

Sorapet Pinyoo and the status of *pleeng luuk tung*

James Mitchell

Before 1997 a number of social, political and academic movements combined to present a more negative image of luuk tung (Thai country music) than was warranted and as a result, the genre was understudied. This article identifies the forces that influenced the development of luuk tung's status in Thai society and demonstrates how the rising status of luuk tung since 1997 has influenced recent academic writing by Thai authors. This survey of the voices that speak on luuk tung is grounded by an analysis of the lyrics and melodies of Sorapet Pinyoo, a well-known luuk tung artist.

Introduction: Argument and structure

This author's particular point of interest in *pleeng luuk tung* is the role that it has played in facilitating the rebirth or regeneration of Isan identity and culture. My overall research proposes that the significant involvement of Isan people within the *luuk tung* music industry has provided Isan people with an entry point into mainstream Thai society and culture, when most avenues were closed to them. Through *luuk tung*, Lao-Isan¹ culture has been able to influence Thai society to the point that Isan language and culture has become acceptable. However I aim to demonstrate that this heavy Isan involvement is one of the main reasons why *luuk tung* has historically been accorded low status.

Conversely, *luuk tung's* rise in status in Thailand since 1997 has prompted attempts to disguise the Isan involvement in *luuk tung*. The status of *luuk tung* is the subject of this article, with status being defined as the degree of prestige attached to an activity/person by society. I propose that from 1958 to approximately 1990, a number of social, political and academic movements combined to present a more negative image of *luuk tung* than was warranted and, as a result, the genre has been understudied. This article aims to address these issues by, first, identifying the

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1 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 Duncan McCargo and Hongladarom Krisadawan, 'Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of politics and identity in northeast Thailand', *Asian Ethnicity*, 5, 2 (2004): 219–34. Most, but not all, Isan people are of Lao ethnicity — hence the term 'Lao-Isan'.

forces that influenced the development of *luuk tung*'s status in Thai society prior to 1997; second, comparing the portrayal of *luuk tung* in the three most recent and significant publications; and, third, by examining the career, songs, as well as songwriting and recording techniques of Sorapet Pinyoo, a well-known *luuk tung* artist.

As my research into the genre progresses, it is apparent that very little has been written about the art of *luuk tung* songwriting. In both the Thai and English literature, analysis of *luuk tung* lyrics as poetry is virtually non-existent. As a consequence, the limited English language literature is unable to give non-Thais a real understanding of what *luuk tung* is. It is hoped that an analysis of Sorapet's work will provide insight into the nature of the genre and allow readers to reassess some of the negative aspects of *luuk tung*'s conventional image. This case study is also intended to complement the overall argument of my research — that *luuk tung* has provided Isan people with the means to revitalise the image of Isan culture within Thailand.

The development of *luuk tung*'s conventional image

The low status of *luuk tung* in Thai society before 1997 has been referred to by many authors, such as Ubonrat Siriyuvasak,² Craig Lockard³ and Amporn Jirattikorn,⁴ but there has yet to be a concerted attempt to identify the reasons behind it. The contention of this article is that a number of different social and political forces, movements or conditions combined to produce an overly negative image of *luuk tung* in Thai society and in academic writing before 1997.⁵ The first such force is the dialectic between Thai classical music linked to the monarchy and popular song genres linked to Luang Phibunsongkraam. *Luuk tung* developed during the period of Phibunsongkraam's influence and the revision of his image after his overthrow in 1957 may have indirectly affected that of genres associated with him. The second force that contributed to the low status of *luuk tung* in the past was the high level of Isan involvement. Isan people have long been derided by central Thais and were regarded with suspicion during the years of the communist insurgency. Throughout the last 100 years, Thai rulers and governments have sought to build a cohesive nation-state and Isan culture has been both suppressed and appropriated in the service of nationhood. The third force to be discussed is the tendency for Thais to classify *luuk tung* as rural folk music. It was not until the late 1970s, with the influence of Marxist theory, that Thai historians became interested in writing about the culture of ordinary people. Even then, the stereotype of *luuk tung* as rustic and traditional was perpetuated by the majority of commentators. Fourth, in terms of external forces, western ethnomusicologists have generally preferred to study Thai traditional and classical music rather than popular genres. The fifth force is that the attention of western scholars influenced by the Birmingham School theory has

2 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising the sound of the people: Pleng luktoong and the Thai pop music industry', *Popular Music*, 9, 1 (1990): 61.

3 Craig A. Lockard, *Dance of life: Popular music and politics in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), pp. 184–5, 191.

4 Amporn Jirattikorn, 'Lukthung: Authenticity and modernity in Thai country music', *Asian Music*, 37, 1 (2006): 24.

5 The reasons for the rise in status for *luuk tung* after 1997 are analysed in detail in *ibid.*, pp. 32–8 and will not be dealt with in this article.

been diminished by *luuk tung*'s apparent lack of counter-hegemonic potential. Relevant to both of these forces is the information filter provided by the Thai language. Texts in Thai language focusing on high culture are more likely to be translated than those on low culture. Finally, the interest of foreign tourists in the exotic and oriental aspects of Thai culture has amplified the status of Thai classical music above more westernised and therefore more familiar genres.

Recent publications

On the other hand, the increase in status of *luuk tung* over the past decade has led to a reinvigorated discussion of the genre's history and renewed academic interest. The heightened sense of nationalism following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the development of a *tongtin* (local) culture movement have resulted in attempts by both nationalists and ethnic minorities to lay claim to various cultural activities. *Luuk tung* has been a particular target for these claims because of its increased status. Thus, the second section of this article is a comparison of the most recently published texts on *luuk tung*: (1) *Luuk tung Isan: Bpraawatsaat Isan dtamnaaan pleeng luuk tung*, an ethnocentric history written by a Lao-Isan author, Waeng Palangwan;⁶ (2) *Wiwatanagaan pleeng luuk tung nai sangkom Thai* by Siripon Gropptong,⁷ the most thoroughly researched and comprehensive history of *luuk tung* yet; and (3) 'Lukthung: Authenticity and modernity in Thai country music' by Jirattikorn,⁸ which downplays Isan involvement in *luuk tung*.

A description of *luuk tung*

Luuk tung, literally 'children of the field' (as opposed to *luuk grung*, 'children of the city'), is usually translated as Thai country music. Since the late 1960s, it has been the most popular form of music in Thailand, although this popularity has only recently extended to the middle and upper classes. The songs, which can be slow and sad or fast and fun, describe the impact of urban development on rural Thais and, although usually sung in Thai, many Isan words and phrases are used. *Luuk tung* is an example of fusion — blending western dance rhythms from the 1940s with (pseudo) traditional melodies and borrowing further musical influences as necessary for commercial reasons. Chord progressions are determined by the traditional pentatonic melodies which means that the stock I–IV–V of western pop music is seldom used. Minor progressions such as i–iv–v, i–iv–VII and i–VI–III are more common with sudden shifts to relative, tonic or dominant major chords. Vocal and instrumental melodies are highly ornamented; as in Thai classical singing, the vocals are nasalised and combined with techniques such as *luk kor* (heavy vibrato) and *uean* (melodic embellishment on a vocable or melisma). Western tuning is employed because the basic *luuk tung* band is drums, bass, organ and electric guitar but folk instruments such as *kaen* (Lao mouth organ), *pin* (Lao three-stringed guitar), *klui* (Thai flute) and *bponglang* (Isan wooden xylophone) are commonly added. Thai

6 Waeng Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan: Bpraawatsaat Isan dtamnaaan pleeng luuk tung* [*Isan Luuk Tung: The history of Isan Luuk Tung*] (1st edition, Bangkok: Ruean Banyaa (RP Books), 2002).

7 Siripon Gropptong, *Wiwatanagaan pleeng luuk tung nai sangkom Thai* [*The development of pleeng luuk tung in Thai society*] (Bangkok: Pantagit Publishing, 2004).

8 Jirattikorn, 'Authenticity'.

classical instruments are also sometimes added (with adjusted tuning) such as *ranaat* (Thai xylophone) or *sor* (Thai violin). The career practitioners of *luuk tung* are highly skilled artists who, similar to blues performers, write, perform and distribute their music for the duration of their lives.

