

INTERVIEW WITH FON FAFANG, A KUI-KHMER WRITER IN THAILAND

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Fon Fafang¹ is the pen name of Wira Sudsang,² born in 1958 in Khun Han District of Srisaket Province, Thailand. Wira's father was Kui, and his mother half Kui and half Khmer. He attended elementary school in his home village and secondary school in the district seat, and then enrolled in the two year program at Surin Teachers' College (now the Rajabhat Institute). After graduating, he returned to his home village to teach. Wira has published five books:

- 1986 *Het Kan Thi Tha Chang*³ (1986 Events at Tha Chang), 1987, Srisaket, Chao Aksorn, a collection of short stories,
- *Chiphajo'n Haeng To'ng Thung*⁴ (Pulse of the Fields), 1995, Bangkok, Matichon, a collection of non-fiction articles from his column in *Matichon Weekly*,⁵
- *Fa Klai Ja Tai Fa*⁶ (The Distant Sky Will Climb the Sky), 1996, Surin, Dok Tiw Pa, poetry,
- *Ban Thung Hai Thek*⁷ (High-Tech Village in the Fields), 1997, Bangkok, Matichon, a second collection of his non-fiction columns from *Matichon Weekly*,
- *Khwam Mai Ao Nai Kho'ng Khon Mai Ao Nai*⁸ (The Ineptness of the Inept), 1999, Bangkok, Chomromdek, a collection of short stories.

One of Wira's early short stories, published in 1984 in the periodical *Thanon Nangseu* (and later collected in *1986 Events at Tha Chang*), is called *Kanjan Jek Wab*.⁹ The title is not Thai, but Khmer, taken from a Khmer lullaby, and meaning, "O Tree Frog." The story's main character is a Khmer mother who, with two small children and a newborn baby, is abandoned in poverty by her Khmer husband. She expresses her tremendous sadness and her memories of getting to know and marrying her husband. What is most remarkable about the story is its extensive use of Khmer language (written in Thai script). The mother

¹ ฟอน ฝ่าฟาง

² วีระ สุตสังข์

³ 1986 เหตุการณ์ที่ท่าช้าง

⁴ ชีพจรแห่งท้องทุ่ง

⁵ A weekly magazine of news, current events, and culture.

⁶ ฟาไกลจะไต่ฟ้า

⁷ บ้านทุ่งไฮเทค

⁸ ความไม่เอาไหนของคนไม่เอาไหน

⁹ ก้นจัญเจกวับ (กฏาญ์เชกวับ)

hears the lullaby being sung nearby, and the entire song is quoted in Khmer, followed by a Thai translation. All the dialogue in the story (which takes the form of recollections by the mother in her thoughts about her husband) is presented in Khmer as well, and then also in Thai translation. The author provides footnotes explaining that the language is Khmer, and that the song is a Khmer folk tune sung in Surin and Buri Ram. The story begins and ends with the Khmer words to the song, the lament of a mother left to raise her children alone.

In the following interview,¹⁰ Wira talks about his life and work and the role that being part Khmer and part Kui has played in them.

Q. When you were a child, what languages did you use at home?

A. When I was a child we used the local language, which was Kui. We used Kui about 80% of the time, and Khmer about 20%. This was in the family, in the village society. When I went to study in secondary school in the *amphoe*,¹¹ I also used Lao, which is Isan language, which I learned to speak when I was studying *Mathayom*.¹²

Q. Using Lao, was that in the *amphoe*?

A. In the *amphoe* I studied in, Amphoe Khun Han, there was Lao, Khmer, and Kui or Suay. In the *amphoe* mostly they used Lao as the language of communication. So when we were in the *amphoe* we had to use Lao as the common language. As for Thai, that was the language of the classroom. Not a language of daily life. Meaning that, if we entered the classroom from first grade (*Prathom 1*) on, in the classroom Thai was spoken. We learned and practiced Thai in the classroom.

Q. But outside you didn't much-

A. Outside we didn't use it much. [laughs] The teacher taught it in the classroom, taught Thai, right? But when we came out, we spoke Kui, we spoke Khmer. [laughs] But when we entered the room, we students stood up straight, "Sawatdi khrap, Khun Khru." [laughs]

Q. But even the teacher, outside the classroom, -

A. Spoke the local language. Thai was more an official language. The language of the civil service, the language of the classroom, of protocol.

Q. Did you speak Kui at home because your mother was Kui, or-

A. Because my father was Kui, 100%, and my mother was half Kui and half Khmer. Meaning that her father was 100% Khmer, and her mother was 100% Kui. So Mother spoke both Kui and Khmer. The marriage culture of Thai people or people in Thailand is that the man goes to live in the family of the woman. So my father had to be able to speak Khmer with my mother's father. It made me absorb Khmer from the family and, by chance, my Kui village was only about 2 kilometers from a Khmer village. So for contacting, communicating, meeting, and so on, [...] we used [...] both Kui and Khmer. In my village, at

¹⁰ The interview was held in Thai on March 28, 1999 in Srisaket. It has been edited for the present publication.

¹¹ The district seat, the main town in the district.

¹² Secondary school.

the time I was studying in elementary school, Lao was barely used. I really learned to speak Lao only when I was in secondary school, in the *amphoe*. I spoke it with mixed success. [laughs]

Q. Could your father speak Khmer before he got married?

A. Before marrying, I don't know if he could speak or not. But from the time they married and I was old enough to remember, I saw that my father could speak Khmer. But my father's relatives couldn't really speak it. Meaning that my father had to adjust himself quite a bit in learning to speak the language.

