

“Thank you for giving me a new life”: The Reconstruction of Self through “Geobiography” and Sense of Place in *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (2021)

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Abstract

This research article examines *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (2021), a Thai TV series, from an ecocritical perspective. It particularly explores the series' portrayal of the protagonist's transformation of self through his construction of sense of place. It also incorporates Wendell Berry's notion of “geobiography”, the postulation of the interconnectedness between one's sense of place. This research argues that the protagonist's journey to become a volunteer teacher at Pha Pun Dao village is a departure point of his healing process. His developing bond with the place, and its inhabitants gradually allows him to reconstruct his sense of place as he begins to see different layers of the place apart from its physicality, specifically its memory, and culture. His newly constructed self not only galvanizes him to come to terms with his trauma but also paves the way for his better treatments of the environment. Ultimately, the protagonist comes to realization of his life goal as he aspires to become a teacher to inculcate into the posterity the idea of sense of place and ecological awareness.

Keywords: ecocriticism, media studies, sense of place

“ขอบคุณที่ให้ชีวิตใหม่กับผม”: การสร้างตัวตนใหม่ผ่าน “ภูมิชีวประวัติ” และความผูกพันกับสถานที่ในซีรีส์เรื่อง นิทานพันดาว (2021)

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้วิเคราะห์ซีรีส์เรื่องนิทานพันดาว (2021) ในฐานะตัวบททางวัฒนธรรมผ่านมุมมองการวิจารณ์เชิงนิเวศ บทความเน้นสำรวจการนำเสนอภาพการเปลี่ยนแปลงของตัวตนผ่านความผูกพันกับสถานที่ (sense of place) ของตัวละครหลัก ผู้วิจัยเลือกใช้ทฤษฎี “ภูมิชีวประวัติ” (geobiography) โดยเวเนเดิล เบอร์รี่ เพื่อนำเสนอความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างการสร้างตัวตนใหม่ผ่านความผูกพันกับภูมิศาสตร์ของถิ่นที่อยู่ในการวิเคราะห์ตัวบท งานวิจัยนี้นำเสนอว่าการเดินทางสู่หมู่บ้านผาพันดาวเพื่อเป็นครูอาสาของตัวละครหลักเป็นจุดเริ่มต้นของกระบวนการเยียวยา รักษาบาดแผลที่ทำให้เกิดความบอบช้ำทางจิตใจของตัวละคร กล่าวคือความผูกพันกับสถานที่และผู้คนในชุมชนของตัวละครที่ก่อตัวขึ้นทำให้ตัวละครสามารถสร้างตัวตนใหม่ขึ้นมาได้ ตัวตนใหม่นี้ทำให้เขาเริ่มเห็นมิติอันหลากหลายที่ยึดโยงกับสถานที่นอกเหนือจากมิติทางกายภาพ เช่น มิติด้านความทรงจำ และมิติด้านวัฒนธรรม นอกจากนี้ตัวตนที่สร้างขึ้นใหม่ยังทำให้ตัวละครสามารถเยียวยาบาดแผลในจิตใจและยังนำไปสู่การปฏิบัติต่อสิ่งแวดล้อมอย่างอ่อนน้อม ท้ายที่สุดตัวละครหลักสามารถตระหนักได้ถึงจุดมุ่งหมายของชีวิตในการเป็นครูอาสาเพื่อปลูกปัญญาความรู้เกี่ยวกับความผูกพันต่อสถานที่และแนวคิดทางนิเวศสำนึกสู่คนรุ่นหลังต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: การวิจารณ์เชิงนิเวศ สื่อศึกษา ความผูกพันกับสถานที่