Section 1: Forces contributing to the low status of *luuk tung* before 1997

The dialectic between Thai classical music and Thai popular music, Phibun's songkraam and the monarchy

One of the forces that may have influenced the status of *luuk tung* in different periods is its connection with Phibun's songkraam. The social engineering characteristic of Phibun's pre-World War II regime created the conditions that allowed *luuk tung* and other popular song genres to develop. According to official Thai historians, the first *luuk tung* song was written in 1938.⁹ *Luuk tung* really developed as a separate genre during the 1950s and 1960s but this earlier date is significant because it coincides with the first prime ministership of Phibun, who had an overall strategy to weaken the monarchy's hold on Thai society and attempted to do this through modernisation.¹⁰ *Pleeng Thai saagon*¹¹ had begun to develop as part of the motion picture industry, and the Fine Arts Department under Luang Wichit Wathakan used the new song style as a hegemonic tool.¹² Commenting on Phibun and Wichit's concerted efforts to impose a popular culture upon the masses, Pamela Moro observes that 'the performing arts became a focal point in top-down efforts to create a modern, national Thai culture'.¹³

It is therefore possible that *pleeng Thai saagon* and early *luuk tung* had higher status during the years of Phibun's influence because of government patronage and the corresponding neglect of Thai classical music. In an excellent summary of the development of Thai popular music, Siriyuvasak points out that, following the abolition of the absolute monarchy, Thai governments adopted western music as the basis for a new national popular music because it 'broke with the classical court music of the *ancien regime*'.¹⁴ Both Phibun and the architect of his cultural policy, Wichit, could see that a new society needed new performance styles¹⁵ and they seem to have grasped instinctively what popular music theorists only later realised, that popular music has greater potential for social and political influence than avant garde or art music because it can generate a mass audience.¹⁶ The 'preservation and classicisation' (in other words, restriction and sidelining) of the Royal musical tradition gave *pleeng Thai saagon* the space in which to grow and develop eventually into *luuk*

9 As stated in 'Half a century of Thai country music', *Thai Cultural Newsletter* [the official government cultural mouthpiece], Nov. 1989.

10 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Cultural control and globalized culture', Conference Paper (May 2000): 4.

11 'Saagon' means universal or modern. 'Pleeng' means song.

12 Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 110–12.

13 Pamela Moro, 'Constructions of nation and the classicisation of music: Comparative perspectives from Southeast and South Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35, 2 (2004): 199–200.

14 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising', p. 63.

15 Refer to Siriyuvasak, 'Cultural control', and Barmé, *Luang Wichit*, for further discussion.

16 Peter J. Martin, *Sounds and society: Themes in the sociology of music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 128.

grung and *luuk tung*.¹⁷ On the other hand, the overthrow of Phibun's government in 1957 may have resulted in a loss of status for the popular music genres associated with him. Despite the far-reaching effects of Phibun's time in office, he has completely fallen out of favour in Thailand today — the 50-year anniversary of the name change from Siam to Thailand was ignored because of its association with his first militaristic, fascist regime.¹⁸ It is possible to suggest that Phibun's fall from grace, combined with the rehabilitation of the monarchy under Sarit's rule and a renewed interest in Thai classical music among the central Thai middle class,¹⁹ may have contributed to the lower status of some popular music during the 1960s and 1970s. This does not mean that genres such as *luuk tung* and *string* became less popular but that they were regarded as having little cultural value.

Luuk tung perceived as 'low' culture because of the involvement of Isan people

A possible main reason why *luuk tung* had such low status in Thai society was its link with the Isan people and culture. Thais take great nationalistic pride in the idea that Thailand was never colonised by western nations, and yet Siam was its own colonial power in the nineteenth century, 'drawing neighbouring peoples around its periphery into its sphere'.²⁰ In 1827, the destruction of Vientiane by Rama III was accompanied by the forced migration of the population, transferring ethnic Lao into areas they had not previously occupied, including the central Chao Phraya river basin area.²¹ Over the past 100 years, there has been a systematic dismantling of ethnic Lao identity in Thailand, in the service of nation-building. Central Thai chauvinism towards Isan people extends back centuries, on the basis that Isan was never part of the original Sukhothai kingdom. This prejudice was exacerbated during the 1960s by the Thai government's characterisation of Isan as a hotbed of communist activity even though any such activity was caused by the neglect of successive Thai governments. Until the recent revival of interest in Isan culture, anything associated with Lao or Isan was disparaged by most central Thais. In an extensive explanation of how 'Lao' came to be a pejorative term in Thailand, Palangwan observes that 'if Central Thai people wish to refer to products, animals or things in a derisory manner they will use the word *Lao* even if the item does not originate from the North East'.²² The heavy Isan involvement in *luuk tung* during the 1960s and 1970s led to it being classified as music for 'country bumpkins'.²³

Luuk tung perceived as 'low' culture through its designation as folk music

The designation of the genre as *pleeng luuk tung* ('children of the field') from 1964 has contributed to most Thais associating it with folk music and this association has

17 Moro, 'Constructions of nation', p. 199.

18 Craig J. Reynolds, *National identity and its defenders: Thailand today* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), p. 1.

19 Moro, 'Constructions of nation', p. 203.

20 *Ibid.*, 198.

21 Ronald L. Myers, 'The Isan saga: The inhabitants of rural north east Thailand and their struggle for identity, equality and acceptance (1964–2004)' (San Diego, Department of Asia Pacific Studies, San Diego State University, 2005), p. 30.

22 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, p. 53.

23 Jirattikorn, 'Authenticity', p. 43.

been confirmed by the majority of Thai commentators. It was not until the late 1970s that Thai professional historians such as Chaatip Nartsupha and Nitti Iaosiwong became interested in writing about ordinary people and their culture, using 'Marxist socio-analysis as a lever to pry the chronicles and archives away from royalist and nationalist myth-making concerns.'²⁴ Several articles were published on *luuk tung* between 1978 and 1985, Anek Nawikmuun (1978),²⁵ Payong Mukda (1984),²⁶ Naowarat Pongpaibun (1984),²⁷ Sujit Wongtet (1984)²⁸ and Kobkul Putharaporn (1985),²⁹ all more or less classifying it as updated Thai folk music. Arguably the most well-known Thai historian, Iaosiwong, responded to these articles in 1985, arguing that *luuk tung* was like many other forms of popular culture in that it borrowed from numerous sources, including western dance music, *pleeng Thai saagon*, Thai folk and classical music.³⁰ His main thesis was that *luuk tung* began in urban areas and had more urban influences than rural. Despite Siriyuvasak³¹ agreeing with Iaosiwong, the view of *luuk tung* as rural music has persisted in the popular media. In a society which, up until the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, privileged the elite, the modern and the urban, *luuk tung* was accorded low status.

The designation of *luuk tung* as folk music can be observed in a variety of texts. In 1988 and 1991, a series of concerts and ceremonies was organised by the government to mark the 50-year anniversary of the birth of Thai country music. The wording of the official review of the concerts published in the *Thai Cultural Newsletter* is revealing:

Some Look Thung songs, in spite of their popularity amongst the local people, have considerable influence over them and their way of life. Some remain a source for sociological studies and a mine of local wisdom. Such a cultural heritage should be preserved.³²

Luuk tung is classified as local culture here, and only useful for sociological study — not as an art form. Clearly what is regarded as influential culture should not be popular and any quality of sophistication is not to be considered in relation to *luuk tung*. The distinction between high and low culture is clearly drawn in Wongtet's short story, 'Second nature':

24 Craig J. Reynolds and Hong Lysa, 'Marxism in Thai historical studies', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 43, 1 (1983): 96.

25 Anek Naawikmuun, *Pleeng nork satawat* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1978 and 1986).

26 Payong Mukda, 'Rueangrao giaogap pleeng luuk tung', in *Jaak pleeng Thai tueng pleeng luuk tung* (Bangkok: Sun Sangkit Silp, 1984).

27 Naowarat Pongpaibun, 'Pleeng Thai tueng pleeng luuk tung', in *Jaak pleeng Thai tueng pleeng luuk tung* (Bangkok: Sun Sangkit Silp, 1984).

28 Sujit Wongtet, 'Pleeng Thai tueng pleeng luuk tung', in *Jaak pleeng Thai tueng pleeng luuk tung* (Bangkok: Sun Sangkit Silp, 1984).

29 Kobkul Putharaporn, 'Country folk songs and Thai society', in *Traditional and changing Thai world view* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Research Institute and Southeast Asian Studies Programme, 1985).

30 Nitti Iaosiwong, 'Pleeng luuk tung nai bprawadtisaat watanatam Thai' ['Thai country music in the history of Thai culture'], *Silipa Watanatam*, 6, 6 (1985).

31 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Thai pop music and cultural negotiation in everyday politics', in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia cultural studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 206.

32 'Half a century of Thai country music', *Thai Cultural Newsletter* (June 1991), p. 4.

(They) were dancing to the tempo of pigs or dogs scalded with boiling water. Alas and alack! ... Two of the girls ... danced together on the stage, complacently bumping and grinding their hips – oblivious to their fellow countrymen, oblivious to the *Chronicles of Si Ayuttaya* [the most famous Thai historical chronicle], oblivious to the inscription of the Kingdom of Sukhothai [a great early Thai kingdom] ... oblivious of King Chulalongkorn [a great Thai king who reformed the nation].³³

Popular music here is marked by immorality and animalistic behaviour. High culture is defined as central Thai culture, implicitly denying high status to Isan (and other minorities).

