

# **The Meaning of Sounds in *Wat*;**

## **Comparative Study of Soundscape of *Wat* in Lamphun and Chiang Mai**

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*Wat*, which is known as traditional space in Thailand, is a community center of Buddhism and has been considered also as a center of Thai peoples' heart. There are held religious events like ritual and festival and meetings in *Wat*. In the time of tourism, *Wat*'s space is not used only for religious and communal events but for tourism, too. *Wat* plays an important role for tourism and many foreign tourists come to *Wat* in Chiang Mai. *Wat* could show us both traditional and modern features now.

This research aims at describing what sounds we can hear in *Wat* of Chiang Mai and Lamphun, and how about people recognize the sounds of *Wat* of Chiang Mai and Lamphun. The word "People" means here Thai inhabitants and tourists from foreign countries. Especially, this study focusses on sounds of bells, drums and loudspeakers in *Wat*. The fields to be investigated are two areas, that is, Chiang Mai City and its suburban area, village in Lamphun, which is located in southern part of Chiang Mai District. The reason why these two areas are chosen is that there seems obvious contrast between them. Chiang Mai is the biggest City in North Thailand, and many foreign tourists come there. On the other hand, Lamphun is closed to Chiang Mai City, but most people are still working on agriculture to earn living expense and tourists never come to these villages.

### 1 Sound spaces of *Wat*

#### 1-1. Lamphun

Sound spaces of Wat Par Sak and Wat Bua Buk in Lamphun are discussed here. At first, I explain the reason why I chose these temples. Because foreign tourists do not come to these two temples. This means that these temples are regarded as villagers' temple.

According to my recording documents in Wat Par Sak (8:20 am, 24 Oct 2005), we can hear sounds of cars and bikes from the road near Wat and voices of village people, noises of feet in the meeting house, voices of chickens and birds and so on. In a short word, this place is quiet. The sound level meter showed 52.5.dBA (average), 69.0dB (max.) and 35.3dB (min.). In Wat Bua Buk (13:04 pm, 24 Oct 2005), we can hear voices of village people, sounds of cleaning Wat with brooms, cars and bikes, Thai-pops BGM in front of the restaurants, voices of chickens and so on. This place is also quiet and seems to be a center of the community where village people always gather.

In Wat Par Sak, monks send information about Wat through loudspeaker to village peoples. Just before monk's announcement is scattered from Wat, we can hear Budda songs, and then monk speaks. The sounds can be heard all through the village. This broadcast began ten years ago. Before then, monk speaks to one of village people who transmitted to another person in the way of "one by one". Except it, we can hear the sound of ringing bell in Wat at 6:00 am and 5:00 pm every day. Young monks beat the Bell. In addition, after Buddhism event, the drums are used.

## 1-2. Chiang Mai

For the samples, I chose a few Wats in Chiang Mai, especially, in old city, Wat Ranchang, Wat Chiang Man, Wat Cheddiruan, Wat Purasinn, Wat pupparamu and Wat Sun Dok. Many foreign tourists come to the Wats in Chiang Mai and I chose famous Wats among them, Wat Chiang Man, Wat Cheddiruan and Wat Purasinn, which are visited by many tourists. Thai inhabitants in Chiang Mai, mostly visit the rest of my samples, Wat Ranchang, Wat pupparamu and Wat Sun Dok.

According to the interviews, gong, bell, drum and wind bell in the Wat have common meaning and function. Those sounds could be message to "Tepu", who is god in the sky. Thus, Thai peoples believe them. We can usually hear the



following sounds in the Wat like “peng peng peng”, sounds of the bells, in the morning, which inform the moment of breakfast and almsgiving, sounds of drums, in the lunch time, which inform lunch time, and sounds of the bells, in the evening, which indicate the moment of praying. Drums were used for wars and still today, there is a competition of loudness of drumming in Chiang Mai and Lamphung.

Sounds of funeral rituals in the Wat are introduced a little bit here. In the present, loudspeakers for the funeral play music, but in the past, fire-crackers (bamboo) were set just after the ritual. In addition, except this, there was interesting sound in the funeral, that is “kong, kong, kong” sounds which were made through knocking a coffin. This sound meant, “Get up and have a breakfast”. White rice, fruit, dessert and water were served for a dead person and after this sound; all these offerings are cleared away.

## 2 Sensing sounds

This small chapter shows how people listen to and think of sounds in Wat, including voices, sounds from loudspeakers, BGM and so on. Thai inhabitants including immigrants and tourists from foreign countries were asked.

### 2-1. Lamphun

The interview was done with eight Thai people living in Lamphun. The range of their ages was between 10's and 50's.

