

Listening to Folk Music from Ta Pho Sub-District: Conservation, Silenced Voices, and Negotiating Thai Identity in Secondary Urban Contexts

การรับฟังดนตรีพื้นบ้านจากตำบลท่าโพ: การอนุรักษ์ เสียงที่ถูกทำให้เงียบ และการต่อรองอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นไทยในบริบทเมืองรอง

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คำสำคัญ:

ชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาภูมิทัศน์เสียง, เมืองรอง, เสียงที่ถูกทำให้เงียบ, เพลงพื้นบ้านท่าโพ, การเมืองวัฒนธรรม, การต่อรองอำนาจ

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Secondary cities in Thailand occupy a liminal space—peripheral to national cultural hierarchies yet subject to centralized state control. This study examines Ta Pho folk music in Uthai Thani province, investigating how local communities negotiate their identity amidst state-sponsored “cultural preservation” projects. The objective was to analyze the power dynamics that determine which songs are amplified and which are silenced in the public sphere.

Methods: Employing a longitudinal ethnographic approach, fieldwork was conducted from January 2024 to September 2025. Data collection involved 6 site visits (comprising both overnight stays and short visits), utilizing high-fidelity soundscape recording and in-depth interviews. Uniquely, this research adopts a “native ethnographer” perspective, leveraging the researcher’s insider status to access private musical practices often withheld from outsiders.

Results: The study reveals a bifurcation of Ta Pho folk music into two distinct categories: 1) sanitized heritage, performed at state festivals, characterized by rigid adherence to moral narratives and praise for authority; and 2) silenced voices, preserved only in private circles, containing sexual innuendo (song-ngae song-ngam) and subtle political resistance. Musical analysis indicates that while the traditional strophic form and heterophonic texture remain resilient, the lyrical content in public spaces has been systematically cleansed of its original “folk” vitality (jouissance) to align with bureaucratic definitions of Thainess. However, musicians employ these structures for strategic adaptation, satisfying state mandates while preserving authentic repertoires in private.

Application of this study: The findings are relevant to both students and scholars of music, highlighting that music is not merely an art form but also a site of power involving selection, audibility, and preservation. The study also offers policy implications, suggesting that musical preservation should shift from maintaining fixed forms toward supporting creative freedom for communities and artists, thereby critically reflecting the role of the state in cultural governance.

Conclusions: Cultural preservation in secondary cities functions not merely as protection but as a mechanism of control. However, the persistence of “silenced songs” in private spheres demonstrates the community’s agency in maintaining their authentic history. This supports the policy shift from “form preservation” to “supporting living cultural processes,” allowing the complexity of local voices to exist without being domesticated.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: เมืองรองในประเทศไทยดำรงอยู่ในพื้นที่กึ่งกลาง กล่าวคือ เป็นชายขอบของลำดับชั้นทางวัฒนธรรมระดับชาติ แต่อยู่ภายใต้การควบคุมจากรัฐส่วนกลาง การศึกษานี้ตรวจสอบดนตรีพื้นบ้านท่าโพ จังหวัดอุทัยธานี โดยสืบสวนว่าชุมชนท้องถิ่นต่อรองอัตลักษณ์ของตนอย่างไรท่ามกลางโครงการ “การอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรม” ที่รัฐให้การสนับสนุน วัตถุประสงค์ของการวิจัยคือเพื่อวิเคราะห์พลวัตแห่งอำนาจที่กำหนดว่าเพลงใดได้รับการขยายเสียง และเพลงใดถูกทำให้เงียบในพื้นที่สาธารณะ

วิธีการศึกษา: การศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีการทางชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาแบบระยะยาว (longitudinal ethnographic approach) โดยลงภาคสนามระหว่างเดือนมกราคม 2567 ถึงกันยายน 2568 การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลประกอบด้วยการลงพื้นที่ 6 ครั้ง (ครอบคลุมทั้งการพักค้างคืนและการลงพื้นที่ระยะสั้น) โดยใช้เทคนิคการบันทึกภูมิทัศน์เสียงความละเอียดสูงและ

Listening to Folk Music from Ta Pho Sub-District, E5890 (1-15)

การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ความโดดเด่นของงานวิจัยนี้คือการใช้มุมมองแบบ “นักชาติพันธุ์วรรณาที่เป็นคนในวัฒนธรรม” (native ethnographer) โดยอาศัยสถานะคนในของผู้วิจัยเพื่อเข้าถึงปฏิบัติการทางดนตรีในพื้นที่ส่วนตัวซึ่งมักถูกปิดกั้นจากคนภายนอก

ผลการศึกษา: การศึกษาเผยให้เห็นการแบ่งแยกดนตรีพื้นบ้านทำโพออกเป็นสองประเภทที่ชัดเจน ได้แก่ 1) มรดกที่ถูกทำให้สะอาด (sanitized heritage) ซึ่งแสดงในเทศกาลของรัฐ มีลักษณะยึดติดกับเรื่องเล่าทางศีลธรรมและการสรรเสริญผู้มีอำนาจอย่างเคร่งครัด และ 2) เสียงที่ถูกทำให้เงียบ (silenced voices) ซึ่งถูกเก็บรักษาไว้เฉพาะในวงส่วนตัว ประกอบด้วยเนื้อหาที่มีนัยทางเพศ (สองแง่สองง่าม) และการขัดแย้งทางการเมืองอย่างแนบเนียน การวิเคราะห์ทางดนตรีชี้ให้เห็นว่า แม้รูปแบบฉันทลักษณ์ (strophic form) และพื้นผิวเสียงแบบเฮเทอโรโฟนี (heterophonic texture) จะยังคงเดิม แต่เนื้อหาคำร้องในพื้นที่สาธารณะได้ถูกชำระล้างความมีชีวิตชีวาแบบ “ชาวบ้าน” ดังเดิม (jouissance) ออกไปอย่างเป็นระบบ เพื่อให้สอดคล้องกับนิยามความเป็นไทยตามแบบฉบับของระบบราชการ อย่างไรก็ตาม ศิลปินได้ใช้โครงสร้างทางดนตรีเหล่านี้ในการปรับตัวเชิงกลยุทธ์ (strategic adaptation) เพื่อตอบสนองข้อกำหนดของรัฐ ในขณะที่ยังคงรักษาบทเพลงที่แท้จริงไว้ในพื้นที่ส่วนตัว

