

# Chinese Music in Chinese and Thai Culture

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## Introduction

Culture is described by the *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* as “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations”. There is no better example of a tool for man’s learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations than music.

This study investigates the role of Chinese music in shaping culture in China and Thailand. Immigration from China into what is now Thailand began in the Sukhothai period (1279-1438 A.D.) and continued slowly but gradually through trade activities until the end of the Second World War (1945) when it exploded and a mass immigration into the Bangkok area began. Today, direct descendants of these Chinese make up over 14 percent of Thailand’s population.

The music that these immigrants brought with them has had a much larger impact on Thai culture than what the proportionate 14% of the population would normally make and the fact that this musical culture is now changing in China will eventually have an impact on both cultures. This research has analyzed the history of the cultures, the changes that are taking place and the impact these changes will have on the two cultures.

## Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this research is to study the cultural influence of Chinese (chaozhou) music on recipient Southeast Asian cultures such as that of Thailand. Aspects to be studied include the Chinese Opera, traditional ceremonial use, music as entertainment, instrumental evolution, and cultural developments that arise from music.

The study also explores the role of Chinese music among the Thai and Chinese communities in Thailand as well as how it contributes to Chinese culture and society, especially in Chaozhou, Shantou and Guangzhou. Finally it compares how the teaching and learning of Chinese music and its history shape Chinese and Thai cultures.

An ethnological method is used in this study, especially in participant observations, interviews and analyses.

## Music in China

In ancient times, the Chinese thought music was one subject that man should study. It is recorded in the *Book of Rites*<sup>1</sup> that “Scholars don’t leave their musical instruments without a reason.” Music is an important part of the Chinese way of life, that of the literati and of the ordinary citizen.

Confucius (circa 551-479 BC), the great Chinese philosopher, was an important influence on the spirit of the Chinese people and made significant contributions to the civilization of the world. He taught the *Six Arts*—ritual, music, archery, chariot riding, calligraphy, and computation. He regarded ritual (morality) as the most important subject, but the second most important was music. He emphasized music and included music in his educational process (Liu 2004).

This research gives special attention to the Chaozhou and Shantou regions<sup>2</sup>. The combined regions of Chaozhou and Shantou make up the original homeland of the majority of the Chinese who migrated to Southeast Asia and particularly into Thailand. The combined regions are generally referred to as Chaozhou, the land of music (Chen 1998).

Chaozhou has a wealth of cultural heritage that fostered the Chaozhou dialect, Chaozhou opera, Kongfu tea drinking, Chaozhou folk music, and finally, the unique Chaozhou cuisine. The Chaozhou people developed the use of the Kongfu tea drinking custom as a social and cultural activity that includes the discussion of politics, family, and social topics including music. They also love to play and listen to Chaozhou music during and outside teatime.

The Chaozhou people consider the Chaozhou opera and music as symbolic of their homeland spirit (Lin and Wu, 2001). Wherever Chaozhou people settle they take their musical heritage with them. The Chaozhou people enjoy studying their traditional Chaozhou music. Chaozhou music is a genre of folk music of Guangdong province in the Chaozhou-Shantou region where the Chaozhou dialect is spoken. Following the journey of the Chaozhou people, the music has spread to southern Fujian province, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and Southeast Asia (Wang and Du, 2004).

## Chinese music in Thailand

Many Chinese migrated to Southeast Asia including what is now Thailand. In the thirteenth century A.D., Chinese traders began setting up societies in Thailand’s early trading towns at and near Sukhothai during the Sukhothai period (1279 - 1438 A.D.).

During the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) period (1782 A.D. -), especially in the King Rama I period (1782-1809 A.D.), many Chinese immigrants settled in Bangkok. The Chinese received permission from the King to relocate their community in the Yaowaraj area. It is there today and is still called the Chinatown of Thailand. The majority of the Chinese immigrants came to Thailand following the end of the Second World War (1945), since there were no restrictions on immigration at that time.

The Chinese immigrants brought their ceremonies and entertainment with them and introduced the music that supported these ceremonies into their new land and new culture. Some examples are Buddhist ritual music, Chinese New Year parades, opening ceremonies (for a new business, new school, new building), funeral rites, plays and operas.

