

## A TEI Project

# Interview of Waewdao Sirisook

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## 1. Transcript

### 1.1. Session One (July 29, 2011)

CLINE

Today is July 29th, 2011. This is Alex Cline. I'm interviewing Waewdao Sirisook—she's smiling and nodding; I got it right—in my home studio in Culver City [California]. This is session number one. Good morning.

SIRISOOK

Good morning, Alex.

CLINE

Thanks for taking some time to talk to us. I know you're not only on a cleansing diet, but you're preparing to go back to Thailand for an extended period, so we're happy to get this in before you leave. We always start these interviews at the beginning, so let's begin with the first question that we always have, which is where and when were you born?

SIRISOOK

I born in 1977 in Chiang Rai, the northeast part, province of Thailand.

CLINE

Let's talk a little about your family, beginning with your father. What is his name and what can you say about what he does and what his background was, or is?

SIRISOOK

My father name is [Thai name] Sirisook. I have to get back to you again. I have to make a note about what my father is do, because he's a machinery guy, but it has a specific word for that I couldn't remember. Yes, but he work with the machine, with the metal and kind of adjusting being, you know, like, with for parts of the machine, and if it not fit, he adjust it.

CLINE

I think here we would actually probably call that a machinist.

SIRISOOK  
[laughs] Really?

CLINE  
Seriously. [laughs]

SIRISOOK  
Yes, he didn't get to study in a higher education. Like by eight years old he had to get out school and start working. After marry with my mom, he moved to Bangkok and learn all these machine skill and come back to Chiang Rai and open his own small family business.

CLINE  
Is he from Chiang Rai, then?

SIRISOOK  
No, he's from Lampang, and he's a karaoke fanatic. He dreamed to be a singer, but— [laughter]

CLINE  
Oh, wow.

SIRISOOK  
So he has recording his own voice singing over the karaoke. He will play that music over and over again for his customer who bring their work. So his happy moment is when he has a headphone on and listen to his own music.

CLINE  
Wow. Cool. What do you know about his family background?

SIRISOOK  
Very little. It's the same old same old thing about mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, so my mom is not having a very good relationship with her mother-in-law, which is my dad's mother. They have Burmese descent. My grandmother name is [Thai name], which is totally Burmese. So I'm part Burmese, very little. I don't know what kind of business they are, they work on. I never remember meeting or have any activities or remember my grandfather at all, so I'm unclear about that. I think he maybe pass away before I remember. I don't know. I can't remember. But I remember when I was young, we would travel to Lampang to visit both of my grand—how you call it?

CLINE  
Parents.

SIRISOOK  
Parents, yes, which is by bus from Chiang Rai to Lampang take five hours, and we don't have air conditioning bus. So it's just normal, very old, old bus, and I would have a carsick every time, I would cry a lot, throw up till I don't have any-- So going to Lampang is not a good experience, but once we were there, we have a good experience.

CLINE

That's good. Wow.

SIRISOOK

Yes, that's all I know. We have a lot of relatives and cousin both side of my mother grandparents and my father grandparents. I couldn't remember all of them at all, and I think we stopped going to Lampang and visit them by—I think when I was, like, ten years old, all of that activity is gone. They may visit us sometime rarely. So that's all I know, and it's all negative thing and idea about what my grandparents from my father's side do to us through my mother. So I always not a good thing about that.

CLINE

Wow. Interesting. You're pretty close to Burma, then, up there. We'll get more into sort of the cultural climate up there in a little while. Let's talk about your mother now, what her name is and what you know about her family background.

SIRISOOK

I know my mother family background much more than my father. Her name is [Thai name] Sirisook. Her maiden name is [Thai name], and [Thai word] means "good day," so she must born on a good day. By the way, my father have sixteen siblings altogether. [laughter] I forgot about that. That important. I don't know.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

It after the World War II, so it's a campaign of you have more children, you get a grant from the government. So they won the grant, but that sixteen [unclear], also some passed away when they born or when they was young, but it counted as sixteen.

CLINE

Still, that's an incredible amount of work on mom's part. Whoa.

SIRISOOK

My mom have four siblings altogether. Wow, this is a lot to say about my mother's side. We see them almost every summer.

CLINE

Where were they?

SIRISOOK

In Lampang also, so they both are in Lampang. So they migrate to Chiang Rai. They are the only one couple from home that moved to another place and settled down.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

SIRISOOK

The relationship between my mother and the entire cousin thing is very complicated because we are the only one that move away from the ancestor place, and we kind of doing well, better than them. So whenever we visit, that means that something going on there, say, money. So they looking for something else. After, then, “Yes, our cousin visiting, but that means he carry money with her, too, so that we can borrow, we can ask her to buy that, buy this for us.” She hold on to her ego a lot, that she think she better than them, so she have to help them, and then it turn bad that she kind of hurts herself by doing that, because they always ask from her. They never ask, “Do you have enough? How about you? Do you need help?” But they think that we fine, so, like, they only need help, but we don’t need help because we fine. She’s happy to do that, but later she feel bad that they didn’t care about her at all, but she think what they care about her is just money.

CLINE

Yes, that really taints things, doesn’t it?

SIRISOOK

That kind of taints another generation, too, so their kids, their grandchild, every time they see us they see—

CLINE

Money.

SIRISOOK

—yes, the bill in us.

CLINE

Wow. That’s unfortunate.

SIRISOOK

My grandfather, again, no memory, only my grandmother that I hang out with a lot. She teach me, you know. She plant vegetable. Sometime she come with us in Chiang Rai and stay for a couple of months. When I hang out with her and she will plant some vegetable and teach me how to separate the rice grain from rice, which is, like, a boring, boring job. “Let me go,” but I have to finish this. And then she would call me to step on her back because I’m the smallest. So I do it as quick as possible, but it doesn’t matter how quick because it’s the same amount of time anyway. But, yes, she passed away when I was sixteen.

CLINE

What about siblings? You said you were the smallest, but what about your own siblings?

SIRISOOK

I have my oldest brother, he passed away when he was twenty-one with a motorcycle accident, and that break my mom heart because she only have one

son. And I have my older sister. She's four year older than me, and my brother is four year older than her. It's, like, well calculated.

CLINE

[laughs] What are their names?

SIRISOOK

My brother name is [Thai name], and my sister name [Thai name], mean "the blessing." [Thai word] mean "lady" and [Thai word] mean "a blessing," so the lady that can blessed.

CLINE

What does your name mean?

SIRISOOK

My name is Waewdao, which mean tinkling star, sparkling star. Yes, it happen when I born and my dad was at the balcony and look at the star, and, like, "Okay, we're going to name her Waewdao." Usually in Thai family they would name their kids similar or as a series, like almost the same meaning or similar meaning, but for my family, that's different, like it come up from somewhere. Some come up from somebody or sometime which is no clue at all, like, why three of us have such a different name, and also nickname is all different too. Usually nickname is kind of relevant.

CLINE

Related to each other. Wow. So how common was it then for people in that part of northern Thailand to move away to another town or another city and start a life away from the ancestral home?

SIRISOOK

I think it's a big deal, but then I don't know how many years ago, about forty, more than forty years ago, especially when you don't have anybody you know in that area. They start from moving to Bangkok. I think they stay in Bangkok for a couple of years, and they didn't find it sexy at all, you know, attractive at all. So I don't know what made them move to Chiang Rai. They don't have any relatives there or people they know there, so it's very brave to totally change the environment. I don't know what they see in Chiang Rai that think that it going to make it different or better than Lampang.

CLINE

You just answered my next question. Thank you. So you didn't grow up, as a result, surrounded by extended family the way I would think would be kind of standard for that part of the world. What was your relationship like with your older brother and older sister?

SIRISOOK

My older brother, because we quite far, like far from the ages, so when he become a teenager, I'm still kid, so he take care of us well. We love each other

very well, but I'm closer with my sister. We share a lot of thing, story, and more now, I think.

CLINE

What was your relationship with your father growing up?

SIRISOOK

My father is always generous, generous. He never punish me. He just an easy person, because we are growing up in the female-dominant family, so my mother run the thing. My mother make a decision. So if somebody [unclear] with my mother. Like when I do something wrong, she would punish me.

CLINE

So she was the disciplinarian in the family.

SIRISOOK

Uh-huh. So my relationship with my father is when I need to hide or when, you know, I need to know for sure that somebody is not going to blame me or punish me, that's my father. He just like, "Oh, whatever," but in a way, he didn't remember anything, too, because my mother run everything. He just work and enjoy his life, do the thing that he like, made money, and then my mother would run everything. So she would know, like, what grades of school I'm in and what of the activity I need, what clothes I need. If you ask my father, he has no idea whatsoever what major that I'm in when I'm in the university and how many year now, am I sophomore, am I a senior. No, he just know that I go to the university and that's it.

CLINE

Wow. Okay. So then you've given us a little bit of a clue of what the relationship was like with your mother. How do you describe that or expand on that?

SIRISOOK

She is the emperor. [laughter] No, but not in the way that, oh, I scare her anything. She just a model. She's just being a model for me of how the female run the family. She fight. She fight for her family, for her kids. She do everything she can do get us into the highest education. She might have some things strict, like if I want one balloon which would cost two baht, like one cent, like when I was young, she wouldn't buy it to me because she think that it's too expensive and it not necessary, because we not that rich. But if something I want to eat, she would buy it for me. So she care about food and life more than the additional stuff that not important for that, and I think I get so much of that personality from her, like if it not important, then, no, it can wait. So, yes, she's now better than what I think she used to be, because all kids is grow up and can take care of themselves and have their own family, so she kind of relief. When we was younger, she was, like, so tight, everything is so serious. If we break one cup, we know that's the punishment. We know that she

going to keep complaining because, I don't know why, but now if we break it, we break it, she might say, "Oh, too bad, so beautiful one," but that's it. I think she learn how to relieve something, since she hold on things so tight.

CLINE

Maybe you could describe a little bit what your home and your neighborhood was like growing up and also the kinds of activities or responsibilities you had in the home in your area there.

SIRISOOK

It's about six houses in that area that we have a strong relationship with next to each other, and five—no, four out of six houses have the—every house have kids in almost the same age with us, so I grow up with I wouldn't say a lot of friends, but friend in the same age, that we can play everything together, kids' stuff. I have a lot of responsibility and job as a kids to do with my sister. We don't have laundry machine, so we have to do laundry by hand by ourself. We don't have a drinking water in a bottle, even like the—how you call it—water, a tap.

CLINE

Yes, you didn't have indoor plumbing.

SIRISOOK

We have a well, so our job is to get the water from the well, and then we put it to the—how you call it—cleaning system.

CLINE

Like a filter.

SIRISOOK

Yes, filter. That homemade by my dad. He make it himself, sand and rock and a layer of thing to clean the water, so when you pour the water in and then it would come out clean, that we can drink it. So that our job in the evening. We have to take water from the well and then put it in the bottle. Cooking. We have to wake up—when I say "we," me and my sister, we have to wake up five in the morning to cook sticky rice, put it on the stove—again, we don't have gas, it's all woodstove—cook it, and then go back to sleep. Then we wake up again, the rice is cooked, and then we have to take it out and do things so that we can put it back to the container for all-day food and pack food for lunch to go to school and get dressed. Then sometime we bike to school, sometime we walk to school, and then come back in the evening and we have to do laundry. Or otherwise if we don't do that, we have tons of laundry to do during the weekend. And then because our house is a wood floor, so we have to wax it every other weekend. That's a rule that my mom give us. So wax it in that day is not fun because you have to use these wax thing from the bottle and put it on the cloth, and then put it on the wood floor, and then use another clean cloth to kind of make it shiny.

CLINE

Right. Polish it, yes.

SIRISOOK

It smell. It just not fun, but we need to have it shiny, otherwise mom would not let us go.

CLINE

Man.

SIRISOOK

Laundry, cooking, yes. In the evening my mom come back from market, then we will have to prepare for cooking.

CLINE

So that would be chopping things, chopping vegetables or preparing—

SIRISOOK

And making a paste. Then sometime we would cook the entire meal, or sometime we would just prepare, and then mom would come cook. What else?

CLINE

Let me ask, though, how big was the house? I'm imagine you waxing the wooden floors. How big was the house?

SIRISOOK

How big was the house? Oh, I don't know. We had two bedroom. It's a two-bedroom house. One bathroom in the house, and then we have the separate bathroom outside, open air, open top, open roof. How big? We never measure it, but—

CLINE

Yes, I don't need numbers. Was it small, big, medium?

SIRISOOK

Medium, medium.

CLINE

Medium-size house.

SIRISOOK

I would say medium. But we have to do that in every room, so living room and also two bedroom.

CLINE

That part of Thailand, there's a lot of rainforest, kind of jungle, mountains. It gets warm, I suppose, but doesn't it also get cooler?

SIRISOOK

It get cool. I remember it's not as hot as is now. The climate changed a lot. It get hot. I mean, I remember in the summer we were fine. We not sweat at all. During what we call the winter, which is the cold time, it used to be very cold. I remember wearing, like, three layers of the sweater out to school, and then I

forgot my backpack because it's already heavy and a lot of stuff heavy, like, "Ah, I forgot my backpack." Then my mom would yell at me.

CLINE

Oh, golly. Wow.

SIRISOOK

Yes, so getting cold a lot.

CLINE

So describe, if you can, sort of the terrain, the environment that you had to live in. I know you have a rainy season and a hot season and, I guess, a cooler season, but what kind of conditions—for example, in going to school, what kind of conditions did you have to go through to get there, what the roads were like, what the terrain was like, if you can describe your area a bit?

SIRISOOK

Chiang Rai is a small city, so from my house to school, if we bike, it probably take about ten minute, and back in the day it's not so many traffic, so we probably have one or two traffic light from my house to school. Not difficult at all. I live in what we call in the city. Sometime we walk to school, too, and then when my mom start to get the motorbike, she would take us to school with her motorbike, which is faster, so five minute to school, no traffic at all.

CLINE

You said, for example, you had an outhouse where it was open on the top, no roof on it, I take it.

SIRISOOK

Yeah.

CLINE

So when it rains, it just rains there.

SIRISOOK

Yes, it just rain, but when it rain, then we would shower in the rain, run out and take the coat off, run out and shower in the rain. [laughter]

CLINE

Nice.

SIRISOOK

Rain doesn't seem to be a problem for us, for kids. Even go to school, if it rain, we use the umbrella. It might rain hard, but I don't think we ever struggled with that. It create a lot of problem for my mom because she's paranoid with—I don't know why, but every time when it's a rainstorm she would close every window as possible, like close every window. Then she would have her ritual of putting—we call [Thai word], which is the container that you cook sticky rice with made from, like, a big log, and then you kind of shave the inside and you put the rice in, and then you put on the stove with the water, and then it steam. I think it come from her lineage of ancestor that teach her that

something like this happen, do this, because I think then the spirit will come protect us. So she would do that just with no rice in that. It's a ritual. Then she would call kids, like her three kids, and come and sit together. I think she worried that the wind going to blow the house away.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

SIRISOOK

So she always call us to come and stay with her together with that rice thing going on. [laughs]

CLINE

Interesting. So what about the religious climate in the house? What, if anything, was your religious background in the family?

SIRISOOK

Buddhism, but Buddhism with animism very much. We just blended. We have both for the Buddha image, but I think that's all over Thailand, that we come from the animism and Hinduism practice and background. But when the Buddhist come, we take it, too, and then we blend it together. So we still offer the rice and food to the Buddha image, which in Buddhism, no, because when the Lord Buddha go to nibbana—nibbana mean “god,” so you don't have anything. But we believe that the Buddha image is still eating, it still hungry, so we offer rice. So, I mean, the temple is to offer rice to the Buddha image. Even in some temple, they still give the glass, the eyeglass, for the Buddha image because they believe that some Buddha image don't have a good eyesight. Yes, so that house, when I grow up, we have an altar for the Buddha image and we have shrine for the ancestor and we have a shrine—we have five shrine, five altars and shrine altogether, one for the mother of earth that we worship, and then one for the spirits of the house, one for the ancestors' spirit house, and then two for the Buddha image. That's my mom job to put food in the morning and take it out before noon. Every Buddhist holy day, she would give a special set of fruit. It depend on which altar and which shrine, like a specific thing, like she would dream that this spirit who take care or who stay at this altar is a guy wearing all white and he like the coconut juice, so she would offer the coconut juice, while this altar or shrine like the kind of certain sweet. She would offer that to them. Then yearly we would have an ancestor offering day when we give them or offer them chicken, a whole chicken, and sometime pig head and spirit, I mean alcohol and other sweet and food. Then she would put the incense on, do chanting to give it to the ancestor. Interesting that the way that check if the ancestor is full with food or not, she would take a leaf from the nearby tree and then cut the leaf. I think if it in even number, that mean they're full, and if it in odd number, they not full yet, so you have to do another set of incense to send it to them. Soon enough, when my dad bought his machine, his big

machine, he would get a lot of accident with that, so then she would do something else, a fortuneteller or something or ask the—what do you call it—medium, and they tell her that it's a spirit in that machine too. So you have to worship that, too, so she would have the worshipping of the spirit of that machine once a year too.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

So very animism, because believe a lot about good spirit, bad spirit.

CLINE

Yes, it's a lot of work after a while, too, keeping track of all that.

SIRISOOK

Yeah.

CLINE

So let's go to your school experience. Where did you start at school and what was that like for you?

SIRISOOK

I start school, I think when I was like four or five, yes, crying like other kids. But other than that, yes, my school is [Thai name], quite long. But my brother study there, my sister, me, and then it go to my niece generation too. When I was in—call like pre—how you call it—the one even before the preschool, pre-preschool. My sister room—she's on grade four for school—for the primary school, it's in front of my room, so during lunch I would run to her room and have lunch together.

