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Wong, DA

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Deborah Wong

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THAI CASSETTES AND THEIR COVERS: TWO CASE HISTORIES¹

by
Deborah Wong

Introduction

The cassette industry in Thailand is a high-powered, fast-moving, risky business which, if anything, becomes more competitive every day. Cassettes began to dominate the recording industry around 1975, and at this point (1989) they have literally flooded the country. Cassettes are everywhere (see Fig. 1). They have made music accessible to Thais in a totally new way, and vividly reflect changing musical and social values.

Cassettes caught hold in Thailand in the mid-1970s, at about the same time that they began to dominate the recording industries of other developing countries (El-Shawan 1987; Hatch 1989; Sutton 1985). Cassettes revitalized the Thai music industry in a remarkably short time, taking it over and enlarging it. Part of the reason for the rapid spread is that Thailand has no national apparatus for the administration of music media as do some countries². Unlike the cassette industries of Egypt or Hong Kong, Thai cassettes do not have much market value or impact outside their own country due to language limitations. On the other hand, Thailand supports a thriving industry of pirated Western pop cassettes. Cassettes are also imported from Hong Kong for the ethnic Chinese (particularly in Bangkok), and Indian tapes of film music enjoy a limited venue.

Bangkok is the center of the Thai cassette industry. All the major recording companies and studios are located in the capital; even the most famous and successful regional performers travel to Bangkok to record at the major studios.³ The industry is dominated by some ten companies: three of these are multinational, two are owned and managed by Thais but are modelled after Western business, and the remainder are Thai-Chinese family businesses.⁴ All market a wide variety of styles, genres, and performers, though some companies specialize more than others.

The two cassettes which will be explored in detail below were produced by two different companies, Rota and Ligo. Rota (or Rota Record and Tape Co., Ltd.) is a large secretive Thai-Chinese company that produces an exceptionally wide variety of styles (teenage pop,

Figure 1. Streetside cassette stand in Bangkok.



regional folk genres, rock, music for weddings and Buddhist ordination ceremonies, etc.) and is also a major producer of classical Thai music cassettes. Although Rota keeps quite a large number of classical tapes in circulation, its coverage of the classical repertoire is rather limited, concentrating on the most well-known pieces and recording them over and over again.⁵ Ligo, on the other hand, concentrates almost exclusively on Thai pop, and has produced albums for many of the most popular singers.

The two cassettes discussed below come from classical Thai music and contemporary Thai pop, two very different performance traditions. Both cassettes are fairly typical of their traditions, so I have chosen to let them speak for wider trends. Rather than examine the actual music on these cassettes, I will focus on the messages encoded on their covers in order to draw some conclusions about Thai notions of performers' identities and authenticity in two contrasting music traditions. In Thailand, appearances are of no small importance and, as elsewhere, can be quite deceiving.

The messages in the medium

Cassettes and their covers are artifacts that aggregate several media: sound, the printed word, and pictorial representation. Mark Slobin's comments on American Jewish sheet music covers apply equally well to cassette covers (1982: 164, 166):

...A piece of sheet music must be seen as a complex cultural package of various expressive and commercial media, all of which combine to create a pleasing product... A sheet music folio is a complex artifact; cover illustration, song text, music, and a great deal of ancillary information.. are combined into a single physical embodiment of the music culture.

Depending on the identity and background of the viewer, the cassette's visual signs and symbols will enhance the auditory sounds and symbols of the music itself. Contrary to what Barthes (1977: 45) and Berger have written about photographs, the images used on cassette covers are not quotations from reality, but translations, and they do indeed have "a language of their own" (Berger and Mohr 1982: 96). They are chosen to sell a product and to sum up entire trajectories of a society in a highly commercial way. They both draw

from reality and create it anew, and the resulting imagined reality can be what sells a cassette best.

Cassettes rely on more than just images. They almost always contain text as well -- sometimes in copious amounts, sometimes sparingly. The relative value of different text is usually indicated by size, i.e., the title or singer's name is usually in the largest print, whereas text that is expected to have little impact on marketability will be in the smallest possible print. Some information never makes it into print at all. Last but not least, connections between the text(s) and images on a cassette cover are open to a great amount of manipulation. Words can transform an image, and vice-versa, and such connective techniques can be extremely subtle. Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1986: 241) have noted that

As the message structures in ads become more subtle, a variety of techniques connect the various dimensions--text, visuals, slogan or headline, and, ideally, ad design itself--without calling attention to the 'connective' techniques.

Juxtaposing images and words that may or may not reflect reality can create unexpected associations that can lend the music itself new or modified meaning. Substituting an untruth for either of these elements -- words or image -- can be the most expressive of all. As Rapping (1987: 165) has commented,

Advertisements are not linear or rational in method. They create meaning through juxtaposition of like and unlike, real and fictional elements... They function much as dreams or poetry do. They combine elements of reality with wish fulfillment fantasies.

