

## **Constructing the Third Identities Through Modern Northern Country Songs (*Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*): A Social History of Modernity in Rural Chiang Mai**

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### **Introduction**

Since the early 1990s, rural Chiang Mai society has been transformed under new conditions of modernity (Gray, 1990; Ritchie, 1996). The conditions resulted from the mixing or hybridizing of the rural agricultural economy and the urban industrial and service economy. Although rural households still preserve their on-farm production, many of their members transfer themselves to work in the off-farm sectors that increasingly expand at this time. The income they receive from working in this sector helps support the continuity of agricultural production. The effect of this is a new structure of rural society: the hybridizing or mixing structure of the urban and rural economies.

The conditions of modernity, therefore, has entailed the changing of the rural Chiang Mai social structure from that of farming-base categories into the mixing of agricultural, industrial and service-base categories. The social structure is not only composed of agricultural producers but also includes industrial and construction workers; employees of shops, restaurants, department stores and so on; middle and low-ranking employees of bureaucratic organizations and private enterprises; taxi drivers and peddlers; and so on. We are able to call these categories of people as “new rural” people. This is because although these people work in the urban economic sector, they still live in rural areas. They are still affiliated with rural communities in which their families, relatives and friends live, with some of them still working in the fields. The people, thus, are not the old kind of rural people because they earn their living in the ways that urban people do, but they cannot be called “urban” because they still inhabit rural communities and conduct some ways of living and participate in traditional ways of life like their rural comrades.

Amidst the changing rural structure, there has appeared a genre of music called *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* or Modern Northern Country Music. The music, in

its style, is a mixture or hybridization between *Pleng Lukthung*<sup>1</sup>, or modern country Thai music, and an old Chiang Mai tradition of jest tale or *Jia Kom*<sup>2</sup>. The music is sung in the northern dialect. We cannot, therefore, say that *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is both the modern urban and the traditional rural music. Instead, it is another genre that represents the “new rural” society and people of Chiang Mai.

The main question of this article, therefore, is: do the hybrid people employ the songs to contest their meanings and identities of modernity? And if they do, how do they conduct?

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this article, I would employ 4 or 5 concepts to help answering the questions. First, by taking the concepts from the works of Sahlins (1985), Tuassig (1983), Comaroff (1985) and Herzfeld (1985), not only the academics or researchers who revealed or constructed knowledge or meanings from their works but also those who were studied as actors could construct knowledge, meanings or identities of their own within the changing conditions. These were accomplished through the cultural space such as legends, rituals and words.

Second, the discourse of modernity. There had been an argument that modernity did not have only one meaning but various groups of people in any society constructed their own various meanings. It was the contestation by the people against the meaning of modernity constructed by the dominant group in order to control them. The works that argued this concept were such as Friedman (1990), Wilson (1999) and Rofel (1999a ; 1999b).

Third, the concept of liminal or in-between space came from Turner (1983) and the third space from Bhabha (2003). According to the concept, the in-between or the third space produced from the hybridization of the two opposite status or conditions or concepts. The example was based on a group of people in the era of colony in India. They were the hybrid people who were indigenous by birth but experienced the western education and way of life. When they stayed at home they lived according to their indigenous way of life but in their offices and clubs they behaved like the foreign colonist. The group of people accepted nationalism from the west and hybridized it with

their historical experiences of indigenous India and produced it into the third concept of nationalism of their own (Anderson, 1991 and Bachi, 1996).

Fourth, the concept of music and identity (Frith, 1996). There had been an argument that music and other kinds of arts were based on the esthetic experiences that initiated identities of the authors and the audiences. Due to the people experiences and their different historical backgrounds, therefore, they differently interpreted or constructed the identities through the same music or any kind of arts or cultural space. This was the same as Bourdieu's ideas of Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977).

Fifth, the concept of Bakthin's dialogism (Gardiner, 2000). This concept was based on the idea that the meaning emanated from the interaction or communication among people in situation or contexts in everyday life. The words or statements would have different meaning in different situations or contexts. This led to the idea that the elite or any group of people wanted to keep the meanings of words and statements static or unchangeable in order to employ it to construct the institutes to dominate the people. On the other hand, the people made the meanings in flux in order to free from such domination. Music and the other kinds of arts were a kind of dialogism that the authors and the audiences communicated and constructed the meanings in their respective situations or contexts.

Comparable to the concept of hegemony of the Grancian, the ruling class constructed the hegemony in order to dominate the people. The people, on the other hand, constructed anti-hegemony by making the meanings or thoughts that the ruling class constructed through the language to be fluid.

At the same time, according to the idea of Davis (1974), he proposed that making the meaning to vary and flux entailed its unclear and ambiguity. The result was the eradication of power relations made by the meaning that positioned the ruling class as the superior and open the way to new complicated relations.

This article framework, hence, built from the above concepts would explain the contestation of modernity by various groups of people in the cultural spaces. The state and the elite constructed the meaning and identity of the modern people in the Thai state in order to control the power. Various groups of people responded to the condition by contesting the various meanings and identities as the third space or identities in order

to make the meaning or identity of modernity changeable, unclear and ambiguous that led to open the way to the new complicated relation.

### **Chiang Mai Traditional State and the Narratives**

Chiang Mai in the past was able to be divided into two domains: center and periphery, or city and village. The king or *Chao Chiwit* established his power at the center and expanded it to the periphery or the villages which were scattered over the Chiang Mai-Lamphun valley. To do that, however, it was necessary to construct universal or public space so as to be able to draw villagers who had inhabited various private communities into a unified realm. Similar to others in mainland Southeast Asia, the Chiang Mai state employed *Buddhist* storytelling and narratives in order to construct the meanings and identities of its people. This was a narrative that identified the king as those who had accumulated merit or *Boddhisattva* in order to achieve enlightenment as a *Buddha* in the future, and the people as those who were dictated by passion and needed to be liberated by the king. The king, therefore, was closer to *Dharma* than all of the people.

The narrative was elaborated in *Jataka* that the royal monks reproduced from the old scripture as well as produced new ones. *Jataka* was a method of storytelling which presented the attainment of power through the accumulation of merit by *Boddhisattva*. His function, therefore, was to struggle and conquer the evils and liberate them and other people who made *Karma* by behaving according to their passions. This was done by suppressing and inducing them to behave according to *Buddhist* principles. Then, they would enter into the realm of *Dharma* (Jantornwong and Samuttawanich, 1980; Anukamal, 2002).

The stories that were opposite to the *Buddhist*'s were the tales about villagers who did not behave according to the obligations of *Buddhist* principles. In these stories, the status and power of the people was not necessarily obtained by accumulating merit or behaving according to *Dharma*; similarly, in these stories, bad conduct did not lead to calamity. Further, those who did not behave according to moral obligations and *Dharma* but were clever or had good fortune or by chance were sometimes able to assume power and could escape punishment. Examples of this are *Mae Ying Chalad* (แม่ยิ่งชาลัด) or *Clever women* and *Tu Chao* (ตุเช้า) or *A monk* (Plenge, 1976). *Mae Ying Chalad* was a story of a woman who committed adultery but was able to escape from

punishment by using her cleverness. *Tu Chao* or *A monk* was a story of a monk who was able to attain a high position by delusion, fortune and chance.

