

**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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Introduction

On a dry summer night in late May 2000, my colleague [Achan Suriya Smutkupt] and I went to attend a *Mawlum Cing* concert at the make-shift stage in front of the district hall of Amphur Prathai, Nakhon Ratchasima province. The center of this festive night was the Ratri Sriwilai's *Mawlum Cing* troupe from Khon Kaen province. This troupe has been highly acclaimed for over a decade, as one of first-rated *Mawlum Cing* troupes in Northeast Thailand, for its articulate, fashionable, and stylistic outlooks and performances. Ratri Sriwilai, 48, the famous female *Mawlum* veteran, who is the leader and owner of this troupe, was the self-claimed inventor of the *Mawlum Cing* in this region. We were delighted to add the performance of this popular troupe to our current research project on the *Mawlum Cing*.

What was the most stunning point for us in this Ratri Sriwilai's *Mawlum Cing* concert was the fact that sponsor, theme, and highlight of this festive, public event dealt totally with the Suzuki, one of the most popular Japanese brand motorcycles in Thailand. Obviously, it was the Suzuki Concert, performed by a *Mawlam Cing* troupe, and well attended by largely young to adult male audiences, who were either clients or prime targets of this Japan-based, transnational vehicle maker. The local Suzuki dealer, the Lim Jeab Hong Group, organized this *Mawlum Cing* concert event as an annual sale promotion campaign in Amphur Prathai and its vicinities.

Sitting on both edges of the large make-shift concert stage were Suzuki's two latest-models of what they called the "family motorcycle," Suzuki Best and Suzuki Raider. They were put on display before hundreds of local concert-goers, exhibiting their powerful engines, attractive designs, and colors. "Suzuki... You are always confident in this brand" [ซุซูกิ... ซึ่มีที่ถนมนั่นใจ], read the large banner, which was hung on top of the stage. Posters of Suzuki's promotion campaigner, Jannistar Liewchalermwong [a.k.a *Nong Bam*], Thailand's top TV presenter who recently turned to politics under the Chart Thai party, were placed on several displaying areas on the *Mawlum Cing* stage.

The majority of audiences were gathered and seated on their portable reed mattresses on the ground. Among them, there were groups of young and adult audiences of either sex, who had engaged in drinking activities. Scores of them were apparently under alcohol influence. Rice whisky, beer, soda pop, tobacco, and snacks were easily available from mobile stores in this concert event. As I roughly counted, there were more than fifty motorcycles, parking around the contemporary concert pitch with their owners sitting on the seats. Most of motorcycles appearing in the event like this belonged to the Suzuki brand. Local folks seemed to be ready for the show.

When my colleague and I arrived to this *Mawlum Cing* concert around 08.00 p.m., we were just on time for the *Mawlum Cing* performers to begin their show. As I will not present an account of contents and details of the performance in this section, this *Mawlum Cing* concert would provide rich materials for myself, as a local ethnographer, to read this popular performing art in different ways. I was stunned not only by how far has the *Mawlum* been adapted and reinvented, but also how it was hired as a medium for multiple commercial as well as cultural and political uses in contemporary Northeast Thailand (see Miller 1985:54-57).

I have been familiar with the *Mawlum* performances as a marketing mouthpiece to promote various kinds of commodities since my childhood in a rural village in Nong Khai province. Famous *Mawlum* singers and troupes were also hired by some government agencies, local politicians, or commercial firms as message carriers to reach larger portions of Lao-speaking audiences from time to time. This is quite common experience for the Lao-speaking natives in this region. I, however, have never experienced as an astonishing combination as this present Suzuki concert in Amphur Prathai. *Mawlum Cing*, a relatively new and controversial version of *Mawlum*, which is widely known for its unconventional musical genres and styles, performed on stage in pop-rock concert style for young to adult male audiences, who primarily constitute the major group of clients of the Suzuki motorcycle maker.

I would describe this combination as uncanny, because I felt I saw a fast-beat *Mawlum* troupe was in action in order to promote powerful motor-racing bikes. Hired by a local motorcycle, machinery, and electric appliance firm, this troupe [and the local Suzuki dealer] had fun-loving as well as speed-crazy young adult males as their prime audiences. After all, the term “*Cing*” [ชิง] is the Thai slang of “racing” in English. This type of popular *Mawlum* troupes indicates fast-beat, fashionable, and pop-hit musical and performing styles.

