

BOOK REVIEWS

Phādāēng Nāng Ai: A Translation of a Thai-Isan Folk Epic in Verse. Translated and edited by Wajuppa Tossa. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1990. Pp. x, 174, glossary, bibliography.

As Thailand grows as an economic power internationally, and politically as the pivotal state in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Southeast Asian region, the world shows greater interest not only in its tourist capacity but also in its contribution to human culture. This book, whatever its flaws, should be seen as a small, but significant, element in that process. The term “epic” has had some tendency to overuse in the Thai context in recent years, but one should leave it to the reader to judge its suitability here. The story is certainly the stuff that epics are made of — and there is the menacing element of fate and destiny that hangs ominously over the narrative.

The domestic and community language of many of the peoples of Isan, the northeast region of Thailand, is Lao; that is, these people have, linguistically, a closer relation to the official language of Laos than to the official language of the Kingdom of Thailand. This book is the translation of what Dr Wajuppa calls “a folk epic” in the language of Isan. This language, traditionally, had two main scripts in which it was represented — known technically as Thai Noi and Tham; and to make things even more difficult the relations of these scripts to the official Thai and Lao scripts are not at all simple. The translation is from a transliteration into modern Thai script by Phra Ariyanuwat Khemacari published in 1981.

The basic story-line of the poem is very simple — but there are a number of themes taken up in the narrative, not all of which are entirely clear in their import. Using Tambiah’s versions of oral narrative¹ as a

guide to what local people think is basic to the story, let me summarize the story below. Some of the other themes, and Tambiah's treatment of the story (1970, pp. 295–304), will be discussed later.

The great king Phaya Khorm had a beautiful daughter Ai Kham. In a previous life she had been the daughter of a rich trader, who gave her as wife to a dumb servant, who abandoned her while she was trying to assuage her hunger in a wild fig tree. She swore to avenge this act in a future life. The husband is reborn as Phangkhi, the son of a Naga king. Phadaeng, the ruler of a neighbouring kingdom falls in love with and becomes the lover of Ai Kham. Phangkhi is rejected by the princess. Phaya Khorm arranges a rocket-firing competition, a traditional form of merit-making. Both Phaya Khorm and Phadaeng are unsuccessful because of their demerit in previous lives. Phangkhi takes on the form of a white squirrel to woo the princess, but is shot by her hunters and eaten by her and most of the populace. The Naga king attacks in revenge and the kingdom is destroyed. Phadaeng attempts to escape with Ai Kham and the palladia (both Wajuppa and Tambiah write "regalia") of the kingdom — a drum, a gong, and a ring. She is, however, overtaken by the convulsions caused by the Naga, and the palladia are lost. The sites of the death of Ai Kham (and others) and the loss of the palladia are identified as major landmarks of the region. Phadaeng pines away, dies, and is born in the land of ghosts, as the most powerful of them. He leads an army against the Naga and the war ends only with the intervention of Indra, who decrees that Nang (lady) Ai will remain with Phangkhi, but whether they will be man and wife will only be decided with the coming of the next Buddha Phra Sī-'ān (Sri Ariya).

In the rather brief analysis of interpretations of the poem, Wajuppa draws attention to three. First, one that she associates with the name of "the late prominent Isan folklorist, Jarubat Ruangsuwan", is a historical interpretation in which the Naga represent the Tai and Phya Khorm and Phadaeng, the Khmer. The poem thus "becomes the story of the rise and fall of the Khmer Empire" (p. 21). Second is Tambiah's analysis of the story as a series of oppositions and resolutions having to do with man and nature, in which

while the sinking of human settlements as a result of humans having eaten *Naga* meat represents *naturalization* of human society, the incorporation of human cultural products by nature represents the *humanization* of nature. It is this balanced equation that the myths portray. (1970, p. 300)

Associated with Tambiah's view is the relationship between the myth (or the poem) with place-names and its position as charter for the rocket festivals. As Tambiah puts it (in relation to topography),

The latent meaning is that the swamps and rivers are the repositories of ancient regalia that give legitimacy to human settlements. (Ibid.)

The final interpretation considered by Wajuppa is to see the romantic tragedy as "a force for teaching Theravada Buddhism" (p. 23).

None of these interpretations necessarily excludes any of the others; nevertheless there are some important issues which emerge in considering them in relation to each other.

The historical interpretation identifies *Naga* with *Tai* and *Khorm* with *Khmer*. The word *khom*, whatever difficulties there may be in its interpretation, is generally associated with *Khmer*. One of the clearest associations of *Naga* with *Tai* is in the references to the city of *Muang Nong Sae*, which is claimed by Thai scholars to have been in the region of *Dali* (*Yunnan*) — and a *Tai* city. It is not the historical validity of these claims that matters, but the accepted association of the name with *Tai*. This immediately raises the question of the date of this poem in its present form. It could well be that sections of this are recent scholarly creations. We do know that at least one small addition of subtitle is likely. Wajuppa comments on the use of the name "Nanchao".

