

Using Thai Literature to Understand Thai Culture*

Herbert P. Phillips**

This paper will present a few of the major findings that have emerged out of a project that, after several years' work, I have just completed and that will soon be published in book form. It is a study of Thai literature written between 1960 and 1976. The class of literature to which I am referring is to be distinguished from classical literature, folklore, and the literature of the mass media such as TV and radio scripts, comic books, and penny novels.

The study is comprised of three elements. First, there are thirty-six translated examples of this literature itself, including short stories, poems, a novella, a play, a chapter from a novel, and even the lyrics of a few historically important songs. Second, each selection is accompanied by a commentary on its cultural meaning or historical significance, as well as account of the personal background and the literary position of the author. Third, the volume is introduced with a lengthy statement on a wide variety of critical contextual issues such as the role of writers in contemporary Thailand, the nature of literacy and its relationship to the kinds of materials that are published, the issue of censorship, and, most importantly, the social organization of writers--their recruitment into the profession, their training, their sense of intellectual genealogy as well as their sense of intellectual independence, and the various *phuak* or groups, with which writers associate at different points in their careers. Also relevant is the class and social background of writers, and correlatively the extent to which writers serve, self-consciously or otherwise, as spokespersons for various social groups and classes.

I must emphasize that from the beginning, this project was not prompted by an interest in modern Thai literature *per se*--its aesthetics, originality, or ingenuity--but rather by an interest in Thai thought. My concern was with how some of the most sensitive, reflective, articulate (and sometimes merely theatrical or bumptious) members of Thai society think about their own culture and experience. From this point of view, I viewed writers as essentially "key informants" on their

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** Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

own society--their "keyness" being a function both of their intellectual and verbal skills and such factors as their social and personal identities, their training, their networks of friends and colleagues, and the amount of time and energy they give to their craft. These latter considerations make what they do as much a social activity as it is a creative activity. Thus, they are persons who are socially situated to talk about things that in Thai culture are deemed to be "important" --sometimes because these things already are important, but at other times simply because they, Thai writers, say they are.

Functionally, of course, Thai writers do a number of different things. They entertain or amuse; mobilize public opinion for social action; glorify, beautify, sacralize--and often desacralize--cherished beliefs or institutions; raise social consciousness and create cynosures for public attention; crystallize new ways for looking at things, although usually that which is being looked at is already quite familiar. However, underlying all of these is a single noetic purpose: to provide their readers with a codification of the world that is cognitively and aesthetically credible and, in so doing, to define what is right and wrong with the universe, what is consequential, and what should be remembered. The remembering function, although motivationally often only a by-product, is especially important, if only because literature is a permanent, preservable record of the self-judgments of a society at different points in time. In this respect, it is a major data base of a society's own intellectual history.

Most Thai writers are, of course, considerably more modest about themselves than my analytic phrasings suggest, and they translate what they do into more down-to-earth, personal considerations. Some say they write merely to make some extra money; others to gain public esteem and attention; and some because they are driven to write, in the same sense that certain people are driven to dance ("Gotta dance!"). Some admit to more psychologically complex reasons such as writing in order to impose a sense of intellectual discipline upon themselves or using it as a way to fulfill an image of themselves that involves sharing their wisdom or expertise with others--the latter often deriving from a *noblesse oblige* vision of their role in the universe. One of the kingdom's most prolific and powerful writers says he became a writer as a way of dealing with his own sense of inadequacy about his inability to talk with people. Having been with him in social situations, I would have to agree with the accuracy of his self-characterization about the way he interacts with others.

However, a significant number of writers also explain themselves in terms of the large historical forces that are impinging upon their society, explicitly viewing their writing as a way of coming to terms with those forces. Like men and women of letters in most places, they are particularly sensitive to the adequacy and inadequacy of inherited wisdom and of the intellectual power of conventional

cultural explanations. What makes their task historically so important, at least in their own eyes, is their awareness that they are living during a period when their culture is undergoing unprecedented social change, and the traditional categories for understanding things no longer work or are persuasive. In fact, most of what they are about--at least as indexed by the essays appearing in my book--has to do with their documenting the breakdown in traditional understandings and, to a much lesser extent, trying to create newer, more viable alternatives. In a few areas (religion, perhaps the family) their work also involves demonstrating the strength and resilience of some of the traditional premises of Thai culture.

Having outlined some of the vectors of the project, I should now like to turn to some of our empirical materials and to what they might teach us about Thai culture.

