

THE LATER SHORT STORIES OF SĪBŪRAPHĀ

David A. Smyth

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

advice - far more than people of her class need.
(Sībūraphā 1979:87)

Despite Chōmchailai's own secret efforts in getting the child to hospital, the little girl dies; Chōmchailai is convinced that she would have lived if she had been born into a wealthy family, such as her own, and had been given proper treatment right from the beginning.

Chōmchailai's friendship with Bao, the son of the family's driver, provides the final incident in which Sībūraphā attacks the attitudes of the wealthy élite. Such is her parents' disapproval of this relationship, that they order the boy to leave the house. An industrious, intelligent and idealistic young man, Bao explains his imminent departure to Chōmchailai: 'My crime is that I'm not from the same class as his daughter [i.e. you] and he thinks it is sinful for his daughter to come and talk with people like me'. (Sībūraphā 1979:87)

While Chōmchailai's parents are thoughtless, narrow-minded snobs, the rich man in *Khō Rāeng Nōi Thōe* is a much more striking personification of cold-hearted exploitation; Chōmchailai's mother's attitude, not that it excuses it, derives largely from ignorance and thoughtlessness; the rich man of the second story, however, is of the entrepreneurial rather than aristocratic class, and his scornful disregard for the suffering of the poor is based on the market value of labour. At the beginning of the story, Māen, a poor farmer, lies sick at home, too poor to buy the medicine necessary to cure himself. His wife goes to the nearby house of the rich man to ask to borrow 100 *baht* to buy medicine; Māen's parents once worked at this house, and Māen himself has often been hired for odd jobs by the owner, so it is reasonable to hope that some assistance might be forthcoming. In fact, Māen's wife is turned away the first time because it is night time and, when the owner finally consents to see her the next day, he remains unmoved by her pleas, saying that it is not his responsibility. Māen's friends gather together and raise the money and in due course he recovers. The situation is then dramatically reversed when the rich man's car gets stuck in the mud late one night as he is driving his wife to hospital. He is forced to beg for assistance, which Māen gives rather reluctantly, pointing out that it is no thanks to him that he managed to recover from his own serious illness.

An important theme running through *Khō Rāeng Nōi Thōe*, and a number of Sībūraphā's other short stories, is the gradual awakening of political consciousness among the poor. Anger at the rich man's attitude creates a feeling of group solidarity among Māen's friends, and between them they raise the money for the medicine. Later, as they all sit around talking at Māen's house, the conversation turns to labour, money and power; Māen

asks:

Who is it, who builds these houses and even the beautiful palaces? Isn't it us poor people?... Who is it, who grows rice to feed the whole country? And who saves us from starving to death? It's us poor farmers again... Who is it who builds canals and roads? Isn't it us who build them?... How are all these things built? Is it with money or labour? I never thought about this problem before until I heard about the contemptuous things that man from the green house said. (Sībūraphā 1979:204-6)

And in the final incident, when Māen and his colleagues at first refuse to help, the author is clearly pointing out the potential power of a politically aware working class.

Khao Tū'n (He's waking up) (Sībūraphā 1979:215-28) is, as its title suggests, another story in which the poor hero comes to question certain things that he has always taken for granted. Am, an impoverished *samlor* driver, rents a single room in a slum area, which he shares with his wife, two young children and mother-in-law. The daily struggle for survival is made harder when he has to find the money to repair the damage done to the roof in a typhoon; to make matters worse, he injures himself while helping a friend and, like Māen in the previous story, is forced to stop working for a while. Eventually he recovers, thanks to a donation of medicine by a kindly old man, and the story can progress from description of the overcrowded living conditions of the poor to the author's main point. Am arrives home late one lunchtime, feeling full of the joys of life; his children are eagerly waiting as he has promised to take them to Sanam Luang to see the official handing over of weapons by the American government to the Thai government. He explains to his wife that he'd met a group of fellow *samlor*-drivers from the North-East who were discussing the poverty rife in their home provinces. One of them suggested that they made a small collection and sent it as their contribution towards alleviating the problem but he was immediately challenged by several others; one of these points out that they've scarcely enough money for themselves as it is, another argues that it will get them into a 'nice bloody mess' (Sībūraphā 1979:223), while a third says he is talking like a communist. Amidst these objections, a fourth driver speaks out with rousing words, demanding:

What the hell's it got to do with politics? It's about helping our starving brothers. But if that's what you're going to call politics, then I'm all for it! A nice bloody mess, I call it, if we don't help.

