

## Literature for Life: The Context and Conditions of Its Emergence in Thailand, 1940s-50s

Thanapol Limapichart<sup>1</sup>  
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

### Abstract

This article examines the context and conditions of the emergence of “literature for life” (*wannakham phuea chivit*) in Thailand. In contrast to previous works that emphasised a single prerequisite such as the role of the Writers’ Club, the Communist Party of Thailand, or the importation, translation and circulation of Marxist literature in the country, this article argues that the concept of “literature for life” developed out of the dynamic contestations and exchanges among writers, journalists, social critics, and literary scholars of various political and ideological inclinations, namely the conservative, the “liberal” and the communist, as each attempted to assert its cultural legitimacy in the period between the end of the Pacific War and the early phase of the Cold War in Thailand.

### Abstract in Malay

Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji konteks dan kondisi yang membolehkan kemunculan ‘sastera untuk penghidupan’ (*wannakham phuea chivit*) di Thailand. Berbanding dengan kajian-kajian yang lampau di mana peranan persatuan penulis, parti komunis Thailand atau penerapan pengaruh Marxist di Thailand, makalah ini membahaskan konsep ‘sastera untuk penghidupan’ muncul dari suasana dinamik para penulis, wartawan, pengkritik social dan sasterawan dari pelbagai fahaman politik dan idealogi yang konservatif, liberal mahupun komunis, di mana masing-masing ingin menerapkan nilai budaya mereka di akhir era Perang Pasifik dan awal fasa Perang Dingin di Thailand.

### Keywords

Literature for life, cultural legitimacy, literary public, Marxism, the Cold War, Thailand

### Keywords in Malay

Sastera untuk penghidupan, legitimasi budaya, khalayak sastera, Marxisme, Perang Dingin, Thailand

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<sup>1</sup> Thanapol Limapichart is a lecturer of Southeast Asian History at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. His specialisations are modern Thailand, with particular emphasis on the 19th century and 20th century intellectual and social history, history of literature, print culture and historiography. He is currently conducting research on the historiography of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and the history and ideology of “culture” in Thailand.

The years between the October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1973 Uprising and the October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976 Massacre were times of great political turmoil and ideological conflict in modern Thailand. They witnessed not only the spread of political activism and violence, but also the fierce battles for cultural hegemony among various groups, particularly between the radicals and the conservatives. According to Prajak Kongkirati, literature was one of the most contested sites of this cultural and ideological struggle as was manifested by the call for the “burning of Thai literary classics” (*phao wannakhadi*) by a group of radical students (452).<sup>2</sup> Thai literary classics were, according to them, legacies of the Thai feudal past for they served as the vehicle through which the ruling class indoctrinated the people with the idea that they were karmically destined to be superior. These works were, moreover, viewed as pornographic and obscene since they were usually comprised of several love scenes.<sup>3</sup> Prajak argued that it was for these reasons that the radical students dismissed the literary classics and advocated instead the “literature for life” (*wannakham phuea chiwit*), which they defined as literature that served the interests of the common people and promoted social justice and progress in the hope of changing the society for the better (449, 452).

The literature for life that was promoted by the radical students in the 1970s was neither a newly invented concept nor a newly translated term. Literary critics and Thai historians agree that it had already emerged and become widely known in the 1950s. These scholars disagree, however, as to how the concept developed and which groups should be credited with its popularisation. After the October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976 massacre, the young literary scholar, Trisilpa Boonkhachorn, and the critic, Sathian Chanthimathon, pointed out in their unrelated works that the emergence and dissemination of the notion of literature for life owed much to a series of debates that took place at a literary organisation called The Writers’ Club.<sup>4</sup>

Writing from a different perspective and in different contexts, two former radical students, Somsak Jeamteerasakul and Kasian Tejapira, proposed for alternative interpretations of the emergence and dissemination of literature for life. In his dissertation on the communist movement in Thailand, Somsak asserted that the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and its network were mainly responsible for introducing and popularising the concept of literature for life. The political scientist Kasian agrees with Somsak on the influence of the communists but places his emphasis less on the CPT itself. In his book, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958*,

<sup>2</sup> This call was however more of a provocative act of criticism than to actually burn the books.

<sup>3</sup> See *Rai-ngan kan sammata rueang “khan phao wannakhadi thai ruemai”* (The Report from the Seminar on “Should We Burn Thai Literature [classics]”?)

<sup>4</sup> See Trisilpa Boonkhachorn 145-46 and Sathian Chanthimathon 279.

Kasian argues that the process of importing, circulating and translating Marxist texts and ideas by different groups of various political inclinations were indispensable factors that eventually led to the rise of literature for life.

This article does not dismiss the importance of the different factors and preconditions that the above scholars claim to have led to the rise of literature for life. It argues, however, that this literary genre did not emerge out of a single prerequisite. It developed instead out of a series of dynamic contestations and exchanges between various political and literary groups as each attempted to assert its cultural legitimacy in the period between the end of the Pacific War and the early phase of the Cold War in Thailand.

### **The Postwar Thai Literary Public Sphere**

The period between the 1932 Revolution and the Pacific War saw great expansion of print capitalism in Thailand. According to Chusri, the production of cheap and popular paperback fiction, locally known as the 10-satang-fiction, became an industry (93). Famous publishing houses that concentrated on popular fiction, such as Phloenchit, Hem Wetchakon, Uthen and Udom, also came into being and grew into maturity, as is evidenced by their large print runs. With only a few exceptions, the first printing of a paperback work of fiction in the 1920s was generally around 1,000 copies (Sathian Chanthimathon 127). In the 1930s, however, the publishing houses were printing not only a few thousand copies but eight, nine or even thirty thousand copies of paperback works of fiction, depending on the popularity of the writer (Sathian Chanthimathon 127).

