

## THE SURVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND ITS CURRENT APPEAL IN CENTRAL THAILAND

*Kelangsungan Musik Tradisional dan Perkembangannya di Thailand Tengah*

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**Abstract:** *Traditional music in Central Thai society is a rich piece of culture that uncovers much about day to day existence in the society. This study investigates the factors contributing to the music's declining appeal to the local people. It focuses on customary music in five focal regions of Thailand. In collecting the data, I combined survey, interviews, and observation. The analysis shows that the popularity and appeal of customary music in Central Thailand is declining. The decline is partly caused by the wide impacts of Western cultures and music on Thai society. Moreover, there are not many youngsters who are keen on preserving the existence of the traditional music. This is coupled with the absence of the government in supporting the survival of the music. It is pity as the folk music is very much in tune with the everyday life of Central Thai society. However, in order to survive it requires modernization and adaptation with the changing dynamics of the society.*

**Key words:** *traditional music, Thailand music, qualitative research*

**Abstrak:** *Musik tradisional di Thailand Tengah adalah kekayaan kultural yang banyak menggambarkan eksistensi dan keseharian masyarakatnya. Penelitian ini menginvestigasi faktor-faktor pendukung yang menyebabkan berkurangnya minat masyarakat terhadap musik tradisional tersebut. Penelitian ini focus pada kebiasaan bermusik di lima area pusat di Thailand. Kombinasi dari survey, wawancara dan observasi digunakan sebagai metode dalam pengumpulan data. Temuan dari analisis menunjukkan popularitas dan daya Tarik music tradisional di Thailand Tengah cukup menurun. Sebagian besar penurunan minat disebabkan oleh dampak masif dari budaya dan musik Barat terhadap masyarakat Thai. Terlebih tidak banyak kaum muda yang berkenan untuk melestarikan eksistensi music tradisional. Hal ini sangat disayangkan mengingat musik daerah di Thailand Tengah sangat kaya nada yang selaras dengan keseharian masyarakat. Walau begitu modernisasi dan adaptasi tetap diperlukan agar musik tradisional dapat berkembang seiring dengan pergerakan social yang dinamis.*

**Kata kunci:** *musik tradisional, music Thailand, riset kualitatif*

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional music is a rich part of local culture that reveals much about everyday life in Central Thai society. This paper examines traditional music in five central provinces of Thailand. This paper assesses the problems with traditional music and the reason for its appeal in local communities. This paper also shows that traditional music in Central Thailand nowadays tend to be less interesting to Thai young people. A decade ago, Sasiwanich (1986) pointed out that 'without the conservation of Thai classical music, it will soon remain only in funeral ceremonies', and indeed, the position of Thai classical music towards the end of the twentieth century is not far from this prediction. One of the reasons could be related to the wide impact of the western culture. Additionally, there are few young people interested in continuing the art and there is a lack of government support in maintaining the traditions. The traditional music retains appeal in its link to the everyday lifestyle of Central Thai society yet requires modernization in order to survive in the face of global challenges.

The traditional music of central Thailand is a significant piece of Thai social legacy that uncovers the way of life of individuals living in the fields toward the North of Bangkok. Traditional music is the tunes and tunes of local individuals. Traditional singing utilizes plain and straightforward language and regularly includes a trade among guys and females. It is normally sung during celebrations and festivities or joined into local working practices. An assortment of Thai names had been doled out to its various structures, for example, *pleng chao ban*, *pleng peun ban*, *pleng peun mueang*, *pleng patipak* and *dontri peun ban*. In any case, these terms all fall under the English language class of 'society melodies'. The traditional music of central Thailand has been acquired by procedure of *mook-dad*

*ta*. *Mook-dad ta* is verbal transmission and retention, with no composed record. The key attributes are the enchanting articulations, profound implications and clever ripostes, in spite of the effortlessness of the language.

Folk songs are thus a part of cultural heritage that has been accumulated over many generations from the past to the present (Loh-ngeun, 2009, p.3). The songs are a type of social excitement and a few tunes are even intended to join together and reinforce the social gathering. These melodies are distinctive for their chorus singing parts and the circular arrangements of the vocalists. The tunes that speak to a gender-based trade have created as melodies for organize execution and diversion however were initially sung as a rule society, particularly during the New Year and Songkran celebrations.

