

The Roles and Importance of Musical Culture in the Thao Hung Thao Chueang Epic

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Abstract

The Lao epic, *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* contains numerous references to musical culture. Music and the sound of musical instruments are mentioned in the context of games and rituals, in order to convey beliefs, emotions, and ideologies associated with the epic's characters. It is evident that musical references are important aspects of cultural information and play a crucial role in this work of literature. The present article examines the role of music in literature, using the methods of literary criticism and applying theories on the relationship between literature and society to analyze the text. The research revealed that the musical culture in this epic is characterized by three essential roles: its role in games and rituals, in politics and warfare, and in conveying emotions and feelings. The roles and importance of musical culture demonstrate their integral part in the way of life of the ethnic groups on both sides of the Mekong River. Music appears to be guiding the rhythm of life, mediating emotions and desires, and motivating the people of all groups. This article aims to demonstrate that *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* is truly worthy of praise and is a genuine literary treasure of Southeast Asian people.

Keywords: musical culture, *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*, role and importance, Southeast Asian people

Introduction

Thao Hung Thao Chueang or *Thao Ba Chueang* is considered a great poetic work of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Chit Phumisak (2020: 219) considered this work to be a great epic because it glorifies heroes and has a length of approximately 5,000 stanzas. In the field of literary studies, when we refer to an 'epic,' we mean timeless and great literature of the world, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, or Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, etc. According to scholars of the field, aside from having a long length, an epic must also be endowed with literary language telling the story of ancient tribes with heroic leaders. The provision of examples, moral guidance and knowledge is achieved through the storytelling of heroic deeds and adventures (Beckson and Ganz, 1975: 65-69; Nimmanhaemin, 2009: 91; Poolthupya, 2004: 684).

The epic of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* became known in academic circles when the Lao scholar Sila Virawong discovered an original palm-leaf manuscript of the work (533 palm-leaves, containing 1,105 written palm-leaf pages), inscribed with Tai Noi characters at the National Library of Thailand. He transcribed it into Thai and published it in 1943, naming the literature, 'ท้าวฮุ่งหรือเจื่อง' [*Thao Hung or Chueang*]. Later, he brought this text to Laos and published it in 2003 (Nimmanhaemin, 1987: 18;

Nimmanhaemin, 2009: 92-93). The poetic work is very old. According to Phumisak (2020: 220), the language, poetic composition and storytelling styles suggest that it was written in Luang Prabang, Lan Xang Kingdom, around the 15th century of the Common Era. The idioms used are similar to those of Sukhothai inscriptions of the roughly the same time and to the literature of the early Ayutthaya period. The narrative style of this literature is not that of fiction, but a true story, based on historical events (Office of the Royal Society, 2005: Foreword).

The epic tells the story of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*, the exemplary cultural hero of the people of the Mekong Basin, including the Tai Lue and Tai Dam of northern Vietnam, and the people of Sipsong Panna (*Xishuangbanna*), Lanna, Lan Chang, and Isan. As the Tai-Lao ancestors like to pass on the stories of the hero Thao Chueang from generation to generation, the way of life of people on both sides of the Mekong River is intertwined with this literary work (Wongthet, 2005: 9; Punnotok, 1998: 76).

Initially, the early transmission of the story of *Thao Chueang* was most probably in oral form, as the Khmu and Stieng have stories of *Thao Chueang* in the form of mythology (Nimmanhaemin, 1995: 79). The stories were eventually written down by poets of the next generation, who continued to add to and improve them until the epic of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* featured extensive details concerning the history, society, and culture of the Tai people. This is consistent with what Virawong (1995: 97) said about the work: "It provides important information on ancient society and is an excellent literary heritage of Laos." Similarly, Duangduean Bunyawong (1995: 183) declared that there is no other work of Lao literature that describes society, culture, environment, and places as clearly. Thus, *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* is a reservoir of knowledge and information about various aspects of the way of life of both royalty and commoners in terms of architecture, weaponry, traditional games, utensils, clothing, etc. (Nimmanhaemin, 1998: 103).