All we're talking about is helping - why should that get us into a bloody mess? And if that's what you call a bloody mess, then a bloody mess is alright by me. And you, whoever it was, who just said wait and let the rich people help our brothers - have you ever seen them ever once stretch out a hand to help us?...

When we were still living with our parents and grandparents, working in the ricefields, the rich made money and rice available for us to borrow. Did they ever help us? When you fell upon hard times, when you had no rice to eat or grow, and they gave you rice, did they do it because they loved you? And when you had rice, how much of it did they take away? How many times their original loan was it? Don't you see? And you've still got the nerve to say wait for the rich to help us!

We sweat and toil away in the scorching sun, wading through mud in the middle of the paddy-fields, exhausted almost to the point of dropping; the rice ripens and then do you know where it disappears to, and where all the money goes, and why we have to live on the bread-line? I'm not clever enough to tell you how it disappears, but one thing I do know for sure is that our rice or our fruit can't just disappear into thin air. And I'd say it flows into the hands of those people that you dream are going to help us. My God! You leave your parents, you leave the rice fields, none of you for very long, and then you just go and forget all about the past. (Sībūraphā 1979:223-4)

Such eloquence carries the day; a collection is made and they march off to the newspapers office to hand in their donation. Am's own small donation has awakened in him a new sense of meaning to life and an awareness that he can be of genuine use to his fellow men. And when his wife reminds him of his promise to take the children to see the weapons, he can no longer see the outing in quite the same light:

Do you want me to take you and the children to see them showing off weapons for killing innocent people?... I don't want to see my children getting enjoyment out of weapons that are used for killing people. I saw the picture in the newspaper of those Koreans who were blown up by petrol bombs. I was horrified. That picture really shocked me with the cruelty of war. It made me hate war. I don't want to see a show of force in support of war - I'd like to see a show of force in support of peace. (Sībūraphā 1979:226)

Writing at a time when Thai troops were fighting on the U.N. side in Korea, Sībūraphā scarcely endeared himself to the authorities

with such vigorous anti-war sentiments; still less so with his ending, in which Am and his wife are about to join the Peace Movement - an organisation which the government was to claim was a mere façade for communist subversives.⁵ Indeed, a month after the appearance of *Khao Tū'n* in *Piyamit* in October 1952, Sībūraphā was arrested and shortly afterwards sentenced to thirteen years and four months in prison.

Prakāi Mai Nai Dūang Tā Khōng Khao (The new light in his eyes) (Sībūraphā 1979:231-46) which was published in the same magazine (*Piyamit*, June 1951) some sixteen months earlier, covers essentially the same ground as *Khao Tū'n*, that is, the political awakening of the individual, the selfishness of the rich, the Peace Movement, and the author's own opposition to Thai involvement in the Korean War. It lacks, however, something of the vitality and directness of the later story; the alcoholic aristocrat who has fallen on hard times never seems a very plausible character for a radical conversion and his credibility is further undermined by the fact that he is used as the butt for some humorous remarks by the young factory workers who rescue him as he lies in a drunken stupor slumped against a tree at Sanam Luang and exposed to the torrential downpour. But Sībūraphā is not one to let a weak plot dilute his didactic mission; indeed, as always, he makes skilful use of the single realistic incident to illustrate his point about morality. In this story, as the old drunkard lies out in the pouring rain a wealthy young couple pull up briefly and, assuming him to be a labourer, make derogatory remarks about the working class before driving on to their society function. The poor factory-worker pair are rather more concerned, but when they attempt to flag down a passing car in the hope that the driver will assist, they are reprimanded at gunpoint for stopping a VIP's car and then, when they finally decide that there is no alternative but to spend their own hard-earned money on hiring a *samlor* to get the man home, the *samlor* driver, aware of their act of kindness, refuses to accept any payment.

