

Socialisation into Values: Collectivism in Award-winning Thai Children's Picture Books¹

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Abstract

Extensive literature can be found concerning the presence of individualism in Western cultures and collectivism in Eastern cultures. By undertaking a combined analysis of the linguistic and visual structure of texts, this article analyses the notions of individualism and collectivism in Thai picture books. Through an examination of picture books that won the National Book Development Committee Awards for small children (6-11 years old) from 1987 to 2006, the article examines the ways in which authors present the relationship between the individual and the community.

The analysis shows that the image of the Thai community is dominated by discourses of social integration and harmony, which aim to produce and reproduce an idealised image of community where all members know their proper role, support one another, and live together happily in peace and harmony. Yet some slight changes can also be detected in the way that perspectives on social integration and harmony are constructed

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at certain periods. These changes indicate the strong connection between the discourse of children's books and the political climate at the time they were published

Introduction

Decades of research has shown the important role children's literature plays in the socialisation process.³ John Stephens, an eminent critic in this field, writes that "children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socialising their target audience."⁴ As a socialising agent, children's literature inevitably reflects the values, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular culture that produces such literature. To be precise, children's literature always consists explicitly or implicitly of ideological assumption about reality, how the world should look and function and the means by which the identities of children should be constructed, that are much closer to what is deemed representative of cultural aspects which that particular society wishes to pass on to its children. As one of the first reading materials that children are exposed to, children's literature helps them develop an understanding of themselves, shape their ideas of other people and relationships, and build a concept of the society in which they live in, as well as of their role within that society.

While certain representations of cultural values in children's literature have been studied, especially when it comes to gender roles, individualism and constructivism constructs is one of the topics that remain unexplored despite the large role such constructs play in helping people to define themselves and their relationship with others. As a framework used for explaining cultural variations in behaviours, attitudes, norms, values, and goals, individualism pertains to a society

³ Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*; Knowles, *Language and Control in Children's Literature*; Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature*.

⁴ Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, 8.

in which the ties between individuals are loose and the interest of the individual prevails over the interest of the group. Individualistic cultures emphasise self-interest and competitiveness, and show little concern for the needs and goals of any group. People from individualistic cultures see independence as an important quality and set personal goals to enhance their experience as individuals. On the other hand, collectivism is described as a form of society that stresses social harmony and the importance of the collective, rather than the importance of separate individuals. People from collectivistic cultures tend to be interdependent and will usually build a network of deep-rooted relationships. If there is any conflict of interests between individuals and the collective, individuals are expected to sacrifice their own good for the sake of the collective well-being.⁵ While it is a common claim that individualism is high in the United States, Britain and British-influenced countries such as Australia, collectivism is a feature of African, Asian and Latin American cultures.⁶

Based on the above definition, this article focuses on a relatively neglected area by exploring the socialising content of award-winning Thai children's picture books in terms of individualistic and collectivistic values.⁷ The following examples of fifteen children's picture books cited in this article are award-winners of the National Book Development Committee Awards for small children (6-11 years old) from 1987-2006. As they received an award organised and funded by the government, it is safe to assume that these books should be more likely to reflect ideological assumptions about reality, how the world should look and function and the means by which the

⁵ For the definition of individualism and collectivism, see Oyserman, "Rethinking Individualism and Collectivism".

⁶ Triandis, "The Self and Behaviours in Different Cultural Contexts"; Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*; Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism*; Schimmack, "Individualism: A Valid and Important Dimension of Cultural Differences between Nations".

⁷ In light of the focus of this article, references to the award-winning picture books are made by using the book title and year of award, rather than the author. In instances of quotation from those books, the title and page reference are given. Full bibliographical details of each book, including the author, illustrator and date of publication, can be found in the References.

identities of children should be constructed, that are much closer to what is deemed representative of cultural aspects which the society wishes to pass on to its children. The timeframe chosen also situates this study in the period that Thai society started to undergo enormous changes – socially, politically, and economically. It is thus interesting to see whether some of the changes that have taken place in Thai society would be reflected in award-winning children's picture books written during such periods.

Social Integration and Harmony: A Study of Award-winning Thai Children's Picture Books

Based on Geert Hofstede's widely cited cross-cultural analysis,⁸ Thailand ranks 41st among the fifty countries in three region surveyed on the index of individualism (scoring only 20 on the scale), indicating that Thai society has a strong collectivist orientation when compared to societies referred to as individualistic. That is to say, Thai society puts great emphasis on groups and communities in which members feel a sense of emotional dependence on each other and seek mutual accommodation to maintain group harmony.

This observation of Thailand as being a collectivist society is supported by the work of numerous Thai and international scholars who have established that the Thai worldview is firmly anchored in

⁸ Hofstede, *Culture's Consequence; Culture's Consequences, Comparing Values*. Hofstede's model distinguishes cultures according to five main dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long-/short-term orientation (the last dimension was introduced in the second edition of his book in 2001). The model provides a scale from 0 to 100 for all countries surveyed for each dimension, and each country has a position on each dimension relative to other countries. Hofstede's model is very well-known since it was the first study that systematically organised cultural differences into overarching patterns. Since its publication, this model has been applied in a large number of cultural and cross-cultural studies (see Oyserman, "Rethinking Individualism and Collectivism" for a review). Although the country scores were originally published in 1980, many replications of Hofstede's study on different samples have proved that the country ranking in his seminal research is still valid. In the second edition of his books, Hofstede describes over 200 external comparative studies and replications that have supported his index.

the harmony and smoothness of interpersonal relations.⁹ Acclaimed as the first empirically based study of Thai cultural values conducted by a Thai scholar, the research of Suntaree Komin exemplifies the view that Thai society is collectivist.¹⁰ Based on her research data, Komin identified nine value clusters to describe Thai national characteristics.¹¹ In one way or another, all these value clusters tend to support the overall picture of the valuing of smooth, kind, and pleasant interpersonal interactions devoid of conflict; in short, the pursuit of social harmony, as observed by other scholars. Out of the nine value clusters, the smooth interpersonal relationship orientation and the interdependence orientation directly imply that Thai people place a high value on social interactions directed towards others and on cooperative behaviours in the community.

