

Musicking and Identities In and From Religious Places of Thai Diasporas

in Chicagoland

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Abstract

Thai Americans are constantly imagining, sustaining, and performing their Thai identity to varying degrees, and this can be seen in the Chicagoland area. Regardless of the differences in musical genre or form, Thai diaspora communities perform and negotiate identity within sacred spaces through musicking. The act of musicking is important for Thai Americans to share their life with one another.

With the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic, Thai musicking communities of religious spaces in the Chicagoland area turned to virtual and outdoor mediums to perform and create. While changes were needed so that musicking opportunities could continue during the pandemic, the fluidity of space is not a new concept; the Thai musicking communities in Chicagoland were creating outside of their designated spaces, even prior to the pandemic. The identity of who they are and the religious spaces from which they come, remain a part of the performances, even as they create beyond those sacred spaces.

Keywords: *Place and Space, Musicking, Religion, Communities, Thai America*

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Introduction

In fall of 2020, two Thai American communities in Metropolitan Chicago (Chicagoland) returned to in-person activities meeting at their respective religious places, St. Paul Thai Lutheran Church (St. Paul) and Thai Cultural Fine Arts Institute (TCFAI), situated at Wat Buddha Dhamma, a Thai Buddhist temple in the village of Willowbrook on the western part of Chicagoland. Through their meetings, musicking has stood out to be a part of what people are engaged in as they are in a process of imagining, sustaining, and negotiating their Thai identity (Thainess). It is from religious places that Thai Americans have been negotiating Thainess through musicking, enacting the totality of doing music, including listening, dancing, practicing, praying, and any preparations that are needed for the music activity to occur. At TCFAI, Thai classical music and traditional music from Northeast Thailand (Isan) can be heard. The music heard during the worship service at St. Paul is mostly influenced by western popular musical culture. However, the Thai classical music, Thai popular songs, and Isan traditional music heard during special events provides communities with opportunities of contemporary transnational Thainess.

On a Saturday evening in January 2021, after a Thai classical music rehearsal held at Wat Buddha Dhamma, I sat with the music director of TCFAI, *Ajaan Chamni Sripraram*,¹ who is also part of the long history of teaching world music in the cornfields of Illinois as the director of Northern Illinois University (NIU) Thai music ensemble (Wang 2014). Sitting on his couch, I brought up the unique position of TCFAI being situated at a temple in the Western suburbs of Chicago. He commented that Thai culture and music can be taught anywhere; it does not only have to be at a temple. *Ajaan Chamni* and affiliates of TCFAI are frequently invited to many performances, events, and workshops outside of the temple space. One place that *Ajaan Chamni* may be heard performing is at St. Paul Thai Lutheran Church (St. Paul) located in Forest Park, Illinois. The community at St. Paul also has their own aspects of disseminating Thai culture through musicking. For both of these communities, musicking is not only done in their respective religious places, but also in outreach taking their communities into public spaces.

In this paper, I focus on the musicking of Thai Americans that meet in two religious places in Chicagoland (figure 1). I agree with geographer Yi Fu Tuan's description of place as security and space as freedom (Tuan 1977:6). Within religious places there are sacred spaces that provide an extension of a home for Thai immigrants, which allows them the freedom to live out their Thai identity in a safe space (Bankston, Kim, Zhou 2002). Ethnomusicologist Bussakorn Binson and et.al observe the importance of communities living their culture in the diverse city of Bangkok (2014). For Thais in Chicagoland, religious places are spaces allowing both security and freedom. From these places, the communities participate in outreach events, in spaces that allow them the freedom to take their identities into the public. These communities are an example on how Thai diaspora communities live, sustain, and negotiate their culture in Chicagoland. I argue that musicking in and from religious place of Thai diaspora communities allows participants to enact and negotiate their Thainess. Thongchai Winichakul calls this a "widespread assumption of a common Thai identity" (Thongchai 1994:3). This assumption, for example, includes acquiring fluency of Thai language - one of the first known markers of Thainess by Siam monarch, King Vajiravudh (r 1910– 1925) (Renard 2000:63). Through musicking, transnational Thainess is being enacted through Thai communities in Chicagoland who are engaged in a process of diasporization and identity making. Musicking occurs with Thais and alongside non-Thais who are also part of the process.

