

MARGINAL IMPRINTS: PROVINCIAL PRINT CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF THAI LITERARY HISTORY DURING THE COLD WAR¹

Chairat Polmuk

Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Chairat Polmuk
chairat.p@chula.ac.th

Received: 4 September 2023

Revised: 17 June 2024

Accepted: 19 June 2024

Published: 7 August 2024

Citation:

Polmuk, C. (2024). *Marginal imprints: Provincial print culture and the politics of Thai literary history during the Cold War*. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 24(2), 391–403.

This article considers the significance of provincial print culture in challenging and expanding Thai literary history. Focusing on Siritham Publishing House in Northeast Thailand or Isan as a case study, the article examines how provincial print culture shaped the contested landscape of literary production and reception during the Cold War, when the category of regional literature emerged under the pretext of national integration. Drawing on the framework of publishing studies as well as existing scholarship on print culture in Thailand, it is argued that the literary corpus of Siritham's publisher, Preecha Phinthong, helps shift scholarly attention away from a conventional literary history that tends to focus on the Bangkok-centric notion of Thainess. Instead, it encourages a more nuanced exploration of the processes of literary standardization and canon formation. Together with a historical examination of Siritham's establishment, a close analysis of paratextual components of Preecha Phinthong's publications and unpublished manuscripts challenges the rigid understanding of Isan regional identity in academic discourse and state policy during the Cold War. Specifically, the articulation of regional literary identity in Preecha Phinthong's archive often involves a transnational relationship between Thailand and Laos that extends beyond the confines of Thai nationalism. Moreover, these paratexts constitute a space through which provincial publishers create their own interpretive frameworks for assessing the historical, linguistic, and aesthetic significance of regional literature, complicating the academic discourse of literary standardization. In addition to this counter-hegemonic vision, provincial print culture offers a more dynamic understanding of regional literature. The emergence of Siritham Publishing House coincided with the rise of Lao nationalism, during which the popularization of Lao literature via print technology traversed the Mekong River. In this context, Isan literary history can be viewed as the result of the interplay between Thai and Lao nationalism, characterized by contestation, negotiation, and mutual construction.

Keywords: Publishing studies; provincial print culture; Thai literary history; Isan literature; Thai-Lao relationship

¹ This article is part of the author's research paper, "Isan Print Culture: Publishing Studies and the Historiography of Local Literature," which is under the "Book History and Literary Studies in Thai Contexts" research project funded by the National Research Council of Thailand.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the 17th Istanbul Biennial that lasted from February–April 2022, internationally known Thai artist Pratchaya Phinthong unveiled his new installation entitled, “After the harvest season, a male water buffalo is slaughtered. After the war, a brave soldier is murdered.” Inspired by a collection of Lao proverbs published in 1985 by Preecha Phinthong, Pratchaya’s father and one of the most influential literary scholars from the Lao-speaking region of Northeast Thailand (also known as Isan), the installation featured twenty proverbs—one of which served as the exhibition’s title—that reflected on social and political issues in the region. The proverbs were printed with a special kind of ink that disappeared within twenty-four hours and were put on display on hanging clipboards. Showcasing the artist’s longstanding commitment to participatory practice, visitors were invited to print their own words on the vanishing proverbs via a nearby printer. The same set of sheets was used over and over by new visitors, creating palimpsests that were finally bound together as a book. In a single-channel video that accompanied the printed texts, viewers could see the artist’s hands scanning Preecha Phinthong’s unpublished manuscripts from the family’s private collection (Figure 1).

While the content of the proverbs and the use of vanishing ink communicated the issue of political censorship in contemporary Thailand and Turkey, the exhibition also foregrounded the materialities of writing, printing, and bookmaking that afforded sensory experiences in this practice of participatory art. The palimpsests formed by the overlay of participants’ freshly printed words onto ancient proverbs denote an interaction with the disappearing past in the present. By specifically evoking the literary legacy of Preecha Phinthong, this connection to the past is particularly anchored in the history of Thailand’s provincial printing press and literary production. In 1963, at the height of the Cold War, Preecha founded Siritham Publishing House in his home province of Ubon Ratchathani. The press was—and continues to be—committed to the promotion of regional language, literature, and religion. In the context of the Cold War in Thailand, the founding of the printing house was part of the politics of knowledge production in the construction of regional and national identity on both sides of the Mekong.

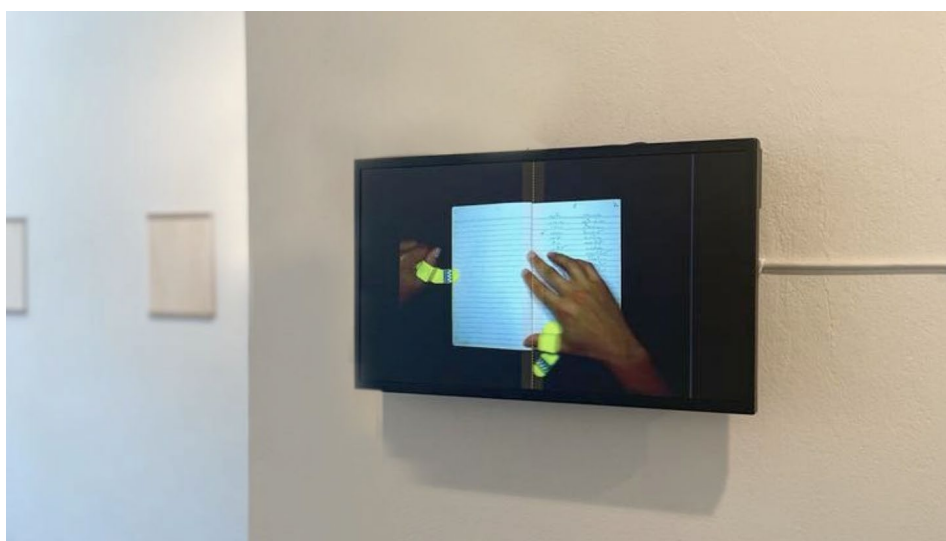


Figure 1: Pratchaya Phinthong’s artistic invocation of Preecha Phinthong’s literary legacy at the 17th Istanbul Biennial (Courtesy of the artist and GB Agency)

