

Pi Chawa Performance in Muay Thai by Japanese People

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Abstract

This article examines the integration of Thai urban culture into Japan through the musical performance of the *pi chawa*, a traditional Thai oboe, in *Muay Thai*, a Thai martial art, by a Japanese woman. Data were collected from workshops in Osaka (2016) and Hokkaido (2017), supplemented by two years of follow-up training in Thailand. This cross-cultural exchange not only enhanced cultural awareness and appreciation but also fostered community bonds and provided educational opportunities. As a result, Yayoi Kuriyama emerged as a proficient Japanese female *pi chawa* musician, now performing in an all-female *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble for *Muay Thai* matches in Japan. This integration highlights the broader benefits of cross-cultural learning in urban contexts, including economic boosts, social cohesion, and the preservation and innovation of cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Pi Chawa Performance, Thai Music, Thai Boxing, Pi Chawa Klong Khaek, Cross-Cultural Learning, Martial Art Music, Muay Thai, Thai, Japanese*

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Introduction

Muay Thai is a Thai combat sport that involves stand-up striking and clinching techniques. According to the Royal Institute Dictionary, "Muay" in Thai means "fighting with fists" and can also mean "one" or "single" (Royal Society of Thailand, 2013). In Muay Thai, "Muay" symbolizes the unification of four elements: Mongkol (headband), Pha Prajad (armband), Chueak Khat (rope wrappings) and khatha akhom (incantation), serving as a spiritual anchor for practitioners (Wasawanon, 2012).

Muay Thai has a long history dating back to ancient times. The Department of Physical Education states that during the Hariphunchai Kingdom, combat competitions involving various societal strata, including royalty and common villagers, were common during temple fairs or festivals. Muay Thai camps and schools would send fighters and trainers to compete for prizes. Inscriptions from the Yonok Chiang Saen Kingdom era, known as the Mangrai code or Mangrai law, suggest the origins of Muay Thai date back to 1839. Evidence of Muay Thai training persists through the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin eras, continuing to the present day (Department of Physical Education, 2013). Muay Thai is a popular sport in Thailand and abroad, known for its beautiful techniques (Figure 1).



Figure 1. One of Muay Thai techniques called *Khun Yak Chap Ling* (giant captures monkey), from <https://www.saranukromthai.or.th/sub/book/book.php?book=35&chap=3&page=t35-3-infodetail05.html>.

Mr. Khaya's "The Art of Muay Thai" details techniques such as *khun yak chap ling* (giant captures monkey) and *chorakhe fat hang* (crocodile swishing its tail) (Khaya, 2003). In Muay Thai, music is able to enhance performances, particularly when there is no clear winner, similar to its use in Khon and shadow puppetry. In Muay Thai, the *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble plays during *wai khru* (ceremony of showing respect to one's teacher & spiritual entities) and matches to heighten excitement and signal rounds with instruments like the *pi chawa* (Thai oboe), *klong khaek* (double-headed drums), and *ching* (hand cymbals).

Japanese interest in *Muay Thai* is evident in Thai festivals held in Japan since 2000, featuring *Muay Thai* stages and competitions. Professional *Muay Thai* events, like those at Korakuen Hall in Tokyo (Figure 2), further showcase its popularity. The Rajadamneon World Series held its first event in Japan on February 12, 2024, featuring *wai khru* performances and live music (<https://prtetimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000001710.000031998.html>).