The two cassettes chosen for analysis and discussion in this essay embody the aesthetics and socio-economic realities of two contrasting music traditions. They also exemplify some of the tensions and incompatibilities of the contemporary Thai music world. Cassette covers are palimpsests -- that is, they are canvases that are inscribed in a number of ways by a number of people, and this overlap is basic to the configuration of the final product. A cassette cover can be read in any number of ways, and the reading below is inevitably that of an outsider.

Anchalee Chongkhadikij and *This Lonely Me*

The first cassette is a typical example of *phleng Thai sakon*⁶ or Thai pop in a self-consciously Western style (*phleng*, "musical work"; *Thai*, "Thai"; *sakon*, literally "universe," but generally used to mean the West or Occident).⁷ Anchalee Chongkhadikij, the featured performer, was formerly a model and is now a movie actress as well as a singer; she was exceptionally popular for a few years (1985-87) and still commands a loyal following.⁸ Anchalee's influence on teenagers (mostly young women) in Bangkok was quite strong for a short time. Her short hair and preference for stylish masculine dress was imitated by many young women, and some Thais feel that Anchalee's popularity is behind the new visibility of teenage female homosexuality.⁹ The cassette is titled *Nung dieo khon ni*, or *This Lonely Person*, and was the first of Anchalee's four albums to date. It contains ten songs that dwell on typical pop themes of love, longing, and loneliness. Anchalee is the featured singer in all ten, backed up by electric guitar, piano, saxophone, bass, and drums in an R&B style.

Not surprisingly, the cover of *This Lonely Person* features Anchalee's face (see Fig. 2). What does, or could, this face convey to a Thai viewer? It is a face that is striking for its strength, confidence, and directness--and it is all the more striking because it is a Thai **woman's** face, in a culture that has not traditionally associated such traits with femininity. Even in a man, most Thais would still prefer to find such characteristics cloaked in a certain amount of humility and self-effacement. Furthermore, Anchalee's masculine hair style and attire (black jacket, white shirt, and red tie just visible) convey an ambiguous, androgynous sexual identity.¹⁰ The total effect is of a strong, unusual personality.

The life history of this cassette is worth examination. Released in 1985, *This Lonely Person* was so tremendously successful that a second version of the album followed several months later in November 1985 (see Fig. 3). This version was called *Banthuk sot: Live.... Anchalee*, and is a commercial release of a live concert. *Ban thuk* means to record and *sot* means raw or uncooked; the subtitle "live" is transliterated into Thai. Although the cover bears obvious resemblances to the first album, the live recording comes complete with the sound of screaming fans and Anchalee's conversation between numbers. In addition to all of the original songs, three American songs are included (in English): "Desperado," "To Do or To

Figure 2. Cover of *This Lonely Person*, featuring Anchalee Chongkhadikij.



Figure 3. Cover of *Banthuk sot: Live... Anchalee*.

