

OBITUARIES

Mahā Cham Thongkhamwan

Mahā Cham Thongkhamwan, epigrapher and university teacher, died in Bangkok on March 20, 1969, at the age of seventy-two.

Mahā Cham's long career of scholarly service is typical of that transitional generation in Thailand which so well served their nation in the critical decades between tradition and modernity. He was born on November 10, 1897 to Cambodian parents in the Cambodian province of Battambang, then still under Thai control. Ordained as a *sāmnera* in a Buddhist monastery in Battambang, he there began the study of Pali; and because instruction was in the medium of the Siamese language, he learned Thai at the same time. At the age of sixteen he moved to a monastery in Bangkok, Vāt Moḷḷok, to continue his studies. He remained there for three years before moving to Vāt Mahādhātu, headquarters of the Mahānikāya sect, where he was ordained a bhikkhu in 1917. In the following year he sat the ecclesiastical examinations and was awarded the third *parian* degree.

It was at that time that the teacher who had taught him Pali in Battambang, okṅā Suttantaprijā (In), gave him a letter of introduction to George Coedès, an event which *mahā* Cham later was to consider the turning point in his life. Brought into contact with M. Coedès, who had recently become director of the Vajiranāṇa National Library, *mahā* Cham quickly was caught up in a new world of historical and literary scholarship. He left the Buddhist monkhood in 1921 and went to live in the home of Coedès. This was early in a new era in the activities of the National Library, when it first began to offer in quantity important historical and literary texts for private publication and distribution at cremation and other public ceremonies, a work directed especially by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. Throughout the decade of the 1920's, *mahā* Cham worked primarily on documents concerning Cambodia and Vietnam, and Thailand's relations with these countries in the nineteenth century, seeking out documents and editing them for publication. At the same time, *mahā* Cham further strengthened his considerable linguistic skills, and learned to read both English and French.

In 1930, when Coedès returned to France, Prince Damrong made known his need for someone with comparable skills to continue work on Thai epigraphy. *Mahā* Cham formally applied for the position, and in doing so pointed to his knowledge of Khmer, Pali, Sanskrit, English, and French, and to his ability to read the Khmer, Mon, Burmese, Lao, Sinhalese, and Devanagari scripts. Prince Damrong is said to have remarked, "This man might be able to replace George Coedès," and so engaged *mahā* Cham to work on the epigraphy of Thailand.

The epigraphic work which *mahā* Cham began in the 1930's was slow and almost unnoticed in appearing in print, and it no doubt suffered some loss of momentum when the work of the new Fine Arts Department was turned in new directions in the '30's. At the same time, *mahā* Cham exhibited perhaps the best of scholarly virtues, exactitude and patience, in proceeding with great care in preparing inscriptions for publication. It was not until 1965 that a full new collection of inscriptions was issued to follow the two volumes prepared under Coedès' direction in the 1920's, but many more than the fifty-five inscriptions presented in this volume had in the intervening decades been published in the bi-monthly Journal of the Fine Arts Department, *Śilpākara*. All but a mere handful are in some measure the work of *mahā* Cham, who never failed to treat these worn old stones with the utmost respect they demand. He would hold back the publication of an inscription for years, awaiting the explanation of a single word, and took the greatest pains to keep his editorial work from intruding upon the text itself. The high standards which he has set for Thai epigraphy are an enduring legacy for all who follow him.

Mahā Cham's influence on Thai scholarship slowly but deservedly grew with the demonstration of his rare talents. In 1938 he was chosen to serve on the national Dictionary Committee, to which he was nominated by *phrayā* Anuman Rajadhon after the death of *phrayā* Upakit Śilpasāra. Later he also became a member of the Commission for the Publication of Historical, Cultural, and Archeological Records, under the Office of the Prime Minister. He began teaching Khmer at Chulalongkorn University in 1949, and concurrently at the Fine Arts University from

1954. Although he formally retired from his position in the Fine Arts Department in 1960, he continued teaching at both institutions and also proceeded with his epigraphic work without interruption.

The numerous students and colleagues who made his acquaintance over many years remember *mahā* Cham with a special warmth from their encounter with a man who was thoroughly independent and free of messy entanglements with worldly affairs. *Mahā* Cham uncompromisingly took the world on his own terms and obtained from it rewards which we all might envy. In an autobiographical fragment written in 1967 he took pride and comfort in his conviction that he had gone through his life having done injury to no man, and in having, with his wife (who died in 1948) raised seven children who knew the meaning of work and the value of learning. He stated then his intention to continue the work which was his responsibility until his skills failed him.*

David K. Wyatt

* Khanchai Bunnān, "Bukhalāniyom ācān Cham Thōngkhamwan," *Sangkhomsāt Parithat chabap Nisit Naksūksā*, no. 6 (Feb. 1968), 83.