaba, the author moves forward to literally *write a new Japanese folktale* that preceded the present development of the protagonists’ lives. The tale interestingly serves as a starting point for the entire novel in which Thai readers would find the revelation of later details intriguing since the combination of Japanese and Thai elements in a fantastical manner is extraordinary.

Contents and source materials of the intertextuality

Four major sources that are found central to the entire narrative are the stories about Tanabata, crane, fox, and snow woman, all of which play little role in Thai culture and have a strong presence in Japanese culture. These elements altogether appear in the first setting through a recreated story, different from that of general perception in Japan. Only the basic traces are maintained.

Tanabata, or Star Festival, is a Japanese term that sounds unfamiliar to Thai ears. Even so, it is presented as a Japanese word, and as such, is accompanied by brief explanation. Adopting the idea from China, Japan celebrates Tanabata on the night of July 7, believing in the annual meeting of Altair and Vega, each symbolizing a lover who lives apart in the Milky Way (Nobuyuki and Hoffer 1986). Considering the story, Tanabata can actually be disregarded in *Kon Kimono* because it does not contribute much to the plot. It is seemingly introduced simply to create atmosphere and to justify why Rindara, or Flow of Stars, is named so.

Regarding the two animals, crane and fox, both of them have special meanings to the Japanese. There is a Japanese saying *Tsuru wa sennen, Kame wa mannen*, meaning “A crane

(lives) a thousand years. A tortoise (lives) ten thousand years.” In other words, *tsuru*, or crane, symbolizes longevity and has an elegant image in Japanese culture. However, such belief about crane is less well-known than the crane in the folktale *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, or *Crane’s Return of a Favor*. Even so, aware of both aspects, Pongsakorn combined them and took the idea to another level by presenting the crane as a god. “The Crane God is the god of health and longevity. Every year he would [...] come to heal and bless humans” (9). In fact, *crane-as-go* is not without legendary support. Another Japanese word for crane, instead of *tsuru*, is *tazu*. The *tazu* was a bird living in heaven and had its original meaning as a swan entrusted with the duty of transporting human souls. Because cranes and swans were white, *tazu* was probably mistaken for crane and used as another word for crane (Tetsuo 1995, 128).

Fox, on the other hand, has two contrasting images, a cunning and goblin-like animal and a benevolent guardian (Nobuyuki and Hoffer 1986). While the former is probably a stronger image in the eyes of Thai people, in *Kon Kimono* Pongsakorn grasps both impressions. He initially presents fox as a god, or *Inari Ōkami*, as in “The Fox God is the god for fertility and crop. He would come to check an abundance of human’s wheat, plants, and other fruits” (9). The image is afterward altered to a deceitful and revenge-seeking creature.

Snow woman, or *yuki-onna* in Japanese, is a famous *yokai*. Yoda and Alt (2012) argued that the translation of *yokai* into such words as demon, ghost, goblin, or specter seemed to draw an imprecise image. Besides, *yokai* should be *yokai and there is no exact translation*. However, at some point, to accommodate the understanding for people in different cultures, a term or explanation is deemed necessary. The least imprecise description for *yokai* can be a Japanese spooky supernatural being. As the name suggests, snow woman is a female *yokai*. Japanese people’s general perception about snow woman is that she appears in the snow and freezes travelers to death with her snow power. There are various versions of her, but the most famous is probably Lafcadio Hearn’s *Yuki-Onna* in his collection of ghost stories, *Kwaidan*, written in English and published in 1904. In this story, Mosaku, an elderly woodcutter, and his apprentice Minokichi are stranded in a blizzard. Mosaku is mysteriously killed by a woman seen by Minokichi. The woman does not kill the young man, but asks him to promise that he will not tell anyone about her existence. Minokichi later marries a woman and lives a happy life. One day while looking at his wife, he is reminded by her appearance of the woman who killed his master in the past. He tells his wife the story, and she becomes angry because she is actually the snow woman; she condemns him for not keeping his promise.

