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James Mitchell

# ***Khon ban diaokan* or 'we're from the same village':**

## **star/fan interaction in Thai *lukthung***

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### **Abstract**

*Phleng lukthung* or Thai country song, is an acculturated song genre of Thailand which draws on modern and traditional cultural forms, appeals to both urban and rural populations, can be nationalistic, yet is also emblematic of the large and historically marginalized Isan minority. Isan people have exerted increasing influence as the dominant consumers of the *lukthung* music industry. As a result certain notions of Lao-Isan identity, such as inferred equality, ethnic solidarity and determined resistance to chauvinism, have become associated with *lukthung* music and its fandom. Whereas Thai pop largely emulates global concepts of fandom, *lukthung* fan culture draws heavily on the Thai discourse of community and the customary performer/audience relationships found in traditional genres such as *like* and *molam*. This article describes two main aspects of *lukthung* fan culture: (i) the opportunities for interaction between fans and performers at concerts and (ii) the communities formed by singers and their fan clubs. The ways in which Isan identity is expressed within these two aspects is assessed according to theories of marginalized and dominant fandoms.

**Keywords:** fandom; Isan; *lukthung*; Mangpor Chonticha; Thai country music

The process of modernization in Thailand has created a culture of media consumption that in turn has given rise to various fan cultures.<sup>1</sup> *Phleng lukthung*,<sup>2</sup> or Thai country song, is an acculturated song genre of Thailand, which draws on modern

1. Unless otherwise indicated, information pertaining to the behaviour of fans and performers are the direct observations of Peter Garrity, who has attended *lukthung* concerts on a bi-weekly basis for the past nine years and whose photos illustrate this article.

2. I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription except for established names or occasionally for an author's preferred spelling.

and traditional cultural forms, and appeals to both urban and rural populations. It can be nationalistic, yet is also emblematic of the large, and historically marginalized, Isan<sup>3</sup> minority. In order to understand the influence of *lukthung* on both Thai society and Isan culture it is necessary to examine the relationship between *lukthung* performers and their fans. Gray *et al.* argue that 'studying fan culture allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world' (2007: 10). The question arises as to what *lukthung* fandom might reveal about the mediated cultural and social realities of modern Thailand.

*Lukthung* is a hybrid genre which has been popular in Thailand since the late 1960s, although this popularity has only recently extended to the middle and upper classes.<sup>4</sup> The songs, which can be slow and sad or upbeat and fun, describe the impact of urban development on rural Thais. Although usually sung in Thai, many Isan words and phrases are used. *Lukthung* originally blended 1940s and 1950s Western/Latin dance rhythms such as the cha cha or rumba with traditional melodies, but has since borrowed from Thai folk music genres such as *like*, *lae* and *molam*, Western genres such as salsa, funk and disco and non-Western genres such as Indian *filmi geet*.

A particular point of interest in *lukthung* is the leading role it has played in facilitating the regeneration of Lao-Isan identity and culture. Since the 1960s, *lukthung* has provided many Isan people with the opportunity to move into mainstream Thai society via participation in the industry as performers and song-writers. Correspondingly, Isan people have exerted increasing influence as the dominant consumers of the *lukthung* music industry. As a result certain notions of Lao-Isan identity, such as inferred equality, ethnic solidarity and determined resistance to chauvinism, have become associated with *lukthung* music and its fandom. *Lukthung* is now portrayed and perceived as an authentic and traditional Thai art form (see Amporn 2006: 24–50) and tradition accordingly plays an important role in the ways fans and performers express themselves. Whereas Thai pop is not indistinct from the modus operandi of popular music found elsewhere in the globalized music industry, it is interesting to note that *lukthung* fan culture tends to draw more specifically on the Thai discourse of community and the customary performer/audience relationships found in traditional genres such as *like* and *molam*. This article describes two main aspects of *lukthung* fan

3. Isan refers to the northeastern region of Thailand. A discussion of the ways in which Isan people perceive themselves and are perceived by others can be found in McCargo and Hongladoram (2004: 219–34). Most, but not all, Isan people are of Lao ethnicity—hence the term 'Lao-Isan'.

4. The reasons for the rise in status of *lukthung* after 1997 are analyzed in detail in Amporn (2006: 32–38).

culture: (i) the interaction between fans and performers at concerts and (ii) the constructed communities formed by singers and their fan clubs.