1. Introduction

A Tale of Thousand Stars (นิทานพันดาว) is a Thai TV series broadcast in 2021. The series is well-received by both Thai and international fans. It belongs to a genre called BL series, standing for “boy love” where plots revolve around a romantic relationship between two men. The plot of *A Tale of Thousand Stars* focuses on Tian, the protagonist, who underwent a heart transplant due to his heart disease. Traumatized by the incident, Tian then embarks on his journey to find the meaning of life at Pha Pun Dao village (หมู่บ้านผาพันดาว) where he discovers a place to call “home”. Although the series is categorized in BL genre, this research will focus on the series’ representation of the environment in relation to one’s sense of self. Specifically, this cultural text is worth investigating as the text encapsulates the issue of the interconnectedness between one’s sense of place and self. In other words, among other series, *A Tale of Thousand Stars* emphasizes the idea of the physical environment in affecting humans’ psyche. In addition, its plot is set in a rural area where other series usually depict lives in a city. This representation of the rural area and the issue of physical environment are thus underrepresented in Thai series and therefore worth investigating from an ecocritical standpoint.

It is worth noting that research of ecomedia in Thailand is still an uncharted area where ecocritics can make academic contributions. Hence, very little is known about the issue of sense of place depicted in *A Tale of Thousand Stars*. The contribution of this research will add up to a diversity of environmental representations of ecomedia, specifically in Thailand as part of the Southeast Asian region. In particular, the series captures one’s healing process that is intertwined with one’s sense of self. Such text, therefore, promotes the role of the physical environment—thereby contributing to scholarship of ecocritical research. As a result, this research will add more dimensions of cultural texts, specifically from the Southeast Asian region, into the scholarship of environmental humanities and ecocriticism. It will also lay bare the inextricability between the formation of one’s sense of place and self.

2. Research Objectives

This research aims at analyzing *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (2021) as a cultural text from an ecocritical standpoint to:

- 2.1) To reveal the text’s complication in portraying the protagonist’s alienation toward himself and his place.
- 2.2) To delineate the protagonist’s healing process through his intimate relationship with the place and its people.
- 2.3) To exhibit how the protagonist’s extended self—including the environment, its various dimensions, and its people—allows him to heal his shattered self, and instills into him an ecological awareness in light of “geobiography” and sense of place.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

This research will draw upon the theories proposed by schools of thoughts in environmental humanities, and Berry’s notion of “geobiography” as the frameworks to shed light on the text. In *The*

Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, Lawrence Buell, one of the prominent ecocritics, argues that our ecological crisis is “a crisis of imagination” (1995, p. 2). He also advocates the role of creative arts in all forms as “an influence upon the emerging culture of environmental concern” (1995, p. 2)—thereby exhibiting the relationship between arts and the physical environment. According to Emmet’s and Nye’s *The Environmental Humanities*, the school of thoughts which echoes such relationship is environmental humanities as it provides an “insight into a certain historical and cultural context of a place in relation to environmental problem” (2017, p. 1). It is worth pointing out that the area of ecocritical films is one of the fields scholars are intrigued in exploring. Bereton’s *Environmental Ethics and Film* (2016) reflects such academic impulse as he analyzes various ecofilms such as Kameron’s *Avatar* (2009). The analysis of *A Tale of Thousand Stars* from an ecocritical perspective is thus plausible as ecomedia.

Among various trends in environmental humanities, place study is one of the issues ecocritics pay attention to. The issue this research will delve deeper into is a phenomenological approach to place, which entails humanistic geography, as proposed by Cresswell (2015, p. 51). There are many ecocritical thinkers whose theories underpin this phenomenological approach to place in their seminal works (Leopold, 1989; Ryden, 1993; Snyder, 2008; Tuan, 1977). For instance, in Marijoan Bull’s *Place-Making: Planning, Modernity, and Humanistic Geography*, she posits the role humanistic geographer is to analyze “[t]exts art, toponyms, songs, symbols, maps, and even social institutions” as “sources of place making” (2008, p. 11). Furthermore, the idea of place making also entails the idea of place and identity. For example, Wendell Berry, an American poet, posits in his work *The Art of the Commonplace*, arguing that one’s sense of place is inextricable from one’s sense of self. As he puts it, “[...] the place and history, for me, have been inseparable, and there is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place. It is a complex inheritance, and I have been both enriched and bewildered by it” (2002, p. 4). This sense of self constructed through one’s subjective experience with the place is what Berry calls “geobiography”, the framework deployed to shed light on *A Tale of Thousand Stars*.

