

Song as a Resource for Cultural Translation:

The Formations of Tai Popular Music in the Borderlands of the Upper Mekong

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Introduction

In the borderlands of the upper Mekong region¹ today, Tai pop songs are sung, performed, disseminated via various forms of media, distributed, and consumed on a daily basis. Tai popular music is lyrically sung in Tai dialects, played with modern instruments, and performed by local Tai musicians who, in different sub-regions, identify and express themselves differently. The Lue (or Dai officially, in Xishuangbanna, southern Yunnan) usually refer to their modern song as ‘Kham Khab Dai Samai Mai’ (Modern Dai Song), the Tai Lhong (or Shan officially, in Shan states of Burma) call it ‘Pleng Leik Tai’, and the North in northern Thailand who call themselves Khon Muang call their new music ‘Folksong Kham Muang’. With the development of different musical styles within the different political circumstances in China, Burma, and Thailand respectively, this Tai popular music highlights the importance of ‘language in music’ and the use of music in identity formation (and transformation) in these local worlds of the upper Mekong today. In this paper, by exploring the developments of Tai popular music, focusing on the Dai in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, southern Yunnan, China, and their musical creation and performance, I hope to show the roles of popular music and song as a resource in the transformations of culture and language among the Tais, who have become the local minorities in the modern nation states of Thailand, Myanmar and China. In particular, I would like to demonstrate how ‘language in music’ and the role of popular music in identity transformation and localization of culture and language are important in the contexts of the formation of modern nation states and commercialization of ethnicity.²

The paper begins with a historical snapshot of different groups of Tai speaking peoples of the upper Mekong region, showing how these peoples, once belonging to powerfully

¹ The upper Mekong region here includes northern Thailand, eastern Shan state of Myanmar, Northern Laos and southern Yunnan of China.

² Ethnographic data presented in this paper is based on my intensive fieldwork conducted in Xishuangbanna, southern Yunnan and other Tai regions of the upper Mekong in 2002-2004. After that I also made several more visits to Xishuangbanna. The latest visit was in April 2013.

established states with their own culture and language, have become simply the minorities in these border regions. Then I trace back to the developments of Tai popular music in northern Thailand and Shan state of Burma, which were influential and inspirational for Dai popular musicians and producers, before going further to explore the beginning of Dai popular music and its operation in southern Yunnan of China. At the end, I will discuss the point that under the power circumstances of Chinese national incorporation and the changing contexts of modern development, tourist industries, and regionalisation, this minority project of Dai popular music should be seen as ‘a new strategy’ spontaneously used and improvised by the Dai minority, enabling and strengthening their local Tai language while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of their locality and cultural identity under circumstances of assimilation and incorporation into the Han-dominated world of modern China.

A historical snapshot of the Tais of the upper Mekong region

Edmund Leach (1954) mentioned three criteria to demarcate Tai ethnicity: wet rice cultivation, Theravada Buddhism, and a feudal (political) system or the Chao Fa (see also Turton 2000). Following Leach’s work, politically throughout history the Tai states were allies – their ruling families were related to each other by kinship and/or inter-marriage, and economically their lives were based on wet-rice cultivation and irrigation systems. Rice was (at least in the past) their *way of life* in other words. Culturally these Tai peoples therefore shared some similarities; linguistically their languages were, and for some still are, mutually intelligible, both in terms of spoken and written languages. In terms of religion they were, and mostly still are, very similar, being Theravada Buddhists, worshipping their ancestral spirits, and practicing Buddhist ceremonies, rituals, and pilgrimages. Even so these peoples can be distinguished from each other by their political domains, their Tai dialects, and perhaps by their dress styles and bodily decorations or tattooing. In short, in the Tai worlds of the upper Mekong there are four major Tai-speaking sub-groups, namely the Lao of Lan Xang, the Yuan (Khon Muang) of Lan Na, the Khuen (Shan) of Chiang Tung, and the Lue of Sipong Panna.

The Lao of Lan Xang are centred in Chiang Thong or Luang Prabang, presently in northwest Laos. This old capital city of Lan Xang was established in 1319, but in the mid-16th century when the Burman empire expanded its power to control the Tai world, King Chaichetthathiraj, who then ruled over both the twin kingdoms of Lan Na and Lan Xang, had to move his centre from Luang Prabang down along the Mekong to establish a new capital city of his new dynasty in 1559, in the city now called Vientiane in central Laos

(see also Stuart-Fox 1997). Historically, the Lao in Luang Prabang, many of whose ancestors were from Chiang Mai, usually identified themselves as ‘Khon Muang Luang’ (the peoples of Luang Prabang). There were also Lue in Luang Prabang who believed that their ancestors had been recruited from Chiang Hung to build a Buddhist site in this town.

