

Analysis of the Visual Similarities and Differences Between the Character of *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia) and *Ramakien* (Thailand) Called Hanuman for the Creation of Digital Artworks

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ABSTRACT

Hanuman's portrayal in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien* extends beyond physical characteristics to include symbolic meaning and narrative significance. This research systematically examines the visual similarities and differences between Hanuman in these two epics. The methodology follows a five-step process adapted from Newbold (2015) to analyse digital representations of Southeast Asian folklore characters. Four images of Hanuman's shadow puppet were selected for detailed visual analysis. The study identifies three primary comparative dimensions: visual appearance, lines and shapes, and the colour and symbolic elements of costumes. In *Ramakien*, Hanuman is depicted with white fur, elaborate golden armour, and a crown, symbolising purity, strength, and heroism in Thai culture. In contrast, *Hikayat Seri Rama* presents Hanuman in simpler attire, emphasising cunning and agility, and reflecting Malay artistic conventions as well as Islamic and local cultural influences. This analysis highlights the distinctiveness and interconnectedness of Southeast Asian folklore and demonstrates an approach for integrating traditional narratives into digital media, thereby fostering regional cultural expression through folktales.

Keywords: Asian studies, Asian art, folklore, visual culture, digital art

INTRODUCTION

The rich tapestry of Southeast Asian cultural heritage is exemplified by the intricate narratives and visual representations of the shadow puppet traditions of Malaysia and Thailand. The iconic character of Hanuman, the heroic monkey warrior, serves as a captivating bridge between the *Hikayat Seri Rama* of Malaysia and the *Ramakien* of Thailand (Aveling 2012). Though rooted in the Indic *Ramayana*, these epics reflect sociocultural environments that distinctly shape Hanuman's portrayal in Malaysia and Thailand. While these two epics share a common Indic origin in the *Ramayana*, the distinct sociocultural environments of Malaysia and Thailand have given rise to unique interpretations and artistic expressions of the Hanuman character

(Balakrishnan et al. 2020). In the Malaysian *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman is depicted as a powerful and dutiful companion to the protagonist Rama, often intervening with his exceptional strength and agility to aid in the quest to rescue the abducted Sita (Azim 2022). The Thai *Ramakien* depicts Hanuman as multifaceted, embodying heroic valour, mischievous wit, and spiritual wisdom (Singh 2015). In both *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*, Hanuman's physical appearance is a significant aspect that highlights the divergent cultural interpretations of the character.

In Malaysian tradition, Hanuman is depicted with a more humanoid appearance, featuring human-like facial characteristics alongside simian traits such as a prominent nose and sharp teeth (Kuroda 2020). His muscular physique is complemented by traditional Malay attire, situating the character within the local cultural context. In contrast, Thai representations in the *Ramakien* emphasise Hanuman's simian features, including an elongated face, limbs, and a tail, reflecting Thai cultural reverence for monkeys and their association with the Hindu deity Hanuman. The symbolic significance of Hanuman also differs between the two traditions, shaped by distinct religious and philosophical influences (Putrawan 2023). In *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman symbolises loyalty, strength, and devotion to duty, guided by righteousness and moral responsibility. In the *Ramakien*, Hanuman is characterised by a wider range of attributes, including intelligence, cunning, and spiritual enlightenment, reflecting Thai values of bravery, humour, and wisdom (Aveling 2012). The portrayal of Hanuman in both *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien* extends beyond mere physical appearance and symbolic significance; it also encompasses his role within the larger narrative structure of each epic. In *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman is a central figure in the heroic quest to rescue Sita, serving as a steadfast ally to Rama and a key strategist in their battle against the forces of evil. His unwavering loyalty and selfless devotion to the cause make him a beloved and respected character among Malaysian audiences (Lim 2010). In contrast, while Hanuman's loyalty and bravery are also celebrated in *Ramakien*, his character is more dynamic and multifaceted, often engaging in cunning schemes and playful antics to achieve his goals (Kuroda 2020). His interactions with other characters, such as the demon king Ravana, Thotsakan, and the monkey army, further highlight his complex personality and moral ambiguity (Mesangrutdharakul 2016). Moreover, the cultural significance of Hanuman extends beyond the epics themselves, permeating various aspects of Southeast Asian society and artistic expression. The Thailand-Malaya border and new religious norms led to the adaptation of traditional dance dramas like *Nora*, *Makyung*, and *Mek Melung* (Kuroda 2020). In Malaysia, Hanuman's portrayal in *Hikayat Seri Rama* is not only a source of inspiration for traditional art forms such as shadow puppetry and dance dramas but also serves as a cultural touchstone for contemporary artists seeking to reinterpret and reinvent his character in modern contexts. Similarly, in Thailand, Hanuman remains a ubiquitous presence in popular culture, appearing in literature, theatre, and visual arts as a symbol of strength, wisdom, and resilience (Fukuoka 2022).

