

## The Emergence of *A Child of the Northeast* in the Capitalist World-Economy: Reading Isan/Thai Literature as World Literature

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(Received: September 19, 2024; Revised: December 19, 2024; Accepted: January 10, 2025)

### Abstract

This research article offers a mode of reading that challenges a parochial view of Kampon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* (1976) as a repository of authentic Isan culture. Combining the theory of world literature by the Warwick Research Collective with the concepts of the bildungsroman and chronotope by M. M. Bakhtin, it argues that the novel's coming-of-age narrative registers the child protagonist's transition from a predominantly subsistence economy to the modern capitalist world-system, where he aspires to become a member of the bourgeoisie. In the novel's chronotopic design, the formation of the child of the Northeast is mapped onto the development of Siam/Thailand as a capitalist society. Such a mapping culminates in the protagonist's heartfelt recitation of a famous Thai verse, "Knowledge as Commodity," which marks not only the integration of Siam/Thailand into the capitalist world-economy but also the uneven development in Siam/Thailand.

**Keywords:** *A Child of the Northeast*; world literature; world-system; Bildungsroman; Chronotope

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“Kamphoon likes to call himself the ambassador of Isan to the world” (Kepner, 1996, p. 92)

### **Introduction: World Literature and Thai Literature, A World Apart**

Academic interest in world literature has been renewed in the past few decades. Recent theories of world literature have attempted to redraw the world literary map by bringing non-Western literatures into conversation with Western literary histories and criticism (D’haen, 2012; Damrosch, 2014). The definitions and approaches to world literature are contentious. David Damrosch (2003), for example, broadly defines world literature as works that move beyond their local context to the larger world through translation, becoming subject to power dynamics in their new context, such as in the processes of editing, publication, and reception. On the other hand, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) significantly contributes to the ongoing debates on world literature by highlighting the materialist concerns of the literary texts on a planetary scale. Its recent study, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), anchors world literature in the context of the modern capitalist world-system. It seeks to demonstrate how the literary forms deployed by authors of world literature encode “the effects of the imposition of capitalism on cultures and societies hitherto un- or only sectorally capitalised” (2015, p. 10). These aesthetic forms index not only “the long waves of the capitalisation of the world” (2015, p. 51) but also the different ways in which capitalist modernity is lived in the centers or at the peripheries of the world-system.

Despite the growing influence of world literature as a field of inquiry in the Western academy and outside, however, there have been few scholarly works that locate the production, circulation, and reception of Thai literature in a global framework (Wimuttikosol, 2020; Prasansak, 2020). One significant study that does so is *Disturbing Conventions: Decentering Thai Literary Cultures* (2014). In the afterword of this collected volume, Chusak Pattarakulvanit et al. state that the field of Thai literary studies is quite isolated from the field of Southeast Asian literature because it has long been entrenched in the nationalist discourse resting on the assumption that Thailand (formerly Siam) is the only country in Southeast Asia that survived Western colonization, hence its unique position in the region and the world (Winichakul, 2014).

Such a claim has grave cultural repercussions when examining Thai literature as world literature. Thai literature is so revered as the repository of national cultural value and identity – “Thainess” – that analyzing it using Western critical and literary theories is met with resistance and deemed irrelevant. This dominant nativist view of Thai literature as sufficient unto itself and incomparable forecloses Thai literature’s entry into the field of world literature, where a comparative methodology is indispensable.

To dismantle the traditional practice of Thai literary criticism, Pattarakulvanit et al. (2014) call for “a new ethics of reading” (p. 235) that advances a counter-hegemonic argument that Thailand does not exist in isolation from the world, nor does it occupy a unique position among the countries that had experienced the ravages of colonialism and its aftermath. In fact, Siam/Thailand was implicated in colonial relations both as a colonized country and a colonizing one (Jackson, 2014; Winichakul, 2000). Drawing on the pioneering work of the Thai literary critic Nopphorn Prachakul, the editor of *Disturbing Conventions*, Rachel V. Harrison (2014), argues for the relevance of postcolonial theory to Thai literary criticism. Rather than conceiving the use of Western theories as perpetuating Western domination over the Thai periphery, Harrison recognizes its liberatory effect in exposing not only the subordination of Thailand in the postcolonial order but also the position of Bangkok as a local

center of postcolonial power that has long dominated its outlying regions, including Isan in this case.

