

'Wat Wanlayāngkūn' is one of the foremost representatives of the radical "new generation of writers" to which Wānit's student-hero comically turns for inspiration. "Before Reaching the Stars," first published late in 1975, in many ways exemplifies the Thai-style "socialist realism" that became increasingly popular during the democratic interregnum of 1973-76. It was composed at a time when the rightwing reaction against student militants, striking workers, and demonstrating peasants was becoming openly violent, and it contains obvious references to contemporary events and issues.⁶⁶

65. This particular statue of Brahma continues to be the object of daily devotions by Bangkok Thai of almost all social strata. It is also worth remembering that although Siam is a Buddhist country, much of the ceremonial of the court, especially coronations, is handled by Brahmins. See H.D. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies* (London: Quaritch, 1931).

66. The student is described as a reporter for a radical newspaper closely resembling the NSCT's *Athipat*, for which Wat himself was working in 1975. The reason for the boy's assassination is that he has been exposing a big mining swindle, involving "some Thais who are conniving with the Americans... [all of them] bigshots with a lot of political and bureaucratic influence." This passage seems a clear reference to the TEMCO tin-mining scandal of 1975. See Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict*, p. 165.

The central figure is a pious, middle-aged countrywoman whose second son, a student activist, has just been assassinated by rightwing extremists. Through the mother's memories we are shown how the boy became radicalized and why he met his death. The story concludes with her own (attempted?) suicide in the temple compound where his body awaits cremation.⁶⁷

The family's fortunes clearly reflect the contradictions of the American Era. Both of the mother's older sons are beneficiaries of the new Thai society: the eldest son has become a successful businessman, whose work takes him as far afield as Japan; his younger brother has successfully climbed from village to metropolitan university. But it is precisely the experience of being a student that turns the younger son into a determined critic of the system that made his family's elevation possible. Wat aptly conveys the "student consciousness" of the time by these words, which the mourning mother recalls her dead son uttering:

"Politics aren't what I'm really after. I'm using my time to study and learn about the problems of the poor, who are so much poorer than we, who don't eat three meals a day, and who have to do heavy work as manual laborers, hiring themselves out for low wages. When they demand fair pay, and appeal for help, how could you have me stand idly by, Mother? Or when the peasants demand justice,

67. It is an interesting reflection of the times, and of Wat's own politico-literary career, that he changed the ending to this story in subsequent printings. Responding to criticism from political associates that the original ending was "defeatist" and did not give readers "courage," he altered it to have the mother stand up, firmly bearing the banner of revolution. I owe this information to Ratsami Phaoluangthong and Panatda Loetlamamphai. See "Samphat: Khuy kap Bennedik Aendoesan," *Lok Nangsu* [Book World], 5:6 (March 1982), pp. 51-65, at p. 58.

sometimes to the point of having to make demonstrations, I can't possibly rest comfortably through it all. I'm concerned about our poor, not about politics. But politics concerns itself with me. So we can't escape it..."

The tune is still that of Witthayākōn's students, even if mode and key have changed. For despite the boy's rural origins, every word he utters reveals his present distance from them. He *is in a position* to "stand idly by" and to "rest comfortably through it all," if he so wishes. "The problems of the poor" are so remote that he must "volunteer" to study them, and finds nothing odd in explaining them at formal length to his rural mother. Wat's ear exactly catches the mixture of idealism and youthful pompousness in the stiff catch-phrases so familiar to readers of the radical student publications of the time.

The complex intertwining of these themes is ironically exemplified in the passage where the mother recalls the last communication she received from her son before his murder. Absorbed in his study of the "problems of the poor," and in his activity as a muck-raking radical journalist, he had long stopped writing letters home. Then one day the mailman brought her a packet containing two cassette tapes, with instructions that she play them on a Japanese tape-deck given to her by her businessman son. One tape "with a dove on the outside" contains radical folksongs for her youngest boy to enjoy;⁶⁸ the other contains a long, *recorded* message from her student son.⁶⁹

Yet for all the irony, "Before Reaching the Stars" represents

68. A clear reference to the famous cassette of Surachay Janthimathōn's *Kharawān* folk-ensemble.

69. This Khomeini-style marriage of revolution and mass-media technology is difficult to imagine in the era of Witthayākōn's volunteers.

a clear break from the stories we have considered so far. Its subject matter is murder and suicide, no longer minor episodes in the lives of little village girls and visa-seeking students. Although the dead hero is partly ironized, the movement he belongs to is not. This mother, intentionally portrayed as the "ideal Thai mother," who "no matter what reasons he gave [for his political activities]... loved him too devotedly to accept them," is miles removed from the careworn, nagging scold so tender-sharply described in Khamsing's "You'll Learn Soon Enough." And the attack on traditional institutions now appears directly in the narrative itself, rather than mediated through style and language. If the Buddhist monkhood, committed to the values of nonviolence and compassion, is a central symbol of traditional Thai culture, Wat denies the commitment and rejects the symbol. The abbot of the temple where her son's body lies is made to address the grieving mother thus:

"When he was a boy your son seemed such a good lad. It's only now I realize how mistaken I was. Who'd have thought that as he got older he'd turn into one of those extremists who are destroying the country. Too bad! Must have gone around with some fine friends, I suppose..." the abbot went on sarcastically. *"That's why these extremists don't live long. Keep a close eye on little Rō; watch out or he'll follow in his elder brother's footsteps. Ah, the young people these days, they're no good at all..."*