

2006

## Thai popular music: The representation of national identities and ideologies within a culture in transition

Lamnao Eamsa-Ard  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# **Thai Popular Music:**

## **The Representation of National Identities and Ideologies Within a Culture in Transition**

By

Lamnao Eamsa-ard

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of

Doctor of Philosophy,

Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries

Edith Cowan University

2006

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## ABSTRACT

Thai popular music always reflects and reproduces the concerns of Thai people in changing times especially in regard to issues relating to identity. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the preservation of Thai identity and the ideologies surrounding it and the adoption of Western innovation in Thai popular music. The issues surrounding the identity and ideology of Thais, such as class, gender and ethnicity are explored within the area of Thai popular music. I use ethnography as the major tool for gathering and analysing the research data. Using triangulated ethnographic techniques, involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, document analysis and participant observation including critical listening of the music, watching TV and video music programs. The ethnographic approach is supported by semiotic and discourse analysis especially of the songs' meaning and the comments of the respondents.

The study demonstrates that there are various degrees and aspects of Thai identity in Thai popular music, and likewise there are many styles of Thai popular music. Each style represents a different aspect or degree of Thai identity. Furthermore, Westernness, as a form of pervasive of modernity is always incorporated in every genre of Thai popular music. Thai popular music is a representative of a process of modernization where Thai and western cultures blend to form something new but also distinctly Thai. Each musical genre reproduces Thai identity and an ideology that represent different aspects of class, gender and ethnicity in modern Thai culture. *Pleng lukgrung* (country music) is a representative of urban Buddhist Thai culture from the capital city of the nation and supports a dominant Thai ideology that emphasises nationalism, patriotism and Buddhist-inflected behaviour and the values of the elite ruling class culture. *Pleng lukthung* represents the different Thai identities of ordinary people from different indigenous ethnic groups of Thai people from the four regions of Thailand as well as the Thai urban working class identity. *Pleng string* involves the identity and ideology of young urban people who have come to form new elite group. The major themes of *pleng puea chiwit* deal with political discontent and opposition to the conservative tradition

and comment on numerous social injustices and it represents the minor ethnicity in Thai society.

Gender roles are different among the four different musical genres. In *pleng lukgrung*, and *pleng lukthung* the role of men is superior to women while *pleng puea chiwit* comment on the social problems related to feminism, especially the perceived inferiority of women in Thai society. *Pleng string* illustrates how more freedom of sexual expression by women compared to the earlier genres, suggesting that Western social influences have become particularly powerful among the new urban elite.

My research findings challenge the validity of the concepts of conventional Thai identity and ideology defined by the dominant groups in Thai society and opens the way for other studies of popular culture within a similar research framework to this study.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The moon tonight is so bright and beautiful  
But why do I feel lonely and confused  
Thinking about my life here, it's still gloomy  
The sky above me is bright but why is my heart so sad

If I have success, everything will be fine  
But if I fail, I don't know what to do then  
I've dedicated my life to achieve my goal  
Though many times I was exhausted and depressed  
I don't want to tell anyone what I feel  
Just force myself to be patient  
And tell myself to continue until sunrise  
(Translated from Thai lyrics)

I wrote this song one night in Perth during a long period of writing this thesis in 2004. At the time, the difficulty in writing the thesis in a foreign language and in a strange country was making me depressed. I found writing a PhD thesis much harder than writing a popular song. Fortunately, I was supported by efforts by many helpful people from the earliest stages through to the completion of this project. Without the love, encouragement, assistance, and inspiration of these people, I would never have finished this thesis by myself. My best wishes go out to them.

First of all, I would like to give my sincere gratitude to Dr Brian Shoesmith, my principal supervisor, who encouraged me to research this topic, which was neglected by most scholars in Thailand. I greatly appreciate his consistent support, encouragement, and advice. He provided me with an excellent opportunity to further develop my academic skills. In his role as supervisor, Brian dedicated both his time and effort well beyond the call of duty. Our relationship as a diligent teacher and an impressionable student will remain a treasured memory. I also wish to extend my thanks to Dr Ubonrat Siriyuwasak, my co-supervisor from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. She first encouraged me to research Thai popular music as a Masters student in 1993, and has now helped me realize this project. I'm also thankful that she encouraged me to present at the *Sangnam Forum International Conference: History, Present, and Future of Popular Music Industries in Asia*, in Seoul, Korea, in June, 2005. As a result, I regard her as my ongoing supervisor.

I would like to thank Edith Cowan University, for providing an opportunity to undertake my PhD and a scholarship to do my fieldwork in Thailand. I thank Professor Mark Hackling for making the PhD study available for me and introducing me to Dr Brian Shoemith. I thank Professor John Renner and Dr James Cross, for providing the prerequisite course to attend ECU. Special thanks to Eleanor Kappella, Michelle de Souza, Vivien Shoemith and Bethany Anderson for polishing the thesis and teaching me academic English, especially Bethany who diligently edited my entire thesis draft and thanks also to Lyn Leslie, a helpful and friendly librarian at ECU, Mt Lawley. I owe thanks to the staff of the school of Communications and Multimedia such as Associate Professor Arshad Omari, Head of the School of Communications and Multimedia and Barbara Peterson for helping me access the excellent educational facilities.

I Thank the Office of Rajabhat Institution Committee in Bangkok, and Rajabhat Institution Pibulsongkram in Phitsanulok Province for providing me the scholarship to do my PhD.

During my stay in Perth, Australia, I met many friendly people who provided hospitality and accommodation. Special heartfelt thank to Nigel Wakefield, a young Australian rock musician, and his girlfriend Michelle. Nigel is my best friend in Australia who provided me a romantic house near the Indian Ocean to live with him for a year. He taught me to speak and write in Standard English and to understand Western pop culture. I offer my thanks to the generous families and good friends who I stayed with in Australia, including John & Ladawan Halpin, Ed & Carole, Rodney and Glen Wakefield, Alan & Gina Storey, Mark & Maria Woodhouse, Kim & Vanessa Hawkins, Dr Jeremy & Penporn Pagram and Vijitra & Brendan Mckell.

My sincere thanks also to my PhD student friends in ECU, especially Rapeeporn Sroinam, Kacha Chansin, Ruchi Permvattana, Chayada Danuwong, Chongdi Srinoparat, Chamnong Wongchachom, Kamonath Malakun, Sujitra Intararatsami, Yuwadi, and Thaweesak Khanyot from Thailand; Thomas Jayaprakash Yesudhasan from India; Juha Tolonen, Scott Smith, Glen Spoor, Judith Pugh, Emma-Kate Dowdell, and Alex Bradley from Australia, for their consistent encouragement and friendship.

I would like to thank the research participants involved in the Thai popular music industry, including the musicians, record producers, business persons, the audiences, radio disc jockeys and administrators in Bangkok and its outskirts, and Phitsanulok province. These people gave me access to primary research data by answering my questions and providing me with a wealth of information on the Thai popular music industry. They made my research both original and lively. In regard to their respondents, their names are referred to as research respondents in Appendix 3.

Finally, I would like to give my special heartfelt thanks to my lovely wife Patama Eamsa-ard, an iron woman who had to work double time while I was away studying in Australia for several months per year, for five years long. She took care of our two beautiful daughters, my parents and me. She provided me with perfect moral and financial support from the beginning until the final steps of the thesis. Without her love and amazing generosity, I would never have completed my PhD.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother who spent only four years in school but is more intelligent than many university graduates, and to my father, who loves studying all his life. They are my biggest inspiration and would be so proud that their only son has attained this level of achievement.

## PREFACE

I was born in a small village in a rural area of the lower north of Thailand. My mother is a rice farmer and my father is a primary school teacher as well as a local musician. Living in the environment of Thai rice farm culture during my youth, I could sing numerous songs of *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music) of that day as well as play Thai traditional music instruments. When I was fourteen, I moved to Bangkok for higher education when rock music from the UK and USA was very popular among teenagers in the city. I learned how to play western instruments such as the guitar, drums and keyboard by myself and from my friends. I also loved singing Thai popular songs as well as English songs with a small band. During the years of liberalization between 1973 and 1976, I was also very interested in social and political issues. With my friends, I formed a student band to perform protest song or 'songs for life', performing in universities and at political demonstrations for campaign purposes. In 1976, during political movements of Thai students for democratic purpose when I was a first year student of political science in Chiangmai University, in the north of Thailand, all those people who disagreed with the military dictatorship were accused of being communists or traitors. After troops and right-wing thugs massacred students who calmly rallied at Bangkok's Thammasat University, along with thousands of progressive students, including me fled to the Northeast and joined the communist-led guerrillas in the jungles.

In the jungle, I learned not only the basis of Marxism and Maoism but also how to survive without shelter, food, drugs, vehicles, and electricity. Moreover, for a year I lived with the poorest people in Thailand who have nothing except patriotism. I learned their perspective, their culture, and their feelings of love and hatred. I found that they loved the country just as well as the soldiers of the government did. Their fighting was for democracy and better lives while the government fought to keep its power. On the other hand, even though I agreed with the communist party in making more opportunity for Thailand to have more democracy and to provide better lives for the people, I could not accept the communist instruction in changing the Thai country violently like Cambodia, Vietnam, China or the USSR. I felt that the communist party of Thailand was dominated by the influential communist party of

China and its revolutionary aim seemed to me impossible. So in 1977, I left the guerrillas and went back home and never returned to the jungle again. After roaming about Chiangmai and Bangkok for months, again, I attended to the school of music education, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Ten years later, I heard that the Thai communist party and its guerrillas collapsed absolutely because almost all of its supporters abandoned the Red Army and went their separate ways. However, besides its internal conflict the main cause of the failure of the Thai communist party was the influence of the government, which followed the military coup of 1976 who launched an amnesty law that affected everyone who joined the communist party. The emergent government again united the people of Thailand through a compromise on policies reflecting non-violent confrontation and building the ideology of Thainess once again.

Holding a Bachelor Degree in Music Education, I have been a participant in student bands as a musician, singer, songwriter and supervisor. I concentrated on playing the guitar as well as singing popular songs. When I studied for a master degree in Mass Communication during 1992-1995, I conducted research on "An Analysis of Thai Popular Songs in Rock Style." During my research, I studied many narratives of popular music, observed many pop concerts, interviewed more than twenty musicians and producers, and listened to and analysed more than five hundred western and Thai popular songs. Since graduation, I have been teaching both music and communication arts in many Thai tertiary institutions for over a period of twenty years. I worked in five Rajabhat institutes and a secondary school in four regions of Thailand. These experiences provided me with an understanding of Thai culture in both urban and rural areas. I still occasionally play music and sing songs for my classroom and for pleasure at parties. I am also an amateur songwriter and radio disk jockey.

As a result of these experiences, of being a practitioner who has got involved in popular music all my life, I have been consistently fascinated by Thai popular music. Having also experienced getting along with Thai people in lower classes as well as middle classes, I appreciate their respective cultures. On the other hand, I have worked for government institutes for over twenty years, and I know well the traditions of Thai authority. These factors will make it possible for me to define the meaning of "Thai identity" from both the perspectives of common Thai people and

the authorities respectively. I want to extend this knowledge and experience to explore the theory that popular music is a significant aspect of contemporary culture in Thailand.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

Music is ... the cultural form best able both to cross borders – sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races and nations – to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us (Firth, 1976, p.125).

In *Popular Music*, Middleton (2002) describes the primary meanings of popular music in the West from three approaches. The first approach is to link popularity with the scale of activity, usually by measuring in terms of consumption or of having a large audience. The second approach is to link popularity with the means of dissemination, and particularly with the development and role of mass media in which the history of popular music is intimately connected with the technologies of mass distribution such as printing, recording, radio, and television. Finally, popularity is linked to social groups- either a mass audience or a particular class.

However, Middleton argues that although these three approaches identify important directions, they are too partial, too static and too basic. He suggests that popular music scholars should better study the fluidity or discursive formation of popular music to understand the term “popular”. Furthermore, he insists that popular music has no permanent musical characteristics or social connections (Middleton, 2002, pp. 1-2).

Thai popular music is a form of popular music, which is a synthesis of Thai traditional music and Western popular music. Since its birth over half century ago, it has been much loved by Thai people. This can be seen from the fact that the popular music industry in Thailand is a very big business. There are over thirty companies involved in creation, production, promotion and distribution of Thai popular music (Limpichai, 1993). Radio programs on 462 radio stations throughout the country are dominated by Thai popular music (Lockard, 1998, p.180). Appreciation of popular

music by Thai fans is equal to that of other world audiences. Moreover, fans attend popular concerts in Thailand in large numbers. Through personal observation of television as well as many live pop-concerts, I find that not only do fans crowd in front of stages but also most of the audience dance and sing cheerfully along with the musician's performances. In short, Thai popular music plays a significant role in the lives of many Thai people.

Although Thai popular music is a modern form of music, which seems to be similar to Western popular music and to global popular music in general, I argue that it is still used to express a sense of 'Thainess'. This is unlike Australian popular music in which the forms do not generally originate in the experience of people in Australia but are largely created by American or British multinational corporations (Windschuttle, 1989).

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between the preservation of 'Thainess' and the adoption of Western innovation in contemporary Thai popular music. The study aims to find out more about Thai identities, and 'Westernness' as well as appropriation, resistance and the young audience's perception of Thai popular music, which is articulated in many forms and genres.

## **The Background to the Study**

Although Thailand is located in Southeast Asia, it differs in many ways from other countries in the region. These differences determine Thai identity and shape the characteristics of Thailand and of Thai people. Firstly, Thailand has never been colonised by a Western power like its neighbours. Historically, Thai people have been very proud of their independence. The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand because the word Thai means "free" and therefore, "Thailand" means "Land of the Free" (Office of the National Culture Commission, 2002, p.1). Craig J. Reynolds (2002), questions why on one hand Thailand has never been a colony, while on the other hand, the ruling elite of the country since the regime of Pibulsongkram insist that to the people behave like Westerners, especially the British, in taste, fashion and deportment:

Being a pure and genuine Thai, however had to be balanced against behaving in a way deemed acceptable to Westerners. In fact, this

Western standard was as much a construction, an image in the minds of the ministers, officials, and bureaucrats who conceived and implemented the cultural policy, as the 'Thai culture' being put forward as authentic and innate. Where, for example, did the culture managers acquire the idea that husbands should kiss their wives before going to work? (Reynolds, 2002, p. 7)

Secondly, although Thailand is a parliamentary democracy similar to England, the monarchy still serves as the glue that sticks the country together. The Thai king gains greater respect from his people than any other king in the world nowadays (Reynolds, 2002, p. 7). His instructions predominantly influence the perspective of Thai people. The birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (the current king is officially known as King Rama IX), December 5<sup>th</sup>, is the Thai national day as well as a public holiday.

Thirdly, most Thai citizens (95%) are Buddhists, and the rest are Muslim, Christian, and others. Thus Buddhist principles deeply influence the Thai lifestyle (Ibid). The citizens of Thailand comprise many ethnic groups such as Mon, Laos, Chinese, Malay, Vietnamese, Persian and Indian. Of these, the Chinese are perhaps the most influential in economic and political terms. Similarly, while there is a large Laotian group in the Northeast, nearly all regard themselves as Thai, culturally as well as nationally. Because of intermarriage between resident Thais and members of the ethnic groups (especially Chinese and Lao) for many years, it is difficult to isolate distinct ethnic groups.

Even though the Thai nation consists of many ethnic groups, 'Thainess' is a concept dominated by Buddhist Thais from Bangkok and the Central region but is accepted by most other ethnicities that comprise Thai society. The evidence of their domination is, for instance, language (in writing and speaking), drama, and music (Thai classical music, *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*). These are determined to be the culture of all Thai people (Office of the National Culture Commission, 2002). However there are also subcultures in the other Thai regions and the ethnic groups express differences from the Central in terms of dialects, local music (folk music) and regionalism (a feeling of love and pride in their region which results in a feeling that their region is better than any other).



The concept of 'Thainess' or *khwampenthai*, was determined by Thai authorities after the change of the country's name in 1939. The notion of 'Thainess' is used not only a set of ethical principles for Thai people to practise but also for foreigners or tourists who visit Thailand to appreciate. A primary sense of Thainess appears in these social values, for instance, *namchai* or "water of heart", is a concept encompassing spontaneous warmth and compassion that allows families to make anonymous sacrifices for friends and extend hospitality to strangers (Office of the National Culture Commission, 2002, p.4). This virtue spontaneously formulates a Thai stereotype, which is used to make a judgment on one's behavior. A good person is a person who has a lot of *namchai* but bad person has not. I will argue that the concept of *namchai* is also mobilized during periods of political election campaigning in the country, especially at local levels. Ironically, vote buying, a chronic problem in the Thai political system, is a popular form of *namchai*.

Another example of 'Thainess' is *mai pen rai* (never mind, it doesn't matter). This expression is used when something unfortunate happens. It is a reflection of the feeling that one must gracefully submit to the external forces beyond one's control, such as the effects of past '*karma*'.

Thai identity or 'Thainess' is a pluralized construction in a constant state of flux although it has been dominated by some ethnic groups who have influenced its construction for several decades. Many political and social groups within Thai society have attempted a definition of 'Thainess'. Before changing the country's name in 1939, Thailand was recognized as Siam and Thai people and the Thai language as Siamese. Sulak Sivaraksa (2002) argues that previously Thai identity was shaped by a 'Siamese Buddhist' ideology. The constant threat of Western and Chinese imperialism, during the reign of King Rama IV (King Mongkut) (1851-1868) inspired the King to bring about many cultural developments. The developments allowed the national identity to survive attempts by China and the West to colonize Siam as Burma and Vietnam had already experienced:

For King Mongkut, Siamese identity meant bending to Western demands in order to preserve our independence politically, culturally and spiritually...losing some of our economic and judicial independence in order to be the masters of our own country. We had to exchange some aspects of our identity for a

more universal aspect of civilization not only accepted by the West, but also for righteousness, i.e. according to the Dhamma, the Buddhist Middle Path, the pristine teaching of the Buddha that predated *The Three Worlds* which mixed Buddhism with Hinduistic cosmology. (Sivaraksa, 2002. p. 34)

Classical definitions of Thai identity originate in the ideologies of King Rama VI (1910-1925) and Prince Damrong Rajanupap, a son of King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn). The definition of Siamese identity of King Rama VI emphasizes the three pillars of Siamese society - Nation, Religion and the Monarchy, or in Thai *chat, satsana, phramaha kasat*. The King also developed his grandfather's concept of "Siamese-ness" to become a powerful ideological force comprising nationalism, patriotism and ethnicity, discriminating against the Chinese influence in Thailand. The belief in the three pillars as the main institutions of Thai society still exists firmly at the present time. It is evident in statements issued by nationalists, politicians and other official organizations that this is the case. For example, the mottos of the military, police, government offices and groups of villager scouts (*luksuea chaoban*) put emphasis on the three pillars of the nationhood (nation, religion and the monarchy).

Unlike King Rama VI, Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, who is called "the father of Thai history", defined Siamese identity in terms of the positive characteristics of Siamese people:

- 1) The love of freedom or independence, nationally, socially and individually;
  - 2) The dislike of violence i.e. if they have a choice the Siamese would prefer peaceful means or nonviolent way of settling disputes;
  - 3) The Siamese are good at assimilation, or compromise.
- (Sivaraksa, 2002, p.36)

The definition of national identity was developed during the regime of Prime Minister Pibulsongkram (1938-1957), especially by Luang Wijiwatakan, a leading academic or guru within the ruling class in the 1930s. The Pibulsongkram government considered, during the period of absolute monarchy, that Chinese ethnic groups had lost their subversive influence because of the king's attempts to deploy absolute control over the Thai nation, especially religious control (Sivalaksa, 2002).

The ruling classes believed that this would create harmony between ethnic groups within Thai society. In the period of transition between absolute monarchy and democracy, the ruling classes were afraid that if Chinese people in Thailand became richer, they might gain political power and become difficult to control (Ibid). The government allowed Chinese political parties to form but they had to promise that they would be faithful to the Nation. After changing the country's name in 1939, and through the cold war period, the leaders built a strong feeling of nationalism amongst Thai people in order to establish patriotism and commitment to political independence. Thai identity at that time was changed into a new version of anti-communism that emphasized the differences between Thai and 'other', or Non-Thai. Consequently questions such as 'Who is a Thai? Who is not a Thai? And who are Thailand's enemies?' were radically posed and distributed widely to the public. The military leaders and their spokespeople who condemned communism were to realize that neighbors and citizens of Thailand were also the enemies of Thailand. The 'enemies of Thailand' were not a clearly identified entity but everyone understood that they were communist. The people of communist countries included neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, China and Burma. Thailand's enemies also included some Thai people who looked forward to socialism and communism. (See Chapter two: Literature Review, Criticism of Thai national identity word choice?)

Recently, several significant Thai scholars have identified a more concrete definition of Thai identity in regard to national character, behaviors, values, and beliefs. For example, Prathamapidok (1995), an intellectual Buddhist monk, states that the national identity of Thai people comprises:

- 1) Loving happiness and relaxation.
  - 2) Always happy with their lives evident, in the term *mai pen rai* (It's OK, no problems).
  - 3) A habit of assimilation, compromising, nonviolence, and clever adaptation to any situation.
  - 4) A tendency towards materialistic behavior.
  - 5) Individualistic competitiveness
  - 6) Preferring consumption to production - because they do not like to create products themselves.
  - 7) Liking imitation
- (Prathamapidok, 1995, pp. 8-30)

Similarly, Ms. Rachaneekon Set-tho (1989) outlines the following behaviors Thai people practice as they move towards a formation of national identity:

- 1) *Krengjaikon*, a short word with a long translation: behaving in a way that openly demonstrates consideration for the feeling of others, obedience, humility, politeness and respect in order to win respect
  - 2) A tendency to procrastinate regardless of urgency
  - 3) Forgiveness (based on Buddhist principles)
  - 4) Always smiling
  - 5) A love of convenience and informality
  - 6) Lack of discipline
  - 7) A keen interest in local ‘gossip’
  - 8) Nepotism
  - 9) Social competition
  - 10) A tendency to forgive social and political dishonesty or unethical behavior
  - 11) Playfulness
  - 12) A belief in fate and auspice
  - 13) Making decisions by emotion rather than by scientific reasoning
  - 14) Liking to negotiate– mixing business practices with pleasure (time is unimportant)
  - 15) A love of eating
- (Set-tho, 1989, p. 84)

Sanit Samakkan (1983) argues that Thai values can be divided into three dominant themes and that each dominant theme includes associated themes. The first dominant theme is ‘personalism’. Thai people tend to give a priority to the person who can give them the greatest benefit or could be most harmful to them. For this reason, it generates associated themes that include individualism, a dislike of conflict, and a sense of permissiveness. The second dominant theme is the value of ‘loving fun’ which generates another three associated themes including ‘consumerism’, ‘a preference for light work’, and a tendency to ‘favor generous persons or hooligans’. The final dominant theme is the belief in ‘karma’ which includes associated themes such as the belief in the ‘previous life and next life’, and ‘the cycle of death and birth’ or ‘transmigration’ (Samakkan, 1983, pp. 33-45).

Prem Tinsulanon, Prime Minister between 1980 and 1988 and a senior statesman, concludes that *khon thai* or Thai people are represented by the Thai who is born with a characteristic identity of ‘Thainess’ and claim Thailand as their

homeland. Therefore, Thai identity encompasses such aspects as personality and manners, language, and dress, among other dimensions (Tinsulanon, 2004).

Over the past half-century, Thai people have adopted Western music and Western culture, most of which has been English and Anglo-American in origin. Much Western music has been integrated into existing Thai local music in terms of genre, form and style. The initial Thai pop songs were very different from Western popular songs. All of the melodies, words, rhythms and content were -distinctly Thai; only the harmony and the instruments were Western. In other words, it was really Thai music incorporating Western instruments. This view is supported by Lent (1995) who claims that popular music in many Asian countries has been transformed into hybrids, often blending foreign and indigenous characteristics in innovative and culturally appropriate ways.

During the past two decades, U.S. popular music, through the global economy, has inundated the world (Robinson, et al. 1991). Unavoidably, Thailand has been dominated by a one-way flow of cultural products from the West. Contemporary Thai popular music has become more and more similar to Western popular music in genre, style and form. It is understood among Thai people that 'The West' means the United Kingdom and the United State of America, the two countries with the most cultural influence on contemporary Thailand.

Thai music in a Western style has been generated since 1877 when a military band was formed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Music teachers from England were employed to teach soldiers to play musical instruments in the band and how to perform songs praising the King.

Thai popular music was established at the same time as modern theatre, film and radio media came to Thai society. Initially Thai popular music was Thai traditional music played with western instruments. Then, little by little, it became more and more westernized. Now, almost every part of Thai popular music resembles western popular music, except for a few aspects that still have recognizable Thai identity expressed through Thai words, content, spirit and so on (Limphichai, 1989). Lockard (1998, p. 164) agrees that as the Thais have been very proud of their independent country and compared to neighboring countries, which

used to be colonies of the western countries, they have embraced their original culture while adopting foreign culture. In a musical sense, Thai music was not only westernized but western music was also 'Thainized'. Thai popular music is still a presentation of Thai contemporary culture, society, and ideology.

Many Thai cultural academics argue that contemporary Thai popular music resembles western music more than Thai music. For instance, Nilobon Kowapitakthet (1991) finds that the aesthetic characteristics of contemporary Thai popular music are greatly influenced by foreign music in terms of musical notation, rhythm pattern and melody lines. Samakamon Limpichai (1993) argues: “That made Thai popular music compositions different from previous local music as well as Thai classical music, as it transformed into Western pop music” (p.5). I will argue that Thai popular music is obviously different from popular music in the West but some characteristics overlap. Therefore, careful analysis should be conducted to clarify these differences.

Although popular music is a very important medium for young people in Thailand and other countries, very few studies in Thailand focus on the subject. Some previous research conducted by communication arts academics concentrated on communication processes and music industries. Most of the researchers lack formal musical training, so traditional forms of music tend to be ignored. Other research, conducted by music academics, is confined to the musical aspects such as the analysis of form, melody, harmony and rhythm. Conventionally, consideration of music as a social phenomenon is not included in classic musicology. This means many questions remain unanswered and there have been no serious studies into the integration of communication and music in Thailand. This proposed research will be the first extensive PhD research to concentrate on the sociology Thai Popular Music, and its relationship to ‘Thainess’, written in English.

In terms of political economy, Thai popular music is monopolized by large corporations that control every step of the communication process, including production, marketing and media, similar to production of popular music of western countries such as Australia. As Keith Windschuttle (1989) states:

Music is today a big business ... in which large corporations own everything: the songs, the artists, the recording studios and marketing facilities. Music has been turned into a product for leisure-time consumption and is run on much the same lines as any other industry... The companies have total control over the musical lives, even the personal lives, of the performers”.

(Windschuttle, 1989, pp. 229-230).

According to Samakamon Limpichai (1989), music companies in Thailand also own Thai popular songs, the artists, recording studios, media and marketing facilities. However, Siriyuvasak (1998) argues that the companies do not control the music process absolutely. There are always negotiations among different groups of people who work in the music industry, especially those associated with the independent sector

## **Thai Popular Music Genres**

Before discussing popular music and identity, I would like to provide an overview of Thai popular music in terms of its history and genres. There are many different styles of contemporary Thai popular music but I wish to focus on what I regard as the four most significant genres. The classification of Thai popular music into different styles by different authors is problematic. However, there are four main genres, namely *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit* which will be described and analysed in this thesis.

### **1. *Pleng Lukgrung***

*Pleng lukgrung* is a hybrid popular musical genre, which is a synthesis of Thai and Western music. The origin of *pleng lukgrung* lies in two main streams of music, namely Thai Court Music and Western popular music.

### **Thai Court Music**

Before Western music was adopted in Thailand, during the era of absolute monarchy, there were only two genres of Thai music. The first was folk music, which was popular among common people in different regions. The second was Thai court Music, which was popular with the monarchy, especially in the capital city.

Thai court music, initially, was composed for the monarchy and then became popular with the elite class. This type of music is more complex than folk music and it is better produced. The instruments, as well as the music, are of better quality. The court music ensemble uses many kinds of melodic as well as rhythmic instruments, whereas in folk music, there are only a few instruments. A court song is usually longer than a folk song; some court songs, for instance, are more than thirty minutes long.

There are a number of conventions associated with Thai court music. Firstly, only the rhythm section accompanies the singer. When the singer pauses, all of the instruments play for long time and the singer is silent. For example:

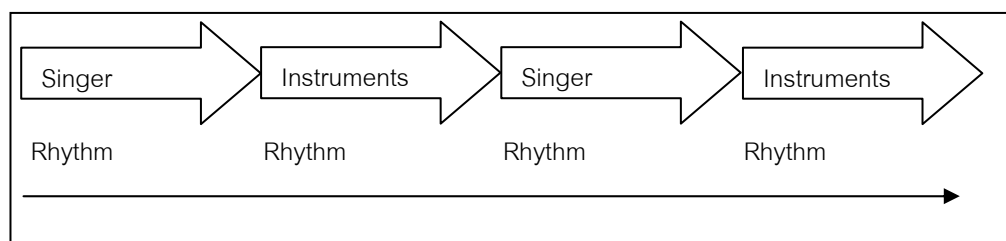


Figure 1.1: The movement of Singing and Instrumental

Secondly, the singing style uses a lot of very slow slurred notes and words. For example, with the lyric *oe* (similar to ‘hoo’ or ‘ha’ in English songs), the singer may make the sound *oe* for four bars with five tones consecutively, on one breath.

Thirdly, the language used is standard Thai with a sophisticated use of vocabulary, understood by the elite but not by common people.

Finally, the content of court music usually includes anecdotes from Thai literature, for example, stories about princes and princesses falling in love. Romantic love is almost entirely the primary theme.

In the words of Pamela Moro (2003), the traditional court music in Thailand has been ‘classicalised’ through the establishment of training academies with centralized curricula, the establishment of written musical notation and the introduction of patronage by prestigious organizations such as the monarchy and universities. Thai court music is therefore considered to be ‘Thai classical music’.



However, after the 1932 revolution, the country changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy; the position of Thai classical music changed. When Thai popular music was first established in Thai society, Thai classical music was called (by Thai people in general) *pleng thai derm* (Thai traditional music or indigenous Thai music), a term that most Thai traditional musicians do not approve of. They do not like it because the name *pleng thai derm* means ‘previous’, implying a stage of Thai music that no longer exists.

With the influence of opera and art music from the West, Thai court music was transformed into a new style. In the 1920s and 1930s, a form of Thai drama (or Thai opera) based on Western dramatic forms was created in Thailand. Music was composed to accompany the play. Thai court music was too slow and therefore inappropriate for the new dramas that were becoming popular. Therefore it was condensed into a new style of completely lyric song called *pleng nuea tem* (Lockard, 1998, pp.116-117).

### **Western Music in Thailand**

In Europe and North America, Western music consists of many forms and styles including classical music, folk music, art music, blues, rhythm & blues, ballad, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, and rock and roll. Some of these have had a major influence upon Thai popular music.

Initially, Western music was introduced to Thai society during the era of King Mongkut (1868-1910) when Western countries came to do business in Thailand. Military bands were formed to perform marching songs the military. Orchestras and songs praising the King were also introduced to the monarchy and elite society during the era of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). Because few classically trained Thai musicians could read a Western score, not many Western songs were played by Thai musicians. At that time Thai traditional music played on Thai instruments was still the most popular type of music (Limpichai, 1989).

During the middle of the twentieth century, plays, and films were popular in Europe and North America. Not long after, they also became fashionable in Thai society, especially among the elite. Western musical styles including marching

songs, classical music, art songs, folk songs and the music of Broadway were employed as background, for ceremonies, theatres as well as musical shows. When jazz, Tin Pan Alley and ballroom dance music (especially Latin rhythms) became successful in the Western countries, they were also adopted into Thai society.

### *Pleng Lukgrung*

Initially, Thai musicians imitated Western music in both musical forms and lyrics (singing in English). Occasionally, they used Thai words instead of English, but the songs were not popular. Gradually, Thai lyrics were written in Western musical forms while Western musical forms were rearranged to fit Thai pronunciation and Thai taste. The style of *pleng nuea tem*, which was derived from Thai court music, was integrated with the Tin Pan Alley form. From this new hybrid, a music style was formed. It was called *pleng thai sakon* (Thai international music). At this point in time communication technologies such as the turn-table, radio and television were not available throughout the Thai countryside, so only members of the elite class and urban people in Bangkok could access *pleng thai sakon*. Accordingly, *pleng thai sakon* is named *pleng lukgrung* (city music or urban music) whereas the other style, *pleng Thai sakon*, which generated a different type of playing was called *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music). For this purpose, the word *pleng lukgrung* was used to distinguish it from *pleng lukthung*.

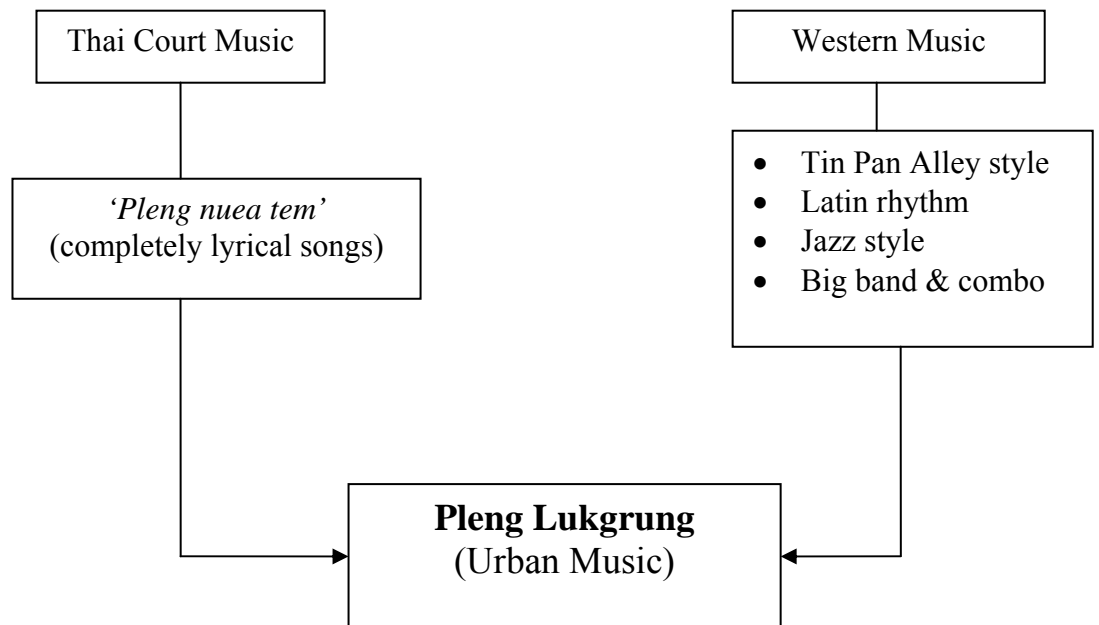


Figure 1.2: Genealogy of Urban Music

There are six major conventions of *pleng lukgrung* (Siriyuwasak, 1990, Limpichai, 1989, and Lockard, 1998). Firstly, its singing style is smooth and conventional, which is similar to the singing style of Tin Pan Alley musicians such as Bing Crosby and Perry Como. Secondly, the music composed is sophisticated, using the form and the rhythmic pattern of Tin Pan Alley (AABA or ABAB). Thirdly, the band in *pleng lukgrung* is a big band or a combo band (small band) consisting mostly of brass and woodwind instruments. Occasionally, some Thai instruments are used in the band, especially when playing Thai style songs such as *pleng ramwong* (Thai dancing song), but they are not the main instruments. Fourthly, the language in *pleng lukgrung* is standard Thai as spoken by urban people in Bangkok. It is formal, conventional, and polite. The lyrics employ a fixed rhyme, which is similar to the style of elite poetry. Fifthly, most of the themes look at romantic love between urban men and women. There are also propagandistic songs expressing patriotic notions, those written by military figures or people in authority. Finally, the audiences for *pleng lukgrung* are usually elite urban people.

## **2. *Pleng Lukthung***

*Pleng lukthung* is the other hybrid popular music, which is a synthesis of Thai and Western music. *Pleng lukthung* is derived from other mainstream musical forms, namely Thai folk music and Western popular music.

### **Thai Folk Music**

Thai folk music is produced by the common people from the many ethnic groups located in the different regions of Thailand. Traditional music or performance by Thai people may vary from region to region, as people from one region may not understand or appreciate the music of another region. For example, the favorite music and performance of people in the central region are *li-ke*, *lamtad*, *pleng choi*, *i-saew*, *lae* etc., whereas the northeast people feel affection for *mo lam*, the northern people love *pleng so* and the southern people are keen on *nangtalung* and *manora*. This suggests that there are many different types of traditional Thai music and that the music, like the culture, is colourful and fluid, not static and unified.

Simple musical instruments, made of natural local materials such as bamboo, coconut shell, and reed, and the use of local language, tones, accents and colloquialisms, characterize Thai folk music. In folk music, not many different kinds of instruments are used. Most of them are rhythmic instruments such as drums, cymbals, and gongs. The main melody is always carried in the singing.

The content of folk music is usually centered on storytelling, folktales, religious stories, and physical, spiritual and emotional love. However, most songs about love are not romantic but rather humorous.

The function of folk music is to unify the local culture. It brings the community together while working, entertaining or celebrating religious or secular festivals.

### **Western Country Music**

From the beginning, a major influence upon *pleng lukthung* was Western country music in the style of Hank Williams, for example. This might be because

some singing styles of Western country music are similar to some Thai folk music singing styles, and these were easily adopted into *pleng lukthung*. Subsequently, many styles of Western music, including jazz, Latin, rock and roll and disco were also integrated into Thai country music. Furthermore, some Asian music such as Indian and Chinese, have also had an influence upon *pleng lukthung*.

### ***Pleng lukthung***

The major conventions of *pleng lukthung* are different from *pleng lukgrung* (Siriyuwak, 1990, Limpichai, 1989, and Lockard, 1998). Firstly, its singing style is similar to folk song styles, which in turn, follow many different styles depending on each region. Secondly, the music is normally composed in a simple style, as some musicians cannot read musical notation. The musical forms are not very different from the form of *pleng lukgrung*, which is similar in form and rhythm to Tin Pan Alley (AABA or ABAB). Some Thai folk musical forms such as *likay*, *lamtad*, *lae* and *mo lam*, are also borrowed or adapted for *pleng lukthung*. Thirdly, this musical style employs a big band or a combo band (small band) similar to the band in *pleng lukgrung*. Some Thai instruments are also used in the band especially when playing Thai folk style songs. Fourthly, the language in *pleng lukthung* is regional Thai as spoken by rural people in the provinces. It is informal, unconventional, and sometimes impolite by conventional standards. The lyrics also often employ a fixed rhyme but not always. Fifthly, the themes vary from the courtship songs of rural boys and girls to songs about farmers' lives, love among the poor, and songs, which indirectly express social protest. Some propaganda and patriotic songs in the style of *lukthung* have also been written, mostly sponsored by Thai authorities. Finally, the audience of *pleng lukthung* consists mostly of lower-class rural people and urban people who have migrated to the city from rural areas.

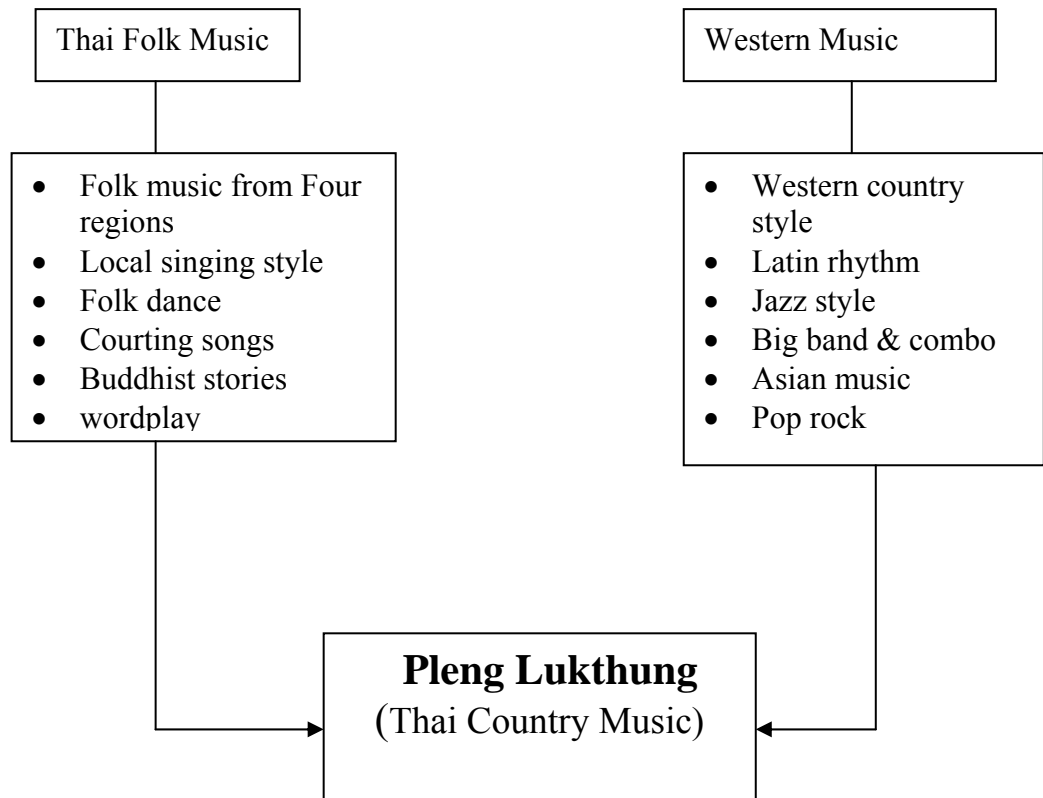


Figure 1.3: Genealogy of Thai country music

The genre of *pleng lukthung* has not been static over time or aimed at one particular audience. It has often been transformed to serve new situations and new environments. Nowadays, *pleng lukthung* is still popular among Thai people in every part of Thailand.

### 3. *Pleng String*

The third genre of Thai popular music is *pleng string* or modern Thai pop music. It is a synthesis of *pleng lukgrung* and Western pop music, especially rock music. Both *pleng lukthung* and Asian music have had a minor influence upon *pleng string*.

#### **The Decline of *Pleng Lukgrung***

During 1947-1980, *pleng lukgrung* was very popular among urban people. Throughout the period of Cold War, when American military bases were located in Thailand to bomb Indochina, many Thai people welcomed the U.S. presence, especially business people, the military and bureaucratic elite (Lockard, 1998). A lot

of nightclubs, bars and brothels were established in order to serve the U.S. soldiers. At that time, rock music was very fashionable in the U.K. and U.S.A., and so it came to Thailand with the U.S. military. Both American musicians and many Thai musicians were employed to play Western popular music for the Americans. Numerous rock records were available in stores and on street corners throughout Thailand. Radio and television also supported the distribution of rock music by making it accessible on air to young audiences in urban areas. Almost all of the young audience that previously followed *pleng lukgrung* were now motivated to consume rock music. Therefore the popularity of *pleng lukgrung* gradually declined as its young urban fans turned to western rock music. Some Thai musicians attempted to write Thai rock songs using Thai words and imitating Western music but they were not very successful.

### ***Neo Pleng Lukgrung***

Due to the popularity of rock music in Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, many pirate records and tape cassettes were produced. Since then, under the influence of the U.S. and U.K., copyright laws have improved and been enforced effectively throughout the country. This means that Thai music industries cannot produce copied music anymore. Instead, musicians are employed to compose Thai music, adapted to imitate the style of Western popular music. From here give date onward, *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* were directly transformed into pop, rock and disco and they were very successful for a short period. However, audiences eventually became bored with this music after many repetitive songs had been produced.

### ***Pleng String***

In the 1980s, Thailand had high rates of economic growth and a democratic government. A mass of people from rural areas migrated to the big cities to seek better work and higher education. The urban middle class expanded, incorporating more young people. Businessmen realized that young people were the most important target in the music market. Producing music by copying and imitating Western music was now illegal. However, many styles of contemporary Western popular music had been transformed into Thai popular music. The degree of Western

and Thai influence varied in the music. Some songs sounded more Thai than Western; others were more Western than Thai; but most of them were more Western than the previous two genres. The new musical style was performed by a string combo in which the lead instruments were electric guitars. Therefore it was first called *pleng string combo* and then *pleng string* or just *string*.

There are six major conventions of *pleng string* (Siriwasak, 1990; Limpichai, 1989; Lockard, 1998; Kowapitakthet, 1991; Eamsa-ard, 1995). Firstly, its singing style is a synthesis style of *pleng lukgrung* and western rock music. It is more modern than *pleng lukgrung*, but smoother than rock music. Secondly, the music composed is both simple and complex, and still uses the form and the rhythmic pattern of Tin Pan Alley (AABA or ABAB). Thirdly, *pleng string* bands are not ‘big bands’ or ‘combo bands’: instead, they are ‘string combos’ or ‘rock bands’ which include electric guitars, bass, drum kits and synthesizers. Not many Thai instruments are used in the band. Fourthly, the language in *pleng string* is normally standard Thai as spoken by urban people in Bangkok, but some singers use an English accent, especially singers who are of mixed European and Thai descent. Local Thai languages are used in some styles of *pleng string* similar to the language used in *pleng lukthung*. A fixed rhyme in the lyrics is no longer strictly adhered to. Instead, more emotional accents are expressed in the music (Kowapitakthet, 1991; and Eamsa-ard, 1995). Fifthly, the main theme is the puppy love of teenagers. There are also variations on the themes of *pleng string*: for example, friendship, social campaigns, protests and patriotism. Finally, the audience of *pleng string* is not only young urban people but also young rural people who are educated.



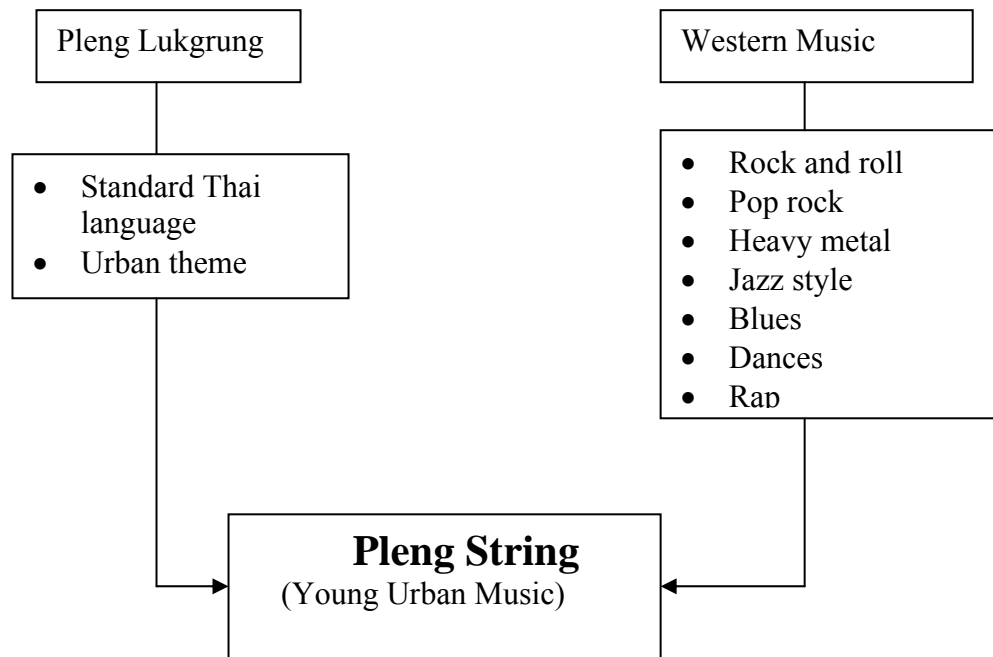


Figure 1.4: Genealogy of *pleng string* (young urban music)

There are many sub-genres of *pleng string* (similar to Western popular music) including pop, pop rock, heavy metal, rap, alternative, folk rock, dance, *string puea chiwit*, and *lukthung string*.

### Comparison

The table of comparison below shows that the three conventions of Thai popular music genres are both similar and different in many ways. A similarity can be seen, for instance, in the way each genre synthesizes Western and Thai music styles but with varying degrees of dominance. An additional point of similarity is that Thai lyrics employing the Thai language are used in all songs. The differences are primarily reflected in the details of each convention: for example, its origin, singing style, language, theme and audience.

Table 1.1: *Comparison of Different Three Genres of Thai Popular Music*

<b>Genre</b>	<b><i>Pleng Lukgrung</i></b>	<b><i>Pleng Lukthung</i></b>	<b><i>Pleng String</i></b>
<b>Origin</b>	Tin Pan Alley + Thai Court Music	Western country music + Thai Folk Music	Lukgrung + pop rock
<b>Singing style</b>	Smooth and conventional	Folk song style	Lukgrung + pop rock
<b>Music</b>	Well arranged	Simple	High-tech
<b>Band and instruments</b>	Big band, combo	Big band, combo	Small band, rock band
<b>Language</b>	Standard Thai	Local Thai	Standard Thai and teenage slang
<b>Theme</b>	Romantic love	Poor people's love	Young urban love
<b>Audience</b>	Elite, Urban people	Rural working class people	Young urban people

#### **4. *Pleng Puea Chiwit***

The last genre of Thai popular music is a style that could not be grouped with any of the three genres above. Beyond the three main styles of Thai popular music, there are many other kinds of music including *pleng taidin* (underground music), *pleng indies* (Indies music), 'progressive' and *pleng puea chiwit*. These styles are alternative genres that specific audience groups favour. The most significant of these genres is *pleng puea chiwit* or 'song for life'. *Pleng puea chiwit* is a synthesis of Western popular music and Thai popular music, which has specific characteristics that separate it from the other genres. The general form of this musical style is similar to the forms of the prior three genres, but its lyrical content, purpose, history, and target audience are very different.

The emergence of *pleng puea chiwit* or 'song for life' cannot be separated from the student protest movement for democracy and anti-dictatorship between 1973 and 1979. An initial aim of this musical style was to arouse a feeling of patriotism among Thai people. This patriotism is very different from the conservative patriotism engendered by the military and other forms of authority. The concept of nationalism contained within *pleng puea chiwit* is based on a position of opposition to military dictatorship coups, corrupt authority and American imperialism. In the essay "Thailand: Song for life, Song for struggle", Lockard (2001) concludes a

comparison between *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) and *pleng plukjai* (nationalistic songs or patriotic songs) by asserting that:

Both song for life and the nationalistic songs represented different discourses on Thai nation. Song for life emphasized the underside of corruption, inequality, suffering, and Western imperialism, and advocated common struggle to rectify the wrongs; it looked to the future. The rightist music glorified and romanticized the nation and its history, portraying a prosperous land of contented people who owed much to the sacrifices of their ancestors; it was past-oriented. The symbolism and rhetoric of the two opposing factions appealed to different constituencies and competed for influence among those in the middle. (Lockard, 2001, p. 197)

*Pleng puea chiwit* played an important role during the demonstrations and protests organized by university students, labourers and farmers' unions in the 1970s (Chanthimathon, 2003). The most significant musical groups during 1973-1976 were *Caravan* and *Kamachon* (Labourers). Besides resistance to dictatorship and American armies, the meanings of the lyrics reflected the suffering experienced by poor labourers and farmers who were suppressed by capitalists and the authorities. The government authorities considered that these songs were subversive and could not be broadcast on radio or television. The channels that conveyed this musical genre to its audiences were live performances and independent record sales. Initially, its audiences were confined to activists, progressive students as well as leaders of farmer and labour unions. The significance *pleng puea chiwit* played in society at that time was demonstrated by the cheering rallies of students and oppressed farmers and workers at performances. The musicians of this musical style not only performed songs spiced with political themes but also talked to the audience explaining the issues related to their songs.

The events of October 6, 1976 represent a watershed in contemporary Thailand and mark the beginning of the shift away from totalitarianism towards more democratic forms of government. The militants and the soldiers of right wing groups cruelly massacred unarmed progressive students and people, who calmly rallied at a center of Bangkok. More than one hundred people were killed and almost ten thousand were arrested and sent to jail. All were accused of undermining the security of the three pillars of the nation (nation, religion and monarchy), and of being communists and traitors. Those who escaped, including most of musicians of *pleng*

*puea chiwit*, inevitably fled to jungles and joined the communist-led guerrillas for their safety.

Following the collapse of the communist party, ‘song for life’ musicians returned home and reformed their bands. There were also new groups of musicians who were fascinated by the previous *pleng puea chiwit* and who also formed bands. Accordingly, the form and content of this genre was improved and changed to increase the ranks of audiences in order for it to survive financially in the music industry. In addition, the increasing democracy of Thai society opened spaces for new perspectives to establish themselves. Then song for life was sent into the orbit of Thai popular music. It was not the music of specific groups such as left wing groups anymore; it became a new mass music form. Nowadays we can hear *pleng puea chiwit* in shopping malls, on radio and television, at wedding parties, and even at social celebrations in the military.

## **The Significance of the Study**

‘Thainess’ is always articulated directly or indirectly by Thai people in many different contexts with the most popular context being *Khwampentha* (see in the definitions of terms). The name of the country was changed from “Siam” to “Thailand” in 1939 (see Office of the National Culture Commission, 2002) because the leader of the day wanted to emphasize the concept of ‘Thainess’ as important for the people to follow (Winichakul, 1998, p.4) and it has been used since then as the official name of the country. ‘Thainess’ is an abstraction that is not easy to present in few words but it is a mental concept which Thai people carry around in their heads at all times. Every Thai understands what it means and articulates it in many ways. It may be articulated through visual art, drama, and traditional music. But these media are too ordinary and traditional for the young; it seems the nostalgia of older Thai people is required to appreciate them. The contemporary and predominant medium of ‘Thainess’, which has been ignored by cultural scholars for a long time, is popular music. Even though Thai popular music is a form of popular culture that has adopted westernized forms, it still expresses a sense of what it means to be Thai. It has been incorporated into Thai popular culture. Therefore it is very important to understand the form in which it articulates ‘Thainess’ if we wish to understand contemporary Thai culture

## **The Purposes of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between the preservation of ‘Thainess’ and the adoption of western innovation in contemporary Thai popular music, which is articulated through its content and form. The study aims to find out more about Thai identity, ‘Westernness’ as well as the appropriation and resistance of Thais in respect to music as well as the young audience's perception of Thai popular music.

In terms of content, most Thai popular music focuses on love. The expression of love could be divided into many different types of love such as romantic love, poor people’s love, and young urban love. But other lyrical content is also articulated in Thai pop songs such as political and social problems, Thai culture, and nationalism. However, Thai popular song always presents the relationship between ‘Thainess’ and ‘Westernness’ for audiences to reflect upon.

## **Research Questions**

The study is designed to answer the following questions.

### **A) General questions**

1. How have ‘Thainess’ and ‘Westernness’ been integrated into Thai popular music?
2. Is Thai music representative of Thai contemporary culture?
3. What are the ideologies expressed in Thai popular music?

### **B) Specific questions**

From which sources have Thai popular music styles been derived?

How have Thai people adopted ‘Westernness’ into their music?

What forms of ‘Thainess’ are expressed in music?

What are the factors that influence the blending of ‘Thainess’ and ‘Westernness’?

What are the ideologies expressed in the four major genres of Thai popular music?

How are the ideologies constructed in the music/lyrics?

Are there any famous popular composers who have used Thainess in their music?

## **Definitions of Terms**

Throughout of this thesis, a number of terms recur. It is important to identify the terms, which recur in the thesis, to be quite specific about what I mean.

### **Identity**

The terms “identity” and “Thai identity” are deployed in this thesis with an emphasis on “social and cultural identity”, which relates to the qualities of sameness and difference, and the personal and the social in Thai society. Social identities are associated with social norms within a specific society (Barker, 2002) while cultural identity is associated with the identity of a group or culture that one belongs to (Kidd, 2002). According to Giddens (1984), social identities are associated with:

normative rights, obligations and sanctions which, within specific collectives, form roles. The use of standardized markers, especially to do with the bodily attributes of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies, notwithstanding large cross-cultural variations which can be noted (Cited in Barker, 2002, p. 168).

Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture that a member of a group/ culture influenced by other member. The members of the group share their identity, which includes common habits, characteristics and ideas. A group defined itself as a group by noticing and highlight differences with other groups and cultures (Kidd, 2002).

However, Hall (1990) argues that cultural identities include identifications of class, gender, and ethnicity and so on. These identities are unstable. They are produced and remain in a state of continual change. So the meaning is never finished or completed.

There is no essence of identity to be discovered; rather, cultural identity is continually being produced within the vectors of similarity and difference. Cultural identity is not an essence but a continually shifting position, and the points of difference around with cultural identities could form are multiple and proliferating. They include, to

name but a few, identifications of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, political position (on numerous issues) morality, religion, etc., and each of these discursive positions is itself unstable (Cited in Barker, 2002, p. 177).

Other words associated with the Thai identity in this study include elite, ethnicity, gender, Thainess, Westernness, and Thai popular music.

## **Elite**

The primary meaning of the word elite is “the richest, most powerful, best educated or most highly trained group in a society” (*Elite*, 2003). In general usage in sociology, elite refers to

a relatively small dominant group within a larger society, which enjoys privileged status and, almost invariably, exploits individuals of lower social status... Elite advantages are the usual ones of a dominant social class: easier access to capital and political power, more rigorous education largely free of indoctrination, resulting in cultural influence, and leadership...” (*Elite*).

According to Mills (1956), the elite comprises those who hold ‘command posts’ in certain institutions such as the major corporations, the military and the federal government and the power elite involves the ‘coincidence of economic, military and political power (cited in Krieken et al., 2000, p. 107).

The use of the term of ‘the elite’ in this thesis conforms to the traditional uses of this term that have been elaborated in politics but also has another dimension. It refers to that group of people who have been associated with the Royal Court, constituting the old middle class to the upper middle class of traditional Thai society and culture. They have their own money and they have filled positions in the various government administrations, the academy and the military. This group of people has exercised their power according to their positions in society. There is also another elite group, which emerged with the economic boom of the 1980s. This is the new elite or business elite, which is comprised largely of Chinese Thai people who now control the large new businesses including the new media and they are now in the position to influence Thai society economically and politically. At times, there are

tensions between the new and the old elite, which are evident in popular culture as well as traditional politics.

### **Ethnicity**

In general, ethnicity may be based on physical characteristics as much as cultural characteristics and it refers to:

a system of definition of people who consider themselves or are considered by others to share common characteristics that are different from the other people in any society... is frequently distinguished from race, although ethnic groups may share racial characteristics. However, there may be exist different ethnic groups within the same race (*Ethnicity*, 2003).

In addition, the concept of ethnicity in terms of sociology refers to:

the cultural characteristics that connect a particular group or groups of people to each other. the concept of ethnicity is rooted in the idea of societal groups, marked especially by shared nationality, tribal affiliation, religious faith, shared language, or cultural and traditional origins and backgrounds, whereas race is rooted in the idea of biological classification of homo sapiens to subspecies according to morphological features such as skin color or facial characteristics” (*Ethnicity*).

Thailand is composed of the number of ethnic groups. The dominant ethnic group is the Thai-speaking people of the central plain and most of other ethnic groups live on the margins in the northeast, the north and the south. However, ethnicity is more complicated in Thailand than most places because of the great cross fertilization between the ethnic groups such as Thai and Chinese, Thai and Laotian, Thai and Mon, who have all intermarried on a fairly large scale. Moreover, because of increased migration, growth of multicultural societies, and the assertion of different identities, the concept of ethnicity in Thai society is critical. As a result, ethnicity is very complex issue in Thailand, but it always associated with regionalism.



## **Gender**

The term gender relates to “the physical and/ or social condition of being male or female” (*Gender*, 2003). In the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia (2003), gender is claimed to involve the social construction of identity as:

the sex-role identity used by humans to emphasize the distinctions between males and females. The words gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but sex relates specifically to the biological, physical characteristics, which make a person male or female at birth, whereas gender refers to the behaviours associated with members of that sex (*Gender*, 2003).

In Thailand, gender is complex. It concerns not only the perceived masculinity or femininity of a person and their respective characteristics but also the concepts of gays, lady boys, and lesbians in a culture which is both tolerant of alternative sexuality, but at the same time has a strict moral code conventionally based on Buddhist precepts. The use of term gender in this study follows the traditional use of the gender, which is the social construction of sexuality.

### **‘Thainess’**

The concept of ‘Thainess’ or *khwampenthai* is the Thai identity which is determined by Thai authorities as well as Thai people. Thainess appears in social values such as *namchai* (water of heart), *mai pen rai* (never mind, it doesn’t matter) and notions of *karma*. ‘Thainess’ is also relevant to Thai identity, Thai ideology and Thai nationalism.

### **‘Westernness’**

The concept of ‘Westernness’ means any innovation the Thai people have adopted from western countries, especially from the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

## **Thai popular music**

There are many musical styles or genres of Thai popular music but I choose only the four main styles to study in this thesis. They are:

*Pleng lukgrung*: Thai urban music

*Pleng lukthung*: Thai country music

*Pleng string*: young/new Thai urban music or Thai pop rock music

*Pleng puea chiwit*: Song for life or protest song

## **Thesis Composition**

The thesis is comprised of nine chapters. Each chapter explores the concept of Thai identity and nationalism through Thai popular music in order to answer the research questions. The chapters contain an analysis of historical as well as current practical issues within Thai popular music.

In Chapter Two aspects of Thailand and Thai culture are questioned to provide an understanding of the whole picture of Thai identity and the arguments surrounding this topic. I explore studies of popular music, especially in the West, to address general concepts and theories of popular music. Furthermore, I outline the studies of popular music reflecting sociology in the contexts of politics, class, economics, race, gender, and social context in order to identify the relationship between music and society. I also present arguments on the topics of Thai popular music and the topics surrounding the music in Thai society. Finally, I will examine the relationship between Thai popular music and world music.

In Chapter Three, I describe the way data was collected and analysed. The methodology used incorporates ethnographic methods and qualitative techniques in the field of cultural, media and sociological studies. In-depth interviews with people in the music industry, focus groups with audiences, personal observation of music on radio, television, recordings, concerts, visiting music companies and musical analysis of every genre within Thai popular music, which were employed in the study, will be demonstrated, besides a variety of relevant documents. Most of the research data I

collected is qualitative data such as open-ended questionnaires, field notes, audio- and videotapes and documents. My major analytic tool is ethnographic analysis where I deal with focus groups of musical audiences and interview songwriters, record producers, radio disc jockeys, broadcasting administrators and music businesspersons. The ethnographic approach is supported by semiotic analysis, especially of the songs and the meanings they generate; and also discourse analysis, where I always ask who is speaking when analyzing the songs. In addition, I demonstrate the conceptual frameworks of Thai popular music relevant to the research questions to guide the research and help to explain or interpret data. Finally, the chapter comprises validation and verification of the methodology and describes the limitations of the study.

In Chapter Four, I explore the history of Thai popular music from its birth in 1877 until the present time in order to answer research questions such as: How have 'Thainess' and 'Westernness' been integrated into Thai popular music? How have Thai popular music styles been derived? How have Thai people adopted 'Westernness' into music? Culture, communication technology, business, politics, class, ethnicity, gender and social context are also examined as each has contributed significantly to the evolution of the various genres of Thai popular music.

Chapter Five develops the themes introduced in Chapter Four but focuses on an analysis of *pleng lukthung* or Thai country music. It also concentrates on the areas of social context, genealogy and on producers of Thai country music. These categories will provide essential primary concepts for further analysis involving the music and critical issues such as politics, class, economics, ethnicity and gender in Chapter Seven and Eight.

Chapter Six focuses on a comprehensive analysis of Thai urban music including *pleng lukgrung* (urban music) and *pleng string* (young urban music). It also emphasizes the areas of social context, genealogy and producers of these musical styles. These contexts will be examined within the industrial process of Thai popular music focusing on *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*. This chapter is concerned with the way in which Thai popular music creates and conveys meaning.