This trend of expansion slowed down during the war. A number of political and socioeconomic factors contributed to it, but two important sets of factors are worth mentioning. First, the Phibun government's language and moral policies aimed not only to promote Thai cultural nationalism, but also to establish government control over public language usage and literary production. These policies included an imposition of a new spelling system and, even more controversially, the censorship of the content of fiction. According to Trisilpa Boonkhachorn, at the introduction of these measures, many prominent writers such as Malai Chuphinit and Chot Phraephan stopped writing in protest (89).

The shortages and the price increase of paper, along with the government's regulation of its distribution, also contributed to the decline in literary production in this period. As Chot Phraephan pointed out in early 1945, the Phibun government regulated the distribution of paper by controlling access to paper factories. He highlighted that the government only allowed certain newspapers to purchase paper from the factories at a negotiated price, but left publishing houses to buy it on the black market, where the prices were twenty

times higher than they were at the factories (Yakhob 1-42). Publishing fiction thus became increasingly more difficult in the final years of the war.

The Thai literary market was, however, rejuvenated as the war came to a close, and by the late 1940s, it had entered a new phase of expansion. Not only did the old publishing houses recover and become prosperous once again, but new houses also started to mushroom.<sup>5</sup> Hundreds of new literary works were published along with a number of old works by well-known writers from the late 1920s to the beginning of the war, including works by Kulap Saipradit, M.C. Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat and Itsara Amantakun. No less important a phenomenon in this period was the boom experienced by weekly and monthly literary magazines and special issues of newspapers (the Sunday or Monday issue of many newspapers devoted most of its space especially to short stories or serialised novels each week). These magazines and newspapers, *Bo Daeng*, *Phloenchit rai sapda*, *Sayam samai rai sapda*, *Roengrom rai sapda*, *Deli mel wanchan* and *Piyamit wan-athit*, to name only a few, were significant outlets for writers and crucial suppliers of new material to the continuously expanding reading public. In fact, nearly all of the famous Thai novels from this period were first serialised in these weekly and monthly magazines and newspapers.

In addition to the dramatic increase in the publication of literary works, the postwar literary public sphere also witnessed the birth of new literary genres. An example of these new genres was “the crime and violence romance,” which was, as the historian Chalong Soontravanich argues, a byproduct of the proliferation of modern small arms and the spread of crime and violence during and after the war (26-46). Another and more controversial example of the new literary genres that emerged after the war was pornography. There previously existed various literary genres that contained erotic and sexual representation, including *bot atsachan* (erotic or sexual portrayal) of Thai classical literature,<sup>6</sup> risqué and humorous poetic tales, traditional and modern or scientific manuals for carnal knowledge and sexual education, and the so-called “indecent books” (*nangsu po*) of the 1920s and 1930s. However, the war and its aftermath saw the emergence of more sexually explicit genres such as erotic fiction and hardcore pornography.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sombat Phlainoi, September 29, 2004. Also see, for instance, Yot Watcharasathian 211 and Chusri Kalawantavanit 105-107.

<sup>6</sup> Sexual or erotic portrayal is a significant part of Thai classical dramatic epics and romance poems. See, for instance, *Phra lo*, *Phra aphra aphaimani*, *Khun chang khun phaen*, and various works of *Nirat*.

<sup>7</sup> The story of the widespread publication of pornography (*nangsu po*) in the postwar period is legendary. Interview with Sombat Phlainoi, September 29, 2004. Also see, *Nangsu an len phit sinlatham* (Immoral Books), file NA. (3) SR. [Office of the Chief Secretary to the Cabinet]

Another significant development in the Thai literary sphere after the war was the establishment of various politico-literary groups, which was the result of the transformation of the Thai political and ideological landscapes. The defeat of the Axis and the Japanese by the Allies brought about the fall of the authoritarian government of Phibun, which allied itself with the Japanese. This demise of the ruling government led, in turn, to the re-emergence of various political groups that had previously been suppressed or silenced. One of these groups was Pridi Banomyong<sup>8</sup> and his many supporters. Pridi was the leader of the Free Thai movement (*Khabuankan Seri Thai*) and represented the liberal/ leftist political stance. Upon his return to power, Pridi also brought back the royalists by granting amnesty to those who were jailed or forced into exile during the Phibun regime as well as by restoring King Prajakhipok's honours posthumously (Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit 141-42). In addition to the liberal/ leftist fraction of Pridi and the conservative royalists, the Communist Party of Thailand also enjoyed postwar political transformation. As Kasian points out, after the war the communists "emerged triumphantly from prison and from the underground." With the support of Pridi and his clique, the Anti-Communist Act implemented in the mid-1930s was abrogated in 1946, and communism was legalised. The Communist Party of Thailand and its associates could then begin publicly organising their political, social and intellectual activities (Kasian Tejapira 56-57).

These political changes stimulated literary activities among the different political and ideological groups. A group of conservative scholars led by M.R. Sumonchat Sawatdikul and M.L. Chitti Noppavong did, for instance, found a literary club called *Wong wannakhadi* (Literary Circle) in early 1946. The club published a monthly journal under the same name and organised an annual meeting for literary discussions (Chonlada Ruangraklikit, Runruthai Satchaphan and Duangmon Chitchamnong 169-70). In addition to regular republications of the works of King Chulalongkorn, King Vajiravudh and other royal elites, including Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Bhidayalongkorn, the journal also published works of prominent literati such as Phraya Anumanratchathon, Worawet Siwasariyanon, Wit Siwasariyanon, P.S. Sattri, Thanit Yupho, Chuea Satawethin and Samak Burawat. The majority of the articles published in *Wong Wannakhadi* focused on the subjects of Thai classical literature, literary art and

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0201.55/52, National Archives of Thailand. Not only were pornographic books widespread, so were pornographic movies (*nang po*). See Noi Inthanon (Malai Chuphinit) 4.

