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Red and yellow songs: a historical analysis of the use of music by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in Thailand

James Mitchell

Abstract: The increase in social protests in Thailand since 2005 has been marked by a dramatic rise in the use of music for protest. This article examines the use of music by the yellow and red shirts, and contextualizes the PAD and UDD within the history of two similarly named but very different genres of Thai song: *phleng chiwit* [life songs] and *phleng phuea chiwit* [songs for life]. *Phleng chiwit* was part of a flowering of satirical art forms during Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram's second term as Prime Minister (1948–57) before censorship forced many songwriters to change to the new commercial genre of *lukthung* [Thai country song]. *Phleng phuea chiwit* was the preferred music of leftist students in the pro-democracy movement of the 1970s. However, the rehabilitation of *phleng phuea chiwit* as the official Thai protest genre has disguised the role that *lukthung* played during the armed struggle of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The article examines the use of satirical songs and *lukthung* during Thailand's most recent political struggle, from 2005 to the present. It appears that red-shirt protestors (the UDD) have accessed a wide range of memories, including the most powerful counter-hegemonic traditions, whereas their yellow-shirt opponents (the PAD) have drawn on a much narrower selection of hegemonic cultural memories.

Keywords: yellow and red shirts; *lukthung*; *phleng chiwit*; *phleng phuea chiwit*; PAD; UDD

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The increase in social protest in Thailand since 2005 has been marked by a dramatic rise in the use of music in a political context. Unlike the leftist movement of the 1970s, which embedded the view of ‘songs for life’ as the accepted Thai protest genre, the People’s Alliance for Democracy (the PAD – or yellow shirts) and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (the UDD – or red shirts) have made use of almost every kind of music found in Thailand. Remarkably, this outpouring of rebellious sounds has taken place against a backdrop of increasing state censorship, self-censorship by media and recording companies, and punitive lese-majesty laws. Why this has been possible is not straightforward. Certainly, advances in the areas of satellite television, home recording equipment and the Internet have made censorship easier to overcome, and the competing political movements have developed sophisticated protest strategies by learning from each other. This article suggests that part of the answer also lies in the messages and memories communicated both lyrically and musically, consciously and unconsciously, through the songs and music used by each group.

Lukthung

A central focus of this article is *phleng lukthung* or Thai country music. *Lukthung* is a fusion genre blending Western and Latin dance rhythms from the 1940s and 1950s with Thai melodies. Traditionally accorded low cultural status,¹ largely because of the heavy involvement of *Isan*² people, it began to be acclaimed as a national art form after a royally sponsored concert series in 1989. In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis, *lukthung* was hailed as the most authentic Thai popular music genre (see Amporn, 2006). However, at that time a process of *Isan* cultural revival and political maturation was under way, and continued attempts to appropriate *lukthung* as an example of Central Thai supremacy³ have only served to strengthen this process. *Lukthung* was

¹ See Mitchell (2009, pp 298, 299); and Lockard (1998, pp 187–191).

² *Isan* refers to the population of the North-Eastern region of Thailand, most of whom are of Lao descent. The North-East only officially came under the control of Siam following the revolt of the vassal state of Vientiane in 1827, and *Isan* people have endured ongoing discrimination and chauvinism at the hands of the Central Thai. Hesse-Swain provides an excellent summary of the history of *Isan* identity (2006, pp 258–260). See also McCargo and Hongladarom (2004, pp 219–234) and Lockard (1998, pp 164–165).

³ See Mitchell (2009, pp 307–309).

already identified with Isan culture and during the last decade *morlam*⁴ [traditional Lao folk music] and *lukthung* have been conflated across generic boundaries under the various titles of *lukthung prayuk*, *Isan lukthung* and *morlam sing*.⁵

For over 40 years, *lukthung* has been the preferred music of Thailand's poor. Rural peasants and the urban working class have found common ground in the stories and melodies of this genre. As demonstrated by Ubonrat Siriyuvasak in her seminal article on the genre, *lukthung* is embedded in a political context through its music, lyrics and subject matter (1990, pp 61–77). However, the apparent absence of overt social protest in a working class genre has discouraged the attention of Western scholars and surprised the few writers who have delved into the popular music of Thailand. Craig Lockard surveyed the popular music genres of Thailand for counter-hegemonic discourses and concluded that *lukthung* 'could probably not serve as a model for musicians interested in more overt protest music, owing to its frequently lavish, almost circus-like stage productions (often involving elaborately clothed dancing girls), its progressive commercialization (and perhaps increasing co-optation) and the conspicuous consumption of its wealthy superstars' (Lockard, 1998, p 191). This article demonstrates that Lockard did not have sufficient information available to him to show truly the counter-hegemonic potential of *lukthung* and that, during the present conflict, a wide range of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (including even the most commercial) elements of *lukthung* have been used for protest. In the Thai context, hegemony refers to the establishment, consisting of the military, the royal family, the government and the Buddhist leadership (in possible descending order of influence); whereas counter-hegemony is any opposition or alternative to that establishment.

Method

While Denisoff's (1966, p 584) categories of magnetic (which promote group solidarity) and rhetorical (which present a political message) protest songs remain valuable, it is generally accepted that any definition of protest music must include the capacity and cultural significance of the

⁴ Although the grammatically correct term for Lao-Isan folk music is *lam* and a practitioner is a *mor lam* ['professional singer'], the latter term has become commonly used to describe the genre.

⁵ *Sing* means 'fast, racing or dangerous'. *Morlam sing* usually refers to fast tempo *morlam* set to dance-club beats.

music itself. As this article will confirm, certain melodies and genres can be extremely powerful cultural and political symbols, and some protest songs gain power through the appropriation of familiar tunes. Potentially, *lukthung* lends itself to being considered as part of the larger discourse on protest music. But that is not the main purpose of this article. Eyerman and Jamison (1998, p 44) propose that ‘protest’ music should be interpreted through a framework ‘in which tradition and ritual are understood as processes of identity and identification, as... collective meaning and memory’. Music gives rise to ambiguous and open-ended images and symbols, which can ‘open channels of identification through which the past can become present’ (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998, pp 44, 46). What can we therefore learn about the yellow and red shirts from their musical preferences? That *lukthung* has been used simultaneously by two opposing groups for competing political objectives is intriguing. But how can this be so? The answers lie in the historical configuration of the music and the nature of the political contours that have emerged since the 1970s.

Structure

Part one builds a foundation for this study by introducing the competing political movements, summarizing the development of relevant Thai musical genres and providing an overview of the performers and genres preferred by each side.

Part two aims to contextualize the music of the PAD and UDD by examining some episodes within the history of two similarly named but very different genres of Thai song: *phleng chiwit* [life songs] and *phleng phuea chiwit* [songs for life]. *Phleng chiwit* was part of a flowering of satirical art forms during Phibunsongkhram’s second term as prime minister (1948–57) before censorship forced many songwriters to change to the new commercial genre of *lukthung*. *Phleng phuea chiwit* was the preferred music of leftist students within the pro-democracy movement of the 1970s. However, the rehabilitation of *phleng phuea chiwit* as the official Thai protest genre has disguised the role that *lukthung* played during the armed struggle of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). *Phleng plaeng* [altered lyrics] using the tunes of famous *lukthung* songs were extremely popular among the rank-and-file insurgents, particularly those in Isan.

Part three examines some of the satirical songs and *phleng plaeng* produced during the recent political struggle. The use of *lukthung* by

each side is surveyed and the types of collective memory evoked by this use are discussed. It appears that the red shirts have accessed a wide range of memories, including the most powerful counter-hegemonic traditions, whereas the yellow shirts have drawn on a much narrower selection of hegemonic cultural memories.

Part 1

Description of the protest movements

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), led by media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, was formally established on 8 February 2006 in order to protest against the alleged corruption of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. With a support base drawn from middle and upper class Bangkokians and southerners, conservative factions of the Thai army, the Democrat Party, some NGOs and labour unions, the PAD is characterized by ultra-nationalist, pro-monarchy rhetoric and the wearing of yellow – the official colour of the Thai king. After the September 2006 coup, the PAD disbanded, only to reform in March 2008 to campaign against the People's Power Party governments of Samak Sundaravej (January–September 2008) and Somchai Wongsawat (September–December 2008). This period was notable for the blockade of Parliament House and the occupation of Bangkok's airports. When the Somchai government was dissolved in December 2008, the PAD once again went into hiatus. Since that time, pink-shirt⁶ and multicoloured groups have held demonstrations that have stressed loyalty to the monarchy and to the state and have often included PAD personnel.

The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was first formed in 2006 as the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD) to combat the appearance of the PAD and to oppose the coup and ensuing military government. Initially only consisting of supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the movement has expanded to include pro-democracy and some leftist groups. After the election in December 2007 of the People's Power Party, the UDD went into recess until May 2008 when it responded to the PAD's seizure of Parliament House. Early UDD protest methods were amateurish compared with those of the PAD,

⁶ The wearing of pink shirts by royalists became popular after King Bhumibol left hospital in November 2007 dressed in pink. The inspiration for a pink-shirt group appears to have come from *morlam/lukthung* singer Jintara Punlap, whose song, 'Mob si chomphu' ['Pink Protest Group'], appeared in March 2009.

and it was not until 2009 that the red shirts emerged as a coherent political force with power bases in the North-East and North. In April 2009, the red shirts forced the Fourth East Asia Summit, held in Pattaya, to be abandoned, and major demonstrations were held in Bangkok. After these demonstrations were dispersed by the military, the UDD appears to have spent the next year quietly planning and mobilizing for the dramatic protests that took place in Bangkok from March to May 2010 and which resulted in the deaths of 92 people.

