

Food in Isan Country Songs: The Urban and the Rural Construction of the Isan Diaspora ¹

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Abstract

This research aims to study the construction process of “urban” and “rural” contexts in the Isan country songs of Grammy Gold Company Limited during 2002-2011. The research has found that the representation of food in country songs through the perspective of the Isan diaspora when referring to urban and rural contexts is different. The representation of food in the urban context reflects poverty and suffering, while the representation of food in the rural context represents prosperity and happiness. Such image is used to voice out to the society that the urban excess is only for the city people, while the Isan diaspora is suppressed and pushed away from having the same privilege; the constructed image for the rural prosperity is also used to counter the mainstream discourse that views Isan rural area as being dry, poor and lacking economic potential. Moreover, food in country songs is well applied to communicate the exclusive shared experience between the Isan diaspora.

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Introduction

Song is a human created art that relates to human daily life. It is a medium that reaches to the heart of people and plays an important role in persuasion. Song is a mass non-exclusive media for both literate and non-literate people. Everyone who is not deaf can listen to any song and sing along. Thus, a song's meaning can easily flow into people.

Country songs are a cultural product created during the period when Thai music was influenced by Western music style; such influence resulted in the birth of Thai contemporary music, which then grew into two categories: urban/city music and country music. Although the lyrics of both categories contain similarities in the fact that they are mostly written about love, the lyrics of country songs are also very diverse. The lyrics act as an up-to-date social record, for instance, "Lady Kin Koy" of Khaothip Thidadin is related to the craze for the Western singer, Lady Gaga, while "Kot Like Hai Nae Doe" of Thai Orathai is the result of the worldwide hype of social networking and Facebook. Furthermore, country songs are very attached to the local way of life. Currently, within the scope of country songs, Isan country songs are dominant and have received nationwide popularity beyond their origin in the Northeast region. This is possibly because there is an apparent growth in the number of Isan people migrating to work in other regions.³

The growing number of Isan workers in Bangkok has led the big record companies such as Grammy Gold to utilise "*Isan Worker Diaspora Identity*" as a selling point for their artists. The definition of the word diaspora has changed from when it was once used and defined specifically for the Jews, Greeks and Armenians due to politics and religion, or that of James Clifford's glorified ideal about the critical point of diaspora that links to the uncertainty and difficulty to return to the homeland.⁴ Nowadays, the definition of diaspora covers various groups of people, e.g., migrants, immigrants, refugees,

³ Santipap, "Country Song and Record of a Local Culture (Isan Case Study)", 250-251 (In Thai).

⁴ Clifford, "Diaspora", 3.

contract workers, foreign settlements of ethnic groups, and ethnic communities. Khachig Tololyan has proposed that the mentality of the diaspora, which centres around parting, loss, root demolition, a powerless state of negotiation and agony, has become a tool to understand the phenomenon of people dispersed and the birth and living of the community in more forms and categories.⁵ This concept matches the definition of diaspora given by Adam Mckeown in the second definition that refers to diaspora as a living group and an away-from-home community in various forms and complexities – diaspora-as-diversity.⁶ Definitions of diaspora given by Khachig Tololyan and Adam Mckeown will be used to define the Isan diaspora in this research.

From the study of Isan country songs, the author has found that the representation of food in country songs is a very interesting topic that has not yet been thoroughly studied. Food consists of a cultural aspect and relates to the way of life. Humans must consume food and water from birth to death. But, we do not only want food for survival, humans also consume food for happiness. Food also relates to society, tradition, art and culture. Food has always been adapted to fit the ever changing taste of society and has been integrated into both work and rituals.

The author has discovered that there are many types of food listed in the lyrics of country songs: local Isan dishes, foreign food and the instant type. Isan people consider having food to eat is the most important issue above anything else, as said in the Phaya (พญา), or the old Isan proverb: “Suffering from not having clothes and home is bearable, but suffering from not having food to eat is too much to stand.” This proverb represents the high regard that Isan people give to having food to eat, which is mostly caused by the fact that the Northeast area is geographically less prosperous compared to other regions. Food is one of the things that anyone would mostly prepare and bring along when going away from the homeland for a long period of time. Moving to work in the city means the Isan workers must live within the

⁵ Khachig, “Rethinking Diaspora(s)”, 9.

⁶ McKeown, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diaspora, 1842 to 1949”, 311.

mainstream culture, their subculture, such as Isan music and Isan food, is then the tool for preserving their self identity. As Hebdige has stated, the form of subculture and construction of group identity is a symbolic meaning of resistance to the ideals and values that are determined by mainstream society; forms of music, costumes and speech are all used as symbolic tools in fighting those in power.⁷

Thus, the author is interested in studying about food in country songs. The leading questions for this topic of study are: 1) How important is food in the lyrics of country songs?; 2) Are there any differences in the representation of food portrayed in country songs in urban and rural contexts? Why?; 3) What type of Isan diaspora experience is shared through the usage of food in Isan country songs?

The scope of this study is the lyrics from Isan country songs of 11 artists from Grammy Gold record company from 2002-2011. The selected songs with vocabulary regarding food are in total 61 songs (Chakachan Wanwisa: none; Khaothip Thidadin: 1 song; Earn The Star: 1 song; Maithai Chaithawan: 3 songs; Thakathan Chonlada: 4 songs; Monkhaen Kaenkhoon: 3 songs; Phai Phongsathon: 6 songs; Mike Phiromphon: 8 songs; Thai Orathai: 7 songs; Siriphon Amphaihong: 10 songs; Phi Sadoed: 18 songs). Theory and concept of discourse, diaspora identity and internal colonialism is used to analyse and interpret the songs.

