

Characteristics, roles and functions of English translation
of politically and socially committed Thai literature
ลักษณะ บทบาท และหน้าที่ของวรรณกรรมสะท้อนการเมืองและสังคม
ภาษาไทยที่ได้รับการแปลเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

This paper investigates the characteristics, roles and functions of the English translation of modern Thai literature with political and social themes. By adopting sociological approaches, the main interests of this article are on the sociological aspects of the translation of modern Thai socially and politically committed novels, also regarded as Thai Literature for Life. The paper firstly introduces Thai literature in translation in the global context by giving an overview and background to the translation of Thai literature. It then delves further into the aspect of the position of Thai literature in the international system of translation by adopting Johan Heilbron's model (1999), world-system of translation, on analyzing translation flow. It further explores deeper issues related to the translation of modern Thai literature as a whole. The paper also examines the factors that contributed to the translation of Thai literature with these specific themes. Finally, the paper offers an analysis of in-depth issues concerning the functions and roles of the translation of modern Thai literature with said themes. Ultimately, it argues that translated Thai literature with politically and socially committed themes not only functions as a tool to provide pictures on Thailand (for educational purposes), but also operates as a means to confirm the positions of certain agents in a social milieu.

Keywords: Thai literature, Literature for Life, Translation, Translation Flow, The Otherness

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้ศึกษาลักษณะเฉพาะ บทบาท และหน้าที่ของวรรณกรรมสะท้อนการเมืองและสังคมภาษาไทยที่ได้รับการแปลเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ โดยศึกษาผ่านวิธีเชิงสังคมวิทยา มุ่งเน้นศึกษาบริบททางสังคมที่มีผลกระทบต่อการ (เลือก) แปลวรรณกรรมสะท้อนการเมืองและสังคมไทย หรือที่ได้รับการขนานนามว่า วรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิต บทความจะเริ่มด้วยการเกริ่นนำถึงวรรณกรรมไทยที่ได้รับการแปลในบริบทนานาชาติ โดยจะสำรวจภาพรวมและประวัติความเป็นมาของการแปลวรรณกรรมไทยเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ จากนั้นจะวิเคราะห์ถึงสถานะหรือจุดยืนของวรรณกรรมไทยที่ได้รับการแปลเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในบริบทนานาชาติ โดยใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์การเดินทางของงานแปล (translation flow) ของ Johan Heilbron (1999) หลังจากได้สำรวจภาพรวมและจุดยืนของวรรณกรรมไทยแปลแล้ว จึงนำไปสู่การเจาะลึกและวิเคราะห์ถึงปัจจัยและสาเหตุที่นำไปสู่การแปลวรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิตของไทย ในส่วนสุดท้ายเป็นการวิเคราะห์และเผยให้เห็นถึงบทบาทและหน้าที่สำคัญของวรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิตของไทยที่ได้รับการแปลเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ กล่าวคือ นอกจากวรรณกรรมไทยที่ได้รับการแปลจะเป็นเครื่องมือในการเสนอภาพ (เพื่อให้ความรู้) เกี่ยวกับประเทศไทยแล้ว ยังมีหน้าที่ในการยืนยันสถานะทางสังคมของผู้ที่มีความเกี่ยวข้องบางกลุ่มอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ : วรรณกรรมไทย, วรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิต, การแปล, การเดินทางของงานแปล, ความเป็นอื่น

1. Introduction

Research on translation strategies has been enjoying popularity in the field of Translation Studies in Thailand, as can be seen and observed in the body of research and convenient databases. This paper¹, however, attempts to investigate the sociological aspects of the translated Thai literature rather than the strategies used in the translation process and products. It probes the characteristics, roles and functions of politically and socially committed Thai literature in translation (into English), placing its central focus on the translation of Thai literature with said theme, as they intrigue foreign readers and dominate the market share of Thai literature in translation.

