A NOTE ON PŪN

by

Hans Penth

The question of the date when large cannon were first made or used by Thai military has been much discussed. The prevailing opinion is that the Portuguese brought the knowledge of casting and using artillery to Thailand. Some writers, however, prefer earlier dates, as for instance Sut Sāngwichian in a recent article entitled "Could the Thais in the past make big cannon and manage them themselves, or not?" He suggests that the Thais of the 13th century, and perhaps even many centuries before, were able to make or at least to manage big ordnance. His argument is, among others, based on the word pūn "cannon", and he quotes several passages from Lan Na Thai chronicles, as cited by Thuaihan Yomanak, where this word is used in connection with old warfare.

Without wishing to discuss here the date when the Thais made their first cannon, or when they first used big artillery, nor wishing to discuss the philological and historical value of the sources referred to, I should like to draw attention to the circumstance that in classical Thai Lan Na, i.e. the Thai idiom(s) used in the old Lan Na Thai, pūn has not the meaning of "cannon", but of "arrow".

In northern Thailand, it is still possible to find old men who remember that formerly, in their language, pūn meant an arrow.

Besides, there is philological evidence. I shall quote just one passage where it is possible to gather from the context that an arrow must have been meant rather than artillery. In a palm leaf manuscript of the Chiang Mai Chronicle in my possession, it is said that "Jao

---

1) ศุลและไข่รุ่ง. วัดบางปะอิน แฟ้ม หน้าที่ 15. เล่ม 6 (13.6) 2513 40-47.
2) หลวงหนุน ธนบดินทร์. พันที่ ได้นิวัฒน์ทางการเมือง, รวมบุคคลของบ้านอุทัยท่าสุข 200 ปี เล่ม 2, 2510, 157-349.
3) It is undated but was probably copied from an older text around 1930-40 or earlier. It consists of 8 bunches of palm leaves and is written in classical Thai Lan Na script and language. Compare Camille Notton, Chronique de Xieng Mai, Paris 1932, p. 26.
Mang Lai ordered a man by name of Ai Phian, who used to shoot very accurately with a cross-bow, to take a cross-bow and pun nya, and to go and lie in ambush at the wayside. When Xun Òong, leading Xun Xuong who was riding an elephant, came (to that point), Ai Phian took the cross-bow and shot Xun Xuong who died”. It seems obvious that pun here means an arrow; nya meaning “drug” in general, is here short for nya pit “poison”.

The misunderstanding that pun in the north must be a cannon, is a relatively old one, and even Phraya Prachakit, compiling the Phongsawadan Yonok from northern texts, did not always escape it, although he correctly translated pun in the passage just quoted, explaining even in parentheses that pun meant “arrow”, and that the poison was of such and such kind. To cite one more example from the Chiang Mai Chronicle: When King Tilok of Chiang Mai gave an armed escort to the Ruler of Phisanulok, who wished to emigrate with his population to the north, they were attacked on their way back to Chiang Mai. The King ordered “one thousand cross-bow shooters with poisoned arrows” (pun nya) against the attackers. In Phongsawadan Yonok, the passage reads “carrying cross-bows and long cannons” (pun yao). It is obvious what happened: the original text said pun nya which in the eyes of Phraya Prachakit or his assistants did not make sense because they understood “poisoned cannons” So they thought that nya in the original text was a wrongly written word, and they corrected it to nyao, yao in Siamese, “long”.

It would be interesting to know at least approximately when and where pun changed its meaning from “arrow” to “cannon”, and whether before designating the barrel of a cannon and eventually the whole outfit, it meant “cannon-ball”.

4) King Mang Rai, who in 1296 founded Chiang Mai. The event here referred to is placed by the chronicle in the year 1275.
5) Phongsawadan Yonok, เรื่องพระยาพะระไกท์, กรุงเทพฯ 126 (พ. 2450).
6) loc. cit. p. 138.
7) Compare Notton, loc. cit. p. 113-114.
8) loc. cit. p. 230.