THAI POETRY: PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

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Up till now, few people have undertaken the difficult task of translating Thai poetry into English. No foreigner has as yet attempted to do for Thai literature what Arthur Waley has done for Chinese literature, Donald Keene for Japanese literature, or Burton Raffel for Indonesian poetry. However, a number of Thai intellectuals have selected their favourites to translate into English. The most popular collection of translations is probably Seni Pramoj's *Interpretative translations of Thai poets*, (1965). The book includes examples of three main Thai poetic forms - the *khlong*, the *kln*, and the *rai* - which the translator tried to maintain in his English translation. Selected poems by some classical poets were also translated by Thong-In Soonsawat in his small book *The Thai poets* (1968); Prince Prem Purachatra's small booklet, *Introduction to Thai literature* (1967) contains some good translations of poems by two great poets, Sirpāt of the Ayutthaya period and Sunthōn Phū of the Bangkok period. Recently, the National Identity Board of Thailand published articles on Thai poetry and translations by Prince Chand under the title *Facets of Thai poetry* (Chand 1983). These authors, with the exception of Thong-In, have a near-native command of English and should, in practice, counter Professor Echols' remarks that much of what had been translated into English by South East Asians was in unidiomatic English and, occasionally inelegant (Echols 1978).¹

Western scholars who translate Thai poetry into English include James Mosel whose monograph *Trends and structure in contemporary Thai poetry* contains helpful information on Thai poetry, especially the *kln*, which is the most popular verse form (Mosel 1961). Among the seven poets Mosel chose to translate, only Uteneni is regarded by the present literary community as prominent.² Seni's work has recently inspired Joseph Cooke to work on Thai *khlong* poetry. Cooke's article (1980) contains translations of some 13 stanzas of Thai *khlong*, 12 of which had earlier been translated by Seni. There is, therefore, a lot of scope for improvement by Cooke on Seni's work. Thomas Silcock has also produced some translations of Thai poetry and, in 1976, undertook the courageous task of translating a full length *kln* poem called *A village ordination*. In spite of the fact that this poem contains numerous technical Buddhist terms, the translator produced a good quality translation and, in some places, managed to experiment with the special technique of Thai internal rhymes. Søren Egerod has also tried his hand at translating some Northern Thai poems, called *The poem in four songs*, by a

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well known poet, Phraya Phrom (Egerod 1971). Recently, the Sathirakoses-Nagapraddipa Foundation produced a book of poetry in translation entitled *Three Thai poets* which contains works by Angkarn, Naowarat, and Witayakorn, the three contemporary poets who took part in the ASEAN Poetry festival in Jakarta in 1978 (Angkarn 1978). Translators for this volume include Sulak Sivaraksa, Hiram Woodward, Vegg Plenge, and Michael Wright. In addition, *The ELEK book of oriental verse*, edited by Keith Bosley (1979), includes a section on Thai poetry which contains translations of both classical and contemporary poetry. This work is the result of a collaborative effort between a Thai and an English poet. Professor E.H.S. Simmonds has also translated some classical poems both from the *khlong* and the *klgn* verse forms although his work is yet to be published. The present paper attempts to discuss some of the problems of translation based on the work of translators mentioned above.

Although Thai classical poetry provides poets with five types of verse forms\(^3\), today only two, *khlong* and *klgn*, are most commonly used. Both *khlong* and *klgn* are believed to be a genuine Thai creation and Thai translators are often at great pains to make them known to their foreign friends. This is true especially for the *khlong* metre which both Seni and Prince Chand have been most insistent about imitating in their English translations. The view that Thai poetry should be translated into English in verse which maintains the original Thai verse form has been strongly advocated by Prince Chand (Chand 1977). Questions could be raised in this context as to whether the Thai metre should be used at all, or whether a translator should try in some way to convey his readers some idea of a Thai *khlong* or *klgn*, or ignore them completely and use the nearest poetic form available in English.

