Limericks and Rhyme in Thai

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Without rhyme, poetry does not exist in Thai (Siamese). So state the Thai poets and critics (Mosel, 1961, p. 9; Ná Nákhoón, 1964, p. 17). In the past 20 years or so, a renewed interest in rhyme in Thai has begun to emerge (Bickner, 1991; Bofman, 1984; Chitakasem, 1972, 1991; Cooke, 1980; Gedney, 1989; Hudak, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1992; Kuo, 1980). Research on rhyme and poetry in other dialects and languages of the Tai family has also begun to appear (Compton, 1979, 1992; Hartmann, 1984, 1992). All of these studies agree that rhyme creates not only the basic stanzaic patterns but also the main aesthetic pleasure found in poetry. In classical Thai poetry, two types of rhyme (sāmphát) exist: external rhyme (sāmphát nōok) and internal rhyme (sāmphát naj).

EXTERNAL RHYME

External rhyme occurs between the end syllable of one line (wák) and another syllable in the following line. This general external pattern can be further divided into a major round (rūat jāj), which links the end syllables of two lines, and a minor round (rūat lēk), which links the end syllable of one line with one of the early syllables, usually the third, in the following line. In both cases a couplet is completed. The following example of klōon poetry from ʔināw of Rama II (1809-1824) provides examples of both couplet types (Hudak, 1986, pp. 41–42). In this Thai example and in others in this essay, slight changes have been made in the transcription system used in the original.

dōokmáaj thúk phan kō bandaan
bōokbaan keesṁōn khācoon klin
phummáreet rōn rōnŋ boojbin
prāsaan šiąŋ phian phinphāat khōŋ

‘Flowers of every kind bloom and produce fragrant pollen floating through the air. Bees fly in a circle buzzing, uniting their sounds like the sounds of an orchestra.’

In the above example, klin and bin in line 2 and line 3, respectively, complete the major round. The final syllable khōŋ in line 4 completes another major round with the last syllable of the second line of the next stanza. The minor round occurs between the end syllable, daan, in line 1 and baan, the second syllable in line 2. Note that a minor round is not completed with bin, the end syllable of line 3, and with phin in line 4 because phin is not one of the first three syllables in the line.

In his article, “Ancient Thai Teases,” Charles J. Algaier (1987) offers a collection of 13 teases or limericks that have been “handed down orally from generation to
generation” and have been used primarily with children (p. 182). He goes on to make the following statement (p. 182): “Rhyme is a common feature, with reduplication and onomatopoeia occasionally occurring to fill them out.” In fact, rhyme is present in every one of the forms, appearing in both external and internal patterns.

The simplest external rhyme scheme, as in the following limerick, corresponds to the minor round. In this case, the end syllable in line 1, teek, rhymes with leek in line 2, and khi in line 3 rhymes with mii in line 4:

1. tum teek
   maa leek tum dii
   tum sêj khi
   maj mii khon ?aw
   ‘The big jar is broken, trade it for a better one; no one will take the jar containing shit.’

large clay jar-break
come-exchange-jar-good
jar-put in-shit
not-have-person-take

A similar pattern occurs in limerick number 2, with tá and ra in lines 1 and 2 as well as dii and khi in lines 3 and 4 completing the minor rounds:

2. ?uan tú? - tâ?
   kin marâ? cim khi
   ?uan maj dii
   kin khi cim marâ?
   ‘Hey fatso, eat melon dipped in shit! Being fat is no good; eat shit dipped in melon.’

fat-(intensifiers)
eat-bitter melon-dip into-shit
fat-not-good
eat-shit-dip into-bitter melon

A variation occurs in limericks 3 and 4 where there is no rhyme between the end syllables in the second and third lines, as there is in the above examples:

3. khi khi màa sàam sòok
   paj bòok mëejaaj
   mëe jaaj màj jùu
   càp ?ii nûu ténrabam
   ‘You ride a horse three measures to go and tell your mother-in-law; if she isn’t there, you grab the girls and dance!’

ride-horse-three-cubits
go-tell-mother-in-law
mother-in-law-not-be
grab-DEROG.-you (child)-dance

4. nòon klàaj
   kin raaj màa nàw
   nòon rim
   kin thàptim thòon
   ‘If you sleep between us, you eat from the trough of a rotten dog; if you sleep beside us, you eat golden pomegranates.’

lie-middle
eat-trough-dog-rotten
lie-edge
eat-pomegranate-gold

A second major type of external rhyme occurs in the following limerick:
5. phōmpia
   maa lia khīkòp
   phrā̀ läj tòp
   hūa bìn hūa bēn
   ‘Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick wood shavings! The monk will chase you, and slap you till your head is crushed flat!’

