

The Spiritual Side of Rice: A Survey on Art and Culture Inspired by and Related to Rice in Asia, Focusing on the Central Region of Thailand

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The Art and Culture That Ties Asia

Rice has been cultivated in Asia for over 7,000 years. (Piper, 1993:1) That rice means to the Asian peoples more than being their staple food is not an overstatement. That the growing and eating of rice have been intimately bound to aspects of regional identity has been proved true. In 2003, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History published a huge volume of **The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia**, an impressive outcome of the project directed by Roy W. Hamilton, the Curator of Asian and Pacific Collections of the Museum. This publication records numerous art forms and cultural aspects of rice in Asia prevalent in the time when the project was carried on, together with some flashbacks. Turning each page of the book, one becomes amazed to learn how Asian peoples have been profoundly yet unconsciously bound together by means of rice as therein depicted. Hamilton himself notes in his preface that rice is the one thing that comes closest to uniting at least a large part of what people know as Asia. (Hamilton, 2003: 11)

Asian Rice Art and Culture in Display

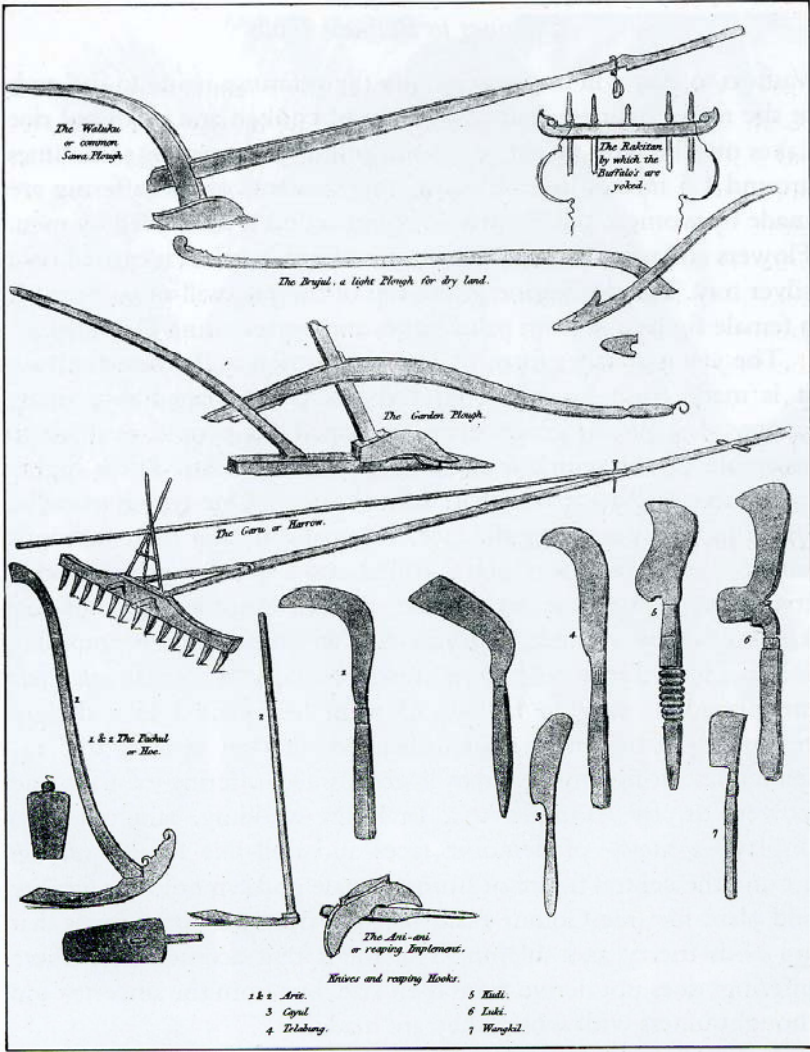
‘A picture is worth a thousand words,’ says a wise man. Following are many thousand words illustrating a comparative view of Asian rice art and culture:





Symbolic signs are put in the rice field and in the granary by Thai farmers to protect the goddess of rice.

RICE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA



24. Implements used in traditional Javanese rice farming. (From T. S. Raffles, *The History of Java*, London, 1817; reprinted Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1965 and 1978)

Implements used in traditional Javanese rice farming. (Piper, 1993: 66)

Thai
vs.
Japanese
scarecrows



(Above) Sickles from different parts of Thailand and a rice cutter from the Southern region.
(Left) A Khmer or Cambodian sickle.

