

Shadow Puppetry and Thai Politics: Power, Humor, and the Art of Political Satire in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Nang Talung, the traditional shadow puppet theater of Southern Thailand, has evolved from a medium of entertainment and moral instruction into a platform for political criticism and social commentary. This study examines the art form's historical and contemporary role in amplifying marginalized voices, focusing on the works of pioneering puppeteers such as Nang Mun Nui, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Nang Phrom Noi, and contemporary master Nang Nong Deaw. Employing James C. Scott's concept of Everyday Resistance and theories on humor as a political tool, the research explores how contemporary *Nang Talung* in the Southern region criticizes existing power structures through allegory, satire, and clown characters that articulate societal grievances while avoiding confrontation. Analysis of archival performances and digital media reveals a shift from traditional poetic storytelling to humor-centric narratives, exemplified by Nang Nong Deaw's innovative use of satire and digital platforms to address local and national issues. These performances highlight contemporary *Nang Talung*'s adaptability, preserving cultural traditions while engaging modern audiences through political discourse. By blending humor and social criticism, *Nang Talung* continues to serve as a dynamic medium for discontent, reflecting the resilience and agency of rural communities in navigating social inequities.

Keywords: *Nang Talung*, Southern Thai shadow puppetry, Humor and resistance, Everyday resistance

Introduction

Nang Talung, the traditional shadow puppet theater of Southern Thailand, has long been a cornerstone of the region's cultural heritage. Originally conceived as a form of entertainment and moral instruction, it has evolved into a multifaceted medium that addresses societal issues and amplifies the voices of rural communities. Beyond its artistic value, *Nang Talung* has been a platform for engaging with critical social and political challenges, including corruption, social inequalities, and governance failures (Green, 2018, p. 68). This adaptability has allowed the art form to remain relevant, reflecting and responding to the shifting dynamics of Southern Thai society.

This research article investigates the contemporary political and social criticism embodied in the

performances of Nang Nong Deaw—a modern *Nai Nang Talung* (shadow puppet master) whose innovative use of humor and satire has garnered significant attention locally and nationally. Moreover, it also explores the historical roots of modern Thai puppeteers in the Southern region through Nang Mun Nui, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, and Nang Phrom Noi. These pioneers transformed *Nang Talung* into a medium for political engagement, using Southern Thai allegory and humor to critique systemic injustices and amplify marginalized voices. Their legacy provides a foundation for understanding the ongoing evolution of *Nang Talung* as a tool for social commentary and resistance.

The selection of these four *Nai Nang Talung*—Nang Mun Nui, Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Nang Phrom Noi, and Nang Nong Deaw—as representatives of *Nang Talung*'s political and social critique is based on their distinct ideological orientations and prominence in shaping contemporary political shadow puppetry. These *Nai Nang* stand out for explicitly incorporating political themes and social commentary into their performances. Unlike other *Nang Talung* practitioners who focus primarily on entertainment and tradition, these figures actively critique governance, state policies, and social inequalities, making them central to understanding *Nang Talung* as a form of cultural resistance. Nang Mun Nui and Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong pioneered the integration of political satire into *Nang Talung*, shaping its trajectory as a medium for subversive discourse. Their narratives highlighted economic struggles, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and grassroots grievances, positioning their performances as reflections of rural realities in Southern Thailand. Nang Phrom Noi continued this tradition, refining allegory and humor to navigate political tensions while subtly challenging power structures. As a contemporary figure, Nang Nong Deaw represents the latest evolution of politically engaged *Nang Talung*. His performances sharply critique political affairs, government mismanagement, and socio-economic challenges. By leveraging digital platforms, he expands *Nang Talung*'s reach while maintaining its function as a tool for political expression. His integration of contemporary issues with traditional storytelling exemplifies *Nang Talung*'s resilience as an evolving cultural and political commentary form.

This research examines *Nang Talung*'s dual role as both a cultural artifact and a vehicle for political criticism. Through a qualitative analysis of historical performances and contemporary works, particularly those shared on digital platforms such as YouTube, it investigates how *Nang Talung* has adapted to changing societal conditions. By embedding political dissent within traditional narratives and humor, *Nang Talung*'s performances challenge authority in ways that resonate with rural audiences while avoiding direct confrontation. This study situates Nang Nong Deaw's work within this broader

historical and cultural context, illustrating how his performances build on and diverge from the approaches of his predecessors.

Ultimately, this article demonstrates how *Nang Talung* is a dynamic platform for fostering public discourse. Blending tradition with innovation exemplifies the resilience of cultural forms in addressing societal transformations and articulating the concerns of marginalized communities in Southern Thailand.

Literature review

A comprehensive review of research on *Nang Talung*

Research on *Nang Talung*, Southern Thailand's traditional shadow puppet theater, has been an enduring subject of academic inquiry among both Thai and international scholars. Since the 1980s, studies on *Nang Talung* can be categorized into three main groups: historical and developmental research, studies on political criticism, and analyses of its broader socio-cultural roles.

The first group focuses on the historical background and evolution of *Nang Talung*. Works such as those by Phongphaibun (1979), Koanantakool (1982), Vandergeest and Koanantakool (1993), Boosarat (2003), and Petchkaew (2003) explore the origins of *Nang Talung* and its transformation in response to social, cultural, economic, and technological changes. These studies emphasize the influence of modern media, such as radio, television, and film, on traditional performances.

Boosarat's (2003) analysis divides the evolution of *Nang Talung* into four key periods, reflecting its adaptability to socio-political and technological changes. The first, the "Era of Kerosene and Hurricane Lamps," from King Rama V's reign to the end of World War II, featured traditional formats illuminated by oil lamps, with narratives rooted in Buddhist teachings and mythological tales. The second, the "Era of Manual Electric Lighting" (post-war to the 1960s), saw the adoption of electric lighting, enhancing visual effects and allowing for contemporary social themes. The third, the "Era of Electric Sound Systems and Western Music" (late 1960s to early 1980s), introduced microphones, electric instruments, and improvisational political satire, turning

performances into large-scale spectacles. The final period, the “Era of Multimedia and Talk Show-Style Performances” (1980s onward), incorporated pre-recorded soundtracks, visual projections, and interactive discussions on socio-political issues.

Boosarat’s study underscores *Nang Talung*’s resilience as it bridges tradition and modernity, remaining a platform for entertainment and public discourse. Local scholars have often approached these studies emphasizing cultural preservation and identity reinforcement. This commitment culminated in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Thai Culture* (1986), a groundbreaking collaboration involving 221 scholars—primarily from Southern Thailand—who worked collectively to compile and preserve the region’s cultural heritage (Jory & Saengthong, 2020). This comprehensive reference work documents various aspects of Southern Thai traditions, language, rituals, and performing arts, including *Nang Talung*. The encyclopedia serves as a cultural monument that reinforces the distinctiveness of Southern identity in response to growing concerns over cultural homogenization.

In contrast to local scholars who focus on cultural preservation and Southern Thai identity, international researchers such as Broman (1996) and Vandergeest and Koanantakool (1993) highlight *Nang Talung*’s adaptability in the face of modernization and its capacity for political expression. Broman’s *Shadows of Life: Nang Talung – Thai Popular Shadow Theatre* presents *Nang Talung* as a performance tradition that has evolved in response to modern cultural dynamics. Unlike local studies emphasizing the art form’s historical roots and efforts to preserve its authenticity, Broman’s analysis situates *Nang Talung* within a global context, comparing it to the Central Thai Nang Yai. He underscores its grassroots origins, fast-paced narratives, and vernacular humor, distinguishing it from the more formal and aristocratic Nang Yai. His interdisciplinary approach, enriched with 147 illustrations, examines how *nai nang* (puppet masters) and clown characters use humor and satire to critique social and political authority, demonstrating the art form’s resilience and relevance in contemporary society.

Similarly, Vandergeest and Koanantakool (1993) approach *Nang Talung* as a dynamic medium embedded in the historical and political transformations of Southern Thailand. Their study contrasts *Nang Talung* with Malaysian and Indonesian shadow play, emphasizing the unique, localized narratives that reflect rural socio-political concerns rather than Hindu epics. They identify three performance styles—modern, traditional, and ritualistic—and contextualize *Nang Talung* within Thailand’s shift from a feudal system to a centralized bureaucratic state. This transition, accompanied by formal education and the rise of print media, disrupted traditional storytelling practices. Despite these changes, they argue that *Nang Talung* has persisted as a space for communal expression and political critique.

However, Boosarat’s (2003) work emphasizes the preservation of cultural heritage, portraying *Nang Talung* as a cornerstone of Southern Thai identity. His research categorizes the evolution of *Nang Talung* into four historical periods, focusing on the technological and socio-economic shifts that influenced performance styles. While international scholars highlight the performative and political dimensions of *Nang Talung*, Boosarat foregrounds its role in sustaining regional identity amidst modernity. This divergence illustrates how local studies often prioritize cultural conservation, while international research frames *Nang Talung* as a living tradition capable of engaging with modern political discourse and reflecting socio-political tensions through satire and improvisation.

