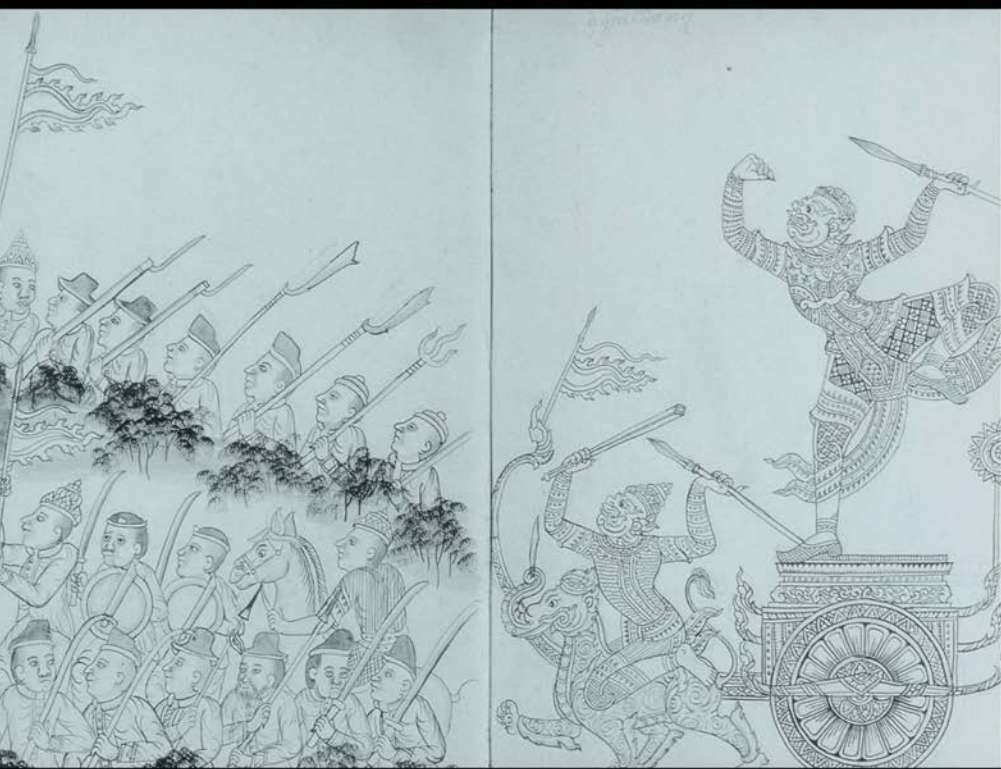


The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures

Literatures of Burma,
Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos,
Malaysia, the Philippines,
Thailand and Vietnam

EDITED BY DAVID SMYTH



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SOUTHEAST ASIAN
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Preface

On 5–7 April 1995 the Centre of South East Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London hosted a workshop on ‘The Canon in South East Asian Literatures’. Generous funding by the European Science Foundation made it possible to bring together scholars from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Russia, Germany, USA, Czechoslovakia, Australia, Holland and England. Papers presented at the workshop covered various aspects of the literatures of Burma, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam; George Chigas was subsequently invited to contribute a paper on Cambodian literature to this volume.

Traditionally the literary canon is seen as a chronological arrangement of famous authors and major works which ‘have stood the test of time’ because of their intrinsic merits and which are linked over the centuries by a presumed cultural unity. In recent years such a view has come under attack by critics who argue that the traditional canon is essentially a social construct which, in its exclusions of certain minorities, reflects power relations rather than aesthetic values. It was this tension which we hoped to reflect in the workshop, despite the uneven development of the study of the national literatures of South East Asia.

While the term ‘canon’ is most widely understood to refer to an institutionally recognised list of exemplary works, such as the body of works constituting the national literature of a country, it is also used to denote a system of rules for creating such works. Both usages of the term are reflected among the papers in this volume.

The sixteen papers in this volume vary considerably in focus. They cover both contemporary and traditional literature and range from broad comparative studies and surveys of trends in a national literature to highly specific discussions of the role of an individual in shaping a canon or the place of a particular text within a tradition. Among the themes addressed are literary historiography, literary criticism, the reception of prose fiction,

Preface

colonialism and Western influence, literary debate, censorship, literary prizes and state involvement, literary studies and the education system, gender issues and indigenous aesthetics.

Professor Phan Cu De (University of Hanoi) and Professor Budi Darma (IKIP Surabaya) also presented papers at the workshop which have been published elsewhere, while Nigel Phillips, Manas Chitakasem, Henry Ginsburg, Rachel Harrison and Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh acted as commentators; we are grateful to all of them for their contributions.

We would also like to sincerely thank Ian Brown, Chairman of the Centre of South East Asian Studies, and Mrs Irene Cummings for their unfailing efficiency in taking care of all the administrative arrangements and ensuring that the workshop ran smoothly. Finally, our deep gratitude is due to the European Science Foundation, without whose funding this workshop would not have taken place

David Smyth

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Chapter One

Buddhist hagiography in forming the canon in the classical literatures of Indochina

Yuriy M. Osipov

For many centuries the religious literature of Buddhism had a strong influence upon the architecture, sculpture, mural painting, folklore and written culture in the ancient and medieval kingdoms of Indochina. Buddhist hagiography as a significant genre of the Pali sacred scriptures played an important role in the development of the national epic traditions in classical poetry, prose, drama, in forming the canon of Myanmar (Burmese), Khmer, Lao, Mon and Siamese (Thai) literatures.

