

## THAI POETRY: PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

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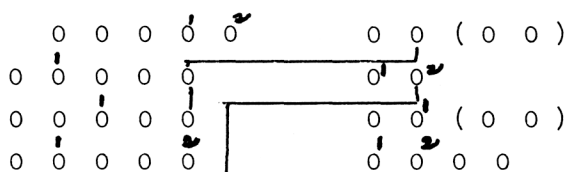
Up till now, few people have undertaken the difficult task of translating Thai poetry into English. No foreigner has as yet attempted to do for Thai literature what Arthur Waley has done for Chinese literature, Donald Keene for Japanese literature, or Burton Raffel for Indonesian poetry. However, a number 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 *klqn* 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 Purachatrat's small booklet, *Introduction to Thai literature* (1967) contains some good translations of poems by two great poets, Sīprāt of the Ayutthayā 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).<sup>1</sup>

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 *klqn*, which is the most popular verse form (Mosel 1961). Among the seven poets Mosel chose to translate, only Utcheni is regarded by the present literary community as prominent.<sup>2</sup> 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 *klqn* 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

well known poet, Phraya Phrom (Egerod 1971). Recently, the Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa 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, Vegn 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 *klon* 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<sup>3</sup>, today only two, *khlong* and *klon*, are most commonly used. Both *khlong* and *klon* 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 to his readers some idea of a Thai *khlong* or *klon*, or ignore them completely and use the nearest poetic form available in English.

The layout of the *khlong* metre is:



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* 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* 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 ēk*). 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 ēk* 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 ēk* 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)	hahāay	kratāay	tên	chom	can
	excl!	hare	jump	admire	moon
(2)	man	bōo	ciam tua man	tâm	tōy
	it	not	know its place	low	base
(3)	nók yuung	hāak	krasān	hāa	mēek
	peacock	if	desirous	seek	cloud
(4)	man	bōo	ciam tua nōoy	tâm	tīa diarachāan
	it	not	know its place	low	base beast

Stanza 2:

(1)	hahāay	kratāay	tên	chom	khēe
	excl!	hare	jump	admire	moon
	sūng sōng	sūt taa lēe		sūu	fāa
	high up	out of reach		towards	sky
	rīduu	rādii	dēe	sāt	sūu kan naa
	season	heart	content	animal	mate each other
	yāa	wāa raw	cāw khāa	yūu	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 *Sīprāt* was one of the two participants. The first is the address of a high-born court lady and the second is *Sīprāt*'s immediate reply. This kind of extemporised 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 Ayutthayā 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 *khlong* metre in an English translation. Here is his translation of the above repartee:

Oho! Bunny loves	High moon.
It will fall so soon	From height.
As bees' swarm will cool	In clouds,
Such love fancy flight.	It might not be.
 Aha! How foolish	 Such care,
Reaching far out there	The height.
Say I, who would dare	To love lonely?
Ah, as if you might	Walk this earth alone.

(Seni 1965:23)

Both quatrains of the Thai begin with a seldom encountered word *hahāay*. 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 *coon*, 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 *kratāay chom can* (the hare admiring the moon) and *nok yuunō kin mēek* (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 *khlong* 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	Moon'th hare
Low station unaware	of self
Peacock cock'th eye where	clouds ride
Low station, low shelf	low underwear.



The hare at the moon  
The hare do you blame  
We tread this self same  
'Tis spring, well you wot,

doth aim  
him not  
good earth  
when creatures wed.

(Chand 1977:349-50)

- (2) Poor hare jumps at moon?  
Does not see how low

Dotes so!  
his place.

Like peacocks who'd know  
Does not see one ace

the clouds,  
his place, the rogue.

Poor hare dotes, jumps at  
As far as eyes go  
But at times hearts flow;  
Queen, do not berate.

high glow--  
in sky.  
then all beasts mate.  
My case fits you.

(Bosley 1979:114)

- (3) Ha! Fie! Silly rabbit  
jumping.  
To catch the moon, knowing  
not how low  
Vain flutt'ring moth,  
aspiring so  
Knowing not how low your  
true estate!

Eyes aglow  
Your humble state!  
To mate with flame.  
Silly creature! Thing  
of nought!

Ha! Fie! Silly rabbit  
jumping.  
To catch the lunar light  
shining high'r  
Yet beats in season yield  
to their desire,  
Say not that slave and lady  
cannot love.

Eyes afire  
Up above.  
Each to each.  
We both are human,  
thou and I.

