

The missed multi billion-baht opportunity of Thailand's Molam industry

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, streaming businesses and online platforms enjoyed explosive growth, especially for the entertainment industry. In Thailand, however, one particular traditional music business – *molam* – plunged into dire circumstances. Yet to be afforded legitimacy, molam artists receive little to no support from the government. Today, they hang onto a dimming hope that they will return to the stage as their art form gradually dies.

Yommanil Namwongsa, leader of the Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng molam band based in Udon Thani, said the music tradition is an iconic part of religious events across Isaan.

Molam bands lead itinerant lives, and are familiar with the roads traveled between contracted events. When the pandemic hit, restrictions rendered those trips impossible. They struggled to survive during the crisis, trying to help hundreds of molam musicians make ends meet.

“The pandemic was the most brutal period for the molam industry. Molam wasn’t the only business impacted. All professions have been affected, but it has been particularly hard on us. We need to be able to get on the road to perform, in order to get money to feed our band,” Yommanil said.



Yommanil Namwongsa, leader of the Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng molam band. Credit: Facebook Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng

It wasn't only the performers who were hurt. Niang Hianglar, a food vendor who has followed molam bands across Khon Kaen province for over 20 years, also struggled. Her main customers were dancers with the bands. Before COVID-19, she traveled by car to sell noodles and grilled meatballs. When the pandemic hit, she had to change to travel by motorbike instead.

"Back then, I had opened my shop for seven years. I earned 7,000 baht a month," she said. "When COVID-19 happened, I couldn't cope with it. I had to close my shop. I used to have a shop, but I had to close after COVID. I couldn't keep it."



Niang Hianglar sells somtam at a religious festival in Khon Kaen City. Photo: Phayusak Yangcharun

Social media survival

Molam is country music that captures the hardships of rural life, often with a dark sense of humor. Its hallmark instruments include the khene, a bamboo mouth organ, and the three-stringed phin lute.

It remains a crucial source of entertainment for the Isaan people. Although many bands were wiped out during the pandemic, artists and creators still try hard to adapt and survive. It is not the first time that the molam industry has had to stand against the current on its own, despite growing popularity on social media.

“When we were unable to travel out of our area, we had to perform only within our molam empire,” Yommanil said. Molam performers turned to Facebook live to reach audiences, he said. His band went through a major change by having to perform in their residences and collect fees via Facebook groups just to earn money to get by while waiting to be able to travel and perform again.

“This time is the era of social media. Before it was CDs or video cassettes,” Yommanil added. “These days are all social media; YouTube, TikTok, Facebook.”

Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng was the first molam band to go big on social media, winning over 1 million followers on YouTube and Facebook. As audiences shifted toward digital channels, the new normal for molam has become performing both on stage and online.

But income from YouTube views is only about 10,000 baht or so per 1 million views. The stage is more lucrative, and molam shows are big business in Isaan. In normal times, a band earns money

from contracted gigs through ticket sales. Usually no fewer than a thousand tickets are sold for between 100 baht to 200 baht each for the 10-hour performances.

Beside the audience and performers, there are many who work behind the scenes. There are the roadies building the gigantic stage, makeup artists, choreographers, songwriters, designers, cooks, trailers, and food vendors like Niang who follow the bands.



Siwaporn Fongthong, a researcher and professor of the Faculty of Economics, Khon Kaen University.

Siwaporn Fongthong, whose research into the socioeconomic implications of molam in Isaan was published last year, said artists have to constantly adapt to keep up. She said that while many professions died during the pandemic, molam bands split up and reconstituted as several new bands. Not only did they not die out, they also found new ways to reach their audiences, such as the Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng band, whose online breakout generated revenues from their YouTube channel.

It also helped the band members establish their own online channels, she said.

“Looking at it, it is like building a fan base and followers, exposing themselves on online platforms,” Siwaporn said. “Then, they separate from the old band and form one on their own, and their fans follow. It is similar to K-pop.”

Industry of culture, entertainment

By the time pandemic restrictions were relaxed in 2021, many businesses had already shut down.

However, molam managed to make a comeback on the entertainment scene.

Crews set up sound and lighting systems in the late afternoon. Dozens of dancers got themselves ready, sprucing up alongside nearly a hundred actors under the stage. Even before most spectators flocked in for a night out, many had taken up seats early in the day to get the best spot. Others queued to buy tickets behind metal fences in front of the venue.



Posters promote shows for the Rabeabwathasilp molam band on the band's Facebook page one day before each show. They feature tourism attractions and points of interest in each province.

Nittaya Senanikom said she is too old to stay up all night to sell her corn and sweet potatoes. However, her love for molam still keeps her up until 3am. She prepares up to 150 corncobs. She said she can earn double compared to when she sells on the roadside.

Nittaya said with a smile that she always tries to attend molam shows if it's not too much trouble, partly because she loves it, and also because she is able to sell more.

Niang, the somtam vendor, feels similarly. She laughed as she talked about following molam acts with her cart.



Dancers for the Sao Noi Phet Ban Paeng molam band get ready before a show. Photo: Phayusak Yangcharun

“Sometimes I only planned to go for one night, but I just kept following them. There was also a time that I traveled [across Khon Kaen] from Ban Kerng to Chonnabot district. I bought new clothes as I went on, because the show got big. When it got big, I just went with the flow, buying new clothes as I needed to. It happened to me often, because I love this job,” she recalled with amusement.

Siwaporn said molam shows can generate massive revenue for the local economy.

She said the economic value stems from people spending on everything from transportation and accommodation to food during a tour. Up to 15% of the audience travels over 100 kilometers to see shows, whether by plane or car. If they watch all night, they will spend a lot on snacks and alcoholic drinks.

“Before COVID-19, molam could create jobs in Isaan worth up to 6 billion baht. During a normal time, each molam band could earn around 700 million baht per season,” she said.

Sirisak Laochankham, a lead researcher on molam and the creative economy, said there have been attempts to create more space for molam shows, outdoors or even indoors. Various related authorities and businesses have helped organize molam shows in a hall at Khon Kaen University, which received quite positive feedback, he said.



Sirisak Laochankham, a lead researcher on the topic of molam and creative economy.
Photo: Phayusak Yangcharun

“Many were surprised. They never thought they could watch molam until the end, but they did,” he said. “It wasn’t 100% molam because it was indoors, but with its economic value, more people have become interested in it.”

“The government however is still unable to properly support molam’s potential as a valuable business, whether by law or other kinds of aid,” Sirisak added. “Molam is not legally recognized as an organization.”

He said the challenge of building Thai “soft power” requires more than just trying to mimic South Korea’s success. He believes there may be places around the world that molam could bring joy to, but Thailand needs to reconsider the support that it currently provides the industry. He questioned if the government is ready to give a boost to molam as a potential “soft power” source for Thailand.

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