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Bangkok streets in Thai short stories

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The aim of this paper is to compare the vision of the city and its streets in Thai modern short stories. This study is based on the research I am doing for my thesis entitled : "*Fiction, ville et société : les signes du changement social en milieu urbain dans les nouvelles thaïes contemporaines*" at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (Paris). This research focuses on short stories by four authors who all received the Southeast Asia Write Award : Atsiri Thammachot, Chat Kopchitti, Sila Khomchai and Wanit Charungkit-anan. In my corpus of short stories, I chose six which show different aspects of the street, such as : description, traffic jam, relations between people in the street, vision of the street according to social class, and conflict between tradition and modernity.

Corpus

Besides the fact that the four authors chosen for my corpus have received the Southeast Asia Writer Award, they all belong to the same generation (born between 1947 and 1954) and are all well-known in their country. The four of them were born in the countryside and came to Bangkok to attend university. They retain from their childhood in provincial towns a nostalgia that is apparent in their short stories and novels.

By Atsiri Thammachot, I have selected two short stories : "*Thoe yang mi chiwit yu yang noy ko nai chai chan*" (She is still alive, at least in my heart) and "*Thung khra cha ni klai pai chak lam khlong sai nan*" (It is time now to escape far from this *khlong*). Both are extracted from the collection of short stories entitled "*Khunthong chaw cha klap mua fa sang*" (Khunthong, you will come back at dawn) for which Atsiri got the SEA Write in 1981.

Born in 1947, Atsiri spent his childhood in Hua Hin where his parents had fisheries. After studying journalism at Chulalongkorn University, he began to work with the Sayam Rat, where he is still working today, writing short stories at the same time. In his literary work, the action is often located in the countryside or in small towns, and the problems of urbanisation, modernisation and social change are recurrent. He also focuses on the return to the village after working in Bangkok, as shown in the short story *Sia lew sia pai* (What is gone is gone).

The first short story, *Thoe yang mi chiwit yu yang noy ko nai chai chan*, is taking place during the events of October 1976. Coming out of his house, a journalist runs into a young woman who is involved in the struggle for democracy. Days later, he receives the list of the people killed in the massacre. The name of the woman is in it. Atsiri shows in this short story how a journalist can see himself as a coward and feel ashamed for not having had the courage to take part directly in the events.

In *Thung khra cha ni klai pai chak lam khlong sai nan*, the author shows how a woman, living alone with her two children in a hut on a *khlong* bank, feels so bad about the life and the surroundings she is offering to her children, that she decides to quit the *khlong*. This short story points out how the city can destroy people.

Chat Kopchitti, born in 1954 in Samut Sakhon, studied art in Bangkok. He had many jobs before he decided to be only a writer. According to Marcel Barang : " He wasn't quite 20 when he decided that creative writing was his life and five years later he turned down a life in business to gamble on a literary career" (Barang, 1994, p.334). Chat got the SEA Write twice : once in 1982, for his novel *Khamphiphaksa* (The judgement), and again, in 1994, for *Wela* (Time). In 1983, Raphiporn declared : "Chat Kopchitti avec son roman le Jugement annonce un nouveau défrichage de ce genre littéraire, une composition plus brillante, à laquelle nous, les anciens, n'avions jamais pensé." (De Fels, 1993). Chat published a lot of novels and short stories collections, showing the life of people living in marginality (*Phan ma ba*) or in social rupture (*Khamphiphaksa*). Some of his short stories, written like tales, like *Mit pracham tua* and *Nakhon mai pen rai*, point out the flaws of society and the use of power by the elite. Chat's vision of society is rather pessimistic.

The short story *Ruang thamada* (An ordinary story) presents the relations between the narrator and an old woman whose daughter is dying of cancer. The narrator is witness and actor at the same time. Beyond the relations between these two characters, it is all the problems encountered by people coming from the countryside which are shown. The conflict between tradition and modernity is evident in this text : traditional healer versus modern doctor ; village customs versus city behaviours ; solidarity versus individuality. All along the story, the narrator speaks to the reader, using *khun*, to involve him in the action.

Khrop khrua klang thanon (A family in the street), written by Sila Khomchai, is one of the most representative short stories of this corpus because the whole story takes place in the street. Actually, the street is the main character in the story which recounts the life of a

middle-class couple. Living in the suburbs of Bangkok, they spend most of their time in their car, stuck in traffic jam, eating, reading, speaking, playing, observing the others.

