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LITERATURE AND LITERARY STUDIES IN THAILAND

Prefatory Note :

The present contribution is an English translation of the introductory chapter to my book published in German under the title "*Studien zur Literatur der Thai, Band I*" (Hamburg 1982, 271 pp.)

In the order marked by Roman numerals this book contains a translation of the following poems with annotations and detailed interpretations :

I. *Khlong chaloem phra kiet Somdet Phra Narai Maharaj*, (Si Mahosot);

II. *Khlong nirat nakhon sawan*. (Si Mahosot);

III. *Kap ho khlong*, (Si Mahosot);

IV. *Phleng yau nirat rop phama thi tha din daeng*, (Rama I);

V. *Nirat Krom Phra Ratcha Wang Bowon Maha Surasinghanat sadet pai prap phama muang nakhon si thamarat mua pimamie 2329*;

VI. *Phleng yau nirat Krom Phra Ratcha Wang Bowon Maha Surasinghanat sadet pai ti muang phama mua pi 2336*;

VII. *Sawatdi raksa kham klon*, (Sunthon Phu);

VIII. *Phiphek son benyakai kham klon*;

IX. *Owat kasatri*;

X. *Phleng yau len wa khuam*;

XI. *Tamra maeo-tamra Sunak*.

Reference to the afore-mentioned Roman numerals has been made throughout the present contribution.

The Introduction of my afore-mentioned book may be of general interest since I have endeavoured to elucidate, in the light of the poems contained in volume I, the characteristic features of Thai poetry in general, and have also suggested possible ways for further research in this field.

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I. The selection of poetic works presented in this volume gives a tentative survey of Thai literature outside the scope of the major epics formally known as "*stage poetry*" or *bot lakhon*. The literature dealt with in this study has presumably been composed in the course of centuries and varies both in substance and formal structure.

The selection comprises the following poems :

1. four *nirat* poems in chapters II, IV, V, and VI;
2. three *suphasit* poems in chapters VII, VIII and IX; together with the *nirat* poems they may be considered as works most typically reflecting Thai mental attitudes and sense of form;
3. an example of Thai works of eulogy which are quite frequent occurrence, chapter I;
4. one of the few examples of form and metre of *kapho khlong* poems which represents the most jovial aspect of Thai poetical expression, chapter III;

5. one *phleng yau* poem of a type which to the author's knowledge is quite unique, chapter X;

6. a type of poem which lies somewhat outside the scope of the poems under 1. to 5. Attention is drawn to this literary type known as *tamra*, which being widely known, is a not insignificant facet of Thai culture.

The above grouping of poems according to subject matter is adapted to the requirements of scholars brought up in the traditions of western literary research, rather than to the requirements of Thai scholars. For the latter poetry means primarily rhyme, euphony, and rhythm. In Thai literary studies groupings would be made solely according to formal criteria i.e. according to metre. The material would be arranged as follows:

1. *khlong* poems, chapters I, II and XI;
2. *kap ho khlong*, chapter III;
3. *phleng yau nirat* poems, chapters IV, VI and X;

4. kham klōn (klōn nirat) poems, chapters V, VII, VIII and IX.

Apart from grouping purely according to metre, nirat poems might possibly be arranged in group of their own: viz. II, IV, V, VI.

If, as a hypothesis, one follows the Thai tradition, the poems under review in this volume were probably composed in a space of time extending over three centuries, a rather long period in the cultural development of a people. By comparison, this would be equivalent to a span of time reaching from the baroque to the expressionist period in Europe. If one considers the range of poets from *Si Mahosot*, *Phra Khlang* (*Hon*) and *Sunthon Phu* to the anonymous authors of the Suphasit poems of the 19th and 20th centuries and draws a parallel with the political and social development from the absolute monarchy under Phra Narai to the enlightened monarchies of the 19th and at the turn to the 20th centuries, one can hardly

discover any major changes in the social and literary conditions of that period.

Thai society was evenly structured on hierarchical lines, conservative and Buddhist in outlook, even though the mode of literary expression underwent various changes. In the West, by contrast, quite abrupt changes in style took place over that period of time—it is hardly necessary to expatiate on this here.