CLINE

How nice.

SIRISOOK

I was a good kid, means that good grade kid, until about eight or ten years old. I used to be in the top three, and then all a sudden I'd be down in the last three in class. We have about thirty-eight student in one class, and I think after past ten, I never go back to, like, top three again. Always below in the bottom, but I'm so much into activities. Like when the school have a festival or some activity, you see me there dancing, not like dancing like Thai dance, but some kind of pop dancing that I would choreograph by myself. I chose the music. I asked my friend, choose my friend, and then I would be boss, a boss, and rehearse them. If the school have a singing group, I be there, not that I'm a good singer, but I just want to be there.

CLINE

You like to perform.

SIRISOOK

Yes, I like to perform.

CLINE

Why do you think your grades sort of started to slip after age ten or so?

SIRISOOK

I think I just concentrate with something else that is not—I do good in some subject, let's say, music. Or if it's the class, like, they teach about agriculture, so we have to have our own small farmland, say, eight-by-eight feet, I would have to take care or be there to take care of it and wash the eggplant and have fruit on that, something. That's that happy time for me. And I like craft, so I do good in the crafting class, doing solving or work on the flower, cooking. Then math, science, it's just like another world for me, so I think that's so much take me down.

CLINE

Maybe more of that at that time, too much math and science?

SIRISOOK

Not attractive for me. It's just not exciting and interesting for me. So what does it matter if you know that square root? Will you be able to use it in daily life? Because what I see, that we give ten baht and we buy five baht and they give us five baht back for change, and if you just know that, be fine. [laughter] That my strategy, but I know that it's the scientist and people in this world, the jet plane or the NASA, they go to the moon with that kind of mathematic. It's just not my world. For me, know to add, know to sum, know to take it out or how to do a little bit of that is enough to survive in this world, and that's since I was young.

CLINE

Interesting. So then when it comes to things like performing arts, music, dance, what exposure to that sort of thing did you have in your early life? Specifically you mentioned that you do a little pop dance thing or something in school, but what do you remember hearing in the way of music or seeing in the way of dance or festivals or anything going on in the town there?

SIRISOOK

When I was young, I remember that my mom would take me to the trance dance ceremony, like a spirit dance, and people getting trance and dance. That's when I hear the music and see things that I never see before, but that, like, when I was very young. Then I just was strike with kind of traditional dance. People do that, but it's just not a cool thing for kids. Especially people who go into a teenager time, something else more fun. But when I when I go to high school, I just change, I just turn, I just stop attend any activities at all. My grades is okay. I'm a lazy kid in term of homework. I don't do homework. I'm very bad, that I sometime would go to school early and take—because everybody would put their homework book on the teacher table so that she can take it to check. I would pull out the best one, the very best one, and then I

would just copy. I'm that bad, because I'm just lazy, and I stop the activity. I just not dance anymore. I don't sing anymore. I just hang out with my friend and do stupid stuff like try alcohol and try smoking. That seemed more exciting for me, hang out with them, you know, ride on the motorbike and see a girl fight.

CLINE

Wow. Very teenage.

SIRISOOK

So that three years of my last three years of high school before go to the college, that I lose track of, of the activity. I be in the hobby group that go and build a toilet or school in the far, far village, and that kind of more like become a hippie, maybe, go with the school and the group and just go help people, go donate, bring the clothes for donate for people in the far, far village where they suffer from cold, and drink a lot of alcohol. I start drinking very early from, like, my sixteen, and I drink a lot. My family do not know about that.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

I start dancing when I was eighteen, when I enter the college in Chiang Mai University.

CLINE

Before we get there, were there any subjects that particularly interested you other than these more performance-oriented activities in school? You said you didn't like math and science. Were there any other areas that kind of interested you, or were you just—I mean, you said you pretty much lost interest in a lot of the stuff by the time you got to high school. But I guess what I'm wondering is if there's anything you were thinking about in terms of what you might wind up doing with your life.

SIRISOOK

I want to be a designer. I draw a lot. I have my set of color that I would draw, and then I would design the costume. When we was young, we would have these figure, comic figure in a piece of paper that they sell one baht for one piece, and it would be these cartoon, female cartoon, and she might come in the underwear. Then she would have a dress, and you take it out and you put it on her, have these two thing. Yes, that's what I collect and put it in the book, in one page of the book. Then I would start to draw my own cartoon, my own ladies, and design a costume for her, so I have a lot of my own drawing. It's a costume with a color and even like a pattern of the flower, of the textile, on that dress. If the magazine that they would admit the—you know, it's a teenage magazine that you would send the drawing of yourself, of whatever you draw, basically Japanese comic cartoon, to them, and then they would publish it, like

the drawing of this month, and then it would be a drawing there with your name, and mine get to be in the magazine once. I was so, so proud. So, you know, we read a lot of cartoon, the Japanese comic.

CLINE

Yes, the manga sort of stuff.

SIRISOOK

Then I would start to draw from that, like imitate that drawing and line. I would consider myself pretty good, because my friend always come to me and ask me to draw for them. Yes, that's the thing. I think it's the only one thing that I doing to be is to become a designer. When they ask me, like, "What do you want to be? What profession that you want to be?" I would say, "Designer," no doctor, no teacher, no nurse. I hate people in the uniform, military, police, no. No, it's not appeal to me that way. Yes, we would want to be a dancer. I very much when I read Japanese comic about ballet, I want to learn ballet, but Chiang Rai is, like, middle of nowhere. There's no ballet school or any class that would teach that, so I would just jump, spin my leg by myself, imagine that I'm onstage and performing ballet, great ballet.

CLINE

Wow. In terms of maybe your encounter with—besides the Japanese sort of manga or anime kinds of things, what about more sort of pop culture coming from the West? What was your experience with music and maybe films and things that were coming from outside your usual sort of context?

SIRISOOK

Very little when I was young. I might be different from other kids because of my brother. He listened to a pop music, from the foreign pop music, rock music from the States, from the Western side. So I would grow up with—what's that—"Handyman" [?], [sings], something, with the kid in the same age could not sing, but I could sing. But I don't know the meaning. I'm not even know what it's—I just know how to make it all—like right now when I listen to the radio, sometime my husband would be surprised that I know a very bad, like, song from—what's the band—Poison or something like that. He, "How do you know that?" Like, "I don't know. I heard it when I was young." So you never know what kind of music that will go to Thailand and become famous. Like for me, my generation is Bananarama, and I would dance to that song. Other than that, it's all cover song from, like, Air Supply. But believe me, when I was young, I don't know what band is that. I just know how to copy it because my brother listened to that. Movie, no, very, very little. Movie theater for us is once-a-year special thing. It got to be something that we really want to see. Then we would get a permission to go see, because it's expensive. Other than that, it's just cartoon from the West, Mickey Mouse, that thing, the rat and the cat that's chasing each other.

CLINE

Tom and Jerry.

SIRISOOK

Yes, and Yogi Bear. That bird, the bird that—

CLINE

Woody Woodpecker.

SIRISOOK

Yes.

CLINE

Wow, those are really going back too. Those aren't even current.

SIRISOOK

Popeye the Sailor Man.

CLINE

Wow. Yes, so this would have been like the 1980s, right?

SIRISOOK

Right.

CLINE

Those were already very old by then, most of those. That's amazing.

SIRISOOK

Well, we always get old stuff from—it would be after the news and before the soap opera we would get about fifteen minute of this comic, and then after that, it's time to go to bed.

CLINE

So you had a TV, though.

SIRISOOK

I have a TV when I was, like, eight or ten years old. Before that, we don't have a TV. We have to go to the neighbor house to watch TV, and the first TV is black and white.

CLINE

So you go through school, you're interesting in performing. You have no access to ballet. You are drawing Japanese-style comics. Then you kind of hit this what we might call delinquent teenage stage. [laughs] What was it you think was influencing you to enter this period where you kind of lost interest in the activities and you just kind of started hanging out and smoking and drinking and doing this thing that so many teenagers kind of seem to wind up doing when they get to that age? Now that you're looking back on it, how does that look to you?

SIRISOOK

I don't know. Yes, I kind of regret about that, because I don't have a family problem. My mom and my dad is not divorce. I can't use that as an excuse. I think it's very important of friends, the friend that you hang out with, who is

that and what influence that they bring to you. I think that I'm very strong now, but I think back in that time I maybe sensitive. I always sensitive, but I may be not strong enough, maybe I can call it weak, kind of maybe a weak teenager, that I let my friend influence me more than what I want to do. I think I want to be accept as a part of the group, and my group is about six, seven people, that they would do this kind of stuff. Yes, I want to be part of that. I want them to take me, so whatever they do, I feel like it's cool. When they tried alcohol, I tried it with them, or when they sneak out from the house to go to the discotheque at night, I want to do that too. I want to be part of that, so I would, like, sneak out from my house to go to the discotheque too. That's very bad. Yes, I wish I haven't done that, but it teach me a lot of how friend can influence you that much. Like I lose interest to everything just because I want to hang out with them. Nothing very good about that, when I look back.

CLINE

You were never caught? Your parents never found out?

SIRISOOK

Oh, she found out. People who do bad thing never get away with that. [laughter] That night that I sneak out to the discotheque I pack another dress with me to change to go to the discotheque, and then I leave my backpack at the front desk when you leave your stuff. Then we having so much fun, I get up and that counter is closed because it too late. It's like four in the morning. So I have no costume to change. I'm in like a dancing costume. Then I go home, and usually my mom will wake up later than that. That day I was, like, hiding outside the fence, look at the door. I was going to take time when she—I know her activity. Because we have the restroom outside the house, she would walk out from the backdoor and go to the restroom, and I was going to take that time to sneak into the backdoor and go back to bed. That day she just walk out from the backdoor, and instead of go to the restroom, she walk to the fence. I don't know why, what make her, and then I was sitting there and she walked. Then she look at me and look at her, and her first reaction is like she still didn't believe that she see me there, so she like, "Oh, you wake up early." Then she look at my dress and like, "Why you dress that way?" Her subconscious defense that, no, my kids wouldn't do that. Then I just have to tell her, and she was just like breakdown, cry. I would be happy if she just hit me or punish me and be the same, but she wouldn't. When I was young, she would hit me, but she would just not talk to me for like three day.

CLINE

Wow. Wow. So how long did you keep that up? Is that something you did through the end of high school, to hang out with your friends and do that stuff?

SIRISOOK

Yes, till the end of high school, and then—

CLINE

You started college?

SIRISOOK

That time every high school kid had to have the system called entrance. We call it entrance. That mean you go for an exam. I mean, you choose to go to where, which university, which department, and then the computer, the thing will calculate for you what kind of subject that you need to take an exam in order to get into that five list that you make. So we go for that. Before that, I go for an exam to go to the nursing school, and I got it. I got it, but that year, the day that we go for the interview, they was like, "Oh, it's no interview." Like, "Oh, why?" Everything got cancelled because the exam sheet was leak, so somebody cheat, basically. So they have to do it all over again. So, like, "Oh, I'm not going to do that anymore." So we go for entrance and I'm the only one in my six people in my group that get accept into Chiang Mai University. Other of my friend didn't get accept into the government university, which is Chiang Mai University is the best for the northern Thai part. So I feel the change. I feel like my life going to change from that moment. I know that I wouldn't hang out with the same people again, and I feel much better than what I am, like I can do it and, yes, definitely my life going to change. I'm going to be another person—not another person, but I'm going to be new person. I would change.

CLINE

So it was like a new beginning.

SIRISOOK

Yeah.

CLINE

So before you got to that point where you were starting to have that feeling, how much interest were you really having in going to college before you took the entrance exam?

SIRISOOK

I think it's just the duty.

CLINE

Just expected, yes.

SIRISOOK

Otherwise, what you going to do with life? So it's like you have to. But then that entire thing change my life since I enter into the Department of Fine Arts. That change me to become a dancer.

CLINE

So how did this happen? You chose to go into fine arts, then?

SIRISOOK

Yes, it's the Department of Fine Arts in the major of Thai arts. So it's alumni, that they have this activity about dancing. We are very much what they call the

new age of the Lanna dance. Lanna is the seven province in northern Thai. They have this Central Dramatic School, [Thai name]. [Thai name], that they teach a classical dance form, and it is the standard, like you have to follow the standard. That's what they call the right form or the right thing to do, and then, like, people who do not such a right thing, but fun. [laughter] I mean in that day. So the alumni and the teacher, they are having this activity for many years ago, that when they start to realize that we have much more variety art form than before. So they start to study into the history and into the ethnic group, and they found that, oh, we have this, we have that, we have the material, that it can become the method of the dance that we can create. So that idea and that activity come to me. So one of the teacher take me and pick me and another three girlfriends to dance for them in just the department activity. We are having an equal number of the transvestite, female, and straight male in the—quite an equal number. So the transvestite and the female, we would grow up together practicing or doing dance, I mean in my department, in my major, Thai art. So it's a mix of transvestite and female always, and now seem like the majority of that changed to be the transvestite. Like the females, they smaller, and it's a big number of the transvestite, gay. That when I start to dance, they teach me how to do the fingernail dance, and we perform it for the department ceremony. Then I has a friend who come from [unclear place name], which she carry her dance form more like Thai [unclear] Burmese trance style with her, and the first time I saw her dance I like, "Wow." I didn't think that I want to do that, but I think it's just cool, like I would like to see it more. Then I think I steal—not steal, but I learned it from her, not learn in the way that she teach me. I just watch her and watch the move, how the body move, how the legs work, and then I just imitate that. So we start to get a dance gig that pay us to dance, and it's even more fun because we have some honorarium from that. The thing is that my teacher, this one, my mentor, he will teach me, or teach us, how to be you and how can you pull out the good thing or great thing in yourself and present it, other than teach you how to dance. But he teach you what do you want to be and what do you want to dance, and then you create it from that. So he would teach you, you know, "So do this and then do this, and then—" No, that's not the way we teach dance. But he would tell me like, "Waewdao, you going to do this dance," name it, "the candle dance." Then like, "Yes." That's the only one instruction, "You going to do the candle dance." So it's my job to find a music or communicate with the musician if we use the live music. My job to find the costume and it's my job to find a movement. What is my candle dance? Is my candle dance fast and then slow or always slow? What style candle dance, Chiang Rai style, Chiang Mai style, Burmese style? It can be, you know, anything. That depend on me who going to create that dance. So that how I learn to create my own style.

## CLINE

It really walks right into what I was waiting to ask, which is being up in that part of northern Thailand, you're very close to Burma and also Laos, the Golden Triangle, so to speak. I was wondering how much influence ultimately you were able to see from Burma and from other areas in the dance and the arts of that part of northern Thailand when you started studying it more.

## SIRISOOK

It's a lot, but it's not a lot, too, because we didn't get to travel there, not yet. I get to travel there eventually, but when I was in the college—also a lack of media. It's no YouTube, it's no computer. I think it's starting the period of computer, so it's very new for us. That 1997, and the computer is still relatively new for us, so no YouTube, no video online. We still use the VHS and the PAL system, not NTSC. So for us to get an access to see all of that is very, very small chance of that. I think we just learned it from the picture, from the history of the mostly picture. Once in a while we would get an opportunity of having people from that culture or carry the influence from the culture into northern Thai and perform that to us, and you just kind of memory by your eyes, taking all of that video into your brain and just remember that. No digital camera, so film camera too expensive for student to have for it, no—how you call it—record about that. I think we learned it from a person, from people similar, which does another advantage of living in northern Thai, is that we have a deep history of migration. We have people migrated from Burma and from Laos, and they come with their own ethnicity, which carry back their craft, textile and dance and music with them. So in Chiang Mai, if you go to Wulai area, you find Thai khun, which is also from Shan State of Burma. Or like you go a little bit below Chiang Mai in Lamphun and you find the Thai Yong people, which is, like, travel from south of Laos, and they carry a different language and also textile and dance, so all of that. Before, if one being that the department going to teach me very good one, it's to teach you who you are and realize that you are not just Thai people, but you have your ethnicity. I'm Thai Yong, yet the language I speak is Yong, so it's no point to be embarrassed and hiding that, which happens so much in my time, that the central Thai or Thai government want everybody to feel the same, being that you are Thai. So you are Thai, period. You speak Thai. So people will act like I don't know that language, the whatever language that when you are at home you speak. You try to speak this kind of broken—not broken, but still kind of funny Thai to each other, because you pretend to be, and whoever enter into this department is teach you that you are who you are, so take advantage from that. Take it for granted. You are not a minority, but you have your own culture, and that's a great thing, so use it. Use it for your class. Use it for your research. Use it for your performance. That's what the department teach me. I still don't know what minority or my ethnicity

is. I'm part Burmese, so I take that for granted too. Because I'm part Burmese, so I can do a little bit of Burmese movement. I can. I claim it. I'm the Lanna people. I'm Kun Lung, which is like the native Lanna. That's what I believe I am.

CLINE

So when you say they're teaching at the university in this department Thai arts—this is an interesting question, considering what you just said—specifically you're doing dance. What else was the university offering in the program under that title of Thai arts specifically?