(Cooke 1980:430)

- (4) Shall a bunny hare leap to kiss the moon,  
Remembering not its own low degree?  
Shall a vain peacock view with clouds so soon,  
Knowing not its place, its base pedigree?

A bunny hare doth leap to kiss the moon,  
When he aims high, and look into the sky,  
And knows that mating season will come soon -  
Yet we both tread earth, thou as well as I.

(Prem 1967:4)

Translation 1 is by Prince Chand who had Seni's translation before him. French is used in the first line of stanza 1. He could not have been serious. Indeed, the poem as it stands makes little sense. What does he mean by "moon'th hare", "cock'th eye", "low underwear", and "wot"? Readers can only conclude that the translator's interest is simply to show off the *khlong* rhyme patterns of which he is so proud. Such a translation can surely help prove that the old Italian expression 'traduttore, traditore' is true at least in translating Thai *khlong* poetry into English.<sup>4</sup> Translations 2 and 3 appear to be better than Seni's and Prince Chand's, the translators doubtless being aware of the existence of these earlier efforts. They could hardly fail to improve, but one still wonders at their adherence to the Thai *khlong* metre, although the rhyme does not come off absolutely, nor does it produce any Thai flavour.

Prince Prem, whose translation is the fourth above, chose to ignore the Thai *khlong* metre. Being bilingual as well as a student of English literature, he must have been aware of English ears in deciding on something more acceptable to his audience with the familiar rhyme ABAB. Clearly, his translation is the more faithful and few would doubt that it is more beautiful.

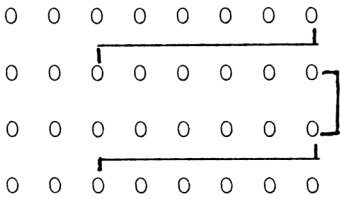
Seni's reason for imitating the Thai metre is clearly a patriotic one. He knew that others before him had translated some works of Thai poets but he said, 'It seems a pity that they found it necessary to adopt not only the English language but also the English poetic forms so that little is left in the translations of true Thai art.' (Seni 1965:1). He therefore tried to 'retain the mono-syllabic characteristics of the Thai language and to follow closely the system of internal and external rhymes'. By so doing, he hoped 'the beauty of Thai poetry may be better appreciated by our foreign friends'. (Seni 1965: 2).<sup>5</sup>

The belief that the form of the model must be imitated or copied is surely a mistake. The motive, like that of Prince Prem, should be invention rather than imitation. Prince Prem produced a better translation as a whole because he made no attempt to reproduce the Thai stanzaic structure but was able to reproduce the essence of the poem in an acceptable English metrical form.

As far as Thai poetry is concerned, rhyme is an absolute necessity. And because Thai is a tonal language (the obligatory placement of tones at particular syllables of obligatory tone placement in *khlong* metre is still unclear), we can say with certainty that the basic forms are more like the underlining tempo and rhyme scheme of a song than the structure of a poem in English. A tone melody has to be woven into the basic

rhythm and obviously, there is nothing anyone can put into an English translation to convey this.<sup>6</sup> If Seni, Prince Chand, Bosley, and Cooke wanted to use the Thai *khlong* metre, then English stress rhythm ought to have been used to take the place of Thai tone melody. But tone melody and stress rhythm are so different that the feeling of the original may not be conveyed at all.

When we turn to *klon*, we see that it is much less complex than *khlong*. The *klon* rhyme scheme, as is shown below, is an eight-syllable metre, with permitted variations from seven to nine syllables and with a rhyming syllable at the end of every alternate line. The lines form a quatrain, with one rhyme linking each quatrain to the next.



This really looks less complex, and is somewhat similar to the Malay and Indonesian *pantun*, but with a tone, usually non-specified on every syllable, instead of four stresses on each line. There is certainly more room to experiment and W.A. Graham (1924:284-5) has done just that. James Mosel (1961:19) later used Graham's translation to illustrate the *klon* rhyme but thought that the translation was too free and unfaithful to the original and so tried his own version. It is interesting to compare the two translations.

For the Thai poem used by Graham, which was probably taken from an old song, see the following page.

