

the twenty best novels of thailand

an anthology by MARCEL BARANG



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PREFACE

To present “the twenty best novels” of any European country or even of a relatively young nation such as the United States would be preposterous. To select “the twenty best novels of Thailand” arguably is not. The novel in Thailand is a recent western import; the first truly Thai novels were written only seventy years ago. The body of available work is relatively small, a few thousand volumes, the bulk of which were scribbled to offer (very) light entertainment* and can be dismissed outright. Sorry to say, Thai novels of high literary octane number only in the hundreds.

I have endeavoured to select the best twenty, out of a first selection of a hundred provided to me by ten “professional readers” (professors of literature, literary critics, writers) and from my own reading, which was guided by the novels featured in various manuals of literature and literary criticism written in Thai, English or French. I also read most of the novels written by each of the eighteen authors selected, to check the validity of the selection and understand the evolution of each writer, as well as most of the novels published since our project started in January 1993.

The choice of Thai literary experts was both deliberate and happenstance. I asked for and received the help of several recognised authorities in the field of literature – and I do apologise to those I failed to identify due to ignorance on my part at the time. A few university professors of literature attending a seminar on translation of Thai short stories organised by linguistic activists from the cultural team of the French embassy

* The Thai have an overwhelming predilection for *bao samong* entertainment, i.e. entertainment ‘light on the brain’, so light indeed that much of what foreigners consider light reading is heavy going for Thai readers, prompting a respected Thai critic to poke gentle fun at those learned professors who expound in earnest on the hidden messages of the likes of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* or AJ Cronin’s *Citadel*.

were also kind enough to forward their own contributions. The eclectic choice of these women was substantially different from that of the acknowledged experts in that it strongly favoured female romance writers of popular appeal, whose novels came to account for a good third of the hundred titles first selected.

I assessed all the novels which were recommended, as well as about another hundred novels. By assessing the novels, I mean that I read them as discriminatingly as I could, with the rule that, no matter how dull or lame they would turn out to be, I would read a minimum of one hundred pages. If, within one hundred pages, a novel is unable to show its mettle, capture and hold the reader's attention, then why bother with it. And so it was that I read about two thirds of all the novels from start to finish, even though in too many cases it was merely to see how the disaster would end.

To my distress, I found it easy to discard a great many works, even among those recommended by more than one expert. The reasons, I believe, had less to do with personal talent than with the lack of a proper literary environment. Too many seasoned Thai novelists make beginner's mistakes. Put bluntly, from a literary-minded foreigner's point of view, no more than fifty Thai novels of any genre or period qualify as flawless classics to be read by this and future generations for pleasure and intellectual profit, as distinct from yarns that are leafed through to kill time or perused out of academic or otherwise specialised interest.

With the aim of selecting the very best Thai novels, not merely the good ones, in order to translate them into English over the next few years – the *raison d'être* of the THAI MODERN CLASSICS programme – I trimmed the list down to twenty titles. Why twenty rather than ten or thirty? Because I decided to make the selection broad but to keep it of manageable size – and also because I am not sure I could find an extra ten titles I would care to translate.

I have tried to choose independently of my own tastes. Among the novels selected, I have a few favourites, and a few others are

not entirely to my liking. Nevertheless, the critic in me believes that all are outstanding and definitely worth translating for the world to read. I am not naive or cocky enough, though, to profess that mine is the definitive choice, because, in the final analysis, there is no such thing: objectivity, like perfection, is an aim man tries to approach but never reaches. Personal taste aside, one's choice is valid only to the extent of one's own knowledge and sensibilities. Discriminate reading, like literary criticism, is an exercise at once objective – observing the various elements of a tale like a mechanic takes apart a car engine – and subjective: keeping attuned to feelings, musings and undercurrents as imponderable as the music of the spheres. To the extent that subjectivity is involved, these are indeed “the twenty best novels of Thailand” according to Marcel Barang.

The basic literary criteria that guided my choice are familiar to most Western readers but still appear to elude many Thai readers, writers and even critics. These criteria are strictly literary, not political or moral. Politics and morals have their own media. Propaganda and zealotry are the death of fiction. A novel may well preach social revolution or salvation of the soul (or damnation or conservatism, for that matter) but it is neither a poster nor a pulpit and should not be assessed as such. To measure literature with moral or political yardsticks is more than irrelevant – it is misguided and harmful.

The first criterion is quality of language, by which I mean ...