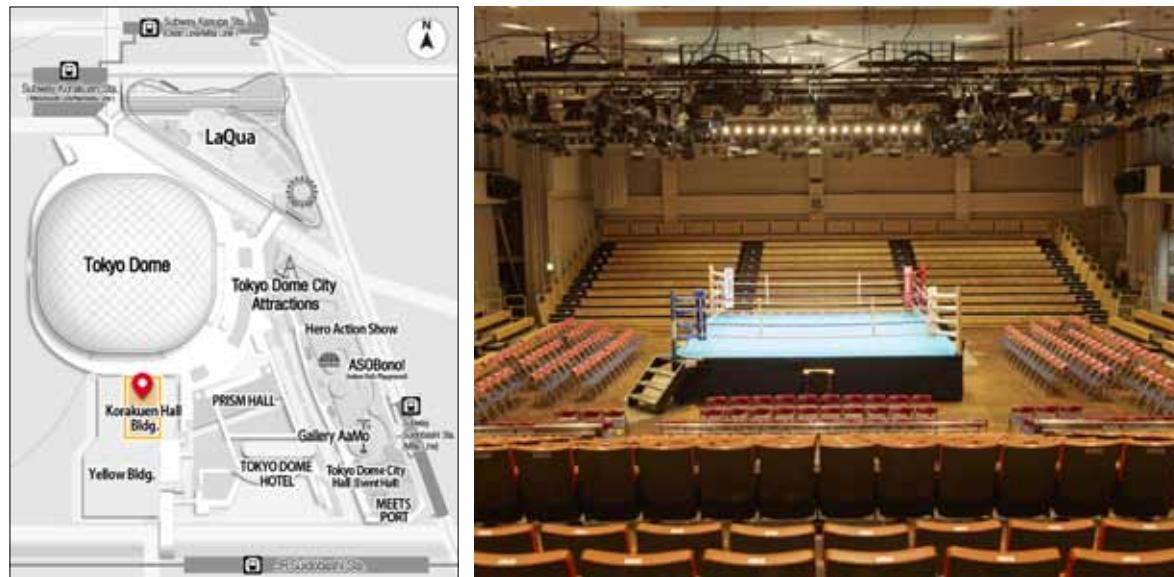


Figure 2. Left, the map of Korakuen Hall from URL: <https://www.tokyo-dome.co.jp/en/tourists/hall/>. Right, the ring in Korakuen Hall from URL: <https://www.tokyo-dome.co.jp/hall/>.

The author taught Japanese musicians how to play the *pi chawa* in Japan, first in Osaka (2016) and later in Hokkaido (2017), attracting significant interest (Figure 4). Japanese women Yayoi Kuriyama and Miho Orita trained in Thailand for two years, mastering the *pi chawa*. Yayoi Kuriyama formed a *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble in Japan, performing alongside *Muay Thai* matches. This article details *pi chawa* playing, sound control, breath control, ensemble practice, and pieces including paying respect to the teacher for *Muay Thai* matches in Japan.



Figure 4. Left, practical training workshop in Osaka, Japan, in the year 2017. Right, practical training workshop in Hokkaido, Japan, in 2018. (photos by Kumkom Pornprasit).

Creating an Understanding of the *Wai Khru* Ceremony in Thai Musical Tradition

Wai khru is a significant ceremony in Thai culture that initiates learning various knowledge and history. People from different cultural regions often have diverse customs and traditions. Mutual understanding is essential when individuals from different cultures immerse themselves in a new culture. The author acknowledges the importance of Thai musical culture from personal experiences studying Thai music. Both of Japanese students received traditional teachings as a student learning to play the *pi chawa* with master Peep Konglaithong (National Artist), an expert in traditional Thai wind instruments. Additionally, they studied *Klong Khaek* with master Boonchuay Sanganan, an expert in Thai traditional percussion instruments affiliated with the Department of Fine Arts. Beyond the specialized knowledge of playing traditional Thai musical instruments, the crucial aspect of transferring knowledge from teacher to student involves approaching Thai music with humility, respect and attention to detail.

The practice of the *wai khru* ceremony before commencing learning involves transmitting feelings, thoughts, and teachings in moral ethics. Virtues, perseverance, and the embodiment of an exemplary artist are considered valuable model. It is a stratagem in Thai culture for every learner to pay respect to all teachers, whether celestial, deceased, or alive. The author allowed Kuriyama and Orita to demonstrate respect for teachers according to Thai musical traditions (Figure 5). For auspiciousness, they prepared offerings including incense, flowers, candles, and a six-baht silver offering, and recited chants to pay homage to the teachers, just like Thai musicians. They performed *wai khru* at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, to instill confidence in those who will continue to inherit the Thai musical tradition.