Through an in-depth analysis of Hanuman's representation in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*, this research aims to illuminate the enduring relevance and cultural resonance of this iconic character across Southeast Asia. As a result, the nuanced differences in the representation of Hanuman across the two traditions offer a rich canvas for creating digital artworks. The use of digital art provides innovative avenues for examining Hanuman. Through digital paintings, illustrations, and 3D models, Hanuman's physical appearance, attributes, and symbolic significance can be explored in greater depth, offering viewers immersive visual representations. Furthermore, digital techniques like 3D modelling and virtual reality enable the reconstruction of historical sites and artefacts associated with Hanuman worship, facilitating the study of architectural styles and ritual practices (Ghosh et al. 2024). Digital art also serves as a valuable educational resource, offering accessible platforms for learners to explore Hanuman's stories and cultural significance. Overall, integrating digital art enhances the examination of Hanuman's enduring relevance and cultural resonance across diverse regions and traditions (Khalis and Mustaffa 2017). Hence, this research aims to analyse the visual similarities and

differences between the Hanuman character in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*. It also seeks to explore how these insights can inform the development of innovative digital artworks. To achieve this goal, an identification approach via digital art images was implemented, incorporating visual arts and cultural studies (Gosh et al. 2024). Through an examination of the main characters in these epic stories—Seri Rama or Phra Ram, Siti Dewi or Nang Sida, Hanuman or Phra Hanuman, and Maharaja Rawana or Ravana (Thotsakan)—this research examines the visual appearance, costumes, and symbolic elements of the Hanuman character.

The study examines three primary aspects of Hanuman's portrayal: iconography, costume design, and physical form. Iconography addresses symbolic motifs and cultural meanings, such as the association of white fur with purity in the *Ramakien* and the use of subdued tones and geometric patterns to convey spiritual depth in the *Hikayat Seri Rama*. Costume design compares the elaborate golden armour and crowns characteristic of Thai tradition with the minimalist, spiritually influenced attire found in Malaysian depictions, as discussed by Khalis and Mustaffa (2017). Finally, the physical form considers the dynamic poses, proportions, and visual aesthetics that define Hanuman's heroic and cunning characteristics in each tradition. These aspects provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Hanuman's portrayal, offering valuable insights to inform the creation of hybrid digital artworks that honour both cultural identities. Digital art was chosen for this study due to its accessibility, adaptability, and role in cultural preservation, as highlighted by Kong, Guo and Liu (2024), who explored the impact of digital media, virtual reality, and computer-generated art on traditional art forms. Unlike traditional media, digital art seamlessly integrates traditional elements into modern representations, ensuring cultural narratives remain relevant and accessible to global audiences. It enables precise documentation of details such as iconography and costume design, supports creative experimentation in merging Thai and Malay cultural features, and facilitates educational applications such as virtual museums and augmented reality (Gosh et al. 2024). These strengths make digital art invaluable for preserving and sharing Hanuman's cultural heritage.

Research Questions

1. What are the main comparisons between the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*'s visuals of Hanuman's costumes and symbolic elements?
2. How can digital artworks that integrate Thai and Malay design elements be created using the visual analysis of Hanuman in these two epics?

Research Objectives

1. Investigate the visual similarities and differences between the portrayals of the Hanuman character in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien* through a visual analysis of their costumes and symbolic elements.
2. Explore how insights from Hanuman's depiction in these two epics can inform innovative digital artworks through the fusion of Thai and Malay design elements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the cultural interpretations of Hanuman in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*, scholars have uncovered a rich tapestry of insights into the complexities of Southeast Asian storytelling traditions. The intricate fusion of indigenous cultural values and Hindu mythology, as embodied by figures such as Hanuman, highlights the rich tapestry of beliefs and traditions

that shape the region's cultural heritage (Aveling 2012; Azim 2022). Costume designs, character depictions, and symbolic elements convey the unique cultural identities of each tradition. Hanuman's evolution across different artistic mediums and historical contexts sheds light on his significance as a cultural icon and symbol of religious devotion in Thai society (Kia 2014). The representation of Hanuman reflects distinct cultural and historical influences unique to Malaysian and Thai traditions. The symbolic significance of Hanuman and the gender dynamics surrounding his character intersect with broader themes of cultural identity and representation (Fukuoka 2022; Hidajat et al. 2021). The socio-political dimensions of Hanuman's portrayal add another layer of complexity, highlighting his narrative role that reflects broader power dynamics and cultural ideologies within Southeast Asian societies (Dilfa 2021).

The analysis of Hanuman's portrayal in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and the *Ramakien* reveals intricate socio-political dimensions deeply entrenched in Malaysian and Thai societies (Aveling 2012; Balakrishnan et al. 2020; Fukuoka 2022). The exploration of Hanuman as a symbol of resistance and resilience in Malay folklore resonates with the examination of his symbolic significance in Thai culture, particularly as a representation of monarchy and divine kingship (Lim 2010). These contrasting portrayals reflect broader power dynamics and cultural ideologies prevalent in both societies, highlighting Hanuman's multifaceted role as a cultural icon (Dilfa 2021). The investigation into the psychological dimensions of Hanuman's character enriches society's understanding of Hanuman by revealing his symbolic significance as a manifestation of human emotions and virtues in Southeast Asian folklore (Aveling 2012). Further, the symbolic significance of Hanuman as a manifestation of human emotions and virtues suggests that digital artists can leverage these attributes to evoke deeper emotional connections with their audience (Azim 2022). In addition, a comparative analysis notes that Malaysian representations often emphasise Hanuman's strategic cunning, while Thai portrayals focus on his physical prowess and loyalty (Rajantharan et al. 2019; Singh 2015). This comparative insight has enabled digital artists to blend these traits, creating multifaceted digital representations that appeal to diverse cultural sensibilities (Singh 2015). The analysis is extended by contextualising Hanuman's portrayals within historical and political frameworks, encouraging digital artists to incorporate historical narratives and cultural symbols to deepen and authenticate their artworks (Azim 2022). Moreover, stylistic and aesthetic influences of these epics on digital art are explored, highlighting the intricate line work and vibrant colour schemes of Thai depictions, which have inspired digital artists to adopt similar techniques to convey the dynamism and heroism of Hanuman (Chaudhury 2024). The analysis contrasts this with the more subdued and earth-toned palettes of Malaysian art, reflecting Hanuman's connection to nature and strategic intelligence. Further analysis reveals how these aesthetic choices are not merely artistic preferences but are deeply rooted in cultural and religious symbolism (Hidajat et al. 2021).