A special function belonged here to the *jataka*, a didactic story describing the Boddhisatta's (the future Buddha) rebirths. According to the doctrine in the Pali Canon of the Buddhists such a story was a kind of a biography of the Great Being who had lived many lives and afterwards was finally born as Siddhattha Gotama to become, in that last earthly incarnation, Buddha or the 'Fully Awakened One'. Most of these biographies were kept in a famous collection called 'The Jatakas' or 'Book of Birth Stories', a part of the *Khuddaka-nikaya* (The Collection of Short Sermons), one book of the sacred canon the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets) in Pali. A lot of the Boddhisatta's life-stories we can also find in other parts of the *Tipitaka* and in quite a few non-canonical Pali texts, such as a well-known Buddhist apocrypha, the *Panniyasa Jatakani* (Fifty Jatakas).

In ancient and medieval Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos, and Siam all the above-mentioned hagiographical collections were not only the source of popular plots, but also the ideal model of literary style for native Buddhist writers and monastic preachers. Very popular in the Buddhist countries of Indochina, the canonical *Jataka* accepted here in its Singhalese version consists of 550 stories. According to the tradition every story has a three-part composition. The first part of every *jataka* is the *paccuppannavatthu* ('present time story') as a preface to the Boddhisatta's biography; the second part is the *atitavatthu* ('past time story') and the third part is the *samodhana* ('correlation') as an epilogue. For Indochinese writers (or storytellers) and readers (or listeners), the second part of the *jataka* seemed to be

the most important and interesting because the Lord Buddha himself had narrated here about his former life. Such hagiographical plots could be selected by classical writers for their works in verse, in prose, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also in drama.

The development of the local literary tradition in Pali was connected with the diffusion of Theravada Buddhism (in its Singhalese form, Mahavihara) throughout the territory of ancient Indochina, namely the Pyu kingdom of Shrikshetra (6–7th centuries), the Mon kingdoms of Thaton and Hansavati (9–10th centuries), the Myanmar kingdom of Pagan (11–13th centuries) and the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai (13–15th centuries). Hagiographical works were not discovered among the ancient manuscripts, but there were many stone inscriptions and mural paintings in Pagan's Buddhist temples, for instance, that show the popularity of the hagiographical stories at the beginning stage of the local literature. We should remember here the famous Lokahteikpan Temple in Pagan of the early twelfth century where the interior walls were adorned with frescos dedicated to canonical jatakas (first of all to the *Vessantara-jataka*) with lines written in Myanmarese (Burmese) which identified them.

Over the centuries the texts of all the canonical *Jataka* and the later non-canonical *Pannyasa Jatakani* existed in the medieval kingdoms of Indochina only in the Pali language, written in the local script. Oral versions of these birth-stories in the national languages as a translation or paraphrase could, of course, be used in monastic preachings or didactic conversations by the Buddhist monks. From the fifteenth century some early poetical interpretations of the canonical hagiography began to appear in the Thai (Siamese), Lao and Myanmar monastic literatures. The main place here belonged to the *Vessantara-jataka*, the last life-story of the Boddhisatta (N 550 according to the Singhalese tradition), translated into classical verse as the 'Great Life' (*Maha Chat* in Thai, or *Maha Sat* in Lao) by author-monks in Ayudhya (Siam) and Lansang (Laos). These hagiographical texts in Thai and Lao were honoured and remained invariable for a long time just as the plot of the jataka seemed to be prohibited from use by laymen writers.

Court poets in medieval Laos and Siam as a rule used to refrain from employing canonical hagiographies for their works and to prefer versifying the apocryphal jatakas of the *Pannyasa*. There was no special genre for narrating a birth story in verse or in prose; sometimes, however, they used the Pali words *nidana* (*nithan* in Thai and Lao) and *jataka* (*chadok/sadok*) to define the form of their works. In Myanmar, on the contrary, there was a particular genre of the didactic poem *pyo* based on the text of the canonical birth-story. Among the eminent early works of this genre, Myanmar philologists appreciated most highly the *Buridat-pyo* (based on the *Bhuridatta-jataka*, N 546 in the Singhalese tradition) by Shin Maha Ratthasara (1468–1530) and the *Hsudownkhan-pyo*, (based on the

Sumedhapandita-jataka, N 499 in the Singhalese tradition) by Shin Maha Silavamsa (1453–1518). As ideal models of medieval literary style, these two poems are the masterpieces of these writer-monks, and a part of the ‘golden treasury’ of Myanmar classical poetry.

The period from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries can be considered the first stage in forming the literary canon in the culture of Indochina. It was certainly determined by the traditional rules of Buddhist hagiography in Pali, and partly perhaps in Sanskrit and Mon, too. The most important thing here was to keep the original plots and compositions invariable, not to translate, but only to comment on the sacred Pali stanzas that were ascribed to the Buddha Gotama.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries religious poets of Buddhist Indochina constantly treated hagiographic topics of the *Khud-daka-nikaya* and the *Pannyasa Jatakani* in their literary works. We can also find several examples of such subjects in the poetical compositions of some court writers. For instance, it was a popular epic poem, *Sinsie*, by Pang Kham, in Laos, in approximately the second part of the seventeenth century); and there were the hagiographical epics, *Samutthakhhot* and *Syakho* (The Tiger and the Cow) by Phra Maha Rachakhru in Siam towards the end of the seventeenth century. Plots for these three poems were taken from the *Pannyasa Jatakani*. In Myanmar poetry apocryphal birth-stories were not so popular as in classical Thai, Lao and Khmer literatures.

In medieval Myanmar there were a few poetical genres for treating the Buddhist hagiography subjects, such as *linga*, *pyo*, *taula* and so on. A new romance-like genre, *htachin*, appeared between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Using the form of the *htachin*, court writers of Myanmar could select subjects from different sources, namely from the hagiography as well as history or folklore epics. So while Minzeya Randamey (1578–1638), a famous poet of the kingdom of Toungoo in Myanmar, preferred to draw on the canonical birth-stories from the *Dhammapada-atthakatha*, his later follower U Aun Hpyo (c.1738–c.1803), a court poet of the Konboun dynasty, treated a wide circle of topics in his works, ranging from the Buddha’s biography to the local version of the *Ramayana*. Genre features of *htachin* permitted a writer to re-work Buddhist canonical subjects in a rather free manner in comparison with *pyo* or *linga*, by changing the strict composition of the *jataka*, or slightly reorganizing its plot.

