

CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIAN LITERATURE*

by

Martine Piat

It is only during the last six or seven years that Cambodia has actually possessed any popular literature. By popular literature we do not mean the oral traditions shaped by and for scholars as is almost always the case in Vietnam, but works of mass circulation intended for the average reader. Only after the appearance of a mass reading public, which was created by the intensive schooling programme that followed independence, did publishers start to provide something for it. Until then popular literature did not exist in Cambodia though there did exist such literature, not in the vernacular but for the Chinese and Vietnamese, who are, in comparison, great readers. As soon as school was over, the non-indigenous children rushed to the lending book-stalls, and, standing there, poured over cartoons and serials. Adults were no less eager.

At the present time, the Chinese are no longer allowed to display Chinese characters in public, lending bookshops no longer carry stalls and those on the pavement have been brought back into side passages. Vietnamese customers are no longer important enough to justify such a business. On the other hand, the markets and other busy places are all crowded with small shops, frequently bazaars, offering cheap books written in Khmer. The contents of the shops are chiefly novels, in film strips or in cartoons, and more rarely in letterpress; since 1970 they have also included magic art books which teach one how to become invulnerable (these are by far the best-sellers), prophecies and some serious studies of contemporary history, dealing mainly with Vietnam, Thailand or the U.S.A.

In an attempt to define the characteristics of popular literature one must consider firstly its low price, in the range of 20 to 30 riels a booklet. Hence the publishers have to conform to a number of limitations. We

* This is a modified form in English of a paper presented at a colloquium at the 29th International Congress of Orientalists in Paris in July, 1973.

can easily understand why these novels are frequently film-strips drawn from films: they make full use of free advertisement as well as of a more sumptuous staging at no cost since they reutilise the same films. Nonetheless the printing costs more than for cartoons.

Sellers therefore prefer to deal in cartoons for a bigger return on a low price, and cartoons occupy the largest place on the stalls. The eye is drawn to the bright colours on the covers which must necessarily include a picture of a pretty girl and the song lyrics of a film.

These picture-strips have little in common with classical American comics. The nicest fantasy prevails in the disposition of pictures. There are none of the conventions which have the strips running from left to right, except the running of the pages themselves; quite often pictures are inserted between two rows at mid-page and one does not know from where to start reading them. In the same way, there is no settled order within the pictures, cues are put in blank spaces and are numbered when necessary. Bubbles and clouds for thoughts and straight lines for speech conventions, as well as vibrating lines around parts in motion, are unknown. This form of the novel is preferred by readers, and printed texts are rare. Uninterrupted texts appear literary and might scare away customers. In low priced literature one can only find so-called historical novels in textual form.

There is one characteristic common to all forms which is their small circulation. Titles are quite numerous, but it takes each book, the printing of which runs to 1000 at most, up to six or more years to sell out. Unsold copies are sent from Phnom-Penh to the provinces. In these conditions no reprint is ever undertaken. Certain parts of the *Reamker* in pictures have sold faster than others and cannot now be found and will not be reprinted.

All this literature is to be found in the same places for sale: bus-stations, Lambretta and taxi starting-points are all endowed with numerous stalls, reserved exclusively for this kind of publication. The market of Phnom-Penh, which is at the same time a bus-station, is of course the best stocked. But in the provinces the most isolated markets all have a few film-strips or picture-strips hanging like clothes on clothes-lines,

There is another place where one can buy their books, and that is the itinerant fairs which offer booklets to their winners as prizes. Children as well as adolescents seem to appreciate them and swarm around the wooden stalls.

The last characteristic of these publications is shared by their authors. Few of them are professionals who live solely by their pen. Authors fall into two categories. The first comprises those belonging to the Society of Writers, who aspire to become pure professionals. They are organized into a cooperative which publishes literary works selected by a committee. The low-priced novel is a by-product of their creative activity, literally a rice-earning literature. Moreover from European criteria it is often difficult to see any difference between the two categories of novels.

The other authors are only after profit; they write books as a means to increase their earnings, for those who already have got a living. However low it may be, the profit is still very big when compared with the cost price, as is the rule in countries where labour is cheap. In Cambodia as in Vietnam books are sold at two or three times their cost price, and much more for schoolbooks which teachers can require their pupils to buy. In this way non-professional authors, if they publish and distribute themselves their writings, can collect sums of money which make the enterprise worthwhile from their point of view. But besides the fact that their initial investment is tied up for years, as has been seen, they take into account neither devaluation, nor their royalties, nor the amount of time spent in the writing, publishing and distributing.

The conflict between the two categories of authors often breaks out as in the preface of *Snang Saur Manokev*, in which Ev Sam Ang proclaims that he is proud of being a market author: why should he be ashamed of bringing out his words when it is for the good of his countrymen; he does not care about the opinion of "refined people".

The subjects of this literature are diverse. In film-strips or picture-strips we find either classical or invented stories. Classical poems have all been set up in pictures: the *Ramayana*, *Khyang Sankh*, *Kakey* and so on. The narrative has of course been cut down in order to fit into a

small book. Only the *Reamker* has come out in several booklets, and the publishing was given up midway. Curiously enough, the Jataka have not inspired producers.