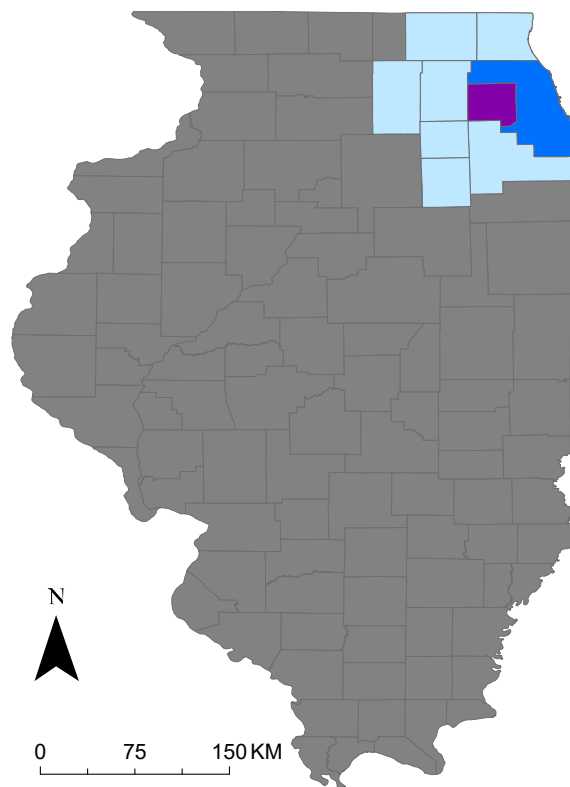


Figure 1. Map of Chicagoland in Illinois (light blue). St. Paul Lutheran Church is in Cook County (dark blue) and Wat Buddha Dhamma is in DuPage County (purple). Map created by the author.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Thai musicking in religious places in Chicagoland turned to virtual and outdoor mediums to perform and create. Changes were needed in terms of space so that musicking opportunities could continue during the pandemic. The fluidity of space is not a new concept, since the Thai musicking communities in Chicagoland were seen creating outside of their religious places even prior to the pandemic. The identity of who they are and the religious places they come from still are a part of the performances when they appear beyond those spaces. Through musicking, Thai Americans in the two communities in Chicagoland create place and reflect Thai identities in Chicagoland (Figure 1: see map for Map of Chicagoland in Illinois).

At the onset of Covid-19 in the United States, communities found alternative ways to continue activities during nationwide stay-at-home mandates. Musicking throughout the pandemic changed, leading to an emphasis on singing from homes, outdoor, and virtual concerts. With a heightened experience of xenophobia, Asian Americans, have found safety and ability to find community within these religious places regardless of their faith traditions. TCFAI and St. Paul were such communities that persevered throughout the pandemic and provided communities of togetherness for Thais in Chicagoland (see figure 2 for locations).

Findings for this research comes from my personal experience and field research of the two communities, beginning in February 2019 to July 2021. During the Covid-19 pandemic my research required a hybrid ethnography, which included a digital ethnography of services and rehearsals on Facebook and YouTube (Przybylski 2021). Part of this research

includes formal and informal interviews with community members, and a survey that addresses Thai identity and musicking activities in religious communities of the Thai diaspora in Chicagoland at Christian and Theravada Buddhist Thai spaces. It is through the nuanced relationships that occur within Thai musicking communities that Thainess in Chicagoland can be further understood.

Soundscapes, Religious Places, and Thai American Experience

Thai communities in Chicagoland are part of a fluctuating soundscape. Ethnomusicologist Kay Shalamay illustrates soundscapes as a seascape to describe the ability that music has in moving throughout the world and absorbing changes in the music portrayed in locations where the music is place in (Shelemay 2015:9). Thais came to the United States in considerable numbers in the 1970s for various reasons, such as for work and education (Numrich 2005). Unlike many other Southeast Asians, in particular the Vietnamese, Lao, or Khmer, Thais did not come because they were fleeing as the result of the wars in Indochina (Padoongpatt 2017). As Thai American communities developed over time, they were also constructing new identities and issues regarding accessibility to Thai language resources as became an issues (Thepboriruk 2015a, Thepboriruk 2015b). Like many in diasporas, religious places serve as a safe space for migrants to pursue their cultural practices (Chow 2006:305).

Musicking in Thai America is part of preservation, as they are shaping “Thai identity” and reimagining Thainess in cities in the United States where Thai migrants have set up livelihoods in a new multicultural setting. Additionally, the complexities involved in the construction and functions of Thai music are multiple layers of the old, the new, the urban, and rural Thai musical elements that inform us of Thai America sonic living history. Adding to the complex layering is the realization that Thais are “imagined” to be present in the expansive Asian American community in United States, challenged to be culturally resilient and to sustain a sense of a central essence of Thainess—for the moment at least (Anderson 2016).

The Thai migrants in Chicagoland resemble other diaspora communities. A key aspect of diaspora communities is that people bring many of their homeland cultural practices with them when moving/migrating to a new place (Bankston, Kim, Zhou 2002). Given that the major religion of Thailand is Theravada Buddhism, Buddhist temples appeared with the expansion of Thai communities elsewhere in the United States. The emergence of Christian missions in Thailand, on the other hand, was followed by ancillary organizations focusing on Thais who had migrated to the United States. Religion may not be a necessary component to Thai and music communities, much like the ensemble Ethnomusicologist, Pornprapit Phosavadi observed. The Siam Sangkiit Ensemble in Seattle, Washington who was unaffiliated with any religious organization, used the musicians they had to establish their Thai identity in the metropolitan city (1998). Religion does provide a place of belonging, and certainly shows for the Thai diasporic community.