Chapter Seven provides a comprehensive analysis of the political songs of the *pleng puea chiwit* genre, from their emergence to the present time. It also demonstrates the relationship between Thai popular music, politics and society. This relationship is figured differently in the case of *pleng puea chiwit* because the genre resists and rebels against the dominant ideology, thereby defining its difference from the previous genres.

Chapter Eight involves a comprehensive analysis of the four genres of Thai popular music (*pleng lukthung*, *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit*) particularly focusing on Thai identities and ideologies presented in the music. The analysis answers questions such as: What are the ideologies expressed in Thai popular music? What forms of Thainess are expressed in music? What are the ideologies expressed in the four genres of Thai popular music I analyse? How are these ideologies constructed in the music? And are there any famous popular composers who have used ‘Thainess’ in their music?

Chapter Nine provides a detailed analysis of the relationship of these social categories in the four genres of Thai popular music I analyse. The analysis draws upon the details provided in Chapter Four to Nine.

The final chapter summarizes the most significant issues identified in the thesis, thus providing answers to the research questions posed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of Literature**

...people produce and consume the music they are capable of producing and consuming; different social groups possess different sorts of knowledge and skill, share different cultural histories, and so make music differently. Musical tastes do correlate with class cultures and subcultures... (Frith, 1976, p. 120)

There is a broad range of literature relevant to the topic of popular music. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the issues surrounding cultural identity and Thai popular music. The literature used in the study has been sourced from university libraries in Australia and Thailand, and includes dissertations, journals, books, encyclopedias, newspaper articles, magazines and Internet websites. According to Murray (2002), the purpose of a literature review is to give an overview of the topic, to provide evidence for the study, to summarize and evaluate other people's research and to develop an understanding of theory and method related to the topic. I will apply the concepts derived from this literature review to the topic of Thai popular music. The content in this chapter is divided into six subheadings: 1) Thailand and Thai culture, 2) Nationalism and identity, 3) Popular music, 4) Sociology of popular music, 5) Thai popular music, and 6) World music.

#### **Thailand and Thai Culture**

Non-Thai are an odd lot. Ask those who have been here what they think of Thailand and you will find that this amazing country is both ugly and beautiful, peaceful and infuriating, noisy and quiet, cheap and expensive, violent and passive, funny and sad. If you have never suffered from culture shock, Thailand is a great place to start. (Cooper & Cooper, 1995, p. 6)

According to Cooper and Cooper (1995) it is not easy to present a clear concept of Thai identity within a few sentences. Consequently, before an argument on "nationalism and identity" can be proposed, I will give an overview of how geographical positioning is significant to the construction of Thai culture.

## **Thailand**

Thailand is situated in the Southeast Asian mainland and bordered by neighbors including Laos (North and East), Malaysia (South), Myanmar (West and North), and Cambodia (East). The population of Thailand is approximately 63.5 million (2004) in an area of 513,115 sq. km (*Country profile: Thailand, 2004*).

Thailand is divided into four regions: The North, the Central, the Northeast, and the South. The Northern region, bordered by Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, is comprised of mountains, natural forests and valleys. The leading city is Chiangmai whose people speak a language similar to Laotian as well as to Burmese. The Central region, the large plain along the Chaopraya River, is the most extensive rice producing area in the country. Bangkok, which is the capital city and the main harbour, is located in this region. The Northeast region, stretching from the Korat Plateau to Mekong River and sharing borders with both Laos and Cambodia, is the largest region in both size and population. Almost all of the people of the Northeast speak Laotian and Cambodian. The Southern region along the peninsula, bordered for most of its length by the Gulf of Thailand on one side and the Indian Ocean of the other side, reaches down close to Malaysia. The Southern people speak a different dialect to other regions. Some speak Southern Thai, and others speak Malay (Parkes, 2000).

Although Thailand is comprised of many ethnic groups, the majority of Buddhist Thai who live in Bangkok and the Central region seem to epitomise the concept of 'Thainess'. However, sometimes, there are conflicts between the majority Buddhist Thai group and other ethnic groups, both overtly and covertly.

## **Thai Culture**

It is difficult to define the relationship between the preservation of Thai nationalism and adoption of western innovation in contemporary Thai popular music media without consideration of the background of Thai culture and western influences. I will not backtrack too far to overview the concept of Thai culture because it is less essential for media studies. We will start with current aspects of Thai culture.

According to Thais, the best way to maintain social harmony is to avoid any unnecessary friction in their contacts with others, expressed in notion of '*krengjai*', which means an extreme reluctance to impose on anyone or disturb his/her personal equilibrium by direct criticism, challenge, or confrontation. This principle is fostered across all Thai generations. Thai people will try as hard as possible to avoid personal conflict. In "The Middle Path for the Future of Thailand", Sipanon Ketudat (1990) proposes an idea of "Development in Harmony with Culture and Ethnic diversity", agreeing that Thai culture is, has been, and should be broad enough to permit a situation of "harmony within diversity". This idea involves not only the notion of '*krengchai*' or avoiding personal conflict but of social harmony in Thai society as well.

However, in regard to Thai unity, Thongchai Winichakul, a progressive Thai scholar, disagrees with this conclusion. He refers to Western scholars who raised some questions about Thai social harmony and the Thai state's ability to achieve a modern national political integration of minorities from different ethnicities, religions and ideologies under monarchical rule (Winichakul, 1998). In "Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of Nation" Winichakul argues that Siam or Thailand has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the past hundred years. Thai leaders have selectively adopted only what they perceive to be good things from the West while preserving traditional values at their best. (A skeptic might question the validity of such a view)

One of the most quoted illustrations of this selective modernization based on Thainess was the reaffirmation of Buddhism as the state religion vis-à-vis the adoption of Western science and technology throughout the period of modernization. Another famous proof was the instruction by certain prominent Siamese kings regarding the extent to which Western knowledge should be adopted: it must be based on its suitability to Siam, they argued, not on the model or standards of its origins. But it is hard to determine exactly what constituted the needs, appropriateness, goodness, usefulness, or right things... (Winichakul, 1998, p.3)

Kasian Techapira (1999) argues that Thai leaders supported the adoption of Western science and technology and ideas that they adopted capitalism as a modern economic model but they delayed the adoption of democracy because whereas

capitalism might provide the opportunity to make them richer but democracy might make them lose their power (Techapira, 1999).

It is ironic that some members of the elite class pretend to present themselves as loving Thainess. It was said that the leaders of 'Thainess' campaigns are perhaps the ones who actually have more admiration for western culture than average people have. Nevertheless, no one can deny that Thainess and Thai nationalism have been very important to Thai people from the past until now. Techapira argues that the more the campaign to love 'Thainess' is presented, the less Thainess remains in Thai society (Techapira, 1999).

## **Nationalism and Identity**

### **Thai nation and Thainess**

“*Chat Thai*” (the Thai nation) and “*kwam pen Thai*” (“Thainess”) seem to be understood among most Thai people as representing an essence, which is unique to Thailand. If a member of Thai society does not embody this essence, he or she may not be considered Thai or may even be considered a Thai enemy. Thai authorities have been attempting to build upon this form of nationalism as a means of convincing its subjects of the importance of such national identity. However, some political leaders and many progressive scholars have challenged the received notion of Thai identity.

Saichon Satayanurak (2002) studied the discourses of Luang Wijiwtakan who built this form of definition into the Thai nation. It is this Thainess, symbolised by Luang Wijiwtakan, which is most popular in Thai society. In “*Kwamplianplaeng nai kan sang chatthai lae kwampenthai, doi Luang Wijiwtakarn*” (Changing and building Thai nation and Thainess by Luang Wijiwtakan), the analysis of Thainess is divided into six chapters including Luang Wijiwtakan’s biographical details, defining nationalism, conceptualising Thai nationality, the development of the Thai nation and ‘Thainess’, identifying “the other” and a conclusion. The purpose of the study was to argue that the concepts of Thai nationality and ‘Thainess’ are not static but have been influenced by political and social change between 1927 and 1957. Satayanurak remarks that the initial definition of what it is supposed to mean to be “Thai” outlined by Wijiwtakan



comprises two main contexts. The first notion of “Thainess” describes Thai people who were able to exist independently despite the destructive influence of other cultures. Secondly, “Thai” defines an alleged cultural restoration where Thai literary, musical and dramatic forms were re-invented in order to gain the respect of other cultures, thus developing the image of national identity into a more progressive and modernised form of civilization. However, the essence of “*kwam pen Thai*” or “Thainess” remains, based upon the historical influence of antiquated Thai art, antiques and ancient remains which have always existed (Satayanurak, 2002).

“*Chat Thai*” or the Thai nation was also defined by Luang Wijiwtakan, as comprising any person born in the land of Siam (Thailand), including all social classes from the kingship to the common man or woman. This definition also includes those who have died in the past, the existing generation and all the future generations. “Nationalism” then means loving, unconditionally, those of the Thai nation and their land above all (Wijiwtakan cited in Satayanurak, 2002, p. 50).

During the years 1927-1937, the fear of foreign occupation by colonial powers influenced Thai leaders. They believed that small countries, especially Thailand, could be assimilated by the imperial cultures and thus become politically and culturally extinct. In order to survive, it was necessary for Thailand to become a great and powerful country. The best way was to expand its borders, for example, by making territorial claims for land from the imperial powers. At that time Wijiwtakan claimed that Thai people were composed of seven ethnic groups which included Thai, Laos, Cambodian, Mon, Burmese, Malay and Chinese. He implied that these people had been living on Siamese soil and neighboring countries. They were suffering in Lao, Cambodia, Burma and China without the protection of Thai culture because they had denied this historical fact. Accordingly they should be united to form a new and expanded Siamese civilisation. The aim of Wijiwtakan’s campaign was to aid in negotiations between Siam and France, thus making territorial claim over territories within Laos and Cambodia (Wijiwtakan cited in Satayanurak, 2002, pp. 63-64).

To accomplish this ambition, Wijiwtakan aimed to build a strong feeling of nationalism amongst the Thai people. He felt his influence was essential in order to establish patriotism and commitment to political independence. The leaders believed

that *kwampenthai* or “Thainess” could make Thai people love their country. Consequently, Thainess was the vehicle which generated a sense of pride and cultural prosperity amongst the population. Simultaneously Thainess also followed certain practices and traditions borrowed from western culture in order to gain approval from these countries. It defined a way of assimilating with imperial cultures, thus symbolising Thailand’s movement into modernity. The following paragraph, in which he describes Thailand’s proud history, exemplifies Wjitwatakan’s ideology.

The history of Thai nation, since ancient times, was great. Thai nation perhaps was a pioneer, which was ever prosperous in the world. At the same time that many western countries (including France) were entirely barbarian, Thai[land] had already established its kingdom in good order (Wjitwatakan cited in Satayanurak, 2002, p.32).

Such representations of Thai national identity were circulated in society at large through the many forms of mass media such as drama, radio, print, and public speaking, and in many different places such as at institutions of higher education.

After World War II, Thailand failed to become the imperial culture that Wjitwatakan had envisaged. The powerful ideology defining Thai culture was diminished a great deal during this period. Its definition covered only Thai people within Siam’s border, excluding the Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese people who lived in the neighboring countries (Wjitwatakan cited in Satayanurak, 2002, p. 65). However while Wjitwatakan still emphasized the importance of nationalism, an ideology that describes the innate characteristics and instincts of Thai citizens, he cautioned against the reactionary forms of nationalism emerging among the military, which he thought was a form of “Ultra-nationalism”. Later, Wjitwatakan changed his position as a consequence of Thailand’s activities in World War II and argued that any form of national conglomeration instigated by a single nation was certainly a serious crime against humanity. In making this observation, he was referring directly to Thailand’s ambitions in the 1930s in regard to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (Satayanurak, 2002).

During the cold war, Indochina was a main part of the battlefield and, unavoidably, Thailand was directly affected by the war. Undoubtedly, the leaders

brought Thailand into the war, aiding the U.S.A. against the communist countries in the region such as Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. It was believed strongly by the political leaders that communists would demolish the three pillars of Thai society including *chat, satsana, lae pramahakaset*” (the nation, king and religion) (Wijitwatakan, cited in Satayanurak, 2002, p.150). Therefore “Thai nationalism and Thainess” were adaptively changed into a new version of anti-Communist resistance.

However, directly following this period the three pillars of Thai society which constitute Thai culture, still existed as three institutions. Buddhist philosophy also evolved to reflect an emphasis on the scientific and rational. The king became an icon symbolising a modernised Thai civilization and a social developer committed to the welfare of his citizens.

Following the cultural change to globalisation, Satayanurak argued, the definition of Thai nation and Thainess were changed by contemporary Thai culture to appropriate the new influences of global culture. At the end of the last decade, Professor Dr Chatthip Natsupa (cited in Satayanurak, 2002, p. 187) proposed a notion that stimulated a new perspective on nationalism. In his academic work, he encouraged Thai citizens to search for their historical roots, and to restore and preserve this Thai community culture. Natsupa continues to argue that this community culture should be merged with the new global technologies. The combination of community traditions and global technologies were to become the “new community culture” which should take its place at the core of Thai culture and replace the previous culture, which was considered to have a feudal social structure attached to a capitalist economy. Accordingly, Natsupa believed that this new movement could affect the development of society at an economic and community level, thus forming a more democratic ideology, which was to be developed in political practice. Finally, he stated that if the new culture plays an important role in supporting the way of lives of Thai people, it would make common people stronger. (Natsupa cited in Satayanurak, 2002)

Recently, there was also a movement towards “Neo-nationalism” founded by a member group of *Thai Rak Thai Party*, the biggest political party in Thailand which has dominated parliament since 2002. The aim of Neo-nationalism is to revive the

ideology and consciousness of nationalism in order to retrieve the failed Thai economy and defend future economic sovereignty. Neo-nationalism boasted that it would extend its positive effects to all Thai people including all ethnic groups and classes. This ideology created a new order in which all Thai people and their descendants could live proudly and with dignity, Thainess and the Thai nation forever (Panyachatrat, et al, cited in Satayanurak, 2002).

In his works, Luang Wijiwtakan built ideas not only of the Thai nation and Thainess but also the concept of “the other”, in order to emphasise the strong relationships amongst Thai people. The term “the other” defines those who are not within Thai culture, or those who are not “us”. The concept of “the other” was altered by Wijiwtakan to suit the particular political standpoint of various leaders as they attempted to restore national identity amongst Thailand’s subjects between the 1930s and the 1940s. The way in which the concept of “the other” might be presented to the Thai people ranged from close friendly relations, to unfriendly or even hostile ones. Examples of “the other” given by Wijiwtakan are the Japanese, Burmese, and Chinese. For instance, in 1927, Wijiwtakan considered that Japan was Thailand’s strongest ally. However, he went on to change his mind and stated that Thailand must watch out for Japan because Thailand might be taken advantage of, or in an extreme circumstance assimilated, by Japanese culture but he still argued that Thailand should take full advantage of its relationship with Japan (Satayanurak, 2002). Wijiwtakan’s shifting views illustrates clearly the complexity surrounding the issue of Thai national identity and further, that it has never been a fixed entity but rather a dynamic one that changes according to ideological, material or even political shifts.

In her conclusion, Satayanurak argued that since the old definition of Thai nationalism influenced and dominated Thailand through much of the Twentieth Century, it also had the effect of generating a lot of prejudice. Through political dictatorship, the old “Thai nationalism” was monopolized in the creation, definition and circulation of “Thainess” as well as the concept of “the other,” irrespective of whether they were friends or enemies of the Thai people. The construction of Thai nationalism has always been dependant upon varying political conditions within Thai society. Political leaders following the example of Wijiwtakan have used their

power to monopolize control over Thai society in order to maintain their power in the belief that it will benefit the nation as a whole. Consequently, the old definition of Thai nationalism and Thainess contributed to many different policies and projects which unfairly and inhumanly affected many groups within Thai society, especially those “less Thai”, beyond the frame of Thainess, “the others” or any enemies of the Thai nation within or outside the borders of the Thai state.

In the same way, many people today worry about “Neo-nationalism” (of the political party of *Thai Rak Thai*), and whether it can respond to or solve the problems of poor people from lower classes. It also raises questions about whether it is used as the instrument of national capitalists in order to arouse the authority and state resources of society to resist an invasion by “international capitalists” and thus protect local capital. Thai national capitalists have always taken advantage of Thai people and this practice is no different from the way in which international capitalists may act. It is for this reason that the claims made by “Neo-nationalism” to distribute benefits to every ethnic group, class, and division of Thai people seem to be vague (Satayanurak, 2002).

In addition, however, Satayanurak suggests that some procedures of the old nationalism, which were perhaps forgotten, for example, nationalistic economics, should be revised and applied seriously as it may lead to the distribution of benefits to all Thai people.

Satayanurak’s “*Kwamplianplaeng ni kansang chatthai lae kwampenthai, doi Luang Wichitwatakarn* (Changing of building Thai Nation and Thainess by Luang Wigitwatakan)” is the first study written in Thai that gives us a clear concept of the construction and evolution of the concept of Thai identity. She found that the concepts of Thai nationality and Thainess respectively as defined by Wigitwatakan dominated and guided the way of thinking of Thai society for a long time (Satayanurak, 2002, pp. 7-8). It can be argued that most Thai people accepted this idea of identity firmly as constituting the essence of Thai culture. Nithi Iawsriwong adds in the foreword, that since a military dictatorship ruled Thailand for many decades, the national ideology of Wigitwatakan encouraged a militaristic political system. Thailand is now established as a democratic country, yet elements of the old ideology still exist in ways of thinking among public servants, scholars and media

producers (Iawsriwong, cited in Satayanurak, 2002, pp. 14-15). These perspectives were also circulated through mass media channels in the forms of music, dance and drama. They became the mainstream of contemporary Thai identity. Many Thais do not realize that the Thai identity, which they have held for at least two generations, is an illusion built by specific political leaders.

Although Satayanurak's study does not relate directly to the content of Thai popular music, terms such as Thai nation, Thainess, and Thai nationalism as well as their definitions could be used as an elementary reference point in the analysis of Thai popular music, and provide answer to questions such as: "What is 'Thainess'?" or "What is Thai nationalism?" I believe that these concepts have been present in the lyrical content and musical forms of Thai popular music from its historical origins to its modern forms, overtly as well as covertly, and therefore may be regarded as forming an ideological position.

### **Criticism of Thai national identity**

After the uprising of progressive students and middle classes during 1973, a dictatorship was overthrown. The arena was opened more broadly for new thinkers such as student leaders, university scholars, journalists and so on. These progressive scholars challenged the previous views of Thai identity, which had been established by the military authority. The arguments on Thai nationalism and Thai identity are presented in both Thai and English in many forms of discourse such as academic research, books, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as on Internet web notice boards. Some examples of prominent Thai authors writing on the topic of Thai identity and Thai nationalism are Suluk Sivaraksa, Chai-anan Samudavniya, Nithi Iawosriwong and Therayut Boonmi. There are also foreign scholars who have made arguments centered around Thai identity and Thai nationalism. Some important examples of these are Craig J. Reynolds, Anthony Diller, B.J. Terwiel, Gehan Wijeyewardene, Peter Jackson, Nerida M. Cook, Charles F. Keyes, Han-Dieter Bechstedt, Philip Hiesch, and Annettete Hamiton. The fact that these articles have been written in English, has led to these arguments being more critical of the nationalist position than those written in Thai.

In September 1989, there was a conference held at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, to acknowledge the fiftieth year of Thailand replacing Siam as the name of the country. At least twelve scholars from Thailand and other countries provided essays centred on the issues of Thai national identity. These essays then were published under the title “National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today” (2002), edited by Craig J. Reynolds. I think that these essays provide the most negative critical appraisals of the issue of Thai identity, which oppose the dominant definition of Thai identity and Thai nationalism.

In these essays, many elaborate arguments about the building of Thai national identity, particularly since the regime of the Prime Minister Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram (1939-1948), are made. Although Thailand avoided being colonized by western countries, a cultural policy and a cultural identity dominated by the Thai-speaking people of central Thai region, in order to assimilate many ethnic groups into central Thai society, caused many serious problems. For example, some other ethnic groups such as Laotians, Chinese, Muslims and other ethnic minorities could not accept this policy but they did not have enough power to resist it directly. They felt that their interests (and dignity) were disadvantaged and suppressed. However, the governments used their instruments and authorities such as mass media, education, public servants and laws to control these conflicts. Mostly they succeeded but sometimes it caused blackening and elimination of whoever were considered marginal (Reynolds; Sivaraksa; Samudavanija; and Terwiel, 2002).

Thirayut Boonmi (2003), a progressive Thai scholar and pro-democracy student leader during the students’ demonstration, (October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976), argues, “It is the Thai State that has constructed ‘Thai nation’ and ‘Thainess’, yet Thai people did not build the Thai State or Thailand”. This conclusion may shock many Thai nationalists who are familiar with the old paradigm (Boonmi, 2003, p. 24). He also states that contradictory opinions surrounding national identity as well as ethnicity in Thai neighboring countries including Burma, Indonesia, China and the Philippines will proliferate in the future. For this reason, Thailand should prepare its mind, policy, and role to face these situations in advance in order to avoid future trouble (p. 30).

Boonmi criticizes the Aristocratic Nationalism of the regime of King Rama VI (1910-1925) arguing that it was unsuccessful because of the emphasis placed upon the monarchy as the centre of the nation, which neglected the common people. He continues to argue that Wichitwathakan's concept of nationalism during the governments of Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram (1938-1957) and Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) generated extreme parochialism. Although this view of national interests emphasized the right of the citizen rather than monarchy, it inspired the motivation to take advantage of or even destroy other countries. It then brought the country to a state of absolutism similar to the regimes of German, Italy and Japan during World War II. However, Boonmi agrees that the nationalist concept makes it easy for citizens to realize a passion for sharing their own fate, as well as their joint aim, in an attempt to make their nation more progressive (Boonmi, 2003, pp. 102-109).

Boonmi states that after the uprising of October 14, 1973, Thailand began to experience a plurality of perspectives in terms of power, economic structure, religious belief, and differing ways of life and so on. There was more tolerance toward differences expressed in ideology, ethnicity, class, gender, religious and region. However, these differences have not been resolved yet. It is a difficult task for Thai society to view these new principles and values with tolerance. To solve these problems dealing with the new situation, the state should use compromise rather than force in the distribution of power by the administration (p.111).

## **Sociology of Popular Music**

According to Middleton (2002), definitions of popular music have changed with time, from the late eighteenth century to late twentieth century. Since the pre-modern age in Europe, there has been some sort of hierarchy of musical categories, such as high and low music (high refers to classical music or good music, and low refers to low-culture or low class). By the late twentieth century, the boundaries between high, middle and low taste had blurred. Globalization and the technology of the cultural economy play an important role in the musical shifts within capitalist society.



In examining the major themes of popular music since the 1900s, Middleton shows that a network of levels of activity, which continuously evolved in shape and dynamics, emerged. These networks include ‘super-culture’ (global), ‘subculture’ (local), and ‘inter-culture’ (cross-cutting) (Slobin, cited in Middleton, 2002).

The book *America’s musical pulse: Popular music in twentieth-century society* (Bindas, 1992) comprises twenty eight essays written by different authors and is categorised in to six parts: politics, class, economics, race, gender and social context. The topics cover various aspects of popular music in the last century. Some significant topics, which relate to my research topic, are: Popular Music as Politics and Protest, by Jerome Rodnitzky; Race, Class, and Ethnicity among Swing Musicians, Kenneth J. Bandas; Taking Care of Business: The Commercialization of Rock Music, by George M. Plasketes; and The Impact of Popular music in Society, by John Orman.

The collection has a very useful introduction and provides important insights into popular music in general which can be used as a theoretical framework for a study of popular music study in terms of sociology and media studies. The essays in this book help achieve a better understanding of contemporary American society which permeates the whole world, including Thailand. But in Thai society, many elements are different from the American contexts: for example, history, politics, economics, culture, values, and identity. Therefore, the complex issues behind Thai popular music will be explored in this thesis utilizing the concepts outlined in Bindas’ collection.

Gatten (1995) provides an overview of the scholarship related to the sociology, psychology and politics of rock music. The topics investigate such diverse aspects of modern culture as censorship, violence, performing arts, fashion, literature, women’s issues, diversity and ethnomusicology. Gatten found that there have been studies on 158 topics of rock music sociology including ninety-nine articles, thirty-eight chapters, twenty books and eight dissertations. For each topic, Gatten provides descriptive explanations of content as well as identifying authors and subject indexes. Outstanding works are listed include and include Simon Frith, “Anglo-America and its Discontents” (Cultural Studies 5, no. 3, 1991): 263-269); Reebee Garfalo, “How Autonomous is Relative: Popular Music, the Social

Formation and Cultural Struggle” (Popular Music 6, no.1, 1987: 77-92); and Howard Koval, “Homogenization of Culture in Capitalist Society” (Popular Music and Society, 1988). All of these works are relevant to this thesis.

Gatten’s study provides a clear overview of the writings of popular music scholars on rock music and sociology. There are many issues, which are relevant to social issues in Thailand, but most of them are associated with Western music. There is no elaboration on the *sociology of Thai popular music*.

In *Popular Music Since 1955: A critical guide to the literature*, Taylor (1985) provides a critical, bibliographical guide to the literature of contemporary popular music published in English between 1955 and 1985. Social aspects of popular music are included in the book covering, for example, sociology, subcultures, stardom, women in politics, women in religion, and women in education.

Taylor’s study provides a wealth of facts on the subject of popular music and makes it easier to find information and reference sources for further study. However, there are few references to studies of popular music associated with Asian music, especially Thai popular music.

In terms of music and politics, Dunaway, (1987), writes that music has been used as a channel to communicate political sentiments by Chinese emperors since 2000 B.C. “Music may be said to be political when its lyrics or melody evoke or reflect a political judgment by the listener” (Dunaway, 1987, p. 37). There are a number of basic types of political music as described in the following, which is a categorization of lyrics, by Ashaf, 1975:

- Protest and complaint, direct or indirect, against exploitation and oppression
- Aspiration toward a better life, a more just society.
- Topic satire of governments, politicians, landlords, capitalists.
- Political philosophical themes; political and ethical ideals.
- Campaign songs of particular parties and movements.
- Commemoration of popular struggles past and present.
- Expressions of international working-class solidarity.
- Comment on industrial conditions and working life and the role of trade unions.
- Protest against racial and sexual stereotyping.

- Appeals for renewable energy sources and environmental betterment.  
(Cited in Dunaway, 1987, p. 40).

According to Dunaway, his study contributes to the framework of political analysis of music. My view is that it can also be used to analyze politics in the Thai popular music arena, especially in the fourth genre or *pleng phuea chiwit*. However, Dunaway's essay emphasises lyrical themes rather than musical form. Future analysis of Thai popular music needs to cover both lyrics and musical form.

## **Thai Popular Music**

Thai scholars have largely ignored the significance of Thai popular music to contemporary culture for a long time, although there are some significant exceptions, as I will show below. There are few studies concentrating on the topic of Thai popular music. These studies have tended to be conducted by journalists in magazine articles, on genres such as *pleng lukthung*, *pleng puea chiwit* (Aiewswiwong, 1985, p.19). Some studies, written by communications scholars, consider Thai popular music as a form of mass communication in Thai society. Examples include "The impact of the tape cassette business on creativity of Thai popular songs" (Limpichai, 1993), "Commercializing the sound of the people: *Pleng lukthung* and "Thai pop Music industry" (Siriyuvasak, 1990, pp.61-77).

Kuekrit Pramot, a journalist and prince, says that *pleng lukthung* provides strong evidence that Thai culture still lives in Thai popular music, which may be changed without losing its fundamental Thai elements. On the other hand *pleng lukthung* portrays Thai music in the present circumstance, and is influenced by Western culture (Pramot, 1973). In the same way, Chintana Damrongloed, a researcher at the Thai Studies Institute, Thammasat University, believes that *pleng lukthung* represents an evolution of local and of folk music. Although it is performed using Western instruments, various characteristics of Thai people and Thai society are still reflected deeply and broadly as the essence of *pleng lukthung* (Damrongloed, 1990).

In her article 'Oh Wannakam muanchon' (Oh Yes, a mass literature), Temsiri Bunyasinh (1975) discusses *pleng lukthung*, reporting that *pleng lukthung* is a

gathering of contemporary Thai beliefs, values, fashions and social contexts. The *pleng lukthung* songs often contain a familiar of Thai style yet are often developed through the influence of Western music. Although *pleng lukthung* is a modern style of Thai popular music, the songs always remain sincere yet humorous, retaining the characteristics of peasants who originally produced and listened to this musical style (Bunyasingh, 1975, pp. 117-118).

Wat Wanlayangkoon (2002) states in his essay, *Pleng lukthung yang mai tai hae* (Thai country music has not died yet) that while previous *lukthung* song-writers wrote imaginative songs, the new song writers write *pleng lukthung* songs that are similar to writing realistic short stories. Their lyrics reflect the lives of rural people; for example, the content in *pleng lukthung* is usually about rural society in which most people are farmers but most of their children go to school in the cities and live among urban people. After graduation and gaining new experiences in the cities, they go back home and live their lives in rural societies. Thus *pleng lukthung* reflects the lives and ambitions of most rural people who are also the most populous group in Thailand. This is the reason why *pleng lukthung* has not died yet, especially *lukthung isan* (the northeastern style of *pleng lukthung*) (Wanlayangkoon, 2002).

One particular academic work that has contributed to this area is a master's dissertation from Chulalongkorn University written by Samakamon Limpichai. The title is, 'The impact of the tape cassette business on creativity of Thai popular songs'. Limpichai looks at the history, development, and the present situation of the Thai popular audiocassette business, as well as the ways and means in which artists have used cassettes creatively. Limpichai gathered different views from artists who have created and produced tape cassettes. She found that business has played an important role in the formation of Thai popular music, and the artists have been confined by the limitations of a commercial system. The production industry has had a great impact on the creativity of the artists. The songs have been produced in a system that lacked industry standards or a system of quality control. This leads Limpichai to conclude that Thai popular music has become more like a 'commercial product' than an 'artistic product' (Limpichai, 1993).

Limpichai's study is, perhaps, the first elaborate work about Thai popular music since its birth in the nineteenth century. Limpichai reports in detail on the

complicated history of Thai popular music and on the more recent systems of the tape cassette business. She conducted musical form and content analysis to prove her hypothesis about the standard and quality of songs. However, now, thirteen years later, social situations and events have indeed changed a great deal. For this reason, this topic requires further study, to produce a deeper and broader analysis of Thai popular music in the present age.

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (1990) studied *pleng lukthung* in terms of the production and distribution process in the music industry. Siriyuvasak's study is entitled, "Commercialising the sound of people: *Pleng lukthung* and Thai pop music industry" and was published in the *International Journal of a Popular Music*. This work is an investigation of the relationships between cultural organizations and the artists/creative communicators. Siriyuvasak argues that there are tensions between artists, businessmen and authorities in the music industry. The artists of *pleng lukthung* strive for relative autonomy in their creative ideology. In their songs, they reflect on their low status and the social resistance of workers. However, it is not easy to be autonomous because they have to work within the boundaries of social and political censorship as well as market forces. The mass media and audiences, especially those formed by radio, are also involved in this process as the consumers and distributors of the music products (Siriyuvasak, 1990).

Siriyuvasak's study is perhaps the first serious piece of academic writing about Thai popular music as a process of social and popular culture written by a Thai Communication Arts scholar. Although it looks at describing the three genres of Thai popular music in the dimensions of political economic and ideology, its focus is primarily on the cultural industry processes behind '*pleng lukthung*'. This leaves the other remaining genres and other contexts of Thai popular music to be explored in order to complete the entire picture of Thai popular music.

Nilobon Kowapitakthet (1991) analyzes Thai popular songs by using the features of postmodern aesthetics as cultural indicators. Kowapitakthet combines qualitative methods and focused interviews in the data collection to analyse the content of a number of significant songs. She found that the aesthetics of Thai popular songs are similar to postmodern aesthetics in many ways. For example, repeated releases of popular songs may use a different singer or variation on the

original composition. The lyrical content may discuss various narratives such as ghost stories, dream-like fantasies or space travel; the written verse and musical styles sometimes break established musical conventions (Kowapitakthet, 1991). Furthermore, she argues that all songs were increasingly similar to the development of post-modern graphic art, in the ways they narrate stories and especially in the methods through which they are reproduced.

Kowapitakthet's study has updated our understanding of the current situation of Thai popular music. She suggests that Thai popular music is not so different from western popular music or other kinds of recent mass media such as film, photography, and television or radio in terms of postmodern aesthetics. While Kowapitakthet's finds postmodernism a useful analytic tool, her thesis is more interested in the texts of produced rather than the context. Consequently, post-modern theory has not been applied in my analysis.

Patcharida Wathana (1992) studied the development of Thai pop singers' rise to celebrity status and the roles of mass media involved in reinforcing their celebrity status. Wathana concludes that in the past celebrity status depended on the quality of songs and singers' voices, but nowadays it depends on the music company's promotional strategy and the type of media used to advertise and promote the singers' image and songs.

Wathana's study focuses on the important role of a music company's promotional strategy and the mass media, but ignores other contexts related to celebrity status such as politics, class and social contexts. I argue that the celebrity of singers depends not only upon the strategy the media use to advertise and promote the singers' image and songs but also the congruency of politics, class and social contexts between the singers and their audiences. Therefore these contexts should be included in a study of Thai popular music.

Lamnao Eamsa-ard (1995) analysed the 'Rock' style of Thai popular music, including the history, the style and content of rock music, in order to understand the ideology within the songs. Eamsa-ard used qualitative methods in the data collection based on analysis of content and musical form, participant observation and focused interviews. The study shows that Thai popular rock music is influenced by American

and English rock music, which has made Thai popular music stronger and more aggressive in melody and words. The content of rock music treats not only love affairs but also social events, and the ideology in the songs is oppositional.

Although this study is concerned with an analysis of contemporary Thai popular music in terms of ideological and social-cultural study, it focuses only on the rock style. There is a need, therefore, to conduct further analysis of this nature upon other styles of Thai popular music.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, there were three master dissertations from the faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, that relate to the topic of Thai popular music.

Firstly, Pitsinee Bamrunnakorn (2000) studied “The immortality of *Suntharaporn’s* songs” in order to discover the reasons why many songs of *Suntharaporn* have endured amongst two to three generations of audiences. *Suntharaporn* is the most famous *pleng lukgrung* band, which produced more than 2000 songs in the style of *pleng lukgrung* (urban music). Its songs were most popular particularly among high-class people, during 1950-1970. The aim of her study was to understand the characteristics of *Suntharaporn’s* songs and determine the factors, which contributed to their songs’ enduring fame. Two research questions were formulated to explain the popularity of the genre: “What are the characteristics of *Suntharaporn’s* songs?” and “What are the factors, which create or support the enduring fame of *Suntharaporn’s* songs?”

Three techniques were used for collecting data including content analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The content analysis technique was applied to analyze the meaning of the songs, focus group techniques to collect data from audiences or fans, and in depth interviews to gather data from song producers about singers, musicians, songwriters, arrangers, and music trainers. These qualitative methods are similar to the ethnographic approach that I use in my study. I can adopt and adapt these methods to my study. Bamrunnakorn found that there were five main characteristics of *Suntharaporn’s* songs that made the songs enduringly famous. Firstly, the content of the songs consists of a relationship between the lyric and melody to produce the meaning. The meaning must then relate to the prosody

and literary style of the writer. Thirdly, the emotion in the songs is reflected in the melody and rhythm. It is necessary for the content to be based on a popular music style. Finally, the aesthetics, which comprise melodiousness, must be familiar to the perceptions of the audience, and performative excellence is also important. Furthermore, the main factors which determine its enduring fame, are the quality of music production including the quality of singers, musicians, songwriters, composers, arrangers and music trainers. The result of her study reconfirms the study of Wathana that the celebrity status of Thai popular music in the past depended on the quality of songs and singer's voices.

Bamrungrakorn's research values an understanding of Thai popular music in an analysis of the issues of Thai popular music history as well as the music production process, particularly the history of "*pleng lukgrung*" which is represented by *Suntharaporn's* songs. Such methodology could also be applied to the collection of data in my own research. However, her study is focused only in terms of music production, which she believes generates aesthetics. I believe that sociological contexts, for instance, culture, political, economic, class and gender, are also very important factors that contribute to the enduring fame of popular music. However these were not included in her study. Therefore, these issues within the context of sociology will be employed in the research of Thai popular music.

Chanabun Puengkunpra (2000) studied "Mass media strategies for sales promotion of independent music companies". The aims of the study were to examine marketing strategies and mass media strategies for sales promotion of the independent music companies in Thailand. A qualitative approach employing in-depth interviews was the methodology used for collecting data. The key informants consisted of musicians, distributors, investors, radio disc jockeys, and the press. In addition, data related to the topic from newspapers, magazine articles, books and dissertations were collected and analyzed.

Puengkunpra found that independent music companies used many techniques to support the sale of their music products. For instance, they would employ talented musicians to produce their quality products, use suitable channels of distribution, determine appropriate sale costs as well as control their production costs, and use the mass media and marketing activities for sales promotion. The most



popular media used by the independent music companies were print media, with secondary usage identified as being radio, and the least significant was television. Furthermore, other special activities were conducted to encourage sales promotion. These involved press conferences, joining music activities involved with educational institutes and the distribution of free CDs to radio stations and entertainment entrepreneurs (Puengkhunpra, 2002).

The study by Puengkhunpra focuses upon mass communication and marketing. It provides very little content that relates to the sphere of sociology. However, some quantitative data techniques used in the research such as in-depth interviews are interesting and these methodologies will apply in my study of Thai popular music.

Finally, Wanlada Pirunsarn (2000) studied “Communicative meaning in the patriotic songs of the military (army, navy, air force and police)”. The aims of her study were to examine the history of the patriotic songs of the four military groups in Thailand and to analyze their communicative meaning, intention, motivation and selective wording to build emotive communication. Eight patriotic songs from a catalogue of 223 songs were selected for analysis. Historical approaches as well as textual analysis were applied to collect and analyze the data.

Pirunsarn reported that patriotic songs in Thailand emerged in the era of King Rama V (1909) and then became more popular in the era of King Rama VI (1913). The patriotic songs gained further impetus during the World War II in the era of the Prime Minister Marshal Pibulsongkram. At that time, the government wanted to encourage a patriotic spirit among soldiers. Following this period, patriotic songs faded in popularity until the years of the pro-democratic movement during 1973-1976, when they reached the height of their popularity.

In analyzing the communicative meaning of the songs, Pirunsarn found that they inspired a vigorous emotion of self-sacrifice for the nation as well as building collective pride. Moreover her analysis found that the songs placed an emphasis on patriotic feeling and the techniques used to achieve this were a repetition of rhymed vowels and consonants that follow the melody of the song. A similarity between each song was identified as the building of emotion, particularly within the March rhythm.

Pirunsarn argues that the strong melodies evoked an enjoyable and lively compatibility with the lyrics, which related to the Thai identities and nationalism constructed by Luang Wijiwtakarn (see “Nationalism and Identity). Finally, the main aim of the patriotic songs, she argues, was to arouse feelings of sacrifice, bravery, and responsibility amongst the people. In the same way, the three main motifs illustrated by the songwriters were a need for security, social acceptance and dedication of oneself to the nation (Pirunsarn, 2000).

Pirunsarn’s study identifies the concept of nationalism in Thai popular music. It provides an elaborate history of Thai patriotic songs that benefit the study of Thai popular music in terms of nationalism and gives us an understanding of their communicative meaning as well. However, it is a restricted study focusing only on the patriotic songs of the military and excluding the other genres of Thai popular music. I argue that it exposes an extreme ideology, representative of the right wing elite ruling class during the Cold War that is also present in some form of popular music. The real purpose of the songs was to oppose the organizations of progressive students and socialist political parties at that time.

Craig A. Lockard argues that patriotic songs were used in order to take revenge on ‘*pleng pea chiwit*’ (song for life) produced by left wing groups between 1973 and 1976:

At the same time right-wing force retaliated against the Song for life through the use of nationalistic and patriot songs (*pleng pluk chai*) that had been utilized since the 1930s in support of governmental and elite policies. These hegemonic songs, many of them written by military officers of member of the royal family, had long occupied an important niche on radio and in history dramas. (Lockard, 2001, p.196)

In Thailand, many genres of Thai popular music project other forms of nationalism. These concepts of nationalism differ from those found within the patriotic songs of the military. The ideology in the patriot songs was influenced by the old nationalism built by Wijiwtakan. Studying other forms of nationalism in popular songs should be done to extend research on the topic of Thai popular music.

## **World Music**

In the last two decades, Western popular music scholars have given more attention to music in non-Western countries such as South America, Africa and Asia. In Asia, there have been some works which focus on popular music, for example, Lockard 1995) with, *“Hey, We Equatorial People”: Popular Music and Contemporary Society in Malaysia.*

Lockard (2001) studied popular music in Southeast Asia with a particular emphasis on Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia/Singapore. In the title, “Dance of Life”, Lockard explores the connection between popular music and politics, the role of singer or musician as a political actor, and the way a number of these performers have used music as a weapon or tool in Southeast Asia over the past three decades. His work is a synthesis based mostly on secondary materials including scholarly and popular books, periodicals, magazines and recordings. While researching for this study, he lived in Malaysia and Singapore for four years. To collect data, he also visited Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand several times. Lockard concludes that popular music in Southeast Asia has played an important role in sociopolitical commentary, criticism, and protest for the past several decades. Popular music developed and proliferated, including imitations of Western pop and creative fusion blending indigenous tradition with external influences from the West, India, the Middle East and the Caribbean.

Lockard’s study is associated with the topic of Thai popular music in the context of music as well as politics and history. He has predominantly used secondary materials in his study of Thai popular music that reaffirms the relationship between Thai popular music and society. However, the use of primary materials and the contexts of the sociology and the culture of popular music have yet to be explored.

## **Conclusion**

The literature discussed in this chapter provides have all contributed to my research and my understanding of the issues involved. There are many more published works in these fields than I can ever cite. This is a selective account of a

large number of materials, which I have selected to illuminate this thesis. These statements provide an understanding of theories and method related to my topic. My study connects to and builds on these researches, which were authored by Thai and international researchers and scholars. I have identified the gap that my research will fill and have shown that why my research is important and need to be done.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study of Thai popular music takes as its starting point the sociology of music, which incorporates the economic, social, political and religious influences, which have an impact on the creation, production, dissemination, reception, presentation and reproduction of popular music. My argument is that an ethnographic approach allows greater depth in analysis of musical form and content and conveys a more accurate reading of contemporary Thai culture. Many aspects of my methodological approach draw heavily on ethnography, insofar as I intend to immerse myself in the world of Thai popular music. Moreover, textual analysis, such as semiotic and discourse analysis, are deployed for the qualitative data analysis. Given my background as musician, performer and amateur songwriter this is possible. This approach is adopted with the basic premise that social meaning is generated through social interaction of people and symbols, especially in the realm of music.

#### **The Ethnographic Method**

Close field observation forms the basis of ethnographic research. It is informed by the study of socio-cultural phenomena and focuses on the sociology of meaning. The ethnographer studies the interaction between community members, selecting interviewees who have an intimate understanding of their community. The study is not restricted by geographic location. It may also include work, leisure and many other social groups. The original informants recommend other members of the community to be interviewed, thus enabling 'chain sampling' to obtain a thorough understanding of information in all empirical areas of investigation. Informants are interviewed multiple times, especially when new information is discovered and needs further clarification. This process provides a deeper understanding of the material when a contributor is re-interviewed and intends to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena being studied. Although ethnographic research is subjective in its sources, it is often regarded as more significant than objective data such as statistical information.

According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999):

The content of ethnography can address some or all of the following: beliefs; attitudes; perceptions; emotions; verbal and nonverbal means of communication; social networks; behaviors of the group of individuals with friends, family, associates, fellow workers, and colleagues; use of the tools; technology and manufacture of materials and artifacts; and patterned use of space and time. (p.4)

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) also inform us that there are seven characteristics which mark a study as ethnographic:

- It is carried out in a natural setting, not in a laboratory.
  - It involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants.
  - It presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviors.
  - It uses inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories.
  - It uses multiple data sources, including both quantitative and qualitative data.
  - It frames all human behavior and belief within a socio-political and historical context.
  - It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.
- (p.9)

Ethnography assumes that to more accurately understand how a community works, we must first discover what social roles people have and then we must assess the reasons they give for performing them. The researchers can only interpret the meaning of ethnographic data after the myriad of interpretations have been drawn over a single issue or situation. Thus ethnographic research process involves longer term, face-to-face interaction with people in the community under research. This is the essence of ethnographic research. An ethnographic researcher cannot control what happens in the community under research. "Thus the ethnographic field situation is unlike a clinic or laboratory-based experimental research where most aspects of the environment are controlled and where all researchers can use the same instruments and can expect to get the same results if the study is repeated" (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 2).

Lack of control over the field setting is a major concern to those who consider ethnography to be more art than science. What is important to

ethnographers, as social scientists, is their ability to adapt or create locally appropriate aids to help in data collection and to provide instruments that are effective in building a theory about the local culture that is predictive. These predictions help to form hypotheses that can be applied to a situation already under research or to other situations using the same research methods and data collection techniques.

The ethnographic method I employ in my research is completely unstructured field studies, which are applied to the study of macro-ethnography. This is due to the fact that in a natural environment research cannot be controlled by the researcher. According to Barrie Gunter (2000), completely unstructured field studies have very little structure as research occurs in a natural setting using participant observation. There are two possible methods of ethnographic research. Macro-ethnography is the study of broadly defined cultural groupings such as “Thai popular music”. The other method of research is micro-ethnography, which is the study of narrowly defined cultural groupings, such as “members of a local band”. Prior to the selection of a methodological approach to my research, I must consider that the Thai Popular music community is not a geographic community but a broad cultural grouping in Thailand including people in the processes of production, distribution, mediation and consumption of music from different classes, locations and ethnicities. Although most music industries in Thailand are located in Bangkok and much of my research is concentrated there, popular music informs culture on a national scale; thus, macro-ethnography is most relevant to my study.

### **Why Did I Select Ethnography?**

There are many different research methodologies which apply to social research, but I have selected ethnography because its characteristics are in accord with my perception about the formation of cultural theory, especially with regard to Thai popular music. Moreover, ethnography is appropriate for my research because of my years of immersion in the industries on a personal and professional level.

I have been immersed in Thai popular music both educationally and culturally for a long time. I hold a Bachelor in Music Education, and work as a music teacher, a musician/amateur songwriter, and a radio disc jockey. After completing

my bachelor degree, I worked as a music teacher in a high school in Bangkok for two years. Then I worked as a music lecturer in four teachers' colleges (Rajabhat Institutes) in Bangkok, and in the South and North of Thailand for another ten years. During the periods of being a music teacher/ lecturer, my employment involved not only teaching musical subjects both practically and theoretically but also supervising the popular music bands of my students. My work with the bands also involved playing music with the students, and arranging and writing songs. At that time, we could play and sing approximately seventy percent of contemporary Thai popular songs, especially urban music and country music. We were deeply immersed in the discourse of popular music. From 1992 to 1995, while completing my master's degree in Mass Communication at Chulalongkorn University, I undertook a research project titled: "An analysis of Thai popular music in rock style". I used content analysis as a main methodology for the study, and thus I had to listen critically to more than 400 songs. I found that Thai popular music in the rock style was strongly influenced by Anglo American and British rock music and always presented a certain ideology. Rather than mainstream ideology, Thai rock music presents radical, alternative ideologies. These experiences provided me with the confidence to conduct further research of Thai popular music.

Considering that I am part of the community under study, I can therefore use myself as part of the study for data collection. Through my personal connections to the Thai popular music industry, I am able to build relationships based on trust with members of the community, the informants who participate in my study, and to be intimate in face-to-face interactions with them. For example, Krisanasak Kantathamawong, a music producer who was previously a music student of mine when I was a music lecturer in a teachers' college in Bangkok, was able to introduce me to some other significant producers and songwriters. Thus when I went to meet those people, they welcomed me and allowed me to interview them as long as I required. Once trust is established, we can create an open personal communication in which the opinions and views of the participants come out in a natural way. For this reason, I am confident that all voices in the study are included in the text of my thesis. For instance, when I conducted a focus group with university students in Phitsanulok province, we discussed the students' backgrounds and favorite songs. Initially, they were too shy to express their opinions. I knew that most of them had



come from rural areas outside the city of Phitsanulok but they were now university students living in city and behaving like city people do. I told them that I came from a poor family of rice farmers in a rural area and my favorite songs since I was young were *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music). I appreciated the same songs that they did. They then openly articulated their ideas relating to the interview questions. This approach helped me to get an answer that *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music) as well as *pleng string* (pop rock) proved to be popular with this group.

Ethnography is a method that uses an inductive process, from bottom up, to generate theoretical explanations, and is compatible with the way I engage in my social interactions. I draw from the concrete data that I have collected in order to move towards abstract ideas or the assertion of general principles. For example, after in-depth interviewing with some successful and famous Thai popular songwriters, I found that their beliefs and behaviors were reflected in their music and were consistent with the ideologies of nationalism, Buddhism, monarchism, capitalism, modernism, escapism and romanticism, dependant upon individual preference. Therefore, I may conclude that Thai popular music reflects Thai ideologies and these ideologies are the mainstream of contemporary Thai society. However, theories often come from the work of other researchers. Consequently, I am also able to apply general or abstract ideas from theories to the concrete data of my work.

Finally, I want to examine the behavior and beliefs of the people involved in Thai popular music. The context of ethnography refers to the cultural, historical, political, and social ties that connect individuals, organizations or institutions in relation to the behavior and beliefs of the community under research. My underlying motivation in using ethnographic research stems from my belief in the integrity of local cultures. Thus my purpose is to develop an understanding of the social, political, cultural and economic contexts of the people involved in Thai popular music. For this reason, I selected ethnography as the most suitable methodology to apply to my research.

## Research Paradigms

According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), a paradigm is a framework for interpretation or a way of viewing the world. In social science research and evaluation, the most popular paradigms are positivism; critical theory; interpretive, phenomenological, constructivist theory; ecological theory; and social network theory. There is no doubt that all of these approaches to research are important in different ways. For a particular research project, we can use not only one of these but also a synthesis of several paradigms. For this research project, I emphasize interpretative and phenomenological or constructive theory at the same time as I mobilize critical theory to support my argument. I believe that these methods are most relevant to my study because I believe that reality is constructed through social interaction.

I deploy the interpretative paradigm because of its relevance to the research questions. I am keen on the perspective of interpretivists who base their approach on a cognitive or mentalist view of reality, especially concerning the “social construction of reality”. They believe that what people know and believe to be true about the world is constructed and constructs are not fixed. Therefore, a view of reality can be altered over time. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) define the interpretative paradigm as:

both cognitive and affective, as reflected in shared meanings and as expressed in common language, symbols and other modes of communication. They believe that cultures are created in a process as many individuals share or negotiate multiple and overlapping socially based interpretations of what they do and what occurs in local situations. Culture, then is an abstract “construct” put together or “constructed” as people interact with each other and participate in shared activities (p. 49).

The meanings that are socially constructed in the interpretative paradigm are located in the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, age and gender characteristics, which influence how people think, believe and present themselves. Furthermore, interpretative approaches are essentially participatory because the researcher is involved, informed by personal experience through interaction with the study participants. I believe a researcher must be interactive with the participants in their research to construct meaning. Therefore this is the way I have chosen to collect

data. For instance, I visited musicians many times, talked to them, sat in on their rehearsals, and sometimes even jammed in their bands.

Thai popular music always reflects shared meaning among Thai people, which is expressed in modes of communication such as language and symbols. It also involves local meanings that are complex accounts. We cannot present Thai popular music in only one story. It can only be conveyed in the stories told in the voices of many different Thai people.

The most effective way of approaching problems like this, in my judgment, is a critical approach, which involves knowledge of historical context, as well as political, economic, and social conditions. In the words of LeCompte and Schensul, “Critical theorists are interested in how the history and political economy of a nation, state, or other system exerts direct or indirect domination over the political, economic, social, and cultural expression of citizens or residents including minority groups” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 45). This critical paradigm constitutes (in terms of my thesis) a way of interpreting cultural and social meaning in Thai popular music from a network of historical, political, economic, and social conditions.

## **Procedures for Data Collection**

The main methods I use for collecting data about Thai popular music are through observation and interview. The purpose of observation is to obtain the data by recording events or activities in Thai popular music that occurred during year 2002-2004 to establish the meaning of these events. The targets of the observations are activities or events in Thai popular music as well as behaviors of people and groups of the performers and their audiences. The instruments I use for observation are written field notes, informal interviews and detailed conversations with musicians and fans, video recordings of Thai popular music concerts on television, and observational checklists of live concerts (see Appendix 1, 2 and 3). The purpose of my ethnographic interviews is to obtain in-depth information from people who are connected to Thai popular music, such as their personal histories, cultural knowledge and beliefs and description of practices. The targets of ethnographic interview are representatives and key informants in the music industries. The procedure for an ethnographic interview is an in-depth interview in order to answer the open-ended

research questions and to succeed in drawing out perspectives about Thai popular music from the interviewees.

After using the method of participant observation for three years, I became a part of the culture I was studying. As a result, I can provide a broad descriptive account of the sociology of Thai Pop music. There are five steps to the method.

Firstly, I started by selecting the genres of Thai popular music that I have lived with all my life, including *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit*. These genres are the main musical styles of contemporary Thai popular music industry which comprises the music itself, producers (songwriters, musicians), media (radio, TV, magazines, newspapers), business people and audiences.

Secondly, I have conducted a review of the literature related to the area of Thai popular music and Thai identity. I reviewed most of the writing about Thai popular music, and Thai identity available in Thailand and Western Australia. Information from the Internet sources and electronic databases was also very useful for my literature review. I spent a lot of time in the libraries of Edith Cowan University in Perth, Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University in Bangkok. The dissertations are written in both Thai and English. These sources benefit my research but are mostly marginal or incomplete. It took years to select and sort them.

Thirdly, I used chain sampling to obtain informants. The first informants were asked to identify other informants representative of the community. I talked to many people about the topic of Thai popular music. I started with teenagers, on easy topics; for example, preferred musical style, preferred musician, the basis of their preferences, where they go to listen to music. Then I visited bars, nightclubs and restaurants to listen to music and to find out what live music was currently popular. I talked to musicians at entertainment venues to get information about famous songwriters, musicians, singers, and producers. Some of them are friends of mine who I have known since I was an undergraduate student in music education at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Some used to be my students when I was a music teacher in Bangkok. Since there are a number of people who are involved in the production of popular music in Thailand, I wanted to find significant

representatives of Thai popular music and asked many people to identify them. I then used the information to gain yet more informants in the chain process.

Fourthly, after visiting and interviewing the informants many times, I gathered data in the form of observational transcripts and interview recordings. I spent two years obtaining a wide selection of informants. The informants I interviewed included three songwriters and musicians, a businessperson, two musical producers, three radio disc jockeys, a radio station director and a focus group of audience members of Thai popular music.

Fifthly, I also collected data from direct observation of live concerts in Bangkok and in the provinces in order to gain information about audiences such as gender, age, ethnicity, status, and their behavior during the concerts. In addition, in everyday life, I listened critically to radio and watched television music programs with the purpose of gathering data about the music that was broadcast. This data was recorded in daily notes in my diaries.

Finally, the data was analyzed. Most of it was qualitative data including open-ended interviewing data and my diaries. Some of it was quantitative data, including statistical information provided by the questionnaires (see in Appendix 1). The first step toward analyzing this data was to establish pre-coded forms, which were applied during the respondents' answers, and post-coded analysis established after the answers had been recorded. According to Gunter (2000), a purpose of data analysis is to reduce too much data by eliminating irrelevant material and categorizing it. When all relevant material is coded, the analysis begins. The methodologies of semiotic and discourse analysis were also applied for the interpretation of the meaning within the codes of Thai pop music. The theories, which related to national identity and nationalism, such as modernism and post-modernism, were then applied in the analysis of the data.

## **Data Analysis**

My major analytic tool is ethnographic analysis where I deal with focus groups and interviews of songwriters, record producers, radio disc jockeys, broadcasting administrators and music executives. The ethnographic approach is

supported by semiotic analysis, especially of the songs and the meanings they generate; and discourse analysis, where I always ask “who is speaking?” when analyzing the songs to interpret the hidden cultural and social meanings embedded in the songs, especially in the lyrics of Thai popular music.

### **Ethnographic Analysis and Interpretation**

Michael Patton suggests that ethnographic analysis consists of summarizing data and discovering patterns and themes in the data and linking them with other patterns and themes (Patton, 1987, cited in LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 3). Interpretation is the second step of the analysis which involves establishing meaning and significance in the patterns, themes, and connections in order to answer the research questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

After collecting data, I repeatedly examined and organized the raw data in preparation for analysis. Analyzing ethnographic data requires managing the collected data in order to interpret and present the result of the research project to audiences. As LeCompte and Schensul state, ethnographic data “must be organized, sorted, coded, reduced, and patterned into a ‘story’ or interpretation that respond to the questions that guide the study in the first place and that is sufficiently coherent and comprehensible so that it can be communicated to a variety of audiences” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, pp. 147-148). The process of data analysis happens at four levels: item identification, pattern constitutive or structural analysis and interpretation. I have followed a similar model in my analysis.

The first stage of data analysis is **the item level or comparison and contrast**. At this stage I established which items have similarities and which items are different. The similar items were sorted or sifted together and the different items were separated. Each item was compared to all other items in order to identify and distinguish one from the other. After the items were compared, contrasted and integrated, the items were organized, connected to other items and linked into higher-order patterns.

Groups of items that match articulate a particular theme, or constitute a predictable and consistent set of behaviors. Then they become patterns. LeCompte and

Schensul (1999) advise that the method of creating patterns is similar to the process that we use in constructing a jigsaw puzzle. You glance at the given picture on the box and then find the border pieces and put them together. The patterns may have appeared before the studies or a theoretical framework. In the pattern of analyzing data you may reflect upon the research proposal or the objectives of the study, forming new clues and patterns to follow in the research. When many large patterns are assembled, the whole picture comes together and the researchers are able to create an overall picture.

The final stage of analysis is interpretation, which draws meaning from the structures in relation to existing or new theoretical frame-works and paradigms.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

Semiotics or semiology “...is concerned with how *meaning* is created and conveyed in texts and, particular, in narratives (or stories)” (Berger, 1998, p. 13). Semiotic analysis is used to identify and interpret sign systems, signification, representation and signifying practices (Gunter, 2000, p. 83-85). In Saussure’s terms (1966), a sign is a combination of a concept and a sound-image, a combination that cannot be separated. The concept is called the signified and sound-image called the signifier. A symbol is something that represents or suggests something else. Codes are systems of symbols, letters, words, sounds and so on that generates meaning. Music holds a number of codes, both cultural codes and social codes. This approach aims to find the deeper meaning of the codes in Thai popular music, which are articulated in its musical formats and lyrical contents.

According to Chandler (2002), significant codes in popular culture include textual codes and interpretative codes. My study will incorporate the analysis of textual codes because they are often presented in a form of genre or stylistic code such as the four genres of Thai popular music where content and formats differ. Popular music is also in the grouping of mass media codes like television, film and radio because it is presented through mass media channels. In the typologies of interpretative codes, popular music is comprised of social codes such as perceptual codes (visual perception) and ideological codes (dominant, negotiated, oppositional). In the same way, individualism, liberalism, feminism, racism, materialism,

capitalism and nationalism are also ideological codes (Hall, 1980; and Morley, 1980 cited in Chandler, 2002). The codes in the music were examined in particular to find the different ideological positions that are reflected in the music as kinds of representations. Hall (1980) uses semiotics to examine ideological positioning in news and he finds that that codes! contribute to the reproduction of a particular dominant ideology (cited in Gunter, 2000) which may be read in differing ways, depending on the decoders' social position. I will use semiotics to reveal the cultural codes at work in the musical forms and lyrics of Thai popular music, which are taken to represent ideological expression in Thai society.

In Thai popular music, not only dominant ideologies are presented in the music, but other kinds of ideologies are also present, which challenge the mainstream of Thai society in quite profound ways. Therefore a semiotic analytical approach should identify the details of the ideological representations listed in Table 3.1.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is a significant tool to interpret hidden meaning in texts and it provides a way of approaching and thinking about the problems a researcher confronts in his/her research. It is used not only for written texts but also for also audiovisual media (Gunter, 2000). Popular music elements include written texts such as musical lyrics and notations, and audiovisual elements such as sounds and pictures. These elements can be interpreted and represent cultural and social meaning to Thai people.

According to Tonkiss (1998), there are three stages of the process of discourse analysis: selecting and approaching data; sorting, coding and analyzing the data; and finally, presenting the analysis.

Firstly, in the stage of selecting and approaching data, I began with research questions in the topic in which I am very interested. I asked questions of Thai popular music such as: How have 'Thainess' and 'Westernness' been integrated into Thai popular music? Is Thai music then representative of Thai contemporary culture? What are the ideologies expressed in Thai popular music? Then I gathered



data from many different sources including interviews, focus groups, observation, documents and video and audio records.

Secondly, when the data is collected, the next step involves sorting, coding and analyzing the data. Fran Tonkiss (1998) provides three ways of employing this process: using key words and themes; looking for variation in the text; and attending to silences. In short, when confronted with a text one asks; who is speaking here? What voice is dominant and, finally, can we hear other, suppressed voices?

Finally, in the stage of presenting the analysis, the social meaning of data is constructed and that warrants the account of the data that provides not only validity and reflexivity but is open up the text to other critical insights.

Overall, the approach adopted in this thesis amounts to a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of Thai popular music, which I interpret to be the task of ethnography. By this, I mean a multi-layered account of the music is presented, which examines a range of issues and concepts not usually discussed in analyzing popular music in Thailand.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Cultural identity involves the common habits, characteristics and ideas of people in a society. These concepts relate to the definition of “Ideology” which means “a collection of ideas” a way of looking at things (*Ideology*, 2004). There are many different kinds of ideologies such as political, social, epistemological and ethical. This thesis places an emphasis on political ideology as an instrument of social reproduction.

This thesis examines ideology in everyday society as well as the political ideologies that influence people in Thai society. Ideology in everyday society includes the dominant ideology based on nation, Buddhist values and the monarchy and countervailing forces such as radical, oppositional and alternative ideologies. As Karl Marx suggests, ideology is an instrument of social reproduction (*Ideology*, 2004).

The conceptual framework refers to cultural concepts relevant to the research questions. It was designed to guide the research and help to explain or interpret data. Figure 3.1 displays a genealogy of contemporary Thai popular music, figure 3.2, meaning constructors of Thai popular music and table 3.1, ideology formation of Thai popular music.

Figure 3.1 outlines the conceptual framework, which demonstrates the lines of descent traced from the ancestors of Thai popular music. The origins and evolution of Thai popular music paralleled the histories of the other mass media such as film and radio. The figure 3.1 also shows that popular music is derived from two major ancestors. Traditional Thai or original Thai music comprises the folk music of the ordinary people and the court music of the aristocracy. Court music, which is complex, was adjusted to be more concise and thus able to fit into the new musical form. Folk music, which was simple in structure and considered old fashioned, was enhanced using western rhythms and instrumentation, creating a more modern style. Secondly, western musical influences, comprising classical music and popular music from the USA and UK, were introduced. Initially, some kinds of western popular music were adopted to perform for Thai audiences including Tin Pan Alley, ballads, jazz and Latin music (ballroom dance music). Thai people tend to favor any music that can be combined with the traditional style of Thai music. Thai musicians not only adopted but also adapted western music to fit the taste of Thai audiences. Gradually, the two forms of music became a new form called *pleng thai sakon* or Thai international music. When the new styles were made more popular in Thai society, it became Thai popular music. Thai popular music is comprised of many different genres. The four most important for my perspective are: *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit*. *Pleng lukgrung* or urban music is popular among elite and city people, while *pleng lukthung* or Thai country music is popular among local people in the provinces and working class people who have migrated to the city. *Pleng string* or pop rock music is derived from *pleng lukgrung* (urban music). *Pleng string* was strongly influenced by American and English rock music. It is popular among young urban people and dates back thirty years. The last genre is *pleng puea chiwit* or ‘song for life’ which recorded the political uprisings of students fighting for democracy and against the military dictatorship in 1973-1976. The format of *pleng puea chiwit* may be similar to the format of the three genres

above but is very different in lyrical content. While the lyrical content of one genre is mostly about love and reflects the dominant ideology, the content of *pleng puea chiwit* reflects a radical or resistant ideology which problematises poverty, oppression, corruption, freedom, revolution and socialism in the Thai context. However, recently, the original style of *pleng puea chiwit* was adapted into a more commercial form, and its lyrical content manipulated to conform to the dominant ideology.