The connection between collectivistic values and books produced for children has been highlighted by Nidhi Eoseewong, a dominant figure in Thai historical scholarship.¹² Analysing the role of the state in promoting Thai nationalism in primary school textbooks, Nidhi illustrates the idealistic way in which young Thais in the requisite educational program are taught to perceive the Thai nation and relationship among its members as the relationship of families or villages. With overemphasis on unity and cohesion, the peaceful villages presented in primary school textbooks provide the fundamental explanation about the ideal relationship of the Thai nation. Nations are peaceful as long as people in nations, namely villages, are following the ideal village regulations based on cooperation, seniority respect, consideration, flexibility, sacrifice, and

⁹ Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*; Knutson, "Comparison of Thai and US American Cultural Values"; Amara, *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*; Knutson, "Thai Cultural Values".

¹⁰ Suntaree, *Psychology of the Thai People*.

¹¹ These clusters, ranked according to their importance in influencing Thai people's behaviours, comprise: (1) ego orientation; (2) grateful relationship orientation; (3) smooth interpersonal relationship orientation; (4) flexibility and adjustment orientation; (5) religio-psychical orientation; (6) education and competence orientation; (7) interdependence orientation; (8) fun and pleasure orientation; and (9) achievement-task orientation.

¹² Nidhi, *Thai nation and Thailand in primary school textbooks* (in Thai).

modesty. As it has been produced and reproduced in the textbooks used in all primary grades, Nidhi concludes that this perfect human world outlook has the power to limit and control children's ideas, perceptions, and understanding of how the world should be organised.¹³

The Discourse on Social Integration and Harmony in Thai Picture Books

When taking a look at a corpus of picture books that won the National Book Development Committee Awards for small children (6-11 years old) from 1987-2006, the view that all aspects of the Thai's lives are based more on the group and community than on individual is also an overwhelming trait of the books. The interaction between text and illustrations reveals the so-called discourse on social integration and harmony. With the main aim to portray an ideal community, the authors of Thai picture books choose to base their themes on a wide range of values that enable people to live harmoniously together. They emphasise the importance of teamwork, unity and mutual enjoyment over competitiveness and individual victory. In what follows, the discourses on social integration and harmony will be investigated in terms of three representations: the representation of "social smoothing" values; the representation of peace and reconciliation as being more important than self-interest and competitiveness; and the maintenance of social order within a hierarchical structure. All three representations emphasise the view that society as a whole has more meaning or value than separate individuals, and that the society values only personal traits that reflect the goals of the group.

The Representation of "Social Smoothing" Values

One of the "social smoothing" values commonly depicted in Thai picture books is the value of helping one another. Both *The Lotus*

¹³ Nidhi, *Thai nation and Thailand in primary school textbooks*, 76-79 (in Thai).

Flower Who Refused to Bloom (1994)¹⁴ and *The Sunflowers and the Golden Bags* (1994)¹⁵ are examples of picture books that focus their theme on the way the characters in the community help one another to complete tasks. This value is emphasised in lexical choices indicating the willingness of the characters to help upon request, for example, the verb ‘request, plead (ชวน, ชักชวน, ขอร้อง)’ is always met with a positive response with such phrases as ‘willingly agree (รับคำอย่างเต็มใจ)’:

“I want you to help us make the lotus flower bloom,” requested the bird.

“Yes,” answered the mother frog. “I will ask my friends to go and sing to the lotus flower.” Then the mother frog and all her friends went to sing together. They sang many songs, but the lotus flower still didn’t bloom. (*The Lotus Flower Who Refused to Bloom*: 10)

“We need to help one another to find the owner of these golden bags,” requested the Sunflowers while the bird willingly agreed. (*The Sunflowers and the Golden Bags*: 2)

Visually, the willingness of the characters is shown in the way the illustrations are framed to reinforce that it is always “the whole group” of characters who are willing to help. For example, in Figure 1, the illustration reveals that the whole group of bees is united to make the lotus flower bloom. This big group of bees is positioned right across the double space illustration, signifying that the value of helping one another is shared by all group members and that all are willing to take part in this effort.

¹⁴ A group of animals have tried many ways to urge the shy lotus flower to bloom until the owl advises them to ask for help from the sun. As soon as she gets the sunlight, the beautiful lotus flower starts to bloom.

¹⁵ After discovering some golden bags on the ground, the sunflowers ask the bird to find the owner of the bags. When it starts to rain, they realise that the golden bags are actually the tree seeds. Those seeds start to grow after getting some rain.



Figure 1: *The Lotus Flower Who Refused to Bloom* (1994)¹⁶

This emphasis on the value of helping one another can be seen even more clearly in some recent picture books. *Our Friend The Scarecrow* (2003)¹⁷ and *The Little Rubber Seed's Journey* (2006)¹⁸ also focus on the way the main characters obtain help from many different characters around them. In these two picture books, the lexical choices involve such key phrases as 'eagerly volunteer (อาสาด้วยความกระตือรือร้น)', 'I will help you out (ฉันจะช่วยเธอเอง)', 'I will take you to wherever you want (ฉันจะพาเธอไปยังทุกที่ที่เธอต้องการ)'. Apart from showing the characters' willingness to help, those words also carry the value of moral obligation to give help. For example:

¹⁶ Image used courtesy of Tonor.

¹⁷ The scarecrow enjoys spending time by the rice field with his friends: the two rats, the sparrow and the dog. After learning that their rice field will soon be turned into a factory, all his friends work hard in helping to move the scarecrow to a nearby field.

¹⁸ Little Rubber Seed falls out of the tree. During his journey, he receives help from the wind, the lizard, the snake and the squirrel. Little Rubber Seed is taken to the appropriate space where he finally grows into a big tree, giving shade to other animals in the forest.

The Little Rubber Seed got down from the snake's back and said, "Thank you very much, khun snake. I would be in big trouble without your help."

