

CONTEMPORARY LAO LITERATURE*

by

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Strongly connected with the political history of the country, the position of contemporary Lao literature cannot be appreciated without a study of its evolution, an understanding of its main types and the eventual problems it faces.

Classical Lao literature reached its peak in the 17th century, at a time when Lane Xang was an independent and unified country. The palm-leaf manuscripts or those on Chinese paper or on bamboo strips which have come down to us bear witness to the high cultural level of the country at this period. Later on, literary writings became very rare and finally disappeared completely. Wars between princes, vassalage to neighbouring monarchs, and above all Chao Anou's defeat in 1827 by the Siamese armies when he was trying to regain his country's independence were the reason for this lack of literature. Siam deported from Laos its population and cultural wealth; Lane Xang was then deprived of its intellectual strength and elite. This was the condition which the French administration found Laos at the end of the last century. Continuance of this state of affairs suited France well and very few efforts were undertaken to create a western type of education which would have helped Laos out of her position of the poor relation in Indochina. Therefore it is very easy to understand why, until the Second World War, only a very small number of young Lao went through their secondary studies and why graduates from high schools and universities were so few.

In spite of the lack of priority granted by the colonial administration in the formation of intellectuals on a western model, one should not omit mention of some official efforts to rediscover Lao civilisation and culture and also to give Lao elites local training. We should mention the

* This is a modified form in English of a paper presented at a colloquium at the 29th International Congress of Orientalists in Paris in July 1973, and takes no account of political events since then.

gathering of classical manuscripts by the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, the publication in the Lao language of religious literature by the Buddhist Institute of Vientiane, the creation of a School of Administration and, again in Vientiane, the establishment of a government printing office in the first quarter of the 20th century.

Despite these few favorable events, no literary works were published until 1941, when writers appeared under the impulse of the Lao Renewal Movement whose aim was to give back to Laos its own personality with regard to its neighbours and to instill the notion of a Lao nation and a Lao people. This cultural revival was supported by the colonial power which was willing, after the French defeat in Europe, to permit a more comprehensive and dynamic style of colonisation, partly to thwart Siamese influence on some Lao groups. This is why the Lao Nhay movement (Great Laos) was patronized by Admiral Decoux and strongly backed by Charles Rochet, the Director of Education. This movement had undoubtedly a great success since most of the young Lao leaders and intellectuals joined it, proud not to be the cultural orphans of Indochina anymore. Facing their neighbours, who were constantly talking about their own culture, the Lao intellectuals tended to propagate theirs by writing in the same publications as the French, Vietnamese or Cambodians. Well-educated Lao¹ published their works in Franco-Indochinese reviews such as *Indochine* or *Kinnari*, in scientific periodicals like the *Bulletin des Amis du Laos* or even in the *Lao Nhay*. By getting rid of their feeling of inferiority, these well educated westernised Lao-tians gave at the same time confidence to their fellows who studied locally. Their frequent participation in poetry, theatre, song and literary competitions organised by the Lao Nhay movement² proves this.

1) Amongst them, Phetsarath, Souphanouvong, Souvannaphouma, Nhouy Abhay and Ouroth Souvannavong.

2) See particularly : *Thao Nouthak* thin¹ than pan²keit khan jat lav (ທ້ວ

ໜູ່ ທ້ວ " ຄືນ ຄຸນ ພ້ມ ເກີດ ຂອງ ຊາດ ລາວ),

Government Printer, Vientiane, 1941.

The 1945 Japanese move greatly shook this cultural revival, and it brought on indirectly a split in the Lao intelligentsia which divided in two main political groups: the first remaining faithful to France, the second siding with the national independence movement Lao Issara. This split, instead of encouraging the development of literature, led to polemics and political controversies.

Until 1948, Lao literature would have completely disappeared without the publication in Vientiane of some cultural magazines activated by Pierre Nginn, Nhouy Abhay and Bong Souvannayong. The latter started to print political works, but took his doctrinal roots in the Buddha's precepts, while Pierre Nginn took up again the publication of *Kinnari* and *Lao Nhay* (then called *Lao Rasmay*).