Building on the insights of *Disturbing Conventions*, this article reads Kampon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* (1976/1988) as a work of world literature, whose bildungsroman encodes the emergence of Isan subjects in the capitalist world-economy. By linking the concepts of the bildungsroman and chronotope by M. M. Bakhtin with the theory of world literature by the WReC, it shows that the protagonist's formation is chronicled in tandem with Isan's transformation from an agrarian economy to a market one where the protagonist desires to become a merchant capitalist. In the novel's chronotopic arrangement, the protagonist's spatial movement from his local village to the wider world intersects with the advent of Thai modernity and the emergence of mercantile capitalism in Siam/Thailand. The novel also offers a glimpse of Siam/Thailand's semi-colonial conditions. While the country is subject to the capitalist world order, there is an internal class division between Isan farming subjects and Siamese or wealthy ethnic minority traders. Lagging far behind the merchant capitalist class, the child of the Northeast finds himself emerging in an uneven world, following in the footsteps of the children of the Siamese/Chinese bourgeoisie of the early Bangkok period (1767-1855) and emulating the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese and Vietnamese traders.

### **Literature Review: Is *A Child of the Northeast* a Provincial Novel or a Work of World Literature?**

*A Child of the Northeast* is an autobiographical novel with a typical bildungsroman. In the Author's Preface to the Thai edition, Khamphun Bunthawi (2009a) reveals that he bases the novel on his family's and neighbor's experience of surviving droughts in Isan around the 1930s. Written from a third-person point of view, the novel recounts the life experiences of an eight-year-old child named Koon, who grows up in an Isan village with his family. The novel is filled with numerous scenes of informal and formal education and is interspersed with some episodes of the protagonist's adventures with his best friend Jundi. Toward the end of the novel, on the verge of starvation, Koon's family embarks on an oxcart journey to the River Chi in another province to catch fish to eat. The novel ends with Koon and Jundi singing songs they have learned from school to celebrate the birth of twins.

Most Thai critics consecrate the novel as a repository of Isan/Thai cultural values. They are primarily concerned with examining Isan traditional beliefs and cultural practices to the point where Isan is glorified as a pastoral utopia and its people are seen as incorruptible, hence a role model worthy of imitation (Anu-an, 2003; Rungrat, 2003; Lamyotmakphon, 2010). These reviews reflect a metropolitan nostalgia for a lost past. As Charles F. Keyes (1995) puts it, "nostalgia for a more traditional way of life" was felt "among readers who regretted the loss of the way of life that had been obliterated in the rush to development in Bangkok" (p. 167). These romanticized reviews, pertaining to my argument, fail to address the novel's aesthetic design that encodes Isan's relationship with the outside world.

Despite the novel's dominant parochial criticisms, however, more politically dynamic readings highlight power relations in Isan culture and those between Isan, Bangkok, and the rest of the world. Nopphorn Prachakul (2014), for example, examines the ethnic composition of the protagonist's village, which is predominantly populated by Lao-speaking Isan farmers, while the Chinese and Vietnamese traders form the minority. While Isan people hold a negative stereotype of the Chinese as boorish, they view the Vietnamese ambivalently as both barbaric and industrious. Another reading is offered by Pattana Kittiarasa (2014), who argues that the novel's seemingly innocent narrative is founded on a set of experiences that mirror Isan people's desire to make a voyage out in search of a better life and partake in the process of modernization (p. 79). Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, he calls this wanderlust a deterritorialization

that encompasses geopolitical, socioeconomic, and regional crossovers. Isan identity has long been characterized by this mobility (p. 81). While Kittiarasa's postulation may strike some as essentializing Isan identity by suggesting that Isan subjects are almost readily adaptable to the global economy, the central point of this article is that "Isanness" is not exclusively defined by fixed cultural norms or traits. Rather, it has long been shaped by the dominant forces of global capitalism, which has evolved in different forms and created varying impacts for people across the world. However, both Prachakul and Kittiarasa do not fully discuss the novel's narrative form, namely, the bildungsroman and its symbolic connection to how capitalist modernity is experienced by Isan subjects at a periphery of the world-economy.<sup>2</sup>

The novel's predominant ethnographic description of Isan culture has sparked a debate on whether *A Child of the Northeast* has a plot. Some critics maintain that the novel is plotless, given its quotidian details of Isan provinciality and its cyclical progression of time (Prachakul, 2009b). Following Bakhtin's concept of the bildungsroman, however, the article demonstrates that the novel does have a plot that is organized around chronotopic principles. It is precisely through this chronotopic design that the novel marks the emerging global outlook of the provincial child.