Theravada Buddhism has been in evidence in Thai American communities largely due to the widely understood three pillars of Thai identity (nation, religion, and monarch). Ethnomusicologist Priwan Nanongkham notes that the three pillars have been influential in Thai American communities, particularly Thai language and Buddhism in regard to cultural

performance and their Thai identity in America (2013). Thus, Theravada Buddhist temples would be the common place for many Thai Americans to gather in diaspora. For this obvious reason, researchers have mainly focused Thai related studies on Thai American musicking in Buddhist communities (Bao 2015; Moro 2012 and 2019, and Wisuttipat 2020).

Thai American Christian communities have been largely left out of the scholarly conversation regarding the Thai diaspora and their music. Musicking in the Thai church and Thai Buddhist temples are meeting places in Chicagoland where contemporary Thai music and Thai traditional music provided a role in sustaining Thai identity through musicking activities. Thai American communities like other diaspora groups are empowered through musicking and as ethnomusicologist Su Zheng notes, there may be stereotyping placed on diasporic communities (2010: 98). Music in its many forms encompasses ways in which Thais in Chicagoland are renegotiating identity and allowing their own communities to be part of the stories portrayed in the Thai community.

In the following section, I offer two vignettes of my experiences when having returned to the St. Paul and TCFAI communities while in-person during the pandemic. Through these, I expound on existing research on Asian American musicking, Thai American studies, religion, and negotiation of place and space.

Transcultural and Thainess at St. Paul Thai Church's "Music Day"



Figure 2. Thai Art portraying the Birth of Jesus hanging on the balcony in St. Paul Thai Lutheran Church.

On an early Sunday afternoon in September 2020, I returned to rehearse for a worship service at St. Paul Thai Lutheran Church (St. Paul) in Forest Park, Illinois for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This service was also advertised as a “Music Day” in which they invite musicians in the community to play after the service, regardless of religious affiliation. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, St. Paul had to make changes in their gatherings, like many communities, such as moving worship services online and implementing hybrid services. With loosened public health guidelines in the fall, we were able to meet in small numbers following safety protocol. As I walked in the church, I heard the piano being played by a college-aged Thai student named Pun. He was playing classic English language hymns that I would sing as a child, such as “A Closer Walk with Jesus” but with a jazzy flare to it. Pun wore a mask while playing the piano, a mandate all attendees followed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I used the hand sanitizer that was at the entrance of the worship space and walked towards the front where the band was setting up. The band consisted of piano, drums, guitar, singers, and me on the viola. As I sit, I was reminded of the Thai artistic interpretation of the Gospel story that is displayed on the balcony area of the hall (see figure 3). I pulled out my viola and started to improvise along with Pun and the band, preparing for the service and “Music Day” that would be broadcasted on YouTube Live. The music selection for the service echoed a mix of familiar tunes from my Christian childhood and new songs that I have never heard before.

Starting an hour later, the few congregants sang along in Thai or English with the lyrics portrayed on the screen, which is a usual occurrence. However, due to pandemic guidelines the congregants in attendance were less than usual but others participated in the service via YouTube Live. The use of both English and Thai in the singing and liturgy were offered in both in-person offerings and virtual broadcasts, emphasizing an inclusive community for a growing transcultural congregation. YouTube Live became an avenue for congregants to still be connected, averaging 20-30 views weekly, along with the Line social media St. Paul Thai group chat, which has 87 members on it (accessed 29 August 2021). These virtual opportunities to connect became more crucial during a time of isolation and need for community.

Following the service, the transition to “Music Day” was made. Musicians that came to perform as part of “Music Day” were also people who I met the day before at the outdoor Thai Market, of which St. Paul would have a booth when the market was held on Saturdays. Songs that guests would sing were Thai popular songs such as, “ขอใจเธอแลกเบอร์โทร (Your Heart for My Number)” by Yinglee Srijumpol and “You Raise Me Up” an English song famously sung by Josh Groban. Another frequent musician and friend of St. Paul is Ajaan Chamni Srirapram, who was the director of the Thai Cultural Fine Arts Institute (TCFAI), an organization that I visited to find a place to practice Thai language and learn Thai culture but also an organization central to this research. For “Music Day” Ajaan Chamni played the pin an instrument from Northeast Thailand with music backtrack. A style of music that is usually accompanied by dance, often people would dance impromptu after hearing this music. However, at the church, no one joined in dance so he commented that he would not continue to play because there was not anyone dancing. This would either show the need of education regarding to this style of music or the hesitation in participating with Covid-19 protocol.