Hay stacks on stilts in paddy field Karnataka, one of the four southern states of India. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)





1. Kenyan women husking paddy. (From C. Hose and W. McDougall, *The Paper Taker of Borneo*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1912; reprinted Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1993)

Kenya women husking paddy. (Piper, 1993: 37)



Women in Southern Thailand use a mortar similar to that of the Kenyan.



This female farmer uses a mortar for a single husker.



A different type of mortar is used by a Thai male farmer.



15. Indo-Chinese girl winnowing rice, photographed in the mid-1870s. (John Thomson)



Two ladies of different ages winnowing rice, an Indo-Chinese girl (left), photographed by John Thomson in the mid-1870s (Piper, 1993: 37), and a Thai female farmer of the twentieth century.



Decoding Asian Rice Art and Culture

Considering rice related cultures in Asia, one might explain what actually happened between rice and mankind in terms of art and culture as simply as follows:

Firstly, rice farming necessitated man to invent and develop tools and appliances to facilitate every chore possible. Thanks to man's leisure and imagination, these tools, technically termed handcrafts, have later been emotionally regarded as artifacts, pieces of art, which form a part of folk material- culture.

Secondly, in the very early age of rice and man, animism strongly prevailed. Man needed spiritual support when facing difficulties or ill prospect. In case of rice farming, such difficulties might be draught or holocaust. A god or goddess might be a good safeguard. And that god or goddess must have been pleased since only a happy god or goddess would spell the draught or holocaust away; an angry god or goddess would not. There arose rituals concerning the god or goddess of rice, which later became known as a part of spiritual culture. Tales were also told of the god and goddess as well as of the rituals.

Thirdly, archeologists have discovered sufficient evidence to make reasonable assumption about where rice farming started; China, most of them said. Once rice

farming was spread from China, in the time when all the land were either without name or with some other names different from what they are called today, it seems the so-called 'art and culture' accompanied rice farming all the way throughout Asia; thus, similar tools were made and similar rice guardians were respected. Differences seem to depend upon local environment including natural resources, and of course, man's imaginative power.

There is still a wonder, however, because the passing on of art and culture seems to have particularly occurred in the rice-and-man relationship, not so much in that between man and any other kinds of food. Furthermore, it seems to have particularly occurred among Asian countries. Rice grown outside Asia¹ has not instilled so much inspiration into either the growers or the eaters.

To Bring into Focus:

Firstly, Thailand

According to archaeological findings, rice arrived in the land which at present is the Northeastern part of Thailand at least 5,500 years ago. There are legends and tales about the origin of rice popular among the peoples living around the areas, which at present day are in Northeastern Thailand, Southern China, Northern Laos and Vietnam. Rice gained complete victory over people in this area. When the early state of Siam² emerged around the thirteenth century, rice was referred to as an indicator of the state's prosperity. Through the evolution of states and societies on the land which is now Thailand, rice has always played an important role in one way or another.

On March 30, 1993, a permanent exhibition under the topic of 'Rice and Thai Ways of Life'³ was opened by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindorn, at the National Cultural Center of Thailand, Bangkok, succeeded by a grand seminar on the theme 'Rice Culture in Thai Society.' On that occasion, it was proclaimed that 'rice is the life of the Siamese,' (Swangvudthitham, 1999:13) and the phrase 'rice culture' has become a catchphrase in Thai Studies since then.

¹ There are ancient references to rice in Babylonia, and Lower Syria after 285 BC. By the first century BC, the crop was known to the Ancient Romans and was imported to Egypt from India and was later brought by the Arabs and grown in the Nile Delta. Rice was taken to the coast of North Africa and Spain in the early Middle Ages. Rice may have been grown in Sicily since ancient times but it did not reach northern Italy until the fifteenth century. In the early part of the past century, rice finally reached Australia and California. (Piper, 1993: 14)

² Thailand's former name.

³ There are four themes of Thai Life Permanent Exhibition

1. The Origin of Thai People,
2. Rice and Thai Ways of Life which gives the importance to rice culture in Thai society from past to present and for the Thai "rice is life"
3. Thai Language and Literature
4. Thai Heroic Deeds and Major Events in Thai History (Swangvudthitham, 1999: 9-10)

Secondly, Thailand's Central Region

Of the four main regions of Thailand, the North, the Northeast, the Central and the South, the Central has permanently held the first place in rice productivity. The great plains along both sides of the Chao Phraya River, which serve as the site of the region, have been referred to as the country's 'U-khao U-nam,' or 'the port of rice and water.' Behind the glory are the fertile Delta soil, sufficient water and sunshine provided by nature, even now.