Sila Khomchai (born in 1952 in the province of Nakhon Si Thammarat) took an active part in the events of 1973-1976 and had to hide in the jungle after the massacre. When he came back to Bangkok in 1981, he became journalist and continued to write fiction. If most of his short stories and novels reflect his political commitment, *Khrop khrua klang thanon* is more a criticism of urban life and, somehow, of the middle-class. This short story won the SEA Write in 1993.

The second story by Sila Khomchai that I chose is entitled *Khop khun ... Krungthep* (Thank you Bangkok). In this short story, a taxi driver and his customer, going through Bangkok at night, develop a strange relation : each imagines that the other is going to attack him. During the whole journey, they are anxious, with feelings of fear and mistrust.

The last author I will consider here is Wanit Charungkit-anan. Born in 1949, in the province of Suphan Buri, Wanit studied at Silpakorn University in Bangkok. Editor, columnist, poet, author of numerous novels and short stories, Wanit is a very famous writer. He received many awards, among which the SEA Write in 1984 for his short story *Soi diaw kan* (The same soi). The short story I selected, *Muang luang* (The capital) is quite well-known in Thailand and even abroad, since it has been translated into several languages. This story gives a very different vision of the city than Sila's *Khrop khrua klang thanon*. The main character is a rather poor worker in Bangkok who describes the street and the people seen from the bus. The description he makes is very pessimistic : tired and desperate workers, inextricable traffic jams, dangerous and hostile city. In the bus, a man from Isan province is singing a folk song that gives the narrator a deep feeling of nostalgia.

Thematic analysis

The usual definition of 'street', as we can find it in dictionaries, is reduced to a minimum. In English dictionaries, as well as in French or Thai dictionaries, the street is defined as a town or village road with houses on one side or both. Beyond the simple description, the aim of this research is to analyse the way the authors see the street and show it in short stories as a social area where all the different communities of the city pass by one another, having or not some contact.

In Bangkok, the life in the street is very rich. Three kinds of 'street' - in the meaning of 'way of communication' - can be distinguished : the large avenues, the *soi* and the *khlong*. A fourth

kind, reserved to the motor vehicles, is the express highway, created to break up the traffic jams. Highways are now very extensive, forming a second level of road network above the old streets.

The organisation of traffic in the avenues and the *soi* is rather difficult, especially because many *soi* are dead ends, making communication between the large roads almost impossible. Life in avenues is quite different from life in *soi*. While the large streets seem to be only ways of communication and commercial areas, the *soi* are where people live, re-creating the village. Nowadays many *khlong*, traditional waterways, have been filled in and covered by roads and buildings. If Bangkok is no longer the Asian Venice, *khlong* still have a role in communication. In Thon Buri, of course, but also in other districts of the town, boats transport people and goods, using the *khlong* as a street.

Bangkok, and the city generally, is viewed by the authors of my corpus as a terrible place, for the conditions of life (traffic jams, housing far from the centre, difficulties to find a job...) and for the relations between the people. Urban society and the city are often described as monsters devouring the countryside people, leading astray men and women and getting more and more westernised. In his book *Aphet kamsuan* (Bad omen), Win Liaw-warin gives a dictionary of life for middle-class people in Bangkok. Under 'Krungthep', he writes : "If Krungthep were a woman, she would be a woman of easy virtue fascinated by the cheap Western culture". About the word 'dream', Win says : "There are two kinds of dream : the good one is dreaming that you fall in Hell (and wake up in Krungthep) ; the bad one is that you go to Heaven (and wake up in Krungthep)" (Win Liaw-warin, 1996). This shows well enough the feelings of the writers, which are shared by a lot of Bangkok inhabitants.

The different themes about the street in the city, which appear in short stories, reveal the importance of the street in the social urban context.