Practicing and Listening with Thai Cultural Fine Arts Institute Rehearsal at Wat Buddha Dhamma

On a normal Saturday TCFAI meets at Wat Buddha Dhamma, a Thai Temple in Willowbrook, Illinois that teaches Thai cultural classes, including language and music. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, TCFAI held Thai language classes on Zoom, and music classes directed by *Ajaan* Chamni were held virtually using social media such as Facebook and YouTube. As a multi-instrumentalist, *Ajaan* Chamni would share video tutorials for each respective instrument, such as the *khim*, *ranad*, and *khong wong yai* for students to practice with. Students were expected to share videos of their improvement which was posted on the virtual Facebook community. He even includes videos for less popular instruments, such as the saw-u, an instrument that he is teaching me. Like St. Paul, TCFAI began meeting in-person again in the fall of 2020, but the use of social media continued as a supplement to in-person learning.

I entered Wat Buddha Dhamma on a late morning of October 2020 for an in person TCFAI rehearsal that had a specific focus to prepare for the Asian American Coalition Chicago meeting set for November. I walked into the temple with my mask on and proceeded to the temperature check just inside the entrance of the temple. I was directed upstairs in the large hall where the rehearsals were held. I took my shoes off, a tradition often held in Asian culture, a tradition I also grew up learning to do inside of my home, and eventually heard the Thai hammer dulcimer *khim* being tuned as I progressed in the building.² Prior to the rehearsal I ate lunch with the musicians and parents, distanced of course. While *Ajaan* Chamni was finishing eating he asked one of the oldest *khim* players to lead the younger *khim* players to start off the rehearsal. The students proceeded to display a respect with a *wai* gesture to Chamni, reflecting what Wisuttipat acknowledges as a transnational Thainess, respect for elders (2020). *Ajaan* Chamni who credits his Buddhist background, invokes his teaching philosophies for TCFAI and NIU Thai Music Ensemble, encouraging his students as what music scholar Jui-Ching Wang notes as “losing self,” which allows learners to have a deeper awareness of the music, environment, and each other (2019:46). As *Ajaan* Chamni entered into the rehearsal accompanying the *khim* players on hand drums. The musicians focus and ability to listen to each other reflects a pedagogical theme that *Ajaan* Chamni teaches his students, respect.

Thai Communities Musicking in Religious Places

Thai classical music has an association with expression of Thainess. Even though *Ajaan* Chamni is not from Isan (Northeast Thailand), he plays and often works with the Lao community in Chicagoland, playing Isan musical instruments, such as the *khaen*, a mouth organ made from bamboo, and the *ponglang*, a xylophone that features melody and harmony. According to *Ajaan* Chamni, he performs and teaches Thai classical music because he enjoys the music, and he believes the pleasure should be shared (*Ajaan* Chamni Sriprarm, Interview with Author, April 5, 2021). While Thai classical music is the core of the music curriculum at TCFAI, various genres of Thai music are taught as long as there are volunteers to teach it. The teaching of Thai traditional music, classical and regional, depends on available resources.

A Thai musician in Chicago recalled that during the 1980s, the beginning of Thai classical music in Chicago was started at the Consulate's home (Anonymous, Interview, May 5, 2021). The musician, a friend of *Ajaan* Chamni's, is an all-around percussionist, playing

different genres that echoed *Ajaan Chamni's* sentiment in establishing Thai classical music classes. He says that in the past, performances were not a pursuit of nationalistic attitudes and feelings, but simply because the musicians enjoyed the music.

Thai classical music and Thai nationalism do not go unnoticed (Wisuttipat 2020, Adler 2014, Wong 2006, Moro 1993). To this day, in Thai communities, Thai classical music has continuous support from the Royal Thai Consulate in Chicago. It was through their support and the community's coming together, that the teaching of Thai classical music grew and became a central part of teaching cultural productions, in addition to teaching the Thai language at Wat Dhammaram, the first Thai Temple in Chicagoland. This also led to the establishment of TCFAI and their classes at Wat Buddha Dhamma.

While TCFAI is not a religious institution, the Buddhist temple is open for TCFAI community needs. It is a convenient space for the Thai community to hold Thai cultural instruction at the temple. Through these cultural classes the Thai community benefits from having a space, and visitors like myself have the opportunity to learn more about the temple and Thai culture. TCFAI is thus an outlet for Thai Americans and non-Thais to participate in Thai cultural productions in a safe space where participants experience an environment filled with Thai language being spoken and classes being taught in Thai. The students that took part in my survey identify as Thai, and many attributes of their music and dance instruction at TCFAI complement their understanding of Thai identity. Many also learn western music at their public schools during the week but take part in Thai music instruction at TCFAI. As noted earlier, *Ajaan Chamni* emphasizes that Thai classical music and Isan music do not have to be taught only in the temple classes. He believes it can be taught anywhere, such as in public schools, much like the Thai and Lao music classes at Northern Illinois University that are being offered. Thai musicians who play different genres of Thai music do so because they enjoy the music varieties and appreciate taking advantage of the many opportunities to participate in these types of musicking in places where Thai communities exist, including but not restricted to religious spaces.