<sup>8</sup> Pridi was a founding member of the People's Party that overthrew the absolute monarchy in the 1932 Revolution. He served as the finance minister in the Phibun government before he left the post to become regent in 1941 because of his conflict with Phibun over the latter's decision to ally with the Japanese. During his time as regent, Pridi gradually developed a better relationship with some members of the royal family with whom he later formed an alliance against the Phibun government.

history, unlike other journals of its kind which laid their emphases more on the publication of short stories or serialised novels.<sup>9</sup>

The *Wong Wannakhadi* journal was endorsed by King Ananda [r. 1935-46], who claimed to read and enjoy it. Thus, in his comment on the first anniversary of the journal, Prince Dhani Nivas praised *Wong Wannakhadi* not only for its intellectual value as a treasure of literary knowledge but more significantly for its express loyalty to the monarch (2-4). Later, the journal also published regular reports on the activities and well-being of King Bhumibol [r. 1946-], King Ananda's brother and successor. In a sense, the founding of the Literary Circle can arguably be interpreted as the royal elite's attempt to reassert the link between the monarchy and literature (*wannakhadi*), specifically the monarch's patronage of Thai literature, an idea that had diminished since the 1932 Revolution.

On the opposite ideological and political pole, the communists and leftists in general arose as producers and providers of new literary work, knowledge and criticism.<sup>10</sup> Soon after the fall of the Phibun government, the CPT-affiliated newspaper *Mabachon* (The Masses) "emerged from clandestineness as a legal commercial weekly publication with a newly expanded, competent and versatile editorial staff" (Kasian Tejapira 152). Its new staff included the Marxist and Maoist literary critic Udom Sisuwan and the radical poet and critic Atsani Phonlathan. The newspaper regularly published short stories by "progressive" writers such as Sot Kuramarohit, Itsara Amantakun, Thida Bunnag and Po Buransinlapin (Puan Buranapakon) (Kasian Tejapira 152).

Another example of this postwar literary activity among the leftist/progressive groups was the publication of the monthly magazine *Aksansan* (Inscribed Advice) in 1949. Founded and published by Supha Sirimanon, a leftist/progressive and pro-Pridi journalist, and his wife Chinda, the magazine had a short publishing life but made major contributions to the literary public discourse by serving as an intellectual platform for political and literary debates as well as a source of new literary ideas and theories, including Marxist, Leninist and Maoist literary doctrines. However, unlike *Mabachon* which was committed to Marxist ideology, *Aksansan* initially aimed at representing various ideologies, ranging from the conservative to the liberal to the socialist and finally to the communist point of view. As Kasian notes, however, its position would gradually turn "left" and become more radical as time went by until it was finally attenuated by the press censorship in the aftermath of the military coup in late 1951 (164-70).

<sup>9</sup> However, it published a number of short stories by internationally celebrated writers, such as Rabindranath Tagore and W. Somerset Maugham.

<sup>10</sup> For a history of early influence of Marxist and socialist thoughts in Thai literary public sphere, see Smith Thanomsasana 48-52.

These newspapers and literary journals not only represented the different political fractions that emerged after the war, but also generated discussions about literature and criticism that captures the ideological contestation among them. These discussions focused on such issues as the proper role of writers, the social function of art and literature, the place of literature in politics, and vice versa, as well as the distinction between art and obscenity.

### **The Marxist Introduction of a New Concept of Literature**

In January 1947, Udom<sup>11</sup> published a critical review of Po Buransasinlapin (hereafter Puan)'s recent book *Chiwit chak mum mut* (Lives from the Dark Corner) in *Mahachon*. It was not simply a regular book review but was an attempt to introduce a new concept of literature and literary writing to the Thai public. In it Udom, writing under the pen name O Sisuwan, criticised the idea of art for art's sake.<sup>12</sup> He argued that "art was not what was in the mind of a writer but what belonged to the people." Udom believed that art was, like other social entities, inevitably involved in politics and always a part of its struggle. Whether or not a writer was conscious of this, he had responsibilities toward his readers and thus should always remind himself "for whom he writes and how he should write it" (O Sisuwan 6, 8-9).

Influenced by Romain Rolland, a famous French writer and pacifist, Udom believed that writers had the obligation of shaping tolerant, motivated and courageous readers "who strove toward knowledge, beauty, love of humanity and public progress" (O Sisuwan 6). He consequently hailed Puan's book as a truly ground breaking work that not only attempted to portray the lives of the poor and the outcasts, but also showed the dignity and humanity of its poverty-stricken characters. To affirm the value of Puan's book, Udom ended his review with the note that "an art that only entertained the well-to-do was less valuable than the one that spoke for the poor" (O Sisuwan 8, 10).

<sup>11</sup> Udom was an ethnic Chinese and a member of both the Chinese Communist Party and CPT. As a young man, he went to China in the late 1930s and spent time there fighting the Japanese and studying in the communist party's school, where he learned, in his own words, "economics, about surplus value and commodities and New Democracy, Yanan literature, self-cultivation and the *Communist Manifesto*" (Somsak Jeamteerasakul 14-15, 208-09). He was asked to return to Thailand in 1945, and became a staff member of *Mahachon*.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of art for art's sake had frequently been mentioned along with the concepts of "literary art" (*wannasin*) and of "the writer as an artist" (*sinlapin*) by a number of writers and literary scholars, both conservative and "liberal," during the Pacific War. After the war, it was further discussed and popularised by the conservative journals such as the *Wong Wannakhadi* and *Sinlapakorn* and the group called "Chakkrawat Sinlapin" (The Empire of the Artist). However, it should be noted that even among the conservative scholars, there were some who tried to argue against the extreme interpretation of the idea that art should only exist for its own sake. See Thanapol Limapichart 61-72.