Bakhtin (1986) demonstrates that the bildungsroman as a subgenre of the novel differs from others in that it does not present the image of a ready-made hero against an immobile setting but "an image of a man in the process of becoming" against the constantly evolving world (p. 49). Its plot is constructed through the introduction of real historical time into the hero that significantly changes his destiny and life. Bakhtin characterizes this type of novel as novel of emergence in which the hero's individual development is inextricably linked to historical emergence: "He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other" (p. 23). Bakhtin (2008) also notes that the bildungsroman is chronotopic in nature; it conceives of time and space as one entity in which "[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (p. 84). In short, the chronotopic bildungsroman features the image of the hero who grows up in "*national-historical time*" (p. 24) and "enters into a completely new, *spatial* sphere of historical existence" (p. 25).

### Discussion: Chronotopic Designs in *A Child of the Northeast*

The chronotope in *A Child of the Northeast* is structured around the outward journeys the protagonist makes and aspires to make from his village house to the wide ocean and the development of his heightened sense of real historical time. Thematically, it is linked to migration and modernity. The first chapter begins with a description of the protagonist's house:

Long ago, more than half of a century ago, a small wooden house stood on round wooden stilts, baking in the sun. The father of the family that lived in the house had often warned his children about that coconut palm. He told them that if ever the wind should blow hard while they were inside the house, they must quickly climb down the house ladder and run away. (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 11)

In highlighting a possible danger encroaching on the children, the narrator underscores the authority of the paternal figure, who plays a vital role in teaching the protagonist about the

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<sup>2</sup> Prachakul is the first critic to characterizes the novel as bildungsroman. In fact, he never uses the German term but describes the novel in passing as "novel of education" ("*nawaniyai khang kan lian ru*") (2009a, p. 34; 2009b, p. 44). However, when his work is translated into English, the word *bildungsroman* is used for novel of education (Prachakul, 2014, p. 106).

ways of the world. In this regard, the father represents the traditional values of the village—a symbol of stability, closure, and pre-capitalist social relations that the bildungsroman of youth and modernity seeks to overcome or compromise (Moretti, 2000, p. 27). From the house, the narrator proceeds to describe the village:

This family lived in a village in the northeastern corner of Thailand, which is called “Isan.” Every house in the village was like every other, built on stilts with a ladder from the porch to the yard below. There was a pen for water buffaloes beneath the house, and a rice silo in one corner of the yard.

Beyond the village were rice fields, and a lagoon which was usually dry. Beyond the lagoon was a knoll the villagers called Kok Ee-laew, where they hunted whatever small animals they could find. (Boontawee, 1976/1988, pp.19-20)

The narrator, like an anthropologist at work, records everything that goes on in the village. He begins by locating the house in a definite geographical region to establish an irreducibly specific Isan culture manifest in the common features of the house. The description of the house aids in an understanding of Isan villages as predominantly agrarian communities relying on livestock-based rice farming. The narrator then describes the weather conditions, geological features, and modes of transportation in the village. While the first few pages of the novel offer ethnographic information on what the Isan village is like, they foreground droughts as a matter of life and death with which the villagers must learn how to deal.

As the novel lengthens, the child protagonist moves away from home, embarking on a series of journeys to explore the world beyond his immediate surroundings. In the second chapter, Koon leaves his house compound for the first time in his life to go to the knoll and nearby forests with his father. Despite the foreground of the menacing drought, the novel does not depict the earth as an abstract geological site or an idyllic landscape against which Koon emerges as a man. Instead, it imbues the earth with human creativity and movements, making it inseparable from human needs and activities. The characters are constantly on the move, searching for food sources to ward off starvation. In his adventure-time, it appears that as Koon ventures farther from home, the earth becomes more populated with animals he could survive on, such as mongooses, quails, crickets, frogs, and fish. In learning the age-old wisdom of hunting from his father, Koon is becoming an apprentice or, as Bakhtin (1986) would call him, “*man the builder*” who transforms out of necessity a locality in which he lives into “a small part of historical life” (p. 35). Koon’s emergence or survival is literally *grounded* in his active engagement with the world around him.

Time in the bildungsroman is not abstracted but highly visualized (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 25). The visualization of time, as evident in the novel’s mode of ethnographic writing (the images of the eternal sun and the ritualistic cycle) and its portrayal of Koon’s adventures (the images of seasonal hunting and agrarian routine), seems to posit the Isan village as the locus of cyclical time. However, this cyclical time is interrupted by a family history that annexes the seemingly desolate Isan village to the Siamese/Thai state in a spatio-temporal sense. Koon’s father tells his son a story about his father, who had experienced racial discrimination when, as a novice, he traveled to Bangkok to pursue religious studies. However, in Bangkok, the center of religious learning, he was denied a place in the temple because the Bangkok monks were prejudiced against his habits of eating raw food and his tattoos. They also believed that he was a *phi pop*, a ghost that feasts on their intestines.

