

THE LATER SHORT STORIES OF SĪBŪRAPHĀ

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Introduction

Kulāp Sāipradit, or 'SĪbūraphā',¹ as he is better known, is one of the most important figures in the development of modern Thai literature. His novel, *Lūk Phu Chai* (A Real Man), first published in 1928, is often cited as the first Thai representative of the genre. Further novels and short stories quickly followed, and soon established him as a popular and prolific writer. His later works, dating from about 1949, showed an increasing concern with social injustice - a concern which was to lead to censorship of his writings, imprisonment and, finally, self-imposed exile in China. A gradual relaxation in the censorship laws in the late 1960s, followed by the radical change in the political climate between 1973 and 1976, brought SĪbūraphā's later more 'political' works back into circulation and it is on the basis of these - more than a dozen short stories,² two novels and numerous articles and translations - that much of his present reputation rests. His short stories, in particular, have been eagerly read by young people who have found, in his outspoken attacks on the rich and powerful, a voice for their own newly awakened idealism. These stories have been reprinted frequently, often in university student magazines, and have served as a model for a new generation of socially committed authors.

Despite his importance, little has been written in English about SĪbūraphā. The most detailed treatment (Batson 1981) provides biographical information and short summaries of his five best-known novels; a few of his short stories are discussed briefly in relation to the development of the short story genre as a means of social criticism (Manas 1982), and reference to his role in the early development of the Thai novel is made in works by Simmonds (1964), Khwandee (1975) and Wibha (1975). While the last few years have seen an upsurge of interest in SĪbūraphā among Thai critics, with several useful studies published (e.g., Charat 1974; Rungwit 1979; Trisin 1980), it is somewhat surprising, in view of their popularity and influence, that very little critical attention has been given to the short stories written after 1949. This paper attempts to redress the balance to some degree by discussing some of the political and literary aspects of these later short stories.

Brief biographical details³

Sībūraphā was born in 1905 in Bangkok and was later educated at the prestigious Thepsirin School. Although little is known of his early life, it is generally assumed that his family background was middle-class. While he was at school, he became interested in writing and journalism, and it was in this profession that he was to make a living, albeit at times a precarious one, for most of his life. A man of exceptional energy and ability, he had, before the age of 30, edited several of the most important Bangkok newspapers of the period, including the influential *Prachāchāt*, a daily paper set up immediately after the 1932 coup with the specific aim of promoting democratic ideals among the people. In mid-1947, he left Thailand on an eighteenth-month study tour of Australia, and it was during this period that he became increasingly interested in socialism and Marxism. These influences are clearly discernible in much of what he wrote after his return to Thailand in 1949.

Throughout his life, Sībūraphā was deeply concerned with social injustice and, on a number of occasions, he ran into trouble with the government for his outspoken views on social and political issues. In 1932, the magazine *Sī Krung* was closed down temporarily as a result of official displeasure with one of his articles; in 1941, his serialised history of the 1932 coup in the daily newspaper *Suphāp Burut*, of which he was the founder, was brought to an abrupt end under government orders; and then, a few months later, his vociferous opposition to Thailand's entry into the Second World War on the Japanese side led to a prison term which only ended with a change in government in 1944. In 1952, he was back in prison again, starting a thirteen years and four months' prison sentence; a newly introduced anti-communist act provided the Phibun government with the opportunity to clamp down on anyone with suspected leftward leanings, and Sībūraphā, who had been particularly active both in the Thai branch of the Stockholm-based Peace Movement and in his condemnation of Thailand's involvement in the Korean War, was obviously a prime target. In fact, he was released under a general amnesty in 1957, having served little more than four years. A few months after his release, he accepted official invitations to visit first Russia, in 1957, and then China in 1958; however, while he was in China, a coup staged by the military strong man of the period, Sarit, was soon followed by another wave of widespread arrests of politicians, writers, and others with known or suspected leftist tendencies. Aware of the fate that would surely await him, Sībūraphā decided not to return to Thailand, and was granted political asylum in China. There he remained until his death in June 1974. Apart from the fact that he made broadcasts over the 'Voice of the People of Thailand', the radio station of the Communist Party of Thailand which was located inside Chinese territory, very little is known of this last period of his life.