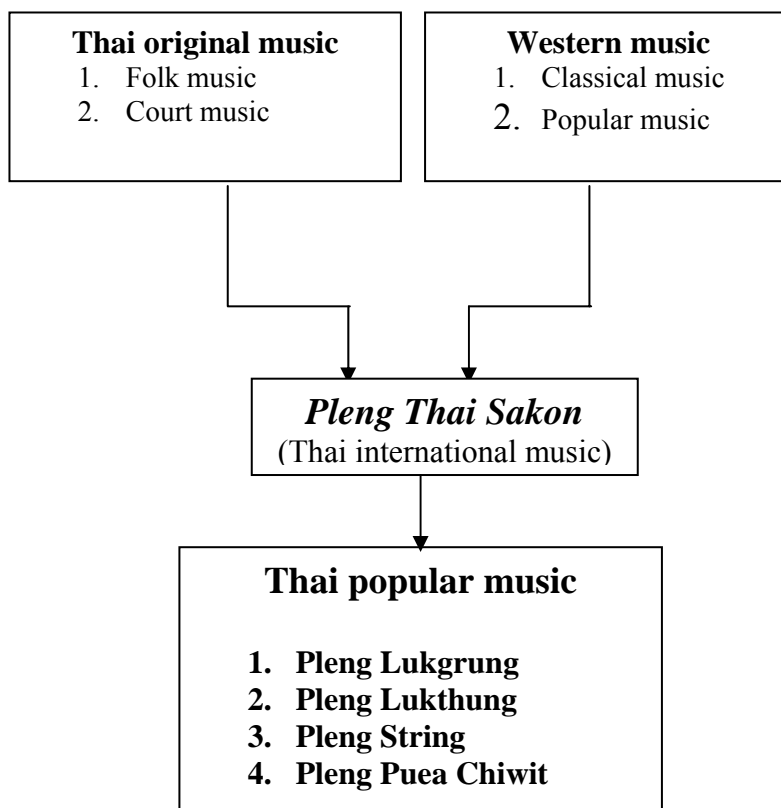


Figure 3.1: Genealogy of contemporary Thai popular music

Figure 3.2 shows that the meanings of Thai popular music, especially Thai identities, are constructed not only by the artists or musicians, but also by different people or institutions. The people play an important role in constructing the meaning of ‘Thainess’ and nationalism include people in business, bureaucracy, media and music audiences.

People in business invest in music industries because they are able to draw profit from selling musical products - they create whatever can be sold. The musical products constructed by the corporate businessmen *may* influence the creation of ideologies such as romanticism, nationalism, Buddhism, consumerism, modernism, postmodernism, escapism, and so on. However, there is no doubt that popular music plays a significant role in the circulation of these ideologies.

Culture in this figure refers to group patterns of behavior and beliefs constructed in Thai society over time. Culture was once constructed by all people but, now, I argue, it is dominated by few people in business and the government authorities. People in business and authority influence culture by owning and controlling its means of production and distribution, thus serving their own purposes in most cases. Although authorities may control business by law, business may also influence authorities through their dominance in the market place. In the Thai music industry business people provide financial support to producers to produce musical products such as audio-video cassettes or CDs, live concerts and so on.

The producers work with songwriters and musicians to create popular music. Songwriters and musicians work for producers and at the same time they draw meaning from the cultural context to create music. Thai popular music is a mass cultural product that needs to be presented through multi media channels to meet mass audiences.

The success of music depends on the quality of music and marketing strategies such as advertising in media texts, distribution in the market, live concerts and so on. The channels through which popular music meets audiences are television and radio programs, audio and videocassette, CD, computer music programs and live performance. People in the media such as disc jockeys play an important role in popular music in terms of selecting music to broadcast on their programs. Many disc jockeys work for musical companies; however, some remain independent.

The audiences of Thai popular music include national and overseas markets and the Thai music industry draws some business from neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia. The business people want to sell their products to consumers. The authorities want to persuade the audience to internalise the dominant ideologies,

which tended to control through their dominance of the political process and the means on ideological work such as the mass media. The musicians and songwriters want to gain favour and be popular to their audience. Although audiences do not directly influence the creation of music, the consumption of musical goods affects decisions made by business, and production. Thus, audiences also play an important role in constructing meaning in the music. The constructed meanings in Thai popular music always convey Thai identity and ideology. Otherwise, it might not be popular or it might alienate its audiences in Thai society.

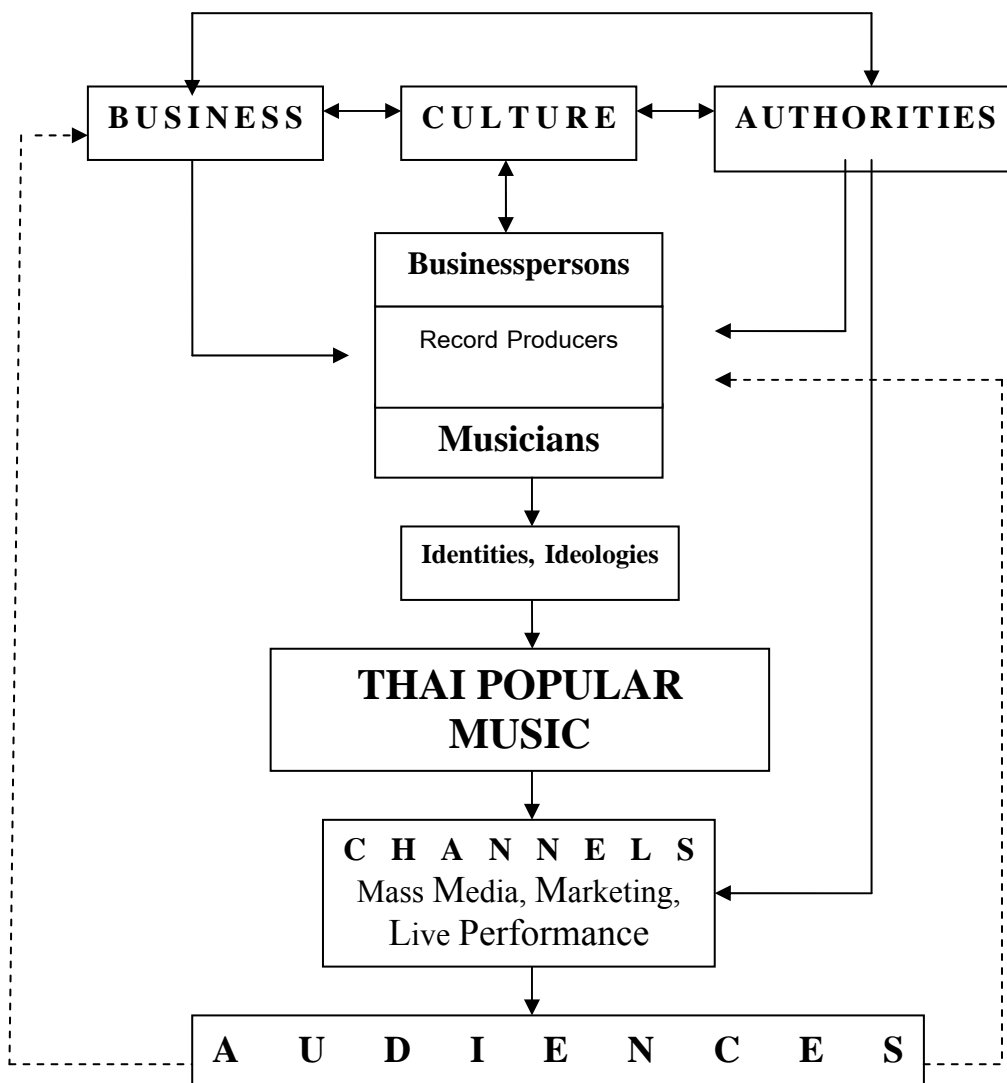


Figure 3.2: Meaning constructors of Thai popular music

Table 3.1 demonstrates that three categories of ideology are presented through Thai popular music. The mainstream or dominant ideologies are nationalist,

Buddhist, monarchist, capitalist, modernist and escapist. The representatives of these ideologies are bureaucrats, the monarchy, business, conservative and right wing groups. Mainstream ideologies are reflected in most genres of the music including *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string* and contemporary *pleng puea chiwit*. The second category set comprises alternative ideologies, which include liberal, postmodernist, multi-culturalist and feminist. They are reproduced in the new styles of *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string*, and alternative or underground music. The least popular ideology is oppositional or resistant ideology to the conventional ideology. The oppositional ideology used to be popular among left-wing groups during uprising of the students' movement in 1970s. It is reflected in the genre of *pleng puea chiwit* or protest music. Recently, *pleng puea chiwit* was adapted to the mainstream. Each of these ideological representatives fights and negotiates in order to obtain their space to present their identity. In the other words, Thai popular music is an arena of ideological contestation that establishes political compromise among people in Thai society. Different groups of people use different genres of Thai popular music as a tool to represent their ideologies. For example, the elite ruling class use *pleng lukgrung* to represent a nationalist ideology, the urban middle class use *pleng string* to represent a liberal ideology, and student activists use *pleng puea chiwit* to represent a socialist ideology.

Table 3.1: *Ideological Formation of Thai Popular Music*

<b>Position of ideology</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Representative of ideology</b>	<b>Music genre</b>
<b>Mainstream/ dominant</b>	Nationalism, Buddhism, Monarchism, Capitalism, Modernism, Escapism, Romanticism	Bureaucracy, Monarchy, Businessmen, Conservationists, Right-wing groups	<i>Pleng lukgrung,</i> <i>Pleng lukthung,</i> <i>Pleng string,</i> <i>Pleng puea chiwit</i>
<b>Alternative</b>	Liberalism, Postmodernism Multiculturalism Feminism	Teenagers, urban middle class, local people from rural areas, feminists	<i>Pleng lukthung,</i> <i>Pleng string,</i> Alternative/ Underground
<b>Opposition</b>	Marxist, Socialist, Communist	Activists, new generations, some radical ethnic groups	<i>Pleng puea chiwit,</i> Underground music

## **Validation and Verification**

David Walsh (1998) suggests that “ethnographic research has produced two forms of validation: respondent validation and triangulation” (p. 231). In respondent validation, the researcher shows the outcome of the research to the participants and asks them to confirm that thus is what they say, and do. Triangulation validation is the method that the researcher uses to compare different kinds of data from different sources in order to verify whether the data agrees with or supports each other. In the other words, the data, which that emerges from the same phenomenon, may come from different phases of fieldwork, different times, different participants, or different methods of data collection.

In my study, I use triangulation to verify the validity of the research. I have observed many different musical activities, at many times and in many places. I have conducted interviews and focus group with many different musicians, business persons, audiences and bureaucracies. I have also collected data from audio and video tapes, books, articles in newspapers and magazines. Then I have compared

every kind of the collected data and checked whether they corroborate with one another. Because the methods of data collection and analysis are so thorough, I believe that the results established are valid.

## **Limitations**

This study concentrates on Thai popular music as a cultural phenomenon that includes popular culture and youth culture. It is not purely a study of music, music education, music history, nor an ethno-musicological study. Popular music is a medium of youth communication and this study does not concentrate on the classical tradition or musicology. Nevertheless, this study is not only a comprehensive analysis of the social, economic and politic contexts of music of particular and important sort; it also takes into account composition and these technical aspects of music. As Simon Frith (1982) claims in *Music for pleasure*, it is difficult to discuss musical issues in a way that general readers who may lack musical knowledge and experience can understand. Another limitation is the limitation of the language. Much data is from Thai material, which I have to translate into English and any errors are mine alone.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### History of Thai Popular Music

The aim of this chapter is to outline the history of Thai popular music since its birth in 1877. The account provides the answer to research questions such as: “How have Thainess and Westernness been integrated into Thai popular music?”, “How have Thai popular music styles been derived?” and “How has Thai culture adopted Westernness into its music?” The relevant elements of Thai popular music including culture, communication technology, business, politics, class, ethnicity, gender and social context are examined to illustrate how Thai popular music styles have been derived, thus exposing the influence of Westernness in the music.

The chapter is divided into seven sections. Section one provides some background on traditional Thai music before the era of Thai popular music. Section two describes the beginning of Thai popular music since the 1850s. Section three studies the emergence of *pleng lukthung* and *pleng lukgrung*. Section four describes the emergence of *pleng puea chiwit* from the 1970s. Section five examines the establishment of *pleng string*. Section six also describes the music industry in Thailand from the 1890s to 2000s. The final section explores national artists of Thai popular music.

The history shows the emergence of *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit* as dominant forms of Thai popular music. Each period traces different elements in the evolution of Thai popular music, especially the roles of the relevant people in the music industries such as musicians, songwriters, musical bands and musical business people. Social elements, for instance, culture, communication technology, business, politics, class, ethnicity, gender and social context, are also linked to this to elaborate the history of Thai popular music.

The evidence mobilized to support this version of the history of Thai popular music, is drawn from the analysis of collected data from different sources including past research, dissertations, books, magazines, internet and interviews. This chapter also provides fundamental information for analysing the following three chapters of

the thesis, namely Thai country music, the dominance of urban music and ‘song for life’.

## **Before Thai Popular Music**

Before Western music was adopted by Thai society, there were two principal genres of traditional music that were popular in Thailand. They were folk music, which was enjoyed by people in the countryside, and court music, which was heard at the royal court. Later, western music was adopted by Thai society and blended with the forms of Thai music to form a new style of Thai music, resulting in both styles of traditional Thai music going into decline (Wongtate, cited in Damrongloet, 1990, p.19).

Thai folk music involves tradition, locality, ethnicity and social classes. There are several distinct regional traditions in Thailand. Each includes several styles of music that accompany specific kinds of performance. These performances include folk dances performed during the annual cycle of religious festivals, some of which are Buddhist and some of which are related to local practices involving agriculture and local beliefs. The most distinctive characteristic of folk music is its simplicity in terms of language, performance and instrumentation, and the simplicity of the instruments, which allows for musicians of variable competence to perform the music. The lyrical content in folk music is usually colloquial, informal and easy to understand. Few musical instruments accompany folk singing and sometimes singing is performed without the instruments. The purposes of folk music are to enhance unity during work in the fields or other communal work places and/or to entertain and relax after work.

In Chapter Two, in my brief profile of Thailand I have stated that there are four principal cultural regions: the north, central, northeast, and south. This chapter elaborates the relationship between language, folk music and the local people of each region.

Thai people in each region are of different ethnicity and they hold their own traditions and speak their own dialects. For example, people in the upper north embrace their *khammueang* or *lanna* language, while people in the northeast speak

Laotian and Cambodian. In the south, Buddhists speak a southern Thai dialect and ethnic Muslims speak *yawee* (a language, which is more similar to Malaysian than Thai language). Suwilai Premssirat and colleagues studied the languages spoken by people in Thailand and they found that there were more than sixty languages spread across the seventy-six provinces of Thailand. The main languages spoken by Thai people are as follows: Central Thai - 39 percent; Laotian (North-east) - 28 percent; Northern Thai (*khammueang*) - 10 percent; Southern Thai - 9 percent, (Premssirat, 2002). However, Anthony Diller estimates that more people speak Laotian than Central Thai or standard Thai (*Thai pak klang*). The estimates of Thai native speakers by Diller are as follows: Central Thai- 25 percent, Laos (Northeast) – 31 percent, Northern Thai (*khammueang*) – 20 percent; Southern Thai - 5 percent, and others – 2 percent (Diller cited in Reynolds, 2002, pp. 71-107).

Table 4.1: *Speaker of Tai Varieties in Thailand and the Estimates of Premssirat and Diller*

(Diller cited in Reynolds, 2002; and Premssirat, 2002)

<b>Tai<sup>1</sup> Language</b>	<b>Premssirat's</b>	<b>Diller's</b>
Central Thai	39%	25%
Laotian	28%	31%
Northern Thai	10%	20%
Southern Thai	9%	5%
Other	–	2%
Total	86%	83%

There are several regional focuses of folk music and drama in Thailand, and each ethnic group has its own music, which incorporates local dialects, and which in turn reflects the specific traditions of the region. Significant kinds of folk music which are popular among local people are, for instance, *li-ke*, *lae*, *lamtat*, *pleng choi*

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<sup>1</sup> “Tai” refers to the greater family of which “Thai, Lao, Shan, Ahom, etc are members (Diller, 2002, p. 75).

and *pleng ruea* in the central region; *sor* and *ue* in the north; *morlam* and *kantruem*; and *no-ra* in the south (*About Thailand*, 2002).

Table 4.2: *Folk Music and Drama of Each Region in Thailand* (*About Thailand*, 2002).

<b>Region</b>	<b>Folk music and drama</b>
<b>Central Thai</b>	<i>li-ke, lae, lamtat, pleng choi and pleng ruea</i>
<b>Northeast</b>	<i>morlam and kantruem</i>
<b>North</b>	<i>sor and aue</i>
<b>South</b>	<i>no-ra, nang talung and rong ngaeng</i>

It is not easy for people from a particular region to understand the language or appreciate the local music that belongs to people from other regions. However, now, because of the state of political hegemony enacted by the ruling class for more than two centuries, all Thai people share some aspects of Thainess (for instance, the concept of Thai nation, Buddhism, the monarchy, and the standard Thai language).

The second genre of traditional music is court music or the so-called Thai classical music, which arose during the Ayuthaya period (1350-1767) and flourished over the next few centuries. The format of the music is more complex than folk music and has higher production values (as was described in the Chapter One). Court music played an important role in royal ceremonies and as entertainment in the royal Thai court. After 1932, with the end of the absolute monarchy, court music ceased to be limited to the royal court. It became popular among the elite classes and those within the bureaucracy in Bangkok and the central region of Thailand. According to Craig Lockard (2001), when state radio opened in late 1940, a modernizing government allowed the musical current from the West to flow through the radio stations programming to compete with the court music. After the 1950s, court music lost some of its popularity, and by the 1960s Western and Thai popular music dominated radio, clubs and the recording industries. Although the bureaucracy introduced policies to maintain the popularity of Thai court music, it was not a successful campaign. In contemporary Thailand, only selected radio programs on Radio Thailand still play Thai court music. Thus Thai court music is primarily heard

at tourist attractions, and it only seems to fulfill nostalgic purposes for the majority of the Thai population.

## **The Beginning of Thai Popular Music**

We can trace the origins of Thai popular music back to the era of King Rama IV (1851-1868), when military bands were formed to accompany the marching of the soldiers. Some army captains from England were employed to teach Thai soldiers to play Western musical instruments in the band. Thai people became familiar with the instruments in the wind section. In the reign of King Rama V (1868 -1910), military bands improved dramatically. More music teachers from overseas were employed to teach Western-style military music to the bands. Songs praising the King have been played by military bands ever since then and they remain a popular form of ceremonial music. Prince Boripat Sukhumpan, a young son of King Rama V who was educated in Europe, composed and arranged several pieces of music for military bands between 1903-1904. He adapted Thai court music to the form of Western music with some success. These songs include “Sudsanor”, “Mekala Waltz”, “Maharerak Waltz” and “Pluemchit Waltz”. For this reason, he is honored as “the father of *pleng thai sakon*” (Thai international music), which is the first version of Thai popular music (Limpichai, 1993).

Pra Jane Duriyang (1995) argues that the first example of *pleng thai sakon* (Thai popular music) which was written in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) was “Pleng Sanrasoen Pra Barami” (the hymn of praise for the king). This song was regularly used at the reception of Their Majesties the King and the Queen and it was regarded as the national anthem at that time. The King bought the music from a European bandmaster in Singapore, but the original composer of the song is unknown. It was composed in a European style with European lyrics and the King then commanded Siamese lyrics to be applied to the melody. These lyrics were changed several times until the reign of King Rama VI, when the definitive version was composed (Pra Jane Duriyang, cited in Thonawanik, 1995, pp. 45-46). That arrangement remains the current form of the text and it is played on ceremonial occasions.

## Thai Opera

Chintana Damrongloed (1990) argues that the starting point of Thai popular music is associated with the emergence of Thai opera in the late era of King Rama V (1900s). In the beginning, songs were performed with the opera containing both Thai lyrics and Western melodies. The content of the operas was based on historical records and consisted of parochial themes, describing Thai national history, Buddhism and the monarchy. The music was composed in Thai rhymes while the lyrical content of the songs related to the theme of the operas, for example:

Born to be Thai men and women  
We are not fearful and ignorant.

We adore our nation and religion  
We are ready to sacrifice our lives  
To protect his Majesty the King  
And all of his family

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard from Damrongloet, 1990, p. 33)

In 1904, films were introduced in Bangkok for public entertainment. Brass bands performed outside of cinemas to draw audiences to the film in a style similar to an overture. The style of Thai overture not only included Thai melodies in a Western rhythm or Thai words in a Western melody but also an original style of Thai music that was called *pleng thai sakon* (which was not copied from previous Thai or Western music).

King Rama VI (1910-1925), the son of King Rama V, who graduated from a European college, was very keen on drama. He not only performed drama on stage but also wrote several dramatic scripts and song lyrics for the dramas. Certainly, drama and *pleng thai sakon* were popular among people of the Bangkok elite at that time. Hamilton (2002) suggests that King Rama VI wished to integrate selective aspects of Western culture and Thai culture into a new Thai synthesis, or hybrid form, and yet retain some authentic or essential Siamese-ness at the same time (Hamilton, cited by Reynolds, 2002).

The founder of Western music in Thailand is generally acknowledged to be Peter Feit or Pra Jane Duriyang (1885-1968), whose father was German and mother Thai. He worked for the Department of Fine Arts as a bandmaster and music

teacher. He then formed a symphony orchestra, which exclusively performed Western classical music styles. He worked as a music teacher for King Rama IX (the current King), and several significant musicians such as Uea Sunthonsanan, Nart Thawonbutr, Wait Sunthonjamon, Sa-nga Arampi and Saman Kanjanapalin. These musicians were trained by Feit (Chonlamoo Chalanukro, cited in Thonawanik, 1995; Chan-ngoan, 1995; and Boonjan, 1998).

The ‘golden age’ of *pleng thai sakon* began before the political revolution (1932), when Juangjan Jantarakana, pen-named “Pran Boon”, a common man who was the owner of a Thai drama troupe, invented a new style of the music for Thai opera. Pran Boon was aware that Thai court music was too complicated and would not gain favour from young people. Thus, he adapted Thai music, transforming a singing style that he considered too discursive and slow, into a new style where more lyrics were added to the melody, reducing the emphasis on long drawn-out vocal utterances. The new style was called *pleng thai nuea tem* (the song with a lyrical melody). When Pran Boon invented a new style of music, which was easier on young ones’ ears, his music became very popular amongst all classes. However, the lyrical content of his music was not significantly different from other music at that time. Pran Boon was named “The First Thai Song Innovator”, which means he is regarded as inventing a new form of Thai music (Kusalasaya, 2003). During the time of Pran Boon (1932-1937), there were four particular ways of composing *pleng thai sakon* or *pleng thai nuea tem* (see above); songs which contains Thai lyrics set to a western melody; Thai music where the lyrics were adjusted to fit the Thai opera style; and the original *pleng thai sakon*, which the composer did not copy from other music (Damrongloet, 1990).

### **Patriotic Songs**

During the reign of King Rama VII (1925-1934), a political change occurred in Thailand that dramatically influenced not only politics but also Thai social relations and culture, especially in the constitution of Thai national identity (Reynolds, 2002). In fact, after the political revolution in 1932, several military dictatorships and quasi-democratic governments ruled Thailand for many decades. The key men of influence in constructing the concept of Thai identity, Thai nationalism and the institutions, are Marshal Pibulsongkram, the Prime Minister and

Luang Wichit Watakan, a Ministry Official (1938-1957). Their concept of Thai identity influenced Thai society for many decades, even after the period of democracy (see Chapter Two: Literature Review, Nationalism and Identity).

The political role of Pibulsongkram as a government leader concerned with building the national identity is more significant than other leaders in Thailand (Winichakul, 1998; Satayanurat 2002; and Reynolds, 2002). He was a strong-willed man who was the Minister for Defence when he was only thirty and the Prime Minister when he was forty-one. Between 1942 and 1957, he occupied the post of Prime Minister for eight terms and was also as a Minister with numerous portfolios at the same time. He achieved these offices through coups as well as elections. Furthermore, he took Thailand into World War II as an ally of Germany and Japan against the U.K. and U.S.A. He hoped that if Germany and Japan won, Thailand might make territorial claims over territories within Lao and Cambodia, which might make Thailand a bigger country with greater power (Satayanurat, 2002; Thanakit, 2002; and Reynolds, 2002).

The policies of Marshal Pibulsongkram's government involved significant sociological and cultural changes such as:

- Changing the country's name from Siam to Thailand and the commissioning of the national anthem; using music and drama to encourage the feeling of nationalism among Thai people.
- Improving folk music such as *pleng ramwong* (Thai dancing song) and excluding some musical instruments which were not considered to belong to Thai culture such as *klong yao* (a drum), *sor-oo* (a bowed stringed instrument), *sor-duang* (a bowed stringed instrument), *lakorn chatri* (a dance drama), *li-ke* (a local opera) and *hun krabok* (a puppet show).
- Using patriotic songs to achieve nationalism and to political purposes; using radio, television and newspapers to circulate his government's version of Thai nationalism during 1938 and 1957.



Famous mottos sum up Pibulsongkram's reign as the dominant Thai politician of the mid-twentieth century, for example: "Trust the leader, save the nation"; and "Trust Pibulsongkram, the nation has not been broken" (Thanakit, 2002).

### **Thai Popular Music and Film**

Following the 1932 revolution and the decline of the monarchy, Thai opera lost its popularity as film became more prominent, especially the musical film genre imported from Europe and America. These inspired Thai film companies such as *Srikrung Sound Film* and *Thai Film* to include some original *pleng thai sakon* music in their films, which proved very popular.

In 1933, *Srikrung Film Company* made a film called *Poo Som Fao Sap* (The Ghost of Grand Father Som Who Guards the Treasure). The major soundtrack, which was written for the film, contained the song "Kluay mai" (The Orchid). The lyrics were written by Khoon Wichitmatra and the music composed by Lieutenant-junior Mannit Senaweenin. This song was considered the first Thai song composed in the form of Western music (Limpichai, 1993, p. 39).

In the 1930s, jazz music was introduced into Thailand when Luang Sukhumnaiyapradit took jazz instruments and music from overseas in 1934 and began to experiment (Limpichai, 1993). He gathered musicians to form *Rainbow*, a jazz band, which played in different venues such as hotels and sport clubs. Later *Rainbow* actually belonged to *Thai Film Company* and the band performed music for its soundtracks and records. In the same year, the Ministry of Defence employed the *Srikrung Sound Film Company* to produce a film in order to improve the public image of the military and the air force. The film was titled *Lueat Thahan Thai* (Thai Soldier's Blood). The major soundtrack in the film contained marching songs such as "Trirong March" (Three Colors Flag March), "Lueat Thahan Thai March" (The Thai Soldier's Blood March), and "Kwamrak Ni Maenam Chaopraya" (Love on the Chaopraya River). The most famous writer of patriotic songs (*pleng plukchai*) was Nart Thawornbutr who composed many patriotic songs and was called "the king of patriotic song in Thailand" (p. 21).

Another significant songwriter during the era of drama and film was Luang Wijitwathakan who was a close supporter of Pibulsongkram. During 1935 and 1955, Luang Wijit composed several patriotic dramas and patriotic songs to accompany these; for example, “Lueat Supan” (Supanburi Blood), “Tuen Thoet Chaothai” (Wake Up, Thais), “Ton Trakoon Thai” (The Original Ethnic Thais) and “Soo Amit” (Fight Enemies). These songs were very popular from the 1930s until 1970s, have become a staple of the army repertoire and are played on military radio stations even today.

When the *Thai Film Company* was founded by Prince Panupan in 1937, a popular band was also formed to perform music for the film. The bandleader was Luang Sukhumnaipradit and the well-known musicians comprising the band included names such as Uea Sunthonsanan, Wait Sunthonjamon and Jampa Lemsamran. These musicians became very famous singers and songwriters of *pleng lukgrung* in the latter stages of the urban music tradition. The *Thai Film Company* produced many films and each film contained an original soundtrack, which was composed specifically for each film. Much of the music for film became very popular with the public, for instance, “Nai Fan” (In My Dream), “Bua Khao” (White Lotus), and “Lom Huan (The Wind Returns) (Limpichai, 1993, p. 21). The film company then produced records of soundtracks for sale and made records of other bands as well. Those songs also proved popular with consumers (Kropthong, 2004, pp. 61-62).

### **Urban Music, Authority and Elite**

In 1939, when the government established the Department of Public Relations (*Krom Kosanakan*), the band led by Uea Sunthonsanan (1910), was transferred from the Department of Fine Arts to the Department of Public Relations. The band contained more than forty musicians who were all good instrumentalists and singers. The main work of the band was performing on the government radio and at many other significant engagements, depending on official orders. Several hundred songs were written and performed by the band of the Department of Public Relations. These songs were mostly written by Uea Sunthonsanan. Beside romantic love songs, the lyrical contents of the works were patriotic themes, praise for the King and Queen, institutional songs, *pleng ramwong* (Thai dancing song), and folk music. Following the policy of the Prime Minister Pibulsongkram to promote Thai

dancing among the cultural elite and the common people, many new Thai dancing songs were written specifically to promote Thai dancing. The band for the Department of Public Relations, which was known as *Suntaraporn*, became the most famous big band in Thailand from the 1930s to the 1960s. The establishment of the *Suntaraporn* band in 1939 could be considered the beginning of contemporary Thai popular music (Rangsikul, cited in Damrongloet, 1990).

In 1940, two other bands were founded including: *Duriyayothin*, led by Jampa Lemsamran; and the *Band of King's Property Office*, led by Nart Thawonbut. These bands mostly performed in film theatres in Bangkok during the interval.

During World War II, because raw materials for making film were not available, film companies stopped making movies. Thus, drama became popular again. Theatre companies funded by members of the royal family and the elite class included *Asawin Drama*, which was owned by Prince Panupanyakon and *Siwarom Drama*, which was owned by Khoon<sup>2</sup> Sawattikampon. These productions generated a lot of Thai popular music in order to have enough material to play during the play's interval.

### **Political Songs**

In addition to lyrics about romantic love and celebration, political expressions supporting and opposing the dominant ideology also appeared in Thai popular music during the 1930s to 1950s. Elite governments gave encouragement to songwriters to compose many patriotic songs, while some songwriters wrote critical songs opposing the theme of patriotic songs.

After World War II, some musicians wrote a new style of song with lyrics that incorporated ironic or critical comment on Thai society, especially on political issues surrounding the Prime Minister Pibulsongkram. The stories of common people, such as laborers and rice farmers, were also deployed in the lyrics of the music. It was the first time that music was used to expose the suffering of the people and thus serve political purposes (Limpichai, 1993, p. 28). The main song-writers

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<sup>2</sup> the word *khoon* and *luang* are titles or ranks used before a name of an official administrator who worked for the monarchy

and singers who wrote and sang these songs were Sa-ne Komarachoon and Kamron Sampunanon. These songs were called *pleng chiwit* (life song) at that time and included “Pu Thaen Kwai” (A Buffalo Representative); “Krai Khan Than Kha” (Whoever Protests Against the Government, Will Be Killed); “Samlor Kaen” (A Rankled Tri-cycle Rider); “Chiwit Nakthot Karn Mueang” (The Life Of Political Detainees); and “Tha Si Kamsuan” (A Sorrowful Rice Farmer Names Tha Si). Sa-ne and Kamron sang these songs without fear despite the oppressive, corrupt powers of dictatorship. Sometimes, they were accused of being subversive elements affecting national security and were thus jailed. During Pibulsongkram government’s regime, *pleng chiwit* was banned on radio or television because its lyrical content was considered subversive towards the government, and thus harmful to the country. After that, the *pleng chiwit* faded out for many years (Damrongloet, 1990).

After the political revolution of 1932 and the change to constitutional monarchy, Thailand was still ruled by military dictatorships, which introduced ‘puppet’ governments, alternatively with short-lived democratically elected or quasi-democratic governments. David Wyatt notices that “Between 1932 and 1996 the nation experienced nineteen coups d’état by various military factions, an average of one every three years. In the same period, seventeen elections were held” (cited in Lockard, 2001, p. 167). Lockard (2001) states that during that time the political significance of Thailand for the rest of Asia was the combination of traditions of aristocracy, monarchy and feudalism, alongside Western notions of culture.

In the late reign of King Rama VIII (1942), Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej (a brother of King Rama VIII and the current King of Thailand), who plays jazz clarinet and saxophone, began to compose songs with titles such as “Saeng Thian”, (Candle Light), “Sai Fon” (Falling Rain), and “Chata Chiwit” (Fate). King Bhumibol Adulyadej composed more than forty songs and every song was adored and considered to be superb examples of Thai popular music by the urban elites. I would argue that these songs were assumed by Thai authorities and the elite classes to be the representative ideal of *pleng lukgrung* (urban music), especially when Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej became the king of Thailand. Actually, no one in Thailand has ever criticized these songs.

## The Emergence of Pleng Lukthung and Pleng Lukgrung

Before 1964, Thai popular music or *pleng thai sakon* was not yet divided by style into *pleng lukthung* and *pleng lukgrung*. The word *pleng thai sakon* means Thai international music or Thai music in a Western style. Thus any music that combines Thai and Western music is called *pleng thai sakon* (Limpichai, 1993, p. 19).

Between 1952 and 1957, when the *pleng chiwit* (life song) was popular, Kamron Sampunanon sang songs in the folk style, and he then was considered “the originator of the *pleng lukthung* singing style”. At the same time, Pornpirom, a songwriter and singer, chose some *pleng lae* (folk songs of the central region, describing events in the life of the Buddha), to produce his records. His music was accompanied by popular bands and Thai ensembles, in which the rhythms were accelerated. Pornpirom’s songs were also very popular, especially among ordinary people in the country.

In May 1964, a television programme called *Pleng Chaoban* (Villagers’ Songs), hosted by Ajin Panjaphan and Thuam Thoranong began and this musical style became popular, juxtaposing *pleng chaoban* with *pleng lukgrung* (urban music). The performing artists were Pornpirom, Pongsri Woranoot and Toon Thongjai. “However many audiences blamed the broadcasting authority for the programme. They considered the musical style was ‘low art’. Some opposed the music and cursed the hosts. Thus, the hosts were pressurized to withdraw the programme”, Prakop said (Chaiphaphat, 1991, pp. 44-45). Seven months later, Prakorp Chaiphaphat restored the programme with a new title “*Pleng Lukthung*” (Thai country music). Initially, it was also criticised by its audiences who watched the program from their homes and at the station. Prakorp said, “The host and broadcasting authority were accused of presenting crazy and rubbish songs. Someone cursed me and even included all of my grand fathers and grand mothers” (p. 44-45). But he did not give up and continued its transmission for about half a year. Following this period, the audiences and the broadcasting authority accepted the Thai country music programme. Since that time, the word “*pleng lukthung*” has become synonymous in the arena of Thai popular music with Thai rural or country music. The previous style, *pleng thai sakon*, which existed since the reign of King Rama VII, was re-named “*pleng lukgrung*” (urban or city music) in order to differentiate

this style from *pleng lukthung* (Chaipiphat, 1991; Limpichai, 1993; and Damrongloet, 1990).

In 1969 when an American film *Your Cheating Heart*, which was screened at Paramount Theatre in Bangkok for three months, the film's title was translated as *Pleng Lukthung*. The film was about the life of Hank Williams, a star of American country and western music who was very popular in USA at that time. The country and western songs of Hank Williams were also played on the radio in Thailand at the same time. That also made the term *pleng lukthung* widely recognized by musical audiences in Thailand (Chaipiphat, 1991; and Thanomsap, 1989).

The word *lukthung* means "a child of the (rice) field", which may also mean anyone or anything that "born in the country, not in towns or cities." The word *pleng lukthung* means the music of country or rural people. By contrast, the term *pleng lukgrung* means the music of urban people.

After the establishment of Thai country music (*pleng lukthung*), urban music (*pleng lukgrung*) remained popular for two decades, particularly among urban people and the upper classes. Excluding the band of *Suntharaporn*, the most famous male singer of *pleng lukgrung* was Suthep Wongkamhaeng, who was considered "The King of Urban Music" (*Raja Pleng Lukgrung*) - like Frank Sinatra in America, (Marshall cited in Chan-ngeun, 1993). Suthep recorded more than 3,000 songs composed by 138 different song-writers, and won numerous awards in his forty years of performing (1953 to 1993). He was elected a member of parliament between the 1970s and the 1980s and was named "The National Artist" in 1990. Other contemporary and equally well-known singers also named as National Artists were Sawalee Pakaphan (female), Pensri Pumchusri (female) and Charin Nanthanakorn (male) (Chan-ngeun, 1993). Most of these singers performing urban music were from well-educated backgrounds, middle class and urban families.

Many significant songwriters of urban music spent substantial periods of time working as musicians for the military or had close relationships with members of the elite class or Royal Family. For example, Sa-nga Arampi, a national artist, born in Bangkok near the palace of Prince Sukhumpan, was familiar with court music of the prince from his youth. He studied music at the Air Force Music School and then

worked for the army for many years. He used to work for members of the ruling and elite class such as Marshal Pibulsongkram, Luang Wijit Watakarn, Khoon Wijitmatra and Prajane Duriyang (Jan-ngeun, 1995).

Jintana Damrongloet, (1990), states that since its birth in 1964, Thai country music has been divided into five periods, by applying the categories of songwriters, songs, singers, lyrical contents, musical instruments and live performances. The five periods consist of:

1. **The beginning period:** when this musical style was known as *pleng chao ban* (villager song) or *pleng talat* (market song) during 1938-1964.
2. **The golden era:** that began when *pleng lukthung* was named on TV in 1964, followed by Surapon Sombatcharoen being called “The King of Thai Country Music” and Pongsri Woranut, “The Queen of Thai Country Music”
3. **The period of movie soundtracks:** when many *pleng lukthung* artists became movie stars during 1970-1973.
4. **Thai country music in the style of ‘song for life’:** during the celebration of democracy (1973-1976).
5. **The period of dance and concerts:** (1980s-2000s) during which the bands of Thai country music performed in concerts with marvelous dance troupes (Damrongloet, pp. 45-68).

At the beginning, *pleng lukthung* was not differentiated from *pleng lukgrung* but the singing style and lyrical content of this musical style remained prominent. The singing style was like a coloratura exposing a vocal style that was similar to that of Thai folk music and Western country music in its slurred notes and words. The famous songwriters of the first period (1938-1964) were Paiboon Butkhan, Payong Mukda, Mongkon Amattayakul, Toomthong Chokchana, Surapon Sombatchareon, Somyot Thasanapan, and Po Chuenprayot. Several singers above had the ability to sing and compose music in the style of *pleng lukthung*. The most famous bands of *lukthung* music at that time were the bands of *Payong Mukda* and *Surapon Sombatcharoen*. Beside these famous singers and song-writers were who mostly male, there were also some famous female singers such as Pongsri Woranoot and Srisa-ang Trinet. The lyrical content of *pleng lukthung*, during that period, mostly involved figurative language invoking the countryside. Beside love themes, the lyrics, which described the beautiful natural scenery of the countryside, included images of rice fields, for example, rice plants, the sun, the moon, the sky, swamps,

waterfalls, flowers, the wind, chickens, birds, fish, butterflies, cows and buffalos. The lyrical content described the lives of people in the country and mostly involved themes such as the love of young rice farmers; the importance of honesty; a firm belief in Buddhism and its traditions; the industriousness of rice farmers; and the poverty of rice farmers. An example of these songs is portrayed in the lyrics of “Klin Klon Sab Kwai” (Buffalo Odor), written by Paiboon Butkhan and sung by Chan Yen-khae:

Please do not look down upon rice farmers  
 Who live in rice fields and have never been happy  
 Because they have to work under the deadly hot sun  
 And walk behind their buffaloes when they plough the fields

.....  
 The smell of country boys and girls that blends with of the buffaloes  
 May not be as good as the smell of city boy’s and girl’s skins  
 Which blend well with perfume everyday,  
 Which make them different from farmers

Please do not look down upon rice farmers  
 That their hands hold sickles when they harvest rice,  
 This becomes our food up to now  
 Every human life has value  
 But the farmers’ lives relate to and adore the buffaloes’ smell

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from *Samnak-ngan- Kanakamakan-Watanatham-haeng-Chat*, 1989, p.130)

The “golden age” of *pleng lukthung* began in 1964, after the term *pleng lukthung* was established via television during *The Second Competition of The King’s Golden Record Award* held in 1966. Somyot Thasanapan (1915-1986) was awarded the prize for the most excellent *lukthung* singer. Somyot sang a song titled “Chor Thip Ruang Tong” (A Divine Bunch and Golden Ear of Rice), composed by Payong Mukda. Somyot and Payong came from the *Navy Symphony Orchestra*. The lyrics of the songs portray the scenery of beautiful golden rice field’s “when ears of rice are ripe and a young country boy is pleading for love from a girl” (Damrongloet, 1990, p. 49).

The man who brought Thai country music to the peak of its popularity was Surapon Sombatcharoen, a prominent *lukthung* superstar, who had a great talent for singing and composing music. Surapon began his singing career in the *Air Force*



band. He was talented at a style of *pleng ramwong* (Thai dancing song) and had the humorous performance style favoured by mass audiences. Prince Kuek-rit Pramot, a former Prime Minister (1975-1976), noted of Surapon that “he can see amusement in the dark sides of life and with a sense of humour, he could select and compose songs that made his audiences happy” (cited in Damrongloet, 1990, p.50). Surapon wrote and sang several hundred songs; produced many records; and appeared in concert all over Thailand. He was not only a performer but also a radio disc jockey who attracted many fans. His songs were heard throughout the airwaves and his pictures appeared all over the country during the 1960s. He was named *Raja Pleng Lukthung* (The King of Thai Country Music). When Surapon Sombatcharoen was murdered at his performance in Nakornprathom province in August 16, 1968, his death became one of the biggest news stories of the year. Every radio and television station throughout Thailand played his music all day. Magazines and newspapers ran extensive stories on the shooting, his fans’ reaction to his death and his biography. Surapon’s death encouraged more audiences to listen to Thai country music and stimulated other singers and songwriters of Thai country music to produce more music. Several songwriters composed music in memory of him. After Surapon’s death, Srinuan Sombatcharoen, his wife, assumed control of the band as both the leader and principal singer but she was not very successful. Around 1975, Surachai Sombatchareon (1956), Surapon’s son, followed his father’s career and became a famous ‘*lukthung*’ singer. Surachai imitated his father’s singing style and produced several albums of his father’s songs (Damrongloet, 1990; and Kropthong, 2004).

There were many famous Thai country singers during the same period as Surapon, particularly Pongsri Woranut (1939) who was called *Rachini Pleng Lukthung* (The Queen of Thai country music). Other prominent singers of the time included Waipot Petsupan (1942), Ploen Promdaen (1939), Porn Pirom (1928), and Chai Mueangsing (1939). The lyrics exposed in the music were more varied than during the first period. Examples include reflections on beautiful country girls fascinated by Bangkok society; songs written to teach ethics; the rule of karma; and ironic comment on the common lives of people in Thai society (Ibid).

Between 1970 and 1972, many singers and songwriters of the *pleng lukthung* style appeared in an arena that was highly competitive, not only between *pleng*

*lukthung* and *pleng lukgrung* (urban music) but within the *pleng lukthung* field. Much Thai country music was produced, and some were successful; however much were not. At the same time, not only did Thai popular music rival *pleng lukthung* but also rock music from the USA and Europe gained in popularity. Consequently, Thai country music seemed to fade out because it lost a lot of the young urban audience. However, it came back into popularity again when a musical film titled *Monrak Lukthung* (The Magic Power of the Country Child) gained success all over Thailand in 1970. Every song in the film was in the *pleng lukthung* form and most of the performers were the famous *pleng lukthung* singers who sang songs in the film. The most significant song was “Monrak Lukthung”, written by Paiboon Butkhan. From that point on, several more musical films were produced and performed by famous singers of *pleng lukthung*. From 1970 to 1972, it was really the period of the musical soundtracks because many *pleng lukthung* were composed to accompany films and *lukthung* singers became movie stars consequently. The lyrical content of Thai country music during that period varied from the love of a young country boy for a girl to the practices of everyday life in country and urban society – these songs often contained a sense of humor and irony.

The following example is from “Mam Plara” (Madam Fermented Fish), written by Chonlathi Thanthong and sung by Sayan Sanya in 1973. The song reflects the impact of American culture on Thai society during the 1970s. The lyrics satirise a girl who earns money by having sex with a Black American GI when the US army was based in Thailand during the cold war. The man left her to go back to America.

Why don't you go to America?  
 Madam Dollars, why did you come back to Thailand?  
 Go to eat big hams and fried eggs  
 You had the GI guy to take care of you  
 Now you are so sad and cry because the Negro GI has said Goodbye  
 I reminded you that your American boy friend would leave you  
 But you didn't listen to me  
 You deserve it because you were of easy virtue  
 Why don't you go to America?  
 Madam Fermented Fish, why have you come back?

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard from Aree, 1975, p. 180)

## Country Music and Song for Life

During the 1970s, Thailand was still ruled by a military dictatorship alternating with short-lived democratic and or quasi-democratic elected governments. Several university intellectuals and new generation politicians strongly criticized the government, focusing on the requirement of democracy to expose social problems such as class discrimination, class conflict, and capitalist exploitation of workers. In October 14, 1973, the dictatorship of Marshal Thanom Kittikhajon (1958-1959 and 1963-1973) was overthrown after mass demonstrations led by students, generating a return to democracy and political liberalization. The new social forces coincided with a new style of Thai popular music that emerged called *pleng puea chiwit*” or ‘song for life’. Several bands formed by student activists exploited the new form (described in the Chapter One). The ideas that influenced the Thai country music song-writers who were usually sensitive to any change in the social environment. Accordingly, Thai country songs written during that time contained a lot of information about the social issues of the period leading into political liberalization, for instance, the poverty of farmers and laborers. Thus the lyrical content of much *pleng lukthung* was similar to of *pleng puea chiwit* although its lyrics were not as radical as *pleng puea chiwit*. The famous song-writers who composed this style of music were Chonlathi Thanthong, Thongchai Lekkampon and Sotsai Rompothong and the singers who sang these songs included Sayan Sanya, Sanya Pornarai, Nam-oi Ponwichian, Banyen Rakkaen and Sonpet Sonsupan. However, after the incident of October 6, 1976, when the right-wing militia killed several hundred-student activists who were protesting the return to Thailand of Marshal Thanom (the ex-prime minister and former dictator) and the creation of a new military dictatorship, *pleng puea chiwit* became illegal and was banned from radio and performance. *Pleng puea chiwit* albums in music shops were confiscated by the police. *Pleng lukthung* musicians and disc jockeys in the style of *pleng puea chiwit* became concerned about accusations of being leftists or communists (a regular tactic of the right-wing governments used to control dissent). The song-writers stopped writing songs about the suffering of the poor and the disc jockeys did not broadcast this musical style (Damrongloet, 1990). When *pleng puea chiwit* became illegal and was not available in music shops, *pleng lukthung* in the style of *pleng puea chiwit* also became less popular, and remained so for years.

In the following years, the songwriters of *pleng lukthung* did not mention critical social and political issues anymore because they did not wish to be accused of supporting leftist songs. Instead, they went back to escapist themes such as happy country lives and courting songs. For example: the song entitled “Sao Transistor” (The Transistor Radio Girl), written by Chonlathi Thanthong and sung by Oi-thip Panyathon, presented an anecdote about a country girl who really loved to listen to and sing along with the music from the portable radio that she always carried while working in the rice fields. However, after 1977, *pleng lukthung* began to portray again the social problems of contemporary Thai society. The main themes of this era were the issues surrounding the migration of people from the country provinces to the big cities, for example, a story of a country girl turned prostitute; a girl who works as a house maid; laborers in textile factories; bar girls; young male laborers; and laborers who left home to work in the Middle East.

Besides the change in the lyrical content, the developing forms of *pleng lukthung* involved technology and marketing, including using technological sounds and lights; marketing promotion; and dance troupe accompaniment that involved much larger production budgets. Unavoidably, capitalism played a more important role in *pleng lukthung* during this period because forming such a band involved the investment of large amounts of money. In other words, the success of a *pleng lukthung* depended heavily on the factor of financial support. In fact, most of the musicians had to be under music companies, for example *Nangfa Promotion* (1976), *Sure Audio* (1981), *Metro Records and Cassettes* (1981) and *S.T.* (1987) (Kropthong, 2004). Several *pleng lukthung* bands collapsed because of the lack of financial support.

Nevertheless, some *pleng lukthung* singers and their music became commercially successful, including Sayan Sanya who was named *Kwanjai Pleng Lukthung* (The Sweetheart of *pleng lukthung*); Yodrak Salakjai; Porn Prison; Surachai Sombatjaroen; Sornchai Mekwichian; Sonpet Sornsupan. Furthermore, the most famous female singer at that time was Pumpuang Duangjan who was named *Rachini Pleng Lukthung* (The New Queen of Thai Country Music). Other popular

female *pleng lukthung* singers were, Daotai Mueangtrang, Hongthong Dao-udon, Sotsri Promseksan and Oi-thip Panyathorn.

From 1985 onwards, concerts featuring famous rock singers and musicians from Europe and USA were performed in Bangkok, most often playing at shopping centres and stadiums. These concerts proved very successful in gaining large Thai audiences. The popularity of these concerts influenced the performance of Thai country music. The most famous concert held in 1985 was the concert of Pumpuang Duangjan (The Queen of Thai Country Music), in which she performed her song entitled “Krasae” (Come Closer to Me). Her concert at Central Plaza, a shopping mall in Bangkok, played to a full capacity crowd; so popular was this performance that many people were refused entry. The music of Pumpuang was different from Thai country music of the past in terms of style and mood. The rhythms were faster, similar to pop rock, and the mood of music was lighter. Moreover, dancers also played an important role in the country music bands. The dancers and singers of this period changed their style of choreography and costume. The dancing style of Thai country music during the previous periods was adapted from the styles of Thai folk dances but the new form was more similar to Western jazz and rock dancing: faster and more sexually appealing to audiences. The styles of costume also changed from a Thai style to a more Westernized version that was considered more sexually appealing. Nevertheless, the singers continued with the singing style of *pleng lukthung* that derived from Thai folk songs. However, some *lukthung* bands did not survive the changes. In fact, during 1986 and 1987, Sayan Sanya and Yodrak Salakjai, super stars of *pleng lukthung* had to disband because the popularity of their music and performance style had declined and they had financial problems.

As we have seen, Thai country music changed to become closer to the mainstream style of Western popular music, using the new musical forms; a different singing style; introducing new choreographic techniques and costumes of a rock style; providing more sexually appealing to audiences; and performing in cities as well as rural areas. However, although this musical style became similar to ‘Thai pop rock music’, Thai audiences still differentiated Thai country music from other musical genres. For instance, the singing styles and lyrical content still preserved the identity of country music style derived from Thai folk music.

Furthermore, Thai country music singers from the northeast still preserved their local identity, especially performers specializing in *lukthung morlam* (northeast country music) which was different from ordinary *lukthung* from the central region in significant ways. The northeastern country music still used Laotian lyrics, folk rhythms and local instruments such as *kaen* (reed pipe organ), *wod* (reed flute), and *ponglang* (a wooden instrument which is similar to xylophone). The singing style of *morlam* and local rhythms also were adapted to *lukthung morlam*. However, the dancing styles and costumes of *lukthung morlam* also adopted the style of the jazz and rock genre that was faster and more sexually appealing.

During the 1990s, Thai country music from the central provinces became less popular but the northeastern styles of Thai country music including *lukthung isan* and *lukthung morlam* increased in popularity, not only in the northeast region, but in Bangkok and other regions also. I have interviewed two radio disc jockeys (Eksak Sutket, personal communication, February 18, 2005 and Thep Thewada, personal communication, June 13, 2003) in Phitsanulok province and a music shop manager (Kulapong Naknoi, personal communication, March 1, 2002) in Bangkok and they stated that total sales of Thai country music of the northeast style were higher than other styles since the 1990s. I argue that the total sale of the northeastern Thai country music may tell us two things. Firstly it tells us about the significant number of Laotian ethnic audiences who are a significant part of the Thai music market. Here language becomes important. People who cannot speak Laotian may not buy the northeastern country music, thereby reducing sales. The second point is related to representation of the Lao ethnic group in Thailand, which has been oppressed by the ruling class of central Thais for a long time. The popularity of the contemporary northeastern music shows that the Laotian ethnic group has gained more political and cultural power in Thai society. I will discuss this issue again in Chapter Nine.

### **The Emergence of Song for Life (*Pleng Puea Chiwit*)**

Thailand was still ruled by a military dictatorship in the 1970s, while most developed countries became democratic and some developing countries began fighting for democracy. It was during this period that the Thai people began to realize that there were political inconsistencies within Thai society. At this point, many university lecturers, journalists and politicians criticized the political and social

policies of the government. These political criticisms were upheld by university student leaders who met frequently to discuss the political and social problems identified by their lecturers. The significant universities such as Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, Mahidol, and Kasetsart became centres for dissent. All parties had the same political platform - a call for democracy from the government. In October 1973, thirteen activists were arrested after distributing pro-democratic information to the public. Those arrested were accused of treason, leading to massive student demonstrations, which had strong public support. Approximately half a million people protested to free the detainees and establish democracy in Thailand. The government took strong action and arrested more student leaders, charging them as communist subversives. Many demonstrators were beaten and finally fired upon. Approximately three hundred demonstrators were killed and thousands were injured. In addition, there were conflicts among the ruling classes, especially among the military leaders of the government, which had been monopolized by the supporters of Marshal Thanom (the 10<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Thailand) and his family for more than ten years. The severity of the 'protest killings' combined with government instability, placed extreme pressure on the government to resign, and Marshal Thanom fled the country on October 14, 1973. Thailand then returned to political liberation, energizing a range of new social forces. It was the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of a new period of democratic government (Damrongloet, 1990; Lockard, 2001; and Thanakit, 2002).

The student movement did not end with the removal of the dictatorship and installation of democratic system; they still requested structural and political changes for the country (Lockard, 2001). The students became more aware that there were many serious social problems, which need to be solved urgently. For example, American political and cultural influence, Japanese economic domination, bureaucratic injustice, corruption, and poverty, all contributed towards a need for social change. The students were confident that, with public support, they could play leading roles in helping to solve many of these problems. The university environment allowed the students more freedom to express their political attitudes through exhibitions, discussions, and seminars concerning political, economic and other social issues. Student activists also combined with many established unions, student guilds and other political groups representing students, peasants, workers and

teachers who had previously felt marginalized by the dictatorship. Between 1973 and 1976, there were many protests and demonstrations held by social reformists in almost every province in Thailand, and these protests were frequently supported by the student activists.

Music was most often performed when exhibitions, discussions, seminars, and protests were taking place. Student musicians began to compose music with lyrical content describing the social movement. Initially they used basic instruments, following American folk musicians, such as the acoustic guitar, mouth organ, and bongos. Local instruments such as the *kaen*, *pin* and *sor* from the northeast; and *khui*, *sor-oo*, and *ranat* from the central region were added to the bands. Student musicians who came from rural areas brought local musical instruments, local dialects and stories from their regions to the music. The new style of music was called '*pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life') because it reflected the 'real life' of the common people, their problems and personal experiences.

The first band of significance in the *pleng puea chiwit* style was *Caravan* founded by Surachai Janthiathon and Wirasak Sunthonsri –both university students in Bangkok. Surachai and Wirasak came from middle class families in the northeast. They acquired some ideas from the anti-war and satirical songs of American folk singers such as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Arlo Guthrie. *Caravan* later added three more members from the northeast: Thongkran Thana, Pongthep Kradonchamnan and Mongkhon Uthok (Jantimathon, 2003, and Lockard, 2001). *Caravan* performed 'songs for life' at many public gatherings, free of charge. Between 1973 and 1976, they launched several albums such as "Khon Kap Kwai" (Man and buffalo) and "American Antarai" (The Dangerous American). These albums were only available at performances held by the student activists or some music shops.

During that period, the bands performing this musical style were well established in many tertiary institutions including Thammasat, Chulalongkorn, Kasetsart, Mahidol, Ramkhamhaeng, Chiangmai, Khonkaen and Songkhlanakarin Universities. The most significant *pleng puea chiwit* bands recorded and produced their own music. The musicians were mostly university students from Bangkok, for example, *Kamachon* (The Labourers) from Mahidol University, *Kong-lor*, and *Ton-*



*kla* from Thammasat University, and *Lukthung Satjatham* from Ramkhamhaeng University. Some of these bands, such as *Kamachon* and *Lukthung Satjatham*, used musical instruments, which were conventional in the Western rock music context; others such as the *Ton-kla* used Thai court musical instruments such as *sor-oo*, *sor duang*, *ranat*, *cha-ke* and *khui*. The *pleng puea chiwit* initially became popular among more progressive university students and then became well known within the social movement as ‘protest songs’. This music built the people’s spirits during demonstrations and provided political information. The lyrical content of the *pleng puea chiwit* was drawn from stories describing poor rice farmers, oppressed laborers in cities; anti-war and anti American sentiment; and socialist ideologies (Lockard, 2001; and Surachai Janthimathon, personal communication, May 29, 2003).

Although there was a movement towards democracy, most of the bureaucratic systems still embraced conservative ideologies ‘normalised’ by the dictatorship. The people in the bureaucracy considered the activities of student activists too aggressive and radical (Lockard, 2001; and Surachai Janthimathon, personal communication, May 29, 2003). The *pleng puea chiwit* was also banned from government radio, television and print. During the period of censorship, right-wing groups, led by military leaders, were secretly making plans to eradicate the left-wing groups (Ungpakorn, 2001). The student activists realized that the right-wing groups would attempt to reclaim power. The students condemned such attempts via public speaking, print media and musical productions. Thus ‘anti-dictatorship’ was also a major theme of this musical style. In opposition to this, the right-wing forces performed ‘patriotic songs’ (*pleng plukjai*) that had been in circulation since the 1930s (Ungpakorn, 2001; Winichakul, 2001; and Lockard, 2001). The ‘patriotic songs’ were broadcast throughout government media networks, exercising great social influence, in opposition to *pleng puea chiwit*.

Several songs of the *pleng plukjai* (patriotic song) style were composed incorporating the hegemonic themes of nationalism, patriotism, Buddhist ideologies and support for the monarchy. More emphasis was placed on the ‘enemies of the nation’ - particularly communists and other political radicals. Therefore, *pleng puea chiwit* and *pleng plukjai* represented polarized ideologies within the Thai nation.

In 1976, the tension between political groups was critical. On October 6, 1976, while several thousand students were protesting the return of Marshal Thanom (the Ex-Prime Minister and military dictator), right-wing militia fired upon a large demonstration of student activists. Approximately fifty students were murdered and hundreds injured. Thousands of arrests were made and student leaders were jailed for years. Military leaders took advantage of the situation, blaming the social chaos upon an ineffective government. A coup followed in an attempt to eradicate the left-wing groups, including student activists, socialist politicians, progressive journalists, rice farmer and union leaders. Those who escaped persecution fled to join Communist party guerillas in the jungles. Consequently, the activity of ‘song for life’ ended with the eradication of the left-wing organizations. However, some musicians continued to compose and perform music for the Communist party in the jungles as well as via the underground short wave radio station controlled by the communist rebels.

In the 1980s, following a government amnesty and ideological conflicts between the radical students and the Communist-led guerilla, the students and the *pleng puea chiwit* musicians left the jungle and returned home. Most of them came back to continue their studies and many gave up political activities. Some musicians reformed their bands. The members of *Caravan* reunited and played music professionally. During the period of political amnesty, several bands of this musical style were also formed by members of new generations. Significant new generation bands of this genre emerged during that period including *Carabao*, *Hammer*, *Hope*, *Su Su*, *Khondankwian*, *Pongthep Kradonchamnan* and *Pongsit Kamphi*. The themes of ‘song for life’ composed by later generations changed in lyrical content to expose situations in their political context – issues more relevant to more modern audiences. Critical issues of the past generation such as socialism, anti-dictatorship and American imperialism disappeared. Yet, the songs continued to reflect images of common people and contemporary social issues, for example, “Wanipok” (The Beggar), “Khonjon Puyingyai” (The Poor, The Great) and “Lung Khimao” (A Drunken Man), performed by *Carabao*. Some artists managed to achieve to mainstream popularity. For instance, *Carabao* became very popular in the late 1980s. Therefore, today’s version of ‘song for life’ is not confined to left-wing groups and student activists, but it is a genre of Thai popular music, which is popular amongst general Thai audiences.

## **The Establishment of *Pleng string***

In the decades following World War II the Allies, especially the United States of America, based many soldiers in Thailand to fight in the Indo-China war for three decades. In the 1950s, rock and roll, which was very popular in the USA and Europe, was brought to Thailand with the US military. A lot of beer bars, nightclubs and restaurants were opened for the US soldiers that permeated the country. Initially, Western musicians performing 'rock and roll' performed in the US camps. Some Thai musicians were employed to play rock music for the US soldiers inside and outside the camps and they got much higher pay than normal. Then many young Thai musicians practiced and performed Western popular music. A younger Thai audience emerged who also favored Western popular music over Thai popular music. Many radio programmes also played rock music and this encouraged Thai audience to listen to Western music instead of Thai pop music. However, while many young people favoured Western popular music, *pleng thai sakon* or Thai popular music such as *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* still remained the mainstream music in Thailand (Eamsa-ard, 1995).

Between 1965 and 1972, the US army who were still based in Thailand introduced progressive rock music into Thailand, which greatly influenced Thai popular music (Lockard, 2001, Parkes, 2000). Thai rock bands that usually played Western rock music made records of *pleng lukgrung* (Thai urban music) in a different style. It was a mixture of *pleng lukgrung* and Western pop rock music. The style of singing did not change very much but the instrumentation and the music style did change. Previously, the term *pleng lukgrung* described a combination of the big band genre with the main emphasis on woodwind, brass instruments and traditional Thai elements. However, the new style was performed in a rock band context, with electric guitars and keyboards playing important roles alongside the big band elements. When the big band was combined with the rock band, it produced a hybridized form called "String Combo band" or *wong string* (string band) - the music of this band was called *pleng string*. The sound of the string combo utilised not only wind instrument sounds but also electric guitar and keyboard sounds. The music of the string combo band interested young audiences who had formerly favored Western pop music. The pioneers of the string combo band included *The Impossible*,

*Silver Sand, Royal Sprites, P.M. 5, P.M. 7, Fantasy, Grand Ex and Chatri*. In 1965, *The Impossible* won the first prize in the String Combo performance held by The Music Association of Thailand, under the patronage of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej, (1946-2004). *The Impossible's* music appealed to young audiences and inspired other bands to produce this new style of music.