A few months after the publication of Udom's book review, *Mabachon* announced its contest for a short story of the week. Writers whose stories won the contest would receive an award of 40 baht, and the story would be published in the newspaper. In the announcement, the newspaper's staff offered the following guidelines for the kind of story they would look for:

In our opinion, a story should not be only about the art of creating affection, sentiment, happiness and sadness through the use of language. The value of writing should be more than that. That is, it should guide the society, expose the [society's] wickedness and shape the mind [of the readers]. It should benefit the majority of the people who live in hardship and oppression. For us, this is the true meaning and value of writing. ("Katika prakuat 'rueang ek pracham sapda'" 6)

Arguably, the announcement and the contest indicated the attempt of the newspaper and perhaps the CPT itself to promote the new concept of literature that was also outlined by Udom in his book review.

In 1947 and 1948, *Mabachon* published at least two short stories weekly. Nearly all of the stories followed the guidelines above. For instance, most of their heroes or heroines were servants, workers, prostitutes and peasants who suffered or were taken advantage of by greedy factory owners, heartless landlords and corrupt officials. Most of the stories published in the newspaper during this time were not from the contest entrants but from the party associates and amateur writers such as Sombat Phlainoi (more commonly known as So Phlainoi), who was not at all radical or interested in Marxism (Somsak Jeamteerasakul 297).<sup>13</sup> As the historian Somsak argues, the party also tried to encourage some already well-known writers to produce works of this kind. His observation is confirmed by the fact that some writers, for example, Ko Surangkhanang (Kanha Khiangsiri), then wife of Puan, Somchai Atsanachinda, Thida Bunnag, Itsara Amantakun and Nongyao Praphasathit, published their stories in *Mabachon*. One should note, however, that although most of their works were about the poor and their sufferings, they were not necessarily ideologically oriented.

As the radical *Mabachon* tried to establish a new type of literary work and criticism, the progressive journals also began to open up questions about the meaning and value of literature. An editorial essay in the new weekly literary journal *Suphaphurut chabap krapao* (The Gentleman: A Pocketbook Version) promoted, for example, a new concept and function of literature which its

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<sup>13</sup> Sombat Phlainoi would later become a famous feature writer.



author called, in English, a “story of a purpose.”<sup>14</sup> Using the works of Nongyao<sup>15</sup> as an example, the author declared that a writer of stories with a purpose was someone who intended to make his readers think, either through his criticism of the society or his portrayal of people who were suffering. In other words, the work aimed not at entertaining any person in particular but at benefiting humanity as a whole (“Chintanakan khong nakpraphan” 77-78).

In his introduction to Kulap’s short story in *Aksomsan*, the editor, Supha, expressed similar views about the function of literature and described Kulap’s writings especially *Songkebram chivit* (The War of Life) as works with “the purpose... of revolutionising thought and reforming society” (276-78). In another introductory essay published a few months later, Supha further developed this new concept of literature and coined the term *nawanijyai thi mi khwam mungmai* (novels with a purpose). The term, as he defined it, referred to a group of works that possessed the power to transform the readers’ mind and inspire them to cast off the oppressive forces of tradition (282-84).

Supha pointed out that this new literary genre had, historically speaking, flourished in the West in the past hundred years. His examples ranged from classics such as most of Charles Dickens’s novels, Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, Voltaire’s *Candide* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to the contemporary works of American progressive writers such as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Howard Fast. In the Thai case, he mentioned the works of Itsara, especially those written after the war. According to Supha, Itsara’s postwar works indicated a shift in his direction as a writer. As he gained more experience of the world and as a writer, he came to acknowledge the existence of social injustice, inequality between the haves and have-nots, and “the bloodsucking behaviours of the demigods” (*sommutdithep*). Supha concluded the essay on the hopeful and confident note that the dissemination of these works would be able to overthrow any oppressive power (282-84).

The influence that Marxist and progressive thinkers and their new concept of literature in this period had on the emergence of the concept of “literature for life” has long been noted by historians such as Somsak. As unmistakable as this influence might have been, however, it was hardly the only factor that contributed to the rise of this new literary genre. Literature for life was arguably also shaped by the debates that took place at *Chomrom Nakpraphan* or the Writers’ Club. It was, as will be shown in the next section, during these debates that Marxist and progressive thinkers and their ideas came into

<sup>14</sup> Although the article did not contain the author’s name, it is possible that the piece was written by Puan Buranapakon.

<sup>15</sup> Nongyao Praphasathit belonged to the early generation of female writers. She worked with Kulap Saipradit at *Prachachat* newspaper in 1937, and later at *Prachamit-Suphapburut* newspaper during the war.

contestation with their more conservative counterpart, which in turn helped refine their new concept of literature that would later become known as “literature for life.”

### **The Intellectual Debates at the Writers’ Club**

The Writers’ Club was established and organised by three well-known writers and journalists: Malai, Wilat Maniwat and Prayat So Nakhanat, who also served as the Club’s president. It was financially supported by Ari Liwira, the owner of Thai Phanitchayakan, one of the biggest and most influential publishing houses after the war. The original purpose of the club was, according to Wilat, to allow writers to meet, discuss and exchange ideas so as to contribute to the general progress of the art of writing. In this sense, its claim was not much different from previous literary organisations that had been established by the government or the ruling elite.<sup>16</sup> Wilat implied, however, that the inspiration for the club actually derived from various international sources and examples, including Flaubert’s opening his house in Paris for his writer friends, the gatherings of American writers such as Emerson and Thoreau in Concord, Massachusetts, the activities of the Bloomsbury Group in England, and the regular meetings among Thai poets and writers at Prince Bhidayalongkorn’s house in the 1930s (Wilat 80-83).

