

Tense Harmony: Thai Cinema and Popular Music

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This paper follows the development of the special connection between Thai cinema and Thai popular music from the 1920s onward. The main argument is that the two dominant musical styles of *luk krung* and *luk thung* have become representative of different social groups within Thailand and that this diversification can also be found in Thai cinema. *Luk thung*, identified with the rural poor, was mostly rejected by producers and audience during the 1950s and 1960s. Only from the 1970s onward did a cinematic style that represented this sector of Thai society and culture develop. In this sense, one can view Thai cinema as an archive of Thai popular music.

Keywords: *Thai cinema, Thai popular music, film music, media analysis, luk thung*

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Popular music has been an integral part of cinema from the very beginning. As early as 1898, a performance of movies titled *Passion Play Pictures* at the Washington Opera House was “interspersed with vocal music” (Loughney, 2009, p. 77). Nine years later the premiere of the opera *Salome* in New York caused a major scandal because of its explicit eroticism. It was immediately followed by movies adapting the biblical story to the screen yet “Strauss’s dissonant music was replaced in the nickelodeons by ragtime and other popular tunes” (Bowser, 2009, p. 181). In 1917, Cecil B. DeMille’s *Joan the Woman* featured opera diva Geraldine Farrar (Landy, 2007), and in 1918, opera’s greatest star Enrico Caruso was paid the unprecedented sum \$200,000 for two silent films that were supposed to be accompanied by his recordings in the cinema (Cesari, 2004). This tendency to utilize the popularity of music in cinema even intensified with the advent of synchronized-sound film, which featured opera singers like Giovanni

Martinelli or popular singers like Al Jolson, often with remarkable success (Tibbetts, 1985).

American dance and jazz orchestras that travelled around Asia in the 1920s and 1930s inspired Thai composers to create similar songs using Thai texts and sometimes local instruments. This new Thai popular music in the western style called *phleng Thai sakon* spread with the help of the new medium of radio but even more so with the help of the nationalist government of the late 1930s. Instead of tapping into the diversity of regional cultures, the government explicitly propagated, through military dictator Phibun Songkhram's infamous "cultural mandates," the new *phleng Thai sakon* as part of a unifying Thai culture.¹ And Thai cinema tried to incorporate *phleng Thai sakon* that had started to develop in the late 1920s and early 1930s just in time to join what has been called the golden age of Thai cinema (Barmé, 2002). This period lasted from the production of the first Thai sound film in 1931 until film production was interrupted during World War II (Sukwong & Suwannapak, 2001). Most popular of the *phleng Thai sakon* at that time was the Suntharaphon orchestra under its founder and leader Uea Sunthonsanan, who in 2009 was the first Thai musician to be included in the UNESCO list of Great Personalities at the suggestion of the Thai government (Thailand Public Relations Department, 2009). He and others provided musical backgrounds for the flourishing film industry, in the form of either recorded songs for the live dubbing of 16-mm films or scores for sound films like *Phleng wanchai* [Sweetheart Song] from 1937 and *Klua mia* [Henpecked] from 1938.

None of these prewar films have survived, but the close partnership between cinema and popular music immediately resumed once film production restarted in the late 1940s. *Phleng Thai sakon* developed into what is now called *luk krung*, which focused on newly emerging vocal stars rather than on a group performance replete with dancers and a chorus. The crooning baritone voice of Suthep Wongkamhaeng epitomized the merging of American popular culture and Thai texts, verbalizing the ideas and values of postwar Thai middle and upper classes. Wongkamhaeng explicitly mentioned Bing Crosby as a major influence on his musical style (Jaiser, 2012), and he participated in many films and even starred, together with other *luk krung* singers, in Rattana Pestonji's technically ambitious musical drama *Sawan mued* [Dark Heaven] in 1958. His regular female partner Sawali Phakaphan was also active in cinema, and his closest competitor Charint Nanthanakhon, who sang and acted in numerous films, even married Thailand's most popular film actress Phechara Chaowarat. So there were ample opportunities for popular music and cinema to share audiences. Thai films in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly shot in 16 mm, which had

technical limitations that did not allow for a pre-produced soundtrack, so complex musical productions were impossible. However, the screening of these films was accompanied by professional live dubbers who not only delivered the spoken parts but also used all kinds of equipment, including recordings, for sound effects. A nostalgic reenactment of this long-gone part of Thai culture can be seen in Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's 2001 film *Monrak transistor* [Magic Love Spell of Transistor Radio]. Therefore, in retrospect, even 16-mm productions helped open up the field for music from records, and it was *luk krung* that was commonly used during those years.

