

# Vietnam from the Poetic Perspective of Naowarat Pongpaiboon in “*Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*”<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines the image of Vietnam from the perspective of Naowarat Pongpaiboon in his poetry collection, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* (2014). Through a textual analysis of the book together with data obtained by interviewing the writer, it finds that Naowarat’s poetry portrays Vietnam through three aspects. First, the country has beautiful natural settings with diverse landscapes that harmonize with and support human life. Second, Vietnam has a rich civilization with a long-developed history, cultural values and customs. Third, the Vietnamese are a gracious people, respected for their bravery and love of art and peace. This picture of Vietnam is positive and poetic, making it distinct from the Thai perception of Vietnam in the past. It reflects the poet’s respect for and admiration of Vietnam, a change in Thai awareness and perspective of its neighboring countries, and the flourishing Thai-Vietnamese relationship at present.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Naowarat Pongpaiboon, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*

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## Introduction

Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country of close proximity to Thailand with frequent and multi-dimensioned contacts, has been portrayed in a number of Thai writings, including historical documents, documentaries, novels and travelogues. Among this diverse corpus, the poetry collection, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* (“Writing about the Golden Land - Vietnam”) (2014), by Naowarat Pongpaiboon presents a distinctly romanticized image of Vietnam and Vietnamese people.

It goes without saying that Naowarat Pongpaiboon<sup>2</sup> is an illustrious name in Thai contemporary poetry, recognized for his lyrical rhyme and exquisite metaphors as well as his love of nature and support for social movements in the 1970s. He won a S.E.A. Write Award in 1980<sup>3</sup> and was titled Thailand’s National Artist in 1993 for his contributions. Naowarat’s recent *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum* projects are remarkable not only for his brilliant poems but also for their portrayal of positive images of Southeast Asian countries like Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, etc. In fact, these projects are a continuation of his earlier work, *Khian Phaendin* (“Writing about the Homeland”), in which he travelled to all 73 provinces (at that time) of Thailand and wrote poetry to describe what he saw as his beautiful, prosperous, artistic homeland in dedication to Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit on her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, marking her fifth 12-year cycle. Ten years later in 2004, he continued the idea by stepping outside Thailand to its closest neighbor, Laos, and after another decade, renewed the project with Vietnam in 2014, followed by Malaysia, Cambodia and Myanmar not long after. Naowarat was determined to praise the beauty of neighboring countries and communicate to the Thai people the emotions evoked by their landscapes and cultures. Among the collections (all sponsored by the Ministry of Culture), *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* represents the

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<sup>2</sup> Transliteration (or Romanization) of Thai language in this article follows the Royal Institute’s system, except for proper names which are used by the owners and/ or have been widely recognized in publications and the media. URL: [http://www.royin.go.th/?page\\_id=619](http://www.royin.go.th/?page_id=619)

<sup>3</sup> The 1980 award recognized his collection of poems, *Mere Movement*, which concerns the sacrifice of the young generation for democracy in the face of brutal police crackdowns in the 1970s.

beginning of Naowarat’s serious attempt to give Thai readers a portrayal of countries in the region that is new in its romanticized images, articulated in poetry and publicized in mixed media<sup>4</sup>.

This article examines the images of Vietnam from Naowarat’s poetic perspective in this book. The data are from primary sources including an interview with him and a textual analysis of *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*. The construction of images is examined using the discourse analysis approach, which concentrates on how discourse and discursive practices produce knowledge. Discourse is defined as “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, Evans, and Nixon, 2013: xxii). Discourse is treated here not as a linguistic concept, but as a model of how people in a culture use systems of signs, such as words, symbols, etc., to make meanings. Therefore, a discourse operates within a specific society in a certain historical context. The historical and cultural conditions of the period in which this collection of poems was created will be examined to understand the long-standing Thai perception of Vietnam, and the extent to which it has persisted or changed. In addition, the poet, his background as a member of society and his motivations in creating the specific work are also taken into account.

