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Topics in Siemsee Literature: A Relationship between Needs and Fortune-telling

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Abstract:

Siemsee is a kind of fortune-telling prevalent in Thailand, especially in temples and sacred places. This study is conducted to analyze the content of Siemsee sheets or fortune-telling sheets. Three collections of Siemsee sheets are collected from three Buddhist temples: Wat Raikhing, Wat Paknam, and Wat Sraket. In total, there are 84 sheets. Content analysis is used to categorize the prophecy in these Siemsee sheets into 14 topics: debt; luck; work; lost stuff; lost person; family, friend and relative; (un)happiness; enemy; health; lawsuit; love life; offspring; patronage; and moral belief. In addition, Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs is adopted to examine the Siemsee content as the Siemsee sheets are pre-made and they should respond to people's basic inquiries and needs when they perform this kind of fortune-telling as much as possible. It is found that the content in Siemsee sheets reflects three lowest levels of needs which are biological and physiological needs, safety needs, and social needs.

Keywords: Siemsee, fortune-telling sheets, fortune-telling literature, hierarchy of needs

1. Introduction

People shaking a flask full of wooden or plastic sticks is a common sight in many Thai temples and sacred places. This activity is a kind of fortune telling known as Siemsee which requires at least two instruments: Siemsee sticks and Siemsee sheets (in Figure 1). Siemsee sticks are numbered and put in a flask. People who are to perform the activity sit before a sacred statue, including but not limited to Buddha images, and ask the sacred being to predict their future. After that, they will shake the flask until one of the wooden sticks falls out, so that they can read the prophecy on the numbered Siemsee sheet matching the stick's number.



Figure 1: Siemsee Sheet

The word 'Siemsee' originates from Chinese language. 'Siem' refers to a small piece of wood or paper and 'see' means a poem; hence, Siemsee is a poetic prophecy on paper. Evidence (e.g., in Ananthawong, 1983) reveals that Siemsee was already in Siam (the former name of Thailand) during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, which is over a century ago. In that period, a man named Plien Saesong translated the Chinese prophecy into Thai and displayed his poetic translation at Wat Kanlayanamit, a temple in Thailand. This is known as the first collection of Thai Siemsee sheets which were later

distributed to other temples. Ananthawong (1983) estimates that Siemsee might even exist in Ayutthaya period or about four centuries ago. Today, this Chinese prophecy has planted its deep roots in the country, especially in temples and become one of the mental supporters for some people, even though it does not seem to conform to the Buddha's teachings.

Being in the society for a long time, Siemsee can be considered a part of Thai culture. Siemsee sheets describe people's fortune on different aspects. Since they are designed for the mass, Siemsee content should answer people's common questions or respond to people's general needs; in other words, the topics predicted in Siemsee sheets must at least reflect what people are concerned about or what they consider as significant parts of their life. Therefore, Siemsee sheets do not only contain information about someone's future but the content on this paper can represent people's beliefs and needs.

Translated from Chinese into Thai, the content is later rendered into English. Some collections of Siemsee sheets offer concise English prophecy. In this paper, the English content of Siemsee sheets is investigated and categorized into topics. Also, theory of needs proposed by Maslow (1943, 1954) is employed to explain the content.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Siemsee

Siemsee sheets are considered a kind of literature with unique purpose and form. Several studies have been conducted to examine its content. Jarungkiet (2006) studies Siemsee sheets in temples in the central region provinces of Thailand and reports that their content includes love, luck, health, lawsuit, offspring, debt, enemy, relative, travelling, and work. Siemsee sheets in temples in the same area are also studied by Poosawisot (2008) who explains that figures of speech like simile, metaphor, allegory and allusion, are used for entertaining purpose and better understanding of the prophecy.

Apart from giving the prophecy, Siemsee sheets contain information reflecting society and people. Singtong (2015) explains that in her study on social reflection in Siemsee sheets in Tak province, topics about everyday living is found the most, followed by family, karma, and didactic content respectively. She describes that the result reveals that people's basic needs involve life quality and four basic necessities. From Singtong's study, it can be seen that the most frequent topic, everyday living, might reflect egoism and the content in Siemsee sheets is mostly about biological and physiological needs, similar to Jarungkiet's study (2006). It might be possible that karma and didactic content are included to teach people as well as to remind them that their fortune also depends on what they did, has done, or will do.