In citing Pratchaya Phinthong’s exhibition as an introduction, this article takes the historical dimension of the artist’s homage to his late father as a starting point for exploring Thailand’s provincial print culture—a subject less familiar to and underexamined by literary scholars. While Preecha Phinthong has been recognized as a leading scholar of Isan literature, his contribution as an editor and publisher has received little attention. What is more, the artist’s emphasis on the materialities of printing, as a pathway to engage with print history, encourages a closer examination of Siritham Publishing House by attending to its material practices in the processes of literary production. Through the lens of publishing studies, this article looks at literary texts as material objects that traverse different social domains in the intricate processes of editing, distribution, and consumption. In other words, it proposes to examine the relationship between the material life of the book and the politics of print that is a central concern in publishing studies. Regarded as a branch of the field of book history, publishing studies posits printing as a set of historical processes and practices (composition, editing, design, production, marketing, distribution) and as a set of relations (commercial, legal, educational, political,

cultural, and media) that “far from being the mediating term between writing and reading, writer and reader, precedes and constitutes all formations of writing and reading (Malik, 2008, p. 709). Focusing on Siritham Publishing House and Preecha Phinthong’s publications on Lao/Isan language and literature, this article examines how provincial print culture shaped the contested landscape of literary production and reception during the Cold War. In so doing, I propose to delineate the politics of Thai literary history, especially with regard to center-periphery relations, at the moment when the formation of the Thai nation involved the politicization of literature and when print technology was instrumental in this process of literary institutionalization.

This article is divided into five sections. The first section locates my central inquiry within a conceptual framework of publishing studies and a debate on the politics of Thai literary history. Proposing that provincial print culture can offer a more dynamic perspective on a historiography of Thai literature, the second section situates the rise of Publishing Houses in Northeast Thailand or Isan in the context of the Cold War, during which the category of regional literature also emerged under the Thai government’s nation-building project. To challenge Thai nationalist literary history, the third section offers a close reading of Preecha Phinthong’s publications at his Siritham Publishing House, focusing on paratextual elements such as prefaces and editorial notes that afford a political interpretation of the texts. The fourth section expands the studies of print culture to include unpublished materials that shed light on a complex process of publishing. Preecha Phinthong’s unpublished manuscripts, I argue, offer an alternative archive of regional literature that further elucidates the complexity of regional literary identity, especially with regard to the relationship between Thailand and Laos. In the final section, I conclude by highlighting the significance of provincial print culture as a new pathway to interrogate and reconstruct Thai literary history.

2. PRINT CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF LITERARY HISTORY

My analysis of provincial print culture in Northeast Thailand is informed by conceptual frameworks in publishing studies which are primarily concerned with the multiple ways in which print technology shapes human perception and knowledge production. Elizabeth Eisenstein’s groundbreaking study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe*, has paved the way for understanding how the shift from scribal culture to print culture profoundly transforms the ways knowledge is produced, consumed, and transmitted. Mass dissemination of printed materials and typographical fixity are among the fundamental features of print technology that make possible the rapid accumulation of knowledge (Eisenstein, 2005, pp. 113–126). Following this idea, Benedict Anderson links the fixity of language through the printing press to the making of nation-state as he writes: “print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 44–45). By standardizing vernacular languages, print technology enables citizens of modern nation-states to envision their shared past grounded in linguistic uniformity and to cultivate a collective identity.

In the context of Thailand (formerly known as Siam), the advent of print technology in the mid-nineteenth century also actively participated in the formation of the Thai modern nation-state. In his historical investigation of the development of the kingdom’s national library between the 1880s and early 1900s, Patrick Jory discusses the crucial role of print in the library’s mission to standardize literary works in its collection. The processes of editing and publishing led to the making of Thai literary canons which can be described, by and large, as royal court editions. As Jory explains, “The power of print, backed up by the Library’s seal of authority, meant that the publication of books it had edited created a standard, authoritative version of a particular work [...] Now the ‘Wachirayan Library Editions,’ as they became known, created one ‘standard’ version of that work which took its place among other ‘standard’ versions to make up the corpus of Thai literature” (Jory, 2000, p. 371). Noting that the establishment of the library coincided with the administrative reforms whereby the Siamese court took direct control of provincial administration, Jory also links the library’s gathering of manuscripts throughout the kingdom with Siam’s nation-building project in which standardization of knowledge consolidated notions of national literature as well as history. Similarly, Trisilpa Boonkhachorn underscores the contribution of Prince Damrong, who served as the head of the National Library during that period, in solidifying Thai nationalism. His historical approach in the process of editing (in Thai “*chamra*,” meaning “to clean, to purify, to revise”) utilized a periodization framework within the overarching narrative of the Thai nation to trace the development of classical literature. Consequently, literary history was depicted as a succession of events revolving around royal dynasties (Boonkhachorn, 2000, pp. 103–105). Although Prince Damrong never produced a comprehensive version of Thai literary history, his editorial notes, which typically provide historical background for each canonical text, have become authoritative sources for subsequent generations of literary historians.

