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## **Ellen Boccuzzi, *Bangkok Bound***

**Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012. Pp. viii, 192; English and Thai references, index.**

**Reviewed by Susan F. Kepner.**

Ellen Boccuzzi's book on the literature of rural-urban migration in Thailand is both fascinating in itself and excellent as a resource for teachers and students of a number of subjects relating to Southeast Asia. In her Introduction, she states that "news stories, songs, soap operas, documentaries ...all depict stories of migration with portrayals that range from alarmist to stereotypical to matter-of-fact" (p. 4).

Boccuzzi's own depictions of the rural-urban migration experience are grounded in modern Thai fiction, but this is not simply a collection of translations that reflect migrants' experiences.

"The train" is first explored as "an icon of the urban-industrial realm, a vessel that transports migrants to the city, and ... a vehicle that transforms the individual into a migrant, 'urbanizing' him" (p. 25). The migrant is Bangkok bound, on many levels; and Thai writers have made great use of the train in some of their finest work. These writers include Ussiri Dhammachoti, Sri Daoruang, Rak Mananya, and Surachai Jantimathorn. They are leaders in the field of socially conscious modern Thai literature, but it is not necessary for the reader to be familiar with the writers or their work in order to appreciate (or understand, teach, or study) the lives and experiences of the people in the stories that Boccuzzi quotes, translates, and interprets.

Although Boccuzzi's focus is Thailand, the universality of rural-urban migration experiences is apparent throughout. Hopeful migrants have scant understanding of the realities of urban life for the poor, or of the possibility that even the journey may break their hearts. In Rak Mananya's "Along the Way," a young man in a third-class train compartment is headed for Bangkok after a government dam has destroyed his family's farmland.

A loud crash sounds, and there is a flash of light. [An] older migrant calmly explains that some of the passengers have fallen from the roof and been run over by the train . . . The passengers who climb onto the roof, replacing those who have fallen represent the unending waves of migrants who move to the city... (p. 31)

While this story and others in the volume seem melodramatic, they reflect the real experiences of rural workers who for decades have boarded trains to the city full of hope and expectations of a better life, at least materially.

After her careful exposition of the train as symbol and vehicle, Boccuzzi moves on to explore nature and the city, animals and the city, urban mobility, and the return home – if and when that ever occurs. Some of the accounts of migrants' attempts to infuse much-missed aspects of village life into their urban lives are simultaneously credible and immensely touching. In Supicha Singyamoot's "Butterfly," Songkram plants flowers in a tiny space in front of his dwelling, and is

excited when his garden attracts butterflies, but becomes irate when caterpillars eat through the leaves of his favorite tree. Songkram wants to bring 'life' to the urban environment but not life that ruins his manicured space. (pp. 57-58)

He brings a butterfly indoors, and is similarly enraged “when he finds the butterfly mangled on the floor” (p. 58), killed by his indoor cat.

The battle to make it into the new urban middle-class, and to remain there, is a less examined aspect of rural-urban migration that is featured in *Bangkok Bound*. Middle-class identity, in the migrant’s own eyes and in the view of others who already have pulled themselves into that coveted status, is entirely dependent upon the purchase and consumption of the hallmarks of middle-class life: home, car, clothing, smart phones and tablets and all the rest. But purchasing and consuming threaten the status that has been so dearly won. Boccuzzi refers to Chris Baker’s and Pasuk Phongpaichit’s studies of this phenomenon as she quotes from short stories such as Nirunsak Boonchan’s “Middle-class People, Second-hand Car, and Mangy Dogs,” which demonstrates the venerable Thai literary tradition of excellent humor in a story with a very sad theme.

The return to rural life, after a period of urban existence, is no less difficult than the earlier stages of the migrant’s journey. A common thread in the stories concerning return is ambivalence – about the protagonist’s self, the decisions that he or she has made, and the options that are available for living the rest of life. In each story, the protagonist has suffered extreme losses, but also has gained something from his or her experiences.

*Bangkok Bound* is an outstanding addition to scholarship on Southeast Asia. Ellen Boccuzzi’s careful research, interviews with writers, and fine interpretations of their poignant, painfully realistic short stories breathe life into decades of statistics and studies about rural-urban migration.

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