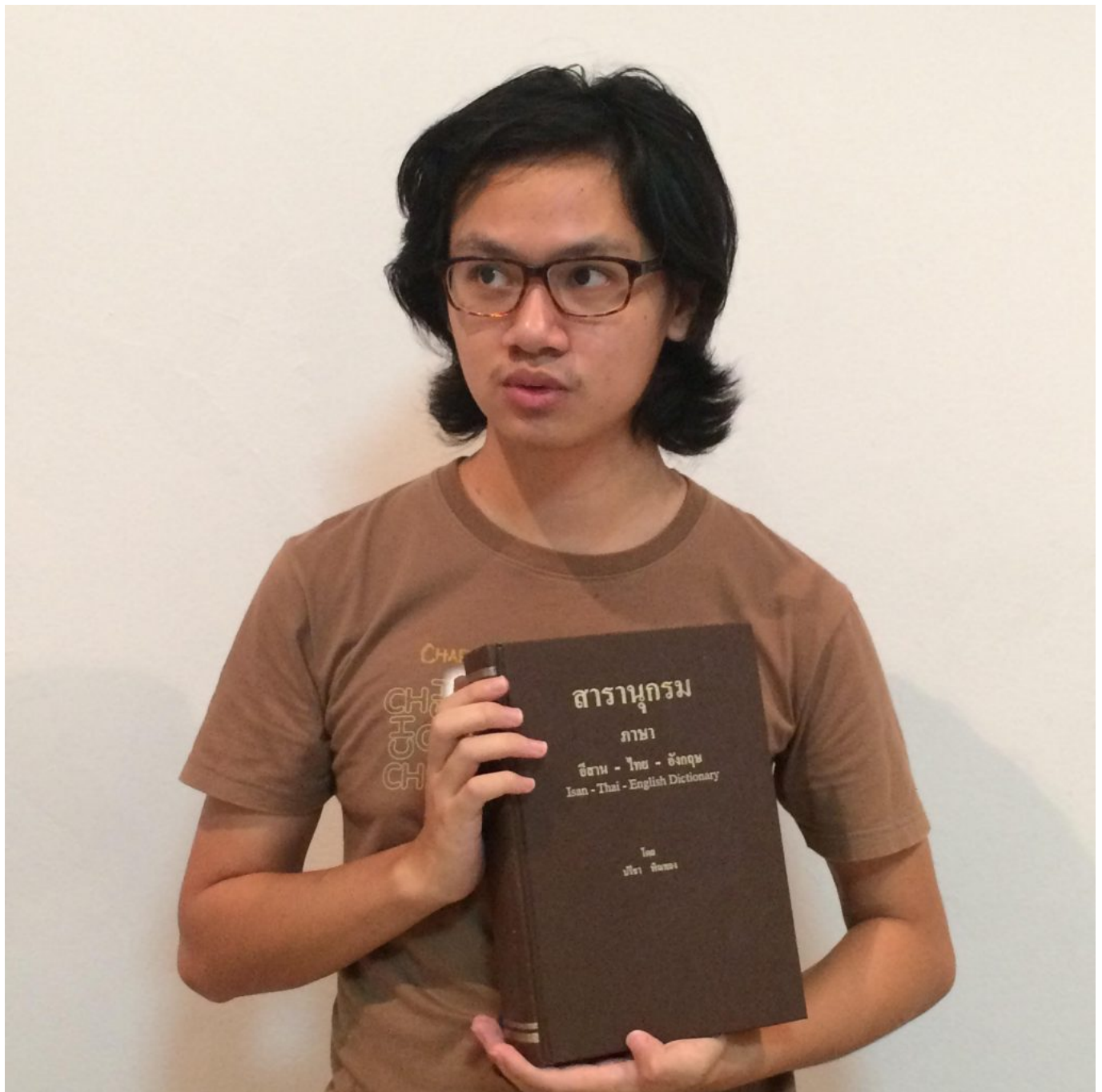


[A Tale of Two Dictionaries: An Elegy for Preecha Phinthong](#)

written by Peera Songkunnatham | August 2, 2017

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The most expensive book I have ever bought, believe it or not, is an Isaan dictionary. At 3,500 baht (a little over \$100 US), the capriciously set price did not deter me from ordering a hard copy. Why? Because it's the most comprehensive dictionary for the Isaan language out there.