"You are welcome. My Mum always teaches me to help others if I know that they are having a hard time," answered the snake with a kind-hearted smile before saying goodbye to the Little Rubber Seed and crawling away. (*The Little Rubber Seed's Journey*: 16)

As the stories develop by showing how the main characters finally get to their desired place with help from others, these picture books suggest that friendly cooperation is the best way to achieve a goal and that this value is considered a significant element that link all members in the community together. In the end, the stories emphasise that the value of helping one another will result eventually in greater sense of social harmony, as seen in Figure 2, where the little rubber seed finally grows up and in turn gives shade to other animals in the forest.



Figure 2: *The Little Rubber Seed's Journey* (2006)¹⁹

¹⁹ Image used courtesy of Bunnakit 1991.

In addition to the value of helping one another, individual sacrifice for the common good is another “social smoothing” value commonly found in Thai picture books. *The Sunshine Bird* (1993)²⁰ is an example of picture books that illustrates this key value. The story first focuses on the sunshine bird’s ability to sense the pain and distress of his fellow birds through the use of lexical choices showing his discomfort, for example, ‘be sad (เศร้าใจ)’, ‘be sorry (สงสาร)’, ‘be deeply touched (สะเทือนใจ)’ and ‘be worried (ไม่สบายใจ)’:

“If nobody does anything about it, they will all dies soon,” thought the sunshine bird who was worried to see his fellows curling up in the pile of snow while he was the only one standing on the branch of the tree. (*The Sunshine Bird*: 5)

Visually, the sense of agency that has been given to the sunshine bird as the only one who survives the coldness is conveyed through the way he is illustrated. His images are always framed in an enlarged close up shot and positioned looking down at others from the top part, while other birds are depicted looking up from the bottom part of the page (see Figure 3). This illustration implies the power of the sunshine bird as the only one who is able to help his fellows to cope better in this survival situation.

²⁰ The sunshine bird flies to the northern area just to find out that his fellow birds are dying because of the terrible cold weather. He decides to sacrifice his life by flying to the sun and bring heat back to the earth in order to save his fellows birds.



Figure 3: *The Sunshine Bird* (1993)²¹

After learning that the only way to help his fellow birds is to fly up to the sun and bring back heat to the earth, the sunshine bird decides to help out without hesitation even though he knows that he will not have a chance to come back. The lesson which young readers have gained from this picture book is that it is ethically beneficial to act in the best interest of the community. In order to maintain social harmony and stability, an individual is sometimes required to sacrifice their own interest for that of the community, and such action would certainly be seen as a heroic deed. Like other picture books, this story eventually ends with an idealistic image of the community where all members are able to live happily together once again.

The Representation of Peace and Reconciliation as Being More Important than Self-Interest and Competitiveness

Within this representation, negative attributes are given to individualistic traits such as a strong sense of competition, self-confidence and self-assertiveness. These traits are seen to lead to conflict and social instability. In order to solve the conflict, it is

²¹ Image used courtesy of Platapean Publishing.

suggested that individuals should avoid expressing themselves this way and learn to unite in order to promote community bonding and strengthen social cohesion. Four picture books in the corpus that exemplify this point are *The Wide-Mouthed Frog* (1989),²² *The Boastful Owl* (1993),²³ *The Animals in the Coconut Shell* (1994)²⁴ and *The White Heron* (1994)²⁵. All of these books feature the same motif of animal characters that face tragic endings as a direct result of misconceptions that they hold about themselves. They finally learn that they should not be so proud of themselves and that it is far better for everyone to live in peace and harmony rather than to think of themselves as individuals and as ‘I’ as distinct from other members in the community.

In each picture book, individualistic traits are represented in the form of an exaggerated sense of self-importance, resulting in building one’s image to be greater than reality and in boasting to others in a way that reflects selfishness and self-interest. Lexical choices denoting negative attributes are used to describe such behaviour, for example, ‘to show off/ to boast (อวด, โอ้อวด, คู้ม้อโอ้อวด)’, ‘to be too proud of oneself (ภาคภูมิใจมาก)’, ‘to act as if one is more powerful than others (วางอำนาจ)’, ‘to insult/ to look down upon others (เหยียดหยาม, ดูถูกหมิ่น)’, ‘to provoke anger (ยี้วน, ยั่ว)’, ‘to challenge/ to shout out a challenge (ท้า, ตะโกนท้า)’, ‘to be too proud of oneself (หยิ่งผยอง, หยิ่ง

²² The young frog is proud of having a wide mouth. He looks down upon the butterfly, the cow and the chicken for having ugly and small mouths. Ignorantly, he approaches the snake and asks him how he can eat anything with such a small mouth. The snake shows the frog by opening his mouth and swallowing him.

²³ The owl is very proud of his ability to fly and see well at night. He becomes even prouder when the other animals refuse to compete with him. He finally realises that he should not be so proud after losing to the small parrot who challenges him to play hide and seek at dawn.

²⁴ During a flood, three animals are stuck together on the same piece of coconut shell. Instead of staying together in peace, they try to prove who is the best and the most talented animal. As they keep moving around, the coconut shell loses its balance and overturns. As a result, they all drown.

²⁵ The young white heron is very proud of his big and beautiful wings. He tries to compare his wings to other animals. He is tricked by the lion, who asks him to go into the cave to meet a monster with bigger wings. He is finally eaten by the lion’s family.

ทะนง)', 'to laugh at others (หัวเราะเยาะ)', 'to be conceited (ลำพองใจ)' and 'to flatter oneself (หลงตัวเอง)':

“Look at all those funny warblers; they sleep in a pile like a pyramid. I heard that you can fly so fast that no one can catch you. If you are that great, do you dare to compete with me by flying through the trees?” asked the owl who was trying to provoke their anger. (*The Boastful Owl*: 5)

The self-interest and competitiveness of the main characters in each picture book is also enhanced by the illustrations. Their images are always framed in such a way to show that they are as powerful as other animals around them, regardless of whether these other animals are inferior, equal, or even superior. A clear example can be taken from *The White Heron* (1994) in which the confrontation between the white heron and the lion is depicted as an encounter between two equals. Despite the fact that the lion is known to be the king of the forest, the two characters are positioned at the same eye level which creates a symmetrical balance between the two characters. Visually, neither the lion nor the heron has gained more power and authority over the others. This means of emphasising the importance of the animal characters as being big and powerful in the illustration correspond to the strong sense of self-interest and the excessively high regard for their own importance found in the text (see Figure 4).

