



Prince Damrongrajanubhab and Thai Literature

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Abstract

Prince Damrongrajanubhab is generally well-known as a government administrator and as the Father of Thai history, but his contribution to Thai literature is also very considerable. This essay aims to briefly give his biography, to relate how his literary works have benefited the field of Thai literature, and to give some of his significant works as examples to demonstrate his genius in the literary art.

Keywords: Prince Damrong, his contribution to Thai Literature

His biography

HRH Prince Damrongrajanubhab, from now on referred to as Prince Damrong, was the son of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and Chao Chom Manda Chum. He was born in the Grand Palace on the 21st of June 1862. He was named Prince Disavarakumar. The name Damrongrajanubhab was granted later by King Rama V.

When he was young, he studied the Thai language with Khun Sang and Khun Pan. He also studied Pali with Phraya Pariyatidhammhadha (Piam) and Luang Dhammanuvatchamnon (Chui). From the age of ten, he studied English with an English teacher, Mr. Francis George Patterson, whom King Mongkut employed for teaching the young princes in the Grand Palace. When he was thirteen, he studied for one year at the Royal Household Guards school, which completed his formal education (MC Poon Pisamai Diskul, 1962).

Some may wonder why Prince Damrong who did not have an extensive formal education was so learned and was so well-versed in many fields. He was so erudite because he had been educating himself all through his life. As the year 2012 marks the 150th anniversary of Prince Damrong, it is therefore appropriate to write about him and his works.

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What caused him to be involved in Thai literature

In 1882, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) ordered the Vajirayan Library to be built. Prince Damrong was on the executive committee of the Library. The purpose in establishing the Library was to preserve old writers' works and also to give the opportunity for contemporary writers to display their works. Also for the same reason, the Library issued the Vajirayan Journal to publish old and new writers' works. Later on, Prince Damrong was appointed Director of the Vajirayan Library, which was later renamed the Capital City Library. Prince Damrong remained Director through the reigns of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII).

In 1925, King Rama VII gave his personal book collections and the cabinets containing King Rama VI's books to the Vajirayan Library. Prince Damrong rearranged the Library to make it more orderly. During that time, there was not a great quantity of books. Prince Damrong found the way to increase the amount of books, by announcing that the Vajirayan Library would buy old books for a good price and he requested library officials to look for old books. Additionally, he urged members of the royal family and high-ranking government officials to publish old books for distribution on various occasions such as birthday, funeral, etc. Prince Damrong himself would arrange for the publication. He would edit the book, write a commentary as well as the biography of the person. The Vajirayan Library asked for 20 percent of the amount of the published books. In this way Prince Damrong could revise and publish old valuable books in order to preserve some volumes for posterity and also sell the rest as fund raising for the maintenance of the Vajirayan Library (Prince Damrong, 1966: Memoir).

When King Rama VII set up the Royal Institute (called at that time Rajapandityasabha) on the 19th of April, 1926, he appointed Prince Damrong, a great expert in various fields of knowledge, to be President of the Royal Institute. In this capacity, Prince Damrong took part in making Thai arts and culture flourish right up to the present day.

Prince Damrong's literary works

Prince Damrong wrote numerous works. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Prince Damrong's birth, the Fine Arts Department collected all his literary works which were over 600 titles (Krom Silpakorn, 1962). He was named a World's Eminent



Personality by UNESCO, the first Thai to receive this honour and the second Asian after Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize Winner from India.

As his works cannot be all mentioned here, only very significant literary works will be named to give some ideas of the extent of his works.

Explaining Literature

Important titles are as follows: *Tamnan Trai Bhumi Phra Ruang*, *Tamnan Samkok*, *Tamnan Lakhon I-nao*, *Tamnan Sepha*, *Tamnan Lakhon Duek Damban*, *Tamra Fon Ram*, *Tamnan Kap Hey Ruea*, *Tamnan Sakkawa*, etc. These are books which explain the origins of important Thai literary works and genres.

Biographies

Important ones are *Khwam Song Cham* or (Prince Damrong's) *Memoir*; *King Naresuan Maharaj's Life History*, *Biography of Sunthon Phu*, etc.

History and Archaeology

Lectures on Siam Chronicles, *Thai Wars with Burma*, *Krung Rattanakosin Chronicle in the Reign of King Rama II*, *History of Buddhist Stupas in Siam*, *Nirat Angor Wat*, *Journey to Burma*, etc.

