

INTRODUCTION TO THE “THE ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY IDEAS
IN THE SANSKRIT STANZAS OF THE SDOK KAK THOM INSCRIPTION,
AND THE LOCATION OF STANZA CXXIX IN THIS INSCRIPTION”
BY AU CHHIENG

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The essay we present in English translation here is the first in Au Chhieng’s “Studies in Indo-Khmer Philology” series published in the *Journal Asiatique* from 1963 to 1974. Its immediate subject is two Sanskrit stanzas which Au Chhieng deems to appear, physically and semantically, out of place in the Khmer portion of the famous bilingual Sdok Kak Thom inscription, and their erroneous reading by previous modern scholarly interpreters of the text. The goal of locating the place in the text where these stanzas belong appears modest. But the two stanzas in question supply ample grist to Au Chhieng’s mill, his close reading grinding out a refined analysis of Khmer Sanskrit poetics with ramifications well beyond the essay’s stated prosaic goal.

With the benefit of Dominic Goodall’s erudition, we can now in fact pursue Au Chhieng’s lead in correcting the erroneous in the latter’s own reading. In the Note which appears after the translated essay, Goodall draws comparisons with other examples in the Angkorian corpus to highlight the semantic and positional logic of the stanzas in question which had indeed escaped the grasp of a long line of scholars including Au Chhieng it turns out. There are many lessons to be had here. The situation points up Au Chhieng’s status as an heir of both Khmer and Orientalist erudition – an heir in good form, whose transmission serves not to reify knowledge but to engender thought. This is a point developed more fully in Grégory Mikaelian’s critical biography of Au Chhieng also published here. To err is human, in truth. And the truth of Au Chhieng’s published work lies not in any spectacular discovery he might have made of this or that, but in his writing.

Au Chhieng’s highly wrought language, in this essay as in all of his published work, is

anything but gratuitous. The unrelenting, meticulous attention to writing which characterizes his œuvre comprises a disarming performativity: demonstrating in his own masterful analyses the literary and grammatical prowess of ancient Cambodia's Sanskrit authors, he explicitly establishes a place for the indigenous intellectual at once in the European colonial scholarly milieu and in the ancient world of his ancestors. With a nod to Sanskrit practice, two conceptual streams are deployed in one. As readers, we are made to see not only the nuanced multivalent poetics of ancient Cambodian masters of Sanskrit, but also that of our own author as he defies colonial narratives of indigenous lack. The "illogic" denounced in the Sdok Kak Thom text by European commentators is countered, first, by situating the apparently "fragmented" nature of the text as an operative feature of Sanskrit poetics; and then, through further analysis of this apparent "fragmentation," by unveiling and celebrating in the text a cogent historical-cum-literary accomplishment – a "continuous chain of ideas," as he says – an accomplishment too elusively sophisticated to have been perceived by the colonial commentators' eyes.

This discreet expression of political resistance in artful form, where two temporalities are made to operate simultaneously, the one, historical, illuminating the other, contemporary, and vice-versa, is of course an established Indic practice across the literary and the visual arts. Just as we see King Sihanouk appearing to receive a portion of the holy relics in a painted scene of the famous aftermath of the Buddha's funeral to re-make a political statement in the here and now; just as we see the Ordeal of Sita represented again and again in an implicit critique of phallocratic oppression which nonetheless, in its very repetition, contributes to reinforcing the same social order...., we see Au Chhieng intentionally conflating the historical and the contemporary, embodying thus, in his work as in his person, a subtle form of anti-colonial resistance.

In the present essay we see in the apparently innocuous image of an "Indochinese porter" [*un porteur indochinois*] a notable exemplar of the aesthetico-political feat sustained over a lifetime of scholarship. The "Indochinese porter" comes in the climax of Au Chhieng's argument. In this hard-working, agile and artful body, this icon of indigenous service to demanding masters, we find Au Chhieng's solution to the enigma which has long escaped Sdok Kak Thom's European commentators:

From a grammatical point of view, the vagabond stanza is characterised, as we have already said, by the absence of a subject "in the flesh" in the conjugated verbe *arhati*. Indeed in stanza LXXIX, the verb likewise in its conjugated form *cakre*, also has no real subject pronoun. But for this verb, we know that it depends on the relative pronoun *yo* placed at the head of the preceding stanza LXXVIII. A simple metrical balancing act requires a counterweight to this *cakre* to establish the necessary stylistic equilibrium. A bit like an Indochinese porter (those who have been in Indochina will have noticed this on a daily basis) maintains in equilibrium, even while running or walking very quickly, the loads at either end of his pole by a regular balancing back and forth, from both the shoulders and the hips. So on one end of the pole metrically represented by *yo*, we already have *cakre*. We need at the other end the required counterweight, which counterweight is advantageously

provided in *arhati* which in turn finds in the relative pronoun *yo* its real subject. And our vagabond stanza takes advantage of this discovery to return to its true home, situated exactly between stanza LXXVII and stanza LXXVIII...