The parallel course of literary and political development in Thailand is strikingly evident and shows that Thai literature may be understood as reflecting a true image of the political and social conditions of the time. Literary innovations were then considered as unnecessary as political change. In this respect the basic conservatism of the Thai accords with the Buddhist view of the world. It is not by lack of ability that the Thai stick to conservatism. They just prefer putting up with existing shortcomings rather than lavish

ing "progressive" improvements on mankind. This, in essence, is also a Buddhist mode of thinking.

2. With only one exception none of the afore-mentioned poems represents a "gloomy" view of the world or deals with "tragic" situations. The **Khlong chaloem phra kiet somdet phra narai maharat** may perhaps be said to be written in a somewhat solemn strain. Otherwise, it is only in the **Phleng yau nirat sadet pai ti muang phama** that the narrative rises to a certain pathos, (chapter VI), especially in the passages bewailing the fall of Ayuthaya and condemning the atrocities committed by the Burmese armies.

In Ch. IX various types of "wicked" women and men are depicted; in Ch. VIII Phiphek cautions against the veering character of Thotsakan. Still, such matters are significant and calculated to be taken seriously by the

addressees—for their own good. Such personal advice is, however, not based on anything like a tragic world view. Again and again attention is drawn exclusively to personally adverse circumstances and the possible dangers that may arise therefrom.

Only one of the poems can be classified as positively serene in character: **Kap ho khlong**, Ch. III. Humerous, even ironical passages do also occur in the **Phleng yau len wa khuam**, Ch. X, but not up to the point of evoking frank laughter. The description of human frailty and weakness prevails throughout. Only the **Kap ho khlong** is written in a more cheerful mood and lively style, at any rate its first part. Nevertheless, it may be said that the moods and sentiments expressed in Thai poetry are, broadly speaking, midway between cheerfulness and gloom. At the root of every verse seems to be, more or less evidently, a consciousness of Karmic Law. Karma is the basic law

of all life, an irrefutable truth which in the Thai mind is as natural as the course of the stars, and does not cause any tragic feeling. There is no reason for either total resignation or exuberant mirth, but rather for an intermediate state which may be called "*The Middle Path*".

This also accounts for the fact that Thai poetry is not overcharged with abstract ideas. There is no metaphysical depth to be found in it, let alone unquenchable thirst for knowledge or speculation. This again may mislead western readers to assume that Thai poetry, or Eastern poetry as a whole is "*superficial*". Yet such an assumption would itself be superficial. It has already been stated elsewhere that the structure of Thai poetry is drawn to the surface level by *v o l i t i o n*. Taking this as a working hypothesis, the question arises: why does the will prompt Thai poetry to be extrovert rather than introspective? Is it for beautiful appearance only? In a way this is so, e.g. when praising the

beauty of flowers or worshipping pretty women—but behind the surface invariably looms a *Memento mori*. Each verse praising worldly beauty carries as an undertone the idea of transience: "*alas, this too is passing*". Yet this undertone is neither very strong nor does it imply despair. A Thai poem implies depth by its mere existence as, in loose parlance, an aesthetic phenomenon which, in more concrete terms, gives by itself expression to the Buddhist world view.

Such recognition, however, cannot prevent us from reading a good number of poetic productions with a critical mind, e.g. the *Khlong nirat nakhon sawan*, Ch. II. The reader feels sometimes tempted to exclaim: Enough of all those flowers and birds! The weariness caused by such redundancy and repetition leads us to consider further general characteristics of Thai poetry.

