A Distant Reading of Khamphun Bunthawi's *Luk Isan (A Child of the Northeast)* as World Literature

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Abstract

This article offers a distant reading of Khamphun Bunthawi's *Luk Isan* (*A Child of the Northeast*) as world literature. By attending to its production, circulation, translation, and reception in an interlocking literary system, it shows that the novel borrows the bildungsroman form from an American children's novel. This borrowing underlines the role of translated literature and editors in establishing a profoundly unequal relationship between the Western core and peripheral literatures. This article also examines the English translation of *Luk Isan*. It argues that while the translation creates an intertext that aids Anglophone audiences in comprehending the novel's foreignness, it fails to convey the linguistic complexity of the novel characterized by the author's use of central Thai and the Isan dialect. The translation consequently erases the traces of the novel's bilingualism, which indicates a compromise between the author's Isan literary repertoire and the Thai readership's demand for the use of standard Thai. The article ends with the reception of Khamphun's speech at a literary conference in Germany. Despite Khamphun's appeal to the Goethean humanist ideal of world literature, the Western audience tended to regard his work as exotic, hence relegating it from world literature.

Keywords: *Luk Isan*, *A Child of the Northeast*, world literature, distant reading, translation

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Introduction

First published in 1976, *Luk Isan* is a widely read novel that has brought its author Khamphun Bunthawi fame both at home and abroad (Khamphun 2009a). This autobiographical novel, which chronicles the life experience of a child protagonist in a drought-plagued village in the Northeast of Thailand (Isan), won the prize for Best Novel by the Thai National Book Association in 1977. It was subsequently included in Thailand's national high school extracurricular reading program. The novel's success went far beyond Thai national borders when it won the Southeast Asian Writers Award (S.E.A Write), the region's most recognized literary prize, in 1979. Nearly a decade later, *Luk Isan* found its way to the English-speaking world through Susan Fulop Kepner's English translation under the title *A Child of the Northeast* (Boontawee 1988). The novel was also translated into French and Japanese. When the English translation was about to be debuted at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Khamphun found himself traveling outside of his home country to participate in an international literary conference in Germany where he met fellow writers from around the world and a Western metropolitan audience.

Despite its popularity among the Thai readership, *Luk Isan* has rarely received critical attention. When it does, it is generally regarded as an ethnographical novel that features Isan cultural practices and wisdom.[2] There are, however, critical works that depart from this dominant mode of reading. Nopphorn Prachakul (2009), for example, employs a formalist method. Using A. J. Greimas's semiotic square, he discloses the structure of the novel organized around the quest for survival. In another piece, Nopphorn looks at the multicultural dimension of the setting of the novel and shows how the protagonist develops multiple senses of belonging to Isan and Thailand (Prachakul 2014). The anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa (2014) offers a more historical reading of *Luk Isan*. He argues that the novel, which is full of physical and psychological crossings, encapsulates a long-standing desire of Isan people to make a voyage out into a larger world in search of a better life. Despite their different focuses, however, these scholarly works on *Luk Isan* use close reading as an approach to analyzing the novel. They bring out meaning from the text by a method of careful reading, seeking to either uncover the underlying grammar of the novel or explicate how the language used reflects Isan culture and Isan people's subjectivity and desire.

This article significantly departs from the previous critical works on *Luk Isan* in that while it still considers close reading as a useful approach to the novel, it also offers a distant reading of it as world literature. Following Franco Moretti (2013), the article takes distant reading to mean a mode of reading that examines how individual texts have come in contact with one another in a world literary system. This method will ultimately reveal the power relations between the literary core and the periphery. However, it does not mean that distant reading does not pay attention to small literary units because it does but only by putting individual texts into relation to each other. As Moretti puts it, "it [distant reading] allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (Moretti 2013, 48-49). In other words, distant reading discloses how certain small literary elements such as plots and narrative voices or larger literary concepts such as romance and tragedy have been transformed when they are adopted across different literary traditions and cultural contexts. Following the lead of not only Moretti but also other contemporary theorists of world literature like Pascale

[2] See, for example, Thanomwong (2010) and Prani (2003).

Casanova and David Damrosch (whose ideas will be further discussed in the section "Debates on World Literature" below), this article examines the production, circulation, translation, and reception of *Luk Isan* in the world literary system. By locating the triadic circuit through which the novel has moved, it discusses the circumstances in which Khamphun as a provincial writer conceived the idea for the novel and how he was brought into the Thai national literary system, which in itself have long been dominated by the Western literary core. The article also examines what is at stake when *Luk Isan* is rendered into English and received by a Western metropolitan audience.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part, which attends to the relationship between Khamphun and his editor, shows that the Western literary core exerts its hegemony over the periphery via translated literature. Heeding his editor's advice, the provincial writer produced his novel using a Western literary form. In the second part, the article demonstrates that the English translation of *Luk Isan* cannot retain the linguistic and cultural complexity of the novel, which is characterized by the author's alternate use of central Thai and the Isan dialect. The author's choice of languages indicates not only the dynamics of multiple belongings of Isan subjects but also the author's concerted effort to use his regional literary repertoire (the Isan dialect) in the dominant Thai literary space. The last part of the article argues that, despite Khamphun's appeal to the Goethean humanist values of world literature during his speech in a world literary forum, the Western cosmopolitan audience tended to marginalize his novel as an exotic one. Overall, the case of *Luk Isan* discloses various aspects of inequalities in world literature.

Debates on World Literature

World literature was once a concern among only a small circle of literary scholars with European origins in the discipline of comparative literature in the United States of America, concentrating only on a handful of major European literatures. Since the end of the twentieth century, however, it has emerged as a vibrant field of inquiry that has now come to recognize non-Western literatures as one of its legitimate objects (D'haen 2012, 1-4; Damrosch 2014). Recent scholarship on the subject has, of course, turned to the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who makes the concept of *Weltliteratur* gain wide currency. In his exchange with Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827, Goethe famously proclaimed, "National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Goethe 1984, 133). But since Goethe never provides a precise definition of world literature, literary scholars have taken it upon themselves to spell out what the term signifies for him and conceive of how to approach it in the age of globalization.

