Suon Sorin, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land*. Translated by Roger Nelson. 108 pp. ISBN 978-981-3250-77-2.

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This translation of Suon Sorin's sole published work of fiction is an important contribution to Anglophone Khmer studies but is problematic for a number of reasons. In his very substantial Introduction, translator Roger Nelson refers to the novel as "an iconic work of modern Khmer literature," and points out that it "remains widely read in Cambodia today, and is still prescribed reading in many Cambodian schools and universities." He suggests that this "canonical status" of the work makes it fitting for it to be "one of the first modern Khmer novels to appear in English translation."

While probably not the worst choice of Cambodian novel to translate into English, given the fact that it is the first translation of any novel at all from the Khmer language into English, Sorin's novel is a contentious choice from a purely literary point of view. Nelson summarizes the problem in his Introduction when he warns the reader that the "narrative and prose may in parts seem quaint or awkward to today's reader," but asserts in the same sentence that "the novel's historical value is great." In the rest of his Introduction, Nelson does not make any attempt to qualify this summary dismissal of the novel's literary value; in fact, there is no discussion whatsoever of the literary qualities of the novel. Instead, the Introduction focuses on the novel's various points of contact with Cambodian society, history, and politics. A significant section of the Introduction is also dedicated to contextualizing the protagonist Sam's occupation as a *cyclo* (pedicab) driver, with the discussion anchored on a couple of contemporaneous paintings of *cyclo* drivers.

Nelson grounds his sociocultural discussion of the text in a rather selective interpretation of ideas articulated by professor of Khmer literature Khuon Sokhampu in a pedagogical text published in 1963, arguing that this focus on the sociocultural context is shared by other Khmer scholars. This same focus on the sociocultural and historical context at the expense of the intrinsic literary qualities of the text marks George Chigas's translation and analysis of the classic 19th-century narrative poem *Tum Teav*, as well as Klairung Amratisha's PhD thesis on the development of the modern Cambodian novel. In his Introduction, Nelson goes on to acknowledge the fact that such an approach "will overlook the literary and other qualities of Sorin's writing," but then suggests that his translation paves the way for future studies that can pay more attention to close textual analysis.

The problem with this is that most readers familiar with the conventions of the novel in just about any other language, will find Sorin's text, as translated by Nelson, precisely what the latter characterizes it to be: "quaint or awkward." In fact most readers will likely dismiss Sorin's novel as nothing more than a clumsy piece of propaganda or an exercise in toadying up to Prince Norodom Sihanouk or his *Sangkum* government, which ruled Cambodia from 1955 to 1970. Sorin's novel won the first prize at the first Indradevi Literary Competition organized in 1961 by the Khmer Writers Association, with the Prince himself in attendance to deliver the prizes.

The novel tells the story of the tribulations of *cyclo* driver Sam as he struggles to make a living in the capital Phnom Penh, opposed at every step of the way by a succession of rapacious capitalist landlords and bosses. The entire narrative is framed by Sam's participation in a National Congress organized by the *Sangkum* government and it is Prince Sihanouk himself who takes centre stage in the last chapter, which quotes entire chunks of his speech. Many of the features that contemporary readers associate with the modern novel are missing from Sorin's text: rounded, fully-realized characters, meaningful character development, a realistic plot, and a carefully crafted narrative. In fact, one might not want to attach the label 'novel' to Sorin's work at all. Its 100 pages are divided into 19 chapters, each of them, 3-6 pages long, coming across either as inflated plot summaries, or very bare narratives.

The problem with presenting a translation of Sorin's novel to the Anglophone world as a representative of the modern Cambodian novel is that this only serves to reinforce a negative view of the literature of the two decades following independence in 1953. Writing specifically about a trend that began in the 1950s, Jacques Nepote and Khing Hoc Dy (1981) assert that the quality of modern Cambodian literature (as opposed to the earlier classical literature) was "normally very poor". They describe the style of the writing from this period as "careless and demagogic" and point out that novels were written "to attract the buyer, in a vulgar style" that was "often denounced by Cambodians" who were still mindful of the style of texts written in the classical tradition (69).

In the absence of any meaningful discussion of the literary qualities of the text or meaningful contextualization of the text as literature rather than as a sociocultural artefact, the reader is forced to ask two questions: "is this a poor translation?" and "is this a poor novel?"

With regards to the quality of the translation, Chigas (2021) has this to say in his review of the book:

> Nelson's English translation follows the Khmer original paragraph by paragraph and sentence by sentence very eloquently, while admirably reproducing its meaning and tone, providing English readers with a virtual replica of the original in the target language. (para 1)

This very much suggests a literal translation, and a comparison between a passage from Sorin's novel translated by Amratisha in her PhD thesis, and Nelson's own translation would appear to bear out this conclusion:

> Nowadays, Sam does not have to pin his hopes on the sky anymore because he has enough dikes, ponds and wells. Before, he had to pray to the gods to give him rain. Now, even if there is no rain, he is not hopeless because his village, which never had dikes, ponds and wells before, is now rich in water. (Amratisha 1998: 248)

> These days, Sam no longer placed his hopes in the skies, for he had a water dike, a reservoir, a well, and enough water. Before, he used to make offerings and say prayers to the spirits to bring rain … but now, even if there was no rain, Sam had no need to despair. His land, which had never before had a water dike or a reservoir or a well, now had become a great store of water. (Nelson 97)

Chigas's assessment of the value of Nelson's translation echoes the translator's own assessment: "For anyone interested in Cambodian cultural history, literary artefacts like this one are a valuable source of primary information and provide a rich opportunity for analysis and debate" (Chigas 2021, para. 1). Chigas's translation of *Tum Teav* appears to me to lean in the direction of the literal as much as Nelson's translation of Sorin's novel. The former's thorough discussion of the provenance and reception of *Tum Teav* similarly side-steps discussion of its intrinsic literary qualities. Neither of the two translators is a literary scholar; Chigas is chiefly a political commentator and cultural historian whilst Nelson is an art historian and curator; consequently no one can really fault them for not furthering the enterprise of literary criticism.

Until someone is able to provide the Anglophone scholarly community with a proper contextualization of the literary qualities of texts of modern Khmer literature, and perhaps more importantly, produce more translations, and literary analyses of the texts in question, it is difficult if not impossible to give Sorin's novel a proper assessment.

Works Cited

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