

# The Development of Country Music Band Costumes to Create Cultural Identity in Southern Thailand

การพัฒนาเครื่องแต่งกายของวงดนตรีลูกทุ่งเพื่อสร้างเอกลักษณ์  
ด้านวัฒนธรรมของภาคใต้

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## Abstract

This was a qualitative investigation to investigate the history of country music bands in Southern Thailand. Eight school country music bands were purposively selected for the case study and data were collected by document study, observation, interview, focus group discussion and workshop. It was found that Southern country music evolved from folk songs and folk performances but modern Southern country music costumes are exaggerated, inappropriate and overtly sexual. They do not represent Southern Thai identity. Costumes were developed by the researchers in response to respondent comments and suggestions in three different sections (head accessories, body accessories and clothing), emphasizing the use of local materials. The important ideas of the designs were to highlight beauty, flexibility, reduce expenditure and increase community income from production. The costumes designed to meet those specifications were for both male and female musicians, singers and female dancers, for both slow and fast songs. The designs of all costumes were based on country music band costume styles, used local fabrics, included accessories created with local materials and incorporated local culture. It is hoped that these developments may be adopted by Southern Thai Look Tung bands and contribute to the reinforcement of local Southern Thai culture.

**Keywords:** Costume, country music, identity, Thai culture

## บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเรื่องนี้ เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยมี ความมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาประวัติความเป็นมา ของวงดนตรี ลูกทุ่งในภาคใต้ ผู้วิจัยได้เลือกวงดนตรีที่ใช้เป็นกรณีศึกษา จากวงดนตรีลูกทุ่งในโรงเรียน 8 วง การดำเนินการวิจัยใช้ วิธีการศึกษาเอกสาร การสังเกต การสนทนา การสัมภาษณ์ ผู้ที่เกี่ยวข้อง และการสนทนากลุ่ม และประชุมปฏิบัติการ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า สภาพปัญหาที่พบในวงดนตรีลูกทุ่งภาค ใต้ คือ การแต่งกายยังมีสภาพเกินจริง มีการแต่งกายที่ไม่ เหมาะสม สื่อบนเรื่องเพศ และขาดเอกลักษณ์ในความ เป็นภาคใต้ ผลการพัฒนาเครื่องแต่งกายของวงดนตรีลูก ทุ่ง โดยการประชุมเชิงปฏิบัติการ พบว่า มีแนวคิดในการ พัฒนา 3 ประการ คือ แนวคิดในการพัฒนาเครื่องแต่งกาย โดยเน้นการใช้วัสดุพื้นเมือง คำนึงถึงองค์ประกอบ 3 กลุ่ม คือ เครื่องประดับศีรษะ เครื่องประดับกาย และชุดที่สวม ใส่ และประการสำคัญต้องเน้นความสวยงาม ความคล่อง ตัวในการแสดง เป็นการลดรายจ่าย เพิ่มรายได้แก่ ชุมชน ชุดที่ออกแบบตามขั้นตอนนี้ ประกอบด้วย ชุดนักดนตรี ชายหญิง ชุดนักร้องหญิงเพลงช้า เพลงเร็ว ชุดทางเครื่อง เพลงช้า เพลงเร็ว การออกแบบชุดทุกประเภทเน้นการใช้ แบบพื้นฐานทั่วไปของวงดนตรีลูกทุ่ง นำมาดัดเย็บด้วยผ้า พื้นเมือง ประดับตกแต่งด้วยวัสดุท้องถิ่น และเครื่องประดับ ในการแสดงพื้นบ้านภาคใต้ ข้อเสนอแนะสู่ความยั่งยืนของ การพัฒนาเครื่องแต่งกายวงดนตรีลูกทุ่งเพื่อสร้างเอกลักษณ์ ด้านวัฒนธรรมของภาคใต้ คือควรมีการขยายผลสู่การ จัดการแสดง ต่อยอดสู่การผลิตและการพัฒนาอย่างต่อเนื่อง คำสำคัญ เครื่องแต่งกาย ดนตรีลูกทุ่ง เอกลักษณ์ วัฒนธรรม ไทย

## Introduction

Costume and dress are integral components of Thai culture. Thai people have a traditionally varied fashion history and clothes have evolved over time with three distinct functions: for everyday use, for beauty and for auspiciousness. Importantly, the diverse nature of Thai dress has become a way to distinguish between regions and

it contributes to the identity of each locality.

