Review Article: Waeng Phalangwan - A Lao-Isan perspective on Thai *Lukthung*

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Abstract

In *Lukthung Isan,* Waeng Phalangwan (2002) makes a case for recognition of the Isan involvement in *phleng lukthung*, usually translated as Thai country music. The significant involvement of Isan people within the *lukthung* music industry has provided Isan people with an effective way of influencing Central Thai culture, when most other avenues were closed. The article examines Waeng's Lao-Isan identity and his use of standard tropes to disguise a defiant radicalism. The centrepiece of Waeng's argument is a revision of the history of 'the king of Thai country music,' Suraphon Sombatjaroen. Phalangwan redefines Suraphon's current status as the symbol of Central Thai cultural supremacy by placing him within the context of two contemporaries, the Isan songwriters Chaloemchai Siruechai and Benjamin. Waeng's history of Isan singers and groups of Isan songwriters in Bangkok during the late 1960s and 1970s can be cross-referenced with establishment histories to make possible a reinterpretation of the development of *lukthung*. The closing chapter of *Lukthung Isan*, detailing the existence of 'communist' *lukthung*, suggests that a re-evaluation of the counter-hegemonic potential of *lukthung* may be warranted.

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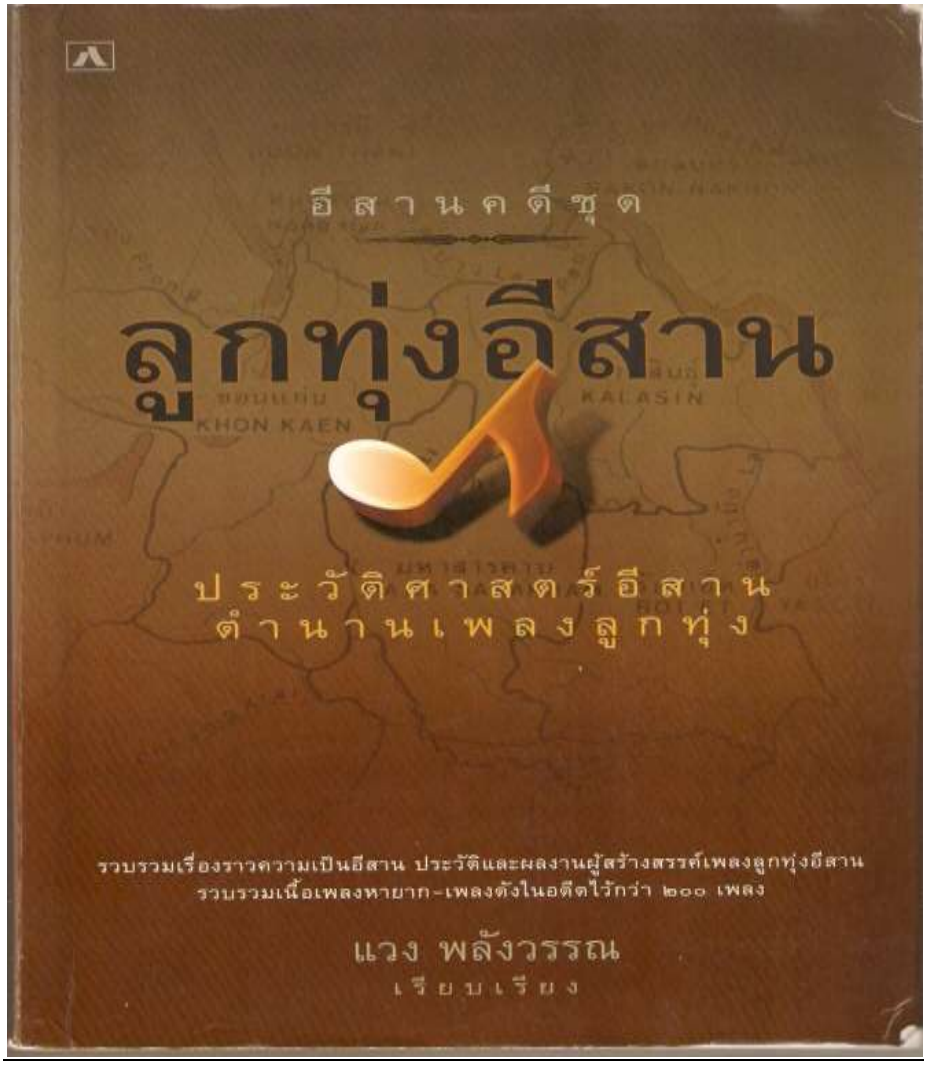
Isan natives are like people of African descent. We're both discriminated against over race and colour, but what we have in common is a love of music and the ability to work hard.

TV presenter and comedian Thongchai Prasongsanti (Kreangsak 2005, 3)



Introduction

The history of *phleng lukthung* [2] (literally 'children of the field' but usually translated as 'Thai country music') is, in some ways at least, analogous to that of early rock'n'roll in America. Both genres rose from inauspicious origins to symbolise a nation and dominate its music industry. It is generally accepted that rock'n'roll developed out of blues and rhythm and blues before being turned into a lucrative business, which then excluded the original practitioners. In *Lukthung Isan: Prawatsat Isan tamnan phleng lukthung* (hereafter *Lukthung Isan*),[3] Waeng Phalangwan (2002) makes a case for recognition of the Isan involvement in *phleng lukthung*. Waeng argues that the early participation of Isan people contributed significantly to the development of *lukthung*, a contribution that is as yet not widely acknowledged. Indeed this connection between *lukthung* and Isan culture has been downplayed or overlooked by the establishment view of Thai history, disseminated through the Thai education system and popular media.

Descended mostly from Lao and Mon-Khmer groups, the twenty-two million inhabitants of Isan comprise one-third of Thailand's population, as well as occupying one-third of its land mass. Isan, or the Northeastern region of Thailand, has only officially been under Bangkok rule since 1827 when Rama III destroyed Vientiane and forced much of the population to migrate. At that time, ethnic Lao were transferred into areas such as the central Chao Phraya river basin area. In the late 19th century, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) consolidated Thai control over the Isan region through a program of 'Thaification.' This ongoing policy de-emphasized the Lao origins of the population and included the implementation of a national school system that mandated the exclusive use of the Central Thai language and the Thai writing system (Myers 2005, 31). Throughout the twentieth century, the combination of poverty and the apparent indifference of the central authorities contributed to numerous incidents of rebellion, culminating in the communist insurgency during the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps

[2] I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription except for established names such as Suraphon Sombatjaroen or occasionally for author's preferred spellings.
[3] '*Isan Thai country song: The history of Isan Thai country song'*. All quotations from Waeng (2002) are the author's translations.

ironically, the stationing of American soldiers in Isan during the Vietnam War and a corresponding influx of government aid led to the improvement of infrastructure.