3. Things animate and inanimate are usually described down to the minut-

-est detail. This habit has at times quite obtrusive, and often even silly effects, e. g. in some verses of Chapters V or I, which through their very redundancy should be consigned to the poetic rubbish-heap. Redundancy is thus sufficiently characterized as a negative aspect of Thai poetry. There is also, however, another more positive aspect in the Thai propensity for dealing with trifling matters and discovering beautiful or alluring facets even in small and insignificant things. Nothing is so small as not to deserve attention. Greatness is often revealed through small things and vice versa. The Thai poet takes note of the scent of a flower with the same acute awareness as of the venerable throne of the most glorious majesty. The fact that equal attention is given to small and great things alike puts the poet's attitude towards king and regalia into its proper perspective: an attitude only seemingly of crouching submissiveness. And what is more, the sympathetic

attention to detail goes to refute any rash appraisal of the verses which tends unjustly to attribute only external motives to the narration of details. Natural phenomena and real objects are not merely described, but without assuming a transcendent meaning refer to symbols and similes. What is intuitively perceived by the senses represents more than a mere material object. It is rather a medium through which other things come to be known by way of association—no less, and no more. No more because the objects of nature are not contemplated for their own sake and their specific nature is only described for special purposes. The impression prevails that plants and animals or entire landscapes are described in arbitrary fashion or in a stereotyped way. The poet indiscriminately made use of whatever he happened to know of the nomenclature of Thai fauna and flora. The modern interpretation of nature that prevailed in the time of Goethe, in

which the subjective view of nature dominated over mere objective representation, was not born as yet.

4. The tendency to describe and to report corresponds exactly to the altogether undramatic evolution of Thai poetic composition. Even in places where the presence of dialogic structure would offer the possibility for dramatic treatment, as in Ch. X. preference is invariably given to the epic form of expression. The epic medium implies distance, aloofness and personal disengagement. Epic diction does not alarm and, as a rule, is free from tension. And this also is consonant with all other kinds of artistic expression of the Thai, e. g. the dignified portato style of Thai classical dancing.

What then were the formative factors bearing upon the evolution of Thai poetry? Climate, environment or genetic heritage? Was it the traditional cultural background that made the Thai mind receptive to Buddhist ideas and

values or vice versa? The question may perhaps be answered thus: The Thais have always striven to attain to the highest possible perfection by embracing such qualities as are restrained, well-balanced and dignified, and do not lend themselves to dramatic effects. Owing to their talent for creating new styles of art, they have risen from the dim and probably unspecific cultural level of their early history to great artistic achievements in an amazingly short time. Such a process of rapid evolution tends to impede the expression of ecstatic moods, sensual emotion or fast moving rhythms.

What is more, in a society of strict hierachic structure in which everyone has his place, there is no space left for dramatic development or stichomythia. The art of dialogue or contradiction is not very much in demand.

5. All poetry is based on the assumption of a firmly established moral

order of the universe which is, however, never apparent as a programmatic idea. Direct reference to the teachings of Buddha is made only in rare instances. More frequent references are however made to moral law and ethics which are supposed to belong to general knowledge. The veneration of deities of the Hinduistic pantheon is to be taken as a feature of popular Buddhism.

Whenever practicable, reference is made to presumably autochthonous, i. e. animistic, deities, e. g. the "supreme Lord of the mountain", forest spirits (Ch. I), and tree-gods (Ch. IX). In some places you come across popular interpretations of Buddhist terms not consonant with orthodox doctrine. It is obviously believed that human life is more strongly determined by fate or even astrology than by merit and good deeds (Ch. VII, and especially Ch. IX). However, the animism as is evident in the poems has none of the blindly menacing character inherent in earlier popular ani-

mistic practices; it never alarms without specific causes. Only simple forms of adoration and only symbolic sacrifices are required in the poems to propitiate the earthbound powers. Here, on lofty poetic art, all animistic relics are tied in with the lofty spirituality of Buddhism. The personified forces of nature are counteracted by controlled and reasonable deeds instead of exorcist rites.

None of the poems is directly concerned with religious matters, as is evident from their titles. A good moral conduct of life is however often emphatically stressed as a prerequisite for attaining salvation. But the primary concern of the poems is to tackle problems of daily life by resorting to magic (Ch. I, VII and IX).

Concepts such as "*truth*", "*justice*", "*faith*" are not presented as ideals to be striven after, but are explained by concrete examples couched in popular language. The poet is not so much intent on defining truth etc., but on

explaining it as the essence of life by concrete illustration in poetic form, and presupposing in the reader an ability to grasp its metaphysical connotations. The essence of life is tantamount to truth itself. The poets never desist from stressing this.