Insofar as the chronotope is concerned, the story of Koon’s grandfather puts Isan in spatial relation with Bangkok in that Bangkok is established as a center of power and Koon’s village one of its peripheries. In temporal terms, Koon’s family time, generational or private,

is assimilated into Siam/Thailand's real historical time to the point where it can no longer live outside it. Koon's father personally has to bear the memories of his father and eventually passes them on to his son. Even though Isan and Bangkok are put in a temporal relation, this relation is hierarchal in nature. As Johannes Fabian (1983) reminds us, "on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some [societies are irrevocably placed] upstream, others downstream" (p. 17). Isan is Bangkok's backward, barbaric, and spectral Other living down a racialized stream of Time, the raw that has not been cooked. The oral history circulating in Koon's family is indicative of Siam/Thailand's internal colonialism, where Isan people are the racialized others of the Bangkokians.

One of the novel's most significant chronotopic designs is the village temple school, which not only broadens the protagonist's secular knowledge but also shapes his moral principles and sense of purpose. When asked by the venerable monk-teacher Luang Paw Ken what he hates the most, Koon responds, "The sky. It never gives us any rain. It only gives dryness" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 111). Displeased by this answer, the monk punishes Koon with a stick, taking this opportunity to teach the young boy a life-long lesson: "From this day forward, you must never, ever say that you hate the sky, or blame the sky for anything. Because the sky never punished anybody" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 112). Made to repeat after the old monk, Koon is integrated into the moral economy of the agrarian village where one must never verbally abuse life-giving nature. Punished even before beginning his formal education, Koon is as dreaded by the prospect of being a student under Luang Paw Ken as excited about the options in life the school holds out for him. As the old monk tells him, "If you study hard, when you are big you can be a maw lam [folk singer], you can be a teacher, you can be the man who leads the water buffaloes to market. You can be anything you want" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 113). Such is the promise of life offered to the young protagonist, and it could be materialized only in and through education.

The chronotopic arrangement in the school episode marks not only the spatial expansion of Koon's world from the familial space of home to the public sphere of the school but also his absorption of real national-historical time. At the temple school, time could not reveal itself more profoundly; its visibility (audibility) manifests in Siam/Thailand's national anthem sung by the schoolchildren on the temple compound before the national flagpole. The anthem begins with "*Prathet Siam Nam Pratuang Wah Muang Thong* [Siam known in its glorious name as the Golden Land]" (Boontawee 1976/1988, p. 122). This anthem was used after the Revolution of 1932 when Thailand was still known as Siam (Jeamteerasakul, 2006). As the song ends, "Koon felt his heart beating with pride" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 122).

This awakened sense of new historical time becomes more pronounced toward the end of the novel when Jundi sings a song, "Oh wondrous twenty-fourth of June, day of our glorious Constitution" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 481). The song, titled "National Day June 24," marks the date of the 1932 Revolution, the watershed event that ended the absolute monarchy and introduced constitutional democracy as Siam's political system. It is through these two songs, composed to celebrate and commemorate the birth of Siam as a modern nation, that real national-historical time is introduced to the young protagonist. In Benedict Anderson's terms (2006), Koon is drawn into "'homogenous, empty time'...measured by clock and calendar" (p. 24). By imagining himself as a Thai citizen and his village as part of the Thai nation through the creation of the new national calendar, Koon becomes "a new, unprecedented type of human being" who "enters into a completely new, *spatial* sphere of historical existence" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 23, 24). In this way, Koon has become "the new epoch's 'specific material sign,'" a visible marker of Thai modernity that has spread from the center of Bangkok to the Isan periphery (Moretti, 2000, p. 5).

## Isan Being Part and Parcel of the Capitalist World-Economy

While the school, as the center of modern education, equips the novel's young protagonist with literacy skills necessary for his future career, the grocery stores owned by the Chinese and Vietnamese merchants serve as a nodal point of trade networks that orients him toward a monetarized market economy. The stores carry a variety of commodities the villagers need, including school uniforms, which are visualized signs of modernity, especially for children. Koon and Jundi alleviate their parents' financial burden by collecting sticklac for the Chinese shopkeeper in exchange for new school outfits. To do so, they must travel beyond the Kok Ee-laew knoll to another, where they meet Uncle Gah the sticklac farmer. Assuming the role of teacher, Uncle Gah lectures the two schoolchildren on the use value and exchange value of sticklac in the market:

The post office seals letters with it, that's one thing. When I lived in Luang Prabang, I used to send silk to my mother, and seal the package with bug wax [sticklac]. You can dye cloth with it too, silk cloth or cotton. The red color never comes out. Every year, merchants come from Khorat to buy my wax for dyeing. (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 147)

