Beyond Nostalgia: The Politics of Loss in Contemporary Short Stories of Isan Writers[1]

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Abstract

This article examines short stories written by authors from Northeast Thailand (also known as Isan) published in the 2010s. They include works of Manote Phromsing, Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, and Phu Kradat, which share a commitment to revisit and revise Isan histories. Focusing on their deliberate departure from a preoccupation with the quest for regional cultural identity in writings about Isan in previous decades, this article discusses the political significance of their short stories in terms of affect and emotion. As these authors shift their attention from regionalism and its accompanied sentiment of nostalgia, the politics of loss in their works points toward a melancholic attachment to wounded histories of the region rather than a nostalgic longing for the idealized past. References to the premodern Lao kingdom of Lan Xang and its literary heritage significantly appear in the short stories to interrogate the construction of Isan under Siamese rule as well as to evocatively connect the violent histories of forced migration and cultural assimilation with recent issues of political oppression and ethnic minoritization. Through the invocation of melancholia, contemporary Isan writers propose a mournful relationship with the past that suggests not a form of immobility and powerlessness, but a critical reflection on loss and its haunting effects in the present.

Keywords: politics of affect and emotion, nostalgia, melancholia, contemporary Isan short stories, ethnic identity, regionalism

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Introduction

Literary works by regional writers have contributed greatly to the development of modern and contemporary Thai literature. In his 2013 book, *Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writings and Regionalism in Modern Thailand*, Martin Platt examines the roles of writers from the Lao-speaking, northeastern region of Thailand (also known as Isan) in shaping Thailand's literary scene since the Cold War era. The socialist-inflected "Literature for Life" movement in the 1960s and 1970s marked the rise of writings on Isan that left a long-lasting impact on literary representations of the region as a prime locus of class struggle and political resistance. In the 1980s when Literature for Life underwent a radical transformation, works by Isan authors became imbued with a sentiment of regionalism (*tho'ngthin niyom*). As Platt notes,

> The regionalistic sentiment of *the tho'ngthin niyom* phenomenon emerged forcefully in the early 1980s after the collapse of the political left and its associated Literature for Life movement. *Tho'ngthin niyom* has been for some Isan writers an extension of that movement, for others an alternative to it. Many writers in Isan turned to their cultural roots as a source of pride and inspiration (Platt, 2013: 178).

The establishment of literary organizations such as the Mun River Literary Group in 1983 and the Isan Writers' Association in 1989 attested to the flourishing of literary regionalism following the decline of the socialist realist literary movement. In his research on the Isan Writers' Association, Saming Chankoon outlines the dominant features of regionalism in works by members of this literary association. Similar to Platt's examples, a search for cultural roots continues to be a main focus of Isan writers. Critiques of state authority, development discourse, and capitalism are other important elements of Isan fiction (Chankoon, 2007: 45-139). Rapid industrialization and urbanization in the aftermath of the Cold War also lead to thematic preoccupation with issues of displacement and alienation. In a well-known poetry collection, *Banana Tree Horse (Ma Kan Kluay)*, a winner of the S.E.A. Write award in 1995, Isan poet Paiwarin Khao-ngam adopts literary conventions of the Thai poetic travelogue known as *nirat* to convey personal as well as collective experiences of migration, transforming a yearning for the lost love in classical poetry into a longing for the lost home (Chongstitvatana, 2004: 505-520).[2]

Nostalgia, from Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (longing), has thus been one of the defining affective features of writings on Isan.[3] Following the 1997 Asian economic crisis, nostalgia became pervasive in the domains of both state policy and cultural production that aimed to promote the notion of Thainess (Fuhrmann, 2016; Ingawanij, 2006). The ideas of community culture, for example, served as a conceptual underpinning of literary creation among Isan writers until the early 2000s (Chuaychote, 2021: 75-80). Filmic representations of Isan in this period were similarly suffused with nostalgia for Bangkok's pastoral Other (Prasannam, 2013: 253-277). While striving to assert their regional cultural identity, Isan writers and cultural producers alike become fixated on the idealized past rather than the changing sociopolitical landscape of the region.