After Sino-Thai diplomatic relations were established in 1975, both Thai and China initiated many art and cultural exchanges. Chinese music has become well known in Thailand through culture exchange and mass media performances. Consequently, Thailand was exposed to the arts and culture from many parts of China, not just the Chaozhou region.

Due to the globalization of world communications, young people in Thailand have seen the Twelve Girls Band on MTV. They have come to like Chinese traditional music rhythms and have adopted them in modern ways, through new instruments and playing methods. For example, some Thai groups are learning to play Thai Classical music standing up instead of sitting down which is the traditional way.<sup>3</sup>

### **Chinese musical activities in China and Thailand**

The activities that accompany Chinese music always include dance, drama, opera, ceremonial prayer or chant.

#### **The Lion Dance**

The Lion Dance combines art, history, and martial arts into an extraordinary performance. Normally, the performers would have some martial arts training as the dance requires suppleness, flexibility, fitness, strength and balance. Every type of movement has a specific musical rhythm and the music mimics the movements of the lion.

The drumbeat follows the lion and the cymbals and gong players follow the drum. The whole dance requires precision and all members of the team must play and dance in unison. The Lion Dance is an important tradition and folk art in China, usually performed along with the Dragon Dance on auspicious occasions.

The Lion Dance requires the skills of two performers. One, handling the lion's head, leads the dance and shows the lion's emotions. Another one plays the body and the tail. They hide themselves under an elaborate cloth cover attached to the head. The Lion Dance is accompanied by musicians playing a drum, a gong and cymbals, and is guided by a man usually holding a fan who entices the lion.

During the dance the lion tries to catch the money or green vegetable that is hung over the building's entrance. Sometimes, when the money is held very high, as offered from an upstairs

window, performers may stand on one another's shoulder to catch it. To take the green vegetable (or money) means "getting rich, good business", and the lion throws an apple to the owner of the store (the apple signifies peace). In Thailand, lion dancers are offered only money from high places and they are not seen grabbing green vegetables or throwing apples as done in China.

Chinese musical instruments in the Lion Dance include a big drum, a gong and cymbals. The music for the Lion Dance is easy and simple.

In China, dance groups are found all over the country. Local communities, schools, colleges or universities all organize Lion Dance groups.

The Dragon and Lion Dance group at South China Normal University, Guangzhou was observed and studied. This student group performs on various occasions and joins the annual Lion and Dragon Dance competition. During Chinese New Year, Lion Dance groups perform in the streets, markets and malls. A company sponsors some groups. For example the Budweiser Beer Company sponsored a Lion Dance for a Chinese restaurant in Guangzhou. In China, the Lion Dance and musician groups enter the mall and visit every establishment (restaurant, pub, bar, department store), whereas the Lion Dance in Thailand is performed only in front of the mall or department store.

The Lion Dance in Thailand is organized by the Chinese and Thai community societies. Most of the dancers and musicians are amateurs. For example in Bangkok's Chinatown, a teacher from the Guangzhou Society helped train the Traitmitr Middle School's Lion Dance. The group practised diligently to perform for the Chinese New Year festival in Bangkok Chinatown. I found that the lion dance style and the rhythm of Bangkok and Guangzhou music are the same especially the beginning of the dance. They do a boxer style exercise before they put the lion head on.

Lion dancers and musicians are local Thai students or workers. The Lion Dance also takes part in Thai cultural activities, such as the *Khao Phansa*<sup>4</sup> which marks the beginning of the Buddhist lent. Here, the lion dance is featured in the processions for the ceremonial candle (*Tian Phansa*) that is brought to the Songkran Festival temple.<sup>5</sup> It is also included in the procession that brings a bridegroom with the dowry to the bride's parents before the wedding ceremony takes place (*Khan Mak*)<sup>6</sup>.

The Thai Lion Dance ceremony usually brings with it the photo of a Chinese deity or a famous Thai monk shown in the front section of the big drum. Before they perform, dancers pay their respects by burning incense and offering liquor. This was not observed in China.

