

## ***Tai-Lue Performance in Contemporary Thailand: Devising a Local Ramayana Tale for Today's Diverse Audiences***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how a student-led devising theatre project based on traditional *Tai-Lue* stories, dance and music enhanced their moral awareness through engagement with *Tai-Lue* communities and their culture. Bangkok university students and local *Lue* musicians mixed moral situations found in parts of *Lanka Sip Ho*, a local version of the *Ramayana*, with a legend of the first *Lue* couple, to highlight moral problems that they themselves and their friends faced. Working with contemporary artists and *Lue* musicians, the students enhanced the script with music and dance, and performed the piece for rural *Lue* audiences as well as young urban people. Their work showed how by using moral choice they could develop self-confidence as well as introduce actors and audiences to ethical ideas.

**Keywords:** *Ramayana*, devising theatre, Thailand, young people's theatre, local theatre.

### **Introduction**

As a university-based theatre practitioner working in theatre for young people and applied theatre, I try to link my Bangkok-centered urban student-actors to some part of their Thai roots by using devising theatre. Performances could come from lullabies, folk tales, legends, or parts of *Ramayana* tales in South and Southeast Asian, including the *Ramakien*, the royal Thai version of *Ramayana*. We stage our performances in universities, high schools and cultural centers around Thailand, as pieces for young people and families. The multimedia productions often mix forms of story theatre, so children audiences can participate; they include traditional media like masks and shadow puppets, while also using music and dance to present old stories with a contemporary feel.

This project was an experiment for urban and rural students to look in old stories and legends to find relevant ethical values for designing a performance for *Tai-Lue* audiences. It centered on the *Lanka Sip Ho* (*The Ten-Headed [Ravana] of Lanka*) text (Sribusara, 1999; Malaroj, 1986), a local version of the *Ramayana*, one of the main

versions of the Ramayana in Northern Thailand, but also known in Yunnan, China, where it has been part of the cultural revival of Dai heritage.<sup>1</sup> The Dai (or Tai) ethnic group migrated from southern China into northern mainland Southeast Asia. (Jiranakorn and Sethkul, 2001; Srisawadi, 2004; Jia, 1991) Tai-Lue local princes once used *khap Lue* (chanting Lue poetry accompanied by the *bi Lue*—the Lue-style bamboo oboe) to perform the long and complex story cycle of Lanka Sip Ho in their courts. Some of these stories were written down and kept as manuscripts, which recently have been printed. The texts were used in my research project for the Dramatic Arts Department festival called OUR ROOTS ⇄ RIGHT NOW which received support from the Thai Research Fund.

I did preliminary research on the Lanka Sip Ho and its ethical stance before going to Tai-Lue communities in Phayao, Nan and Lampang provinces of Northern Thailand. Only a few Lue people knew this version of the Ramayana well, but they did know several other Lue legends. Using my findings, I then worked with eight university students, six actors and two technical managers from the Department of Dramatic Arts at Chulalongkorn University. They trained with artist-facilitators in traditional Thai movement and dance and simultaneously worked on devising a performance based on the Lanka Sip Ho and some Lue legends. Later, we worked with musician facilitators and young Tai-Lue Musicians from Ban Nam Wan in Northern Thailand. The goal of this two-track devising process was to instill ethical virtues and confidence by training in traditional dance and to create a script inking morally challenging situations faced by characters in the old stories with moral problems that students could recognize and face in their lives. Dance and music were integrated into the script to create a theatre piece for young people in Bangkok and Tai-Lue communities in Northern Thailand.

The devised project had two main phases, one based in Bangkok (May to August 2011) and another in Phayao Province, northern Thailand (June 2012), with tours extended into 2013. The Bangkok phase involved six student actors from the Department of Dramatic Arts who devised a new plot based on Tai-Lue legends and myths in relation to problems young Thais face, using personal experience, news reports, and social media. Chulalongkorn University students worked with those from Silapakorn University's Music Department, musicians and dancers to devise the theatre piece. In Phayao Province, student actors worked with eight young musicians in Chiangkham District to create live performances for five Tai-Lue communities in Phayao and Lampang provinces.

For the Bangkok phase, a *khon* masked dance choreographer, a teacher in Lanna martial arts, a contemporary music director familiar with Thai traditional music, and a Tai-Lue composer and musicians were involved. In Phayao, students and the music director worked with Phayao High School musicians to create new live music for the performances.