Mankind is divided into "*good*" and "*bad*" people in a surprisingly crude way, (Ch. IX and VI). There is black and white painting without half-tones, and the enemies of the Thai are menaced with death and destruction in a totally un-Buddhist manner, (Ch. I, VI).

6. All poems are set in the frame of hither-worldliness. They are one-dimensional. There are various spheres of heaven and hell. There is "*above*" and "*below*", but both are tied in with the cycle of rebirth, hence they are not basically different from life on earth. Events are invariably tied in with concrete situations to the extent that the place of action can be determined more or less accurately. Towns, countries and

river's which are still there today are enumerated by name. Some parts of poems are virtually manuals of indigenous fauna or flora. There is always a close relationship with real environment. Imaginary spaces such as hells are posited as really existing. Nature is nowhere felt to be weird, inexplicable or inimical to man. Man is always aware of the beauty of nature and obviously feels at home in it. The unity of all being and the equivalence of all forms of life is latently realized which is perhaps a relic of the magic view of the world. Man and nature are both in like manner subject to the law of transience.

The home country, and in particular its towns, are thought to be full of glory, and are showered with praise accordingly. This must not be understood as a "*blood and soil*" myth. The home land is to the Thai a place where they can feel secure. Life within its boundaries is not in any way mysterious, but familiar and inspiring security. In it normal

activities are routine and exceptional actions calculable. The Hinduistic-Buddhist cosmology is as a whole a well-ordered system that can be rationally explained. In these conditions the relationship between the subject and the object is not antithetical.

7. The spiritual and moral order corresponds to the security of the external order which is of maximum efficiency. There is trust in it without there can be no belief. Order is undisputed, there is no ground for fear. On the other hand, it is likewise true that in such conditions no spiritual forces are set free struggling to dispel doubts or solve antithetical relations. Poetical and spiritual inspiration is limited to a more or less positivist description and praise of perceptible things. There appears to be no pressing need to harmonize seemingly incongruous matters. In fact, knowledge and faith are congruous. It appears moreover, that the poet directs his mind

not so much towards his inner world, his psyche, but solely on the real world outside him. The unfathomable depths of human existence as such are not mythicized, not taken up as a programme, certainly not as a central theme for composition.

Here a number of things go together, the spiritual and psychological mechanisms of which can be explained to the Westerner only in a roundabout way. In paragraph 2. above it has been pointed out that Thai poetry is characterized by a tendency to remain on the surface. We now wish to substantiate this statement. This tendency accounts for two facts: firstly, the verses take up only external appearances in a quite unreflected manner and, secondly, they deliberately avoid to an even greater extent the mere semblance of "*profoundness*" or what in the West is known as "*introspection*".

In fact, introspection is practiced only by those who still cling to things—

an attitude totally un-Buddhist—or by one who seeks a fixed point in the course of life although life is not rationally predictable.

Is it true then that Thai poetry is an art devoid of “soul” and “inner feeling”? If we interpret “soul” and “inwardness” in the Western way in which these words smack of sentimentality, then of course the question must be answered in the affirmative.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that Thai poetry is an art which can be understood only when seen in the light of its background of Theravade-Buddhism. Any interpretation which does not take this background into account must be wrong.

As to “soul” and “inwardness” it should be noted that, according to Buddha, life in this world of sense is based on the “Five Groups or Aggregates”, *panca-vokārabhava*. Besides the group of corporeality there are groups

of sensation, (*vedanā*), perception, (*sannā*), mental phenomena (*sankhāra*) and the group of consciousness (*viññāna*). “What now, Brothers, is the group of sensation? Sensations are divided into six classes according as they are received by the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or the mind...”

“What now, Brothers, is the group of perception? Perception is divided into six classes corresponding to the six classes of sensations...”, etc. “Whatever exists in sensation, perception, mental phenomena and in consciousness should be regarded thus: This is not mine, not I, not my Self”.