Q. Now, here in your home, you mostly speak Lao, right?

A. I married a Lao person, my wife is Lao, and I went to live in a Lao village. I had to speak Lao in my daily life. It made me become distant from using Kui and Khmer. But I didn't forget. When I met Kui people I still spoke Kui, when I met Khmer people I spoke Khmer, living with Lao people I spoke Lao. Until, when I spoke Lao, Lao people didn't know I was Kui or Khmer. But when I speak Kui, they barely know that I can speak other languages. When I speak Khmer it's the same. I consider that I can blend in with every ethnic group, in accent.

Q. But the people around here in this village speak Lao —

A. They speak Lao.

Q. When did you start writing? In *Het Kan Thi Tha Chang* I saw that it says you started in 2515 (1972).

A. Around 2515, I didn't know that what I was doing was art. I started to write songs. It started because I liked *luk thung*¹³ (country music) songs, a lot. And it made me like to sing. And then I wrote songs. Writing songs is the basis of writing poetry. When I studied in secondary school, I learned to write poetry. I wrote essays. And I learned to write stories, and short stories, when I was in secondary school, years one, two, and three. When I went to teachers' college I practiced writing more. Even though I'd never published anywhere. I wrote all the time. An important thing was that I made a daily record every year. 365 days a year. There are volumes and volumes of what happened to me. Keeping a daily record was practice using language, editing sentences.

Q. Was there anyone who supported or encouraged you?

A. No, there wasn't. In my writing I never got any special support from anyone. But there was one teacher, when I was in secondary school, who gave me moral support. But not seriously and continuously. Mostly writing is solitary work, work that other people think is difficult, that they shouldn't lead other people to do. People who can write are probably not ordinary, or whatever. And my studies weren't at a good level, they were more middling, toward the weak side. I read a lot of books, when I was in secondary school. I was poor, I didn't eat lunch. I didn't dare go to the lunchroom, because if I went my mouth would water, seeing my friends eat. So I had to avoid it by going to the library, which led me to read books. When I read a lot, it made me want to write. I wrote my stuff without anyone reading it, or if my friends read it, they laughed at me. [laughs] So encouragement, support, there wasn't. I wrote at home, my parents/guardian/

¹³ ลูกทุ่ง

administrator scolded me, saying that I wasted time, instead of studying for exams, I came back and wrote I don't know what, filling up pages of paper. I bought foolscap in piles, writing and writing. I didn't read for my exams. And I was scolded. So there was no one encouraging me.

Q. You just did it by yourself.

A. Yeah, I did it by myself.

Q. Are there any writers that you particularly like?

A. At the time I was in secondary school, I read work by Nimit Phumthaworn,¹⁴ who wrote about teachers' stories in rural schools. I liked them a lot. I liked the atmosphere of the stories, the descriptions of the fields, of nature, the folksy-ness, the country-ness, the up-country atmosphere. It made me want to write like that. So I started to write that way, like Teacher Nimit Phumthaworn. I wrote all the time. So that I didn't know which story was my first, which came later. Then I studied at teachers' college, and I continued to read and write. I willingly received monthly magazines without eating. If I had money I paid for books and magazines. I didn't eat. I told the shops that I would pay later, and then I saved money that was for food in order to pay for them. [laughs] That is, when I was in secondary school I didn't eat lunch much. I had to go read books in the library. When I went to teachers' college in Surin, I didn't eat breakfast. I ate lunch and dinner. For me, in any case, I just had to eat twice a day, not three times.

Q. So you saved money to buy books and magazines.

A. I saved some money to buy Ajin Banjaphan's¹⁵ magazine, *Fa Muang Thai*,¹⁶ because Teacher Nimit Phumthaworn wrote in there. Khamphun Bunthawi¹⁷ wrote in there, at that time. [...] I read *Fa Muang Thai* from '16 (1973). In '16 I was in secondary school. In '19 (1976) I went to teachers' college. [...] And when I graduated, I wrote again, and got *Fa Muang Thai*, *Fa Muang Thong*,¹⁸ *Fa Achib*,¹⁹ *Fa Nari*,²⁰ all of them magazines in Ajin Banjaphan's group. I read them and then I tried and tried to write.

Q. Why do you write?

A. Back then I read a lot. I read *Fa Muang Thai*, I read *Jakrawan*,²¹ *Bangkok*,²² which were about the world, action stories, shooting, the characters practically tearing the paper. I felt, hey, writers are like gods. I pronounce you the hero, and have you fight ten villains and win, I'll make you win. Or, I'll make you lose. Or I'll make you unlucky, I'll make you poor, I'll make you rich. As if the writer was a god who could determine the characters' lives. As if the writer was something supernaturally powerful. That was my idea at the

¹⁴ นิมิต ภูมิถาวร

¹⁵ อจินต์ บุญจพรต

¹⁶ ฟ้ามืองไทย

¹⁷ คำพูน บุญทวี

¹⁸ ฟ้ามืองทอง

¹⁹ ฟ้าอาชีพ

²⁰ ฟ้านารี

²¹ จักรวาล

²² บางกอก

time. And I felt that writers were people who were respected, people who were magical, who could create and relate the writer's own creations to other people. This is the starting point of writing. But when the Literature for Life²³ era arose, I began to feel that writers are not magicians, that writers are people who have to watch over society, watch over images of society and present those images widely, and show their ideas and opinions [...], to explain for people to take note of the things that occur in our society, how do we fix them, what are the ways, how can we develop? My thinking started to change from what it was, from using the elevated language of love, from thinking that writers were magicians and gods. From then on, writers, for me, have been ordinary people who have to keep watch over society, watch over change. Another part is that writers have to serve the poor, have to reflect the lives of the poor for other societies [...], take note of how poor people live, how they eat, how they sleep, how their lives are. Reflect these images for society to acknowledge, in order to subsequently alleviate them. This kind of thinking arose after reading the work of Jit Phumisak,²⁴ Seni Saowaphong,²⁵ Suwat Woradilok,²⁶ Wat Wanlayangkul,²⁷ Visa Khanthap,²⁸ through to the writers from October 14th, from October 6th. [...] My thinking changed. And those new ideas still are with me today, that we have to keep watch over society and always understand the way out, and learn and solve and serve.