From conversations with Phra Ariyanuwat, the translator sensed that the word may be added during the process of his transcription from *Isan* script to modern *Thai* script. Unfortunately, Phra Ariyanuwat was unable to locate the original palm leaf manuscript he used. (p. 102)

If it is true that the suggestions that *Naga* = *Tai* are recent, this would

remove a possible objection to Tambiah's interpretation. If the core of the poem (or myth) makes this identification, it becomes more difficult to accept that the Naga represent nature as opposed to the human Khorm. This line of interpretation raises other questions, such as,

Why is Phadaeng condemned to be a ghost, while it seems to be taken for granted that Phangkhi is the only possible legitimate spouse of Ai Kham?

The poem ends with the lines

		. . . the next Buddha.
	He will decide	whether <i>Phayā Naga Phangkhi</i>
Will remain	with Nāng Ai	as her rightful husband or not (p. 90).

This leads to the third interpretation and the question "Is this a Theravada Buddhist poem?" I find it difficult to answer in the affirmative. It certainly involves the notions of karma, rebirth, and merit, but these are notions more ancient than Buddhism and the tone of the poem recalls Arjuna on the eve of battle more than it does the ethicism of Theravada Buddhism. It is now true that the merit-making of the rocket festival is assimilated into a Buddhist community and Tambiah has shown how this and the celebration of the Vessandorn ritual may be looked at within a single framework incorporating the religion of the monks — but the poem itself shows no such incorporation. The merit and demerit is there, but not the monks or Theravada Buddhism. One might suggest it comes from a more robust epic tradition.

A review must consider the translated poem itself, and I think the most serious question to be asked is whether the translation fulfils the demands of the original. Those demands are, I think, quite exceptional, and without this particular translation the outside world would not be aware of those demands. I also think that some of the decisions made by the translator were wrong. In a harsh comment on a translation of a novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Ian Buruma writes:

Like so many translators with tin ears, [the translator] ignores the most important yardstick of a good translation: it must read well in the language at hand. To judge whether this is so does not

demand any knowledge of the original. Accuracy is of course a different matter. (1990, p. 70)

Wajuppa is not a native speaker of English and I doubt that justice could be done to this poem except by an English-speaking poet. The conflict between fidelity to the culture and style of the original and the creation of an acceptable work in the new language will always be there — but with poetry there is a much more fundamental problem. Wajuppa's initial response was, I think, wrong. The attempt to reproduce the Thai verse form, perhaps, could never succeed. It does not succeed in this case. The English verse is stilted and difficult to read. Let me just give one example:

Ten spoken words	add up to less	than seeing with your own eyes
Seeing ten times	amounts to less than	touching and feeling as you please.
	Phādæng was elated	prating with Nāng Ai;
Chattering	with his darling lady,	he became blithe hearted (p. 44).

In my opinion, part of the infelicity derives from a verse form inappropriate to the language, but part of the blame must go to her academic supervisors. There are many occasions in the text when native English-speaking advisers could have done a better job. I must emphasize, however, that the poem would not have been available, even to those like me who have some knowledge of Thai, without this translation. The poem deserves to become part of world literature and someone will in the future build on Wajuppa's initial labours.

There are other aspects of the translation which need comment. It is perhaps foolhardy to question the translation of a native speaker of the languages of Isan, but let me voice two of quite a few disagreements and lay myself open to refutation. The most important query relates to the translation of the line

phôociŋ tâŋchêthâj wâa naaŋ'aj cajmuaŋ²

which is rendered as

Then the kingly father names his child Nāng Ai, the city's sweetheart

The translation of *cajmuaŋ* as "city's sweetheart" occurs throughout the text, and, more important than the rather inappropriate echo of the

Western culture of popular song, is the bypassing of the political implications of this term. Literally, “heart of the city”, this term commonly refers to the central shrine of the political unit in Lü, Lao, and perhaps, in the past, areas of northern Thailand and Tai-speaking Burma. In the poem the epithet is attached to the royal heir — to Phadaeng, as well as to Ai Kham.

A much smaller point relates to the translation on p. 57. The word “quintillion” seems not only infelicitous, but is also, perhaps, wrong. The Isan dictionary suggests that *sĕnktuláan* could be translated “a hundred thousand kings” (*sĕncâwmahāñanakhon*) (Preecha 1989, p. 89), though 10^{13} is also possible.

This translation and the original poem deserve much attention, and admission to the heritage of world literature. I have tried to suggest in this review that much work needs still to be done on establishing its social and historical context. Wajuppa writes that the poem is unknown “on the Laos side of the Mekong River” (p. 3). This is quite astonishing, but such surprises are not uncommon in the study of the palm leaf manuscripts of the region. Does this tell us something about the history of the poem? Another of many unresolved puzzles is the story of the Naga and their internal battles. We know the Naga are associated with water, but what is the import of the section “The Two *Naga* Remake the Courses of the River” (pp. 53–54) in which, among other things, they are responsible for the creation of the Mekong? It seems to have no bearing on the tale of Phadaeng, Nang Ai, and Phangkhi. A new translation should be in English verse and not Thai verse in English. It should also, I think, incorporate other versions of the text. In the mean time we should express our gratitude to Dr Wajuppa for making the poem available to us.

NOTES

- 1 Note, however, that a palm leaf version of the tale exists in the temple library of the village in which Tambiah worked (Tambiah 1968, p. 106).
- 2 The transcription used in this review is largely based on the Mary Haas system.

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