Now, if there is no “soul” there cannot be “soulless” poetry either. The formulation used in this article, i.e. that there is a tendency in Thai poetry to “stay on the surface” cannot be maintained, because Thai poetry can of necessity represent only that which is felt according the group of sensation,

what is perceived according to the group of perception, and so on.

8. The sentence structure of all the verses in the following poems is more or less the same. In fact, it should not be otherwise because of the structure of Thai grammar itself. As an isolating language Thai virtually allows only of asyndetic assembly of words and a paratactic sequence of sentences. Parataxis therefore is not a characteristic of style as deliberately applied in Western poetry (Pindar, Hölderlin). It was therefore impossible for Thai poets to win acclaim or fame merely through the technics of their verses. Hence the question arises what is to be understood by "*style*" in Thai poetry. This question is of the utmost importance and so far-reaching that it is quite impossible to attempt even a mere tentative answer in this chapter. It may however be said with some assurance that sentence structure and sequence

cannot be considered as criteria characterizing the "*style*" of an individual author, or a literary period.

Asyndeton and parataxis, free assembly and juxtaposition of equivalent sentences are deeply rooted in the traditional Thai mentality. It follows that under the impact of the cultural background Thai sentence structure and sequence could not evolve otherwise than it did. The linear non-discursive way of thinking of the Thai finds adequate expression in this structure. There is an eidetic way of visualizing things, which is perhaps the primitive form of all thought. The things imagined are linked with each other by way of association not logic which leads quite naturally to the formation of asyndetic and paratactic sentence structures. Association refers mainly to things that are similar. The comprising spirit and polite way of thought formation is more commensurate with Thai temperament than contradiction. This is born out by the

frequent, and at time tedious, use of conjunctions such as "*likewise*" (*muan*), and the rare use of adversatives such as "*but*", (*tæ*).

The paratactic sequence does not only prevent consistent logical and grammatical exposition, but also distorts chronological order as can be seen especially in chapters II and V.

Language, the individual word which always remains unchanged even within the sentence, is a unit carrying a definite signification which does not admit of subjective interpretation. This phenomenon accounts for the sobriety and dryness of Thai poetry. It does not make sense to look for "*profound*" meaning behind words, phrases and sentences. Their meaning is as well defined in its contours as is a piece of rock to a sculptor. The poets (of ancient Thailand) did not strive to go beyond the limits of their language by charging words with subjective shades of meaning. Asyndetic structure makes for brevity,

but brevity does not allow of flowing rhythms, euphony and the expression of delicate nuances. This may be the reason for the frequent use of rhetorical figures and periphrasis.

Another field awaiting further research is the relationship of rhythm, tone and rhyme in Thai poetry and Thai music. Thai music has also an asyndetic structure. The occurrence of harmonies in the sequence of melody is merely incidental.

In the following remarks the author wishes to add a few notes and observations which are calculated to help on one way or another towards a better understanding of Thai literature. They aim at no more than this. More notes are to follow with other poems which await translation.

The Poets.

Only three of the poems hereafter presented contain personal remarks of their authors. It is assumed that the

opening paragraphs and/or the colophon of the other seven poems have been lost. There is no doubt about the authorship of Sunthon Phu's **Sawatdi raksa**. Right at the beginning (VII, 1) it is stated: *Sunthon Phu, has written these words to safeguard good luck*". In the colophon—the last section of the poem may be regarded as such—he asks the disciple to whom the poem is dedicated to follow his teaching (VII, 132 ff.) and he designates himself as the "*faithful servant*" who composed these verses "*to express his gratitude for Royal favours*". (VII, 140).

The author of **Owat krasatri** remains anonymous, but the exact date of its composition is given (IX, 826 ff.) The author affirms to have stated "*nothing but the truth*", (IX, 3, 10, 412 ff., 560 ff.)

In the case of the **Phleng yau len wa khuam** only one of the four authors, viz. Camun Wayaworanat, points out at the beginning of the first

paragraph that it is his own poem. He wishes the poem to be a **klon** of laudable words.

Much has been said in other volumes on the subject "*self-esteem and role of the poet*" in Thai literature. The reader is referred to those articles and books.

