

## **The Fall of an Angel: A Social and Political Reflection Derived from Thai Short Stories Written During the 1997 Economic Crisis**

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*The years 1997-2001 will probably go down in Thai economic history as the darkest period of all time. Using short stories written during this period as empirical data, this paper is an attempt to observe and take note of any emotional shifts and changes in value that have taken place in the minds of ordinary people most directly hit by the economic meltdown. Apart from illustrating how one can learn about social reality through the reading of short stories, this paper also seeks to ascertain if the economic crisis has had any impact on these writers' world views.*

During the post-Second World War period, Thailand was one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Economic growth had been averaging 7.6 per cent over the two decades from 1977-1996. Several years of breakneck growth had created new macro-economic challenges, particularly an exacerbating external account imbalance.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1990s, the burgeoning Thai economy had become much more difficult to manage. Finally, on 2 July 1997 the Bank of Thailand allowed the baht to float in the system. The fall of the baht led to widespread contagion throughout in the economy began to have a serious effect on private sectors and ordinary Thais. Sectors hit hardest in the beginning were financial services and that part of the manufacturing and services that catered to the domestic market. The number of unemployed reached 1.48 million persons

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<sup>1</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, *Crisis from Within: The Politics of Macroeconomic Management in Thailand, 1974-97* (Doctor of Philosophy's thesis, Department of International Relations, London School Economics, 2001), p.29.

or 2.1 per cent in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Besides this crisis brought about cultural colonization and economic invasion by trans-national corporations, the World Bank, IMF and WTO<sup>3</sup> As a result of these pressures, several different forms of localization emerged significantly: civil society movements the rediscovery of local wisdom, the re-birth of the traditional community organizations, and the expansion of non-governmental organizational networks.<sup>4</sup> Regarding to the Impact of this economic collapse, some social critics called it the “Third Fall of the Kingdom”.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the crisis and find a solution, many explanations have been made. A great number of economists and scholars interpreted the Thai crisis of 1997 as a financial crisis, caused by excessive private borrowing. Some who had political

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<sup>2</sup> Ammar Siamwalla and Orapin Sobchokechai, *Responding to the Thai Economic Crisis*, a paper presented at the High-Level Consultative Meeting “Policy Response to the Economic Crisis and Social Impact in Thailand, 22 may 1998, Bangkok, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> To acquire a \$ 17.2 billion loan from e IMF as a ‘rescue’ package, the Thai government had to agree to follow certain IMF’s fiscal measures, such as, raising the level of value-added tax from 7 to 10 per cent, maintaining a surplus budget, and increasing the prices of public utilities. The most important requirement, however, was to open up the country’s financial institutions to 100 percent foreign ownership. The Thai government had also pledged to support legislation allowing foreigners to own land, something long regarded as a taboo. For more detail see Walden Bello, Shea Cunningham and Li Kheng Poh,(1998) *A Siamese Tragedy: Development and Disintegration in Modern Thailand*, Zed Books, London.

<sup>4</sup> Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Globalization and the Future of Thailand*, (Bangkok: Phuchadkarn, 1994), p. 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Ayuthaya was the former capital city of Siam. It was sacked twice after Kingdom was founded in 1350. After the second fall of Ayuthaya in 1767, the capital was moved to Thonburi and later Bangkok. The economic crisis in 1997 is sometimes considered the third fall of the Kingdom because the Thai economy fell victim to outside forces like transnational corporations such as the World Bankm IMF, WTO and the like. Suwinai Pornwalai, *Setthakij thai tai leaw phuun*, (Thai Economy: the Phoenix Returns, Amarin, Bangkok, 1998), p.7-8.

economy views suggested that it was because the vested interests of emergent alliances among elected officials, bureaucrats and bankers/ businessmen had precluded the necessary adjustment policies from being formulated and/or implemented.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted here that much of what one can learn from the government or professional economists centers on its global and regional cause-effect. Almost nothing is said about ordinary people and their feelings.