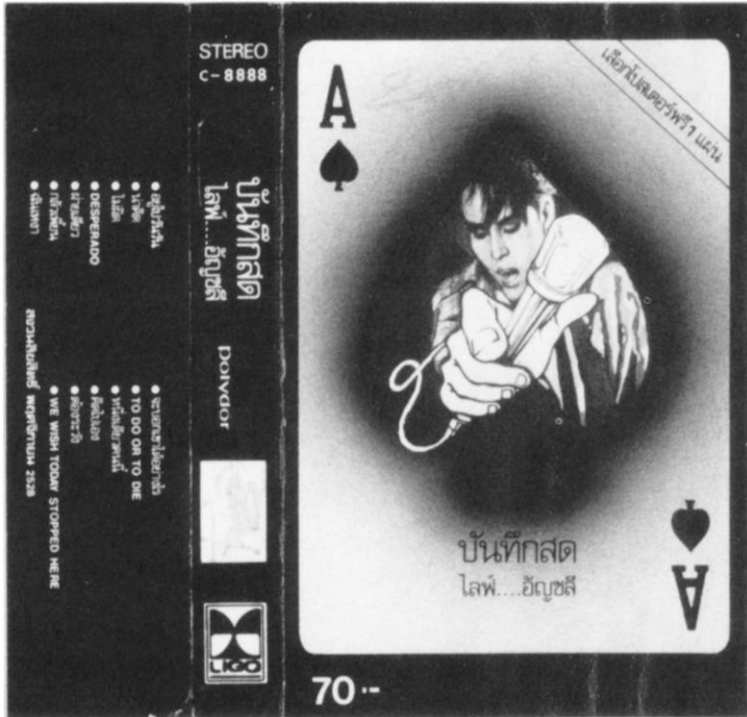
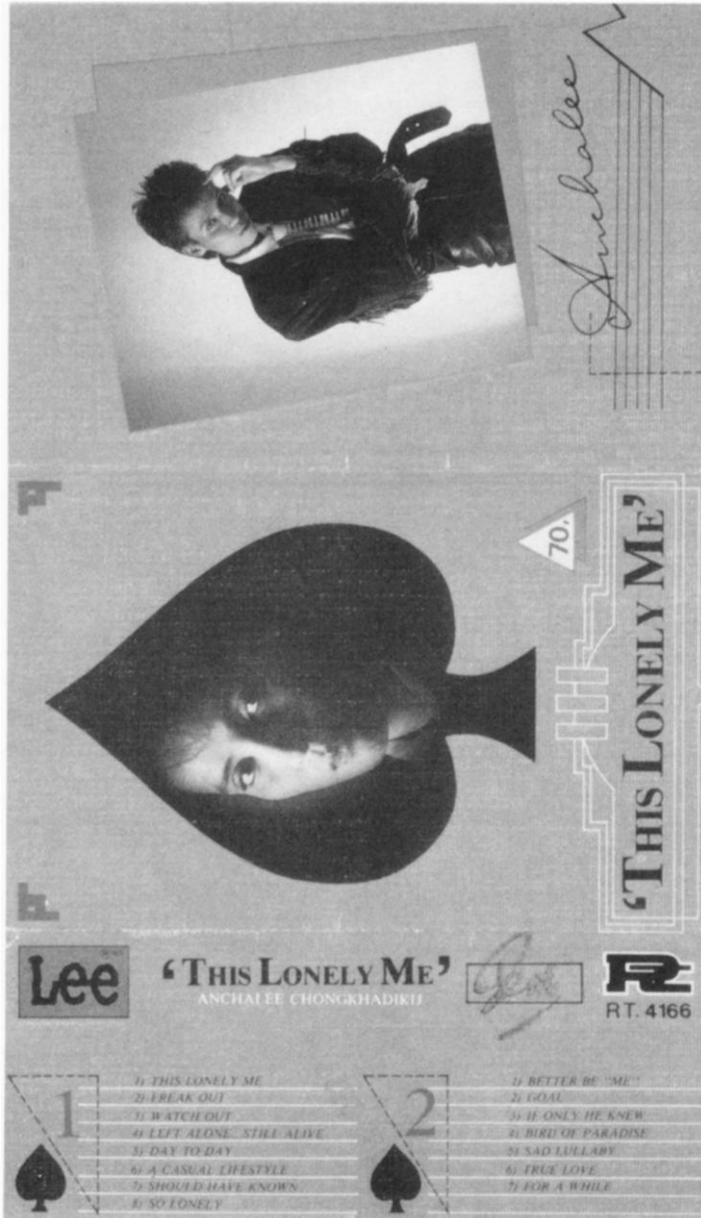


Figure 4. Cover of *This Lonely Me*.



Die,” and “We Wish Today Stopped Here.” Inside, the Thai lyrics are reprinted exactly as in *This Lonely Person*, but the English lyrics for “To Do or To Die” and “We Wish Today Stopped Here” are printed where the list of artists and producers were formerly placed.

The transformation of Anchalee's image on the cover is the most striking departure. Although she is framed as before by the ace of spades, a drawn caricature has replaced the photograph, stressing the violent masculinity of her face. But her face almost pushed aside by a huge phallic microphone thrust forward in one hand, dominating the entire cover. Evidently the promotion department decided to emphasize her image as an aggressive man-woman -- in fact, the spade is surrounded by a fiery red halo of pulsating energy.

Anchalee's second album, *Sadut rak*, was released in mid-1986 and was not as successful as her first. But her Pepsi commercial with Tina Turner followed hard on the heels of this disappointment, and it is not coincidence that yet a third version of *This Lonely Person* was issued shortly after the popular commercial was aired. *This Lonely Me*, an all-English version of *This Lonely Person*, came out in November/December 1986 (see Fig. 4).¹¹ Once again, the cover shows her face framed by the ace of spades, this time in a moody black and white photo portrait, her face half in shadow. The former violence is gone, replaced by a reflective melancholy. Inside is another introverted photograph of Anchalee (in a black leather suit and a rather new wave haircut), along with a page listing the composers and lyricists (four different people), and the complete lyrics in English. A television advertisement for this cassette at the time of its release showed a dancer in classical Thai costume opening a door to reveal Anchalee in her usual tailored man's suit and tie, singing in English. The message was clear: the old Thailand was opening up to a new era.

Anchalee's third album appeared in May 1987, but it was actually her fifth cassette if the metamorphoses of *This Lonely Person* are counted. The process of re-releasing her first album in several versions not only developed Anchalee's image, but was also a pragmatic attempt by the 'owners' of her music (i.e., Anchalee herself and her producers) to make a single album go as far as possible.