The third kind of storytelling was one that mixed or hybridized the two opposite methods of storytelling mentioned above. They were *Pleng Saw* (Chimpanao, 1980; Chetpatanavanich, 2003) and *Jia Kom*, or jest tale (Chimpanao, 1984; Aeuosriwong, 1996; Pra Sonserm Chotago, 2005). *Pleng Saw* is a semi-ritualistic semi-entertaining traditional musical performed all day in various ceremonies and celebrations. The performance was performed in three plots. First, the ceremony and celebration plot, such as house-warming, ordination or new temple-building celebration plot and so on. The plot was always concerned with *Buddhist* and other beliefs. This plot represented Buddhism and the sacred beliefs of the ruling class that dominated the peoples' minds. Following the *Buddhist*-themed plot, the second plot of *Pleng Saw* was the plot based on the ordinary life of the people and fertility beliefs. It was the plot of a man and a woman who met, courted and married and included the narration of sexual relations including sexual intercourse. This plot constructed the meaning of private space in which people realized the significance of private life based on the drives of love, desire and needs of ordinary people. This plot presented an antithesis to the first plot. Finally, the third plot of *Saw Kep Nok*, the synthesis, showed how the upper class (who was considered as representation of *Dharma*) became the opposite of original status because of reverse conducts under the encouragement of lust and greed. This behavior made them into jokers and then their power disappeared. For example, *Nai Oay*, who was a representative of the royal institution, tried to exploit a village couple and took liberties with the woman who was the wife. But the husband and wife employed trickery to delude *Nai Oay* that made him a joker in the eyes of audiences.

*Jia Kom* storytelling showed the other side of the behavior of monks, *Noi* and *Hnan*, or ex-novices and ex-monks, seniors, and the other respected people driven by passion. The plot of villagers' *Jia Kom* was according to the *So Kep Nok* plot. Aeuosriwong (1996) argued that, actually, *Jia Kom* was intended to present that all people, including the king, courtiers, monks and respected people, could have the behaviors driven by passion. On one hand, in any society, the people have to behave under the obligations of morality and regulation. But, on the other hand, all people could conduct themselves in ways that broke down the order.

We can see that storytelling is a cultural space in which various groups of people in Chiang Mai contest their life meanings or, put in the other way, contest their

identities. The kings, courtiers and monks construct their identities as the *Dharma* conductors. They, therefore, ought to assume power as leaders in order to establish public space in which *Dharma* is as the common aim of all people. At the same time, various groups of villagers also employ storytelling as a space in which to construct their identities, both identities in accordance with and opposite to the elites and third identities that mix and hybridize the identities of the elite and the people.

### **The Modern Thai State and Modern Narratives**

The emergence of the modern Thai state began when the Bangkok Monarchy under the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, occupied territories which depended on Bangkok in form of *Pratesaraj* as Bangkok's colonies (*Pratesaraj* were territories which were still self-governed and self-administrated within their own border but were acknowledged to be under the power of another, bigger realm. Under this tradition, *Pratesaraj* had to send *Ton Mai Nguen* and *Ton Mai Tong*, or artificial golden and silver trees, to the bigger realm in order to show their respect to it.). Rama V established a bureaucratic system imitated from western colonies as the mechanism of administering its colonies which had Bangkok at the center (Winichakul, 1993).

The state originated from a hybridization between colonial discourse and the constructed memory of the traditional Thai state. According to this discourse, the colonies had to be governed by the center because the people who lived in the colonies were out-of-date, barbaric, uncivilized and they behaved irrationally. In contrast, the center's people were more progressive, civilized and rational. And for the memory, the traditional Thai state was under the governing of the "Jaroen" or "civilized" king and elites who behaved according to *Dharma*. Therefore, over the history of the modern Thai state of absolute monarchy under King Rama V to Rama VII, the nationalist State of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, the paternal state with the promotion of the monarchical institution of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, or the "Democratic" state under the patronage of the monarchy, capitalists, the king, state officials, and other elites have been considered the Thai civilized leaders. The function of the leaders has been to induce people (*Chao Baan*, villagers, and *Chao Pa*, forest people) who sink low into a path of ruin to proceed to a civilized, progressive and *Dharma* way (Winichakul, 1993)

Amidst the situation of the modern Thai state is the emergence of some modern forms of storytelling such as Thai film and television drama, *Pleng Lukkrung*,

or urban music, and *Pleng Lukthung* or rural music. All of them are modern performances that are engendered from the hybridization between the memories of traditional narratives and performances and the modern western concepts and forms of performance.

First, the popular Thai film and T.V. drama called “*Naam Nao*” (“rotten water” or “the repeated plot”) is a hybridization between *Jataka* tales and the other storytelling such as *Legae* (a kind of traditional drama) performance and *Nang Talung* or the Shadow play (Vanderveest, 1993 b; Aeuosriwong, 1995 b) with modern western concepts of civilized and rational behaviors of men and women. The plot of “*Naam Nao*” film and T.V. drama narrate about protagonists who occupy a status of civilized and rational characteristics and *Dharma*. They are a representation of state officials, capitalists, middle class professionals as well as gentlemen and ladies. In the plot, the protagonists have to struggle with the villains or evils who behave in accordance with passionate and irrational motivations. The villains are represented as communists, drug addicts, jealous men and women, and so on. The modern protagonists are similar to *Bodhisattva*, who are the representation of goodness. They struggle with the evils who want to destroy *Dharma*. The struggle of the protagonists with the villains is intended to reveal that “*Dharma Yom Chana Adharma*” or “goodness always conquers evil.” It means that whoever in accordance with rational ways of conduct and *Dharma* must assume a position superior than those who behave in accordance to passionate forces. They, therefore, become leaders who help *Adharma*, or the evil, to give up walking on the path of ruin and turn to proceed to the good and rational ways<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the hero and villain characters, there are another characters who take the role of jokers or the protagonist’s servants and the followers of the villains. These characters are the representation of “*Chao Baan*,” or villagers, who still behave irrationally and passionately. Sometime they are placed closer to *Dharma* as the protagonist’s servants or followers and sometime closer to *Adharma* as the villain’s followers. They are also meant to be transformed into more civilized people by the protagonist, or state officials and middle-class gentlemen and ladies.

The plot of “*Naam Nao*” film and T.V. drama is, therefore, to show that state officials, capitalists and middle-class gentlemen and ladies are possessed with *Dharma* and civilized minds. To put it another way, they are modern Thai people who behave with rational motivation. The villains and villagers, in contrast, are out-of-date and their behaviors are dominated by lust, greed and irrational ways of thinking. They are

uncivilized people who need their minds to be developed to become more rational and civilized. This means that within the Thai state, there are the elites who hold *Dharma* or have civilized and rational minds. They are those who occupy the function of struggling with *Adharma* or the evil who are out-of-date, uncivilized, and irrational in order to develop or upgrade them.

Second, *Pleng Lukkrung* and *Pleng Lukthung* are considered to be the two major genres of modern music. *Pleng Lukkrung* is understood to be the music of urban people while *Pleng Lukthung* is identified with the rural. But the two originated in the same place – which is the urban center, or Bangkok (Ratchaburi, 1994; Aeuosriwong, 1995 a). *Pleng Lukkrung* is considered urban music because it emerged from a hybridization of the memories of classical Thai music and the traditional noble and urban ordinary people's *Pleng Yao*, which is a love ballad composed for courtship between men and women, and a modern western style of music.(Ratchaburi, 1994; Krobtong, 1998) *Pleng Lukthung* is a hybridization of various kinds of traditional rural music and modern western styles of music (Krobtong, 1998). The content of *Pleng Lukthung* was hybridized between the concept of modernity with constructed memories and experiences of the composers whose backgrounds were rural ways of life.