The ways in which Isan identity is expressed within these two aspects can be assessed according to theories of marginalized and dominant fandoms. De Kosnik defines a dominant fandom, not according to numbers, but power—'power over state apparatuses, power through aura or legacy, or power in the form of popularity or currency' (2008: para. 2.2). The large Isan minority was marginalized in Thai society during the 1960s to 1980s yet constituted a dominant *lukthung* fandom. Today Isan cultural identity has a higher profile in Thailand than in the past and *lukthung* has dramatically increased in status. Isan people are not marginalized to the same extent and are actually pre-eminent in some areas of society. The question arises as to how this shift towards the mainstream of Thai society has affected the Isan *lukthung* fandom. Of central concern to this article is the process by which an audience forms emotional bonds with a *lukthung* singer. Audience behaviour has not yet been a major consideration in either Thai or English language literature on *lukthung*. Furthermore, a convergence of historical and social events have meant the *lukthung*, and its wider signification in Thai society, had not been a major area of intellectual inquiry.<sup>5</sup> This study is therefore intended to both fill a gap in the *lukthung* literature and assist in providing an alternate view of fan studies in the West by contributing a case study of an increasingly popular music genre that is little known outside of its cultural domain.

### **The *lukthung* concert audience**

In the *lukthung* literature the audience, when discussed at all, has been compartmentalized according to place (rural Central and Northeast Thailand) and socio-economic status (poor/working class).<sup>6</sup> The term *lukthung* ('children of the field') was coined in 1964 as the title of a music television show<sup>7</sup> and the oppositional term for westernized pop, *lukkrung* ('children of the city'), quickly evolved. During the 1960s and 1970s, it had been widely assumed that the audience for *lukthung* consisted of rural peasants whereas city folk preferred more Westernized pop music. In fact, surveys from 1968 show that *lukthung* was almost equally popular with rural and urban audiences (93 per cent and 90 per cent respectively), but there was a greater divide when it came to *lukkrung* (54 per cent as opposed to 89 per cent) (Siriphon 2004: 233, 239, 444–45). This indicates that urban migrants formed a significant section of the early *lukthung* fandom. It has also

5. See Mitchell (2009a: 296).

6. See, for example, Lockard (1998: 184–85) and Connell and Gibson (2002: 82).

7. See Mitchell (2009b: 87).

been assumed that, because many of the early singers came from Suphanburi and other Central Thai provinces, the main audience must also have been ethnically Central Thai. However, these areas actually contain significant populations of ethnic Lao. The destruction of Vientiane by Rama III in 1827 was accompanied by the forced migration of the population and the transferral of ethnic Lao into the central Chao Phraya river basin area (Keyes 1967: 11). Waeng reports that during the 1970s Suphanburi had so many people of Lao origin that it was nicknamed 'Lao Suphan' (2002: 168).

While the precise influence of Isan people on the development of *lukthung* is a matter of considerable debate,<sup>8</sup> it is probable that the largest demographic for *lukthung* has always been the Lao-Isan working class, even in Bangkok. Miller notes that as early as 1946 a *molam* (Lao-Isan folk music) concert in Bangkok was advertised by trucks playing *molam* which were followed to the Rajadamnoen Boxing Stadium by 3000 Isan laborers (1985: 40). By the 1960s, Isan urban migration was in full swing. Many of the early *lukthung* songwriters were seasonal migrants from the northeast (Waeng 2002: 239–45, 258). The frequent use of Isan words in *lukthung* songs during the 1960s, when Isan people were suffering widespread discrimination, suggests that Isan migrants were the dominant fandom. *Accommodation theory* proposes that speakers of a language adapt their speech to become 'more like the listener or less like the listener' (Downes 1984: 228). Throughout the history of *lukthung* there is evidence of such linguistic convergence whereby performers adjusted their delivery to gain the approval of Isan audiences. Siriphon mentions a 1959 song, 'Phleng molam rock', 'which Sak Koetsiri wrote and gave to Khamron Sambunnanon to sing in the style of Isan folk'. This song included such Isan phrases as 'Oh... oh la no...nuan oei...fang doe nong' ('hey woman, listen up girl') (Siriphon 2004: 170). Waeng records the competition between 1960s superstars such as Benjamin and Suraphon Sombatjaroen to appeal to Isan fans by including Isan words and phrases in their songs (2002: 162, 216–18). Furthermore, during the early 1970s, Saksayam Petchomphu (who was himself Isan) had significant popular success with his show at the Lumpini boxing stage titled *Lukthung Isan phatha lukthung phak klang* ('competition between Northeast and Central Thai country song') (Waeng 2002: 323). One of his most popular songs was 'Tam nong klap Sarakham' ('Follow my girl back to [Maha]sarakham'), which listed the names of the provinces in Isan (Waeng 2002: 317). Lao-Isan dominance continued during the 1980s, when 'the queen of *lukthung*' Phumphuang Duangjan used the nickname 'Mon Muangnua' specifically to please her Isan-speaking fans (Waeng 2002: 321).