The influence of western ethnomusicologists

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Thai society has been influenced by western assignments of value. This can be seen in the development of *pleeng Thai saagon* and *string*, in the adoption of western business dress and in the presentation of Thai culture to tourists. Thus it is unsurprising that Thai popular music genres were not studied by Thais until the late 1970s, since before 1970, ‘mass-mediated and popular culture ... were all but ignored by (western) historians, area specialists and most social scientists’.³⁴ Western ethnomusicology may have contributed to a negative image of *luuk tung* by privileging high and folk culture over popular culture. Some ethnomusicologists have blamed ‘the siren songs of extensively promoted pop music’ for the loss of more authentic Thai folk and classical music genres.³⁵ Terry E. Miller was dismissive of *luuk tung* when he conducted the definitive English language study of *mor lam*³⁶ in the early 1970s:

The new genre, called pleng look toong (“children of the fields”), however, is marked by simple poetry, direct sentiment, and a general lack of sophistication. The subjects are the lives of ordinary people, especially villagers. For singing styles the composers, most of whom live in Bangkok, plunder any and all regional folk and art forms including maw-lum glawn and maw-lum moo.³⁷ ... pleng look toong, the popular songs which plunder regional styles.³⁸

In contrast, he considered *luuk grung* as ‘sophisticated and highly westernised (and) the lyrics ... relatively polished and subtle’.³⁹ Miller’s portrayal of *luuk tung* songwriters as wealthy Bangkok Thais who plunder peasant culture is difficult to sustain when the history of *luuk tung* is examined. As demonstrated by Palangwan⁴⁰ and

33 Found in Lockard, *Dance of life*, p. 179. Lockard’s parentheses.

34 John A. Lent, ‘Review of *Dance of life: Popular music and politics in Southeast Asia* by Craig A. Lockard’, *Pacific Affairs*, 73, 1 (2000): 140.

35 Found in Lockard, *Dance of life*, p. 179.

36 Lao-Isan folk music. Without capitalisation, *mor lam* refers to the genre; with capitalisation, it is the title for a practitioner.

37 Terry E. Miller, *Traditional music of the Lao: Kaen playing and maw-lum singing in northeast Thailand*, vol. 13, *Contributions in Intercultural and Comparative Studies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 54.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

40 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, pp. 255, 323.

Grorptong,⁴¹ most songwriters had rural origins (some were *Mor Lam*) but they migrated to Bangkok in order to make a living. Miller presents *luuk tung* more favourably, albeit briefly, in a recent article⁴² which suggests that the field of ethnomusicology has since become more accommodating of popular genres. However, his conclusion in *The garland encyclopaedia of world music*, that ‘Thailand’s heart may beat to the sounds of rock and modernized regional music, but its soul rejoices in its classical tradition’,⁴³ does not allow for class and ethnic divisions in Thailand. Isan people, who comprise approximately one-third of the population, have very little interest in central Thai classical music — even gentrified and urbanised Isan are intensely proud of *mor lam*.

The influence of Birmingham School theory

The overt commercialism and (occasionally) nationalistic lyrics of *luuk tung* have possibly discouraged the attention of cultural studies. Michael Hayes identifies the reluctance of some western popular music writers to discuss music within its commercial context — ‘the avoidance of commercialism’ and a corresponding level of discomfort with music that does not call explicitly for revolution.⁴⁴ For the listeners of world music, this has translated into a general aversion to nearly all East and Southeast Asian popular music because it is openly commercial and not obviously rebellious. The influence of Birmingham School theory has encouraged scholars to analyse popular music genres in terms of counter-hegemony. Sometimes, as in Myers-Moro’s examination of *pleeng puea chiiwit*,⁴⁵ the genre demands this kind of analysis, but with *luuk tung*, such analyses have not been so successful. Tony Mitchell criticises Lockard (*Dance of life*, 1998) for ‘trying to fit his subjects into outmoded western sociological paradigms of rock music as “a vehicle for social and political comment”’ (1998: 268).⁴⁶

Actually, *luuk tung* has at times been explicitly counter-hegemonic. In addition to the examples quoted by Lockard⁴⁷ from Siriyuvasak, Pasuk and Baker, Nawikmuun records that several songs were banned during the 1950s and 1960s⁴⁸ while Palangwan writes a whole chapter on the subgenre of ‘communist *luuk tung*’ from the 1970s.⁴⁹ The problem for non-Thai scholars has been the limited access to such information. As the Thai people saw that Thai classical music was valued by foreign ethnomusicologists, they were more likely to translate high, rather than low, culture texts. In addition, texts that supported the royalist nationalist history taught throughout

41 Grorptong, *Wiwatanagaan pleeng luuk tung*, pp. 439–40.

42 Terry E. Miller, ‘From country hick to rural hip: A new identity through music for northeast Thailand’, *Asian Music*, 36, 2 (2005): 96–106.

43 Bruno Nettl, Ruth M. Stone, James Porter and Timothy Rice, *The garland encyclopaedia of world music*, vol. IV (New York: Garland Publishers, 1998), p. 333.

44 Michael Hayes, ‘Capitalism and cultural relativity: The Thai pop industry, capitalism and western cultural values’, in *Refashioning pop music in Asia: Cosmopolitan flows, political tempos and aesthetic industries*, ed. B. Shoemith, A. Chun and N. Rossiter (Richmond: Curzon, 2004), p. 23.

45 ‘Songs for life’. Pamela Myers-Moro, ‘Songs for life: Leftist Thai popular music in the 1970s’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20, 3 (1986): 93–114.

46 Tony Mitchell, ‘Dick Lee’s transit lounge: Orientalism and pan-Asian pop’, *Perfect Beat*, 5, 3 (2001): 19.

47 Lockard, *Dance of life*, p. 190.

48 Nawikmuun, *Pleeng nork satawat*, p. 63.

49 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, pp. 492–505.

the Thai education system were more likely to be translated than texts which questioned central Thai cultural and political hegemony. Consequently, foreign scholars have sometimes accepted the information they were given as the only discourse. In Thai popular musicology, as in historiography, the Thai and English literatures have tended to operate virtually as separate worlds — Lockard openly acknowledges that his work is a synthesis of the few secondary sources available at the time in English: Siriyuvasak (1990),⁵⁰ Marre and Charlton (1985)⁵¹ and Putharapon (1985).⁵² The exceptions such as Siriyuvasak (popular musicology) and Thongchai Winichukun (historiography) assume great importance because they permit the flow of information, ideas and criticism between the literatures.

The influence of foreign tourism

Another external force that has influenced the status of Thai classical music and popular genres is the expectation of foreign tourists regarding Thai culture. The importance of tourism to Thailand's economy has resulted in an emphasis on the exotic and oriental: 'Classical music and dance are one of the messages foreigners want to hear about the Thai, and which the Thai are willing to tell.'⁵³ Clewley asserts that Thai popular music in general is largely ignored by tourists, who are far more likely to encounter 'classical or court ensembles at restaurants or the National Theatre'.⁵⁴ Understandably Thais want to put their best foot forward and the influence of foreign ethnomusicologists and the dominance of central Thai culture have contributed to Thai classical music being viewed as the most appropriate representation of Thai culture. *Luuk tung* is certainly as representative of the cultural endeavours of Thai people as Thai classical music,⁵⁵ but when it comes to representing Thailand to tourists, *luuk tung* has been regarded as too westernised by foreigners and *mai tansamai* ('old fashioned or rustic') by Thais.

Section 2: The effect of *luuk tung*'s present higher status on academic writing

Few texts of significance on *luuk tung* were published between 1990 and 1998 but the genre's rise in status after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis has led to an increase in academic discussion of the genre among Thai authors. *Luuk tung* has become a valuable cultural commodity and is now considered more worthy of academic study.

Waeng Palangwan: An alternative ethnic discourse

Palangwan's *Luuk tung Isan* (2002) is significant because it is the first widely published text by an Isan author to question the royalist nationalist view of the history

50 Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising'.

51 Jeremy Marre and Hannah Charlton, *Beats of the heart: Popular music of the world* (New York: Pluto Press, 1985).

52 Putharapon, 'Country folk songs'.

53 Pamela Myers-Moro, 'Thai music and attitudes towards the past', *Journal of American Folklore*, 102, 404 (1989): 193.

54 John Clewley, 'The many sounds of Siam', in *The rough guide to world music: Volume 2*, ed. S. Broughton (Rough Guides Ltd, 1994), p. 440.

