

# Historical Narrative, Synecdoche, and *Pong Lang*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines two particular narratives about the Northeastern Thai musical genre *pong lang* [โปงลาง] that rely upon the rhetorical strategy of synecdoche – the substitution of a part of something for the whole – to link the *pong lang* ensemble with Northeastern Thai history and culture. In the first of these narratives, the history of the *pong lang* xylophone serves as a means to historicize the entire *pong lang* ensemble and contextualize it within Northeastern Thai history and culture. In the second, individual instruments within the *pong lang* ensemble serve as representations of different provinces of northeastern Thailand, allowing the *pong lang* ensemble to symbolize the *Isan* region. Although the *pong lang* ensemble and its associated genre of music are relatively new, people have employed rhetorical strategies, such as synecdoche, to highlight important connections between *pong lang*, Northeastern Thai history, and Northeastern Thai culture, helping to establish the genre as one of the most well-known types of Northeastern Thai cultural performance.

*Keywords:* Northeastern Thai music, *pong lang*, Thai traditional music, music and culture

## Introduction

In late September of 2011, I sent a message to my friend Pok in Thailand – at the time a teacher and assistant to the dean of education at Rajabhat Marasarakham University – about my recent decision to focus on connections between *pong lang* [โปงลาง] music and *Isan*

[northeastern Thailand, อีสาน] identity as the subject of my master's and doctoral research. Most of what she said in response to my decision to study this particular variety of *Isan* folk music was exactly what I expected to hear: excitement that I am planning on returning to northeastern Thailand and agreement that pong lang was a great music to try to study. One of her comments, however, gave me pause. This comment, written in her friendly and very clear English writing style, simply read:

That's a good idea that you'll do the research about *pong lang*, as you know the original *pong lang* [a log xylophone-like instrument popular in the northeast] is from Kalasin and the best place to make it is in Kalasin, I think Ajarn Karn took you to visit the place where they make them already. The original *khaen* [แคน, a reed mouth organ popular in Laos and northeastern Thailand] was made in Khon Kaen and the *wode* [โหวด, an instrument resembling a pan pipe, made up of several reed tubes arranged in a circle] is originally from Roi-et, man!

While I had heard most of the connections in the statement while I was in Thailand, there was something in the way my friend phrased her comment that drew my thoughts to the ways that the pong lang ensemble, and the genre of music that it is associated with, are associated with the *Isan* region of Thailand, both historically and spatially. This article, and much of my current dissertation research, stems primarily from these ruminations. This research focuses upon the ways that *pong lang* music and the *pong lang* ensemble are historically, rhetorically and symbolically tied to the *Isan* region and its history. More specifically, two particular narratives about *pong lang* are examined that rely upon synecdoche – a rhetorical device in which a part of something stands in to refer to the whole – to link the *pong lang* ensemble with Northeastern Thai history and culture. In the first of these narratives, the history of the *pong lang* xylophone serves as a means to historicize the entire *pong lang* ensemble and contextualize it within Northeastern Thai history and culture. In the second, individual instruments within the *pong lang* ensemble serve as representations of different provinces of northeastern Thailand, allowing the *pong lang* ensemble to symbolize the *Isan* region.

## *Pong Lang*

*Pong lang* itself has been imbued with many different (and often confusing or seemingly contradictory) associations. This web of meanings is even apparent in the name *pong lang*, which can simultaneously describe a type of wooden cowbell used in the northeast, a particular piece of music originally part of the *kaen* repertoire that is meant to imitate the sound of this bell ringing as an animal is walking, the log xylophone (originally called the *khaw law* [ขอลอ]) that adopted and was later associated with this piece, an ensemble led by this particular instrument, or the genre of music and dance played by this ensemble (Miller, “From Country Hick” 104).

The *pong lang* ensemble and its associated genre of music are commonly heard and performed in Thailand’s northeastern region. The music is typically fast paced, pentatonic, largely heterophonic and always danceable. While groups can differ largely in size, ranging from small ensembles to large theatrical troupes, there are several instruments that can be found in nearly every *pong lang* ensemble. One or more *pong langs*, each one often played by two separate individuals to provide both an elaborated version of the melody and a rhythmic drone, usually share the center stage with multiple *wodes*, *khaens* and an electric version of the *phin* [พิน, a type of lute]. A larger bass *phin* has also been developed to fill the role of an electric bass guitar, although often this role is taken by a standard bass guitar that has been outfitted with an elaborate Thai-style scroll (Miller, “From Country Hick” 105). A wide variety of percussion instruments fills out this ensemble, typically including the *klawng yao* [กลองยาว, long drums], *chap* [ฉาบ, hand cymbals], Western-style drum sets and the *phin hai* [พินไห]. This final instrument is a set of different-sized ceramic jars with large bands stretched over their mouths. While this instrument was actually played at one point, in modern *pong lang* troupes an attractive woman usually stands behind the instrument and dances in such a way as to simulate playing (Miller, “From Country Hick” 105). While the ensemble may feature vocalists, it is also often performed as a completely instrumental genre. There are, however, typically several dancers in these ensembles who are often clad in traditional *Isan* costumes and perform a number of dances that depict old-time *Isan* life.