Q. The work of Jit Phumisak that influenced your work, was it *Art for Life*, *Art for the People*?

A. Yes. Yes. It was, *Art for Life*, *Art for the People*. Which I read, I also read about his [Jit's] life. And work of Sri Intharayut,²⁹ which is by Nai Phi,³⁰ where he talks about art. Then in one period I read, "What is Art" by Tolstoy, which made me think again that being a writer is hard and difficult and very troublesome. Being a writer is a lot harder than other things. I thought, this is the reason that no one led me to write.

Q. Did you read those books around October 14th,³¹ or between October 14th and October 6th,³² or-

A. At the time of October 14th, I didn't know of the events, because around October 14 '16 (1973) I was just starting M 1.³³ I hadn't yet become aware of what the substance of society at that time was. In 2516 I was still a kid. [...] At that time there was little television. The radio belonged to the state. Television belonged to the state. And we didn't have one. We had a few newspapers. And we lived in the countryside, far away. There was little awareness of October 14th. But I did hear the news that there was killing of students. Even in '19 (1976), when I was studying at Surin Teachers' College I wasn't yet interested in politics. I wasn't

²³ วรรณกรรมเพื่อชีวิต. Socialist realist movement reaching its zenith in the 1970's, especially after the student uprisings of October 1973.

²⁴ จิตร ภูมิศักดิ์

²⁵ เสนีย์ เสาวพงศ์

²⁶ สุวัฒน์ วรดิลก

²⁷ วัฒน์ วรรณยางกูร

²⁸ วิสา คัญทัพ

²⁹ ศรีอินทรายุธ

³⁰ นายผี. Sri Intharayut and Nai Phi are both pen names of Atsani Phonlajan, อัศนี พลจันทร, but Nai Phi is the name by which he is best known.

³¹ October 14, 1973, the date of the successful public uprising that overthrew the Thai government.

³² October 6, 1976, the date that protestors against the government were brutally massacred by police and rightist paramilitary groups, triggering a massive flight of leftist students and intellectuals into the jungle to fight, in conjunction with the Communist Party of Thailand, against the Thai government.

³³ The first year of secondary school, at age 13 or so.

interested in society. My writing at that time was about love, feelings, greed, thinking that writers were gods. I was still thinking that writers were wizards, magicians, holy people. At the time of October 14th and October 6th my thinking was still like that. My thinking just started to change in 23 (1980). I didn't know what literature was. I was slow. About ideas I was very slow, I grew up slowly. It was because I wasn't in a society of people who knew about these things. I didn't get direction from anyone. I wasn't close to anyone who had ideas like this. I didn't have teachers who talked and told us. Not to mention friends. I had no communication, or other things. It made me waste 6 or 7 years.

Q. Was there a particular event or something that made you change your thinking?

A. Yes there was. The school that I went to had a teacher who now is a very dear friend. He had thought about these issues. He had read Literature for Life books. I watched what he was reading. When we had stayed together a while, I picked up his books and read them. So I knew that our society was like this. The more I read the more I was interested. I bought books by Jit Phumisak myself and brought them to Srisaket. I bought the work of Seni Saowaphong, the book *Phi Sat*.³⁴ I read it and it gave me new ideas. And I read work by Chinese writers, like Lu Xun, different stories, which made me think, oh, this is how our society is. Things have to be improved, I can't sit around and do nothing anymore. I thought, how can I help society? There was one way, which was that I be a mouth and a voice, I had to write.

Q. In writing now, or in the past, did you have a picture in your mind of whom you would write for, or who would read your work?

A. At that time, I didn't think about who would read what I wrote. I didn't think about it at all. I thought that if the story was published, there had to be people who would read it. I didn't specify who it had to be. But the people who would read it were mostly intellectuals. Farmers probably wouldn't read work like this. In '23 I didn't have any work published in the newspaper yet. My first piece published was a poem called "Father's Order", published in *Matichon* Daily April 18, 2524 (1981). It was a poem in which the father orders his son to study in order to return and serve the people. This was the first piece I had published in a central³⁵ publication after I wrote and sent I don't know how many, 30, 40 pieces before one was published. When I got my first piece published, the poem, I got a lot more energy. I had to write more. In '24 I had only this one piece published. In '25 (1982), Sorawut Sripetch³⁶ and I talked and decided to do literary work. So we joined together and agreed that we would start the *Lam Nam Mun*³⁷ Literary Group. We talked at the Srisaket train station, and we announced there to each other on August 2, 2525 (1982), the Mun River Literary Group³⁸ (MRLG) of Isan came into existence. That was the starting point. And the MRLG became the present Isan Writers' Association³⁹ (IWA). It started there, it started at the train station. [laughs]

³⁴ ปีศาจ

³⁵ "Central" here means central Thai, in contrast to Isan (the Northeast) or other regions.

