

## **Writing Wrongs: Offensive Language and Bad Romance in 1920s Siam**

**Matthew Copeland, Mahidol University International College, Thailand**

### **Abstract**

The efforts of Siamese elites to promote a tradition of Thai language and literature in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are well documented. Far less attention has been paid to the criticism engendered by their interventions. The narratives developed here suggest the limited nature of Chakkri cultural authority in the years just prior to the absolute monarchy's overthrow. The first is an examination of how essayists writing for the popular press responded to Seventh Reign (1925-1935) linguistic reforms. The second is a consideration of how better-known writers of the period made use of romantic allegory to critique the prevailing dynastic order.

**Keywords:** *Thai nationalism, literature, language, romance, allegory*

### **Introduction: Engaging Literature**

In recent years, the literary tradition of modern Thailand has been the subject of fresh investigation. Canonical certainties cobbled together in the 1970s have been called into doubt by critical reappraisals and the assessment of newly-discovered texts. The reflections contained in Thak Chaloemtiarana's *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature* are the latest contribution on this front (Thak, 2018). The essays included in Rachel Harrison's *Disturbing Conventions Decentering Thai Literary Cultures* are another (Harrison, 2014).

The renewed academic interest is long overdue. Some thirty years back, Doris Sommer examined the intimate relationship between 'foundational fictions' and the emergence of new national polities in Latin America (Sommer, 1990). She was particularly enamored of romance and the emplotment of productive national union. Her insights are relevant here. Romance attained a remarkable popularity in early 20th century Siam, the very period in which Thai nationalism began its ineluctable spread. Somewhere between five and fifteen new titles were published each day in 1924 alone ("Talking with Writers," 1925; "Matters of Interest," 1927). In an age when arranged marriage and polygynous practice determined social standing, the love story was a compelling way to push new national values and explore the shortcomings of the prevailing domestic order.

A second area of inquiry stems from the recognition by Homi Bhabha and a number of others that nationalist narratives are creative compositions in their own right (Bhabha, 1990). At a time when the nation had yet to meaningfully coalesce, writing on 'things national' involved 'a dramatic process of imaginative abstraction and representational labor' (Tooze, 1998). Like the collectively-developed literatures associated with contemporary fandom websites, narratives were reiterated and rephrased by appreciative, emotionally-charged readerships, giving rise to plots that shifted over time. The point can be better understood by examining a 'discussion thread,' which developed in the popular press on the topic of national language.

### **Despots, Dead Indians and a Pressing Need for Short, Colorful Obscenities**

"Any nation which hopes to gain freedom ... must strive to free its language" ("The Existence of the Thai Nation," 1929, November 14).

The author's rhetoric was inflated but he appeared to know his topic. For weeks, he had been writing on language and national development. Over the course of nine long essays, he discussed the work of Cardinal Richelieu at the *Academie Francais*, the activities of various language councils in Europe, the importance of language reform in ending Japanese feudalism and the efforts of Hu Shih and the Assembly of Scholars to colloquialize written Chinese. His aim was to show that people everywhere

were engaged in struggles to maintain their independence through the promotion of 'well-defined and secure national languages.' Those who failed to do would 'disappear from the face of the earth,' their tongues being 'consumed by the languages of others.' To save the Thai nation from this fate, the writer demanded a program of linguistic irredentism, an effort to restore words which had been 'lost to the race' and spread the use of Thai language in territories that had been taken from Siam by the British and French ("The Existence of the Thai Nation," 1929, November, 14).

The proposal was new. The concern was not. For decades, Thai elites had been fretting over the precarious condition of their language and literature. From the mid-19th century, Siamese rulers grew increasingly unsettled by the encroachment of foreign meanings and understandings. Wary of gunboat-backed missionary printers, they sought to shore up traditional linguistic practices and administer Siam's nascent public sphere from within, buying their own presses, turning out court broadsheets and 'patronizing' foreign-language publishers into quiescence (Copeland, 1993; Thanapol, 2009). In a bid to check the spread of invasive genres, they championed native varieties of good books, cultivating them with a Royal Literary Society and enshrining them in a new public library (Jory, 2000; Thanapol, 2014). They also took steps to end the foreign monopoly on Thai dictionary production and began to eradicate an infestation of foreign loan words, one syllable at a time (Thanapol, 2014, p. 47).