Regarding especially the references to musical culture, the research found that the epic mentions a wide variety of musical instruments. We can classify them into four groups, as follows: 1) percussion instrument: drums, moon-shaped bells, cymbals and gongs; 2) wind instruments: oboe and *suan lai*, which could mean either the ancient Yunnan oboe or a certain kind of flute (Office of the Royal Society, 2005: 154), *khaen*, a bamboo mouth organ; *sang*, conch shell horn and metal horn or trumpet; 3) stringed instruments: *sueng*, plucked lute and *phin*, two- or three- or four-stringed lutes; 4) ensembles: *phin-phat*, which signifies not only a particular type of lute (*phin*), but also an orchestra, that is, a set of at least five musical instruments usually consisting of an oboe, a barrel-shaped drum with two heads, a circular set of gongs, *ranat* or wood percussion keyboard, and drums (Office of the Royal Society, 2005: 154). Additionally, in stanza #29 of the work, the term *thai-phat* is used. This term means a group of various instrumentalists (Office of the Royal Society, 2005: 31). These references indicate that the author(s) of the epic had a very good knowledge of musical culture. Therefore, special emphasis was given to various aspects, e.g., the instruments, the instrumentalists, and the audience who participated in musical events. Furthermore, the epic uses the imitative sound of musical instruments. Such references can be seen in the following examples:

Example 1

๑ พิณพาทย์พร้อมแกมปี	สวนไล
หน้าหน้าขมแพ่งแค	กินแกลัม
หลังเห็นดาวไหลเหลื่อม	แสงใส สุนเมฆ
ไก่อู้แก้วนพร้อม	ส่งเสียง

(Wongthet, 2005: 54)

Translation: The sound of the orchestra, oboe, and flute. Pouring liquor and enjoying foods. The moon shines brightly, among the clouds. Roosters sing along.

Example 2

๑ กูจกคล้องเป็นเชื่อน	ขนงเมือง
โงงโงงเสียงผ่านพิณ	พานสร้าง
บุญเฮื่องนั้นนางจอม	เป็นอาชญ์
เจ้าเนบข้างเทียมท้าว	บ่คลา

(Wongthet, 2005: 7)

Translation: Surrounding the city are a moat and a dam. The sound of lute plucking, percussion sounding, *ngong ngong!* Phra Nang Chom, by her great merit, sits close to her husband, Thao Chom Tham.

In example 1, the poet mentions musical instruments, the oboe and flute as part of an orchestra in line 1. Even though there are no words literally mentioning the sound of music, the reader could deduce that the musical instruments indicate an ensemble of instrumental soundings, and particularly a harmony. The conveyed scenario in this example is at a time when young men formed drinking bands and played musical instruments for entertainment, amidst beautiful and pleasant surroundings late at night and with the sound of roosters crowing.

In example 2, the poet uses a literary device called *onomatopoeia*, which is the imitation of the sound, in this case, ‘โงงโงง’ (*ngong ngong*) of the percussion instrument *kang sadan* (moon-shaped bell) to provide an auditory effect in a scene which takes place in the city of Suan Tan or Nakong City of King Thao Chom Tham. The reader sees a vivid scenario of the live event in Nakong City as pleasant and joyful. The sound of music rouses the people, enlivens them, stimulates them to listen carefully.

Thao Hung Thao Chueang conveys aspects of the culture that are among the common practices of societies on both sides of the Mekong River. The poem was written based on the living conditions of people in a certain era (Phumisak, 2020: 221). When the poet mentions music, it reflects the identity and way of life of ethnic groups which are connected to and by musical culture. The mention of various types of musical instruments is not only a reflection of social conditions that are materially prosperous or evidence of a common culture of the people coming into contact with each other (Manorat, 2004: 46). It also is an admirable reflection of the intellectual development of the people on both sides of the Mekong in the past. Therefore, it is worth studying how *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* demonstrates the role and importance of musical culture. Most importantly, this article will confirm the value of the epic, that is, the reasons it has been praised by readers from the past until today.

Research Objective

This article aims to demonstrate the role and importance of musical culture in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*, by examining aspects of the poem referring to musical culture.