Unlike many of Sībūraphā's short stories, this one provides an example of practical, grass-roots political activity; the two factory workers are already committed peace activists, and they spend all their free time asking people at bus-stops and in cinema queues to sign their anti-war petitions. At the same time as it puts the anti-war argument across, the story aims to show that peace activists are not dangerous subversives, but ordinary, hard-working, compassionate people, and it implies that, by voicing their opinions, ordinary people might be able to influence government policy. If the old drunkard's signature on the peace petition -- hence the 'new light' of the title -- seems scant reward for the workers' diligence, and a rather flat conclusion to the reader, the author has at least achieved his main aim of getting his message across when the girl factory worker

says:

I think that the people are beginning to wake up... Now, when you ask them to sign the petition demanding the five great powers to make peace, you don't have to spend so long explaining as you did when there was the first petition. Most people seem well aware that, for their own good, and for that of their family and country, they must do something or other in support of world peace. They've begun to realize that whether they choose peace or war is up to the people themselves, not simply a matter for two or three people to decide. Those people who refrained from signing the petition were mainly government officials; they said they'd dearly like to do something to bring peace but, that by signing, they would be endangering their jobs. Several told me that they were looking for a chance to leave government service where they were forced to sell their freedom so cheaply. People are gradually beginning to understand that if government is going to be government by the people, or democratic, then its policies must be those of the people, and the rulers of the country must respect those policies. (Sībūraphā 1979:240-1)

But commitment to high ideals and a desire to improve the lot of one's fellow men are by no means the exclusive preserve of the working class in Sībūraphā's stories; nor would it be fair to say that the author is primarily concerned with class struggle and strengthening class divisions. What does concern him is that people, whether rich or poor, should behave in a virtuous and compassionate way towards fellow human beings. Chōmchailai, in *Khon Phūak Nan*, is a clear example of how a rich person should behave; and there are other minor characters - the man who gives ointment to Am in *Khao Tū'n*, and the judge who helps pay for the tram driver's son's education in *Āi Nū Long Thāng* (Nipper's got lost) (Sībūraphā 1979:173-94) - who readily fulfil the traditional obligations of the more fortunate towards the less. This idea of the 'virtuous man' finds fuller expression in two stories, *Nak Bun Čhāk Chāntan* (The saint from Shantung) (Sībūraphā 1979:113-35) and *Khao Lū'ak Lāmbārēnē Nai Sayām* (He chose his Lambaréné in Siam) (Sībūraphā 1979:153-70). In both stories, the author avoids the issue of class and class conflict, using the heroes to set an example to readers by their selfless devotion to others.

The hero of *Nak Bun Čhāk Chāntan* is Alan Norton, an Australian volunteer worker in North China during the late 1940s; the story is told in the first person by Nātayā (or 'Netti'), a Thai girl studying medicine in Australia. She meets Alan when he returns on a brief fund-raising mission in which he gives public talks on the plight of the people in China. The lecture, and Alan's subsequent conversations with Netti, provide the author

with the opportunity to exercise his journalistic talents in presenting readers with up-to-date information on the hardships endured by the Chinese people and the efforts of certain foreign individuals to alleviate their plight. Yet, contrary to the author's intentions, the story holds the reader's attention, not because of the inspiring example that Alan Norton sets, but rather through the successful interweaving of a romantic plot. This is a quite deliberate device, employed in several of the stories, although judging from the title of this particular one, it seems to have achieved undue prominence.

Netti, a typically apolitical and socially unaware Thai student, is deeply impressed by Alan's idealism and self-sacrifice, and from there, in Sībūraphā's world, falling in love is only a step away. Netti's deliberate flouting of Thai social conventions - romance with a 'farang', inviting him to go dancing, and then as they walk home, agreeing to his request to put his arm round her waist 'for warmth' - while to some extent reflecting the author's own progressive attitudes towards women, cannot fail to excite the average reader's interest for rather less high-minded reasons; and when Alan proceeds in 'true confession' style to reveal how his affair with his fiancée, Emma, came to an end, the story has drifted away from sermon and into romance. Psychologically orientated readers might delve further and conclude that Alan seemed to suffer more from a damaged ego than from genuine heartbreak, for his intention of offering Emma the chance to back out of a life of hardship in a remote corner of China has been neatly pre-empted by her opting out of her own accord, thereby denying him (without any intended irony) the chance to play the generous-hearted saint! Alan and Netti discuss the nature of love and it comes as no real surprise when, at the end, she promises to take her medical skills out to China as soon as she has finished her studies, the implication being that they will marry and live happily ever after, caring for the poor in China.

While the story does, to some extent, 'reflect the spirit of internationalism making sacrifices for the disadvantaged' (Sībūraphā 1979:35), it clearly branches off into a direction that the author had not intended - the direction of the kind of romantic love stories he had been writing two decades earlier.