By the opening years of the Seventh Reign, the authorities appeared to have linguistic matters well in hand. The implementation of a compulsory education act put central Thai on the path to national language-hood, providing its defenders with an institutional base at the Ministry of Public Instruction. In the Department of Texts (*krom tamra*), a five-member committee was tasked with drawing up guidelines for Thai abbreviations and developing a formal Thai-English transcription system. They also continued to work on standardized spellings and the replacement of foreign words with Thai-sounding Pali-Sanskrit neologisms, changes which were introduced to the public through official proclamation, the revision of school texts and the publication of an expanding dictionary (*Thai language and writing*, 1927; *The benefits of a dictionary*, 1928; *Thai language*, 1929). The 1928 edition reportedly contained 26,230 entries, almost double the number of its 1918 predecessor (*The difference between the first and second editions*, 1928).

Press commentary indicates that writers of the period were unhappy with developments however. Many argued that a widespread use of English in administrative circles was the real problem. English was said to have 'taken over' the Ministry of Commerce and Communications, making it seem as if ministry personnel were more interested in assisting foreigners than they were in helping their fellow nationals. English-language forms and explanations were reportedly baffling the nation's farmers and because English speakers drew better rates of pay, there were concerns that the nation's youth would give up studying Thai. Worse; many children had picked up the irritating habit of peppering their speech with English vocabulary ("For the Thai Language," 1927; "Thai Writing and Numerals," 1927; "Our Thai Language," 1929; "The Existence of the Thai Nation," 1929, October, 1; "We Should Be Careful," 1929).

Official proclamations on the appropriate usage of titles also rankled. What point was there in knowing how and when to use the English expression 'His Excellency'? ("A Matter of Criticism," 1927). The profusion of positional pronouns and honorifics in Thai was already 'a sufficient source of national division,' an anachronistic facet of the language which created problems for people of all classes by making it impossible for fellow nationals, individuals who were 'all basically the same' anyhow, to address each other as peers. The solution, wrote one, was to dispose of honorifics altogether and promote the use of *khapjao* [I, me] and *than* [you] to the exclusion of all other forms of first and second-person address ("Me and You," 1927).

The Department of Texts' neologisms and spellings came in for heavy criticism as well. Some writers complained that the Thai writing system was being rendered 'even more complicated and chaotic' than before, confusing those who had mastered the language and creating problems for those who were learning it ("Thai Language and Writing," 1927). Others expressed alarm that reform was 'undermining the history of the language' by giving 'real' Thai words 'foreign roots', creating the erroneous impression the Thai spoke an amalgam of Pali, Sanskrit, Khmer, Chinese, Lao, Mon, Kha, Mao and Chawa (Phra Sarasat, 1929, August 15).

The department's 'strange new words'—polysyllabic compounds of a length which threatened to 'slow the development of the nation'—wasted time and gave rise to misunderstandings. The public was already obliged to 'dawdle' over *phrabatsomdetphrajaoyuhua* (His Royal Majesty the King),

*phradechaphrakhun* (Your Great and Powerful Majesty) and *taitaokaruna* (Your Highness). It was counter-productive to further 'clutter up' the national language with the 'insincere patois of court sycophants', particularly when most people had 'a far greater need for short, colorful obscenities' (Phra Sarasat, 1929, September 4). The newly-coined *somburanayasitthirat* (absolute monarchy) was a modest improvement on the expression *kanpokkhong yang phrajao phaendin yu nua kotmai* (a political administration in which the lord of the land is above the law), but it lacked the punch of the shorter and far more convenient English 'equivalent' despot. Why was no effort made to assign the meaning to an unused Thai phoneme ("Thai Language," 1929)?

And wasn't it ultimately better to make do with a few Western words than to set about devising cumbersome equivalents with 'the languages of Indians, and dead Indians at that' (Phra Sarasat, 1929, August 15)? In the opinion of one writer, there was simply no point in replacing terms which had already attained a degree of common usage in Siam with another set of foreign expressions which nobody understood, particularly when it resulted in the nation losing the advantage of sharing a political and technical lexicon with the peoples of the West. He asked that the Department of Texts stop trying to develop an insular national vernacular devoid of links to the world's living languages and promote the 'internationalization' of Thai instead. This, he argued, could be done by encouraging the retention of foreign technical terms, the adoption of Arabic numerals, and the use of short place names as opposed to the aristocratic-sounding Sanskrit names which were usually chosen by the court (Phra Sarasat, 1929, August 21 and 23). Another author went further, arguing for the adoption of a romanized script ("The Thai Alphabet," 1931).

