

Beyond East Asian Landscapes: A Survey of Ecocriticism in Thai Literary Studies

John Charles Ryan

Abstract— Ecocriticism is the study of the representation of the environment and ecological issues in works of literature, film, and popular culture. Recent developments in East Asian ecocriticism have begun to focus on literature in Japan, China, Korea, and Taiwan. This paper asks the research question: What is the status of ecocriticism, as a scholarly field, in Thai literary studies? The objective of the study was three-fold: (1) to understand the academic position and development of ecocriticism in Thai literary studies; (2) to identify literary works (selecting from poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction) that have received critical attention; and (3) to outline potential directions for ecocriticism in Thailand, considering the unique natural environments of the country and the literary and/or activist traditions of Thai writers.

Keywords—Ecocriticism; Literature; Environment; Thailand; Khukrit Pramroj

I. INTRODUCTION

THAILAND today faces a number of pressing environmental problems, such as deforestation, soil erosion, water and air pollution, overfishing, and the loss of plant and animal diversity [1], [2]. Since the Seventh Economic and Social Development Plan (1992–1996), environmental protection has become a concern for the Thai government, alongside social and economic growth. One of the objectives of the plan was the “prevention, control and management of the environment in all aspects” [3]. As in many other parts of Southeast Asia, the health of Thailand’s rivers is being compromised. The Chao Phraya is the most important river in Thailand, flowing through the center of the country to the Gulf of Siam near Bangkok [4]. With its four tributaries and watershed, the Chao Phraya has been central to the economic and political stability of Thailand for centuries. However, the river has been polluted by factory and residential waste, threatening a number of its animal and fish species, and endangering human inhabitants as well.

While scientific research and political strategies are important to protecting the environment and, in particular, vital aquatic systems like the Chao Phraya, humanities-based approaches can also raise awareness of ecological problems and catalyze change. One such approach is known as “ecocriticism,” defined by American scholar Cheryl Glotfelty almost twenty years ago as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [which takes] an earth-centered approach to literary studies” [5]. With its

origins in the late twentieth-century theoretical writings of Raymond Williams in England, Lawrence Buell in the United States, and Kate Rigby and others in Australia, ecocriticism has borne throughout much of its short history a distinct Anglophone imprint [6]. However, the recent collection *East Asian Ecocriticisms* has turned an ecocritical eye to Asia, with attention to the literary works and writers of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China [7]. Additionally, Karen Thornber’s *Ecoambiguity*, published in 2012, focuses on responses to environmental crises in East Asian literature, but with only passing references to Southeast Asian works (those originating in the Philippines, Timor Leste, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand) [8].

This brief background suggests that ecocriticism offers a framework for understanding the social and cultural dimensions of ecological issues and human-nature relationships in Southeast Asia. However, ecocritical studies in Asia to date have focused on East Asian writers, works, and contexts, rather than their Southeast Asian counterparts, despite the rich literary traditions of the aforementioned countries.

II. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions addressed by this paper include the following: What is the status of ecocriticism—as a scholarly field—in Thai literary studies? What critical analysis has been conducted on the relationship between Thai literature and the physical environment? What are some of the key Thai literary works with environmental focus that could become objects of ecocritical analysis? What scholarly mechanisms should be implemented in departments of Thai literature and cultural studies in order to foster the development of the field beyond its current focus on East Asian landscapes?

The objectives of the study were to identify the extent to which ecocriticism is being practiced in Thai literary studies; to better understand Thai literary works with environmental themes, through one case study of M.R. Khukrit Pramroj’s work; and to propose a pathway for the advancement of the field through scholarly practices (conferences, journals, research centers, and graduate programs). The central hypothesis is that the further development of ecocriticism will enhance Thai literary, cultural, and environmental knowledge while, at the same time, increasing awareness of ecological issues, potentially impacting policy in the country, and enhancing the well-being of Thai people and their environment.

John Charles Ryan is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Communications and Arts, Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley, WA 6050 Australia

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology consisted of three interrelated methods. The first was a review of secondary literature on Thai ecocriticism conducted in order to identify major ecocritical studies of Thai literary works, selecting from poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction. Literature review is a research method involving the systematic and critical understanding of knowledge on a topic. As part of a review, an individual contribution to knowledge is made through the researcher's synthesis and interpretation of the secondary, or scholarly, literature [9]. The literature review consisted of twelve books and articles on Thai literary studies with either a full or partial focus on the environmental dimensions of the works being analyzed in the studies, as listed in the Findings section.