Sunthon Phu is well aware of the role he plays as a poet. It is in fact symptomatic that the first word of the first verse of his poem is nothing else but his own name. He intends to give advice to his disciple, a prince of highest rank, a *cau fa*, but in the first place he stresses his authorship: "*Sunthon wrote these words*". He obviously lays great stress on his creativity as a poet and wishes to draw attention to the poem as such, its forms and its contents. With all due respect to the Royal prince Sunthon extolls his own extraordinary ability for his own sake and that of the reader. This self-consciousness may possibly have been caused by the belief

hidden in his subconscious mind that he was entitled to a place among the "great" of his age, although he was of very humble birth. Notwithstanding the omnipotence of the Royal family, the society of his time was liberal and tolerant enough to condone and even accept the manifestation of righteous self-confidence.

Camun Wayaworanat (see X, 1) likewise draws attention to his poetic artistry right at the beginning of his verses. The designation of the metre is proof of this. The contents of his verses are to be ascribed to mere playfulness, see chapters X, III, something not to be taken seriously. He is aware of this from the outset. What matters to him is the artistry, the rhyme and the euphony of the *klon*. Poetry derives from the Greek "*poiein*" which means "to make, to perform".

Wayaworanat as a court official of high rank lived in secure financial circumstances and wrote his poems for

his own sake, not for gain. He could well afford to devote himself to the fine arts for their own sake. In his position he could always be sure of drawing an interested though small reading public.

The author of *Owat krasatri* follows wholly in the footsteps of the "*old tradition*". He remains anonymous, does not lay stress on his personal abilities. He merely gives the date of contemplation of his poem and makes personal utterances only when deemed necessary. It may be asked whether it is right to classify this type of poet as belonging to the "*old tradition*". Among the three who make personal remarks about their work, is he alone to be so classified? Or would such a classification be mere cliché? Are not Sunthon Phu and Wayaworanat also to be reckoned within this tradition? Supposedly so, but the question cannot be answered at this stage.

The figure of an anonymous author certainly comes very near the

idea in a Buddhist inspired way of life. This may be why such an ideal appears to be generally accepted as desirable in Thailand. Numerically, the anonymous poet, as represented by the author of *Owat krasatri* prevails in Thailand.

However, apart from the group of anonymous authors, as further research will probably show, there was a small group of brilliant poets full of genius such as Cau Fa Thamathibet, Sunthon Phu and possibly Phaya Phrom.

The Composition of poetry was apparently an activity quietly performed at leisure and in a relaxed atmosphere. Nothing in the verses that have come down to us is indicative of authors with a split or unbalanced mind. There is not even a trace of shrill tones to be found in the poems which would betray an unsettled mind. The impression prevails that composing poetry in old Thailand was in no connected with any psychic problems on the part of the poet. Plain unreflected statements prevail in the

verses to such an extent that the diction appears not infrequently to be naive. The prevailing mode of expression appears to have corresponded to the receptivity and the state of preparedness of the Thai audience.

It may safely be assumed that the sensibility of the Thais to poetry was pretty evenly developed in all social strata and was, so to speak, geared to what was true to their tradition.

Notes on the subject "*The Poet*" are necessarily bound up with notes on "*poetic works*". In the preceding section it has been stated (under 7.) that Thai poetry prefers to describe concrete things that can be seen, understood and appreciated by everybody alike. The same may be said about the poet: when composing his verses, he will refrain from all subjective colouring, one-sidedness or extravagance. This gives rise to further questions. If it is true that Thai poets control, and rarely show, their feelings, to what extent then, does Thai

poetry contain "*personal*" elements?