Throughout this review article, 'establishment' is used to refer to the combined hegemonic forces exerted by the Thai Royal family, military, Buddhist leadership and government (in possible descending order of power or influence). 'Establishment history' refers to the Royalist Nationalist history taught throughout the Thai education system.[4] If the writings of historians supporting Central Thai cultural hegemony are broadly characterised as establishment histories, then those critical of, or expanding on, the establishment view may be described as alternative. This article is an analysis of Waeng's alternative view and its historical, social and political ramifications. This author's particular point of interest in *lukthung* is the role that it has played in facilitating the rebirth or regeneration of Isan identity and culture. The significant involvement of Isan people within the *lukthung* music industry has provided Isan people with an effective way of influencing Central Thai culture, when most other avenues have been closed. Thus I will comment on relevant sections of *Lukthung Isan* in order to demonstrate the Isan involvement in *lukthung*.

In my research, I have examined how the convergence of certain social and historical forces resulted in *lukthung* having low status in Thai society and academic writing up until the late 1990s.[5] The first such force was the dialectic between Thai classical music (linked to the monarchy) and popular song genres (linked to Luang Phibunsongkram). The growth of an affluent Thai middle class during the 1960s and the associated increase in popularity of the monarchy tended to privilege classical Thai music and downgrade the status of popular song. A second force is the historical tendency for Thai scholars to classify *lukthung* as rural folk music. Third, in terms of external forces, western ethnomusicologists have generally preferred to study Thai traditional and classical music rather than popular genres. The fourth force is that the attention of western scholars influenced by Birmingham School theory has been discouraged by *lukthung*'s apparent lack of counter-hegemonic potential. Relevant to

[4] See Jory (2003) for further discussion.
[5] For a detailed discussion of why *lukthung* has traditionally had low status see Mitchell (2009). This article also contains a case study of the Isan songwriter Soraphet Phinyo.

both of these forces is the information filter provided by the Thai language. Thai language texts on high culture are more likely to be translated than those on low culture. Fifth, 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.

However, the force with most significance for the discussion within this article is the high level of Isan involvement in the *lukthung* industry. Over the past 150 years, Isan culture has been both suppressed and appropriated in the service of nation building. The desire to create a cohesive nation state resulted in a policy of ethnic assimilation, which was accompanied by widespread discrimination against Lao-Isan people. The Lao-Isan preference for *lukthung* and *molam*[6] led to both genres being accorded low status. As early as the late 1970s, *lukthung* was being designated as a uniquely Thai (rather than Lao) art form; however, after the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, it became a source of national pride.[7] Consequently, the Isan involvement in the development of *lukthung* has increasingly been appropriated by the Central Thai establishment. The publication of Waeng's *Lukthung Isan* indicates that *lukthung* may be in the process of becoming a site of dialogue/debate for establishment and alternative views of Thai history.

Waeng's book is particularly significant because it is the first widely published text by an Isan author to question the Thai establishment view of the history of Thai popular music. It is part of an intellectual oppositional discourse present throughout modern Thai history which has undergone periods of reinvigoration and stagnation. Patrick Jory (2003, 2) identifies three eras of "historical scholarship which questioned existing historical knowledge,", the most recent ending during the affluent 1980s. This recent generation of historians used "Marxist socio-analysis as a lever to pry the chronicles and archives away from royalist and nationalist myth-making concerns" (Reynolds and Lysa 1983, 96). Several articles were published on *lukthung* between 1978 and 1986: Anek (1978,), Payong (1984), Naowarat (1984), Suchit (1984) and

[6] Lao-Isan folk music. Used in this paper without capitalization, the term refers to the genre; used with capitalization, the term is the title for a practitioner.
[7] The reasons for the rise in status of *lukthung* after 1997 are analysed in detail in Amporn (2006, 32-38) and will not be dealt with in this article.

Kobkul (1985); all more or less classifyied *lukthung* as updated Thai folk music. Arguably the most well known Thai historian, Nithi Iaosriwong, responded to these articles in 1985, arguing that *lukthung* was like many other forms of popular culture in that it borrowed from numerous sources including western 1940s dance music, *phleng Thai sakon*, Thai folk and classical music (Nithi 1985). During the 1990s, Marxist historians such as Chatthip Nartsupha and Srisak Vallibhotama turned to writing ethnohistories of Tai peoples in the region. According to Reynolds, their intention was to "show that the Central Thai represent merely one of a number of evolutionary paths and have no special claim to speak on behalf of all Tai[8] peoples" (2002, 315). Waeng begins his popular music history with a racially connoted theory of origins that situates his work within this stream of ethnohistory. Thus *Lukthung Isan* may be seen as part of a new era of questioning, especially by and on behalf of, ethnic minorities, a new era influenced by the writing of professional historians such as Chatthip, Nithi and Thongchai Winichakul.

The subject matter and structure of Waeng's book also confirms the rise of a new Isan sensibility within Thailand, represented by the opening quote from Thongchai Prasongsanti. *Lukthung Isan* reflects a mixture of pride in Isan achievement in the face of adversity and anger at Central Thai chauvinism. Waeng projects a unified rather than fluid identity, identifying himself as simultaneously Thai and Lao-Isan (therefore Tai), not switching between the two. Nevertheless, he appeals to readers with either establishment or oppositional leanings by employing standard tropes – a theory of origin of the Thai race, an appeal on the grounds of religious authority and a denouncement of western influence in Thailand – to disguise his defiant radicalism. *Lukthung Isan* indicates that the anti-establishment ideas of the previous generation of Thai professional historians have made the transition into the genre of popular history.

The centrepiece of Waeng's argument is a revision of the history of 'the King of Thai country music,' Suraphon Sombatjaroen. Waeng redefines Suraphon's current status as the symbol of Central Thai cultural supremacy by placing him within the

[8] Tai refers to such groups as the Thai, Lao, Shan, Black and White Tai. Ethnic Tai groups live in Southern China, Eastern India and parts of Vietnam in addition to the main groups in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. All Tai groups speak tonal languages and celebrate common festivals such as Songkran (New Year) (see Reynolds 2002, 314).

context of two contemporaries, the Isan songwriters Chaloemchai Sriruecha and Benjamin. Waeng's history of the circles of Isan songwriters in Bangkok during the late 1960s and 1970s can be cross-referenced with establishment histories to make possible a reinterpretation of the development of *lukthung*. The closing chapter, detailing the existence of communist *lukthung*, suggests that a re-evaluation of the counter-hegemonic potential of *lukthung* may be warranted. Each of these elements requires critical assessment and will be explained further.

