



# Translations of National Literature: Existing Translation Works as Means to Promote Better Understanding among Nations

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## *Abstract*

This paper traces the history of translation from ancient time to the present, especially the translation of literature. The translation of literary works in Thailand also has a long history going back to the Sukhothai Period. Through trade and cultural connection with countries in Asia and the intrusion of Western ideology and technology, there have been broader scopes of translation. In the first stages translation was of a religious nature. During the turbulent times in history when Thailand was still waging wars with neighboring countries there were many literary works in reference to the wars, most of them glorifying the heroic deeds of various Thai kings who had fought to maintain peace and sovereignty of the country. In the country-building periods it was time to concentrate on the intellectual side. Eminent writers and poets vied to present their works to the court and artists in all fields produced their works of art. There were poems praising the splendor of the architecture of palaces and temples, the royal barge procession, and even the exquisite cuisine and floral arrangement. After World War II regional cooperation among countries in Southeast Asia has resulted in the launching of several bi-lingual volumes of the *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* and the *S.E.A. Write Award-Winning Stories* in English translations as an attempt to make the

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literatures and cultures of ASEAN known to the world. In comparison to works translated from foreign languages into Thai, there are fewer Thai literary works being translated into foreign languages. The modern trend in the age of globalization is the translation of romances and thrillers. There is a shift of translation purposes from entertainment to business and economic development and the source and target languages of translation vary. A good translation can promote better understanding among nations, thus linking people all over the world together in a world made smaller by globalization.

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Translation has been in existence since 3000 B.C. but it started to play an important role in the Western world around 300 B.C. Influenced by Greek civilization and religion, the Romans translated writings on arts and sciences from Greek into Latin. Such eminent Roman writers as Catullus and Cicero translated works from Greek into Latin. Later on when the Roman Empire became powerful, the process was reversed, that is, there were translations from Latin into Greek. When the Arabs rose to power around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, works by Aristotle, Plato, Galen and Hippocrates were translated into Arabic. In the same century the Moors invaded Spain, resulting in the influx of academic books into Toledo. Contact between the Moors and the Western world popularized the translation between Arabic and European languages. When the Moorish influence in Spain came to an end, the Toledo School of Translation translated the Arabic version of Greek scientific and philosophical knowledge into English. Some books had been translated back and forth from one language to another in succession, causing the contents of the translated versions to deviate from the originals. One area of translation, the translation of the Bible, has played a significant role in the diffusion of Christian teachings and has been continuously revised and improved. Translation has progressed through time and the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered “the Age of Translation”.

Translation, especially the translation of literary works, is not a novel subject in Thailand. The country has had a long history of translation from dealings with Western countries as well as its Eastern neighbors. There was a translation of



Vessantara Jataka from Pali into Thai by the name of *Mahachat Kham Luang*, the first religious literature of the Ayutthaya Period in the reign of King Borommatrailokkanat (1448-1488). *Sam Kok (The Three Kingdoms)* was translated from Chinese into Thai in the reign of King Rama I (1782-1809), founder of the Royal House of Chakri, in the Early Rattanakosin Period. In the reign of King Rama III (1824-1850) the coming of missionaries to disseminate Christianity in Thailand gave rise to English-Thai translations. More Thai people were interested in learning English in the reign of King Mongkut (King Rama IV, 1850-1868) and during the transitional period between the reigns of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, 1868-1910) and his son, King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, 1910-1925). The Oxford-educated King Vajiravudh, whose reign was called the Golden Age of Thai Literature, rendered a beautiful Thai translation of three of William Shakespeare's works: *As You Like It*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The king also translated the play *Les Sauterelles* by Émile Fabre into English entitled *The Locusts*. From that time on there were increasing numbers of translation works from English into Thai. This has been the trend up to the present. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX, 1946-), the current monarch, translated William Stevenson's book, *A Man Called Intrepid*, and *Tito*, a biography of Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia by Phyllis Auty, into Thai and translated *Mahajanaka*, the story of one of the lives of Buddha, from the Thai text into English. He wrote *Thongdaeng*, a story about his pet dog in Thai and then translated it into English.

