Thainess as Part of Thai Diaspora Identity in Thai American Literature: A Case Study of Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*

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Received: January 21, 2025 Accepted: April 22, 2025 Online Published: July 31, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n1p217 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n1p217

Abstract

The study of Thai American literature is a new area of exploration in Asian American literature scholarship. This study investigates two literary works by Thai American authors, Sunisa Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*, aiming to uncover significant traits of Thainess as a part of the Thai diaspora identity. Employing the framework molded by Asian American criticism and the concept of cultural identity, this study manifests that Thailand, the authors' home country, is represented through different traits of Thainess as their cultural identity, constituting their diaspora identity. In the first book, the monarch is portrayed as a central trait of Thainess, suggesting that an ideal Thai citizen must revere and express loyalty to the kings who are depicted as the national saviors and unifying figures in times of crisis. On the other hand, *Sightseeing* represents Thainess in the form of tourist destinations and prostitution, a more common image deeply rooted in Western imagination, which is a result of the Vietnam War. The representation of Thainess in these two books asserts the Thai diaspora identity as an integral part of the authors' Asian American identity. Presenting the background of the authors' home country, these two literary works serve as a cultural connection between America and Thailand, aligning with the evolving trend of Asian American literature.

Keywords: Asian American literature, Thai American literature, Thainess, cultural identity, diaspora identity

1. Introduction

The United States is a literary cradle where various ethnic groups from different parts of the world have created a plethora of works. Experiences of immigrants in their new environments and the recollections of their homelands serve as foundational elements for their literary creation. In Asian American literature, for example, readers are brought into the new world in which Asian Americans struggle to build their new life while reminiscing about the years in their countries of origin. This can be seen through Carlos Bulosan's *American Is in the Heart* (1973), a pioneer Asian American novel based on the author's life in the Philippines and his experiences in the United States. In the same vein, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), an early Chinese American literary work, intertwines the (can you put one adjective here that is the tone of the stories) stories in China with the life of Chinese people on American land. Asian American literature serves as a channel through which its people negotiate for their existence in the promised land. In doing so, they demonstrate their commitment to overcoming racial conflicts and oppression in various forms, striving to be included in the American sphere. Meanwhile, they often depict their lives in Asia before relocating to the United States, as they also want the mainstream to learn about their initial identity and embrace it. Therefore, important themes often appearing in Asian American literature include racial conflicts, a yearning for inclusion, and memories of homelands. As stated by Babri (2024), this group of literature offers "narratives that deeply resonate with the immigrant experience" (para. 2). Such experience encompasses the contexts in the immigrants' homelands and their new world.

Thai American literature is a relatively new sub-genre of the Asian American literary canon, compared with its counterparts such as the Chinese American, the Japanese American, or even the Vietnamese American, sharing its roots in Southeast Asia with the Thai American. According to Cheung (1997), Thai American literature, as a sub-genre of Asian American literature, is understudied, as she stated that she had never found any scholars whose expertise is in this literary field. To this day, Thai American literature is not as well-established as Chinese or Japanese American literature, since the Chinese and Japanese in the United States have a longer history than the Thais. Another important reason why Thai American literature is low in visibility is that the number of Thai Americans is not as high as that of Chinese Americans or Japanese Americans, resulting in its low number of literary works. Despite this fact, it should be acknowledged that Thai American literature also plays an important role in the growth of Asian American literature. It deepens the understanding about the life of its people, including the context in their new world and that in their home country. Moreover, it contributes to heterogeneity in Asian American literature. In fact, according to Lowe (1996), Asian Americans and Asian American literature, despite their diverse ethnic origins, tend to be homogenized by the mainstream in the United States. To confirm the Asian American heterogeneity and the existence of Thai Americans, it is important to promote the scholarship on Thai American literature. Therefore, in this article, two literary works by Thai American authors are selected to study: Sunisa Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*. This study aims to investigate how these two literary works portray "Thainess" for their audiences, especially those in the West. In this context, the term Thainess refers to the

shared characteristics of the Thai people, encompassing their culture, beliefs, identity, and the nation as a whole. Employing the framework of Asian American criticism and cultural identity, this study argues that Thainess is part of the authors' cultural identity, constituting their diaspora identity. By studying these two literary works, one can see significant traits of Thainess that their authors present to Western audiences, who will better understand Thai Americans' backgrounds and the Thai diaspora identity. This study also reaffirms Cheung's argument that the trend of Asian American literature has shifted from claiming America to bridging America to Asia (1997). As evident in many modern Asian American literary works, instead of representing Asian American people as fully American to be accepted by the mainstream, they feature their Asian identities. By discussing the aforementioned literary works, this study reveals important characteristics of Thai American literature. Given that this area of Asian American literature remains understudied, this study addresses that gap and contributes to the ongoing development of the literary canon.