Thailand's musical genres

Traditional music is divided into the court-centred 'classical' tradition and various folk traditions. Central Thai classical music is performed by *mahori* [stringed and percussion instruments] and *piphat* [percussion and wind instruments] ensembles and also accompanies the *khon* [masked] and *lakhon* [non-masked] dance-drama forms. The term *phleng Thai doem* ['original Thai song'] refers to the large Thai classical repertory. Since the 1970s, classical music has increasingly been adopted by the Bangkok middle class as a marker of status and identity (see Moro, 2004, pp 206, 207).

The most significant folk genres in terms of influence on *lukthung* are the Central Thai folk traditions of *phleng lae*, *phleng choi*, *phleng isaeo* and *lamtat*⁷ and the North-Eastern *morlam* tradition. Although all Thai folk genres use pentatonic scales, the equidistant tuning of Central Thai genres contrasts greatly with the natural pentatonic minor scale of North-Eastern genres. *Likay* is a theatrical form that has blended Central folk traditions with classical elements.

Thai popular music can be traced back to *phleng Thai sakon* (universal or Western songs) of the 1930s and 40s. Under the leadership of Field Marshall Phibunsongkhram and Luang Wichit Wathakan, Thai melodies and lyrics were combined with Western harmony and instrumentation. Folk melodies were adapted to create *ramwong* ['circle dance'] – a hybrid genre that rivalled the popularity of Western dance music such as the tango or the waltz. After the Second World War, *phleng Thai sakon* gradually developed subgenres such as *phleng talat* [market songs] or *phleng chiwit* [life songs], which discussed rural concerns and were sung with rural accents.

⁷ All of these Central Thai folk traditions employ chanted rhythmic dialogue and equidistant tuning. According to Ubonrat (2000, p 9), Central Thai folk singing was influenced by *suat khaek* or Malay chanting introduced by Malay prisoners during the reign of King Rama III (1824–52).

During the 1960s, a formal division was made between these realistic songs sung in rural accents and incorporating myriad folk styles – *lukthung* [literally, ‘children of the field’] and romantic love songs sung in a Western style – *lukkrung* [literally, ‘children of the city’]. *Phleng phuea chiwit* [songs for life], which combined American folk with Thai lyrics, melodies, singing techniques and instrumentation, provided a voice for the leftist student protest movement of the 1970s and has since developed into a commercial country rock genre. Opposed to songs for life were *phleng pluk-jai* [patriotic marches], which developed from Western brass band music during the nineteenth century. Through a process of cross-pollination with *lukthung*, Isan folk has developed into the hybrid genres of *molam sing*, *Isan lukthung* and *kantruem*.⁸

Lukkrung soon developed into *string* (Western pop with Thai lyrics), which then followed similar paths of development to Western popular music. Disco and funk were important influences in the 1970s, while more recently, Britpop/alternative, J-Pop and K-Pop, ska and hip hop have been incorporated in local variants. Western jazz has been appreciated by the Thai upper and middle classes since the 1930s and is particularly associated with King Bhumibol (r 1946 to the present).

Music of the PAD

Anyone who has followed the turmoil in Thailand over the last six years is probably aware that music has played an important role in the protests. The PAD’s combination of free-to-air satellite television coverage and continuous demonstrations centred around a performance stage (rather than the object of protest) has resulted in a blend of protest entertainment. Just as the proliferation of cable television networks around the world has led to a massive increase in demand for content, so ASTV’s 24-hour format meant that musical content was essential. Furthermore, the PAD appears to have had high levels of support from Bangkok’s entertainment industry (see Clewley, 2007, pp 42–43). This was clearly seen when Pongpat Wachirabunjong accepted the award for Best Supporting Actor at the Nataraja Awards (for Thai TV) ceremony on 16 May 2010. To a standing ovation, he gave a speech, ‘If you hate Father, no longer love Father, just get out of here. Because this is Father’s house. Because this land belongs to Father.’⁹ As a result of this support, a constant

⁸ *Kantruem* is a folk-rock genre, usually sung in Khmer and practised in the *Isan* provinces closest to Cambodia – Surin, Buriram and Srisaket.

⁹ This speech can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9TW5rNNwx4>.

stream of celebrities has been available to perform at PAD protests. Correspondingly, well educated middle to upper class viewers with an interest in the fine arts did not want to watch hours of uninterrupted speeches. Consequently, variety programmes such as Jor Yellow [Yellow Screen], hosted by the well known actor *Saruny Wongkrachang*, became key drawcards for the PAD.

Many of the genres favoured by the PAD constituency, such as *phleng phlukchai* [patriotic marches], Thai and Western classical, *lukkrung*, jazz, electronica and Thai alternative rock, can be described as elite genres that signify high status and are produced by and for the most affluent segment of urban society. Artists in these genres, who joined the PAD campaigns between 2005 and 2008, include classical musicians Nat Yondarak and his wife Wongduean Indharavud, alternative group Apartment Khunpa, Natda Wiyakan [*phleng wan*]¹⁰ and electronica project The Photosticker Machine. Another elite artist to come out in support of the PAD was the artistic director of the Bangkok Opera, S.P. Somtow, who famously proclaimed ‘having returned to the country of my birth after having spent some 50 years abroad, I had never felt more free’ (Somtow, 2006) just weeks before the junta’s Ministry of Culture censored his opera *Ayodhya* for fear of bad luck (Condie, 2006). A number of other genres are not elite culture *per se*, but are usually followed only by niche audiences. These include the Central Thai folk genres of *lamtat* and *lae*, represented by Wang Teh Lamtat ensemble and the pastiche folk group Farmer’s Son, plus the Teochew Chinese opera genre of *ngiw*.

However, not all the PAD’s music is so easily classified as elite culture. Many *phleng phuea chiwit* musicians have campaigned for the PAD, including top southern bands Hammer and Malihuanna [marijuana], Folkner and the leader of the prototype songs-for-life group Caravan, ‘Nga Caravan’ Surachai Jantimathon. Nga Caravan even wrote original protest songs for the movement including ‘March Phantamit mai klua DAD’¹¹ and ‘Sanam Luang’¹² (Clewley, 2007, p 43). Lanna (Northern) folk singer Suntaree Vejanond (mother of pop star Lanna Commins), most famous for the 1978 song ‘Ka jao pen sao Chiang Mai’ [‘I am a Chiang Mai Girl’] first appeared for the PAD in 2006 (Kelley, 2009). Country rock has been featured at many protests through

¹⁰ Slow sweet pop similar in nature to the older *lukkrung*.

¹¹ Translates as ‘March PAD Not Afraid of the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship’.

¹² Site of protests in Bangkok.

artists such as Sek Saksit and Nasu Rapin Putichat and the Su Su Band. Other popular music performers include rock artists Sip Lor [10 wheels], Sukanya Miguel and Rang Rockestra, and actress Joy Sirilak Pongchok (*lukthung*), referred to on the protest stage as *Nang ek khwanjai phantamit* [‘Darling heroine of the PAD’].

The PAD claims to be waging a ‘holy war... to protect the three institutions of Thailand, namely the state, the religion, and the monarchy’ (Palphol, 2009), so it is not surprising that royal music and patriotic songs have featured at demonstrations. Songs written by King Bhumibol, such as the anti-communist anthem ‘Rao su’ [‘We Fight’], jazz tune ‘Chata chiwit’ [‘Destiny of Life’] and songs in praise of the King have been especially popular at yellow- and pink-shirt protests. In September 2008, an Australian folk singer, Kelly Newton, performed her own song ‘Long Live the King of Thailand’ on the protest stage at Government House to rapturous applause.¹³ With such emphasis on royal and elite culture, the yellow shirts consciously differentiate themselves from the working class. A PAD video accompanied by a rock version of an old *phleng phlukchai*, ‘Rak kan wai thoet’ [‘Please Love Each Other’] draws a clear distinction between pro-Thaksin thugs who smoke, drink and expose themselves, and peaceful, orderly yellow shirts who participate in Central Thai folk arts and customs.¹⁴ The video ends with a shot of the phrase *muea khon thoi pen yai, khon Thai yorm dueat rorn* [When scum become big, Thai people accept trouble]. This strong demarcation of boundaries of heritage and status is inevitably reflected in the PAD’s attitude to working class music. Certainly, both the PAD’s demographic and its assumed mantle as the protector of the monarchy have led to an expressed preference for elite culture and tradition.

Music of the UDD

After the People’s Power Party was dissolved and the Democrats came to power in December 2008, a proliferation of UDD media content included a dramatic increase in the use of music. Over the course of 2008, the UDD had learned much from the PAD regarding organization and use of media technology. Launched soon after the Democrats began governing, DTV (democracy television) was a repackaging of the earlier PTV (people’s television) that was clearly intended to emulate the

¹³ This performance can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNvZk-o0zmA>.