Starting in 1947, several reviews, printed by the Lao Issara in exile, were published in Siam. The leader was Katay Don Sasorith who, as well as being the propagandist of Lao Issara opinions by writing in small papers called *Fusées de la Semaine* (The Weekly Rockets), was also the author of a small book of funny stories called *Pour rire un peu*³ in which he relates a certain number of adventures that happened to himself and his companions in exile. This small book belongs to the humoristic types of literature, more specifically to *Jyn hmyn*² (ຈິນ ຫມິນ), and has been the precursor of other works of the same type, but none of them as good as this.

The Vientiane publications as well as Katay Don Sasorith's works were almost exclusively written in French because, we believe, the writers were willing, for the purpose of standing up to the colonial administration, to be considered as intellectuals and they wanted to prove that they were able to handle French as well as a Frenchman.

As of 1949, with the return of the majority of the Lao Issara to Vientiane, literature became more vigorous. Still remaining in the traditional cultural path, it covered three main topics. There was the Buddhist renewal thanks to miscellaneous articles published by monks and also by Nhouy Abhay, Kruong Pathoumsat, and Phouvong Phimma-

3) Bangkok, 1947 (Lao Issara Edition).

sone⁴. The printing of manuscripts was undertaken; they were reviewed, corrected and translated into modern Lao, and reviews published by the Ministry of Religion also helped. The second theme was Lao culture: Nhouy Abhay, Phouvong Phimmasone and Pierre Nginn were publishing either in *France-Asie* or in informal papers numerous studies on Lao manners and customs, on oral or classical Lao literature⁵. The third theme was that of constitutional law; articles were published to notify and explain to the general population that since 1947 Laos had been ruled by a constitutional monarch.

The 1954-1963 period was more productive. Along with Buddhist literature which remained inferior, technical writing became quite important. Finance, agriculture, cattle-breeding, and medicine were the subjects of publications written by young intellectuals coming back from Europe and who became from 1954-55 the technocrats of the Vientiane administration. These publications were quite easily produced thanks to a vast flow of dollars from the U.S.A. which allowed them to be printed in foreign countries or with the few printers founded about that time by Lao politicians.

Mention should also be made of political literature. This dealt mainly in political journalism with an historical tendency as in *Storm over Laos* by Sisouk Na Champassak⁶. Revolutionary literature made a timid appearance in the region controlled by the Lao Patriotic Front.

Non-political and non-technical writings of this period were written either in French or in Lao. The French medium authors were mainly political personalities except for Thao Kene⁷ and Pierre Nginn, president of the Lao Literary Committee. Minister Nhouy Abhay wrote also studies on manners and customs, in particular on the *Lao New Year*

4) Phouvong Phimmasone, *Le That Luang de Vientiane*, in *France-Asie* (82), pp. 142-152;

Nhouy Abhay, "le bouddhisme laotien" in *Sud-Est*, 9 (1950), pp. 7-17.

5) Nhouy Abhay, "Lamvong" in *Sud-Est*, 15 (7-1950).

6) New York: F.A. Praeger, Inc., 1961; translated from the French edition *Tempeste sur le Laos* (Table Ronde), Paris, 1961.

7) Kene (Thao) published in *France-Asie* articles on manners and customs, and has written a novel *The Princess Madhi*, Vientiane, 1960.

(1959), on Lao Buddhism and on the classical text *Sin Xay* which he translated into French. Katay Don Sasorith, also a statesman, for his part published a recollection of his youthful memoirs : *Souvenirs d'un ancien ecolier de Paksé* as well as a book of very bold stories entitled *Elle est formidable la belle-mère* (Mother-in-law's terrific)⁸, about extra-conjugal affairs and risqué subjects. This author also left us several papers on Lao tales, legends and customs and particularly on the *phaytong* game.