In an attempt to deconstruct this Thai literary history, Thai historians such as Surapong Jankasamepong and Thanapol Limapichart have examined how private publishers, newspapers, and literary markets challenged the authority of state-sponsored publications. Looking at the publications of popular literary tales known as “Wat-Koh books” (*nangsue Wat Koh*) from 1922–1932, Jankasamepong underlines the tension between folk literary traditions and court literature in the age of mechanical reproduction. Regarded by court scholars and authorities as “profane” for their uses of ordinary language, supernatural elements, and humorous satire, the popularity of Wat-Koh books was deemed a threat to the more standardized and sanitized editions of court literature (Jankasamepong, 2004, p. 31). Thanapol Limapichart pursues this similar line of critique by examining how print culture created the modern public sphere in which state-sanctioned conceptions of literature and literary taste became radically contested. The establishment of the Royal Society of Literature, or Wannakhadi Samoson, in 1914 can be considered both a continuation of Wachirayan Library’s effort to standardize Thai literature and a response to a more contentious debate over literary values fueled by print capitalism. Their criteria for what count as “good books,” Limapichart succinctly notes, “reveal the history of the Siamese ruling elite’s struggles with the emergent public sphere since the later reign of Mongkut. Simply put, these (rhetorical) criteria—specifically nonpolitical-ness, usefulness and politeness—were formulated out of the ruling elite’s pattern of criticism against popular literature (e.g., *reuang jakjak wongwong*), and social and political critiques printed in journals and newspapers” (Limapichart, 2014, p. 46). By bringing studies of print culture into dialogue with a historical examination of literary modernity in Siam/Thailand, these scholars offer a dynamic perspective on Thai literary history. However, it should be noted that in their shared effort to deconstruct the nationalist discourse of literary history *from within*, their arguments rely heavily on Bangkok-based print capitalism.

The effort to challenge the standardization of literature by examining debates and tensions within the cultural context of literary canonization aligns with Adrian Johns’s argument in *The Nature of the Books: Print Culture and Knowledge in the Making*, which prioritizes cultural and historical contexts over technological apparatuses. With regard to the notion of standardization and fixity, Johns proposes that:

We may consider fixity not as an inherent quality, but as a transitive one. That is, it may be more useful to reverse our commonsense assumption. We may adopt the principle that fixity exists only inasmuch as it is recognized and acted upon by people—and not otherwise. The consequence of this change in perspective is that print culture itself is immediately laid open to analysis. It becomes a result of manifold representations, practices and conflicts, rather than just the monolithic cause with which we are often presented (Johns, 1998, pp. 19–20).

Focusing on a historical analysis of scientific knowledge production in Europe, Adrian Johns challenges the conventional belief that science is contingent upon print’s objectivity by presenting a more nuanced perspective on how the concepts of scientific and print reliability are socially constructed. Against the predilection for technological determinism in previous studies of print culture, Johns thus encourages a more historically grounded and culturally specific analysis of print technology. In line with this critical approach to the idea of standardization, he also argues against the notion of authoritative texts by suggesting that “an apparently authoritative text, however ‘fixed,’ could not compel conformity in the cultures of its reception. In practice, rather the reverse seems to have happened. Local cultures created their own meanings with and for such objects” (Johns, 1998, p. 29). This emphasis on local reception is instructive for the study of provincial print culture and literary history in which the interpretations of standardized versions of literary canons are subject to contestation based on local reading practices. Expanding upon this idea, we may consider how central and peripheral print cultures contribute to divergent perceptions of literary standardization.

More recently, Thai literary scholars have explored provincial publishing houses to help expand studies of print culture beyond the metropolis. Attapon Buapat and Kaeota Chantranuson (2022), for example, provide a comprehensive survey of the publications and publishing networks of the Klang Nanawiththaya and the Klang Nanatham Publishing Houses, both established in 1947 in Khon Kaen province. Focusing on the role of the publishing houses in the preservation and dissemination of vernacular Isan literature, they link this mission to the construction of Isan identity. Their analysis, however, falls short of investigating the political significance of provincial print culture, especially in the broader context of the Cold War during which the emergent concept of regional identity is closely tied to the state policy of integrating the region into the Thai nation-state. In this regard, a closer look at provincial print culture can shed light on how the construction of regional literary identity operates.

3. SIRITHAM PUBLISHING HOUSE, THE COLD WAR, AND THE MAKING OF REGIONAL LITERATURE

To expand existing scholarship on publishing studies and the politics of Thai literary history, this article focuses on Siritham Publishing House, established in 1963 in Ubon Ratchathani province by Preecha Phinthong (Figure 2). Born into a craftsman family in Ubon Ratchathani in 1914, Preecha Phinthong's fascination with Lao-Isan literature and culture began in his early years, influenced by his grandmother's captivating storytelling abilities. At the age of fifteen, he entered into a monastic education as a Buddhist novice and pursued the study of Pali language and literature. After he ordained as a monk in 1934, Preecha Phinthong composed his first book, *Prapheni Boran Thai Isan* (Ancient Isan Traditions), published by Khon Kaen's Klang Nanawitthaya publishing house in 1952. His biographer recounts how the author decided to pen this first comprehensive book on Lao-Isan annual ceremonies and codes of conduct as follows: "*Ancient Isan Traditions* was Preecha Phinthong's first famous book, published in 1952 [...] It came out of Preecha's frustration when he traveled to Bangkok to take an exam for his monastic education in 1938. During that time, people from Isan were shunned and insulted as lazy, simpleminded, and backward. Deeply unhappy, Preecha Phinthong, whose Isan blood ran in his veins, began to think of proving these insults wrong" (Sriphufai, 1986, pp. 106–107).² Reflecting on the stigmatization of ethnic Lao people in Thailand, this personal recollection shows how book publishing gives Isan authors a voice to defend their cultural roots. Following his retirement from the monkhood at the age of forty-eight, Preecha Phinthong founded Siritham Publishing House, acknowledging his father and grandmother for fostering his love for Lao-Isan literature and culture (Phinthong, 1986, p. 94).