Works written in English

Prince Damrong wrote a number of articles in English for the *Journal of the Siam Society*. These have been collected and published by Siam Society to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Prince Damrong's birth in 1962 under the title "Miscellaneous articles written for the *Journal of the Siam Society* by His Late Royal Highness Prince Damrong."

Poetical Works

Prince Damrong wrote some significant poetic works. Though only sixteen titles in all, they are full of worthy thoughts and very well-written.

Examples of his literary works

Tamnan Lakhon I-nao

This book is divided into three parts: Part One explains Lakhon Ram or dance drama, Part Two discusses I-nao, dance drama, the Java Chronicle of I-nao (I-nu), Part Three explains the origin of Lakhon. Each part has many divisions.



In this book, Prince Damrong relates the origins of several types of Thai drama, the development of Thai drama in different periods from the late Ayutthaya period, the Thonburi period, and the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) period, from the reign of King Rama I to King Rama V. The book should be named “Tamnan Lakhon Thai” as he talks about I-nao dance drama only in Part Two (p. 97-116). The rest deals in details with various types of Thai dramas such as Lakhon Nok, Lakhon Nai and Lakhon Jatri. He also describes dance costumes, musical ensemble accompanying the dance, and the tradition in performing each type of drama.

Prince Damrong describes the differences between Lakhon Nai and Lakhon Nok as follows:

“It was formerly said that Lakhon Nai was performed by women. Only the royal court could own a Lakhon Nai troupe. The Lakhon that was performed for the general public was called Lakhon Nok which was performed by men. Later on, permission was granted by King Rama IV of the Bangkok period for the people outside the court to train women to play Lakhon. From that time on, Lakhon has been performed by women outside the palace. However, the fundamental difference between Lakhon Nai and Lakhon Nok is not that the performers are male or female, but that the singing tunes, the dancing patterns, the stories they play are all different. Lakhon Nai only plays three stories: the *Ramakien*, *Unarud*, *I-nao*, and no others. Formerly, when the royal women troupe performed other stories, these performances were called Lakhon Nok. Even the royal compositions of other stories such as *Sang Thong*, *Khawi*, were still called Lakhon Nok. Sunthon Phu mentioned this point in his Sepha composition, the *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, in the episode which relates the presentation of Phlai Gnam, : King Phanwasa did not order the release of Khun Phaen from prison because

“he was in a trance, composing verses for Lakhon Nok. As he could not think of the words, he was in oblivion. He forgot to do his intended royal duty and retired to his sleeping couch.” Thus, Lakhon Nok performed other dance dramas. The *Ramakien*, *Unarud*, *I-nao*—these three stories were not performed by Lakhon Nok. Though male troupes under the patronage of princes, like Krom Phra Bibidh and Krom Phra Bidaksa, performed *I-nao*, the performance was called Lakhon Nai. Considering the reasons cited, we can see that the difference between Lakhon Nai and Lakhon Nok



lies in the nature of the Lakhon. The main reason does not depend on the female or male performers as was formerly given” (Prince Damrong, 1965: 2-3).

Prince Damrong concluded the explanation of Lakhon Nai and Lakhon Nok that “the term Lakhon Nai must have derived from ‘Lakhon Nang Nai’ or ‘Lakhon Khang Nai’, then it was shortened to ‘Lakhon Nai’. When there was another type of Lakhon Nai, people came to call the former drama Lakhon Nok. Thus there are two names to differentiate the type of drama (Prince Damrong, 1965: 46-47).

The origin of drama performed only by women was described by Prince Damrong very interestingly.

“The reason why there is a drama performed by women in Siam cannot be found related anywhere. I therefore deduce from the reason given in Tamnan Khon and Lakhon that originally, a certain king who ruled Ayutthaya (possibly before the reign of King Narai Maharaj) thought of making dancers dance according to the Vedic belief, such as being dressed like gods and goddesses and dancing to fit in with the Ramasura story. This kind of dance was performed in a royal ceremony at the palace, the same way as the Duek Dam Ban Performance already referred to. This dance may be the origin of Lakhon Nai. That is why there has been the prologue dance of Ramasura¹ right up to the Rattanakosin period. As there has been a dance which tells a story, it has become a custom to perform a story in a royal ceremony at the palace, in the same way as the custom has developed of performing Khon Luang (Royal Masked Dance Drama) in a royal ceremony outside the palace.² Later on, as there was the wish to perform a dance drama telling a different story, an episode of Khon was chosen to suit the type of dancing, such as the episode of Unarud in the story of Krishnavatar. They planned the choreography and trained the female dancers to perform. As they did well, the female troupe was created from then on. The origin of dance drama performed by women can be thus explained (Prince Damrong, 1965: 15-16).

