

THE DATE AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE  
ROMANCE OF PHRA LÔ.

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The romance-*lilit*-of *Phra Lô*, one of the three best known of this type of poetical romances, is, to judge from its archaic language, an old one. No information, whether within the poem itself or outside, exists as to its date or authorship. The problem remains a debatable one in Siamese literature and no satisfactory solution has been advanced. In this case the problems of date and authorship go together. Internal data which have usually been considered in this connection are seemingly contradictory. In order to arrive at some conclusion one must take them up for consideration.

At the end of the poem there are two quatrains, the first of which runs:

*"Thus is concluded the composition (nibondh) of the Great King (mahārāj cao), in praise of Phra Lô, . . . . ."*

and this is immediately followed by another quatrain thus:

*"Thus is concluded the writing (bancong) of the Prince Royal (yaovarāj cao), in praise of Phra Lô, the most eminent of men, . . . . ."*

The interpretation of these quatrains have been variously suggested by many authorities. Some say that the first quatrain referred to the fact that a King, perhaps Boromatrailokanāth, composed the romance; whilst the second referred to the fact that his heir wrote it down. The term *bancong* is just as wide of interpretation as the English term *write*. While it is possible that the heir wrote down what his father composed one cannot help feeling that it was hardly probable. Even in modern days of the typewriter, when the labour of copying out or taking down dictation has been greatly minimised, a high personage (who must needs have been a very busy man) could not, or at best was not likely to, be inclined to write down a long poem

which had been composed by another even though that other was his own royal sire.

Other solutions were therefore sought.

In his introduction to the second edition of the *Phra Lô* in 1926, Prince Damrong advanced the theory that the quatrains in question were later than the poem itself and were written by someone who was not author of the romance. He drew attention, however, to another passage in the poem where its author said, in his prefatory stanzas:

"I hereby embellish my stanzas to divert *the sovereign lord*, endowed with kingly virtues."

It is clear from this that the author was not the "Great King" of the first quoted quatrain since there was mentioned a "sovereign lord" whom he wished "to divert". Prince Damrong, therefore, in consideration of the wide knowledge of court etiquette and the high literary standard displayed in the poem, was inclined to think that the author might have been no less a personage than a royal prince. He suggested, in pursuance of this idea, that it might have been this princely author who later succeeded to the throne. In such a case the order of those quatrains should be reversed to keep their historic sequence. In fact, Prince Damrong presupposed a misarrangement by the copyist of the version which has been handed down to our days. From the point of view of strict historical criticism such a conclusion sounds a little arbitrary and yet there is so far no other suggestion.

Prince Damrong then went on to the problem of dating. He seemed to have been very definite about the date for he said that there were proofs of the work having existed before the reign of King Nārāi. His proofs were:

1. the fact that *Phra Lô* was quoted in the *Chindāmani*, a primer of the Siamese language, written by Phra Horā, a famous figure of the Court of King Nārāi; and

2. the fact that Siamese poetry of the Ayudhyā period was distinguishable by three chronological features, namely the period of King Boromatrailokanath in which the favourite form was a *lilit*, such as this poem; the period commencing with the reign of King Nārāi, in which the *khlong* and the *chanda* predominate; and the period of "His Majesty of the Great Urn", a decade before the fall of that capital, in which the *phlengyāo* was the most favoured.

The Prince, therefore, came to the conclusion that the *lilit* of *Phra Lō* must have been written in the first period above-named, i.e. between the years of the Buddhist Era 1991 and 2076 (1448 to 1533 of the Christian era), covering the reigns of King Boromatrailokanāth and his four immediate successors. And in such a case the "Prince Royal" might have been either of the two sons of King Boromatrailokanāth or the grandson who succeeded the latter of the two. They were, of course, in their respective turns Princes Royal.

Now, Prince Damrong presupposed identification of the author with some royal personage on the ground of his presumed good education and surroundings. It is not supported by any definite proof. No other similarly well-educated personage is known of and thereby the theory of the Prince must needs remain unchallenged. It does not preclude, however, authors outside of the Royal Family if such existed. A challenge from this direction should be well considered although none has so far come forward.

An obvious direction where we might come across some light on the subject would be comparison with contemporary works of the early Ayudhyā period. True to Prince Damrong's theory, very few works, if any, which are not a *lilit* have been handed down to our days. The earliest *lilit* in existence is the Oath taken on the occasion of taking the water of allegiance. It is extremely archaic and stands by itself both in style and vocabulary. It is admittedly the oldest surviving *lilit* in Siamese literature. The other

two *lilit* are two well-known poems of the *Yuan-Phāi* and this romance of *Phra Lô*. They are considered as belonging to the same period, that is to say the reigns of King Boromatrailokanath and his immediate successors. I personally feel that *Phra Lô* has been better preserved than the other poem and what seem to be archaisms are real archaisms and not bad copying. The *Yuan-Phāi*, on the other hand, exists only in one edition which cannot be said to have been well edited. Its archaisms are problems which may be soluble through better editing. And yet *Phra Lô* seems to contain so many unintelligible words. Both were based on scenes in the north, in the Lanna country and one should not have contained more archaisms than the other on account of local touches. Could not the *Yuan-Phāi* have been older than the *Phra Lô*?