Research Scope and Methods

We studied the epic, using the version edited by Sujit Wongthet, *Thao Hung Thao Chueang Mahakap haeng Usakh-ne* [Thao Hung Thao Chueang, the Epic of Southeast Asia], published in 2005. The work has a total of 4,997 stanzas, but the study focused only on the data related to musical culture, i.e., the stanzas with reference to musical instruments, sounds of musical instruments, musicians, and vocabulary related to musical culture. With regard to the understanding of the vocabulary, the researcher studied the definitions proposed by various dictionaries, including Dictionary of Thai Local Literature of the Northeastern Region: Thao Hung or Thao Chueang, volumes 1-4, along with the explanations by Bunyawong, (2006), transcribed by Bunyawong from the original edition of Virawong, and translated from Lao to Thai by Pramote Naijit.

The research used methods that provide a detailed reading of the text emphasizing descriptive analysis and literary studies to analyze the text critically. In order to provide in-depth analysis, we applied theories on the relationship between literature and society as a research tool to show that this work is part of society, reflecting the cultural structure within society.

Literature Review

Theories on the Relationship between Literature and Society

A work of literature is an artistic production created by a person based on lived experiences and in historical and cultural contexts. People are social animals. When a person thinks, feels, has expectations and desires something, he or she communicates it to other people. Plueng Na Nakhon (2000: 27) discussed the relationship between literature and society, which can be summarized as follows: Literature of a certain period reflects the living conditions of the people and the country during that time. In interpreting a literary text, we can see the thoughts, feelings, wisdom, and ideals of the relevant nations of that time. This idea is consistent with that of Wit Sivasriyanon (1988: 183-199) who viewed the relationship between literature and society as follows: A single author is like three people: 1) a writer, 2) an individual of that generation, of that time, and 3) a citizen. The comparison means that authors are influenced by their society, that is, they use the language of that society; thus, an author must accept socio-linguistic norms in order to be able to convey their thoughts and feelings to others. The concept regarding the relationship between literature and society is a way to study literature as a reflection of society. We used this concept to study social aspects concerning musical culture in the epic of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*.

Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Studies of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*

The literature survey revealed that there is a large body of work analyzing *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* in terms of linguistics, literary techniques, and culture. Among the important examples is the study of Chit Phumisak (1995), in which he commented that this piece of literature was written in an ancient style of poetry, using ancient Lao mixed with Tai Lue languages. Hence, it should probably have been composed several hundred years before the story of *Sinchai*. He pointed out that the intellectual heritage of this literature is the foundation of the richness of the Southeast Asian literature. This idea also appears in his other work, on the Water Oath ritual (Phumisak, 2020) which suggests that *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* has several traces of *Khlong Ha*, which is the oldest poetic composition of around the 13th to the 14th century.

The central point is that this period, which was contemporary with the early Ayutthaya period, was a time when Lao people came to the land of the Kha and adopted their traditions and culture before developing into a new culture of their own. Therefore, studying the cultural wisdom in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* can also reveal traces of old customs that have been erased from other works of literary heritage.

Virawong (1995) is equally important because it gives an overview of the literature, provides details of the original discovery, summarizes the story, explains the poem, i.e., its literary form, language, as well as the traditions and rituals found in it. The study also suggests that Thao Hung is of Khmer or Mon ethnicity.

An important study following Virawong is Bunyawong, Kham-in-su, Phothisita and Ninathi (1997), which analyzes ideas and concepts in the epic, comparing it with local legends of Tai-Lao culture. It also studies cultures and traditions found in the epic, explaining the power relations between the ruling elites of ancient cities, construing roles and duties of the ideal leader and confirming that *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* is a true cultural hero. And it shows that the epic preserves the traces of traditions and cultures, i.e., the way of life of not only the elite, but also of commoners, and that it reflects traces of the evolution of ideas and beliefs of the Lan Chang people in the past.

