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Review

Reviewed Work(s): A Village Ordination by Phra Maha Thongyoy Worakawinto and Thomas Silcock

Review by: Donald K. Swearer

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with a particular appreciation for northern Thai humor as embodied in the story, its telling, and the audience response.

Sug first appears in the cycle as a *dek wat*, a young attendant to a monk who makes the Venerable a complete buffon, tricking him into eating dog excrement, drinking hot chili water, going out on his morning alms rounds at 2:00 A.M., and finally losing his head—literally! Sug then takes the monk's place as abbot and through devious means builds up a reputation as a soothsayer with magic powers. In one episode in the abbot cycle Sug is asked to aid the king's wife who after three days of labor still cannot give birth to her child. Sug, not knowing what he will do, enters the queen's chambers and chants a mantram he made up on the way: "round pillows and musk melons." The queen, hearing the "birth spell" suppresses a laugh: "She wanted to laugh (at the abbot's spell) but was afraid the people would scold her. It was just as if she pressed. The child shot out. [laughter]." Sug's escapades continue until he returns to lay life, marries and becomes a farmer. In this part of the cycle we find the better known episodes beginning with the "Daring Bear Fighter," and ending with Sug being given half the kingdom to rule.

The reader who is familiar with the traditional deference given to secular and religious authority in Thailand may be surprised by the tale. Sug fools ordinary folk, of course, but monk and king are the primary targets. There is a difference between them, however. Sug knowingly fools the monk who acts the buffoon, while his ability to deceive royalty and benefit from it results from a combination of chance, his own wit, and royal favor. Does this mean that Thai villagers have disdain for Buddhist monks? I think not. Rather, it reflects the ability to poke fun at the familiar which, on the one hand, represents an ideal, but, on the other, does not fully embody it. Hence, the ambiguity in the Sangha is reflected in the attitude and the behavior of the laity toward it.

Sug, the Trickster Who Fooled the Monk is a bilingual text with transliterated northern Thai and the English translation on facing pages. It also has a complete vocabulary, making the volume a helpful resource for the study of northern Thai, especially when used in conjunction with Richard Davis, *A Northern Thai Reader*. It is encouraging that northern Thai or Thai Yüan is beginning to receive more study in the West as well as in Thailand. It is a rich language with a not insignificant literary tradition which has been woefully neglected. Students of the Shan, northern Thai, and Lao should encourage the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies to publish literary northern Thai as well as this delightful tale from the folk tradition.

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A Village Ordination. By PHRA MAHA THONGYOY WORAKAWINTO. Translated by THOMAS SILCOCK. Pp. xxiii + 93. (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, No. 25). London: CURZON PRESS, LTD. 1976. £3.50.

Thomas Silcock is a man of many talents—a social scientist (economist) by profession, a student of Thai and Southeast Asian history and culture, a published poet, and a dedicated Quaker. In *A Village Ordination* he has undertaken an exceptionally difficult and demanding task: the translation of a long Thai poem written by Phra Maha Thongyoy Worakawinto, abbot of Mahatat monastery outside of Rattaburi, central Thailand.¹ Such an undertaking confronts three major problems: Thai poetry is difficult to render into an effective English translation, and is done, ideally, I suppose, by a bilingual Thai poet; it calls for intimate knowledge of rural customs and traditions which Westerners usually come by only if they are acute ethnographers; and, since the subject matter is a Buddhist ordination, firsthand knowledge of Thai Buddhism and its institutional life is almost a prerequisite. Of course to be able to meet all of these conditions would be unrealistically demanding. We are fortunate that Professor Silcock did not take such considerations so seriously to heart that he refused to accept Dr. Adul Wichiencharoen's, Rector of Silapakorn University, and the J. F. Kennedy Foundation's invitation to translate this poem. As a result he has provided the English reader with a rich cultural and religious resource; a sensitive and insightful look into the total meaning of a rural Buddhist ordination celebration.

The poem relates the story of Pian, sent to the local monastery at age seven by his father and mother to be educated and properly socialized. It paints a marvelous picture of the strict and demanding abbot, Boon, and of the daily activities of the temple boys (*dek wat*): helping during *piṅḍapāta* rounds, morning lessons, childish pranks during the abbot's afternoon nap, and being schooled in local crafts. At age 14 Pian returns to lay life to help his parents farm, but after six years, concerned for his moral well-being and their own future merit (*puññā*), they encourage him to be ordained a monk. The poem then develops a detailed description of the ordination preparations; the elaborate reenactment of Prince Siddhattha's renunciation; visiting the village spirit shrine; both normative and contextual details of the ordination ceremony itself; Nāi Suan's spirit calling sermon on merit, virtue and the monastic life; the ordination as a rite of community celebration and social reinforcement; Abbot Boon's sermon on training and meditation; receiving ritual instructions from the preceptors; and receiving the monastic precepts. The last section of the poem paints a poignant picture of the activities, joys, and frustrations of a new monk's life.