The article will firstly provide a basic background to the translation of modern Thai literature (mainly) into English, followed by an overview of the international system of the flow of translation with particular reference to the case of Thai literature translated into other languages (mainly English). The article subsequently leads to an elucidation of the characteristics of Thai literature translated into other languages with a discussion on the compulsions and impacts of practices relating to social and political literature in translation. Before arriving at the conclusion, the paper outlines and analyses the functions of translated Thai literature with politically and socially committed themes. Through a sociological lens, it argues that the translation of political and social themes in modern Thai literature not only functions as a means to inform readers about this exotic area, but also works as a tool to confirm the depiction of *third-world* countries such as Thailand, with some agents in the field also using such translations as a way of reaffirming their own legitimacy.

2. Modern Thai literature in translation and translation flow

The traditions of literary translation in Siam (or Thailand - post 1939), especially in its naissance, were largely adaptations and imitations of foreign (Western) literature and “vernacularisation as appropriation” of Western knowledge was

prevalent (Chaloemtiarana, 2009; Chittiphalangsri, 2014b). Seen in this light, practices relating to translation, adaptation and rewriting were aimed at importing and localizing innovative knowledge by local agents. Conversely, translations of Thai literature were not for the export of Thai knowledge to foreign readers to imitate, but rather for educational purposes, in the sense that readers merely aspired to learn about the unknown and exotic, resulting in *in-translational* practices prevailing over the *out-translation* of Siam's (Thai) own literature.

This phenomenon can be explained in the context of the world-system of translation as described by Johan Heilbron (1999; 2010), according to whom, the international sphere of translated books is hierarchized on the basis of language groups situated within such system. Within Heilbron's world-system of translation, languages around the world are stratified into four hierarchical groups: hyper-central, central, semi-peripheral, and peripheral. He demonstrates that the degree of centrality of these language groups can be noted by their share of the total number of translated books worldwide, obtained from international statistics on translated books² (Heilbron, 1999). The figures indicate that English is located at the hyper-central language position in the international translation system, whereas French, German and Russian are situated in the central language group. Thai, according to the figures referred to by Heilbron, is placed within the peripheral language group. By classifying languages into stratified groups, Heilbron observes that translations usually occur from the core (central languages) to the periphery (peripheral languages) rather than the other way around, and that the translation flow among languages located in the periphery usually occurs through the center or the core (English, French, German and Russian). This provides the central language groups with an intermediary or vehicular role in the system, resulting in correspondingly higher levels of distribution in relation to the centrality of the language in the process (Heilbron, 1999).

In this context, therefore, the world-system of translation can account for Thai literature's *in-translation* and *out-translation* predicament. Against the backdrop of

translational practices in Thailand, this highlights and confirms the peripheral position of Thai literature in the global sphere, as evidenced by the fact that there are greater amounts of *in-translations* from central languages, as opposed to the *out-translations* of Thai literature. Further, it raises concerns over the hegemony of central languages, which not only dominate the market, but also limit production and publication of works in peripheral languages, as confirmed by Heilbron (1999) who alludes to the fact that in the international translation system central languages provide greater amounts and varieties of literature to translate from, and as corollary, languages in the peripheral group offer fewer genres for *out-translation* beyond their own contexts (Heilbron, 1999).

In-translations, especially from central languages, such as English and French, have been significantly more numerous since the beginning of translation in Thailand, due mainly to the importation of foreign knowledge - where translation, imitation and adaptation were interwoven and inseparable. Filtering Thai literature through the systematic translation mechanisms has, in the main, been done intentionally - if not merely, for educational purposes. This indicates that *in-translational* practices see a greater variety of literature in terms of themes and genres being translated into the language of the periphery group, while *out-translations* from languages in the periphery, such as Thai, are limited to very few purposes. Consequently, this limits the genres and themes of Thai literature available for translation to these predominantly socially and politically focused.