In the wake of Thailand's political crisis from the late 2000s to 2010s, Isan writers started exploring new possibilities to express their views on political issues. Manote Phromsing (b. 1956), a notable member of the Isan Writers' Association, became the chief editor of the newly published literary magazine, *Chaikha Rueangsan,* upon the request of his younger cohort Phu Kradat (b. 1975) in 2010. Consisting of writers from Isan and other parts of Thailand, *Chaikha Rueangsan* (literally, "Shelter of Short Stories") offers a new platform for politically engaged writing (Chuaychote, 2021: 146-150). Manote Phromsing declares the magazine's mission and stance as follows:

[2] For literary research that includes discussions of writings by Isan authors on themes of displacement, globalization, and nostalgia, see Boccuzzi (2012), Naknuan (2004), and Intaraluk (2002).

[3] Although the word "nostalgia" contains Greek roots, it is "only pseudo-Greek, or nostalgically Greek" and was, in fact, first coined in the late seventeenth century by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer (Boym, 2001: 3).

> Besides our desire to create literary works by a new generation of writers for this country, we also considered [this magazine] as a political action of young writers who condemned the coup d'état on September 19, 2006, that caused conflicts among writers all over the country (Phromsing, 2019a).

Several authors turned to their Lao origins as a way to interrogate and challenge rigid understandings of ethnic identity in official narratives and mainstream media representations. Chatchawan Khotsongkhram (b. 1968), for example, describes himself as "a writer of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang on the right bank of the Mekong River" as he feels frustrated with being labeled as Isan (Khotsongkhram and Songkunatham, 2017). In alluding to the premodern kingdom of Lan Xang, Khotsongkhram recalls a historical moment when the Lao ethnic had not yet been assimilated into the modern Thai nation-state. References to traditional Lao literature composed during the Lan Xang era[4] significantly appear in contemporary works of Khotsongkhram's cohorts, such as Manote Phromsing and Phu Kradat. In turning to Lan Xang's history and literary heritage, these authors seem to evoke nostalgic sentiment among the Lao ethnic readers in Northeast Thailand. However, their shared commitment to critically engage with political violence differs from the more conventional nostalgic quest for Isan cultural roots in the previous decade.

Despite their diverse trajectories and writing styles, Manote Phromsing, Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, and Phu Kradat represent contemporary Isan writers in this study for several reasons. First, these writers have played active roles in Isan literary circles. Manote Phromsing and Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, who are now in their sixties and late fifties, respectively, were prominent members of the Isan Writers' Association. Phu Kradat, who is in his late forties, is a central

[4] Lan Xang refers to a Lao kingdom that was unified by King Fa Ngum in the mid-fourteenth century. The Lan Xang kingdom flourished from the sixteenth century until it dissolved into three separate kingdoms–Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak–in the eighteenth century. This fragmentation eventually led to the Lao kingdoms falling under Siamese domination (see Evans, 2002: 9-25).

figure of *Chaikha Rueangsan*, a literary magazine devoted to short stories on Isan (Yodmuang and Polmuk, 2024: 147-187). Their literary achievements have garnered recognition both regionally and nationally. Manote Phromsing's collection of short stories, *Winds Blowing through an Ancient Road* (*Sailom bon thanon boran*), was shortlisted for the S.E.A. Write Award in 2005. Chatchawan Khotsongkhram's novel, *Milky Ocean* (*Thale nam nom*), and Phu Kradat's two novels, *Exile* (*Nerathet*) and *24-7/1*, were shortlisted for the S.E.A. Write Award in 2009, 2014, and 2021. Second, these writers are collectively known for their critical stance toward Bangkok-centric perspectives on Isan. The portrayals of regional culture and identity in their literary works often explore themes related to political violence and ethnic marginalization. Since 2010s, their writings–many of which appeared in *Chaikha Rueangsan*–have represented radical voices among Isan writers that address the traumatic effects of political crises on the region. Finally, these authors share profound and longstanding interests in Lao-Isan histories, making their literary works alternative sites for historical narratives of Isan.

