

KULAB SAIPRADIT AND THE 'WAR OF LIFE'

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I. Introduction

To say that Kulab Saipradit is a Thai writer who is little-known abroad is not to say a great deal; it would be difficult to name a Thai writer, excepting perhaps King Mongkut, whose letters in an imaginative, highly idiosyncratic English style are a favourite of historians, who was not little-known outside the country. Nevertheless Kulab is one of the major figures of twentieth century Thai literature, whose eventful life was intertwined with many of the major upheavals of modern Thai history. His outspoken criticism of the system and the powers-that-be involved him in constant controversies, and several times landed him in jail, and in his development from an author of somewhat conventional romantic works with an element of social conscience to a more radical and less optimistic social critic he was a forerunner of many younger Thai writers. Though known throughout most of his active life primarily as a journalist, it is now for his novels and short stories that he is mainly remembered. Particularly since the 14 October 1973 uprising, which occurred only eight months before his death in exile in China, his works have undergone a major revival, exerting a strong influence on the present generation of Thai intellectuals; indeed Kulab's standing in the world of Thai letters is probably higher today than it was at any time during his lifetime.

The present paper will outline briefly his career as a journalist and author, and then discuss several of his better-known works. Emphasis will be on their political and social content, rather than literary qualities or merit.

II. A Writer's Life

Kulab was born in Bangkok about 1905,¹ near the end of the long reign of King Chulalongkorn. Little information seems to be available on his family, except mention of an elder sister who was a performer in classical dance dramas and who during some of the frequent periods when Kulab found himself out of work provided financial assistance.² But Kulab's relatively good education, the profession of the sister, and his failure in later life to lay any claim to proletarian origins all suggest that the family were at least middle-class of moderate means.

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(Full citations of references abbreviated in notes are included in the concluding discussion of sources.)

1. The 1905 figure has been derived from the ages of schoolmates and Kulab's stated age at the time of his death; Rungwit, however ('*Si Burapha*', p. 116), gives 31 March 2448 (1905/06), which if the Buddhist Era date is correct would be the last day of the old Thai calendar year, corresponding to 31 March 1906.
2. Rungwit ('*Si Burapha*', p. 117) adds that Kulab's father died when he (Kulab) was young, and his mother supported her two children by taking in sewing in their home.

Kulab attended the prestigious Thepsirin School, where his schoolmates included M.C. Akatdamkoeng, Sot Kuramarohit, and several others later to become prominent writers of the 'Thepsirin' group. While at Thepsirin Kulab worked with Prince Akat and others in producing student newspapers, his first introduction to the world of journalism.

Kulab completed his secondary schooling near the end of the reign of Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925), 'the Great Literary King', and began his professional career with a series of newspapers and periodicals, writing both fiction and non-fiction pieces. These publications were characterized by small circulations and constant financial problems, and were often of an ephemeral existence. But while individual publications might come and go, the overall trend was toward a marked increase in the numbers of newspapers and journals and in the circle of readership. Writers were paid little, and sometimes not at all, and were often compelled to seek part-time work in other fields; Kulab for a time taught English, an ability presumably deriving from his Thepsirin schooling. He also wrote short stories, sometimes described as proto-novels, usually published in serial form.

It was during this period that Kulab acquired the pseudonym 'Si Burapha', by which he was to become better known than under his real name. It was bestowed upon him by an older, though not particularly well-known writer, whose own pseudonym began with 'Si' ['Sri'], an Indic honorific meaning something like 'great' or 'glorious'. The elder writer wished to establish an identifiable group of followers, and thus to each of several young writers with whom he was associated he gave a pseudonym beginning with the element 'Si'. Of this 'Si' group 'Si Burapha' ['Great East'] was to be by far the most prominent.

Kulab's major fiction works were published under the name 'Si Burapha', while most of his political writings appeared under his real name. He at various times used at least four other pseudonyms for various categories of writing, and on occasion he even listed himself as 'joint' author, using a combination of his real name and one of his pseudonyms.

The 12 months from October 1928 to September 1929 were a milestone in modern Thai literature, for in this brief period three important writers each published their first major works, generally regarded as the first true Thai novels.³ The first to appear, in October 1928, was Kulab's *Luk Phuchai* [A Real Man], thus giving him a

3. The exact dating of the 'first Thai novel' is somewhat arbitrary (there are 'proto-novels' and adaptations of Western works going back to the end of the nineteenth century), but the virtually simultaneous appearance of three major novelists in 1928-29 has served to focus critical opinion on this date.

plausible claim to the title of first Thai novelist. This was followed in mid-1929 by the serialization of *Sattru Khong Chaolon* [Her Enemy] of 'Dokmai Sot', and while this was still appearing M.C. Akat, Kulab's old Thepsirin classmate, published *Lakhon Haeng Chiwit* [The Circus of Life].