This sequence of cassettes is not only a rather extreme example of making the most of a good thing, but also reflects the process of refining Anchalee's image and making her into an icon over the course of a year. First of all, her identity as Anchalee

Chongkhadikij is increasingly **assumed** with each successive album. On the original, her name is given in full, Anchalee Chongkhadikij; on the second album, only her first name, Anchalee, is given; and on the third, her name isn't present at all. Her facial features are progressively obscured on each cover: on the first, Anchalee appears full-face, on the second, she is partly blocked by the microphone, and on the third, half of her face has retreated into deep shadow. Each successive representation of Anchalee's face increasingly evokes rather than simply presents her.

The treatment of Anchalee's trademark, the ace of spades, also changes. This trademark has been used on at least four of her album covers as well as concert posters. It is increasingly emphasized on each of the three albums: the central spade becomes larger and larger, eventually losing even the letter A that indexes it as an ace. The letter A assumes a second meaning as Anchalee's initial, and the ace of spades has other connotations as the winning card, or the top of the deck; it is also a single or lonely card. As a suit, spades has male (and even phallic) associations. In a wider sense, gambling with cards is a male pastime in Thailand, and a female pastime among prostitutes.

What can be seen here is the process of making Anchalee Chongkhadikij into an image that eventually becomes co-terminous with her symbol, the ace of spades. The transformation of the performer into an image or icon is as central to pop music in Thailand as it is in the West. When we refer to a singer's image, it is tacitly understood that this image is something larger than and different from the real-life person behind the image. As Roland Barthes said, we are left with the face-object, the absolute mask (1973: 56).

The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains

The second cassette is titled *Khloi: Lom phat chai khao*, and is a collection of classical unaccompanied pieces for the vertical bamboo flute called *khloi*. It was first issued about ten years ago (an exact date for its original release is unavailable) and has evidently been reissued several times, for it can still be found at numerous streetside cassette stands and stores. Its title is taken from the name of the first piece on side A, that means "the wind blowing at the foot of the mountains." The thirteen works on this tape are all fairly standard pieces from the classical repertoire and could be performed on nearly any instrument or combination of instruments.¹² *Phleng dieo* (solo pieces) like these are vehicles or showcases for the

Figure 5. Cover of *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*.



Figure 6. Photograph of Khru Thiap Khonglaithong (from Phunphit 2529/1986: 154)



Figure 7. Cover of Three Thai Flutes, featuring Khru Thiap Khonglaithong.


 วิทยุ วิทยุ


สามขลุ่ยไทย

หน้า 1 สามขลุ่ยไทย
 ๑. นกเขตริมฟ้า ๕. สาราจารย์ (วงเล็ก)
 ๒. การระงู ๖. ครูอึ้ง คณนพคุณ ชูขลุ่ย
 ๓. สาสีกลอง ๗. พ. อารมย์ นนทกุล ๘. ชิมฉิ่งขลุ่ย ๙. สาราจารย์
 ๔. สาสีกลองแขก ๑๐. ครูอึ้ง คณนพคุณ

หน้า 2 เขียวขลุ่ย
 ๑. สาราจารย์ ๔. สาราจารย์
 ๒. ชิมฉิ่ง ๕. ทนฟ้า-สีทองขลุ่ย
 ๓. พ. อารมย์ นนทกุล ๖. สาราจารย์
 ๗. ครูอึ้ง คณนพคุณ ๘. สาราจารย์

8268

60 บาท

สุวัฒน์ นนทกุล
 คณนพคุณ ชูขลุ่ย
 สอนขลุ่ย

technique and interpretational abilities of the performer; a greater amount of ornamentation and improvisation is not only allowed but expected. A tape of solo khlui might be bought by an aficionado of Thai classical music, an aficionado of khlui in particular, or by a student of khlui interested in the technique of the featured performer.

The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains is also dominated by a photograph of a young woman (Fig. 5), but one doesn't have to be Thai to see the difference between her and Anchalee. Shown from the waist up, this young woman is sitting in a white wicker chair holding a khlui. Clothed in a dark dress that modestly covers everything except her face, neck, and hands, with her long hair pulled back from her face (no bangs in her eyes), she is everything that Anchalee is not. She is, in effect, a good girl as defined by traditional Thai society: demure, pretty, and unassuming. Although she looks into the eyes of the viewer, her head is slightly inclined to communicate shyness. She is even given an aura of sanctity by a halo of concentric rainbow bands that frame her head in the background.