In this article, I investigate selected short stories written by Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, Manote Phromsing, and Phu Kradat in terms of their configurations of Lao-Isan histories. Focusing on an affective aspect of such literary engagement with history, I pay attention to the ways in which these authors evoke emotions and sensory experiences to connect the past with the present. I argue that references to Lan Xang challenge the restricted notion of nostalgia and offer a new mode of engaging with the past. As Chusak Pattarakulvanit suggests in his review of Martin Platt's book, a new generation of Isan writers can reclaim their identity and agency "neither by returning to their local culture already commodified by the Thai authorities, nor by following the established Thai literary forms, but by going above and beyond local and national literary boundaries" (Pattarakulvanit, 2014: 523). The invocation of Lan Xang in the short stories discussed below, I contend, allows the authors to unsettle national boundaries–literary as well as temporal and geographical. More importantly, by tracing a

history of Isan prior to its full integration into the Thai nation-state, these writers are less interested in the idealized past, and more concerned with the violent and traumatic memories that still resonate with political conflict in the present.

Literature, Affect, and History

Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, Manote Phromsing, and Phu Kradat have published numerous novels and short stories that engage with Lao-Isan histories**.** From the early 2000s to the 2010s, a period marked by their intense engagement with political and historical issues, Chatchawan Khotsongkhram published a novel, *Milky Ocean* (*Thale nam nom*), and a collection of short stories, *Dancing Crows on the Newly Ploughed Soil* (*Ka ten kon*). Manote Phromsing published a novel, *A Rainbow over Ruins* (*Sai rung klang sak phu kron*). Phu Kradat published two novels, *Exile (Nerathet)* and *24-7/1,* as well as a collection of short stories, *Like the Body without Organs* (*Dang ruan rang rai ongkhaphayop*). All three authors also published several short stories in *Chaikha Rueangsan.* In this article, I limit my case studies to four short stories published in the 2010s**:** Manote Phromsing's "Death on the Night of Crispy Pancakes" (*Kwam tai nai khuen khanom buang*, first published in 2010), Phu Kradat's "Blissful Ignorance" (*Ngua ngao*, 2011), and Chatchawan Khotsongkhram's "A Man Who Turned into a Peacock and a Young Girl Who Stood Silently in Front of the Temple Hall" (*Chai phu klai rang pen nokyung lae dek saonoi wai la-on phu ma yuen ning yu na bot*, 2011) and "Mother Does Not Merely Weave" (*Mai piang tae tho pha thaonan*, first published in 2015). Despite their stylistic differences, these short stories share a thematic focus on a marginalized history of Isan. References to Lan Xang are also the common thread that connects different episodes of history, ranging from the integration of Lao ethnic groups into the Thai nation-state to the Cold War and contemporary political violence toward Isan citizens.

Manote Phromsing's "Death on the Night of Crispy Pancakes" tells a haunting story that reflects the intertwined histories of the U.S.

military intervention in Northeast Thailand during the Cold War and Siam's administrative mission to take control over the Lao-speaking region. Set in Ubon Ratchathani province in the 1970s, the story unfolds through the interior monologue of an unnamed female prostitute who is a witness to American soldiers' sexual exploitation and their involvement in the Vietnam War. Told in a nonlinear sequence, her memory shifts back and forth between past and present as she describes herself as a wandering spirit that exists through time. Notably, the story begins with a recollection evoked through a sensory experience of smell–the fragrance of indigenous flowers that reminds the protagonist of her ancestral roots.