With the popularity and prevalence of World Wide Web, Siemsee has been kept up with the technology. Different websites and mobile applications offer Siemsee services. Investigating electronic Siemsee, Thabtan (2006) categorizes its content into 11 topics: karma, luck, spouse, work, money, illness, enemy, lawsuit, offspring, lost stuff, and other topics like residence and destiny. On linguistic aspect, she explains that language use in Siemsee sheets is simple and easy to understand while there is the use of common metaphors which can be considered the distinct point of this literature. Jarungkiet (2006) and Thabtan (2006)'s studies also show that the topics of Siemsee sheets' content are mostly related to everyday life and basic needs. In this study, a categorization of topics in Siemsee sheets is conducted as it may provide more details and deeper understanding on people and culture related to the fortune-telling.

2.2. Hierarchy of Needs

The psychological theory of Maslow (1943, 1954) is used for explaining people's needs reflected in Siemsee sheets. Defining human desire, Maslow (1943) originally proposes five levels of basic needs and later adds another three levels, arranged in a hierarchy shown in Figure 2 below. He further explains that needs in lower levels should be met before reaching the higher ones and each level of needs may dominate human behavior.

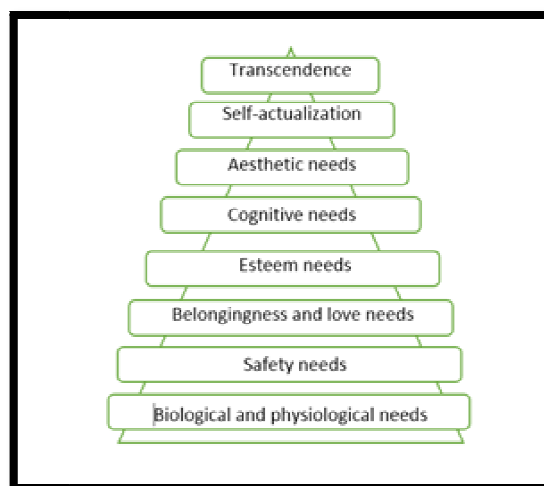


Figure 2: Maslow's Updated Hierarchy of Needs

From the bottom up, biological and physiological needs are basic needs for survival, such as food and air. Safety needs concern with security and feeling safe, including job security and health. Belongingness and love needs (or social

needs) are desire to be accepted and loved. Esteem needs involve becoming important to others or being in a high position within a group. Cognitive needs relate to gaining knowledge and understanding the world. Aesthetic needs refer to the appreciation of beauty. Self-actualization is the need to make the most of their abilities. Lastly, transcendence is the spiritual need to help others self-actualize.

Though this hierarchy has been negatively criticized for its lack of evidence and practical use as well as the irrelevance of hierarchy, the theory has survived over decades. Realizing its limitations, Maslow's theory is still used in this study for a few reasons. First, this study focuses on the content in Siemsee sheets and simply compares the topics in Siemsee sheets to basic human needs. Second, despite heavy criticism, the theory has been well-known and well-received by the public and it might elicit more details in Siemsee sheets for a better understanding. Lastly, adopting it in this study probably lead to identifying any applicability or weakness of the theory itself.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study. The methodology is divided into two phases: data collection and data analysis.

3.1. Data Collection

Since Siemsee is prevalent in religious and sacred places in Thailand, the researcher first visited several Buddhism temples in Bangkok and suburban areas, focusing on famous temples that attract foreign visitors in order to search for English Siemsee sheets. Some temples offered the same collection which was Saesong's original translation. However, three different collections of Siemsee sheets with English translation were collected from three temples: Wat Raikhing in Nakornpathom province, Wat Sraket in Bangkok, and Wat Paknam in Bangkok. Each collection consists of 28 sheets; hence, there are 84 sheets in total.

3.2. Data Analysis

Focusing on the English translation of Siemsee sheets, content analysis is used to examine their content. Each Siemsee sheet is read to find the topics predicted in the prophecy. The content is classified into topics and discussed how they reflect Thai people and culture, in relation with Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs.

4. Results and Discussion

Overall, the English content in Siemsee sheets can be categorized into 14 topics: debt; luck; work; lost stuff; lost person; family, friend and relative; (un)happiness; enemy; health; lawsuit; love life; offspring; patronage; and moral belief. It should be emphasized that the categorization of topics is flexible. Below is the discussion of each topic and its example(s) found indifferent collections of Siemsee sheets. These examples are presented in italics within the quotation marks, followed by the name of the temple where the specific Siemsee sheet was collected and the number of Siemsee sheet.