Figure 2: Preecha Phinthong (1914–2003) in front of Siritham Publishing House in 1984
(Courtesy of Anake Nawigamune)

Despite this personal narrative, the establishment of Siritham Publishing House can also be situated in the wider context of the Cold War, especially with regard to the politics of the knowledge production about the region. As region whose historical and ethnolinguistic origins are closer to those of the Lao, Isan was gradually integrated into the Thai modern nation-state in the early twentieth century. During the Cold War, the region became a heated battleground between a communist movement and the military government. As a result, US-backed military governments implemented development projects and administrative centralization plans with the ultimate goal of gaining complete political control over the region. In the domain of culture, this nationalist project resulted in the establishments of provincial cultural institutions to promote the idea of regionalism (*thongthin niyom*). The Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture and the Center for the Preservation of Literature of the Northeastern Region were established in Mahasarakham province in 1970, coinciding with the introduction of "regional history" (*prawattisat thongthin*) into the curriculum of teacher colleges around the same period (Singsuwan, 2010, pp. 110–123). Research on literature written in Lao scripts was conducted under the category of "regional literature" (*wannakhadi thongthin*) at universities such as Chulalongkorn University and Silpakorn University in the late 1960s. By the late 1970s, there were about

² All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

twenty thesis titles on the subject, focusing on textual analysis and anthropological studies of Lao-Isan literature. In her research on the life and work of Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, who pioneered the studies of folklore and folk literature in Thai higher education in the late 1940s, Saichol Sattayanurak (2013, pp. 129–150) proposes that this scholarly attention to regional culture can be considered a response to an increasing debate among leftist intellectuals and dissidents over Bangkok-dominated understandings of Thai identity.

Through the notion of regionalism, Lao language and ethnic identity are subsumed under the administrative term, Isan, which literally means “northeast” in Sanskrit and thus puts Laoness into a center-periphery relationship with Bangkok. In the preface to his book titled, *Isan Literature*, published in 1979, renowned scholar Thawat Poonnothok explains the importance of seeing Isan writing as regional literature, as follows.

Nowadays, Thai people are searching for national identity and becoming more interested in Thai national art and culture. Educators have included materials that reflect national identity in their classrooms, aiming to teach students to be proud of national sovereignty and cultural heritage [...]. Nonetheless, Isan literature and folklore remain less known due to the lack of systematic preservation and scholarly attention. Some might think that Thai people in the Isan region are culturally inferior but that is untrue. Isan art and culture had been flourishing since ancient times (Poonnothok, 1979, preface).

While defending Isan culture, Thawat Poonnothok links the discovery of an Isan cultural heritage to the search for Thai national identity. Studies of Isan literature therefore simultaneously promote regionalist sentiment and subsume that regional identity under the Thai nation-building project of the Cold War. Drawing on approaches in folklore studies, literary scholars in this period shared an effort to uncover Isan cultural values, worldviews, and beliefs while de-emphasizing their Lao origins and political meanings.

Looking beyond Thai academic discourses on regional literature and, instead, at provincial print culture, we begin to see the complexity of this emergent category in connection to Thai-Lao literature as well as geopolitical relations. According to Anuchit Singuwan, the rise of print culture in Isan stemmed from a Lao nationalist movement during French colonial rule. Within this context, the definition of Lao literary heritage served as a platform for reinforcing Lao cultural identity (Singuwan, 2010, pp. 78–89). In 1931, the French established the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane to promote studies of Pali language and literature. Later, in 1941, the French-sponsored Lao Nhay cultural campaign published the *Lao Nhay* newspaper, which regularly featured excerpts from traditional Lao literature as well as modern poetry and fiction (see Polmuk, 2015, pp. 209–242). This revival of Lao literature in the context of Lao nationalism then spread across the Mekong River, resulting in the commercial publications of Lao-Isan literary works by publishing houses such as Klang Nanawithaya and Siritham. Singuwan also notes that chronicles, or *phuen* in Lao, and books on ancient customs such as Preecha Phinthong’s *Ancient Isan Traditions*, were popular genres among Isan publishers from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, a period when Isan as a regional and ethnic identity was not yet widely accepted and the Bangkok-centric idea of Thainess was not yet fully dominant (Singuwan, 2010, pp. 97–99). This transborder literary exchange between Laos and Thailand thus challenged the Thai nationalist discourse in which Isan literature is often considered part of Thai literary history.

4. PARATEXT AND POLITICS AT THE MARGINS

The historical background of Siritham reveals the importance of Thai-Lao literary exchange in the construction of Isan identity, but a closer look at the actual margins of books published by the provincial publishing house further elucidates this complexity. As scholars in publishing studies have noted, paratextual elements such as the title page, editorial notes, and the preface are spaces in which the technical and social dimensions of books converge. This paratextual apparatus, as Leah Price has called it, shapes our understanding of books as material and cultural objects as well as our interpretive cognition of certain literary genres (Price, 2000, pp. 8–17). In the context of Siritham’s publications, I examine how paratexts function as a locus in which the notion of Isan identity is contested and negotiated during the Cold War.

My first example is the publication of the well-known literary tale *Sang Sinchai* by Siritham Publishing House in 1981. The same title had been previously published by Klangnana Witthaya in 1957 and by the Ministry of Education under the Royal Lao Government in 1959. In 1976, Thai scholar Phrakong Jaroenjitrakam (1976) wrote her master’s thesis titled, “Isan Literature: Sang Sinchai,” at the Department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University, using both versions as her sources. By the time Preecha Phinthong published his version of *Sang Sinchai*, this vernacular tale of the Buddha’s past life had already become part of the Lao literary

canon as well as an example of “Thai regional literature.”³ His prefatory notes to the Siritham edition complicate such nationalist and regionalist framing by emphasizing the translocal history of the text.

On this auspicious occasion of the bicentennial celebration of Ubon, I am publishing the book *Sang Sinchai* as part of this commemoration and to remind the descendants of Ubon about who our forefathers were, where we are from and since when. Ubon means lotus and the publication of this book stresses this symbolic meaning. The poet who composed *Sang Sinchai* was the ruler of the City of Lotus Pond (Muang Nongbua). Phra Wo Phra Ta who founded Ubon also came here from Muang Nongbua [...] They chose this location, which was south to the Lotus Pond (Nongbua), to build the city of Ubon that has been standing until the present (Phinthong, 1981, p. 4).

