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*Etude sur la Littérature Siamoise*  
(*Study of Siamese Literature*)

BY P. SCHWEISGUTH

Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1951, pp. 1-409, 1 carte.

‘It was not our purpose’, says the author in his introduction, ‘to give the public a complete study of Siamese literature, but merely a bibliography of it with comments. If this work may, in later years, serve as a guide to others who wish to investigate the subject more thoroughly it will have attained the goal the author set himself in publishing it.’

In order to do justice to M. Schweisguth’s book we should consider that it is the work of a pioneer in the field. The study of Siamese literature is an entirely new subject in Europe, and even in Siam it has, as far as I know, given rise to only one work of a general character, the anthology of Nay Tamra Na Muong Tai. It is somewhat

surprising that this work is nowhere mentioned in M. Schweisguth’s book, for it is apparent that he drew some inspiration from it and in certain respects has often followed it closely.

What he modestly calls ‘a bibliography with comments’, is in fact a guide which permits the reader to find his way about in an unexplored field, in as much as it gives a carefully documented chronology, a judiciously classified enumeration of various categories, biographical notes taken from the best sources (notably from the meticulous introductions to the publications of classic works made under the direction of Prince Damrong), and a bibliography which, without being

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exhaustive, contains everything essential.<sup>1</sup>

Siamese literature before the middle of the nineteenth century consisted exclusively in poetry. 'This is due', explains M. Schweisguth, 'just as in Sanscrit literature, to the intellectual temperament of the writers and to the utilitarian and didactic goals of Siamese literature in its beginnings. These works were generally written to be recited either on the stage or in religious ceremonies, and the verse form gave both the writers and the declaimers the opportunity to express themselves with all the solemnity desired: verse alone made it possible to remember texts whose content was sometimes sacred. It is also necessary to concede to the Siamese a natural taste for poetry, even among the least cultivated of the common people' (p. 12).

This poetry was in its origins a poetry of the court and has so remained until our day. Unfortunately nothing is left of the ancient popular poetry. Most of the kings, poets themselves, had at their courts poets who were in their employ, actually officials who collaborated in the literary productions of the ruler. It was an aristocratic literature, caring little whether it penetrated to the mass of the people, at that time for the better part illiterate. It was a literature of scholars; not only, as M. Schweisguth says, did the writers have to be highly educated in order to write

but the readers and the hearers had to be themselves equally well educated to understand; the texts are full of foreign words the meaning of which in Siamese is not always clear. It was a literature often anonymous or at least by writers whose biographies were empty of details and whose dates were uncertain and variable. It was a literature without great originality, for the poets, with rare exceptions, took their inspiration from the Sanscrit epics which they had come to know through the Khmers, and still more frequently from the literature on the Lives of Buddha, more particularly from the apocryphal Fifty Lives.

The quality of this poetry, meant to be chanted, is above all formal and consists in large measure in its form, in the harmony of the sounds of the language used<sup>2</sup>, in the musical quality of its intonations, in the rhythm and the rhymes, or the assonances of its prosody. The richness of form makes up for the poverty of thought, and poetic emotion is aroused by the skilfulness and perfection of expression rather than by the depth of the sentiment.

All the qualities of Siamese literature are brought to light more or less clearly in M. Schweisguth's book. In his introductory chapter devoted to general information on the people of Thailand, their history, their government, the characteristics of their language and their literature, he formulates certain well-expressed opinions on these

<sup>1</sup>This bibliography has one serious defect: it does not give the dates of publication of the works cited in the alphabetical list of authors at the end of the book. This at times makes cross references valueless.

<sup>2</sup>M. Schweisguth asserts (p. 16) that 'the Siamese language is not harmonious'. I do not share this opinion—for, without doubt, the Siamese is the most euphonic of all the Indo-chinese tongues, as well as the most agreeable language for singing.

traits. 'Even though Siamese literature is largely inspired by Sanscrit literature, it does, nevertheless, differ from this by special qualities endowing it with a character of its own. The Siamese have made the subjects and the personages dealt with more lifelike and natural: the most characteristic example of this is the book called *Ramakien* into which the Hindu epic *Ramayana* has been transformed. In their descriptions of nature, in the expression of the emotions, such as the sadness of leaving, regrets, frustrated love, the Siamese have in essentials remained themselves.' And a little further on, he says, 'There is little tragedy in the dramas, the finality of death is rare, most of the productions are childlike and have a moralising purpose. There are few scenes that shock, but, on the contrary, there is much gaiety and good humour, the descriptions are lively and picturesque. These qualities give this literature its special charm.'

After having explained (p. 14) that 'the authors gladly sacrifice content to form and care little whether or not they make use of this or that expression void of sense, provided it suits them euphonicly'; and also that 'they often make obeisance to the rules of prosody, going so far as to substitute homophones with a different meaning for certain words where accentuation is to satisfy poetic laws', M. Schweisguth makes a very useful contribution to the understanding of Siamese poetry in an excellent chapter of his introduction where he deals with prosody. There he enumerates various facts of technique, heretofore inaccessible to the European

reader not familiar with the Siamese works on this subject.

In his 'bibliography with comments' of Siamese literature the author follows a chronological order. Beginning with the remains of the time of Sukhotai (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), notably with the inscriptions and the Buddhistic cosmology of the Traiphum, which are the most ancient monuments of prose in Siam, he goes on to the first poetical writings, often hardly comprehensible, of the early period of D'Ayuta. Continuing, he traces the beginnings of the theatre in the sixteenth century, as well as those of the *Nirat*, or love-song, 'to give expression to the sorrow of a farewell, or a separation' dating from the seventeenth century. He attempts to give some reality to the persons of the poets who surrounded King P'hra Naray. Finally, he devotes three chapters to the eighteenth century, considered the Golden Age of Siamese literature.

The second half of the book deals with the much more familiar period, rich in writings of all kinds, from 1770 to our own days. This epoch has witnessed the birth of prose literature where we find examples of the work of the kings of the Bangkok dynasty and of several highly gifted writers, most of them, by the way, members of the royal family.

Following in his Siamese model, the anthology of Nay Amara, M. Schweisguth has also tried to give his book the character of an anthology and has given us many translations, choosing by preference the descriptions of landscapes and natural scenes.

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Unfortunately, as has been said before, the value of Siamese poetry lies in its form rather than its content. Even though the text may be fully understood, a task not always easy even for a Siamese if the poem is an ancient text, a translation of it, above all into a language as totally different from Siamese as French, is utterly incapable of giving even an approximate idea of the rhythm, of its musicality—in short of everything which makes for its charm and arouses the admiration of the Siamese. And since the thought content is generally meagre, where it is

not lacking entirely, and the simple emotions expressed, which arouse native sympathies, are hardly of a kind to touch the European reader, these translations have a general air of mediocrity and puerility which does not do justice to the originals fully entitled to be considered works of art of great merit and beauty. If M. Schweisguth wished by means of his various attempts at translation to set forth the artificiality of this poetry of scholars, lacking original ideas and the fire of inspiration, he has succeeded fully. But he might have reached this goal at less trouble to himself.