In Japanese folklore, these four beliefs and stories are independent of each other, but in *Kon Kimono*, Pongsakorn combines them and adds his own imaginative touches. The craft of his novel may have rendered harmony to the whole story, but critical readers may question the reasoning behind the outcome, notably why the avatar of Myojo is Thai, not Japanese.

IV Intertextual representation

The analyzable level of intertextuality depends greatly on the textual representation conducted by the author of the text. What Pongsakorn opted for as major techniques can be categorized as explicit and implicit references.

(1) Direct reference

A feature that makes intertextuality in *Kon Kimono* noticeable is the extensive use of Japanese words, resulting in verisimilitude. In general, a novelist tries to create an atmosphere that enables the readers to easily believe in the depiction of the story. Pongsakorn was successful in that part through the purposeful use of Japanese terms. Some readers may have the impression that Pongsakorn overuses them and may find them annoying as the meanings are not always clearly explained. Nevertheless, they build settings that encourage readers to share the same feeling with Rindara who is in Japan where she does not always understand what is being said.

In addition to personal and place names, those words and phrases include *yukata* (Japanese casual summer *kimono*) (136), *hitotsume-kozō*¹ (one-eyed child *yokai*) (140), *torii* (gate to a Shinto shrine) (152), *tatami* (Japanese mat) (143), *rokuro-kubi* (long-necked female *yokai*) (164), and *furisode* (long-sleeve *kimono*) (266, 267). The most striking feature is that Pongsakorn also used Japanese letters in the Thai text, which is a textual representation hardly seen in any other Thai novel; for example, *Arigatō* (thank you) (69), *Dōzo Yoroshiku Onegaishimasu* (nice to meet you) (69), *karamiori* (cross weave) (86), *O-yasuminasai* (good night) (131), *O-tanjōbi O-medetōgozaimasu* (happy birthday) (133), *hina ningyō* (a Japanese *hina* doll) (185), and *teruteru bōzu* (handmade doll to wish for good weather) (196).

Indirect reference

In indirect reference, what Bazerman (2004) calls indirect quotation, a source is usually specified, or identifiable by some hints in case of literary works, to reproduce the original meaning of the text in another context. This is evident in *Kon Kimono* in that the motif was Japanese folklore, but the author recreated a totally new setting and added imaginative elements.

Rindara is a Thai woman, but the story takes place almost entirely in Japan against the backdrop of the conflict between two families of Japanese gods. The re-contextualization first took Thai readers to a new world, far from everyday life, while maintaining easy access by making the protagonist Thai.

At another level, three most important parts, unfounded in popular Japanese folklore, can be pointed out as follows: 1) The Crane God and the Fox God were historically and heavenly good friends, 2) The Crane God and Myōjō the Goddess of July Star were lovers, and 3) Snow woman fell in love the Crane God, was once defeated by the Fox God, and was locked up in a *hina* doll. All of these forms are the alterations from the original Japanese perception. Obviously, the purpose is to hold the attention of Thai readers through romance, mystery, and

action, and to create a backstory that would help move the main plot forward.

V Conclusion

The analysis of intertextuality revealed that the Thai novel *Kon Kimono* drew heavily on Japanese folklore. In *Kon Kimono*, a cross-cultural literary work as it is, the general Thai readers are likely to embrace an impression, or a question, of how Japanese *kimono* and folklore have crossed national boundaries and been turned into a modern Thai novel. Intertextuality can be discovered in both the general structure and the contents. The analysis points specifically to major Japanese folklore, notably traditional beliefs and folktales; Tanabata, crane, fox, and snow woman. By combining the two different cultures in a single work of literature, Pongsakorn, ensures that Thai readers see the subject of Japanese folklore in the realistic atmosphere of the present day by employing the techniques of intertextual representation of direct and indirect references.

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Notes

1 Note: Pongsakorn actually wrote *hitochime-kozō* instead of *hitotsume-kozō*.