Uncle Gah's lesson sheds light on a microcosm of a crucial internal trade route in Thailand where Khorat links Isan to Bangkok. Notably, during the early Bangkok period, sticklac was listed as one of Siam's essential export products coveted by the Chinese and British traders (Eoseewong, 1982/2005, pp. 61-63). This passage allows us to see a complex trade network between Isan, Bangkok, and the world. No matter how remote Koon's village may seem, it has long been integrated into the capitalist world-economy, with Isan people, here represented by Uncle Gah, having turned into simple producers for the world market. Additionally, Uncle Gah plays an important role in initiating Koon and Jundi into a market economy where money is the dominant medium of exchange. As sticklac apprentices, Koon and Jundi now come to understand that there is a world-market out there where their labor will be of (exchange) value. This scene with Uncle Gah marks Koon's first step toward becoming an active agent in the modern capitalist world-system.

The novel's chronotope is tightly interlocked with the theme of migration. As previously mentioned, the migration motif is foreshadowed in the first chapter, where Koon awakes to see his neighbors getting on the oxcart in front of his house. He learns they are migrating to another village where the soil is more fertile and the river is teeming with fish. At first, Koon's father does not want to join them because his father has told him not to; however, after being reminded by his wife that their rice paddy will not last much longer, he decides to join the oxcart caravan to the River Chi in Roi Et province with their neighbors. Koon and Jundi are excited to see a big and long river: "It was nothing at all like the rivers that had flowed near Koon's village, before they dried up" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 263). Looking left and right, the two boys could not see where the river begins and ends. Unable to contain his happiness, Jundi says, "I can't believe it, Koon, can you? Finally, for the first time in our lives, we are seeing a *real* river" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 263). Koon replies to his friend's remark, "You know what, Jundi? Someday, I am going to stand just like this, at the edge of the sea" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 263).

Through the river scene, the novel broadens the horizon of the young protagonist's knowledge of self and home by moving him beyond his small village into a wilder world. Although Koon's family returns home toward the end, the novel does not posit an Odyssean narrative where the young hero settles down. Future-oriented and open-ended, the novel anticipates Koon's other voyage out to the world, specifically to the sea: "Someday, I am going to stand just like this, at the edge of the sea" (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 263). A glimpse

of his destiny is provided in the verse entitled “Knowledge as Commodity,” which he recites toward the novel’s end.

The novel’s arrangement of the chronotope culminates in the last chapter, which ends on a happy note and looks toward the future. One night, back home, Koon sees a shooting star in the dim sky. Shortly afterward, a neighbor runs to his house, bringing the news that Khamkong, Koon’s cousin, has just given birth to twins. The villagers gather to celebrate the birth of the newborns. On this festive occasion, Uncle Gah, the new grandfather, insists that Koon sip alcohol and sing a song. Jundi volunteers to go first and loudly sings the song “National Day June 24.” Overcoming his discomfort, Koon then recites the verse his teacher and his father have taught him: “Knowledge is a commodity, with value in a far-off land, hard to attain. May your body be like a magnificent ship” (Prachakul, 2014, p. 104). The two songs sung by Jundi and Koon are central to the argument of this article. While Jundi’s song, as previously discussed, marks the birth of Siam/Thailand as a modern democratic nation, Koon’s verse underscores Siam/Thailand’s entry into the capitalist world-system and Koon’s desire to take part in it.

Examining the history and content of the verse is instructive for comprehending *A Child of the Northeast* as a novel of historical emergence—especially, the emergence of Siam/Thailand as a capitalist society in the modern world-system. The verse sung by Koon, “Knowledge as Commodity” (“*Wicha muean sinkha*”), is one of the most famous poems known by heart by most schoolchildren throughout Thailand. It appears in the Thai national verse textbook published by the Ministry of Education. Supaporn Kongsirirat (2013) suggests that this well-known verse was not composed by the French catholic priest François Touvenet Hilaire, as many once believed. Instead, it originally appeared in a textbook titled *Si Sawatdiwat*, written by the poet Nai Mi, who lived in the early Bangkok period, presumably under the reigns of Kings Rama I-III (1782-1851). Nai Mi presented it to King Rama III for use as a textbook for children. Nai Mi and other authors contributed to the constitution of the emerging literary culture in the early Bangkok period.