Figure 5. Japanese students paying respect, *wai khru*, to the teacher before inheriting knowledge. (photo by the author).

Training to Control the Sound of *Pi Chawa*

Before delving into the process of controlling the sound of *pi chawa*, preparing the musical instrument is essential. The Japanese students had purchased their own oboes. Another crucial piece of equipment for blowing the *pi chawa* is the reed. The author had prepared the *pi chawa* reeds for them and taught them how to create the reeds so they could do it themselves when they returned to Japan. During that time, master Peep Konglaithong (Thai National Artist) kindly demonstrated the reed-trimming technique to Kuriyama and Orita (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Master Peep Konglaithong (Thai National Artist in white shirt), along with the author, imparting the technique of trimming *pi chawa* reeds to Kuriyama and Orita. (photo by Kumkom Pornprasit).

Controlling the sound of *pi chawa* is crucial. Traditionally, masters in Thai wind instruments do not teach students to play the *pi chawa* immediately. Every beginner must start by learning the *pi nai* (a Thai woodwind oboe). Once proficient in playing the *pi nai*, they can then begin learning the *pi chawa*. This is because the *pi chawa* requires more air to play compared to the *pi nai*, making it easy for the sound to go out of tune. Controlling the sound becomes more challenging, and a faulty foundation might lead to misunderstandings and improper playing techniques. For Kuriyama and Orita, the author allowed them to practice playing the *pi chawa* initially. Therefore, close supervision and control over various blowing techniques during practice are essential.

Training to control the sound of *pi chawa* must begin with controlling the mid-level sound to avoid distortion. This is a crucial step before practicing other sounds in subsequent steps. Clear sound control involves producing sound like speaking words in clear sentences. The player must use their tongue to control the *pi chawa* by pressing their tongue against its reed. However, this training step may cause the trainee's tongue to bleed or crack, which can deter some learners. Kuriyama and Orita practiced this step during their training at Chulalongkorn University (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The author teaching how to play the *pi chawa* at Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University. (photo by Kumkom Pornprasit).

Musicians with some background may be able to play without distortion. Afterward, they moved on to playing short melodies composed to utilize the three sound groups of pi chawa. After receiving the knowledge and method, Kuriyama expressed her feelings about the difficulty of controlling the sound of pi chawa: *"I felt very happy to participate in the training. When I saw it in person, I realized that it was smaller and more beautiful than I had imagined. I also felt that it was very challenging to produce the sound. It was a great learning experience for me."* (Kuriyama, Interview, 23 April 2023).

Orita explained her feelings as follows:

"I went to watch a Muay Thai match for the first time and became interested in live performances. I then searched on YouTube and became fascinated by its power and intricate sound. There aren't many instruments used with the pi chawa. When professors from Chulalongkorn University came to organize a workshop at my university in Japan, I rented a practice room with Yayoi. Practicing pi chawa has improved my skills. I think the pi chawa is a very challenging instrument. It's difficult to control the sound consistently, and I find it hard to breathe while performing. I have to manipulate the pi chawa with my tongue, but I'm not very good at it." (Orita, Interview, 23 April 2023)

In addition to learning from the instructor, self-practice is essential because disciplined practice leads to rapid improvement. Kuriyama is disciplined and diligent in her practice, both while receiving instruction at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and in Japan. To achieve a perfect performance, it is crucial for performers to sit in close proximity to one another and observe their co-performer's action, facilitating effective communication during the preparation phase. This arrangement contrasts with the traditional setup of pi chawa klong khaek ensemble (See Figure 8). However, this dedication enables her to quickly adapt to playing the *pi chawa* alongside the *klong khaek* and *ching* with high-quality sound.



Figure 8. Practicing pi chawa klong khaek in Japan. (photo by Yayoi Kuriyama).