The devising process aimed to introduce ethical thinking into the lives of participants and the audiences. Young participants created the theatre piece that linked traditional ethical problems and virtues to deal with them to contemporary moral quandaries and ways to face them to appeal to young people in Bangkok and Tai-Lue communities.

## **Devising Theatre**

Devising is a theatre making process that uses physical theatre methods to go beyond collaboration. It works through a team of people with different sorts of training and background in theatre, including directors, actors, choreographers, designers, playwrights and/or dramaturges, who create an original performance. Alison Oddey argues that devised theatre often occurs in the combination of narrative, “text”, and physical movement, and stresses the importance of physical and visual explorations during the devising process. She notes that “the body and the use of physical visual imagery are the focus of the performance” (1994, p. 162). Due to the importance of physical action, performers and audiences are often closely related in ways that push audience to attach meaning to the images and movement presented in the performance text. It also leads performers to create special relationships with audiences. Thus the nature of the spectator-actor relationship is a very particular one” (Oddey, 1994, p. 20). Callery (2001) notes with respect to the devising process, no matter what its inspiration:

The key point is that whether your starting point is a style of performance or an idea about content, the process begins with generating visual material; characters, actions, images all from physical improvisation (p. 172).

She stresses three main phases of devising: a preproduction research period, a ‘making’ stage where the ‘text’ is generated, and a final phase of rehearsing that ‘text’ (p. 165). For the phases to emerge, the devising team must use a method to filter ideas, either democratically or through the director. Tina Bicat and Chris Baldwin (2009) stress how the director facilitates the project and nurtures it, often trying to mediate between creativity and objectivity. Baldwin stresses that:

Above all else the director is responsible for ensuring that the production is conceptually and aesthetically coherent, that the story is clearly told, that it can be seen and heard by the audience, that it is stimulating and entertaining, and most importantly, it is not boring! (p. 13).

Baldwin, Bicat and Callery all argue that the director acts like a dramaturge. All those involved in the devising process need to both feel comfortable contributing to the piece and to be able to challenge one another’s ideas. These dual duties suggest that a devising team can develop a kind of collective dramaturgy, based on regular suggesting, questioning, examining, and reflecting. Oddey discusses how devisers are constructors of dramaturgy: “The devising process needs to be searching, the work constantly sifted, re-examined, and criticized” (26). Bicat and Baldwin explore this important idea further, stating that:

devising process is one in which the team must search out the stories that contain interesting or puzzling accounts of the way people interact with

one another and then locate what we might describe as playable actions (p. 18).

This brief review of some key aspects of devising theatre indicates the importance of a physical phase of experimentation for the devising team that then becomes focused and centred on developing a sound dramaturgy through which performers and audience members become part of the performance.

## **Two Tai-Lue Literary Sources for the Project: Lanka Sip Ho and Phathommakal**

I began my research by analyzing legends and myths from Northern Thailand that was part of local community life. Due to the need to find moral issues that were relevant today, I searched for scenes and situations in these materials that had a moral dimension and could lead to questioning choices and values in our contemporary lives. The texts provide access to an ethical dimension that could be tied to values and a transmittable sense of goodness. I found several Lue legends and myths that held clues that we sought to trace out and develop about being good and how one can recognize and strengthen ethical virtues. For this purpose, I chose to focus on two tales from the Tai-Lue heritage, the Buddhicized version of the Ramayana, called Lanka Sip Ho, and the Tai-Lue origin myth *Phathommakal*.

### ***Lanka Sip Ho: Keep Your Heart Clear, Strong, and Ready***

Lanka Sip Ho is an old chanted text that is also still passed down orally.<sup>2</sup> It was written down and kept in manuscripts in Yunnan, China, and in the Lanna script among at some Chiangmai temples. Lanka Sip Ho is one of four versions of Ramayana circulating in northern Thailand. All four situate the plot in a local Buddhist context, rather than stressing Hindu beliefs. Lanka Sip Ho is a common text to ethnic groups like the Tai-Lue, Tai Yuan, and the Tai Yai people in Shan State<sup>3</sup> (Jeennoon, 2004; Davis, 2005; Malaroj, 1986).