While there was little support for this latter proposal, most commentators were highly critical of the Department's 'addiction' to Sanskrit. In an essay entitled 'Thai is Not an Indian Tongue,' one writer addressed 'the Sanskrit contagion' by explaining that the ancestors of the Thai race had *not* migrated from West to East but rather from North to South—from north of Assam into the Ahom region of India, and from southern China into the area comprising present day Siam ("Thai Is Not an Indian Tongue," 1929). In the process, Thai speakers borrowed from the languages of the Khmer, the Burmese, the Mon, and the Vietnamese, 'as normally occurred whenever people discussed the new things which developed in each age.'

Replacing common vocabulary with the words 'used by nations which had already lost their independence' was a different matter. Although Pali was the language of the Buddhist canon and the means by which to learn of the Buddha's life and teachings, it was never spoken by the Buddha and the important points of Buddhism had nothing to do with it either. The same was held to be true of Sanskrit, a language which spread with Indic religions before being 'forced into the mouths of the Thai' along with Khmer (*khom*) when Siam was a vassal of the Cambodian court. It was alarming that officials at the Department of Texts were determined to reinvigorate these dead Indian languages while making 'no attempt to restore any of the words which truly belong to the Thai through common usage.'

The writer continued the next day with a critique of *ratchasap*, the specialized vocabulary, much of it of Khmer origin, that Thai speakers employed when talking of royal activities and possessions ("Thai Is Not Khmer," 1929). Readers were reminded that *khaek* (a derogatory reference to things Indic) was 'not the only language trying to gobble up Thai in its own home' and informed that Khmer was 'just as bad.' The language of 'a tiny race which lost its freedom,' it was said to have been 'incredibly lucky' in that it had been afforded the status of a high language in Siam, 'supplanting a number of true Thai words' in the process. When the Khmer still ruled Siam, the Thai were said to have misconstrued that they were gods and taken their language to be sacred. Thus, they began using Khmer when speaking of their own leaders. This treatment—and the continued use of *ratchasap*—was in his view no longer warranted. It was ludicrous 'for the free peoples of Siam, an independent country recognized by all of the countries of the West, to employ the language of a historical adversary which has lost its independence' when speaking about their rulers, particularly when the language continued to be used in French Cambodia to describe the activities of lower-class commoners. 'Real Thai leaders' were also said to have 'no great love of the Khmer words which commoners use to flatter them.' Instead of trying to persuade people that Khmer was 'a marvelous language which deserved to be passed on to the young' the Department of Texts was asked to 'restore Thai to the condition it was in when it was invented some 2,000 years before.'

Other writers demanded the formation of an elected 'language assembly' (*nirutti sapha, sapha banyatsap*)—a body that could work to 'give Siam a common language with common principles' ("Thai Language," 1929, November 21). Quoting Voltaire to the effect that people were 'the lords of their own language,' one argued that linguistic change was inherently democratic anyhow:

for when someone feels that a word should be written or pronounced in a certain way, they have the right to request that others do so but no authority to order such changes. Even if they are the rulers of a country, their wishes will be unrealized if others are unwilling to agree and in the end, they will be forced to follow the usage of the majority (Phra Sarasat, 1929, August 15).

Spelling and pronunciation were best left to 'tradition or the majority view,' not matters to be decided by a single individual. As Thai was the 'shared treasure of some ten million people' it was 'much too dangerous' to leave its development to the five-man council at the Department of Texts. It was, the writer insisted, a 'breach of democratic principles,' an effort to 'return to linguistic axioms that had already been passed over' and 'could never be restored again' ("Contesting North Star," 1929).

### **Loveless Liaisons and Misguided Miscegenation**

Dynastic efforts to establish a literary canon also came unraveled during the period. Ascending the throne in 1925, the new king Prajadhipok continued to patronize an annual competition for good books but quietly disbanded his brother's literary association. With one exception, its top prizes had invariably gone to reprinted classics or the writing of kings, an outcome that by the start of the Seventh Reign was being openly ridiculed. Noting the insular nature of the selection process, one wit of the period feigned cautious optimism that he would nonetheless succeed in winning top prize with his forthcoming account of the factors which had driven the founder of the Chakkri Dynasty insane ("Was Taksin Really Crazy?," 1926).