Waeng's Isan identity

Before continuing further, it is necessary to comment on Waeng's use of the word Isan. Over the past decade there has been a revival in Isan identity led by the cultural markers of food and popular music (Jory 1999, 340) (Miller 2005, 97). This has been noted in establishment circles with the well-known *lukthung* commentator Jenphop Jopkrabuanwan stating that "*molam* is the type of folk music which has most influenced *lukthung* because Isan people have the strongest culture" (Chaba 2004, 6).[9] Moreover, the term 'Lao,' which historically had been used pejoratively, has actually been reclaimed by some Isan people as a symbol of pride (Jory 1999, 341). An informative discussion of the ways in which Isan people perceive themselves and are perceived by others can be found in McCargo and Hongladarom's 'Contesting Isan-ness: Discourses of politics and identity in Northeast Thailand' (2004). Waeng's conception of what it means to be Isan is certainly more radical than any of the views expressed by McCargo and Hongladarom's respondents. Waeng spends the first three chapters showing how 'Lao' came to be a pejorative term in Thailand, observing 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" (53).

For Waeng, the word 'Lao' has had "significant historical implications and effects on Thai attitudes" (23). He sets out to show why it has simultaneously become a symbol

[9] All quotations from Chaba (2004) are the author's translations.

of pride and a marker of neglect. In the following *lam phloen*[10], which was turned into a hit *lukthung* song for Sommainoi Duangjaroen in 1990, the inferiority complex developed by Isan people is apparent:

> *I carry love from my village and bring it to a white-cheeked Bangkok girl.*
> *Can you accept my love?*
> *Do not be afraid of an Isan man.*
> *He is 99% Thai and only 1% Lao.*
> From 'Baek rak chao krung' (Carry my love to the city dweller) (55)

Waeng regards this light-hearted song as an insult and contrasts it with a Lao *lukthung* song from 1995 recorded by celebrated Lao singer Phuwiang Watthalisak. 'Pu Jan' (Grandfather Jan) expresses the sorrow felt by Isan and Lao people at being separated from one another:

> *Khorat [Nakhon Ratchasima in Isan] and Wiangjan [Vientiane in Laos] people are the grandchildren of grandfather Jan*
> *Ancient people know the story of Lao and Thai relationship before there were records*
> *In the past they were united.* (56)

By citing such songs and Lao historians such as Douangsay Louangphasi, Waeng adopts an almost militant stance. A popular bumper sticker that read, "I'm glad that the car driver behind me is also Lao," was interpreted in a positive light by Jory (1999, 340-341), but is viewed as derogatory by Waeng:

> *That these stickers can be seen all over the country shows one of two things about the purchasers. Either they do not understand the humour that was originally behind the stickers, when they were adopted by taxi drivers who are mostly Isan, or they take pleasure in insulting other people.* (53)

[10] *Lam phloen* was originally a genre of Lao theatre music. Since the 1960s it has became successful as a popular song genre and has been influenced by *lukthung* singing styles.

In Waeng's opinion "Thailand is a colonial power, and Lao people have become colonized" (46). McCargo and Hongladarom show that identity for the majority of Isan people is fluid, yet throughout *Lukthung Isan*, Waeng projects a surprisingly consistent Lao-Isan ethnic identity. That his conception of 'Isan' appears to only include those of Lao descent is demonstrated by his careful noting of ethnicity. For example, he writes that even though Prasit Nakhonphanom was Yo[11] (247) and Songkro Samattaphaphong was Phuthai (256) (both of which are Isan minorities), they were capable of writing Isan songs. Furthermore, there is no room in his history for *kantruem*, the music of Isan people of Khmer descent. Significantly, however, Waeng argues that Lao-Isan identity does not stop at the borders of the North Eastern region. In claiming Central Thais of Lao descent as Isan people, Waeng inverts the Central Thai appropriation of Isan culture. *Lukthung Isan* is thus an ethnic history laying claim to a reputedly Central Thai art form, a radical concept in Thai historiography.

Waeng's motivation for writing

The preface of *Lukthung Isan* reveals that Waeng Phalangwan is the pseudonym for an unidentified journalist and documentary maker. He was born in Amphoe Kumphawapi, Udon Thani, but now lives and works in Bangkok. During the Vietnam War, the American army had a base at Udon Thani; consequently, Waeng grew up listening to western rock and country music. Like many Isan migrants, he experienced alienation and prejudice once he left his hometown:

> *When I came to Bangkok for the first time, I lived among people who looked down on Isan people. That made me very homesick. This was the first step that made me angry with people who looked down on Isan culture. I was homesick so I got into listening to* lukthung *and* molam*. Then I realised that this music was my heritage, not the western songs I grew up hearing in Udon Thani* (iv).

[11] Yo and Phuthai are ethnic minorities in Isan.

That Waeng has kept his identity secret is testament to the sensitive nature of some material and demonstrates the alternative nature of his discourse. In his preface, he 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" (ii). Following the last generation of Thai professional historians,[12] Waeng's approach is heavily influenced by Marxist theory. One of his themes is the failure of copyright to protect Isan performers, whereas Central Thai composers with higher status generally have been better protected (251). He is critical of capitalism and applies that criticism to western popular music: "The word '*sakon*'[13] means the kingdom of the winner. The way that they write music is because of the power of the winners, not really because of the power of the arts" (iv). He sarcastically thanks God for the IMF because "when you forget your farmers and ordinary people, God's judgment will come upon you" (iv). Many Thai commentators blamed the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis on western investors and the capitalist system (Pasuk and Baker 2000, 193-194), and it was widely interpreted as a warning to return to traditional Thai values.

In terms of unveiling Waeng's motivation the following sentence is revealing:

> *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 Nakha tribe in Myanmar, or the music of the Cham tribe in Cambodia and Vietnam, or the songs of Phi Thong Lueang in the Northern province of Thailand. Why is this? Because these groups do not have any political power* (iv).