SIRISOOK

You might think that, okay, we do Thai painting. No. We do a little bit to pass that course. For our freshman year, we still have to learn the basic of art, let's say, Occidental and Oriental art, so the history of arts, drawing, painting, sculpting, printing, and design. Everything we have to learn the basic, the same, and then by the second year, your sophomore year, then you start to go to your major. If your major is printing, then you learn specifically for that, and my major is Thai art, so we learn a little bit of Thai painting, but what we learn so much is architecture. We learn a different style, period, region. Different, you know, region have different architect. We also learn how to use that knowledge into your real life, how to adjust it so that you can really use it. A problem of the art program in Thailand, I would say, or maybe just in my university is that you know how to make art, but you don't know how to sell it, how to present it. So this is "Untitled Number One," and that's it. Yes, but why should I buy it? Something like that. So my major, Thai art, is about that, like you got to have the background, you got to have the work, and you got to have the explanation of why and how that and what it lead to. If you can present that, then you can sell your work. Like, "Oh, the background my dance is this, the textile that I wear is belong to this, this, this, and it means this, this, this, therefore why I wear it. And the movement, if the textile represent an ocean, my movement is also represent that ocean, and the concept is this, this, this." So you would see this, or this thing would present this. You have an answer for everything, not like, "Oh, I wear it because it's beautiful." Maybe you can sell it for some time, but not for somebody who looking for something more meaningful.

CLINE

Interesting.

SIRISOOK

We learn history of the border country, surrounding country, and that very important because when you know history, you can relate to that, you can pull the material from that to use with your work. So we learn textile. We learn design, how to design. We even have a class that we have to do flower arrangement specifically and makeup and making ceramic and making,

building, a packaging for the ceramic that you work on. So you know how to make ceramic, you know how to present it, and you also know how to make a package for that, like how to protect your ceramic. So you have to make a package, and then they will, like, let it go from, like, five feet high, and if your ceramic survive, then you pass. If it not survive, then you not pass. [laughs] You take again.. How you understand the shape of that—and all of that, I would say, is very useful. I don't know who is actually create that curriculum, but you can use everything knowledge of that in the real life. I know how to do flower, so if you told me that one event that I have to do flower, I know how to do that. You throw me a group of dancer, I know how to do makeup for them, do hair. You throw me a clay, I can make a ceramic. So it's so much of adjusting whatever in the surrounding to get a piece of that.

CLINE

Wow. What kind of people were the other students there in that program and how many came from outside that area, if any?

SIRISOOK

In my class mostly people from very different field, like different class in high school. We have a mix of everything. I can't even describe it, but everybody have their own personality, special personality, that by the end of the fourth year, that will become your project, like they pull out the ancestor style. I don't know. It's like they pull out their hometown into their work, mostly. Some would just do it because you have to graduate, but some really show what you're interest is and your background is. I can't even explain, but I think everybody shared the same thing of having a history, having a different history, but you have a history that you can relate to. I think that what my class is.

CLINE

So people are coming from all over Thailand to be in this program?

SIRISOOK

Yes. Now we change, though. Now most of people come from northern Thai part, and they come with a very clear skill. Like if this person can make this thing, like make this craft, then they come with that, and the department accept them because of that, that skill. They have a special process to take the student who have a special skill in to study. In my generation very few people, two or three people, come with that special skill. Other than that, you just come through the entrance, the exam by the government system, and then you found yourself, that you have a different skill than other people.

CLINE

Thailand is the only country in that area that was not colonized by a Western country, so it's free of a lot of that colonial sort of layer. How much do you think the emphasis on learning Thai arts comes from a strong sense of pride in

Thai culture in the sense of being, in this case, free of the influence from the outside? No?

SIRISOOK

No, doesn't matter for me. It's from my opinion. I don't know for others. Maybe I can't say that. Maybe that not the right thing to say, because we say that we never been colonized, so that we have these culture. Maybe if we been colonized, we might have a different one, and I can't say that I don't care or it doesn't matter, because it not happen. If it happen, and then we have another one, I might have a different answer. Now that I can say it doesn't matter for me because we never face that, yes, yes.

CLINE

I just wondered, the people who designed this program, if they sort of—it's fairly unique, from my experience. It's a unique kind of sounding program, and so much of the time in other nations that have a similar deep tradition of their own culture, a lot of the time their own culture was not encouraged to be learned or the performing arts were not encouraged to be continued because the colonial culture was considered better or in some way more desirable or more advanced. Anyway, I'm just explaining where my question came from. What did your parents think of this direction in your schooling and your life, this life direction at the university that you were doing then?

SIRISOOK

They are happy, especially my mom. She have a lot of pride in me. I'm the first one in the family who get to, first of all, fly on the airplane domestically. Then after that, I'm the only one who get to fly on the airplane to another country, so I'm the first one who getting out of the country. So I get to go to perform in a different countries, and that, for my mom, is pride. She has a pride because that I preserve the culture, too, that I am protecting—maybe not the word “protecting,” but practicing the culture, yes, because not so many people do that.

CLINE

How much interest did you have in the escalation of Western pop culture through that time period? I mean, you had to have seen it, right? It was there. You couldn't ignore it, I guess.

SIRISOOK

I have fun with that. Just Western culture itself is new for me every time when I get to go dance, to promote Thailand, when I get to be in the foreign country. It's fun to learn, it's fun to experience it, but I also have a pride in my own culture, too, that I get to be the one who present it to another culture.

CLINE

What did your brother and sister wind up doing? I mean, we know what happened to your brother, but what direction did they go?

SIRISOOK

My brother was going to take over my dad business. He learned specifically for that, and my dad's still doing the business with no helper. He just run it by himself. My sister end up having two kids and work with the insurance company, which she work very hard toward for her first five year, and then after that, she was just kind of leave it that way. Once when you have a customer and they pay the insurance and you get a percentage from that, and she would just keep it going, but she's not do it to find another customer to make it higher. She just happy with what she have and more concentrate on her kids. Also, we actually torn down the factory that my dad had, built a small corner for him so he can still do the thing that he like, but then we build the apartment. So she and her husband own the apartment for rent, start to get some profit from that, but they still have to pay back to the bank for the bank loan too. So that direction goes, just maybe thinking about expanding, have another one, because she think that's a good way to make a living, because once it's there, it's there, and you can just get money from that, maintain it a little bit.

CLINE

So when did you graduate from university in Chiang Mai?

SIRISOOK

I graduate in 1999, Chiang Mai University, graduate and work with one of my teacher.

CLINE

What was your teacher's name, the one who you talked about earlier who was your mentor?

SIRISOOK

Ajahn [Thai name]. [Thai name] is his name. In Thai we call ajahn. It's like the word sensei.

CLINE

Were there any other influential teachers other than him that you'd like to mention from this period?

SIRISOOK

Ajahn [Thai name], and then Ajahn [Thai name]. Ajahn [Thai name] is much younger than Ajahn [Thai name]. He's the generation of—my husband say that Ajahn [Thai name] is like a trickster. He throw this idea to his student, including Ajahn [Thai name], which is his student, too, and then he become the teacher. These people use that idea and knowledge to build something from that, so Ajahn [Thai name] building his own dance and his own style and teach another generation. Then he also teach me and nurturing me as a dancer too. So Ajahn [Thai name] is another influence of people who have the guts to do things and don't care, like don't care about what people say. If you like to do that, you love to do that, and you happy to do that, do it, that kind of

person. Then Ajahn [Thai name], Ajahn [Thai name] is the first female teacher that invented the Lanna puppet. We don't have a puppet culture, so she's the one who invented the rod puppet.

CLINE

Like the Balinese style, sort of.

SIRISOOK

Yes, but not a shadow puppet. It's like a three-dimension puppet. I'm the second generation in the puppet troupe that she built name Hobby Hut [Puppet Theatre], and she still have that troupe. The new student, the new generation is learning it now. So, yes, that a couple people that give me an inspiration and influence and also a knowledge of performing arts.

CLINE

I think we'll call it right now, and we'll pick up next time with the years that lead you to the decision to come to UCLA, and we'll talk about your experience at UCLA in the Worlds Arts and Cultures and how that led to you deciding to start your own dance company here in Los Angeles.

SIRISOOK

Lan Sattha.

CLINE

Does that work for you?

SIRISOOK

Yes.

CLINE

Okay, thank you very much. [End of July 29, 2011 interview]

## **1.2. Session Two (August 3, 2011)**

CLINE

Today is August 3rd, 2011. This is Alex Cline interviewing Waewdao Sirisook at my home studio in Culver City [California]. This is our second session.

Good morning.

SIRISOOK

Good morning, Alex.

CLINE

Thanks for coming again. We talked last time about your early life, and we brought you up to the point where you are at the University in Chiang Mai and your graduation from there in Thai arts in the Department of Fine Arts there. I had a few follow-up questions about this period before we move on chronologically from there. One is, you mentioned earlier that based on some things you had seen, I guess, in Japanese cartoons and things, you had an interest in ballet. You actually just kind of had to imagine, I guess, what that

might be like because you didn't have any way to experience ballet directly where you were in Chiang Rai. I wanted to ask you if once you got the university, if you had any opportunity to have any experiences, direct or indirect, with Western dance traditions like ballet or modern dance or anything outside which you were studying at the time.

SIRISOOK

Not at all.

CLINE

None?

SIRISOOK

No. If anything we involved with that, it's probably just Western art history and Western art in particular, like fine art, because that include in my first two year in the college.

CLINE

How long was it before you had any opportunity to experience Western dance forms?

SIRISOOK

None, none.

CLINE

None. Okay. Wow. Did you continue to have a fascination with it or an interest in checking it out?

SIRISOOK

Not at all because I start to do my traditional and contemporary northern Thai dance style, yes, when I'm in my freshman year, and that took all my time, not that I just don't care about that anymore, but it's just gone. I mean, since my teenage prom, I think I already forgot about that. That thing, my fascination of that Japanese comic about a ballet in the comic is, like, when I was like eight to ten, twelve, and after that, I have another concentration.

CLINE

You mentioned when you were at the university, it sounded like one of the things you were able to do was begin to perform, and not only to perform, but to perform outside the immediate area. Where did you travel to perform when you were in college?

SIRISOOK

I start to perform with the organization that work with the TAT, Tourism Authority of Thailand. It's a government department that do only promote and support the tourist culture in Thailand. So the first place that I get to go riding on the airplane outside the country is Japan.

CLINE

Oh, really.

SIRISOOK

We attend the Asian Month Festival in Fukuoka, and that unforgettable experience, first time to Japan. It's like wow. Then after that, I still continue working with them, and we get to go to several places, Germany, South Korea, Hong Kong, and we perform—I mean, we go back to Japan several times after that too.

CLINE

At what point in your college years did this happen? Did it happen right away or later, or how far into your studies?

SIRISOOK

I believe it's in sophomore year.

CLINE

What were your impressions? What did you think, first of all, being the first one in your family, as you said, to get on an airplane? But being in a totally different place, in a different culture, what was that like for you?

SIRISOOK

I really take it for granted. I suck every opportunity, and also, of course we want to impress people, not only to impress the organization that you go with. It might sound kind of cheesy, but you carry the face of Thailand with you, so what people going to see is what the culture say, the Thai culture say for you and for them. I perform my best every time. I don't know. Maybe it's over the top or maybe it really meet the quality, so that that's why they keep calling me back to perform with them. Also, the type of the performance we perform that time, it's quite different from what it exist before, because they usually bring a group of the classical Thai dance, which have a certain style, and now we try to present to the northern Thai style dance, which is quite new. So it's something different from what they used to see, so it's a lot of pressure, it's a lot of expectation, but I think we do very well during that time, and I really enjoy it and totally—I don't know—thankful for all that situation. It just right people, right time, in the right place, that they get to see me and bring me out for the performance.

CLINE

What did you think of Japan, for example? Let me back up and include this. How much up to the point had you even been outside northern Thailand?

SIRISOOK

Yes, not that much. So, yes, Japan, when we would grow up with that fascination of Japanese comic and products already, so to get to go there is a big deal, and we are very fascinated by the system of, like, wow, they have these crossing thing, like the sign, that it have the sound, [demonstrates], of the bird or whatever, and sometimes it's a song. We're like, "Wow, it's so clean, clean," and everything just, like, look right. Fashion is different. People wear different thing, food. Even I bring back home kinds of hotel stuff like shampoo,

soap, razor, brush. Whatever in the toilet, we take it every day and we share it between the dancer. So it's just everything from Japan looks good. It's look extraordinary, even just the hotel shampoo. Yes, it just so new for me, that I take every minute for a good experience.

CLINE

What about Germany? Was this your first experience being outside of Asian culture?

SIRISOOK

Right.

CLINE

What was that like for you?

SIRISOOK

Yes, we stay in Germany for, like, almost a month or even longer. It's wonderful for me because it's the first time the weather is just right, people, food. We enjoy every moment too. The people still ask me which part of, you know, the world that you been visit and you like, and I got to say Germany.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

Even if some people might say, "Oh, it's boring and it's sometime racist." But, no, no. But I don't know. I just like it, I just like it. But, no, like it doesn't mean that you really can live there for long term. Like Japan, I like it, but would I be able to live there? No, no. Three week is probably the longest one. Three month is probably the longest I can stay if I really have to. It's something in that when you visit for a short time, you didn't think about that. It's just fun and it's just right, but if I had to stay for longer, which I did stay for a little longer, like two week, it just so tight and everything have its own system, which made me tired, and that's not a thing that I grow up with and not the thing that I grow up with, but it's the thing that I can't adjust to.

CLINE

What was it like for you being around white Europeans in a very old European culture? Where specifically in Germany were you?

SIRISOOK

We went to Munich, Berlin, Dresden.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

SIRISOOK

Yes, we tour.

CLINE

What year would this have been? Do you know, roughly?

SIRISOOK

I think probably '98. Yes, I think '98.

CLINE

So the Berlin Wall was down at that point.

SIRISOOK

Yes, we visit the wall. Feel good. Feel like the center of attention. It's not so many Asian there, especially it's not so many young Asian there. But back in that time I would have to say with my ego that it's not so many young Asian that good-looking. You can erase that. [laughter] Yes, we go out almost every night to the club there. We feel good. We feel like a center of attention. Everybody pay attention to us. Everybody come to talk with us. After, then performing good cultural dance. We are also performing good club dance in the club too. I didn't feel the conservative side of that there because I was so young and, I might be able to say, innocent in some way, that I didn't get that feeling at all of racism or conservative side. I just have fun. But now I look back, you know, I just don't know if I get to go back again, I would feel the same.

CLINE

You mentioned a couple of the dances that you were encouraged to do sort of your own versions of when you were being trained. One of them was that you said a candle dance, one you mentioned was a fingernail dance. Maybe you can describe what they are or what that means and how much of this type of—or specifically the type of dancing that you were doing when you were performing in these countries.

SIRISOOK

It's two kind of this touring, performing, one with the government and with a certain organization. Another one is more of a private funding and—how can I say that—support. Like went to Japan so many time with a person who fund the dancer and musician to go there to perform for their own exhibition for their own event. During that time is for me to get to perform my own version or creation of dance. Sometime improvise and sometime a set, but most of the time when it go to the private session, that means that less musician and less dancer, usually only one musician and two dancer, at the most. Three is the maximum. So if we don't do duet, then we usually do solo, for the solo, because it's 100 percent improvisation with the musician. I tell the musician what kind of music I want. If I can name the song, I name the song. If not, I just tell him that something sweet and slow at the beginning and get faster toward the end, and usually we just use the signal. Fast signal like nodding or look at him and smiling, and he would know that I'm ready to finish the piece, so we make a finishing. If I go with the government, that a bigger group, so we have to rehearse and we have to come up with the set performance. It doesn't mean that I don't put my creation or personality in that at all, because all this is new. We not follow the old rule or the kind of classical dance form, so even though

we perform a classical dance, but we cut a lot. We shortcut thing because the classical dance take fifteen minute one piece, and we know the audience can't take that. We also want to make it exciting, so we would try to throw everything within thirty minute, so that mean you change quick, you perform quick, you only cut the part that you think is the best movement and the beautiful one and put it together. Some dance, we want to create something very new, so we just collaborate and choreograph together within the dancer. Of course, the organization finance. That mean they come up with the theme, saying that, "We want you to do this dance." So they take care of the costume and our props. We just have to choreograph it. They also take care of the music sometime. Usually when we go with government, we use most of the time the record, CD. So they put a lot of special effort in that, the sound of the wind, [demonstrates], something dreamy or something, something very beautiful to make it like a soundscape for the entire set of dance.

CLINE

So this private type that you were describing where there's maybe only two dancers and one musician, what instrument might the musician be playing?

SIRISOOK

Everything.

CLINE

He plays everything? He just switches instruments?

SIRISOOK

He just switch the instrument. Sometime the dancer who's not performing yet will get to help do a small percussion thing. Like I did it sometime, I do the ching, a small one, bronze. It go [demonstrates].

CLINE

Yes, almost like a little finger cymbal sort of sound, yes.

SIRISOOK

Just to keep the beat, but I found it very difficult. [laughs]

CLINE

Then what instruments would maybe the musician be playing? Are these traditional instruments or modern instruments or both?

SIRISOOK

It traditional with a contemporary style, form. Like he would have the [Thai word]. It's like the two-string—

CLINE

Yes, like the er-hu in the Chinese.

SIRISOOK

Right, right. Yes, it's different, just a different technique to play. That his specialty. He's very good with that. I mean, I'm talking now for the particular

person, musician. His name is [unclear], which have a lot of influence, and we work together a lot. He can do the sun, which is like a—

CLINE

Yes, more like a lute or a pipa or one of those kind of--

SIRISOOK

Like a guitar, that northern Thai style, the flute and the heart lute [pin pia] that made from either—gourd?

CLINE

Gourd.

SIRISOOK

Gourd or coconut shell, and that's my favorite instrument.

CLINE

Is this someone who was also in that program at the university?

SIRISOOK

Yes.

CLINE

Were they training in music as well?

SIRISOOK

Yes, and he now teaching at the university.