Had his study been published, it might well have made money. Success in the market was increasingly a function of commoner tastes. By 1924, some ninety-nine privately-owned printing presses were operating in the capital, a number which rose to one hundred and twenty-seven over the next three years. A part of this increase was due to the growth of a book trade, Bangkok's fourteen publishing houses producing some 40,000 copies of thirty-nine titles in a one month period of 1924 alone. Most were pieces of pleasure reading (National Archives of Thailand, 1924). Scores of young men and women took up writing during the period, developing 'a variety of new literary styles' in the process ("Talking with Writers," 1925). Journalism, translation, and the production of novellas were listed alongside taxi driving and crime as growth occupations for 'the tens of thousands of young people who came to the capital in search of education and work.' Bookstalls were 'filled with so many strange new publications' that it was 'no longer possible to make a selection' ("The Condition of the Thai," 1928).

Flocking to the market, would-be authors drove down the price of manuscripts; works which had earlier commanded hundreds of baht were reportedly selling for as little as three baht by 1928. Those with the wherewithal for self-publication were no less obliged to keep an eye on sales; as pocket books retailed at twice the cost of printing, half of a standard thousand-copy print run had to be sold to break even ("Siamese Authors," 1928; So Bunsanu, 1987, p. 36). To make ends meet, some pandered to readers with salacious material. In mid-1923, when a local publisher was charged with obscenity for printing an etching of a couple poised to make love, he complained that the market was already filled with postcards (*rup potkat; rub po*) of bare-breasted women and spicy novel (*nangsue lamok*) capable of "shaking the heavens more than our little drawing ever could" ("Watching the Heavens Tremble," 1923). To sidestep the authorities, the trade in pornographic material was done by subscription and under brown paper wrapper, a ruse reportedly pioneered by a young woman of the upper class who had earlier been fined for her torrid love stories—*The Mermaid*, *Opening Heaven*, and *A Man with Lovers* ("Indecent Books," 1927).

From the outset, novels were also used for purposes of social criticism and the promotion of new national values. Political satire came into vogue. Sunchai Manmat's *Fallen From Favor* (*tok krabong*), which featured a picture of Vajiravudh on its cover "in honor of the king's birthday", *Falling Out of Bed* (*tok tiang*), *Consuming Wives* (*kin mia*) and *The Bald Playboy* (*hualan jaochu*) were reportedly just a few of the works that contained "characters modeled after real individuals"—a literary device still novel enough to warrant explanation ("Watching the Heavens Tremble," 1923).

Allegorical romance was immensely popular as well. Better-known authors of the period all made use of it. The commoner protagonists of Kulap Saipradit's early novels struggled to establish careers and households, occasionally to no particular end. His 1932 *War of Life (songkhram chiwit)* charted the relationship of Raphin Yuthasin and Phloen (happiness, pleasure), the object of his desire (Kulap, 1979). Hoping to establish himself as a writer, Raphin used an epistolary exchange with Phloen to detail the inequities of Siamese society—the sharp disparities of wealth and privilege which allow some to enjoy comfort while others live in poverty. In this 'fictional' world, there was little room for social mobility and Raphin remained an impoverished clerk. Phloen left him to marry for money.

Similar themes figured in the work of Akat Damkoeng.<sup>1</sup> His first novel, *The Circus of Life (lakhon haeng chiwit)*, narrated the story of Wisut, another aspiring writer who succeeds in reaching his goal, but only by quitting Siam and traveling to England to become a reporter (Akat, 1972). Out of concern for his countrymen, he ultimately returned home to an uncertain future in Siam, a land where the press was "held in such low esteem that journalism isn't even considered to be an occupation" (Akat, 1972, p. 104).

