

CHANGES IN THAI RURAL SOCIETY: A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LAO KHAMHOM'S LITERARY WORKS*

Trisilpa Boonkhachorn**

Introduction

Social and historical dimensions in literary studies may be different from those of social scientists. Literature not only records social experiences of a writer as an individual, but also generates his/her reactions to social changes that he/she has confronted.

Since Thailand's first Social and Economic Plan during Marshal Sarit Thanarat's regime in the 1960's, Thai governments has geared national "development" to material growth and superstructures, by promoting the slogans such as "flowing water, electric lighting and good transportation." Over the four decades of material and technological oriented "development,"

Thai society, especially in rural areas, has been, physically and mentally, dramatically changed. However, today it is realized that those policies might have not been the appropriate ones for the country's growth and development.

During these past four decades of social and economic changes in Thai society, Lao Khamhom, the pseudonym of Khamsing Srinauk, National Artist 1992, one of the main literary figures in Thai literary circles, a senior mentor of Thai writers, has conducted performed his career as a writer whose works, both in short story and novel form, are related to social and political changes in Thailand. It can be said that the development of his writing career has flourished along with those tremendous social changes in Thai rural areas. Lao Khamhom once stated that when writing fiction, he intends to appeal to Thai people, by presenting the poverty, decline and backwardness of Thai peasants, for the understanding and social conscience of the urban. Lao Khamhom's fiction raises simple and honest questions, without giving answers, about social changes, the inequality of national development, an increasing gap between the urban and the rural, and the collapse of the agricultural community, which is still the biggest sector of Thai society, due to the impact of industrialization. "The social complaints" in Lao Khamhom's literary works enable readers to realize that everybody should take responsibility for the misery that results and perceive that the peasants are still living under difficult conditions. They are still poor and have always been oppressed.

The development of Lao Khamhom's literary works during the past four

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** Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

decades is closely related to contemporary social and political changes in Thai society, especially in the Northeast. Social changes from the literary dimension, particularly in the development of Lao Khamhom's literary works, therefore, are interesting and valuable because they are not only individual but collective complaints of the poor peasants, whose lives have never improved.

This article is an attempt to analyze the development of Lao Khamhom literary works in these four decades, by emphasizing social changes in Thai rural society in Lao Khamhom's perspective in order to scrutinize the impact of the social and economic development plan on the Thai rural community and the writer's reaction to those policies and social changes.

The Development of Lao Khamhom's Literary Works

Lao Khamhom is one of the first writers from a poor rural background. He tries to bring the reality of peasant life to urban readers, neither sentimentalizing nor romanticizing their lives. He has been widely regarded by fellow writers and critics as one of Thailand's most accomplished short story writers.

Lao Khamhom was born in a family of rice farmers in Khorat province in northeast Thailand. He read all that he could get his hands on while tending his family's buffaloes. His uncle, who was a monk, encouraged him to read and study, and other family members supported his attending secondary school. After graduating from high school, he attended night classes of the Faculty of Journalism at Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University, at

the same time working as a political correspondent for Naew Na newspaper and writing occasional short stories. He got a position at the Forestry Department, and worked in Lampoon province in the north of Thailand for five years (1952-1956). Returning to Bangkok in 1956, he spent two years as a research assistant to Dr. Herbert P. Phillips, an American anthropologist from Cornell University and other American scholars. With the money he earned from this job, he bought farm land and established a small publishing company. At the same time, he began to write short stories and published his most famous collection, *Fa Bo Kan* (The Sky is No Barrier)

During the Sarit regime (1958-1963), Lao Khamhom abandoned writing and turned to farming in Khorat. After the overthrow of the military regime in October 1973, he became actively involved in politics and was appointed vice chairman of the newly formed Socialist Party of Thailand. When the military returned to power following the massacre of students on October 6, 1976, he and his family fled to Sweden where they spent two years as political refugees, which was perhaps the most depressing period of his life, before returning to Thailand in 1981 to resume his former life as a modern farmer and writer.