CLINE

Wow. What about performances in other parts of Thailand? Was there anything going on as far as that went while you were at the university? Did you perform in other areas, like in the south or central parts of Thailand?

SIRISOOK

Most of the time central part, not really get to go to the south much, not until, like, the last three, four year. Usually in central part. We talk about central part. That most of the time is Bangkok.

CLINE

What was that like for you? What were your feelings?

SIRISOOK

The feeling about the performance?

CLINE

Or of Bangkok.

SIRISOOK

Oh, Bangkok is very unique, the place that I would never dream to live in and I would never, ever live in Bangkok. For real. It's just pollute. It's like New York, but it times ten. I don't know. It's just nothing that attractive to me at all. I hate Bangkok. I perform in Bangkok, it not because I perform for my teacher, then it's all just about job and make money.

CLINE

So you were representing the northern Thai style again when you'd be playing there, performing there. When you described what you were describing in that so much of what you were doing was improvisation, how much of that is actually part of that dance and music tradition and how much of that is a more recent sort of development?

SIRISOOK

Difficult to say. I think from the beginning it might be seventy-thirty, of tradition, seventy, and the new development is about thirty. Then counted by the year, I think the personal developments start to take over the tradition until I can't separate that two from each other anymore because it become me. That's the great thing about northern Thai part, is that we lost the tradition, we lost the history, during the wartime. Going back to what we talk about in last session about we have a pride that we never been colonized by anything, by any country, it's actually not true, because in the northern Thai part we've been colonized by the Burmese for over 200 year. The government never talk about that because they don't want to talk about that because they ignore it because it just not in their zone of interest at all. So during that time we lost our history. We can say that. But we also gained some other history, too, which mean history of us being colonized by Burmese, and we exchange a lot of culture. People get migrated from place to place and carry their culture to that area. Our culture get carried there too. So we are mix of everything, and that become now we also take it for granted. That become our selling point, that we have such a diversity of the ethnicity and culture, that we can freely do anything with that, including a performance, because we take it as in the history. Or even now, we have a mix of these ethnic group and this culture, so if we perform this dance, it doesn't mean that we are performing a Burmese dance, but we performing the dance that have the Burmese influence from these Thai Yai ethnic group or Thai Khun ethnic group. So, you know, everything right, nothing wrong.  
[laughter]

CLINE

How much of that attitude is carried out, though, in sort of the general population? Do you find that people are tolerant of these influences? What was the opinion, for example, of if you're northern Thai, what would one normally think of the Burmese? What's the attitude? Okay?

SIRISOOK

Okay, okay. Yes, no, nothing negative, no negative thing at all, because so what? So what? When we was young, I remember that in the school textbook we was taught to hate the Burmese because they come to Thailand, they went to Ayutthaya, they killed people, they burned the temple, they burned all the gold stupa and carry it back to their country, they rape people, they kill people, uh-huh. So we were supposed to hate them.

CLINE

Right, that's what I was wondering.

SIRISOOK

That's what in the history book.

CLINE

A little propaganda there, yes.

SIRISOOK

We like, that's okay. Nobody really know what happened in the day, and it's the war, so the people who stronger will always beat people who's weaker. It go back to the fact that nobody really know what's the fact is. Somebody write a history. Somebody write the history, and we live with the fact, we live the truth that we have a mix of these, so we can't hate it or like it. We just live with that and we feel naturally fine, don't try to make us feel bad about others, just like what they try to do now with the Cambodian thing and just, like, it make no sense at all.

CLINE

How much, if any, contact did you have with singing or experiencing the refugee situation in northern Thailand near the Burmese border with Burmese coming across to escape Myanmar, as they call it now? Anything?

SIRISOOK

A lot. We just didn't think that it's a critical thing, or at least we just didn't care that it's critical. For us, the Burmese is probably like the Latino here, that they found a better life across the country, so they try to migrate to Thailand and work mostly in labor site, gain less payment, but they more happy to do that, that at least we probably have a little more democracy than in their country.

CLINE

I think so.

SIRISOOK

I hope and I think so. They're freely to do a certain thing that they can't do there. So for us, nothing serious. You want to go across, go across. We have a lot of illegal immigrant in Thailand and northern Thai. Right now the laws say that you can work if your—how you call it—employer take you or make this document for you. It's like a temporary document for foreign immigrant. So every year they just have to extend it. So they make it easier for people, and if you live illegally, you just get the money under the table. People willing to hide and pay you because it's lower than the normal labor. So that's the refugee situation that we all experience, but we don't take it seriously, like pay a lot of sympathy and that.

CLINE

What did you feel the response was in other parts of Thailand, like in Bangkok or whatever, to what you were presenting, representing the northern Thai style of dance?

SIRISOOK

Well, except I believe that long time ago it is not. Let's say, back then, twenty years ago, it's not. People probably against that a little bit, of saying that's not Thai. Then you say, "Of course it's not Thai," because it's not Thai Lanna; it's the part that you never talk about in your textbook. You want everybody to be Thai, but, you know, we found our kitsch is that we selling Lanna. So right now since I start to perform, people take it very, very well, been fascinated by the performance and also the diversity of the style, and somehow I think we put a lot of personality in that that you not be able to put in the classical form because it's so strict. It means what it means. But for us, we have a lot of flexibility. Also, we adjust it so that it get more exciting. We only take the exciting part, and then take out the boring part or slow part or whatever. People like it, and not only that. I think it get practice in some group or community there, too, that they now know that they can't sell the same thing anymore. Nobody's going to hire them to do the same thing, long performance, you know, so they did change it too. But that not apply to a very conservative classical one like khon, the mass dance, that they still practice a strong traditional style. But that also get support by the government and also the royalty too. So they bring it alive again. They support it, and people now—from like last ten year, khon is almost die because it's long, just it's boring, because people don't understand the context and story that the performer or the story try to tell at all. So it like the old, old thing, boring, but they develop it. They start to perform it in a different way, slightly different way, put more of a technique in term of special effect, I think, more, and now people like to go see the khon. They think that's the cool thing to go see. That's another part. That the classical dance.

CLINE

How often would you have the opportunity to actually perform the dances in their full, quote, "boring" longer, slower form, and if you did, where would you get to perform that, rather than these kind of shorter, more edited, more kind of exciting versions of the pieces that you were dancing?

SIRISOOK

No, I never get to perform.

CLINE

Never?

SIRISOOK

Never, because I'm not trained in that.

CLINE

No, I don't mean the classical form, but I just mean when you're doing the things that you do, when would you get to do kind of the longer—when would you get to do versions where you don't have to think so much about the audience's attention span or desire for excitement or whatever? Would that ever present itself?

SIRISOOK

Yes, one, in my own performance when I create or organize my own performance or maybe co-organize it with other artists, and two, is in—I can't name it. I can't tell you, but in sometime a party. It's not like informal. Sometimes it is formal, but I just get my own time to perform whatever I want and however long I want. But I don't know. I still care about the audience, how they're going to feel if it get longer, so I think subconsciously I still limit it in time. Let's say, twelve, thirteen minute is the longest. Back in the day that would never happen. Five, seven minute is probably the longest one, even though in my own version.

CLINE

Interesting. How much do you think as time has gone on, the gradually shorter attention span of most people has affected some of these more traditional art forms, like you mentioned the mask dance that was very long and is perceived now as kind of very boring? How much do you think modern people's interest in having things be very fast and exciting and not too long is changing the performance of traditional sorts of art forms like what you're coming out of?

SIRISOOK

A lot, I would say 80 percent of that perception, or maybe we think that they want it that way, so we try to present it that way. Maybe they might want it longer, but we don't know. We make it shorter and shorter and shorter, and they like it more and more. So we both play the rule that we think they like it, and they play the rule that they think we will like it by respond to a shorter one better than longer one.

CLINE

Yes, it's an interesting phenomenon. Everything's speeding up and getting shorter. So, specifically, how much of this sort of activity, these performances and things, were you doing after you graduated from the university in Chiang Mai, and what specifically were you doing during those years before you left Thailand?

SIRISOOK

I start to work with one of my teacher who teach Thai textile in the specific program that she get fund by American foundation called the Grand Circle Foundation, that we start to have this project called Weaver for the Environment, where we went to a village, textile village, in Sanpatong—[Thai village], actually—to help people, especially female, who have a risk of being a

prostitute, or some is, like, retiring from prostitution, to help them produce the textile and also find them a market. You know, you produce a textile, but you can't sell it, so what's you do? Either go back to work in the rice field or go to be a prostitute. So we have that money to help them, but I only work for that project for a year because they running out of money and the grant didn't continue to give money. Then after that, have some savings, so I went to Indonesia, Bali, to study Balinese dance, because I have an impression of that since I was the sophomore. One of my teacher showed me, showed the class, the video of the Balinese dance when they are in trance, and that's so powerful that I feel that one day I will learn that. Even when I'm in the university, I try to perform that, too, with that impression or go to the fabric market and try to find the closest style of textile as possible that I see in the video, which is even black and white, find something like that and start to dress like that and make the ornament by ourself, try to adapt and apply things, that it look like Balinese dance. Going back and look at that, like, why do you do that? But it's fun. It's fun and I get to do new thing. So I have that dream to go to study, so I eventually achieve my dream, stay there for half a year, study Balinese dance and a little bit of music, know people there, and then I come back, work with an organization, that we tried to produce a show, a play in the water. It was supposed to be in the river, but instead we adapt to use it with like a kind of big pond, like giant one. It used to be a restaurant area, and that they want to change it to a restaurant with a play, so we premiere it. But the marketing is all very good, so we get to perform for several months, and then running out of money, so the project is closed.

CLINE

Where was that?

SIRISOOK

It's in Chiang Mai. It's not outskirts of the city, but quite far from the downtown, probably about twenty-minute drive. Maybe now it nothing for a twenty-minute drive, okay. But with that big show with like thirty cast member, you need a better marketing to get the audience and the tour. You supposed to have it, like, the contract signed like year in advance to get the tour there and make sure that you have money to support all the cast. So that didn't run well, and also, it's not very healthy, especially for me, because it's in the water, and it's not the running water, and I have to go underwater every time at night. We perform it at night. So it's kind of not very clean and the best solution for me, but I'm happy to work on that. I get a good experience. Never such a ghost story that we passing while other cast member did. That's another thing.

CLINE

Going back to the Balinese experience, how did you find the person or people that you were learning from in Bali? How did you hook up your connection there?

SIRISOOK

I just go. I just go find a school.

CLINE

Where was it?

SIRISOOK

It's in Denpasar.

CLINE

Who was your teacher or teachers?

SIRISOOK

I went to a school, like an art school, called [Indonesian name] Denpasar Indonesia. It's like University of California [unclear], so it's like [Indonesian name] Denpasar or Surakarta or Jakarta, and they have it in different places. I just go there and take class there. Also, the problem that I have learning that time is that they cancel class just because of the festival, so it didn't condense enough or concentrate enough for me, so I find the private class that, you know, you pay the instructor privately. So my first instructor for private class is Bu Susilawati, which is very, very, very strict. She teach little kids to dance, to do the Balinese dance. Her principle is like everything going to be right, everything going to be the way it should be, which I'm really thankful for that, because without that, I would get all wrong, because my second instructor is [Balinese name], which she's a great dancer, great instructor, but she won't be concerned about a small detail, like, "You already know the detail. You come here to learn the movement from me." So she won't correct me, while my first instructor correct me a lot, a lot, a lot. Like she could hit you in the head if you do something wrong, wrong tilt of the head. Yes, and that's very good experience, very, very concentrate. They work hard.

CLINE

What was your impression of those six months in Bali just as an experience of being in Bali?

SIRISOOK

Other than good dance experience? Hospitality and the richness of their belief in culture and ceremony is everywhere. Music is everywhere. Dance is everywhere, and offering all kind of that stuff, which we still practice that in northern Thailand, but it start to get vanish. They still practice it regularly and very concentrate on that, and that's a good impression about that. Also, like I say, they work hard. For me, I look at them as this is golden time for them for art and culture because they not only work hard in their field, but they also take another theory and idea from other culture, say, Western. So they combine it

together. They try to expand their work in a different way. They try. I don't know if they success with that, but they definitely work hard to achieve that, and for me, it feel like a golden time for them, while for us, we just want to sell it. The island culture, especially in northern Thai part, we do whatever that is the best selling.

CLINE

Interesting. Did you get to experience the trance dance that you were interested in experiencing when you were in Bali? Did you see that?

SIRISOOK

No, no. No, I see the tourist version one, but I didn't see the real one.

CLINE

You said that you saw trance dancing in northern Thailand when you were young. What was that like? What was your feeling about that? What was going on with that?

SIRISOOK

Weird that time, but when I get to experience it again after I come back from Bali and work in the hotel business, and we host the trance dance sometime because the owner want to maintain all of these, so the hotel host it sometime.

CLINE

Interesting.

SIRISOOK

Also, I think it's always there. The trance dance, it happen every year. I just didn't get to experience it again. So when all these thing come back to me again and realize that we always have that, so I attend the trance dance more in terms of just observe it, and they more likely invite me to dance in the ceremony almost every time. So that's a great experience. I found that we have a lot of rich culture that's still alive, and people still practice that. The content and the style might change due to the economy, due to the fashion, due to the society, but the core, the main belief of that is still there. It's for people to connect with their ancestor, but it's also something else in that, like you tell your status in the society by hosting the trance dance or being a medium. You tell the history by that, because when you dance, when you do trance dance, you dance your version of your ancestor or whatever spirit that come to possess you, that you try to build your reputation and status in the society that different from other people, say, that my ancestor's the great warrior or a princess, prince, or king or queen or some royalty, which give you a different status from other people.

CLINE

Interesting. Wow. So you came back from Bali, you did this show in the water, and that ended eventually, and it sounded like you went into the hotel business at some point. What happened exactly?

SIRISOOK

The hotel owner know people who graduate from the same department, the Fine Art Department and specifically Thai art. A lot of Thai art student who graduate work there. It's the hub of the monster. So they would like to have the art and culture department in the hotel too. They want to make it different from other hotel, not only the service, not only the food, not only—but they want a beautiful architect in the hotel that reflect the Lanna style and also art and culture, so they have their own performance group that will perform for the client.

CLINE

What was the name of the hotel?

SIRISOOK

It's the Mandarin Oriental group. I mean, the owner built the hotel, and the Mandarin Oriental chain managed it. So the owner want the hotel to have a certain name, which is Dara Dhevi, so it say Mandarin Oriental Dara Dhevi, Chiang Mai. So it's the combination of the two name together. So I work on that as a head of the department, the Art and Culture Department, and our job is to produce a performance, and just it's great, pay well, fun. I have my own thing, but up to one point I can't stand it anymore because it's all about commercial, not that it do anything bad. Really it give a job to a dancer and they get to perform. It just so heavy in the commercial way, and I just get tired of that.

CLINE

It's a very tourist approach.

SIRISOOK

You going to have to do whatever the client asks you to do. I mean, like I say, it's nothing negative about that. It's good. It's good. I still get to create a lot of fantastic thing. I just get tired of that. So my friend who I knew from Bali who's a musician visit me in Chiang Mai, and he say, "You should think about getting a master, especially in dance or choreography, because you have that ability. You different. You can create your own work," so we start to look at the program.

CLINE

How old were you then, and what year was this?

SIRISOOK

I was twenty-four.

CLINE

So you did a lot before you were twenty-four. So what did you look at then? What did you start looking at in terms of programs to achieve that?

SIRISOOK

We just look at a lot of stuff just online, and my goal is to start in next year, fall, but we miss a lot of the application deadline already. I think I start to look at it in November. A lot of application deadline probably due in August or, yes,

earlier than that. So we found UCLA and we apply for that. It's the first university that I apply for, and then after that, I also apply for SUNY Brockport, Sarah Lawrence [College], very conservative one—I don't know why I apply for that—and, you know, Mills College. All of that, I get the rejection letter because my undergrad degree is not related to what I apply for, and only World Arts and Cultures of UCLA take me.

CLINE

Interesting. What experience did you have, if any, outside Germany, you mentioned, in traveling outside of Asia?

SIRISOOK

No, I also went to another place, like France. I get to come to the State twice, one in New York and then another one in L.A. before I apply for that.

CLINE

Was that also with the tour, then, of your dancing, or was that something else?

SIRISOOK

In L.A. we come for the Chiang Mai University Alumna Association of Los Angeles.

CLINE

Wow. Okay.

SIRISOOK

They have a celebration of forty years of Chiang Mai University. They want to have some performance with dinner, a gala, so they bring the alumni to come to perform. So that's the first time I come. Then after that, I went to New York, perform at Lincoln [Center for the Performing Arts] plaza. That for the Thai Airways International [phonetic] for the press conference about the new route, Bangkok, New York, nonstop flight. We perform kind of the idea of the bird that go to several place.

CLINE

So how many, if any, universities or colleges did you apply to that were outside the United States?

SIRISOOK

None. Before I go to Bali, I did apply for the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, went for the audition, but didn't pass because my English is not that good.

CLINE

Interesting. I was going to ask you—maybe this is the time to ask, when did you start working on your English? When did you start learning English?

SIRISOOK

I mean, they teach English in high school. I mean, I think start from primary school, but, you know, it just very basic, basic one, start from a, b, c, d. I never get a good grade in English. In high school okay, but when I went to the

university, I always get a low, lowest grade. We have to take two English class, fundamental English 101 and 102, and I get the lowest grade, like just to pass, like a [unclear]. I'm very bad with the tense and grammar because we not grow up with that. Our language structure is not like that. I just speak English because I get to travel a lot outside the country, and I just want to talk. I just talk my way, correct or not, I don't know, but I just say, and that's the way I practice English.

