Thai Literature at the Crossroads of Modernity: Advancing a Critique of Neo-liberal
Development though the Writings of Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti

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ABSTRACT

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Thai Literature at the Crossroads of Modernity: Advancing a Critique of Neo-liberal Development through the Writings of Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti (132 pp.)

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Throughout its modern history, Thailand has experienced incredible change, resulting in a marked tension between traditional values and those of the “modern” world. During this turbulent process of modernization, new social groups emerged to challenge both the status quo and military regimes. This thesis analyzes how two noted literary figures from these socially conscious groups, Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti, critique their rapidly changing society, and how their works underscore a sense of increasing futility and powerlessness as the old world of custom and extended families comes into contact with the new world of materialism and competitive individualism. The writings of Khamsing and Chart function on two distinct yet interrelated levels. From one perspective, their works serve as exemplary pieces of poignant literature, which effectively highlight a worrisome shift in values within Thailand, while also addressing universal themes concerning the purpose and meaning of life. From another perspective, their writings operate as biting criticisms that point to greater and more comprehensive socio-political problems. Their nuanced treatment of the rapid shift in values that has occurred within Thailand during the modern era is indicative of a much larger structural problem not only for Thailand, but also for the rest of the developing world. The critiques of Westernization, globalization, and development presented by these two
authors, both indirectly in their fiction and directly in my interviews with them, can be tenably extrapolated to serve as a broader critique of the neo-liberal development agenda that has been employed in Thailand during the past three decades. The works of Khamsing and Chart do more than simply imply that Thailand’s development model is unsound; they each view the system as tragically flawed, personifying its failings in many of the tragic characters in their stories.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Thailand – Traditional versus Modern Values</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of Neo-liberalism: Thailand 1945-2005</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Khamsing Srinawk</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1950s and 1960s: Khamsing and a Heavy-Handed Government</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Politician”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Breeding Stock”</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Quack Doctor”</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Gold-Legged Frog”</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dust Underfoot”</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Plank”</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Dark Ages” in Thailand (1958-1963)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dunghill”</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Owners of Paradise”</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Peasant and the White Man”</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Clash”</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dark Glasses”</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sales Reps for the Underworld”</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Happy Birthday, Grandpa” ................................................................................................. 47
Growing Unrest and Revolution: Khamsing’s Literary Role Renewed .......................... 48
“Paradise Preserved” ........................................................................................................ 50
“I Lost My Teeth” .............................................................................................................. 51
“The Buffalo with the Red Horns” .................................................................................. 52
After 1976: The Jungle, Exile, and a Final Story ............................................................ 53
“Intercourse” .................................................................................................................... 54
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 55

Chapter Three: Chart Korbjitti ......................................................................................... 57
Literature, Students, and Social Revolution ...................................................................... 59
Beyond 1973: Idealism Lost ............................................................................................... 61
Chart’s Emergence on the Literary Scene .......................................................................... 64
No Way Out ....................................................................................................................... 65
The Judgment ................................................................................................................... 70
Prem and a Greatly Changed Nation: Stability at Last? .............................................. 77
Bloody May and the Long Road to Democracy ................................................................ 78
Time .................................................................................................................................... 80
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 85

Chapter Four: Toward a Critique of Neo-liberal Development .................................... 87
Understanding Perspectives by way of Comparison ....................................................... 87
A Western Model of Development: A Literary Critique ............................................. 98

Appendix A ...................................................................................................................... 103
CHAPTER ONE: THAILAND – TRADITIONAL VERSUS MODERN VALUES

Thailand truly is a country of two faces. It is, from one vantage point, a successful model of economic development and growth. On the other hand, it is a modernizing country where the disparity between the rich and poor is continually increasing, highlighting the unequal access to resources and opportunities. This rapid societal change has led many to question the country’s course of action, which has resulted in a marked tension between traditional Thai values and those of the modern world. Must tradition be sacrificed at the cost of modernity? Does modernization come at the cost of societal alienation and one’s cultural identity? Moreover, is the “progress” and modernity espoused by the ruling elite benefiting all of Thailand’s population, or are some necessarily excluded from this development equation?

In this project, I shed light upon these broader aforementioned questions, while also directly addressing the following four specific questions:

1) How do the works of Khamsing Srinawak and Chart Korbjitti reflect on the change of values in Thai society? That is, working chronologically from Khamsing to Chart, how do we see these values progress and change? How do the four thematic perspectives outlined on page thirteen of this chapter change or shift with time, and how is this corollary to changes occurring in society?

2) Can the biographies of these authors provide further insight into their writings and their critique of “development” in Thailand?

3) In what ways do the writings of Khamsing and Chart provide insight into the shortcomings of globalization and/or the failings of Thailand’s development agenda that are not apparent in the statistical analysis of economists or the assessments of both critics and supporters of free market, neo-liberal economics?

3b) Given the differences between the writings of Khamsing and Chart, how should one rightfully interpret their works? How should one
understand their motivations for writing? Can the shared critique of
development be retained while still properly addressing the dissimilarities
in each author’s work?

I address the questions above by analyzing four works of fiction by two of
Thailand’s most renowned contemporary authors, Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti,
as their works serve as poignant societal critiques. I analyze all seventeen of Khamsing’s
short stories included in the most recent edition of The Politician and Other Stories
(2001), as well as three of Chart’s novels: No Way Out (1980), The Judgment (1981), and
Time (1993). I chose to work with these two authors because I believe that they best
reflect the socially conscious literature of their respective generations. Their writings are
of recognized literary merit; at the same time they constitute a critical commentary on
Thai society and politics that amounts to a critique of development over the last thirty
years. Khamsing stands as one of the foundational pillars of modern Thai literature. His
satirical short stories helped propel a student movement that toppled an authoritarian
government, forever changing the way modern Thai history should be viewed. His
stories are subtle, yet biting; he portrays the troubles of the underprivileged by
highlighting not only the corruption, but also the condescending and paternalistic stance
adopted by an authoritarian regime toward the poor. Chart, on the other hand, represents
a changed Thailand: the rapidly modernizing Thailand whose experiments with
democracy and development programs appear to have failed, as Thailand returned to
authoritarian rule over and over again. Chart’s works speak directly to the sense of
despair and hopelessness felt by an increasing portion of the population struggling to
succeed within a flawed socio-economic system. His writings offer an existential critique
of a lopsidedly modern Thailand and the development paradigm adopted by the
government, focusing on the plight of the individual within a changed society. Chart also
criticizes the materialistic framework intrinsic to Thailand’s development paradigm,
which often leads people to feel life is meaningless.

Material for this thesis has been drawn not only from published sources, but also
from personal contact with Khamsing and Chart, and with Chart’s longtime friend and
translator, Marcel Barang. Spending two months in Thailand at the end of 2007 allowed
me to conduct extensive interviews with these literary figures, contributing to a stronger
and more nuanced understanding of how the works of Khamsing and Chart reflect the
often agonizing changes their country has experienced throughout the past five decades.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical framework of this project is grounded on the idea that the literature of
Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti provides a deeper (or at least a parallel) critique of
neo-liberal development than is offered by economists or social scientists. Instead of
focusing solely on economic or political statistics, the critiques put forth by Khamsing
and Chart address how poverty and underprivileged circumstances impact the individual
within society. Their works demonstrate not only that the promises of development are
asymmetrical, but also that the values which make life rich and fulfilling are destroyed by
consumerist materialism.

In modern Thailand, traditional values and the institutions that legitimate these
values – the sangha and the monarchy – are losing their once revered status in the wake
of Westernization and globalization. The works of Khamsing and Chart give voice to a
critique of the ideology of modernization and development and reflect on the effects of modernization on individuals and society. Approaching modern Thai literature from a thematic standpoint, this thesis seeks to understand the shift in values that has occurred due to the traditional Thai values coming into conflict with the values of the self-proclaimed “modern” Western world.¹ This critique and these reflections will be analyzed according to the following thematic perspective:²

- **Tradition vs. Modernity**: There exists a fundamental dilemma within a rapidly modernizing Thailand between the desire for material abundance and wealth (Westernization) and retaining one’s traditional customs and values.

- **Ideological confusion**: With traditional values being co-opted by the “modern machine,” citizens of a developing world are confronted with different ideologies fighting for their allegiance. An increased sense of individuality, stemming from the Western insistence on rugged self-determination, is in conflict with a tradition of social solidarity.³

- **Societal alienation**: Modernity leads to a sense of loss of purpose in life (existential crisis), a sense of aimlessness and futility, and feelings of powerlessness and despair (and conversely, feelings of rebellion and defiance) given the breakdown of the traditional family structure, increased population densities, and the move from small, communal villages to giant, sprawling industrial cities.⁴

- **Barriers to upward social mobility**: The prevailing socio-economic system of modern Thailand furthers the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged, exposing the promise of “development” to be hollow. In their work, Khamsing and Chart show how people are confronted with new barriers (educationally, economically, politically)

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¹ In the initial formulation of this thesis project, I intended to frame the works of Khamsing and Chart according to a comparative analysis where their respective works seemed to set up a functional dichotomy between pre-1973/6 Thai literature and post 1976 Thai literature. I address this idea in Chapter Four.

² This thematic approach is modeled after a similar analysis outlined by Suvanna Kriengkraipetch and Larry E. Smith, *Value Conflicts in Thai Society: Agonies of Change Seen in Short Stories* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1992), 10.


⁴ Cf. Emile Durkheim’s concept of anomie as discussed in his work entitled *The Division of Labour in Society* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press).
to social and economic advancement despite a system that purportedly provides opportunities for all.

I chose to analyze the aforementioned works by Khamsing and Chart as they serve as mirrors of an unfortunate reality for many Thai citizens. I provide a summary of each work while examining it in light of the four thematic elements that I see as key to understanding the shift in values that has been occurring in Thai society throughout the past few decades. I then compare and contrast the writings of each author in an attempt to better understand how and why they crafted their works in such a fashion, broadening the lens from the detail oriented thematic analysis to a more comprehensive view of what each author was attempting to convey on a larger scale. In this analysis, I will seek to emphasize how these authors are dealing with rapid societal change from an insider’s perspective.

The thematic value analysis utilized in this project rests upon a simplistic contrast of traditional and modern values. I am not attempting to concretely define these concepts, but rather only to delineate their inexact boundaries, as their fluidity stands as one their most important characteristics. It is not a category distinction that I seek to make, but instead my aim is to focus on the tension that arises between the call of tradition and the appeal of modern individualism and change. This contrast can be fruitful in showing how development paradigms applied in Thailand and elsewhere may lead people to “lose their very souls.” This is what the literary work of Khamsing and Chart shows to be the cost of the kind of development that has been implemented in Thailand (as elsewhere) throughout its modern history.

5 For example, one of Khamsing’s stories entitled “The Plank” demonstrates the fluidity of traditional values and superstitions.
In this thesis, I am not making a value judgment between tradition and modernity, but rather I am seeking to expose a tension that has been growing more pronounced in this “clash of civilizations” during Thailand’s modern history. I am not arguing for a return to a “golden age” before modern infrastructures (e.g. hospitals, telecommunications, mass education, or transnational corporations), but I am critiquing the way in which traditional customs and values have been undermined, said to be “backward” and without value. I do not romanticize the life of the villager (often used as a symbol of tradition), as it is obvious that a return to tradition is not what either Khamsing or Chart want for their country. What they want is for people to retain their humanity, dignity, and identity while still enjoying the benefits of modernity (e.g. more efficient technology, ease of communication, safer and more sanitary healthcare, etc.). What they seek to avoid is a Thai society that is homogenized culturally, politically, or economically by Westernization and the “modern machine” (within a “dog eat dog” capitalist framework).

Most Thais accept the frequently repeated mantra that to be Thai is to trust in nation, religion, and monarchy (chaat, satsanah, mahakaset). The traditional values of Thai society begin by being passed down from one generation to the next, highlighting the primary role of family within the Thai worldview. On an institutional level, the monarchy has played a central role in promulgating and representing Thai values. Of equal importance to understanding the traditional Thai perspective is Buddhism.

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6 This phrase was used by Khamsing Srinawk. Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
The foundational source of many Thai beliefs, values, and customs is Theravada Buddhism. The religion of over 95 percent of Thailand’s population, there is “much truth in the idea that to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist.”\(^8\) A feature of Thai life since the kingdom’s earliest recorded history, Thai Buddhism reflects both animist and Hindu influences in a philosophical system that serves as a pragmatic guide that most Thais apply in their lives.\(^9\) The core teachings of Thai Buddhism are found in the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering; suffering is caused by desire and attachment; there is a way to achieve liberation from attachment and suffering; this way is called the Middle Path.\(^10\) The goal of abiding by these truths is nirvana, the extinguishing of all desires. In achieving this final liberation, one is freed from the shackles of rebirth (samsara) through the cessation of desire and attachment, as well as the accumulation of merit. In the Thai context, merit-making (tham bun) ceremonies are often undertaken as a way to counterbalance one’s negative karma (literally “action;” negative karma is the residue from past misdeeds) in an attempt to progress up the spiritual ladder. It should be noted that most lay practitioners of Thai Buddhism do not believe nirvana to be a realistic goal for their lifetime, but instead work towards progressing spiritually so as to gain a more favorable rebirth in their next life.\(^11\)

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\(^10\) For a more detailed account of these Buddhist teachings, see Walpole Siralula’s *What the Buddha Taught* (London: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd, 1978). Also, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University has recently created a detailed website concerning Thai Buddhism: [http://www.thaibuddhism.net/](http://www.thaibuddhism.net/)

Reinforced through various rituals and traditions, Buddhism often defines for Thai people “their important goals in life, the means they should employ to reach these goals, and the modes in which their means [are] to employed.” According to Kriengkraipetch and Smith, the traditional values of Buddhism are “cast in a complex set of incentives and constraints, partly structural and partly ideological, which together constitute the foundation of [Thai] culture.” Within this context, one finds the elevation of such attributes as moral goodness, the just use of power, and wisdom (education).

The hierarchical structure of the Buddhist sangha and the monarchy provide stability to the Thai social order and are believed to serve as a moral compass in the modern era. Niels Mulder goes so far as to assert that “without ‘King’ there is no Thailand; without a leader the Thais are nobody.” So revered is the current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, that many view him to be semi-divine. He has intervened in politics on a number of occasions, helping to bring to an end the violence of the 1970s, as well as facilitating Thailand’s transition to democratic rule in the early 1990s. What are widely viewed as the King’s morally righteous actions have served to legitimize the hierarchical nature of the Thai social structure and to exemplify the traditional values of respect, honor, duty, and dignity.

Critique of Neo-liberalism: Thailand 1945-2005

In the decades following the Second World War, Thailand, though sharing many of the same characteristics as the Siam of Chulalongkorn, was increasingly immersed in the

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13 Ibid.
throes of modernization. The 1950s and the 1960s were a time of societal upheaval, increased industrialization and urbanization, and dynamic economic growth. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Thailand was transformed from a rural nation of small farmers who exported agricultural products to a predominately urban workforce manufacturing products for the global marketplace. By the 1990s, social and economic changes had transformed Thailand greatly.\textsuperscript{15}

The process of modernization fostered new social groups prepared to challenge both the status quo and military regimes. Raising questions concerning both the sustainability and the inherent worth of the country’s development scheme, which relied heavily on a Western notion of progress, a handful of Thai authors began to challenge the dominant trend and direction of Thai society in new and innovative ways.\textsuperscript{16} Khamsing and Chart are examples of two such authors who worked in successive generations beginning in the late 1950s. Their works reflect the social tensions of these rapidly changing times and expose the rhetoric of “development” that proffers unrealistic promises of increased financial security and improved quality of life for all. Here, I assert that the way in which both Khamsing and Chart speak to these shifts in values underlies a greater critique of Thailand’s dominant development agenda. The writings of these authors raise critical questions concerning this development paradigm, drawing attention to such issues as social equality, distribution of power and wealth, and their effects on the lifestyles of Thai people. In their writings Khamsing and Chart go beyond


economic statistics to expose the hollow promise of economic advancement and socio-cultural “progress,” exploring the human cost of development for ordinary Thais.

Pinit Ratanakul and U. Kyaw Than echo this aforementioned sentiment in Development, Modernization, and Tradition in Southeast Asia: Lessons from Thailand (1990), contending that while it is clear the Western-style development model embraced by Thailand’s ruling elite has brought material benefits to a portion of the Thai populace, it has “also created…disparities between urban and rural areas, and between different regions.”

Instead of promoting sustainable development, “[t]he government’s development policy, aiming primarily at economic growth…has been pushing Thai society with such speed toward materialism that the traditional social and cultural values have been shaken, not only in the urban sector but also in the rural areas.”

After World War II, President Harry S. Truman’s idealistic proposal of “development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing” was quickly replaced by Cold War politics as the United States adopted a foreign policy that “created a ring of satellite states on the Asian side of the Pacific Ocean” in order to offset similar advances of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This politically based foreign policy sought to bring stability to countries threatened with a communist takeover. Often, as in Thailand, support was given to authoritarian regimes in an effort to stop the spread of Communism.

18 Ibid.
The Vietnam War not only affected Thailand militarily, but economically, socially, culturally, and politically, so much so that Benedict Anderson terms the years between 1958 and 1973 as the “American Era” of Thai history. America poured money into the Thai economy throughout the 1960s, amounting to “several hundred million dollars.” During this time, more than forty thousand U.S. troops stationed in Thailand greatly boosted the Thai economy. An even greater number of troops visited Thailand periodically on “rest and recreation” ("R&R") leaves from Vietnam, which helped create a service sector (hotels, bars, restaurants, etc.) in the Thai economy, but also left an indelible scar on Thai society in the form of prostitution. The surge of new money into the Thai economy led to “tens and even hundreds of thousands of Thai becom[ing] dependent upon the American presence for a livelihood,” but a middle class began to emerge, particularly in Bangkok.

Large-scale construction projects saw a boom in high-rise hotels and office buildings, which stood in stark contrast to the Buddhist spires that once dominated Bangkok’s skyline, while the population of the city “mushroomed from 1.7 million in 1960 to almost 3 million by 1975.” This period of rapid growth impacted Thai society in serious ways. Occupations changed in this increasingly modern context, as “[y]oung women and men went to the city to learn English and work as waiters and waitresses, bartenders and hotel desk clerks, prostitutes and masseuses, tour guides and souvenir

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22 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 285.
The construction industry boomed, creating new roads, hotels, shopping malls, and housing to accommodate the influx of farangs (foreigners), as well as the new class of wealthy Thais. According to Wyatt, this newly emergent middle class was still tradition-oriented in its attitudes:

This is not necessarily to argue that a Thai middle class emerged that was fully conscious of its distinctive identity and interests. Judging only by its members’ behavior, one might conclude that the growth of a middle class strengthened a traditionalistic sort of Thai political conservatism. The members of this class had a clear interest in preserving a relatively privileged social and economic position. At the same time, their formal values – the liberal values gained from schooling and encouraged through their exposure to Western political life – increasingly made them uncomfortable with authoritarian military rule and with those elements of Thai cultural tradition that they regarded intellectually superstitious or, by international standards, inhumane. Their interests thus led them to value order and some modicum of hierarchy and to fear instability and any rapid, fundamental changes in the existing economic and political order. Thus, while they would support the overthrow of the Thanom-Prapas regime in 1973, they also would join the right-wing reaction against the political chaos of 1976.

Under the dictatorial government of Sarit and Thanom, Thailand embarked on a rural development program, funded by American economic aid designed in part to improve the Thai infrastructure for military purposes. According to Owen et al., “Rail service was also extended to serve provincial military needs, and roads were improved to open military access to border areas which could also carry farmers’ produce to market,” resulting in an economic growth rate in excess of seven percent per year. In addition, efforts were made to improve public health through programs to improve the quality of drinking water and to eradicate malaria. However, the increase in rural income “was not equally shared among Thailand’s farmers, and the combination of rapid demographic

26 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 279.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 285. According to Wyatt, the long-term effects of this development would prove beneficial to the tourist industry, but the “intensive foreign presence” would cause socio-political unrest in the short-term (2003, 279).
29 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 358.
30 Ibid.
growth and the exhaustion of the supply of new land led to a decrease in average farm size, and increase in agricultural tenancy, and the flight of youth from the farms to the already oversaturated urban labor market.\textsuperscript{31} From a socio-economic perspective, exploitive landowners became wealthy, and the American military presence left in its wake social problems such as prostitution, narcotics abuse, and fatherless children. Rising prices due to development and a gradual swing from a rural-based agricultural economy to an urban-based industrial one caused a huge migration of rural labor to the capital, contributing to the development of slums in the city and the breakdown of the traditional family structure.\textsuperscript{32} The effects on rural Thailand and its people were overwhelming, especially in the areas around upcountry towns like Udon Thani, Nakhon Ratchasima (also known as Khorat – the longtime home of both Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti), and Phitsanalok.\textsuperscript{33}

Another significant development of this era was the continued expansion of education, partially as a result of U.S. financial aid, which was to benefit many writers over the following decades. This program not only exposed young Thai intellectuals to the mass media and progressive ideas, it also helped to shape the identity and consciousness of the newly emergent middle class.\textsuperscript{34}

The American presence hastened the modernization and Westernization of Thai society, influencing virtually every facet of Thai life. The American presence brought a large segment of the Thai population that until this time had led a fairly insular existence

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Wyatt, \textit{Thailand: A Short History}, 286-287.
\item Ibid.
\item Owen, \textit{The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History}, 358. Parenthetical remarks mine.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
face to face with the outside world. Thais were exposed to Western ideas about fashion, music, and moral standards. As “[b]right university students became critical of the dominant position of Japan in Thailand’s trade and in the modern sector of its economy, and, like youth elsewhere in the world, they were excited by the anti-Vietnam war movement to the point of questioning their own nation’s role in that war,” many Thais began to question prevailing economic and political trends.35

In the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan radicalized neo-liberal economic policies,36 promoted as “globalization” with the slogan

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36 Neo-liberal economics is the subject of hot debate by economists. For example, consider the following two characterizations of Neo-liberalism, the first, drawn from Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie’s article entitled “What is Neo-liberalism?” and the second, drawn from Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia’s article of the same title:

(1) “Neo-liberalism is a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual, especially commercial, liberty, as well as strong private property rights. This conviction usually issues, in turn, in a belief that the state ought to be minimal or at least drastically reduced in strength and size, and that any transgression by the state beyond its sole legitimate purpose is unacceptable. These beliefs could apply to the international level as well, where a system of free markets and free trade ought to be implemented as well; the only acceptable reason for regulating international trade is to safeguard the same kind of commercial liberty and the same kinds of strong property rights which ought to be realized on a national level. Neo-liberalism generally also includes the belief that freely adopted market mechanisms is the optimal way of organizing all exchanges of goods and services. Free markets and free trade will, it is believed, set free the creative potential and the entrepreneurial spirit which is built into the spontaneous order of any human society, and thereby lead to more individual liberty and well-being, and a more efficient allocation of resources.” Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie. “What is Neo-liberalism?” http://www.statsvitenskap.uio.no/ISVprosjektet.neo-liberalism.pdf

(2) “‘Neo-liberalism’ is a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last 25 years or so. Although the word is rarely heard in the United States, you can clearly see that effects of neo-liberalism here as the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer. “Liberalism” can refer to political, economic, or even religious ideas. In the U.S. political liberalism has been a strategy to prevent social conflict. It is presented to poor and working people as progressive compared to conservative or right-wing. Economic liberalism is different. Conservative politicians who say they hate “liberals” – meaning the political type – have no real problem with economic liberalism, including neo-liberalism. ‘Neo’ means we are talking about a new kind of liberalism. So what was the old kind? The liberal school of economics became famous in Europe when Adam Smith, a Scottish economist, published a book in 1776 called *The Wealth of Nations*. He and others advocated the abolition of government intervention in economic matters. No restrictions on manufacturing, no barriers to commerce, no tariffs, he said; free trade was the best way for a nation’s economy to develop. Such ideas were “liberal” in the sense of no controls. This application of individualism encouraged “free” enterprise, “free” competition – which came to mean, free for the
of “Trade Not Aid!,” which caused developing countries to become mired in debt and their economies to grow increasingly unstable. Laird writes of Thailand: “Two decades of ‘freeing up the markets,’ arguably begun…with the Ronald Reagan – Margaret Thatcher era of economic deregulation and hands-off government,” show that neo-liberal economic models, while benefitting already affluent portions of Thailand’s populace, also greatly increase profits of the transnational corporations who invest in these third-world economies. When Asian economies collapsed in 1997, one journalist asked, “Are we therefore looking at the early signs of a general failure of an economic model – the technology-driven, consumption-driven, debt-driven model of endless growth based on the simple, time-honored principles of free trade and free-market capitalism?”