Thus, in the history of Indochinese literature Buddhist hagiography fed first of all the literary poetry, court or monastic, which occupied the main place in the national belles-lettres of the medieval epoch. A religious poem on a grand scale, a kind of Buddhist epic, interesting and didactic at the same time, served as a text for ritual recitation at the king’s court or at the monastery and later, for popular festivals and theatrical performances. The local theatre of Indochina had no special dramatic literary works

virtually until the end of the eighteenth century. The above-mentioned hagiographical poems and, later, narrations of the Buddhist jatakas in prose also served as literary sources for composing many popular plays, at first, in verse.

As for prose works, they occupied rather a small place in the classical heritage of Indochinese literature. Local authors' narrations of the canonical jatakas in prose appeared only occasionally in the history of Myanmar literature; monastic writers, for instance, such as Varabithanganahta-hsayado (1558–1618) or Thaddammalingara-hsayado (1758–98), sometimes used hagiographical stories in their works.

The first literary translation of the *Mahanipata* was an important stage in the life of Myanmar literature of the nineteenth century. Ten Great Jatakas were translated into the Myanmar language by a venerable scholar, U Aubatha and his pupils at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. All these works are now considered masterpieces of the national prose literature. U Aubatha, as Dr. Htin Aung supposed, 'followed closely the Pali originals as far as the incidents of the stories were concerned, but he portrayed character in detail, and made the characters more lifelike and therefore more interesting' (Htin Aung 1957: 47). Thus the author-monk kept to the tradition, daring to change only the style of the narrative, but not its plot.

Prose translation of Buddhist hagiography into the local language, in exact or free manner, became a feature of the national literature. In addition to U Aubatha's works in Myanmar, we can mention some narrations of the *Pannyasa Jatakani* birth-stories in Lao, for example, the *Phutthasena* (based on the *Raddhasena-jataka*) and the *Champa Siton* (Four Sprouts of the Champa-tree, based on a plot of the *Champaraja-jataka*). The Pali hagiography tradition was apparently maintained more firmly in prose interpretation than in verse. Prose works as a rule contained fewer traces of the author's creativity. A writer could not change the *jataka*'s structure, its strict succession of episodes, or its cast of characters. It can be suggested that the Pali literary canon served here as a principal impulse in forming the canonical rules of the local literature.

Many works of Indochinese hagiographical epic in prose and verse became a rich source of plots for classical drama and dramatic performances in the nineteenth century, the time of the rise of court theatre and the literary play. Throughout the previous period there were no special dramatic genres or literary texts for the theatre. Noble actors at the king's court used some epic poems that were recited during a pantomime or a dance-drama. Plebian, often non-professional, players knew anonymous folk versions of popular epic stories by heart. There was interaction between the court theatre and folk theatre. For a long time theatre art in Siam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar existed without the drama as a part of literature.

A special dramatic genre began to emerge in Siam in the eighteenth century. This was the *bot lakhon* (literally, 'theatre text'), a kind of long epic poem to accompany the dramatic performance. Siamese authors of the *bot lakhon* used hagiographical plots taken not from the canonical *Jataka*, but only from the *Pannyasa Jatakani* and non-Buddhist sources, such as local versions of the *Ramayana* or *Inou*. This tradition continued in Myanmar where the dramatic genre of *nandwinzat* appeared under the influence of Siamese dramatic poetry at the end of the eighteenth century and developed through the nineteenth century. The masterpieces of poetic and dramatic style most famous and popular in this period, described by U Pe Maung Tin as 'romance-drama', and written by eminent court dramatists such as Myawadi Mingyi U Sa or Princess Hlain, were always based on non-canonical stories, from the apocryphal collection The Fifty Jatakas and from the well-known Indian and Javanese epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Hikayat Panji Inu Kertapati* (*Inou* in Siam, *Eenoun* in Myanmar). We may suppose that performing the sacred birth-stories on the court stage was prohibited by the orthodox abbots of the Buddhist Sangha in Theravadian Indochina.

Meanwhile plebian actors of the non-professional theatre in Myanmar, for example, had performed incidents from the canonical *jatakas*, or even from the Buddha's life-story, long before, first of all when performing the *nibhatkhin*, the Myanmar equivalent of the European miracle play, according to Dr. Htin Aung. It is possible to find some forms of the miracle play in the folk theatre of the other peoples here. This old theatrical tradition was not forgotten by Myanmar playwrights of the nineteenth century when they began to experiment with the *pyazat* (literally, 'shown *jataka* ') genre. In the court theatre, of course, they performed neither the Pali canonical text, nor the translation by U Aubatha and his pupils. There were original plays in verse composed by U Kyin U (1773–c.1838) and U Ponnya from Sale (1812–67), prominent dramatists of the Myanmar court.

The development of the *pyazat*, the most popular dramatic genre, was connected just with the Buddhist canonical hagiography. Nevertheless, in the sphere of theatrical art and dramatic practice, local writers and actors felt themselves rather free when using the sacred stories. Myanmar dramatists of the nineteenth century permitted themselves to make some reorganization of the story, changing the plot, the cast of characters and their functions. The above-mentioned U Kyin U, U Ponnya and their followers selected, as a rule, popular episodes from the *atita-vatthu* (the second part of the *jataka*), intending to make the play more interesting and less didactic. The same tendency could be noticed in Siamese drama, in the works of the King Rama II (1809–24) for instance, whose *bot lakhon* take their plots from the *Pannyasa Jatakani*. It could be concluded that the literature of Indochina in the nineteenth century acquired a general tendency towards secularization.