A sequel published in 1930, *Yellow Skin, White Skin (phiw luang phiw khao)* was a romantic assault on Chakkri rule (Akat, 1973). Wisut's affair with a British reporter serves as a foil for the relationship of two new characters in the story: Worapraphan, a high-ranking Thai prince enrolled at Oxford, and Irene Stills, the daughter of a wealthy British businessman. In contrast to Wisut, who keeps his lover at a distance, Worapraphan hopes to marry Irene over the objections of several characters in the story. Wisut, for one, tries to convince the prince that Asians and Europeans are poor marriage partners, only to be accused by Worapraphan of "thinking with the old-fashioned ideas of the men who used to stand in the way of change and global civilization" (Akat, 1973, p. 68). A more determined effort to dissuade the prince is then made by another character in the tale, an exiled Indian princess named Aruya. She, too, has had a relationship with an Englishman, one which ended in betrayal, and this, in conjunction with her memories of the colonial legacy in her homeland, have caused her to openly despise the British.

When Wisut at one stage admits that his knowledge of India is limited to what he has read of English history, for example, she angrily asserts that:

there is absolutely no truth in their historical records. The British wrote those in order to convince people that they are gods and were little concerned about the factual basis of what they had written ... the British wouldn't dare write a [true] history of India because of the ruthless behavior which they displayed in the past. They stole a country, stole the wealth of a kingdom, and killed millions of people in the process ... anyone who knows even a little Indian history and is honest will admit straight-away that the British are animals, the most brutal of bandits. They are forever moralizing about right and wrong, while locking up petty thieves in pursuit of justice ... But as for traveling around stealing big things, countries and kingdoms, they seem to have no understanding that these are crimes at all. In fact, they see such theft as being praiseworthy! ... They see all other human races as animals ... perhaps you don't understand what they have already done to your country. All of us in Asia and Indochina have been cheated together (Akat, 1973, p. 85).

Convinced that Worapraphan's relationship with Irene is a 'collaboration' which will bring him little but British scorn, Aruya tells him:

you and I are very similar. You have been studying in England since you were a child, while I've been here since I was born ... They've raised us as British children, forcing us to adopt their habits. We've forgotten ... what the hearts of the Thai or the Hindu, what our own hearts, are really like ... how can you be happy when they've taught you to be someone you shouldn't be, taught you to want things you can never hope to get? If I'd lived in India all of my life, if the British hadn't come and stolen my birthright, my life, and my mind, I would never have dreamed of loving a European male, or a white-skinned male from any other country. In all likelihood, I would have had the same feelings for the whites which they now have for us (Akat, 1973, pp. 120-121).

When Worapraphan still refuses to recognize that his love for an Englishwoman is misplaced, Aruya arranges for him to overhear Irene joking with her latest paramour about the prince, who she describes as “a vile species of insect” (Akat, 1973, p. 130).

Worapraphan is devastated. Aruya reminds him that he should be happy to have escaped from becoming another object of British ridicule, “as we yellow and brown-skinned peoples of the East have displayed our stupidity to them in sufficient numbers already” (Akat, 1973, p. 136). Angered, the prince blames everyone *but* the British, expressing his disgust at those who sent him to England, at himself, and finally at Aruya. Announcing that he is “not one of her kind”, he breaks off their relationship, quits the scene for a brothel, later explaining to Wisut that for years he had been “trying to construct a paradise by which he might escape from the color of his skin” only to discover that he could “enter paradise” whenever he wished. In response, Wisut observes that “it is just this sort of ruler who has made the Chakkri clan so progressive, so capable of leading the nation to good things” (Akat, 1973, p. 155)

At the end of the story, when Maria asks Wisut if he truly loves his king, he replies that he has already answered the question with the tale of Worapraphan. The sarcasm is obvious. In an opening passage, readers have already been asked to consider:

How is it that our country has come no further than this at present? When will we ever awaken from the stupor which has caused us to believe that we are already happy? We are not at war and the foreigners are no longer likely to bother us. It is time that we cease worrying about them. There is nothing strange about our poverty. When we leave our schools, we seek only to become civil servants, as if there were no other occupations in Siam. Engaging in business is considered a dangerous test of luck in which we feel we have neither the capital nor the skill to better our Chinese competitors. Nor, for that matter, do we try to accumulate capital, even though we are all well aware that our Chinese immigrants arrive here with next to nothing, unable to speak Thai, and yet within a five or six years, have amassed fortunes ... we allow foreigners to come and have the pleasure of mining our ore at Phuket, planting our rubber plantations, growing our coconuts. We Thais let the foreigners suck the blood from our bodies, we allow them to come and develop our commerce, to reap as full a harvest as they please (Akat 1973, pp. 11–12).