*Pleng Lukkrung* and *Pleng Lukthung* are modern narratives or cultural spaces in which modern meanings and identities are contested. In the case of *Pleng Lukkrung* the contents and plots are contested from various sources. The plot from the state is the contested meanings or identities of the king and the other elites as leaders who possess merit, civilizedness and progressive qualities. They include music such as *Sadudee Maharaja* (ศรุติมหาราชา), or *In praise of the king*, which is about the merit of a king who is “*Rom Pho Rom Sai Khong Puang Pracha*,” or “the protector of Thai people,” and *Khong Kwan Jak Kon Din* (ของขวัญจากก้อนดิน), or *Present from The clod of earth* that narrates about a king who is comparable to the father of all the people. He, with his kindness to all the people, is the leader who creates “*Kwam Jaroen*” or the developed condition of the country. “*Waddhanadham*” (วัฒนธรรม), or “*Culture*” and “*Srang Thai*” (สร้างไทย), or “*Constructing Thailand*”, were composed under the guidance of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsonkram to persuade the Thai people to obey leaders who would create progress and civilization for the nation.

The majority of *Pleng Lukkrung*, however, is a hybridization between the urban ordinary people's experiences of individual desire and the concept of modern

individualism. It is opposite to the state and the elite's conception. This kind of music has been produced in large numbers since the end of World War II until now. The examples include the many songs of *Sundraporn* band<sup>4</sup>. Many songs sung by the band's singers were music constructing the meaning of the experiences of men and women's individual relations about love. Examples include "*Chan You Klai Thoe*" (ฉันอยู่ใกล้เธอ), or "*I am staying close to you*," which is the bemoaning of a man's feeling of love and his sexual desire to his lover. At the same time, "*Yam Hang Klai*" (ยามห่างไกล), or "*When we are apart*," is a song about a woman bemoaning to her lover when they have to be apart. Another example is "*Pieng Kum Deo*" (เพียงคำเดียว), or "*Just one word*," sung by *Suthep Wongkamheang*, that describes the emotion of a man who would like to hear the word "love" from a woman.

We can see that the plot of the narratives or music is to construct an identity for modern people as the individuals who are interested in their own private world, not the public or nation. This identity, therefore, is in contrast to the identity constructed by state that emphasizes the fondness of the nation and the civilized manner of modern Thai people and the loyalty to the developer King who will lead the Thai nation to progress and development.

At the same time, modern urban music become a space for the contestation of the meanings and identities of a particular category of modern Thai people: the urban poor. It is a plot that is a hybridization of the memory of the urban poor and the modern concept of capitalism. "*Yam Jon*" (ยามจน), or "*When I am impoverished*," is intended to indicate that modern Thailand is a society in which people are encouraged to be greedy and to worship money as a God. The prestige, virtue and friendship of people are based on whether they have money or not.

This is the identity of the poor who live in modern society. This identity is in contrast to the identity constructed by the elite. Instead of constructing the modern people's identity as those who can obtain the fruit of advancement, they construct the identity of the poor as those who are victims of modern capitalism.

We, therefore, can conclude that modern urban music or *Pleng Lukkrung* is a space in which various groups of people contest meanings or identities of modern urban Thai people.

In case of *Pleng Lukthung*, Chagaj argue that the contents of the music have continued from “*Pleng Chiwit*” (“Music of life”) or “*Pleng Talad*” (common peoples’ music) composed and sung since the 1950s. *Pleng Chiwit* was identified as the opposite of “*Pleng Phudee*,” or “gentry music,” that would be transformed into *Pleng Lukkrung* later (Ratchaburi, 1994). *Pleng Talad* presented the suffering of the poor in modern Thai society (it was the same plot of the urban poor mentioned above) such as labourers, *Samlor Rupjang* or three-wheeled bicycle hired-driver, and minstrel beggar. The storytelling narrated about the exploited and insulted people including rural people who were categorized by modern discourse as out-of-date, lazy and lower. *Pleng “Klin Clone Sap Kway,”* or “*Muddy and rank smell of buffalo,*” composed by *Paibun Budkhan*, one of the famous *Lukthung* composers who came from a rural background, is a song that narrates about rural conditions and the people. This song narrates the life of Thai peasants who are looked down upon as *Ta Si* (word employed to call outermost people equivalent to a “bumpkin” or a “yokel”) who are seen as unclean, rough and ignorant similar to buffalo. At the same time, they are those who plant rice for all of people in the country to consume.

The narratives of *Pleng Talad* that were transformed into *Pleng Lukthung* produced a significant plot. This plot became a plot of *Pleng Lukthung* later. The plot is the contestation of the identity of rural people with those constructed by the discourse of modernity of the state that presented villagers as out-of-date, ignorant, and rough. The plot constructed is that although the peasantry has to work hard and their bodies smelled of mud and the rank smell of buffalo, they are those who cultivate rice for everyone in the nation. At the same time, even if they are very poor, but their mind is fine, and they are faithful and sincere.

This plot reverses the meanings of the urban and rural. Instead of considering the urban as the progressive and civilized place and the people who inhabit it as behaving rationally as advanced in modern discourse, *Nidhi* argues that the modern condition represented by urban ways of life is not admired from the plot. According to the plot, the urban center with the advance and rich of material facilities is a place occupied by people who behave evilly while the rural is occupied by people who are clean, faithful, kind, and so on. Urban culture from this point of view is rotten. When we compare the urban with the rural in *Pleng Lukthung*, urban people have the nature of evil. *Cholatee Thantong* composed a song entitled “*Sao Rot E-Tan*” (สาวรถอีแตน) (*Rot E-Tan* is a kind of mini motorcar that peasants employ for various purposes and *Sao*

means Miss) and sung by *Oiythip*. An example of its content is "...rural people who only have primary education are better than the urban who have the bachelor's degree...I am not interested in an urban young man...peasant young man are so diligent...". (Aeuosriwong 1995a : 45).

*Surintra Paksiri* described the decadence of urban life in "*Chang Mun Toe*" (ចាត់ម៉ោងទោះ) (Let it be) and he concludes: "...life in town is very progressive. Women like to be minor wives and men spend money wastefully...the singers who work for hire in nightclubs like to divorce their husbands in order to free themselves as a widow who is attractive to many men..." (Aeuosriwong, 1995a : 45).

The urban in *Pleng Lukthung* is something very strange. There are lights and sounds, exciting entertainment, and many conveniences in the city, but people who live in urban areas are occupied by evils such as the singers who are the symbols of light and sound and convenience like to divorce their husbands as mentioned above. If one compares a person who drives a luxurious car with a peasant who rides a buffalo, the former will always be worse than the latter. It is because he is often selfish, cheating, insincere or he is being a gigolo who deceives woman to become prostitutes. *Kan Karunwong* compares the life of a "good man" from a rural area when he has to come to stay and work in an urban area with the life when he stayed in his rural home: "Big buildings that are taller than *Yang* tree (Dipterocarpous plant) but they are filled with the lonely and no one is concerned with me. It is unlike my home at *Supan* province. There, all people love, help and agree with each other. When someone comes to visit, they are willingly welcomed and looked after" ("*Pleao Jai Nai Krung*" (ប្រជាធាសានក្រុង) or "*Lonely when staying in the city*") (Aeuosriwong, 1995a)

The other plot of *Pleng Lukthung* is the narrative of the individual who pays attention only to personal instead of public activities. Many songs belong to this category. The examples are such as "*Kin Khao Kab Arai*" (កិនខាងកំបែង) ("What kind of food do you eat?") and "*Mae Tang Rom Bai*" (មេពេងរំម៉ីបី) ("A girl with beautiful complexion"). The two songs describe the beauty of labour and farming women.