According to Laird, Collins, and numerous others, Thailand’s economic crisis of the 1990s exposed the problems inherent in the neo-liberal “primacy-of-growth” model that had been promoted to developing countries worldwide by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund over the past three decades. In *Money Politics, Globalisation, and Crisis: The Case of Thailand* (2000), Laird compiles a list of the effects of neo-liberal policies worldwide and in Thailand:

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39 Ibid., 60.
• The unemployment rate has risen even at a time of high global growth. High unemployment is the rule in Europe, even as their economies are regarded as “sound.” In crisis-hit Thailand, unemployment rose from 486,000 in 1996 to an estimated 1.31 million people at the end of 1998.

• The gap between the rich and the poor grew, both within and among nations. Capital mobility and competition among countries for jobs makes it harder for governments to tax their businesses and richer citizens and to maintain policies that promote equality, or cushion economic shocks, such as a minimum wage or social safety nets.

• Despite a decline in the percentage of poor globally, there remains a population increase of 78 million people per year, a core of some 1.2 billion people living at the poverty line or in absolute poverty.

• The march of technology allows fewer workers to produce goods that saturate global markets to the point of overproduction. The industrial world has built a capacity to produce far more than it can sell.

• Commercially-induced stress is becoming a major health problem in both industrialized and newly-industrializing countries, arising from intensified competition, the pressure to “perform” at work, fear of losing one’s job through corporate downsizing to reduce labor costs, and stress from peer pressure to keep up an appearance of materialistic prosperity.

• Within the global financial system, a huge “industry” has grown up that seeks riches without creating value: the “money for nothing” syndrome. Big profits are to be made by players who can leverage huge amounts of short-term credit to force upward or downward movements in currency exchange rates, often with devastating consequences for ordinary people. For example, international hedge funds and investment banks that forced the devaluation of the Thai baht in July 1997 pocketed some $12 billion in profits.42

Laird cites these failings of neo-liberal economics to assert that “free markets are never ‘free.’”43 Instead, he argues that “the myth of the free market is propagated by transnational corporations and their parent governments which seek economic advantage by breaking down barriers to markets. If market forces were left completely alone to do their work, greed and exploitative chaos would dominate global markets.”44

According to supporters of neo-liberal economics, “market forces” will not only correct flaws in the system, but also eliminate global poverty via a modern reformulation

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
of Carnegie’s “trickle-down theory.” The Asian financial crisis of the 1990s exposed this view as hollow rhetoric. Until this time, argues Laird,

There had been a kind of smug complacency among economists and proponents of laissez-faire market economics in the modern era that economists had become too wise—with their accumulated experience, advanced technologies, research models, and information databases—to ever allow a Great Depression like that of the 1930s to recur. But, there is evidently a self-destructive potential within the system, as seen by the previous financial bubbles, boom and bust cycles. Now—in a globalized world, with integrated financial systems and instant telecommunications—the hurricane force of herd-like, electronic money-flows have globalized the potential of the boom and the bust cycle, taking us dangerously close to a global meltdown.

As critics of neo-liberal models of economics and development point out, free-market ideology creates wide-ranging problems, including rampant environmental destruction, cultural degradation, and societal disintegration. Although couched in terms of the high-minded rhetoric of “development,” the neo-liberal system “is first and foremost concerned about the most efficient use of money to make more money…reward[ing] those whose management of resources (human, technological, and natural) is most efficient, and whose perception of risk and what the market “wants” (or can be persuaded to “want”) is the most cogent.” This leads to the question: What about those who have no resources to manage?

In The Race to the Top (2001), Tomas Larsson asks questions that sound strikingly similar to those voiced by Khamsing and Chart:

What if globalization is causing us to lose our very souls? What if ever-expanding markets threaten to standardize and plasticize not merely this or that western redoubt of free enterprise, but the entire world? What if globalization is progressively smothering

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45 Laird, Money Politics, Globalisation, and Crisis: The Case of Thailand, 64.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 66.
48 Ibid., 67.
49 See interviews with Khamsing (2007, 6) and Chart (2007, 5-6) where each author reflects on the role of modernization and Westernization in shaping the course of Thailand’s modern history.
everything that is most distinctive and appealing in the world’s cultures and replacing it with nothing but standard-issue widgets and strips of potato?\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50} Tomas Larsson. \textit{The Race to the Top} (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2001), 83.
Khamsing Srinawk (pseudonym Lao Khamhawm) is widely acknowledged as “Thailand’s most accomplished short-story writer.” A man of slender physical stature, Khamsing readily commands an audience due to a presence and energy that are almost larger than life. Still very spirited and strong at 77 years of age, he always seems ready to engage in intellectual discussion, eagerly sharing with friends and pupils the experiences of his past. With a piercing gaze and sharp tongue, he recognizes that positive social change is not easy, yet he remains as committed to this vision of his youth ever since the publication of his first short story in 1957.

Khamsing is a child of the Northeast. Born on December 25, 1930 in the village of Nong Sa-art in Bua Yai district, Khamsing experienced firsthand the poverty and hardship that have come to typify this region of Thailand called Isan. A small village located in Khorat Province, Bua Yai was five miles away from the closest town when Khamsing was a child. According to Herbert Phillips, Thai scholar and long-time friend of Khamsing, this did not hamper young Khamsing’s desire to study and learn. A voracious reader as a child, he was encouraged by his family members in his academic pursuits. Khamsing read “virtually anything he could get his hands on while tending his family’s buffaloes.” This eventually led him to pursue his education up to junior high

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54 Ibid.
When I asked Khamsing if he could describe for me what it was like to grow up in this rural setting during the 1930s, he told me,

Thailand was a different place then. We were a very poor country, but in a lot of ways we are still a very poor country. My family was very poor when I was a child and it was often very difficult to survive in Isan. You know that Isan is very dry and we often lack proper water here to irrigate our crops during the hot season. My parents owned some buffalo and we were peasant farmers. My parents were not educated people... My mother could not read or write, but my father was literate. Sometimes, when I was writing, I would think about my village in Khorat and ask myself if anything has changed. I see people nowadays with televisions and cell phones, but I wonder if anything really has changed.

Khamsing “moved to Bangkok, where he completed high school and enrolled in the Journalism Department of Chulalongkorn University.”

I asked Khamsing whether he knew from a young age (like Chart) that he wanted to become a writer in the future. Khamsing replied, “When I was a child I did not think that I would grow up to be a writer. I thought I would grow up to be a productive member of the mainstream society. I attended university with this [intention].” After his time spent at Chulalongkorn, Khamsing entered the School of Economics at Thammasat University in Bangkok. At this time, he explained, the School of Economics was “considered an ‘open school,’ [which]...meant that anyone who wanted to study there could do so for free. But there were not that many people studying [economics] because not many people in [Thailand] knew what it was.”

Khamsing’s reflections on his study of economics are revealing:

…I wanted to try out this kind of “high education,” but after only one year I found that it was not for me.... I found that economics didn’t have anything to do with my life. It was the old kind of economics, nothing like the political economics of today that might have some application to society. Students had to learn about supply and demand and the very basic fundamental structures, but they were never asked to apply it to anything. It

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56 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
57 Anderson and Mendiones, In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era, 291.
58 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
59 Ibid.
made no sense to me. This kind of study didn’t do anything for the world. It was so far removed from everything.60

His distaste for the further study of economics, as well as illness and financial difficulties, forced him to give up his studies.61

The 1950s and 1960s: Khamsing and a Heavy-Handed Government

The years Khamsing spent in Bangkok were years of political instability. Field Marshal Phibun became Prime Minister again in 1948 and with the onset of the Cold War, Western governments looked more favorably on military rulers who promised to fight communists.62 Phibun curried favor with the American government by sending Thai troops to aid in the American war in Korea and by keeping Thailand “relatively stable.”63 This outward appearance of stability, however, was not reflected within the government as there were four separate military coup attempts between 1948 and 1951.64 American aid and a postwar economic boom fuelled by rice exports helped Phibun to temporarily keep his adversaries in check.65 Although Thailand’s economic situation was improving, its social policies were growing increasingly authoritarian. According to Wyatt, the heavy-handed rule of Phibun discouraged development and “loosened the traditional bonds that held society together.”66

In order to earn money, Khamsing worked briefly as a political reporter and feature writer for local newspapers in Bangkok. This pursuit was short lived as he joined

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60 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
62 According to David Wilson, Phibun also served as Prime Minister of Thailand from 1938-1944 (1962, 25).
63 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 356.
64 Ibid.
65 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 256-258.
66 Ibid., 269.
the state forestry service and spent the years 1953-1956 working as a forest ranger in Lamphun Province in the far north of Thailand. Phillips asserts that during this time, Khamsing “thrived—psychologically, physically, and as a reader and writer.” 67 In Bangkok, however, life was not so good for Khamsing’s fellow students and writers. Towards the end of 1952, Phibun ended the freedom enjoyed by authors during the previous four years by instituting strict censorship. 68 As Owen et al. note, “General Phao’s arbitrary imprisonment of government opponents and rampant official corruption, brought the government under increasing attack.” 69

Returning to Central Thailand in late 1956, Khamsing found work with Phillips and other American scholars as a research assistant. This not only exposed Khamsing to an engaged style of Western academics, it allowed him free time for writing. Khamsing also took odd jobs, such as working as a traveling sewing machine salesman to supplement his meager assistant’s stipend. 70

At the time of Khamsing’s return to Bangkok, Phibun had legalized political parties, lifted press censorship, and called for general elections in 1957 in an attempt to solidify his deteriorating position in the government. 71 This proved to be Phibun’s undoing. He managed to win only a slight majority of seats in the election despite widespread electoral corruption. General Sarit Thanarat, Commander of the First Army in Bangkok, who “ostentatiously avoided full participation in the campaign and election,

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67 Phillips, Introduction to The Politician and Other Stories, viii.
69 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 356.
70 Phillips, Introduction to The Politician and Other Stories, viii.
71 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 357.
and criticized its outcome,” forced Phibun from power through a bloodless coup d’état on September 16, 1957.72

General Sarit Thanarat claimed that his government was “revolutionary, for his regime was devoted to a total restructuring of the social and political order,” according to an “original ideology.”73 This ideology was described by Thanat Khoman, Foreign Minister of Thailand under Sarit, as based on traditional Thai values:

> The fundamental cause of our political instability in the past lies in the sudden transplantation of alien institutions onto our soil without proper regard to the circumstances which prevail in our homeland, the nature and characteristics of our own people, in a word the genius of our race, with the result that their functioning has been haphazard and ever chaotic. If we look at our national history, we can see very well that this country works better and prospers under an authority, not a tyrannical authority, but a unifying authority around which all elements of the nation can rally.74

The way in which Sarit and company exploited this “traditional” perspective in order to justify their authoritarian rule highlights the error in privileging this framework over modernity; it also demonstrates how tradition can be corrupted. Khamsing addresses this idea in “Dunghill.”75

Sarit declared military rule in October 1958. According to Morell and Samudavanija, “Military factionalism was a major characteristic of the rule of Field Marshal Phibun Songkram (Prime Minister, 1938-1944 and 1948-1957)…[but] [i]t was only when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat overthrew Phibun in 1957 that a fusion of military power and royal legitimacy was reestablished” by utilizing the symbols of

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72 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, 357.
75 See page 29 of this thesis.
nation, religion, and monarchy (chaat, satsanah, mahakaset) to further the military’s authority within the political process.76

During Sarit’s brutally authoritarian regime, “more than two hundred writers and journalists were arrested on charges of being communists or communist sympathizers [as] [t]he Constitution was set aside, Parliament dissolved, political parties abolished, and several politicians were executed without trial.”77 Smyth and Chitkasem state that during this bleak era of Thai history, most “writers either practice[d] voluntary self-censorship or abandon[ed] their calling altogether.”78 Sarit ruled Thailand with an iron fist until his premature death in 1963, whereupon General Thanom Kittikachorn took office.

“The Politician”

Khamsing began publishing short stories in 1957 and published his major work Fa Bo Kan (No Barriers) one year later in 1958.79 His short stories, which highlight the cultural misunderstandings of Thai villagers and the motivations of those who brought “development” to them are poignant satires. The title story is Khamsing’s most recognized work. “The Politician” is set in rural Thailand during the 1950s and centers on a character addressed as “Professor Khoen” because he had been the chief monk of his district. However, after rising to the level of abbot of the local temple, he quit the monkhood to marry a wealthy widow. When she died, he became a fairly harmless

77 Smyth and Chitkasem, The Sergeant’s Garland and Other Stories, xiv.
78 Ibid., xv.
79 Fa Bo Kan would later be edited and translated into English as The Politician and Other Thai Stories in 1973. The third and most recent edition published in 2001 to commemorate Khamsing’s 70th birthday has the title The Politician and Other Stories.
drunk. Khoen passes the days with two fellow drinkers, Khwan and Koi, who had been disciples of his in the past. Koet, a janitor at the local governmental office, also spends time with this group of social misfits.

In a conversation about the impending elections, the motley crew of Khwan, Koi, Koet and Khoen conclude that running for office is a lot like being one of the town’s louts. As they see it, being elected to office requires no more than shouting, cursing, bribing, and empty promises. Thus, Khoen is persuaded to enter the race for People’s Representative in the district. When he attempts to disrupt the speeches of fellow candidates, Khoen is punched in the face by villagers eager to receive cash bribes.

Khoen then hatches a scheme to ruin his bombastic opponents. He sends his cronies to the marketplace, telling them to inform the villagers to meet at Khoen’s house whereupon he will take them to get their expected bribes. Khoen leads almost one-thousand villagers to the hotel where his rival candidates are lodged. He exposes the empty rhetoric of his adversaries by inciting the villagers’ demands for money. Each candidate eventually drops out of the race and returns to the city as they cannot offer the villagers anything tangible, but instead proffer only empty talk. This leads to the restoration of Khoen’s reputation, as well as his victory in the election.

On the day of the election Sergeant Huat, the village policeman, jails Khoen and company for public drunkenness. When he learns of Khoen’s victory, he immediately lets the entire group out of jail, fearing for his job as he and Khoen already have a tense relationship. Returning home from jail, Khoen reflects on his recent victory. His mind still reeling from a hard night of drinking, Khoen realizes that he knows nothing about
being a governmental official. He wonders whether he must move to Bangkok, forced to live an uncomfortable life away from his people. Troubled, Khoen walks to the night market. After helping to push a stalled truck, Khoen disappears, never to be heard from again. Reporters from Bangkok write articles that paint Khoen’s disappearance as a politically motivated murder aimed to silence the rabble-rouser. The exact circumstances concerning Representative Khoen’s fate are left uncertain as the story comes to a close.

In “The Politician,” Khamsing highlights the glaring disconnect between traditional village life and the politics of the government in Bangkok. The villagers are depicted as simple and naïve: they do not fully understand the nature of the election taking place in their village, but they see the opportunity to capitalize on the presence of the high-talking representatives from the city. For them the election is about money, a tangible and immediate benefit to be acquired from the candidates as opposed to the promises about road construction, canal digging, or school building which may never be fulfilled.

In this story “democracy” is cast as a farce though the portrayal of the corrupt and self-seeking politicians, who, like the villagers, have little understanding of what democracy really means. To a villager like Khoen, being a People’s Representative means that one could “do anything: Booze, beat up anyone, kick the Chinese in the pants,” and “get even with that bloody police officer Sergeant Huat.”

To the potential representatives from the city, “democracy” is a way to achieve political power, prestige, and financial gain.

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“Breeding Stock”

“Breeding Stock,” written in 1958, shows the absurdity of introducing modern practices into a rural environment which the villagers do not understand. The villagers are told that the modern world is scientific, advanced, and valuable, whereas the traditional world of the village is superstitious, ignorant, and less valuable. The first half of the story recounts the history of the family from the wife’s traditional perspective. She speaks of the reality of karma, fate, and the world of spirits without reservation. Her husband, however, is the object of a development program. Recognized for his hard work as a farmer and for his dedication to the village, he is given a governmental award in the form of a trophy and is called to attend meetings with provincial officials so that he can help implement agricultural advancements from the West. He is indoctrinated into the world of progress, where he is told that Thailand’s agricultural practices are outdated and must be changed according to a Western model. He is told that Thailand’s farm animals are too small and must be bred with animals imported from America in an effort to maximize production. The husband tries in vain to explain to his wife why these changes are necessary. The story comes to a comedic close when the wife asks if the (large) American her husband tells her about has also been sent to Thailand for breeding purposes. Here, Khamsing employs the right amount of delicate, patronizing humor to highlight the absurdity of “bigger is better,” while pointing out the awkward dilemma faced by the farmer who has been offered inadequate explanations for the change he is to promote.
“Quack Doctor”

Like so many of Khamsing’s stories, “Quack Doctor” (1958) shows how puzzling villagers find the innovations introduced by development experts and the suspicion they harbor toward those sent from the city to help them. In this story, the members of one village family are confronted with doctors practicing modern medicine; they cannot understand the specialization that has created so many different types of doctors (e.g. veterinarians, medical doctors, etc.). As they fail to grasp these changes, the villagers label these newly arrived purveyors of medicine “quack doctors.” The grandfather of the family represents the naiveté characteristic of Thailand’s rural population by asking two new doctors if they are indeed “quack doctors.” He later encounters a young medic who seeks to help the ailing man. Serving as watchman over the family’s water buffalo (replacing the recently deceased family dog) the grandfather has fallen ill due to too little sleep. He is examined by the young doctor who gives him three pills to help him sleep. The grandfather takes all three pills in one sitting, disregarding the orders of the doctor and following a traditional adage that asserts if a medicine is pleasant to one’s taste then it is the correct remedy for one’s ailment. When the doctor visits the old man the next day, he finds him sprawled out on the floor of the hut surrounded by his family. Too tired to keep watch during the night because of the medication, the grandfather failed to scare off water buffalo thieves who made off with the family’s most valuable possession. After the grandfather tells the family that it was the doctor who had given him the pills to induce sleep, they decide he must be the thief. As the story closes, the doctor, the
symbolic embodiment of modernity and a new ideology, lies on the ground, felled by a harsh blow to the back of the head with a stick.

“The Gold-Legged Frog”
Presumably set in rural northeast Thailand during the 1950s, “The Gold-Legged Frog” (1958) is a story of dire poverty and hardship. In this work, the bizarre demands of the government are contrasted with traditional family values. In drought-ridden Isan a family attempts to eke out an existence, which includes scavenging the fields for frogs and other small creatures that can be eaten. One day while hunting for their breakfast, one of the young sons is bitten by a cobra while trying to pry a frog from the earth. His father carries him home, calling upon all of the local healers and herbalists to save his son’s life. After several traditional remedies have been tried, the father is informed that he must go to the district government office to receive a cash allowance for families comprised of more than five people. He refuses, saying that he must stay with his dying child, but finally threatened with imprisonment, he agrees to go. At the district office, he is ridiculed for having so many children by the government official. He eventually receives the promised two-hundred baht. In a morbid twist, the father is reminded of his “luck” that the cash allowance was given on this particular day. Otherwise, his family would have fallen one member short of the aid requirement.

“Dust Underfoot
Situated in the forests of northeast Thailand, Khamsing’s longest story, “Dust Underfoot” (1958), highlights the arbitrary and oppressive nature of Thailand’s royal power structure.
The story’s narrator, Choet, is the foreman of a teak logging operation in the once densely forested areas near the Burmese border. Choet befriends Intha, a Kamu mahout, when the logging crew buys a bull elephant named Phlai Thong. Intha is the only person capable of handling the temperamental beast. Intha is in love with a village girl named Bua Kham; they are to be married. Mom Ratchawong Paipin Ratchaphruk, a nephew of Choet’s boss who is also minor royalty, is also attracted to Bua Kham. While the logging crew is working in the jungle, he uses her for his pleasure. When Choet musters the courage to inform his boss that Bua Kham was betrothed to Intha, Paipin shows no remorse for his actions. He mockingly tells Choet that he has no intention of ending his affair with Bua Kham before he leaves the camp and that Intha can have her back when he is through with her. In a jealous rage and furious at his powerlessness, Intha uses his elephant to smash the house of Bua Kham. In the end, Bua Kham and Intha both die as pawns in a lopsided game of power over which they have no control.

“The Plank”

Set in a village near Lopburi named after Grandpa Yang, who built the first house in the area, “The Plank” (1959) is a story about the power of tradition. In this village there is a sacred tree associated with the Holy Mother Ironwood Spirit who protects the village. In childbirth each woman in the village lies on a plank from the tree to ensure the health and safety of her child and herself. On this occasion, two men need the Holy Mother Ironwood plank on the same day as their respective wives are about to deliver. Use of the plank is granted to the man who requests it first. The second man, Khen, substitutes a floorboard from a nearby pig sty for the sacred plank without the knowledge of his wife
and the midwife. When his baby is delivered safely and his wife suffers no complications, Khen thinks he has discredited a baseless traditional superstition. Fueled by frustration, he decides to reveal what he has learned to the village, but upon seeing Father Yang leave his house with the now freshly anointed plank, Khen decides to forego the public revelation, giving pause to the idea that there is value in tradition that extends beyond utility, efficiency, or even pragmatic “truth.” Khamsing concludes this story with an air of ambiguity, leaving the reader to question if all traditional customs are mere superstition that should be jettisoned, or whether there is any value to such harmless rituals.

The “Dark Ages” in Thailand (1958-1963)

*Fa Bo Kan* elevated Khamsing to a position of celebrity among Thai artists. He related how after “1957, [Marshal] Sarit [Thanarat] had writers killed or jailed in an attempt to repress free speech after the revolution…[and] [m]any writers, like Sriburapha, had to seek asylum outside of the country.”

Khamsing paints a vivid picture of the social context in which he began his career as a writer:

> After Sarit’s revolution, the Cornell project [that I was working on] had to stop because the police started to investigate every writer. No one could write during this period that we call the “Dark Ages” because of the amount of repression and fear. So, I had an idea to write about the folk tales of my home region so that I could keep my project going. I told Cornell that I needed a tape recorder. They told me they had sent one to the Siam Society so I went to pick it up. When I asked for it, they questioned me, asking, “What are you going to use this for?” I told them I was going to use it to record traditional folk tales in order to preserve the tradition of the upcountry because they are being lost with the introduction of television. The Siam Society told me this was not a good idea and asked who I was. I told them I was a writer and gave them my book. They told me that the *farang* who was in charge could not read Thai so he passed my book along. Two weeks later, I found out that my book was considered subversive and communist (I

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81 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
was labeled the second Jit Phumisak) because the Society had passed my book along to
the Thai police. After this I had to stop writing for 10 years. I became a shadow.82

Owing to these politically volatile conditions, Khamsing retired to his home province of
Khorat and started a farm.83 He also decided to write under a pseudonym. He describes
how his impoverished upbringing in Isan is reflected in his choice of a pen name:

It is not so much that this name would give you more freedom to write as you wanted, but
it reflects your identity. When I thought about my pen name, I thought about who I am. I
am a person of Isan so the first part of this name reflects my Isan identity. Isan is very
close to Laos. I am a Lao person, I speak Lao; I have Lao customs. In Bangkok, they
call all people from Isan “khon Lao.” “Khon Lao” actually means “Lao person” so
people from the city didn’t see the people from Isan as Thai people, but as Lao people.
They saw people from Isan as second-class citizens in Thai society; they look down upon
Isan people and Lao people. This is very important to consider when you read my
stories. This name was inspired by a Thai classical song and it refers to a Lao person
coming home. So, when you think about my pen name you should think about a Lao
person being home, feeling at home in Thailand where [he lives and does not] feel like an
outsider in [his] own country because [he is] already home.84

During what Khamsing describes as the “Dark Ages,” he wrote several more short
stories, but failed to get them published until 1963.