¹⁴ The video can be downloaded at <http://cid-f2b83f81974b406c.office.live.com/self.aspx/boringdaysfiles/media/RakKanwaiterd2.wmv?ccsf=1>.

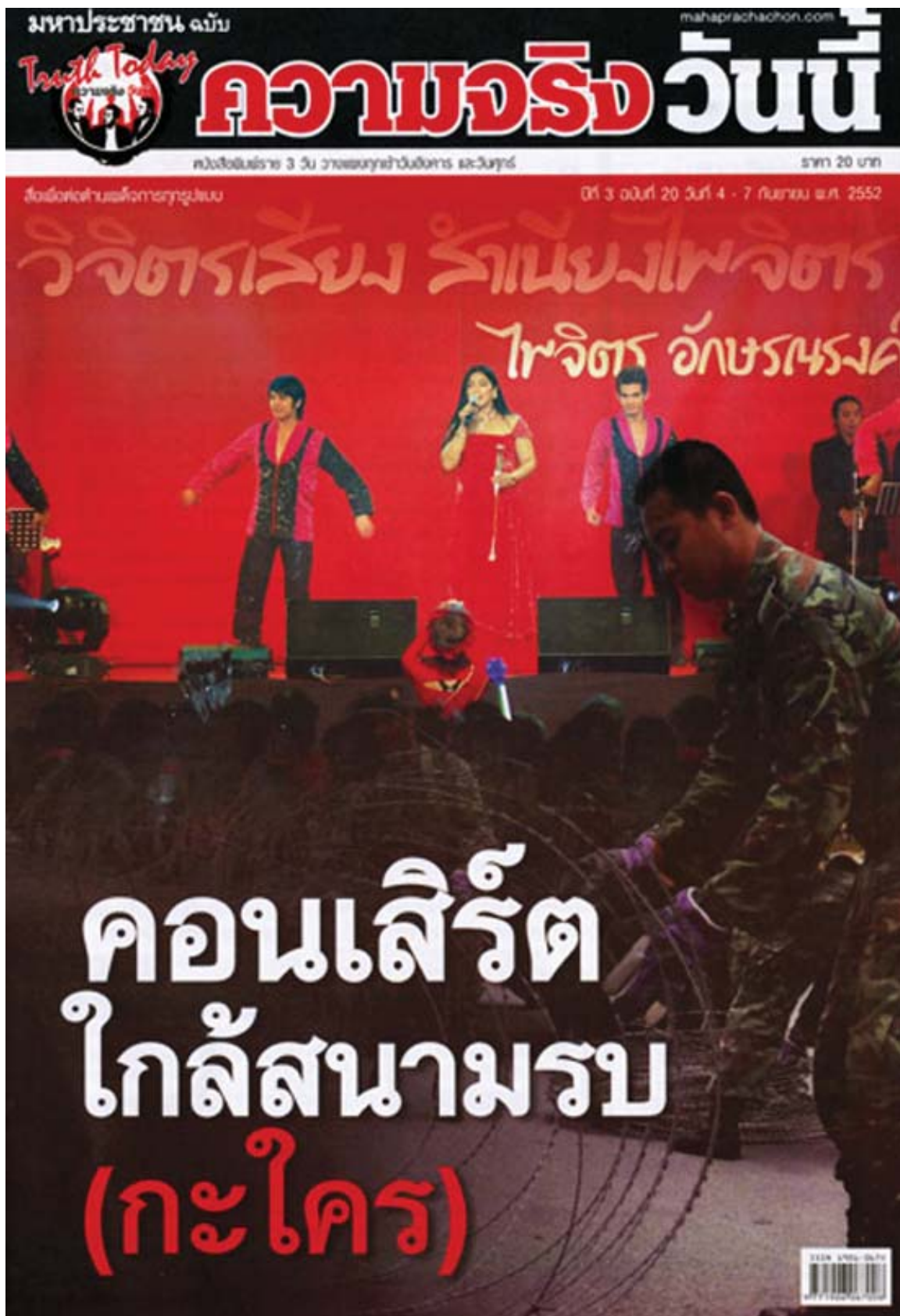


Figure 1. From *Truth Today*, 4–7 September 2009. The words at the back of the stage read: ‘The exquisite voice of Paijit – Paijit Aksonnarong’.
Source: Used with permission from 2Bangkok.com.

role played by ASTV in coordinating the protests against the Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat governments. The channel followed the same ‘infotainment’ format and featured such programmes as political talkshow *Khwan-jing wan ni* [‘Truth Today’] and *Khui kap Adison* [‘Talk with Adison’]. The latter was a music variety show hosted by Adison Phiangket, who composed songs for the CPT during the years of the *Isan* insurgency before embarking on a political career in which he rose to be MP for Khon Kaen and a minister in Thaksin’s government.

However, perhaps illustrating the difference in demographic, the key medium for mobilizing support for the UDD was radio, rather than television. A large network of community radio stations interspersed political rhetoric with *lukthung* and *morlam*, the preferred genres of the UDD demographic. The mixing of political and commercial content in such radio programmes effectively appropriated these genres to the UDD cause. Demonstrations featured entertainment spots, karaoke singalongs and, occasionally, specially composed political songs. VCDs and MP3s of red-shirts music were distributed at protest sites and through the Internet. After the Songkran 2009 setback, the UDD consolidated support throughout Thailand via a series of fundraising concerts.

At the time of writing, the most popular red-shirt singers include Paijit Aksonnarong (see Figure 1), Muk Methini and Phloidi (*lukthung*), Satian Noi and EE-Sompo (*morlam*), Phithan Songkamphon (country rock) and Orm Khaphasadi (*kantruem*).¹⁵ Of these, only Paijit has had a considerable commercial career (singing Chinese-flavoured *lukthung* and *phleng wan* for the Nithithat company). While it is true that some of the PAD artists no longer have active careers, there does not appear to have been any industry-led censure of those performers who support the yellow shirts. The same cannot be said of artists who support the red shirts – no currently contracted *lukthung* or *molam* star has performed at red-shirt rallies – not even 1970s superstar Sayan Sanya, who was a member of Thai Rak Thai.¹⁶ The appearance by Grammy¹⁷ star Takataen Chonlada

¹⁵ Hybrid folk-rock genre, sung in Khmer dialect, found in Isan provinces close to Cambodia.

¹⁶ Sayan, possibly the most famous living *lukthung* singer, had his 2007 album banned by the Public Relations Department after he made a speech critical of the junta. Since then he has kept a very low profile. Of course, this may also have to do with his questioning the authenticity of fellow legend Yodrak Salakjai’s terminal cancer. This writer has also heard that 1970s *Isan lukthung* star Dao Bandon appeared for the red shirts, but he does not have a current recording career.

¹⁷ The dominant Thai entertainment company.



Figure 2. *Lukthung* star Takataen Chonlada at Thaksin’s 60th birthday, 26 July 2010. Photo by Nick Nostitz. Used with permission.

at Thaksin’s 60th birthday party (see Figure 2) held at Mangkorn Luang Restaurant on 26 July 2009 could perhaps qualify as an endorsement, but *lukthung* stars are often booked for private celebrations. The UDD leadership itself boasts a formidable trio of musicians – Paijit’s husband Wisakhan (songs for life), a former member of Caravan, politician Adison Phiangket (*morlam/country rock*) and 1980s pop heart-throb Arisman Phongruangrong (*phleng wan*). One of the most popular red-shirt songs since the events of March–May 2010 has been former communist activist Jin Kamachon’s *Nak-su thuli din* [‘Warriors of the Dust’], which valorizes the fallen protesters.¹⁸ Perhaps inspired by the PAD’s successful use of satire (see ‘Ai na liam’ in Part 3), there appears to have been a concerted attempt to produce low-brow satirical *phleng plaeng* in various popular genres by artists such as Nakara and Lorlian.

¹⁸ This song can be heard at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coo0FTaXHf0&feature=related>.

Part 2

Phleng chiwit

In his second term as Prime Minister from 1948 to 1957, Phibunsongkhram was not in the position of ultimate power he had experienced during his first term. Among the problems he faced were growing charges of economic discrimination from North-Eastern politicians, an uneasy alliance with ambitious elements in the armed forces and how to maintain a democratic facade while still hanging on to power. It is not surprising, therefore, that a range of satirical art forms developed at this time. For example, the novel *Pattaya* by Dao Hang satirized the social engineering policies of Phibunsongkhram's government (Thiraphap, 1998, p 62), while Malai Chuphinit protested against Phibunsongkhram's simplified Thai writing system by halting his famous novel, *Our Beloved Land* [*Phaen-din khorng rao*, 1951] before its conclusion (Ubonrat, 2000, p 13). Malai, in *The Field of the Great* [*Thung maharat*, 1954] and Senee Saowaphong, in *Wanlaya's Love* [*Khwam-rak khorng Wanlaya*, 1951] and *Ghosts* [*Pisat*, 1953] abandoned the conventional aristocratic hero in favour of ordinary protagonists who fought for the underprivileged (Klausner, 2004). At a nationwide *likay* competition organized by Radio Thailand in 1955, the most popular group, Homhuan, were disqualified because they deviated from the approved script in order to criticize the political situation at the time (Ubonrat, 2000, p 15).