55 Siriyuvasak observes that 'influences from Indian and Chinese cultures are minimal in contemporary pop music, though much greater on classical music', 'Commercialising', p. 62.

of Thai popular music. It is also significant in terms of length – over 600 pages, making it the longest book available on *luuk tung* – and because it contains a large amount of information not recorded elsewhere in published form. Waeng Palangwan is the pseudonym for an unidentified journalist and documentary maker born in Udon Thani. *Luuk tung Isan* can be seen as part of the *tongtin* (local) culture movement, inspired by the generation of professional historians from the 1970s and 1980s influenced by Marxist theory. The *tongtin* revival has been strongest in Isan with centres for Isan studies being established at the University of Maharakam and Loei Rajabat University. Palangwan's purpose is accurately described by Catherine Hesse-Swain's comment that 'Lao-Isan scholars ... grounded in the harsh realities of leftist repression during the 1970s, are openly writing about how to maintain Lao cultural integrity in the face of central Thai and western cultural domination.'⁵⁶ *Luuk tung* is important to him but his primary concern is the cultural identity and heritage of Lao-Isan people.

Palangwan makes a case for recognition of the Lao-Isan involvement in *luuk tung*, arguing that the early participation of Lao-Isan people contributed significantly to the genre's development. His book was written during a period of increased status for *luuk tung* (1997–2001) and he wants Lao-Isan people to share in that higher status. Palangwan believes that the Isan involvement in *luuk tung* has been downplayed and underestimated by some historians and the Thai popular media. In the preface, Palangwan is explicit in his intention to expand the scope of Thai history: 'I want to bring glory back to Isan people and take the opportunity to invite people who work in high positions to look at the lies of western culture.'⁵⁷ Many Thai commentators blamed the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis on western investors and the capitalist system,⁵⁸ and it was widely interpreted as a warning to return to traditional Thai values. Palangwan's purpose is made clear in the following statement:

People say that music is the international language but no one is interested in the music of Australian Aboriginals, or the music of Uganda, or the Naakaa tribe in Myanmar, or the music of the Djam tribe in Cambodia and Vietnam, or the songs of Pii Dtornglueang in the Northern province of Thailand. Why is this? Because these groups do not have any political power.⁵⁹

Palangwan equates the status of Isan people within Thailand with that of other oppressed and disenfranchised minorities elsewhere. He is an impassioned participant on an evangelical mission, who sets out to redress what he regards as past injustices by proposing an alternative history of Thai popular music, a history that allows Isan people to share in the increased status of *luuk tung*.

Palangwan's revision of the history of Surapon Sombatjaroen (1925–68) is a calculated attempt to transfer some of Surapon's high status back to Isan musicians. The

56 Catherine Hesse-Swain, 'Programming beauty and the absence of Na Lao: Popular Thai TV and identity formation among youth in northeast Thailand', *GeoJournal*, 66, 3 (2006): 260.

57 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, p. ii.

58 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Christopher John Baker, *Thailand's crisis* (Singapore and Copenhagen: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 193–4.

59 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, p. iv.

centrepiece of Palangwan's argument is an explanation of the relationship between Surapon and two Isan contemporaries, Chaloemchai Siiruechaa and Benjamin. Hailing from Surapburi in central Thailand, Surapon dominates all discussion of *luuk tung* in Thailand, occupying a position similar to that of Elvis in rock music or Hank Williams in American country music. Chaloemchai, an established Isan *ramwong*⁶⁰ singer and songwriter originally from Roi Et, was one of Surapon's closest friends. Palangwan makes the convincing point that Surapon could not speak Isan and when he sang Isan words, they were often mispronounced. Some of the songs upon which he built his popularity, such as '*Namdtaa Lao Wiang*' ('Tears of a Lao girl'), '*Korng bplorm*' ('Fake things') and 'Snooker', were most probably written or co-written by Chaloemchai, and even Surapon's habit of shaking the microphone stand was an imitation of Chaloemchai.⁶¹ The hypothesis that Surapon would not have been able to write Isan songs, or songs using Isan elements without assistance is supported indirectly by Raadrii Siwilai's observation on why Isan people have influenced *luuk tung* so heavily. She told this author that Isan people were able to borrow from central Thailand because they could speak central Thai but the opposite was not true because most central Thais could not speak Isan.⁶² Clewley confirms that Isan performers, 'brought up bilingually', can easily switch between *luuk tung* and *mor lam* but that central Thai artists must stick to *luuk tung*.⁶³

Dtamtorng Chookchana, born in Ubon Ratchatani and otherwise known as Benjamin (1921–94), was the most popular *ramwong* singer in Thailand until he enlisted in the Thai army in order to serve in Korea. During his absence, Surapon became the unrivalled superstar of *luuk tung*. Palangwan claims that competition with Benjamin was one of the main reasons why Surapon developed into such a fine artist. Palangwan refers to the song '*Yaa tiang gan loei*' ('Don't argue with each other') in which Benjamin denounces Surapon for criticising Pongsii Woranut and for copying his singing style. He also says that all singers should only sing their own songs. In reply, Surapon wrote '*Sip niu kor kamaa*' ('Ten fingers asking for forgiveness') in which he tells Benjamin not to interfere in the affairs of young people and denies that he has copied Benjamin's voice. He says that Benjamin should be proud that there is another voice like his!⁶⁴ Palangwan's point is that the contributions of Isan musicians to Surapon's development should be remembered.

Siripon Gorptong: The study of luuk tung taken seriously

The publishing of Gorptong's *Wiwatanagaan pleeng luuk tung nai sangkom Thai* (2004) represents a further stage of development in the status of *luuk tung*. *Luuk tung* is here presented as a subject for book-length academic study by a history

60 Popular Thai folk dance in which men and women dance in a circle — developed during Phibunsongkraam and Wichit's period of influence.

61 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, pp. 210, 214.

62 Author's interview, Jan. 2007.

63 Clewley, 'Many sounds', p. 446.

64 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, pp. 200–1.

graduate from Chulalongkorn University.⁶⁵ Gropotong's history is meticulously researched and carefully assembled from the many Thai journal, newspaper and magazine articles previously published on *luuk tung*. Interviews with key industry personalities provide fresh information, including an awareness of the participation of Isan people through the input of such artists as Sonchai Meekwichian and Yenjit Pontewii. Gropotong was only 31 at the time of publishing, and her book represents a towering achievement for a young, female Thai scholar because publishing has usually been reserved for old male professors. There is, however, no reference to the work of Siriyuvasak or Putharapon, demonstrating again the discrete natures of the Thai and English literatures. A further problem is that her account is overly dominated by discussion of Surapon Sombatjaroen and Pumpuang Duangjan — indeed, she stops at Pumpuang's death in 1992.

Gropotong follows Iaosiwong in proposing that *luuk tung* was originally an urban art form that spread to rural areas via seasonal migration and mass media.⁶⁶ She also argues that the audiences for *luuk tung* and *luuk grung* were not divided significantly along rural/urban lines, as has been previously accepted. What makes her arguments so powerful is that she provides a wealth of information in the form of charts and tables. Her lists of *luuk tung* singers and songwriters are far more comprehensive than Nawikmuun's and can be used to support Iaosiwong's thesis that *luuk tung* began in urban rather than rural areas, and Palangwan's argument for the early involvement of Isan people in the industry. In a list of 46 singers and songwriters from before 1957 (*pleeng Thai saagon*, *ramwong* and early *luuk tung* and *luuk grung*), 15 were born in Bangkok, while only six were born in Isan and seven in Supanburi.⁶⁷ In a list of *luuk tung* singers and songwriters from after 1957, only six were born in Bangkok, whereas 29 were born in Isan and nine in Supanburi.⁶⁸ Gropotong has investigated previously unresearched material, such as television and radio fan magazines and government statistical reports, in order to assemble tables of audience preferences from the 1960s and 1990s. These tables are divided into regions and rural/urban areas and show that in 1968, *luuk tung* was almost equally popular with rural and urban audiences (93 per cent to 90 per cent), whereas there was a marked difference with regard to *pleeng Thai saagon* (54 per cent to 89 per cent).⁶⁹ These results were repeated in 1993 although with less of a difference. Such information can be used to critique the classification of *luuk tung* as a rural art form.

Amporn Jirattikorn: Luuk tung as a central Thai art form

Jirattikorn's 'Lukthung: Authenticity and modernity in Thai country music' (2006), is an important addition to the small English language literature on *luuk tung*. The main thesis of her article is that the terms 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' are socially constructed, and various notions of authenticity (the perception of

65 Jenpop Jopgrabanwan has recently followed Gropotong with a guide to *luuk tung* singers, *Pleeng Luuk Tung*, published in late 2007.

66 Gropotong, *Wiwatanagaan*, pp. 193–4.

67 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

68 *Ibid.*, pp. 439–43. Such lists do not take into account urban migration, and a more detailed analysis of the histories of individual performers is needed to determine whether Iasiwong is correct.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 239, 444–5.

something as genuine) have been applied to *luuk tung* during the past 15 years. Jirattikorn details the change in status experienced by *luuk tung* after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, commenting that ‘contemporary lukthung has become so popular that pop stars, movie stars, and foreigners want to sing lukthung songs’.⁷⁰ Jirattikorn’s article can be interpreted as a reaction to the *tongtin* culture movement represented in this article by Palangwan’s *Luuk tung Isan*. She does not refer directly to the *tongtin* movement or Palangwan, but central Thai cultural hegemony is confirmed throughout her article. If the *tongtin* movement can be characterised as an attempt by ethnic minorities to claim a greater share of the cultural currency, then a reaction on behalf of central Thai cultural hegemony is to be expected. The interest of both movements in *luuk tung* stems from the genre’s increase in status after 1997.