The literary works of a country reflect its people's linguistic ability, art and science, customs and traditions, myths, religious beliefs, historical, social and political developments. In the past, geographic and linguistic barriers made it difficult for communication among nations. Thus, there were accounts of fabulous lands and exotic peoples and animals related by travelers of yore. These accounts were for the most part exaggerated and tended to be misleading. Westerners who thought of themselves as being sophisticated looked down on peoples in Asia or Africa as primitive and uneducated, whereas Eastern nations with a long history of civilization thought of Westerners as vulgar and uncultured. Before the age of Information Technology it was through translation works that one could learn and understand more about people in other countries. The teachings of great religious and philosophical



figures, literary works by eminent authors, as well as works in other fields of knowledge have been translated into several languages. Nowadays, one can read quotations from the Bible or the works of Shakespeare in almost any language.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a geo-political and economic organization comprising ten countries located in Southeast Asia was formed on 8 August 1967. Its founding members were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Later the membership was extended to include Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. ASEAN aims at accelerating economic growth, social progress, and cultural development among its members, protecting regional peace and stability, and providing opportunities for member countries to discuss differences peacefully. From the early 1980's to the early 1990's there had been efforts to compile the diversity of literary works in regional languages of Southeast Asia into an anthology.

Sponsored by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), this project selected masterworks of literature from every regional language of Southeast Asia and translated them into English as a means to promote better understanding and exchange of appreciation on each individual country's culture and way of life. This is a good example of how linguistic and cultural diversity of Southeast Asia has been recognized as an integral part of ASEAN common interests. Compiling the works and translating them into English has built and enhanced understanding among ASEAN members of their common cultural heritages. It can also lead to further cooperation in preserving and developing linguistic and cultural diversity in Southeast Asia. It was also concluded that it would be more appropriate if the selected works for translation be translated into the national or the official indigenous language of each nation, especially in the case of ASEAN countries which rely on more than one language for their communication. This could help enhance wider appreciation of their local literature and also would benefit the study of the national literature in each particular member country.

As a result of this project several volumes of the bilingual *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* were issued. It was decided at the Preliminary Meetings in Singapore during 14-16 June 1982 that the selection of literary works to be included in the



Anthology, based on the criteria of literary merit and on a broad chronological order, should be left to the national teams. Thus, **Brunei Darussalam** chose to deal with folklore and classical poetry. **Indonesia** presented a variety of oral literary genres observed in different linguistic areas and pre-Islamic written literature. **Malaysia** chose a collection of excerpts of traditional texts and folklore taken from both the indigenous tradition and early classics. **The Philippines** concentrated on epics from the different regions of the country and the Spanish influenced metrical romances. **Singapore** followed the broad chronological approach and concentrated on poetry and fiction.

In the case of **Thailand** where there is solely one official language used for the whole country, the Thai National Team on *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* deemed it appropriate to produce translated version and simplified or paraphrased Thai version of the Thai Anthology as Volumes a and Volumes b. Thai literary works existing in written form are divided into five periods as follows:-

1. Sukhothai Literature (1238-1377)
2. Early Ayutthaya Literature (1350-1529)
3. Late Ayutthaya Literature (1620-1767)
4. Thon Buri Literature (1768-1781)
5. Rattanakosin Literature (1782-present)

For Volume I, the Thai team presented the “*Traibhumikatha*,” (*The Story of the Three Planes of Existence*) believed to have been composed by King Lithai of Sukhothai. A treatise on Buddhist cosmology, actually a sermon which King Lithai while in the monkhood preached to his mother, it represents the first work of Buddhist literature ever written in the Sukhothai Period describing the Three Planes, namely the Sensual Plane which includes the Human World, Heaven and Hell; the Corporeal Plane or the Plane of the Brahma; and the Incorporeal Plane or the Plane of the Formless Brahma.

Volume II comprises eight literary works of the Ayutthaya Period starting with *Ongkan Chaeng Nam (Oath of Allegiance)*, an incantation in verse to be uttered by courtiers, princes and representatives of vassal states in the ceremony of Drinking the



Water of Allegiance; *Mahajati Kham Luang (The Great Life of Lord Buddha)*, the royal version of a poem based on the story of Vessantara, believed to be the greatest of Buddha's incarnations, aiming at showing the basic doctrines to which all Buddhists adhere, particularly mercy, kindness, and willingness to help; *Lilit Yuan Phai*, a historical poem eulogizing King Borommatrailokkanat's meritorious deeds and victory over Prince Tilokaraj of Chiang Mai. This piece of work reflects the heroic and virtuous deeds of Thai kings in defending the land and bringing peace and happiness to the people throughout the Thai history; *Lilit Phra Lor*, the first poem that plays on the emotions of the readers, is an anonymous narrative poem the plot of which is based on a Northern folktale with a tragic theme similar to that of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The remaining four selections are *Khlong Thawa Thotsamas (Twelve Months Poem)*, in which the anonymous author refers to the rites and ceremonies observed each month; *Dutsadi Sangwoey Klom Chang*, a lullaby for a newly captured royal white elephant. The white elephant, believed to be sacred among the peoples of Asia, is a symbol of grandeur and prosperity, bringing fame and honor to its owner, usually a king. The greater number of white elephants a king has in his possession, the more renowned he is. The lullaby is meant to pacify the elephant which has just been taken from the jungle in order that it may acclimatize to the new surroundings in the royal stable; *Phleng Yao Phayakon Krung Si Ayutthaya (Prophecy of Ayutthaya)*, dating back to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, describes sixteen bad omens foretelling the collapse of Ayutthaya; and *Krung Kao Chronicle: Luang Prasert Aksonnit's Version (The Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya)*, a prose narration of the historical events of Ayutthaya, a former capital of Thailand, starting from King Chai Rajathiraj up to King Naresuan the Great. This chronicle is renowned for its exceptionally accurate accounts.