Ra-bai Lom Practice (Circular Breathing Technique)

The Circular Breathing Technique is a special aspect of playing the Thai flute and oboe. It allows the blown sound to be sustained for as long as desired, making it a marvel of Thai oboe playing. Therefore, mastering the technique of *ra-bai lom* is crucial for anyone learning to play the Thai oboe. This technique is challenging and requires specific skills. Even some professionals in Thai woodwind instruments may struggle with it. Kuriyama and Orita gained an understanding of *ra-bai lom* during their training sessions in both Osaka and

Hokkaido. However, they may still face difficulties in executing it perfectly. Currently, Kuriyama can perform this technique smoothly and play melodies continuously, demonstrating significant progress in mastering this intricate and beautiful Thai musical tradition.

Ra-bai lom involves regulating airflow within the musician's body to ensure continuous airflow. Many musicians train by blowing into a tube inserted into a glass of water, but the author finds this method challenging. Instead, the author teaches Kuriyama and Orita to practice with the flute itself, focusing on tongue control. They use their tongues to touch *pi chawa*'s reed. When blowing a melody, if the airflow stops, they employ the cheek puffing technique to keep air in their cheeks. When it is time to blow the note again and it's challenging to maintain, they squeeze air from their puffed cheeks while inhaling. This ensures continuous airflow, maintaining the melody without interruption. They repeat this process by puffing their cheeks again, ensuring uninterrupted airflow throughout the performance. While Kuriyama can practice and execute breath control, Orita finds it difficult.

Assembling *Pi Chawa Klong Khaek Ensemble*

Once Kuriyama was able to play the *pi chawa*, assembling an ensemble became significantly important. The ensemble, which includes the *pi chawa*, *Klong Khaek*, and *Ching* (as depicted in Figure 9), is an integral part of royal ceremonies. This ensemble is used to perform pieces regarding weapons such as *krabi-krabong* (sword and blackjack), *ngow* (halberd), *hok* (spear), and *thuan* (lance).



Figure 9. The *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble (photos by the author).

The *pi chawa* (a Thai oboe influenced by a Javanese model) is a quadruple reed woodwind instrument. It consists of two main parts: the first part, resembling a long, tapered cone approximately 27 centimeters in length, has seven finger holes on the top to control the sound. The second part is similar in shape to a long tube, approximately 14 centimeters in length, resembling a horn. The sound of the *pi chawa* is produced by sequentially opening and closing the finger holes, similar to the fingering technique used in traditional Thai wind instruments and Western woodwind instruments (e.g., recorder). When the finger holes are opened one by one, the sound rises in pitch, and when they are closed, the sound lowers in pitch, following the sequence of the notes.

In the *Pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble, the *pi chawa* player sits in the front, directly in the center of the ensemble. The *Klong Khaek* players sit behind and close to each other. The *Ching* player sits to the right of the drummers. The reason for the drummers sitting close to

each other is that the rhythms played on the *Klong Khaek* are relatively complex. Drummers need to listen to each other to play together in sync. If they sit separately, they may not hear each other well, which could hinder coordination during performance. Even the *Ching* player sits close to the drummers, forming a cohesive group. This arrangement is unique to this type of ensemble setup.

Pi Chawa Ensemble Accompanying Muay Thai

The pieces played during *Muay Thai* matches typically feature melodies with a moderately fast tempo known as *song chan* rhythm, carrying symbolic meanings related to weapons. Each weapon category is clearly distinguished within the piece. The composition of the pieces is determined by specific sections known as "special overlapping sections" or "special overlapping verses." The process of playing the *pi chawa* during *Muay Thai* matches involves the following steps:

Wai khru: Perform a piece named *Sarama*.

Round 1: Perform a piece named *Chao Sen*

Round 2: Perform a set of *Khaek* pieces,

such as (*Khaek-Reo*, *Khaek A-wang* & *Khaek Nang*)

Round 3: Perform a piece named *Reo*

Round 4 and 5: Perform a piece named *Choet*

If a *Muay Thai* match consists of three rounds, the second round will feature the "*Khaek*" piece. At the end of the third round or the final round, it will conclude with the "*Choet*" piece. If the match consists of five rounds, rounds 2-4 will feature fast-paced "*Khaek*" pieces. The fifth round, which is the final round, will also end with the "*Choet*" piece.