In lines 1 and 2, pia and lia complete the first couplet, the minor round. The final syllables of the next two lines, kòp in line 2 and tòp in line 3, complete the major round, the rhyming of the end syllables of two lines. (This major round also appears in the first two examples where it links up with the second minor round in each limerick; it is absent, however, in the third and fourth examples.) This same combination of couplets can be found in limericks 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. (See the Appendix.) The following example shows a variation in which the minor round has been omitted, leaving only the major round. sāaw and thāaw:

11. taa kḕe
    jāak mī mia sāaw
    thūùu májthāaw
    jákjḕ jākjan
    ‘The old man wants a young wife, yet he hobbles with a cane.’

The two couplet types examined so far represent two of the three major external rhyme patterns that also appear in classical Thai verse forms. The minor round, the simplest couplet, is the primary rhyme pattern in the verse form known as rāaj, a type of rhymed prose in which an unlimited number of lines is linked together by rhyme. The following rāaj example, taken from the literary classic Phrá̀ Lōo, illustrates that rhyme pattern: phon with hōn, hāan with kaan, bāat with rāat (Gedney, 1989, p. 501).

lēe̠w trát sāj khūn phon
phūak pháhōn hiām hāan
rḕŋ triam kaan phājūhābāat
cātturoŋ rāat rōp
‘Then he spoke, ordering the leader of the troops, the groups of brave soldiers, to make haste to prepare the movement, the fourfold royal (or able) army, glorious in war…’

The combination of a minor round with a major round appears in almost all of the classical four-line stanzas in kāap, chān, and kloon. The earlier kloon example from ʔīnāw shows both the minor and major round. In limerick 11 the minor round has been omitted, a variation not particularly favored but also possible in classical verse forms. Although the limerick is complete in four lines, it is probable that if another stanza were to be added, the second stanza would duplicate the first and that the final syllable of the initial limerick, bēn in limerick 5, would probably rhyme with the final
syllable of the second line of the following stanza, a characteristic of stanzas in succession and a normal pattern in classical verse forms.

Finally, a third type of external rhyme couplet occurs in which the rhyming couplet is separated by an intervening line as in the following:

12. mēw māj jūu
    nūu rāarōŋŋ
    mēw klāp maa
    lāŋkhaa pɔɔŋ
‘When the cat’s away, the mice make merry; when the cat comes back, off blows the roof.’

cat-not-be (in place)
mouse-jovial, in high spirits
rat-return
roof-blows off

In this case the final syllable of line 2, rōŋŋ, rhymes with the final syllable pɔɔŋ in line 4, which completes the major round. A similar pattern occurs in limerick 13, although in this case there is a rhyme between the end syllables of lines 1, 2, and 4:

13  khîŋŋēe
    khāaj dɔkkhēe
    khāaj māj mōt
    rōŋŋhāaj ŋēŋŋēe
‘Crybaby! You try to sell flowers; when you can’t sell them all, you cry like a baby!’
given to crying; crybaby
sell-edible flower for curries
sell-not-completely
cry-imitative of crying

External rhyme patterns in which a line is skipped (limerick 12) and in which another line is added (limerick 13) are also common in the classical verse forms of khlooph and kāap. The following kāap example taken from stūa khoo kham čān illustrates this pattern (the final syllables wii, tii, and sī), combined with several others (Hudak, 1986, pp. 57–58):

prānāŋŋ kan khoɔŋ
mūŋ meen tōŋ rōŋŋ
bō hēn khaawii
rēŋ jen rēŋ jām
rēŋ khām rēŋ tii
ʔōk háj háa sīi
phruūtsōp maandaąa
‘They waited together and then looked for traces of the body. But still they did not see Khawii, the cow. Quickly came the dusk and evening. Quickly came the night and early morning. They wept looking for their mother.’
gather-together-wait
intend-look-body-trace
not-see-cow
quick-dusk-quick-evening
quick-night-quick-early morning
heart-weep-look for-excellent
cow-mother