

**Making Sense of Modernity:
Mawlum Cing and Everyday Life
Experience in Northeast Thai Villages¹**

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Abstract

Mawlum Cing, a modernized *Mawlum* (folk singing and performing troupe), has occupied an interesting place in the contemporary landscape of popular culture in Northeast Thailand. While it has been popular among young and adult audiences, many people with powerful voices, especially local academics, government officials, and senior *Mawlum* singers, have severely criticized it from musical, art, and cultural preservationist standpoints. On several occasions, they even accused that *Mawlum Cing* is a vulgar, sexually and violently oriented type of *Mawlum*, which should never be labeled as a traditional performing art in their highly privileged Isan culture.

In this paper, I examine the popularity of *Mawlum Cing* and try to make some reflexive comments on its discursive place in the local landscape of popular culture. I will also discuss issues of everyday modernity by using the popularity of *Mawlum Cing* in Northeast Thai villages as a focal point. How did I read this *Mawlum Cing* troupe in action and relate it to everyday experience of modernity of people in this region? How did I, as an Isan native ethnographer, reflect this direct experience from the field?

It is my argument that the emergence and popularity of *Mawlum Cing* in this region since mid 1980s have reflected Isan villagers' ways of making sense of modernity in their daily life. The *Mawlum Cing* has been continuously invented and reinvented by including "elements of modernity" into its contents and forms. Favoring fast and upbeat musical melodies, the mixture of Western electrical and local instruments, series of pop-rock hits, and up-to-date clothing and dressing fashions, *Mawlum Cing* opens door of possibility to understand one of the most intriguing aspects of modernity, namely, its tempo, from perspectives of Isan villagers.

Keywords: *Mawlum Cing*, modernity, tempo, everyday life, experience, contemporary Northeast Thailand

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