The main objective of this paper is to fill this gap through the study of works by short story writers who used the 1997 economic crisis as their main theme. More precisely, two criteria, theme and publication date, have been used to select short stories for the study. All in all, 1,559 stories published between 1997-2001 in both collected short stories and purposive popular magazines have been explored. A total of 53 stories written by 40 different writers were finally selected. Content analysis and textual interpretation were utilized to analyze these data.

The Stories illustrate social and political reflections in six main topic areas as follows.

## **1. The Plight of Innocent Victims**

The first thing that comes to one's mind from reading these stories is the fact that the authors are very sympathetic with those who suddenly found themselves unemployed. When companies and factories could no longer cope with their running costs, they simply chose to close down. As a result, most employees were totally unprepared for the change.

The character, "Pen" in Payment by Bongkojphet is a good example. She had to take care of three children after her husband walked out on her several years earlier. She became more desperate

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<sup>6</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, op.cit., p.30.

when the factory owner tried to avoid the legal responsibility of having pay redundancy funds to his employees. Not knowing if she would receive any compensation and having no idea what was lying ahead, all she could do was to tell herself that life must go on.<sup>7</sup>

It was not only people in the workforce and their families who had to suffer, innocent people also fell victim to this change in fortune too. In Aunty Paew by Taweessit Prakonsil,<sup>8</sup> aunty Paew, who had to support herself and a fourteen-year-old niece, was talked into buying life insurance for her niece's future by an insurance agent. After having given him almost all her life savings (and having never missed installments on her own life insurance premium), she found out one day that the insurance agent had disappeared. Afraid that she might lose her benefit if she missed an installment, she went to inquire at the headquarters. She was told,

“This company closed down months ago. It is said that it is something to do with the cash flow. Perhaps it has gone bankrupt. I have heard that the owner has taken the money and fled abroad. Many staffs have been laid off. The people around here have themselves lost a lot of money. And how about you? How much?”<sup>9</sup>

The news simply devastated and literally killed Aunty Paew. In the evening her niece waited endlessly for her return not knowing that she would never make it back.

The Destroyer by Korn Siriwattano is also about innocent victims.<sup>10</sup> An old, poor woman was accused of being the cause of the

<sup>7</sup> Bongkojphet, “Kaa tob tan (Payment)”, *Sakulthai* 45 (11 January, 1999): 44-47.

<sup>8</sup> Taweessit Prakongsil, “Paa Paew (Aunty Paew)”, *Khwan Reun* 31 (April 1999): 176-179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., : 179.

<sup>10</sup> Korn Siriwattano, “Puu tam lai (The Destroyer)”, *Kwan Reun* 31 (November 1999): 246-248.

economic collapse, and several people in her village started disappearing without any trace. Interestingly, all of them were also poor and old. It was said that they were responsible for the economic meltdown, partly because they were economically unproductive. Therefore, they had to be eradicated from society. Realising that she was to be next, she shouted at the intruders to leave her. No matter how loud she cried out, nobody seemed to care. No one came to her rescue. It was as if she was all alone, helpless in her very own village.

The stories above suggest that people who have never taken any active role in the macroeconomic system also suffer from this calamitous situation. The authors seem to suggest that a society, which is as highly competitive, chaotic and individualistic as ours, does not allow one to care for others. It is acceptable that an individual should possess self-interest and should naturally want to protect it. Therefore, weaker members of society will be taken advantage of and exploited. On the one hand, the authors have attempted to tell the true but bitter stories about the poor and the weak. On the other hand, they admit that these facts of life are something that cannot be rectified. The tragic endings to these short stories imply that there is no way out of the crisis, and the present social and economic system should be left untouched. In Payment, for example, Pen simply made the decision to start new career as a street vendor. Theoretically speaking, such a solution is still confined within the capitalist “horizon.”