การประยุกต์ใช้: ผลการศึกษานี้มีความหมายต่อนักศึกษาและนักวิชาการดนตรี โดยชี้ให้เห็นว่าดนตรีไม่ใช่เพียงงานศิลปะ หากแต่เป็นพื้นที่ของอำนาจที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการคัดเลือก การได้ยิน และการอนุรักษ์เพลง ขณะเดียวกันยังให้ข้อเสนอเชิงนโยบายว่า การอนุรักษ์ดนตรีควรเปลี่ยนจากการคงรูปแบบเดิมไปสู่การสนับสนุนให้ชุมชนและศิลปินมีอิสระในการสร้างสรรค์และปรับเปลี่ยนผลงาน ซึ่งช่วยสะท้อนบทบาทของรัฐในการกำกับวัฒนธรรมอย่างมีวิพากษ์

บทสรุป: การอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรมในเมืองรองไม่ได้ทำหน้าที่เพียงแค่การปกป้องรักษา แต่เป็นกลไกของการควบคุม อย่างไรก็ตาม การดำรงอยู่ของ “เพลงที่ถูกทำให้เงียบ” ในพื้นที่ส่วนตัวแสดงให้เห็นถึงศักยภาพในการกระทำการ (agency) ของชุมชนในการรักษาประวัติศาสตร์ที่แท้จริงของตนเอง ข้อเสนอแนะสนับสนุนการปรับเปลี่ยนนโยบายจาก “การอนุรักษ์รูปแบบ” ไปสู่ “การสนับสนุนกระบวนการทางวัฒนธรรมที่มีชีวิต” เพื่อให้ความซับซ้อนของเสียงในท้องถิ่นสามารถดำรงอยู่ได้โดยปราศจากการถูกทำให้เชื่อง

Introduction

In the cultural geography of Thailand, Uthai Thani (Figure 1) is quintessentially a “secondary city”—a space defined by its proximity to, yet distinction from, the center of economic and cultural power (Sudhipongpracha & Dahiya, 2019). Unlike primary urban centers where global capitalism dominates, secondary cities occupy a liminal space, existing in a state of constant negotiation between local traditions and the pressures of state-imposed modernization. As noted by Teanthaworn, Chapman, & Tangpoonsupisiri (2023), Uthai Thani exemplifies this dynamic, functioning as a “cultural borderland” where local identities are continuously reshaped by both internal community needs and external tourism policies. This is particularly evident in Uthai Thani, a province that historically served as a buffer zone and a trade route linking the Central Plains with the former Lanna Kingdom.

Today, its “secondary” status is not merely a demographic classification but a socio-political condition. Unlike primary cities that are integrated into global flows of capital and culture, secondary cities in Thailand are often treated by the central government as repositories of “authentic” tradition—museums of living history intended to bolster the national narrative of Thainess. This creates a paradox: to develop economically, the city must commodify its culture; yet, to satisfy the tourist gaze, this culture must be frozen in a specific, idealized version of the past. For the folk musicians of Ta Pho, this means their living, breathing tradition—which is naturally raucous, changing, and sometimes vulgar—must be manicured into a polite spectacle. The tension between the “lived city” (the chaotic reality of residents) and the “imagined city” (the orderly projection of the state) is nowhere more audible than in the soundscape of its local festivals. Within this context, folk music serves not merely as entertainment or aesthetic heritage, but as a contested site where these power dynamics play out audibly.

Traditional approaches to Thai folk music often frame “conservation” as a benevolent act of saving disappearing arts from the onslaught of modernity. However, this perspective frequently overlooks the political dimension of what is being saved and what is being erased. As scholars of critical heritage studies argue, heritage is not a neutral inheritance but a process of selection, where dominant powers curate a version of the past that serves present political agendas

(Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2012). In the Southeast Asian context, Schofield (2024) further posited that such preservation efforts often enforce a state-sanctioned narrative of “Thainess,” effectively silencing local variations that do not fit the national mold. Thus, the “revival” of folk music can paradoxically function as a tool for cultural sanitization.