#### 2-1-1. Khon Thai

As mentioned above, the bell in the Wat rings twice a day, at 5:00 am (five times) and 6:00 pm (six times) in Lamphun. The inhabitants consider this ringing of bell as a clock, which declares time to the village people. A man said, “When bell rings, I get up in the morning”. The onomatopoeia of this sound is ‘tang tang tang’ (by woman of 40' age) or ‘ting ting ting’ (by woman of 50's age).

Except bell, people agree that sound of drum is also symbolic one in Lamphun. The sound of drum is used for Buddhist special events and the festivals, and its onomatopoeia is ‘tum tum tum’ (by woman of 50's age).

Besides, when somebody died in the village, village people heard cries of many women, which made my informant (man of 50's age) very sad. Another informant (woman of 50's age) told me the same thing. When somebody died in the village, the older persons sang a song and played traditional music. She felt sad when she heard its sounds and voices of old people. Now, we can hear such traditional music in the funeral, which is recorded in the tape, instead of real performance.

I did interviews also with teenager's people in the village. One girl said, "I hear the voice of monks from loudspeaker in Lamphun". Her interest is facing modern equipments. One man of 50's age also talks about the sounds of loudspeaker. He thinks that it is effective equipment to inform something from the Wat.

With these answers, my questions moved to the modern equipments; loudspeaker. I asked them, "How about do you think of big sounds from loudspeakers, Big-sounding BGM or sounds of Karaoke?" "If the neighbors make too big sounds, what do you do?" Most people in Lamphun love and enjoy "karaoke", and they told me, "I don't like big sounds basically, but I like such sounds in the festivals," or "I like quiet sounds, but I like big sounds, too". People claim for too big sounds, or they go out of their homes to escape from them. I am interested in some answers; "mai pen rai" or "I don't like big sounds, but the neighbors enjoy doing a party. In such case, mai pen rai!"

## 2-2 Chiang Mai

### 2-2-1. Khon Thai

Although most people have their own watches, the sounds from the Wat like ringing bells, drums and even voices from loudspeakers are still regarded as signals, which inform the time, now in Chiang Mai.

When I asked people, "which do you like the sounds of bells, drums or loudspeakers?" some people like more the former, bell and drum, because they have had extremely a long history since Buddha era. If these people hear them, they feel happy. However, one monk likes loudspeaker, because it is more convenient to transmit informations with modern equipment than by oral way. The information can reach all people very quickly. In this sense, he does not like traditional media like bell and drum but modern one, too.

Moreover, we should think of the problem of the sounds of Karaoke music from PA system and people's reaction against it. Most people, especially young people, do not like noisy place, but they love "Karaoke" and Thai-pop music. In Chiang Mai, many peoples enjoy "Karaoke" at the Karaoke pub and big sounds are produced there. The neighboring people's attitudes are partly similart to them of in Lamphun. They told me, "I go out of my house, because I can not bear it", or " I throw my complaints to neighbors". However there is another unique opinion among them, "I turn up TV or Radio in my room too the full volume."

I had a chance to do the interview with a woman of 20's age, who was born in Lamphun and now lives in Chiang Mai. She does not like voice from loudspeaker at the Wat in Lamphun, because the loudspeakers are old and in a result the quality of its voice is not good." On the other hand she loves big sounds like Karaoke in Chiang Mai.

## 2-2-2. Foreign tourists and immigrants

How foreign tourists and immigrants are listening to the sounds in Chiang Mai? Foreign tourists think that Wat is "quiet (calm)" space and immigrants think that Wat is "quiet" and "peaceful" space. Except in the Wat, Chiang Mai is very "noisy" city. Longer the immigrants live in Chiang Mai, closer their "ears" becom these of native Chiang Mai people. One of immigrants told me, "I don't like the sounds of traffics and music, but mai pen rai." Another immigrant feels relaxed when she hears the sound of bell from the Wat.

## 3 Conclusion

The atmosphere of Wats in Thailand does not seem to change drastically, because they are very traditional. Thai people in Chiang Mai and Lamphun, and foreign tourists, immigrants are accustomed to think that Wat is quiet and relaxed space. However, from this research, it can be said that sounds spaces in the Wats of Chiang Mai and Lamphun have varied very much. There are some signals in the Wats such as bells and drums, which were traditionally made from human's body movements. At the same time, we can hear other kinds of sounds, such as music and voices from loudspeakers, which are made with modern equipments. In the Wats of Chiang Mai, sounds by foreign tourists, tour guides, drivers and street sellers are mixed with traditional sounds because of the

present-day condition of globalized tourism. Shortly speaking, soundscape in the Wats is a miniature copy of modern Chiang Mai City, where we can hear both traditional and modernized sounds.

The people living in Chiang Mai and Lamphun like the sounds of sign, which inform the time to the people. These sounds often function as symbolic sounds in the areas. On the other hand, younger people among them like machinery sounds of sign, because those modern media are convenient. These attitudes are almost same in both Chiang Mai and Lamphun. Maybe their life styles are not so far from each other because of development of internet technology. However, there is a slight difference between them. It is an attitude for noises. The people living in Lamphun tell to me their reaction, 'mai pen rai. The peoples living in Chiang Mai tell to me, 'turning on TV or radio in my room'.