The second research group focuses on *Nang Talung*’s role in political criticism, emphasizing its function as a social commentary and political expression medium. Dowsey-Magog (1997) explains how *Nang Talung* evolved from rural entertainment into a platform for reflecting social realities. He highlights how puppeteers like Nang Narong captivate audiences with humor, improvisation, and timely references to contemporary events. These performances blend traditional storytelling with modern elements, such as electric instruments and dynamic sound effects, showcasing *Nang Talung*’s hybridity and ability to resonate with younger audiences. Integrating satire and real-time social commentary demonstrates *Nang Talung*’s

enduring role in challenging power structures and engaging with socio-political issues.

Johnson (2006) expands on this theme by analyzing the role of comedic clown characters, particularly Ai Theng, who serve as cultural intermediaries. These characters provide subversive social critiques through humor and satire, acting as voices for communal concerns. Johnson's analysis underscores how these performances assert Southern Thai identity and resist cultural homogenization by incorporating regional dialects, local references, and portrayals of Southern lifestyles. Despite their traditional roots, modern *Nang Talung* performances often reference consumer culture and political events, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape while maintaining the art form's core function of social criticism.

Among Thai scholars, Sutcharitpan's (2018) research offers a comprehensive examination of *Nang Talung*'s role in political communication during the politically tumultuous period from 2005 to 2015. His study emphasizes the dual roles of puppeteers as entertainers and grassroots media figures who convey socio-political messages to their audiences. Sutcharitpan's findings also reveal that contemporary *Nang Talung* performances often reflect conservative political perspectives. Some puppeteers openly supported the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the "Yellow Shirt" movement, framing their narratives around themes of national unity, anti-corruption, and resistance to populist agendas. This shift illustrates how the performers' personal beliefs and broader political currents shape *Nang Talung*'s role as a platform for political discourse. The performances of specific troupes criticized the Red Shirt movement, advocating for a non-violent resolution to political conflicts and emphasizing the importance of loyalty to the monarchy and national integrity. Sutcharitpan's work demonstrates how *Nang Talung* continues to serve as a cultural space for expressing dissent and support for prevailing socio-political ideologies, reinforcing its complexity as both a medium of resistance and an instrument for upholding conservative values.

The third research group focuses on *Nang Talung*'s socio-cultural roles, often supported by government research grants aimed at promoting education, public health, and community development. Vimuktanon's (1997) study investigates how *Nang Talung* was utilized by government agencies from 1995 to 1997 to disseminate public messages related to voter participation, health campaigns, and agricultural reforms. These performances integrated humor, local dialects, and cultural references to enhance public engagement, illustrating the adaptability of *Nang Talung* as a medium for public communication. The study underscores the resilience of puppet masters as cultural intermediaries who maintained cultural authenticity while conveying state-sponsored narratives.

Over the past three decades, research on *Nang Talung* has increasingly emphasized its function as cultural capital in Southern Thailand, particularly in public campaigns related to the sufficiency economy philosophy, health education, and community-based tourism initiatives. Many of these studies have been funded by government grants designed to support actionable outcomes for community development. This trend reflects the state's recognition of traditional performing arts as practical tools for fostering civic engagement and promoting economic sustainability.

Since the 1970s, the Thai government has prioritized tourism as a key economic strategy, viewing it as a low-capital-intensive revenue source compared to industrial sectors. This policy shift has influenced economic activities in southern and eastern regions, though its impact has been most significant in southwestern provinces. For example, Nakhon Si Thammarat, located in the heart of Southern Thailand, has diversified its tourism sector by enhancing travel infrastructure and cultural attractions to draw more visitors (Ruengmak & Dejpawuttikul, 2024). The integration of *Nang Talung* into cultural tourism programs underscores its dual role as both a cultural ambassador and a driver of regional economic development.

However, despite the growing body of research on *Nang Talung*'s contributions to public policy and regional development, there remains a significant gap in studies examining *Nang Talung* as a tool for grassroots political

resistance and everyday social criticism. While previous studies have highlighted its potential to reinforce cultural identity and disseminate state-led narratives, fewer have focused on how the art form operates as a subtle form of resistance and empowerment within local communities. This gap highlights the need to explore *Nang Talung's* evolving role in articulating communal concerns and fostering agency in the face of socio-political challenges further. Recent studies, such as Yuthong-Saeng-uthai's (2022), continue examining *Nang Talung's* historical development and transformation, updating previous research with new details and perspectives. However, the core narrative remains consistent with earlier studies, framing *Nang Talung* as a cultural symbol that embodies Southern Thai identity. Yuthong-Saeng-uthai's work, while comprehensive in tracing the literary and performative evolution of *Nang Talung*, reinforces its role as a repository of communal memory and cultural pride. The study outlines how *Nang Talung's* performances have adapted across three key eras. However, the primary focus is still on its function as a cultural expression rather than an active political tool.

The research by Peawchana et al. (2023) focuses on *Nang Talung's* role in promoting political morality within the constitutional monarchy framework. Their study emphasizes the puppeteers' role as civic educators who use storytelling, poetic verses, and humor to convey messages about political rights and responsibilities. Using clown characters as intermediaries makes complex socio-political content accessible and engaging for rural audiences. While this research acknowledges the capacity of *Nang Talung's* performances to foster civic engagement, it frames the performances within the broader context of cultural cohesion and education rather than as direct acts of political resistance.

Additionally, Peawchana et al. (2023) underscore how integrating local dialects and cultural references enhances audience relatability. However, their focus remains on *Nang Talung's* educational role rather than exploring instances of explicit political critique or grassroots resistance. Although pivotal in addressing social and political issues through satire, the clowns are

presented more as cultural representatives than political provocateurs.

Similarly, Sutcharitpan et al. (2021) highlight the adaptability of *Nang Talung* troupes in incorporating modern political narratives and digital platforms to sustain audience engagement. Their research demonstrates how puppeteers leverage digital tools and live streaming to maintain relevance while incorporating commentary on contemporary socio-political issues. Despite this, their analysis also aligns with the trend of emphasizing *Nang Talung's* cultural resilience and symbolic role in reinforcing community identity rather than positioning it as a primary platform for political dissent.

Previous research has extensively documented *Nang Talung's* historical development, cultural significance, and role as a medium for political and social commentary; this study offers a novel perspective by examining its function as a contemporary tool for everyday resistance (Scott, 1985). Earlier studies have primarily framed *Nang Talung* within the context of cultural preservation (Boosarat, 2003) or broader political transformations (Vandergeest & Koanantakool, 1993), emphasizing its role in sustaining Southern Thai identity rather than its function as an active site of resistance. This research moves beyond such perspectives by focusing on the performances of four politically engaged *Nai Nang Talung*—Nang Mun Nui, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Nang Phrom Noi, and Nang Nong Deaw—who have redefined *Nang Talung* as a platform for subtle resistance against systemic inequalities.

While existing scholarship acknowledges *Nang Talung's* engagement with political themes, prior research has primarily prioritized the biographical narratives of shadow puppet masters rather than examining the art form as a mechanism of direct political resistance. These studies often highlight the personal histories and artistic legacies of *Nai Nang Talung*, emphasizing their cultural contributions over their role in subverting power structures. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how *Nai Nang Talung* integrates humor, satire, and allegory to critique state authority while circumventing direct confrontation. Furthermore, unlike prior research that primarily examined live performances, this study situates

Nang Talung within contemporary digital media landscapes. By investigating how puppeteers, particularly Nang Nong Deaw, employ social media to extend their influence, this research highlights *Nang Talung*'s transformation into a hybrid form of cultural resistance that merges traditional performance, digital activism, and political satire. This study deepens the understanding of *Nang Talung*'s contemporary role in socio-political discourse and demonstrates its adaptability in response to shifting media environments and evolving forms of political expression. Unlike previous research, which largely framed *Nang Talung* within historical or preservationist narratives, this study foregrounds its dynamic role in contesting authority and amplifying marginalized voices within Thailand's changing socio-political landscape.

Theoretical perspectives on Nang Talung as a political tool

This study applies two complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze *Nang Talung* as a medium for political criticism: James C. Scott's concept of *Everyday Resistance* and the notion of *Humor as a Political Tool*. These frameworks provide critical insights into how marginalized groups utilize subtle and symbolic strategies to challenge authority and address societal issues while remaining embedded in cultural traditions. Together, they illuminate how cultural expressions like *Nang Talung* operate as vehicles for resistance and social commentary, blending tradition with contemporary criticism.

