



# Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia

Political and Sociological Perspectives

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## *Introduction*

This book presents to the reader a broad analytical account of the modern literatures of Southeast Asia. It is not a literary study in the conventional sense where the intrinsic properties of plot, characterization, and literary style dominate. It is a critical account of literature as a societal phenomenon in contemporary Southeast Asian societies.

Modern Southeast Asian literature as a collective product is indelibly a part of the total process of change and modernization brought about internally and externally. As such, it should be studied as a sociological as well as literary manifestation.

There are many parallels in the literatures of Southeast Asia. The reader will no doubt identify some of them on reading through the articles contained in this volume. Like the literatures of many other developing societies, Southeast Asian literatures exemplify one dominating fact, and that is the struggle to find meaning, purpose, and identity in the many changes brought about since the advent of Western influence on the region. This struggle continues to assume many forms ranging from responses of a highly personalized or subjective character to the ideological and uncompromisingly critical. Within this range of responses, a complex of moods and commitments is also discernible. There is no doubt that Taine's concepts of "race, moment, and milieu" as sociological determinants of literary creativity are pertinent to an adequate appreciation of the complexity of the literary scene.

The sociological properties of Southeast Asian literatures as a whole should be of special interest to social scientists studying the social, political, ideological, moral, and intellectual issues in the pre- and post-independence periods of each of the countries of Southeast Asia. This book does not purport to be a comprehensive documenta-

tion of all the issues dealt with in the literatures of Southeast Asia — it is an attempt to deal with the salient and crucial ones.

The impact of literature on social policies and the political process is difficult to define and, in any case, a great deal of variation is possible between societies, being a function of a number of factors. However, what is clear is that literary writers generally continue to regard themselves as having an important role to play in shaping and directing the social process. Hence what they write about, the perceptive-cognitive patterns they exemplify, as well as the solutions suggested for the resolution of problems and issues, are all of interest to serious students of Southeast Asian societies. Literature in Southeast Asian societies is substantially *littérature engagée*, both implicitly and explicitly. In this respect, the writer of literature assumes many roles — as social critic, teacher or guru, nationalist, protagonist, ideologue, and arbiter of justice and traditions. For many too, reality as confronted furnished the occasion and material for literary creativity. How effectively the roles have been played is a matter for another discussion. What seems important for a literary work to gain recognition in the Southeast Asian context is the fact that it must not only possess literary merits but also reflect with understanding, sensitivity, and faithfulness the life, problems, and aspirations of the people.

The literary writer no doubt has many problems to cope with. During the colonial period, two linguistic media were used for literary expression. With the exception of Thailand, perhaps, there were two groups of writers in the countries of Southeast Asia under colonial control. One group, forming the majority, wrote in one of the local languages — Burmese, Thai, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Khmer, or Lao. The other group constituted those who were conversant with one of the colonial languages — English, French, Dutch, or Spanish. In Vietnam, Chinese was an important literary medium for centuries among the Vietnamese *litterati*. The post-independence period has, however, shown the gradual loss of status of the colonial languages as literary media and, conversely, a rise in prominence of the local languages. The elevation of Filipino to the status of the national language of the Philippines in 1973 is the latest in a series of changes towards a re-instatement of the local languages to national prominence.

The two strands of literature mentioned earlier were, of course, the consequence of the colonial educational system based on differentiation. Those educated in the elitist educational institutions

managed by the colonial government or Christian missionary bodies, if they wrote at all, did so in the colonial language, at least initially — for example, Jose Rizal of the Philippines and Raden Adjeng Kartini of Indonesia. Those who wrote in one of the local languages were largely the ex-students of native schools introduced by the colonial government. The latter group has had to cope with a local literary medium that was largely oral at one time and that, coupled with classical literary forms, hindered the early flowering of literary creativity to some extent. Few successfully adopted the classical forms for modern literary expression; most abandoned them.

Those writers who continue to write in the non-native tongue such as English or French have to contend with the problem of relevance or identity in the wake of mounting demands for indigenization in language, literature, and culture as argued by Bernad and Koh. The Philippines and Singapore are perhaps special cases in this regard. The elevation to official status of the English language alongside Filipino and the fact that English remains the language of the significant elites ensure that literature in English will continue to be popular. In Singapore, while the Government's cultural policy favours the Asian languages (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil) yet the ubiquity of the English language and its gathering strength in the economy and the educational system will ensure that it enjoys certain inherent advantages in its development as a literary medium.