Thai costume has a particularly intimate relationship with Thai performing arts, which are also regionally identifiable. The aesthetic role of performer costumes is a key part of the overall impression of artistic performances, such as traditional dance, instrumental music and puppetry. Costumes enhance the moods and feelings of the performances and use local resources to reflect the identity of the community in the show. This identity has been inherited from generation to generation and the costumes are physical evidence of local traditions and heritage.

One such example of traditional Thai music with a strong identity in fashion is Look Tung, or Thai country music (Sorat, 1973). This style of music is particularly popular in rural areas of Thailand and the lyrics commonly reflect the state of local society, popular trends, history and culture (Angkinan, 2009). These changing states and trends over time have also been replicated in the costumes worn by performers. In the first phase of Thai country music, singers wore standard, everyday rural clothing. Men wore traditional Thai shirts and women wore traditional Thai wraparound skirts. As local groups began to compete more, the costumes were developed to give performers an edge. Male singers began to wear suits and female singers wore more varied, more colourful outfits. As competition grew stronger and cultural influence from the West crept into costume design, performer outfits began to lose their link with local identity and an unofficial national standard became clearer (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Generic Thai country outfits for women



The modern Thai country costumes of Southern Thailand are thus very similar to Central Thai costumes and there is no real distinguishing feature unique to Southern culture (Nootong, 1988). There is a plethora of suitable materials and beautiful traditional patterns that originate in Southern Thailand, which could be adapted to create a unique performance costume for Southern Thai country singers (Fadzil, 1993). The most famous and prominent of these is perhaps *pa yok*, which is brocade, a type of fabric woven in elaborate patterns and commonly containing golden thread.

Given the potential of Southern Thai fabric for Thai country costumes in the South and the current lack of local identity reflected in the Thai country costumes in Southern Thailand, the research team designed this investigation to

develop country music band costumes reflecting local identity and culture.

### Research Aims

This investigation has three principle aims:

1. To study the history of Thai country music in Southern Thailand
2. To study the current conditions of and problems with the development of costumes for Thai country singers in Southern Thailand
3. To develop costumes for Thai country singers in Southern Thailand that reflect local culture and help create an identity for Southern Thai Look Tung

### Research Methodology

This investigation into the development of costumes for country music bands to create cultural identity in Southern Thailand is a qualitative research. Field research was conducted from March 2014 to October 2014 in the upper part of Southern Thailand. Eight school country music bands were purposively selected for the case study. All of the chosen bands had successfully performed at The National Country Music Bands Contest. The research sample was composed of 30 individuals, who were divided into three groups: key informants, casual informants and general informants. The research was divided into 3 stages: stage 1 was the study of the history of school country music bands in Southern Thailand, stage 2 was the study of problems, needs and suggestions for the development of country music band costumes, and stage 3 was the development of country music band costumes to create a cultural identity for Southern Thai country music. The research methods were the documentary study,

observation, interview, focus group discussion and workshop. Data were analyzed using content analysis and the results are presented here by means of descriptive analysis (Satsongwon, 1999).

## Results

The results showed that Southern country music evolved from folk songs and folk performances, which were then adapted into typical folk shows retaining Southern identity in their content. The shows reflected contemporary society, economics, politics, language and other Southern folk performances. However, school country music bands were developed from brass bands with the aim to enhance the ability of them together with the everyday dress of local people.

students by promoting their performances. Due to many national country music band contests, country music bands were established in many schools.

There are many problems with Southern Thai look tung costumes (Table 1). In modern Southern country music bands, costumes are exaggerated, inappropriate and overtly sexual. They do not represent Southern Thai identity. Therefore, there is a need to develop appropriate costumes for the singers, musicians and dancers in order to accurately showcase Southern identity. The suggestions made by research respondents were to develop the costumes by adapting the costumes used in folk performances and mixing

**Table 1** A list of problems with costumes worn by Southern Thai country music performers, as identified by research respondents and solutions given during interviews

Problem	Suggested Solution
“Costumes do not reflect local identity.”	Enlist a local company or academic institution to create model costume designs that incorporate and reflect local culture.
“The costume budget is insufficient, so costumes do not match the music and lyrics.”	Generate funding and sponsorship
“Costumes are expensive.”	A style must be developed that is suitable for all performances and reflects local culture.
“Rented costumes are generic and do not match the performance.”	Costumes for hire should at least be created using local materials, with local culture in mind.
“Costumes are too standardized and generic.”	There should be a fashion designing contest to allow people to be expressive with the stipulation that the creations must reflect local culture.
“There is a very limited number of costume patterns available.”	Costumes should be developed to cover all performers and themes, so that musicians, singers and dancers can wear different outfits.