In the beginning, the string combo bands played *pleng lukgrung*, including the King's music, but they did not gain as much favour as the original bands. The musicians also copied Western pop music and used Thai lyrics that were translated from the original compositions. The new music was not yet popular because the audiences found that the original composition was much better. In 1979, the band *Grand Ex* made a recording of the album "Lukthung Disco" where they brought *pleng lukthung* to play in the disco musical style. It was dramatically successful with the total sale of more than 100,000 copies (released on cassette), which was the highest album sale in Thailand at that time (Limpichai, 1993). That inspired other string combo bands to follow the same process. Many *Lukthung Disco* albums were produced consecutively, until they began to decline in popularity. Two years later, *Grand Ex* made an album titled "Grand Ex O" which used *pleng lukgrung* compositions re-arranged and played in pop rock style. It was also highly successful. Again, there followed many releases of *pleng lukgrung* albums in the pop rock style. They were also very successful. Many *pleng lukgrung* songs included the music of Suntharaporn, Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Charin Nanthanakon and their contemporaries, re-released in the form of cassette. Thus the music industry realized the importance of the cassette market, which grew strongly due to the alertness of young audiences who tended to favour the new styles of urban music to the previous style. For this reason, *pleng lukgrung* in the previous styles of Suthep Wongkamhaeng, for instance, Charin Nanthanakon, Thanin Intharathep, Sawali Pakapan, and Daojai Paijit, gradually became less popular.

Once the music industry became aware that young audiences were the main target market for the cassette tape, they produced many cassettes for this consumer group. The music was mostly performed by young musicians who were good looking, but they were not particularly accomplished musicians. Thus imitative music made many audiences bored with the music that the industry produced in the

1970s. Some people went back to listen to ‘song for life’ (*pleng puea chiwit*), especially the music of *Carabao*, a ‘New Wave’ of the ‘song for life’ in the folk rock style that emerged in 1981. The music of *Carabao* that emphasized sociopolitical themes has been the most popular form with Thai youth since the mid-1980s.

Since 1979, the Thai popular music industry has produced music which has lacked creativity, mostly because it has been produced by copying and imitating earlier Thai forms or Western forms. Up until 1985, the Thai popular music industry had to deal with the introduction of many new music companies increasing the competition, all battling for a share of the domestic market. The dominant music companies in the 1980s were *Grammy Entertainment*, *R.S. Promotion*, and *Nithithat Promotion*. These companies produced numerous albums of popular music, especially in the pop rock style or the Thai style called *pleng string*. In the second half of the 1980s, the market for *pleng string* expanded dramatically; thus many albums of this musical style were produced for many different target audiences. This musical genre could be divided into several sub-genres in the same way as Western popular music, for example, can be divided into Pop, Rock, Heavy Metal, Rap, Hip Hop and Country Rock, but all were sung in Thai language. The lyrical content of this musical style also ventured outside the theme of romantic love to cover almost every aspect of contemporary Thai society.

Moreover in the 1990s, the genre of ‘*pleng string*’ adopted other styles of the previous local music such as *pleng lukthung*, *pleng puea chiwit* and *morlam* to produce new hybrids such as *lukthung string*, *string puea chiwit* and *morlam rock*. Therefore, in this period, the borders between the *pleng string* genre and other genres of Thai popular music began to blur. Now the producers, audience and purposes of these musical genres seemed overlap. We can name numbers of urban elite who sung or played *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music) and *pleng puea chiwit* (‘song for life’) for example, while *pleng string* (young urban music) fascinated many young rural people.

## The Music Industry in Thailand

According to Roy Shuker (2001), the term music industry refers to institutions and businesses involved in the product of music performances and the surrounding paraphernalia. “The recording companies and retail sector, producing and selling recordings in their various formats; the music press; the music hardware, including the musical instruments and sound recording and production technology; the merchandising (posters, t-shirts, etc.); and royalties and rights and their collection or licensing agencies” (Shuker, 2001, p. 27).

The music industry in Thailand appeared during 1892 and 1893 when the cylindrical talking machine became popular among elites groups in Bangkok (15 years after Thomas A. Edison invented the talking machine). No recording company was established in the country in the early period and gramophone records were imported from overseas for distribution in Thailand. During the late reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), international record companies came to Thailand and produced Thai music records. The significant international record companies in this period were: *Gramophone Concert Record*, from Germany; and *Robinson Piano Columbia*. Beside several international companies, local record companies were established in Thailand, for instance *Tor Ngek Chuan Company*, in 1925; and *Srikrung Company*, in 1931. Each hoped to cash in on the popularity of the new medium. During that period, only Thai court music was recorded, until 1932, when the recording of Thai popular music (*pleng thai sakon*) for movie sound tracks began. When the number of recordings of *pleng thai sakon* increased, recordings of Thai court music declined. In 1948, the Department of Public Relations and *Namthai Record Company* produced a record of *Suntaraporn's* music that was very popular.

Although Thai popular music records were popular in the country, only the elite groups could afford them because of the high cost of the turntable and records. Most people were exposed to music via the radio and live musical performance, which were much cheaper. With the production of affordable cassette tapes in 1967, the purchase of music became very popular among all people throughout the country (Damrongleud, 1990; and Limpichai, 1993).

The music industry in Thailand differed from music industries in Australia and neighboring countries such as Singapore and the Philippines in terms of ownership of the means of production. Although the United States and Japan strongly influenced the music industry in Thailand, big music companies, such as *Grammy Entertainments* and *RS Promotion*, owned by Thai businessmen and especially Chinese Thai tycoons, actually controlled the industry (Flercher, 2004; and Ripley, 2001).

Even though it is difficult to obtain reliable data about the music industry in Thailand, nevertheless we can construct, based on the available data from various sources, an account of the economic significance of the products of the music industry. According to George Ripley, in 2001, in Thailand, there were more than 200 record labels, mostly for small independent music companies. There were ten large music companies, of which only two had their own replication facilities. The national music market in Thailand generated approximately 50 billion Baht (US\$1.2 billion) per year. That does not include music software piracy which accounts for 30% to 40% of the total (Ripley, 2001).

In the 1980s, *Grammy's* strategy of combining local lyrics and Western pop rhythms completely changed the form of Thai popular music from the old style of Thai urban popular music (*pleng lukgrung*) to the new modern one (*pleng string*). The new style of Thai popular music influenced Thai popular music for the next two decades. It also proved very profitable for the company (Zuylen, 1994).

In the 1990s, during the Economic Crisis, many music companies in Thailand collapsed, but *Grammy Entertainments* commanded over 70% of the \$90-million a year of the local music market (Crispin, 2001). In the 1990s, *Grammy* expanded its national market by purchasing other small music companies, which produced northeastern Thai country music. Furthermore, in 1998, *Grammy* invested in Taiwan and also targeted China (Ibid).

### **The Producers of Thai Popular Music**

In the music industry, the production of Thai country music is based on the activities of three groups of people including musicians, record producers and

businessmen (Longhurst, 1995). The musicians include song-writers who compose music and write it down; arrangers who prepare the music for instrument-players and singers; instrument-players who play musical instruments; and singers who use their voices. The record producers are major contributors because they choose the songs and shape the sound of music. The businesspersons provide finance and management for the music production to ensure commercial success for their investments.

The heart of a vibrant and growing music industry is the record companies, and the key power brokers within record companies are record producers. Besides songwriters and musicians, record producers are extremely influential in the process of building meaning through Thai popular music. The responsibilities of the music producers include finding singers, musicians and songwriters; and organizing recording for production. Critics often make an argument about a conflict between creativity and commerce in the popular music industry. On one side, it is argued, the purpose of the musicians is to create music as an expression of creativity, or simply to have fun; the other side of the argument says the purpose of business people is to earn a profit (Negus, 1996; and Loetpipat, 2002). A major role of a record producer is to combine the purposes of both sides and produce records. However, Simon Frith states that in rock music, there is no tension between commerce and creativity because art and commerce are complementary and integrated (Frith cited in Negus, 2002).

Most record producers have had experience in the music industry as musicians, singers or songwriters. Usually a record producer specialises in a particular style of music, for example, *pleng lukthung*, or *pleng string*. A vital role of the producer is to choose appropriate songs for artists. They make the final decision in this area. Although producers can make autonomous decisions with personal projects, they are forced to follow certain guidelines in the production of record company projects. There are also some producers who work independently, but their products are less popular than those of producers who are employed by the big companies.



## Music Piracy

Although big music companies are commercially successful, in the 1990s, they are threatened by musical pirates who produced illegal MP3 and CDs. The President of *RS Promotion*, Thailand's second biggest music company, said that music piracy had become a serious problem for the industry because it blocked industry progress. At this point musical piracy accounted for 30-40% of potential earnings (Ripley, 2001).

The music industry in Thailand and internationally asked their respective governments to take action on copyright laws. However, musical piracy still exists in Thailand. Since the 1990s many pirated cassettes and CDs have been eradicated and several corrupt business people have been arrested. But the authorities have not completely stopped musical piracy because of corruption and the high demand for a less expensive product. This process is similar to many illegal businesses such as prostitution and drug trafficking, businesses controlled by mafia and corrupt politicians (Pongpaichit & Baker, 1999). People continue to buy pirated products because they are much cheaper than the real products, and readily accessible.

I have discussed this topic with audiences of Thai popular music (Focus groups, 2003) and searched for opinions on Internet websites such as 'www.thaitopic.com' (2004). I found that most people know that pirated musical products are illegal, yet they continue to buy these products because the prices of the copyrighted music are considered too high compared to their average incomes. Some people believe that the music companies take advantage of their customers. They said that they love the music and the artists but not the business people. There is a common belief that the government's efforts to eradicate musical piracy have been made in favour of the business people rather than consumers or artists. There are even some critics who believe that the government took action on the copyright law because of pressure from the US government and other international business people, while Thai people get no benefit from the law (focus groups, 2003, and thaitopic.com, 2004).

## **National Artists of Thai Popular Music (Hall of Fame)**

In 1986, The Board of National Culture, The Office of National Culture Committee and the Ministry of Education established annual awards for outstanding Thai artists including songwriters, musicians and singers of Thai popular music. These people were titled “National Artists” (*Sinlapin Haeng Chat*), and were set on par with artists from other fields such as fine arts, architecture, and literature. The National Artists Award is not simply honorary; winners are also provided with a pension for their contributions to Thai society. The first person who was given the award was King Bhumibol (the current King), as a great artist - especially in the areas of music and fine art. The National Artists Awards may be compared to the awards given to American musical artists whose names are in the Hall of Fame. The awards provided for national artists of Thai Popular music consist of four categories including: musical performers; song-writers; *pleng lukgrung* singers and *pleng lukthung* singers. Between 1986 and 1999, the awards were presented to twenty-two musical artists (see Appendix 5).

Since 1986, there have been annual award ceremonies held for National Artists at the Thailand Cultural Centre. The ceremonies have included the presentation of musical works and biographies of award winning artists, radio and television coverage, the establishment of numerous internet websites, and publication of a ceremonial booklet. The booklet provides biographical information about the artists and reflects on their political ideologies as well as focusing on their social identity. I will discuss these notions in detail in the following chapters of analysis, suggesting a link between the biographies of the successful artists of Thai popular music and Thai identities and ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter on Thai popular music history has provided a basic overview of events in the establishment and evolution of Thai popular music within the contexts of Thai society. The chapter outlines the influence of the Western culture on Thailand in terms of culture, politics and economics. Before Thai popular music emerged, two genres of Thai traditional music including Thai court music and Thai folk music were popular in Thailand. The new genres were established after Western

music was adopted into Thai society in the 1850s. Initially, the Thai elite ruling class introduced Western music to Thailand and then middle and lower class people adopted it. In addition to imitation, Thai musicians chose and made adjustments to Western music to fit their tastes and the forms of Thai music. On the other hand, Thai traditional music was also adjusted to fit the forms of the Western music. Thai musicians then created new styles of hybrid music that were a synthesis of Thai original music and Western music. The new musical styles may be called Thai popular music, as they became more popular while the original music declined.

The chapter also describes the concepts, events and people relating to the production of four genres of Thai popular music identified here as comprising popular music, namely *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung*, *pleng puea chiwit* and *pleng string*. We can see how Thai culture has adopted Western culture into the music; how Thainess and Westernness have been integrated into Thai popular music; and how Thai popular music may be seen as representative of a process of modernization where Thai and western cultures blend to form something new but also distinctly Thai.

The significant styles of Thai popular music consist of four genres including *pleng lukgrung* (urban music), *pleng lukthung* (country music), *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) and *pleng string* (young urban music). Each genre was produced by different groups of musicians for different audiences. *Pleng lukgrung* (urban music) was produced by the elite and urban middle-class musicians and it was popular among urban people during the 1930s to 1970s. At the same time, *pleng lukthung* (country music) was produced by musicians who came from rural backgrounds and had little formal education and it was popular among rural people and the urban working class. *Pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life') emerged during the political conflict between the conservative ruling elite and progressive students and socialist politicians during the 1970s. It was produced by the student activists and radical musicians for political purposes, in order to oppose the elite ruling class and encourage oppressed people to fight for better lives. Since the 1980s, it has been adapted into the main stream of Thai popular music. *Pleng string* (young urban music) emerged in the 1980s and it was produced by new generations of urban middle-class musicians who worked for record companies. However these genres are

not stable, they change as the political, social and economic conditions of contemporary Thailand change.

Every style of Thai popular music presents Thai identities and ideologies to a different degree, depending on the factors surrounding the production of the music such as the backgrounds of the musicians and particular situations. Due to the fact that there are many different sorts of Thai identities and ideologies in Thai society, they are included in the Thai popular music. The history of Thai popular music shows that different musical styles portray different sorts of identities and ideologies. The emergence of each musical genre and the social context surrounding the music also provide the basis for understanding the relationship between Thai popular music and modern Thai society. The history of Thai popular music in this chapter is essential information, helping readers to understand the detailed analysis of the following chapters, including the chapter on specific musical genres and the related topic of identity, ideology, class, ethnicity and gender.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Thai Country Music (*Pleng Lukthung*)

#### Introduction

Chapter Four explored the emergence of Thai popular music including the formation of the four musical genres that constitute the basis of this research project. This chapter extends the detailed analysis to focus on Thai country music or *pleng lukthung* in an effort to answer the research questions: What forms of the Thainess are expressed in *pleng lukthung*? What are the ideologies expressed in the music? And how are the ideologies constructed in the music?

Data involving *pleng lukthung* was gathered from many different sources such as: transcripts of the interview with relevant people in the music industry (songwriters, business people, disc jockeys and broadcasting authorities), lyric books, biographies of various songwriters and critical articles from print media and the internet, interviews with musicians and video and audio CD and cassettes of this musical style. I also draw on my direct experiences as a critical listener and an amateur Thai country musician as a means of adding depth to my analysis. I deploy the techniques of ethnographic, semiotic and discourse analysis to interpret this data. The data is organized and coded into items and patterns that relate to the research questions. Finally, these patterns are linked to establish the structure of Thai country music and chart its differences in terms of content, form and significance, compared to other genres.

This chapter concentrates on a detailed analysis of the social context of Thai country music, its genealogy, the role of the producers and the significance of Thai country music to audiences. My account comprises interviews with musicians and people involved in the production of music, an examination of both the social context of the music and of the performers, an analysis of the social class of the producers and the performers, a discussion of gender as it relates to the music, and the issue of ethnicity.

## Social Context in Thai Country Music

Studies show that beyond the theme of love, many aspects of Thai society are portrayed in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung* (Damrongloet 1990; Meksrithongkam, 1991; and Siriyuvasak, 1998). Besides the ways of life, customs and traditions that I described earlier, Thai country songs deal with a number of issues, including rural life, working class life (derived from urban life), economic and political circumstances, patriotism, problems of work, sex, alcohol and using technology. Thai country music has always commented upon Thai society, bringing together city and country, farmer and workers of modest circumstances, and major events of the twentieth century in Thailand in an intriguing cultural mix. In many respects, the new emphasis on *pleng lukthung* reproduces the changing nature of Thai urban culture. Paradoxically, a cultural form that draws upon tradition and the unfashionable country for its inspiration reproduces quite accurately a burgeoning Thai modernity.

Many critics such as Damrongloet (1990), Pramot (1973) and Jopkrabuanwan (1989) accept that if you want to understand contemporary Thai culture, listen to contemporary Thai country music. I agree with this idea because I have listened to Thai country music and lived in the rural community for long time. I would like to again mention my background in order to demonstrate how I draw this conclusion.

I was born and raised in small village of poor rice farmers in the lower north of Thailand. At that time, electric power, running water, cinema, bars and shopping malls were not available in my village. The varying sources of entertainment for the people of the village were AM radio, *li-ke* (Thai folk opera), occasional outdoor movies, and frequent participation in various social ceremonies. Such ceremonies were held in temples and homes, and mostly related to Buddhist rituals and Thai traditions. These included *ngan buat nak* (the ceremony of becoming ordained as Buddhist monk), *ngan tang ngan* (wedding ceremony), and religious ceremonies such as *song kran* (the water festival), *khao pansa* (the Buddhist Lent ceremony), *ok pansa* (the ceremony at the end of Buddhist Lent), *upasombot* (the ceremony of becoming ordained as Buddhist monk), *thot krathin* (giving and offering a robe to monks after Buddhist Lent), *loi krathong* (the festival of floating *kratong* in the river or canal), and *kan len klong yao* (playing long drums). A significant element of each

ceremony was a powerful amplifier with horn shaped audio speakers that hung on a high pole or tree in order to make sure that everyone in the village and surrounding villages could hear the music and information. The audio speakers projected music and announcements in every direction from about four o'clock in the morning until after midnight, sometimes twenty-four hours a day. Each year, there were approximately fifteen to thirty of those kinds of ceremonies in my village and its neighbouring villages. Wherever and whenever you were there, you could not escape from those sounds. The most popular forms of entertainment for the rural people at that time was singing and dancing at those ceremonies. The several hundred songs repeatedly broadcast during the ceremonies and parties were in the style of Thai country music.

When I was young, I could perform many examples of Thai country music. Between 1971-1994, when I studied and worked in Bangkok, I still listened to and performed *pleng lukthung*, juxtaposing this style with *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*, the main stream of Thai popular music for urban people in that period. From 1995-2004, I went back to live in the country again. I lived in a rural village near the city of Phitsanulok, in the lower north of Thailand. My house was located very close to two Buddhist temples and I hear daily rituals being performed via audio speakers in the temples. Besides Buddhists praying, I have heard many songs in the *pleng lukthung* style on every religious occasion. It seems to me that other genres of Thai popular music, particularly rock music and Western music, were not permitted on the temples' audio speakers. Many thanks should be given to the abbots for providing me with a firm grounding in *pleng lukthung* without any need for radio or records.

Manop Thanomsri divides Thai country music (from 1938 to 1991) into three periods including the beginning, the peak, and the period of decline (Samnak-ngan kanakamakan-watanatham-haeng-chat, 1991). The music reflects the reality of society at the time it was composed. The producers of *pleng lukthung* have collected things from the environment surrounding them to compose the music. Owing to the fact that many producers (songwriters, singers and musicians) and fans of *pleng lukthung* migrated from their hometowns in the country to the big cities, they brought this music with them. The producers chose issues in the modern context to write the songs and the fans enjoyed listening to the updated musical forms. For this reason,

Thai country music lyrics not only describe traditional rural circumstances but also current issues surrounding urban life. However, the descriptions of the troubled lives of rice farmers in the country and love of rural boys and girls still exist in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung*. The lyrics deal with the migration of rural boys and girls who are forced to work in cities. Thus, the poverty of country people remains a major problem for the country in the Twenty First Century.

The differences between Thai country music of the past and the present can be found in the way they comment on a changed society: the influences of urban living, changing sexual behaviour, increasing alcohol consumption, the impact of modern technology, mandatory education and urban careers. The lyrical content of *pleng lukthung* between the 1950s and 1970s mostly portrayed agricultural society but from the 1970s up to the 2000s, it began to represent more of the industrial society in the cities, which in turn had a strong effect on rural society. Since the rapid economic expansion of the 1980s, the low cost of agricultural produce to consumers and the need for industrial sector labourers has encouraged a massive rural-to-urban migration. No one could dispute the fact that every rural village throughout Thailand has experienced people moving to Bangkok and other large industrial centres. From 2001 to 2003 while I was collecting the data for a research project on the number of drug users in Thailand, I visited people in more than fifty villages in three provinces of the lower north. I rarely found young people in the villages. Mostly elderly people and children stayed at home. Some children told me that they had lived with their grandparents for years since their parents, brothers and sisters moved to work in construction in Bangkok. Their parents visit home only two or three times a year. The impact of this form of migration has yet to be fully understood but I contend that its impact on rural culture is already charted in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung*.

The theme of romantic love between rural boys and girls in the beautiful countryside has declined in Thai country music since the 1990s. Instead of stories about young rural love, lyrics focus on themes involving sexual activity and recreational alcohol use. Although illicit drug use is a serious problem in Thailand, lyrics dealing with the use of these drugs rarely appear in the musical style. However, many contemporary *pleng lukthung* songs describe alcohol as the solution to a broken heart, for example; “Law Ton Mao” (Good Looking when I Am Drunk),



sung by Ekachai Sriwichai; “Namta Motdaeng” (Tears of a Red Ant), sung by Jaroi Henry; and “Mao Mai Loek” (Never Give up Drunkenness), sung by Suthika Supansa.

The prevalence of the mobile phone, which has spread even to the rural areas in 2004, is commented upon in several *pleng lukthung*. For example, “Show Ber Mai Show Jai” (Show Your Number but Your Not Heart), sung by Duangjan Suwani; “Tho Ha Nae Doe”, sung by Tai Orathai; and “Namta Lon Bon Mue Thue” (Tears on the Mobile Phone), sung by Rung Suriya, mention using mobile phones and they became very big hits on radio during 2004 and 2005. Wimon Wajasuwan, a disc jockey of *pleng lukthung* at Radio Thailand, Phitsanulok province, affirmed that her listeners requested these songs several times a day (Personal Interviews, 2005). The songs deal with the mobile phone as a tool of communication between boys and girls. During the 2000s, Thai people were encouraged by telecommunication companies to use their products and services, especially the mobile phone. In 2004, the data from the Office of National Statistics showed that 47.8 percent of people in Bangkok and 24.6 percent of people in other provinces used mobile phones.

Table 5.1: *The Estimation of Using of Technology and Communication in 2004* (Sunwijai-kasikorn-thai-jamkat, 2005)

Percentage of the users		
Instrument	Bangkok and its outskirts	Other provinces
Mobile phone	47.8	24.6
Basic telephone	38.9	5.5
Internet	26.6	9.7

Telecommunication firms in Thailand were very successful financially in the first years of the 2000s. It is well known that the biggest telecommunication

company belongs to the family of the Prime Minister Taksin Chinawat. I argue that songs about using mobile phones not only reproduce the value of using the modern communication technology but also unintentionally encourage the people to acquire and use this instrument. Beyond the appropriate melody, harmony and rhythm of the music, the songs are successful because the content supports the dominant ideology; especially capitalism and consumerism (see further argument in Chapter Eight).

To sum up, Thai country music reflects both the lives of the working class people and the values and attitudes that influence their behavior. However, the songs neglect the social, political, and economic causes of the problems confronting the audience for the songs. The social structures that produce the problems are, and remain, beyond the control of the music. However, as Jaret and Boles (1992) state, although the country song lyrics may not offer the best solutions to these problems, they let their audiences know that others have faced the same situations and have felt the same way.

## **Genealogy of Thai Country Music**

The *pleng lukthung* genre is a synthesis of Thai folk music and Western pop music, and I will now elaborate on what styles of music have shaped *pleng lukthung* and how they are integrated into contemporary Thai country music. My aim is to elaborate on the sources of ideology the music adopts and which social processes are involved in its construction.

Although, the origins of *pleng lukthung* came from a convergence of both Thai folk music and Western popular music, this genre was predominantly influenced by Thai folk music rather than by Western popular music when compared with other genres of Thai popular music such as *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng string* and *pleng puea chiwit*. During the 1930s, a lot of melodies and rhythms of central Thai folk music, such as *lae* (a kind of sacred song about Buddhism), *lamtat* (a secular song, dealing humorously with sexual matters), *pleng khotan* (beggar song), *li-ke* (Thai folk opera), and *ho* (a single word, “ho” sung drawlingly with slurred notes), were altered to accompany Western pop music bands. That movement has generated the most significant style of Thai popular music since the 1930s.

An important aspect differentiating *pleng lukthung* from *pleng lukgrung* and other styles of Thai popular music is the singing style. The way *pleng lukthung* vocalists slur their notes and words is very similar to the singing style of Thai folk music from the four cultural regions in Thailand mentioned above. It may be difficult for foreigners to distinguish the stylistic features but Thai people can easily identify the origins and local dialects of a *pleng lukthung* from its singing style. In “Fon Duean Hok” (The Rain in the Sixth Month), sung by Rungpet Laemsing, and “Sao Na Sang Fan” (A Peasant Girl Says Goodbye to Her Boyfriend), sung by Pumpuang Duangjan, the local dialects and the lyrics about the way of life of rural people in the Central region are deployed. In the song “Bor Pen Young Dok” (Never Mind, That’s All Right), sung by Samai Onwong, and “Hak Sao Khonkaen” (To Love Khonkaen’s Girl), sung by Panom Nopporn, reflect the origins of *morlam*, a major style northeastern folk music.

Besides the singing style of Thai folk music, many styles of Western popular music have been adopted to form *pleng lukthung*. Previously *pleng lukthung* borrowed singing styles from American Western country music, and after that, it also borrowed music from other Western styles such as Latin, jazz, pop, ballad, rock and roll, disco and rap. The rhythmic patterns mostly use Latin rhythms similar to the rhythms of *pleng lukgrung* including ‘slow’, ‘beguine’, ‘bolero’ and ‘cha-cha-cha’. I have noticed that the way *pleng lukthung* cries out with the pain, rage, joy and passion of poor farmers and workers, is similar to American bluegrass and blues. Furthermore, some music from Asian countries such as China, India, Laos, Japan, Vietnam and Korea has also been borrowed to enrich Thai popular music traditions. Mostly the lyrics involve issues love or the long-distance relationships between a boy or girl from Thailand and a lover from other countries in the region. The composers of *pleng lukthung* pick whatever musical influences they like to write in this musical style. Both audience and composer appreciate the accessibility and versatility of the form.

Since its birth, there has been conflict, competition, struggle and compromise between *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* in the representation of Thai national identity in what is perceived to be an authentic manner. *Pleng lukthung* emerged at the same time as *pleng lukgrung* and since then Thai popular music has seen the two

genres overlap and compete for dominance. Thai popular music at that time was known as *pleng thai sakon* (Thai international music), a modern hybrid style of music which is a synthesis of Thai and Western music. Although the term *pleng lukthung* was not well known in the 1950s, its audiences were aware of the significance of this style of music, especially the singing style and the lyrical content. As Siriyuvasak (1998) concludes, “by slurring notes and words, *lukthung* singers represent their class background and oppose the parole designated as the national Thai language” (p. 207).

Prakop Chaipipat, a pioneering popular television host, and Mongkon Amartayakul, a famous ‘master’ band musician of *pleng lukthung* during the first period (1930s-1960s), state in *Some notions about Thai country music* (1991) that some biased businessmen who controlled the record companies divided Thai popular singers into two groups: singers of *pleng pudi* (elite song) and *pleng talat* (ordinary song). The musical business people preferred *pleng pudi* to the *pleng talat* because they considered the *pleng talat* to be low art. During the regime of Marshal Pibulsongkram, *pleng talat* was banned on radio because some of its lyrical content involved radical social comment. After being obstructed by the elite classes for more than two decades, *pleng lukthung* appeared formally on television in 1964 because of a high demand from audiences (Chaipipat, 1991). (See also in Chapter Four: The Emergence of *Pleng lukthung* and *Pleng lukgrung*)

After struggling for prominence, Thai country music gained acceptance in presenting Thai identity largely because business and the authorities played important roles in encouraging the popularity of this musical style. During the economic recovery of the 1990s, the Thai government released a campaign encouraging Thai people to again become listeners of *pleng lukthung* in order to encourage Thai nationalism and reinforce the economy. The government claimed that *pleng lukthung* represented Thai identity and thus reflected the ways of life, society, ideology, and culture of Thai people. The Office of National Culture Commission (*Samnak-ngan kanakamakan watanatham haeng chat*), Ministry of Education, began to conduct *Kueng satawat pleng lukthung* (The Mid-century of Thai Country Music) where a hundred *pleng lukthung* songs were selected as the best examples of all Thai country music. The songs had lyrics that were perceived to

reinforce and at the same time reflect the values of Thai culture, but above all evoked the atmosphere of the Thai countryside, which had now become a crucial element in defining Thainess.

During 1990s, business people realized the potential of this musical genre market in Bangkok, gauged by the significant numbers of sales of *pleng lukthung* cassettes and CDs in Bangkok and surrounding provinces. The business people built upon the established market by expanding the airtime of *pleng lukthung* on radio and television. In 1997, *Pleng Lukthung FM 90.0 MHZ*, located in Bangkok, was formed by a group of professional disc jockeys. The radio station played only *pleng lukthung*, twenty-four hours a day. The aim of this station was to provide *pleng lukthung* to a target audience in Bangkok and its outskirts who loved this musical style. The major consumers of this genre are working class residents, taxi drivers, factory workers, government officers, soldiers, and police officers who originally came from the provinces (Lukthungfm.com, 2004). The station then attempted to expand its target audience to a white-collar clientele. Witaya Supapornopat, a founder and an administrator of *Lukthung FM 95*, said that his station had dramatically changed the preconceptions people had about FM radio in Thailand. In the past, most people believed that FM radio should play only high class music styles such as Western music, *pleng lukgrung*, and *pleng string*, while *pleng lukthung* should be broadcast on AM radio only (Ibid). Due to the majority of radio disc jockeys believing that the major fans of *pleng lukthung* lived in the country and others provinces, no FM radio in Bangkok had previously played *pleng lukthung*. Consequently, his station was the first FM radio station in Bangkok to play *pleng lukthung* solely. *Lukthung FM 95* celebrated its seventh anniversary in 2004, by which time it was very successful and popular among fans throughout the country (Lukthungfm.com, 2004).

In addition, in 2004, *Lukthung Rakthai F.M.98.0 MHz*, a radio station, was formed by *Broadcasting Network Company (Thailand)* in order to present *pleng lukthung* to its audiences. The program emphasised new disc jockeys and the modern style of Thai country music. In the same year, *MCOT (Mass Communication Organization of Thailand)* formed *Lukthung Mahanakorn F.M. 95*, another radio station that played only “good” *pleng lukthung* from any music company. The target

audiences were a new generation of listeners such as high school students. Each station boasted that their frequencies gained the highest ratings (Krapook.com, 2004). The stations' rise to prominence also illustrates, with some sociological accuracy the changing social composition of Bangkok, as the rural people flocked to the city in order to find employment and opportunity.

### **The Producers of Thai Country Music**

An analysis of the lives of famous Thai country musicians from books and websites shows that the backgrounds, works, ideas and abilities of these people are diverse, although according to Siriporn Kropthong (2004), who studied the biographies of Thai country music songwriters and singers who became professional musicians since 1968, most came from lower social status groups. They also tended to come from the different Thai regions; they tended to have only a primary school education background; and the previous occupations of most songwriters were musicians while most singers came from families of rice farmers or labourers (see table 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4).

Table 5.2: *Birthplaces of Thai Country Music Songwriters and Singers*  
(Adapted from Kropthong, 2004, pp. 439-440)

<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Songwriter</b>	<b>Singer</b>
Bangkok	2	2
Central	19	26
North	2	0
Northeast	12	16
South	4	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>48</b>

Table 5.3: *Education of Thai Country Music Songwriters and Singers*  
 (Adapted from Kropthong, 2004, pp. 439-440)

<b>Education</b>	<b>Songwriter</b>	<b>Singer</b>
Master degree	2	1
Bachelor degree	2	2
High school/ Vocational	6	4
Secondary school	10	6
Primary school	16	26
Lower	3	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>48</b>

Table 5.4: *Previous Occupations of Thai Country Music Songwriters and Singers*  
 (Adapted from Kropthong, 2004, pp. 439-440)

<b>Previous occupation</b>	<b>Songwriter</b>	<b>Singer</b>
Rice farmer/ labourer	8	24
Pop/ Folk musician	17	4
Radio disc jockey	2	1
Officer/ teacher/	6	1
Buddhist monk	2	0
Others	4	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>48</b>

The number of the musicians who came from the central and northeastern provinces is significant, while those originating from the north and south are rare (see table 5.2). As a result, the influence of Thai country music from the central and

northeastern styles in the music market is greater than that from the northern and southern styles.

Most of the songwriters have little formal music education (see table 5.3). They learned how to compose and play music by themselves. Some songwriters could compose music, play instruments and sing songs very well but others could not. Famous Thai country music singers such as Surapon Sombatcharoen (1930-1968) and Ploen Promdaen (1939- ) composed many songs for themselves and other artists. Some songwriters wrote either the music or the lyrics and others did both. There are more lyric writers than music writers in the style of *pleng lukthung*. We can see many songs of this style share the same melodies, in particular melodies from Thai traditional music. Many lyric writers took Thai traditional music and easily fitted their words to the music because there is no copyright protection for anonymous and traditional songs. These factors led some critics and well-educated audiences to see Thai country music as repetitious and boring (Damrongloet, 1990).

The significant songwriters of the first period (before 1963) of *pleng lukthung* included Paibul Butkhan (1921-1972), Surapon Sombatcharoen (1930-1968) and Payong Mukda (1926). In the following period (1963- 1972), songwriters such as Ploen Promdaen (1939), Chai Mueangsing (1939), Samniang Muangthong, Kan Karunwong, Chalong Pusawang and Pongsak Jantharubekha composed a lot of popular Thai country music. During the third period (1973-1977), many *pleng lukthung* songs were produced in the ‘song for life’ style, with many written by Chonlathi Thanthong (1937- ), Jaiw Phichit (1923- ) and Niyom Manrayat. The successful songwriters of the period of modern *pleng lukthung* (from 1978 to the present time) include Lop Burirat (1935- ), Chonlathi Thanthong, Chuanchai Chimpawong and Sala Khunawut. The songs written by these songwriters became very popular and the singers who sang these songs became *lukthung* super stars such as Pumpuang Duangjan, Jakapan Abkornburi and Mike Piromporn.

Although songwriters are very important to the production of Thai popular music, they are ignored by audiences. Unlike singers, songwriters are not recognized by people. The names of songwriters have never appeared in the general lyric books that I have read unless they are singers or members of bands. Similarly, the names of songwriters are rarely presented on television and radio. The most significant ones



appear in the media as singers and they are heavily promoted by the music companies. Lop Burirat was probably the most successful songwriter during the 1980s and 1990s because his songs made Pumpuang Duangjan ‘the queen of Thai country music’ (*Rachinee Pleng Lukthung*). Lop wrote numerous *lukthung* songs and many were very popular, such as “Samsip Yang Jaew” (Thirty but Still Excellent), sung by Yodrak Salakjai; and “Krasae” (Come closer To Me), sung by Pumpunag Duangjan. However, Lop told me (personal interview 2002) that most songwriters of *pleng lukthung* are not rich. They earn less money than singers and instrument players. When I visited him at his home in 2002, he was already famous, but external signs suggested he was not a rich man. Lop continued that the songwriters could not work alone; they have to get involved with other persons. If they wanted their songs to be popular, they had to win the favour of both the audience and businessmen (Wichian Kamjaroen, personal communication, March 22, 2002). As a result, their music combines their own ideas with ideas that they think the business people will judge to be popular. In other words, in their music, songwriters have to compromise some of their own ideologies and assume the ideologies of others in society, to conform to the consensus, if they wish to be successful.

The most prominent people in the *pleng lukthung* music industry are singers because audiences recognize them, rather than other groups of musicians. Their names and their pictures are always presented to the public while the songwriters and instrument players are not promoted. Successful singers make their audience believe that the words in their song are from their hearts. *Pleng lukthung* singers have specific talents for improvisation that singers of other genres do not have. The songwriters only write the melodies, lyrics of songs and guidelines for the singers. Beyond the original notations, the singers of *pleng lukthung* invent their own singing techniques, usually derived from Thai folk singing, especially the slurring of the notes and the use of local dialects (Wichian Kamjaroen, personal communication, March 22, 2002). If the singers sing songs according to the musical notation, they are not singing *pleng lukthung* but another style. In short, the style of singing is crucial to the genre. Some singers of urban music styles reproduced many *pleng lukthung* albums where they use the same melodies and lyrics as the original ones. But their songs do not sound like *pleng lukthung* because the singers lack the talent for singing in the *pleng lukthung* style, which is not easy to learn without the right social

background of rural existence or the urban slums. ‘Urban *lukthung*’ songs might be popular among urban audience but they are not popular with rural audiences (Jopkrabuanwan, 1989; and Kotchayut, 2004).

The public images of Thai country music singers in their performances on TV, radio and live concerts diverge significantly from the low status origins (see the table 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4). Their costumes are luxurious, extravagant and colorful and they perform on stages with extravagant sets. The dance troupes are also very important to the performances because they make the singers appear outstanding on stage. The costumes of the dancers are also extravagant and colorful. I argue that the public images of that the artists project send mixed signals to the audience. On the one hand, they seek to present their own identities as those representing of the interests of the rural and urban poor (see table 5.4). On the other hand, their style of performance suggests they want to escape from their low status and humble background.

According to the surveys of *Suandusit Poll* between 1999 and 2005, the prominent male *lukthung* singers were Rung Suriya, Jakrapan Apkornburi, Mike Piromporn, Kung Suthirat and Yingyong Yodbua-ngam (see table 5.5). The most popular female *lukthung* singers were Sunari Rachasrima, Yui Yatyoe, Apaporn Nakorn Sawan, Benz Pornchita, Jintara Punlap, Luknok Supaporn, Fon Thanasunthorn, Siriporn Ampaipong and Tai Orathai (see table 5.6).

Table 5.5: *The Most Popular Male Thai Mountry Music Singers From 1999 to 2004*  
 (Adapted from Suan-Dusit-Poll, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004)

Male Singer	1999		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%
Rung Suriya	1	35.56	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jakrapan Apkornburi	2	30.66	1	59.19	2	38.45	1	45.01	2	37.40
Mike Piromporn	3	16.67	2	20.47	1	48.26	2	44.49	1	51.22
Kung Suthirat	-	-	-	-	3	13.29	-	-	-	-
Yingyong Yodbua-ngam	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	10.5	-	-
Toi Muakdaeng	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	11.38

Table 5.6: *The Most Popular Female Thai Country Music Singers from 1999 to 2004*  
(Ibid)

Female Singer	1999		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%
Sunari Rachasima	1	32.22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yui Yatyoe	2	25.00	1	59.19	-	-	-	-	-	-
Apaporn Nakornswan	-	-	2	29.94	-	-	-	-	-	-
Benz Pornchita	-	-	1	34.12	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jintara Punlap	-	-	-	-	1	56.06	1	44.72	3	20.31
Luknok Supaporn	-	-	-	-	2	26.62	-	-	-	-
Fon Tanasunthorn	-	-	-	-	3	17.32	2	30.23	2	28.67
Siriporn Ampaipong	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	25.25	-	-
Tai Orathai	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	51.02

Most instrument players of *pleng lukthung* cannot read music. They have learnt to play music by themselves. The main instruments used in *pleng lukthung* bands from the 1950s to the 1980s were saxophones, trumpets, trombones, accordions, drum kits, keyboard, electric guitar and bass. Many *pleng lukthung* musicians previously played music in brass bands or marching bands before becoming musicians in pop groups and most of them could play Thai traditional

music as well (Wichian Kamjaroen, personal communication, March 22, 2002). Thai folk musical instruments were also used in the bands as supplements in some songs. For this reason, the sounds of the Thai country music bands are also similar to the sounds of Thai traditional and folk music. However, after the 1980s, due to use of the synthesizer, the use of wind instruments became less popular in *pleng lukthung* bands. Consequently, the main instruments in Thai country music bands became no different from those used in rock bands. However, Thai folk instruments, especially from the central and northeast regions, are still used in some *pleng lukthung* songs. The instrument players of Thai country music in the 2000s still blend Thai traditional and folk music with western popular forms (Damrongloet, 1990; and (Kropthong, 2004). This inclusion of local instruments and traditional singing style contribute *pleng lukthung's* distinctive sound and help differentiate the music from the other popular genres.

The key persons controlling the quality and quantity of the music produced are record producers. They control the musicians and recording processes in the music companies. The record producers work for business people in order to produce records to be commercially successful. They play an important role in organizing the music by choosing songwriters, songs, singers, instrument players and studios to produce record music. The role of a record producer is that of a middleman between the musicians, the businessmen and the music audience. Some record producers are musicians such as songwriters, singers or instrument players; others are not. Due to the fact that there are many different genres of popular music produced by the record companies, there are also many different kinds of the record producers. Normally a producer produces a specific musical genre; for instance, producers of *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung* and *pleng string* specialize in one of the genres (Kongsuwan, 2002). The most successful producers of *pleng lukthung* during the 1980s and 2000s were Lop Burirat (1935- ) and Chonlathi Thanthong (1937- ). Both work as songwriters and record producers for music companies. They also used to be *pleng lukthung* singers when they were young. There are several famous record studios in Bangkok that have produced numerous *pleng lukthung* records since 1980, such as *Kamon Sukoson*, *Kings Sound*, *Rota*, *Paiboon Stereo*, *Unique Stereo*, and *V.C. Music* (Kropthong, 2004).

The business people who work for music companies influence musicians and record producers by providing financial support and marketing the music records. There are several music companies that have produced *pleng lukthung* records, for instance, *Nangfa Promotion* (1976), *Lepto Industry Ltd* (1979), *Sure Audio* (1981), *Metro Records and Tapes* (1981), *S.T. Ltd* (1987), *Pro Media Mart* (1988), *Nithithat Promotion* (1989), *Top Line Music* (1989), *Smart Bomb Entertainment* (1991), *S.N. Art Promotion* (1991), *Boxing Sound Ltd* (1991) and *C.V. Music* (Kropthong, 2004). However, recently big companies that previously emphasized the production of urban music began to produce Thai country music records as well because the companies realized the enormous potential of the *pleng lukthung* market. These companies include *GMM Grammy* and *RS Promotion* (GMM-Grammy, 2004; RS-Promotion, 2003; and Kropthong, 2004). Without financial support, record producers and musicians could not produce their records and make them commercially successful. However, if the business people do not think the records will be popular, they will not invest. Due to the fact that most musicians are poor and have a low level of education, they cannot produce music by themselves; they depend on the business people. Their music is a compromise between them and the business people.

### **The Significance of Thai Country Music**

Thai country music is significant because it is perceived to express the culture of the Thai common people. This musical genre expresses different lyrics, different languages, and sentiments that are considered to be more democratic than the earlier forms of Thai music. *Pleng lukthung* is considered by scholars and authorities to be the best representative of Thai culture in the era of globalization, in terms of its attempt to preserve Thai identity and at the same time adopt Western culture, and to blend them together into a new form of modern culture without losing indigenous identity (Damrongloet, 1990; and Kropthong, 2004). Jenpop Jopkrabuanwan, an expert on *pleng lukthung*, argues that, nowadays, although Thai traditional and folk music have virtually disappeared from the lives of Thai people, their descendants still exist in Thai country music. This musical genre derives a lot of melodies, rhythms, instrumentations and singing styles, from Thai folk music and it still reproduces the themes of Thai traditional culture in modern times (Jopkrabuanwan, 1989). According to Siriporn Kropthong (2004), *pleng lukthung* plays a very important role

and conveys significant meanings in Thai society. Almost every social and political event that has occurred in Thai society has been presented in the themes of Thai country music. At the present time, this musical style is very popular not only among rural people and the lower classes but also among urban people and the middle class because it deals with issues that resonate with their lives. Furthermore, *pleng lukthung* is admired as a potential representation of Thai society and identity that is specifically Thai. Additionally the study of Thai country music adds not only our understanding of Thai popular music but also our knowledge of Thai identity because peasants still comprise the majority of the population in Thailand.

Thai country music is also closely linked to ethnicity in the Thailand. A number of Thai ethnic groups who live in the country and who have migrated to the cities also comprise the majority of the urban population. *Pleng lukthung* is the favorite musical genre with these people because it is performed for them and its themes are relevant to their lives, while urban music is perceived by the critics to be driven by minority interests (Jopkrabuanwan, 1989; and Kongsuwan, personal communication, June 7, 2002). Urban music presents the identities and ideologies of minor groups rather than the majority of people. Although Chinese -Thai business people, new members of the elite ruling class, own the companies that produce *pleng lukthung* and control the media that present this music, *pleng lukthung* remains representative of Thai ethnic groups and working class people from different regions in Thailand.

Initially some among the elite classes disliked *pleng lukthung* and excluded it from the mass media (see in Chapter Four), but now they approve of this musical genre as being representative of Thai identity. This is affirmed by the number of appointments to the Thai Pop Music Hall of Fame of *pleng lukthung* musicians by government authorities, such as the Office of National Culture Commission and the Department of Public Relations (Samnak-ngan-Kanakamakan-Watanatham-Haeng-Chat, 1991).

The Royal Family, which has also made an effort to preserve Thai traditional music in the past, now regards Thai country music as an important aspect of Thai culture. According to Princess Sirinthon, the second daughter of King Bhumibol (the present King), *pleng lukthung* is significant because:

- It provides historical and sociological knowledge of Thailand.
- It provides sources of villagers' wisdom and intelligence.
- The music is simple, easy to understand, sing and remember.
- It is instantly accessible to anyone from every class and every rural area.
- It represents Thainess in terms of language and melodies and singing style.

(Sirinthon, 1991, p. 26)

## Conclusion

It is clear that many writers such as Damrongloet (1990), Meksrithongkam (1991), Siriyuvasak (1998) Pramot (1973), Jopkrabuanwan (1989) and Kropthong (2004) have concluded that from its birth until now, *pleng lukthung* has portrayed many different social aspects of Thai society, more so than any other musical genre of Thai popular music. I agree with this view and can draw upon my direct experiences as a country boy who was born and grew up in a rural area. Furthermore, I draw the conclusion from my analysis of collected data and from critically listening to many Thai country music songs that *pleng lukthung* always illustrates the lives of peasants and the environment surrounding them. The lyrical content of this musical style consists of various issues including rural, working class life, economic and political circumstances, patriotism, and problems of work, sex, alcohol and technology.

The genealogy of Thai country music shows that both historical and contemporary practitioners of *pleng lukthung* have expressed a rural sensibility. Besides Western popular music, Thai country music has had a close relationship with Thai folk music and with ethnic people and cultures from the four major regions of Thailand. I have described the backgrounds and characteristics of the producers including the musicians and business people who produced *pleng lukthung* in order to support this information for further arguments about identity and ideology, class, ethnicity and gender in Thai pop music in the Chapters Eight and Nine. In this chapter, I have argued that most of the Thai country music musicians came from poor, rural backgrounds and had little formal education. However, the class and regional backgrounds of Thai country musicians do, in many ways, make them



representatives of the poor and rural people. Their songs articulate the hopes, concerns and aspirations of the lower classes; hence their wide popularity.

Thai country music is highly significant to Thai people of all classes. This represents a transformation in elite thought. Previously, the urban elite either ignored or discounted Thai country music as an inferior cultural form. However, since the 1980s, these elites have appropriated country music to these agenda of conservative and nationalism.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Dominance of Thai Urban Music

#### Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the dominant form of urban music, namely “*pleng lukgrung*” (urban music) and *pleng string* (young urban music). The relationship between the two forms is traced and analysed within a matrix of social conditions. The contexts in which that music is produced will be examined within the communication process of Thai popular music. The chapter is primarily concerned with the way in which Thai popular music creates and conveys meaning in an urban setting. The aim of this chapter is to answer the research questions: What form of Thainess is expressed in the music? What are the ideologies expressed in urban Thai popular music? And how are the ideologies constructed in the music? The process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data is similar to the process followed in the study of Thai country music in Chapter Five.

In Chapter Five, I explained that *pleng lukthung* reproduces an alternative identity to that of the dominant urban image: that of rural Thai culture, expressed in its lyrics, vocals and music. By contrast, ‘urban music’ expresses a certain form of Thainess represented by the dominant, ruling group in Thai society, an identity that is clearly linked to urban society. I will identify the form of Thai identity expressed in *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string* and describe the way dominant ideas, beliefs and values which support the dominant group in Thai society, have come to be accepted by many Thai people, even in the rural areas.

Thai urban music is different from other musical genres in terms of musical forms, singing styles, lyrical content and the language used by the songwriters and the artists. *Pleng lukgrung* is an urban Thai popular music that was popular during the 1930s and 1970s while *pleng string* or young urban music, the most recent genre of Thai popular music, emerged latterly during the healthy growth of the music business from the 1970s to 80s. *Pleng string* has been the most significant style of urban music since the 1980s and its popularity still remains in the 2000s. I will also

emphasise the influence of the music business and mass media on this genre, arguing that the music business has introduced exploitative marketing strategies through the mass media in order to make the music popular and to sell more cassettes and CDs.

### **The Social Context of Thai Urban Music**

I have claimed that *pleng lukgrung* supports the dominant Thai ideology, which emphasises nationalism, patriotism and Buddhist-influenced behaviour, by producing content that supports the values of elite class. Consequently, in the content of *pleng lukgrung*, some issues are simply avoided or rendered invisible. For instance, some social groups are notably absent from the themes of *pleng lukgrung* and social difference is hidden or displaced by an interpellation that addresses all social groups under the notion of a unified society.

Most of the lyrical content of *pleng lukgrung* concerns romantic love - either happiness or disappointment. The songs narrate the happy stories of privileged people who do not need to struggle economically because of their wealth, power, or privilege. The lyrical romantic love themes of *pleng lukgrung* were portrayed in the songs of the present King, Suntharaporn, Sawalee Pakapan, Charin Nanthanakorn, Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Ruangthong Thonglanthom and so on. Examples are such as “Dream of Love, Dream of You”, words and melody by King Bhumibol; “Suk Kan Thoe Rao” (Let’s Be Happy), sung by Suntharaporn; “Rak Khun Khao Laew” (Falling in Love with You) sung by Suthep Wongkamheang; and “Duean Dara” (The Moon and the Star), sung by Sawalee Pakapan.

A good example the themes of romantic love and the joy of life in *pleng lukgrung* is “ Dream of Love, Dream of You”, words and melody by King Bhumibol:

Each day, I dream of love, I dream of you.  
You’re like an angel, dear,  
For heaven sent you here.  
With joy, I feel your kiss;  
Your love light gleams.  
But then I find each bliss:  
Only in dreams.  
Each night, I yearn for love.  
I long for you  
You bring me ecstasy  
Now you’re forsaking me

So heaven, please...

(King Bhumibol, cited in *Kita maha raja sadudi [The honour to King's music]*, 1987, p. 68)

Beyond the love theme, the music reflects the social context surrounding the perspectives of ruling class including their values, ideas, beliefs and feelings. 'Patriotic songs' (*pleng plukjai*), for example, are also a part of the *pleng lukgrung* genre. During regimes of the dictatorships after 1932, governments, such as that of Marshal Sarit Thanarat and Marshal Pibulsongkram, used patriotic songs as a tool to convince the people to obey the leaders (Satayanurat, 2002). During the battle against the communist guerrillas during the 1960s and 1970s, many patriotic songs were composed by right-wing groups such as Sompop Janprapa, Saman Kanjanapalin and Nat Thawonbut, which were established and encouraged by the authorities and the ruling elites, in order to fight left-wing groups during the uprising of student activists. The songs reproduce an ideology that encouraged Thai people to love their country and be possessive of Thai soil and defend it from its enemies. These songs were sung by members of right-wing organizations such as military soldiers, the village scouts, and Nawapon group (a right wing group formed by Dr Wattana Kiawwimon after 1973) to ensure the people adhered to the correct version of Thai identity when they assembled. Radio stations of military networks played the patriotic songs many times a day. Somsak Jiamthirasakun (2005) said that the top three the patriotic songs were "Thahan Pra Naresuan" (The Soldiers of King Naresuan), "Nak Paen Din" (A Weight upon The Country) and "Rao Su" (We will fight). The king composed some music with patriotic lyrics during that period. In 1973, he composed a melody for the written lyric entitled "Rao Su" (We will fight). The theme of the lyric encourages patriotism, exhorting Thai people to fight the country's enemies, especially communists:

### **"Rao Su" (We will fight)**

Lyric: Mr. Sompop Janprapa

Music: H.M.K. Bhumibol Adulyadej

Our ancestors in the past protected our country  
They sacrificed so much of their blood and flesh.  
Our duty is to preserve the country for our descendants to live in

Thailand has to exist in the future  
We will do not let anybody destroy her  
Although we are intimidated – that we and our families will be killed  
We will not be afraid of the enemies  
We will fight them without retreat  
Fight here until we die  
Although we may be the last ones standing, we'll try  
We have to protect our country  
If they want to destroy it, come on, we will fight  
We admire our prestige  
We will fight and not retreat even a step.

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from *Kita maha raja sadudi [The honour to King's music]*, 1987, p. 175)

There have been many significant social issues in Thai society during the time in which *pleng lukgrung* has been popular, such as political and economic problems including many political conflicts among the ruling classes from the 1930s to 1970s. There was also fierce competition among political and military leaders to govern the country. From 1932 to 1996, the nation experienced nineteen military coups. Totalitarian governments run by military figures caused political and economic injustice that generated the bulk of social problems. However, these issues have never been addressed in the lyrical content of this musical genre. I argue that some producers of *pleng lukgrung* were aware of these social problems but they avoided referring to them because they did not want to jeopardise their commercial position, which opposition to the ruling ideology entailed. Therefore, the lyrical content of *pleng lukgrung* tends to be escapist. For example, although Suthep Wongkamhaeng (1933 - ), the most famous male singer of *pleng lukgrung* and a politician, stated that he resisted any dictatorship and corrupt government (Janngoen, 1993), I argue, this critical stance has never appeared in his songs.

Most *pleng string* songs (young urban music) in the 1990s and 2000s have been about boy-girl relationships, sugary interactions between lovers, unrequited love, fun, and being with friends. Few *pleng strings* comment on what is happening in society and when they do, the comments tend to be superficial. This musical style rarely influences attitudes but acts to reflect what is already happening in Thai society or somewhere also around the globe.

Chatree Kongsuwan (personal communication, June 7, 2002) suggests that famous songwriters of *pleng string* avoided any mention of violent or aggressive themes in their music, or directly referring to social context; and that pessimistic views were not common. Boyd Kosiyabong, a famous songwriter, singer and Vice President of *Bakery Music Co., Ltd*, also states on the CD cover of his album “Bakery Love Is Forever” that even in his songs about broken-hearts, the concept of his music was always optimistic and bright and not all tears (Kosiyabong, 2002). Most *pleng string* lyrics involved love, friendship, compliments, encouragement, loneliness, thinking of lovers and so on. However, the musical forms and lyrical content of the music can reveal much about the society that the musicians lived in. For example, the song “Khun Ru Mai Krup” (Do You Know?), a well-known *pleng string* in 2004, does not tell us who speaks to whom, when he was talking about, or where he lived, but some codes in the song told us that the lyrics concern an urban boy falling in love with an urban girl. The codes such as “The message I sent you” and “call me and say goodnight to me” tell us that the song is set in a technological communication society and that everyone (in cities) has mobile phones and use them regularly. Urban boys and girls frequently use mobile phones for their communications (including telling their admissions of love) instead of writing letters.

“Khun Ru Mai Krup” (Do You Know?)

Words and Music: Seksan Sukpimai  
Singer: Thongchai McIntyre

Just looking in your eyes, I feel nervous  
The words I have said came from my heart  
I would like to tell you that  
The message I sent you was considered carefully by my heart  
And consigned to you by wind stream  
Do you know I can't sleep tonight?  
Do you know I see your face in the sky?  
I would like you to call me and say goodnight to me  
And tell me clearly only one word: “LOVE”  
I don't think it will make you reluctant to do that, won't it?  
The stars are so beautiful and the wind is mild  
The grass is dancing as it used to every day

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

The 1990s and 2000s, saw an increase in the political and social advancement of *pleng string* stars as they used their celebrity status to raise money or the consciousness of the audience with respect to a particular issue. In 2003, many artists from *Grammy Entertainment* and *RS Promotion* music companies contributed in the effort to raise consciousness about drug abuse, deforestation and the piracy of the intellectual property rights (illegal CDs and cassettes); and fund-raising for flood disaster and other disasters. In 2004, after a violent eruption between Muslim separatists and Thai authorities in southern Thailand, many stars of Thai popular music, including *pleng string* stars, held concerts to campaign for national unity, which were televised nationally. These musicians also released patriotic albums to call for national unity such as “Rock Rakchat” (Patriotic Rock), including ten patriotic songs in a pop rock style performed by seven famous rock bands, including *I-nam, Hyper, Out, Motif, Baby Bull, Signature, and Scupa* (Monster-Music, 2004). I saw these albums in music shops in 2004 but the shopkeepers told me that the total sales of these albums were not high (personal communication with music shopkeepers in Phitsanulok province, 2004). Although this album was not commercially successful, at least Thai people recognised the social conscience of these artists (my personal observation of articles and news in the mass media such as newspapers, radio and TV mentioning these artists concerning the campaign, during 1 June to 31 December 2004). However most songs performed during the campaigns still involved love themes rather than the related social topics because *pleng string* does not customarily address social issues.

## **Genealogy of Urban Music**

Both *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string* genres have similar origins, such as styles, producers and geographical regions, but they are differentiated by the period of time at which they appeared. As I have said, *pleng lukgrung* is a synthesis of Thai court music and Western popular music; and *pleng string* is a descendant of the *pleng lukgrung*. Both genres were produced by people from elite and middle class groups in urban society. *Pleng lukgrung* is an urban musical style that was popular during the 1950s and 1970s, while *pleng string* is a young urban musical style that has been popular since the 1980s.

## **Genealogy of *Pleng Lukgrung***

The origin of *pleng lukgrung* lies in Thai court music and western popular music styles, especially Tin Pan Alley and jazz, which were adopted and blended with Thai court music. I have argued in Chapter One and Four that Thai musicians and listeners tend to appreciate some Western popular music for its melodies, rhythms and singing styles, which are not very different to Thai music. I talked to Surapon Thonawanik, a famous songwriter of *pleng lukgrung*, who said that Thai listeners tend to prefer sweet melodies, slow and medium tempos, and mild singing styles to rather than a ‘bitter’ melody, a fast tempo and a harsh voice. For example, ballad songs sung by Frank Sinatra, Perry Como and Nat King Cole were very popular among the Thai elite classes during the 1950s (personal communication, 2002). Although *pleng lukgrung* was a new style of Thai music, traces of its ancestry still exist, especially in the ideologies it articulates. The characteristics of this musical style demonstrate a combination of Thainess and Westernness. Thai court and Western music are also similar to *pleng lukgrung* in terms of their producers, formats, and lyrical contents.

It should be remembered that Thai court music was composed particularly to entertain the monarchy and its elite attendants. Hence some themes, such as social conflicts and the representation of marginalized social groups, are absent from the construction of court music. Although most musicians of the Thai court musical genre were common people, they created music that supported the values of the monarchy - since the period of Ayuthaya (the previous capital city of Thailand) and Rattanakosin (Bangkok). Thai court music has higher production values and is more complex than folk music. It was considered by Thai authorities such as Samnak-ngan Kanakamakan Watanatham Haeng Chat, (The Office of National Culture Commission) to be the Thai classical music form and as such was appropriated as the national music of Thailand (Jan-ngeun, 1993, 1995). The main target audiences of Thai court music during the period of absolute monarchy were the monarchy and nobility in the royal Thai court. The music enjoyed high political, social and cultural status, and musicians of Thai court’s musical ensemble, employed by royalty, were judged the best musicians in the country. The musical instruments were also of the highest quality in order to contribute the best sound. The lyrics were composed in the form of poetry mostly from Thai literature. Compared to Thai folk music, Thai court



music is more elaborate. The lyrics of Thai court music also employ formalized language. The language used in the songs was considered more formal, incorporating monarchical ‘jargon’ (*rajasap*), for instance, *sadet* (to go), *banthom* (to sleep), *sawoei* (to eat) and *nipon* (to compose) and was thus considered to be of higher rank than the language used by regular Thai society. The instrumentation, musical forms, lyrical content and language used are the codes of Thai court music representing an urban identity and civilization opposed to the ‘localness’ of the rural and some of these codes remain in *pleng lukgrung* as an inheritance of Thai court music.

Although the lyrics of contemporary *pleng lukgrung* do not contain monarchical ‘jargon’, they use appropriate, formal and Central Thai polite words used by the elite classes in the lyrics, to express ideas and feelings: for instance, *nitha* (to sleep), *u-ra* (heart), *jumpit* (to kiss). The words used in the lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* are different from lyrical words used in other genres of Thai popular music. For example, the language used in *pleng lukthung* tends to use many informal words and local words (see table 6.1).

Table 6.1: *Comparison Languages Used in Between Pleng Lukgrung and Pleng Lukthung*

Meaning	Words found in ‘ <i>pleng lukgrung</i> ’ (formal)	Words found in <i>pleng lukthung</i> (informal)
to sleep	<i>nitha</i>	<i>lap</i>
heart	<i>u-ra</i>	<i>ji</i>
face	<i>pak</i>	<i>na</i>
mother	<i>manda</i>	<i>mae</i>
father	<i>bida</i>	<i>por</i>

By contrast, *pleng string* tends to use modern slang such as *suit suit* (ultimate), *chai loei* (yes, all right), *cing* (racing) and English words such as *sure*, *o.k.* and *hallo*. These words have been adopted by *pleng string* along with UK and

US rock styles. *Pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) tends to use words popular with left wing political groups such as *muan chon* (mass people), *padetkarn* (dictatorship), *prachatipatai* (democracy), *seripap* (freedom), *kwam yutitham* (justice) and *udomkarn* (ideology).

*Suntharaporn's* music was the best exemplification of Thai popular music, which brought a plentitude of Thai court music to the genre and rearranged it to conform to Western popular music (see Chapter Four). According to Yai Napayon (1993), a pioneering musician of Thai popular music, the first group musicians in *Suntharaporn's* band, such as Uea Sunthonsanan, Wait Sunthonjamon, Sompong Thipayakaran, and Thanit Ponprasert were involved in Thai court music. These musicians borrowed hundreds of Thai court pieces and rearranged them into ballroom dancing rhythms, including the tango, beguine, rumba, cha- cha- cha, mambo, offbeat, waltz, slow and rock. The musical sound of the Thai ensemble changed to big band music, rich in brass and woodwind. During the period in which *Suntharaporn's* music was popular, ballroom dancing was also very popular among the higher classes and the aristocracy. *Suntharaporn's* band was admired by Thai scholars and musicians as the best 'social dance' band in Thailand (see in Jaroensuk, 1995, p. 21). That many other big bands, particularly in schools, universities, the military, and government agencies were also formed and played *Suntharaporn's* music thereby confirms the popularity of the genre.

However, unlike Western pop singers, *pleng lukgrung* singers tend not to dance when they perform dance songs. They just stand still or sometimes move slightly while they are singing. The way they sing songs is similar to the manner of 'Thai court music' vocalists who sit still or squat on the floor while they are singing; they do not dance or move their body. Musicians and singers of Thai court music had to sit still on the floor because normally they performed for the King and Royal Family who usually sat on chairs. The musicians and singers had to pay respect to their audiences who had higher status than they did. They needed to be careful of their posture while performing in order to look polite and respectful of their audience. Standing or dancing while singing for the monarchy might be considered impolite. However, when they sing, *pleng lukgrung* vocalists usually stand still or move slowly but they do not dance. In contrast, in performances of *pleng lukthung*

and *pleng string*, singers tend to dance when they sing dance songs. In traditional Thai culture, to move excessively when singing is considered uncivilized and impolite and by contrast, stillness when performing is seen as civilized and polite. This custom draws on types of behavior displayed in front of the Royal Family when performing. Thus we can argue that the very style of performance in Thailand is ideologically loaded. The musicians of *pleng lukgrung* were expected to reproduce elite styles of performance and to act with proper decorum (*sombat pudi*) (see in Pongpan, 2004) while the musicians of other styles were not expected to behave like this.