In China, Lion Dance competitions are held in many regions of the country. In Thailand, Lion Dance competitions are also organized, but commercial firms and enterprises usually host these competitions. The rules of the competition are set by the local Thais. Thailand's Lion Dance competitions not only have Lion Dances, but they also show people-on-people acts with up to five people on one another's shoulders without safety devices. This is frightening to watch, as the topmost person is usually a very small child.

## The Dragon Dance

The Dragon Dance is an important folk/traditional ceremonial performing art in China. It was originally performed to please the dragon, which is the deity of water, to ask for rain during drought years. Gradually it became an entertainment and dance form for festive occasions, usually during the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival.

The dragons built for the dance, usually ranging from several meters to more than 100 meters long, are mainly made of bamboo, wood, cloth and paper, and are elaborately painted. There are poles attached to the belly of the dragon. During the performance, performers hold the poles and raise the dragon, starting the grand dance with the beat of roaring drums. Sometimes a man raises a pearl (a large white ball) and entices the dragon to follow his rhythm.

Chinese musical instruments used for the Dragon Dance include drums, a gong and cymbals. The musical accompaniment for lion dancing is easy and simple. A Dragon Dance requires a large number of dancers, so sometimes a leader blows a whistle to maintain rhythm.

In China, Dragon Dance groups are found around the country, similar to the Lion Dance groups. Local communities, schools, colleges or universities organize Dragon Dance groups in China, whereas the Dragon Dance in Thailand is organized by Chinese societies, Chinese shrines or a Chinese foundation.

In China, dragon dancers perform for various occasions, especially Chinese festivals (Spring Festival and Lantern Festival), opening ceremonies of sports competitions, grand opening ceremonies for a building or department store. In Thailand, the Dragon Dance is often performed in the Chinese Spring Festival, to celebrate the important day of a Chinese shrine or the birthday of a Chinese deity. Because of its auspicious implications, the Dragon Dance also serves an important purpose in Thai cultural activities, such as those ceremonies in the royal palace. Recently (May 2005), a dragon dance group was part of a special procession organized to celebrate the joyous occasion of the birth of the son of Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.<sup>7</sup>

The Dragon Dance group of the South China Normal University in Guangzhou consists of ten dancers (nine dancers hold the dragon body and the leader holds the pearl). Ten dancers is the standard size for competition in China.

There are male and female Dragon Dance groups in China. In fact, Dragon Dance groups comprising female senior citizens were found in many regions of China, but such groups have not been formed in Thailand.

In China, Dragon Dance competitions are held in many regions of the country. The China Dragon and Lion Dance Association organizes these competitions. Such competitions are not held in Thailand.

The Thai Dragon Dance groups in Nakhon Sawan add the *Naga* or *Praya Naga*<sup>8</sup> into the performance. The Dragon and the *Naga* dancing together in Chinese festivals demonstrate the intermingling of Thai and Chinese cultures. Two high poles are used and the dragon and the *Naga* intertwine and dance on these poles.

As an act of purification, the dancers and musicians of the God and Goddess Golden Dragon Dance Group from Pak Nampho in Nakhon Sawan province must abstain from eating the meat of cows, buffaloes, tortoises, frogs and eels during the period of practice until performance. This practice was not observed in China.

The Thai Dragon Dance can be performed in both daytime and nighttime. Dragon Dances at night display many flashing lights on the dragon's body. Some dances are performed on barges in the river, some dancers dance over a bridge, some dancers climb a high pole and the top man raises a pearl up the pole. This was not observed in China.

### Yingge dance

Performers of Yingge hold two sticks. The performance has some similarity with the drum yangge, but the performer's faces are made up to mimic heroic characters from the famous novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*.<sup>9</sup>

The most important Chinese musical instrument used in the Yingge dance is the drum, sometimes joined by a gong and cymbals. In China, Yingge dancers perform for various occasions, especially Chinese festivals (Spring Festival and Lantern Festival) and opening ceremonies but in Thailand the Yingge dance is performed as a Chinese cultural activity, e.g. Chinese festival and Chinese Shrine ceremonies.