“Dunghill”

“Dunghill,” written in 1960, is another account of the abject poverty and hardship
endured by rural farmers in the northeast of Thailand. It is also a story about how those
appealing to traditional values may use trickery to achieve their desired ends. Set in the
dry season in rain-deprived Isan, the story centers around a grandfather and two young
boys named Iang and Lom. A quiet day of tending to the respective families’ water
buffalo as they graze in the almost barren fields is interrupted when Iang and Lom find a

82 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007. According to Khamsing, this phenomenon
reappears again during the period in which Chart is writing. He states, “This is why Chart is so insistent on
writing only fiction.”
83 About his farm, Phillips notes that Khamsing “turned [it] into a successful modern operation producing
corn, cotton, and later, milk” (2001, ix).
84 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
fresh dung patty. The boys fight over ownership of the pile of manure from one of Iang’s buffaloes that landed on Lom’s field. The quarrel arises because the boys are undernourished and hungry and the buffalo dung is full of edible beetles. In an appeal to the traditional values of cooperation and solidarity, the grandfather figure convinces the boys to leave the dung until the next morning so that it may harden and they can divide it equally. The climax comes when each boy, upon the advice of their parents, leaves his home before dawn so he can take all of the beetles for himself. A fight between the two boys ensues, which the grandfather stops only seconds before it turns very ugly. What the boys only barely recognize in the end was that the grandfather himself had gone in the night to the dung pile with a bucket and shovel in order to pilfer the beetles.

“Owners of Paradise”

Published in late 1962, shortly before Sarit’s death, “Owners of Paradise” is an allegorical attack on the oppressive dictator who ruled Thailand during the previous five years. “Owners of Paradise” is just over three pages in length and is divided into two sections: one titled “In Paradise” and the other “On Earth.” The story opens with a traditional Thai description of Paradise. More poetic and mystical than most of Khamsing’s works, the section entitled “In Paradise” describes a conversation between the so-called newcomers to Paradise and the Lord of Heaven, Indra, who is described as green in color. Indra appears to be a stand in for Field Marshal Sarit, who was typically clad in a green military uniform. The conversation conveys the idea that the inhabitants of Paradise should revel in their happiness, being ever mindful not to take for granted that which is divine. The section entitled, “On Earth,” consists of only two lines. It describes
a man exiting an outhouse located at the end of a field with a bottle of insecticide, exclaiming to himself that only one green bug was able to escape the poison. The green bug also appears to allude to Sarit. By likening Sarit to Indra, Khamsing seems to be poking fun at Sarit’s megalomania in that the despot considered his right to rule to be divine in origin and displayed a disparaging attitude towards the people of Thailand who lived outside of his privileged “heavenly” context.

“The Peasant and the White Man”

After Sarit’s death in 1963, Khamsing wrote “The Peasant and the White Man,” a story about an old man named Khong, a dog named Somrit, and a bird-watching farang. Khamsing uses this story to criticize Field Marshal Sarit for becoming spoiled by the Americans, biting the hand of his native country, which previously fed and cared for him. The story is set in a small village just outside of Bangkok where the residents are subsistence farmers. Khong and his elderly wife care for a number of different animals. One of their young dogs, Somrit, captures the attention of a foreigner who has come to the area to do research on birds. The foreigner befriends Khong and Somrit and convinces Khong to allow Somrit to go to Bangkok with him for veterinary treatment, as well as for training purposes. Although he does not initially understand the training aspect of the foreigner’s request, Khong allows him to take Somrit. When Somrit returns to the village after being away for about a week, he no longer acts like the jovial, carefree dog he was in the past. Instead of being content with his usual meal of rice and gravy served in a coconut shell, Somrit refuses to eat. Also, he tries to bite the other animals and barks incessantly at the old man, his wife, and friends of the family. In an attempt to
regain the favor of his canine companion, the old man serves Somrit’s food on an enamel dish and puts on his finest clothing. His success is short-lived as Somrit does eat the food, but eventually bites the old man. It seems as though his training and pampering by the *farang* have ruined the dog’s disposition. After receiving a beating by the wife for his misbehavior, Somrit flees, cowering under the porch. The story closes as old Khong receives word that a factory is going to be built upon his land in the near future. Khong’s reflection on advice from his friend, revealed through the author’s clever use of a double-entendre, highlights his speculation concerning what it really means to be “brought up.”

* * *

After living a life of relative anonymity in Pakchong for nearly a decade, in 1967-68 Khamsing went to the United States where he worked with a publishing house on a Time-Life grant. On his return to Thailand, Khamsing traveled to France, Germany, Israel, and the Ivory Coast as “an official guest interested in literary and agricultural activities.”85 He went again to a few of these countries in the early 1970s to give lectures on his own work and contemporary Thai literature.86 He also began to write and publish again.

“Clash”

“Clash” is a satirical tale about the death of decency in the face of “progress,” and what Khamsing refers to as the “clash of civilizations” when facets of a more modernized civilization impact one that is considered more traditional and backward. In this story written and published in 1969, Khamsing comments on the kind of “progress” that is

86 Phillips, *Introduction to The Politician and Other Stories*, ix.
associated with an American military base. “Clash” forces the reader to think critically about what “progress” entails and what may be lost in an attempt to acquire it.

An unlicensed taxi driver in rural Thailand recounts the events of his last day on earth, beginning his tale by describing what in retrospect must have been a bad omen, a meeting with a man trying to sell him life insurance. The driver recollects the day of his death, driving some prostitutes (jokingly referred to as “ambassadors’ ladies”) to the local army base, watching a movie at the local drive-in theatre, and listening to the lottery drawing with friends. In the evening he had the good fortune of driving three men who agreed to pay his initial quote of one hundred and fifty baht (twice the normal fare), while making merit by giving a monk a free ride at the same time. As the taxi speeds down “Progress Road,” a road traveled by the driver many times before, two water buffalo block the path, causing the driver to crash into the side of a bridge. The impact kills all of the passengers, but throws the driver onto a small dirt hill. People emerge from the woods, presumably inhabitants of nearby “Progress Village,” to strip the dead of their valuables. In an attempt to avoid being killed, the driver pretends to be dead by contorting his body and holding his breath. When the police later arrive, they identify one of the men as the leader of a gang who had recently committed a robbery. The taxi driver then realizes that his death is imminent because he will be mistakenly included as a member of this gang of bandits.

“Dark Glasses”

Also written in 1969, “Dark Glasses” is a tragically beautiful story about a village family living in the northeast, experiencing firsthand the heartbreaking consequences of the
American military presence in Thailand during the Vietnam War. In this work, Khamsing’s tone is harsher and more despairing than in the stories he wrote during the 1950s. As Wyatt points out, the consequence of military aid was that Thailand was “more awash in cash and corruption.”\footnote{David K. Wyatt, \textit{Siam in Mind} (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 112.} In “Dark Glasses,” the family’s daughter, Khaemkham, is the apple of her father’s eye. She is frail, but beautiful in appearance and gentle in demeanor. Eventually, she is lured away to the city by two men wearing dark glasses. She disappears from the village at the same time a new road is built, opening the small hamlet up to the outside world. The mother and father are both overcome by sadness at the loss of their daughter. The father traps a small bird and keeps it in a cage, perhaps to help assuage his feelings of sadness and despair. At the end of the story, the father decides to free the caged bird to make merit during the annual Vessandara festival. Only the next day is it returned to him by his son. Not realizing that it was the same bird, the boy had clubbed it to death, thinking he was dealt good fortune by being able to so easily kill the defenseless bird. At this point Khaemkham returns home and the metaphor of the poor caged bird takes on new meaning.

“Sales Reps for the Underworld”

“Sales Reps for the Underworld” was written only a short time after the death of Khamsing’s brother in 1970. In this story the protagonist, Kop, from Roi Et Province in the northeast, is searching for a relative who lives in a monastery in Bangkok. Kop’s brother, a World War II veteran, lies dying in a Bangkok hospital. While trying to deal with the grief and suffering of losing his brother, Kop is confronted with the dilemma of
what to do with his brother’s body, as he does not have a lot of money. Even before his brother’s death, Kop is approached by men who feign compassion for his loss in order to persuade Kop to utilize their funerary services. He is filled with rage for the way in which the death of his brother is treated as an opportunity to make money. The story concludes ambiguously as Kop finally finds the monk who may be his relative from Roi Et. This small reprieve, however, does little to alleviate the feelings of disorientation and powerlessness of the protagonist. It seems as though even death is far from sacred in this modern context.

“Happy Birthday, Grandpa”

A story about a rural homecoming, “Happy Birthday, Grandpa” (1971), expresses nostalgia for a traditional way of life. This, however, is not to imply that the story is without social criticism. In the first half of the tale, two men decide to embark on a trip that would be a long overdue homecoming for one of the men. Given new roads built by the Rural Accelerated Development program, the men find that their trip will not take nearly as long as it had in the past. Their ease of travel, however, seems to be one of the only benefits resulting from the development program, for there are also the ubiquitous signs of modernity, an abundance of plastic bags and buckets. To while away some time “saved” by taking the new road, the men stop at a coffee shop. They hear the sound of a nearby celebration broadcast through a stereo system. It is a birthday party for a village family’s grandfather. The party pays homage to a man who made great sacrifices so that his children could succeed. As a gesture of their gratitude – something Khamsing would contend is greatly lacking in the modern world – the family’s children have organized the
grand event. The story’s narrator, previously indifferent to his friend’s homecoming, recognizes in the family’s show of respect and reverence the value of traditional ways of life. This is juxtaposed against the success of the children, underscoring Khamsing’s belief that modernity is not inherently evil, but should not come at the cost of one’s tradition.

Growing Unrest and Revolution: Khamsing’s Literary Role Renewed

In 1968, in response to mounting societal unrest in the countryside and in an attempt to garner political support in the cities, Thanom’s government introduced a new constitution. According to Wyatt, under the military rule of Sarit and Thanom:

Increased government presence in the rural villages…served to heighten dissatisfaction. Villagers became more subject to military police harassment or bureaucratic corruption and bungling; their expectations raised by overly optimistic government promises of development, frequently were not fulfilled; and they became conscious of how far they lagged behind more prosperous regions and city dwellers. These developments heightened political consciousness and fed both insurgency and farmers’ and labor unions by the early 1970s. As strong as such movements had become by then, however, they had nothing like the strength and immediacy of middle-class disaffection with the military regime. Rural discontent may have served to legitimize student and middle-class commitment to political change.

Elections were held in 1969 and, not surprisingly, Thanom remained Prime Minister. Thailand enjoyed “a brief period of democratic relaxation” after the elections, but Thanom then suspended the newly drafted constitution and dissolved the Parliament, reinstating military rule once again in late 1971.

Many of Khamsing’s writings were republished in the 1970s, making him a cultural hero for leftist academics and student activists. He was elected vice-chairman of

88 Owen et al. note that Thailand had been without a constitution since Sarit suspended the previous one in 1958, which provided for an elected lower house of parliament (2005, 359).
89 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 286-287.
90 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 359.
the newly formed Socialist Party of Thailand, which later led to his inclusion on a government blacklist.\textsuperscript{91} Despite a governmental ban on political meetings, student demonstrations against military rule began in 1968 and grew in frequency and fervor into the early 1970s. The protests often focused on the “Thai alliance with the United States and against the government’s slow pace of economic development.”\textsuperscript{92} In June 1973, nine Ramkhamhaeng University students were expelled for publishing an article in a student newspaper that was critical of the government.\textsuperscript{93} Thousands of students held a protest at the Democracy Monument demanding the reinstatement of the expelled students. The government eventually complied, but this was the beginning of what would become one of the most tragic events in Thai history.

In October 1973, thirteen Thammasat University students were arrested on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government. Supported by workers, businesspeople, farmers, teachers, and ordinary citizens, students demonstrated in the streets of Bangkok, demanding the release of the arrested students, the replacement of the current government and a new constitution. According to Wyatt, “Thai society as a whole – workers and farmers little less than students and the middle class – no longer seemed willing to accept a regime that appeared to represent only military interests in the guise of national security and the public welfare.”\textsuperscript{94}

On October 13, the government released the students, noting that the angry crowd had grown to several hundred thousand. It seemed that a crisis had been averted when

\textsuperscript{91} Anderson and Mendiones, \textit{In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era}, 291.
\textsuperscript{92} Wyatt, \textit{Thailand: A Short History}, 287.
\textsuperscript{93} Morell and Samudavanija, \textit{Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution}, 145-146.
\textsuperscript{94} Wyatt, \textit{Thailand: A Short History}, 288.
the demonstration leaders called off the protest at the request of King Bhumibol. The worst, however, was yet to come. As the crowds began to disperse on the next day, October 14, a full scale riot erupted as police tried to direct the flow of foot traffic by closing the southern route to Rajavithi Road. Cornered and overwhelmed by the hostile crowd, the police threw teargas and opened fire. The military was called in, and for several hours an orgy of violence erupted in the streets surrounding Thammasat University and the Grand Palace. Over a thousand people are estimated to have lost their lives during these gruesome events.

“Paradise Preserved”

Khamsing became politically active after the events of October 14, 1973, and he wrote two short stories that year. “Paradise Preserved” is a straightforward and direct criticism of bureaucracy and social hierarchy. The tale begins with the narrator attending a lecture on Thailand’s economic problems. It is a story about a man who needs more money to support his family but does not have the skills or the opportunity to get a higher paying job. He gives up a job as a modestly paid rural schoolteacher in hopes of making it rich by taking a job on an American military base. After he builds a large, new home, his hopes for a better life are dashed as he finds he is faced with a rapidly increasing cost of living. He rents out rooms in his home to offset his expenses, but soon finds his home turning into a brothel. The protagonist finds himself caught between the ideology of the modern world that espouses material gain and individualism, and traditional values rooted in family and group solidarity. He eventually chooses tradition and moves his

family back into their old dwelling, abandoning the new home. After briefly working as an unlicensed taxi driver, he is able to get another job as a lackey for a member of parliament. The man serves as a minion for the MP, wielding a power that is not truly his, serving a god who is supposedly preserving the “paradise” that is the modernizing Thailand of the 1970s. There exists purposeful ambiguity and satire in the story as the “paradise preserved” might not be this modernized contemporary society, but the village to which the man finally returned with his family. The implication here is that the way to succeed in the new, “modern” world is not through honest effort, but by kowtowing and using the power of those who have more power.

“I Lost My Teeth”

Also written in 1973, “I Lost My Teeth” conveys the desperation felt by so many of Thailand’s rural population. In this story the impoverished protagonist recounts how he was robbed of an old pistol, over two-hundred baht, four of his teeth, and most importantly, his dignity. When his friend asks why he did not use his gun to fend off the robbers, he tells him how impossible it is to tell the difference in modern society between a “good guy” and a “bad guy.” With so many governmental officials visiting their poor village as part of development programs, the villagers offer a friendly smile to each new person they encounter. This old-world bewilderment robs the protagonist of not only his few worldly possessions, but also most of his teeth. As if this incident were not enough, the protagonist concludes the story by telling his friend that when he informed the cops of the crime, he failed to mention how moments before the robbery was completed, he
upbraided one of the criminals. He left this out for fear that he could lose the remainder of his teeth at the hands of the increasingly corrupt police officers. It seems that in this atmosphere where neither cops nor robbers can be discerned from one another, even the value of honesty is no longer what it used to be.

“The Buffalo with the Red Horns”
Khamsing’s only work dealing with the tension between ethnic Thais and ethnic Chinese, “The Buffalo with the Red Horns” (1981) is a story about how a Chinese businessman comes to dominate an entire village through the buffalo trade and one clever villager’s costly encounter with this seemingly insurmountable power. As hardship becomes an all too common reality in this area, the Chinese merchant-cum-county headman exploits the poverty of the villagers and gains almost complete power over the small hamlet. To distinguish the many buffalo that he now owns from those of the villagers, he paints their horns red. Thit Si is the only remaining inhabitant of the village who has not sold his buffalo to the Chinese businessman in exchange for polished rice. In a clever twist, Thit Si paints the horns of his buffalo red, knowing that it will be protected from thieves while he is away seeking extra work, for they would not dare to steal from the powerful Chinese lord. Thit Si’s cunning, however, backfires as one of the servants of the Chinese lord demands payment from Thit Si for the use of the buffalo. Although he is able to convince the servant that the buffalo is indeed his, Thit Si is ultimately forced to buy the Chinese lord food and drink to avoid punishment for his actions.
After 1976: The Jungle, Exile, and a Final Story

In 1976 Khamsing was forced to flee into the jungle when the short-lived democracy was suppressed after the October 6, 1976 elections. He recalled:

I had a very good relationship with many of the students at that time so I went to the jungle with them. I was shown the blacklist by a friend of mine who was a professor at Thammasat and my name was on it. I could not believe this. When he told me my name was on the list as the number 12 leader of the student movement, I was shocked. This is a Buddhist country; nothing could happen. But after this professor friend was shot to death, I quickly realized that this was serious.  

Khamsing spent 10 months in the jungle. He describes his disillusionment with members of the Communist Party whom he met there:

I know that they absolutely wanted me dead, but I didn’t fear for my life. Instead, I just kept thinking that this country was so off track that I could no longer stay…. When I first fled to the jungle, I thought like so many others that the Communist Party was the only answer. But I soon found out that the mixed up political nature in the Party was just as bad as the Thai government. I was asking questions of the intellectuals who were there that had already joined the Party and they could not give me good answers about the reality of the social and political situation in Thailand. I was looking for what was right, what was just. In the Communist Party I encountered a blind, old faith where people were just as misguided as those that believed in the government of the time.

Khamsing decided to leave Thailand. He had planned to go to the United States, but “could not get the plane ticket so [he] went to Laos before eventually going to Sweden.” With a sad look creasing his face, he told me that “[he] could not stand to live any longer in a country whose government could act like this one did.” Khamsing returned to Thailand near the end of 1978 and settled in Bangkok after a change of government.

In 1992, Khamsing was selected as a “National Artist of Thailand in Literature” by the National Culture Commission of Thailand. This award is “accompanied by a

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96 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Phillips, Introduction to The Politician and Other Stories, ix.
small annual stipend for the rest of his life.”101 Khamsing now lives on his farm in Pakchong, Khorat, with his wife, a pack of wild chickens, a dog, and a playful black kitten.

“Intercourse”

“Intercourse,” the final story in the thirteenth edition of *The Politician and Other Stories* was written by Khamsing in 1996, nearly four decades after his first story. In this story Khamsing returns to familiar themes. He exposes the superficial implementation and execution of an educational campaign to end illiteracy in rural areas, which became an exercise in producing positive statistics, questioning the nature of the education promoted by government programs. The story takes place in the aftermath of the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. A young, barely literate man named Somdet works in a town near the Cambodia border as a servant to the boss of a small illegal logging outfit. In his home village Somdet, who managed to pass the literacy test only with great help from the village headman, is teased for his stupidity, and people refer to a dim-witted action as “pulling a Somdet.” At his job, however, he becomes a reliable “jack of all trades,” acting as cook, doctor’s assistant, servant, and general watchman of the logging camp. Somdet returns to his village after being forced to flee from his job in the jungle amidst fears that Khmer Rouge insurgents would overrun the camp. Upon his return home, Somdet’s mother informs him that his uncle has fallen gravely ill. She tells Somdet to visit his uncle immediately as it seems that he is merely waiting for one last visit with Somdet so that he can die in peace. Somdet rushes to his uncle where he finds

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several villagers attempting to comfort the dying man by forgiving all his worldly debts. Rather than confessing the details of a debt that he owed to his uncle, Somdet pours a bottle of medicine (presumably saline that he brought back from the logging camp) down his uncle’s throat, bringing the sick man back from the brink of death. The villagers are twice chagrined as their “village idiot” made fools of them all by healing a sick man that even the doctor could not save, and also because they had publicly forgiven the dying man all his debts.

Conclusion

To Khamsing, literature has power as a catalyst for social change by revealing the realities of life and thus affecting the perceptions of readers. Khamsing wrote about the realities of life in the northeast for students and intellectuals in the 1950s, rather than for farmers, who were mostly illiterate and were much less concerned about the larger social issues, even when these often had a direct impact on their daily lives. In his stories he tries to give the villagers a voice. In his own words, “When I write, I want to be a voice for these people. I do not write to them, but I write for them.”102 Khamsing told me his chosen readership were mostly students in Bangkok from elite families because they seemed to him at that time to have been the only viable group that could bring about substantive changes.

The rural citizens in his stories are portrayed as having an insular perspective and their superstition and naïveté comes through in their encounters with the outside world, most frequently defined as Bangkok. Khamsing masterfully utilizes humor, as if gently

102 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
teasing the villagers who “increasingly face a world in which foreign-aided economic
development rudely encroaches upon their isolation.”\textsuperscript{103} It has been suggested that Khamsing was one of the writers who got away with his social criticism due to his ability to use the art of implication.\textsuperscript{104}

In his Introduction to the 1973 edition of \textit{The Politician and Other Thai Stories}, Michael Smithies’ contends, “Modern Thai literature is not dominated by realism or solicitous concern for the condition of society.”\textsuperscript{105} Smithies suggests, “Modern Thai literature lacks a window on the world and is not interested in the world outside.”\textsuperscript{106} Khamsing, however, stands outside of this equation as he depicts the underprivileged and often forgotten peasant world from an insider’s perspective, offering a unique social critique that does not sentimentalize the villagers’ plight. His stories reveal the brutal and often unfair circumstances of a rapidly changing Thai society, “the real world of 80 per cent of Thailand’s population and the setting of the vast majority of Asia’s peasants.”\textsuperscript{107} His presentation of the conflicts, injustices, and inequalities in Thai society struck a chord in a time when many became aware of the increasing gap between the rural and urban worlds of Thailand (which can also be viewed as the increasing gap between the rich and the poor).\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{103} Smyth and Chitakasem, \textit{The Sergeant’s Garland and Other Stories}, xv.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Michael Smithies, \textit{Introduction to The Politician and Other Stories} (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), xiii.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., xiv.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{108} This issue is dealt with in more detail in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER THREE: CHART KORBJITTI

Born on June 25, 1954 in Baan Bo, Samut Sakorn province, Chart was the second of nine children. His childhood home was located near the Howling Dog Canal in what was “then a rural community but [is] now a nondescript, industrialized satellite town of Bangkok not far from the sea.” Chart’s father worked as a ferryman, which often kept him away from home. According to Chart, his father would “take the boat upriver to sell salt in bulk at Bangkok. He would be away for seven to ten days and then return home for two or three days only to repeat the process again.” Chart’s mother ran a small shop near their home, which sold goods for local people, like rice, sugar or medicine.

When I asked Chart to describe what life was like growing up on the fringes of the “Celestial City” during the 1960s, he explained that although his family was not as poor as some other residents of Baan Bo, they often struggled to make ends meet. Chart painted a picture of an average rural family eking out a meager existence in a house with no electricity or running water. However, trips to Bangkok added an element of adventure: “When we would go to the city, we would go by boat because there was no train and we would have to use an electric light, like a big flashlight to lead our way down the river at nighttime.”

When he was seven, Chart began attending the elementary school in his village, as is customary for children in Thailand. After completing his seventh year of primary

110 Howling Publications is the name of Chart’s self-funded publishing company. Marcel Barang contends that the name of this childhood canal “may explain [Chart’s] subsequent literary love affair with dogs (which to the Thai are what pigs are to Westerners) – [as] two of his novels are named after dogs....” Ibid., 334.
111 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007. All quotations from Chart and information about his life not otherwise noted come from this interview.
school at 14, Chart asked his parents if he could go to live in a temple, which takes in boys in order to give them an education. He said that he wanted to study at Wat Yai, the local temple, because the boys there would have fun and staying at home was too quiet. When he lived with his brothers and sisters and “it wasn’t as much fun.” At about this time, Chart’s father began to trade in coarse sand, which meant that he spent even more time away from home. Chart’s mother also started to work on the boats, so Chart moved to his grandmother’s house and attended Ekachi School in Samut Sakorn.

