



The Balance Between Values

Cultural Tensions Surrounding Thai Comedy

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Abstract

Thai culture in general finds reasons to celebrate and have fun — anything can be turned into a reason to have a good time. Humor in Thailand, however, exists on a spectrum, and can sometimes be controversial. There is a marked tension between what is considered proper conduct and what is “sanuk” or “fun.” Of course, there is always a proper way to have fun, but Thai humor often finds itself reaching for the taboo. This paper aims to explore the cultural evolution of Thai comedy in performance, analyzing different contexts and forms, and tracing how the values of sanuk and being a proper Thai have influenced performance in Thailand over time.

Countless times, I’ve tried to share the delight of a Thai commercial with my American peers, only to be met with confusion. To be fair, I perceive some Thai humor as bordering on absurdity, so their reaction is not necessarily unjustified. For someone familiar with the Thai life and language, however, the Thai sense of humor has a unique charm and spirit that I’ve never encountered anywhere else. The best part for me, as a foreign expat who was born and raised in Thailand, was witnessing Thais poke fun at their own incongruities. Thai humor is filled with puns and social

commentary that would be considered rude if they were not in the context of entertainment. Set up a stage, however, and the rules change.

I lived in Chiang Mai, a bustling city full of art and culture, until I was 18. When I was young, I picked up the northern dialect quickly and would often translate for my mother. There were years during my childhood when my parents would provide housing for their Thai students in our own home — a lack of educational opportunities in rural regions often meant that young people would come to

the city without a support network, and few housing options. My parents would often take these young people in: at one point, we had thirteen students living with us. As I grew older, I attended an international school where I studied the Central Thai language and became friends with children of high-ranking diplomats and businessmen. This gave me a unique perspective on the social value systems of Thailand, having lived alongside people from both the lower and upper economic and social classes.

For an American, the Thai expression of comedy can sometimes flirt with political incorrectness — often too much for comfort. Take, for example, this 2007 commercial for Sylvania light bulbs. The scene opens with a family sitting outside having a picnic. A young boy asks his father a series of questions.

BOY (*pointing*): What's that?

FATHER: That's a Thai ghost called "Kra-Sue"; it's looking for things to eat at night time.

BOY (*pointing*): Dad?

FATHER: Another ghost called "Kra-Hung"; it always flies around.

BOY (*referencing a ghost holding a bunch of bananas*): Can I have that banana?

FATHER: No son, that belongs to the banana ghost.

BOY: So, that's a jackfruit ghost, right?

FATHER (*hushed*): No, that's a transvestite (*kathoey*).¹

BOY: Oh. Got it.

FATHER: Good.

BOY: Dad! A blue ghost!

The blue ghost runs. The camera pans to show two very long legs.

FATHER (*nonchalant*): Hey, a tall ghost. (*To the ghost:*) What the hell are you standing here for? We are having dinner. Go away!

The ghost walks away. The image shifts to a wide shot of the family surrounded by the ghosts.

FATHER (*ignoring the ghosts, throwing a rock at an off-screen dog who is barking*): Damn ... Shut up!

The commercial cuts to the light bulbs being advertised.

NARRATOR. Under the light, nothing seems to be scary.

The lights flicker off and the scene goes dark; the family starts to scream.

(JEH United Ltd.)

For many Americans, it might be unthinkable to make a joke regarding gender non-conformity; this is the jarring political incorrectness that I referred to earlier. This can be understood as an

¹ The Thai word *kathoey* used in this commercial refers to a character who is male dressed as a female. This word has been understood differently over the course of time and is often used to refer to a general "third gender" category, under which several identities might fall. (Taweewuttichai 9)

