In recent years, interest in the Tai world outside Thailand and Laos has surged, and this high-quality, annotated translation is most welcome because it furnishes us with primary source materials to fill the huge gap in our knowledge about the history of the largest Tai polity in Yunnan east of the Salween River. Of course, the attributes of this path-breaking set of translations far outweigh the minor flaws in the maps and the typos, for it multiplies our ability to make comparisons with other polities in the Upper Mekong basin. Undoubtedly, it will soon assume status similar to that of Sao Saimong Mangrai's translations of the Chiang Tung Chronicles, and David Wyatt / Aroonrut Wichienkeeo's rendition of the Chiang Mai Chronicle, garnering plaudits for the authors.

Christian Daniels

The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen: Siam's Great Folk Epic of Love and War translated and edited by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010). Hardback: ISBN: 978-974-9511-98-5 (two-volume set); paperback: ISBN: 978-616-215-045-6.

Khun Chang Khun Phaen (*KCKP*) is a great epic not only of love and war – but also of treachery, violence, magic, romance, sex, male chauvinism, bawdy humor and more, woven into a dense tapestry of colors, flavors, sounds, and emotions. Marveling at the sumptuous milieu of old Siamese customs, beliefs, and practices in which the story takes place, the great Thai linguist William J. Gedney, commented, "if all other information on traditional Thai culture were to be lost, the whole complex could be reconstructed from this marvelous text."

The epic has long had a wide impact on many aspects of popular culture, including songs, sayings, movies, novels, magical amulets, and even cigarette cards. Its basic plot is a love triangle involving the fair, gentle Phim (who later takes the name Wanthong) and her childhood friends, Khun Chang, who is ugly and uncouth but rich, and Phlai Kaeo (later known as Khun Phaen), who is handsome and dashing, but lacking in wealth. Swept into relationships with each of them at different times for different reasons (romantic love with Khun Phaen, security with Khun Chang), Wanthong in the end is condemned to death because she cannot choose between them.

Along the way, Khun Phaen learns the lore of magic and sorcery which enables him to entice women and defeat his foes, while Khun Chang uses his wealth and wiles to bolster his position in society and win Wanthong. High points in the story include numerous occurrences of the classic Thai "wondrous scenes" or metaphors of tempestuous wind and waves used to describe love-making, Khun Phaen's creation of a spirit son and magical sword, his daring flight into the forest with Wanthong

astride the horse Color of Mist, and the frantic attempt to prevent Wanthong's execution.

Most of the action, apart from a military expedition to the north, takes place in the towns of Suphanburi, Kanburi and Phichit, at locations long abandoned, at some time around the early 17th century. Surrounding the main plot are common everyday events, such as births, deaths, funerals, and weddings, occurring in the lives of ordinary people, and told in the language of ordinary people, often with bold sexual overtones.

KCKP has been praised for its soaring poetic passages, criticized for its burlesque scenes and graphic portrayal of warfare, and condemned for its misogynistic ending. However, until a few years ago there existed no translation of the full text into a Western language because of the highly challenging nature of the task. Not only is the poem lengthy (a famous published edition consists of 40 volumes), it exists in various versions, has a complex history as a commoners' oral text that was transformed into a courtly written one, and is full of literary devices and references to cultural practices and beliefs, local flora and fauna, and other obsolete minutia that defy translation and are even difficult for Thais to understand.

In 2004, however, the husband and wife team of Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit took on that challenge. Baker, a researcher and resident of Thailand for over thirty years, and Pasuk, an economics professor at Chulalongkorn University, had already co-authored several books on Thai politics and history that earned them wide acclaim for their knowledge and insight. With their wide network of colleagues and contacts, the couple invited ideas, leads, comments and suggestions from everyone interested in contributing to knowledge about this iconic story. They made a working draft of the translation available online while they refined the language, organization, and references. The effort culminated in a brilliant and delightful two-volume, 1430-page opus published by Silkworm Books in 2010.

Anyone who has tried to translate classical Thai poetry understands the challenge of rendering into another language not only the meaning but also the essence and feeling of the original. Thai poetry is especially difficult to translate because it is based on elaborate patterns of meter, rhyme and alliteration, as well as a heavy infusion of loanwords from Khmer and Pali-Sanskrit, while completely ignoring grammatical structure. As Baker pointed out in one of his blogs, "the wording can be almost telegraphese. The reader has to supplement the syntax." Sensibly, the authors did not attempt a word-for-word translation or one in poetic form, but instead a prose rendition that captures the essence of the characters and their speech by way of the storyteller. The result is lively, straightforward, and readable. The phrases have a cadence that moves the reader along briskly though the long and winding plot. Sentences are alternately eloquent, informative, and earthy – as needed.