In the case of modern Thai literature in translation, the largest amount is surprisingly not directed toward English, but rather Japanese (Yoon, 2014)³. Even though Japanese is neither the world's *lingua franca* nor a traditional intermediary language of the global translational system, modern Thai literature has been of interest to Japanese translation agents since before the 1950s (Fukutomi, 2012; 2014; Udo, 2014). Despite Japanese translations of Thai literature making up a greater share of the translation market than English translations, both share common socially and politically committed themes.

3. Translational practices for Thai literature as *third-world* writing

Internationally, Thai literature is not only positioned at the periphery of the system, it might also be considered as *third-world* writing⁴, in that it is perceived by foreign readers as remote, unknown and, therefore, as the Others. The writing of the Other – in this case, *third-world* countries – usually comes in anthological form, combined with intriguing and enticing themes, that are frequently political and social.

Although chronological-order is a common and popular compiling method for publishers – considered safe and convenient (Schulte, 1995), publishing and anthologizing based on themes and aspects of interests to the compilers (and editors) attracts a wider range of readers than other kinds of anthologies. Given this fact, it is useful to compile anthologies according to text themes.

Themed collections of translated Thai short stories in anthological form exist in great number as they present as more coherent, united and palatable to foreign producers and readers than those in chronological order. Since many publishers (including compilers and editors) endeavor to present an account of “the ways of the third-world” in their publications, many anthologies of “third-world writing” reveal the social and political values of those countries to convey their foreign and exotic values in order for readers to better understand a mysterious foreign way of life (Schulte, 1995). Translations of *third-world* literature anthologies thus portray values, including social injustice, crime and war, including, several titles originally in Thai, such as *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women* (1996), *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1985) and *Modern Thai Literature with an Ethnographic Interpretation* (1987). These compilations of short stories were accumulated according to theme - women in the case of *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women*; politics in *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* and ethnographic aspects in *Modern Thai Literature with an Ethnographic Interpretation*.

Much of the Thai literature which has been translated into English contains a collected short stories with specific themes that depict Thailand and its people, culture and society. And that includes not just short stories but also novels with such themes as they also manifest Thai society in its *third-world* (unknown Others) guise.

4. For educational purposes: the function(s) of Thai literature as *third-world* writing in translation

The Thais have long regarded themselves as, what Thongchai Winichakul (2014) calls, “a single jewel in the crown” due to their uniqueness, i.e. the belief that Thailand has never been formally colonized. With this in mind, the Thais define themselves differently from their neighboring countries, such as Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (Winichakul, 2014). Although the Thais are well aware of the fact that Thailand is located in the Southeast Asian region, their conception of uniqueness of the *Self* compels them to be almost unaware of their neighbors’ profiles. Despite the belief in their own uniqueness, Westerners still study Thailand and its neighbors as a package of Others or the way of the *third-world*. The depiction and knowledge of the *third-world* have traditionally been conducted through the national literatures of such countries and have faced changes over time, from the colonial era, the post-colonial period, to present (Winichakul, 2014). Nonetheless, the recent knowledge of the Others or the *third-world* is gained through translation.

Since the advent of the export of translation of Thai literature, many of the translations of modern Thai novels were for educational purposes (Anon, 2014). Those students who are interested in Thailand, Thai people and society utilize modern Thai novels to learn about Thailand as they can vividly depict Thailand, its culture and people; this pattern of attaining knowledge was established from the era of colonialism.