The second method was textual analysis using an ecocritical theoretical framework, as defined in the Introduction section of this paper. As Alan McKee writes, "when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" [10]. The term text, for McKee and other cultural studies scholars, includes literary works (poetry and prose) and "films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on" [10]. The second method employs ecocritical theory as a lens for understanding the work as an *environmental text* (one which represents the environment or ecological issues) or, conversely, to elicit environmentally focused interpretations of a text through close analysis [11]. The textual analysis component of the research focused on twelve Thai literary works with environmental themes, as listed in the Findings section.

The third method, the case study, is used commonly in social and life science research and involves in-depth analysis of a subject and its context in order to extrapolate trends and themes [12]. This study adopted the case study method typical of these fields but with an ecocritical focus in order to rationalize the selection of one writer and his works out of the twelve works surveyed here. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (1911–1995) was born in Thailand but educated in Oxford. A prolific writer, Pramoj was also a politician, former prime minister, journalist, teacher, and classical dancer. Two of Pramoj's works will be examined in detail: his novel, *Many Lives* (originally published in 1954; but translated to English in 1995 by Meredith Borthwick) and his essay "The Chao Phraya River Is on the Verge of Dying" (published in 1970 in *Siam Rath*). These two works, one a fictional novel and the other a short non-fiction essay, exemplify the range of genres and forms taken by writers interested in environmental issues and problems, but share in common a focus on the Chao Phraya river.

IV. FINDINGS

As described in the Abstract and Objectives/Research Questions sections of this paper, the objective was three-fold and focused firstly on the field of ecocriticism in Thai literary studies; secondly on literary works that have or should receive

critical attention; and thirdly on prior and potential directions for ecocriticism in Thailand. A summary of twelve books and articles on Thai literary studies in English is presented (Table 1). The works were selected for their availability, breadth, genre range, importance to Thai literary studies, and publication in English. The "Potential Subjects" column lists themes in the texts or areas for further research. Phillips' *Modern Thai Literature*, published in 1987, is included twice because it contains primary (anthologized works) and secondary (criticism) literature. Due to the space limitations of this paper, only works that are analyzed in the Discussion section will be referenced in full at the end.

TABLE I
SUMMARY OF THAI LITERARY CRITICISM SURVEYED

Type	Title	Editor or Critic	Potential Subjects
Anthology and Book-length Study	<i>Modern Thai Literature with an Ethnographic Interpretation</i> (1987)	Phillips, H. (editor)	rivers; agriculture
Book-length Study	<i>Essays on Thai Poetry</i> (1981)	Bidyalongkorn, H.H., & Chand, M.C. (critics)	harvest; seasons; poetic meter and the environment
Book-length Study	<i>Imagining Siam: A Traveller's Literary Guide To Thailand</i> (2008)	Dann, Caron Eastgate (critic)	jungles and flowers as objects of Orientalism
Book-length Study	<i>History of Thai Literature</i> (1973)	Jumsai, Manich (critic)	role of animals in history and religion
Book-length Study	<i>Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand</i> (2013)	Platt, Martin (critic)	regionalism; nature; folklore
Book-length Study	<i>Ecocriticism in Thai Literature</i> (2013) (in Thai language only)	Thanyā, Phaithūn (critic)	Buddhism; poetry; environment
Book-length Study	<i>Thai Literature: An Introduction</i> (1995)	Wenk, Klaus (critic)	poetry; flowers; nature
Conference Paper	"The Relevance of the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy and Ecological Awareness..." (2012)	Chuenpraphansorn, Teeradet (critic)	<i>A Child of the Northeast</i> by Khamphoon Boonthawee
Dissertation	<i>Becoming Urban: Thai Literature about Rural-urban Migration</i> (2007)	Bocuzzi, Ellen (critic)	migration; mobility; animals

Journal Article	“Natural Settings in Thai Children’s Literature” (2009)	Charoenbutra, Preeyaporn (critic)	water; sea; family life; children’s literature
Journal Article	“Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism” (2012)	Sullivan, Heather (critic)	dystopianism; environmental catastrophe; seeds
Note	<i>Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures</i> (2013)	Thornber, Karen (critic)	ecological disasters; Minamata