Kulab, 'Dokmai Sot', and M.C. Akat had a number of characteristics in common: all three were born in Bangkok in the same year of 1905,⁴ and all had been educated at prestigious 'Westernized' schools which were a product of the reforms of Chulalongkorn's reign. In each of their respective first novels the clash of traditional culture and Western ideas is a central theme, and in each of the works students educated abroad figure as protagonists (in the case of M.C. Akat, who alone of the three had studied abroad, the major part of the story is set in Europe and America).

But the three authors also had significant differences both in their backgrounds (M.C. Akat was of the royal family and 'Dokmai Sot's' father of royal descent and high conferred aristocratic rank; Kulab's family background is obscure, but certainly he was of humbler social origins), and in their subsequent careers. Of the three first novels, that of Prince Akat received the most enthusiastic critical and popular reception but also aroused the most controversy, both because the plot so closely paralleled the author's own life that many saw the work as thinly disguised autobiography and its critical portrayal of the hero's family as a reflection on the author's own home, and because of the unorthodox theme of love between a Thai man and a Western woman. *Lakhon Haeng Chiwit* established M.C. Akat's reputation, but he was to publish only one other novel (*Phiu Luang, Phiu Khao* [Yellow Skin, White Skin]) before undertaking a mysterious trip to Hong Kong where in May 1932 he suddenly died, or – as some still insist – chose to disappear. He remains an enigmatic but influential figure, whose brief, brilliant career recalls some of the tragic figures of Western literature.

'Dokmai Sot' has sometimes been compared to Jane Austen, for her novels are carefully crafted studies of upper class manners and morals. Another apt comparison might be her American contemporary Margaret Mitchell, for both portrayed the passing of a way of life and the efforts of an old aristocracy to adjust to new circumstances and values. 'Dokmai Sot's' works are overtly didactic, with a prominent Buddhist moral element; she is in a sense a 'conservative' writer and has been a favourite of the critical and educational establishment. Her plots at times appear contrived, but her skill often enables her to make seemingly implausible scenes work, as for example the

4. If the 1905 date is correct for Kulab; see note 1. Their deaths also have a common factor: all were to die abroad in Asia, in Peking, New Delhi, and Hong Kong respectively.

conclusion of *Ni Lae Lok* [This is Life] in which the young heroine, following the marriage of the man she loves to her best friend, succumbs to a heart attack – a building crescendo of fear and intense pain ultimately giving way to feeling of well-being and mystical release, “floating into the brightness of the next world.” After this work (1941) ‘Dokmai Sot’ virtually ceased to publish, but during the remaining 22 years of her life did work fitfully on a last, unfinished (and rather atypical) novel, a biting satire of the wartime policies of the Phibun government.⁵

M.C. Akat’s literary career was so brief as to appear static, and while ‘Dokmai Sot’ was active for over a decade neither her subjects nor the way she viewed them underwent fundamental changes. In contrast, it will be seen that Kulab’s interests and approach were to undergo significant transformations during the three decades of his writing career.

In 1929, one year after the publication of *Luk Phuchai*, a number of young authors and journalists joined together under Kulab’s leadership to form the ‘Suphab Burut’ [Gentleman] group and publish a magazine of the same name. The group included several members (in addition to Kulab) who were to become prominent literary figures, and maintained an informal but close cohesion through various professional vicissitudes and frequent shifts in employment determined by the rise or demise of particular publications, including several later revivals of journals bearing the original ‘Suphab Burut’ name.

The original *Suphab Burut* closed after a short period, but Kulab, who since starting as a writer and editorial assistant in the mid-1920s had already established a considerable reputation as a journalist, now went on (often accompanied by other members of his group) to be an editor of a succession of major Bangkok newspapers, including *Bangkok Kanmuang*, *Thai Mai*, and *Sri Krung*. His tenure in each position was brief, and his departure invariably the result of his outspoken criticism of the traditional system of privilege and hierarchy in the political, social, and economic order, resulting in pressure from the government or from his own management. Shortly before the 1932 *coup*, for example, an article by Kulab entitled ‘Humanism’ in the paper *Sri Krung* was disapproved in royal-official circles and resulted in the paper’s temporary closure.

Between 1928 and 1932 Kulab also continued to produce novels at a prolific rate, and at the beginning of June 1932, only three weeks before the *coup* which ended the absolute monarchy, he published perhaps his best-known work, *Songkhram Chiwit* [The War of Life], a Thai version of Dostoyevsky’s *Poor People*.