The artists require uncommon capacities in memory, speed of brain, verbal expertise, imaginative reasoning and agreement. Given these requirements, not all members of society were able to sing the songs, leading to a separation between performers and audience. When there was an event such as a remembrance or ordination ceremony and the host wanted entertainment, they would employ talented singers to perform. This inspired the creation of musical groups involving a skilled male and female singer, who were formed to seek employment at local events. Singing on private patios and temple courtyards evolved to stage performances with specific backgrounds. Local folk music thus developed from community singing to a stage-performance art and profession (Nawikamoon, 1984, pp.77-79). Specifically, traditional music in central Thailand is used for courting and contains many double-entendres, which reveal the light-hearted and playful nature of central Thai lifestyle. Ultimately, this is entertainment of the people, created by locals for locals.

From the past to the present, the central Thailand has remained the centre of all major developments in the country. It is the most crowded city in Thailand with around one sixth of the national population. Bangkok's population is predominantly young: over half of the residents are under 30 (National Identity Board, 1995). Central Thai is the gate opening the country to the outside world and is said to be the city where East meets West; here the reception of foreign ideology and practice is at a maximum. Therefore, it is surprising that it could still maintain the traditional music among the youngsters.

Modern Thai society has been influenced by Western civilization, especially in the field of technology. Global popular culture has threatened the particularisms of native culture. Thai classical music, then, falls into a category perceived as dated (Sasiwanich 1986). This has affected national culture, in particular traditional performances because they have not adapted to meet the demands of changed society (Pongpaiboon, 1999). Those performances that have managed to survive have done so by modifying in line with modern trends (Maijaroen, 2009). Traditional music of central Thailand has declined in popularity and presence (Detpimon, 1988; Saihoo, 1980), yet continues to hold important value for Thai culture and economy. For this reason, the researcher embarked upon a study to determine the specific problems with traditional music and its current appeal in the communities of Central Thailand.

Some study had been conducted and has found that modernity can go hand in hand with traditional music proven by Somsak Srisantisuk and Suwan Buatuan (1985) who studied the changing society and culture among indigenous groups in Kalasin Province. They found that the music of two communities with the same original traditions developed differently

due to their location. If the music was in an area where it was influenced by external culture and society, the characteristics of the music altered to incorporate this influence (Srisantisuk & Buatuan, 1985).

However, other group of studies found that modernity has negative impact on traditional music proven by Buapan Supanyot (1992) who studied the Ee-saew a folk song of Suphanburi Province and, by studying the song, he found that the problems and obstacles for its creation and inheritance come from the artists themselves and popularity within society. Conservation of the song to protect its inheritance is therefore necessary, yet current inheritance of traditional knowledge is primarily achieved by word of mouth, which can be unreliable (Saprasert, 1999).

My study is going to explain and support the previous studies by Somsak Srisantisuk and Suwan Buatuan on modernity can go hand in hand with traditional music.

## **METHOD**

This was a qualitative research. Five provinces in central Thailand were purposively selected for this investigation: Suphanburi, Ang Thong, Kanchanaburi, Singburi and Lopburi. The sample group for the study was determined by a purposive sampling method and was composed of five individuals involved with the performances of five musical groups in the research area. Research data was gathered by journal article. A variety of tools were used in the field, specifically interview and secondary data analysis. The structured interview was divided into two parts. The first part was a set of questions designed to gather personal details from the respondents. The second part was a set of open-ended questions designed to ask what the current conditions and problems with traditional music in Central Thailand were and how much overall appeal traditional music in Central Thailand had.

A snowball sampling approach was used for unstructured interviews. Data collected from journal article was about the background of traditional music in Central Thailand, steps of performance, beliefs and customs, musical components and musical identity. Data collected from the journal article also focused on current conditions of traditional music in Central Thailand, problems and modern appeal of the music.

