

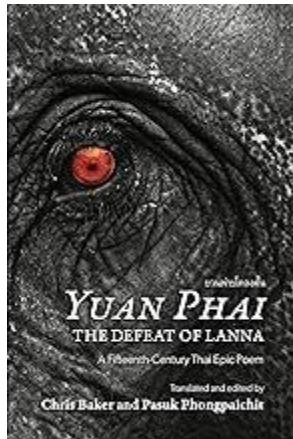
Yuan Phai: The Defeat of Lanna – A Fifteenth-Century Thai Epic Poem

Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, editors and translators

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Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, long working together as a team, have systematically compiled a notable body of work contributing to the contemporary understanding of Thai history. In recent years, they have supplemented their excellent *A History of Thailand* (2014) with translations of some of the landmarks of Thai literature, such as *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (2010). In this book, *Yuan Phai*, they have turned their attention to the defeat of Lanna, the northern state centred on Chiang Mai and its absorption into the Ayutthaya state. As a martial epic, it is the first of its kind in Thai literature. It does not, as the translators observe, present any sense of valour among those who did the actual fighting but does represent an instalment in the development of the royal panegyric which has continued into the modern age. Nevertheless, warfare is glamourized to some extent as an activity and this, it is suggested, might indicate that the poem had an audience outside of the royal palaces where literate people might be gathered. It is a tempting thought that there once existed a kind of troubadour class of people moving from village to village or at least polity to polity retelling the tale of the battle. However, as far as I am aware, there is no evidence of this.

It is not known who the author of the poem is or even if there was a single author. A well-known passage within the narrative bemoans the inarticulacy of the poet to describe the scene as would be desired but this might well have been introduced by one or more of a number of playful authors, as the overall work evolved and changed over time. In any case, very little is known of the provenance. Further, the text is clearly incomplete and it is of course also not known how much more of it there might once have been and what content it had. It is possible to speculate but little more than guesswork is possible.

Baker and Phongpaichit's work is formidably difficult not just because of problems with the text but also because of changes in the Thai language over time and in the complex nature of Thai verse of the past. Currently, Thai has five tones but previously only three and the transition from one state to the next seems to have brought forth radical changes in pronunciation. Since the same string of letters with different tones can have very different meanings, this indicates there is a great deal of uncertainty with respect to possible translations. The authors have done what they can to publish what they consider, with their extensive

experience, to be the most likely rendition but they point out ambiguity in the accompanying notes. The comparison in English would be not Shakespeare or even Chaucer but with Anglo-Saxon verse, which is quite impenetrable to native English speakers who have not studied it.

As for the verse itself, it is explained in the following way:

“The meter used in most of the original is *khlong si dan bat kunchon*, an ‘elephant-foot’ *khlong*, which has three rules: (1) lines of five syllables with a two-to-four-syllable tailpiece, (2) rhymes linking one of the two final syllables in the line to the fourth or fifth syllable in the second line down, and (3) mandatory tones at certain positions (p.101).”

Understandably, this would be impossible to translate in verse into a language like English which does not have a tonal system and, rather than try and fail, the authors have adopted a blank verse approach instead. Even so, understanding and appreciating the text requires knowledge not just of the history of events described but of Buddhist cosmography and the courtly rituals of the time. For example, in the opening panegyric, this stanza is presented:

“Nine realms of living creatures He knows well;
nine kamma forms, in total, nine conceits,
nine supermundane ways, both good and bad,
nine things compounded – all He explices (p.25).”

It is obvious, especially within the context, that the king (Trailokanat of Ayutthaya) is being praised but quite a lot of additional knowledge is required to realise the extent and nature of that praise (and that knowledge is itself contested by different scholars). It is not surprising that the poem is considered to be ‘notoriously difficult’ even for experts in Thai history and language, as a back-cover blurb from the noted religious scholar Professor Justin McDaniel observes.

As for the content of the poem, after the establishment of the virtue of the king, we move on to the actual historical events of the work. These focus on the struggle between Ayutthaya and the ruler of Lanna, Tolok, ‘the Lao,’ who receives the opposite treatment from Trailokanat: he is thoroughly demonized, being shown to have killed both his father and one of his sons and possibly having become insane in the process. He is demonstrably disloyal in a work that stresses the importance of loyalty to family and liege. He is also, of course, doomed to failure on the battlefield but only after a fierce and protracted struggle. The war takes a number of years to reach a conclusion – it was presumably not fought on an all-out basis as the monsoon season would have made moving an army all but impossible and the various forms of support required would have been composed of corvée labour who would have been needed to harvest enough food to feed the lord’s community or else risk having it dissolve, loyalty notwithstanding. One city, Chaliang (though to be the modern Chiang Chalian) changes hands several times during the course of the narrative. However, eventually the final battle does arrive, which historically occurred in 1474 or 5 and the virtuous prevail:

“The Golden Helmets, slashing, sally forth,
For them a fight is just a finger’s snap.
Ten men against a thousand hefty Lao,
they lop off heads, lugged back to give the king.

With spear and shield they charge ahead in streams.
Now man-to-man they slay the fear-filled Lao.
The peacock-tails flag on the Golden Spears.
In hordes the Yuan flee to find safe camp (p.77).”

Defeat in battle s, of course, disastrous as the victorious army would be expected to take away all useful resources (e.g. women and skilled workers) as slaves and leave nothing behind. It is certainly the case that Lanna was one of several previously independent states which have been incorporated into what became known as Siam and, now, Thailand, with only a few residual laments about what had once been remaining, although dialects and accents remain distinctive. In the case of the South of Thailand alone has there been any real interest in recreating the previously existing state.

This book, slim as it appears to be, represents a significant contribution to understanding the processes by which a unified Siam emerged and some of the individuals who helped bring this to pass. The translated verse is presented clearly and well and the accompanying notes are helpful without overwhelming the general reader. There is obviously space for more detailed scholarly work on various aspects of the poem and explorations from, for example, feminist and class-based perspectives will be very helpful. However, the book is essential for anyone interested in Thai history.

References

Baker, C. and P. Phongpaichit (2014). *A history of Thailand*. 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baker, C. and P. Phongpaichit (2010). *The tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen: Main volume*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

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