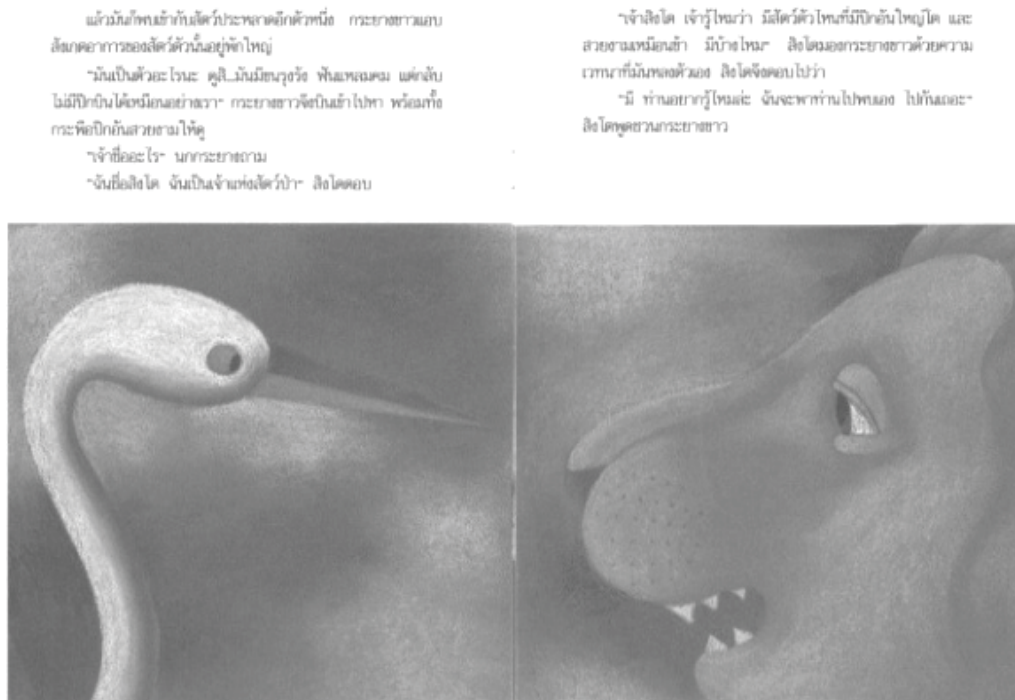


Figure 4: *The White Heron* (1994)²⁶

As the story develops, each picture book shows that the negative characteristics that the characters hold eventually lead them to a tragic ending. Each story finally ends with an explicit moral message that aims to teach young readers the negative consequences of people attaching greater importance to self-interest than to collective well-being. For example:

This story teaches you not to look down at others by showing off your abilities but you should make the most of your abilities to benefit yourself and the whole community. (*The Animal in the Coconut Shell*: 15)

The moral messages found in these four picture books link very closely to one of the nine value clusters that Suntaree identified and used to describe Thai national characteristics, namely the value of ego orientation.²⁷ Despite their cool and calm front, Thais can be provoked

²⁶ Image used courtesy of Tonor.

²⁷ Suntaree, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 133-138.

easily to strong emotional reaction when they feel their face and dignity is violated. This value orientation can be used to explain how conflicts between the characters in these picture books arise from verbal confrontations and direct insults. In order to establish harmonious interpersonal relations, one should learn to practice what Suntaree called the “avoidance mechanism” that enables Thai people to preserve each other’s ego and fend off unnecessary clashes.²⁸ Comprised of three key values, “face saving,” “criticism avoidance,” and “considerate kreng jai,”²⁹ the underlying essence of this avoidance mechanism is to take another person’s feelings into account and to avoid confrontation, criticism or anything that can hurt that person’s feelings or make him or her lose face. Reflecting this top concern for face, the individualistic traits of each animal character in the picture books express a social affront that should be avoided at all costs.

In addition to depicting the negative side of individualistic traits, the Thai picture books also suggest that people should learn to cooperate effectively with each other in order to establish and maintain peace and reconciliation in society. This collectivist cultural value is clearly evident in *The Singing Contest* (1993)³⁰ which shows the story of the three animals who finally learn that they can make the most beautiful song only when they sing together. Sorani Wongbiasaj et al., assert that the desire of the three characters to overcome the others is emphasised through lexical elements showing their strong sense of competitiveness,³¹ for example, ‘to compete against (แข่ง)’, ‘more beautifully (เพราะกว่า)’, ‘the most beautifully (เพราะที่สุด)’ and ‘to be second to none (ไม่แพ้ใคร)’:

²⁸ Suntaree, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 143.

²⁹ Suntaree, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 143.

³⁰ The black cricket, the red cricket and the cicada all believe that they are the best singers in the forest. Since the lion, who is the king of the forest, cannot judge who sings the best, the owl suggests that the three should try singing together. When they start to sing together, all the animals in the forest are impressed by the most beautiful song they have ever heard.

³¹ Sorani, *Award-winning Thai children’s picture books*, 69 (in Thai).

The black cricket and the cicada then competed against each other by singing, but they could not work out who sang more beautifully. (*The Singing Contest*: 3)

Upon hearing that, the red cricket told them that his singing ability was second to none. He wanted to see the lion too. (*The Singing Contest*: 8)

Visually, the fact that the three animals are represented more as individuals rather than belonging to a group is also emphasised by the way they are positioned on the page. While there is an image of other animals working together in the background, their images are positioned separately from those animals in the foreground, signifying a sense of independence.