The stories

Between 1949 and his arrest in November 1952, Sībūraphā published at least thirteen short stories, six of them appearing in the weekly magazine, *Piyamīt*, and the remainder in magazines such as *Dēlī Mē Wan Čhan*, *Sayām Samai*, *Rōengrom*, *Aksōnsān Thai Rāi Dū'an*. Since 1973, many of these stories have appeared in collected editions, often published by various groups of students. For example, a volume entitled *Rūam Rū'ang San Rap Chai Chīwit Khōng Sībūraphā* (Sībūraphā's collected short stories for life) (Sībūraphā 1974b) containing six short stories, first appeared in April 1974, sponsored by a group of students at Chiangmai University. It went through a second printing just two months later, and a third edition appeared the following year.⁴ In the immediate aftermath of the bloody riots at Thammasat University in October 1976 when the Thanin régime was carrying out public burnings of subversive literature, Sībūraphā's books once more disappeared from the bookstalls, and just as in the previous decade, no printer would dare to publish them. This time, however, an easing of restrictions followed more swiftly and, by 1979 a fourth and more comprehensive edition had appeared, with four more stories added, and a long introduction, consisting of essays by three different critics (Sībūraphā 1979). Another collection, in which seven of these same stories appeared, was also published in 1974, under the title of the first story in the collection, *Khō Rāeng Nōi Thōe* (Give us a hand), the sponsors of this edition being another group of students calling themselves 'The United Front of Students Against Imperialism' (*Nāeo Rūam Naksu'ksā Tōtān Čakrawandiniyom*). Apart from the various collected editions, Sībūraphā's later short stories continue to be reprinted frequently in magazines and anthologies of modern short stories. Under the present political régime they are no longer regarded as subversive, nor labelled 'a danger to society'.

Social inequality and the sufferings of the poor provide the background for most of the stories under discussion. Sībūraphā frequently gives detailed descriptions of the low quality of life of the working class, the cramped and smelly living conditions, the long hours of physical toil and the ever-present threat of sickness with its consequent loss of wages. His workers - whether farmers or factory workers, *samlor** drivers or servants - are honest, hard-working folk, generous and reasonable by nature. Often, the plot involves them in direct confrontation with an exploiting ruling class of frivolous-minded aristocrats, hard-nosed businessmen and corrupt representatives of the government. Two of Sībūraphā's best-known and most highly-regarded stories, *Khon Phūak Nan* (Those kind of people) (Sībūraphā 1979: 77-89) and *Khō Rāeng Nōi Thōe* (Sībūraphā 1979: 197-213) represent a scathing attack on the attitudes of this privileged élite. In *Khon Phūak Nan*, the people referred to in the title are the poor; the story itself consists of three separate incidents and the

* A tricycle pedicab. (Ed.)

resulting confrontations which occur between Mōm Lūang Chōmchailai, a titled but progressive-thinking girl of twenty and her conservative parents. The story opens with Chao Khun Sīsawat trying to persuade his daughter, Chōmchailai, to continue her education in America; his attitude is scarcely different from that of many of the tens of thousands of Thai parents who have sent their children overseas in the three decades since the story was first published:

Chao Khun Sīsawat was of the opinion that if you were a Thai, then you couldn't really command respect if you hadn't been to study in America or England, so he advised his daughter to continue her education in America. He even went on to say that there was no need for a girl to study anything too demanding. This being the case, Chōmchailai ought to go to America for two or three years, study make-up, and then come back with some kind of diploma and speaking English. That would be quite sufficient. (Sībūrāphā 1979:78)

Chōmchailai is not interested in buying the education that would further validate her status and she points out that, despite the hundreds of Thais who have studied abroad and brought back specialised knowledge, there has been little change or progress in the lives of the majority. Her father is reluctantly forced to admit that his idea of progress - new buildings, wide roads, neon lights and fast cars - is unknown beyond the suburbs of Bangkok.

The second confrontation, which is linked to the story by a flashback, occurs when the cook's little daughter becomes seriously ill. Chōmchailai wants to rush the child to hospital immediately in her parents' plush car, but her mother will have nothing of it; the child is a scruffy little urchin, she says and proceeds to argue callously about the different needs of poor people:

Before, when they were sick, if they needed to go to the hospital, they didn't go by car, did they? So how did they manage to survive then, without any great trouble? Tiu [Chōmchailai's nickname], don't go getting yourself involved so much with those kind of people; they'll start forgetting themselves. And as for sickness, they've long been used to that, and they've got their own ways of treatment. If they hadn't, they'd all be dead by now. Just look at the people up-country; they've never seen a doctor or a hospital. How do they manage to survive for generation after generation? And as for Granny Khrām [the cook], well, she's a hundred times luckier than those kind of people in being able to live in the city amongst people of our class. She even gets too much medicine and up-to-date