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Martin Platt, *Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand*

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Reviewed by Eli Elinoff.

Martin Platt's book *Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand* gives a foundational history of the Northeastern Thailand's writers and their literary contributions. It adeptly documents many of the binds facing Isan writers who sometimes sought to represent the region's distinct culture, traditions, and political trajectory and sometimes sought simply to be seen as legitimate writers in their own right. Along the way the book raises (even if it does not always answer) many important questions surrounding representation, politics, and the experience of being a writer in contemporary Thailand. As such, it has much to offer readers interested in Isan, Thai literary history, Southeast Asian writing, and cultural production in Thailand and Southeast Asia more generally.

The book's documentation of Isan's writers and its shifting literary culture in the twentieth century is its chief strength. However, the book's main limitation is that it does not provide enough critical synthesis surrounding issues of

representation or much sustained analysis of the politics of writing itself to leave readers not specifically interested in Thai literature/Isan literary culture for their own sake totally satisfied. To be sure, many of these issues are raised, but Platt leaves it up to the reader to synthesize many of the details across historical periods and literary figures and thus to make sense of the complex and shifting politics of the region's growing intelligentsia.

Given that Platt's aim was *not* to subordinate his discussion of Isan's writers to these sorts of questions, but rather to consider how the region's writers have shaped Thai literature, I cannot fault him for not using this material in the service of such questions. Nevertheless, specific tropes and representations of Isan and its people have become very important on the Thai political landscape, both contemporary and historical. Further, Isan identity has become the subject of much discussion both within scholarly circles and political ones. In these contexts, readers seeking to use Platt's analysis to gain a better purchase on Isan identity or on the politics of representing Isan as a place will find a great deal to engage with but will ultimately be left to put the pieces together on their own.

Instead of giving sustained attention to the politics of representation, Platt is more concerned with exploring the lives of Isan's writers and their influence on the development of Thai literature more broadly. In this task he is successful. *Isan Writers, Thai Literature* both demonstrates the important role that Isan

has played in producing literary talent and uncovers the themes and issues facing Isan writers as they have forged their place within the Thai literary world. Although Isan is, at best, portrayed as a space of “folk culture” and at worst “bereft of culture,” Platt’s work demonstrates the crucial, but ignored, role that the region has played in shaping Thai literature throughout the twentieth century. This point alone marks the book as an important contribution to Thai studies.

The book’s first chapter, “What Makes Isan a Region?”, addresses the question of defining the region from a wide variety of perspectives, including the geographical, cultural, historical, political, and social. Platt emphasizes the region’s distinct ethnic heritage (mainly Lao, but with significant pockets of Khmer and other ethnicities as well), its difficult geography (hot and arid), and its dissident political history (which, at times, has flared in rebellion or, alternatively, been subject to both overt and subtle forms of repression by the Thai government). He also discusses the importance of Isan as a site of concern for Thai authorities, who have worked diligently to control the region through expansive programs of nationalist education and militarized national development. Such actions, Platt argues, sought to root out local identities, languages, and beliefs in order to subordinate them to “Thai” national culture.

Paradoxically, it is precisely these same efforts that have helped to produce Isan as a distinct and important space on the Thai national landscape. The

residue of history, geography, and culture created Isan as a region but left an ambiguity at the heart of its identity that can be best summed up as neither wholly Thai nor sufficiently (or uniformly) Lao. As Platt argues, the region's cultural and physical geographies have been influential in defining Isan as Isan—an identity that is always betwixt and between. This between-ness has been a pivotal issue for many Isan writers whose work wrestles with cultural identity and the circumscribed role of Isan within the Thai political landscape. Moreover, as Platt shows in later chapters, what is true politically is also true within the Thai literary world, where many of the authors treated in the book have wrestled with whether and how they must portray Isan in their writing. While some wish to be seen as voices for the region, others eschew this task altogether.

As Platt's shows in the following chapters of *Isan Writers, Thai Literature*, Isan-ness is not simply a question of a distinct cultural identity but also an entanglement of geography, class, ethnicity, and politics. Navigating the binds of such an entanglement is thus a hallmark of many of the region's literary contributions. While not revolutionary for those already familiar with the region's history, this introductory chapter nicely retraces the contours that have come to define the Northeast as a distinct region. It provides an important foundation for the rest of the text by laying out the terrain of binds and dilemmas facing the writers whose lives and work later chapters describe.