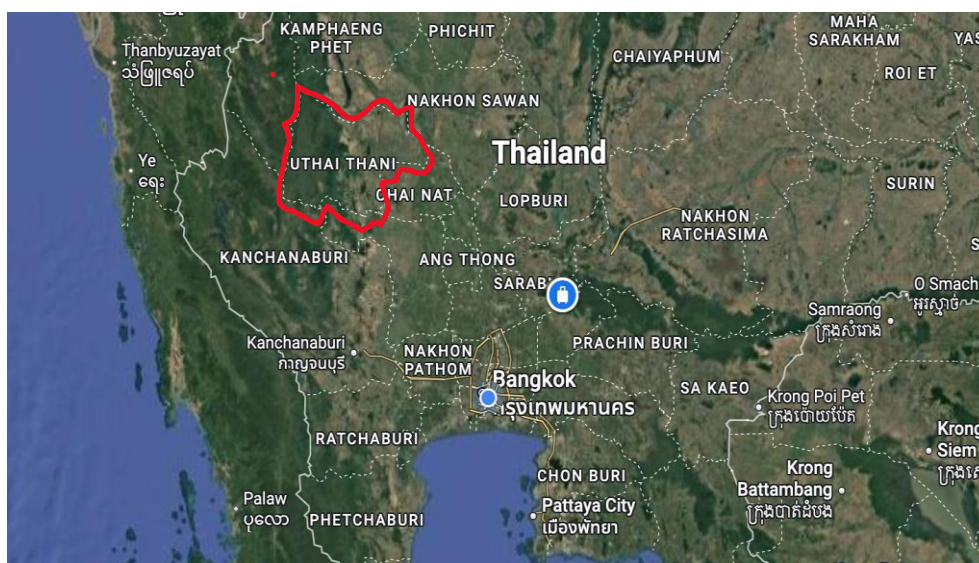


Figure 1 Map Showing the Location of Uthai Thani Province in Relation to Bangkok and Major Urban Centers in Thailand (Adapted from Google Maps)
(Source: Boonrod, Intarakaew, & Samnieng, 2025a)

This article challenges the romanticized view of folk music conservation by adopting a critical listening approach. Drawing on Schafer’s (1977) concept of the “soundscape” and Attali’s (1985) political economy of music, we argue that the acoustic environment of Ta Pho—a community with a rich musical lineage in Uthai Thani—is a disciplinary space managed by state power. By analyzing the songs that are promoted versus those that are silenced, we expose the power relations embedded in the soundscape. We ask, how does the “secondary” status of the city shape its sound? And how do local musicians navigate the tension between satisfying state mandates for “polite culture” and maintaining the authentic, often raucous, spirit of their tradition (jouissance)?

Research Objectives

This study examines Ta Pho folk music in Uthai Thani province, investigating how local communities negotiate their identity amidst state-sponsored “cultural preservation” projects. The objective was to analyze the power dynamics that determine which songs are amplified and which are silenced in the public sphere.

Literature Review

To position this study within the broader academic discourse, we draw upon three intersecting bodies of literature.

1. Thai Folk Music: From Heritage to Hegemony

Traditional scholarship on Thai music has largely focused on musicological description, preservation, and the role of music in constructing national identity (Miller & Shahriari, 2021). Early ethnomusicological works often adopted

a “salvage” paradigm, treating folk genres as dying artifacts in need of recording and archiving. However, more recent critical scholarship has challenged this innocent view of conservation. Schofield (2024) argued that cultural politics in Southeast Asia often utilizes music to enforce state-sanctioned narratives of “Thainess,” effectively silencing local variations that do not fit the national mold. Similarly, McDonald (2013), writing on music and nationalism, posited that folk music is frequently co-opted as a “weapon” of identity construction. This study builds on these critical perspectives by shifting the focus from “what is preserved” to “what is erased.”

To understand why certain aspects of folk music are systematically erased, we must look beyond mere politeness to the psychoanalytic concept of *jouissance* (excessive enjoyment). As Žižek (1989) elaborated in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, ideology functions not by suppressing truth, but by regulating enjoyment. The state-sanctioned version of “Thainess” relies on a harmonious, conflict-free image of the social body. In this framework, the raw vitality of folk music—its sexual innuendos, its unbridled laughter, and its physical looseness—represents a surplus of enjoyment that threatens the orderly fantasy of the nation. The “dirty” jokes in Ta Pho music are not just rude; they are structural anomalies that disrupt the official narrative of a disciplined, moral citizenry. Therefore, the “sanitization” process observed in this study is, in Žižekian terms, an attempt to domesticate this *jouissance*, transforming the “Real” of the folk tradition into a symbolic “Sublime Object”—a purified, hollowed-out version of heritage that can be safely consumed without disrupting the status quo.

2. Soundscape Ethnography and the Politics of Silence

To understand the erasure of voices, this study employs the framework of “soundscape ethnography.” Pioneered by Schafer (1977), this approach moves beyond musical analysis to consider the entire acoustic environment. Schafer argued that the soundscape is not merely a backdrop but a reflection of social conditions. Expanding on this, Feld (1984) introduced the concept of “acoustemology” (sound as a way of knowing), demonstrating that sound structures are homologous to social structures. Crucially, power operates not only through noise but through silence. As noted in contemporary sound studies, the ability to control the acoustic territory—to decide what counts as “music” and what is dismissed as “noise”—is a fundamental exercise of power. This study applies these theories to Uthai Thani, viewing the absence of *song-ngae song-ngam* (risqué songs) not as a natural decline, but as a political silence engineered by the state’s management of the soundscape (Titon, 2015).

3. Secondary Cities as Cultural Borderlands

The spatial context of this “silencing” is specific to the “secondary city.” Unlike the metropolis (Bangkok) or the rural village, secondary cities occupy a liminal space. Culturally, these cities function as “borderlands” where local traditions collide with rapid urbanization and standardization pressures. This dynamic creates a unique pressure cooker for folk musicians, who must negotiate between their local identity and the expectations of the center—a dynamic that has been underexplored in Thai ethnomusicology (Carrillo, 2014).

