

## **Chinese Music in the Philippines: History and Contemporary Practices<sup>90</sup>**

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Arsenio Nicolas

### **Contemporary Chinese Music in Manila, Philippines**

The contemporary musical practices in the Chinese temples in Manila, as surveyed in 2008-2009, is a musical geography that cuts across many boundaries of religious systems, temple structures, and musical groups. Taoist and Buddhist temples, as well as Catholic churches, are found in a large area in old Manila on the northern side of the Pasig River, which was also the site of the old *parian* from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and which today has evolved into a large commercial district.

All temples began as small structures, but grew over time, and most of them have been moved to new sites when bigger tracts of land were available. Donations to temples of varying amounts enabled temple groups to acquire land property and build new temples, or to purchase condominium units as well. Most of the temples that I visited are now in commercial buildings, some are on the third or fourth floors, and one on the 9th, and another one on the 25th floor of a high rise building. In central Manila, on Sta. Cruz, Binondo and Tondo, very few temples are located on the

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ground. Those with their own tracts of land are located in the suburbs in Tondo, Manila; Sta. Mesa in Quezon City, Pasay City, Malabon, and in Valenzuela, Bulacan.

In all these temples, several genres of music and theatrical plays are performed according to the calendrical cycle of temple rites and feasts, as well as in funeral and death rites. This short study describes several musical genres -- *nan'guan* (also called *nan kuan*, *lam kuan*, *lam-im*) music; music for the dead called *sam tian tiu*; the singing of *lam-im* in *kaw kha* theatrical plays; music for divination, séances and trance-possession in temples. These shows a general overview of the musical scene in the Chinese temples of Metro Manila.

### **Nanguan (nan kuan, lam kuan, lam-im) music in the Philippines**

Musicians in Manila today recall that in the 1930s, their parents migrated from Fujian to Manila in search of work. As there were few musicians at that time, there were only small ensembles for funeral ceremonies and temple ceremonies and feasts. It was only after the 1950s that the music associations that organized performances of *nan'guan* music came into existence. Today, three music associations sponsor regular performances or musical events. These are held in the association's clubhouse, each having a temple altar, a music room, a dining room, meeting rooms and recreation rooms. Each association has a weekly meeting where musicians come to play. These days are scheduled separately for each club so that all the musicians can visit these clubs several days in a week. Over time, the

number of musicians vary, as some new immigrants from Fujian arrive, play with the group and after a time, when their business activities are in full operation, most cannot regularly participate. A sumptuous dinner with drinks is usually served at rehearsals.

The three music associations in Manila are now part of an international network of *nan'guan* musicians from Fujian, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Malaysia, and Singapore which holds regular concert festivals in the capital cities around Asia, attended by all the music associations. In one festival in Manila held in 2010, a dinner featured musical groups from all these countries. The music program consisted of several groups performing as a small standard ensemble with four musical instruments – a 4-stringed lute, a flute, two 2-stringed lutes, and a female or male singer, who also plays the *paipan* (wooden clapper). The other numbers are played by a larger group drawn from all the participating countries, sometimes around 20 musicians, playing pieces that are in the common repertoire of all the groups. In addition, new popular musical pieces are also played by visiting musicians, usually from Hong Kong, Taipei and Fujian.

### **Funeral Songs**

When a member of a music association dies, *namguan* groups perform a special ceremony to honor the dead. At the wake of the father of the president of music association on February 22, 2008, at Funeraria Paz (an upscale funeral parlor on Araneta Avenue in Quezon City), the music association came in full attendance, and several rites were

held in front of the dead, where *lam-kuan* is sung at around 10 in the evening. Musicians came in white long sleeve shirts, with a red sash draped on top of the left shoulder. One male soloist sang a very moving, intense piece, accompanied by the four music instruments, as they stood in front of the casket.

The music for the dead is called *sam tian tiu*, which literally means "three dead wine", where three glasses of wine are offered to the dead person. This is played by an ensemble consisting of *sio tiaw* (transverse flute), *tong hsiaw* (vertical flute), *di lian* (two-stringed fiddle), *sam mien* (plucked lute, 3 strings), *pipa* (plucked lute, 4 strings), *si the* (pair of sticks), *chieng ngah* (two small bells), and *lio tsua* (small round disk with beater). A bottle of imported whiskey is placed on the middle of the floor as the musicians play. After this rite, the musicians moved to one side of the parlor and continued to play. During the procession to the cemetery and the cremation rites, pieces played by the ensemble called *tua koh che* are considered standard and the ensemble may consist of two *tua che* (type of big trumpets); *tua luo* (gong), *tua pwak* (cymbals) and drums.