Renowned Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong points out that the rise of literacy highly prized by the early Bangkok bourgeoisie was underpinned by the growth of Siam’s overseas trade with China. During this period, Siam’s export economy flourished; royalty and nobility were more involved in long-distance trade, relying on Chinese-style junks than they had been in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. These junks served as a bridge between internal production and external markets.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of the export economy gave rise to the emergence of the bourgeoisie. It was during this period that manuals for reading and writing the Thai language, as well as literary works written for that purpose, appeared for the first time. Unlike the primers in the Ayutthaya period, these were meant for children, not adults (Eoseewong, 1982/2005, p. 102). Literacy became crucial to the bourgeoisie because it was considered an essential skill for both business and government service. As Eoseewong puts it:

The attention to literacy was probably confined to the urban bourgeoisie. Their children had enough “free” time to devote to education, and they had a use for literacy in their lives. Trade required accounts, letters, petitions, and even the opportunity to enter government service for added business advantage. The general Thai farming population could not sacrifice their offspring’s time to study enough to gain full literacy because the children’s labor was needed from an early age. Besides,

<sup>3</sup> For a critical overview of the debate on Eoseewong’s scholarship regarding the growth and influence of market economy during the early Bangkok period, see Baker, C. (2005). Afterword. In N. Eoseewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok* (C. Baker, Trans.) (pp. 361-384). Silkworms Books. (Original work published 1982)

literacy was of no benefit at all to the life of a phrai. Literacy was a property of the bourgeoisie, and a property they sought for their descendants. (p. 103)

The bourgeois culture and the economy of the early Bangkok era are mirrored in the verse “Knowledge as Commodity.” While the verse in its inception was meant to enhance literacy among the bourgeoisie children of that period, who could use it in their future trade, it has continued to serve a didactic purpose, possibly being used even today to teach young students the value of industriousness. In reciting it, Koon, like his Bangkok bourgeoisie predecessors, is encouraged to imagine his body as a magnificent junk by which he could carry knowledge from a faraway land. That the junk figures so prominently in the poem that everything else revolves around it is indicative of the significance of the Chinese junks in Siam’s foreign trade, especially in the early nineteenth century when the junk trade reached its peak (Viraphol, 2014; Lysa, 1984). Organized around the analogy of knowledge as commodity, the verse not only promotes literacy but also a bourgeois worldview where knowledge is not simply compared to commodity but is itself commodified. The knowledge gained can be sold in the global market, valorizing the cycle of capital accumulation. Schools, in turn, are the institutions that manufacture such knowledge.

After singing the verse, Koon finds himself weeping tears of happiness. That the song is sung at the very end of the novel suggests that Koon the protagonist will emerge as a new man in Siam/Thailand—a new nation that has been no stranger to a global maritime trade network. Therefore, his heartfelt recitation of the verse underwrites Isan subjects’ desire to belong to a class of mercantile capitalists in the modern world-system. Koon’s aspiration for upward mobility or transition from a provincial farming child to a cosmopolitan subject is accentuated as the novel draws to a close with the traditional oxcart yielding to the Chinese junk as the novel’s dominant trope of movement. In essence, the conjuration of the Chinese junk looming large at the end of the novel anticipates Koon’s voyage out to the world of commerce, and the only vehicle that could take him to his destination is education.

Koon’s desire to become an affluent Chinese has deep historical roots. As Eoseewong (1982/2005) points out, during the early Bangkok period, Chinese migrants played a significant role in strengthening the export economy and internal trade. Because of their engagement in economic enterprises, the Chinese gained entry to a cash economy before the Thai farming class. Despite being set a century apart, the socioeconomic conditions of the early Bangkok period at the beginning of the nineteenth century bear a striking resemblance to those of the novel of the 1930s, where the Chinese and Vietnamese traders are more familiar with the monetized economy than the Isan farmers. Money is not widespread in Isan villages, as the subsistence economy operates on bartering practices. For instance, when Koon’s oxcart caravan stops at a village to sell their fish, the villagers there, not having money, exchange rice or salt beef for fish (Kampon, 1976/1988, p. 436). The encounter between the Vietnamese traders and Koon’s mother brings to sharp relief the economic disparity between the wealthy ethnic traders and the Isan farmers. When a Vietnamese peddler-merchant buys eggs from Koon’s mother using a banknote, she does not have enough change to give her (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 53).

In addition, because of their long engagement with trade and commerce, the Chinese achieved upward mobility and joined the Thai elite. The unskilled labor positions once occupied by Chinese immigrants were increasingly filled by the Thai from the countryside. In the postwar era, as G. William Skinner (1957) notes, “Thai [migrating to Bangkok] have come to equal Chinese in callings of lowest status” (p. 305). This statement strikingly captures class hierarchies between the Chinese and the Isan people articulated along ethnic lines. In short, Isan people’s limited access to money, their low status as cheap labor, and their

thwarted upward mobility—exemplified by racial discrimination against Koon’s grandfather—reflect the uneven development in Siam/Thailand, where capitalist development has long been concentrated in Bangkok at the expense of the underdevelopment of its peripheries.