Lanka Sip Ho first attracted me because it is a Buddhist story cycle centered on Bhummachak, a localized version of the demon, Ravana, rather than focusing on Rama's adventures. Bhummachak is born with ten heads after his mother, a virgin princess in exile, offers ten mangoes to Lord Brahma. She lives in the jungle with her ugly but powerful children—all sons—hiding from the children's grandparents, the King and Queen of Lanka. The sons meditate to generate *tapas* (spiritual energy) which they use to meet Lord Brahma and receive blessings from him, before finally meeting their grandparents in Lanka. The plot is driven by Bhummachak's passion. He tries to conquer the world and become the most powerful person above the three cosmic worlds. Each episode focuses on how Bhummachak's actions lead to bad ends due to karmic retribution.

Bhummachak is an anti-hero whose behavior can only lead to his downfall, and in so doing is able to teach us moral lessons. This moral dimension is clear in the text. Lanka Sip Ho was used in Lue courts to warn Lue princes about how and why a king should not misbehave. Its poetry also describes in detail what Bhummachak does wrong, and

ends with a Buddhist *gatha* (verse) that describes how, in contrast to being an evil and passionate king, a good king should behave under certain circumstances (Nimmanhemin, 2005). The main plot within this frame tale is similar to the *Uttara Kanda* section of the Ramayana by Valmiki<sup>4</sup> (Richman, 2007; Menon, 2004; Pantharangri, 2000; Malaroj, 1986).

The Lanka Sip Ho plot is simpler than that of the Ramayana, focusing on the anti-hero Bhummachak, rather than Rama, the hero. As Lord Brahma's son, Bhummachak seems to do all that is against the world and against what is right. When Brahma gives him a mighty "arrow-heart" which confers special powers of immortality, wealth, and invincibility, he orders Bhummachak to keep it close to himself, closely guarded, and never give it to anyone. Brahma also warns him that there are three things he cannot do: he cannot lift Indra's Bow; he cannot defeat the Bodhisattava, Jao Lamma (Lord Rama); and he cannot defeat the white monkey, Anumon (Hanuman). Later, as King of Lanka, Bhummachak tries to gain more power and wealth; this leads him to commit many evil deeds. After hearing that Kaew Sida (Sita Devi) is the most beautiful woman on earth, he tries to lift Indra's bow during a competition to win her; when he fails, he abducts her. This causes Jao Lamma and his white monkey-general, Anumon, to go in search of Kaew Sida and rescue her. When he sees Anumon, the white monkey, referred to by his father as undefeatable, Bhummachak fears for his life. He hands the "arrow-heart" received from Brahma to a hermit, with orders to hide it deep in the jungle. Without his heart, Bhummachak makes even worse decisions. Unable to kill the demon with any other weapon, Jao Lamma eventually manages to get hold of Bhummachak's "arrow-heart" and shoots him, severing off his ten heads. Anumon throws the heads into the sea, where each turns into a monster that occasionally returns to earth. Bhummachak thus perishes because he ignores Lord Brahma's instructions regarding his arrow heart.

***Phathommakal: The Legend of Pu (Grandpa) Sangasa and Ya (Grandma) Sangasee***

The origin myth of the Tai-Lue people—called Phathommakal—centers on an old couple. (Hongsuwan 2007. Natahalang 2005). We related the myth to a theme that helped clarify the message of Lanka Sip Ho. The first couple were made of soil shaped by Lord Indra, who had each of them walk in different directions. When they meet after 20,000 years of walking, Grandpa wanted to settle down, but Grandma was unsure; so she tested him with a question: "What is the brightest thing in the world, and what is the darkest thing in the world?" Grandpa was stumped; so they walked for a further 20,000 years before they meet again. In the meantime, Grandpa had obtained from Lord Indra the right answer to Grandma's question. When he meets Grandma again, she asks him the same question as before: "What is the brightest thing in the world, and what is the darkest thing in the world?" Grandpa answers: "The human heart." Grandma was pleased with the answer, and so they settled down, becoming the ancestors of the Tai-Lue people.