CLINE

That's good.

SIRISOOK

That's a good thing about get to travel out of the country, that you got to speak, otherwise you will not be able to communicate. Then when I go to Bali, instead of learning Basai, Indonesian, I get a lot of the international student there who come from, like, Hong Kong and the State and also United Kingdom, so we have to communicate in English. That when I start to really practice English.

CLINE

I see. So what was your impression, then, of the United States after your trips to L.A. and New York?

SIRISOOK

So-so. [laughs] So-so.

CLINE

Two very big cities that are very different from one another.

SIRISOOK

Right, right. After, then—yes, after, then class, because I read in the curriculum of the World Arts and Cultures and think, “Wow, this is great. This is something I can study. They have world dance form. They have the choreography class, which I can improve my skill,” and that goal is not to make you to be another person, but they would like to help you with whatever skill and style that you already have and help you develop from that.

CLINE

Wow. So it was really just what you were looking for.

SIRISOOK

Right.

CLINE

What were your feelings about coming and living in L.A. for a while after being here?

SIRISOOK

In L.A., in particular or in the program?

CLINE

No, in L.A.

SIRISOOK

Feel very, very isolated. But, okay, this is what I found, that people either value art or people try to value it. Like these thing will never happen or soon it will happen, but it will take time in Thailand, in northern Thailand, for people to buy a ticket to go see a performance. Like in Royce Hall it's always full. Even in the small event that they perform something, there will always be people buying a ticket to go see that, pay money for that. Whether people is value art so much or they try to, that's what my impression, and when I try to do the same thing, like produce a performance in Chiang Mai, we have a hard time getting people to buy a ticket to come see, even though the ticket's just like two dollar, I think, because of our rich culture, that the richness of the culture that's already there. Like, "Why do I have to buy a ticket to come see a performance when I can see it in the ceremony, when I can see it in the street during the festival? Why?" So we have to try to show them that we do different thing. It's a concept in that. It's a conceptual work. When here, you don't have to—I mean, you have to work hard to get a good work, but people did support it. So I don't know if it good or if it an impression, a good impression, in that. I just have a feeling that, wow, people did pay to come see the work when we have our time on that.

#### CLINE

The performing arts are very much less integrated into daily life in this culture. You go to museums to look at art and you go to concert halls or something of that nature to see performances of music or dance or theatre. Yes, it's different.

#### SIRISOOK

It's just that side of the thought that, you know, people visit here, go to Europe, and go back to Thailand, like, "Why don't we have a good museum? Why our museum is so old and smelly and not up to date?" That's why people don't go to the museum, because it nothing to see there, while here you have a good museum. You have the headphone. You have that thing. I used to think like that, too, and then I looked back again, say, "Wait a minute. Why that we don't have a museum?" Because some thing just cannot be kept in the museum. That's just my thought, that maybe it's good the way it is, like you don't keep thing in museum, but it's everywhere in your daily life. Maybe it can't be kept in the museum just because you can't. Or maybe it's just good that way. I mean, we have a couple of an okay museum, and that should be enough. We should not make everything as a museum. That what my thought. Later, when I'm here and go back, when I go back and forward so many time, that I think maybe it's good the way it is. Maybe we better keep it the way it is. Maybe people right that they don't need to go the museum, because maybe you can experience all of that from your life. Or really does it make people dumber if they don't go to the museum, or are they okay the way they are? Is that really educate people? Or my mom may know more from working in rice field when

she was young, and she know this thing can be ate and this thing can't and this thing can be ate if you cook it a certain way or you take that thing out. It just a different way of thinking or taking the meaning of the knowledge, like what is necessary. Like people here or life here is so high technology that maybe kids don't know where is the vegetable come from and whether you can eat these bugs or not. Once when it's the market or really the end of the world coming and you are starving, who going to be survive? Maybe my mom will be well survive because she know she can eat—you know, you can catch this, and without the supermarket or the expired can of food, people who go to the museum might not survive, but maybe that's not a healthy thought at all, that I think about that. Maybe it didn't help anything, but I just think that people value thing differently and people learning thing differently. So maybe don't have a museum or the high technology doesn't mean that you have a disadvantage or something.

CLINE

So you got accepted by the World Arts and Cultures program at UCLA. When did you make the trip to start there?

SIRISOOK

I arrive in Los Angeles in 2005, September—can't remember—23rd, like three days before the quarter start, because it's so soon, that I'm actually not the first choice when they admit me. They have two other Taiwanese or Chinese student that they accept, and that two happened to get a better grant, funding, from other university, so they left. So I'm the third choice, so they turn to me very late, like in August, to let me know that, "You got admit to the UCLA, so can you come?" I don't have any funding, but I would like to come, so I say yes, and that mean I have to do all thing about visa and move, pack, and also find a funding to come here, to really come here. So I didn't have that much time to prepare, and I come here with no expectation whatsoever about class, like what I'm going to be experience in the class, which I think later it's good for me to not have any expectation at all, because then I'm not disappointed in any of the experience I get later in the academic year.

CLINE

How did you get all that together? You got funding somehow, or you didn't?

SIRISOOK

I fund myself.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

SIRISOOK

I had some saving, and I just tell my mom that, "I'm going back to be a student again, so I'll just going to ask for money from you for the first year until I get a

grant, until I apply and get a grant. I'm going to have no shame to ask for the money from you."

CLINE

What did she think of this idea?

SIRISOOK

She support it. She know that it heavy, but she did support it very well.

CLINE

So what happened when you got here then in that brief period of time before you started taking your first class? You had to find a place to live.

SIRISOOK

I have Thai people from the Thai community that—this Chiang Mai University Alumni Association [of Los Angeles], that they give me—I stay at their house and they give me a ride to UCLA on the way to work. They live in North Hills.

CLINE

North Hills, oh, yes. I'm not used to these new names of places in the Valley. It's all different now.

SIRISOOK

They have to go to work in Torrance.

CLINE

Oh, man.

SIRISOOK

So she give me a ride on the way. We have to leave home very early to be there, and then in the evening come to pick me up, go home. I live there for about a month before I can find the apartment near UCLA that I can walk to campus.

CLINE

Okay. What did you make of the Thai community here in Los Angeles? There's a sizeable population here, but what was your—I mean, you're staying with people who are part of that community. What was your first sort of encounter with the Thai community here once you moved?

SIRISOOK

In return, I give them a dance lesson to a Thai children in the community, whoever want to participate, and without charging too. I mean, if they want to pay, if they willing to pay me, fine, you know, you pay me, but if not—well, they get together Saturday afternoon, bring their kids. I teach them dance and they cook. So we just kind of party every Saturday evening, and sometime if they can't make it, then Sunday afternoon would be the time that we meet before they give me a ride back to UCLA. So, yes, yes, that's what we do, and if there's some community event, then I bring the kid to perform and perform with them. Sometime we travel to Arizona to perform at the Thai Cultural Day there.

CLINE

What were some of the entities or venues through which you found the Thai community was making contact with one another or having their cultural events? How much of that did you get involved with once you got here? What were some of the places that the community sort of centered itself around?

SIRISOOK

Most of the time it's just the activity within the Thai community, like the Thai New Year, that they have the event at Hollywood.

CLINE

Wat Thai or Thaitown in Hollywood?

SIRISOOK

Yes, Thaitown in Hollywood or, like I said, sometime in Arizona and that Thai Cultural Day at the Barnsdall [Art] Park. I participated later. Yes, I stop going, teaching, in 2008 because it just a lot to do. You kind of lose contact. Also, I didn't participate much with the Thai community in Thai temple because it's just too big and it's too—so much politic in that.

CLINE

Yes, I wondered about that.

SIRISOOK

They have their own group. They have their own instructor, that they have a program that they bring Thai teacher, or who study to be a dance and music teacher in Thailand, to come teach at the Thai temple, and they are very much conservative in the classical form. So I perform that sometime, I just didn't teach there or involved with that, with them. Yes, only in the Thai community, very rare that we would perform for something else, like an event in NASA somewhere in—I can't remember the area, but it's the organization that work with NASA. Then they have, like, International Day, and they will ask us to perform for them alongside with other community like Indian and Chinese and Korea. I start to get involved in other community after 2008, I think, or start from 2008 when I found out that, oh, it's the Thai Cultural Day there in Barnsdall and I can apply to perform there, or, like, I would get contact from the Renaissance [Pleasure] Faire that they would like to involve the Thai dance, Thai performance in that within the Renaissance time of Thailand. Like, "Can you do that?" I'm like, "Yes." Or other community that have a festival, like Lotus Festival, I would apply to get the group to perform there.

CLINE

That's a little further in the chronology, but I was mostly curious to know how much interest you felt there was in the Thai community here in specifically what you do, something, for example, northern Thai from the part of Thai culture that, as you said, according to some people's perception, is not correctly Thai. What was the perception? [interruption]

CLINE

I was just asking what the perception was as far as your own feelings were of how much interest there was in the Thai community here in the northern Thai culture that you were representing outside, I guess, the Chiang Mai University Alumni, who, I would assume, are already interested?

SIRISOOK

Very strange. We have a very strange idea and perception about that. They first refuse it because it's very new, because for them, most of people, if they not come from a very conservative classical Thai dance form, they migrate here long time ago, at least thirty-five years ago, and some might be maybe longer than that. So their idea and image about Thai dance is back then in thirty-five years ago or more. Time is freeze there. Time is kind of stopped there. Whatever is the last image that they would see from Thailand, and they would experience that, it's what they carry here with them, and it stay there. So I would see in the Thai temple or in the Thai community when they do beauty contests, they would wear, like, thing that I see. I'm like, "Whoa, what year is this? [laughs] This thing, it still exist? This costume, it still exist?" I think especially in northern Thai because we go so fast. We just go to another culture and another kind of costume, outfit, you know. It's just like this is so, like, so yesterday. I'm like, "Are we still wearing this?" I was fascinated by that, and they probably think the same way for me, for us who perform this kind of form. It's like, no, it's not Thai. No, you perform the hill tribes. No, it's Chinese. No, it's Burmese. With the idea of "Thaimese," the Thaimese of that is so strong that anything else other than Thai is not Thai, the Thai that they see, that they didn't know or didn't have an idea that in several part of Thailand these idea is already change. We go for more. We study more history. We study the history that not exist in the textbook or in the history record. We go a little deeper in the ethnic group. We go a little deeper in the culture and the style and the genre of whatever real exist in the real world, not only in the textbook or in the history. So they have a hard time. They have a very strange perception about that, but in the same time, they can't deny that it's nice and interesting. I don't know if we can say beautiful or not, but it's, for sure, interesting, the kind of movement that have some flexibility in that, the costume that really like a mix of that and this, like a mix of Burmese and something else, you know, like where's this come from? A different music that we use also. I carry a lot of Lanna contemporary-style music that sometime is a collaboration between the northern Thai instrument and the Western instrument—we go that far already—or something very avant-garde that they'd be like, "Oh, that's strange, but, oh, yes, it's interesting." So it takes a while for me to present my work in that community. They would have a guard, like a barrier for them first, and then slowly get into that idea of like, "Oh, okay, I guess this is Thai, too," but it's

northern Thai. It Lanna style. Then they're like, "Oh, yeah, cool, it's Lanna." Then it go to another world. It's like warm welcome. I can see from the last thing that I participate that they did carry on a lot of this idea and apply it to use into their work, too, I mean, other Thai community group like the temple. It's also that the technology of communication, because we have YouTube, we have all kind of that stuff, Facebook, and you can view a lot of video of what Thai people in Thailand during several years, and they can see that. It's changed a lot, and you can't just step on the same thing, and you can't deny that it's interesting. So I see a lot of that influence in their work. Maybe it's still the same pattern, maybe still the same kind of dance, but what I see change in that is the costume, that they follow the trend more.

CLINE

So it's slowly changing over here.

SIRISOOK

Right.

CLINE

As far as World Arts and Cultures go, what did you first start with as far as your coursework there? What classes were you taking?

SIRISOOK

My first class there is Korean dance.

CLINE

Really.

SIRISOOK

It's the studio class. I take Korean dance, and also I took the class called—what is that—sound resources that teach by Bob [Robert] Een. He's a great musician. He do a lot of, like, soundscape thing, so I learn a lot from that. And also production art seminar, which is very helpful for me in terms of for me who come from a different culture, just I'm not even know how to write my biography, how to project myself that way. So that class teach me. Also how to create a press kit, all kind of stuff that artist need here that we don't need in Thailand. Especially people who perform with the Thai government, we are very spoiled. We just don't know how to sell ourself that way or present ourself that way because, you know, the opportunity is there right in front of you. It's served in the plate for you. "You want to perform for the TAT? Let's go to Japan. We're going to take you to Japan and you perform." They prepare our costume for us, so we never know what to be to apply for the grant, what to be to apply to perform on that stage because we never have to do that. People just arrange for us to go perform. It just easy like that, so we are very spoiled. So being here and have to learn all of this is very helpful for me, and like I said, I come with no expectation that I got to get to learn this and that. Besides, I

didn't take any ballet class at all throughout these three years. I just don't see that it's kind of, you know—

CLINE

Helpful?

SIRISOOK

Helpful or interesting for me anymore. Ballet class is ballet class. I'm done with that. I not even take it, but I'm already done with it. I'm more interested in other opportunity like learning the world-style dance like Indian dance, Bharatanatyam. Or in some quarter they would have a guest artist who would teach Indonesian dance, which I'm happy to learn, or that class they call—class that I have to take which is, like, the choreography class, we have A, B, C, D, Choreography A, B, and C and D. That help me to develop my work in term of I'm working my style, but they put the theory and idea, different idea, in that, and some class I like, “Oh, I know. We did that all the time, but we just didn't break it apart and think about that.” Like they would say, “Okay, now this assignment you're going to make work about time or timelessness or just time, period.” Well, we did that before in our performance. We did that all the time without thinking about that, but now we have to make it a part and make a work specifically about that. So it help, and also that class teach me how to adapt my own culture into the work and create a conceptual work, which is very, very helpful, because before coming to UCLA, I did do improvisation a lot. I did some conceptual work, but that's very thin, like I can't answer why I wear these or why that I do this. But it's just very shallow, I would say. It's just, okay, this work is about an emptiness of the mind, and that's it. But I can't explain anything else. But being here, you have to be able to explain more, why you move a certain way and what is this mean and how will you travel within this area of the state and make it interesting, all kind of that stuff. Later it also lead me to a deeper and more heavy conceptual work that I would never be able to think about that if I'm still working in Thailand because, like, again, we are so spoiled. It just that the movement is already graceful and beautiful. This is what I take from the feedback from people. So we don't have to do much to make it interesting because it's already interesting and it's already beautiful, and then it go back to the word “beautiful.” Everything is so beautiful, so you don't have to work hard. You just move a little bit and be beautiful, and people like it. That's back in Thailand. Here I believe I can do the same thing, too, [unclear], and it's already beautiful and people like it, and I should be satisfied that way, but it's not just that. I also learn—oh, I go too far. It's not about the class. I mean, it's about the class, but—

CLINE

No, keep going.

SIRISOOK

—I also learn that here people think a lot more about other issue, sometime too much. Like I didn't have a problem with that, but you think I should have a problem with that. Like being Asian, especially female Asian, here is some issue in that, like racism and gender and prostitution and sexual—

CLINE

Yes, sexism, the objectification.

SIRISOOK

Which I don't have a problem with. I never think that it's a problem. We are who we are, and if we agree to put ourself onstage, that just us, and it doesn't matter. Maybe it's your idea what you think about that, but it's not our problem. But most of the time they project to me that I should have a problem about that. Like, "I got no—." You know, because we are comfortable with our body, and this is what I want to wear. It not because I'm [unclear] myself, but you think that I am, or I should be aware about that. So it's my problem, it's your problem. So all these issue was developed during the time that I'm here, and going back to Thailand, what is important, what do you wear, what is beautiful, what is the costume and what is the prop you use in the performance? That all people are concerned about. Nothing wrong with that, but I'm done with that. I think beautiful is beautiful, but what is the content in that? So I start to develop my work based on how I look at myself in the society, what people think about me and what I think about them think about me, and create work from that. That the advantage of World Arts and Cultures and also my experience as the traditional and contemporary Lanna dancer in Los Angeles.

CLINE

Maybe that's a good place to stop, because I want to get more into discussing the rest of what you experienced through the World Arts and Cultures program, who some of the students were, what they were doing.

SIRISOOK

And also Lan Sattha. We didn't go through that.

CLINE

Right, I was going to say. Then we have to talk about what you do after you leave there and your dance company and its continuing work here in L.A.

SIRISOOK

I also have my own company of my own. I mean, I have one with my husband called Waewdao Sirisook & Michael [Sakamoto] Dance Theater. [unclear] Then I have another one called Authentic Yellow [Dance], which is me in the company, because I'm authentic yellow. So I create a different work from the Lan Sattha. It's another side of me.

CLINE

Okay. I want to get all of that in next time, and that'll be it. Then you're off to Thailand. Thank you—

SIRISOOK

Thank you.

CLINE

—very much for today. A lot left to do. [End of August 3, 2011 interview]

### **1.3. Session Three (August 5, 2011)**

CLINE

Today is August 5th, 2011. This is Alex Cline. I'm interviewing Waewdao Sirisook once again at my home studio, which is so convenient, in Culver City [California]. This is session number three. Good morning.

SIRISOOK

Good morning.