In this passage, Preecha Phinthong refers to the poet Pang Kham, who is believed to have composed *Sang Sinchai* in the mid-seventeenth century. According to Sila Viravong (2009), a Lao intellectual who pioneered historical analysis of the work, Pang Kham was the ruler of Muang Nongbua when it was still part of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. Drawing this connection between Laos and Thailand, he also mentions Phra Wo and Phra Ta, the founding fathers of Ubon Ratchathani whose origin is, therefore, from a town under the authority of the Lan Xang kingdom of Vientiane.⁴ The publication of *Sang Sinchai* celebrates the Lao origins of the work as well as the city itself. The antiquity of literary works such as *Sang Sinchai* attests to the past glory of Ubon Ratchathani. Thus, although the content of Preecha Phinthong's version of *Sang Sinchai* may not differ significantly from that of the Royal Lao Government and Klang Nanawitthaya, it is the paratextual element that allows for a political reading of the text. By anchoring the text within local history, the preface provides an interpretive framework that enables readers to draw connections between the adventurous tale of the Buddha's past life and the historical significance of Ubon Ratchathani's illustrious past.

The publication of *Thao Hung or Cheuang*⁵ by Siritham Publishing House in 1986 provides another instance of this paratextual politics. Prior to Preecha Phinthong's publication, the work had been previously transcribed by Sila Viravong from Lao palm-leaf manuscripts. Sila Viravong was then in exile for his participation in the anticolonial movement known as the Lao Issara and worked at the Lao-Isan section at the National Library of Thailand, where he discovered this Lao epic. He published it in 1943 as a cremation volume for senior monks of Ubon Ratchathani. When Sila returned to Laos to work for the newly established Committee of Literature under the Royal Lao Government, he published excerpts from this national epic of Laos in *Vankhadi San* (Literary Journal) from 1950–1953 (Figure 3). In 1979, the Department of Archaeology at Silpakorn University reprinted Sila Viravong's first edition to use as material for a regional literature class. Like that of *Sang Sinchai*, the publishing history of *Thao Hung or Cheuang* reveals its double life, one as Lao national literature and another as Thai regional literature.

The publications of a provincial publishing house are where these different lives converge. In his preface to the Siritham edition, Preecha Phinthong asserts that “The book of *Thao Hung or Cheuang* was originally from palm-leaf manuscripts in the National Library in Bangkok. Its archaic style of composition belongs to the ancient Isan-Lan Xang tradition [...] This work is an exquisite book of poetry and the oldest book ever discovered” (Phinthong, 1986, preface). Again, the paratextual element offers a frame for political interpretation of the text, especially with regard to the relationship between Thailand and Laos. By asserting the cross-cultural nature of the work, Preecha Phinthong pushes beyond the restricted frameworks of regionalism and nationalism that had governed the reading of this ancient poetry.

³ It should be noted that the process of making *Sang Sinchai* into a Lao canonical literature began in the French colonial period when excerpts from the work were serialized in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper from 1941–1944.

⁴ In early 2023, there was a controversy around this regional history, as the municipality of Nongbua Lamphu organized an annual festival to celebrate King Naresuan, a national hero according to Thai nationalist historiography, as some believed his troops once stopped at the city. Some local organizations protested against this idea and demanded recognition of Phra Wo Phra Ta, whose statues were erected in 2016 right across the shrine of King Naresuan in Nongbua Lamphu.

⁵ For an overview of *Thao Hung or Cheuang* and its historical significance, see Chamberlain (1989–1990).

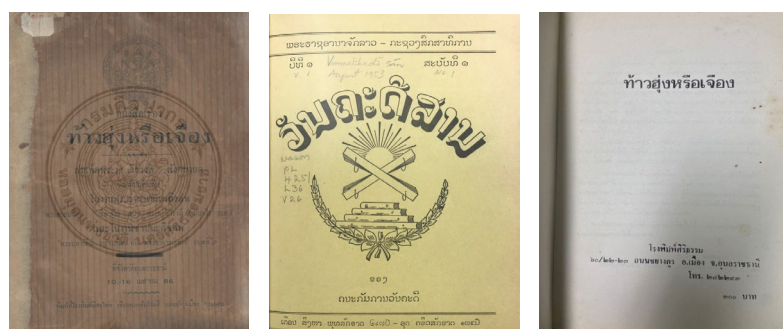


Figure 3: Different editions of *Thao Hung or Cheuang* published between 1943–1986

The first volume of an anthology of Isan literature (*Ruam wannakhadi Isan lem 1*) published by Siritham Publishing House in 1979 offers another example of how Isan regional identity is challenged. In the preface, Preecha Phinthong explains the urgency of compiling the anthology as follows:

In 1917, the government promulgated the Mandatory Primary Education Act that required all students to learn central Thai. The study of *tham* and *Thai noi* scripts among Isan people was consequently abandoned. Books written in *tham* and *Thai noi* scripts that contained all kinds of precious things were locked up in cabinets. After a long time, some had been destroyed by termites or delinquents and some naturally deteriorated. Nowadays, there are only a handful of Isan literary works (Phinthong, 1979, p. 4).

The materialities of Lao-Isan scripts (*tham* and *Thai noi*) and books are central to Preecha Phinthong's critique of the Thai state's education policy. Lamenting the critical condition of Lao-Isan manuscripts, his anthology performs restorative work in the wake of such cultural demolition. It might seem ironic that the volume is almost entirely composed in Thai in an attempt to make Lao-Isan literature accessible for a young generation, whose knowledge of Lao-Isan scripts was foreclosed. However, Preecha usually used central Thai for a summary of each selected work and included passages from original manuscripts when he considered them "melodious" (*phairoh*). As Leah Price notes, aesthetic beauty replaces moral beauty in the making of modern anthologies in the Western literary tradition (Price, 2000, p. 8). In Preecha Phinthong's anthology, aesthetic beauty is intimately tied to the Lao-Isan language itself. What is more, Preecha later complains that: "the translation of Isan language into central Thai is extremely demanding. Isan vocabulary is adequate so we need not borrow words from other languages. When translated into Thai, which has limited vocabulary, it is difficult to find the right words, only something close" (Phinthong, 1979, p. 5). In announcing the inadequacy of the Thai language, Preecha asserts the superiority of the Lao-Isan language both in terms of its aesthetic and communicative values. For him, to revive Lao-Isan literature involves reclaiming its originality and resisting an inclination to translate or assimilate its poetic qualities to conform to central Thai standards.