In her discussion of authenticity, Jirattikorn provides the example of a Thai commentator, Wanit Jarungkitanan, who believes that since 1997, recording companies have reshaped *luuk tung* to the point that it is no longer authentic.⁷¹ Her implication is that Jarungkitanan is engaged with a non-issue because authenticity is always changing. This immediately brings her into conflict with the *tongtin* movement and Palangwan’s belief that although Isan people are heavily responsible for *luuk tung*, they have been disinherited by central Thai cultural hegemony. Jarungkitanan is really protesting over the proliferation of *luuk tung* recordings by *luuk krueng* (half Thai, half western) actors and actresses at the expense of career *luuk tung* singers — the crowding out of Isan faces by central Thai. For writers such as Palangwan and Jarungkitanan, authenticity matters because it is a means of asserting and denying ownership. The refusal to judge authenticity in, or assign ownership to *luuk tung* can be perceived as the appropriation of Isan culture. In the words of Jacques Attali, the ‘appropriation and control (of music) is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political’.⁷²

Although not relevant to her main thesis, Jirattikorn denies the possibility of Isan involvement in the development of *luuk tung* and in doing so, makes uncharacteristic errors. Her choice of words is somewhat reminiscent of the ultra-nationalistic discourse of the Pan-Thai movement⁷³ of the 1930s and 1940s:

Western scholars studying Thai popular music often argue that lukthung comes from Isaan, or northeastern Thailand, which is linked to Lao ethnicity. Most Thais recognize, however, that lukthung developed out of central Thai folk traditions, and for the first two or three decades had little Isaan input. It was only with the later influx of Isaan people into the writing

70 Jirattikorn, ‘Authenticity’, p. 35.

71 Ibid., pp. 25–6.

72 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The political economy of music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 6.

73 The concept of Pan-Thai influence over Southeast Asia, which culminated in the attempts to ‘reclaim’ parts of Laos and Cambodia during World War II, has persisted throughout the 20th century and still exerts influence on contemporary Thai thinking through the nationalist historiography found in school textbooks which ‘promotes a linear view of Central Thai development’ (Reynolds, *National identity*, p. 315). For example, a diplomatic dispute in February 2003 between Thailand and Cambodia was sparked by comments from a character played by Thai actress Suvanant Kongying claiming Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand (‘Thailand withdraws envoy to Cambodia’, *BBC News World Edition*, 29 Jan. 2003). The recent dispute over the Preah Vihear temple can also be viewed in this light since the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) support the nationalist historiography.

and production of lukthung that the music came to be associated by some with this region and its traditions. Anake (*sic*) (1978) lists the thirty most popular lukthung singers in the 1970s. All are from central Thailand ... Clewley (2000) argues that many lukthung singers came from the central town of Suphanburi, and they added their own unique accent to the style, another fact well known to Thai fans of the music.⁷⁴

Western scholars have actually been no more likely to suggest that *luuk tung* comes from Isan than Thai scholars.⁷⁵ Jirattikorn appears to be attempting to restructure the debate as between all Thais on one side and *farang* – the wicked Other – on the other.⁷⁶ Nawikmuun's *Pleeng nork satawat* does indeed list 30 *luuk tung* singers from the 1960s and 1970s. Most are from central Thailand, but not all — the extremely popular Saksayaam Petchompuu and Sonchai Meekwichian were born in Isan, while Panom Noppon and Cholatii Tarntong had Isan lineage.⁷⁷ Unlike what Jirattikorn suggests, Nawikmuun does not claim that his list is exhaustive or that it is a list of the most popular singers — in fact he states that he is establishing the rural origins of *luuk tung* versus the urban origins of *luuk grung*. Furthermore, the lists found in Gropotong confirm Palangwan's argument that Isan people were active in the *luuk tung* industry right from the beginning. Palangwan also notes that many people in Supanburi and Chonburi have Lao ancestry because of Rama III's conquest of Vientiane and forced repatriation of the Lao people.⁷⁸ Jirattikorn's assessment of *mor lam*⁷⁹ is equally revealing: 'In the Thai perception, if lukthung is considered "low-class" music and somewhat associated with being a "country bumpkin" morlam is truly "bumpkin" music and definitely rustic.'⁸⁰

Apart from demonstrating the negative image *luuk tung* held in the past, this statement ignores the steady growth in popularity of *mor lam* over the last decade, to the extent where *mor lam sing* has become the coolest music for young Thais and even older styles, like *lam glorn*, have begun to make a comeback.⁸¹ In a recent interview, *Mor Lam* Raadtrii Siiwilai stated that she has had an increase in requests for older styles, indicative of a groundswell of interest in Lao-Isan culture (and also the desire of house owners to discourage the drunken fighting that often breaks out at village *mor lam* song concerts).⁸²

The main focus of Jirattikorn's article is a discussion of Bird Thongchai's⁸³ 2002 *luuk tung* album *Chut rap kaek*,⁸⁴ which includes Isan vocals by *mor lam* singer

74 Jirattikorn, 'Authenticity', p. 47.

75 Only Myers-Moro suggests that *luuk tung* originated in Isan, 'Songs for life', p. 98.

76 *Farang* means Caucasian. Refer to Pattana Kitiarsa, 'Farang as Siamese occidentalism', *Asia Research Institute: Working Paper Series* (Sept. 2005), http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/article_view.asp?id=359 (last accessed on 11 Aug. 2008).

77 Nawikmuun, *Pleeng nork satawat*, pp. 66–7.

78 Palangwan, *Luuk tung Isan*, pp. 166, 177.

79 *mor lam* is used here to refer to the overall genre.

80 Jirattikorn, 'Authenticity', p. 43.

81 Miller, 'From country hick', pp. 103, 106.

82 Author's interview, Jan. 2007.

83 Thongchai McIntyre, known as 'Bird', was one of Grammy's first promoted acts. He has subsequently become Thailand's most famous contemporary musician (Hayes, 'Refashioning pop music', p. 21).

84 An item used to welcome guests.

Jindtaraa Puunlaap. The words of Joey Boy, the producer of *Chut rap kaek*, demonstrate the extent to which the status of *luuk tung* has changed, but also assert central Thai cultural hegemony over *luuk tung*:

We kissed America's ass for a long time. I think it's time to learn that we have so many valuable things in our language, our music. The beauty of Thai language as it is expressed in four different dialects is stressed here. I want to introduce Thai music to the world and hope to pave the way for the new generation to follow.⁸⁵

Here Joey Boy is protesting against the colonisation of Thai pop music by America but, at the same time, he is trumpeting the Thai government's policy of the central Thai language ruling over regional differences. That Isan is much closer to Lao than Thai is ignored and the 'four dialects' all became 'Thai'. As in the study of Tai⁸⁶ peoples by some Thai scholars, an 'h' is conveniently inserted to spread Thai hegemony throughout Thailand and neighbouring countries.⁸⁷ In addition, Boy unrealistically claims that he wants to introduce Thai music to the world but the appeal of *Chut rap kaek* was always going to be strictly limited to Thailand and Laos. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Boy is more interested in reinforcing the status of central Thailand as the centre of the Tai cultural world rather than in promoting *luuk tung* to the rest of the world.

My purpose in discussing these three recent texts is to demonstrate how the rising status of *luuk tung* has influenced recent academic writing by Thai authors. *Luuk tung* has become cultural currency to be argued over and claimed. The Lao-Isan *tong-tin* movement, represented by Palangwan, views *luuk tung* as part of Isan heritage whereas writers such as Jirattikorn wish to extend central Thai cultural hegemony over the whole of Thailand. Scholarly texts such as that written by Gropptong present the opportunity to measure the claims of each side through detailed research. The overall increase in debate is extremely welcome because of the past lack of interest in *luuk tung*. I will now move on to an area that has not really been addressed in detail in any text up to this point — the techniques of *luuk tung* songwriting.

Section 3: The practitioner's art: A case study of Sorapet Pinyoo

The third section of this article is a case study of the songwriting and recording techniques of Sorapet Pinyoo. My intention is to ground a survey of the voices that speak on *luuk tung* with an analysis of the lyrics and melodies of an experienced practitioner.