Noteworthy research in the form of doctoral dissertations includes Nimmanhaemin (1987), which examines the figure of *Thao Chueang* in the literature of various Tai ethnic groups, in term of mythological analysis, literary composition, and literary use of vocabulary, expressions, and rhetoric. The results reveal that the story of *Thao Ba Chueang* consists of two components, the original composition as well as supplementary or later compositions. The dissertation argued that this work is truly a great epic, complete and suitable to be regarded as the literary heritage of the Tai people. As for the literary background, there is, nevertheless, no explicit information regarding the author or the era in which it was composed. In any case, scholars agree that it is very old. Nimmanhaemin (2009), for example, provides a hypothesis on the antiquity of the epic based on its ancient vocabulary. Even though the most-used poetic form is similar to the form of '*Klon Aan*' used in Lao poetry, the epic has the special feature of rhymes in each stanza and between stanzas similar to '*Klong Dan*,' or comparable to the poetry from the early Ayutthaya period (Nimmanhaemin, 2009: 93-94).

Another doctoral dissertation with reference to the subject is Sukaranan (2010), which examines the epic as an example of Lao heroic literature, mentioning that the main character reflects the image of a hero by performing heroic deeds in an elephant duel. Sukaranan's interesting argument is that this work not only exhibits the characteristics of a great epic in terms of content, prosody, and rhetoric; it also provides an ethnographic history through literary art. This study, therefore, encourages reconsideration of the idea that the epic contains not only linguistic and aesthetic dimensions, but social and cultural dimensions as well.

Studies on the Subjects of Music in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*

Still another study, Rueangsuwan (1976), gives insight into the evolution of musical performances in Isan culture, especially how musical instruments not only provide entertainment, but are considered accessories to the prestige of the ruler. This can be seen in the epic where large ensembles of musical instruments, consisting of *phin-phet*, or small bands of musical instruments, consisting only of the *saw* (bowed string instrument) and *khaen* or only of the *seung* and *khaen*, are mentioned (Rueangsuwan, 1976: 23).

As for studies on the representation of music in terms of literary devices, Yamdate (2017) (my own research paper) also provides the basis for rethinking the role and value of musical instruments' sounds

as a literary device. An example is when a poet creates literary representation of aesthetic succession of sounds by imitating the sound of musical instruments in terms of words, imagery and intonation. This idea motivated us to further develop the study of musical culture with regard to the social and cultural dimensions of the epic.

Research Results and Discussion

The study found three important roles of musical culture in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*: 1) games and rituals, 2) politics and warfare, 3) the conveying of emotions and feelings.

Role and Importance of Music in Games and Rituals

In *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*, music is a component of games and rituals. Music is a medium that creates an atmosphere of sacredness, order, and joy. In rituals, there are musical performances, vocal and instrumental, that send signals to spiritual or divine beings, and also unite the listener's emotions to be one with the ritual. Moreover, the sound of music is used to symbolize the beginning of a new life, cheerfulness, and hope. The characters of the story also use music as a means of predicting their fate in order to give direction to their lives, as in the two events described below.

Event 1:

The event when Phra Nang Ngom invited Thaen Lom (which possibly means 'god of wind') to come down from heaven and participate in the gathering of the *Long Tao Khuang* ceremony, a seance ritual for divination. There were musical performances in the ceremony, to the extent that the sound of musical instruments could send a signal inviting the heavenly spirits to come down, gather in the ceremony, and celebrate with the people. For example, in stanza #402 (Wongthet, 2005: 65): “สองขอกเทียบเสียงปี่ พรหม แคน สมสมนั้นซู่ภายใน หุ่่มพร้อม” [“On the way, the sound of oboes. The sound of *khaens*. Loudly, one can hear them. In harmony and in every direction”]. The passage depicts a female medium performing a ritual to summon divine spirits. In the event, along the route, there was the sound of chanting, the sound of oboes and *khaens*, playing loudly in harmony and in every direction. Also, in stanza #411 (Wongthet, 2005: 67): “นางโยสร้อยเสียงหวาน จับคว่าง เขาก็พรหมปี่พร้อม หลายก้อง กล่อมเสียง” [“Nang Yai, with her sweet and delicate voice, sang. The musicians played along. The sound of several oboes resounded harmoniously”]. In this passage, the female medium was also acting as a *mor lam* (expert female singer) in a ritual, chanting with a beautiful voice, accompanied by the sound of oboes. The two passages show that music is a language used for communication between human and spiritual beings. The more beautiful and delightful the singing and the playing of musical instruments is, the more the spiritual beings will be satisfied in participating in this delightful event with humans.