Aware, perhaps, that romance had led him to stray, Sībūraphā made a more disciplined attempt at the theme of virtue personified a few months later in *Khao Lū'ak Lāmbārenē Nai Sayām*. As one might guess from the title, the life of Dr Albert Schweitzer provides the inspiration for this story; after studying medicine in England for ten years, the hero, Pan, returns home determined to set up a hospital and free school in his native Phetchaburi province, despite the attractive offers of high positions in government service. Three years pass, and the first-

person narrator of the story comes across Pan's name in the newspaper as the newly elected M.P. for Phetchaburi. At first he assumes that Pan has simply abandoned his ideals in favour of a quick and easy way to wealth and power; later, when they meet, Pan assures him that his 'Lambaréné' is making slow but sure progress, but that he has decided to enter politics in order to further spread his vision. The story ends with Pan expressing the hope that he will be able to fuse the qualities of two other doctors whom he (and Sībūraphā) greatly admired - Dr Albert Schweitzer and Dr Sun Yat Sen⁶ - in bringing justice and an improved standard of living to the rural people.

With no female characters in this story, there is no danger of romance distracting the reader from the sight of virtue. However, it is never very exciting to read about pure unadulterated goodness, and with the social criticism lacking a little of the author's customary fire (the trains not running according to the timetable is one of the more serious complaints), the distinctly vague nature of the Utopia that is supposed to be developing somewhere in Phetchaburi and the five-page potted biography of Albert Schweitzer which is squeezed in rather gratuitously, there is little really to attract the reader.

Māhāburut Khōng Čhantima (The Great Man in Chantima's Life) (Sībūraphā 1979:137-51), which appeared a month before *Khao Lū'ak Lāmbārēnē Nai Sayām*, is another rather unconvincing attempt to write about a 'good' person, partly because of the problem of making virtue sufficiently interesting, and partly because the virtuous 'hero', Nopphadon, is already dead before the story begins. Čhantima, his widow, marries a rich and successful, fun-loving businessman, Kaiwan, who is the antithesis of her first husband, a serious-minded writer. Čhantima adjusts well to her new spouse and finds him much better company than the 'great man' of the title: 'When she thought of her first marriage, it made her think that she had been living with a teacher, not a close friend like Kaiwan was' (Sībūraphā 1979:140).

After a while, things begin to turn sour, and she tires of the endless social rounds, eating, drinking and throwing up at a different friend's house each month. When her husband begins to stray a little, she turns a blind eye, but seeks solace in the letters she has kept from her deceased first husband. This infuriates the jealous Kaiwan and a violent quarrel ensues. They are eventually reconciled, Kaiwan admitting the error of his former ways and, in an ending which, if nothing else, indicates Sībūraphā's active encouragement of reading and public libraries, the couple work together to publish 'The selected letters of Nopphadon'. The story ends with news that the book has received wide acclaim and that the profits will be put towards setting up the 'Nopphadon Public Library'.

In *Khao Tū'n* and *Prakāi Mai Nai Dūang Tā Khōng Khao*,

Sībūraphā uses the story, or at least part of it, to criticise directly the government's policy in supporting the United Nations in the war in Korea. The stories *Kham Khān Rap* (Answer my call) (Sībūraphā 1979:249-61) and *Kae Thī Phlat Fūng* (The sheep that strayed from the flock) (Sībūraphā 1979:91-111) also represent strong attacks, not on a single specific policy, but on traditionally respectable and respected institutions of Thai society. The former consists entirely of a discussion (a technique that the author was to use later in his short novel *Chon Kwā Rao Cha Phop Kan Ik* (Until we meet again) (Sībūraphā 1979)) between two university students. Thanong has decided to cut class and persuades his girlfriend, Rati, to join him. As they walk together hand in hand, he questions the purpose and élitism of the university; he sees it not merely as a sterile institution with inflexible rules which deny real freedom of thought, but as an integral part of a system which perpetuates social injustice:

As long as we think only of ourselves - that is by settling down to study so as to get a piece of paper to sell to the highest bidder in the market place for cheats and tyrants, we're praised for being nice, quiet polite kids. But if we spend some of our time thinking about other people, thinking about the suffering, the oppression and the injustice that exists here and there, about the swindling, the moral bankruptcy and the decay in our society, and we complain or speak out in all sincerity about our dissatisfaction, then we're met by reproachful looks and accused of being disruptive kids and real trouble-makers. (Sībūraphā 1979:225)

The story ends with Thanong announcing that he is going to drop out of university, just two months before his final exam, and try to find a 'new way'; marriage to Rati is to be postponed, yet she appears to be quite prepared to wait until he sorts himself out, in spite of the conventional middle-class attitudes she has been voicing throughout their conversation.