Chart explained that his parents lacked any education beyond primary school. But Chart discovered that he could retreat into books when there was no money for snacks and treats that other children had:

…In my house as a child we had no books, certainly no great works. My father and mother didn’t read; they were just normal people. One point in my life that pushed me to read more was when mother couldn’t give me money for snacks or toys so I went to the library to read. I spent my time here because I didn’t have money to spend on other things like some of the other children. So it has become my habit to read. I learned as a young child that because I could read, I could also write, so I started to write. Many people ask me why I want to be a writer. I say I don’t know, but maybe it was because as a child I read so much. It was at age 14 that I told myself I would be a writer and I didn’t change my habits for fulfilling this wish.

After finishing junior school, Chart moved to a temple in Makkasan, Bangkok, where he was a dekwat (temple boy), looked after by an uncle who was a monk there. In 1966, Chart took the examination for Bathum Khong Kha School, which he passed. Interested in writing and art, Chart was encouraged by a trainee teacher from Chulalongkorn University, who praised his work and gave him some direction and confidence in his writing.

After high school, Chart went on to study at Pochang College in Bangkok, beginning a five-year course in fine arts and printing in 1971. He explained that Pochang
“was a kind of technical school where they teach arts and crafts.” While attending Pochang, Chart shared a rented room in Pratunam district. His parents managed to pay for the first two years of his college education, and then he started to sell handbags that he made at local shops in the Banglamphu area of Bangkok and took a job as a doorman at a local bar in order to pay for his schooling. Later, Chart and his friends moved to another house in Bangkhunthian, Bangkok. He recalled, “We were a scruffy bunch, struggling to get by, and all aspired to be great musicians, artists, and writers.”

Literature, Students, and Social Revolution

Chart moved to Bangkok just as a student movement against the dictatorship of Thanon was emerging. Under pressure to democratize, Thanon’s government introduced a new constitution in 1968 and held an election in 1969. After a brief honeymoon, in 1971 Thanom suspended the constitution and dissolved the Parliament, reinstating military rule.

At the heart of the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a quarterly journal called the Social Science Review (Sangkhomsat parithat), first published in 1964, the year following Sarit’s death. First edited by Sulak Sivaraksa and later by Suchart Sawatsi, the Social Science Review became “a forum for discussing social, economic, and political problems facing Thailand.” The students were also inspired by an article entitled “Art for Life, Art for the People,” written by Jit Phumisak, a scholar

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112 He writes about these experiences in Phan Maa Baa (Mad Dogs & Co.).
113 Owen et al. note that Thailand had been without a constitution since Sarit suspended the previous one in 1958, which provided for an elected lower house of parliament (2005, 359).
114 According to Anderson and Mendiones, after his world travels in 1967 and 1968, Khamsing was recruited by Suchart to submit articles to the liberal journal (1985, 291).
115 Smyth and Chitakasem, The Sergeant’s Garland and Other Stories, xv.
and literary critic who was killed in 1966 after he joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This article formed the basis for the “Literature for Life” movement. In Jit, the young writers found a socialist perspective, as well as the idea that it “was the responsibility of the writer to challenge readers to think critically about the society around them by portraying the real life of ordinary people and the way society oppresses them.”116 “Literature for Life” became the voice of a generation of political activists who maintained that “the place of the [writer is] side by side with the people and that literature must present the reality of life and society.”117 Many previously banned works (e.g. those of Kulap and Khamsing) were re-published, and long unavailable works by Saipradit (pen name, Sriburapha), and Jit Phumisak were reissued.118 These young, socially-conscious writers also read Marxist and Western progressive works.119 They wanted to challenge the authority of the military regime and American influence in Thailand.120 Recurrent literary themes in works written at this time include the negative effects of rural development schemes, lack of rural education and communication, blind adoption of Western culture, and the U.S. military presence.

From 1973 to 1976 Thailand “experienced democracy of the most thoroughgoing sort, with a frenetic anarchy of political parties, demonstrations, strikes, debates, discussions, and police brutality.”121

118 According to Smyth and Chitakasem, Kulap “proved a favorite with the Thai youth movement, who found in his political fiction an eloquent and passionate voicing of their own ideals; sponsoring reprints of his works became both an expression of their own political sympathies and a focus for their own group solidarity” (1998, xvi).
120 Ibid. Two literary groups took center stage in this literary movement, Prajan Siow (Crescent Moon) composed of Thammasat University students, and Noom Nao Sao Suay (Young Boys and Beautiful Girls) from Sinlapakorn University.
activism, and turmoil.”121 This was a period of unsurpassed literary freedom in modern Thai history due to the absence of a military dictatorship and censorship.122 “Literature for Life” flourished; the output was mostly in a short story format suited to political messages and social criticism. However, the authors’ narrow-minded political views or lofty idealisms often made them easy targets for conservative critics, one of whom wrote:

The short stories of the new generation of writers are becoming more and more bitter all the time. What these writers still dare not vouch for, is whether or not the short stories of today are acceptable to readers in general, excluding young people from their own generation.123

Chart was among the young writers influenced by the “Literature for Life” movement. He cites Kukrit Pramoj and Khamsing as authors who led him to look at the problems plaguing the poor and “taught [him] about humanity”; while Rong Wongsawan showed him how to be artistic in his language. But while Khamsing took an active political role at this time, Chart adopted an apolitical attitude, focusing instead on his growing literary ambitions. He got a job working for Siriphon Yu with the literary magazine, Sanao San. Although the position was unpaid, it gave Chart work experience and exposed him to the literary profession.

Beyond 1973: Idealism Lost

By 1976 “cleavages between rich and poor, city and countryside, management and labor, monarchist and anarchist, revolutionary and conservative” wracked Thai society.124 Thailand’s internal problems were exacerbated by events on the international scene. The

121 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 359.
122 Smyth and Chitakasem, The Sergeant’s Garland and Other Stories, xvi.
124 Owen, The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History, 359.
“world petroleum crisis of 1973-1974 curtailed economic growth and fueled general inflation, while global commodity prices, on which Thailand depended for exports, also slumped.”125 As communist regimes came to power in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the United States withdrew from Thailand. Although many young activists heralded the withdrawal of American troops, large sums of money were removed from the economy as the U.S. put an end to nearly two decades of economic assistance.126

During this time of great socio-political upheaval, first Seni and then Kukrit Pramoj, representing contending parties, tried to bring stability to Thailand.127 As the influence of the progressive leaders and student activists diminished, the army and right-wing political parties embarked on a propaganda campaign accusing student activists of being communists.128 Students again took to the streets almost exactly three years after the brutal massacre of October 1973 to protest the return of General Thanom. In an episode strikingly reminiscent of events three years prior, a riot broke out at Thammasat University. Hundreds of students were arrested and some were tortured, lynched, burned, beaten, and killed by the factions of the military and the police.129 Seni’s resignation as leader of the Democratic Party brought an end to Thailand’s experiment with full democracy. The military Administrative Reform Council army installed a civilian law professor, Thanin Kraivichien, as Prime Minister. Thanin ruled with ruthless oppression,

125 Barang, The 20 Best Novels of Thailand: An Anthology, 488.
126 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 290.
127 The brothers were foreign educated and of royal descent, each having served in government prior to serving as Prime Minister. Kukrit was a prolific writer, penning over 120 books (six novels) as well as a journalist, dancer, actor, and businessman; Seni studied law as a young man and later served as a judge in Thailand’s Justice Civil Court. Barang, The 20 Best Novels of Thailand: An Anthology, 259-260.
129 Simple adjectives do not convey these horrific events. Short films and photographs that show the almost unimaginable brutality of these events leave one dumbfounded, disgusted, and thoroughly dejected.
forcing thousands of students, intellectuals (including Khamsing), and other radicals to flee to the Thai countryside, where many joined guerrilla movements against the government alongside the Communist Party of Thailand. In October 1977, the army again intervened in the political process, replacing Thanin with General Kriangsak Chomanand, a relatively moderate figure, who offered amnesty to dissident students. Kriangsak was forced to resign as Prime Minister in February 1980, and General Prem Tinsulanonda took office, becoming Thailand’s longest serving premier (1980-1988).

By the 1980s, Thailand had undergone dramatic changes. According to figures drawn from David Wyatt’s *Thailand: A Short History* (2003), “agricultural households as a percentage of total households dropped from 73.9 percent in 1960 to 55.6 percent in 1980.”130 Along with an increasingly urban population, Thailand “was caught in the worldwide slump in the prices of primary commodities and in the catastrophic rise in the prices of petroleum and manufactured goods that the country imports in great quantity.”131 Life was difficult during this time, especially for the immigrants from the countryside who now lived in urban slums. The general state of mind among political activists and dissidents after their defeat in 1976 was one of alienation, resignation, and disillusionment. The “Literature for Life” movement had failed.132

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130 Concerning these figures, Wyatt notes, “[They] may be somewhat deceptive, disguising a certain proportion of rural people who carry on agriculture in addition to other pursuits, but it should signal the fact that Thailand was no longer a bucolic, rural, rice-growing society” (2003, 282).
Chart’s Emergence on the Literary Scene

Chart graduated from Pochang College in 1976. He moved to Mahachai to live with his father, who had retired. Chart was still intent on becoming a writer, but on his father’s suggestion, he started a small business manufacturing leather bags, continuing the business that had supported his studies in college. He married a fellow Pochang student, Soi, who was also an aspiring artist. They both poured their energies into the bag business in an attempt to finance their artistic aspirations.

Chart began experimenting with unusual writing styles. He studied the works of Hemingway and Sartre, and used them as models and inspiration for his own style. In 1979, Chart started a short story edition of the literary journal *Lok Nangseu* (*Book World*). In the third issue titled *Khrleun Hua Derng*, Chart’s short story “Phu Phae” (“The Loser”) appeared. It was one of two stories that received the *Cho Karaket* literary award; the story was also recognized by the Thai Writers Association as one of the best of the year. After this initial success, Chart sold his bag business and used the money to publish his first book. He reflected, “I think most parents want their children to grow up to be rich. But a writer cannot be a rich man especially in the old days, but also today as well. I tried to hide from my parents that I wanted to be a writer. They never knew that I wanted to be a writer until I wrote my first book.” Laughing, he added, “But nowadays, they say ok!”
No Way Out

Chart’s first major work to be translated into English, *No Way Out*, was published in Thai in 1980 as *Jon Trok*. ¹³³ Chart’s short novelette is a work of social realism, the story of one family’s desperate struggle to survive in the slums of Bangkok. The novel opens with an emotionally charged scene where Boonma, the father, is berating his teenaged daughter, Sida, for turning to prostitution. This tortured interchange between father and daughter does not actually occur until much later in the story, but it sets the stage for a devastating critique of society from the perspective of the impoverished slum dweller.

Living in a small, dingy house constructed from rusty corrugated iron, scrap wood, and discarded paper advertisements, Boonma, his wife, their three children, and Boonma’s grandfather fight to eke out a living. Each character, with the exception of the baby Dam, is forced to perform menial, and sometimes degrading, tasks so that the family can survive. Boonma works for a wealthy Chinese *towkay* (business man); his wife stays at home with Dam and folds paper bags; Ort, the middle child, cleans car windows at a busy intersection after attending elementary school; the grandfather sharpens knives for inhabitants of the surrounding slums; and Sida is ultimately pressured into prostitution.

In an attempt to provide a more comfortable life for his family, Boonma takes a loan from the *towkay* to build a bigger house that will accommodate his newly arrived father and newborn son, Dam. He soon becomes indentured to his boss and must take a

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¹³³ At the same time, three of Chart’s other novels were also translated into English, *The Judgment, Time, and Mad Dogs & Co.* by Marcel Barang. *No Way Out* was translated by David Smyth. Marcel Barang, Chart’s long time friend and translator, commented, “Let’s not talk about *Jon Trok*. He wasn’t really Chart Korbjitti yet; it’s not that I don’t like it, but I just think it’s just a minor novelette.” Interview with Marcel Barang, November 19, 2007. I disagree with Barang.
job on a fishing boat, which keeps him away from home for increasingly long periods of time. While Boonma is away at sea, his father is mugged when returning home late one night after a long day of sharpening knives. The muggers abscond with about one hundred baht, and leave the old man nearly crippled after striking him on the spine with a large stick. This misfortune not only subtracted a financial provider from the already destitute family, but it also put an additional strain on the family as the grandfather could no longer care for himself.

Upon returning home from a four-month stint on the fishing boat, Boonma finds his wife pregnant. There is no possibility that the child is his. Flying into a rage, Boonma beats his wife in front of his entire family, so that she flees the next morning never to return. It is also at this time that Sida begins to sell herself to the neighborhood men. When Boonma learns of this, he casts her out from the family, screaming, “You ain’t no daughter of mine, you little whore!”134 Twelve-year-old Ort is now left to care for his grandfather and Dam as Boonma must return to the fishing boat in a futile attempt to repay the loans from the towkay.

Ort is arrested for stealing scrap metal from a nearby factory in an effort to get money to take his grandfather to the hospital after he burned his foot in a cooking accident. With no one left to provide for them, the grandfather is forced to give Dam to Mrs. Pu, a family friend, in the hope that she will raise him as one of her own. Wishing no longer to be a burden to his family, the grandfather hangs himself.

After spending six months in a Burmese prison for unknowingly working on an illegal fishing boat, Boonma returns home. Crushed and defeated, he can no longer cope with all that has befallen him and his family. Attempting to avoid what he sees to be a life of misery for his youngest son, Boonma feeds Dam poison. Boonma also takes the poison, but his suicide attempt is botched and he is tried for the murder of Dam. Given his full confession, *No Way Out* comes to a close as Boonma’s sentence is reduced from death to life imprisonment.

*No Way Out* is based on an article Chart read in the newspaper during his final years at Pochang College in the late 1970s. His telling of the story makes it clear that each of the family members was almost *forced* to commit illegal or immoral actions due to factors that were outside their control; it is not that choices did not exist, but that only bad choices were available. As the title suggests, the characters are trapped in a web of poverty and despair no matter how hard they struggle to escape. The work established Chart at the “cutting edge” of post-“Literature for Life” writing. This short novel takes up many of the themes of the “Literature for Life” genre, but it goes further by addressing the despair that stems from societal alienation and the ideological confusion experienced by the uprooted urban poor.

Sida and Ort are trapped in poverty long before they reach adulthood. Ort sells newspapers to cars at traffic lights each afternoon after school. Exhausted, he makes the long walk home only after he has made enough money to purchase dinner for the family. It is no surprise that Ort’s education will not continue past primary school. Sida has successfully completed Grade 4 primary school, but, like her younger brother, will not
continue her schooling given the family circumstances. Given no other option as she lacks a skill that would lead to employment, Sida begins sleeping with men to earn money so that she can help support her family. This leads to the fate that befalls so many impoverished girls in Thailand: Sida is kicked out of her home, labeled a “whore” by her father, and winds up working as a prostitute in Bangkok.

Ort is pulled in several different directions as traditional values come into conflict with the modern world of Bangkok. He feels a traditional duty to support his family, but he is also mesmerized by the neon lights of Bangkok that fill the evening sky. Mature beyond his age, he thinks to himself,

Why…hadn’t he been born into a rich family, like the ones he saw when he was running around selling newspapers? Lots of the kids sitting there in cars were the same age as him. Why wasn’t it him, too? Why was he born into a family whose life was like this?135

Through the anguish of his young character, Chart calls attention to the injustice of the poverty that destroys lives of the poor and leads to a feeling of alienation from a modernizing society that holds materialism in high regard.

As the father attempting to build a suitable home for his family, Boonma had taken a loan from his boss. Boonma acts with a sense of agency and rationality that his children do not experience in the same way. He believes that he can make a better life for his family. His children do not share this belief. Due to increasing interest on the loan, Boonma must take a job aboard a fishing boat, which keeps him away from home for long periods of time. While he is away, his wife becomes pregnant by another man. Boonma finds himself in ever greater debt as his wages are not sufficient to cover the

135 Korbjitti, No Way Out, 97.
interest on his loan. In the end, Boonma is overwhelmed by loans he has taken to offset other loans. Despite the fact that he leads a decent life, never drinking or gambling, Boonma is not able to escape poverty. He is trapped inside a system where there truly is “no way out.” Boonma is overcome by despair and convinces himself that it would be best to spare his baby son, Dam, a life of pain and misery, so he feeds him poison. Succeeding in killing only Dam but not himself, Boonma is sentenced to a life in prison. Questioning whether it was “really such good luck that he hadn’t died,” Boonma does not see the societal inequalities and pressures that determined his actions, but instead blames himself:

Who is really to blame? Boonma asked himself.
It’s you, of course. The thought suddenly came loud and clear.
If you hadn’t asked Dad to come to Bangkok?
If you hadn’t been so desperate for a house!
If you hadn’t gone borrowing money from the towkay!
If you hadn’t kicked your wife that day!
If you hadn’t kicked Sida out of the house!
If you hadn’t got involved with boats!
If you hadn’t got arrested!
…Boonma didn’t blame anyone at all. He wasn’t even angry with anyone for making his family end up like this. He blamed only himself. He was angry only with himself for being born poor. He didn’t know why poor people such as him always encountered such misfortune.  

Throughout much of his writing and especially in No Way Out, Chart seems to say that the underprivileged are not truly free to make their own decisions because they live within an unjust system that is not only unequal, but also deceitful. They are trapped within a world where one must weigh choices according to a cost-benefit analysis and opt for the “lesser-of-two-evils.” The system has so utterly defeated Boonma that he is left

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136 Korbjitti, No Way Out, 135.
137 Ibid., 129-135.
without any hope and has only his past *karma* to blame for a life of misery. In a final attempt to escape, he experiences the ultimate irony as even death cheats him.

The Judgment

Chart’s breakthrough novel, *The Judgment*, was published in Thai as *Khamphiphaksa* in 1981. In 1982, at age 26, he was awarded the SEA Write Award for this book. The *Judgment* is an intensely claustrophobic novel that depicts the psychological destruction of an individual against the background of a hostile social environment. Marcel Barang, Chart’s longtime friend and translator has written:

*The Judgment* is a landmark. In many ways, it is the first modern Thai novel…[A]fter the dark ages, the 1970’s saw a landslide of “literature for life,” which sided with the underdog but was aesthetically ruined by its political good intentions. By 1980, the failure of reformist mass movements, the discredit of communism and the rapid changes brought about by socio-economic development all called for a new approach to socially orientated fiction. *The Judgment* offered precisely that, by shifting the focus from “us against them” to “one against all” – or rather “all against one.” For the first time, a well-crafted [work] pitting the individual against society appeared.

The implication of Barang’s comment highlights that *The Judgment* is not solely about poverty, but also about the strains of modernity and how an individual living within such an atmosphere can be psychologically destroyed.

The work is divided into three parts titled: “Prologue,” “The Entanglement,” and “The Liberation.” The setting, perhaps modeled on Chart’s childhood hometown of Samut Sakhorn, is a rural village in the throes of modernization. The village is transformed from a temple-based community to a modern urban town. The story follows Fak, the school janitor, chronicling his downfall at the hands of the villagers. It is

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138 The SEA Write Award is an annual honor given since 1979 to one author of outstanding literature from each country in Southeast Asia (not all countries have a recipient each year). Granted according to a three-year cycle (novel, poetry, short story), the SEA Write Award is both a mark of distinction as well as a monetary award.

through Fak, the tragic protagonist, that Chart reveals the injustices in a society representative of much of Thailand at that time. In the “Prologue,” the reader learns that Fak is a respected young man who is destined for great things in the Buddhist clergy. His father, whose wife is long dead, works as a janitor at the local temple school. Fak, lamenting that his elderly father must work so hard, leaves the monkhood in order to do the work for him. At the beginning of the book, the villagers use Fak as an example for moral action to their children: “Why can’t you be more like Fak? If you were half as good as he is, I wouldn’t have to worry anymore.”

Fak leaves on military service and returns two years later to find a new road linking the village to the main town and a woman named Somsong living with his father as his new wife. The new road brings the materialistic and modernized urban values of Bangkok to the village, corrupting the villagers. Electricity fills the villagers with dreams of owning the electrical appliances they have seen in town. Village gossip now focuses on who has bought what. The greed and selfishness of modern society begins to replace the traditional values of community. Material advancement not only corrupts the traditional values of the villagers, it also destroys traditional village life. For example, temple fairs often had a large screen for films, and the villagers would gather to see the movies. However, when television is introduced to the village, villagers decide they would rather stay home and watch their own televisions in private. Even the Buddhist temple, the repository of traditional values and customs, does not escape the changes. With the new consumer culture sweeping through the community, temple ceremonies

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become a means of keeping up appearances, enhancing one’s status, and showing off one’s material wealth. This consumerism even penetrates the monkhood. When the pond outside the headmaster’s house becomes a status symbol in the village, the assistant abbot copies the idea.

Soon Fak’s father dies, leaving Fak to deal with Somsong, who is mentally unstable. It is at this point that Fak’s troubles begin in earnest. The villagers decide that Fak has taken his father’s wife as his own, and nothing Fak does or says changes their minds. Even when a few villagers sneak a look into Fak’s hut one night and see nothing to support their suspicions, they decide that somehow Fak knew they were watching. Fak continues to look after Somsong out of sympathy and a sense of duty. His moral resolve leads directly to his personal tragedy. A series of unfortunate and coincidental events convince the villagers that their suspicions concerning Fak are indeed true, whereupon they turn on him, and by the end of the novel they are threatening their children with Fak:

> It wouldn’t be altogether correct to say that he was of absolutely no use to the village, because whenever children threw tantrums or wouldn’t be pacified, their flustered mothers would threaten them with, “If you don’t stop now, I’m gonna get Fak to take you away.” As soon as this was said, the wailing kids would shut up.141

Society’s rejection of Fak is evidenced when none of the villagers, excepting Uncle Khai, attend the funeral of his father. When Fak invites the kamnan (village head) to his father’s cremation, he greets him with a respectful wai; the kamnan’s response shows his opinion of Fak: “The kamnan acknowledged Fak’s greeting by raising his left hand, as though he were brushing a fly off his chin.”142 All the villagers claim to be too busy to attend the funeral of Fak’s father, but when the father of the kamnan dies, the

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141 Korbjitti, The Judgment, 273-274.  
142 Ibid.
entire village turns out in their finest clothing for the ostentatious affair. Fak reflects that it is his low social status that has made him vulnerable to the villagers’ suspicions:

I’d really like to know, though: if I had a family, if I had relic urns like the others, or if I had wealth and status like the headmaster or kamnan Yorm, would the villagers dare claim that I sleep with my father’s wife? ...But here I am, someone with no social standing. Nobody respects me. I’m a nonentity, so the villagers take for granted that I’ve taken my father’s wife.143

Fak has nowhere to turn. His only friend, the lowly undertaker, Uncle Khai, introduces Fak to his favorite killer of pain and suffering: alcohol. Fak starts drinking, quickly becoming addicted to alcohol’s numbing properties. He loses his job at the temple, and his life continues its downward spiral. The villagers deal him one blow after another, never wavering in their predetermined convictions concerning Fak’s alleged moral decline.

The gross consumerism of the villagers and Fak’s fall from grace are connected by Chart in a poignant scene at the temple ceremony where the villagers pay homage to their ancestors. Fak arrives at the scene drunk, carrying an old whisky carton containing his cremated father’s remains. The other villagers bring beautifully ornate urns of exquisite design and high price in an effort to outdo each other. Fak brazenly places his old box among the urns on the platform. After paying homage to his father’s relics, he walks away, ignoring the villagers’ stares. Chart writes:

Many people stared at the platform and more than one person must have been wanting to get up and put the carton of booze out of sight, as there was no way that it could fit in with the urns, from whichever angle you looked. It wasn’t just a matter of aesthetics: the carton was worthless when compared to the precious metallic urns; even the bones inside were no match to other people’s relics when weighed in terms of human worth. That battered old carton was a real eyesore.144

144 Ibid., 228.
Fak recognizes the irony that Uncle Khai is the only one who believes he is telling the truth, for even Fak looked down on the undertaker before the villagers accused him of sleeping with Somsong. Fak remembers that during his days as a novice monk, even the monks viewed Uncle Khai with scorn, refusing to eat his offerings of merit. Uncle Khai gives voice to this sense of societal alienation the two men now share at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the village:

If all the people in the village were lined up according to their status, I’m sure I’d be at the end of the line because I’m really inferior – just an undertaker. But right now – you and me are birds of a feather and it’s a toss up who’d be at the end of the line. When you were a novice you were at the head of it and you had no idea how the people at the other end felt.  