The intentional nature of the critique is also indicated by Akat’s play upon the novel of a contemporary—Sir Hugh Clifford’s *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*. Midway through his text, he acknowledged that he borrowed material from Clifford’s work (Akat, 1973, p. 77). Clifford’s novel also contained and embittered and nationalistic “Little Princess” and Akat made use of her speeches for his character Aruya. In contrast to Clifford, who offered a sympathetic portrait of a Malay *raja* who has lost his identity after years of study in London, Akat crafted a picture of an arrogant prince so enamored of things British that he no longer heeds the advice of fellow nationals or peers from neighboring Asian lands. The shift in meanings is nowhere more evident than in the conclusions of both tales: Clifford’s Saleh returns to his homeland to die in an unsuccessful uprising against the colonial authorities; Akat’s Worapraphan regains his self-esteem with the whores of London.

Misguided miscegenation and the difficulties it posed for productive domestic union were also addressed in the romances of Buppha Nimmanhemini or Dokmai Sot, another well-known author of the period.<sup>2</sup> Published in 1929, her first novel, *Her Enemy (Satru khong jao lon)* was seemingly a light-hearted love story, a Thai-language *Taming of the Shrew* that could also be read as a critique of Siam’s Westernized elite. The tale turned upon the troubled relationship of two upperclass youth, Prasong Wibunsak and his betrothed Mayuri. Prasong, whose very name conveys the idea of desirability, is an idyllic fusion of traditional and modern Thai leader, an individual whose virtue and Western training have earned him the right to run the family business, which prospers under his guidance. In contrast, Mayuri has been marred by her exposure to things Western. Despite her foreign education, she is incapable of contributing to the family business and appears content to pass her days in pursuit of idle pleasures. She is also headstrong, stubbornly refusing to follow her father’s wish that she marry Prasong.

The romance is staged in the home of Mayuri’s father ‘Chatra’—a name denoting the multi-tiered umbrella which serves as a prominent symbol of Chakkri kingship. At the opening of the tale, Chatra informs Prasong that Mayuri is no longer willing to marry him, ‘freeing’ him from his long-standing vows.

Prasong determines to win Mayuri back and, disguising himself as an educated commoner, he travels to the Chatra household to become the secretary of his would-be father-in-law. Initially, his relationship with Mayuri is strained, for although in love with her, he treats her with open disdain and refuses to acknowledge her 'superior' social standing. She, in turn, repeatedly reminds him of the distinction between "people of breeding and commoners—masters and slaves" (Buppha 1963, p. 60). This cross-class struggle eventually concludes when Mayuri realizes that her 'enemy' is not Prasong but rather her current suitor, a Chinese man who is plotting to drug and rape her. Just as his scheme is about to be realized, Prasong arrives to 'awaken' Mayuri and reveals his true identity. Thus, as the story ends, she agrees to marry him and the unity of the Chatra household is restored.

Like Akat, Buppha built upon the themes of her first novels to craft a more elaborate critique of the kingdom's European-oriented elite in the period just prior to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. In her 1932 novel *Past Karma* (*kam kao*), the reader is presented with another overly-Westernized protagonist, Nut (Buppha, 1973). In this instance, the characterization is sufficiently exaggerated to make Nut appear more European than Thai. She dislikes Thai food and can barely speak the language.

She also has no obvious romantic partner. Her uncle Phong, a European-educated barrister, is the ideal candidate but the nature of their relationship appears to preclude this possibility. Her other suitors have inexplicably broken off their courtships. Even her relationships with family members are problematic: her father is absent from the story, her mother has little patience for her and her elder sister seems distant and withdrawn. Thus, early on in the tale, she comes to suspect that 'there must be some reason' for her inability to find love.