That time brought more freedom in writing into the sphere of traditional poetry too. This concerned not only the court lyrics or the romance-like epics and dramas, but also the hagiographical subjects in the monastic genres. The famous court poet of Myanmar, U Shun (1782–1850), for example, wrote his well-known work, *Oummadanti* (based on the *Ummadanti-jataka* N 530) modernizing the religious genre *pyo*. The Buddhist didactic story gained some satirical elements in the poem by U Shun. The tendency towards secularization of the literature became more obvious in genres of court poetry, for instance, in Myanmar epics of the *yagan*, The *Neimi-yagan* by the eminent Kinwunmingee U Kaun (1821–1908) based on the canonical *Nimi-jataka* (N 544 in the Sinhalese version) might be considered a brilliant example of that phenomenon. Fantastic adventures of the legendary King Neimi (Nimi) in the heaven, *Tawadeintha* (*Tavatimsa* in Pali), in the empire of Thagyamin (Sakka), gave the author a base for parodying the life and etiquette of the royal court at Mandalay.

A similar tendency is visible in Siamese and Khmer court poetry of the nineteenth century. We might recall here the popular poem *Ryang Kaki* (The Story of Kaki, based on the canonical *Kakati-jataka* N 327) by Phra Khlang (Hon Bunlong, c.1750–1805), a famous writer at the Bangkok court. Didactic and amusing at the same time, this poem reflects the author's innovations in changing the plot and style of the original Pali *jataka*. Later it continued in the Khmer poem *Nieng Kakei* (Lady Kakei) by Ang Duong (1796–1860), the king of Cambodia from 1841–1860.

There were no special works on poetics in the classical heritage of Indochinese literature. Although Indian theories of poetry and dramatic art (the *alamkaracasta*, and the *natyacasta*) and their texts were known in the sub-region, they did not receive universal recognition and seemed to have no noticeable influence on the canonical tradition of the local literatures. Among the medieval philological works written by monastic and sometimes by court authors, there were some anthology-like collections of classical texts selected as models to imitate. It should be remembered that imitation was the normal way to learn and adopt the ideal literary style. Such anthologies contained as a rule many local hagiographic works in verse and prose. It is possible to mention here the famous Thai collection, the *Chindamani*, edited by Phra Horathibodi at the end of the seventeenth century, or, in Myanmar, the *Kavilekkhana* (Attributes of Poetry, c.1751) composed by U Au. So the classical text became a pattern to follow for a contemporary or a later writer.

One may suppose that in the history of Indochinese literatures there was no written canon in the form of a special treatise on literary rules. An unwritten canon existed, however through the practice of following the existing literary tradition, and primarily, the tradition of the Buddhist sacred scriptures. We have already tried to explain that well-known works of Buddhist hagiography served as models for literary style, composition

and plot. It is possible to say that the Buddhist literary tradition dictated the canonical rules for the local literatures of Indochina. This phenomenon was noticed first of all in the field of epic poetry and of drama, in the development of the system of genres, tropes and metrics.

The hagiographic canon was manifested in using a definite cycle of plots, primarily, the Boddhisatta's birth-stories. It often caused the transformation of the non-Buddhist epics into Theravadian hagiography. It is noticeable that the Indian or Malayan *Ramayana* and the Javanese or Malayan *Inou* (a version of the Panji-romance) became hagiographic epics or plays containing real Buddhistic incidents, characters and sayings. The Lao *Pha Lam Sadok* (The Great Rama Jataka) written by anonymous monks in the medieval period is the best illustration of the 'buddhization', of the Theravadian influence upon Indochinese literatures. According to the hagiographic tradition authors followed the three-part composition with the immutable Pali stanzas. As for Rama, the famous epic hero, they described him as the Boddhisatta, more a wise mentor than a warrior.

During the nineteenth century, the last period of the classic literature in Indochina, the fundamentals and rules of the canon were gradually changing and disappearing. The general secularization of the local culture weakened the influence of the Buddhist literary tradition. The rise of modern literature, with its new aesthetics, new system of styles and genres, relegated the old classical traditions to the background in the twentieth century.

Now the sacred texts of the Buddhist hagiography in Pali are always included in the programme of monastic education. Literary works of this kind, for instance, classical poems, prose stories, dramas in fragments or in various adaptations, in the national languages of Indochina occupy a definite place in the school text-books or in the university readers. Thus Buddhist hagiography plays a role in the field of the humanities education. In modern conditions the hagiography is no longer the principal source of the epic plots and the canonic rules as it was during the epoch of classical literature, but it continues to live in the collections of archaic texts and in the memory of many peoples of Indochina whose religion is Theravada Buddhism.

Chapter Two

Myanmar prose writing: tradition and innovation in the twentieth century

Annemarie Esche

THEORETICAL REMARKS

Tradition and innovation are not invariant categories, but categories in constant mutual relationship. They are dependent upon each other so that there cannot be tradition without innovation, nor innovation without tradition; although sometimes tradition seems to be like a fixed star, which like the planets, does not appear to move, but does move nevertheless.

The categories tradition and innovation cannot be invariant categories because of the process of development of societies. They cannot be 'constants' because there is a contradiction between them, which calls for a solution, and then the new itself becomes the tradition. That does not mean that the old is completely negated. What is taken and what is left depends on the needs of the present, that is, on the society and its needs. There is, however, nothing that is completely new. Some of the old is transcended and retained in the new. As Dankwart A. Rustow writes,

. . . historical research quickly dispels the somewhat naive assumption that modernity is the only factor injected into an otherwise static traditional scene . . . (Rustow 1965: 171).

and referring to political culture,

. . . it becomes clear upon closer reflection that modernity and tradition are never fully distinct in reality, that the political culture of even the most modern countries is in fact a blend of traditional and modern traits.' (Rustow 1965: 171).