**Fig. 1.** *Pong Lang Ensemble. Instruments shown (Left to Right): 'khaen', 'wode', 'pong lang', and 'phin'*

While often said to be much older, scholars typically agree that the *pong lang* ensemble was originally organized and popularized by a district official in the province of Kalasin in the late 1950s. Initially known as *wong dontri phuen-muang Isan* [วงดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน, *Isan* local music ensemble], *pong lang* music was a typically-upbeat and danceable style of music featuring instruments native to the northeastern region of Thailand. While the instruments and much of the repertoire had been around for a long time, the inclusion of the instruments together in the same ensemble and the use of the *pong lang* and the *wode* [a type of panpipe] as serious musical instruments, rather than musical toys or signaling devices, were novel developments (Nanongkham 360, 376).

After the Vietnam War, *pong lang* rose to further prominence after it was chosen to be part of the musical curriculum in a number of northeastern Thai arts high schools, known as *natasin* [นาฏศิลป์] and, subsequently, was added as a subject in northeastern Thai teacher's colleges and universities in the 1980s (Miller, "From Country Hick" 100-101). Miller and Nanongkham explain that *pong lang* was adopted by these schools over a number of more established genres of Northeastern Thai music such as *morlam* [หมอลำ] or *luk thung*

[ลูกทุ่ง] because it was a form of ensemble music and thus easy to teach to large numbers of students; it was viewed as exciting and popular enough to draw students' and audiences' attention and was perceived to be less "Westernized" than other forms of Thai traditional music, which had undergone many changes to cater to their increasingly-cosmopolitan fan bases ("From Country Hick" 100-101; 385-386). In the institutional setting of the *nataasin* and Thai colleges, new pieces and dances were added to the repertoire to reflect and celebrate the agrarian history and ethnically-Lao culture of the region, while the ensemble itself and its teaching methods were standardized (Miller, "From Country Hick" 105).

### The Historicization of *Pong Lang*

While *pong lang* is a relatively recent genre of music, it has very strong ties to the *Isan* region and its culture. These ties are due, in part, to the way that *pong lang* has been given an historical narrative that allows it to be connected to a period "predating Indian-Thai culture" while still acknowledging the genre's modern sensibilities and recent invention (Ridout 836). When the history of *pong lang* is given in any detail, especially on government or tourism websites and materials, a strong historical element is created by resorting to the histories of the instruments in the *pong lang* ensemble, as most of these instruments have long histories of use in the northeast and are unique to that area of Thailand. While the histories of several of these instruments could be used to tie *pong lang* to *Isan's* past, the history of the *pong lang* itself is usually used for this purpose. These *pong lang* origin stories trace the modern *pong lang* from its modern form as an instrument to supposedly original forms as items used in premodern *Isan* life. These stories take two distinct shapes.

The first, and most widely used of these historical narratives traces the *pong lang* back to an earlier form that is said to have had anywhere from one to six different keys and was used as a means of communication, a recreational musical activity and to scare birds away from crops. For instance, *The Rough Guide to Thailand* introduces and describes *pong lang*, stating:

One notable folk style to have grown in popularity in recent years is the up-tempo and danceable northeastern instrumental style known as *bong lang* [*sic*] (a wooden xylophone that is attached vertically to a tree and was originally used to keep birds off crops). *Bong lang* is ancient, predating Indian-Thai culture, and was updated by National Artist Pleung Chairasamee in the 1970s. (Ridout 836)

Here the authors first mention *pong lang* as an instrumental style but, in their definition, they shift the discussion to the instrument itself, which is claimed to have a long history and an original use as a means of keeping birds away from crops, with the present shape of the instrument (as well as the ensemble itself) attributed to an “update” in the 1970s.

Similarly, Miller claims:

The original *pong lang* was called *khaw law* and its origins appear to be in Kalasin province in central *Isan*. It derives from simpler instruments that were played in rice-field huts as self-entertainment for villagers assigned the duty of guarding the rice crop, or to ward off wild animals. Interviews conducted in 1973 established that the instrument was known as far back as 1915, when it probably had only seven to nine logs. (“From Country Hick” 104)

While he is not using this story to trace the history of the *pong lang* ensemble, Miller’s field experience does support the story of the development of the *pong lang*. Similarly, the website, [thaiclassicalmusic.com](http://thaiclassicalmusic.com), while dedicated to “*pong long* Thai music,” outlines the history of the instrument, but only briefly discussing the development of the modern *pong lang* ensemble. The website states, “Mr. Pleung Chairadsamee has learned, searched, improved and developed ‘Phonglang’ [*sic*] all over 40 years making ‘Grolor’ – only for chasing birds and crows – be the well-developed Phonglang” (“Pong Lang”).