Following this first chapter, *Isan Writers, Thai Literature* launches, somewhat schematically, into chronological coverage of the region's notable writers and literary modes starting in 1950 and moving up through 1999 (when Platt conducted his fieldwork). Each chapter is organized in roughly the same way, starting with a summary of the literary trends of the era and then moving on to short biographical sketches of writers from the period that describe their literary trajectory, highlight their works (sometimes in list form), and emphasize notable themes from their writing.

At times the chapters read more like reference entries than sustained analysis. Organizing each chapter this way has its benefits, ensuring that the book will remain useful long after its initial release by serving as a necessary starting point for scholars interested in the region's writing. For this reason, the book will also appeal to students in area studies or world literature looking for a point of entry into Thai literature in the twentieth century. However, this structure limits the depth of the book's analysis by fragmenting discussions of thematic importance and sidelining theoretical synthesis in favor of biographical and historical details.

Chapter Two, "Early Isan Writers", explores the lives of Rom Ratiwan, Kanchana Nakkhanan, and Lao Khamhawm. In the biographies of these writers, especially Rom and Lao, a number of significant tendencies begin to emerge. All three writers moved from Isan to Bangkok. Rom and Lao began

their careers as journalists. Kanchana studied law. These career moves and educational backgrounds were repeated by many of the authors treated in subsequent chapters of the book. Both Rom and Lao also followed trajectories towards increasing politicization in their writing. In this sense, these writers formed the template that many of the region's later writers would follow. Their journeys towards writing and politicization through Bangkok's intellectual institutions also stand out as something worthy of deeper investigation.

Chapter Three, "Isan Comes to the Center", describes the growing importance of Isan writing to Thailand's changing political landscape starting in the early 1960s. Here, Platt shows how the region's writers contributed to the "Literature for Life" movement and, in turn, to shifting the nation's political consciousness. This chapter begins Platt's discussion of the long and complex legacy of Literature for Life, which advocated for writing that documented the lives and everyday struggles of the poor and disenfranchised. Platt ties this literary movement to the rise of the left throughout Thailand, demonstrating how the nation's changing political landscape transformed what counted as literature in the 1960s and 1970s.

Writers treated in this chapter include Surachai Janthimathorn, Prasert Jandam, Somkhit Singsong, and Udorn Thongnoi. The period's writing reflected both the aims and aesthetics of the growing Thai left, which promoted resistance to the state's development project and was critical of growing

American influence in Thailand. Aesthetically, the movement valorized the life of the peasant, simultaneously glorifying rural modes of self-reliance and attempting to document the suffering of the poor and the difficulties of life for rural people.

While the chapter successfully highlights the emergence and pervasiveness of these themes in the period's writing, this chapter in particular would benefit from a more critical analysis of these representations. Although Platt avoids discussing contemporary politics, it is clear that the aesthetics of struggle that characterized Literature for Life remain important, but they have fragmented along with the rest of contemporary Thailand. The images, tropes, and representations that this movement used are now called upon across Thailand's divided political spectrum. Literature for Life (and the broader Art for Life and Songs for Life movements) put forward a particular vision of rural Thailand as a site of hope and a site of suffering. It also prescribed certain roles for the intelligentsia and for middle-class activists: to translate the actions of the state for the poor, to help them understand the nature of the socio-economic shifts taking place in the country, and to organize them politically to oppose such shifts. Finally, these aesthetics seemed to have a core notion of the poor as good-hearted, but easily corruptible, and thus in need of help of the sort offered by middle-class, educated activists. (See Platt's discussion of the film *Tho'ngpan* on pages 50-53, for example).

Considering that most of Isan's writers from this period were Bangkok-educated (including Surachai, Prasert, Somkhit, and Yong Yasothorn) and that some, like Surachai, have gone on to work with organizations like the People's Alliance for Democracy, probing these representations of the poor and analyzing the writers' politics in their own right would have been welcome here. The current diffusion of Literature for Life and Songs for Life across Thailand's divided political spectrum marks the period covered in Chapter Three and its writing as important to understanding of the contemporary Thai political landscape. I say this not to suggest that *Isan Writers, Thai Literature* should have focused on documenting current events (an approach that Platt explicitly rejects in the book's introduction, on pages xvi-xvii), but rather to point out that a deeper theoretical engagement with the politics of representation *within* the periods he was studying would almost certainly help us gain a better understanding of the way that such representations emerged and became fixed on the national political landscape. Some of this information is contained within the text, but without a broader theoretical engagement or more overt analytical synthesis achieving such an understanding remains a task left up to the reader.