The Writers’ Club organised over twenty meetings between 1950 and 1951 to discuss various topics concerning literature. The meetings were attended by well-established writers, literary critics and literary scholars of both genders and from all political and ideological backgrounds. The details of each meeting were afterwards reported by Wilat, writing under the pen name Olan, in the Thai Phanitchayakan weekly and monthly newspapers, first in *Roengrom rai sapda*, then in *Phim thai (wanchan) – Roengrom rai sapda*, and later on, in *Phim thai rai duean*. The publication of the reports in such widely-distributed newspapers meant that the debates could be followed by the general public as well as writers who did not themselves attend the meetings. It followed, therefore, that the issues that were debated among the members of the Writers’ Club had an impact that reached beyond the club’s circle. During its first meeting, which took place at the Thai Phanitchayakan office in late January 1950, the club decided to discuss “the duty and responsibility of writers,” an issue that was critically important to the participants and would be taken up again in later debates.

Those who participated in the debate on this particular issue could be roughly divided into two groups. The first saw literature as an art form and thought of themselves and other writers as artists whose sole responsibility was to the art itself. When commenting on the role of writers, for example, Malai

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<sup>16</sup> See Thanapol Limapichart.

elaborated on his own personal approach to writing by saying “when I have a story to tell, I will write about it, and think of nothing else. I am honest only to myself and responsible to my characters.... As for the people, I am not concerned about them. I do not worry about whether or not they will like my work. I write to satisfy myself alone” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 21-24, 28).

Another participant in the debate who held a similar position with regards to the responsibility of writers was Wit, a young, European-educated literary critic and scholar. Wit observed, in his address to the club, that Thai people tended to place too much emphasis on moral lessons (*khati*), which were, for him, not the objective of art. Writers, he suggested, should remind themselves that their duty was not to preach to all of humanity (*prot sat*) but to create a work of art (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 23). Wit did not, however, push his position to the extreme. He claimed instead that the idea of art for art’s sake and for nothing else was untenable although he never elaborated on how to create a work of art that did not exist solely for its own sake (Olan, *Phim thai rai duean* 3.26: 34).

Interacting against these ideas were those espoused by the Marxist and leftist thinkers who were, as we have seen in the previous section, starting to formulate ideas about a new genre of literature. Atsani claimed, for instance, that writers should not write simply to satisfy themselves but should try to serve the cause of the people especially the poor and the disadvantaged. He declared, for example, that he and other writers “are with the people; [they] are part of the people” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3. 137: 23). Though himself a conservative scholar, Pluang Na Nakhon agreed with Atsani that writers had responsibilities not only to themselves but to others as well. He did not think, however, that writers had an obligation to promote the people’s interests. He believed instead in the didactic function of literature and argued that writers should answer the call from both the state and the society to use their works in order to uphold the standard of morality (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 23).

The discussion of the role and responsibility of writers was taken up again when the club took on the issue of the political novel. The debates were intense because the participants not only held different views on the function of art and literature but also realised, for the most part, that writing a novel could be political. Sa-ngop Suansiri humorously remarked: “except for the homework a teacher assigns, everything else is political” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 28). Speaking from the “art for art’s sake” position, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, a royalist politician and writer, argued that writing a novel was not about shaping people to be good or evil. It was rather a vehicle for a writer’s artistic and emotional expression. If anyone wanted to write in order to

admonish the people, Kukrit believed he should become a preacher rather than a writer (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 28).

Agreeing with Kukrit, Banchop Chuwanon, a journalist and newspaper editor, expressed his opinion during the debate on the meaning of “art for art’s sake” that “artists, either writers or painters, do not, in fact, think of the people. What they are concerned with is how they can translate their imagination into their works. Whatever the critics think is not important” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 4.141: 21-23). He further criticised the idea of “art for people” as being beyond the realm of art itself as it had a tendency to be involved in politics. He said everything seemed, at that moment, to be all about nationalism and politics, and it would be a loss if art too was exploited for nationalistic and political ends.

In contrast to Kukrit’s and Banchop’s autotelic view, Kulap believed that literature has the function of serving the people’s interests.<sup>17</sup> He explained that, in the past, artists had no artistic freedom because they worked under the patronage system of the traditional elite. After the market system has replaced the earlier patronage one, however, artists were still not completely free because they had to follow the demands of the market. The question for Kulap was how, under these new circumstances, writers could offer the greatest benefits to the greatest number of people, that is, how writers could make the poor and the disadvantaged realise the inferiority of their situation and want to change their lives for the better (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 28).

Although those who attended the Writers Club’s meetings seemed to be divided into two camps on the issue of the role and responsibility of writers, it is important to note that some also tried to reach a compromise between the two positions. Itsara declared, for example, that “[his] first responsibility is [to himself]. The people come second” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 22). Unlike other proponents of the “art for art’s sake” approach, however, Itsara did not feel that he could write anything with impunity as long as it expressed his artistic vision. He added, for instance, that “[he] won’t give poison to the people [*prachachon*]. If [he has] to give them poison, [he] will inform them, to make sure that they know what they are consuming” (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.137: 23).