After Fak starts drinking, he goes to visit the headmaster to withdraw the last of his savings, but the headmaster claims to know nothing about the money. Once Fak realizes that it is the “others” who are the cause of his suffering rather than his own karma or past actions, he begins to think of revenge. He goes to the school to demand the money the headmaster owes him. He causes a scene and the police are called. The villagers take much delight in seeing Fak dragged off to the police station, where he is put in a cell. As Fak sits in the jail, the headmaster manipulates the situation to make it appear as though he pities Fak. Before being released from jail, Fak is forced to apologize to the headmaster in the presence of all the villagers. Fak tries to insist on an honest rendering for his money, but there is no way a drunkard of his low status could challenge the moral authority of the village headman.

This public humiliation by the headmaster is the final straw for Fak. He returns to his hut and sends Somsong out to buy him some rice wine. He waits alone in utter

desperation, a complete and total social outcast. Fak’s mind wanders off, lamenting the absence of the “constant” values, represented for Fak in the traditional temple way of life that he so desperately craves; even in the final moments of his life he yearns “to be included in the sharing of merit.”\textsuperscript{146} When Somsong returns, Fak hits the bottle for the very last time, ultimately dying in a pool of his own blood and vomit. With no shred of dignity remaining, Fak’s only liberation from his living hell comes through death.

In death, Fak is not shown even a modicum of respect. The headmaster agrees to sponsor Fak’s cremation under false pretences. A new furnace crematorium has been purchased as part of the modern development of the village. Fak’s cremation is set for the same day as the abbot’s birthday. The headmaster, while ostensibly appearing to be benevolent, simply wants to use Fak’s body to test the new crematorium. Uncle Khai is taken in by the headmaster’s plan. The headmaster delays Fak’s cremation for six months so as to wait for the new furnace to arrive, and Uncle Khai regrets letting the headmaster use Fak’s body to show off the “progress” of the village. If there is any semblance of a reprieve for the tragic hero to be gleaned in \textit{The Judgment}, it is ironic. Once Fak is dead, the headmaster, Uncle Khai, and the new janitor go to collect Fak’s body, but Somsong will not let them take it. As they attempt to restrain Somsong, she manages to spit directly in the headmaster’s face. Vindication is provided by the one character who is oblivious to all that has happened.

\textit{The Judgment} is consistent with Chart’s other novels, \textit{Time} and \textit{No Way Out}, which also end without hope. The reader is not “liberated” from the claustrophobic atmosphere, even after Fak has been “liberated” by death. The dark, suffocating

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{146} Korbjitti, \textit{The Judgment}, 288.}
atmosphere of the novel offers no solutions to the complex problems of the modern world. The three main protagonists, Fak, Somsong, and Uncle Khai, are good people who do not judge others on the strength of outward appearance and status. They embody the good morals that are being displaced by “progress.” *The Judgment* subtly asserts that progress leads to the decline of traditional morals and values. There exists a striking correlation between the fetters of modernity (e.g. roads, electricity, increased material possessions) and the erosion of traditional, communal values. Fak’s tragedy leaves the reader without hope or respite. There are no calls to action to stand up against the “others” in Chart’s work.

*The Judgment* is a poignant societal critique that details one virtuous man’s struggle to find meaning and acceptance amidst a clash of civilizations. It is written in a way that encourages the reader to reflect on their own behavior and the moral course of action in a rapidly changing context that creates a conflict in values. This work gives voice to a palpable sense of societal alienation through a critique of modernity, while suggesting the existential dilemma brought on by the individual’s growing estrangement from society within the modern context. An increase in consumerism and materialism move people away from the traditional communal values of their village formerly represented by the temple. Chart’s treatment of one righteous man’s struggle to retain his dignity in a world that is quickly losing sight of what is important in life highlights the existential crisis of the modern age.
It would be 12 years before Chart would publish his next major work, *Time*. I will now outline the socio-political framework of the 1980s and early 1990s before analyzing the last of Chart’s works included in this thesis.

Prem and a Greatly Changed Nation: Stability at Last?

Prem’s government, which spanned almost the entire decade of the 1980s, was a period of rapid economic expansion in which the country’s rural-based agricultural economy was being transformed into an urban-based industrial one, a change that brought about conflicts in society that were soon to be manifest in literature. Exports, global business dealings, tourism, and industrialization contributed to the economic boom that resulted in rapid urbanization and the growth of the middle class. To the extent that the middle class rushed to embrace the economic expansion and Western values, they lost much of their Thai identity.

Television networks emerged and televisions began to appear in homes. Liberal press policies allowed the media to become a venue for social and political debate. New political parties appeared, and with them newspapers, which were allowed to propagate political messages. Television dramas became popular and programs dealing with socio-political issues were also aired. By the mid-1980’s, television viewing had become a national pastime.

There was also resistance to protest the changes. A military faction of the government known as the “Young Turks” staged a coup against Prem, taking aim at the

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business orientation of the government. However, the King’s support for Prem soon ended the coup. There were also protests over corruption, yet Prem retained a reputation of being incorruptible. Indeed, in *Corruption & Democracy in Thailand* (1994), Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsana write, “From 1981 to 1988, while the prime ministership was held by General Prem Tinsulanonda, there was no incident of scandalous political corruption.” Prem’s time as Prime Minister brought a sense of stability back to Thailand. After he stepped down, General Chatchai Choonhaven (1988-1991) came to power by winning the general election.

**Bloody May and the Long Road to Democracy**

In February 1991 a bloodless coup returned Thailand to military rule. General Suchinda Kraprayoon took control of the country in May 1992, precipitating mass protests. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Bangkok, near Rajadamnoen Avenue and the Grand Palace. In an attempt to suppress the demonstration, Suchinda ordered military units loyal to him to act. Several hundred students died in the ensuing confrontation, and the country was nearly thrust into a civil war. The ruling elite of the country were divided. The Navy refused to participate in Suchinda’s aggressive bid for

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149 Ibid., 345.
150 The King’s support for, or opposition to, politicians and political events had enormous influence during the previous decade, often dictating political outcomes. The King’s political influence had not waned during the 1980s.
152 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, 449.
power. Instead, they sailed a ship up the Chaophya River behind the Grand Palace and Thammasat University, displaying a banner that read, “The navy does not kill people.”

Days after the initial confrontation between the demonstrators and the military, Bangkok was still engulfed in street battles. Suchinda accused Chamlong Srimuang, the controversial civilian activist, who had been the leader of the “Young Turks,” of fomenting the mayhem. As the demonstration grew in size, it was clear that the Thai citizenry had grown tired of military coups, prompting an “articulate businesswoman interviewed on ABC Television news [to say] in perfect English, ‘I am so ashamed of our country.’” The crisis came to an end when King Bhumibol scolded both Suchinda and Chamlong on national television. Suchinda resigned soon afterwards, and the King appointed Anand Panyarachun as interim Prime Minister until new elections could be held in September. In the election of 1992, the Democrat Party won 185 out of 360 parliamentary seats, and Chuan Leekpai, a politician from Trang province, took office.

Owen et al. contend that by the 1990s Thai society had undergone fundamental changes such that traditional patterns of authority no longer held sway and the analytic categories used to explain politics in Thailand no longer applied:

One might have expected such abuses to be reined in by civilian parliamentary politics, but instead they seemed to accelerate. It became increasingly clear that the analytical categories once used to examine Thai society and politics were no longer adequate to the task. Only a generation before, Thai people and the scholars who studied them spoke in terms of a few monolithic, hierarchical structures in Thai society, the interplay among which shaped politics, economics, and intellectual life. As late as the time of Sarit, in the early 1960s, we could speak of the army, the monarchy, the sangha, the bureaucracy, the Chinese business community, and the peasantry, and conclude that we had covered all the elements of Thai society that “mattered.” We could explain continuing military dominance by referring to the unity of the army in the face of a disunited and even fractious urban population (meaning the bureaucracy and the Chinese, as far as politics

154 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, 450.
156 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, 450.
Wyatt further asserts that in the 1990s Thailand “began to see and feel the consequences of the social and political evolution – or ‘revolution’ – of the 1960s and 1970s in the 1980s and 1990s, [and] [t]hose who thought they ‘knew’ the Thailand of that earlier age may have found that they did not recognize the nation that succeeded it.” And he argues that the changes that Thailand were bound to precipitate a crisis: “In the long run… the steepest price remained still to be paid: paid by the growing conflict between the old order and the new, between traditional powers and the modern.”

Time

Chart was living abroad in the United States from 1992 to 1996. During that time, in 1993 his novel *Time* was published in Thai under the title *Weila*. It was the second of Chart’s books to win the prestigious SEA Write Award. In this work Chart employs a unique narrative style that blends elements of prose, playwriting, and screenwriting, weaving a story around a senior movie director in Thailand who is watching a play about old people living in a nursing home. *Time* is a hugely creative and forceful work that speaks not only to a shift in cultural values within Thailand, but also to the unchanging and seemingly universal values of all humanity.

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157 Ibid., 451.
159 Ibid.
Taking place over the course of a single day, *Time* is a surrealistic portrayal of life in a nursing home in Bangkok. In addition to the movie producer, the novel is about the characters in a play about the nursing home: Granny Nuan, Granny Bunruean, Granny Jan, Granny Sorn, Granny Erp, Granny Thapthim, Granny Yoo, Granny Thapthim’s “retarded” son, and a deranged old man kept in a locked cell who is never seen by the audience of the play.

The novel begins by describing an audience waiting for the play. A clock is fixed in the middle of the stage, slowly ticking away as no action transpires. The audience begins to grow restless, including the protagonist, who begins to doubt the quality of the play that he has carefully rearranged his busy schedule in order to see. Drifting into an internal monologue, he remembers that he became interested in the play because a review in the paper had dubbed it “the most boring play of the year.” Detecting a faint smell of urine as he sits in silence for fifteen increasingly uncomfortable minutes, the protagonist wonders to himself how the young actors who play the roles of the elderly have come to be so interested in such a depressing subject that they would present a play about it. The ironic tone of the novel begins to mount. The play is interesting because it is boring. The sixty-three year old protagonist, who wants to make movies not about people his own age, but instead about young people, comes to see a play made by young people about old people.

The play finally begins as the clock strikes 5:00 AM. After this, the focus of narration shifts back and forth from the play onstage to the internal monologue of the movie director. In the nursing home the residents awaken and take their morning baths.

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Then there is a quarrel between Granny Jan, Granny Nuan, and Granny Bunruean as Granny Jan claims that her money was stolen. The daily routine of the elderly women continues. A food vendor sells the women food to give to the monks to make merit; a young boy peddles soda; and a family visits the women to serve them a meal as they celebrate their own grandmother’s birthday. All the while there are intermittent, yet incessant cries coming from the unseen man in the cell. The voice continually assaults the audience, “There’s nothing! There’s absolutely nothing!” This tortured wail disturbs the reader, raising questions about the meaning of life beyond daily routines.

The story reaches its climax when Granny Thapthim’s thirty-something “retarded” son comes to visit. Three months have transpired since his last visit, and Granny Thapthim has no idea where he has been as he has no one to care for him. He arrives with a newly shaved head (perhaps suggesting that he has ordained) and an aura of ill-ease. Normally delighted to see him, the other women of the nursing home approach him with caution, and Ubon, the young nurse, clutches a mop handle in readiness should something go awry. Granny Thapthim coaxes her son to her bed with soda and sweets, putting at ease all but one of the women. Asked where he has been during his long absence, Granny Thapthim’s son tells the women that he has been at the big swamp: “There are big white lotus flowers. Their shadow in the water’s like silver. The fish swarmed around to eat the silver, fought over it, bit one another—.”161 The women urge him to go on. He regales them with a frightening vision of a swamp of blood filled with animals and people fighting over the lotus shadows:

The whole swamp was red. Pigs, fish, buffalo, dogs, tigers, all fighting each other in the swamp, fighting over the lotus shadow. People too came, women, men too, stripped and fought each other in the swamp. People biting buffalo, buffalo biting dogs, tigers biting people. Vultures also came to eat the lotus shadow—

...Nobody can eat the lotus shadow. It’s only a shadow, ah, ah! They’re mad—mad buffalo, mad dogs, mad people, mad birds, mad tigers, mad animals. They bite each other day and night, jump into the swamp then bite each other, fight over the silver shadow of the lotuses.

...By the edge of the swamp, the blood had thickened into a lid that simmered. Chunks of meat from men and beasts were floating and rotting in there—

...The little birdie came and sang what he heard, the blood in the swamp kept rising and rising—

...—The blood flowed out of the swamp, running all over the ground, flooding houses, flooding the town. A monk came and stood praying, but it didn’t help any—

...—The blood has already come, the blood of those who fight over the silver shadow of lotuses. Be careful, all of you. It’ll flood the whole town. The town’ll become a swamp.

Nobody can stop it—

...—I saw it with my own eyes. I see it every day. That’s why I’ve come to tell you to beware—

Then he eats dinner with his mother and leaves again for the unknown.

The play ends with the quiet death of Granny Yoo. Granny Yoo asked to be bathed earlier in the day before making a large offering to the monks. Ubon discovers her lifeless body and calls to her fellow nurse, Lamjiak, for help. Rushing to Ubon’s aid, Lamjiak forgets to lock the door of the old man’s cell where she was working. As the curtains close, the stage lighting shifts to reveal the interior of the cell. As the clock chimes seven times, the audience sees that there is nothing in the cell – “it is only an empty room.”

In Time Chart masterfully uses the daily routine of the nursing home and the internal reverie of the producer to suggest the meaninglessness of life – punctuated by the invisible and non-existent voice in the cell – in modern society. There are hints that life was not always like this. Early in the story, Granny Nuan loans Granny Jan some money so that she may buy food for her offering to the monks. It occurs to Granny Jan that “[i]f

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162 Korbjitti, Time, 197.
163 Ibid., 246.
it wasn’t for offerin’ the monk, I needn’t use [money] for nothin’. All the money I have I use to make merit.” When Granny Jan becomes upset again that someone “stole” her money (the play later reveals that she misplaced it), Granny Nuan tells her: “People these days, they ain’t afraid of sin, they ain’t afraid of fate. I don’t know what it is their hearts are made of these days. May eternal fire come to cleanse the world once for all.”¹⁶⁴

Using the character of Granny Sorn, Chart suggests that Buddhist values have also lost their meaning for “modern” people. Granny Sorn finds solace in the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment. She sees the problems of contemporary society as stemming from people’s unwillingness to see through the illusion that is the physical world. People instead cling to their possessions and to their money. The movie director considers this attitude to life and rejects it:

I don’t really believe in what Old Mrs. Sorn has been telling Old Mrs. Bunruean, that if someone takes something off her, she’ll think it must be necessary or useful to that person and that she’ll be happy to give it away. These days, I never hear anybody talk like that. Only edifying Buddhist tales.¹⁶⁵

At one level a major theme of Time is how the elderly of Thailand are treated as worn out goods. This view is expressed by the father who brings his family to the nursing home to make merit for his mother on her birthday. He tells his son,

[O]ld people aren’t important any longer. Society doesn’t want them any more. They want to go forward into the future, they aren’t thinking of the past. Those who’re growing up today, it’s people in the past who’ve helped to raise them up; they haven’t just popped up fully grown. They only think old people are no longer useful, so they get rid of ’m. If we keep thinking like this, see what’s gonna happen before long.¹⁶⁶

Aiming to inspire critical thought rather than to preach, Chart utilizes the characters of Granny Thapthim’s “retarded” son and the “deranged” old “nobody” in the

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 26.
¹⁶⁵ Korbjitti, Time, 75-76.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 109.
cell “to [have] more liberty to say whatever I want without getting into trouble, because, after all, these [are] only the words and thoughts of crazy people.”

167 Labeled “mad” or “retarded” by the rest of the characters in the story, the two outcast individuals represent Chart’s essential critique, which is purposefully cryptic and ambiguous. Suggesting that the dreams and hopes fostered by modernity are more smoke than substance, Granny Thapthim’s son delights in describing how viciously people fight to “eat the lotus shadow,” although they never eat the lotus and only end up hurting one another.168 The ominous implications and horrific images of the young man’s poetic monologue serve as a metaphor for the “dog eat dog” mentality that has come to define modern society.

Conclusion

Chart Korbjitti has won the prestigious SEA Write Award twice, the first Thai writer to accomplish this feat. *The Judgment* also received the Book of the Year Award from the National Literary Council of Thailand in 1982. Chart was named a National Artist in Literature in 2004, and was among the honorees of the inaugural Sinlapakorn Award, given to contemporary Thai artists. In addition, three of Chart’s books have been made into movies: *Jon Trok* (under the name *Baan*), *Khamphiphaksa* (as *Ai-Fak*) and *Phan Maa Baa*. Chart has become well known in literary circles and is relatively wealthy.

Chart’s dark, grim portrayals of contemporary society and the human condition stand in ironic contrast with the ebullient, *mai pen rai* (never mind, don’t worry) attitude he presents in person. Clad in a pair of old jeans and t-shirt, he seems at home with himself. He enjoys a slow paced, quiet life upcountry with his wife, his dogs (eight in

167 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
all), and a few close friends who live nearby. His relaxed manner betrays little of the true mind of this perceptive, socially conscious author. Rather reticent when discussing personal matters, Chart seems content to let his writing speak for him.

Chart creates a dark, bleak world inhabited by everyday people whose struggles go unnoticed in a rapidly modernizing society. The full impact of his works is rooted in the overwhelming sense of defeat suffered by his characters and caused by the powerful workings of modernization. While illustrating the complex and frequently tragic problems of the modern age, Chart provides no solutions. With despair and tragedy pervading Chart’s works, the reader is often left with an image of utter futility and hopelessness. Chart writes in an existential manner about the meaninglessness of modern life, offering no answers, compromises, or viewpoints concerning the social problems he so powerfully depicts.
CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF NEO-LIBERAL DEVELOPMENT

By analyzing the works of Khamsing and Chart in the preceding two chapters, while also attempting to provide a socio-historical framework through which to view their writings, I have thus far addressed two of the four questions detailed at the beginning of Chapter One. I have examined how Khamsing and Chart reflect on the change of values in Thai society, and how these values progress and shift throughout the successive generations in which these authors worked. In this concluding chapter, I will speak to the final two questions of this project. Given the differences between the writings of Khamsing and Chart, how should one rightfully interpret their works? In what ways do the writings of these two authors provide insight into the shortcomings of globalization and/or the failings of Thailand’s development agenda that are not apparent in the statistical analysis of economists or the assessments of both critics and supporters of free market, neo-liberal economics?

Understanding Perspectives by way of Comparison

The writings of Khamsing and Chart share striking similarities, yet they also differ in important ways. The works of each author detail a tension within the indigenous value system that has existed in Thailand throughout the past five decades, and both highlight the problems incurred through the implementation of foundationally flawed modern development programs. The manner in which these social and political shortcomings are addressed, however, is not the same in the works of these two highly respected authors. How should one understand these differences? Can the shared critique of development be retained while still properly addressing the dissimilarities in each author’s work?
In an effort to better understand the works of each of these authors, I had to first understand their underlying motivations for writing. For Chart, this was a rather straightforward question, as he does not burden himself with the same kinds of elevated aspirations as Khamsing. I asked Chart about what drives him to write, whether he is aiming to be critical, realistic, or inspiring, and if he considers himself to be a voice of the oppressed in Thailand in any way. He told me his initial concern is originality, as he does not like to repeat a previously used style or topic. He addressed the remainder of the question in a rather simple and unassuming manner:

With my work, I don’t like to repeat the same topic or the same form that I have already done. I try to make a new avenue to explore each time I work. This way I avoid routine and try to keep my writing fun. When I try to write a new short story or a novel I first ask myself what it is that I want to tell my reader. Whether or not my message is right or wrong is of no consequence. You can choose to believe me or not, but what I am ultimately trying to show is what I believe to be the problems or issues that my country faces. And maybe also I am trying to show something about humanity in general. Also, my work may be political, but it does not depend on politics. I try to fuse reality, fiction, and humor.  

Chart also does not feel he has a duty to write “realistically” about the social problems of Thailand. This does not imply, however, that he does not still feel compelled to write critically:

…I cannot quiet the voice inside of me that speaks to the things of Thailand that I do not like and do not see as good things for [my] country. Because we live in a society we cannot help but look at society and see both the good and the bad and I try to show people what is really going on now. So, I suppose I’m trying to be a bit critical when I write. If I were only being realistic when I write then I would be no different than a newspaper journalist.

Khamsing takes his role as a writer very seriously, and has since he first decided to pursue a literary career. He adopts a much more socially committed stance than Chart, attempting to directly address pressing social ills. About his writing, he says,  

\[169\] Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.  
\[170\] Ibid.
...When I write, I try to think of myself as one part of society. Maybe the writer in the present day takes on the role of the observer, [but] I see myself as one part of the greater problem. How can I help fix these problems? ¹⁷¹

Unlike Chart, Khamsing’s motivation for writing is rooted in a belief that literature should be directed at fostering change:

More than 85% of the population lived in poverty at the time when I wrote my book. I tried to present my stories to the rich people in charge to show them that the poor were being repressed. The rich people have the power to change this. The objective of my writing is to communicate with this rich group, the intelligentsia, so that they can understand better what the problems of the rural parts of Thailand are so that they can do something about it. My target group of readers is not the farmers that I was writing about, but the rich people of my own country. ¹⁷²

Khamsing recalled an experience with a young student who visited him shortly after her return from Nakhon Phanom, a socio-economically depressed province in North Thailand that borders Laos:

She cried and she said to me, “Khun Khamsing, I met someone who was exactly like the character of the father from ‘The Golden Legged Frog.’ He is exactly the same as what you wrote. This changed my life.” She said that she could never be the same after her trip to the countryside – she would never be able to forget the poverty she saw. ¹⁷³

Khamsing recognizes the difficulty of his literary aims, using an analogy of a crystal to explain his writing:

When I write, I try to make my stories like crystals. These stones are very hard and take a long time to form and they last a long time. When I write I want to make it perfect and so the stories take a very long time for me. I have not written a lot for this reason, but when I began writing I knew I wanted to inform the world about the Northeast [of Thailand]. ¹⁷⁴

Wishing that he be “the voice of the poor” and that his stories embody “the very manifestation of poverty,” Khamsing used the Cold War as an opportunity to show the world how poorly the people of Isan were treated by their own government. ¹⁷⁵
writing reflects this imbalance, highlighting how “[the people of Isan] are a very poor people, often undereducated, and often left out of the equation, with [t]he people of the Northeast…not get[ting] the same benefits as those people in the capital.”

Writing two decades before Chart, Khamsing is quick to point out that this time difference probably explains a great deal of the dissimilarities in their works, both in their underlying motivations and also in their literary styles. Initially, I wanted to explain the difference between the works of Khamsing and Chart according to a historical watershed demarcated by the turbulent and tragic events of 1973 and 1976. I quickly concluded, however, that such an explanation would not prove sufficient to fully understand the differences in the works of these two authors. Khamsing echoed this sentiment (adding the caveat that one could interpret Thai literature according to this dichotomy, but such an understanding would lack complexity and depth), asserting that a true comprehension of social context is key to fully grasping a work of art or literature, as “[y]ou cannot be free from your societal perspective.”

