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***Phin Phia*, A Plucked Zither in Northern Thailand: Its Origin, Diffusion, and Survival in Northern Thailand**

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Abstract

The *phin phia* is a type of zither with a long history. Traditionally, the word *veena* referred to any stringed instrument. The *veena* was believed to be the instrument of Hindu gods and goddesses. It was brought from the southern part of India to Southeast Asia in the Daravadi period by merchants and priests who accompanied them. These traders came to Thailand by way of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In Southeast Asia, there are stone sculptures of musicians playing the *veena*. The *veena* first appeared in Thailand in the Sukothai, Ayuthaya, and Lanna kingdoms, and is also found today in the north and southeast. The *phin pia*, *pia*, or *phia* is an ancient musical instrument dating from the Lanna period. Developed from the gourd zither, the *phin phia* has from two to seven strings. Its body is made



from a coconut shell or gourd. The neck is made from hardwood with one end sharpened to attach to the head of the *phin pia*. The head can also be made from bronze, and is often cast in the shape of an elephant or a *hatsadiling* (a mystical bird of the Lanna people)

Keywords: *Phin phia*, Lanna, Thai folk music, ancient lute

The Origin of the *Phin* (zither) and the *Phin Phia* in South East Asia

The *rudra veena* or the *phin* (zither) is used in Hindustani classical and Indian solo music. The *veena* was believed to be the instrument of Hindu gods, as there are stone carvings in Southern India of the God Shiva holding a *veena*. *Veena* is a Sanskrit word meaning the Indian musical instrument or “gourd zither.” It is a traditional Hindustani plucked instrument. The word *veena* became *pheena*, *phin*, *bin*, or *phia*, and is referred to as *pia* in the Lanna period. The *rudra veena* is 54 inches long with two large tumba resonators and seven strings. The musician put the *rudra veena* on his shoulder with the upper resonator at the back and the lower resonator in the front. The *rudra veena* is always played by a male, and in an aggressive manner, as the name *rudra veena* means “being furious” or “veena of the god Rudra or Shiva” suggesting a fierce musical style.

Figure 1 *Sarasvati holding a vina*



The religion, music, and social structure of India has played an important role in Southeast Asia. Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand retain Indian cultural features, artefacts and/or architecture.

The Influence of Indian Civilization and Religion in South East Asia

India has a long history of trade with South East Asia. Traders sailed from port cities on the east coast of India to south Thailand, Malaysia, and Sumatra, and across the Gulf of Thailand to central Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Indian traders also travelled by land across Bangladesh and Burma to reach Kanchanaburi and eventually south Thailand. These Indian merchants were accompanied by priests and monks who introduced Hinduism and Buddhism to Southeast Asia. Many significant kingdoms emerged in the region: Funan (first to fifth century A.D.), Champa (second to fourteenth century A.D.), Chenla (sixth to eighth century A.D.), Sri Ksetra (fifth to eighth century A.D.), Khmer (ninth to twelfth century A.D.), Dvaravati (fifth to eighth century A.D.), Srivijaya (sixth to twelfth century A.D.), and Hariphunchai (eleventh to twelfth century A.D.).

Figure 2 *Expansion of Hinduism in Asia*

Noted. From The Ramayana Masks in South East Asia & Mask of Asia, (n.d.), MOCA Bangkok
(<https://mocabangkok.com/th/moca-admin-moca-admin-8/>)



The *phin* (zither) has been in use since ancient times. The Cham's sculpture of the angels playing the gourd zither in Danang, Vietnam is evidence of the use of the zither as well as of the Hindu and Buddhist influence in South East Asia.

Figure 3 *Sculpture Apsara Pedestal Dancer Tra Kieu, Da Nang, Vietnam*

Noted. From Base with dancer and musician, at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2015, Arts in Southeast Asia (<https://db.sac.or.th/seaarts/artwork/761>)

Figure 4 *Borobudur relief showing musicians*

Noted. From Indonesian art slide set, by Professor M.C. Supataradit Diskul, (n.d.) Thapra Library SU (http://www.thapra.lib.su.ac.th/supatlib/slide/SL1013_0136.jpg)



In Cambodia, there is evidence for the use of the *veena* dating from the period of the Khmer Empire. The word *veena* or *veen* appears in several inscriptions, including number K263D at Wat Preah Inkosei, Siem Reap in 984 AD, and numbers K324A and K669C at Siam Reap. Furthermore, in the inscription of number K324A, the word *tamee veen* was written, which refers to the musician playing the *veena*. Moreover, there is an eleventh century low relief sandstone sculpture at the northern balcony of the eastern side of Angkor wat, which depicts a number of musicians, including one holding a gourd zither, in the celebration of the victory of Kritsana. The musician holding the gourd zither is wearing upper class dress, which suggests that the position of holding the zither was elegant.