Southeast Asian governments in different proportions and in varying forms are promoting literary development in the local languages, with certain linguistic, literary, ideological, cultural, political, and educational aims. Their objectives are not always explicitly stated, and in practice there is again a great deal of variation of stress and selection in regard to the objectives. A contradiction or conflict may be perceived between official support for literary development and the implication this has for literary creativity as an art form governed by its own norms. The complexity of this problem is dealt with in the articles by Allott (Burma), Tham (Malaysia), and Tran Huan (Vietnam). There is no doubt that the literary writer desires support and recognition which he feels are necessary to the development of his art. On the other hand, official assistance for the promotion of literature normally comes with a stipulation of certain thematic priorities, or at least there is an expectation that the writer is sensitive to the underlying social and political constraints in operation. What seems clear is that literature, whether in its classical or modern form, is regarded as an important parameter in political

socialization or political development. This point is lucidly explained in the articles by Allott, Badgley, Nepote and Hoc Dy, Sombat, Tham, Din-Hoa, and Poolthupya.

During the colonial and early post-colonial periods, there was a unity of purpose among the literary writers — that of attaining self-rule. Literature was characteristic for its conscious commitment to the nationalistic cause. This aspect is most systematically explored in the articles by Medina Jr., Tham, Din-Hoa, and Tran Huan. Under such circumstances, both the commitment and the orientation of the writer were unambiguous. However, in the post-independence period, the picture has become less clear. There is great variety in the responses of the writers to current social and political developments. The theme of nationalism remains salient, and in the Philippines, the struggle against social injustice and corruption is identified with what Medina Jr. terms the second Propaganda Movement. Another movement with somewhat similar motivations, representing the culmination of social and political changes that have occurred, is found in the Thai Wannakam Pua Chivit (Literature for Life's Sake) which came into being following the political upheavals of 1973. This is discussed in the article by Poolthupya. In Malaysia, the communal process has now filtered into the precincts of literary creativity and development. In Indonesia, the writing of "popular" literature is now a boon because it fulfils a social demand, both to entertain as well as to mirror human idiosyncracies and failings, without any social commitment or identification on the part of the writer. This form of literary response is discussed in Boen Oemarjati's article. In short there is enough evidence to suggest that literary writers in Southeast Asia are attempting to grapple with new social and political dimensions. Whether this will lead eventually to the crystallization of an unambiguous perception of literature's role is difficult to predict.

There will continue to be a place for minority literature in Southeast Asia. Analysed in depth, such a literature is not intrinsically different from the literatures associated with the indigenous communities. It is a literature fundamentally concerned with the search for continuity and identity, as shown in the articles by Koh and Clammer. This literature may be less strident in its nationalistic cry, compared to its counterpart, but it is no less committed to the values of freedom, justice, and humanity.

It is perhaps convenient at this juncture to let the authors take over the discussion, but before that, a few words about the purpose of the book is in order.

This book has been prepared with two considerations in mind. Firstly, in content it attempts to cover as much of the literary ground as possible. It was originally planned to have two articles on each of the countries of Southeast Asia. This has been substantially achieved, though only one article on Kampuchea was received. It was not possible to obtain a contribution on Laos. Secondly, in each of the articles contributed there is a fairly detailed select bibliography containing the most important references on the areas of literature being discussed. This select bibliography will serve to assist the reader who may wish to delve deeper into those aspects of literature that interest him. In this regard the various select bibliographies act as a comprehensive guide to the literary scene in Southeast Asia.

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# 1

## *Prose Writing and Publishing in Burma: Government Policy and Popular Practice*

Anna J. Allott

Ever since it came to power in 1962 the Military Government of Burma has been trying to mobilize writers in support of its declared aim of building a new socialist society in the country. To judge from recent editorials in the Working People's Daily (see Appendix C), the Government of the Union of Burma (GUB) does not seem very satisfied with the performance of its so-called *literary workers*, even though many influential and persuasive writers were ready and willing at the time of the military takeover to help them in their task of leading the country. What has been happening on the literary front since 1962?