The British and French – the significant Western power in Southeast Asia during the era of Imperialism, entered and studied about Southeast Asia and Indo-China. The newcomers to these Asian territories perceived and labelled these lands and their people as “backwards” (Winichakul, 2014). The knowledge about the Others during this period of Imperialism was created under the influence of Orientalism and what the Imperialists understood about the East was entangled up with their colonial power. Under the influence of Orientalism, the Other (the East) was viewed as romantic but ancient and backward, and any semblance of greatness they once held had already fallen to the colonizers themselves (Said, 1978 as cited in Winichakul, 2014). In the following era, the heirs to this imperialist type of knowledge - the Americans, possessed a similar kind of knowledge about these distant lands, although, as successors, the body of knowledge on Area Studies established by the Americans was different from that of the Europeans. While, the archaeology, art history and philology of the region were of prime interest to the latter, the Americans focused more on economics, social sciences and humanities (Winichakul, 2014). And since the field of Area Studies is especially tuned toward the lives of the people, modern Thai literature depicting ways of life, economics, social injustice and humanity, intrigued scholars and students of Area Studies. It should be noted, though, that the approach to Area Studies taken by the Americans usually views the region as a single entity, which challenged the belief held by Thais that Thailand was *the only jewel in the crown*. *ฟ้าบ่กั้น* (*Fa bo kan*) or *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958) by Lao Khamhom (Khamasing Srinawk), *ครูบ้านนอก* (*Khru bannok*) or *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp* (1978) by Khamman Khonkhai (Somphong Phalasan), *จนกว่าเราจะพบกันอีก* (*Chonkwa rao cha phop kan ik*) or *Until We Meet Again* (1950) by Siburapha (Kulap Saipradit) and *ลูกอีสาน* (*Luk isan*) or *The Child of the Northeast* (1976) by Kampoon Boonthawee are among the best examples of this genre. It should be also noted that many of these literary texts that were produced under the stream of social and political forces have widely been regarded as modern Thai literary masterpieces, thanks to their contributions

to both societal and literary milieus. The selection of these titles, however, clearly suggests not only that one of the major purposes of translation of modern Thai literature is for educational purposes, but also indicates the position of being the unknown Other that is needed to be studied.

Not only can the selection of Thai literature with serious themes such as society and politics educate readers on what the *third-world* and Others might be like, it can also reaffirm the readers' preconception of the ways of the Others. The phenomenon of the translation of politically and socially committed literature of the *third-world* countries can be read by using the discourse of Orientalism that Edward Said (1978) famously outlines. The Western approach to acquiring knowledge about the unknown East is to reconstruct and dominate (Said, 1978). The representation of the Orient through the prism of Orientalism, by way of translation, is to confirm the Western perspective over that of the Oriental. Western knowledge of the East is produced by limiting and mediating their depiction to the level that is considered to be a "sufficient" depiction of the East (Said, 1978 as cited in Chittiphalangsi, 2014a, p.55) and this depiction of the unknown and imagined East – perhaps even mediated – by the Orientalists is what they feel most comfortable with (Chittiphalangsi, 2014a, p.55). The approach to obtaining knowledge of the East used by the Orientalists is to grasp from the outside, while maintaining a suitable distance (Said, 1978, p.222). In so doing, they can study the East and retain authority and control over the Orientals. Although translation of the *third-world* countries' literary works for educational purposes are primarily carried out in the North American style, the sense of confirmation that the East is inferior still persists. The depiction of the *third-world* is constructed by conventions between elements in the literature itself and the target readers. The conventions illustrating the *third-world* East as inferior but exotic have underlined the sense of the Otherness of the Eastern subjects.

Cognisant of the fact that the Thai literature with social and political themes is of great interest to foreign readers, translation agents of Thai literature, both foreign and Thai, keep producing translations of such literature in various languages. Whether or not these translation agents are aware that such literature is employed as material to study the supposedly subjugated Others, their selections and reproductions suggest that they accept and are subscribed to the guidelines of the depiction of the *third-world* and the sense of Otherness. Thanks to the dynamicity and structure of social spheres, the exemplar of choosing such seriously themed literature is appreciated by later generations of translation agents. Seen in this light, as the translation agents have been inculcated with such paradigms, they, in the meantime, reproduce and perpetuate the practices of producing the translation of social and political Thai literature. The persisting reproduction of the social and political themes of Thai literature in translation has strengthened the guidelines itself. Eventually, translation agents of Thai literature are fully endowed with this paradigm of choosing Thai literary works with political and social themes.