Lao Khamhom's literary works can be divided into two periods. The first period is the period before the October 14, 1973 event (1958-1973). The second period is the period after the October 14, 1973 event up to the present time.

The first period, 1958-1973: Wit and Humor

This period covers two collections of short stories: *Fa Bo Kan* (The Sky is no Barrier) and *Kampaeng* (The Wall) a collection of 13 short stories written and published in Sangkhomsat Parithat (Journal of Social Sciences Review) before the October 14, 1973 event. *Kampaenglom* (The Windwall) is a revised edition published later, which includes four other short stories written after 1973.

Since it first appeared in 1958, *Fa Bo kan* has been reprinted about 15 times. Many of the stories in this collection appeared in English translation under the title *The Politician and Other Stories* (1973) and were translated into other languages too, e.g., Japanese, Swedish, Danish, Singhalese, Malay, German and French. The stories in this collection portray the reactions of villagers to a rapidly changing rural society in which foreign-aided economic development rudely encroaches upon their way of life. He also portrays the downtrodden villagers encounter and their attempt to cope with the incomprehensible changes, in the name of "development" with irony and satire.

Thai rural society as portrayed by Lao Khamhom in his first period of writing is a substantial society in which the relationship among villagers is still friendly and mutually depended. Though poverty is a common condition, the villagers have their own method of struggling to survive. Superstitious beliefs and folk-Buddhism are their paradigm of thinking. The image of villagers given by Lao Kham Hom are honest, naïve or even simpleminded

people. The impact of the social and economic development plan, the expansion of capitalism, the hypocrisy of politicians and bureaucrats are factors that stir changes in the village.

The Irony of the Development

The social and economic development plan, started in the Sarit regime, concentrated on materialism, industrialization and modern infrastructure, such as buildings, roads and public utilities. Due to social beliefs imported Western goods are better than local ones, the government distributed, with U.S. aid, the breeding stock; chickens, buffaloes and bulls. This causes the misunderstanding by the villagers that even human beings may need breeding from the West. Here is the way the villagers try to know "American" and the policy of "development:

The Agriculture Officer said that the Government ordered these bulls from America because our own cows are good for nothing. They are old-fashioned, grow slowly, neither good for food nor work..."

"...I lived to see the day! I have seen an American. With my own eyes I saw him.

The size of him! Like this."

"Eh, what can I compare him with so that you can get an idea? I know, you've seen a scarecrow haven't you?

"I have," she agreed.

"Well, he was like that; all arms and legs with hazel eyes just like our own dog's, hair yellow-brown like dried grass... With him was a Thai, a

very crude man. I don't know what they are saying except for the word "Yet"* that no decent person would use but he kept repeating it"

(* "Yet" and "Yes" are a pun. Thai people have difficulty in pronouncing the final stop of 's' so that the word "yes" sounds like "yet" which is a crude Thai word meaning sexual intercourse.)

...

"Why did they send that scarecrow over?"

"Uh," her husband sighed deeply.

"They sent him for breeding just like the bull, didn't they?"

she asked further.

There was silence for a moment. "That's right. That must be it. That must be why the Thai man was using that smutty word more than half a day."

"And they are sending him to our District?"

"Not yet I think. Now they're just using him in Bangkok for the women there," he replied, tickled by the idea.

"Oh!"

"What do you mean by "Oh"?" her husband queried.

"Oh, erh, that is I feel sorry for, well, I fell sorry for those Thai cows, that's all grandpa," she faltered.

"Well, for Thai people too."

The last sentence hardly disturbed the stillness of the dark night.

(Breeding Stock, p.29-31.)

The aesthetics of this story lies in the ability of the writer to use a pun and the naivety of the villagers trying to understand the policy of the government in order to show the misunderstanding and the miscommunication of the situation caused by the policy of "development." The use of wit and humor here encourages the reader to question further about the meaning of the word "development" and also suggests the naivety of the government.