Isan-Thai-English Dictionary by Preecha Phinthong, first published in 1989, with a run of 5000 copies. It is still in print, and you can order a hard copy from the publisher at the price of 3,500

baht, not including shipping. Photo from April 2016.

I was so elated when I received the book by mail that I posed for several photos holding it in my palms, its weight bearing on the veins of my wrist.

For such an expensive book, it did not disappoint. It became my go-to reference for my work as a writer and translator.

At first, I didn't understand why Preecha called this book a *saranukrom* ("encyclopedia"), rather than *potchananukrom* or *vatchananukom*, which are, respectively, Thai and Lao words for "dictionary."

Coming to understand it was a slow surprise. As I was trying to wade through an edition of *Sang Sinxay*, the most iconic and nationalized of Lao verse epics, where the text is presented without line breaks and without any explanatory notes, I found that so many of the entries in Preecha's book were drawn straight from ancient Isaan Lao literary texts like this. In that regard, the *saranukrom* proved to be a trustworthy companion. It saved me from many disheartened moments reading the Lao epic when I couldn't figure out, for the life of me, what a line meant at all.

As this encyclopedia goes heavy on the literary register, many alternate pronunciations, colloquialisms and local variants are simply not included. Still, Preecha defends the common people's language. He specifies common words like *mueng* ('you') and *bak* (word used before or in place of males' names) as simply that-common, of commoners—rather than "vulgar" like the way standard Thai classifies them.

In a way, this book is a very long love letter to the Isaan literature and language.

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In the absence of a central authority dictating the English language, English-language dictionaries have been one of the greatest forces in normalizing and homogenizing the English language since the 18th century. In the United Kingdom, Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 became so authoritative that a bill was thrown out of British Parliament in 1880 simply because "one of its words had not been recorded by Dr. Johnson."

Dictionaries not only dictate correct spellings and usages, but also subordinate all regional dialects under the written standard.

In this regard, Northeastern Thailand is an interesting case. Here, not only is there no central linguistic authority like the Royal Thai Institute, but also no written standard whatsoever—nor is there a real desire to have one standard over dozens of variants.

As a side note: Saying that Isaan Lao is not a written language would be false on so many levels. Nowadays, "Isan language" is written all over the place on social media and corporate advertisements. Historically, it was also written in multiple scripts—*thai noi* in worldly usage, and *tua tham* in monastic inscription.

What does it mean, then, for Isaan to have dictionaries?

Has there ever been a general need for Isaan Lao's standardization? Has there ever been a need for its homogenization? Or a need for its translation?

To these three yes-or-no questions, I say no, no, and no. Yet, Preecha's dictionary, as well as a few other smaller ones in print and online, exist. While the books never sell out and the schools never use them as teaching materials, Isaan people continue speaking their vernaculars, setting them further into variation and hybridization, until "Isan language" runs its course and dies a natural death, perhaps [in 100-200 years](#) as John Draper has predicted. In the meantime, every day the language is reborn.

Now, words like *indy* (from 'indie,' used to distinguish a class of idiosyncratic people, generally male, who live their lives nonchalantly with a self-styled independence from social norms) and *srok-kraaw* (from Khmer, meaning 'country bumpkin,' popularized by comedian Nose Udom and embraced by the celebrated soccer team Buriram United as its namesake) have become indigenized in the Isaan lexicon. The dictionaries are left behind in the dust. The Isaan *homme de lettres* is a lost figure.



In the pages before the actual dictionary, Preecha Phinthong's life pans out before me. Born in 1914, Preecha passed away in 2003. Who is the heir for this life's work?

A short essay on collecting "Unpacking My Library" by Walter Benjamin, a fellow 20th century *homme de lettres*, has brought me to think of Preecha's endeavor as an individual collector of words.