Yet the whole situation changes when the three animals are asked to sing together. The lexical choices change to words with an emphasis on unity and togetherness: “Together as a group, they made a very fascinating song, even more beautiful than when they sang alone by themselves.” (*The Singing Contest*: 13) The illustration also translates how the implication of their actions changes from singing for their own self-interest to singing for the pleasure and happiness of the community by showing the image of the group of different insects and animals gathering together and clapping their hands happily while listening to the song (see Figure 5). This picture book implies one of the most commonly held assumptions that working together as a group for the benefit of community is considered more valuable than being an individual.



Figure 5: *The Singing Contest* (1993)³²

The Maintenance of Social Order within a Hierarchical Structure

Another form of the discourse on social integration and harmony represented in Thai picture books is making sure that all members know their proper place and truly understand their roles and responsibilities. Within this representation, each member is assigned a specific role in sustaining the community. Instead of comparing themselves to others and striving to be like others, all members should be proud of their respective roles in contributing to the benefit of the whole community. In other words, this way of representing relationships among people can be seen to be a way of maintaining social order within a hierarchical structure in that all members are expected to accept that they are not equal and that they should be satisfied with their roles that help the community grow stronger. Three picture books that illustrate this point include *I Don't Want to Be a*

³² Image used courtesy of Thai Watana Panich Press.

Buffalo (1989),³³ *The Sky is as Wide as the Well's Top* (1992),³⁴ and *The Little Earthworm and the Side Root* (2001).³⁵

Although there is a great difference between the times they were published, both *I Don't Want to Be a Buffalo* (1989) and *The Little Earthworm and the Side Root* (2001) convey an identical message in which the main animal characters finally learn to live their lives according to their own abilities rather than making a vain attempt to achieve an unrealistic personal ambition. In *I Don't Want to Be a Buffalo* (1989), the buffalo's dissatisfaction is clearly emphasised through words with negative connotations that are used to describe his work such as 'hard work (งานหนัก)' and 'boring (น่าเบื่อ)' and his strong desire to live his life in the way that human do: "It would be better if I lived my life as humans do, ate like them, thought like them, worked like them and had fun like them so that I could have a prosperous life like them." (*I Don't Want to Be a Buffalo*: 5) In *The Little Earthworm and the Side Root* (2001), the construction of the setting as a pair of binary opposition: 'the underground (ใต้ดิน)' and 'above the ground (บนพื้นดิน)' is used to emphasise the meaning of the story. Unlike the underground, the world above the ground where the little earthworm dreams to live in is depicted a place full of unfamiliar and beautiful things.

³³ As the buffalo grows bored of hard work, he starts to live his life in the way that humans do. Yet he still feels that there is something missing as he never feels as happy as humans. He asks different friends to help until the earthworm takes him back to the mud wallow. As soon as his body touches the mud, the buffalo starts laughing out loud and he finally realises where he belongs.

³⁴ While growing up together at the bottom of the well, a group of little snails who are strong enough start to crawl up in order to find better food. As he is crawling up, Dotty believes that the sky is only as big as the top of the well. Although he is not as strong as Dotty, Spotty keeps warning him not to believe what he sees from the bottom of the well. After several days of travelling, Dotty is shocked to see how big the sky is and he finally agrees to let Spotty lead the group.

³⁵ Disobeying his mother's advice, the little earthworm goes above the ground and meets the butterfly for the first time. After being looked down upon by the butterfly, the little earthworm becomes depressed and falls sick. He dreams to be as beautiful as the butterfly he has met. With help from the side root, who is his best friend, the little earthworm finally learns that he should be proud of being himself and of his task of helping the flowers grow.

The main characters in both picture books finally learn that the only way to live their lives happily is to understand their own self-worth and live in their right and proper place. While the buffalo realises that the only place that he belongs is the rice field where he can enjoy lying down in the mud wallow, the little earthworm learns that it will be impossible for roses and all plants to give any beautiful flowers without him to fertilise the soil and help them grow. On the surface, the main purpose of these picture books seems to be to teach young readers that true happiness comes from accepting themselves as they are. However, it is clear that there is an underlying message that society is structured and organised by a social order in which all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying degrees of ability to do certain things. In order to live happily together, members must not cross strict social boundaries.

This idea that nature places people in a hierarchical order is also reinforced in *The Sky is as Wide as the Well's Top* (1992) through the way the relationship between the group of little snails is represented. Although they are born together, the little snails are totally different, both in terms of their physical strength and their intelligence. The binary opposition of 'strong (แข็งแรง)' and 'weak (อ่อนแอ)' is used to describe their characteristics. This message is supported by the illustrations showing how the group of stronger snails is positioned in the front while the weaker snails are either following or falling down from the wall (see Figure 6). Among them, Dotty and Spotty are the two strongest. Although he might not be as strong as Dotty, Spotty is the most intelligent. He is the one who keeps warning Dotty not to believe in what he sees from the bottom of the well. After spending several days travelling, Dotty finally realises that the sky is not as big as just the top of the well and that it is so vast that he gives up the idea to climb across it. He agrees to let Spotty take the leading role by asking him to crawl in front.