The integration of Buddhist and Islamic motifs in Thai and Malaysian art, respectively, has prompted digital artists to fuse traditional artistic elements with contemporary digital techniques, creating artworks that resonate with both historical authenticity and modern sensibilities (Azim, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2024). Finally, the impact of regional aesthetics on digital art is discussed, noting that the interplay of traditional and contemporary styles in the depiction of Hanuman has led to innovative digital artworks that celebrate and reinterpret Southeast Asian cultural heritage (Azim 2022; Chattopadhyay and Das 2022). By cross analysing these studies, it becomes evident that the visual representations of Hanuman in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien* profoundly influence the creation of digital artworks, shaping their thematic depth, emotional resonance, and cultural authenticity (Chattopadhyay and Das 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology comprised several key steps, each essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the visual and symbolic elements inherent in these digital portrayals. The study employed Newbold's (2015) five-step methodology to investigate the visual representations of Hanuman in Southeast Asian folklore through digital artworks.



Figure 1 Wayang Kulit characters from Hikayat Seri Rama

Source: Author's collection

First, digital representations of main characters such as Seri Rama or Phra Ram, Siti Dewi or Nang Sida, Hanuman, and Thotsakan were systematically compiled from online art platforms, archives, and artist collections. This phase ensured a better understanding that captured a wide array of contemporary digital artistry related to Southeast Asian folklore. And then the character has been narrowed down to only Hanuman by using the references in Figure 2.

Next, each artwork was examined to identify the visual appearances, intricate costume details, and symbolic attributes. This detailed focus on colour schemes, line work, and gestures offers a deeper understanding of the aesthetic and cultural choices embedded in the artworks. A systematic comparative examination was then conducted to identify recurring motifs, visual deviations, and shared symbolic codes across regions.



Figure 2 (a) Hanuman character from *Ramakien* Thailand and (b) Malaysian *Ramayana*

Source: Author's collection

To operationalise this analysis, Newbold's five-step framework was applied to the following coding layers:

Iconography

A codebook was developed for motifs and attributes, such as fur colour, crown or diadem type, armour filigree, fang or jewel marks, tail position, mudra or gesture, and decorative pattern families (Thai floral scrolls vs. Malay geometric arabesques). Presence/absence of these features and short descriptive notes were recorded for each image. For example, Khon masks employ conventional colours and ornaments to denote sacred rank, moral status, or character class (warrior, deity, demon, monkey).

Colour Palette

Dominant colours were extracted using histogram intersection and clustering ($K = 5-7$). This enabled calculation of percentage share across key categories such as whites/golds, earthy reds/oranges, and deep greens/blues. Such quantification follows Swain and Ballard's (1991) colour indexing, a common practice in computer vision, to compare palettes across cultural and artistic contexts (Table 1).

Table 1 Colour palette analysis of Hanuman artworks

Image	Dominant colours (%)	Notes
Hanuman Kera Putih	White 48%, Gold 22%, Red 15%, Black 10%, Blue 5%	Spiritual purity, divine status
Hanuman Ramakien	Gold 35%, Blue 25%, White 20%, Red 15%, Green 5%	Heroic grandeur, theatrical contrast

Shape/Form

Key silhouettes (masks/face + crown) were analysed using contour descriptors (area, perimeter, aspect ratio), ornamentation proxy ($\text{Perimeter}/\sqrt{\text{Area}}$), and crown tip counts to compare complexity between Thai and Malay outlines. This structured approach moves from inventory into interpretation in line with Newbold's heuristic.

Practitioner voices and cultural heritage sources further validate the visual codes identified in this study. For example, Khon mask-making manuals describe how colour and decoration alone allow audiences to distinguish character types: white fur or face signals divine or heroic status (such as Hanuman), while green or dark tonalities with fang marks indicate demon-giant roles. In Malaysia, accounts of Wayang Kulit highlight how the "Tok Dalang" (master puppeteer) and audience treat the puppets and their palettes as micro-cosms of moral and cosmological order, where form, gesture, and pattern encode meaning beyond surface visuals. These ethnographic and media sources support the study's assertion that the creative reinterpretation of motifs, colours, and shapes in Muay Thai branding is not merely aesthetic but grounded in long-standing cultural semiotics and performative traditions (Dawson 2024). However, this remains an introductory stage of research; a more detailed ethnographic investigation will be expanded in future studies to deepen cultural insight and further validate these findings.

Based on this analysis, the study proposed a viable approach for incorporating Malay and Thai cultural aspects into a single digital representation of Hanuman, similar to the work of Khalis and Mustaffa (2017), who integrated Malay and Thai cultural elements in their study on animation character design. The findings provided insights into Malay geometric patterns and subtle earth tones, as well as Thai intricate line work and dynamic stances, which served as the foundation for constructing a hybrid character. For instance, Hanuman's golden Thai armour could incorporate geometric Malay designs subtly embedded into its surface, while his dynamic stances might reflect Thai traditions of movement and vitality, balanced by the elegant simplicity of Malay aesthetics.