Churches in diaspora have a function similar to the Thai Buddhist temples in that diaspora cultural churches provide communities an opportunity for cultural refuge as Maria M. Chow analyzed the music of the Chinese Church in the United States (2006). She says that Chinese churches are venues for migrants to have "a place to pursue the community life they may otherwise lose" (Chow 2006:305). The Thai religious centers, both the Church and Buddhist Temples in Chicago function as a place of refuge where Thais and non-Thais may freely participate in cultural productions. These religious places, much like the Chinese Churches of which Chow speaks of, allow Thais and non-Thais to pursue a community life where cultural productions, such as musicking, is a central component of expressing the community.

During the worship service at St. Paul, the music is largely western hymns translated into Thai and includes three editions of hymnals. These hymnals were designed for the St. Paul community, including lyrics in English and Thai. The later hymnal only has songs with a chord chart, not with staff notation. Also sung in the church are new Thai Christian songs composed by Thai Christian song writers. Worship scholar Sooi Ling Tan argues that Thai songwriters present Thainess in the music, even with western influence. These elements appear in the songs that are chosen and the musical styles themselves.

The first aspect of Thainess is argued by Tan that “the themes in the songs encapsulate the Christian experience of struggle” (Tan 2019:100). The struggle that Tan speaks of is the Thai Christians struggle in the expectation of Thais to be Buddhist. Senior Pastor of the church for over 20 years, *Ajaan* Pongsak experienced this struggle as a young student in Bangkok, who hesitated in joining the Buddhist rituals that were conducted in school (Holmes 2015:19). This does not reflect as a problem in the Thai Chicagoland community. The Thai Chicagoland community often find ways to connect, such as playing badminton together and plays music together. Theologian Mary Codman-Wilson recalls that *Ajaan* Pongsak would encourage members to take part in Buddhist temple activities, since that is where the Thai cultural festivities were separated (Codman-Wilson 1992:53). Even though the struggles are not the same in each community, the songs that St. Paul sings do articulate the shared struggle of the Thai community, as the songs and prayers are often uplifting for the Thai community in the United States and in Thailand. These struggles also include the ongoing pandemic, issues regarding human rights, and the struggles of the greater Asian community with the ongoing trauma experienced by xenophobia and Asian Hate.

The second aspect of Thainess is presented in the newly composed songs, which have elements of a Thai popular genre known as *lukthung* (Thai country music) or *Isan* music in them. That could be the reason why the pastor told me he thought I should learn to play the *khaen*. While these newer songs are used in the services, they are not all in the hymnals, as the hymns have mostly older hymns or popular Christian songs translated into Thai. When I asked *Ajaan* Pongsak if a new hymnal would be published, he replied that there is no need for a new hymnal, as all the songs are now projected on the chapel wall. Moreover, many new Thai Christian songs are available free online on the Project W501 website, a Christian project dedicated to the production and dissemination of Thai Christian music written by Thai songwriters.³

St. Paul has weekly Sunday services, which usually include rehearsals at 2:00 p.m.; services at 3pm; dinner at 5pm; and badminton matches or music nights after dinner. Services usually have drum set, piano, guitar, bass guitar, viola, and voices as part of the music worship (*singspiration*). The Sunday service follows a strict liturgy with the following structure: *singspiration*, prayer, sermon, special music, offering, and benediction. The songs are mostly western hymns translated into Thai, and musicians in the band utilize the hymnals for these songs. However, most congregants use the text projected on the wall screen, which displays lyrics in Thai and English.

The congregation can participate in singing following the guidance of the lead singer and lyrics. With the advancement in technology, congregants can participate in singing even without the hymnal (See Figure 7). The projected languages are Thai and English, and the singing follows accordingly. This gives the community the opportunity to join into the degree that they wish. The musicking on a Sunday afternoon is part of the greater liturgy, but the music that begins the service is called “*singspiration*” following the section of the bulletin called “the Gathering.”

Along with the music, the entire period is filled with prayers, scripture reading, and a sermon. While the Thai membership is clearly living their Thainess within Christianity, their identity as Christians amongst other members of different cultural identities, embracing the element of a multicultural Thai church, are joined together through the musicking experience.

Special events such as “Music Day,” Thanksgiving service, and Christmas service are events when additional community non-Christian musicians also perform. Members of the Royal Thai Consulate-General of Chicago are also usually invited. For example, in 2019, for the Thanksgiving service, the Deputy Consulate General Siriporn Tantipanyathep was in attendance and supported the Thai Christian community with her attendance. These special events are also times when Thai classical music or Thai folk music is performed by congregants or musicians in the community, such as one of my primary informants, *Ajaan Chamni*, from TCFAI.