Local legends have been used as well; the maiden with unbound hair, *Krai Thong*, the *Neak Ta Khleang Muong*, the maiden with perfumed hair, have come out, either in pictures or in novels. In a different style, we find a tale, "The Blindman and the Paralytic", or "The Four Baldheaded Men".

Among the classics, mention should be made of the modern novels which have already been included in the secondary school syllabus such as *Sauphat*, "The Rose of Palin", and "Faded Flower", which came out as low-priced texts, and in pictures or in film-strips, sometimes as a re-use of the film. Cartoons too make use of imagined scenarios: either they come from the re-use of a film, or they are invented for the occasion. They are always exotic stories, that is, carrying a Hindu or Chinese flavour. In this case plates formerly printed with a Chinese text are used again. Nowadays the words are in Khmer.

Some categories of texts are always in the form of letterpress, chiefly the 'historical documents'. Under this name are written fancy novels which make use of all episodes of the "Chronicles", (*Pongsavodar*) capable of providing an attractive plot. That is to say above all adventures are rendered extraordinary by sword-thrusts or the fantastic. This is an easy thing to do because quite often the *Pongsavodar* revive popular traditions. But there must be either a beautiful heroine, or an unhappy leading young lady. Thus we come upon "The Story of the Capture of Lovek", *Prasad Banteay Chmar*, *Preah Bat Pnhea Yat*, *Preah Bat Batum Reachea*, *Preah Chey Chesda*, *Kev Preah Phloeung*, and even a 'prehistorical novel', "The Kingdom of Sovannaphumi". Modern history, poorer in romantic situations, provides only a few subjects. However *Snang Saur Manokev* relates one of the 19th century revolts against the French.

Curiously, detective novels are very rare, and they are always in letterpress. They are not actually detective stories, giving the reader food for thought, but tales of violence and spy stories with a touch of the fantastic, the Khmer equivalent of James Bond.

Lastly, Khmer translations of great Chinese novels, such as "The Three Kingdoms", have appeared lately. It is doubtful that these translations could be carried through to the end, considering the length of the originals. Moreover they are not actually popular literature, for the volumes are quite thick and sold in bookshops proper.

All these works share the same topics and the most important is the battle. Historical novels are packed with sword fights and the wielding of axes, while other works are filled with prolonged fisticuffs. One would think one were at the Chinese theatre: the flying hero takes fantastic plunges which take him right down on his victim. It is traditional Chinese theatre renewed by judo. Events run from a simple brawl in a night-club to wars between traditional enemies, Siamese or Vietnamese, or eventually against the French. What is continually remarkable is the cult of individual chivalrous deeds, set aside from all political ideology. The advertisement clearly states: 'After *Snang Saur Manokev*, the author is offering: "The Owner of the Bloody Boat", a sequel of "The Seven Sacred Hands", filled with secret mysteries, describing animated fights'.

Nearly as important is the topic of thwarted love. The pure-hearted maiden is either an orphan or a princess exposed to the assaults of an evil man. Her virtue and gentleness are of course unchallengeable, as well as her courage. The orphan needs courage to work and earn a living, the princess courage to escape from the evil man. The leading young man suffers only when banished from his ladylove; otherwise he lives a quiet life, is sometimes wealthy and always contented with his fate. After some time spent on laments, his drastic intervention brings his beloved back to him and secures a deserved punishment for the traitor. Parents seldom stand in the way of the lovers and it is usually a wealthier and more powerful rival who abducts the maiden to force her to marry him.

Up to now there has been no distinction between this popular literature and the European serial. But in the theme of thwarted love, there is a typically Khmer element, which is rape. It is almost inevitably brought about not only by the passion of the evil wooer but

also by his mother's advice. The pictures are rather unobtrusive, but inevitably the maiden gives birth to a baby which the husband will probably adopt later. This tradition of violence does not apply to princesses of course, but flourishes chiefly in film-strips carrying a contemporary subject. One should note that, like Homeric heroes, Khmer heroes are easily moved to tears, and their laments take up a rather important place with regard to the whole work.

Another of the Khmer characteristics in popular literature is the marvellous. This is not the Superman fantastic, but the Brahminical marvellous. Even in stories which take place in the modern period, the consoler of afflicted lovers is a *Moharusey*, an ascetic wearing coiled-up hair, a Santa Claus beard and a tiger-skin loin-cloth. The heroes' own will is seldom strong enough to overcome misfortune and the character of the ascetic is not only a strengthening help, but most often plays an essential part in the defeat of the bad. His weapons are mainly curses and thunderbolts. He willingly lends the latter to his princely disciples who undertake the reconquest of their kingdom. He is not the only one who possesses magical weapons; the bad too can paralyse with magic formula or club to death with a supernatural cudgel. Besides the weapons there are also magic vehicles such as flying chariots or the Garuda, which are reserved for the good. The bad go on foot or fly through the air.