2. Asian American Criticism and Cultural Identity

As the two primary texts were authored by Thai American writers, they are classified within Asian American literature, a category encompassing works by Americans of Asian descent, including both first-generation immigrants and their descendants. According to Cheung (1997), who is among the first scholars to theorize Asian American criticism, there is a shift in Asian American literature. In the first stage, the writing by Asian Americans seems to focus on the yearning for inclusion into the body of the American nation; in other words, it tries to claim America. This is because Asian immigrants are put outside the American social, cultural, and economic spheres and seen as the others. Based on Palumbo-Liu (1999), white Americans are obsessed with the purity of the American body and deny people of other races, refusing to include them in American society.

Racial formation was a serious issue in the United States, causing severe racial conflicts. As stated by Omni and Winant (1994), during the second half of the twentieth century, people in America were treated according to their races, and among the minority groups, Asians were placed at a low rank of racial hierarchy and excluded from the white mainstream. The fact that white Americans did not want Asian immigrants to be part of America can also be seen through a series of laws preventing them from gaining U.S. citizenship in the early stages of Asian immigration (Lowe, 1996). The denial of citizenship seemed to be a contradiction, since the United States imported a large number of Asian laborers from countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines to work in agricultural areas in different parts of the country. Those laborers helped foster the American economy, but were denied citizenship. They were exploited, oppressed, and treated as non-Americans. For this reason, a prominent theme of Asian American literature in the first stage is seeking inclusion into the American sphere and acceptance as American citizens.

Through the writing of Asian American authors in that era, they tried to present themselves as fully American, and insisted that they should be treated like other white Americans. This trend can be seen in a novel like John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), which depicts the lives of Japanese Americans during World War II, who have to abandon their Japanese heritage to indicate that they do not have any ties with the Japanese Empire. On the other hand, they attempt to present themselves as full Americans, loyal to the United States. This is to avoid being seen as the others or the enemies, and to be accepted as Americans. Similarly, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) features Chinese male immigrants who labor for America, but are not recognized. Those people, like the Japanese people in the previous novel, want to be seen as Americans, and included in the body of the nation. A significant motive behind these two books is exclusion and discrimination against Asian Americans.

In the later stages of Asian American literature, Cheung (1997) points out that there is a new theme emerging in this canon, bridging America to Asia. This phenomenon stems from a changing identity of Asian Americans; they gain American citizenship and are more (if not fully) accepted in American society. Asian American authors focus more on their Asian roots, providing more background on their home countries. Memories of homelands regarding landscape, culture, and context are employed to craft their works. This presentation suggests that they want their true identity, which is partly Asian and partly American, to be accepted. According to this identity, Palumbo-Liu (1999) argues that there is double consciousness in the Asian American psyche caused by the culture of the homeland and the circumstances in the new world. One part of their identity is American; the other part is Asian. This double consciousness also leads to Asian Americans' dual personality. For example, they are Asian at home, but present themselves as fully American when they are outside. Double consciousness and a dual personality also appear in Asian American literature in the later stages, which does not try to hide the Asian identity of its authors. The roots of Asian Americans play a significant role in constituting their identities.

In addition to the politics of identity, the shifting trend of Asian American literature also encompasses the themes of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Cheung 1997). For example, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) is an Asian American play centering around the gender issue and the perception of the West toward the East. The East is effeminate, as suggested by the Chinese male protagonist who is denied masculinity by a French diplomat who sees him as a woman. Apart from the gender issue, a good example of a literary work portraying the theme of ethnicity is *The Coffin Tree* (1983) by Wendy Law-Yone, a Burmese American writer. This novel not only portrays the racial conflict regarding Burmese immigrants in the United States, but also reveals the conflict between different ethnicities in Burma, which causes the main characters to leave the country for America. Moreover, Low-Yone also exhibits the way of life of ethnic people in Burma, such as the rice culture and religion. Through these two examples, one can see that the themes of Asian American literature are more diverse, and not merely limited to claiming America.