Lao Khamhom uses this style of irony and satire again in another short story titled "Pai" (Name Tag) written in 1970. At the time when a U.S. military base was located in UdonThani Province, many young Thai women turned to prostitution. The way to show that those young ladies working in the province were not "rent wives" or prostitutes was to show one's name tag. When the military base withdrew from Udon, the young ladies no longer put their name tag on, which made their mothers think that their daughters might have become prostitutes.

The social values that appreciate Western products and people generated by the government had a tremendous effect on the agricultural production. Not only the breeding stock, but the government also brought in seed plants, such as seed fiber crops, which offered high productivity for the first few years but later on destroyed soil quality and caused drought. This issue has been raised by Lao Khamhom in many short stories, such as "Kangwan Prai" (The Echo Forest) and "Khao Cak Play Na" (News from the End of the Ricefield) in Lom Laeng.

The expansion of capitalism has been another factor which has caused

changes in rural villages. The villagers are victimized by many oppressors. The local capitalists or “Thao Kae”, bit by bit, expropriate villagers’ land and the local bureaucrats or “Chao Nai” oppress the villagers and at the same time are oppressed by the local capitalists in “Sua To” (Table Bandit), “Phonlamuang Dee” (The Good Citizen). There are also those from the city such as politicians and medicine hawkers in “Nak Kan Muaung” (The Politician) and “Mo Thuan” (Quack Doctor).

The villagers, therefore, have to endure not only the uncertainty of nature which could damage their agricultural products, but also local and urban oppressors who could make them the debtors, losers and bankrupt.

Among many changes in rural society, those things unchanged are poverty and the superstitious beliefs of the peasants. Lao Khamhom subtly criticizes the superstitious beliefs of the villagers by presenting characters who challenge these beliefs, such as “Kane” in “Kradan Fai”(The Plank).

Although the rural lives presented in Lao Khamhom’s short stories are lives of ordinary people, with an optimistic point of view, he criticizes and mocks the ruled, and their naivety. Lao Khamhom challenges the hegemony of the central government by using honest and simple villagers who ironically react to those changes generated by the policies of the government, and some of them can even compete using their folk wit, such as “Koen” in “Nak Kan Muang” (The Politician).

The Second Period, 1973 up to the Present Time: Tragedy of the Defeated

This period covers *Lom Laeng*, a collection of “folktales” in the form of short story. Most of them were written in 1981 and published in *Chatturat* (The Square) magazine. *Maew* (A Cat), a novel written in 1976, was first published in 1984. Thong Pan, a film’s script was written in 1976. And *Praweni* (Intercourse) was written in 1996.

The development of Lao Khamhom literary works can be seen from his style, the way he presents social problems and his world view. In *Lom Laeng*, he stated in the introduction that he would like to present the failure of the development plan that put priority on industrialization rather than agricultural development and neglected local wisdom. “Even though there are more buildings, more roads, electricity, etc., the poverty and the desolation of the peasant remains. ...” He confessed that he was tired and depressed to writing these folk stories because they are more tragic than tragedy. At this stage, he analyzed social problems into two levels. The universal level relates to the fact that all the human beings are social animals. They tend to take advantage of the other by instinct, like bigger fish swallowing small ones. On the local level, political and state oppression keep on invading the life of the villagers in various and more complex ways, which the villagers cannot penetrate. The folk stories that he wrote, therefore, are only the “outer” phenomena of the genuine “inner” problems.

In many short stories in *Lom Laeng*, Lao Khamhom presents the social status of the peasants as bankrupt. Due to

drought and debts, farmers have to sell their land or they are expropriated. The peasants lose not only their lands, but also their buffalo. So they have to rent buffaloes from those who confiscate them. Some villagers try to struggle in their own way but in the end they find out that the thieves are officials in "Khadi Tam Khuay" (A Case of Looking for Buffaloes) and "Khay Khao Daeng" (Red Horned Buffaloes). Another way of survival is to sell one's ricefields and become a janitor in a public school. Even though the job he gets is one of the lowest classes of government official, he gains some privileges as an official and can afford to give his children a better education in "Thit Ma Mai Ngoo" (Thit Ma is not Stupid).