But the most interesting thing about this young woman is that she has nothing to do with the contents of the cassette aside from the khlui she holds in her hands. She is not one of the performers. Her face graces the cassette cover in the same way that nameless pretty faces grace wall calendars in Thailand. Her name isn't given anywhere on the cassette, but this young woman is in fact a movie actress named Suphansa Nuangphirom who always plays characters that are pretty, gentle, a little naive, and good. In other words, *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* contains neither the names nor the faces of its performers.

The major performer on this cassette is almost certainly Khru Thiap Khonglaithong, an acknowledged master of khlui who died in 1981 at the age of seventy-nine (Phunpit 2529/1986: 154-56; *Nangsu anuson* 2525/1982) (Fig. 6: picture of Khru Thiap). Nameless and faceless, Khru Thiap and his fellow performers are nowhere in evidence on their cassette cover. One must be an insider indeed to guess at their identity¹³. The number of Thai listeners who could listen to the tape and identify the playing as Khru Thiap's is debatable, but I am willing to guess that it is very, very few.

Identity and iconicization, ownership and authenticity

What are the two cassettes saying about the importance of the performers' identities in these two music traditions? One cassette

contains absolutely no indication of specific identities, and the other makes individuality a selling point -- Anchalee's personality and charisma are certainly as important to her fans as her music. Anchalee's cassette cover thus bears both her name and her demeanor, and the cassette spine is inscribed with her name yet again. The importance of names and identities extends inside the cover as well, to an interior fold-out page that lists all of the album's performing artists as well as the names of the composer/lyricist, the two arrangers, the executive producer, and the recording studio. Obviously, specific names and identities are extremely important in Thai *sakon* pop.

The identities of performers and composers are downplayed, however, in the classical tradition represented by *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*. This is not to say that performers' names and identities are unimportant: master musicians are as appreciated and valued in the Thai classical tradition as they are in the West.¹⁴ Nevertheless, musicians' names are rarely publicized in performance contexts (e.g., dance-drama accompaniment, funerals, etc.) and are almost never on commercial cassettes. Outside of music circles, musicians' names and identities tend to survive only as long as the memories of those who knew or heard them, usually a generation or two. The composers of particular pieces are rarely known: some repertoire is probably hundreds of years old, transmitted by oral means, and its composers are long forgotten. Certain pieces composed or arranged in the past fifty years or so can be attributed to particular musicians, notably the body of works generated by Luang Pradit Phairo, one of the last great court musicians. But even pieces like these are not automatically associated with their composers in the way that Western art music identifies works with their creators.¹⁵ In short, there is an almost Buddhist impermanence to the names and memories of classical musicians. Their primary survival over time is as links in the chains of teacher-pupil relationships that continue to form the backbone of the tradition.

I asked several Thais and Thai musicians why classical cassette covers rarely feature performers, and they all said, in one way or another, that a picture of a young girl is much more *na du* ("look-at-able," or better looking) than the old men and women who are often the best musicians, and that people would therefore be more apt to buy the cassette. In other words, packaging is the better part of selling a product. Classical cassette covers are thus decorated with pictures of instruments or objects that connote 'tradition' in some way -- a classical painting, a dancer, etc. The tape in Figure 7 is a

rare exception. It is another cassette of classical flute music, called *Sam Khlui Thai (Three Thai Flutes)* and the old man in front is Khru Thiap — the performer who is so conspicuously missing from *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*. The major difference between this cassette and *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* comes down to two words in small print at the bottom: “sanguan likhasit,” or copyright reserved.

Very, very few Thai classical cassettes have copyright, but virtually all pop cassettes are copyrighted.¹⁶ These two words, “copyright reserved,” represent a web of relationships between the performer(s), the recording company, the distributors for the recording company, the streetside vendors who purchase their wares from the distributors, and the buying public. Furthermore, copyright creates a primary relationship between the performer(s) and the sounds they create — i.e., a web of ‘ownership’ that begins with the performers themselves. The performance is objectified, or conceived of as an ownable object, from the very start. Names and identities are therefore extremely important: they are appellations for who owns what, and in what respect. The executive producer has a very different relationship to ‘the ownable object’ than, for instance, the guest artist on saxophone.

But what is ‘the ownable object’? It is, and it isn’t, the cassette itself. The thousands of plastic boxes with their tape and paper contents are material manifestations of the real object, i.e., the sound of the music itself, which is (like all sounds) ephemeral. In Thai, a thing that is created in a material sense (and that can therefore be owned or marketed) is called *phon ngan*. *Phon* means result or outcome, and is also an elegant word for fruit; *ngan* means work. Together, they mean the result or “fruit” of work. A painter’s painting is considered *phon ngan*, but a musician’s performance at a dance-drama is not *phon ngan* because it is ephemeral. A recording, however, is *phon ngan*. A commemorative volume issued at the time of Khru Thiap’s cremation ceremony summarizes his *phon ngan* as the instruments he made, his radio performances, and his many recordings, whereas his live performances in Thailand and abroad are merely described as examples of his great ability and musicianship (*Nangsu anuson* 2525/1982: 66-71).