The German literary historian Fritz Strich offers arguably the best sketch of Goethe's concept and usage of world literature. He clears the common misconceptions of world literature as a sum of all national literatures and a pantheon of mostly Western masterpieces. Goethe, he maintains, takes world literature to mean "the literature which serves as a link between national literatures and thus between the nations themselves, for the exchange of ideal values" (Strich 1971, 5). Strich also points out that Goethe uses the metaphorical language of trade and commerce to bring home the notion of world literature: "It is an intellectual barter, a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange" (Strich 1971, 5). For Goethe, the foundation of or the traffic in world literature is inconceivable without translation. In taking national literatures out of its home of origin and

then reinscribing them in a foreign language, an act of translation allows a community of readers to advance a common humanity or, in Goethe's words, "the Eternal One-ness, displayed in many forms" (Strich 1971, 13).

Built on this Goethean paradigm of world literature, contemporary theorists of world literature, notably Casanova, Moretti, and Damrosch, challenge the nation-based model of literary history and criticism. In redrawing literary geography and history, these scholars develop a new theoretical framework by which to analyze literary texts in ways that attend to the process of their production, circulation, translation, and reception on a planetary scale. Indeed, as Emily Apter (2013) observes, many literary historians and comparatists draw on a certain world-systems theory from the humanities and the social sciences or even an evolutionary theory from the natural sciences to put the existing literatures into relation and display them on a world map. World literature has thus come to be regarded as a system or a supranational space into which disparate national literatures enter, albeit on an unequal footing (Apter 2013, 31-56).[3]

Such a systemic approach to world literature is evident in the work of Casanova and Moretti. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova employs Fernand Braudel's concept of an economy-world and Pierre Bourdieu's notions of field and capital to put forward the argument that the international literary space is structured on an unequal relationship and grounded in rivalry and competition among the participating nations. The literary centers have determined what Casanova calls "the Greenwich meridian of literature," which is the literary yardstick by which the works of writers of small nations are measured (Casanova 2004, 87). These so-called dominated writers from former colonies or peripheral Europe would be well advised to conform to established literary conventions if they seek to achieve success in the world republic of letters. Casanova (2004) also points out that the world literary system is safeguarded by variegated cosmopolitan agents such as publishers, libraries, translators, and critics.

Like Casanova (2004), Moretti (2013) characterizes the world literary space as structured in asymmetry. Inspired by the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Morretti prefers distant reading to close reading as a method by which to comprehend world literature as a system. He contends that the world literary system, like the capitalist world-system, is "simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality" (Moretti 2013, 46, italics in original). Using the genre of the novel as an example, Moretti states that the world literary system is operated by the law of literary evolution whereby peripheral literatures have emerged as world literature as a result of their negotiation with the Western literary core: "in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" (Moretti 2013, 50). Moretti also draws upon evolutionary science to examine how literary styles, genres, and forms, like biological forms, have mutated or survived in different places and times (Moretti 2007).

Damrosch (2003) is another influential theorist of world literature. Revisiting Goethe's conceptualization of the circulation, translation, and reception of world literature, he takes world literature

[3] For Marxist and postcolonial approaches to world literature, which engage in close reading of literary texts, see, for example, Warwick Research Collective (2015) and Pheng Cheah (2016). It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate how these approaches can also be employed for an analysis of *Luk Isan*.

to include "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003, 4). In emphasizing the relationship between translation and transculturation, he demonstrates that a translated work is prone to a certain degree of manipulation, deformation, and assimilation when it is received in a new cultural context. Like Casanova (2004) and Moretti (2007, 2013), Damrosch (2003) draws attention to the inequalities in world literature. Though a work may enter world literature by virtue of being translated and circulated abroad, he argues, it is not free of cultural hierarchies: "Works rarely cross borders on a basis of full equality; if the classics and masterpieces long dominant in world literature have typically enjoyed high prestige and authoritative weight in their new homes, the power relations are often reversed when noncanonical works come into North America today" (Damrosch 2003, 24). Non-western or peripheral European works are likely to be manipulated by their editors, translators, and interpreters in ways that serve their immediate interests.

Part I: Circulating Translated Literature from the Great Plains of North America to the Khorat Plateau

Based on the author's childhood experience in Isan around the 1930s, *Luk Isan* is written in a typical bildungsroman with the third-person point of view that documents the life of an eight-year-old child named Koon (Khamphun's former name) who grows up in a village with his family (Khamphun 2009, 7-8). The novel is filled with numerous scenes of informal and formal education, interspersed with some episodes on the protagonist's adventures. Through the teaching and influence of parents, relatives, teachers, and friends, the child protagonist comes to accept the village's traditional beliefs and social norms and engage in practical matters. Toward the end of the novel, Koon's family makes a trip in an oxcart caravan to catch fish in the Chi River in another village and eventually returns home.

Luk Isan's success is principally attributable to its simple narrative structure and ethnographical description of Isan pastoral life. However, it is important to note that the source of the novel's bildungsroman form and its distinctive local color is not the author's originality. What inspired Khamphun to write *Luk Isan* was the series of American children's novels called the Little House Books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. An examination of the history of the production of *Luk Isan* shows that the novel, which won so many literary awards, would not have been possible without the role of translated literature and one editor.

Achin Panchaphan, the editor of the legendary Thai literary magazine *Fa Muang Thai* (1969-1988), played a crucial role in developing Khamphun as a writer and shaping *Luk Isan* as we know it. He published Khamphun's first short story in 1972 while Khamphun was working as a prison guard in the South of Thailand. What captivated Achin's attention was Khamphun's local color style. Having published more of Khamphun's stories including his first novel *Men of One Hundred Prisons* (1974), Achin developed a more professional and personal relationship with the new writer. One day Khamphun confessed to his editor that after the completion of his first novel, he experienced a writer's block. Having discovered that Khamphun was born and raised in Isan, Achin recommended him to read the Thai translation of Wilder's Little House series: "I gave him *Ban Lek Nai Pa Yai* [the Thai translation of *Little House in the Big Woods*] by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I told him to try to write about life in Isan" (Nangnoi 2005, 218).