๑    นกขุนทองของเราแต่เก๋าก่อน  
       ไปร่วมคอนกับนกแก้วเสียแล้วหนอ  
       ชีชะช่างกระไรน้ำใจคอ  
       ติดนกต่อแล้วก็หลงจากกรงทอง  
       โผล่ลัดผลัดไปก็ใจแตก  
       แทบจะแปลกไม่รู้จักทักเจ้าของ

บุญน้อยมิได้ร่วมเจ้าขุนทอง  
       ได้ประคองเคียงกันเท่านั้นเอ๋ย ฯ

nók khǔn thoong khǎaw raw tɛ̌e kǎw kɔ̌on  
 pay rūam khoon kǎp nók kɛ̌ew sǎa lɛ̌ew nǎw  
 chíchá cháaŋ kraray náam cay khoon  
 tít nók tɔ̌w lɛ̌ew kɔ̌w lǎŋ càak kroŋ thoong  
 phǎo phlât phlât pay kɔ̌w cay tɛ̌ek  
 tɛ̌ep ca plɛ̌ek mǎy rúucàk thák cǎw khǎawŋ  
 bun phii nǎw mǐ dǎay rūam cǎw khǔn thoong  
 dǎay prakhoong khiang kan thǎwnǎn ɔ̌ay

(Chand 1977:332)

In these translations, A is Graham's liberal rendering, in which he restricts himself on the *klɔŋ* rhyme, C is Mosel's more literal translation in prose. B is a close translation into English prose.

A

The Minah, once my pride, my own

Has flown off with the Popenjay

Ah me! what shall my poor heart say?

Left, for gay and gaudy parrot.

Broken my heart, Oh cruel fate

Changed my state, we meet not again.

Luckless, all hope to hold vain.

I feel your love is at an end.

B

O my Minah bird from former  
time

You have gone off to be on the  
same perch as the parrot

Well, well, how heartless you  
are

You swallow that bird's bait  
and stray from your golden  
cage

Soon you became addicted to  
your newfound pleasure

You have so changed that you  
couldn't recognize your owner  
My merit is so small that I do  
not get to share my life  
with you.

And to support you being  
together side by side

C

The Minah bird, mine from former  
times

Has gone off with the parrot, perch  
and all

Alas! Damn my heart and character

You fell for that bird and so have  
strayed from your golden cage

As soon as you fled my heart broke

I'm almost changed beyond recogni-  
tion, you'd not know your owner  
My merit was so small, I didn't  
get to dwell with you, Minah bird.

I only got to carry you carefully,  
close to me, and that was all --  
oei!

(Graham 1924:285)

(Chitakasem)

(Mosel 1961:19)



period such as *Yuan Phai*, *Phra Lō* and *Thawāthotsamāt*. The unusual syntax which appeared in these poems is, perhaps, also the result of the Pali-Sanskrit influence. The royal children started by learning Khmer script and learned to read Pali when they were only seven or eight. In the fifth reign of the Bangkok period, Prince Wachirayan, the Prince Patriarch, said in his autobiography that his knowledge of Pali and Khmer vocabulary helped him to broaden his comprehension of Siamese. (Reynolds 1979:8). The degree of difficulty in both vocabulary and syntax for translators was clearly pointed out by Griswold and Prasert Na Nagara when they translated *Yuan Phai*. They modestly aimed at clarity since their main interest was historical rather than literary. Even so they said:

We found that the vocabulary includes many words that are lacking in all dictionaries known to us. The syntax was eccentric, sometimes to the point that we are uncertain which is the subject of a verb and which the object, and some places we had to guess at the meaning or give up altogether. (Griswold and Prasert 1976:142).

Some Thai scholars admit that many words in *khlong kamsūan Sīprāt* remain obscure and that they have to make guesses when reading the poem (Wārawēt 1960:ii). Prince Phitthayā (1952: 310) once challenged anyone who claimed to comprehend *Yuan Phai* completely to come forward to receive a financial reward from him. Even to a well-educated Thai, fully equipped with literary handbooks and other such aids, Thai classical poetry still presents formidable obstacles. It is a field not readily accessible to the casual passer-by and those who really come to understand and love it are few in number. Like greenhouse plants they are confined within a limited space and one has to get into the greenhouse to admire and smell the scent of their flowers. Since one knows that the owner of that greenhouse is proud of his plants and is kind enough to invite you to see his greenhouse, you would have to say, if he ever asked, that his plants look lovely and the flowers smell nice.

This explains why few translators have dared to touch Sīprāt's poem. And when they did try, only selected stanzas of their choice were possible. Professor Simmonds, for one, has undertaken this daunting task. Two examples from his work will be examined in order to illustrate the complexity of such a project.<sup>10</sup> 1A below is the first example of translation and under it, 1B is the original *khlong* stanza with the approximate English equivalent given below each Thai word or phrase.

1A

Far from your flesh I sleep so cold,  
Cold to the bone in the bitter wind  
That pierces me through and through.  
At Bang Thornao, exhausted by the cold,  
Could I but hold your hand twined  
And entwined!