Khru Thiap evidently made quite a large number of recordings in his lifetime, and many have undoubtedly become disassociated from his name. *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* is a collection of such recordings: it is evident from its sound quality alone that the

cassette is a collage of many different old records whose pops and scratches are reproduced as faithfully as Khru Thiap's playing. The cassette is thus a locus of overlapping times, places, and performers: it represents many recordings made in many studios by two or more performers over an indeterminate amount of time. Such reassemblage is possible only in the absence of copyright. As far as Khru Thiap's interests are concerned (or would be, if he were still alive), it makes very little difference whether his cassette is pirated or not, since he almost certainly received one-time, flat fees when he recorded the records that later became the cassette of *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*.

The plastic case for the cassette is boldly embossed with the words "*rawang khong plom*," or "beware of fakes." This warning is on all of Rota's cassette cases, no matter what kind of music is inside. It raises an interesting question: what is a fake in the conceptual framework of the Thai cassette industry? In the West, a fake would be any cassette or record produced and marketed in violation of copyright. In Thailand, however, copyright simply doesn't carry the same weight of meaning or consequences. Pirate cassettes of Western pop music are sold by the thousands along Bangkok's streets. Since copyright (Thai or international) seems to be a non-issue for Rota, a "fake" must mean something else, and it probably refers to the time-honored Thai practice of copying brand names as well as products. Bangkok's street stalls are full of "Adidas" running shoes, "Gucci" wallets, and "Rolex" watches. Rota is a well-to-do, prosperous company with a wide distribution, and its anxiety that a pirate might try to make money off its name is understandable.

The process of pirating and reassembling goes on. The cassette in Figure 8 was probably taken from *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*; it contains all the same recordings (in a different order) plus four additional numbers. It even has the same actress on the cover, looking yet more virginal, and (of course) no copyright. But the recording company is different. Which tape came first? There's no way to know, except that the musicians I asked agreed that *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* has been around for at least five years and is much more widely available. Which tape is the original, and which is the pirate -- or do such terms even apply? in any case, recording companies' files are frequently of no help in these matters.

Figure 8. Cover of *Thorani kansaeng Classical Thai Pieces for Solo Khlui (6th Album)*.



The Commodity and Its Promotion

Turning to the back flaps of the two cassettes, both list the titles in order of appearance, but in addition to its copyright notice, *This Lonely Person* has yet another small detail that *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* lacks: the precise length of each song, given in minutes and seconds. These songs are intended for contexts in which timing (down to the second) is important, i.e., radio. Radio and television are essential means of promotion for Thai pop music.¹⁷ An enormous amount of money is poured into advertisements for new pop cassettes, including radio, TV, and magazine advertisements, videos, and special television programs (three of the major recording companies have weekly television programs, on three different stations).¹⁸ Although most producers feel that television and videos are the most effective means of advertising, radio spots still have a vital role in promotion. Like most radio stations in the world, Thai radio works on the principle that the more a song is heard, the more listeners will like it -- and the more they will want to buy it.¹⁹

Classical Thai music occupies much less air time. Although some stations carry regular programs of classical music (e.g., Thai Educational Radio, Thai Military Radio, etc.), most don't; a casual twist of the dial is as likely **not** to turn up classical music as it is. Classical music is sometimes used to fill up extra air time at the end of other programs: when the hour or half hour arrives, the classical piece is faded out and the next program begins. Extra air time before news broadcasts is a favored slot for such classical fillers: it may be that the music's traditional association with affairs of state and the ruling classes is still viable. Used in this manner, the timing or full length of a piece is not important. Its mere presence, indicating a shift from the realm of advertisements and entertainment to the realm of government and civic duty, is enough.²⁰ The proposition that air time equals promotion equals money, which works so well for popular music, is quite irrelevant for classical music. Commercial recordings like *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* lie even further afield, and are produced with no expectation of radio broadcast as a means of promotion.

Conclusions

These two cassettes represent very different attitudes and conceptions of what Thai music is and how it can be owned, and it is

over issues of identity, ownership, and authenticity that they part ways.

To what extent is Thai music an object that can be owned? Like much popular music in the world, Anchalee's music was created with ownability in mind: commercialism is as basic to Thai pop as it is elsewhere. If cassettes like *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* have a rather precarious and uneasy position in the contemporary music industry, it is not surprising. Classical music was never meant to stand on its own as an object; removed from its aristocratic and ritual contexts, classical music conveys but a fraction of its intended meaning and significance. *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* is extraordinarily silent as to who is playing, and when -- matters that are of central importance to contemporary Thai music, just as in the West. The recording industry methodically erases the identities of classical performers, preserving their sounds but rarely their names or faces. Cassette recordings of classical music tend to float in time and space, unanchored by copyright or by the iconicity of their performers. They have, as Walter Benjamin said, no unique existence at the place where they happen to be (Benjamin 1968: 220). To some extent, this lack of placement reflects the position of classical Thai music in contemporary Thai society. Some feel that it is but a pale reflection of its former glory, a cultural fossil preserved in the interests of national pride and heritage, supported by the government and universities.