A good example comes from one of the earliest Thai films that has at least partly survived: *Phanthai Norasing* from 1950, directed by Bhanu Yukol, with cinematography by Rattana Pestonji. It is the story of a faithful royal servant. A scene from the beginning of the film shows the male protagonist returning to his village and meeting his fiancée, and they sing *nam ta saeng tai*, the theme song of the play, in typical *luk krung* arrangement. The contrast between the rural scene showing every possible detail of an idealized country life, from haystack and canoe to the hero in loin cloth, and a musical style that has been called "pseudo-sophisticated" (Miller & Shahriari, 2009, p. 153) is striking but probably does not disturb the audience. Although the soundtrack of available copies of the film is of recent date, the text of the original song is based on the lip movement of the actors. The text is also printed in the original dubbing script.² One cannot be certain, however, that it was a recording that had always been used in actual screenings. In simpler cinemas outside Bangkok, it was probably quite common for the dubber to sing both voices. Nevertheless, the recorded version of the song would probably have been known to the audience.

Up to this point it may seem that the relationship between Thai cinema and popular music is not a very exciting subject. However, things become more complex and interesting with the emergence of a new style of popular music—what was soon called *luk thung*, that is, "children of the field," as contrasted from *luk krung* or "children of the city." From the late 1940s onward, several composers and singers started to add new subjects and later on also new musical features to the already established *ph leng Thai sakon*. In the beginning, the new style was hardly distinguishable from *ph leng Thai sakon*. They sang, for example, *The Muddy Smell of the Buffalo*, the title of one of the earliest hits. Addressing the life and problems of farmers living in remote rural parts of the country, however, was not in the interest of the second Phibun Government of the early 1950s. The ideal of a unitary Thai society was not to be disturbed by songs about social and regional differences. In fact several of the early singers served prison sentences because of their work, and many times their songs were banned from being

broadcast. Bangkok elites also considered the new style vulgar and primitive and protested heavily when it was finally featured on television. An early TV program featuring *luk thung* songs was soon dropped due to these protests (see Jaiser, 2012). In the long run, though, it was not possible to prevent the success of *luk thung*, and it has proven much more durable and creative than the preceding style. Records, radio, and especially concert tours all over Thailand helped spread *luk thung*, with Suraphon Sombatcharoen becoming a star comparable to the established *luk krung* artists but attracting new audiences.³

Therefore, the early 1960s saw Thai film producers facing a major problem. On the one hand it seemed highly advisable to take advantage of the increasing popularity of the new musical style that, in the long run, could be essential in order to keep rural audiences in the cinemas. On the other hand, *luk thung* was unattractive, often even provocative, to the Bangkok elite and its representatives all over the country who still formed the most important base of cinematic audiences. Reluctantly, producers finally started to introduce *luk thung* into the idyllic world of Thai cinema using various strategies. This paper follows some of these producers to show that Thai commercial cinema can reflect social conflicts in much more detail than one might expect.

An early example of a direct confrontation of the two musical styles can be found in the 1965 film *Nang sao phoradok* [Ms Phoradok] directed by Wichit Khunawut, who became one of the most prolific directors of the 1970s and was well-known for his ambitious films *Khon phukhao* [Mountain People] from 1979 and *Luk isan* [Son of the Northeast] from 1982. Even in his more commercial films of the 1960s he already showed a remarkable interest in more unconventional subjects, such as the authentic depiction of rural life in his 1967 film *7 phrakan* [7 Angels of Death], or the discussion of religious diversity in Thailand in *Nang sao phoradok*. In terms of the music used, *Nang sao phoradok* seemed to follow the given standard with its title song sung by Phensri Phumchusri, one of the most popular female *luk krung* artists. A later scene, however, showed the male hero being harassed by a drunken woman who fell in love with him and listened to noisy radio music while suffering from a headache. The music used in the soundtrack of available copies of the film was a song by Chai Mueangsing, one of the major *luk thung* stars of the mid-1960s, who had a voice that was the strongest possible contrast to the soothing voice of Suthep Wongkamhaeng. Mueangsing's rough voice and aggressive singing style must have sounded quite abrasive to a lot of Thai listeners, and it was used in the film precisely because of this characteristic. Unfortunately, the dubbing script of the film was not available in the Thai Film Archive, and it has therefore remained

unclear whether this specific song was purposely chosen or it was the only lively music accessible at that time. Since the song is contemporary to the film from the early 1960s, however, the former seems more likely.