TABLE II
SUMMARY OF PRIMARY LITERATURE SURVEYED

Type	Title	Editor or Author	Potential Subjects
Anthology	<i>Taw & Other Thai Short Stories</i> (1975)	Draskau, Jennifer (editor)	flowers; animals
Anthology	<i>Thai P.E.N. Anthology: Short Stories and Poems of Social Consciousness</i> (1984)	Masavisut, Nitaya (editor)	flowers; grass; water; jungles; Isan region
Anthology	<i>The S.E.A. Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories and Poems</i> (1996)	Masavisut, Nitaya, & Grose, Matthew (editors)	flowers; animals; leaves; rivers; snails; banana plantations
Anthology and Study	<i>Modern Thai Literature with an Ethnographic Interpretation</i> (1987)	Phillips, H. (editor)	rivers; agriculture
Novel	<i>A Child of the Northeast</i> (1988)	Boonthawee, Khamphoon (author)	Isan region; agriculture; farming
Novel	<i>Time</i> (2000)	Korbchitti, Chart	nature
Novel	<i>An Ordinary Story</i> (2010)	Korbchitti, Chart	nature
Novel	<i>Many Lives</i> (1954)	Pramoj, M.R. Khukrit (author)	rivers; natural cycles
Poetry	<i>Angkar Kalyanapong: A Contemporary Siamese Poet</i> (1986)	Kalyanapong, Angkarn (author)	nature poetry; flowers
Poetry	<i>Point of View</i> (1983)	Pongpaiboon, Noawarat (author)	Buddhism; time; flowers
Poetry	<i>The Flute Songs</i> (1992)	Pongpaiboon, Noawarat (author)	Buddhism; time; flowers
Poetry	<i>An Anthology of Modern Thai Poetry</i> (1977)	Singhaseni, Krisdaporn (editor)	nature

Table 2 presents a summary of the twelve works of Thai literature or poetry surveyed for their ecocritical themes, as possible subjects for further research in the field.

Additionally, in order to assess the status of ecocriticism in Thailand, a preliminary search of online content was conducted. The following terms are examples of those used to identify relevant scholars, organizations, professional societies, and courses in the field: *Thai, ecocriticism, nature, course, conference, and organization*.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of Thai literary criticism with an environmental focus (as summarized in Table 1) demonstrated that nature (alongside topics in culture and society) is a common area of focus in scholarly books, dissertations, and articles. However, the analysis of the environment is often limited to discussions of regionalism, history, and religion. Table 2 shows that nature is an important dimension of Thai novels, short stories, and poetry. Hence there is high potential for ecocriticism to be further developed in Thai literary studies as demonstrated by the relative lack of scholarly studies in relation to the breadth of existing literary works with ecocritical themes. The need for ecocritical studies in Thailand is underpinned by the magnitude of environmental change discussed earlier in this paper, particularly in relation to waterways and aquatic systems. In sum, it appears that ecocriticism is an emerging area within Thai literary studies that can build on the small body of work that has already been done on Thai literature and the physical environment (Table 1). Key Thai literary works that could become objects of ecocritical analysis include novels by leading literary figures Khamphoon Boonthawee, M.R. Khukrit Pramoj, and Chart Korbchitti, as well as poetry by Angkarn Kalyanapong and Noawarat Pongpaiboon (Table 2). Scholarly mechanisms, to be proposed in the Conclusion section, can be implemented to foster the development of the field in Southeast Asia.

Based on the online search, it was also determined that neither Thailand nor Southeast Asia has an ecocritical society, whereas professional organizations do exist for India, China, Japan, and other East Asian countries, particularly as branches of the American-based Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). Moreover, there appear to be no conferences, journals, or research centers devoted to the topic. However, evidence of ecocritical content in undergraduate literary studies curricula was found in one course, “Thai Literature and Nature Studies,” which addresses the “poets’s concern of nature and reality which forms a convention of Thai literature [and the] development of ideas concerning nature found in Thai literature” [13]. This indicates some dispersed scholarly activity related to the subject, but as of yet no focused set of professional activities to advance the field.

Now turning to Khukrit’s short essay “The Chao Phrayaa River Is on the Verge of Dying” (originally published in 1970): the work is exemplary of a Thai environmental text. In the 1970s, Bangkok was dubbed “the sixth filthiest major city in the world” by the Thai media [14]. The essay represents one

of the earliest expressions of concern for the Thai environment by a well-respected and known public figure at a time when the terms *ecology* and *environmental protection* were only beginning to be common parlance [(14, p. 270)]. It also demonstrates Khukrit's dexterity at invoking Thai history and generational responsibility in relation to ecological issues as well as "the utility of nature and how all human existence is contingent upon its continued health" [(14, p. 270)]. The piece opens by describing the Chao Phraya River as afflicted with an "incurable disease," implying that the river must be living if it is "on the verge of dying" and breathing its last breath [15]. The river is personified as a "he" whose loved ones are tormented by the imminence of his demise. The author then reflects on the historical and cultural legacy of the river, as having witnessed and contributed to the evolution of Thai civilization and artistic accomplishment—"in royal service since the reign of King Utong," the founder of the Ayuthian dynasty in 1350 [(15, pp. 273–274)]. The river played an active role in the construction and protection of the capital, while also providing sustenance to the Thai people.