5. Kwandee, pp. 388ff.

The *coup* brought another change in Kulab's fortunes, for he was soon invited to meet M.C. Wan Waithayakorn, an influential adviser in the new government.⁶ Prince Wan explained that he wanted to start a new newspaper to promote liberal democratic concepts among the public, and he asked Kulab to accept the editorship. (An official of the royal government was later to relate that King Prajadhipok, before the June 24 *coup*, was envisioning an undertaking with the same purpose as Prince Wan's, and had asked Kulab to come to discuss the project; the audience, however, was scheduled for June 27, three days after the *coup* took place.)⁷ Kulab eventually agreed to Prince Wan's proposal, and the new daily *Prachachat* soon appeared under Kulab's editorship.

Despite his already rather varied career, Kulab was still less than 30 years old, and when the University of Moral & Political Sciences (Thammasat) was established in 1933 under the influence of Pridi, whose political liberalism and socialist-Buddhist utopianism Kulab admired, Kulab returned to part-time studies and was among the first graduates.

Kulab had initially been enthusiastic about the 1932 *coup*, but like many intellectuals he grew increasingly disenchanted with the growing ascendancy of the military in politics and with what he saw as factionalism and self-seeking. The new system, he came to believe, was if anything even worse than the order it had replaced, and hypocritical in its veneer of democratic rhetoric. Eventually he left *Prachachat* and returned to his more accustomed role of social and political critic working outside the establishment.

In 1936 Kulab made what was apparently his first trip abroad, a study tour of newspaper operations in Japan.⁸ The following year he published *Khang Lang Phab* [Behind the Painting], a romantic novel set partly in that country.

In 1938 Kulab and some of his old associates launched a new *Suphab Burut*. In December of the same year Phibun replaced *Phya* Phahon as prime minister, and as the new government embarked on a program of intense ultra-nationalism and suppression of political opposition Kulab became increasingly critical of its policies.

6. Prince Wan was prohibited from holding a Cabinet position by the constitutional provision which attempted to remove the royal family from politics by declaring those of the rank 'M.C.' and upward to be 'above politics'.

7. Cited by M.L. Wanwipha Charoonroj in an article in *Warasan Prawattisat* [Journal of History], May-August 1976, p. 33-34.

8. The details behind this trip are not clear, but it is more than possible that it was sponsored by the Japanese government, which at this time was trying to cultivate the sympathies of a range of Thai opinion-makers as part of its campaign to supplant Western influence in Southeast Asia.

One of these policies was the fostering of a 'Pan-Thai' movement for the recovery of former parts of the Thai state lost during the period of Western imperialist expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and especially those territories with which the Thai could claim close ethnic or cultural links. As *Luang Wichit*, Phibun's chief adviser on cultural affairs and an ardent propagandist for the movement, had his characters sing in a 1939 play, *Nančhao*⁹

... But our brothers are still scattered in various places.
If only we could gather all Thais in the world together,
our nation would be the great Thai.

Agitation for the recovery of lost territory was focused mainly on Indochina, and following the failure of diplomatic efforts hostilities broke out in late 1940 between Thai forces and the weakened Vichy colonial regime, resulting finally (after Japanese mediation) in the return of some Lao and Cambodian areas to Thai rule. The government's Indochina policy received widespread public support, encouraged by a concerted campaign in the Bangkok press to sensationalize certain border incidents which took place early in the dispute. Virtually the only writer who refused to go along with the press campaign was Kulab, who likened it to "throwing petrol onto a flame." (One of the few others to express criticism of the irredenta movement was 'Dokmai Sot', who saw it as useless and dangerous adventurism.)¹⁰

The Indochina crisis had scarcely subsided before Kulab was again in conflict with the government, this time over a series of articles published in *Suphab Burut* in May and June 1941 under the title "Buang Lang Kan Pathiwat" [Behind the Revolution]. These, based upon interviews with the ex-prime minister *Phya Phahon*, gave an 'inside' story of the planning of the 1932 *coup*. Their publication was severely criticized on government radio by two commentators closely associated with Phibun, on the grounds that it was 'premature' and likely to exacerbate differences within the *coup* group, and after 16 parts had appeared the still-incomplete series abruptly ceased. The affair caused considerable controversy in political and journalistic circles, and in the National Assembly, and also resulted in Phibun's sending several conciliatory letters to Kulab. In 1947 (before the November *coup* which returned Phibun to power) Kulab published the series, with the addition of a concluding chapter, in book form. Since 1973 this work has been republished several times, and has long been recognized as one of the authoritative accounts of the 1932 *coup*. (In its more recent publications the date has been added to the title, as the proliferating number of *coups* has necessitated a more specific designation.)