Kae Thī Phlat Fūng deals with the problem of overseas-educated students who return home full of knowledge and ideals, eager to play a role in the development of the country, only to bump up against an inflexible bureaucracy. The story opens with a female first person narrator (who subsequently disappears altogether from the story) sailing back to Thailand after studying in Australia; the Norwegian captain of the boat tells her of two other young Thai students he had known, who had also studied in Australia. The first, Hathai, arrived home to find his fiancée on her death-bed and as a result, threw himself body and soul into improving workers conditions by establishing cooperatives. He ran into trouble with the authorities and was arrested, and by the time his name had been cleared, he had spent six months in prison. During this time, all his hard work had been under-

mined and, Hathai, the sheep who strayed from the flock by trying to fight against the system and do something practical to help the poor, had become a disillusioned alcoholic. Anop, likewise, was an idealist when he returned, but he quickly discovered that his colleagues in the government department where he worked were too busy occupied with their own petty jealousies, back-stabbings and internal intrigues to take any interest in developing the country. A senior colleague, in advising Anop to be a little more flexible and realistic, sums up the author's criticism of the bureaucracy:

I admire all of these plans of yours. I'm sure they must be very good. And if they could be implemented, they would doubtless benefit the country greatly. But the trouble is, who are you going to tell them to? Haven't you heard what people are talking about nowa-days? They're talking about corruption, and they're not saying corruption is a terrible thing. Rather, they're wondering how they can find a way of soliciting a bribe, because if they do, just once, they can hit the jackpot in a much bigger way than if they worked their guts out for the government for five or ten years. It's worth it. People curse you for two or three weeks and then you quit. After that, the power of your wallet makes you a big man in society. Don't you realize, in Thai society people don't despise dishonesty nearly as much as they do poverty? (Sībūraphā 1979:106)

Anop gradually comes to see the futility of trying to change things by himself, and joins the flock; the Captain bumps into him one evening in a nightclub and soon notices that Anop now talks not of improving his country, but only of enjoying himself, and in a style, moreover, that could only be financed by the accepting of bribes. The story ends on a profoundly pessimistic note, with Anop asking the Captain not to judge him too severely, and the latter replying ominously: 'It's not your fault, Anop. I understand only too well. But I hope you won't go too far. I feel sorry for your country'. (Sībūraphā 1979:111-2)

One final story is *Āi Nū Long Thāng*, in which a poor tram-driver struggles to put his son through school, only to see him fatally wounded in an opium-running misadventure, shortly before he was to take up a coveted place at university. The first three-quarters of the story are devoted almost entirely to a description of the sacrifices the father makes - the long hours of work during the day, the extra work at night, giving up his drinking habit and going into frequent debt to a neighbour - all the time countering his wife's more limited ambitions for her son's future, in the hope that the boy will have a better chance to make something of himself. Having passed the university entrance exam, *Āi Nū* goes up-country on a hunting expedition with his more well-to-do classmates. Ashamed of his poverty, he

is readily lured into a scheme that promises easy returns, especially when he is assured that it has the backing of an influential person and that there will be no risk involved. The death-bed scene where he admits his mistake and begs forgiveness from his father provides a suitably tear-jerking finale, and lest the reader should feel inclined to draw the conclusion that one should not try to rise above one's station, as the mother had been saying all along, the author swiftly steps in to point the finger of blame at society:

His brief life, once innocent and beautiful, had fallen a victim of the greed and dishonesty, the wrongdoing and shamelessness towards sin which had overwhelmed society during his lifetime. (Sībūraphā 1979:194)