Such are the important elements of the marvellous. Less frequently we meet gods, Indra or Siva, the former in his traditional *deus ex machina* role, and sometimes sorcerers and demons as well. The sorcerer or sorceress casts spells, enamours or poisons, and ends up looking like a Cham.

Curiously, the younger generation which is bored with reading the *Reamker* never tires of the fantastic. To them, literature, in pictures or otherwise, remains a means of escape, and anything that encourages day-dreaming is good. The cinema is much more often of modern inspiration, chiefly since the war.

The last widely used topic is that of the portrayal of society. This is never to be found in classical literature, is rare in the modern novel,

and always proceeds in stereotypes. The rich, stepmothers and mothers-in-law are hateful and only seek to abuse their rights; the rent collector is the instrument of the big landowner's evil schemes, as well as the village authorities. Peasants and maidens are perfect. The hero is not tied down to the same virtue as the heroine and he is often unfaithful, at least temporarily, and a consequence of a magic spell. There is the same lack of observation in the portrayal of a given social milieu. The description of the most lavish night-club does not rise above the ostentation of the old Petit Tricotin of Phnom-Penh comprising a dance orchestra and coloured lights. Even the most inconceivable topics are used: the orphan never has either brother or sister or relative, which is most unlikely to happen in Cambodia. There is the same lack of realism when Cambodia dreams: it dreams of a society exclusively rural and princely, without small craftsmen and without the Chinese. Even the usurers are Khmer. There are already some novels and films which describe the sufferings of lovers separated by the present war, but film-strips or picture-strips have not yet taken up this theme, and the portrayal of the society which they suggest is entirely conventional.

One might wonder why only a survey of subjects and topics has been made, without reference to the characters. These hardly exist; there are only situations and roles. One never sees a hero or heroine analyses his or her feelings or even has a hesitation. Racinian doubt, which fills the French sentimental press, never causes a Khmer young hero to wonder if he loves or hates. He is in love, and at first sight, and his love is returned.

The costumes are a good indication of this state of things: they are, as in ancient and oriental theatres, symbolic, and show at first sight the position and role of a character. In works with a classical subject, the costumes are those used in traditional dance.

Lastly let us consider the style of the texts and pictures. The style changes of course with authors and adapters. But it presupposes a set of general characteristics. It is usually prolix and very slow moving. This is quite unexpected, for normally picture-strips require suggestive conciseness. It is not peculiar to popular literature; concision, as far as

we know, can only be found in the *Reamker*, so perfectly elegant, but nowhere else. On the other hand, the authors, though writing for a large public, do not shun scholarly words and neologisms coming from Sanskrit or Bali. This derives from a second characteristic which is the poetic aspect, in the Khmer meaning of the word. This implies that the writer, far from shunning stylistic stereotypes, seeks them out though only for their emotive value. Lovers know of no other way of addressing each other but as *Meas Prak*, my gold, my silver, my treasure. The sound play of consonants is modelled on the classics as in the beginning of *Neang Sovannabanhcha* : *Nou loe phaèn thmâ da dâ thom skoem skaèk kandal prey hemopean sâm san sngat* ('Amidst the dreary big rocks in the heart of the desolate forests of the Himalaya . . .'). The same method is used in the Ramayana or in any other Khmer literary works. Alliterations and duplications are the two usual resources : *saoec kâak kâay* is an expression which is both common and poetical.

The style of the pictures or photos is chosen chiefly for the sake of economy : inexpressive and very general pictures of a conversation or a battle are used, then the text describes and characterizes. This allows cheap production : by taking photographs of one scene at two or three different angles, with gestures taken at different stages, one can use these photos repeatedly throughout the work.

There are also the settings to consider, and not only for the cover. The settings are very roughly done, taking no account of verisimilitude, projected shadows or perspective. Yet they carry a peculiar feature : the same abhorrence of empty space and the same decorative instinct as with the Khmers of old, though they have been perverted by the French sentimental press. Not a bit of empty space is left in the pictures and even a scrap of sky a little too large is filled up with a pen drawing. In the same way, the landscape surrounding two lovers includes thickets and trees in its upper part, and in its lower part a lawn which is never empty but always filled with frolicsome hares. Moreover, as often as not, pictures or photos are framed with drawing done in the best style of *A tout coeur* or *Nous Deux*. The Zorro style with black tights and skulls contributes to the decoration too. Usually the cartoonists are Khmer, unless stereotypes of Chinese stories have been re-used.

In conclusion, we can say that this Cambodian popular literature uses the subjects and topics of melodrama (thwarted love and battles) and the reader's object is primarily to find in them an escape; we have only fantastic deeds, beautiful girls, rich costumes, a world where the bad are punished and the good rewarded. And yet it is endowed with some purely Khmer characteristics such as the wealth of historical novels (dear to a people which seeks in the past reasons for hope), the Brahminical marvellous (which can be compared with Indian films), violence and rape. These picture-strips or film-strips are neither better nor worse than others, they are simply a product for consumption. Their low price is both the cause and consequence of their diffusion. It seems alarming that Cambodia is moving directly from a state of literary incuriosity to the reading of purely commercial literature.