First, major images of Vietnam in the poet’s eyes will be examined through his descriptions in the poems. The analysis is supplemented with essential information about Vietnam, the poet’s view of the country and his intention in creating this project. Next, the images are compared with previous and existing portrayals of Vietnam to demonstrate the originality of Naowarat’s representation. Overall, this article will provide insight into Vietnam from Naowarat’s poetic perspective and the project’s contribution to the development of Thai poetry portraying neighboring countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Naowarat and a production team from the National Broadcasting Television (Thai Channel 11) were sent to the country. When arriving at a place, Naowarat would look for a place representing the atmosphere or meaning of the place and most suitable to his ideas and imagination. While he was composing on location, the place and his work were filmed. In the documentaries, Naowarat recited his poems to narrate his impressions of Vietnam and his journey.

## Images of Vietnam in *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*

*Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*, a collection of 40 poems about places and people across the country, is the result of five trips to Vietnam. Naowarat and his team traveled to all of the important places in the country, from northern-most provinces like Dien Bien, Lao Cai, Son La, through big cities of three regions including Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Hue, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Ho Chi Minh City, to southern areas in the Mekong Delta and Can Tho. Naowarat writes about places famous for their natural beauty like Ha Long Bay, Perfume River, Cam Li Waterfall, Phong Nha Cave, well-known historical sites such as Hoa Lu, Ben Hai Bridge, Cu Chi Tunnel, and ethnic minorities including Tai and Gia Rai groups. Textual analysis reveals the poems' concurrence in portraying positive and present images of Vietnam through three main themes: diverse natural beauty, a rich history and culture and dignified people.

### Vietnam's Diverse Natural Surroundings

Naowarat is a nature lover at heart. Nature is one of the most important inspirations in his poetry in addition to love, Buddhism and society (Limplertsathien, 1996). His love of nature was formed and nurtured throughout his childhood. He was born in 1940 in a rural area of Kanchanaburi province and had a peaceful childhood during which he was close to nature, surrounded by gardens and forests around his house (Wetchasuwan, 2000: 11, 15). *Khian Phaendin* is also very much about nature. In his preface, Naowarat said that he was determined to "write about the homeland," focusing on Thailand's natural beauty rather than man-made works, and to record it before it would be exploited and totally destroyed.

When he travelled across Vietnam, Naowarat was mesmerized by Vietnamese's natural surroundings. Vietnam is a long, slender S-shaped country, about 1,650 kilometers in length and home to a wide variety of landscapes including river deltas, mountains, coastline, and cities. With deep emotion Naowrarat describes diverse scenery from north to south: spectacular mountainous areas like Sapa, Son La, vast

seascapes such as Da Nang, Nha Trang, caves (Phong Nha), beaches (Mui Ne), lakes (Sword Lake) and rivers (Red River, Perfume River, Mekong River).

Nature displays its diversity not only through the range and number of places across the country, but also in the variety of faces and features of each place. In the following poem about the red sand beach of Mui Ne, each sentence is like a piece of an intricate jigsaw puzzle, each piece contributing to a stunning picture. The recurring word, “*thi*” [the place where...] at the beginning of each line emphasizes that whichever spot Naowarat turned his eyes to, he discovered a spectacular masterpiece.

