Further Observations on the Thai chān Poetic Conventions

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During the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) with its flourishing Indic culture, the chān meters assumed a prominent position in Thai poetry. With Sanskrit and Pali counterparts, these meters consist of syllables defined as light (lāhū?) and heavy (khārū?) and arranged in invariable numbers and sequences. After the addition of rhyme schemes, approximately six different meters appeared regularly in the chān compositions. Following the Ayutthaya period, other more popular verse forms gradually replaced the chān meters. With the composition of emplates kham chān in 1913, however, a chān revival occurred. Because of the great concern for proper literary types and forms at this time, this revival emphasized the fulfillment of the light and heavy syllable sequences. Authors of the new compositions adhered rigidly to the descriptions of each chān meter outlined in the chānthálák, the Thai versification textbooks. Approximately twelve new meters began to appear in the new compositions, and these meters also became a part of the Thai literary corpus.

In comparing the older chān compositions with those written during the 1913 revival, many Thai critics claim that the early compositions do not closely follow the light and heavy syllable sequences and, therefore, contain numerous errors. In fact, these early compositions are not filled with errors. Errors seem to appear because the compositions are examined in their printed form. These same so-called errors disappear when the meters are

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1 For the Thai chān meters, a light syllable consists of a short vowel followed by no final consonants. The glottal stop that follows a short vowel in spoken Thai but has no consonant symbol in this position in written Thai is ignored. A heavy syllable ends in a long vowel or any vowel plus a final consonant.

2 The six meters found in the pre-1913 chān compositions include emplates chān 11, wásántádlók chān 14, toodókkà? chān 12, maaλníi chān 15, sāttharáa chān 21, and sāthunlăwíkkiílītā? chān 19.

3 The twelve new meters that began to appear regularly in the post-1913 compositions include emplates chān 12, wapsáthtǎ? chān 12, kammáalaa chān 12, phúchoŋkháŋpàyāat chān 12, emplates chān 11, ñúpàtthítàaa chān 11, sāλníi chān 11, ampilkan chān 11, cítápáthhaa chān 8, maanáwàkkà? chān 8, witchummaalaa chān 8, and ñíithiśā? chān 20.
recited with their characteristic rhythms. Each recitation employs specific poetic conventions that produce the required light and heavy syllables. Examined and explained in earlier studies (Hudak 1985: 107-119; 1990), these conventions include 1) syllable breaking—the division of monosyllabic words into two syllables; 2) syllable cross-over—the division of a word between hemistiches (wák); 3) the addition of normally silent syllables on Indic loanwords; 4) the alternate pronunciation of syllables; 5) the syncopation or muting of short vowels; 6) the reduction of vowels in weakly stressed syllables or words; 7) the use of syllables ending in a short vowel and a final nasal as a light or heavy syllable; and 8) the use of prefixed syllables ending with -am as a light or heavy syllable. Upon closer examination of several older compositions, a number of additional observations regarding these conventions and their use can be made.4

The first observation concerns the reduction of vowels in weakly stressed positions or vowel reduction. Vowel reduction generally occurs in non-final syllables of disyllabic and polysyllabic words. Syllables in word-final position receive the greatest stress. In these syllables, the vowels substantially shorten, although they may not be as short as natural short vowels. Once shortened, these vowels may then qualify as light syllables even though they are spelled with orthographic long vowels (a heavy syllable). Thus, in the following example, the initial syllable daa in the disyllabic word daabôt (wák d) is reduced, making it a light syllable. It is spelled, however, with a long aa (* indicates a light syllable and 0 a heavy one).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{?intháráwíchíanchán} & \quad 11 \\
0 & 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
a. \quad ?aawâat & \quad phrálaan & \quad lian \\
\text{temple} & \quad \text{lawn, grounds} & \quad \text{cleared, polished} \\
* & * & 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
b. \quad dùcà & \quad wen & \quad sûwan & \quad sān \\
\text{like} & \quad \text{mirror} & \quad \text{gold} & \quad \text{construct, create} \\
0 & 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
c. \quad mii & \quad rùup & \quad phrásàtcâphan \\
\text{have} & \quad \text{picture} & \quad \text{personal name}
\end{align*}
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4 The older compositions examined include Sàmùtthákhoót kham chán, Bunnoowâat kham chán, and Sña khoo kham chán.

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d. *00
d. *0 *00

*tha  daabot  banphachaa
hermit  state of becoming

Clean, cleared, resembling golden mirrors, the temple grounds
glisten. And there stands a statue of Satcaphan's ordination.
— from Bunnoowaat kham chan

Similar shortenings also occur in naturally unstressed words, such as
prepositions, pronouns, demonstratives, and classifiers.

The earlier studies of the chan conventions concluded that the poets
generally exploited vowel reduction in grammatical function words and in
disyllabic and polysyllabic words, but they tended to avoid vowel reduction
in content words, particularly if the reduction, as a result of the meter, pro-
duced distortion (Hudak 1985: 115). Further examination of the older clas-
sics, however, demonstrates that the poets did exploit vowel reduction in
content words when those words occurred in natural rhythm groups. Typical
rhythm groups of this type include syntactic phrases such as noun phrases,
prepositional phrases, and predicates. In these phrases, stress frequently falls
on the final syllable of the rhythm group in which case the remaining vow-
els in the group reduce. In wak d of the following example, both occur-
rences of ruu, a heavy syllable, appear in light syllable positions. The
vowel, however, reduces because it does not receive full stress in either of
the two rhythm groups. The word ruy receives full stress in the final posi-
tion of the first rhythm group, and trii in the final position of the second
rhythm group. In both cases, the natural rhythm groups of three syllables
fit the rhythm groups of the meter (**0 and *00).6

?inmpharawichichan chen 11

0 0 0 0
0

a. praakaan  pracop  khoom
walls  equipped with  torch

b. sawaan  sehn  samn can
bright  rays of light  the same  moon

5 Stanza 68, p. 9.
6 Thai tends to fall into natural rhythm groups of two and three syllables.
Torches on walls flicker, the interior becomes day from rays of moon-bright light. Whether dawn or dusk, no one knows.

—from Bunoowáat kham chán\(^7\)

The second observation concerns rhyme, which played a significant role in classical poetry (as well as in much modern poetry, although the comments here apply to the classical). In the classical verse forms, rhyme functioned as a major building block of the stanza as well as a major source of aesthetic pleasure. In most cases, the poets rhymed syllables that ended in the same vowel or in the same vowel and final consonant. No distortions of syllables or words occurred in the production of these rhymes. To produce the required rhyme at other times, however, the poets needed to distort syllables. In these cases, they often resorted to the conventions used to produce the light and heavy syllables in the chán meters. Those conventions most often employed for rhyme include the following:

**Syllable breaking and syllable carry-over.** In the following stanza of sàttunláwikkiílíítá? chán 19, the final syllable of wák a, daa, must rhyme with the final syllable of wák b. The final syllable of wák b should read phaan 'young'; this reading, however, fails to produce the rhyme. Accordingly, the syllable is split with the final consonant plus an added vowel carried over to the initial position of wák c, which requires a light syllable. Wák a and wák b then rhyme, daa and phaa; and wák c begins with a light syllable ná. Some readings would have lá as the light syllable because phaan ends with an orthographic “l” ( والله).

sàttunláwikkiílíítá? chán 19

\[0 \ 0 \ 0 \ * \ * \ 0 \ * \ 0 \ * \ * \ 0\]

a. ?áa ?áa ?oórá yúphintháphaan phánídaa
   oh oh young girl young, beautiful girl young, betrothed woman

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\(^7\) Stanza 66, p. 9.