

Suchart Sawatsi: Thailand's First Man of Letters

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Despite a small output of fictional works, Suchart Sawatsi is, without doubt, the single most influential figure in the contemporary Thai literary world. For nearly four decades he has campaigned tirelessly, through magazine articles, newspaper columns, edited books, and public lectures and seminars, to create awareness among the Thai public of the country's small but vibrant modern literary culture. The monthly literary magazine *Lok Nangsu*' (Book World, 1977-83) and the quarterly short story magazine, *Cho' Karaket* (Screwpine Bouquet, 1978-99) are particularly important legacies of his energy and vision; the former, because it introduced a generation of readers to unfamiliar writers from both Thailand and beyond, and the latter because it launched the careers of many of today's better-known writers. His best known creative writing is a collection of short stories first published in 1972 under the title, *Khvam Ngiap* (Silence).²

Suchart Sawatsi, the youngest of four siblings, was born on 24 June 1945 in Tha Reua District, Ayutthaya Province, where his parents had relocated to during the Second World War to avoid the allied bombing raids on Bangkok. His father, Sae Sawatsi, was a doctor with the rank of captain in the medical corps, while his mother, Thom, came from a family of farmers and never learned to read and write. After the War the family returned to Bangkok, and Suchart attended primary school at Wat Don Muang and secondary school in the same locality. He showed an early interest in literature, submitting his first short story to a newspaper competition when he was only twelve. With few books in the home, other than his father's medical textbooks, Suchart recalled that on occasions he stole money from his mother to buy works by popular writers of the day, such as P. Intharapalit, J. Traipin and S. Naowarat; after a beating or two he decided to take a part-time job selling iced coffee at the railway station to feed his reading habit.

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²An English translation of *Khvam Ngiap* by Martin Clutterbuck, Martin Platt and David Smyth is scheduled for publication in Bangkok in 2008.

On completing his secondary education Suchart entered the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University, where he majored in History. Here he was able to indulge his love of reading, discovering for the first time on the library shelves the works of authors such as “Siburapha,” M.C. Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat, Sot Kuramarohit and other famous writers from the pre-war period. He also took a course on modern Thai literature with the prominent educationist, M.L. Bunlu’a Thepyasuwan, who played a key role in persuading traditionally conservative Thai departments in universities to admit the study of twentieth century novels and short stories into their classical oriented literary curriculum. M.L. Bunlu’a, herself a novelist, and also the half-sister of the respected novelist “Dokmai Sot,” further inspired Suchart to read widely, and not only in Thai. But his command of English was weak when he entered university, and after failing the first year exam, he had to work hard on it to avoid his student career coming to a premature end. Through sheer effort, however, he transformed himself, within the space of a few years, from failing student to published translator of complex English-language works. At Thammasat Suchart also got to know other students with similar interests in literature; this loose association of friends, which met to discuss literature and show each other their work, became known as *Phrachan Siew* (Crescent Moon) and included a number of writers who would shortly achieve recognition, such as Surachai Chanthimatho’n, Prasoet Chandam and Witthayako’n Chiengkun.

Suchart graduated in 1966, achieving a Merit in his History degree. He was then briefly employed in a private school, where he taught English and Geography; but he soon resigned, unable to stand some of the practices he observed there. It was at this time that he began to write seriously, while building links with various other literary groups. This networking brought him into personal contact with established writers, newly-emerging talents and young-hopefuls, and gave him an unequalled insight into contemporary trends in Thai literary circles. But his real ambition at the time was to get a university appointment. After a couple of unsuccessful applications for university posts, a chance meeting with a former history professor led to a change of direction. She wrote a letter of recommendation to Sulak Sivaraksa, the editor of *Sangkhomsat Parithat* (Social Science Review) the result of which was that Suchart was offered a post as Sulak’s assistant.

Sangkhomsat Parithat was the leading intellectual journal of the day, publishing serious scholarly articles, largely by prominent Thai academics, on History, Philosophy, Buddhism, Art and Linguistics. In 1969, two years after taking up the post as Sulak’s assistant, Sulak departed and Suchart became editor. Under Suchart’s editorship, and a slightly less oppressive political climate, it was quickly transformed from a rather staid quarterly academic journal into a lively monthly magazine that was not afraid to court controversy, nor openly challenge official government thinking. In the editorial in the November 1971 issue, for example, which focussed on the People’s Republic of China, not officially recognised by Thailand until four years later, Suchart pointed out:

Thailand has throughout never had a systematic policy regarding the People's Republic of China. All we have is propaganda resulting from the Cold War, or else because those in power want a tool to arrest political opponents. Now the time has come for us to have a clear policy towards the People's Republic of China for the sake of our own survival.