ที่ที่ฟ้าจรดน้ำ น้ำจรดทราย	The place where sky meets sea, sea meets sand <sup>5</sup>
ที่ที่พรายพวยคลื่นพริ้วแผ่วพลิ้วไหว	The place where waves so gently sway
ที่คลื่นเมฆคลืนน้ำจ้ำगरะโอ	The place where clouds touch sea, dewy air
ที่ทรายแดงแสงใสละไมละมุน	The place where red sand shines soft and bright
ที่คลื่นทรายพลิ้วเส้นเป็นภูทราย	The place where sand draws lines into dunes
ที่สนรายชายหาดปาดสีฝุ่น	The place where pine trees stretch along the beach
ที่ที่ฟ้าทาทองรองอรุณ	The place where dawn paints sky in golden stains
ที่แดดอุ่นอวลกระโออบทรายแดง	The place where warm sun kisses red sand
ที่แนวเนินทรายขาวผุดพราวผ่อง	The place where white sand dazzles like silver
ที่ถิ่นท้องทะเลสาบพลอยอาบแสง	The place where green lakes bathe in sunlight
ที่เงางำลำดับค่อยปรับเปลี่ยน	The place where light and shade dance together
ที่เรียงแรงแห่งตะวันจักบันดล...	The place where sun inspires high spirits...
(ทะเลทรายสองสี)	(Two-color sand beach, p. 249)

Here, Naowarat captures the beauty of a beach through his fluid rhyme, musical vocabulary and vivid imagery. While an ordinary person might describe the red and white sand dunes in just a sentence or two, Naowarat writes three verses containing the same ingredients—sky, sand, sunlight, sea and sand. And with the alliteration of initial consonants like /*phr*/ (*phraophrai*, *phriu phaeo*, *phliu*, *phut phrao phong*)

<sup>5</sup> Translations of all the quoted excerpts are by the author of this article. Poems of this genre should be read in 3/2/3 or 3/3/3 chunks and the translations try to follow this rhyme.

and clusters of internal rhymes, such as “*sai daeng saeng sai lamun lamai*”, “*fa tha thong rong arun*”, “*daet un uon kra-ai op*”, “*ngao ngam lam dap khoi prap-praeng*”, the fluid language captures the subtle movements of the landscape.

Nature in Vietnam in Naowarat’s portrayal is rarely a beauty-complete-in-itself. Instead nature is often seen as close and kind to people, accommodating and supporting the nation.

...ไหลหมอกลอยหมึกเมฆลอย  
 พร้อยพร้อยสร้อยแสงตะวันส่อง  
 ภูหนาวเคล้าคล้ายกระไอละออง  
 ประคับประคองแผ่นดิน ...  
 (ซาปา)

Flowing fog, floating clouds - like ink  
 Shimmering softly - light from the sun  
 Blurring under mist - cold mountains  
 Nurturing all the land of Vietnam  
 (Sa Pa, p.53)

...ทิวผาภูรับกระซิบฟ้า  
 สองน้ำสายซ้ายขวามาตั้งต้น  
 เป็นน้ำแดงเลี้ยงแผ่นดินพระภูวดล  
 เลี้ยงผู้คนคงอยู่คู่ปฐพี...  
 (หล้าวกาย)

Mountain range upholds, encloses sky  
 Two rivers left and right join in one  
 Red River bears and rears, carries earth  
 Breeds and feeds both people and the land  
 (Lao Cai, p.67)

Although nature sometimes is described as threatening to the people, who experience its sometimes devastating force, in the end the description highlights their spirit in withstanding natural disasters:

...ที่พายุดุกล้าผ่าประจัน  
 ที่ใจคนแกร่งเกิดจุดเม็ดทราย  
 (ทะเลทรายสองสี)

The place where rough storms roar - free and wild  
 The place where people’s hearts hard as sand  
 (Two-color sand beach, p.249)

To sum up, nature in Vietnam is portrayed as beautiful, diverse and dynamic, existing in harmony with human life and supporting the development of Vietnam.

### Vietnam’s Rich Culture

The second aspect of Vietnam that Naowarat emphasizes is its cultural and historical richness. His poems acknowledge its long-standing civilization through the many places he saw and the stories he heard along the way. Vietnam’s rich culture and history are related through descriptions of tangible manifestations, such as the old citadels of Hanoi and Hue, Cham sandstone or brick temples, indigenous musical instruments like the *cong* and *chieng* (ฆ้องชัย), as well as spiritual values like ancient tales, pilgrimages to distant temples (วัดพายัพไหว้พระ), music, performance and literature. In the following extract, Naowarat borrows scenes from a water puppet performance to tell stories about Vietnamese history and culture. In this unique folk art, artisans design wooden puppets which they manipulate to perform on a water stage. The performance tells many tales about Vietnamese history, such as one about the establishment of Ha Noi as the capital after a king saw a dragon flying there more than a thousand years ago; and the tale of Sword Lake, in which a king was given a magical sword bringing him victory and was asked to return it to the Turtle God at the lake.