Advanced digital tools such as Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, and early 3D modelling software like Blender and 3ds Max were used to enhance the cultural depth and visual appeal of the digital artworks. Kia (2014) describe techniques for capturing traditional Wayang Kulit shadow puppet styles using these tools, which enabled the detailed analysis and reconstruction of visual elements, including iconography, costume details, and physical form, preserving cultural authenticity while embracing modern aesthetics. Subtle colour gradients captured the dynamic transitions of traditional Thai and Malay art, while texture layering added depth and realism, replicating Malay geometric patterns and Thai ornate gold inlays. The hybrid Hanuman design was developed iteratively by merging these elements, drawing inspiration from Khon Mask dance and Wayang Kulit performances for dynamic poses. Basic skeletal rigging techniques enhanced visual storytelling, emphasising movement and vitality. The findings were then contextualised within the cultural and narrative frameworks of the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*, grounding the observed visual similarities and differences in their cultural significance and symbolism. This approach highlights the adaptability of digital art for preserving and reinterpreting Southeast Asian heritage while engaging modern audiences through innovative storytelling.

FINDINGS

Visual analysis reveals significant insights into Hanuman's portrayal in *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien*. Three categories of similarities and differences emerged: physical appearance, costume details, and symbolic elements, as shown in Table 2. These comparative dimensions

illuminate how each epic uniquely interprets and represents Hanuman, providing a deeper exploration into the cultural and narrative contexts that shape his depiction across Southeast Asian traditions.

Table 2 Comparison between *Ramakien* (Thailand) and *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia)

	Ramakien (Thailand)	Hikayat Seri Rama (Malaysia)
Visual looks	Hanuman in the <i>Ramakien</i> embodies rich cultural symbolism, emphasising his divine attributes, heroic stature, and enduring legacy as a beloved cultural icon in Thai art and literature	Hanuman in Malaysia emphasises his supernatural abilities and role within the narrative, while aligning with Malay cultural values and integrating Islamic principles to resonate with local audiences
Lines and shapes	Hanuman is portrayed through intricate lines and dynamic shapes emphasises his heroic and divine attributes, reflecting his revered status as a symbol of strength and loyalty in Thai culture	Hanuman is depicted through lines and shapes emphasises simplicity and grace, conveying character depth and loyalty to Rama in traditional art like Wayang Kulit
Colours	In the <i>Ramakien</i> , Hanuman's depiction in symbolic colours like white and gold highlights his purity and heroic stature against vibrant backgrounds, enriching the narrative with cultural symbolism and visual impact	Hanuman is portrayed in subdued earth tones and greens, symbolising his connection to nature and bridging the divine and earthly realms, influenced by Islamic art's geometric patterns and abstract colours, adding symbolic depth to the narrative

Visual Comparison of Hanuman in the *Ramakien* (Thailand)

In the *Ramakien*, Hanuman's depiction in Thai art and literature is rich in cultural symbolism and iconic imagery. One notable aspect of his appearance is his portrayal with white fur, which symbolises purity and strength in Thai culture. This visual representation underscores Hanuman's divine attributes and heroic stature, emphasising his role as a formidable warrior and symbol of righteousness. Additionally, Hanuman is often depicted with a strong physique, adorned in elaborate golden armour and a crown, reflecting his royal status and highlighting his valour and heroism on the battlefield. For example, in temple murals and traditional artworks, Hanuman's majestic presence is captured through intricate details and vibrant colours, evoking awe and reverence among viewers. Attributes attributed to Hanuman in the *Ramakien* further illustrate his esteemed status and noble character. Celebrated for his unwavering devotion to Rama, Hanuman's incredible strength and supernatural abilities are showcased throughout the epic. His exploits, including his ability to change size and shape at will, are portrayed with a focus on his heroism in battle and his pivotal role in the search for Sita. For instance, in theatrical performances such as the Khon dance drama, Hanuman's dynamic movements and powerful gestures convey his courage and determination, captivating audiences with his fearless spirit and unwavering loyalty to his lord. The depiction of Hanuman in Thai art and literature is deeply rooted in Thai culture, incorporating elements of Thai mythology, Buddhism, and royal iconography to enrich his portrayal. In temple murals, traditional dances, and theatrical performances, Hanuman is revered not only as a hero of the *Ramakien* but also as a symbol of loyalty, bravery, and the power of good over evil. For example, in temple murals depicting scenes from the *Ramakien*, Hanuman is often depicted alongside other mythical figures and celestial beings, symbolising his divine status and significance within the cosmic order. This integration of cultural elements underscores Hanuman's enduring legacy as a beloved cultural icon and emblem of moral integrity in Thai culture.