From this study of Grammy Gold Isan country songs, the author acknowledges a vast amount of words about food in the lyric. The presence of these words in the country songs has constructed some meanings that represent the negotiation and counter action of the Isan diaspora with the mainstream discourse. The presentation of food in Isan country songs relates to space that the narrator or character in the song is referring to, because the conscience of self identity of Isan diaspora in this scope of study is attached with two areas, namely the urban community and the rural. The author has found that the representation of food that appears in the urban space and the rural is different; the detail will be further described and discussed.

⁷ Kidd, *Culture and Identity*, 194.

Poverty and Suffering: The Representation of Food in Country Songs and the Urban Construction

Food is a part of our culture and is a reflection of our way of living. Many words about food have appeared in country songs. The author has noticed that when the song is about the Isan people in the capital city, food is used to represent the image of poverty; the type of food that the Isan diaspora eat is low quality and must be purchased with money. The illustration is conflicting with the image of the city being a prosperous centre of the economy.

An example of such depiction is seen in the lyrics of the song “Nao Sang Neon” which says:

During the day that the bird flies alone in the heart of Bangkok with little knowledge and little luck, the bird is constantly asking for ways to reach its dream. Living in a rented room and *eating street food*, working a low paid job, the reality is discouraging. Yet, the little heart is determined and will not give up... (Title: Nao Saeng Neon [หนาวแสงนีออน]; Singer: Thakathan Chonlada [นักร้อง ตักแตน ชลดา]).⁸

Another example is in the song “Fan Yang Klai Chai Yang Nao” which has part of the lyrics: “...The dream is still far away and the heart is still cold. The accommodation is still a rented room and the *food* is still *bought from up the road*...” (Title: Fan Yang Klai Chai Yang Nao [ฝันยังไกลใจยังหนาว]; Singer: Thai Orathai [ต่าย อรทัย]). The song “Dae...Rao Song Khon” also portrays the same image of Isan diaspora: “...Will not associate happiness with being rich or poor. *Grilled squid from the roadside* will keep me satisfied if I have my love one near me...” (Title: Dae...Rao Song Khon [แต่...เราสองคน]; Singer: Siriphon Amphaiphong [ศิริพร อำไพพงษ์]).

The examples above show the representation of food in the city for the Isan diaspora with adjectives such as street food, up the road, and roadside. These adjectives reflect the cheap food of low income people. The words also carry the connotation that the food is not so

⁸ The lyrics included in this article were translated by Janrumpai Chaisompongpan.

hygienic. Apart from that, “*roadside*” and “*street*” also conveys the hidden feeling of the Isan diaspora for being unequal and 2nd class citizens. Even though the food mentioned in the song “Dae...Rao Song Khon” is squid, seafood of a higher price, the squid is made by a grill and at the “*roadside*” or “*street*”; the squid is not cooked with complicated methods, nor served in a proper restaurant. The vocabulary used in the aforementioned songs is thus a very good indicator of the Isan diaspora as being a mere marginal group in the city.

Beside the fact that the food for Isan living in the city is low priced, the type of food consumed also depicts low quality and lack of nutrition. For instances: “...Although I was dead, there wouldn’t be any news made. Living in a rented room, *eating rice with canned fish...*” (Title: Kon Din Rim Thang [ก่อนดินริมทาง]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]) or “...Are you tired of being an employee? Do you receive enough money? When you already deduct *food on rice* and rent, please send it to us would you my dear?...” (Title: Doe Nang Doe [เดือนางเดอ]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]), and “...Labour life, I’m tired building my dream alone. To have you, the salty sweat seems worthwhile. I know why I fight and who am I doing it for. Rented room, *food in a plastic bag* would fill our hearts with sweet love...” (Title: Khwam Mai Khong Kham Wa Rak [ความหมายของคำว่ารัก]; Singer: Mike Phiomphon [ไมค์ ภิรมย์พร]). Another example would be:

Although there is no shopping mall in my life, if I want to shop there is still a market. Second hand stuff is not too expensive. Will you be shy to hold my hands and walk? What’s the difference between being full from *food on rice and noodles at the roadside* and food centre in shopping malls? We would have enough money left to rent a new movie, replacing going to the cinema with a DVD from China... (Title: Rak Mai Tong Prayat [รักไม่ต้องประหยัด]; Singer: Mike Phiomphon [ไมค์ ภิรมย์พร]).

It is noticeable that “food on rice” and “food in a plastic bag” mostly come together with the word “rented room”. Hence, the

accommodation is further representing the fact that Isan diaspora is being suppressed.

In the capital city which is supposed to be full of different kinds of food, it is rather interesting to have the lyrics of country songs talking only about food on rice, food in plastic bags, and canned fish. Also, there are some songs which talk about Isan diaspora having to hide from people's sight while having Isan food in the city, such as the song "Chaeo Bong Nai Klong Komp". These songs show the practice of negotiating and captivately reflect the double conscience of the Isan diaspora in Bangkok.

