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The Evolution of Political Songs in the Development of Democracy in Thailand

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Abstract

The political situation in Thailand has continued to be unstable since the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932. Struggling with the establishment of democracy, the country has faced twelve coups by dictatorships enforced by military men. The most violent ones were during the period of the 1950s and 1970s, when many innocent college students and faculty sacrificed their lives in protesting. Educated with the principle of democracy, university students united together to call for justice against the abusive of power of the ruler. Songs were used as weapon for people to fight against the oppression and restrictions on freedom, and to support each other and strengthen their political ideology. The evaluation of two songs—"Starlight of Faith" by Jit Phumisak and "For the Masses" by Jin Kamachon, known to Thai people as "Songs for Life"—connect the songs' characteristics with their success in possessing power throughout the history of the Thai coups, since the two songs arose at the height of political conflict and have been recalled in every coup from the past till this modern era. Three analytical areas are evaluated: political situations in Thailand through the incidents of the 1973 "Thai Popular Uprising" and "the 1976 Thammasat University Massacre"; world situations that influenced Thai politics and Thai political movements, such as the intervention of America in Thai politics and the effect of communist ideology on the Thai youth; and lastly, the rise of the political songs in expressing emotion and its connection with song lyrics. Studying these songs can help explain why they are so effective in uniting the people to insist on a more democratic ideology.

Keywords: Thailand, Political Songs, Protest music, Propaganda songs

Introduction

The Siamese Coup d'état of June 24, 1932, changed the political system of Siam (which was re-named Thailand in 1939) from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. It was a civilian-military collaboration called the People's Party staging this coup. Unfortunately, however, the road towards democracy in Thailand was rough due to several factors. One important factor was the People's Party's internal conflict that the party became defunct around the early 1950s. From then until the early 1970s, the military dictatorship took

absolute control of the country. Since then, Thailand has until recently experienced intermittent democracy with military interference in politics time and again.

During political conflicts, political songs and music (so-called song/music for life) are always created by the progressive/pro-democracy sides and have a significant role to play. Since the 1950s, song writers have comprised of university students, progressive authors, social critics, intellectuals, etc. who have been involved in the fight for democracy. However, around the 1970s, the ruling regime started to fight back the protestor by adopting the same strategies of creating songs as a state propaganda and changing the direction of the message in the songs.

One other important observation is that many songs used in today's protests came out at different times after the 1932 Coup and many others have disappeared. While many new songs have been created in each political period until the present. This research, therefore, aims to examine lyrical contents and musical elements of selected political songs from each period that make them popular, hence their roles remain even in this modern time.

Through analysis of Political Messages in Songs and musical elements, the research then: reflect the unchanged unstable/looping of political situations in Thailand; find the evolution of functions of songs, and reasons behind songs' popularities; and observe the reactions of governments/ruling regimes toward political songs.

The methodology exercised in this study is based on qualitative methodology. Selected songs are drawn from three major political events: 1973 Thai Popular Uprising (Oct 14th) - 1976 Thammasat University Massacre (Oct 6th); 1992 Black May - National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC); 2014–2019 National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) led by Prayuth Chan-ocha. Among a numerous number of political songs that were created, I picked ten songs from these major political events to analyze; songs for life from the pro-democracy movement in the 1970s by the intellectuals, a song created by songs for life artists, and songs

created by governments/ruling regimes. Each song represents messages and feelings in particular situations from different groups of people.

Analysis of Thai Political Songs

Songs are analyzed in two areas. The first area is evolution of political messages in songs. This is to find a message that reflect social condition and how people/authorities react to it in each particular period. This will imply each stage of the development of democracy in Thailand. The other area to analyze is the musical aspects of some popular songs in order to observe the musical elements that are the reasons why those songs catch the ears of listeners.

A. Evolution of Political Messages in songs

1973 Thai Popular Uprising–1976 Thammasat University Massacre

Before the October 14th Incidents, Marshall Sarit Thanarat (1957–1962) and later Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn (1962–1973) were prime ministers. During this long period of military dictatorships, people had no freedom to express their thoughts. Any journalists, social critics, intellectuals, artists, political activists, students, etc. whose acts were deemed a threat to the stability of the government were quelled. Many were arrested, put to trial in martial court and ended up in jail.