Visual Comparison of Hanuman in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia)

In the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman's portrayal exhibits slight variations in appearance compared to the Thai *Ramakien*, reflecting local artistic styles and interpretations prevalent in Malaysia. While retaining his simian features, Hanuman's attire and ornaments in the Malay version could be less elaborate, with greater emphasis on his supernatural abilities and pivotal role in the narrative (Figure 3a). For instance, Hanuman might be depicted wearing simpler attire, adorned with symbols representing his strength and agility, tailored to resonate with the cultural aesthetics of Malay artistry (Figure 3b). The attributes attributed to Hanuman in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* align with his depiction in the *Ramakien*, emphasising his strength, loyalty, and intelligence. However, in Malay narratives, there may be greater emphasis on Hanuman's cunning and strategic prowess, reflecting the region's cultural values and storytelling traditions. For example, Hanuman's ability to outsmart adversaries and navigate complex situations may be highlighted to resonate with Malay audiences, who appreciate tales of wit and cleverness. The cultural context of the Malay adaptation integrates Hanuman's role and characteristics within a narrative framework that blends Hindu mythology with Islamic and local Malay cultural elements. This unique fusion influences the portrayal of Hanuman's virtues, aligning them with Malay moral and ethical values. For instance, Hanuman's unwavering loyalty and commitment to duty may be framed within the context of Islamic principles of faithfulness and honour, adding depth to his character and making him relatable to Malay audiences.



Figure 3 Hanuman shadow puppets from *Hikayat Seri Rama*

Source: Author's collection

Visual Comparison of Lines and Shapes in *Ramakien* (Thailand)

In the context of the *Ramakien* in Thailand, Hanuman is portrayed through intricate lines and dynamic shapes that emphasise his heroic and divine attributes, reflecting his revered status as a symbol of strength and loyalty in Thai culture. For example, in temple murals and traditional paintings, Hanuman is often depicted in dynamic poses that convey movement and vitality. These intricate lines and shapes not only highlight Hanuman's physical strength but also serve

to emphasise his heroic nature and divine attributes. Furthermore, the detailed depictions of Hanuman's muscles and facial expressions convey his courage and determination, capturing the essence of his character as a mighty warrior and loyal devotee of Rama (Figure 4a). Moreover, Hanuman's silhouette in Thai art is adorned with ornate costumes and accessories, further enhancing his regal appearance and valorous demeanour (Figure 4b). In traditional Thai sculptures and reliefs, Hanuman is often depicted in elaborate attire and majestic ornaments, symbolising his royal status and significance in the *Ramakien* narrative. These intricate details in Hanuman's portrayal not only showcase the craftsmanship and artistic skill of Thai artisans but also underscore the cultural reverence for Hanuman as a symbol of strength, loyalty, and righteousness.



Figure 4 Hanuman shadow puppets from *Ramakien*

Source: Author's collection

Visual Comparison of Lines and Shapes in *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia)

In the context of the *Hikayat Seri Rama* in Malaysia, the portrayal of Hanuman through lines and shapes embodies a distinct stylistic approach that reflects the nuances of Malaysian artistic traditions. Unlike the intricate lines and complex shapes often found in Thai art, Malaysian depictions of Hanuman may prioritise simpler lines and more rounded shapes, underscoring a stylistic preference for fluidity and grace (Figures 5 and 6). For instance, in traditional Malaysian paintings and illustrations, Hanuman's figure may be rendered with smoother contours and gentler lines, which contribute to a sense of elegance and poise. While still detailed, the emphasis in Malaysian art might shift from physical prowess to conveying character and narrative through posture and expression, enabling a deeper exploration of Hanuman's personality and motivations. Furthermore, the shapes used in Malaysian art tend to be softer and more organic, which could reflect a different aspect of Hanuman's personality compared to his portrayal in Thai art. For example, in Malaysian shadow puppetry (Wayang Kulit), Hanuman's silhouette is often characterised by rounded shapes and gentle curves, symbolising his intelligence, wisdom, and loyalty to Rama. These softer lines and shapes convey a sense of warmth and humanity, inviting viewers to empathise with Hanuman's journey and moral dilemmas.



Figure 5 Hanuman character design line art

Source: Author's collection

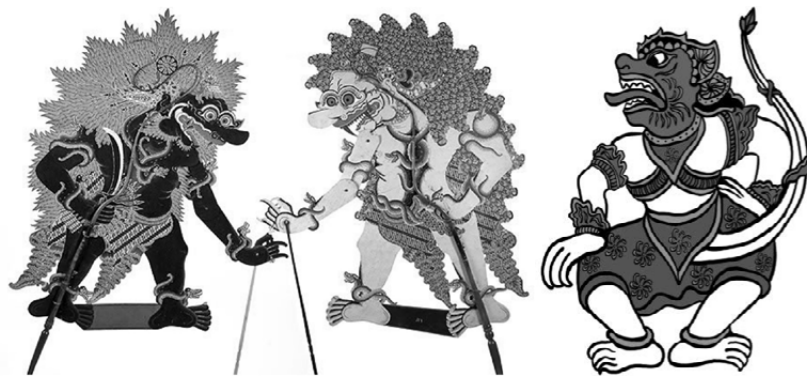


Figure 6 Hanuman character in Malaysia folklore

Source: Author's collection

Visual Comparison of Colours in *Ramakien* (Thailand)