## **2. The Middle Class and their Sufferings**

Apart from telling the plight of innocent victims, the short stories show in particular how members of the middle class suffered as they experienced a loss in their sense of security. The rapid and unexpected changes due to the economic downturn

made them feel like the real losers.<sup>11</sup> This anxiety was so strong that it could drive one to do many unimaginable things. In order to survive, one had to somehow adjust one's self to fit in with the new circumstances. In most cases, their social relationships turned for the worse.

Most stories show how losing a job can be fatal to the middle class. The possibility of losing one's job motivates them to work harder and become more efficient.<sup>12</sup> So what if they become unemployed anyway? From these Stories, it is clear that no job means no money and no dignity. Those who are unproductive and have no income simply have no value. Domestic work, too is of no value. This notion of work and work ethics can be seen in the following excerpt:

The rumour becomes more widespread as time goes by. Those who have no income have to struggle more for their living. This results in a drastic change in how one looks at life. Everyone seeks to reach his or her goals without paying any attention to the means being used. In the age of the IMF, money has turned out to be an indicator of the quality of life. Therefore, those people who are no longer productive or are under qualified become just like the NPL, waiting

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<sup>11</sup> Attapol Songsang has also found that during the first two years of the 1997 crisis Thai short stories still reflected several kinds of serious social problems. Most stories ended with the characters' sense of loss. For more detail see Attapon Songsang, "Phap Satorn Sungkom Nai Reung San Thai Ra Vang Puttasakkaraj 2538-2542 (A Social Reflection Derived from Thai Short Stories from 1995-1999)", (master degree's Thesis, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2002), abstract.

<sup>12</sup> It is believed that the fear of losing a job is one of the most important working motivations in the neo-classical economy. Preecha Piempongson. *Setthakij Karn Meuang: Lokatas, Karn Wikroh Rabob Lae Karn Plaengplang (Political Economy: World view, System Analysis and Changes)*, (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn, 1995), p. 39-40.



to be gotten rid of.<sup>13</sup>

Inevitably, women, children and the poor who are too weak to earn any income are left to perish. It can be said, therefore, that economic activity has imposed its way of thinking on people. Working for money has become the most important aspect of life.

Naturally, when becoming unemployed, most upper and lower middle class citizens worry most of all about their economic survival. Still, the fear of losing their dignity and prestige is never far behind.

I am of the opinion that when a doctor who has worked for a private hospital for 21 years loses his job, it affects our family a great deal. We have lived mostly on his salary. As a mother, first of all, I have to take care of our kids' feelings. How can they cope with this fact? So they regret that their father is now an ex-hospital director, that they are no longer the director's children?<sup>14</sup>

It is evident that the middle class has always sought recognition from others. According to Hegel, humans and animals are alike. Both need food and shelter. Only recognition, however, is a human need. Being held in high esteem can make one proud of oneself. In contrast, one will become stressed and ashamed if one cannot gain recognition from others.<sup>15</sup> In a modern capitalist world, money can provide individuals with the identity they need through the consumption of brand name merchandise and luxury

<sup>13</sup> Korn Siriwattano, op.cit., p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Busabong, "Naey khang kon mai (The New Chunk of Cheese)", *Siam Rath Weekly* 43 (16 August, 2001): 52.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the last Man*, (New York, Avon Books, 1992), p. xiii.

lifestyles. Understanding this can help us realize why money plays such an important role in the lives of the characters created by the authors. Even members of the middle class who originally come from the working class want their new “self” to be seen and recognized. On the other hand, they want to be someone “different”.<sup>16</sup> A simple and easy way to be different is consumerism. The products and services they purchase are not bought simply as just products and services. Their usefulness as such is probably less important than the image the consumer expects to portray from using them, just as the advertising campaigns say. Attaining a new image by use of these products has become a real passion.<sup>17</sup>