³⁶ สรวุฒิ ศรีเพชร

³⁷ ลำน้ำมูล

³⁸ กลุ่มวรรณกรรมลำน้ำมูล

³⁹ สโมสรนักเขียนภาคอีสาน

Q. What was that person's name?

A. Sorawut Sripetch. He was a teacher. I was a teacher, too. We tended to meet in the town of Srisaket to buy books. We lived in the countryside, far out, in different places. We met, we bought books. "What did you buy? What did I buy?" We read them, we drank beer, talked, and then saw that in that year, '25 (1982), literary groups [were popping up] in Thailand: the South had a group, lots of groups, whether it was the Praphakhan⁴⁰ group, the Chom Rom Pheuan Rao⁴¹ group, and lots of other groups until they became the Nakhorn⁴² group. The North had the Rom Neua group of Saengdao Sathamman.⁴³ The Central region had the Ploeng Tham⁴⁴ of Rak Mananya,⁴⁵ Prakai Prachya,⁴⁶ Neramit Praphan⁴⁷ (at that time they were in the Phloeng Tham group), of Somphong Thawi,⁴⁸ Kaew Laithong,⁴⁹ they also were the Phloeng Tham group. They were the Central region. We said to ourselves, "Hey, us here in Isan, we don't have a group yet like they do. We better start one." We started the MRLG group, because Lam Nam Mun is the longest river in Isan. Protecting and nourishing the people of Isan over the ages. When we started the group we looked for members all over Isan. Until in the end it became the IWA. That was its starting point. After we started it we looked for friends.

Q. Everyone was a writer, right?

A. Everyone was a writer.

Q. Do you consider yourself a local/regional writer, an Isan writer, or what?

A. I consider myself a writer. As for what kind of writer, I don't know. Am I local/regional? Am I of Isan? Am I of Thailand? Am I of the world? I couldn't say. But I know I'm a writer. I don't limit what I have to write about, or where, or how. I only ask that I know what I'm writing about. Just that is enough.

Q. Normally do you choose a story or scene of Isan, or write about Isan, or is it not necessary?

A. At first when I was writing, whether it was poetry or short stories, I tended to use Isan atmosphere, because I was used to it, I saw it. Afterwards, say in the past four or five years, especially in poetry I've gotten free of the word "Isan," of the word "Thailand," gotten free of the word "where." I'm not interested in where it is. In my poetry I communicate about abstract things more than material ones. I want to talk about philosophy, about ideas, more. These things are hidden, they might be based in Buddhism somewhat. My poetry tends to not have a scene. It's bringing out feeling, bringing out ideas, [...] which are not limited to any particular locality. Short stories are the same. I have eased away from the words, "which region," "which location," "which country." I speak in common terms, pretty much. But my non-fiction,

⁴⁰ ประกาศาร

⁴¹ ชมรมเพื่อนเรา

⁴² นาคร

⁴³ แสงดาว ศรีทอมนัน

⁴⁴ เพลิงธรรม

⁴⁵ รักษ์ มนัญญา

⁴⁶ ประกาย ประชยา

⁴⁷ นฤมิตร ประพันธ์

⁴⁸ สมพงษ์ ทวี

⁴⁹ แก้ว ลายทอง

like *Chipajo'n Haeng Tho'ng Thung*, *Ban Thung Hai Thek*, and "Ban No'k Kho'k Na,"⁵⁰ are set in Isan. This is intentional. It is specifically to present a picture of the problems of Isan villagers. In *Chipajo'n Haeng Tho'ng Thung*, I present pictures of present-day problems. It's non-fiction. Images that exist in the present. I'm not talking about the past.

But in the present there are problems like this and this and this. In the non-fiction book, *Ban Thung Hai Thek*, I speak of the life of struggle of Isan people in the present. Environmental conditions and so on that arise, social conditions that arise with Isan people. As for "Ban No'k Kho'k Na," it's non-fiction that reflects images from the past to the present: beliefs, life, ways of thinking, ways of leading life, their philosophy, from the past to the present. And I tend to claim that those things are good, things that used to happen were good. We should make use of them, and we should adjust them for use. Not run away. Anytime people run away from their origins, they slip away from their origins, inside themselves there won't remain the atmosphere of themselves from the past, from their ancestors. You'll slip away from this orbit without realizing it, and then you'll be a new person, think anew, live life in a new way, struggle and strive in a new way. You slip away. So I say, you don't retrace the past, but even if you don't use it, don't get far away from it, don't run away from it, let it gradually go, [...] and face what lies ahead. I present a picture of Isan and usually emphasize beliefs. Actually I don't specify Isan in particular, but it seems like the words I write refer to Isan, [...] the atmosphere of the story I'm presenting is a picture of Isan. Actually these are the problems of rural culture all over the country. No matter in what region, in the villages. The village-ness is disappearing. The culture, the beauty in the villages is disappearing, and there are new things coming in. Electrical lines are coming into the villages, electrical poles reach the villages, and you just turn the switch, the old culture disappears. You turn on the switch and lanterns disappear. You turn the switch and radios disappear, radios that were used to listen to tales. People have come to watch television. You turn the switch, and the rice is cooked. Firewood disappears, charcoal disappears. The old things disappear with these [new] things. Some things we should live with. I'm talking too much.

Q. The non-fiction you write is for Thais in general, right, not specifically for Isan people?

A. I think I write for people of the whole world, to let them know that problems like this occur. Thailand is like this, in Laos it hasn't happened yet. If Lao people read it, they'll know what it is. If Cambodians read it, or if Americans read it, or if English people read it, they'll know what results the abandonment of traditional culture has. Accepting new culture without taking lessons from traditional culture, to use, to think, I think it is a part of the world and is a loss. It is a loss for life.