## ANALYSIS

### **Current Problems with Traditional Music Performance in Central Thailand Spread of the media**

The Traditional music of central Thailand is not popular because other excellent performances have spread to Thailand. Traditional music in central Thailand has decreased in popularity because other performances have come to replace it. This has been affirmed by the interviewees who said 'Normally I watch the TV in my extra time since it is convenient, free, doesn't require travel time and, critically, traditional music isn't performed routinely. I don't have the foggiest idea when people tunes are being performed. Except if I pass them or somebody comes to let me know, I don't get an opportunity to watch the performance.' (Mali Klinmala, 2019, interview). 'These days, customary entertainers can't regard singing as their essential occupation in light of the fact that there are no phases to perform. The entertainers don't need a high salary, only enough to get by. A genuine craftsman simply needs to play out, a phase to show their capacity and a spot for the social legacy of their grandparents to be passed on.' (Samran Sukkam, 2019, interview)

In the past, seeing arts performance was well known and spectators would watch the exhibitions to see the stances, tune in to the rhymes and respect the clever verses in customary music appears. As media turned out to be progressively powerful in regular day to day existence,

group of spectator designs changed and present day performance replaced traditional amusement in the public arena. This is the explanation behind a decrease in the popularity of traditional music and could prompt its vanishing, as has occurred with prop gai music. In the past, employers held conventional music execution with extraordinary significance, particularly the music of focal Thailand. Any semblance of *ee-saew*, *choi*, *pleng yey* and smash tone were performed at each celebration and yearly occasion. This gave the entertainers an ordinary wellspring of work and there were insufficient entertainers to satisfy the need, placing existing entertainers in a solid position. However, nowadays the number of employment opportunities has been dramatically reduced. Primary factors for this are insufficient venues and high costs, which mean that the people are unable to employ performers as before. Additionally, the modern generations have less time to spend watching traditional performances because of an increased need to work and meet the financial demands of modern society. People are rarely free and required to work longer hours, meaning that they have little interest in folk songs. Only if it is absolutely necessary, will traditional music groups be employed to perform at local events, such as redemption ceremonies and funerals. Current traditional music performances last for one or two hours, a clear divergence from the past, when musical performances were played through the night. Additionally, the younger generation does not know what traditional music is or what the lyrics are like, which leads them to turn their attentions to the television or other media. This is how Western culture enters Thai society and causes audiences to lose interest in traditional entertainment. The majority of people consider traditional music of central Thailand to be outdated and boring,

leaving audiences composed of the older generation.

With the appearance of today media, traditional music needed to build up their presentation display and incorporate execution adjustments to engage and draw in spectators. Individuals of this age don't generally think about *pleng yey* or *pleng choi*. They watch the TV and tune in to the radio. The main individuals who love traditional music are old, and of those lone a couple completely value it. We should acknowledge that we are a piece of a crowd of people that adores current media, regardless of whether it is TV music CDs, the Internet or interpersonal organizations. We like fun, impermanent diversion that is simpler to access than conventional music, which is hard to discover and requires a devoted group of spectators.

Audiences are no longer impressed by the dance postures, rhymes and performance wit and turn to more impressive and convenient modes of entertainment. This is in keeping with the research results of Jintana Nuna (1991), who found that people now have a great choice of entertainment in the form of modern media. This is one reason for the decline of traditional music performances.

### **Influence of globalized culture**

Thai economy and society have changed. Trade has expanded and new technologies have been invented and adopted. The introduction of media has led to a growing choice of entertainment in the form of television, cinema, stage performance, modern music, karaoke, compact discs and the Internet, this has been affirmed by the interviewers who posited that 'The appearance of present day media has made the traditional music of central Thailand adjust and modernize its performance, while joining stories from network shows as offering focuses to engage the crowds' (Prateep Onsalung, 2019, interview)

This has caused the waning popularity of traditional music. The traditional music performances that have not adapted their methods have declined. Those musical groups that have been able to adapt their content to fit modern trends are able to survive. The telephone, radio, CD, VCD and karaoke are forms of media that provide a platform for the adaptation of traditional music and the example has already been set by the adaptation of Thai country music or *look tung*. Although folk songs are traditionally performed at local events, young people know less about it than the new global cultures that have entered society, such as K-pop and J-pop. Young people sing Korean and Japanese songs rather than the traditional Thai music and are more prepared to spend money downloading these songs and modern Thai pop than they are to watch free traditional music. Although young people cannot be forced to like and sing traditional music, they can be educated about its importance, the historical value it holds, the stories it tells and the lifestyle it reveals.