The day I performed during the pandemic, Chamni also played the *khaen* during the Music Day. It was reminiscent of the pre-COVID 19 productions that musicians of the Thai community would have performed that Codman-Wilson experienced at the Christmas performance, where there was a group of students showcasing Thai dance (Codman-Wilson, Mary. 1992). Chamni played the *khaen* on his own and with a music back track, the special events often provide space for community members to perform regardless of their religious background. These are moments where non-Christian themed songs are more likely to be performed. While music like Thai classical music and Isan music can be heard at TCFAI, it is not part of the everyday soundscape of St. Paul. Still, there is a place for such music in the Church space. In a conversation with a member of the church about playing Thai instruments like, *ranad*, *Ajaan Pongsak* realized that several members studied Thai instruments when they were in Thailand but they could not play them anymore because they did not have access to them. So, he said that St. Paul should have their own Thai instruments to fulfill the need.

Time permitting, both TCFAI and St. Paul members take the opportunity to engage in activities outside the sacred spaces. Opportunities to be out in public, like the outdoor Thai Market, Columbus Day parade, and at universities, allow Thai communities to create artistry in the freedom of that public space provides.

Outreach Events: From Religious Places to Creating in Spaces

Outreach events are events that allow members of TCFAI and St. Paul to legitimize their communities in public spaces, that is, outside of the places where they usually meet. Musicking is part of their process of legitimizing their respective communities. The process has many facets. Because Asian America musicking is often missing in public spaces, Thai musicians from St. Paul and TCFAI strived to provide opportunities to share their music publicly so that their cultural lives can be seen through their performances (Shimakawa 2000: 288), and the audience can participate in celebrating Thai musicking (Wong 2004 and Bryant 2009). This can be seen similarly as Larasati et al. identifies the interconnectivity of making culture to establishing space in Indonesia (2022). Essentially, St. Paul and TCFAI both have unique functions in creating their particular musicking in space.

A central function of St. Paul’s outreach is to legitimize their Christian identity outside the worship space. One example is its participation in the Thai Market, where through music and their presence at the market, they legitimize their Thai Christian identity. Various outreach events occur, such as various volunteering opportunities in the Chicagoland community, and feeding the homeless. St. Paul’s participation at the Thai Market was one type of outreach event in which I was able to participate. The presence at Thai Market demonstrates St. Paul’s accessibility to the community.

For TCFAI their presence in public provides opportunities for musicians to play in students' schools and in public displays, even alongside university musicians who are novice learners, giving enjoyment to both students and teachers. These public displays allow for the Thais to engage in an outward process of becoming (Braggs 2016 and Wisuttipat 2020). The other layer attached to these performances are non-Thais musicking with them, which allows for an extended element of the diasporization process where non-Thais are learning alongside the Thai community.

While I did not attend as many TCFAI events, I was able to be part of several TCFAI outreach events through my own participation prior to the start of the study, either as a presenter, volunteer, or performer. I observed three examples of their outreach performances: a large group performance at Indiana University, a small group library performance, and performing virtually with the Northern Illinois University Thai Music Ensemble. Below is the description of several such outreach events; I begin with St. Paul at the Thai market, followed by the TCFAI related events.

Creating in Spaces - Christian Identity and Being Thai: St. Paul Lutheran Church at Thai Outdoor Market



Figure 3. St. Paul Booth at the Thai Market in Chicago.

St. Paul participates in outreach activities so as to be more involved with the community. One event is the Thai Market, held in an open space behind the Thai Twin restaurant in Bridgeview, IL. Weather permitting, the Thai community has Thai Market on the weekends. Every month, they alternate between Saturday and Sunday, and St. Paul participates in the market on months when it is held on Saturday. Many Thai community organizations participate and sell Thai items and food. St. Paul prepares food to sell and plays music. The music performed includes popular songs sung both in English, such as: "You Raise Me Up"

by Rolf Løvland and Brendan Graham, “The Joke is on Me” by Bee Gees and Thai popular songs such as, “ขอใจเธอแลกเบอร์โทร (Your Heart for My Number)” by Yinglee Srijumpol เพียงแค่ใจเรารักกัน (Pieng Kae Jai Rao Ruk Kun) by Viyada Komarakul Na Nakorn (Figure 7: Photo of St. Paul at Thai Market).

On a Saturday afternoon during the COVID-19 Pandemic, I joined the musicians on my viola at the St. Paul booth. We all wore our masks and distanced ourselves from each other around the booth. In the booth people from the church were selling food for the church as a fundraiser. Surrounding us were other vendors selling Thai food and souvenirs, representing the interweaving of food in Thai America (Padoongpatt, 2017:17) and music's active role in uniting people in the process. Also present was a booth representing Wat Dhammaram, the largest Thai temple in the area, just two blocks away. The people visiting the market were Thai and non-Thai customers. The music performed by St. Paul participants was like a Sunday worship, sung in Thai and English, demonstrating the various singer's comfort in singing in the two languages, accompanied by a keyboard, guitar, and viola. Both Christian and non-Christian songs were performed. Joining in the outdoor jam session were members from other booths and visitors to the Thai Market. These musicking moments outdoors at the Thai market provided the longing of in person creative collaboration that was lacking due to the uncertainty. Ever since March 2020, communities were not able to meet each other in person. This outdoor Thai Market provided members a free atmosphere outside of the Church space for musicking and sharing their Christian identity in a public space, resembling a freeing connotation which Tuan concludes that space provides (1977).