At the same time, love and sex affairs are also narrated in *Pleng Lukthung*. There are many *Pleng Lukthung* whose contents contain sexual metaphors such as part of the content of "*Khon Khub Rot Tai*," (កន្លែងទុក្ខុក) or "*Plowing-car driver*" is "...every kind of field, large or small, and its soil white, black, or red, I have been used to plow

them already...” This contains the metaphor of *Teena*, or field, as the female sexual organ, and a plough as the male sexual organ and the act of ploughing as making love (Aeuosriwong, 1995a : 33).

We can see that the many methods of storytelling of *Pleng Lukthung* function to disobey the Thai state’s discourse of modernity. *Pleng Lukthung* resist the discourse by narrating the decadent aspects of modern urban civilization, the stories of suffering and the peripheral but high-mindedness of rural people, and the private relations and individual desires of the people. We can see, therefore, that *Pleng Lukthung* is a cultural space for contesting meanings and identities of modern rural people through various plots.

### ***Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* as a Cultural Space for Contesting “New Rural” Chiang Mai People Identities**

Chiang Mai was one of Prateseraj which has been included into the modern Thai state since the reign of Rama V. But its rural areas remained unchanged until the 1960s. Rural changes and transformation came about as an effect of the National Economic Development Program of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. However, the most fundamental change has occurred from the 1980s to the present, when the urban economy of industry and service expanded intensively into the rural areas of Chiang Mai. Hybridization between the urban economy and rural agricultural production has taken place. The result has been the transformation of the rural socioeconomic structure. The “new rural” people have emerged.

Amidst this transformation, the old forms of storytelling such as *Pleng Saw* and *Jia Kom* have gradually declined while the national forms of storytelling, such as Thai film, T.V. drama, *Pleng Lukkrung* and especially *Pleng Lukthung*, have been increasingly consumed by the “new rural” people. At the same time, it appears that the new music that is most popular among “new rural” people is *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* or Modern Northern Country Song. The song was created in the 1980s and became popular between 1990-2000. We can see that *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is a result of the hybridization between *Pleng Lukthung* and the memories of *Jia Kom* (Wanna, 2001) and *Pleng Saw* (Jareonmueang, 2003). This hybridization is created by mixing *Pleng Plud*, or speaking song style, *Pleng Lukthung* with a dialogue within it. In this article, I will study two of *Lukthung Kam Mueang*’s most famous singers and

composers: Bunsri Rattanang and Witoon Jaiporm. I will study *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* as a space where “new rural” people contest their modern identities.

### **Bunsri Rattanang**

Bunsri Rattanang was born on March 5, 1953 into a peasant family that lived in *Sansai* District of Chiang Mai province. He only completed primary school. After leaving school, Bunsri began working on his parent’s farm. He grew rice in the cultivation season and after that, he worked as hired worker in both rural and urban areas. Bunsri’s uncle was a local musician, and as a result, Bunsri was trained to play northern musical instruments at a young age. He was occasionally employed as a musician and played *Pee* (a kind of flute) as back up for *Saw* singers. Bunsri was also trained to be a *Saw* singer (Wanna, 2001). When Bunsri became an adult, he joined the Amnouy Karampat Show band<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently, he joined a few additional bands. He also worked as a taxi driver for a brief period. Bunsri only gave up his career as a rice cultivator after he became famous as a singer of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. He then set up his own band that worked for hire in both *Saw* and *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* performances (Rattanang, 1999).

The reason Bunsri turned to compose and perform *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* was the decline in listening to *Pleng Saw* by the “new rural” audiences. Although *Saw* singers were still hired for providing entertainment for some celebrations, “new rural” people began calling for entertainment more modern than the old native performances. Bunsri, therefore, performed *Pleng Lukthung* in order to respond to the need of his audiences. After that, Bunsri began composing and singing *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. In 1982, he received an opportunity to record “*Lung Od Pho Bo Dai*”, (ลุงอดผ่อนบ้าดี) or “I can’t stop looking at you”, and “*Bao Keong*”, (บ่าวคง) or “*An old man who has never married*”, onto cassette tapes for sale (Rattanang, 1999). The two songs can be considered as “new rural” music engendered by hybridizing modern national rural music (*Pleng Lukthung*) with *Jia Kom* and *Pleng Saw*.

We can say that Bunsri is a truly hybridized person. He was born in a rural area and made his living there in half of his life, and in the other half of his life, he interacted with modern, urban ways of life. The *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* composed and sung by him is also hybridized. It is a form of music that resulted from

the mixture of modern *Pleng Lukthung* style music, modern concepts, and the memory of *Jia Kom* and *Pleng Saw*.

### **The Contents and Discussion of Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang***

Wiluk who studied Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* argues that Bunsri's music reflects aspects of life in Chiang Mai and other parts of northern Thai. These include the alcohol addiction of rural people, problems in rural family relations, paths of ruin and various other problems in rural society, (Sripasang, 1993).

Firstly, Wiluk indicates that it is believed in rural Chiang Mai society that one of the signs employed to show manhood is to drink alcohol. And alcohol is also used in all of the rituals and drinking is part of all of the feasts in rural society such as after reciprocal working or during the rituals of feasting spirits, weddings and so on. In many of his songs, Bunsri reflects the problems which come from some rural peoples' habit of drinking alcohol. The songs are such as "Na Mue Lang Mue" (นาเมืองเมือง) or "Reverse the front to the back hand" (reverse wrong to right and right to wrong), "Ai Moiy Khod Keong" (ไอมือขาดกึ่ง) or "Mr. Moiy's one and a half bottle of whisky".

Secondly, Bunsri indicates the problem of the family relations in his *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. It includes the conflict between a father-in-law and a son-in-law and between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law as well as the issue of lacking ethics between a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law, between a father-in-law and a daughter-in-law and between a mother-in-law and a son-in-law. Bunsri describes those problems in amusing ways. In the song entitled "Mun Ngay Dee" (มั่นเงยดี) or "It is easy", Bunsri narrates the story of a man whose wife has just passed away who immediately goes to see his mother-in-law in order to propose marriage to her other daughter, or his sister-in-law. In the same song, *Mun Ngay Dee*, Bunsri also narrates about a father-in-law who proposes to marry his daughter-in-law after the death of his son.

The story about a shameful affair between a father-in-law and a daughter-in-law also appears in one of Bunsri's songs. "Chiwit Ai Kam" (ชีวิตไอค้า) or "Life of Mr. Kam" is about a man who is jailed and leaves his wife to stay with his father. At last, his wife is to become his father's wife. He becomes aware of the situation when his father goes to visit him at the jail the last time. When *Ai Kam* is released from the jail, he suddenly goes to see an abbot. The abbot advises him to practise *Dharma* in order to

make his mind peaceful. In the song, *Ai Kam* decides to be ordained in order to serve Buddha and does not intend to leave the monkhood until he dies.

The path of ruin is the third issue addressed in Bunsri's music. Wiluk indicates that many of Bunsri's songs reflect the problems of alcohol addiction and gambling of many rural people. Alcohol addiction brings with it the problems of quarreling among drunkards and between drunkards and members of their families. And the problems of gambling addiction are narrated in many of Bunsri's songs, such as “*Nak Leng Kai Chom*” (ນັກລົງໄກ່ໜູນ) or “*The gambler of cock fighting*” and “*Pho Leao Heuy*” (ພອແລ້ວຫາຍ) or “*I want to give up playing lottery*”.

