

What's so special about Isaan people writing in English? A review of Pira Sudham's stories

written by Peera Songkunnatham | August 20, 2017

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“Writing in English, he aims not only to give the English reader insights into Thai life, but also to give significance to the lives of the poor in rural Thailand so that ‘they do not come into this world to merely exist, suffer, and die in vain.’ ”

— Noel Rowe, in his foreword to Pira Sudham's *People of Esarn*, 1994 (first pub. 1987)

Look—an Isaan native who writes in the language of international commerce!

But what's so special about an Isaan person writing in the English language? The exceptionalism ascribed to Pira Sudham's writing troubles me, someone who is also an Isaan native writing in English- we can't be that exceptional!

Bearing the same name as myself, Pira Sudham is in many ways my predecessor. His life, like mine, has been deeply shaped by experiences of mobility and cosmopolitanism. Born fifty years after him, my life traces similar landmark moves-moving from Isaan to Bangkok, graduating from the same high school, winning a scholarship for studies overseas, coming back and staking out a path as a writer and cultural translator.

I say “cultural translator” because, Pira's works serve to translate the cultural experience of Isaan people of rural origin into literature. However, despite his works being translated into several European languages, Pira Sudham [doesn't allow](#) his works to be translated into Thai. According to Pira Sudham's [website](#), he says,

“I chose English as a medium because of the discipline of the language and the process of reasoning it reflects, in contrast to Thai, which lacks punctuation marks and capital letters. Thai words are simply strung together without space between words. Languages reflect our minds. In this light I could see my lack of discipline, my crippled mind, maimed for life by an outdated, authoritarian education system that serves as a mind-maiming apparatus to make the populace submissive, silent and tractable. I use the English language in the same way the disabled uses crutches.”

Pira speaks of the Thai language as a crippling, oppressive force in his life. I presume that circumventing the Thai language altogether must give him a sense of control, uninflected by his first-rate Thai-language education in Bangkok. While unsurprising for a Thai proficient in English (I have my fair share of Thai friends who regard the Thai language the same way), it does surprise me that Pira speaks disparagingly of the Thai language but locates the authenticity of Isaan people in their Lao vernacular. In his stories, Pira never refers to his vernacular as “Isaan” or “Esarn”—it's always “Lao.”

Yet, the Lao language, like Thai, doesn't need punctuation marks, capital letters, or space between words. The only untranslated Lao sentence that appears in his collection of short stories *People of Esarn* appears undisciplined—“words simply strung together”: “Our bor kai yang kong koy saeb eelee day! [D'you want some of my grilled chicken—it's really delicious!]” (page 46).

Even more surprisingly, Pira Sudham doesn't want his works to be translated into Lao either. According to him, to translate it into Lao would defeat the purpose since he "set out to write in English for international readers." Therefore, Lao is aligned with Thai in its inferior qualities, disqualified from joining the international ranks of readers.

In this light, It is hard to not read his tirade against the Thai language as also including Lao in its sweep: that his Lao vernacular is also undisciplined, and therefore unworthy of being a medium for his literature.

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"His love for English literature, combined with his devotion for his countrymen, give him a determination, not only to make a name for himself, but also to become a Thai writer who would bring the English readers into the souls of the people of Thailand."

— Michelle Rola, in her foreword to Pira Sudham's *Best: Siamese Drama and Other Stories from Thailand*, 1983

As a reader of his English-language works who happens to also be an "insider" of sorts, I do not see "the souls of the people" in his works the way that his foreign readers describe. What I readily see in Pira's art is rather its artifice, his own hands crafting the stories. I see a version of myself, a *nak rian nauk* [student educated overseas] trying to give back to his people in his own strange ways. In his own words, in the epilogue to *People of Esarn*,