In my interview with Khamsing, I asked him if analyzing modern Thai literature according to a dichotomy that used the period of the 1970s as a critical tipping point for Thai society (i.e., setting up a dichotomy with which to talk about two types of Thai literature, early modern and modern) would offer a fair assessment of the country’s literary framework. I told Khamsing that I wanted to examine his works as dealing with problems arising at the cusp of modernity, whereas I wanted to examine the works of someone like Chart as dealing with problems of the fully entrenched modern age. Noting the difficulty of this question, Khamsing asserted “it is fair to divide up Thai history like this.”

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176 Ibid.
this only to a point.” He implored me to further consider his societal perspective, which was more heavily influenced by events occurring nearly twenty years earlier. For Khamsing, Sarit’s brutal authoritarian regime and the “Dark Ages” had more of an impact on his literary perspective than did the tragic events of 1973 and 1976. He added,

…I think that, in the end, I agree with the timeline you have, but it’s just more complicated than that. In my opinion, I think it would be best to concentrate on how Thai literature throughout the past several decades has offered a critique of social ills and development rather than trying to see Thai literature differently according to one critical point in history. There are too many complex junctures in history to make this work perfectly.178

Khamsing explained that his generation of writers operated within a much different social context than those of Chart’s generation, thus leading to the dissimilarities between their styles and themes of writing. According to Khamsing, “Chart’s work tends to focus more on the individual than on society, but [his own] writing is more about the problems of society and of Thailand in general.”179 For Khamsing, this difference is due to the amount of repression and control exercised by the government that he was forced to endure during his lifetime, which writers from Chart’s generation did not experience in the same way. Khamsing explained, “Chart grew up after the 6th of October [1976] in terms of his writing, and the problems of his society are different than those of my generation because the country developed and modernized very quickly – there were big changes in about only the same amount of time that separates Chart from me in age.”180

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177 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
To Khamsing, every historical period has its own character, which greatly influences and shapes artistic production. Whereas Khamsing felt an “obligation to understand social problems,” he argued “this is not the same for Chart’s generation of writers:”

It is not just our desires that shape what we write but it is also a social process. All of [the] works [of my generation] were political works because of the way society was at that time. I do not think the same thing is true for Chart’s generation of writers. …The social situation is different, so many times when they write they may actually just be writing according to a feeling or an impression, but their work may not directly reflect the politics of the age. They don’t necessarily look at the whole picture of society and that is probably the difference.181

Khamsing explains that his generation also experienced a “loss of innocence” in much the same way as those living through the 1970s. He detailed the repressive atmosphere of Sarit’s regime and how literary production finally exposed people to many grave injustices committed under this “brutal and vicious” authoritarian regime. According to Khamsing, literature opened the eyes of many students and Thai citizens, forcing them to question how and why a government could act in this manner towards its own populace. Revealing this type of socio-political injustice lies at the root of Khamsing’s literary viewpoint.

Chart sees the historical divide between his writings and those of Khamsing in a different light. As an artist first and a socio-political critic second, Chart finds this kind of historical analysis less significant; he focuses more on his own agency and autonomy as an individual:

For me, when I work I don’t think about these historical periods. This is not a conscious thing for me. When I was writing after the second governmental crackdown in Bangkok during the 1970s, the critics and the “Literature for Life” people never tried to force me into being a political writer or a socialist writer. When I work, these historical periods

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181 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
don’t change anything for me. I’m just a writer who writes about Thai society. Maybe this is a question you could ask to someone who studies Thai history.\textsuperscript{182}

From the start of his literary career, Chart did not want to align himself with a particular movement. This owes not only to his overtly apolitical literary stance, but also to the fact that “after the killings and censorship of the 1970s…‘Literature for Life’ didn’t satisfy people anymore.”\textsuperscript{183} Chart felt his writing must move beyond abstract social problems to focus more on everyday people and how the societal changes taking place affected them. While he agrees with Khamsing in that “[t]he writer cannot refuse the thing that is inside of him – his desires, his family, his historical perspective, his context,” he does not share the same political ambitions. For Chart, the freedom to be able to write whatever he wants stands as one of the key differences between their writings. Whereas Khamsing “felt pressure to criticize Thai society in a smart, clever way because of the different historical time in which he lived,” Chart does not feel pressured to write in the same way. Asserting that “[t]here is nothing to force [him] to write for the good of the people or for the good of the writing,” Chart does find similarities between No Way Out and Khamsing’s stories. He states,

\begin{quote}
In this book I write more clearly and directly about social problems than in other books. This is similar to Khamsing because his writing is more obviously about social problems. But maybe in my other books I write more about humanity and the social problems are all wrapped up in the story. I’m not exactly sure how to explain these similarities and differences – maybe it is because we were writing at different times and have different contexts. Even if events in history, maybe even the events of the 1970s, affect my life, it’s still up to my perspective to decide what I write.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

Perhaps owing to the historical circumstances out of which they were born, Khamsing and Chart view the role of literature in societal change from distinctly different

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
vantage points. For Khamsing, art should not be divorced from life. He is a committed social critic, who is proud of the accomplishments made by writers of his generation. Literature, for Khamsing, should be reflective of the socio-political atmosphere of the time, making a statement about social equality and justice. Excepting a handful of committed authors (including Chart), Khamsing does not witness the same type of dedication in the literature of the modern age. He laments,

I feel ashamed that none of our contemporary writers step so close to the prison. My generation of writers and thinkers took things very seriously and were the first of a batch that would risk being arrested in order to reveal some “truth” about society. What is a writer if they are not committed to seeing what is going wrong, to pointing out what is an injustice within society?185

Implicit in this view is Khamsing’s steadfast belief that literature can enact tangible social change, doing the work not only of a historian, but also but also serving as an impetus for social action:

I think that most writers think like this – [holding the belief that literature has the potential not only to mirror society but also to propel/enact real and tangible changes within society] – even though this may not be their intention. I believe that if writers don’t think like this then they have no power in their writing. If their writing is to mean something to the world it must have something behind it otherwise they have no place writing. What an author writes should be like a bullet.186

Unfortunately, little has changed in Thailand. When I asked Khamsing why he does not continue to write in the hope that his works would bring about much needed social change more quickly, he replied,

I have written so little because it is so difficult. When I write I use a lot of power to create. I ask myself what the big problem is that I haven’t yet dealt with. In Fa Bo Kan I cover a lot of issues that still have not been addressed. So I then ask myself, “Why use so much energy to create something when these problems have still not been fixed?” So perhaps less writing can be good enough if the writing is good.

185 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
186 Ibid.
I am very happy that I think I get my points across well in Fa Bo Kan, but it also makes me sad to see that a lot of the same problems still exist. We are still a very poor country and we are a very unequal country.187

Khamsing praises Chart for the way in which he has adapted social criticism to the modern context where the individual has been estranged from society. In The Judgment, Khamsing views Chart as acting “very much as a social critic. The whole picture of society is…reflected in his work.”188 This, according to Khamsing, is the point of literature, reflecting his belief that art and social issues should not be separate. He adds: “I think of society as a wall: if an artist’s work has no social background, it’s just floating around not saying anything.”189

Khamsing’s optimism is refreshing in a modern world that so often lacks any shred of hope. It is, however, a worldview that is rejected by a writer like Chart. Known for his bleak portrayals of society, Chart does not share Khamsing’s positive convictions regarding the role of literature in fostering real social change in Thailand’s future. Chart adopts a more cynical view:

In Thailand, I’m not sure [that literature has the potential not only to mirror society but also to propel/enact real and tangible changes within society]…[b]ecause people don’t read books! …[I]n many developing countries, many people don’t know about a lot of literature because they don’t have the opportunity to read. Many of the people who do read books like mine or like Khamsing’s already know a lot about social problems – they are usually educated people who are not poor. This is a problem of development. It doesn’t work for everyone so literature in Thailand might reach only a few of those people who are poor and uneducated.190

Despite the differences between these two paradigmatic authors, both Khamsing and Chart use their literature to search for meaning in a rapidly changing world. Each author chronicles a tension between traditional values and those of a rapidly modernizing

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187 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
188 Ibid.
189 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
190 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
society, highlighting the effects of abandoning their indigenous culture in favor of a Western-style modern development model. Each author urges his readers to question the value of “progress” and “modernity” and to decide for themselves what it is that truly constitutes a good and happy life.

Both Khamsing and Chart recognize this tension between tradition and modernity as central to their writing. To Chart, this is an obvious aspect of his work because Thailand “is changing to [a] more…Western style.” This is problematic because he feels that Thai people are losing their cultural identity, focusing too much on material gain and forgetting many of their traditional values and customs:

... In some of my books like *Time*, I am trying to show how a Western way of living is just overrunning and wiping out a Thai way of living. The message in this book is that we as Thai people are losing sight of what is really important because a new set of values or a new way of living has started to blind us.

Although critical of the unchecked adoption of modern customs and values, neither author views modernity as the ultimate enemy. Each is quick to point out the obvious positives of “progress” and modern “civilization.” Yet they see how modern values are replacing traditional values in a way that is problematic for a developing nation like Thailand. Khamsing declares that he has never had a problem with modernity, as change is inevitable, but that his concerns rest with how change should come about. He gives voice to this issue in a complex and nuanced way:

It is impossible to go back to life like it was in the past. Our society...needs a good manager to deal with the changes brought about by modernity. ...My major concern is that I would like to see Thailand adapt to the changes of modernity well without simply getting rid of our traditional customs and values completely. ...My book is a political book at heart because the heart of the book is about ways to manage the resources of Thailand, both traditional and modern.

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191 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007. Chart also pointed out that this “is not just happening in Thailand, but in lots of other countries as well.”
192 Ibid.
Even values shifting and changing is an inevitable thing – I recognize this. No one can stop this kind of thing, but the real Thai values should be able to be kept in the heart. What I see as a problem in our modern society is that many people lack the acknowledgement to change in a good way.\textsuperscript{193}

Chart also approaches this problem with a critical eye, believing neither Western values nor those of less developed (i.e. less “modern”) countries to be inherently more or less valuable than the other:

So much depends on the culture; I don’t want to say that one culture is necessarily better or worse than any other. Some aspects of Westernization are obviously good, but there are many parts that don’t fit with the Thai style today. For me, the good thing is that we can mix and choose what is useful with Western ways and discard what doesn’t work.\textsuperscript{194}

Understanding the differences between the perspectives of Khamsing and Chart allows one to better understand how their responses to a rapidly changing society differ. Khamsing’s works were written during a time period that witnessed dramatic changes when social movements took shape and seemed capable of sweeping change, whereas Chart grew up in a world seemingly without hope, without any light at the end of the tunnel. Chart matured at a time when there were no longer a handful of committed, forward-looking social groups committed to democracy and pitted against unjust military dictatorships, but rather at a time when it was the individual railing against a corrupted society (or perhaps even worse yet – the society versus the individual). Chart’s writings reflect a rise of individualism, raising the question of whether a Western sense of competitive individualism, rather than a sense of Thai group solidarity (rooted in part in the family and traditional religious practices and rituals) is good for people or a good way of life. Chart’s writings reflect an increase in feelings of societal alienation and the purposelessness of life. Coupled with new barriers to social mobility stemming from

\textsuperscript{193} Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
\textsuperscript{194} Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
flawed economic programs and a sense of ideological confusion due to changing times, one witnesses in the transition from the writings of Khamsing to Chart a sense of increasing futility and powerlessness as the old world of custom and extended families comes into contact with the new world of competition and social Darwinism.

A Western Model of Development: A Literary Critique

The works of Khamsing and Chart span almost the entirety of what I have defined as the modern history of Thailand, bearing witness to both the implementation and effects of the development efforts started by Sarit and carried on by his successors. Throughout this time, the way in which development was undertaken has been subject to continual criticism and scrutiny. According to Khamsing, “Thai literature throughout the past several decades has offered a critique of social ills and development.”195 He adds, “Good literature in Thailand has…always been very critical of development and the people in charge of this kind of ‘development.’”196

According to Marcel Barang, “[Khamsing] and Chart have been writing about the Westernization of Thai society and the change of values that crops up. This is, by the way, something that is very worrying – I have been in Thailand for about 20 years now and I can attest to the changes that have taken place in this short amount of time.”197 I asked each author if their works contributed to a grander critique of development, globalization, and Westernization. Both authors responded in the affirmative, their answers highlighting the ignorance of Thailand’s population in fully understanding how

195 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
196 Ibid.
197 Interview with Marcel Barang, November 19, 2007.
these aforementioned, abstract forces of change affect their lives. Khamsing replied, “I think this is very clear in my writings [that] I am very critical of the clash of civilizations and development because I don’t think that many people in my country understand the consequences of these things.”

Chart explained,

I think nowadays there is a new kind of colonization. Colonization, in a way, has changed. In the old days, we would use weapons or guns to take over another country, but now we use culture (movies, food, songs, and other things). This is the way that I try to tell our people about how our country is changing in negative ways. [For example], in the past we would revere and respect our old people, but now we put them in nursing homes.

The breakdown of traditional structures within Thailand is not only linked to the adoption of Western values, but also to a change in the structure of Thai society. Chart laments the loss of traditional family structures in Thailand:

In the future I think Thai society will move more towards a nuclear family. …I think this is partly due to the influence by the West. When I was young we all lived together like a big family, but nowadays families tend to live separately. It is different now. When you marry you move out of your parent’s home and when you have a child, you send them off to school. The family bonds are breaking down when compared with the past. There are also economic reasons for this as well. In the past, families would tend to work together so it was only natural that they would live together too. But now that our society is based more on money than on production of food for your own family – everything is buy, buy, buy – things are changing.

Chart expanded on this theme, suggesting how the values of a culture and the material things of a culture are interrelated: “[When] Western materials and goods started to come to Thailand, the values came along with it. People began to buy more Western goods without even realizing that they are then replacing their own values.” He criticizes Thailand’s neo-liberal development agenda from the perspective of ideological confusion in the following comment about the country’s youth:

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198 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
199 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
200 Ibid.
They don’t quite understand which values are useful and which should be discarded. As you can see when you travel around Thailand it is becoming quite the problem. Our youth today are like so many other young people throughout the world; they don’t know what to do if they don’t have a television or a cell phone nearby.201

Similar changes are eroding Buddhism, another pillar of traditional values. Chart adds, “Today, I…see Buddhism being replaced by a love of money and material things….”202

Rather than place the blame solely on the “other” – the West, the pursuit of “progress,” or modernity – both authors recognize the complexity of the issue. Khamsing expressed his views concerning how outside agents of modernity impact both tradition and the course of development as follows:

This phenomenon is taking place in every country, but the way in which each country develops and deals with this clash of civilizations is based upon the educated classes. The key word here is education. In the past, Thailand could be separated into two groups: the farmers and the elite. The farmers made no decisions and had very little resources so this type of change did not have such a great impact on them in the past. But now things are changing as Thailand is becoming less dependent on farming and is moving towards a cash economy. We must teach our people so that they know how to deal with this clash of civilizations. When civilization and modernity is introduced to the peasants they don’t know how to deal with it. This is becoming a big problem for Thailand.

…The impact of the clash of civilizations, or Westernization as you call it, is up to how strong the traditional beliefs of a particular country are. A lot of peasants ways of understanding the world are based on traditional customs and beliefs, which may look like stupid superstition to an outsider, but the important thing is that these beliefs are not imposed from outside. The way in which farangs play a negative role in this equation is when they judge these beliefs from the outside when they don’t understand the detailed process that has gone into the entire structure. This is an example of how modern ways sometimes destroy tradition and impact development.203

From a perspective that focuses on the failings of Thailand’s development within its own borders rather than on external forces, Chart sees an undereducated and underprivileged population as indicative of a flawed system. When I asked him why virtually no Thais that I had spoken to during my two months in Thailand knew of his writings, he laughed, saying,

201 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid.
Oh, this is normal. This is because Thai people don’t give a damn about writers. (More laughter.) When people ask me about my career and I tell them I’m a writer, many of them think I paint signs or that I work for a printing company. In this country, maybe five or six percent truly know what writers do. It’s not like being a movie star or a singer. We are a poor country. The first thing people in the countryside have to do is find something to eat, and then people with find something for entertainment – maybe some music. Books are not necessarily something that the normal Thai is going to value as important in their life due to these types of financial problems and constraints. It is only the guy with an education, whose family has money that is going to be concerned with writers and books.  

The works of Khamsing and Chart do more than simply imply that Thailand’s development model is unsound; they each view the system as tragically flawed, personifying its failings in many of the tragic characters in their stories. For Khamsing, “The Politician’ is a manifestation of poverty and it still applies today – but things are more complicated now. This story shows that development has a long way to go and still does not incorporate the people of Isan into the big picture.” A similar view was expressed by Chart when I inquired about the following quotation from No Way Out: “…to the capital, the city where their futures lay….” First noting that this short work was based on a true story, he explained,

Even nowadays people move to Bangkok with the hope of a better life. That is why we have so many poor people who have moved there and that is why there are so many slums. In Bangkok, the people come from a range of different backgrounds. Even in Bangkok, development does not work entirely. You still have rich people cheating poor people everywhere, not just in Bangkok.

Khamsing shared another anecdote, telling me about a self-aggrandizing reality show made by Thailand’s previous Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, where people visited him to discuss their problems. I interjected to say this reminded me of King Ramkhamhaeng and the first Stone Inscription from Sukothai, to which he replied:

204 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
205 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
207 Interview with Chart Korbjitti, December 18, 2007.
Yes, it was kind of like this, but in this television show, the villagers were not portrayed as poor and it showed Thaksin to be the kind of leader that is available to all citizens and treats everyone equally. But modern history has shown me that this is not true. In recent years we have had riots and uprising and even a coup – we are still not a stable country and we are still very far from an equal country. Also, this shows that the poverty of Thailand, especially in the Northeast, is still not taken seriously and that development still does not reach all areas of the country.208

As evidenced in this quotation, even the hope of a man like Khamsing, who at times is so resolute in his belief concerning the possibility of real change, wanes in the face of continued socio-political callousness and injustice.

The writings of Khamsing Srinawk and Chart Korbjitti function on two distinct yet interrelated levels. From one perspective, their works serve as exemplary pieces of poignant literature, which effectively highlight a worrisome shift in values within Thailand, while also addressing universal themes concerning the purpose and meaning of life. From another perspective, their writings operate as biting criticisms, which point to greater and more comprehensive socio-political problems. Their nuanced treatment of the rapid shift in values that has occurred within Thailand during the modern era is indicative of a much bigger structural problem not only for Thailand, but also for the rest of the developing world. The critiques of Westernization, globalization, and development presented by these two authors, both indirectly in their fiction and directly in my interviews with them, can be tenably extrapolated to serve as a broader critique of the neo-liberal development agenda that has been employed in Thailand throughout the past three decades.

208 Interview with Khamsing Srinawk, December 17, 2007.
APPENDIX A

Interview with Khamsing Srinawk
Khamsing’s Home in Pakchong, Thailand
December 17, 2007

Q: Can you describe for me what life growing up in Nong Bua Sa-art in the 1930s and 1940s was like? Your parents were farmers, right? Did you grow up amidst abject poverty, and assuming you did, how did this shape your future views?

A: Thailand was a different place then. We were a very poor country, but in a lot of ways we are still a very poor country. My family was very poor when I was a child and it was often very difficult to survive in Isan. You know that Isan is very dry and we often lack proper water here to irrigate our crops during the hot season. My parents owned some buffalo and we were peasant farmers. My parents were not educated people, but they supported me with my education. My mother could not read or write, but my father was literate. Sometimes, when I was writing, I would think about my village in Khorat and ask myself if anything has changed. I see people nowadays with televisions and cell phones, but I wonder if anything really has changed. I think that my stories are still important, especially when you think about this part of Thailand. When I write, I want to be a voice for these people. I do not write to them, but I write for them. I am very much a product of my upbringing. This is reflected in my choice of pen name.

Q: What does your pseudonym, Lao Khamhawm, mean?

A: Well, first, I chose this pseudonym because at the time I was writing you had to be very careful not to say anything negative about the government or the military or you could end up in a lot of trouble. All of the writers at the time used pen names. It is not so much that this name would give you more freedom to write as you wanted, but it reflects your identity. When I thought about my pen name, I thought about who I am. I am a person of Isan so the first part of this name reflects my Isan identity. Isan is very close to Laos. I am a Lao person, I speak Lao, I have Lao customs. In Bangkok, they call all people from Isan “khon Lao.” “Khon Lao” actually means “Lao person” so people from the city didn’t see the people from Isan as Thai people, but as Lao people. They saw people from Isan as second-class citizens in Thai society; they look down upon Isan people and Lao people. This is very important to consider when you read my stories. This name was inspired from Thai classical song and it refers to a Lao person coming home. So, when you think about my pen name you should think about a Lao person being home, feeling at home in Thailand where they live and not to feel like an outsider in their own country because they already are home.

Q: How did you become a writer? Did you know from a young age (like Chart) that you wanted to become a writer in the future?
A: I did not think that when I was a child that I would grow up to be a writer. I thought I would grow up to be a productive member of the mainstream society. I attended university with this mindset.

Many people still ask me whether the stories from *Fa Bo Kan* are still relevant today. When I write, I try to make my stories like crystals. These stones are very hard and take a long time to form and they last a long time. When I write I want to make it perfect and so the stories take a very long time for me. I have not written a lot for this reason, but when I began writing I knew I wanted to inform the world about the Northeast [of Thailand]. Especially during the Cold War, there were a lot of questions about Asia – people wanted to know more about this part of the world. I saw this as an opportunity to write about Thailand. I wanted to tell people about the poverty and the hardship of my people and how they were not treated well by the government. The people of the Northeast do not get the same benefits as those people in the capital. We are a very poor people, often uneducated, and often left out of the equation. “The Politician” is a manifestation of poverty and it still applies today – but things are more complicated now. This story shows that development has a long way to go and still does not incorporate the people of Isan into the big picture. Two years ago during the Thaksin period, he made a kind of reality show about life in one particular district where people came to him to discuss their problems and to get advice from the Prime Minister.

(Matthew – interjection: Oh, this reminds me of King Ramkhamhaeng and the first Stone Inscription from Sukothai.)

Yes, it was kind of like this, but in this television show, the villagers were not portrayed as poor and it showed Thaksin to be the kind of leader that is available to all citizens and treats everyone equally. But modern history has shown me that this is not true. In recent years we have had riots and uprising and even a coup – we are still not a stable country and we are still very far from an equal country. Also, this shows that the poverty of Thailand, especially in the Northeast, is still not taken seriously and that development still does not reach all areas of the country.

Q: As you previously alluded to, you left your village in the countryside to enter the Department of Economics at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Was it difficult to leave village life? Can you talk about your experience at Thammasat?

A: When I left my home in the countryside for a job at Thammasat I wanted to try out this kind of “high education,” but after only one year I found that it was not for me. At this time, the Department of Economics was considered an “open school” in the university. This meant that anyone who wanted to study in the School of Economics could do so for free. But there were not that many people studying this subject because not many people in this country knew what it was.
I found that economics didn’t have anything to do with my life. It was the old kind of economics, nothing like the political economics of today that might have some application to society. Students had to learn about supply and demand and the very basic fundamental structures, but they were never asked to apply it to anything. It made no sense to me. This kind of study didn’t do anything for the world. It was so far removed from everything.

Q: Can you remember where you were during the events of 1973?

A: I was here [Khorat].

Q: Do you remember how you felt? Do you remember what might have been going through your mind during this time?

A: My involvement in the events of the 14th of October, my being one of the 100 people who signed the petition against the government put me in a difficult position – this was an act of solidarity as I was part of a group of progressive individuals, friends, who came together to talk about progressive ideas, to discuss literature, to really go through ideas – a lot came out of these events and the meetings me and my intellectual friends had. One of my friends who was a teacher started a program at the University called Voluntary Graduates, which is a Bachelor’s Degree that focuses on rural studies and cultural studies in the underdeveloped parts of Thailand. He told his students that when they go to the Northeast, they should stop by my house because a lot of them are naïve about the issues facing the rural parts of Thailand and I could teach them some things. This teacher told his students this because he had read my book before and he realized that by reading the book that he knew very little about the problems facing the rural peoples of Thailand. His students started to drop by and they happened to be students that were very socially aware and very interested in what is going on in Thailand. Some of these students stopped by my house after coming back from visits to rural villages and told me how much of an impact this had on their life. Many of them were very sad and very angry because they never realized how poor the rest of their country was – they only knew about life in Bangkok – and told me that after they graduated, they would return to the countryside to teach or to try to do something to help the poor villagers. In this way, I suppose I helped along part of the student movement during the 1970s by exposing some of these young students to the harsh reality of what life in the rest of Thailand was really like.