Through an analysis of paratextual elements such as prefaces and editorial notes, I have demonstrated that the publications of literary works by Siritham Publishing House challenge the Thai nationalist literary history in multiple respects. As the thresholds of interpretation, paratexts constitute a space through which provincial publishers create their own evaluative frameworks for assessing the historical, linguistic, and aesthetic significance of local literature. This process complicates the academic discourse of literary standardization, challenging the assumption that local literary cultures derive their standards solely from the center. Moreover, as these paratexts foreground the transborder history and cross-cultural nature of Isan literature, the articulation of Isan literary identity in Siritham's publications exceeds the rigid category of regional literature, which often subsumes regional literary culture under a centralized and homogenous understanding of Thai history. Finally, the emphasis on transnational flows of literary exchange between Laos and Thailand in these paratexts further reveals that the construction of Isan literary history is a result of the contestation and negotiation between nationalist movements on both sides of the Mekong River. In this regard, Isan literary history transcends the monolithic understanding of regional literature by weaving together Thai and Lao histories into its narrative of literary creation.

5. PREECHA PHINTHONG'S UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS AS A REGIONAL LITERARY ARCHIVE

In search of a more dynamic and inclusive literary history, we must expand our sources from conventional to lesser-known archives. In the introduction, I have shown that Pratchaya Phinthong's artistic

invocation of his father's literary legacy at the Istanbul Biennial also features the digitization of Preecha Phinthong's (1992) unpublished manuscripts from the family's private collection. These unpublished, handwritten manuscripts constitute an alternative archive for the study of regional literature. This archive, as I argue in this section, offers an intimate glimpse into Lao-Isan literary production that is virtually absent from academic discourse about regional literature. In examining the unpublished manuscripts, I also demonstrate that publishing studies is not limited to an analysis of printed materials but the whole process through which books come into being.

When Preecha Phinthong passed away at the age of eighty-nine in December 2003, he had published approximately fifty books, mostly by his own Siritham Publishing House. This includes, for example, a two-volume collection of Isan literature, a book on traditional medicine (*tamraya boran*), the remarkable *Khai Phasit Boran Isan* (Glossary of Ancient Isan Proverbs), and his *magnum opus*, the thousand-page long *Isan-Thai-English Dictionary*. He also left approximately a hundred unpublished manuscripts on various topics: memoirs, oral histories, folk Buddhist cosmology, astrology, Lao-Isan classical literature, folktales, mantras, and lists of local plants, animals, and mushrooms. Bringing these unpublished materials into conversation with the questions about regional literary history and identity explored in previous sections, I propose that this archive further sheds light on the transnational character of Isan literary production and networks.

Besides what we have seen in the published materials, in which Preecha Phinthong constantly invokes the Lao origins of Isan literature, his unpublished manuscripts provide additional evidence on this recurring theme. As he laments the loss of literary works written in Lao-Isan scripts, one of Preecha Phinthong's concerns is to revive and promote this written tradition. In his handwritten manuscript titled, "Tamnan Akson Song Fang Khong" (The Legend of Scripts Across the Mekong), dated 13 April 1992 (Figure 4), Preecha Phinthong offers a historical account of Lao scripts, tracing their origin, transmission, and development. It is notable that the author uses the Mekong River, a natural border between Thailand and Laos, as an entry point to his orthographic study. Following his brief geographical description of the Mekong River, Preecha Phinthong highlights the ethnolinguistic affinity between local communities on both sides of the river.

In ancient times, people across the Mekong River belonged to the Lao ethnic group. They similarly upheld animistic and Buddhist beliefs. They shared similar cultural, artistic, ritualistic, and literary traditions. When they split into different countries, their speech and culture varied. Some similarities persisted [...] However, people in both countries continued to cherish their affection and respect for each other. They continued to pay visits and trade with each other. They remained hospitable and respectful to each other like siblings who were born from the same mother's womb (Phinthong, 1992, pp. 1-2).

Reflecting on such cultural ties, Preecha Phinthong identifies Thai nationalism under Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's cultural mandates in the late 1930s as a defining factor that led to the rigid ethnic categorization that divides the Lao-speaking people on the right bank of the Mekong River, who were gradually assimilated into Thais, from those on the left bank in the present Lao nation. With this historical consciousness, Preecha Phinthong's sustained effort to revive the Lao scripts contributes to a reconstruction of regional literary history in which the cultural boundary created by the modern nation-state becomes porous. Preecha Phinthong also composed several manuscripts on regional history, following the popularization of the genre of *phuen* or "chronicle" in the early 1950s. Three volumes of his manuscripts titled, "Phuen Muang Ubon" (A Chronicle of Ubon, n.d.-a) (Figure 4), are devoted to a historical study of his home province. As we have seen in his preface to the Siritham edition of *Sang Sinchai* (Phinthong, 1981), his interest in the history of Ubon Ratchathani lies in its foundation by Phra Wo Phra Ta, who abandoned the court of Vientiane in the mid-eighteenth century and relocated to the right bank of the Mekong River. As such, Preecha's symbolic use of the Mekong River in his works connotes a sense of unity rather than demarcation. By evoking the Mekong, his writing highlights the interconnected history shared between Thailand and Laos, which extends beyond national boundaries.

Preecha Phinthong also penned a history of his hometown in "Prawat Ban Phonthong" (A History of Phonthong Village, 1996) that recounts the resettlement of people from Nongbua Lamphu to Ubon Ratchathani under the leadership of Phra Wo Phra Ta. He also notes that the Phinthong family was among the earliest groups to relocate to this area. Tracing the origins of provincial and familial histories, these manuscripts further supplement the transborder aspect of Preecha Phinthong's literary corpus.