Significantly, the exchange of the literary gift between the well-versed editor and the emergent provincial writer marks the inauguration of *Luk Isan* as world literature. It reveals the role of editors as, to

use Casanova's words, "cosmopolitan intermediaries" or "foreign exchange brokers" who import literary texts from one country to another, hence consecrating their literary value (Casanova 2004, 21). By bestowing the Thai translation of the American children's novel upon Khamphun, Achin exposed the novice writer to the Western literary core whose norms he could adopt for his writing. Achin, however, did not state why the Little House Books would be a worthwhile read for him. Neither did he discuss the literary values of the series.

A look at the history of the Thai translation of the Little House Books, however, could throw light on their literary value that Achin recognized and sought to further consecrate in Khamphun's future work. The first eight of the Little House series were first translated into Thai in 1964 by Sukhontharot, penname of Mom Luang Rotsakhon Isarasena. In the Translator's Preface to the first edition, Sukhontharot revealed that while she was studying for a master's degree in history at Kansas State University (1953-1955), the head of her department recommended her to translate the series into Thai, hoping that the Thai rendition of these American children's novels would enhance Thai students' understanding of the geography and society of America. Sukhontharot wrote, "Upon reading the series, I found gratification in translating them into Thai. I want our children to know how hard the American people fought nature and how they overcame adversity with perseverance before they became, as they today are, a prosperous nation and a great power only over eighty years" (Sukhontharot 2016, Translator's Preface, para. 3). This statement clearly illustrates that Sukhontharot conceived the Little House series as novels of education for a Thai readership. For her, Thai people should draw inspiration from the Americans.

Insofar as the relationship between world literature and translation is concerned, Sukhontharot's true success as a translator of the Little House Books does not lie in the fact that her version is the most popular among the Thai readership so much as Khamphun's successful domestication of the foreign form of her translated books. Khamphun revealed that having read only the first two chapters of Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* (the first book of the series), he was inspired to write a story based on his life experience in Isan (Somrom 1993, 101). He also reflected on how he initially started writing *Luk Isan* and published it serially with Achin:

> I sent a few chapters of what I wrote to Achin…He told me to keep writing and sending him more. I read four or five books of the Little House series…I did not even get to the last book. By the time I wrote chapter seven or eight, letters from the readers flooded in… (Khamphun 1984, 30-31)

What is revealing about this anecdote is not only the fact that *Luk Isan* hooked its readers so early (*Luk Isan* in its serialized form had thirty-six chapters) but also the fact that Khamphun wrote/published *Luk Isan* and read the Little House Books at the same time!

Such a writing process, no doubt, resulted in the striking similarities between Khamphun's *Luk Isan* and Wilder's series. The opening chapter of *Luk Isan* strictly follows that of Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*. Khamphun began his novel with "Forty-seven years ago there stood on round wooden stilts a house bathing in the scorching sun" (Khamphun 2009, 11, translation mine) while Wilder started her first book of the series with "Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs" (Wilder 2012, 5). Khamphun imitated Wilder by not only setting his novel in the not-too-distant past but also by, after the first sentence, proceeding to describe the protagonist's house and its immediate environment. Furthermore, when considering their entire narrative

structures, it can be seen that *Luk Isan* and the Little House series are autobiographical fiction that depicts their author's childhood memories in the Great Plains of North America and the Khorat Plateau in Thailand, respectively.[4] They describe how the protagonists in their historically specific locale learn about their family, master wilderness survival skills, encounter ethnic "others," and interiorize their social role in the world. Given this kind of coming-of-age chronicles, the works of these authors can be placed in the genre of the bildungsroman and local color.[5] As it should be noted, prior to his first meeting with Khamphun, Achin had already detected local color in Khamphun's early stories, which he described as having "a local smell" (Nangnoi 2005, 218). It is also worth mentioning that Achin changed the original title of Khamphun's first published story "Khwamrak nai heo luek" ["Love in the Deep Valley"] to "Nithan lukthung" ["Folk Tale"], which conveyed an acute sense of regionalism. This change is indicative of Achin's attempt to make the story a local color. Therefore, for Achin, local colorism was perhaps the most treasured value of the Little House series that should be transferred to and consecrated in *Luk Isan*.

Wilder's formal influence on Khamphun could be conceptualized, following Itamar Even-Zohar, as laws of literary interference by which "a certain literature A (a source literature) may become a source of direct or indirect loans for another literature B (a target literature)" (Even-Zohar 1990a, 54). Even-Zohar also states that the laws of literary interference are channeled through translated literature that "simply fulfills the need of a younger literature to put into use its newly founded (or renovated) tongue for as many literary types as possible in order to make it serviceable as a literary language and useful for its emerging public" (Even-Zohar 1990b, 47). As we have seen, Wilder's work via a Thai translation became the source of inspiration for Khamphun. It fulfilled his need for a new story, supplying him with the new language of the bildungsroman, its pedagogical value, and local color style. In this light, for its success in the Thai national literary space, *Luk Isan* is greatly indebted to the Anglophone literary tradition of the bildungsroman.