Jit Phumisak wrote “Starlight of Faith” while he was a prisoner of conscience serving his second jail term (1958–1964) in Lad Yao prison.¹ The lyric mentions faith as light in the darkness and never refers to any specific political situation. After WW2, he was one of those attracted to socialist ideas at that particular time. He developed the concept of “Art for Life, Art for People” and the concept of Song for Life in political contexts. Although after his

¹ Suthachai Yimprasert, “Ra Luek Nak Thod Garn Mueng Chue Jit Phumisak [In Remembrance of A Prisoner of Conscience Named Jit Phumisak],” *Prachatai*, May 13, 2012; <https://prachatai.com/journal/2012/05/40486>.

death (in 1965), the image of Jit Phumisak was used by the Communist Party of Thailand to attract young students at that time to join the revolutionary movement, “Starlight of Faith” is not lyrically adhered to any political ideology.²

The 1973 Thai Popular Uprising preceded a 3-year period during which time democracy flourished and university students had even stronger presence in almost, if not, all mobilizations. Numerous music-for-life bands came into being and a large number of songs for life were composed. Songs by Jit Phumisak were sung on stage at political gatherings by Caravan, an earliest band that was formed by young progressive artists and political activists. Songs that emerged in this period have messages to convince people to join their fight. In 1973, “Flower Will Bloom,” a poem by Jiranant Pitpreecha with a melody added later composed by Dr. Weerapoj Luaprasertkul, used a flower as a metaphor of young people who will bloom to serve the masses. Using “flower” as a symbol, the poem ingeniously encourages young intellectuals to see the value of themselves, patiently grow up, and serve the society.

In 1974, a band named “Kammachon” from Mahidol University created “For the Masses” to encourage students and the commonplace to fight and “Proletariat” (in Thai “Kam-ma-chon,” the name of the band) to encourage those in the lower rungs of society — the farmers and the poor — to participate in this political fight. Mobilizing masses to gather together in political fights became the key lyrics in songs of university student movement in this period.

Against the rise of student movement, “Deadwood” composed by Colonel Boonsong Hakritsuk reflected the view of the government and the conservatives. The purpose was to make the people, mainly in rural areas, believe that the university students were deadwood,

² Atipob Pattradechpaisarn, “Sang Dao Hang Sat Tha: Sa Tha Na Khong Phleng Phue Chee Wit Lae Communist Chue Jit Phumisak [Starlight of Faith: The Place of Song for Life and A Communist Named Jit Phumisak],” *Read*, October 2011–March 2012; <https://readjournal.org/contents/atipob12/>.

thus, a threat to the nation and the monarchy.³ As political tensions arose, “Deadwood” was heavily played via radio stations.⁴ Distorting the integrity and morality of the student movement, this song was used by the right-wing reactionary groups to arouse the public feeling of hatred towards students. The situation came to a tragic end as unarmed student protesters were massacred by the paramilitary forces at Thammasat University in the heart of Bangkok marking the very day (October 6th, 1976) a darkest and deadliest day in Thailand’s political history.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1976 Thammasat University massacre, hundreds of university students fled to the forest, with no choice but to find refuge by joining the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand. They were introduced to the communist ideals and philosophy. Within this intensifying situation, “Fuel the Flames” by Caravan was composed and recorded in the forest. The lyric of the song was more aggressive and overtly contains terms commonly used by socialist activists. For instance, there are passages such as, “(we) rebel, defeat the old regime” or “to topple the Fascist and feudalist empires.” This song clearly expresses the communist ideology.

1992 Black May

In May 1992, popular protests, mainly the urban middle class, were held to oust the military junta leader and prime minister General Suchinda Kaprayoon. 15 months before, General Suchinda together with his colleagues had staged a Coup d’etat (known as the National Peace Keeping Council) that overthrew the democratically-elected government led by prime minister Chatchai Shoonhawan. The NPKC-appointed government administered the country, promulgated the national constitution and held an election in March 1992. The

³ Nidhi Eoseewong, “Nak Phan Din [Deadwood],” *Matichon*, February 25, 2019; https://www.matichon.co.th/article/news_1376536.

