

Saw Vocal Tradition in Local Schooling: The Contestation between Official Knowledge and Localized Knowledge

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The Asian Conference on Education 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The prevailing discourses on Thai Education indicate that school is highly institutionalized and culturally hegemonized. It serves an important apparatus for the reproduction of state ideology in disciplining and preparing desired citizen. This paper is a conceptual paper that aims to address the question of whether school is actually a negotiating space. The paper argues that school is an opening space for negotiation and contestation for knowledge, thought, belief, and cultural politics. Based on the examination of Saw Vocal Tradition (or Lan Na Oral Poetry) contained in local curriculum in Chiang Mai province, the study found that Lan Na sociocultural capital developed in the past two decades served as the important force that made it possible for knowledge and culture of the locals to be included in local curriculum of schools, which were highly oriented to localness. When Saw Vocal Tradition as a Lanna culture product was included and represented in local curriculum, it reproduced imagined Lan Na identity, on the one hand. On the other hand, it served to reproduce 'theatrical state'. The study also revealed that the presence of Saw Vocal Tradition in the local curriculum of the schools led to the institutionalization of local knowledge to become local official knowledge. This phenomenon restricted the inclusion of other local knowledge that was not institutionalized from local curriculum in school. This study concluded that ongoing contestation in school is needed in order to provide school with choices in teaching, developing, and cherishing students.

Keywords: Saw Vocal Tradition, Curriculum, Localized Knowledge, Contestation

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Introduction

“Saw Vocal Tradition”: The meaning and social space.

“Saw Vocal Tradition” is a kind of duet involving reciprocal songs between men and women. It is derived from traditional Lanna culture which has been gaining a large traction in the Thai state and among localist groups/ Lannaists/in the past two decades. The Saw performance and signing has been used to construct and explain about “Lanna identity” all along.

Historically, it could be assumed that “Saw Vocal Tradition” has been performed by people in Lanna with Chiang Mai as the center of local administrative powers. It has mainly fulfilled an entertainment purpose since King Menrai the Great (Songsak Prangwattanakul, 1989). Later when Lanna was a principality and semi-colonized by of Siam, the Lanna women dignitaries including Princess Dara Rasmi, a princess consort of Chulalongkorn, King Rama V of Siam has adopted Saw performance and had it performed in the ceremonies to greet and honor visiting dignitaries of high ranks from Siam (Chutima Khongsanthia, 2556). It shows how Saw Vocal Tradition has been existing across the classes of the Lanna people through generations. The performance itself is quite diverse in terms of the musical instruments, the melodies, and the language based largely on the dialect used locally.

Compared to other local cultures, Saw Vocal Tradition is similar to “Klon Mor Lam” in the Northeast, “Pleng E-Saew” in the Central Plain and “Lamtad” in the South since its musical genre is flexible and its melodies and lyrics can be subject to modification by the singers themselves or the artists. The lyrics can either be prepared in advance or improvised, or even a mixture of both. The singers of “Chang Saw” are at their liberty to choose part of the prepared words to sing or just mix it up with their improvised words and melodies.

Saw Vocal Tradition is therefore a kind of literature composed of “coding” or “symbolism” or “message” to convey the meaning between the artists (*Chang Saw*) – both men and women – so long as it is appropriate to the context and the feelings of the audience. It also depends on the intent of the artists as the performers. Work by Oraphin Sroyyana (1990, p. 8) reveals how Saw Vocal Tradition has been approached differently as a ritual or a medium of entertainment. On some occasion, Saw Vocal Tradition has also been vehemently used as a tool to gain political leverage from the state by various marginalized groups.

Academically, Saw Vocal Tradition is treated as a genre of Lanna local literature emphasizing entertainment, politics, culture, tradition and way of life. It helps to shed light on Lanna agrarian society and mirrors the way of life in society and about local people including their “eating, shitting, fucking and sleeping” daily pattern as well as the social life interwoven with the mundane and divine worlds. Saw Vocal Tradition is also approached through cultural study as a reproduction of the process to construct the identity permeated with cultural and political dimensions. In addition, Saw Vocal Tradition is treated as folk media by mass communication gurus from various schools as a powerful mode of communication. It has been instrumental in the development and evolution of the public sector, as the state has often adopted Saw Vocal Tradition songs to convey their messages to local people, such as by using Saw songs during the

campaign to encourage people to cast their votes (Bussakorn Samrongthong, 2552 ; Chiraporn Khunsri, 2014).

Saw Vocal Tradition as local knowledge.