Evidence shows that the *khse mhoy* (a one-string, plucked instrument) has been popular in Cambodian culture. This variation of the gourd zither is still played in Cambodia, and there is a statue in Phnom Penh of the famous Khmer poet and master of *khse mhoy*, Krom Ngoy, holding the instrument. Krom Ngoy also wrote many educational books, including a poem about teaching young people. The *khse mhoy* requires wisdom and a calm mind to play. *Khse mhoy* is also found among other instruments as part of a traditional band, akin to a Cambodian “grand orchestra,” which includes both stringed and percussion instruments. An audio CD of gourd zither music can be bought in Siam Reap. The gourd zither is still made according to the ancient methods, and has been a part of Cambodian culture since ancient times.



Figure 5 *Memorial to Krom Ngoy, Phnom Penh*

Noted. From DISCOVER CAMBODIA by Krom Ngoy, 2019, Notes East
(<https://noteseast.weebly.com/discover-cambodia/krom-ngoy>)

The zither is also part of the story of the Buddha. When the Buddha was doing self-mortification, the god Indra saw his determination and appeared in front of the Buddha with a three-stringed zither. Indra plucked the first string that was too loose, and the sound from the loose string could not be heard. When Indra plucked the second string, it was too tight and the string broke. Finally, he plucked the third string, which was moderately adjusted, and the sound from the string was beautiful. The Buddha came to his senses and used the third string to understand the Buddhist philosophy and way of practice called the “Moderate Way”, which is not too tight and not too loose.

Moreover, in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* of Tika Buddhism (*Tripitaka* volume 10/247/299), there is a story about an angel named Panjasika who was ordered by Indra to meet the Buddha. While he was waiting for the Buddha to finish his meditation, he played the yellow gourd zither and sang.



Figure 6 *Goddess and celestial musician. Painting on wall. Kizil, north-west of China*

Noted. From Indian art slide set, by Professor M.C. Supataradit Diskul, (n.d.) Thapra Library SU
(http://www.thapra.lib.su.ac.th/supatlib/slide/SL1012_0750.jpg)

At the base of the pagoda in Ban Khubua, Mueang, Ratchaburi, Thailand, there is a high relief sculpture dating from the Dvaravati kingdom (sixth to ninth century A.D.). The sculpture depicts a female singer and four female musicians playing a gourd zither, a five-stringed zither, a pair of small hand cymbals, and a pair of wooden clappers.



Figure 7 Three female musicians, from center, play a five-stringed zither, cymbals, and a tube or bar zither with a gourd resonator.

Noted. From An illustrated book of costumes based on historical and archaeological evidence (p. 10), by The Fine Arts Department, 1971.

The sculpture of women playing zither or the *phin phia* put the stripe and the body of the zither on the chest. Therefore, the gourd zither or the *phin phia* could be played by both male and female (by putting on the flat area of the women's chest).

At the base of the old pagoda in Muang, Nakhon Pathom, now in the Nakhon Pathom Museum, there is a sixth century high relief sculpture at of Kinnari playing the gourd zither.

In the Sukhothai period, Thai people enjoyed playing music and singing, as recorded in King Ram Khamhaeng's stone inscription number 1, dated 1292 A.D., at Mahathat temple. The stone inscription number two, on the lines 17 – 20, describes people at Aranyik making merit at the end of the day during Buddhist Lent. Returning from Aranyik, people sang and played on the zither and other percussion instruments.

“ดบงคมกลอง ด้วยเสียงพาทย์
เสียงพิณ เสียงเลื้อน เสียงขับ
ใครจักมักเล่น เล่น ใครจักมักหัว หัว
ใครจักมักเลื้อน เลื้อน”

(Thai dramas in various eras, 2021, p. 2)



The above passage describes various musical instruments: percussion, wind, plucked, and bowed instruments and the zither might be one of those musical instruments appearing at that time.