4.1. Debt

'You will meet people who borrowed your money soon.' Wat Raikhing #3

'You will be taken care by your debtors, also relatives.' Wat Paknam #2

Debt is a common topic found in all 3 collections of Siemsee sheets, but not in every one of them. The prophecy always predicts about debtors, for example, whether you will find your debtors. This clearly show that only creditors are the worried party who seek help from the sacred to predict if they will get the money back while the debtors probably do not need to know about their creditor. In all 84 sheets, there is no prediction about creditors from the debtors' perspective. The fact that creditors ask about this issue, instead of asking their debtor directly, reflects a few aspects about Thai people and culture. First, it shows that borrowing and lending money are common practices. Moreover, the notion of face is always concerned. Demanding answers from the sacred, creditors may try to save debtors' faces or even their own face. Pessimistically, the content implies that debtors are likely to run away or refrain from paying back. From the creditors' perspective, the topic is related to Maslow's safety needs. It is all about the needs to feel assured that they will get their money back.

4.2. Luck

'Don't worry of the unluckiness you're facing, soon it all will be eliminated.' Wat Sraket #1

'You'll never lack fortune, happiness and prosperity.' Wat Sraket #22

Found in nearly every Siemsee sheet, luck is one of the significant issues as its content is more elaborated and in details, compared with other topics. Unmistakably, it is what many, if not all, people are concerned about and it is believed that luck plays a very important role in a person's life. The prophecy demonstrates that luck is related to almost every aspect of life, such as family, love, and work. Good luck means good life. If your luck is bad, sometimes Siemsee provides you a solution or comfort. For example, it may predict that your luck will be better or recommend you to donate money to boost your luck. Even if your luck is fine, Siemsee might remind you to be careful. Moral belief which is another topic discussed later is related to luck and it brings people closer to Buddhist teachings.

Indeed, as luck is related to a wide range of things, identifying its representation of needs is not easy. It depends on what you need luck for. Broadly speaking, it can be safety needs. In addition, it should be noted that prophecy about fortune is included under this topic. This is an example of the categorization problem. Fortune can also be classified as another main

topic; yet, it is usually mentioned with luck. In fact, luck itself covers most topics presented in the paper; however, other topics are also worth the discussion.

4.3. Work

'You'll succeed in anything you do, especially commercial.' Wat Sraket #15

'Work as a team, it's harmful for you to be the leader.' Wat Sraket #4

Sometimes, work is not mentioned directly in Siemsee sheets. One of the reasons is that it is included in the topic about luck. Basically, if you have good luck and fortune, your work is good as well. However, when it is clearly predicted, the common kinds of work in the content are those related to commerce and investment. One explanation is that such work has been desirable for the Chinese and the content was preserved when it was translated into Thai. Reasonably, commerce and investment are risky in their own nature. People may need mental support from the sacred before or when doing their job and this demonstrates that the topic is related to Maslow's safety needs. Moreover, the prophecy on this topic sometimes mentions benefactors, patronage, luck, and money. This might show that many people believe they need help from others or invisible power in order to be successful at work.

4.4. Lost Stuff

'If you ask for a lost item, you'll never get it back.' Wat Raikhing #10

'Don't worry about what being lost.' Wat Paknam #26

This topic is included in every collection of Siemsee sheets, though there is not much information about it. Generally, the prophecy can be predicted in 2 ways: either the lost stuff will be found or not. Sometimes, Siemsee prophecy gives a mental support and it is very common that people should be worried or distressed when losing something. Again, the topic reflects various needs proposed by Maslow. Apart from physiological needs, safety needs can be related to this topic, depending on the lost stuff.

4.5. Lost Person

'With regards to the absent person, he will still not be found.' Wat Raikhing #4

'You'll meet the missing person you're looking for.' Wat Sraket #9

Similar to lost stuff, this topic simply predicts whether a lost person will be met or not. It does not provide any other details about it. Compared with luck, both lost stuff and lost person seem to be minor issues as they appear in a few sheets of each collection. Moreover, these two topics are usually not related to others and the prophecy about them is one of the most straightforward. Classifying this topic under any of Maslow's needs also depends on various factors, such as relationship and social status of the lost person.