We must put a price to our work since the music companies make so much money out of it ... Just to give an idea of the differences ... The company made approximately 44 million bahts (about 1.1 million pounds) from 'Num Ma Kao, Sao Na Klua' (*sic*) ('Rice Field Lad, Salt Field Girl') but the songwriter, Sorapet Pinyoo, received 8000 bahts initial payment plus another 2000 bahts (approximately 250 pounds in total). When the song became a hit, the company then paid him 50000 bahts more (approximately 1250 pounds). You see the gap?...⁸⁸

85 Jirattikorn, 'Authenticity', p. 44.

86 Tai refers to Thai, Lao, Shan, Black and White Tai people groups. Reynolds, *National identity*, p. 314.

87 Reynolds, *National identity*, pp. 315–16.

88 *Luuk tung* songwriter Cholati Taangtorng in Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising', p. 54. As an interesting

The above quote is the only mention of Sorapet in the English language literature. Indeed in Thailand, people recognise his biggest hit, *'Num naa kaa, saao naa gluea'* ('Rice farming boy, salt farming girl'), far more easily than his name (see Figure 1). My contact with Sorapet began in January 2007 and during our first interview, he expressed interest in recording a *luuk tung* album sung in English. After I agreed to translate, he wrote 10 new songs in four days. As I slowly translated the songs and attempted to match the English versions to the original melodies, I was surprised by the complexity and artistry of the rapidly composed lyrics because *luuk tung* lyrics are usually characterised as simplistic, clichéd and rustic.

Sorapet Pinyoo is the stage name for Samoe Jandaa, born in 1950, in Bua Yai near Nakhon Ratchasima in Isan. His story is typical of *luuk tung* singers in terms of humble rural beginnings, ambition and career development. He left school after finishing sixth class and started learning how to sing, because performing was a profession which does not require high educational qualifications. He went to watch all the travelling *ramwong* bands that came to his village and remembers that only he, out of his extended family of rice farmers, had a desire to be something different. All of his eight brothers and sisters are still rice farmers. When he was 15 years old, he entered a radio singing competition at Chaiyapum and won. The competition's MC asked him to record for him in Khon Kaen. He joined the army at 20 for two years but returned to singing and writing songs in Bangkok afterwards. In 1982, his duet with Nong Nut Duangchiiwan, *'Num naa kaa'*, was the top selling song for that year and started a fashion for duets (see Figure 2). As a result, he was awarded a *paen siang tong kam*,⁸⁹ a highly prized honour from the royal family. He had other hits during this period, including *'Tui ort yaa kaa ort kaa'* ('No grass for buffalo, no rice for me'). In 1989, *'Num naa kaa'* was listed in the top 50 *luuk tung* songs of all time by the Office of National Culture.⁹⁰ For the past 20 years or so, Sorapet has lived in Khon Kaen, where he still makes a good living from writing songs.⁹¹

The yet-to-be-titled album consists of 10 songs, which is fairly standard for *luuk tung* projects. Four of the songs – *'Kittueng kon koei rak'* ('Missing you'), *'Kit nak'* ('Think hard'), *'Muean kaa ror fon'* ('Like rice waiting for rain'), and *'Ork hak rak salaai'* ('My broken heart') – are from the point of view of an abandoned lover. There are two 'sights of Thailand' songs – *'Mueang Thai naa tiao'* ('Touring Thailand') and *'Yaak yuu tii Mueang Thai'* ('I want to live in Thailand') – although the latter is a 'sights of Isan' song from the point of view of a *farang* (caucasian) living in Isan. There are two other songs from the point of view of a *farang* – *'Farang pop rak'* ('Farang finds love') and *'Rak kam korp faa'* ('Love beyond the sky'). *'Toe tuun*

point of comparison, Grammy made \$4 million (presumably USD) from selling 1.6 million cassettes by the artist Mos in 1994. Mos received \$280,000 in royalty. This means that Grammy has dramatically improved the pay conditions for at least some performers. Andrew Tanzer, 'Control freaks', *Forbes*, 10 Apr. 1995, pp. 90–2.

89 Literally meaning 'gold record'. Unlike gold or platinum records in the western pop industry, it does not signify sales of a certain amount.

90 Committee for the Office of National Culture, *Gueng satawat pleeng luuk tung Thai* (Bangkok: Amrin Printing Group, 1989), p. 126.

91 This information is taken from this author's interview and *Tam niap silabin chabap bprawat nak-rong luuk tung gueng satawat 1 and 2* (Bangkok: Office of National Culture, 1996), a publication listing the details of the performers who were honoured in the 'Half century of Thai country music' concerts.

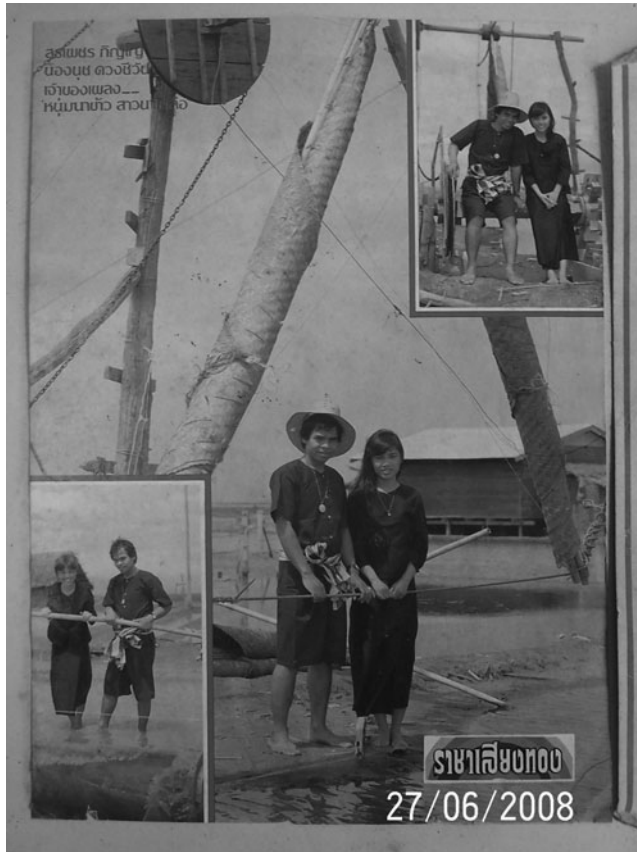


Figure 1. An original promotional poster for *Num naa kaa, saao naa gluea*'

Mueang Thai' ('All hail Thailand') is a patriotic song, while '*Chaonaa naa dam*' ('Farmer with a dark face') is narrated from the point of view of an Isan farmer who feels unattractive.⁹² The translation of each song keeps the rhyming pattern, number of syllables and as far as possible, the rhythm of the original. The original Thai words are included whenever the songs are quoted in this article. Please note that the English versions are not exact translations of the Thai.

All of the songs were newly composed for this album after our first meeting and what is truly astounding is that eight of the songs were written over a period of two days. This is only possible because of the skill accumulated over 40 years of writing and an intimate knowledge of the subject matter that *luuk tung* songs draw upon. Siriyuvasak asserts that 'the uniqueness of the artist stems largely from his/her ability to innovate while not departing entirely from the current trend',⁹³ although it is possible to go further and say that the artist relies on the similarity between songs for financial security. For most songwriters, the ability to produce songs according to

92 The English song names are not direct translations of the Thai names but the names of the English translations.

93 Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising', p. 66.



Figure 2. Sorapet Pinyoo with his royal award for ‘Num naa kaa, saao naa gluea’

demand is what ensures ongoing commercial success — not the ability to innovate. Sorapet said that if he did not write quickly, other songwriters would get the work. On the other hand, he also said that he was inspired by the story of my wife and I to write ‘Farang finds love’ and ‘Love beyond the sky’. He had not previously written songs about interracial relationships. A common criticism of *luuk tung* is that many of the songs sound the same — ‘one hundred songs in one tune’.⁹⁴ However, this could be equally applied to other genres such as blues. It is certainly true that some phrases of several of the faster songs are quite similar but as in blues, the basic melody is skillfully manipulated to fit the required syllables. Like other *luuk tung* songwriters, Sorapet has sometimes reused the melodies of old *Thai doem* and *luuk tung* songs. He borrowed the melody of ‘*Kaek Mon Baangkunprom*’⁹⁵ for one of his early hits ‘*Sansanii nii cham*’.⁹⁶

94 Ibid., p. 67.

95 *Kaek* – Indian, *Mon* – minority in Myanmar, *Baangkunprom* is a place in Bangkok. Hence, ‘Mon Indian of Baangkunprom’.

96 The translated song title is ‘*Sansanii* (girl’s name) escapes’.

The songs follow the usual *luuk tung* themes, such as rural poverty juxtaposed with urban wealth and urban migration resulting in cultural and emotional dislocation (lost love). Typically, however, the themes are updated with contemporary concerns and references. These include the increasing presence of *farang* in Isan ('I want to live in Thailand'), emigration of Isan women through overseas marriages ('Farang finds love' and 'Love beyond the sky') and the division of Isan society in terms of wealth and class ('Farmer with a dark face'). In the latter song, the poor farmer resents teachers, rather than the usual rich politicians, reflecting the growth of an Isan middle class [although Sorapet did explain that *kruu* ('teacher') was easier to manipulate than *damruat* ('policeman') or *sapaapuutaenrasadon* ('politician')]:

My fav'rite food's the frogs I catch in bogs and hang on the door
I hold and snap the legs, then boil in kegs and dry while raw.
I make frog dip to store when crops are poor cause I've got no wage.