Asian Americans became more diverse regarding their ethnic origins when a new group of Asian immigrants came to the United States. The rise of this population—refugees from Southeast Asia who escaped from war and political persecution—also promoted the diversity of

Asian American literature. Historicizing this group, Chan (1991) discusses the experiences of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the countries in the area known as Indochina, exploring their journey to the United States and how they were received in the new world. The great diaspora of Southeast Asians emerged after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the end of the Vietnam War, when a large number of Vietnamese refugees escaped from communist persecution. Apart from this group, refugees from Cambodia and Laos also fled their countries for the same reason. Critiquing the policy dealing with the refugee crisis during the Cold War, Chan contends that the United States "as a leader of the 'free world' […] had to eliminate racial discrimination not only in all domestic aspects of public life but also in its immigration policy" (1991, pp. 145-6). That is, the United States had to receive Indochinese refugees to maintain the country's image and eventually became the main destination for those people.

The coming of Southeast Asian refugees brought a new voice to Asian American literature. According to Lowe (1996), the writing by Southeast Asians in the United States entails different themes from those existing in the older generations of Asian American literature. Stories of war, communist persecution, and journeys to the new world appear in literary works by those refugees. Among Southeast Asian writers, the Vietnamese are probably the most significant group, as they produce the highest number of literature portraying their lives in Vietnam and the United States. The themes of war and diasporic journeys in Vietnamese American literature add more diversity to Asian American literature. However, except for the works by Vietnamese American authors, the works from other groups of Southeast Asians, such as Cambodians, Laotians, or Malaysians, are less visible in Asian American literature. Thai American literature is even less visible due to its small number of published works. This also results in a low number of studies on Thai American literature since there are only a few scholars in this area. For example, Praphan (2019) investigates *Jasmine Nights*, a novel by S.P. Somtow, arguing that the transformation of Thai society in many aspects, such as economy, ways of life, and values, is caused by American Imperialism, which penetrates Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. This study suggests that there is an attempt by the author to represent Thailand, the author's home country, to Western audiences. With only few studies, Thai American literature is still underrepresented. Therefore, by investigating Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*, the current study aims to address the existing gap and to advance the scholarship in the Asian American literary canon.

Since Asian American literature is embedded in the diaspora experience of different ethnic groups, it articulates the identity issue as a product of their migration. To understand the diaspora identity of Asian Americans, it is important to discuss the concept of cultural identity which they have in common. According to Baskin (2024):

> Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a particular group culture, shaped by various factors such as ancestry, ethnicity, religion, and social class. It encompasses the beliefs, norms, and practices that connect individuals to their heritage and to each other, often expressed through traditions, clothing, and behaviors. (para. 1)

Similarly, Hall (1990) defines cultural identity as "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other […] which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (p. 223). Although some people, especially diasporic ones, might try to hide this cultural identity, they cannot escape from their "one true self." Cultural identity reveals people's common experiences and the cultural codes they share among their groups. Hall further states that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' [belonging] to the future as much as to the past" (p. 225). It is not something fixed but something shaped by history as well as constant transformation: "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power" (p. 225). This is the case when considering diaspora people who come with their original cultural identity and encounter the culture in their new world, thus causing the transformation of their identity.

Based on the above concept, Asian Americans' cultural identity can be considered unfixed, constituted by their past, present, and future. The cultural identity of Asian Americans is shaped by their diasporic experience, encompassing their historical background, contemporary realities, and future aspirations, ultimately resulting in a diaspora identity. According to Hall, "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (1990, p. 235). That is to say, Asian Americans' diaspora identity is interconnected with their cultural identity, both molded by their past, present, and future. In Asian American literature, memory and history particularly play a significant role in narratives regarding the authors' diaspora identity. As stated by Lim, "family, home, community, origin, loss, dislocation, relocation, racial differences, cross-cultural resistance, second-generation Americanization and assimilation, identity destabilization and reformation, as in many other American ethnic texts, are common trajectories in Asian American literature" (1997, p. 292). These issues have become important themes in this literary genre to the present. In other words, Asian American literature serves as an arena where their diaspora identity is revealed.

Thai American literature, constituting a small yet distinct subset within Asian American literature, also displays the cultural identity and diaspora identity of its authors. In this study, two literary works—Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*—are investigated and discussed to show how different traits of Thainess, as an integral part of the authors' diaspora identity, are represented to the readers.