The earliest incarnations of *lukthung*, variously known as *phleng chiwit* [life songs] or *phleng talat* [market songs], were renowned for their biting social criticism and popularity among the working class. Songwriters such as Saengnapa Bunrasri (the first to use *phleng plaeng* for protest),¹⁹ Saneh Komarachun, Chalo Traitrongson and Phaibun Butkhan decried the exploitation of farmers and extolled the virtues of the common man. When Phaibun's *Klin khlong sap khwai* ['Muddy Odour and Stinking Buffalo'] was first broadcast in 1953, it created a sensation, selling over 5,000 records in one week (Wat, 2003, p 251). It was banned by Phibunsongkhram's government for drawing unhelpful comparisons between rural and urban conditions. The most controversial lines were: 'The smell of the buffalo is mixed with the smell of the young men and women of the farmers/It's not upper class like the people of heaven', which referred to the residents of Bangkok (Krungthep, the City of

¹⁹ According to Phayong Mukda, the first composers to write *phleng plaeng* were Saengnapa Bunrasri and Nakhon Monklayon (Siriphon, 2004, p 114).

Angels). The song implied that peasants received no help from the central government and warned listeners not to ‘look down on farmers as if they are poor things’ (Wat, 2003, p 254).

Saneh Komarachun and ‘Samlor khaen’. One of the *likay* actors responsible for the protest previously mentioned was the famous songwriter Saneh Komarachun. One of the true renaissance men of Thailand, Saneh began acting in *jam-uat* [slapstick drama] and *likay* before periods of singing lead and backing vocals for an orchestra, composing for the navy band, dubbing voices for foreign films and acting in radio plays and film. Later, he popularized the horror film genre when he produced and directed the iconic comedy *Mae nak phrakhanong* [‘Nak of Phrakhanong’, 1959]. Saneh seems to have borne a grudge against Phibunsongkhram on at least two counts: he had royal blood through his mother’s line; and, like many other musicians, he was angered by the restrictions placed on *phleng Thai doem* during Phibunsongkhram’s first regime.

During his period of singing life songs, his signature performance was a medley called *Suphaphurut pak Khlongsan* [‘Gentleman of Khlongsan Asylum’]. Wearing a waistcoat and shirt, with burning incense sticks inserted in a coloured bandana and sometimes holding a portrait of Phibunsongkhram, he would begin by praising nature with his popular Navy Band song *Ngam chai-hat* [‘Beautiful Beach’], then pass through *phleng choi*, *lamtat* and *ho* before finishing with *Phleng sansoen phra barami* [‘Praise to His Majesty’]. At the end, he would sing *Tut dawai chai chayo* [‘Praise the Victory’] and then tell the audience he was a gentleman from the mental asylum. Witnesses say that the performance was so manic and hilarious that even politicians identified by name would not take offence (see Siriphon, 2004, p 119; and Thiraphap, 1998, p 61).

Arguably, Saneh’s most influential song was *Samlo khaen* [‘The Resentful Pedicab Driver’], written in 1950 to express the frustration of pedicab drivers who were threatened with expulsion from the streets of Bangkok (Siriphon, 2004, p 119). Through its use by these drivers during a campaign of protest stretching from 1950 to 1960, *Samlo khaen* became linked to emerging *Isan* regional identity. In a contemporary ethnography of the pedicab drivers, Textor recorded that the majority of drivers came from *Isan* and that ‘the degree of interest in parliamentary politics [among them] is probably greater than that found among other working people, in Bangkok or elsewhere in Thailand’ (Textor, 1961, p 44).

Other famous songs by Saneh included *Phu-taen khwai* ('Buffalo Representatives'), which criticized politicians, and *Police thue krapong* which compared the newly adopted police truncheons to kitchen pestles. The latter spelled the end of his career in life songs because the notorious head of Phibunsongkhram's secret police, Pao Sriyanon, issued Saneh with an ultimatum to cease singing or cease living. Saneh chose life and took on the role of spokesperson during Phibunsongkhram's next election campaign (Wat, 2009, p 7).

Despite its composer's pragmatic decision, the cultural memory of '*Samlor khaen*' has persisted until the present. This author first became aware of the song through a link from a red-shirt website and the lyrics have been posted on red-shirt forums. Today's equivalent of the *samlor* drivers is the Isan-dominated pro-Thaksin Taxi Drivers Protection Association [*Samakhom phithak phon-prayote phu-khap-rot taxi*] led by red-shirt leader Chinawat Habunphad. Similarly, the involvement of professional members of the Bangkok entertainment industry on the side of the PAD evokes the memory of Saneh and other *phleng chiwit* composers. Indeed, the atmosphere of Phibunsongkhram's second regime bears some similarities to Thaksin's final term. Both governments attempted to win support via populist measures; both made use of mass communications; and, while each was criticized for attempting to censor opposition, both periods were marked by an outpouring of satirical protest music.

Phleng pheua chiwit and lukthung during the Isan insurgency, 1976–82

In 1973, massive demonstrations by students led to the overthrow of the military regime of Thanom Kittikhajorn and Praphat Jarusathien. One significant element of the student protests was *phleng pheua chiwit*, a song genre clearly influenced by the protest music of performers such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and Pete Seeger. Finger-picked acoustic guitar was the main accompaniment for traditional-sounding pentatonic minor melodies. Although the influence of American folk was paramount, the performers also drew from Isan melodies, completely eschewing the Central Thai folk genres such as *lae*, *lamtat* and *isaeo*, which figured prominently in *lukthung*. The Art for Life [*sinlapa pheua chiwit*] ideology of the Thai communist writer Jit Phumisak can be observed in the students' choice of music. Jit differentiated between art for imperialism, which imposed vulgar popular culture on the masses, and art for the people, which protested injustice and offered solutions

for society's problems.²⁰ In the early 1970s, *lukthung* appeared to fit Jit's description of art for imperialism. It had developed from *phleng Thai sakon*, a product of Phibun Songkram's era of social engineering, and had recently produced Thailand's first popular music superstars in Suraphon Sombatjaroen and Phongsri Woranut. By 1973, the travelling bands of artists such as Sayan Sanya and Saksayam Phetchomphu featured troupes of dancing girls, amplified instruments and huge sound and lighting systems. The students of Bangkok's elite universities clearly did not see *lukthung* as a form of music useful for protest (see Lockard, 1998, p 191; and Vater, 2003).²¹

Following the 1973 October revolution, many urban Thai students from the upper and middle classes were committed to political change. The 6 October massacre of students at Thammasat University in 1976 forced many student activists and 'songs for life' musicians to flee to Laos and the North-Eastern region of Thailand, where they found refuge with the CPT. Since they were unsuited to the hardship of life in the forests, the students were organized into teams and assigned to the Isan villages under communist control. Their duties included the creation and dissemination of propaganda via pamphlets, radio and tape cassette (see Wat, 2003, pp 396–424). This created a situation in the North-East whereby the majority of the foot soldiers were Isan peasants, but the propaganda units were made up of Bangkok students directed by the CPT leadership influenced by China. It is not surprising that a cultural disjunction developed between these three groups, a disjunction that has had important implications for the present political struggle.

Communist lukthung. Because *phleng phuea chiwit* has become institutionalized as *the* Thai protest genre, it is often assumed that the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) only used songs for life. However, publications by Waeng Phalangwan (2002) and Wat Wanlayangkul (2003) reveal that, despite the CPT leaders' preference for Chinese-style marches and the student activists' preference for *phleng phuea chiwit*, the most popular genre among the rank-and-file insurgents was *lukthung*.

The experiences of Adison Phiangket and Wisu Khantap vividly illustrate this cultural divide. As an undergraduate Adison used to play the *khaen* [bamboo mouth organ] onstage with Caravan at Thammasat

²⁰ See Myers-Moro (1986, p 99).

²¹ According to Nga Surachai from Caravan: "When I was young I listened to Luk Thung", but I was looking for something else. We wanted to shout at the government. "Luk Thung" lyrics did not deal with serious issues." (Vater, 2003)

University (Wat, 2003, p 423), but after the 1976 massacre, he and Caravan member Wisā (a Ramkamhaeng University student) fled to the forest where they were placed with Propaganda Unit A30. Their first attempt at writing communist propaganda had a melody pieced together from three *Thai doem* songs, and their first broadcast composition was *Ramwong neung thanwa* [‘1 December Circle Dance’], which was accompanied by guitar and piano accordion (Wat, 2003, p 397). They recall that they were then encouraged to write in Chinese style, as in the song *Jet singha su bon thang puen* [‘7 August Fight on the Road of the Gun’], which used a melody written by a member of the Chinese proletariat named Chot Wongchon and was accompanied by *khim*²² [a dulcimer] played to sound like a piano (Wat, 2003, p 404).