In Volume III a, literary works of the Thon Buri and Early Rattanakosin periods are featured. They consist of *Poem in Tribute of King Taksin of Thon Buri* by Nai Suan, the Page; *Fighting the Burmese at Tha Din Daeng*, a poem by King Rama I; *Nirat Narin* by Nai Narinhibet; *The Floating Maiden* episode of *Ramakian* by King Rama II; *Being Captivated by a Portrait* and *Carried off by the Whirlwind* episodes of *I-nao*, a dance drama by King Rama II; *Phlai Kaeo's Wedding* episode of *Khun*



*Chang-Khun Phaen*, a narrative poem about the lives of common people by King Rama II; *Wali Pledges Her Service*, *The Birth of Sudsakhon*, and *Extraordinary Adventure*, three episodes of *Phra Aphai Mani*, a narrative poem by Sunthon Phu, declared a world personage by UNESCO in 1986.

Volume III b contains two long works of the Rattanakosin Period namely *Lilit Taleng Phai (King Naresuan's Victory over the Burmese)*, an epic poem lauding the feat of King Naresuan the Great of Ayutthaya who defeated the Burmese Crown Prince in a fight on elephant back, by His Holiness Prince Paramanuchitchinoros, the 7<sup>th</sup> Supreme Patriarch of Rattanakosin, and *Ngo Pa: Romance of the Sakai*, a poignant drama in verse by King Chulalongkorn about a love triangle that ends with the deaths of the three principal characters belonging to a primitive tribe living in the jungle of South Thailand. It is the only Thai literary work that thoroughly explores the living conditions of the Ngo or Sakai, also called "Semang" in Malay that should be of interest to those studying cultural anthropology.

It can be seen from the Thai selections that most of the works were written by kings, royals, or courtiers. This is because in former time education started in the court. The royal children were the first ones to have formal education, followed by children of courtiers, before education spread outside the palace. Many Thai kings were renowned writers, dramatists and poets and some were well-versed in foreign languages. For example, King Mongkut who had spent many years in the monkhood before his ascension to the throne was an expert on the ancient languages of India like Pali and Sanskrit and knew English and French. It was he who employed the service of an English governess to teach his children, one of them being Prince Chulalongkorn who succeeded his father as King Rama V.

It should be noted that the subject matters of the selected works are varied. Some are religious or historical in nature and others deal with warfare, as during the Ayutthaya, Thon Buri, and Early Rattanakosin periods Thailand was constantly engaging in wars with neighboring countries. Foreign influences derived through commercial or cultural contact with other countries appear in such works as *I-nao*, the story of a Javanese prince, and *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana* epic. Though the plot and characters come from abroad the customs and traditions



depicted in these works are typically Thai. Sometimes royal personages did not write only about stories pertaining to courtly life. King Chulalongkorn, after hearing the tragic story involving the three Ngo from an old woman while he was taking a forest trip in the south of Thailand, was so captivated by it and wrote the play *Ngo Pa* (Wild Sakai) in eight days while convalescing from an illness. The play reveals a universal fact that human nature is the same everywhere regardless of race or status as illustrated by the following excerpts in English translation:-

“Look at the power of love,  
That could lure people to their deaths.  
Here are three corpses in a row,  
All of them were slaves of love.”

“**Thus concludes** my poetic endeavor,  
**A tale** which can be turned into a play,  
**Of Sakai** born on the high land of Phatthalung,  
**Wild** forest their home, how to love they do know.”

The South East Asian Writers or S.E.A. Write Award founded in 1979 by the Oriental Hotel, Bangkok is an annual event that recognizes and honors the works of contemporary poets and writers within Southeast Asian countries, presenting one award to a winner from each country. The award is given in the categories of poetry, short story and novel in rotation. In the early years, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were the key participants. Winning writers receive a commemorative plaque, cash, and an all-expenses-paid vacation in Thailand or another ASEAN country. The initiative was well-supported by several organizations and other entities also joined in providing additional sponsorship. At the onset the Award was presented by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. In later years, members of the royal family or their representatives have graciously presided over the annual award presentation ceremony and gala dinner, during which a keynote speech is delivered by a prominent literary figure.