While Even-Zohar's theorization of the laws of literary interference sheds light on the connectedness of the literary polysystem on a planetary scale, however, it overlooks the process whereby peripheral literatures (the target literature) negotiate with the central ones (the source literature). This is precisely Moretti's intervention when he elaborates on Fredric Jameson's binary opposition of Western form and local materials. For him, world literature is not simply the encounter of Western form and local reality but "a compromise" between the two (Moretti 2013, 50). Revising Jameson's formula, he states, "For me, it is more of a triangular: foreign form, local material—*and local form*. Simplifying somewhat: foreign *plot*; local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*" (Moretti 2013, 57, italics in original). What fascinates Moretti in this law of evolution is the third term – local narrative voice. He gives myriad examples of peripheral literatures to demonstrate that when a Western form is welded with local materials, there is a sense of disruption or "crack" in the narrative voice (Moretti 2013, 58). The local narrative voice in peripheral literatures cannot fully appropriate Western literary forms because it is permeated with local concerns or

[4] Khamphun once reflected on how the Little House series reminded him of his childhood and the similarities between Wilder's heroine and his protagonist: "the story reminded me of my childhood life – going out with my father to catch fish at the Chi River. The book's heroine had a dog just as I did except that mine was very good at chasing porcupines" (Khamphun 1984, 30).

[5] Fred Erisman, for example, considers the Little House series as belonging to "the classic tradition of the bildungsroman" (Erisman 1994, 45). Moreover, Katharine Slater reads Wilder's Little House on the Prairie as "a work of U.S. literary regionalism" (Slater 2014, 56).

indigenous literary traditions. The narrator, who is "the pole of comment, of explanation, of evaluation," plays a crucial role in making peripheral novels "most unstable – most uneasy" (Moretti 2013, 57).

While it is true that Achin lent Khamphun a foreign literature, he did not encourage him to strictly imitate it. When he gave Khamphun the Little House Books, he said, "This is how farangs [Caucasians] wrote. How are you going to write?" (Achin 1984, 33). Khamphun remembered this lesson well: "He told me to write in my style. How do the bullfrogs sound like? How does the rain sound like? You can read other writers' works, but do not follow them. This is how Achin taught me" (Khampoon 1984, 30). Even though Khamphun drew heavily on Wilder for inspiration, he wrote *Luk Isan* in his own way, inventing his own literary repertoire. As Yok Burapha, Achin's editorial assistant, stated, "In the first few chapters of *Luk Isan*, you will see that Khamphun held fast to the series. But in the later chapters, writers are writers – they have their own freedom. Khamphun turned *Luk Isan* into what it is with no sense of foreignness. No ham or cheese but fermented fish" ("Khao nangsue" 1979, 19).

A less distant reading of *Luk Isan* discloses the compromise between Western form and Isan local materials or, more precisely, a crack in *Luk Isan*'s form as a bildungsroman novel. The novel's local narrative voice oscillates between narrative discourse and ethnographic discourse. The narrator not only tells a coming-of-age story of the Isan protagonist in the strict bildungsroman fashion, but he also presents a sort of authentic Isan culture to the Thai audience. One cannot help but is struck by the novel's meticulous description of various aspects of Isan cultural life. As one Thai critic observes, "more than three-quarters of the novel presents—in a simple, realistic style coupled with an extensive level of detail, much in the form of an anthropological report or survey—the topics of food, customs, local traditions and beliefs and so forth" (Prachakul 2014, 106). This anthropological form throws off course the traditional narrative discourse. Its dominance gives rise to the debate on whether or not the novel has a plot at all. Considering that plot is fundamental to the novel form, *Luk Isan*'s alleged lack of one might be regarded as, to use Moretti's words, its "structural weakness" (Moretti 2013, 58).[6] This narrative defect, however, turns out to be one of its strengths because the Thai readers and critics are impressed with the novel's anthropo-encyclopedic portrayal of Isan village life. More importantly, as previously mentioned, many critics view the novel rather nostalgically as a repository of authentic Isan cultural values and identity (Thanomwong 2010; Prani 2003).

The disruption of *Luk Isan*'s local narrative voice not only stems from the two irreconcilable modes of ethnographic documentation and dramatic presentation but also its bilingual nature. In applying Moretti's formula to *Luk Isan*, it is important to note that the "local" in the novel's local narrative voice is not only "Thai" but also "Isan." Written in two languages (central Thai and the Isan dialect), the novel assigns the narrator more roles than just telling a story. The narrator also takes up the role of a cultural translator. As this point will be more fully discussed in the next part, it will suffice to say here that the Isan speech is what makes the novel uneasy because the Thai-speaking readership might not be able to grasp it. To resolve

[6] This can also be attributed to its first appearance in serial form. As previously mentioned, the novel was first published serially in *Fa Muang Thai*. When the first installments of the novel became popular among the readers, Achin told Khamphun to keep writing until he had nothing left to say and not to think about when to end it. Achin said, "As long as the readers wrote us and told us that they enjoyed reading it, he should keep writing" (Achin 2003, 64). Working under this saleable condition might explain why Khamphun wrote *Luk Isan* not only without an end but also with no plot in sight. Susan Fulop Kepner also comments that it is understandable to see a "lack of consistence of quality" of Thai novels first published in the serialized format (Kepner 2000, 6).

this conflict, the narrator finds himself pause from time to time to relay Isan messages in central Thai for the Thai readers. Therefore, the novel's narrative discourse is occasionally interrupted by the narrator's explanatory notes, which mark an element of foreignness in both narrative and linguistic senses. This hybridization of the local narrative voice is itself indicative of the complexity of Isan subjectivity bordering on both Thai and Isan cultures.

To sum up this part, the works of Casanova (2004), Even-Zohar (1990a, 1990b), and Moretti (2007, 2013) throw light on the combined and yet unequal world literary system and Khamphun's doubly subordinate position in it. As a provincial writer, Khamphun invented his literary repertoire by borrowing from translated Western literature via his editor. This act of borrowing simultaneously marks the dependence of Thai provincial writers on the Thai national literary space and the formal influence of the Western literary core on the peripheral Thai literary system. Situating *Luk Isan* in this triadic relation allows us to see the process whereby Khamphun negotiated with a Western form and a Thai readership. The compromise manifests itself in the novel's bastardized bildungsroman form and its movement in and out of two linguistic terrains. *Luk Isan*'s localized form indeed reinforces Moretti's statement that "[t]he one-and-unequal literary system is not just an external network here; it doesn't remain outside the text: it's embedded well into its form" (Moretti 2013, 58-59).