Wilat was another writer who tried to reach a compromise between the two main positions on the role and responsibility of writers. He did so by

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<sup>17</sup> Arguably, Kulap might have been seriously interested in radical and Marxist literature when he went to study in Australia from 1947 to 1949. As Scot Barmé mentions, the Australian officials who checked out Kulap’s book collection were quite surprised to see “a stack of Marxist books and pamphlets in one corner of the living room” in his apartment. After he came back from Australia, he wrote the novel *Chon kwa rao cha phop kan ik* (Till We Meet Again), which would later be regarded as the first work of socialist realism, or of literature for life. See Scot Barmé xxxix, Trisilpa Boonkhachorn 150 and Somsak Jeamteerasakul 13.

arguing that the two approaches to art were, in fact, not radically different from each other. They simply had different emphases. Those who thought first and foremost of the people were not, according to Wilat, necessarily disregarding the artistic aspect of writing. They too wanted their works to be artistic. Those who believed that art should exist for its own sake were, likewise, not necessarily disregarding the people. They were, after all, inspired by their contemplation on the people's lives, and the works that they created did, in turn, affect the people's feelings and emotions (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 4.140: 23-24).

Yet another writer who tried to compromise between the two approaches to art was Malai. After he expressed his view during the first meeting of the club that a writer should write for himself alone, Malai seemed to reconsider his position. He argued, in a later meeting on the topic of the political novel, that there were two ways of writing. The first was to instigate actions (*khian bai koet patikiriya*), and the second was to call for understanding and create feelings of sympathy. Malai himself preferred the latter, more peaceful approach even though he acknowledged that it might take more time to lead to real changes (Olan, *Phim thai (wanchan) – roengrom rai sapda* 3.136: 24, 34).

In addition to the role and responsibility of writers, another issue that was heavily debated among the participants of the meetings was art and obscenity (*anachan*). Its focus was on Thai literary classics, in particular *Khun chang khun phaen*, one of Thailand's greatest folk epics. The issue at hand was on the status of this particular text as either a piece of art or a work of obscenity. The debate was particularly intense because it was less about aesthetic tastes and more about political and ideological beliefs between two sides, that is, between the liberal and conservative on the one side, and the Marxist on the other.

Wit argued that we needed to consider the author's intention in order to decide whether or not a piece of work should be labelled as obscene or pornographic. If the writer wanted to provoke the reader's sexual desire, the work would be considered obscene. If, however, the author simply wanted to represent an aspect of love and life, his work should not be considered pornographic. Agreeing with Wit, Pluang asserted that a love scene in poetic form should not be considered obscene because it was rendered beautifully (Olan, *Roengrom rai sapda* 3.124: 38). Thus, for both writers, Thai literary classics like *Khun chang khun phaen* were far from being pornographic. Wit even declared that *Khun chang khun phaen* was the work that most thoroughly explored all aspects of life, so if one were to consider it obscene simply because it included love scenes, one would have to consider life itself obscene (Olan, *Roengrom rai sapda* 3.124: 22).

Disagreeing with Wit and Pluang, the Marxist thinker Atsani insisted that *Khun chang khun phaen* and, by implication, other Thai literary classics were indeed obscene, adding that intention was less important than expression.

Atsani further developed these ideas in an article that was published in *Aksornsan* after the series of debate on art and obscenity took place at the Writers' Club. The essay was entitled "*Lilit phra lo... wannakhadi sakdina*" ("Lilit Phra Lo"... The *Feudal* Literature), and it was one of the most famous and controversial works of criticism in Thai literary history. Atsani's criticism of *Lilit phra lo* was twofold. First of all, he regarded this literary classic as the apparatus of the "feudalists" to indoctrinate the people. Second of all, he criticised *Lilit phra lo* on the grounds of its obscenity [*wannakhadi lamok*]. Specifically, he asserted that the love/sex scenes in *Lilit phra lo* were not true art but were examples of the feudalists' idea of artistic beauty.

### The Rise of Literature for Life

The publication of articles, discussions and book reviews in the newspapers and journals (particularly *Mahachon*, *Sayam samai* and *Aksornsan*) had, as other historians have noted, an undeniable influence on the later emergence of the concept of art for life and people. As mentioned above, however, it was not the only factor that contributed to the rise of this new concept. By providing a forum where the nascent ideas of literature that sided with the poor and of literature that had a social purpose came into contestation with their more conservative counterparts; the series of debate at the Writers' Club arguably helped shape what later became known as literature for life. The clearest examples of the influence that the Writers' Club debates had on the emergence of the new concept of art and literature can be found in Atsani's and Udom's works.

While participating in the Writers' Club debate on obscenity, Atsani put forth his idea that art was composed of two parts: form and content. If the content was obscene, the art was also obscene – or what he called the art of obscenity. True art must be good in both form and content.<sup>18</sup> Atsani also criticised those who said that art and obscenity could not be distinguished from each other. He declared that they were either using the title of "art" to cover up their own obscene works or were trying to mislead and suppress the people (Inthrayut 164-166).

The distinction between artistic form and content later allowed Atsani to develop a formula for "revolutionary literature" (*wannakhadi fai patiwat*), which was Atsani's name for the type of literature that later became known as literature for life. Writers of revolutionary literature would not, according to Atsani, dismiss form in favour of content. In fact, they could even use the old forms of classical literature whose artistic beauty had already been endorsed by

<sup>18</sup> His idea of art constituting of both form and content was evidently derived from Mao Tsetung's talks on art and literature at the Yanan forum (1942). As mentioned above (see fn. 30), Atsani translated and published Mao's Yanan talk in the magazine *Aksornsan*, in the December 1949, and January and February 1950 issues. Also, see Mao Tsetung 250-86, particularly, 275-76.

the reading public. What they needed to do was create new material, so that their literature would be “national in form, but Socialist in content” (Inthrayut 198). It followed then that revolutionary literature could potentially be as artistic as reactionary literature (*wannakhadi fai patikiriya*) but would, at the same time, present new content that was neither obscene nor oppressive (Inthrayut 198).