3. Discussion

It is found in Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing* that the Thai American diaspora identity aligns with the concepts discussed above. It is constituted by the cultural identity that the authors share among their group of Thai Americans. This can be seen in how the two authors craft their literature. Unlike the first stage of Asian American literature in which the authors try to claim the

American identity (Cheung, 1997), Manning and Lapcharoensap alienate their works from the American context, choosing to represent only Thainess as their diaspora identity. These two literary works ignore life in the United States, and choose to recount the cultural identity of Thai Americans. However, although Manning and Lapcharoensap employ Thailand as the setting of their stories, they opt to represent Thainess in different dimensions. In *A Good True Thai*, Manning features the monarch as a significant trait of Thainess engraved in the heart of the Thai people. This institution is deeply respected and is a source of national pride. Contrastively, in *Sightseeing*, Lapcharoensap portrays Thainess in the form of a tourist destination and prostitution, another dimension of his home country. Despite this difference, the two books insist on representing Thai identity constituted by their shared history. The detailed discussions of these contrastive traits of Thainess are as follows.

3.1 The Monarch as a Significant Trait of Thai Diaspora Identity in A Good True Thai

A Good True Thai is the first novel by Sunisa Manning. The story is based on political turmoil in Thailand during 1973-1976, portraying different views on Thainess through two different groups of characters, the commoners and the nobles. It entered the finalist for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize in 2020, the year of its publication. According to Chia (2020), "the book, six years in the making, has arrived at a moment of incredible political upheaval in Thailand, where the meaning of 'true Thainess' is once again under question" (para. 1). By the time this novel was published, there had been political protests, demonstrations, and encounters, leading to doubts concerning Thainess which coincide with the situations happening in the story, especially the doubts regarding how Thai people view the governing system in the country, which was transformed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with a democratic form of government in 1932. This new system has been deployed to the present time, although it is not a smooth one, since there were many revolutions and coups throughout its period. Currently, a huge number of Thai people still call for a genuine form of emocracy, as they perceive that there is power suppressing their freedom and voice. In many political upheavals, the monarch was brought to be an issue which amplified the conflicts between different groups of people.

A significant trait of the Thai diaspora identity as portrayed in *A Good True Thai* is the perception of the Thais toward the monarch which also serves as their Thainess and cultural identity. According to historical accounts, Thailand, under the former name of Siam, had been governed by an absolute monarchy before the transition to democracy. The king's status was defined by the term "the lord of life" who owned all people's lives in the country (Chakrabongse, 2013). The kings in Thailand are worshipped as angels who are believed to descend from heaven to help and guard people. To date, Thai people have been taught to appreciate the bravery, sacrifice, ability, and mercy of the kings who have contributed greatly to the creation and existence of the nation. Especially in the previous reign of King Rama IX or King Bhumibol, there were a large number of narratives indicating the virtue of this king who dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the well-being of his people and the country. Loyalty and love for the king have become an important trait of the Thai identity. To represent this characteristic of Thai people, in *A Good True Thai*, Manning creates a male character who was born of a king's descent. A student at a prestigious university in Thailand, Det is a great-grandson of King Chulalongkorn, the fifth king of the Chakri Dynasty. He is considered a man of the noble class with a strong faith in his great-grandfather and the monarch as a whole. From time to time, this novel highlights the virtuous deeds of King Chulalongkorn, portraying his efforts to guide the country toward civilization and modernity, mainly to evade colonization, as in his reign, all neighboring countries fall under Western rule:

> You know how he freed the slaves. [...]. How he kept the country free when our neighbours fell to foreign powers? [...]. If Siam was seen as civilised, if the King was acknowledged as a monarch alongside other monarchs, then the West couldn't conquer us in the name of civilising the natives. (Manning, 2020, pp. 11-12)

Through the representation of King Chulalongkorn, this novel suggests that Thai people should be proud to have the monarch as part of their Thainess and identity, especially in a way that he successfully maintains the country's freedom by civilizing it. Based on history, this king employed his diplomatic skill and strategies to modernize the country to make "it possible for Thailand to survive as an independent state, the only country in South and Southeast Asia which was never colonized by a European power" (The U.S. House of Representatives, 1966, p. 75). Maintaining the country's freedom from Western colonization constitutes a significant source of spiritual pride among the Thai people. As a writer, Manning recognizes the significance of this identity and features it in her novel.

In addition to the concept of civilization, King Chulalongkorn is also praised in the novel as a key person who reforms the country in several aspects. For example, in transportation, he initiates the railway system in Siam: "King Chulalongkorn had the railways built" (Manning, 2020, p. 48). The construction of this transportation system indicates the king's great ability to develop the country under his leadership, especially when compared to other countries under Western colonialism. To illustrate, the railway system in India was built by the British Empire which ruled India from 1858-1974, while the Thai railway system could be built without the domination of Western colonialism. Furthermore, there were many more developmental projects initiated by King Chulalongkorn to drive the country to modernity and civilization, such as educational reformation, banking system, postal service, electricity system, and so on (Stengs, 2009). With all the development projects he led for the country, he has been praised as one of the greatest and most beloved kings of Thailand, and as stated by Stengs he is referred to as the great modernizer of this country. Presenting Thailand's modernization in the novel, Manning implies that her home country, as part of her diaspora identity, is not uncivilized and backward.