Some genres of Western music were chosen by the Thai elite class to be blended with Thai court music. It is important to recognise that not every genre of Western music was chosen to be blended with Thai court music. Specific genres were selected, such as classical music, Tin Pan Alley and jazz, because they were considered appropriate to Thai culture at that time. This notion is in line with the ideas of certain prominent Siamese Kings such as King Rama IV and King Rama VI who believed in the acquisition of Western knowledge and culture. The Kings were selective in the adoption of Western cultural practices, choosing them according to their perceived suitability to Siam (Thailand) (Winichakul, 1998).

At first, military bands were formed in the royal court in order to play music praising the king, but mostly the bands played Thai court music rather than Western music. In 1904 military bands performed music to accompany the movies being screened outside the royal court. When the Thai opera and drama were formed by the elite group during the 1860s, the lyrics and music of *pleng thai sakon* (Thai international music) were composed to accompany the opera and theatre. Indeed, *pleng thai sakon* was much more popular when the authorities such as, ‘The Department of Public Relations’, formed a big band- *Suntaraporn*- which produced much of the *pleng thai sakon* performed on government radio and television. They additionally played at entertainment activities related to government projects such as parties for government officials and public relation campaigns. Most of the lyrical content of *pleng thai sakon* relates to themes of happiness such as romantic love, ballroom dancing activity, and nationalism. The singing style was also formal and mild, similar to the singing styles of Frank Sinatra and Andy Williams. It was also

called *pleng pudi*, which means ‘song of the elite’. In contrast, some songwriters of *pleng thai sakon*, such as Saengnapa Bunrasri and Sa-ne Komarachun composed music, which reflected the lives of poor people and contained political themes. The singers then borrowed some singing styles from Thai folk music and Western country music. This style was called *pleng chaoban*, which means ‘song of villagers or rural people’. After TV programs featuring *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music) were introduced on television in 1964, the *pleng Thai sakon* in the style of *pleng pudi* (elite song) was named *pleng lukgrung* (urban music) in order to differentiate it from *pleng lukthung* (Thai country music). The songwriters and artists of *pleng lukgrung* preserved the characteristics of ‘elite song’ for another two decades before *pleng lukgrung* became less popular and was gradually transformed into the new urban music style or *pleng string* (see figure 6.1). Nevertheless, *pleng lukgrung* does not become extinct within Thai society. In the 2000s, this musical style remains popular among old members of the urban middle class and elite.

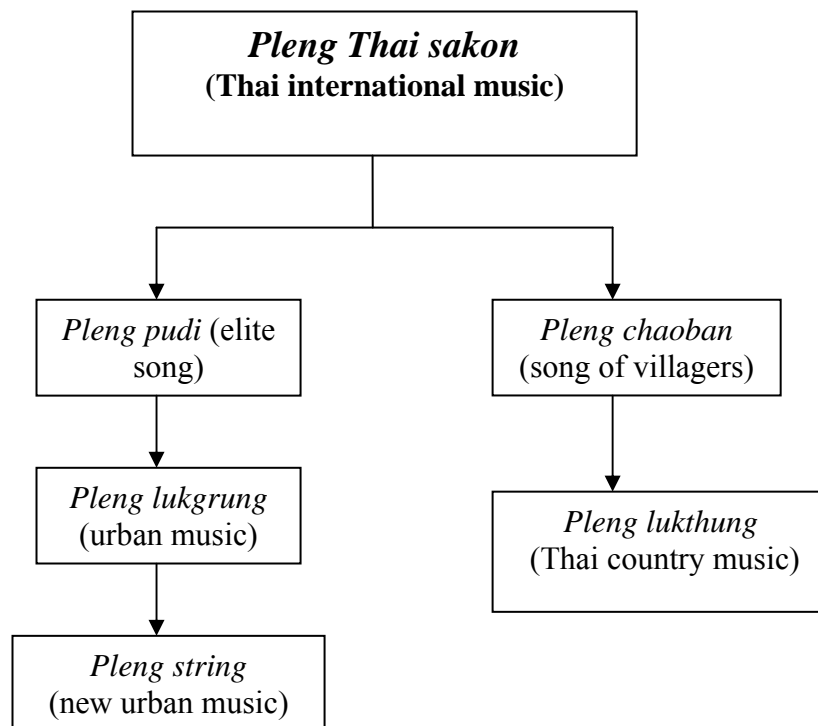


Figure 6.1: Genealogy of Thai urban music

I argue that the specific Western musical genres such as classical music, Tin Pan Alley, March and jazz, which were adopted by Thai elite to blend with Thai

music, were chosen because they were already popular among the white elite and middle classes in Europe and the United States. This explains why the appropriated music was not Western country music, rhythm and blues, or rock and roll. I agree with the idea that music is a universal language that can penetrate cultural barriers and differences in language, ethnicity, and culture. However, I argue that we cannot separate music from social class. The musical appreciation of a social subject depends on the relevance that genre of music has to their social class. For example, although they may not understand the context of the lyrics, members of the Thai elite tend to prefer Western ballads to country music and, conversely, Thai working class people tend to prefer Western country music to ballads. Although some members of the Thai elite might appreciate western country music or blues, I believe that the way they appreciate and interpret the meaning of the music is linked to attitudes towards modernization or fashionable practice; in short, to like western genres is to be hip, urban and modern.

The ideal of *pleng lukgrung*, in terms of a representation of the dominant ideology, is the music composed by King Bhumibol (the current King). The King has composed forty-eight songs since 1946. Forty-two songs were composed in the period 1946 to 1966 (Jiamthirasakun, 2005), a period that coincides with the peak popularity of *pleng pudi* (elite song) and *pleng lukgrung*. Mostly, the king composed the music and not the lyrics, but he wrote the lyrics to five songs in English. The king allowed some the nobility such as Momchao Jakrapanpensiri Jakrapan, Prasert Na Nakorn and Kunying Nopakhun Thongyai, who are his attendants, to compose the lyrics for his music. The themes expressed in the lyrical content of the King's music consist of the beauty of nature, romantic love, such as "Lom Nao" (Love In Spring), political themes, such as "Rao Su" (We will fight) and significant episodes from his life such as "Klai Kang Won" (Far Away From Worry). The King also composed music for major universities such as Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, and Kasetsat to be played at important events, and for the military, especially the army and navy. During the battle against the communist forces, the king composed several patriotic songs, for example, "Rao Su" (We will fight), "Kwam Fun Un Soong Suit" (The Ultimate Destination), and "Kert Pen Thai Tai Puea Thai" (Born To Be Thai And To Die for Thailand) (*Kita maha raja sadudi [The honour to King's music]*, 1987). Although the King did not compose most of the lyrics, most Thai people assumed

that these songs were composed by the King and the themes in the music represent the ideology of the King (Jiamthiraskun, 2005).

The King's music has been presented to the public on radio, television and records for more than five decades. Everyone in Thailand can hear the king's music on the radio and television all day during the week of the King's and Queen's birthday celebrations (5th December), as well as on other public holidays related to the monarchy. Thai authorities and the members of elite classes consider the king's songs to be the best form of Thai popular music. Therefore, it may be argued that the King's songs are perceived as representative of the dominant ideology in Thai society.

An example of the lyric written to accompany music by the King is "Love at Sundown" which describes beautiful nature and romantic love. The king composed the music and Prof. Thanpuying Nopakhun Thongyai Na Ayuthaya and Momchao Jakrapan Pensiri Jakrapan, who are the king's relatives, composed the lyrics in English and Thai. This song is very popular among Thai elites and government officials. It is significant because of its lovely modern melody and romantic lyrics have influenced other *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string* compositions since the 1980s, although the song was composed in the 1940s. Many *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string* tunes, which were composed after "Love at Sundown" comprised similar themes to this song.

### **Love at Sundown**

Lyric: Prof. Thanpuying Nopakhun Thongyai Na Ayuthaya

Music: H.M.K. Bhumibol Adulyadej

'Tis sundown.

The golden sunlight tints the blue sea,  
Paints the hill and gilds the palm tree,  
Happy be, my love, at sundown.

'Tis sundown.

The multi-coloured dancing sunbeam  
Brightly shines on in my heart's dream



The lyrics in Thai contain conventional noble words, which are popular among the Royal Family and the elite group, for example, *tinnakorn* (the sun), *prueksa* (plant), *pamorn* (a carpenter bee), and *winya* (spirit). Normally, these words are used in elite poetry and literature but are not used in colloquial speech and the everyday lives of ordinary people.

In the English version, the lyrics of “Love at Sundown” include significant codes representing a dominant ideology about a life of privilege, for example “the golden sunlight”, “the blue sea” and “the hill” probably signify a large affluent realm (of Thailand), which is stable and secure; and “brightly shines”, “my heart’s dream”, and “the bird” likely signify freedom, love and peace for every one. These codes represent the sentimental perspectives of elite groups, about their happy and stable lives that they want to maintain the status quo.

### **Genealogy of *Pleng String***

Before charting the genealogy of *pleng string* I need to add a personal note. At the beginning of the *pleng string* era, when I was about 15-17 years old and lived in Bangkok, like most of my friends of the same age, I was fascinated with music in the style of groups such as *The Impossible*, *Royal Sprite* and *P.M.5*. It was an exciting time for Thai youth who listened to and sang these songs at parties, schools and home. After I finished my Bachelor’s degree in Music Education from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, in 1982, I worked as a music teacher at a high school in Bangkok for two years. I had to work ten hours a day, five days a week without extra pay, but I enjoyed it. Besides teaching music in the classroom, I was assigned to form three bands including junior and senior student bands and a staff band. It was the time when *pleng string* was very popular among teenagers. I chose many songs in the *pleng string* style to be performed by the school bands. As the bandmaster, I had to recruit and train musicians, prepare musical scores, and supervise rehearsals and performances. Two years later, I moved on to teach music in the music departments of three teacher’s colleges for a period of ten years, namely, Petburi Teacher College in the central region (1984-1985), Nakornsrithamarat Teacher College in the south (1985-1988), and Suansunantha Teacher College in Bangkok (1988-1994). At the teacher’s colleges, I continued to teach music in classrooms, supervise student popular bands and perform with my student musicians.



Most of the songs we played were in the *pleng string* style because the student musicians loved to play this musical style and our main target audience was young people in cities. There were hardships for me considering that I was paid only a small salary but I was happy to be involved in Thai popular music and to work with my student musicians. The compensation I received during twelve years of hardship was not money or celebrity but the knowledge and experiences I gained of Thai popular music. I am proud that many of my students are now working as significant musicians in the music industry in Thailand.

Between 1992 and 1995, when I was studying a Master's degree in Mass Communication at Chulalongkorn University, I conducted a research project entitled "An Analysis of Thai Popular Music in Rock Style". During the process of collecting and analyzing the data, I explored much information on Thai popular music including interviews with musicians, and critical analysis of the music. Therefore, when I was conducting research on Thai popular music for my PhD, it was not difficult for me to use the same approach for gaining information about Thai popular music. Moreover, in the information technological era of the 2000s, many websites provide free information about Thai popular music dealing with lyrics, records, musicians, concerts, music companies and related issues. In this analysis of *pleng string*, I insert and place great emphasis on my personal experience as a musician in Bangkok between 1975 and 1994. I do this for two major reasons. Firstly, I have direct experience of the conditions under which musicians work, which in turn provides insight into the music industry. Secondly, I have played many Thai popular songs of the period, which in turn provides a deeper understanding of the musical forms.

The musical genre of *pleng string* is the youngest genre of Thai popular music and it emerged after *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*. *Pleng string* is mainly a synthesis of *pleng lukgrung* and Western rock music. It is produced by young urban musicians for a young urban audience in Thailand. The origins of *pleng string* relate to the arrival of American popular culture and Thailand's elite ideology during the Cold War. The elite, ruling class and significant players in the corporate sector played an important role in supporting, production and distribution of *pleng string*. The elite probably wanted to keep their eyes on the favorite musical genre of

their children rather than ignore it. That is the reason why the Music Association of Thailand, under the patronage of the King Bhumibol, held *The of String Combo Band Contest of Thailand* during the 1960s, which became an annual event.

The word *string* came from ‘string combo’, a kind of popular small band musical style including seven to ten instrumentalists. Thus, initially, *pleng string* was a style of music that was performed by string combo band. Yet the music performed by rock bands was still called *pleng string* (see the major conventions of *pleng string* in Chapter One: Pleng String). The prototypical rock band of the 1950s was Cliff Richard’s backing band *The Shadows*. Subsequently the word ‘Shadows’ was used to refer to such popular music bands as *wong shadows*, meaning bands similar to *The Shadow* that Thai people called *wong string*. The word *wong* means band and *string* means string instruments such as electric guitar and bass. The word *pleng* means song or music; thus the music played by *wong string* becomes *pleng string*.

During the Indo-China War, the United States of America based nearly fifty thousand troops Thailand for three decades (Lockard, 2001). During the late 1950s, rock and roll, which was very popular in the USA and Europe, was brought to Thailand with the US military. Since then Rock and Roll from the US and UK has influenced young urban musicians and audiences in Thailand. Western pop and rock music were played on many radio programs in Bangkok and other cities. During the 1960s and 1970s, some Thai record companies earned a lot of money by purchasing original Western and Chinese pop music records from overseas, making copies into cassettes and distributing them in Thailand (Limpichai, 1989). Limpichai said that

The music companies such as *Paktai Utsahakam Company Limited (Onpa Stereo)* (1974), *Rose Sound Music Company Limited (RS Promotion Group)* (1976) and *Rota Paensiang Lae Tape Company Limited* (1977) operated their businesses by copying music from original records into cassettes without paying any copy right to the musicians who created the music (Limpichai, 1989, p. 61).

During that time, numerous rock bands were formed by Thai musicians to perform music to entertain the US soldiers, as well as the Thai audience. At the beginning, the bands were known by Thai people as *wong shadow* (Shadow’s band) and then *wong string combo* (string combo band). Initially, the Thai musicians absolutely imitated Western rock music and Thai singers sang the songs in the

English language, although most Thai audiences could not understand the lyrics. Some English songs were also translated and sung in the Thai language. But such imitation of rock music was not very popular because the audience preferred the original Western rock music to the imitated music. The young audience then returned to Western pop music that was available on radio and pirated cassettes.

The Thai elite classes also indirectly supported rock music in Thailand. On the one hand, some members of the conservative elite resisted rock music because they considered that the music was a threat to traditional Thai culture. They considered that Western rock music sounded alien to many Thais accustomed to the traditional styles of Thai popular music. Others claimed that rock music was destroying Thai morals (Jaroensuk, 1995). On the other hand, I argue that, elite officials in the Thai government could not condemn rock music because the music was loved by the US soldiers. Thus resistance to rock music could affect the relationship between the Thai and US governments. In addition, many Thai elite families sent their children to study in Europe and America. When the young elite came back from study, they showed off their superiority by singing, dancing and listening to Western popular music. Consequently, the musical taste of young elite also influenced other young urban people.

Instead of resisting rock music, the ruling class led the way in attempts to homogenize rock music by standardizing the form to make it conform to acceptable social and cultural norms. For example, the elite supported rock music by organizing music contest of *pleng string* held by the Music Association of Thailand, under the patronage of King Bhumibol. The winner of the competition would receive the King's cup, symbolizing the music's relevance to Thai culture. In the competition, besides Western pop songs, every band had to play songs composed by the King. From 1965, *The Impossible*, a string combo band, won the first prize three years consecutively. *The Impossible* rearranged and performed some *pleng lukgrung* in the pop rock style. *The Impossible's* and particularly its sweet songs in pop rock style were very popular among young urban audience during the early 1970s. Lek Wongsawang, the publisher of *I.S. Song Hits* and *The Guitar*, the most famous pop song books since 1964, said "...at that time *The Impossible* was the best band in Thailand that played Western pop music and it was very popular. When this band

played Thai pop music composed without copying western music, it generated a significant change in Thai pop music”...(Wongsawang, 2003, p. 79). For this reason, *The Impossible* made *pleng string* more acceptable to the elite and ruling classes. The musical style of *The Impossible* formed the basis for much of the Thai popular music created in the next decades (Limpichai, 1989; and Eamsa-ard, 1995).

In addition, during the 1980s, the Thai government was pressured by international music companies, especially from the USA and UK, to enforce international copyright law in Thailand. When the imitated and copied Western music became illegal, Thai rock musicians responded by taking *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* and reproducing them in the rock style; for example, *Royal Sprite* released “Pakhaoma” (1981) and “Rueang Jip Joi” (1982); and *Grand X* released “Prom Likhit” (1982), “Lukthung Disco” (1983) and “Grand XO” (1984). The lyrics and melodies remained the same, but they made changes in the singing styles, rhythms, harmonies, and music instrument sounds. The new styles of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* were popular for a while (see evidence in Wongsawang, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984). Some critics and audience reviews asserted that the music lacked creativity (Limpichai, 1989). Thus most audiences continued to support the *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* styles that remained within the mainstream of Thai popular music during the 1970s and early 1980s. However, many young urban middle-class audiences began to get bored with the musical styles of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*, criticized as monotonous (Ibid). For example, some songs were repeatedly written in the same melody and “a hundred different lyrics in one melody” became a term of derision (Wongsawang, 2003). From 1978 to 1981, when I was studying at Chulalongkorn University, I attended a lot of parties and celebrations in Bangkok. I remember that most of the university students preferred Western popular music to Thai popular music. The young audiences praised Western music for its diversity of musical styles; however, foreign language was the barrier to true appreciation of the music. Most of the Thai audience could not understand English lyrics, although they liked the music.

By the late 1980s, the situation changed when domestic music companies, such as *Grammy Entertainment*, *R.S. Promotion*, *Nithitat Promotion*, *Kita*, *Music Train*, and *Night Spot Production* (see in Chapter Four: The music industry in

Thailand), began to produce a new style of Thai popular music. This musical style was called *pleng string*. It sounded similar to Western rock music and differed from *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*. In *pleng string*, Thai musicians did not directly copy the music of Western musicians but they took or imitated some elements of Western pop music such as some parts of the melodies, harmonies, rhythms or ideas to create new songs in the Thai language. Thai pop musicians also borrowed from Asian pop music forms, especially from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan and they adapted them to *pleng string*. However, it should be pointed out that Western music forms have historically influenced many of these other Asian popular music forms. The new style of Thai popular music sounded more like Western popular music than previous Thai music, although its lyrics were sung in Thai and the ideologies expressed also remained Thai. Indeed, the sound quality of *pleng string* was better than the previous styles because the record companies used hi-technology instruments and employed professional musicians to produce the music. The significant record companies that produced good quality sound were part of big music companies that operated musical businesses, which encompassed everything from production, distribution, promotion, publicity and performance. Such companies included *Night Spot Production*, *Nithithat Promotion*, *Music Train*, *RS Promotion* and *Grammy Entertainment* (Limpichai, 1989).

## **The Producers of Thai Urban Music**

Although *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string* came from similar backgrounds, they appeared at different periods. *Pleng lukgrung* was popular when traditional Thai culture had a strong influence on the music (1950s-1970s) while *pleng string* emerged when the foreign cultures had a stronger influence on Thai popular music. The biographies of prominent producers of Thai urban music can tell us how ideologies are expressed in Thai popular music and how these ideologies are constructed in the music.

### **Producers of *Pleng Lukgrung***

After collecting biographical data about some significant *pleng lukgrung* songwriters and singers using multiple data sources such as interviews, books, magazines and the internet websites, I analysed the data to identify the beliefs,

attitudes, perspectives and social networks pertaining to these artists. I found that the backgrounds of these people related intimately to the ruling class and elite of Thai cultural production. They had worked for the ruling class and elite and had supported the dominant ideology for a long time and consequently they were successful insofar as they were still faithful to the dominant class.

Although some *pleng lukgrung* artists came from poor families or the common people, they had adopted ideologies of the ruling class and elite (see in Chapter Nine: Social class in Thai society) and thus incorporated these ideologies into their music. I have examined the biographies of five significant male songwriters including Sa-nga Aramphi, Saman Kanjanapalin, Chali Intarawijit, Prueang Chuenprayot, and Surapon Thonawanik. All received the award of National Artist (*Sinlapin Haeng Chat*) from The Board of National Culture, The Office of National Culture Committee and The Ministry of Education. National Artists may be compared to the awards given to American musical artists whose names are in the Hall of Fame. The brief biographies of these songwriters describe their works and the reasons why they deserved the awards. I found that four of them were born and had grown up in Bangkok and the other one was born on the outskirts of Bangkok. They were familiar with Thai court music since they were young. In adult life, they had worked for the military leaders and the elite or members of the Royal Family. Consequently, it can be argued that their ideologies aligned with the high-class authorities, as I will show below. The themes of Thai identity and nationalism articulated in their work are those of the Thai ruling classes (see Chapter Nine: Social class in Thai society).

For example, Saman Kanjanapalin, a well-known *pleng lukgrung* songwriter, was born in 1921 in Bangkok and he grew up there. His father was a musician in the Royal Court and also employed Thai musical ensembles at his home. Saman graduated from the School of Music and Drama, Fine Arts Department, in Bangkok. He was a student of Peter Feit (Pra Jane Duriyang), ‘the father of Western music in Thailand’. He worked as a bandmaster and played music in many styles, including classical music, jazz, ballroom and Thai court music. His compositions were derived from Thai melodies and he simply changed the original rhythms and harmonies to blend with the Western musical form. His musical style motivated young audiences

to return to Thai music. Saman composed more than 2000 songs of *pleng lukgrung* for many singers. Besides romantic love songs, he also composed a lot of patriotic songs, ethical songs for young students, and songs for boy and girl scouts. He received the award of ‘National Artist’ in 1988 when he was 67 years old. He believed Thai people should preserve Thai court music as their national heritage forever and should not destroy or look down upon it (Boonjan, 1988).

The second example is the biography of another ‘National Artist’ named Sa-nga Arampi. Sa-nga was born in 1921, of a poor family in Bangkok. His parent’s house was located near the Bangkhunprom Palace of Prince Boripat Sukhumpan. The prince employed Thai ensembles and military bands to entertain him, his family and guests. Thus Sa-nga heard the music being played in the palace every day when he was young. He learned how to play the music by himself. When he was a teenager, he loved to compose poetry, rhyme, verse, essay and articles. He studied music at the Music School of Air Force and then worked for the army for many years. He used to work for famous members of the elite such as the Prime Minister Marshal Pibulsongkram, Luang Wijiwatakarn, Khoon Wijiwatra, Prince Anusorn Mongkonkan and Prajane Duriyang. Sa-nga had the ability to compose both the melody and the lyrics while most songwriters could only do one. He wrote two thousand songs and many of his compositions were very popular. His music made many *pleng lukgrung* singers, such as Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Charin Nanthanakon and Sawali Pakapan, very famous (Wacharaporn, 1995). Sa-nga’s music was not confined to *pleng lukgrung*, he also composed music for 250 stage dramas, fifty films and fifty TV soap operas. He received the award of ‘National Artist’ in 1995 when he was 74 years old (Jan-ngoan, 1995).

I have also analyzed biographical data of other significant *pleng lukgrung* singers who also received the *National Artists* awards such as Sawali Pakapan, Pensi Pumchusi, Ruangthong Thonglanthom (female), Suthep Wongkamhaeng and Charin Nanthanakon (male). I found that although some of these artists were not born in Bangkok and they did not come from high-class families, they grew up in cities and had been well educated and tend to speak in the standard Thai language, thereby signifying their high social status, rather than a regional dialect. These artists had the ability to sing songs in the Bangkok dialect very clearly. It should be remember that

the use of rural or country dialects is unacceptable in *pleng lukgrung*. I have listened to several hundred *pleng lukgrung* songs over many years and have not found any rural or country dialects used. I used to be a judge for several singing contests of *pleng lukgrung* in Bangkok during 1982 and 1994. An actual rule for the judgments was that the singer must pronounce the standard Thai dialect (central Thai) properly.

I have listened to the music of every famous *pleng lukgrung* singer since my youth and I can say that if we use the judgment of the elite classes, these singers had high quality voices and excellent abilities in performing songs. More important factors to consider are that their performances were greatly appreciated by elite and urban audiences from the 1940s to 1970s. During that period, several singers of this musical style, such as Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Sawalee Pakapan and Charin Nanthanakorn received many awards while singers of other popular styles rarely obtained them (see Appendix 5). Their formal and gentle singing styles presented models of an elite and civilized performance that conform with the content of *sombat pudi* (proper decorum) which is an instruction book for students about how to perform as an aristocrat or member of the elite. For instance, an aristocrat should speak politely, not too softly or too loudly and should not shout (Pongpan, 2004, pp. 22-27). The music reflected themes of sweetness and happiness rather than sadness or trouble. Although many of these songs are sad, they involve the sadness of unrequited love rather than torture from poverty or depression. Thus these songs are still sweet and melodramatic and not critical or radical. Some lyrics of “Alai Rak” (Lamenting of Love), a famous song, with lyrics by Chalee Intharawijit, melody by Saman Kanjanapalin and sung by Charin Nanthanakorn, is a good example of sweet songs:

I loved you while worrying that some day you might leave me  
Later on, you really left me  
You left me to stay with a lament of love  
If I had wings like a bird  
Though I were badly hurt and suffered from arrows,  
I would come back to die on your lap  
And ask you to wipe my blood and tears

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)



*Pleng lukgrung* represents the cultural identity of a particular social group, which is aristocratic, well educated, Thai, and from urban: in short members of a cultural elite. In other words, the representations of *pleng lukgrung* do not reflect the poor, uneducated people, Laotian, Chinese, rural farmers or the laboring segments of Thai society and culture.

Besides the musicians (songwriter, instrumentalist and singer) of *pleng lukgrung*, the people who control mass media such as radio and television also played an important role in presenting *pleng lukgrung* as a form of culturally elite music. In 1990, all of the 484 radio stations and five television stations in Thailand belonged to Thai government agencies. The Ministry of Defense owns 211 radio stations and two television stations. The Department of Public Relations owns 127 radio stations and one television station while the Organization of Thailand Mass Communication owns 63 radio stations and two television stations (Siriyuvasak, et al., 2002, p. 32). In 2004, only one television station (ITV) belonged to a public company. These radio and television stations were controlled by government officials who firmly upheld and supported the ruling class's ideology. Some genres of Thai popular music were chosen to be presented via the media, while others were omitted. For instance, between 1973-1978, 'Song for life' was banned on TV and radio, while *pleng plukjai* (patriotic song of the right-wing groups) was played regularly. *Pleng lukgrung* has been played on these radio stations all over the country for more than sixty years.

To sum up, many famous musicians of *pleng lukgrung* became successful because they produced songs that represented the ideology of elite and dominant classes. In the same way, the people who work for the government broadcast media organizations deployed *pleng lukgrung* on radios and televisions in order to please their bosses who came from the elite and ruling classes.

### **Producers of *Pleng String***

After the late 1980s, many thousand songs of *pleng string* were produced and distributed on cassette, video, and CD. The music companies were determined to be in control of the production process such as choosing singers, songs, instrumentalists, artistic styles and marketing strategies (Limpichai, 1989; and Kongsuwan, personal

communication, June 7, 2002). The companies chose good-looking youth and trained them to sing songs and perform *pleng string*; and advertised them on TV, radio programs and through live concerts, for instance. In a sense, young fashionable teenagers, who might have no prior knowledge of the music industry, were marketed into something that could sell fun and danceable music to a preteen audience. The images of many *pleng string* stars were constructed by the music companies, including, *Ruam Dao Artists* (All Star Artists), by *RS Promotion*; and Thongchai McIntyre, by *Grammy Entertainment* (Grammy, 2003; and RS-Promotion, 2003). Some singers had already gained fame elsewhere or in another entertainment field such as movies and soap opera. They were often good-looking and had acting talent, but they lacked singing talent. Only some could sing songs well, such as Thongchai McIntyre, Ampon Lampun and Moss Patipan but most failed in the music industry and then returned to TV and film. However, young people liked the young stars because they were good looking and famous. Music academics and columnists criticized and condemned the good-looking but low quality singers. For example, Dr. Sugree Jaroensuk, a music columnist and an associate professor in music from Mahidol University, Bangkok, commented on music companies producing *pleng string*:

Without singing ability, anyone, such as a good- looking actor or actress, even a boxer, could be a singer if they were promoted by music companies. It's a pity, the records of good singers who had good voices were not available in the market... Now the music businessmen are strongest and they destroyed everything except one musical style (*pleng string*)...  
(Jaroensuk, 1995, pp. 23-25)

Music companies tried to discover ways to make their musicians popular and commercially successful. For example, in 1986, *Grammy* created Thongchai McIntyre as a superstar by presenting him in several kinds of mass media including as a leading actor on soap operas, game shows and advertising spots on TV and movies at the same time (J2K, 2002). Many local Thai popular music companies have grown into conglomerates since the 1980s. According to Fletcher & Shameen (2004), in 1997, Thailand's market in recorded music was worth US\$150 million a year. The biggest music company in Thailand was *Grammy Entertainment*, the second was *RS Promotion*, and the third was *Nithithat Co.* (Zuylen, 1994).

According to Rungfapaisarn (2004), *Grammy* commanded more than seventy percent of the market share of Thailand's music business. Some analysts noticed that *Grammy Entertainment* was probably one of the most integrated entertainment companies in Asia because the company has more records, videos, computer software, books and magazines than the big mega-stores in Hong Kong and Singapore (Fletcher & Shameen, 2004). Besides music, the current business of big music companies such as *Grammy* and *RS* includes movies, radio, television production, books, magazines and computer games (RS-Promotion, 2003; and GMM-Grammy, 2004). Bangkok is the center of the Thai popular music industry because most music companies are located in Bangkok and its outskirts and most musicians who worked for the music industry lived there. Every style of music was produced in Bangkok or its outskirts and distributed throughout the country.

Chinese Thai and Western business people continue to dominate the production of *pleng string*. Before the 1980s, music companies in Thailand were influenced by European, American and Japanese companies. The foreign companies, such as *EMI*, *WEA Records*, *CBS* and *Sony* imported Western music, and distributed it in Thailand when Thai popular music markets in Thailand were still small. After this period, when the markets for Thai popular music had matured, the foreign companies became less popular, while local music companies owned by Chinese Thai businessmen, dominated music markets in Thailand. During the 1990s and 2000s, 80 % of music market shares belonged to Thai popular music and only 20% belonged to the Western music (Soonwijai-Kasikonthai-Company, 2003).

The vital growth of Thai popular music market, worth four billion baht a year ("BEC Tero, Sony take on Grammy," 2001), especially of *pleng string*, inspired international music companies to invest in Thai popular music. In 2002, *Sony Music Co*, which had run the Western music business in Thailand for long time, closed down and joined *BEC Entertainment Co.* to form a joint venture producing and distributing Thai pop music. The new company, which was named *Sony BEC Tero Music Entertainment*, was owned 60% by *Sony Music Thailand* and 40% by *BEC Tero*. The joint venture hoped to become the second-largest music firm in Thailand and its sales were expected to be between 400 and 500 million baht for that year

(Ibid). This formation of this company challenged *GMM Grammy* and *RS Promotion*, the two biggest firms in the market.

According to *GMM-Grammy* (2003) and *RS-Promotion* (2004), the sub-genres of *pleng string* consisted of eight styles including Pop, Pop-rock, Heavy Metal, Hip Hop, Rap, Pop Dance, Jazz and Alternative. Some academics and audience may have different opinions about the classification of *pleng string* but there would only be minor differences.

The main target audience of *pleng string* is a young urban audience including students under 15 to working people over 22. Before releasing the music to the market, music companies classify the target audiences of *pleng string* into different groups. For example, according to *RS-Promotion* (2004), the listeners of Thai popular music were divided into three groups including; pre-teen students under 15, teen students from 16 to 22; and employed adults over 22. The classification of target audiences is related to the sub-genres' style because each sub-genre fits the demand and taste of a particular audience group. Chatri Kongsuwan, an executive from *GMM Grammy*, pointed out, "In the popular music realm in our country, the producers still adhere to the idea of commercial success. They produce music that could be sold to mainstream Thai audiences. Unfortunately, during the current climate of economic insecurity, creative projects or any new ideas of quality are not yet a priority for the record companies" (Personal communication, June 7, 2002).

I have studied the biographies of a number of *pleng string* musicians for many years and I found that most of them come from middle-class families and they grew up in the cities. They have been well educated, reaching at least high school or vocational level. The most significant *pleng string* artist during the late 1980s and early 2000s was Thongchai McIntyre or Bird (nickname). During this time, he released over thirty albums and performed at least eighteen concerts. Thongchai was born in 1958 in Bangkok. His mother is Thai and his father is American. His family was poor since his father died when he was young and his mother had to raise seven children, including Thongchai, three brothers and three sisters. Bird has a Diploma from Thonburi Commercial College in Bangkok. He started his music career by winning three awards from *Siam Kollakan Music Foundation Singing Contest* in 1983. His first album "Haadsai Sailom Song-rao" (The Beach, the Wind, and Both of

Us), released in 1986, was very successful. His following albums, launched consecutively, were also very successful. Many of Bird's songs climbed up to the top of every chart. With his sweet voice, friendly personality, talent for acting and good looks, Bird became the Superstar of Thai popular music. As a singer and TV and movie actor, Bird won over nineteen awards from 1983 to 2002, for example: *Siam Kollakarn Contest: Best Singer* (1983); *Mekala: Best Singer* (1986); *Mekala: Best Actor* (1990); *Vote Award: Most Favorite Singer* (1993); *Billboard Viewer's Choice Awards First in Asia* (1996); *Top Awards: The Best Singer* (2001); and *Top Awards: The Best Singer* (2002). Besides being an entertainer, Bird was the Executive Director of *GMM Grammy*, the biggest music company in Thailand (www.BBBird.com, 2004).

This brief biography of Thongchai McIntyre shows him to be a successful *pleng string* musician who came from a middle class family in an urban area and who became popular among young audiences in cities. The life story of Thongchai also tells us how the image of Thai identity has changed from a traditional one to the modern one, with a blending of Thai with foreign culture, especially American and Chinese culture.

A lot of *pleng string* artists were promoted by music companies during the 1980s but many of them disappeared after releasing one or two albums. However, some music awards and polls provide information on their popularity and how is this gauged. According to the *King's Awards of Prapikhanet Thongkam*, held by the Thailand Music Association under the King's patronage on 27 April 2003, the best female singer of *pleng string* was Parn Thanaporn and male singer was Sopchai Kraiyunsen ("Pikanet Thongkham [Music Awards]," 2003). On the other hand, the results of the Suandusit Polls by Saundusit University, Bangkok, from 1999 to 2004, were different and show that the greatest singer of *pleng string* was Thongchai McIntyre while the second and third place getters changed every year (see table 6.1). I suggest that the popularity of Thongchai also involves his political power in the music industry owing to the fact that he was not only an artist but also the Executive Director of the company. Therefore, I believe, he had to play an important role in the strategy for achieving his success.

Table 6.2: *The Top Three Popular Male Singers of Pleng String from 1999 to 2004*  
 (Adapted from *Suan-Dusit-Poll*, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004)

Male Singer	1999		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%
Thongchai McIntyre	1	53.89	1	59.1	1	71.69	1	71.43	1	37.38
Panthakorn Bunyajinda	2	16.99	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sek Loso	3	13.00	-	-	-	-	2	14.96	-	-
Tui Thirapat	-	-	2	26.96	-	-	-	-	-	-
Patipan Pathaweekan	-	-	-	-	2	14.41	-	-	-	-
Nakharin Kingsak	-	-	-	-	3	13.90	-	-	2	34.65
<i>Clash</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	13.61	-	-
Fluk I-nam	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	27.97

Unlike male singers, the popularity of female *pleng string* singers tends to be unstable. Only Nicole Theriault, Parn Thanaporn and Mai Charoenpura have consistently appeared in the top three popular singers over two years and the rest have emerged for one year and then disappeared (see table 6.3). The material suggests that the popularity of these female singers is unstable because these artists do not have enough political power in the music companies they work for. However, on this issue it is not easy to reach a conclusion because of other relevant social and cultural factors, especially gender roles in *pleng string* (see Chapter Nine: Gender and *Pleng String*).

Table 6.3: *The Top Three Popular Female Singers of Pleng String from 1999 to 2004 (Ibid)*

Female Singer	1999		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%
Nicole Therialt	1	49.70	2	23.24	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nanthida Kaewbuasai	2	19.32	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Maleewan Jemina	3	11.82	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Macha Wathanapanit	-	-	1	41.88	-	-	-	-	-	-
Parn Thanaporn	-	-	-	-	1	37.34	2	36.39	1	47.64
Mai Charoenpura	-	-	-	-	2	32.82	3	22.27	-	-
Cathariya English	-	-	-	-	3	29.84	-	-	-	-
Palmy	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	41.34	-	-
Lanna Comins	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	27.83
Da Endorphin	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	24.53

## The Significance of Thai Urban Music

*Pleng lukgrung* is significant because it represents Thai popular music as having a closer link to Thai traditional music than the latter forms. The significance of this genre is that it may be seen as the representative of modernity becoming established in Thai culture while clinging to an illusion of tradition. Studying *pleng lukgrung* provides us with a better understanding of the factors that influence the blending of Thainess and Westernness and how Thais have adopted Westernness into the music and into the wider culture. The evolution of this musical style is the best example of a turning point in modern Thai culture where Thailand adopted Western culture while preserving Thai identity at the same time.

This musical genre is also a good example of how hegemony is maintained in Thai society by the dominant groups who persuade subordinate ones to accept, adopt and internalize the values and norms of the elites (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002). *Pleng lukgrung* is a representative of modern central Thai culture in terms of speech, customs, and identity. It also demonstrates how an elite ruling class encouraged general Thai people to accept this music as a standard Thai popular music. The evolution of *pleng lukgrung* involved the adoption of Western music blended with elements of the identity and ideology of Thai elite classes, Central Thai, and Buddhism during 1950s and 1970s. The elite ruling class played an important role in establishment of *pleng lukgrung* in Thai society. The government authorities during 1930s and 1940s encouraged the formation of bands and the composition of this musical style. This music was broadcast on air via the government media throughout the country for many decades. The authorities wished to establish this musical style as a national popular music replacing Thai court music which had declined in popularity. In *Suntharaporn's* music, the blend of Western popular music and Thai court music was obvious because much of the music was composed by taking melodies of Thai court music and adjusting them to the Western ballroom dance rhythms that had become popular through the introduction of the gramophone and the activities of the military bands. In the music of Suthep Wongkamhaeng, Sawalee Pakapan, Charin Nanthanakon and Pensri Pumchusri, for example, the melodies of Thai traditional music were not prominent but there remained tenderness in use of the elite language of the central Thai and Thai poetic forms that, like Thai court music, were representative of the earlier period. In the King's music, the melodies composed by the present King are very different from Thai traditional music (because he was born in the USA and grew up in Europe) but the lyrics, mostly written by the members of the Thai elite, give expression to Thai identity through such tropes such as Thai poetic forms, formal Thai language and ideology. For this reason, *pleng lukgrung* was admired by the elites and judged by those in authority to be a superb form of Thai popular music.

'*Pleng string*' represents another state of the evolution of Thai popular music under the great influence of modern American popular music. It is the music of new generation of Thai people, especially young urban people. If one wants to understand the contemporary culture of teenagers in Thailand, one can find it in the popular



musical genres of the moment. Because of rapid population growth and migration to the capital and provincial centers from the 1960s to 1980s, the number of urban people continued to increase while the rural population became smaller. The major music companies such as *Grammy Entertainment* and *RS Promotion* found the opportunity to make money from these people. They considered young urban people to be the main target audience of Thai popular music. Therefore they created a lot of *pleng string* artists and music for the young urban market.

In the past, Thai society appeared homogeneous because the basic social and communal structure was controlled by a power elite system comprising the monarchy, the military and upper level bureaucrats. However, the composition of all parts of the elite system was changing in the late 1980s. The composition of urban society began to change in the 1980s becoming a multicultural society comprised of Christians, Chinese Thais, European Thais, homosexuals and so on. The changing composition of urban society also began to be reflected in Thai pop music at this time, especially as it was transformed into *pleng string*.

Although some critics, such as Loetchai Kochayut (2004), and Tawan Nutasarin (1991), argue that *pleng string* departs from the characteristics of Thai identity, I argue that this musical style still keeps Thai identity through its links to early Thai musical forms such as court music and its use of language conventions. The lyrics of every song of this musical style still use Thai language and the themes of this music still contain the main positive characteristics of Thai people, such as loving fun, relaxation and disliking violence. Therefore, this musical genre still reproduces and presents a significant Thai identity and ideology.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that ‘Thai urban music’ expresses a certain form of ‘Thainess’ represented by the dominant and ruling groups in Thai society, a ‘Thainess’ clearly linked to urban society, and most urban music content relates to romantic love between young urban people. In making this claim, I have also been insistent that *pleng lukgrung* supports a dominant Thai ideology that emphasizes nationalism, patriotism and Buddhist-inflected behaviour by producing lyrical content that supports the values of elite class culture such as those expressed in

patriotic song. In *pleng string*, which is a descendant of *pleng lukgrung*, the lyrical themes still portray romantic love between urban teenagers and the positive side of urban society, although they do not have a strong emphasis on nationalism, patriotism and Buddhism as such. *Pleng string* describes the relationship of young urban boys and girls and their social situations in contemporary Thai society, which on analysis rarely strays from the boundaries of traditional Thai sexual ideology. These perspectives involve the identity and ideology of dominant group in Thai society, an argument that I will pursue in Chapter Eight.

The origin of *pleng lukgrung* lies in Thai court music and western popular music while *pleng string* is derived from *pleng lukgrung* and American pop rock music. The elite ruling class in the past supported *pleng lukgrung* and most producers of this musical style had close relationships with the elite class. In *pleng string*, a second genre of Thai urban music, music companies that belonged to the businessmen who were part of the so-called new elite group or upper-middle class, created the artists and music of *pleng string* in order to make their profits as well as to represent their identity and ideology. However, Thai identity and ideology at the present time is not simple. There are various and complicated versions of ideologies that can be found in other genres to be discussed below.

Therefore, Thai urban music is significant because it is a representative of the identity and ideology of ruling class and urban people in Thai society who dominate the country. In other words, these musical genres are representatives of a Bangkok-centric notion of Thai identity.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ‘Song for Life’

#### Introduction

The ‘song for life’ genre has a chapter devoted to itself for two reasons. First, while its origins lie in both country and urban music, it differs significantly from both genres, especially in its formative period. Second, the genre has been little studied in the academic writing on Thai popular music and its significance is largely misunderstood. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the significance of ‘song for life’ and argue that it is, in many respects, the most Thai of the present music genres because it attempts to deal with the real life situations of the majority of Thai people.

The genre of ‘song for life’ or *pleng puea chiwit* cannot be grouped with the genres of urban or rural music because its characteristics transcend the geographic limitations of both *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*. The origin of this musical style is associated with the radical ideology that emerged from political conflict in Thai society in the 1970s. The Thai identity commented upon in the music is a critical identity that has experienced resistance, oppression and struggle. This musical style was alleged to threaten or subvert Thai society and was banned from being broadcast for many years, especially by the conservative elite ruling class. This musical genre has struggled to survive a cultural climate dominated by a conservative ideology. Indeed the musicians of this genre had trouble in their efforts to gain airtime and thus popularity with Thai audiences. However, through a homogenization process that is a characteristic of the Thai popular music industry, and due to adjustments made by its practitioners, *pleng puea chiwit* crossed over from being music for a minority audience to become music for a general audience in Thailand. It is now a genre of Thai popular music that attracts mass audiences, which is reflected in records sales and the amount of airtime it receives on radio (Kiatpaiboon, 1990).

According to “Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit” [The Group of Cultural Arts for Life] (2001), *pleng puea chiwit* or ‘song for life’ has various definitions, but they all relate to the desire to produce a better world for Thai people.

For example, *pleng puea chiwit* refers to music that expresses a desire for a better life for the poor and the oppressed. It is also a music that motivates people to fight for social justice and the music comments upon social problems and in some circumstances, suggests solutions. However, the definition of this musical style has become more flexible since the 1980s. Business persons, disc jockeys, and audiences have collectively redefined the meaning of *pleng puea chiwit*, to encompass any song performed or written by any *pleng puea chiwit* artist, regardless of its lyrical contents. Furthermore, any music that is now sung and played by artists who dress in costumes like *pleng puea chiwit* artists or sing in the *pleng puea chiwit* style is also categorized into this musical genre. As a result, we can see that a lot of so-called *pleng puea chiwit* songs in the 2000s do not involve the life of the poor or radical issues, but have become commercial, portraying romantic love themes, sexual desire and the enjoyment of life. However, now all Thai popular music audiences recognize this musical style as a significant genre of contemporary Thai popular music.

I used to be an amateur musician of *pleng puea chiwit* when I was a high school student between 1974 and 1976. At that time (the so-called liberal period), *pleng puea chiwit* was very popular among student activists including me. The music of *Caravan* and *Kamachon*, for example, inspired me and my friends to form a band named *Yaowachon* (The Adolescents) in which I was a guitarist and singer. Besides performing the music of other bands, we wrote some songs that criticized the inefficient education policies in Thailand. *Yaowachon* often performed music free of charge for the student audience at exhibitions in high schools and universities in Bangkok and sometimes in the provinces. We also played music for demonstrations, including student and labour strikes. During performances, I met and talked to several famous musicians in *pleng puea chiwit* bands, such as *Caravan*, *Kamachon*, *Komchai*, *Kuruchon* and *Lukthung Satjatham*. It was a difficult time for the musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* because the right-wing groups supported by the authorities made efforts to stop our movements by, for example, verbal threats and physical assault. The troubled situation generated comradeship and solidarity among the ‘song for life’ musicians of many different bands. After a violent incident in which over one hundred students were slaughtered and 3,000 people arrested at Thammasat University (Winichakul, 2001) and the right-wing military coup returned to power on October 6, 1976, I fled to a jungle in the northeast of Thailand and lived

with the communist-led guerillas between 1976 and 1978. In the jungle, I met up with the members of *Caravan*, *Komchai* and *Kuruchon* and we stayed at the same camp for several months before they left for Laos and China and I returned to Bangkok. Although we have not met for long time, I still follow their movements through the media and through mutual friends. Our friendship and their music are still important to me. For this reason, I recognise a lot of songs of this musical style and when I was collecting the data about *pleng puea chiwit* for my PhD, it was easy for me to meet and have long conversations with these musicians who were the original sources.

### **The Social Context of ‘Song for Life’**

The lyrical content of *pleng puea chiwit*, especially during 1973 and 1976, ignored sexual or romantic love themes and instead paid attention to social issues. Despite the numbers of *pleng puea chiwit* songs being fewer than other genres of Thai popular music, the lyrical content comments more deeply on social life than any other genre of Thai popular music. We could say that almost every social issue that existed in Thai society was reproduced and commented on in this genre. The issues covered included national problems of politics, economics, education, and culture, as well as, more personal accounts of the poor’s lives. As “Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit” [The Group of Cultural Arts for Life] (2001), describes, the primary functions of *pleng puea chiwit* were to motivate people to fight for social justice and reflect on social problems.

I have said in Chapter Four that the lyrical content of *pleng chiwit* (life song) during the 1930s and 1950s began to reflect the lives of lower class people such as garbage men, tramps, harbour laborers and military conscripts; and satirized political leaders, politics and Thai society. The music of this style was considered particularly subversive towards the elite ruling class. Therefore, it was banned from airwaves and disappeared from Thai society for two decades. However, the *pleng chiwit* (life song) was regarded as the first version of the *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) (Ibid).

The peak of *pleng puea chiwit* was during the second period of the liberal celebration during the 1970s, which began after the anti-dictatorial uprising of October 14, 1973 and ended with the massacre of radical activists in October 6,

1976. Over 200 songs of this musical style, composed during this period, commented on various social issues. Besides reflecting on the poor, the music shook Thai society, especially the elite ruling class by dealing with the issues of political conflict, injustice, corruption and class-inflicted social oppression. The demonstration of social problems evident in this genre strongly affected student activists and intellectuals who had become disappointed with the governments. They did not believe that a democratic government would ever solve the country's problems. As a result, they became interested in an alternative political system beyond liberal democracy. However, the alternative proposition tended to be ideological, and was abstract and unclear.

The lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit*, during the period of business growth after the 1980s, portray more tangible accounts of social issues in every day life. The music reflects social problems such as the oppression of women, prostitution, drug addiction, poverty, the lives of rice farmers and labourers, corruption, and so on. The music also satirizes the social structure by exposing social inequality, for example, "Prachathipatai" (Democracy), "Kao-dee" (Good News) and "Puthon" (A Tolerant Person) by *Carabao*.

Between the 1980s and 2000s, *Carabao*, the most famous band of this musical genre, made dramatic changes to the image of 'song for life'. This band changed the music from a conduit of leftist ideology to become more patriotic and nationalistic, thereby aligning the genre with the more commercial music genres. The lyrical content of *Carabao's* music since the 1990s has portrayed themes of Thai identity and ideology, for example, patriotism in "Tho Thahan Otthon" (The Patient Soldier) in 1982; "Made in Thailand" in 1984; "Tap Lang" (The Lintel, which was stolen and found in the USA later) in 1988; and "Naksu Pu Yingyai" (The Great Fighter) in 2003 (*Carabao*, 2003). In "Luang Por Khoon" (A Old Buddhist Monk Named Khoon) in 1994, the lyrics deal with the themes of Buddhism and politics. In addition, *Carabao* joined the Thai army in their concert for "Isan Khiaw" (The Concert for Green Northeast) in order to raise funds for army projects during the 1990s. On the other hand, *Carabao* continued to produce songs criticizing and challenging the ruling class at the same time as supporting the dominant ideology in, for example, "Prachathipatai" (Democracy) in 1976, "Jaek Kluay" (Giving Banana)

in 1995, “Siam Lor Tue” (The Pigs of Siam , satirising on Chinese Thai Businessmen) in 2000, and “Purachai Curfew” (The Curfew for Entertainment, the social order campaign by the Interior Minister Purachai Piamsomboon) in 2001 (Ibid).

On the other hand, many ‘song for life’ artists have been criticized by critics such as Nithi Iawsriwong, a progressive professor, for compromising their music and ignoring the political ideology of the genre of the previous period (1973-1976). Most of the ‘songs for life’ written since the 1980s lack any significant political ideology and have returned to ballads about humble people. “Wanipok Panejon” (A Roaming Beggar), “Bua Loi”, (He Is ‘Bua Loi’, a dessert) and “Ham Thiam” (Artificial Testicles) are examples of this. These songs do not advocate justice or attack American imperialism any longer (Iawsriwong, 1999).

However, the alertness to social events of the composers of *pleng puea chiwit* was recognised, especially in regard to social tragedies. A recent event was the disastrous Indian Ocean undersea earthquake or Tsunami disaster on December 26, 2004, which killed approximately 228,000 to 310,000 people in Indonesia, Srilanka, South India, Thailand and other countries (*Tsunami*, 2004). In Thailand at least 5,300 people along Thailand’s western coastline were killed, thousands lost their homes and livelihoods, and many lost loved ones. In the aftermath of the disaster, on 8 January 2005, several artists of the ‘song for life’ genre released an album named “Sub Namta Undaman” (Sweeping Tears of The Andaman Sea) in order to raise money for the disaster fund. The CD comprises eighteen songs, which are written and performed by the artists of the so-called ‘*pleng puea chiwit*’ such as: “Sap Numta Undaman” (Sweeping Tears of The Andaman Sea), by Yuenyong Opakun; “Non Bon Kwam Tai” (Lying On The Death), by Surachai Janthimathon; “Khon Thai Mai Thing Kan” (Thai Do Not Leave Thai Alone), by Precha Chanapai; “Tsunami 26 Thanwa” (Tsunami 26 December), by Suthep Tawanwiwatkun; “Raum Jai Thai Supai Tsunami”, by Sek Saksit; “Tsunami”, by Pongsit Kampi; and “Khop Khun” (Thank You), by Hammer (Sarajutha, 2005).

The lyrical content of these songs not only describes the tragedy of the Tsunami disaster but also raises awareness of the problem associated with it and encourages all Thai people to help the victims. The *pleng puea chiwit* artists

redeemed themselves after the worst natural disaster of being irresponsible about social problems, although this album was not very commercially successful (personal communication with music shopkeepers, 2005).

### **Genealogy of ‘Song for Life’**

One cannot separate the history of *pleng puea chiwit* from the history of the Thai student uprisings and the fight for freedom and justice of Thai people and related political movements in Thailand between 1973 and 1976. I will elaborate on the genealogy of this musical genre drawing parallels with the history of movements against social injustice in Thai society from the 1930s through the 1970s, and in the 2000s. I have to emphasize two incidents, the student’s uprising in October 14, 1973 and the massacre on October 6, 1976, because these incidents directly influenced the ‘song for life’ musicians’ perspective and the concepts of this musical style. Furthermore, these violent incidents were ignored and suppressed by several elite governments. The victims and their relatives have asked the governments for an investigation to find and prosecute those behind the killings but nothing has happened. The governments have tried to exclude them from Thai history and make Thai people forget them (Winichakul, 2001). Political violence has frequently been the solution to political problems in the Thai context, especially the brutal suppression of protest in Thai society in the 1970s.

According to “Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit” [The Group of Cultural Arts for Life] (2001), the era of *pleng puea chiwit* can generally be divided into four periods. The first period began with the emergence of *pleng chiwit* (life song) between the 1930s and 1950s as the first version of *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life). The second period celebrated the period of liberal politics between October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976. The third was the period after the violent events of October 6, 1976, when the artists fled to the jungles to escape persecution, until 1981. The last period sees the inclusion of *pleng puea chiwit* in the musical business of tape cassette and CD sales from the 1980s to 2000s.

Before the emergence of *pleng puea chiwit* in the liberal era of the 1970s, there was a similar musical style called *pleng chiwit*, an early style of *pleng lukhung*. During the 1930s, Saengnapa Bunrasri, a famous actor, wrote and sang songs



reflecting the lives of the lower class people. Following this period, Sa-ne Komarachun, a musician from the Royal Thai Navy band, wrote and sang songs satirizing Thai society and politics. The examples are “Ba Ha Roi Jampuak” (Hundred Nuts), “Sam Law” (Tri-Shaw), and “Puthan Kwai” (The Representatives of Buffalos). The two latter songs were banned on airtime and Sa-ne was threatened with death by Police General Pao Sriyanon, the director general of Police Department. Eventually he had to quit his work as a musical performer (Ibid). During the 1940s, Kamron Sampunanon, a famous movie star, succeeded Saengnapha in his work. He sang songs such as “Tasi Kamsuan” (A Crying Farmer), “Mon Kan Mueang” (The Magic of Politics), and “Kamakon Rot-rang” (Tramcar Labourers). Consequently, *pleng chiwit* may be considered as the ancestor of *pleng puea chiwit*. In other words, *pleng chiwit* can be regarded as the first stage of *pleng puea chiwit*.

During 1950s and 1960s, no protest song was ever heard in the public musical arena, which was dominated by the patriotic songs of the military coups. It was a period of absolute military dictatorship led by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) and then Field Marshal Thanom Kitikajon (1958-1959 and 1963-1973). The government accused many radical intellectuals who criticized the existing political system of being communist rebels, arrested, and incarcerated them. Some were secretly assassinated by the assassins who worked for the government, others fled to the jungle or stayed at home but all they had to cease all expression of their political views.

The second period of *pleng puea chiwit* began in 1973, after the uprising of October 14, 1973. According to Ji Gile Ungpakorn, a professor in the faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, the student movements had a significant role during the period:

Students had played an important role in leading the overthrow of the military dictatorship. After 1973, they continued to play a leading role in progressive politics. They involved themselves in labour disputes and farmer’s movements and they led protests against U.S. military bases and the destruction of the environment (Ungpakorn, 2001, p. 7).

*Caravan* was the first band that emerged from the uprising, followed by *Kamachon*, *Dialectic*, *Konglaw*, *Komchai*, *Lukthung Sajatham*, *Kuruchon*, *Tonkla*

and *Ruam Khon*. Over 200 songs of this musical genre were composed during the second period. The songs were recorded and copied onto tape cassettes in simple studios and distributed by student activists in universities as ‘underground’ music or independent record. Plengprachachon (2004) argues that *pleng puea chiwit* during this stage can be divided into three sub-periods including the period of Western influence (1973-1974); the period of defining identity (1974-1975); and the recovering of culture (1975-1976).

At the beginning, *pleng puea chiwit* musicians were influenced by the protest, anti-war and satirical songs of American musicians such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Thai musicians borrowed the musical styles and instruments of Western bands, the lyrical content and costume styles from the American musicians, and yet sang their songs in the Thai language. The musical instruments of *pleng puea chiwit* bands in the beginning mainly consisted of two to three acoustic guitars. The musicians dressed like Western hippies. They had long hair and wore jeans, T-shirts, rubber sandals and carried knapsacks. The music written during this period commented on the troubled lives of rice farmers and labourers, the uncivilized rural northeastern region, presented anti-war themes, described pro-democracy protests and reflected on social injustice. Examples are “Khon Kap Kwai” (Men and Buffalos), by *Caravan*, which dealt with an uprising of oppressed rice farmers; “American Antarai” (The Dangerous American), by *Caravan*, which described an attack on American military bases in Thailand; and “Puea Muan Chon” (For The Mass), by *Kammachon*, which referred to fighting for the freedom of people under the pressure of dictatorship.

The second sub-period took place during a time of strong political conflict between the ruling class and radical student activists, which followed demonstrations and protests by student groups and other concerned Thai citizens. The acoustic bands of *pleng puea chiwit* proved inappropriate for a mass audience in demonstrations or protests. As a result, the *pleng puea chiwit* bands, such as *Kamachon*, for example, emerged in the style of electric or rock bands that could produce louder sounds for a several thousand strong audience. Later brass and woodwind instruments were included in electric bands such as *Lukthung Sajatham* from Ramkamhaeng University, Bangkok. The music written during this period reflected the motivation

of the people rebelling against the corrupt authorities and the capitalists who were perceived to be the main causes of the problems. The aggressive power of the music encouraged strong emotions of enthusiasm and solidarity among the activists. Confrontation between the leftists and the rightists became more serious. For example, *Kathingdaeng* thugs (Red Gaur), a right-wing group of students from some vocational colleges in Bangkok who were backed by military leaders (Jiamthiraskun, 2001), attempted to assault the activists and burnt a building at Thammasat University. Some activists realized that the student movement at that time was in crisis because right-wing groups and government media alleged the student activists were Communist supporters who attempted to subvert the three pillars of the nation (the nation, religion and monarchy) (Ungpakorn, 2001; and Winichakul, 2001).

During late 1975 and early 1976, the musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* adjusted their musical forms and lyrics to be less aggressive in order to make the genre friendlier to general audiences. Some forms of Thai traditional musical styles such as *Pleng Ramwong* (Thai traditional dance), *Lamtat* (a style of folk song from the Central) and *Mor-lam* (a style of folk song from the Northeast) were borrowed in the performance of the *pleng puea chiwit* during the third -period. The song-writers of this musical style were more careful and considerate in composing their music in order to avoid being accused of subversion (Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit, 2001).

Despite making concessions to appease the government, the radical student movement was finally demolished by right-wing groups in October 6, 1976. Thongchai Winichakul (2001), a student leader who stayed overnight at Thammasat University, described that while many thousands of people had gathered peacefully all night to protest the return of Marshal Thanom Kitikajon, one of the former dictators ousted three years earlier the situation at Thammasat University, the police, raging paramilitary groups and semi-fascist groups co-operatively crushed the student movements. At least forty-six people were killed and thousands were arrested. Thongchai was arrested on the morning of 6 October 1976 and he spent two years in jail. He depicted the brutal carnage thus:

At 5.50 am, a rocket-propelled bomb was fired into the crowd inside Thamasat. Four were killed instantly and dozens injured. The bomb signaled the beginning of the non-stop discharge of military weapons that went on until about 9 a.m. Anti-tank missiles were fired into the Commerce building which by then sheltered a third of the crowd. Outside the university, after the besieging forces had stormed into the campus, they dragged some students out. Lynching began. Two were tortured, hanged and beaten even after death on the trees encircling *Sanam Luang*<sup>3</sup> ...A female student, chased until she fell to the ground, was sexually assaulted and tortured until she died. Inside the campus, apart from the unknown number of casualties from weapons, more were lynched. A student leader, Jaruphong Thongsin, a friend of mine, was dragged along the soccer field by a piece of cloth around his neck. Later, six bodies were laid on the ground at *Sanam Luang* for a man to nail wooden stakes into their chests. On the street in front of the Ministry of Justice, on the other side of *Sanam Luang*, opposite to Thamasat, four bodies- unknown if being already dead or still alive- were piled up with tires, soaked with petrol, and then set aflame. These brutal murders took place as a public spectacle... (Winichakul, 2001, p. 3).

Ji Giles Ungpakorn analyses the cause of the incident and identifies the people who were behind the massacre:

This brutal state crime was supported, either directly or indirectly, by all section of the Thai ruling elite. Their aim was not so much the crushing of the young parliamentary democracy, which had arisen after the mass popular uprising three year earlier, but the destruction of the growing socialist movement throughout the country (Ungpakorn, 2001, p. 1).

The slaughter was followed by a military coup and then martial law was declared. In the days that followed, the right-wing government hunted the remaining activists and their offices and houses were raided. Several left-wing newspapers were closed and political parties, student unions, and farming organizations were banned. University libraries and bookshops were ransacked and many books were

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<sup>3</sup> *Sanam Luang* is the large public oval located in the center of Bangkok and surrounded by Thamasat University, the royal palace and the Ministry of Justice).

confiscated. Over 100, 000 books by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Jit Pumisak, Maxim Gorky and so on were burnt (Ungphakorn, 2001).

Consequently, *pleng puea chiwit* then became illegal. There were no more cassettes available for sale and all performance of this musical style in the cities was banned. Yet the ‘song for life’ movement would not die. After the dreadful event at Thammasat University in October 6, 1976, most of *pleng puea chiwit* musicians escaped capital punishment and imprisonment by escaping to safer places such as the jungles in rural areas of the north, northeast, south and central where the communist-led guerillas were hiding out. The activists brought some musical instruments with them into the jungles and continued to perform and compose their music for people in the jungles. That was the third period of song for life.

Surachai Janthimathon (2002) describes how the jungle music was recorded using a simple studio walled with bamboo, and sent to be broadcast via the shortwave radio of the Communist Party of Thailand (C.P.T). The lyrical content of this musical genre in the jungles completely supported the policies of the C.P.T. and was against the government movement. For this reason *pleng puea chiwit* became a powerful instrument of public relations for the Communist Party of Thailand. Some of the guerillas including the students and musicians were sponsored by the Communist Party to travel via Laos and Vietnam to study in China in order to come back to work for the C.T.P. in Thailand. Thus the musical and lyrical themes of Chinese revolutionary army influenced *pleng puea chiwit* during this period.

The lyrics of ‘song for life’ in the jungles actually included the ideas of socialism such as Marxism and Maoism. Many lyrics dealt with communist ideology and symbols, praising C.T.P., for example, “Tawan Daeng” (The Red Sun), “Dao Daeng Haeng Pupan” (The Red Star From Pupan), “Jak Lan Po Tueng Pupan” (From Lan Po To Pupan), “Poet Pratu Kuk Hai Puean Hok Tula” (We’ll Open the Prison’s Doors For Our Friends of October 6), and “Luk Ja Klap Prom Chai” (I’ll Come Back with the Victory). The music written in the jungle consisted of approximately 400 songs but most of them were not recorded and distributed by the music industry (Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit, 2001).

However, late in the third period, the relationship between the students and the existing guerillas soured because of conflicts in opinion about the communist political ideologies and strategies to revolutionise Thai society. For instance, many students disagreed with the idea that the Communist Party of Thailand being dependent on the Communist Party of China for its inspiration and policies of revolution. They did not think these ideas would enable the revolution to achieve its goal in Thailand. On the other hand, the working-class communist pioneers were not happy with what they regarded as the fragile characteristics of the middle-class students (Kiatpaiboon, 1990). They thought that the middle-class students might retard the revolution's progress because the students were not able to live independently in the jungles as the working classes were accustomed to, for example. At the same time, the new democratic government in Bangkok proclaimed an amnesty for all, including the killers and victims involved the incident of October 6, 1976, and to those people who were misguided in joining the communist-led guerillas. Then a succession of the students, including the *pleng puea chiwit* musicians, left the communist-led guerillas in the jungles and returned to their homes.