This statement raises a number of issues. Waeng appears to be unaware of the interest taken by world music (meaning the genre) listeners in Aboriginal and African music. This is hardly surprising, given that a case has been made by Tony Mitchell (2001, 19) and others that world music listeners, likewise, have often not heard of Southeast Asia,

[12] See Jory (2003, 7) and Thongchai (1995, 5).
[13] *Sakon* means international but can mean western. *Phleng Thai sakon* refers to the new international song genre introduced by Luang Phibunsongkram during the 1930s and 1940s. Later this genre developed into *lukthung* and *lukkrung* (western pop with Thai lyrics).

let alone *lukthung*. However, this ignorance does mark Waeng as an amateur music scholar. A more significant issue is that he 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, not a detached academic observer. The preface makes it clear that Waeng intends to redress what he regards as past injustices by proposing an alternative history of Thai popular music.

Waeng's use of establishment tropes

Waeng sets out to appeal to readers with either establishment or oppositional leanings by employing standard tropes – a theory of origin of the Thai race, an appeal on the grounds of religious authority and a denouncement of western influence in Thailand – to disguise his more radical views. To describe the *cha on chon* rhythm of 'Pu Jan,' Waeng employs imagery that might also be applied to his book: "It is as if the strong material (like a hammer blaming people who forget their origins) is covered with a layer of honey" (56). Waeng's theory of the origins of Tai people allows him to claim moral authority and also to undermine Central Thai hegemony. Vatthana Pholsena shows how histories are used, especially in postcolonial situations, in the service of nation building to consolidate "a collective memory and identity" (2004, 236). Thai and Lao history textbooks compete to claim authority by defining a national identity that is continuous from the distant past (2004, 254). Similarly, Barry Sautman identifies the use of "mythical perceptions of the people as one race" by recent Chinese and Japanese governments (1997, 1). Since Waeng believes that *lukthung* has been appropriated by the Central Thai, he begins his historical revision by combating "the nationalist historiography that promotes a linear view of Central Thai development" (Reynolds 2002, 315).

The first chapter of *Lukthung Isan* is an attempt to find the origin of Thai people in the Tai race (Thai, Lao, Shan, Black and White Tai people (see Reynolds 2002, 314)).This is a practice ridiculed by academic historians such as Srisak Vallibhotama, who argues that "the Tai race... is a mistaken concept" (see Thongchai 1995, 107), but Waeng seeks to establish the brotherhood of all Tai people so that he can appeal for a

change of heart on the part of Central Thais. He purports to give a balanced view by referring to theories of origins from Thailand, Laos and the Thai Yai or Shan people living in Myanmar. He cites the work of Douangsay Louangphasi as an example of Lao historiography. According to Pholsena, Louangphasi is a "keen amateur historian" who "never quotes his sources or mentions any references" (2004, 239). In other words, his histories are derived more from nationalistic fervour than scientific research. In *Kumue phong sawadan Lao* (Lao historical handbook) Louangphasi asserts that Lao people settled in the Altai mountains in Mongolia over 8000 years ago and were gradually forced to migrate south (Waeng 2002, 2). What Waeng describes as a Chinese perspective (although it appears to be written by a Thai) is presented through *Lak Thai* ('origins of the Thai') by Wichit Matra, which tells a similar story, but changes the name Lao to Thai. *Nuea khwaen daen Sayam* by Prani Siriton is cited to present the Shan or Thai Yai[14] myth of origins. Waeng chooses his sources carefully to build an alternative perspective that, he hopes, will be acceptable to most readers:

> *It is interesting to observe that all three accounts explain the history of origin by classification but do not mention the other two nations that remain to this day. Thus Lao history explains only Lao origin and only mentions Thai origin a little. The Chinese account incorrectly changes Lao to Thai - therein it means the same thing. Furthermore the Thai Yai account refers only to Tai and does not specify that Tai, Thai and Lao are the same people. Bringing all three accounts together, however, allows us to know that Tai, Thai and Lao are definitely the same people* (2002, 7).

As yet archaeological support for the theory that Tai people existed together as a single nation in Mongolia thousands of years ago is not forthcoming. Indeed, as Pholsena writes: "As far as the origins of the Tai-speaking peoples are concerned, it is most unlikely that they were ever within a thousand miles of the Altai Mountains" (2004, 240). She cites recent studies in linguistics, history and comparative anthropology that

[14] Waeng sometimes uses Tai to refer specifically to Thai Yai or the Shan people of Myanmar.

suggest that the original Tai homeland occupied an area extending from Western Guangxi and Southeastern Yunnan into Northern Vietnam and Northeastern Laos. Similarly Martin Stuart-Fox concludes that it is "unlikely ... that whoever the Chinese referred to as the Ai-Lao were directly ancestral to the Tai-Lao who founded the Kingdom of Lan Xang well over a millennium later" (1998, 23). Waeng's theory of origins is almost certainly not accurate, but it serves his purpose by asserting that Thai, Lao and Shan people are related and therefore should show loyalty to one another. Waeng's awareness of the contested nature of his subject area is impressive. He understands that the question of ownership of *lukthung* is not limited to disputes over the ownership of individual songs; the cultural heritage of his people (the Isan people) and the cultural integrity of all Tai people are at stake.

After establishing the brotherhood of Tai people, Waeng appeals to his readers on the basis of common religious belief. As is the case in the majority of Thai social commentary, there is significant reference to Buddhist teaching ("Because we are Buddhist we should not accept anyone looking down on any other nation" (iii)), but in *Lukthung Isan*, religion is also linked to ethnicity:

> *I have been able to stay with Thai Yai, Thai and Lao people and have been able to practise the* hit *and* khlong*. I am Isan. I believe that Thai, Tai and Lao people all emigrated from the south of China.* (31)

Chapter 2 details the 12 *hit* (monthly festivals) and 14 *khlong* (rules) that were practiced by Thai, Lao and other Tai people in the past. The decline in popularity of some of these festivals and rules in modern Thailand is viewed by Waeng as a decline in religious devotion. Chapter 6 details the increasingly important role of the Isan region in providing the Buddhist leadership for Thailand. This phenomenon, providing Isan people with one access point into Thai hegemonic structures, may partially account for the recent resurgence in expressions of ethnic and regional culture (see Jory 1999). Throughout *Lukthung Isan* the morality of Lao people is compared favourably to that of the Central Thai (who, according to Waeng, have been corrupted by western influence), and such comparisons are often framed in religious terms:

> *Songkran used to be considered the New Year of Thailand, but now the Christian New Year is more celebrated. Laos still holds to the Brahman Buddhist beliefs from India. Thais again are separated from Lao and Tai people* (43).

Thus for Waeng his identity and kinship with fellow Tai is measured by devotion to Buddhist law.