1B

- (1) cāk maa nāk nīn nīa noon nāaw  
come away beloved soft flesh sleep cold
- (2) nāaw nāy phró lom chaay sāap chūu  
cold exhaust because wind blow pierce beloved
- (3) cāk baṇ thoranaaw naaw nom mēε  
come to Bangthoranaw lemon/bend down breast beloved
- (4) nāaw nāy mīi kēεw kūu mūn mīi  
cold exhaust hand beloved relieve soft hand

First, we can see that four different expressions are used when the poet addresses or refers to his beloved: *nāk nīn* or perhaps *nāk nīn nīa* on the first line; *chūu* the last word of the second line; *mēε*, the last word of the third line; and *kēεw*, in the middle of the last line. Let us now consider the underlined words.

*nāk nīn*: *nāk* is a word familiar to students of modern Thai. As an adverb it means 'so, very', as in *nāaw nāk* 'so cold'. As the head of a noun compound, it often means 'the one who is good at...', as in *nāk phūut* 'the one who is good at speaking, i.e. a speaker'. In line 1 we do not know whether *nāk* is an adverb modifying the verb preceding it or whether it is the head of the compound *nāk nīn*. But what does *nīn* mean? Some experts suggest it must be a variation of *nīm* 'soft' and thus *nāk nīn* is the poet's reference to his beloved -- something like 'the soft one' (Chanthit 1951:63). The next word *nīa* is easier. *nīa* means 'meat, flesh'. So can we have *nāk nīn nīa* all three syllables together to mean 'the beloved' i.e. the soft-fleshed one?

The translation of the first line, so far, can be rendered as 'the poet coming away from his soft-fleshed one -- sleep cold'. Who sleeps cold? Is it the poet or the beloved? Two experts (Wōrawet 1960:17; Lanlanā 1970:17), suggest the poet, while the third (Chanthit 1951:63) insists it is the beloved. Could it be both the poet and the beloved, we might ask?

Line 2 is fairly straightforward. As usual, it is the poet who is the speaker. So, here we have 'I, the poet, am



cold and exhausted because the wind pierces through me - my body'. Here again, syntactically the wind can pierce through the beloved, *chūu*, as well. But all three experts agreed here that it should be 'O beloved'. To the non-specialist this seems a rather arbitrary decision, especially in view of the arguments for 'poet and beloved', and the statement that the wind piercing through the beloved is a syntactic possibility.

In line 3 the underlined words are naaw and nom. This is where we run into difficulty. It is part of the *nirat* convention that the poet uses the name of the locale for punning. Here *Thoranaaw* is the name of the locale and the meaning of naaw depends on which tone we assign to it since the old writing system does not show the difference. As it stands, it means 'lime', but if it is to be pronounced with a high tone náaw then it means 'to bend something down' and it should mean 'cold' if pronounced with a rising tone naaw. We are, therefore, faced with three possibilities. Wōrawēt (1960:17) decided it should be náaw 'to bend something down', while Chanthit (1951:63) preferred naaw 'lemon', but as the lemon tree is full of lemons its branches will droop down or bend down because of the weight of the fruit. Lanlanā (1970:17) simply said it is naaw 'lemon'. However, one ought to consider naaw and nom together as a unit and she decided it means 'to touch the breast'.

Line 4 is very difficult to understand, let alone to translate into English. The syntax is unanalysable, with *mūn* at first glance appearing meaningless. One theory is that in the North and North Eastern dialects, the vowel U is often pronounced *ua*, and therefore *mūn* should be *mūan* meaning 'good, comfortable, soft'. *mūn mīi* then means 'soft to the hand', but to whose hand? According to one of the experts this line should read 'No matter how cold and exhausted I am, when touched by your soft hands they (the cold and exhaustion) disappear'. (Wōrawēt 1960:17), so Professor Simmonds' translation sticks closely to the Thai, as close as one can perhaps hope to while maintaining, or rather creating, a sense of poetry in the English.

For the next example of translation, a similar layout is given in 2A and 2B below:

2A

*The boat glides fast to Thung Phranaya town*  
 But I see no peopled town,  
 Only the bare fields empty of rice.  
 Thus is my heart empty, far from you.  
 All I can do is crane my neck to the empty sky  
 Calling to you, searching for you all in vain.