However, the Chao Phraya River might very well turn into a "stream of poison" at the current rate of pollution and neglect [(15, pp. 275)]. The impacts of urbanization also imperil the temples and statues, which together with the river constitute an irreplaceable Thai heritage, both cultural and natural. For the writer, "such growth necessarily poisons the earth and the air and is hazardous to human life as well as animal life" [(15, pp. 276)]. The essay, therefore, provides an environmentally conscious commentary by beginning and ending with the imagery and diction of the river's decay; the middle of the essay shifts between allusions to Thai history and its royal lineage as directly related to the river over time. This combination makes for a persuasive environmental text and a catalyst for protecting heritage.

Khukrit's novel *Many Lives* (originally published in 1954) also personifies the river as a protagonist, but with less of the overt environmental commentary of the essay. In this novel, the river could be said (at the risk of affective fallacy) to enact revenge against its human spoilers. Whereas his essay could be categorized as activist literature in the tradition of American biologist Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (published in 1962), *Many Lives* includes passages of insightfully human and sensitive nature writing. Consider for example the following passage on rain from the chapter "Loi – The Bandit" after the young Loi has an intimate encounter with a woman:

The rain had eased. The smell of wet earth made him take a deep breath. He knew that the rain made the soil fertile, purified the air, and filled the water jars of the villagers – filled them in the same way that his life had just been fulfilled. The level of water in the jar would fall the next day, as he knew his own sensation would, but he was untroubled. [16]

We find here some of the conventions of Western nature writing, including an emphasis on the impact of sensory experience (the smell of the earth) and an understanding of natural rhythms. Human life is inextricably related to water cycles, which not only purify the air but absolve the bandit protagonist of his deeds. And the cycle of rain is connected to

the river, where a fatal boat accident took place during a storm. This sensoriality is strongly evident in another chapter, "Linchong – The Mother" in speaking of the idyllic upbringing of Linchong:

They endured no struggle or hardship, and found contentment in their surroundings – the bright green of the fields, the murmuring of the bamboo in the wind, the warm, sweet smell of the buffalo and cattle in their pen, the sound of fish surfacing under the house in the wet season. [(16, p. 156)]

A sense of harmony between the villagers and their environment is created in this passage through the interplay of sight (green fields), sound (bamboo murmuring), smell (of the buffalo and cattle), and sound again (fish surfacing). This pastoral idyll is used by the author to create tension in each chapter in relation to the accidental deaths met by each of the protagonists under the river's surface, "all drowned together, in the same place, in the same way, and at the same time" [(16, p. 203)].

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on its three-fold methodology of literature review, textual analysis, and case study, this paper firstly recommends that further research be done on ecocritical studies of Thai authors and their works. The scope for ecocritical analysis is broad and could include specific regions (such as Isan or Lanna), species (such as elephants or eels), or rivers (such as the Chao Phraya or Ping) in Thailand. The relationship between history, religion, environment, and literature offers an particularly salient and productive focus for Thai scholarship. Secondly, alongside the development of environmental perspectives on literature, there should be increased professional activities to enhance the status of the field in Thailand. Some guidance could be given by the Japanese or Indian branches of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, or by the American, Australian, or European branches. A conference or symposium entitled "Southeast Asian Ecocriticisms" would be a productive first step. If ecocriticism in Asia is to continue to grow, it must consider Southeast Asia; however, it is contingent on literary and environmental scholars in Thailand to forward the cause and advocate for the importance of the field. Lastly, for ecocriticism to gain a firmer footing in Thailand and the region, topic courses should be introduced as part of undergraduate and graduate university programs. It is through the humanities and sciences dialogue that a more sustainable future can be realized; this is the value of ecocriticism in the twenty-first century.

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John Charles Ryan is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. He earned a PhD in Cultural Studies (2012, Edith Cowan University), MA in Environmental Philosophy (2003, University of Lancaster, UK), BS in Liberal Studies (2002, University of the State of New York, Excelsior College), and BA in English and Environmental Design (1998, University of Massachusetts at Amherst). He is the author of the books *Green Sense: The Aesthetics of Plants, Place and Language* (2012, TrueHeart Academic Press), *Unbraided Lines: Essays in Environmental Thinking and Writing* (2013, Common Ground Publishing), *Digital Arts: An Introduction to New Media* (2014, Bloomsbury, with Cat Hope), *Being With: Essays in Poetics, Ecology, and the Senses* (2014, Common Ground Publishing), and *Posthuman Plants: Rethinking the Vegetal* (2015, forthcoming, Common Ground Publishing). His interests include the environmental humanities, ecocriticism, Buddhist studies, digital humanities, and practice-led research.