I remember one girl who had just returned from Nakhon Phanom [a socio-economically depressed province in North Thailand that borders Laos]. She cried and she said to me, “Khun Khamsing, I met someone who was exactly like the character of the father from ‘The Golden Legged Frog.’ He is exactly the same as what you wrote. This changed my life.” She said that she could never be the same after her trip to the countryside – she would never be able to forget the poverty she saw.
Q: As far as literature is concerned, do you think the literature before 1973 is very different than the literature after 1973?

A: I think that every period has its own character and its own characteristics. Even writers who were committed to one particular genre or type of writing, for example, the “Literature for Life” writers, had different ways of viewing the world. They had different perspectives concerning social reality. But the period of the 1970s is different. Even though the writers of this time still talk about the poor people, the way they go about it is different, and I think this is because of their experiences during this time.

Q: Yes, this is what I want to understand better. I might be wrong and I might not know well enough, but I see 1973-76 as (and this may be cliché) a time of a loss of innocence?

A: Yes, it’s cliché, but at the same time it is also true that during this time people lost a sense of innocence -- again. I say again because the authoritarian government of the 1950s and 1960s was probably more brutal and vicious than the government during the 1970s, but people did not know about it. It was during these “Dark Ages” that many writers and intellectuals were silenced and sometimes even killed if they spoke out against the government. But people in the society had little knowledge about what was really going on. Because of the policy of “Americanism” where so much positive emphasis was put on American films and American ways of life, there was a kind of fog cast over Thai society that busied people with other things so that they didn’t see how brutal their government was. Students and Thai citizens were overrun with these kind of impressions, but through literature, they started to open their eyes about a lot of things – these works of some writers from my generation made them realize that things in the past might not have been as good as they were taught. So, it is fair to call this period of loss of innocence, but you must think about it in a different way. Maybe it is not even so much a loss of innocence as it is a final culmination of all of these tragic events of the past few decades. It is a loss of innocence for the students who were conditioned to think of their country’s past in a favorable way, but maybe not for the older generation like me who had to live through the “Dark Ages.”

To me, literature plays such an important role in opening people’s eyes during this period. They finally started to see their country in a true light – a wonderful country that, on one hand, has a beautiful culture that they should be proud of, and on the other hand, has parts of its past that should not be forgotten and should not be repeated in the future. For a lot of young students and intellectuals, this period was an awakening. They now approached the world with a critical eye. They were no longer ok with literature only as soap opera and entertainment, but they wanted to use literature for social change. Now that they knew the reality of the situation, they wanted to make Thailand a better place.

Q: I’m trying to understand why you and Chart write so differently from one another. I know that you are a bit older than Chart, from a different generation, but the way in which you deal with the problems of Thai society are so different. Why is this?
A: (Audible laughter) This is very hard to explain! I don’t know exactly why one writer writes differently than another. To explain about this, you need to understand the social context. My generation of writers…

*Khamsing accidentally knocks my digital recorder off the porch sill for the second time (the first was only moments after I initially set it there minutes before beginning our interview).

…operated during a much different social context than Chart. Chart’s work tends to focus more on the individual than on society, but my writing is more about the problems of society and of Thailand in general. Chart is a bit younger than I am, more than 20 years. You cannot be free from your societal perspective. Chart grew up after the 6th of October [1976] in terms of his writing, and the problems of his society are different than those of my generation because the country developed and modernized very quickly – there were big changes in about only the same amount of time that separates Chart from me in age. For me and my generation of writers, our obligation is to understand social problems and this is not exactly the case for Chart’s generation of writers. It is hard to say that the politics of a generation does not shape the way a writer creates his work, but this is especially true for my generation because of the repression and control that was exercised by the government during our lifetimes. Whenever we write, we have these types of things in mind. It is not just our desires that shape what we write but it is also a social process. All of our works were political works because of the way society was at that time. I do not think the same thing is true for Chart’s generation of writers. I am not blaming these writers for being apolitical. The social situation is different, so many times when they write they may actually just be writing according to a feeling or an impression, but their work may not directly reflect the politics of the age. They don’t necessarily look at the whole picture of society and that is probably the difference.

For me, I feel ashamed that none of our contemporary writers step so close to the prison. My generation of writers and thinkers took things very seriously and were the first of a batch that would risk being arrested in order to reveal some “truth” about society. What is a writer if they are not committed to seeing what is going wrong, to pointing out what is an injustice within society?

Q: You had to flee to the jungle, right? Were you afraid for your life?

A: Yes, I had to run to the jungle, but only for a short period of time. I had a very good relationship with many of the students at that time so I went to the jungle with them. I was shown the blacklist by a friend of mine who was a professor at Thammasat and my name was on it. I could not believe this. When he told me my name was on the list as the number 12 leader of the student movement, I was shocked. This is a Buddhist country; nothing could happen. But after this professor friend was shot to death, I quickly realized that this was serious.

I stayed in the jungle for 10 months. I know that they absolutely wanted me dead, but I didn’t fear for my life. Instead, I just kept thinking that this country was so off track that
I could no longer stay. So, I left the country. I was supposed to go to the United States, but I could not get the plane ticket so I first went to Laos before eventually going to Sweden. I could not stand to live in a country any longer whose government could act like this one did. When I first fled to the jungle, I thought like so many others that the Communist Party was the only answer. But I soon found out that the mixed up political nature in the Party was just as bad as the Thai government. I was asking questions of the intellectuals who were there that had already joined the Party and they could not give me good answers about the reality of the social and political situation in Thailand. I was looking for what was right, what was just. In the Communist Party I encountered a blind, old faith where people were just as misguided as those that believed in the government of the time.

Q: Do you see literature as having the potential not only to mirror society but also to propel/enact real and tangible changes within society (i.e. author not merely a social historian but also and agent/catalyst for social change as well)?

A: Yes, I agree with this. I think that most writers think like this even though this may not be their intention. I believe that if writers don’t think like this then they have no power in their writing. If their writing is to mean something to the world it must have something behind it otherwise they have no place writing. What an author writes should be like a bullet. I think Chart’s writing is like this. In The Judgment, Chart is very much a social critic. The whole picture of society is still reflected in the context of his work. It is not easy to find good work like this nowadays. I think that ultimately art should be involved with social issues, not separate from it. This should be true not just of literature, but of all art. Here, I think of society as a wall: if an artist’s work has no social background, it’s just floating around not saying anything.

Q: Are farangs the bearers of Westernization, modernization, misguided notions of progress, and the eventual downfall of traditional Thai society? Do they hold any redeeming value in Thailand? Are Thais also culpable in this equation?

A: This is a very complex question. This phenomenon is taking place in every country, but the way in which each country develops and deals with this clash of civilizations is based upon the educated classes. The key word here is education. In the past, Thailand could be separated into two groups: the farmers and the elite. The farmers made no decisions and had very little resources so this type of change did not have such a great impact on them in the past. But now things are changing as Thailand is becoming less dependent on farming and is moving towards a cash economy. We must teach our people so that they know how to deal with this clash of civilizations. When civilization and modernity is introduced to the peasants they don’t know how to deal with it. This is becoming a big problem for Thailand.

As I said before, this problem is quite, quite complex. The impact of the clash of civilizations, or Westernization as you call it, is up to how strong the traditional beliefs of a particular country are. A lot of peasants’ ways of understanding the world are based on
traditional customs and beliefs, which may look like stupid superstition to an outsider, but the important thing is that these beliefs are not imposed from outside. The way in which farangs play a negative role in this equation is when they judge these beliefs from the outside when they don’t understand the detailed process that has gone into the entire structure. This is an example of how modern ways sometimes destroy tradition and impact development.

Q: I suppose ultimately I want to see your works as dealing with problems arising at the cusp of modernity, whereas I want to see the works of someone like Chart as dealing with problems of the fully entrenched modern age – in your view, is this a fair assessment? Do you think it’s fair of me to use the period of the 1970s as a critical tipping point for Thai society (i.e., setting up a dichotomy with which to talk about two types of Thai literature, early modern and modern)? Are there a host of other social, economic, political, and cultural elements I am failing to take into account? Is it fair to divide Thai literature according to this pre- and post 1970’s period in the way I am trying to do (i.e. pre-1970 literature dealing with problems on the cusp of modernity, tongue-in-cheek criticisms of social problems vs. post 1970 literature as offering more fully modern, head-on attacks of social ills through writing due to the events of the previous decade)?

Or is it more complicated than this above? Are there periods of repression (by the Thai government) and periods of Westernization (Vietnam War – late 1960s into 1970s) that break up modern Thai history much more accurately when trying to understand Thai literature from a social history perspective?

A: Again, this is a very difficult and complex question. It is fair to divide up Thai history like this only to a point. You must remember I am an old man from a different generation and so I will have a bit of a different perspective. (Audible laughter.) Another key point in Thai history for me that I talked about earlier is 1957 with Sarit. This takes the focus away from the 1970s and the events of ’73 and ’76 because of my perspective. The family of literature at this time could be broken up into two groups: social realism (Sriburapha, Seni Samphong) and entertainment novels (going along with only the idea of reading or art as sanuk [fun, enjoyment]). In 1957, Sarit had writers killed or jailed in an attempt to repress free speech after the revolution. Many writers, like Sriburapha, had to seek asylum outside of the country. I published my book during this period in 1958, but I was not very well known at the time. I was still very interested in the upcountry lifestyle and I was working for Cornell University’s Research Center. After Sarit’s revolution, the Cornell project had to stop because the police started to investigate every writer. No one could write during this period that we call the “Dark Ages” because of the amount of repression and fear. So, I had an idea to write about the folk tales of my home region so that I could keep my project going. I told Cornell that I needed a tape recorder. They told me they had sent one to the Siam Society so I went to pick it up. When I asked for it, they questioned me, asking, “What are you going to use this for?” I told them I was going to use it to record traditional folk tales in order to preserve the tradition of the upcountry because they are
being lost with the introduction of television. The Siam Society told me this was not a
good idea and asked who I was. I told them I was a writer and gave them my book.
They told me that they would look at the book and if they found it acceptable they would
sponsor my project. The farang who was in charge could not read Thai so he passed my
book along. Two weeks later, I found out that my book was considered subversive and
Communist (I was labeled the second Jit Phumisak) because the Society had passed my
book along to the Thai police. After this I had to stop writing for 10 years. I became a
shadow. This phenomenon reappears again in Chart’s period. This is why Chart is so
insistent on writing only fiction.

During the 1960s some important literary figures in Thailand say that my book is not
Communist and that it is actually quite good. According to them, my book should be
labeled as social realism because it reflects the social context of the time. But at the same
time some university professor calls it Communist again because it doesn’t point out any
exits or solutions to these social problems.

People often ask me to define my own work. Is it socialist? Is it only a reflection of
social realism? When I write I try to be the voice of the poor. I want my writings to the
very manifestation of poverty. I never say that we should have a revolution. I have never
wanted to incite violence or a violent revolution.

More than 85% of the population lived in poverty at the time when I wrote my book. I
tried to present my stories to the rich people in charge to show them that the poor were
being repressed. The rich people have the power to change this. The objective of my
writing is to communicate with this rich group, the intelligentsia, so that they can
understand better what the problems of the rural parts of Thailand are so that they can do
something about it. My target group of readers is not the farmers that I was writing
about, but the rich people of my own country.

I think that, in the end, I agree with the timeline you have, but it’s just more complicated
than that. In my opinion, I think it would be best to concentrate on how Thai literature
throughout the past several decades has offered a critique of social ills and development
rather than trying to see Thai literature differently according to one critical point in
history. There are too many complex junctures in history to make this work perfectly.
Good literature in Thailand has, however, always been very critical of development and
the people in charge of this kind of “development.”

Q: Poverty and hardship (often bordering on, if not far surpassing a sense of tragedy)
also seem to be major themes in your works. I would assume so from some of your
previous answers, but is it fair to say that your works serve as a grander critique of
development (in total)? Globalization? Westernization?
A: Yes! I think this is very clear in my writings. I am very critical of the clash of civilizations and development because I don’t think that many people in my country understand the consequences of these things.

Q: Do you see the traditional way of Thai life and society as inherently more valuable than the modern age or is it simply the ways in which modernity is over-running traditional values that you have a problem with?

A: I have never had a problem with modernity. Change is inevitable. I understand that everything must change, but how to change is the biggest issue. It is impossible to go back to life like it was in the past. Our society instead needs a good manager to deal with the changes brought about by modernity (e.g. the temperature change of the world [global warming]). My major concern is that I would like to see Thailand adapt to the changes of modernity well without simply getting rid of our traditional customs and values completely.

Q: Can you expound on the tension between tradition and modernity that exists in your stories? What, if anything, does it tell us about the contemporary dynamic within Thailand?

A: It is not just tradition versus modernity in my stories. There are parts of modernity that will happen no matter what, like trendy hairstyles. These are just very minor points that don’t matter. I understand this phenomenon as inevitable; you cannot stop this kind of fad. My book is a political book at heart because the heart of the book is about ways to manage the resources of Thailand, both traditional and modern. Even values shifting and changing is an inevitable thing – I recognize this. No one can stop this kind of thing, but the real Thai values should be able to be kept in the heart. What I see as a problem in our modern society is that many people lack the acknowledgement to change in a good way. An example of this is a place like Chiang Mai. In the past, this was an ideal province, but it has been changed by the importation of Western ideals so there are festivals and parties all the time and all the people do now is sell cheap goods to the farangs.

When I write, I try to think of myself as one part of society. Maybe the writer in the present day takes on the role of the observer. I see myself as one part of the greater problem. How can I help fix these problems? A good example to illustrate my point is [South] Korea. [South] Korea is a country with clear objectives and a good leader. Right now, Thailand has neither.

Q: Why have you written so little? (Or is this only due to my ignorance that I ask this question and perhaps only so little has been translated into English?)

A: I have written so little because it is so difficult. When I write I use a lot of power to create. I ask myself what the big problem is that I haven’t yet dealt with. In Fa Bo Kan I
cover a lot of issues that still have not been addressed. So I then ask myself, “Why use so much energy to create something when these problems have still not been fixed?” So perhaps less writing can be good enough if the writing is good.
I am very happy that I think I get my points across well in Fa Bo Kan, but it also makes me sad to see that a lot of the same problems still exist. We are still a very poor country and we are a very unequal country.
APPENDIX B

Interview with Chart Korbjitti
Chart’s Home in Pakchong, Thailand
December 18, 2007

Q: Can you describe for me what life was like growing up in Samut Sakhorn? Your parents owned a grocery shop, right? Did you grow up amidst poverty yourself? What about the town of Samut Sakhorn? How was this life different from life in Mahachai with your grandmother?

A: I was part of a big family. We were not poor like some people were poor, but we did often struggle to make ends meet. I was the second child born to my parents and I was the oldest boy in the family. I was born near a small river far away from Mahachai – about 20 kilometers away, in a place called Baan Bo in Samut Sakhorn province. When we would go to the city, we would go by boat because there was no train and we would have to use an electric light, like a big flashlight to lead our way down the river at nighttime.

When I was about 7 or 8 years old, I went to school like normal children in Thailand. My family owned a small shop, which sold goods for the local people like rice or sugar or medicine. My father didn’t stay at home every day because he would take the boat upriver to sell salt in bulk at Bangkok. He would be away for about 7 to 10 days at a time and then return home for 2 or 3 days only to have to repeat the process again.

When I was a student in the school after my seventh year I asked my parents if I could go to live in the temple because the temple takes in many young boys in order to give them an education. Also, the boys would have fun at the temple and staying at home was too quiet and I had to live with my brothers and sisters and it wasn’t as much fun. After one term in the school, I had to move out of the temple and go to live with my grandmother in Mahachai in the city because my parents decided to quit their career in the small grocery business and instead to invest in a big boat that could ferry bulk quantities of sand up the river, which was used for building purposes. They would carry the sand between Ayutaya and Bangkok. Our family moved everything (all of our possessions) from our old house in the countryside to our grandmother’s home in Mahachai. I stayed in Mahachai about 6 or 7 months in order to finish the school year in the temple and then my uncle asked me to study in Bangkok. He had a friend who had become a monk in Bangkok so I went there to study at a new school when I was about 13 or 14. [This is when Chart served as a dek wat (temple boy).] This school is the equivalent to what you would call high school in America. I studied at this school for about 3 or 4 year until I went to Pochang College. Pochang is a kind of technical school where they teach arts and crafts. I studied here for 5 years until I finished my education.

Q: How did you pay for college?
A: The first two years my parents paid for me. After that I asked them what I could do for money in order to pay. I started to sell handbags that I made at local shops in the Banglamphu area of Bangkok and I also took a job as a doorman at a local bar. I wrote about this in Phan Maa Baa (Mad Dogs & Co.).

Q: Any fights?

A: For me? No, I am so kind.

(Matthew – interjection): (Audible laughter.) That’s why I asked!

Q: Just so I understand better, at what age were you a dek wat?

A: 13, 14, 15.

Q: What did you do as a dek wat? You’re not a monk, are you? You don’t have to ordain as a novice, correct? You don’t have to shave your head or anything, right?

A: No, no. You don’t have to shave anything! (Audible laughter.) You have to help the monks carry food, go to the store to buy things for them – you just have to help out around the temple as necessary.

Q: Was it a struggle for you to break away from your family tradition of running businesses (assuming this to be the case) in order to embark on a career as a writer?

A: No, because I think most parents want their children to grow up to be rich. But a writer cannot be a rich man especially in the old days, but also today as well. I tried to hide from my parents that I wanted to be a writer. They never knew that I wanted to be a writer until I wrote my first book. But nowadays, they said ok! (Audible laughter.)

Q: Who are your literary influences? I have read that you acknowledge no main literary model, but surely you must have some literary influences?

A: I read many books in Thai, like Khamsing. He is one of the authors who convinced me to look at the problems plaguing the poor. And also Kukrit Pramoj. They showed me how to explain the difficulties faced by the poor. And Rong Wongsawan showed me how to be artistic in my language. Khamsing also taught me about humanity.

Also, I have always admired the writing of Suchart Sawatsii. I sent a story called Nakriam Nak Leng” (“The Hoodlum Student”) [it was about inter-school fighting] into the Social Science Review, but I guess Suchart must not have read it.

Q: When were you reading these books? As a young man, during college?
A: Yes, when I was a young man, when I attended Pochang. During the incidents of 1973, there were many books that were made available to students and I took this opportunity to read a lot.

It was at this time that I, with a group of close friends, moved to a house in Bangkhunthian, Bangkok. We were a scruffy bunch, struggling to get by, and all aspired to be great musicians, artists, and writers.

Also during this time, I was also able to get a job working for Siriphon Yu on Sanao San magazine. I was not paid for this, but it did provide me with some work experience.

Q: Because so many Thai’s didn’t read, or didn’t read works like those of Tolstoy, was it your parents that pushed you to read more? Were they educated people?

A: No, no. In my house as a child we had no books, certainly no great works. My father and mother didn’t read; they were just normal people. One point in my life that pushed me to read more was when mother couldn’t give me money for snacks or toys so I went to the library to read. I spent my time here because I didn’t have money to spend on other things like some of the other children. So it has become my habit to read. I learned as a young child that because I could read, I could also write, so I started to write. Many people ask me why I want to be a writer. I say I don’t know, but maybe it was because as a child I read so much. It was at age 14 that I told myself I would be a writer and I didn’t change my habits for fulfilling this wish.

Q: What drives you to write? Are you aiming to be realistic, critical, inspiring? Do you consider yourself a voice of Thailand in any way, a voice of the oppressed? Also, has this drive changed at all over the years?

A: When I try to write a new short story or a novel I first ask myself what it is that I want to tell my reader. Whether or not my message is right or wrong is of no consequence. You can choose to believe me or not, but what I am ultimately trying to show is what I believe to the problems or issues that my country faces. And maybe also I am trying to show something about humanity in general. Also, my work may be political, but it does not depend on politics. I try to fuse reality, fiction, and humor. With my work, I don’t like to repeat the same topic or the same form that I have already done. I try to make a new avenue to explore each time I work. This way I avoid routine and try to keep my writing fun.

Q: Do you feel you have a duty to write about the social problems of Thailand?

A: Not a duty, but I cannot quiet the voice inside of me that speaks to the things of Thailand that I do not like and do not see as good things for our country. Because we live in a society we cannot help but look at society and see both the good and the bad and I try to show people what is really going on now. So, I suppose I’m trying to be a bit critical
when I write. If I were only being realistic when I write then I would be no different than a newspaper journalist.

_Q: I mean no offense when I say this, but I am amazed that virtually no Thais that I have talked to know who you are. Why? Do you think this tells us anything about the grand picture of contemporary Thailand?_

_A: Oh, this is normal. This is because Thai people don’t give a damn about writers. (Audible laughter.) When people ask me about my career and I tell them I’m a writer, many of them think I paint signs or that I work for a printing company. In this country, maybe five or six percent truly know what writers do. It’s not like being a movie star or a singer. We are a poor country. The first thing people in the countryside have to do is find something to eat, and then people with find something for entertainment – maybe some music. Books are not necessarily something that the normal Thai is going to value as important in their life due to these types of financial problems and constraints. It is only the guy with an education, whose family has money that is going to be concerned with writers and books. I do, however, see this as changing in Thailand and so I am hopeful that in the future people will be able to have their basic needs taken care of and that they can then focus on education and reading even more._

_Q: Is Mad Dogs & Co. a “true” story of your life rather than a fictionalized account? Are you Chuanchua? Is this a story of lost youth and innocence, lost idealism – or rather a more optimistic account that proves ideals live on and grow on the outskirts of mainstream society despite hardship and despair? Did you consider yourself a hippie then? Would you still consider yourself a hippie now, and if so, what does that mean?_

_A: It’s a mix of fiction and fact. About 60% of it is a true story, a kind of blend of stories from the lives of a bunch of different people brought together into one book. I don’t know if I am Chuanchua. (Audible laughter.) In this story, Chuanchua is a necessary character as he acts as a kind of narrator. Many people ask me if I am Chuanchua, but I tell them just in the book, I’m a writer in real life. (Audible laughter.) When I was a teenager, my group of friends and I made handbags and sold them, but we didn’t know exactly what the hippie movement was about. We would just drink and smoke, but we didn’t know about the hippie philosophy. We would wear jeans and t-shirts, but weren’t doing anything productive as far as society is concerned. When I became a writer, I thought that this kind of story could be a memory of what it was like to live carefree outside of society, but not necessarily doing a lot of good to change things. It’s a story of youth and it’s also a story of hope._

_Q: In Mad Dogs & Co. you talk about the traditional view Otto’s father holds about one being responsible for oneself – do you see this sense of responsibility fading away in the modern world?_
A: I’m not sure now that people have responsibility. It seems that nowadays there exists an even lesser sense of responsibility than there was in the past. I think this is because of your country! (Audible laughter.) Just kidding – there are so many factors that play into this equation, but I do think that a shift away from traditional values has a lot to do with it.

Q: Vulgarity permeates a lot of your work – why? Is this indicative of greater changes within modern society?

A: You mean in Mad Dogs & Co., right? If you speak politely in that story it’s not the real thing. I tried to use the real way that this group of friends would talk in order to make the story more realistic. If Otto said, “Yes, sir, yes mam,” it wouldn’t be real. I see the use of vulgarity as a stylistic or artistic thing. I don’t use much of it in other books or stories.

Q: Do you recognize the tension between tradition and modernity to be a major theme throughout your novels? If so, can you expound on this? What, if anything, does it tell us about the contemporary dynamic within Thailand?

A: Yes, I do. The reason this is so obvious in my work is because I think that Thailand is changing to more of a Western style. This is not just happening in Thailand, but in lots of other countries as well. I see a problem with this because people are forgetting what it means to be Thai. They are becoming too focused on money and things; they are losing many of the values of the past that made them Thai.