In this paper, I will discuss issues of everyday modernity by using the popularity of *Mawlum Cing* in Northeast Thai villages as a focal point. How did I, as an Isan native ethnographer, reflect to this direct experience from the field? How did I read this *Mawlum Cing* troupe in action and relate it to everyday experience of modernity of people in this region? 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* have continuously invented and reinvented itself 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 hit genres, and up-to-date clothing and dressing fashions, the *Mawlum Cing* opens a new possibility to understand the tempo of modernity from the perspective of Isan villagers. I believe *Mawlum Cing* renders itself as a prime example to understand dynamic pace of modernity in this region as well as Isan villagers’ appropriation of it in their daily life episodes. This should be a significant contribution in reading this popular performing art.

Understanding Modernity and Its Limitations

Modernity, as well as its ongoing transition to postmodernity, has emerged as one of central themes in sociology and anthropology literature at the turn of the 21st century. It has been existing as an influential concept in describing and marking sociocultural forms and people’s experiences resulting from the break away from premodern traditions. The term “modern” comes from *modo* in Latin, simply means “of today” or “the contemporary” (Cahoone 1996) or “something existing now, just now” (Williams 1976:208). In its broadest sense, modernity refers to a new form of civilization that developed in Europe and North America for several centuries before fully evident during the early twentieth century. Giddens (1991:14-15) maintains that

modernity exemplifies "...the institutions and modes of behavior established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact." Centuries after breaking away from the God and the Dark Age, people in Europe and North America developed new sciences through which to study nature, machine technology, and rational-based action, which, in turn, lead to a high standard of living. This kind of civilization then spread to Asia and other parts of the world in forms of mega-projects and forces like, colonization, industrialization, Westernization, modernization, or globalization.

Modernity refers to not only the spread of knowledge, ideologies, machines, technologies, innovations, and life styles, but also the emergence of new consciousness resulting from awareness of ever-changing temporality and place. Matsuda (1996) notes that modernity creates a new consciousness of time, which distinguishes the past, points in a linear to the present, and directs us toward the future. For critics of modernity, however, the modernization process deconstructs as well as constructs human civilization. It associated with European colonization and large-scale exploitation of the world's natural and cultural resources. It creates pollution and destroys cultural and biological diversity. Modernity, in its extremely negative sense, also gives birth to racism and ethnocentrism, which are elements of what some would characterize as the failure of modern human civilization (see Cahoon 1996).

Giddens (1990, 1991, 1996) is among those contemporary scholars who write intensively on the multiplicity and complexity of modernity. He argues that modernity by its very definition always stands in opposition to tradition, since it involves the spread of modern institutions via globalizing processes and creates the processes of international exchange (Giddens 1996:8). Taking modernity as industrialism, he further characterizes it in three dimensions: (1) the social relations implied in the widespread use of material power and machinery in the production process, (2) the rise of capitalism which emphasizes a system of commodity production involving both competitive product markets and the commodification of labour power, and (3) the formation of the nation-state, with very specific form of territoriality and surveillance capabilities, and the ability to monopolize effective control over the means of violence (Giddens 1991:14-15). These three major dimensions of modernity make the modern world order almost completely different from any traditional order in the premodern era. Altogether, they form the irresistibly powerful forces and institutions that transformed premodern society, in which people's lives were mostly fixed in the certainty of tradition, into the modern world where people face choices, uncertainties, and constant dynamism.

While Giddens discusses characteristics of modernity, Hall (1996:8) examines it in practical settings. He tries to identify what are defining features or characteristics of modern societies. According to him, modern societies should contain or experience these following phenomena.