The Yuan (Khon Muang) of Lan Na who were also called Lao by the American missionaries, the French, and the Siamese until the early 20th century, are the people who recently have called themselves and have been called by others ‘Khon Muang’ in present day northern Thailand. Lan Na capital, centred in Chiang Mai of present northern Thailand, was first established in 1296 by King Mangrai who moved his kingdom’s centre down from Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai (established in 1262), northern Thailand. The Mangrai dynasty and its centre however were defeated by the Burman expansion and became the latter’s tributary state for two hundred years from the early 16th century. The rebuilding process of ‘the second Lan Na’ began in the late 18th century and lasted until the mid-19th century. This process became the most significant period of Lue settlement in what is presently northern Thailand. After their long battles for independence with the Burman kingdom, the princes of Lan Na, ordered by the Siamese rulers, led their men up to the upper Mekong region to capture ‘the Lue of Sipsong Panna.’ These forced resettlement processes took place in the same period of the establishment of Chakri dynasty and the foundation of Bangkok, the capital of Siam, in 1772 by Phya Chakri, who later became King Rama I. It is believed that these forced peoples became the ancestors of the peoples in northern Thailand, widely known as *Khon Muang*, who presently account for more than half of the population in northern Thailand.

The Khuen (Shan) of Chiang Tung are centred in Chiang Tung (in eastern Shan state of Burma).³ Chiang Tung was re-established by King Mang Rai of Lan Na in 1298, two years after he had established Chiang Mai (mentioned above). Accordingly, the rulers of Chiang Tung were probably originally from Lan Na (and as told by the locals a majority of the local population in this town were Khuen or Yong). However, these people were called Shan by the British (and academics) since the mid-19th century, while the French called these people Burman Lao or Laotian. The Khuen dialect on the one hand is very close to the dialect of the Yuan, which is widely known as Kham Muang in northern Thailand, and on the other hand it also sounds like the Lue dialect. Culturally and geo-

³ In the Shan States of Burma today, there are at least three sub-groups of Shan, namely northern Shan, also called Tai Neur, southern Shan, sometimes called in northern Thailand Kwiew, and eastern Shan (including Lue and Khuen)

politically, Chiang Tung state thus played a significant role as the mediator between Lan Na and Sipsong Panna. Not surprisingly, during the establishments of ‘the second Lan Na’ and Siam in the late 18th and the mid 19th centuries, along with the fate of the Lue, many Khuen were also forced to resettle in present northern Thailand, mostly based in Chiang Mai city and in Lamphun province (in Muang district).

The Lue of Sipsong Panna (who were also called Shan by the British, but Laotian by the French in the mid-19th century) are now called the Dai in southwest China. Chiang Hung, the oldest capital of Lue country was first established in 1180. Also the peoples of Chiang Kheng/Muang Singh (in present northwest Laos) and Muang Yong (in the Shan state of Burma) formed part of the Lue population in the old days (Muang Yong Chronicle 1984). The Lue thus, from the past up to the present, have not only lived in the southernmost region of Yunnan but also in the eastern Shan state of Burma, in northwestern Laos, and in northern Thailand, particularly after the forced settlement campaign in the late 18th century, as mentioned above. The movements of the Lue at this time were significant. The forced resettlement processes took place in the same period as the establishment of the Chakri dynasty, and the foundation of Bangkok (in 1772). Lue mobility thus played a crucial part in the history of Siam, which later became Thailand (in 1939).

Ordered by King Rama I of Siam, the rulers of ‘new Lan Na’ led their men sequentially up to the upper Mekong. The prince of Chiang Mai and the prince of Muang Nan battled with several Tai states along both sides of the Mekong. Whilst the prince of Chiang Mai had, years earlier, moved his troops up along the west bank of the Mekong, the prince of Muang Nan later mobilised his men along the east. The two princes recruited a large number of Lue and Khuen for resettlement in ‘the new Lan Na.’ From the late 18th century to the early 19th century, the prince of Chiang Mai forced the peoples in Chiang Tung, Muang Yu, Muang Yong, and Sipsong Panna (particularly from the principality of Muang Long, southern Xishuangbanna) to resettle in the areas of the present provinces of Chiang Mai-Lamphun region and Lampang. The prince of Muang Nan captured and/or forced the Lue in the northeast and southeast of Sipsong Panna, including Muang U, Muang La, Muang Phong, Muang Mang, and Chiang Kheng, Muang Singh to resettle in the present provinces of Nan, Phrارة, and Chiang Rai, with most resettling in Nan, particularly in the mid-19th century. According to Rattanporn (1995), there are about fifty-eight Lue villages in Nan province, in the districts of Tha Wangpha, Thung Chang, Pau, Chiang Glang, Muang, and Santhisuk. In Chiang Rai province, several Lue communities are located in

the districts of Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, and Chiang Kham (later becoming part of Payao in 1977).