example of how “benign violation theories of humor” are subjective to the audience. Benign violation theory suggests that a violation of a rule can be humorous if accompanied by an element that suggests that its violation is benign. When a certain emotional attachment is formed to the construct poised for violation, however, an intended joke is not well received by its audience (Oring 57). Individuals carry varying emotional attachments to perceived norms, rules, and expectations; I propose that the same is true for cultural groups. Studies suggest that humor and joking function to establish a community — the joke being a way to determine if an individual is intellectually, socially, and emotionally compatible with the group while also establishing commonalities for cohesion (Fine and De Soucey 2). It would be an interesting line of inquiry to explore the Thai reaction to the joke from that particular advertisement. Even though Thais might demonstrate a higher tolerance for certain brands of humor than Americans, there is still a tension within Thai culture concerning what kinds of humor are appropriate inappropriate. This raises two ideas I hope to pursue further in this paper. The first is the emphasis placed on the importance of “fun,” or *sanuk*, in Thai culture. The second is the Thai value placed on proper conduct and appearance. There is a brashness in some Thai comedy that would be considered indecent or lewd by Thai standards. Comedy itself is a controversial form in many cultures, because it tends to push boundaries; and the same is true for Thailand. So while a good portion

of Thai comedy is charming, there is also an intriguing clash of value systems not just between cultures (such as the American reaction to some Thai humor) but also within the culture itself. These internal value systems at work are evolving, and responding to the modernization of a country rich in tradition. Contemporary politics, tourism, and trade collide with heritage, religion, and national identity, resulting in wide array of comic expressions. This paper will touch upon some of the ways in which value systems have either evolved or remained the same within Thai comic performance, giving specific focus to the two often-conflicting values of *sanuk* and respectable behavior for Thai people. The study will incorporate both Thai and non-Thai scholarly perspectives, as well as my own extensive observations and experience in Thailand.

It is a common understanding to those with any experience in Thailand that “fun” is an important part of Thai life (Kislenko, 175). Celebrations can last for days, weeks, or even months longer than they would in other cultures. There is at least one celebration observed each month of the year, if not more (166); I remember telling someone once that it felt as if the Thai invented reasons to throw parties. Historically, the value of *sanuk* permeated even some of the most serious of circumstances, including various religious rites. Some of the earliest accounts of Thai comic performance have been recorded as interludes between somber eulogies and rituals during funerals. These comedic performances are known as *suat Phra Malai*

(Polachan 440). Up until the reign of King Rama V (1873-1910), *suat Phra Malai* contained brash humor, such as jokes regarding male genitalia, to keep audiences engaged (441). This is already a stark contrast to the American system for mourning, in which coarse joking would usually be considered inappropriate at events such as funerals or venues such as churches. In Thailand, however, Buddhist temples were where the fun began. Temples historically supported the art of shadow puppetry, and are still renowned for their festivals (Tawalongsri 12) — I have childhood memories of lying awake at night with a pillow over my head as the temple next door blasted the neighborhood with music and laughter until sunrise.

It is important to note that joking and laughter associated with traditional Thai Buddhist ritual was not necessarily separate from the power or potency of that ritual. To employ humor was not to suggest that the ritual was not sacred; in fact, some scholars have noted that humor was an important part of the ritual vehicle. Peter Vandergeest and Paritta Chalernpow-Koanantakool refer to a term called *saskit*² in their article reviewing the historical contexts of Thai shadow puppetry. According to Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool, *saskit* was a kind of potency available to the lower class, associated with healing, midwifery, and performance (315). Men who practiced rituals with this potency often obtained their knowledge from their time spent as novice

monks during childhood; they would leave the monkhood at an appointed time, but would still offer their knowledge as a service to the community. The events or rituals requiring this potency were not to be taken lightly: they were regarded as events attracting evil spirits that posed a significant threat to the safety of those involved. The Thai shadow theatre, commonly known as *nang tulung*, often accompanied spiritually significant events such as a *kae bon* ceremony, the formal releasing from a vow (Koanantakool 45). Other instances would include the rites associated with cremation, wake ceremonies, or ordination into the monkhood (47). Potency usually involved a formula or incantation performed by the puppeteer; but according to Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool, the comedy of the clown characters found in *nang tulung* was also a vital component of this potency (309). Other scholars have noted that many highly revered puppeteers have claimed that the comic element is one of the most important experiences of a shadow play, second only to music (Dowsey-Magog 191). How exactly humor is linked to potency is largely speculative in my current research. Some scholars note the potency of the clown puppets in *nang tulung*, giving reference to the order in which they are stored: below the *rusi* (wise men or teachers) but above the heavenly beings. They also speak about certain clown characters from other traditions that are considered potent, such as *Semar* in

² The authors do not provide the Thai spelling of this word, and there is reason to question its transliteration. In my research, I found no other source using the term “*saskit*”; but I am aware of a similar word “*sakti*,” which is commonly translated to mean “power.”

