

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Modern Thai Literature — With an Ethnographic Interpretation.* By Herbert P. Phillips, in association with Vinita Atmiyanandana Lawler, Amnuaycaj Patipat, and Likhit Dhiravegin. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 391.

*Modern Thai Literature* is an important contribution to Thai studies in an area whose significance has now been by and large acknowledged and accepted. It seems almost axiomatic that quite apart from its intrinsic interest, Thai literature deserves study because it offers an important means of arriving at further understandings of life in Thailand from a *Thai* perspective — for the *foreign* scholar. It is probably not quite the convention in book reviews (as against review articles) to review a book with reference to others but *Modern Thai Literature* deserves some comparisons if only to place the contribution which it represents in context.

In Gehan Wijeyewardene's view a Thai novel may neatly encapsulate the findings of long-winded social science studies or draw attention to unconsidered aspects of what it is that social scientists attempt to study (Khammaan Khonkai, *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp*, translated by Gehan Wijeyewardene [St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978], p. xxxi). He goes on to say, "it is a slice of Thai life seen through the eyes of a Thai observer, and therefore has the supreme virtue of telling us outsiders what Thai themselves consider important, particularly about their relations with other Thai" (*ibid.*, p. xxxiii). It is a reasonable view and few if any would quarrel with it. However, there are probably not very many foreign scholars who can claim to be so thoroughly familiar with the language and literature of Thailand as to be able to draw upon the literature for scholarly purposes in any significant, meaningful way. In other words, the axiom is recognized; but few are able to put it into practice.

Fortunately, some of those with such a familiarity (or some familiarity and some help from their Thai friends) have made translations of Thai

works available — but these translations are pathetically small in number. Translations by Thais are even smaller. The more notable are, of course, Morell's *Letters from Thailand* (*Chotmai Jaak Muang Thai* by Botan) Wijeyewardene's *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp* and *Teacher Marisa* (*Khruu Baan Nauk* and *Kha Ratchakarn Khru* by Khammaan Khonkai), Anderson and Mendiones' *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, a collection of short stories, and Tulachandra's (Janjaem Bunnag) *Prisna* (*Pritsana* by "W. na Praumnmak") and *Sii Phaendin* (*Sii Phaendin* by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj).

The full-length translations of modern novels, on one hand, are instructive in ways relevant to the locales, conditions, circumstances, character types, and contemporary issues which, by the very nature of the form, may be more extensively dealt with by the respective authors. Anderson and Mendiones' collection which contains thirteen short stories (selected by Suchart Sawatsri) by several authors (all born after World War II), on the other hand, has a broader interest because more ground is covered. Still, this collection has a certain "specificity" (if I may be allowed to appropriate the term) because most if not all of the stories are concerned with "many of contemporary Siam's problems" during the "American era" (*In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* [Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985], p. 11).

Given what is currently available, *Modern Thai Literature*, with its wide selection of Thai writings in the 1960s and 1970s, is a most welcome addition to the literature-in-translation. It is a considerable improvement on the Anderson and Mendiones collection because there is infinitely more variety in the selections contained in it but has, as with that collection, highly and in places even better informed discussions of the social and political issues which influenced the writing of the translated works. It shares, at the same time, the strengths of Wijeyewardene's effort in that it pays considerable attention to contextual ethnographic detail and comprehensive explanations of the literary and other uses of Thai in various contexts. The title of the book is, however, a misnomer. Phillips' anthology is not entirely "literature" for it includes other kinds of writings such as an open letter, an anonymous chain letter, and lyrics from a song. But I hasten to add that far from detracting from the merits of the book, these and other inclusions of like kind serve only to enhance its value.

The book is in two parts. The first is an extended introduction to the works that follow. In this introduction, Phillips deals with the ethnographic context of Thai literature, the criteria by which the various pieces were selected for inclusion in the volume, the various groups which make up the community of writers and offers some reflections on literature and ethnography. Phillips views the writers and thinkers whose pieces are translated in the book as “key informants”, interesting to the anthropologist because of their sensitive renditions of the native’s viewpoint. Phillips also points out, quite rightly, that because of what they do they are structurally significant and therefore command analytic attention. Or, as Wijeyewardene has noted elsewhere, Thai writers not only write about Thai society, they *are* Thai society, or are at least an important and often influential community in Thai society. Phillips’ discussion of the social and political setting in Thailand and the role of the writer in Thailand is illuminating. His discussion of “intellectual genealogies” is no less interesting for what it shows of how such “genealogies” may be employed to serve legitimatory functions and ideological ends. For example, Phillips observes, of Sulak Sivaraksa the conservative-monarchist writer, that “Sulak’s link to *Phya Anuman* projected him further back into Thai history through *Phya Anuman*’s own links to Prince Damrong . . . and Prince Narisara” and that “It was this series of direct, personal connections to a golden age of Thai scholar-bureaucrats that provided the emotional support and justification for the intellectual position . . . Sulak tried to establish for himself, with considerable success, during the 1960s and 1970s” (pp. 48–49). At the same time, Phillips adds that “Sulak himself would be the first to admit that his ritualizing of the relationship was meant, at least in part, as a metaphor for some of the social values that over the years have come to be associated with these historical figures” (p. 49). There are other observations which Phillips offers such as — to refer to one of the more ironic developments in personal relationships and contemporary politics — Samak Sundaravej’s beginnings as a journalist in *Siam Rath*, under M.R. Kukrit Pramoj’s patronage and how, a decade later, Kukrit lost his parliamentary seat to Samak in an election that forced Kukrit to relinquish his prime ministership. The book is replete with information and observations of this sort which serve only to confirm that the study of Thai literature and its personalities is indeed relevant