The representation of Thai identity through the appreciation for King Chulalongkorn in *A Good True Thai* is juxtaposed with a movement to reform the country during the 1970s, the time setting of the novel. This movement is represented through two important characters, Lek and Chang. Lek is a daughter of a Chinese family, while Chang is a son of a lower-middle-class Thai family. Det, Lek, and Chang are close

friends who are being educated at the same institution, Chulalongkorn University, the first university in Thailand, named after the above king who founded it. Unfortunately, Lek and Chang are influenced by Chit Phumisak, a Marxist historian and activist who wants to drive a communist revolution in Thailand. Historical records indicate that Chit was shot to death by the police while hiding in the forest in one of the northeastern provinces of the country. He died at the young age of 35 in 1966 (Fernandez, 2017). Although Lek and Chang are Det's friends, their status drastically differs from his because they are commoners, not belonging to the elite class like Det. Learning Marxism, Lek and Chang are against the ruling class and try to follow Chit's idealism. Their perspectives contrast with Det's belief which foregrounds the importance of the monarch, especially King Chulalongkorn, his great-grandfather. Similar to Chit, Lek and Change have to escape from the police to the jungle because they try to reprint one of Chit's books which is a taboo in Thailand. Moreover, Lek is accused of lèse-majesté because she puts a picture of farmers instead of King Chulalongkorn on the cover of Chulalongkorn University's yearbook. This action is considered an extreme disrespect for the monarch, especially the one who founded this university. Manning portrays this situation in her novel to illustrate how the monarch, as an important part of Thainess and Thai identity, is threatened by the communist agenda, which seeks to reform the nation and alter how Thailand is perceived by the international community.

The situation above indicates that there is a battle of power between the monarchy and communism in Thailand during that time. The main characters above decide to join the communists in the jungle, Lek and Chang for their ideology, and Det for his love for Lek. They spend a long time trying to move forward the ideology initiated by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) before returning to join the student protest against the tyrannical prime minister. Based on Prizzia (2019), the CPT was set up in 1925 when Chinese communist agents were sent to spread their doctrine in Thailand. Then, during 1928-1931, the CPT gained more momentum from the Vietnamese Communist Party, which penetrated the Northeast of Thailand during the Vietnam War. In the novel, Manning attempts to point out that the monarch, as part of the Thai identity, plays an important role in saving the country from communism. In other words, due to a deep-rooted reverence for the monarchy, the majority of the Thai populace resists the imposition of the communist regime, thereby rendering any attempts at its dominance and transformation of the nation largely ineffective.

In addition to the portrayal of King Chulalongkorn, Manning also brings King Bhumibol, the ninth king of the Chakri Dynasty, into the scene. The appearance of King Bhumibol in the novel asserts the importance of the monarch. As depicted in the story, King Bhumibol is renowned for his benevolence and profound compassion toward his people. For example, during a protest against the government, soldiers are deployed to break up the mob. A large number of protesters escape from bombs and bullets into the palace of the king who saves their lives and provides them with food and shelter. His protection and kindness warm the hearts and boost the morale of the protesters: "The King's on our side, [...]. The King supports the people" (Manning, 2020, p. 91). Despite the king's rescue, Lek still does not change her negative attitude toward the monarch because communist ideology is deeply ingrained in her psyche. Her belief is challenged by Det, who argues that love for the king is an essential part of the Thai identity: "It's something you're born with. It can't be explained to outsiders; it's in us, lodged in us, from birth" (Manning, 2020, p. 166). This statement reflects the perception of Thai people regarding their identity. Especially for King Bhumibol, it is well known that Thai people love him for his dedication to the country and his love for the people. With his numerous royal projects and other attempts for the betterment of the people's lives and the nation, he is among the greatest kings in the history of Thailand. As stated by Smith (2022), although he faced a formidable challenge from communism during his reign, he led the country through the crisis and successfully maintained the constitutional monarchy in Thailand.