Poetry is intrinsically a human creation and, therefore, should always reflect a trace of its creator. Is it right to conclude that in Thai poetry the personal element constitutes only the selection of the subject-matter, the choice of words and their arrangement? Even if one assumes more personal elements to exist in Thai poetry, the personal characteristics which make (Western) poetry so attractive, are conspicuously absent. It may be inferred, as a mere hypothesis, that poetry in Thailand is more or less on a even level, and poems by different poets with the same or similar subject-matter resemble each other in expression and mood rather closely. As far as the present author knows this holds true of many Thai poems. If Thai literature is measured by the yardstick of the many modes of expression existing in Western literature, then indeed Thai literature appears to be rather uniform. Only in

exceptional cases is it possible for the connoisseur to find in individual verses any typical cadence or mode of expression which could be characteristic only of a certain poet such as Cau Fa Thamathibet or Sunthon Phu. And yet even the greater part of the works of these poets cannot be exempted from the general uniformity prevailing throughout Thai poetry.

All arguments lead to the same result: it is beyond the intention of a Thai poet to strive after "*originality*", "*individuality*" or "*independence*". As an artist, he rather strives to follow traditional patterns as closely as possible.

We hope this apparently tortuous way in which the present study has sought to shed light on these difficult problems, is pardonable. It has been necessary in order that it may help to open up for Western students new avenues of approach to a spiritual world in many ways so different from our own.

Suggestions and Notes on Literary Studies in Thailand—Scope and Limits

Up to the present day Thai literature lies before us like a torso and it is not clear whether the head or parts of the body are missing. Systematic study of Thai literary texts gradually reveals new aspects and adds to what is already known. As a whole, however, the results of literary research have so far been rather unsatisfactory and caused a feeling of uneasiness. In trying to analyze this state of affairs it becomes evident that the possibilities for literary studies are rather limited in Thailand at the present time.

The following hypothesis and notes are chiefly based on the various chapters of this book as well as on twenty years experience of Thai literary research carried on by the author. The author wishes to state expressly that the contents of this book can be only of very limited significance within the compass of Thai literature ~~as a whole~~. In order to evaluate further literary works such as *bot lakhon Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, possibly the greatest work of Thai literature, new criteria and yardsticks must still be worked out.

I. The Present Situation

1. All those interested in Thai literary studies are aware of their highly unsatisfactory state. This is reflected in the lack of practically all scientific aids and facilities. There is complete lack of encyclopedias and near-complete lack of bibliographic works. The few existing "*histories of literature*" worth mentioning are not more than uncritical works with many gaps and sparse commentaries. This holds also true to the *History of Thai Literature* by Pluang na Nakhon

and Schweisguth's *Étude sur la littérature Siamoise*. We must nevertheless be grateful to these authors for having undertaken this difficult task at all.

2. All the most important texts of literary or cultural history appear to be available in print.

Probably nobody is able at the present time to have an overall systematic view of Thai literature as a whole, taking into account also the texts not yet available in print. The manuscripts in the National Library are for the most part catalogued, it is true. However, the subject-matter of the texts in many cases differs from, and is more comprehensive than appears from the titles catalogued and their signatures.

3. The greatest obstacles to literary research lie in the edition of the texts as hitherto practiced.

a. the major part of printed texts has been edited uncritically.

This means:

- (1) In so far as the printed texts can still be compared with the manuscripts, it has been found that as a rule the text of the manuscript does not correspond with the text printed. This is not only true as regards the subject-matter of the text. Not just single works or phrases have been omitted, added or changed here and there, but in fact whole verses and parts thereof.
- (2) If there exist several manuscripts of a title, the printed edition has obviously been based on only one of them, leaving the other manuscripts out of consideration.
- (3) In some cases title and author are quite arbitrarily mentioned.

- b. If several manuscript versions exist, no mention is made in the printed version that other versions exist of the same title.
 - c. For many printed texts there are no corresponding manuscripts available in the National Library, or only in defective form such as typed scripts. The question arises, how the existence of the printed texts is to be explained.
4. In so far as printed editions of a poem exist, they have as a rule been edited uncritically.
- a. Their dating is in most cases unreliable, in some cases even impossible. Dates are not, or not sufficiently, substantiated by proofs of reasonings.
 - b. As to authorship the remarks under a. equally apply.
 - c. Not even in academic studies is any mention made of the existence of several other versions; reference is invariably made to the poem as such bearing a certain title.
5. Apart from deficiencies of literary science there are shortcomings of philological research. Comparative historical linguistics are practically non-existent for the Thai language. And it is just the latter that, it is hoped, may help eventually to arrive at approximately true datings.