The same year saw the production of the major musical comedy *Ngoen ngoen ngoen* [Money, money, money] (A. Mongkolkarn, 1965). While most films of this period were shot in 16 mm and presented in cinemas with a dubber, this film was shot in 35 mm, with a soundtrack, and featuring many of the biggest stars of the time. Mit Chaibancha and Phechara Chaowarat, the most popular film couple of the 1960s, played the main characters, supported by some of the most important *luk krung* stars. Besides Suthep Wongkamhaeng and Charint Nanthanakhon, the film even featured Uea Sunthonsanan who popularized *phleng Thai sakon* in the 1930s and who by 1965 had become a legendary figure. In a highly interesting scene that deserves closer analysis, he appeared from nowhere as a kind of demigod in order to save the nightclub that was destroyed by the villains. More interesting in the context of this paper, however, was the fact that even a *luk thung* singer took part in the film. Former stage actor Phon Phirom played one of the supporting characters of the music group that followed the main character around and was featured with a short song in his typical style of *phleng lae* or speech song. From today's point of view, this is arguably the strongest musical performance in the film. Nevertheless, for the remaining three hours nothing more was heard of this singer, although he would be part of all the group's adventures and musical performances. Phirom, a master of elegant words and smooth singing was certainly less provocative than Chai Mueangsing. But he still represented a style that was irritating to at least part of the audience and was therefore not given a more dominant part. Only one year before, a television program presenting *luk thung* and featuring, among others, Phirom, was dropped, following strong protest from many viewers (Jaiser, 2012). The country was not yet ready for *luk thung* to be part of its mainstream programs.

Within the next few years, however, this changed. In 1967, Phon Phirom was finally featured as one of the main actors in *Saneh Bangkok* [Enchanting Bangkok], an early example of a story of a countryman leaving home in search of a better life in the city. It was again director Wichit Khunawut who risked the experiment of a full feature film by casting mostly *luk thung* singers. In addition to Phirom the film also starred composer and singer Phayong Mukhda, one of the creators of the style, as well as younger singers who were popular at the time, like Chaichana Bunachot and Phet Phanomrung. The film was quite unconventional at that time, drawing a more authentic picture of Thai country life and serving as forerunner of the films in the 1970s and 1980s that showed the rural exodus in more detail.

However, it was really a musical film featuring *luk thung*. Phon Phirom's acting style was more realistic and understated than his contemporaries, but his musical contribution merely consisted of the title song that was meant to be played during the opening credits. The only *luk thung* music played during the film was a few seconds from *sano sadao*, a popular love duet sung by Chaichana Bunachot, hardly distinguishable from *luk krung* duets.⁴ The film used music in various other situations: folk songs and a *ramwong* dance to describe the atmosphere in the countryside, and *ph leng nak muai* for the boxing scene and other scenes. It is not completely clear how much of the music was intended by the film producers, but it seems that the music selection was more or less left to the dubber's discretion. In the copy of the script in the Thai Film Archive, most of the notes on the kind of music to be used were handwritten, most probably by a dubber. Any more use of *luk thung* music was obviously not intended. Director Wichit Khunawut was interested in a more authentic depiction of rural life than in previous Thai films. Phon Phirom may have interested him as an actor of *likay*, the popular form of open-air theatre, but not as a singer of popular rural songs.

Luk thung's most popular star was not Phon Phirom but singer and composer Suraphon Sombatcharoen. Travelling with his orchestra all over Thailand, Sombatcharoen had become popular because of his concerts and recordings. During his lifetime he was not allowed to enter the world of Thai cinema or television. This changed immediately after his untimely death in 1968, when he was shot dead in Nakhon Pathom by local gangsters or by a jealous husband—according to locals, the details surrounding his death never became completely clear. The very same year saw the release of *16 pi haeng khwam lang* [16 Years Have Passed], a highly melodramatic screen adaptation of his life story featuring Mit Chaibancha as the late *luk thung* singer. Everything possible was done to soften Sombatcharoen's provocative style, and his most ironic and sometimes quite daring songs were not used at all. The film succeeded in making the title song, a semi-autobiographic song about the end of 16 years of love, one of the most popular evergreens of Thai popular music. The sentimentality of this song is quite rare in his body of work and has overshadowed many of his bolder texts and rhythms. Nevertheless, it was Sombatcharoen's own songs that were obviously intended to be played in the cinemas, making the film the first *luk thung* feature in the history of Thai cinema.