The English translations of selected S.E.A. Write award-winning works have appeared in *The S.E.A. Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories and Poems*; *ASEAN Short Stories and Poems by S.E.A. Write Awardees 1999*; *Old Truths, New Revelations*; and *The S.E.A. Write Anthology of ASEAN Short Stories and Poems—The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. These volumes were aimed at promoting good understanding and mutual respect among ASEAN nations. Since the works are in English, it is hoped that they will also interest readers all over the world and make international literary circles aware of the distinctive as well as common cultures and aspirations of ASEAN countries.

At present the genres of literature translated into Thai are short stories and novels. Romance, detective story, mystery and science fiction are the most popular. A large number of people are addicted to Chinese martial arts or gung fu novels in translation. With the invasion of Japanese movies and soap operas, the trend has shifted to the translation of Japanese literature into Thai, especially the “manga,” the Japanese word for “comics,” consisting of comics and print cartoons, popular among people of all ages in Japan. With the trend of Korean romance becoming prominent among Thai youngsters, new translators emerge in a large number. Their works are often met with criticism that they lack linguistic efficiency and appeal only to young college and school girls. The texts often lose their original meanings and flavors in the process of translation. Apart from English, Chinese and Japanese texts, there is a rise in the number of texts dealing with philosophy being translated into Thai from the European languages like French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish.

On the other hand, there are fewer works by Thai authors translated into other languages. Apart from the selected works included in *The Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* and *The S.E.A. Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories and Poems*, the popular novel *Khu Kam* by Dhamayanti has been translated into English as *Sunset at Chao Phraya* and also into Japanese as the hero of the story is a Japanese naval officer who meets and falls in love with a Thai girl during World War II in Japan-occupied Thailand. *Si Phaendin (The Four Reigns)*, a novel by the late Prime Minister of Thailand Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj, depicts the life of the principal character, Mae Ploy, from her childhood to death spanning four reigns. The readers can follow the



development of Ploy's life along with the cultural and political changes in Thailand. The winner of the SEATO Prize for Thai Literature, *Chotmai Chak Mueang Thai (Letters from Thailand)* by Botan, is the story of Tan Suang U who leaves China to make his fortune in Thailand at the close of World War II. His life is unfolded through the letters he writes from Bangkok Chinatown to his mother in China.

Translations of the S.E.A. Write award-winning novels include *Kathang Chaniang Rim Natang (The Chaniang Pot by the Window)* by two-time winner Win Lyovarin and *Khwam Suk Khong Kati (The Happiness of Kathi)*, a novelette by Jane Vejjajiva. The first story is a psychological novel with a twist ending about a paralyzed victim of a head-on collision who is hospitalized and unable to speak. His suffering makes him want to end his life but a kind nurse convinces him to change his mind by telling him about her own miserable life. The second one, a story of love and sorrow from the viewpoint of Kati, a nine-year-old girl, has been translated into English, French and Japanese. The aforementioned examples seem to show that only popular and award-winning books get translated, often by native speakers of foreign languages, but also by competent Thai translators.

In modern days, globalization not only leads us into the world of technology and computerized space but also the realm of translation as well. The impact of globalization is the functional determinant for the translator to choose between "what to translate" and "for whom the translation is meant." In the past, translated literatures in Thailand generally dealt with religious and cultural themes. After Western literature was introduced into the country there have been constant translations mostly through the medium of English. Many of them, from the Greek plays and Shakespeare's dramas to Steinbeck's novels, have been adapted and staged. Modern Thai readers tend to read translated novels with themes based on romances or action-packed thrillers. The makeshift trends of readers' interest from religious and classical literary texts could possibly be the impact of globalization.

Translation needs not be the sole means for the translation of literary texts. Because of business expansion in today's world, we see the shift of translation purposes from entertainment to business and economic development in our competitive world. "Know-how" books in translation are trendy with modern



readers. The source and target languages of translation can also vary and in Thailand the upcoming of Japanese and Korean as target languages is popular. Rudyard Kipling's words "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" no longer apply to the "small world" in the age of globalization. We know what is happening in other parts of the world in just seconds, sometimes at the same time that it is happening. We share the joys and sorrows of our fellow human beings. It remains the duty of the translator to transfer facts and ideas from one language to another as accurately as possible while still retaining the aesthetic aspect of the source language, keeping in mind that nothing gets "lost in translation."

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