First, it should be noted that these materials are a result of a selection process involving the examination of some 250 literary efforts written between 1960 and 1976. These 250 were reduced to 67 "candidates" which in turn were reduced to the 36 items finally chosen. I note these numbers merely to indicate that our selections derive from a broad-ranging search where we sought advice from numerous writers, some of their enemies, our colleagues and friends, as well as their friends. The notion of a "statistically representative sample" was rejected from the outset as totally untenable for this kind of enterprise, and instead we used three simple, in no sense mutually exclusive, criteria in choosing our material: 1) the historical importance of an item; 2) the extent to which it expressed or revealed significant aspects of Thai thought or concern; and 3) its intellectual persuasiveness to a native Thai audience. The second criterion is implicitly of course an expression of a selection's intellectual persuasiveness to a *farang* audience, as judged by the editor.

With these kinds of criteria it is not surprising that our collection includes some of the most famous or memorable literary statements authored during the past two decades. There is Suchit Wongthed's haunting poem, "Wat Erj, Wat Bot!" which celebrates the 1973 October 14th Revolution--the power of the poem deriving from Suchit's use of two stanzas of an 18th century lullaby which commemorates the Bangranchan defense against the Burmese invaders of 1767, and which by juxtaposition makes the two events symbolically equivalent. Suchit's use of the two hundred year-old cry, "Chaw Khum Thong paj plon . . ." (My son, Khun Thong who has gone to strike the enemy"), a phrasing that simultaneously is both profoundly proud and plaintive, is essentially a reinvocation of one of the archetypal symbols of Thai martyrdom. Here that martyr is the youth in perennial search of justice, goodness, and moral integrity.

Of an entirely different order is the now classic novella "Saneh Cawak" whose title I have translated as "The Enchanting Cooking Spoon" written by M.L. Boonlue Debyasuvarn who, unfortunately, passed away two years ago. This is the story of the wealthy, high-placed Praphon who comes back to Thailand after several years abroad and marries Khun Phachongchid, an attractive, wellspoken woman whose only purpose--very much as the result of the way she was reared--is to attend to the needs of her husband : preparing him the tastiest of foods (and thus the title), constantly maintaining her femininity, keeping a beautiful home, and otherwise indulging his every whim. The only problem is that Praphon claims he wants a "modern"--not a "traditional" wife : one who will challenge him intellectually, who will discuss world and national problems with him, and who will essentially treat him as an adversary in a debate. The narrative thrust of the story is the constant miscommunication between the spouses--based upon the narcissism of the husband and the selfsacrifice of the unduly naive wife. The novella also contains superb contextual material on the frivolity and self-indulgence of elite life, the constant attention to social ritual, the perennial threat of "the other woman" who presumably has the talent to make the husband happier, and, most importantly, the malaise that the husband feels about his inability to recreate at home--as a settled, socially responsible adult--the excitement that he knew for so many years overseas. There is no doubt that for the author boredom and frustration with Thailand--with the concerns and expectations of relatives and one's spouse's friends--is one of the prices that must be paid for having been a "nakrian nauaug."

Of a still different order than the above is M. R. Khukrit's statement **From Page Five of the Siam Rath** on his feelings about losing his dog when someone took it for a drive and permitted it to run away. The statement is essentially an expression of his despair about his fears for the dog, his sense of loss and his loneliness and depression. What is remarkable is that 16 years after the fater the fact, many Thai still refer or allude to the essay, and virtually all educated Thai know about it. I am still not sure what has prompted this kind of collective memory, but I suspect that it is simply that Khukrit has conveyed to his readers that even the most eminent and talented among them can suffer the most basic and natural deprivations, and that more important, it is not improper, e.g., undignified, uncool, or socially awkward to acknowledge one's emotional distress by sharing it with others. The situation is profoundly human and stands in contrast to the posturing with which people usually pursue their social lives.

Not all our selections are famous or even eloquent. A play by Witayakorn Chiengkul entitled "Naaj Aphajmanii" is included not because it is persuasive in either Thai or English. Infact, most Thai with whom I have discussed the effort say they do not like it because it is excessively verbose and stilted; and in English, it reads as if it were written by a Berkeley freshman who has just

become ideologically engaged. But for all these qualities, the play is an extraordinary example of the capacity of a sensitive and creative thinker to perceive emerging forces in society and to predict accurately what in fact was soon to happen. Written two years before the Student Revolution, the play describes a pair of ethically enraptured university students moralizing to their putatively corrupt father--thus turning the Thai value system on its head--and how politics--rather than bad friends, gambling, or sexual peccadilloes--has become the principal focus of inter-generational family conflict. Lingered in the background of this scene is the gentle, peace-seeking Thai mother and wife who is totally confused by what is going on, cannot believe that it is happening, and who feels that no political issue could ever be worth this kind of father-son argument.

what then can one learn about Thai society from examining its literature? There are several things, perhaps somewhat obvious when you think about it, but for me the obviousness did not emerge until I did think about it and compared the literature with real Thai life as I, an outsider, observed it.

