

The two stories that follow were written by the infant prodigy of Thai fiction, Chatcharin Chaiwat. Although he was only 21 years old when the first of them appeared, they evince a remarkable maturity of vision and a fully-formed personal style. "The Railway Hamlet" takes the reader into one of Siam's oldest industrial communities, for railways were introduced into the country already towards the end of the nineteenth century. Yet it is a community that has in one respect completely changed its character since that era; while the railways were built by imported

71. This isolation by no means wholly ended when she met and married (in 1974) Suchat Sawatsi, the well-known author, anthologist, and editor of *Sangkhomsat Parithat*. For further details on her life, see the biographical appendix.

Chinese labor--at enormous cost in human life⁷² --Chatcharin's hamlet has become completely Thai. Nonetheless, the age of the industry is essential to the story for, in its bare bones, it concerns the gruesome accidental death of a railway laborer and the identical fate that meets his son a generation later.

The story is told in the first person, by the childhood friend and playmate of "Peng," the railwayman's son, who witnesses the father's funeral, and later, on a brief visit home from Bangkok and the successful life of a student, that of "Peng" himself. The strange power of the narrative derives from this anonymous observer's awareness of both separation and attachment to his community of origin. On the one hand, the engines of change have irremediably transformed his relationship with his childhood companion. On his return to the hamlet, he is treated by "Peng" with the respectful deference due to any member of the country's university-educated elite, and he finds himself too changed in mind and habit to break through the barrier of his success:

The truth is I felt pretty uncomfortable, for in the old days we had been equals. Our fathers had had almost the same rank at work. Even though his father had been my father's subordinate, his financial position had been no worse than mine. He'd often treated me--and fought with me--without any inhibitions. Inwardly puzzling how and why two people, who came from the same place, whose way of life had been so similar, could become so unequal, I leaned back, chatting casually. There was something that made me want to dash over and embrace him as a dear

72. "It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of Chinese lost their lives prior to 1910 on railway construction in Siam." G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p.115.

old friend; yet something else held me back--I couldn't say what. I only remember thinking that his sitting lower down [than I] made it difficult for me to jump up and hug him to my heart's content.

When "Peng" humbly invites him home for a simple workman's meal, the narrator feels put off by the thought of what will be served, and makes a transparent excuse for declining.

On the other hand, it is precisely because he grew up in the hamlet that the narrator is in a position to see the deaths of "Peng" and his father, a generation apart, as a single, and social, tragedy. At the funeral:

I felt certain that what had happened to "Peng" would be forgotten before long... There'd be a new young worker in his place--who might well be his own son. And so it would go, on and on, over and over. People would always say: "Don't brood over such a trifle. It's not worth it..."

It must have been because the sun had just disappeared that I was confused enough to say out loud: "You know, he's not really dead at all. Do you see his two little kids? Do you see his wife? Do you see their future? That's just it, no one sees. Where will those two kids end up? It's not over yet. I know for sure that it's not over yet. It'll happen again, over and over, because no one gives a damn about these little people."

That the grief-stricken narrator speaks of "Peng" and his family as "these little people" reflects Chatcharin's sense of the fateful separation of himself and his upwardly-mobile fellow student-intellectuals from their communities of origin, but also of the moral

obligations that this separation entails. For the very structure of the tale suggests that only its readers can “see” what has happened, and will go on happening, in the railway hamlet. The railwaymen themselves will never read his pages and will stoically continue to accept each death as chance or destiny, while the state railway corporation, oblivious and indifferent, will continue to devour the lives in its trust.