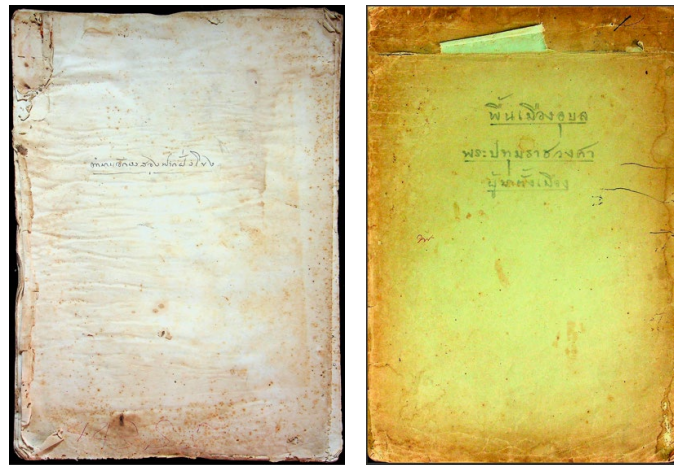


Figure 4: Preecha Phinthong's manuscripts of *A Legend of Scripts Across the Mekong* and *a Chronicle of Ubon*

The genre of chronicles, or *phuen*, in Lao literary tradition also includes accounts of Buddha images, especially those that have become symbols of particular premodern kingdoms. In Preecha Phinthong's archive, this kind of vernacular Buddhist literature is found in a collection of *Miscellaneous Knowledge* (*Rueang thi naru*, n.d.-b) in which he discusses various subjects ranging from Buddhist myths to biographies of venerated Buddhist monks. In a section on the Prabang, a Buddha image that is now the religious emblem of Luang Prabang in Laos, Preecha Phinthong cites *Phuen Prabang* (*A Chronicle of Prabang*) published by Laos' Ministry of Education in 1952 as his main source. According to the chronicle, the Prabang was cast and consecrated in Sri Lanka before it was transferred to a Khmer kingdom. Fa Ngum, a legendary ruler who established the Lan Xang Kingdom in the mid-fourteenth century, was then raised by a Khmer king. When Fa Ngum became the king of Luang Prabang (known as Xieng Thong at the time), he requested the Buddha image to serve as a newly established kingdom's religious symbol. Later in the chronicle, we learn that the Prabang was transferred to Bangkok along with the famous Emerald Buddha, as Vientiane was sacked by Siamese troops in 1778. Only the Prabang was returned to the Lao kingdom and continued to be one of the most important Buddha images of Laos until today. Central to this narrative is, again, a history of Thai-Lao relationships, in which Preecha Phinthong is deeply invested.



Figure 5: A photograph of Prabang is included in Preecha Phinthong's reproduction of *a chronicle of Prabang* (*Phuen Prabang*) in his collection *Miscellaneous Knowledge* (*Rueang thi naru*)

In this particular text, we encounter a photograph of Prabang enclosed in a brown envelope and affixed to a blank page (Figure 5). The address on the envelope indicates that the photograph was dispatched to the Siritham Publishing House from a temple in Bang Yi-Khan, an area where Lao aristocrats, who had been war captives during the early Bangkok period, resided (Van Roy, 2017, pp. 108–116). Although there is limited

evidence regarding its potential link to Bangkok's old Lao community, this photograph is significant in several ways. First, the act of obtaining the photograph itself underscores Preecha Phinthong's profound interest in Lao art and literature as well as his attentiveness to the circulation of this photograph in Thailand. Second, the photograph reveals a network among Buddhist and literary scholars through which an exchange of knowledge occurred. Lastly, the photograph as a material object provides a glimpse into the bookmaking process as its presence hints at the potential for reproduction in a publication. In fact, across various unpublished works, pages are already numbered, prices are established, and copyrights are acknowledged, indicating their preparedness for publication. In this light, the unpublished manuscripts exemplify the processes of composition and publication that involve a complex network of social relations.⁶

Through my brief survey of Preecha Phinthong's unpublished manuscripts, we can conclude that this archive deserves scholarly attention for its potential to expand the existing scholarship on provincial print culture. As I limit my inquiry in this article to the question of literary history, my analysis of these materials focuses on how their transnational features challenge the framework of nationalism in Thai literary history. Foregrounding the cross-cultural nature of Isan language, culture, and literary tradition, these works provide supplemental evidence for Preecha Phinthong's nuanced articulation of a regional literary identity. Isan literature, according to this literary archive, exceeds national literary boundaries as it incorporates conflicting narratives of Thai and Lao nationalism into its history.

6. CONCLUSION

This article considers the significance of provincial print culture in challenging and expanding Thai literary history, with a focus on Preecha Phinthong's Siritham Publishing House in Northeast Thailand (Isan), as a case study. Drawing on the framework of publishing studies as well as existing scholarship on print culture in Siam/Thailand, my investigation of Preecha Phinthong's works at Siritham offers a new approach to the study of Thai literary history. First of all, I have demonstrated that publishing studies redirects scholarly inquiry away from the traditional narrative of Thai literature that tends to focus on Bangkok-centric ideas of Thainess. Instead, it encourages a more nuanced exploration of the processes of literary standardization and canon formation beyond official narratives of national literature. I have illustrated this point in my close analysis of paratextual components of Preecha Phinthong's publications and a survey of his unpublished manuscripts. Together with a historical examination of Siritham's establishment, the textual analysis sheds light on the politics of knowledge production during the Cold War, when the concept of regional literature arose with the aim of fostering national integration. Provincial print culture challenges this rigid understanding of regional identity in academic discourse and state policy. As we have seen in Preecha Phinthong's corpus at Siritham, the articulation of regional literary identity in Northeast Thailand often involves a transnational relationship between Thailand and Laos that exceeds the nationalist framework of Thai literary history.