Adison soon realized that the best way to inspire Isan insurgents was to use *morlam* and *lukthung*. He had written *lukthung* songs with altered lyrics before entering the forest, and decided to compose a *phleng plaeng* using Suraphon Sombatjaroen’s *Rueang khorng faen phleng* [‘A Tale of Music Fans’].²³ He changed the famous lyrics of the chorus, *Fang, fang, fang, siang phleng roem dang ik laew... Suraphon ma laew* [‘Listen, listen, listen, the loud sound of song has begun again... Suraphon has come’] to *Pang, pang, pang siang puen dang 7 Singha/pluk muean pracha/luk kuen ma jap puen* [‘Bang, bang, bang, the loud sound of guns on 7 August/stir up the people/stand up and take a gun’] (Wat, 2003, p 405).

Waeng records that there were many other Isan insurgents who put communist lyrics to well known *lukthung* songs sung by popular singers such as Sarika Kingthong and Yortrak Salakjai. The most prolific communist songwriter was Phloeng Nalak, a forest guerrilla who wrote more than 200 songs criticizing the government with such lines as ‘The government’s power comes from the barrel of a gun’ (Waeng, 2002, p 495). Sornchai Mekwichian’s popular song *Khon ngam luem ngai* [‘Beautiful Girls Soon Forget’] was changed to *Tuen thoet chao na Thai* [‘Awake Thai Farmers’] (Waeng, 2002, p 500). Yutachak Charali, of 156 Company, used the slow and sad melody of *Faen ja yu nai* [‘Where Are You Darling?’] by Saengsuri Rungrot for his song *Pa chan* [‘Sheer Cliff’], which celebrated the exploits of his company against the Thai soldiers:

²² The *khim* was introduced to Thailand in the late 1800s by Chinese immigrants living in the Yaowarat Chinatown district of Bangkok.

²³ Actually, Adison incorrectly remembers the original title as ‘Suraphon ma laew’ [Suraphon Has Come], which is a completely different Suraphon song.

‘This sheer cliff has a story
 It is a story about arresting thieves who came to make trouble
 The enemy came to the cliff like a crazy man
 They wanted to kill people on the cliff
 The sound of the gun never disappeared... pity the people who are
 slaves
 The master uses the slaves but never sees the truth
 The sheer cliff bit the enemy and they rolled down like monkeys.’
 (Waeng, 2002, p 501)

Yutachak sees the Thai government soldiers as invaders of peaceful communities and portrays the guerillas as enforcing the law – a complete inversion of the establishment history.

Ironically the communist *lukthung* songs were banned, not only by the government, but by the senior members of the CPT, who decreed that only Chinese songs were to be sung (Waeng, 2002, p 505). The *lukthung* songs were thought to be too commercial and the cha-cha rhythm unsuitable for marching (Waeng, 2002, p 495). Nevertheless, Waeng reports that many of the insurgents defied orders not to listen to ‘enemy radio’ so that they could keep up to date with the latest songs (2002, p 500). *Lukthung* was used both to boost morale and to mourn. Writer Khaen Sarika asserts that the insurgents were more motivated when they listened to *lukthung*:

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

Khaen also recalls that his time in the insurgency began with the song *Ramwong su rop* [‘Fighting *ramwong*’], ‘From the ricefields we will say goodbye to our parents/ Go far away to the jungle with hatred in our hearts’, and ended with the song *Yu kap khwam-phet-wang* [‘Living With Disappointment’] by Sayan Sanya, ‘to leave and never go back to your hometown’. He remembers his friend ‘sitting and humming the famous song by Phi Bao (Sayan’s nickname) on the sad day when the female fighters of the artists’ unit No 32 surrendered to the authorities’ (Wat, 2003, pp 457–458).

The tragedy of the 6 October massacre at Thammasat University in

1976 had seemed to create a climate for full-scale rebellion, but the ensuing period was in fact an Indian summer for the CPT. The wider Thai population, including Isan, did not want to abandon the King or the Buddhist socio-cultural order for an alien social structure (Marks, 1994, p 193). Events in China, Laos and Vietnam combined with local factors, such as government amnesties and investment, strangled the insurgency, which was effectively over by 1982 (Marks, 1994, p 204). Ensconced as the official Thai protest genre, *phleng phuea chiwit* was absorbed into the Thai popular music industry, and the use of *lukthung plaeng* by the insurgents was forgotten.

Over the past 30 years, ideological lines have become increasingly entangled. Since the end of the insurgency, many on the Thai Left have become ardent royalist nationalists (Thongchai, 2008b, p 575), while Samak Sundaravej, adjudged to be one of those most responsible for inciting the 1976 Thammasat massacre, joined forces with Thaksin and ended up serving as Prime Minister. An examination of the key personalities involved in the present conflict reveals that on the side of the PAD, Pipop Thongchai, Therdpoum Chaidee, Nga Caravan and politician Poldet Pinprateep were involved with the CPT insurgency, as were UDD leaders Weng Tojirakarn, Thida Thawornset, Jaran Dittapichai, Suthachai Yimprasert, Adison Phiangket and Wisakhanap.

This confusion of ideology has been reflected in the strange juxtaposition of ultranationalist anthems such as *Nak phaen-din* [‘The Scum of the Earth’] and leftist songs such as ‘The Internationale’ together on the PAD stage (Thongchai, 2008a, p 5). However, perhaps even more startling than the return of the right-wing nationalist anthems of the 1970s is the PAD’s preference for *phleng phuea chiwit* and the overall preference of *phuea chiwit* artists for the PAD. While covering the PAD rallies of 2006, Clewley (2007, p 43) wrote, ‘the one songs-for-lifer not seen at all – Ad Carabao – said he was too busy to make it, but it is more likely that his being co-opted to many Thaksin government projects had compromised his position’. The irony here is that these populist government projects are perceived by many working class Thais to be the fulfilment of what the original generation of *phuea chiwit* musicians called (and fought) for. To many red shirts, the idea of Nga Caravan campaigning to bring down a democratically elected populist government is incomprehensible. Chuwat Rerksirisuk, editor of the independent (and anti-PAD) news website Prachatai, referred to songs for life when he drew a satirical distinction between the yellow and red shirts:

‘There would not be any life music or protest songs from the intellectual bands for you to listen [*sic*], since there will only be country music songs and easy understanding sentences from those giving the speech on the stage.’ (Chuwat, 2007).

Chuwat clearly believes there has been a shift in the position and function of *phleng phuea chiwit* in Thai society and that the aspirations of the Thai working class are now represented by *lukthung*.

Part 3

These two historical episodes provide the context for an understanding of the musical choices of the present conflict. The next section examines some of the songs and artists of the PAD and UDD in more detail. The social satire of *phleng chiwit* echoes through the satirical songs of the PAD and UDD, and the spirit of songwriters such as Saneh Komarachun can be seen in the involvement in the conflict of professional songwriters such as Wichaya ‘Nong’ Vatanasapt. The role of *lukthung* and *phleng plaeng* during the struggle of the CPT helps to explain the use of these genres by the red and yellow shirts and illuminates the musical preferences of each side.

Satirical songs of the PAD and UDD

‘*Ai na liam*’. The involvement of many professional songwriters in the PAD movement has resulted in a regular flow of original, professionally recorded satirical songs. ‘*Ai na liam*’ [‘Mr Square Face’], which appeared in March 2006, has been arguably the most influential protest song produced by either side.²⁴ It was instrumental in mobilizing support against Thaksin’s government, which was so frustrated by the song’s rapid distribution through the Internet that it asked the songwriters to identify themselves so they could be arrested (Clewley, 2007, p 43). The lyrics exhaustively catalogue Thaksin’s faults before lampooning in turn everyone associated with him. The music is a blend of funk and rap with a chorus typical of the Central Thai folk genre *lamtat*. This use of one of the building blocks of *lukthung* can be interpreted as an attempt to widen the appeal of the PAD’s message beyond Bangkok.

²⁴ See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLGT0pD8UH4>. An English translation of the lyrics can be viewed at <http://www.2bangkok.com/06/squarefacesong.shtml>.

However, the choice of *lamtat* over *morlam* or *kantruem* confirms a pattern of struggle for cultural supremacy discussed by this author in a previous article (Mitchell, 2009, pp 306–309). The increasingly dominant identification of *lukthung* with Isan culture by both Thais and non-Thais is perceived in elite circles as a threat to Central Thai cultural hegemony. The Asia Pacific Database on Intangible Heritage for UNESCO identifies *lamtat* as Central and *morlam* as North-Eastern Thai culture (UNESCO, 2007). Thus, for the PAD, *lamtat* is a pure folk genre that confirms Central Thai hegemony.

The Photosticker Machine. One artist who demonstrates both the close links between the PAD and the entertainment industry and the eclectic musical preferences of some within the PAD constituency is Wichaya ‘Nong’ Vatanasapt, a member of legendary Thai ska band T-Bone. Wichaya writes sound tracks for commercial Thai films and is also a freelance producer, working on a regular basis for the entertainment giant Grammy. He describes his solo vehicle, The Photosticker Machine, as lounge room jazz electronica, usually produced for a limited circle of industry insiders and friends (interview with the author, 15 January 2009).