Social conditions and the surrounding environment have changed with the introduction of modern media. The economy and trade have expanded and technology is more prominent. Sutiwong Pongpaiboon (1982) concluded three consequences of these changes: academia has neglected Thailand in favour of Eurocentric and Americentric outlooks; technology has weakened work ethics and made time more precious for both performer and viewer; modern values have displaced community spirit and levels of cooperation and participation have suffered.

### **Lack of government support**

There is not as much support from related organizations as there should be because the importance of traditional music is not realized. There is no support from the community or large institutions

to provide impulse to the performances. There is also very little information about traditional music in central Thailand and there is neither systematic work procedure nor adequate advertising. These are obstacles to local and national performances of traditional music. Government support of traditional knowledge related to central Thai music is not found in all areas according to the interviewers who cited that 'the budget from government institutions to sponsor *pleng yey* in the local area is almost non-existent but we are able to survive through our love of the music. But, if there was some sponsorship from the government, it would be a big encouragement, as now communities are forced to help themselves.

We don't want our heritage to disappear from the community' (Prayong Kaewpradit, 2019, interview) Even though the **provincial** culture offices do not have information related to traditional music performances, the culture of each region and each province should be treated as a part of national heritage that must be conserved and protected this has been affirmed by the interviewers who cited that 'Interest and participation of the government, the private area and the community are significant in supporting the local ram tone music in light of the fact that, if not all divisions understand the advantage of participation, it will be troublesome. Now and again, individuals included will become dishearten yet they should not surrender on the grounds that the advantage will be felt by our descendants.' (Prateep Onsalung, 2019, interview)

### **The Appeal of Traditional Music**

Appeal is the interest and attraction of the artists and performances to the audience. In central Thailand, there are different groups and artists that appeal to different audiences for different reasons.

The *See Pee Nong* music group has a truly traditional performance style and pedigree through inheritance from their grandparents. The group of mother and two daughters will improvise lyrics and dance styles so there is no need for memorization. At some events, the performances will consist of the mother scolding her children or using racy language to make them embarrassed as cited by the interviewers who said that it is entertaining for the audiences because it requires visible wit and speed of thought (Samran Sukdam, 2019, interview).

*Ram Yey* music group, under the administration organization of Nong Rong Sub-District is famous for its *Ram Yey* performance. The group was established after community cooperation to preserve traditional lifestyle. The appeal of the performances by this group stems from the traditional costumes, visible performer enthusiasm and traditional lifestyle portrayed. Additionally, the *Yey* music has no defined time limit so the performers may continue for as long as the audience is entertained. Instruments used are *klong yao, pi, ching, chab, krab and mong*. The appeal of the music is the ease with which people are entertained (Prayong Kaewpradit, 2019, interview).

The *Ram Tone* music group from Wat Jakornsee School prevents traditional music from disappearing by incorporating it into the local school curriculum. The teachers hope that the children of the school may continue the traditions, so they teach the singing, dancing and music. The group includes children and members of the public. They will perform at school events but, thanks to the charm of the children, they are invited to perform at external functions. The group is financially sponsored by locals and is one example of traditional music being embraced by the younger generations (Pantip Nakpleum, 2019, interview).

## Conclusion

The age of globalization has dramatically affected Thai society, especially the people who have not kept up with the speed of change. The existence and adaptation of traditional music in central Thailand is dependent on the people and their behavior in accepting the activities as part of their everyday lives. When the public adopts culture from outside, they must do so without detracting from the value of their own culture. It tends to be the case that a society gradually adopts foreign cultures that correspond to its own domestic culture. These new elements, which are 'borrowed' at first, soon become indistinguishable from the traditional customs. Negotiations have been one of the ways to make traditional music in central Thailand survive in the globalized culture.

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