The reason pertains to the identity of Nut's father. He is not the aristocrat in whose home she has grown to adulthood but a commoner, *Nai At*, a former army officer who has just been released after serving a twenty-year prison sentence. Nut learns this while visiting some mysterious relatives in the countryside. The landscape surrounding their village appears wild and dangerous, the manner of dress and betel nut-stained teeth of the locals fascinating, and even such simple tasks as washing her face require the help of others. Not surprisingly, when she learns that this is her real home and its occupants her true family, she becomes physically ill (Buppha, 1973, pp. 64–70). She is reconciled with her changed circumstances after learning of her parents' tragic romance. Denied permission to marry, they eloped and lived happily together until a day came when At arrived home to find his wife struggling with an intruder. He shot the man only to discover that he had killed his father-in-law. Devastated, Nut's mother died as well, leaving At without witness to his innocence. Sent to prison, he entrusts his daughters and family inheritance to a friend's care.

This tale within a tale, the 'past karma' that determines story's outcome, can be taken as an allusion to one of the more significant historical events of the period. In 1912, a plot to end the absolute monarchy was uncovered within the ranks of the Siamese military. After the new king Vajiravudh (1910–1925) failed to comply with his father's wish that he establish a representative assembly, a scheme arose to establish a Siamese republic. Sentenced to twenty years in prison, the rebels were only just being freed in 1932, the year *Kam Kao* was published. Through this correspondence of dates, At's elopement could be read as a metaphor for rebellion, a cause which ultimately captures Nut's sympathies and allows her to be reunited with her family.

## Conclusion

Among other things, the above narrative suggests the limited nature of elite cultural authority in the public life of 1920s Bangkok. If Chakkri dynasts were for a time the prime movers of literary and linguistic reform, Thai national fiction (and the fictive Thai nation) were reworked in the marketplace. Despite official efforts to whip national language into shape, Thai writing was still perceived to be threatened from without by the intrusion of foreign words and corrupted from within by the self-serving policies of rulers who tailored the language of a people, a nation, to suit their own purposes. In romances of the period, an elite love of status and penchant for coupling with the West remained the principal impediments to productive domestic union. A second observation follows from the first. In national histories of a later period, dynasty and nation are often conflated. In the partial histories discussed above, dynastic authorities are seemingly positioned as national antagonists, a telling indication of the climate of opinion that prevailed in the years just prior to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> The son of Prince Ratburi Direkrit, Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat (1905–1932) became interested in writing while studying at Bangkok's Thepsirin School, where he issued a broadsheet with Kulap Saipradit. In 1924, he left Siam for a brief period of study in England, ultimately returning to Siam via the United States and Japan four years later. His first novel, *Lakhon haeng chiwit*, was published shortly after his return. It proved to be exceedingly popular, some four thousand copies of the work being sold within the space of a single year.

<sup>2</sup> Like her contemporary Akat, *mom luang* Buppha Nimmanhemin ('Dokmai Sot' 1905–1963) spent her early years on the periphery of the extended royal clan. Her mother was an actress, one of the forty-odd wives of *jao phraya* Thewetwongwiwat (*Momratchawong* Lan Kunchon), and while still quite young, Buppha was sent to live in the women's quarters of Royal Palace. She remained there until she was thirteen, at which time she was enrolled at St. Joseph's Convent for her formal schooling. It was while studying at St. Joseph's that she was exposed to Western fictional forms and developed an interest in writing. Her earliest published work was a short play which appeared in *Thai kasem* in 1927. It was not until 1929 that she produced her first novel, *Satru khong jao lon* (Her Enemy) which was serialized in *Thai kasem* from June to September of 1929. Apart from her final piece of writing, an unfinished satire of the Phibun administration, Buppha's works have not been interpreted as political allegories.