...คืนกระบี่ล้างบาปปราบประลัย	Return sword, clean sins, win rivals
มังกรทองคะนองไฟคลั่งไลหน	Golden dragon exhales fires, flies to sky
หุ่นนินยาย สายน้ำ ย้ำให้ยล	Puppet scenes, clear water - both mirror
เรื่องราวของผู้คนบนแผ่นดิน	Stories of the people in this land
(หุ่นน้ำ)	(Water puppet, p.232)

Diverse ways of life are reflected in the livelihoods and activities of ethnic minorities like the Black and White Tai in the north (เตี๋ยนเปี๋ยนฟู, บ้านหัวถนน) and the Gia Rai in the central highlands (เผ่าจाराย). All are described as living simple and peaceful lives, doing agriculture and having their own folk beliefs. The Tai plant rice and vegetables in small fields up high in the mountains, worship a god called Phaya Thaen and believe in the tale that humans originally came from a gourd. Meanwhile, the Gia Rai plant coffee, raise cattle, gather in a traditional longhouse, and use their special bronze musical instruments as a means to

communicate with their group members, both living and deceased.

Moreover, Vietnam also has a cherished body of literature, respected writers and a highly developed language system, as seen in the lines below:

หมึกเขียวเรียวยาวขอบคาง	Green ink, brush strokes help frame
กระดาดฟ้ามาปาดเป็นเส้นสี	Lines, colors on the sky like paper
สูงศักดิ์อักษรกลอนพรี	He honors and devotes through poetry
คารวะกวีประชาชน	The poet of people, we pay respect
(คารวะกวี)	(Paying respect to a poet, p.155)

In addition to being impressed by the work of well-known Vietnamese poets, Naowarat is also fascinated by the Vietnamese language's similarity with the Thai language in sounds, tones and linguistic roots. He considers this an endless source for composing verses and even uses a Vietnamese verse form to write some poems in this book, which will be referred to later.

Frequently Naowarat extols the greatness of such cultural values; at times he is moved to see cultural identities and values visible in the simple lifestyle of the Vietnamese. The currents of traditional culture never stop overflowing in their daily life. The regular four-word pace, the repeat of certain sounds (/t/, /s/, /m/) and phases (“*tang ko to kan*”, “*yu di chong di*”) echo the continuity of Vietnamese culture:

	ตึกกว้างร้านกว้าง	Huge homes, vast shops	
แต่งห้องต่อห้อง	ตั้งก่อต่อกัน	Deck rooms, build malls	Set up, expand
สืบเชื้อสืบสาย	สายน้ำสัมพันธ์	Grant, inherit	The string of bond
ตั้งก่อต่อกัน	สันติสามัคคี	Set up, expand	Peace and unity
	เลียบเมื่อรอบเมือง	Along, around	
ประทับใจประเทือง	อยู่ดีจึงดี	The charming town	May you be well
มากมายสารทศ	มากมิตรไมตรี	In every way	Have many friends
อยู่ดีจึงดี	เกิดชาวโห้ยาน	May you be well,	Hoi An people
	(โคมโห้ยาน)		(Hoi An lantern, p.123)

### Dignified Vietnamese People

The third aspect of Vietnam that Naowarat is impressed with is its dignified people. Their dignity in Naowarat’s eyes is the courage of warriors and nation-builders and protectors; at the same time, they always have art and beauty in their hearts.

Naowarat praises the spirit of its brave people in many poems. The image of the Vietnamese as strong-spirited fighters is constructed in contrast with brutal natural disasters and war enemies.

...ที่ฟ้ากว้างน้ำกว้างดานั่งกว้าง  
คนยังทำยังสร้างยังฝ่าข้าม  
พายุกล้าฟ้าฝนคำรณคำราม  
สู้สงครามชีวิตพิชิตชัยฯ  
(น่านน้ำดานั่ง)

Vast sea, vast sky, vast Da Nang  
Humans here still build, overcome  
All the storms - severe and fierce  
Strive to win wars and all obstacles  
(Da Nang Sea, p.117)

Historical sites like Vinh Moc Tunnel and Cu Chi Tunnel are mentioned to highlight the spirit of the people there. In Vinh Moc village, some 300 inhabitants had to dig tunnels to use as underground shelters from American bombing. From 1966 to 1972, sixty families lived in the nearly three-kilometer, three-level tunnels. It is estimated that an average of seven tons of bombs was dropped on each villager during these years. The second network of tunnels was dug in Cu Chi district by Vietnamese guerilla troops to combat the better-supplied American and South Vietnamese forces. Running under the jungle terrain for a distance of more than 200 kilometers, it played an important role in guerrilla attacks on Sai Gon.

...ขุดใจก็เจอใจ  
เป็นใจแม่เป็นใจเมือง  
ขุดแค้นไว้ฝังเคือง  
กับทุกข์เข็ญแห่งสงคราม  
ไล่ล้างแผ่นดินเลือด  
อันเดือดลวกด้วยไฟลาม

Dig heart to find heart  
Heart of the Motherland  
Dig to hide all hatred  
Deep sorrows from the wars  
Clean the bleeding land  
Burnt, injured, full of pain

เลือดนี้แหละเวียดนาม  
ยังหล่อตัวยังเลี้ยงดิน...

(อุโมงค์กู๋จี)

This blood of Vietnam  
Running wild for homeland

(Cu Chi Tunnel, p.243)

The image of Vietnamese people is also portrayed by the man they consider their leader, President Ho Chi Minh, who fought with all his courage and led them to success:

...พลิกดินเป็นดาววาวโรจน์  
ประชาชนตีประชาชาติหยัดอยู่  
ผ่านศึก พันศึก ศัตรู  
ประธานโฮจิมินห์สู้ชาติใจ  
ยามชาติขาดไร่ใจร้าง  
ประธานโฮจิมินห์สร้างใจใหม่  
กู้ชาติกู้ชนกู้ชัย  
ประธานโฮจิมินห์ให้เวียดนาม

(บ้านลุงโฮ)

...Turn soil into stars shining bright  
People fight, country stands solidly  
Conquering hundreds of enemies  
Ho Chi Minh dedicates life and heart  
When homeland falls hard, loses heart  
Ho Chi Minh builds new spirit  
Saves country, saves people, saves triumph  
Ho Chi Minh brings all to Vietnam

(Uncle Ho's house, p.205)

One important aspect related to the dignified nature of Vietnamese people is that they have justice on their side. Naowarat points out that in their wars against enemies, the Vietnamese tried to protect the peace and sovereignty of their country.

...สงครามเป็นธรรมกำชัย  
ทุกยุคทุกสมัย  
สงครามแห่งธรรมระยำยับ  
สะพานแห่งสันติสดับ  
เพลงกาลخانขับ  
ประโคมสัจจะอนันตกาล  
ผู้ใดคือผู้รุกราน  
ผู้ใดบันดาล  
คานติวิถีเป็นธรรม

(สะพานเบนไห่)

Justice is to win wars  
Every time  
Evil falls to its knees, quivering  
Bridge of Peace listening  
Eternal songs  
Saluting the truth of all times  
Those who invade  
Those who create  
The peaceful way gets justice

(Ben Hai Bridge, p.225)

If we read the verses aloud, we can realize that the sound and rhythm of these poems are not as gently melodious as those about nature, nor are they joyous or serene like those about culture and lifestyle. Instead, Naowarat chose verse forms with fewer syllables in a line, and rhymes in shorter chunks with powerful sounds. These literary techniques help highlight the image of the Vietnamese strong people.

However, Vietnamese people are depicted not only as having a fighting spirit, but also possessing a love of art and culture. They desire not only national independence but also personal freedom in developing fully. Han Mac Tu<sup>6</sup> whose work is referred to in the line below, is one example of the noble soul of the Vietnamese:

...เขียนโลกเขียนรักจากใจ  
ประจักษ์จริงยิ่งใหญ่อักษร  
ใจเวียงใจวังมังกร  
นิรันดรความงามและความดี

(คารวะกวี)

Write world, write love from the heart  
Great values, true love for language  
Strong heart, grand soul - like a dragon  
Forever ever - goodness and beauty

(Pay respect to a poet, p.155)

Naowarat sums up the extraordinary appeal of Vietnam in the last poem of *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum - Vietnam* as follows:

... มีทะเลไร่นาภูเขาผ่อง  
มีคัลลองแบบฉบับให้นับถือ  
มีคัลลองแบบฉบับให้นับถือ  
แผ่นดินนี้มีชื่อว่า “เวียดนาม”

(เสน่ห์เวียดนาม)

... Vast sea, green fields, lovely hills  
Rich values and customs to respect  
Heroic people well-known world-wide  
All comprise this land named Vietnam

(Vietnam’s charms, p.271)

<sup>6</sup> Han Mac Tu is a well-known Vietnamese poet, recognized since the age of eighteen. It was a pity that he caught leprosy, an infectious disease that caused severe, disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage. Because of the terrifying damaged appearance which was incurable at that time, leprosy patients were isolated and treated with humiliation and stigmas. Han Mac Tu’s tragic life consisted of many conflicts: a young intellectual suffering from endless, bitter physical and emotional pains, and a strong character but sensitive soul. Romantic poems in his early creative life later turned into a dark phase, the so-called “crazy poetry.” Despite this life crisis, these years, lasting from 1930 to 1940 - when he died at the age of twenty-eight - were considered his creative “golden” time in which he composed countless beautiful verses about youth, friendship, love and life.

## Outstanding Features of Naowarat's Image of Vietnam

From the analysis of extracts in the previous section, Naowarat's romanticized, positive, poetic image of Vietnam and obvious admiration of the country is obvious. His tone and voice are in accordance with the objectives of this project, which aims to portray the country from an art and cultural perspective and to promote mutual friendship. In other words, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum - Vietnam* reflects not only Naowarat's gentle, romantic worldview but also the development of his personal perspective of the country which inspired him.

In an interview with on March 1, 2018, Naowarat told me that his understanding of Vietnam has changed through time and can be divided into three periods. He was born and grew up in Kanchanaburi province, where a "Yuan" or Vietnamese community nearby resided in harmony with Thai and Chinese communities. Growing up among many Thai-Vietnamese schoolmates as well as *wat Yuan* or Vietnamese Buddhist temples and Vietnamese abbots, Naowarat innately accepted them as part of his society without any discrimination. The second phase was during the Vietnam War. Naowarat, like the majority of Thai society, was provided with the image of Vietnam as a villain. This image in the Thai perception at that time was heavily influenced by the American and Thai governments' propaganda and the stories of Thai military troops going to fight in South Vietnam. "Vietnam" was associated with "cruel" *Viet Cong* or the Vietnamese communists in the Vietnam War and later the students in the 6 October 1976 incident<sup>7</sup>; the two groups were considered by some Thai people to be external and internal threats to Thai security. While they imprinted a negative image of Vietnam in the Thai perception for many years as some Thai people were afraid of communist connections or influence, it marked a change

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<sup>7</sup> In October 1976, four to five thousand students and their supporters gathered to protest the return to Thailand of Thanom Kittikachorn, a military dictator who was forced into exile in 1973. Thai society during that time feared that communism would soon spread to Thailand from its neighbors, China, Laos and Vietnam. Right-wing groups accused the student protesters of being communists, anti-Buddhist, anti-royal and having Vietnamese origin. The situation ended up in a massacre at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976, later referred to as the "Hok Tula" Incident. (Beemer, 1997: 1-8)

in Naowarat’s understanding of the country. He joined a group of intellectuals to study social science, socialism, Marxism and ways of life in neighboring countries, and thus, adjusted his worldview and attitude. His early breakaway from political prejudices against socialism can be considered the turning point in the evolution of Naowarat’s perspective of Vietnam. Subsequently, his first-hand experiences from several trips to Vietnam formulated his insightful understanding of the reality of contemporary Vietnam. He was a delegate in former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun’s visit to Vietnam in 1992, soon after the settlement of the Kampuchean dispute in 1991, as well as the two governments’ foreign policy changes to meet the needs of economic development. Naowarat travelled to Hanoi in 2010 during the celebration of its 1000<sup>th</sup>-year anniversary and returned to Vietnam five times for this project in 2014 (Pongpaiboon, 2018).

Naowarat’s story goes in line with the context of Thai-Vietnamese relations, which are another significant factor in the change of Thai attitudes toward Vietnam. After the Cold War, the broad socio-historical context changed at the global as well as the regional level. After Vietnam declared the *Doi moi* policy in 1986 and opened a diplomatic orientation of inviting friendships with all countries in the world, Thailand adopted a new approach to Indochinese countries of “*turning battle fields into market places*” in the early 1990s, and Thai-Vietnamese relationships were gradually upgraded and accelerated to a strategic partnership in 2013. Bilateral relations were further enhanced by cooperation at the regional level, especially in the ASEAN framework.

During the years prior to the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, the search for more knowledge of ASEAN nations became a social movement in Thailand. The perspectives presented were mostly voices and views of the state, media and academics, which created a favorable context. It encouraged many Thai writers such as Jadej Kamjorndet or Chamlong Fangcholchit to write short stories set in neighboring countries, and Praphatsorn Sevikul to carry out his novel project *Literature for ASEAN*. In fact, contemporary Thai literature broadened its scope to international and regional spheres,

including considerable literary space for the relations between Thailand and neighboring countries as a result of globalized communication and from the efforts of writers themselves to find new topics to present (Chotiudompan, 2014). In this respect, the role of the marketplace should not be left out. An eager readership, new opportunities for writers to publish in Thailand and to have their works translated into languages of neighboring countries, as well as sponsorships for ASEAN-labelled projects, were strong stimuli for the writers. Naowarat among others showed his enthusiasm in promoting Thai art and literature to be introduced in ASEAN. In sum, the context of a warmer Thai-Vietnamese relationship and Southeast Asia regionalization facilitated Naowarat's initiative and his positive portrayal of Vietnam.

Therefore, the romanticized image of Vietnam in Naowarat's work is distinguished from that of previous Thai writings about Vietnam such as the *Phongsawadan* or Thai chronicles of the early Rattanakosin period (spanning the reigns of King Rama I to IV) and books about Vietnam during the Cold War, such as *Songkhram Vietnam* by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (1968), *Yuan ya le* by Lithi Itthipracha (1975), *Vietnam, laeo Thai?* by Phan Rakkaeo (1976), and *Yuan Opphayop* by Khachatphai Burutsaphat (1978). These books, through descriptions of the war, Vietnamese refugees and communists, project a view of Vietnam as either the enemy, or an aggressive competitor, and as inferior to the Thais. Winichakul (2004: 124) summarized the Thai perception of Vietnam in the early Rattanakosin era and the Cold War era in the following way:

In the Thai [mainstream] perspective, Siam had helped Vietnam [the Nguyen Dynasty] to survive only to have it become a new arch rival... Vietnam is seen as an aggressive expansionist power in the region. This image is reformulated and reinforced during the Cold War as Thailand sees in the communist Vietnam the bastion of the communist influence in the region, giving support to the insurgent movements that tried to destroy Thailand, and backing the regimes in Laos and Cambodia after their revolutions.