Everyday resistance in the lives of common people

James C. Scott's foundational works, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) and *Resistance Without Protest and Without Organization* (1987), offer a profound framework for understanding the nuanced and non-confrontational methods through which marginalized groups contest systems of power. These studies explore how individuals and communities deploy subtle acts of resistance that, while lacking overt revolutionary action, collectively undermine oppressive structures over time.

In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), Scott examines the lived experiences of Malaysian peasants, illustrating how they resisted domination through everyday acts such as reducing productivity, feigned ignorance, covert disobedience, and minor theft. These actions, which Scott terms "weapons of the weak," are neither organized nor openly confrontational. Instead, they represent incremental strategies to mitigate immediate exploitation and preserve autonomy within a broader economic and social inequality system. Scott emphasizes that these forms of resistance, although seemingly insignificant, accumulate to erode the legitimacy of oppressive systems over time. They reflect a pragmatic adaptation to systemic injustice rather than an attempt to radically overthrow existing power structures (Scott, 1985, pp. 29-35).

Similarly, *Resistance Without Protest and Without Organization* (1987) delves into the symbolic dimensions of resistance. Scott underscores how cultural practices—such as humor, satire, and storytelling—serve as subtle yet powerful tools for dissent. These symbolic acts often subvert dominant ideologies by exposing their contradictions and limitations. Storytelling, in particular, becomes a medium for marginalized voices to criticize authority in a manner that avoids confrontation. By embedding satire and allegory within narratives, these acts leverage cultural familiarity and anonymity, making them difficult for authorities to suppress (Scott, 1987, pp. 419-425).

Scott's "hidden transcripts" concept further illustrates how individuals and communities resist domination within private or informal spaces. These hidden transcripts—manifested in gossip, satire, and coded language—provide a means for expressing grievances and challenging authority indirectly. For example, Scott's analysis of Malaysian peasants reveals how subversive humor and informal dialogue criticism of landowners and officials allow for resistance without provoking direct retaliation. This indirect approach fosters a sense of agency among the oppressed while minimizing the risks associated with overt defiance (Scott, 1985, pp. 136-140).

The principles outlined by Scott resonate deeply with the practices of *Nang Talung* puppeteers in Southern

Thailand. Like the peasants in Scott's studies, *Nang Talung* artists employ storytelling, humor, and satire as instruments of subtle resistance. *Nang Talung* is a "hidden transcript" that criticizes systemic inequalities while circumventing confrontation by embedding criticism of social injustices and political corruption within allegorical performances. Clown characters, a central feature of *Nang Talung*, often serve as the voice of ordinary people, articulating their frustrations and grievances in a humorous yet incisive manner. This aligns closely with Scott's assertion that symbolic resistance can erode the ideological foundations of power structures over time (Smithies & Euayporn, 1972, p. 385).

The evolution of *Nang Talung* further underscores Scott's observation that resistance adapts to shifting socio-economic and political conditions. For example, puppeteers such as Nang Nong Deaw have innovated their art to address contemporary challenges, from economic disparities to political inefficiencies. Nang Nong Deaw, in particular, has utilized digital platforms to amplify his criticism, thereby expanding the reach and impact of *Nang Talung* as a medium for resistance. This adaptability reflects the dynamic nature of everyday resistance, demonstrating its capacity to persist and evolve in response to changing contexts.

Moreover, Scott's analysis of resistance through cultural forms highlights the transformative potential of storytelling and humor. In the case of *Nang Talung*, these elements are not merely entertainment tools but serve as mechanisms for fostering public discourse and challenging dominant narratives. The allegorical narratives performed by *Nang Talung* puppeteers allow for articulating collective grievances in ways that resonate deeply with audiences, reinforcing a shared sense of agency and resilience.

In conclusion, Scott's conceptualization of everyday resistance provides a valuable lens for analyzing the interplay between cultural practices and systemic criticism. His work illuminates how subtle acts of defiance embedded within the fabric of daily life can undermine oppressive systems and foster resilience among marginalized communities. The enduring relevance of these principles is evident in the art of *Nang*

Talung, where humor, allegory, and satire continue to serve as powerful tools for social criticism and resistance in contemporary Thailand.

Humor as a political tool

Humor serves as a powerful mechanism for political and social commentary, offering a means to challenge authority while engaging audiences in a non-confrontational manner. As Sombatpoonsiri (2015) explains, humor in resistance operates as both a "safety valve" for releasing societal frustrations and a subversive tool that undermines the legitimacy of authority. By mimicking and exaggerating dominant narratives, humor exposes contradictions in power structures and encourages audiences to question ingrained values. While satirical performances often articulate discontent, they also provide emotional relief, allowing criticism to be expressed within socially acceptable boundaries (Sombatpoonsiri, 2015, pp. 41-52). This dual function of humor is vividly exemplified in *Nang Talung*, Southern Thailand's traditional shadow puppetry.

Its clown characters are central to *Nang Talung*'s role in political criticism, who act as cultural intermediaries and agents of resistance. Characters such as Teng and Nu Nui embody contrasting traits that resonate deeply with rural audiences. Teng, with his sharp wit and unfiltered criticism, voices the frustrations of marginalized communities, making him a symbol of resilience. In contrast, Nu Nui's naivety and submissiveness highlight power structures' absurdities, adding depth to the humor and reinforcing the criticism. Delivered in the Southern Thai dialect, their dialogues are entertaining and relatable, offering audiences a lens through which to reflect on societal grievances.

The function of humor in *Nang Talung* aligns with Scott's (1987) concept of everyday resistance, emphasizing subtle and decentralized acts of defiance. Much like Malaysian peasants resisting authority through covert actions such as tax evasion or feigned ignorance, *Nang Talung*'s clowns criticize societal inequalities and question power's legitimacy through humor. This symbolic resistance avoids confrontation, allowing criticism to remain impactful without provoking

retaliation. As Scott (1987) observes, cultural practices like storytelling and humor are essential for subverting dominant ideologies while reducing participant risks (pp. 419-425).

Moreover, *Nang Talung's* humor reflects the cultural identity of Southern Thailand, where directness, self-reliance, and dignity are deeply valued traits (Boosarat, 2003, p. 128). Clowns like Teng embody these characteristics through candid criticism, targeting bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and social inequities. By transforming complex political issues into digestible narratives, *Nang Talung* engages audiences in a way that blends regional identity with meaningful societal criticism.

Nang Talung's humor also preserves local histories and cultural narratives, merging folklore with contemporary issues. Clown characters serve as living archives, recounting stories that combine myth with reality and reflect the shifting dynamics of rural communities. Vandergeest and Koanantakool (1993) highlight that *Nang Talung* creates a space for political expression, significantly when overt dissent is suppressed, using humor to navigate the boundaries of acceptable criticism (pp. 314-321). This ability to question authority and highlight systemic inequalities ensures its relevance in the socio-political discourse of its audience.

In conclusion, humor in *Nang Talung* is a vital tool that enables puppeteers to address societal issues while preserving the art form's traditional roots. Through their satirical dialogues, clowns bridge historical narratives with contemporary realities, transforming *Nang Talung* into a platform for public discourse. By critiquing power structures and engaging audiences, *Nang Talung* exemplifies how traditional art forms can adapt to inspire reflection, resilience, and resistance in an ever-changing world.

Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the socio-political narratives embedded in *Nang Talung's* performances. Data collection is based on two key sources. The first involves recorded live performances accessed from digital platforms such as YouTube,

encompassing contemporary shows and archival recordings of past masters. These performances, featuring renowned puppeteers like Nang Mun Nui, Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Promnoi Talung Sakon, and Nong Deaw Lukthung Wattanatham, illustrate how humor, allegory, and socio-political critique are used to engage audiences and reflect public sentiment. The second data source comprises academic research, journal articles, news reports, and interviews from Thai and international publications. These documents provide historical and cultural context, enriching the analysis of *Nang Talung's* evolving role in public discourse.

To ensure a well-defined scope, this study examines archival recordings, live performances, and digital broadcasts on YouTube to analyze the political and social critique embedded in *Nang Talung* performances. The research incorporates both previously documented *Nang Talung* scripts from academic studies and video recordings of live performances on digital platforms.