8. See Mitchell (2009a: 295–321) and Mitchell (2010: 66–96).

Both Jory (1999) and Miller (2005) have observed the significant role played by Isan music, especially *molam sing*, in reshaping the image of Isan culture in Thailand, while Miller has noted the role of an increasingly affluent Isan working class in ensuring the popularity of *lukthung* (2005: 99–100). Waeng, however, claims there is ongoing Central Thai chauvinism towards Isan people (2002: 46, 53), while declaring that ninety percent of those involved in the *lukthung* industry and audience are of Isan ethnicity (2002: 68). Although this figure is certainly inflated given the nationwide popularity of *lukthung* and the significant presence of performers from the Northern and Southern regions, it is certainly reasonable to suggest that Isan people are still predominant in Bangkok audiences and in the overall *lukthung* fandom.

The socio-economic status of the *lukthung* audience appears to have developed relative to the expansion of the Thai middle and urban working class. DJ Jenphop Jopkrabuanwan comments:

Our audience comes from every class of people. For example, politicians, directors, both government and private employees, taxi drivers and even students. But it is the middle class people who work in offices who listen to our program the most—not the lower class as many people think (quoted in Chaba 2004: 4).

While there may be an element of wishful thinking here, *lukthung* is evidence of the rising fortunes of some Isan people. Private concerts, costing around 300,000 baht (9,000 USD), are obviously not being organized by factory workers and bus drivers. Miller refers to this upward mobility when commenting on the village concert scene:

Although the old-fashioned troupes were preferred by the older generation of villagers, the rapidly growing and increasingly affluent younger generation, many of whom worked in Bangkok, demanded entertainment more in line with its modern city experience. Since it alone had the money to hire the large troupes (when these were to perform gratis), it gained control over decision making (2005: 102).

According to Amporn, *lukthung* has been adopted by middle-class audiences as an antidote to the rootlessness of modern Bangkok (2006: 35). Certainly Bangkok concert audiences feature a cross-section of Thai society,<sup>9</sup> including politicians and high-ranking police and army officers. There is considerable cost involved simply in attending concerts, and some fans go to three or four concerts a week. Some concerts are clearly aimed at a wealthier, higher-class audience. For example, an event that took place on June 7, 2009 at the Thai Cultural Centre to mark the anniversary of the death of Phumphueng Duangjan had tickets ranging in price from 500 to 2,500 baht (16–80 USD).

9. See Amporn (2006: 34–36).

## Interaction between fans and performers at concerts: *phuang malai*

*Lukthung* concerts are community meetings and as such are structured so as to allow a constant stream of interaction between fans and singers. Seating is arranged to allow the audience to get in and out of their seats to access a large area in front of the stage that is left vacant. This is a communal space where fans are able to achieve proximity with singers through the presentation of gifts and for such moments to be photographed or videoed. Star/fan interaction notably occurs when fans present red roses, presents, and elaborately made garlands known as *phuang malai* or *malai* to singers during concerts, a practice derived from the traditional Central Thai dramatic genre *like* (Miller 1985: 51). *Malai* are usually made of flowers (both real and artificial) and money but can include dolls, fruit or even groceries, as well as photos of the singer or the fan and singer together. Some *malai* are home-made but most are purchased from sellers at the concerts.

The giving of *malai*, and the subsequent reaction of the performers, represents an exchange of social capital. Singer Sasinan 'Donut' Sansinee describes the process:

The malai will always include the fan's telephone number and details about themselves. Then later I will call them back to have a conversation with them—to thank them and find out when their birthday is so I can sms later on. The fans appreciate what I have done so I want to make them feel special (interview with the author, June 8, 2009).

Courtesy, gratitude, and making the fans feel that the singer is still 'one of them', are much admired qualities. Singers have to be ready to collect *malai* at all times and are expected to hold them for as long as possible (see Figure 1). Considerable dexterity is required to continue singing while collecting dozens of roses and allowing *malai* to be placed around the neck. Any singer seen taking *malai* home rather than discarding them is admired, although this rule does not apply to roses, which are often recycled during the show. Singers should always attempt to collect every *malai* unless the fan is abusive or behaves inappropriately. There is definitely a pecking order, however, when it comes to fans. If there are too many fans, singers will choose to take *malai* from those they recognize, rather than from strangers, and a singer will always stop to accept a *malai* from his/her superfans.

The giving of *malai* made of money is open to manipulation since popularity and respect are often measured by the amount involved. One eyewitness observed *malai* of more than 12,000 baht (360 USD) given to singers who were not even top level. Singer Yodrak Salakjai is reported to have once given 300,000 baht (9000 USD) in a *malai* to a young female singer in order to outbid a wealthy fan and therefore save face (personal communication with Peter Garrity, March 15, 2009).

Sometimes the presentation of fake money malai is orchestrated by a singer for the purpose of building face (see Figure 2), a tactic adopted from the *like* scene where the presentation of *malai* signifies a high-status ritual.