"Things are happening so fast in Thailand these days that if I were still drifting somewhere in Europe, leading a European life, I would have missed them, would have only heard their echo in the newspapers or from the BBC, there in England. And an echo is not good enough for me as a writer. All I have to do here is to be alert and to keep my own counsel, though what I see and hear could turn me into an embittered man. As a writer, I should not put my head in the sand, so to speak, or turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. On the contrary, I should be a 'seeing eye', an observer." (pages 99-100)

As an observer, one sets oneself apart from the people observed. Earlier Pira speaks of being "a child of two worlds—a Thai and a Westernised Thai" and sees his country both as a native and an outsider. Being an observer-writer who doesn't participate in the lives of others who serve later as his characters, Pira then sets himself up to be the dramaturgic God who sets the stage for Isaan tragedy.

Such a tragedy finds its most appropriate literary form in third person narration, as in a stage play where the audience understand more of the characters' tragic fate than the characters themselves. Interestingly, the vast majority of the stories in his first collection *Siamese Drama* are narrated in the third person. The drama unfolds before the reader, unbeknownst to the characters, whose tragic end then serves to hit home to the reader some moral conclusion about poverty, corruption, greed, or displacement. In other words, through the staged drama the author conveys to the reader final "truthful messages," which Pira hopes will have to be accepted "even by lying and corrupt men."

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words to comfort him. To say: Goodbye now. Take care.
She will soon be well seemed only a few drops of water to
a man dying of thirst. So it was Kumjai who suffered all
the more as he walked away towards the town centre.
Having missed his train, he went to an inn to spend the
night and to wait for the morning train.

Pira

If you enjoy this book,
Please, lend it or recommend
it to a friend, for the
sake of the poor in Esarn,
northeast Thailand.



Monsoon Country in this edition of *Siamese Drama* is an excerpt from
Monsoon Country, a novel by Pira Sudham, available also in French
by Editions Olizane, Switzerland.

Pira Sudham's signature at the last page of one of his books. Proceeds from the books' sales would go to the author's charity organization which provides school lunches to children in need.

Even though the characters seem plucked from reality, their lives are made (im)moral by the author through his observation. People become “materials” for moral lecture. Pira writes on his website, “Once in a while I drove 600 kilometres to Pattaya. It was amusing to observe the likes of Salee, Nipa, Horst, Niels, Eric, Nicolai, Rosano, Tom, Dick and Harry participating in the rite of living their active lives.”

Some of those names are character names in the title story *Siamese Drama*. Nipa and Salee feature, respectively, as madam and unwilling Isaan girl turned prostitute, and Horst and Niels as some of Salee’s clients. However, the drama in *Siamese Drama* is not between Nipa and her clients, but in the abusive relationship between Nipa and Salee. As an emissary of prostitution in Bangkok and Pattaya, Nipa becomes one more Thai person abusing more poor, rural Isaan people.

In his next collection, *People of Esarn*, however, all the stories are narrated in the first person. This method, markedly different from the one in *Siamese Drama*, is not so much an indictment of immoral society, but rather an exploration of people’s life histories and their own life assessments. The ensemble of characters-narrators in these testimonies includes a displaced *som tam* seller in the Khlong Toey slums, a *mia farang* in Germany, a repentant gunman hired to kill community leaders, or a drag queen who had been sold to a brothel at a young age.