We can only agree with this. Two further important points might be added:

Firstly, not everything which is new is progressive, simply because it is new. This claim needs no substantiation. Secondly, generally speaking we call 'tradition' and 'innovation' historical and philosophical categories. That means that these categories are applicable to all fields connected

with history, such as cultural history, literary history, ethnology and so on.

The topic 'tradition and innovation' and its significance for developing countries has already been generally recognized and treated in several scholarly papers. In 1975 the International Congress of Historians in San Francisco took as its central theme, 'Tradition and Innovation in Asia and Africa'. The general consensus of opinion thus far is:

1. Tradition is a sort of mediation between past and present, between old and new. That is the nucleus of this category. The Latin word *traditio* means just this.
2. Most researchers agree that the relationship between past and present will be realized by certain representatives in the society, and by class forces and groups. And they agree that what is acquired is socially determined.
3. All agree that there is some stability in the relationship between the old and the new. But one should not think that this stability is in any way something conservative which has to be overcome. (There are of course such tendencies, for instance, after revolutions. The pendulum which has been kept too long on one side swings suddenly too far to the other side. Examples from history can easily prove this.)
4. Researchers point out that within the category of tradition contradiction is immanent. That we have to understand, if we wish to do justice to the significance of traditions in a given society.

TRADITION AND HERITAGE

Tradition and heritage are not synonymous, although they are from time to time used interchangeably. Inheritance in the field of culture we call 'cultural heritage'. Both inheritance and heritage share a sense of comprehensiveness. They simply include all that we inherit. When we inherit things from a person who has died, we throw away some things and we keep others. In principle the same is going on with the heritage of history, culture, literature and so on. We keep some things and we reject others, putting them aside because we have no need for them or simply because we do not like them. What is used and how, depends on the time and conditions under which the recipients live. Here, the historical factor and class-dependence are the determining elements.

The historical heritage must, on the whole, be seen from two angles. First, it consists of objects long preserved, as well as of ideas, habits and so on, handed down from one generation to another until the present. Second, to the heritage belongs also what is unknown, forgotten, suppressed and – in the case of objects – destroyed or lost. If we measure cultural heritage in terms of social progress, we see that it includes

progressive and reactionary trends. Between these two exist connections as well as contradictions which are mediated by the given society. And the active part of the society decides what will be taken and what will be left out. So the relationship of the society to history and culture is always socially determined. In a process of acquisition and of abstraction the society puts itself into a relationship with the heritage. So this process is always connected with the society of the time under consideration. The active part of society takes more or less consciously these components of the past that it needs. In short, tradition and heritage are not identical but are related to each other like the part to the whole. So, taking, rejecting, or forgetting is a continuous process which the scholar has to look for and assess correctly.

THE CHANGE

In Myanmar the literature in the period up to the end of the nineteenth century consisted predominantly of translations, religious commentaries and poetry dealing with nature or events at the royal court. The twentieth century brought a revolutionary change to Myanmar literature. It was not simply a reform of the old. The overwhelming majority of the old genres ceased to exist as organized entities, in form as well as in content. Traditional paradigms, for instance the *mawgun*, a poem reporting important events of the state, the *egyin*, a poem eulogizing the king, the *bawle*, an elegy expressing longing for the beloved, had all lost their royal centres and become defunct. Drama, popular since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and gaining even more in popularity in the form of puppet plays by the end of the century, subsequently lost its struggle against the novel, although it has showed some signs of renewal. It even has to be said that drama has not found a new beginning up to the present. In 1885 the colonization of Myanmar by the British was completed. The novel was a literary sign of the drastically changing society. It was the genre able to express the new relationship between art and life and it had to be written in prose.

TRADITION OF PROSE WRITING

In spite of the concentration on rhymed and metrical writing during feudal times, prose writing also has a long tradition. A pithy prose already appeared in the stone inscriptions during the Pagan time. Translations from Pali and also from Sanskrit and Old Mon were written on palm-leaves. However, later translations remained as anonymous as the former ones. It is not until the eighteenth century that we hear of two monks, Sayadaw Shin Kaweinda and U Awbatha, both of whom translated *jatakas* into the Myanmar language. U Awbatha's translations, in

particular, were exemplary in style and were considered as the norm for future prose writing. His translations made him a pioneer for future novel writing, too, because no writer, either before or among his contemporaries, was to have such a powerful influence on the future style and vocabulary of Myanmar prose. Besides these translations, chronicles, lawbooks and folktales were also written in prose, although folktales did not really appear separately; rather, they embellished the chronicles and even lawbooks, providing guidelines for good behaviour within society. Nineteenth century translations again paved the way for the early twentieth century novel: Aesop's fables (1880), 'One Thousand and One Nights' (1886) and 'Arab Tales' (1889) were all translated in the Myanmar language, as were novels by Sir Walter Scott. The novels of Scott had far-reaching influence, the author's extensive use of dialogue attracting the intelligentsia of Myanmar, who were familiar with the use of dialogue from drama and puppet plays and from old prose where it was a popular expository device for Buddhist teaching materials. It was the middle path, too, that Scott employed historically, a path corresponding with the Myanmar Buddhist mentality.

THE NEW WRITER AND THE READER

'The Burmese are brilliant speakers,' a colleague from Humboldt University commented on his first visit to Myanmar 1995. He had hit the bull's eye. Monastery education and school education (still similar even now, as regards teaching methods) have trained them to speak with a light tongue, freely and brilliantly employing their sense for word selection, word figures, comparisons, metaphors and the like. This educational tradition has helped them also to become good writers.

The new writer was freed in a double sense. Firstly he was no longer isolated from society as a result of having to be either a member of the monkhood, with all its restrictions, or a Court poet, who could only win fame by his integration into the affairs of the king, the princes and other personalities at court. Secondly, he was freed from the necessity to write on palm-leaves. Not only newspapers, but also journals and literary magazines gave him the opportunity to express himself in a new form. A knowledge of the English language enabled the intelligentsia, in our case the writers, to become acquainted with European literature.