Do you still remember the smell of Chaeo Bong? Many years now that you've lived in Bangkok and cannot eat Pla Ra. I send you Chaeo Bong in this computer box because I'm afraid you will be embarrassed with your colleague if I send it via a bus...*food in big towns doesn't warm your stomach*. Hope this Chaeo Bong that I made will get you through. Slowly dipping this with *warm sticky rice* but *don't let the smell fly away*, or else *your boss will deduct your pay*. Hope you have strength to fight. I will send you food and support to help you tolerate the *dry and unkind city people*. So, this Chaeo Bong must hide in a city looking computer box... (Title: Chaeo Bong Nai Klong Komp [แจ่วบองในกล่องคอมพิวเตอร์]; Singer: Siriphon Amphai Phong [ศิริพร อำไพพงษ์]).

This song refers to an Isan man who works in Bangkok and his girlfriend is sending him Chaeo Bong [แจ่วบอง] (fried Pla Ra), but she is afraid that it will be too smelly. She is also afraid that her lover might be embarrassed about the food and thus, hides it in a computer box. This signifies the need of Isan people to find jobs in towns and the fact that they must hide their Isan identity. The food that the Isan people are familiar with is sticky rice and Pla Ra. However, when living in town, they must change their eating habit to gain acceptance from the city people. Although to Isan people, Pla Ra has a nice smell, for non-familiar Bangkokian it becomes smelly and stinky food. Therefore, when those Isan people who work in the city go back

home, they must secret the food back into the city and also must hide when they are eating such food.

Furthermore, the lyrics of the song also show that the Isan food culture has been driven away from the city space with the act of disgust (as shown in the music video) and through the use of language “*don't let the smell fly away, or else your boss will deduct your pay.*” If wanting to work in the city, the Isan diaspora must play the role as determined by society; while there is an effort to maintain their Isan identity by hiding Chaeo Bong in a computer box and eating Chaeo Bong, smelly food from a Bangkokian perspective, in a restricted area. This reflects the double conscience of the Isan labourer. Pla-ra is Isan food which the Bangkok people generally reject; therefore, the Isan labourer cannot just openly eat it. However, the urban culture cannot suppress Isan food culture. Pla-ra is still significant in the life style of the Isan diaspora as represent in the songs, which shows the efforts of the Isan labourer to resist the rules by hiding and eating Chaeo Bong in a computer box. Moreover, the presentation of food in the songs also portrays differences between the lifestyle of the Isan labourer in the city and in the rural area. It is noticeable that the sentence “*food in big towns doesn't warm you stomach*”, the song writer has used the word “*warm the stomach*” instead of “*being full*”. Hence, food is not merely for physical needs, but also for psychological and mental support. The word “*warm the stomach*” reminds and relates the listener to a heart-warming experience. In the same sentence, the lyrics also hide the complaint to society that they are in poverty, which is a reverse relation to the city's economic growth and projects the picture of the entrepreneur, capitalist and city people as bad guys, as “*your boss will deduct your pay*” and “*dry and unkind city people*”. The food that appears in the city context implies Isan diaspora as low class and as victims. The Isan country song is thus a space to declare the self and identity of the Isan labourer to society and also to voice their suffering.

The lyrics of the song “Khon Klai Muea Klai Ban” illustrates the lifestyle of the Isan people working in the city who have to wait for the end of the month with their salary to go into a more expensive and proper restaurant. “...standing in front of the road after work in this

special occasion that we have a date at the end of this month, hope this evening at the *Chim Chum restaurant* (ร้านจิ้มจุ่ม) won't be cancelled" (Title: Khon Klai Muea Klai Ban [คนใกล้เมื่อใกล้บ้าน]; Singer: Thai Orathai [ต่าย อรทัย]). These lyrics show that Chim Chum, which is of Isan origin, is becoming more widespread and popular in Bangkok amongst its people because they would like to try a new taste. Consequently, Chim Chum in Bangkok comes in different forms from food kiosk to restaurants in shopping malls.

The Chim Chum restaurant in this song is the meeting place. It is seen in the context of the song that the lyrics signify the city lifestyle that people live their life by the working hour; the date with the love must be strictly after work. The life of the workforce also relates to the salary. The end of the month is the time when people in Bangkok go shopping and eat out more than any other time. It differs from the Isan lifestyle in the rural area where people tend to eat at home. Even though the food in this song belongs to Isan people, they must also pay for the food with money from working in the city.

From the aforementioned examples, it can be seen that the representation of food in an urban context through the Isan country song has negative connotations that implies the meaning of poverty and suffering, which conflicts with the mainstream discourse that the city is the economic centre and is thus very prosperous. The Isan country song is telling a different story that this prosperity is not for the Isan diaspora, but is reserved only for the city people. The Isan diaspora has been suppressed and driven away. This message differs from the representation of food in the Isan rural area, which will now be discussed.

Prosperity and Happiness: Representation of Food in Country Songs and the Rural Construction

The country songs which have lyrics about food in the rural context are completely the opposite of the food in urban context. Food is used to show the prosperity of the Isan area, which conflicts with the mainstream discourse that mostly projects a stereotype of the Northeast or Isan region as being a rural land with the poorest population compared with the people from all other regions of

Thailand.⁹ Nonetheless, the author has found that Isan country songs of the latter generation tend to present a prosperous image of the Isan region through the use of food imagery. An example is the song “Bet Kop” of Phi Sadoed:

living in the Isan area means never lacking something to eat.

When the rain comes, it brings food. *If you're not lazy, you will never die of hunger.* Go out to find *frogs* and *fish* to your bait, take the shovel to find earth worms. Some go out to find *small green frogs*...some people's paddy field will never run out of fish because they keep it for fishing. (Title: Bet Kop [เบ็ดกบ]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]).