As early as 1914, as exemplified in a famous novel, *Shwei-pyi-zō* by Ū Lat, works of fiction had reflected the concern of many Burmese at the threat to their culture and traditional way of life posed by Western ideas and habits. Later, in the 1930s, many novels expressed a strong awareness of injustice and humiliation at being under foreign rule, and the growing desire of the Burmese for independence. The writers of these works reflected the mood of the country; the Burmese readership responded by reading the works eagerly and according the authors considerable respect and authority. To the traditional reverence felt by the Burmese for scholars and writers was now added admiration for their patriotism. Many of the writers who introduced socialist and Marxist writings to Burma were also successful novelists — for example, Thein Pe Myint, Bamaw Tin Aung.<sup>1</sup> As a result, important novels often had more ideological content than might have been expected, and the new ideas reached a wider audience.

This situation continued after independence and through the 1950s, during which time there was an increase in translations from all literatures — Soviet<sup>2</sup> and Chinese as well as English and American.

There was very little restriction of political expression except for some ultra-Communist publications, and right up to the end of the caretaker Government (1960–62) even these were allowed to appear.<sup>3</sup> When the Revolutionary Council took over in March 1962, it felt that not only journalists but all creative writers represented an influential body of opinion which could, indeed which should, be enlisted in the task of building a united and prosperous socialist state.

*National Literary Conference, 1962*

What exactly did the Revolutionary Council wish the writers to do? And how should the writers set about the task? One way, much favoured by the GUB in its early days, of trying to find answers to the many problems involved in working out its new policies was to hold a conference or seminar, and so it was with the writers. From 17 to 21 November 1962, an unusual gathering took place near the World Peace Pagoda in Rangoon — the first National Literary Conference, attended by over 700 authors, journalists, and men of letters.<sup>4</sup> The conference was called by the Burma Writers' Association after the GUB Minister in charge of Information and Culture, Colonel Sàw Myínt, had met with its Executive Committee. He had made a strong suggestion that writers should give priority to writing for peasants and workers; so the Association decided to hold a conference to discuss the problems this raised, and also "how literature was to participate in the great socialist revolution". The expense involved in holding such a meeting was borne by the Government — a further indication of its desire to encourage literature and the arts to support government aims.

The meeting was chaired by Û Thèin Pe Myínt, the 1962 president of the Burma Writers' Association, who, surprisingly for one so involved in politics himself, called upon the participants to avoid party and ideological differences and to keep to a discussion of literary problems. As a writer himself he knew full well that creative writers do not write to order, and as a wholehearted supporter of the Revolutionary Council at that time he wished the conference to enlist the cooperation of his fellow writers, not to alienate them. It is interesting to note the points that he made in his opening address.

In the present state of the country, and of our literature, it is not yet possible to vote and decide upon any particular line in literary matters. This is still only the time for trying to involve the majority of those engaged in writing. From the beginning

we decided that any conference held should only be for the exchange of opinion and experience; it should not be a literary synod for settling doctrinal differences. [A reference to the fact that they were meeting at the site of the great Sixth Buddhist Synod of 1956.] Our country is one where there are many different political parties and political opinions. For this reason we should at this conference only discuss literary matters and differing literary opinions, and as far as possible avoid political and party controversies. I believe that by discussing purely literary matters we will encourage unity and broad cooperation among writers, so I urge you to speak as writers and not as politicians. The three days of the conference are to be devoted to the content of literary works, to their form, and to writers' rights and opportunities. However it is not to be merely an aimless discussion; it has as its ultimate objective the development of a literature founded on peasants and workers, that is, one that presents the working man as the hero in fiction, and that depicts the social forces which have shaped the lives of the working classes.

Thein Pe Myint then pointed out that there were already in Burmese literature several works depicting the lives of peasants and workers, though only a few showing people actually engaged in the struggle for the liberation of the masses; it would be up to the conference to discuss the merits of the two approaches. He then raised the topic of light-weight fiction (still a cause of concern to the GUB today), saying that there were some who condemned love stories, others who wanted to get rid of thrillers, others who would ban all ghost stories. (This was actually done not long afterwards.) However, he felt, a reader needed to be able to read all kinds of reading matter, just as a body needed all kinds of food; and it was part of human nature to desire spice and excitement.