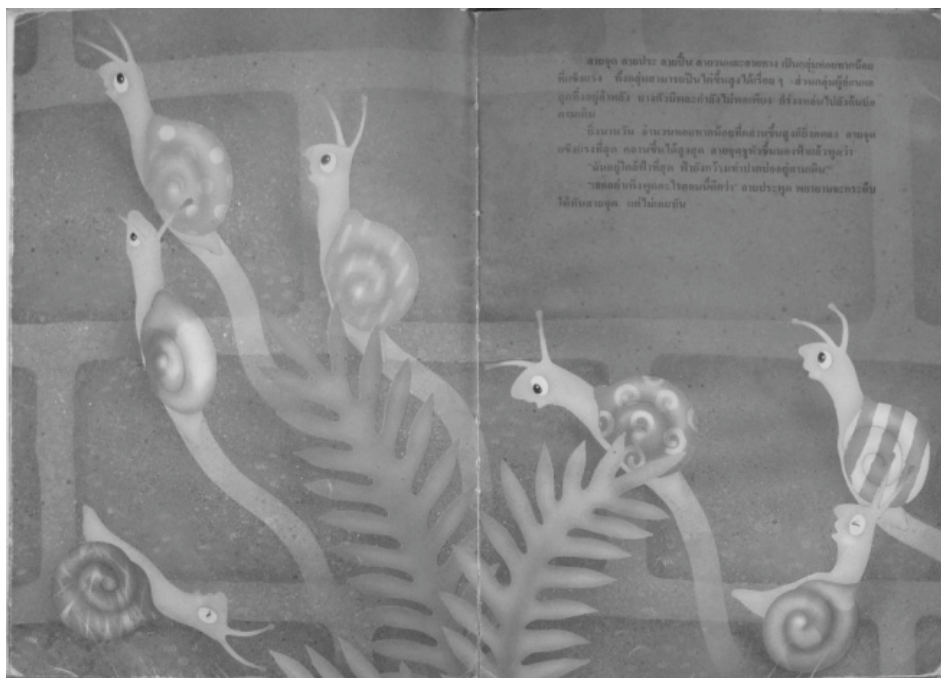


Figure 6: *How Big Is the Sky?* (1992)³⁶

Having Spotty as the leader of the group clearly implies that intelligence is regarded as more important than physical strength and it is often placed in the highest order of the hierarchical group. Compared to physical strength, society gives more value to the need to understand things thoroughly before making any kind of major commitment. Like the little snails, a person without a developed intelligence needs to be an obedient follower. Yet we should note here that Spotty's intelligence does not actually lead him to the discovery of any new truth, but it enables him to better understand his own limitations and realise his proper place in the world. While they are stronger and more intelligent than the others, both Dotty and Spotty still need to live their humble lives without trying to exceed their abilities. The story ends with an illustration showing how all the little snails live and find food happily on the safe and unexposed ground. The ending of this story emphasises that a strong sense of social hierarchy plays out in the lives of all living beings. In order to have a happy life, it is vital for people to understand their own self-worth and live in their right and proper place.

³⁶ Image used courtesy of Children's Foundation.

In her study of the representation of subjectivity in Thai children's films, Salinee Antarasena describes this organisation of a hierarchical social structure by the term "zero social mobility," meaning that social status assigned to individual is static and that the ability to move up or down the social hierarchy is impossible.³⁷ Based on the collection of Thai films analysed in her study, she concludes that the stories always end "when the principal characters admit that their ascribed status in the hierarchy is immutable and accept the status into which they have been interpellated."³⁸ The only possible subjectivity allowed for each individual to advance their life appears in a form of "self-life satisfaction."³⁹ For example, Saen dee, a main child character in Tossaporn Mongkol's film *The Little Prince*, redefines his "life satisfaction" of being a rich boy when he is able to cease his persistent jealousy by sharing his vegetables with his rich classmate regardless of the fact that he and his family still need to live a life which is materially poor.⁴⁰ Like Saen dee in the film, the only thing that the animal characters in the picture books discussed above are able to accomplish is to conform to their designated position in the hierarchy and seek their life satisfaction from what they can contribute for the benefit of the community.

To put this in a Thai social context, this belief in the differences between people based on social hierarchy can be described using the Buddhist notion of karma.⁴¹ According to Suntaree, the concept of karma is one of the Buddhist doctrines that are commonly used in everyday life interactions.⁴² With the differentiation between 'good karma (บุญวาสนา)' and 'bad karma (กรรม)', this concept of karma has always been applicable to situations associated with positive/negative, success/failure and good fortune/bad fortune for oneself or others.

³⁷ Salinee, "Strong Is Beautiful", 138.

³⁸ Salinee, "Strong Is Beautiful", 148.

³⁹ Salinee, "Strong Is Beautiful", 149.

⁴⁰ Salinee, "Strong Is Beautiful", 141; 149.

⁴¹ Kirch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System"; Jackson, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand*; Salinee, "Superior and Subordinate Relations in Thai Folklore Schemata".

⁴² Suntaree, *Psychology of the Thai People*, 178.

While having higher status or being associated with success or fortune can be seen as good karma, the cause of mishaps or negative experiences that occur is attributed to one's bad karma. The fact that all people are born with different status and ability can be then described generally as a direct result of the unequal good karma.

In addition to helping them to better understand their proper place in society, this concept of karma actually indicates the psychological acceptances of one's state of life, attributing the cause of one's position in the social hierarchy as being beyond one's power or control. Compared to those who are more fortunate, people who are born with lower status and limited ability have to accept the truth that they do not have good karma for having better lives. This concept of karma and its implications can be applied to the way the buffalo, the little earthworm and the little snails in the picture books discussed above finally accept themselves as who they are without trying to go beyond their abilities.

The Re-Interpretive Discourse on Social Integration and Harmony in Thai Picture Books

While a sense of unity and cohesion has always been seen as a major element leading to the construction of an ideal community, slight changes are beginning to occur in the presentation of the meaning and implications of unity in recent picture books. In reconsidering the discourse on social integration and harmony, we see that it is potentially harmful if members of the community take the sense of unity and cohesion for granted. Although the collective well-being remains unchallenged, these picture books suggest that people need to reconsider their understanding of unity as it is sometimes necessary for them to be flexible in situations where a sense of unity alone might not be enough to build and sustain a state of harmony and balance in society. *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000)⁴³ and

⁴³ Two cats find advertisements about two villages; the true freedom village and the strict discipline village. After they decide to separate and go to different villages, the two cats find that neither village is a good place to live. As they meet each other on their way to another village, the two cats agree with their fellows to combine the strong points of those two villages and build their own village called the freedom and discipline village.

The Clever Ant (2001)⁴⁴ are examples of picture books that illustrate these changes. The connection between these changes in the discourse of children's books and the political climate at the time they were published will also be discussed.