The general problems in rural society are the last group of issues addressed in Bunsri's music. This includes issues such as the problems arising from the misuse of the power by the *Kamnan*, or head of sub-district and the *Pho Luang* or *Phu Yai Baan*, or head of village, which are reflected in *Pleng Wo Song (2)* and *Wo Pad (8)* (ວອສອງ ວອປັດ).

The music's content shows that rural leaders often use two-way radios as a sign of their higher status and power. They also employ the instruments for non-official purposes. That is, they say that the purpose of two-way radios is for public business, but the leaders use them for their own private business. According to the song's content, the *Kamnan* employs two-way radios to call the head of the village and his assistant to come to meet him quickly. The head and his assistant believe that the *Kamnan* wants them to complete public service. Hence they put on their full uniforms and go quickly to see him. But when they reach the *Kamnan's* house, he orders them to climb up the coconut tree and harvest the fruits for him.

We can see that the issues Wiluk addresses from Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* are in line with the meanings and identities of rural society constructed through the storytelling of the state and the urban middle-class. The storytelling constructed rural people's identities as those who are occupied by individual desires such as alcohol addiction, gambling and promiscuous sexual affairs. Compared to the urban middle and higher classes, rural people appear more irrational. They are engrossed with lust, greed and other passion. Even government officials such as *Kamnan* and *Phu Yai Baan*, who are supposed to serve the public with rationality, often commit acts for their own private benefit.

At one level, Bunsri indicates that, in some cases, alcohol addiction and gambling, the conflicted relationships between fathers-in-law and sons-in-law, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the immoral affairs between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, are a few phenomena happening in rural society. But, at another level, we can see that Bunsri is presenting his music in the tradition of *Jia Kom*. He is showing that humans whether men or women, high or low status, senior or junior, head (*Kamnan* and *Pho Luang* or *Phu Yai Baan*) or member of community, may behave in accordance with lust and greed. Bunsri illustrates the conducts mentioned above, which cannot be addressed directly, in a joking manner (*Jia Kom*). In fact, therefore, the usual behaviors of rural people are presented as part of customs, ethics and morals. Whoever behaves well will be admired as good members of the community. If one is an elder or head of a community, good conduct is important for one's legitimacy and power. The elder or head of community who behaves according to his or her passions will be considered a joker. According to Bunsri's music or, put in another way, the new *Jia Kom*, conducts motivated by lust and greed are amusing and the legitimacy and power of those who act as such will eventually vanish.

This is the hybridization of the modern concepts of the rational, orderly and regulated ways of modern life with the selected memories of the conducts situated in old customs, traditions, ethics and morality of rural people. The result of the hybridization is that rural customs, traditions and morality are considered and interpreted as the order, regulation and rationality of modern people. Rural people, therefore, are as civilized as urban people.

We can see that Bunsri borrows the method of *Jia Kom* to show the amusing behaviors of those who behave under the encouragement of passion in order to indicate that the behaviors are treated as bad and wicked by rural people. Hence, the opposite, usual conduct of rural people is assumed as good. The example Bunsri raises to show this idea is the bad and good conducts of rural leaders. The good *Pho Luang* in the eyes of Bunsri and rural people are those who serve their communities in order to solve the public's problems. In *Hua Ook Pho Luang* (หัวอกเพื่อหลวง) or *Pho Luang's mind*, Bunsri indicates that good *Pho Luang* have to solve all of the problems of their villages, such as serving as guarantor for the transactions of purchasing and selling of land, mediating the quarrelling of husband and wife, and taking action to address the damage done to roads and other things by flooding (Sripasang, 1993). On the other hand, in "Wo song

*Wo Pad*', Bunsri indicates that bad rural leaders are those who employ public instruments and officials in the service of his private business.

At the same time, Bunsri shows the irrational behavior of men who are addicted to drinking alcohol and gambling and fighting with each other. While women are usually treated as those who act irrationally, they are shown as rational when they take action to stop fighting between men and to dissuade men from drinking alcohol and gambling. In these roles, therefore, women occupy the status of holding power because they rationally conduct themselves while men become jokers who have to lose their power.

In conclusion, Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is employed as a cultural space to construct modern identities of the "new rural" people. While the state and the modern urban high and middle classes consider the rural people as those who have behaved in accordance with irrationality, lust, greed and selfishness. Bunsri argues that, in fact, these conducts are usually perceived as amusing by rural people, and, in the eyes of the people, are opposite to the customs, ethics and morality under which rural people usually behave. On the second level, Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* hybridizes modern constructed concepts or ideas of rationality, and tolerates the lust and greed of civilized urban middle and higher class with selected memories of the conducts based on customs, traditions, ethics and morality of rural people. The method employed by Bunsri to show that rural people live an ethical life is *Jia Kom*. *Jia Kom*, or jest tale, is a method rural people use in order to indicate the behaviors under the driving of passion and selfishness as amusing and the people who behave those behaviors as jokers. The aim is to indicate that the majority of villagers are those who behave well in accordance with custom and tradition.

The result of the hybridization is the creation of the modern meaning and identity of rural people as those with rational conducts, behave in accordance with social order and regulation, and under the provision of prohibiting lustful, greedy, and selfish actions. To put it another way, the meaning of the traditional conducts of rural people turn to be interpreted as the modern meaning and identity of the "new rural" Chiang Mai people.

This hybridization produces another result. It is the constructed concept of the state of status and power as in-flux. It means that power isn't always up to the status of leader or man but changes according to the conditions. In the usual condition, elders,

men and leaders occupy positions of power because they behave well. But, if they behave in irrational ways, their status will change to a joker. In this condition, they will lose their power. Women, in usual condition, are treated as powerless because they are considered as those who are occupied by irrational emotion. But, in some conditions, they can behave rationally. In this condition, woman can assume power and can employ the power to punish men who do not behave in rational, ethical and moral ways.

### **Witoon Jaiporm**

Witoon Jaiporm was born on December 15, 1962 in *Amphoe* (district) *Pa Sang* in *Lamphun* province, which is next to *Chiang Mai*. He completed secondary school at his village school. Because he came from a peasant family, upon leaving school he began helping his parents working in the rice field. He was fond of singing music and taught himself to sing when he was a child. At the age of 18, he applied for a *Pleng Lukthung* singing contest and won first place.

The Thai economy was expanding while Witoon was growing up (1960s-70s) and continues with the expansion of the urban industrial and service economic sectors to rural areas (1980s-present). This transformation has entailed the increase of investment and the hire of labourers. The middle class and class of industrial workers have increasingly expanded. The result is the enlargement of entertainment businesses such as the musical production business, nightclubs and restaurants. Hence, many labourers are recruited into these businesses. Witoon is one of these people (Jaiporm, 1999).

After winning the singing contest, Witoon entered the entertainment circle by working for hire as a singer in restaurants in *Chiang Mai* city. But he changed his style of singing from *Pleng Luk Thung* to *Pleng Peur Chiwit* or songs for life of the famous *Carabao* Band (Wanna, 2001). Since the 1980s, however, the current of localism has been on the rise and Bunsri's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* has become popular. The owner of a music production corporation, Tipanatra Enterprise Corporation, found that he might be able to make profit from the popularity of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. He saw the potential of Witoon as a singer of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. Hence, he encouraged Witoon to sing this style of music and the corporation promoted and recorded him (Jaiporm, 1999).