CLINE

Thanks for coming over again. Last time we left off talking about your time at World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, what it took to get you there and what the decision was that led you there, which is something I wanted to ask a little bit more about. You mentioned that a friend of yours that you met in Bali suggested that you go for a graduate degree, and I was wondering, number one, who that was, since you didn't say a name, and also what it was about getting a graduate degree in dance or choreography that seemed particularly important or appealing to you at the time.

SIRISOOK

A friend that I didn't mention name is—very good friend of me. His name is Andrew McGraw. We call him Andy. He was there, the Ph.D. track from the Wesleyan University, and his subject is about Indonesian avant-garde music. What is the question?

CLINE

What was it about getting an advanced degree—

SIRISOOK

Oh, yeah. I mean, it feel for me very important to have that not only to follow the popularity of the Thai way of thinking about getting a master degree from the United State or from somewhere else outside the country, but it's about reputation and it's about the respect that people give to you, not only that I would, like, dying to have that respect from people about my dance, but, you know, with that idea of you graduate from somewhere outside the country, especially from the State. The people believe you more, people listen to you more of whatever you want to speak out in word or in the body language, I mean, quote, "in your dance," because, I don't know, it's just an idea about that that make people think that, "Oh, she'll be better now, since she carry the degree from the United State." It's all about age and experience. When you

younger, people don't seem to listen to you much until, of course, you get older, but how old can it be for people to really listen to you or understand your work or pay attention to your work? So I won't say that this is the detour way to get there, but I also believe in my work that it can be developed more. I think, you know, getting the degree and have the respect from people is the last thing I would think about, but that's something that people think about, especially for a dance [unclear]. Not so many people do that in Thailand. You know, you go for the master degree or the Ph.D. for something else, MBA, for science, for doctor, but not for dance. Like why do you need that? For me, I believe that the work can be expand more and can be develop more outside it own tradition in the way, do I want to build a new tradition? No, it's not that, but people might say that. But I believe that traditions should not stop or should not freeze just because the work right or wrong, the work moral or immoral. It shouldn't be any boundary between that. A thousand years ago, a hundred years ago, somebody did create a tradition, and they carry on, somebody carry on, until now, that it become tradition. But somebody got to start it. It's not an ethereal thing. So that I believe that if I start it today, if I create something today, if I build tradition today, someday in the future it will become a tradition if it appropriate. If it not appropriate, it won't be carry on and practice. That's what I believe about my dance tradition. That's why I come here.

#### CLINE

Who were some of the other people in Worlds Arts and Cultures when you were there and what kinds of things were they doing? I guess specifically what I'm looking for is how much was what you were doing and how it related to your tradition similar or different from what other people were doing at the time?

#### SIRISOOK

My class is very diverse. We have one fundamental hip-hop dancer choreography, we have an afro-Caribbean dance, and another one more like post-modern dancer, and we have one Bharatanatyan, well-known dancer, young one. This is my class, but then the previous class we have the instructor, like the dancer from Korea and from China and from Mexico. We have such a diverse student, which they all give the dance class, which I'm happy to take. Also, the style of doing the work there is very different, very, very diverse. So, you know, each person carry their own philosophy and psychology sometime about work and present it in their dance. I mean, their piece sometime is more like a dance theatre. Somebody do that. I have Judy Mitoma as my advisor, which is right person, right time, just right, because without Judy, I would be lost, so do other international student, because in the way World Arts and Cultures now change a little bit from an intention of exploring the world and the world dance form to be more—I would say more modern and postmodern.

Maybe I could be wrong, but that's what form I see. They try to understand other kind of dance form and its philosophy, but so far, the instructor are more concentrate on modern and postmodern, I mean, in the dance part, dance and performance part. We have culture study and—how do you call that—performance study, and that's another thing. Like, yes, they do open up and learning more about other culture. It get smaller and smaller in term of the thought.

CLINE

Interesting. Of course, also, the dance department at UCLA for many years before World Arts and Cultures was formed was very concentrated on modern dance and that particular tradition in the West, so maybe they're still finding their balance. I don't know what that's about. Who were some of the other teachers that were particularly helpful or influential to you?

SIRISOOK

Like I said, I come with no expectation and also no experience about other dance form or other theory than Thai and Indonesia, so it's all helpful. It's all how you take it, how I take it, and adapt and apply it to use in my own work. They try to understand my work and I try to understand their work too. It's all value. Dan Froot would teach the production arts seminar that helps a lot in terms of understanding how the dance world, the grant, the professor, the application, work, which is very important for starving artist. John Bishop teach video production, and that's the first time, for me, coming from-- Learning how to use the system, the video system. That's very helpful. I'm able to edit and create my own promo video because of that class, and I'm in love with that, actually. I mean, I'm not a good filmmaker or video-maker or anything, but I just think how useful it is that I don't have to hire anybody to do that anymore. I can cut and paste. I can do thing with that, and it become the video. You know, it's other more dance class and production class, seminar class that I get to study. I would say it's all helpful for me, not a single one that I think is not helpful for me. It's all create a different experience that I can use it for my future work and also my career of teaching. The lighting design class, we don't have that in Thailand. We not even have a good lighting equipment. I talking in terms of university and education. In terms of, like, entertainment world, yes, of course they have all these fancy thing for concert, for a commercial performance, but in school, let alone to have a good dance class or performance class, lighting is something we not even think about. We all do some unacceptable thing like a disco dance, like all that smart light that go up and down by itself and all the flashing thing when it turn to the fast or exciting part of the dance. Dancer and choreographer from where I came from have no idea about lighting and how to control that. Like, just let the lighting do and the lighting guy know this much how to do light. You know, it just do something,

for me, very unacceptable and very cheesy, like old, old, old style. If you go to, like, a temple ceremony, none. You just use the neon light, go-- foom!--to your face, and everybody look the same. It doesn't matter what color of the costume that you wear. But that's another thing that's that pure form, like you perform for another purpose. But in theatre and dance and, like, dance education, no. So the lighting design class fascinate me. I have so much fun in that and I learn a lot, and somehow I feel very smart to be able to speak the lighting language, say, "Oh, can I go 20 percent of—can I have magenta on—." Stuff like that, the name of the color of the gel. So it very helpful.

CLINE

Yes, absolutely. How, then, would you actually think about how to use or incorporate some of the other influences that you were experiencing there, for example, different dance, sorts of movement from different cultural traditions? You mentioned Mexican. You mentioned Korean. What was it, maybe, about some of those different dance expressions that you would find useful or interesting or appealing in a way that you would even appropriate them, perhaps, for what you might want to do?

SIRISOOK

I think it's helpful in terms of that it make me look back to my form and see what I have—how you call that—lack of that, but not that to bring its own form to use in my form. It's just a essence of that that I can see and think, "Oh, maybe I can do that, maybe I can do this," but not using any movement from that at all. I think the most useful movement that I'll use or incorporate into my dance form is probably Indonesian. Somehow I feel that I can use some essence from that, other dance, the idea or the feeling of that, I mean, really like a move, move. But again, I don't learn all of this to be a Korean dancer or an Indonesian dancer or Bharatanatyan dancer; I learn all of these to develop my own dance form, which is Lanna traditional and contemporary.

CLINE

So then when did you start thinking about forming your own dance company?

SIRISOOK

That's in 2008. I mean, I have it on and off. I never have a name for that. It just Waewdao Sirisook and the gang or the group or the dancer. It's very small and, yes, like I say, on and off. I would ask the student, some of my student who I can see that they have a passion for dance, especially for Thai dance, to come join me in some event like Thai New Year performance. Not until 2008 that I met my husband [Michael Sakamoto], and that's a shame, because before that, I just think that I'm not going to stay here. I just come here for degree, and then right when I finish, I'll go back and work in my country. I never have any desire to stay here. Then right before I graduate, I met my husband and we get married, and that changed my life because then I have to think about—at least

consider to be here for a while we decide what we're going to do with the life, where we're going to be. That give me an idea of then why not form the dance group or at least give it a name so that it's easy to remember, for people to be able to identify which group is that and have a stronger feeling not only for me, but for the dancer themselves to really know to call themselves. So that 2008 I also start to work at the Dance Art Academy. It's a dance studio that they will hire me to teach dance, and I have some dancer, some student, who come and take class, and I ask them to dance with me outside the class. Right now she's still in the company. So I will pick some of the student from my class both from UCLA and from outside and ask them to dance with me and see who still have a passion in that and also fit in the category. So I start to name my dance group. I think that's after I came back from Thailand in August or September. That's when, 2008, we went back to Thailand and get married there in July, and then come back, I think, in September. I named it Lan Sattha. "Lan" in Thai mean million. Like when you call "Lanna," it mean million rice field. Some might say it mean something else, but, no, it's to believe in that. So "Sattha" mean faith or belief. So if you have a million faith and belief in something, and for me, it's for my dancer and for me, myself, that if you have a faith in the thing that you do, that doesn't matter how old you are, what ethnicity that you were, doesn't matter where you came from, nationality. Everything doesn't matter if you have a faith or a belief in that. So if they believe they can do Thai dance, then they can do Thai dance and they should get an opportunity to do Thai dance. It doesn't matter who you are or what race you are, because my dance group has so much diversity.

CLINE

Yes, this is what I was waiting to ask you about. Obviously these aren't all Thai people.

SIRISOOK

No, we have me as Thai, and then we have another dancer who's, like, Thai, Thai. We have Japanese. We have Filipino. We have American, Cuban. We have Vietnamese. We have Hispanic, Mexican. On and off we will have a mix of Thai and white kid come join. So we are very welcome, open for—any ethnicity is possible. We have white. We have, like, white, white American. The only one that I'm missing is the—

CLINE

African American.

SIRISOOK

African American, which I really, really want. I want to have all in the company to show, like, it's no boundary in dance. If you want to dance, you believe you can dance, you can dance, and I'm not saying that you can't because you not look Asian enough. No. But in terms of commercial, sometime

when they ask for a Thai dance and Thai dancer, I have to sometime have ask only the Asian-descent dancer to do that because sometime people feel like—I don't want people to feel like that they get a propaganda from me saying, "A Thai dancer," and, "He's not Thai. He's Mexican. Don't you see?" Or something like that. So before I agree with them, I tell them that my group is a mix, so if you can take that, that's okay, but if you only want Asian look, I can do that too.

CLINE

Sometimes it's as much about the image as it is about the movement, I guess, for some people.

SIRISOOK

Most of my dancer, I would say, the one that can have a very, like, restful move, it's not Asian at all, while the Asian one could be—I mean, some of them is, like—Asian Asian means Asian-born, but some of them born here as a second or third generation.

CLINE

How did you meet your husband then?

SIRISOOK

He came to see my performance in spring or winter—actually, winter—2007, and then we met again in 2007 before summer, before I went back to Thailand. He's a new MFA student for that, for 2007, so he contact me and say, "Oh, I'm a new-coming MFA student and I saw your work and think that's something related to my work, so I'd like to talk more about that." Little did I know. [laughter] So we made an appointment to meet. You want a specific place? No. [laughter] At the Coffee Bean. We talk about work and my schedule. So after I meet him, I'm off back to Thailand for the summer, and then I come back again to continue my last year. So when the quarter start, I ask him to be my stage manager for my final performance, which is outdoor in the botanical garden.

CLINE

Oh, yes. I saw photos from that.

SIRISOOK

Not so many people do things outdoor. So, yes, it start from that.

CLINE

He is someone from this country, I presume.

SIRISOOK

Yes, he's born in Monterey Park, around that area.

CLINE

San Gabriel Valley.

SIRISOOK

Yeah, yeah, and he's fourth-generation Japanese American.

CLINE

So you graduated, then, in 2008?

SIRISOOK

Yeah, I use a maximum of three years. I can actually graduate that fall because I finish my final concert and I finish everything, all the coursework and everything. But then I got offered to teach the class from my advisor, Judy Mitoma. It's called Art and Culture in 21st Century, something like that. Can't remember the full name, but it's a lecture class and it's a big class, so we have about seven TAs altogether.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

I think that's a very good opportunity to be able to teach the lecture class, so I grab it. So that TA-ship pay for my tuition that semester, that quarter, because I don't have any funding anymore because I was supposed to finish in fall. And that's a very good experience. I'm glad I do that. So I graduate in spring, walk, go home, and get married in 2008, summer, in Thailand. It's hot and it's rain.

CLINE

It was raining too?

SIRISOOK

It was raining.

CLINE

You always get to go back when it's hot, it sounds like, summer. So then you had a whole new decision to make about where you were going to spend at least probably the next couple of years or so, and it looks like you chose to be here. How were you thinking about going about pursuing your aspirations as a dancer and choreographer here continuing to be in Los Angeles, a place that has become home to you by that time, but at the same time perhaps poses a certain number of challenges, hard to figure out maybe how to make a living, how to do what you want to do in the big, diverse, overwhelming city? What were your choices that you were starting to make at that point and the kinds of decision-making you had to do?

SIRISOOK

Just have to make a living, so I sent a lot of application to do the dance school or the college that have a dance department, but so far, that time, the economy wasn't good at all. Nobody have money to hire for something that not a mainstream dance, I mean, no ballet, no hip-hop, no jazz, no modern, no yoga, no pilate, no tai chi. Something mainstream are more well received than something like this. So I only get to teach at the Santa Monica College for one semester.

CLINE

What were you teaching specifically?

SIRISOOK

Thai dance.

CLINE

So when people come to learn Thai dance—and it sounds like not only Thai people, and maybe not even very many Thai people, come to do that—what is it specifically you think they’re looking for or what interests them, in particular, about learning that here in L.A.?

SIRISOOK

I don’t know. Even my student back in UCLA, when I ask them, like, “Give your brief idea, like, why are you interested in learning Thai dance,” some will say, “Because I like Thai food. I like pad thai.” Yes, yes, yes. Most of them will say, “Because of Thai food. I like Thai food.”

CLINE

Interesting.

SIRISOOK

That’s why they come, which is okay for me. I tell them that it’s okay, and anything that make you want to learn Thai dance, it help me. I have, like, in one class, I would say, 2 percent of Thai student who want to learn Thai dance. Other than that, it’s other kind of student. Yes, not so many Thai people who are interested in learning Thai dance. I don’t know why. They just don’t care, and I think part of that is because they don’t think it can be so much fun. I still don’t know if my student think that it so much fun, but I try to teach it my style, which is not like classical Thai, not conservative way. I always tell them that you going to have to know how to do the right thing, the right angle, the hand and the finger, how it was supposed to be. You can’t be sloppy. But once when you know, then it’s depend on you how you going to make it look good or feel right to you, not that I feel like that it’s not right, it doesn’t mean that it’s wrong. You just move the way you move. Ten people move different way, different angle. So you not a robot, so I can’t tell you that it got to be 45 degree and it have to be 45 degree, when, in practice, yes, it have to be 45 degree. But when you dance, if you feel like it can be a little less or a little more, then that’s your choice, and I always put that idea in their head that it’s not fixed, nothing fixed. Nothing fixed feel beautiful. It’s what you feel beautiful is beautiful.

CLINE

You kind of helped set me up for my next question, which was how do you cope with people’s expectations of what Thai dance is or what Thai culture might be in their minds, particularly when you’re clearly very interested in diversity and furthering the tradition in a way that honors and values the personal, and even improvisational side of the art?

SIRISOOK

I start some class—if I can, I show them Thai classical, Thai contemporary, and then I show them the spirit dance, the trance dance. I shock them by that. It's like not [unclear] knowing what Thai dance is, because some say, "Oh, I never see Thai dance. I only like Thai food." Some say, "Oh, I see The King and I." [laughter] So I bring them another—not another level, but it's another environment of what Thai dance is, which I always say that I'm not teaching the Thai dance; I teach you Lanna dance, which is also Thai, but it from northern part of Thailand. That what I'm good for, so I start to show them the spirit dance, which I say is the Dance 101. When you learn how you can move with the rhythm, it's such a fixed rhythm, because the rhythm like that go all day. They do it from nine a.m. till five p.m., dance nonstop. But what happen in that is the same rhythm, but you move differently. You follow that rhythm. Everybody is synchronized, but the hand, the body go different way, but it based on the same rhythm. So if you know how to listen to the music and move with that rhythm, throw you in anywhere that have music, you can move with that. You going to have to learn how to listen to that. It's a trance dance, so it come from inside, and this is what we do in northern Thai. Then later I'll move on to something else, more Thai contemporary or more Thai or northern Thai traditional, but then to see that you see the same dance that we do, exactly the same dance, but the level of the hand and everything is different, and compared with the classical Thai, it's all very different. Not that I have anything against the classical Thai, it's just it's a dance form that I can't do, or if I would do, I would do it my way because I can't do it the way they do.

CLINE

You said earlier that, in a sense, no matter what you do, you are sort of—you're a cultural ambassador of some sort. I mean, there has been in the world, particularly since the sixties, a phenomenon known as dance diplomacy, which you were part of when you were traveling the world and performing when you were still at the university. But I'm curious now that you're living here in L.A., there is a Thai community here and there are all these other communities here. How do you think about that which you represent, in this case, the Lanna, the northern Thai form in relation to not only all these other communities that maybe only know Thai from Thai food, but the Thai community itself here who seems to have—you talked a little bit about last time—its own ideas about what Thai is and how many different degrees of interest there may be in their own culture in Thai culture. I mean, this is the United States. It's a very different culture here. Even if you're from Thailand, you're not in Thailand anymore, right, especially for young people growing up American. How do you, or do you, reach out to that community?