to an understanding of contemporary social and political issues in the kingdom and vice versa. Phillips' discussion, however, contains a fright or two. Terms like "pre-Oedipal Thai sons" (p. 181) and "libidized mode of thought" (p. 73), for example, pounce on the unsuspecting reader. They presumably reflect an ongoing or perhaps residual interest in Thai peasant personality, but they are thankfully few and far between, occurring in end notes.

The second part of the book is a well-thought-out presentation of thirty-four works. There is no question that most of the selections do say something about Thai society, culture, and politics. They include, to name a few which come immediately to mind, the delightfully mischievous, highly entertaining "Concerning *Farang*" by Vasiit Dejkunjorn (whose "Social Work" is also included); the testy, petulant, and slightly self-indulgent "My Dog Is Missing" by Kukrit Pramoj; the pellucid "The Enchanting Cooking Spoon" by Boonlue; "Getting Drunk Abroad" by Sujit Wongthed; the bitter, angry "I Lost My Teeth" by Khamsing Srinawk; the controlled, angry, contemptuous "Fishiness in the Night" by the late Chitr Phoumisak; the disillusioned, gently remonstrative "My Beloved Brother, Thamnu . . ." by Puey Ungpakorn; and the macho, provocative "Chewing out a Special Class" by Anand Senakhan. Each translation is preceded by a thoughtful introduction which attempts to place the work in its cultural, social, or political context, seeks to convey information about the author (and Phillips shows himself to be remarkably well informed in these two areas), and explains the intricacies of the particular style or use of language employed by the author. The translations themselves are often heavily annotated to provide additional contextual, ethnographic, linguistic, or literary information. While some may consider this unduly distracting, it is a device dictated by Phillips' preference for more literal rather than liberal translations. I, however, have no quibbles with the preference nor the device because a great deal of enormously useful information at several registers becomes available in this translational mode.

Ultimately, this is probably the greatest strength of the book, namely, the vast amount of information that it contains at several levels of interest. *Modern Thai Literature*, despite its somewhat misleading title, is undoubtedly an invaluable contribution to Thai studies. Its value will probably be even more appreciated by foreign scholars not entirely

familiar with the written language, but who wish to know more about the significance of those works by those embarrassingly unfamiliar, or vaguely familiar, and sometimes unpronounceable names which occasionally fall with such great facility from the lips or pens of the initiated, whether through genuine erudition or indulgence in a little scholarly one-upmanship.

*Modern Thai Literature* raises a disconcerting question of some importance, however. If the commentaries and critiques by Thai writers are to be taken as the legitimate accounts and reflections of “key informants”, as Phillips considers them to be, are what they say then to be taken as part of the data or explanation — both of which are so much sought after by *farang* scholars? If much of *reflective* modern Thai writings are sociological, as they often are, do we accept them for what they are or as “folk sociology” and subject them to further scrutiny? At a conference on “Thai Studies in ASEAN”, organized by the Thai Khadi Research Institute in September 1987, it was my distinct impression that for many Thai scholars present, Thai studies regardless of the discipline ought to be directed at solving contemporary problems in the country. Or, at any rate, it should instruct in the identification of and coming to grips with the problems and issues facing the country. Such a view, if pursued to the extreme must necessarily exclude the foreign scholar for if legitimacy and authority be accorded to the views of “key informants”, especially in literate cultures, then they must be accepted for what they are. And it would be presumptuous indeed for a non-Thai scholar to undertake Thai studies of the prescriptive kind so favoured by, for example, many at that conference. If this is conceded, however, what then is left for the foreign scholar of Thai studies? Is it the implication, then, that the social and political analyses of Thai scholars, including the more reflective, more sociological writings of the kind presented in *Modern Thai Literature*, be given the status of data for, after all, are they not in their own way important slices of Thai life? In other words, do they become part of the ethnography?

ANANDA RAJAH