Of course, words cannot be collected the same way material objects can be. Yet, by the sheer fact that the dictionary is exhaustively compiled by one individual, looking up words in his *saranukrom* felt almost like walking through a collection of extant objects. These objects are presented with weathered appearance (let's add an additional "r" or "l" in the transliteration of that Lao word to make a familiar Thai version with a consonant cluster) and with few retrievable historical references. "Look-this word appeared in a line in *Sang Sinxay*, let me give you its definition and what that original line says, but you may not comprehend it fully anyway," echoes Preecha's silent, unknown voice.

Benjamin writes,

Actually, inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection. For a collector's attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility . . . [T]he phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects [or words in this case] get their due only in the latter.

As Preecha has passed away, this phenomenon of collecting words seems to have lost its meaning. Who has inherited Preecha's collection? Should his copyrighted collection of words be made public somehow?

There are several resources I have online to learn more Isaan Lao words. Of particular note is Chulalongkorn University's [Isan Cultural Club collection](#), numbering in two thousand Isaan words. It contains many vernacular phrases and marks them by province of origin. Above all, it is a collective

endeavor, and its fruits are open to the public.

Alas, all these resources belong to the Web 2.0 generation of message boards, and they have become inactive.

As Lao is not my first language, I am cursed to be a lifelong Lao language learner, in addition to being an English language learner.

My farang husband owes a lot of his Thai language learning to a cluster of applications and dictionaries on his smartphone. So often I wish that the amount of language learning resources for Isaan Lao comes close to what he has at hand, the same way he wishes the materials to learn Thai would come close to what Thai people have for learning English.

At times I get so desperate to find the Lao translation of English words that I resort to Google Translate, and then cross-check with an Isaan native of Lao whether those words are still in use on the right-hand side of the Mekong.

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One day, I couldn't find the word I was looking for. Flipping the pages around, I found that there were about a dozen blank pages in the middle of the book.

When I complained to the publisher of the missing pages, I kept my fingers crossed hoping that I'd get a PDF or a digital copy, so that my excruciating search for words could be done quicker, and also done backwards from the standard Thai meaning to its northeastern vernacular variants.

After almost thirty years of existence the print dictionary still has no digital counterpart, and still no such plans from the press.

I unwrap the box mailed from the press in Ubon Ratchathani to my house in Sisaket-the same box where I've sent my beloved, flawed copy of the *Isan-Thai-English Dictionary* back to its unknown fate. The new copy, wrapped in plastic, nevertheless appears to be even older than the first copy. It has signs of decay on the white fore edge. The corners of the cover are crumpled as well. I check inside-no missing pages. I put it in the same place the old copy used to reside. But it no longer feels the same.



The replacement copy -with an additional text in gold "Complimentary of Toyota Foundation" on the faux-leather cover- came to me in the mail. Photo from July 2017.

Is this collection of words transmissible once the man passes away?

Even though the two copies of the dictionary evoked in me opposite feelings, one of wonder and the other of lament, they are the same dictionary. My hope lies in the other dictionary, the one that has yet to exist-the digital talking dictionary.

In this other dictionary, each entry will have alternate ways of spelling, and the user can choose for themselves which to appear: one will be a *thai noi* spelling faithful to the standard Lao ways, another will be Preecha's transliterated spelling, and yet another will be the Thai spelling mimicking the word's actual pronunciation.

In this other dictionary, each entry will have a button next to it where the user can press to hear how

it is pronounced in any given dialect the user has chosen to hear.

In this other dictionary, not only the literary texts but also the colloquial usages will be given center stage, based on a collective work of volunteers who collect spoken words from a representative sample of Isaan villages.

This other dictionary will retain the relative equality of dialects, resist homogenization under more powerful dialects (like Ubon Lao), and make translations creative rather than reductive. This other dictionary will be a private endeavor, given over to the public for free...

You may ask if I am daydreaming. Think about it though—this dictionary is of course possible. It is so possible. The real question is, who will make it happen? Who will be the spiritual heir(s) to Preecha Phinthong? Only time can tell.