Q. Do you think there are differences between writers who live in Isan and writers who live elsewhere, for example in other regions or in Bangkok?

A. I don't think they're different. If you live in Bangkok, in the jungle, in the mountains, it's not different. Because writers pay attention to the same issues. I live in Srisaket and people who live in Bangkok see the same news, except that I might be a bit slower, the newspaper arrives late, the news comes late. But in the end, no matter what corner of the country or the world they live in, they are aware of the substance of society in the same way. Whatever happens in the world, we are aware of it. When people know the same things, difference lies in the intellect of each person. You see that and what do you think? I see this and

⁵⁰ บ้านนอกคอกนา

what do I think? If they're different, they're different in the system of thinking. With different systems of thinking, you have to see that the background of each person is different. [...] So people look at the same problem but think differently. [...] But overall, in being writers, there is nothing different. Writers don't have to live in the city, writers don't have to live in the countryside. Writers can live anywhere.

Q. To speak about the [Isan] Writers' Association again, has the role of the Association changed since the beginning?

A. It hasn't changed. The role of the Writers' Association isn't different from when it was the MRLG, that is, its role in society. If it has changed, it's in the process of working. When it was the MRLG it wasn't that systematic. [...] the leader wasn't elected, but appeared naturally, by acceptance and respect, by contact through the members of the group. The Association [now] has elections. It started to have requirements, to have a more complicated process. But its true substance, its role in society, is the same as it was. The MRLG travelled to speak at this and that school, planted literary dreams with the youth. The IWA is the same. It plants the dream of writing and reading among the youth, tries to arrange activities. These things have continued [...].

Q. Why do people join the IWA, because they want to encourage each other, or because they want to present themselves so that there are Isan writers for Thailand over all, or what?

A. In truth, writers [...] have to work alone. They are alone, with the pen, with the paper, with the typewriter or the computer. No one helps writers when they're working. But, writers cannot be alone all the time. When they are free from writing which they have to work hard at and do alone, they need to meet friends, talk and exchange. They want to listen to that person talk, to listen to this person talk. They want to give moral support, criticize and praise each other, criticize (literarily) each other. Isan writers need this. They started [the group] for this. I think any kind of writer needs to have friends who are in the same process. They need to have friends who they can talk to, exchange with, in order to have their work develop, to admit their mistakes. Neither the MRLG or the IWA was founded to declare that Isan has a writers' group. It isn't necessary to announce the existence of this group. The substance, or utility, of the group is not in its being known. The utility lies in the fact that the group, whether the MRLG or the IWA, gets together. When they have a meeting, everyone goes to see each other, to talk. That's it, the contact. They don't go to solve problems or anything else. But to talk and encourage each other and then go back and write. This is what is important.

Q. Would you say that Literature for Life is more important in Isan than in other regions?

A. No, no. It's equally important in all of them. The influence of Literature for Life isn't specifically important for Isan. I think it's important for everyone in the country, everyone in the world. Because Literature for Life is serving the disadvantaged. What will we do, what will Literature for Life do for the lives of those disadvantaged people? Whatever they may be disadvantaged about. They will have rights and existence equal to people of other groups. It isn't specific to Isan, the South, the North, the Central region, Vietnam, Cambodia, or poor people in America or England or Ireland or China or wherever. It's the same. The ideals of Literature for Life are the need to have the lives of the people who are disadvantaged overlap with people of higher classes. Allow them to be happy, allow them to have development, I think it's that.

Q. In your story "Kanjani Jek Wap," you use rather a lot of Khmer.

A. Yeah, I use a lot.

Q. Why do you use a lot? Do you feel the readers will be people who understand Khmer?

A. I used Khmer in the story “Kanjani Jek Wap” because my short stories then had the atmosphere of Isan, of Cambodia, or I was writing about Khmer people, or one Khmer person. So when they sang the song *Kanjani jek oei, Kanjan jek wap, Khlun phibak neung salab, Traneuam mien kon yum, A mui yum si, A pir yum jro’m, Jied padaiy meun sano’m, Anjem kon meun rua*⁵¹ in Khmer I wanted the dialogue to be in Khmer also. I thought it ought to be a style that stood out. But the problem was that people who didn’t understand the language didn’t like to read it, other than people who were really interested in reading it. I wanted to have the atmosphere, the flavor, the feeling of Khmer-ness. Because when the song *Kanjani jek oei* [sings ...] or the song *Paka Ranjek*⁵² comes up, the sound carries in the fields and farms. If the dialogue was in Thai, sweet and spectacularly beautiful, it would have clashed with the atmosphere of the scene. So I used these dialogues in Khmer.

Q. This is a song that you knew when you were a child?

A. I know this song from when I went to study at Surin Teachers’ College. I absorbed *kantreum*,⁵³ Khmer songs, more and more. Before that, when I was a kid, I listened to *jarieng*,⁵⁴ I listened to Khmer songs from Cambodia, Khmer songs in Srisaket and Surin.⁵⁵ When living in Surin, where a lot of Khmer people live -I lived there 3 or 4 years- I absorbed and listened to Khmer songs more, I listened to the *so*,⁵⁶ and the *klui*⁵⁷ more often. I absorbed them, and so I wanted to use them. And at that time no one was using them [in writing]. So I wanted to use them. I used them in one story. [laughs]

Q. In other stories you didn’t use Khmer?

A. No.

Q. Have you ever thought that you should live in Cambodia more than Thailand?

A. In Cambodia? I never thought that I should live anywhere more than anywhere. But I tend to feel hurt about being ethnically Kui, that we don’t have a written language, and I regret the language that is disappearing. I am a real Kui who has to speak Lao, has to speak Thai, has to speak Khmer, or, in the future I might have to speak English.⁵⁸ My Kui language, people don’t want to speak it. The new generation of kids, they don’t want to speak Kui anymore. My Kui language is dying. I think that in no more than 100 years it will disappear entirely.