Kuriyama and Orita have learned all the melodies of the *Muay Thai* process, including *Lom phat chai khao* and *Mon lam dap*, which are fundamental pieces that the *pi chawa* player must be able to perform. These two pieces were transmitted during the initial practical training sessions in Japan, twice. When the training continued in Thailand, the author transmitted the melodies of the combat dances to Kuriyama and Orita, such as *Khaek-Reo*, *Khaek A-wang*, and *Khaek Nang*. The set of *Khaek* pieces (Javanese idiomatic melody) was extensively transmitted to both of them, ensuring versatility in performance selection.

In addition, the author has also transmitted the drumming patterns, the method of blowing the *pi chawa* accompanying the *klong khaek* and *ching*. However, the exception is the "*Sarama*" piece, which is considered the pinnacle of *pi chawa* performance and has not been transmitted yet due to the absence of *klong khaek* performance skills. The performance of the "*Sarama*" piece requires both the *pi chawa* player and the drummer to have a mutual understanding of the melody along with the drumming rhythm. This demands both skill and comprehension, and the author hopes that Kuriyama will eventually be able to play it. Kuriyama expressed her feelings upon hearing the "*Sarama*" piece: "I was touring in December 2015. It was a *Muay Thai* competition. I felt like the music presented the dignity of the intense competition, especially the "*Sarama*" piece, which was impressive and wonderful. The *pi chawa* has a powerful sound and delicate rhythm." (Kuriyama, interview, 23 April 2023).

In this article, the author provides examples of two *pi chawa* melodies: "*Lom phat chai khao*" and "*Mon lam dap*." Both were transmitted during practical training sessions in Osaka and Hokkaido. These melodies were recorded in the group of sounds that are interconnected within the three groups of *pi chawa*'s sound, including CDEGA, GABDE, and EFGBC (Figures 10 – 13).



Figure 10. Notation of pi chawa melodies: Lom phat chai khao piece, part 1.



Figure 11. Notation of pi chawa melodies: Lom phat chai khao piece, part 2.



Figure 12. Notation of pi chawa melodies: Mon lam dap piece, part 1.



Figure 13. Notation of pi chawa melodies: Mon lam dap piece, part 2.

The transmission of *pi chawa* pieces to foreigners in this instance serves as one avenue to cultivate international Thai musicians dedicated to embodying the spirit and practice of the art. Both individuals are considered students akin to Thai apprentices, fostering a strong bond and readiness to transmit the cultural heritage of *pi chawa* as part of Muay Thai ceremonies. This cultural exchange is beautifully depicted in Japan, as stated by Kuriyama in her interview: "I learned about the *pi chawa* at the Takahara Cultural Hall of Osaka City University. Teacher Pattara Komkam taught me how to play the *pi chawa*. I am very happy to have participated in the training... I thank the teacher for graciously teaching me with wholeheartedness" (Kuriyama, Interview, 23 April 2023).

Currently, in Japan, there is a music band called Dok-Sakura (Cherry Blossoms), which is another band from Nagoya City that accompanies Thai boxing matches. The wind instrument player in this band is Japanese. They are considered the only music band in Japan that accompanies Thai boxing matches and has received acclaim, featured in the Muay Siam magazine on May 17, 2015. (Figure 14)



Figure 14 Dok-Sakura band in Muay Siam magazine (May 17, 2015), from URL: <https://livedoor.blogimg.jp/king-muay/imgs/e/0/e01554cb.jpg>.