- (1) cāk maa ria rôn thốṅ phayaa mian  
 come away boat glide/rush Place name
- (2) mian plāaw pliw cai hăay nāa nốṅ  
 town empty blow stunned with fear O beloved
- (3) cāk maa yia maa plian òk plāaw  
 come away boat come disheartened empty
- (4) òk plāaw waay fāa rốṅ rām hăa ron hăa  
 lonely look across sky moan look for you

This piece presents fewer problems than the previous one and the link between the literal translation and Simmonds' poem can be seen fairly readily. It is worth pointing out, however, how *yia* in line 3 comes to mean 'boat'. The word for boat, *ria*, occurs in line 1. According to most authorities:

1. It is possible for /r/ to become /y/, for example the Thai called Rangoon *yānḡkūṅ*;
2. The vowel *ia* in Central Thai becomes *ía* in Northern and North Eastern dialects, so *yia* is *ía* 'the boat'.

The third line of Simmonds' translation has no correspondence with the Thai original; here the translator, following the example of Khun Phra Wōrawēt, has added the reference to the rice field for the sake of clarification.

Although high-style vocabulary is not the only element that distinguishes an ordinary poem from a masterpiece, it is clearly an important factor as far as Thai critics are concerned. Indeed, the sheer quantity of such words inevitably makes vocabulary a key issue. No Thai literary scholars, in speaking of *khlong kamsūan Sīprāt*, *Yuan Phai*, and *Thawāthotsamāt*, fail to find the vocabulary obscure, archaic, or foreign, as it maybe, anything but a positive attribute; they regard it as something that can only be understood and appreciated by careful study, but something that is essential if one is to learn the Thai language and preserve Thainess. Chanthit, a prominent literary scholar, while praising *Yuan Phai* as a *wannakam lōet* 'an excellent work of literature', condemned *Manora Khrang Krung Kao* which contained mostly non-poetical high-style vocabulary as a *wannakam lēo* 'an ordinary or base piece of writing'. (Chanthit 1967:46).

The key word for Thai poetry is *phairḡ*, a word of Cambodian origin meaning 'sweet, melodious, musical, harmonious, worth listening to'. The appreciation of poetic expression is part of a more general esteem for the ability to *phūt phairḡ*, 'to speak euphoneously', which is a highly prized social skill (Mosel 1961:9). First and foremost, a good poem must sound *phairḡ* because the ear-music and the poetry are one and

inseparable. A good poet must have a musical mind and ears that can hear the lines in terms of melody when recited or sung. This is probably why puns, synonyms, and alliterations are abundant in Thai poetry, especially in poems regarded as *phairṇ* to Thai ears. According to Prince Phitthayā, whether a poem is good or bad depends on its *rot kham*, 'the flavour of the words' - i.e. the choice of words, and the *rot khwaam* 'the overall flavour' of the chosen words when put together (Phitthayā 1952:310). So, in theory, one may argue that it does not matter what type of words they are, classical or non-classical, Thai or Sanskrit, humble or courtly, so long as their choice and use are artistic or poetic and thus produce the effect of being *phairṇ*.

Prince Thammāthibēt's composition of boat songs and *nirat* poems is regarded as the most *phairṇ* of all Thai poems.<sup>11</sup> The author of a university text book on Thai literature wrote:

'These poems are so captivating and so breathtakingly sweet that there can be no comparison. The poetry sounds as if every letter in every word was still wet with the coat of sweetest honey' (Sitthā 1972:135)

a vivid description of what makes something *phairṇ* to the Thai ears. Here is a *kap* stanza from one of Chao Fā Kung's compositions to illustrate the Thai ideas of melody and euphony, or *phairṇ*.

sṳṳṇ	sùk	sṳṳṇ	sṳm	phâat
two	happy	two	make	love
sṳṳṇ	sùt	sawàat	sṳṳṇ	sùu sṳm
two	top of	passion	two	make love
sṳṳṇ	sanit	nítthraa	rom	
two	close	deep in	sleep	
klom	kliaw	chúu	sùu	sṳṳṇ sṳm
arms	around	each other	two	make love

(Thammāthibēt 1973:49)

Thai has a great wealth of synonyms or near-synonyms which poets had at their disposal. These cannot be adequately matched in a translation and there is little a translator can do about it. In the stanza above we see three different expressions which could only be rendered into English as 'make love'. But none of the three Thai expressions would ever offend even the most prudish of Thai old maids, nor excite the embarrassed sniggers of a class full of spotty schoolboys. They are beautiful, poetical sounding words chosen for their euphonic effect. Together with the alliteration of the *s*'s and other assonance patterns, they give the verse a harmonious structure as a whole. The Frenchman de la Loubère was very observant about this aspect of the Siamese language in the 17th century. He said: 'I have

seen some expressions which to me appeared full of smuttiness and gross immodesty although this had not the same effect in their language' (de la Loubère 1969:60).