> Smelling the fragrance of *chik* flowers, I long for the past. Smelling the fragrance of *hang* flowers, I long for the old home…The sound of an ancient Lao saying (*phaya*) gently arises from within my body. It's the sound of my grandma's lullaby she sang for my mother when she was still a child. It awoke me (as I walked among the crowd with my eyes open). I believed I wanted to keep on dreaming my fragmentary and repetitive dreams. To dream in the name of all the people who were born and lived here. Those who were still breathing and those who died a hundred or a thousand years ago. They were me. And they were this land (Phromsing, 2022: 33).[5]

The symbolic use of indigenous plants and flowers to evocatively link personal and collective memories also appears in Chatchawan Khotsongkhram's "A Man Who Turned into a Peacock" and "Mother Does Not Merely Weave." In both short stories, *manpla* trees (also known as *kankrao*) are central to the author's reflection on Isan history. In "A Man Who Turned into a Peacock," the authorial voice begins to narrate the story about its protagonist named Cheuang with an invitation, "Please kindly and quietly listen to this clear voice as lively as the blossoming *manpla* flowers in those auspicious days (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 3). Named after a hero in the Lao epic poem, *Thao Hung Thao*

[5] All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

Cheuang (see Chamberlain, 1989: 14-34), the protagonist represents an attachment to historical memory of Lan Xang that the *manpla* tree symbolically signifies. As Cheuang suffers from profound depression and sadness caused by political violence, especially regarding the events known as Black May in 1992, the tree becomes his melancholic refuge. As the author recounts, "Our family's financial situation began to decline, but the old *manpla* tree continued to provide fresh flowers and shade like a dear old friend. Cheuang was attached to this tree more than to anyone. The day he returned home, he broke down and hugged the tree" (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 5). In "Mother Does Not Merely Weave," the author also mentions the *manpla* flower that "exuded its fragrance as April approached" (Khotsongkhram, 2016: 91). Focusing on an exchange between a mother and her son on the history of displacement and marginalization of Lao ethnic people, the scent of *manpla* flower in this story is a power as evocative as Manote Phromsing's reference to the fragrance of *chik* and *hang* flowers in the recollection of historical memory in "Death on the Night of Crispy Pancakes." In his footnote to "Mother Does Not Merely Weave," Chatchawan Khotsongkhram explains that the *manpla* flower is "a symbol of homeland" among the Lao people of Lan Xang (Khotsongkhram, 2016: 153).

Phu Kradat's "Blissful Ignorance" also revisits the history of Lan Xang and relates certain historical narratives to the present. The story's protagonist, who lost his uncle in the 2010 military crackdown on the Red Shirt protest, turns to the book titled, *Phuen Vieng: Literature of Oppression*, and cites a passage from the classical poem:

> Then you opened a bag and grabbed a thick photocopy of a book. You showed me its title, "Phuen Vieng: Literature of Oppression," before flipping through a marked section and reading it to me:
>
> People perished in huge numbers.
> The only man who dared to challenge him was Phanya Kai.
> Phanya Kai rode an elephant and tried to get all the territories under his control.
> The Lao *huamuang* were in disorder because of Phanya Kai [6]
> (Thammakaew, 2011: 174).

Composed in the early nineteenth century, *Phuen Vieng* (The Chronicle of Vientiane) recounts an historical event that leaves a wound imprinted on the Lao-Thai relationship, namely, the 1826 revolt of Chao Anou of Vientiane against the Siamese government (Ngaosivat and Ngaosyvathn, 1998). The passage cited above describes a tragedy among the Lao people caused by Siamese authorities who sought to take control over Lao and other ethnic groups. The subtitle, "Literature of Oppression," refers to the Thai transcription of the poem by Prateep Chumpol (1982) that further highlights its political significance. Through this intertextual reference, Phu Kradat's short story thus connects contemporary political violence against Isan protestors with an historical account of the suppression of Lao populations under Siamese rule.