However, for female musicians, there hasn't been much presence before. Kuriyama has been able to play the *pi chawa* and study the full repertoire of *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble performance. (Figure 15) It can be said that the knowledge passed down from the lineage of Phraya Sanoduriyang (Cham Sundaravadin), through master Peep Konglaithong (National Artist), to the author, and passed on to the Japanese students. This represents a significant academic advancement in the field of Thai wind instruments on the international stage. She has been able to play the *pi chawa* in the *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble at boxing stadiums in Japan, achieving success. Her latest performance was playing at a boxing match during an international festival in Osaka on March 10, 2024. (Figure 16)



Figure 15. Yayoi Kuriyama's *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble (by Yayoi Kuriyama).

In that event, Kuriyama's *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble had a rehearsal session with the boxers on March 2, 2024, and they were scheduled to perform as the third act alongside boxers from Turn Up Kickboxing and Fitness according to the event schedule. (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Thai boxing poster scheduled to fight on March 10, 2024 (by Yayoi Kuriyama).

Discussion: Cross-Cultural Learning and Urban Context Benefits

The cross-cultural exchange highlighted by the integration of *pi chawa klong khaek* music into Japanese *Muay Thai* events represents a significant phenomenon in urban cultural dynamics. This fusion of Thai and Japanese traditions not only enriches the cultural tapestry of both nations but also exemplifies the broader benefits of such exchanges within urban contexts.

Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Diversity

Urban centers are often melting pots of diverse cultures, and the inclusion of *pi chawa* in Japanese *Muay Thai* events exemplifies how such cross-cultural interactions can enhance cultural awareness and appreciation. Yayoi Kuriyama's dedication to mastering the *pi chawa*, a traditional Thai oboe, underscores the deep respect and understanding that can be fostered through cultural exchange programs. This mutual appreciation fosters a sense of global citizenship and cultural empathy, vital components for harmonious urban living.

Economic Benefits and Tourism

The cultural infusion of Thai traditions into Japanese events, such as *Muay Thai* matches, can significantly boost local economies. As noted, Thai boxing's evolution into a commercial sport has substantial economic implications. The introduction of authentic *pi chawa klong khaek* music to Japanese *Muay Thai* matches can attract tourists and cultural enthusiasts, increasing footfall in urban areas hosting these events. This influx of visitors can benefit local businesses, including restaurants, hotels, and retail outlets, thereby contributing to the economic vibrancy of the city.

Strengthening Community Bonds

Cross-cultural learning initiatives, such as the collaboration between Japanese and Thai musicians, can strengthen community bonds within urban settings. These cultural exchanges create platforms for shared experiences and collaborative endeavors, fostering a sense of unity and collective identity. Kuriyama's formation of an all-female *pi chawa klong khaek* ensemble in Japan not only promotes cultural heritage but also empowers women in both societies, highlighting the role of cultural initiatives in promoting social cohesion and gender equality.

Educational Opportunities

The exchange of cultural practices provides valuable educational opportunities for urban populations. Workshops and training sessions, such as those attended by Kuriyama and Orita, serve as educational platforms where participants can learn new skills, gain historical insights, and develop a deeper understanding of different cultural traditions. These educational experiences enrich the intellectual landscape of urban centers, promoting lifelong learning and intellectual curiosity among residents.

Preservation and Innovation of Cultural Heritage

Urban centers, with their dynamic and evolving nature, provide an ideal environment for both preserving and innovating cultural heritage. The practice of *pi chawa* music in Japan illustrates how traditional arts can be preserved through cross-cultural learning while also being adapted and innovated to fit new cultural contexts. This dual process of preservation and innovation ensures that cultural heritage remains relevant and continues to thrive in modern urban settings.

Conclusion

The integration of pi chawa music into Japanese *Muay Thai* events is a powerful example of the benefits of cross-cultural learning in urban contexts. This phenomenon enhances cultural diversity, boosts local economies, strengthens community bonds, provides educational opportunities, and ensures the preservation and innovation of cultural heritage. As cities continue to grow and diversify, fostering such cross-cultural exchanges will be crucial in creating vibrant, inclusive, and harmonious urban societies.

Acknowledgements

This Paper was supported by the Center of Excellence for Thai Music and Culture Research, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

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