Most stories tend to suggest that life before the crisis was good. Even though the characters had to work hard and compete with each other, they could still earn enough to promote their lifestyles and consequently gain recognition. These stories also suggest that if one can get through the hard times, the “good” life, as ever, will be back, as one can see in From Mouth to Hands by Hok Lok Sew.<sup>18</sup> This story is about a family that has fallen into hard times during the economic downturn. Before the crisis, the four family members were living happily in a society of consumerism. For example, after taking the kids to the ‘weekend school’ in a shopping mall, the mother would go shopping or would relax in a spa. Meanwhile, the father would enjoy himself at the golf course. Later, they would all have dinner together in a nice restaurant. When the economic meltdown struck, the parents could not admit the new reality. In the end, they learned from their children that they should be strong. The end of the story hints at the eternal return of happy days:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Pra Paisal Wisalo, “Kham phon punha toa ton (Beyond the Problem of Self)”, *Matichon* (15 august, 2004): 8.

<sup>18</sup> Hok Lok Sew, “Teen teep pak had” (From Mouth to hands), *Mahasanuk* 9 (1-7 August, 1997): 71-74.



Now they face it (the new reality) altogether in a very positive way. It turns out to be a kind of happiness that they have never experienced before. The truth they have learned is that happiness and great comfort can slip away if one is careless about living a life. They now feel no fear and are ready to fight against all odds in life. *And they will wait until the blazing light shines through to them again.*<sup>19</sup>

The very last sentence suggests that, from Hok Lok Sew's point of view, the lifestyle before the crisis is eternally desirable. It is the best possible option and, thus, it is good enough for all. In such a society one has the right to pursue one's own goals, provided one has a strong will and the ability to do so. One is always free to do what one wants to. It is fair to say that those who work hard deserve to be rich, and those who are lazy should be poor. Even during difficult times, the author seems not to be frustrated with life in a capitalist society.

### 3. Self-Centeredness: Something Natural

The study suggests that what the middle class care about the most is their own "selves." In the story, Where is your Home, Baby?<sup>20</sup>, a woman from a well-to-do family has to suffer economically when her husband's business collapses during the economic recession. She can no longer afford to live a life of luxury as she is used to. One hears nothing about her own family helping her out. Nobody from her own family reaches out to help her. Later, a trivial quarrel, stemming from the economic hardship becomes so serious that the couple goes their separate ways, each taking one of their two

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>20</sup> Napa Lynn, "Ban nuu yuu nai? (Where is your Home, Baby?)", *Kulsatree* 31 (September 2001): 195-198.

innocent kids with them.

A reader is entitled to ask why this family was alone in their struggle to live the life they were used to. Why was there no help coming from their parents, brother, or sisters? It might be because they held individualism as a basic value; a clear and conscious feeling of separation between one's own self and others.<sup>21</sup> The ties and the feelings of kinship, therefore, were less important than their own self-interest. In this regard, humans seem to be not just a political animal, as the classical philosophers think, but also an economic animal. In this respect, one cannot expect the middle class to fight for others.

Self-centeredness is a dominant value appearing in most stories. The value of self-centeredness is never challenged. One rarely sees the authors condemning selfishness as something intrinsically bad. Instead, they imply that self-centeredness is very natural. To survive, one must, first and foremost, stand on one's own two feet. Accepting individualism, the authors are clearly of the opinion that individualism should take precedence over collectivism.

#### **4. Keys Factors to a Higher Status**

All the middle class characters seem to believe that one can always fulfil one's aspirations if one has ability and strong will, regardless of one's background. "Opportunity" and "equality" seem to be key words for all who seek physical happiness. A number of the stories show that members of the middle class, who may originally have their roots in an agricultural or traditional society can successfully change their status through formal education. In fact, even farmers and the working class have adopted the middle class's aspirations and dreams as their own. They too have become

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<sup>21</sup> Edward S. Greenbag, *The American Political System: A radical Approach*, fourth edition, (Boston: Little and Brown, 1986), p.38.

more aware of the importance of formal education, and are ready to sacrifice everything for their children's future. In the story, The Last Day by Weera Sudsung, a farmer in his early fifties, "Yod," had to suffer high interest bank loans after the economic meltdown.<sup>22</sup> One can feel his tension through the frequency of use of four key words; education (11), money (8), bank (5) and interest (5). It is clear that even though a farmer's way of life is economically sufficient; he always needs money to pay for his kids' school fees and miscellaneous items. Education as an investment seems to be generally supported in such a society.