When the two stories were paired, we can see how they suggest the importance given by the Tai-Lue to the human heart as a moral compass for living in an ethically challenging world. One can be good or bad, but what is good or bad comes from the

virtues that affect one's choices, which are individual and difficult. The message is appropriate for contemporary youths, who know how to be good but still do not practice it. Therefore, the main theme for our project was: *Learning to keep your heart shining bright and able to guide you, even when you are amidst moral troubles in the darkest world.*

### **Tai-Lue Culture in Contemporary Thai Society**

Analyzing the two above-mentioned stories was part of my preliminary research. Another part of my preparation involved visiting Tai-Lue communities in northern Thailand (in Nan, Phayao and Lampang provinces). The Tai-Lue there all are Thai citizens, working in Thailand as teachers, doctors, nurses, policemen, car-dealers, hotel owners, factory workers, etc. The head of the community wants to find ways to preserve their "Lue-ness" for young people and the community. The Lue culture may be seen in the special types of old houses, in weaving and making cloth, and in unique types of martial arts such as boxing and sword dance. The Tai-Lue heritage in these provinces includes important ancestor ritual ceremonies performed every two and a half years, and small annual events when people gather to practice forms of Tai-Lue ritual. Such occasions, spread throughout each year, include temple merit ceremonies and national celebrations such as Songkran, New Year festivals, and various Buddhist celebrations.

The Tai-Lue people have a Tai-Lue association in each town where they work together for these special events. Some events and community practices also bring them income, such as women's weaving of cloth, decorating flags, and other types of clothes and dresses for sale. Tai-Lue performance culture has unique forms of chanting and melody pattern that require special training. Our project focused on two cultural forms well-developed in Tai-Lue communities. One is khap Lue, or chanting Lue stories and songs while accompanied by the Lue oboe, a key element of Lue culture; the other is the martial art dance, *fawn jerng*; and the Sword Dance. These art forms are practiced and shared among Lue communities and their networks are strong and regularly updated. Only a few older residents in these communities know much in detail about the Lanka Sip Ho tale but most know Phathommakal and other legends quite well.

Young people in Tai-Lue communities love to play computer games, use mobile phones to call and text, and want to adopt a Korean outlook, just as many young people in Bangkok. This led us to find a new way to tell the Lanka Sip Ho story to challenge performers and attract audiences, both old and young people. The project invited four artists to facilitate young student actors while they devised a script and created a performance with music, dance and mixed media elements from Tai-Lue culture.<sup>5</sup> The performance used traditional sources but was contemporary in its theme, with mixed media like masks and shadow puppets, new lighting and video clips.

Aside from using the two above stories, the script integrated khap Lue and fawn jerng into the performance. The former is Lue chanting by a *zchangkhap* (narrator) accompanied by a Lue bamboo oboe (bi Lue), but as a chant, Tai Lue people do not count it as music.<sup>6</sup> Khap Lue chants include poems from Lue culture, such as courting

songs between boys and girls, chants of some good verses and blessings for weddings or other special events, as well as many festival and ritual chants for festivals.<sup>7</sup> Khap Lue is not difficult except when it deals with a long and complex story, in part since it was hard to play the oboe (Kotsila, 2012). Since the tip of the oboe is dipped into alcohol, young people could not learn to play it, so we turned to a young zchangkhap named Noppadol Kotsila, a Tai-Lue school-teacher now living in Bangkok, who also plays the Lue oboe. He wrote a new version of poetry for our performance. Students learned the fawn jerng Tai-Lue martial art form to train their bodies and be included in the performance. Students also studied the basics of the khon (masked dance) so their bodies would be stronger and more energetic for the performance. Their fawn jerng training was used for dance movements and for crucial fight sequences in the piece, especially for the fight at the end of the performance.

### **Touching on Some Ethical Dimensions of the Lanka Sip Ho Project**

Lanka Sip Ho is a moral tale that teaches how to recognize situations where moral choice matters and how to build up ethical virtues to withstand temptations of morally challenging situations, a focus also found in the Phathommakal. We wanted to continue that basic moral function in our devising theatre project. Besides stressing awareness of situations that require moral choice in the stories, our theatre project sought to develop a performance that was tied to moral choices that students face today. We aimed to show how Tai-Lue values could help young people navigate their way in a morally complex world. Ethics depends on feelings and thought as much as words and actions, and devising theatre is a wonderful way for participants to develop virtues and to work together through moral quandaries. Students learn best when they are actively involved in what they aim to learn. Theatre is wonderful means to combine these aspects of ethics, since it forces people to focus and develop with their bodies and minds, and to work with others over a limited period of time. The space to practice and time to create an arts project, especially one that is focused on moral problems, helped to instill more moral awareness and discipline, trust of others, and the ability to open up to new ideas and listen to one another in order to provide strength to make moral choices.

