

The Journey of Pong Lang Sa On in the Thai Entertainment Business

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Abstract – *Pong Lang Sa On is a Thai musical group, who perform traditional pong lang music with elements of pop, rock and comedy. They mix Northeastern and Central Thai cultures, combining folk music, dramatic arts and live performances that relate to the young generations of Thai people. They modernize traditional performances by including jokes to entertain viewers. The cultural adaptation of Pong Lang Sa On has led to their popularity and importance for Northeastern Thai folk music. Before going mainstream, the primary concern of Pong Lang Sa On band-members was their specific group identity. After Pong Lang Sa On entered the entertainment business, their identity became a sensitive issue. They needed to adapt their original style in order to be accepted by the general public, while continuing to conserve and spread Thai culture. The band members analyzed data to find ways to strengthen and adapt Pong Lang folk music in order to spread traditional culture. In 2013, Pong Lang Sa On ended their contract with R-Siam so that they could manage their business independently and focus on promoting and conserving Thai culture.*

Keywords – *Pong Lang Sa On, entertainment, performing arts, business, ensemble.*

INTRODUCTION

The entertainment business is the management and administration of entertainment with the aim of generating income [1]. Entertainment includes movies, drama, television, radio, music and other performing arts that have production processes [2]. Before artists enter the entertainment business, their primary concern is artistic creation. By stepping into the entertainment business and becoming professional performers, artists must begin to manage their work with specific steps and operate systemically [3]. Consequently, professional performers require overseers, managers and assistants to ensure their practices meet business standards and comply with entertainment law [4].

Besides generating income, the role of the entertainment business is to help solve social problems, entertain and develop a business system to support artists, actors and entrepreneurs to create and disperse work [5]. Creative product analysis allows members of the industry to identify outstanding or interesting aspects of their work, harness their benefits and continuously expand their target group. Therefore, the ultimate role and function of the entertainment business is to provide and increase viewer satisfaction.

When there are many types of entertainment, there will be more viewers. In light of this, entertainment companies manage their artists to maximize income potential by increasing variety and appealing to wide audiences. The Thai entertainment business is no different and there is a huge variety of performance genres and styles to meet consumer demand and generate larger audiences. One example of this variety is Pong Lang Sa On, a Northeastern Thai (Isan) folk band. The band plays a variation of pong lang log xylophone, has a unique identity and differs from other performers [6]. These components have caused a rapid growth in popularity for Pong Lang Sa On since their mainstream emergence in 2005 [7]. Pong Lang Sa On entertain and provide knowledge of Isan performing arts, enabling them to reach a very broad audience. Moreover, their appeal is a vital lifeline for traditional arts and provides a medium for inheritance of endangered ancestral culture [8, 9, 10]. Given their privileged and vital position at the vanguard of cultural inheritance, this investigation was designed to assess their role and experiences in the entertainment business. Ultimately the research problem is to discover how Pong Lang Sa On was affected by the mainstream entertainment industry and provide information for future, similar ventures.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This investigation was conducted primarily to study important factors in the performance lifecycle of Pong Lang Sa On; to study the formation and change

of Pong Lang Sa On from independent artists to contracted performers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cultural qualitative method was used for this investigation and a purposive sampling technique was used to identify 50 randomized samples, including six key informants, 19 casual informants and 25 general informants. The sample included music producers, managers, musicians and audience members. The range of participants was chosen in order to understand broad perspectives in the fields of management, music, aesthetics, culture, art and consumer satisfaction. The informant groups are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of informant groups selected for the investigation.

Key Informants	Casual Informants	General Informants
6	19	25
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 national musicians / academics 3 music producers / managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 dancers 7 musicians 2 costume designers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23 audience members 2 news reporters

The research area was composed of Bangkok, Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham, Kalasin and Roi Et Provinces because these are the areas where Pong Lang Sa On operated most frequently. Data was collected by field note annotation, structured and non-structured interview, participant and non-participant observation and focus group discussion. Data reliability and validation tests were conducted by methodological triangulation. Informend consent was given by all research participants under the knowledge that all data would be collected and used purely for the purposes of this investigaton The research data was analyzed by analytic induction and typological analysis according to the aims of the research. The research began in 2005, when Pong Lang Sa On was formed, and concluded in 2013, when the group ended the contract with their agency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mr. Sompong Kunapratom, nicknamed Eed is the lead performer and founder of Pong Lang Sa On (personal communication, 2011). Originating from