- (1) The dominance of secular forms of political power and authority and conceptions of sovereignty and legitimacy, operating within defined territorial boundaries, which as characteristic of the large, complex structures of the modern nation-state, (2) A monetarized exchange economy, based on the large-scale production and consumption of

commodities for the market, extensive ownership of private property and the accumulation of capital on systematic, long-term basis..., (3) The decline of traditional social order, with its fixed social hierarchies and overlapping allegiances, and the appearance of a dynamic social sexual division of labor. In modern capitalist societies, this was characterized by new class formations, and distinctive patriarchal relations between men and women, and (4) The decline of the religious world-view typical of traditional societies and the rise of a secular and materialist culture, exhibiting those individualistic, rationalist, and instrumental impulses now so familiar to us.

In other words, Hall points to the domination of modern nation-state, the global market forces, the decline of traditional order, and the growing secularization. Indeed, many social theorists, including Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, in the 19th and early 20th century had championed the rise of modernization in their different ways. In late twentieth century, modernity was heavily put into critical gaze. Many modernization projects, including national education, identities, ideologies, and development, have not delivered a linear progress, nor a rationalized modern person or citizenry. Their promises seem to be far diversified, complex, and even chaotic, especially during the later half of the twentieth century. Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre (1994:15) describe radical turns of late modernity as the “crisis of authority” or “crisis of modernity.” Primordial attachments or premodern traditions cannot be simply replaced by the civil orders produced by modernization and nation-building projects. In this sense, modernity and modernization project rarely achieved their monumental status as sociocultural process that creates “human knowledge and rationality triumph over ignorance and adversity” (Kearney cited in Barfield 1997:326).

Considering modernity on the terrain of popular culture and everyday life, most obvious impacts of modernity can be expressed as what Giddens (1996:11) calls “the penetration of modern institutions into the tissues of day-to-day life.” In this penetration process, it is no doubt that the modern nation-state and capitalist market agencies represent the most pervasive social institutions and forces affecting people’s lives around the world.

Here, I would note that local people around the world are far from being passive actors, when they face the penetration of modernity. Indeed, modernization in traditional societies around the world creates awareness of difference and leads to the re-evaluation and re-invention of ethnic and cultural identities. The awareness of difference was particularly profound among the elite and political leaders who were in the position to contact with Westernized or advanced civilization. Active roles of local communities in their perception and reaction to modernity are particularly apparent in the fields of popular culture, e.g., music, arts, religion, fashion, and economy.

Among leading theorists of modernity, only a handful of them paid attention to the *speed or tempo of modernity*. Most of related studies tend to favor the investigation of meanings, contents, and forms of changes from traditional to modern societies. While many would argue for the linear evolutionary mode of transition in their perceptions of sociocultural transformations, little attention was paid to the speed of modernity. How, in what forms and tempo, does modernity invades, imposes, or

enters a particular cultural setting? How do local people and societies perceive, react, or make sense of modernity? What does modernity mean to them and societies? These questions require empirical evidence. As I will show in this following section, modernity and its multiple impacts in daily life will be further examined through a case of the *Mawlum Cing* and its profound popularity in Northeast Thai villages.

Mawlum Cing as a Modernized *Mawlum*

Mawlum Cing is one of modernized versions of *Mawlum* or folk singing and musical performing troupe derived from historical and cultural roots of Laotian ethnic groups in Northeast Thailand and Laos. *Mawlum*, literally refers to the master of singing (*maw* = master or expert; *lum* = singing), originated from Isan or Laotian folk traditions like lullaby, storytelling, palm-leaf script reading at local gatherings for religious ceremonies, healers' chanting during folk healing rituals, and courtship songs or verses (Charuwan Thammawat 1985, Sukanya Pathrachai 1989). Many scholars on the *Mawlum* tend to conclude that *Mawlum* singing's original forms were those traditions of storytelling and palm-script reading given by local literate persons or ritual experts before evolving into versed genres accompanying by reed mouth-organing or *kaen* playing (Phaiboon Phaeng-ngern 1991). Traditionally, *Mawlum* singers, both male and female, were highly respected for their wide scales of knowledge, ranging from local world to Buddhist traditions and beyond, as well as their valuable singing skill and expertise. To be a professional *Mawlum*, one must devoted his/herself to this profession, taking live-in courses and practices as a novice under the master's supervision for years before becoming a full professional *Mawlum* on their own.