King Bhumibol can be likened to King Chulalongkorn in their significant efforts to modernize the nation, aiming to improve the quality of life for their people. Smith further states, "There is no doubt to the fact that King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol Adulyadej epitomize great leadership by demonstrating actively how benevolent but powerful heads of state can contribute to the betterment of their country and people" (2022, para. 13). With the two kings' great efforts and success in improving the nation and the life of the Thai people, there is no doubt that the monarch is represented as a significant trait of Thainess which is part of the Thai cultural identity in *A Good True Thai*. Such an identity then transforms into the diaspora identity of Manning, the author of this novel, who neither abandons it nor claims to be fully American. As suggested by this novel, a good true Thai must revere and love their monarch because of its virtue and being a part of the Thai identity. Although Manning has become an American citizen, she does not conceal this part of her diaspora identity, but features it in her writing.

3.2 Tourist Destination and Prostitution as Part of Thainess and Thai Diaspora Identity in Sightseeing

Sightseeing is a collection of short stories by Rattawut Lapcharoensap, which received the prestigious Asian American Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award. In addition, it won the "5 Under 35 Award" in 2006 by the National Book Foundation, offered annually to five writers under 35 years of age. Containing six stories, this book depicts contemporary Thailand in different dimensions through the views of young characters growing up in the Thai context. Their stories reveal Thai culture and ways of life, offering many traits of Thainess to readers. The settings of the stories include an island and Bangkok, two sites among the most famous destinations in Asia for foreign visitors to Thailand. In fact, according to Tersch (2023), two places in Thailand ranked the third and sixth most popular attractions in Asia (Phuket Island and Chiang Mai respectively), suggesting that Thailand is among the most fascinating countries in Asia for tourists to explore.

In contrast to the above novel, *Sightseeing* portrays two different aspects of Thainess: the depiction of Thailand as a tourist destination and its simultaneous representation as a land associated with prostitution. Especially for the latter aspect, "Thailand hosts one of the largest prostitution markets in the world, per capita. […] Thailand is known internationally as a major sex tourism site" (Weitzer, 2023, p. 1). These two images are among the well-known concepts about Thailand in the eyes of foreigners, which have also become parts of the Thai identity.

In "Farangs," the first story in *Sightseeing*, this part of Thainess is represented through the life of a single mom's family, who owns a small motel on an unnamed island, a famous tourist destination, in Thailand. This story also implies that Thailand is a sex tourism site as mentioned above, since an important purpose of foreign tourists is to enjoy prostitution. The story is told through the motel owner's son, a teenage boy who falls in love with a *Farang* girl. *Farang* is the Thai term that has been used since the ancient Thai era to refer to white Westerners. According to Kittiarsa (2010), this term is derived from the name Frank, "which originally referred to a Germanic-speaking people in the region of modern France which came to be widely used in early medieval Egypt, Greece and other Mediterranean areas to refer to Western Europeans in general" (pp. 60-61). Contacting Muslim and Persian traders in the Ayutthaya period, Siamese people borrowed this term from them to refer to the Portuguese, the first group with a significant number who came to Siam in that era. Since then, the term *Farang* has been used by Thai people to refer to white Westerners until the present time.

Thailand, as a tourist destination, is portrayed in "Farangs" in a way that Thai people view foreigners, especially tourists. Through the eyes of the unnamed narrator, those tourists are the main source of income for the locals who have to deal with those tourists daily. Those foreigners are from different parts of the world with different cultures and habits. The narrator provides interesting information about foreign tourists on the island:

> June: the Germans come to the Island–football cleats, big T-shirt, thick tongues–speaking like spitting. July, the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. [...] The French like plump girls, rambutants, disco music, baring their breasts. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. [...] They're also the worst drunks. Never get too close to a drunk American. August brings the Japanese. Stay close to them. Never underestimate the power of the yen. Everything's cheap with imperial monies [sic] in hand and they're too polite to bargain. (Lapcharoensap, 2006, p. 1)

The above excerpt indicates that Thailand is a tourist paradise attracting people from many countries. Moreover, it reveals Thai people's perceptions of foreign tourists who are not only *Farangs*, but also those from other Asian countries. Apart from the narrator's view on foreigners, there is a representation of *Farangs* through the view of his mother, who has to attend to them all year round, revealing important natures and real purposes of those tourists. In her perspective, these foreigners show minimal interest in Thai culture or the local ways of life, focusing instead on superficial attractions such as women and elephants:

> "Pussy and elephants. That's all these people want." She always says this in August, at the season's peak, when she's tired of farangs running all over the Island, tired of finding used condoms in the motel's rooms [...] "You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating markets, seafood curry, tapioca desserts, silk-weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking gray beast like a bunch of wildmen and to pant over girls and to lie there half-dead getting skin cancer on the beach during the time in between." (Lapcharoensap, 2006, p. 2)