4.6. Family, Friend and Relative

'Though misery is through, your family and comrades are all happy, but yourself still feel uneasy.' Wat Sraket #7

Family, friend, and relative are grouped under the same topic as they are often mentioned in the same sentence like in the above example. This topic is included in every collection of Siemsee sheets but with limited information. Yet, the topic is reasonably related to others like happiness and luck. For example, it might predict that your friend will bring you a good fortune or your family will be happy. Reflecting safety needs and social needs, family and peers are important in a collectivist society like Thai's and Chinese's. Even though the prophecy is directed to other people, not the person who perform the fortune-telling activity, these people can affect the person's life and this might be one of the reasons that this topic is related to others.

4.7. (Un)happiness

'You will get more and more unhappiness.' Wat Sraket #25

'After non-fortune, one will be happy and healthy.' Wat Paknam #22

The prophecy under this topic simply predicts whether you will be happy. This is another topic that can be related to many other topics like spouse and work as happiness is affected or created by various factors. In fact, other topics classified in the study can be the causes of (un)happiness. Logically, whether a person is happy solely depends on that person. For example, you can choose to be fun doing a lot of work or you can be bored. Vague as it is, the prophecy cannot be true or untrue; however, the topic clearly appears in every collection of Siemsee sheets. Linking it to any specific needs is also complicated because happiness is the result occurred when needs are satisfactorily met.

4.8. Enemy

'Be careful of the enemies that surround you.' Wat Sraket #25

This topic can be a cause of unhappiness discussed above. The content about enemy rarely appears, but it is included in every collection of Siemsee sheets as a stand-alone topic. The prophecy usually warns people to be careful. It also predicts whether your enemy will be able to harm you. The inclusion of this topic suggests that enemy plays an important role in a person's life. At least, it makes a person so worried that s/he seeks help from the sacred. Sometimes, an enemy may not expose him/herself, so people do not know and need the sacred to help them about this. It generally reflects Maslow's safety needs because an enemy brings insecurity.

4.9. Health

'After illness, you will be healthy.' Wat Paknam #23

'If you ask about a sick person, he will recover.' Wat Raikhing #7

This topic includes both physical and mental health. Apart from providing the prophecy about the person who casts Siemsee, it can predict about other people's health. This is not surprising because a patient might be too sick to visit a temple, so a friend or relative should be the one who asks the sacred about the patient's health. The prophecy simply predicts whether a person's health will be good. The content focuses on a person's present illness and rarely does it predict that a person will be ill. For this topic, Siemsee's role is a comforter or mental supporter for a worried person. Similar to luck, sometimes Siemsee recommends people who get negative prediction on health to make merits or do good deeds in order to get better. The topic definitely represents people's safety needs.

4.10. Lawsuit

'If you're involved in a lawsuit, don't worry, you'll win the case.' Wat Sraket #22

Though this topic is not a common aspect of every people's life, the content can be found in several sheets of every collection of Siemsee sheets. The prophecy simply informs whether you will win a legal case or a dispute. Psychologically, involving in a lawsuit can be stressful and people may need to consult the sacred to comfort themselves. The topic sometimes depends on luck since good luck can bring triumph; hence it can be seen that this topic also reflects safety needs.

4.11. Love Life

'According to the fourth oracle, you may not meet your boyfriend or girlfriend now.' Wat Raikhing #4

'Should you refrain from seeking a mate for quite a while, otherwise you'll find a terrible spouse.'

Wat Sraket #3

Indeed, this topic is found in every collection of Siemsee sheets. There is a variety of prediction for this topic. It can be about whether you will find your love, when that will happen, or who will bring your soul mate to you. It may predict whether your future spouse is good. It might warn you to not looking for your mate at the moment. Also, Siemsee may inform you about the current situation of your love life. In addition, some Siemsee sheets predict the direction of current relationship. These various sub-topics are offered to respond to people's questions about love and show that people are concerned about many aspects of their love life. Those who do not have a spouse would like to know when or if they will have one. Those who are in a relationship wonder if it will last or how it is going to be. The topic is in the lower levels of Maslow's needs and it reflects social needs in most cases and safety needs in others.

4.12. Offspring

'Welcome your daughter if you are pregnant.' Wat Raikhing #26

'For you who wish for a baby, now it's not yet the time.' Wat Sraket #21

The prophecy about offspring usually predicts two things: whether you will be pregnant and whether an unborn baby will be a boy or a girl. There is no explicit prediction about existing offspring; however, that part might be included in the family topic. This topic shows that descendant issue is important for many people as it appears in all collections of Siemsee sheets. This topic may lack direct relationship to any of Maslow's needs. To decide that which need is reflected by this topic depends on parents' view toward their child. For some families, a child means another helping hand or represents security in love. In a collectivist society, having descendants can make people rest assured that they will have someone to take care of them in the future or carry on the family name. On the other hand, an unwanted child can threaten their parents' safety needs.