The results of the interviews, discussions and a workshop on Monday 16th September, 2014 in Surat Thani were taken by the research team as the basis for designing costumes for the school country music bands. The costumes were developed in three different sections (head accessories, body accessories and clothing), emphasizing the use of local materials. The important ideas of the designs were to highlight beauty, flexibility, reduce expenditure and increase community income from production. The costumes designed to meet those specifications were for both male and female musicians, singers and female dancers, for both slow and fast songs. The designs of all costumes were based on country music band costume styles, used local fabrics, included accessories created with local materials and incorporated local culture.

### **Costumes for Thai country singers in Southern Thailand**

The first costume set developed is for male and female musicians. These are adapted Southern Thai suits that can be made with Southern Thai fabric (Figure 2). The second set of costumes is for male and female singers. For male singers to fast songs, Islamic-style clothing has been selected and for female singers to slow songs an adapted traditional Thai-style dress has been selected. Dresses for female dancers have been designed to incorporate local materials and styles. Different designs have been made for fast and slow music. These four designs are shown in Figure 3.



Figure 2 Costume design development for a male musician, with details of material and colours



Male Singer (Fast Music)



Female Singer (Slow Music)



Female Dancer (Slow Music)



Female Dancer (Fast Music)

**Figure 3** Costume design development for male and female singers and female dancers

## Discussion

The problems found regarding costumes of Thai country music performers in the eight schools in Southern Thailand can be divided into three main categories. Firstly, there is a lack of local identity represented in the costume design. Secondly, due to modern trends and the desire to match Western styles, more accessories and adaptations have been made to traditional costumes than are necessary and costumes are now overly elaborate. Thirdly, female costumes are too revealing and unsuitable for Thai culture. These findings agree with the research of Grobton (2004), who concluded that modern look tung costumes have diverted drastically from the original folk costumes they were first based upon.

From this investigation, the researchers discovered that the needs of the school band administrators were similar. The administrators wanted costumes to reflect local society and culture so that students could simultaneously learn about their heritage. They also wanted the costumes to be suitable for the performance and something students, parents and audience members could take pride in and relate positively to Thai culture. These sentiments were also acknowledged by Junngam (2011), whose research into classical Thai dance led to the conclusion that the ability to reflect and teach about accurate Thai culture is a source of pride among people concerned with classical Thai dance.

The costumes designed as a consequence of this investigation were divided into three groups: musicians, singers and dancers. This corresponds to the context of their performances, the roles they must observe and their place on the stage. All of the designs incorporated local colours, patterns

and materials in response to the comments and suggestions made by interview respondents. All accessories were designed to use local resources and ethnic styles. These styles should be considered a base. Any additions that are required should be made by costume designers associated with the bands to reflect the specific local culture and the performance (Saijai et al., 2003)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative investigation was conducted from March 2014 to October 2014 in the upper part of Southern Thailand. The aims were to analyze and develop costumes for Thai country music bands. Results show that the precursor to Southern country music was local folk music. The evolution of the genre has seen modern Southern country music costumes become exaggerated, inappropriate and overtly sexual. This is incongruent with the identity of the Southern Thai people. The focus of costume designs developed in this investigation was to return to Southern Thai identity, whilst also increasing local community income. The designs of all costumes were based on country music band costume styles and were developed for a range of song speeds, for both male and female performers. Local fabrics were used in the hope that these developments may be adopted by Southern Thai look tung bands and contribute to the reinforcement of local Southern Thai culture.

As a result of this investigation the research team wish to make the following recommendations:

1. Local government institutions should take a greater interest in preserving and promoting local Southern Thai culture through the medium of dress in performing arts.
2. An education centre focused on the

maintenance of cultural heritage through fashion should be established.

3. Further study should consider the optimum materials for look tung costume creation.

4. Further study should concern the costumes of other cultural performing arts in the Southern region of Thailand.

5. Further study should be conducted to analyze the cultural value and development of costumes in Thai country music performances in other regions of the country.

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