The culminating point of *luk thung's* inroad into the world of Thai cinema was *Mon rak luk thung* [Magic love spell of *luk thung*] that ran for an unprecedented five months in Bangkok's cinemas in 1970 (Sukwong & Suwannapak, 2001). It was also the final step in successfully incorporating

luk thung into the fairy tale world of Thai cinema. The opening titles showing images of an idealized country life were accompanied by the nostalgic title song and set the pace for the whole film, a typical fairy-tale-like story of poor boy, rich girl, and evil father. The musical score, although written by Phaibun Butkhan, one of the pivotal composers of *luk thung*, avoided any musical or textual features that could irritate middle class audiences. The music was a kind of rural *luk krung*, musically slightly different, maybe a little odd, but exotic and interesting rather than unsettling. It is an early example of what May Adadol Ingawani calls “the capitalist appropriation and commodification of plebeian cultural forms, such as luktoong [sic] music and postwar lowbrow Thai cinema” (2006, p. 94).

In many respects, 1970 was a turning point in the history of Thai cinema. *Mon rak luk thung* was a major success, and it also showed the transgression of the old style. The death of Mit Chaibancha, the greatest star of the 1960s, in a stunt accident, marked the end of an era. Most importantly, Thai society was changing. A younger generation was all grown up, and they wanted to be represented in popular culture as having their own values and interests. So it was no coincidence that 1970 saw *Thon*, the debut film of Piak Poster, who was to become one of the most important directors of the 1970s and 1980s. *Thon* used popular music in a new and remarkable way, juxtaposing the latest form of Thai pop music in western style with *luk thung*. The opening sequence is notable for showing new social relations within an old story line. The film opens in a school cafeteria, with two young men agreeing on a trip to the countryside. A shot showing a travelling train links to a scene with the main character in a simple rural house. This is quite a common opening for Thai films. The young hero has to find his fortune and prove his value in the foreign world of the countryside, similar to the prince in a fairy tale. New in this film, though, is the music that represents the two different locales in Thai society. The school scene features The Impossibles, a young band that adapted the 1960s style of western pop groups to Thai ears and became very popular among the young middle-class in the early 1970s. Their fashionable and somewhat trivial music cuts to the title song sang and acted in the rural scene by Sangthong Sisai, a young *luk thung* singer.

Sisai was one of the best singers of a second generation of *luk thung* singers that emerged during the late 1960s, but he certainly owed his popularity in cinema largely to his rather scary looks caused by a hereditary disease. In later years, his face with missing teeth and sparse hair became a stereotype in Thai popular culture, copied even after Sisai's untimely death in 1983. The film made him quite a star and the title song remained his signature tune. Although his character in the film was a very positive one, he appeared as a kind of “amiable freak,” the friend of the main character but

foreign to the contemporary world and impossible to integrate. In one shot during his opening song, he was shown beside a comical mask of a skull, obviously paralleling his two “faces.” Quite early in the film, the villains shot him to death. The director’s sympathy was obviously with Sisai’s character, and Poster stated that the killing was intended to arouse compassion for said character (S. Chotirosseranee, personal communication, June 20, 2012). Nevertheless, the film showed two different styles of popular music that seem to be as incompatible as the two sectors of Thai society they represent. Even to a younger generation of city people who have added western style pop music to the *luk krung* music of their parents, *luk thung* could only be local color, not part of their own culture.

To summarize, *luk thung* has been incorporated into mainstream cinema between 1965 and 1970 via different methods. Some films included *luk thung* as a marginal element, letting the accepted style of *luk krung* dominate, as in *Ngoen, ngoen, ngoen*; as a negative counterpart to *luk krung*, as in *Nang sao phoradok*; or as mere local color, like in *Saneh Bangkok*. Other films showed more sympathy to the music and the rural lifestyle but still using these elements to represent an alternate world to accepted lifestyles, as with Sangthong Sisai’s likable but rather freakish appearance in *Thon*. The most successful films, though, ignored or removed the features that had separated *luk thung* from *luk krung* in the 1950s and presented a form of country music that was digestible to the majority of city people, like in *16 pi haeng khwam lang* and *Mon rak luk thung*.