In retelling histories, contemporary Isan writers essentially rely on emotions and sensory experiences. To better understand the relationship between affect and history in their short stories, my methodological approach takes its cues from scholarship in affect theory. Writing on an affective aspect of historical novel, Lauren Berlant, a leading scholar in affect studies, notes,

> [H]istorians of the historical novel have long understood the genre as a locus of affective situations that not only generate exemplary aesthetic conventions but exemplify political and subjective formations local to a particular time and space. This means that the historical novel aimed to induce certain affects in the reader whose value sutured that reader to history and genealogy, producing a capacity to sense historical experience in an aesthetic feedback loop […] The cultural Marxist take on the historical novel foregrounds affect not as the sign of ahistoricism, but as the very material of historical embeddedness (Berlant, 2011: 65-66).

[6] Translation of this passage from *Phuen Vieng* is from the Department of Lao Language and Literature (2004) edition.

Following Berlant's insightful discussion of affect as a key component that creates a transhistorical attachment for readers of historical fiction, my analysis is further informed by scholarly writing on the politics of affect and emotion. As Sara Ahmed explains in her influential work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, to pay attention to emotional intensities is to take into account how social structures and social transformations are shaped by the circulation of feelings across private and public life (Ahmed, 2004: 5-12). In the context of contemporary Thai politics, emotions have been central to academic debates about political movements among marginalized groups (Charoensin-O-Larn, 2012: 87-96; Sopranzetti, 2012: 361-379). Focusing on this kind of affective politics in literary works, my article proposes that the political emotions in contemporary fiction by Isan writers revolve around the notion of loss.

The Politics of Loss: From Nostalgia to Melancholia

> [T]o mourn the remains of the past hopefully is to establish an active and open relationship with history (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 1).

As mentioned in the introduction, literary and filmic representations of Isan since the 1980s have been imbued with nostalgia, a longing for home that often leads to romantic portrayals of the Isan countryside. Nostalgia is, therefore, "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym, 2001: xiii). The politics of loss in the context of Isan regionalism involves what Boym calls "restorative nostalgia," a desire to reconstruct the lost home rather than a critical engagement with the past. Isan writers from the 1980s to the early 2000s often feature local traditions and folk beliefs to articulate Isan cultural identity alongside a critique of state-sponsored development projects in the region (Chankoon, 2007: 45-48). In so doing, they inadvertently perpetuate an image of Isan as the rural opposition to modernity and globalization. As Svetlana Boym succinctly remarks on nostalgia and modernity:

> In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition (Boym, 2001: xv).

While the sense of history is obliterated in nostalgic recollections, we have seen that the works by Manote Phromsing, Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, and Phu Kradat published in the 2010s emotionally and critically invest in Isan history. This means that we require an alternative conceptual framework to probe the politics of loss in this emergent literary phenomenon of the region. For these writers, the past is not an ideal home, but the ruins that testify to various episodes of violence and oppression. To revisit the past is therefore to mourn the historical loss: the loss of independence, culture, and life. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian cite Sigmund Freud's famous essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," and propose that we might understand melancholia as a sustained form of mourning that opens up the possibilities to engage with history and envision the future.

> [W]e find in Freud's conception of melancholia's persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a "grasping" and "holding" on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future. While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects (Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 4).

Through this recalibrated notion of melancholia, I examine the "rewriting of the past" and the "reimagining of the future" in short

stories of contemporary Isan writers. Their melancholic relations to history suggest not a form of immobility and powerlessness created by loss, but a critical reflection on loss and its haunting effects.

In "Death on the Night of Crispy Pancakes" Manote Phromsing's protagonist mournfully ponders over the loss of Lao culture and the loss of life under Siamese rule.

> It must have all started when Siamese craftsmen began to place sculptures of nagas over mythical crocodiles at the temple hall's balustrade of Wat Thung [Si Mueang] that belonged to Ya Khu Sui [Sui Lakkham, a Buddhist monk who founded Wat Thung Si Mueang in Ubon Ratchathani in 1813]. Soon a crispy pancake [*khanom buang*] party was held at a royal residence. Next morning a blue river turned blood red. That was it, that moment. People went crazy, with an angry look in their eyes. It then became vengeful when impoverished farmers faced tax fleecing. Finally, there came the Holy Man's Rebellion (Phromsing, 2022: 38-39).