### **Devising Theatre with Young People: The Lanka Sip Ho Project**

The Lanka Sip Ho devising theatre process was part of a larger project funded by the Thai Research Fund which aimed to show how theatre could provide young people with moral understanding. It started in 2011 when nine students devoted their summer holiday to prepare themselves in a studio with artist facilitators at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok to work together and prepare a script but postponed the trip due to a major flood. In June 2012, they went to Phayao, Northern Thailand, to work with a team of young musicians and their teacher for another 10 days. The resulting script and performance relate moral issues faced by the characters in a localized Ramayana tale to moral issues faced by students in the production. Students devised a performance around the ethical theme of learning to recognize and act morally by being strong and ready to make moral choices amid diverse moral temptations and challenges they faced in their lives. In 2012 and early 2013, the piece was performed more than a dozen venues in Bangkok, Northern Thailand, and Taiwan.

In devising the piece, the first and second year university students worked on three separate tracks, one aiming to prepare their bodies and their skills in collaboration, another aiming to produce a script, and a third working with choreographers and musicians to integrate dance and music into their performance. Training with artists, they strengthened their bodies by learning basic fawn jerng and khon movements, as well as learning to trust one another in group theatre exercises. They read the old Lue Lanka Sip Ho text and the legend, and they were asked to identify ethical dilemmas and problems in these texts. They then worked on relating these moral dilemmas to contemporary ethical problems that they and their peers faced. The results became a set of moral situations that were faced both by characters in the old literature and in their own lives that they started to develop into scenes. These scenes became the basis of a devised script for our university, for communities in Bangkok and northern Thailand, along with those done at five campuses.<sup>8</sup>

After identifying a set of moral problems that characters in the old literature faced, the devising team used theatre exercises that created trust in the group, and allowed them to share their thoughts, struggles, problems, and fears. They then used a collaborative script-writing process to link together the different scenes they made and combined them with their training in dance and music to show how to build up ethical self-confidence in a morally complex world, one that centered on a kind of “virtue ethics” (Blackburn, 2001). After some exploration for an organization device for the plot and theme, they decided to stress building up virtues to develop character and that could allow them to navigate through morally challenging situations and making ethically difficult choices.

### **Devising Theatre: Developing a Lanka Sip Ho Plot and Refining the Script**

The devising process worked through two channels that were increasingly coordinated. First, students worked together on improvisation and physical techniques, while training in traditional Thai dance and Northern Thai movements with artist facilitators. Secondly, the students created the characters and a plot for a script that linked moral dilemmas faced by characters and situations drawn from the Tai-Lue Lanka Sip Ho and Phathommakal materials to parallel moral problems members of the devising team faced in their own lives or that they had researched in today’s sources. They wanted to know how people could strengthen their will to do good, and to counter temptations to do bad.

After reading the Tai-Lue materials, the devising team had some trouble knowing where to start, but decided on a main character as their focus: a young Tai-Lue boy named In-Pun who did not do bad things until he faced problems at school and in the city. He was then tempted to lie, use violence, cheat, and join a gang, so that would be “accepted”. Students shared moral situations they had faced that would suit the situation in which In-Pun found himself. They discussed their struggles and what would make them want to win at all costs, even if it meant doing bad things, and whether this would lead them to regret what they did. Such activities made them more morally aware and more empathetic to others in their team.



The devising team then decided some problems for In-Pun while working out a storyline. But after struggling with his choices, In-Pun sought to remove himself from his new world after he remembered his Tai-Lue values, and would show this in a meeting with his great ancestors, the first Grandpa and Grandma of the Tai-Lue people. He himself would later enter into the Lanka Sip Ho story as In-Pun, so that Bhummachak would allow In-pun to take on many roles in the Lanka Sip Ho story. When In-Pun meets Bhummachak, he becomes a friend and even a protégé of the latter, experiencing life as a powerful person, before transforming into Jao-Lamma to win Kaew Seeda by lifting up Indra's bow. The last scene shows In-Pun meeting Bhummachak, who in fact symbolized the dark part of his own mind, as they fight over attempts by the former to draw In-Pun into the dark world.