⁵¹ The lullaby is given in Khmer transcribed into Thai script in the text: ...กันจัญเจกเอย กันจัญเจกวับ คลุนพิบากนึ่งสลับ ตระเนอเมียนโกนยุม อามุขยุมซี อามุขยุมจ้อม เจียตปะโธยมีนลน้อม อันเจมโกนมีนระวะ... In Khmer, this would read: ...កញ្ចក់ចេកអើយ កញ្ចក់ចេកវ៉ាប់ ខ្លួនក៏បាត់ទីស្នាក់ ទ្រាំកូនយំ អាមួយយំស៊ី អាពីរយំច្រំ ជាតិប្តីមិនស្រណាំ ចិត្តប្តីកូនមិនរស់... In English: O tree frog, O tree frog, I am troubled to death. My children are crying. One cries to eat, the second cries to devour. My husband is worthless. How will I raise my children...

⁵² ปากแร้งเจก. In Khmer: ផ្កាវិចេក This is the name of the plant ดอกลำเจียก in Thai, “screw pine” in English or *Pandanus* in Latin.

⁵³ กันตริม. In Khmer: កន្ទីរ.

⁵⁴ เจริญ. In Khmer: ច្រើន.

⁵⁵ Kantreum and jarieng are types of Khmer folk songs found in the Srisaket - Surin - Buri Ram region.

⁵⁶ ซอ a kind of fiddle. In Khmer: ទ្រវែង.

⁵⁷ ขลุ่ย a kind of flute. In Khmer: ខ្លឹម.

⁵⁸ phasa farang

Q. But at school it isn't used much?

A. They still speak it. But in 100 years I think it will completely disappear. Because in 2450 (1907), 92 years ago, the whole province of Srisaket was almost 100% Kui. But now, after only 92 years, there are not even half of the Kui that there were. So in another 100 years, the Kui language will probably be gone, will disappear from memory. Because of that I'm compiling a dictionary, so that it be known that this ethnic group once existed.

Q. The fact that there is less than half the number of Kui than before, is this because other people have come in, or because Kui people began to use other languages more and changed themselves?

A. Kui have a cultural inferiority complex. People who have an inferiority complex feel ashamed. So when they live near Khmer people, they adopt Khmer culture to make themselves feel like Khmers. They have to speak Khmer. When they live close to Lao people, they have to adopt Lao culture in order to make themselves like Lao. When they live close to Thais, (etc.). Because, other than their spoken language, Kui, they don't have any other unique characteristic that can affirm their culture. If we had a written language it would be important proof, it would be an important identity. We have only a spoken language. Therefore Kui culture is very weak. Kui songs aren't in the curriculum. Khmer songs are barely in the curriculum, only Lao songs now. The Kui are going to disappear, and they are going to be followed by the Khmer. Then the Lao. Then the Thai. The Thai are going to disappear too. The Thai are going to speak English.⁵⁹ Your language. [laughs] Whoever speaks English mixed with Thai is grand. [...] "Ooh, I know farang movies, why do they put out Thai movies?" Oy, the names of stars, Johnny, Sam. Don. Among women there's Cindy. And all kinds. Willy McIntosh. Oy. It's just like watching a farang movie, but they speak Thai. [laughs]

Q. Next they'll speak English. [laughs]

A. Yeah.

Q. Speaking of pen names, why did you choose the name Fon Fafang?

A. Actually, before I used the name Fon Fafang, at the time when I was writing according to the idea that writers were gods, I used Yod Dok Ya.⁶⁰ I used a whole bunch. I came up with the name Fon Fafang in '33 (1990) and it was born in '34 (1991). *Fon* (to gnaw away at, to cut down to pieces, to be utterly destroyed) is the chopped up, decomposed state of society, *Fafang* (overcast) is darkness, indistinctness, gloom. Society is *fon fe*,⁶¹ it's dark/gloomy/overcast, there's no way out.

If it ever becomes good, I'll change [my name] to Sodsai Saengsawang⁶² [Bright Shining light], or something like that. [laughs]. Another thing, at that time in writing you couldn't use your real name. Because politics were still tense, even though General Prem had announced Order 66/2523.⁶³ The atmosphere remained tense in other ways. Disclosing oneself could be dangerous. In '23 (1980) there was still killing.

⁵⁹ phasa farang

⁶⁰ ยอดดอกหญ้า

⁶¹ ฟอนเฟะ เฟะ meaning messed up, destroyed, in pieces.

⁶² สดใส แสงสว่าง

⁶³ Amnesty for members of the Communist Party of Thailand.

There were still accusations against communists. This was the case through '25, '26, '27 (1982, 1983, 1984). Anything that carried the atmosphere of communism. Whoever does something like this is a communist, whoever does something like that is a communist. So it was necessary to conceal one's own name and use names like this instead.