4. Methodology

This research analyzes *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (2021) as a cultural text from an ecocritical perspective. It is firmly grounded on hermeneutics, study of interpretation. The researcher then watches, analyzes, and synthesizes the series’ plot, dialogue, and cinematography to capture the underlying message in relation to “geobiography” and its healing effects.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1 Tian’s Alienation

My analysis of *A Tale of Thousand Stars* suggests that the series portrays Tian’s disorientation toward himself and also the environment in the city where he lives due to his heart disease. To answer the first research question, the protagonist’s background must be provided to delineate exactly where his trauma stems from. Tian, an affluent university student who is fully aware of his short life span, has lived

a wasted life before he got his heart transplanted. For instance, in the opening scene, Tian is enjoying a gamble and he is so addicted to the game that he is going to bet his own luxurious car. The disorientation and toward his aimless life and alienation within himself and are reflected in the gambling scene as he willingly lives his life to the fullest despite how wasted his life is. The turning point of the event is Tian's heart transplant after his heart suddenly weakened. Confused by the abrupt heart transplant, he later finds out his father's ploy to use his connection to get the donated heart. Tian also discovers that the accident—bringing death upon Torfun, the heart donor—is partially Tian's fault.

It is also significant to point out that Tian retrieves Torfun's diary where she recorded her past experiences while being a volunteer teacher at Pha Pun Dao village in Chiang Rai province. The diary is one of the important motifs in the series galvanizing Tian to embark on his journey as a volunteer teacher. In the diary, it writes, "Finally we managed to fix the wood flooring of this house. It took all the energy of me and the villagers here. But the kids seemed to have a good time with it. [...] They are so nice. I'm grateful to them all for making this house the happiest place to live for me". The passage here captures the true happiness of being a teacher at the village. It also connotes oneness in the community where villagers help each other. This endows Tian with a sense of wonder and prompts him to question his own existence and at the same time yearns for atonement for the crime he and his family committed. As he states to the school headmaster regarding his reason to be a volunteer teacher:

I have never had to be alone. I have never lived without water supply or electricity. I have never had to do anything by myself. All through my life, I have lived a comfortable life. [...] I almost died once. And now...I was given another opportunity. It was as though I was born again. So I want to use this opportunity to do something for others.

From this passage, Tian's journey to the village is the departure point for his healing process to heal his shattered self and atone for his crime.

5.2 Tian's Healing Process

Tian's healing process is represented by his bond with the environment and its people as he gradually learns to become a part of the community through his interactions with people as a teacher, his learning of the community's culture, and his discovery of various dimensions of place in Pha Pun Dao village.

Despite having a difficult time adjusting himself into the new environment during his early days at the village, Tian is gradually getting along with the kids and eventually becomes part of their lives. The scene that illustrates Tian's developing bond with people in the community and his students is the scene when he pays a visit to the students' family. There Tian visits each kid to help out his students for their local businesses. In doing so, not only can Tian strengthen his bond with the students but also their guardians or parents. For instance, Tian helps the villagers from being exploited by the merchants who buy tea from this village. When he explains the situation to Chief Phupha, Tian states, "How could I just stand there watching their villagers being taken advantage of?" By protecting villagers' welfare, it can be

seen that Tian is gradually becoming a part of the community where the locals and his students accept him with their open arms.

Moreover, the other significant character that cultivates into Tian an ecological consciousness is Pupha, the chief of forest rangers at Pha Pun Dao village. This scene helps open Tian's eyes to the interconnectedness between one's sense of self and the environment. In this scene, he brings Tian to Pha Pun Dao cliff for the first time and shares with Tian his background:

When I was a kid, my father took me here. He told me his work was to protect all the trees we saw. [...] I was mad that he sacrificed his life for these trees and that he left me and my mother. Today, as I'm standing here, I understand my father now and how he must have felt. This forest is like a home, a resource to earn a living, and a life of people here. If I have to die like my father, I won't regret it.