When the prime minister, Field Marshall Thanom Kittikhachorn, staged a coup against his own government, and reinstated martial law in November 1971, Suchart responded in the pages of *Sangkomsat Parithat*, with an "Open Letter to the Head of the Revolutionary Group" which consisted of a blank white page, edged in black, a sign of mourning, with the inscription at the bottom, "With deepest respect." Not very surprisingly, Suchart was "invited" to present himself before the Thai Special Branch, who duly threatened to lock him up. Nevertheless, later issues continued to focus on sensitive political and social issues, such as, American military bases in Thailand, the role of the CIA, Japanese economic encroachment, Thai mercenaries, the heroin trade, labour conditions, corruption, censorship, human rights and terrorism; the cover illustrations were striking and carried provocative titles, such as "Yellow Peril" (April 1972), "Is Democracy Dead?" (June 1972) and "The New American – Short Hair or Long Hair?" (November 1972).

But Suchart's days at *Sangkomsat Parithat* were not devoted exclusively to political activism. A year after joining the journal, his first short story "Songkhram" (War) was published in the prestigious weekly review *Sayam Rat Sapda Wichan*. A further nine stories appeared in various magazines over the next four years and in 1972 they were published in a single volume under the title of one of the stories in the volume, *Khwam Ngiap* (Silence), together with a number of poems and a play. The stories were by the standards of the day, unusual to say the least. In "Rot Fai Dek Len" (Toy Train), for example, the narrator declares that he has been killed after being hit by a toy train at a bus stop, a day after taking his older brother to a hospital for the mentally ill, while in "Ma Chak Nai, Ma Yangngai, Cha Pai Nai?" (Where Do We Come From, How Did We Get Here, Where Are We Going?), the main character discovers a corpse hidden in the drawer of his desk. More accessible are "Kamphaeng" (Barriers) which takes the form of a series of diary entries, written over a period of two months, mostly recording the author's boredom, discontent and sense of alienation, and "Atchiwaprawat" (Personal Biography, 1972), in which the author's dissatisfaction with contemporary society is expressed in his attack on the materialism and consumerism that has enveloped everyday life. In "Khwam Ngiap" (Silence), the story which gives its name to the collection, a young female teacher has become pregnant and seeks advice and comfort from a male friend, who can only advise her to inform the father and marry him. The narrative is interspersed with radio news reports on the war in Vietnam and the internal political situation.

Reaction to *Khwam Ngiap* among writers and critics ranged from lukewarm incomprehension to barely-concealed hostility. Fellow-writer Wisa Khanthap, reviewing the volume in *Sangkhomsat Parithat*, commented, “Suchart’s writings can communicate with only a few people, and those tiny groups, when they have read Suchart’s work, still cannot agree on what Suchart is trying to say.” Duangmon Chitchamnong noted that “the difficulty of *Khwam Ngiap* is a major obstacle for readers,” adding, “we ought to ask how necessary that difficulty is, and if it is necessary, why is it necessary?” More bluntly, Chamaipho’n Saengkrachang claimed, “He writes like a writer who very much looks down on readers. His approach is casual and if he wants to put something in, he does so, without thought of anything else, other than his interest in his own mixed-up self;” the point was echoed by Saman Chairakmit, who accused Suchart of lacking any clear point of view and producing art which ordinary people could not read.

Suchart’s stories appeared after a decade of martial law during which literature that aimed to make the reader think and question the society in which he lived had ceased to exist. While his stories were a conscious reaction against the kind of popular literature that flourished during the years of martial law, they also reflected the interest of Suchart in foreign, and in particular, post-war European literary trends. A number of Thai critics and academics have identified the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the surrealist art movement as major influences on Suchart, and in recent years a number of MA theses in Thai university literary departments have examined his works from such perspectives. More than three decades after the appearance of *Khwam Ngiap*, Suchart’s stories continue to puzzle, frustrate and alienate most ordinary readers, yet his pivotal role in the Thai literary world, his one-man campaign to promote the modern short story and his reputation as a walking encyclopaedia of Thai literature, have made it impossible to simply dismiss his work as readily as some of his early reviewers had.