Figure 1. Job and Joy holding typical *malai* (Veteethai concert, Bangkok, April 4, 2009)



Figure 2. Fake money *malai* (Phra Ram 2, Bangkok, June 27, 2009)

## The communities formed by singers and their fan clubs

*Lukthung* differs from most Western and Thai pop genres in the level of interaction between fans and performers. Thompson's observation of Western fandom that 'an important part of being a fan is the cultivation of non-reciprocal relations of intimacy with distant others' (1995: 222) cannot be applied to *lukthung*. Supanat 'Off' Chalermchaicharoenkit, who entered the *lukthung* scene through the reality TV show *Academy Fantasia*, observes: 'my fans regard me as a relative; a son, a brother or a nephew. Their love and care is a *rak thon rak nan* ("enduring love, lasting love")' (Kanokporn 2007: 2). The conflation of celebrity and family is not surprising given the Thai perception of non-intimate distant others as threatening and unreliable. Mulder describes the Thai world view: 'The inside is the world of near persons, of home, family, and community; the outside is the world of distant persons, of strangers, power and suspicion' (2000: 60). Since outside relationships are informed by the power to rule and are undertaken out of a desire for gain, it is no wonder that Thai fans wish to create a sense of inside relationship with the fan-object, and sometimes vice versa. This is even more characteristic of Isan urban migrants who have a long history of exploitation at the hands of Bangkok employers.<sup>10</sup> *Lukthung* fan clubs exemplify the Thai discourse of community which is opposed to modernity, globalization and market-driven capitalism—the very conditions that have led to the development of modern *lukthung*. Indeed, although it might appear that the hybrid, market-driven genre of *lukthung* is an unlikely refuge from modernity, Haughton observes that 'villages and the term "community" itself are themselves recent state constructions' (2009: 44, 53). For many urban migrants *lukthung* provides a continuous link between their rural childhood, present urban existence and future unknown location, simultaneously fulfilling the need for familiarity and community with the desire to be *thansamai* ('up-to-date').

### Fan club case study: the Mangpor family

For Nopporn Silver Gold's biggest star, Mangpor Chonticha (see Figure 3), born in Khon Kaen, her fan club literally is her family—the Mangpor Family Club. Unlike Western fan clubs there is no formal way of joining. Fans who frequently attend concerts gradually become known to the singer or the singer's management and are then personally invited to events. Peter Garrity, an expatriate resident of Bangkok and long-term *lukthung* fan, and his wife were invited to become members of the Mangpor Family three years ago. They receive personal invitations to concerts, often sitting with the singer's husband and other Nopporn artists. It is not unusual for Mangpor to take the entire fan club out to dinner after a concert. Club members

10. See Waeng (2002: 297–305).



keep each other informed of news and appearance schedules and sit together at concerts to provide visible support for their singer. They hold up signs and LED boards with Mangpor's name and identifying visual symbol (*maengpo* means dragonfly) (see Figure 4). A sense of community is created by the designing and wearing of club shirts and the ceremonial presentation of a shirt to the singer.



Figure 3. Mangpor Chonticha (Lumphini night bazaar, June 14, 2009)



Figure 4. Mangpor fan club (Thai Cultural Centre, Bangkok, June 8, 2009)

From 2008, Mangpor has taken her most supportive fans on an annual bus tour—the 'Mangpor Family Club meeting'—along with Nopporn staff and her dancers (see Figure 5). In 2009 the excursion was a merit-making<sup>11</sup> outing to a very poor school in Suphanburi, which had only fifty-eight students. The company gave the school a large amount of food, books and sporting equipment, and Mangpor donated a sizable sum for student scholarships. At the school there were games and prizes for students and competitions involving the singer, staff and fan club. Meals and refreshments were provided on the bus and each fan received free t-shirts and memorabilia. The motivation for this kind of excursion appears to be purely relational. There is no publicity or media coverage and it will not result in further sales or bookings. However, it does demonstrate that Mangpor has progressed in her career to the point where she has become a patron rather than just a client.



Figure 5. The Mangpor Family Club bus (Supanburi, May 16, 2009)

## Superfans

When discussing the world of *lukthung* fans it is helpful to differentiate between average fans who may attend one or two concerts per month and 'super-

11. This is the term commonly used for giving money to the temple in order to receive merit from spirits.

fans',<sup>12</sup> such as Peter, who attend several concerts per week. Tulloch and Jenkins draw a similar distinction between fans, who claim a social identity, and followers, who do not (1995: 23). In the *lukthung* concert scene the fans who attend most regularly and who are well known for their gifts achieve special status and receive special privileges. In the midst of performing, singers will sometimes point out these fans by name, especially if given *malai*, thus elevating the symbolic social capital of both fan and singer. It is sometimes difficult for singers to keep all fans happy and the hierarchical status system in Thai society<sup>13</sup> must be adhered to. At the Phumphuang Duangjan memorial concert Liu Ajariya accepted a bouquet from one male admirer with 'suai mak khop khun mak mak Phi Dam' ('very beautiful, thank you so much Brother Dam') but then had to interrupt her introduction to the next song to accept a *malai* from another male fan who was presumably of higher status than Phi Dam: 'Oh khotot khotot Lung Kaeo' ('Oh excuse me I'm sorry uncle Kaeo') (see Figure 6).

