Major Periods in Thai Printing

BY SUTHILAK AMBHANWONG

Thailand has a rich national literary heritage, with some early masterpieces of Thai literature dating back to the thirteenth century. The oldest written documents known in Thai are the stone inscriptions of King Rama Kamhang the Great, who reigned between 1277-1317 A.D., when Sukhotai was the capital of Thailand. The inscriptions of this famous king are particularly interesting not only from the historical but also the linguistic standpoints, since the first set of alphabets ever adopted in the Thai language were used in the inscriptions. Furthermore, they have literary value since the writing was clearly and precisely expressed in compact prose, and without any foreign influence. The inscriptions are considered, therefore, as the first landmark of Thai literature. Apart from King Rama Kamhang's inscriptions, a considerable number of other valuable inscriptions are also in existence.

Other early writing materials best known in Thailand include palm-leaf and accordion manuscripts, which also date back to the Sukhotai period. Despite the fact that a great number of Khmer and Pali palm-leaf manuscripts have been preserved in the National Library of Thailand, most of them are of recent period, dating back only after the foundation of Bangkok in 1782 A.D. The destruction of the old capital, Ayudhya, by the Burmese in 1767 A.D. destroyed a great number of old Thai documents. French missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries collected and took with them to Europe some Pali palm-leaf manuscripts of earlier periods, so that these old manuscripts are more easily seen in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and in The British Museum in London than in Bangkok. However, The National Library of Thailand has in its possession a few valuable Pali palm-leaf manuscripts copied between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. The oldest one is a commentary of the Samyuttanikāya, copied in Khmer writing in 1440 A.D.

It is interesting to note that prior to King Rama Kamhang's creation of the Thai script, the Thai had no alphabet of their own. For the purpose of translating Pali texts on Buddhism into Thai, Khmer writing had been adopted to some extent so as to render sounds in the Thai language. Therefore, it can be said that Khmer manuscripts are mostly of Thai origin.

After the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 A.D., Phya Tak Sin restored the independence of the country. He became king in 1768 A.D., and made Thonburi the capital of Thailand. Among his efforts to preserve Buddhist literature was the acquisition of the royal collection of Buddhist Sacred Scriptures, which had been scattered about. The work
The Thonburi period was of short duration, but still produced some literary works: *Ramakien*, an adaptation of Ramayana composed by King Tak Sin, *Lilit Petchamongkut*, and *Inao Kam Chan*, written in verse by Luang Saravijit (Chao Phraya Phra Klang Hon).

The Bangkok period saw numerous masterpieces of Thai literature. Only some of the great books and distinguished authors in the early part of this period are represented here. The first one, *Khun Chang Khun Pan*, a great romance poem, comprises three main characters: Khun Pan, the hero; Nang Pim, the heroine; and Khun Chang, the villain, with Supanburi as the setting of the story. The book not only depicts the Thai society and the way of life in those days, but also serves as a source book for old Thai customs. Another famous romance poem is *Phra Apaimani*, composed by Sunthorn Poo, a poet of genius, who lived in the reign of King Rama II. The story describes the delightful adventures of Phra Apaimani and his brother. Besides this work, Sunthorn Poo composed a great number of poems of high quality, which were unrivalled in the later period.

The early part of the Bangkok period also saw the beginning of the translations and adaptations of Asian classics into the vernacular language. Among this kind of great works are *Sam Kok*, the translation of the Chinese literature *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (San Kuo); *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the well-known Indian epic *Ramayana*. There are varying versions of *Ramakien*. Besides the one composed by King Tak Sin, other versions were adapted by King Rama I, King Rama II, and King Rama VI for different purposes. *Inao* is another popular adaptation, based on an episode in the history of Java. Another one, *Rajathiraj*, is an episode of Burmese history.

Some main works on the subject of Buddha and Buddhism include several versions of the Tripitaka. The first one in book form was produced by King Chulalongkorn on the occasion of his accession to the throne in 1893 A.D.¹⁹ *Patom Sompotkatha*, written by Prince Paramanuchitchinorot is an excellent biography of Lord Buddha. *Vessundara Jataka* is a poem about Buddha’s last incarnation prior to his birth as Prince Siddhattha, manifesting his great alms-giving.

It is interesting to note that several Kings of the Chakri dynasty have contributed much to the literary world. King Chulalongkorn was famous for several works. One, *Klai Ban*, a series of letters written to one of his daughters describing in full detail his European trip, makes delightful reading. Another *Phra Rajpithi Sibsongduen*, is a scholarly work describing royal ceremonies performed in each month. This work has been highly esteemed as the best Thai prose. His two romance poems *Ngokpa* and *Nitrachakrit* are of considerable appeal to all people. King Vajiravudh was a versatile writer. He contributed
enormously to the literary world; his works include numerous plays, poems, prose, and translations of Shakespeare’s works.

Other well-known Thai writers in the past worth mentioning here are Prince Bidyalongkorn, Chao Phraya Dhamasak Montri, Phraya Upakit Silpasarn, Prince Damrong Rajanubhaph, and Phraya Surintaraja. Prince Bidyalongkorn wrote under the pseudonym of “N.M.S.” Among his famous works are Kanok Nakorn, a poem of difficult rhythm; delightful Vetan Tales; and the humorous Student Life in England. Chao Phraya Dhamasak Montri, with the pseudonym of “Kru Dep” was famous for his essays on various subjects and poetry of rich original thoughts. Phraya Upakit Silpasarn was a great poet; his poem adapted from Thomas Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is so impressive in Thai version, that it has been considered as a precious gem of Thai poems. Prince Damrong Rajanubhaph was a great historian and great writer. His interest was so extensive that he wrote more than a hundred books on various subjects. Among his outstanding works are Nitan Borankudi, interesting essays on different subjects; War with Burma; Buddhist Monuments in Siam. Phraya Surintaraja was known as “Mae Wan.” He was the first author to introduce the translation of the Western world’s fiction into Thai. His translation of Marie Corelli’s Vendetta was a great success. It not only appealed to all people, but also helped broaden the scope of Thai literature to include translated works which are numerous at the present time.

References

1Phra Waravetpisit, Thai Literature (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1959), p. 99. (in Thai)
4Ibid.
5Ibid., p. 22.
7Coedès, op. cit., p. 27.
8Ibid., pp. 28-30.
9Ibid., p. 33.
11Coedès, loc. cit.
12McFarland, loc. cit.
13Coedès, op. cit., p. 35.
16Sathirakul, op. cit., p. 52.
17Waravetpisit, op. cit., p. 100.
18Ibid., p. 31.
20Suthilak Amphanwong, Four Periods of Thai Literature (Bangkok: Thai Library Association, 1961). (in Thai)