The ousting of the military dictatorship, following the mass student demonstrations of 14 October 1973, heralded an era of unprecedented freedom of speech, with a sudden mushrooming of books on socialism and Marxism. The works of earlier “progressive” writers, such as “Siburapha,” “Seni Saowaphong,” Chit Phumisak and Itsara Amantakun were reprinted, and many young writers consciously adopted the “literature for life” approach to fiction, writing stories that invariably focussed on some aspect of social injustice. Something of the spirit of the times is apparent from the titles of the considerable number of books that Suchart himself edited between 1973 and 1975; these included *Kan Patiwat kho’ng Chili* (Chile’s Revolution), *Kan Patiwat kho’ng Chin* (China’s Revolution), *Wirachon Asia* (Asian Heroes), *Chit Phumisak: Nak Rop Kho’ng Khon Run Mai* (A Warrior of the New Generation), *Khabuankan Kho’mmiwnit Nai Prathet Thai* (The Communist Movement in Thailand), *Chak Ho Chi Minh thu’ng Plu’ang Wannasi* (From Ho Chi Minh to Plu’ang Wannasi), and *Ko’n Klap Ban Koet: Ruam Ru’ang San Wiatnam Patiwat* (Before Returning Home: Collected Vietnamese Revolutionary Short Stories).

Suchart's activist role continued during this period, and it was while addressing a group of factory workers that he first came to the attention of his future wife, Wanna Thappanon. Wanna had only completed 4th Grade of primary education, had spent most of her adult life doing menial work, as a maid, factory worker and cashier and had little interest in politics and student activists. Yet she was impressed by the complete lack of airs and graces of this "intellectual" who sat on the floor amongst factory workers as he addressed them. She got to know Suchart and, with his encouragement and guidance she began to write herself, adopting the pen-name "Sidaoru'ang."³ They soon married and later, a son, Mone was born, who today is himself a writer and regular newspaper columnist.

By 1976 the political right had re-organised and on 6 October, the military, supported by civilian paramilitary organisations, launched a brutal assault on Thammasat University, massacring many of the students inside who were demonstrating about the lynching of labour activists in a nearby province. The military immediately seized power and as a result of the strict censorship and other repressive measures that were introduced, many intellectuals, students and writers fled to the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand. Suchart himself disappeared from view for a while, sheltered in Bangkok by a sympathetic foreign friend. After he re-emerged, in 1977, he was informed that *Sangkomsat Parithat* no longer required his services, as the journal would in future follow a strictly academic editorial policy.

Within a year of the 6 October massacre a new literary magazine *Lok Nangsu'* (Book World) appeared on the bookstalls of Bangkok. It was published by Suk Sungkawang, owner of the Duang Kamol bookstore, Thailand's leading bookstore in the 1970s and early 1980s, and also a popular meeting place for Thai and foreign intellectuals. Publishing a new literary magazine at this time was a bold venture, given the close link between literature and the dissemination of liberal and "leftist" ideas in the immediate past. It was a link, moreover, of which the military regime was well aware, for in the immediate aftermath of the coup they had organised the public burning of books deemed "a danger to society." What made the venture look even bolder, however, was the appointment of Suchart as editor. Suchart had already edited an important 4-volume anthology of contemporary Thai short stories for Duang Kamol in 1975, called *Laeng Khen* (Drought), *Thanon Sai Thi Nam Pai Su Khwam Tai* (The Road to Death), *Mu'an Yang Mai Khoei* (As if it had never happened), *Kham Khan Rap* (Response). Suchart's reappearance as editor of a new literary journal was of considerable symbolic importance: for progressives who had fled to the jungle, it was a symbol of both defiance and hope for the future, while for the government itself, now headed by the more liberal General Kriangsak Chomanan, it was part of an easing of restrictions on freedom of speech and a step on the path to national reconciliation.

Lok Nangsu' itself, was a brave and inspired attempt to awaken the Thai reading public and popularise literature. Within its pages Suchart could snipe at the

³English translations of Sidaoru'ang's stories appear in Kepner (2004) and Sidaoru'ang (1994; 2004).

authorities with, for example, a column that on one occasion began, “This space is not about politics, but about writers who are interested in politics;” but nor was he afraid to declare that “literature for life” could also be trash. The magazine forced many writers and readers to move on from the polarised political standpoints of the early 1970s, by opening their eyes to a much wider literary world. With its eclectic mix of articles on the lives and works of both Thai and foreign authors, explanations of current ideas in literary studies, news of overseas literary trends, interviews with writers, discussion forums, book reviews and new short stories, it became essential reading for Thai intellectuals at the time. Yet it wore its learning lightly. There were cover stories not only on famous writers such as M.C. Akatdamkoeng, Siburapha, Lao Khamho’ m and Chit Phumisak, but also on science fiction, westerns, kung-fu novels and Japanese cartoons. Articles were generously illustrated with photos of writers and dust-jackets of books and were written in an informative, accessible and unpretentious style. It was in the pages of *Lok Nangsu*, too, that Suchart’s famous “Sing Sanam Luang” column was born, a column that has survived until the present, by turns informing, challenging, advising and annoying its devotees.