The formations of Tai popular music in the borderlands of the upper Mekong

In her work, *Song and Silence*, which investigates Dai cultural revival in Xishuangbanna through the Lue oral poetry tradition, Sara Davis (2005), mentioned that a Dai songwriter/senior monk had been strongly inspired by ‘northern Thai pop.’ Although she does not mention clearly what this ‘northern Thai pop’ is, it was probably *Pleng Kham Muang*. This northern Thai pop is a similar kind of Thai-style folk music but sung in northern Thai dialect, particularly on the classic album, ‘Ew Muang Neua’ (‘Touring the North’), which has annually been played throughout northern Thailand during the traditional New Year Festival in April (later I found that one famous song from this album, *Mu How* (We, the North) was translated into Dai, entitled *Mu How Chao Dai* (We, the Dai) and put on the first album of a Dai band, released in 1999). Another possible source which inspired Dai musicians is probably the ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ created by Jaran Manophet (1952-2002), which became popular nationwide after its first release in 1977. Jaran’s Folksong Kham Muang, along with ‘Pleng Kham Muang’, has since been disseminated via community radio, in households by tape/VCD players, northern Thai restaurants, shopping malls, etc. This kind of northern Thai popular music, which I will discuss more below, has become immortalised, integrated as part of the social identity of the northerners who call themselves Khon Muang, or in other words, part of a Khon Muang identity (see Tanet 2003).

It is clear from my fieldwork in Xishuangbanna, conducted from 2002 to 2004, that the Dai monks and musicians who took part in the development of Dai popular music in Xishuangbanna in the mid-1990s, had been very much influenced and inspired by both Shan popular music and ‘Pleng Kham Muang’, both of which developed along with the formation of the Thai popular music industry in the late 1970s (see Lockard 1998:162-206). For decades the Dai minority, therefore, had been consumers of the Shan and the northern Thai and Thai popular music industries, rather than the Chinese music which they hardly understood the contents of. This was particularly until the first release of New Star’s album in 1997 (see also Wasan 2008), about twenty years after Jaran’s ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ was first released.

Consumers, as de Certeau suggests, are not passive, but active users who engage in creative processes of interpretation and improvisation in the cultural fields of everyday

life (1984: xi-xxiv). And this is particularly true in the field of popular music culture. As Paul Willis remarks, in this cultural field, what bridges production and consumption is ‘symbolic creativity’ which “means that pop musicians begin as fans and create by copying sounds from records and cassettes: they become producers as consumers.” (1990: 60-61). Drawing on this idea, Dai popular music producers, similarly to other popular musicians, thus should be considered as creative consumers of popular music. It is the consuming process they engage in that in turn significantly forms and shapes the ways in which these minority musicians produce and develop their own Dai style of popular music.

Now we go on to explore this process of ‘consumption as production’ in the minority music industries in the borderlands of the upper Mekong. One aim of the exploration is to describe the transnational connections between the Dai, the Thai (in northern Thailand in particular), and the Shan, via popular music. This discussion is also intended to make sense of the distinctions between these three regional musical worlds: the Khon Muang, the Shan, and the Dai.

My discussion of Shan popular music will be focused on Sai Mow (1948-) and some of his works. Sai Mow is a famous Shan singer. His works have been very popular among Shan and Dai listeners. The discussion of northern Thai popular music will be explored through Jaran’s ‘Folksong Kham Muang’. Jaran Manophet (1952-2002) was a famous folk singer and his work has been widely known in Thailand for decades. Sai Mow and Jaran Manophet were famous among Dai monks/song writers and musicians. Let us begin with Jaran Manophet. One of his songs, ‘*Kid Thueng Ban*’ (Missing Home), was translated into Dai, entitled *Jai Thid Ban*, part 2 (Missing Home, part 2) and put on a Dai pop album, released in October 2000.