Reading was no longer confined to religious texts but expanded to take in works written for entertainment. The relatively high literacy rate, promoted by Buddhist monks for centuries, made it easy for listeners to become readers. It was a bold stroke to call the novels *wutthu*, a term previously limited to the *jatakas*. The protest of the monks against this secular use of the term was in vain and it became established as the equivalent for fiction, that is for the novel and short story.

PROSE WRITING FROM 1904 UNTIL 1919

The novel of James Hla Kyaw *Maung Yin Maung Ma Meh Ma wutthu* (Maung Yin Maung and Ma Me Ma, 1904) and the novel of U Kyi, *Chin-baung ywet-theh Maung Hmaing* (The Roselleleaf-Seller Maung Hmaing, 1904) not only heralded the beginning of the novel but also, more generally, the new Myanmar literature. Princes and princesses or mythical figures ceased to be the main characters. It was simple folk coming into the foreground of these adventurous and longwinded stories. The main function of the novels in the period between 1904 and 1919 was entertainment, conveying general knowledge and Buddhist values. The novels were under the influence of West European models, as well as the palace plays of the nineteenth century, showing their origins in the moving from place to place of the hero – as in the famous palace play *Inaung* – in homilies not always fitting to the action, and in the insertion of dialogues or verses into the now dominant prose. Accidental encounters and the death of women who became superfluous rapidly change the constellation of the figures. Unlike Prince Inaung, who moves through the polygamous societies of some old South East Asian states, Maung Hmaing is a simple vegetable-seller who shares the prince's ability to flatter, even though his voyages on the Ayeyarwady seem rather fantastical.

After 1912/13 prose literature started to voice some criticism of the outward forms of social life. However, there was no criticism of the colonial system itself. The author U Lat, whose famous book *Shwepyizoe* (Ruler of the Golden Land, 1913), translated into Russian as early as 1963, suggested some solutions in form of a mental freedom from foreign domination.

Unlike the novel, the short story needed more time to establish itself. Prior to 1919, authors, with limited artistic experience, often confined themselves to imitating the pattern of English detective stories.

PROSE 1920–1930

With P. Mo Nin, the Myanmar novel, as well as the short story, reached a new level. His aim was to help his countrymen to find their way in the capitalist world. This did not allow him to present life in an idyllic way. The individual has to fight to achieve a position of respect in society. One of his greatest achievements was to show that women have to have equal rights. He kept his prose free from religious declarations, introduced new ethical principles and showed skill in rendering the psychological impetus of his characters. His knowledge of the general social situation, his compassion for his fellow citizens and the precise style of which he was capable helped him to impart new thinking to his readers. Old and new thinking and change in traditional views, already seen in *Shwepyizoe* (here the traditional thinking is positive) is again distinct, when the heroine, Nyo

Nyo ignores the wishes of her foster parents and goes to the town to become a teacher. P. Mo Nin's literary figures are no longer at the mercy of external events like those of some early novelists. In this way he succeeded in an artistic transposition of reality and became the author of the first psychological novels. But not only this. *Ne Nyo Nyo* (Dark Days, 1920) and other novels made him the founder of the modern novel in Myanmar.

Novels of other authors in this time still bear a close resemblance to the traditional genre of the palace play and concentrate more or less on the adventures of the hero. Adaptations of West European novels produced by Shwe U Daung show that the author was able to mask the sources with an indigenous overlay, so that the story, and the eloquence with which it was told, could attract quite a lot of readers.

The historical novel, however, can only be seen as having its starting point in this period. 'Mister Maung Hmaing, the pseudonym of the later famous Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, published *Dhammazedi* not later than 1923. He himself called this literary work, which took its title from the name of the king, a *wutthu*, though the mixture of genres and the references to legendary stories makes it more a chronicle than a historical novel. Ledipandita U Maung Gyi's novel *Tabinshwehti*, serialized 1924–8 in *Dagon* magazine, finds its bearings by the biography of that famous king. Both authors choose to draw the attention of their readers to their own history and in so doing, hope to evoke patriotism, as the latter author declared in his foreword.

Also in his tales P. Mo Nin showed a markedly higher quality than other writers before him in the new century. Other pioneers of the new story were Yan Aung, Shwe U Daung, Jarneyaw U Chit Maung, Dagon Shwe Mya, Zeya, Nyana and the radiant stylist Mya Myo Lwin.

PROSE WRITING 1930–45

After 1930 the economic situation worsened and political consciousness grew. The growing national consciousness, the organisation of strikes and the Thakin movement can be studied in history books. The important fact to mention here is that there are a lot of political and social similarities in other countries in South East Asia. Therefore comparisons in the field of literature would be a fruitful undertaking.

In Myanmar the new hierarchy in the literary system is nearly completed. The different genres are established. Individualization and socialization at the same time let the novel turn towards the contemporary society. The fight for identity, social welfare, political independence drew in the whole society, including literature. The authors found new topics and their books had a far-reaching influence on the readership. With his novel, *Thabeikhmauk kyaung-tha* (The Student Boycotter, 1938), Thein Pe (Myint) became the pioneer of the progressive, realistic present-day novel. It became

a model for the later progressive literature in Myanmar. At much the same time Zawana published his four volume novel, *Kaw-leik kyaung-tha* (College Students, 1936), which is set in the period 1930–34, when the author had already left university. The student characters of this novel are different, though, more concerned with their love affairs and a good career in the colonial régime than their studies. They have no interest in political events; after all, had not the peasant's revolution just failed? Thein Pe (Myint), by contrast, was an active participant in student affairs during his university days from 1933 to 1935 while at the same time working as a politically conscious writer and journalist.

Socially critical prose was founded by Maha Swe. The youth of Myanmar recognized the symbolism of his novel *Do Ame* (Our Mother, 1935), in which the mother represents the country, and that the author was urging readers to stand up against their colonial masters. In his other novels, Maha Swe denounced bad habits of lay people and of monks from his own country. His suggested solutions, however, were not free from anarchist ideas and so reduced the value of his writings.