4. The Research Gap

While the literature on Thai music conservation is extensive, there is a paucity of research connecting these fields within the specific context of Thailand’s secondary cities. The secondary city—as a site of specific acoustic negotiation—remains a “silent” zone in the scholarship. This article fills these gaps by using Ta Pho folk music as a case study to demonstrate how state power and community agency negotiate the soundscape.

Research Methods

1. Fieldwork Design and Timeline

This study employs a longitudinal ethnographic approach to move beyond superficial observation. Fieldwork was conducted over a 20-month period, from January 2024 to September 2025. This duration was strategically chosen to cover diverse temporal contexts: the agricultural “low season,” when music serves intimate communal functions, and the “high season” of provincial festivals, where music is performed for state consumption.

2. Data Collection and Site Visits

The researcher conducted a total of six site visits. These were divided into two types:

2.1 Overnight Fieldwork (3 visits, 3–5 days each): To observe the “nightlife” of the music—the after-parties and private gatherings where the “silenced” songs are performed.

2.2 Short Visits (3 visits): To observe official state ceremonies and daytime events. In total, the researcher spent approximately 27 days conducting the fieldwork.

3. Research Instruments

To capture the nuances of the secondary city soundscape, high-fidelity mobile recording devices were utilized. These devices allowed for unobtrusive recording in natural settings, preserving the acoustic authenticity of the environment. Field notes were meticulously maintained to document non-verbal cues and environmental contexts.

4. Researcher Positionality: The Native Ethnographer

A critical methodological strength of this study is the researcher’s positionality. The primary researcher is a “native ethnographer” (insider)—a local resident of Ta Pho born into the community. Having established lifelong relationships with key informants, particularly the community elders and musical custodians Ms. Somjit Tipsiri and Mr. Surapong Tipsiri, the researcher possesses “cultural intimacy.” This insider status granted access to the “backstage” of musical life—specifically the risqué, humorous, and politically incorrect songs that are strictly withheld from government officials and external academic researchers.

However, this positionality is not without its ethical complexities. Being a “native ethnographer” involves a constant negotiation of trust and betrayal (Narayan, 1993). The researcher is privy to the “hidden transcript”—the complaints about local officials, the mockery of government policies, and the performance of illicit songs. Revealing these practices in an academic publication carries the risk of exposing the community to scrutiny. To mitigate this, the researcher engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the interlocutors, specifically Ms. Somjit Tipsiri, regarding what could be recorded and what could be published. The decision to publish the lyrics of the “silenced” songs (Type B) was made with the explicit consent of the practitioners, who viewed this documentation not as an exposure of secrets, but as a necessary act of historical preservation for a repertoire that is in danger of fading from memory. This research, therefore, operates on the delicate boundary between protecting the community’s privacy and amplifying their muted agency.

Research Results

The investigation into Ta Pho folk music reveals that musical form and political strategy are inseparable. Our findings demonstrate how the genre’s flexible sonic architecture facilitates a complex negotiation with state power.

This section first analyzes the sonic materiality that enables this flexibility, before examining the resulting dichotomy between the 'sanitized' heritage performed in public and the 'silenced' voices preserved in private.

1. Musical Characteristics: The Sonic Architecture of Flexibility

Before analyzing the socio-political dimensions, it is essential to understand how the sonic materiality of Ta Pho folk music facilitates negotiation. The genre, specifically seen through Phleng Chak Ka Yer (เพลงชักเย่อ) and Phleng Lom (เพลงลอม), functions within a strophic form. This structural repetition is not merely aesthetic but strategic; it provides a stable “container” for unstable content, allowing the vocalist to improvise lyrics in real-time—switching between “safe” praise for officials and “risqué” humor for locals—depending on the immediate social context.

1.1 Scalar Structure and Regional Identity. The melody utilizes an anhemitonic scale (five tones without semitones). This scale firmly roots the music in the Central and Lower Northern Thai folk tradition, acting as a sonic marker of “localness” that resists the hegemonic influence of Westernized pop or standardized Central Thai classical music (dontri Thai).

1.2 Vocal Delivery as Agency. The performance relies heavily on melismatic ornamentation (Eu-an). This technique serves a crucial function beyond decoration: by stretching syllables, it buys the singer time to think. This “moment of suspension” is the space of agency, where the singer decides whether to conform to the script or insert a subversive joke, making censorship difficult in live performance.

1.3 Texture as Communal Resistance. The resulting texture is heterophonic; while the lead vocalist carries the melody, the chorus (luk khu) supports it with slight rhythmic and melodic deviations (Figure 2). This creates a dense, “buzzing” communal sound that physically embodies the collective spirit. Unlike the disciplined unison preferred in state-run schools, this “messy” heterophony resists standardization, representing the unruly, authentic voice of the community.



Figure 2 Ms. Somjit Tipsiri (Kru Lin Chee) Demonstrates Ta Pho Folk Music Performance
in Nong Kha Yang Sub-District, Uthai Thani
(Source: Boonrod, Intarakaew, & Samnieng, 2025b)

To fully grasp the dynamics of resistance, one must look closely at the role of the luk khu (chorus/rhythmic supporters), exemplified here by Mr. Surapong Tipsiri (Figure 3). In Ta Pho folk music, the luk khu is not merely a background accompanist but an active agent of disruption and energy. While the lead singer may carry the narrative

melody, the luk khu employs the rammanna (frame drum) to drive the rhythm while simultaneously performing roi soi (ร้อยสร้อย)—the art of vocal interpolation. These interpolations are often rapid, rhythmic interjections designed to “tease” (yea) the lead vocalist or the audience, injecting a sense of sanook (fun) that prevents the performance from becoming too stiff or ceremonial.