The first thing I would note is that modern Thai literature is in no sense a reflection or a replication of society. Rather, it is a refraction or distillation of it--an author's personal vision of the way things are that is just as much a result of that author's background, prejudices, and social and political pressures that he accepts, as it is of the things he is writing about. It is for this reason that we should try to learn as much about an author as we learn about his or her text. We must also never forget that "fiction" is, by definition, "untrue," although it has some special qualities that might make it true, or that we wish were true, or whose lack of truth we find it easy to temporarily suspend. What is so appealing about literature, however, is that one derives from it a superbly documented sense of the different, subtle and complex ways that people perceive their own experience. That alone is such a refreshing antidote to the putatively true, but experientially unreal, homogenizations that are the stock-in-trade of most social scientists.

Let me illustrate this sense of subtlety and complexity by comparing the approach to villagers taken by four well-known Thai authors, all of whom are village born and bred and all of whom, despite their adult status as educated intellectuals, have always maintained a keen sense of their village origins--both in their writings and in their personal identities. While I have my own prejudices about which author's literary vision approximates most fully the empirical realities of village life, I think that each vision, whatever its own epistemological limitations, represents an accurate refraction or distillation of some critical aspect of rural existence.

The first of these persons is Chitr Phoumisak whom we all know about as Marxist thinker and martyr and a philologist and historian of considerable power. But Chitr also wrote powerful poetry, an example of which, a *khloong*

sil suphaab, is presented and analyzed in my study. While only a small section of the poem focuses on villagers, it is a superb encapsulation of Chitr's romanticized idealization of the endogenous purity of villagers who are simultaneously victims of an exogenous institutionalized oppression--whether it came from *sakdinaa* types and bureaucrats or, in this particular poem, the foreign legionnaires who with their fabulous wealth are buying the flesh of beautiful Northeastern maidens.

Standing in clear contrast to Chitr's Rousseauesque-Marxist vision (but ultimately probably more Rousseauesque than Marxist) is the perspective that has been developed over the years in numerous short stories by Khamsing Srinawk or "Lao Khamhom." Farang know his work as it appears in the volume *The Politican, and Other Stories* and khonthai from *Faa Bo Kan and Khamphaeng*. While Khamsing does not deny the presence of oppression--although for him the source is an much endogenous as exogenous--he defines villagers mainly in terms of their realism and resourcefulness in coping with their circumstances. They are real, vibrant human beings--some stupid, some bold, but all of complex human dimension--rather than faceless creatures swept up by historical forces that they are incapable of effecting. Unlike Chitr (and I would add, unlike his own literary model, Siiburapha) he portrays villagers as constantly calculating, negotiating, and using their limited powers to their maximum advantage. For him, villages are places where people get on with pursuing their lives rather than wasting their time beating their breasts over their plight or pining for an alleged golden age--whether in the past or future.

The third person, Angkarn Kalayaanaphong attends to a totally different village universe than does either Chitr or Khamsing. Most of us know Angkarn as Thailand's greatest living artist and among its very greatest poets--living or dead--an authentic aesthetic genius. For years, his black and white drawings adorned the covers of *Sangkhomsat Parithat*. In addition to his poetry, Angkarn has occasionally written short stories, one of which, "Yaa" (or "Grandma," but because of an intentional misspelling perhaps "grass") appears in my collection. As is the case in almost everything he does, Angkarn is thoroughly indifferent to social conditions and arrangements (except to say that under the best of circumstances human beings are not very nice) and instead uses some of the elementary ideas of village Buddhism to locate people in nature and the cosmos. Angkarn's Buddhism is a village product in terms of its rhetorical qualities--its directness, lack of self-consciousness, and lack of pretense--as well as the fact that it is animated by the vitality and wonder of village supernaturalism, e.g., "anything is possible, anything can happen." This idiom provides his work with both its aesthetic power and sense of reality, if only because millions of Thai villagers assume Buddhist and supernatural explanations to be absolutely true. Angkarn's work also portrays the heightened involvement that villagers have with flora, fauna, and the processes of the natural

world. Like them, he perceives human beings primarily as morally aware biological creatures involved in an endless biological and moral process.

The last person I wish to cite is Suchit Wongthed, whose work is known to most Thai readers but who has not yet emerged into *farang* awareness. I earlier made reference to his poem, "Wat Erj, Wat Bot!" Suchit is a man of many parts, and most of his recent fiction really does not focus on villagers *per se*. But there is in virtually all of his work constant reference back to the rural origins of things--as if the village were the font of so much that is both wonderful and painful in the Thai experience. Thus, while the point of one of his short stories, "Lord Buddha, Help Me?" is how the poverty and desperation of urban life compels a man who had been a monk for seven years to give up his faith in Buddhism, it is also very much about the aspirations of young village men who are driven to leave their natal soil and prove their manhood in the world of urban challenge. Similarly, the model for the student revolutionaries in 1973 in "Wat Erj, Wat Bot!" are the village martyrs of 1767. But as much as the village is for Suchit the source of Thai idealism and bravery, it is also the place which corrupt officials can most easily ravage--as Suchit reminds us in still another story, "Madame Laamhab." One has the sense that for Suchit in these and many other writings, the village is not so much a place that can be typified in literary terms--which is the way Chitr, Khamsing, and to a lesser extent, Angkhan, perceive it--as it is a symbol of what is generative, continuous, and consensual in Thai life. It is, in his treatment, almost a collective representation of Thai culture.