Event 2:

The ritual of soulmate divination. Stanzas 591-595 (Wongthet, 2005: 94) describe a ritual of soulmate divination as having a *mahorathuk*, sacred bronze drum, as a device for the divination. The passage relates an incident in which Thao Hung and Phra Nang Ngom participated in a divination ritual to predict their fates. The method of divination begins with the characters throwing a hammer at the head of a *mahorathuk* drum that is spinning under the tension of a silk rope. When the hammer hits any part of

the drum's head, the fortune teller will make a prediction about the person's fate. According to the story, Thao Hung threw the hammer and hit the head of the drum with a crashing sound. This made the spiritual beings rejoice. As for Phra Nang Ngom, she threw the hammer and it fell right on the middle of the drum. All the young people rejoiced. From this it can be seen, first, that the musical instrument is depicted as device that plays a distinctive role in divination, and, second, that it reflects the ideals of young people in wishing to have a good, suitable partner in order to pass along an heir to their family.

It is noted that *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* places importance on music as a form of entertainment that creates happiness among people. And this could be interpreted as a reflection of the ancient societies on both sides of the Mekong as valuing fun and joy in every phase of their lives. This can be seen in stanza #2273 (Wongthet, 2005: 342) describing the fun that the people of Tum Wang city had when playing music, playing conch trumpets and oboes, creating loud melodies. In the event, the dancer moves gracefully and tightrope performers climb up high poles to perform dances that entertain the audience.

๑ คุ่มพางพร้อมแตรสังข์	สวานเสพ
เสียงสนั่นก้องดังห้าว	มีนั้น
สะพรั่งเนืองนางกะลิ่ง	พื่อนอ่อน
ละเม้งเล่นขึ้นโตนเต็น	ได้กระโดง

(Wongthet, 2005: 342)

Translation: The people of Tum Wang were blowing conch trumpets and oboes. The interwoven sounds were deafening. The dancers moved gracefully. Tightrope performers climbed the poles up high.

Role and Importance of Music in Politics and Warfare

Music in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* has political significance as it demonstrates the might of the king and plays a role in the hero's introduction, journey, and battle. The relationship between music and the heroic figure is noticeable from the beginning. For example, the section introducing Thao Hung's parents, Thao Chom Tham and Queen Chom, describes the sound of lutes and bells being played. These particular instruments demonstrate the prosperity and majestic quality of the city. Thus, the sound of musical instruments is part of the identity of the city and the medium of displaying royal prestige.

Additionally, music is used as a literary device to project different characters in the Thao Hung epic, in term of affecting the narrative or the progression of the story. For example, when Thao Hung was born, a group of musicians beat drums deafeningly throughout the city of Nakong. The music signaled joyfulness at the birth of the king's son. As the text says, “ฮั่นฮั่นก้องไทพาทย์ ตีกลอง ทวนทวนเสียงทั่วเมือง ดังก้อง” [“*Huen huen!* Musicians beat drums. *Tuan tuan!* The sound spreads through the city. Loud and echoing”]. On that occasion, the people brought tribute, which included the great White Elephant, Phra Saeng Dab (sword), and a pair of silver gongs to honor Thao Hung. It should be noted that the double silver gongs are considered to be Thao Hung's most regal musical instruments. They are a symbol of the fame and honor of Thao Hung which will long be remembered. Another example is when Thao Hung became the king of Nakong city and married Phra Nang Ngom. The singing and the playing of musical instruments within the palace were performed continuously. Inside the palace there was only enjoyment with games, singing, and the beautiful sounds of musical instruments, demonstrating the merit and prestige of the king and the well-being of the state.

In the scene of Thao Hung's marching army, the sound of musical instruments is mentioned as a part of war. This sound was used as a signal for the troops to move. At the same time, it was also used to create solidarity and unity in the army. This can be seen in stanza #1359 (Wongthet, 2005: 207) where the loud sound of the gongs being struck, “*swa swa thuang!*” signals the movement of Thao Hung's army:

๑ สว่าสว่าท้วงฆ้องป่า	ตีเดิน
สองคราญคลาแท่นทอง	ถึงช้าง
เส็นเส็นย้ายขอยเชิง	ช้าอย่าง
คนกัณฑ์ตูกว้าง	ออกละวัง

(Wongthet, 2005: 207)

Translation: *Swa! Swa! Thuang!* The sound of the gongs was the signal. Thao Hung and Phra Nang Ngom left their golden thrones. On the back of an elephant, slowly and elegantly, the procession moved forward. People came out to see, until they overflowed the city gates.