Lung Kaeo is a good example of a *lukthung* superfan who has achieved high status through frequent concert attendance. He is 53 years old, works as a food seller and attends at least three concerts per week. He spends surprisingly little on his hobby—less than 1,000 baht per month—and claims that he does not give money to singers. Yet he is able to contact many singers by phone and once attended a party at Luknok Supphaphon's house. He feels proud when singers mention his name at concerts or telephone him to thank him for *malai* (personal communication with Lung Kaeo, May 10, 2009).

Indeed, superfans appear to have almost instant access to their favoured singers, through having their personal phone numbers and sometimes visiting their homes. Siriphon Amphaiphong sets some time aside each day for these superfans to be able to call her. As previously described by Donut, singers actively court the attention of superfans through phone and text messages, even presenting them with birthday presents. As in *like*, there can be rivalry among fans as to who has the longest history with the singer, or who knows the most about a particular performer.

There are a number of reasons why fan/fan-object relationships achieve such extraordinary intimacy. The structure of Thailand's entertainment industry, whereby *lukthung* singers are paid very little for their recordings, has emphasized

12. When writing this article I conceived the term 'superfan' to describe the most committed members of the *lukthung* fan clubs. However I then discovered that Kanokporn Chanasongkram had already used the term in the article 'Patrons of the Arts' (2007).

13. Lockard notes that Thai society is 'constructed from the top down, with reciprocal, vertical links between the elite and their clients' (1998: 163). Several factors including age, education, family status, profession and even skin colour contribute to one's place in society.

the importance of personal relationships with fans. Given the recording companies' expectation of an album every three months and the resultant high turnover in performers, fans are a singer's most reliable form of superannuation, in the sense of an informal mode of income insurance in the event of being dropped by their company. Bookings for private celebrations, which are more lucrative for singers than company organized concerts, are more likely to result from contact with superfans than from advertising. Although there are many websites produced by record companies and fans to promote *lukthung* singers it can be argued that there is an overall mistrust on the part of performers of non-traditional means of promotion. In November 2009, for example, Mangpor ceased posting on her fan club website, reportedly because one of her fans had impersonated her on Facebook (personal communication from Peter Garrity to the author, November 16, 2009).



Figure 6. Superfan Lung Kaeo with Liu Ajariya (Wethithai concert, September 10, 2008)

### The Thai patron/client system

A significant feature of Thai society is its organization along vertical lines of patron/client relationships. Unsurprisingly, industry and fan relations in all Thai popular musical genres are organized according to this system. However, *lukthung* differs from the other main genres of Thai popular music in the degree to which singers

function as both patron and client in their relationships with fans. The *lukthung* fan system allows singers an element of independence in an highly hegemonic industry by boosting their bargaining power within the company and by providing alternative patronage. The company system functions as a patron and client relationship in which the company, as patron, takes on more risk and consequently deserves a greater share of the profit. Furthermore, when the company helps the singer out of a hopeless situation (of being an unknown), *bunkhun*, or moral obligation, it enters into the relationship and consequently loyalty is expected from the singer. As singers gain fame, the balance between patron and client shifts and very occasionally the roles are reversed.

Of course, simply having fans confers status on singers and makes them more valuable to their company. Within the *lukthung* fan system singers and fans alternate between the roles of patron and client. When fans provide alternative sources of income through private concerts and *malai*, the singer is a client. Certainly many singers regard fans as their patrons, as the following quote from Aphaphon Nakhonsawan shows: 'It's a lighter example of the patronage system, which is entrenched in our society. As patrons, *mae yok* [*mae* = mother and *yok* = to lift up or worship] and other fans are instrumental in keeping *likay* and *luk thung* alive' (Kanokporn 2007: 3). However, when Mangpor takes her fan club out to dinner or on an excursion she takes on the role of patron. This progression from client to patron is the reason why money *malai* can be important income for minor singers whereas big stars will usually donate all such stage money to charity.