Javanese shadowplay, who is said to be a god born on earth (Vandergeest and Chalermpow-Koanantakool 313). While this does little to explain why such a value is reserved for the clown characters, it does indicate that their potency is acknowledged.

One potential explanation involves the timing of these rituals. Certain milestones or situations in the human lifespan might attract the attention of an evil spirit, according to the Thai-Buddhist worldview (Kislenko 37). Ways of diverting spirits from inflicting harm often involve tricking the spirits. For example, someone might call a baby ugly to make the child seem less of an attractive target for a spirit wanting to inflict harm (38). If humor is indeed part of the potency of a ritual, perhaps it functions as a distraction or even a pleasurable experience for the spirits as well. Or perhaps a good sense of humor accompanies potency as a general rule. This topic certainly warrants further research.

How is it possible for humor to infiltrate sacred spaces and events in a manner that maintains respect and proper conduct? Another significant Thai value that is just as strong as the value of *sanuk* is the value of proper conduct and appearance. Though there are several words that could define the parameters of propriety, there are two key terms that I will focus on to examine what it means to be a respectable Thai. “*Maw-som*” refers to respectable behavior, while the term *riap roy* refers to modest attire, polite manners, and refined speech (Zefreys 71). My experience growing up in Thailand leaves me with the impression that propriety is twofold,

presenting itself in both behavior and appearance.

An example of *sanuk* conflicting with *maw-som* is seen with the ascent of King Rama V into power. The king viewed *suat Phra Malai* as religiously irreverent and banned any form of coarse humor connected to religious practice, threatening to decommission monks who violated his ban on comedic performance during religious ceremonies. Many monks chose to retire from religious life as a way to keep those comic traditions alive (Polachan 3). This illustrates a cultural tension that continues in modern Thai culture.

Since the early incarnations of comic performance, Thai comedy has branched out from its Buddhist roots. Though it now operates in the secular world of political and social satire, the tension between *sanuk* and respectful conduct is just as much of a concern as in the days of King Rama V.

One example of comedic forms that challenge the concept of proper conduct would be *talok café*. This form of comedy rose from the migration of workers of lower social standing from the Isan provinces to Bangkok. Today, *talok café* has a tendency towards obscene sexual humor — but Wangkawan Polachan comments in her article “Buddhism and Thai Comic Performance” that the lewdness of *talok café* has often prevented the presence of respectable Thai women in the audience (446). This would be an example where the Thai concept of proper conduct, and the idea of what it means to be a respectable Thai

woman, clash with certain comedic genres of performance.

Another prime example of how cultural expectations for propriety battle the presence of fun in Thai comedy is evident in the treatment of a well-known clown character in *nang tulung*, Theng. There has been a recent movement to popularize the clown character by making him appropriate for children. However, Theng has traditionally been anything but child-appropriate; his original form as a shadow puppet involves one of his fingers being shaped like a penis. The tamed rendition of Theng excludes his vulgar sense of humor and presents him without physical deformity. Known as “Uncle Theng,” his presence in children’s literature reinforces cleanliness and personal hygiene, which is an element of *riap roy* (Vandergest and Chalermkow-Koanantakool 324).

Within Thai comedic forms we also see a light mockery of Thai society, which is incongruent with the value of proper conduct. A “proper” Thai is expected to have a strong command of the Thai language, with clear pronunciation. Yet Vandergest and Chalermkow-Koanantakool point out that although there is a central dialect that is regarded as the correct way to speak Thai, there are dialects of Thai that are vastly different from each other; this often results in miscommunication between native Thai speakers from different regions. A foreigner learning to speak Thai might notice that different Thai people vary in their pronunciation of words. Sometimes a rolling “r” becomes an “l” sound; and though this is a widely