The music of the Ayutthaya kingdom was more advanced than that of the Sukhothai kingdom. The people of Ayutthaya were interested in arts and music was widely played. Ayutthaya's musical instruments were holdovers from the age of Sukhothai but much more advanced in shape. Musical ensembles and performances were more detailed and included additional instruments such as the *krachappi*, the *chakhe*, and the *phin phia*. The *phin phia* or a gourd zither also appeared in the poem of Ayutthaya called “*Yuan Phai*” ยวนพ่าย (the defeat of the Lanna). The *phin* or zither was one of the instruments mentioned in this celebration song of victory over the Lanna:

“สงยพินสงยพาทยพ้อง	สารสม คู่แฮ
สงยคีตสงยแพดงจयर	จันแจ้ว
เกวี่ระงมเกวี่	สงยลั่น ฤาแฮ
สงยเกือบสงยก้องแกลั่ว	โห่หรรษา”

The committee of historical documents publishing (1998:120) recorded the story of the *phin phia* or the gourd zither that appeared in the written literature. It is part of a folktale from Chiang Mai narrating the celebration hosted by King Kawila after he drove out the Burmese army from Lanna in 1696 A.D. There was the inscription written about the *phin phia* in the event as follows:

“.....ต ทา ในกาลนั้นโสนครั้ง เมืองรัตนสาครนครเชียงใหม่ ประกอบไปด้วยประการ
กาแพงหอหึ่ง หอเรือ หอป้อม หัวหมูประตู่เวียง อาดและคือ กว้างเล็ก หัวระพ่า เต็มไปด้วย
น้ำ ดาษเต็มไปด้วยดอกบ้านจันกร ดอกบัวขาว บัวแดงต่าง ๆ มีวัดวาศานากันรุ่งเรือง สดุดิม
นะเกษมเต็มไปด้วยท้าวเสนา 16 อ มาตย์ ข้าเจ้าไพร่ไทย ผู้คนชนบทบ้านน้อยบ้านใหญ่
ทั้งหลายมากนัก ประกอบไปด้วยเข้าเหล่าชั้นปลาอาหาร พรวัว ตาล หมาก พลุ ส้มสุกลูก
หวาน เข้าหนาปลาอุกสนุกเจริญ กินทานม่วนเหล่นมมโหรสพ ปอบลาม จ้อยซอ สี บท กัน
โลง ดิดสี ดีเป่า ขับพ้อนต่าง ๆ เสียงพิน พาท ส้อง กลองอูย แน ตะแหล เหิน แคน คอยดั่ง
ธอระลือซอ เป็ยะพิน ปั่นเทาะว่ หอยสังข์ เป็นอันสนั่น เนืองนั้น อุกะหลุก.....”



This inscription described the celebration at which people enjoyed food and music, including the *phin phia* or the gourd zither.

The following folktale from Chiang Mai indicates that the *phin phia* has been well-known for more than 200 years. It was recorded in a Palm-leaf manuscript called “Ovat” in 1822 A.D. The passage describes the Chiang Mai king lecturing a novice Buddhist monk about behaving according to the law for the prosperity of Buddhism:

“.....ว่าแต่นี้ไปภายหน้าอย่าซื้อเจ้าภิกขุและสามเณรวัดใหญ่วัดน้อยทั้งมวล ...อันหนึ่งอย่าหื้อได้หัดสอนกันนุ่งผ้า กะคอง ผ้าหื้อดงามคาด กาวลแฉวใส่อังสะ ชุตนทั้งภิกขุและสามเณร อย่าได้ป่วยต้น (เปลื้องผ้า) ป่วยทั่ว ไปตามบ้าน ไปเรือน เมื่อชู้ดเวลากาละเมื่อค่ำเมื่อคืนอย่าได้ ตีตีเพียะ ตีกลอง ชะ กลองหน้าเดียว เป่าปี่ ยิ่งขอ คาดหัว เฟดมา ำให้ร้องและเหาะหยอกแม่ร้างนางสาว แฉวปาล้าง อยู่ประตูละทอน้ำ อย่ากระท าชะปะหากินและกินเหล้า กินเข้าแลง เหน็บดอกไม้ และทื่อท้อต่างลานหุ ถือมิดปลายเหลียมและพรว้าแวง... จาริกลำดับต่อมาคือโอวาทานุศาสน์จุลศักราช 1219 ตรงกับพุทธศักราช 2400 มีใจความที่เป็นอาญาสำคัญให้ถือปฏิบัติโดยพร้อมเพรียงกัน โดยห้ามมิให้ชายหนุ่มนำพิณเปี้ยะ เข้าไปเล่นในวัดอัน....”

In the passage, the king describes actions inappropriate for novices, including playing the *phin phia* or other instruments. The *phin phia* was prohibited in the temple, as a potential distraction. Monks themselves were also prohibited from playing the *phin phia*.