Part II: *Luk Isan* Going Global and Lost in Translation

It has been acknowledged in the field of translation studies that something is doomed to disappear (or something new is doomed to appear) when a work is translated into another language.[7] Since this article is not a full-length study of Kepner's translation of *Luk Isan*, it focuses on only a few aspects of her translation that specifically involve world literature. Kepner is a critically acclaimed translator who has brought Thai literary works to an English-speaking audience. Before *A Child of the Northeast* was born, she had translated Botan's award-winning novel into English under the title *Letters from Thailand* in 1982. Her translations, however, are not free of criticism. Martin Platt, for example, criticizes her for being unfaithful to the original Thai version of *Luk Isan* by adding to her English translation details that do not exist in the source text. Kepner, for example, inserts her own sentence conveying "a Protestant work ethic," which Platt finds at odds with "an Isan Buddhist worldview" of the Thai version (Platt 2013, 120).

Kepner's approach to translation can be conceived as a rewriting of the source text. In her "On Translating "Letters from Thailand,"" she uses the metaphor of a picture puzzle to explain her translation practice:

> The strategy I developed was to imagine *Letters from Thailand* as a picture puzzle containing thousands of pieces that had been broken apart and all turned over. I further imagined that the reverse side of the puzzle was called "English," and that in order to make the picture on the "English" side tell the same story as that on the "Thai" side, some of the pieces would have to be reassembled *in a slightly different order*... (Kepner 2000, 6, italics in original)

[7] Susan Bassnett, for example, states that "translation is a doomed enterprise from the start, since so much is lost when a message of any sort is transferred from one language to another" (Bassnett 2014, 9-10).

Kepner's (2000) translation strategy as a reassemblage of bits and pieces of the original text necessitates adding and deleting certain details. By her own admission, her *Letters from Thailand* is not a word-for-word translation: "the translation contains everything in the original *and a bit more*" (Kepner 2000, 8, italics in original). For her, the additions or deletions are acceptable as long as the overall translation recreates "an accurate sense of the world of the tale," retaining "its emotional quality" (Kepner 2000, 6). In defense of her translation method, Kepner concludes, "putting each part into its "proper" place and scrupulously avoiding both additions and deletions does not guarantee a good *literary* translation" (Kepner 2000, 10, italics in original).

Instead of viewing Kepner's insertion of the Protestant worldview in her English translation of *A Child of the Northeast* as Platt does as damaging the sense of the Thai original, this article suggests that the insertion can be conceptualized as Kepner's interpretation of the source text that aims to recreate "the world of the tale" with which an Anglophone readership is already familiar. This translation strategy resembles what Lawrence Venuti calls the creation of a "receiving intertext" that seeks to enhance the reader's understanding of a translated work by drawing on literary traditions or cultural knowledge in the receiving culture (Venuti 2012, 185). Interestingly, whether intentionally or not, Kepner's extra sentence "good things come to those who work," which is inserted in the scene where the child protagonist is encouraged by his father to be a good student, underlines the central tenet of the genre of the bildungsroman. The Protestant ethic and the Anglophone traditions of the bildungsroman both postulate work as a necessary condition for personal and spiritual growth (Trites 2014, 75). If we concur with Venuti's idea that a translator has the right to "interpret the source text for audiences in the receiving situation," Kepner's insertion of the Protestant work ethic as an intertext for the Anglophone readership then does not disrupt the sense of the Thai original so much as reinforces the novel's overarching bildungsroman discourse (Venutti 2012, 191). To drive home the novel's main message on Koon's education and self-cultivation, Kepner draws upon the cultural and literary knowledge of the Protestant ethic and the Bildungsroman that her Anglophone audiences in the receiving culture already possess.

In his criticism of Kepner's translation of *Luk Isan*, Platt not only calls into question the translator's faithfulness to the source text but also her cultural and linguistic knowledge of Isan. He gives one example of Kepner's inaccurate translation when she mistranslates the word *nai hoi* (Isan: buffalo traders) as *nai roi* (Thai: junior officers). This mistranslation, Platt suspects, probably shows Kepner's unconscious bias against Isan: "Thus, perhaps unconsciously mirroring Central Thai prejudice, she negates Lao or Isan aspects of the novel, the very characteristics that make it unique and provide the purpose for which it was written" (Platt 2013, 120). While Platt's criticism of Kepner's (mis)translation, which is based on just one example, sounds like an exaggerated claim, it does touch on the complex relationship between standard Thai and the Isan dialect where there is more at stake than mistranslation.

When *Luk Isan* enters world literature via translation, its original bilingual world is lost. In keeping with Kepner's concept-metaphor of translation as reassembling a picture puzzle, the reverse side of the English is not only called "Thai" but also "Isan" since Khamphun wrote *Luk Isan* using both central Thai and the Isan dialect. In the Thai original, the narrator employs central Thai to describe the events in the novel and then shifts to the Isan dialect to relay the conversation between the Isan characters.[8]

[8] To name just one example, this is similar to the way Zora Neale Hurston constructs her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by using standard English and a Southern dialect.