This captivating story by Phupha here encapsulates his bond with the place and also his ecological awareness as a forest ranger. The land, specifically his "geobiography", is packed with the memory of his family. He also discerns the forest as an essential part in the people's lives. For Phupha, the wellbeing of the community is hinged upon that of the forest. In other words, the two components, humans and physical environment, are inextricable with each other. It is Phupha's story that opens Tian's eyes to Phupha's "geobiography" and its ecological dimension.

Apart from Tian's developing bond with the physical environment through his growing ecological awareness, he is also able to tap into the place's cultural dimension. Tian's first exposure to the place's cultural dimension is illustrated in the scene in which Tian was given the local clothes by head of the village, Khama. After Tian puts the clothes on, a forest ranger remarks Tian's resemblance with the locals here: "You look like a local here". Furthermore, the following scene also shows the contrast between Tian's former self and the present self. That is, Tian's flashback portrays his past self when he was enjoying luxurious clothes, yet in the present he no longer fancies the luxury he had. Rather, Tian now takes pleasure and pride in wearing the indigenous clothes as he feels accepted as a part of the community. This sense of belonging is further elaborated in the next scene through the cultural dimension of the place in the welcoming ceremony—specifically the scene in which Khama and the villagers secretly holds a welcoming event for Tian. As Khama states, "Everyone at Pha Pun Dao sees that you have been with us for quite some time. So we come together to hold a blessing event for you and to officially welcome you to our village". The scene thus can be read metaphorically as Tian's plunging into the cultural dimension of Pha Pun Dao where the villagers now officially embrace Tian as part of the community.

The other element that serves as an indispensable motif in the series is the tale of thousand stars itself. It is a local legend that is tied to the Pha Pun Dao cliff. According to a villager, he says, "if you go to the cliff on the last day of the year, and count 1,000 stars to wish for love, your wish will come true. I have been hearing this tale since I was a kid". The tale can be seen as a part of Pha Pun Dao's cultural aspect as it has been told from a generation to generation. The fact that Tian fully believes in this tale to atone for his crime for Torfun's death reflects how Tian now becomes part of the community

through this collective story. It is also the motif that brings Tian to Pha Pun Dao cliff as he wants to fulfill Torfun's dream to wish at the cliff. This motif is important because it shows how this shared legend is also a part of the place and the community. The tale thus embodies Pha Pun Dao cultural dimension.

From our discussion, it can be seen that Tian has been exposed to various dimensions of the place apart from its physical environment. That is, Pha Pun Dao is a site where people's memory, experience, and legend are embedded in the landscape. As a result of such exposure, Tian is able to reconstruct his sense of self through his discernment of the place's various dimensions and "geobiography". Put differently, Tian's sense of self is no longer alienated but rather extends to include the environment, its people, its memory, and its cultural dimension.

5.3 Tian's Extended Self

Apart from the idea of Tian's healing process manifest in this cultural text, the series also delineates his extended self that includes not only the physical environment and its inhabitants but also the cultural dimension embedded in the place. Tian's newly developed self both heals his wounded self and paves the way for his better treatments of the environment. For instance, the scene illustrating this point is the scene Tian risks his life to save the forest from illegal logging. Tian records the video of their wrongdoings, but he was caught in the act and almost died unless the forest rangers rescued him. The fact that he willingly puts his life on the line despite being just a volunteer teacher reflects his altruistic self. As Tian firmly states to another villager of his doing, "I don't want anything bad to happen to the village anymore". His selfless action thus hints at his love and care not only for the forest but also its inhabitants. This scene, therefore, represents his ecological-oriented self.

Intriguingly, the physical environment is not the only site through which Tian sense of self is constructed but also its inhabitants. This extended family of his is represented in the scene in which Tian has to return to his home in the city. The whole village gathers to bless him before the farewell. With the sad atmosphere of saying goodbye, the scene captures an image of Tian and villagers surrounded by one another in a group hug. Such image, in this sense, serves as a metaphor of Tian's extended family and materializes such concept through the visualization of the group hug. Hence, Tian's sense of self embraces not only the physical environs but also its inhabitants.