Based on an historical record about the millenarian movements in present-day Northeast Thailand and Southern Laos at the turn of the twentieth century, the short story describes a series of events that led up to the uprisings. According to historians, the Holy Man's Rebellion in Isan was a response to administrative reforms during the reign of King Chulalongkorn that were aimed at gaining full control of Siam's tributary states (Murdoch, 1974: 48-55; Baird, 2013: 269-271). In Manote Phromsing's fictional account, the resistance against Siamese domination begins with a sense of cultural loss, namely, the replacement of indigenous decorative use of mythical crocodiles with Siamese-stye sculptures. Notably, the author also pens a short article on the Holy Man's Rebellion for an online news platform, *The Isaan Record*, in which he mentions the "crispy pancake party" held at the royal residence of Prince Sapphasitthiprasong, Bangkok's *khaluang* or high commissioner who was sent to Ubon Ratchathani on the centralizing mission. This event, the author notes, occurred when several Lao women were forced

to become consorts of Siamese authorities. Prince Sapphasitthiprasong himself also acquired a local consort, Chiang Kham, a high-ranking noblewoman of the province (Phromsing, 2019b). Linking historical oppression with sexual subjugation, the short story posits its protagonist as a mournful spirit who laments the loss of Isan cultural and political autonomy.

The female character in Chatchawan Khotsongkhram's "Mother Does Not Merely Weave" also embodies a melancholic attachment to the past. In the story, Phathummas recounts her memory about their ancestral roots to her son.

> "What do you think of when it rains?" asked the mother.
> "I want to go catch shrimps at Sanom Pond," her son replied.
> "I think of Grandmother," she said. "That year she was eighty-one and wanted to visit the rice field. Her children wouldn't let her go there on foot so they put her on an oxen cart. Once the cart left the village onto a sandy road, the rain started pouring and she began to cry. I asked why she always cried when it rained, for other people would be delighted to see their rice fields watered. She shed her tears and replied with a trembling voice, "I recall the time when your grandfather took our family on an oxen cart to the right bank when he was eleven. It was raining and birds were chirping in the forest. Grandfather was singing; his voice resounded through that dense forest."
> "He moved from where?" her son interrupted.
> "From the left side of the Mekong River"
> "Was it a part of Siam then?"
> "Lao people of both sides were related to each other since the time of Khun Buhom," she answered softly but firmly (Khotsongkhram, 2016: 80).

Through this melancholic recollection, the memory of forced displacement and migration can be transmitted from generation to generation, first from Phathummas's mother to her, and then from

Phathummas to her son. While the story begins with one family's history, the reference to "Khun Buhom" in the passage above points to a collective memory of the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong River. The *Tale of Khun Bulom* or *Nithan khun bulom* tells a mythic account of Lao origins that has become a ground for a genealogical thinking of Lao history and identity (Wolfson-Ford, 2016: 68-188). According to this account, the Lao-Tai ethnic groups originated from a giant gourd. In citing this myth, the author stresses the idea of transborder kinship and thus challenges nationalist discourses of belonging and citizenship. As the title suggests, the act of weaving is also a metaphor for storytelling that affectively connects personal with collective memories.

The issue of storytelling and its political implication is also explored in "A Man Who Turned into a Peacock" in which Chatchawan Khotsongkhram similarly invokes Lan Xang literary heritage to convey melancholic attachments. The opening paragraph reads:

> I want to tell two stories so that children these days know this kind of thing happened in our country. Please note that both stories are full of twists and turns as knotted vines in the woods. The story of A Man Who Turned into a Peacock is perhaps longer than any other epics in the great continent of Southeast Asia. It might even be longer than the epic of Thao Hung. But all of them remain shorter than the story of A Young Girl Who Stood Silently in front of the Temple Hall (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 3).