Another Marxist thinker who was influenced by the debates that took place at the Writers’ Club was Udom. Unlike Atsani, Udom did not himself participate in the debates. He did, however, closely follow their published reports and wrote his most celebrated articles “Du wannakhadi chak sangkhom, du sangkhom chak wannakhadi” (Study Literature through Society, Study Society through Literature) in part as a reaction to the discussions that took place at the club.<sup>19</sup> Udom published the article under the pen name Pho Muangchomphu in *Mabachon* in late June 1950, just a few weeks after the series of discussion on the topic of “art for art’s sake” had taken place (Banchong Banchoetsin 49-96).<sup>20</sup> In it he tried to define the idea of art for life. He wrote that art was a reflection of life and society. Its value must, therefore, be measured by how meaningful it was to human beings. If it had no meaning to human life, then it had no meaning at all (Banchong Banchoetsin 56). He dismissed, for instance, a poem that described the beauty of the full moon for having no value when one realised that all around people were dying of hunger (Banchong Banchoetsin 58-59).

Udom also responded to those who tried to find a middle ground between the two approaches to art by calling for a discourse of sympathy such as Malai and Wilat. Udom believed that if an artist were to see people suffering from natural disasters, he should use art to urge for sympathy and to call for help. If, however, he were to see them suffering at the hands of other people, it would not be enough to encourage the readers to sympathise with them. What the artist should do instead was to use his art to reveal the social wickedness and injustice in order to fight for freedom from hunger and oppression (Banchong Banchoetsin 52, 57-59). Udom’s idea corresponded with the notion of proletarian art (*Wannakhadi chonchan kanmachip*) and literature that had developed in the West. Writers of proletarian literature not only respected the virtue of workers and protected the interests of the poor, but they also joined their fight for justice. This idea was, as Udom himself noted, the origin of the motto, “art for people’s sake” (Banchong Banchoetsin 61-62).

<sup>19</sup> Udom mentioned that the article was inspired by two developments. One was the Writers’ Club debates on “what art is for,” and the other was the publication of Siburapha’s (Kulap’s) book *Chonkwa rao cha phop kan ik* (Till We Meet Again). The novel was often regarded as a starting point for literature for life.

<sup>20</sup> Udom finished his article on June 18, 1950. The Writers’ Club held three sessions of debate on the topic of “art for art’s sake,” on May 3 and 19 and June 2, 1950. (Note: Banchong Banchoetsin is another pen name of Udom).

As has been shown, the debates at the Writers' Club had considerable influence on scholars who were trying to formulate their ideas of a new genre of literature that would later come to be known as literature for life. One should note, however, that the notion of art or literature for life was not restricted to intellectual debates alone but was actually practiced by several writers. In 1952, Wilat, writing under the pen name Chunlathat, made an observation about a changing trend in the style of short story writing in the magazine *Chao krung* (The Bangkokian) (Chunlathat, *Chao krung* 1.2: 93-94).<sup>21</sup> This new style sometimes looked like an essay or a dialogue with no plot or climax. Examples of these short stories could be witnessed, according to him, in the works of Isara, Kulit Inthusak (a pen name of Atsani), and other progressive writers. More importantly, Wilat pointed out that back in 1949, most editors and readers were not at all interested in this kind of story. Malai, for instance, used to criticise this kind of short story written by a young writer as "too serious," in other words, radical. A year or two later, however, Malai praised a similar style of work highly for being full of ideas and for being driven by the desire to create a just society (Chunlathat, *Chao krung* 1.4: 90-92).<sup>22</sup> In 1952, a young writer named Seni Saowaphong (a pen name of Sakchai Bamrungphong) also claimed, in his well-known book *Attaniyom kap chintaniyom* (Realism and Romanticism), that Thai literature was in a transition period – a period in which "art for life" was its motto (Seni Saowaphong 173-238).

Wilat's observation and Seni's assertion indicated a rise of the concept of art and literature for life in the early 1950s that was confirmed by the numerous publications of short stories, novels, poems and essays on literary theory. Among them were O Udacon's short story "Karl marx, klin dinpeun lae nanthiya" (Karl Marx, Gunpowder Smell and Nanthiya), Srirat Satapanawat's novel *Phaendin ni khong kraai* (Whose Land is It?) (1951), Seni Saowaphong's novels *Khwamrak khong wanlaya* (Wanlaya's Love) (1952) and *Pisat* (The Ghost) (1953), Atsani's poem "Isan" (The Northeast) (1952), and Udom's two articles "Sinlapawannakhadi kap chiwit" (Art, Literature and Life) (1952) and "Chiwit and khwam faifan" (Life and Dream) (1952).

This enthusiasm for literature for life was briefly subdued during the aftermath of the Peace Movement in late 1952.<sup>23</sup> It was renewed, however, in

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<sup>21</sup> The magazine was founded by Kukrit and had Wilat as its editor. Also, as the title might suggest, it was inspired by the magazine *The New Yorker*.

<sup>22</sup> Malai's praise for a work labeled as literature for life did not mean that he totally agreed with its approach or message. As seen in the Writers' Club debates, Malai had subtly criticised Kulap's version of art/ literature for life.

<sup>23</sup> The Peace Movement was "a Stockholm-based campaign against nuclear weapons which Beijing patronized to bring international pressure against U.S. military action in China and Korea." See Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit 145.



the mid-1950s as evidenced by the establishment of literary journals such as *Pithuphum* (which also had a French title, *La Patrie*, and a motto, “newspaper for life and hope”) (1955) and *Saithan* (Stream) (1958). These journals effectively revived the discussion on literature for life by publishing works of this particular genre.<sup>24</sup> Every issue of the biweekly *Pithuphum* contained, for example, an instalment of serialised “novels for life” (*nawaniyai phuea chiwit*).<sup>25</sup> These novels had as their protagonists the poor and the disadvantaged and featured the themes of poverty and social injustice.