The third trope employed by Phalangwan to broaden his appeal and strengthen his authority is criticism of western influence on Thai culture. *Lukthung Isan* begins with the kind of generalized attack on *farang* (Caucasians) that is typical of Thai popular intellectualism.[15] Although Waeng is surprisingly forthright in his criticism of Thai culture and government, it is the encroaching Western culture that initially receives his strongest condemnation. Referring to the 'inferior, shallow and absentminded Thai Government offices that are supposed to protect Thai culture' he declares:

> *They are not capable of seeing the insidious culture destroying process that has permeated Thai society whereby the unique elements of culture are being destroyed. This is because it has been ingeniously implanted to encourage ordinary people to think, 'Despise Lao - respect* farang' (28).

In this first chapter it appears that westerners are blamed for most of the problems in Thai society, apparently even plotting to convince Thais to accept a quota of at least 50 percent of *luk khrueng* (Eurasian) in their television presenters and actors (28). 'Blaming the *farang*' is a common trope in Thai literature, usually deployed when calling for a return to traditional Thai values. In an article tracing the historical and cultural constructions of *farang* by Thais, Pattana Kitiarsa identifies a "typical Thai conservative and nationalist standpoint" in which farang are portrayed as "one of the evil roots of the country's economic, political and cultural woes." He observes a trend within Thai

[15] See Pattana (2005, 4).

intellectualism of nationalistically accusing immoral white foreigners of preying on the innocent Thai (2005, 4). This trend extends from Prince Damrong in the nineteenth century to Luang Wichit and Pridi Phanomyong in the early years of constitutional monarchy and more recently Sulak Sivaraksa and Theerayuth Boonmi.[16]

Yet despite his trenchant criticism of the Thai establishment Waeng is careful to emphasise throughout the text that he is adding to Thai history, not destroying it. He wants young Thais to know the details of their culture:

> *There are several mountains in Thailand and neighbouring countries such as Phu Phan, Sankalakhiri, Phanom Dong Rak, Banthat, etc. Asking Thai students for the names of these mountains will only cause a shake of the head because they do not know them* (27).

This is a fairly standard complaint – as shown by the following comment by Jenphop Jopkrabuanwan:

> *We spend most of the time trying to remember the stories of the Nile River and the Red Sea... If we take a turn to ask about the Ping, Wang, Yom, or Nan Rivers in Thailand the students don't understand or don't know much about them* (Chaba 2004, 4).

Such criticisms of the education system are often made as part of nationalistic denunciations of western influence on Thai culture. Actually the lack of focus on Thai history and geography in the education system is a legacy of 150 years of modernisation and is also in the interests of the powerful Central Thai hegemonic forces that continue to mould public opinion. Jory identifies two dominant forms of history being consumed by the Thai public: the Royalist Nationalist history taught in the schools, which has rewritten key events such as the 1932 coup and avoids others such as the massacre of October 1976; and products of the commercial media in the form of

[16] See Pattana (2005, 38-39) for further discussion of this trope.

movies, TV dramas, and even advertisements (2003: 4). In the opening chapter, Waeng criticises both forms of history: "The Thai education programme has lead Thais to disengage from their neighbours," and "an effective force for western culture and propaganda is television" (4). Since the Thai commercial media is heavily influenced and controlled by establishment institutions, it is not difficult to understand why western influence is often used as a scapegoat.

Case study: An alternative view of Suraphon Sombatjaroen and the development of *phleng to*

The centrepiece of Waeng's argument that the Isan involvement in *lukthung* has been downplayed and underestimated is an explanation of the relationship between Suraphon and two Isan contemporaries, Chaloemchai Sriruecha and Benjamin. Suraphon Sombatjaroen (1925 – 1968), known as 'the King of Thai country music,' has become a legendary figure in Thailand, dominating all discussion of early *lukthung*. He was born in Suphanburi in Central Thailand (also the birthplace of Phumphuang Duangjan and Sayan Sanya). Suraphon's father worked for the government, and he had a better education than most singers. After studying at technical college, he became a teacher before joining first the navy, then the army, and finally the air force. He established his own *ramwong*[17] band while in the air force and gradually changed to the emerging genre of *lukthung*. By the time he was murdered in 1968, reportedly at the behest of a jealous husband, he was the biggest music star in Thailand.[18] After his death some of his fans committed suicide because they could not imagine life without him (Anek,1978, 62).

By questioning elements of the Suraphon myth, Waeng risks angering the local politicians and citizens of Suphanburi, as well as establishment forces. When a history Masters student Saipin Kaewngamprasert proposed that there was no evidence for the existence of 'Thao Suranari,' the heroine who helped suppress a Lao 'revolt' in Nakhon

[17] Popular Thai folk dance in which men and women dance in a circle; developed during Phibunsongkram's period of influence.
[18] Information found in Siriphon (2004, 242-247)

Ratchasima (Khorat) during the reign of Rama III, the citizens of Khorat protested. Subsequently Saipin went into hiding and was later transferred to another university (Jory 2003, 6).[19] Thailand's popular media (television, film and newspapers) regularly present the romantic image of Suraphon as an individual genius killed in his prime. For example, when then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced in September 2002 that he would like to stay in power for 16 years, he was alluding to Suraphon's 'Sip hok pi haeng khwam lang' (sixteen years of our past). Thanong Khanthong responded with a discussion of Suraphon's life (which subtly made the point that 16 years of Thaksin could be more bitter than sweet for Thailand's people). Khanthong's paragraph detailing Suraphon's life demonstrates the key elements of the Suraphon myth:

> *Suraphol died on August 16, 1968 from gunshot wounds, leaving a rich repertoire of luk thung songs that embodied the spirit of the 1960s when Elvis Presley and the Beatles were rocking the world with their electrifying performances. But Suraphol, who came from a humble background in Suphan Buri, had his own special way of crooning the songs he composed by himself. His music was rich in style and his lyrics reflected the changes Thai society was undergoing at that time.* (2002, 1)

By comparing Suraphon to Elvis, Khanthong displays the ambiguous positioning of *farang* by Thai writers (Pattana 2005, 43). The desire to have a home grown 'Elvis' coupled with the prestige conveyed by indirect comparison with the Beatles is balanced by the implied superiority of authentic Thai music ("His music was rich in style"). Suraphon is credited with a unique performance style, and it is stressed that he wrote all of his own songs.

