http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/09/30/review-of-bangkok-bound-tlc-nmrev-lx/

Ellen Boccuzzi, *Bangkok Bound*

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

Reviewed by Martin Platt.

Anytime a new book on Thai literature is published, there is cause for celebration, partly because it is such a rare occurrence, but also because it assures the small group of us who study it that our field of study is not dead. This is especially true when the new book offers a fresh perspective and useful insights based on careful reading of Thai texts. *Bangkok Bound* is unique, at least among books in English on literature in Thai, in that it concentrates on a particular theme, in different works by different authors, rather than on a single author or a single work.**(1)** Ellen Boccuzzi here brings to light a significant aspect of modern and contemporary Thai literature that has up to now received little attention: the topic of migration. Her method is to concentrate largely on analyzing the plots and messages of short stories (mostly untranslated, and thus read in the original Thai) from the 1990s and 2000s. She supplements that analysis at times with comments from interviews with the writers themselves. The book is nicely written and easily read, flowing along smoothly and for the most part not overly freighted with fashionable theory or smothered with too much jargon.

Boccuzzi's Introduction (Chapter 1) begins with Phaiwarin Khaongam's poem, "Ma Kan Kluai" (which she calls "Banana Tree Horse" following the English translation by B. Kasemsi), from the eponymous book, one of the most re-printed works of modern Thai literature. Her assertion that Phaiwarin's book

"was the first major work of Thai literature to call critical attention explicitly to the migrant and his journey" (p. 7) seems overstated: Khamphun Bunthawi, Kanchana Nakkhanan, and Botan, among others, had all done so some decades earlier. In addition, the migration discussed in Boccuzzi's book, as its title indicates, is specifically oriented, perhaps narrowly, toward Bangkok (not to other parts of Thailand, let alone abroad). Nonetheless, she convinces skeptical readers (if indeed any exist) of the importance of migration, and of the related phenomenon of urbanization, in Thailand in the past few decades. However, she attributes migration entirely to industrialization, ignoring the long pre-industrial tradition of migration among residents of Isan and other parts of Thailand and Southeast Asia more generally.**(2)** Neither does Boccuzzi explain what qualifies as migration literature, or why and how she chose the works that she examines.

Chapter 2, "The Train", gives attention to a major vehicle of migration and a recurring presence in migration literature. Boccuzzi here contributes useful observations about the train as an emissary of the urban, its transformative nature, the relationship between the train journey and loss, and the fact that other forms of transportation in Thailand have been regularly improved while the railroad retains characteristics of its early-twentieth-century origins. One might therefore disagree with, or find outdated, her statements that the train is "the engine of development that urbanizes the countryside" or that it "functions as a beacon of modernity" (p. 25), at least in the period that she discusses. I read this chapter while riding a train myself and wondered why Boccuzzi discussed the encounter of riding the train, and analyzed the view of the train by those whom it passed, but did not consider the impact of looking out of the train by those travelling on it.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 ("Nature and the City", "Animals and the City", and "Urban Mobility" respectively) look more at what happens after migration has occurred than at migration itself. The stories covered here all take place in

Bangkok; they seem to comment on urban dwellers in general, rather than on migrants specifically, and on the city by itself, rather than on the city in contrast to the countryside. In some cases it is not certain that the characters in these stories are migrants at all, as in Sila Khmomchai's "The Family in the Street" or Kon Krailat's "There Was a Day". Nonetheless, Boccuzzi treats a number of stories that are well worth attention, many of them previously not much discussed (at least not in English), such as Suphachai Singyabut's "Butterfly", Siriwon Kaewkan's "About the Person Who Turns Off the Lights", and Tatsanawadi's "Wall".**(3)** Similarly, her observations are often illuminating, as when she shows that the significance of rain changes for the farmer who moves to the city, or in her elucidation of the role of consumerism in demonstrating and then threatening a migrant's newly-acquired middle-class status.

In Chapter 6, "Return", by far the longest chapter in the book, the potentially rich subject of migrants' return to their home villages is considered, whether that return be a unique occasion, an annual practice, or a permanent move. Here, although it is not explicitly stated, the topic really changes from the process of migration to its result or aftermath—exile. For many migrants, a return to one's home village is a fraught endeavor in which one is forced to confront what one has left behind, what one has gained, and what one has failed to achieve. Among the more poignant of these realizations are the changes that have occurred, both in the migrant and in the village or its inhabitants, and the varied reactions to those changes. Issues of obligation come to the fore, as does the recognition that returnees are no longer of the village in the way they had been, but also not completely of the city either, whatever their wishes and efforts may be.

