

Isaan Lives: Hongthong Dao Udon: From singing star to political prisoner

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Ethnomusicologist James Mitchell takes a closer look at the amazing life of luk thung singer Hongthong Dao Udon and her journey from star to political prisoner.



Hongthong Dao Udon was a child star of the 1970s who developed into a major *mo lam-luk thung* act during the 1980s. A second career as a radio DJ placed her at the heart of Udon Thani's Red Shirt movement and she found herself entangled in Thailand's color coded political conflict.

For years I had been trying to meet Hongthong Dao Udon because *luk thung* and the Red Shirts were two of my key research interests. We finally met in September 2015, a week before Hongthong entered Udon Thani Prison to begin serving a 16-month sentence resulting from her political activism.

The rise of luk thung



In the 1960s, Thailand’s music scene was shaken up by the rise of the working class hybrid genre *luk thung*, or Thai country songs. The first generation of stars, such as Chai Mueangsing, Waiphot Phetsuphan, and the first king and queen of *luk thung*, Suraphon Sombatjaroen and Phongsri Woranut, were mostly from the Central provinces above Bangkok.

At the same time, *mo lam*, the folk music of the Thai Lao people living in the impoverished Northeast, was heavily recorded and gaining increasing popularity.

The blend of the two genres *mo lam* and *luk thung* in the 1970s paved the way to stardom for singers like Saksayam Phetchomphu from Mahasarakham, Dao Bandon from Yasothon, and Sonchai Mekwichian from Nakhon Ratchasima.

But it was not until the 1980s that the Isaan cultural resurgence really took off. Soon a constant stream of Isaan performers poured into the *luk thung* industry, including [Soraphet Phinyo and his singing partner Nong Nut Duangchiwan](#).

Other talented Isaan performers from this period were Chaloemphon Malakham from Surin, Phimpha Phonsiri from Chaiyaphum, Thongmi Malai from Yasothon, whose most famous song, “[Chomrom taxi](#),” describes the lifestyle of Isaan taxi drivers in Bangkok. Other singers were Khwanchai Phetroiet from Roi Et, Onuma Singisiri and Yenjit Phonthewi from Khon Kaen, and of course, Hongthong Dao Udon from Udon Thani.

This generation of Isaan *luk thung* singers were often mentored by the older songwriters from the region like Surin Phaksiri, Sunthum Phairimbueng, and Doi Inthanon, who hailed from Surin and was of the minority Kui ethnicity.

It was Doi Inthanon who shaped the careers of both Somchai Mekwichian, another rising star at the

time, and Hongthong Dao Udon, with an eclectic mix of mo lam and luk thung songs.

The success of these older songwriters pushed more and more Isaan musicians to enter the luk thung industry.

By the time Suphan Chuenchom wrote Siriphon Amphaiphong's massive 1991 hit "[Bow rak si dam](#)" (Black Love Bow), the dominance of Isaan songwriters and their protégés from the region was firmly established.

From Isaan temple fairs to a face cream factory in Bangkok

Born Kulap Yot-orn, Hongthong made her way into the music industry through provincial song contests. By the time she was ten years old she was already a veteran of temple fairs, a common venue for local concerts in the Northeast.

In 1976, former singer and band leader Sripthrai Jaiphra organised a large-scale contest to find four talented young singers. Kulap Yot-orn, then aged 16, was the third chosen. Sripthrai visited her parents with the promise to make her a star.

But Sripthrai also wanted to promote his own brand of face foundation cream, known as Hongyok, so he renamed his four new singers Hongnoi, Hongfa, Hongthong and Honghoen.

At first, Hongthong was seen as the least promising of the quartet. But when fellow singer Hongnoi struggled with the First Prize winner's song "Pump lam phloen" Hongthong took her chance. Because of her *mo lam* background she turned 'Pump lam phloen' into her first big hit.

It soon became clear to the young singers that life under Sripthrai's guidance was less than ideal. When Doi Inthanon, the band's song writer, had a song ready, Hongthong had to memorize it quickly or Sripthrai would hit her and say "if you can't do it then go home." Being on the plump side, he would sometimes force Hongthong to fast for three days, drinking only water.