In Witoon's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*, he often sings side-by-side with Prapan Keawkae, a *Chang Saw* or a singer of *Saw* ballad. Prapan has the ability to imitate the voices of other people. Prapan imitates the sound of an old man who is represented the villager in Witoon's music. Although Witoon partially helps in the composition of his *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*, the majority is written for him by Prasit Jeenachan (Wanna, 2001).

We can say that Witoon, Prapan and Prasit are hybrid people who, on one hand, were born and grew up in rural contexts (especially Prapan who has had a traditional *Chang Saw* experience) and, on the other hand, they have earned their living in the modern business of entertainment.

### **The Content and Analysis of Witoon's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang***

When we first listen to Witoon's *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* (Jiaporm, 1992/1; 1993/2; 1993/3; 1994/4; 1994/5; 1995/6; 1995/7; 1996/8; 1997/9; 1998/10), we may get the feeling that the music is mimicking the awkward and out-of-date behavior of rural people when they articulate with modernity. In other words, in his *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*, Witoon makes fun of rural people who are disorderly, unregulated, absurd, irrational and full of lust and greed conducts.

The example song that seems to mimic the clumsy and outmoded behavior of rural people is “*Kamnan Khon Kao*” (កំណានកណ្តាល) or “*The Past Kamnan*”, which is a song about an old man who are used to be a *Kamnan*. The *Kamnan* is an old man who is awkward and out-of-date. He is still egoistic about his old status but expresses it through amusing actions. One day, he would like to go to the city and before getting onto the bus, he asks the driver about the fare rate. The driver replies that “*Dek* (children) are charged 5 baht, *Phu Yai* (adult) are charged 10 baht” The old *Kamnan*, then, says that “If *Phu Yai* have to pay 10 baht (he misunderstands *Phu Yai* to mean head of the village or *Puo Yai Baan*), I am a *Kamnan* (head of the district, with a higher rank than the head of the village) and should have to pay 20 baht. The next day he was sick and so went to the city in order to buy some medicine. He was instructed to take one tablet before sleeping. That night, he took the medicine before sleeping, but when he woke up during the night, he took one tablet each time.

There are many examples of songs in which it seems that Witoon constructs the identities of rural people as amusing, clumsy and out-of-date.

At the same time, there are some songs of Witoon that seem to portray rural people as disorderly and as not understanding the regulation of modern society, such as “*Luk Ka To. Ko. So.*”, (ลูกค้า ท.ก.ส.) or “*Agricultural and Agricultural Co-operative Bank clients*.” The song is about a villager who borrows money from the Bank so as to buy cows. The Bank sets the condition that the villager has to buy two cows but instead he only purchases a pregnant one. When the Bank official objected to his disobedience to the contract, the villager promises that he will buy another one. But he waits for his cow to bear its offspring. The cow, however, does not give birth. Then the villager decides to sell the cow and uses the money to purchase other things. His project of raising the cows ends and it results in the destruction of the contract he made with the Bank. We may interpret this as indicating that Witoon would like to show rural people as disorderly and those who do not keep their words.

Witoon’s *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* seems to indicate that the behaviors of rural people are driven by individual desire and irrational behavior. We can find that many songs of Witoon are about rural people who are addicted to alcohol such as “*Keaw Lum Tuk*” (แก้วล้มทุก), which is about a man who always drinks because he needs to escape from the difficulties of his life. “*Naam Plean Nisai*” (น้ำปลีนนิสัย), or “*Water that makes habits change*” is about an old man who is so addicted to alcohol that he never pays attention to making merit.

“*Meo Plong Long Hong*” (เมวโพลงหลงห้อง) describes a bother-in-law who falls in love with his sister-in-law and endeavors to search for ways to persuade her to be his second wife. Another song, “*Long Ruk Mia Khao*”, (หลงรักเมียชา) shows the bad conduct of a man who falls in love with a woman who is already married. Finally, according to the song, the man is able to make love with the woman by employing a trick. It causes her husband to be furious.

Witoon’s music also seems to indicate that rural people’s actions are dictated by irrational modes of thinking. Examples of this are such as “*Kam Boran*” (คำโบราณ) or “*The ancient-instruction words*” which is about a peasant who doesn’t believe the foretold warning that he should not to harvest his paddy field on a specific day. So he

reaps it, and at night, all of it is burnt and “*Pleng Siang Chok Siang Ruk*” or “*To take a chance and to take a chance of love*” is about a man who believes that the sound of the gecko can foretell winning numbers of lottery, future events, and so on.

However, the more we listen to Witoon’s music, the more we can understand about them. We may be able to consider, on a second level, two additional aspects of Witoon’s music. Firstly, Witoon’s music is also composed in the *Jia Kom* tradition. The music portrays the awkward, out-of-date, irrational and disorderly actions and conducts under the drive of lust and greed of rural people as amusing behaviors. This means that the majority of modern rural people do not behave in this way. These behaviors, in the eyes of modern rural people, are amusing and not suitable for them. Secondly, the purpose of Witoon’s music may be to indicate the dichotomy in modern rural situations. There are many songs of Witoon which show dichotomous ideas such as “*Pai Kan Bo Dai*” (ໄປກັບບໍໄດ້) or “*I am not getting along well with you*” and “*Ai Num Rot Dump*” (ໄຊ້ໜຸນຮອດຕົ້ນ) or “*A young man who drives dump truck*” are songs in which the composer would like to show the collision of two different cultures: Chiang Mai and Bangkok, or the center of modern Thai urban culture. The end of the difference is the separation.

Considering this aspect, therefore, we may suggest that Witoon’s music would like to indicate the oppositions of culture, language and ways of life of northern people in comparison with Bangkok people. The assignment of one as high and the other as low is not intended; instead, he attempts to make clear the difference and conflict between them.

If we consider Witoon’s *Pleng Luktung Kam Mueang* more profoundly, we can find that there he endeavors to hybridize this dichotomy and synthesize it into a third meaning and identity of the “new rural” people. It is the hybridization of the meaning of modernity of urban people and the meaning of the rural people. Or, in other words, the hybridization of the constructed identities of modern people who act in accordance with rationality, knowledge and order and the constructed identities of rural people as guided by irrationality, ignorance, disorder, lust and greed.

We find the mode of hybridization of dichotomous thinking in Witoon’s songs such as “*Khon Suay Prapet Song*” or “*The second category of a beauty*”. The song is about a transvestite who calls for the third space or identity in a world in which sex is categorized into only two opposites of male and female. In the song, a transvestite

is invited to participate in a feast of a wedding ceremony. When all the guests have already come to the ceremony, the spokesman says that "It is the time for every one to enjoy the food that we have prepared for you: ladies first and gentlemen to follow." Hearing the words of the spokesman, the transvestite replies with a loud voice: "Why do you invite only ladies and gentlemen? Why is there no room for transvestites? Do you think they are nonexistent?" Further, when the transvestite tries to go to the restroom, he finds that the restrooms are separated into two categories of men and women. There is no restroom for transvestites.

We can see, therefore, that there is a mode of thinking of hybridizing dichotomies and synthesizing them into the third spaces or identities in Witoon's music.