Figure 3 Mr. Surapong Tipsiri Performing the Role of Luk Khu, Providing Rhythmic Support With the Rammanna Drum and Interjecting Improvised Verses.
(Source: Boonrod, Intarakaew, & Samnieng, 2025c)

The content of these roi soi interjections is the primary domain of the genre's “bawdiness” (song-ngae song-ngam). While the main lyrics might be telling a formal story, the luk khu will often insert double entendres, sexual puns, or playful insults during the instrumental breaks or the gaps between verses. This functions as a “carnavalesque” counterpoint; the luk khu acts as the trickster who subverts the seriousness of the official text with earthy humor. For instance, if the lead singer sings about “harvesting rice,” Mr. Surapong might interject a rhythmic shout about “chasing girls into the hay,” instantly grounding the metaphor in the physical body and eliciting laughter from the locals.

From a theoretical perspective, the luk khu represents the community's refusal to be fully disciplined. If the “sanitized” version of heritage requires silence, order, and politeness, the luk khu introduces “noise” in the Attalian sense—a disruption that signals life. The sheer volume, the clapping, the drumming, and the shouting of the luk khu create a sonic wall that protects the “folk” spirit from being completely erased by the state's demand for order. The rammanna drum, therefore, beats not just for rhythm, but for resilience, insisting on the presence of the unruly, joyful body in the public sphere.

Ultimately, the interaction between the lead vocalist and the luk khu mirrors the negotiation between the text and the context. The text (often monitored by the state) may be compliant, but the context (controlled by the luk khu) remains rebellious. By maintaining this role, elders like Mr. Surapong ensure that even within a state-sponsored event, there are pockets of uncontrolled meaning—moments where the “dirty” and the “sacred” coexist, preserving the complex humanity of the Ta Pho community against the flattening effects of cultural bureaucratization.

1.4 Case Study: The Metamorphosis of Pleng Chak Ka Yer. To illustrate these dynamics concretely, we examine the transformation of Pleng Chak Ka Yer (The Tug-of-War Song). Traditionally, this song is a courtship game performed during the Songkran festival. It is structurally designed to be confrontational and flirtatious. The male and female groups stand on opposite sides, holding a rope, and sing improvised verses to tease and challenge each other.

1.5 The Traditional Context (The Silenced). In its authentic form, observed during a post-festival gathering in 2025, the lyrics were physically embodied. The men sang, “If I pull you over, you become my wife,” to which the women retorted with sharp, witty insults about the men's strength or financial status. The rhythm was erratic, driven by the physical pulling of the rope. The laughter, the stumbling bodies, and the sexual tension were integral to the music. The “sound” was messy, full of overlapping shouts and heavy breathing—a sonic chaos that signaled community bonding.

1.6 The State Context (The Sanitized). In contrast, the version performed at the “Uthai Thani World Heritage City” opening ceremony completely altered this sonic architecture. The rope was removed or used merely as a static prop. The male and female singers stood in fixed positions. The confrontational lyrics were replaced with verses praising the unity of the province: “If we pull together, Uthai Thani moves forward.” The chaotic heterophony was replaced by a pre-recorded backing track to ensure the singers stayed on pitch. The “tug-of-war”—originally a game of sexual tension—was rewritten as a metaphor for civic cooperation. This case study exemplifies how the state preserves the shell of the form (the name and the melody) while extracting its kernel (the playful conflict and jouissance).

2. The Sanitized vs. The Silenced: A Comparative Analysis

Our fieldwork reveals that state intervention has not merely “preserved” this music but has actively filtered it. We identified a stark dichotomy between songs performed for public/state events and those sung within the community's inner circle. Table 1 illustrates this divergence based on observed performances and collected lyrics.

Table 1 Comparison Between State-Sanctioned and Community-Preserved Lyrics

Feature	Type A: State-Sanctioned (Sanitized Version)	Type B: Community-Preserved (Silenced Version)
Context	Provincial festivals, opening ceremonies, “Cultural Street” events.	Private gatherings, post-performance parties, agricultural rest breaks.
Primary Theme	Development, Gratitude, Royal Praise, Provincial Motto.	Sexual Innuendo (Song-ngae Song-ngam), Gender Teasing, Daily Struggles.
Lyrical Example (Thai)	“เมืองอุทัยธานี เมืองพระชนกจักรี... สายน้ำสะแกกรังหล่อเลี้ยงชีวิต ประเพณีค้ำชูคุณธรรม...”	“น้องจำพี่ขอลามา... นาของน้องน้ำมันแห้ง พี่จะเอาแรงไปไถให้... ไถให้ลึกให้ดินมันร่วน...”
Translation	“Uthai Thani, city of the Chakri father... The Sakae Krang river nourishes life. We uphold traditions of gratitude and morality...”	“Oh sister, let me till your rice field... Your field is dry, let me use my strength to plow it... I'll plow deep until the soil is soft...”
Analysis	Keywords like “Gratitude” and “Dynasty” align with the state's narrative. Improvisation is minimized to ensure “correctness.”	The “Plowing” metaphor is a classic double entendre referring to sexual intercourse. This wit is the heart of folk humor but is erased in public to maintain “politeness.”

The data presented in Table 1 highlights a deliberate “sanitization of sound” occurring within the public sphere. Type A lyrics are not merely polite adaptations; they function as ideological vehicles that reinforce the state's narrative of Uthai Thani as a “moral city.” By emphasizing keywords such as gratitude (กตัญญู) and loyalty to the institution, these state-sanctioned performances strip the genre of its inherent unpredictability. The improvisation that once defined the folk spirit is replaced by a rigid adherence to “correctness,” transforming a fluid, communal practice into a static ceremony of state allegiance.