### **Influence from *like* and *molam***

The Central Thai folk drama genre of *like* is famous for the obsessed behaviour of some audience members. The most dedicated fans, known as *mae yok*, are wealthy, elderly women who worship the youthful *phra ek* ('hero') because of his good looks, small body, high voice and exquisite manners—an image of non-threatening masculinity. According to Mulder, 'the deepest *bunkun* occurs in the closed personal relationship with one's mother' (2000: 62) and it appears that *mae yok* are seeking to fulfill the role of mother in their relationship with the *phra ek*. In addition to giving flowers, garlands, cash, jewelry and other presents, *mae yok* frequently cook food for the singer, clean his house and wash his clothes. The extreme possessiveness of some fans leads to fighting with other fans and also with their husbands because affairs between *mae yok* and *phra ek* are not uncommon (Mae 2009: 48–50). As the main source of revenue *mae yok* constitute the dominant *like* fandom, but they are often held up to ridicule in the Thai media and therefore constitute a marginalized fandom within the field of Thai music.

Unlike *like*, the dominant *lukthung* fandom is split more evenly between men and women, with men possibly in the majority. Whereas *mae yok* attempt to emulate the mother/son relationship, in *lukthung*, sex is a key element of attraction for fans. Ubonrat claims that there are two features which make *lukthung* politically and culturally contentious: its unfailing identification with the peasantry and its expression of sexual desire (1990: 69). The earthy sexuality of *lukthung* may be derived from several folk genres (*isaew* comes to mind) but the wordplay and explicit jokes contained in *molam* have certainly been most influential. For example, Ken Daolao sings: 'I am an old man; my testicles have turned yellow with age. Please keep the old buffalo until it dies... Please touch my dung, for this may be better than smelling my gas' (Miller 1985: 301). In *lukthung* the bawdy humour of *molam* is sublimated to a certain extent so as to be acceptable for a wider audience but the expression of sexual desire is still too open for elite Thai society. In 2003, the Ministry of Culture issued a list of twenty songs that were to be banned, including classics such as Suthep Wongkamhaeng's 'Pit thang rak' ('Wrong way to love') and Chai Mueangsing's 'Mia phi mi chu' ('My wife had an affair').<sup>14</sup> After public outcry the ministry backed down and only banned three *molam* songs 'loaded with immoral content and improper language...and in the Northeastern dialect'.<sup>15</sup> Thus overt displays of sexuality in commercial *lukthung* is watched carefully by government organizations but writers and singers regularly test the boundaries.

### **The impact of Isan cultural and social identity on the *lukthung* fan system**

*Molam* is the most interactive of Thai folk performance arts and so Isan people expect *lukthung* singers to be approachable, to be 'one of them'. From the other side of the relationship, performers seek close emotional ties with their fans and, as Donut points out, Isan audiences are more receptive than those in other areas.

Most of my fans are Isan people even though I am not Isan. Isan people like to get close to the singer, like to touch the singer, like to dance and like to cooperate with the singer. Whatever the singer asks them to do (from the stage) they will do it. In contrast southern and central people are very quiet and just sit there (interview with the author, June 8, 2009).

Various commentators have observed the past and continuing reluctance of Isan workers and students to reveal their Lao identity in front of friends or acquaintances from other regions.<sup>16</sup> Yet this cultural cringe is certainly not apparent at

14. Both Suthep and Chai are *Silabin haeng Chat* ('artists of the nation').

15. Unattributed (2003).

16. See McCargo and Hongladoram (2004: 225) and Hesse-Swain (2006: 263–66).

*lukthung* concerts. Isan singers will often stress their rapport with the audience by cries of 'anyone here from Isan, who is from Ubon, who is from Khon Kaen?' and the audience responds by shouting and raising hands. Singers from other regions seldom ask their audience for cultural identification. Indeed it is noticeable that concerts in areas with no or few Isan people can have a subdued atmosphere, with little singer/fan interaction or singing and dancing in the crowd.

One of the clearest statements of Isan identity within a *lukthung* song is found in Phai Phongsathon's massive 2009 hit 'Kon ban diaokan' ('People of the same village'). Phai (see Figure 7) is rapidly becoming the biggest male *lukthung* star in Thailand and his songs communicate a high level of class consciousness and ethnic pride, despite his being signed to the dominant entertainment company, Grammy. Hesse-Swain's observation that competition 'has driven Thai media operators to create programming that appeals to ethnic and regional tastes of their audiences' (2006: 261) can certainly be extended to the recording and concert industries. The fact that Phai's songs are written by Grammy's in-house songwriters shows either that Grammy is adept at manipulating and commodifying such troublesome concepts as ethnic identity or that its songwriters have strong beliefs on such issues. The idea that an agenda may exist among senior songwriters to advance Isan cultural identity is not necessarily fanciful. One Grammy insider was of the opinion that the status of established *lukthung* songwriters is far higher than for their pop equivalents, with the former receiving the title of *khru* (teacher) and being accorded greater independence in artist choice and subject matter as long as they remain successful (personal communication with Wichaya Vatanasapt, January 15, 2009).