The Laotian and Isan *Mawlum* had a long illustrious history, especially when this ethnic group was subsumed under the modern Thai nation-state since the early nineteenth century (Miller 1985:37-40). Prior to the second World War, *Mawlum* was primarily a local pastime or entertainment during the off-rice harvesting season. *Mawlum* singers were hired to perform in annual festivals or occasional gatherings with limited wages, while they earned their living mainly from rice farming.

The *Mawlum* singers and troupes have been commercialized since the 1960s. Famous male and female singers from Lao-speaking areas around the region were hired to perform in annual festivals and occasional ceremonies, especially during post-harvesting season (see Charuwan Thammawat 1985, 1997; Phaiboon Phaeng-ngern 1991). Their popularity was turned into intensified commercial values in last few decades. Some famous professional *Mawlum* singers became pop stars as they were successful marketing their series of recorded albums and concert tours. It should be noted that Thailand's Office of National Commission on Culture (ONCC) (Ministry of Education) has reconized *Mawlum* as a branch of folk performing arts in the country in the early 1990s. Many senior and successful *Mawlum* singers were awarded the national artist honor by the ONCC, including Thongmak Chantalue, Ken Dalao, and Chaweewan Damnern.

In Northeast Thailand, *Mawlum* in general can be classified into three main varieties: (1) *Mawlum Phi Fa* (genres sings during folk healing rituals), (2) *Mawlum Klou* (genres in which a solo singer accompanied by *Kaen* sings epic-length tales or

sings alternately or in competition, and (3) *Mawlum Mu* (theatrical genres involving troupes or companies) (see Miller 1985:35-37; Somphon Butrote 1989: 169-71). Each of these varieties of *Mawlum* can be further elaborated and classified into specific genres, styles, and performances, which will not be covered in this paper. From the fertile tradition and popularity of *Mawlum Klon* in mid 1980s, the *Mawlum Cing* has been developed and prospered up to the present.

Mawlum Cing is only one of recent phenomena appearing in Isan *Mawlum*'s community roughly since mid 1980s. Its origin can be traced back to *the Mawlum Klon* tradition. *Mawlum Klon* was modified and adapted with the introduction of Western musical instruments, especially drums and electric guitars, pop-rock genres and melodies, and a team of on-stage, young sensual female dancers, which is widely known in Thai as *Hang Krueng* [หางเครื่อง] literally, supporting or back up cast dancers. *Mawlum Cing* also shifted away from its roots when it is performed live. Its outlooks and images are somewhat close to those pop-rock concerts with a pair of male-female *Mawlum* singers situating at the center of the stage and running the entire show.

According to Ratri Sriwilai, *Mawlum Cing* was developed around mid 1980s. It was during the time when *Mawlum Klon* and other forms of folk entertainment in the region had been struggling and stumble under the intrusion of modern entertainment media like mobile movies theatres, mobile discotheques, TV soap dramas, famous *Lukthung* and string bands. These entertainment media brought night-life entertainment styles from cities to rural areas in Isan. They in turn drew local audiences away from traditional pastimers like *Mawlum*. Young to adult audiences, in particular, expressed clearly their favor of fashionable, fast-beat music and messages of modern living styles. Traditional *Mawlum*, especially *Mawlum Klon*, seemed to be boring and out-of-date for them. A solo singing of well-versed genres by a pair of *Mawlum* singers in accompanying of *Kaen* was outdone by *Pleng String* [เพลงสตริง] or Western-style pop-rock musical genres.

From there, groups professional *Malum Klon* singers, like Ratri Sriwilai and her colleagues, had begun to re-invent their craft in order to counter those powerful popular entertainment media from cities. They came to realize that traditional *Mawlum* needed to be modernized, if they wanted to lure local fans back to where they once were. Key modifications, which arguably revolutionized *Malum Klon* and other varieties of *Mawlum*, were made and this folk performing art was turned into a modern popular form of *Mawlum* ever since.

First, the introduction of Western musical instruments like drum, bass guitar, and keyboard, makes the best out of traditional *Mawlum* instruments like *Kaen*. Never before did these Western instruments were useful intensively in *Mawlum* performances in the past. *Mawlum* musicians learned this application from the *Lukthung* and other pop-rock bands, which were popular in urban areas of this region, especially after the end of the Vietnam War in late 1970s.

