

Southeast Asia as a Cultural Cluster

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Southeast Asia shows diversity in livelihood, occupational types, ethnicity, religion, and other cultural aspects, conditioned by their historical, social and environmental specificities. It is divided into insular and inland regions, each of which has fostered particular multiple heritages. Each region, society, and people has also developed a unique music culture according to its traditional style or aesthetic.

The music cultures of Southeast Asia can be divided into four groups: 1) urban classical music culture, which has been influenced by successive ruling families or dynasties; 2) rural agrarian or mountainous folkloric music culture; 3) music culture of tribal peoples; and 4) popular music culture based on the information-oriented global society. These types of music culture have influenced each other and continued to transform for many decades.

Southeast Asian music culture has also been influenced by the various adjoining cultures, especially that of distinct major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, as well as of minor local beliefs and folklores by means of ceremonial custom or esoteric religious music. Regional factors cannot be separated from the characteristics of their music.

Despite the diverse sources of influence, Southeast Asia has some common characteristics. From the global point of view, these districts could be conceptualized as a cultural cluster. The first characteristic is that of musical instruments. *Dong Son* culture flowered with typical bronze ware in northern Vietnam before the time of Christ. This culture expanded as far as insular Southeast Asia, only to produce various types of metallic instruments. Copper drums (*dho-ko*) are now found in large quantity as a material heritage in the interior, but are rarely considered as having been used as musical instruments. However, gongs of various shapes and sizes are used across an extremely wide area of Southeast Asia. Iron xylophones follow gongs in quantity. The variety of instruments made of bamboo, such as bamboo flutes, oboes, and *khen*, is another characteristic feature of these districts. This is unsurprising, as the vegetation of subtropical rainy forests and riverside is suitable for supplying a variety of bamboo materials.

The second characteristic is seen in the music ensemble format. Under the influence of dynastic culture, the ensemble format has been very popular for musical performance. The size of the ensemble (or the number of instruments used) may vary, but the types of instruments used are almost the same. Generally speaking, in rural-agricultural regions, traditional ensembles involve a large number of instruments

and players. In contrast, in mountainous districts or in small-scale agrarian localities, we often find smaller ensembles with similar kinds of instruments to those common on the plains.

Thirdly, ancient Indian influences are noticeable in every aspect of culture. In particular, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the two great Indian epic tales, have helped to create cultural bonds throughout South and Southeast Asia: a cultural cluster. Their wide-ranging influence has affected not only music and dance but also art, crafts, and sculpture as well as local literature. With many variations and diversity in the character's names, vocabularies, designs, and styles, Southeast Asia has over hundreds of years developed unique variations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Prominently expressive body movements are especially discernible in dance, not only of humans but of puppets. The Asian body may well symbolize Asian mentality as well.

Finally, Asian popular music has displayed a remarkably positive acceptance of traditional elements: epic themes, classical lyrics, musical style, and form. Their fusion with rock music, for example, could be said to produce the characteristic style of Asian pop music. This trend may provide a practical suggestion as to the future of Southeast Asian culture.