Jaran and his ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ in northern Thailand

Jaran Manophet, who created a new kind of northern Thai style of popular music, widely known as ‘Folksong Kham Muang’, was born on 1 January 1951, in Chiang Mai city, in ‘an ordinary musical family.’ While his father usually played northern Thai string music called *Xung* for him when he was young, his mother, who was Christian, brought Jaran to the city’s Sunday Church with her every weekend, where he began to learn the piano, basic musical notes, and absorbed Church songs. Living his young life as a Chiang Mai urbanite in the sixties, Jaran himself described his ‘musical road’ to a song-book magazine’s writers (Siray and Shan 1984), saying that besides the northern Thai string

instruments, which he played very well, he was also much inspired by a teenage American Christian brother band who performed Western folk songs in his school. Jaran loved the country folk sound more than the pop or rock music which was then quite popular among the young in the city. When he was a college student he very much preferred Western folk music such as Peter Paul and Mary, Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez (Siray and Shan 1984: 35-60). The last year of his college life in the city's technical college also significantly shaped his musical style and career, when he joined the university student movement in 1973 as 'a folk singer' in an ideological unit. Most importantly, a long backpack journey 'to find himself' as he described it (ibid: 66-76), a pilgrimage-like act he made after his graduation in 1974 for about a year in total from Chiang Mai to Bangkok, then to Kanjanaburi, ending up in Had Yai (in southern Thailand), brought him the great experience of being in a transit process of 'the liminal' to 'communitas' (Turner 1969: 80-118). This long journey eventually turned young Jaran into the pragmatic *Khon Muang*, who gradually became a cultural hero of the North. After his devotional journey Jaran worked in a government department (in Payao province), but only for two years. His 'October spirit' did not allow him to be more tolerant of Thai corruption and he thus decided to quit the system. And that was the beginning of the journey of Jaran's 'Folksong Kham Muang.'



Jaran Manophet and his band's (re-recorded) album cover, released in 1991.

After he left the government department, Jaran disappeared for a year. He went to Mae Hong Son and later back to Chiang Mai working in a Thai agricultural bank as an

accountant, simultaneously developing his 'Folksong Kham Muang.' In 1979 he finally retired himself from the bank and fully began working and develop his musical career.

Jaran Manophet was an October 1973 person. This is not often recognised. The social formation of Jaran's musical journey was very much a part of the movement of Thai popular music in the early 1970s, which was influenced by the Thai Left movement when the notion of 'art for life' was flourishing. Lots of Thai novels and literature about this notion were then produced and released by Thai Left writers, journalists and other intellectuals. Along with these literary works, there was also a new kind of Thai popular music called 'song for life', or *Pleng Pue Chiwit*, that was produced and released by Thai Left musicians, led by one prominent band, *Caravan*, whose members were mostly originally from the north-eastern Thai region (see also Lockard 1998: 192-198). Most of these Thai Left musicians were college students or former students. Jaran, a college student in Chiang Mai, and leading members of Caravan became close friends. Although both Jaran and Caravan were influenced by the Western folk music of the sixties and Thai Left ideology, each developed and created their works in their own ways.

While the members of Caravan later became legends of Thai 'songs for life', which critically reflected on and voiced 'political issues' such as farmer's problems and poverty in the countryside of Thailand in the seventies, Jaran's musical work was provocative in its distinctive style. He mixed the sound of acoustic guitar with northern Thai instruments to create and improvise his 'new tunes' of the *Muang* (northerners). His songs were mostly about Lan Na folklores, traditional northern Thai culture, ordinary people (the hill peoples like Karen, Akha, and Hmong included), and northern ways of life, but never critically or overtly emphasised any 'political issue'. Most importantly, Jaran sang his songs in modern-northern Thai dialect (mixing central Thai and northern Thai words but still pronounced in a Kham Muang way), while Caravan's songs, although its singers were north-easterners and they used traditional instruments in their work as well, were mostly sung in central Thai.