Lao authors wrote about civilisation and culture too, particularly Pierre Nginn, Sila Viravong and Thao Kene. Sila Viravong⁹, well-known for the publication of his *Bon savahitan lav* (ພິສາວະດາພລາວ) which was translated into English and presents a quite legendary history of Laos, was one of the first writers who attempted the recollection, review and translation into modern Lao of the great classical literary texts. The author published them after having removed passages he believed to be offensive. It could be said that he modernized the expression but kept unchanged the spirit of traditional literature. This work gave its author much influence in intellectual circles. But it has not been his only work, since he published later works in a totally different style.

In 1957 was published in Siamese an important work by Prince Phetsarath, under the pen name 3349, where the author mixes his autobiography and his opinions on what could have been Laos if his ideas had been adopted¹⁰.

8) (Lao Sedone Edition, 1958).

9) Let us mention particularly: "Nidan dav² syvsvat" (ພິສາວນ ທ້ວ ສຽວສາວ), Bangkok s.d.; "nidan nan TanTrai" (ພິສາວນ ນາງ ທ້ວໄຕຣ), -Vientiane, 1957.

10) "Cav² bejraj purus hlek henl rajanacakr lav" (จ้าวเพชรราชบุรุษเหล็กแห่งราชอาณาจักรลาว) by 3349, Bangkok 1956 and our report in *BĒEO*, T. LVIII, 1971 pp. 321-330.

After the 1960-61 political and military confrontation and the 1962 Geneva Agreement, the reunification of the country was expected; but as early as 1963, Laos was divided in two socially and politically opposed areas. The situation grew worse daily and the literary duality increased; a more diversified but very often more common style of literature was produced in Vientiane, and an essentially political literature in the Lao Patriotic Front (L.P.F.) zone¹¹.

One can wonder what were the reasons for the L.P.F. in publishing political literature. One such could be the belief of the L.P.F. leaders in the need to glorify the resistance and instill in the inhabitants of their zone the spirit of sacrifice to face barbarous American aggression. This led them to remove from their publications everything that did not reflect the inherent purity of the people and emphasise the struggle between the foreign assailant and local partisans. In spite of all this, Lao revolutionary literature is not devoid of tenderness and does not break with the tradition of classical literature. As P.B. Lafont has said, these works often tend to be epic literature whose characters could find their place in the Ramayana : Laos could be compared to the ravished Sita, Prince Souphanouvong and the L.P.F. to Rama and his army, the United States of America and its partisans to Ravana and his armies of giants.

The literature published in Vientiane was more diversified and increased rapidly from 1969-1970. Political literature went through some evolution : after the 1962 Geneva Agreement it gave up its witch-hunting and tended to neutralist writings criticising US policy and Lao administrative corruption at the upper levels. On the other hand, the production of cultural literature increased thanks to the 'Literary Committee' which later on became the Royal Academy. This literature continued to review and correct editions of classical literary manuscripts.

11) The L.P.F. also published many books about technical and education topics in the Lao language.

Buddhist literature increased as well. Along with the traditional publications, documentaries were published by the monks at the Phonphanao temple and formed the nucleus of a research center sponsored by Tay Keoluangkhot. These writings stemmed from the national Buddhist texts. Among these publications, let us mention *Dithok* (ທິດທັກ) which is an extract of the Buddha's thoughts on relations between individuals living in the same society; *Gamsan lapvat* (ຕຳສອນລາບວດ) which advises future monks; "*Tamra ya Rakmai* 2" (ຕຳຮາຢາຮາກມາ) which gives medicinal recipes copied out of *tham* manuscripts; *Kalah năp mu²svy²* (ກາລະພັບມຸສວຍ) usually considered as quality writing because it gives advice to husbands and wives and children; "*Bud Pahvat dasnahsuksa*" (ບຸດພາວັດ ທັສນະສຸກສາ) which is a sketch of the Buddha's life and can even be understood by uninformed lay readers. These titles only represent a very small part of the total output.

Some Buddhist writings originating from Thailand were also published in Lao for the first time. These stemmed from the Lao monks belonging to the Buddhadhat movement whose aim was to reform Buddhism and to lead it back to its former purity. This movement was opposed to the existing monastic order.