Conversely, Type B represents the “repressed unconscious” of the secondary city. The “plowing” metaphor serves as a prime example of song-ngae song-ngam (double entendre), where the physical realities of agricultural labor and sexual intimacy are linguistically intertwined. This lyrical ambiguity is the hallmark of Ta Pho's aesthetic vitality (jouissance). Its erasure from public discourse suggests that the state perceives this raw, embodied humor as a threat to the orderly image of “Thainess” required for cultural tourism. Thus, the “silence” in the public sphere is not an absence of sound, but an active suppression of the community's lived reality.

Ultimately, this dichotomy illustrates that cultural preservation in secondary cities operates through a mechanism of selective filtering. The musicians of Ta Pho must navigate this divide by engaging in what might be termed “performative compliance”—delivering the sanitized version to secure state patronage and awards, while safeguarding the authentic, sexually charged repertoire within the “hidden transcript” of their private gatherings. This bifurcation ensures the economic survival of the artists but results in a fractured cultural identity, where the “official” version of heritage is severed from its human roots.

The negotiation between the local community and state expectations is vividly encapsulated in Figure 4, an artifact displayed at the Ta Pho community center: a buffalo skull painted in bright yellow, inscribed with “Ta Pho Folk Music, Uthai Thani.” This object functions as a complex symbol of cultural adaptation. Culturally, the buffalo skull serves as a grounded reminder of the community's agrarian origins and is often associated with the phleng phuea chiwit (songs for life) genre, reflecting the hardworking spirit of the peasantry. By adopting this symbol, the musicians affirm their connection to the land and the unpolished reality of rural life.

However, the raw bone is not left in its natural state; it is coated in yellow. In the context of Thai bureaucracy and official culture, this color signifies formality, prosperity, and adherence to established social norms. The act of painting the skull represents a process of “cultural refining.” The musicians are essentially taking a symbol of the “raw” countryside and dressing it in the “polite” color of the official sphere. This allows the object to inhabit a public space not as a relic of death or primitive labor, but as a piece of decorated “Heritage.”

This visual synthesis mirrors the musical strategy employed by the community. Just as the skull (the local content) is preserved by being painted yellow (the official form), the folk music survives by adopting the polite vocabulary required by the Ministry of Culture. The artists do not abandon their roots; instead, they carefully package them in a way that is acceptable to the bureaucratic gaze. The “yellow buffalo” thus becomes a metaphor for diplomacy: it demonstrates the community's willingness to align with state standards of “Thainess” while stubbornly holding onto the core structures of their identity.

Ultimately, this artifact challenges the binary of “preservation” versus “modernization.” It shows that for Ta Pho musicians, survival does not mean choosing one over the other, but rather merging them. By displaying this hybrid object, they assert that their “folk” identity can coexist with “official” expectations. Figure 4 stands as a testament to their resilience—proof that they can navigate the requirements of the modern nation-state without erasing the skeletal structure of their local history.



Figure 4 A Yellow-Painted Buffalo Skull Inscribed With “Ta Pho Folk Music,” Symbolizing the Negotiation Between Local Agrarian Roots and the Official Aesthetic of “Thai Cultural Heritage.”

(Source: Boonrod, Intarakaew, & Samnieng, 2025d)

3. Interview Extract: Living Tradition and Strategic Compliance

To bridge the gap between structural analysis and individual agency, we turn to the lived experience of the practitioners themselves. The dichotomy presented in Table 1 is not merely a passive result of state imposition, but often an active, calculated choice by the musicians. Ms. Somjit Tipsiri, a respected folk music educator and custodian of the tradition, provides a revealing account of how she navigates the precarious space between preserving local heritage and satisfying bureaucratic expectations:

Previously, Ta Pho folk music... existed since before auntie's generation. Currently... we can continually create new lyrics responsive to various circumstances... We have composed songs thanking organizations, submitted entries to various state agency competitions... Yet what auntie takes greatest pride in involves composing folk music performance pieces incorporating content from royal gift books... illustrating how original Ta Pho folk songs like 'Chak Yao,' 'Lom,' and 'Bucha Nak' have adapted to contemporary circumstances through new lyrical composition. This represents another soft power of our Ta Pho community. . .

(S. Tipsiri, personal communication, September 27, 2025)

This extract reveals a sophisticated deployment of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1988). Ms. Somjit does not merely capitulate to state authority; she actively appropriates its vocabulary—specifically the contemporary phrase “soft power” and the reverence for royal institutions—to validate her local art form. By embedding state-sanctioned narratives (e.g., royal recipes) within traditional musical structures (Chak Yao, Lom), she successfully converts her local cultural capital into economic survival (via awards and funding). Here, “adaptation” is a survival tactic: the musicians publicly perform the role of the “good Thai subject” to secure the resources necessary to keep the tradition alive, even if it means temporarily silencing its more raucous elements.

4. The Politics of the Grotesque Body: Gender and Refusal

Beyond the textual analysis of lyrics, the bifurcation of Ta Pho folk music must be understood as a conflict between two opposing conceptions of the human body. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1984) distinction between the "classical body" and the "grotesque body," we can see that the state-sanctioned sanitized heritage operates within the aesthetic of the classical body: it is closed, disciplined, monumental, and elevated above biological necessities. In official performances, musicians stand still, their movements are choreographed to be graceful (*riap-roi*), and the content is strictly cerebral (gratitude, history, morality).