SIRISOOK

I'm not reaching out to that community much because they have their own agenda. They have their Thai teacher and also just so much political involve in that. I don't want to get involved in that so much. Again, not that I have anything against them. They do it their way, but I do it my way. Whether you like it or not, that's your choice, but this is my choice to do it. So in the land of freedom, I mean, we all have freedom say that. So I would like to create it my own way and approach it my way. Not that I could say that I don't care, even though I might have that in me all the time, but I come from the culture that, especially in northern Thai, that you do what you want to do. If it good, people like it. If it don't good, then people hate it, and they will be honest with you. They will not welcome your work, and that's time you have to rebuild yourself and make a move on that. So, you know, you have a freedom to do that, do it. The Thai kids here, I don't have any interaction with them much because, like I say, most of them, their parents will take them to the temple, [unclear] temple in Los Angeles, in California, and they will learn it from the temple. I don't think so much of them care of what they learn. They do that because the parents want them to do. They not really speak Thai that much. I can ask them Thai and they will answer me in English, so do the same way they interact with their parents. It both music and dance that they get to learn from the temple, so I leave it that way. Yes, not so many Thai people approach me the way of, like, "Can you teach dance to my kids?" Some of them may, but not so many. The only one parents that still with me, she also dance with me. We start from she have her daughter study dance with me, and then slow, slowly she start to dance with me, and now she's the member of the Lan Sattha group, so do her daughter.

CLINE

So how do you then think about the continuation of your art form? How do you see that happening now that you're in L.A.? It isn't a literal thing where you're teaching children who will then teach their children. It's not like that's so much. What is your particular way of continuing your tradition, as you see it?

SIRISOOK

As I see it, I'm happy to teach it to anybody who have their interest in my dance form. So again, I think that's the idea of the Lan Sattha, that if you have the belief in that, then you can learn that. So I'm open up for anything. Also, I would say that at this point if the Thai people want to learn it, that's good. If not, that's fine.

CLINE

Then how much interaction do you have with other groups in the area who are representing the dance and music and culture of different parts of the world, specifically countries in Asia? There are a lot. There are more Asians in this part of the country here than anywhere outside Asia, so there's quite a

population, a number of groups doing their own versions of this sort of thing. How much interaction do you have, or connection, with any of these other groups from these different cultures in the area?

SIRISOOK

Not so much inter-group. I would say none at all. But in the body, in person, maybe some, like we sometime have a collaboration in another way. Let's say, like, for example, my husband and me, we incorporate the butoh dance form with the Lanna dance form and we collaborate together and create a piece of that, or it would be me and other musician, like noise artist, that would do this thing together. Yes, very, very, very small way that I would be working or exchange my form with other.

CLINE

Sounds like in a way that's different from some of the people who are doing similar things to what you're doing, that you're more interested in combining what you do or, in a way, blending what you do with different art forms, different influences, different kinds of music, different expressions and expressions that are more contemporary rather than creating something that's a museum sort of experience. You mentioned blending with butoh. You mentioned using, say, noise type of musical context. How much do you see incorporating some of these different influences as being an element to expose and further develop your own art form?

SIRISOOK

A hundred percent. I'm all for that. I mean, okay, I'll have to take back a little bit back to my early year in the dance, that I grow up with that as a dancer, that we always experiment something. My teacher would throw a task or assignment to me saying that dance with the silence, and then I'll have to do that. He will not ask, "Can you do that?" No. In a way, I think he know we somehow can create it. Or he'll tell the musician to do something and tell me to dance with that. So it's not traditional anymore. It's all contemporary and improvisation. So even with the traditional instrument, it's always the contemporary approach. Then when I'm in the State at UCLA, I also participate in the Asian Pacific Performance Exchange 2006, and that we have seventeen artists from all around the continent, I mean, not only the continent, but from Asia they participate, from India, from Indonesia, from Malaysia, Philippine, and artist from the State. So that, we blend everything together. I choreograph work with Indian dancer and theatre person, and also we work with the taiko man and Andy who's do all kind of noise, vibrator in the gongs, and we experiment on stuff. I use that as the base for my work later too. Also, we constantly do that all the time.

CLINE

So some would say then you're not a purist, and yet at the same time it sounds like your tradition is inherently more flexible and open-ended than some others, perhaps.

SIRISOOK

Yes, I take it two ways, too, extreme traditional and extreme contemporary, but who know what traditional in Lanna is when we lost the history? Now I don't know if we passed the golden age, but we are reaching the golden age, you know, people accepting all new thing and open up for that. It's a golden time for artists to create a new thing. For me, it seem like we are going there, but to somebody it might already pass ten years ago. But I want to answer back to your question about what am I doing here. Also, we're-- I'm part-time there, part-time here and in Thailand, too, since now the job availability is better there.

CLINE

That's a good reason.

SIRISOOK

We have to make a living, and that's the core of everything. We have to make a living and also do the thing that we love. So since when I was young when I start to be a dancer, who am I, what role in that or how I want to take my work, I can say that I'm a whore of the dance world. I'm a prostitute. I can call that. I do everything to, one, make a living, two, appear on the stage. Just tell me. Just pay me. I'll be onstage because not only make a living, but because of my love of my dance, too, or maybe it's because my ego of myself that want to shine onstage all the time. So whether you pay me or not, I'll be onstage and dance for you. I have to make a living. I have to do all commercial thing to have that money for me to be able to do the other kind of work that not so commercial, say, people won't pay me to do that, so I have to pay myself to do that. These thing all compromise each other. One semester my student ask me what did I do beside teaching. I say, "Well, I teach because then I can get money to do the thing that I love, but when I do the thing that I love, then I will get another money to be able to teach for low cost, too, because teaching is a thing that I love too. So it's a triangle. It's a love triangle of teaching is the thing that I love, commercial dance, commercial world where I do everything to get money. But it's also I can't say that I don't love it, because I also love it that way too. Then this is my private contemporary/traditional work that I also partly get money, and no money, sometimes lose money. But it's also the thing that I love. So I love everything the same way, equally or not I don't know, but I can build a triangle from that and I can relate these three thing together. Sometime I love some much more than other, but it always [unclear], and sometime that love can shift to other too. Depend. So, yes, I do everything. Just

put me onstage, or not onstage, but with audience. With even only one audience, I'll do it.

CLINE

So what is it in Thailand that you do that allows you to make more money?

SIRISOOK

Right now it's my third semester to teach at the Payap University in the Thai and Southeast Asian Studies program that particularly have the student from the State and other places. So like an exchange program, they go to study Thai dance, Thai culture, religions, and language. Some will go for one semester, some will go for more, and some stay for the entire academic year. They also have the comparison program where half of the semester students stay in Thailand and half of that they go to Cambodia to study comparison mostly in religion.

CLINE

Interesting. How much do you find religion has relevance to what you're doing or teaching?

SIRISOOK

A lot in my work, in teaching, some. I just find out that—I mean, I'm not a good Buddhism practitioner whatsoever. I don't know if I'm a good one or not. If I have to name or give a definition to myself, I would say I'm not, because I don't do the way the Buddhism or what they call good Buddhism do, because I strongly believe that Buddhists should teach people to not attach in anything, and I think that's the core of that or what I understand about that. But people now, even my mom in my hometown in Thailand, they're all attached with something saying that when you practice it, you get—

CLINE

Merits.

SIRISOOK

Merit, yes, you gain merit back, and you do everything just because of that. For me, it doesn't matter, you know. Like I do it because I want to do it. If I want to give clothes or money for poor kids or the orphan house, it's because I want to do that and I have my heart for that, but not because that I think, oh, in next life, then I don't have to be an orphan, or in next life I will get a comfortable life or better life, not that I don't believe in next life. I don't believe in anything, basically, but I go to temple because I'm interested in seeing all of this, seeing how people react to that. I appreciate in the way people practice that because they believe in that, but I'm not appreciate in some of them that do it because they want something in return, because that's not the way you should do that. But if they feel fine and happy to do that, that's fine, totally fine. That's their way, and I have my way. Maybe I'm the best Buddhist practitioner—who know—because I'm not attached with anything at all, or maybe I'm the worst,

but I think because of that, then I can teach the way I teach and not so attached with anything. I can also bring some belief or philosophy of that into my work. My previous work is all about the philosophy about that, you know, like the self/none-self thing, like sometime the belief and the story about that work, about way this magical thing happen and life after death, something like that. That's my previous work, but now my work is more in the real world, more of what I look at the society.

CLINE

How much, if any, involvement in the Buddhist temple do you have when you're spending your year to the time of your year here rather than in Thailand? Do you go to the temple here, or only when you're in Thailand?

SIRISOOK

No, because—not that much. I have more participation in Thailand. Here I'll go to the temple when it's a festival and I go perform there, because I'm not a kind of a person who go to the temple because when I feel bad, when I feel I have a problem, then I go the temple and I pray and I meditate and I believe-- No, because I didn't use the temple or approach the temple that way. So going to the temple is not an answer for me. Go for anything. The same thing in Thailand, not that I enter the temple and I find my sanctuary and I feel so relieved. I'm not a meditate person. I would do it when I want to do it. I go to the temple because I'm interested in the form and architect and how people react with that, how interesting it is when the society, when a group of people, come to do something with that belief, strongly believe in something. Like I say, I appreciate the way they carry the tradition, the way they practice that. I think it's a thing that we should have maintain it. Whether they do it because they want something in return or not, but for me, it feel beautiful. It looks beautiful. It looks interesting, the way [unclear]. If I'm Thailand and it's some temple ceremony, we also go dance, but that's not for the money at all. I dance because I believe that I dance and I make people happy and make myself happy, and I get to go back to myself that I'll do everything if I'm happy and if it make me happy. I'm selfish. I'm so selfish. [laughs]

CLINE

So here when you're in Los Angeles, what were you able to do to make ends meet, as we like to say? I know you also have dance projects outside of Lan Sattha. What is it you do when you're in Los Angeles, then?

SIRISOOK

Keep dancing.

CLINE

That could be really, really hard.

SIRISOOK

Yes, keep dancing, keep the Lan Sattha alive. I feel like my mission for the Lan Sattha is bring it to the world. That sounds-- But bring it to the outside world. People going to have to know this is Thai dance, this is Lanna dance, and this is the Lan Sattha who do this kind of work. So I do everything not to put the Lan Sattha in the whole dance world. I do everything to get them to perform, so I don't choose only the Thai event or the event that the Thai people organize. I take the group everywhere that we can, because the more outside the community we do, is the more people from the outside of the community can see us. Whether it's free or it's paid. If some of my dance member like to perform, I will try to have it happen, Renaissance [Pleasure] Faire, Lotus Festival, and last year and this year we participated in the Baldwin Hills Festival in Culver City, the [Baldwin Hills] Overlook.

CLINE

Yes, that new building.

SIRISOOK

We plan to participate in more. My dream is to have my group perform in the Gay [Pride] Festival, the West Hollywood—I'm so much a drag. Like I can be fine or be flexible with almost everything. When it turn to the costume, it got to be right, and it doesn't mean that right in the way that it should be work. In my head I have my image of, like, "Oh, for this time, specifically this time, it going to have to be this kind of sarong and this ornament and this and this and this--" I have that picture in my head, and then I'll ask my dancer or I'll set it for my dancer to wear, and it got to have to be that one hairpin missing is something wrong. But it nothing to the universe, it just wrong in my thought, and the next time it might be different from this time. I can go to an extreme of so many ornaments and costume to the most simple one. That's the style of my work, too, other than very, very traditional or very, very contemporary, can go very, very simple and very, very flashy, like over-- Over-- How do you call it? Decorative..

CLINE

It's the designer in you from when you were young coming out again.

SIRISOOK

Probably. Probably. [laughs]

CLINE

That doll you changed the clothes on. You mentioned when you were at the university, and the people studying in your area was kind of evenly mixed between male, female, and transvestite. How's that mix look now over on this side of the Pacific Ocean in terms of what you're doing with your dance group? What is sort of the gender makeup of people interested in doing the Lanna dance?

SIRISOOK

Here, so far I wasn't able to get any male dancer in my group.

CLINE

Really? Wow.

SIRISOOK

I think my group is too feminine in the way it's shown. It somehow just apply to female. I used to have some of my dance student that is kind of a mix, but they didn't join the group long enough. They have something else to do. So I have decide to have more of other gender, other kind in my group. Both straight or, you know, none-straight are all welcome. That's why I would like to join the West Hollywood Gay Pride or any gay pride parade that they would want my group to join. I want to not only that I have every ethnicity in my group, but every kind of gender or, you know, the—

CLINE

Sexual orientation. Wow. It seems like you should be able to do that.

SIRISOOK

Next year, for sure.

CLINE

So now about how much of the year, then, do you spend in L.A. in your schedule that takes you between here and Thailand?

SIRISOOK

I stay since 2005, and I only go back for the summer until 2008, but then 2009 and 2010, 2010 actually, that when I spent more time in Thailand because of the job, when I start the Payap University job to teach people there, and I also curate or organize the event there a lot too. Other than just dance, commercial dance, me and my colleague in Thailand, we try to organize the annual event called Divine Dance and Music that raise money to sometime renovate the temple and sometime give as a scholarship for a student in my department, I mean the department that I used to be.

CLINE

So what are your feelings now about living here, that you never imagined probably still being here?

SIRISOOK

I still not quite sure if I'm where I want to be. I know for sure that I can't be here full-time, and Michael, my husband, feel the same way, that he can't be there full-time, because we have a different background. We born in a different places, so we should be able to live in both places. So we are now looking for a multi-space in between, like we will spend some time here mostly, I think, in the summer, and then spend some time in Thailand. We are looking for having an art space in Thailand, but get funding from here to bring the artist from here to work in Thailand to do exchange work in Thailand. I was looking for doing something like what they have here, for example, the Anatomy Riot that

happen, I think, once a month, that there will be a curator who curate the dance series and invite people to come perform. Or like Max 10 [Performance Laboratory] at the Electric Lodge, the first Monday of every month, that they would accept application from performer and curate ten-minute performance for ten artist for that night, and people buy a ticket to go see. So the artist don't get paid, but the curator have that money to run the theater. So we looking for doing something like that, because I believe that it would be a lot of young artists and artists who want to do something new, who want to do something outside of their form or experiment something, but they don't have a stage, a place that they can perform, because in Chiang Mai, in northern Thai now, we are so much on the commercial side, so all the dance that they would perform would be for commercial, for people who willing to pay to hire them to dance the way they want it, the way that I think it well selling. So being here as an artist, other than keep the Lan Sattha running and showing to the outside world, get it expand more, for me, is to develop my own dance with my company.

CLINE

Which is?

SIRISOOK

Which is Michael Sakamoto & Waewdao Sirisook Dance Theater. We have several project, like right now we are running the Empty Room series. Because it's empty room, so you can do so many thing in that empty room. That series will be a work series with different artist in the United State and also in Japan and probably in Thailand too. It different that we'll be running it within the 2011 to 2012, and also I have my own group, which have one member, is me. [laughter] It's called Authentic Yellow Dance.

CLINE

How does it differ from the other projects that you do? How are they distinguished from one another?

SIRISOOK

The Michael Sakamoto & Waewdao Sirisook is more on the collaboration with other artist and musician. The Authentic Yellow is my own interpretation of the Lanna contemporary, my way. I would not be able to have this company, which have one member, at all if I'm not here. I think if I'm not in the State and experience all these thing. It's for me, this idea and this form, this work, because if I'm still in Thailand, I'm still in that world of it's real, but it's not real. All the dance that we perform is in the dream. We dreaming of a beautiful dancer, dance ornaments, costume, idea. Nothing critical about that at all. When we actually live in a critical world and situation every day, I think maybe we just want to escape from that. We just want to not accept the truth that we are not that beautiful. So being here, I'm seeing more of the reality and also, I think, the idea and the thought of people here. The contemporary artist, the

modern artist here, that when I'm in Thailand before I came for the MFA, I would think that, why doing work about political? I have no interest about that. Let the political world run it own, you know. I want to be a goddess. I want to be this mysterious, in the mythical forest, and this is all I'm interested about. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful world, and why doing work about pollution? It's not beautiful, and I don't understand why people would do that, and I'm not interested in that. And being here, I can't just live with beautiful. That word can carry me so far, but once what if you're not beautiful anymore? What would be more interesting than that? It's nothing wrong to be beautiful too. It's just good to do that because sometime you just—my first year being here, going back to Thailand, I understand, like, oh, I understand now why people, why tourists, pay to go to a kind of a dance performance, like something like Vegas style. Back in Thailand it's the [unclear] dinner. It's like you go for a dinner. People serve you and it's a performance onstage, that they get that idea from visiting the Polynesian culture thing in Hawaii, the first one who invent that. Seeing that, go to Hawaii, seeing that, going back to Thailand, do the same thing, serve food and portray the cultural dance, I understand why people want to do that, because it's beautiful and because you can really sit there and enjoy the food and enjoy the performance, and, yes, that dancer dance and smile for me, and is nothing else behind that other than that. It's a path that you can fully relax or at least think that you can relax. It's another world, that you don't have to think, "Oh, is she being critical or critique about that, about this?" No, she dance for you, and you should enjoy that, and that's what the Thai purpose of coming there. Before I go to the States in 2005, I have something against that. I'm like, I'm so done with this commercial dance. I don't want to do dance from that order anymore. After a year being here I [unclear]. Nothing wrong with that. You can still do that, and I understand why people do that and why people come to see that. Another year, another year, my perception change time to time. It go back and forward. I can see both side of a positive side of both, nothing negative at all. Now I understand why people make work about pollution, about politics, about racism, about gender, because it's all there. It about do you mention it or not, or do you want to pay attention to that or not. I understand now why people have so much problem about me being an authentic Asian and perform my Asian female body. Sometime people give that issue into me, like I shouldn't do a certain thing because then I start to exoticize myself in my work, and for me, I don't have any idea why I would do that. Or maybe I doing it all the time, but I just not conscious about that, because I'm so comfortable with my body, and that all become that Authentic Yellow because I'm authentic yellow and I'm happy to be that, to be me, to be perform it my way. I am looking at how they look at me, and I project that to them and try to tell that I'm fine. I'm fine either the way you look at me and want me to be or

I'm fine to just be what I can be, and it doesn't matter what issue that you try to give to me, because I'm fine with that. It may be your issue, but it's not my issue. Or if you want to be my issue, it can be my issue, but I don't give a shit. [laughs] So that's all the Authentic Yellow about, is to tell that I'm fine.