Description

In most of the short stories of my corpus, the descriptive part is not a very important one. Due to the shortness of the text or by choice of the author, the accent is more on the characters and the action than on the description. However, some places are described throughout the story. The opposition between avenues and *soi* is quite evident in Chat's story *Ruang Thammada*. Leaving in an old wooden house located in a *soi*, the narrator make the difference between the street where he lives, and the streets around, that he calls "the jungle" and the big avenues, where "one can find all things making civilisation, as luxurious hotel, cinema halls, massage parlours, bowlings, restaurants, bookshop (...) and very smart people. (...) The atmosphere is

perfumed and air-conditioned, people look beautiful, there is lifts, escalators and other signs of progress. Coming from the *soi* is like coming out of the barbarism and emerging in the centre of a fairy tale city, except that it is a real city." Speaking about the city, Chat named it *muang neramit*, the 'city built by supernatural powers'. The opposition between *soi* and main street is really evident in this text. Atsiri, in *Thoe yang mi chiwit yu...*, describes the *soi* (which is actually called *trok*) where lives the narrator as "long and narrow as a railroad". The narrator has to walk to join the main road, since there is no buses crossing in his *soi*.

The *khlong* as a way of communication is well represented by Atsiri in his short story *Thung khra cha ni klai...* The mother and her two children are living in a hut under an arch of a bridge that crossed over a dirty *khlong*, surrounded by big buildings. Just like in a street, vendors are passing in the *khlong*, paddling in the stream. Even the sex market is present : at night, the family can hear the prostitutes paddling up and down the *khlong*. Afraid that her little girl could become one of them, the mother will decide to quit the dirty *khlong*.

During the night, the city changes its appearance. Lights, streets and people are not the same than in daytime. For the narrator of *Ruang thamada* (Chat), the city at night is a place of pleasure. At the end of the story, after the death of the daughter of his neighbour, the narrator decides to go to the city : "Tonight, I am going to walk around, to sit somewhere having a drink, or even to get a girl in the fairy tale city". In *Khop khun...Krungthep*, Sila shows a city deserted, crossed by fast cars and illuminated by advertising lights. It is two o'clock in the morning : "[the taxi] goes fast in the dark streets. In the headlights, some closed buildings appear on both side of the streets ; the side-walks are deserted. From time to time, headlights of an other car shine while passing the taxi, in a roar of engine". Arriving on Anusawri Chai : "[the place] is empty and wide. The white shining lights of the street lamps make a warm atmosphere. The advertising billboards pierce the black screen of the night with multicoloured and flashing lights". This description is quite far from the one of the daytime city, crowded, polluted, and congested !

Traffic jam

From the moment that a short story is developed within the context of the city, traffic jam takes a central role in the story. The congested streets are described in a lot of short stories, but in two of which, they are almost the principal characters.

Muang luang, by Wanit, and *Khrop khrua klang thanon*, by Sila, give two very different visions of the traffic jam in Bangkok. The family of Sila, actually a middle-class couple, is

driving in Bangkok, spending most of their time in car. Having an appointment at three o'clock in the afternoon, they decide to leave their house, located in the North suburbs, at nine in the morning. The husband, who is also the narrator, describes the way his wife prepares the car : "She put on the back seat a basket full of food, an icebox with cool drinks (...) She put also some plastic bags for rubbish, a spittoon, a spare suit hanging above the window. Just as if we were going for picnic !" In the car, they eat, play, listen to the radio, and even make love. They think to the new car they want to buy, more spacious. Especially at the end of the story, when the wife announces to her husband that she is pregnant : "My wife is pregnant ! Pregnant in the street ..." the husband wants to yell. For this couple, traffic jam become more or less a way of life : the car is means of transport, house, and office as well.

The hero of *Muang luang*, by Wanit, has not the same reaction towards the city and traffic jams. Bus user, he feels exhausted and sick of his life in Bangkok. Spending hours packed tightly in the bus stuck in traffic jam, he dreams of the village where he was born, of the girl he left there. At a cross-road, traffic jam is so long that he gets off the bus : "How the cars could go ? Going through this city is so difficult. The traffic lights have no meaning. Cars which get green light can't move because other cars are stuck in the middle of cross-road . (...) Green light become red ; on the other side, red light become green. And all comes to the same thing, cars crawl along and stop". And when the narrator walks in the street, it is even worse : "I was feeling so bad I could die when I was waiting to cross the street in Rachaprasong corner. I was standing on an island, exposed to polluted smokes, almost wanting to spit. (...) I suffocated, almost in blackout".

Relations between people in the street

Reading these short stories give the feeling that the relations between people in Bangkok streets are quite similar to relations encountered in European capitals. The main feeling shown in the texts is indifference towards the others, just as in Paris. The indifference is especially clear in *Muang luang* (Wanit). The hero, walking in the street to the bus stop, almost received on the head a stone felt from a building under construction. Nobody notices the fact, neither the other pedestrians nor the workers. Arriving at the bus stop, he looks to the people waiting for the bus : "People waiting at the bus stop are as usual. Nobody pays attention to the others". After the struggle to get in the bus, the narrator try to find a sit in the bus that is full : "Two children and their mother are holding on the back of a seat, standing in the middle of the bus.