Thai song critics usually preferred to pick up Jaran's folk ballads, which often reflected and narrated the tragic stories of ordinary people, northern Thai and hill peoples, to review and discuss in the press. Although these songs were not overtly political, Jaran's folk ballads in fact effectively reflected what we might call in these days the cultural politics of popular music in everyday life. The nationwide popularity of his folk ballads usually derived from their moving sounds and the sentimental stories of their lyrics. Jaran's

‘Folksong Kham Muang’, as remarked by Tanet Chareonmuang, is a kind of popular music that represents urbanity, localism, social realism, humanism, romanticism, and the simplicity of northern ways of life (2003: 25-30). This great characteristic of the combination of global and local tunes in Jaran’s Folksong Kham Muang has resulted in its huge success, socially and commercially. Since its first release in 1977 in Chiang Mai city in the form of cassette tape (produced by home-studio recording and dubbing), Jaran’s ‘Folk Song Kham Muang’ albums (co-produced by his brothers and one female singer) were widely produced, distributed, consumed, and popularly recognised by the Thai middle class. According to Manit Aachawong, Jaran’s personal manager, the first nationwide release of the Folksong Kham Muang album took place a few years after it had first been released in Chiang Mai. The album distributed nationwide, was entitled ‘Jaran Manophet’s Folksong Kham Muang: The Immortal Album’ (Rich 2001: 67-69).⁴

Since then, Jaran and his folksong band (comprising of three of Jaran’s younger brothers and one female singer) continued to produce, develop, and distribute their ‘Kham Muang sounds’ for a decade. Jaran developed and distributed new styles of tunes in his later albums, nevertheless the albums with songs in the style of Folksong Kham Muang have been the most well known and memorable. Jaran’s musical work has become a symbol, a sonic icon that represents the social identity of the Khon Muang. This is understandable, since this new kind of northern Thai popular music, great works of art I would say, was first produced, distributed and consumed under the political circumstances of rapid changes of culture, language, and traditions and a continuing process of national incorporation of the northern region (the former Lan Na state) into the modern nation-state and the ‘modernisation’ of Thailand since the 1980s. Within these political contexts and changing circumstances the ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ has been, consciously or not, consumed as a kind of work of art that fulfils the nostalgic desires of Thai bourgeois consumers, Khon Muang urbanites in particular, for a rural past.

In the early 1990s, Jaran and his folksong band selected 16 songs from the ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ albums (9 of these from ‘the Immortal Album’ released in the previous decade), re-recorded them with a new sound, and entitled the newly refined album ‘the Great Hits of Folksong Kham Muang’. This Great Hits album has since gradually become integrated as a part of the everyday world of the Khon Muang in the modern days of northern Thailand. While Jaran, the musician who created it, has been recognised as a

⁴ A Bangkok-based merchant bought the copyright from him and re-produced the songs from Jaran’s ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ albums as new sound recordings in Bangkok.

sonic icon of the Khon Muang, his musical work has become an iconography of the Khon Muang social identity. The daily ‘uses’ of the ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ created by Jaran Manophet, in northern Thailand in particular, eventually turn that soundscape into a ‘new space’ which enables music consumers to make sense of something called the North, and Khon Muang identity.

On 3 September 2001, Jaran Manophet suddenly died in his home in Lamphun, about a month before the 25th anniversary concert of the ‘Folksong Kham Muang’ he had prepared with his brothers was going to take place. However ‘the Kham Muang sounds’ he created are immortal.

Sai Mow and his ‘Shan sound’ in the Shan states of Burma

Born on 18 February 1949 in the town of Mu Che in the northern Shan state of Burma, Sai Mow began his musical career publicly, in the late 1960s, when he was about twenty years old. He went across the borders to northern Thailand on motorcycle and sang on a local radio station in Chiang Rai. In the 1970s, Sai Mow, like many Shan men, joined the Shan State Army (SSA) and Muang Tai Army (MTA) as a pop singer in a culture unit. Socially and ideologically, his task was to produce and perform Shan music to empower Shan audiences, army members in particular. So, as I was told by one music supplier in the Tachilek town market, the production of Sai Mow’s album was financially supported by the Shan army, particularly Khun Sa – the opium warlord of the Golden Triangle then. For decades, this famous Shan popular singer produced some 50 Shan song albums, circulating through the Shan state of Burma (and some areas in Xishuangbanna and Thailand).

His first historic album, called ‘The Pang Long Agreement,’⁵ was released in the early 1970s. The title song from this album, written by Mor Jai Kham Lehk, was banned by the junta. And probably it was this that partly encouraged the young Sai Mow to join the SSA in 1972. According to *Salween Post* (No. 9 July-August 2003), earlier Sai Mow had performed this song (then not yet recorded) for years on stage wherever he toured with

⁵ The Pang Long Agreement signed on 12 February 1947 officially declared the Union of Burma’s independence (including the states of the Burmans, the Shan, and other frontier peoples) from the British government. However, about five months later, on 19 July 1947, Aung San, then the Burman leader and several other state leaders were assassinated. The new country came under the domination of the first Prime Minister, U Nu. Burma since then has been in chaos. Civil war between the Burman led government and the ‘minority insurgents’ broke out. It continues to the present day (see Lintner 1991).