Q. But afterwards it seems you used your real name.

A. Yeah, afterwards I thought I would use my real name for everything except poetry. For poetry I would use Fon Fafang. For other things, short stories, novels, non-fiction, I would use my real name for all. Songs,⁶⁴ too. I still use Fon Fafang for poetry because I think Fon Fafang was born from poetry and is a pen name that was established in coming into Literature for Life. I didn't want to abandon it, I would regret it. I thought I would use Fon Fafang for poetry. Other things would be Wira.

Q. I see that you have the ability to write many different kinds of things, short stories, novels, essays, poetry. Is there one form in particular that you like the most, or do you feel there is a type that is most important for you?

A. There isn't anything that I like the most in writing poetry, short stories,⁶⁵ tales [*niyai*],⁶⁶ non-fiction, or essays. There isn't any work that I give the most importance to. Writing each variety depends on the feeling toward it. Suppose I had an idea. I would ask myself, what [literary form] should I use this idea with? If I write an essay, I have to gather more information. Where would I publish it? If I use it as an essay, I have to get information from references, have footnotes, have a bibliography. Where will I send it to be published? If I use non-fiction, [...] do I need to have pictures [...]? Do I have enough time to take pictures to accompany the non-fiction that I'm writing? And where is it going to be published? How much of a venue is there for it? If I write it as a short story, can I lay the plot out in a harmonious way? Can this issue be the plot of the story, and if so, how should I have it begin? How should I have it end? Where is the climax? Can I do it? If I write it as a poem, can I use words that are in keeping with this issue? Is it appropriate? Am I going to use it as *khlong*,⁶⁷ or as *kab yani 11*,⁶⁸ or *kab chabang*,⁶⁹ or *chan*,⁷⁰ or *khlong suphab*?⁷¹

And then, should I use live syllables or dead,⁷² play with live and dead words, how should I have it rhyme. These are the reasons why I don't give most importance to anything. What's important is: what is the idea appropriate for?

⁶⁴ In 1997 Wira released a CD, with the Khmer title, "Neung Thoe Yang Na," *นี่งเทอยังนา*, What to Do, of kantreum songs in which he sings in Khmer, as well as Kui, Lao, and Thai.

⁶⁵ *เรื่องสั้น*, short stories in the modern sense.

⁶⁶ *นิยาย*, tales, stories of no particular length.

⁶⁷ *โคลง*, a verse form with rules prescribing placement of words with certain tone marks.

⁶⁸ *กาพย์ยานี 11*, a type of Thai metrical verse with eleven syllables.

⁶⁹ *ฉับ* also *chabong* ฉับ, from Khmer; a verse form with each stanza containing 16 words.

⁷⁰ *ฉันท*, a metrical form of Pali origin, adopted into Thai through Khmer.

⁷¹ *สุภาพ*, a type of *khlong*.

⁷² The type of ending of words in Thai helps to determine their tone, words ending with nasal consonants or unstopped (open) vowels are "live," others are "dead." This plays a significant role in poetry, too, especially in relation to meter and rhyme.

Q. And what about the name Yefimov Fon Wi Fafang?

A. Ahh! Wow, you're very detailed. I didn't think I would be asked this. I liked the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky very much, from *Rak Wiriyado'n*⁷³ to the story of Yefimov, which is a very small book, that someone - I can't remember who- bought for me. And I also felt that when I finished reading this story, that was me: Yefimov. Have you read this story?

Q. Not yet.

A. You read it, you'll see that I'm the real Yefimov. I'm as worthless and vile as Yefimov in that book. During the time in my life when I ate and drank like that, I spoke rudely, [...] and so on. Yefimov was very appropriate for me. I liked that he rebelled. The Russian nobility hired him to sing for them, he didn't sing. They gave him land and things so that he would play the violin for them, but he wouldn't. He said, people like you don't have the intellect to listen to worthless people like me play the violin. That is, in your head, however rich you may be, your artistic feeling is insufficient. So he wasn't interested. The things that he stood up for, ok, I'm not saying they're good or bad, but I liked that he was his own person. And at the time I was a lot like that. To put it simply, in Buddhist terms he had a strong self, he had great obstinacy/intellectual arrogance. Artists have to be like that. I liked it. So I invented Yefimov Fon Wi Fafang. [laughs]

Q. Have you ever lived in Bangkok?

A. No, I've never really lived there. Oh, there was a period when I graduated from teachers' college and hadn't started working yet, at first I worked in a factory that made furniture from bricks and cement. After that I worked in a fruit pickling factory. Altogether I only lived in Bangkok about 2 months. Other than that I've been for two nights or one night, or whatever. And I go about once a year. [laughs]

Q. Those two months, you felt you'd had enough?

A. Enough. I couldn't live there. I knew I couldn't live there. It wasn't suitable, and I couldn't live there. I knew myself. I concede to those who can live there. But I can't.

Q. When you read Thai literature, do you think, where does the writer come from? Do you think it's important what region the author comes from?

A. No. I don't think: where does the writer come from. But I'm interested in what it is they're writing. What they're presenting. Where they're from is their business. Sometimes I don't even look at the name to see who wrote it. I read it and, oh, what do they think. Is it old or new, this idea.

Q. Which Isan writers do you think are important?

A. Previously I read the work of Rom Ratiwan.⁷⁴ I think he is an important person. He wrote *Thon Thewada Nak Su Jak Thi Rab Sung*.⁷⁵ Lao Khamhawm⁷⁶ is important. He has written since I was born. Or some stories, I wasn't born yet -in *Fa Bo' Kan*.⁷⁷ But his stories are classic, up to the present. It is work with ideas,

⁷³ รักวิริยตร, translated (from Russian) as "The Eternal Husband" in English.