From the early 1970s onward, Thai society changed in a way that soon made it nearly impossible for established film producers to target their audience as a unified entity. The strong political polarization led to the development of social groups that opposed each other and requested to be distinctly represented in popular culture. Young producers like Piak Poster and Chatrichaloem Yukon started to attract these groups. Poster’s films targeted young city people while Yukon’s films were interesting to intellectuals. Then it was no longer possible to ignore the rural population. Many of them left their homes in the north and northeast to find a better future in the cities and form a new social group. They demanded films that captured their own unique experiences. Thus, the common story of the city boy looking for love in the countryside was reversed, and films that showed the adventures of a boy or girl freshly arrived in Bangkok attracted a new audience. Their musical representation was a revived form of *luk thung*, with new elements of western pop music and texts targeting the new city proletariat. While *luk krung* stagnated artistically and commercially, the *luk thung* revival of the 1970s and 1980s produced the biggest stars Thai popular music has ever seen. *Mon rak mae nam mun* [Magic love spell of the river

Mun] from 1977 by director P. Chantharukha referred to *Mon rak luk thung* in the title but took the story from an unreal and unspecified rural world to the very real-life problems of Isan in the 1970s. In the film, the young singer who finally finds success in the capital became the representation of the hopes of migrants of the time. *Luk thung's* greatest star singer, Phumphuang Duangchan, together with Sayan Sanya, Yotrak Salakchai and other popular singers of the *luk thung* revival, gave voice to these hopes in her songs and appeared in many films.

It may seem that by then Thai cinema was a divided field, producing different films for different target groups and thus avoiding conflicts. However, tension between social groups and their musical representation still surfaced, as in C. Saithong's *Siao i-li* from 1983. The title is an untranslatable expression used in a derogative way for a person from Isan. Soraphong Chatri, major actor of these years, plays a typical modern version of the fairy tale's simpleton who gains fortune in the end. After he fails in various jobs in the beginning, he finally becomes a successful singer, but not without an initial clash with his future audience. When he serenades his girlfriend in a fashionable restaurant, the other guests consider his naive singing rude and unrefined and boo him off the stage. The fact that he eventually becomes a popular singer in this very restaurant later can be interpreted in two different ways: either the people in the audience changed their taste and accepted the rural style or the singer adapted his singing to the demands of city people. While the producers most probably intended the first reading, the musical arrangement implied the second.

The last film to be mentioned here is an example of an attempt of a *luk krung* singer to regain his diminishing audience by using all possible musical styles. In 1985, *luk thung* revival was in full swing. *Luk krung* veteran Charint Nanthanakhon produced and directed *Phukan ruea re* [Philandering commander], a comedy showing three marines on a three-week land excursion to the countryside. Besides the popular star Soraphong Chatri, the film also featured Sutthiphong Wathanachang alias Chomphu Frutti, a young fashionable pop singer. The film also used *luk thung* as well as disco and other popular music. The patriotic world of the navy was merged with rural life by sending the marines to the world of *luk thung*, quite in the way traditional films send city people out of town to find their luck and love. The film included all the musical styles that were popular at the time to show how a diverse society could unite in the end in a patriotic military song.

Did the two styles finally make peace with each other? The developments in Thai film disprove this. In recent years, the polarization of Thai society saw a search for representation in popular culture by disparate social groups

and a stronger opposition of styles than ever before (Jaiser, 2012). While *luk krung* has seen a revival in live performances, *luk thung*, at least in its more provocative form, has virtually disappeared from Bangkok musical life (see Jaiser, 2012).

However, other developments that would deserve a more detailed discussion here are the increasing changes in Thai popular music, especially *luk thung*, due to commercial as well as political pressure. There can be no doubt that *luk thung* became more romanticized and tame during the 1980s and 1990s to accommodate a new political climate (Siriuvatasak, 1998), as well as a much more commercialized culture industry (Barmé, 2002). Standardization and predictability have also become an increasing trend over the years (Jaiser, 2017). One might argue that the discrepancy between the more subversive tendencies of *luk thung* and commercialization has diminished since the 1960s and Thai cinema has become a more adequate “archive” of Thai popular music than ever before. This short paper cannot trace this progression in full detail but only tries to show how these developments are deeply rooted in the history of Thai popular culture.

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Notes

1 For the history of cultural mandates see Reynolds (2006, pp. 248) and Wyatt (2003, p. 244).

2 Page 3 of the copy available in the Thai Film Archive. These scripts were used by dubbers during performances and included dialogue and sometimes basic information on proposed sound features.

3 For the development of early *luk thung* see Jaiser, 2012, pp. 24-29.

4 Page 17 of the copy of the dubbing script preserved in the Thai Film Archive.

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