The dancers of the Chumsang Yingge group in Taklee, Nakhon Sawan are mostly young Thai men. They dance in the procession of Chinese Deities. After dancing all morning, they change to modern rhythms such as the disco. By then, they are a little tipsy.

### Chaozhou opera

Chinese musical instruments used in the Chaozhou opera are generally divided into two: on one side is the string ensemble group (Xiansi yue) and on the other side is the percussion group (drum and gongs).

In the streets by the Shantou seashore, about 6-8 groups play Chaozhou opera and music every morning. Each group has more than one hundred members. While singing Chaozhou opera accompanied by live Chaozhou music, the group members also play cards and mahjong, drink

Kongfu tea, or just enjoy the exchange of local gossip. Most members are retired people. Some are actors, musicians or workers who come to join the group and learn how to sing Chaozhou opera after they finish their jobs. The groups congregate every morning. The activity lasts from 8 am until noon everyday. They have to move the musical instruments daily. They have a donation box that helps defray expenses.

The Chaozhou opera in Thailand is sung in both the Chaozhou dialect and the Thai language but Chaozhou is usually used when the Thais hold Chaozhou opera performances for charity. However, it is sung more and more in the Thai language because it is easier for amateurs to learn the lines within a shorter time. There has been no instance in China when the Chaozhou opera was sung in a foreign language.

Sometimes there are attempts to integrate Thai musical instruments with Chinese ones during charity performances. Musical instruments in Thailand and China are similar. The cello, a western string instrument, is used by the Chinese music groups, but no other foreign instrument is included.

In Bangkok, most of the members of the Chaozhou opera are in their late middle age and many of them are of Thai-Chinese descent; some, though, are Chinese from Shantou. They all speak the Chaozhou dialect and sing Chaozhou opera specifically. Many of the members are well-to-do business people and are well dressed. Besides singing Chaozhou opera and playing Chaozhou music, they may enjoy a beer or drink Chinese tea while socializing.

#### Chinese music in the Teahouse and Restaurant

In China, Chinese folk music is usually played in teahouses or Chinese restaurants in five stars hotels. Solo Guzheng and String ensembles (two to three ladies playing the Chinese erhu, pipa or yangqin) were often observed in Guangzhou and Shantou.

In Bangkok, Solo Guzheng and solo Yangqin in Chinese restaurants are common. In Bangkok's Galaxy Restaurant, Chinese musical instruments are used in the band, e.g. erhu, guzheng, flute and yangqin. Thai musicians using Chinese musical instruments play Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Western popular songs, usually according to the nationality of the guests.

#### Amateur musical groups

There are many musical groups in Shantou City. They are composed of retired musicians, artists, politicians, doctors and government officials. In Chaozhou, each small village has a *Luoguodui* (Gong and drum ensemble). The musicians are students, farmers or workers in the village. They

practice after dinner and play in the Spring Festival. They usually join the procession of Chinese Deities.

In Bangkok, the *Ji Tai Kor*'s String Ensemble, which has an activity on weekends, is comprised mostly of middle-aged people of Chinese descent. In Chon Buri's *San De Shantang*'s Chinese music group, the musicians are local students (8-17 years old). Some are children of Chinese immigrants, but most of them are Thai workers or children of Thai farmers. The music class is sponsored by the *San De* Foundation. The foundation has a van that picks up the students and drives them home after class. They learn Chaozhou folk songs as well as some Thai songs, including the National Anthem, *Sadudi Maha Raja* or a salute to The King and Queen of Thailand and the Royal Anthem.

### Gongde Ceremony

Gongde is a Chinese funeral ceremony originally held in Southern China, especially in the Shantou, Chaozhou region. Chinese musical instruments used in the Gongde ceremony are similar to those used in Chaozhou opera and can be divided into two parts. On one side is a string ensemble and on the other side is a percussion ensemble.

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the government had endeavored to eliminate all cultural practices, ceremonies and traditional rites deemed to promote superstitions. Emphasis was placed on the socialist ideology in accordance with the teaching of Mao Tse Tung. At present, however, places like Shantou and Chaozhou have recovered much of their culture including the resurrection of this ceremony. The revival could be seen as an attempt on the part of today's people to preserve the rich cultural heritage that China is renowned for.