## References

- [A matter of criticism: Foreign languages in Siam] Ko khwan wijan ruang phasa tang prathet nai muang thai (1927, April 9), *Si Krung*.
- Akat D. R. (1972). *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [The circus of life]. Bangkok: Phraepitthaya.
- Akat D. R. (1973). *Phiw luang phiw khao* [Yellow skin white skin]. Bangkok: Phraepitthaya.
- Bhabha, H. (ed.) (1990). *Nation and narration*. London: Routledge.
- Buppha N. (1963). *Satru khong jao lon* [Her enemy]. Bangkok: Bannakhan.
- Buppha N. (1973). *Kam kao* [Past karma]. Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya.
- Clifford, H. (1926; 1989). *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*. Singapore, Oxford.
- [Contesting North Star's view of the Thai language] Tuang khwamhen dao nua ruang phasa thai (1929, September 25), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- Copeland, M. P. (1993). Contested nationalism and the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Siam. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Canberra: Australian National University.
- [For the Thai language] O wa phasa thai (1927, January 27), *Pakka Thai*.
- Harrison, R. (ed.) (2014). *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- [Indecent books] Nangsue lamok (1927, June 24), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- Jory, P. (2000) Books and the nation: The making of Thailand's National Library. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31(2), 351–373.
- Kulap S. (1932; 1979). *Songkhram chiwit* [The war of life]. Bangkok: Kophai.
- [Matters of interest to us all] Ruang na ru samrap chao rao (1927, June 5), *Sayam Riwiw*.
- [Me and you] Khapjao lae than (1927, June 4), *Pakka Thai*.
- National Archives of Thailand (1924, September 20). Sixth Reign. *Nakhonban, kromtamruat phranakhonban lae phuthon, rachakan tuapai* [Ministry of the Capital; Department of the Police; General Affairs], 4. 1/213. *Nangsue'phim mangkhon daeng* [Mangkhon Daeng]. *Phraya Athikon Prakat to Phraya Phetda*.
- [Our Thai language] Phasa thai khong rao (1929 September 4), *Si Krung*.
- Phra Sarasat, [Thai language will no longer be Thai language] Phasa thai ja mai pen phasa thai (1929, August 15, 21 23; September 4), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- [Siamese authors] Nakpraphan muang Thai. *Ratsadon* (1928, December 30).
- So Bunsanu (1987). *Tam roi lai sue thai* [Following the tracks of Thai writing]. Bangkok: Phiawathin.
- Sommer, D. (1990). Irresistible romance: The foundational fictions of Latin America. In H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and narration* (pp. 71–98). London: Routledge.
- [Talking with writers of the day] Sonthana kap nakpraphan samai ni (1925, January 9), *Sayam Ratsadon*.
- [Thai language] Phasa thai (1929, August 28), *Si Krung*.
- [Thai Language] Phasa Thai (1929, November 21), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- [Thai Language and Writing] *Phasa lae nangsue thai* (1927, August 3), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- [Thai is not an Indian tongue] Phasa thai mai chai khaek (1929, November 22), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- [Thai is not Khmer] Phasa thai mai chai khamen (1929, November 23), *Krungthep Daily Mail*.
- [Thai writing and numerals] Nangsue lae lek thai (1927, June 16), *Si Krung*.
- Thak C. (2018). *Read till it shatters: Nationalism and identity in modern Thai literature*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Thanapol, L. (2009). The emergence of the Siamese public sphere: Colonial modernity, print culture and the practice of criticism (1860s–1910s). *South East Asia Research* 17(3), 361–399.
- Thanapol, L. (2014). The Royal Society of Literature or the birth of modern cultural authority in Thailand. In R. Harrison, (ed.) *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures* (pp. 37-62). New York: Rowman and Littlefield., 37-62.
- [The benefit of a dictionary] Pathanukrom mi khun arai (1928, September 5), *Thai Num*.
- [The condition of the Thai] Saphap khong khon thai (1928, August 22), *Si Krung*.
- [The difference between the first and second editions of the dictionary] Pathanukrom khrang thi noeng kap khrang thi song tangkan yang rai (1928, May 4), *Si Krung*.
- [The Existence of the Thai Nation Depends Upon the Thai Language 1] Chiwit khong chat Thai yu thi phasa Thai doi trong 1 (1929, October 1), *Si Krung*.
- [The Existence of the Thai Nation Depends Upon the Thai Language 8] Chiwit khong chat Thai yu thi phasa Thai doi trong 8] (1929, November 14), *Si Krung*.
- [The Thai alphabet should be changed to mark the 150th anniversary of the Chakkri Dynasty] Akson thai khwan plian rup pua fang prawat wai nai ngan 150 pi bang (1931, September 14), *Si Krung*.

Tooze, A. (1998). Imagining national economies: national and international economic statistics, 1900-1950. In G. Cubitt (ed.) *Imagining the nation* (pp. 213-224). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[Was Taksin really crazy?] *Jao Taksin ba jing ru* (1926, November 30), *Bangkok Kanmuang*.

[Watching the heavens tremble] *Hen sawan wai* (1923, July 17), *Bangkok Kanmuang*.

[We should be careful about using language] Khwan rawang kanchai phasa (1929, April 28), *Thai Num*.