But Baker and Pasuk have done much more than translate the poem. Their detailed annotation serves as a cultural encyclopedia that defines esoteric terms,

explains metaphors, identifies place names, quotes literary authorities, and provides other clues that guide the reader through puzzling passages and references. In fact, the book is worth purchasing for these entries alone. Among the most fascinating is the staggering array of practices involving magical powers that Khun Phaen acquires as a Buddhist novice monk through his quest for knowledge of "inner ways" (*thang nai*) or hidden forces. These include powers derived from the use of mantras, yantras, charms and other occult practices sometimes involving use of bodies of those who had died a violent death. Much of the story hinges on the balance between these powers, human conflict and the desire for control, and the force of karma.

In terms of organization, the book consists of two thick volumes, each with a convenient ribbon place-marker. In Volume 1, comprising 836 pages, the action begins immediately after a two-page preface and a list of principal characters. The story starts with the birth of the three main characters and ends with Wanthong's death. Following the translation are the various components of what might be called a users' manual: a pronunciation guide for key proper names; a synopsis of the story; a timeline; maps; a glossary; and a detailed 69-page "afterword," containing a wealth of information on the story's origins and evolution, poetic features, physical landscape, and social setting.

Volume 2 presents a continuation of the story with additional episodes involving Khun Phaen's son, alternative tellings of certain episodes of the basic narrative, two prefaces by Prince Damrong, and a catalogue of flora, fauna, costumes, weapons, and food in the text. Both volumes are heavily footnoted and lavishly sprinkled with 400 delightful illustrations by the gifted artist Muangsing Janchai, many based on old paintings and drawings, to help the reader visualize the setting.

And, for the convenience of readers who cannot commit to reading every page from beginning to end, the translators in their preface (p. x) suggest two approaches that exclude certain chapters and focus on the key episodes of the story. These shortcuts make sense because traditional oral performances usually consisted of a single episode rather than a set of acts narrating the entire story as in a Western play, and even in its early written forms, the story was not intended to be read cover to cover. Moreover, although all Thais are familiar with *KCKP* in some way or other, few have ever read or had to study more than a few lines, and these were often out of context.

Unlike other important works of Thai classical literature like the *Ramakien*, *Inaw*, and *Sam Kok*, which were courtly creations based on foreign (Indic, Javanese or Chinese) sources, *KCKP*'s plot is derived from a local tale, told and retold by ordinary storytellers as a means of entertainment. Moreover, its main characters are not the deities or kings found in court literature, but members of the minor local gentry and commoners who live their lives at the mercy at those with wealth and power.

As for its history, *KCKP* is thought to date back to around 1600 to a story about the death of a beautiful woman, which was passed along orally by storytellers

who embellished and expanded it over the years with outside episodes and bawdy comedy. Baker and Pasuk suggest that its continued popularity stemmed from its two core themes: 1) the situation of women living in a society in which they were unable to control their lives, and 2) the story of an ordinary man "pitted against wealth and power" (p. 886). Originally a commoners' tale, it was adopted by the court around the early 18th century and revised repeatedly over the next two centuries. Along the way it was censored, revised, and edited, the most prominent edition of which was produced by Prince Damrong in 1917-18. This edition, in the form of a book that is divided into chapters, is the basis of the translation by Baker and Pasuk, who supplemented it with "roughly a hundred passages from older versions." These include both printed versions and traditional accordion-folded paper manuscripts, including a 40-volume work published at Wat Ko (formally known as Wat Samphanthawong) in Bangkok in 1890, now in the University of Michigan's William J. Gedney Collection. That edition includes many bawdy passages that Prince Damrong deleted in his edition out of a sense of overzealous propriety.

By assembling it all together into an historically accurate, highly readable work, Baker and Pasuk have created a stunning landmark contribution not only to the field of Thai literature, but to Thai art, performance, humanities, and social studies. Its references to gender relations, ceremonies, magical rites, social hierarchies, and myriad other aspects of life not only provide a wealth of evidence about the past but also raise countless questions for further study. Examples include the relative freedom of women of social classes, the role of the supernatural in everyday life, attitudes toward the forest, and the extent to which such beliefs and attitudes still impact outlooks and decision making today. Apart from serving as an encyclopedia of early Siamese culture, this book could comprise the basis of a syllabus for a semester-long college seminar on Thai literature, history, and traditions.

In November, 2012, according to the authors' blog on the Silkworm Books website (http://www.silkwormbooks.com/blogs/kckp/), a paperback edition became available, containing 600 corrections (mostly technical edits and additions to the notes, only a handful or retranslations), attesting to Baker and Pasuk's tireless dedication. The blog offers a wealth of insight into how they went about their work, with musings, events, performances, reviews, and updates. It also carries the news that they have completed a Thai text of *KCKP* based on the Wat Ko version. Let's hope that their enthusiasm will inspire more translations of old Thai literature despite the difficulty of equaling the level of excellence they have achieved in translating this superb folk tale.

Bonnie Brereton