The Thai musicians and laymen<sup>10</sup> in the Gongde groups are professional, but they play or perform only as a sideline. Most of them have their own businesses. The Gongde ceremony is usually conducted at night so it is easy for the musicians to find time. In contrast, the Shantou Gongde musicians make music their only career. Since the Chinese Gongde is normally performed in the Moral Pavilion or local Funeral Hall, the musicians all work in the Moral Pavilion.

In Thailand, the Gongde is held in both Thai and Chinese circles, either at a Chinese temple or a Thai Buddhist temple and are attended by both Chinese descendants and the local Thais. Today the only live Chinese music performed in concert can be seen in the Gongde ceremony. There is a Gongde ceremony in a Thai temple around Bangkok almost every night and the musicians who play for the Gongde seldom have the opportunity to perform the preferred Chaozhou opera. It is unfortunate that the number of skilled musicians is very limited in Bangkok.

Often the royal Thai family includes a Gongde ceremony as part of their funeral services. It was included in the funeral of the Princess Mother of King Rama IX. And most recently, Khun Poom



Jenssen, a grandson of Thailand's present King was killed in the recent tsunami that hit Phuket in December 2005. At his funeral there was a Gongde funeral ceremony sponsored by the Chinese Business Men's Society. The Royal Gongde ceremony comprised a large number of musicians and laymen.

### Music for learning

Music has been a popular form of cultural expression since the time of Confucius and many Chinese parents send their children to music classes. In Guangzhou, most parents want their children to learn how to play a western musical instrument, especially the piano. It is usually only when they cannot afford the cost of instruments or study fees that they turn to Chinese classic or folk music.

In Shantou, it is the Guzheng, the most popular Chinese folk music instrument, that Chinese girls love to play. A Guzheng class held in a home at Jin Xin Dasha, Shantou was observed in December 2004. It was a large class (8 students) and for one student, her second. Huang Guanying, the Guzheng teacher, said: "The little girls love to study Guzheng, because its sound is very beautiful and it is easy to learn. A Guzheng instrument is not too expensive. I teach both in the Chaozhou dialect and Mandarin. The parents like to understand what I teach so they can tutor their child at home in the familiar language." (December 12, 2004)

In Bangkok, the Guzheng is also the most popular Chinese music instrument. The Oriental Chinese Academy in Bangkok has 120 students in Guzheng class. Guo Yunxiang, a Chinese music teacher from Shantou, has taught Chinese music in Bangkok for almost 20 years. His class is large but he also teaches one-on-one in a large room so that others could observe.

A Chinese music class in Bangkok was observed in the Chinese language school located in one of the big department stores. This is a private class where Thais learn to play as a hobby. A study fee is charged. There are many Chinese music classes organized by Chinese foundations. These classes are free of charge. Some classes are meant for teaching and preparing the music group to perform during festivals while some classes are meant for teaching poor children how to spend their free time and educating them about arts and culture. In Nakhon Sawan, the student is given a little money to take home after class so there are many poor children who join this kind of class.

Another Chinese music instrument that is popular in Thailand is the Kim (Yangqin or Yaoqin or Hudie qin). Kim is a borrowed word from the Chinese Chaozhou dialect meaning music or music instrument, the equivalent of 'qin' in Mandarin. Immigrants brought the Kim to Thailand from China. It was played in the Chinese Opera (Chaozhou opera) and became very popular in Chinatown in the Bangkok period. Thai classical musicians adopted and included the Kim in Thai classical music ensembles and it has become an integral part of Thai classical music for more than

one hundred years. Thai composers have composed many Thai songs that use the Kim as a solo instrument.

Incidentally, this instrument is no longer seen in China, but it is still manufactured and played in Thailand. Thai children love the Kim because it is easy to learn. It is also not too expensive.