Alongside these specialised writings which did not excite the majority of Lao people, a popular literature began to spread widely in Vientiane especially after 1970. This popular literature has three tendencies. The first could be defined as 'prose for sensitive souls'. In spite of their efforts, its authors never were able to avoid the influence of Indian or Siamese films that have overrun Laos for the last twenty years. This type of work is more like sketches for teenagers than strongly considered, thoughtful work. It explains why its authors give their readers 'laughs and tears' but always have a happy ending to their stories. A representative work of this kind is *O wife you are* (ຜູ້ຍິງ ມີຜູ້ຍິງ).

published in 1971 by Leng Phouphagneun (Xat Lao printers), which can be summarized briefly : Thene, a young bookkeeper, and Bouadin, a young secretary, are working in the same office. A few days earlier, Thene had tried to seduce Bouadine who defended herself by scratching him. Although she swore never to speak to this young man any more, a phone call from her employer requires her to talk to him. Taking advantage of this opportunity, he confesses how much he loves her and promises her that he will never compare her with 'the girls of high dignitaries or rich tradesmen's daughters who, condemning poor people, are forever wearing rain-coats even though it is not raining and sunglasses so that nobody can recognize them, and are then seen slinking indecently into bungalows with young men'. Finally the two were reconciled, but Bouadin still saved her dignity and this makes Thene say 'Oh, how proud you are, you women!'

A second tendency in this contemporary popular literature is the use of the comic. Unfortunately, contemporary Lao authors are not very good on humorous writing. In fact, if they are really trying to make one laugh, it is always by copying *Jyn hmyn*² (ຈິນ ພິນ) but none of them ever reached the high comic level of this work of the classical Lao literature. Their funny stories, because of their trivialities and their vulgarity, are far from the illustrious model. As examples, the following summarizes two stories from *Hov, reuan Tlok khan ditpov* (ຫົວ, ເຮືອງ

ຫລັກ ຂອງ ທົດ ບົວ), published in 1972 by Xieng Tai (Pakpassak printers, Vientiane). In "Som nam² hna²" (ສົມ ນາມ ພ້ອມ ນາ) ("Too bad for you"), the author tells us about a young married girl who never wants to obey her husband. One day, he got angry, beat her and even kicked her. She complained to her father who could not bear the tears and moaning of his own daughter and kicked her, saying : "Go away, and tell your husband anything you want; it doesn't concern me . . . If he kicks my daughter, then I can do so to his wife . . ." In the story "Kha² mey

dan aam²” (ຂ້າຍຸ້ງ ທາຍ ສັບບຸ), the author relates how two friends are exchanging recipes, unknown by the police, on how to kill one's wife. The most efficient means is to 'devour your wife's health by endless nights of love'. One of the two decides to try it. After two months, without any news of his friend, the other one goes to his friend's house, hoping that the wife is dead. On reaching the house, he hears a woman singing cheerfully, and finds his friend's wife beaming with joy and like 'a rose-tree that just received manure', while her husband is lying on the bed 'as pale as a fried crab breathing with difficulty'. The story ends with the questions and answers between the two which for decency's sake had better remain untranslated.

The third tendency of popular literature is definitely more interesting than the two preceding ones. It deals with themes for sensitive souls and joking themes and takes in social criticism as well. This is the reason why we can say that it bears the seeds of the novel, referring to the substance, but unfortunately not to the style. The source of inspiration of this literature lies in every-day life and events, bringing on to stage the corrupt civil servant, the abusive politician, the military man taking advantage of his position and this in a country at war. It also points out the injustice and disparity between the rich and the poor. As an example, in 'SarahbatRan²' (ສາ ຣ: ພັດ ສັບບຸ)¹², Panai, the author, regrets that people are prevented by the police from enjoying happy new year as they would like, and regrets that public authorities punish humble people for gambling whereas VIP's are allowed to do so in the open.