Second, the introduction of varieties of pop hits genres into *Mawlum* performance bring this traditional performance more lively and attractive to musical taste of young and adult *Mawlum* audiences. By and large, modern *Mawlum* singers have to be more versatile. They have to learn how to sing any pop hits or fans-favorite

genres and adapt them into the *Mawlum Cing* show. *Mawlum Cing* people simply call these pop-hit genres “*Pleng Talad*,” [เพลงตลาด] literally “songs of the market place, which are familiar to anybody’s ears.”

Third, the addition of young female, back up cast dancing team has proven one of the most exciting and fascinating aspects of *Mawlum Cing*. With young dancers in sexy, provocative outfits and dancing gestures on stage, audiences in every age and sex seem to be easily caught off guard.

Fourth, *Mawlum* singers catches us with flashy fashionable outfits and make-ups. Male and female singers nowadays are required more than quality voice and wit. Their professional success depends very much on their physical outlooks. They have to be youthful and good looking. Famous female singers usually have curvy shapes, long legs, and sexy appearances in complementary to their pleasant, powerful voices of traditional *Mawlum* performers. Fashionable, sexually provocative outfits plus their flashy but sensual dancing gestures also produce images of these *Mawlum* singers as be “*Cing*” persons. They are highly regarded by fans as persons who are able to afford to catch fashion trends as well as who have identified themselves with the modern “things”.

Fifth, contents and forms of *Mawlum* performance have become more fluid, flexible, and adjustable to demands of hosts and fans. Gone are fixed, epic-length storytelling modes with serious subjects like local history, Buddhist Dhamma, and famous folk tales. *Mawlum Cing* performed more and more like pop-rock concerts, which appeared regularly on national TV rather than its precedent folk opera.

Sixth, *Mawlum Cing* singers, both male and female, do not hesitate to use sexually-related or provocative terms or expressions during their performances. They would recite series after series of ultra dirty jokes or tales to excite their audiences. They would love to give comments concerning sex and sexuality, especially heterogeneous sexual intercourse, and direct them to their fun-loving fans. This tradition is inherited from *Mawlum Klom* and *Soi* sayings, which contain intensive sexual matters and are well-liked by average Isan audiences. They also use sexually-related comments to test their audiences’ entertainment’s tastes, since audiences have relatively different favors from place to place. If their test’s result is positive, indicated by loud applause and laughter, they would run their show from there.

Finally, *Mawlum Cing* as business units have been run by professional brokers or representatives, who maintain office in market-town centers, usually near local bus terminals. In 2000, hiring a *Mawlum Cing* troupe for an overnight performance (from 09.00 p.m.-05.00 a.m.) costs somewhere between 18,000-40,000 baht. The price depends on geographical distances between the host’s places and residences of *Mawlum Cing* troupes and on recognized fame, popularity, and experience of each singer. Business brokers will receive an approximately 10% out of each contract payment. Members of the troupes, especially male and female leading singers, live in their own places and operate their own business. They no longer live under the same roof and were trained by same masters as in the past, but they join hands simply because the hosts want their match up or the business agents propose them as a pair for the hosts to decide. The troupe is also handled separately by partners with certain departments

of specialization, like musical instruments, light and sound equipments, dancing teams, make-shift stage convoys, etc.

The Suzuki in Concert

More than seven months after I made my fieldwork on the Suzuki concert, performed by the Ratri Sriwilai's *Mawlum Cing* troupe in Amphur Prathai (May 23, 2000), I now try to rethink and reflect what I had experienced from that single show. Issues concerning the intangibles of modernity and its irresistible forces were quite apparent in this *Mawlum Cing* live concert. However, I felt that the invasion of modernity into a local setting is far from complete or one-sided domination. Local agencies are able to hold their little voices of resistance or to find ways to integrate mighty modern stuffs into their fluid, flexible bodies. I also tend to believe that modernity projects reach a given locality not in a systematic, integrated, unified form, rather in a quite fragmented fashion. I have found a support to this point from Hall (1996) when he reviews some current thoughts on modernity project. His writing is worthy of quoting at length as follows.