The layout of the *khlong* metre is:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
\end{array}
\]

This is called *khlong* sī *suphāp*, the most common of the *khlong* metres. The minimum unit of a Thai verse form is a *bāt* (stanza). A *khlong* sī *suphāp* stanza has four lines (bāt). Each line has two parts (*wak*) which are separated by a space signalling a pause in recitation or a hum when sung. A *khlong* sī *suphāp* stanza is thus written, purely for the eyes' mind and the ears' mind, in two blocks. Each line of the first block has five syllables, whereas in the second block, the first three lines have two syllables each but the last line has four syllables. Two optional syllables may occur in the first and third lines. Thus the number of syllables is restricted to seven and nine syllables per
line with a space between the fifth and sixth syllables. Eleven syllables are placed with prescribed tone marks; four with a (mai thō), seven with a (mai ŏk). These prescribed tone mark syllables may be replaced by stopped ending syllables (often known as dead syllables) which do not bear tone marks. However, a syllable with a mai ŏk must be replaced by a dead syllable headed by a high or mid class consonant, and a mai thō syllable must be replaced by a dead syllable headed by a low class consonant.

Phonemically speaking, in modern Thai terms, the position in which a prescribed mai ŏk syllable occurs must be a syllable which has either a low tone or a falling tone, whereas the position prescribed for a mai thō syllable must have either a high tone or a falling tone. Rising tones and mid tones may occur elsewhere but never in the prescribed tone marked positions.

Stanza 1:

(1) hahāy kratāy tēn chom can excl! hare jump admire moon (2) man bōo ciam tua man tām tōy it not know its place low base (3) nōk yuuŋ nāak krasān hāa mēek peacock if desirous seek cloud (4) man bōo ciam tua nōy tām tīa diarachān it not know its place low base beast

Stanza 2:

(1) hahāy kratāy tēn chom khēc excl! hare jump admire moon sūŋ sōŋ sūt taa lī tā sūŋ fāa high up out of reach towards sky (2) réduu rāddī dā sāt sūŋ kān nāa season heart content animal mate each other yàa wāa raw cīw khāa yūń phīn din diaw don't say we're high low at level ground, same

Above are the original Thai khlong stanzas laid out line-by-line with an English equivalent below each word or expression. These two khlong stanzas are probably the best known as well as best loved examples of repartee in Thai because the most celebrated poet SiPrāt was one of the two participants. The first is the address of a high-born court lady and the second is SiPrāt’s immediate reply. This kind of extemporized poetic game was common in the 17th century during the reign of King Narai. khlong poetry competitions must have been a fairly regular event at that time since the French envoy, Simon de la Loubère, who visited Ayutthaya in 1678, did not fail to notice that 'The Siamese do conceive easily and clearly, their repartees are witty and quick'. (de la Loubère 1969:60).
Seni Pramoj is the first to stimulate the use of the Thai klong metre in an English translation. Here is his translation of the above repartee:

Oho! Bunny loves
It will fall so soon
As bees' swarm will cool
Such love fancy flight.

High moon.
From height.
In clouds,
It might not be.

Aha! How foolish
Reaching far out there
Say I, who would dare
Ah, as if you might

Such care,
The height.
To love lonely?
Walk this earth alone.

(Seni 1965:23)

Both quatrains of the Thai begin with a seldom encountered word haišay. Although it is an exclamation, the /y/ ending gives it a poetic quality pleasing to Thai ears. At the same time it carries a suggestion of mockery indicating that the speaker wishes to ridicule the addressee. Whether the rather melodramatic 'Oho!' and 'Aha!' quite capture the subtlety of the Thai is somewhat questionable. Questionable also, is the translator's choice of the word 'bunny' with its connotations of playgroups and playboys. Seni probably wants a two-syllable word here in order to make seven syllables in the line but in satisfying the metrical requirements, he has opted for a wildly inappropriate English word. He did succeed, however, in producing the rhymes for moon-soon and cool although cool should be pronounced soon, in the Thai way of reading the final -l if the true rhyme is to be obtained. Height and flight are also rhymed. His sacrifice of peacock for bees is, however, unforgivable. Here, the Thai flavour which could have been conveyed in the translation is totally lost. It is common knowledge among Thais that hares come out on nights of the full-moon and peacocks are seen more often on cloudy days. In Thai, the double meaning expressions kratâay chom can (the hare admiring the moon) and nok yuûñ gö kin mešk (the peacock eats the cloud) must have stemmed from this. Thus, the Thai operates not only at a symbolic level but also at a quite literal level - a fact quite unapparent in the English translation. Clearly, in insisting on the Thai klong metre, the translator has had to make considerable sacrifices to the meaning of the original, the result being a translation of very dubious value.

Here are the remaining translations of this famous repartee:

(1) Au clair de la lune
Low station unaware
Peacock cock' th eye where
Low station, low shelf

Moon' th hare
of self
clouds ride
low underwear.