The selection includes four politically engaged *Nai Nang Talung*, focusing on a total of 24 performances, categorized as follows:

1. Nang Mun Nui – Analysis of four recorded performances:
 - *Rachini Ban Na* (The Village Queen)
 - *Banlang Wipyok* (The Devastated Throne)
 - *Nang Mun Nui Chut Ha Tem Phikad* (Nang Mun Nui: Full-Throttle Comedy Edition)
 - *Thewada Prakasit* (The Deity's Decree)
2. Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong – Study of five recorded performances, namely:
 - *Sai Lueat Thi Lai Klap Ma* (The Returning Bloodline)
 - *Phaendin Dueat* (The Scorched Land)
 - *Phu Phithak Santirat* (The Guardian of the People)
 - *Saeng Thian Khunatham* (The Candlelight of Virtue)
 - *Apinihan Thewarup* (The Miracle of the Sacred Statue)
3. Nang Phrom Noi, Talung Sakon – Examination of five performances, including:
 - *Namjai Phra Raja, Nam Ta Khon Yak* (The King's Compassion and the Tears of the Poor)

- *Fah Lom Din* (Heaven Embraces the Earth)
- *Awut Tham* (The Weapon of Dharma)
- *Khu Rak Khu Khaen* (Lovers and Rivals)
- *Bora Phet Wan, Nam Tan Khom* (The Bitter

Sweetness of Life)

4. Nang Nong Deaw – Analysis of ten performances from 2018 onwards, under the government of General Prayut Chan-o-cha, which include:

- *Thepbut Chamlaeng* (The Disguised Deity)
- *Yodthong Da Ruk Tid Khuk Thaksin* (Yodthong's Verbal Attack on Thaksin's Imprisonment)

- *Rak Kham Phop* (Love Across Eras)

- *Thang Rak Phithak Tham* (The Path of Love and Righteousness)

- *Sao Ngam Sam Phraya* (The Three Princes' Beautiful Maiden)

- *Yodthong Chamnarn Thaeng* (Yodthong, the Master of Combat)

- *Ruam Talok Nang Talung Nong Deaw* (A Compilation of Nang Nong Deaw's Best Comedy Moments)

- *Ha Dai Rueang Muk Kan Muang* (Laughing Through Political Jokes)

- *Muk Kan Muang Than Yuk Nuk Yao Pai* (Timely Political Humor for Endless Fun)

- *Kamphaeng Sakkadinna* (The Wall of Feudalism)

This selection ensures a comprehensive examination of *Nang Talung's* evolution as a medium for socio-political commentary, particularly in the context of humor, satire, and everyday resistance. By incorporating performances from different generations of *Nai Nang Talung*, the study provides a comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary narratives, assessing how *Nang Talung* critiques power structures while maintaining its cultural and entertainment functions.

Data analysis focuses on narrative and content analysis, examining storytelling structures, humor, and dialogues within performances. The study pays special attention to socio-linguistic strategies, such as using Southern Thai dialects, to highlight how local expressions enhance audience engagement. Satire, political symbolism, and moral critique are examined to understand how *Nang Talung* challenges authority through cultural

narratives. This approach underscores *Nang Talung's* dual role as a traditional art form and a medium for resistance. By preserving its narrative essence while adapting to digital platforms, *Nang Talung* remains a cultural tool transforming serious socio-political issues into accessible, humorous narratives, fostering reflection and critique across generations.

A brief history of *Nang Talung* in southern Thailand

Nang Talung occupies a significant place in Southeast Asia's cultural heritage. Scholars trace its origins to regional traditions such as Indonesia's *Wayang Kulit* and Malaysia's *Wayang Kulit Siam*, highlighting the historical exchanges that have shaped interconnected puppetry traditions across the region (Lim, 2013, p. 3; Smithies & Euayporn, 1972, p. 380). Despite distinct local adaptations, these forms share a common cultural lineage, underscoring the dynamic interplay between regional influences.

Possibly, *Nang Talung* originated in Phatthalung Province. Historical records from 1826 describe shadow puppetry performances introduced to Bangkok as "*Nang Phatthalung*", a term later simplified to "*Nang Talung*". The word *nang* refers to the leather material used to craft the puppets, while *talung* is believed to derive from Phatthalung, traditionally regarded as the birthplace of this art form (Nawigamune, 1987, p. 88; Smithies & Euayporn, 1972, p. 380).

The official record of *Nang Talung* suggests that it emerged during King Rama V. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's records on *The Panji Tales* (or *Inao Play*) document how villagers in Phatthalung adapted shadow puppetry from Javanese traditions. This adaptation gained prominence during Rama V's reign, as evidenced in the *Memoirs of the Southern Provinces* (1909), which describes its performance in Southern Thailand. A tax reform decree issued on March 1, 1892, further legitimized *Nang Talung* by including it alongside Thai classical dance-drama forms like *Khon* and *Lakorn*, marking its official recognition during this period (Nawigamune, 1987, p. 99; Pongpaiboon, 1979, p. 25).

The evolution of *Nang Talung* reflects broader cultural exchanges within Southeast Asia. Puppets from Phatthalung have appeared in international collections such as the British Museum and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, showcasing cross-cultural interactions that have enriched shadow puppetry traditions (Green, 2018, pp. 60, 70; Chareondej, 2002, p. 53). Initially, performances centered on royal and supernatural themes drawn from epics like the *Ramakian* (Thailand's adaptation of the *Ramayana*). These narratives emphasized cosmic justice and moral virtue, with noble protagonists gaining supernatural merit to triumph over demons (Koanantakool, 1982; Vandergeest, 1993, p. 147).

Over time, *Nang Talung* adapted to reflect changing societal values. Stories rooted in the *Ramakian* were gradually replaced by localized folk tales and original compositions crafted by puppet masters. These modern narratives often addressed contemporary social issues and resonated with local audiences. Puppet masters began integrating humor and subtle criticism of social norms, marking a significant shift in the art form's thematic focus (Koanantakool, 1982). Despite evolving narratives, certain stylistic elements remain central to *Nang Talung*. Heroic protagonists continue to embody moral ideals, while comedic clown figures provide humor and serve as vehicles for social commentary. This dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation has enabled *Nang Talung* to maintain cultural relevance (Phetkaew, 2003; Koanantakool, 1989, pp. 31-34). The rise of modern entertainment media, including radio, television, and films, since the late 1960s has posed challenges to traditional performance arts like *Nang Talung*. By the 1970s, innovations such as incorporating Western musical instruments by the "Nang Promnoi Talung Sakon" troupe blended traditional elements with contemporary styles, creating a hybrid form known as *Talung Sakon*. This fusion appealed to modern audiences but departed from traditional practices (Narongrach & Kaewthep, 2008).

Although the popularity of *Nang Talung* has declined due to competition from modern entertainment, its adaptability remains remarkable. By integrating contemporary themes and innovative techniques, the art

form balances preservation with modernization, ensuring its relevance in a rapidly changing cultural landscape (Boosarat, 2003, p. 12; Phetkaew, 2003).

Nang Talung as a medium for political and social criticism

Nang Talung, the traditional shadow puppet theater of Southern Thailand, has evolved significantly from rural entertainment to a potent platform for cultural expression, social commentary, and political criticism. Deeply embedded in the cultural traditions of the South, *Nang Talung*'s performances employ humor, satire, and allegory to highlight societal concerns such as corruption, inequality, and abuses of power. Central to these narratives are the clown characters, who personify the voice of ordinary people and function as incisive yet non-confrontational criticism of societal norms and political authority (Lim, 2013, p. 6; Smithies & Euayporn, 1972, p. 385). This transformation aligns with broader socio-political shifts in Thailand, particularly during the politically volatile period from 1973 to 1976, when explicit criticism of government actions became more prominent. Terms such as "political shadow puppetry" and "shadow puppetry for the people" emerged, underscoring *Nang Talung*'s role as a medium for amplifying the voices of marginalized rural communities.

Prominent puppeteers, such as Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Nang Mun Nui from Trang Province, and Nang Promnoi Talung Sakon from Phatthalung Province, skillfully integrated political commentary into their performances, employing traditional storytelling as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance against authoritarian regimes. Dowsey-Magog (2002) emphasizes the role of clown characters like Yodthong and Si Kaew, who embody the everyday individual and use satire to criticize elite figures while articulating communal grievances (p. 186). These characters transform the performance space into a "people's stage," where social frustrations and concerns are voiced openly (p. 187). During the 1970s, performances became so politically charged that the Thai government imposed censorship due to their resonance with the grievances of farmers and laborers (pp. 185-186). Despite these restrictions,

puppeteers adapted their craft by incorporating electric instruments, contemporary humor, and popular songs to appeal to younger audiences (pp. 190-191).

The thematic adaptability of *Nang Talung* aligns with Eoseewong's (2020) analysis of Southern Thai literature, which often presents resistance through allegorical storytelling. Unlike royal court narratives from Central Thailand that glorify monarchy and state authority, Southern Thai narratives frequently depict protagonists who seek autonomy and knowledge beyond the state's boundaries. This reflects a conception of the state as a utilitarian entity centered around agricultural production rather than cultural or intellectual leadership. Similarly, the clown characters in *Nang Talung* serve as moral commentators, criticize corrupt rulers, and reinforce a cultural ethos that prioritizes communal values and personal accountability over hierarchical authority. This thematic pattern reflects the cultural ethos of Southern Thailand, where personal relationships and moral accountability are prioritized over the formal structures of power.