The subscription of such guidelines for choosing the literature of said political and social themes can be exemplified by several examples. The first case is the translation of common literature into multiple languages. The collection of political and social short stories in *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958), is a perfect example. *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958) has been translated into various languages, i.e. English, French, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Japanese, Malay and German (UNESCO, 2016) and other examples among the translations of Thai politically and socially committed literature include *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp* (1978), which has been translated into English and Japanese, and *A Child of the Northeast* (1976), translated into English, French and Japanese (UNESCO, 2016). Publications in multiple languages indicate the reproduction of guidelines in publishing the image of the *third-world* in various locations in the world. Viewed against this backdrop, not only do readers in English speaking countries seek confirmation of the images

of the Others, but readers in other non-English speaking countries also look to better understand the unknown Others as well.

The second case is the reproduction of guidelines in the form of republications. Several of those novels and compilations of short stories have also been appraised as modern Thai literary masterpieces. Some, as a result, have been republished by a well-known publisher of English materials in Thailand – Silkworm Books. The first version of *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958) and *Letters from Thailand* (1969) by Botan (Supha Siring) were published by Duang Kamol publishing house in 1991 and 1977 respectively and later, both titles were republished by Silkworm Books in 2001 and 2002. The practices of republication of some books suggest that the publishers and editors acceded to the principle to publish the translation of socially and politically committed literature as a depiction of Thailand.

The final indication of practices by translation agents of Thai literature is in the form of a concrete guideline. Recommended Thai Literary Books (2011) -published and distributed by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, in 2011 contains a large number of Thai literary texts recommended to foreign publishers and literary agents - two of the politically and socially committed Thai literary texts are presented in the index. Again, *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958) and *A Child of the Northeast* (1976) are selected for recommendation to foreign publishers and books' rights agency, despite having already been published and republished multiple times. The depiction of the third-world country through the translations of socially and politically committed literature, therefore, is repeatedly reproduced through translation and the distributions of translations.

In short, much of the Thai literature in translation was produced for educational purposes with the desire to obtain knowledge of Thailand as part of the Oriental Others being one of the major contributing factors to the production of translated Thai literature in the global sphere. This represents one of the major

functions of Thai literature in translation and in the section that follows, another function of Thai literature in translation will be discussed.

5. Another function of the translation of politically and socially committed Thai literature

Translations of socially and politically committed Thai literature can be used as a tool to provide depictions of Thailand and its people to foreigners and can function as a means of confirming depictions of the *third-world* countries, as illustrated in previous sections. Yet, some translations of novels with a sub-theme exploring rural lives, not only function to reaffirm the ways of the *third-world* to foreigners, but also as a measure for confirming the urban population's own legitimacy within Thai society.

The literature with political and social themes in Thailand was mostly produced under or influenced by the tide and trend of Literature for Life in Thailand. The Literature for Life (วรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิต; *wannakam phuea chiwit*) movement is one of the most highly acclaimed and celebrated themes of modern Thai literature. Its emergence was kindled by the accumulation of feeling of love for humanity and empathy, as well as the struggle for justice and real democracy in society. The birth of Thai Literature for Life in the 1950s coincided with the popularization of Art for Life (ศิลปะเพื่อชีวิต; *sinlapa phuea chiwit*) in the country and *จนกว่าจะพบกันอีก* (*Chonkwa rao cha phop kan ik*) or *Until We Meet Again* (1950) by Siburapha (Kulap Saipradit) was the first Thai novel with this theme.

In fact, the movement of *progressive novels*⁵, or a kind of socialist realist literature, had already been widespread among Siamese or Thai domestic literary producers even prior to the dawn of the trend of Literature for Life. The creation of the progressive novels was a reaction to changes in the country that were prompted by both domestic and international forces from the 1932 Siamese revolution to World War II (Janthimathorn, 1982). By creating progressive Thai novels, the local authors at the time showed their responsibility for the lives and

welfare of the people within the society through their writings that reflect the relationships between people and society, calling for social and political changes for the betterment of the citizen's lives. Furthermore, the literature as a part of this progressive trend also addressed the issues of poverty of the people, class difference and social injustice (Janthimathorn, 1982). Seen in this light, both progressive novels and Literature for Life novels share similar characteristics and intentions.