Some Final Observations

Sībūraphā's main aim in the stories discussed here was clearly social criticism; indeed, so fundamental and so explicit is the didactic element that many of these stories might more appropriately be termed 'parables'. At the same time, however, he wished to reach as wide an audience as possible, which meant to some extent catering to popular taste. Thus, several of his stories are an odd mixture of political tract and popular romance, the latter sometimes merely hinted at, at other times an integral part of the plot. In *Khon Phūak Nan*, for example, there is a suggestion of romance between Chōmchailai and Bao - the classic rich-girl-poor-boy theme - with the story ending as the thought flashes through Chōmchailai's mind: 'that it was indeed possible that in the future she might choose a hero from among "those kind of people" to be her partner'. (Sībūraphā 1979:89)

Prakāi Mai Nai Dūang Tā Khōng Khao and *Kham Khān Rap* both involve young couples, partly at least because the author knew that they would hold the reader's attention more readily, since there is a certain curiosity involved when observing mixed couples even if their words and actions are rather ordinary. Indeed, in the latter story, absolutely nothing happens; the story is pure dialogue, broken up occasionally by such observations as: 'the girl couldn't bear the silence. Silence was a thing frightening for girls of her age' (Sībūraphā 1979:253). But with the young couple walking along flouting convention by cutting class and holding hands, and with rebellious ideas swirling around in Thanong's head, even the reader left cold by the shortcomings of tertiary education will feel some incentive to read on to the next page. In *Nak Bun Chāk Chāntan* the romantic element clearly got out of control and dominated the whole story; in *Kae Thī Phlat Fūng* it is confined to a tear-jerking episode near the beginning, in which Hathai's fiancée dies just hours before his boat docks; criticism of government failings is forgotten

for several pages as some standard romantic devices are paraded: first there is the rather whimsical touch of asking the girl to wear the same dress she had worn on the day of departure five years ago; then there are the premonitions of impending doom - the ghostly sighting on board the ship, the family waiting at the quayside dressed in mourning, and the mistaking of the younger sister for the dead fiancée; and finally the death-bed scene, complete with ice! Of course, there is a practical side to this which goes beyond merely catering to popular taste, for if we shed a tear in sympathy with Hathai at his loss, perhaps we will sympathise too with his ideals, workers cooperatives and all, and not jump to hasty conclusions that he's a communist trouble-maker.

The western reader, approaching these stories out of context of the times when they were written, is inevitably going to be left with certain reservations; for one thing, didactic literature of this kind is too far removed from the mainstream of the Anglo-American tradition to be considered quite respectable, while the frequently made criticism that such works lack artistic merit is, in the case of several of these stories, not without justification; and the melodramatic and overly-sentimentalized treatment of the love theme, a perfectly acceptable approach in Thai fiction, sets up a further cultural barrier for a readership not accustomed to such a convention in serious modern writing. As if these general problems were not enough, many of the stories themselves are full of their own little shortcomings which can only be attributed to the carelessness or clumsiness of the author himself: do we really want to know about Schweitzer's organ performances (*Khao Lū'ak Lāmbārēnē Nai Sayām*) (Sībūraphā 1979: 158)? Why, we ask, does boring old Nopphadon (*Māhāburut Khōng Chantima*) (Sībūraphā 1979:140) manage to achieve the status of a great man (Sībūraphā 1979:150-51), especially since Kaiwan has already redeemed himself? And where does 'I' (*Kae Thī Phlat Fūng*) (Sībūraphā 1979:91-3) disappear to, after introducing the story *Kae Thī Phlat Fūng*? The list could go on and on.

But despite the many literary shortcomings of these stories, new readers still find in them a tremendous freshness and vitality. Even a quarter of a century later, their relevance to contemporary Thai society is all too apparent and, even in the least tightly constructed stories, the author's attacks on social injustice are delivered with undeniable eloquence and passion. Today, Sībūraphā is admired by many young Thai authors and critics for his strong sense of social conscience and his courage to speak out fearlessly, regardless of the personal consequences. Clear testimony to his influence can be seen in the growth of the *Wannakam Phū'a Chīwit* (Literature for Life)⁷ movement over the last few years and in the hundreds of other short stories published annually which also take contemporary social and political issues as their basic theme.