Creating in Spaces – Mobility as Living Culture and Pedagogy

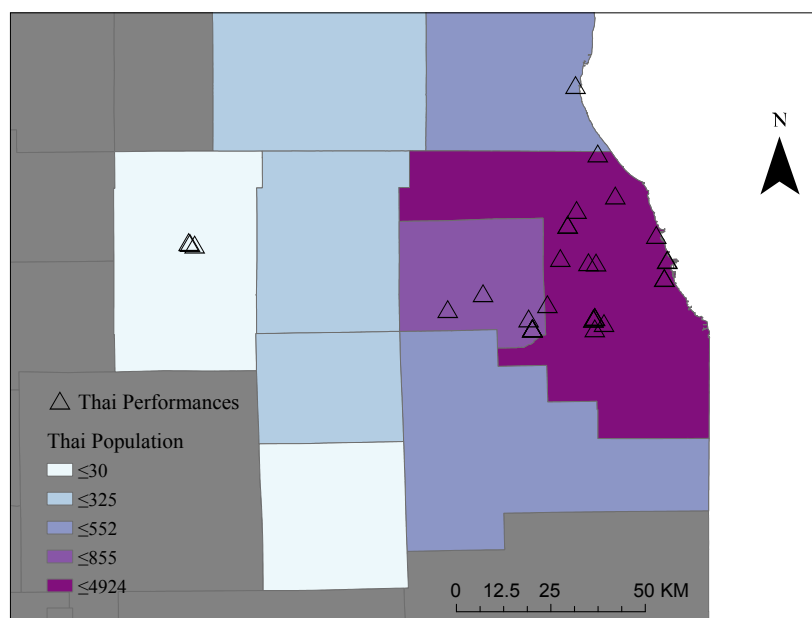


Figure 4. Map showing locations of Thai performances related to Thai population.

TCFAI's versatility in providing a wide range of styles of Thai music for different occasions offers ample opportunities to perform for the community, even extending their performance outside the Chicagoland area to cross the borders to Indiana and Wisconsin.

The map provided illustrates places where TCFAI and *Ajaan* Chamni participated in 2018–2020 (See figure 5 for TCFAI performance sites). These events show the geographical presence of TCFAI on the greater Chicagoland community. While the performance sites correlate with higher density of Thai population, the performances were not all for Thai audiences. The performances like NIU are representations of the outward showing of Thai culture, giving non-Thais an opportunity to participate through listening, at provided locations in Chicagoland, for a Thai American musicking presence (Bryant 2009). Through the versatility of TCFAI, the events in which I was able to participate, provides a glimpse of the other events where TCFAI performed.

On Friday, April 19, 2019, Indiana University Center for ASEAN Studies hosted “Passages: Locating Global Traditions in Southeast Asian Music and Performance, an Interdisciplinary Symposium,” which included lectures and performances by Kent State University Thai music ensemble and Sin-Isan Ensemble from Mahasarakham University, Thailand. For this all-Friday symposium, TCFAI had a large group performing Thai dance and playing *khim*.

The symposium focused on Southeast Asian Music—particularly Tai/Thai music—because the featured Sin-Isan Ensemble was performing that evening. In addition to participating in this one-day symposium as a presenter in the morning, I stayed as an attendee all day for the event. Driving in from Chicago, the TCFAI musicians arrived in the afternoon and performed in the evening before the performance of Sin-Isan Ensemble. The multi-function university classroom had a stage, where ensembles performed, and a podium, where speakers stood and talked. The music the TCFAI musicians played featured their *khim* players and their dancers (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. TCFAI performance at Indiana University. Photo by author.

On Saturday, September 4, 2019, Dekalb Library hosted a multicultural event “8 Countries 1 Day.” This event featured different countries and included cultural activities, food, and drinks. I volunteered for the event by assisting the NIU Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) booth in passing out samples of a Thai fruit drink Mogu Mogu, as well as interacting with visitors in talking about Thailand and giving stamps on participants’ passports. To

enhance the experience for the multicultural event, TCFAI was invited to perform a short Thai dance. Because the event took place at the same time as the regular rehearsals at TCFAI, instead of showcasing a larger group, they could only feature two of their dancers at this event. The versatility of TCFAI performances allows for different degrees of size and types of performances based on the context of the events and when the event would take place. Many of the dancers are also *khim* players and can play other instruments as well, like their teacher, *Ajaan Chamni*. The ability of the performers to be available for different types of performance situations showed viability during the pandemic, when they were required to adapt to a different performing situation.

The first two events were public performances by invitation, an example of many of their public performances. These invites demonstrate the versatility of the type of events that TCFAI participates in as a large ensemble at a university or a smaller group of dancers at a library. The third event demonstrates the musicians' and dancers' persistence in sharing their culture during Covid-19. Rather than performing for a live audience, the performance was pre-recorded prior to the air date.