9. Quoted in Kwandee, p. 429. 'Nančhao' was an early kingdom in southwest China believed at the time *Luang Wichit* wrote to have been Thai and the forerunner of the later Thai kingdoms in the territory of what is now Thailand; subsequent scholarship has cast considerable doubt on the theory that Nančhao was Thai.

10. Kwandee, pp. 428-430.

The arrival of Japanese forces in December 1941 and the series of increasingly close agreements between the Phibun government and the Japanese, culminating in the January 1942 Thai declaration of war on Great Britain and the United States, again put Kulab at odds with the government. He was one of a number of journalists and writers strongly opposed to Thailand's entering, however reluctantly, into the alliance with Japan. In the critical war situation officialdom was even less tolerant of criticism than previously, and for the first time in his controversial career Kulab was arrested and imprisoned, being released only after the parliamentary *coup* of July 1944 which ousted Phibun and brought to power a government dominated by Pridi. In 1944 Kulab also published an essay entitled "The Meaning of Democracy."

In 1946 Kulab revealed another facet of his interests when he journeyed to the southern peninsular town of Chaiya to meet 'Buddhathat', a renowned monk. Kulab was deeply impressed with the teachings of 'Buddhathat', and (using one of his pseudonyms) recorded his impressions in the newspaper *Suphab Burut*. 'Buddhathat', despite his now advanced age, has remained to the present a dynamic and influential force in both lay and clerical Thai Buddhism, and his teachings have been disseminated widely in both Thai and English.

In July 1947 Kulab left on his second trip abroad, this time to Australia where he studied political science in Melbourne.¹¹ Kulab remained in Australia a year and a half, and in addition to his stay in Melbourne visited Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide, Perth and Broome. While critical of some aspects of Australian culture, most notably the 'White Australia' policy, Kulab on the whole found Australia under the Chifley Labor government a near-utopia of social, economic, and political equality, of honest and efficient government and compassionate and self-reliant citizens; these he contrasted with the economic disparities, political restrictiveness, and class-consciousness of Thai society. Australia's success he attributed to its 'socialist' government and genuinely democratic system, contrasting bleakly with the vicissitudes of 'Thai democracy' in the 15 years since the 1932 *coup*.

Kulab's Australian experience resulted in three quite dissimilar works. Kulab returned to Thailand in February 1949, on the very day of Pridi's abortive 'palace *coup*' against the restored Phibun, and beginning in May he published in several newspapers and journals a lengthy series of sketches of aspects of life in Australia. These, together with several lectures, were subsequently published in a single large volume under the title

11. As in the case of the earlier trip to Japan, just how this trip was made possible is unclear, and even Kulab's very lengthy accounts of his time in Australia give few hints of details of financial and other arrangements (a Bangkok informant does indicate that the trip was undertaken privately, with Pridi's encouragement.)

Khaphāchao Dai Hen Ma [(What) I saw].¹² Kulab's second 'Australian' book was the short novel *Čhonkwa Rao Čha Phob Kan Ik* [Till We Meet Again], first published in 1950. One of his best-known works, it is the story of a Thai student from a wealthy family who goes to Australia mainly to acquire the prestige of a foreign education, but who under the influence of an idealistic Australian girl develops a social awareness and prepares to return to his country to work for the good of the common people. The final, and perhaps most unexpected, of Kulab's Australia-inspired works was *Khao Thuk Bangkhab Hai Pen Khunčhon* [Forced to Become an Outlaw], a long biography of the Australian bushranger-folkhero Ned Kelly, adapted from an English work and published in 1952.

In an extremely prolific period immediately following his return from Australia, Kulab between 1949 and 1952 also produced "Marxist Philosophy" (adapted from an English work), translations (presumably from English versions) of Chekov's "In Exile" and a portion of Gorky's "Mother," "The Historical Status of Women" (lecture given at Thammasat University, and subsequently published), and several of his best-known short stories.

Kulab also continued to be outspoken on political issues, including opposition to the increasingly close military ties between Thailand and the United States and particularly to Thai participation in the Korean War. In 1952 he was chosen as spokesman for a newspaper group protesting government restrictions on the freedom of the press. Early in November 1952 the government responded by arresting a number of its critics and charging them with involvement in what has come to be known as the 'peace conspiracy'; three days later the government promulgated a stringent new anti-communist act. Kulab was among the most prominent of those arrested, who included journalists, writers, students, and even monks suspected of leftist leanings. Kulab and a number of others were eventually sentenced to 13 years 4 months in prison; he actually served a little more than four years before being released in February 1957 in an amnesty proclaimed on the occasion of the celebration of the 2500th year of the Buddhist Era.

