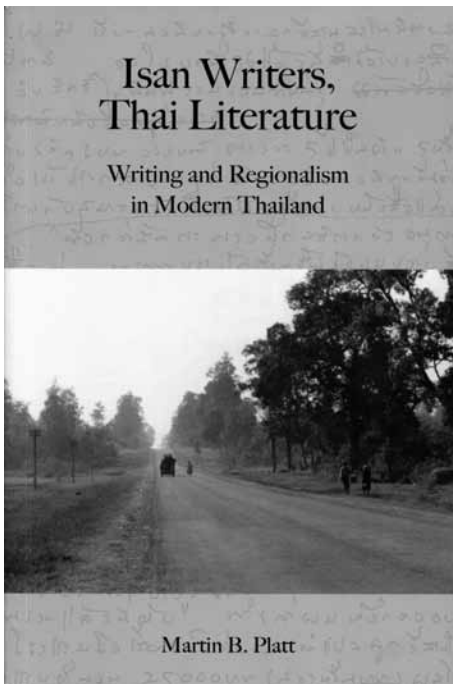


events in Southeast Asia is well written and thought provoking. In this case, these events overshadow the book's subject. Unfortunately, the author's search for Jim Thompson the political, or "ideal" man, turns out to be a chase after a mirage.

Jeffery Sng

Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand by Martin B. Platt (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press; and Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013). ISBN: 978-9971-69-697-9.



In Thailand today everyone knows that Isan refers to northeastern Thailand, but the term is understood by urban people differently from those who live, or have their roots, in the region. For most urban middle and upper class people, Isan is assumed to mean a place of uneducated and unsophisticated country people who speak an unrefined language (primarily Lao). In the political rhetoric of the 21st century, the *khon isan* (คนอีสาน), the northeastern people, are often symbolized as stupid water buffaloes. What Platt succeeds in doing in this pioneering work is demonstrating that for at least half a century there have been a number of men and a few women who write from their own experience of a mainly rural world where most people speak as their native language a dialect of Lao or, in some cases, of

Khmer, but who write in the national language and whose contributions are to the national literature of Thailand.

What makes a writer an "Isan" writer? This is a question that Platt pursues throughout his book in which he examines some two dozen writers whose published work appeared in the second half of the 20th century. First, a modern Isan writer is not one whose education was gained as it was traditionally, in a monastic school, and who learned to write in Lao, Khmer or what is called *tuatham* (ตัวธรรม) (literally 'dhammic script'), an orthography once used for Buddhist texts not only in northeastern and northern Thailand, but also in Laos. Rather, a modern Isan writer writes in standard Thai, the language he or she learned in a government school. Secondly, although a modern Isan writer may draw on the traditional literature of the region – legends incorporated into sermons given by monks or used as the basis for performances of

folk opera, *môlam mu* (หมอลำหมู่) – the modern Isan writer situates himself or herself with reference to novels, short stories, and poetry that has been composed by other writers in standard Thai. Finally, in contrast to traditional or modern *môlam* whose audiences have always been primarily people from northeastern Thailand, “few Isan writers, especially those working at the end of the 20th century, saw themselves as writing specifically for other Isan people....Isan writers recognized that their audience was the Thai reading public in general, and thus their goals were primarily to educate outsiders, to bring about social and political change (and thereby to improve the conditions of Isan) or simply to assert the presence and significance of Isan.” (230) An Isan writer, Platt concludes, is typically one born in, and who usually grew up in, northeastern Thailand and whose “writing is related to Isan,” (226)¹

Some writers who originally came from northeastern Thailand, like the highly published Kanchana Nakkhanan (กาญจนา นาคพันธ์) (b. 1921), have not been identified as *khon isan* and have written only a little about northeastern themes. Platt includes her as one of the first Isan writers, because in some of her stories her portrayal of rural people – based on those in the Northeast – shows these people “worthy of sympathy and respect.” (48) Two other writers who are a little younger than Kanchana – Khamsing Srinawak (penname, Lao Khamhawm) (คำสิงห์ ศรีนอก / ลาว คำหอม) (b. 1930) and Khamphun Bunthawi (คำพูน บุญทวี) (1928-2003) – whose work has been based much more on their own Isan experience are recognized as foundational Isan writers. Khamphun’s work, and notably *Luk Isan* (ลูกอีสาน), his most famous work, is at once autobiographical and what I would also term ethnographic in its detailed depiction of rural Isan life; “in its humorous, reduplicative non-linear characteristics [*Luk Isan*] recalls the techniques of Isan/Lao oral arts.” (126) In contrast, Khamsing, who was influenced by Western scholars associated with the Cornell project of the 1950s for whom he worked, is more analytical in his approach, wanting as he said “people with power in the cities to understand and sympathize with people like Nai Nak Na-ngam,” a northeastern villager who is the main character in one of his stories (quoted at p. 57). He influenced the Isan and other writers who came to be associated with leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