Creating in Spaces - Virtual Resiliency

St. Paul and TCFAI share a commonality of being Thai while in America, simultaneously sharing their distinguished identities. St. Paul members establish their presence as being both Thai and Christian in a multicultural Church. TCFAI meets mainly at a Theravada Buddhist temple for cultural classes in Thai classical music and Thai language but presents to the wider Chicagoland community their Thainess through their musicking. It is through the freedom of space that Thai musicking can be heard beyond religious places, and in a wider public (Tuan 1977). These opportunities of musicking outside of the comfortability of the religious place into spaces around the Chicagoland provide the much-needed Asian American representation, even more the Thai American representation that lacks in the mainstream arts (Wong 2004, Bryant 2009, Zheng 2010).

Virtual Resiliency and Covid-19

Like many communities, St. Paul and TCFAI demonstrated “virtual” resiliency as its own space during Covid-19 pandemic. St. Paul broadcast their worship through social media. When possible, they took advantage of opportunities. Though the numbers in attendance had to be restricted, the communities met and used outreach events to continue their mission throughout the pandemic. Musical expression of faith by St. Paul church continued, and those who were not able to attend in person were still connected virtually and thus were given the opportunity to participate while they followed the PowerPoint presentation on the broadcast (figure 11). As previously noted, St. Paul's participation in the Thai Market provided a creative outlet beyond the virtual activities during Covid-19.

TCFAI used their public space to stay connected and to prepare for their AACC performance through virtual lessons. The recordings of their individual practices were sent to *Ajaan Chamni*. The use of Facebook encouraged participants to continue practicing and to follow their progression, even during the pandemic. They collaborated fully with the newly formed NIU Thai ensemble, with only two in-person rehearsals. These virtual spaces further expand Yi Fu Tuan's notion of space as freedom, providing Thai American communities to further expand their audience through virtual mediums.



Figure 6. St. Paul YouTube Live set up with PowerPoint.

Conclusion

With multiple means available for the transmission of Thai traditional musical, differences between the musicking spaces and practices of Buddhist temples, compared to selection of musical expression in the Thai Christian community, informs the complex musicking and imagining of Thai identity in Thai America in Chicagoland. Musicking expresses the complexities of transnational Thainess in Chicagoland. As musical agendas and various means of transmitting and continuing Thai performing arts, these communities provide contrasts in the role of music as an identity marker.

Even throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, many communities continued to find ways to get together. This is also true for the Thai American musicking communities I examined in my study, as in-person meetings were more difficult to arrange. Thai Americans are, in their religious practices, imagining, sustaining, and creating their “Thai” identity to varying degrees, which was already seen in the Chicagoland area prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Through varied musicking experiences, Thai diaspora communities discovered opportunities to perform and negotiated their Thainess in religious places and secular spaces that transcend their proscribed practices. As shown in my study, Thai musicking provides Thai Americans representation in Chicagoland, but also allows for non-Thais to participate and learn, encompassing a more thorough form of diasporization, in which Thai American communities continue to live.

In the past couple years, our understanding of place and space has been challenged through finding alternative means of community-making in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Virtual space has given communities the freedom that people continue to long for and allows us to connect. Through virtual spaces, musicking occurs in communities as they continue to long for spaces to create, whether it happens in homes, backyards, temples, churches, or over Zoom.

Musical communities are involved in sustaining Thai classical music in the temple setting. However, sustaining Thai identity goes beyond just Thai classical music. The religious places that provide community also contribute ways for their Thainess to be maintained. In the different Thai American communities that I have identified in Chicagoland, I am provided with a window to investigate how musicking is part of the imagining Thai America. A study of sacred and secular communities in Chicagoland allows me to more fully appreciate and understand the role of musicking in Thai American identity formation. The significance of this study shows the nuances of musicking, identity, religious place, and public spaces for Thai Americans in 21st century American society. With the onset of Covid-19, the histories of xenophobia and Asian discrimination were further realized. To address the need for deeper understanding of Asian American history and addressing false Asian stereotypes, the state of Illinois required Asian American history in K-12 curriculum. These musicking opportunities in religious places and public spaces also addresses these needs for the greater American society to be more inclusive.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Ajaan* is a respectful title given to professors/teachers. The titled would be followed by their first name. In the community *Ajaan* Chamni is also called *Khruu*, which is a title commonly used for artists. In this case, *Ajaan* Chamni is also my music professor at Northern Illinois University, so throughout the paper I will use "*Ajaan* Chamni."

* The Thai Romanization system in this article follows the Royal Thai Institute system with a few modifications. I utilize the j for จ and double letters to represent long vowels and single letter for a short vowel.

- 2 Here the connotation of taking off one's shoes in Thai culture is a matter of cleanliness and respect.
- 3 W501. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://w501.org>.

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