Even in jail Kulab continued to write, publishing in 1955 the first part of his last (and in the opinion of some critics his best) novel, *Lae Pai Khang Na* [Look Forward]. In 1957, following his release, the second part of this work began to appear serially, and he also resumed his outpouring of journalistic pieces on a wide range of political topics.

12. Several of the sections in this work are by "Juliet" (Chanit Saipradit), Kulab's wife and frequent literary collaborator, who accompanied him to Australia.

In October 1957 Kulab and two others were invited by an official Soviet cultural organization to journey to the Soviet Union for the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the 1917 revolution. In the end only Kulab went; the Thai government (under the new interim prime minister, Pote Sarasin) did not oppose the trip, and even expedited the issuing of a passport.

Following his return from Moscow, Kulab in June 1958 published an account of his trip, and then almost immediately received another invitation, this time from a Chinese cultural organization to visit the People's Republic (the invitation being relayed through the Thai Journalists' Association as the Thai government until 1975 recognized the Nationalist regime on Taiwan and had no official relations with Peking). Kulab and several others went, and while they were still in China Field Marshal Sarit, the power behind the overthrow of the Phibun government in 1957, staged his second *coup*, and ousting his own appointees himself took direct control of the administration. The October 1958 *coup* was followed by the arrests of a number of politicians, journalists, writers, and others considered potential dissidents, and especially those suspected of communist or other leftist affiliations. Kulab of course was a prime example on practically every count, and facing virtually certain imprisonment or worse if he returned to Thailand he instead sought and was granted political asylum in China.

Kulab's last 16 years in China, like the first years of his life, are something of a blank, and even when Thai-Chinese relations began to improve in the early 1970s and increasing numbers of Thai began to visit Peking, returning travelers still reported 'no news' from Kulab. His one visible activity, from 1961 onward, was a series of broadcasts he made over the 'Voice of the People of Thailand', the radio station of the Thai Communist Party operating from Chinese territory, in which he strongly attacked the Thai government and the social, economic, and political order. But one would also like to know what, if anything, he wrote during these years, for after a lifetime of practically compulsive writing it is difficult to imagine that he could cease work for 16 years; in particular did he complete the unfinished novel *Lae Pai Khang Na* [Look Forward]? How much Chinese did he speak and read? And what were his contacts with Pridi, whom Kulab had long admired and who was also living in exile in Peking from Kulab's arrival in 1958 until Pridi's departure for Paris in 1970?

In Thailand itself, for a decade after 1958 only Kulab's prewar writings were allowed to circulate freely. From about 1968 onward there was some easing of literary restrictions, and even before the 14 October 1973 uprising journals such as *Sangkomsat Parithat* were publishing re-examinations of Kulab's work. Following the 1973 overthrow of the military government there was a flood of republications of his works, many sponsored by student organizations, accompanied by a considerable amount of

writing about him, and even since 6 October 1976 his works have continued to appear. But 'success' came almost too late for Kulab himself; he died, aged 69, in a hospital in Peking in June 1974. The Chinese government sponsored memorial services, which included messages from Chinese leaders and from Pridi, and in Bangkok a group of old associates published a memorial volume under the title 'The Life of Struggle of Kulab Saipradit'.

III. Five Novels

Kulab's active writing career spanned more than three decades, during which his style, his approach, and his subjects underwent considerable development. Class differences are almost always a central theme in his writing, but his earlier works tend to focus on the specific problems and situations of individuals rather than the more generalized portrayal of social groups evident in his later writing. The early works are also somewhat conventional, with a considerable romantic element, whereas the later ones are more purposeful and didactic; one critic has divided Kulab's writing into an earlier 'light', romantic phase and a later 'serious' phase, the point of division being 1948, i.e. the time of Kulab's stay in Australia.¹³ Politically Kulab's work moved steadily leftward, from the rather mild criticism of some aspects of the traditional system in his first works to an almost despairing rejection of the whole political, social, and economic order, and in his later nonfiction pieces considerable discussion of socialist and Marxist theory and the status of farmers, labourers, women, and other traditionally repressed groups.

Some of these changes can be seen by looking at the more important of Kulab's novels. The first, and arguably the first of all Thai novels, was *Luk Phuchai* (1928), in which a hero of humble background manages by diligence and determination to obtain a good education, wins a scholarship to France to further his studies, and eventually achieves high government position and an aristocratic title. The main villain is from an upper class family, but so is the hero's main romantic interest; there are convoluted romantic complications, involving the hero in various triangles and missed chances, rather improbably resolved when in the end the hero marries the look-alike daughter of his one true love. At heart it is a 'poor boy makes good' story, with the message that despite the inequalities and injustices in society, by hard work and perseverance even those less privileged can succeed within the system. In later works Kulab was to be less optimistic.