In April 1983, the last group of revolutionary students arrived home and there were no more communist-led guerillas in Thailand. The students came back to continue their studies and some worked in the cities. Most musicians went back to school or turned to other jobs, except *Caravan* who returned to perform *pleng puea chiwit* as professional musicians and were eventually lured into the mainstream music industry. *Caravan* released several albums, reproducing previous material and creating new albums. Although the music of *Caravan* was not very commercially successful, *Caravan* was recognized by its audience as the greatest *pleng puea chiwit* band of the 1970s (Kiatpaiboon, 1990).

The last time I met Surachai Janthimathon, the leader and song-writer of *Caravan*, in Bangkok in 2002, he was continuing to produce music in the same style, although his music would not ever prove commercially successful. He said that, "I will not follow the mainstream such as writing songs about sexual desire - although I can do that. I will continue to write the theme of 'song for life'. I might not become rich, but if I have only 30,000 fans, I could survive" (Personal communication,

2002). However, he accepted that the thematic content of his music after 1983 has changed to accommodate the current political situation and it is far more relaxed about political issues than was the case previously. Furthermore, *Caravan* included electric instruments such as electric guitar, bass, keyboard, and drum kits into its band. This was criticized by some of its loyal fans who preferred the original style of *Caravan* but Surachai said, “I get older and I have to take care of my wife and kids now. So I don’t want to have more hostilities and now several military officers are my good friends” (Personal interviews, 2002).

Several bands of ‘song for life’ have emerged in the period since 1982 including *Carabao*, *Kon-dan-qwian*, *Hope*, *Kra-thon*, *Ki-tan-cha-li*, *Ni-ra-nam*, *Indo-jean*, *Zuzu*, *Pongsit Kampi* and *Pongthep Kradonchamnan*. The most successful band during the period was *Carabao*, which released more albums than any other *pleng puea chiwit* band. *Carabao* was an electric rock band, led by Ad Carabao (Yeunyong Opakun). *Carabao*’s music was a blend of country rock style and Thai folk songs, especially from Supanburi province<sup>4</sup>. The music of *Carabao* attracted fans from the working to middle class in both urban and rural areas. From 1981 to 2004, the music of *Carabao* achieved large sales amounting to over five hundred million Baht (about US\$12.5 million) (Plengprachachon, 2004).

The primary musical form of the new *pleng puea chiwit* was not very different from other genres of Thai popular music. It also achieved a synthesis between Western popular music and Thai music, which included urban music, country music and folk music. The musical instruments in the bands of this musical style were similar to the instruments in the bands of *pleng lukhung* and ‘*pleng*

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<sup>4</sup> Supanburi Province is located in the central of Thailand and to the west of Bangkok. It is well known that it was the birthplace of many *lukthung* singer stars such as Surapon Sombatcharoen (1930-1968), “the king of Thai country music”; Pumpuang Duangjan (1961-1992); “the queen of Thai country music”; and Wipot Petsupan (1942-present), a famous *pleng lukhung* singer of *pleng lae* (a style of central region folk songs - describing the Buddha life and times).

*lukkrung*' except some bands such as *Caravan*, *Pongsit Kampi* and *Hope* which still preserved their musical style with mainly acoustic instruments (Kiatpaiboon, 1990).

There are two principal styles of contemporary *pleng puea chiwit* music: the acoustic band and the electric band. The instruments of acoustic bands such as *Caravan* and *Hope* consist of three acoustic guitars, a violin, harmonica, bongos and flute. The instruments of electric bands such as *Kamachon* and *Carabao* consist of electric guitar and bass, drum kit, keyboard, and accordion. Some Thai musical instruments were occasionally included in the bands to provide supplementary instrumentation; for example, *khui* (a Thai flute), *saw-u* (a bowed stringed instrument), and *sueng* or *pin* (a plucked stringed instrument). However, the *pleng puea chiwit* bands in the first three periods (1973-1976) tended to be smaller and more fluid or flexible because of the lack of financial support. The original purpose of *pleng puea chiwit* performance was not commercial success, but propaganda. However, the musical instruments in the bands of 'song for life' now are not simple any more. For instance, in "Refugee", *Carabao* used a symphony orchestra to accompany the song; and in 2003, *Caravan* joined *Bangkok Symphony Orchestra* to perform its songs in *Caravan in Concert* at the auditorium of Thammasat University, Bangkok (Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit, 2001).

### **The Producers of 'Song for life'**

Unlike other popular styles, the musicians of the *pleng puea chiwit* bands in the early period were not professional musicians. Most of them were university students who learned to play music by themselves. Their music tended to be easy to learn and simple to perform compared with *pleng lukkrung*' and *pleng lukthung*. They produced music in primitive studios and distributed it by themselves to an audience who were mostly university students. Now most of the musicians of this style work for music companies like musicians of other styles but they still compose music for themselves.

As we have seen from the history of *pleng puea chiwit*, although the lyrical themes relate to the lower classes (similar to *pleng lukthung*), the producers of *pleng puea chiwit* were not from the lower classes. They were intellectuals who mainly came from middle class families in the country and most of them studied in Bangkok



and other big cities such as Khonkaen, Chiangmai and Songkha. By contrast, in *pleng lukhung* (Thai country music) most of the producers came from poor farming families in rural areas and had lower educational backgrounds. Certainly, the unforgettable violent incidents of October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976 influenced the perspectives of the musicians during the 1970s. The musical forms of *pleng puea chiwit* were not very different from other styles of Thai popular music but the differences in the lyrical content were very significant. Factors such as the educational and family background, political ideology and direct experiences of the producers influenced the characteristics of *pleng puea chiwit*. Thus the lyrical content of *pleng puea chiwit* provided not only a reflection of the reality of common people's lives but also propaganda on behalf of the political left who wished to direct the behavior of the audience. As a result, the images of musicians of song for life tended to be leftists or radicals. They were also accused of being communists or communist supporters by conservative Thai authorities and right-wing groups, which contributed to *pleng puea chiwit* musicians being in trouble during the Cold War.

The musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* tend to compose and perform their music rather than rely on the record companies to provide them with songs. For instance, Surachai Janthimathon (Nga Caravan), the lead singer and guitarist of *Caravan*, composed and performed most of *Caravan's* music. Similarly, Yuenyong Opakun (Ad Carabao), the lead singer and guitarist of *Carabao*, composed and performed most of *Carabao's* songs. They have also developed a particular performance style during concerts where they tend to talk to the audience about their motivation for writing their songs and on musical themes in addition to the singing.

Today most of the musicians of this style belong to music companies but they still create music for themselves while most artists of other styles recorded music provided by record producers at the music companies.

Surachai Janthimathorn, *Caravan's* leader, is the most famous musician of 'song for life' since its inception in 1973. As a guitarist, song-writer and announcer in *Caravan*, he is still performing music in the 2000s. He wrote more than two hundred songs of this style. Surachai was born in 1947 in Surin Province, the northeast region where local people still speak Laotian and Cambodian. His father was a teacher and his brother, Sathian Jantimathon, was a journalist. When he was a

teenager, he went to live in Bangkok, studied at Art College and worked as an author of short stories. During the incident of October 14, 1976, he was a leader of the protest against the dictatorial government and demanded that the constitution be followed and that democracy be introduced. After achieving democracy, Surachai and his friends such as Wirasak Sunthonsri, Mongkhon Uthok, Thongkran Thana and Pongthep Kradonchamnan formed the band *Caravan*, which always performed only in the style of *pleng puea chiwit*, free of charge at many public gatherings in numerous locations. The money they were given from their performance was only enough for food and transportation. Surachai said that the aim of forming *Caravan* at that time was not to make money but for to support the political movements of students and the people ("Caravan's Leader," 2003). Surachai and other *Caravan* members were blacklisted by the right-wing ruling military group for allegedly holding extreme left-wing views, which meant their visibility decreased. After the massacre of October 6, 1976, *Caravan* had to flee to the jungles and stay with the communist -led guerrillas for five years. In the jungles, Surachai wrote and performed many songs for the guerrillas. He also went to China to study music but as he could not read music, he returned to work for the Communist Party of Thailand in the jungles. Surachai and other members of *Caravan* came back from the jungle to Bangkok in 1982 after the new government introduced the amnesty law for the people related to the incident of October 6, 1976. After 1982, *Caravan* claimed that they were now a professional band, which meant they could play music to earn a living and thus become professional musicians (Surachai, personal communication, May 29, 2002).

Surachai described that he never has had any formal music education; he learned how to play music by himself and from some friends when he was twenty-five. When he was young, he often listened to many different styles of music, such as Thai folk music from the northeast, Thai country music, Western rock and American protest song. However, he did not play music when he was young because he preferred to paint and draw. He also loved reading, especially poems, short stories and political works. Surachai claims he was not a good student because he did not like to study at school. He used to smoke a lot of cigarettes and cannabis and drink alcohol. He had long hair and wore old T-shirts, jeans and sandals because he did not

want to dress in a uniform like a soldier because he disliked the military (Ibid). However, the irony of adopting the uniform of the rebel seems to have escaped him.

The most successful musicians of this musical style since the 1980s are *Carabao*, led by Yuenyong Opakun (born in 1954). The other six members of this band are Kirati Promsakha Nasakonnakorn, Precha Chanapai, Pitat Poemchalad, Thanit Sriklindi, Thiery Mekwatana and Amnat Lukjan. From 1981 to 2002, *Carabao* released twenty-three albums of *pleng puea chiwit*, which were quite financially successful. Their most famous and successful album is “Made in Thailand” which has sold over three million copies (see Carabao.net, 2003). Yuenyong Opakun wrote most of the *Carabao*'s songs and he is also the lead singer, guitar player and spokesman for the band.

Yuenyong Opakun (his nickname is Ad Carabao) describes in his autobiography (Opakun, 2001) that he was born in 1954 and raised in a small town in Supanburi Province where his father was a teacher, a shopkeeper and amateur musician. Yuenyong initially learned to play music from his father, but is largely a self-taught musician. He also began to write songs when he was a teenager. Yuenyong attended primary and secondary schools in Supanburi; and went to Bangkok to continue his vocational education at Utaintawai Construction College where he played music in bars and pubs at nighttime. Then he went to the Philippines where he spent two years studying for his bachelor in Architecture. In the Philippines, he met Kirati Promsakha Nasakonnakorn and Sanit Limsila and joined with them to form *Carabao*. After he came back to Thailand, he worked as an architect for the Office of National Housing, a government office in Bangkok, but he also continued to perform in bars and pubs at nighttime. His musical tastes are eclectic, enjoying Thai country music, folk music from Supanburi province, rock, folk rock and *Caravan*'s music. His taste in Western music ranges from the music of Led Zeppelin, to that of John Denver, The Eagles, CCR, Peter Frampton, Mike Hanopone, and Freddie Aguira (the latter two are Filipinos). From the comments he made about his youth during the interview it is clear that he was a rebel. He joined the incident of October 14, 1973, demonstrating for the constitution and the introduction of democracy. Moreover, after coming back from studying in the Philippines, he worked for the Communist-led guerrillas as a secret informant and

used to stay in the jungle for a while. Ad Carabao claimed that he was interested in the political ideologies of Marxist-Leninism, Maoism, Socialism and Liberalism. He stated that he disliked the exploitation of musicians by music companies, especially taking advantage of children through their ridiculous music. He also dislikes *pleng lukgrung* such as the music of Suthep Wongkamhaeng and *Suntharaporn* because their lyrics do not relate to the real situation of contemporary society (Opakun, 2001).

The brief autobiographies of Surachai Janthimathon (Nga Caravan) and Yuenyong Opakun (Ad Carabao) illustrate the backgrounds of the most famous musicians of 'song for life'. Their backgrounds helped shape their music as well their attitudes towards society and life in general.

### **The Significance of 'Song for Life'**

Unlike other musical genres of Thai popular music, the purpose of 'song for life' was not only to entertain the people but also to make a comment on society, regardless of the mainstream values of people in Thai society. The motivation of the musicians was not to gain celebrity or commercial success but to achieve a political end by correcting the injustices they perceived to be endemic in Thai culture and politics. This musical style is the only kind of Thai popular music similar to protest songs or political music from the USA because the music opposes political state power. The 'song for life' is important and significant because it also shows how political discontent among sections of the Thai people could be transposed to popular music and thus become an expression of opposition to the conservative tradition.

Arising in the underground music tradition, the 'song for life' became a genre of commercial music recognized by Thai people all over the country. Now there are actually numerous *pleng puea chiwit* fans including people from the middle class and skilled laborers who appreciate this musical style. Some loyal fans even refuse to listen to mainstream music because they consider that music monotonous, dealing only with love between boys and girls (Klum-Silpa-Watanatham-Puea-Chiwit, 2001).

The history of this musical genre also provides us with significant information about the uprising of Thai people for democracy in 1970s, a subject ignored by the other genres. Furthermore, the main lyrical content of this musical style currently comments on various issues that have occurred in contemporary Thai society but which were ignored in the other musical genres. In fact, most of the musicians of this musical style were progressive intellectuals who were keen to see a just and equitable society introduced in modern Thailand, views which they presented in their music.

The turning point of *pleng puea chiwit* crossing over from music for a minority audience to becoming music for general audience in Thailand was the adoption of commercial values in the production of the music in the 1980s. Initially, this musical genre was rejected by the authorities and the dominant class as subversive but from the 1980s on it has become a staple of the pop music radio program. The evolution of 'song for life' demonstrates the struggle to survive as well as the changing ideologies and adjustment to the mainstream among musicians. In the other words, the popularity of 'song for life' relates to the compromise between an ideal society (the oppositional ideology) and reality (the dominant ideology).

## **Conclusion**

The genre of 'song for life' or *pleng puea chiwit* is different from other genres of Thai popular music in terms of the meanings contained in its lyrical content and its origins as a form of protest music. Almost by definition, *pleng puea chiwit* did not deal with love themes but portrayed numerous issues of social injustice in Thai society. Since its birth, this musical genre has commented on numerous social situations including political, economic, cultural, educational issues and social problems. The major themes of this musical style are resistance to dominant power, anti-war themes, anti-Americanism, anti-dictatorship, pro-democracy, and satirical accounts of politicians, government policies and the elite class. The minor themes of this style relate to issues at the core of nationalist ideology such as patriotism, nationalism, and Buddhism, but in different form from those expressed by the elite ideology by discounting them and seeing exploitation of the weak and marginal as much more important (see Chapter Six: The Social Context of Thai Urban Music).

‘Song for life’ emerged from situation of the political conflict in Thai society during the 1970s. After struggling to survive for two decades, it grew up and established a presence in Thai society as a genre of Thai popular music in the 1980s. The initial idea of this musical style, to oppose the dominant power and support political movements among radical students and the people, arose from perceptions about the conservative nature of Thai culture and politics. Its lyrical content was accused of supporting socialism and Communism during the Cold War by the upholders of the conservative view of Thai society and culture. However, it became a commercial music form like the other popular musical styles because the lyrical content was adjusted to suit the tastes of general Thai people although it can still be claimed to be different (Kiatpaiboon, 1990). Many songs of this style, such as the songs of *Carabao* and Pongsit Kampi, were very popular in the 2000s.

The musicians of ‘song for life’ tend to come from well-educated backgrounds and middle class families in the provinces but they had close relationships and empathy for the working class. Most of them were born and grew up in other provinces and have a university or college education background. They tend to be interested in politics and social situations and resistant to the dominant ideology. The musicians of this musical style are able to compose music for their own bands although they work for the music companies. Now many bands still compose and perform the music in this style, including *Caravan* and *Carabao*.

The ‘song for life’ is significant because it shows how despite expressing political discontent and opposition to the conservative tradition, this musical genre can spill over into popular culture. It challenges many widely held views in the field of Thai popular music. Although there are fewer songs in the genre than in other styles, its lyrical content has been very influential. While most of other Thai popular songs deal with love and the positive side of Thai people’s lives, this musical style portrays the opposite side to the majority. Therefore this genre is an alternative music for people who need to escape from the circular love themes and bland enjoyment of other popular genres such as *pleng lukthung*, *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Identity and Ideology in Thai Popular Music

#### Introduction

Thai identity is a crucial issue for Thai people and for people from other countries. There are many different definitions of Thai identity depending on the person making the definition and the time the definition was made. Different ethnic groups, social classes, religions and genders in Thailand define Thai identity in different terms (see Chapter One). However, the current convention is that Thai identity is shared by several groups of people in Thai society regardless of how they define themselves or are defined by others. When the modern nation-state was invented by political leaders, the “national identity” was defined by the ruling classes but the concept of national identity has changed over time (Satayanurat, 2002). In this chapter I will explore the problematic nature of identity and ideology and the manner in which they are explored in the four main genres of Thai popular music.

Both cultural and national identities in Thai society have been reproduced through Thai popular music, as well as other means of cultural reproduction, for over half a century. Identity is not natural but is constructed, reproduced or subverted by many groups of people who interact within a system of unequal power relations. Identity construction may be seen as an ideological process because it reproduces or subverts social interests and power relation within a society (*Ideology*, 2004).

Ideologies of the political organization found in Thai society try to influence people by broadcasting opinions through many different media including popular music. The dominant class of Thai society proposes a norm of behaviour that we may claim represents the dominant ideology and is based on nationalism, reverence for the monarchy, and Buddhism. Its aim is to create for all Thai people a form of “public opinion” or “common sense” that establishes the social norms that govern acceptable behaviour. The dominant ideology usually remains invisible and appears as “neutral” {to most people within the society. If there are others ideologies that

differ from the dominant ideology, they are often seen a radical (*Ideology*, 2004). Thai popular music always projects ideologies, both the dominant ideology as well subordinate ones. In this chapter I propose to examine the ideologies expressed in the four genres of Thai popular music discussed in this thesis. The chapter also explores the relationship between identity, ideology and music in order to answer the research questions: What are the ideologies expressed in Thai popular music? And how are the ideologies constructed in the music? The arguments about identity and ideology presented in this chapter are applied to the problematic issues of class, ethnicity and gender. Normally, most Thai scholars avoid any mention of these controversial issues because they relate to the stability by the elite ruling class. It is assumed that any discussion of power relations based on class will lead to instability and jeopardize the security of the country, and is thus to be avoided. When the dominant ideology is presented in Thai popular music, it is invisible and appears as “neutral” to most people within the society as it is “the public opinion” or “common sense”. However, how identity and ideology work and are constructed in Thai society is not simple. They concern numerous issues such as history, politics, culture, influence from other countries, and so on. This analysis is therefore part of an account of how identity and ideology are constructed and how they work in Thai popular music.

## **Identity in Thai Popular Music**

Within a system of unequal relations, Thai identity is shared, constructed, reproduced or subverted by many groups of in Thai society. These also occur in the communication process of Thai popular music. This chapter explores the relationship between Thai identity or Thainess and Thai popular music to ask what form of Thainess is expressed in the music? However, related concepts such as the culture, the way of life, characteristics, traditions, customs, values, and beliefs and so on, are often referred to in regard to Thai identity and are also addressed in this chapter.

### **Identity and *Pleng Lukgrung* (urban music)**

*Pleng lukgrung* is a representative of the dominant group in Thailand, especially the elite group in Bangkok. The word *pleng lukgrung* itself denotes the art of urban people. *Luk* means a son or daughter and *grung* means urban or city. The word *lukgrung* refers to “born in *Grung Thep*, the official name in Thai of



“Bangkok”. Because *thep* means angels, *Grung Thep* means ‘the city of angels’ or ‘the heaven’ where the Royal Palace, the government offices and millionaires’ buildings are located. Consequently, *pleng lukgrung* concerns high-class people in Bangkok. As I have argued *pleng lukgrung* still preserves a Thai identity that is derived from Thai court music with Thai traditional melodies, formal Thai language in the lyrics and a mild singing style. The lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* portrayed the values and norms of elite urban people from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Most of the themes in *pleng lukgrung* involve love rather than societal problems or critical issues. The themes reflect some Thai identities especially in regard to loving happiness, enjoyment and relaxation or ‘loving fun’; always being happy with life, expressed in the Thai saying *mai pen rai*; disliking conflict; having a habit of assimilation, compromise, nonviolence, and clever adaptation to any situation (see Chapter One). The practices embedded in these characteristics of people benefit the dominant and ruling groups because they are perceived not to subvert the status quo. If someone has a different way of thinking about these aspects, they will be considered personal problems rather than social issues. O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) state that the media’s function is to support the dominant ideology: “Social problems and contradictions are often masked or displaced by being understood in personal or psychological terms within a moral framework of good and evil, rather than in social terms” (pp. 217-218).

In Chapter One, I described the concepts of Thai identity or Thainess as defined by significant Thai scholars from the period of the absolute monarchy (1850s) to modern democracy (1990s). These intellectuals explain the explicit meanings of Thai identity or Thainess (historically Siamese identity), Thai identity, national character, behaviors of Thai people and Thai values as being essentially collective forms of behaviors that most Thais aspire to. I argue that shared the values, ideas, beliefs and feelings of Thai people reflect a blended ideology of individualism, liberalism, capitalism and Buddhism. These ideologies were molded, and then built upon, by the political situations as well as long term social practice. Thai ideology describes both positive and negative traits. These ideologies govern how Thai people act and live together in Thai society. Institutions such as school, religion, and the media play an important role in their formation. However these ideologies are not

static, they have undergone many changes. Through time, some national characteristics became less popular or declined while others became more popular. It depends on which ones are encouraged or discouraged by the dominant groups defined here as the ruling elite. Some social characteristics are disadvantageous: for example to give priority to the person who could give benefit to or could be harmful to them; individualism; disliking conflict; and ‘permissiveness’. These characteristics benefit the ruling and elite classes to maintain the status quo. However, they might cause Thai people to be less successful than other ethnic groups.

The ruling elite groups may allow Thai popular music to be broadcast and distributed through their media and companies, regardless of the lyrical content, which may involve love, sex, alcohol and adultery as long as this music does not express opposition to the ruling class. Thai popular music is also important in communicating and reinforcing these ideologies. It has been manipulated by several groups of Thai people in order to present their identities. Elite ruling classes have successfully used *pleng lukgrung* to present their ideology and ideologies for more than six decades.

Although the popularity of *pleng lukgrung* has declined since the 1980s, this musical style is still broadcast on the radio and television stations belonging to the government such as Radio Thailand, and TV Channel 11. I argue that these programs are not commercially viable but only provide music to fill old elite groups with nostalgia for their teenage days. Although *pleng lukgrung* is no longer widely popular in Thailand, it still receives a significant amount of air tune on media (radio and television), all controlled by the military and government. This suggests the genre is still viewed as an important ideological tool by the military and by the elite classes generally.

### **Identity and *Pleng lukthung* (country music)**

Thai popular music, especially *pleng lukthung*, is considered to be a significant socializing mechanism that both transmits and reflects ‘norms’ regarding all social behavior, including Thai identity (Damrongloet, 1990). The maintenance of Thai identity through music helps people understand how and why the ideas regarding Thai people’s behaviour continue to exist in a modernising Thai society.

The reflection of Thai identity in *pleng lukthung* assists subjects in affirming and maintaining their understandings of a complex process, even when the songs do not accurately reflect their current social context.

While *pleng lukgrung* reflects an urban and formal Thai identity which was defined by the elite and ruling class, *pleng lukthung* reflects a rural and informal Thai identity which was defined by lower class and rural people. Although some Thai identities were shared by both groups, the reflection of *pleng lukthung* can cover a wider range of Thai identity than *pleng lukgrung*. Thai country music reflects not only a compliance with the ideology of the ruling classes but many also present the oppositional ideology of working classes. As Siriyuvasak, (1998) points out, on one hand, the discourse in *pleng lukthung* can be apparently accommodating in its content; on the other hand, it remains structurally resistant to the ideologies of the Thai ruling classes. This apparent contradiction is the focus of this section.

Thai country music or *pleng lukthung* is popular among the largest section of the population (rural people and the urban working classes) who have the least power. In contrast, *pleng lukgrung* is popular among urban elite people who are fewer in number but have the most influence on the political and economic power structures. There has always been an overt or covert struggle for power between the rich and the poor in Thailand. As I have argued in chapter five, after struggling for prominence, Thai country music gained greater significance in presenting Thai identity largely because the music business realized the potential of the *pleng lukthung* markets. Subsequently the authorities came to regard this musical style as a representative of Thai identity. As a result, *pleng lukthung* may be seen as an important instrument used for masking Thai social issues and problems for more than five decades. Currently, approximately seventy percent of the population lives in rural conditions and now more than seventy percent of Thai popular music records in the market is *pleng lukthung* (Kamjaroen, 2002, Kongsuwan, 2002, and Thewada, 2003). This correlation is not accidental.

Thai identity may be expressed in many ways. The image of Thailand circulated in a range of discourses from tourist brochures to television documentaries comprises elements of myth, nostalgia and reality. According to Jintana Damrongleud (1990), the lyrical contents of *pleng lukthung*, which I regard as an

exemplary discourse, are reflections of every dimension of rural society in Thailand including the ways of life, customs and traditions such as the following:

- The belief in animism and astrology
- The values of the main institutions of the nation, religion and monarchy
- The values of materialistic behaviour and temptation
- The values of rank, nobility and power.
- Admiring life in Bangkok

Believing firmly in Buddhism, especially merit (*boon*) and sin (*kam*), the lyrics describe the related customs and traditions, which are presented in the music, such as, *songkran* (the water festival in April); *khao-pansa* (the Buddhist Lent ceremony); *ok-pansa* (the ceremony at the end of the Buddhist Lent); *upasombot* (the ceremony of becoming ordained as Buddhist monk); *thod kratin* (giving and offering a robe to a monk after Buddhist Lent); *loi-kra-thong* (the festival of floating *kratong* in the river and canals); *taeng-ngan* (wedding ceremony); *kan-len klong-yao* (playing drums); *boon-bang-fai* (the sky rocket festival); and *ngan chakpra* (the festival of drawing the Buddha's image).

Several hundred Thai country songs, especially those published between the 1950s to 1970s deal with the contexts of Thai customs and traditions. Many popular Thai traditions appear in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung*. For example, the songs deal with 'sonkran' festival (the water festival in April) are "Kwan Long Jak Sonkran" (The Aftermath of the *songkran*), written by Kan Karunwong; "Ro Thang Pi" (To Wait For You All Year Long), sung by Sornchai Mekwichian; "Khi Kwai Tam Faen" (Riding A Buffalo To Find My Girl Friend), written by Chonlathi Thanthong; "Namta Chai Nuea" (The Tears Of The Northern Man), sung by Kampi Saengthong; and "Songkran Ban Na" (*Songkran* At The Farmer's Village), sung by Yot-rak Salakjai. Songs that refer to Buddhist rituals such as *upasombot*, *khao-pansa* (the Buddhist Lent ceremony), and *ok-pansa* are, for instance; "Buat Pra" (The Ceremony of Becoming Ordained as Buddhist Monk), sung by Waipot Petsupan; ("Khoi Nong Sipsong Duean" (Waiting for You for Twelve Months), sung by Yot-rak Salakjai; and "Surachai Labuat" (Surachai Says Goodbye to Become Ordained as a Buddhist Monk). Wedding ceremonies are also popular in *pleng lukthung* such as "Bup-pe Sanniwat" (The Mating of Souls), written by Paiboon Butkhan; "Kaew Raw Pi" (I

Am Waiting for You), written by Waipot Petsupan; and “Sang Wiman” (An Image of the Paradise), written and sung by Surapon Sombatjaroen.

In addition, the atmosphere and description of natural environments surrounding rural areas in Thailand are also described in the songs through images of paddy rice fields, rivers, plants, animals, wind, sunshine, moonlight and stars. The ways of life of people in the country is also portrayed in the music, including their occupations, houses, costumes, foods and entertainments. In “Tawan Lap Fa” (Sun Down), sung by Pumpuang Duangjan, the lyrics describe the wonderful atmosphere of the rice field village in the country when the sun goes down.

The sunshine is going down on the horizon  
The gentle breeze cools bamboo trees and slightly moves them  
Cicadas produce sounds over the rice field when the sunshine disappears  
They sound like music from heaven  
After the sun left, the sounds of stream can be heard too  
And flocks of birds swoop down and take their partners.

(Translated By Lamnao Eamsa-ard from Damrongloet, 1990, p. 271)

Moreover, the significant content that makes *pleng lukthung* differ from *pleng lukgrung* and other genres of Thai popular music is its sense of humor. The lyrics of *pleng lukthung* contain not only narratives about the troubled lives of poor farmers and workers but describe emotions and plentiful sensual pleasures. As several significant Thai scholars such as Sulak Sivaraksa (2002), Saichon Satayanyrat (2002), Sanit Samakkan (1983), Rachaneekon Set-tho (1989) and Pra Thamapidok (1995), have identified, Thai identity in the aspects of the national character, behaviors, values, and beliefs are the values of ‘loving fun’, playfulness, loving happiness, enjoyment and relaxation. These themes were demonstrated in not only the music and lyrics but also the performance of *pleng lukthung*, whose performers have always included comedians. The sense of humor represented in this musical style is similar to that found in Thai folk traditions such as *lamtat*, *pleng choi* (a folk song style from the central), *morlam* (a folk song style from the northeast) and *nang-talung* (a shadow play from the south).

In “an analysis of the lyrical contents of *pleng lukthung* during 1989 and 1990”, Bupa Meksrithongkam (1991) found that 74.77% of songs in this genre emphasize the sexual values and expressions and attitudes of young male and female lovers. Other themes are related to social values of the rural society such as the concepts about family; the ways of life; tradition and customs; and the values of patriotism. Meksrithongkam summed up that the main themes of Thai country music demonstrate the characteristics of rural society in Thailand.

Besides the lyrical content and singing style, *pleng lukthung* also shows and reproduces representations of Thai identity or Thainess in its melodies and rhythms. The melodies and rhythms of this musical style mostly came from Thai folk music and Thai court music. However, some Western and Asian music from the countries that have influenced Thailand such as China, India, Laos, Japan and Korea have also influenced Thai country music with the music being slightly altered to fit in with the Thai country music style. Furthermore, the main musical instruments in the band of Thai country music are Western instruments, but many Thai musical instruments are added in order to produce a uniquely Thai musical sound. The supplementary Thai musical instruments used in the *pleng lukthung* band include the instruments of Thai folk music from four cultural regions of Thailand: *ranat*, *ching*, *krap*, *thon*, and *klong yao* from the Central; *sueng* and *sor* from the North; *kaen*, *ponglang* and *pin* from the Northeast; *khong* and *mong* from the South. Although it is not easy for foreigners to differentiate the sound of these instruments, Thai people immediately identify the instruments of each region (see in Damrongloet, 1990; and Kropthong, 2004).

### **Identity and *Pleng Puea Chiwit***

I argued in the previous section, that Thai identity is mainly defined by the influence of the elite ruling class who control the media institutions, including Thai popular music. In Chapter Two, I also showed that traditional Thai identity was challenged by the ideas of some radical intellectuals within the middle class who disagreed with the classical concept of identity promoted by the ruling classes. They also redefined Thai identity in ways that broadened the concept of identity to cover more aspects of Thai society. I will discuss the relationship between those redefined identities and *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) in this section.

Some intellectuals like Suluk Sivaraksa, Chai-anan Samudavniya, Nithi Iewsriwong and Thirayut Boonmi (cited in Satayanurat, 2002) argue that the construction of Thai national identity, particularly since the regime of the Prime Minister Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram (1939-1948) has caused many serious problems. For example, because traditional Thai identity places emphasis on the Buddhist Thai ethnic group, other ethnic groups such as Laotians, Chinese, Muslims and other ethnic minorities could not accept this policy and therefore felt that their interests and dignities have been disadvantaged and suppressed (Satayanurat, 2002).

Furthermore, the radical intellectuals disagree with the concept of emphasis being placed upon the monarchy as the ideological centre of the nation. This ideological standpoint neglected the working class as well as the parochial concept of Thai ethnicity and national unity that inspired the motivation to take advantage of or even destroy other countries for the political and financial gain of the nation. For example, during the Cold War, *Siam Manusati* (The Reminiscence of Siam), a daily prominent radio program broadcast by the network radio stations of the military, commented repeatedly on the history of Thai ethnicity and Thailand. The program described how, initially, the empire of the Thai ethnic group, located in the south of China, was invaded by the Chinese many times. Thais, who love peace, had to gradually move to the south but their land was still was invaded continuously. When they settled down in the Indo-China peninsula, the Thais could not retreat anymore because there was no more land available. The historical parallels with the then contemporary situation were hard to ignore, as the countries hostile to Thailand remained the same, namely the neighboring countries of China, Burma, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Winitchakul, 1998). Many intellectuals have suggested that after October 14, 1973, Thailand began to become a nation where a plurality of perspectives in terms of power, economic structure, religious belief, different ways of life, and so on had emerged. From this perspective, redefining Thai identity should come from a position of greater tolerance toward the differences that are evident in ideology, ethnicity, class, gender, religious and region.

The progressive concepts articulated by these thinkers influenced university students and some musicians during the 1970s. The student musicians embraced these ideas and wrote songs that contained strikingly different lyrical content to that

of the existing Thai popular music. In the early period of *pleng puea chiwit*, the songwriters excluded romantic love themes and nationalism from their music. The musicians also refused to perform the music of the main stream such as *pleng lukthung* and *pleng lukgrung* because they considered that the lyrics of this music supported the elite ruling class ideology, and thus the political status quo. Instead, they wrote music that contained themes of oppositional ideas to the dominant classes. However, at the beginning, the musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* borrowed some musical forms from *pleng lukkrung*, *pleng lukthung*, and *pleng plukjai* and then changed some lyrics to create new meanings. The most significant concepts that influenced the songwriters belong to radical intellectuals, such as Jit Pumisak, Asanee Ponjan, Kulap Saipradit and Anut Apapirom. These intellectuals strongly criticized elite ideology and dictatorial governments. The first stage of lyrical content that defined *pleng puea chiwit* abandoned almost all of the themes of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* and adopted a stance echoing the ideas of the radical critics. For example, the lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* excluded the theme of love between boys and girls, sexual fantasy, enjoyment, and traditional nationalism (Janthimathon, personal communication, May 29, 2002). Instead new lyrical themes were created which commented upon social problems such as poverty, corruption and oppression; and suggested solutions such as fighting for their rights and overthrowing the corrupt government (Kiatpaiboon, 1990).

During the 1970s, the musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* brought back *pleng chiwit* (life song), the first version of *pleng lukthung* and *pleng puea chiwit* and reproduced them, but as a form of protest. The lyrical content of *pleng chiwit* deals with the lives of common people such as the poor, rice farmers, laborers, and prisoners. Moreover, it includes political issues such as corruption, cheating in national elections and other social injustices. These themes may be regarded as reflections of a reality, exposing troubled lives amongst the working class but they do not provide any suggestion of political resistance against the authorities or ways of solving social problems. The elite class who favored *pleng lukgrung* humbled and hindered the producers of *pleng chiwit* because they believed that *pleng chiwit* was a lower class form of art that related only to the ordinary people. That was evidenced in the 1940s, by the authoritarian government of Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram who banned *pleng chiwit* (life song) on airtime because of allegations that its content was



insignificant and subversive against the government (Jopkrabuanwan, 1989, Chaiphiphat, 1991, Amatayakun, 1991).

The lyrical content of *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) in the 1970s remained consistent, dealing not only with the lives of low status people but also stimulating people to fight for their rights. Moreover, after the right-wing authorities, such as the military and police, suppressed the political movement of the student activists, the lyrics of this genre paid attention to the radical and sometimes militant activists, including the Thai communist guerillas who were fighting against the state government. Some examples are expressed in *Caravan's* songs such as, “Kon Gap Kwai” (Man and Buffalo), “Khon Pukhao” (The Mountain Fighter) and in *Kamachon's* songs such as “Ku Ja Patiwat” (I Will Make a Revolution).

In “Kon Gap Kwai” (Man and Buffalo), the lyrics suggest that poor rice farmers carry their guns when they are ploughing field with their buffalos in order to protect themselves from the thugs of rentiers who threaten their livelihood, while the lyrics of “Khon Pukhao” (The Mountain Fighter) expresses admiration for the people who were fighting against the state government in the jungle. In the 1970s, the song “Ku Ja Patiwat” (I Will Make a Revolution) also expresses feeling about the oppressed people who were willing to revolutionise the country and bring about a more equitable society.

Unlike *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*, the lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* did not promote the three pillars of the Thainess (the nation, the religion and the King). Instead, they emphasized the basic rights of common people; equity; anti-dictatorship; and a condemnation of the U.S. military, even encouraging the people to fight against the government. They also seemed to encourage Socialist reform. During the late third period, the student activists believed that the Thai government was influenced by U.S. imperialism, and was thus unable to solve the chronic problems in Thai society. Therefore, the people should overthrow the government and establish a new society.

During the chaotic situation of political conflict in Thai society from 1973 to 1976, the student activists were accused by the right-wing groups of being the cause of the disorder confronting Thai society because of numerous demonstrations and

protests. The rightist groups were formed in order to stop the student movement. Members of the right-wing groups consisted of government officials, village boy scouts, vocational students, Nawapon and Krathingdang thugs, renowned for placing pressure on the leftists through physical intimidation and psychological abuse, releasing bombs into crowded protests and assaulting students, rice farmers and labor union leaders at meeting, rallies and demonstrations. The increased pressure of the situation encouraged tighter comradeship among the so-called leftists including the musicians of *pleng puea chiwit*. The musicians were inspired to create the music that represented their strong identity, which differed from the rightist's as in the lyrics, which deal with paying tribute to the dead activists who were killed by the right-wing groups. Eponymous songs such as "Jit Pumisak", by *Caravan*; "Saeng", by *Kamachon*; "Por Intha", by *Lukthung Sachatham*, for example, were songs that represented heroes of the student movement. Jit Pumisak, a leftist intellectual, born in 1930, was arrested and jailed for six years because he wrote several books criticizing the ruling-class ideology. After having been released in 1965, Jit joined the communist-led guerillas in the northeast and he was killed by a government troop in 1966. The lyrics of "Jit Pumisak" are as follows:

Jit Pumisak

Music by *Caravan*

He fell at the edge of the forest  
His blood soaked the troubled land  
A land impoverished and bleak.

On the day he came down from the mountains  
Under the giant eagle's shadow  
His killers were gleeful  
His death brought good fortune  
Promotion, four stars and many stripes

As a shooting star falls, so fell his life  
But how long can we expect to live?  
Ten rich men for each hundred thousand poor,  
A shame between heaven and earth  
But his lot was cast on the side of the poor,  
Speaking out all he had seen  
Prison may hold his body, but never his hopes,  
Determined to struggle for justice

His path blocked and twisted by treacherous rulers,  
So many like him were destroyed  
In the year of 1965  
With the spell of the giant eagle  
He left home and village for guerrilla life in the jungle,  
A life of unending risks  
In May of 1966  
Sun and shadow fled  
On an oxcart path he died

This body, this body of Jit Pumisak  
He died where town and jungle meet  
He died at the edge of the forest,  
His red blood soaking into the northeast soil  
Its red colour will last on and on

He did not die in vain  
His name steadily grows  
The people still learn from his thoughts  
Jit Pumisak, a thinker and writer,  
Has become a candle giving light to humanity

*(Jit Pumisak)*

The lyrics of “Jit Pumisak” reflect a heroic view of the student activists during the 1970s. In terms of the Thai authorities, Jit Pumisak was considered a dangerous rebel, a traitor and a communist. By contrast, the radical students considered that he was the most distinguished hero of modern Thailand and a patriot. So they promised to follow what Jit had done. The students’ hero may be described as an intellectual; a brave fighter against the ruling power who devoted himself to the poor yet was bound to marry. The songs presented an obviously different form of Thai identity to that expressed in the traditional Thai music forms and reflected in the patriotic songs of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*.

During the period in which many *pleng puea chiwit* musicians joined the communist-led guerillas in the jungles, the lyrics portrayed a deep mental hurt from the carnage on October 6, 1976. The songs expressed themes such as their pride in their participation in the war, admiration of their leaders and the manner of fighting they had adopted, and description of the vigorous spirit living in the jungle created, despite the troubles. Although most of these songs did not become popular among the general audience, they were recognized by their serious fans as a part of the history of *pleng puea chiwit* ("Caravan's Leader," 2003).

The lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* produced during the last period under discussion, that of commercial exploitation by the music business, significantly reduced their aggressive approach in order to gain the favor of mass audiences who were not keen on radical political ideology. Some of this musical style during this period did not differ largely from the themes of mainstream music. The lyrics began to include love themes and songs about the enjoyment of life, and the expression of a sense of humour. *Carabao*, a group famous for their opposition to the status quo of Thai society, began to write and perform patriotic songs similar to the existing military patriotic. I have argued in Chapter Seven that since the 1990s, *Carabao* has portrayed themes of Thai identity and ideology such as patriotism, Buddhism and nationalism (see Chapter Seven).

### **Identity and *Pleng String***

Although Western rock music has stronger influence on *pleng string* (young urban music) than on other genres, the contents of this musical style did not lose all of its Thai identity. *Pleng string* still reflects Thainess and Westernness simultaneously, but the aspects of Thainess represented differ from those found in *pleng lukgrung*, *pleng lukthung* and *pleng puea chiwit*. The characteristics of Thainess in *pleng string* represent a new version, updated to be more modern and culturally broader in its ideology, and the music is essentially modern, urban and youth oriented.

Some Thai popular music critics such as Tawan Nutasarin (1991), Sukree Jaroensuk (1995), and Loetchai Kotchayut (2004), criticized the lyrics and vocal styles of *pleng string* stating that they damaged the aesthetics of Thai language because the musicians leave out basics of standard language such as rhyme, combining consonant sounds and slurring notes and words in the songs. However, I argue that although the lyrics of *pleng string* lose some characteristics of Thai poetical composition, which is different from the characteristics of the previous genres such as *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*, the main positive characteristics of Thai people, such as loving fun and relaxation and disliking violence, are also significant in the content of this musical style. Numerous compositions of *pleng string* were very popular among Thai people because the musicians took these characteristics of Thainess to blend into the music exemplified in the songs of

Thongchai McIntyre, a pop superstar, who sings “Fan Ja” (Hello Fans), “Sawadi Pimai” (Happy New Year) and “Banrao” (Our Home). Thai identity is contained in more than the lyrical content, and may be found in the musical form of *pleng string* itself. Even though the musicians took many ideas from Western rock music, not every idea or every Western rock song was accepted. Some songs of Western rock styles that were very popular in the USA but failed when they were introduced to the audience in Thailand including Heavy Metal, Progressive Rock and Punk Rock. Generally Thai audiences tend to appreciate Western rock songs that share some characteristics of traditional Thai music such as sweet melodies, danceable rhythms, relaxed music and enjoyable lyrics. I can judge from my experience that Thai audiences tend to appreciate sweet ballad rock rather than aggressive rock. For example, the following Western rock songs were very popular in Thailand during the 1970s and 1990s, “Don’t Let Me Down” (The Beatles), “Holiday” (The Scorpions), “Hotel California” (The Eagles), “The Sound Of Silence” (Simon and Garfunkel) and “Dust in the Wind” (Kansas). Chatri Kongsuwan, an executive, producer and song-writer of GMM Grammy, supports my argument. He argues that Thai audiences like gentle music and beautiful melodies that follow the characteristics of traditional Thai music. Thus the rule of success for *GMM Grammy’s* song-writers were holding the Thai cultural frame, emphasizing the themes of mildness and non-violence such as helpfulness (*nam jai*), friendship (*mitraparp*), and concern (*kwam huangyai*). Thus the successful song-writers avoid any content that depicts violence, either lyrical or musical (Kongsuwan, 2002).

In addition, rap and hip-hop may also be considered sub-genres of *pleng string* where Thai musicians borrowed these musical forms from the West but performed in Thai language. Although they are not in the mainstream, they have a substantial fan base, especially among young urban audiences in Bangkok. The famous singers in Thai rap and hip-hop are Joey Boy and Dajim. After discussing this form of music with many Thai students who are the audience of these musical styles, I found that some liked these musical styles and some disliked them because they thought that rap and hip-hop were not good music, owing to a lack of melody and because they sounded too different from previous Thai music. In contrast, Kongsuwan (2002) confirmed that Thai rap and hip-hop still contained Thai identity because the lyrics were written in rhyme with a sense of humour similar to the

rhymes and humour of Thai folk songs from local Central region such as *lamtat*, *pleng choi* and *isaew*, although the melodies and rhythms of the music were exactly similar to Western music.

Many musicians and businessmen who created *pleng string* came from Chinese-Thai or European-Thai families, and thus presented their identities subtly in the music. For example, the most successful music businessmen such as Paiboon Damrongchaitham, the founder of Grammy Entertainment, and Kriangkrai Chotchetsak, the founder of R.S. Promotion, are Sino-Thai; while Thongchai McIntyre, and Nicole Theriault, *pleng string* superstars are American-Thai. The Thai identities represented were various, modern and hi-tech instead of traditionally Thai. Unlike other genres of Thai popular music, *pleng string* emerged during the period of democratic and diverse culture in Thai society. After the 1980s, other ethnic groups in Thai society including Chinese-Thai, European-Thai, Islam-Thai, Christian-Thai and Anglo-European played important roles in shaping Thai identity. The degree of cultural identity of each ethnic group is not equal and does not depend on the number of its representatives but depends on their political and economic power in Thai society. For example, although the population of Chinese-Thai in the 2000s is much less than Buddhist Thais and *Isan*- Laos ethnics, Chinese-Thai ethnics dominate Thai politics and economic life ("Taksin, dictatorship," 2005). Chinese Thais have progressively dominated contemporary Thai culture. Most big business firms in Thailand are owned by Chinese-Thai ethnics, (Jory, 2002) but most labourers are from indigenous Thai ethnic groups. Most local and national politicians in 2004 were also Chinese-Thai ethnics, including the current Prime Minister Taksin Shinawat, as are many ministers in his cabinet. Unlike Chinese ethnics in other South-east Asian cities, assimilation of Chinese into Thai society has prevailed because of government pressure promoting assimilation and intermarriage between Chinese and Thai ethnic groups for many decades (Satayanurat, 2002). However, Chinese customs survive and cultural distinctions are still visible in Bangkok and other cities; for example, the Celebration of Chinese New Year, titles of family names, words referring to family members (different from those words in the Thai language) and Chinese trademarks and language in business. During the period of economic growth from the 1980s to 2000s many Chinese Thai people became very rich, and they tended to present their superiority over indigenous Thai and Laotian ethnic groups by using a different

system of signification. For example, instead of using indigenous Thai words, they chose Bali-Sanskrit and English words for their first and family names and instead of using Thai title such as *khun*, *nai* (Mr) or *nang* (Mrs) before the name of a man or woman, they used Chinese title such as *hea* (older brother) or *je* (older sister) before the names. Teochew people, the main Chinese ethnic group in Bangkok and other big cities, who speak Thai language in their daily lives still use Chinese to name their family members:

Table 8.1: *Comparison between Teochew Chinese and Indigenous Thai Words*

<b>Chinese word</b>	<b>Indigenous Thai word</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>pa-pa</i>	<i>por</i>	father
<i>ah-ma</i>	<i>mae</i>	mother
<i>ah-hea</i>	<i>pi chai</i>	elder bother
<i>ah-ti</i>	<i>nong chai</i>	younger bother
<i>ah-muay</i>	<i>nong sao</i>	younger sister
<i>ah-ee</i>	<i>na sao</i>	aunt
<i>ah-jek</i>	<i>lung</i>	uncle

Other Teochew words which are popular among urban people are *jeng* (excellent), *sing* (new), *suay* (bad luck), *ngi-ngao* (silly), *si-sua* (muddle), *jao* (to go off), *seng* (to take over business), *hang* (warehouse) and *huay* (bad) (Pongpaiboon, 1970). These Chinese words were often included in the music, especially *pleng string*, although the main words remain Thai language.

As a university lecturer in the field of Mass Communication and Music Education for more than twenty years, I met many people who work in the mass media in Thailand when I was supervising my student practice in media companies in Bangkok between 1995 and 2004. I found that, in the media businesses, although all TV and radio stations belong to government departments, popular music is controlled by companies that belong to Chinese Thai businesspersons. Approximately eighty percent of the music market in Thailand is owned by *Grammy Entertainment* and *RS Promotions* which are controlled by Thais of Chinese descent.

They are now part of the new elite in so far as they blend Thai, Chinese and Western characteristics into Thai popular music, especially in *pleng string*. Their cultural influences are increasingly replacing the old indigenous Thai elite's influence.

## **Ideology and Thai Popular Music**

It is possible to argue that the ruling ideas or ideologies are embedded in a society because they are shared by almost everyone and they seem absolutely normal. With the construction of national identity and the extension of hegemony through the centralized culture, Thai popular music, especially *pleng lukgrung*, exploited as an institution, the manner in which Thai people are socialized into accepting the dominant ideology. The people are not forced but they are convinced to consent to the dominant ideology, which becomes hegemonic.

### **Ideology in *Pleng lukgrung***

The ideologies conveyed in *pleng lukgrung* consist of some aspects of Thai identity and nationalism as defined above. The continued emphasis on patriotism, nationalism and Buddhist-inspired behaviour forms the dominant ideology because individually and collectively they support the interests of the ruling groups who coalesce around the Royal Family, the military and business interests, and all are based in Bangkok. The themes of patriotic song (*pleng plukjai*), a sub genre of *pleng lukgrung*, define the concepts outlined by King Rama VI and Prince Damrong Rajanupap. The patriotic themes describe Siamese identity as including the three pillars of Siamese society- Nation, Religion and the Monarchy; or in Thai *Chat, Satsana, Pramaha Kasat*; the love of freedom or independence, collectively and individually; a dislike of violence; and ability to assimilate, or compromise. There is no evidence to suggest that *pleng lukgrung* expresses any idea of resistance to the three pillars of Siamese society or the concept of independence.

In 2003, I traveled to Bangkok to visit Surapon Thonawanik, a famous *pleng lukgrung* song-writer and a 'national artist'. At his home, we talked for more than three hours about his life, work and ideology. Surapon was born in Bangkok in 1931. His mother was a servant who worked for his father. Surapon was illegitimate, as his father was already married. When his mother became pregnant, she fled from



Surapon's father and did not return. After Surapon was born, his mother could not take care of him because of her poverty, so she gave him to her sister, a dumb woman who lived with Buddhist nuns in a temple. His mother died when he was six, and he had to beg for food and sleep in garbage bins. He often used to stay with Buddhist monks and became a novice monk, thus learning to read and write as well as Buddhist doctrines.

He used to live and work as a servant for famous authors of drama and fiction such as Rapiorn (Suwat Woradilok), Thaweeep Woradilok and Ing-on (Sakkasem Boontakom), which provided a good opportunity for him to read the literature of those authors. Several books written by Laung Wijit Wathakan were his favorite books. He learnt how to be an author from reading those books. He then lived with song-writers, and learned how to write songs by observation and imitation of the song-writers. It took him a long time before he became successful at this skill.

Although his life was difficult and he had to struggle since he was young, he had never blamed others or society. He believed in the Buddhist philosophy that said his troubled life was because of his karma in a past life. He often chose some Buddhist doctrines to put in his lyrical music. Surapon said that he never felt discouraged when he was experiencing failure or was in trouble. He believed that it is never too late study-we can study any time. He also believed that one should not be sorry about disappointment because sadness and happiness are equal, the same as day and night, our lives and other lives.

Surapon composed more than one thousand songs for many singers and many of them became famous. As a prominent song-writer, he won six *Golden Record Awards* and several other awards. Surapon received the award of the *National Artist* from the Office of the National Culture Commission in 1997 when he was sixty-six. The brief biography presented at the ceremony explained that Surapon's music consists of his life philosophy, encouragement, reflections of tenderness, love and the relationships of human beings.

The biography and ideology of Surapon provide an insight into the way the dominant ideology is constructed in music. I conclude from the evidence that the song-writer adopts the dominant ideology from the elite because he lives with the

elite and thereby embraces elite ideology which makes him happy. Beside his loyalties to the nation, Buddhism and the monarchy, the significant Thai characteristics that Surapon adopted consist of love of freedom or independence; the dislike of violence; and the ability to assimilate a contradictory position, or compromise with conflicting opinions. He also appropriated the dominant ideology as an instrument to make a living. He associates with the ideology and then transmits this ideology through his music. He said that he had been supported by the nobility all his life. Surapon's music is very popular among elite and urban middle classes (Thonawanik, 2002). That is why he became successful in his career of *pleng lukgrung* song-writer.

### **Ideology in *Pleng lukthung***

In Thai country music (*pleng lukthung*), although most musicians come from rural and working-class backgrounds, their music still represents the dominant Thai ideology because the producers of this musical style are formed within that ideology and to succeed musicians must reiterate its content; otherwise they will get no airplay. The ideology expressed in *pleng lukthung* is a blend of various ideologies (those of Thai people, especially in the country) including conservatism, patriarchy, nationalism, Buddhism, individualism and capitalism. These ideologies are spread through cultural practices such as education, religion, employment, marketing, child rearing, and through the media, especially *pleng lukthung*. Through these practices, certain values are reproduced and passed on to Thai people. Thus *pleng lukthung* as a mass media product has played an important role in reproducing these values for more than sixty years.

Although sometimes artists have resisted the dominant ideology, their powers are too feeble, compared to the political and economic power of the elite ruling class and middle classes who happen to control the means of distribution and exhibition of the music. The song-writers and performers of *pleng lukthung* are still dependent on the ruling class which controls the media and broadcast policy, and middle class business persons who control the music industry. However, within the dominant ideology, there are various sub-ideologies, which differ from the dominant ideology reflected in the urban music (*pleng lukgrung*). Moreover, within the limited power of the *pleng lukthung* producers, sometimes contested and resistant ideologies

challenging the dominant ideology are also presented in the contents of this musical style although they are masked by the style of humour and satirical expression (Siriyuwasak, 1990 and 1998). Unlike 'song for life', the lyrical content of Thai country music does not openly criticise Thai society and the elite class. Social comment in *pleng lukthung* is regularly presented in a humorous way.

Reflections of nationalism are prominent in Thai country music, from past to present, in terms of its lyrical content and forms. The way in which patriotism is expressed in this musical style is strongly influenced by the patriotic songs of urban music (*pleng lukgrung*). Many *pleng lukthung* lyrics reflect themes of patriotism, support for war (especially the Cold War), anti-Communism, and the lives and loves of soldiers. Patriotism and heroic deeds are often articulated in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung* as Siriyuwasak (1998) suggests. She points out that most *pleng lukthung* stars pay tribute to glorious warriors, especially ordinary soldiers who are praised for their patriotism. Unlike in *pleng lukgrung* where most patriotic songs were written by the ruling class or authorities, *pleng lukthung* emphasises the lives and loves of ordinary soldiers or conscripts. Patriotic lyrics in *pleng lukthung* appear in the songs, which are sung by both male and female vocalists, often portraying romantic love between a soldier and his girlfriend.

Many songs of the male singers portray the lives of the common soldiers and reflect the terrible job they have to do in the battlefield for the good of the country. The songs of female singers, as girlfriends or wives of the soldiers, tend to praise the soldier's heroics. Although these songs do not strongly express pro-war sentiments, their praise for the warriors as heroes is unquestioning. This indirectly unquestioning praise for the soldiers supports war. Thailand joined many wars including sending numerous soldiers to join US army to fight in the soils of other countries such as in Korea, Vietnam and Laos. Joining the war was not simply to defend itself from an enemy's invasion but to support the US interests and the Thai military government. The reason for Thailand's participation may be regarded the same as the USA's - to prevent the communist menace from conquering the world. The enemies of Thailand at that time were all communist countries. During the wars, Thai government radio made broadcasts, accusing the communist countries of representing the most dangerous evil, at least three times a day. However, after the USA established

diplomatic relations with China and other communist countries, Thailand followed. Many intellectuals in Thailand became confused by the new political position, which they found ambiguous. Nevertheless, the lyrical content of Thai country music always expresses admiration for the warriors as heroes.

There are a lot of *pleng lukthung* lyrics that deal with patriotic ordinary soldiers or conscripts and the wars. These songs include “La Nong Pai Vietnam” (I’ll Leave You for Vietnam), sung by Waipot Petsupan; “Thahan Mai Pai Kong” (A New Conscript Goes To The Army), sung by Yodrak Salakjai; “Luksao Pukarn” (The Colonel’s Daughter), sung by Sayan Sanya; “Thahan Akat Khat Rak” (An Air Force Need Love), sung by Seksak Pukanthong; and “Thahan Kain Pat Song” (A Second Shift Conscript), sung by Surin Paksiri.

Beside romantic love between soldiers and their girlfriends, the themes of these songs support the dominant ideologies of nationalism, patriotism and anti-communism. A well-known song like “Siam Mueang Yim” (Siam, The Land of Smiles), written by Lop Burirat and sung by Pumpuang Duangjan, is a good example of a *lukthung* patriotic song that has received several awards. Lop attempts to enhance nationalistic feelings by describing the generosity of Thai people who always welcome visitors and to encourage Thai people to be proud of being Thai.

#### **“Siam Mueang Yim” (Siam, the Land of Smiles)**

Be proud that you are a Thai  
Uncolonised and generous  
Siam is the land of smiles  
We should be proud

The Thai is known for her sincerity  
Whoever you are, our nation welcomes you  
Crossing the Mekong, the troubled water,  
We welcome you with our smiles

We are famous, we the generous people  
Caution, our settler  
For our tradition, a bowl of rice  
Must not be forgotten

We Thai love our nation and religion  
Adore the virtuous king

Respect our right, forever welcomed  
With a Siamese smile

(Translated by Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 1998, p. 222-223)

The music of “Siam Mueang Yim” is a sweet melody with a slow tempo much like a ballad in Western popular music or *pleng lukgrung* but it is the different singing style, which provides its authenticity. The slurred notes and the use of common words in singing is a usual feature in *pleng lukthung*. The lyrical content is not different from the lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* patriotic songs. The song expresses a pride in being Thai and a willingness to proclaim pride in the country. The song explores as the idea of Thai pride because Thailand has never been colonised by any nation and the land is so fertile that everyone wants to settle there. It implies that Thailand is better than its neighboring countries, which have all been colonised by Western powers or devastated by terrible civil wars. The composer did not forget to emphasise the faithfulness of the three pillars of Thai nationhood (the nation, religion and the monarchy). The song was released at the same time the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) released the tourist campaign including the ‘catch phrase’ “Thailand, the Land of Smiles”. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (1998) argues “Siam Mueang Yim” is an exemplification of cultural negotiation between the representative of resistant ideology and of dominant ideology. Due to the fact that the *pleng lukthung* composers have produced many sexually suggestive songs for commercial purposes that challenge the moral standard of the elite classes, simultaneously they have inserted some patriotic songs in the same album to gain favour from the ruling elite. In this instance, they were successful commercially and politically. I agree with Ubonrat that there is a negotiation between the different ideologies but would argue that “Siam Mueang Yim” reflects the real perceptions of the song-writer. I have talked to Lop Burirat about this song. Lop claimed that he believed in what wrote in “Siam Mueang Yim”. I found that he did not have any radical ideology. Moreover, he states that what he has written in songs affects the views of people in Thai society that he has observed throughout his life. So Lop Burirat’s music reflects not only his perceptions but also those of his audience (Kamjareun, 2002).

The ideologies related to conservatism, patriarchy, nationalism and Buddhism are frequently reflected simultaneously in the lyrical content and forms of *pleng*

*lukthung*, especially the songs composed during 1950s to 1970s. In the song “Khat Khon Hung Khao” (I Need Someone to Cook for Me), sung by Yodrak Salakjai, the lyrical content reflects a blending conservative ideology, patriarchy, nationalism and Buddhism. Part of the lyric follows:

I have nobody to cook for me at home  
I need you to do that  
My parents are too old to do that  
And I am so busy, so nobody takes care of me

Come on, come on, come on and be my housewife  
If we have a son, I'll encourage him to be a military officer  
And if we have a daughter, I'd like her to be a nurse  
In order to treat us if we are sick

I have no one to cook for me at home  
I need you to do that  
Although I will lose out  
'Cause I'll let you share my family name, you don't need to pay for it  
Come on to love, my darling  
Come on to solidarity with me

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

Unlike “Siam Mueang Yim”, the music of “Khat Khon Hung Khao” (I Need Someone to Cook for Me) is very lively, with a Cha-cha rhythm. The lyrics, sung by the male singer, simultaneously reflect conservatism and patriarchy, where the boy needs the girl marry him because he wants her to do housework, take care of him and his parents. It reflects the values of extended family and a traditional society controlled by men in which men use their power to their own advantage while women are encouraged into domestic and subservient social roles. The lyrics encourage the son to be a military officer, which reflects the ideology of patriotism as well as nationalism relating to a support for war. Buddhist ideology is also reflected by the practical values of reciprocal gratitude (*kwam katanyu*) whereby good children take care of their parents because their parents have raised them. These values suit the political situation because of the fact that elderly people in Thailand are not provided for by any government pension. Thus the quality of life of elderly people in Thailand depends entirely on their retirement funds and *kwam katanyu* (reciprocal gratitude) of their children.

### **Ideology in *Pleng Puea Chiwit***

The concept of ideology, suggested by Karl Marx and Louis Althusser, is about the ideology of the dominant class of a society is proposed to all members of that society in order to make the ruling classes' interests appear to be the interests of all, and thereby achieve hegemony (cited in O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002, p. 213). In Thai society, the dominant ideology is always presented as "neutral", while all others that differ from the norm are seen as radical. To maintain their power, Thai governments and elite groups try to influence people by broadcasting their opinions in order to persuade Thai people to accept, adopt and internalise their values and norms as being natural. But the dominant groups cannot control society completely because there are people who refuse to accept these values. The dominant ideology has been challenged by some subordinate and minority groups over time. There has been a continual negotiation and struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups. Since the 1970s, the content of *pleng puea chiwit* has expressed significant political ideologies especially various oppositional and alternative ideologies, including pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-corruption, anti-war, anti-Chinese, pro-democracy, Marxism, Maoism, socialism, and Communism. These ideologies were presented via the music directly or indirectly, depending on appropriation of different situations or condition concerning the musicians (see in Opakun, 2001, and Janthimathon, 2002). For example, the music during the 1970s directly condemned the military government for its totalitarianism and supported socialism, while the music during the 1980s and the 1990s criticized the corrupted politicians and supported nationalism.

Many songs in the style of *pleng puea chiwit* have tended to contradict the dominant ideology. They include radical and conservative aspects, and regressive and progressive aspects, all at the same time. Particularly, during the period when the student activists and musicians moved from cities to join the communist-led guerillas in jungles, the lyrics proposed a revolution by encouraging Thai working classes to overthrow the elite government and establish a new ideologically based society. For example, in "Tang Tom Hom Raeng Fai" (Acceleration and Increase of Powerful Fire), composed and performed by *Caravan* during 1976 and 1981, the lyrics obviously suggest socialist revolution. Some lyrics are as follows:

Revolt against the old social system  
Revolt for us and democracy  
Come together and push the historical wheel  
Into real and clear independence  
Revolt, accelerate and increase powerful fire  
In order to achieve the ideological society

(Translated by Lமானோ Eamsa-ard)

The lyrics of “Tang Tom Hom Raeng Fai” propose revolution and socialist ideology, although the word “socialist” is not referred to directly, but the listeners infer its meaning from the political standing of the musicians who performed the music. Surachai Janthimathon wrote several revolutionary songs after the brutal slaughter of October 6, 1976 when the radical intellectuals despaired about overthrowing the corrupt government and establishing parliamentary democracy. At that time they considered that socialism was probably the only alternative. *Pleng puea chiwit* was used as a method of expressing the oppositional ideology held by the intellectuals.