From the part that says “...*living in the Isan area means never lacking something to eat.* When the rain comes, it brings food. *If you're not lazy, you will never die of hunger*”, we can see that the lyrics act as a counter discursive practice to the mainstream discourse that has constructed the myth of impoverished Isan region. The lyrics argue that Isan has plenty of food and diligent people will always survive. This is the creation of a new meaning and discourse which opposes poverty and further supports the prosperous image of the Isan area. In the next verse, the writer gives examples of food that are abundant in the region, e.g., frogs, fish and small green frogs.

Even though the lyrics portray the representation of food abundance, the food only comes from small animals such as fish, chickens, frogs, etc. This shows the humbleness and sustainability of the Isan people, as they will only consume big animals, such as cows and buffalo, in ceremonies or big festivals. Beside fish, the other main source of food for Isan people is mushrooms, as seen in the song “Kep Het” from Phi Sadoed.

⁹ The representation of poverty appears in various media, especially TV drama and movie. For example, the broadcasting TV series from Thailand Channel 7 named “Nang Bap Khok Kradon”, in which the pictures of trees and paddy fields were all edited into grey scale.

Het Pluak (เห็ดปลวก), *Het Phueng* (เห็ดเผิง หรือเห็ดผึ้ง), *Het Than* (เห็ดถ่าน), *Het Hamfan* (เห็ดห้าฟาน) grows on mounds, *Het Hamfan* grows on mounds. It will possibly give us energy to have a sip of Nam Kaeng Niew (น้ำแกงเหนียว). *Het Hua Lueang* (เห็ดหัวเหลือง), *Hua Daeng* (เห็ดหัวแดง), *Kaeng Het Ra- Ngok* (แกงเห็ดระโงก) is so delicious. *Het Takhai* (เห็ดตะไค) on the grill, then pound in mortar...Come, come into the wild woods. Wanna go to collect mushrooms? There're plenty of mushrooms: both eatable and poisonous. Separate the grass first then find. You might even get *Het Pho* (เห็ดเผาะ) (Title: *Kep Het* [เก็บเห็ด]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]).

“*Kep Het*” illustrates the lifestyle and the way to find food of the rural Isan people. During April to May, which is towards the end of summer and starting to have the first rain, mushroom flowers start to flourish. The song refers to many mushrooms, i.e., *Het Pluak*, *Het Phueng*, *Het Than*, *Het Hamfan*, *Het Ra- Ngok*, *Het Takhai* and *Het Pho*. Mushrooms are a fungus which is a result of plant and animal decay. The perfect ecosystem of the forest is the cause of mushrooms. Nowadays, many types of mushroom are hard to find and are expensive. For example, *Het Pho* is 400-500 baht per kilogram. But when it comes to the mushroom season, Isan locals get to eat this expensive mushroom. Hence, the reference to mushrooms is aimed to illustrate Isan prosperity and abundance and also the fact that Isan people know how to pick various mushrooms to eat. The song also talks about the method of cooking mushrooms, which reflects the local wisdom of Isan people concerning food.

Apart from that, the lyrics also discuss the ways rural Isan locals find food using digging tools and traps. The food in the rural area is around the field, the mountain and the forest; food is free in Isan rural area, which is different from food in the city. “*Chuan Nong Long Thung*” states the difference:

holding the short shovel to dig the *Dok Kachiao* (ดอกกะเจียว), green Pak Wan (ผักหวาน) and young Pong (ปลิงยอดอ่อน) around the corner of the paddy field to put into *Kaeng* (แกง) with *ant larva*

(ไข่มดแดง) and *fish*. When the evening comes, it is so delicious, ...so scrumptious...Going out to the field, we *don't waste money like going to shopping malls. Everything is given by nature; we can all find that without a price tag. Everything is so abundant but we don't need to use any money...* (Title: Chuan Nong Long Thung [ชวนน้องลงทุ่ง]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]).

The song reflects the prosperity of the Isan field in late summer and early rainy season. The food is easily found in nature without having to pay for it: flowers, vegetables, ant larva and fish. Comparing this with the lyrics in other country songs about the food in town, we could see that it is totally the opposite because the food found in the urban area is food in plastic bags, canned fish and street food, which must all be paid for with money. The quantity and quality is also lower than the food in the rural area that comes from nature.

Besides presenting the image of food during the raining season when the food is rich, the country song also projects food in summer time when the water from natural source is getting drier. During such period, the Isan people will take out the water in the pond and catch some fish. Then, they will preserve the food through methods such as drying or make pla daek [ปลาแดด] for the incoming dry season.

Fourth and fifth month, the land is dry and there is no rain. We walk upon the dust from clay and hear the fish move. The pond sitting over the paddy field, under the tree and the bamboo shoot, has a big stripped snake head fish and many more fish. Fish this and grill or make some soup...Big stripped snake head fish boiled with ant larva. Sip the hot soup and get boosted...Koi Mot Daeng (ก้อยมดแดง) and white rice wine, now I'm energised (Title: Sa Pla [สาปลา]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]).