In *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000), the story makes it clear that an excessive belief in the practice of either freedom or discipline will actually lead to social upheaval. As the two cats look at the advertisements, the names of each village can be seen to foreshadow how each village is going to be like: 'the true freedom village (หมู่บ้านเสรีจ๋า)' and 'the strict discipline village (หมู่บ้านวินัยจัด)'. When the two cats decide to separate, certain characteristics of each village are further reinforced by lexical choices. While key phrases denoting the sense of autonomy such as 'to do whatever one likes (ตามใจชอบ/ตามใจตัวเอง)' and 'to have freedom and autonomy (เสรี/เสรีภาพ/อิสระ)' are used to describe the actions of people in the true freedom village, words conveying a sense of orderliness can be found in the part describing the strict discipline village, for example, 'neatly (สะอาดเรียบร้อย)', 'orderly (ระเบียบเรียบร้อย)', 'rightly (ถูกต้อง)' and 'peace (สงบ)'. These messages are strongly supported by the illustrations. For example, Figure 7 shows the image of a small town where all the cats are seen doing whatever they like: playing, dancing and fighting on the street, driving without following the traffic rules, and pricing goods at unreasonably high prices.

⁴⁴ While the whole group of ants believes that unity will always lead to victory, the clever ant warns them that unity without careful thinking may lead to negative consequences. Without paying attention to what the clever ant says, the big group of ants jumps into a fire as they believe that they can overcome it. In the end, the clever ant and his fellows who survive agree to teach their young to have a better understanding of unity.



Figure 7: *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000)⁴⁵

This picture book reaches a conclusion that freedom and discipline should come to be regarded as complementary when the two cats realise that neither the autonomy nor the orderliness found in each village make them better places to live and decide to build their own village. By naming their new village ‘the freedom and discipline village (หมู่บ้านเสรีและมีวินัย)’, the story suggests that freedom and discipline should not be seen as two separate ideologies, but they should work together in a complementary way to ensure the happiness and well-being of all people:

In this village, all the cats have rights to do anything they want as long as they don’t cause trouble to their fellow cats. At the same time, they create a set of rules that they all agree to follow. All the cats in this village are then able to live happily together in peace. (*The Siamese Cats Find Their Home*: 15)

⁴⁵ Image used courtesy of Tonor Grammy.

To a considerable degree, the belief that the characters hold in establishing a vision of their new village resembles the philosophy of democracy that stresses equality and freedom of all individuals. While the collective consciousness remains unchallenged through the cats' desire to live together, this picture book implies that the worth of the individuals who make up a society is regarded to be as important as the collective well-being. Uniting with others does not mean that people are absolutely free to do whatever they like or that they need to give up completely what they want, but rather it means that every individual in the society is actually given freedom to maintain their aspirations and needs, as long as it does not violate the will of the majority. Compared to the picture books discussed earlier, the same concept of unity still appears as a common goal that all the characters are working towards, but this sense of unity has been represented more as a social characteristic that comes from the awareness and understanding of every individual's rights while being subject to the same discipline.

Taking the social context into consideration, this slight change of focus by making the story relevant to a more democratic way of life strongly corresponds to the situation at the time when the book was published. This picture book won the award in 2000, the year before the Thai general elections were held in 2001. As was customary, several campaigns had been launched during that period to increase people's awareness of the importance of their participation in the electoral processes. As the recipient of a government-sponsored award, this picture book can be seen as one of the ways that the Thai state strived to promote and instil an understanding of, and belief in the democratic way of life among both young readers and adults who may read to their children.

A more extreme example can be found in *The Clever Ant* (2001). As the story focuses on the sense of unity, 'สามัคคี' and 'สามัคคี' (translated as 'unity') are the two key words regularly found. In this picture book, the colony of ants is presented as being so well known in their strong sense of unity that no other animals dare to bother them. Their power of unity is visually emphasised by showing their ability to defend their colony and defeat bigger animals, for example, a flock

of birds and a herd of elephants. As they always triumph over their enemies, all the ants believe that the sense of unity in whatever situation is the right and proper attitude to uphold strictly, and that their sense of unity will always lead them to victory and success.

This belief has always been questioned by the clever ant who tries to persuade his fellow ants that the sense of unity with little or no scope for the exercise of any discretion will certainly lead to negative consequences. Without listening to the clever ant's warning that they should stay away from the fire, the group of ants insist on their collective capabilities and agree to defend their colony. The story finally ends by the clever ant and a few of his fellow ants who survive the fire expressing their deep regret over the loss and agreeing to teach their young to have a better understanding of unity: the sense of unity that comes with intelligence and presence of mind (ความสามัคคีอย่างเฉลียวฉลาดและมีสติปัญญา). By ending in such a way, this picture book appears to be totally different from any of the other picture books discussed earlier in that it is not simply the act of collaboration among individuals that is portrayed positively, but also the sense of unity that comes with careful appreciation of the context. While collaborative behaviour is still regarded as one of the most desirable characteristics of the society, the sense of unity has been reinterpreted to show that it is necessary for people to consider carefully whether their collaboration will be effective in certain situations.

Similarly to *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000), the way in which the meaning and implication of unity has been slightly changed in *The Clever Ant* (2001) corresponds to the social context at the time the book was published. After a historic election victory in 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra became the Prime Minister of Thailand and started to form his administrative team to run the country. Despite introducing a range of partly effective and popular policies to alleviate rural poverty, the Shinawatra government became embroiled in several controversies after assuming power following the 2001 election. These controversies included corruption, authoritarianism and a violent crackdown on drug dealers. As a result, Thai society became increasingly polarised between those supporting and those opposing the (then) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Since that

time, a strong sense of unity has developed equally on both sides as people have continued to call on the authorities to respond to their demands.

To a considerable extent, this picture book can be seen as an attempt to illustrate that sometimes a strong belief in a sense of unity by Thai society may lead nowhere if it has not been applied in a right and proper way. This picture book can even be taken to foreshadow the events of the political crisis that occurred in 2005, three years after this book won the award, and continued up until 2010. During this political crisis, a strong sense of unity has been used by both the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD: "yellow shirts") and the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD: "red shirts") to bring people together and to continue their rallies. As illustrated in *The Clever Ant* (2001), it can be seen from unfolding events in Thailand that sometimes the sense of unity alone might not be enough to build and sustain the harmony and balance of the society.