In 1984, the government released a campaign to encourage the buying of products that were made in Thailand and *Carabao* released the album of “Made in Thailand”, containing the same content as the campaign that made *Carabao* very popular. The musical forms and lyrical content represent modern Thai identity as a blend of national identity and Western culture (*Carabao*, 2003). In “Made in Thailand”, *Carabao* borrowed the melody and rhythmic style of a Thai folk song from Supanburi (the central region of Thailand), used Thai musical instruments such as *klui* (a bamboo flute) and combined them with electric the guitar in a Western country rock style. The lyrics portray an allegedly authentic Thai culture is reproduced in Thai products of good quality. This song had the effect of encouraging a strong sense of nationalism among Thai people because it advocated a return to some sense of their authentic identity and rejected the unquestioning acceptance of Western culture.

After enjoying the success of “Made in Thailand”, *Carabao* wrote several patriotic songs dealing with the patriots in Thai history, including “JaoTak” (King



Taksin); “Kon Thai Rue Plao” (Are You Thai?); and “Bang-ra-jan” - the heroic performance of people from Bang-ra-jan village.

After the economic crisis in 1997, *Carabao* again emphasized nationalist ideology in its music, which helped the music become even more popular. This nationalist music was welcomed by the people controlling the Thai music scene and broadcast via the mass media throughout Thailand. For example, in “Khon Thai Rak Kan” (Thais Love each other), and “Nak Su Pu Ying Yai” (The Great Fighter), the songs express the ideology of nationalism. The latter song was used as the advertising jingle for “Carabao Daeng” (Red Carabao), an energy drink owned by *Carabao*. After the song was broadcast on television and radio, the energy became very popular among working classes. I drank few bottles of the energy drink myself but I could not tell the difference between *Carabao Daeng* and other energy drinks. I argue that the energy drink was a commercial success because the song “Nak Su Pu Ying Yai” (The Great Fighter) pleased the audience and customers who were motivated by the nationalist theme and exciting music.

Some of the lyrics of “Nak Su Pu Ying Yai” (The Great Fighter) are as follows:

There was a legend of fighting for liberty and freedom,  
Aim to defend and preserve this land  
The heroic performance belongs to Thai people and Thai ancestors  
They were the great fighters and superb Thai people  
They were also the willing descendants who intended to reach their goal.  
Although exhausted, they would break through it  
Although mentally tired, they would force themselves  
In order to protect the land as their ancestors have done.

...  
“Red Carabao”, “Red Carabao” pays tribute to the great fighters  
“Red Carabao”, “Red Carabao”  
“Red Carabao”, “Red Carabao”

...  
(Translated by Lamanao Eamsa-ard)

*Carabao* wrote and performed the song in rock style with powerful electric guitar and bass and energetic male vocals. In the advertising spot for *Carabao Daeng* on television, Ad Carabao, the presenter and leading singer, and other members, dress and act like urban labourers. The lyrical content of “Nak Su Pu Ying Yai” (The

Great Fighter) is similar to most military patriotic songs but the musical style is very different. Unlike the traditional patriotic songs, the music of this song contains the sounds of heavy rock beats and electric guitars instead of march beats and wind instruments. Yuenyong (Ad Carabao), the song-writer, borrowed the military patriotic themes of Luang Wijiwathakan to promote the energy drinks and he gained great commercial success. *Carabao's* music reflects a new version of nationalism that emphasizes the unity of ordinary people while the ideology of the elite ruling class emphasizes the security of the nation, religion and monarchy. Ad Carabao has an ability to produce appropriate words and melodies for particular themes, especially these concerned with Thai identity. Most of the Thai audience are familiar with military patriotic songs and those songs became representative of the dominant ideology in Thai society. But the military patriotic songs sound monotonous to young audiences because the music is in an old-fashioned, *pleng lukgrung* style with most of the rhythms in march style or *ramwong* (traditional Thai dancing song). When the audience heard patriotic songs in new styles such as pop rock music, the young audiences could accept them easily. For this reason, the music of *Carabao* has been financially successful and has contributed to the group's fame. However, although the lyrical content of "Nak Su Pu Ying Yai" seems to support the dominant ideology, the music and the costumes of the presenters contest the elite values. Indeed the word *Red Carabao*, which refers to a leftist symbol during the Cold War, seems to provoke right-wing groups. There is another energy drink named *Krathing Daeng* which shares a name with the Krating Daeng thugs who killed many student activists during the 1970s (Winichakul, 2001). I explored public opinions on the Internet such as "longdo.com", "member.thai.net", "carabao.com" and "mitchon.co.th" when the song was released in 2002 and I found that the audience expressed both positive and negative opinions about "Nak Su Pu Ying Yai". Some fans who like the song said that *Carabao* did well in terms of blending patriotic song and *pleng puea chiwit* and others said that the song was a satire on the patriotic song of the elite. But some loyal fans of *pleng puea chiwit* argue that *Carabao* exploited nationalist and leftist ideologies for its own benefit and they also accused *Carabao* of being absolute Capitalists and of betraying the ideology of *pleng puea chiwit*. However, several members of the *Carabao Fan Club* defended *Carabao* saying that it was a right of *Carabao* to use a capitalist vehicle for their survival because they were living in capital society (see in *Has 'song for life' died yet?*).

In addition to expressing praise for Thai patriots, *Carabao* has written songs criticizing Chinese capitalist politicians, such as “Tao-hu-yi” (Fermented Tofu), “Siam-Law-Teu” (Siam Pig), and “Tayat Trakun Yi” (The Heir of Yi’s Family). These songs contain colloquial Chinese words and satirise the criminal activities of Chinese-Thai businesspersons and politicians such as bribing, monopolization and corruption. Some lyrics of “Tayat Trakun Yi<sup>5</sup>” (The Heir of Yi’s Family) are:

Ai Ya!

...

Unlucky we were born as Thai people  
‘Cause the government is only concerned about the capitalists

....

The rice farmers were in trouble.  
And they had to sell out their lands  
To the families of the *Yi*’s families

...

After selling out their lands, they had to leave their home  
And worked in factories of Chinese businessmen.

...

Thai people are waiting for the government service  
Please work for the major people,  
Not only for the minority such as descendants of the *Yi* families.  
Or our country might ruin.

...

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

In addition, several *Carabao* lyrics contain offensive words and coarse language, depicting drug use and satirizing political leaders. These songs have not been broadcast since the 1980s, for example, “Ham Tiam” (Artificial Testicles), “Kancha” (Marihuana), “Thinner” (The Paint Thinner), and “Khon Khikong” (Corrupted Persons).

The commercial success of *Carabao* proves that any music that supports the dominant ideology can achieve popularity. In contrast, if it opposes the dominant ideology, it will be rejected and will never been commercially successful because most of Thai people agree with the dominant ideology, an agreement achieved

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<sup>5</sup> “Yi” is a Chinese-Thai word, which means a type of eye, which looks like narrowed eyes. The word “Yi’s families” refers to Chinese people who have narrow almond-shaped eyes.

through hegemonic practices on the part of the elites. The contemporary musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* learned how to make their music commercially successful from successful mainstream musicians in the genres of *pleng lukthung* and *pleng string*. Thus the ‘songs for life’ since the 1980s share some of the major characteristics of the dominant ideology with the other three genres of the contemporary Thai popular music. However, some songs of the *pleng puea chiwit* in the 2000s continue to reflect an oppositional ideology, one that wishes to see an equitable society created in Thailand and the wrongs perpetrated against the poor are rectified.

### **Ideology in *Pleng String***

In the Chapter Five the origins of *pleng string* were shown to mainly derive from Western pop rock music and *pleng lukgrung* and its musical performance was also supported by the elite ruling class, while the musicians tended to be from the well-educated middle class in urban society. The main purpose of the music business is commercial success and thus *pleng string* acts as an institution which maintains the dominant ideology such as capitalism and rarely threatens the elite ruling group in Thai society. It continues to promote a hegemonic system and a popular culture that favours the wealthy. *Pleng string* continued to maintain the ideology of the dominant class as *pleng lukgrung* had done.

However, some aspects of the dominant ideology since the 1980s have changed because the elements of the dominant class have changed. Besides the indigenous Thai elite, many Chinese Thai elite and upper-middle classes have emerged in urban areas after economic growth in the 1980s and they dominate economy and politics in Thailand (Jory, 2004). Patrick Jory claims that the development of the political system has given new protection to Sino-Thai identity (ibid). *Pleng string* is the representative culture of the young urban elite and middle classes. Thus ideologies presented in *pleng string* are more various than in *pleng lukgrung*

I demonstrated in the genealogy of *pleng string* that the main element of the music is the synthesis of *pleng lukgrung* and Western rock music and that *pleng string* still reflects the ideology of its heritage. I also stated that *pleng lukgrung* was absolutely the reflection of the ruling elite ideology, especially in relation to

traditional Thai identity and nationalism. While Thai elite classes initially condemned the Western rock music as an alien culture, the elite government opened the door to the rock music by allowing the American Army to have bases in Thailand for three decades. Western rock music, which represented modernity and Westernness, was standardised into a safe and familiar sound in order to be more in line with the moral standards of the Thai elite classes. As a result of this, the sounds of *pleng string* (Thai pop rock) were milder than Western rock music but rather harder than *pleng lukgrung*. In the other words, the defining elements of *pleng string* derived from a cultural compromise between Thai traditional ideology and modern Western ideology.

In addition, because the Chinese Thai ethnic group played an important role in the music industry and mass media in Thailand, they also conveyed their identity in Thai popular music especially in *pleng string*, which created more room (compared to other musical styles) for them to represent their cultural identity because young urban audiences tend to embrace novelty. That is the reason why you can see many famous *pleng string* stars who look European and Chinese. These musicians present their identities by using not only European and Chinese words in their music but also their ethnic images as well.

Like TV and movies stars, *pleng string* stars are the role models for young audiences. The most important popular music value in Thai society is mass consumption. Music companies use *pleng string* to promote their music, artists, and other products. Music companies use twenty-four-hour TV promotion to sell their records or products. Although the musicians have autonomy in the creation of their music, expression of their identities through their music is limited because they have to work under the policies of the music companies that they worked for. The most important value of *pleng string* in a capitalistic society is mass consumption.

The music companies attempted to expand the *pleng string* market in order to target most audiences. Many sub-genres of *pleng string* such as ballad, pop-rock, heavy metal, punk, modern rock, rap, hip hop and alternative rock were produced to cater for the demands of various audiences. Each sub-genre not only presented different musical forms and lyrical content but also reflected different identities and ideologies. For example, ballad and pop rock tend to reflect traditional Thai identity

and elite ideology as *pleng lukgrung*, while heavy metal, modern rock and hip hop tended to reflect alternative ideologies, and present a challenge to the dominant ideology.

However, since the new capitalist elite gradually took political power from the old aristocratic elite groups, the dominant ideology in Thai society also changed. Dramatic emphasis on economic growth over two decades has made Thai society more and more capitalist, consumerist and globalised and the negative effects of this, such as environmental destruction and increased inequality between rural and urban populations, have been neglected. While the new elite continued to push the country toward absolute capitalism and globalization, some old elite groups have played a significant role in warning against the dangers of accelerated economic growth (Boonmi, 2005). King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the Queen, for example, were the leaders of many social campaigns, campaigning for forest preservation, projects for self-sufficiency and independent economic standing, anti-corruption and most recently non-violent unity between south Muslim militants and Thai authorities (Ibid). I consider that the King's proposal and recommendations have made many new elite groups unhappy because the King's ideas oppose the ideas of the capitalist elite. But the new elite could not directly resist the King's ideas because they are aware that most Thai people love and support the king. However, I believe that nothing could stop the strong stream of capitalism and consumerism in Thai society because the power of the new elite groups was very strong.

Musicians of *pleng string* also addressed these issues in their lyrics, in songs such as "Rung Kinnam" (The Rainbow), sung by Asanee and Wasan Chotikul; "Dan Civilise" (Civilisation Society), sung by Thanet Warakulnukror; and "Rakpa" (Forest Preservation), performed by a group of famous singers. However, the lyrics tends to be limited by the generic conventions of *pleng string* defined by the concept of compromise and nonviolence (Kongsuwan, 2002). The musicians could not directly condemn capitalism in their lyrics because the genre does not allow them to present ideas that are problematic in the social context. If they abandoned romantic love themes and replaced them with social issues, their songs would be reclassified into another genre such as *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life) or something else and they would have to find another target audience. If their music contains images and

themes of rural areas such as paddy fields, rice farmers, or peasants, the music might be excluded from the genre of *pleng string* and would be reclassified as *pleng lukthung* (country music). According to Kulapong Naknoi (2002), the discrimination between the musicians of *pleng string* or *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* still exists in the 2000s. The musicians of *pleng string* tend to avoid doing what the musicians of *pleng lukthung* and *pleng puea chiwit* had done in order to present the superiority of modernity, urbanity, education, and ethnicity over the musicians who play other musical styles. Naknoi also stated that the difference between the target audiences of each genre was still significant. The majority of listeners to *pleng string* were young urban people in Bangkok while listeners to *pleng lukthung* and *pleng puea chiwit* came from the provinces (Naknoi, 2002).

To sum up, *pleng string* is a reflection of ideological compromise among various groups of urban middle class and new elite people who live in capitalistic society in Thailand. Ideologies represented in this musical genre are not unique anymore, and a multiplicity of ideological standpoints is represented. However, these ideologies tend to support rather than resist the dominant ideology in Thai society. Although at times they present alternative or resistant ideologies, these performances tend to be standardized by the industrial process of the music industry in order to be accepted by the dominant group, thus preventing their exclusion from the genre of *pleng string*.

## **Conclusion**

A major theme of this chapter is the construction of social and cultural identities in a specific cultural context. At the beginning of this chapter I provided general comments about the significance of Thai identity as expressed in Thai popular music and the relationship this identity has in relation to a certain form of Thai ideology. These identities were reproduced by different groups of people in Thai society over a long period. Identity construction can be seen as ideological because it involves social interests and unequal power relations that change over time. This chapter has been interested in the expression of ideology in everyday society and its relationship to political ideologies.

My exploration of the relationship between Thai identity and the four genres of Thai popular music shows that factors such as history, style, musical forms and lyrical content, as well the lives of personnel involved in the production of the genres, have shaped their ideological content. I found that *pleng lukgrung* is representative of urban Buddhist Thai people from the capital city of the nation. It also presents the perspectives of the elite ruling class through the expression of their collective values, ideas, beliefs and feelings. While *pleng lukgrung* reflects urban and formal Thai identity, defined by the elite and the ruling class, *pleng lukthung* reflects a rural and informal Thai identity, defined by lower class rural people. The lyrics of *pleng lukthung* portray dimensions of rural and urban society in Thailand including ways of life, customs and traditions. The lyrical content of this musical genre contains not only narratives about the troubled lives of poor farmers and workers but emotions and plentiful sensual pleasures, which are similarly expressed in the Thai folk tradition. This genre not only presents the cultural identities of different Thai ethnic groups from the central region but also those from other regions of Thailand including the northeast, the north and the south. In addition, both *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* promote the three pillars of Thai nation (the nation, the religion and the king).

In contrast, *pleng puea chiwit* presents a different identity from *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*. Rather than solely portraying the identity of the Buddhist Thai ethnic group from the central region, *pleng puea chiwit* presents many characteristics of other ethnic groups such as Laotians, Muslim, hill tribes, and other ethnic minorities in Thailand. The musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* refuse to accept mainstream themes such as romantic love themes, sexual fantasy, enjoyment, and traditional nationalism in their music. They tend to present the lives of humble and suppressed people. Moreover, this musical genre presents the ideas of radical people, such as the left-wing groups who were excluded by the ruling elite from Thai culture.

The content of the *pleng string* did not lose all of its Thai identity although it was influenced by Western rock music. The main positive characteristics of Thai people, such as loving fun and relaxation and disliking violence, are still significant in the content of *pleng string*. This musical genre also presents an expression of other ethnic groups in Thai society, including Chinese-Thai, European-Thai, Islamic-Thai,



Christian-Thai and Anglo-European, besides Buddhist Thai ethnic groups. Chinese Thai ethnics, who now dominate Thai politics and economics, also dominate the music industry in Thailand and their identity is presented in *pleng string*. Therefore, this musical genre blends the character of ethnic Thai, Chinese Thai and Western identities, suggesting the hegemony of traditional ideological forms in Thai popular music has weakened.

Ideologies in the four genres of Thai popular music are different. Exploring the biographies of the musicians and their music, I found that the main themes of *pleng lukgrung* derive from ideologies such as nationalism, Buddhism, and patriotism. These ideologies tend to support the interests of the dominant class, especially the ruling elite in Bangkok and other major cities. In *pleng lukthung* the music still represents the dominant Thai ideology but it differs from *pleng lukgrung* in that it has taken traditional concerns and refocused them. The dominant ideology expressed in *pleng lukthung* is a blending of various ideologies pertinent to the rural background common to most Thai people, including conservatism, patriarchy, nationalism, Buddhism, individualism and capitalism. *Pleng puea chiwit* has tended to present an opposition to the dominant ideology. This musical genre contains significant oppositional political ideologies including pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-corruption, anti-war, Marxism, Maoism, socialism, and Communism. In short, it is the left wing branch of Thai popular music in its original form. However, this musical style at the present time includes both radical and conservative aspects, and regressive and progressive aspects at the same time. It also contains dominant ideological aspects in its lyrical content such as nationalism, anti-Chinese sentiment and patriotic songs, and one could argue capitalism in the commercial interest has captured *pleng puea chiwit*, with “Carabao Daeng” exemplifying this trend. Finally, in *pleng string*, the biographies of the musicians and an analysis of their music now reflect the ideology of the new elite groups who have emerged since the 1980s. The ideologies, which are expressed in *pleng string*, include capitalism, consumerism and liberalism.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Class, Ethnicity, Gender and Thai Popular Music

#### Introduction

Class, ethnicity and gender have shaped the identities of Thai people, which were constructed by the people themselves as well as people from other society for a long time. Thai popular music plays an important role in reproducing these identities. Thai people from different classes, ethnicities and genders have also shaped Thai popular music into different genres. Shepherd (1991) states that in a harmonic-rhythmic framework music becomes available to people from different classes, generations and ethnicities.

...as different groups and cultures related differently to this environment, according to such variables as class, generation and ethnicity, so their music articulated that relationship through the way they utilize and articulate the harmonic-rhythmic frame work (Shepherd, 1991, p. 133)

I suggest that besides the harmonic-rhythmic framework, the melodies and lyrical content of music are also important in assisting people to share the experience of music. Thai people from different classes, genders, ethnicities and ages also use different genres of Thai popular music to entertain and express their thoughts and feelings. Each genre of Thai popular music was produced by different groups of people. The musicians articulated their identities in terms of class, gender and ethnicity through their music while the audiences from different groups also chose particular genres of music to entertain and represent them in different ways. The emergence of the four genres of Thai popular music is not accidental but involved in the process of social interaction and cultural reproduction in Thai society. Within the process of social interaction and cultural reproduction, there were struggles and conflicts as well as negotiation between the musicians, the business persons and the audiences. These people shaped Thai popular music into different genres. These processes related to entrenching their political power and influence. Thus, class,

gender and ethnicity are the constituent parts of Thai identity and ideology and their expression in Thai popular music.

In Chapter Eight I have explored Thai identity and ideology in Thai popular music. This chapter extends the sociological analysis of Thai popular music raised in Chapter Eight by describing the relationships of Thai popular music to cultural issues such as class, gender and ethnicity.

### **Social Class in Thai Society**

According to O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002, pp. 24-25), social class in modern societies is comprised of three distinct levels of class: they are the upper/ ruling class, the middle class, and lower/ working class. The upper/ ruling class is the smallest group but is the most advantaged or privileged, while the lower/ working class is the largest in number but is socially disadvantaged. In many respects, current Thai society mirrors this analysis with the upper/ ruling group being the smallest in number but the most influential, controlling the political and economic power structures, while the lower/ working classes are the largest in number but are very poor and have little or no social, political or cultural power. According to Kramol Kramoltrakul (2003), a Thai sociologist, the evidence from the National Statistic Bureau (1980s – 1990s) shows that the greater the economic growth, the bigger the gap between elite and working classes (p. 91).

Unlike in India, stratification of social class in Thailand society is not stable although the hierarchy of social status is still obvious. As a constitutional monarchy, formal discussion of social class in Thai society is a sensitive issue. The critics or analysts might be accused by conservative authorities, of subverting the security of Thai nationhood, especially the monarchy. During the Cold War (the 1950s to the 1980s), whoever discussed social class in Thai society might be accused of being a Communist and could be sentenced under the law of anti-communism and national security to imprisonment. This may explain why I could find very few academic studies of social class stratification in Thailand. A significant gap in the data is from 1957 to 1964, during the Cold War, Jit Pumisak, a leftist intellectual, was accused of subversion of the nationhood and being a communist because he wrote the book *Chomna Sakdina Thai* (Revealing About Thai Feudalists). The book elaborates on

the stratification of Thai society and the privilege of elite classes during the regime of the monarchy (before 1932). He had to spend over six years in jail and then he was assassinated by government assassins (Rattikan, 2004). However some foreign authors such as Robert & Nanthapa Cooper (1995), Neils Mulder, (1997), Mont Redmond (1999) and Carl Parkes (2000) who had lived in Thailand for some period or have settled permanently in Thailand, notice that the stratification of Thai society into defined levels still exists in this country. According to Carl Parkes (2000), the author of *Thailand Handbook*, Thai society has traditionally given top status to the king; below the king are the princes and princesses and members of the royal court, followed by the government officials. The middle classes are given status according to their economic position and political power. Other factors such as occupation, education and income are also important in the definition of social class in Thailand. Parkes only discusses the upper and middle classes and does not mention the lower classes.

The boundary between the social classes is not clear-cut but the large gap between high and low classes and class-consciousness still exists in Thai society. The smaller elite ruling classes still hold huge power over the country while the more numerous low classes are still weak politically and economically and the middle classes who are also fewer than the lower classes have tended not to be active in politics but concentrate on economic achievement. Within a class there are many groups or sub-classes. The elite ruling class, for example, consists of the old elite and the new elite. The old elite groups in Thai society include the Royal Family, the military leaders and bureaucratic elite while the new elite groups consist of Chinese Thai business people who control financial, commercial and industrial organizations and institutions. The Royal Family since 1932 has not been part of the ruling political class, nor does it control the economy, but nevertheless has a moral significance that gives it great power. The ruling class now consists of several groups such as the military, the bureaucratic elite and the Chinese Thai Businessmen.

According to Thirayut Boonmi's research (2005), from 1957-1973, political power was held by soldiers and police; economic power was held by Chinese Thai business persons and bankers; and intellectual power was held by elite technocrats or bureaucrats. However, Thirayut continues, after 1973, political power was held by

bureaucrats, professional politicians and representatives of local godfathers while economic power was still dominated by the same groups such as industrialists and provincial business people; and intellectual power was held by young technocrats. In *Thai Society and Culture After the General Election 2005*, Thirayut claims that the political and economic power is currently held by the capitalists of communication technologies and entertainment and broker groups and will continue so long into the future, while the power of the middle class, which was significant during 1973-1976, declined. The middle classes tended to become professional employees for the former groups (Boonmi, 2005). Although the middle class increased during the 1980s and 1990s because of rapid economic growth in Thailand, it is still much fewer in number than the lower/ working class (Kramoltrakul, 2003). According to Seksan Prasertkul (2004), a significant academic in economics from Thammasat University, about 453 or 90.2% of 500 members of the National Assembly came from business careers in 2001. These politicians owned a 42% share of the stock market in Thailand. Consequently, we can assume that these people control both economics and politics including the culture industries in Thailand.

Although discussion of social class in Thai society tends to be a taboo topic in Thai society, it is important to cultural studies in terms of understanding contemporary Thai society and culture. The issues of social class cannot be separated from the study of popular culture. I will investigate the relationship between class and Thai popular music in order to provide a clear account of the current significance of popular music in contemporary Thai society.

### **Class and *Pleng Lukgrung***

#### **Floor Fueang Fa (The Bougainvillea Dance Floor)**

Vocalist: Winai Julabusapa

Lyric and Music: Suntaraporn

The sound is like the music from heaven  
A paradise of musicians in heaven came from the sky  
Thai male and female angels are holding and moving with the music  
Happiness comes around the Fueang Fa floor  
The hot movements are accelerated and decelerated  
Absorb them along with the music

Enjoy them because of motivation  
The earth swings towards to paradise  
Cheer and fun from the far paradise  
Thai Gods and angels are dancing and swinging  
Oh! Immortal paradise of the musicians from heaven  
They are happy and enjoy themselves  
Sleeping or awake  
They are in the paradise of Fueang Fa floor.

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

The artists of *pleng lukgrung* indeed provide Thai audiences with pleasure; so many Thai people like consuming *pleng lukgrung*. Many lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* portray images of the happy young members of the new elite enjoying a party. In “Floor Fueang Fa” (The Bougainvillea Dance Floor) the lyrics describe young people who are dancing happily on the ballroom floor. It is ballroom dancing music to a tango rhythm. The lyrics say that as they dance, they are happy and as beautiful as angels in paradise. This song is one of many examples of *pleng lukgrung* that represents an image of elite classes in urban society between the 1930s and 1970s. While this song appears to be romantic song, it is actually a representation of Thai culture, in form of the characteristics, the setting, the lyrics and the music (melody, harmony, and rhythm) that are repeated over and over in this musical genre. It is escapist fiction of the elite society.

In the chapter four, I described the types of the people involved in Thai popular music especially in the music industry of *pleng lukgrung*. All the people who owned businesses were in the upper/ ruling class and most of the artists, such as song-writers, musicians and singers were in the middle class. Initially the elite group formed bands and composed in this musical style. Lately middle-class musicians here performed the music but they still maintain the dominant ideology of the upper classes.

The current King himself is a model for *pleng lukgrung* because he is a musician in a popular music band and he has composed forty-eight *pleng lukgrung* songs. He was the first person to receive the *National Artist Awards* provided by the authorities in 1986. Although Thailand is not currently governed by an absolute monarchy, the king is still the spiritual leader of Thai society. He is considered the

icon of Thailand and his ideological influence permeates through every social class. I argue that the elite mostly benefit from the ideology that imbues the King with so much social and cultural power. The ruling classes have exploited the King's image as a justification for maintaining their political, economic and cultural position. For example, between 1932 and 1996, the justification for every military coup that set out to destroy an existing government and laws was "in order to protect institution of the nation, the religion and the king" (Winichakul, 1998; 2001). But the real reason for their coups was that there were conflicts among the leaders of the ruling class and they failed in their allocation of political power. In order to gain absolute political power, the coups illegally took the governments' power by force and set themselves or their relatives and friends up to be governments.

To sum up, the analysis of the genealogy, producers, music and lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* shows that this musical genre is a representative of the elite classes, especially the older elite group, because it reproduces the identity and ideology of the elite group during the 1930s and 1980s (see in Chapter Six).

### **Class and *Pleng Lukthung***

The genealogy of *pleng lukthung* shows that a wide variety of Thai country music artists provide consistent reference to traditional values and the humble origins of *pleng lukthung* audiences and performers. As I have said, *pleng lukthung* is the music that is composed and performed by rural and working class artists for rural and working class audiences. Nevertheless, major artists of contemporary Thai country music also tend to rise from the humble circumstances that provide the context and content of the country music artists use to reach their audience because the artist and the audience share same background. In the 2000s, most of the Thai populations in the country are working class and they are *pleng lukthung* fans. Despite the fact that the image of people in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung* has changed over the years, it has remained essentially steeped in the imagery of rural people and laborers.

Now several *pleng lukthung* superstars have become millionaires, but they still refer to their poverty-stricken rural backgrounds. For example, Jenpop Jopkrabuanwan, a famous radio disc jockey of *pleng lukthung*, said that Jakrapan Arpkornburi, a *lukthung* superstar, earned about 200,000 baht per concert (*A Little*

*Bit Country*, 2004). Most successful *pleng lukthung* artists still represent the values of the working class. For example, Mike Piromporn, the most famous *lukthung isan* star of the 2000s, is from a family of poor rice farmers in the rural village of the northeast. When he was a young man, he had to work as a labourer in Bangkok due to a lack of education. Although Mike is now a millionaire, his music still reflects the troubled lives of the poor and his image (his style of dress for example) represents the working class. Several of his famous songs deal with the poverty stricken, for example; “Yajai Khonjon” (The Sweetheart of a Poor Boy); “Jaonai Krup” (The Boss); “Num Krueang Jak” (An Engine Boy); “Kampaeng Ngoen” (The Financial Obstruction); and “Chauffeur Jai Ngao” (A Lonely Chauffeur). Thus *pleng lukthung* has adapted to combine rural roots with low socioeconomic conditions of the urban working classes. The people who are described in the lyrics of *pleng lukthung* tend to be the peasant lads/ girls, the lorry man, the fisherman, the boxer, the taxi-driver, the factory worker, the maid, the bar girl, the prostitute, and so on.

Nevertheless, recently some members of the elite class have borrowed *pleng lukthung* to present their public images. Some members of the elite and ruling classes such as wealthy politicians who were elected by people from provincial regions often used *pleng lukthung* for political purposes. During the campaigns for the general election in February 6, 2005, many MP candidates composed their political jingles in *pleng lukthung* style. Through loud speakers used on the campaign cars the jingles, including *pleng lukthung* were presented repeatedly all day long for over two months before the election. The jingles borrowed music and words from well-known *pleng lukthung* and combined them with propagandas (my personal observation, December 2004 to February 2005). Some critics such as Thirayut Boonmi have concluded from this example that there is no longer a class boundary in Thai popular music (Boonmi, 2005).

Even some people from the top status of Thai society sang *pleng lukthung* as a part of public relations campaigns. In June 26, 2004, I watched Princess Ubonrat, the first child of the current King, singing *pleng lukthung* with pleasure and enjoyment on TV Channel 11 and again (live) on the national network for a special broadcast of “World Anti-drug Day”. The program entitled “To Be Number One”, which aims for a drug free nation, targets young people in particular and is under the



patronage of the Princess. At the meeting, there were approximately twenty to thirty thousand people including several high-class people such as Mrs. Sudarat Keyurapan, the Minister of Public Health, and Mrs. Sirikorn Maneerin, the Deputy Minister of Education. The Princess sang several popular songs including English and Thai pop songs, but the most memorable part of her performance were three *pleng lukthung* compositions which she chose, including the well known 'sexy' songs of Pumpuang Duangjan, the most famous female vocalist of *pleng lukthung*. The lyrics of the songs did not involve anti-drug themes but were love stories and expressions of female sexual desire, while the music was a blend of exciting rock style and *pleng lukthung* singing styles. The Princess sang the songs and danced on stage accompanied by a dance troupe, while the audience clapped their hands along with the music.

One needs to question why the princess chose to perform *pleng lukthung*. It might not be unusual for a member of the social and cultural elite like the princess to listen to and sing *pleng lukthung* during the peak period of *pleng lukgrung* but currently more members of the elite and ruling classes, such as some members of the royal family and politicians, have publicly sung *pleng lukthung* via the media. I argue that the elite use art forms understood to be of low cultural origin in order to gain favour from low class people who make up the majority of citizens in Thailand, for political reasons. In short, the manner in which *pleng lukthung* has been appropriated by the elites illustrates clearly the functioning of hegemony in a modernizing culture.

As the representatives of the elite ruling class, Thai authorities have played an important role in boosting Thai country music. Since 1993, The Board of National Culture began to provide National Artist Awards for *pleng lukthung* vocalist such as Pongsri Woranut (see Appendix 5). Some members of the elite have also used *pleng lukthung* to build their persona of class indiscrimination. There is a broad gap between the ruling and working classes in Thailand that generates social tension and conflict illustrated in the chronic protest of the Thailand Assembly of the Poor during the 1990s and 2000s (Kramoltrakul, 2003). The upper classes used the music to inform the lower classes that they occupy the same social class as the lower classes and thus social discrimination is deferred. Thus it can be surmised that *pleng lukthung* is used as a tool of exploitation by the ruling classes in order to decrease

social tension. So the elite obtained love and faithfulness from the lower classes. The authorities have publicized these events, in order to promote the notion of egalitarianism and social unity in Thai society through the state media for many years. I argue that there are still significant differences between high and low culture in Thai society but the boundary seems to be blurred because of politics and business. On one hand, the ruling classes use high culture as the dominant ideology to influence the working class ideology; on the other hand, low culture is exploited by ruling classes to build their image and by businessmen to make profits. Finally, the main purpose of the ruling class using *pleng lukthung* is to maintain the status quo and obtain more economic and political power.

### **Class and ‘Song for Life’**

‘Song for life’ or *pleng puea chiwit* takes an overtly critical stance in regard to the social stratification in Thai society. Unlike *pleng lukthung*, most *pleng puea chiwit* artists are from the intellectual middle class who sympathise with the working class. In other words, the radical middle class compose music dealing with the conflict of the working class and the elite ruling class. Initially, the song-writers and musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* mostly came from university or from vocational students groups in the cities. They tended to be autonomous thinkers who loved reading and searching for the truth. These intellectuals found that many serious problems in Thai society came from the inequalities evident in a political structure that was monopolized by the ruling class. The political monopolization caused unfair income distribution (Boonmi, 2005). Moreover, economic growth created an even larger gap between the rich and the poor. The National Bureau of Statistics states that in 1999, approximately 80% of the population earned only 41.5% of the national wealth while 20% of the rich earned 58.5% (Kramoltrakul, 2003). Thus the evidence shows that the greater economic growth, the greater the gap between elite and working classes. Faced with injustice and corrupt politics, the progressive intellectuals could not expect a resolution from the existing political system, which was controlled by corrupt governments.

Many intellectuals during the 1970s were interested in Marxism and Maoism because they considered that these ideologies might provide a solution to the chronic

problems confronting Thai society. The purpose of Marxist and Maoist ideology is to emphasise the benefits of the political change for the working class and the establishment of a new society based on equity. Many books about Marxism, Maoism and socialism in Thai translation were available in general bookshops and were very popular among radical students between 1973 and 1976. Socialist ideologies also influenced the radical student musicians at that time. They were very interested in studying the lives of rice farmers and laborers and their problems. In addition, most *pleng puea chiwit* artists came from rural areas or the provinces. Although they might not be members of working class, they were very intimate with the condition of the working class. Some went to mingle with rice farmers in the country or factory laborers in cities while they were studying in colleges (Surachai, 2002). For this reason, most lyrical content of *pleng puea chiwit* reflects the lives of the working class rather than the middle class intellectuals. In the other words, unlike *pleng lukthung*, the lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* reflect the lives of the working class expressed through the eyes of the radical middle class. However, the musical forms of this musical style were preferred by intellectuals and middle class rather than by working class.

I found that, although the music is likely to reflect working class ideology, most audiences of *pleng puea chiwit* are not working class, but mostly are middle class or lower-middle class. I have collected the data from observations of many concerts of *pleng puea chiwit*, and interviewing disc jockeys, businesspersons and song-writers. I found that the main target audiences of *pleng puea chiwit* are vocational students and skilled-labourers while most rural farmers, and laborers still prefer *pleng lukthung*. As a code of this musical style representing working class, the costumes of the musicians also tell us about the characteristics of the audience that they intend to communicate with. The artists of *pleng puea chiwit* dress in humble costume similar to skilled-laborers, while *pleng lukthung* artists dress in magnificent and elegant costumes. Most *pleng puea chiwit* musicians wear old jeans, faded T-shirts and some wear hats, caps or head bands. Most male musicians have long disheveled hair and they are unshaved. The codes of costumes suggest that *pleng lukthung* artists accept the elite's domination- they imitate the elite, but the artists of *pleng puea chiwit* reject the domination- they behave in contrary way.

In “Khon Jon Pu Ying Yai” (The Poor, the Great), *Carabao* paid tribute to the poor as great people. The song emphasises that ‘poverty’ includes goodness and is much better than ‘richness’ that is ultimately based on corruption. Some lyrics of “Khon Jon Phu Ying Yai” are as follows:

Although they are poor, they do not mind or annoy others  
Richness and poverty could not prove human heart  
Poverty that contains a lot of *namjai* is the great poor.

No property but I live happily in society  
No degree but I can read and write  
I went to work as an employee  
I did every thing besides flattering the boss  
If he regards a person by flattering  
I will say goodbye because I am not a silly buffalo

...  
Money means greed  
As the Great teacher has taught us in the bible  
This is the truth that we should take it  
For cleaning the dirt in Thai society

The spirit of Buddhism is crystal clear  
That is the goal  
Richness if its behavior is so bad  
It’s not great but worse.

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

### **Class and *Pleng String***

It is quite clear that *pleng string* was produced for young urban audiences who belonged mainly to the middle class. Most *pleng string* musicians also came from the same background as their audiences and some came from upper-class families. Several *pleng string* musicians were educated overseas in Western countries such as the USA, UK or Australia. These musicians were of higher status than the musicians of other Thai popular musical genres due to their parent’s wealth and Westernization. Most lyrics of this musical style also reflect lives of middle class and support the new elite ruling class ideology at the same time.

I have studied the biographies of several famous *pleng string* stars, whose names were cited in the polls of Bangkok people’s favorite pop artists: Thongchai McIntyre (Bird), Asanee-Wasan Chotikul, Sekson Sukpimai (Sek Loso), Pot

Moderndog, Boyd Kosiyabong, Palapon Sengkong, Therapat (Tui) Sajakul, Mai Jaroenpura, Pim (Masha) Watanapanit, Eve (Palmy) Parncharoen, Amita Tata Young, Thanaporn (Parn) Wagprayoon (Suan-Dusit-Poll, 1999-2004). After examining the life stories of these musicians, I found that they came from middle class families who lived in Bangkok and other major cities in Thailand. All of them had been well educated, at least graduating from high school, some in Western countries. Most of them were good-looking young urban persons and could perform well due to better opportunities. They all belonged to big music companies and they received many music awards (Hayes, 2004).

The musical and lyrical contents of *pleng string* also reflected themes of middle class lives. The sounds of this musical style, standardized by the music companies before they were released to the market, were technological, modern, and mild and fit for the taste of the young urban middle class. Although the lyrical themes of *pleng string* did not directly specify a social group, they always reflected lives of the young urban middle class. The answer was clear when I deployed discourse analysis to find out the connotations embedded in the codes of *pleng string*. As an audience member and analyst, I have engaged in the process of ‘decoding’ the music including sounds, words and images.

I also found that some *pleng string* musicians have also written song lyrics reflecting the lives of lower class or rural people but their songs tend to be excluded from the genre of *pleng string* and were grouped in other genres such as *pleng string puea chiwit* or *pleng string lukthung* instead. The musicians whose music overlapped with *pleng puea chiwit* and *pleng string* were Asanee-Wasan Chotikul, Thanapon Intharit, and Rithiporn Insawang, for example. However, the most popular songs of these musicians contained many love themes.

If we analyse the names of *pleng string* bands and the musicians’ costumes, one may be confused about the codes that represent their social status. Surprisingly, the names of many *pleng string* bands signify the lower class and humble things or offensive behaviors, such as *Loso* (Low Society), *Kala* (Coconut Shell), *Siplor* (Ten-Wheels Truck), *Modern Dog*, *Heart Dog*, *Taxi*, *Big Ass*, *Bangkok Gigolo*, *Clash*, *Baby Bull* and *AB Normal*. Unlike *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*, the costumes of *pleng string* musicians also present us with codes representing the lower classes

and humble backgrounds. Many of them dress like Western rock musicians and members of working class. They have long disheveled hair, are unshaved, wear old blue jeans and faded T-shirts and sport shoes. They did not wear formal suits or evening dresses like musicians of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*. But when I have analyzed the music of the musicians above, I could not find any reflection of lower class or resistant themes in their music. I have explored the biographies of several *pleng string* superstars and talked to some musicians who dressed in working class style and did not find any of their ideas consistent with a working class ideology or resistant ideology. The musicians insisted that they had different ideas from *pleng puea chiwit* musicians. They did not want to resist the dominant ideology but they wanted to be famous and rich. Therefore, these codes did not actually represent the working class background of the musicians or communication to working class audiences. The codes were only fashions that the musicians had inherited from Western rock musicians. The young musicians might be telling us that they are a new generation and their identities are not as same as *pleng lukgrung* musicians and other genres of Thai popular music.

However according to the recent research of Therayut Boonmi (2005), a famous progressive scholar from Thammasat University in Bangkok, discrimination between high and low culture as well as Western and Thai cultures, has decreased in Thai society in the 2000s. In the other words, this period in history is noted for a greater tolerance toward universal culture (Thairath, 2005).

## **Ethnicity in Thailand**

I have described Thai citizens and cultures in Chapters One and Four which dealt with ethnicity. In order to connect these elements to the music, I would like to emphasise that there are many ethnic groups in Thai society. The majority of Thai people belong to one of four main groups in four regions: central, north, northeast and south. Each ethnic group speaks a different dialect but they can communicate with each other using the Central Thai dialect. As today, most Thai people from all regions can speak, read and write the central Thai language but in contrast, most people from the central region cannot speak the dialects of other regions. Central Thai is the required form used in modern Thailand for official, business, academic and other transactions. The main religion of people in Thailand is Buddhism. More

than 90 percent are Buddhists, and the remainder is Muslim, Christian, or animists. Furthermore, each ethnic group has its own distinct customs, traditions, folk music and so on. Now Thai folk music has declined but it still firmly integrated in Thai popular music. Finally, while each ethnic group has a strong regional basis we should not confuse ethnicity with geography, especially in the era of modernity where the various ethnic groups have flocked to the cities in search of employment.

### **Ethnicity and *Pleng Lukgrung***

The representative ethnic group in *pleng lukgrung* is actually the central Thai Buddhist ethnic group who differ from other Thai regional groups in the country. Every song of this musical genre is sung in the dialect of urban central Thai or Bangkok dialect. Local dialects are not deemed appropriate in this genre because these dialects are considered the characteristics of rural music, which is considered inferior (by the central Thai people). Besides Western musical instruments, Thai court musical instruments are used in some songs but they are just supplements. The lyrical content of many *pleng lukgrung* songs contain Buddhist philosophy, practice, ritual and tradition. These themes are often inserted among love themes. Local dialects or other religious content are unusual in this musical style. The images of other ethnic groups such as Chinese, Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Muslim are not included in the themes of this genre.

Poor people's lives might appear in the subject of *pleng lukgrung* but the themes do not reflect the troubled lives of the poor. Instead, they involve a request for sympathy from their richer girlfriends by reference to their poverty. However, most of lyrical contents of this genre avoid referring to ethnic or class differences because the themes of the lyrics should adhere to the ideology of 'disliking conflict' and the value of 'loving fun'.

However, lyrics emphasizing Thai ethnicity appear a lot in '*pleng plukjai*', a patriotic version of *pleng lukgrung* genre. One of many examples is a patriotic song entitled "Paen Din Thai" (The Land of Thais). It is a marching song played by combo bands in march rhythm. The lyrical content demands that Thai people be very proud of their ethnicity and their land. Buddhism and the monarchy are also

significant parts of Thai nationalism and patriotism. The song was also written for students to listen to and sing as a compulsory song at primary and secondary school in order to inculcate patriotic feelings.

**“Paen Din Thai”**  
(The Land of Thais)

Music: From Thai folk song

Lyric: Samai In-udom and Pradit Rotitajon

This land is named the golden cape.  
There are a plenty of treasure there.  
It belongs to our Thai ethnic group.  
Green paddle farms and plantations are absolutely adored by Thai people.  
The religion like a falling rain and Buddhist doctrine bring us happiness  
Moreover, the King is our sweetheart who made the sky merry.  
We are very happy because we have had freedom for a long time.  
But there are bully Reds who want to invade our Thailand  
Do not allow them to do so  
Also do not let any danger occur  
The sovereignty of our Thai people will not be destroyed by anyone.

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from Tapkallai, 1975, p. 78)

The codes such as musical forms and lyrics in this song represent a distinct ethnicity. The march rhythm and sounds of brass and woodwind connote the military songs which are written for soldiers marching under central control in Bangkok. The words “Thai”, “Buddhist religion”, “happiness” and “freedom” connote the so-called cultural identity of Buddhist Thai ethnic ethnicity. The song juxtaposes the King with the Thai nation and Buddhist religion in order to make them firm as the three pillars of Thailand. The song puts an emphasis on the idea that Thailand belongs to the Thai ethnic group and it is of high value to Thai people. Unfortunately, some others want to take this land. The bully Reds represent the enemies of Thais who eagerly want to invade and occupy Thailand. These messages are strong enough to inspire the Thai audience with patriotic feeling. The nationalist stance in this song is exactly as same as the nationalism of Luang Wijiwtakan (see Chapter Two), which dominated Thai society for long time between the 1930s and 1960s.



### **Ethnicity and *Pleng Lukthung***

Thai country music reproduces not only its rural roots but also often a specific geographical location in the hierarchy of socioeconomic status. Due to most *lukthung* musicians coming from the country, their music continues to express a strong sense of loyalty to their home regions. Like any other musical or artistic forms, this musical style exhibits several sub-styles including, *lukthung pakklang* (central style), *lukthung Isan* (northeastern style), *lukthung morlam* (*morlam* style), *lukthung paktai* (southern style), *lukthung rock* (rock style), and *lukthung puea chiwit* (in ‘song for life’ style). Each sub-style represents the identity of a specific region and ethnic group. The *pleng lukthung* messages thus reflect numerous themes, including images of the countryside or small-towns, love of family and country, and working class images of hard work and deprivation derived from urban life.

The local roots of *pleng lukthung* are evident in a variety of sources, for example, singer’s names, song titles, and content. Songs display local-oriented content in numerous ways. *Lukthung* singers such as Kan Kaewsupan, Waiphot Petsupan, Dam Dansupan and Sonpet Sonsupan represent their second names as “Supan” referring to Supanburi, a province in the west of Bangkok, where they were born and raised. Many *lukthung* stars in the central style including Surapon Sombatjaroen, Pumpuang Duangjan and Sayan Sanya, also were born in Supanburi province. Similarly, the second names of these *lukthung* singers also represent the other places where they were born and raised, for example, Kwanchai Pet-roi-et from Roi-et province, Rom Srithamarat from Nakonsrithamrat province, Sonkiri Sripajuap from Prajuap Kirikhan province, Sunari Rachasima from Nakon Rachasima province, and Daotai Mueangtrang from Trang province (see table 9.1)

Table 9.1: The Relationship between *Pleng Lukthung* Singer’s Names and Places

<b>Singer’s name</b>	<b>Province</b>	<b>Region</b>
Waipot Petsupan	Supanburi	Central
Apaporn Nakornsawan	Nakornsawan	Central
Kwanchai Pet-roi-et	Roi-et	Northeast
Sunari Rachasima	Nakorn Rachasima	Northeast
Sonkhiri Sripajuap	Prajuapkhirikhan	South
Rome Nakonsrithamarat	Nakhonsrithamarat	South
Daotai Mueangtrang	Trang	South

Geographic regions are also identified in the song titles, for example; “Nao Lom Ti Renu” (I Was Cold at Renu), sung by Sonkiri Sripajuap; “Monrak Ti Paktai” (Love Magic in the South) , sung by Suriya Chinapan; “Num Supan” (A Young Man From Supan), sung by Seri Rungsawang; “Rak Jang Ti Bangpakong” (My Love Has Gone to Bangpakong), sung by Sotsai Rungpothong; “Sao Udon Non Nao” (An Udon Girl Is Cold), sung by Pritsana Wongsiri; and “Numna Nakonpanom” (A Country Boy from Nakonpanom), sung by Pornsak Songsaeng (see table 9.2).

Table 9.2: *The Relationship between Song Titles and Places*

<b>Song title</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Region</b>
“Nao Lom Ti Renu” (I Was Cold at Renu),	Renu Nakon District	Northeast
“Monrak Ti Paktai” (Love Magic in the South)	The South	South
“Num Supan” (A Young Man From Supan)	Supanburi Province	Central
“Hak Sao Konkaen” (I Love a Konkaen Girl)	Kornkaen Province	Northeast
“Rak Jang Ti Bangpakong” (My Love Has Gone at Bangpakong)	Bangpakong District	Central

In some songs, the artists identify themselves with different cultural ethnic groups from others by their use of regional languages. Songs sung in the Laotian dialect include “Hak Sao Konkaen” (I Love a Konkaen Girl), “Hak Sao Srimueang” (I Love a Srimueang Girl), and “Kuet Hod Kon Klai” (I Miss Someone Who Is Far Away). Some songs also contain Southern dialects and colloquialism such as “Show Ber Mai Show Jai” (Show Your Number but Not Your Heart) sung by Duangjan Suwani; and “Top Hai Tai” (I’ll Slap You), sung by Chathong Mongkonthong.

In the early period of Thai country music, the domination of central style (*lukthung pakklang*) influenced the media and music market, but recently, other local styles have predominated. Among the sub-styles of *pleng lukthung*, the Northeastern style (*lukthung isan*) is very significant in a number of ways. *Khon isan* or ethnic Thai people who speak the Laotian dialect, no longer live only in the northeast region but have spread throughout the country. As Craig Reynolds (2002) notes, people who speak the Laotian dialect account for 31% percent of the citizens in Thailand, compared with people who speak the central Thai dialect, who comprise about 25 percent of the population. In Bangkok, the population originating from the northeast now comprises the second highest ethnic group in the city following the Chinese.

Lop Burirat, a famous *pleng lukthung* songwriter estimates that at present (2004), *lukthung isan* songs account for ninety percent of the Thai country music market in Thailand.

However, northeastern people or *khon isan* in Bangkok tend to be looked-down upon by urban people and people from another regions because of Thai social conventions and regionalism and prejudices created through economic and political and identification (Hesse-Swain, 2001). Most of northeastern people in Bangkok tend to be poorer and have lower status than people from other regions. The general image of the *khon isan*, defined by the dominant social group, describes people who come from the northeastern region; speak the Laotian dialect; are seen to be poor by definition; diverse in their eating habits; love eating *plara* (fermented fish paste) and sticky rice; and are able to do hard physical work for low pay. They were originally called *lao isan* (Laotians who live in the northeast) instead of *thai san* (Thai who live in the northeast). These significant characteristics and opinions constructed by the dominant social group generate feelings of alienation among *khon isan* in Bangkok and other regions but this has changed since 1980s. For this reason, *khon isan* embrace *lukthung isan* and *lukthung morlam* because these songs allow them to express their identity, revealed through the positioning of audience within the music.

The primary causes for superior and inferior feeling among Thai ethnic groups, I argue, comes from the ‘naturalising’ of Thai national identity or Thainess in popular Thai discourses. As Sulak Sivaraksa (2001) states that, the official construction of Thai national identity favours the central Thai elite but ignores the nation’s ethnic diversity. Thirayut Boonmi (2003) argues that because of the strong influence of global culture, Thais have to assert their local cultural and identity. However, the identity of today’s population in northeast Thailand is continually defined and then is redefined (Hesse-Swain, 2001). I agree with Hesse-Swain when she says that more of the ethnic Laotian group live in the northeast region of Thailand than in the nation state of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and their identities are no longer Laotian but *isan-thai* (Thai people who live in the northeast) within the larger Thai nation state. Because of the daily pressure of mass media on cultural integrity, many young *isan* people nowadays live with and express multiple identities including Thai, Laotian, Western, regional, and global identities

simultaneously. Most young *isan* people can speak the Thai dialect as well as Laotian and they have been integrated into dominant Thai society.

Thai country music in the *isan* style is not only popular among people in Thailand but also in Laos. Vipha Uthmachant's research (2001) reveals that "many young Lao follow Thai popular music, even hiring vans to travel to Thai radio stations along the border so they can have their photos taken with their favourite disc jockey" (cited in Hesse-Swain, 2001, p. 6). Thai media has strongly influenced Laotian culture because of the ability of the medium to transcend geographical and political boundaries. There is no communication barrier because the northeastern Thai and Laotian people also speak the same language. This has made the Laos' communist authorities deeply concerned about the influence of Thai culture on Laotian people (Hesse-Swain, 2001).

Southern identity is also reflected in *pleng lukthung* but less so than the northeastern identity because of the smaller southern population (five percent of the total Thai population). Furthermore, the southern people are divided into two ethnic groups including Buddhist Thai and Muslim ethnic groups. While Buddhist Thai identify themselves as Thai people, the Muslim ethnic groups do not. Most Muslims in the deep south of Thailand do not speak Thai but Yawee (similar to Malaysian). The violent conflict between Thai authorities and Muslim ethnic group in the south has been evident for decades but has worsened in the recent years. Muslims in the south have long complained of discrimination. Consequently, Muslim separatists have been considered a serious problem for the country. Thai country music in southern Buddhist style (*lukthung paktai*) also appears in commercial Thai country music but the musical style of the Muslims has never been evident in Thai popular music.

The lyrical content of Thai country music in the southern style is not very different from other regions in terms of regionalism. A noticeable part of southern identity of southern Thai country music (*lukthung paktai*) is the songs, which are sung in a southern dialect by singers who came from the south. The themes of these songs are the love of southern boys and girls who live in the south or who have left home to live in Bangkok or other regions but are still loyal to the southern culture. This style of Thai country music tends to reproduce the values of southern ethnic

people, venerating their people, birthplaces, language and culture. People from southern Thailand take great pride in their regional culture, which emphasises regional differences. These differences have found expression in many songs written in the southern style of *pleng lukthung*.

The most popular *lukthung paktai* singers during the 2000s include Ekachai Sriwichai, Daotai Mueangtrang, Rome Srithamarat, Salika Kingthong and Duangjan Suwanni. Some prominent examples of the southern songs are; “Saen Wang Woed” (My Grievance), sung by Salika Kingthong; “Long Tai” (Go to the South), sung by Ekachai Sriwichai; and “Show Ber Mai Show Jai” (Show Your Number but Not Heart), sung by Duangjan Suwani.

### **Ethnicity and ‘Song for Life’**

On the surface, Thailand displays a marked ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. But the homogeneity is the result of the cultural hegemony of the central Thai over the other Thai people who live within the national boundaries. The social structure in Thailand is more complex than it first seems. Besides four Thai ethnic groups: central Thai, northern Thai, southern Thai and the Thai Lao of northeast, a number of sub-groupings, such as Chinese, Malay, Mon, Khmer, Burmese and Indian ethnic groups are found in varying degrees thorough the country. While musicians of other genres seem to consent to the dominant forces of Thailand, ‘song for life’ musicians tend to oppose the hegemony. This musical genre always reflects ethnicity and geographic identification because the musicians come from different ethnic groups and regions in Thailand. The musical forms and lyrics of this style are derived from various backgrounds and experiences of the musicians. Their lyrics contain a lot of indigenous words and dialects. Some folk melodies and musical instruments from different regions are also borrowed in this hybrid genre.

Many *pleng puea chiwit* artists such as *Caravan*, *Khondankwian*, Pongthep Kradonchamnan and Pongsit Kampi came from northeast and they are able to speak two languages including Laotian and central Thai dialects. *Pleng puea chiwit* performers have the confidence to present songs about the condition of the poor whereas the other genres tend to avoid this. In their music and costumes, they represented the identity and lives of the Laotian ethnic group who live in the

northeast or in Bangkok. For example, *Caravan* sang “Kula Rong-hai” (Crying Kula Village), “Poep Khao” (Eating Rice) and “Maihate Jak Muban” (The Story from a Village) in the Laotian dialect and these songs were popular among radical students in Bangkok during the 1970s. *Kondankwian*, a famous band of the 1980s, also sang “Dek Pam” (A Petrol Station Boy) in Laotian. Pongthep Kradonchamnan sang “Koracha” (Nakhonrachasima Province), for example, in Korat dialect (an indigenous dialect of Nakhonrachasima province). Besides the lyrics, *Caravan* included indigenous musical instruments from the northeast such as *pin*, *kaen* and *wot*. Everyone in Thailand recognized that these musical instruments were symbols of *isan*. These musicians courageously presented the *isan* (Laotian) dialect in their music to people in Bangkok and other regions. Previously *isan* culture used to be alien to people in Bangkok and the central region but now it has become familiar to those people. Moreover, with the music, the messages of the troubled lives of people from the northeast (*isan*) were also sent to a mass audience.

“Dek Pam” (A Petrol Station Boy), sung by *Kondankwian*, portrays the troubled life of a boy from the northeast who works in a petrol station. It is a good example of the music that represents the alienation of a poor boy from the northeast:

I have left the northeast for the beautiful angel city for many years  
 To earn a living by servicing vehicles  
 They called me ‘a petrol station boy’  
 I had to get up early because of worrying  
 If I was late, everyone knew, it meant my wage might be reduced  
 Every time I heard the horn blow  
 I had to get up immediately  
 It is difficult life I have faced with from dawn until late night  
 Oh! Though I was so sleepy

Dressed in humble clothes  
 Because I have no money to pay for them  
 My working clothes are also my pajamas  
 A partner, mate, or girlfriend?  
 I don’t think I need her now because I’m still poor

I don’t think there is anyone who is interested in me.  
 I’m poor, I know, I have to be patient  
 And I’ll keep my poor heart for someone who has a sincere love

Having a car is a good idea but I’m a peasant  
 I don’t think I should get one  
 Just looked at car but I am unconcerned about it

Because I'm poor and I'm not confident enough to talk to other people

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

In *pleng puea chiwit*, the number of 'song for life' performed or written in northern and southern musical styles are fewer than in the northeastern and central styles. Examples of the northern style are included "Ui Kam", an eponymous song about an old woman; and "Mida", a song about a woman who was assigned to teach sexual intercourse to the men of *e-kaw* hill tribe. These songs were sung in *kammueang* (northern dialect) by Jaran Manopet, a well-known singer in the northern dialect. In recent times, *Cowboy Nampoo*, a band from the north, released its albums and several songs were sung in *kammueang* dialect. The lyrical content and musical texture of 'song for life' in the northern style is gentler than in the northeastern one. The themes of troubled lives described in the songs are less aggressive, the melodies and harmony are softer and smoother, and rhythms are slower. These characteristics are similar to the general identity of people in the north who are well known for their gentle characteristics (Parkes, 2000).

In "Bin La" (A Bird Called Binla) and "Pak Tai Ban Rao" (The South, Our Home), sung by *Hammer*; "Khoban Mueang Tai" (Cow Boy from the South) and "Khon Tai Klai Ban" (The Southern People Who Are Far From Home), sung by *Chama*, the songs were sung in the southern dialect and popular throughout the country. Similar to Thai country music, 'song for life' in the southern style expresses the values of southern ethnic people such as their veneration of their people, birthplaces, language and culture but the lyrical content emphasises lives of working class people rather than love themes.

Like *Caravan's* songs, most of *Carabao's* songs, from its first album in 1981 until the twenty-third album in 2002, continued to portray the lives of the working class and common people from every region in Thailand. Although Yuenyong Opakul, the song-writer and leading singer of *Carabao*, grew up in Suphanburi province in central Thailand, he wrote music that reflected places and people from other regions such as northeast, north and south as well. Such songs include "Sa-udon" (combining the words "Saudi Arabia" and "Udonthani", a province in the northeast), "Mae Sai" (a district in the north which many girls left to become



prostitutes in Bangkok and other cities), “Roi” (Yum - the word “Roi” is a southern word means delicious). However, *Carabao* most often refers to the northeastern region and *lao isan* in its music, for example, “Lao Doen Din” (A Laotian Walks), and “Sen Thang Sai Pla Daek” (The Way of Pla Daek, the word “Pla Daek” refers to fermented fish, a favorite food of the Laotian ethnic group).

The lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* also refer to Bangkok but in negative ways that are similar to *pleng lukthung*. For example, in “Sanya Na Fon” (The Promise in Rainy Season), sung by *Carabao*, the song talks about how his girlfriend from the country left him and was misguided in Bangkok. “Sao Doi Soi Dao” (A Hill Tribe Girl Went To Be a Star), sung by Thiery Mekwatana, describes a hill tribe girl who imagined that if she went to work in Bangkok, she would earn a lot of money and come back to buy a new house for her parents. But when she did, she had to work very hard and received only enough pay to buy her food.

Besides indigenous Thai ethnic groups, *Carabao* refers in negative ways to Chinese ethnic groups, especially rich people, who live in Thailand. In “Tayat Trakun Yi” (The Heirs of Chinese Family), *Carabao* talks about Thai farmers who had to sell their land to rich people and work in factories owned by the Chinese business persons while the government supported Chinese capitalists over the poor Thai people. In “Siam Law Tue” (the word “Siam Law Tue” is a Chinese word that means a Siamese Pig), released in 2000, the music amusingly imitates Chinese music. *Carabao* also satirically talks about corrupt Chinese Thai politicians who dominate the parliament in Thailand (see the lyrics in Chapter Eight). Many Chinese politicians also did business through monopolizing large government construction projects that made them very rich while the country and most common Thai people became poorer and poorer.

Representations of ethnicity and geographic location in *pleng puea chiwit* are emphasised because the music producers wish to oppose the monopolization of the elite ruling class. Owing to the fact that the homogeneity is the result of the cultural hegemony of the central Thai over the other Thai people who live within the national boundaries, the radical musicians believed that the ethnic groups were oppressed and excluded by the elite ruling class. As a result, they had to struggle for freedom. On one hand, *pleng puea chiwit*, convinces some humble ethnic groups to be proud of

their identities instead of having an inferiority complex. On the other hand, this musical style raises public awareness of discrimination against ethnic groups, which have been suppressed for a long time in Thai society. *Pleng puea chiwit* gives special importance to the suppressed ethnic groups by presenting their stories and problems in the music. The musicians also brought some indigenous music of the ethnic group, such as folk music from the northeast, north and hill tribes, into their music.

### **Ethnicity and *Pleng String***

The musical forms, lyrical contents and performances of *pleng string* are always associated with specific ethnic groups and places. This is similar to the reflection of *pleng lukgrung* but in different aspects. *Pleng string* is associated with young urban people who live in the big cities such as Bangkok.

Besides critically listening to the music, I saw many music videos of *pleng string* in order to examine and establish codes of ethnicity and geographic identification in the music. I found that the music reflected ethnicity, not only of urban Thai but also of Chinese Thai and European / American-Thai citizens. In addition, the ethnicity could be seen in the musical content as well as in the physiques and complexions of *pleng string* performers.

During the late 1980s and the early 2000s, many famous stars of *pleng string* were of mixed racial heritage such as hybrid American or European-Thai and Chinese descendant. For example, Thongchai McIntyre (Bird), the super star of *pleng string* from 1986 to 2004, is American Thai; and Eve Parncharoen (Palmy), the most popular female singer voted by people in Bangkok in 2004 (Suan-Dusit-Poll, 2004), is of Belgian and Thai descent. Other examples of famous American or European-Thai artists of *pleng string* include Tata Young, Nat Meria, Nicole Theriault, Cathariya English, Pim (Macha) Watanapanich and Cristina Aguilar.

During the 1990s and 2000s, while the TV shows from Hong Kong and Taiwan such as *F4* were popular on Thai TV, Sino-Thai musicians were also promoted to be Thai pop stars, for example: *China Dolls*, *D2B*, Dom Pakornlam, Joey Boy, Rueangsak (James) Loychusak, Fandi-Fanden and Film Rathapum. These musicians look very much like super stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This trend also took place in the other areas of Thai mass media during the 1990s and 2000s.

Performers who look like indigenous Thai were rarely presented on TV during the 2000s; instead American or European-Thai and pure blood Chinese performers were popular as TV stars, advertising presenters, TV commentators, reporters, announcers and quizmasters. Beside record producers and business persons, several famous radio/TV disc jockeys were Chinese Thai, such as Samapon Piyasamapan and Winit Loedratanachai. Samapon released his own album expressing some ethnic Chinese identities and his music was favored by Chinese-Thai fans, especially the song “Tueng Nang Kia” which contains Teochew lyrics and translates as ‘we are the same group’. The words *tueng nang kia* were very popular among Teochews (my personal observation) who are the biggest Chinese ethnic group in Thailand (Chunsuvimol, 2004; and Parker, 2000). The deeper meaning of the words *tueng nang kia* is contained in the codes which represent the ethnic Chinese identity. The song tells us “they are not indigenous Thai or Chinese but Chinese Thai”. Due to Chinese Thai business people controlling most of the music industry in Thailand including music companies, TV and radio media, they play an important role in deploying their ethnic identity into Thai popular music especially in *pleng string*. For this reason, since the 1980s, many Chinese Thai musicians were promoted to be pop stars.