By the mid to late 1960s, Thai society had undergone a radical socioeconomic transformation. In the post-Second World War period, the Thai economy boomed as a result of the marked increase in Thai exports – mainly of rice and other primary products, the extremely large transfers of aid from the United States, and the side-effects of the American war in Vietnam, including the establishment of American military bases in Thailand and the servicing of hundreds of thousands of GIs on ‘rest and recreation’. An increasingly larger percentage of rural northeasterners – first male, and then also female – found temporary and sometimes, more rarely,

¹ The volume published by the Isan Writers Association, สาบอีสาน: รวมเรื่องสั้นของนักเขียนภาคอีสาน (‘Scent of the Northeast: Collected stories by Isan Writers’) [พระนคร]: เคล็ดไทย, 2551, might well be read as a companion volume to Platt’s book.

permanent work in Bangkok. During this period when Thailand was under a military dictatorship, there was marked corruption and no political will to institute policies that would have ameliorated the growing inequalities in wealth between Bangkok and rural Thailand. These inequalities became the concern not only of a growing student movement, but also of writers who took as their responsibility producing stories to promote attention primarily to the plight of rural people.

These writers took inspiration from Jit Phumisak, the Thai philologist, historian, and Marxist, who was killed in 1966 while fighting alongside the Communist Party of Thailand. Jit had argued that literature and art should serve the people, a proposition that was taken up by writers under the banner of “Literature for Life” (*wannakam pheua chiwit* / วรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิต). In the 1960s and 1970s, most well-known Isan writers became identified with this movement.

Platt discusses several of these writers, including Surachai Janthimathorn (สุรชัย จันทิมาธร) (b. 1948) and Prasert Jandam (ประเสริฐ จันดำ) (1945-1995). Surachai, who came from the minority Khmer-speaking people of Isan, had acquired an impressive ability as a writer in Thai of short stories, poems and songs, and used his ability “to speak forcefully against injustice and the suffering it causes.” (86) After the coup of 1976 when the student movement and its supporters were forcefully repressed, Surachai “went to the jungle”, that is, he joined the revolutionary movement led by the Communist Party of Thailand. He, like many others who joined the ill-fated communist-led revolution, became disillusioned with the party and, after an amnesty in 1980, returned to society. His subsequent writings evolved from revolutionary themes to manifestations of the “growing regionalism in Thai literature.”

Prasert, a Sisaket native, in his numerous books and poems made himself “almost synonymous with Isan writing, political struggle, and Literature for Life” (86) in the 1970s. Although his life was short, since his death he has become a legend as people have “rediscovered his writing and associated him somewhat nostalgically with the golden age of political activism and literary presence on the national stage.” (105)

The shift away from seeking the revolutionary overthrow of the Thai political system to the quest by Isan people to become recognized as full citizens of Thailand, with the right to help choose the leaders who govern them, was foreshadowed in the writing of Khamman Khonkhai (คำหมาน คนไค) (b. 1937). Platt notes that Khamman’s primary interest “is education and teaching,” (127) as is manifest in his well-known *Khru Ban Nok* (ครูบ้านนอก), “Village School Teacher,” a book made into a film and translated into English by Gehan Wijewardene and published as *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp*. The teacher in a Thai government school in rural Isan holds a very critical position serving, as I have shown elsewhere, to reshape Isan villagers’ identity so that they come to see themselves as Thai citizens, but with a distinctive

regional character.² Khamman's writing dramatically pursues this theme.

Platt shows how Isan writers such as Yong Yasothorn (ยงค์ ยโสธร) (penname of Prayong Mulsan) and Fon Fafang (ฟอน ฝาฟาง) (penname of Wira Sudsang), who both emerged from the late 1970s on, embraced a regionalism (*thongthin niyom* / ทองถิ่นนิยม) that seeks to identify, discuss, and assert the value of Isan artistic, historical, linguistic, and local cultural products as significant components of the cultural heritage of Thailand. By the end of the 20th century, the fact that newer Isan writers such as Phaiwarin Khaongam (ไพวรินทร์ ขาวงาม), the winner of the prestigious SEAWrite Award, Prachakhom Lunachai (ประชาคม ลุนาชัย), winner "of all the major Thai literary awards except the SEAWrite Award," (192) Manote Phromsingh (มานิต พรหมสิงห์), "among the most promising of the new generation of Isan writers," (197) see themselves as contributing more generally to Thai literature, and not only to a regional literature, has made the category of Isan writers less clearly demarcated than it was in the 1970s.

Platt's book, with its exceptional combination of critical readings of a large body of Thai literature by Isan writers, interviews with many writers, and insightful reflections on how these writers have developed in the turbulent decades of late 20th century Thailand, has made a unique contribution to the understanding of writers with roots in the distinctive region of northeastern Thailand. One looks forward to Platt writing a new chapter that examines Isan writers in the era that began early in the 21st century with the rise of the populist politics most associated with Thaksin Shinawatra. As support for these politics is very marked among northeasterners, one would expect that a newer generation of Isan writers would be shaped not only by general trends in Thai literature, but also by the experiences of the Red Shirt movement and the conflict with those of the Thai middle and upper classes.

Charles Keyes

² See "The Proposed World of the School: Thai Villagers Entry into a Bureaucratic State System," in *Reshaping Local Worlds: Rural Education and Cultural Change in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Charles F. Keyes. (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies), 1991, pp. 87-138.