In this passage, it can be seen that when Thao Hung and Phra Nang Ngom left the royal throne and sat on the elephant's back, the sound of the gongs, “*swa swa thuang!*” signaled the royal procession to march to war. Next, it depicts the army of elephants marching out onto the road, looking majestic. The people came out to admire the procession until the city gates overflowed. In these events, music was playing along.

As for the battlefield or the warfare itself, music also plays significant roles. Along with signaling battle, music was used to boost the army's morale. When the army went to war, there were musicians alongside the soldiers to play music on the battlefield. An example is stanza 2111, when the army of Thao Sum, governor of the city of Ngen Yang, was victorious over the army of Thao Angka. In the middle of the battlefield, there was the sound of music playing exuberantly to indicate the joy in Thao Sum's victory. The poet, in describing the musicians playing gongs, oboes, and flutes, portrays the joyful display of the soldiers with their eyes wide, their faces elated, and their complexions visibly bright:

๑ เขาฮีบ ค้อนปิ่นฆ้องคอมปี	สวนไฉ
สมคามเฮาค่อยทรง	ตางเจ้า
หุดาคิ้วคอยไหล	เหลียวเหลือด
เนอบเศร้าวพิวเกลี้ยง	ส่องใส

(Wongthet, 2005: 318)

Translation: On the battlefield, the musicians were playing gongs and oboes. The soldiers were fighting in place of their masters. They widened their eyes and raised their eyebrows. But their faces were fresh and bright. No fear.

In this battle scene, the music is deafening, creating a stirring atmosphere. Stanza #2486 (Wongthet, 2005: 373) describes Thao Hung raising a great army to attack the city of Pakan. The army of Ngen Yang fought against the Kaew until they were defeated. Elated, the Ngen Yang played music, beating drums and gongs to signal that their army was superior to the Kaew army. In this episode, the poet created an

image of the Ngen Yang army, comparing it to birds catching fish in a swamp lacking water. This figure of speech means that when the swamp lacked water, birds and snakes swarmed in to eat the fish in the swamp, as in the following passage:

	๑ ผุ่งไฟรลัมเลียนคุ่ม	ตายเต็ง
ทวนทวน	ไทเงินยางตี้มกลอง	เกาหม่อง
เทื่อนี้	เป็นดังปลาแปนน้า	ในวัง บกขาด
	นกนากฮ้องบินเค้า	เคียนมา

(Wongthet, 2005: 373)

Translation: Many of the enemy died. *Tuam! Tuam!* The victorious Ngen Yang played drums and gongs. Winning this battle was like catching fish in a dry swamp. Flocks of birds and snakes were rushing, claiming the fish.

Musical performances in the royal court were a sign of the king's honor and the country's magnificence. Moreover, when the king performed a war mission, a troupe of musicians played instruments to signal battle and to express congratulations when the army won. From this it could be said that music had significant roles in politics. It demonstrated the stability of the state. And it played an important part in the battlefield because music creates an invigorating atmosphere on the battlefield, rousing sentiment for the goal of victory.

Role and Importance of Music in Conveying Emotions and Feelings

Playing music is a way to convey shared emotions and feelings in a community. The context in which music is used to help convey emotion in the *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* epic depends on the circumstances of the story. As in the previous section when talking about music on the battlefield, it can be seen that the music stimulates excitement, boosting morale for the brave soldiers who will sacrifice their lives for the army. The sound of drums and gongs was deafening, encouraging brave deeds. However, when the story concerns death, music is used to create a mood of mourning. This can be seen in the passage in which Thao Chomtham, the father of Thao Hung, died suddenly. While the people of the city carried his body and placed it in an urn, there was the overpowering sound of gongs, drums, and oboes. As the passage of stanza #48 (Wongthet, 2005: 13) stated, “เมื่อนั้น โงงโงงฆ้องกลองนั้น เนืองปี้,” [*Ngong! Ngong!* The gongs and drums were played. The sound of the oboes was deafening”] which shows the involvement, imitating the sound of music. This literary involvement of musical sounds is later expanded to create a feeling of sorrow in the hearts of the audience, as appears in stanza #49 (Wongthet, 2005: 14): “สว่าสว่าให้ฮ้องฮ้ำ ส่งสะกา,” [*Swa! Swa!* (The people) all wept loudly. [They] performed the funeral rite, in solidarity”] where the sound of a musical instrument, “swa-swa,” was described as inspiring people to weep at the mourning ceremony.