Chapter Four, "Isan Writing Enters to the Mainstream", details the lives of SEA Write winner Khampun Bunthawi and of Khamman Khonkhai, two of Isan's best known writers. Khamphun Bunthawi is notable in that he followed a different path towards writing from that of many of his contemporaries. He

moved to Bangkok, but not to further his education. Rather, he traveled there—like many other people from Isan—for work, taking numerous odd jobs to make money. Khamphun actively disassociated himself from the Literature for Life movement, even though some claim that his book *Luk Isan* (A Child of the Northeast) is a work belonging to that movement. Platt argues that many within the movement actually derided *Luk Isan* because it “perpetuated the disdain other Thais have for Isan” (page 125). Platt points out that, for his part, Khamphun had no interest in using writing to produce social change.

The critical response to Khamphun’s work reflects the class politics among Thailand’s intelligentsia and the representational binds facing many of the other Isan writers. Wishing to celebrate Isan and record its way of life, Khamphun took an apolitical approach to writing that provoked derision. He was in the middle of the tense field of questions surrounding who was able to speak for Isan and how properly to represent the region’s sufferings. Although many other writers sought to document the region’s everyday hardships, they did so with an inherently political purpose. Where writers like Khamphun chose other paths or other forms of representation, they risked alienating themselves from the broader literary community. So, although the Literature for Life movement built on the political concerns already apparent in many Isan’s writers’ works, it also hemmed in writers who found themselves pegged, both fairly and unfairly, as authors who simply repeated the genre’s conventions, themes, politics, and flaws.

Chapter Five, “The Rise of Regionalism”, builds on these questions, showing how the center of gravity for Isan’s writers shifted from Bangkok to spaces within the region itself. This chapter and the one that follows present some of the most compelling information in the book as they discuss the way that the region became a source *and* a site of cultural production and literary discussion. With the waning of the Literature for Life movement and the return of many activists/writers from the jungles, the region became a space in which writers could gather to discuss, exchange, and produce writing. Unlike previous eras, in the period after the 1980s it seems that the region’s educational institutions and its writers were intent on building bodies of work within Isan that were, to some extent, available to people *in* Isan.

The history of the Mun River Literary Group and the Isan Writers Group are particularly nice examples of this remarkable shift in cultural production. As the book shows, in the 1950s many of the region’s authors had to go to Bangkok in order to become educated and to find intellectual communities. By the end of the century, Isan’s writers were able to network with one another within the region and to build both regional publications and new outlets for emerging writers. These groups generated a considerable amount of material and moved about the region and the country under the banner of Isan. Although Platt points out that the content of much of this work did not go beyond Literature for Life, these new forums seem to have significantly

transformed cultural production in the region by offering accessible spaces for regional writers and by leading to the creation of new culturalist “Isan Studies” programs at regional universities.

The book’s final chapter, “Isan Writers in the End of the 20th Century”, demonstrates the diverse results of these shifts. The chapter starts with an overview of the numerous outlets for writers in contemporary Thailand. What Platt describes is a tight but sometimes insular community, which has fostered the creation of a handful of prominent literary journals (and many, many more minor journals, magazines, and periodicals) with relatively small circulations; hosts many events in Bangkok and in the provinces; and has given rise to a growing number of literary associations. As Platt points out early in the chapter, most books published in Thailand have relatively small publication runs of around 2,000 copies (page180). So, although the chapter makes it clear that many more people in Isan are writing today, it does not tell us exactly how many more there are in the region are reading.

The chapter profiles a number of writers, including SEA Write award winner Phaiwarin Khaongam, Prachakhom Lunachai, Manote Phromsingh, Somneuk Phanitchakij, Sangkhom Phesatchmala, Phisit Phusri, Somneuk Phanitchakij (another of the book’s and the region’s few female writers), and Chaiya Wannasri. Each of these writers expresses complex and diverse feelings towards the region. Some, like Manote, Sangkhom, and Chatchawal

Khotsongkham, explicitly cast themselves in the mold of Isan writers, sharing and extending the concerns of their forebears. Others, like Phaiwarin, Phisit, and Raks Mananya, reject the label or play with it in order to free themselves to represent the Isan of today, with its issues of migration and urbanization.

