

Xiang Miang, a Trickster of Southeast Asia

(Thailand)

Like most countries in Asia, Thai people hold high respect and great consideration for elders, Buddhist monks, high ranking people, and royalty. They would not be allowed to speak back, disobey, or revolt against them in any way. All this is true in reality, but in the imaginary world of the folktales, all subordinates could outwit or defeat higher authorities if the authorities are not just, or if they do not behave properly. Most trickster stories provide checks for society to re-examine the roles of elders, Buddhist monks, high ranking people, and royalty.

In many parts of north-east Thailand and Laos, the representative of subordinates is a notorious trickster named Xiang Miang (pronounced “syang myang”). In some areas, he is called Khattapa. In central Thailand, he is called Srithanonchai. In Cambodia, he is called Ah Thonchuy Prach. In Myanmar, he is called Saga Dausa.

Xiang Miang stories come in many episodes beginning from the trickster's birth and how he got his name, Xiang Miang and ending with his death at the end of the entire story. Two episodes are related here.



Xiang Miang and the Snail

Once when Xiang Miang was walking by a swamp near his village, he saw a snail moving slowly along the edge of the pond.

“Aha, ha, ha, ha, Snail, you walk so slowly. Where are you going?” asked Xiang Miang.

“I am going to the other end of the swamp,” answered the snail.

“Ha, ha, ha . . . I figure it must take you one month to reach that end of the swamp,” said Xiang Miang.

With that Xiang Miang laughed at the snail.

The snail looked up, feeling quite insulted.

“Well, if you think you walk so fast, do you want a race?”

The snail's proposal tickled Xiang Miang so much that he laughed even louder.

“Of course. When do you want to have a race? Now?” Xiang Miang challenged the snail.

The snail became quite nervous, but maintained his cool. “Oh, no, not now. I want you to have time to get in shape for the race,” said the snail.



“What?” exclaimed Xiang Miang, annoyed.

“Why don’t we have a race tomorrow, this time, here?” said the snail.

“Sure,” said Xiang Miang.

The snail became a little worried about the race. So, he went to his snail relatives for help. Other snails were more than happy to help because they would like to see the day that Xiang Miang was outwitted.

The next day came. The snail was waiting at the edge of the swamp for Xiang Miang. When Xiang Miang arrived, the snail said, “Xiang Miang, since I am so small, it might be difficult for you to see where I am in the race. Why don’t you call my name after you have run for awhile and I will answer your call? You can call, ‘Snail!’ And I can answer, ‘Kuuk!’”

“Kuuk” is a sound used in north-eastern Thailand and Laos, which means “I am here.”

“All right, let’s rehearse,” agreed Xiang Miang. “Snail!”

“Kuuk!” answered the snail.

Then, the race began. The snail moved slowly and Xiang Miang ran off as fast as he could. Then, he looked back and could not see the snail. So, he called, “Snail!”

“Kuuk!” came the snail’s answer from way ahead of Xiang Miang.

“How can that snail go so fast? He is ahead of me. I have to run faster. I am

sure I can catch up with him easily,” said Xiang Miang confidently to himself. He ran and ran and ran as fast as he could. After awhile, he looked back and could not see the snail. So, he called, “Snail!”

“Kuuk!” came the snail’s answer from way ahead of Xiang Miang.

Xiang Miang began to feel a little concerned. “Oh, no! He is ahead of me again. I have to run faster. I think I can still catch up with him,” said Xiang Miang with some confidence.

So, he ran and ran and ran as fast as he could. Then, he called, “Snail!”

“Kuuk!” came the snail’s answer from way ahead of Xiang Miang.

Xiang Miang became so exhausted and worried. “Oh, no! Not again! He is ahead. I have to run even faster now,” said Xiang Miang.

So, he ran and ran and ran until his legs could no longer carry him. As he was about to lose consciousness, he called weakly, “Snail!” And he heard faintly, “Kuuk!” ahead of him. As he passed out, he still wondered how the slow moving snail could defeat him in that race.

The clever snail had made a plan with the other snails in the pond. Snails had placed themselves at intervals all around the edge of the pond. They were waiting for Xiang Miang’s call. And all snails look and sound just alike. So from the starting line to the finish line, there was always a snail ready to answer Xiang Miang’s “Snail?” with a loud “Kuuk!”

This is the first time that the trickster Xiang Miang was outwitted. And it was only a tiny snail that did it!