The linguistic practices in *Nang Talung's* performances also reflect broader socio-political changes. Traditionally performed in the Southern Thai dialect, puppeteers began incorporating Central Thai for characters of higher social standing, such as royalty and heroes. This shift, pioneered by puppeteer Kan Thonglor, mirrored the growing centralization of governance and the imposition of standard Thai as the national language (Boosarat, 2004). While this linguistic adaptation increased the accessibility of performances to broader audiences, it also highlighted the tension between local identities and national integration.

Nang Talung's socio-political role parallels Indonesia's *wayang kulit* during Suharto's authoritarian regime. Shadow puppetry in Indonesia was used as a tool for state propaganda and as a medium for subversive satire (Jirattikorn, 2001). In both traditions, performers used humor and allegory to expose contradictions within official narratives, creating spaces for critical discourse among rural communities. By the 1990s, *Nang Talung* had incorporated puppets representing prominent political figures, such as Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda and

Major General Chamlong Srimuang, further emphasizing its function as a mirror of contemporary socio-political realities (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 4; Boosarat, 2004, p. 224).

Dowsey-Magog (2002) further underscores the significance of live improvisation in *Nang Talung* performances, noting that puppeteers often tailor their dialogues to reference current events and local issues. This improvisation enhances audience engagement and enables timely socio-political commentary. The hybridization of musical arrangements—combining traditional instruments with modern electric sounds—illustrates *Nang Talung's* ability to modernize while maintaining its cultural essence. Such innovations have allowed *Nang Talung* to remain relevant as an entertainment form and a platform for cultural criticism. While historical *Nang Talung* narratives often centered on Buddhist teachings and communal ethics, modern performances have integrated more diverse themes, including romantic subplots and humorous depictions of rural life. Dowsey-Magog (1997) observes that explicit political satire has become less frequent due to concerns about censorship and evolving audience expectations in rural areas. Nonetheless, *Nang Talung* continues to address contemporary socio-economic challenges, such as inflation and rural hardship, using metaphor and humor to engage audiences and sustain their interest.

The adaptability of *Nang Talung* underscores its resilience as a living cultural artifact that bridges tradition and modernity. *Nang Talung* reflects Southern Thai communities' aspirations, anxieties, and moral values by weaving together allegory, humor, and contemporary references. The continued relevance of this art form attests to the dynamic role of folk performances in fostering social reflection and resisting cultural homogenization amid socio-political change. In this sense, *Nang Talung* exemplifies the power of traditional art forms to serve as enduring platforms for cultural identity, communal discourse, and social resilience.

Nang Mun Nui: A pioneer of political Nang Talung in southern Thailand

Nang Mun Nui, a celebrated *Nai Nang Talung* (shadow puppet master) from Southern Thailand, exemplifies the transformative power of folk art as a medium for political expression and societal criticism. Born into a poor farming family in Trang Province, Nang Mun Nui experienced systemic exploitation by state officials and local elites. These formative experiences shaped his artistic vision, driving him to use *Nang Talung* to address social injustice, corruption, and abuse of power. He began his career in 1916 and rose to fame in 1956, captivating audiences across Southern Thailand, Bangkok, and Malaysia. Earning up to 1,200 baht per performance—a considerable sum at the time—his prominence extended beyond his artistry to influence political and cultural discourse. His legacy was further solidified by his mentorship of successors like Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, who also became a prominent figure in political *Nang Talung* (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 6). His work evolved in tandem with his political engagement. Initially aligned with democratic ideals and the Democrat Party, his narratives later reflected socialist ideologies, culminating in his involvement with the Socialist Party of Thailand. Though he never secured a parliamentary seat, he remained a political force, using *Nang Talung* to critique government policies and advocate for the rural poor. His performances frequently incorporated material from contemporary political discourse, drawing on sources like Thai Rath and leftist publications (Suksong, 2007, pp. 46-58).

His creativity extended to crafting unique characters and incorporating figures like Mao Zedong into his performances. These allegorical representations embodied socialist principles and criticized state ideologies, effectively blending artistry with political advocacy. During his affiliation with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), Nang Mun Nui used *Nang Talung* as a tool for mobilization, embedding the party's ideologies into every aspect of his performances. Despite leaving the CPT, he collaborated with state initiatives to counter communist narratives, using *Nang Talung* to promote

democratic values and national unity in rural areas (Suksong, 2007, pp. 61-68, 80).

In 1969, Nang Mun Nui demonstrated the potential of *Nang Talung* as a medium for grassroots political engagement by supporting Chuan Leekpai, a young politician from Trang Province. Through his performances, he endorsed Chuan's candidacy while creating opportunities for direct interaction between political leaders and rural communities. This innovative strategy became a model for political campaigns across Southern Thailand. By the 1970s, Nang Mun Nui's embrace of socialist ideologies had fully transformed his performances into platforms for political education and criticism. Even after facing electoral defeats, he remained dedicated to addressing pressing societal issues through his art, criticizing corruption, empowering marginalized communities, and promoting political consciousness. The political turmoil of the 1970s, including the October 14, 1973 uprising, intensified his focus on political themes. Nang Mun Nui's performances became increasingly pointed, addressing local and national issues. His ability to adapt his narratives to shifting political contexts while maintaining the traditional essence of *Nang Talung* underscored the resilience and relevance of this art form. His work seamlessly blended entertainment with critical engagement, inspiring new puppeteers to view *Nang Talung* as an artistic tradition and a platform for resistance and societal reform (Suksong, 2007, pp. 68-80).

An illustrative example is *Balang Vipayok* (The Devastated Throne), where Nang Mun Nui critiques systemic elitism through allegory. The play's protagonist, a fictional king, rejects an exploitative democratic system that serves only the aristocracy and capitalists. His proposed reforms—including fixed-term bureaucratic appointments and merit-based examinations for public office—aim to dismantle entrenched privilege. However, the narrative ultimately exposes the persistence of class barriers as educational disparities continue to disadvantage the peasantry. This reflects Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital, where structural inequalities in access to education perpetuate social stratification.

Beyond thematic critique, Nang Mun Nui also resisted the state co-optation of *Nang Talung*. As he remarked in his prologue to *Balang Vipayok*:

“I, Mun Nui, have never been anyone’s tool. I have always remained independent. They summoned me to train in Yala, but it was not a traditional training session. They wanted shadow puppeteers to serve their agenda. I refused to allow the association to manipulate me.”

This assertion underscores Nang Mun Nui’s refusal to let his performances be instrumentalized by state authorities, positioning him within James C. Scott’s (1985) framework of everyday resistance. His legacy extends beyond his era, as his model of using *Nang Talung* as a vehicle for political engagement continues to inspire contemporary practitioners. By fusing traditional aesthetics with incisive political critique, Nang Mun Nui preserved *Nang Talung*’s cultural significance and redefined it as a platform for grassroots resistance. His work remains emblematic of *Nang Talung*’s enduring capacity to navigate, critique, and challenge systems of power.

Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong: Transforming shadow puppetry into a political force

Born in 1940 in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong is a transformative figure in the history of *Nang Talung*, Southern Thailand’s traditional shadow puppetry. Moving beyond its conventional role as a source of entertainment, Nang Phrakhiang infused the art with incisive political and social criticism, reshaping it into a platform for public discourse. His groundbreaking approach emerged during the politically charged era of the 1970s, marked by the spread of communist ideologies and heightened state repression in Southern Thailand. His performances became a medium for criticism of governance, exposing systemic injustices, and reflecting societal realities, establishing him as one of his time’s most daring and innovative puppeteers (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 7).

Thailand’s political and social changes in the 1970s presented significant challenges for artists like Nang Phrakhiang, who used their platforms to criticize government policies. Shadow puppeteers addressing

corruption, social inequities, and bureaucratic inefficiencies were frequently accused of communist affiliations and targeted as threats to national security. Nang Phrakhiang’s bold performances led to 37 arrests for inciting unrest and undermining state stability. On each occasion, local communities protested vehemently, successfully securing his release. Despite such support, his opposition to state policies made him a target of violence. In one incident, a grenade attack destroyed his puppetry equipment during a performance in Nakhon Si Thammarat, and another assault in Surat Thani left him critically injured. These threats forced him into exile, where he joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and remained in hiding for seven years (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 50). Nang Phrakhiang’s performances were characterized by their engagement with political, economic, and social issues that deeply resonated with rural audiences. His criticism addressed government corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and the exclusion of public voices from political processes. Economically, he highlighted inflation, declining agricultural prices, and inequitable land distribution. Socially, his works explored themes like drug addiction, urban migration, and the challenges rural youth faced. By tackling these pressing concerns, Nang Phrakhiang’s storytelling fostered political awareness and collective reflection among his audiences, empowering them to question systemic injustices and envision societal reform (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 149).