understood way of speaking, it is not uncommon for this manner of speaking to become the butt of a joke in Thai comedy (323). There are even tonal differences between dialects that contribute to humorous moments of confusion: the Southern Thai dialect can have up to eight tones, which may confuse those who speak the Central Thai dialect, which only has five tones (Dowsey-Magog 200). In addition, just as Thais have no qualms about mocking their own dialectic differences, they have no qualms about mockery of foreigners. In the days when *suat Phra Malai* was banned by King Rama V, there was a verbal type of humor known as *o’k phasa*. This humor mocked foreigners’ pronunciation of Thai words (Polachan 441). From the American point of view, such mockery might be seen as racist or ethnocentric and generally unacceptable; to the Thai, however, there are two functions to this kind of jesting. The first is the creation of a group identity — separating the foreign from the collective and reinforcing group cohesion (440). The second is that light mockery is considered good-natured in regards to language in general, Thai or otherwise; and it would not be uncommon to find, say, someone from the Isan province willingly doling out jokes about his own pattern of speech and cultural idiosyncrasies (441). It would be hard to justify the mockery of a foreigner to an American, however, which makes this aspect of Thai culture distinctly different.

There are other elements found in Thai comedy that are generally viewed as benign and acceptable forms of entertainment, but which challenge the limits of what

is appropriate from an American standpoint. There are various comic characters that are popular among the Thai, such as characters with unique physical attributes or lower intelligence, *Khatoey* characters, or persons with Down Syndrome (Polahan 446-447). This is something that might shock the common American audience, where it would be considered inappropriate to make any person with different qualities the punchline to a joke. As with the Isan comedian making light of his own linguistic idiosyncrasies, however, it is not uncommon to find a person with Down Syndrome as a willing actor in his role (447).

As previously discussed, one group that is often targeted in Thai comedy is the LGBTQ+ community. Milagros Expósito-Barea speaks to the level of acceptance versus tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community in Thailand. On the one hand, Thai cinema has made the effort to increase empathy for the LGBTQ+ population by creating stories that show the struggle of being tolerated, but not accepted, by society. For the most part, however, transgendered or homosexual characters remain popular comic relief characters, which Expósito-Barea suggests is a huge component in reinforcing stereotypes (193). Polachan, however, while addressing the same issue, claims that such joking is not meant to mock transgender people or homosexuals, but rather to make fun of the comedian who is in the role (449). These differing analyses are an excellent example of the ways in which scholars from different cultures might have different perspectives on the same social issues. Both scholars speak to the

misconception that Thailand is completely friendly toward the LGBTQ+ community, but Expósito-Barea is more critical in assessing the nature of Thai tolerance. He explains that, although Thailand is known for its “ladyboy” cabarets and its sex trade industry, the status of being homosexual or transgender is not necessarily celebrated. Buddhism, though the largest reason for tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community in Thailand, also contributes to a stigma against members of that community. Since Buddhism’s main goal is to control desires, having sex at all is seen as a barrier to achieving enlightenment — even more so if the sexual behavior seems to violate a “natural order.” Expósito-Barea also points out that Thai Buddhists will often contend that if one is attracted to the same gender, or feels as if their gender identity does not “match” their physical biology, it is because they are working out bad karma from a previous life (192-193). So there seems to be a negative stigma attached to same-sex attraction and transgendered people, even though the country boasts a high tolerance of people identifying as LGBTQ+. Expósito-Barea also makes a connection between traditional identities and modern progress in the representation of LGBTQ people in the media:

A very common theme in Thai cinema is the opposition of urban versus rural. Rural areas are presided [*sic*] by a series of connotations such as the traditional idea of the foundation of Thai society on basic principles of harmony

between man and nature. Conversely, in the urban environment of the city, people forget their origins and set themselves free from tradition, embracing the influence of modernity and extravagant behaviors. In most of the films mentioned above, *kathoey* migrate from the countryside to cities where they come out of the closet and freely express their so-called sexual deviation (200).

This poses the question: is the idea of proper conduct changing in Thailand to reflect an inclusivity of various sexual orientations and identities? If this is so, how much longer will the existence of a transgender or homosexual comic relief character be an acceptable source of humor?

Polachan, however, speaks to the ways in which the portrayal of transgender people and homosexuals is not congruent with how these demographic groups present themselves in Thai society. The comic characters are known to be lewd and brash, but Polachan contends that transgender people and homosexuals usually strive to be polite members of Thai society (449).