On the question of form, Thein Pe Myint stated that the writer should be able to choose freely. He expected that there would be discussion between those who felt that the simplest form and most direct style should be used — as they attached most importance to larger numbers understanding them — and those innovative writers who cared more for artistic experimentation and the development of new forms. (Here he touched, but only indirectly, on a matter that was to be the subject of controversy in the late sixties and early seventies, namely, whether the literary language should be abandoned as the official written medium in favour of a more modern style

based directly on the present-day colloquial language. Despite their chosen name, this is a matter in which the Revolutionary Government has resisted change, opposing very strongly the movement led by the Upper Burma Writers' Association based in Mandalay. The majority of the Burmese literary establishment also appears to be against such a change, though certain younger writers are in favour.)

With regard to rights and opportunities, Thein Pe Myint expected there would be discussion of the freedom of literature, the freedom to write, relations between writers and publishers, the formation of writers' organizations, and the question of writers supervising themselves by mutual criticism rather than by government decree.<sup>5</sup> Finally, it seemed to him that the most important question was how writers could acquire greater experience and understanding of the life of ordinary people, so as to feel for and with them and to serve their interests.

Though some of Thein Pe Myint's statements may have been too strongly Marxist to gain the unanimous approval of all his fellow writers, he nevertheless spoke for all of them in pledging their support and offering their willing cooperation to the Government, provided their right to choose their own way of working was respected.

The opening speech by Lieutenant-Colonel Bo, then Director of Policy at the Ministry of Culture, was persuasive and reassuring. He said that the massive attendance at the conference was very heartening; that it was the Government's task to encourage literature and the arts; that it was not his job to tell writers how to write; that they could write freely and see to it themselves that they observed the writers' code of conduct by criticizing each other. He reminded them of the importance of writers in society, and that at a time of change the strongest weapon for changing people's attitudes was the pen; they were needed now to write works suited to the times and to lead the country in the direction of change. Far from being in any way coercive, this approach showed the traditional Burmese respect for the writer and teacher (*hsaya*), in contrast to the set of seven policy objectives laid down by the Burma Socialist Programme Party — the Lanzin Party — in 1975, a considerably more directive approach (see Appendix B).

Colonel Bo also voiced the official view that the type of writing that would be beneficial to the workers and peasants of Burma was writing about themselves and their way of life. To this end he urged writers to leave the towns and undertake field trips to gain

practical experience of life on the land. (Many of the speakers at the conference who echoed these sentiments do not seem to have asked themselves whether the paddy farmer or exhausted urban trishaw rider would actually choose in his spare time, if not too tired, to read a work of fiction telling him about his own daily grind, or whether he might prefer to be distracted or amused by a thriller, a funny comic, or a love story with a happy ending.)

Finally, the Colonel talked with great understanding about the economics of writing and publishing, and said that the Government proposed to offer assistance so that the kind of works it was asking for could be written and published; and it would hold discussions on how this help could be given to both new and established writers.

The conference was addressed by fifteen speakers representing a wide range of approaches: from the scholarly (Ū Thèin Han) to the practical advice of professional writers (Ū Ohn Pe, Mò Wei); from the poetic (Dàung Nwe Hswei) to the informative (Ū Htin Hpat on copyright); and various opinions from the radical Bamaw Tin Aung ("freedom of expression is irrelevant if one does not have freedom from hunger") to the socialist-realist position of Dagon Ta-ya ("hero should be a positive character, a model for people to follow"); from the traditional Burmese nationalism of Mìn Shin ("our young people are too open to foreign influences and have become disenchanted with the life they are leading today") to the realistic individualism of U Yàw-Zei-yá ("only if a writer can think freely and write freely will really worthwhile [*akyò-pyū*] writing result"). Over the three days another seventy-five people had the opportunity to state their own positions briefly or comment freely on the main speakers. Many frank criticisms were voiced and misgivings expressed; in particular, a young author from Taungyi said that he was disappointed at the lack of advice given by speakers on writing for the various nationalities and states of the Union. This was a timely reminder about what is still the GUB's major problem — the attainment of national unity. The immense interest in the written word in Burma was further illustrated by the numbers who wanted to speak — forty on the first day, seventy on the second, and a hundred on the third. Lots had to be drawn to decide who could do so.