I would briefly like to note a few more critical attributes of this literature and what it can tell us about contemporary Thai thought. Perhaps its most visible feature is that, despite the modern problems that it addresses and the complexity of those problems, Thai literature is still infused with a powerful didactic strain that assumes that the central purpose of writing is the promulgation of morality by preaching, exhorting, coaxing, ridiculing, being ironic, or otherwise enacting some kind of rhetorical performance. One consequence of this kind of intellectual style is to make writers sometimes seem more important than the things they are writing about, and inevitably to cast some of them into the role of patronizing people whose respect for their readers' own critical and moral faculties appears problematic. There may be a generational factor here, in that so much of this moral discourse seems to be by the young or addressed to the young. Although some of his middle-aged peers may snicker at him, I do not think that Sulak Sivaraksa's perception of himself as "the Socrates of Thailand" is solely self-inflating. Rather, as one of the nation's most compulsive moralizers, Sulak like Socrates, has always concerned himself with the training, moral development, and intellectual challenge that he feels must be provided the young. I do not think it is fortuitous that Sulak's current difficulties with the Thai police over a possible charge of lese majeste actually derive from his publications on what ails Thai education. This has been of the passions of his life.

Even his contribution to my book is on the same subject. It is a brilliant, funny, pompous poetic criticism of the creation of a-then-new university--NIDA. Sulak's attack on the establishment of NIDA is mainly on the grounds that it will not be a modern version of Plato's Academy. I cite Sulak in this context simply because he is one of the kingdom's most cogent moralizers.

Not all modern writing is didactic, and not all writers are as morally certain as Sulak. There is clearly a large coterie of people who take the position that the primary purpose of *wanakam*, or modern literature, is to clarify and analyze human problems or conditions, and that readers will make up their own minds about how such problems are to be resolved--if they are to be resolved at all. Some of these writers thrive on moral ambiguity and conflict--particularly conflict between equally competing goods, while others portray situations that are so intractable that they are essentially without solution. This lack of solution is presented much more as an inherent, rather than as a depressing, feature of the human condition. In fact, the stoical, non-Faustian, and thoroughly realistic acceptance of personal loss, failure, and ultimately death as things that are omnipresent and intrinsic to the human experience is one of the most recurring themes of this literary strain. To be defeated even heightens the essential humanity of the heroes of this fiction. Typically heroes here are people of obvious talent or goodness--often with considerable rhetorical skills--who fail when they are presented with life situations that are the precise opposite of the way they are supposed to be. Thus, in one story a dam is supposed to be of major social benefit, but it results in the death of the hero and in pain to thousands of others. In another short story by Vasit Daedkhunchorn, charity is not supposed to be tainted by human vanity and alms are not supposed to be stolen, but they are. In a chapter I translated from the novel, *Nai Amphur Patiwad* (the **Revolutionary District Officer**), government officials are supposed to be dutiful and incorruptible, but only the psychologically aberrant or naive actually are; in this particular instance, the hero--almost a Thai equivalent of Billy Budd--eventually goes crazy. In still another short story, a charming **Kamnan Thuj**, (that is the name of both the hero and the story), a man dedicated to progress and *pattanakaan* (economic and social development), is made to feel nothing but anxiety and discomfort about the modern conveniences that he was supposed to introduce to his fellow villagers. And so it goes. In fact, the heroism of these characters--or if not heroism, at least their attractiveness and complexity--is very much a function of the anomie that surrounds them. While in the end some muddle through, or are left in a state of ambiguity, or may even die, they all have a personal integrity that is at least aesthetically attractive.

It is this concern with portraying a world that is considerably less than satisfactory--but that is nonetheless real--that most clearly distinguishes this second, non-didactic stream of the Thai literary tradition. The authors who move in this

stream seem overwhelmingly concerned with gaining some kind of rational understanding and intellectual control over the chaos of contemporary experience, even if they cannot do very much about ameliorating their situation. If they have a constituency, it is those readers and real people whose lives are remarkably similar to those of their fictional creations.

There are several other critical dimensions of this problem that should be discussed such as how writers use their writing to position themselves in Thai society; the financial features of writing and the remarkable nature of those men and women who gamble on making it as writers; the organizations of writers into friendship and patron-client groups, and the like. These matters are pursued in some detail in my forthcoming book.