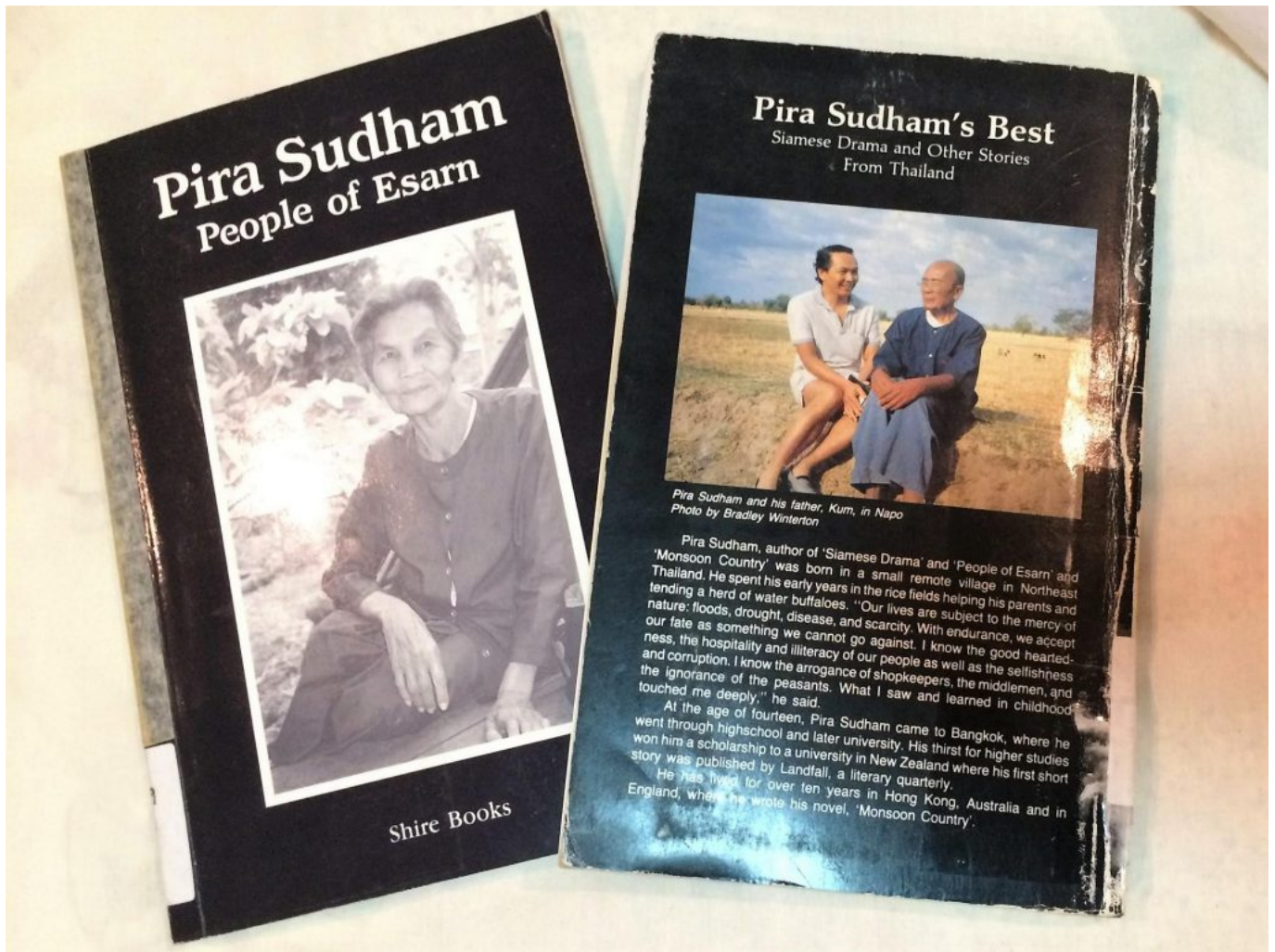
Unlike *Siamese Drama*, the focus shifts from the tragedy of poverty and corruption to the ambivalence of home and homecoming, which every character-narrator touches upon in the end.

Rather than playing the part of the omniscient dramatist, the author steps right into the characters’ minds to relate their stories. The formal separation between the observer and the suffering native disappears. This gives the reader more opportunity to empathize—to feel into—the character. I presume that, psychically, the author himself also gets to “feel into” these characters, however divergent their life trajectories.

The stories from *Siamese Drama* had little effect on me, while the ones in *People of Esarn* really hooked me.

The moral drama was conveyed more indirectly, more incidentally, through first-person narratives, and as such, the characters were freed from the purpose of representing an archetype in the plot’s central conflict, for example, as the victim of prostitution.