Schooling is part of social space and is instrumental in cultural transmission. Cultures and wisdom are passed on through the education system, rituals and all other aspects of learning process in the school. The school's pedagogy, curriculum, course activities, and rules have been developed to expose the students to a hidden curriculum which aspires to instill such consciousness and cultural norms among the students (Tierney, 2002; Nongyao Nawarat & Chayanisuan Yimsawat, 2017).

In addition, the schooling system has incorporated wisdom, knowledge or cultural production of villagers. It aims to reorganize local knowledge making it more compatible with modern society. All is aimed at making foreign knowledge become more Thai. This has happened inside and has expanded to outside the schooling system (Monthana Pipatpen, 2004). Saw Vocal Tradition as a cultural output of Lanna society is therefore part of such phenomenon. It is almost inevitable to avoid "clash" or "assimilation" with the new "education propellers" which have become more involved with, and have influenced the status of "Saw Vocal Tradition" in the education provided in local schools.

The present study attempts to use "Saw Vocal Tradition" as a key to shed light on and unveil what has been happening behind the scenes in Chiang Mai's local schooling. It aspires to draw the attention to the fact that "Schools are not just a closed and rigid space or a highly institutionalized space which tends to culturally dominate or reproduce certain ideologies to prepare desirable citizens for the state. Rather, Chiang Mai's curriculum and local schooling (as in other localities) can be a space with great flexibility which provides for the expansion of – and can be powerful enough to contend with – "official knowledge". It can give rise to leverage, contestation, clash and cooperation in order to re-localize knowledge and thought incompatible with – and in relation to – the construct of Lanna identity. It is also an attempt to ask: since schools are a cultural space, how have they incorporated "localism"? What are the educational actors? What are the discourses that have been produced by and have emerged from such schooling system?

All these questions should help us to come to term with the "complex education identity" emended in the contemporary Lanna social space which can be visualized through the rise of arts and cultures that move about and express themselves in and around the local schooling system. The aforementioned questions shall be tackled by documentary research and interviews as well as observations of teaching courses for children led by two senior local artists in Chiang Mai and Lamphun in July 2017. Both singers have made an attempt to form an association of the local Lanna Saw singers and have been playing an important role to pass on the tradition of Saw Vocal Tradition in schools. They have been instrumental to promote the teaching of Saw Vocal Tradition. With help from the Ministry of Culture, an attempt has been made to develop the curriculum on "the essence of local performing arts including Saw Vocal Tradition in 2007".

School and the construct of “Thainess”.

On one hand, the state education provided for local people tends to focus on increasing Thai literacy through the schooling system in order that they can conveniently interact with the authorities and can use it as a springboard for their occupations. On the other, modern education by the Thai state has been flourishing through the bureaucratic system with an emphasis on the construct of “Thainess”. Emphasizing the teaching of Thai language makes it dominate and replace local dialects. Such education has been part and parcel of a political project by the state ever since public education has been developed in the Thai nation over one hundred years ago. During the time the Lanna political structure has been assimilated to the Siamese or Thai nation state, education has been used as a tool by the state to impose ideologies and to transform the imagination and mentality of local people imposing on them the same perspectives as Siamese or Thai people. This is to ensure national integration through focusing on teaching Thai language, Thai history, arts and culture in Thailand (Arsa Khambha, 2006; Nongyao Nawarat & Chayanisuan Yimsawat, 2017).

While such attempts have been made to assimilate, the weakness of Siamese education has also constantly been contested. It reflects a social truth regarding education that it is not fixed and durable. Instead it has been challenged by the disillusioned, particularly some local people who fail to live a sustainable livelihood, having to rely on such reductionist education without any relevance to their own lives or their social views. The questioning of the Thai education system has expanded to target policies and contents of the curriculum provided for by the state from 1973-1976.

A critique of such education systems has emanated from the leftist intellectuals. They have been influenced by literatures on education including by the pedagogical works such as Paolo Freire (1970) or Ivan illich (1971), among others. Then, around 1990s, the critique against the education system has been replaced by an education perspective pushed through by “the rise of community culture” and reflections made up on themselves among the Lannaists during the celebrations to mark the 720th anniversary of Chiang Mai. Nationally, a devolution project was revived and dusted off and gave rise to the promulgation of the 1999 Education Act gesturing an incorporation of local wisdom with curriculum in schools.

Conclusion

Saw Vocal Tradition and the construct of “imagined Lanna identity”.