Paitoon Dokbuakaew (2000) mentioned the passage in his poem titled “U-sabaros” in a Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok temple version. The poem has 546 chapters with the pseudonym *Sansurin*. The year of composition was unknown but it was copied in 1838. *U-sabaros* was the literature from the King Kuen’s reign in the 13th century. It was widely known in the 15th century during the reign of King Tilokarat. He had *Tripitaka* sorted out at Wat Chet Yot temple and introduced the story of *U-sabaros* to the near kingdom such as the north-eastern Thailand region. There was a passage about the *phin phia* as follows:



“เอ็งกองตีกตีพิณพาดแก้ว	เกรงเกรง
มีแต่คนล่าเงา	แอ้วเหล้น
แม่ไฉนเสียงเพียะหมู่พิณเพลง	แกมขลุ่ย ก็มีเฮย
อวนแม่หมองหมอนเหมียง	ผ่อแล้วเล้งตาย”
เสียงเครง นั้นนา ยามตีกฆ้อง	พาดเคว้ง
แอ้วเหล้น ฝูงหมู่คนละเลง	ตรงเตงแกมขลุ่ย นั้นนา
เสียงเพะ หมู่พิณเพลง	แกมขลุ่ย นั้นนา
แม่มือพายน้ำหน้าให้	ทอดทิว”

Beside the literary evidence, there is archaeological evidence showing that the *phin* or zither was known in many Lanna communities. A mural painting was found in 1983 behind the Buddha image in the Chapel of Lai Hin temple which depicts some angels playing the zither, while others hold flowers and an offering. This could indicate that the zither was part of Buddha worship.

In Lamphun, there is an inscription from 1370 in the temple at Phra Yuen which tells a story of King Kuena of Lanna requesting that the high monk, Sumana from King Mahathammaracha I of Sukhothai, bring the Buddha's relic and introduce Langkawong Buddhism to the Hariphunchai kingdom. In the welcoming ceremony for the monk and the relic, the inscription is written as follows:

“ให้ถื่อกระทรวงข้าวตอกดอกไม้ได้เทียบ ตีพาทย์ดังพิณฆ้องกลอง ปี่สรโนพิสนญชัย
ทะเทียดกาหล แตรสังมัลย์ กังสดาล มรทงค์ดงเดือด เสียงเลิศ
เสียงก้อง อีกทั้งคนร้องให้อื้อดาสรท้านทั้งทั้งนครทริภุญชัย แล”

Noted. From <https://th.wikipedia.org>, 2022, <https://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/เครื่องดนตรีไทย>

(Translation) “There was an order to play the *phin* or zither and other musical instruments loudly all over the Hariphunchai kingdom.”

Montri Tramote (1955) said in Kradungtong magazine volume 18 that the *phia* or zither is a musical instrument with four strings. There were two types of *phia*. One is like the Cambodian gourd zither with its body made of gourd, and another type is made of a half coconut shell and attached to a long (75 cm) neck. The tip of the neck would be beautifully carved, usually with the shape of a Naga. The four strings would be attached from the tip of the neck and run down to the



body of the zither. The strings were placed in the order of the pitch. When the musicians plucked the strings, they would put the body of the zither on the chest and move while playing in order to make the desired sound. The method of playing the *phia* is the same as playing the gourd zither. The gourd zither has only one string but the *phia* has from two to seven strings, so the *phia* can produce a more varied musical dynamic. Another type of *phia* was made of wood with a flat shape about ten centimetres wide. The instrument was connected to a resonator similar to that of an Indian zither. The body and neck were beautifully decorated.

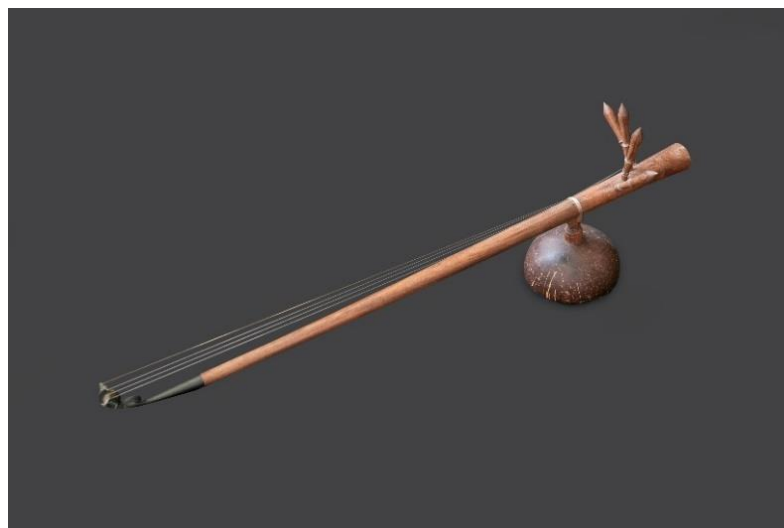
Phia is the traditional musical instrument of Northern Thailand, but not many know how to play it today. It is assumed that the musical instrument that appeared in the Lan Xang Chronicle called “pia” is the same as *phin phia*.