Soon, Hongnoi took the other two younger singers off to join Somchai Mekwichian's band. But Hongthong stayed because she felt indebted to Sripthrai. She remembers that he had lots of knowledge to pass on, but not many - only her really - could stand being with him long enough to learn it all.

Even though her song had turned into a hit, living in Bangkok proved very hard. Hongthong lived in a crowded apartment with Sripthrai's other protégés and the workers who manufactured his face cream.

Hongthong recalls that Sripthrai would hand the singers a hundred baht each to last for five days but sometimes he forgot and disappeared, taking trips to other provinces.

The Ramkhamhaeng University students who lived next door would borrow money from them even though Hongthong and the other singers were poor themselves. Bonded by the hard circumstances, they would all get together and make a very watery soup with tofu.

When her family made the long trip to Bangkok from the Northeast, they were shocked to see the poverty she was living in and to find she did not even have anything to cook with. The fish that her family brought from home was divided equally with the neighbor who offered to prepare it.

Sripthrai, who had a *jao chu* (playboy) reputation, was once married to the famous singer Buppha Saichon, but Hongthong only knew Bom, his third wife.

Despite being Sripthrai's biggest star, Bom would send Hongthong shopping because the other singers were too tall, beautiful, and white-skinned to go to the market.

A handful of prawns from the market would have to feed the whole band of ten people. Bom was so stingy that if Hongthong took just one longan fruit to eat she would yell, "Who ate my longan?" Nevertheless, Hongthong credits Bom and Sripthrai with teaching her how to save money.

Cashing in stardom



The author James Mitchell with Hongthong Dao Udon in September 2015, a week before she began serving a 16-month prison sentence resulting from her political activism.

In 1978, her decision to stay with Sripthrai began to pay off. That year she recorded answering songs to hits by two of *luk thung's* biggest stars. "[Rak Tim nae rue](#)" ('You really love Tim, don't you') answered Sayan Sanya's "Rak Tim khon diao" ('I only love Tim'), and "[Bua Luang ror rak](#)" ('Bua Luang waits for love') responded to Sonchai Mekwichian's "Bua Luang bueng phalanx."

After gaining her radio license, Hongthong began to DJ, write and perform advertising jingles and also act in television advertisements.

For the song and ad, "Chan rak jakrawan Micky, du si sanga suai di, khi pai nai" ('I love Micky bicycles, so elegant and beautiful, you can ride anywhere), she was paid 100,000 baht.

Later, she appeared in a large story in Thai Rath newspaper posing on a Micky bike. Using the pen name Cho Phaka, she also became a regular columnist for the newspaper *Ban Mueang*.

She continued her partnership with the entrepreneurial Sripthrai whose house in Phetburi Tat Mai hosted his face cream factory upstairs, and downstairs was the SAS international laboring company, which supplied Isaan laborers to Saudi Arabia.

In order to promote this business, Sripthrai made the culturally influential film *Khun Nai Sa-u* ('Lady Saudi') in 1978, featuring Soraphong Chatri, Lalana Sulawan and Naowarat Yukdanan.

For the female lead, he turned to Hongthong because all other singers had left him by then. She played the role of a laborer's wife and performed three songs - "[Hongthong khanong lam](#)" ('Singing and Swinging Swan'), "Tha phi" ('Waiting for you'), and "Khun Nai Sa-u" in a Japanese style.

In the film Sripthrai tricks Isaan laborers by flying them to Bangkok and then back to Udon. They think they have reached Saudi Arabia and say "this looks just like my hometown - let's call it Sa-Udon." Another joke that has since entered Isaan folklore was that the Isaan laborers were clueless about what to do with the butter in the plane so they put it in their pockets where it melted.

In the film Hongthong's character is asked how she can afford to wear so much jewelry. She answers, "I sent the buffalo to work abroad" ("Song khwai pai mueang nork"). This line inspired a well-known saying that "Khwai mueang Udon khaeng raeng" ('Udon buffalos are strong'). Hongthong comments "Bangkok people didn't understand how that saying came about and thought it only had a sexual meaning."

Even though the film was not a huge monetary success, it was popular enough that men who wanted to go to Saudi Arabia would automatically think of Sripthrai's company.

Hongthong's role in the film got her lots of music work. A monthly income of about 30,000 baht made it possible for her to buy a house even before she got her ID card.