In 2005, Wichaya wrote and recorded a song to support the PAD’s protest movement against then Prime Minister Thaksin. ‘Corruption’ is an extremely hard-hitting piece of social commentary that could be about Thai society in general, although the song’s subtitle ‘FTA (Fucking “TS” Agency)’ made it clear who was being targeted. Wichaya says that the recording of ‘Corruption’ was a cathartic process that allowed him to express the anger he felt at Thaksin’s betrayal of Thailand’s three institutions (interview with the author, 15 January 2009). The first verse addresses the greed of politicians:

‘Day after day you think, think what law can make return on your
money
If you cannot find it then you write your own law to fill your
pockets.’²⁵

The second verse contrasts this greed with the faithfulness of a dog:

‘You’ll never know the land’s goodness, which you can work until
you are satisfied and happy

²⁵ The song’s lyrics are in Thai, apart from the title. All translations are the author’s own.

Even dogs know the goodness of the people, poor or rich, never
proud, faithful to their owner
If anybody doesn't know, think for yourself, no ethics, get the dog
to teach you.'

The comparison to a dog is an obvious insult, yet this verse also invokes both the royal self-sufficiency programme and the King's book about his favourite dog, Thorng Daeng.²⁶ The final part of the song is a rapped curse that calls on 'sacred spirits anywhere in the universe' to give suffering to this thief: 'Stay around, pay your karma, in the prison of the dark place/Forever the fire of hell burning you.'

The song is an impeccably assembled piece of social criticism in which the musical elements have been consciously chosen to reinforce the composer's message. For example, the spoken curse is echoed by wah-wah guitar stabs, which, the composer explains, were supposed to sound like the Thai word *yet mae* ['motherfucker']. However, the eclectic, cosmopolitan nature of the musical elements serves to narrow the song's appeal and thus its influence. The opening Led Zeppelin-like riff is then meshed with reggae rhythm guitar and record scratching. The vocal melody, sung in a Western style, descends from the minor 7th through the notes of the major scale. A heavy blues guitar solo precedes a rap break, reminiscent of the Beastie Boys, with psychedelic falsetto back-up vocals. Musically, the song is a pastiche of Western styles – styles, moreover, that would be familiar only to Thais who had received a Western education or travelled extensively.

Nakara. Unlike the PAD, the red shirts have almost exclusively used famous songs as their vehicles for satire. These *phleng plaeng* are generally poorly recorded and tend to be more humorous and lowbrow than their PAD equivalents. For example, Nakara's '*Mi na hak*' is an altered version of '*Family mi phaenda*' ['Panda Family'] sung by Nong Benz Jr that questions Abhisit's achievements as Prime Minister. The original song was a surprise independent dance hit featuring a cute Thai girl singing about the cute pandas on loan from China to Chiangmai Zoo. Nakara's version changes the title to '*Mi na hak*' ('Vomit Bear', but sounds like 'Cute Bear' in *Isan* dialect) in order to suggest that Abhisit

²⁶ In 1998, King Bhumibol adopted a stray dog and in 2002 wrote a book about her, which stressed how respectful and well behaved she was, despite coming from a lowly background.

is just a pretty face and that in reality his achievements have all been insubstantial publicity stunts.

Verse one describes the competition to find a name for the baby panda: ‘Ask the villagers, they answer straight away that this panda’s name is Na Hak’. The second and third verses are concerned with two cases that dominated the general interest news during May and September 2009: Keiko Sato, an abandoned Thai boy who was looking for his Japanese father;²⁷ and Mong, a stateless Burmese-Shan boy, who was eventually given a temporary passport so that he could take part in a paper aeroplane competition in Japan.²⁸ The fourth verse criticizes the cost of security for Abhisit’s visit to the North-Eastern city of Ubon Ratchathani to deliver a cheque to Yai Hai, an elderly Isan woman who was owed compensation from the government: ‘Gave it only to one person, You don’t care about other people, Then you fly away in a helicopter, Not brave if compared to the cute panda’.²⁹ Plays on words abound: *Man jop Oxford rue ork lek wa* [Did he graduate from Oxford or as a welder?]. For the most part, the tone is good-humoured and down to earth, but in the last verse the song descends into pure vitriol: ‘Don’t you know that they hate you like shit?/If you are so stupid go take care of buffalos.’ As with the majority of red-shirts video clips, the production quality is low, featuring poorly ‘Photoshopped’ pictures of Abhisit dressed as a panda.

‘*Khwai Daeng*’. Directly after the military crushed the red-shirt protests on 19 May 2010, there was an outpouring of anti-red-shirt invective on social networking Web pages such as *Facebook* and the video-sharing website *YouTube*. The professionally produced rap song ‘*Khwai Daeng*’ – translated by the songwriter as ‘Red Shit’ – is fairly representative of the sentiments expressed during those days.³⁰ The first verse accuses ordinary red-shirt supporters of being gullible, stupid and greedy:

‘You dumb water buffaloes, how much did they pay you per day
You rushed to take it, to admit that you are low peasants.’

Class difference is a key concern of the song – the rural red shirts who follow Thaksin are referred to as *bia rap chai* [slaves]. The second verse

²⁷ See, for example, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090518a6.html>.

²⁸ See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/thailand/6212585/Stateless-boy-allowed-to-leave-Thailand-for-paper-aeroplane-contest.html>.

²⁹ See http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2009/10/13/politics/politics_30114293.php.

³⁰ This song can be heard at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrfb0NyNddg>.

gloats over the death of Seh Daeng – ‘You weren’t able to show off for long, you took a bullet in the head’ – while the third and fourth verses are devoted to red-shirt leaders Nattawut Saikua and Jatuporn Prompan. The fifth verse is of particular interest to this article because it addresses Arisman:

‘Kee [Arisman’s nickname] is another one, you were not brave enough
 Father Liam [Thaksin] gave you a million per day, you said ‘yes...
 I’m brave enough’...
 Kee you are the vilest scum, you lolly-sucking dog.’

The songwriter’s knowledge of his subjects is impressive – he plays on the title of one of Arisman’s biggest hits, ‘Jai mai dan por’ [‘Not Brave Enough’] and alludes to the popular story that Arisman’s singing voice was so sweet because he constantly sucked (Halls) lozenges.

When it comes to Thaksin, however, the songwriter is overcome by rage, alternating accusations with chants of ‘Sat Maeo, hia Maeo’.³¹ Thaksin’s alleged crimes include attacks on the monarchy, a desire to be President, payments made to *phrai* [serfs], the bribing of Thailand’s government assembly, and living in comfort while his followers are killed on the streets. In the final section, the singer curses Thaksin (‘may you have cancer in your testicles’) and urges the red shirts to ‘move to Montenegro’, one of several countries in which Thaksin found refuge and of which he holds citizenship.

Lukthung

Although Lockard (1998, pp 190–191) concludes that *lukthung* is generally unsuitable for protest, he follows Ubonrat in acknowledging that it both affirms establishment views and challenges the institutions of socio-political power. It is ostensibly a simple matter to classify the various musical and cultural elements that make up *lukthung* as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. In terms of hegemonic elements, there are many *lukthung* songs that praise the institutions of king, country and religion or glorify the military. Up-tempo *lukthung* songs and concerts are unifying sites of community celebration that affirm the Thai tradition of collective *sanuk* [fun]. The commercialism and extravagant performance style of *lukthung* qualify it as bourgeois culture, as was

³¹ Maeo is Thaksin’s nickname. *Sat* means animal, but could be translated as bastard. *Hia* means lizard, but can be translated as a range of insults: for example, asshole.

shown by the CPT leadership's reaction to the 'communist *lukthung*' songs. Finally, Amporn (2006) has shown that *lukthung* has been increasingly viewed as authentic Thai culture since 1997, and this author has written on the appropriation of *lukthung* as a symbol of Central Thai superiority (Mitchell, 2009, pp 306–309).

In terms of counter-hegemonic elements, many songs deal with themes of separation and mourning and the social dislocation resulting from economic migration. Ubonrat (1990, p 71) shows that *lukthung* often presents a more frank discussion of sexual matters than the establishment would like. In commercial *lukthung*, indirect social criticism is common and direct satire, though rare, does occur. Class difference is communicated through the music – the vocal styles of *lukthung* singers usually make use of rural accents and the vibrato [*luk khor*] and embellishment [*uean*] found in folk songs. Although it may seem to contradict the final points of the previous paragraph, *lukthung* is often considered by many Thais as part of *Isan* identity, due to the high degree of *Isan* involvement in the industry.

However, as intimated in the introduction, any assessment of music according to theories of hegemony *versus* counter-hegemony is problematic because musical elements are ambiguous and can act simultaneously for and against the dominant culture. The situation in terms of this present conflict is further complicated by the changes in government that have taken place during the period in question. For example, while Thaksin Shinawatra, Samak Sundaravej or Somchai Wongsawat were in power, the PAD could be reasonably designated as counter-hegemonic, but under General Sondhi's regime and Abhisit's government, the PAD became part of the hegemony. For these reasons, classifying the use of *lukthung* during this struggle as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic is not overly helpful. However, it is certainly possible to observe which musical elements and cultural memories are tapped into by each side and then draw conclusions as to the success of such use and some of the implications raised by each side's choices of music.