The landscape presented at the end of Platt's study is thus one in which Isan plays a complex and ambiguous role in the lives and work of many regional writers. Isan's subordinate political and economic position, its widespread poverty, and the effects of its rapid socioeconomic transformation are central themes in many of the recent works that Platt treats. Yet here, even more strongly than elsewhere in the book, we encounter many writers who distance themselves from the idea of being an "Isan writer" in the first place. For example, Chaiya says, "It's not that I'm a writer of Isan. I want to be a writer of everything, of anyone who accepts me. If you are an Isan writer who others don't accept, or a Thai writer but every region doesn't accept you, doesn't know you, what use do you have?" (page 221).

Similarly, Platt quotes Phisit Phusri saying,

"The term 'Isan writers' that people talk about is a term that does not exist in the dictionary. And there is no way to combine or compound [the words] because they have no connection to each other of any kind . . . What can we do? When we write about aridity, about problems of farmers, [people] say we are repetitious and monotonous;

when we write about something else, they say we are mavericks”.

(page 204)

The same sentiment is echoed by the many writers throughout the chapter who use writing as a tool to explore their lives and the lives of others who have experienced Thailand’s rapid and radical social, political, and economic transformation, but do not wish to necessarily be seen as “regional writers” or even simply an Isan writer. Platt argues that in many ways this rejection of the label of Isan is tantamount to a rejection of the stereotypes that have dogged the region for years. Only here, instead of seeing Isan people as “dull-witted”, the writers are seen as “repetitive, boring, and plain” (page 204).

Yet, it seems to me that the authors’ rejection here is two-fold. On the one hand, it *is* a matter of pushing back against the old stereotypes of dim-witted ignorance that continue to plague representations of Isan. On other, the writers seem intent on disrupting our idea of Isan as a distinct region altogether. In doing so, they are not rejecting local cultures, languages, and traditions so much as pushing against the idea that the region’s sufferings and politics must continue to stand out as the archetype of what might be called “anti-Thainess”—of, that is, the way in which Isan has come to be a foil of all things Thai (both in ways positive and negative). Many of Platt’s writers seem to reject this notion, angling instead to show us how life in Isan—its joys, sufferings, anxieties, transformations, kindnesses, exclusions, traquilities, and violence—mirrors life in other parts of the country. This latter point seems to be equally

important for those wishing to understand many of the frustrations facing many within the region in the contemporary political moment.

Here is where I think the *Isan Writers, Thai Literature* could have benefited from a more sustained, theoretically robust analysis throughout. Writing, whether it tackles politics overtly or not, is itself the enactment of a politics. Occasionally those politics challenge the status quo and sometimes they produce it. The experiences that Platt so carefully documents speak to the difficulties of writing as a person from Isan and to the shifting politics of representation in Thailand more broadly. Just as literature is a rich source for information about the everyday experiences of those on the margins, stories about writers help us to understand the way that particular tropes emerge and transform the world that literature claims to represent.

Because writing is always bound up in its own aesthetic politics, questions of who and what count as authentically Isan are not simply up for grabs, but are rather bound up in existing political formations that define who gets to say what it is to be properly “Isan”, when they get to say it, and how. As the debates over Literature for Life show, how to write about Isan’s subordinate position vis-à-vis the Thai state was an issue that was deeply contested among the region’s writers. More than that, the writers continue to disagree about whether Isan is even a meaningful category for yoking together the different kinds of experiences of those living on and writing about life on the Khorat

plateau. Such disagreements themselves are indications that a sharpened set of theoretical tools would have helped unpack the political effects of the emerging literary scene within Isan. Indeed, a more sustained, theoretically grounded approach to thinking through the relationships among politics, class, and representation might have resulted in a way of thinking not only about the fact that there is a coherent body of regional Isan writing within Thai literature, but also about what that coherent body of literature has to say about the politics of representing something as specifically Isan.

Martin Platt's book is significant because it clearly demonstrates the importance and coherence of the "regional" within Thai literature. In doing so, *Isan Writers, Thai Literature* makes a lasting contribution to studies of Thai literature by highlighting the strands of thinking that link together disparate writers from distinct kinds of Isan backgrounds whose work transformed Thai literature. Moreover, Platt's considerable attention to the lives and struggles of *writers* offers a sense of what it was both to *write* from a regional perspective and to *be* an Isan writer in during the twentieth century. Because of these strengths, the book is an important starting point for those uninitiated into studies of Thai literature and a necessary contribution to the ongoing conversations about what it means to be Isan in the first place.

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