The use of *Nang Talung* as a medium for political criticism was exceptionally effective due to its mobility and grassroots appeal. According to Jirattikorn (2001), shadow puppetry’s ability to travel and engage directly with rural communities made it an ideal medium for disseminating messages. While Southeast Asian states often utilized folk media to propagate state ideologies, performers like Nang Phrakhiang subverted this purpose, using satire and allegory to undermine official narratives and expose the absurdities of government policies. His ability to balance cultural authenticity with sharp political criticism made *Nang Talung* a rare space for resistance, even under strict state censorship (Koanantakool, 1989, pp. 51-52). The October 14, 1973 political uprising further

amplified the role of *Nang Talung* in public discourse. During this period of upheaval, Nang Phrakhiang emerged as a central figure in the movement of political shadow puppetry, using his platform to criticize authoritarian governance and advocate for systemic reform. His performances emphasized the importance of public participation and accountability, unprecedentedly bridging art and activism. Through his innovative storytelling and unflinching political stance, he challenged oppressive systems and inspired his audiences to reflect on their societal roles and responsibilities (Sunthornpipaphan, 2017, p. 50; Jirattikorn, 2001).

Nang Prakiang Rakhangthong exemplifies satire as a form of political critique, demonstrating how *Nang Talung* functions as a medium for dissent against authoritarian rule. His play *Balang Luead* (Throne of Blood) provides a striking example of how traditional performance art can be employed to challenge state power. In this performance, Prakiang deliberately named the antagonistic characters after real-life political figures associated with Thailand's military dictatorship, subtly reshaping their names to avoid direct accusations while ensuring audiences could easily recognize the references. The play's protagonist, Phraya Kittisak, who assumes the role of an autocratic prime minister consolidating power, is a clear reference to Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn. His close associate, Phraya Charuwong, represents Field Marshal Praphas Charusathien, while Narongrit, the prime minister's son and a rising military figure, mirrors General Narong Kittikachorn. Through this renaming strategy, Nai Nang Prakiang subtly critiques the concentration of power within military elites while maintaining a fictional framework that allows the performance to evade direct censorship.

Balang Luead's narrative revolves around Phraya Kittisak's efforts to maintain his political dominance amidst increasing opposition. Holding multiple ministerial positions, he consolidates power within his close circle, while his son Narongrit plays a significant role in both military and political affairs. However, tensions escalate when Phraya Charuwong, once a loyal ally, defects to the opposition. In one pivotal dialogue, Phraya Kittisak acknowledges the growing dissatisfaction among

government officials and the public, stating, "They know that many government officials oppose us. The people despise us. Academics, journalists, intellectuals, students, and activists all stand against our dictatorship". Narongrit, responding with a sense of urgency, warns, "That is right. They demand democracy and constitutional law to take root in this land. However, if that happens, how will we survive? If they defeat us, we will lose everything. We must strike first. We have broken the law to place our loyalists in key government positions, and now the people are rising against us." This exchange encapsulates authoritarian rulers' core anxieties about the spread of democratic ideals. The characters acknowledge the public's demand for constitutional governance, yet their concern lies in preserving their control rather than responding to the people's will. The dialogue also reveals a self-awareness of corruption and systemic cronyism, as Narongrit openly admits to manipulating government structures to secure political power while recognizing the inevitable backlash from the populace.

Nang Prakiang's performances function as more than entertainment; they serve as a political statement disguised within allegory and humor, engaging rural audiences in discussions about governance, corruption, and social justice. By embedding his critique within a traditional art form, Prakiang ensures that his message remains accessible to his audience while evading confrontation with state authorities. His creative use of satire allows *Nang Talung* to serve as an alternative media platform, particularly in the state-controlled mainstream channels. This underscores the role of shadow puppet theater as a historical archive of resistance, preserving collective memory while offering a critique of power structures. Through *Balang Luead*, Nang Prakiang demonstrates how *Nang Talung* remains an essential tool for socio-political engagement, reinforcing its role as both a cultural artifact and a means of political subversion.

Nang Phrom Noi: Modernizing Nang Talung as a voice for political reflection

Nang Phrom Noi, also known as Phrom Boonrit, is a seminal figure in the evolution of *Nang Talung*, Southern Thailand's traditional shadow puppetry, into a powerful

platform for political and social engagement. Born on February 12, 1935, in Phatthalung Province, his contributions to this art form earned him widespread acclaim. They established him as a transformative force in the cultural and political landscape of the region. His innovations elevated *Nang Talung* from its traditional role as a medium of entertainment and moral instruction to a dynamic tool for criticism of social injustices and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. In recognition of his profound impact, Nang Phrom Noi was named a National Artist in Performing Arts in 2003.

Despite receiving only a primary-level education (not completing Grade 4), Nang Phrom Noi was a voracious reader who sought knowledge through self-education. He once reflected on his passion for reading, stating:

“I never had much money when I was young, but I would never spend my last baht on food, no matter how hungry I was. If I had a baht, I would buy a book—perhaps one by P. Intharapalit, Luang Wichitwathakan, or Yakob. My uncle, a monk, once used his 1,800 baht in savings to buy me a bookshelf full of books. He said, ‘Let Phrom read to his heart’s content.’ That was how I learned, reading books by the great writers of our time until I fell asleep with them in my hands. I always searched for knowledge and sought truth, though I never trusted newspapers—they print whatever sells (Yuthong-Saeng-Uthai, 2012).”

A defining aspect of Nang Phrom Noi’s work was his groundbreaking integration of modern musical elements into traditional *Nang Talung* performances. In the 1970s, he revolutionized the art form by incorporating Western musical instruments, including guitars, bass, keyboards, and drum sets, alongside the traditional Thai five-piece orchestra (*mong, ching, thap, klong, pi*). This bold experiment earned him the moniker “Nang Phrom Noi Talung Sakon” and redefined *Nang Talung*’s aesthetic appeal. By blending contemporary music with traditional narratives, Phrom Noi attracted younger audiences while maintaining the art form’s cultural essence. His innovative approach inspired a wave of modernization among other *Nang Talung* troupes; many adopted similar styles and

appended “Talung Sakon” to their names to signal their embrace of modernity (Narongrach, 2005, pp. 69-70).

The popularity of *Nang Talung* during Nang Phrom Noi’s era coincided with broader socio-cultural shifts in Southern Thailand. The 1970s witnessed the rising influence of central Thai entertainment, including *luk thung* (Thai country music) and cinema. To compete with these modern forms of entertainment, *Nang Talung* troupes, led by innovators like Nang Phrom Noi, adopted hybridized styles that blended traditional storytelling with contemporary cultural elements. This adaptive strategy ensured *Nang Talung*’s continued relevance amidst changing audience preferences, bridging generational gaps and securing its place in Southern Thai cultural identity (Boosarat, 2003, p. 241).

Beyond his artistic contributions, Nang Phrom Noi was a masterful political commentator, using *Nang Talung* to engage with local and national governance issues. His performances featured pointed critiques of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and social injustice, often using clown characters to deliver satire that resonated with grassroots audiences. Characters like Nai Lam became a mouthpiece for the frustrations of ordinary citizens, reflecting the struggles of rural communities under exploitative political structures. Unlike earlier *Nang Talung* narratives centered on mythical heroes or royal figures, Nang Phrom Noi’s work emphasized the lived realities of ordinary people, critiquing state officials and power dynamics at various levels (Koanantakool, 1989, pp. 51-53).

The transition from *Nai Nang Talung* to elected politician was a natural progression for Nang Phrom Noi, as he built a deep rapport with rural communities through his performances. His candidacy for Parliament under the Democrat Party (1979-1986) was not merely a career shift but an extension of his commitment to social change. His ability to articulate grassroots concerns in a way that resonated with the electorate reflected his dual identity as both a cultural figure and a political actor. Unlike conventional politicians, his performances had already conditioned audiences to think critically about governance, making his transition into politics a continuation of the work he had been doing on stage. His

tenure in Parliament saw him advocating for local governance reforms, rural development, and policies addressing economic inequalities, particularly concerning the role of Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAOs), village heads, and local bureaucrats, whom he had long criticized in his performances.

One of the most notable examples of his political satire can be seen in *Awut Tham* (The Weapon of Dharma), where corruption within the SAO system was humorously yet incisively critiqued. In one scene, the clown character Nai Teng discusses the disproportionate power of SAO officials compared to village leaders, sarcastically remarking that while village heads have minor duties such as registering births and deaths, SAO members wield substantial financial influence. The character satirically declares:

“The *Obor Tor* (SAO official) can steal so much money! The one in our village is filthy rich! He gets a big salary, but that is not enough—he still takes more. Look at the Miyazawa Fund—it came to our village to help people, but the villagers only got 120 baht per day for mining work, while the SAO officials did nothing and took 600 baht per day just by standing there!”