The second, less historically grounded narrative takes *pong lang* for its name and traces its origins back to the wooden cowbell that the piece “*pong lang*” is based upon. This is explained in the English

summary of one [Thai language] Mahidol University dissertation on the instrument, which states:

The Second background, Bronze Ponglang held on the cow when the cow stepped or walkout, it made a voice. It protected the cow loose the way [*sic*]. If the cow lose the way, the voice help to know where is the cow. Moreover, the voice of Ponglang told the villager that the commercial caravan passed that village. Ponglang was firstly made from bronze. Than [*sic*] it was developed to be a wood as today. (Karintr 160)

While many sources (including the dissertation above) have found this particular story to be historically inaccurate, this history was the one that Ajarn Kan, my host, related to me while I stayed in Kalasin researching for my undergraduate thesis. She handed me a cowbell as a gift, referring to it as “the original *pong lang*,” and explained that the modern instrument developed from this type of cowbell. Indeed, the item that she handed me was made of the same variety of wood as the instrument and had two clappers that looked remarkably similar to the mallets of the *pong long*.

In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau outlines a “walking rhetoric,” describing the ways that people manipulate an overbearing and panoptic spatial organization through the everyday act of walking (100-101). One of the key rhetorical features that Certeau highlights is the synecdoche, which “names a part instead of the whole which includes it. Thus ... a brick shelter or a hill is taken for the park in the narration of a trajectory” (101). Thus, by using the synecdoche and its counterpart, the asyndeton [which fragments and elides, rather than expands], one is able to shape and manipulate space within an imposed grid of power. By using the history of the *pong lang* to stand for the entire *pong lang* ensemble, these historicizing narratives also employ synecdoche as a rhetorical device. However, in this case, it is used not to manipulate panoptic space, but to counter the imposed narrative of time, allowing a relatively recent “invented tradition”, in the Hobsbawmian sense, to create a history stretching back to premodern times (Hobsbawm and Ranger). The synecdochal narratives manipulate *pong lang*’s space in Thai history to be not a recently invented instrumental ensemble, but



the end result of the evolution of the *khaw law* – an important part of traditional culture that served as both a means of communication and crop protection.

This manner of historicization also serves as a prime example of ideas proposed by a number of scholars who view concepts such as “tradition” and “heritage” as processes rather than categories. Rather than somehow just being traditional music, *pong lang* is made traditional in the present by constructing a connection to the past, reflecting sentiments by scholars, such as Handler and Linnekin, who argue against naturalistic conceptualization of tradition by understanding tradition itself as “not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past” (287), or Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who understands the concept of heritage as “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (369). Stories of *pong lang*’s history, such as those discussed here, serve as a means of legitimating and adding value to an already valuable genre of music through the use of history.

It is also interesting to note the similarities between this process of fashioning a history for *pong lang* music with the ways that nation-states construct and naturalize their histories, as outlined by Benedict Anderson. Noting the numbers of people that have allegedly fought or even died for a country that they had no conception of and would not even come into existence until much later (e.g., William the Conqueror, who died before the English language even came into existence), Anderson theorizes that nations are compelled to create a “narrative of ‘identity’ ” (205, 208). He states:

Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no originator, the nation’s biography can not be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it ‘up time’ – towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archeology casts its fitful gleam. This fashioning, however, is marked by deaths, which, in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, start from an originally present.... [T]he nation’s biography snatches, against the going mortality



rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own.’ (Anderson 208-209)

Thus, rather than being able to simply trace a genealogy back to its origins, the nation, as an imagined community with no definite beginning, must fashion its own historical narrative that begins at the present and incorporates suitable people and events into “its” history.

Just as with the nation-state, people have crafted historical narratives for the *pong lang*. Beginning at the present time, these narratives progress backwards through time, drawing upon certain individuals and events that have been deemed exemplary and important until they settle with an appropriate “ur-*pong lang*” with roots stretching back hundreds or even thousands of years and grounded in the everyday life of premodern *Isan* – be it as a signaling device and means of crop protection or a means of locating stray cattle. Histories such as these lend an air of legitimacy, naturality and inevitability to what they are describing, which can serve as a useful tool for genres of music such as *pong lang* that must compete with other, often more established genres for listenership and support.