If we maintain that some novels of the period distinguish themselves by better individualization of their characters, we can do so only in comparison with the literary figures of feudal times, prose after 1900 and fiction with low-ranging artistic claim and merits of the same period. If we assess those works with standards of the developed critical realism, we recognize as their main deficiency a sort of mechanical determinism making the characters products of their class or their strata of society. The movements of the characters are like those of marionettes manipulated from above. The reason for these ties to the social situation and structure and this sociological schematism was the lack of ideological and artistic experience. (In Maha Swe's *Do Ame* U Eng is the Englishman, in Nyana's *Piya hse* (Love Potion, 1935) Toe is the rich man, Maung Thaug the bureaucrat, etc.). All of the characters act in a strictly limited and predictable context.

To acknowledge the fight of the writers in the thirties we are not to forget the pressure of their own clergy. Tet Toe, one of the leading journalists and authors said, 'So it becomes understandable that Thein Pe (Myint) provoked a scandal with his novel *Tet Hpongyi* (Modern Monks, 1937) in which he ridiculed corrupt members of the sangha.'

The historical novel has developed as a special category within the fiction of world literature. The authors of historical novels prefer as their main subjects particularly powerful forward movements in the history of a people or of several peoples; the task of the historical novel is to make the formative forces in history vivid and to contribute towards a better understanding of the present.

It would be wrong to think that in Myanmar literary works concentrating on history did not start until the authors had been

influenced by European writers. Whereas the stone inscriptions and chronicles belong to the documentary part of history the *mawgun* and the *egyin* have a tendency towards fiction. In the centre of both stood a historical event, although some of the *egyin* had a tendency to eulogize. *Mawgun* and *egyin* can be traced back to the fifteenth century. Admittedly, the chronicles had legendary parts, and *mawgun* and *egyin* were sometimes only loosely connected with a real historical event, but we cannot simply ignore such important roots. Thein Maung's novel *Ye Myanmar* (Brave Myanmar, 1931) brings the time of Myanmar's unification to life. For this historical novel, not only Scott's 'Kenilworth' but also *Inaung* seem to have provided some inspiration. Repeated changes of name, incognito appearances, frequent changes of location, the existence of the secret organization 'Brave Myanmar', the search for the vanished father, the confused romance with Thirimala are relics of past literary traditions. The hero, Maung Yupa is, however, like Scott's heroes, connected with the historical events of his time. Thein Maung's novel *Ye Myanmar* and the biographies of other historic personages like Alaungpaya, Maha Bandoola and Bayinnaung appeared in a time of national movement and inspired patriotic feelings and courage among the Myanmar youth of those days. Other important historical novels, however, were not published until the 1960's.

In olden times the principle of Buddhist Anatta had strengthened the barriers of self-centredness and self-projection, had stabilized the striving of Buddhist aesthetics for abstract figures and promoted the representation of mental ideas by literary figures. That makes understandable the relatively late and hesitating attention to forms of literature in which the private sphere of the authors comes into the foreground, for instance biography, autobiography, and, to a certain extent, travelogues. Of course, there were traditions too. The most exclusive one is the Life of the Buddha, going back to several Pali sources (*Nidanakatha*, *Mahavagga*, the *Mahapadanasutta*, the *Buddhavamsa* from Sri Lanka and others). In Pagan this well-constructed hagiography found oral, literary and artistic presentation. The earliest archaic biographies, generated on the soil of Pagan, were stone inscriptions giving evidence of the deeds of honourable Theras and kings. The most famous of them are the Rajakumar inscription (1113 AD), the inscription that relates the life of Maha Aggapandita (1174) and, later on, the Dhammazedi stone inscription (1479). Autobiographies, however, were only known from the *Thera Apadana* and the *Theri Apadana* (a part of the *Khuddakanikaya*). But, apart from occasional remarks by an author on his palm leaf manuscript, there was nothing that could be called secular biography or autobiography.

The revolutionary situation in the mid 1930s filled the gap. Hmawbi Saya Thein wrote biographies of personalities and their political and intellectual life. Po Kyar turned to the biographies of Htun Shein and

U Ponnya. Pagan Wundauk U Tin submitted a biography of the archaeologist Taw Sein Ko. Thein Maung presented life stories of Minye Kyawswa, Bayinnaung, Alaungpaya, Maha Bandoola and other historical personalities. In the magazines *Thuriya* and *Myanma Alin*, the biographies of U Ottama or of scholars like Shwe San Aung were published. Most influential was the biography of Saya Lun (Thakin Kodaw Hmaing) in 1937, written by Thein Pe (Myint). The first secular autobiography, however, was P. Mo Nin's *P. Mo Nin* which appeared in 1941. The period called for personalities to lead the fight for independence. Writers answered in their way and showed, through biography writing, that there were heroes in the past to be proud of and hence, that there should also be heroes in the present.