David Harvey (1989:12) speaks of modernity as not only entailing "a ruthless break with any or all preceding conditions," but as "characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself." Ernesto Laclau (1990) uses the concept of "dislocation." A dislocated structure is one whose center is displaced and not replaced by another, but by "a plurality of power centers." Modern societies...have no center, no single articulating or organizing principle, and do not develop according to the unfolding of a single "cause" or "law." Society is not, as sociologists often thought, a unified and well-bound whole, a totality, producing itself through evolutionary change within itself... It is constantly being "de-centered" or dislocated by forces outside itself. (cited in Hall 1996b:599-600).

I would think that I must have seen some fragmented, de-centered, dislocated forces of modernity from outside were put into play on stage with dynamic, adaptive power of a cultural capital in this Ratri Sriwilai's *Mawlum Cing*'s performance.

The Ratri Sriwilai *Mawlum Cing* troupe kicked off the Suzuki live concert at 08.00 p.m. It was an exact time set forth in the contract between the troupe's leader and the Suzuki Corporation (Thailand) and the local dealer in Amphur Prathai, who hired this troupe for a year-long promotion campaign in Northeast Thailand. As I learned from the manager of Lim Jeab Hong Group, the Suzuki dealer in this market town, Suzuki would pay the troupe 30,000 baht per each night show, beginning at 08.00 p.m. and ending around 24.00 a.m. The automobile company planned to organize promotion campaign like this one for a total of six times region-wide in 2000. The troupe, in the meantime, had to take care of its own maintenance costs, transportation, and other charges. Ratri Sriwilai and the Suzuki's campaign managers designed the show together. She even composed some *Mawlum* genres as the motorbike commercial, which would be showed throughout the campaign. The troupe's moderator, who ran the entire show, was provided important messages and information concerning the commodity in question, the Suzuki motorbike.

Ratri Sriwilai's is an extra-ordinary *Mawlum Cing* troupe. It is not merely featured by a pair of male-female leading singers and a four-member dancing team like most *Mawlum Cing* troupes. Rather, it normally shows three pairs of singers plus separate teams of all-male and all-female dancers in a series of fancy outfits. Each dancing team has featured ten members. When they matched up male-female dancers in pairs for the show on some occasions, it would have twenty dancers on stage at the same time. This would make the show very lively and crowded. There should be no doubt, anyway, since Ratri Sriwilai has run her own *Mawlum* school in Khon Kaen for years, where young boys and girls are taught and guided from the basics toward an advancement in this profession.

Regular *Mawlum Cing* shows are divided into five continuous rounds, namely, *Wai Khru* or paying homage to teachers, greeting fans and acknowledging the host or sponsor, staging series of *Pleng* or *Klong Talad* shows, singing *Mawlum Klon* or whatever requested, and singing farewell genres. However, the Suzuki concert was apparently a different show. The first hour was devoted to a long series of *Pleng Lukthung* and *Pleng String* pop hits, in which male and female singers and dancers performed alternately on stage. The second hour belonged to the Lim Jeab Hong's manager to run their thank-you-customer session. They drew lotteries of their customers and awarded them with Suzuki motorbike spare parts, electric goods, T-shirts, and other consuming goods. Lucky fans were announced and came on stage to receive their awards. Following the lottery session was the turn for a brief comedy show. Only the less than two hours were allocated to the troupe to perform *Mawlum Cing*. Three pairs of male-female singers shared the rest of show time, which excited most adult male audiences and lured them to dance along on the ground.

While *Mawlum* singers and dancers performed on stage, audiences enjoyed their pastime. Many people were obviously drunk. Beer, rice whisky, soft drink, and tobacco were heavily consumed among audiences. Many young male audiences used alcohol to stimulate their festive mood and courage. It is common experience among them that having fun in a *Mawlum Cing* concert is possible without alcohol. They simply do not know how to dance in public, if they do not drink. With *Mawlum* singers' provocative genres, gestures, and sexually-oriented comments as well as pop-rock like music, both young male and female audiences were hardly irresistible to dance along and join in.