13. Rungwit Suwannaphichon, in an introduction to *Ruam Ruang San Rab Chai Chiwit Khong 'Si Burapha'*, p. 69.

Kulab's next major novel was *Songkhram Chiwit* [The War of Life], published in June 1932 just days before the *coup* which ended the absolute monarchy. The basic outline, as well as the epistolary form, were taken from Dostoyevsky's *Poor People*, but transformed into a Thai context. This is notable as the first use in Thai literature of a Russian model, and a significant contrast to the French and English (and Chinese) novels, mainly romances or mysteries, from which earlier Thai authors had 'borrowed'. The view of society is considerably darker than in *Luk Phuchai*, with the power of money the main source of evil. The gap between the wealthy classes and the poor (to which the protagonist belongs) is so great as to divide them into 'two separate worlds'; life is a struggle in which, as in nature, those who are 'big' and powerful take advantage of those who are small and weak. The outcome also contrasts with the 'happy ending' of *Luk Phuchai*, for here in the end the sweetheart with whom the hero's letters have been exchanged abandons him to marry for money. *Songkhram Chiwit* was the first Thai work of fiction to focus primarily on the problems of society, and has variously been described as the first Thai political novel and the beginning of 'proletarian literature'.¹⁴

Kulab's next novel, stylistically considered among his best, was *Khang Lang Phab* [Behind the Painting], written after his trip to Japan. The middle-aged heroine has recently married a much older man, not for love but in hopes of escaping the narrow confines of the traditional culture in which she had been brought up. In Japan on a 'honeymoon' trip she meets a much younger Thai student, and a romance develops. The heroine is more affected than the student, whose modern generation can 'love easily and forget quickly', but in any case their affair is foredoomed by circumstances and the ties of the past. Back in Bangkok, the student goes on to a successful career and the heroine, bound to a hopeless love, to a sad and early death (from tuberculosis). *Khang Lang Phab* is one of Kulab's least 'political' works, in which differences of sex and age and the values of 'old society' and 'new' are the focus, rather than his more usual background of class differences.

Kulab's 1936 stay in Japan had provided part of the setting for *Khang Lang Phab*, and his period of study in Melbourne in 1947-48 provided the setting for his next novel, *Čhonkwa Rao Čha Phob Kan Ik* [Till We Meet Again]. Again the protagonist is a Thai student abroad, this time from a background of wealth and idle luxury. Komet has gone to Australia mainly to enjoy himself and to acquire the prestige of having studied abroad, but meets a sincere and idealistic Australian girl, Nancy, who convinces him of the meaninglessness of his previous life. Under her influence he applies himself to serious study, resolved to return to his country to work for social and

14. See for example Trisilpa, pp. 33, 48.

economic justice for the common people. Nancy's tragic early death (also from tuberculosis) only increases his determination to serve humanity, and the story ends as, despite his developing relationship with a second Australian girl, he boards a train for Perth en route back to Bangkok.

This second girl is Dorothy, and the entire story is seen through her eyes, Komet explaining to her his relationship with Nancy in a series of conversational flashbacks. If unoriginal, this 'reverse' perspective allows Dorothy—who is presumed to know nothing of Thailand—to ask all the obvious questions, giving Kulab-as-Komet the chance to expound at length on Thai social, political and economic conditions. Indeed the whole work consists largely of a series of dialogues—or nearly monologues—Nancy to Komet, Komet to Dorothy. There are no other characters and almost no 'action', and some critics have complained that the work is hardly a novel at all but closer to an essay or sermon. The problems and inequalities of Thai society are treated at length, and particularly rural conditions and the economic exploitation of farmers to support the extravagant lifestyle of the Bangkok elite from which Komet has come. In a theme frequent in Kulab's later writing, it is argued that real change must come from below, from the masses; attempts to impose fundamental change from above, as in the case of the 1932 *coup*, must fail. Australian freedom, relative economic equality, and democracy are glowingly contrasted with conditions in Thailand, though all three characters roundly condemn the 'White Australia' policy and particularly the Labor Party's 'betrayal' in supporting it. Romance has little place in such an idealized atmosphere, and Komet comes to see that real love is love for humanity, not mere personal relationships.