It is easy to recognize that the historical importance of the time sheds light on literature. One has, however, to keep in mind that historical periodization does not necessarily coincide with literary periodization, because the latter has its own laws. Also letters and correspondence were not used as literary forms, though the genre of *myit-taza*, correspondence between abbots and kings and later between monks, had literary significance in olden times. In the 19th century laymen, also, wrote *myit-taza*. Apart from 'Jarnegyaw U Chit Maung's Diary', diary writing is until now not popular, in contrast to memoirs, which emerged in the 1960s. The same applies to the travelogue. Elements of this genre are to be found in different genres of the feudal literature, for instance, in the *mawgun*. Especially the famous 'London diary' of Kinwun Mingyi U Kaung, a book showing already clear signs of a modern diary-cum-travelogue. But until the 1950s we find almost nothing similar. *Khitsan* ('time-testing') literature, a new type of experimental writing, played a special role. Pioneered by Rangoon University students in 1928, it had established itself by 1934 with the publication of anthologies of prose and poetry; its most prominent authors were Zaw Gyi, Minthuwun and Theikpan Maung Wa. The ideological achievement of their poetry and their stories was a contribution to the democratic base of Myanmar national literature which is to be seen in their humanity and their closeness to the people. They did not foster the Buddhist principles of *annatta* (not-self), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anicca* (impermanence), but especially in Zaw Gyi's oeuvre, now to be published as a set of collected works, the Buddhist idea of impermanence is easily recognized. *Khitsan* – although widely accepted – also had its opponents from the clerical as well as the revolutionary side. Today we can see that *khitsan* was a progressive movement and, in spite of several private topics, a nationally-orientated literary movement. The aim of their exponents was the independence of all the people including minorities. Thein Pe Myint had the same aims, but he stressed the problem of social justice, for instance in the stories *Ye-nan* (Oil, 1938) or in *Thachin hso-ywe ngo-ya-thi* (A Song to Make One Weep, 1938) and others.¹

PROSE 1945–1970

World War II brought with it new experiences which expanded and enriched the range of subjects that writers drew upon. Anti-fascist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist literature – prose as well as poetry – was written. After years of necessary silence authors and literary critics felt the urge to speak while the people had the desire to read and to find confirmation of their thoughts. In literary magazines and journals approximately forty stories a month appeared, accompanied by a flood of poems and articles.

After the war, and especially after gaining independence, conflicting ideas produced different standpoints regarding literature. The propagating of ‘new literature’, a term coined by Dagon Taya, and of ‘socialist realism’ on the one side and ‘pure literature’, ‘neutral literature’ and ‘literature free from ideological tendencies’ on the other, led to fierce debates on ideological and literary problems. Yet the practice of creative literature was not so much a result of theoretical standpoints which were largely taken from outside the country, but a result of the political and ethical position of the writer himself. Therefore one can say that in the period in question we find a highly interesting literature. Authors like Jarnegyaw Ma Ma Lay, Khin Hnin Yu, Tet Toe, Nu Yin, Hsinbyugyun Aung Thein and of course Thein Pe Myint presented novels, stories, poems and articles ranging over a broad subject area.

In our research work we interpret the term ‘literary subject’ as a link between author and society. Therefore if the narrative or poem does not touch so-called ‘eternal subjects’, like love, hatred, jealousy and so on, we have to look for such links. One of the themes explored in the period, and one still popular, is the problem of identity, or more precisely, the question of change in traditional lifestyle. The most prominent novel in this context is Ma Ma Lay’s *Mon-ywe-mahu* (Not out of Hate, 1955). Since then the latest story dealing with this subject is Maung Maung Nyo’s ‘Love Story’ (1992). The life of farmers was presented in this period by so-called ‘peasant novels’. The most prominent was Maung Htin’s *Nga Ba* (The Peasant Nga Ba, 1947), but Bhamo Tin Aung’s *Nga Aw* (The Peasant Nga Aw, 1961) and Ma Ma Lay’s *Kaba-mye-weh* (In the World, 1952) were also popular. Yet literature dealing with farmers remained rare. People in the countryside do not read so eagerly as people in the town, and people in the town do not know enough about people in the country. It is to be hoped that this situation will be changed soon with the improvement of the infrastructure currently under way. From the theoretical point of view we have to ask whether there is such a genre as the farmer novel and whether we should encourage novels of this type. I think it is not correct to ask for novels which deal exclusively with farmers. We would do better to ask for *Gesellschaftsroman* (novels focusing on society) because one should not

Myanmar prose writing

write about farmers while isolating them from society as a whole. That means that writers should write *Gesellschaftsromane* in which farmers are the protagonists. Thein Pe Myint's *Acho-tama* (Bitter Sweet, 1949) and Maung Htin's *Hkit-i ahson* (End of the Period, 1949) are already stories which do not offer watery generalizations about humanity, but discuss social problems within a 'real' story on a high level. In the period considered all other subjects find their continuation. Out of all this good and interesting prose we should at least mention two highlights of the historical novel, *Pagan-tha* ('The Son of Pagan', 1964) and *Htihlaingshin* (1969), by Kyaw Myint, a prolific writer who should not be neglected.

PROSE SINCE 1970

Principles and guidelines like those from the Printers and Publishers Central Registration Board in 1976 prevent nothing and give no guidance.² They were also incapable of preventing an enormous production of spy novels, stories about gangster heroes and primitive love stories. Conan Doyle's heroes were soon superseded by figures like James Bond, or similar such characters found in the books of Mickey Spillane and James Hadley Chase among others. Who wants to throw the first stone? We only have to look into some bookstalls of our own to realize the power of commercial interests. Of course, easy reading has and will have its place, but there must be ways and means to support writers of high-class literature and to help the books to find their way to the reader. What possibilities do we have in Myanmar? Writers in Myanmar are generally well-known to their reading public. For this, there are several reasons:

1. Frequent book publication by individual writers. One or even two books a year is not rare.
2. Approximately 80 magazines giving ample possibilities for publication.
3. Writers' Day, the first day of the month *Nattaw* (in December), has already established a tradition in itself. This 'day', celebrated since 1944, has in the course of time become a writer's month, with speeches by well-known writers, discussions and competitions. Elderly writers, too, are honoured: in 1994, for example, 29 from the province of Yangon, ranging from 84 year-old Saya Thinkha down to the youngest, U Chit Swe, were each awarded 10,000 kyat each.
4. Besides a lot of small lending libraries and the Universities' Central Library, there is the Sarpay Beikman Public Library, opened in 1956, which has a collection of 52,000 volumes of various kinds in Myanmar and English.
5. Annual awards of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise of the Ministry of Information, in order to educate and to propagate knowledge to the general public: