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Life during wartime and memories of World War II in the Thai novel, Chungking Sexpress

Hattakarn Areesilp

ABSTRACT—This article aims to investigate the Thai novel entitled Chungking Sexpress by Anusorn Tipayanon in terms of its themes, the devices employed to present these themes and the role of the novel as a forum in which memories of the Second World War are presented. The study found that the main plot of puzzle-solving and the love triangle sub-plot that presents the lives of the characters during the Second World War are devices that the author chose to present the novel’s themes: accepting a compromise with the demarcation of norms which dictate the way of life while still preserving one’s “humanity” or the essence of a human being who knows how to love and maintain the balance of his soul is the way in which a person can lead a meaningful life. The biggest obstacle to be overcome in an individual’s life is the internal war that is inevitably ignited by external social contexts. When viewed as a source of memory the novel reinforces the memory of the wound to the “war loser,” invokes memories of prostitutes who served the Japanese military in Thailand and presents the dimensions of humanity through the accounts of marginal characters.

Keywords: Modern Thai literature; Chungking Sexpress; Anusorn Tipayanon; memory; World War II

In the realm of Thai literature, Anusorn Tipayanon became widely-known among readers and critics after his first short novel, London and the Secret of a Kiss, the story of a male protagonist’s attempt to recover after losing his Korean female friend following the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, was published in 2004. His following literary works received a positive feedback from readers and critics alike, as was evident when his collection of short stories, Household Objects first
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published in 2007, was shortlisted for the Southeast Asian Writers Award (S.E.A Write Award) 2008, and when Nimit Wikarn, another short story collection of his, which was first published in 2011, was also shortlisted for the same award in the same year. In addition, Tipayanon has been named by Thai readers, especially those in online social networks, “Thailand’s Father of Magical Realism” and “Thailand’s Murakami,”1 soubriquets which may have resulted from his use of magical realism as a literary device in the presentation of middle-class characters, a technique also employed in the works of Haruki Murakami, the world-famous Japanese author.2

In addition to the use of magical realism, in terms of the content of the entire body of Tipayanon’s literary works, it can be seen that the author has often incorporated social, political and cultural issues that transcend Thainess in his works, such as, the genocide during the Khmer Rouge period and France’s colonization of Cambodia as it appears in the short story “The Shadow of the Rain” in Nimit Wikarn, the 9/11 attack as in London and the Secret of a Kiss, Japan’s New History Textbook, which sparked a conflict between nations, especially between China and Korea, which appears in his short novel 8½ Richter: the Search for the Lost Heart, published in 2006.

Interestingly, the history of the Thai-Japanese relationship during World War II is the key element from which Tipayanon has chosen to create the plots of two out of three of his novels. It is evident in the plot of 8½ Richter: the Search for the Lost Heart, where the protagonist, a Japanese geologist, travels to Thailand to gather historical documents on the Greater East Asia War for the revision of Japan’s New History Textbook and in the plot of Chungking Sexpress, his latest novel published in 2015 and long-listed for the S.E.A. Write Award of the same year, in which the reader is taken on a journey to recover the memory of World War II with “I,” a Thai protagonist who travels to Lampang in search of the Yunghing Hotel, which offered sexual services to Japanese soldiers during World War II.

It can be said that Chungking Sexpress demonstrates another phase in Tipayanon’s literary development. A unique feature of the novel lies in its two-part structure. The first part is the “Author’s Novel,” which consists of the quest to locate Yunghing Hotel, which appears in “my” dreams so often that the protagonist has to travel to Lampang in search of it, interspersed with stories of characters in World War II.
such as a Chinese prostitute, a Japanese soldier and a Japanese assassin. The second part is “Miscellaneous Information,” in which the author cites or uses excerpts of information from different sources, such as the cabinet meeting minutes dated December 7-8, 1941 regarding the discussion whether or not to accept the deal that Japan offered to the government of Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram; the minutes dated March 23, 1942 regarding the opening of a recreational venue for Japanese soldiers in Lampang; the memoir of Sergeant Kochi Kawabata about troop mobilization from China to Thailand after Japan had declared war on the Allies, extracted from Tales by Japanese Soldiers by Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley; statements about the procurement of Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery as told in My War Crimes by Seiji Yoshida; the history and origin of Tanabata or the Star Festival and the folklore tale of the Weaver Girl and the Cowherd; the interview script of Tadao Ando, a Japanese architect, who places emphasis on the dark area of a building from Seven Interviews with Tadao Ando; and information on the abnormal mental state of serial murderers from Journal of Psychology. The storytelling is complex. Throughout the 41 chapters, the novel is divided into even-numbered chapters, while the miscellaneous information is assigned to the chapters with odd numbers. The author mentions this “experiment” in the introduction and believes that “how [such a literary technique] affects the perception of the reader is intriguing.” (Tipayanon 2015, Introduction)

In Thai literature, the history of the relationship between Thailand and Japan during World War II is a subject that is often employed in creating literary works. One of the most prominent Thai literary pieces that was written from the author’s memory of World War II and enjoyed widespread recognition in Thai society is Khu Kam by Wimon Siripaiboon (whose pen name is Thamayanti), which was first published in 1969 and tells the story of Kobori, a Japanese soldier who is deployed to Thailand and falls in love with and marries a Thai woman named Angsumalin. The popularity of the novel has prompted many academics to use it as the scope of their studies. However, although Khu Kam was inspired and moved by Thamayanti’s visit to a site of memory, which is the Kanchanaburi Allied War Cemetery and the inscription on the grave of a Dutch soldier who was the only son of the family and whose funeral his family could
not attend (Golden Films 1998), an overall investigation of the novel reveals that the plot and the storytelling techniques are not as conducive to the presentation of memories of World War II as for an historical literary work that reflects the society and the way of life of people during World War II.

In discussing the significance of fiction or literature as cultural information relevant to the remembrance of the past, Birgit Neuman (2008) states that “[a]llusion to legends, fairy tales, myths and other stories of dubious historical authenticity suggest that fact and fiction intermingle in cultural memory and that these fictions should thus be treated as cultural documents in their own right as they shed light on what is actually remembered as a culture’s past” (339). In this respect, the combination of fiction and information that flows within the context of Thai and Japanese societies and in the fictional world in Chungking Sexpress has given the novel the status of a kind of cultural information, which, in this context, is related to the construction and presentation of memory about World War II to readers in the present. Therefore, Thai literature has been transformed into a source of memory that is beyond the sites of memory and a written and verbal memoir.

In this article, I aim, mainly, to study the “Author’s Novel” to analyze whether and how the novel’s structure, which is a literary technique that Tipayanon has chosen to create complexity into the storytelling, is integral to the presentation of the main theme or the main message of the novel; and, when considered as a site of World War II memory, how the novel influences the perception of the reader. The main plot and the sub plot, both of which Tipayanon has employed to present the novel’s main theme, as well as the novel’s role in presenting memory about World War II will be discussed separately.

Puzzle solving: the quest for truth and the decipherment of dreams

In the introduction to Chungking Sexpress, Tipayanon discusses the novel’s title, explaining that it was inspired by Puengthip Kiattisahakul’s The Southern Railways in the Shadow of the Rising Sun, which details the establishment of premises that offered sexual services for World War II Japanese soldiers in Lampang; he identifies the hotel run
by a Chinese owner as “Yunghing Hotel,” because the pronunciation of the hotel’s name reminded the author of the movie *Chung Hing Sam Lam* (重庆森林), or *Chungking Express* in English, directed by Wong Kar-wai, a renowned Hong Kong director, and screened in 1994. The title of the novel is, thus, a play on the English title of the movie; the word “Express” being altered to “Sexpress,” with “sex” communicating sexual activity or intercourse and ‘press’ giving the sense of making efforts to persuade or force somebody to do something, corresponding with the purpose of Yunghing Hotel as identified in the historical reference. In the novel, the author makes the Chungking Hotel an area of sexual gratification and fulfilment for Japanese soldiers during World War II, which is in keeping with the real information recorded in the book.

“A plot is a plan or groundwork of human motivations, with the action resulting from believable and realistic human responses” (Roberts 1991, 51). E. M. Foster states that a sequence must be integrated with human motivation, giving the example of plot “the king died, and then the queen died of grief.” (cited in Roberts 1991, 51) To approach the main theme in *Chungking Express*, the main plot and the sub plot will be used as devices.

The author begins the novel with the recurring dreams of the protagonist “I,” in which he lies beside a naked woman in Chungking Hotel and with every attempt to take a glimpse at her face he wakes up to the real world. That is until he decides to travel in search of Chungking Hotel, which is located in Lampang as recorded at the end of Puengthip Kiattisahakul’s *The Southern Railways in the Shadow of the Rising Sun*, which mentions a nearby hotel called Yunghing. The dreams only stop after he has begun the journey. From beginning to end, the plot is based on a puzzle-solving structure. The story begins with a mystery or question that prompts the protagonist to seek answers or solve a conundrum. In the story, dreams of Chungking Hotel are employed to send the protagonist on the quest for a hotel in Lampang. The plot resembles plots in the detective genre in that the protagonist “I” is a detective who tries to uncover some truth using logic and logical relations to piece together evidence. After the protagonist has found the blueprints for the construction of Yunghing Hotel, which are kept at Lampang’s Municipality Office, and learns about the locations of two Japanese military bases in Koh
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Kah and on Charoen Muang Road from a provincial public official he begins looking for a two-storeyed building with a shed roof and balconies surrounding the top and bottom floors. The author sends the protagonist on a circular journey, “starting with a probable point and going around in circles, with the radius slowly expanding and the centre of the circles shifting a little every day, from the Ratsada Bridge to Suandok Road and Bookwat Road.” (Tipayanon 2015, 50)

The journey relies on the protagonist’s instinct rather than maps. The puzzle about the hotel’s location is solved through a natural phenomenon, which is rain, so that the protagonist “I” can take notice of the building where the restaurant he usually frequents is and realize that it is where Chungking Hotel was located 80 years before.

Nevertheless, the plot of Chungking Sexpress also differs from that of the common detective genre in that the puzzle-solving occurs mainly internally in the mind of the protagonist “I.” In addition, in solving the conundrum, the protagonist does not rely solely on logic and evidence but also makes use of his instinct or his natural impulses. This dual mode corresponds with the protagonist’s relationship with the Chungking Hotel of his past life. It can also be seen that his instinct does not only serve to help him discover the hotel but also inhibits him from giving up and making a trip back to where he has come from, as shown when, instead of travelling to the train station to take a trip back home after finding the location of Chungking Hotel, the protagonist returns to the restaurant where Chungking Hotel once stood and asks the owner for permission to explore the second floor. Upon recounting the event, the protagonist “I” says “I give credit to my instinct. It may have been some sort of familiarity or bond that is beyond my wildest guess.” (Tipayanon 2015, 79)

Although the exploration of the second floor leads him to discover the secret room in the hotel that appears in his dreams and after sleeping in the bed makes him realize that he was “the ravishing girl that was lying beside that mysterious person” (Tipayanon 2015, 92), and not the man that is lying beside the girl in his dreams at the beginning of the novel, the author deters the protagonist “I” from leaving with a mystery about the blood scent in the secret room he has just discovered, which is different from the floral fragrance emanating from the body of the girl in his dreams. The author creates a story in which the palm of the protagonist “I” is caught on a nail at the railway ticket booth and is
injured. The bleeding awakens his curiosity and he suggests that “[s]ome quest must continue. I cannot leave this town until I’ve discovered where the blood scent that never fades comes from.” The mystery is solved when the protagonist discovers that the blood scent in the secret room in Chungking Hotel comes from “a patch of human skin” which “reveals to the world the masterful craftsmanship of the person who peeled this skin patch from someone’s body,” (Tipayanon 2015, 125) and has been concealed inside one of the walls of the room and cemented over. The author ends the story by having the protagonist “I” leave a final remark in the “epilogue”:

Although I have solved the puzzle and confirmed the existence of Chungking Hotel, I have yet to decipher my dreams. Am I the sleeping man who is looking at the billowing curtains or the ravishing girl who is staring at the raindrops on the window frames? (Tipayanon 2015, 125-126)

It can be seen that the author uses the curiosity of the protagonist “I” to slow the story down, prolonging his stay in Lampang to open up a space for the author to insert the stories of other characters, such as a Chinese prostitute, a Japanese soldier and a Japanese assassin in Lampang in World War II, creating an intercut between the main plot, which contains the story of the protagonist,9 and the stories of these three characters from the past. Upon considering the plot with regard to signification, the stories of the three characters from the past are linked to the main plot in the present and help explain current events, for example, the ambiguity about the past life of the protagonist, which is tied to “the sleeping man who is looking at the billowing curtains” or the Japanese soldier and “the ravishing girl” or the Chinese prostitute, who both appear in his dreams and prompt the protagonist to take a journey to find Chungking Hotel. Another example is the tragic love between the Chinese prostitute, the Japanese soldier, and the Japanese assassin in World War II, which ends with the assassin skinning the soldier and killing the girl and himself. The tragedy is linked to the blood scent and the discovery of human skin concealed in the wall of the room. Afterwards, the skin is preserved by Lampang’s Municipality together with the blueprints of Chungking Hotel.

The plot of Chungking Sexpress is based on a mystery that is
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grounded in dreams and the curiosity of the protagonist “I” leads him towards the puzzle solving, ranging from the discovery of Chungking Hotel’s location, the secret room in his dreams and the source of the blood scent instead of the fragrance in his dreams. However, while the question of who the protagonist was in his past life will continue to pique the curiosity of the reader, Tipayanon makes the protagonist abandon his curiosity about his identity in his past life when he says, “It does not matter who those two people were. The knowledge that I was in that room, that I existed and lived in that room, was enough. Nothing else matters anymore. Nothing else matters.” (Tipayanon 2015, 125-126). The epilogue appears to have significant implications and allows the interpretation that the protagonist’s past life, especially the story of the Chinese prostitute and the Japanese soldier in wartime, which will be addressed in detail in the next section and is integral because it communicates the main theme of the novel to a greater extent than the story of the protagonist in the present. In addition, the ambiguity in which the answer about the identity of the past life of the protagonist, who can be inferred as being Thai, is withheld might be included to represent the fluid identity of a person both in terms of gender and nationality, capturing the various dimensions and complexities of a person’s identity.

Lives in wartime

Rather than being added as an appendage that will transmit the plot to an audience, narrative point of view creates the interest, the conflicts, the suspense, and the plot itself in most modern narratives…. In order to understand the functional importance of point of view, we must extend its range of meaning to include the relationship between characters, as well as their relationship to the narrator. Each one can provide a perspective on the action just as the narrator does. (Martin 2006, 131, 143)

According to Martin (2006), it can be seen that the plot is not the only single device employed to present the novel’s main theme but there is also narrative point of view which is related to the complexity in the storytelling or plot and characters. In this chapter, I mainly aim to analyze the combined creation of plot, point of view and characters
in *Chungking Express* as related devices employed to present the major theme.

In recounting the story of the characters in World War II, the author employs two points of view. The first-person point of view, in which the character refers to herself as “I,” is assigned to the Chinese prostitute, who tells the story of her life as a comfort woman for Japanese soldiers and the love between her and a Japanese soldier, Colonel Hinoda. The third-person point of view, in which the narrator refers to the story’s main characters as “he,” is used with the Japanese soldier, Colonel Hinoda, and the Japanese assassin. The omniscient narrator can probe into the inner thoughts of the two characters. Both points of view have their distinctive advantages. The use of “I” in storytelling makes the reader feel as if he or she is directly reading the Chinese prostitute’s memoir about World War II, which is autobiographical in nature. On the other hand, the third-person point of view reveals the internal states of mind of the characters from the perspective of the narrator who is outside the text and the characters’ behavior from a wider perspective. As a result, the reader can follow the characters both internally and externally at the same time. In this article, I will weave the stories of the three characters, namely the Chinese prostitute, the Japanese soldier and the Japanese assassin, which were set in Thailand when World War II was winding down and are interspersed in the book to create a pastiche, from which the significance of the inclusion of these wartime stories on the presentation of the main theme of *Chungking Sexpress* will be investigated.

While the novel’s main plot, which is based on a puzzle and the decipherment of the protagonist’s dream, does not show the link between the social context, which is an external factor, to the life of an individual, such as the protagonist “I,” the stories of the three characters, which are based on the love triangle sub-plot that ends in tragedy towards the end of the war, demonstrate the ways in which individuals during wartime, whose existence is imposed upon by norms of duties, manage their lives in order to maintain their humanity and emotional sensitivity. To this end, the Chinese prostitute, the Japanese soldier and the Japanese assassin will be analyzed in turn.
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**Sex object**

I am merely an object. Once they step outside this room, they’ll forget me. Not even once when they walk past me in the street do they greet me, even if I smile, bow or stop and stand in their way. They walk right past me as if I were air. For them, I am just a sex object, an empty wartime sex object. (Tipayanon 2015, 26)

Tipayanon creates the story of a Chinese prostitute at Chungking Hotel who gives sexual service to Japanese soldiers of various ranks, from sergeants, to lieutenants, colonels and generals. Her story is expanded with the minutes of a meeting on the establishment of premises that offered sexual services for Japanese soldiers in Lampang dated March 23, 1942, which the author incorporates into the novel in Chapter 5. The text details the service fees and the service hours for soldiers of different ranks, as follows.

The fee for a soldier is 1.00 Baht per hour. The fee for a sergeant is 1.50 Baht per hour. The fee for a military officer is 2.50 Baht per hour. Out of the collected fees, 30 percent will be allotted to the comfort station manager, and the other 70 percent will be given to comfort women. Soldiers are not allowed to spend the entire night with these women. However, sergeants may spend the entire night, from 22:00 hrs. - 07:00 hrs. For those who spend a night, the fee is 4.50 Baht per night for sergeants and 7.50 Baht for military officers. (Kiattisahakul 2011, 231 cited in Tipayanon 2015, 22)

In the novel, the author lets the Chinese prostitute “I” recount her sexual experiences that vary according to the rank of the soldiers who are seeking her services, such as sergeants who spend their limited as efficiently as they can, lieutenants who have enough time to treat her as a lover and become complete strangers upon meeting her in the world outside, generals who are pensive and expect constant pandering from her and colonels who are filled with liveliness and “humanity” and who form the best memory for her each day, even though she loses to them in the battlefield of sex. (Tipayanon 2015, 26-27) The author chooses to make the Chinese prostitute fall in love with a colonel named Hinoda, who often visits her establishment for long writing.
Even though the story told through the prostitute deals with the suffering of a girl who is forced into sexual services during World War II and is given the social status of nothing more than a “sex object” in the eye of the soldiers who receive her services, many parts of the text indicate that the signification of sex work as work helps release a sexual instinct, which is part of human nature. This is evident when the narrator reveals the internal thoughts of the assassin, who is staying in the room next to the prostitute’s room while fleeing capture after he has evaded conscription.

He fell into the cacophony of happy cheers of soldiers who sought release and the suffering of the women who were forced to serve…. The sensual music he heard every night brought him pleasure in this real world. However dire the war they find themselves in is, however wretched they find their existence, humans are ready to play their personal music, the ancient song played countless times, the ancient song about overtures, release and relaxation, the oft-repeated ancient song that is played differently from one person to another. (Tipayanon 2015, 35)

The author not only imparts the meaning of “work” to sex work for the Japanese soldiers who receive the service but also reveals the meaning of the work for the prostitute, as shown in the beginning of the prostitute’s story when she is waiting for Colonel Hiroda to return from the Battle of Imphal.

I am well aware what the Japanese military call me: a comfort woman. … Even so, I think I’m offering comfort. This is the only valuable thing now. However cruel the war may be, I will get through it. I must make it through, even if it has to be done with humans’ ancient way of sexual intercourse. (Tipayanon 2015, 35)

While waiting, I pass the time by offering my service. I do not stop working, and I deny no one my service. I want sexual intercourse to grow so ordinary and routine, like sleeping, drinking or eating. I treat everyone like a void. Those men mean nothing in my sight. However despicable, lewd or filthy they are, I do not reject them. (Tipayanon 2015, 74)
It is interesting to investigate why the work of the prostitute plays such an integral role in an existence during wartime. According to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, human behavior is tied to the internal instinct. Sexual intercourse is driven by the sexual instinct, which is part of the life instinct (called “Eros”; the Greek word for “love.”) and exists for gratification, and resembles other activities in the daily routine that are undertaken for survival such as breathing, consuming or sleeping. The sexual intercourse that the prostitute has does not, thus, contain only the “duty” dimension and she is not just a passive object of desire but it also assumes an active role as she is driven by her sexual instinct and has the freedom to love, which is a feeling of pleasure and a behavior closely related to the life instinct, which gives her life a purpose, especially during wartime which is characterized by uncertainty. Thus, the novel has expanded the dimension of a labelled “sex object” or “sex slave” by showing a way of giving value to an individual’s existence through the character of the prostitute who tries to preserve the quality of a human who has love as something in life to hold on to and does her job as a prostitute because driven by her sexual instinct.

I am now certain that I am not afraid of death. I am not afraid of the end of the war. I am not afraid of leaving this world. … It is the body of the man in my arms that is familiar and real. I no longer have any fear. If this man leaves this world, so will I. War inflicts pain on people, except me. War brings me happiness. War has led me to the person that gives me immeasurable bliss. (Tipayanon 2015, 89)

**War machine**

What they do is no different from robots left unwound upon exiting the battlefield. They will throw the door open, throw their clothes to the corners of the room, throw themselves on the bed and lie without moving their bodies. They will tell me to serve them as best as I can, while they do not expend even the slightest ounce of their energy, their eyes filled with anxiety, staring contemplatively at the ceiling, their hearts thumping off beat. The only thing in these robots that changes is the size of their weapons.... The sound of their
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provided cars fades. That’s the only sound I remember them by. It is strange, like the sound of a war machine being wound back up to life again. (Tipayanon 2015, 26-27)

Although the text illustrates the wider image of the Japanese soldier as a “war machine,” or a person who has to strictly follow orders to accomplish his assigned mission, many parts of the text present Colonel Hinoda as filled with human emotions, as is shown when the prostitute says, “[a]lthough I have seen the naked bodies of so many colonels, the naked body of this colonel is different. It is graceful, sorrowful and melancholy at the same time. It contains all the emotions of his inside.” (Tipayanon 2015, 79)

While the prostitute uses her duty to console herself while waiting to be with Colonel Hinoda, the author makes the colonel free himself from the bonds of his duty as a robot under the army’s command by “performing an act more ancient than writing” (Tipayanon 2015, 43). As with the Japanese assassin, in addition to killing, writing is another activity that restores his peace of mind, as the narrator comments.

He wrote down everything he could remember about the war, from the exercise uniform to his first kill. Before long, he found that writing gave him no less pleasure than reading. Before long, he found that writing was reading. They were the same thing, only that writing was reading in which one entered one’s own thoughts, not others’ thoughts as he had been familiar with. (Tipayanon 2015, 43)

“The reading of one’s own thought” through writing is thus not only to record the memory of that person but also serves as a space to express one’s ideas and feelings towards things. Thus, it can be considered another way of preserving humanity amidst a war where victory is the only goal under a mainstream discourse in which “The army of the Land of the Sun will not lose this war.” (Tipayanon 2015, 27)

The turning point of the story is on July 3, 1944 when Colonel Hinoda decides to lead the soldiers that have survived the Battle of Imphal, which is the capital of Manipur in India, to death instead of marching the troop back to Thailand through Khun Yuam District, Mae Hong Son, which is a safe passage. Instead, he chooses the route heading to Chiang Dao District and times their arrival at a cliff for
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the night of the new moon so as to lure the soldiers to fall off the cliff, with him as the only survivor heading back to Lampang. The narrator explains the reason behind Hinoda’s decision as follows.

The last order he received from General Mutakuchi of Imphal was that if they were to become war prisoners, he was not to leave anyone alive. Even if they escaped becoming captives, Hinoda thought none of them deserved to live. Soldiers of the Emperor were not supposed to lose, and if they did, they were to lose not to enemies, but to death. (Tipayanon 2015, 97-98)

What is beyond expectation is that the great army of the Emperor is about to lose the war that they have started and that “not every Japanese soldier … is obsessed with the war.” (Tipayanon 2015, 97). This is evident when his aide-de-camp shows a strong desire to go home to his family after the war. This event, when coupled with his bestowing death upon his own soldiers, prompts Colonel Hinoda to question every soldier’s duty to the army and the Emperor, which goes directly against the love for one’s lover and family, and leads to his “emotional turning point.” This can be seen when, upon arriving in Lampang, he decides to stop “writing” and starts openly expressing his love for the Chinese prostitute in a way he has never done previously. The author seems to give him a background that distinguishes him from other soldiers, especially generals who have become complete war machines, in order to show an individual’s negotiation to preserve his humanity. In addition, the story of Colonel Hinoda is an account from a sub-stream that fights against the main stream account regarding the glory and dignity of those who serve the nation and argues that, in reality, war never gives anything, especially the real value of existence, to anyone. It is actually love that is valuable enough to keep a person alive.

He was well aware that the war was nearing its end. He was well aware that the Japanese army was losing. There was no glory left for him any longer. When he thought of his punishment for leading his troop to death, he felt worthless, with nothing of value to give him the will to continue living in the world, except that girl. (Tipayanon 2015, 110)
Assassin

He had learned that the man was not in the army. He had no uniform or other badge. He was completely a civilian. However, Japanese civilians now included only photographers, dentists or merchants who, in fact, were spies of the Imperial Japanese Army. Nevertheless, that person also appeared in the army. The nameless spy in the guise of a civilian could only be a spy with no lord, like a wandering samurai called ronin. That person, of course, had his private world and secrets and for Colonel Hinoda, others’ private worlds were the only place he could never transgress or trespass on. (Tipayanon 2015, 106-107)

While the Chinese prostitute and Colonel Hinoda have duties imposed upon them that dictate their conduct quite clearly, the author does not give the Japanese assassin any clear affiliation, as is shown in the narrator’s description of Colonel Hinoda’s contemplative episode, in which the assassin is described as a “spy with no lord” when they meet at a temple in Lampang.

An interesting question is why the author has created the character as someone who had been a soldier in the medical corps of the Japanese army before becoming a free agent who is addicted to killing. From the story of his life, the reader will find that he does not kill anyone for the Imperial Japanese Army or assume the role of a “civilian spy.” Rather, he contemplates and kills individuals for individualistic love, as seen in the description, “He did not kill because it was his duty…. He was killing someone for himself, for his personal love.” (Tipayanon 2015, 67)

No one in this world should see their loved one die in front of them. Everyone in this world suffers enough already. Seeing the person they love dying right in front of them is too painful. He might kill someone so easily but he could not kill anybody’s love. (Tipayanon 2015, 106-107)

“Love” is a significant set of values that serves to anchor people to this world and gives their lives a purpose or meaning, especially during wartime filled with violence and persecution, as can be seen
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in the lives of the Chinese prostitute and Colonel Hinoda discussed above. In *Chungking Sexpress*, Tipayanon highlights the value of love by inserting an excerpt from *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, which states that serial killers are psychopaths who “have no basic emotions, such as love” (81) in Chapter 25 of the novel, before undermining this apparent fact by making the Japanese assassin fall in love with the prostitute in the adjacent room. When he discovers that she and Colonel Hinoda are deeply in love, he decides to plan the murder of the colonel when he is on his solitary journey at a temple in Lampang at the place where Colonel Hinoda and he usually sit and study the golden pagoda.

Out of the three characters, the assassin demonstrates the greatest mental complexity. The narrator describes the discrepancy between something inside him by linking it to the image of the golden pagoda but inverts it because it is seen through a small hole in the wooden temple as if viewed through the lens of a pinhole camera.

He used to think of reasons why he was so fascinated by the image. Perhaps, he wanted to believe that the land he had come from was the inverted replica of this land. However, he knew that that was not the real reason. What draws and ties him to the upside-down image was how it reminded him that there was something upside down in him. Despite the calm, friendly and non-threatening exterior, he was filled with seething and uncontrollable fury. At this moment, his impulse to kill someone surged. (Tipayanon 2015, 94-95)

His internal war in his mind, which contrasts with the calm façade, helps drive his thirst to kill, as can be seen when the narrator describes the value of killing he has in his mind.

Killing was of the greatest beauty for him. It calmed his mind. It gave his life meaning. It gave this world meaning. He could find no other reason to explain why he would have endured the existence in a world that was filled with iniquity, melancholy and gloom if there had been no killing to soothe his soul. Killing was like a blazing fire that burned bright inside him and his dull and dark existence. (Tipayanon 2015, 67)
His love, inner conflict and killing, including the assassination and the skinning of Colonel Hinoda, the murder of the Chinese prostitute and his subsequent suicide can be explained through psychoanalytical theory. Robert Kastenbaum (2003) explains the cause of suicide and homicide as follows: “Suicide and homicide often have roots in a confused and unbalanced relationship between the life and the death instincts. The destructive impulses may be turned against one’s own self (suicide) or projected against an external target (homicide).” It can be seen that while he does feel love, which is part of the life instinct, “the world that [is] filled with iniquity, melancholy and gloom,” the sufferings of people in the world, especially during wartime and the destructive memories that have been passed down to him by his fishmonger father, which have inured him to killing since his childhood, are what stimulates his death instinct (called “Thanatos,” the Greek word for “death.”). This conflict between his life and death instincts is what the author has the character express in the form of injuries to others and himself.

“Life was sacred for him, no matter whose life it was. If he had to make someone depart from this world, he would do it with respect. He would do it with faith. Respect for the lives of others and faith in execution. (Tipayanon 2015, 67)

It can be said that the perspectives shown above are contradictory because if life is meaningful and sacred enough in itself it should be allowed to persist in this world. Killing, thus, undermines the meaning of life. The death instinct, which drives killing or destruction, was posited and proposed by Freud in 1920, after the end of World War I, when humans had to face colossal losses and devastation that had left wounds as the heritage of memory. (Kastenbaum 2003) In this respect, the war that the author has chosen as his setting corresponds with the drive of the character’s death instinct very well.

The stories of the three characters in World War II are tied together in the love triangle sub-plot. They form an integral part through which the author communicates a theme about life, in which accepting a compromise with the demarcation of norms which dictate the way of life while still preserving the “humanity” or the essence of a human being who knows how to love and maintain the balance of his soul.
Life during wartime and memories of World War II is a way in which a person can lead a meaningful life. This is evident in the Chinese prostitute, whose duty is to serve soldiers sexually, and Colonel Hinoda, who strictly follows the orders of the Japanese army. Both of them are successful in maintaining their humanity. Even though evading duties dictated by social contexts or external factors in order to live a life as an individual is an alternative that a person may choose, that person must still inevitably face the internal war that results from the external war, as is seen in the assassin, who fails to maintain his balance of mind and ends up killing others and harming himself.

**The role of novels and the presentation of memory**

Memory’s relationship to any notion of ‘truth’ of factual evidence has become a complex one, however. Unlike historical documentation, memory seemed to rely on the individual’s recollection. The genre of the novel could advertise memory’s fictional nature more ardently than any autobiography could. (Weissberg 1999, 10)

Among the various genres it can be said that novels have a more intense role in relaying memory than autobiographies. In addition, when the storytelling of *Chungking Sexpress*, which is based on an alternation between the main plot of the journey of the protagonist “I” to recover his memory of his past life and the love triangle sub-plot of the characters in World War II, to which the author has assigned the past life of the protagonist “I,” is taken into account, it can be said to correspond with the mechanism of memory in fictions of memory, which do not proceed in a chronological order. Neuman (2008) argues that “[d]eviations in sequential ordering (anachronies) are often semantici-zed because they illustrate the haphazard workings of memory and thus contribute substantially to highlighting the memory-like quality of narratives” (336).

At a superficial level, the main plot of *Chungking Sexpress* appears to aim at recovering the memory of the protagonist’s past life to determine whether he was the Chinese prostitute or the Japanese soldier but the ambiguous ending that does not resolve who the protagonist was in his past life shows that memory recovery for the identification of the present self is not as central to the story as the use of the novel
and complex storytelling to create memory about World War II in the perception of the reader. In the previous section, the role and significance of Chungking Sexpress as a literary work that presents the main theme about life has been discussed. In this section, the novel will be studied and treated as a reservoir of memory that the author has created in order to examine the role and significance of the novel in presenting memory.

Memory of wounds of war losers

The final period of the war is the setting where the author has chosen to open up a space for readers to learn about the circumstances of that time through characters who are representations of various groups of people. The novel reveals two sets of truths that were at war during that time. While depicting the defeat of the Japanese army in different battlefields through Colonel Hinoda, the author simultaneously presents another contrasting set of truths through the Chinese prostitute, the representation of civilians, who understands that the war is coming to end and the Japanese army is the victor.

When they think that the war is coming to an end, everyone is talking about going home. Foot soldiers are dreaming about meeting their families. Soldiers of higher ranks dream of the glory that awaits them. News of truce comes in every day. Although our army may be weak, no one can withstand the power of the Emperor. That is what I’ve always heard. The opponents have surrendered although we are no longer making skirmishes. That is what I hear almost every day. Everyone is dreaming of packing up and leaving this country. However, what would be left of China and Fujian for me when I get there? (Tipayanon 2015, 103)

In the final scene, the author has chosen to end the assassin’s life at the same time Emperor Hirohito’s surrender, the symbol of the end of World War II, is broadcast over the radio. Tipayanon depicts the senselessness and absurdity of the war through the perspective of the assassin, as follows.

It was 1945. The war had been going on for long enough. He had
lived enough. He had escaped enough. Although the external war was still raging on, it was time for this inner war to end. (Tipayanon 2015, 118)

He thought. He missed going home and he thought she should go home as well. He felt gloomy and sad. It was 18:00 hrs. He recognized that the sound was the announcement of the end of the war, in which he was involved and did not wish to get involved. … Now was the time he had to leave this world. He felt bliss to leave this world after the war had ended. It was pointless. He now knew that wars were pointless. (Tipayanon 2015, 119)

The excerpt above reinforces the assassin’s internal war or failure to maintain the inner balance as a result of the pressing external war circumstances, which ultimately leads to the tragedy between the Japanese man and the Chinese woman against the setting of Thailand. The creation of the stories of the characters in World War II, including those told as a memoir by the Chinese prostitute and those told from the third-person point of view about Colonel Hinoda and the assassin, and the insertion of the Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War in Chapter 40 after the three characters have died, are a structure that not only reproduces the wound about the loss of the Japanese army but also reinforces that the war has created wounds in the memory of many people. Even though the war has ended, the memory of those wounds persists in the perception of subsequent generations through the passing down or the recovery of the wartime memory, as in this case, in which the author brings to the reader the memory of these wounds through the lives of individuals who lived during the war and who are aware that what gives a person’s life true meaning is not the patriotic ideals that drive people to wage wars against each other but rather the individualistic love that enables a person to maintain his or her humanity; but who are also unable to free themselves from the role of direct and indirect war losers as the war inevitably affects a person’s life and mental state. This corresponds with the status of Japan and China during and after the war. In addition, the characterization of the protagonist “I,” a Thai character, drives the story and leads the reader, who assumes the role of an observer, through the stories of the Chinese and Japanese characters who are directly affected by the war
and also corresponds with the status of Thailand during World War II. The signing of a Thailand-Japan alliance pact in 1941 rendered Thailand Japan’s ally and when Japan lost the war, the formation of the Free Thai Movement gave Thailand the status of neither a war loser nor the Allies’ enemy, but the status of an “occupied country” (or non-Japan’s allies) enjoying the support of the United States. (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 213)

Memory of prostitutes of the Japanese army in Lampang

“... buildings or parts of buildings…often visually represent memories.” (Neuman 2008, 340)

As mentioned in the introduction, the novel was created after the author had read about the establishment of premises that offered sexual services to Japanese soldiers in World War II in Lampang. The author bases Chungking Hotel on Yunghing Hotel which, according to record, was owned by a Chinese and makes it the starting point for the protagonist “I” on his mission to recover his memory and locate the hotel. Therefore, not only does the novel reproduce the memory of prostitutes of the Japanese army stationed in Thailand as is demonstrated in the general historical information but the selection of this literary space also expands the boundaries of memory of World War II in respect through the perspective of the Chinese prostitute, which is considered an empowerment of the character that represents the marginalized who may be forgotten by people at large. This echoes the argument of Neuman (2008) who states that “[f]ictions of memory may symbolically empower the culturally marginalized of forgotten and thus figure as an imaginative counter discourse” (341).

The memoir of the Chinese prostitute that the author has inserted as a mini-narrative reveals the human aspect of the characters that are representations of people in the real world. That is, both Colonel Hinoda and the Chinese prostitute assume the passive roles of war victims. Nevertheless, in spite of the wartime duties imposed upon them they have individualistic love to soothe their souls and sustain their lives. Their stories that appear in the novel, thus, demonstrate a greater narrative diversity than the grand narrative, which mostly presents the atrocities committed by the Japanese army and the subjection
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of women to sexual slavery in a unidimensional manner.

After the protagonist has discovered the location of the hotel, the secret room and the human skin, which is concealed in one of the walls and subsequently kept with the blueprints of the hotel, and other places in Lampang, the author ends the story with the demolition of Chungking Hotel, which is damaged beyond repair and will be replaced with a new building that the authorities will construct in compensation for the owner. The construction of this plot has given the novel a significant role as a reservoir of memory of prostitutes of the Japanese army in Lampang, as opposed to a place that deteriorates and alters with time, and passes the memory on to people who are not contemporary such as the protagonist “I” or the reader of this literary work, whether or not the hotel still exists in Lampang.

The examination of the stories of the characters in World War II, which form the main part of Tipayanon’s *Chungking Sexpress* reveals that the novel proposes a main theme about the management of life in wartime, restrained by norms and duties, in order to maintain humanity and sensitivity. However, upon a more in-depth examination, the theme that appears in the novel is not restricted to the way of life during World War II but applies to wars in a wider sense, encompassing social, political and cultural contexts through time, which are one of the major factors that dictate the way of life of an individual through the imposition of work and duties. In addition, as the novel’s main plot is contemporary with the reader and was published in 2015, it can be said that the theme that the author has presented in the novel is also applicable to the present day and poses an important question of how, in a world where capitalism interferes with and dictates our way of life, an individual can make a compromise and lead a life under norms that force us to perform our duties with maximum efficiency, not unlike robots or machines, while still maintaining our humanity, ability to love and balance of mind. Furthermore, in addition to proposing a life philosophy, the novel, when considered as a reservoir of memory, also reinforces the wounds of war losers, which include the Japanese army and the wartime citizens who were affected by the war. The novel also plays a role in recovering the memory of prostitutes of the Japanese army stationed in Thailand, which often appears only in historical texts, in the conscience of the Thai reader, as well as depicting the human aspect of the war through the stories of
the marginalized characters, which help expand the scope of the grand narrative, which mostly presents the atrocities committed by the Japanese army and the subjection of women to sexual slavery as the only major dimension.

Although this article does not aim to conduct an in-depth examination into the extent to which the structure of this experimental novel, which features an intercut between the story that the author has created and information from other sources that influence the perception of the reader as much as it aims to investigate the novel that the author has created in tandem with the overall storytelling technique, which relies on a main plot and a sub-plot and a plot in the current timeline interspersed with narratives in the past, it is undeniable that the analysis of different components of the novel is influenced by mental associations triggered by the structure of the experimental novel that the author has created. In addition, in spite of some discrepancies in the storytelling, Chungking Sexpress is an important novel in Thai literature both as a Thai literary work that presents a universal theme through lives during a war that is a global level issue and as a reservoir of memory of World War II in Thailand, both of which might be new roles of literature that warrant further research.

Notes

1 In Art Club, aired on July 10, 2013 on Thai PBS, Tipayanon commented on the nickname, saying “Murakami’s and my strains of magical realism may share something in common in that the daily life of the middle class is viewed as magical. … The unpredictability [of the middle class] opens up opportunities for the magical elements to be incorporated … [as] … the life of the middle class is unpredictable, highly uncertain. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. … I try to observe ordinary things in our daily life and invert their value, expand them or embellish them, so that people can see their magical aspects.” (Silpsamosorn 2013) (The text in square brackets is added to make the idea complete.)

2 A study that analyzes Tipayanon’s literary works in terms of their main themes, use of magical realism as a literary device and the roles of magical realism in presenting the main themes is a Master’s Degree thesis entitled Magical Realism in Anusorn Tipayanon’s Literary Works by Hattakarn Areesilp.

3 Japan invaded Thailand and made three demands, namely 1) troop mobilization through Thailand, 2) a Thailand-Japan alliance treaty protecting Thailand, and 3) a Thailand-Japan alliance against Britain and the United States. (Tonseingsom 2007, 21)
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4 Taken from Kiattisahakul (2011, 231-232), which is culled and gathered from RTARF 2.5.3/8 Joint Sub-committee of Lampang (March 18, 1942 - August 13, 1945).

5 Scholarly studies that employ Khu Kam as their scope include the thesis An Analysis of Structure, Society, Politics and Economic as Reflected in Thommayantee Novel Khu Kam by Prapa Boonyon (1996), the thesis “Khu-Karma” and perception of the Thai consumers on Japanese and Japanese by Evitra Sirasart (2010), the article “Beloved Enemy: Values of War and War of Values in Damayanti’s Khoo Karma” by Natthanai Prasannam (2013), the article “Muea ‘Kobori’ Pen “Obori” Kan Sueksa Priaptiap ‘Khu Kam’ Khong Thommayatee Lae ‘Menamino Sangetsu’ Khong Iwaki Yuchiro” (When ‘Kobori’ is ‘Obori’: A Comparative Study of Thommayantee’s Khu Kam and Iwaki Yuchiro’s Menamino Sangetsu) by Thanabhorn Treeratsakulchai (2014).

6 Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Ranong and Chumphon Provinces are the location of museums and monuments which are sites of memory of World War II. There are many sites of memory at Kanchanaburi in which Japanese military units built the Burma-Siam Railway, known as the Death Railway, such as Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum; Kanchanaburi Allied War Cemetery; Death Railway Museum; Art Gallery and War Museum.

7 In a Thai context, a memoir that has been widely published is Phubanchakan Chao Phut: Banthuek Phubanchakan Kongthap Yipun Pracham Prathet Thai Kieo Kap Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi Song (Buddhist Commander: An Account of the Commander of Japanese Forces in Thailand about the Second World War) by General Aketo Nakamura, the Commander of the Japanese Army in Thailand from 1943 until the end of World War II. The book was first published in Thai in 1991. In 2015, the August issue of Sarakadee Magazine featured a special scoop entitled “2488-2558 Riwroy Lae Khwamsongjam Lang Jetsip Pee Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi Song” (“1945-2015: The Wrinkles and Memory Seventy Years after the Second World War”). The scoop presents sites of memory related to World War II and the stories of Thai people who lived through the war, such as Mr. Boonpong Sirivejjabhandu, the owner of Boonpong and Brothers in Kanchanaburi, who smuggled medicines and medical supplies to Dr. Weay Dunlop, a doctor in a concentration camp, through the memory of the living family members and their personal memoir. (See more in Sarakadee 2015, 78-125.)

8 In the novel, the author uses the name Yunghing when referring to information that appears in documents such as the blueprints or books to create an overlap with the real world and alternatively uses the name Chungking for the hotel in the novel that the protagonist is looking for. However, both names refer to the same place. Therefore, from this point onwards, the name Chungking will be used to prevent confusion.

9 The protagonist’s journey to Lampang appears only in Chapters 2, 4, 12, 18, 24, 30, 33, 38 and the Epilogue. It is worth noting that Chapter 33 does not conform to what the author has stated in terms of its content, whereby the Author’s Novel will appear only in even-numbered chapters while Miscellaneous Information will appear in odd-numbered chapters. In addition to this journey of the protagonist, a similar idiosyncrasy also appears in the stories of the characters in World War II as well.
10 Upon examining the text, the author appears to give more weight to the story of the Chinese prostitute, which appears in Chapters 6, 10, 16, 22, 28, 34, and 37, and the story of the assassin, which appears in Chapter 8, 14, 20, 22, 31, 35, and 39, than to the story of the Japanese soldier, which is mainly told from the first-person point of view of the prostitute and the third-person point of view that follows the assassin, respectively. The soldier’s story, told from a third-person point of view, that follows him accounts for a much smaller proportion and appears only in Chapters 32 and 36.

11 Attempts to expurgate historical facts about Korean and Chinese women who were forced into sexual slavery are evident in Japan’s history textbooks, in which the term “comfort women” is bowdlerized from the 2015 History Textbook. These attempts have sparked domestic political problems in Japan and international conflicts between Japan and China and Korea. (Schneider 2008,108-12,116) At present, Japan and South Korea have successfully reached an agreement to mitigate the conflict concerning women who were forced into sexual slavery during World War II after the first negotiations in 1965. Japan has agreed to establish a compensation fund for those affected by the practice to show its responsibility. (BBC News 2015)

12 This is based on information in Chapter 5 Imphal and Kohima March to July 1944 in Tales By Japanese Soldiers by Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley, pages 151-212.

13 Neuman (2008) proposes the term “fictions of memory,” which is defined in a narrow sense as stories that present the functioning of memory and defined in a broad sense as “stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ or, collectively, Who are we?”(334).

References