Kalasin Province, Eed was educated at Kalasin College of Dramatic Arts and furthered his education in Bangkok, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in drama and music from Rajamangala University of Technology. When he studied at Kalasin College of Dramatic Arts, Eed played traditional Isan folk music and had the opportunity to perform at many events. He took these experiences with him to Bangkok, where he and two or three friends played bass, Isan phin (a fretted, plucked lute), khaen (a mouth organ) and drums. Initially, the music was purely acoustic, incorporating some Thai dancing. Gradually, the group began to include jokes. Following positive feedback from audiences and at the request of some restaurants, the show began to develop parts for string music and international music. The group was also expanded from three or four people, adding eight more performers. The group performed in large restaurants, such as Kai Yang Korat Restaurant, Wipawadee-Rungsit Road, Mai Kao Restaurant in Ao To Ko Market and Hai Kam Pak Kred Restaurant in Nonthaburi Province. They also played at the Rong Beer German Country Place Restaurant in Rangsit. The band became known as Pong Lang Sa On and made their mark on the professional entertainment industry as winners of a domestic television talent show in 2005. They were subsequently signed by Thai entertainment company RS and embarked upon a professional music career (Figure 1).

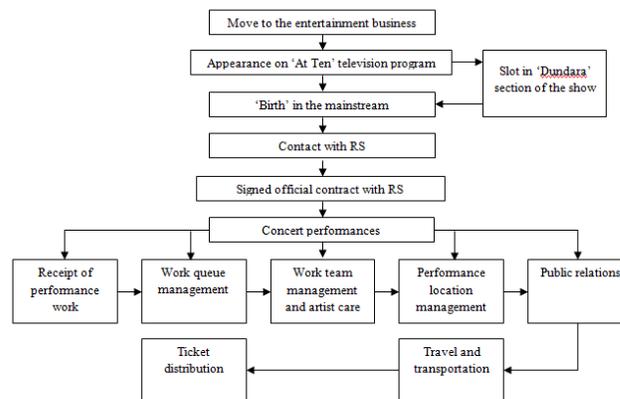


Figure 1. Flow chart of Pong Lang Sa On activity in the entertainment business

A combination of contractual obligations, active performance analysis and development led Pong Lang Sa On to create a standard act with 15 steps, or stages. The 15 elements of the performance are as follows: 1) Opening piece; 2) The Nang Hai performs at the front

of the stage before retreating to tap a hai (clay jar); 3) The head of the band greets the audience and introduces the act; 4) A slow-tempo song is played, such as Phu Tai Sampao, which incorporates solo performances for each of the musical instruments in the band; 5) The master of ceremonies officially opens the performance and gives a brief history of the act; 6) Thai dancers perform to a slow-tempo piece, such as Bai Sri Su Khwan music, Ram Tung Wai or Phu Tai Sampao; 7) There is an interlude of singing and dancing; 8) Thai dancers perform to fast-tempo songs, such as Ram Serng Bung Fai, Ram Toei and Ram Serng; 9) There is a second interlude of fast-tempo singing and dancing; 10) Thai dancers perform to fast, entertaining melodies, such as Ram Dueng Krok Dueng Sark; 11) The musical instruments and musicians are introduced. The band uses traditional Northeastern Thai instruments, including khaen (a mouth organ), wot (a circular panpipe), pong lang (a log xylophone), phin (a fretted, plucked lute), a drum kit, bass guitar, hai song (clay jars) and a variety of percussion instruments; 12) There is an interlude of singing and dancing; 13) The artists perform jokes; 14) The master of ceremonies closes the show, while Pong Lang Sa On play; 15) End of the performance (personal communication, 2011). The biggest divergence from traditional pong lang performances is the incorporation of a drum kit rather than traditional Isan drums [11]. This allows Pong Lang Sa On to play fast-tempo songs. Traditional pong lang groups use slow and medium-tempo songs during their act [12]. Pong Lang Sa On use faster music to appeal to modern audiences. The act can be divided into three clear types of performance: traditional pong lang, music with vocals and comedy. Pong Lang Sa On performers wear clothes specifically designed to incorporate traditional indigenous fabric and modern styles. The artists have reinvented Isan folk garments by using silver and gold accessories and flowers on the heads of the female performers.