As a facilitator, I helped students to interpret and find the motivation for each character to do things described in the basic story and script, thus enabling them to focus and refine it. Since our time was limited, I ended up as a dramaturge who shaped the piece, helped students find out how a person can connect himself to his imagination and what the main character realizes from fighting with Bhummachak. We did character interviews, talking with each other to see if there were any moments in their lives when they had done something bad or if, among them, there were some who wanted to do something bad, but did not do it; why they did it or what they did not do it. These interactions helped to bring out real moral problems students faced and to determine how one did or could deal with them. The new revised script for the play came from four sources: personal moral problems faced by the devising team members, current news that showed similar problems, Lanka Sip Ho, and the Phathommakal origin myth.

As a main protagonist, In-Pun, from today's world, was tempted to do bad, and fought against desires in his own head tempting him. Students searched through current Bangkok media and news reports, researched teen problems using YouTube, and looked at problems in schools such as bullying, sex or pregnancy, drug use, and abuse by teachers and friends. The devising team linked these new stories with their own personal experiences during discussion sessions, helping to enrich and make the plot more real and current.

A chief antagonist, Bhummachak, from Lanka Sip Ho, was someone who tempted In-Pun to follow his desires and do as he wished to, so he would be accepted by his peers in the modern world of drugs, sexual lust and violence.

And finally, we used the theme of strengthening your heart to counter temptations in a world full of difficult moral choices, from the Phathommakal. This theme forms the moral theme which connected the scenes together into a performance centered on developing ethical awareness and virtues to make the right choice.

### ***Devising Performance: Strengthening Bodies and Minds to Act***

Along with devising characters and a script for the Lanka Sip Ho project, the devising team also developed a disciplined approach to moving and acting on stage, one that gave them more confidence to work with their peers. This involved two basic forms of

training for the actors. First, they learned to know their body and to directly and clearly communicate with each other.

They used a series of exercises that allowed participants to learn to listen, give, focus, share, and trust others on the team. A second lesson was to prepare and strengthen the body and mind to work together, both individually and with others. We used many exercises and dances with music to instill control and balance in the performers, and to strengthen mastering basic classical Thai dance and Thai martial arts positions, as well as some improvisation within scenes and situations.

We also used three steps to devise our performance. First, we experimented with the script, using scenarios found in news media from the papers, media, and the internet. Students included their internet research into the performance. Second, they worked with musicians to find the sequence and music that will come in and out the performance. Third, we learnt the martial arts by working with a choreographer. This included an improvised scene that used and created movement, and then worked with choreographers to clean it and get it clear and systematic. These steps permitted performers to make a flexible and strong script.

### ***Enriching the Production: Working in Music and Other Media***

The script was enriched with dance and music. The composer worked with the young musicians to alter the sound production and got them to see how instruments could be used to produce many different and interesting kinds of unique sounds for situations such as when the character fights or comes into his imagination. Some musicians who never see live productions found it hard to produce new kinds of sounds for the music. They were young and needed a lot of formal guidance and suggestions about how to use forms and sequences. The sequence was a sharing program between the actors from Bangkok and the musicians. They worked well and slowly coalesced into a tight musical ensemble. Eight Tai-Lue high school students from the Lanlin Chao Loung Mueng La, Tai-Lue Cultural troupe also participated.<sup>9</sup>

### ***How Building Ethical Awareness and Self-confidence Fit into This Project***

By devising the piece with an ethical view in mind from the start, the actors and musicians, all in their teens, gained an ethical perspective in several ways. First, by devising the script with an ethical goal, they gained more moral awareness and could start to see the moral dimensions in many situations around them. Second, they gained confidence as individuals by their individual training and their creative work with others, and learning to make their own choices. They learned to share their thoughts and ideas and to perform with others. Their training increased their confidence in using their body in performance. They learned how to communicate, listen and share. They saw a project to completion and how to adapt it to many different settings in Thailand and internationally. The completed project gave them self-dignity and moral confidence.