In the *Ramakien*, colour is a critical element that enhances Hanuman's portrayal, imbuing him with symbolic significance and visual impact. Hanuman is often depicted in white or light shades, which symbolise purity, divine support, and his semi-divine nature. This choice of colour is not merely aesthetic but deeply rooted in Thai cultural and religious symbolism. For example, in traditional Thai murals and paintings found in temples such as Wat Phra Kaew (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Hanuman's white fur stands out against the intricate, vibrant backgrounds, highlighting his purity and heroic stature in both celestial and earthly realms (Figure 7). Moreover, Hanuman's attire and accessories in the *Ramakien* are rendered in gold and other bright, vivid colours, which reflect the luxuriousness and exuberance typical of Thai royal and religious imagery. His golden armour, crown, and other regal adornments are not just indicative of his royal status but also signify wealth, power, and divine favour. These rich colours serve to elevate Hanuman's status from that of a mere monkey to a revered and powerful warrior-hero. Additionally, the backgrounds and elements in Thai art depicting Hanuman are equally colourful and detailed. Scenes depicting Hanuman's adventures, such as his battles with demons or his service to Rama, are often set against lush green backdrops, resplendent palaces, and vibrant

skies. These elements not only enhance the visual appeal but also contextualise Hanuman within a richly symbolic world where every colour and detail contributes to the overall narrative. For example, in a mural from Wat Phra Kaew, the depiction of Hanuman leaping across the ocean to Lanka is rendered with a vivid blue sea and golden waves, highlighting his epic journey and the divine intervention that aids him. This use of colour creates a visually captivating depiction that engages viewers and underscores the cultural and spiritual significance of Hanuman within the *Ramakien*.



Figure 7 Hanuman character design from mural painting at Wat Phra Kaew, Thailand

Source: Author's collection

Visual Comparison of Colours in *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia)

In the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, the colour palette used to depict Hanuman is often more subdued and varied compared to the vibrant hues of the *Ramakien*, reflecting different cultural and aesthetic influences (Figure 8). Earth tones and greens are commonly used to symbolise Hanuman's connection to nature and his role as a bridge between the divine and earthly realms. This choice of colours highlights a harmonious relationship with the natural world, underscoring Hanuman's innate strength and vitality derived from his environment. The use of colour in Malaysian depictions of Hanuman also reflects the influence of Islamic artistic traditions, which are prominent in Malaysia's cultural landscape. Islamic art often favours geometric patterns, intricate designs, and calligraphy over figural representation, leading to a more stylised and abstract approach to colour and form. This influence can be seen in the way colours are applied in Malaysian depictions of Hanuman, where the palette might include soft blues, greens, and earthy hues that align with Islamic art's emphasis on symmetry and pattern. For instance, in manuscript illustrations of the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman might be adorned with muted, harmonised patterns and colours, incorporating geometric motifs and subtle shading that reflect Islamic artistic sensibilities. Additionally, the subdued colour palette in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* aligns with the narrative's focus on the moral and ethical dimensions of Hanuman's character. The colours used not only enhance the visual storytelling but also convey deeper symbolic meanings. For example, green might symbolise growth, renewal, and fertility, underscoring Hanuman's role in restoring balance and harmony. Similarly, incorporating earth tones could symbolise stability, resilience, and a grounded nature, highlighting Hanuman's unwavering loyalty and dedication. These colour choices contribute to a nuanced portrayal of Hanuman, enriching the narrative with layers of cultural symbolism and artistic expression unique to the Malaysian context.



Figure 8 Hanuman character design (shadow puppet)

Source: Author's collection

Application to Innovative Digital Artworks

The fusion of cultural elements is a key strategy for developing innovative digital artworks. This involves actively integrating symbolic features from both the *Ramakien* and the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, exemplified by the incorporation of Hanuman's white fur and golden armour from the Thai tradition (Figure 9), as well as the subdued earth tones and geometric patterns characteristic of the Malaysian narrative. Such a fusion not only enhances aesthetic appeal but also deepens the cultural resonance of the resulting artworks, as revealed by the analysis of Hanuman's depiction in these epics.



Figure 9 Digital art of Thai *Ramakien* Hanuman, created by Chris Parks of Palehorse Design Studio

Source: Author's collection

Furthermore, exploring narrative depth in digital artworks is seen as an avenue to enrich the audience experience. Leveraging the strategic prowess and moral values depicted in the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, designers can integrate interactive elements that highlight Hanuman's cunning and loyalty. This approach offers audiences a more immersive and engaging experience through the utilisation of storytelling and interactive narratives, as supported by insights derived from the analysis of Hanuman's character traits in the narratives. Moreover, artistic techniques and aesthetics play a crucial role in translating Hanuman's essence into digital form, as shown in Figures 10 and 11. The figures are digital illustrations created by the first author, based on the Hanuman character from the *Ramakien*. By utilising the intricate lines and dynamic poses characteristic of the *Ramakien*, digital animations can effectively capture Hanuman's vitality and heroism with lifelike precision.

Conversely, adopting the smoother contours and rounded shapes found in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* enables digital illustrations to achieve a harmonious balance of elegance and expressiveness, thus appealing to modern aesthetics while preserving traditional values, as indicated by the examination of artistic styles in the narratives. Additionally, the importance of colour schemes and symbolism in crafting compelling digital artworks is underscored. Harmonising the vibrant colours of Thai art with the subdued tones of Malay art offers audiences a unique visual experience that encapsulates the essence of both cultures, according to research findings. Strategic application of symbolic colour schemes to different scenes or aspects of Hanuman's character, such as the use of white and gold to depict divine and heroic moments, further enriches the narrative and emotional depth of the digital artworks, as revealed through the analysis of colour usage and symbolism in the narratives.