⁴ “Rueng Lao Phleng ‘Nak Phan Din’ Pra Wat Sart Phleng Thee Ron Ra-U Thang Garn Mueng [Story of A Song Titled ‘Deadwood’: History of Song That Triggered Political Outbreak],” *Springnews*, last modified February 18, 2019; <https://www.springnews.co.th/column/polnothing/445227>.

parliament then appointed General Suchinda as the prime minister. This prompted the people mobilizing to demand Suchinda's resignation and the coalition parties to agree to amending the constitution to permit only elected member to take the premiership. Although yielding to such a demand, the parties insisted they want to continue supporting General Suchinda to assume the post for at least a transitioning 4-year term. Over 200,000 people joined the protest. The government then sent in armed forces to crackdown on the protesters. Tens of protesters were killed and hundreds injured. With the royal intervention, the violent confrontation known as the Black May was resolved and General Suchinda resigned from the prime minister.

Immediately thereafter, "Who Kills the People" by Carabao was created. The first verse is "we are the people, we love democracy, why kill us, who kills the people." Much different from songs in the 1973–1976 period, this is the message from the people to the authority, not the message that encourages people to fight. The word "democracy" in the song clearly stated the political standpoint of the people in the protest. For the Black May, "Who Kills the People" perfectly sums up the event. The song utterly represents the emotion of people at the time, they were infuriated by the injustice of how authorities treated the citizens.

2014–2019 National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)

The year 2014 witnessed the most recent military interference with the politics. Their justification to seize power is far greater in depth and complexity than most of the previous coups. The junta (known as the National Council for Peace and Order – NCPO) led by General Prayuth Chan-Ocha deemed the political predicament characterized by red/yellow-shirt clashes as driving the entire nation to a dangerous dead end. The junta claimed they had no choice but overthrowing the democratically elected government led by Yingluck

Shinnawattra (Thaksin Shinnawattra's younger sister).⁵ Despite significant growth in political consciousness across Thai society, strong popular politics, and criticisms from international community, the junta decided to rule the country in a tough way.

Throughout their five years in power, they took a strong stance against all anti-coup/pro-democracy efforts and acts of new-generation activists, academics, local leaders, journalists and other social groups they considered a threat to their legitimacy. Interestingly, music formed an important part of their propaganda strategies. In 2017, for instance, "Return Happiness to Thailand" composed by the prime minister himself and Wishian Tantipimolpan was released and broadcast every day via television and radio. The message was to convince people to believe in NCPO as the chorus part reads, "we will keep the promise, allow us time." The verse "military will never give up, this is the promise" clearly wants to gain trust from people.

In contrast, on the people's side, "Which Is My Country" created by a young group of musicians called Rap Against Dictatorship (RAD) was released on Youtube in 2018. The song harshly and directly criticizes the actions of NCPO. In one of the verses that reads, "The country has no corruption and no checks and balances, The country that the minister watches belongs to a ghost, The parliament house is soldiers' play yard" talks about the real situation that happened.

Not long after that, "Rap Thailand 4.0" from the military government side was released in the same year as a counter attack to "Which Is My Country." The lyrics of "Rap Thailand 4.0" totally ignore the situations being described in "Which Is My Country," but

⁵ Yingluck's predecessor is her own elder brother Thaksin Shinnawattra. A business tycoon turned politician who rose to power in 2001, he was the first ever elected prime minister who completed a 4-year term and was re-elected in 2005 with landslide victory. With various populist schemes, he was highly popular among vast majority farmers/rural sector that later became core of the Red-Shirt movement to countervail the Yellow-Shirt movement. Primarily urban, middle- and upper-class-based, the Yellow Shirts held a series of mass protests against Thaksin, who was accused of corruption and abuse of power. A military coup ousted him in 2006. Red-Yellow confrontation subsequently became a new face of Thai politics.

just encourages Thai people to improve themselves in this new age of digital/information technology.