his band. However soon after the song had spread throughout the Shan state area he was arrested and put in jail for about two years. In 1972, after he was released, Sai Mow decided to join the SSA, working in the cultural unit. And the Pang Long Agreement album was produced and first released at this time. After the historic album was released, the junta could not reach Sai Mow, who was now a famous Shan singer, to arrest him. This was partly because Sai Mow was then protected by the SSA. Nevertheless, the campaign to arrest him continued. It was not until 1976 that Sai Mow decided to surrender to the junta and stopped producing revolutionary songs.



Yong Zai Sai Mow

A few years after that, however, Sai Mow decided to fight for the Shan state's independence again. This time he joined the Muang Tai Army (MTA) and also worked in a culture unit. But, the albums produced by Sai Mow since then turned into something like Shan 'songs for life' and love songs, mostly inspired by Thai popular songs.

Sai Mow's most famous album released in this period was recorded and produced in a music studio in Chiang Mai of northern Thailand, and the song at the end of this famous album, 'Mahk Ho Jay Mor Lad Khwam', literally means 'voice from my heart'. This famous song was in fact translated from a popular Thai song, originally sung by a Thai super star, Thongchai MacInthai, or Bird. It was because of this that Sai Mow, who is recognised as a pioneer of the Shan popular song, is sometimes titled by Shan fans 'Bird of the Shan' (*Salween Post*, No. 9 July-August 2003). Until today this album remains the

most popular one among Shan and Dai audiences in the countryside of Xishuangbanna, as I witnessed by chance in Dai villages and on a local bus.

Sai Mow's famous album perhaps represented close ties between the Thai and Shan popular music industries (via musicians, businessmen, and merchants). Since the 1980s, the Thai popular music industry has rapidly developed. Many Shan musicians along the Thai-Burma border in eastern Burma in particular, have been influenced and inspired by Thai popular music, and this is reflected in Shan lyrics and melodies. Thinking through Sai Mow's complicated life story, nevertheless, one can see that the development of Shan popular music and the Shan political movement are inseparable. And, this is a significant point that differentiates Shan popular music from both the Folksong Kham Muang in northern Thailand and the Dai popular music in Xishuangbanna, as manifested through the New Star album released in 1997. While Shan popular music, as we have learned through Sai Mow's story, is revolutionary in nature, the Folksong Kham Muang is also significant in the cultural politics of the everyday world of Khon Muang identity in northern Thailand. Both these forms of minority music have clearly political meanings, although they are more overt in Shan music. The messages in Dai popular music, as we shall see below, are even more subtle, however.

The Akara Song and the Dai popular music in southwest China

Considering the Dai music producers as creative consumers (as discussed above), the Dai popular music development should be understood within a regional context of the minority popular music industries in the borderlands of the upper Mekong. In this changing context, the Dai in Xishuangbanna can easily access, understand, and make sense of the products of this Tai/Thai popular music industry, through their Tai language. The early Dai popular music was to a great extent a combination of Shan and northern Thai popular music as symbolically represented by the two leading actors who took part in the production process of the New Star album, released in 1997, Maha the songwriter and Ai Sam the lead singer.

Ai Sam, who was born in Muang Che in western Xishuangbanna bordering the eastern Shan state, was the only Dai singer then, and in his late thirties he went to Chiang Tung where he learned about and favoured Sai Mow's late albums.

Maha, the only songwriter in this album, now in his early fifties, was then a senior monk at the Central Temple in Jinghong. He had lived and studied in a northern Thai monastery

in Lamphun for about 8 years. Maha himself explained to me that the first Dai pop album was also very much inspired by a kind of Thai-style country music called *Pleng Luk Thung*.



New Star album cover, released in 1997

The development of Dai popular music since the 1990s took place under the socio-political contexts of Xishuangbanna tourism, national integration, and regional trade development. This process has therefore been manipulated and transformed by both the state and the market. The Dai minority producers, however, are still able to produce a Dai style of popular music which is distinctively different from Khon Muang, Shan, and Han Chinese popular music. I therefore propose that we should see the development of Dai popular music in Xishuangbanna as a new strategy spontaneously used and improvised by the Dai minority to produce a new form of social space, which simultaneously continues and transforms the uses of their local Tai language.