Only one story, Sensitivity and Fragility, by Jumlong Phangcholjit suggests that formal education is only good at making one a slave of modern companies and factories, a salary man, so to speak.<sup>23</sup> If one becomes unemployed, only those who have learned their parents' crafts can survive.

Success in formal education, however, needs a free market to support it. The free market is envisaged as a place that allows everyone to compete with each other on equal terms. It is a place that tests one's ability. Anybody who is hard working and creative will reach a higher social and financial status.

After taking a training course for professional sales men, his thoughts are fully occupied with selling. Everything can be sold at a high price if we can find its advantage and value. Authentic Thai food, for example, can be exported around the world. A photo frame that is decorated with useless dry leaves can be sold as well. Therefore, with only a creative

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<sup>22</sup> Weera Sudsung, "Wan Sud Taai (The Last Day)" in *Khawm Mai auo Nai Khong khon mai auo Nai*, (Bangkok: Chomsom Deg, 1999), p. 177-183.

<sup>23</sup> Jumlong Phangcholjit, "Wan Wai Lae Prok Bang (Sensitivity and Fragility)" in *Meuang na Yiu (A Nice city)*, (Bangkok: Praeo Publishing, 1999), p. 51-57.

team and a good sales man, all things around us can be sold.<sup>24</sup>

In this regard, most people in a capitalist society are ready to enter into the market and compete with one another. Unfortunately, not everyone is actually equal from the very beginning. Therefore, in the world of business only a small minority become winners and get rich, whilst most are taken advantage of and become losers. The more the national economy grows, the greater the differences between the two groups become. The disparity in the quality of life between them can be seen in the following excerpt;

At a high building, he who has lived a life like a god points at those who are walking on the street, saying to his girlfriend. "Can you see those roving devils - the people who are walking below?" They have no future, no money and no job. You know what, the janitors who work for my company must be happier than they are. Their quality of life too, is better.<sup>25</sup>

The difference in the ways of life between the two groups is slated as normal and as natural. This implies that exploitation and a biased distribution of wealth in society are either not noticed or accepted. Even when Thailand was hard hit by the 1997 crisis, the idea of the free market remained unchallenged in most stories. The authors honestly seem to believe that the free market is either truly a fair game for all competitors, or unfair but everyone has to live with it. And they seem also to think that somehow "an invisible"

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<sup>24</sup> Prajak Santrong, "Kon Ba Tok Pla (When a Mad Man Fishes)", *Siam Rath Weekly* 42(1 July, 2000): 76.

<sup>25</sup> Tan Ya Warratas, "Sawarn lom (heaven is Gone)", *Choor Karakade*, (November-December, 1998): 51-66.

hand will take care of everything in any uncertain financial or political situation.

## 5. No More Ideological Conflicts

While these stories do mention people from all social classes, they never once mention the aristocrats. The old aristocrats seem to have completely lost their dominant roles in society. It is very possible that they all have become modern capitalists. It is interesting to also note that, in a sense, the economic meltdown has put both the capitalists and the workers on equal terms. Both the rich and the poor have fallen into hard times. Both have to struggle to survive economically. The traditional conflict between the two classes seems to have disappeared - at least temporarily. Ideological conflict is nowhere to be seen. Conflicts between the two classes, which do appear in a few stories, are those of a legal nature. Even though the labourers know that they have been taken advantage of, their fear of losing their job appears to be more urgent. In other words, they do not feel the urge to talk about the idea of exploitation at all.

