

WORD-MELODY RELATIONSHIP AND MODAL SYSTEM  
IN THAI COURT SINGING

Presented at the International Conference

on Thai Studies

22-24 August 1984

Bangkok

by

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Though some scholars have already referred to a word-melody relationship in Thai court singing, a study of Thai singing principles, especially in terms of melodic generation, has not yet been done in a comprehensive way. It is assumed that there are rules for realizing tonal inflections in the singing of Thai, a tonal language. Without the proper inflection of each tone in a given vocal melody, song texts rendered vocally might at least be confusing, even if there might not be any change of the whole meaning of the text which could be usually understood in context.

From this point of view, I have been conducting research since 1974, on singing practice with teachers at the College of Dramatic Arts, Fine Arts Department, Bangkok. In my M.A. thesis, "A Preliminary study of Thai Traditional Music," 1979, I showed an amazing consistency in the relationships between tonal inflections of the text and the actual melodic formulae of Thai court singing. This was also true in Buddhist chanting and other recitations as well as in Village types of singing including children's game song. Since then, however, more first-hand material has become available, and it is thus possible to reinforce and expand the hypothesis. The purpose of this paper is to outline the expanded hypothesis.

Basic structure of the vocal melody of Thai court music

There are two different types of practice in Thai court singing, i.e., recitation and singing. Recitation has a closer relationship with song texts than does singing and also shows a strong tendency to reflect each tonal inflection in the melody. In other words, each tonal inflection tends to generate the recited-type melodies. Nonetheless, the

singing type, which is considered to be richer in melodic contour, will be dealt with in this paper because the relationships are more complex.

Thai court songs are accompanied by any of the ensembles variously called pīphāad, Kkhr̥yāṣāaj, and mahōorii. Vocal sections are usually performed in alternation with sections for the ensemble. Singing unaccompanied may stem from the need for clarity of text. Though each section, whether for singing or instruments, is structurally identical, the vocal melodic formulae may be somewhat different from the instrumental melodic formulae. But both are built on the same basic melody, though usually composed separately.

Both the basic instrumental and vocal melodies are composed based on a pentatonic scale, i.e., the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth pitches of the Thai tuning system consisting of seven approximately equidistant steps. It is also based on various rhythmic cycles played on drums and other percussion instruments, the cycles being called nāathab. Nāathab prōbkāj is twice as long as nāathab s̥jymāaj. The most important melodic pitch of each rhythmic cycle is that falling on the last beat of the cycle, which is the most accented beat. Each rhythmic cycle of either nāathab prōbkāj or nāathab s̥jymāaj consists of two unaccented beats called chīy (o) and two accented beats called chāb (+) played by a pair of small cymbals called chīy : o + o ⊕ (⊕ is the most accented beat.) Ex.1.

The pitches falling on both chīy and chāb, these being the fixed pitches, usually determine the structure of the basic melody played by melodic instruments and sung by vocalists. Each melodic instrument of an ensemble also incorporates these structurally important pitches into its own idiomatic realization of the basic melody. Therefore, the melodic formulae of each instrument as well as those of singers vary according to each style. Nonetheless, all these melodic formulae are based on the same basic melody determined by the pitches falling on the accented and sometimes also the unaccented beats of each rhythmic cycle. The important thing is that these fixed pitches are mostly from among the pitches in the pentatonic scale mentioned above, while the melodic realizations by each instrument and occasionally the vocalist too may use the fourth and seventh pitches in a passing function.

Vocal melodies can be structurally divided into two parts, i.e., the parts with and without song texts. The part without song texts uses certain vocalized vowels and consonants called yan. Ex.2. Actual song texts tend to be placed towards the latter part of a rhythmic cycle (naathab); the structure of the vocal melody in the texted portion is thus most important in the analysis of a piece. An example of the first section of a song, Ton phleeychiy, sam chan (the third tempo level of the naathab pròbkaj), is as follows: Ex.4.

Ex.5 shows each syllable of the text and its melodic formula in the example, Ton phleeychiy, sam chan, section 1.

#### Word-melody relationship in Ton phleeychiy

One of the prominent features of Thai court singing is that a song can theoretically be sung to any poem which is in the same form, provided that the samnyay -- national accents, e.g., Thai, Lao, Khmer, and Chinese -- of both texts and melody are the same. Each song has usually one or more popularly used song texts. It is also a very important procedure in performance practice to select and put various suitable song melodies to given texts especially for theatre performances.

Based on this principle, having singers perform an experimental text model to the above-mentioned melody, Ton phleeychiy, in each tempo level, i.e., sam chan (the third tempo level), suy chan (the second tempo level), and chan diaw (the first tempo level), showed two distinctive features.

Firstly, the same basic melody can be sung realized with many different melodic formulae according to different song texts and tonal inflections. The variety of melodic formulae is sometimes so great that it is hard to believe that those actual melodic formulae are considered to have the same basic structure. Examples of actual melodic formulae considered to be the same melody taken from Ton phleeychiy, sam chan, follow. Ex.6. The hyphens following song text syllables are actually sung with vocalized syllables called yan sòdsəg (short inserted yan), while the hyphens in one syllable such as thú-g indicate a sliding tone.

Ex.6 shows surprising variety within the final phrase which can be reduced to f f d f g. And since d and f are used to sing yan sòdsəg, the main or fixed pitches in this phrase are really only two, f and g.

The basic melodic structure is thus an ascent from the fixed pitch f to the fixed pitch g.

Secondly, there is consistency in the relationships between each tonal inflection and its realization as melodic formulae. Ex.7. The actual melodic formulae reflecting each tonal inflection have stereotyped patterns, and any word having a given tonal inflection will be sung to the same melodic pattern. Exceptions are the falling and rising tonal inflections which use a few melodic variants in order to enrich the melody. Ex.9A shows the word-melody relationship for the fixed pitches, f, g, and c, in the piece, Tôn phleeuchìy, săam chán, section 1. Ex.9.

Taking the entire piece into consideration, i.e., both sections, there is a total of four fixed pitches in the basic melody: f, g, c, and d. All of these pitches, however, do not belong to the same pitch level or key, that called thaay phiaay ɔ̌lâay, the pentatonic scale starting with the pitch f: f g a c d. This is because this piece includes a shift of pitch levels, called metabole, from thaay phiaay ɔ̌lâay (f. pitch level) to thaay kruad (c pitch level, i.e., the scale starting with the pitch c: c d e g a). Metabole is frequently observed in Thai traditional music and singing; but it is sometimes hard to say whether metabole has taken place because the transition from one pitch level to another is so smooth. In the process of transition from the f pitch level to the c pitch level, or vice versa, the fixed pitch-c can be understood either as the fifth of the f pitch level or as the first of the c pitch level. But the important thing is that the melodic formulae of each tonal inflection on the fixed pitch c in either f or c pitch level, are exactly the same. Thus, the transition happens so smoothly.

Consequently:

1. Fixed pitches f, g, and c belong to the f pitch level.
2. Fixed pitches c and d belong to the c pitch level.
3. C functions as the fifth pitch of the f pitch level and the first pitch of the c pitch level, and constitutes a pivot tone.
4. Because the c and d result from metabole, they are structurally the same as f and g (except that c and d are at the c pitch level and f and g at the f pitch level).