Another characteristic of Čhao Fā Kung is his use of puns. Punning is created by using a syllable of the names of natural objects such as birds, plants, flowers, and so on, which are conventional love stimulants and thus finding appropriate words with the right meaning to express love-longing through the punning technique.<sup>12</sup>

sōnsōy <i>Beakea</i> <i>frutescens</i>	sōy sòok sad	dūay because	naaŋ klay beloved far
māaktōŋ <i>Sandoricum</i> <i>indicum</i>	tōŋ taa please eye	chanāy how	hāaŋ kēw far from you
sabāa <i>Entada</i> <i>phaseoloides</i>	bāa cīt mad (as if)	cay my heart	cāk khàat cease to breathe
tōn kàyhāy <i>Caparis</i> <i>flavicas</i>	hāy lēew cry already		khurun hāy thǎŋ naaŋ weep for you

(Thammāthibēt 1973:88)

This stanza illustrates the type of puns used by Čhao Fā Kung. Each line of the *khlong* stanza contains the name of a tree, the last syllable of which also has another meaning. Thus the poet makes use of the meaning of the syllable in the name of the tree for punning and then to express his love-longing. Essentially this kind of poetry is untranslatable.

So far, no one has attempted to translate Čhao Fā Kung's works into English. However, a German scholar, Klaus Wenk, has tried his hand at the 'Boat songs'. He admitted from the start that a translation could never be entirely satisfactory and had to be approached by paraphrase. Several lines or phrases could only be interpreted in footnotes; in fact, footnotes occupy nearly half his translation. Such a euphonic poem with all its alliterations and synonyms must surely indicate that Čhao Fā Kung had sets of vocabulary at his disposal. No less than 30 epithet pronouns occur in a mere three pages. The following list gives them with an English equivalent and Wenk's German translation. Some of these epithet pronouns are a combination of others; e.g. no.17, *Čhao eo bang*, is a combination of no.2 *Čhao* and no.10 *eo bang*. Most of the longer ones are made up of combinations in this way. We can also see that alliterations are already formed in many of these epithet pronouns, e.g. in numbers 12,13,18,22,24,25,27,29 and 32. Anyone attempting to translate a poem with pronouns such as these will have difficulty in finding suitable English pronominal phrases to match the Thai.

# Epithet pronouns:

1. *naṅg* Lady (f. counterpart of 'master')
2. *ṭhao* Lady (identical with 'lord')
3. *ṅṅṅ* younger sibling
4. *kaeo* jewel
5. *anong* girl (Skt. *anāṅga* 'of Kama, God of Love')
6. *Suda* girl (Skt. *suta* 'daughter')
7. *saṅṅ* love (Skt. *smara* 'love, God of Love')
8. *baṅg-ṅ* tender
9. *ṅṅṅ naṅ* (5 + beautiful) (Skt. *nāma*)
10. *eo baṅg* slim-waisted
11. *varida* beloved (Skt. *varita* 'mate, wife')
12. *suda ḍuaṅg* 6 + orb
13. *suda ḍuaṅg chan* 6 + orb of the moon (Skt. *caṇḍra* 'moon')
14. *sai saṃat* strings of passion
15. *ḥom naṅg* countenance + 1
16. *saṅ wai* of tender years (Skt. *vayas* 'age')
17. *ṭhao eo baṅg* 2 + 10
18. *ṭhao ta tru* 2 + eye + beautiful
19. *khān net* soul (here = apple) of (my) eye (Skt. *netra* 'eye')
20. *nuan phachong* creamy + meticulous

# Wenk's German

dir  
dich, du  
dir, du  
sie  
dich  
dich, du  
...meiner Liebsten  
Liebste  
...meine Dame, die  
Liebeinswerte  
dich schlanke schöne  
die mir Vertraute  
deine  
(nach) der Liebsten  
wie des Mondes Rund  
du Liebensweite  
...dir, ...deine  
du Zarte  
du Schlanke Schöne  
meiner schönen Herrin  
Allerschönste  
der so vollendet  
Schönen

# English equivalent of German

thee  
thee, thou  
thee, thou  
her  
thee  
thee, thou  
(of) my best beloved  
O best beloved  
my lady, worthy of love  
thee, (O) slim beautiful one  
the (one so) intimate to me  
thine  
the best beloved, like the orb  
of the moon  
thou, (so) worthy of love  
thee, thine  
thou tender one  
thou, slim beautiful one  
(of) my beautiful lady  
most beautiful of all  
(of) the one of such perfected  
beauty