A teacher has respect and step by step earns more with age.
The farmer works all year, promotion here is earth worm stage.

Naeo gin yaang dii waa goo kae kiat iimoo jap maa dom bpon
Jap maa hak kaa gogae sai kii dang bpae dom wai kaang poon
Tai naa kuen maa laeo bpon naa luu dton kon bor mii ngoen duean

Bor kue kruu sii 6-7 naa bor dai het dtae kan dai luean
Chao naa het yuu moet bpai wao puen sii mii dtae kii gai duean

Sorapet is clearly still in touch with the ongoing poverty of Isan people outside the cities. His imagery reflects the rural audience without becoming patronising or clichéd. In the following example, he extends the commonly used imagery of rice fields in drought:

Waiting for you like rice for rain
My roots dry'n roasted red
I'm alive as one almost dead
Just like the parched and shriveled rice grain. ('Like rice waiting for rain')

Ror jao muean kaaor ror fon
Raak dton hiao prorm dtaai bpai
Pii yuu muean kon ja sinjai
Mai pit arai gap bai kaaor chao

Sorapet makes frequent use of this kind of metaphorical language. In 'Love beyond the sky', a cross-cultural marriage is portrayed as a union between 'sticky rice and white bread' (kaao niao gap kanom bang maa ruam bpen kaaor dtang). In 'My broken heart', the impact of a relationship breakup is 'like a punch, like a punch, thrown back, thrown back' (muean doon chok muean doon chok ngaai pueng).

Humorous songs are expected in *luuk tung* albums and the humour is usually at the expense of outsiders, whether that be the rich city folk or foreigners. The gentle humour of 'Farang finds love' is self-referential, imagining the smell of *bladaek* (Isan fermented fish sauce) being released on a modern airplane:

If my dear cannot leave bladaek
 You can take back a jar or two
 But please don't open till we're through
 Or the whole plane will be overcome.

Taa yort ying ting bplaadaek bor dai
 Jong hiu ao hai bpai nam jaem jan
 Hai bplaadaek yaa het dtaek ga laeo gan
 Diao gap dtan si paa han jii lor

Patriotic songs are also common in *luuk tung* albums. 'Toet tuun Mueang Thai' ('All hail Thailand') is a patriotic song in the tradition of Wichit's best known song, 'Rak Mueang Thai'.⁹⁷ The continuing popularity of this kind of song both demonstrates and reinforces the presence of Pan-Thai thinking among Thai people. These nationalistic songs are popular to a certain extent but their presence in *luuk tung* albums is also expected by the Thai establishment. Lop Burirat, a well-known songwriter, points out that 'the extras are imperative for our trade ... it is a sort of statement of allegiance ... it doesn't really bother me as long as we get to do what we want to'.⁹⁸ Keeping Sorapet's experience with Bangkok music companies in mind, it is difficult to believe that he is not being a little facetious with lines like: 'For nowhere else has air so good, air filled with ozone/Morality lives in Thai people's pure hearts/We are not deceitful' (Mai waa ja bpen puumiaagaat dem duai taat ozone/Mai waa ja bpen kunatam bprajam yuu nai jai kon/Mai mii wokwon sapsorn). As Siriyuvasak observes, the presence of this kind of song is a commercial requirement — part of the narrow path that *luuk tung* songwriters must negotiate to be successful.⁹⁹

The rhyme structures of Sorapet's lyrics illustrate one of the most interesting features of *luuk tung*. Thai school students learn to write highly complex forms of poetry in high school — *klong*, *chan*, *gaap*, *raai* and *glorn*. Traditional Thai poetry has tonal rules but also uses rhyme. *Luuk tung* songwriters have taken these forms and adapted them for use in songs. The traditional tone rules that poets follow are not used (perhaps because of the distraction of instrumental accompaniment) but there is a greater emphasis on rhyme. These structures require great skill and their use differentiates *luuk tung* from both 'songs for life' and Thai pop or string. Myers-Moro establishes that 'songs for life' use the internal rhymes of *glorn* but usually not the external,¹⁰⁰ whereas Thai pop is more likely to make sporadic use of external rhyme (following western pop music).

Sorapet's rhyme structures are far more complex than traditionally structured English poems. Furthermore, the rhymes are not in any way related to tones. In 'Love beyond the sky', each three-line stanza follows the same rhyme structure. Each line is two bars long and contains an inner rhyme with the third beat of the first bar rhyming with the first beat of the second bar. The dominant rhyme is the final syllable of lines one and two which also rhymes with the inner rhyme of the

97 'Love Thailand'. Refer to Barmé, *Luang Wichit*, p. 124.

98 Siriyuvasak, 'Commercialising', p. 71.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

100 Myers-Moro, 'Songs for life', p. 107.

third line. The final syllable of the stanza becomes the dominant rhyme of the next stanza.

If we walk the line the wind and sky cannot accuse
Sticky rice and white bread are joined to be wed so spread the news
The angels won't refuse the path we choose to write.

Haak waa bun saang lom faa lae lom mai aaja gan
Kao niao gap kanom b pang maa ruam bpen kao dtang gorn nueng diaogan
Prom daen haeng teep sawan mai aat bpit gan sorng rao

This rhyme structure is also used in 'Touring Thailand' and 'Farmer with a dark face'. 'Missing you' is a typical *glorn bpaet* poem:

My heart's desire is far from me,
Naught I see can bring you to mind.
Lost forever, never to find
Hope, resigned, longing for you.

Months past seem just an hour or day,
Next spring may come, the pain is new.
God knows I still care, still miss you,
Your love too cruel, it breaks my heart.

Each four-line stanza has eight syllables per line and a similarly complex rhyme structure. The final syllable of line one rhymes with the third syllable of the second line. The final syllable of line two rhymes with the final syllable of line three and the third syllable of line four. The final syllable of the stanza becomes the dominant rhyme for the next stanza.

Thai speech has a melodic (pitch and rhythm) contour of its own and the degree to which the speech melody and song melody match may be seen as a mark of authenticity by Thai listeners. Several authors have discussed the very high level of correspondence found in Thai classical music, notably Yoko Tanese-Ito (1988)¹⁰¹ and most recently, Dusadee Swangviboonpong (2003)¹⁰² and Vicki-Ann Ware (2006).¹⁰³ An older study by George List is pertinent to this article because it includes an example of *pleeng Thai saagon*, the forerunner of *luuk tung*. List found that, as the imitation of western styles spread throughout the culture, coordination of register tones (low, medium, high) with musical contours tended to diminish but that contour tones (rising, falling) strongly influenced the melodic line.¹⁰⁴ A more recent study by Saurman examines the correlation between linguistic tone and melodic settings in several central Thai musical genres, ranging from traditional and classical through to Thai pop

101 Yoko Tanese-Ito, 'The relationship between speech-tones and vocal melody in Thai court song', in *Musica Asiatica V*, ed. R. Widdess (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

102 Dusadee Swangviboonpong, *Thai classical singing: Its history, musical characteristics and transmission*, SOAS Musicology Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2003).

103 Vicki-Ann Ware, 'Stylistic and cultural transformations in Bangkok fusion music from 1850 to the present day, leading to the development of dontri Thai prayak' (Monash University, 2006), pp. 70-3, 89-91.

104 George List, 'Speech melody and song melody in central Thailand', *Ethnomusicology*, 5, 1 (1961): 31.

songs and found that ‘the more the pitches move with the tones, the more clarity there is in understanding a new song’s textual meaning’ (1996: 5).¹⁰⁵

Sorapet composes melodies using only his voice which suggests the possibility of a high level of coordination. In ‘Love beyond the sky’, significant evidence of coordination can be seen for both sets of tones but, as a strophic song, there is a common melody which must be adapted to fit with the speech melody. Figure 3 compares the second line of all four verses and interestingly shows a high level of coordination in the second and third verses but not so much in the first and fourth. In the third verse, the phrase ‘(H)*tang* (H)*rorn* (H)*tang yen* (H)*tang* (L)*nak* (H)*tang bao*’ is perfectly coordinated. It is possible that, since I am transcribing from a guide vocal without much ornamentation, closer coordination with linguistic tones may be accomplished via embellishment during the recording process (see Figures 3 and 4). This is demonstrated in the transcription of the recording of ‘*Num naa kaa*’. The melody reflects speech tones in many places and ornamentation is used to increase the coordination, as with the falling and high tones in the second phrase of the third verse (‘*num maa* (F)*kaa* (F)*mai* (F)*tort* (H)*ting*’). Occasionally, words, such as *saa* in the last phrase ‘*yaa* (H)*ting* (R)*saa naa gluea*’ have to be ornamented to make them fit. The singer, Nong Nut, glides up on the note to make it seem like a rising tone even though the overall direction of the melody is downward.

