

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 *râay*, a kind of rhymed prose, and *khlooj*, 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.

พระเอยอาบน้าชุ่ม	เอาเย็น
ปลาหมอกหมกเหม็นยาม	อยากเคี้ยว
รุกขาราคจำเป็น	ปางเมื่อ แคลนนา
อดอยู่เยียวตัวเดียว	อยู่ได้ฉันใด

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 พจก , 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 phòk or phók , or as two syllables, which would be pronounced pha'òk , 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

briefly how to prepare the fish, the name of which he says must be pronounced as phaʔòk, in order that it rhyme with the following word mòk 'to cover'. It is interesting that he offers this argument in support of the reading he prefers. While such rhymes do appear within a few hemistiches of the poem, they are by far the exception rather than the rule. In fact, passages with this sort of internal rhyme appear to be modern interpolations, far more like klòon than khloón, and wholly out of character with the rest of a given passage. This anomalous internal rhyme casts doubt on the age of the passage, as do other features of the stanza, which will be discussed below.

While it is clear to me that phaʔòk is the more appropriate reading, the reasoning offered by Chanthit to support that reading is worth considering carefully, and ought to be seen as an expression of modern taste, coming from a scholar whose expectations of poetry were formed by exposure to the great frequency of internal rhyme in klòon. In the older texts rhyme is put to a different use that it is in modern forms, not as a way of creating decorative passages, but as part of the building blocks of poetic structure. Chanthit's reasoning is not reflective of any rule or pattern to be found to the old texts, but is in keeping with modern expectations. There are many instances in which this type of reasoning leads him astray. He is often meticulous in citing a half dozen or more variations of a given passage, stating just which copy has which reading and identifying each copy by its owner's name, only to pick one as the best of the lot because it, he says, it sounds better, by which he really means that it conforms to modern views of beauty in language, completely overlooking the pattern as it appears in other passages. His judgement happens to be correct in this case, but his reasoning is anachronistic in that he unwittingly bases his judgements on the dictates of modern taste. He is not alone in such unacknowledged biases, for both Phra Worawetphisit and Jit do much the same sort of thing.

Consultation of the manuscript copies sometimes resolves questions of ambiguity, and the printed texts are often very unfaithful in their representation of ancient wordings, but they do not, in fact, clarify the disagreement between Jit and his teacher. The stanza in question appears in 15 manuscript copies. One copy is illegible at this point in the story, leaving 14 that are legible. In eight of those copies the word in question is written as it appears above (ឆ្នក), but in six copies it is spelled with the low category initial (ឆ្នក) instead of the high category initial. In no cases does the short vowel marker [-ɛ], representing the vowel a, appear in the manuscript copies. Modern convention requires the insertion of that vowel marker to reflect the vowel that stands between the two syllables. There are no cases of a spelling reflecting the pronunciation phahòk that Professor Gedney asked me to search for, evidently based on a query from Girard Diffloth.

So, we are left with no certain textual evidence for one interpretation or the other. We do know that Jit recognized a Khmer word that easily fit the meaning of the passage, and we can assume from knowledge of Jit's erudition that he must have *seen the sense of looking at different interpretations of complex passages* using the tools of modern comparative linguistics. We also know from even a cursory examination of the text that Khmer words are far from uncommon in the poem, so the suggestion that the Khmer word is appropriate is not, on the face of it, objectionable. We also know that Phra Worawetphisit read the symbols differently than did Jit, and assigned a different, although not dissimilar meaning to them. Whereas Jit felt that fermented fish was being referred to, Phra Worawetphisit felt that it was fish cooked in a length of bamboo. It is clear from the author's *Handbook*, published after the disagreement with Jit, that he was not content to let Jit's suggested interpretation go by without giving what he

must have felt was convincing refutation, although he did so without mentioning Jit at all. We also know from the account of Professor Gedney that this disagreement contributed to Jit's reputation as an cooperative student.