For all its merits, however, *Lok Nangsu* lost money, and when Suk Sungawang decided to withdraw his backing, the magazine quickly folded. A quarter of a century after its demise, it is remembered fondly by a generation of writers and readers for whom it provided a rich foundation of knowledge about literature. Such was its impact, that later attempts to produce similar magazines, such as *Thanon Nangsu* (Book Street, 1983-7) and *Writer Magazine* (1992-8) could but suffer by comparison.

When *Lok Nangsu* closed in 1984, Suchart received a generous severance payment which enabled him to buy land to build a house on. Over the next few years he became involved in editing a number of magazines, such as *Ban Mai Ru Roi* (Globe Amaranth [plant name], 1985-6) and *Samoso’n Thanon Nangsu* (Book Street Club, 1988). In 1989, Suchart founded a new literary group called “Samnak Chang Wannakam” with Ru’angdet Chantharakhiri, the former editor of the short-lived *Thanon Nangsu* magazine. Their aim was to promote the work of young writers and to this effect they published a quarterly short story magazine to showcase the works of new authors. The magazine appeared from 1989 to 2000 – a considerable length of time in Thai publishing terms – and ran to 41 issues. Many of Thailand’s established contemporary writers trace their earliest published works back to this journal and recall their first scent of literary success when they saw that their works had passed Suchart’s scrutiny. The award of annual prizes, one judged by the editor, Suchart himself, and a number of others by readers’ votes, also added to the prestige of the journal and in turn, the writers who won these awards. *Cho’ Karaket* magazine eventually ceased publication amidst internal recriminations following attempts to raise funds to put the journal on a more secure financial basis. *Cho’ Karaket* prizes have nevertheless continued to be awarded, at the discretion of Suchart, usually to

senior figures in the literary world in recognition of their contribution to Thai literature.

Suchart's own literary output after the appearance of *Khwam Ngiap* was modest. In 1993 the short stories from the original edition were republished in a new volume, *Khwam Ngiap Nai Khwam Ngiap* (Silence in Silence) with a further six stories, written between 1972 and 1987 also included. In 2003, five of these additional stories appeared in a new volume called *Khwam Wang* (Vacant) together with two further stories; the story from which the volume takes its title, is the most extreme example of Suchart's "experimental writing," consisting of ten blank pages.

While the *Cho' Karaket* magazine focused on new writers, Suchart's interest in early writers and commitment to making them known to new generations of Thais has remained as strong as ever. When the Thai Post Office issued a set of stamps to celebrate the centennial of the births of the writers, "Siburapha," "Dokmai Sot," M.C. Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat and "Mai Mu'ang Doem" in 2005, this was as a direct response to Suchart's years of campaigning for greater national recognition of the country's writers. His acerbic comments in his *Sing Sanam Luang* column, contrasting the government's huge 260 million baht budget for a Miss Universe contest in Bangkok with its 5 million baht allocation towards the "Siburapha" centennial celebrations, also had some effect, with sufficient further official funds being released to ensure an ambitious programme of lectures, exhibitions, publications and reprints of works by "Siburapha." But Suchart is, by inclination a scholar as well as an activist, and his painstaking research on the lives and works of early writers, in particular "Siburapha," has not only brought to light a wealth of new information, but also established a standard against which much literary research in Thailand looks decidedly sloppy.

Suchart's enormous and unique contribution to Thai cultural and intellectual life has earned him a number of prestigious awards, including the *Siburapha* Prize (1997), an honorary doctorate from Thammasat University (2000) and the *Pittisin* Prize (2005) awarded by the Pridi Phanomyong Institute. Now in his early sixties, his creative energies have broadened beyond the written word to embrace art and film; he has held a number of one-man exhibitions of his largely abstract paintings at major centres in Bangkok in recent years, and, in 2006, a public showing of his "experimental" short films. Most recently he has announced a welcome revival of *Cho' Karaket* as a quarterly magazine that will include not only short stories as in its earlier incarnation, but also general articles on literature of the kind that had appeared in *Lok Nangsu*.

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