Since the first release of the Dai popular music album called ‘Dao Mai’ or ‘New Star’, with its opening song ‘Sao Dai Pai Fon Muang Haw’ (‘Dai girls go to dance in Han country’), which became the most famous song overnight at that time, the New Star phenomenon indeed made a great impact in the Dai minority region of southwest China

(see also Davis 2001, 2003, McCarthy 2000, 2004). This New Star phenomenon has particularly been discussed in Sara Davis's works and she considers this new Dai music movement to be 'the continuation' of the Dai minority tradition in these global days. As she states, '[f]rom 1997-1998 ethnically conscious Tai youth, including former monks and cultural activists, staged a number of concerts at various temples. Their goal was to promote the use of Tai language among youth who spoke mostly Chinese, and to foster the development of Tai culture in new "modern" directions' (Davis 2001: 37).

Indeed, the development of Dai popular music in the beginning was precisely and overtly to promote the use of Tai language, which had recently been abandoned and is actually less applicable in the public spheres of Xishuangbanna and modern China, as was exemplified through a famous Dai popular song, *Akara* (Tai script), first released in 1998.

Akara Akara ... it is Tai language
Akara Akara ... remembering and studying it
The Tai vowels
Come together to study it
Akara Akara ... it is our Tai script
Akara Akara ... posting this message to the Tai
The Tai alphabet
Remembering and studying it
Akara Akara ... it is our Tai script
Akara Akara ... continuing our Tai culture
The Tai alphabet
Remembering and studying it
Study it study it study it...
Practicing to read and write our Tai script
Come together to study it
Come back! to study our Tai script,
Start from the beginning, keep studying it
The Tai tones
Together, you and I come to study it⁶

Akara, written by Maha, 1997

⁶ My translation.

According to Maha, who wrote this song, the song *Akara* was originally written for the specific purpose of using it to teach young Dai (male and female) the Tai script. The dissemination of this pedagogic song was also aimed at provoking Dai audiences to be aware of the importance of preservation and maintenance of their culture and tradition (as directly manifested through this song's lyrics). After finishing writing it in 1998, Maha passed the song *Akara* to the second band associated with the Central Temple, *Poi Luang Saeng Sawang*, who used modern instruments to transform it. This song was first performed by Kham Chan (then a young Dai pop musician) and his band, *Poi Luang Saeng Sawang*, in a pub and restaurant they worked in, in Jinghong city.



The first Dai music video cover, 1998

Later E-On Noi, a female Dai poet (*Zhang Khap*) who turned herself into a kind of modern Kam Khap singer, asked Maha for permission to include *Akara* as the first song in her music VCD album, produced by the Xishuangbanna Television Station (BNTV). This first Dai music video was introduced as ‘MTV Special Edition of Dai Nationality Folksong’, entitled ‘My hometown is the most beautiful’, and released in 1998.

In the same year, the BNTV filmmakers decided to re-produce a new music video of this song, *Akara*, but chose Kham Chan to perform this song instead (and the recording was done in Kunming). This new music video of *Akara* was nominated in the third national competition of a music television program and won the golden song prize in 1999. Since then this music video version of *Akara* performed by Kham Chan has been broadcast on BNTV channels almost every day. In 2002, the song was again reproduced by Kham Chan and his group. This time they put it in their ‘experimental album,’ *Dai Pop, or*

Modern Kam Khap Vol. II. The song was a big hit, although the album was not successful in terms of its distribution.



Kham Chan and his band's first VCD album cover, released in 2000.



Kham Chan and his band performing a concert in the village of Damenglong in southern Xishuangbanna, 2004.

As I have already discussed elsewhere (see Wasan 2008, 2010), Kham Chan, now in his thirties, like some other boys in the old days of Sipsong Panna, was ordained as a novice when he was about ten. In the early 1990s, he went across borders with his senior monk to study in a northern Thai monastery, in Lamphun city. And he was there for six years. During those years he was very much inspired by Thai popular music and kept practicing it on a guitar. Nevertheless, similarly to other student monks in the northern Thai monastery, he also had to learn Thai and *Pali*, as well as improving his speaking ability of northern Thai and modern Thai. Kham Chan spent seven years of life as a novice and a migrant (in the last year) in northern Thailand before he returned to his country, and since the turn of the new century he has been a Dai pop star singer in Xishuangbanna.

What we have learned and I should like to highlight here is the significance and importance of the role of Tai language, both as cultural capital and a social instrument for the Dai musicians and their popular music production.