It is still too soon to say, but the facelessness of *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains* may represent a slow fading-away of Thai classical music in general. Despite government attempts to support and bolster the traditional court arts, some Thais feel that classical music and dance ceased to develop when the courts disbanded after 1932. Instead, the existing repertoire has been worked over in exhaustive detail, in a manner reminiscent of the involuted social patterns observed by Geertz in Java (1963). Perhaps even more importantly, classical music is produced and supported by only a fraction of the recording industry, which in itself may add to the obscurity and specialization of the tradition. The small audience for classical music will surely become even smaller if the music is available in only limited forms and quantities: a dwindling audience and lack of support from the industry thus become joined in a vicious circle.

But Thai popular music is firmly fixed in the pantheon of contemporary Thai values. Anchalee's music is not only an object, but

it is an object specifically designed to fit into certain commercial slots. It was created **in order** to be "cassette-ized" and to circulate in the realm of promotion and profits. It is not surprising that *This Lonely Person* is so firmly 'placed,' compared to *The Wind at the Foot of the Mountains*. Everything about it, including its physical markings, point to and assert its legitimacy within the realm of contemporary music. It is authentic according to the rules of the Thai music industry because it is pinned down in matters of identity and ownership.

And this is its essential difference from classical music cassettes like Khru Thiap's. Anchalee's albums were designed to be commodities: the distance and separation between the performer and the performance is built into the process of copyrighting a cassette. The performance is designed to be anchored in time and space by making it into an object that can be owned by many people in many ways. Anchalee's image becomes an icon of the ownable performance: the performance--or the commodity--truly takes on a life of its own. The more it is reproduced, the more it becomes designed for reproducibility, and the more the icon and the performance become fused.

Khru Thiap, however, is quite far indeed from becoming an icon of his own performance. No doubt he pocketed his one-time fees (no copyright, no royalties) and chalked it up to a good day's work. If anything, he and his scratchy recordings are now separated in such a way that they will never come together again. With each new reassemblage and reduplication, they become more anonymous. Instead, they fuse with the image of a pretty face that provides a vision of good girls and traditional values. Khru Thiap's performances are not commodities: they are events that have been rather awkwardly commoditized, and transformed to the point that they no longer have anything to do with their performer. One performer vanishes, and the other becomes larger than life. Hopefully this is not a metaphor for classical and pop music in contemporary Thailand.

University of Michigan

Notes

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² See Wallis and Malm 1984: 13-14 on Tanzania, Tunisia, Sweden, and Trinidad; Yampolsky 1987 on the national recording company of Indonesia.

³ Regional city centers (like Chiang Mai in the north and Ubon in the northeast) certainly have recording studios of their own, but their cassettes are produced in much smaller numbers and their distribution is quite localized. The concentration of the major recording companies in the capital (and their subsequent domination of the national market) has many implications for Thai music. One of the most obvious is that the same cassettes are found all over the country. Another is that the street price of cassettes is lower in Bangkok than anywhere else: ironically, Bangkok-produced cassettes of regional performers cost 20-40% more in their home areas than in the capital. The cost of distribution is thus passed on to the regional market. In some areas, regional consumers lose at both ends. In Chiang Mai, for instance, cassettes of traditional northern music are a rather pricey 40-45 *baht* in order to meet local production costs.

⁴ The multinational companies are EMI (British), CBS, and Nite Spot (both American). Grammy and Creatia are owned and run by energetic young Thais with an astute grasp of Western business models. Some examples of Thai-Chinese family businesses are Onpa, Rota, R.S. Promotion, and Golden Sound.

⁵ To be fair, Rota has also recorded its share of odd and obscure pieces -- eclecticism seems to be Rota's byline. But classical musicians are forced to look elsewhere for recordings of less standard works. The cassette series recorded and produced by Prof. Prasit Thaworn of the Fine Arts Department and the late Prof. Uthit Naksawasdi are not widely available, but are well-known to all classical musicians.

⁶ All transliteration follows the Library of Congress system, with the exception of proper names.

⁷ This term was originally coined to differentiate "new" pop from traditional Thai popular music such as *luk thung*.

⁸ A measure of Anchalee's popularity was her appearance in 1986 in one of Pepsi's spectacular television commercials (aired only in Thailand) alongside American rock star Tina Turner (Noppong 1986). This commercial has since been immortalized in posters found on walls all over Thailand.