Possibly the most sensational claim in *Lukthung Isan* is that Suraphon Sombatjaroen did not compose all of the songs that bear his name. Waeng makes the convincing point, confirmed by the songwriter Surin Paksiri (162), that Suraphon had no Lao ancestry, could not speak Isan and when he sang Isan words (in an attempt to appeal to the large Isan *lukthung* audience) they were often mispronounced. For

[19] Jory gives two recent examples of Thai historians forced into hiding by regional forces rather than central government forces (2003, 6).

example, in his first song to be published, 'Namta Lao Wiang' ('tears of a Lao girl'), the line 'Khoi khoei wao sao chao thoeng huean (mid tone)' ('I used to speak with you girl in the house') contains the Isan words khoi = I, wao = speak and huean = house, but Suraphon mispronounces the latter as 'huean' (falling tone) which means a kind of skin disease or leprosy (216). The Thai education system during the 1940s and 1950s so discouraged the speaking of Isan that the idea that Suraphon could have written Isan lyrics without considerable assistance is not credible (216). One of the few Isan members of Suraphon's band was his close friend Chaloemchai Sriruecha, an established Isan *ramwong* singer and songwriter originally from Roi Et. Chaloemchai was an alcoholic who was happy, according to this book, to relinquish ownership of his songs if he was able to keep drinking (220). Waeng concludes that some of the early songs upon which Suraphon built his popularity with Isan fans, such as 'Namta Lao Wiang' and 'Khong plom' ('fake things'), were most probably written or co-written by Chaloemchai (210). Support for this claim can be found in Siriphon, who records Suraphon's comments regarding his early work, although Chaloemchai's name is not mentioned:

> *'Chu chok song kuman'*[20] *was my first song to be performed. My friend helped me with the melody and presented it to To Ngek Chuang company. I received 400 baht* (2004, 244).[21]

Waeng also questions the originality of Suraphon's legendary stage movement, suggesting that he imitated Chaloemchai's habit of shaking the microphone stand (214).

Tamthong Chokchana, born in Ubon Ratchathani and otherwise known as 'Benjamin', rivalled Suraphon for popularity until he enlisted in the Thai army in order to serve in Korea. During his absence, Suraphon became the unrivalled superstar of *lukthung*. It was competition between Benjamin, Suraphon and Phongsri Woranut (Suraphon's most famous protégé) that led to the popularising of the concept of dueling songs (*phleng to* or *phleng ke*). Siriphon makes reference to this dispute in passing -

[20] *Chu Chok* was the gluttonous man who borrowed Sidhaatha's children but treated them badly.
[21] All quotations from Siriphon (2004) are the author's translations.

"Before he [Suraphon] sang dueling songs with Phongsri Woranut he sang them with Benjamin because Benjamin thought that Suraphon had copied his style of singing" - but asserts, without providing the song lyrics, that "Suraphon was the first person to compose dueling songs using the same lyrics" (2004, 246). Siriphon also suggests that it was the use of *phleng to* with its interplay between male and female singers that possibly made the Suraphon Sombatjaroen Band so famous (2004, 247). This shows why the detail provided by Waeng is so important for a full understanding of the development of *lukthung*. Initially Suraphon wrote the song 'Kaeo luem dong' (parrot forgets the jungle) to complain about Phongsri Woranut leaving his band, and Phongsri responded through the song 'Salika luem phrai' (blackbird forgets the forest) that Surapon was talking nonsense. Then Benjamin wrote the song 'Ya thiang kan loei' (don't argue) denouncing Suraphon for attacking Phongsri and for copying his singing style. Suraphon responded with 'Sip niu kho khama' (ten fingers ask for forgiveness) telling Benjamin not to interfere in the affairs of young people and denying that he had copied Benjamin's voice (200-201).

Close analysis of the lyrics reveals how the singers inspired and played off each other. Benjamin begins by continuing the bird imagery employed by Suraphon and Phongsri:

> *Father Nok Salika blamed her*
> *Forgot the partner and when they used to fly together*
> *You forget the sky and fly down in the dirt*
> *You forget everything, even the person who trained you.*
> (lines 7-10 'Ya thiang kan loei'[22])

Benjamin makes it obvious who he is referring to by alluding to the names of the songs in line 15: "luem dong luem prai..." (forget jungle, forget forest): His criticism becomes progressively harsher, "In your stomach how many coils are there? / Get your intestines out to give to the crows" (lines 17-18) before he insults Suraphon by warning him not

[22] All lyrics on pages13 and 14 are taken from Waeng (2002, 200-201).

to pick on a woman ("We are male, do not fight with a woman / This brings no credit upon you" (lines 21-22)) and by accusing him of copying his style of singing: "Even my voice people want to copy / Get a reference to work with my voice" (lines 27-28). He then asks Suraphon to consider the audience who buy their records:

> *Have pity on them when they buy them...*
> *They spend lots of money on the singers who are complaining*
> *It's funny isn't it?* (laughing) (lines 34-36)

The end of the song appeals to national pride, "The story of music is the honour of Thailand / If there is too much (arguing) it will not be good" (lines 43-44), subtly making the point that Suraphon is being un-Thai.

Suraphon's response begins with the declaration that he does not want to sing *lae* (the style chosen by Benjamin) but has been forced to do so. That he does so very skilfully demonstrates pointed false modesty, as do lines 5-6 ('Sip niu kho khama'): 'I am a junior singer you may know / Not like the teacher who is a skilled composer.' Suraphon wishes to be considered the underdog by the audience and to show that he is not reaching above his station. He counters Benjamin's insults with, "You can see the lice on other people's heads / But there are also lice hiding on your head" (lines 11-12) and the deliciously pointed barb, "Don't speak everywhere my teacher / The children will get annoyed and will pull out your white hair" (lines 28-29). He questions Benjamin's right to interfere in his friendly argument with Phongsri: "If you want to blame the children you must do it the right way / If I love my cow, I tie it up but if I love my child, I teach him right... / Try hard to teach composing" (lines 15,16,19). This appears to be a reference to Suraphon's past request to become Benjamin's student. Benjamin rejected him and then was not able to accept it when Suraphon became famous (202). As for the accusation that he had copied Benjamin's voice, Suraphon declares that "if the children become famous, you should be proud / If the children sing like you, you should applaud" (lines 32-33) and sarcastically queries the idea that it is really possible to copy someone else, "Well the voice of a person / It is difficult to find the same / If they wish to copy, Thailand will have only artists" (lines 35-38). His final

remark, "I still love my honour as an artist" (line 41), is a defence against Benjamin's charge that he is disgracing Thailand.