The part describing *I-nao*, a Thai drama in verse, Prince Damrong surmises that the reason Princess Kunthon and Princess Mongkut of the Ayutthaya period composed

¹ This dance depicts the demon Ramasura chasing the goddess Meghala who waves a crystal ball, which he wishes to own for himself.

² Khon developed from the ceremonial Duek Dam Ban Performance.



I-nao as a drama, and not a poetic tale for reading, was “because at that time King Borommakot enjoyed watching dramas. It is possible that it was not long after Lakhon was first known and performed. Perhaps the two royal daughters had the duty to oversee the training of the royal drama troupe. They might have heard from their ladies-in-waiting that the Mayong drama from Malayu, often performed the story of Inao because it was a story that most Malayu people esteemed. The princesses requested that they told the story. Seeing that the story was indeed fit for drama, they tried to make it into a Thai drama. When King Borommakot saw the drama composition, he was pleased and granted permission to perform the drama of I-nao as another drama in the repertoire (Prince Damrong, 1965: 103-105).

Khwam Song Cham (Memoir)

Prince Damrong composed this book while he was residing in Penang after the change of the government from absolute monarchy to democracy in 1932.

Those who read this book will see that his *Memoir* is more concerned with history rather than his autobiography. This book gives a lot of information about life in the Grand Palace, for example, the education for young princes in those days; King Mongkut’s biography in detail, from the time before he ascended the throne to the years after; events during the succession from King Rama IV to King Rama V; and happenings during the early years of King Rama V’s reign.

Apart from giving information about the life and events from the various periods of history generally known from historical texts, there are also some parts in the *Memoir* that make the readers feel that they have participated in the events, and understand the actual thinking and outlook of the people at that time. There is one story that Prince Damrong relates quite amusingly. It is the story of “ice” which was strange and new at that time.

“... One strange thing was the ice. It seemed that it was made in Singapore recently. Someone often sent a block of ice covered in sawdust to the King. Whenever the King received the ice, he distributed it to princes and high-ranking government officials. Those who had just seen it, children such as myself, liked to chip it into small pieces, keep a piece in my mouth and feel the coldness quite enjoyably. Those who were older did not like it so much. They often complained that eating ice gave them



tooth-ache. Moreover, some elderly people, hearing that the King gave pieces of ice, would not believe that it was made of water. They whispered in amazement, “How can they shape water into a solid thing?” This is because there is a saying in *Phra Ruang’s Proverbs*, “Do not shape water into a body”, which means, “Do not do something against nature”, or it can be a censure that someone tells a lie to resemble the truth. I have been long familiar with this saying from the ancient time. The ice-making factory has just been set up in our country in King Rama V’s reign (Prince Damrong, 1962: 19-20).

Prince Damrong relates the changing of the royal court customs when King Rama V returned from his visit to Singapore. He also tells about the feeling of young princes most interestingly. Readers can see how the children were fun-loving and full of curiosity.

“At the time the court customs were changed after His Majesty returned from Singapore, young princes like myself still accompanied the King. When he went to sit in the parlour, if we were not sent away because he had guests, we could enjoy sitting in a chair. When he went by car in the afternoon, we crept into the second car to follow him. In the evening at dinner, if there were empty seats at his table, he would send for young princes to sit in the vacant chairs. I could sit and eat at the table and enjoy some ice-cream. Ice-cream was a wonderful thing at that time because a small ice-maker, like the rural people have nowadays, had just arrived in Siam. On some days the water was frozen, but on other days it was not frozen solid. Therefore the day we had ice-cream was considered superb. Young princes like myself were not forced to use the modern costume. Even so, when I saw how the adults dressed themselves, I wanted to wear stockings and shoes so much. I begged my mother to get them for me. Seeing that I regularly joined the King’s retinue, my mother bought me shoes and stockings. I was so glad. But the first day I wore them, I was sorry because my shoes were quiet, they did not make any noise and I had heard that they should squeak “odd, odd,” if they were good shoes. I asked the royal guards how to make the shoes squeak. They suggested that I pour some coconut oil on the soles. I took their advice and tried to do so. When the shoes sounded “eed, eed”, I was pleased (Prince Damrong, 1966: 181-182).