This concert's theme was centered in the song, entitled "*Toey Suzuki*" [เต๋ยซุซุกกิ], literally, a genre promoting Suzuki motorbike, which Ratri Sriwilai composed for this promotion campaign. The text of this song is tentatively translated as follows.³

*A motorbike, a motorbike [repeat]
 Wherever you go, take a motorcycle ride, older brothers
 Best and Raider are finest models
 Suzuki is the most famous motorbike brand
 A speedy ride with durable engines.*

³Special thanks go to Achan Suriya Smutkupt, Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, who help me edit this text's translation.

*Wanna own a motorbike [repeat]
 Suzuki motorbike is your best choice, fathers
 Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
 Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
 Never mind, even if they have only two wheels.*

*The blast sounds paen paen paen paen [repeat]
 Laen-taen, laen-taen, this is a heart soothing blast
 Do you own one, dear?
 Come and buy a Suzuki motorbike
 This brand of motorbike has a special place in everyone's heart.
 [repeat]*

*Please buy a Suzuki, brothers and sisters [repeat]
 Please come in to buy and ride it off
 Riding a Suzuki motorbike, give you a pride [repeat]
 Especially with the new Raider model [repeat]
 Holy, holy Raider, Raider, and Raider
 Get your money worth using Suzuki
 No loss, but a pure net gain
 Suzuki always pay you back a handsome profit*

*[Speak] Suzuki, the quality name, you are confident.
 Want a motorbike, don't forget the Suzuki
 Worth every minute,
 Buy a Suzuki, you are always gain.*

Conclusion:

Uncanny Combination and Tempo of Modernity

How did I feel during my observation and participation in this concert? First of all, I share similar mood with those young audiences who came out, danced, or gave some tip money to singers and dancers. As I witnessed a numbers of *Mawlum Cing* concerts in Isan villages, people were madly fun with it. Rhythms, melodies, and momentum of the entire show were particularly fast, non-stop, fluid, and flexible. I felt this is an up-tempo performance, which is so much different for most folk musical troupe. Movement and speed are very noticeable. I believe the *Mawlum Cing* is designed to encourage audiences to dance along, participate in, interact with singers and dancers, and have fun with this special festive moment. *Mawlum Cing* is the *Mawlum* for dancing. In this respect, *Mawlum Cing* is so distinctive from its precedent *Mawlum* genres, which primarily perform for people to listen to and watch. You can never gain valuable knowledge or Buddhist Dhamma from *Mawlum Cing*, but you may have gained a perspective of life, which focuses on a motto like "don't be serious, let's have fun now."

I thought the Suzuki concert and this *Mawlum Cing* performance is a good example of uncanny combination. By uncanny, I basically refer to weird, strange, and out-of-place, but somewhat, somewhere it makes sense. Let's take a brief look at the

concert again. A Japan-based motorbike firm via a local dealer hired a *local Mawlum Cing* troupe to help promote its latest models. They want to market its motor-sport good to young male adults in rural villages as well as in market towns. *Why Mawlum Cing?* Why not other entertainment media? The manager of local Suzuki dealer told me that they knew from their marketing research that young to adult people constitute the majority of their customers. These people love motor racing. They rely on their motorbikes for their daily transportation. They have earned enough incomes to afford motobikes, too. In Northeast Thai villages, *Mawlum Cing* is the first-rate entertainment for these target groups. Apparently they love speed. They have fun with motorbike riding, drinking, and enjoying fast beat music and dance. So Mawlum Cing is the Suzuki's strategically clever choice.

I have figured out three crucial ways for Isan villagers in their attempts to make sense of modernity as expressed in this pastime entertainment. For them, *Mawlum Cing* represents a complex embodiment of their popular pastime, which allows them to (1) appropriate musical genres and performances, (2) consume fashioned goods and images, and (3) "race" along with temporality and pace of modernity, which constitute the most powerful global forces in their daily life. Many modern sociocultural institutions may be successful to alter Isan villagers' life styles in a number of areas. However, when come to their favorite pastimer or popular entertainment medium, their voice seems to be heard clearly and loudly that no way they would abandon *Mawlum*, their ethno-cultural heritage, in favor of Western pop-rock music concerts. They have invented or revolutionized *Mawlum* traditions and are turning them into a modernized entertaining source of their choice.