The prosperity of the Chinese and the Vietnamese is something the Isan people envy. In the novel, the wealthy Chinese and Vietnamese merchants are portrayed as ghosts that feed off children’s livers. Koon’s father does not really like them because of their superior economic position. However, he hopes his son will become a master (*chaonai*) in the Thai bureaucratic world and do better than the Vietnamese. As he tells his son, ““So they’re smart, are they? Then we need to be smarter”” (Boontawee, 1976/1988, p. 35). Just as literacy in the early Bangkok period was prized by the Siamese/Chinese bourgeoisie as the tool by which they could accumulate wealth and capital, it is now seen as an essential vehicle through which the marginalized Isan subjects could climb the social ladder. By reciting the verse “Knowledge as Commodity,” Koon dwells on the territory well-trodden by the Siamese bourgeois children of the early Bangkok period, modeling his desire after them. This moment marks Koon’s transition from a traditional subsistence economy with limited access to money to the capitalist world-economy where he could compete on an equal footing with the Chinese or traders of other races.

### **The Bildungsroman as Genre of Contradictions and Compromises**

In his analysis of *A Child of the Northeast*, Kittiarisa (2005) reads the novel as a marker of deterritorialization where the Isan subjects, represented by the young Koon, venture into new economic territory in search of a better life (pp. 76-82). However, using the frameworks of world-system theory and the bildungsroman, this article argues that the novel should be characterized not only as one of deterritorialization but also as one of reterritorialization. Although the bildungsroman promises Koon a journey beyond his village, the world he will encounter remains firmly with the capitalist system, which will reshape his body and mind according to the social logic of capital accumulation. What is particularly interesting about the verse “Knowledge as Commodity” is how it draws an analogy between parts of the human body or intellectual properties and the components of the junk: the body to the hull; arms to the mast; fingers to the ropes; feet to the anchor; mouth to the captain; manner to provisions; consciousness to the rudder; intellect to binoculars; and ears and eyes to accountants (Kongsirirat, 2013). In analogizing the human anatomy to the mechanical parts of the junk, the verse accentuates the utilitarian functions of the human body in the accumulation of capital. It values productivity over laziness by comparing laziness to vicious fish that could sink the junks laden with cargoes. To maintain the cycle of global capitalism, the heart, metaphorically represented as a gun, must kill the vicious fish. Therefore, to gain knowledge, which is likened to a precious commodity, the children of the bourgeoisie must refashion their bodies and minds into machines that serve and sustain the capitalist world-economy. In other words, while the verse takes Koon out of his provincial village, it still keeps him within the bounds of global capitalism. In this regard, *A Child of the Northeast* or Koon’s singing of the verse “Knowledge as Commodity” can be read as a response to, or an acceptance of, the call of the global capitalist market.

The tension between deterritorialization and reterritorialization echoes the contradiction inherent within the bildungsroman, as theorized by Moretti. Linking the concept of the bildungsroman to modernity, Moretti (2000) contends that the bildungsroman functions as the symbolic form of European modernity, with youth serving as modernity’s material sign. Youth is chosen because it highlights “modernity’s dynamism and instability” (p. 5). However, as youth is short-lived, modernity’s dynamism, which youth formally represents, must be curbed. In this sense, the bildungsroman is structured upon sharp contrasts between “dynamism

and limits, restlessness and the ‘sense of ending,’” making it “*intrinsically contradictory*” (p. 8).

However, Moretti does not view the contradiction in the bildungsroman as a flaw because it speaks to “the paradoxical *functional principle* of a large part of modern culture” (p. 9) where opposing values coexist. Celebrating compromise as one of its themes, the bildungsroman offers a solution to the conflict between the actualization of one’s individual freedom and the process of social normalization in modern bourgeois culture. In the bildungsroman, one internalizes the social norms to the point where there is no difference between external forces (“objectification”) and internal drives (“individuality”) (p. 16). Since the contradiction between free self-making and social determination is characteristic of modernity itself, Moretti suggests that we should not attempt “to ‘solve’ the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival” (Moretti, 2000, p. 10).