Unfortunately, the distinct style of *Luk Isan*, its bilingualism, is lost in its English rendition. This loss in translation is perhaps best seen when Kepner could not execute Khamphun's use of a bilingual pun. In the chapter where the fishing caravan is about to return home, Koon and his friend Jundi encounter three girls. One of them asks Jundi in central Thai, "How many major directions are there? ["ทิศใหญ่มีกี่ทิศ"] (Khamphun 2009, 241, translation mine)."[9] Here Khamphun intends to entertain the readers with the pun "ทิศ" (pronounced "thit," meaning directions in central Thai). This word sounds the same as the word ("ทิด"), which means a man who left monkhood in Isan.[10] The girl's question thus can be alternatively translated as "How many big ex-monks are there?" Jundi gets the answer wrong because he thinks that the girl means to ask him about men who have left monkhood in his village. As the narrator tells us, "Jundi said that in his village there were many *thits* (ex-monks), *chans* (religions teachers), *ya khru* (honorary Buddhist monks), and *samanen* (novices)" (Khamphun 2009, 241, translation mine). Kepner deals with the pun by having Jundi give a vague answer: "Four *major* directions? … I don't know what you would call the major ones, but in our village there are a lot of different directions. Even at our house, you know, the phuyaiban's house, well, you know how a phuyaiban's house is—it has quite a few directions" (Boontawee 1988, 365, italics in original). While Kepner's translation could render Jundi's attempt to show off his privileged status as son of the phuyaiban (village head) and the context of misunderstanding between Jundi and the girl, it fails to translate the wordplay and convey its intended humor. Put another way, it cannot display Khamphun's ability to artfully maneuver between standard Thai and the Isan dialect. His mastery of the two languages should be regarded as his literary repertoire; Khamphun does not just borrow from Wilder, but he also develops his distinct literary style that is anchored in the compromise between the Thai language and the Isan dialect, his "newly founded tongue" (Even-Zohar 1990b, 47).

That the English translation of *Luk Isan* fails to render its bilingualism has repercussions for an understanding of Khamphun's position in the complex literary polysystem. Because it cannot register the linguistic complexity of the novel, Kepner's translation erases the trace of the compromise between Khamphun as a provincial writer and the dominant Thai literary system. As he was emerging in the Thai literary space, Khamphun was confronted with the question "which language is he going to use in his work?" In one of his interviews, Khamphun mentioned this dilemma:

> I do not get stuck when I write. But I do when I write about Isan people. It has to do with the use of language…A reader wrote to me saying that "do not forget that your readers are not just Isan people but also us people in the South who do not understand some Isan words." That created a problem. So, what am I going to do? If I do not use the Isan dialect, I will get stuck. My work will lack the Isan atmosphere. Or should I translate it into central Thai and put it in a parenthesis? I think it is too complicated and crazy. When the hero and the heroine speak in Isan, the use of parentheses or hyphens will ruin the aesthetic quality of the work. It is not easy on the eye at all. I do not think it is a novel. It is something else. (Khamphun 1978, 42-43)

[9] Kepner translated this as "What are the four major directions?" (Boontawee 1988, 365). I intended my translation, which is more literal than Kepner's, to accommodate Khamphun's intended pun.

[10] Although the word "ทิด" also means the very same thing in central Thai, the fact that Jundi says this word along with other Isan words ("chans" and "ya khru") in the class of religious figures should testify to the prevalence of the word "ทิด" in Isan discourse. In other words, contextually speaking, from Jundi's standpoint, he thinks of this word as an Isan word.

As Khamphun's reader mentioned, when the Isan dialect was used, it might not be understood by the (non-Isan) Thai-speaking audience. In *Luk Isan*, Khamphun solved the problem or, more precisely, negotiated with the Thai audience by constructing the narrator as a cultural translator who translates Isan words into central Thai. The character who normally asks questions about the Isan dialect or customs is the protagonist Koon. This makes him no different from non-Isan readers in the sense that both sides are constructed as beginner Isan students. The correspondence between the narrator and the protagonist is a repeated pattern that perfectly serves the novel's pedagogical function as a novel of education. This technique of composition enables Khamphun to reach to the Thai reading public.

In the Thai original version of *Luk Isan*, there are many instances of this repeated pattern where the narrator provides explanations for difficult Isan words. It can be seen, for example, in the scene where upon hearing a thunderstorm Koon says:

> "Alright. Let the rain fall. *Let de ren flood mah fiel' n' wet mah pant*."
> The meaning of Koon's words is "Let the rain fall. Let the rain flood his fields and let the rainwater stay long and let it soak his pants for once." Those words that Koon unconsciously sang out were part of the verse sung during the cat procession. (Khamphun 2009, 39, translation mine).[11]

Kepner's translation of the same scene reads:

> "Oh, rainwater," he sang out softly into the breezy darkness, "stand long in our rice fields—with rainwater let my pants be soaked!"
> It was a song he had heard all his life, the song people sang in the process of the cat, begging for pity to be taken on the cat that never had been wasted on them. (Boontawee 1988, 67).

Apparently, Kepner's translation fails to present the bilingual nature of the text. In it, an English audience is not able to recognize that Koon sings the song in the Isan dialect. By not using two different languages in this scene, the translation critically erases the traces of the text's hybridized nature. In the Thai original, when difficult Isan proverbs are used, the novel supplies an explanation for them. It is no surprise that the novel is filled with Koon's favorite question "What does this mean?" and the narrator's subsequent reply "What this means is" or other character's explanation (Khamphun 2009, 99; 138). This self-explanatory aspect of the narrative serves an anthropo-linguistic function in that it digests the Isan dialect and supplies cultural information on Isan customs in central Thai for the Thai-speaking audience. Therefore, in failing to transfer this element of foreignness to the English translation, Kepner cannot render intelligible the negotiation process by which Khamphun as a novice provincial novelist felt under the pressure of having to explain his work in central Thai, a language which is not his own, in exchange of his recognition in the Thai literary space. Kepner could have maintained the novel's bilingualism by using both standard English and a more vernacular form of it, mirroring the use of central Thai and the Isan dialect in the original.[12] In other words, the Isan dialect should remain in the English translation as an element of foreignness that cannot be wholly assimilated into proper English.

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[11] The italicized words indicate Isan words.

[12] This approach is discussed in Damrosch (2009, 82-85).