Kulab's last novel, *Lae Pai Khang Na* [Look Forward], is in some ways similar to his first, *Luk Phuchai*. Again the setting is Bangkok, and again the central character is introduced as a boy of humble background who through rather fortuitous circumstances has an opportunity to obtain a better education than might ordinarily be expected and thus improve his prospects in life, in the process being thrown into association with assorted members of the upper class. A difference is that in the later work the hero is originally from the countryside, allowing Kulab to return to the theme of the gulf between urban and rural life, and specifically from the Northeast [Isan], providing a chance to consider the Isan-center tensions that have been an important factor in modern Thai history.

The first part, written while Kulab was in prison and published in 1955, is set in the last years of the absolute monarchy. Chantha, the Northeasterner, comes to live in Bangkok as a temple boy and then in the household of a high noble-official. He is exposed to the stratifications and pretensions within the upper classes, and even among the household servants, whose hierarchy resembles that of their 'betters'. His back-

ground follows him, and when he is sick a character remarks that country people like him do not need or merit modern medical treatment. But since early childhood Chantha has been taught traditional values, that status differences in society are natural and one should accept the status to which one is born, and it is only gradually that he begins to question the system. But there are signs of coming change, particularly in his school where some teachers are propagating democratic ideas.

The second part of *Lae Pai Khang Na*, originally published serially in 1957, opens with the 1932 *coup* and follows the careers of Chantha and some of his friends until the Second World War, by which time they are in such varied roles as government official, labourer, and journalist-become-political-prisoner. Originally enthusiastic about the 1932 *coup*, most soon (like Kulab) come to have doubts about the new regime. The second part is generally considered less successful as literature than the first, though this may in part be attributable to its unfinished state. (How unfinished is uncertain: it consists of a first section of 16 chapters and a second section of which only 3 chapters had appeared when publication ceased; furthermore, the subtitles of the first and second parts of the whole work—'Youth' and 'Middle Age'—make it seem possible that a third volume was projected.)

In the first part of *Lae Pai Khang Na*, Kulab has sketched a critical picture of the old society, though not without also showing that virtue too can be found at any level (one of the most virtuous characters is a poor Chinese student, another example of Kulab's explicit rejection of the usual conventions.) In the second part the 1932 *coup* brings high expectations, but these are soon disappointed. But still there is a degree of optimism and hope, and in any case there can be no going back to the former system—the only choice for the Thai people is to 'look forward'.

IV. Conclusion

With his heroines dying of tuberculosis and his somewhat two-dimensional characterizations, Kulab's works in some respects may seem dated, but he was in a number of ways an exceptional and innovating figure among modern Thai writers. He wrote what is arguably the first Thai novel, and certainly the first political novels; he was among the first to use 'ordinary' pronouns, rather than the conventional stylized forms; he was the first to use Russian literature as a model. He was among the first writers to discuss seriously the position of women (though not *the* first—in the 1952 lecture at Thammasat University he could quote a 1904 passage from Thianwan on the status of Thai women), and among the first to popularize socialist and Marxist thought. In the early 1950s he took a leading part in a seminal controversy among Thai intellec-

tuals over 'art for art's sake' or 'art for life'—Kulab of course being firmly in the latter camp. (In a 1951 debate on the subject he argued that, "The writer has a greater responsibility to society than other 'producers', in that a chair or clothes cannot turn the person who uses them into a good or bad person. But books can . . .")¹⁵

Throughout his works, whether journalism or fiction, the constant themes are class differences, social injustice, and concern for those at the bottom of the political, economic, and social order. (Even when writing about other societies these concerns are apparent: in his account of his stay in Australia the roots of modern democracy and egalitarianism are traced back to the uprising at the Eureka Stockade, for Kulab the crucial turning point in Australian history, and the only substantial biography he ever wrote was of Ned Kelly, seen in Robin Hood style as a victim of official persecution.) Kulab is highly critical of both the traditional pre-1932 system and the political and social order which replaced it, though fortunately his unrelenting basic seriousness, and the idealism that sometimes seems to border on naiveté, are leavened by a humorous style, his most bitter attacks often being in the form of satire or ridicule. One aspect of traditional Thai culture Kulab does not reject is the Buddhist religion, though he does question some forms of its modern practice, e.g. criticizing those who are willing to make gifts to already relatively well-provided-for monks but refuse to give to truly needy laity because such charity produces less 'merit', or, when the authorities send monks to lecture striking factory workers on 'proper behaviour', asking rhetorically whether the authorities have ever sent monks to lecture factory *owners* on proper behaviour.¹⁶

In many ways Kulab was a forerunner of the next generation of Thai writers. Among the most influential of these has been Chit Phumisak, born 25 years after Kulab (though he was to be killed in Thailand before Kulab's death in exile). Chit is perhaps best-known, aside from his poetry, for his critical analyses of the *sakdina* system, for the philosophy expressed in his work 'Art for Life, Art for the People', and for his writings on the status of women—all themes for which (and despite some significant differences of emphasis)¹⁷ one can trace precedents in Kulab's works. Since at least

15. Quoted in Trisilpa, p. 165.

16. In a section in *Khaphačhao Dai Hen Ma* contrasting the effective organization and bargaining power of the Australian labor movement with the fragmentation and economic dependence of Thai workers.