Except inhabitants of Chiang Mai and Lamphun, there live many foreign tourists and immigrants, whose experiences are quite different. When they encounter sound cultures there at first time, they feel surprised. However, as long as they stay there, their ears become almost similar to those of native inhabitants. This change is very so significant that they may produce quite new cultures in Chiang Mai.

Up to the present, in the soundscape research, sound cognition of native inhabitants has been usually emphasized. That of foreign people has been secondary, because they were regarded as outsiders. As Prof. Yamashita mentions that the border of community becomes vague and one culture is accepted across its border" (Yamashita 1999:4), globalization, borderlessness and 'glocalization' (Yamashita 1999:226) are in progress now. "Culture is mixed, manipulated, recreated and consumed" (Yamashita 1999:4). "The culture is not a fixed or uniform system." (Yamashita 1999:4-5). In this sense, for the next step, soundscape researcher should not study only insider's culture of sounds, but also that of outsider, who lives together with insider. As mentioned above, especially in Chiang Mai, there are both native Thais and foreign people who live together and influence each other. Their perception and cognition of sounds are often different, but this difference made a unique significance of soundscape in Chiang Mai. In this meaning, soundscape and sound cognition of Lamphun shows us the basic factors in order to do the comparative study of soundscape in Thailand. However, soundscape of Lamphun

is also changing now because of global tourism and internet technology. This change should be investigated increasingly.

Traditional

Native inhabitant Foreigner

Modern

Thanks

I would like to show special appreciation to Thai people living in Chiang Mai and Lamphun, and foreign tourists, immigrants, with whom I interviewed, for this paper. Among them, I thank especially Yong (who translates Thai language to Japanese) and Jaew (who translates from Thai language to English), Professor Shin Nakagawa (Osaka city University) and Mr. Thitipol (Chiang Mai University).

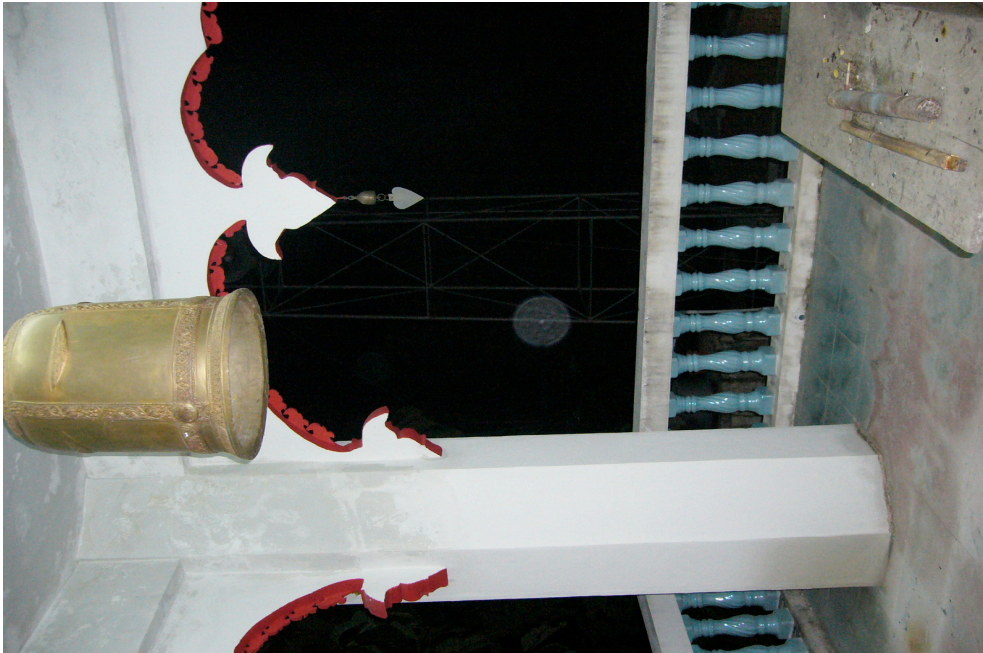
( pictures 1 – 12)



1 The festival in Wat Par Sak in Lamphun



2 The bell in Wat Par Sak in Lamphun



3 Wat Bua Buk in Lamphun

4 The bell and drum in Wat Par Sak in Lamphun





5 The drum in Wat Par Sak

6 Wat Chedi ruan in Chiang Mai





7 Wat pupparam in Chiang Mai

8 Wat Chiang Man in Chiang Mai





9 Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai

10 Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai





11 Wat Ran Chang in Chiang Mai

12 The bell in Wat Chedi Ruan