Witoon's *Lukthung Kam Mueang* also mixes or hybridizes status and identity between urban and rural people. According to modern discourse, urban people are defined as those who possess knowledge and rational modes of thinking while rural people are assumed to be irrational and ignorant. But Witoon' music presents status and identity as not given. In his music, urban people may behave in accordance with irrationality and ignorance. In contrast, rural people may conduct themselves in a rational and knowledgeable manner. The hybridization entails the third space or identity of the relation between rural and urban people.

"*Tung Dang*" (ตุงแดง) or "*Red Flag*" is the first example. This song is about a Bangkok woman who is married to a "new rural" Chiang Mai man. One day, the man brings his wife back to his home in Chiang Mai. When she faces the complexity of northern culture, the woman, who is an urban person and should have a rational mind, reverses into an ignorant and irrational person. When she and her husband reach Chiang Mai, she sees red flags sticking into the roadside. She asks her husband why people stick the beautiful flags into the roadside. He replies that it is because it is a site where there was an accident that killed someone. This fact makes the woman frightened and afraid. The next day, they attend *Ngan Poy* or celebration. The women sees that there are many flags sticking around the area; she becomes very afraid. The man tries to explain to her that the flags sticking into the site of *Ngan Poy* have a different meaning from that of the accident spot, but she does not understand the difference. She is still frightened and afraid. Her husband, therefore, brings her to meet *Pho Nan*, or an old man who is the rural intellectual, in order to let him explain and give the knowledge of the meaning of the different flags to the Bangkok woman.

This song indicates that, actually, the urban people of Bangkok who are defined in modern discourse as those who have knowledge and rationality are able to become those who are awkward, ignorant and irrational when they are faced with another culture with which they are not familiar.

“*Amnaj Ngeun*” (อัมนาจเงิน) or the “*Power of money*” and “*Krang Neong Nai Chiwit*” or “*One upon a time in my life*” show that it is not only the villagers who are occupied by passions. Instead, physicians, who are considered symbols of an urban intellectual and upper class are shown to be able to behave under the drive of greedy desire. “*Amnaj Ngeun*” is about an old rural person admitted to a hospital. He is fond of the gambling of lottery and buys a lottery ticket and gives it to his daughter before going into the hospital. His lottery wins the first prize, and the reward is many million baht. His daughter is afraid that if he finds out about it suddenly, he may be shocked. Therefore, she asks for help from a physician at the hospital to tell her father about the fortune. The physician detours in his telling of the old man about his win. He asks the old man how he will spend the money if he wins the first prize in the lottery. The old man replies that he will separate it into three parts. He will spend the first part to donate in order to make merit. For the second part, he will spend it to buy land and a house for his son and daughter. Finally, because he has been treated very well by the physician, he will give the last part to him. Hearing the words of the old man, the physician is immediately shocked and dies. This story tells us that even a physician can be occupied by greed that makes him so happy when he learns he will receive a large fortune that he is shocked to death.

Another example of Witoon’s *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is “*Krang Neong Nai Chiwit*” (ครังเนงไนชิต). The meaning of the song is that urban people can behave under the encouragement of lust as the rural people. The song begins when an urban man meets a woman by chance. The woman is crying with sorrow, so he comforts her. He also brings her to a restaurant, and then to a motel. He and she finally make love. After that she confesses to him that she cries because she has been infected with H.I.V. and, then the man starts to cry.

We can see that the two songs show us about urban people who behave under the drive of passion and that this conduct brings them calamity.

At the same time, Witoon's music also indicates that, actually, rural people are able to understand and employ efficiently rational modes of thinking in the same manner as urban people. “*Yoob Leao Finaan*” (ყູບເລົວໄຟແນນ) or “*Insurance companies have gone liquidated*” is about an old rural woman, *Mae Keaw*, who insures her life with an agent of an insurance company. But she bargains to receive part of her insurance money from the agent before she dies because she finds fault with the agent who insures her with many insurance companies but tells her that he insures her with only one company. We learn from this song that even though rural people are considered by urban people as foolish, they are clever enough to bargain over business transactions with urban people.

Witoon's music, therefore, tells us that the qualities of modern and traditional characteristics are not fixed within the status of urban or rural people. In other words, they are not given but are in flux. The dichotomy of the identities of urban and rural people is hybridized into a third space or identity of “modern urban and rural” people. The modern urban people can be occupied by traditional characteristics while “modern rural people” can behave as modern people. We can conclude, according to Witoon's music, that the identity of “modern rural” people of Chiang Mai is a mix of modern and traditional characteristics. In one situation, they behave according to traditional motivations but, under other conditions, they may reveal themselves as modern people who possess modern qualities.

### **The Contesting Identities of the Audiences on the Cultural Space of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang***

Entering into the modern time means recognizing that enormous socio-economic changes of rural Chiang Mai have taken place. The social structure of the society has been transformed from one in which the majority of the people earn a living from agricultural production to one in which the majority are engaged in off-farm careers. Although some members of rural families still work in farms, many of them work in the urban economic sector. Among people working in the off-farm sector, those who come from rich families and are educated either at the vocational or university level often work as middle bureaucrats or junior executive of private enterprise. Those who come from middle and poor families and finish only a primary or secondary level education are recruited to the modern economic sector as industrial and construction workers, lower employees of private enterprises, stores, and restaurants including

lower-rank officials of bureaucratic organizations, etc. The condition of the latter is, on one hand, they work in urban area which many of them begin to become more familiar with but, on the other hand, they still live in and are tied to the rural community circle. Rural community is considered by them as their home and their ancestral land.

The result of this condition is the complexity of the “new rural” ways of life. The “new rural” people who come from rich families try to share the same taste of the urban middle class (Gray, 1990). They prefer to shop in department stores in the city, and eat the same kind of food, dress in similar clothes, see foreign movies, and listen to the same kind of music as the urban middle class. But the “new rural” people who come from middle and lower family have different taste. They enjoy seeing Thai film, listening to *Lukthung* music, joining village celebrations and ceremonies such as *Wat* or temple celebrations, ceremonies, fairs, ordination ceremonies, and house-warming ceremonies within their communities (Photinam, 2006). They, especially the latter, are hybrid people who are the audience of hybrid music such as the modern *Saw* (music that employs the melody of *Pleng Saw* but rearranges it in a modern style) and *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*.

Amidst this situation, rural people are the audience of various narratives, both those produced in the Bangkok urban center and those produced locally. The narratives from the center construct rural peoples’ identities as those who behave under the control of irrational, unorganized and passionate forces and who are lazy and not enthusiastic in working or their careers. The rural people, therefore, are defined as uncivilized and underdeveloped. But *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* hybridizes the concept of modernity with the memories of tradition and custom of rural people into the organized and rationalized identity of “new rural” people. Their identity, therefore, is the same as civilized modern urban people.

The two meanings and identities, nevertheless, are constructed as the dominant frames of Chiang Mai rural people’s life. Identifying rural people as uncivilized or underdeveloped gives legitimacy for the state and capitalism to manage their ways of life. Constructing the identity of the people as those who are civilized due to behaving in traditional and customary ways means that they can position themselves as equal to the urban people. But they are still dominated by the static traditional, customary and moral obligations through the construction of static meanings and identities of rural people. It is not an identity that rural audiences have constructed for themselves.

In this section, therefore, I will show that audiences of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* contest meanings and identities in the cultural space of the music.

On one hand, from the author's field work in observing rural rituals and celebrations conducted by the rural people, I found that the performances in which they are popular among the "new rural" people are *Pleng Saw* (already declined) and *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. Comparing between the two, the latter is more popular than the former. Almost every ritual and celebration, around the stage of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is crowded (Wanna, 2001).