Sadaeng Banyai Phongsawadan Siam (Lectures on Siam Chronicles)

This book contains lectures on Thai history given by Prince Damrong at Chulalongkorn University in 1924. It is divided into four parts which he calls “Kand”. The first part relates events from the time before Thai rule to when the Thais came to rule Siam. He describes the rise and fall of the Sukhothai Kingdom. From the second part up to the fourth part, he relates the founding of Ayutthaya City, how the Ayutthaya Kingdom enlarged her territory, and the consolidation of Ayutthaya up to the great war with Burma, in the reign of King Naresuan Maharaj.

In his lectures, Prince Damrong not only relates historical events in detail, but he also gives reasons and references. He offers interesting hypotheses such as the word “Phra Ruang” which can mean either King Si Indraditya or King Ram Khamhaeng. From his hypothesis and reasoning, he comes to the conclusion that Phra Ruang should be King Ram Khamhaeng.

“However, if we consider the stories in the Mon Chronicle and Chiang Mai Chronicle, the latter says that Phra Ruang and Phraya Gnam Mueang went to help Phraya Mengrai choose a location to build Chiang Mai. The Northern (Chiangmai) Chronicle says that Phra Ruang went to China. The Mon Chronicle says that Phra Ruang appointed Makkatho as Chao Fa Rua. All the events related happened during the reign of King Ram Khamhaeng Maharaj... It is possible that Phra Ruang was the former name of King Ram Khamhaeng Maharaj, as it appears in the stone inscription where he related that he received the name Ram Khamhaeng after he won the battle on elephant back against Khun Sam Chon, ruler of Muang Chot” (Prince Damrong, 1949: 34-36).

In this book, Prince Damrong also talks about other things. Although they do not concern history directly, they give the reader fascinating pieces of historical insight. For example, he relates the reason why people like to build temples in the old days.

“They built temples in the old days for two reasons: to make the Buddhist faith continue and prosper, which was the religious reason; the other reason was worldly, concerning the members of their family lineage that passed away to the other world. According to the ancient custom, after the cremation of the dead, the relics were gathered up, but were not kept in their homes. When their relations died and were cremated, they built a stupa to contain the relics in the temple. When the living missed



them, or on religious occasions, they went to make merit at the stupa which contained the relics. For this reason, any family, that could afford to build a temple, would build one for the members of the family line, to make it a place to bury the relics and make merit for the family. Building a temple was generally considered an honour for the family lineage. That is why numerous temples were built” (Prince Damrong, 1949: 57-58).

The name “Chao Phraya River”, Prince Damrong explains, “is so called only in the Rattanakosin period. Formerly it was just called Menam³. At Tambon Paknam⁴ (Paknam sub-district) before the town of Samut Prakan was built, it was called Bang Chao Phraya. So it was called Paknam Bang Chao Phraya in the same way as (we call) Paknam Bang Pakong. Then it became the name of the river (Prince Damrong, 1949: 72).

The name of the Chao Phraya River, in old books written by European writers about Siam, appears as Menam. (Pallegoix, 1854: 8) Some Thais who do not know the facts think that the Europeans called it incorrectly. If they had read Prince Damrong’s explanation, they would know the true origin of the name.

Poetry

People generally do not realize that Prince Damrong had poetic talent, for he did not compose a lot of poetry, indeed only sixteen titles altogether (Prince Damrong, 1944). Princess Poon Pisamai collected them for publication. The following excerpts can demonstrate his talent. Many poems are noted for their beauty and depth.

Vajirayan Subhasit

This poem from the collection shows the value of knowledge.

“Knowledge can be a friend when one is alone,

It can be one’s ornament when speaking,

It becomes strength when one makes decision,

It is one’s wealth evenings and mornings.”

(Prince Damrong, 1944: 20)

³ Menam simply means ‘river’.