What is more, paratexts provide a platform for provincial publishers to articulate their own interpretive frameworks for evaluating the historical, linguistic, and aesthetic significance of regional literature, which complicates the academic discourse surrounding literary standardization. In the case of Siritham publications, the historical and poetic values of Isan literature are often tied to Lao cultural roots. In this regard, the formation of literary canons in Isan through print culture can be seen as a contested terrain between Thailand and Laos in the development of national literature. The emergence of Siritham Publishing House, which coincided with the ascent of Lao nationalism, also indicates that the historiography of Isan literature can be understood as a product of the interaction between Thai and Lao nationalism, marked by contention, negotiation, and mutual influence.

The results of this study suggest that publishing studies can provide valuable insights into the dynamics and characteristics of publishing networks, a topic often overlooked in the examination of Thai literary history. While my article primarily focuses on Siritham Publishing House in Ubon Ratchathani, I have mentioned Klang Nanawitthaya in the neighboring province of Khon Kaen, and located the emergence of this provincial print culture within a broader context of literary exchange between Thailand and Laos. Moreover, I have noted that Preecha Phinthong's works often engage with previous publications both in Thailand and Laos as he tries to foreground the literary and historical significance of the Siritham editions. Mapping this literary network provides a more dynamic portrait of Isan literature and clues about socioeconomic factors that shape the Isan literary landscape.

⁶ Editing is another process that these unpublished manuscripts can shed light on. A comparison between the same titles of Preecha Phinthong's published and unpublished works might reveal changes that occurred during the editing process. This topic deserves to be explored in another essay.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

An earlier version of this article, titled "Sociomaterial Life of Texts: Publishing Studies and Thai-Lao Literary Relations," was presented at the 8th AAS in Asia Conference in Daegu, Republic of Korea. The author extends his gratitude to the Research Affairs Division of the Faculty of Arts and the Centre of Excellence in Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Communication, Chulalongkorn University, for providing generous travel grants.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. R. O. G. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Boonkhachorn, T. (2000). The development and trends of literary studies in Thailand. *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities*, 3(1), 99–111.
- Buapat, A., & Chantranuson, K. (2022). Nangsue Isan: Sathaban kap kan kamnot satana thang sangkhom khong wannakam thongthin [Isan books: Institutions and the determination of regional literature's social status]. In K. Chantranuson (Ed.). *Wannakam Isan: "Tuabot" khwam samphan choeng amnat* [Isan literature: "Texts" of power relations] (pp. 44–84). Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Khon Kaen University. [in Thai]
- Chamberlain, J. (1989–1990). Thao Hung or Cheuang: A Tai epic poem. *The Mon-Khmer Studies Journal*, 18–19, 14–34.
- Eisenstein, E. L. (2005). *The printing press as an agent of change: Communications and cultural transformations in early modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jankasamepong, S. (2004). *"Wat-Koh book": Continuation and transformation of attitude and values in Thai society 1922–1932* [Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University Library and Information Network. <https://library.car.chula.ac.th/record=b1713880> [in Thai]
- Jaroenjitrakam, P. (1976). *Northeastern literature: Sangsinchai* [Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University Library and Information Network. <https://library.car.chula.ac.th/record=b1424162> [in Thai]
- Johns, A. (1998). *The nature of the book: Print and knowledge in the making*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jory, P. (2000). Books and the nation: The making of Thailand's national library. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 31(2), 351–373. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20072255>
- Limapichart, T. (2014). The royal society of literature, or, the birth of modern cultural authority in Thailand. In R. V. Harrison (Ed.). *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures* (pp. 37–62). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Malik, R. (2008). Horizons of the publishable: Publishing in/as literary studies. *ELH*, 75(3), 707–735. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27654631>
- Phinthong, P. (1979). *Ruam wannakhadi Isan lem 1* [A collection of Isan literature volume 1]. Siritham Publishing House. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (1981). *Sang Sinchai*. Siritham Publishing House. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (1986). *Thao Hung or Cheuang*. Siritham Publishing House. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (1992). *Tamnan akson song fang khong* [The legend of scripts across the Mekong River] [Unpublished manuscript]. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (1996). *Prawat ban Phonthong* [A history of Phonthong village] [Unpublished manuscript]. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (n.d.-a). *Phuen muang Ubon* [A chronicle of Ubon] [Unpublished manuscript]. [in Thai]
- Phinthong, P. (n.d.-b). *Rueang thi naru* [Miscellaneous knowledge] [Unpublished manuscript]. [in Thai]
- Polmuk, C. (2015). Nithan kao nai lok mai: Wannakam Lao samai ananikhom farangset kap khabuankan khleuan wai thang watthanatham [Old tales in the new world: Lao literature during French colonialism and cultural movements]. In S. Rungmanee & C. Vaddhanaphuti (Eds.), *Yat yaeng kan patthana lae khwam than samai nai lao* [Contesting development and modernity in Laos] (pp. 209–242). Center for ASEAN Studies, Chiang Mai University. [in Thai]
- Poonnothok, T. (1979). *Wannakam Isan* [Isan literature]. Odeon Store. [in Thai]
- Price, L. (2000). *The anthology and the rise of the novel: From Richardson to George Eliot*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sattayanurak, S. (2013). *Phraya Anuman Rajadhon: Prat samanchon phu neramit "khwam pen Thai"* [Phraya Anuman Rajadhon: A commoner-intellectual who invents Thainess]. Matichon. [in Thai]
- Singsuwan, A. (2010). Isan historiography, A.D. 1932–1970s [Master's thesis, Silpakorn University]. Silpakorn University Repository. <https://sure.su.ac.th/xmlui/handle/123456789/11681> [in Thai]

- Sriphufai, P. (1986). Preecha Phinthong and Isan literature. In Ubon Ratchathani Cultural Center (Ed.), *Choet chu kiat Dr. Preecha Phinthong* [Commemoration of Dr. Preecha Phinthong] (pp. 105–109). Yutthitham Offset. [in Thai]
- Van Roy, E. (2017). *Siamese melting pot: Ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok*. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Viravong, S. (2009). *Sang Sinchai: Kham kon khu hoi keo 1* [Sang Sinchai: In verse and prose volume 1]. Dokked. [in Lao]