A young guy is sitting in front of them, but he does not think to give his seat. I do not blame him ; if I was sitting, I am not sure I would give my seat to someone else".

The indifference is sometimes verging on non-assistance. Chat describes in *Ruang thamada* how the people walk in the street near a man lying on the side-walk : " (...) quite often, I see somebody lying on the side-walk or on a footbridge. People come and go, but nobody stops, nobody takes care of him, nobody takes time to check if he is still alive, or if he is still breathing. People pass in front of him as if he was a rubbish heap - some of them do not even see him. This is an ordinary story (in our urban society). If someone stops to check or to give assistance, that is extraordinary".

In other cases, people feel contempt for the ones who are acting in an unusual way. When the Isan man begins to sing in *Muang luang*, some people appreciate it, but most of them laugh with contempt, looking at him as if he was crazy.

With indifference and contempt, a third feeling is shown by the inhabitants of the city : the fear. The fear of each other, even when there is no reason to feel it. The short story of Sila, *Khop khun ... Krungthep*, illustrated well enough this irrational feeling. The taxi driver, remembering that a friend of him has been attacked one night and that every day, in newspapers, he can read about violence, becomes really frightened by his customer. Tall and strong, the customer wear a thick moustache and has a scar on the cheekbone, under the left eye. He holds tight on his knees a black bag that seems very precious. His odd-looking makes the taxi driver really nervous and anxious. The driver tries several times to start up a conversation with the customer, but this one answers only by few words. Actually, the customer is afraid of the driver, and the driver of the customer. Throughout the story, they feel more and more anxious, suspicious, and frightened, until they arrive to the house where the customer wanted to go. After he left the car, the two of them feel free and thankful. Thankful for each other, and thankful for the city, that is not as bad as they think. That is why the short story is entitled *Khop khun ... Krungthep*.

Fortunately, the relations between people in the street are not always that pessimistic ! Characters of the short stories encounter sometimes people they like or who give them good feelings.

The hero of *Khrop khrua klang thanon* takes advantage of being stuck in traffic jams for encountering people who could be useful in his job. Walking around his car stopped, he speaks with men : "We speak about our problems, we criticise politics, we chat about business or sport. We are like neighbours. (...) I work in advertising business (...) I find sometimes

some unexpected customers". Later, the narrator meets a strange guy who is planting out some banana trees on the central strip of the road. The guy wants to plant out more and more trees to fight off pollution.

Despite the discouraging feelings shown by the hero of *Muang Luang*, he makes an encounter in the bus which changes his state of mind. When he hears the Isan man singing, the narrator thinks at first that he is dreaming. Listening to the folk song, his mind is transported to his village, with his girlfriend. It makes him feeling better, forgetting his bad situation in Bangkok. At the end of the story, the narrator gets off the bus, following the singer. He asks him : "Excuse-me to ask you that, but are you crazy ?" The singer answers : "No, but I wish I am".

The journalist of *Thoe yang mi chiwit yu...* (Atsiri) meets a young woman who is running in his *soi*, frightened by people chasing her. The story takes place during the events of October 1976, and the young woman is carrying some political posters. Although they just speak a brief moment, the journalist feels himself very involved in this encounter. When the girl leaves, she gives him her name, that he writes on a piece of paper. Later on, he find her name on the list of the people killed in massacre. This encounter symbolise the relation between people who were involved in the political events and the ones who did not dare to. There is a lot of emotion in all this short story, and despite the sadness, a kind of hope.

Vision of the street according to social class

As seen before, the vision of the street and of the city is quite different, whether heroes are car users, bus users or pedestrians. And of course, the way of transportation is usually connected to the social class.

In the short stories chosen for this paper, three kinds of people are represented : the middle-class, in *Khrop khrua klang thanon*, in which the hero is working in advertising and seems quite fashionable, living in modern style, and appreciating the urban life ; the employees, in *Ruang thamada* or *Muang Luang*, who have definitely not the same standard of life and who did not really choose to live in Bangkok but have to for economic reasons ; the very poor, in *Thung khra cha ni klai...* , who have to struggle for life at every moment, living in a slum, having no job, and feeling bad because the children are not living in good conditions.

