

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONDITION TOWARDS THE STRING ENSEMBLE DEVELOPMENT IN RATTANAKOSIN ERA

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Abstract- The research aims to study the influence of social condition towards the string ensemble development during Rattanakosin period; and to study the role of string ensemble in Thai society. The study is counted as a historical research applying a set of methods, namely, documentation research, field study, and in-depth interview with 10 historians and Thai classical music experts. The research results are as follows : According to the research on the Thai string ensemble, the first ensemble was created at the early Ayutthaya period and was popularly performed among artists until the early Rattanakosin era. During the Western colonialism, the Thai society was changed in terms of policy by King Rama IV. A lot of development plans were launched to be compatible with the western. In particular, the Royal court and noble circle adjusted themselves by adopting some western cultures. The Thai string ensemble was developed and formed as a recreational activity to please the elite group. The later king, King Chulalongkorn, had expanded his father's idea of modernization by sending his sons and cousins to study in Europe. In the meantime, the Thai musicians and singers also had chances to perform, exchange and share their experience with the western artists. Upon their return to Thailand, the western style of performance was introduced to the royal court and some instruments were added to the conventional band, such as violin and organ. These were continuously adapted to the royal court of King Rama VI, King Vajiravudh, who graduated from Oxford University, as the Thai string ensemble with piano. After the Siamese coup d'état of 1932, the popularity of the Thai string ensemble was transcended to the civil services and the rich. Regarding the role of the Thai string ensemble found in the documents, it was performed in the auspicious events – wedding ceremony. And from the in-depth interview, it was obvious that the ensemble was not performed for earning, but for the pleasure among favorites. Therefore, it was gradually transmitted from the royal household to the civil servants. The rehearsal at the band master's place, the new narration and composition and the gathering for album recording for sale were also found. It is, nowadays, classified as one of the national heritage.

Keywords- Influence of Social, Condition towards, Thai String Ensemble

I. INTRODUCTION

A band originated from the play of two musical instruments with different tone quality, dividing individual duty according to its tone color. Regarding the Thai ensemble, the musical instruments were divided into 2 groups: the melody group, consisting of percussion, wind instrument, plucked string and bow string; and the rhythm group, consisting of various types of drums, cymbals, clappers, flat cymbals and hanging bossed gongs. The Thai ensemble can be classified into three types: Piphat, Mahori and Khruang Sai. Piphat has been considered as the primary form of ensemble since the Sukhothai Kingdom, having pi or oboe, keyboard percussion instruments (xylophones) and rhythm instruments; has been used for the interpretation of the most sacred and "high-class" compositions of the Thai classical repertoire, including the Buddhist invocation and seasonal events. Mahori was believed to firstly appeared as an ensemble in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, being traditionally played by women in the courts, composing of bow string (Chinese instruments were later added), plucked string (originally fretted lute but later changed to fretted floor zither), wind instrument and rhythm instrument, and has continuously performed until now. Khruang Sai firstly appeared in the early period of Ayutthaya Kingdom, composing of string section including the saw-duang (a high-pitched two-string bowed lute), saw-u (the lower pitched bowed lute), chakhe (a

three-string plucked zither) and pi or (reed oboe) in combination with barrel drums – was called as "Java oboe string ensemble" (presuming borne during later period of King Mongkut); was mainly performed by male; frame drum and duct flute were used instead of pi or (reed oboe) and glong khaek (barrel drums) in the early period of King Chulalongkorn; hammered dulcimer, violin, organ and other kinds of instruments were combined to the ensemble in this reign; and piano was mixed with the ensemble in the reign of King Mongkut.

Owing to the three types of bands identified, Khruang Sai is variously composed, including foreign musical instruments. As a result, it is named according to the instruments being added, such as Khruang Sai mixing with organ, Khruang Sai mixing with violin. It has been doubt how those instruments were mixed with Khruang Sai; when those were mixed; and what the roles of string ensemble were in the Thai society – which was in contrary with Piphat and Mahori. The changes of social in Rattanakosin era and the western culture acceptance and adoption have been so noticeable that the study on how those changes affected the ensemble development.

II. OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 To study the influence of social condition towards the string ensemble development during Rattanakosin period

2.2 To study the role of string ensemble in Thai society.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is a historical research applying documentary research; and a field study was applied via in-depth interview with 10 historians and Thai classical music experts.