The poem was written by Phra Maha Thogyoy with a moral intent which he makes clear in the closing verses:

This verse I have written, from the start, to frame
my words to form something of lasting worth.
Monkhood, the earnest study of the faith,
young Thais, in truth, from ancient times have sought.

Now, day by day, lads are ordained for fun,
a task half done, not reaching to the heart.
In the new monk's chant we're vexed, must prompt
their part.
Their books lie shut, unlearnt. They fall asleep.

For those concerned about the future of the Thai Sangha the author's assessment of contemporary monks sounds an ominous warning.

A Village Ordination is written in the Thai poetic form known as *klawn paet talad*, the most common for long poems. It is an eight syllable meter allowing for variations from seven to nine, a rhyming syllable at the end of every line and on the third syllable of every alternate line. The lines form quatrains with one rhyme linking each quatrain to the next:

..... b
..... a
..... b
..... a
..... a b
..... b
..... b d

Professor Silcock preserved a rhyme scheme in his translation using a ten syllable line with the internal rhyme on the fourth syllable, and divisions between the quatrains. In this reviewer's opinion the translation is somewhat stilted, partially because of the translator's decision to use this poetic form, but because of other factors such as word choice.

Word choice raises the more interesting question of meaning, however, not merely of style. On the level of the social meaning of language, for example, what happens when *thā kra ku²n kūt nī kūt tī trāi* is rendered, as Silcock does, "I always beat the truants till they yell," instead of the more literal, "Whoever disobeys or tries to run away, I'll beat 'em till he dies." "Truants" is certainly a more culturally loaded term than the direct simplicity of the Thai ("whoever disobeys or tries to run away"). More importantly, by softening the threat, the moral and symbolic value of the traditional elder/younger, superior/inferior social distinction loses some of its impact.

We can raise the question of meaning on other levels, also. For example, in Silcock's translation, the description of

Pian's parents first home which appears in the fourth quatrain overemphasizes the notions of harshness and crudeness rather than the overtone of the Thai which conveys the sense of the peasants acceptance of a simple, difficult existence (*prasāi yāk . . . mai āthōn*). In the same passage *s'ua fāk* is translated as "bamboo mat" when it must be the split bamboo floor of a villager's hut that is meant, and *lang khā faek tae pen fā* is rendered "the walls' rough touch crude jungle thatch supplies," instead of "roof of thatch, walls of plaited bamboo." Silcock's translation inserts "rough" and "crude" and misconstrues *tae*. I am not quibbling about words but about meaning. I am suggesting that in this very simple passage the feeling of Pian's parents for their environment, as well as some of the physical aspects of their house are not rendered quite correctly.

In the arena of religious language the problem of meaning takes on different dimensions involving contextual, normative, and cross-cultural considerations. For example, in the phrase, *rak rū cam kham khāthā* (Skt. *gāthā*) *suphāsī*, Silcock translates *gāthā* as "spells" ("proverbs and spells he knew"). While this rendering is appropriate at some points in the poem, in this instance the context would seem to favor the rendering, "proverbs and verses. . ." Of a more serious nature is the translator's tendency to use words with strongly Western Christian overtones such as "angel" for *deva* (p. 31), "grace" instead of "merit" or "meritorious power" (*guṇa*); and, he translates *esāham* as, "*Amen*, I would be a monk" (italics mine).

The above criticisms of Professor Silcock's translation are, I realize, partially a matter of opinion. Furthermore, they are not made to slight the immense value of *A Village Ordination*. Students of Theravāda Buddhism and of Thai culture are indebted to him, and the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies for publishing this volume. Explanatory notes would have enhanced the book's usefulness as a resource for research, although there is a helpful introduction written by B. J. Terwiel and a set of photographs, both articulated with the poem. The book is recommended to all students of Southeast Asian religion and culture.

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History and Culture of Himalayan States, Vol. II, Himachal Pradesh. By SUKHDEV SINGH CHARAK. New Delhi: LIGHT AND LIFE PUBLISHERS. 1979. 372 pp. \$30.00.

This volume represents an attempt to conclude a series of brief historical and cultural studies of various Himalayan states, now included in the state of Himachal Pradesh, including Chamba, Mandi, Suket, Bilaspur Kutlehr, Banghal, Kulu, Lahul and Spite. As such the volume is a companion