Even if, sometimes, the narrator of *Khrop khrua klang thanon* seems to regret the countryside, he appears like a very integrated person in the urban society. Living in the suburbs, he points out a paradox : "If we were poor, we could live in a slum in the heart of the city, as high class

people who reside in condominiums (...)". It is actually what is shown in *Thung khra cha ni klai* ... The poor woman who lives in a hut by the *khlong* is surrounded by rich buildings and restaurants. The hero of *Khrop khrua klang thanon* is attached to the signs that prove his social status : the place where he lives, and the car : "Having a car allows us to rise our social position".

On the opposite, the hero of *Muang luang* endure his life in Bangkok with a lot of difficulty. He is suffering of the transports, the heat, the loneliness. Forced to come in Bangkok for working and living, he always keeps in mind his province : "If only I could choose ! I should not be in this terrible big city".

The mother in *Thung khra cha ni klai*... has a vision of the city even worse. She compares the city to a tiger, that pulls her life to pieces. She came also from countryside, with her husband. He promised her that they will get a better life, jobs and money. But then, he left her with their two children and disappeared in the big city. And her life is worse than before, because of the city and the hard urban life.

Conflict between tradition and modernity

The opposition between tradition and modernity is to be seen in a lot of short stories. Many themes are linked to this conflict, especially the nostalgia for the province. For most of the characters of short stories - and thus, for the authors - the tradition as found in villages is often idealised in opposition to the bad effects of the modern city.

The narrator of *Muang luang* feels really nostalgic listening to the Isan folk song : "Yes, it is that ! Exactly ! Behind my house, there was some palm trees. I plaid flute, I was an applauded singer of *ram wong* in the village". Thinking about his girlfriend, he dreams : "To take along my girlfriend in a boat, for fishing together. It is a dream I have, but it is only a dream". But still, he keeps the sense of reality, saying : "I would like to come back in my place, in province. I would like it so much, but what can I do there ? There is no job at all, except to fish or to collect shellfishes. Not enough for living expenses. I could not stand a job of labourer in a rice-processing factory".

Even the narrator of *Khrop khrua klang thanon*, who seems to like his urban life, think about the traditional way of life : "I know that after we, human beings, have destroyed the nature all around us, our own inner nature has been consumed by urban life, pollution, traffic jams...

The family life, that was an hymn to happiness by its rhythm and elements, felt in incoherence and instability".

The characters of *Ruang thamada*, living in an old house in a *soi*, are re-creating the village life in their house. The old woman, refusing modern medicine in hospital, calls a traditional healer to cure her daughter. Although she is living in Bangkok, not far from hospitals, she reacts as if she was still inhabiting a village. Traditional healer, astrologer, masseuse are trying to remedy to the cancer, but without success. The narrator tries several times to persuade the mother to take her daughter to hospital, but she refuses, arguing that the modern methods were not efficacious and too expensive. The narrator does not dare to insist, feeling that if the girl dies in hospital, the mother will accuse him. The narrator is really representative of the young employees class in urban society. He is always hesitating between tradition and modernity, solidarity and indifference, commitment in traditional values and fascination for Westernised city. These oppositions are symbolised by the three conditions that determined his choice for a room : "I wanted a room that be cheap, near civilisation and far from crowd".

Conclusion

As seen in this paper, short stories are a very rich material for studying about city and urban society. I tried here to expose only a few themes connected to the street as a social area, but, of course, a lot of other themes can be analysed, especially about how the traditional ways of life are re-created in urban environment and how the urban specifics are taken back to villages. If the four authors of my corpus have distinct visions of the city and urban culture, they all point out the changes of the Thai society and the transformations of the traditional values in contact with modernisation and Westernisation of the city.

Prospects of research about literature and city, are obviously wide and numerous. Since the city is in perpetual change and development, we can imagine that literature will follow the same way. How the financial crisis - that makes the city changing too - will be perceived and shown by Thai writers should be a very interesting point to study.

Loved and hated, Bangkok makes everybody concerned : inhabitants, writers, researchers and even tourists... In his dictionary, Win Liaw-warin writes : "If Krungthep were a cocktail, it would be composed of : 10% of natural sweetness ; 40% of synthetic sweetness ; 30% of lead essence ; 20% of dirty sediments". Let us hope that the natural sweetness will grow up.

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