In Return Home by Thawan Mascharas, one can see what members of the working class think about life and work before the crisis.<sup>26</sup> A working class couple enjoyed themselves working in the factory and had adequate and regular salaries. Their income, unlike that of their parents, did not depend on the season. The harder they worked, the greater their income. In hindsight, they realized they had never achieved the true happiness that comes from a simple and middle way of life. Yet, there was no doubt for them that such a social and economic system might be wrong.

Almost every character portrayed in the storied admits that

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<sup>26</sup> Thawan Mascharas, "Klab Ban (Return Home)" in *Bed Nang Rum*, (The Authentic Thai Fish Hooks), (Bangkok: Dokya, 1998), p.175-184.

the capitalist society exists naturally and unchangeably. As seen in the following excerpt, no matter what happens to the national economy they succumb to its ways, even after considering the way that most companies treat their employees in order to keep costs down.

“Being so smart and efficient, you can find a new job.” He is struck by her words. Yet, he can understand what he has just heard although it is not wholly true. This is a very common policy that all companies follow. It is due to the fact that his salary is higher than any of the other managers. Paying legal redundancy to him is certainly a great budget saver.<sup>27</sup>

By interpretation, heavy self-reliance has become an answer that most characters must achieve. It might be partly because the government in a capitalist regime is not supposed to play an active role supporting the poor or the marginal fringes of society. Both rich and poor alike must struggle to get through the hard times. To survive and continue living their lives as ever, there appears to be no need for either to pay any attention to political or economical ideologies. Again, one cannot hear any comments or criticisms about this issue from the majority of authors.

## 6. Different Reactions to the Crisis

The study shows that there are two different reactions to the economic meltdown. Most stories are realistic, while some are romantic and always optimistic.

In the realistic stories, people have to struggle in many ways for survival. No one can foresee how life will work out.

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<sup>27</sup> Reunksai Na Plyfa, “Klab (Return)”, *Praeo* 21 (10 September, 1997): 333-336.



Standing on their own feet is all they can do. Sensitivity and Fragility, by Jomlong Phangcholjit can serve as a good example. It begins with a conversation about a life crisis for a couple with two kids. The fear of losing their jobs is a source of worry to them. They try to adjust themselves to the new reality without knowing how things will turn out. In the end, they continue living in fear and without a clear future. This story seems to convey the message that during a crisis one has no other choice but to adjust one's own self and wait for the return of the good days. Again, this implies that there is nothing wrong with the social and economic system.

In the romantic stories, village and urban life during the economic crisis is romanticized unduly. One sees that all trouble faced can be overcome. For example, when finding their urban life no longer bearable, they can return immediately to their original roots and traditional ways of life. The end to this type of story is always happy, as seen in the following excerpt;

That night, 'Sang' fell into a deep sleep. In his dream he saw his father smiling and waving at him. The stems of golden rice bowed to him as if they were welcoming him home, the old place he left behind years ago. In spite of being asleep, his face was radiant with a smile. Beside him, his mother was sitting and swatting mosquitoes away from him. She felt that she was receiving something most valuable back.<sup>28</sup>

Here, only the positive side is presented. In fact, returning to the village is not at all easy for those who have departed for many years. When returning, they have to adjust to the new environment, being unfamiliar with working outdoors. Besides, a lack of experi-

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<sup>28</sup> Thawan Mascharas, op.cit., p. 336.

ence and professional skills will make it hard for them. Moreover, agricultural land has decreased considerably since the Kingdom adopted the first economic development plan many years ago. Importantly, the problem of cheap labour migrating from neighbouring countries has also become more serious. Finding a new job up-country is, therefore, truly difficult.