The Tai-Lue musicians learned that their work was part of a project that audiences liked and responded to. As key participants, they were instrumental in making the performance exciting. They participated in a contemporary project that made their own Tai-Lue arts and culture alive so that people both inside and outside of their community could see its beauty and value, and recognize its dignity for their lives. By going to Bangkok to join an international festival, the young people felt uplifted and saw their work in the art as having dignity. Most of the musicians were quite young, and they did not at first seem to be interested in chanting. After many rehearsals, they could chant by heart and wanted to learn more about how to do more of it and to practice longer sequences of their own tradition. They wanted, in short, to ensure that khap Lue continued and that their local cultural tradition would strengthen. They also wanted to practice melodies and perform the story at their own local village.

### **Performing Lanka Sip Ho and Our Post-Performance Education**

The piece was performed more than a dozen times in different areas. Performing in Tai Lue provinces. Performances started at around 7:30 p.m., but audiences arrived around 7:00 p.m to watch a community show of Tai-Lue young people, the “Lanlin Chao Luang Muang La,” as our musicians called themselves, a mixture of traditional martial arts dance and sword dances. This was followed by an introduction to our show, which included its origin and introduction of the team with masks and puppets. The show itself would run for more than an hour. Audiences filled out questionnaires, and after each performance, they interacted with the performers and musicians.

Audience appreciation for the piece may be gauged in several ways. First, although the money they gave may not seem like much (around 1000 Thai baht for each performance), the audiences also fed everyone involved in the play and arranged for the costs of the performance itself. A better gauge was in the post-production talks, which allowed us to see the extent to which the young audience members liked the piece. We had post-production talks with three communities with village head, teachers and community leaders. We also interviewed audiences, old and young and video-taped the encounters. We did survey questionnaires with campus audiences. We had teachers help class reflection among the school audience. They started to see new possibilities for enhancing their cultural lives.

These performances and their responses showed how the performers collectively helped excite the audience with the play and find out that they could identify their lives with that of In-pun based on situations that are happening around them. Many young people in the audience could do fawn jerng and were happy to help the main character fight the bad guys during the participation scene. The young musicians liked what they did and proved in their school that they could perform with older people in the university. They also learned how to dance and play music. In learning art forms most, especially the girls, found it challenging, since the work required them to have strong bodies and to be able to do fighting scenes. Studying basic khon and martial arts over time allowed their disciplined training to give them both strength and self-confidence to act ethically within the performance before an audience.

## **Conclusion: Reflections on the Lanka Sip Ho Project**

The Lanka Sip Ho project was a devised theatre done by students and artist facilitators for Tai-Lue communities in Northern Thailand and in Bangkok. The devising team worked through old Tai-Lue written and performance traditions to recover their moral aspects and then to relate them to contemporary moral problems that they faced, and used this dynamic to creating a lively piece with depth. The young performers tried hard to find new ways to tell old stories that had moral meanings for today's youth. This process gave them an ethical confidence to resist temptations and to do the right thing which they showed on stage. The core moral idea that they focused on was on the heart that was central to both the legend and the Lanka Sip Ho. This focus allowed them to tie the two Tai-Lue stories together and to create different characters and scenes in the script. The key theme was how to keep the heart strong and morally clear to assess moral dilemmas and to resist temptations to do wrong. Using this theme from old texts to guide them, the devising team began making their script. They linked morally challenging episodes faced by characters in the old tales to moral quandaries that they or their peers faced today, as they learned in their own discussions and by researching news media. Each episode centred on characters learning to face moral problems and deciding what to do.

As young theatre students, once they had a set of possible scenes to work with, they wanted to find the main conflict as a way of organizing the plot. They chose to stress the conflict between the main protagonist, a young Tai-Lue boy named In-Pun, who was caught in a series of moral challenges in today's world. To better represent the moral conflict, the devising team chose to embody the boy's moral dilemmas in the temptations to do wrong offered to him by the villain Bhummachak, which they imagined as a negative aspect of In-Pun himself. This crucial plot point allowed them to show the internal moral conflict faced by In-Pun onstage as conflicts between In-Pun and Bhummachak and to create a script based on resolving these internal conflicts. To enhance the story, they used their training in the basics of Tai-Lue and classical Thai dance to show these conflicts in well-choreographed scenes, and included Tai-Lue forms of singing and music throughout.