⁴ Paknam means the river mouth.



Bot Doksoi Subhasit

These poems were formerly selected for singing and reciting by primary school children because the language is simple and the contents can teach them good conduct.

“Try to put an egg upright.

However hard we try, the round egg will tumble.

Though we can boil the fallen egg,

What can we do if it falls on the ground?

We had better put our effort

To reading, writing and learning from books,

Trying to acquire knowledge and putting it to practice.

Don't insist on wasting time putting an egg upright.”

“Toot Too⁵, Dear Toot Too,

How can you live in a hole?

You are so lazy, what a shame!

You invite me to chew betel nuts with you.

I do not want to mix with your kind,

Lazy bones who take advantage of their neighbours,

And try to avoid even a small task.

We should wake up early and work till evening,

We shun idle people who are loathsome.

(Prince Damrong, 1944: 29-30)

A poem for King Rama V in R.S. 112

MC Poon Pisamai Diskul wrote the explanation why Prince Damrong composed the poem.

When difficulty arose with the French in R.S. 112 (C.E. 1893), King Chulalongkorn was so depressed that he became seriously ill and stopped taking medicine. He wrote a farewell Chand (a type of poem) to some of his brothers. My father related to me, “As soon as I received the Chand, I wrote the reply immediately. I did not

⁵ A kind of mole.



keep a copy but someone told me that when he finished reading it, the King continued to take medicine and recovered from his illness soon after.” (Prince Damrong, 1944: 43).

Before quoting Prince Damrong’s poem for King Chulalongkorn, it is necessary to quote the King’s Chand to Prince Damrong, so that one may see Prince Damrong’s genius in composing his answer.

King Rama V’s Chand to Prince Damrong

“Sorely ill for such a long time,
I have no wish to seek recovery.
My mind is no longer at ease,
My head troubling, my heart broken.
Were I to recover, I would have a heavy heart,
Thinking of all the troubles that weigh upon me.
I fear to resemble the king who failed to defend Ayutthaya,
Losing the land and forever earning blame.
Seeking the solution, I can find none.
Ashamed to face all men, I wish to die and disappear.”
(Prince Damrong, 1944: 46)

Prince Damrong’s poem:

“It is usual for an ocean to be
Sometimes calm, when the storm abates.
When the tempest causes high waves,
But yet, the ship is strong enough,
She will survive unscathed.
If Fate wills it so, every ship will sink.
Mariners know this in their heart.
While the ship still floats, they join forces to steer.
If they get through, they will be safe and glad.
If they misguide the ship, she is doomed to sink.
If they do nothing, make no effort to strive,
They finally lose the ship like those who try but fail.
The difference lies between trying hard though sinking,



And being careless, foolish, doing nothing.
Losing can be renowned and praised by all
With sympathy that Fate is stronger than human effort.”
(Prince Damrong, 1944: 47-48)

Poem given to Princess Siriratnabusabong

This poem is outstanding because it makes one see the truth about human life.
“As a child, one sees the world full of fun,
As a youth, one enjoys happiness night and day,
At middle age, one begins to feel both sad and glad,
In old age, one realizes all is transient.”
(Prince Damrong, 1944: 135)

The translations cannot express well the original compositions. They can only give a glimpse into his poetic talent.

Conclusion

Prince Damrongrajanubhab had composed a great deal of literary works and was a great Thai writer. He wrote everything clearly, always presented everything based on evidence and facts, as far as he could discover during his time. His works have become the source for later generations to utilize. In every piece of his extensive literary works, he uses simple language that is considered a model of good Thai writing. Many of his works have been selected for studies in Thailand and abroad. At Ecole des Langues orientales in Paris where the Thai Language is one of the subjects, Prince Damrong’s works are selected as texts for the curriculum (Burnay, 1938: Chrestomathie siamoise).

One can see the whole collection of Prince Damrong’s works in the Prince Damrongrajanubhab Library on Lan Luang Road. HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhon presided at the introduction ceremony of the new ongoing e-Library project there in June 20, 2012 to keep up with the age of e-Learning and thereby continue the Prince’s idea of literary preservation.

It is evident that Prince Damrong’s works enrich several fields of knowledge while they express the beauty of Thai Language. His literary works contribute significantly to the field of Thai literature. The Thais should be forever grateful to Prince Damrong.



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