The lyrics of this song reflect the lifestyle of the Isan people in the summer time without rain and when the water is drying up. Yet, the song chooses to project the prosperity, instead of poverty, when it comes to summer. The people take out water and catch fish. Late summer, red ants are laying their larva and the locals will cook fish

with this larva. Ant larva is food from nature that is so tasty it is listed in a restaurant. Apart from the larva, Isan people also eat green tea ants and red ants; they give more sour taste to a broth. The song also shows the simplicity of the people through the method of cooking; they can cook with just chilli, salt, and fish sauce. When they get the food, the method is quite easy and simple, such as grill, Koi and Kaeng. The food is from nature. In daytime, Isan people do not go home and so they mostly cook at the rest area around the rice field.

It is highly noticeable that the lyrics of the song also represent the happiness of the Isan people that comes from a simple lifestyle and the love and bond among themselves. This is seen in the song “Fak Siang Lam Long”: “...Hearing the song and music from the country band, missing two of us walking along the paddy field. Our house is right next to each other and all the relatives. *When we get a small frog, we share with everyone and make Kua, Om and grill or Pon...*” (Title: Fak Siang Lam Long [ฝากเสียงลำลอง]; Singer: Siriphon Amphaiphong [ศิริพร อำไพพงศ์]). The song “Fak Siang Lam Long” of Siriphon Amphaiphong talks about cousins and friends in the hometown; when Isan people go out and find food, they tend to go together in a group. Then, anything they have is shared amount several groups, even to the one that did not catch anything.

When the Isan people reminisce about the homeland, they normally relate that with food. For instance “Yak Mua Ban Hao De”:

Living in a distant town is not warm as living back in ours. Fish in the field, we help each other harvest the rice and put it in containers. *Lap Khom Tom Kai* (ลาบขม ต้มไก่), the light fog in cold weather and the smell of soil still sticks within my heart. The wonderful smell of the fresh rice, my eyes start to cry when I think of home... (Title: Yak Muea Ban Hao De [อยากเมื่อบ้านเฮา เด้]; Singer: Phai Phongsathon [ไผ่ พงศธร]).

The song mentions the feeling of the ones living away from home that it is not as warm as being at their home. The memory that has been reminisced is related to food because food is in everyday life. Food is also a memory that touches all senses: eyes, nose and tongue.

Food in the song also transcribes love and bond within the family, especially the memory towards mother. The “Khao Chi Kham Nan” from Mike Phiomphon is the example:

at the evening like this, so many years back I was fighting the cold wind with the Khao Chi (ข้าวจี) next to the grill. Mom offers Khao Chi from her warm hand with the kind look. I still hold on to this memory in my heart. That bite of Khao Chi warms my heart in cold weather. Whenever I’m tired and want to return home and the warmth, all I could do is to sit and glance. Alone in the city’s dust...light up the fire and the warmth and wait for me, would you please? When I would be better off, I will go back there and smell your Khao Chi... (Title: Khao Chi Kham Nan [ข้าวจีค่านัน]; Singer: Mike Phiomphon [ไมค์ ภิรมย์พร]).

The song above has the name of one Isan food, which is “Khao Chi”.¹⁰ From the context of this word, the meaning of the food in this song is not only about Isan food – it is also related to love and warmth of mother, which represents family as a whole. The sentence saying “Mom offers Khao Chi” made this food very special for the receiver. Then it is followed by the sentence “Mom offers Khao Chi from her warm hand with the kind look. I still hold on to this memory in my heart.” Presents the love and bond that mother has towards her children. “Mom offers Khao Chi” has extended the meaning to offering love to the children too.

When the son eats Khao Chi and sings further about “That bite of *Khao Chi* warms my heart in cold weather”, the son realise the warmth in his heart due to the love from his mother and her kind look. It is not the hotness of the rice that makes it warm, as explained in the

¹⁰ The word “chi” means to grill. “Khao Chi” is food which relates to the people’s life and season, which is “winter” – when the temperature gets really low and cold in the Isan region. Isan locals light a fire to keep warm and usually do some activity around the fire. To not waste the firewood, Isan people also bring along food to grill. “Khao Chi” also reflects the identity and characteristic of the Isan people for being simple and economical because it is made from the leftover sticky rice from the day. The sticky rice is made into a flat piece with some salt added, then grilled.

last verse, “When I would be better off, I will go back there and smell your Khao Chi.” This signifies the meaning of returning to the love and family bond. The song portrays the image of the love and bond of Isan people with their homeland and the economic driver that forces them to leave home to the city. The nostalgic feeling in this song carries the hidden meaning of negotiation of the Isan diaspora. Another example of a country song that relates food and happiness in the hometown appears in the song “Khid Hot Hak Thae”:

Lying on mom’s lap in the balcony since I was young, the wind blows and Khao Chi smells great with salt. Missing the night when I smell the paddy field and grilled fish. The warmth I have had from the familiar person and the home I’d lived, this memory still lives with me. I miss the true love. Love from mother is eternal, oh dear mother... (Title: Khid Hot Hak Thae [คิดฮอดฮักแท้]; Singer: Phai Phongsathon [ไผ่ พงศธร]).

These lyrics explain the image of love, warmth and bond between a man and his mother. This bond is relating to food, which is Khao Chi and grilled fish. The other songs which portray motherly love are, for example, “Thon Thun Rang Chai” by Phai Phongsathon “...Love of mother never fades. I’m sending you love with *Pla Daek Bong* (ปลาแดกของ). Dipping and eating in your room would feel like sitting next to the rice field.” (Title: Ton Thun Raeng Chai [ต้นทูนแรงใจ]; Singer: Phai Phongsathon [ไผ่ พงศธร])). The lyrics from Khuet Hot Khon Klai also make a remark about happiness in the Isan rural area: “...The past has reminded me that I shall not forget. I want to go back to join your dream. Counting the day with my heart. Now dad and brother must be back from the paddy field and mom is certainly preparing some *rice, fish and food* and making some *soup* to greet them with...” (Title: Khuet Hot Khon Klai [คิดฮอดคนไกล]; Singer: Mike Phromphon [ไมค์ ภริมย์พร])).