The devising team were a dozen or so young university and high school students, about half of whom were Tai-Lue. Besides training together in Tai-Lue and classical dance, they also learned to share their experiences and work together on devising and staging a script. After many performances, community members in the audiences asked them questions about their experience doing the piece, and young audience members came up to them to converse and show them how to dance. The devising team learned to express Tai-Lue community values, both those found in the old Tai-Lue texts and in the traditional forms of performance. This helped them to recognize and pass on those values, whether by performing them or by talking about them. Based on what they said, the students gained greater moral confidence. They could more easily recognize the moral dimensions of situations that they faced, better empathize with others in similar situations, and deal with these situations more confidently by both talking about

these moral problems and dealing with them, and by using their strength to resist temptations.

Audiences thus saw a piece whose story and staging was familiar to them since it had the characters, stories, and performance styles of their culture, even as it was linked to contemporary ideas and issues. The audiences who of the fifteen or so performances staged of Lanka Sip Ho included those in both local rural and urban communities and schools. The performances allowed local Tai-Lue groups and young audiences to see how their old values and traditional forms of performance could be used to make them more interested in new ways to use their culture. The audience feedback stressed how they wanted to continue learning and sharing their cultural life with themselves and with others in new ways, and saw how the ethical values of their culture still had value and could be worked into performances in their schools and communities. Besides making the full Lanka Sip Ho story cycle familiar to the Tai-Lue audiences, they also identified strongly with the local Tai-Lue art forms used in the piece, like their unique khap Lue chanting in Tai-Lue language and strong martial dance. They saw how both the old stories and these forms could be used to enliven contemporary performances. Young Tai-Lue people spontaneously cheered the main character as he struggled with the villain and his gang to stand up for what was right using their own martial dance form, chanting, and music. After seeing the performances, several Tai-Lue communities started traditional Tai-Lue culture clubs that taught students their own unique music and dance, and also their legends and the story of Lanka Sip Ho. They recognized the power and value of their own traditions and saw new ways to use it to engage young people in their communities with their own culture. We were happy to see that the power of Lanka Sip Ho continues to this day.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This text records an oral verse version, written in Buddhist *gatha*, telling a story of a bad king (a version of Ravana), whose bad deeds and bad results aim to remind audience show *not* to behave. Ending with the death of Ravana, it is a counter-example of being moral.

<sup>2</sup> Some versions are *Sipsong* (12) *Ho* (Head) rather than Sip (10) *Ho* (head).

<sup>3</sup> Tai ethnic groups that share languages, cultures and arts in Northern Thailand-Shan states, Myanmar and Laos.

<sup>4</sup>The *Ramayana Uttara Kanda*, by Menon resembles the Lanka Sip Ho except that Menon focuses more on motivation. We can understand Ravana's passion, his motivation to prove himself and his jealousy over his half -brother, and his aim of raising the status of his demon clan. The *Uttara Kanda* section of the Ramayana is mostly about Ravana and what moved him to seek to conquer the Three Worlds, like the Lanka Sip Ho.

<sup>5</sup>Ajarn. Sinnapa Sarasas from Silapakorn University was the Music Director, while the Choreographers were Ajarn Poramet Maneerat and Ajarn Julaluck Ek wattanapan, and the mask and costume were designed by Ajarn Khanabudh Wiratanachai (Burapha University), and Ajarn Pornrat Damrhung was director and drama-facilitator.

<sup>6</sup>Khap Lue (chanting Lue songs) has recordings uploaded to YouTube, where it is sometimes accompanied by similar instruments used in today's popular Thai music.

<sup>7</sup>The Master of Lue chanting in Ban Wang Mai village said that he heard of Lanka Sip Ho, but that it was not ordinarily sung by the community or for celebrations. A long story and connected to the court, it was hard to Khap. As a kind of complex storytelling, the Lanka Sip Ho might somehow be connected to the court, which is why people were not familiar with it. The Lue people in Nan and Payao province knew about localized Lanna versions of the Ramayana such as *Horaman*, or *Prum Hien*, but not Lanka Sip Ho.

<sup>8</sup>Lanka Sip Ho was first performed at Sodsai Pantumkomol Drama-center in July 2012 as a work in progress and again in January 2013 as a reprise piece with young Tai-Lue musicians. The project also toured to Burapha University, Silapakorn University, Wat Pratumwanaram School and Taiwan National University for the Arts (TNUA), as well as to northern Thailand.

<sup>9</sup> This cultural performing troupe consisted of volunteer young people from Ban Nam Waen in Chiengkam District, Phayao Province, Thailand.

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