Dai Pop album cover, released in 2002

In a sense, the uses of Tai language in popular music and the development of this minority popular music as a whole are indeed political acts of contestation. Generally, as represented through the song *Akara*, there are different agencies who have come to get involved in this field of cultural production, covertly and overtly (Becker 1982), including state power (such as the state television stations, local government, and state censorship), minority music producers (senior monks/song writers, traditional Dai poets, Dai popular

musicians, local leaders, and leading scholars) and the market (tourism, tourist consumers, and ordinary Dai audiences included). Specifically, among the Dai themselves, there might have been internal debates in this complex field. The Dai had not only witnessed that they now had their own ‘modern songs,’ they also saw the new opportunities and potentialities to make and produce their own works, just like the Khon Muang in northern Thailand, the Shan in Shan States of Burma, and even the Han in China, who had developed this new culture before them for decades.



Kham Chan and his band performing a concert in Banna College, Jinghong City, 2003.

Conclusion

The media in the modern nation states, in China and southeast Asia in particular, is mostly a state owned enterprise. Printed media, radio, television, films, and mobile phone companies are all under state control and regulations. All of these state mechanisms, supposedly disseminated in a national language, are dominant in the public spheres. As a result, ‘State messages’ and national culture-dominated programs are broadcast daily to the people’s households easily and effectively. In this sense, the national integration of minority peoples and places, such as the Dai in Xishuangbanna in the southern border of Yunnan, into modern China seems to present no problems. However, many scholarly works suggest that things are not that simple (see Davis 2003, McCarthy 2000, 2004). Even schooling, and the compulsory education considered the prime mover of this state incorporation, is problematic (see Hansen 1999). This is particularly so in the borderlands of the upper Mekong.

Traditionally, the transmission of culture, knowledge, technology and tradition in the Tai world of the upper Mekong region mainly operated through Theravada traditions such as schooling in Buddhist monasteries or the performances of Tai oral poetry by Tai oral poets. In Xishuangbanna, the Dai oral poetry called *Kham Khap*, similar to the Tai oral poetry in Lan Na (northern Thailand today) locally called *Xor*, was typically performed as a male-female duet, called *Chang Khap* and *Chang Xor* (in Xishuangbanna and Northern Thailand respectively). The *Chang Khap* or Dai storytellers, similar to the *Chang Xor*, primarily transferred a simplified version of Buddhist legends, such as *Sitha Ok Bout* (literally Prince Sithadha becomes a monk), *Vessantara*, folktales, and love songs to a wider audience, and this usually took place during Buddhist festivals or cultural activities in the community called *Poi*, including Pagoda pilgrimages and New Year festivals, as well as weddings, house warming ceremonies, and courtship.

Since Dai popular music developed in the 1990s, this new music has spontaneously become part of the daily life of Xishuangbanna. The release of Dai music albums and performances of Dai concerts, which seasonally take place during the annual Buddhist festivals (from November to April or May) in Xishuangbanna, are therefore today really a supplementing cultural activity or, ultimately, a replacement of the traditional *Kham Khap* in these festival venues. The consumption of this new Dai music eventually transforms that public setting into a new Dai social space.

Anthropologists and social theorists of practice (Bourdieu 1989, Geertz 1983, de Certeau 1984) always remind us not to oversimplify the complexities of human lives and people's everyday worlds. Dai villagers, as active media users, may switch on and off of any particular media source, selecting TV channels or tuning into radio stations whenever they want. And it goes without saying that their cultural backgrounds (religions, beliefs, class, gender, etc.) and language competence are 'stocks of knowledge' which will 'guide' and generate the ways these minority media users 'interpret' and 'use' those 'messages' and communication technologies disseminated from outside in their everyday worlds. Considering consumption as production, all media users indeed need to develop what we may call 'conventions' to consume, 'read', and use those 'messages' and 'medias' in their everyday lives. In this sense, the stories of Dai popular music development, and those of the Shan and the Khon Muang discussed previously, may provide very good examples of minority-active agencies in cultural consumption. The formations of Tai popular music in the borderlands of the upper Mekong, in general, suggest that the uses of Tai language, media consumption, song writing, and musical

skills are a fundamental force and practice that is enabling these Tai minorities to create and transport their ‘local knowledge’ – cultural practices and traditions, which paradoxically strengthen their incorporation into the modern nation states, at the same time as forming new spaces of cultural autonomy. And the case of Dai popular music considered here suggests that in this frontier region of China the urge to tradition can importantly contribute towards a *translation* of their cultural identity in terms of the Chinese Nation.

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