Regardless of certain details, Thai farmers in the Central region basically share similar methods of rice farming and beliefs as those in other parts of the country, and in some cases, as those in other Asian countries. What makes this area utterly interesting must be, therefore, something that makes it distinctive.

Songs of the Open Field

Roy W. Hamilton opens the second chapter of **The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia**, with a Burmese plowing song and a Vietnamese folk song in English translations: "The two verses present rather idealized images of the grueling work of growing rice, yet they are not outsiders' views. They are the songs sung by rice farmers themselves, presenting their own views of their labor. The songs lighten the burden of the work no doubt, but they also show an abiding love and respect for rice farming despite its hardships." (Hamilton, 2003: 37)

Even though Hamilton's key words seem to be the (Burmese and Vietnamese) farmers' 'love and respect for rice farming,' the description of the songs as a presentation of the farmers' views of their labor and as a means of lightening the hardship of the work (rice farming) turns to be more interesting.

Thai farmers of the Central Region also sang songs with the intention to lighten the burden of their work, and they some time show 'abiding love and respect for rice farming,' but they rarely make their songs a compliant of hardship. Their songs were truly entertaining for both the singers and the listeners. A plurality of people, here, is pivotal because it took a large number of farmers to participate in the singing, or in a Thai farmers' own word, the 'playing'⁴ of those songs.

Thai Farmers' Songs

Number, Names, and Nature

In his survey through villages in the Central provinces of Thailand from about 1975 to 1977, Anake Nawigamune found that there were at least forty-four kinds of song sung by villagers in this area. (Nawigamune, 1984: (10)) Except for lullabies, folk songs of the Central Region can be divided into two categories on basis of their role in agrarian culture. One includes songs associated with cultivation while the other consists of songs performed on festive occasions, such as 'Songkran,' Thai traditional New Year's celebration.

Out of the forty-four songs, eight solely belonged to farmers who either composed or memorized and sang them along their rice-farming based activities; the activities that called for great collaboration, especially those at the harvest time. Following are the names of the eight Thai farmers' songs, listed in accordance to the sequence of the activities they accompanied:

⁴ The Thai word is 'len (to play) – pleng (song)'.

1. Pleng Hae Nang Maeo (parading the cat song)
2. Pleng Kiaw Khao (harvest /cutting rice sheaves song)
3. Pleng Ten Kam (sheaf dance song)
4. Pleng Ten Kam Ram Khiew (sheaf and sickle song)
5. Pleng Song Fang (turning the straw song)
6. Pleng Pan Fang (removing straws song)
7. Pleng Song Kho Lamphuan (sorting out straws song)
8. Pleng Chak Kradan (pulling a board song)

Characteristics

Generally speaking, the same verse form is found in the lyric of the folk songs throughout the Central region, the melody is almost identical; what distinguishes one song from the other is the manner in which the parts are sung, and the rhythm.

Rice-farming-based songs, except the ones for 'Hae Nang Maeo' and 'Chak Kradan,' were sung as inter-change between a man and a woman, accompanied by a chorus. The lead singers courted or mocked one another, attempting to outdo each other in a duel of wit using both spontaneous and memorized lyrics.

We can tell from the names of the songs which rice farming activities accompanied, except the third and the fourth which were sung during rest breaks in harvesting or at the end of the harvest day. The first song is semi-ritual, yet full of so much fun.

Songs in Relation to Rice Farming Cycle

Given the natural fertility of the land, Thai farm folks evolved a simple way of life intimately related to their fields and their rice crops from one growing season to the next. This cycle of life measured from planting through harvest gave rise to wealth of customs, ceremonies, beliefs, and amusements. We can narrate this cycle of life in relation to the songs they 'played.'

The Planting Season

Starting from the beginning of the rice-growing season, when rains of the wet monsoon came, plowing and sowing could get underway. If the rains delayed, however, the farm folks would put a cat in a creel and parade it around the village to ask the gods for rain.⁵ Pleng Hae Nang Maeo was sung by a leader who was answered by a chorus. It usually began with "Oh Mistress Cat ..." and ended with "and the rain comes pouring down, and the rain comes pouring down." Such simple ceremonies accompanied as they were with merry making bespoke the optimistic outlook on life and the world that so typified traditional agrarian society. And for whatever reason, the rain would come pouring down, just as the farmers wished.

The seed moistened by the rain sprouted and grew into sturdy young rice plants. The brilliant green of the fields stood as a promise that all the work that they had put into plowing, sowing, and transplanting would not be wasted.