However, in events where the narrative expresses love or grief, the sound of music is used to create a feeling of melancholy. For example, the passage describing Thao Hung's mourning for his beloved, Phra Nang Ngom, resounds with sadness. The sounds of musical instruments from the *phin-phet* orchestra and the sound of bells resounded, in order to convey Thao Hung's sorrow. In another event, the passage describes the time when Thao Hung fell in love. The memory did not make him feel distressed. But once he realized that his lover had actually passed away, deep sadness took over. As in stanza #806 (Wongthet, 2005: 125):

	๑ คำว่าหัวหน้าเจ้าสูง	สมนา
ฟังยิน	แคนซุงเสียงพาทย์พิณ	เพลงพร้อม
	กระดิ่งดังก้องเสียงน่าน	เนื่องหิ่ง
แม้งหนึ่ง	เถิงที่ไม่งำค้อม	ทางปึก เขียงเครือ

(Wongthet, 2005: 125)

Translation: At the fork in the road, passage to Chiang Khrua. Under a tree. With the sound of the *khaen* and the *phin-phet*. Along with the bells. Mingling in desolation. A sorrowful face, he had.

In *Thao Hung Thao Chueang*, music is also the medium for creating shared emotions between spiritual and human beings. It demonstrates that among the peoples of the Mekong basin, spirits could come into contact with humans. And when spirits come, music plays a part in conveying joyful sentiment to both, as in stanza #509 (Wongthet, 2005: 81):

	๑ เสียงปี่ก้องลมล่วง	เวหา
	คอนคอนนันทอกใน	ดังก้อง
แต่นั้น	นงเมืองเจ้าคำหา	ด้านตอบ
	ชมชื่นหน้าขาวแจ่ม	จิ่งแถลง

(Wongthet, 2005: 81)

Bunyawong translated the above passage as: “ลมพัด เสียงปี่ดังแทรกอากาศมา เสียงกระหึ่มดังก้องทั้งในและนอกงานบุญ พุดจาตอบโต้ แถ่นคำหาจึงกล่าวถ้อยแถลงด้วยใบหน้าที่ยิ้มชื่นเบิกบาน” [The wind blew, and the sound of the oboes pierced the air. The loud melody resounded both inside and outside the area of the merit-making ceremony. In response, the heavenly spirit, Khamwa, made a statement with a smile.] (Bunyawong, 2006: 53). The context of this musical performance is the joyful atmosphere of the merit-making event. Music is a medium of communication between spiritual and human beings because it creates an entertaining atmosphere. Entertainment here does not refer only to the experience of human beings. Spiritual beings also desire satisfaction and happiness from games and music. The music in this epic thus strengthens the friendship between spirits and humans.

Conclusion

The epic of *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* reflects the role and importance of musical culture in three significant ways. 1) In rituals, music is part of games and rituals. Music stimulates joy in playing a game and creates meaning in ritual practices, making the rituals complete and meaningful. 2) In politics and warfare, playing music is part of the proclamation of the merit of the ruling class. Music is a signal for warfare, boosting courage in battle. 3) In conveying emotions, music induces a wide range of feelings, e.g., arousing courage, causing sadness in the grief of loss, or melancholy from a painful love experience, as well as creating joy and happiness among people who come together to play music and games. The study of the musical culture in *Thao Hung Thao Chueang* reveals what is essential in the lives of local ethnic groups who desire the aesthetic experience provided by music. The study also reveals the value of the epic, both socially and culturally, as a truly great literary work of the people on both sides of the Mekong.

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