The Kim comes in many shapes and sizes. The painting on a Kim box is Thai. Today, colorful Japanese cartoon pictures decorate Kim boxes. Many schools in Bangkok offer Kim classes. Kim teachers are Thai and they learned to play Thai classical songs, not Chinese songs.

## **Conclusion**

The migration of Chinese culture into Thailand has seen immigrants bring their music and family customs. However, the cultural evolution of immigrant societies and that of mainland China is different. For instance, the importance of music to today's China is demonstrated by the existence of nine music schools throughout China. Classes start at middle school level and are taught all the way through to Ph.D. Consequently, the supply of musicians, scholars and teachers in China is stable and growing. The level of research, preparation of textbooks, music sheets and music history reference are also very well developed. Even at the non-professional level, Chinese schools test for ability or aptitude at the 9<sup>th</sup> level for folk music instruments. There are many official music competitions held in China on national and international levels.

Because of this exposure, Chinese students are motivated to study music both as a career and as a hobby. Chinese scholars also research Chinese folk music instruments with the aim of developing new and modified musical instruments and instrumentation. Musicians are developing new techniques in their performances and often find a new style to present in their concerts. In fact, there is a new style of Chinese folk music that is called *Neo-folk Music*. This is a fused composition, mixing folk and modern music. Two of the most well known international groups are the The Twelve Girls Band and the Red Poppy Ladies' Percussion. This new music however is not traditional and has little effect on the cultural ceremonies and social customs in either China or Thailand. However it has spread awareness, particularly among the young people of Southeast Asia, of an art form that has been part of the Chinese culture for millennia.

In Thailand, people study Chinese music primarily for recreation or as a hobby. There are a few professionals, but there is not enough of a market to support many. Thailand uses the talent available for ceremonial and social events. Chinese music in Thailand is more conservative in style. Thai-Chinese musicians do not experiment much due to the lack of competition and public motivation. Most of their motivation comes from their community, family, temple or simply love for the music.

Thai musicians acquired the Kim in order to play Thai-Chinese music many decades ago. Later the Kim was assimilated into Thai culture and ceremonies. It is interesting to note that 'Kim' and

‘Zheng’ are both Chinese words for the name of a Chinese music instrument and appear in the Thai dictionary. Many Thai Classical songs are named ‘Chin.’ Thai musicians enjoy Chaozhou opera songs and like the Chinese style rhythm that they incorporated into their own compositions. They composed Thai songs that have a Chinese accent and named them ‘Chin,’ which means Chinese. Recently Thai musicians are trying to use the Pipa, Erhu, Dizi and Muyu (wooden fish) in their music, but continue to play while sitting on the floor which is Thai style.

### **The Future of the Music Culture in China**

It is safe to predict that it will continue to evolve away from being solely performed for ceremonial and story telling (opera) purposes into being part of the entertainment culture of Southeast Asia. The advent of various forms of media, while making the music more available to all, may eventually erode the original cultural purpose of the music, however this is not necessarily a bad thing. If the education system moves forward with classes such as music history, music appreciation and music training in a formal way at elementary levels throughout Southeast Asia and Thailand, these links will remain an important part of the immigrant culture. In addition, the basic religious and social ceremonial origins will receive more exposure, hopefully motivating new and expanded appreciation of this very important part of Thailand’s cultural heritage.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Book of Rites, the records of ritual of the Zhou Dynasty.

<sup>2</sup> This area is Chaozhou which is located in the northeastern part of Guangdong province; most of the Chinese immigrants in Thailand came from this part.

<sup>3</sup> Thai classic music is traditionally played by musicians who are seated on the floor or a chair.

<sup>4</sup> Khao Phansa, or the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, is the time when all Buddhist monks are required to remain in their temples. People usually make merit by offering a large candle to the temple.

<sup>5</sup> The traditional Thai New Year which falls in April.

<sup>6</sup> A part of the Thai wedding ceremony.

<sup>7</sup> A new Prince was born to the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn in April, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Naga is the snake-like God of Rivers

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<sup>9</sup> One of the Chinese classical novels, written in late Yuan-early Ming Dynasty by Shi Nai-an

<sup>10</sup> Laymen are the group of men who chant and perform during the Gongde ceremony.

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