The published proceedings of the conference includes at the end a closing statement apparently voicing the agreed opinions of the meeting. In it the writers indicated their willingness to use their talents and influence in support of the Government's aims provided that their artistic integrity was respected and they were left to

choose how they did their work; at the same time they made a request for a certain amount of financial encouragement. The Government in its turn should have been well pleased with the outcome of the conference. This period might well be considered the honeymoon period of the relationship between the parties. We may now take a look at the way this relationship has developed, particularly from the point of view of the action taken by the Government to ensure that the writers carried out their undertaking.

### *The Burma Translation Society*

The idea for an organization that would undertake the translation of important foreign works — mostly from English — into Burmese was conceived before the Second World War, at the time when English was the official language in Burma, and when all university teaching was conducted in English. With the example of Japan before them, where the national medium of instruction was the mother-tongue, Burmans became aware that Burma could not hope to keep up with the modern world scientifically and technically if its people could not read and learn about new developments in their own language. A State Translation Bureau was set up by the British but was closed by the war. During the war a small translation and library department under Û Thên Han continued preparing material, but nothing could be printed. After the war ended, one of the most urgent tasks was to rebuild the education system. In order to help to “pierce the darkness of ignorance with the light of knowledge”, the Burma Translation Society was established on 26 August 1947, with the aim of translating as many important and useful books into Burmese as possible. The Society, with Prime Minister Û Nú as its first chairman, had an independent management committee but was subsidized by the Government which bought its publications for distribution to government-established reading-rooms.

The Society's publications, both fiction and non-fiction (*sa padeitha*), were well received. In 1948 it instituted the first literary prize (worth 1,000 kyats) for a novel, and in succeeding years added prizes for other types of writing including translation, non-fiction, collected short stories and poems. In the early fifties it was asked to help with providing reading matter in Burmese for students at the university, and in 1954, in cooperation with the newly appointed Director of Text-Book Production, Û Thên Han, the Society became involved in the preparation of textbooks for the nation's schools.<sup>6</sup>



A further task entrusted to the Translation Society was that of producing the first Burmese Encyclopedia; it was asked to undertake this in August 1948 by Û Nú who felt that Burma should have an encyclopedia of its own. The first plan was to make a direct translation of a Western work, but this was abandoned after discussions and, in February 1949, it was decided to prepare a work directed at a Burmese readership. The first volume was ready in 1953; the final one (vol. 15) was completed in 1976. Volumes 1–5 were printed in England, but in 1962 the printing was taken over by the Society's own press in Rangoon. Volume 10 which happens to cover the words "Burma" and "Burmese" is in fact a fascinating presentation of many aspects of Burmese life and culture, extending to 380 pages. Topics dealt with include the Burmese army, children's games, Burmese music, literature, indigenous medicine, famous actors and actresses, the Sino-Burmese border, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party, to name only a few.

From 1952 onwards the Society also produced a magazine intended primarily for readers in rural areas, but in spite of being especially adapted, not merely translated, it did not prove very popular as it did not contain enough entertaining fiction. In addition there were problems with distribution because of unrest in the country areas; it tended to remain unsold and unread, and was abandoned in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

### *Sarpay Beikman*

The headquarters of the Burma Translation Society, situated on Prome Road, was known as the Sa-pei Beik-man, "The Palace of Literature", a name which by now seemed more fitting for an organization that was playing such an important role in the literary life of the nation. This indeed was the official name given to it by the Revolutionary Government in 1963 when it was reconstituted as a government organization under the Ministry of Information, under the direction of a ten-member "Sarpay Beikman Management Board".<sup>8</sup>

As promised at the 1962 Writers' Conference, the GUB was looking for ways to promote serious literature and educative writing. Some body or organization was needed to channel funds and execute the policy; the Translation Society was obviously suitable. Its new tasks were spelt out as follows: "The essential concern of the Sarpay Beikman is to improve and enrich the general knowledge of all the nationals of the Union. To bring about this objective, the new