The red shirts' use of lukthung. The current *Isan* cultural resurgence³² and the dominance of *Isan* people in the UDD have ensured that *lukthung* and *morlam* have been the most performed genres on the red-shirt protest stages. *Kantruem*, Northern *lanna* folk music, Central Thai folk

³² See Miller (2005), 'From country hick to rural hip: a new identity through music for Northeast Thailand', *Asian Music*, Vol 36, No 2; also Kreangsak (2005), 'Cracking up the egg emperor', *The Nation*, Bangkok.

music and rock/songs for life are also featured, but far less frequently. The problem with regional genres such as *morlam* or *kantruem* when performed for televised protests, or those held in Bangkok, is that the lyrics are inaccessible to a certain proportion of the audience. This is one of the strengths of *lukthung* – the use of Central Thai language mixed with certain words of class and ethnic identification, such as *bor* (*Isan* and Northern Thai or *khammueang* dialect for ‘no’) appeals to the largest possible audience.

Despite the gaudiness of its commercial concert presentation, musically speaking, *lukthung* is suited to certain counter-hegemonic circumstances. Slow and melancholy songs function effectively as laments for loved ones lost through death or separation. The theme of longing and separation taps into cultural memories such as the unfulfilled political objectives of the CPT insurgents, 50 years of seasonal migration to Bangkok and almost 200 years of separation from Lao people on the northern bank of the Mekong. Reaching further into the past, *lukthung* echoes the subject matter of the ancient Siamese travel literature genre *nirat* [literally: separation, departing from something that is dearly desired]. The definition of *nirat* as a poetic expression of love-separation melancholy with a journey in the background aptly describes the lamentation found in many *lukthung* songs. As Thongchai Winichakul (2000, p 42) observes, until the second half of the nineteenth century, travel was not a desirable activity and pleasure was not its primary purpose. For the Thai working class, this is still the case and so *lukthung* songs are full of accounts of loss and forced separation.

Whenever these channels to the past are accessed, a deep emotional investment is created. In an interview with the BBC, Kwanchai Praipana, who leads the Rak Udon group (a red-shirt chapter from Udon Thani in the heart of Isan), described himself as ‘*lukthung*’ in the literal sense that he is a ‘child of the field’ (or a country boy). As a DJ and long-time friend of the legendary singer Sayan Sanya, this description is not accidental. Kwanchai states that he used to care only about music, but that the degree of political participation made possible by Thaksin’s government inspired him to become involved with the red-shirt movement (Ash, 2009). Thus *lukthung* has become a political statement and a rallying point.

Muk Methini. A case study of the songs of Muk Methini demonstrates that *lukthung* has been used by the red shirts to lament, praise and celebrate. Muk, who had a minor singing career before becoming the face

of UDD entertainment, is one of the most polished red-shirt performers. *Rueang sao muea chao ni* [‘Sad Story From This Morning’] is a lament for Narongsak Krobthaisong who died during a clash between PAD and government supporters in September 2008. The singer adopts the persona of the dead man’s wife, who learns of his passing on the morning news:

‘Sad story one morning
Always remember and never forget
Never have the words to say goodbye
There’s no young man to come back home again.’

Narongsak is not mentioned by name; rather, his story is that of all *Isan* migrants:

‘You said before you left home
You said you wouldn’t be gone for long
You went looking for work in the big city.’

In the chorus, which proclaims ‘You died for all of Thailand/Great democracy/Joined the protest until death’, the singer’s individual loss is linked to the wider political struggle.

Another common use of lament by the red shirts is to mourn the absence of Thaksin. *Khon di thi na neung* [‘Top-Rate Person’] is a hymn of praise to Thaksin that lauds his efforts to help the poor:

‘At the time you were here you took care and had mercy
For those with no place to sleep, the answer to their desires lay in
Ban Uea Athorn³³
Many projects this Thaksin did
Got rid of Thailand’s debt, he was vilified so had to flee into exile.’

The perceived usurping by Thaksin of the King’s place in society has been one of the key drivers behind the yellow-shirt movement. Considering that *lukthung* songs of this kind are usually written to praise the King, Thaksin is here seen to be taking the place of the King in providing care for Thailand’s most needy. The following excerpt from the chorus makes this point explicitly:

³³ Cheap housing development in Khon Kaen.



Figure 3. Red shirt *hang khrueng* (dance revue).
Photo by Nick Nostitz. Used with permission.

‘Since the day you left the villagers have been waiting intensely
For you to come back to heal the poor.’

Many up-tempo commercial *lukthung* songs, which are otherwise celebratory, assume a background of separation forced by economic migration. At red-shirt rallies, Muk often sings *Sao Udon jam-dai* [‘The Girl from Udon Remembers’], a slightly altered version of *Sao Udon jai dam* [‘The Hard-Hearted Girl from Udon’], which, ironically, was originally sung by Sotsai Rumpotorn, who served as a junior minister in the Abhisit Democrat government. *Sao Udon jam-dai* has the simple premise of an *Isan* girl declaring that she will definitely return to her country boyfriend after she finishes working in Bangkok. Separation is an established part of everyday life for *Isan* families, and the theme of waiting and enduring through prolonged absence can be easily applied to the political climate of December 2008 to June 2011, during which many red shirts felt disenfranchised and abandoned by Thailand’s elite.

As with blues, *lukthung* is able to fulfil the seemingly contradictory functions of lament and celebration. In *Ramwong prachathipadai* [‘Democracy *ramwong*’], Muk adopts the role of entertainer by address-

ing the protesters as an audience: ‘you are the players I will be the singer’. She seeks to include speakers of all dialects by calling *Chan ja ho la na* (Central), *Chan ja ho la noe* (Northern), *Chan ja ho la wa* (Southern), *Ao chan ja ho la woei* (*Isan*) [I will sing ‘ho’]. Throughout this upbeat *lukthung* song, Muk is accompanied by the customary dancing revue costumed in red. It is significant that the commercial elements of *lukthung* (such as elaborate costumes and dancing girls) identified by Lockard (see section on *lukthung* at the beginning of the paper) as discouraging to overt protest musicians have actually been embraced by red-shirt performers (see Figure 3).

Num na khao, sao na kluea. The collective meaning and memory embodied in *lukthung* are aptly demonstrated by a red-shirts version of *Num na khao, sao na kluea* [‘The Rice Farm Boy and the Salt Farm Girl’]. This famous duet was perhaps the most popular song of 1982 and earned its writer, Soraphet Phinyo, a *Phaen siang thornng kham* [literally, ‘gold record’],³⁴ a highly prized honour from the royal family. In 1989, *Num na khao* was listed in the top 50 *lukthung* songs of all time by the Office of National Culture. Its enduring popularity among karaoke singers has inspired any number of *phleng plaeng*, such as an amusing version in which the male and female singers declare their love for alcohol of all kinds.³⁵ Musical elements of the song have become ingrained in the public consciousness. The introduction’s rhythm and cha-cha-cha cadence are so well known that Thais inevitably begin the opening lyrics at exactly the right spot – no easy task with a syncopated anacrusis.

A key factor in the original’s appeal is the ubiquitous nature of the characters – the peasant boy and girl are hard-working urban migrants drawn together by their humble origins. The girl is identified as ‘Yuphin’, a traditional peasant name that can also be used to refer to any woman whose name is unknown. A second factor is that *lukthung* provides the comfort of tradition to those who are most confronted by the alienation of cosmopolitan life (see Amporn, 2006, pp 40–41). Although tempted by their independence, the characters choose to conform to societal expectations by seeking parental blessings on their relationship and returning to live in the girl’s home town. Finally, the song itself is a well known symbol of the inequality of modern Thailand. In 1990, song-

³⁴ Unlike gold or platinum records in the Western pop industry, it does not signify sales of a certain amount.

³⁵ The first lines of this version are – M: ‘My village drinks alcohol, alcohol before food every time’; F: ‘I like to drink beer, I drink beer before looking for food’.

writer Cholathi Thanthong complained that Soraphet was paid only 60,000 baht by his company for a song that had made over 44 million baht (Ubonrat, 1990, p 65). Soraphet has informed this writer that he is unable to re-record his most famous song because he does not own the copyright (interview with the author, 23 January 2010). Each of these channels of identification resonates with the red-shirt constituency on deeply emotional levels.

Num suea khao sao suea daeng [‘The Boy in the White Shirt and the Girl in the Red Shirt’]³⁶ draws on these collective meanings and memories while adding new layers of meaning in a political context. First, it appears to be sung by the original female singer, Norng Nut Duangchiwan, who now lives in Norway.³⁷ The ubiquitous peasant girl of the original is individualized in the lyrics as the Isan celebrity Norng Nut and acknowledged as politically stronger and more aware than the male protagonist. Her acceptance of him as a partner depends on his acceptance of and active participation in her politics. The subtext is clear – those who were formerly subservient now have a political agenda. Second, some elements of the song are informed by new realities. The villagers in the original are identified by the kind of labour they provide, whereas in the red-shirt version they are identified according to political persuasion. At the time of the original song, Dao Khanong was a new, vibrant market place; but it is now run-down and out of favour. The characters of the red-shirt version go to Dao Khanong to attend a protest, rather than for social or commercial reasons.