17. Chit, for example, treats the *sakdina* system in historical context, while Kulab's works (with some minor exceptions) are set no earlier than the last years of the absolute monarchy, a period he knew from personal experience.

the late 1940s Kulab had been writing extensively on many of the subjects that would become major concerns of Thai political and intellectual life in the 1970s, and thus the recent revival of interest in his works is hardly surprising. Kulab was also a leading figure in the evolution of a new concept of the role of writers, including writers of fiction, in society. The question of 'art for what?' has engendered heated controversy from the early 1950s to the present, and here also, as in the case of a number of other aspects of literary values, Kulab's once rather radically iconoclastic views have become for many of the present generation of Thai writers the accepted orthodoxy.

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A Note on Sources

Very little has been written on Kulab in English, and even the Thai accounts, while fairly numerous, tend to be sketchy and fragmentary. The present paper is basically a synthesis of a range of Thai sources, and only a few quotations and matters of opinion have been specifically footnoted. For biographical detail, perhaps most use has been made of an introduction by Rungwit Suwannaphichon to a recently published collection of Kulab's short stories (pp. 41-71 in *Ruam Ruang San Rab Chai Chiwit Khong 'Si Burapha'* [Collected Short Stories to Serve Life of 'Si Burapha'], Bangkok, 1979). (This is the fourth publication of this collection, the first two publications having been by the Student's Association of the Faculty of Science of Chiangmai University, in April and June 1974.) This valuable introduction is also included (pp. 122-163), with a number of other pieces (some previously unpublished), in Rungwit's recent major contribution to 'Kulab studies', *'Si Burapha' Si Haeng Wannakam Thai* ['Si Burapha', Glory of Thai Literature], Bangkok 1979.

Use has also been made of a number of other 'Introductions' or 'Afterwords' included in recent republications of various Kulab works, and of course a number of the works themselves (*Buang Lang Kan Pathiwat, Khaphachao Dai Hen Ma, Chonkwa Rao Cha Phob Kan Ik, Lae Pai Khang Na, Prawatsat Satri Thai* (with Chit Phumisak et al), etc.) Another source has been the numerous articles and reviews on Kulab and his works which have appeared since 1970 in journals such as *Sangkomsat Parithat* (Social Science Review) and *Warasan Thammasat* (Thammasat University Journal). Finally, among a large number of recent Thai-language theses on aspects of modern Thai literature use has particularly been made of Trisilpa Bunkhachorn, "Patthanakan Nawaniyai Thai B.E. 2475-2500 : Kansuksa Khwam Samphan Rawang Nawaniyai Kab Sangkhom" [The Development of Thai Novels, 1932-1957 : A Study of the Relationship Between Novels and Society], MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1978.

A substantial Thai work on Kulab which was not available, and which might be expected to fill some of the gaps in the data, is the memorial volume, Charat Rotchanawan (editor), *Chiwit Kan Tqsu Khong Kulab Saipradit* [The Life of Struggle of Kulab Saipradit], Bangkok, 1974.

In English perhaps the most extensive treatment of Kulab is to be found in Wibha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand* (Bangkok, 1975); this account, however, virtually ends with Kulab's first novel, *Luk Phuchai*, which is discussed in some detail (pp. 82-91). A considerable amount of information on Kulab's writing may also be found in Mattani Rutnin, "Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization and the Transformation of Values" (pp. 1-132, comprising *East Asian Cultural Series* (Tokyo), vol. 17, no. 1-4, March 1978). Also valuable in English is Kwandee Rakpongse, "A Study of the Novels of Mqm Luang Buppha Nimmanheminda (pseud. Dokmaisot)", Ph.D. dissertation, University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies), 1975, an excellent study of 'Dokmai Sot' which also includes discussion of many of her contemporaries.

Note: After this article had gone to press Chanit Saipradit ('Juliet'), who has recently returned to Bangkok from Peking, kindly informed the author that the broadcasts Kulab made from China were over the Thai-language service of Radio Peking, and dealt with social, economic, and political conditions as he found them in China.