With the Youtube platform, messages that Thai musicians want to portray are sent to bigger audiences. Right now, not only are Thai people aware of the political situations in Thailand, but also people around the globe. If “Which Is My Country” were played in the 1950s, the authoritarian regime might have just banned the song or arrested the artists and put them in jail. But in this century, they would need to deal with this situation differently. “Rap Thailand 4.0” seems to have a purpose of minimizing a negative image of the political landscape by displaying the positive message to Thai people and society. But the lyrics are too weak to have psychological effect on the people. This is completely different from the enormous psychological effect on Thai people “Deadwood” was able to generate in the 1970s.

B. Musical elements, reasons behind popularity

I only mention in this research, song for life/ folk music and later touch a bit on rap. But songs that describe unfairness in society and criticize the authoritarian regime exist in other genres as well. Song for life is not really a musical genre; it is rather a concept of lyrical content in the characteristics of folk music. Song for life in the periods of Jit Phumisak, Caravan, Kammachon, and later Carabao, all present political messages. Yet, besides the content of text, I would like to explore the musical elements as to why some songs are always played. My analysis focuses mainly on melodic characteristics including melodic motion, motives, and relation of melody and lyric.

In Example 1, the chorus part of “Starlight of Faith,” at the beginning of each three-bar phrase, there are four repeated notes which stress the attitude of insisting on fighting and

believing in faith. The meanings of words that are stressed by repeating notes are underlined.

This explains why they make people feel engaged and sing along passionately.

Scorn miseries, thorns, and woes
Standout people still stand up to challenge
Even that sky turn black, all stars die
A star gleams to mock the earth and sky

kor yoh yey— tuk yark kwark namlamken kon yang kong— yuenden doi ta tai

mae phuen fah— mued dab duen lab ma lai dao yang phrai— sat ta yey fah-din

Example 1. “Starlight of Faith,” chorus part.

In the example 2, the phrases of the chorus part of “For the Masses,” also start with repeating notes. The underlined words are the meanings that are stressed by the repeating notes.

My life, I would give
For masses who endure pains
 No matter how many deaths that I die

Repeating rhythmic patterns explains why people can learn melodies of most of songs for life after listening to them just a few times. This is one significant factor contributing to their popularity. Patterns can be divided into long rhythmic patterns (repeating sequence) and short rhythmic patterns (repeating motive).

chee wa— yorm phlee hai—

muan chon— tee tuk ton— kor phlee ton mai wa ja tai ghee krang

Example 2. “For the Masses,” chorus part.

For Example 3, the first verse of “Starlight of Faith” repeats four times the same rhythmic sequence. Likewise, in Example 4, the first verse of “For the Masses” repeats three times the same rhythmic sequence.

Example 3. “Starlight of faith,” first verse.

Example 4. “For the Masses,” first verse.

Repeating rhythmic motives can strengthen particular words. In Example 5, in the chorus part of “Deadwood,” “Nak-Phan-Din” (means deadwood) are repeated twice at the beginning and once more at the end of the phrase with the same rhythmic motive. This is why the phrase “Nak-Phan-Din” catches the ears of listeners.

Example 5. “Deadwood,” chorus part.

Table of Songs Categorization

The table is to categorize the change in messages and purposes of political songs that

I have mentioned in this paper. Songs are arranged in chronological timeline.