The few sympathetic voices that existed were little known because they were suppressed by the state’s view and discourses. Clearly, the image of a beautiful, peaceful, culturally rich Vietnam in Naowarat’s poems is far from the mentioned mainstream discourses previously set in the Thai perception.

In addition, the beautiful images of Vietnam from Naowarat’s poetic perspective are partly formed from displays in Vietnam’s tourist sites and information from his Vietnamese guide (Pongpaiboon, 2018), i.e. being formulated to a certain extent by Vietnamese mainstream sources. Apart from that, the genre of poetry itself is an essential factor that makes his image of Vietnam distinct from what other contemporary books or media often portray. *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* belongs to a Thai poetic tradition called *Nirat*<sup>8</sup>, in which literary techniques and conventions including pictorial imagery as well as melodic vocabulary and verses portray beauty in a romantic tone. Moreover, Naowarat intentionally avoids looking at political and economic aspects or providing much factual data, but instead focuses on emotion and beauty (Pongpaiboon, 2018). Therefore, the portrayal of Vietnam in this collection of poems differs from the factual description of scenic locations, historic sites, cultural traditions or people’s lives that appear in Thai documentaries or travelogues about Vietnam.

In a broader sense, Naowarat’s representation of Vietnam and other neighboring countries can be seen as a further development of not only his poetry but also the genre of Thai poetry known as *Nirat*. Poems belonging to this genre were written by a poet on a journey describing landscapes and towns seen along the way as well as loneliness for his loved one. In Naowarat’s travel poems, the conventional love-in-separation theme is replaced by descriptions of foreign elements such as scenery, people and their daily activities through a more personalized tone in looser verse forms and real materials. The beginning of this project, Naowarat’s *Khian Phaendin*, written in 1992, can be

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<sup>8</sup> *Nirat* was composed in the Ayuthaya Era and became very popular in the Rattanakosin Era. The essence of *Nirat* is descriptions of places and people along a journey and expressions of love and longing for a separated loved one.

“considered a turning-point in the creation of ‘Nirat’ in Thai convention” (Chongstitvatana, 2000: 17). The expression of love here is no longer “personal lamentation” or suffering, but Naowarat’s optimistic love for nature and his homeland “in a most serene and subtle manner.” Accordingly, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* can be considered his contribution to modern Thai *Nirat* when his on-the-move poems praise and promote regional friendship. All of the books in this series are entitled *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum + country* [Writing about the Golden Land +...] to indicate that these countries share similar roots. Moreover, regarding literary techniques, Naowarat employs not only Thai conventional forms but also Vietnamese language and its identical verse forms to add more color to his work.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* depicts Vietnam through beautiful, diverse natural settings, a rich traditional culture and admirably strong people. This poetic and positive portrayal of Vietnam reflects the poet’s admiration and his motivation in promoting regional friendships. It is evidence of flourishing Thai-Vietnamese relations at the common people’s level and the increasing interest in ASEAN countries among Thai society. More significantly, it results from the shift in Thai people’s awareness and understanding of neighboring countries from a biased and negative perspective to one that is pluralist, close-to-reality and friendly.

Naowarat’s poetry brings a new dimension, a new voice, to the interaction between the two countries. Apart from the views of governments, academics and the media, now literature contributes a romanticized picture of Vietnam’s beauty and a hopeful vision of Thai-Vietnamese friendship. The new poetic image of Vietnam in *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* is evidence that the Thai perception of its neighboring countries has changed to a noticeable extent. Moreover, Naowarat’s influential poetry will help spread this new image to a broader audience in Thai society.

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