Epithet pronouns:

21. *chqm sawqt* summit of passion
22. *nuan nang* creamy + 1
23. *chom ngam* countenance of beauty
24. *sam sang'iam* 16 + chaste
25. *sam sang'uan* 16 + cherish
26. *nong Yao* 5 + young (Skt. *yauvan* 'youth')
27. *chao chom chai* 2 + countenance + radiant
28. *nong thng noppamat* 3 + gold +  
sold of 9th grade purity
29. *kaeo komon* 4 + tender
30. *phuan khiao* friend + fondle, caress
31. *sai chai* strings of the heart
32. *sut sai chai* ends of 31
33. *kaeo phi'i* my + 4
34. *kaeo ta* 4 + (here = apple) eye

Wenk's German

du Schöne  
 ...meiner Allerschönste  
 Schon bist du zart  
 und jung,  
 (same as 23 above)  
 du Zarte  
 dir  
 dir...an Eleganz  
 dich...Glänzende  
 du blühender Lotus  
 der (feinen) Freundin  
 sie zu umarmen  
 dich  
 Liebste  
 du, meine Glänzende  
 dich...Glänzende

English equivalent of German

thou beautiful one  
 thou most beautiful of all  
 thou art beautiful, tender and  
 young  
 thou tender one  
 thee  
 thee...in elegance  
 thee...(0) shining one  
 thou, (0) blossoming lotus  
 longing to embrace my (soft)  
 partner  
 thee  
 best-beloved  
 Thou, (0) my shining one  
 thee...(0) shining one

Egerod made a literal translation of similar epithet pronouns occurring in a Northern Thai poem 'Four songs'. Some of his translations emerge in English as follows:

<u>Northern Thai</u>	<u>English</u>
mêe phœe cĩn tây	Lady of the Chinese silk from the South
câu sǐi wan yen	Lady with colours of the day cooling towards dusk.
mêe phœe sǐi can	Lady silk colour of the moon.
câu wêen thalon sǐi	Lady of the glorious mirror.

(Egerod 1971)

These literal renderings simply fail to convey the significance of the compliment and are therefore rather meaningless without a detailed explanation in footnotes.

Attempts to reproduce the subtlety of the Thai pattern of assonance and alliteration have also been made by some translators. Silcock, for one, tried to capture the Thai use of alliteration but could manage to recreate the exact Thai pattern only on the first line of the quatrain. He maintains some alliteration in his other three lines but without the same embellishment as the Thai:

The sharp sharp eyes, the long long hair, the fair fair maidens,  
Like fragrant gardens, and vibrant voices, will soon be gone,  
Ailing old age will beat the body down,  
And when all's done we'll rot, not handsomely.

(Silcock 1976:39)

One of Thailand's greatest poets is Sunthon Phu, and naturally his works are often translated. The two translations given below are of the same piece, taken from one of Sunthon Phu's *nirat* poems. Translation A is Keith Bosley (1979), and is the result of a collaboration between a Thai poet and an English poet; translation B was similarly made but the collaboration is between a Thai not necessarily a poet, and his Professor of English in America (Thong-In 1968). An interesting point that is worthy of mention is the rendering of the Thai *nārī phon* and of *witchāthōn* or *witthayāthōn*. The Bosley version rendered *nārī phon* as 'passion petal' and *witchāthōn* as the 'hero'. The Thai-American effort was more ambitious and fanciful, with *nārī phon* as 'the fruitful lady of graceful moonlight' and *witchāthōn* as 'the Noble General of the March Intellect'. Both *nārī phon* and *witchāthōn* appear frequently in

works of Thai literature; they are creatures of Himavana forest. *Nārī phon* are the 'maiden fruit' which, when ripe, become full-sized beautiful maidens. Once picked, however, they can stay fresh for just sixteen days and then they rot like any other fruit. The *witthayāthōn* are neither humans nor gods but can wash themselves in the god's Anodat pond. They each have a magical weapon resembling a knife which enables them to fly in the air. When the maiden fruits are well formed, the *witthayāthōn* come to pick them and keep them as their maids for sixteen days. The *witthayāthōn* are reported to do practically nothing but sit around relaxing after swimming in the pool with the gods. They indulge in sex and there is a Thai folk belief that they like to come to make love to young virgins while they are fast asleep (Samnuan 1964:49-54). A translator would indeed need a footnote when translating such complex characters.