A management company or record label, such as R-Siam proved useful to Pong Lang Sa On because the company allocated officials to deal with various aspects of the entertainment business that the artists were unfamiliar with or ignorant of. These included management of public relations, process management, financial management, budget support, travel, life insurance, facilities, distribution and work schedule. This delegation freed the performers to design patterns for the show, design costumes and practice. However, there were a number of adverse effects of this

relationship. Firstly, the central contract with R-Siam was for three lead band members. This meant that the company occasionally selected work requiring the minimum number of performers. This contrasted with the philosophy of Sompong Kunapratom, who wished for a united band with equal benefit distribution, equal opportunities and equal levels of fame (personal communication, 2011). Secondly, the record label was driven by profits. In the eyes of Sompong Kunapratom, they did not allocate adequate payment for lesser band members, which destabilized band unity and caused jealousy among the group (personal communication, 2011). Finally, the company influence led to an increasing influence of looktung (Thai country music). This is not in line with the artistic style of the performers and caused Pong Lang Sa On to have a confusing and conflicting identity.

Pong Lang Sa On ended their commercial contract in 2013, thus ending their lifecycle in the entertainment business. Their business contract required Pong Lang Sa On to adapt many parts of their performance. The group had to make changes to their performing style, such as incorporating new instruments, faster music and additional elements not traditionally associated with pong lang music, as well as their mindset. The need to adopt a business conscience was a difficult transition that was not always embraced by group members (personal communication, 2011). Consequently, there were three key reasons why Pong Lang Sa On chose to end their association with the entertainment business. Firstly, only the three main performers were centrally contracted and guaranteed job security. Secondly, the artistic values of the performers were jeopardized by asking them to perform in a style more commonly associated with looktung [13, 14]. Finally, the band leader wanted to return to a method of self-management and traditional styles of pong lang that the public could easily recognize.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Pong Lang Sa On is a musical group from Thailand, who performs traditional pong lang music with elements of pop, rock and comedy. They mix Northeastern and Central Thai cultures, combining folk music, dramatic arts and live performances that relate to the young generations of Thai people. They modernize traditional performances by including jokes to entertain viewers. The cultural adaptation of Pong Lang Sa On has led to their popularity and importance for Northeastern Thai folk music. Before going

mainstream, the primary concern of Pong Lang Sa On band-members was their specific group identity. After Pong Lang Sa On entered the entertainment industry, they were required to manage their creative process and production in a business model. The band members analyzed data to find ways to strengthen and adapt pong lang folk music in order to spread traditional culture. This necessitated a divergence from the traditional musical principles of pong lang and caused the performers to adapt their identity in order to appeal to the general public [15]. This allowed them to conserve and spread Thai culture but led to a conflict of artistic values, which ultimately caused them to leave their contractual relationship with R-Siam entertainment business and return to their musical roots [16]. In 2013, Pong Lang Sa On ended their contract with R-Siam so that they could manage their business independently and focus on promoting and conserving Thai culture.

Pong lang is a performance that can add cultural value to society. However, future management of pong lang bands in the entertainment industry must protect the traditional identity of the music and not jeopardize cultural integrity for the sake of maximizing profits. With responsible care, management and administration of artists the lifecycle of pong lang bands in the entertainment business can be successful. For this to be achieved there must be mutual understanding between performers and companies, regarding the goals, values and methods of each party. Further research must consider the entertainment business lifecycles of traditional performing artists in other genres in order to synthesize a method for developing their management. It would be beneficial for further research to consider the decentralized view of the music business proposed by Jonathan Sterne [17], which was published after the conclusion of this investigation. An alternative perspective of the cultural adaptation of folk music may be reached when adopting Sterne's suggestion that 'there is no music industry.' Further investigation must also be carried out to analyze the adaptation and development of performing arts to ensure that cultural integrity is maintained and that folk traditions are supported, rather than diluted, by entertainment businesses.

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