Therefore, *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* are the most popular, singers such as Bunsri Rattanang and Witoon Jaiporm are well known among the Chiang Mai "new rural" people (Damrongpich, 2006; Munsert, 2006; Photinam, 2006; Reuongsri, 2006). Until now, *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* cassette tapes and C.Ds. have been, repeatedly reproduced. The example is Witoon Jaiporm's cassette tapes that have been already produced more than 20 albums. Several radio stations in Chiang Mai have regularly broadcasted these songs.

Hence, the Chiang Mai "new rural" people love to listen to *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*, because the songs present contents that are in line with their taste and worldview. The contents present the diverse and unfixed identities of the "new rural" and urban people, such as the identities of both rural and urban people based on civilization, rationality and restraint of lust and greed as well as irrational, ignorance and behave in accordance with passions.

On the other hand, some audiences contest their own identities on the cultural space of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*. I will give some examples that can possibly be the representatives of the audiences.

But because of the limitation of space, I will present it in terms of summary. From my interview (Damrongpich, 2006; Munsert, 2006; Photinam, 2006; Reuongsri, 2006), I found that it is not only the authors but also the audiences of *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* contest the meanings and identities of Chiang Mai's modern rural people. The identities are varied depending on the experience or memory of each individual or group of rural people. In case of Pratumma Munsert, we may assume that she is representative of the majority of "new rural" Chiang Mai people who experience bad conditions in rural life and inferior and insulted-working status in urban life. She

interprets *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* as music that narrates about rural people, especially men, who are addicted to alcohol and gambling and the difficulties that this leads to in family life. At the same time, women are those who take action as problem solvers. For her, the music shows that many rural people believe in sacred power but also that the power will help only those who behave well.

For Praves Reuongsri, he is representative of the minority of “new rural” Chiang Mai people who are successful, in comparison with the majority of rural people, in the modern condition. Praves’s family in the rural village lacks resources but he can support his family by sending the money received from working in urban center to his parents. His ability to elevate himself to be the head of workers means that he is successful in his career in the modern sector. *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* for Praves reflects the outmost identity of rural people who are addicted to gambling and alcohol, behave under the drive of passion and expect the sacred to bring fortune to them. They are different from the “new rural” people like him who do not depend on the sacred or gambling, but his own industry.

In case of Anan Damrongpich, he has good memories of his life and status as a patron in rural life while he is a low-level state official who works as a servant in a bureaucratic organization. For him, *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is a representation of rural culture that reflects the optimistic identity of rural people. Although rural people are identified in the music as out-of-date, ignorant, and sometimes behaving in accordance with passionate motivations, they are expressed as natural. This is in contrast to the modern urban people who are delusional and take advantage of and exploit rural people.

Supin Photinam’s memory of her rural life is not bad but at the same time is not very good. Her experience of modern urban life is also the same. Her status in her workplace is that of the lowest state official like Anan. However, she is married to a middle-rank technician of a state enterprise. Compared with her rural friends, therefore, she is better off than many of them. Compared with urban people, however, she is of a lower status but better than many employees and proletarians. She interprets *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* as reflecting both bad and good identities of rural and urban people.

We can conclude that *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is a cultural space where not only the authors but also the audiences contest the modern identities of Chiang Mai

“new rural” people. The meanings and identities are contested which differ from the memories of people who constructed them. Hence, there is not a dominant meaning or identity. The meaning and identity of Chiang Mai “new rural” people, therefore, is not static but is in flux.

### **Summary**

In summary, firstly, this article argues that there is not only one meaning of modernity. The state presents and emphasizes the meaning of modernity through the cultural spaces of film, T.V. drama and music in order to employ it to dominate individuals and various groups of people. People also produce their own modern identities through the cultural space, especially, *Pleng Lukkrung*, *Pleng Lukthung* and *Pleng Lukthung Kam Mueang*.

Secondly, the contestation of modern identities conducted by the hybridization between the dominant concepts of modernity and the constructed memories of each group’s history and experience in the cultural space becomes the third modern identity of each group. To put it another way, the cultural space is the third space in accordance with the concept of Homi Bhabha.

Thirdly, considered from the view of Bakhtin (Gardiner, 2000), the cultural space is the same as dialogism in which meanings are constructed. In this article, the meanings in question are the meanings of modernity. The Thai ruling class endeavors to hegemonically construct the meaning of modernity. They try to make it static, unchangeable and abstract in order to dominate all of the people in the nation. But, at the same time, various groups and individuals who are part of rural Chiang Mai people contest the meaning and make it dynamic, changeable and concrete. The modern meanings are, therefore, on one hand, related to the everyday life of the people or, in other words, the modern meanings emerged from interaction between the people within specific space and time of the modern life of them. The meanings, on the other hand, become those struggling against the dominant meaning of the ruling class. As Michael Gardiner cites from Bakhtin, they are:

the ceaseless ‘battle’ between official (monologizing, centralizing) and ‘unofficial’ (dialogizing, multiform) sociocultural forces, and the latter he identified with

the popular or 'folk-festive' culture of the people,  
the 'eternally living element of unofficial speech  
and unofficial thought'

(*Gardiner, 2000*)

In other words, we may say in Gramscian terms that the ruling class endeavors to produce hegemonic thought in order to override all of the people but the people, especially subaltern people, resist by forming dynamic anti-hegemonic meanings so as to free themselves from the domination of the ruling class.

Furthermore, the result of the various groups of people contest the meaning of modernity is the flexibility of the meaning that entails the vagueness and ambiguity of it. The vagueness and ambiguity of the meaning of modernity, hence, leads to the eradication of power relations that the ruling class constructs through such meaning. It entails the emergence of opportunity toward the new complicated relations that various groups of people are able to negotiate and share the practices of power in modern society.

Therefore, the social history of modernity in rural Chiang Mai is not only one history that is unified with that offered by the central state. The social history of modernity also includes the resistance to the domination of the Thai state by those who contest the meanings and identities assigned to them through engaging cultural space. This means that there is an attempt by rural Chiang Mai people to construct their own history.

### **Acknowledgement**

This study was financially supported by Thailand Research Fund through the Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.d Program. The author would like to thank Professor Dr. Anan Ganjanapan for his valuable academic advice.

### **Notes**

1 *Pleng Lukthung* is a genre of music that was generated in the urban center by, in majority, composers and singers who migrated from rural areas to inhabit Bangkok. In general, it was understood as a representation of rural Thai society. But Nidhi

Aeuosriwong, one of the most famous Thai historians, argues that its true function is to mediate modern urban meaning so that it can be understood by rural people, (Aeuosriwong, 1995a).

- 2 Jia Kom were the tales narrated about the behaviors driven by passion of people, especially those with high positions such as kings, monks and elders. The behaviors of the people were narrated in a joking way so the teller could escape from being penalized because he was speaking of the immoral and unethical behaviors of people who had a high status in society, (Chimpanao, 1979; Aeuosriwong, 1996).
- 3 This conclusion comes from Aeuosriwong, 1995 b and my observation of Thai films and T.V. dramas for a long time.
- 4 Sundraporn was a *Lukkrung* band found by the Public Relation Department since 1939 and it has existed until now. On the one hand, it serves as a spokesman of the state by composing and singing by the band singers under the state policy but, on the other hand, it has been also the representation of urban middle class by composing and singing by independent songs.
- 5 This band performed music that mixed modern and Chiang Mai traditional styles.

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