Two steps have been planned to systemize the conduction and to achieve the objectives identified. The first step dealt with research framework preparation; Thai traditional music (in particular Khruang Sai) information, concepts and theories collection; social condition in Rattanakosin period study; literature review from research articles, books, journal, website, etc.; making documents analysis; research framework identification; research tools analysis; and proposal submission to the Research and Development Institute. And step two dealt with research conduction plan and documents synthesis.

To reach the objectives, the details of the research methodology regarding population, sample group, variables, tools, data collecting and observation were generated. The population and sample groups were history experts and musicians who experienced and gained knowledge background on the string ensemble performance. The tool, the open-ended questionnaire, was developed from document study and literature review. The variables applied in the research were the social condition in Rattanakosin period affecting the Thai string ensemble and its role in the society.

In terms of data collecting, interview with 4 specific topics were specified: Thai social changes during Rattanakosin period; form of mix string ensemble; string ensemble group; and the roles of string ensemble in Thai society. Later on, the observations on the rehearsals of the 3 groups, Prasitsilapa, Mitrnunlaeng and Samniangpairoah, were made with concentration on the individual participant status. The entire data being collected from documents, interviews and observations were synthesized as the facts found.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results are classified into 2 parts.

Part 1 deals with the Thai social condition in Rattanakosin period affecting the development of the Thai string ensemble. It is found that the form of the Thai string ensemble have got a big change since King Mongkut, Rama the forth, succeeded the throne in 1851. At that time, a lot of plan and strategies were launched to protect the country from western colonization, such as the announcement of "THAINESS"; the omission of playing some certain musical instruments and songs, being replaced by saw-u. Consequently, the Thai string instruments had

been modified more in the performance, ranging from the Royal members to the commoners. According to the bibliography of Phra Preaditpairoh (Mee Duriyangua), the certain music lessons were reserved for the Royals and the nobles in the form of Mahori – Hom Rong Iyares, Tab Ton Pleng Ching 3 Chan (Ton Pleng Ching, Charake Hangyao, Tuang Phra Thatu and Nok Curmin.)

Moreover, the biography and old portraits of the Royals also illustrated the popularity of Thai string ensemble among those in the royal court. The royal members who obviously performed the string ensemble were the Royal consort Princess Saisavali Bhiromya who played chakhe (a three-string plucked zither); and Princess of U-thong who played saw-duang (picture illustrated below.)



fig 1 : The Princesses daughters of King Chulalongkorn's string ensemble; source: HRH Prince NakhonSawan – Ploy Pradab Mongkut of Siam, p.14, pic.2



Fig 2 : The Princesses daughters of HRH Prince NakhonSawan's string ensemble; source: HRH Prince NakhonSawan – Ploy Pradab Mongkut of Siam, p.82

From the picture, it could be notified that there were some differences between the Royals' and the commoners' ensembles -the commoners applied glong khaek (barrel drums); meanwhile, the Royals applied thon (goblet drum) and Rammana (frame drum), which were used in Mahori. However, in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama the fifth, the western cultural influence came to the region and Thailand opened its gateway and accepted these

cultures - western music was one of those. Not only the acceptance, but Thailand also had to adapt and adjust ourselves for the world society by establishing the relationship with the European countries. King Chulalongkorn himself made his visits to Europe 2 times and each time musical artists had joined the trip for cultural promotion. Upon their returns, many new types of knowledge and arts were brought back, including architecture, fashion and modern materials and utensils. In terms of musical instruments, violin and piano were introduced and they were later added to the Thai string ensemble. There was evidence being recorded by the courtier of the Royal consort Princess Saisavali Bhiromya that Mr. Kondin was assigned to teach violin for playing with the string ensemble. In the reign of King Vajiravudh, King Rama the sixth, Khruang Sai mixing with piano was firstly recorded in the band of Phra Sujaritsuda, the Royal concubine of King Vajiravudh. She is in favored with music and patronized young ladies to be trained in order to perform for the pleasure of the king after his meals. She still maintained and supported the ensemble after the king had passed away and named her band "Naree Sri Sumitra" (naree means young lady.) In addition, she had recorded the albums which came from the songs of the king and composed the jingle for her own band dubbed Sudasawan (the angel). Yanee Tramote, the Thai National artist, further described that the Royals' band had adopted Khim, the Chinese hammered dulcimer, to the band and it was played by the Royal musicians to relief the illness of King Vajiravudh, which was recommended by the doctors as music therapy. In the reign of King Prajadhipok, King Rama the seventh, he was very much in fond of Thai music. He made an order to found the Department of Entertainment to gather and patronize the musicians / musical artists from the previous reign, such as Luang Phairoh Siang Saw. And it was in this reign that the radio broadcasting was firstly aired during the coronation of the king. A lot of songs and music were promoted and a new trend of music "tableau vivon" was composed and broadcasted. Suwit Bovonwattana wrote that Master Prom was the first person who mixed organ with the string ensemble and played in the cinema. The band was formed by commoners who were not supported by the court. After the Siamese Coup d'état, the term "civilization" was introduced to propagandize the new trend of culture. The musicians and artists had to head back to their hometown since Thai traditional music was "out-of-date." However, the Thai string ensemble survived and continued its existence until the television era. The string ensemble named "Techanasenee", leading by Master Chuea Seneewongse and later by Suwit Bovonwattana, was the first band to be televised on the Thai Broadcasting Channel 4 since it was firstly aired, including at the AS radio station (founded by H.M. King Bhumibol, the present king.) Later, the