As a result, characters in *People of Esarn* come off more open-ended, and their lives do not end with their testimonies on the printed page. Rather, they continue living and moving toward an unknown destination—like real life. The book also features short essays on the social issues touched upon in the stories, an aspect of the book which adds to the stories’ realistic feeling and their characters-narrators’ afterlives. In other words, with *People of Esarn*, I had the chance to take a break from the author’s plotting strings.



Pira Sudham, in his loafers, next to his father in traditional cotton wear.

Admittedly, Pira Sudham's stories are not so unique when compared to contemporary writings in Thai about the Northeast. The only quality which sets Pira Sudham's writings apart seems to be the English language. What's so special about an Isaan person writing in English?

Since my return from studies overseas, I have come across many people—including creative writers—who feel like they are "lesser" just because they are not proficient in English. (I have also come across many who feel like they are superior for knowing English). There is a real sense that a generation of writers from Northeast Thailand, unlike Bangkok writers or writers from the South, hasn't been able to advance as much as they could, because they don't know English and don't have a ready access to literary translators English to Thai. In turn, I am cast as someone in a privileged position to bring literature from Northeastern Thailand to the international stage.

I see that Pira Sudham casts himself in a similarly privileged position within Isaan society. On the back cover of two of his self-published books, first the author's authenticity as a *luk isaan* is inscribed: "Pira Sudham was born in a small remote village in Esarn, Northeast Thailand. He spent his early years in the rice fields helping his parents and tending a herd of water buffaloes."

Having claimed his roots through his childhood experience, he then claims cosmopolitanism through writing exclusively in the English language. Pira Sudham wants to have it both ways. As this (self?)promotional quote illustrates:

“It is a wonder that a small boy from the rice fields of Esarn, speaking Lao...should survive the hardship, poverty, political upheavals and massacres to be able, years later, to offer readers worldwide his works written originally in English, and now translated into several languages.”

— *People of Esarn*, 144

What must an Isaan writer do to be counted as a writer who could offer worldwide readers a glimpse into Isaan? When a region and its peoples are persistently described as lacking—in abundance, in power, in knowledge, in development—whether by its own doing or by its victimhood, individuals who manage to break through those molds can be held up as exceptions.

We haven't broken the hierarchy in Thai society that values people like Pira Sudham and myself who have had opportunities to go abroad as students and travelers by our own will, yet devalues people who go abroad as low-wage migrants simply because of their class status. After several decades of Isaan people's work overseas, transnational labor migration somehow still remains discussed within the discourses of victimhood and disenfranchisement, rather than those of adventure and cosmopolitanism, worthy of being listened to in their own right. People's voices must not be ignored and written over by self-proclaimed representatives of culture.

Let me clarify that I do not fault Pira Sudham for choosing English as the language to carry his literary works—I, too, am writing in English here, and I acknowledge that writing in English is not the same as writing in Thai, both in terms of the mechanics of each language, and also of the expectations and preferences of readers in each language.

Rather, I would like to suggest that it is possible and more productive to conceive of languages in a more equal way. While every language is rational and formally coherent (according to the discipline of formal linguistics), Pira's views toward languages (English as rational and international, Thai as authoritarian and undisciplined, and Lao as a bounded language of natives) are to an extent reflected in the actual uses of these languages.

The thing is, there is always already a potential for any human language to become as “rational” and “international” as English has become.

Literary writing and all kinds of translations play a big part in this process of becoming. In this regard, Pira's refusal for his works to be translated into Lao is puzzling. The act of writing literature in a nonstandard language automatically increases its cultural prestige and its spread beyond ethnic borders. As the Lao people have already become diasporic and international, why not the language too?

I take as a challenge Pira Sudham's view of languages as unequal. My task, then, is to elevate Isaan Lao through literary translations. I take as a challenge, too, Pira Sudham's view of the world as divided into natives and internationals. My hope, then, is to act as a bridge between Isaan people and foreigners in such a way that both sides have an equal chance to have a word.