### Lam-im in kaw kha operas

One type of *lam-im* is sung as part of the *kaw kha* theatrical performance. These pieces are rarely heard, as these can only be sung by professional *lam im* singers who are also members of *kaw kha* groups that play in temple feasts. The several pieces sung are part of an interlude in the narrative of the opera.

## Music and Ritual Practices in Chinese Temples in Manila

### Divination and séance

There are two types of divination that can be found in three temples in Manila. The first is a trance possession ceremony (**chut sin**) conducted by a middle aged woman, who officiates in her own temple, a Taoist-Buddhist temple. She sits on a chair and devotees can inquire and ask questions regarding business opportunities or events that may happen in the future. A type of question one may inquire may refer to the most auspicious day, week or circumstance a new business venture may be started. In one séance, musicians play for the entry of the 8 generals, performed by *kaw kha* artists, who pay homage to the deities enshrined in the altars of the temple, while the woman sits in her chair and enter into trance.

The second type is the use of a Y-shaped wooden branch called *kha-ki*. The séance specialist holds one tip of the Y-shaped branch and another person holds the other tip, as the two follow the movement of the *kha-ki* as it scribbles on a large sheet of paper the symbols and scripts that the pen attached to the single branch writes on the paper. After completion of the séance, the specialist reads the paper and interprets it for the devotee. A similar type of séance is also found in Thailand at an installation of a new temple in Maḥasarakham, during which three nights of Teocheow opera called *ngieu* were also performed in an outdoor theater, the stage having been constructed on the parking lot by the theater company. In this type of

divination, the wooden branch, also in Y-shape, scribbles symbols on a fine sand surface placed in a wooden box in front of the altar, the temple of which was also constructed temporarily for the occasion in the parking lot.

### Trance and possession in a Taoist temples

In one rare occasion, during a temple feast in a Taoist-Buddhist temple in Quezon City, Metro Manila, the temple priest, who is also the temple owner and administrator, officiated in a procession circling around the temple floors. Donning a red cape with yellow or golden prints, flowers and scripts, he carried the sacred image of the temple deity, placed in a small altar pedestal with a canopy. As the musicians play, he entered into a trance, jumping as he carried the image of the deity in his hands and arms. Similar types of trance-possession can be found in many temple feasts in Thailand and in Singkawang, Sarawak, east Malaysia, as well as in some Hindu temples in Bali, where palanquins of deities are carried in processions. As the gongs and drums play, the palanquins move on their own and the carriers follow the movement of the palanquin, sometimes running around the temple grounds.

### *Performances in temples, funeral parlors, cemeteries and celebratory dinners*

Table summarizing the types of music, dances, theatrical performances performed in Chinese temples in Metro Manila.

	Taoist temples	Funeral Parlors Cemeteries	Celebrations Dinners
kaw kha (Fookien opera)	regular		rare
lang-say (Lion Dance)	regular		regular
lan-ding (Dragon Dance)	regular		regular
Lamkuan Lam-im Nangguan	some	Exclusive for musicians and club members	regular
Instrumental Music	sam song koh	tua koh che koh puak che	(torotot, cymbals, tambul) (all gongs)

Some Taoist temples engage all three in temple ceremonies --- *kaw kha* operas, lion and dragon dances and *lam-im* music --- each ensemble given an appropriate time and space during the ceremonies. This is largely dependent on the financial resources of the temple and its devotees who commission these groups for a particular performance. In rare cases, theatrical companies and *potehi* groups from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Fujian are also engaged to come to Manila and perform exclusively for a temple feast.

Some temples engage only *kaw kha*, and during the annual temple feast, daily performances of *kaw kha* may be held for as long as three months, each day being sponsored by individuals or families. In some large temples in Ermita, Manila, the temple feasts can be celebrated with processions around the block and performances of lion and dragon dances on the streets, sometimes attended by prominent officials of the city.