In addition to the mother's negative view of *Farangs*, there is also a representation of culture as part of Thainess in the above quote. Her statement suggests that Thai people are proud of their cultural identity, which they seek to present to foreigners. In general, it is common to see foreign tourists visiting famous Thai temples in Bangkok and other cultural sites in the country. Another important activity is to bring them to cultural shows featuring Thai classical music accompanied by classical dances during dinner with Thai cuisine. Despite all these activities, the mother concludes that eventually the *Farangs*, especially the males, will focus only on Thai women and elephants, the two exotic features in their imagination. Mentioning Thai women, in particular, implies that an important part of Thainess in the eyes of Westerners is prostitution. This is in agreement with Said (1978), a prominent scholar in postcolonialism, who critiques the Western view on the East or the Orient, arguing that the East offers exotic sexual experiences which cannot be obtained in the Western world. Thailand, as part of the Eastern world, cannot avoid being seen in such a way, becoming a land of business which Weitzer (2023) calls sex tourism.

It is clearer in the second story, "At the Café Lovely," that prostitution is among the recognized images of Thailand in the eyes of Westerners. This is in line with the above story and also many Westerners' imagination that this country is a destination where individuals seek to fulfill their sexual desires. In this story, the naïve-boy narrator urges his older brother to bring him to experience a night café located in a small neighborhood in Bangkok. An innocent boy, he never imagines that there is prostitution in this area, but believes the night café is simply a fun place for boys to hang out. Arriving at the place, the narrator is astounded to see that it is not only a café, but also a brothel, the place where his brother frequently visits to have an erotic moment with his favorite girl. The scene the narrator sees in front of him is some girls taking care of their customers and other girls waiting to be called to service:

> A couple of girls in miniskirts and tank tops and heavy makeup danced and swayed with two balding, middle-aged local men [...] their large hands gripping the girls' slender waists. In a dark corner, more girls were seated at a table, laughing. They sounded like a flock of excited birds. I'd never seen so many girls in my life. (Lapcharoensap, 2006, pp. 36-37)

With many girls ready for service, this place is a destination for lonely men to seek their comfort, not only middle-aged men, but also teenage boys like the narrator's brother. The picture of the sexy girls dancing and laughing excitedly also indicates the place's liveliness which invites thirsty customers to their services. Even more distressing, there is a very young girl who is under 16, offering her body as a commodity. Her presence in this story suggests that teenage prostitution exists in Thailand:

> She couldn't have been more than sixteen years old–younger than my brother–but it seemed clear to me now that she was the one holding him, directing his course, leading him. I wondered how many men she had held up tonight, how many more she would hold in the thousands of nights before her. (Lapcharoensap, 2006, pp. 45-46)

Although the girl is still young, she appears highly experienced in her job, confidently leading her customer without any awkwardness. This suggests that she has served numerous customers throughout her career as a prostitute. It is poignant that she has to do this job instead of going to school like other girls her age. The narrator's experience at this café suggests that prostitution is available not only in brothels, but also in other places. According to Weitzer's study on prostitution in Thailand, "When people think of prostitution, they often think of the street sector, but off-street commerce is far more common. It takes place in brothels, bars, massage parlors, hotels, residences, cafés, beauty salons, and karaoke clubs" (2023, pp. 15-16). Behind the facades of these service businesses, Thai girls are waiting for hungry customers.

Based on historical accounts, prostitution was flourishing during the Vietnam War, when Thailand was established as a U.S. military base. With a large number of American soldiers and personnel in Thailand, many people saw great business opportunities. Many nightclubs, restaurants, bars, and brothels were set up to serve those soldiers. As stated by Baker and Phongpaichit (2005, pp. 149), many new businesses, such as "bars, nightclubs, brothels, and massage palours" were started and operated on "American strip," a road in Bangkok, since Thailand was "chosen for the GIs' R&R ('rest and recreation') tours." The American strip is still operated until the present time under the name Patpong District, where foreign tourists, especially *Farangs*, enjoy its colorful nightlife. Thailand was not in a war zone during the Vietnam War, so it was a good place for American soldiers to unwind from the battles. Apart from the American strip in Bangkok, Pattaya, a beach city in the eastern region of the country, was also another talked-about place among the Americans, where alcohol and women were always ready for them. Surprisingly, in Bangkok alone, the number of prostitutes rose to about 300,000 during this period, and the government even wanted more because they attracted tourists and helped stimulate the Thai economy (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005). Since then, Thailand has been known among Americans and other Westerners as a paradise for men. Although it is a negative reputation, prostitution has also become a part of Thainess perceived by those people.

