Reflections on a Literary Dispute Between Jit Phumisak and Phra Worawetphisit

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In July of 1997, the late Professor William J. Gedney asked that I provide him with details, based on my study of the manuscript copies of the Thai literary classic *Lilit Phra Law*, of a specific passage of that poem. The passage was once, he reminded me at the time, the subject of a disagreement in the early 1950’s between Phra Worawetphisit, of the Department of Thai and Eastern Antiquities at Chulalongkorn University, and Jit Phumisak, the Thai scholar and writer with whom Gedney is forever linked. ¹ Gedney recalled that disagreement as a significant turning point in Jit’s life, and he wanted the details of the disputed passage made known to researchers, and he urged me to publish those details. While I did not do so at the time, I am publishing them now not only to honor his wishes, but also because I agree that it would be useful to have this part of the picture clarified.

*Lilit Phra Law* is a lengthy poem composed of stanzas of rāay, a kind of rhymed prose, and khloong, a stanza format composed of prescribed numbers of lines, hemistiches, and syllables, and patterned placement of rhymes, and tones. Elsewhere, I have written at some length about this text, and about what it can tell us about both ancient poetry and also modern scholarship. I will not repeat that material here, but will include the single verse in question.

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**Footnote:**
¹ Gedney (1997) mentioned this disagreement as a significant turning point in Jit’s life.
Lord, one will bathe in cloudy water to become cool,  
And eat stinking fermented fish in time of hunger.  
And to satisfy desire low-born women must sometimes  
suffice.  
Deprivation may weaken you; how would you survive?

The disagreement between Jit and Phra Worawetphisit concerned the interpretation of a single word that appears in the stanza quoted above, which is number 246 of the version of the text published by the Thai Ministry of Education, hereafter referred to as the "Ministry text." This is the only version of the poem that numbers the stanzas in sequence throughout, and so is the only one that can be used effectively for comparative purposes. Other versions of the text include the same stanza, but the interested reader who wishes to read the passage in any other version will have to search it out. I cite the published text only as a convenience, and rely for study on the manuscript copies from the National Library of Thailand. While these manuscript copies appear to be the oldest extant versions of the text, they are not internally consistent. They shed a great deal of light on a variety of issues, but are not without problems of their own. Nonetheless, they are the oldest and most authoritative source for the text.

The disagreement between Jit, who was then an undergraduate student, and Phra Worawetphisit, who was Jit's Thai literature teacher, involved the reading of the symbols ณณ, which form the second syllable of the second line of the stanza. The heart of the matter was whether to read the word as a single syllable which would be pronounced either phɔɔk or phɔɔk, or as two syllables, which would be pronounced phaʔɔɔk, with Phra Worawetphisit favoring the first and Jit the second reading. Thai orthography is ambiguous with this combination of symbols, since the second of the three functions sometimes as a vowel and sometimes as a consonant.
Modern writing includes rules to resolve some of the ambiguity, but older writing conventions are less definitive, opening the way to differing interpretations.

Although we do not have direct written records of the position of either Phra Worawetphisit or Jit, there is little doubt that Jit recognized the word, pronounced with two syllables, from his knowledge of Khmer, which uses the word as a noun designating a pungent fermented fish concoction, known in Thai as plaa ráa. According to Prof. Gedney, Jit made his position clear in class, which could not have pleased his teacher, who was no doubt already upset at complaints that the old literature was filled with inappropriate content. The text includes, for example, a hero king who deserts his kingdom and takes up a clandestine sexual relationship with two sisters from the rival kingdom, themes that must have been easy pickings for those who wished to be critical of the old literature. Granted the tensions of the day, having his interpretation of the text challenged could not have been a matter of any pleasure for Phra Worawetphisit.

There is indirect evidence of Phra Worawetphisit’s displeasure with Jit’s interpretation in the former’s Handbook for Lilit Phra Law. Although the title may suggest a more complex work, the Handbook is actually a text of the poem with interpretations of potentially difficult stanzas written in contemporary Thai following the original wording. Obscure words are clarified with very brief definitions given in footnotes, and again in a glossary at the end of the text. There are no indications of variant readings of passages of the poem.

Surprisingly, following the stanza in question the Handbook contains a lengthy paragraph discussing the interpretation of the term, concluding that the word refers to a method of preparing food by cooking it in lengths of bamboo, which would make for easy carrying in the forest. In ending the
paragraph the author acknowledges the existence of a Khmer language term for fermented fish, but says that Thai has other terms for the same foodstuff, and so concludes that something else was intended. The argument is convoluted, at best, and irrelevant at worst, and all the more peculiar for the absence from the text of any apparent motivation for giving this one word such elaborate attention. The sense of the stanza, that otherwise repugnant options must be accepted in times of need, seems to call for the reference to fermented fish that the author of the Handbook is at such pains to deny.

The very presence of the discussion in the Handbook suggests the vehemence of Phra Worawetphisit’s reaction to Jit’s suggested interpretation. This is the only instance in his entire book in which the author devotes attention to an individual word in the body of his text, in all other cases simply giving single word definitions in footnotes. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the comments were included in the Handbook in an unacknowledged response to Jit’s arguments. Unfortunately, Phra Worawetphisit does not make a convincing case for his position.

Although Phra Worawetphisit does not give any indication in his Handbook that there is reason for considering various interpretations of the text, the work of another author studying the poem at the time suggests there at least someone knew of the great variety that exists in the manuscripts and considered it important to consider each of them in trying to determine the meaning of the text. That author is Chanthit Krasaesin whose text and commentary on the poem was published in 1954.

Throughout his text Chanthit gives exhaustive lists of the variant readings found in a number of copies of the poem and includes numerous notes on cultural details throughout. In his discussion of the passage in dispute (p. 315) he describes