If this is the case, then which scholar is more accurately representing the issue? Does cultural proximity to the issue necessarily mean a clearer perspective? Does an outside perspective necessarily have a full understanding either?

Though the function of such characters in Thai culture is debatable,

different interpretations such as this could point to the idea that taking offense or perceiving certain social injustices might be a cultural construct. If, in a culture, the making of jokes based on physical features or cognitive shortcomings is a way of integrating, accepting, and celebrating the different, it may not in fact inflict the same harm as it would within a culture that makes these jokes as a way of exercising power. Thai comedy tends to challenge oppressive forces or authorities of power. This could inform the tensions between what is fun and what is proper.

There was a time when the Thai government responded to the unabashed humor of *nang tulung* by trying to regulate its content. Pamphlets were distributed giving detailed instruction for the proper exercise of shadowplay (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 325), and government officials would honor the more traditional and “proper” puppeteers — an example would be the designation of Nang Kan, a famous traditional puppeteer, as “Folk Artist of the Nation” in 1985 (328). It could be said that the concept of *riap roy* holds strongly with the elite, whereas the value of *sanuk* finds a stronger footing with the working class. That does not mean that there is not a presence of both values among each class; but it may suggest that the distribution of power influences the nature and content of comedic performance — the ebb and flow between proper conduct and fun.

The comedic elements in *nang tulung* also rely heavily on improvisation, which allows for a special kind of

communication to take place between the performer and the audience — dialogue can be fluid enough to remain relevant and respond to the social dynamics of the community without disrupting the story line (Koanantakool 43). For jokes of this nature to fly, it would require that the puppeteer be familiar with the culture of his audience and the issues that apply to their lives. This might also have contributed to the government's need to enforce stricter rules regarding *nang tulung* performances, since improvisation is not scripted and therefore cannot be held accountable to any set standards prior to a performance.

Another aspect of *nang tulung* that may also demonstrate the tensions between humor and conduct would be the nature of the genre's clowns. Clown characters are prominent in Thai shadowplay, driving much of action with their comedic dialogue. There are six clown characters that are constant across all variations of *nang tulung*. A distinctive feature common to all six clowns is their rough appearance and association with the working class in Southern Thailand. All clowns speak in the southern dialect and are primarily concerned with their basic human needs. This provides an excellent opportunity for satire to develop, as the actions of the clowns are contrasted with the refined actions of noble characters (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 312-313).

Issues surrounding the *nang tulung* performance style provide another example of the tensions between having fun and being proper. There are two schools of thought in the making of *nang tulung*. There

are more traditional performances, known as *nang booran*, where the focus is on the potency of the ritual and the didactic elements of the story (Dowsey-Magog 186). Nang Kan, for example, is a puppeteer who attributes his success to being “gentle, good mannered, and avoiding impropriety” (Koanantakool 50). Then there are performances, referred to as *nang samai*, that strive to keep up with modern progress (Dowsey-Magog 186). These performances are produced for their entertainment value, and puppeteers often prioritize creating content that sells (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 319). Modern forms of *nang tulung* also have more of a tendency to follow the stories and characters of film and literature. Nang Phrom Noi, for example, draws much of his inspiration from comic books and Indian television (Dowsey-Magog 189). A subcategory of *nang samai* is known as *nang kan muang*, translated as “political shadowplay.” Nang Phrom Noi was a significant contributor to the genre during the time of the 1976 coup; common themes in his work included corruption among government officials, and the younger generation teaching the older generation about modern progress (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 319).

The concept of the “younger teaching the elder” was something I found surprising. To understand my reaction, one has to first look at the three pillars of Thai national identity: language, religion, and the monarchy (317). Social behavior toward anyone embodying these symbols observes a strict code of conduct. For example, I was

