Representations of the past in a pre-colonial Khmer monastery manuscript

Prior to the arrival of Western notions of history in Cambodia, bangsāvatār writing was the most popular genre used to record events and stories about the past. Literally meaning ‘annals of a family or kingdom’ and commonly translated as ‘chronicle’, the bangsāvatār was a type of writing that belonged to a small elite class and highly respected religious leaders.

Benefiting from three kinds of goodness

The main focus of Pich 1855 is a noble family associated with the sponsorship of a religious building. The family is that of a lady named Prāk, whose husband, Narentrā, was appointed governor of the province of Kampong Svāy. Narentrā was appointed as governor by the court of King Ang Charō (r. 1806-1833). After the king's death and Siam's withdrawal in 1833, he mobilized the people in his province and nearby provinces, including those in Bārāy, to rise up against Vietnamese rule. The revolt was defeated and Narentrā, together with his family, fled to Bangkok for safety. He fell sick and passed away in Siam leaving behind his wife Prāk and a young son named Moen Meas.

The text goes on to depict how, after the end of Vietnamese rule over Cambodia during the early 1840s, Prāk and Moen Meas returned to their country. Due to the works of his late wife, Narentrā, Prāk undertook to build a religious building. The family is that of a lady named Prāk, whose husband, Narentrā, was appointed governor of the province of Kampong Svāy. Narentrā was appointed as governor by the court of King Ang Charō (r. 1806-1833). After the king's death and Siam's withdrawal in 1833, he mobilized the people in his province and nearby provinces, including those in Bārāy, to rise up against Vietnamese rule. The revolt was defeated and Narentrā, together with his family, fled to Bangkok for safety. He fell sick and passed away in Siam leaving behind his wife Prāk and a young son named Moen Meas.

The passing of Prāk’s husband in Siam, the writer explains that the sponsorship that Prāk undertook for the new religious building would allow her to benefit from three kinds of goodness, namely earthly goodness, celestial goodness, and nirāsavīs, thus escaping from all types of suffering and poverty.9

Journeys, behavior and heartbreak

A close reading of the text shows that in its account of Prāk’s family, it also incorporates a mix of elements from several literary genres such as the nīrads and chbāps. The nīrads, known in Thai literature as nīrads, which means ‘memorable journey’ or departure, is a literary genre narrating someone’s journey to a particular place. Conveyed in poetic form, the nīrads usually recount in detail each step of the journey from beginning to end. In the text, for example, a long nīrads passage was inserted when describing the journey of Prāk’s family when they escaped from Kampong Svāy province to Bangkok. It describes different landmarks, including the names of the forests, rivers and mountains through which they travelled, their difficulties and happy moments, people they met, and the natural beauty they encountered. The chbāp, which literally means the code of conduct, is another literary genre conveyed in poetic form that describes and analyses people’s behavior and, at the same time, suggests norms and roles for people to follow. A chbāp passage was incorporated, for instance, when Moen Meas’s mother-in-law gives instructions to her daughter (Moen Meas’s wife) about how to serve and obey her husband by following five principles including honesty, patience, and politeness.5

Moreover, some events in the text are heavily romanticized. When the writer covers dramatic moments, such as a death, he goes into considerable detail so as to capture the grief of the relatives of the deceased person. The writer does so by highlighting one or two family members express their sadness and mourning. Using the voices of the deceased person’s relatives, the writer poetically romanticizes the moment by interspersing personal expressions of love, loss and heartbreak. For example, at the passing of Prāk’s husband in Siam, the writer conveys Prāk’s feeling at that moment:

Remembering the sad moments we ran through that long and hard journey. It is really painful and brings difficulties and risking our lives. Thinking of those moments, it hurts me [Prāk’s] feeling very much. Marrying, you have forever gone and left me alone. Without caring about me anymore. If it was me alone, I wouldn’t be in this problem. But, what about our baby boy. Why did you suddenly die and leave him behind without providing food? I deeply disapproved of the teaching who loses his father and lives with no one to take care of him.8

Based on what has been examined in the text, it is evident, that besides keeping a record of events about the past, this monastery text combines several forms of knowledge and literature genres. First of all, apart from recounting past events and dramatic moments, it associates some of these events with the ideas and philosophies of Buddhism. This indicates that the teachings of Buddhism were a vital element of the perceptions of the past in this text. Secondly, the choice of the literary genres, especially the romanticization of certain events, indicates the importance of foregrounding people’s feelings and behaviors. In this way, the representations of the past in this pre-colonial text can be partly understood as recalling memorable moments and places, enforcing rules and regulations of how to behave, and romanticizing tragic moments such as the passing away of loved ones.

Notes


2. Some parts of this text were translated from the Khmer text by Theara Thun in 2002. In addition, the meanings of many terms clarified in this translation from the Khmer text were partly understood as recalling memorable moments and places, enforcing rules and regulations of how to behave, and romanticizing tragic moments such as the passing away of loved ones.

3. Theara Thun received his PhD in History from the National University of Singapore under a joint doctoral scholarship program between Harvard-Yenching Institute and National University of Singapore. (Theara Thun, 2002). Note: Pich ‘the Poems of the Venerable Pich’

4. For a discussion on chbāp writing, see Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, pp.256-259.

5. For a close discussion on chbāp writing, see Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, pp.256-259.

6. For a discussion on chbāp writing, see Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, pp.256-259.

7. For a discussion on chbāp writing, see Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, pp.256-259.

8. For a discussion on chbāp writing, see Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, pp.256-259.