In the song “Pen Khon Thai” (I Am a Thai), sung by *China Dolls*, a famous young female Sino-Thai group, the music and lyrics emphasise the identity of the Chinese Thai. Some of the lyrics are as follows:

To be Thai, to be Thai  
 I know you feel confused and may not understand  
 Do you not know? Why don't you speak?  
 I suspect why you do not speak to me  
 Or is it because I look like a ‘Chinese girl’  
 That you are skeptical whether I am ‘Chinese’ or ‘Thai’  
 I'll tell you now that I am Thai although I look like a Chinese girl  
 Come on and look at me again  
 I am Thai although I look like Chinese girl  
 Nothing is wrong, I am Thai  
 Look at me again

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

The message in lyrics of “Pen Kon Thai” (I Am a Thai) is an example of the representation of the ambiguous nature of Chinese identity in Thai society. Ethnic

Chinese identity was suppressed by the ruling Thai elite for long time, especially during the periods of absolute monarchy and military dictatorship. The periods of Democracy and economic growth after the 1980s opened more opportunities for Chinese-Thai to present their identity as part of Thai national identity. The words “to be Thai, to be Thai” and “I am Thai” which are repeated in this song, illustrates the confusion of young Chinese girls who state that they have an equal share of Thai identity but at the same time remain firmly embedded in Chinese popular culture.

A critical issue that concerns many Thai language teachers and elite critics is the singing and speaking in Thai by the hybrid stars. Besides the different physiques and complexions of the musicians, the singing and speaking styles of the hybrid singers are different from other styles. Most American or European-Thai singers could not sing or speak the same dialect as standard Thai. Their pronunciation of some Thai words is too similar to English words for conservative Thai tastes. These performers also used some English words when they speak or sing in Thai dialect. Some conservative academics and journalists criticized their singing style, stating that it damages the standard Thai language, but young audiences seem not to mind. On the contrary, they think these styles are fashionable and attractive (Kachayut, 2004) and they are widely copied. The total sales of the records of these musicians tended to be higher than those of indigenous Thai musicians.

The musical content of *pleng string* also reflects the environment of urban areas and big cities. The sounds of *pleng string* music are composed on electric and synthesized instruments rather than on acoustic musical instruments. The music represents the sounds of an industrial and technological society. While the sounds of *pleng lukthung* represent the natural context of the rural areas, *pleng string* represents popular public urban places such as pub, nightclub, restaurant, condominium, shopping mall and factory. Most *pleng string* lyrics do not identify specific places but the pictures in the music videos and the sounds of music exposed the viewers to the locations. The codes of the musical forms and lyrical contents provide the audience with information about the geographical locations referred to in the songs.

## Centrality of Bangkok

Bangkok is not only the capital city of Thailand, but also the center of the Thai cultural industries. Most of the music industry, including people who work for the music industries, is located in Bangkok and its outskirts. Although many employees of the music companies come from the country or other provinces, they tend to migrate to Bangkok and produce their work there rather than in their hometowns. Some artists still live in the provinces but they come to Bangkok when they want to make records. For example, Chintara Poonlap, a famous singer in the style of *lukthung morlam* (Thai country music in the Northeast style), who lives in the northeast region, performs her music mainly in the provinces, but her records are produced in high-tech record studios and factories in Bangkok and then distributed throughout the country. In other words, if someone wants to be a successful artist, s/he should move to Bangkok. Bangkok is also the center of the mass media business, such as radio, television and print media. Although some local media also produce and distribute their own products, their market share is very small. Most Thai people prefer to consume cultural goods, particularly popular music, from Bangkok, in preference to local products (personal communication with the director of Radio Thailand station in Phitsanulok Province, 2004).

In addition, evidence that identifies Bangkok as the center of national culture can be illustrated in the training requirements expected for radio broadcasts (e.g. disc jockeys and news presenters). The Department of Public Relations determines regulations for the qualification of radio disc jockeys. The regulations state that radio announcers are required to speak proper standard Thai (the official Thai language). People who do not pass the test are not allowed to be an announcer or disc jockey on government radio or television networks. The regulations block the opportunities of many people who were born and raised in the regions outside of Bangkok because standard Thai is not their dialect. Therefore, provincial people who cannot speak the Bangkokian dialect properly could not be radio or television disc jockeys or good singers in urban musical styles such as *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*.

Although most Thai country musicians came from other provinces, they were under the influence of Bangkok culture to some degree. As most *pleng lukthung* is produced by music companies in Bangkok and its outskirts, the music does not

represent the pure ethnicity and geography of each region. It is a blend of rural music and urban music, at least in musical forms, costume styles and recording technologies. The musical form and sound quality of *pleng lukthung* are not very different from urban music and the costume styles of the performers are always fashionable. The combination of rural music and urban culture makes *pleng lukthung* more popular than the previous Thai folk music, and it remains popular in both rural and urban society.

## **Gender**

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) state that "gender is about social and cultural roles, about behavior, that is deemed socially acceptable for men and women and about 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (p. 230). Gender study also focuses on the relative social positions of men and women, and about the social inequalities and the social struggles between them (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002, p. 230). This section analyses Thai popular music and its relationship to critical gender issues such as masculinity, femininity, sexuality, patriarchy, heterosexuality, homosexuality and asexuality as represented in the music. These are issues of gender identity and ideology, which are constructed by a society. Like general music, Thai popular music is an arena for the construction and maintenance of power relations. In Thai popular music, it is still possible to see general tendencies of how masculine and feminine behaviour are represented and how men and women act and feel. Further, different musical styles present different representations of masculinities or femininities.

### **Gender and *Pleng Lukgrung***

*Pleng lukgrung* is a good example of how male hegemony is maintained. In Thai society before the 1970s, Thailand was a patriarchal society whose ideological values directly related to men and masculinity (Purisinsit, 2002, p. 193). The analysis of Thai popular music artists shows that there is significant gender bias. Almost all song-writers and instrumentalists of *pleng lukgrung* are male, while the singers may be either male or female. Songs for female singers involving the love of girl are normally written by male song-writers. Such songs do not represent the attitudes of women but of men. Like patriarchal societies in other countries, the role of women is determined by men and women do not resist this construction (O'Shaughnessy &

Stadler, 2002). The themes and lyrical content in *pleng lukgrung* sung by female singers is not determined by female song-writers or singers but by male song-writers and consented to by female singers.

I interviewed some young female audience members about song-writing and gender and found that when they listen to popular music, most did not pay serious attention to the song-writers. Instead, the audiences concentrate on the singers and their songs. The songs are assumed to be composed and presented by the singers. I explored more than twenty songbooks at several bookshops in Bangkok, Chiangmai and Phitsanulok province; I found that none of lyrics in the songbooks identifies the name of songwriters. Each song title is only accompanied by a name of singer or band. It is not surprising that the readers and audiences assumed that the lyrics were written by the singers.

*Pleng lukgrung* reproduces the dominant values of patriarchal and elite society in both its lyrics and its music. The girl represented in the lyrical contents of *pleng lukgrung* tends to be beautiful, virginal, polite, shy, conservative, traditionalist, passive but adoring in love, loving only one boy, a prospective good housewife; the purpose of her love is marriage rather than just a temporary relationship. A good girl should not actively approach or talk amorously to boys. Instead, she should wait for boys to approach her and then she might choose the one she wants. It is not acceptable for a girl to have more than one boyfriend at the same time. These ideal characteristics of women that are determined by men and consented to by women in Thai society are reproduced in the songs.

The concept of 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' in *pleng lukgrung* differs from that in the West. The concepts of 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' in Thai society generally mean that you have a romantic relationship, but normally this does not mean a sexual relationship. If one has a sexual relationship with someone, society deems the couple may be called husband and wife, although they are not formally married. A girl who has sex before her marriage is considered of less value than a virgin girl, especially to her prospective husband, because of Thai culture values a girl's virginity (Iawsriwong, 2002, p.p. 74-75). Sexual relationships in the lyrics of '*pleng lukgrung*' are mostly described discursively and indirectly, creating a set of conventions that are often at odds with the reality. In fact, many Thai girls have sex

with their boyfriends before their marriage, but they normally keep the information secret (see Abacpoll (2004), the survey about “Sex experiences and behaviours of young students at the age of between 15 and 25, in Bangkok and its outskirts”). In *pleng lukgrung*, description of a girl’s beautiful face, eyes, lips, skin, figure, breasts, and hair are usually deployed, particularly in the lyrics of the songs sung by male singers, to signify sexual desire of men as a metaphor.

For example, “Yang Jam Dai Mai” (Do You Remember?) is a significant romantic love song, sung by Ruangthong Thonglanthom, a popular *pleng lukgrung* female singer between the 1940s and 1960s. The music, which played by a combo band and conveyed in the sexy sounds of trumpets and saxophones, sounds so sweet and lonesome. The most noticeable sound in the music is the clear and high tone of the female singer. The rhythm is soft and its tempo is slow, reminding the listener of a slow ballroom dance. The lyrics were written by Thatree and Uea Sunthonsanan, both famous male song- writers. The lyrics portray a girl talking to her boyfriend about his compliments to her and reminding him about their love and relationship. The lyric describes the words that the boy used to describe the girl’s beautiful body and she still fantasises about his complement:

### **Do you remember?**

Vocalist: Ruangthong Thonglanthom (female)

Lyric: Thatree (male)

Music: Uea Sunthonsanan (male)

Do you remember someone who you told that you really loved?  
Do you remember someone whose heart’s slave you intended to be?  
Which girl’s breasts did you lean on during the full moon of the twelfth month  
When the river was full of water?  
You praised her beauty, bright as the moon  
And you have clung to me, remember?  
You praised her eyes, bright as a star  
You praised her skin, white as cotton  
You have praised her cheek’s smell that was so mild and fragrant  
And you have praised her warm chest when you leant on it  
Do you remember someone you told you loved as much as the sky?  
Do you remember someone about who you raved that you adored?

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from *Yang Jam Di Mai [Do You Remember?]*).



In contrast with the female's characteristics, a boy is expected to be brave, to approach a girl and request love from her. A boy might amorously meet many girls in order to compare them and choose the best one. Unlike girls, the status of a boy's virginity is not important; moreover, it is probably an advantage for a boy to have sexual experience before his marriage. Moreover, although a man may have sex with another girl after his marriage, his behavior is probably still acceptable if he is a rich man or an aristocrat. In the other words, extra-marital affairs are tolerated in wealthy or aristocratic men, especially in a patriarchal society. Before the democratic revolution in October 14, 1976, many rich and aristocratic men such as Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram and Marshal Sarit Tanarat, former Prime Ministers and dictators from 1938 to 1963, openly had several wives. This fact was also exemplified in films and television drama portraying men with high bureaucratic status, especially senior government officials during the absolute monarchy and the following few decades, as having several wives. I argue that social class superiority is more significant than gender in Thai society because these male aristocrats were the most powerful people in the country and so they had privileges that are generally not available to common men who wish to copy this behaviour. After the 1970s and through the period of democracy, however, when polygamy was illegal, this behaviour declined and became less acceptable. Moreover, most Thai women realized their matrimonial rights and they did not allow their husbands to marry other women.

The second example is the lyrics of an erotic song composed by a male songwriter and sung by a male singer. It was also very popular during 1940s through to the 1960s. The lyrics describe the feeling of a man who is missing the happy experience of a sexual relationship between himself and his girlfriend. The music of combo band and male voice connote sexually excitement. The rhythm is a slow tempo that is good for slow ballroom dancing.

### **Thinking of You**

Vocalist: Uea Sunthonsanan (male)

Lyric: Kaew Achariyakul (male)

Music: Uea Sunthonsanan (male)

Thinking of you, I nearly die

Thinking of you who I had touched  
Thinking of your beautiful and bright smile  
Thinking of you I nearly die  
Thinking of your sweet face  
Thinking of your warm lap that I used to rest my head on  
Thinking of your whisper pleading me  
Thinking of you made me rave while sleeping every night  
Touching, holding, tightening  
Mild graceful pleading made me daydream  
I still appreciate these things every night and day  
We have loved, have you forgot that, sweet heart?  
Thinking of you, painfully, deathly  
Thinking of the past that always reflects our story  
Thinking of impressive kisses  
Thinking of the past, missing you, I can't forget you

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from *Kit Thueng [Thinking of You]*)

The lyrical contents of this song places an emphasis on the tangible sexual desire of the man for a woman while the lyrics of “Yang Jam Dai Mai” (Do you remember?), sung by female singer, is about an imaginary sexual expression which deals with the compliment of her boyfriend about her beauty. This shows that the gender role of men is superior to women and that women’s role is determined by men. The contrast between the lyrical content in male and female songs (both composed by men) is in gender difference in expressing sexual desire. The girl represented in the female song is innocent and conservative while the boy represented in the male song is more flirtatious and advanced than the girl. Both types of songs reflect gender identities, which enhance our understandings of masculinity and femininity and show how an ideology of gender is constructed in Thai society before the 1970s.

### **Gender and *Pleng Lukthung***

Acting out the gender roles is evident in every aspect of *pleng lukthung* including the lyrics, the behavior of the producers, and highly stylized performances. This musical genre plays an important role in shaping the identity and behavior of girls and boys in both rural and urban areas. *Pleng lukthung* presents the theme of gender relations and a vast majority of the songs within this theme deal with the concept of love. Unlike *pleng lukgrung*, which often ignores the real situation of Thai society, the role of *pleng lukthung* is a ‘realistic’ reflection that is ‘naturalised’ in

Thai society. The musical forms of *pleng lukthung* are simple and easy to remember, similar to folk songs, and the lyrical themes are explicit about the characteristics of country people. Although some lyrical contents of this genre involve resistance to the dominant ideology of masculinity, the degree of the resistance is limited and they do not subvert the dominant ideology.

As Bupa Meksrithongkam (1991) found, more than seventy percent of *pleng lukthung* lyrics reflect the sexual values, expressions and attitudes of young male and female lovers. It does not surprise me because it is no different from other mainstream genres of Thai popular music except *pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life'). Most Thai popular music and other popular music genres throughout the world involve reflection on love. Yet I am interested in the way *pleng lukthung* reflects this theme. I believe that beneath the love, there is always some covert social identity and ideology. Expressions of young love in *pleng lukthung* still differ from those expressed in *pleng lukgrung* and Western popular music in a number of significant ways, depending on the different backgrounds and the purposes of its producers.

Patriarchal dominance still influences *pleng lukthung*. Although approximately half *lukthung* singers are female, the majority of this musical form is still written by men. Most *pleng lukthung* texts, either sung by male or female singers, were written by male song-writers. Consequently, songs sung by men quite clearly reproduce the ideology of the men, while songs sung by women may not present the ideology of women but most frequently reproduce an ideology mediated by masculine sensibilities. Lop Burirat, a famous song-writer who has written many of *pleng lukthung* greatest hits, especially for female singers, said that there are also some women who have written this musical style but their songs were not successful. Lop notices that "perhaps the female song-writers were too shy to reflect what they wanted to say or perhaps their songs were too ordinary for the target audience. I wrote songs represented female tastes and they like them" (personal communication with Kamchareon, 2003). As a result, female song-writers of Thai country music could not appeal to female singers and audiences.

The masculinity that appears in *pleng lukthung* exemplifies the Thai identity of young rural men. On one hand, the general characteristics of rural boys represented in this genre are poverty, low education, a dark skin (the result of

physical outdoor work) unprepossessing, industrious behaviour, honesty and sincerity. For example, the song “Khon Khi Lang Kwai” (A Man on A Buffalo), written and sung by Dao Bandon, deals with the depression of a poor boy who works hard in the rice field (he uses a buffalo to help his job) and falls in love with a girl who prefers a rich man. In the song “Rak Jang Thi Bang Pakong” (I Lost My Love at Bang Pakong), Sodsai Rungphothong’s narrator reproaches his girl friend who left him to stay with a rich man because of his poverty. On the other hand, many lyrics of *pleng lukthung* reproduce negative values of Thai males as being flirtatious, drinking a lot of alcohol, and being unfaithful. In “Lao Ja” (Oh Alcohol), sung by Suchart Thianthong, and in “Mao Lao Mao Rak” (Drunk from Alcohol and Love), sung by Chatree Srichon, the performers proclaim that they prefer drinking alcohol to girls and that they drink all day because they are broken-hearted. Some of the lyrics of “Lao Ja” (Oh Alcohol) are:

There is no one who has a reliable heart in this world  
 Both women and men are liars  
 They cheat and deceive each other  
 So I hate humans but happily love alcoholic drink instead  
 Oh alcohol, my love, please look at me and smile for me  
 I will stay with you for long time and marry you.  
 ...  
 (Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

Female characters in *pleng lukthung* are similar to male characters in terms of low status, but different in their representation. Mostly the girls represented in *pleng lukthung* are poor, rural, poorly educated, industrious, polite and virginal, yet innocent and pretty. Rural female characters often tend to be deceived by rich men or city guys because of their innocence or inexperience. Such girls are satirically represented as preferring millionaires and uniformed officers, police or soldiers, to poor rural boys. Many songs portray rural girls who have left their boyfriends to live with millionaires who already have wives and who later leave the girls, or sell them as prostitutes. Examples include “Kaina Tafang” (The Dizzy Girl), sung by Jiraphan Weerapong, “Kanmark Sethi” (The Millionaire’s *Kanmark*), sung by Seksak Pukanthong, and “Khi Keng Ya Luem Kwian” (Don’t Forget the Cart While You Have a Car), sung by Pumin Inthapan. Some lyrics of “Kaina Tafang” (The Dizzy Girl) are:

Well, never mind, honey! You decided your own fate  
Because I don't have a university degree, you ignored me  
Do forget me. I'm poor and have no money  
'Cause I have to travel on foot, you said that I'm outdated

Hugging the poor boy, you complained about my bad smell  
While hugging the Mercedes Benz man,  
You were excited and wide-eyed  
You look very happy because you've got a new partner  
Every evening you show how rich you are  
By sitting in the Mercedes Benz  
And you have forgot me, the poor rice farmer boy

...  
(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

The lyrics of *pleng lukthung* also comment on the values of Thai people and focus largely on women's behavior. Many lyrics, particularly of this musical style from the early periods, demonstrate that the virginity of a girl is very important to her life. A good girl should not have sex before her marriage or she should not have sex with another man before meeting a right boy. The loss of a girl's virginity diminishes her value in the marriage market. Owing to the fact that these songs were written by men, I argue that this reflection privileges the value of the men above women. This suggests that Thai society, especially in rural areas, is heavily controlled by men who use their power to their own advantage.

However, the girls represented in *pleng lukthung* changed after the 1980s, with the popularity of Pumpuang's songs and the masses of young rural people who migrated to big cities. Pumpuang Duanjan, the former female *pleng lukthung* super star who died in 1992, portrayed the innocent rural girls as sexy and confident. In her songs such as "Krasae" (Come closer to me), "Ue Hue Lawjang" (Wow! You Are Every Handsome) and "Puchai Ni Fan" (The Man in My Dream), the music is modernized in pop rock style and the lyrics appeal to men and persuade them to flirt with her, lest they miss the opportunity of being her boyfriend. Unlike previous female *pleng lukthung* characters, the girl in Pumpuang's songs introduces herself to boys instead of waiting for their advances and then she might (or might not) choose someone to be her boyfriend. Her music was very popular among female and male audiences in both rural and urban areas throughout the country. Following Pumpuang, several other female *pleng lukthung* singers such as Yui Yatyoe, Apaporn Nakornswan, Dao Mayuri and Tai Orathai, copied Pumpuang's style and they

released the same style of love songs, which describe the characteristics of girls who are sexy and confident in themselves. The gender identity presented in the new style of this genre demonstrates an aspect of feminism which celebrates women's sexuality. In other words, the new version of female *pleng lukthung* represents an example of the struggle over the maintenance of male hegemony in Thai society.

### **Gender and 'Song for Life'**

According to my experience of student activism during 1973 and 1977, approximately more than a half of the activists were female. Beyond the issues of political and economic conflict between working class and ruling class, the female activists were very keen on studying the feminist movement. They explored problematic masculinity in Thai society and saw gender and masculinity as a social construction. Although at that time, women in Thailand had almost equal legal rights to men, for example voting rights, practically, they had less right in terms of power and wages, especially working-class women (Purisinsit, 2002, p. 193). For example, the wages of female workers were less than men's and moreover, accounts of women who were sexual abused and killed by men, were heard often. The female activists attempted to fight for women's social, legal, political, and economic rights. They found that the media, especially popular music in Thailand, supported the oppression of women and maintained the values of patriarchal society. They considered that popular mainstream such as *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung*, especially love themes, took advantage of and oppressed women's rights: for example, in representation of women responding to men's sexual advances. Due to the fact that *pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life') emerged among student activists, the musicians agreed with feminists. Although most song-writers of this musical style were men, the rights of women were respected. The musicians of *pleng puea chiwit* considered that sexual connotations in the lyrics of *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* reproduce the values of gender oppression. For this reason, sexual themes were excluded from the lyrical contents of this musical genre, especially during the 1970s.

Instead, the lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* offered messages of sympathy to women who suffered from poverty and oppression. Examples are such as "Nang-ngam Tukrajok" (The Beauty Queen In Massage Parlor), "Maesai" (Maesai District), "Miss Chao-na" (Miss Rice Farmer), sung by *Carabao*; "Noso Ratri" (Miss Ratri),

by Pongthep Kradonchamnan; and “Puying” (Women) and “Sao Doi Soi Dao” (A Hill Tribe Girl Went To Pick a Star), by Thiery Mekwatana. These songs describe the troubled lives of rural girls who have to struggle to survive the poverty, and yet she was taken advantage of and oppressed by bourgeois men.

The best example is “Maesai” (Maesai District) a famous song of *Carabao*, about a girl from Mae Sai district in Chiangrai province, in the north of Thailand, who was sold by her parents for a small amount of money. She had to comply because she wanted to express her gratefulness to her parents reciprocally. Before she realized what wrong with her, she became a prostitute and drug addict in Bangkok. It is a sad song, which has been very popular for more than ten years (personal communication with radio disc jockeys, 2005). Some of the lyrics of “Mae Sai<sup>6</sup>” are as follows:

A cheap little bird from a paddy field  
She was a daughter who was sold by her parents  
Because of reciprocal gratitude  
She had to leave home in Chiangrai to a bad society

When she realized what’s wrong with her, it was too late  
She had slept with several thousand men  
That was why her heart was so unresponsive  
Moreover, she was a drug addict  
So she didn’t want to back home  
She needed only addictive drugs

When she got a message about her parents being sick  
She left Bangkok and went back to Mae Sai to visit her parents  
She bought them some medicine, betel nuts, betel-vines and clothes  
But it’s too late, like the name of her hometown  
It was time for the funeral of her parents when she arrived home...

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard)

Some *pleng puea chiwit* songs during the 1980s contained love themes but they were still unrelated directly to sexual desire in the manner of *pleng lukthung*. Thus the expressions of gender produced in *pleng puea chiwit* remain different to those found in the other genres of Thai popular music. One of many examples is “Put Mai Wan” (Un-sweet Talk), sung by Pongsit Kampi. The song also expresses sexual

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<sup>6</sup> *Mae Sai* also means the town of ‘lateness’

desire, which differs from other styles. The musicians of this genre adopted a feminist ideology from the radical musicians of the 1970s and they still respect the rights of women and disagree with male hegemony. Their love songs avoid the theme of men using their power to their own advantage. Instead, the lyrics encourage the girl to have confidence or hope about a better life. Erotic feelings are excluded from the song but the expression of romantic love remains:

I might not talk to you in a pleasing way  
But I am always sincere  
I do not dare to say that I love you  
But you can see what I have done

Do not live like a hopeless one  
Because you still have someone who cares about you  
When you are so lonesome  
Let me stay along with you

(Translated by Lamnao Eamsa-ard, from Trakoonkrasemsuk, 2004)

### **Gender and *Pleng String***

In *pleng string*, the relative social positions of men, women and gays and their social struggles were significant because of the social change in Thailand since the 1980s. Gender roles in this genre are different to these found in other musical genres. This musical genre represents different themes including masculinity, femininity and homosexuality.

There are still more male than female among popular musicians and business people involved in the production of *pleng string*. However, the role of the female musicians of *pleng string* is more prominent than the role of the female musicians in other genres. According to the study of Mitraporn Yoosathaporn (1996), Thai popular music, especially *pleng string* during 1984 and 1996, constructed images of women modern in their appearance, and lyrics which expressed their thoughts, values, and attitudes toward themselves, love and society. Yoosathaporn found that the images of modern women demonstrated three characteristics: audacity, strength, and intelligence. She said that the modern female singers defined themselves as independent, self-directed, powerful, intelligent, flexible, and critical of men (Yoosathaporn, 1996, p. v). In 2002, I interviewed Kulpong Naknoi, a famous record retailer to young listeners in Bangkok. Naknoi confirmed Yoosathaporn's study that



the images of Thai women in contemporary *pleng string* were a reflection of women in contemporary Thai society. He stated that:

Unlike women in the past, the women in the current music were strong women. If they were not happy with their loves, they would leave them carelessly and without remorse. Moreover, the modern women could begin amorous advances towards men. For example, in Nicole's song, the girl began an amorous advance to a boy. Therefore, it reflected the social change that the social status of women and men are equal... (Naknoi, personal communication, March 1, 2002)

There were many female musicians including song-writers and instrumentalists who performed *pleng string*. Several female song-writers who wrote *pleng string* have been successful since the 1980s such as Sifa, Saowalak Leelabut, Warachaya Promsathit, Chawini Ketbunchoo, Wanthana Werayawat, Narinthon Nabangchang, and Wilawan Koedsuthi (Kaewsuk, 2002). The famous female bands and singer groups were those such as *Sao Sao Sao*, *Dok Mai Pa*, *Puying*, *Budokan*, and *Pink*. The names of these bands elaborate the meaning of female identity; for example, *Sao Sao Sao* means 'three young women'; *Dok Mai Pa* means 'wild flower' and, *Puying* means 'woman'. Although there were fewer female songwriters and bands than male song-writers and bands, the number of female musicians of *pleng string* is still greater than female musicians of other genres. Approximately half of singing stars of *pleng string* are female. The female musicians present their identities and ideology in the music that reflects the equal social status of women in contemporary Thai society.

Compared to neighboring countries, the social status of urban women in Thailand from the 1990s to 2000s has improved to be almost equal to that of men. Like Western societies, in some activities, urban women in Thailand can do as much as men if they like, including expressing sexual desire, having several boyfriends or sexual partners, drinking and smoking. However, these behaviors are still unacceptable among most of their parents. These behaviors are also not acceptable for men in Buddhist society but the women tend to be condemned more than men do, owing to the fact that patriarchy and masculinity have dominated Thai society for long time; these ideologies have not disappeared yet.

Feminism in Thai society has existed for several decades. There are feminists who fought for women's right in Thailand but they were not very aggressive. The conflict between the ideas of masculinity and femininity is not radical in Thai society. I believe that the doctrine of Buddhism made feminism easily accepted in Thai society. Buddhism taught us that mothers are the most important person in our lives and our first priority is to adore motherhood and pay respect to mothers. We should pay respect to women too because they are the gender of motherhood. The main purpose of the tradition of every Thai Buddhist man becoming a Buddhist monk (once in his life) is to express his gratefulness to his mother.

Homosexuality, both gay and lesbian, was also presented through the genre of *pleng string*. Thongchai McIntyre, the super star of Thai popular music in the *pleng string* style, was subject to speculation that he was a gay although he never declared that he was, but his alleged homosexuality did not damage his popularity (focus group with university students, 2003). People in Bangkok voted him the most popular star, consecutively for many years (see Suan-Dusit-Poll, 1999-2004). His fans consist of Thai people of every age and gender, from small children to high school students, teenagers to adults, boys, girls and seniors. His fan clubs have devoted several homepages to him and aid in the maintenance of his popularity. An example of a popular internet website constructed for him is <http://www.bbbird.com>.

Another example is Anchalee Jongkadeekit, the most famous female rock singer in the 1980s. She did not release many songs but her work is considered very important because of her distinct personal characteristics, defining her as a "masculine" female, which compliment her soft rock music that appeals to a wide audience. She was popular especially among young urban female audiences at the same time that Thongchai began to be well known but later she stopped singing to become an active member of a Christian Church in Bangkok. Although recently she has not produced any new albums, she is still regarded as the most popular lesbian star in Thailand.

There are some songs with lyrics that directly are homophobic, for example, "Kliat Tut" (Hatred of Transvestites), an album of alternative Punk Metal, performed by Sepia E.P in 1994. On the cassette cover, there is a motto "We are to opposed every kind of homosexuality" (Norahymn, 1994). However, the songs of Sepia E.P.

were not popular. Nevertheless, there were some successful songs satirizing transvestites, for example, “Prathueang” (an eponymous song), sung by Thai Thanawut (male). The lyrical content of this song does not oppose to transvestism but it presents a story of a lady-boy named Prathueang with surprise and amusement.

Both Thongchai and Anchalee are good examples of the successful presentation of homosexual identity in Thai popular music. Normally, although there are a lot of homosexual people in Thailand, they are marginalized and tend to be satirized and despised. Nevertheless, the cases of Thongchai and Anchalee are exceptions because the majority of Thai audiences love them due to their exceptional talent in music, their performance abilities and their appropriate public images. I have never seen any academic or journalistic article that criticized their gender roles in negative ways. I argue that their homosexuality is less important than their ethical practices. Although their so-called homosexuality was open to the public, they were still popular because their images were appropriate to the moral standard of Thai society. For example, to the public, they were very polite, friendly and entertaining; and they were not overt about their sexual lives. As a result, this tells us that homosexuality is acceptable in Thai society within the compromise between the marginal ideology of homosexuality and the dominant ideology of heterosexuality. In other words, Thai society considers that homosexuality may be acceptable as long as it does not undermine the moral standard of Thai society or the dominant ideology.

## Conclusion

Early in this chapter, I have argued that the harmonic-rhythm, melody, language and lyrical content of Thai popular music concern Thai people of different classes, ages, and ethnicities. Different groups of people use different genres of Thai popular music to entertain and express their thoughts and feelings. The purpose of this chapter has explored class, gender and ethnicity in Thai popular music.

This chapter has argued that although the boundary between the social classes is not clear-cut, social stratification still exists in this country. Social class in the modern Thai society comprises three distinct levels including the upper/ ruling class, the middle class, and lower/ working class. The upper/ ruling class is the smallest group but it is the most advantaged or privileged. The lower classes are very poor and have little or no social, political or cultural power. However, stratification of

social class in Thai society is not stable. It might change over time. The elite class consists of old and new elites. The old elites include the royal family, the military and bureaucratic elite while the new elite groups now include Chinese Thai business people who control the financial, commercial and industrial organizations and institutions of Thailand.

*Pleng lukgrung* (urban music) reproduces and maintains the dominant ideology of the elite class. Most musicians in this genre worked for the upper class although they were the middle classes. In contrast, *pleng lukthung* represents the lower classes such as rural people and laborers. In *pleng puea chiwit* (song for life), although the musicians were from the intellectual middle class, their music represents the lives of the working class. *Pleng string* (young urban music) represents the urban middle class and new elite classes especially in Bangkok.

The representative ethnic group in *pleng lukgrung* was actually the central Thai Buddhist ethnic group, while *pleng lukthung* represents not only the central Thai Buddhist ethnic group but also other regions including the north, northeast and south. *Pleng puea chiwit* dealt with ordinary people from every region, as did *pleng lukthung* but it did not emphasise Buddhism. Besides indigenous Thai ethnic groups, *pleng string* also dealt with Chinese-Thai and European ethnic groups.

Most of the lyrical content of Thai popular music deals with the sexual values, and expressions and attitudes of young male and female lovers. Men influence Thai popular music because most song-writers and record producers are male while the number of male and female singers is equivalent. Representative of the gender roles are different among the four different musical genres. In *pleng lukgrung*, the role of men is superior to women. The role of men in *pleng lukthung* is also superior to women but the women are shown to do more physical work on a par with men. The lyrical content of *pleng puea chiwit* does not emphasise sexual values or male and female love themes. The songs tend to comment on the social problems related to the inferiority of women in Thai society instead. In *pleng puea chiwit*, women's rights are sympathized with and women are not exploited. *Pleng string*, by contrast, is characterised by the adoption of more Western values about gender roles and shows more freedom of sexual expression. Therefore, sex appeal and the sexual values of men and women are not different in *pleng string*.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Conclusion

The general election of 2005 finished with a landslide victory for the “Thais Love Thais Party” (*Thai Rak Thai*) which won more than 375 of the 500 seats in parliament, and Dr Thaksin Chinawat became the Prime Minister for the second consecutive term. It is the first time in the political history of Thailand that one party formed a government without entering into a coalition. *Thais Rak Thais* is a political party formed by capitalists who are mostly well-educated with a Western background. The name of the party has connotations of neo-nationalist ideology and its public image reflects a blend of Thainess and Westernness. Its huge success in the election signifies that the perspective of nationalism and modernism are still significant in many aspects of Thai society. This remains especially so for popular music, which was also widely used by the various parties to articulate their messages in the election.

Thai popular music is perceived by scholars to express a sense of Thai identity and ideology although several conservative critics argue that the contemporary music has very little to do with ‘Thainess’ anymore (see Lockard, 2001; and Kotchayut, 2004). However expressions of ‘Thainess’ in the music is not a simple matter. There are various degrees and aspects of Thai identity in Thai popular music, and likewise there are many styles of Thai popular music. The major styles of the contemporary music, analysed in this thesis, are *pleng lukgrung* (urban music), *pleng lukthung* (country music), *pleng puea chiwit* (‘song for life’), and *pleng string* (young urban music). Each style represents a different aspect or degree of Thai identity. Furthermore, Westernness, as a form of pervasiveness of modernity is always incorporated in every genre of Thai popular music.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the preservasiveness of ‘Thainess’ and the adoption of Western innovation in contemporary Thai popular music. These concepts relate to identity and ideology in Thai society. The issues surrounding Thai identity and ideology, such as class, ethnicity and gender, have been explored within the area of Thai popular music to

show how the music reflects and reproduces the concerns of Thai people in changing times. This thesis, by studying the four genres, reveals the close connection between culture, ideology and politics in contemporary Thailand. My major analytic tool has been an ethnographic analysis where I deal with focus groups and interviews of songwriters, record producers, radio disc jockeys, broadcasting administrators and music executives. The ethnographic approach is supported by semiotic analysis, especially of the songs and the meanings they generated; and also by discourse analysis, where I always ask who is speaking when analysing the songs in order to state that the meanings were represented or expressed by people inside the music industry.

Thai popular music tells us that contemporary Thailand is changing but at the same time, there is the bedrock of 'Thainess' that still exists. The three pillars of that bedrock are nationalism, Buddhism and reverence for the monarchy. All of these pillars come through in the songs in complex and challenging ways. The history of popular music illustrates that there is always the tension between the new, the modern, the Western and the conservative in expressions of 'Thainess'. At any one time, one aspect is more dominant than the other but they have never overwhelmed each other. One can conclude that contemporary Thai music is not homogenous. There are different genres and, within the different genres, there are different themes as well. Moreover, while the bedrock remains, the surface features evolve over time.

The chapter on Thai popular music history outlines the influence of the Western culture on Thailand in terms of culture, politics and economics. Two genres of Thai traditional music including Thai court music and Thai folk music were popular in Thailand before Thai popular music emerged. The new genres were established after Western music was adopted into Thai society in the 1850s. Initially, the Thai elite ruling classes introduced Western music to Thailand and then the middle class and lower class people adopted it. In addition to imitation, Thai musicians chose and made adjustments to the Western music to fit into their tastes and the forms of Thai music. By contrast, Thai traditional music was also adjusted to fit into the forms of the Western music. Thai musicians then created new styles of hybrid music that were a synthesis of original Thai music and Western music forms. Through the mass media, such as radio, television and records, the new musical

styles came to form what may be called Thai popular music and they became more popular while the importance and popularity of the original Thai music declined. We can chart how Thai culture has adopted and adapted Western culture in the music; how Thainess and Westernness have been integrated into Thai popular music; and how Thai popular music may be seen as representative of a process of modernization where Thai and western cultures blend to form something new but also distinctly Thai.

The major significant styles of Thai popular music consist of four genres and each genre was produced by different groups of musicians for different audiences. *Pleng lukgrung* (urban music) was produced by the elite and urban middle class musicians and it was popular among urban people between the 1930s to 1970s. At the same time, *pleng lukthung* (country music) was produced by musicians who came from rural backgrounds and had little formal education and it was popular among rural people and the urban working class. *Pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life') emerged during the political conflict between the conservative ruling elite group and progressive students and socialist politicians in the 1970s. It was produced by the radical student musicians for political purposes, in order to oppose the hegemony of the elite ruling class and encourage oppressed people to fight for better lives. *Pleng string* (young urban music) emerged in the 1980s and it was produced by new generations of urban middle-class musicians who worked for music companies. However, these genres were not stable. They change when situations change and moreover, each form has influenced the successive style of music production.

However, every style of Thai popular music always presents Thai identities and ideologies to a different degree and from a different stance, depending on the factors surrounding the production of the music such as the backgrounds of the musicians and particular situations. There are many different sorts of Thai identities and ideologies in Thai society and they are presented in the Thai popular music. The history of Thai popular music shows that different musical styles portray different sorts of identities and ideologies.

The country music of today is not the same as country music of yesterday, even though they may be a superficial similarity. Thai country music is very sensitive to the changing lifestyles, issues and problems confronting ordinary people.

The music demonstrates not only rural themes such as dispossession, emigration to the urban centres and the introduction of new technologies but also urban concerns as well, reflecting the shifting Thai demographic. This musical genre represents the different identities of different indigenous ethnic groups of Thai people from four regions of Thailand as well as urban identity. The popularity of the music also reflects the hierarchy of the political and social power of those people.

Many authors such as, Damrongloet (1990), Meksrithongkam (1991), Siriyuvasak (1998), Pramot (1973), Jopkrabuanwan (1989), and Kropthong (2004) have concluded that from its birth until now, *pleng lukthung* has portrayed many different social aspects of Thai society, more so than other musical genres of Thai popular music. I can draw upon my direct experiences as a country boy who was born and grew up in a rural area as well as the conclusion from my analysis of collected data and from critically listening to many Thai country music songs that *pleng lukthung* always illustrates the lives of peasants and the environment surrounding them. The lyrical contents of this musical style consist of various issues including rural, working class life, economic and political circumstances, patriotism, and problems of work, sex, alcohol and technology.

The genealogy of Thai country music shows that both history and contemporary practitioners of *pleng lukthung* have expressed a rural sensibility. Besides Western popular music, Thai country music has a close relationship with Thai folk music and with ethnic people and cultures from the four different regions of Thailand. I have described the backgrounds and characteristics of the producers including the musicians and business people who produced *pleng lukthung* in order to support this view of identity and ideology, class, ethnicity and gender in Thai pop music. Most of the Thai country music musicians came from poor, rural backgrounds and had little formal education. However, the class and regional backgrounds of Thai country musicians do in many ways make them representatives of the poor and rural people. In their songs, they articulate the hopes, concerns and aspirations of the lower classes, hence their wide popularity.

Thai country music is highly significant to Thai people of all classes. This represents a transformation in elite thought. Previously, the urban elites had either ignored or discounted Thai country music as an inferior cultural form. However,



since the 1980s, these elites have appropriated country music to the agendas of conservative and nationalism.

*Pleng lukgrung* or urban music is actually one of the greatest vehicles of Thai nationalism operating in contemporary Thailand, even though *pleng string* or young urban music deviates from the three pillars in many respects. Its major deviation is the manner in which it borrows from Western music, mainly in its rhythms, styles and themes, but on close examination it still articulates ‘Thainess’. Moreover the lyrics have been very important in establishing a national language, which in turn, has important consequences for Thai modernity. Unlike Thai country music, ‘urban music’ expresses a certain form of ‘Thainess’ represented by the dominant and ruling group in Thai society, a ‘Thainess’ clearly linked to urban society, although most of its lyrical content concerns the love of young urban people.

*Pleng lukgrung* supports a dominant Thai ideology that emphasises nationalism, patriotism and Buddhist-inflected behaviour by producing content that supports the values of elite class culture such as those expressed in patriotic song. In *pleng string* (young urban music), which is a descendant of *pleng lukgrung*, the lyrical themes still portray romantic love among urban teenagers and the positive side of urban society, although they do not have a strong emphasis on nationalism, patriotism and Buddhism as such. *Pleng string* demonstrates the relationship of young urban boys and girls and their social situations in contemporary Thai society, which on analysis rarely strays from the boundaries of traditional Thai sexual ideology. These perspectives involve the identity and ideology of the dominant group in Thai society: the authorities and business people who control the music industry and mass media in Thailand as well as other cultural industries.

The origins of *pleng lukgrung* lie in Thai court music and Western popular music while *pleng string* is derived mainly from *pleng lukgrung* and American/ British pop rock music. The elite ruling class in the past supported *pleng lukgrung* and most producers of this musical style had close relationships with the elite class. In *pleng string*, the business people who own music companies are part of the so-called new elite group or upper-middle class. They created the artists and music of *pleng string* in order to make their profits as well as to represent their identity and ideology. However, Thai identity and ideology at the present time are not simple

because there are various and complicated versions of ideologies that can be found in other genres Thai urban music is significant because it is a representative of the identity and ideology of ruling class and urban people in Thai society who dominate the country. In other words, these musical genres are representatives of a Bangkok-centric notion of Thai identity.

‘Song for life’ or *pleng puea chiwit* is different from other genres of Thai popular music in terms of the meanings contained in its lyrics and its origins as a form of protest music. Almost by definition, *pleng puea chiwit* did not deal with love themes but portrayed numerous issues of social injustice in Thai society. Since its birth, this genre has commented on numerous social injustices including political, economic, cultural, educational issues and social problems. The major themes of this musical style are resistance to dominant power structures, anti-war themes, anti-Americanism, anti-dictatorship, pro-democracy, and satirical accounts of politicians, government policies and the elite. Minor themes of this genre relate to nationalist ideology such as patriotism, nationalism, and Buddhism, but in a different form to those expressed in the other genres discussed that adhere more strictly to the elite ideology developed by the Thai ruling classes since the 1930s.

The student uprising of the 1970s influenced the emergence of the genre of *pleng puea chiwit* or ‘song for life’. Thai student musicians adopted some ideas from the protest songs of American musicians such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, who sang songs of discontent and criticism. They perceived that there were corruption and repression in Thai society that impinged on all Thais, but especially the poor and rural people. They used the music to articulate the discontent they perceived and to point out the problems, which in turn brought further repression in the form of the ideology of conservatives. Because of accusations of rebellion, these musicians went underground to the jungles where they continued to struggle against what they saw to be injustice. After the installation of the democracy in the 1980s, ‘song for life’ lost its distinctiveness and moved towards country music and urban music in its style, form and the themes it expressed so that it no longer articulated the themes of rebellion and discontent. It established a presence in Thai society as a genre of Thai popular music since the 1980s.

The initial idea of this musical style (to oppose the dominant power and support political movements among radical students and the people) arose from perceptions about the conservative nature of Thai culture and politics. Its lyrics were accused of supporting socialism and Communism during the Cold War by the upholders of the conservative view of Thai society and culture (Jiamthirasakun, 2001). However, it became a commercial musical form, like the other musical styles, because the lyrical contents were adjusted to suit the tastes of general Thai people although it can still be claimed to be different.

The musicians of ‘song for life’ tend to come from well-educated backgrounds and middle class families but they had close relationships and empathy for the working class. Most of them were born in other provinces and have a university or college education background. They tend to be interested in politics and social situations and resistant to dominant ideology. The musicians of this musical style are able to compose music for their own bands although they now work for the music companies. Many songs of *pleng puea chiwit* such as songs of *Carabao* and Pongsit Kampi are very popular in the 2000s.

The ‘song for life’ is significant because it shows how despite expressive political discontent and opposition to the conservative tradition, this musical genre can spill over into popular culture. It challenges many widely held views in the field of Thai popular music. Although there are fewer songs in the genre than in other styles, its lyrics have been very influential. While most other Thai popular songs deal with love and the positive side of Thai people’s lives, this musical style portrays the opposite side of life, featuring the troubled lives of oppressed people and other social problems. This musical genre is an alternative music for people who need to escape from the circular love themes and bland enjoyment of the mainstream such as *pleng lukthung*, *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng string*.

A major theme of this thesis is the construction of social and cultural identities in a specific cultural context. These identities were reproduced by different groups of people in Thai society over a long period. Identity construction can be seen as ideological because it involves social interests and unequal power relations that change over time. My exploration of the relationship between Thai identity and the four genres of Thai popular music shows that factors such as history, genealogy,

musical forms and lyrical contents as well the lives of personnel involved in the production of the genres have shaped their ideological content. I found that *pleng lukgrung* is representative of urban Buddhist Thai people from the capital city of the nation. It also presents the perspectives of elite ruling class through the expression of their collective values, ideas, beliefs and feelings. *Pleng lukgrung* reflects urban and formal Thai identity, defined by the elite and the ruling class, and *pleng lukthung* reflects a rural and informal Thai identity, which was defined by lower class rural people. The lyrics of *pleng lukthung* portray dimensions of rural and urban working class society in Thailand including ways of life, customs and traditions. The lyrical content of this genre not only includes narratives about the troubled lives of poor farmers and workers but also describes emotions and plentiful sensual pleasures which are similarly expressed in the Thai folk tradition. This musical style presents the cultural identities of different Thai ethnic groups from the central region and also those from other regions of Thailand including the northeast, the north and the south. In addition, both *pleng lukgrung* and *pleng lukthung* promote the three pillars of Thai nation (the nation, the religion and the king).

In contrast, 'song for life' presents a different identity from the urban and country music. Instead of portraying the identity of the Buddhist Thai ethnic group from the central region, *pleng puea chiwit* presents many characteristics of other ethnic groups such as Laotians, Muslim, hill tribe people, and other ethnic minorities in Thailand. The musicians of this genre refuse to accept the mainstream themes such as romantic love, sexual fantasy, enjoyment, and traditional nationalism in their music. They tend to present the lives of the humble and suppressed people. Moreover this genre presents the ideas of radical people, such as left-wing groups who were excluded by the ruling elite group from Thai culture.

The content of the *pleng string* (young urban music) did not lose all of its Thai identity although it was influenced by Western rock music. The positive characteristics of Thai people, such as loving fun and relaxation and disliking violence, are still significant in the content and musical forms of this genre. This musical style also presents an expression of other ethnic groups in Thai society, including Chinese-Thai, European-Thai, Islam-Thai, Christian-Thai and Anglo-European, as well as Buddhist Thai ethnic groups. Chinese Thai ethnics, who

dominate Thai politics and economics, also dominate the music industry in Thailand and their identity is presented in *pleng string*. Therefore, this musical genre blends the character of ethnic Thai, Chinese Thai and Western identities suggesting the hegemony of traditional ideological forms in Thai popular music has weakened.

Ideologies in the four genres of Thai popular music are different and yet they all share an innate sense of ‘Thainess’. Exploring the biographies of the musicians and their music, I found that the main themes of *pleng lukgrung* express the dominant ideologies such as nationalism, Buddhism, and patriotism. These ideologies tend to support the interests of the dominant group, especially the ruling elite class in Bangkok and other major cities. In *pleng lukthung* the music still represents the dominant Thai ideology but it differs from *pleng lukgrung* in that it has taken traditional concerns and refocused them. The dominant ideology expressed in *pleng lukthung* blends various ideologies pertinent to the rural background common to most Thai people, including conservatism, patriarchy, nationalism, Buddhism, individualism and capitalism. *Pleng puea chiwit* has tended to present an opposition to the dominant ideology. This genre contains significant political ideologies especially various oppositional and alternative ideologies including pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-corruption, anti-war, Marxism, Maoism, socialism, and Communism. In short it is the left-wing branch of Thai popular music in its original form. However, this musical style in the present time includes both radical and conservative aspects, and regressive and progressive aspects. It also contains dominant ideological aspects in its lyrical content such as nationalism, anti-Chinese and patriotic songs and, one could argue, capitalism in the commercial *pleng puea chiwit* such as “Carabao Daeng” too. Finally, in *pleng string*, the biographies of the musicians and their music reflect the ideology of new elite groups since the 1980s. The ideologies, which are expressed in *pleng string*, include capitalism, consumerism and liberalism.

Different groups of Thai people use different genres of Thai popular music to entertain and express their thoughts and feelings. The harmonic-rhythm, melody, language and lyrical content of Thai popular music concern Thai people from different classes, ages, and ethnicities. Although the boundary among the social classes is not clear-cut, social stratification still exists in this country. Social class in

the modern Thai societies comprises three distinct levels of class including the upper/ ruling class, the middle class, and lower/ working class. The upper/ ruling class is the smallest group but it is the most advantaged or privileged. The lower classes are very poor and have little or no social, political or cultural power. However, stratification of social class in Thailand society is not stable. It changes over time. The elite class consists of old and new elites. The old elite class includes the Royal Family, the military and bureaucratic elite while the new elite groups include Chinese Thai business persons who control the financial, commercial and industrial organizations and institutions of modern Thailand, especially in Bangkok and also in the provincial cities.

*Pleng lukgrung* (urban music) reproduces and maintains the dominant ideology of the elite class. Although most musicians of *pleng lukthung* were middle class, they worked for the upper class. *Pleng lukthung* (country music) represents the lower classes such as rural people and laborers. In *pleng puea chiwit* ('song for life'), although the musicians were from the intellectual middle class, their music represents the lives of the working class. In *pleng string* (young urban music), it represents the urban middle class and new elite classes. The representative ethnic group in *pleng lukgrung* was actually the central Thai Buddhist ethnic group while *pleng lukthung* is not only the central Thai Buddhist ethnic group but also other ethnic groups from regions including the north, northeast and south. *Pleng puea chiwit* dealt with people from every region as did *pleng lukthung* but did not emphasise Buddhist groups. Besides indigenous Thai ethnic groups, *pleng string* also dealt with Chinese-Thai and European ethnic groups.

Most of lyrical content of Thai popular music dealt with the sexual values, and expressions and attitudes of young male and female lovers. Men influence Thai popular music because most of song-writers and record producers are male while the number of male and female singers is approximately equal in number. Gender roles are different among the four different musical genres. In *pleng lukgrung*, the role of men is superior to women. In *pleng lukthung* the role of men is also superior to women but the women tend to be do more physical work producing food and crops. The lyrics of *pleng puea chiwit* do not emphasise sexual values or male and female love themes found in the other genres. They comment on the social problems related

to the perceived inferiority of women in Thai society instead. In *pleng puea chiwit*, women's rights are respected and women are not exploited. *Pleng string* reflects an adoption of more 'Westernised' values about gender roles that show more freedom for sexual expression by women than the earlier genres. Sex appeal and sexual values of men and women are not, however, different in *'pleng string'*.

The study of Thai popular music shows how it has reflected or reproduced the forces of change in the process of modernizing Thailand, problems that have rarely been explored elsewhere in Thai popular culture. The same could be said for the other forms of popular culture but the research has yet to be done. A need for further research in fields like popular magazines and television shows is required in order to chart the remarkable transition to modernity that has occurred in contemporary Thailand. The work to be done on film, television, illustrated graphic, novels, books, magazines and so on is beyond the scope of this thesis but it is important to recognize that there are parallels between these media and popular music.

As long as Thai popular music is heard in Thai society, it will reproduce and comment on modern Thai identities and ideologies. As long as there are tensions among different ethnicities, classes and genders, they will be articulated in Thai popular music as it represents the concerns and fears of the people of Thailand. At the same time, the music is a remarkable barometer of change in a society undergoing modernization and seeking to balance the traditional with the new.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview Schedule\*

### Part 1: Personal Information

1. Sex

Male

Female

Other

2. Age

10-19

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60-79

70-100

3. Place of Birth: Province/ city: .....

Country: .....

4. The condition of your community where you lived when you were young

Urban area

Suburb

Rural area

Crowded area

other: .....

4. Education

Primary

Secondary

Vocational

- Bachelor
- Master or higher

5. Religion

- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Islam
- Hindu
- Others.....
- No religion

6. Status of marriage

- Single
- Married
- Separated
- Widowhood
- Divorced

7. Occupation.....

8. Annual income

- Less than 60,000 baths
- 60,001-12,000 baths
- 12,001-24,000 baths
- 24,001-360,000 baths
- 36,001-600,000 baths
- More than 600,000 baths

9. Your parents' occupation (in the past or present)

Father: .....

Mother: .....

10. What dialect do your parents speak?



10.1 Father

- Native Thai
- Lao-Thai
- Chinese
- Cambodian-Thai
- Lanna* -Thai
- Southern-Thai
- Malay
- Indian
- Others.....

10.2 Mother

- Native Thai
- Lao-Thai
- Chinese
- Cambodian-Thai
- Lanna* -Thai
- Southern-Thai
- Malay
- Indian
- Others.....

11. What is your relation to Thai popular music?

- Songwriter
- Instrumentalist
- Singer/ vocalist
- Sound engineer
- Recorded producer
- Businessperson
- DJ
- Authority administrator
- Customer/ audience
- Others.....

12. What type of Thai popular music do you like most?

- Pleng lukgrung* (urban music)
- Pleng lukthung* (country music)
- Pleng puea chiwit* (song for life)
- Pleng string* (pop rock)
- Others.....

## **Part 2: In-depth Interview Questions**

### **General Questions**

1. What genre/style of Thai popular music do you like most?
2. Why do you prefer this kind of music?
3. In your view, does Thai popular music represent contemporary Thai culture?
4. What are Thainess and Westernness in Thai popular music?
5. How is Thainess presented through Thai popular music?
6. Could you tell me the songwriters presenting Thainess in their music?
7. What is the appropriate proportion of Thainess and Westernness in Thai popular music to make it successful?
8. Are there any ideologies presented through Thai popular music? If there are, what are they?
9. How have these ideologies been developed?
10. In your view, is contemporary Thai popular music appropriate for Thai society?
11. How does Thai popular music have an impact on Thai society?

### **Specific Questions for Musicians**

1. What do you do?
2. Could you tell me what your Thai popular music products/ records are?
3. Which foreign musicians/ groups influence your musical composition?
4. Which Thai musicians/ groups influence your musical composition?
5. How do businesspersons, administrators, DJs, customers and people in your community influence on your musical composition?
6. What inspires your musical composition?

7. How do politics, economy, culture, technology and actual situation influence on your musical composition?

### **Specific Questions for Businessmen**

1. What do you do?
2. Could you tell me what your Thai popular music products/ records are?
3. How do you choose songs for your business?
4. How do you share your ideas on constructing form and content of the music?

### **Specific Questions for Disc Jockeys**

1. What are your duties as a disc jockeys?
2. What company do you work for?
3. How do you choose songs to broadcast in your program?
4. Are you satisfied with the quality of contemporary Thai popular music?
5. Who influence you on choosing music for your program?
6. Who are your sponsors?

### **Specific Questions for Administrators**

1. What are your duties as an administrator?
2. What organization do you work for?
3. In your view, should Thai popular music be monitored more?
4. Do you have a policy that promotes Thai identity or controls Westernness in Thai popular music? If you do, how can you do?
5. How do politics, economy, culture, technology and actual situation influence on your musical concepts?
6. What are your relationships with Thai popular music businessmen, musicians, disc jockeys and customers like?

### **Specific Questions for Customers**

1. How much do these factors: friends, radio, television, parents and magazines, influence on your musical preference?
2. Who are your favorite musicians/ singers/ groups? Why?
3. Which components of Thai popular music do you like?
4. Are you satisfied with the quality of Thai popular music?
5. How does Thai popular music have an influence on you?
6. Could you tell me your top five favorite songs?
7. Please tell me how you get access to Thai popular music.
8. How many records have you bought within the last 12 months? Please specify.
9. How many times have you attended live concerts within the last 12 months? (please specify).

### **Part 3: More Recommendation**

1. What should good music be like?
2. If you can, what do you want to do to improve Thai popular music?
3. Is there anything I left out that you would like to cover?

\* This interview schedule is just guidelines on the interviews. It might be adapted to fit the real situations when it was used. The original script was written in Thai language but Thai version was not available on the computer system in Australia.

## Appendix 2

### Checklist of music events

1. Date.....

2. Type of performance

- Live concert
- TV program
- Performance in an entertainment place
- Other.....

3. Location.....

4. Occasion.....

5. Genre/ style

- Pleng lukgrung*
- Pleng lukthung*
- Pleng string*
- Pleng puea chiwit*
- Other.....

6. Performers

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7. The holder/ organizers

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8. Lyrical content

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9. Type of audience

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10. What the audience's response to the performance

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11. Remarkable Issues

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## Appendix 3

### The List of Interviewees

1. Krisanasak Kantathamawong, a song writer and record producer of *pleng string*, 20 February 2002, in Bangkok
2. Focus group of 20 students from Rajabhat Pibulsongkram University, as audience and customers of Thai popular music, about their opinion concerning Thai popular music, 24 February 2002
3. Kulapong Naknoi, the manager and owner of *Nong Taprajan* music shop, 1 March 2002, in Bangkok
4. Surapon Thonawanik, a famous song writer of *pleng lukgrung*, 8 March 2002, in Bangkok
5. Wichian Kamjaroen, a famous song writer of *pleng lukthung*, 22 March 2002, in Bangkok
6. Surachai Janthimathon, a famous song writer, singer and guitarist of *pleng puea chiwit*, 29 May 2002, in Bangkok
7. Chatree Kongsuwan, a well known record producer of *Grammy Entertainment Music Company*, 7 June 2002, in Bangkok
8. Thep Thewada, a famous radio disc jockey of *pleng lukthung* and *pleng puea chiwit*, 13 July 2003, in Phitsanulok
9. Thongchai Tangjaroenkun, the director of *Thailand Radio Station of Phitsanulok Province*, 20 July 2003, in Phitsanulok
10. Ekasak Sutket, a famous radio disc jockey of *pleng string*, 18 February 2005, in Phitsanulok
11. Wimon Wajasuwan, a famous radio disc jockey of *pleng lukthung*, 18 February 2005, in Phitsanulok



## Appendix 4

### Cultural History of Thai Popular Music

- 1851-1868 Military bands were formed to accompany the marching of soldiers during the reign of King Rama IV.
- 1860s Thai opera emerged with Thai musical compositions.
- 1868-1910 Songs praising the King were played by military bands during the reign of King Rama V.
- 1903-1904 Prince Boriphat Sukhmphan composed and arranged several pieces of music for military bands.
- 1904 Cinema was introduced in Bangkok. Brass bands performed outside of the cinemas to draw audiences.
- 1910 During the reign of King Rama VI, the King composed and performed drama and music, popularizing its form in Thai culture.
- 1930s Luang Sukhum Naiyapradit introduced jazz music to Thailand.
- 1932 During the reign of King Rama VII, the absolute monarchy was overthrown by a coup that brought middle-class military officers and politicians into power.
- 1932-1937 Pran Boon invented a new form of Thai music called “*pleng Thai nuea tem*”.
- 1933 Srikroong Film Company made the first Thai feature film entitled “Poo Som Fao Sap”.
- 1942-1957 Marshall Phibulsonkram served as Thai Prime Minister. He reinforced notions of Thai nationalism and Thai identity.
- 1942 Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej (the current king of Thailand) composed Thai popular music in jazz and blues styles.
- 1945 After World War II, Mr Sa-ne Komarachoon and Mr Kamron Sampunanon performed songs with lyrical content that incorporated ironic or critical commentry on Thai society called *pleng chiwit*.

- 1945 The United States sent many soldiers based in Thailand to fight in the Indo-China war. This military action lasted for three decades.
- 1950s ‘Rock and roll’, which was very popular in the USA and Europe, was introduced to Thailand with the US military.
- 1964 *Pleng lukthung* (Thai country music) was introduced on television. Thai urban music became “*pleng lukgrung*” to differentiate its style from *pleng lukthung* for Thai audiences.
- 1965 ‘The Impossibles’ won the first prize for String Combo music contest, held by the Music Association of Thailand, patronage of the King.
- 1965-1972 “String combo band”, or “*wong string*” (string band) was formed and the music of this band became “*pleng string*”.
- 1966 Mr Somyot Thasanaphan was awarded a gold record, the first for a *lukthung* artist.
- 1968 In August 16, Mr Surapon Sombatchareon (The king of Thai country music) was murdered during a performance in Nakornprathom province.
- 1973 October 14, the dictatorship of Marshall Thanom Kittikhajon (1958-1959 and 1963-1973) was overthrown after mass demonstrations led by students, generating t return to democracy and political liberalization.
- 1973-1976 “*Pleng puea chiwit*” or ‘song for’ life was made popular among Thai university students.
- 1976 October 6, a military dictatorship came back into power and right-wing militia killed several hundred student activists who were protesting the return of Marshal Thanom (the ex-Prime Minister and dictator).
- 1979 “Grand Ex” made a recording of “*lukthung disco*” combining Thai country and Western Disco styles.

- 1980s Grammy Entertainment, R.S. Promotion, and Nithithat Promotion dominated Thai popular music, especially in the pop rock style called “*pleng string*” music.
- 1981 “Carabao”, a folk rock band playing *pleng puea chiwit* emerged.
- 1985 Concerts featuring famous rock singers and musicians from Europe and USA performed in Bangkok, most often playing at shopping centers and stadiums. Then Ms Pumpuang Duangjan (The Queen of Thai Country Music), began performing her concerts at Central Plaza Bangkok.
- 1986 The Board of National Culture established Awards for artists of Thai popular music.
- 2000 Jonas Andeson, from Sweden and Christy Gibson, from Holland, released records of *pleng lukthung* and concerts.
- 2000 Grammy Gold claimed that the fifth album of Mike Phiromporn, a famous northeastern *pleng lukthung* singer, entitled “Yajai konjon” sold more than one million cassettes.
- 2002 Thongchai McIntire, Thai pop superstar, joined Jintara Phoonlarp, a female superstar of ‘*lukthung morlam*’ to release “Chut rap khaek” (Sofa), the album blending pop rock and *pleng lukthung Isan*’ style.

## Appendix 5

### National artists of Thai popular music

#### The Board of National Culture – Award Winners (Musical Performance)

- M.L. Puang-roi Apaiwong, 1986
- Mr. Sa-nga Arampi, 1988
- Mr. Manrat Srigranon, 1992
- Rear admiral M.L.Asani Pramot, 1994
- Khunying Malaiwan Boonyaratanawet, 1997
- Lieutenant-commander Piyaphan Sanitwong, 1998

#### The Board of National Culture – Award Winners (Song-Writing)

- Mr. Payong Mukda, (*pleng lukthung and pleng lukgrung*), 1991
- Mr. Chali Intharawijit, lyrical song-writer and movie director, 1993
- Mr. Prueang Cheunprayot, 1995
- Mr. Surapon Thonawanik, (*pleng lukgrung*), 1997
- Mr. Prasit Silapabanleng, (Thai classical music), 1998
- Mr. Somneuk Thongma, ‘*Chonlathi Thanthong*’, (*pleng lukthung*), 1999
- Mr. Wichian Khamjaroen, ‘*Lop Burirat*’, (*pleng lukthung*), 2006

#### The Board of National Culture – Award Winners (*Lukgrung* -Vocal Performance)

- Mrs. Cherry Sawetanan (Sawali Pakapan), 1989
- Mr. Suthep Wongkamhaeng, 1990
- Mrs. Pensri Pumchusri, 1991
- Mrs. Ruangthong Thonglanthom, 1996
- Mr. Charin Nanthanakhon, 1998

#### The Board of National Culture – Award Winners (*Lukthung* – Vocal Performance)

- Miss Pongsri Woranoot, 1993
- Mr. Somsian Panthong, ‘*Chai MUEangsing*’, 1995
- Mr. Waiphot Sakuni, ‘*Waiphot Phetsuphan*’, 1997
- Mr. Chaichana Boonyachot, 1998
- Mr. Chin Faitet, ‘*Chinakon Krailat*’, 1999