Perhaps the most important contribution to the revival of the discourse of art and literature for life in the mid-1950s was, however, the work of the Marxist intellectual Jit Phumisak. Jit wrote and published many articles in both *Pithuphum* and *Saithan* as well as in the popular newspaper *Sanseri* (Free Voice). Among all of his works on art, literature and criticism, the most well-known (and, in retrospect, the most influential) was *Sinlapa phuea chiwit* (Art for Life). The book was a collection of four articles written between 1955 and 1957. It touched upon most of the themes that had been debated among writers, literary scholars and critics since the end of the war. Jit stated that the book aimed “to wash out the old idea of art,” by which he meant the doctrine of art for art’s sake (Jit Phumisak 9).

Citing Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* as an authority, Jit emphasised that art must serve the people (Jit Phumisak 27-28). Art that served the people meant “art that wakes people up to the objective reality of life, and prompts them to turn their lives around” (Jit Phumisak 74). The metaphors that Jit often used in his writing were art as a spear and a lamp. The spear served, according to Jit, “to hurt the enemies of the people – the enemies that make their lives miserable. The lamp helped lead the people to better conditions by revealing: first, the sufferings that they are currently enduring; second, the causes of these sufferings; third, the solutions to these sufferings; fourth, examples of the decent lives that they would soon be living” (Jit Phumisak 74-75). Although Jit did not mention it, it is not difficult to recognise that the formulation of these four revelations was profoundly influenced by the Buddhist notion of the Four

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<sup>24</sup> *Pithuphum* was owned and edited by Pluang Wannasi, a journalist and poet. He was also arrested in 1952 during the government’s crackdown of the Peace Movement. He founded *Pithuphum* in 1955 after having been released from prison. *Saithan* was owned by Thongtoem Samerasut, a friend of Itsara. According to Somsak Jeamteerasakul, the journal was owned by the CPT. See *Pluang wannasi: kawi-nakkhit-nakkhian-naksu* (Pluang Wannasi, *Poet, Thinker, Writer, and Fighter*) 12-16, and Somsak Jeamteerasakul 221.

<sup>25</sup> Although these works were called “novels” (*nawaniyai*), they were, in fact, short stories and novellas.

Noble Truths.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, we may say that Jit's concept of art was not only influenced by the great Russian writer but also by Buddhist teachings.

In the same work, Jit also criticised Thai classical literature (*wannakbadi*) and its sexual representations as pornographic. In addition, he considered *rueang chakchak wongwong* (folk tales about royal characters from an imagined past) as the ruling elite's instrument to brainwash the people and bolster the feudal (*sakdina*) system. According to Jit, these stories usually portrayed the ruling elite as talented and beautiful characters, while at the same time presenting poor people as either villains or clowns. Good people were those who were loyal to the ruling class (Jit Phumisak 81-82, 125-126, 132). Despite his criticism of feudalism and its art, Jit contended that art for life had actually existed in every period of history including in feudal times. There were, for instance, the poems of Sri Prat in the Ayuthaya period and the play *Raden lan dai* by Phra Mahamontri (Sap) in the Early Bangkok period. These works reflected, Jit argued, the struggling spirit of the common people (Jit Phumisak 129-130).

In addition to the literary classics, Jit also disapproved most contemporary popular fictions which he identified as bourgeois utilitarian art (Jit Phumisak 138, 141-142). He criticised these fictional works, such as those by Cha-um Panchaphan, a popular writer at the time, as nonsensical and fanciful. For Jit, these popular fictions were, by and large, influenced by imperial American culture such as Hollywood movies and rock-and-roll music, which had flooded into Thailand after the end of the Pacific War. At the same time, he denounced works of famous writers such as Kukrit Pramoj's *Si phaendin* (Four Reigns) as nostalgic for the good old days of feudalism. In contrast to these works, Jit lauded the later works of Kulap and those of Seni, Itsara, Atsani, as well as himself as works that served the interest of the people. He lauded them, in other words, as examples of art or literature for life (Jit Phumisak 147-148).

## Conclusion

Art and literature for life were the products of their time. As this article has demonstrated, they came into being during times of crucial political and ideological struggles among various fractions, namely the progressive, the conservative, the royalist and the communist, with each trying to assert its political power and cultural hegemony. Some scholars have argued, as discussed above, that the concept of art and literature for life was initially introduced and promoted by the CPT and its network. This article has shown, however, that it actually developed out of the dynamic exchanges and debates among writers, journalists, social critics and literary scholars of various political and ideological inclinations.

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<sup>26</sup> The Four Noble Truths in Buddhist teaching are as follows: 1) life is suffering, 2) suffering involves a chain of causes, 3) suffering can cease, and 4) there is a path to such cessation.

After their emergence in the early 1950s and their renewed prosperity in the middle of that decade, art and literature for life were swept away by the 1958 military coup that resulted in a long-running authoritarian regime (Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit 148). The coup was followed by massive crackdowns, arrests and censorship. Progressive writers and intellectuals were put in jail (e.g. Udom, Jit and Pluang Wannasi, who all went to the jungle after being released), exiled (e.g. Kulap), went to the jungle and joined the CPT (e.g. Atsani), kept silent, wrote something else, or stopped writing altogether (e.g. Seni, Supha, Srirat and Khamsing Srinok). Progressive and leftist newspapers and journals (among them *Pithuphum* and *Saitban*) were also ordered to close down (Prajak Kongkirati 380-382 and Sathian Chanthimathon 344-350). Most progressive and radical works disappeared from the literary market and were unavailable to the reading public. It would not be until the early 1970s that the concept was once again revived by radical students and intellectuals.

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