As translation is as linguistic as cultural, Kepner's failure to capture the bilingual aspect of the novel necessarily means that it fails to bring home the novel's thematic concern with Isan cultural identity. The fact that the novel borders on two linguistic terrains should accentuate the status of the bildungsroman, following M. M. Bakhtin, as a novel of becoming where the protagonist Koon is constructed as an intermediary agent straddling between Thai and Lao cultures.[13] The uses of central Thai and the Isan dialect in the novel is, therefore, indicative of the dual tie of Isan cultural identity to Bangkok and Luang Prabang. In this light, the pun episode, where the girl also asks Jundi about how to get to Luang Prabang, is by no means light-hearted given that it subtly capitalizes on the child characters' linguistic and geographical disorientation. In other words, it marks the multiple belongings of Isan subjects. Children of the Northeast are hard-pressed to decide which center they are moving toward between Thailand and Laos.

To conclude this section, while Kepner's translation method in *A Child of the Northeast* develops an intertext that facilitates the Anglophone readership's understanding of the text's bildungsroman discourse, it fails to register the linguistic complexity of the Thai original characterized by the author's use of central Thai and the Isan dialect. Her translation obliterates the traces of Khamphun's peripheral position within the dominant Thai literary system, which is displayed in the compromise of central Thai and the Isan dialect. When *Luk Isan* circulates in the world in another language, its nuances of meaning are lost. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Kepner apologetically acknowledges "the impossibility of doing it full justice in English" (Kepner 1988, 15).

Part III: *Luk Isan* Entering and Exiting from World Literature in Germany

As mentioned in the Introduction, the success of *Luk Isan* at home and abroad gave Khamphun opportunities to travel outside of his home country to join the community of international writers. Khamphun documented this experience in one of his memoirs *A Country Bumpkin Roaming Germany* (1999). This memoir significantly reveals the different ways in which *Luk Isan* can be conceived as world literature and the hierarchical nature of world literature when a peripherical writer was received by a Western metropolitan audience.

In the preface to the memoir, Khamphun told that he was invited to the International Symposium on Literature: The Second Interlit, which was held in Erlangen, Germany, between September 25 and October 2 in 1988 (Khamphun 1999).[14] He was the only Thai writer who was invited because the international audience was interested in the movie *Luk Isan*, which was based on his novel. The film was produced in 1982 and showed in many different European countries. The topic of the conference is "The

[13] See Bakhtin (1996). I hope to offer elsewhere a close reading of *Luk Isan* as world literature that combines Bakhtin's concept of the bildungsroman with the Marxist concept of world literature to mark the construction of Isan subjectivity within the capitalist world-economy.

[14] Khamphun names this book *A Country Bumpkin Roaming Germany* because of his rustic, awkward demeanor which, according to his friends, makes him one hundred percent Isan. No matter what clothes he puts on, people can always tell his region of origin. But by entitling the book as such Khamphun proudly proclaims that this country bumpkin too can make it to Germany, securing his entry into the world where the notion of world literature originated. In fact, he was also invited to the first symposium, held in Cologne in 1982, but he declined the invitation because he had no financial support.

Third World, Our World." With the financial help from Suk Sungsawang, the owner of Duang Kamol Publisher, which published Kepner's English translation of *Luk Isan*, Khamphun found himself boarding a Lufthansa "flying boat" bound for Frankfurt. At the Frankfurt Airport, he was introduced to other fellow writers – two women and three men.[15] Khamphun reported that two of his books were exhibited in the meeting hall of the conference building: Kepner's translation of *Luk Isan* and his short story collection in Thai. At the conference, Khamphun was thrilled with the heated exchange among writers from around the world on various critical issues such as censorship and writing, the World Bank, women's rights, and writers' freedom.

Khamphun's speech at the symposium relayed through a Thai female interpreter was well received by the audience likely because of its Goethean humanist appeal. His speech is organized in a strikingly chronotopic structure that moves from a particular place in a particular time to a larger world just like his *Luk Isan* that begins in a remote village and ends with Koon's desire to roam the world.[16] Khamphun concluded his speech with an opening of a cosmopolitan future to come. As geographically conscious as his novel, he began the speech by grounding himself almost in a literal, concrete sense in a specific locality of "the driest and hottest land" in Thailand in the South of Asia, where he had to dig up taros to eat and sleep near a bonfire to keep himself warm at night under extreme weather conditions. Just like the narrator of *Luk Isan*, he talked about his education at the temple school and the practical life lessons he had learned from his father and the monk.

Having given the account of his personal life in his home country, Khamphun represented himself as "a small Thai writer" to create some sort of a cosmopolitan bond with other fellow writers from different parts of the world (Khamphun 1999, 81). He emphasized the public role of writers in bringing about peace and freedom in the world through literature. As he said, "All of you who come to this conference would agree with me that the role of writers is not only to reflect on human experience and turn it into letters but also to present creative thoughts to the public to establish peace in this world. Many of you may agree with me that writers or people of literature and freedom belong to one another" (Khamphun 1999, 81). In another round of discussion, Khamphun toyed with the theme of the conference "The Third World, Our World," expressing his hope for the unity of humanity:

> Writers are those who entertain fellow human beings and reflect on the experience of humanity through the arts. I want to speak on behalf of trees, mountains, or nature so that human beings would conserve them instead of destroying them. Sometimes I think like a madman, asking why God does not make humankind speak only one language. I want to ask Him when He would bring all the peoples together to live in just one place so that human beings will have only smiles to give one another, and there would be no second or third world eventually. (Khamphun 1999, 83)

[15] The female writer with "rather white skin" whom he knew by the name "Rosa" is Rosario Ferré from Puerto Rico. The other writers with "pitch-dark skin" are "Miriam" (Miriam Tlali from South Africa), "Stanley" (Stanley Nyamfukudza from Zimbabwe), and "Sony" (Sony Labou Tansi from Congo). Khamphun could not remember the fifth male writer because he did not see him during the conference (Khamphun 1999, 18; 19).

[16] For the concept of chronotope, see Bakhtin (1981). Before he left for Germany, Khamphun consulted his editor for advice on his speech. Achin told him to be himself and tell the story about why he wrote *Luk Isan* and how he survived droughts. He also told him to be poised like a S.E.A Write Award winner (Khamphun 1999, 8).