band changed its name to "VajaraBunlaeng" when Suwit had got his post abroad. The story of this band has reflected the influence of social condition towards the development of the Thai string ensemble very well.

Other evidence that well portrayed the development of the string ensemble was from the work of Mr. Serm Salikupta. The band named "SermitrBunlaeng" was formed during WW I, aiming to relief the fear of the civil officials of the Land Department. Firstly, he had hired Techanasenee band, but later he and those officials who were able to play music formed the band as the string ensemble mixing with organ and played by themselves. At that time, this kind of amateur group could be found in many government bodies, such as the Public Relations Department, the Communication Department, the Thai Tobacco Monopoly, etc. It was understandable that this kind of band had been expanded to many government organizations and singers were added later.

Both VajaraBunlaeng and SermitrBunlaeng particularly reflected the development of the Thai string ensemble, affected by the social condition, from the royal court to the officials and extended to the mass communication society. The ensemble experienced its rise and fall, from album recording with high volume sale to its loss of popularity. The only band left nowadays is named "PrasitSilapa" led by Mr. PrasitKhumsab, the former member of VajaraBunlaeng. The band has had a very few hiring show, however, the residence of Mr. Prasit is still used as the place for the rehearsal.

Illustration 3: VajaraBunlaeng string ensemble;
source: Record's cover "Mon Mob Rua"

Part 2 dealt with the roles of the ensemble in Thai society. According to the documents, interview and observation, this kind of band was formed for the individual pleasure. During the glorious period of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, songs and music were widely performed and played both in and out of the court. With their over-booming, King BoromTraiLokanat (1448 – 1470) launched a royal law forbidding the ballad singing, the vertical duct flute blowing or drum beating in the Royal court. Assumingly, the performance at that time should be in the individual performance since the ensemble was in the form of Mahori. There was another form of solocalled AeawKlow Saw – singing with saw, drum and small cymbals. Later, plucked instrument and barrel drum were added called Wong Glong Khaek Khruang Yai (Big Barrel Drum Band.) There was no evidence of competition, no occasion identified like Piphat. So, it might be performed as individual pleasure. Nonetheless, the string ensemble was very popular among the high ranking Royal members and was created in Royal form. The musicians, musical artists and singers were patronized by those royals for the pleasure of the masters. Primarily, it can be

concluded that the string ensemble is for the pleasure of the royal members; and is performed as a leisure of individuals and groups.

When the Royal patronage had ended, the statism was replaced. The civil services became the elite group and were eager to consume the artistic pleasure from the ensemble. Consequently, these people gathered themselves in forming a band. Most of the band masters were high ranking officials. This kind of band has been publically performed, including through television and radio broadcastings.

Nowadays, the string ensemble has fewer role in the society since the invasion of modern music industry. The new trend, style and forms of music are flooded from all directions. The traditional Thai music has been neglected and ignored by the new generation; and cannot be found in any medias. It may be the duty of the Thai traditional musicians, not the band or songs, to find the floor to conserve this kind of ensemble to exist in the Thai society.

CONCLUTION

It can be concluded that the Thai string ensemble has been progressively developed in accordance with the social changes of Rattanakosin era. Therefore, the Thai string ensemble, which was once composed of conventional instruments - Saw Duang, Saw U, Jakhe, Khlui (vertical duct flute) and Rammana, has currently portrayed in a modern way by mixing the Asian and European instruments – Chinese dulcimer, violin, organ and piano, in the form of mixed string ensemble. In terms of the role in Thai society, the sting ensemble was primarily regarded as the recreational activity to please the king and royal members; then was transcended to the civil services and the rich for their pleasure; and is now counted as the cultural heritage of the nation.

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