In sharp contrast, the silenced voices performed in private circles celebrate the grotesque body: a body that is open, protruding, secreting, and engaging in the acts of eating, drinking, and copulating. The song-ngae song-ngam (double entendre) repertoire is replete with agricultural metaphors that map the laboring body onto the sexual body—plowing fields, threshing rice, and planting seeds are all linguistic vehicles for discussing human reproduction and desire.

Crucially, this creates a specific space for female agency. In the "sanitized" public sphere, female performers are expected to be passive vessels of culture—smiling, beautifully dressed, and singing songs of praise (Butler, 1990). However, in the "silenced" private sphere, elder women like Ms. Somjit often take the lead in initiating the most raucous and sexually explicit verses. This vocal dominance disrupts the patriarchal norms of the secondary city, where women are traditionally relegated to domestic or supportive roles. By singing about their own desires and mocking the sexual prowess of men through witty repartee, these women reclaim their bodies from the state's attempt to turn them into docile mannequins of "Thainess." The erasure of these songs from public festivals is, therefore, not just a cleansing of "rudeness," but a patriarchal suppression of female vitality and the unruly, grotesque reality of the agrarian life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The dichotomy between the "sanitized" heritage performed on state stages and the "silenced" voices persisting in private gatherings reveals that Ta Pho folk music is more than an artistic tradition; it is a contested political terrain. Our findings illustrate how the secondary city functions as a specific site of negotiation where the hegemony of the center collides with the agency of the periphery. This section interprets these dynamics through three critical lenses: first, by examining the state's use of cultural preservation as a disciplinary mechanism; second, by analyzing the local community's strategic resilience against this control; and third, by listening to the broader soundscape that exposes the economic inequalities masked by festive performances.

1. Sanitization as Control in the Secondary City

The erasure of song-ngae song-ngam (สองแฉ่งสองง่าม) (risqué songs) from the public sphere confirms Foucault's (1978) assertion that power operates through the regulation of discourse. By silencing the sexually charged and physically earthy aspects of folk music, the state effectively "tames" the local body. In the specific context of a secondary city like Uthai Thani, this control is magnified. Unlike the metropolis, which may have autonomous cultural markets, the secondary city relies heavily on central bureaucracy for legitimacy and funding. Thus, it becomes a space where culture is permitted only insofar as it mirrors the moral values of the center. The "noise" of humanity—lust, humor, complaint (*jouissance*)—is filtered out, leaving a clean, marketable product for tourism.

2. The Resilience of the Periphery: Strategic Essentialism

However, the persistence of these songs in private spaces suggests that total domination is impossible. The "silence" in the public sphere is not an emptiness, but a container for the "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1990) of the community.

This resilience is enabled by the sonic architecture of the genre itself (as discussed in Section 4.1); the flexibility of the strophic form allows musicians to instantly switch between “safe” lyrics for officials and “authentic” lyrics for locals. This aligns with Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism”—the musicians of Ta Pho have learned to speak two languages: the bureaucratic language of “conservation” to gain resources (claiming “soft power”), and the vernacular language of “life” to maintain their identity.

3. Soundscapes of Inequality: The Simulacrum of Festivity

Listening to the broader soundscape of Uthai Thani reveals the economic reality that folk music attempts to mask. As recorded in our soundscape analysis, the everyday environment is dominated by the sounds of labor (factory machinery), commercialism (standardized pop music), and the profound silence of empty homes due to labor migration.

This acoustic reality contrasts sharply with the “festive” soundscape presented in state rituals. The folk music heard in official venues thus functions as a “simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1981)—a copy without an original—constructed to mask the quiet desperation of the secondary city economy. The amplified sound of the “sanitized” performance serves to distract from the silence of economic stagnation, creating an illusion of vibrancy in a city struggling to define its future.

4. The Political Economy of Silence

Ultimately, the management of the Ta Pho soundscape must be understood within the broader political economy of the secondary city. As Attali (1985) argued, music is a prophecy of social reality. The “silencing” of the risqué folk repertoire is homologous to the economic marginalization of the local farmer. Just as the messy, earthy reality of agricultural labor is hidden behind the clean facade of “agro-tourism,” the messy, earthy reality of folk music is hidden behind the facade of “heritage preservation.”

The state invests in the “sanitized” version because it produces a commodity that is easily consumable by tourists from Bangkok—a version of rural life that is cute, nostalgic, and unthreatening. A song about sexual frustration or the hardships of debt (common themes in the silenced repertoire) disrupts this commodity form. It reminds the consumer of the uncomfortable realities of rural poverty. Therefore, the “sanitization” is not just a moral project, but an economic imperative. The musicians, in their strategic compliance, are navigating a marketplace where their “authenticity” is devalued, and their “performance of compliance” is the only thing that pays. This reveals the stark limitation of the “creative city” policy: it encourages creativity only insofar as it serves the fantasy of the metropolis, silencing the very creative impulses that gave birth to the tradition in the first place.

5. Sonic Hauntology: The Specters of the Secondary City

If the “sanitized” music is the only version audible in the public square, what happens to the “silenced” repertoire? It does not simply vanish; rather, it exists in a state of “hauntology” (Derrida, 1994). The official festivals of Uthai Thani are haunted by the “ghosts” of the songs that are not played.

When local musicians perform the polite, state-approved lyrics on stage, there is often a palpable tension—a “spectral presence” of the real lyrics that everyone in the community knows but agrees not to sing. This creates a temporal disjuncture. The state festival projects a “time out of joint”—a simulacrum of a past that never existed (a pure, moral ancient city). Meanwhile, the “silenced” songs, sung in the shadows, carry the weight of the actual past—the memories of hardship, famine, and chaotic joy that the city tries to forget in its rush towards modernization.