The Literature for Life movement in Thailand later spawned successors, such as country-life novels, which were also committed to the Thai social and political problems, and Literature for People (วรรณกรรมเพื่อประชาชน; *wannakam phuea prachachon*) (Boonkhachorn, 1978). The essence of Literature for Life in Thailand was partly adopted at later stages in the Thai literary milieu. In the aftermath of the Thammasat massacre in 1976, the Communist Party of Thailand and student activists disagreed as to ideology, and this eventually led to their separation. Thereafter, the student and intellectual groups began to doubt and challenge the patronising and stereotypical character of the Literature for Life, seeing it as a sort of “propaganda literature” (Pattarakulvanit, 2014, pp.148-149). Nonetheless, they did not completely reject all values and facets of the socialist realism promoted in Literature for Life; they continued to appreciate the way of “engaged literature” (Pattarakulvanit, 2014, p.149), by which the authors took responsibility to expose social injustice and to raise the awareness of their readers of important socio-political issues (Pattarakulvanit, 2014). In later generations, some of the Thai literary producers perpetuated and exercised the idea of addressing issues of social reality, only in a more “creative” style. Thereafter, they created the “Creative Literature” (วรรณกรรมสร้างสรรค์; *wannakam sang san*) mode in Thailand (Pattarakulvanit, 2014), perpetuating the “strain of realism” in Thai literature that was greatly apparent between the 1990s and 2000s (Chotiudompant, 2009, p.48).

Not only did the ideology of the Literature for Life movement influence the production of Thai literature, but such trend was also passed on to the

translation of modern Thai literature. The succession of the trend to the domain of the translation of Thai literature was conducted through close relationships between agents in the domain of Thai literature and its sub-field, the domain of the translation of modern Thai literature, which inherited not only the logics from the field of Thai literature, but also shared the very same agents in the field of Thai literature. So, with both fields sharing common logics as well as agents, what was acceptable to the field of Thai literature, was embraced in the domain of Thai literature in translation. Given that the socialist realist paradigms existing in Thai literature are welcomed in the field of Thai literature, such paradigms are easily perpetuated in the translation domain, because they can be very attractive to foreigners, as previously illustrated.

As aforementioned, the themes of social injustice and political issues are commonly and especially presented in modern Thai literature produced under the trend of Literature for Life. They depict social problems that disrupt and disturb the lives of both urban and suburban local Thai people. Unsurprisingly, readers in other countries are attracted to translations of Thai literature with this theme, as well as modern Thai realist literary texts - as evidenced by the number of translated works of Thai literature with this theme to be found on the UNESCO database (UNESCO, 2016). As proposed by Roland Barthes (1967), the audience and readers of literature are able and free to read, decode, interpret and understand the meaning of literary pieces, regardless of the authors' original intent. Yet, with established biases, some readers and literary critics might have superficially or casually read and interpreted some titles among the works produced as part of the Literature for Life trend resulting in them understanding imprecisely the meaning of the books. Bias in rendering the underlying messages of literature with this theme might be epitomized in the criticism and appraisal of the Thai version of *The Politician and Other Stories* (1958) and the comments of critics also depict deep-rooted values in the Thai mindset. Despite the author's claim that the anthology of short stories was produced to portray images of poverty, deterioration and deprivation of rural

farmers” (Srinawak, 2012, p.253), this collection of short stories presents various other aspects of interest. Yet, in spite of the aforementioned fact, only one aspect of the story was and has been commented on, criticized and appraised by literary critics⁶, namely that the stories perfectly illustrate “the poverty, impairment, credulity and foolishness of the rural people”, or more precisely, Isan or Northeastern Thai people (Pattarakulvanit, 2012, pp.35-37).