II. The Limits

The deficiencies and shortcomings mentioned under I. must be seen in the light of certain limits which impose themselves:

- 1. It is assumed that a considerable part of Thai literature has been lost when Ayuthaya was destroyed in 1767 and through other events. Among the

works lost may have been a number of Unica, but no precise information is available on this subject. The question is whether there exist references prior to 1767 to titles which are not traceable today. It can however be assumed that the statement of an ordinance by Rama I, according to which nine tenths of all legal books (*samut thai*) then existing, have been destroyed, also applies to literary documents.

2. The present state of repair of many manuscripts does not permit the drawing of unambiguous conclusions as to their date. In a few cases it is possible to delimit the date of composition (of the manuscript) by means of the duct of the script to a number of decades, but no more, and it is uncertain whether we can hope for further contributions from descriptive philology in this field.

3. Inexact recordings in the manuscripts cannot be corrected anymore; corrections of corrupted texts can be made only by hypothesis.

4. There are no biographical or bibliographical notes about poets prior to 1800 A.D. which could be of any value for scientific research, unless a poet was at the same time a historic personality and thus mentioned in one of the state chronicles. Even about the poets of the 19th century no precise information is available. Almost all the "*facts*" known about poets of the time of Phra Narai are based on anecdotes without indication of any sources.

5. Only in very exceptional cases can significant dates of literary history be gleaned from other literary sources.

III. Possibilities

Some possibilities have already been shown under I. An infinite amount of scholarly research is still required, but it should ultimately be possible to bring

Thai literary research up to international standards. In order to attain this high level, one should however be prepared to kill some "sacred cows" on the way, i.e. to put in doubt "*tradition*" and "*the teachings of the sages*" in many cases. This applies also to Prince Damrong's prefaces to many first editions which often contain tentative datings. No one embarking upon studies of Thai culture, even of the most cursory kind, can possibly call into question the outstanding position of this universal scholar and his achievements in the fields of literature, art and history, and in the entire sphere of the humanities in Thailand. Without the work of Prince Damrong we would have no points of orientation in many fields. We should honour the memory of this great man and his work by taking it seriously as a basis for scientific discussion.

It has repeatedly been said however that some of the statements which Prince Damrong made with great assurance are very probably wrong. He has not furnished data which would admit of verification of his theories, and indeed such data can probably never been furnished. Oral transmission of texts may be as valid as transmission in writing. The transmission of oral texts can however be valid only in proportion as it is substantiated as to contents and source. This was supposedly impossible during Prince Damrong's life time. Consequently, the Prince used to record possibilities rather than facts by using very vague language such as *khau cai wa* or *hen ca*. He thereby implied that his statements were to be understood in the mode of potentiality and he can hardly be held responsible for the fact that the generation of literary scholars who came after him did not pay heed to the modal aspect of his words and phrases. The crucial error of present Thai literary research lies just in the mistaken interpretation of Prince Damrong's modally qualified formulations. Hypotheses are legitimate in scientific research, in fact they

are at times necessary, but they must always be clearly marked as hypotheses and not as facts.

Finally, a mere "feeling" or "opinion" about a certain matter may often be right. Still, this is not a sufficient basis for drawing conclusions that claim to be valid also for other people.

IV. Personal Summary

Reverting to the beginning of this chapter the author would like to confess that despite the gratification derived from the study of Thai literature, the whole subject is overshadowed by a disconcerting sense of uneasiness and frustration.

1. The objective conditions prevailing in Thai literary research are in most cases discouraging. (See I. and II.) A lot of pioneer work remains still to be done before any progress can be made in the study of Thai poetry.

2. The prevailing conditions do not only impede exact results of scientific research but discourage also any consistent research effort. (Where are the limits of what can be hypothetically justified? To what extent is it still possible to get at the true meaning of a text by way of interpretation? etc.)

3. The author is fully aware of the predicament of putting in doubt the traditions of a cultural community, without, himself, being able to present adequate solutions except perhaps to suggest a better method of research. ©