⁹ Teenage adulation of Anchalee has certainly played an important role in this trend, but Anchalee is by no means its sole initiator. Dr. Seree Wongmontha has used his exposure as an actor, writer, and television personality to bring gay issues into the public eye; his play-turned-movie, *Chan phu chai, na ya'* ("I'm a man") was immensely popular during 1986-87. Male homosexuality has a long history in Thailand, as does transvestism. Although Anchalee is not as outspoken as Dr. Seree and although she has never (to my knowledge) publicly acknowledged that she is gay, she is frequently seen with her lesbian lover in public. Her music and notoriety has helped to bring female homosexuality out of the closet in Thailand.

Nevertheless, middle and upper class Bangkok society still perceive homosexuality as undesirable and abnormal. A seminar was recently advertised in the newspaper as "Tackling the Gay Problem: Prevention and Assistance for Your Children Who are Walking Towards Homosexuality" (*Bangkok Post*, April 15, 1987).

¹⁰ Although most Westerners would have no trouble recognizing Anchalee as a woman, this is apparently not the case for some Thais. I had a heated conversation with two middle-aged Thai men (in Chiang Mai, not Bangkok) who insisted Anchalee was a man masquerading as a woman.

¹¹ *This Lonely Person* was produced not by Ligo/Amigo (like Anchalee's previous albums) but instead by Rota (the same company that produced the classical tape examined above, sponsored by Lee. It can be surmised that an English-language album was seen as financially riskier despite its earlier success in Thai, and that Amigo/Ligo was unwilling to take that risk. As it turned out, they were right: the album did not sell well, and even Anchalee's fans agree that it isn't as good as *This Lonely Person*.

¹² Rota has also released cassettes featuring other solo instruments, including *khim* (a struck zither), *so duang* and *so u* (bowed fiddles), *ranat ek* and *ranat thum* (wooden xylophones), *chakhe* (a plucked zither), *pi* (a class of quadruple-reed wind instruments), etc.

¹³ The only reason I am reasonably certain that Khru Thiap is the performer is that my own khloi teacher, Mr. Rangsi Kasemsuk of Srinakharinwirot University (Prasarnmit), was a student of Khru Thiap's. Steeped in his teacher's style of playing and interpretation, Rangsi knew he was listening to his late teacher within a few seconds. He concluded that three of the thirteen pieces were performed by other musicians, probably students of Khru Thiap because their style of playing was very similar. The three pieces are "Dao thong," "Khun phlap phla," and "Cha hoi."

¹⁴ Perhaps even more so: students respect and venerate their teachers in a manner quite foreign to the West. The Thai word for "teacher" (*khru*) comes from the Sanskrit word *guru*, and pupils are known as *luk sit* or "disciples." Music students continue to be conscious of the line of teacher-pupil relationships preceding them.

¹⁵ Again, the cassette series produced by the Fine Arts Department and by Dr. Uthit Naksawadi are virtually the only cassettes to include such information, and this is a direct result of their didactic purpose, which is to preserve a traditional art form.

¹⁶ Recent debates over copyright protection have made it clear that copyright enforcement is of growing concern to the Thai government and many artists. On March 1, 1989, Thailand became a signatory of the Berne Convention, and stricter protection of both foreign and Thai material may follow.

¹⁷ A recent estimate put the ratio of promotion cost to production cost in Thailand as 8:2, compared to 3:7 in the West ("The sound of...," 1986: 48-52).

¹⁸ Recording companies like Ligo/Amigo seem to be the shape of things to come; the old days of family-run recording businesses are almost over. Instead, record companies are becoming larger and more compartmentalized as promotion and production become more complex. The most successful companies are run like Western corporations, divided into departments with a hierarchical division of labor. These companies are successful precisely because of this studied approach; every aspect of 'objectifying' the singers and songs is broken down into the separate components of contractual agreements, promotion via several kinds of media, and production

itself (in which standards are quickly rising). Successful singers and albums are now 'created' and iconicized along lines first found in the West and now common to popular music all over the world.

¹⁹ Recording companies pay radio stations by the cue or spot, and the average cue costs about 1,000 baht (US\$40.00). Reasonably successful songs are usually aired for three or four months, exceptionally successful songs for longer. *This Lonely Person* was exceptionally successful; several of its songs were aired for many months during 1985-86.

²⁰ On programs devoted to classical music, timing is obviously more important, but my impression is that commercial recordings are used much less frequently than recordings made by the station itself (particularly in the case of Thai Educational Radio, which has an excellent recording studio) or even amateur recordings (which would explain some of the poorer sound quality). Recordings of school and university groups are often used, and solo singers' names are usually announced. Clearly, tapes like these are not copyrighted, nor is the station paid for the 'cue' since such recordings are only heard once or twice.

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