CLINE

What form does that take?

SIRISOOK

It's still Lanna contemporary, but it including the dance theatre in that too. So that says the change of my work, too, because in northern Thai, again, we don't speak, we don't act, because we are very bad actor. Once when we start to act, everything look horrible, no matter how you try. So this is something new, that if I'm not here, I'm not quite sure I would have a courage to do that, to act and to speak sometime, because when we dance, we just dance. We don't speak. We don't sing. We don't combine all together. But when I have what I learn from here, I use it in my work. I'm thinking even though my thinking is not good at all. I'm not a thinker, but what's wrong with that? Not good is not good, and you can laugh with that. I'm happy to, because that's me. So we not looking for something only beautiful anymore. I'm looking for something more interesting. So again, it's totally different from the Lan Sattha. Lan Sattha is all about beauty, beautiful movement, beautiful girl, beautiful costume, beautiful music, or elements of that is all beautiful, and I think that's the side of the Lanna or Thai dance that I want people here to see, because it is true. That's all about that. So I think I carry my dance culture to here, and I carry the dance culture here combined with my work to my hometown and also over here to both have something new in exchange for people on both side. Something I do here is that about my culture back in Thailand, it's new for here, and something I have do here is new for me, and also when I carry it back, it's new for people there too. That's what I want to give both side, because back in Thailand that's so much that they give to me, is they always support me. They always want to see what happen with me after the degree, and sometime I can give so much surprise for them that I can be both very extreme traditional and very contemporary. Sometime it just too much for them that, "Let me back up for a second. I don't understand what you do, but it's interesting, but I still don't understand. I don't get it." I say, "That's fine."

CLINE

I have to assume that the degree helped you get this teaching job in Thailand that you're doing.

SIRISOOK

Yes.

CLINE

What is the feeling within—you gave a little bit of it just now, but what is the feeling at this point among your family members toward what you're doing, and not just that you're bringing in these other elements into your art, but that you're also living still part of the time very far away from them? You married someone who is clearly not Thai.

SIRISOOK

And can't speak Thai.

CLINE

Where are you at with your family with all this? How's it going?

SIRISOOK

They still have a pride in that, and they happy for me to marry someone that they don't know at all. That summer, that go back and say I'm going to get married. My sister can speak English, so that the only one person other than my niece and my nephew who's three years old now who study English now, and he very good. You know, kids always learn something really quick. My mom and my husband will use the body language. He will learn some word. I mean, he can speak very little, so they can say hi. She can ask him is that delicious, and he'll say, "That's very delicious," in Thai. The only one thing is she would, like, tap him and like, "Eat it," and he would have to eat it, whatever she give to him except the bug.

CLINE

He's not eating bugs?

SIRISOOK

He's not eating bugs, but he tries some. He refuse to try some, but he try some now.

CLINE

Wow.

SIRISOOK

To my family, to my work, they don't see so much of my contemporary work or the extreme contemporary work. They only see some of my work, and because my hometown is in Chiang Rai, but my half of cultural dance, it's in Chiang Mai, so I spent a lot of time in Chiang Mai and performed there. Whenever that I have the work that very extreme in terms of contemporary, they didn't get to come to see me, so they can see so much of half of that. But I think they should get to see more, and I don't know how much they can take that. Like my last performance that I produced is called Lanna Dream. I dance in my half underwear, and it's okay, for people here totally okay, but it's not okay for Thai people. They will be like, "Huh? Really?" I get so much surprise feedback from people of seeing me do that, but what I try to tell them is it's and it's okay, whether you okay or not, but I'm okay to perform.

CLINE

You don't have children yet. That can be quite the issue. I'm familiar with that with some parents. So you haven't settled in the sense that you're living in two places that are very far away from one another, but where do you see your life going at this point? You said you're looking for a place between here and there with your husband.

SIRISOOK

Mean place between here and there is mean leaving here and there.

CLINE

Leaving both places where you are able to do what you want to do in both places, yes.

SIRISOOK

I think it depend on the job now, because he's on his Ph.D. program, and after he graduate, we'll see if he get a very good job that he love and pay well. I may have to quit my job, I think, or, yes, I would have to just keep probably the Payap University job where I can be there for like two, three months and I can be here for another four or five months and go back there for another chunk of that, because I'm now about to start my full-time job, which in my university in the international program where they looking for somebody who can do cultural representative in the different center. They have center in China, in Cambodia, in Vietnam, and in Burma. They want somebody to do that, the job for them, which will probably be me, and that's the full-time job, which means I can't travel to the State that much. I'll be able to be here one and a half month—that's the longest—starting in 2012. I mean, the job probably start when I go back this time.

CLINE

Really. Wow.

SIRISOOK

So we are not looking forward for kids yet because we don't know where we will be, not until we know for sure what's the job situation will be. I don't want to live here full-time, for sure. That's the phrase that I always tell people and tell my husband. We would like to adopt kid, but we don't know from where, what ethnicity. I don't think we care much about that, as long as if that would do good for kids. My parents is totally not agree with that.

CLINE

That's very outside the culture, yes.

SIRISOOK

We both healthy, so we should have our own kids, and not that we have a problem, or we might have a problem. We don't know. We don't know because we don't try it yet. So we might find out that we can't have kid. They believe in the blood, in the lineage. They believe that if that kids is coming from a parents that don't care about them, don't care enough to leave them, that means that

that blood is not good, so they will not be a good kid. They strongly believe about that, so they not agree about that, while we believe that kids will grow up with their environment. It depend on what kind of environment. Of course, they might carry some of their history with them, but if we don't start to be with them, then who will start to be with them? It's so much of the kids that don't have parents in this world, and are we produce another one to be out? Or are we be fair enough or not selfish enough to adopt one? I, of course, totally want to have my own kids because I want to have that feeling, you know, from the beginning to the end [unclear], but I can't be selfish. Somebody else probably can. It's their choice, but this is our choice. So we not concerned about time. No, I'm thirty-four, and people will say, "Oh, you have maybe three more years before you reach the age that you can be pregnant safely." I go, "It's okay," because we would like to adopt kids anyway.

CLINE

That's just how we were. Why don't you want to live here full-time?

SIRISOOK

I just have a feeling that I'm not belong here, and it might be totally a wrong thing to say to say that I'm not belong here. I don't think belong to any places in particular. I think people just choose to be there or not be there, and in my case, my goal is to bring the knowledge here or whatever I get here back to my hometown and give it to people there. But in the same time, I'm here. When I'm here, I have a feeling that I also have this duty to bring my own culture to present here too. It become necessary for me. Like maybe that's why I'm here, is to perform my dance culture here. So I don't want to be here full-time, but I'm happy to be here part-time and be there part-time, the same way my husband feels. So I think we try to compromise each other by being in both place, because I think I have my mission in both places, and it's very important for me that if I'm here and not running the Lan Sattha, then it's no point for me to be here, because I have that ability, I have that culture that I can give to people here not only because it's like a knowledge thing that people should know what Thai dance is, but, you know, to create the happiness itself is what important. When people see the dance, they feel happy, they feel independent, and then something else will come after that, curiosity, like what kind of dance that you do. People not necessarily have to be 100 percent know that, oh, that's Thai dance. Sometimes they come to me and, "What kind of dance? Because I can see a little bit of Indonesian and I can see a little bit of Burmese, can see a little bit of Cambodian in that." I tell them, "Oh, that's just northern Thai, Lanna dance," because I incorporate everything into the dance. I'm not stick with the old one because I believe that it have to grow. So to run the Lan Sattha is important for me here. Going back to Thailand, to also keep the tradition, dance tradition, is important for me, too, because it's the place that it form and

it should go there, but also develop it with the knowledge that I have from here is important too. So when people ask me or when my husband ask me, “So who are you other than the dance whore?” That’s the joke that we always say, but it’s true. I think it’s true. So what kind of dance? So what if you see yourself as a dancer? I come up with this idea that it’s like a tree. We grow in a particular places. We sink into the ground and eat that. That how we grow. But the flower, the fruit, the leaf, the shape of the tree that I grow is depend on the environment in that place. If we grow and give a different size of flower and taste of fruit here in Los Angeles—and it might be different from where in Thailand. It depend on the water and the air and the environment that we grow with, but we are not stopped growing. We going to stop when—I don’t know, probably nonstop. But it’s also when I grow and I have flower and I have a fruit, some of that fruit would become a tree, so when I teach people here how to dance, they are allowed to dance without me, not that it have to be with their own teacher all the time. They can grow. The bird can carry it to somewhere else and grow more and become a different thing. That’s fine. I give them what I have, and then they develop it the way they do. If they don’t develop it, they don’t want to perform without me, that’s their choice. That seed didn’t grow up anymore, but it’s okay. The same thing in Thailand. I grow different tree in that, or maybe it’s the same tree, it’s just reaching the arms to different place, and it give a different result for that. So that’s my philosophy that come up in, like, the last two or three years when I think of myself, but the only one thing is that we not stop growing.

#### CLINE

Since what you’re doing is not dependent or entirely focused on the Thai community here, coming, as you do as an adult, from Thailand, from northern Thailand, and coming here to Los Angeles where they have all these different transplanted communities from different parts of the world and certainly different parts of Asia, what is your sense of what the Asian American experience is or where it’s going from your experiences living here for a while?

#### SIRISOOK

Uncontrollable. They can’t be the same way that their ancestor used to be because world is changing. Yes, I can’t tell where it going to go, how they going to carry their own culture and tradition throughout this century or not, or even, you know, this year or not. It unpredictable and, yes, uncontrollable. I totally don’t know where it going to go from this point. That’s from what I see both in Thai community and other community. I think people who somehow strongly want to represent that, especially in the new generation, it’s just because it’s a fashion. I could be totally wrong or misjudge, but because other student and other group have these community, Thai community, Vietnamese community, student association, and you show your own culture. That’s when

they start to do a kind of a performance thing with their own culture, but it's totally just on the surface. I don't know what they think. Maybe they have a strong relationship with their past or the history much more than that. Maybe in some of the race or group they might have a stronger relationship with the past or the history if they have a very difficult time. Again, when I'm in Thailand, we have so little information about the surrounding people in Asia, in Southeast Asia, not that many information at all. Somehow our government care about that, or maybe it's just not important enough. We know very little about Vietnam War. We know very little about the Khmer Rouge. I know why we don't know about that. Or Timor, East Timor, Indonesia, all that stuff, it just somehow disappear in the air, and being here, hang out with interesting people and learn more about that, see the film and documentary about that, made me wonder how much Thai or the new generation of people know about their own history, not only the Thai, but other new generation of the Asian American people, too, like how much they know about the history. It just if it not important for them anymore, or it maybe it may be better to just step forward and not look back to the past, but they have so many pain to experience in the history with the war and all kind of that colonialist and thing. Somehow I wonder how the Thai escape or how the Thai manage to lose so little from all that. Laos get bomb. Vietnamese get bomb. Other place get this, this, this very, very, like, tragic thing. We get so little from that, and how do we manage to get that? It still remain mysterious for me. That go to another thing. But maybe because of that, maybe because we have so much pride of we never be colonial by others and we never lose the war. We never-- We are peaceful. It does say in the national anthem we're peaceful, but when it time to go for war, we have a break for that, something like that. If that's not too-- [laughs] So we just didn't have much about our own culture and the surrounding culture we never lose, and I think that that have an influence, too, to the culture, to the dance, to the performance culture, because we have so much pride that we are taking for granted. We don't think so much about maintaining or developing. It just didn't appear to us. We just take it for granted because it was there, so use it, use it, use it, perform it for that, for this, for this, for the promotion of Thailand. Do people want to develop it because their love of that? Some, but they just develop it because some other purpose, say, money. They can make money from that. That's why they develop that thing.

CLINE

And what about the impact of Western culture on Thailand at this point?

SIRISOOK

Tourism, yes, a lot, a lot. We see dollars in the blue eyes. [laughter] That's what I would say. Not so much on the Western— I mean, some. If it comes formally, it comes from the pop culture, music and—what do you call that—

mass production. Like we adopt that America's Got Talent to be the Thailand's Got Talent, and of that TV show, commercial thing, that have so much impact in Thailand other than the tourist industry. I think we use so much on the J-pop and K-pop now, like Korean pop and Japanese pop, which is now the Korean come stronger.

CLINE

Interesting.

SIRISOOK

Other than that, I don't think the Western—I mean, we already Westernized in some way, the way the industry go, the tourist industry or the machine and the object. It's already there.

CLINE

There has been a fair amount of unrest in Thailand over the last few years. I mean, it settled down. How much do you think the social sociopolitical situation will affect your choices in where you decide to work or perform or spend your time, or do you think that it won't matter so much?

SIRISOOK

Won't matter so much for me. I can live with that, but maybe not for my husband. We're looking for democratic, and it going to have to be the right one, from his idea. Also, because of all of these loose thing in Asian culture like, easy example, my neighbor who live in front of my house, we don't know them very well because they're new, but the husband would try to stab the wife and try to kill somebody else, like stabbing. His wife lose her eye, one eye, because he try to stab her and he did stab her. He got bail out from the jail easily because his boss is somebody who has the power, he have money.

CLINE

So, corruption.

SIRISOOK

He come back, and obviously she come back to live with him. You can't call for your own safety. Here if something happen like that, you can call the police or go to the court and say, "I'm not feeling comfortable having somebody like that near me, so he going to have to be away from there," or something, somebody should keep an eye on him, or people in the community can do that. Nothing can be done like that in Thailand because if you start to do that, and if it not affect him, like if it not work for him, then he will become your enemy and your life is in risk. Your children is in risk too. So nobody will step to do anything. Let them stay. If we not step in their business, they will not step in your business. That's the way we compromise with each other. For my husband, that totally wrong, like it can't be like that, and he say that he don't want to raise our kids in that environment, not at all. So if it's the reason that we're not going to raise our kids in Thailand, it's because it's—

CLINE

Not safe.

SIRISOOK

—unjust in Thailand. Because it come from the government, it come from the society, it come from the top of that, people already corrupt, people already give a favor for the big man, so that tradition carry on, even in the smallest society, and people who have the very small power, they do the same thing that the big people do, and that's okay or they think that's okay. People just can't ask for their right in some way, but in some way, they have so many right to do many things that people can't do here. It's just different way, and we would just kind of adjusting ourself to every situation. While here, you got to have to go with that situation. Adjusting is something else that not apply to the thought at all, same as in Japan. "You've got to be this and you've got to be this." It can't be something else, circle, a circle. It can't be something else. While for us, "Okay, we can't do it that way. Okay, we will do it this way. Oh, no? Then we go another way." We just get it the way to approach is one, go there, just how you go there.

CLINE

Interesting.

SIRISOOK

We are so very good and easy with that. Sometime for him it seem like a dishonest thing, like we do something that not honest, but for us it's like, no, no, we not trying to be dishonest. It's just if you can't do it this way, you got to have to do it another way, because it's not only one path. It's another way to do that. The same way with how we deal with political.

CLINE

So here you are, you're kind of poised between two worlds, and that appears to be who you are. I wanted to know if there's anything that we haven't talked about that you would like in the record before we end the interview.

SIRISOOK

I value my art more when I get to come here. I appreciate whoever or however start to create the tradition, the dance tradition, when I'm here, because when I see the dance tradition or performance tradition here, it have a value in some things, but it have a lack of some things too. I look back to my own dance tradition, and I feel thankful for thankful for whatever it did, because it have some meaning in that. It not for people here, but it's for us. But in a way, every dance have it own value, it's just being here remind me of what I have in my hand and my experience and my background, that I can use so much of that, and it's endless. The things people back in my culture give to me or what I learn from them or what I steal from them or what I get an idea from them, it's endless use of that as long as you keep using it. I value a humanity side of

people more when I'm here. I see different things, different life. I probably see it in Thailand, too, but I didn't realize that. And that can be applied to the work very well of what I'm looking at, human being. There's probably so much more to say, but I can't think of all of it now.

CLINE

It really is endless. There could be just an infinite number of interviews, but we can only do so much.

SIRISOOK

I know. Yes, here open up my world, being here, in many ways. It change the way I look at the world, and also specifically for the dance idea, from all the different ethnicity or different theory and the way people approach the tradition and practice tradition. It change the way I look at the world. I can't say in good or bad world. It just in a useful way that, again, I can apply to use in my work, in my dance.

CLINE

Okay. Well, on behalf of the Center for Oral History Research at the UCLA Library and, speaking for myself, thank you so much for taking this time to talk about your life and work, and I wish you the best on your next indeterminate number of months back in Thailand.

SIRISOOK

Thank you to listen to me and take it a long way. I feel very important to be able to tell every single detail about my life, about my work, and this interview is not only for me to tell my life and my work, but it somehow give me some idea for what I want to do or something that I never think about before that I never speak of. I can say here.

CLINE

I was pleased to offer the opportunity. The pleasure seems to be all mine, but I'm glad it has been more for you as well. I look forward to seeing you perform.

SIRISOOK

Thank you. [End of August 5, 2011 interview]

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