After a silence of more than two centuries, as a consequence of the country's fragmentation, of having been crushed militarily by Siam, and put under French protectorate, a new literature was launched by

12) in *Kalvi javpan²* (ກາລີ ຈາວ ພັນ), Pakpassak Printing Co., Vientiane, 1971, pp. 4-6.

the National Renewal Movement at the beginning of the Second World War. From 1941 to 1963, this new literature was inspired by tradition and mostly utilised the French language although it was significantly influenced by young American inspired technocrats as early as 1956. Later on, the proportion of literature written in Lao increased and today represents about 90% of all publications.

Although Lao authors have formally Laocized their production, they nevertheless, in their use of the Lao language, show a dichotomy according to which zone of the country they are in; there is a basic distinction to be made between literature printed in the Vientiane governed zone and the revolutionary one.

The publication and distribution of works issued by the L.P.F. does not raise any problem, as is the case with any state literature. However, the authors in the Vientiane zone face a different situation. They are obliged to have their works printed at their own expense, because no publishers are to be found either in Vientiane or in the rest of the country; moreover, they have to carry out delivery to the bookshops themselves, since no distribution network exists, even for newspapers. So that writing requires a great deal of courage on their part, all the more so, as unlike the Vietnamese or Siamese, the Lao are not fond of reading: one bears in mind the ridiculously low volume of newspapers printed, even though most of them are free. As a countermeasure, the authors specializing in popular literature in Vientiane show a tendency to deal in pornography; they undoubtedly believe they can catch extra readers in this way, and therefore make literature pay.

The spread of literature is seriously impeded by many factors. To the lack of motivation in educated people we have to add the large number of illiterates. The selling price is a further handicap. For example, the book *Dahle jivit* (ທາງຊີວິດ), published by Panai and Douangchampa, cost in 1971 250 kips, which is as much as a clerk can earn in one day. As for the élite, if they know a foreign language,

they despise Lao literature, calling it local, and read European and American works¹³.

Finally, a typical book for popular consumption is produced in no more than 500 or at most 1000 copies. Authors try to meet the requirements and the possibilities of their potential readers by writing simply¹⁴ and also by using scenes familiar to their readers, which accounts for all the daily life situations. In spite of all these efforts, it only attracts interest among urban people and especially the younger generation.

To add to the woes of modern literature, television has made its appearance. Not Lao television, which does not exist, but the Siamese stations which are clearly received by the Lao living in the plains by the Mekong river, that is to say, the greater part of the Lao population. All television viewers, whether a senior civil servant or a cyclo-driver, obtain a tireless audio-visual satisfaction in T.V. shows, and therefore are less and less inclined to read. Moreover through watching Siamese TV, Lao viewers express themselves more and more like those they view, and gradually and unconsciously forget their own language to the benefit of Siamese, considering their language and literature as minor when compared to the Siamese.

In spite of all these difficulties, the young Lao are frightened that their national culture will be overwhelmed by foreign influences and still continue to print works of popular literature. They do so under the

13) Douangchampa and Panai 'Hnav cai' (ໜ້າໄວ), Pakpassak printers, Vientiane B.E. 2514 (1971), p. 3.

14) Sila Viravong, in the preface to *Kuy kint sav gav phu² jay*, (ກຸຍກິນສາວກວນຸ້ງຊ້າຍ),

ສິລາວິຣາວົງ -) edited by Panai and Douang-Champa,

Pakpassak printers, Vientiane 1971, p.k. (໑).

moral and paternal authority of Sila Viravong¹⁵ who popularized classical literature and is a veteran of the independence movement *Lao Issara*. Even if their works are not, from the standpoint of literature, a success, they are nevertheless patriotic undertakings devoted to promote, in the midst of a wave of cultural influences from Siam and America, a contemporary Lao literature, the roots of which are to be found in the Lao environment and written in the only language yet understood by all, daily Lao. Whatever its quality may be, the contemporary Lao literature deserves our interest, if only for this reason.

15) Four such young authors are Sila Viravong's children.