It is worth noting that Tian's reconstructed self enables him to eventually find a goal in his life: to be a teacher at Pha Pun Dao to keep cultivating his knowledge of the place into the posterity. His resolution also suggests that Tian is eventually able to integrate into the community where he truly belongs. A sense of yearning for life in the village is manifest in the scene after Tian returns to his home in the city. He expresses his yearning through the letter he writes to Phupha: "It's been weeks since I came back home. My life here is totally the opposite, which makes it harder to believe that I dared to live up there by myself. [...] Somehow, I miss the difficult life up there in the village more". Despite living a comfortable life in his luxurious house, such comfort still cannot fulfill his desire to return to Pha Pun Dao as his "geobiography" and sense of place are there. This motivation to return drives him to get inspired to become a teacher so that he can live his life at the village where he belongs. As he mentions

his new dream to his mother, “I want to study something that can help people. [...] I want to study to become a teacher. [...] I just realized that teaching kids makes me so happy”. Tian’s determination can be deemed a result of his newly developed self to help others in the community. As Tian puts it, “At first, I thought there would be something I could give them there. In the end, it was me who got something from them”. Tian’s remark reflects his intention to return to the village to give back to the place.

Ultimately, Tian is able to heal his shattered self from his trauma, originating from his guilt of Torfun’s accident. With the love from the people at Pha Pun Dao and also Phupha’s guidance, Tian comes to terms with his trauma and eventually forgives himself. This redemptive element reflects in the climactic scene where Tian fails to count 1,000 stars, as told in the legend, to fulfill Torfun’s dream and to atone for his crime. As Phupha talks some sense into Tian, “You don’t need to do anything for Torfun. You have done enough, Tian. [...] No one should use their whole life to repay anyone else’s life. I know you have done your best. And I know that Torfun could see this and forgive you”. Phupha’s remarks finally makes Tian realize that he no longer owes Torfun as he has contributed so much to the village. Phupha also points out that it is Tian who “brought [Torfun’s] heart back here” to fulfill her wish. The other significant scene that marks a sense of closure to Tian’s inner conflict is the scene where Tian returns to Pha Pun Dao cliff to bury Torfun’s diary. Tian says, “Sorry for just returning this to you. Thank you for giving me a new life. I hope you rest peacefully, Torfun”. This important scene reveals how Tian has finally comes to terms with his own trauma as the act of burying the diary serves as the metaphor of Tian burying his wounded self. Moreover, Tian also shows his own “tale of a thousand stars” which suggests a new beginning for Tian’s life here in Pha Pun Dao village, now becoming Tian’s “geobiography”, with the place and people he loves. In other words, his wounded self is eventually healed through the healing process as he develops his bond with the place and the people.

In essence, we can see how Tian’s extended self which is gradually formed during his stay at Pha Pun Dao village induces him to heal his shattered self and simultaneously foster his ecological awareness resulting in his better treatments of the land. We can also see that Tian’s exposure to various dimensions of the place such as its memory, people, and culture gradually intermingles his sense of identity with the environment. It should be noted that my analysis of *A Tale of Thousand Stars* echoes Berry’s notion of “geobiography”. It is Tian’s intimate relationship with the place and the discovery of his own “geobiography” at Pha Pun Dao that eventually allows him to recreate his sense of self. Tian’s journey to make sense of his own identity thus is inextricable with his intimate experiences with the place and its people. The sense of harmonious livings among human and nonhuman beings thus serves as the core value of this series. In conclusion, my research has contributed to issues of ecological complexity and how it can be intertwined with one’s identity in scholarship of Thai ecomedia.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

- 6.1) The theory of queer ecology could be deployed to shed light on this series.
- 6.2) The idea of romanticization of rural landscape can be explored to excavate the underlying power.
- 6.3) The series’ cinematography can also be examined to delineate more symbols and metaphors.

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