According to Pattarakulvanit (2012), reading should widen our perspectives and readers should gain a sense of compassion for other people. Yet, the superficiality and imprecision of rendering messages with the established bias found in *The Politician and Other Stories* might be a reproduction of the image of the Isan locals. Such representation of Isan locals was created by the ruling elites (Pattarakulvanit, 2014). The socially-constructed discourse around the inferiority of the ways of Isan people serves mainly the interests of those living in Bangkok. Isan people are seen as wild yet tamable, a myth was created in the process of identity-making and defining Thainess during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Winichakul, 2000). In order to differentiate urban from rural folk, the ruling elites used the words *chao pa* and *chao bannok* to mark them as jungle people and rural people, thereby labelling them as the Others (Winichakul, 2000).

This image of Isan was subsequently reproduced by governmental agencies (Winichakul, 2000). The depiction of Isan people as “foolish, poor and impaired” by the ruling elites was conducted so thoroughly and systematically by various authoritative governments, (such as Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikhachon, both of whom launched campaigns highlighting these constructed images and discourse of Isan and rural people) that even Isan people themselves believed this image to be precise portrayal of who they were (Winichakul, 2000). Such images and characterisations still play a prominent role in stigmatizing Isan people today (Pattarakulvanit, 2012).

In the field of the translation of Thai literature, the image of foolish, poor and impaired people has also been adopted to portray lives of Isan people. Perhaps, the most obvious examples of this are the front covers of English

The cover of these translations are good examples of the confirmation of attitudes toward rural people. The covers show symbols and conventions of the unfortunate, underprivileged and poverty-stricken lives of Isan people (both of these books tell stories about Isan and the rural poor⁷). Both books are translations of Thai literature, and aimed at a foreign readership, so it can be argued that the covers were designed to appeal to that market. On the cover of *The Politician and Other Stories*, an Isan ‘everywoman’ – thin, dark-skinned, dressed in local attire, presumably the grandmother of the boy in her lap - is a cliché representation of a local village in northeastern Thailand, a dry, underdeveloped rural region; while the cover of *A Child of the Northeast* portrays a sad faced Isan boy crying and eating a strange object (to urban people), alongside other stereotypical images and objects, such as a buffalo (representing rural backwardness and stupidity), an Isan plough-boy and a glutinous rice container (another agricultural symbol). This perhaps illustrates, as Said argues, that the Orientalist approach propose ‘sufficient’ knowledge and conventions of the Orientals by which the Orientalists restructure and limit the knowledge they attain of the Orients according to their cultural predilection.

The issues raised by these covers of two translations of Thai literature with themes related to Literature for Life can be read as *the reproduction* of the reproduction of the depictions of Isan people. *The reproduction* of the reproduction shows double-layered practices of reproductions of the portrayal of Isan people. That is, the ruling elites firstly created the depictions during the reign of King Chulalongkorn which were subsequently promoted by social agents (public and private) and further *reproduced* in image and discourse through various kinds of practices. Eventually, through the means of distribution of modern Thai literature in translation, such images and myth were again *reproduced* and have become universally acknowledged, and this very phenomenon makes manifest how such depictions of Isan people become *repetitively reproduced* and firmly established in Thai social-psyche. Moreover, this very phenomenon signifies that, by explicitly placing those stereotypical elements at the forefront of the translation of Thai

literature, translation agents, overtly or covertly, utilized the translations of Thai literature with the theme of Literature for Life as a means of reproducing the discourse and images of inferior rural people and reaffirming of urban people's sense of superiority.