In his utopian vision, Khamphun also alluded to one of the most memorable lines by Mahatma Gandhi: All men are brothers. He hoped that one day this statement would be realized.

While his speech might strike as an unattainable ideal, it is certainly in line with what Goethe imagined when he put into practice the notion of world literature. Like Goethe, Khamphun conceived world literature as an intellectual barter made possible by translation which could form a cosmopolitan reading public. As he put it in his speech:

> I agree with all the discussants, for example, on the idea of exchanging novels or translating all kinds of literature for people to read, instilling in world citizens a love of reading literature that can give them aesthetic pleasure. How could the Third World be developed if young people still read cheap cartoon books? (Khamphun 1999, 83).

From the standpoint of translation and circulation, perhaps no non-English work could have better attained the status of world literature in a Goethean sense than *Luk Isan*, for its English translation was debuted at the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, the birthplace of Goethe.[17] Khamphun came to Germany, one of the world's biggest literary markets, to barter his goods with other authors from different parts of the world. We may very well understand his speech, which mimics the structure and content of his novel, as an advertisement to the cosmopolitan reading public. In fact, Khamphun did mention Goethe and the Goethe-Institut in Thailand in a way that acknowledges Goethe's foundational promotion of cultural exchange and understanding through world literature. As Khamphun told the audience in one of the school trips he made as a requirement of the conference:

> I honestly feel very excited to be here in West Germany just as I dreamed it would be. This is the land of world thinkers, writers, philosophers, and literati. You must know them very well because they are your ancestors – Gabriel Garcia, Hegel, Hermann Hesse, and Goethe. I will be honest with you. If they were still alive, I would pay homage to them and ask if they would agree with the statement that literature could make human beings more compassionate and create a better world. (Khamphun 1999, 94)

Through his long practice of world literature Goethe would surely agree with him, for Goethe believed that world literature via translation could create "the Eternal One-ness, displayed in many forms" (Strich 1971, 13).

However, Khamphun's appeal to universal humanity was not of interest to the audience. After his conference and field trip talks, he was bombarded with questions that had nothing to do with the issue of a common humanity. The audience asked him, for instance, about the reptiles on which he lived. Some asked if he was still eating taros. Some asked if Thai people used imported knives from Germany and Switzerland. The questions from the Western audience were mostly concerned with sex: "Is it true that there are many brothels in Thailand? Why do Thai women like to marry German men? Do you find Thai prostitutes in Germany disgusting?" (Khamphun 1999, 90). Only a few people asked him about his writing

[17] The translation was launched after the symposium. The book, which was exhibited in the conference, was probably a demo. Khamphun did go to Frankfurt, but he did not state in the memoir whether or not he had seen the English translation of his *Luk Isan* in the book fair.

and the launching of *Luk Isan* in English. This reveals the discrepancy between the way Khamphun presented his work and the way the Western reading public perceived it. More importantly, it shows that the world literary system is structured in inequalities whereby non-Western literatures of the periphery do not achieve the same prestige as Western literatures.

The majority of the questions Khamphun received reflect a particular way in which non-Western literatures are read by the Western audience. In his study of the relationship between world literature and African literature, Graham Huggan points out that African literature is filtered through what he calls "the anthropological exotic," which is "a mode of both perception and consumption," which projects the images of African culture as, for example, primitive, noble, and savage (Huggan 2001, 37). In and through this discourse, African literature is perceived and consumed as some sort of anthropological documentation that provides information about Africa to the West. The anthropological exotic represents the African world as culturally specific or even homogenous. This mode of discursive framing, which renders Africa perennially different from the West, makes African literature "readily marketable" (Huggan 2001, 37).

Following Huggan (2001), we can see that the Western audience at Erlangen also fell under the influence of the anthropological exotic. Its mode of reading renders the life experiences of Isan subjects as strange and inferior to its Western self. In this Eurocentric lens, Isan subjects become the Ethnographic Others, frozen in primordial time and deprived of historical progression and universal humanity. By regarding *Luk Isan* as an exotic novel, the Western reading public simply relegated it from the world republic of letters, pushing its author back to where he was from – originally. Exit *Luk Isan*.[18]

Conclusion

This article has attempted to read Khamphun Bunthawi's *Luk Isan* as a work of world literature by way of "distant" reading proffered by Moretti. It has demonstrated that Khamphun, following the advice of his editor, borrowed the bildungsroman form from the West literary core via the Thai translation of the American author Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series as a model for his novel. While this borrowing underscores a formal inequality between the Western core and the young Thai literary system, it also highlights Khamphun's attempt as a provincial writer to negotiate with the dominant Thai national literary space. This article also addresses some of the issues in Kepner's English rendition of *Luk Isan*. It brings to the fore how the translation fails to register the novel's linguistic complexity based on the author's alternate use of standard Thai and the Isan dialect. What is lost in this translation is the author's negotiation with the Thai-speaking readership and the novel's thematic focus on Isan cultural identity. The article ends with a

[18] It should be noted that this is my conjecture about the Western reception of *Luk Isan* as the information presented in this part is about the Western reception of Khamphun's speech, not his novel. My conjecture is based on (1) how Khamphun's speech is strikingly similar to the novel's plot and (2) how the Western metropolitan readers tend to read non-Western literatures as exotic. Moreover, evaluating from the way the novel has been read and appreciated by most Bangkok-based critics and readers, I conjecture that the Western readers could also romanticize and exoticize the novel the way their Bangkokian counterparts do. However, further research could be conducted to find out how the novel is actually received by the Western audiences and scholars.

sense of irony. From a Goethean standpoint of circulation and translation, *Luk Isan* in its English afterlife, *A Child of the Northeast*, may have entered world literature by promoting universal humanist ideas and being exchanged in a world book market. However, the Western audience at the conference in Germany denied it such an entry by regarding it as merely an exotic novel. In the heart of the world republic of letters, *Luk Isan* is still a provincial child.

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