4.13. Patronage

'For number sixteen, you will be filled with hope and may be supported by someone who is generous and can give kind advice.' Wat Raikhing #16

'You'll be patronized and happy unless you're impetuous.' Wat Sraket #1

Patronage is one of the significant topics. It is included in many Siemsee sheets of every collection. This might reflect collectivism and how people believe that it leads to success. Similar to luck, patronage brings about good things. Even it is predicted that you will have difficulties in life, if you get a patron's support, your problems will be solved. Therefore, the prophecy about this topic is related to many other topics, such as work, health, and happiness. Usually, it is predicted whether you will be patronized. The topic clearly indicates the needs for safety as people can feel safer when realizing there is someone ready to help them.

4.14. Moral Belief

'Try not to commit evil deeds.' Wat Sraket #14

'The fortune will be on one doing good deed.' Wat Paknam #27

This topic is related to many other topics such as luck, work, and love. Moral is included in a lot of Siemsee sheets to teach people. The teaching part is usually based on the Buddha's teachings. Since Buddhism is prevalent in China as well as in Thailand, the content is probably transferred from the original Chinese Siemsee sheets; however, some parts might be adapted later to fit the context of Thai Buddhist temples. Usually, it teaches about karma and reminds people that if their life does not go as predicted, it is due to their own karma. Considering that Siemsee does not really conform to what a

Buddhist should believe in, this topic makes it closer to what the Buddha teaches. As the content about this topic does not respond to people's questions when they cast Siemsee, it cannot be linked with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Apart from the fourteen topics categorized above, there are some minor issues excluded from the categorization, even though it is intended that the categorization should be as specific as possible. The reason is that these minor issues are not clearly mentioned or they are too close to other topics. For example, travelling is a topic discussed by Jarungkiet (2006); however, it is found that the English prophecy does not actually predict about travelling, but the result of travelling or what travelling will bring to you. Below are examples of such prophecy.

'What this number forecasts are great, wherever you be, neither poverty nor trouble could happen to you.' Wat Sraket #22

'Being constantly patronized everywhere, one can be conquered by no-one in accusation.' Wat Paknam #24

In Thabtan's (2006) study, residence, spouse, and destiny are also classified as main topics found in Siemsee sheets. However, in this study, spouse is included in love life while destiny is under luck. Residence is not considered as a main topic in the study because there is no explicit prophecy about residence in English prophecy, similar to the case of the topic of travelling, but it should be noted that the prophecy about residence does appear in Thai content of Siemsee sheets.

5. Conclusion

Written to respond to people's questions and needs asked when casting Siemsee, the content in Siemsee sheets reveal that people are concerned about these 14 topics: debt; luck; work; lost stuff; lost person; family, friend and relative; (un)happiness; enemy; health; lawsuit; love life; offspring; patronage; and moral belief. Most topics can be found in every collection of Siemsee sheets. The rest are not as common. Some topics like patronage and offspring reflect collectivism. The fear of losing or threatening face is implied in the debt topic. Luck and patronage seem to influence other topics; so, these topics are interrelated in some ways. In addition, every collection of Siemsee sheets contains moral beliefs and Buddha's teaching.

Compared with Maslow's needs, these topics reflect the lower levels of needs: biological and physiological, safety, and social needs. Most topics demonstrate that people need to feel safe. While most biological and physiological needs like food and residence are obvious to bare eyes and foreseeable by general people, safety needs, similar to social needs, are intangible, uncontrollable, and unpredictable; therefore, people turn to ask for help to forecast their future regarding these needs.

Prevalent in Buddhist temples in Thailand, Siemsee can be considered a part of popular Buddhism since its content predicting people's future does not conform to the Buddha's teaching to stay within the present. On the one hand, it does not seem to be a temple or a sacred place's role to provide Siemsee fortune-telling. On the other, this activity might help people overcome suffering and Siemsee can at least give mental support to people. Whether the prophecy is good or not, people can benefit from Siemsee. If good prophecy is given, people will be happy. If not, they can prepare for the worst beforehand. Finally, there are many other aspects about Siemsee that should be studied. The topics can be examined using a quantitative approach, for example. Further studies on Siemsee's history, translation, and language can also be beneficial and can give more details about this kind of literature.

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