Fisher (2014) argued that the “slow cancellation of the future” in neoliberal culture leads to a fixation on retro-aesthetics. In Uthai Thani, this manifests in the “retro market” (talad kao) phenomena, where folk music is reduced to

“sonic wallpaper” for nostalgia tourism. However, the *jouissance* of the silenced repertoire refuses to be commodified into mere nostalgia. It remains a “stubborn ghost” that interrupts the smooth surface of the city’s branding. Every time a musician slips a micro-tonal “tease” or a non-standard improvisation into a formal performance (as discussed in Section 4.1.2), they are allowing the ghost to speak, reminding the audience that the “secondary city” is not just a tourist destination, but a place of complex, unresolved histories.

Our fieldwork reveals two distinct transmission systems. The “sanitized” repertoire is transmitted through formal workshops organized by the Provincial Cultural Office. Here, learning is vertical and text-based: lyrics are printed on paper, melodies are standardized to match a fixed pitch (often Western tuned), and the goal is “preservation of correctness.” This pedagogy produces disciplined subjects who view music as a duty.

Conversely, the “silenced” repertoire is transmitted through oral osmosis in informal settings—often involving alcohol and communal meals. Here, learning is horizontal and embodied. Younger musicians learn not by reading texts, but by “stealing knowledge” (*khru phak lak cham*)—watching the elders’ improvisational cues, breathing patterns, and witty retorts in the heat of the moment. This “pedagogy of the circle” teaches more than music; it teaches social resilience. It trains the younger generation how to read the room, how to use humor to diffuse power, and how to maintain a dual identity (compliant on the outside, rebellious on the inside). Thus, the survival of the “silenced” songs is critical not just for the music itself, but for the survival of the community’s capacity for strategic negotiation.

This study demonstrates that cultural preservation in secondary cities is neither innocent heritage protection nor neutral documentation. Rather, it is a contested terrain where the centralized hegemony of the state collides with the resilient agency of the local community. Through the lens of Ta Pho folk music, we have revealed that the “secondary city” is not merely a geographic location defined by lack or subordination to the capital, but a specific acoustic arena where identity is constantly negotiated.

Our findings challenge the prevailing narrative of “loss” and “revival.” The disappearance of *song-ngae song-ngam* (risqué songs) from the public sphere is not a natural decay, but a deliberate “sanitization of sound” engineered to construct a palatable image of “Thainess” for the tourist gaze. Yet, the persistence of these silenced voices in the private sphere—and the musicians’ strategic adaptation of their public repertoire—proves that local communities are not passive victims. They are skilled navigators who maintain a “hidden transcript” of their history, ensuring that the vital, human spirit of their tradition survives beneath the veneer of official heritage.

Research Recommendations

To transform these insights into impact, we propose a paradigm shift in cultural policy:

1. From “Freezing Forms” to “Supporting Living Ecosystems.” Current policy often fetishizes the “preservation of form” (rigid lyrics, costumes, steps), which risks turning folk music into a museum artifact. We argue for a policy that supports “living cultural processes.” Funding should encourage new compositions that reflect contemporary realities—including the complexities, paradoxes, and humor of modern life in a secondary city—rather than forcing artists to perform a romanticized past that no longer exists.

2. From “Moral Sanitization” to “Emotional Authenticity.” State agencies must recognize that the value of folk music lies in its “emotional authenticity” (*jouissance*), which inherently includes the bawdy, the satirical, and the politically incorrect. These elements are not flaws to be hidden but are the heartbeat of the genre. Cultural funding and awards must be decoupled from the requirement of “politeness” (*khwaam riap-roi*). Sanitizing these elements creates a “zombie heritage”—bodies that move, but without a soul.

3. From “Centralized Control” to “Participatory Governance.” The power to define “what is worthy of performance” must be shifted from bureaucratic committees in the capital to local practitioners and community elders. Participatory governance models should be implemented, allowing the community to curate their own festivals and decide which narratives represent them, ensuring that the “secondary city” speaks with its own voice, not an echo of the center.

For ethnomusicology and critical heritage studies, this research calls for a “methodology of critical listening.” It is no longer sufficient to document only the music that is played; we must attend to the “politics of silence.” We must ask: What is not being heard? Who is not on the stage? By listening to the silences within a secondary city, we do not just hear the absence of sound; we hear the loud, persistent resilience of people negotiating their place in the modern nation-state.

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- Boonrod, V., Intarakaew, C., & Samnieng, C. (2025a). Figure 1 *Map Showing the Location of Uthai Thani Province in Relation to Bangkok and Major Urban Centers in Thailand (Adapted from Google Maps)*.
- Boonrod, V., Intarakaew, C., & Samnieng, C. (2025b). Figure 2 *Ms. Somjit Tipsiri (Kru Lin Chee) Demonstrates Ta Pho Folk Music Performance in Nong Kha Yang Sub-District, Uthai Thani*.
- Boonrod, V., Intarakaew, C., & Samnieng, C. (2025c). Figure 3 *Providing Rhythmic Support With the Rammana Drum and Interjecting Improvised Verses*.
- Boonrod, V., Intarakaew, C., & Samnieng, C. (2025d). Figure 4 *A Yellow-Painted Buffalo Skull Inscribed With “Ta Pho Folk Music,” Symbolizing the Negotiation Between Local Agrarian Roots and the Official Aesthetic of “Thai Cultural Heritage.”*
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