This song is about the love of mother, which is the motivation for the singer to be able to fight with living and working in the city. The lyric illustrates the love of the mother that has been sent together with the food, which is Pla Daek Bong. When the mother sends the

food from home, it means that she has also sent the love and memory of the hometown too. Therefore, when he got to dip the sticky rice with Pla Daek, it is almost like he has travelled back to the rice field outside his old house. The story in Isan country songs mostly relates to the memory of home and mother signifying the relationship between the diaspora and their motherland.

Isan people come to work in the capital because of economic needs. The Isan diaspora mostly work as a labourers and are restricted to live in a small rented room, as described in the previous section. Henceforth, the space of food is the space of negotiation that the Isan diaspora has created. In Bangkok, Isan restaurants have become the centre of Isan people as appeared in the song “Khon Ban Diaw Kan ”: “Oh...oh...*we are from the same hometown*, just look into the eyes and we understand each other; knowing how tired it is, how hard it is in this path we have to fight...decided to take the luggage and fight in this big city. *Met you several times at the Lap restaurant*, how is it going brother?” (Title: Khon Ban Diao Kan [คนบ้านเดียวกัน]; Singer: Phai Phongsathon [ไพ่ พงศธร]). The space of Lap restaurant appeared in this song is not only the space to sell Isan food. It is actually the space to show the Isan identity, the meeting point, and also a centre of Isan people.

Apart from that, the restaurant is also a space to freely show your identity and release the discontentment from being the victim as seen in “Cho Chak To Kao”:

Stay with the boss, don't even think about singing. Just whistling, it was forbidden. I can learn to say yes. Then stop and only use my mouth for eating. When I get off work and have money, I will go to the street side Lap restaurant...The labour guy sounds sad, not exactly drunk but the loneliness stays in his heart. *Being poor teaches me to stand and tolerate my boss.* But, with the microphone, I'm willing to fight and sing away. I'm not afraid about how many plates of Lap I'm having, nor how many thousand baht that would cost. I will take it as a paid ticket to release my suppressed feeling. *Bring up the feeling of inequality and sing that away with the fun song; tomorrow I can speak*

sweetly with my boss again. (Title: Cho Chak To Kao [โจ้จจากโ้๊ะ
เก๋า]; Singer: Mike Phiromphon [ไมค์ ภิรมย์พร]).

The lyric points out the negotiation between the worker and his boss and the double conscience of the Isan diaspora that has two characters in one self: the public transcript and the hidden transcript.¹¹ We can see from the lyrics that this Isan worker is playing the role as appointed by the society as “Being poor teaches me to *stand and tolerate* my boss.” Therefore, he must try to please his boss in order to keep the job by not singing, not whistling, and always say yes and speaking nicely to the boss. Although “Tomorrow I can *speak sweetly with my boss* again” has a sense of being two-faced, for the Isan worker, playing the role is to protect him from the unfair society. Outside the work space, the Isan people also have a way to negotiate and open up their inner self and suppressed feeling using the space of “Lap restaurant” and “song”, which have turned into a space for negotiation and release. When thoroughly examined, it becomes clearer that the way Isan people use singing to release their feelings is clever; a song once written is turned to be public goods, which anyone could sing. Song is then a tool to release but also to cover up the feeling.

As aforementioned, when comparing and contrasting the representation of food in the country songs in two contexts, urban and rural, it is apparent that food is used as a symbol to construct the meaning of urban and rural.

Therefore, we can see the construction of “urban” and “rural” in country songs through the use of food imagery. The image projected upon the Isan urban context has created the image of poverty and suffering, while the image projected upon the Isan rural context has created the image of abundance and happiness, bringing a positive image to the Isan people. This is to counter the stereotype of the outsider seeing Isan as a poor dry land and lack economic potential.

¹¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1-16.

Food in Country Song: The Shared Experience between Isan Diaspora

From the previous description, it can be seen that the presentation of food in country songs has constructed the meaning to urban and rural areas. Food is also used as a counter discursive practice for the Isan diaspora towards the suppressed discourse of the society. Moreover, food in country songs is used to deliver shared experiences within the Isan diaspora group, such as the song “Hom Klin Ban Koet”:

Smelling the great scent of *Pak Kayaeng* (ผักกะแยง) from the plastic bag of soup in the street kiosk *got my heart flying across the wide sky back to the straw and rice field that I’m used to*. It is so heart-warming as if I’ve actually been back there to stand at the old house together with mom, dad and grannies. Sitting watching stars, eating out in the balcony (Title: Hom Klin Ban Koet [หอมกลิ่นบ้านเกิด]; Singer: Thai Orathai [ต่าย อรทัย]).

The specific vocabulary or terminology about food in this song is “Pak Kayaeng or Pak Ka Ngang”, which is a local vegetable of the Isan region. The locals must know this vegetable very well because it is an important ingredient of many dishes; it is also used to cover the smell from meat such as beef and frogs. Pak Kayaeng is a vegetable that grows during the rainy season and also rice harvest time. It has a unique scent. The word Pak Kayaeng thus not only symbolises a local vegetable, but the writer, the singer and the listener, which are all Isan diaspora, also share the experience of shape, taste and smell. Furthermore, this also carries the shared memory of the season, which cannot be accessed and shared by the outsider.