Figure 7. Phai Phongsathon (Wethithai concert, Bangkok, May 16, 2009)

'Khon ban diaokan'<sup>17</sup> starts with the traditional call of 'Oi no no', signalling that a *Molam* (Isan folk singer) is ready to sing. The chorus sums up the singer's identification with his Isan audience through the local community:

We from the same village, just look at each other's eyes and we understand.  
I know how tired you are and how hard you must struggle.  
We have words of encouragement,  
We have words of comfort.  
We have the Isan greeting 'sambai di bo' to always give each other—the people  
of our village.

The song and accompanying film clip casts Phai as the owner of a *lab* (spicy Isan minced meat dish) shop who greets his customers with Isan blessings:

Hai sok hai man hai mang hai mi (May you have good luck and lots of money)  
Hai yu di mi haeng, yu daeng mi hi, doe khrap phi nong. (May you have good  
health, my brothers and sisters)

In this last line the consonants are swapped to create a typically bawdy Isan play on words. 'Yu daeng mi hi' has no particular meaning but 'hi' can mean vagina depending on the tone. This is a good example of the *lukthung* songwriter adapting explicit Isan humour so that it does not offend the wider audience.

The verses present two snapshots of Isan migrant workers in Bangkok. In verse one, Mr Thitkhen from Roi-et has left his debt-ridden life of rice farming to try his luck driving taxis in the big city. In verse two, Nong (younger sister) Takadaen has left high school to work in a Bangkok sewing factory but is unable to get ahead. In a master stroke of cross promotion, Takadaen is fellow Grammy singer Takadaen Chonlada. This is a case of multi-layered mirroring: the young Isan migrant is actually the famous *lukthung* singer. In real life Takadaen worked as a Bangkok bus conductor and was rejected many times by companies before she won a competition and was signed by Grammy. The *lab* seller's exhortation to Thitkhen and Takadaen to 'keep on persevering' can be applied equally to Isan migrant labourers and aspiring Isan *lukthung* singers. The taxi driver and factory worker are able to endure hardship and discrimination through the support of the wider Isan migrant community and the successful *lukthung* singer does not forget where he/she comes from. McCargo and Hongladoram suggest that the Isan self-image combines 'a sense of marginality' with 'a strong sense of ethno-regional pride' (2004: 221). This duality, so apparent in 'Khon ban diaokan', is what binds Isan fans and *lukthung* singers together. In this regard, a case could perhaps be made concerning possible links between Isan sensitivity to disparagement and

17. The video of this song can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4kpOYu2QGU>



marginalization and the greater emotional and physical response to singer's overtures compared to that experienced by other Thai ethnicities.

### Signs of tension in the *lukthung* fandom

Undoubtedly Isan fans still constitute the dominant *lukthung* fandom. Yet signs of tension can be observed that indicate a struggle for dominance is taking place. In an analysis of the rise in status of *lukthung* after 1997, Amporn observes that a rural background is no longer necessary for a singer to be successful and that folk singing techniques are not as prevalent. Furthermore, she notes the increasing adoption of Western ideologies, a Western look, English loan words, Western products, a newly urbanized setting, and Western musical styles at the same time that *lukthung* is being proclaimed as authentic Thai culture (2006: 37–39). It has been previously noted that the rise in status described by Amporn has led to a struggle over the 'ownership' of *lukthung* between the Central Thai establishment and the Isan *thongthin* ('local') culture movement (Mitchell 2009a: 307). The following examples illustrate how this academic struggle is now manifesting itself in the world of concert fandom.

Firstly, some fans have reacted negatively to the modern sub-genre of new *lukthung* and a perceived loss of authenticity. Amporn cites the example of Wanit Jarungkitanan, a writer and *lukthung* fan who argues that Thai entertainment companies have killed *lukthung* by blending it with other genres and promoting actors who look good but cannot sing in the traditional style. Wanit protests the proliferation of recordings by *luk khrueng* (half Thai, half Western) singers at the expense of career *lukthung* singers, most of whom hail from Isan (cited in Amporn 2006: 25–26). This blurring of the edges between genres is concerning to older fans especially, and a common subject of discussion at concerts is a nostalgic comparison between the modern *lukthung* scene and the past. Fans are constantly judging a singer's behaviour and one area where some modern singers are found wanting is in the collection of *malai*. At a Wethithai concert in May 2009, one teenage singer caused offence when she immediately passed on two expensive *malai* with money attached even though she had nothing else to hold. Fans inevitably contrast this with an iconic picture of Yodrak Salakjai from a 1986 concert in which he is wearing so many *malai* that his face can hardly be seen. The success of Channel 9's schools competition show, *Ching Cha Sawan* ('Ferris Wheel'), has fostered interest in *lukthung* among Thai youth, but the show's emphasis on *lukthung* as a national art form effectively dilutes the Isan-ness of the genre (Mitchell 2009b: 92–93). Thus the issue of authenticity works against the dominant Isan fandom through the alienation of older fans and the gentrification of the genre in the eyes of younger fans.