Nowadays, Thai village life is not the same as it used to be. According to a TDRI report, no village can escape the impact of modernization processes.<sup>29</sup> Just about every household in the Kingdom now leads a modernized way of life promoted through community development programs and mass media. Thai farmer now bring along their mobile phones when out tending their farms. Most young villagers now have an American breakfast instead of their traditional meal. A popular hobby for children is playing computer games and watching VCDs.<sup>30</sup> It might be, therefore naïve to think that life in the village has not felt the impact of capitalism and globalization.

It is also noteworthy that the village community is presented as a cultural centre where all manner of local wisdom has been accumulated and passed on from one generation to the next since time immemorial. The Authentic Thai Fish Hooks: Bed Nang Rum by Thawan Mascharas, serves as a good example.<sup>31</sup> In this story, a farmer learned how to make and use fishhooks from his father, whom the villagers knew as the greatest fisherman. The hooks he made were unlike the ones generally sold in market. Once in the river, they looked as if they were dancing gently and beautifully. Naturally, such lively hooks always tempted their prey, which would take a bite. He always felt sorry for the fish that fell prey to

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<sup>29</sup> Thailand Development Research Institute, *Social Impact Assessment: Synthesis Report*, (Bangkok: TDRI, 2000), pp. 43-47.

<sup>30</sup> Wanchai ton, "Kong toon moo ban sun yan chud jeaw (Village fund: A Good Sign)", *Matichon* (25 July, 2004): 8.

his hooks. After the economic downturn, the farmer's village became colorful and lively as people who left home years ago returned. Newcomers, with all kinds of imported fishing hooks, showed up along the bank of the river. Yet, the new fisherman who had just returned from the capital had to leave without catching anything and had to fish caught by him. To the farmer, they, like the poor fish, had fallen victim to modernization and capitalism. According to the author, it seems that the time for Thais to re-evaluate and appreciate local wisdom has finally arrived. 'Bed Nang Rum' is a symbol for "localism", fighting against modernization and capitalism in the age of globalization.

"Localism" - local wisdom and sufficient economy - is an idea stemming from the so-called 'Wattanatham Chumchon' (communal culture) approach, which is one of approaches to community development used by NGO since the 1980s. In those days this approach was considered backward, one that "reverses into the canal." After the King's speech on sufficient economy on December 4<sup>th</sup> 1997, several versions or interpretations of sufficient economy, local wisdom, civil society, etc. were actively introduced.<sup>32</sup> Yet, a common message in localism shared by all localists is that liberalization and market economics have failed. The economic crisis and recession are seen as evidence of this failure. The market, consumerism, materialism, urbanism and industrialism are recognized as the interconnected effects of rampant capitalist development, and each is identified as injurious for rural communities. As a result, localism has finally been recognized as a new alternative for the country. For them, it is seen as an antidote to human lust for consumption and the problems resulting from capitalism in the age

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<sup>31</sup> Thawan Mascharas, "Bed nang rum" in *Bed nang rum (The Authentic Thai Fish Hooks)*, (Bangkok: Dokya, 1998), p. 185-200.

<sup>32</sup> Sawai Boonma, *Setthakij por paeng: poom Panya Chat Thai (Sufficient Economy: thai Wisdom)*, (Bangkok: P.A.Living, 2000), p.4.

of globalization. Once established, peace and happiness will emerge in rural communities, and the problems of migrant labour, crime, narcotics, gambling and so forth will become less severe. For some, this involves the end of the market, for where there is no cash economy there can be no greed and no debt.<sup>33</sup>

However, it should be noted that localism has been the subject of considerable criticism. There have been three major criticisms. First, viewing the community as a source of morals and values is a hopeless idealization. If there ever were such a moral community values derive from the patronage system, rather than being based in egalitarianism and co-operation. It is patronage that has permitted the political and economic exploitation of the rural community. Third, the salvation of the rural community is not to be sought through a reactivation of local wisdom but through a more thoroughgoing transformation of the community and countryside. In this regard, it does not mean that localist approaches to village-based rural development have no merit. But where localism becomes a national development strategy or political discourse, it is transformed into a middle-class intellectual exercise.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, localism as a new alternative never offers a realistic interpretation of the threats and adverse impacts of liberalization and globalization. It provides neither a feasible solution to the mainstream approach of government, international business and financial institutions.<sup>35</sup> Realistically speaking, localism is just a romantic daydream.