In his artistic chronotope, Boontawee borrows the language of the past, that of the early Bangkok period, and introduces the national-historical time of the 1932 Revolution to his child protagonist, marking the emergence of Isan people as merchant capitalists in the modern world-system. *A Child of the Northeast* attains its symbolic meaning as bildungsroman by encapsulating the contradictions inherent in the subject formation of the Isan people. While they (represented by the young Koon) seek to deterritorialize their identity and home, aiming to become part of the modern cosmopolitan world, their subject formation is determined by the forces of global capitalism. In this light, the novel can be read as world literature, with its bildungsroman form acting as a literary correlate to the social logic of combined and uneven development characteristic of the modern capitalist world-economy. While the novel reveals the imposition of capitalism on far-flung corners of the world, including Isan, it also registers the complex subjectivity of Isan agrarian subjects, who, in internalizing the logic of capital accumulation on a global scale, aspire to take part in the world of international commerce. Koon does not seek to sustain himself and his family at a subsistence level but to sell commodities in the world market. This is a cosmopolitan world the poem “Knowledge as Commodity” invites him to imagine and inhabit

### **Conclusion: Being at Home in a Capitalist World**

Apollo Amoko (2009) notes that the genres of the bildungsroman and the autobiography are characterized by “temporal reversal” (Amoko, 2009, p. 195). While the stories narrated in these two genres on which *A Child of the Northeast* borders seem to proceed from the past to the present or from childhood to adulthood, they are told in retrospect when the narrator is already a mature adult. Bildungsroman narratives, in other words, “begin at the end” (p. 195). Subject to the complex process of “remembering, forgetting, revising, inventing, selecting, and arranging events” (p. 196), the writings in the bildungsroman feature what Amoko calls “primal scenes” or decisive past moments that, while they may or may not have happened, can retrospectively account for the destiny of the narrator and his identity at the moment of writing (p. 203).

This future anterior leaves its mark in the last sentences of *A Child of the Northeast*. After describing Koon’s tears of joy after he recites the verse “Knowledge as Commodity,” the narrator reflects:

That day’s atmosphere is like today’s. Koon will have to face it again because he is a child of the Northeast, a grandson of a man with leg tattoos. Following the advice of Luang Paw Ken and his father, he has never blamed the sky. And he has to this day taken the teachings of his father to heart (Bunthawi, 2009b, p. 310, my translation).

The split between Koon the fictional character (that day) and Koon the third-person autobiographical narrator – Boontawee himself (today) reveals that Koon the character has already attained maturity. Koon the narrator could have given the novel a closure by revealing Koon’s ostensibly stable identity as an adult working in a particular profession. However, the fact that Koon the narrator chooses to end the novel with an opening onto an unknown future, signaled by the verse, suggests that Boontawee’s bildungsroman form falls into the transformation principle, whereby “youthful dynamism is emphasized,” rather than the classification one, which focuses on the end of youth (Moretti, 2000, p. 8). By choosing a youth protagonist, Boontawee also captures the boundless and volatile nature of capitalist development, mirrored in the dream of Koon the character. In his travels, real and imaginary, which cut across many different spatio-temporal terrains, the peasant child of the Northeast aspires to get a foothold in world-wide trade. Venturing into uncharted territory, he relives a dream that was already materialized a century ago by the Siamese merchant capitalists of the early Bangkok period and is now realized in the novel’s context of the 1930s by their Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts. This dream itself indexes the combined and uneven development within Siam/Thailand, where Bangkok has flourished as an urban center of the capitalist world-system, while its peripheral Isan remains rooted in a peasant economy, characterized by its so-called “primitive” forms of exchange (bartering) and production (subsistence).

The narrator’s final words underscore *A Child of the Northeast* as world literature of transition, where Isan subjects seem to be psychically caught “on the border between two epochs” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 23). Despite his dream of becoming an affluent long-distance trader, Koon has never forgotten the lessons imparted by Luang Paw Ken and his father, the figures of traditional authority, who taught him never to forget his agrarian roots and blame the rain-giving sky. Despite his then emergent cosmopolitan outward-looking mindset, Koon has not to this day denounced his Isan cultural identity. Isan remains the center of his belonging as he transitions from “who I was” to “who I am.” This Janus-faced conclusion thus marks the tension between a new cosmopolitan outlook and the grounding in traditional Isan values. Koon can thus be called a “cosmopolitan villager.”<sup>4</sup> When read as a pedagogical novel primarily intended for an Isan readership, *A Child of the Northeast* teaches Isan subjects how to be at home in a world shaped by the encroachment of global capitalist modernity. Such a tension or transition encapsulates the novel as a distinguished work of world literature in the sense that even in the far-flung corner of the world known as Isan, global capitalist forces continue to wield power. As Isan/Thailand become increasingly integrated into the capitalist world-system, the child of the northeast is found navigating his identity amidst the waves of the global economy.

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<sup>4</sup> The term is Charles Keyes’s, but it is used here in a slightly different context. For Keyes, cosmopolitan villagers are Isan labor migrants who, having worked in a “global system of labor,” develop a cosmopolitan perspective (2012, p. 344). While Koon has developed a cosmopolitan outlook and character, it remains to be seen as to which class between the working class or the capitalist he will belong to.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research paper was funded by the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University.

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