The style of expression and the narrative in *Lom Laeng* is much different from the one in *Fa Bo Kan*. He seems to be more realistic, serious and have less sense of humor.

Thong Pan (1976) is the film's script that Lao Khamhom adapted from the real story of Thong Pan, a poor farmer who joined the seminar on the impact of the construction of Pha Mong Dam on the local way of life. He emphasizes again that "the most serious problem of Thailand is peasant's poverty. Eighty-five percent of the Thai population are peasants who are still poor, like Thong Pan. It is a pity that those in power are afraid to face this problem and are avoiding it.

The development of Lao Khamhom's literary works and world view can be seen in only one of his novels titled *Maew* (The Cat, 1984). The rural society presented in this novel is a quiet, isolated scene in the Northeast. The main character, "Phu Some", is a lonely old man who is always fearful and worried

about everything. All in his family move to a better place to survive but the old man refuses to leave. The village is almost deserted. Therefore, he stays alone as the keeper of the barn, which once was on his own land, but now urban capitalist take over and hire him as the barn keeper. His dwelling place is, in his opinion, better called "hollow or den." Every month, the owner brings him a bag of rice and other sundry goods. That cause the villagers to call him "Khon mee bun" or "the blessed one," which is an irony because he is all alone, fearful, bored and depressed. At his age, he still has to work for something to eat. His everyday life is so monotonous that time is meaningless for him. All he has is memories that recollect the good old days. He almost resigns himself to his fate. One day, he comes across a black cat. He keeps and loves it dearly. However, as time passes because of his superstitious belief, worry and fear, he thinks that the cat is tiger or even a monster that he has to pay respect to. Finally, a young boy proves that the cat is only an ordinary female cat, so he can use his feet to play with it. The story ends up with the scene of a day of heavy rain. The heavy day destroys the dream of three people, who belong to three generations, to catch fish in the swamp in order to make a spicy fish salad for their lunch. Their stomachs are all crying from hunger.

The main character, Phu Some, can be analyzed on two levels. First, on the local level, he represents the fate of the peasant in Thailand who works hard all life but ends up in solitude and poverty. The life of a human being here is not different from that of an animal. The development plan brings no improvement to the peasant's quality of life and even worsens the situation. Drought and poverty make villagers migrate to other

places as it uses to be long times ago. Now the peasants are bankrupt and hopeless. Now that all they need are food and necessities, it is always hard for them to gain these things. Second, on the universal level, the fate of Phu Some also represents the fate of all human beings. At the end of life, one has nothing but loneliness. Human beings are always afraid of everything including their own imaginations. Lao Khamhom explains, "A cat is one phenomenon in human mind. Normally people are good friends but when in crisis, they have to make a decision. And it could happen that a tiger jumps out of the mind. Human beings may lose control in time of trouble."

A Web of Tragedy as A History of the Peasants: The Changes and the Unchanged

Lao Khamhom once said that all changes are eternal.

"It is true that changes are eternal. Even so changes can bring good or bad results. Particularly changes in human society. Man should choose the good way. If changes occur in the villages, the villages should have chances to choose the better ones."

The development of Lao Khamhom's literary works presents social changes in Thai rural society, from the less complicated ones to the more complex, and various forms of changes. Factors in these social changes are the social and economic development plan of the government, the expansion of capitalism, and the hypocrisy of politicians and bureaucrats. At the same time, he also

shows the unchanged and the unsolved, serious problem, that is, poverty. The villagers still have superstition as their form of belief which brings them to an even worse situation because it may be hard for them to penetrate the status of being oppressed. History of the peasants presented in Lao Khamhom's literary works, therefore, is a web of tragedy of common people who never have any tragic flaws but have to end their lives in tragedy. However, let us hope that the catharsis which readers experienced from reading these tragedies may bring better understanding and social conscience to the urban community, so that there will be neither wall nor sky as a barrier to understanding between rural and urban people any more.

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