The short Conclusion of *Bangkok Bound* (Chapter 7) primarily reiterates what has come before, in the process distilling and clarifying the book's main weaknesses. Migration, urbanization, industrialization, and exile are conflated

and even equated, rather than considered as separate, if related, phenomena. The rural/urban clash, encounters with the machine age, and even the experiences of soldiers and wandering monks are subsumed under the rubric of migration, while the relationship between these categories remains unclear. In the final paragraph of the book (p.162), we are told, "This book, in the end, is about identity", and although this might be a theme or subtext in a number of the literary works discussed, the word "identity" is rarely mentioned in the book (and indeed does not appear in the index). Furthermore, and perhaps most regrettably, while Boccuzzi seems to give primary attention to the literary works themselves, she rarely draws connections between them, and she provides little or no information on their historical or political context, their authors' lives and concerns, or critics' and readers' reactions to the works; even the years of the various works' publication are given only in the Bibliography. Similarly, there is scant concern with the works' literary elements such as style, technique, influence, or allusions. In arguing for the importance of her topic, Boccuzzi refers to "the genre of Thai migration literature" (p. 5), but she does not fully convince us that the body of work related to this theme constitutes to a genre.

Overall, then, the book amounts to an individual reader's take on an array of stories by different authors at different times, with useful insights, yes, but lacking a real overview or concise unifying principle. Instead, its emphasis is on making statements about the nature and importance of migration (and related processes) in Thailand, thus mirroring to some degree the unfortunate tendency of some scholars (including a few whose work Boccuzzi cites) to use Thai literature primarily as fodder for social science commentary on Thai society.**(4)** The back cover describes the book's appeal to "specialists in migration", but one must wonder how many such people would read a book that relies on fiction (and on one poem) as it source texts. It seems that both the sociologist and the literary scholar thus might remain dissatisfied with this volume, while still finding valuable material in it.

A wider issue is raised in consideration of the book under review here: why are there so few western scholarly (or otherwise) studies of Thai literature? In the mid-1980s, Benedict Anderson stated, "Only a handful of foreigners have acquired sufficient knowledge of, and love for, the Thai language to read it with discriminating pleasure".**(5)** Indeed, it takes years to learn the language, and then years more to read enough to have something to say. One can spend the same time in training to be a surgeon, with accompanying better pay and status. Still, there seem to be additional forces at work. An important one is that literature is not valued as an aspect of Thai Studies. Few universities teach it, or hire people who have expertise in it; therefore few students give it any importance, or have the chance to pursue it if they do. The situation is thus self-perpetuating. In the field of Comparative Literature, it seems, mastery of "theory" is emphasized, so that few people outside of that field find it fruitful to delve there, and in any case, few inside the field concentrate on Thai (whether for lack of interest, opportunity, or apparent reward). Nonetheless, as authentic text, literature is a gold mine for those trying to understand the language, culture, history, politics, and other aspects of a society. For it contains within it people's and society's beliefs, assumptions, aspirations, biases, and fears, if only we can discover and decode them. In spite of periodic calls by scholars and academic institutions for greater attention to literature, though, the situation does not change. On the contrary, a whole generation of scholars with expertise in Thai literature is retiring around the world, and few if any of them are being replaced.

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Notes

1. It is also the first work to consider the literary role of the bus stop.
2. Boccuzzi sometimes also seems to ignore scholarship on some of the other topics on which she touches.
3. There are, as is usual, some editorial errors and issues in the text. Some quotations are repeated as phrases (p. 96), as sentences (pp. 110 and 156), and as whole paragraphs (pp. 139 and 159). In one case, the name Pracha is used when the character Chamrat is clearly meant (p. 95). In transcription, "k" is used to represent both ก and ก,

while the vowel อ is represented variously by “o”, “oh”, and “or”, leading to some confusion. Moreover, while translation is often a matter of interpretation, น้ำใจ (p.60) should not be rendered as “watery heart” (water is the noun, heart is the modifier), nor can หมาที่เสียหมา (p.79) be translated as “a lost dog” (further along on the page, however, the author gets somewhat closer when she says, “A dog that does not behave as a dog is supposed to behave...”).

4. These include Benedict Anderson’s and Ruchira Mendiones’s 1985 socio-economic study *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol), and Herbert Phillips’s 1987 anthropological study, *Modern Thai Literature: With an Ethnographic Interpretation* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press), although the latter is absent from Boccuzzi’s “Selected References”.

5. Benedict Anderson, “Introduction” to Anderson and Ruchira, eds., *In the Mirror*, p. 9.