⁷⁴ ร่มย์ รติวัน

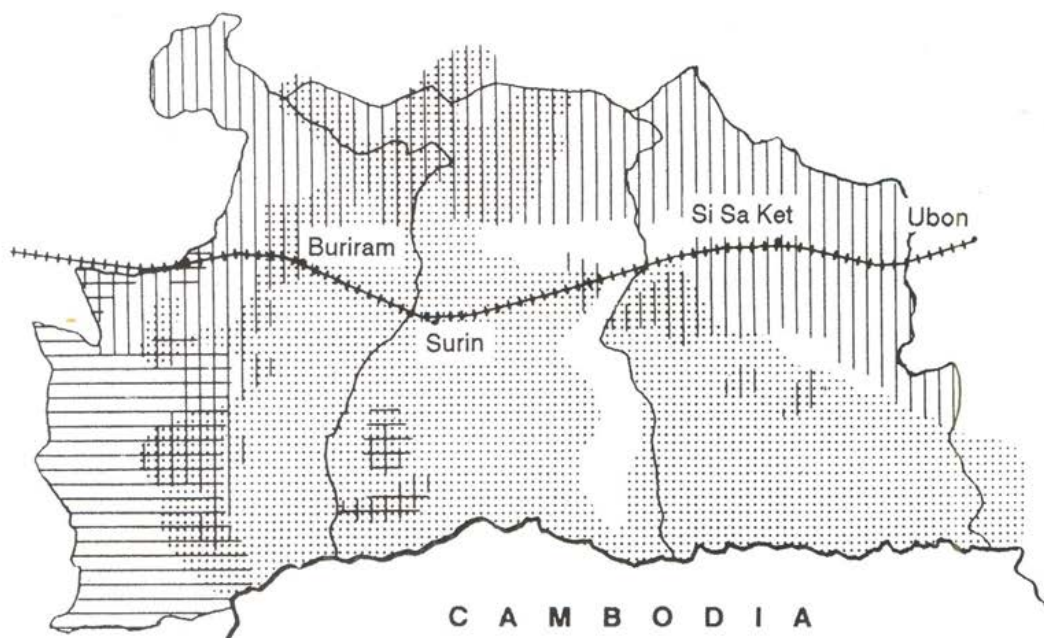
⁷⁵ โทน เทวดา นักสู้จากที่ราบสูง

⁷⁶ ลาว คำหอม

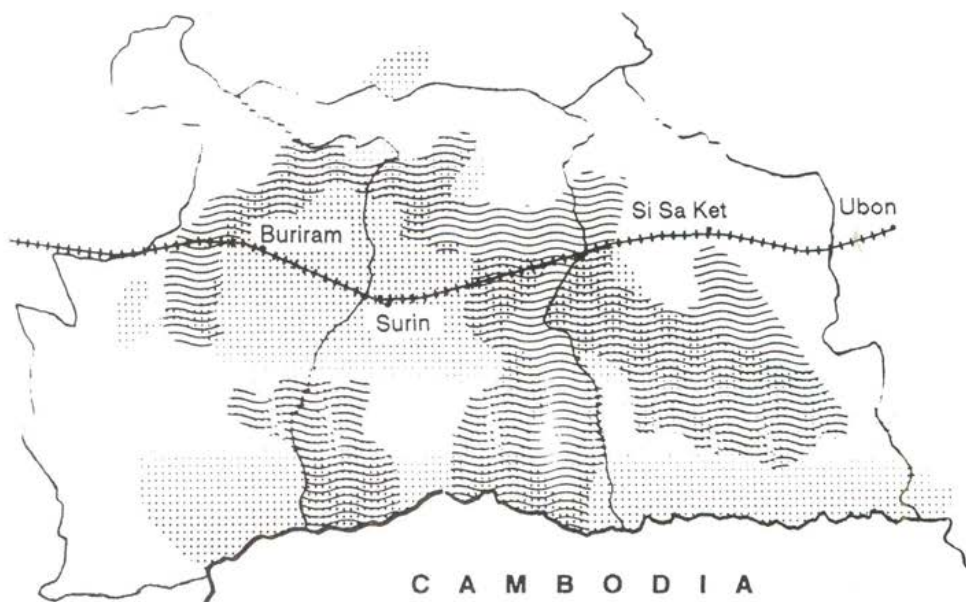
⁷⁷ ฟ้ามก่น

and his ideas remain sharp, they do not die. Khamphun Bunthawi presents images of Isan people [...]. In *Luk Isan*,⁷⁸ the lives of Isan people, the endurance, the perseverance, the striving in the manner of villagers, [is seen] clearly. While Lao Khamhawm presents images of Isan intellectuals, intellectuals of struggle, of thought. [...] I think that Isan writers from the old generation to the new are of equal importance. I consider important everyone who reflects the life issues of Isan [...]. Even though writers of the new generation currently may not specifically have to write about Isan anymore, there are still many issues that make the image, the scent of Isan-ness. That is important.

⁷⁸ ลุกอีสาน



Khmer, Lao and Central Thai language distribution and interface in the concerned area of northeast Thailand. Khmer communities are represented by dots, Lao by vertical shading and Central Thai by horizontal shading. (Map based on Smalley 1994: 139.)



Distribution and interface of Kui and Khmer in the same area. Kui is represented by wavy shading, Khmer by dots. (Map based on Smalley 1994: 149.)

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⁷⁹ Most of these books have been reprinted several times by different publishers over many years. Recent editions are listed here.