As a result, the understanding of emotion when listening to the song is an exclusive experience for Isan people. As well, this links to the bond of Isan people in the countryside; the extended family which consists of father, mother, grandparents and cousins will all sit together eating, especially “*Pak Kayaeng from the plastic bag of soup in the street kiosk*” or dinner. While “dinner” in this sense can be interpreted as food that must be bought with money, unlike the food at

home, which is found in the nature or sharing. The name of the song is “Hom Klin Ban Koed” (Klin=smell), smell certainly plays a big role in triggering the memory of Isan people.

From the study of Isan country songs, the author has found that the Isan country song has been presenting through standard Thai language with an Isan accent or basic Isan words that are easy to understand. This may be caused by the fact that the country music industry does not want to restrict the audience to just Isan people; people from other region can listen to Isan country songs. Aside from the marketing strategy of the record companies, to not overuse the local dialect also allows the Isan country song to reach out to more audience. Nevertheless, in the songs that talk about food, there will be some Isan jargon and experience regarding Isan food which is not accessible and shared by the general audience; they could only understand and picture the overview of the song, for instance, “Yok Sot” song of Phi Sadoed:

been working, so tired, so must find something to eat. Inviting all Isan diaspora brothers to pour out the kindness into the glass and cheers. We have *Tom Sap* (ต้มแซ่บ), *Tom Pla Kho* (ต้มปลาข่อ), and *Tom Kai* (ต้มไก่). To have a spoonful, the heart would be revitalised. We have *Lap lueat* (ลาบเลือด), Bua Loy which looks like red cheek of teenage girls. Also *Om Kop* (อ่อมกบ) and *Tam Mak Thang* (ตำหมากแตง) for us to sit and dine. *Kaeng Pak Wan* (แกงผักหวาน), *Khai Mot Daeng* (ไข่มดแดง), *Maeng Tap Tho* (แมงต๊อบเต่า), *Lap Ma Noi* (ลาบหมาน้อย), *Lap Tho* (ลาบเทา), *Kaeng Pla, Luk Krok* (แกงปลาครก), *Mak Khai Pham* (หมากไข่ผ่า), *Om Nong Wua* (อ่อมน้องวัว), and *Tom Kop Sai Bai Mak Kham* (ต้มกบใส่ใบหมากขาม). To have a girl to eat with, Oh, it would be delicious. Just seeing that I want to just swallow, swallow, swallow, swallow, swallow and eat them all (Title: Yok Sot [ยอกซด]; Singer: Phi Sadoed [พี สะเดิด]).

From the song above, it can be seen that many Isan dishes have been in the urban context, such as Kaeng Pak Wan, Khai Mot Daeng, Maeng Thap Tho, Lap Ma Noi, Lap Tho, Kaeng Pla, Luk Khrok, Mak

Khai Pham, Om Nong Wua, and Tom Kop Sai Bai Mak Kham, etc. Most of these dishes are only available in the Isan region and are also seasonal. So, the time spent in an Isan restaurant is the enjoyment time for Isan people to feel happiness and reminiscing on time back home.

The shared experience about food is commonly a part of the diaspora group. For the Isan diaspora, they also give high importance to eating and food. Because, food reflects the life and living of people and also acts as memory record. The song “Thang Nan Pen Chang Dai” is an example:

Ask your heart, do you know there's someone missing you?
 Eat Kaeng Het Din around the paddy field thinking about sending
 it to you. Don't know how you are, are you tired from work?
 Have you had dinner? Do you still remember my number? This
 poor girl is waiting for your call. Struggling over there, I just
 wanna tell you when I eat Pon... (Title: Thang Nan Pen Chang
 Dai [ทางนั้นเป็นจ้งใต้]; Singer: Siriphon Amphaiphong [ศิริพร อำไพ
 พงศ์]).

The singer uses food to send out care and remind their love to think of home. She expresses her feeling towards her lover who must be away from home to work in the city through telling her that she would like to bring food from home for him. Because he lives at a different place and must adjust to the culture, lifestyle and food that he might not be familiar with and would love to eat something that he is used to. Moreover, the name of the familiar local food also reminds the diaspora about their hometown. Thus, the woman in the song is saying “I just wanna tell you when I eat Pon”, which marks that the important topic of conversation for the Isan rural people tend to be about food. To tell a story about local food also has hidden agenda to keep the lover thinking about home and their shared experience.

Conclusion

Food in country songs not only reflects the way of life and the consumption of Isan people. For the Isan diaspora, the image of food that appears in the country songs, which refers to urban contexts,

differs from the ones that appear in the country songs which refer to rural contexts as binary opposition. The representation of food in urban contexts signifies poverty and suffering; this is done by the use of adjectives describing the kind of food and the place to buy food, such as street food, roadsides, plastic bags, grilled squid on the street, etc. This also combines with the fact that the Isan diaspora do not get enough food and receive inadequate salary. On the contrary, the representation of food in the rural context projects prosperity and happiness through a variety of food that differs according to changing seasons. On top of that, this also illustrates love, warmth and the friendship of people in the rural Isan area. This is to counter the mainstream discourse that paints the representation of Isan as being poor and lacking economic ability. Furthermore, the usage of food in the country song is to voice that the abundance of the city is not for the Isan diaspora, but is reserved only for city people.