There is a dynamic political interaction of various sets of ideological culture in the official curriculum and the hidden curriculum in school. It should be noted that “Lannaness in school” has been systematically developed as contention to “Thainess in school”. This is different from the past when such Thainess was dispersedly permeated along with the state knowledge. That utilization of both state knowledge and Lanna knowledge to construct a complex Lanna identity has started from an education space when the Ministry of Culture has developed the curriculum on “the essence of local performing arts including Saw Vocal Tradition in 2007” (Office of the National Culture Commission, 2007). Meanwhile, senior teachers, men and

women, have formed themselves into associations of traditional Lanna Saw singers bearing various names in all eight provinces in the Upper North. From this time Saw Vocal Tradition could poignantly contend with other forms of knowledge in the schooling sphere. Groups of five senior Saw singers, with two singers and three musicians, have been assigned to teach in hundreds of schools. Based on the interviews of the senior singers highly revered as artists and maestros of Saw Vocal Tradition in Chiang Mai and Lamphun, it was found that their schedules were tightly full during the three-month-vacation.

In such context, Saw Vocal Tradition has expanded beyond just the monastic sphere, merit making ceremonies, or rituals performed in rich people's houses, to public performance of art and culture in public venues including the Art and Cultural Hall, a welcoming party for foreign dignitaries, broadcasting media, and "schools". Previously, Saw Vocal Tradition could not exist in any of these spheres. Such a phenomenon implies that schools through local curriculum development have explored and incorporated traditional cultures to reproduce them and put them on the map in response to the need of local educational institutions. It also demonstrates that the new Lanna identity has been developed through schools. This reflects the contestation and cooperation between the traditional Lanna and modern Lanna as well as the intense competition among the different sets of knowledge in order to construct the identity and the "imagined Lanna identity".

Saw Vocal Tradition as part of the official localized knowledge.

The "official localized knowledge" of Saw Vocal Tradition has been incorporated into the school curriculum. Through the process to ensure local culture and wisdom be recognized as part of the official knowledge, the identity of such local wisdom has been reduced to merely serving the transmission and reproduction of culture and wisdom, being taught as part of the curriculum on "the essence of local wisdom". Therefore, Saw Vocal Tradition has to be adapted and adjusted to accommodate the modus operandi of the academic realm of schools. The officialization of such local knowledge as part of the formal education in order to pass on Saw Vocal Tradition as local culture and wisdom has appeared in the standardization of the singing, sitting posture, utterance and lyrics, or even how to walk during the performance. In other word, all the patterns of the performance have been changed and assimilated to the "Chiang Mai accentuation". It is believed that such standards shall garner beauty and popularity for the performance. Meanwhile, attempts have been made to ostracize and exclude any Saw performance which sounds and appears to be "Non-Chiang Mai". Such Non-Chiang Mai performances and the reproduction of such knowledge have been excluded from the mainstream. As a result, Saw singing has been divided into different standards to illustrate objectives of the curriculum, the contents, and how to train the teachers. In practical terms, there have always been competitions among avant garde Saw signers at the regional level. Such competitions have often been held in Chiang Mai whereby the singers from different schools in different provinces could compete. But such standards of arts and cultures have affected "traditional" local culture and wisdom. The young Saw singers have to adjust their dancing posture and the rhythm of their music to suit the Chiang Mai standards as well as their sitting posture and the politeness of the proses that have to accommodate to the Thai/Chiang Mai style of politeness and civility. This phenomenon implies a belief in the establishment of "genuineness", or "standard mold" or "the extreme quality of Muang

Chiang Mai” of the “ideal Lanna”. It has given rise to the concept of placing Lanna as the center of the region with the power of Lanna has derived from being a peripheral state of Siam.

A new phase of contestation.

Thus in the past decade, an effort has been made to turn Saw Vocal Tradition into an identity and the officialized local knowledge as part of the movement for social transformation through education reform at the local level. Such education actions to integrate local culture and wisdom has led to a challenge of the aged-old landscape of knowledge that had been nurtured in the past one hundred years which rejected schooling system. It has facilitated the emergence of a space for contestation and competition of knowledge and ideologies between marginalized groups of people and the ruling class. The power of localism/Lannaism has become social and cultural capital that has given rise to new forces which help the transmission of local culture. Such new forces have provided the local Lanna society a narrative about the process to revive localism through education to prevent the monopolization and hegemonic powers. However, such local curriculum and local schooling systems have also given various groups, state, private and civil society, a space in which they can maneuver their powers in the struggle to achieve the maximum interests and to serve their own political and cultural goals.

A more thorough review of educational activities that have emerged in the official curriculum and hidden curriculum and hidden culture would shed light on the formation process (the reproduction, the invention, and the reorganization of knowledge) which is relating to the process to construct Lanna identity and Lannaism. This would demonstrate the structure of power contestation and cooperation among Chiang Mai, Siam and other forces that have emerged in the midst of modern development and urbanization of Chiang Mai.

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