

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Debyasuvarn, Boonlua (Mom Luang). 1968. *Thutiyawiset*¹

Because of my advanced age (88), this is likely to be my last public statement on matters relating to Thailand. Thus, I ask the reader's forbearance in judging any views expressed here that go beyond the typical conventions of a book review.

I feel I knew the author, Mom Luang Boonlua (MLB) as well as I knew any *khon-thai*, and I have only happy memories interviewing her for numerous hours in the 1970's about her views of her own life, family members, colleagues, and her own writings. Too, I have the clearest memory of strolling with her through the Botanical Garden on the Berkeley campus on her final visit to America, when she correctly anticipated her impending death. Finally, readers should know that I considered MLB to be one of the two most provocative (of the twenty-four) authors I examined in my 1987 book, *Modern Thai Literature*.

¹ The novel was translated by Abhassara Charubha and Charungkiat Phutiratana, edited by Prof. Wibha Kongkanandana, M.L. Poonsang Sutabutr and Assoc. Prof. Churairat Laksanasiri, published by *M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn Cultural Fund*, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, NakornPathom, Thailand, 2017.

My purpose in writing that book was to bring to an English-speaking audience the ways various Thai writers expressed their cultural concerns. Although totally different in their narrative purposes, the other author I was particularly impressed with was Vasit Dejkunjorn who, like MLB, I came to know and from whom I personally learned a great deal.

I was pleased to read that *Thutiyawiset* was prefaced by "Reading *Thutiyawiset* in 2014 (B.E. 2557)" by Emeritus Professor Chetana Nagavajara of Silpakorn University which splendidly analyzes the historical value of MLB's first novel in an English translation. Professor Chetana taught at UC Berkeley in the late 1980's and his wisdom and character made him one of the most exciting visiting professors to Berkeley during that period. Our students thrived in his classes.

Although this is the first English translation of MLB's novel, published serially in 1966-67, I earlier translated a 1964 short story of hers, "Sneh Plai Jwak" (from *Chak Nung nai Chiwit*) which titled in English "The Enchanting Cooking Spoon" and which was a subtle exposition of the verbal exchanges and misunderstandings between a loving wife and a self-concerned husband.

Although such relationships do occur all over the world, MLB's treatment of this Thai variation of marital ambiguity was delicate and subtle, and I looked forward to an equally non-judgmental presentation of wife-husband relations in the longer, more complex novel.

My expectations in reading *Thutiyawiset* have been both fulfilled and frustrated. This second and less tenable response derived mostly from my immature cultural prejudices. A large part of the first 80 pages of the novel is concerned mainly with the small talk and the numerous family links of the principal participants, and I could not easily identify the narrative aims of the book.

But on reflection it became obvious that small talk among family members is what all Thai I have known first do. Most Thai I know love to talk about their own interests in power, politics, money, personal successes and failures, what is right or wrong about members of the royal family, and some even describe their own supernatural encounters. But these issues are usually not shared with others (or readers), until later in discussion, after people have learned to respect, respond, and look forward to learning each other's thoughts.

Nevertheless, my impatience with the text changed radically with the beginning of chapter 6 (pp. 87), when the text outlines the preparations being made for the marriage of Cha-on and Withun, the two major figures of the novel, and their relationships with their children, relatives, and critical friends, over the course of their rich lives. This is a long novel, presented serially in 29 chapters and 497 pages, covering several decades, wars, and coups d'état (successful and not) during the middle period of the 20th century.

Although Thai history is the context of the book, I found the presentation of the

characters and their strengths and foibles and the way they dealt with their own psychic needs, to be the most persuasive feature of the novel. It revealed the author to me as a brilliant psychologist, someone far more astute than the eminent public intellectual that I had previously known and enjoyed. Her public fame was based on her family name, education, and range of interests, but as an author, MLB was a mind who loved subtlety, unpredictability, word play, and teasing her readers' expectations. The text is woven through with the repartee of verbal games—on which ordinary Thai discourse thrives, but which *farang* observers usually miss—although the novel's two brilliant translators often do convey the latent intent or meaning of the participants' speech.

As might be expected the novel contains a complexity of issues. At one level, it is the story of a warm, loving woman, Cha-on, who marries Withun, a handsome, well-behaved Thai army officer and through his own good luck and personal bearing he is promoted through the bureaucracy until he grows into the second most powerful person in the kingdom. While his hero is Napoleon Bonaparte, Withun's career ends when he, in an attempted *coup d'état*, is outmaneuvered by his superior, flees the country, but cannot escape the fatal reckoning at the hands of a mentally unstable adversary. Other than his reliability and good fortune, Withun is a man with few identifiable strengths or skills—not unlike some real Thai political figures. On the other hand, Cha-on, because she is her husband's wife, is eventually given a royal title of

“*Thanphuying*” which adds to her persona and sense of self. She is not only wise and decent but a good source of decision-making. Her one shortcoming is the respect and tolerance she gives to the immature man in her life and his incessant pursuit of women. Some of these women are fascinating, but they are disappointing in their choice of such inadequate partners. It is as if MLB was extremely selective in her approval of men.

There are several men and relationships in this book that are genuinely appealing. Wherever he appears, *Khun Kroen* is a man of total integrity, warmth and trustworthiness. His friendship with *Khun Chaeo*, an aristocrat who thrives on her ownership of a successful restaurant and her pleasure in making others feel happy about life, is delightful. (And for many Thai readers what better way to develop a relationship than through sharing delicious food?)

Thus, while this narrative was not always easy for me to read, it was rewarding in the depiction of complex social interactions, as careers ascended and fell apart. The story held my interest to its satisfying denouement. While this is clearly a work of fiction, it is a realistic rendition of some of the principal currents of elite Thai social and political life during the middle part of the 20th century. It is also an intriguing read.

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