Secondly, with *lukthung*'s rise in status, class difference is beginning to become an issue at concerts. Roses are a cheaper alternative to *malai*, and if singers neglect to collect them the roses are sometimes thrown onto the stage in disgust. Recently, increased television coverage has resulted in fans at some concerts being asked to only give *malai* between songs. This has irritated fans and exacerbated the issue of presenting roses because singers have less time for interaction with the audience. The lowly *malai* sellers are complaining of being undermined by companies who hand out free *malai* to their singer's fan club to 'ensure' popularity. Some upper-class fans have been heard deriding other audience members as *ban nok*—roughly translated as 'country bumpkins'. Before *lukthung*'s rise in status and acceptance as a symbol of Central Thai culture these signs of tension were not as common, simply because the audience was far more ethnically homogenous.

The above examples of tension only become significant in the context of the ongoing class-based political turmoil in Thailand. Since 2005, the political scene has been dominated by the personal conflict between former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and businessman Sondhi Limtongkul and their two opposing fandoms—the UDD (red shirts) and PAD (yellow shirts). While there is no direct link between *lukthung* fan clubs and any political persuasion, such as that found in Tamil film star fan clubs (see Rogers 2009), there is a strong correlation between the dominant Lao-Isan *lukthung* fandom and the red shirt movement. Various newspaper articles and blogs have noted the use of *lukthung* by the UDD (United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship)<sup>18</sup> with demonstrations featuring performances by *lukthung* singers such as Muk Methini and Phajit Aksonnarong. Miller and Shahriari note that Bangkok taxi drivers overwhelmingly hail from Isan and are also renowned for their love of *lukthung* (Miller and Shahriari 2006: 156). During the April 2009 confrontation, taxi drivers were one of the most active groups of red shirt protesters, at one point rallying to protect Taxi Radio, a station that blends *lukthung* and *molam* with anti-PAD rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> The increasing use of seemingly apolitical *lukthung*<sup>20</sup> for the purposes of political protest by the red shirts is a subject to be explored in another article, yet it is clear that a link exists between Isan political identity and Isan cultural identity expressed through *lukthung*. Although the red shirts are presently the marginalized fandom in Thai politics, the fact that Isan people are heavily represented and invested in a powerful political movement demonstrates the progress that has been made by the largest minority in Thailand. Perhaps it is ironic that as Isan people attempt

18. See Barrow (2008).

19. See Unattributed (2009) and Chomthongdi and Chanyapate (2009).

20. See Lockard (1998: 191).

to move towards mainstream participation in Thai politics their position as the dominant *lukthung* fandom is being threatened by media commodification and cultural nationalization.

## Conclusion

The adoption of certain features of *like* and *molam* fandom has resulted in a unique fan scene that both mirrors and influences Thai society. Compared with Thai pop, where interaction between fans and fan-objects can be managed through the internet and shopping mall appearances, *lukthung* fan/singer relationships are less regulated, involve greater proximity and are consequently more profitable to both parties. The organization of the Thai recording industry means that *lukthung* singers prioritize the development of long-term fans to ensure the immediate interest of his/her company and to insure against future disinterest. Fan clubs and superfans become part of the singer's inner circle, providing social and emotional, as well as financial support, and in turn receiving the benefits of close family ties.

In closing, the process by which an audience forms emotional bonds with a *lukthung* singer has the potential to shed light on the practice of Thai politics. Although no longer confined to the poor and working class, the *lukthung* audience provides a snapshot of non-elite Thai society formulating and engaging in responses to the modern mediated world, and in the process contributing to the ongoing shaping of that world. Just as Isan political identity is threatening to overwhelm the established power structures so has Isan cultural identity come to dominate the *lukthung* scene. This is apparent at *lukthung* concerts where singers, no matter what their ethnicity, actively seek the Isan audience because of the closer emotional bonds they are able to form. Old-style Thai politicians have traditionally remained in power through systems of patronage, and vote-buying and pork barrelling are seen as part of this Thai social mechanism.<sup>21</sup> However, in the present context of increasing political awareness and public demonstration politicians are under increasing pressure to please their constituents by their policies and ideas as well as money. The effort that established singers such as Mangpor and new singers such as Donut put into creating and maintaining fans holds lessons for the new wave of Thai politicians, exemplified by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who will have to bridge the widening rift that has emerged in Thai society. Singers without any Lao-Isan heritage have learned how to appeal to the Isan *lukthung* audience. For the Democrat Party to stay in power it will have to do the same.

21. See Yoshinori (2007: 343–64).

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