This dialogue reflects broader concerns about misallocating public funds and systemic corruption within local governance. The reference to the Miyazawa Fund, an actual Japanese economic stimulus initiative intended for local Thai communities, underscores how local elites often manipulated development programs at the expense of ordinary citizens. Through this form of satire, *Nang Talung* functioned as an alternative media platform, providing a space where corruption, political exploitation, and bureaucratic inefficiency could be dramatized in an accessible and engaging manner. Nang Phrom Noi ensured that his political messages reached his audience without directly provoking state suppression by embedding critiques within humor and allegory.

His career exemplifies the intersection of folk performance and political engagement, showing that traditional art forms can serve as platforms for both entertainment and activism. His ability to blend humor, satire, and direct political involvement highlights how folk media can shape public discourse and foster political

consciousness among marginalized communities. Even after his passing on October 30, 2012, his contributions to *Nang Talung* and Thai political culture remain influential, reinforcing the art form’s role as a cultural artifact and a mechanism for grassroots resistance. By transforming *Nang Talung* into a space for political reflection, Nang Phrom Noi exemplified how traditional performance arts could engage with contemporary socio-political challenges while preserving their cultural heritage.

Nang Nong Deaw: Revitalizing Nang Talung through political and social commentary

Nang Nong Deaw, performed by Banyat Suwannawentong—widely recognized as Nang Nong Deaw—epitomizes the evolution of *Nang Talung* as a vibrant medium for humor, social criticism, and political commentary. Born on March 17, 1988, in Phatthalung Province and visually impaired since birth, Nang Nong Deaw has overcome significant challenges to become a celebrated figure in Southern Thai shadow puppetry. Known for his sharp wit and inventive approach, Nang Nong Deaw’s performances transcend traditional boundaries, addressing contemporary societal and political issues while maintaining the essence of *Nang Talung*’s cultural roots. His innovative storytelling has elevated *Nang Talung* to new heights, ensuring its relevance and accessibility for modern audiences.

One of the hallmarks of Nang Nong Deaw’s success is his ability to criticize political and social issues with humor, rendering his performances both engaging and thought-provoking. Unlike earlier politically engaged puppeteers who faced state repression, Nang Nong Deaw employs humor as a disarming tool, allowing him to address sensitive topics without provoking confrontation. This approach is exemplified in his caricatures of political figures, notably former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. Using puppets modeled after contemporary leaders, Nang Nong Deaw criticizes governance and leadership, highlighting government inefficiency, economic hardships, and public dissatisfaction. His satirical portrayal of Prayut’s policies, such as those affecting rubber and palm oil prices, resonated strongly with Southern Thai audiences, particularly during periods of

economic and political tension. A defining moment in Nang Nong Deaw's career occurred when he performed a satirical "talk show" directly in front of Prayut during a public visit to Nakhon Si Thammarat. Through humor and poetry, he addressed government policies in a manner that captivated both the live audience and online viewers. Clips from this performance quickly went viral, showcasing his ability to transform political satire into a widely appreciated art form. Additionally, compilations of his criticism, particularly segments focusing on government policies and societal challenges, have garnered significant attention on platforms like YouTube, amplifying his reach beyond live performances.

Nang Nong Deaw's innovation extends beyond content to the structure and accessibility of his performances. Recognizing the evolving lifestyles of modern audiences, he has adapted the traditional *Nang Talung* schedule, shifting performances to begin at 8:00 PM and conclude by midnight. This adjustment caters to contemporary viewers juggling work and educational commitments, making *Nang Talung* more convenient for a broader audience. Moreover, Nang Nong Deaw offers tiered performance options to suit varying scales and budgets. Smaller productions cost approximately 30,000 baht, while large-scale shows featuring advanced projection technology and 12-meter screens cost up to 60,000 baht. These elaborate productions incorporate immersive backdrops of palaces, forests, and temples, enhancing the visual appeal and storytelling experience. By blending traditional puppetry with modern technology, Nang Nong Deaw has created performances that are both culturally authentic and visually captivating (Buabal, 2024). Central to Nang Nong Deaw's performances are clown characters, such as Yodthong, who serve as conduits for humor and critical reflection. These characters engage audiences with relatable, often hilarious dialogues criticizing local governance, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and societal issues. Their satirical observations transform complex political topics into accessible and entertaining narratives, fostering public discourse without inciting conflict. This balance of humor and criticism has cemented Nang Nong Deaw's reputation as a master of modern *Nang Talung*.

The contributions of Nang Nong Deaw must also be understood in the broader context of *Nang Talung*'s evolution alongside pioneering puppeteers such as Nang Mun Nui, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, and Nang Phrom Noi. Nang Mun Nui laid the foundation for using *Nang Talung* as a platform for grassroots resistance, employing clown characters to criticize systemic oppression and bureaucratic exploitation. Nang Phrakhiang extended this legacy by focusing on economic disparity and governance at both local and national levels, crafting narratives that resonated deeply with rural audiences. Nang Phrom Noi introduced contemporary musical elements and relatable clown characters like Lam, symbolizing the collective frustrations of Southern Thai villagers. While Nang Nong Deaw shares the common goal of amplifying the voices of ordinary people, his use of humor to address political issues is distinct in its reliance on satire rather than confrontation, reflecting the cultural and technological realities of the digital age.

This excerpt from Nang Nong Deaw exemplifies the role of contemporary shadow puppet theater as a medium for political critique. The dialogue between former Prime Ministers Prayut Chan-o-cha and Thaksin Shinawatra satirically portrays their alleged behind-the-scenes negotiations regarding political power and legal immunity in *Yodthong Da Ruk Tid Khuk Thaksin* (Yodthong's Verbal Attack on Thaksin's Imprisonment). Through humor and irony, the performance critiques the mechanisms of Thai politics, particularly the influence of wealth over legal and democratic processes.

"Prayut: After returning to Thailand, does everything feel like it is finally in place?"

Thaksin: Thank you very much for making all the necessary arrangements.

Prayut: And the senators—everything settled?

Thaksin: Everything went according to plan. They paid off each one, millions as they requested.

Prayut: No worries now. As for the prime ministership, Pheu Thai got it as planned. We arranged everything in advance.

Thaksin: But I still have some concerns. We publicly declared that we would not form a government with you.

Prayut: That is nothing to worry about. People forget. Even if they say everyone is equal under the law, we both know that is false. The rich are above the law. The poor are just fools. What we said before is not relevant. The important thing is that we are working together now.”

This exchange showcases how Nang Nong Deaw employs satire to highlight political contradictions and perceived corruption among Thai elites. The exaggerated yet familiar language reflects public skepticism about political alliances, particularly in the context of power transitions and elite negotiations. By portraying political figures engaging in backroom deals and casually discussing legal loopholes, the performance underscores the disillusionment many citizens feel toward the justice system and democratic institutions. The phrase “the rich are above the law, the poor are just fools” serves as a sharp critique of socio-economic inequality and the perception that laws are selectively enforced to benefit the powerful. Furthermore, the humor embedded in this performance aligns with James C. Scott’s (1985) concept of everyday resistance, where marginalized voices use cultural expressions—such as satire, allegory, and humor—to challenge dominant power structures without directly confronting them. By presenting these critiques through comedic performances, *Nang Talung* serves as a vital platform for public discourse, allowing audiences to engage with political issues entertainingly and thought-provokingly.

Discussion

Nang Talung as a tool for political criticism and everyday resistance

Nang Talung’s function as a platform for political criticism aligns with James C. Scott’s (1985, 1987) theory of everyday resistance, where political dissent is embedded within cultural practices to subtly challenge authority. Through storytelling, humor, and satire, puppeteers such as Nang Mun Nui, Nang Phrakhiang Rakhangthong, Nang Phrom Noi, and Nang Nong Deaw create a “safe space” for resistance, allowing critiques of power structures to emerge in non-confrontational yet impactful ways. By employing symbolic resistance and

hidden transcripts, these performances capture the lived realities of rural Thai communities, exposing systemic inequalities while strategically avoiding direct conflict with state power.

The nature and depth of political satire in *Nang Talung* performances vary depending on the historical and political contexts in which each puppeteer operates. Nang Mun Nui and Nang Prakiang Rakhangthong, who performed during periods of intense political conflict, employed deeply layered narratives that highlighted class struggles, systemic corruption, and structural inequalities. Their performances were not merely a form of entertainment but functioned as active critiques of power and injustice, offering alternative visions of fairness and social equity. By addressing broad societal issues, they directly confronted authoritarian rule and entrenched hierarchies.