Between 1978 and 1982 Hongthong recorded fifteen cassette albums. But in 1982-83 the luk thung concert touring business took a hard hit by nationwide petrol shortages, which caused petrol stations to close at 10 pm. On top on that, Hongthong started to have problems with her voice, which forced her to cut back on bookings.

In 1985 she married and completely stopped performing because her husband disliked the attention she received from male fans.

Changing stages

In the late 1980s, the door to a new career opened when Hongthong joined the election campaign of Kon Thapharangsi and Chatchai Chunhawan. As she befriended Chatchai's wife, she got to know many of the Bangkok politicians at the time. She remembers singing at Chatchai's birthday party shortly after he was elected Prime Minister and was given a tip of 30.000 baht.

After giving birth to a son in 1987 and getting divorced in 1994, she left Bangkok and moved back to Udon Thani.

Hongthong was impressed by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra whose Thai Rak Thai party won a big election victory in 2001. Thaksin visited Isaan and learned from it, she says, adding that people in the Northeast valued democratic participation because it allowed them to express their opinions.

When the military deposed Thaksin's government in 2006, she wanted to protest. She had just met former *luk thung* manager Khwanchai Phraiphana and started working as a DJ for his Rak Udon community radio station.

As Khwanchai's profile within the Red Shirt movement grew, Hongthong was caught up in his militant style. On July 24, 2008, Khwanchai's Rak Udon followers attacked a rally of a local Yellow Shirt group at Nong Prachak Sinlapakom Park in Udon Thani

On that day, as part of her normal radio shift, Hongthong asked the Rak Udon supporters to go down to the park to confront the Yellow Shirts. As a result, she was charged with spreading misinformation through the radio and was sentenced to 16 months jail on October 30, 2010.

Khwanchai, who did not take part in the incident, received a two year sentence while the 32 Red Shirts and two Yellow Shirt protesters involved in the fighting were given 8 months in prison.

In 2007 Hongthong had formed a musical partnership with her relative, police officer Baonao Mueangudon. They wrote Red Shirt songs, produced video clips, and performed together at protest concerts.

Many of their songs were *phleng plaeng* or songs with altered lyrics. "Num suea khao, sao suea daeng" (White-Shirt Boy, Red-Shirt Girl) was an adaptation of Soraphet Phinyo's famous duet with Nong Nut Duangchiwan, "Num na khao, sao na kluea" (Rice Farming Boy, Salt-Farming Girl).

I discuss this song in my recent book, *Luk Thung: The culture and politics of Thailand's most popular music*, but was not aware who was behind the powerful declaration, "I am a red-shirt woman of the strongest kind."

Another Red shirt music adaptation is "[Mi na hak](#)" ('Cute bear') based on Nong Benz Jr.'s "Family mi phaenda" ('Panda Family'). Hongthong wrote the satirical, acerbic lyrics and Baonao photoshopped pictures of then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva into the video. As far as she can recall it was only performed once, at the opening celebration of the Chomrom Rak Udon (Love Udon Club) in 2008.

A verse in the song refers to Hongthong going to jail. In our interview, she joked that Baonao decided to keep the verse despite her wanting to cut it. "I wrote it, I sang it, I'm going to jail for it - I have too much artistic talent in my head," she said.

Hongthong has just been released from Udon Thani prison after serving 12 months of her sentence. One cannot help thinking that Thailand should celebrate artists like Hongthong Dao Udon. She came from poor circumstances to excel in a national art form through hard work and talent. When ill health threatened her singing career, she simply strove to do something else. Today, she is passionate about the political process and the chance for ordinary Thais to be heard by their leaders.

Yet, like many ordinary red shirts, she has paid for her activism with her liberty. At the end of our interview, Hongthong asked me to make the following words known:

"I'm not a Red Shirt because I love Thak sin or Yingluck," she said. "I want to stress that the Red Shirt protesters did everything off their own backs. They paid for everything. I think that now people in the countryside will have a better life because I and others were willing to stand up and fight for our rights."

James Mitchell completed his Ph.D. from Macquarie University in 2012 and is currently a lecturer at Khon Kaen University and an adjunct research fellow at Monash University, Australia. He is the author of the book [Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand's Most Popular Music](#).