### Some conclusions

Two types of Chinese musical and ritual systems are found in the Philippines. The first is held in Buddhist temples and the second, in Taoist, Taoist-Buddhist and Chinese ancestral temples. Buddhist temples in Manila and in the Visayas hold prayer rituals during specific holy days using Chinese texts sung in the Minnan (a.k.a. Hokkien) dialect of South Fujian in a particular chant style as part of the ritual procedures (Dy 2013:84). The second type consists of music played in Taoist and ancestral veneration ceremonies that are more widespread and varied. Being set in numerous temples, variations are very prominent in each specific temple. Five musical forms - Hokkien Buddhist sutra chanting, Fukien *nan'guan* music, *kawkha* theatre, *toa ko che* music and *lang-say* (lion dance) and *lan-ding* (dragon dance) - are integrated into various ritual procedures for some temples.

Annual *nan'guan* music festivals are held today in Fujian, Guangzhou, Taipei, Hong Kong, Manila, Jakarta, Malaysia and Singapore. Thai musicians play new Chinese compositions for Chinese traditional musical instruments in Udon Thani and Bangkok, and hold concerts of Chinese and Thai music in Kunming, Shanghai and Beijing. There is the current spread of several genres of Chinese opera like the Fukien *kaw kah* in the Philippines, the Teochew *ngieu* in Thailand as well as similar forms in Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam with historical antecedents dating to the establishment of Chinese temples in Southeast Asia.

There are three historical lineages of Chinese music in the Philippines.

The first lineage has its roots in the appearance of flat gongs as trade goods in two maritime shipwrecks – the 10th century Tanjung Simpang shipwreck off the coast on northeast Borneo, carrying some 300 flat gongs, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Pulau Buaya shipwreck in Lingga Archipelago, Riau (Indonesia), which yielded eight flat gongs, and a dated 13<sup>th</sup> century flat gong found in Muara Jambi, Sumatra, with a Chinese inscription specifying the year 1231 and the term *tongluo* as flat gong. These three early sites for flat gongs along the coasts of Island Southeast Asia are precursors to the appearance of flat gongs on Luzon during the Spanish colonial period, thereafter named *gangsá*, derived from the Sanskrit term *kaṅṣa*, and which are called by this name today among the highland peoples of Northern Luzon (Nicolas 2009, 2010).

The second lineage stems from this first, with the use of a similar flat gong that accompany lion and dragon dances today. The Chinese term is also called *luo*, but Filipino players who do not speak any Fukien or Mandarin refer to flat gongs in this ensemble as *tongtong*.

The third lineage starts from the Spanish period with documents describing the performance of theatrical plays in Manila. The Chinese communities in Manila lived in the *parian*, a defined residential district for the Chinese as the Spanish colonial government became more dependent on Chinese labor, which resulted likewise in the rise of immigrants (Salazar 1590). These descriptions date from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth

century, revealing a general picture of the musical life of the Chinese at the time of Spanish contact. The Chinese played an important economic role during this period (Nicolas 2007). It is from these settings that contemporary theatrical plays now called *kawkha* may have evolved, and later, when immigrants from Fukien started to form musical groups in Manila to play the Southern Chinese classical music called *nanguan*, *lam-kuan* or *lam-im*.

The recent influx of Chinese workers into Southeast Asia and to many other parts of the world has been significant, and is most felt on the southern borders of China – especially in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Recent news reports that as new economic ventures are implemented like in Bali, workers from China are also employed. Will they return to China after their contracts have ended? Will they or are they playing music? In what contexts and spaces? in new temples? or in more secular spaces?

The various types of Chinese music in the Philippines presented in this study provide a panorama of Chinese music there. Much remains unknown and still be to studied, as can be seen in the gaps in the long-duree chronology of musical events that centers on the northern part of the Philippines, and on contemporary musical practices in Manila.

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The conference had been organized to shed light on how local artists stand up to the challenges and negotiate their relations to their local communities and their complex contemporary cultural environments. These artistic negotiations can lead to positive and negative results, with local artists able to work with many cultural agencies and institutions. In this complex situation, we need to view folk culture as a dynamic part of contemporary cultural life here in Southeast Asia.

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