raised with the knowledge that the position of my *wai* – where I placed my hands when I greeted a person – should change based on their status in society. Growing up, I was told that should I ever be granted an audience with the King, I would have to approach him on my hands and knees, placing my *wai* above my head. It was emphasized to me that to challenge or mock any office that carries symbols of national identity is a bold action with severe consequences, punishable by law. I was also raised with the notion that ruling authorities are regarded as “fathers” or “mothers” of the nation. I’ve made the observation, over my time spent in Thailand, that this reverence trickles down from sacred national identity to roles executed within the nuclear family. It has been my experience that fathers and mothers within households are expected to be given a reflection of the kind of reverence one might have for a governing authority; so the idea of the “younger” educating the “older” could be seen as counter-cultural. This takes the often-didactic role of the puppeteer into new waters. Traditionally, Thai culture looks to these art forms as educational resources, which leaves audiences vulnerable to the influence of a modern performance intended to provide commentary rather than education. Traditional artists argue that shadowplay is losing its identity, and they accuse Nang Phrom Noi for disrupting the unity of their nation (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 321-322).

This speaks to the tensions that exist between the role of teacher and entertainer in *nang tulung* performance. As previously

stated, though comedy enhances the entertainment value of a performance, in many cases it also has a didactic element (Koanantakool 44-45). This is important to understand within the context of Thai culture. Harkening back to my previous discussion concerning codified behavior towards people of status, I was taught that there were certain levels of rank in society for various vocations. A teacher, for example, was regarded with the same respect as a doctor; and it is my experience that teachers are given a higher status in Thai society than in American society. So to say that a performer also carries the responsibility of a social and moral teacher would carry a significant weight for the Thai people. This could be why the conversation about what is appropriate for *nang tulung* carries so much significance for those who value the art form’s traditional role.

Lastly, it would be a mistake to neglect the most popular form of folk theatre known to Thailand: *likay*. Some scholars claim that *likay* has religious roots, stemming from the Malaysian Muslim tradition (Smithies 36). It is said that as the Malay tradition progressed, jokes were interwoven with prayers and that the Thai people saw this as an opportunity for entertainment and started to imitate the Malaysian form (Maha HH Prince Dhaninivat Vajiravudh and Bibyalabh 3). If this is true, it demonstrates that the value of *sanuk* has had a long-standing influence on the development of Thai entertainment over the course of history.

Other scholars, however, contend that *likay* may have Indian origins, and are reluctant to fully support theories tying the form to Malaysia (Smithies 37). *Likay*'s form today, however, is a far cry from its origin as a form of worship. Michael Smithies describes it as a bawdy form of improvisational theatre with loose choreography and musical elements (35). Interestingly, however, the modern *likay* audience is largely comprised of women, with plotlines designed for their interests. This is an interesting contrast when compared to *talok café*, which is geared toward a largely male audience. *Likay* has not necessarily been described as appropriate or proper by authorities on the subject; it is referred to by Prince Vajirāvudh as “vulgar” (9), while Smithies notes that the actors involved in *likay* are typically seen as “morally loose by the upper class” (60).

Likay is in decline due to the rising popularity of television. Smithies suggests that this could be because *likay* produced for television has been cleaned up from its thrown-together and low-budget aesthetic to be more polite and respectable (61). It is unclear whether this shift is due to the attempt to appeal to a wider audience, since the improvisational nature of *likay* doesn't translate well to scripted television, or if this is because there is a cultural expectation for television programming to maintain a certain level of decorum.

Regardless, all forms of traditional Thai performance, whether comedic or not,

face the threat of extinction as film gains popularity. *Sanuk* is a value that seems to carry over well into modern forms — comedic elements keep audiences engaged. *Nang tulung*, for example, has survived into the modern era because many puppeteers have decided to cater to audiences drawn to spectacle and comedy. By no means does this imply that the Thai are abandoning their values of proper social conduct in favor of what is popular and fun; it is simply an observation regarding what elements seem to be contributing to the perpetuation of traditional forms in the modern era, when film and television are major competing industries.

One element of culture that will always remain true is that its forms will change — culture is not static. Change is bound to happen, creating a cycle of losing culture, preserving culture, and making culture. The value of being “a proper Thai” assists in preserving art forms through traditional performance styles with sacred significance, while the value of *sanuk* assists in preserving the forms through reinventing the content and engaging audiences in an entertainment context. As society changes, newer art forms also arise — borrowing from their predecessors on occasion, but standing alone with unique conventions. In all cases, however, it is clear that in Thailand these two values remain constant, with their natural tension creating dynamic avenues for comic relief.

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