So, in the end there is no sure way to end the dispute, and in looking at it carefully we must add a note of sad irony to the already sad story, for the passage that these two determined men argued over is more than likely either a corruption or a modern insertion, and not one of the original passages of the poem. In support of my contention, I ask the reader to consider four features of the hemistich in question.

First, the mandatory rhyme is out of place. The rhyme from the previous hemistich falls not on the expected fifth syllable, but on the fourth one. Of nearly 300 stanzas of this verse type in the poem only a handful have the rhyme out of place, casting into doubt the authenticity of those passages.

Second, the syntactic unit is split by the hemistich boundary. The first hemistich of the line depends on the second for the completion of its meaning, which violates the normal pattern found throughout the poem.

Third, the normal internal separation of the hemistich into two phrases, one of two stressed syllables and one of three stressed syllables, is missing.

Fourth, internal rhyme is so unusual within the hemistich in this older form of poetry that it seems to have been avoided on purpose, which would be logical if rhyme did have the structural role that I have argued that it did in ancient khloong poetry.

Taken together, the four points make it very likely that the text at this point is corrupt. Phra Worawetphisit and Jit

were, in all probability, arguing over a passage that was so recent in comparison to other passages in the text that it should have been seen as irrelevant.

But there are other ironic aspects to this dispute. For all of his considerable insight into comparative linguistics, Jit seems to have been as caught up in prescriptive attitudes as was Phra Worawetphisit, the same prescriptive attitudes that we see in the analysis of Chanthit. One need only look at Jit's writing on khloong verse to see his concern with visual form, a concern that mirrors that of his teacher. His writing about a revived form of khloong poetry, which he called khloong 5 pháththanaa, seems to have been both a jab at the state ideology of "development," and also evidence of a feeling that a specific number of syllables per hemistich was preferable. His goal was to revivify the form, which was, of course, not possible, since the rhythms of speech in the older three tone system were forever altered when the modern five tone system came into place. But the method he suggested for revivifying the form, to require five and only five syllables per hemistich, does not take into account the clear pattern of the ancient forms which was to employ five stressed syllables, allowing for additional unstressed syllables whenever needed. His method was thoroughly print oriented in that it emphasized visual aspects of poetic form that would have been utterly foreign to the ancient poets, who must have been concerned with what a passage sounded like, not what it would have looked like on paper.

There is every indication that Phra Worawetphisit and Jit Phumisak viewed each other from the opposites sides of a great divide when they considered the relationship between teacher and pupil, a divide that is still far from erased today, and that says that the pupil must accept the teacher's views without question. But neither of them seem to have realized

that they stood together on the same side of an even greater gulf that separated both of them from the ancient poets out of whose language sprang the poetic forms in which the story *Lilit Phra Law* is told. Their views of what made good poetry were both informed by long exposure to modern kloon poetry, which obscured for both of them the differences that separated them from the language of the ancient poets.

Their squabble, however sad the results, and however tragic the consequences of the subsequent more serious conflicts that followed in Jit's life, was ultimately pointless. Their disagreement could neither have destroyed our admiration for the work of the ancient poets (or even for the teachers of that poetry in modern times), as Phra Worawetphisit no doubt feared, nor could it have led to a deeper understanding of the poem, as Jit may well have hoped. The disagreement was about a spurious passage and so was ultimately inconsequential. But even if the core of the ancient text had been at issue, neither man was in a position to explore the more significant issues involved because both were caught in a resolutely modern perspective.

It was the desire of Professor William J. Gedney that the specifics of the text that lay at the heart of this dispute between Phra Worawetphisit and Jit Phumisak be brought together and published for the benefit of future scholars with interest in Jit's life. I have addressed this question here as a small gesture of respect for a great scholar who was first my teacher, and then my mentor, and finally my friend. May he rest in peace.

Notes

1. For details see Reynolds, 1987.

References

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