This is a translation of *Num na khao, sao na kluea*:

M: My village farms rice, plants rice at all times

F: I harvest salt, sell salt to buy food to eat

M: My village is in Kalasin

F: As for me, Yuphin, I live in Samut Sakon

M: I have come to meet a beautiful girl and visit Dao Khanong

F: I count it as good luck that when I met you, you greeted me first

M: I really want to go to live at Samut Sakon

F: From what you say I’m afraid that is not true

³⁶ Found on an undated VCD purchased at a red-shirts demonstration in Khon Kaen on 31 January 2010.

³⁷ This demonstrates the involvement of the Thai diaspora in the present political struggle. Correspondingly, 70s pop star Nata Wiyakan returned from living in Canada to appear on the PAD’s performance stage.

M: I, the rice farmer, love a young girl
F: I am a salt field girl
M: The rice field boy will never forsake you
M: If I will go what will your father say?
F: I'll be very happy if you truly go ask for my hand
M: The rice field boy guarantees I will not forsake you
F: If you love me truly don't leave the salt field girl.

And this is a translation of *Num suea khao sao suea daeng*:

M: My village is white-shirt. I've met a strong woman
F: I am a red-shirt woman of the strongest kind
M: My house likes to watch Nattawut
F: As for me, Norng Nut, I follow everyone
M: I came to meet my red-shirt sister and have visited Dao
Khanong
F: So that is my good luck to meet you before you turn into a
yellow shirt
M: I am interested in the red shirts – you must help to teach me
F: From what you say I'm afraid you are not truly red
M: I want to go to the protest. Can you come as my friend?
F: So you must wait till the end of the month
M: If you're my friend don't leave me
M: If I change to become a red shirt, are you going to tease me?
F: I will be very happy if you become truly red
M: This white-shirt man guarantees that I will not go back on my
word
F: If you love me truly don't leave the red shirt girl.

The use of lukthung by the PAD

Logically, there would be significant advantage for the yellow and pink shirts in employing *lukthung* and *morlam* to spread their message. *Morlam* was used beneficially by the United States Information Service (USIS) during the Vietnam War and by the Thai government during the communist insurgency (see Miller, 1985, pp 56–57). However, until the recent campaign by the red shirts, the PAD ignored *morlam* and tended to send the wrong messages when attempting to use *lukthung*. In concentrating on hegemonic and satirical elements, the PAD has missed an

opportunity to engage with the working class on a visceral level. For example, Joy Sirilak became a popular *lukthung* star after her appearance in the soap opera *Sao noi café* [The Young Girl in the Café, 2000]. Yet when she appeared for the PAD in July 2008, rather than any of her hits, she sang only *Khon Thai rak chat lae satsana* [‘Thais Love the Nation and Religion’], honouring the three institutions.³⁸ It is significant that most of the use of *morlam* and *lukthung* by the PAD has occurred since the beginning of the 2010 Songkran protests in the context of YouTube videos satirizing the red-shirts demographic. The mocking *Khwai, khwai, khwai (daeng)*³⁹ is fast *lukthung*; Suraphon Sombatjaroen’s *Khamen lai khwai*⁴⁰ [‘The Cambodian Buffalo Herder’] accompanies simple animation of Thaksin riding the other red-shirt leaders; and Folkner’s *Mob Weng* [‘Weng’s mob’, alluding to Dr Weng Tojirakarn]⁴¹ is a cross between *lukthung* and *morlam*.⁴²

Likewise, attempts by the pink shirts and the Democrat government to capitalize on the popularity and ubiquity of *lukthung* have usually come across as forced and heavy-handed. On 27 December 2009, the long-running television concert *lukthung* show, *Wethi Thai* [Thai Stage], diverted from its usual programming to broadcast a pink-shirt rally featuring Prime Minister Abhisit. When long-term fans of the show arrived at the alternative venue, they discovered that about a thousand pink-shirted supporters had already arrived by bus, along with a sizeable security presence. The stage featured a huge backdrop of the King with a halo effect looking over farmers planting rice. An introductory film interspersed footage of the King with footage of Abhisit and his government. Before the Prime Minister made his appearance, Grammy artist Mon Khaen sang *morlam* accompanied by 10 dancers all holding *khaen*, the musical symbol of *Isan*. Abhisit and other dignitaries then sang *Chom thung* [‘Admiring the Rural Scenery’] (see Figure 4), originally sung by *lukthung* legend Phloen Phromdaen, before being presented with garlands and roses by a procession of poor people. Despite being carefully

³⁸ This performance can be viewed at <http://www.boringdays.net/joy-pad-beloved/>.

³⁹ This video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLagRkoSWII&feature=related>.

⁴⁰ This video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84TyfpvwLp8&feature=related>.

⁴¹ In 1976, Weng was a student leader who joined the armed struggle of the CPT and later took part in the 1992 democracy movement. He has become one of the key leaders of the UDD.

⁴² This video can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc_KkCDBLXY&feature=related.



Figure 4. Abhisit singing next to famous *likay* and *lukthung* singer Chaiya Mitchai. Behind them is Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij. Photo by Peter Garrity.

designed to appeal to the *lukthung* demographic, the overall effect was undermined by the Prime Minister's obvious discomfort and lapses in memory during the song.

It has already been established that the PAD has been far less likely to make use of *phleng plaeng* than the UDD, yet an exception to this rule shows what the unifying force of *lukthung* might achieve. At a PAD rally in May 2008, Nga Caravan sang a *phleng plaeng* of *Fon duean hok* ['Rains in June'], composed by Phaibun Butkan in 1968 for Rungphet Laemsing.⁴³ The choice of song hints at compromise – Phaibun being honoured by both the establishment, as Central Thailand's greatest songwriter, and the Collective of Thai Revolutionary Songs Project [*Khrongkan banthuek lae phoei-phrae prawattisat ngan phleng pathiwat*], as the father of left-wing protest (Wat, 2003, pp 251–253). The original evokes the spirit of rural Thailand with the sound of frogs calling in the

⁴³ This performance can be viewed at <http://www.boringdays.net/wet-firewood/>.

rice fields during the rainy season. Nga's version maintains the wistful, lilting singing style and some of the lyrics of the original, which suited the inclement weather in which the protest took place. The restrained altered lyrics attacked corruption and the bullying of the press without resorting to the extreme invective characteristic of recent PAD songs. Overall, it came across as a well performed and credible piece of propaganda that could have appealed to the working class.

Conclusion

An exceptionally poignant moment occurred at the red-shirts concert in Khao Yai on 15 November 2009 when Adison Phiangket broke down while singing about his younger brother, killed during the CPT insurgency (Nostitz, 2009; see Figure 5). The symbolism of this moment shows why the red shirts have succeeded in becoming a nationwide movement. As Adison and Wisa discovered 30 years earlier, real change in the Thai social order could not be brought about by weapons or ideology. The cultural disjunction that developed between the CPT leadership, Bangkok students and Isan farmers showed Adison that a common purpose was best promoted through a musical genre that represents all Thais. A significant factor in the cultural unity of the red shirts has been that their favoured genre, *lukthung*, allows for regional and ethnic differences while maintaining a high degree of Thainess. In contrast, the yellow shirts have confined their appeal by explicitly preferring elite and Westernized genres that exclude Thailand's working class. While it is surprising that the PAD have not made greater use of *lukthung*, perhaps this is a reflection of the degree to which *lukthung* and *morlam* have become conflated in the eyes of the Thai public.

This article shows that, although the PAD has used a much wider variety of music than the UDD and has produced music of better quality, its choices have acted to exclude the majority of Thais. Perhaps this issue of agency is what truly connects the three periods examined here. During the era of *phleng chiwit*, talented, highly educated songwriters protested on behalf of the muted lower classes, but the state was eventually able to stifle their criticism by force. During the struggle of the CPT, the rank-and-file insurgents had songs written for them by Bangkok students in genres prescribed by the CPT leadership, but were also able to produce *phleng plaeng* in their preferred genre of *lukthung*. After the insurgency, however, *phleng phuea chiwit* was celebrated as the official Thai protest genre, while *lukthung plaeng* were silenced. During



Figure 5. Adison Phiangket mourns his younger brother.
Photo by Nick Nostitz. Used with permission.

the present conflict, both sides have made use of *lukthung*, but, by channelling a wide variety of cultural memories and musical elements within the genre, the red shirts have successfully appealed to the working class. Perhaps this indicates that, for the first time in Thai history, working class Thais are making their own political choices.

It appears that *lukthung* has gained traction among the red shirts because of the social configuration of their movement. Attempts to use *lukthung* by the yellow shirts have not been successful because *lukthung* does not have the same emotional resonance within their demographic. This discussion can contribute to the larger discussion of protest music through the way it has highlighted deeply felt issues of identity and emotional investment associated with a musical genre and how these can be harnessed to political ends. There is scope for further investigation, particularly into the role played by music during the dormant periods of each group. It will be tempting to apply Eyerman and Jamison's observation that 'Music, and song... can maintain a movement even when it no longer has a visible presence in the form of organizations, leaders, and demonstrations' to the red shirts post May 2010. *Lukthung* may

indeed 'be a vital force in preparing the emergence of a new movement' (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998, p 43).

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