Mawlum Cing, as exemplified in the case of the Suzuki concert, represents a mode of cultural appropriation as initiated by local villagers. It appropriates modern musical instruments and their pop-rock genres into traditional *Mawlum*'s. Imported and well-modified into the *Mawlum Cing* troupes were Western electrical instruments, especially drum, bass guitar, and keyboard. These instruments, playing along with traditional items like reed mouth-organ (*kaen*) and plucked lute (*pin*), have brought pop-rock musical genres and melodies into *Mawlum Cing* performance.

Mawlum Cing reflects tempo and pattern of commodity consumption as they heavily drink, listen to and dance along with Plend Talad, and of course, most of them are Suzuki's faithful customers. Along this pattern, I would argue also that *Mawlum Cing* help Isan villagers make sense of their place in the modern world. Through this lively performance and active participation from audiences, people seem to settle with question of who they are. What are their cultural and ethnic roots? I think in many ways an issue of being Khon Isan Samai Mai is closely identified with this *Mawlum Cing* text, goods consumption, and self-identification.

Appendix A

เต๋ยซูซูกิ

รถมอ รถมอเตอร์ไซค์ (ซำ)
จะขี่ไปไหนมาไหนมอเตอร์ไซค์นะพี่

รุ่นเบส เรคเคอร์อย่างดี
ชื่อเสียงเขาดีรถซูซูกิ
ขับขี่ว่องไวเครื่องขนต์ทนทาน

ต้องการอยากมีอยากได้ (ซำ)
รถมอเตอร์ไซค์ซูซูกิคือพ่อ
พี่น้องกันพ่อว้อพ่อว้อ
พี่น้องกันพ่อว้อพ่อว้อ
สองล้อเป็นหยั่ง

เสียงดังแป้น แป้น แป้น แป้น (ซำ)
เล่นแต่เล่นแต่แสนสุขใจจัง
คนคิมิแล้วหรือยัง
ชื่อซูซูกิไปนั่ง
รถเขามีความหมายสะใจทุกคน (ซำ)

อุดหนุนแทนแต่พี่น้อง (ซำ)
เชิญไปจับจองชื่อไปขับขี่
ซูซูกินั่งเพื่อเธอ (ซำ)
รุ่นใหม่กะมีเรคเคอร์ เรคเคอร์ (ซำ)
เรคเคอร์โฮ้ยเรคเคอร์ เรคเคอร์
คุ้มค่าเสียจริงใช้ซูซูกิ
บ่ขาดทุนมีแต่ได้กับได้

Toey Suzuki

A motorbike, a motorbike
Wherever you go, take a motorcycle ride, my older
brothers

Best and Raider are finest models
Suzuki is the most famous motorbike brand
A speedy ride with durable engines.

Wanna own a motorbike
Suzuki motorbike is your best choice, fathers
Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
Never mind, even if they have only two wheels.

The blast sounds paen paen paen paen
Laen-taen, laen-taen, this is a heart soothing blast
Do you own one, dear?
Come and buy a Suzuki motorbike
This brand of motorbike has a special place in
everyone's heart.

Please buy a Suzuki, brothers and sisters [repeat]
Please come in to buy and ride it off
Riding a Suzuki motorbike, give you a pride
Especially with the new Raider model [repeat]
Holy, holy Raider, Raider, and Raider
Get your money worth using Suzuki
No loss, but a net gain

ซุซูกิ কিনกำไร...ให้เฮาพร้อม	Suzuki always pay you back a handsome profit
(พูด) “ซุซูกิ ชื่อนี้ คุณมั่นใจ	Suzuki, the quality name, you are confident.
อยากได้มอเตอร์ไซค์ อย่าลืมซุซูกิเค้อ”	Want a motorbike, don't forget the Suzuki
“คุ้มค่าทุกนาที	Worth every minute,
ซื้อซุซูกิแล้ว คิมิได้กับได้...”	Buy a Suzuki, you are always gain.

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