Waeng and Anek Nawikmun: Expanding the field of discourse

Throughout *Lukthung Isan*, Waeng provides information on Isan singers and songwriters that cannot be found in establishment histories. Cross-referencing between Waeng and establishment writers such as Anek Nawikmun expands the total field of discourse and allows for a more critical analysis of the available information. For example, in *Phleng nok sathawat* (Songs outside the century) Anek compiles lists of *lukthung* and *lukkrung*[23] singers (1978, 66-67). Anek's expressed purpose is to compare the places of birth of *lukthung* singers to that of *lukkrung* singers, in order to demonstrate a strict rural/urban divide. In one of the few English language articles on *lukthung*, Amporn Jirattikorn (2006) chooses to interpret the list as evidence that *lukthung* is a Central Thai art form:

> *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 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* (47).

Amporn, however, is mistaken in her last comment; Saksayam Phetchompu is listed as coming from Mahasarakam and Sonchai Mekwichian from Nakhon Ratchasima, both Isan provinces. Furthermore, Anek does not claim that his list is exhaustive or that it is a

[23] Literally 'children of the city'. *Lukkrung* combines western popular music from the 1940s -1950s with Thai lyrics sung without the *luk kho* (heavy vibrato) and *uean* (melodic embellishment on a vocable or melisma) of *lukthung*.

list of the most popular singers from the 1970s (Suraphon Sombatjaroen died in 1968). A closer analysis, using information provided by Waeng, reveals the true extent of Isan involvement in the early *lukthung* industry and shows how an Isan perspective is able to expand the overall field of discourse.

A major problem for those wishing to classify *lukthung* as an exclusively Central Thai art form is the significant Isan populations of Bangkok and some Central Thai provinces. Waeng reports that Suphanburi had so many people of Lao origin that it was nicknamed 'Lao Suphan' (168). Although Waiphot Phetsuphan is not of Lao descent, when growing up he had contact with Lao speaking people in Suphanburi and so is able to sing fluently in Isan. Phanom Nopphon and Cholati Tarnthong (both on Anek's list) were born in Chonburi but had Lao ancestry, which is why they were able to compose and sing well in Isan (177). The well known songwriter Sombat Bunsiri was born in Prachinburi but always 'introduced himself loudly as "Lao Prachin" because of his Ubon Ratchathani ancestors' (250). Despite almost two centuries of forced integration, most families with Lao ancestry still speak Isan at home and are proud of their Lao musical heritage (see Hesse-Swain 2006, 264-265).

After the death of Suraphon, the most popular band was that led by Sayan Sanya. However, his popularity was rivalled by Saksayam Phetchompu's '*Lukthung Isan*' band, which was given this name by the Isan songwriter and DJ Surin Paksiri in 1973, the first recorded use of the term (323). The two groups joined forces to become the top grossing show at the Lumphini Boxing stage. Surin named their show: '*Lukthung Isan pata lukthung phak klang*' (Competition between Northeast and Central Thai country music). Saksayam was thereafter known by the title '*Kunpon phleng lukthung haeng khwaen daen Isan*' (*lukthung* genius of the Isan region). Waeng records that Saksayam's most popular song was 'Tam nong klap Sarakam' (Bring the girl back to Mahasarakam), which catalogued the names of the provinces in Isan so that "Isan people felt that this was their song" (317). Waeng provides a list of 27 popular Isan *lukthung* singers from the 1970s including Dao Bandon, who was one of the first to incorporate distorted electric guitar into his band. Waeng suggests that it was actually the withdrawal rather than the presence of most American troops from bases in Isan such as Udon Thani in 1973 that propelled the blending of rock with *lukthung* and *molam*. While the

Americans were in Thailand, they were entertained by Thai bands such as The Impossibles who played western pop music sung in English for the soldiers and sung in Thai for a Thai audience (Hayes 2004, 29). Once the soldiers left, many of these bands had no work and returned to playing *lukthung* and *molam* incorporating western techniques they had learned (319).

The 1970s were certainly a golden period for Isan *lukthung* singers and songwriters from Isan were just as common. There were two influential circles of Isan songwriters in Bangkok during the early 1970s. The largest group, consisting of the students of *khru* (teacher) Kor Kaeoprasoet, included Loet Srichok, Wichian Sitthisong, Samson Na Mueangsri, Samran Arom and Chor Kachai, all of whom wrote songs for the famous singers on Anek's list, especially Waiphot Phetsupan, Phloen Phromdaen and Chai Mueangsing (239-245, 258). The second group included Surin Paksiri, Sanya Jurapon, also known as San Silapasit, Prasit Nakhonphanom and Songkro Samatthaphaphong (255). The existence of these groups proves that *lukthung* song writing was taken very seriously by Isan people and was viewed as a viable career path as early as the 1960s. When Anek's list is cross-referenced with *Lukthung Isan*, it is clear that the majority of famous *lukthung* singers in the 1960s and 1970s were performing songs written by Isan songwriters, often using Isan expressions and phrases to appeal to the majority Isan audience (such as 'Khit hot ai nae doe' (Do you miss me?) sung by Thepphon Phetubon). Phalangwan provides many examples of *lukthung* songs which use Isan words and phrases and, according to him, predate Surapon (although this is difficult to verify because no dates are provided in the appendix).[24] The fact that songwriters were writing in this way from the early 1950s indicates that a key demographic for *lukthung*, even at that time, was Isan people. During this period anything Isan was despised by the elite Central Thai, so the Thai establishment claim that "*lukthung* developed out of central Thai folk traditions, and for the first two or three decades had little Isan input" (Amporn 2006, 47) must be considered questionable.

[24] According to Waeng the first songwriter to popularize the use of Isan in *lukthung* songs was Pong Prida (2002, 164).

'Communist *luuk tung*'

The final chapter of the body of *Lukthung Isan* provides insight into the little known subgenre of 'communist *lukthung*', termed *phleng phuphan*[25] in Thai. *Phleng phuea chiwit*, or 'songs for life,' and its origins among the student demonstrators during the 1970s are well known,[26] but the use of *lukthung* by Isan communists has never been publicised in Thailand. A possible reason for this is that the October generation (the university students from Bangkok who produced songs for life) were quickly rehabilitated back into Thai society and today wield considerable political power. Phalangwan states that most of his information comes from the book *Siang phleng jak Phuphan* (songs from Phu Phan) written by Khaen Sarika, an editor and columnist who took part in the Isan insurgency during the 1970s (493). This book appears to be out of print but, in 2003, the Collective of Thai Revolutionary Songs Project published a large volume commemorating the use of music by the Thai communist party, which contained chapters written by Khaen Sarika.