The image of poverty and suffering is then used by the Isan people to object to the society in that they are being suppressed and driven away from the prosperity; they are also being exploited from the city. In addition, food in country songs is used for sharing the experience between Isan diaspora groups, which is not accessible from outside groups.

The terminology and vocabulary about local Isan food that appears throughout the country songs not only gives direct meaning or definition, it also is used as a tool for Isan diaspora to circulate their shared experience within their group since it needs to be interpreted by connecting the experience of form, taste, and smell. Once the Isan diaspora hears the song containing such words, their mind will link the present and past memory to create a shared perception, while the outsider who never experiences any of the food could not understand. Thus, the process of meaning construction of food in country songs is then a tool used by the Isan diaspora to negotiate and counter argue the urban community.

Isan Food Vocabulary Directory

Chaeo Bong (แจ่วบอง): Isan chilli paste.

Chim chum (จิ้มจุ่ม): Isan hotpot that is similar to sukiyaki.

Dok kachiao (ดอกกะเจียว): Patumma or Siam Tulip flower; the young flower is eatable when boiled.

Het Din (เห็ดดิน): Mushroom that blossoms, but sinks in the middle. The flower is off white colour.

Het Hamfan (เห็ดห้าฟาน): Mushroom that is quite round and is yellow to orange in colour. The diameter is 1-3 cm. Commonly used to make koi and kaeng.

Het Pho (เห็ดเผาะ): Earth star mushroom.

Het phoeng (เห็ดเผิง): One of the popular mushrooms that Isan people like to eat.

Het Pluak (เห็ดปลวก): Brown mushroom that grows on termite hills.

Het Ra-Ngok (เห็ดระโงก): One type of mushroom that comes in white, red or yellow. The mushroom petal is oval shape like a goose egg. It is found in sparse wood and grove forest throughout the north and northeast of Thailand.

Het Takhai (เห็ดตะไค้): Beige colour mushroom found around swamps, grove forests and dry forests in the Isan region. It has a good smell and crispy texture with a slight sweet taste.

Het Than (เห็ดถ่าน): Flower of black mushrooms. The flower stalk is long and the petal is white. The petal rim is black like charcoal when the flower blooms. (Than (ถ่าน) is charcoal in Thai).

Kaeng Phak Wan (แกงผักหวาน): A cooking method that brings water to a boil to make a clear soup. Phak Wan is the main ingredient.

Kang Pla (แกงปลา): A cooking method that brings water to a boil to make a clear soup. Fish is the main ingredient.

Khai Mot Daeng (ไข่มดแดง): Red ant larva and green tea ant is used to make many types of dishes such as soup, Kaeng Puk wan Sai Khai Mot Daeng or omelette with red ant larva.

Khao Chi (ข้าวจี): Rice with salt grilled. Sometimes the rice is dipped in egg then grill.

Koi (ก้อย): A method of Isan cookery that mixes raw or cooked meat with Pla Ra sauce, fish sauce and lime juice or juice from other

sour fruit. Then, ground chilli, roasted rice, spring onion, sawtooth coriander, kaffir lime leaves, and mint is added.

Lap (ลาบ): A method of cooking of Northeast Thailand and Laos which mixes minced meat with seasoning, fish sauce, Pla Ra juice, lime juice, sugar and garnished with roasted rice, ground chilli, mint, chopped spring onion and red onion. Lap Lerd uses cow's blood as a main ingredient instead of meat.

Luk Khrok (ลูกครอก): New born stripped snake head fish.

Ma Noi (หมาน้อย): A local vegetable with heart shape leaves. The leave has soft hair.

Mak Khai Pham (หมากไข่ผ่า): Fresh water algae in very small green ball used for making soup.

Maeng tap tao (แมงตับเต่า): A kind of insect that has hard wings and a glossy black body and is consumed by Isan people. It lives in swamps, ponds and streams and likes coming out to play with the light at night time.

Nong Wua (น้องวัว): Cow placenta.

Om (อ่อม): The method like Tom (clear soup), but uses less water or broth.

Pak Kayaeng (ผักกะแยง): A local vegetable with a nice smell, used to cover up strong smell from other ingredients.

Phak Wan (ผักหวาน): A type of vegetable. The young tips, flowers and fruit is used for cooking.

Pla Kheng (ปลาเข็ง): Climbing perch fish.

Pla Kho (ปลาช่อ): Stripped snake head fish.

Pla Ra (ปลาร้า): Preserved fish, which is a Thai and Laotian local wisdom of food preservation.

Pon (ป่น): A cooking method with pound minced meat, mushrooms or fig-like fruit.

Tam Mak Thaeng (ตำหมากแตง): Sliced cucumber into long thin pieces and then pounded in a mortar just like Som Tum.

Thao (เทา): Fresh water algae that has green leaves, used for cooking.

Tom Kai (ต้มไก่): A cooking method that brings water to boil to make clear soup. Chicken is the main ingredient.

Tom Kop Sai Bai Mak Kham (ต้มกบใส่ใบหมากขาม): A cooking method that brings water to boil to make clear soup. Frog and tamarind leaves are the main ingredients.

Tom Pla Kho (ต้มปลาช่อ): A cooking method that brings water to boil to make clear soup. Stripped snake head fish is the main ingredient.

Tom Saep (ต้มแซ่บ): Isan spicy soup which is similar to Tom Yum.

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