There is also a connection between the Vietnam War and the first story, "Farangs" in *Sightseeing*, regarding the narrator's background. His father, an American soldier, comes to Thailand during the Vietnam War, probably for the R&R purpose, and falls in love with his mother. It is not mentioned in the story whether they marry each other, but their consummation gives birth to the narrator. It is interesting to notice that he demands the narrator to call him Sergeant instead of Daddy: "'Not Daddy,' I remember him saying in English, my first and only language at the time. 'Sergeant. Sergeant Handerson'" (Lapcharoensap, 2006, p. 5). This form of addressing suggests that there is no strong bond between Sergeant Henderson and the narrator, his son, who is seen as simply a byproduct of his sexual pleasure. Eventually, this Sergeant leaves the narrator and his mother for America when he is at a very young age, promising to send for them. Unfortunately, the Sergeant neither does it nor comes back to Thailand again. His departure suggests that he is not serious about the relationship between himself, his wife, and his son, but sees them as only a source of temporary comfort. Since he disallows his son to call him daddy, it is indicated that he intentionally avoids emotional intimacy. In doing so, he can leave at will without feeling emotionally attached.

There are other traits of Thainess presented in *Sightseeing*, such as the common life of Thai people, family relationships, and culture in particular areas, serving as the Thai cultural identity. However, the most prominent dimension of Thailand appearing in this book is the country's status as a tourist destination and a land of prostitution. These two traits are interrelated, since prostitution, as implied in "Farangs," is an important factor that attracts tourists to this country, leading to a notorious image of sex tourism. For Lapcharoensap, an Asian American writer, these two traits of Thainess have become parts of his diaspora identity perceived by Western people, especially those familiar with Thailand in these two aspects. By incorporating this part of his diaspora identity in his literary work, Lapcharoensap reveals a truth about Thailand, which the Thai people are not comfortable talking about. With its renowned status as a tourist destination, prostitution is the hidden reality.

4. Conclusion

This study indicates that Manning's *A Good True Thai* and Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*, as Thai American literature, represent Thainess as parts of their cultural and diaspora identity in different dimensions. These two books portray the key aspects of Thailand that Thai people share in common, which become parts of the authors' diaspora identity emerging in their writings. The monarch, as represented in the first book, has existed in this country since ancient times, playing an important role in Thai society, especially in maintaining the freedom of the Thais, who are proud of the fact that their country has never been colonized by any Western countries. Set in the era of the communist threat, the representation of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol suggests that this institution helps intensify Thainess and the sense of belonging among the Thai people, preventing them from falling to the communist regime. The novel suggests that genuine Thai identity involves reverence for the monarch, along with love and loyalty toward the kings. While *A Good True Thai* represents an institution that Thai people are proud of, *Sightseeing* reveals a different side of the country, a famous tourist destination and prostitution. Although tourism is a highlight, this book also features prostitution, a serious form of sexual abuse and human trafficking. The image of Thailand appearing in this book is more familiar to Western readers, especially the Americans, whose history during the Vietnam War is involved with this country, which was established as an R&R place known among the American soldiers during that time.

In addition to the portrayal of the Thai American diaspora identity, this study manifests that *A Good True Thai* and *Sightseeing* differ from Asian American literature in the early stages, in which Asian American authors attempted to claim their American identity, to be seen as fully American, because they wanted to be included in the body of the American nation. However, in the later stages, there has been an attempt to bridge America to Asia through the representation of the authors' homelands (Cheung, 1997). They provide their backgrounds regarding their home countries to show that Asia is an important part of their identities. By doing so, their works connect America to their home countries in Asia. Furthermore, it can be argued that they seek to preserve their Asian identities while urging Americans to recognize and accept them as Asian Americans, not just full Americans. Based on this transformation, this identity aligns with the concept of diaspora

identity proposed by Hall (1990), which is fluid, shaped by the past as well as the present. This idea is also applied to Manning and Lapcharoensap, who possess diaspora identity, as their literary works examined in this study do not depict life in the United States; instead, they focus solely on the context of Thailand, their country of origin. That is to say, although they live in the United States, they do not abandon the cultural identity of their home country, which constitutes their diaspora identity, revealing their common experience and cultural codes shared among their group. Through *A Good True Thai* and *Sightseeing*, readers gain more perceptions about Thainess and the background of Thai American people. Thainess, as portrayed in these two books, is asserted as an integral component of their Asian American diasporic identity, embedded within their psychology.

Acknowledgments

This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University.

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

This research project was financially supported by the Division of Research Facilitation and Dissemination Mahasarakham University.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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