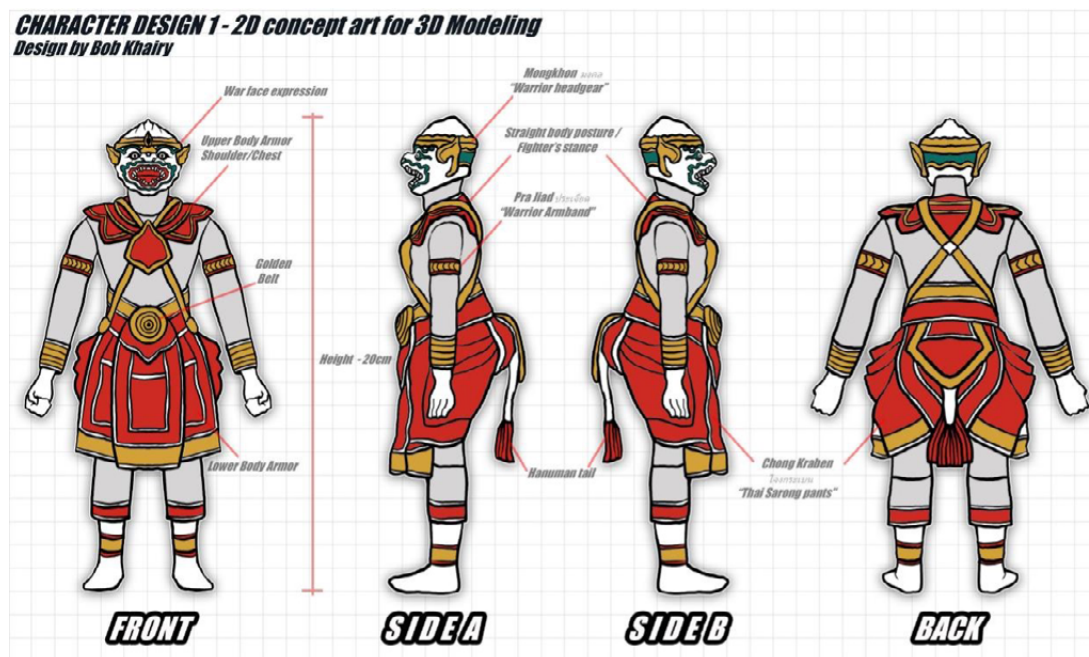


Figure 10 Hanuman 2D conceptual art for 3D modelling

Source: Author's collection



Figure 11 The war mask of Hanuman and Thotsakan in digital drawing

Source: Author's collection

DISCUSSION

Both the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and the *Ramakien* depict Hanuman as a heroic figure with significant abilities. On the one hand, the Malaysian version emphasises Hanuman's strategic and cunning traits through a spiritually infused, minimalist artistic framework. On the other hand, the Thai version highlights his physical heroism, elaborate royal attire, and integration into Buddhist and royal iconography, reflecting a more ornate and vibrant artistic tradition (Aveling 2012). The depictions of Hanuman in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia) and the *Ramakien* (Thailand) reflect distinct cultural and artistic traditions. In the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman is portrayed in simpler attire and with fewer ornaments, emphasising his supernatural abilities and strategic cunning, aligning with Malay values and storytelling traditions that blend Hindu mythology with Islamic and local elements. This depiction often focuses on spiritual and ethical dimensions, using subdued colours and geometric patterns influenced by Islamic art (Putrawan 2023).

In contrast, the *Ramakien* presents Hanuman with white fur symbolising purity, elaborate golden armour, and a crown, highlighting his royal status and heroism. Thai art emphasises intricate details, dynamic poses, and vibrant colours, reflecting a cultural emphasis on supernatural heroism and the integration of Buddhist and royal iconography. Both versions maintain Hanuman's core attributes—strength, loyalty, and intelligence—but adapt his portrayal to resonate with their respective cultural contexts. The portrayal of Hanuman in both *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Ramakien* also encompasses his role within the larger narrative structure of each epic. In *Hikayat Seri Rama*, Hanuman is a central figure in the heroic quest to rescue Sita, serving as a steadfast ally to Rama and a key strategist in their battle against the forces of evil. His unwavering loyalty and selfless devotion to the cause make him a beloved and respected character among Malaysian audiences (Lim 2010). In contrast, while Hanuman's loyalty and bravery are also celebrated in the *Ramakien*, his character is more dynamic and multifaceted, often engaging in cunning schemes and playful antics to achieve his goals. His interactions with other characters, such as the demon king Ravana and the monkey army, further highlight his complex personality and moral ambiguity (Dilfa 2021).

Moreover, the cultural significance of Hanuman extends beyond the epics themselves, permeating various aspects of Southeast Asian society and artistic expression. In Malaysia, Hanuman's portrayal in *Hikayat Seri Rama* is not only a source of inspiration for traditional art forms such as shadow puppetry and dance dramas but also serves as a cultural touchstone

for contemporary artists seeking to reinterpret and reinvent his character in modern contexts (Azim 2022; Chattopadhyay and Das 2022; Chaudhury 2024). Similarly, in Thailand, Hanuman features prominently in Khon Mask dance dramas (Figure 12), Nang Yai shadow puppet performances, mural arts, sculptures, and modern literature and art as a symbol of strength, wisdom, and resilience.