NOTES

1. Thai writers frequently adopt pseudonyms. Kulāp wrote under a number of different pen names as well as his real name, with most of his fictional writings appearing under the name 'Sībūraphā'.
2. Rungwit's bibliography of Sībūraphā's works (Rungwit 1979: 100-14) lists thirteen short stories as definitely belonging to this later period (1949-58) although he provides no date for one story *Khon Khit* (The Thinker) which could also belong to the same period. This paper deals with ten of these stories which appeared together in a collected edition for the first time in 1979 (Sībūraphā 1979).
3. For fuller biographical details in English, see Batson 1981.
4. Unlike many of the pocketbooks (paperbacks) produced over the last decade, the publication figures for these volumes do not appear on the inside cover. Based on the estimates of Suwit and Prathīp (1972:66) and de Fels (1975:232) and the figures that appear in books published at the same time dealing with similar themes, it would be reasonable to assume that there were, on average, about 5,000 copies printed for each edition.
5. For further details, including the precise charges laid against Sībūraphā, see Charat (1974: 52-9). One of the chief activities of the Thai branch of the Peace Movement was to gather signatures for mass petitions; this aspect of their work forms the basis of the short story *Prakāi Mai Nai Dūang Tā Khōng Khao*.
6. A few months earlier, Sībūraphā, had in fact, translated a short biographical article about Sun Yat-Sen which appeared in the weekly *Dēlī Mē Wan Čhan*.
7. The term *Wannakam Phū'a Chīwit* describes literary works written from a socialist viewpoint, in which the author focuses on a particular aspect of society with a view to improving it. Following the 1973 coup, numerous pocketbooks appeared on the market, bearing the legend '*phū'a chīwit*' on the cover in addition to the title, thus indicating the political sympathies of the author(s).

REFERENCES

- Batson, B. 1981. Kulap Saipradit and the 'War of Life'. *J. Siam Soc.* **69**, 58-73.
- Charat Rotchanawan 1974. (ed.) *Chīwit Kān Tō Sū Khōng Kulāp Sāipradit* (Kulāp Sāipradit's Life of Struggle). Bangkok: Prachak kānphim.
- de Fels, Jacqueline 1975. Popular literature in Thailand. *J. Siam Soc.* **63**, 219-33.
- Kwande Rakpongse 1975. A study of the novels of *Mōm Lūang Bupphā Nimmān-heminda* (pseud. *Dōk Mai Sot*). Thesis, Univ. London.
- Lōk Nangsu'* 1978. Ralu'k Thu'ng Sībūraphā (In memory of Sībūraphā). *Lōk Nangsu'* **2** (2), 28-81.
- Manas Chitakasem 1982. The development of political and social consciousness in Thai short stories. In *The short story in South-East Asia* (eds.) J.H.C.S. Davidson and H. Cordell. London: Sch. Orient. Afr. Stud., 63-99.
- Rungwit Suwanaphichon 1979. *Sībūraphā: Sī Hāeng Wannakam Thai* (Sībūraphā: the Jewel of Thai Literature). Bangkok: Samnakphim phāsikō.
- Simmonds, E.H.S. 1964. Some aspects of narrative prose fiction in Thai. In *Proc. 25th Internat. Congress of Orientalists*, 1960. Moskva: Izdat. vostoch. lit., **4**, 337-43.
- Sībūraphā 1954. *Lūk Phū Chāi*. (A real man). Bangkok: Phrāe phitthayā. (4th ed.).
- 1968. *Rūam Rū'ang Ēk* (Selected short stories). Bangkok: Samnakphim phadungsu'ksā. (3rd ed.).
- 1974a. *Khō Rāeng Nōi Thōe* (Give us a hand). Bangkok: Nāeo Rūam Naksu'ksā Tōtān Chakrawandiniyom.
- 1974b. *Rūam rū'ang san rap chai chīwit khōng Sībūraphā* (Sībūraphā's short stories for life) (ed.) Samōsōn naksu'ksā khana witthayasāt Mahawitthayālai Chīangmai. Bangkok: Mitnarā kānphim. (2nd ed.).

- Sībūraphā 1979. *Rūam rū'ang san rap chai chīwit khōng Sībūraphā* (Sībūraphā's short stories for life). Bangkok: Samnakphim pancha. (4th ed.).
- Suwit Sangyōkha and Prathīp Mū'annin 1972. *Wannakam Patēhuban Lae Kānsū' sān Mūanchon* (Modern literature and mass communications). Bangkok: Sutthisān kānphim.
- Trīsin Bunkhačhōrn 1980. *Nawaniyāi kap Sangkhom Thai (2475-2500)* (The novel and Thai society (1932-1957)). Bangkok: Samnakphim sāngsan.
- Wibhā Sēnānān 1975. *The genesis of the novel in Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai watthana phanit.