In the first part of the short story, the author tells a family history of the protagonist Cheuang, whose name recalls the Lao epic, *Thao Hung Thao Cheuang*, cited above. Focusing on the rise of his family's economic status in the 1950s and its decline in the next decade, the story offers a subtle critique of misguided development policy, and fantasy of upward mobility during the Cold War. Despite his family's commercial success, Cheuang begins to develop an undiagnosed symptom of profound sadness and spends his days in a hammock under

the *manpla* tree. According to his younger brother, "Cheuang's sorrow came after the incident on the afternoon of May 19. His white bird flew away. Losing the bird was like losing one's heart for him" (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 5). While the author does not provide the year of the incident, the date suggests the tragic incident from May 17-20, 1992. Known as "Black May" or "Bloody May," the incident involved the military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations. Reportedly, about fifty civilians were killed while several hundred were injured, in addition to many enforced disappearances (Muntarbhorn, 2022). In the short story, the white bird thus signifies democratic aspirations that have been suppressed by authoritarian power. In his seemingly incurable sadness, Cheuang, therefore, mourns the losses of lives and political ideals. In the end, we are told that Cheuang turns into a peacock after his parents cut down his beloved *manpla* tree. With this magical realist element, the short story contemplates several dimensions of loss in relation to history, politics, and personhood. The protagonist's transfiguration into a peacock can be interpreted as the return to a primordial state where a utopian world is possible.

In the second half of the short story, the narrator turns to a tale of "a young girl who stood silently in front of the temple hall," which deals more abstractly with the politics of loss and storytelling. The narrator first compares the story of the young girl in question with narratives of the Buddha's previous lives: "This is a strikingly common story. It's not as sacred and grandiose as the story about the Buddha's past life [*jātaka*] when he was born Phra Wetsandon, the story that Buddhist followers throughout the continent would listen to respectfully whenever it's recited" (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 15). Citing one of the most well-known Buddhist texts, the *Vessantara Jātaka* (*Wetsandon Chadok* in Thai), this comparison thematizes power relations between the center and the periphery. The Buddhist *jātaka* here stands for religious and political authority while the young girl's tale represents folk mythology. As Patrick Jory has noted, the *Vessantara Jātaka* is foundational for the conception of kingship in Thailand for its portrayal of an ideal monarch who possesses *barami*, "an idealized form of

personal authority characterized by moral superiority, spiritual prowess, and supernatural ability" (Jory, 2016: 53-60). Jory also highlights the performative aspect of the *Vessantara jātaka*, which has been popularized through an annual ritualized recitation known as *thet mahachat* (recitation of the Great Life). The short story's emphasis on the girl's silence is then in stark contrast to this authoritative voice in the Buddhist narrative. Her silence, however, signifies a form of resistance rather than powerlessness. The final paragraph of the short story reads: "Hear me, people of the republic of Lan Xang on the right bank of the Mekong River. Please remember and keep spreading the story that she only teasingly swallows the temple hall in her mouth!" (Khotsongkhram, 2011: 17.) Through this myth-like story, the author subtly challenges Buddhist authority and underlines the significance of folk narrative. The girl's silence suggests the loss of voice, but her story persists through oral transmission among Lao descendants of Lan Xang.

In Phu Kradat's "Blissful Ignorance," the politics of loss is central to the story's histories interwoven across different periods of time. As mentioned earlier, the intertextual citation of a poem from *Phuen Vieng* in the story recalls the loss of Lan Xang's independence under Siamese rule in the nineteenth century. This historical loss is further explored as the author mentions a history of the Holy Man's Rebellion in the twentieth century. Upon his return to Isan to attend his uncle's funeral, Phu Kradat's unnamed protagonist begins to relate family and local histories. At one point, a description of his mother's romantic relationship includes a reference to the Holy Man's Rebellion. In this particular scene, the mother and her lover are swimming in a pool where the history of the revolt is literally submerged.