It is not only rural community and village life during the

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<sup>33</sup> Kevin Hewison, "Responding to Economic Crisis: Thailand's Localism" in *Reforming Thai Politics*, (Duncan McCargo ed., Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2002), p. 143-161.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154.

<sup>36</sup> Taweessit Prakongsil, "Nak Plang Mue Mai (A New Hand Song Writer)", *Siam Rath Weekly* (6 March, 1999): 62-63.

crisis that is romanticized; urban life is too. Those who wanted to stay on in the city could also succeed in turning the crisis to their advantage. A New Hand Song Writer by Taweesit Prakongsil<sup>36</sup> and Bye-Bye by Pimtawan<sup>37</sup> are cases in point. When they became unemployed, the lead characters from both stories eventually found new jobs and thoroughly enjoyed their new lives, due to finding their true inner desires and hidden potentials. The character in A New Hand Song Writer was on the breadline when unemployed, doing nothing but looking for jobs and listening to the radio. It was the music from the radio that awakened an old dream, that of writing lyrics. With determination and devotion, he wrote some beautiful lyrics and sent them to a music company. His songs became great hits and he eventually received much fame and fortune. The lead woman in Bye-Bye was fortunate too. She became a schoolteacher, and later found herself most suitable for the new job.

Again, it is time to have my students' weight and height measured. I can hardly believe that both figures have gone up so much. I have to thank my ex-boss for making me redundant. If not, I would have ended up working on something that I strongly dislike; a job that does not suit me at all. Having to work now as a teacher in a kindergarten will not be easy, but I find it much better than working with a computer.<sup>38</sup>

It is quite evident that the two authors are unrealistically optimistic. They try to console themselves and others with the thought that unbearable lives will one day become better. Life crises

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<sup>37</sup> Pimtawan, "Bye Bye", *Khwan Reun* 33 (16 December, 2001): 176-178.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

can also bring new opportunity despite the fact that just to survive during any crisis is tough enough.

It should not be too bold to conclude that these stories have not made a significant contribution to society, except that they are a means of escape from reality-even for short while. Such a social role partly supports and strengthens the existence of capitalism itself.

## 7. Conclusion

The study shows that having been hit by the crisis, everyone thought of himself as a real loser, without thinking about the major drawbacks of liberalism and capitalism.

An individual 'way out' presented in most stories is the concept of self-reliance. One has to accept the fact that things have now changed and have to learn to live with one's problems the best one can. In practical terms, this means that one must firstly adopt a new "self" before trying to live a new life. Still, a new self is closely linked to the capitalist system and a life in the world of the market economy. Even though the crisis has taught them all a valuable lesson, that of uncertainty and the law of impermanence, they still look for the return of the "good life."

The realistic stories suggest that there is no other way out. Living in the world of a market economy might be not the best policy, but it provides the best possibilities. From the point of view of most authors, the economic crisis seems to be just a temporary financial crisis. If one can wait patiently during this transitional period, and adopt a new self with a realistic stories suggest that localism can be a new remedy for all. Still, it is in reality no more than an escapist fantasy. More importantly, most of the realistic and romantic stories never challenge the principles of liberalism and capitalism. It seems that these authors feel no pressure to imagine anything further than their present "horizons." Dominated by liberalization and globalization, they are eager to embrace the



market economy. Possibly, the collapse of fascism and communism throughout the world has prevented them from seeing things differently. In the age of globalisation, capitalism is the mark of the end of history. The authors are most likely social products of the economic environment in which they have lived their entire lives. It seems that even during the time of the crisis, the most their stories can do is to reproduce the very same ideology they grew up with.

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