## Ties to Place

As an ensemble comprised of different instruments tied to different provinces within northeastern Thailand, the *pong lang* ensemble itself also serves as a sort of musical synecdoche for the *Isan* region as a whole. As evident in Pok’s original email, the instruments within the *pong lang* ensemble have particular historical ties to different provinces within northeastern Thailand. Two of these connections between province and instrument have become especially explicit and thus will be discussed here: those between Roi-Et and the *wode* and Kalasin and the *pong lang*. Both of these provinces have adopted these instruments as symbols of identity, especially within the respective provincial capital cities for which the provinces were named, where they serve as a popular motif. One contributor to a website entitled *Waymarking.com* commented upon this phenomenon,

noting “[a] ‘vode’ [*sic*], as the name is rendered in English, is a Thai musical instrument, and a symbol associated with the small city of Roi-Et. As a motif, the instrument is found throughout the city” (Groundspeak). The most notable of these vode symbols takes the form of a large sculpture – quite a bit bigger than a large car – that occupies a roundabout near several municipal buildings (see *Fig. 2*).



**Fig. 2.** *Town Hall Vode Statue in Roi-Et* from: Groundspeak. “Town Hall ‘Vode’—Roi-Et Town, Roi-Et Province, Thailand.” *Waymarking*, 2010, [www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM95YQ\\_Town\\_Hall\\_VodeRoi\\_Et\\_Town\\_Roi\\_Et\\_Province\\_Thailand](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM95YQ_Town_Hall_VodeRoi_Et_Town_Roi_Et_Province_Thailand). 2010. Accessed 12 Dec. 2011.



**Fig. 3.** Large Pong Lang in Kalasin from: *AsiaFinest.com*, [www.asiafinest.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php/t216085.html](http://www.asiafinest.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php/t216085.html)

Similarly, the city of Kalasin is home to the world's largest *pong lang* (see Fig. 3) – also occupying an open area near several municipal buildings – which plays a central role in the area's annual Kalasin Pong Lang, Phrae Wa and Red Cross Fair (Lapang). Furthermore, the province is also home to the Ban Phokhru Plueang Chairatsami – a small hut that Plueang Chairatsami built that serves as a museum of *Isan* traditional instruments and a school for traditional music such as *pong lang* (TAT, “Ban Phokhru”) – and is even described in the Tourism Authority of Thailand's website as “known across Thailand for its Pong Lang music and the famous Phrae Wa cloth” (“Thailand Travel Guide”). The connection between Kalasin and *pong lang* has even been reflected in the province's motto, “Fa Daet Song Yang Ancient City, Pong Lang Folk Music, Phu Thai Culture, Phrae Wa Silk, Pha Saweoi Phu Phan, Lam Pao River, and Million-year Dinosaurs” (TAT, “Thailand Travel Guide”). These ties between *pong lang* and the *Isan* region – either in the form of more general ties between

the ensemble's history and *Isan* culture outlined above or the more specific ties outlined here that establish the *pong lang* ensemble as a collection of instruments with different ties to cities and provinces in the *Isan* region – allow the *pong lang* ensemble and its music to serve as a further synecdoche of the *Isan* region, establishing *pong lang* as a symbol of northeastern Thailand and *Isan* culture as a whole.

### Synecdoche and Meaning in *Pong Lang*

It is through processes such as synecdoche that people invest the *pong lang* ensemble with meaning and employ the genre to communicate ideas of Northeastern Thai identity. From the modern *pong lang* ensemble's creation in the 1950s to the present day, perceptions of the genre have risen from it being “insignificant to the traditional music of the Northeast” (Miller, *Khaen Playing*) to *pong lang* being the “most prominent symbol of old-time *Isan* musical culture” precisely because people have found ways in which to invest the genre with meaning (Miller, “From Country Hick” 104). Synecdoche, a rhetorical substitution of part for whole, is just one of such processes through which people are able to invest the genre with meaning.

By utilizing the history of the *pong lang* xylophone to stand in for the *pong lang* ensemble, people are able to highlight the place of the *pong lang* xylophone in premodern *Isan* life instead of the ensemble's much more recent origins and thus better connect the ensemble to the time period and lifestyle that it is used to represent. Additionally, by highlighting the connections between the instruments of the *pong lang* ensemble and the provinces in the northeast that they are most strongly associated with, people are able to point to geographical ties between the ensemble and the *Isan* region and even use the ensemble to represent the *Isan* region and *Isan* identity as a united whole. Synecdoche and similar rhetorical strategies are ways in which people can add value to aspects of culture that they place importance in, circumventing some aspects (such as *pong lang*'s recent establishment as a genre of music) by highlighting other, more meaningful, connections to space and time.

## Notes

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