Taking into account some picture books outside the corpus, Wongbiasaj et al., identifies a strong connection between the discourse of children's books and the political climate at the time the books won the award in two picture books published at two different periods.⁴⁶ In *The Animals' Lesson* (1990)⁴⁷, the relationship between the groups of characters reflects, in an overall way, the power structure between the three groups of people during the time when the country was run by the civilian elected government of Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan before it was overthrown by the military – led by a coup calling itself the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) in 1991.⁴⁸ The conflict between the old monkeys and the group of

⁴⁶ Sorani, *Award-winning Thai children's picture books*, 177-180.

⁴⁷ With the conflicts over a ferry boat between the old monkey and the group of animals, the lion orders the old monkey to serve all animals equally without giving privilege to his relatives. When many animals suddenly fall sick at the same time, they keep referring to the lion's order and jump into the boat no matter how the old monkey tries to stop them. When the boat loses its balance, it capsizes and all the animals drown in the river.

⁴⁸ Sorani, *Award-winning Thai children's picture books*, 178.

animals over the ferry boat is comparable to the conflict between two groups of people: the government officers who were using their coercive power in an unjust way and the powerless people who could only express their frustration and demand better treatment. The way in which the lion solves this conflict also replicates the role and authority of the head of the government and the necessity to use absolute power to deal with social unrest. Like the lion that is known as the king of the forest, General Chatchai claimed his integrity in running the country and his legitimacy as the head of the democratically elected government to use his absolute power to keep peace and harmony in the society.

In addition, the initial conflict that later develops into a cooperative relationship between the Thai desserts and the Western desserts in *The War of the Sweets* (2002)⁴⁹ can be read as a metaphor of the relationship of Thailand with other nations and its position in the world during the age of globalisation.⁵⁰ While Thailand was still suffering from the post economic crisis which took place after the burst of the bubble economy in 1997, there were several attempts to define and promote the significance of Thainess in order to make the Thai people feel connected and realise the negative consequences of moving the country closer to a Western capitalist way of life. This story implies that Thailand and its people should not regard themselves as inferior to Western countries. As a single nation in the age of globalisation, Thailand cannot avoid associating with other nations, but it is crucial for the Thai people to find the best way to establish a mutual relationship on equal terms without allowing other nations to exercise superior power over them.

⁴⁹ Although they are sold in the same shop, the Thai desserts and the Western desserts always fight with one another as they believe that they are better than each other. As they are having an argument one night, both the Thai and Western desserts are attacked by a colony of ants who come to look for food. When they see that the Western desserts cannot defend themselves, the group of Thai sweets decides to help them out. After this shared experience, both groups of desserts agree to stay together on the same shelf.

⁵⁰ Sorani, *Award-winning Thai children's picture books*, 179, 180.

As in *The Clever Ant* (2001) and *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000), slight changes can also be detected in the way that the meaning and implications of unity have been constructed in these two picture books. Although the collective consciousness remains unchallenged, it has been redefined to show that careful consideration of the context is also important. *The Animals' Lesson* (1990) shows that neither absolute power nor the establishment of rule and order alone would lead to peace and harmony as long as people in the society still take these for granted without fully considering the exceptional nature of the circumstances. These changes are apparent in the negative consequences of the animals' excessive belief in a sense of fairness and equality, which causes the ferry boat to become overloaded and capsize after the animals all insist on getting onto the boat at the same time. In *The War of the Sweets* (2002), the sense of integration and harmony also reflects a wider context in which unity does not simply represent a way of strengthening the relations among members of the same community, but should be seen as a way of bridging relations between members of different communities to enable them to live together harmoniously.

Conclusion

This article shows that the view that all aspects of Thais' lives are based more on the group and community than on the individual is an overwhelming trait of the Thai picture books. A strong sense of unity and cohesion is considered the most important social characteristic. In order to achieve this great sense of unity and cohesion, the books' themes are focused on the values of peaceful interrelationships and harmonious community living; for example, the value of helping one another and individual sacrifice for the common good.

In addition, the books emphasise that all members in the community should avoid expressing their individualistic traits. Instead of being supremely confident in their own abilities and striving for personal victory, they should learn to cooperate effectively with each other in order to establish and maintain peace and reconciliation. Yet it should be noted that this sense of unity and cohesion in the books is

always represented in a top-down scenario in accordance with the hierarchical structure of the society. That is to say, the sense of unity and the implication that all members of the community should strictly uphold it can be seen as a social order imposed upon them by those with superior power. In order to live together in peace and harmony, this hierarchical structure needs to be maintained by having all members accept themselves for whom and what they are and live their lives in a way that contributes to the common good of the community.

However, the analysis also reveals that there are slight changes in the way the perspective on social harmony and social integration has been represented in Thai picture books that won awards at certain points in time. In these books, a sense of unity and cohesion can be seen as potentially harmful if members of the community take it for granted. Instead of insisting solely on a sense of unity, it is necessary for people to be flexible in situations where a sense of unity alone might not be sufficient to build and sustain the harmony and balance of the society.

The fact that this type of discourse can be found only at certain points in time indicates the strong relationship between the discourse of children's books and the social context at the time the books were published. The idea that a strict belief in either freedom or discipline will not achieve social stability can be found in *The Siamese Cats Find Their Home* (2000), which was published to promote a democratic way of thinking in the lead-up to the general election. The negative consequences of an excessive belief in a sense of unity is presented in *The Clever Ant* (2001) which was published during the political crisis where a sense of unity was used extensively as a political weapon to attack the opposite side. Yet the collective consciousness remains unchallenged in these picture books despite the extent to which the meaning and implications of social integration and harmony have changed. Living together in peace and harmony and with understanding and love is still seen as the main social objective.

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