Be thou a tree then let me on thee settle;  
Let me brood on a branch, bide in the thick.  
Be thou a lunar beauty, Passion Petal,  
I beg I, as the hero, fly to pick.

Be thou a lotus, let me be the bee,  
To court and suck and make much of thy pollen.  
Be thou the water, let me dragon be  
That I praise and enjoy, once in thee fallen.

Be thou the cooling cave, then, swan of thine,  
I'll swirl and dwell' and enter in a flood.  
Be thou, oh coolest flesh, in fact divine,  
Then let me, charmed by thee, be as a god.

(Bosley 1979:114)

If she were the wood, I would rather be the bird  
brooding the branches  
of the tree in the greenwood;

If the fruitful lady of graceful moonlight  
may I be the Noble General  
of the March of Intellect;

If the lotus lily, myself is the carpenter bee  
to enjoy courting the pollen;

Being the Riverflow - I hope to be a dragon  
to sojourn - yearn the sea at  
all times;

If the heartcave, I'd rather be the swan  
   descending to dwell in the  
   rocky lodge;



If her cool flesh is the godly fairy  
I beg to dwell her enchanting  
charm to be the divine nature.

(Thong-In 1968:11)

The Bosley translation gives one the impression that the poem has aged more than the original actually has because of the archaic pronominal forms, 'be thou' and 'of thine', etc. Sunthorn Phu simply used *phīi* and *nōn* (literally: older brother ~ younger sister), the conventional forms of address between lovers and married couples even today. Whether a translator should attempt to render a foreign work into an archaic form of his own language is essentially a matter of choice. Clearly, the issue becomes more and more complex where, for example, one of the indications of 'archaicness' in the English is the use of pronouns, while the Thai pronouns of that period have not aged one bit. And what the foreign student of Thai will tend to identify as 'archaic' vocabulary will crop up with wilful regularity in the works of modern Thai poets.<sup>13</sup>

Like translation itself, problems of translation go on. Thus, Thomas Silcock, after the painstaking work of translating a Thai poem, wrote to his envoi, imitating a Thai style of *krathu*:<sup>14</sup>

So still in vain we must pursue,  
Ends that we can't combine -  
This strict rich rhyme to render through  
English our floating line,  
Verse where words waver and wriggle on a hook  
Translation never ends, we close the book.

(Silcock 1976:93).

## NOTES

1. As will be discussed later, the translators' competence in English was marred by their insistence on using Thai metrical forms in English.
2. Utcheni's real name is M.R. Prakhin Chumsai. A poet and social critic who was active in the 1950s, her poems and critical writings in prose have been published in two volumes; *Khōp fā khlip thōng*. Bangkok: Duangkamon, 1973 and *Dao phong naphā dīn*. Bangkok: Phikkhanet, 1974. A short account of her work and personality is well depicted by Thomas Silcock in his book, *Proud and Serene*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968.
3. These are *khlong*, *chan*, *kap*, *klon* and *rai*. For details see, for instance, Robert B. Jones and Ruchira Mendiones, *Introduction to Thai literature* (Cornell Univ. South-east Asia Prog.) Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970.
4. Works on translation by Prince Chand have recently been published by the newly established National Identity Board in order to propagate and preserve Thai heritage. See Chand (1983).
5. It is also interesting to note that Seni's translation was published by SEATO.
6. An informative discussion of *klon* can be seen in Mosel (1961).
7. The Thai poetical sounding word *oei* is used to mark the ending of a *klon* poem. This kind of device cannot be translated.
8. The text for poetry composition, *Chindāmanī*, provides an extensive list of poetical vocabulary which it requires poets to learn and use in their composition. See Phra Hōrathibōdi, *Chindāmanī*. Bangkok: s.n., 1969.
9. For the discussion of *nirat* poetry and especially *khlong kamsuan Sīprāt* see Manas (1972).
10. Professor E.H.S. Simmonds has translated many stanzas from Thai classical poems and it is hoped that he will publish them in the near future.

11. Prince Thammāthibēt is better known as Čhao Fā Kung, a renowned poet of the late Ayutthayā period.
12. See Manas (1972: p.157ff.) for discussion on the technique of punning.
13. See, for instance, Angkarn Kalyanapongs, *Lamnam Phūkradu 'ng*. Bangkok: Su'ksit Sayām, 1969.
14. This is like an anagram where the first syllables of the lines form a sentence, here 'So ends this English Verse translation.'

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