Table 1. Table of Political Songs Mentioned in this Study

Year/Song/Artist	Events	Message	Purpose	Comment
(~1958-64) *Starlight of Faith (Sang Dao Hang Sat Tha) by Jit Phumisak	1960-70s Thailand under Military dictatorship	In the dark moment, people's faith will gleam like the starlight	Give hope during darkest moment	Never mentions politics in the lyrics
1973 *Flower Will Bloom (Dork Mai Ja Barn) by Jiranant Pitpreecha	1973-76 University Student Movement	The young are like flowers that will bloom in their hearts that care for the people	Encourage and inspire students and young people in general	Written as poem first
1974 *For the Masses (Phue Muan Chon) by Kammachon		Lead the people to freedom	Encourage students	Written in simple Language
1974 Proletariat (Kam Ma Chon) by Kammachon		Encourage worker class to fight for better life	Reach the farmer and worker classes	
1975 *Deadwood (Nak Phan Din) by Thai Military	1975-76 lead to 1976 Massacre	To get rid of deadwood/ bad people in the country	Attack the university student movement	Play heavily via radio
1977 Fuel the Flames (Thang Thom Hom Raeng Fai) by Caravan	After 1976 Massacre/ Join CPT in the forest	Express communist ideology	Encourage people to join and defeat the old regime	Recorded in the forest
1992 Who Kill the People (Khrai Kha Pra Cha Chon) by Carabao	Black May 1992	Hold those in power accountable to death of the people	Demanding justice	The word "democracy" is used in the lyrics
2017 Return Happiness to Thailand by NCPO	Thailand under NCPO	Promise to return happiness to people	Convince people to trust NCPO	Play via television and radio everyday
2018 Which Is My Country (Pra Ted Goo Mee) by Rap Against Dictatorship		Criticize government corruption	Criticize Government	Play via Youtube Platform

2018 Rap Thailand 4.0 by NCPO		Encourage people to improve themselves in this age	Counter Attack from government	
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*Song that are often played in many political events

Conclusions

By analyzing the examples of these songs we learn some aspects of Thai politics:

A. The looping political situations in Thailand

Many songs since the 1960s have been used constantly until today in political fights between people and authoritarian regimes. This reflects Thai politics coming full-circle in which the same old situations of military coups and political conflicts repeat. However, considering the message in songs that were newly created in each period of time, social conditions have changed.

B. The reaction from those in power has changed

While a number of songs of the people have been created in different political events, counter songs from those in power were also created. “Deadwood” in 1973 and “Return Happiness to Thailand” in 2017 are among others. More recently, the lyrical content of political songs from those in power has changed. They simply cannot use radical messages in songs. Instead, these songs try to convince people to look to them in a nicer way.

In 2018, “Rap Thailand 4.0” as a counter-attack to “Which Is My Country” was a fight over the internet. In the twenty-first century, platforms of political songs are not only in the protest arena, but also in cyberspace. When “Which Is My Country” grabbed the attention of internet users in both Thailand and abroad, the government kept an eye on how to react to the song. But in this period, they could not only attack by use of force, so they released “Rap Thailand 4.0” which appeared to be a failed attempt.

C. Other than political messages, there are musical elements behind song popularities

Political songs, especially in the case of song for life, are created to gain the attention of people, and should not be too difficult to sing. Repeating either melody or rhythm is the key. One of the most famous “Starlight of Faith” has both repeating rhythmic sequences in both verses and chorus, and repeating notes in the Chorus. All of these elements perfectly fit with the structure of the lyrics in Thai octatonic poems.

“Deadwood,” which presents the radical point of view, was used again in later protests. Although the song was created by authority, it was later sung by a flash mob. As the repeating rhythmic motives in the chorus part, “Nak-Phan-Din” (meaning deadwood) keep repeating several times in the song, it strongly represents the meaning of a deadwood.

D. Emotion of People, Musical Arts, and Hope for Democracy

Studies of development of democracy in Thailand tend to be confined within social science disciplines. Nevertheless, I believe that to learn how people really feel in their fight for democracy, studies need to extend to the field of Arts. More precisely, we cannot avoid the psychological and emotional aspects of humans for they always play an important role in the people’s political fights. Songs that have effective lyrical and melodic ideas naturally create impact on society. They can inspire political participation and movement, also unite people in the protest.

Hope for democracy? By looking at the whole timeline, we can see the growth of democracy through songs in respective periods. We can see more rhetoric about freedom in later political songs. Although authorities always repeat the same mistakes, they cannot continue to react in the same way as long as people keep fighting for democracy and never lose faith in themselves.

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