SIAMESE VERSE FORMS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

The corpus of Siamese\textsuperscript{1} poetry, encompassing a period of six or seven centuries, exhibits a wide variety in theme and form, and attains in many works a level of quality hardly surpassed in any other culture. Poetic artistry in Siamese verse finds expression mainly in the skillful manipulation of language within the constraints imposed by the various verse patterns. So much of the value of Siamese poetry lies in the form, as opposed to the semantic content, that translations into Western languages are notoriously disappointing. The paramount importance of form is reminiscent of eighteenth-century Western music; in both cases, in Siamese poetry as well as, say, in minuets by Haydn and Mozart, one feels that the main purpose was not so much to produce something basically new and different as to exploit existing patterns in elegant and graceful ways.

The traditional\textsuperscript{2} verse forms of Siamese are described in detail in a well-known textbook called

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chānthálák. The chānthálák textbook is part of a series of traditional grammatical works, named after Pali texts of similar content.

?àkkhārâwíthii (orthography and phonology)
wáciwíphâak (parts of speech)
wâakkàyásâmphan (syntax)
chānthálák (versification)

(As indicated by the underlining, the four titles are linked by rhyme.) Each of these four textbooks has gone through a number of versions, editions, and printings, most of them published by the Thai Ministry of Education. The best versions are those by the late Phya Uppakit Silpasarn (born 1879, died 1941), who taught Thai language at Chulalongkorn University. Nowadays versification (chānthálák) is usually included as a chapter or section in the various textbooks, by many different authors, entitled làk phaasāa ('principles of language'), with pretty much the same content as the older separate chānthálák textbooks.

Westerners who write on Siamese versification invariably follow the chānthálák model. In fact, it may be said in general that the more accurately the Western work reproduces the chānthálák description, the better it is.

The chānthálák tradition is one of high quality. The classifications it makes of the various types of Siamese verse forms are unexceptionable. Its statements of the rules, for example, of rhyme or syllable count, are highly accurate. Various versions of the
chănthálák tend to differ mainly in their choice of illustrative examples (sometimes original compositions for this purpose), and these examples are almost always good ones. Various versions differ also as to how detailed a treatment they give to each category.

There are, however, two criticisms that one may make of the chănthálák textbooks, both the Siamese and the foreign versions. The first, perhaps less serious than the second, is that one frequently finds that a particular poetic work, especially if it is one of the older classics, deviates significantly from the models described in the textbooks. The deviations may be in either direction: sometimes the actual poem is found to disobey the rules in ways not mentioned in the textbook. On the other hand, a particular work is sometimes found to obey various constraints not mentioned in the textbook. One has the feeling that this lack of perfect agreement between the textbook rules and the actual practice of the poets is due to an ambiguity of purpose in the textbooks; they are intended to be not only descriptive (and it is in this aspect that one occasionally finds imperfections), but also prescriptive. Thai students are required to compose original poems in the various forms, and the chănthálák textbooks are intended to tell them how to do it.

The other criticism that one feels compelled to make of the chănthálák tradition is its tendency to make too little of the relationship of each of the various forms to the linguistic or cultural period in Siamese history during which it arose. This is
probably due to the fact that each of the forms, once it was established, continued to be used through successive periods, and all of them are in current use today, equally available to contemporary poets. One gets the impression from many of the textbooks that all these forms are coeval and eternal, with only occasionally a reference to chronological matters (sometimes, as we shall see, right, and sometimes wrong). Some of the best versions, Siamese and foreign, are especially irritating in this respect; for an ancient form they will often cite an illustrative example composed by a twentieth-century poet, who may impose upon himself either more or less stringent constraints than did those who first used the form in earlier times in works that have become literary classics.

It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to place in correct perspective with respect to linguistic and cultural history each of the major types of verse. This enterprise will be found at times to correct or clarify the statements found in the traditional textbooks. At other times our findings will turn out to require no significant changes or additions to the statements found in the textbooks, but to add a historical dimension, or in some cases to suggest worthwhile topics for further research.

To put it another way, and I must beg forgiveness for speaking here in a personal and not very modest vein, after some thirty-odd years of studying and thinking about these matters I believe that there are a number of basic points on which the traditional account is incorrect or incomplete, and my purpose