Given the popularity - if not, common-practice of compiling short stories about *third-world* countries into an anthological presentation and intensification of depictions of rural and Isan people, the translations of modern Thai literature with themes of Literature for Life and socialist realism perhaps seem to be most compelling to both translation agents and their readers. Yet, selection of this kind of Thai literature can also be read as a *second-hand confirmation of* perceptions of (rural) people in Thailand. To put it differently, the affirmation of the socially-constructed discourse and images of 'third-world' countries through the process of selecting Thai literature for translation guarantees that this presupposed portrayal of *third-world* is repeatedly reproduced and thus perpetuated. The "desire and need of Westerners" (Achebe, 1988) to perceive the distant Others as the antithesis of European civilization is once again confirmed. Moreover, some of the translations of socially and politically committed Thai literature with rural life themes also function to sponsor the power and superior status of their producers and the urban elites.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the characteristics, roles and functions of translated Thai literature into English. Firstly, it investigates the position of Thai literature in translation, and then discusses in detail the features of the translated Thai literature into English, before finally conducting an analysis of the functions of Thai literature in translation in the global spheres.

Through the investigation and analysis of the characteristics, role and functions of the translation of politically and socially committed Thai literature, it is argued that the translation of socially and politically committed Thai literature has more than one function. The primary function of Thai literature in translation is for

the purpose of educating readers on Thailand and greater Southeast Asia. However, the educational materials produced often provide depictions that favour and reinforce preconceived Western notions of the region. Thai literature in translation not only operates to promote the *third-world* aspects of life to the West, particular selections made by domestic translation agents also reveal the degree to which translation agents themselves exercise their power through their choice of works for translation – proving that domestic agents of Thai literature in translation hold the same familiar prejudiced mindset with respect to the rural people as that of most privileged urbanites. By selecting politically and socially committed literature, and depicting the lives Isan people in Thailand, translation agents often propagate preconceived attitudes and notions of a *third-world* way of life, and at the same time they submit to a contrived and misleading discourse that regards Isan people a foolish, poor, impaired and inferior.

Notes

¹ Some parts of this article were taken from my Ph.D. thesis, entitled *The Sociology of the Representation of National Self through the Translation of Modern Thai Literature into English: A Bourdieusian Approach* (2016).

² The figures include Index Translationum, the list of books translated in the world, provided by UNESCO. Despite some limitations of the index, this figure was the only official and international figure for the global translation sphere.

³ The Japanese imported Thai literature through translation in four different waves. Currently, there are approximately 200 titles of Japanese translations of modern and contemporary Thai literature (Fukutomi, 2012, p.122; 2014; Udo, 2014, pp.96-107)

⁴ The concept of the *third-world* writing in this paper is borrowed from Schulte's article on *International Literature Transfer via Translation Anthologies* (1995). For the use solely for this paper, the term of *third-world* writing is an umbrella term denoting the writings from the countries which are deemed as less-developed (in terms of economic, social justice, welfare and infrastructures) as well as some other developing countries, such as Thailand. The *third-world* writings mostly

are composed of the writings from such countries with politically and socially committed themes (manifesting social injustice and deterioration of societies). The *third-world* territories are viewed as underdeveloped, thus they need to be developed. The term also signifies view of Imperialist idea of seeing some other countries as backwards or as the *third-world*.

⁵ The progressive novels written with their serious socially committed themes are also regarded as “the literature of social consciousness”, as opposed to the literature of social preservation that aimed to maintain the ruling elites’ powers (Kepner, 2009).

⁶ Those literary critics include Witthayakon Chiangkun, Charuwan Thammawat, Suwanna Kriangkraipet, Thirayut Bunmi and Banchong Banchoetsin (Pattarakulvanit, 2012).

⁷ It should be noted that, *ลูกอีสาน* (*Luk isan*) or *The Child of the Northeast* is a novel that purely deals with Isan and Isan people, while Isan is also the location where all short stories in *ฟ้าบ่กั้น* (*Fa bo kan*) or *The Politician and Other Stories* happen, apart from one short story, *ไพร่ฟ้า* (*Phraifa*) or *The Commoners* that is set in a city in Northern Thailand.

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