Q: Do you see the traditional way of Thai life and society as inherently more valuable than the modern age or is it simply the ways in which modernity is over-running traditional values that you have a problem with?

A: In some of my books like Time, I am trying to show how a Western way of living is just overrunning and wiping out a Thai way of living. The message in this book is that we as Thai people are losing sight of what is really important because a new set of values or a new way of living has started to blind us. So much depends on the culture; I don’t want to say that one culture is necessarily better or worse than any other. Some aspects of Westernization are obviously good, but there are many parts that don’t fit with the Thai style today. For me, the good thing is that we can mix and choose what is useful with Western ways and discard what doesn’t work.

Q: Poverty and hardship (often bordering on, if not far surpassing a sense of tragedy) also seem to be major themes in your works – do your works, then, serve as a grander critique of development (in total)? Globalization? Westernization?

A: Yes. I think nowadays there is a new kind of colonization. Colonization, in a way, has changed. In the old days, we would use weapons or guns to take over another
country, but now we use culture (movies, food, songs, and other things). This is the way that I try to tell our people about how our country is changing in negative ways. In the past, we would revere and respect our old people, but now we put them in nursing homes.

**Q:** Quotation from *No Way Out*: “...to the capital, the city where their futures lay...” -- is this to say that development and promise only reside in Bangkok – does development even work there?

**A:** I based *No Way Out* on an article I read in the newspaper. It is based on a true story. Even nowadays people move to Bangkok with the hope of a better life. That is why we have so many poor people who have moved there and that is why there are so many slums. In Bangkok, the people come from a range of different backgrounds. Even in Bangkok, development does not work entirely. You still have rich people cheating poor people everywhere, not just in Bangkok.

**Q:** The familial relationship seems to stand as one of the defining characteristics of traditional Thai value systems – do you see this breaking down with the influx of Westernization and modernity?

**A:** In the future I think Thai society will move more towards a nuclear family. Yes, I think this is partly due to the influence by the West. When I was young we all lived together like a big family, but nowadays families tend to live separately. It is different now. When you marry you move out of your parent’s home and when you have a child, you send them off to school. The family bonds are breaking down when compared with the past. There are also economic reasons for this as well. In the past, families would tend to work together so it was only natural that they would live together too. But now that our society is based more on money than on production of food for your own family – everything is buy, buy, buy – things are changing.

One thing to keep in mind is that the values are related to the material things of a culture. When Western materials and goods started to come to Thailand, the values came along with it. People began to buy more Western goods without even realizing that they are then replacing their own values. But it is important to remember that Western values are not the devil; it is up to the people to choose what they want. However, now I am concerned with the young generations. They don’t quite understand which values are useful and which should be discarded. As you can see when you travel around Thailand it is becoming quite the problem. Our youth today are like so many other young people throughout the world; they don’t know what to do if they don’t have a television or a cell phone nearby.

**Q:** Can you talk about how Buddhism impacts your writing/being/life? I know that this is vague, but I ask because while I certainly would not call your books Buddhist, there are certain elements that permeate your writings and sometimes even become a focus of sorts (e.g. the notion of karma, the tension with the monastery in *The Judgment*, etc.).
Also, do you think Buddhism is becoming a vestige of the traditional world in Thailand? Are youths turning a cold shoulder to Buddhism and in place looking for money and image? What are your views on Buddhism as a whole? Do you find it to be an altogether positive influence on Thai society? (Some of your writings seem to depict Buddhism in a bit of a disparaging light.) What about Chuanchua and his destruction of Buddhist images when drunk?

A: It’s difficult to answer questions about Buddhism. When I was young, I didn’t pay much attention to Buddhism. Maybe this is I was kind of anti-religion, anti-monk at the time because as a *dek wat* I saw a lot of bad monks who were hypocrites. I saw a lot of monks who were supposed to live according to Buddhist ways, but didn’t really live that way. When I was in my mid-30s (around 35 or 36), I read many books about Buddhism. I read some works by Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and felt that this was the correct interpretation of Buddhism. I could now understand it; I could touch it. As I read more, I felt that what Buddhadasa said was true. For me, Buddhism is a kind of handbook for living. It’s not so much a religion, but a philosophy of life, a guide to living correctly in the world. Today, I do see Buddhism being replaced by a love of money and material things, but this was also present in the past as well. In Thailand, you have always had monks and temples who seem only to be involved with Buddhism for the financial benefit and security it brings.

As far as Chuanchua is concerned, his message is very simple in the scene where he knocks down the Buddha statues. I don’t believe in the Buddha as a God, but only in what he says, in how he interprets a philosophy of living. I don’t dare tell all Thai people that their way of looking at Buddhism is wrong, but instead I am only telling a story to my friends. (Audible laughter.)

Q: You were 19 at the time of the 1973 massacre at Thammasat University, right? And only a few years older for the tragic events of 1976 -- Can you explain any impact this situation had on you? Do you remember where you were when it happened? Do you think Thai society and Thai literature lost a sense of innocence after these events?

A: In 1973, I walked with the students in protest. By 1976 I had finished my education at Pochang and was staying with my parents in Samut Sakhorn so I wasn’t there to witness the demonstrations or the killing of the students. However, as a student during the years of 1974 and 1975 I joined a pro-democracy organization and made signs and banners and took an active role like so many other students and participated in the many demonstrations. I was fortunate, however, to have graduated before the killings that took place again during 1976. These events of 1976 greatly impacted my work and I actually wrote a couple of early short stories about it. In one short story, I talked about some of the students who fled to the jungle and later returned to the city and I ended up writing about how they couldn’t adjust to living in society again. The point of the story is that these students are viewed as madmen by society and actually turn into madmen because of the way they are treated by society and how they can’t adjust themselves to the
accepted social context. I used the character of the madman so that I had more liberty to say whatever I wanted without getting into trouble because, after all, these were only the words and thoughts of a crazy person.

Yes, sure, I think Thai society lost a sense of innocence after the killings that took place during the 1970s. There was also a lot of censorship during this time as well. People were not allowed to think for themselves and they were not allowed to say what they wanted to say in public. Many people were afraid that if they said something bad about the government they would disappear or be killed.

Q: I suppose ultimately I want to see your works as dealing with problems arising out of the entrenched modern age, whereas I want to see the works of someone like Khamsing dealing with problems on the beginning cusp of modernity – in your view, is this a fair assessment? Do you think it’s fair of me to use the period of the 1970s as a critical tipping point for Thai society (i.e., setting up here a dichotomy with which to talk about 2 types of Thai literature, early modern and modern)? Are there a host of other social, economic, political, and cultural elements I am failing to take into account? Do the 1970’s represent a time of lost innocence within Thailand? Is it fair to divide Thai literature according to this pre- and post 1970’s period in the way I am trying to do (i.e. pre-1970 literature dealing with problems on the cusp of modernity, tongue-in-cheek criticisms of social problems vs. post 1970 literature as offering more fully modern, head-on attacks of social ills through writing due to the events of the previous decade)?

A: For me, when I work I don’t think about these historical periods. This is not a conscious thing for me. When I was writing after the second governmental crackdown in Bangkok during the 1970s, the critics and the “Literature for Life” people never tried to force me into being a political writer or a socialist writer. When I work, these historical periods don’t change anything for me. I’m just a writer who writes about Thai society. Maybe this is a question you could ask to someone who studies Thai history. I’m not an “art for life” writer. Yes, I have written a couple of short stories about what happened at Thammasat during the 1970s, but I don’t think that makes me a political writer. If something changed after the killings and censorship of the 1970s it was that “Literature for Life” didn’t satisfy people anymore. You can’t just write only about abstract social problems anymore – you must write stories about people and the changes that are taking place in society as they affect the normal person. When I write I don’t aim towards politics like Khamsing did. For example, I can write a story about a dog that I like and that is it. There is nothing to force me to write for the good of the people of for the good of the writing; I just write what I feel, but that was not always the same for Khamsing. He felt pressure to criticize Thai society in a smart, clever way because of the different historical time in which he lived. The writer cannot refuse the thing that is inside of him – his desires, his family, his historical perspective, his context. We must think about all of these things when we think about the writer. How old is Khamsing compared to me? What about his family? His parents were farmers. He is a real Isan person. These things will make our writing different. His context is different. The writer is like a philosopher. The writer always
writes the thing that he knows first. The themes that I mostly write about are universal. I think the same thing is true about Khamsing. People will change and things will change, but some things, like these universal themes of humanity, will always remain the same. Perhaps you will see more similarities in a book of mine like No Way Out (more than other of my books) and Khamsing’s works because of the way it is written. In this book I write more clearly and directly about social problems than in other books. This is similar to Khamsing because his writing is more obviously about social problems. But maybe in my other books I write more about humanity and the social problems are all wrapped up in the story. I’m not exactly sure how to explain these similarities and differences – maybe it is because we were writing at different times and have different contexts. Even if events in history, maybe even the events of the 1970s affect my life, it’s still up to my perspective to decide what I write.

Q: In Mad Dogs & Co. farangs are often depicted in a negative light (and I can certainly understand why) – what is your view of farangs? Are farangs the bearers of Westernization, modernization, misguided notions of progress, and the eventual downfall of traditional Thai society? Do they hold any redeeming value in Thailand?

A: (Tells a joke about an old man hitting a dog with a stick, which causes the dog to hide from him. Eventually the old man grows old. One day the old man is walking on the beach and comes across a couple of farangs having sex. He hits the two lovers, thinking it is the dog and wonders to himself why the dog cries out for help!) There is an example in Mad Dogs & Co. where the farangs come to Thai’s [the character] restaurant dressed in Speedos or have no shirts on – would you dress like this in your country when you go to a restaurant or to the bank? Of course not. Why would you dare to do this in my country? Because we’re a developing country, right? If you do the same thing in your country that you do in my country then it’s ok, I have no problem with this. Sometimes farangs treat our country with no respect, which is not acceptable. Many farang look down on my country, so this is why I try to tell them, “No, not in my country – it is not ok to treat us like this!”

This is not to say that all farangs are bad or don’t have respect. People are people – some are good, some are bad. But often Thai people are treated poorly because we are not as rich or civilized as developed countries. I think many farangs think they are better than some Thai people because they are modern, because they are developed, so a lot of Thai people try to imitate how they act and what they wear. Sure, farangs are partially responsible for some of the problems of Westernization, but Thai people also choose to follow this bad example. This is what I try to warn my people against in my books. I try to show them that just because something is from the West doesn’t mean that it is better. Money and material things are not the only important things in the world. A lot of our problems may come from this kind of thinking, but it is not all the fault of Westernization – Thai people are also making some bad decisions. Perhaps farangs can be seen as a symbol of some of the downfalls of Thai society as they bring Western values, which are not always the best values for Thai society, but only as a symbol – not as the complete reason for the negative things currently happening in Thai society.
Q: Do you see literature as having the potential not only to mirror society but also to propel/enact real and tangible changes within society (i.e. author not merely a social historian but also and agent/catalyst for social change as well)?

A: In Thailand, I’m not sure. Because people don’t read books! (Audible laughter) Ok – finished?! (Audible laughter.)
No, but really, in many developing countries, many people don’t know about a lot of literature because they don’t have the opportunity to read. Many of the people who do read books like mine or like Khamsing’s already know a lot about social problems – they are usually educated people who are not poor. This is a problem of development. It doesn’t work for everyone so literature in Thailand might reach only a few of those people who are poor and uneducated.
APPENDIX C

Interview with Marcel Barang
Thanon Phra Ahtit, Bangkok, Thailand
November 19, 2007

Q: What is it about Thai literature that you find so appealing?
A: I’m not sure I do.

Q: What is it about good Thai literature that you find so appealing?
A: Good Thai literature is appealing in the sense that when I started to translate it, nobody thought there was anything good about it. And way back in 1993 I started to look around, asking experts in the field to tell me what they thought to be the best novels in Thailand ever. And I ended up with an overall list of 99 titles, which I trimmed down, added to, and eventually ended up with the 20 best novels of Thailand according to my standards and feelings. Some of these books, not all of them, are really very good and could have found their place on the world market, but they had not. I’m lucky because I can still translate the whole series and be able to publish it myself.

Q: What do you find so appealing about authors like Chart Korbjitti or Khamsing Šrinawk (you had mentioned in an interview that I read that Chart and Khamsing were your two favorite Thai authors)?
A: That, by the way, is not to belittle other Thai authors – there are other very good Thai authors in their own right as well. Chart Korbjitti is, obviously, the best Thai novelist alive today. Since 1981 when Khamphiphaksa (The Judgment) came out, he’s been acknowledged as the number one novelist and rightly so. In my view, he’s not as successful as a short story writer; he’s a bit too harsh in his writing. On the other hand, Damrong Samsong is by far the best Thai stylist currently living. This is a very obvious difference. If you read Chart Korbjitti, you need probably something like 1000 words to get by. If you read Samsong, you probably need a couple of dictionaries just to keep up.

Q: Do you see either any striking similarities or striking dissimilarities in what I submitted to be early modern Thai literature (e.g. Khamsing) versus more recent Thai authorship (someone like Chart)?
A: No. Well, yes and no. Let us put things into perspective first. Khamsing was ahead of his time. Before him there were lots of writers that emerged in the tradition of writing which could be very critical at times but usually wasn’t focusing on the problems of society, but were basically doing an entertaining job (and of course there were gradations of that). Some of the best pens were actually publishing true literature, but many just wanted to tap into the popular market (romance and cloak and dagger stuff and that kind
of thing). Now, Khamsing Srinawk, as I said, was a bit of an exception in the sense that he summarized two trends: one was that of entertainment and the other was sharp, critical assessment of Thai society from this time on. He succeeded because he wasn’t virulent. The trouble with many of the highly critical writers, with the exception of Sriburapha (he was a master), is that they are too black and white. They give you pre-cooked solutions – they don’t give you the chance to decide the import of something that you are reading. With Khamsing, it is something else. Last week I was re-reading one of his stories, “Breeding Stock,” and I was amazed because I was smiling the whole time. Khamsing has a sense of humor, which makes it possible for him to be highly critical without appearing to do so. In that sense, there is no basic difference between Khamsing and Chart except that Chart manages to be a Khamsing in his novels, but in his short stories he tends to be too crude, too black and white, too hard hitting.

Q: Do you see this sense of a sharply critical assessment of Thai society as being the same in Khamsing’s writings as you do with Chart’s writings or do you see the way in which they are critical of Thai society in different lights?

A: It’s a different light of course; it’s a different generation. There exists a different problematic in the writing of Khamsing than in that of Chart. When Chart wrote The Judgment, it was an epoch-making book for the field of literature. Khamsing is writing about Thai society as it is – villages, politicians, etc. – in a fairly classical kind of way, on the level of humorous writing, but it is not revolutionizing the genre. On the other hand, Chart, when he published The Judgment, he was bringing something really new to Thai literature, which was the problematic of one man (an unexceptional man) pitted against the rest of Thai society. His story is hugely debated, but he is not giving you answers or conclusions, but he is making you think. He is a bit too didactic at times (not necessarily in The Judgment, but in Mad Dogs & Co.). Many times he is taking you by the hand and showing you what to think, which is a bit of a drawback. But if you go from The Judgment to his next best novel, which is Time, you will see a writer who has done a lot of thinking about Thai society. He is explaining Thai society to you and criticizing Thai society to you in a very subtle way. He’s just taking facts and then those facts put together can form a different meaning when you, the reader, thinks about them, but he is never imposing his own will on you. Now, Time, is a marvel in the sense that it is a definite progression in his work, but it’s amazing that you have an author mixing theater, psychological, romance, social considerations all into one work. The Judgment was written 20 years earlier. It’s obviously written about the same society, but it’s a society that’s has been changing in directions that are fairly evident when you read Time. The problematic of Time is sort of different from that in The Judgment because it’s not one guy pitted against society, but it’s the workings of a society 20 years after.

* (Marcel – tangential comment): Mad Dogs & Co. was a performance. He actually originally wrote it as a serialized story month after month after month – that’s why it took him so long. He wrote it for a magazine called Lalana (a women’s magazine). In that magazine, normally you have all the “queen’s of romance” writing and Chart lost a bet or
something so he decided to show all of those girls, those women, how you can write good literature even in a serialized paper – and he did. It came out in its entirety after about one and half years and Chart finally repackaged it and edited it into what we now read as *Phan Maa Baa* (Mad Dogs & Co.).

**Q:** What you have been talking about with the shift of values within Thai society and the nature of how Khamsing wrote and how he criticized Thai society with a humorous, tongue-in-cheek kind of way versus the way in which Chart does it gets right at the heart of what I am trying to better understand with my project. I guess my question to you, which I don’t know if you can fully answer, is why? Why? That is, can we say that these are merely stylistic differences that separate and distinguish these two paradigmatic authors from one another or was there an event or a series of events in recent Thai history that dramatically changed the nature of Thai literature?

**A:** We have to go back a little bit if you want to really understand the role of Khamsing and the way he writes. You have to have the background knowledge of the so-called “art for life” school of writing, which is where you get all those buggers criticizing Thai society in too-black and too-white ways, which Khamsing did escape from. When it comes to Chart, it’s a little bit different; it’s a new generation. By the time Chart came up with *The Judgment*, the “art for life,” “art for art” debate was a bit passé. Chart was basically the first one to say, “Look, this is rubbish – the way to criticize Thai society is not to point fingers, but to write in such a way as to allow the message to come through by itself.” Khamsing had done this too, but he was always writing in the traditional form of the short story. If you look at the political context of the time of Khamsing’s generation with the people, the Communists, fighting in the jungle, by the time Chart comes into the picture, this was no longer the main problem. Focusing on traditional Thai society, Chart’s main theme, in both *The Judgment* and *Time* was the Westernization of Thai society and what this implies in the change of values. In those two novels, the main themes of *Mad Dogs & Co.* (let’s not talk about *No Way Out* – he wasn’t Chart Korbjitti yet – it’s not that I don’t like it, but I just think it’s a minor novelette) is not the transformation of values at all, but it’s about a bunch of people who are living outside of mainstream Thai society with their own sets of values and their own values are question of the relationship between happiness, success, and the accepted social mores of the times.

**Q:** I try to understand the differences in the writings of Chart and Khamsing in the context of Thai politics and Thai history with a breaking point of 1973-1976 and I’m trying to say that the events of 1973-1976 represent a fundamental shift in Thai society which would allow for a writer like Khamsing to exist prior to this break (who writes in a more passive, humorously critical way) and also then for a writer like Chart to come about after this break (who writes in a more head-on, vulgar, in your face way). These differences can’t simply be because of a generational gap but must owe to something outside of this. What do you think of this distinction?
A: Oh, quite obviously. Chart is a bit of a mystery in that he was not politically involved – I’m not saying that he wasn’t politically conscious, but that he wasn’t politically involved. And he actually made a point in saying that he was just a writer and that he’s just a bystander. But yes, you can’t escape your times anyway and what happened in the 1970s was a turning point in Thai society not just because Communism was defeated, but because Thai society by then opened the way for very grassroots and rapid changes. Quite normally, a writer will reflect changes like these.

Q: It’s a bit cliché, but do you think it’s too much to say that Thai society lost a bit of innocence during this period of brutal governmental massacres during the years of 1973-1976?

A: Oh, definitely. It’s not 73-76 by the way. You have to enlarge the period. 73-76 was the urban side of things. Much more important in my view was the rural side of things. The real eye opener was not the clash between right and left in the city during 73 to 76, but the hangover that came with the impossibility to calm the strife between the rural population and the generals. With the two combined you realize that you can’t say anything against the government because your life is going to be defeated. And eventually, though, the whole generation of intellectuals got baptized twice over: first by having to give in to the generals and then by having to go back into the mainstream. Most went on into NGO’s and tried to carry on the struggle, but a great number simply had to assimilate into mainstream culture for fear of their life.

Q: Perhaps the implication I am trying to draw from this project in its entirety is that the works of Khamsing and Chart serve as grander critiques of globalization/Westernization/development according to a Western model? What do you think of this?

A: For sure, I agree with this. You can look to “Breeding Stock” by Khamsing as an example of this. He and Chart have been writing about the Westernization of Thai society and the change of values that crops up. This is, by the way, something that is very worrying – I have been in Thailand for about 20 years now and I can attest to the changes that have taken place in this short amount of time.

*(Marcel – tangent) The first short stories penned by Thais in a Thai context came about in the 1880s. The first real novels started to crop up around the 1930s with The Circus of Life.

Q: In the introduction to Khamsing’s book written by Michael Smythies, “modern Thai literature is at once centered only around Bangkok and not concerned with social realism.” Do you consider this a fair assessment?

A: He hasn’t read Thai literature. I have to strongly disagree with that because there are a number of good Thai writers who have been writing about the boondocks and things
happening in the boondocks. There are a number of good works that do actually take place in Bangkok and usually in the upper class as well, but there are many exceptions to that. Even 30 years ago a woman like Suwanni Sukhontha did write a number of books that had nothing to do with Bangkok, but with Thai or farang people in the boondocks. No, there is a whole line of novels that do not take place in Bangkok at all, but in the country. Again, he’s wrong with this notion of social realism. There are quite a few books that deal with the place of teachers in the country, namely The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp or Look Esarn. This would be a negation of what has been going on in Thai literary circles for years.

Q: Alcohol and drug abuse are prevalent themes in Chart’s works – are these a product of modernity or do they transcend that framework and also factor into traditional Thai society as well (here I am thinking of Khamsing’s “The Politician”)?

A: Drug use in Thai society is prevalent especially among the lower classes. You find it as a reflection of what goes on in Thai society throughout many novels. There is a prejudice in Thai society that those who use drugs have a built in excuse in that they can be as crazy as they want and they are held responsible because they’re high on drugs. Drug abuse has become a problem in later years. I’m not sure that it was as much of a problem 40 or 50 years ago, but it has become a rather large problem in Thailand not just because of the spread of drugs like heroin but also because of drugs like yaa baa [methamphetamine]. There are two points here: one is that a bunch of drug users are being killed secretly and indiscriminately by the police and also that it has created societal problems that people are starting to become more aware of and taking more engaged actions to combat. I can’t remember any main character that was heavy into drugs (excepting the pedicab driver who takes some time out to smoke some marijuana) around which an entire story was set in modern Thai literature; this always seems to me to be of a secondary quality.

Q: Can you speak to the sense of tragedy and sadness often bordering on despair that seems to permeate much of Southeast Asian literature?

A: I agree with this sentiment, but also disagree as one of the main elements that you must keep in the fore when dealing with Thai literature is the sense of fun, sanuk. We might find very tragic stories, but we will laugh out loud at the same time. Look no further than An Elephant Named Maliwan for a prime example of this. It is at once a very cute story, but at the end it is a very sad, almost (like you say) tragic story. It’s easy to feel sad about this story, but I don’t think that’s the point. I think ultimately this idea of sanuk so thoroughly permeates Thai culture that it can’t help but be infused into their literature.

Q: In your opinion, is Buddhism becoming a vestige of the traditional world in Thailand? Are youth turning a cold shoulder to Buddhism for notions of materialism, money,
image? I say this because I see Chart’s writing as indicating a bit of frustration with the role that Buddhism plays in modern Thai society.

A: Let Chart answer to this latter comment – I won’t. I’m biased because I’m totally anti-religion, meaning that I think people too often conflate the true meanings of religion in an attempt to use it to their own social or political advantage. I once tried to translate a work that was deeply entrenched in Buddhist philosophy and I had to borrow special dictionaries from a friend and also had to enlist the help of my wife. Finally, I gave up and have made a vow not to touch any piece of Thai literature that deals too heavily with any Buddhist doctrine or teachings.

Q: Do you think the reading I have concerning Chart and his views on Buddhism are completely off?

A: No. I think there is a problem here. He is Chuanchua. You can read this as just a story, but it’s more than that. It’s a good question to ask him what lies behind this scene from *Mad Dogs & Co*. It’s a difficult topic to talk about in Thai society, but maybe in the course of a conversation you can get him to talk about it rather freely.
REFERENCES