⁵ Cats also feature in farmers' appeals for rain elsewhere: Malay women have been known to wash cats in earthenware bowls to attract the Rain God's attention. (Piper, 1993: 76)



Parading the Cat Ceremony



Transplanting



Men and Women paddling, singing boat songs.

The Water Season

And so it was with hearts full of cheer that the farm folk gathered at their monasteries for rainy-season festivals, such as the annual presentation of robes to the monks.

In places where people traveled by boat, men and women with song in their hearts would paddle their boats alongside one another and sing Pleng Rua (boat songs) as a way of getting acquainted. The men's songs and the women's responses would resound over the expanse of the waters, enchanting the hearts of both the singers and passers-by resting their paddles to listen.



Singing sheaf dance song in the field at the harvest time

The Harvest Season

As the nourishing flood in the fields gradually subsided, so the rice plants would grow.

When the ear of rice was forming, the farmers would hold a ceremony to “welcome the rice in the womb” to receive the spirit of Mae Phosop, the Goddess of Rice, who was now with child. The farmers cared for and guarded the rice in the field so that it was strong and safe, as they waited expectantly for the time when the brilliant green of the fields would change to shining gold. At last the long awaited time came.

The owner of the field to be harvested first would hold a bee, preparing food for the neighbors, who would come to help cut, bind, and carry the sheaves of rice.

Exchanging labor among themselves like this, the farm folks moved from field to field until the harvest of everyone in the village had been brought in.

To relieve their weariness as they bent over to cut the ears of rice, the farm folks would sing Pleng Pleng Kiaw Khao (harvest songs), back and forth to one another, and when they took a break from work or when the harvesting was done, they would sing Pleng Ten Kam⁶ and dance holding their sickles and the sheaves they had won.

On the Threshing Floor

When the rice had been harvested, there was still the work of threshing and storing the crop. Threshing was carried out in the evening until late at night. To lighten their labor on the threshing floor, farm folk would sing to one another songs in parts like Pleng Song Fang, while turning the stalks, shaking it to so that the grain would drop from the stalks to the ground with a hook; Pleng Pan Fang, while removing straw from the grain using the same hook. So that every rice grain would be saved to the last minute, the farmers would sit down on the threshing floor, using a loosely woven bamboo tray to sort out the remaining grain. At this, they would sing Pleng Song Kho Lamphuan. Lastly, the scattering grain had to be gathered. Together, the farmers pulled the rope tied to both sides of a board, sweeping all the grain to the marked area, singing Pleng Chak Kradan to signal the spontaneous action. The grain, then, formed a huge heap in the middle of the ground, ready for storage.

⁶ Pleng Ten Kam Ram Khiew, the sheaf and sickle song, was the version popular only among the farmers in Payuha Khiri district in Nakon Sawan, a province in the upper part of the Central Region.

On the threshing floor



Singing Pleng Pan Fang



Singing Pleng Chak Kradan

A Time to Celebrate

After all the work of the harvest had been completed, the farmers saw that the sweat of their brows had been transformed into rice in the granary, and with their cares and worries at an end, they gave themselves up to joyous celebration. They would join on the ground of a monastery nearby, 'played' such songs as Pleng Yua or teasing song, Pleng Yoei or mocking song, Pleng Klong Yao or long drum song, to pass their leisure time merrily.



Playing Pleng Klong Yao

The Significance of the Songs

Reconsidering the Thai farmers' songs, we find not a single jot of bitterness in either the lyric or the singing. The songs did not come out of nowhere. Both the melody and the lyric were invented, created by men. In our case, the artists were the farmers who were mostly illiterate. The songs, then, signifies both the farmers' creativity and the pleasant condition of life which inspired them. The existence or the extinction of the songs, therefore, can be taken as an indicator of the changes occurring to the farmers.

Like that of many other countries in Asia, Thai society has been stricken with a wide range of cultural and political problems, mainly caused by both socio-economic changes from within and the adoption of an alien culture from without. (Kanokpongchai, 1988: 31) Taking the case of the Central Region farmers and their songs as an example, we find that the utmost severe problem Thai farmers have been facing is the loss of their former way of life. The condition of life which inspired Thai farmers' songs has almost completely gone since 1960s. Farmers have been rushed into an endless and fruitless hunt for money since the government took its first step on the path of the National Economic and Social Plans. With the so-called advancement in agricultural technology, which includes new kinds of tool and appliance, new rice breeding, the aim is set to deliver high productivity.

Since what is meaningful in a particular culture must be relevant to the people and their way of life, the farmers' songs have lost their place there.

And the farmers cannot find anything to replace the songs yet.

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