In contrast, Nang Phrom Noi’s performances emerged during a relatively stable political climate, shifting the focus toward provincial governance and bureaucratic corruption. His narratives often targeted figures such as Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) officers, village heads, and local bureaucrats, exposing their exploitation of state resources, engagement in bribery, and failure to serve the people. Unlike Nang Mun Nui and Prakiang, who critiqued national power structures, Nang Phrom Noi localized his resistance, addressing grassroots political struggles that were immediately relevant to his rural audience.

A further departure from these traditions is seen in Nang Nong Deaw, who gained prominence during the tenure of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. His performances rely primarily on surface-level political satire, often lampooning the Prime Minister’s policies and public persona. While this approach fosters public discourse and entertainment, his critiques lack the structural depth and ideological engagement found in the works of Nang Mun Nui and Prakiang. Rather than directly challenging institutional power or advocating systemic change, Nang Nong Deaw focuses on issues of economic hardship and everyday frustrations. His performances align more closely with humor-based political commentary than with direct resistance,

positioning him as an entertainer rather than a political provocateur.

These distinctions illustrate the evolving function of *Nang Talung* in different political contexts. Whereas Nang Mun Nui and Prakiang engaged in ideologically driven critiques of national governance, Nang Phrom Noi concentrated on regional governance, while Nang Nong Deaw emphasized contemporary political satire with an appeal to popular discourse. This evolution demonstrates how *Nang Talung* adapts to shifting political climates, shaping its critiques based on audience expectations, political constraints, and technological developments.

One of the most striking aspects of *Nang Talung* is its role in constructing and reinforcing the image of Southern Thais as politically conscious and engaged citizens. By embedding political critique within its narratives, *Nang Talung* consistently portrays Southern Thais as individuals who express political opinions openly and actively challenge power structures, reinforcing the region's identity as a stronghold of political awareness. A central element of this critique is the role of clown characters, who mediate between the ruling elite and the common people. These characters do not merely resist oppression but hold all figures of power accountable—whether they be rulers, bureaucrats, or even fellow Southern Thais. Crucially, *Nang Talung* engages in self-critique; the clowns mock political leaders and satirize their communities' behaviors and contradictions, using humor and irony to create a space for political reflection and debate. While *Nang Talung* plays a crucial role in shaping Southern Thai identity, it does not rigidly define Southernness in opposition to external influences. Instead, its performances frame political consciousness as a dynamic trait transcending regional boundaries, emphasizing engagement with local and national politics. The narratives of *Nang Talung* consistently depict the South as a region deeply attuned to political affairs, whether concerning provincial governance, national leadership, or broader socio-political structures. Its storytelling conventions reinforce this perspective, employing allegory and satire to illustrate power dynamics and the tensions between authority and the people. This

ensures its continued relevance as a medium for political and social criticism.

During periods of political crisis, such as Thailand's conflicts in 2006 and 2014, mass media—particularly satellite television—played a crucial role in amplifying public dissent, particularly in Southern Thailand. Narongrach and Muthmainnah (2024) describe satellite TV as a “weapon of the masses” that mobilized large-scale protests and calls for systemic change. By contrast, *Nang Talung* serves as a distinct form of everyday resistance. Unlike satellite TV, which incited mass demonstrations, *Nang Talung* employs humor and satire to engage communities in a manner that does not escalate into overt confrontation. Rather than rallying citizens to the streets, *Nang Talung* invites audiences to laugh at the absurdities of state policies and governance, offering subtle yet meaningful critiques that resonate with their lived experiences. While its resistance appears less intense, its ability to reflect daily struggles and question authority makes it an indispensable element of socio-political discourse in Southern Thailand.

The evolution of *Nang Talung* as a medium of critique underscores its adaptability over time. Early puppeteers like Nang Mun Nui and Prakiang emphasized moral instruction, economic disparities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and social hierarchies in their performances. Their critiques were often conveyed through intricate storylines featuring poetic recitations and satirical clown characters. In contrast, modern puppeteers like Nang Nong Deaw have streamlined storytelling, prioritizing humor and rapid political satire, reflecting contemporary audiences' shifting preferences. By reducing the emphasis on traditional poetic narration and amplifying the role of clown characters such as Yodthong, To, and Si Kaew, Nang Nong Deaw engages directly with local and national political issues, including agricultural policies and governmental inefficiencies.

The political function of humor in *Nang Talung* aligns with Sombatpoonsiri's (2015) analysis of humor as a dual-purpose tool for resistance. *Nang Talung* dismantles the symbolic power of authority by parodying political figures and critiquing governance through exaggerated narratives. For instance, Nang Nong Deaw's

satirical portrayals of former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha transform national policy critiques into accessible and shared cultural experiences. By employing humor as a “safety valve,” *Nang Talung* performers can address sensitive topics without provoking confrontation, maintaining a balance between political criticism and entertainment.

Digital platforms like YouTube have further amplified *Nang Talung*’s relevance in modern discourse. Performances by Nang Nong Deaw, often edited into short clips highlighting political satire, have garnered widespread attention and reshaped how *Nang Talung* reaches its audience. This adaptation reflects Scott’s (1985) assertion that resistance often evolves in response to changing socio-political environments. By leveraging digital media, Nang Nong Deaw extends the reach of his performances, engaging a broader audience while preserving the cultural authenticity of *Nang Talung*.

A comparative analysis of these four major *Nang Talung* puppeteers reveals a clear shift from ideologically driven, systemic critiques toward more localized or even superficial satire. Nang Mun Nui and Prakiang Rakhangthong framed their work within class struggles and democratic movements, using *Nang Talung* as an intellectual and activist tool. Nang Phrom Noi remained focused on local governance, exposing the exploitation of rural communities. In contrast, Nang Nong Deaw engages in surface-level political humor, primarily aimed at entertaining audiences rather than advocating political change. This shift reflects broader transformations in Thai media culture, where digital platforms and rapid information consumption favor short-form satire over in-depth critique.

In sum, *Nang Talung* exemplifies the intersection of cultural tradition and political resistance. Through its humor, allegorical narratives, and adaptability, *Nang Talung* transcends its role as entertainment, serving as a dynamic platform for social criticism and public engagement. Performances by puppeteers across generations reflect the resilience and creativity of rural Thai communities, demonstrating how traditional art forms continue to adapt in response to contemporary socio-political challenges. By engaging with Scott’s and

Vandergest’s theoretical frameworks, *Nang Talung* emerges as a vital medium for articulating marginalized voices, reinforcing its enduring relevance in Thailand’s cultural and political landscape.

Conclusion

Nang Talung, as examined through the works of puppeteers such as Nang Mun Nui, Nang Prakeang Rakhangthong, Nang Phrom Noi, and Nang Nong Deaw, underscores the enduring relevance of traditional art forms as mechanisms of political critique and social resistance. The varying degrees of satire and political engagement in their performances reflect the evolving socio-political landscape of Thailand. While Nang Mun Nui and Phrakhiang Rakhangthong engaged in systemic critiques of class structures, governance, and corruption, Nang Phrom Noi localized his resistance by focusing on provincial politics and bureaucratic exploitation. In contrast, though politically satirical, Nang Nong Deaw’s performances prioritize entertainment over deep-seated critique, illustrating a shift towards more populist and humor-driven resistance in contemporary *Nang Talung*.

Despite differences in thematic depth and focus, all four puppeteers exemplify James C. Scott’s concept of everyday resistance, where humor, allegory, and symbolic narratives serve as tools for navigating power structures. Their explicitly ideological or primarily comedic performances provide a platform for marginalized communities to articulate discontent in ways that resonate with their lived experiences. Importantly, *Nang Talung*’s ability to adapt across different political contexts demonstrates its resilience as a form of cultural expression and a conduit for socio-political discourse.

The increasing integration of digital platforms, mainly through YouTube, has further expanded the reach of *Nang Talung*. While early puppeteers relied on live performances to engage with audiences, contemporary figures like Nang Nong Deaw leveraged online platforms to amplify their messages, making *Nang Talung* more accessible to a broader audience. However, this shift has also influenced the nature of political critique, as the demand for rapid, viral content often favors satire that is more surface-level rather than in-depth ideological

critique. This transition highlights broader transformations in Thai media consumption, where digital satire has increasingly replaced long-form political commentary in traditional folk performances.

Ultimately, *Nang Talung*'s continued relevance lies in its ability to merge cultural tradition with evolving political discourse. Adapting to new media landscapes and shifting audience expectations remains a significant form of grassroots resistance, providing a voice for those on the periphery of formal political arenas. While it may not incite direct systemic change, *Nang Talung* plays a crucial role in fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and preserving a tradition of resistance that has long been embedded in Southern Thai society. As a result, it remains both an artifact of cultural heritage and a dynamic tool for political expression, illustrating the enduring power of folk media in navigating socio-political realities.

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