The use of *lukthung* by communists usually took the form of *nuea plaeng* (adapted lyrics). Isan insurgents with experience in songwriting put communist lyrics to well known *lukthung* songs sung by popular singers such as Salika Kingthong (no.28 in Anek's list) and Yodrak Salakjai. The most prolific communist songwriter was 'Phloeng Nalak' a forest guerrilla who wrote more than 200 *lukthung* songs criticising the government with such lines as "the government's power comes from the barrel of a gun" (495). Sonchai Mekwichian's popular song 'Khon ngam luem ngai' (beautiful girl forgets easily) was changed into 'Tuen thoed chaona Thai' (please wake up Thai farmers) (500). Yutthasak Chanrali, of 156 Company, used the slow and sad melody of 'Faen ja yu nai' (where are you darling?) by Saengsuri Rungrot for his song 'Pha Chan' (sheer cliff), which celebrated the exploits of his Company against the Thai soldiers:

This sheer cliff has a story.
It is a story about arresting thieves who came to make trouble.

[25] 'Songs of Phuphan.' Phu Phan is a mountain area near Sakhon Nakhon in Isan.
[26] See Myers-Moro (1986) and Lockard (1998).

> *The enemy came to the cliff like a crazy man.*
> *They wanted to kill people on the cliff.*
> *The sound of the gun never disappeared.*
> *Screaming and the sound of the wounded reverberated throughout the earth.*
> *When the echo ended there was only the sound of the dying.*
> *Bring the people again and pity the people who are slaves.*
> *The master uses the slaves but never sees the truth.*
> *The sheer cliff bit the enemy and they rolled down like monkeys.*
> *Just as the people say: rolling over and over.*
> *What they say is the truth.* (501)

Yutthasak sees the Thai government soldiers as invaders of peaceful communities and portrays the guerillas as enforcing the law, a complete inversion of the establishment history. An excerpt from *The Musical Compositions of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej* reveals the Royalist Nationalist view of songs for life and the October conflict:

> *They were particularly apt at a time of social and political awareness in the 1970 (sic). The songs accompanied students as they travelled upcountry to participate in volunteer development camps and for the government officials, soldiers and police assigned to protect and patrol the borders the songs strengthened their resolve to carry out their duties.* (1996, 110)

Apart from the startling suggestion that the students and soldiers were on the same side, there is no mention of Isan people or the peasant class. In this version of Thai history, the students have been rehabilitated and their music officially celebrated. In marked contrast, the lower classes and their music have been ignored.

Ironically, the communist *lukthung* songs were banned, not only by the government, but by the senior members of the Thai communist party, who decreed that only Chinese songs were to be sung (505). The *lukthung* songs were thought to be too commercial and the cha cha rhythm unsuitable for marching (495). Nevertheless, Waeng reports that the songs were extremely popular among many of the guerrillas

who defied orders not to listen to 'enemy radio' so that they could keep contact with *lukthung* (500). Khaen Salika asserts that the insurgents were more motivated when they listened to *lukthung*:

> *When the young people at Ban Suankorp sang 'From the ricefield' in the style of* ramwong *or* lukthung *(with lyrics like 'Get him to cut off his head / Receive the karma that he's made') and you heard what they were singing it made you feel more courageous than the marching songs.* (Wat 2003, 459)

Since *phleng phuphan* were not allowed to be broadcast through either the government or guerilla radio stations, it is not surprising that little is known about the sub-genre. Unlike the students from the elite Thammasart and Chulalongkorn Universities, Isan peasants who took part in the insurgency have not been able to be as open about their involvement. Thus the songs that they preferred during the days of struggle have not been remembered in the wider community.

Conclusion

Some western writers have wondered why *phleng lukthung* has not been more overtly dissident considering its working class demographic. For example, Craig Lockard surveyed the popular music genres of Thailand for counter-hegemonic discourses and concluded that *lukthung* "could probably not serve as a model for musicians interested in more overt protest music" (1998, 191) (although access to the information found in *Lukthung Isan* might have changed his mind). Lockard's excellent overview of Thai popular music has drawn some criticism. Mitchell points out that Lockard "pays more regard to socially and politically inflected song lyrics than to the more difficult and devious issues of musical syncretisms" (2001, 19). Certainly the seeming absence of protest in commercial *lukthung* should lead to a discussion of why it was not able to serve as protest music - because of the fragile socio-economic position of Isan musicians and because of the strict censorship that the music attracted, no doubt as a result of its strong Isan origins. Yet it is also true that the issue of protest cannot be

examined until the question of historiography has been addressed. Examining commercial *lukthung* for signs of revolution has been a futile exercise when the imprint of Central Thai hegemony was so strong. Once the field of discourse has been expanded to include alternative views of Thai popular music history and English translations of key Thai texts, a study of counter-hegemonic content in *lukthung* becomes more viable.

Just as the need to acknowledge African Americans for their contributions to the formation of rock 'n' roll was resisted for many years in America, so have Isan people been denied credit for their part in the history of *lukthung*. The case study of Suraphon Sombatjaroen demonstrates that selective and discriminatory history is poor history. The King of Thai country music was only able to ascend the throne (as Waeng would put it) because of the help he received from his friend Chaloemchai Sriruecha and his competition with Benjamin. *Lukthung Isan* provides the historical context and detail necessary to understand how a performer of the calibre of Suraphon was able to develop. The myth of Suraphon as an individual genius who rose from poverty to become the King of Thai country music before dying a tragically early death is a very un-Thai construct, a construct heavily influenced by western tropes of the Romantic artist. In reality he was not an individual genius but rather he developed his musical ability in competition with other talented performers, many of whom were Isan people. The contributions of Isan musicians are keys to understanding the development of *lukthung*. *Lukthung Isan* records the stories of these forgotten musicians and, as such, deserves to be widely read.

In closing, a parallel can be drawn between the cultural conditions of today and the reign of King Mongkut. In 1865 the King proclaimed a ban on Lao musical performance because he was afraid that Lao musical culture would completely supplant Siamese genres:

> *Thais have abandoned their own entertainments... Both men and women now play laokaen [morlam] throughout the kingdom... We cannot give priority to Lao entertainments. Laokaen must serve the Thai; the Thai have never been the Lao's servants* (Found in Miller 1985, 39).

Isan music is again heard throughout Thailand in the forms of *phleng lukthung* and *molam sing* ; it is important that Isan people receive credit for their contributions to Thai culture. Waeng Phalangwan can be seen as an Isan music history counterpart to anti-establishment historians such as Chatthip Nartsupha, creating a viable alternative discourse that includes the stories of Isan musicians and consequently communicates a more complete, more realistic view of the history of *phleng lukthung*.

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