This is neither the first nor the last time in this essay where Au Chhieng anthropomorphizes language: Sanskrit is for him a living, breathing subject. The immediate object of the essay, the supposed misplaced stanzas of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, are, as we see here, “vagabonds” for which he seeks the “true home.” The codified malediction and benediction which frequently conclude Khmer Sanskrit epigraphic texts are likened to a bride and groom who do or do not, as the case may be, copulate. But the metaphor of the Indochinese porter takes the rhetorical work to another, overtly contemporary political level. Any visitor to Indochina, he notes in apostrophizing his French readers, will have remarked the Indochinese porter: of course this is a method of transporting loads that no doubt predates the colonial intervention in Southeast Asia, but in the context in which Au Chhieng is writing, it is difficult not to see a commentary on colonial relations in this image of the porter, whose body serves as a means of transport, perhaps like an ancient scribe, a modern scholar-interpreter... or a translator. But, for all the looking, what Au Chhieng’s readers will not have seen, and which Au Chhieng proceeds to show them in detail, is the supremely artful work of this body. The metaphor makes visible both in the body of the porter and in the body of the text the refinement and logical coherence of an indigenous corpus that was only partially visible to the colonial gaze. In short, it shows the *human* inhabiting the grammar – the “subject ‘in the flesh,’” the careful, regulated, meditative balance of the composed porter’s body as of the composed text. In its highly wrought poetics conveyed by Au’s highly wrought metaphors, the Sdok Kak Thom text is shown to be anything but “illogical.” And the cosmopolitan vagabond is returned to his rightful – Khmer Sanskritic – home. In correcting previous translations to confirm the logic of the actual placement of the stanzas on the stone, Dominic Goodall has in effect taken this logic - of Au Chhieng, as of the ancient epigraphic author - one step further.

Let me note, also, that Au Chhieng’s culture, like that of his Khmer predecessors, as well as that of his French contemporaries, was thoroughly hybrid, with access to Sanskrit had through vernacular languages. For the latter group of which Au Chhieng also claims rightful membership, Europe’s classical *lingua franca*, Latin, effectively becomes a vernacular, the mother tongue embedded in French and through which the cosmopolitan foreign language, Sanskrit, is compared, contrasted and described. At times, Au Chhieng can be said, for example, to have adopted the classical Ciceronian periodic style with which he compares and contrasts Sanskrit. His sentences are typically convoluted, comprising multiple subordinate clauses and appositions, often revealing their logic only in closing with the belated emergence of the principal subject. This is a far cry indeed from the much decried “fragmented” stylistics of Sanskrit verse, which fragmentation, Au Chhieng – with the subtle triumphalism that is his hallmark – comes to rename “autonomy.” In the end, it should be said that the unfurling of logical progression through grammatical nesting makes for an elegant and highly compelling exposition of the unfurling of logical progression in the Khmer style, where a sequence of literary allusions link a sequence of “autonomous” Sanskrit

stanzas to form a singular if multivalent continuous chain.

Speaking of which, it is instructive to return to Au Chhieng's chain where the "Indochinese porter" has a correspondent in the form of the ancient Khmer scribe. Au Chhieng insists in his very first sentence on the singular length of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, an excessive length that is the cause of all the trouble: it was too heavy a burden for the scribe "charged" [*chargé*: weighted down] with inscribing it, who was therefore unable to "sustain" [*soutenir*: to hold up] his attention through to the end. So he dropped a couple of stanzas, which he later collected and inserted out of order. Au Chhieng interprets the out-of-place location of the two stanzas as a message from the scribe (not the author) to the reader, an invitation to find their proper location that Au Chhieng willingly accepts: from porter to porter, from scribe to hermeneut, the charge passes from hand to hand. Thus the "invisible chain" (which is opposed to the "visible" chain of non-Sanskrit literary languages where "the sentences are chained together [*s'enchaînement*] in a visible and continuous fashion"), like the burden carried by the various porters, is itself an ambiguous, or polyvalent figure here. It is difficult not to see it as a sign of colonial domination or oppression, but it is, at the same time, the mark of a cultural resistance to, and perhaps even in, that very oppression.