Sorapet’s ongoing success is conditional upon his ability to record and distribute his songs (see Figure 5). Throughout his recording career, he has had to master new technology. He said that in the past he would raise a small amount of money to record a demo of songs. Then he would offer the songs to companies who would pay for better recordings to be made in Bangkok. The recording of each album would often be completed in one day. For the past 20 years, however, he has been able to record songs to album standard in his own studio (‘the best recording facilities in Khon Kaen’¹⁰⁶), which he runs as a company called SP Sound Limited. He has recently changed over to digital recording through a computer and recording can now take place over months when musicians are not available at the same time (see Figure 6). Much of his output is passed on to other artists through a network of friends and business acquaintances. He has written hit songs for Pimpaapon Siri (‘*Namdtaa mia Saud*’),¹⁰⁷ Jindtaraa Puunlaap (‘*Waan puean kian jotmaai*’)¹⁰⁸ and Somport Duangsompong, among others. This writer overheard a phone call in which Sorapet accepted a booking to have 10 of his songs recorded at Bua Yai. He later explained that the price he charged was 60,000 *baht* but that he gave 10,000 *baht* to his representative in Bua Yai. His representative said that was too much but Sorapet told him it was ‘okay’ because he had hundreds of songs ready to go. Sorapet made the decision early on in his career to not rely on the copyright system. In the past, he always sold his songs to companies for a set fee and capitalised on their

105 Mary E. Saurman, ‘Thai speech tones and melodic pitches: How they work together or collide’, *EM News*, 5, 4 (1996): 5.

106 *Tam niap silabin*, p. 37.

107 ‘Tears of Mrs Saudi’ tells the story of an Isan woman whose husband has gone to work in Saudi Arabia. Mentioned in Clewley, ‘Many sounds’, p. 446.

108 ‘Ask friend to write a letter’. A girl asks her girlfriend to write a letter for her to a guy and the guy ends up going out with the girlfriend!

Rak Kam Korp Faa

Words and Music by Sorapet Pinyoo

1

Khon (L)Kaen gap mueang (H)Syd - ney

2

(F)Kao (R)ni - ao gap ka-(R)nom bang maa

3

(L)Sap - pa (L)sing (H)tii (H)ruu (H)tii hen

4

(H)Pra (F)Jao (H)mai bpit (H)gan taang

2

— yuu kon la tii (H)gornuean (H)mai (L)glai

ruam bpen (F)kao (H)dtang (H)gor (L)nueng diao gan

— (H)tang (H)rom (H)tang yen (H)tang (L)nak (H)tang bao

— (H)pror bun rao (H)saang (F)ruam gan (R)song kon

Figure 3. Comparison of the second line from each verse of ‘Love beyond the sky’

popularity by touring. Despite missing out on millions of *baht* of royalties from a few extremely successful songs, he has been able to ensure a regular income by his creativity, technological skill and business sense.

Sorapet is still making a good living from his art 25 years after reaching his peak of popularity. He is in no doubt as to the worth of his chosen field and is still looking to reach new audiences. Although he is not permitted to re-record his most famous song because a record company owns the copyright, he is constantly producing new songs. Selling each song for a set 5,000 *baht* (AUD 180) means that he must maintain creativity in order to support his family. Now 57 years old, he is attempting to qualify for the status of *Silabin Haeng Chaat* (‘artist of the nation’), a royal honour conferred

Num naa kaa, saao naa gluea

Words and music by Sorapet Pinyoo

Verse 1

(H)Baar(R)kong (F)pii tam naa tam naa (L)bpluuk (F)kaao tuk

4

muea (H)Nong (H)gor tam naa gluea kai gluea nan sue (F)kaao gin

9

(H)Baan (R)kong (F)pii (L)yyu (F)tii Ga - la - sin Suan dtua (L)yyu pin

12

Verse 2

(L)yyu Sa-mut-saa - (L)kon (F)Pii maa joe kon ngaam kon ngaam maa (F)tiao Daao Ka -

17

nong Nap waa bpen bun (R)kong (R)nong maa (H)pop (F)pii (F)tii tak (H)nong gorn

22

Yaak bpai (L)yyu jang (F)tii Sa-mut - saa - kon (F)Tii (F)pii (H)wao - worn

25

Break

(F)puut maa ghua (F)mai (L)jing (F)Pii tam naa bpluuk (F)kaao rak (H)nong (R)saao gaen

30

ruen (H)Nong bpen (R)saao naa gluea Num maa (F)ksao (F)mai (F)tort (H)ting

2

35

Verse 3

Ta (F)pii (L)ja bpai (R)kor bpai (R)kor (H)por (L)ja waa (L)yang (L)ngai

39

(H)Nong sut-saen dii - jai taa (F)pii bpai (R)kor (H)nong jing jing Num naa

44

(F)kaao rap rong (F)mai (F)tort (H)ting Taa rak (H)nong jing yaa (H)ting (R)saao naa gluea

Figure 4. Melody and lyrics of 'Num naa kaa, saao naa gluea'



Figure 5. LP cover from 1986. Sorapet is at the bottom right



Figure 6. Sorapet's home studio in Khon Kaen. In the top left corner hangs a picture of him receiving his royal award from the Queen of Thailand

on famous artists when they turn 60 years old. They receive a pension of 17,000 *baht* per month (about AUD 600), which would translate to financial security in a country without general pensions, and an associated increase in status. While Sorapet's financial future might have been assured already if the copyright system dealt fairly with



Figure 7. Sorapet is an accomplished *kaen*, guitar and piano accordion player

songwriters, he has survived and prospered because of his skills in writing poetry and melodies that appeal to a *luuk tung* audience (see Figure 7).

Conclusion

This case study of Sorapet Pinyoo is intended to assist in the contextualisation of the literature on *luuk tung* by demonstrating the variety of skills that a *luuk tung* songwriter needs in order to be successful. Speed of writing and the ability to adapt established forms to the current trends are vital. A strong command of central Thai is required to be able to manipulate complex poetic structures and knowledge of Isan is helpful in appealing to the majority audience. Sorapet shows considerable business acumen and is able to keep pace with music technology. Despite never attending high school, he is an accomplished artist.

There are many reasons why *luuk tung* has historically been accorded low status in Thai society. The transition from absolute monarchy to emergent democracy has resulted in the growth of a popular music industry, which eventually allowed many Isan people to escape the endemic poverty that oppressed their region. However after the 1957 coup, the revival in status of the Royal music may have contributed to an overall loss in status for popular song genres associated with Phibunsongkraam. The high level of Isan participation in *luuk tung* and the Isan audience's preference for *luuk tung* certainly resulted in the genre having a low status in wider Thai society. The rehabilitation of Thai classical music and the popular classification of *luuk tung* as folk music led to a heightened distinction between high and low culture. This distinction was exaggerated by western ethnomusicologists, who privileged art and (real) folk music over the popular. The preference of Birmingham School scholars to engage with less commercial and more rebellious genres also compounds the fact. The difficulty of translating the Thai and Isan languages has acted as an information filter, where texts supporting central Thai hegemony are more likely to be translated than those questioning the royalist nationalist history. Finally, foreign

tourists have expected to see the exotic and oriental aspects of Thai culture and Thais have preferred to show the tourists something representing high culture. These forces are intertwined and their cumulative effect has been to accord *luuk tung* lower status in Thai society and in academic writing than was warranted by the genre's characteristics.

The desire to build a cohesive nation-state has assured the paramountcy of the royalist nationalist historiography, which has alternately overlooked or classified *luuk tung* as a central Thai art form. Under this kind of nationalist ideology, ethnicity markers are marginalised while ruling sensibilities and institutions are privileged. A genre of music wielding strong influence over the rural and urban underclass was dangerous and needed to either be crushed (censorship) or co-opted (appropriation). Both tactics have been employed to disguise the Isan involvement in *luuk tung*. The appropriation of Isan involvement in *luuk tung*, represented in this essay by Jirattikorn, may be explained in part as a reaction to a strengthening of ethnic identity by Lao-Isan Thais and the *tongtin* movement. The recent upsurge of interest in Isan culture may have encouraged some central Thai authors to define the historical and cultural borders around *luuk tung* more firmly than is warranted.

The good news is that Isan musicians like Sorapet Pinyoo are today being recognised for their part in the development and history of *luuk tung*. The increase in status of *luuk tung* over the past decade has not only benefited *luuk tung* performers but also prompted the publication of texts by authors with such varied perspectives as Palangwan, Grorptong and Jirattikorn. A recent visit to Maharakam in the heart of Isan revealed 10 copies of Palangwan's *Luuk tung Isan* in the university library. The revision of *luuk tung*'s status has only just begun — it is to be hoped that the future will be filled with the sound of both Isan and Thai *luuk tung* songs.