Figure 12 Hanuman character in Khon Mask dance performance

Source: Author's collection

Thematic Synergies and Cultural Preservation in Hanuman's Digital Representation

Hanuman's portrayal in Malaysian and Thai traditions reflects shared values of loyalty and heroism, symbolising his dedication to leaders and allies, alongside contrasting traits of cunning (Malaysia) and regal heroism (Thailand). A hybrid depiction could merge these qualities by blending agile, strategic movements with commanding, heroic stances (Chaudhury 2024). For example, his golden Thai armour could incorporate subtle Malay geometric motifs, reflecting a balance of divine authority and strategic brilliance. Design choices can integrate Malay geometric patterns into Thai-inspired golden armour, adding spiritual depth, while dynamic Thai poses inspired by Khon performances harmonise with the calm symmetry of Malay art. A unified colour palette combining Thai gold and white with Malaysian earth tones symbolises shared heroism and spirituality (Lim 2010). These elements create a culturally meaningful hybrid representation, providing a framework for celebrating Southeast Asian heritage through innovative digital art. As highlighted by Hidajat et al. (2021), a character's aesthetics can reflect local spiritual and cultural influences, underscoring the importance of integrating these elements into digital representations.

The fused digital representation of Hanuman serves as a tool for cultural preservation, connecting traditional Southeast Asian narratives with modern audiences (Kong et al. 2024). As shown in Figures 13 and 14, integrating Malay and Thai artistic elements into a cohesive design highlights their shared heritage while honouring unique identities. This approach ensures Hanuman's story remains relevant and accessible, especially to younger generations, through innovative digital mediums. The design balances authenticity and modernity by combining traditional motifs such as Malay geometric patterns and Thai intricate line work, with contemporary techniques like computer-rendered artwork and 3D modelling. This fusion preserves Hanuman's symbolic and aesthetic significance while engaging audiences in dynamic ways, contributing to the legacy of

Southeast Asian folklore. Efforts to preserve cultural heritage in Malaysia, particularly through the use of computer graphics, are crucial for safeguarding traditional narratives. According to Suaib et al. (2020), digital preservation offers innovative approaches to protect and promote cultural heritage for future generations.



Figure 13 Hybrid digital representation of Hanuman, reflecting shared cultural values and visual elements from Malay and Thai traditions

Source: Author's collection



Figure 14 Hanuman Si Kera Putih's skull (reimagined from the Hikayat Seri Rama) with a Thai serpent called Naga

Source: Author's collection

CONCLUSION

The visual analysis of Hanuman's depiction in the *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia) and the *Ramakien* (Thailand) reveals significant insights that can inform the development of innovative digital artworks, focusing on cultural symbolism, historical interactions, and regional aesthetics. Hanuman's portrayal in these epics embodies rich cultural symbolism, with each tradition emphasising different aspects of his character. In the *Ramakien*, Hanuman is depicted with white fur, symbolising purity and strength, and is adorned with elaborate golden armour and a crown that reflect his royal status and heroism. This vibrant and regal imagery can inspire digital artists to use a bright, dynamic colour palette and intricate details to convey Hanuman's divine and heroic nature. Conversely, the *Hikayat Seri Rama* presents Hanuman with a more subdued appearance, emphasising his supernatural abilities and strategic cunning. This version often utilises earth tones and greens, reflecting Hanuman's connection to nature and the local Malay-Islamic artistic traditions. Digital artists can draw on these elements to create artworks that highlight Hanuman's intelligence and loyalty, using softer lines and shapes to convey a sense of grace and fluidity, in line with the aesthetic preferences of Malaysian folklore.

Historical interactions between Malaysia and Thailand have also influenced the portrayal of Hanuman, integrating local cultural elements into the narrative. For instance, the *Ramakien* incorporates Thai Buddhist and royal iconography, while the *Hikayat Seri Rama* blends Hindu mythology with Malay-Islamic cultural values. Understanding these historical interactions allows digital artists to create hybrid representations that honour the cross-cultural influences, fostering a sense of shared heritage and cultural exchange. Regional aesthetics play a crucial role in shaping Hanuman's visual representation. Thai art is characterised by intricate detail and dynamic forms, inspiring digital artists to focus on complex line work and vibrant compositions. In contrast, Malaysian art's preference for simplicity and symbolic depth can guide artists to emphasise narrative and ethical dimensions in their digital creations. By integrating these insights into their work, digital artists can develop innovative artworks that not only capture the essence of Hanuman's character but also resonate deeply with the cultural and historical contexts of Southeast Asian folklore. This approach enriches the viewer's experience, fostering a greater appreciation for the cultural heritage and narrative traditions embodied by Hanuman.

The methodologies and insights developed in this study extend beyond the specific case of Hanuman, providing a framework for analysing and reinterpreting other characters from Southeast Asian folklore. Future exploration of antagonist characters, such as Thotsakan (Figure 15) in the *Ramakien* (also known as Maharaja Rawana in the *Hikayat Seri Rama*), could similarly reveal their cultural significance and offer opportunities for cross-cultural artistic fusion. Hanuman, as depicted in these traditions, embodies symbolic elements that reinforce his cultural depth: purity and intelligence in the *Ramakien*, represented through his white fur and cunning strategies, and loyalty and heroism in the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, highlighted by his unwavering dedication and moral strength. These qualities not only define his role in each tradition but also serve as guiding principles for digital artists aiming to maintain the character's essence in their work. By applying comparative visual analysis and digital tools, future studies can delve into the shared heritage and unique traits of these figures, enriching cultural narratives and ensuring their relevance to modern audiences. This broader applicability situates the research within a larger framework of cultural preservation and innovation, highlighting the potential of digital art as a universal medium for storytelling and heritage conservation.



Figure 15 Antagonist character in Ramakien called Thotsakan, the green demon king (left)

Source: Author's collection

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