> Chief Boonchan struck the gong and its sounds reverberated from the deepest abyss of the Sa-erng Kuan whirlpool. The gong had been submerged under the water since the time Siamese troops marched up to quell the Holy Man's Rebellion on Sampika Mountain. The Siamese troops could sink only this brass gong as big as an ox cart wheel, while Chief Boonchan and his soldiers escaped. Humiliated and full of anger, the Siamese troops returned to their stronghold in Khukhan. Six months later, Chief Boonchan was beheaded and his head was publicly displayed at the city square in revenge. Nobody knew that the man who lost the battle at Phu Fai and was later beheaded was actually Chief Boonchan's friend. The real Chief Boonchan was still alive at Phu Tabaeng (Thammakaew, 2011: 155).

In this passage, Phu Kradat refers to a historical figure named Boonchan, a leader of the Holy Man's Rebellion in Khukhan (today's Sisaket province). According to Toem Wiphakphachanakij's historical account in *Isan History* (*Prawattisat Isan*), Thao Boonchan was the younger brother of Khukhan's governor. During the Holy Man's uprisings, Thao Boonchan claimed to be a holy man with hundreds of followers. During his battle against Siamese authorities, Thao Boonchan was shot dead at his sanctuary located at Phu Fai (Wiphakphachanakij, 2014: 459-460). Diverging from this official narrative, the short story focuses on an oral history in which Boonchan escaped and survived Siam's military suppression. The theme of survival and continuity is metaphorically underlined by an anecdote about the sunken gong whose sounds continued to reverberate under the whirlpool. The politics of loss in this short story thus points to the submerged history of Isan that reemerges in the contemporary political context.

What does it mean for these authors to invoke a history of Isan through the aesthetic idiom of loss? In her book on loss and queer history, Heather Love points out a paradox of transformative criticism and oppositional politics in which "dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence" (Love, 2007: 1). In looking back to the losses of the past, contemporary Isan writers propose that the future is impossible without reckoning with historical injury. Through their allusions to the Lan Xang kingdom, these authors thus foreground a melancholic relationship to past trauma to articulate a critical perspective on political violence across historical periods.

Conclusion

This article offers an analysis of contemporary short stories written by writers from Northeast Thailand or Isan published in the 2010s. This includes literary works of Manote Phromsing, Chatchawan Khotsongkhram, and Phu Kradat, which share a commitment to revisit and revise Isan histories. Focusing on their deliberate departure from a preoccupation with the quest for regional cultural identity in writings about Isan in previous decades, this article has delineated the political significance in their short stories in terms of affect and emotion. In so doing, the article charts new directions in contemporary Thai literature in which the notion of regionalism has proven inadequate in grasping ways in which contemporary Isan writers move beyond both regional and national boundaries.

As these authors shift their attention from regionalism and its accompanied sentiment of nostalgia, the politics of loss in their works points toward a melancholic attachment to wounded histories of the region rather than a nostalgic longing for the idealized past. References to the premodern Lao kingdom of Lan Xang and its literary heritage significantly appear in the short stories to interrogate the construction of Isan under Siamese rule. Their ubiquitous intertextual allusions to Lan Xang also evocatively connect the violent histories of forced migration and cultural assimilation with recent issues of political oppression and ethnic minoritization. Through the invocation of melancholia, contemporary Isan writers thus propose a mournful relationship with the past that suggests not a form of immobility and powerlessness, but a critical reflection on loss and its haunting effects in the present. The analysis of the politics of affect and emotion in these stories expands existing scholarship on Isan literature, which largely relies on the framework of regionalism. What is more, these contemporary Isan authors' attentiveness to an affective history of Isan offers a new pathway to understanding the complex relationship between literature and history, one that is not limited to recounting historical events but that also explores the emotional dimension of the region's past.

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