Furthermore, a gourd zither called the *khse mhoy* was found in the southern part of north-eastern Thailand. These musical instruments have a shape similar to a bow which is connected to a resonator made of a gourd half. Above the resonator is the tuning peg. On the tip of the neck, there is a carving in the shape of a Naga. The string would have been tied from the tuning pegs to the tip of the neck. The length of the *khse mhoy* is 100 centimetres.

Figure 14 Kuntrum musician play the music before Prince Damrong Rajanubhab

Noted. From <https://communityarchive.sac.or.th>, by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2020,
https://communityarchive.sac.or.th/community/SurinPhotoGallery/search?media_type=picture&keyword=กันตรึม

Figure 15 *Phin phia*



Noted. From <https://www.sac.or.th>, Author Tanwadee Sukprasert published by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2021, https://www.sac.or.th/databases/traditional-objects/th/equipment-detail.php?ob_id=260

The *phia* is a plucking musical instrument with four strings. There are two types of *phia*. The first is similar to the Cambodian gourd zither. The second is the *phin phia*, with a body made from a half coconut shell and a long (75 cm) neck. The tip of the neck would be carved into beautiful shapes like a Naga. The four strings will run through the body and be put into the order of the pitch. When the musicians plucked the strings, they would hold the body of the zither against the chest and move while playing to make the desired sound.

The method of playing the *phia* is the same as playing the gourd zither. The gourd zither has only one string but the *phin phia* has two to seven strings, so the *phia* can produce a more varied sound. Another type of *phia* is made of wood. The shape is flat and about 10 cm wide. The instrument was attached to the resonator, which looks like the Indian zither. The body and the neck are beautifully decorated. The *phia* is the traditional musical instrument of Northern Thailand. Not many can play the *phia* today. It was assumed that the musical instrument that appeared in Lan Xang Chronicle named “*pia*” was the same as the *phin phia*.

“เมื่อนั้นพระยาแสนหลวง จึงให้ ศรีคันทัพพะเทวดา ลงมาบอกสอนคนทั้งเมือง
ให้เฝ้าฆ้องกลองกรับแจแวงปี่พาทย์ สอนเพียะเพลงกลอน”

In this passage, Phaya Tan told the angels to teach people how to play the *phia* and other musical instruments.



The *phin phia* was normally called the *phia* in northern Thailand. There can be no word “*phin*” before the word “*phia*”. It is Lanna’s plucking instrument, like the gourd zither, and can be played with two, three, four or seven strings. The body is made of a coconut shell attached to a one-meter-long neck. The neck is made of a hardwood like Rosewood. The tip of the neck is bent and covered with a metal sheet. There are tuning pegs which are about 18 centimetres long. The tip of the *phin phia* is carved or cast into different shapes like a peacock, elephant, or Hadsadiling (a mystical bird according to the beliefs of the Lanna kingdom). The string would run from the tip of the neck through the body.

Figure 16 The tip of the *Phin Phia* carved in different shapes



Noted. From Chumbhot–Pantip nonprofit organization, (n.d.) Chumbhot–Pantip (<http://www.chumbhot-pantip.org/web/index.php?f=pinpia02>)

The string of the *phin phia* was made of bronze smaller than the *khim*’s string or the brake wire from a bicycle. Today, guitar strings are typically used. The traditional string was tied to the pegs and ran down the body of the *phia* with a notch to secure it. A tying string made of cow tendon or the string from a fiddle was used to fasten together the strings, neck, and body. A small bamboo stick was used to tighten the tying string connecting the various parts of the *phin phia*. The resonator consisted of half a coconut shell that had been sanded smooth. The shell should not be so thin as to be easily broken, nor too large or small, because the size affects the sound of the *phin phia*.



One hole was drilled in the shell to make a sound when the coconut shell was held close to the musician's chest.

The final component of the *phin phia* is the tying string, which braces the second to fourth strings, not including the main strings. The tying string gives the *phin phia* a higher pitch, although its tension must not be so tight as to break the tip of the *phin phia*'s neck. The tying string also makes one string has two sounds.

The musicians normally do not wear a shirt when they play. They would put the body of the *phin phia* against the left side of the chest and point the tip of the *phin phia* down. On the right hand, they would use the nail of the fifth finger to pluck the string and the left-hand index finger to press the string to make a sound. While they pluck the *phin phia*, they would move the body of the *phin phia* to resonate the sound as desired.

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