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 *klgn* 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 Purachatra's small booklet, *Introduction to Thai literature* (1967) contains some good translations of poems by two great poets, Sîprāt of the Ayuthaya period and Sunthôn Phû 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).

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 *klgn,* 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. 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 *klgn* 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-Nagapraddipa 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 Woodword, Veng Pleng, 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 klong 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, today only two, khlong and klong, are most commonly used. Both khlong and klong 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 klong, or ignore them completely and use the nearest poetic form available in English.

The layout of the khlong metre is:

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0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 (0 0)
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 (0 0)
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
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This is called khlong sī suphpāp, 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 ăk). 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 ăk 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 ăk 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) hahāy kratāy tēn  chom  can
excl! hare  jump  admire  moon
(2) man  bōo  ciam tua man  tăm  tōy
it  not  know its place  low  base
(3) nōk yuuq hāak  krasān  hōa  mēek
peacock  if  desirous  seek  cloud
(4) man  bōo  ciam tua nōoy  tăm  tāa  diarachāan
it  not  know its place  low  base  beast

Stanza 2:

(1) hahāy kratāy tēn  chom  khāc
excl! hare  jump  admire  moon
sūu ng sūt taa līs  sūu  fāa
high up  out of reach  towards  sky
rāduu  rādiī  dā  sāt  sūu  kan  nāa
season  heart  content  animal  mate  each other
yāa  wāa  raw  chw  khāa  yūu  phīt 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 Ayutthaya 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
It will fall so soon
As bees' swarm will cool
Such love fancy flight.

Aha! How foolish
Reaching far out there
Say I, who would dare
Ah, as if you might

High moon.
From height.
In clouds,
It might not be.

Such care,
The height.
To love lonely?
Walk this earth alone.

(Seni 1965:23)

Both quatrains of the Thai begin with a seldom encountered word haïk. 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 aoon, 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 kratay chom cao (the hare admiring the moon) and nok yuung kin mak (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) Auclair de la lune
Low station unaware
Peacock cock' th eye where
Low station, low shelf

Moon' th hare
of self
clouds ride
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
Like peacocks who'd know
Does not see one ace
Poor hare dotes, jumps at
As far as eyes go
But at times hearts flow;
Queen, do not berate.

Dotes so!
his place.
the clouds,
his place, the rogue.
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!

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 aglow
Your humble state!
To mate with flame.
Silly creature! Thing of nought!
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. 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).5

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. 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 quatrains, with one rhyme linking each quatrains to the next.

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0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
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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.
នកែងនីតិដើម្បីបង្កើតរបស់កនាទីនប្រការប្រជាជនដែលមានកនុងក្នុងការលេងនិងការធ្វើការផ្លាស់ប្តូរភាពតួនាទី។

រីករាលដាលក្នុងក្នុងតែងនៅក្នុងក្នុងការធ្វើការរបស់កនាទីនប្រការត្រូវបានគ្រប់គ្រាន់នឹងអាចទទួលបានមូលដ្ឋានបានពិតជាពេលដែលកូនស្របនិងភាពមួយ។

បើឆ្នាំងនេះមិនមានការធ្វើការទេ នេះប្រភេទនេះមិនពិតជាពេលដែលកនុងក្នុងក្នុងការធ្វើការរបស់កនាទីនប្រការ។

nök khün thooŋ khörŋ raw têk kâw kêt têk
pay ruɔam khoɔn kâp nök kêt tw sêa lêeɔ nêo
chíchâ châaŋ krâray nâm caŋ khoɔ
tit nök tê lêeɔ kêɔ lêŋ cääŋ krok thooŋ
phôo phlât phlât pay kôɔ caŋ têk
têŋ ca plêk mây rûuɔcâk thâk câw khörŋ
bun phê nôo mî dâay ruɔam câw khún thooŋ
dâay prakhoɔŋ khiaŋ kan thâiɔn sêy

(Chand 1977:332)

In these translations, A is Graham's liberal rendering, in which he restricts himself on the kʰɔŋ rhyme, C is Mosel's more literal translation in prose. B is a close translation into English prose.
(Wheat 1957:19)

I only go to carry you carefully.

- - -

Get to dwell with you, then why don't I dwell with you, with you, with you?

My heart is so small that I could not recognize your form.

I'm almost changed beyond recognition.

As soon as you read my heart, you fell for that bird, and so have you.

You swallow that bird's heart, that now heartless you.

O my much loved from former times.

Now heartless you. O my much loved from former times.

A

(Chattakase)
Line 1: Both Graham and Mosel are reasonably close to the original.

Line 2: Graham had to use 'flown' in order to rhyme with 'own' and as a result left out 'to perch' and 'to share'. Mosel is slightly incomplete and incorrect.

Line 3: Both are wrong. The poet was not speaking to himself but was talking to the bird. *chichá* is an exclamation like 'Well, well!'.

Line 4: Graham got his rhyme 'gay' with 'say' but the rest is not quite right. Mosel is correct.

Line 5: Both wrong. The expression *cay tésk* is an idiom 'to be spoiled, to develop a passion for' and here it is the bird that is the subject of *cay tésk*, not the poet.

Line 6: Graham chose 'state' to rhyme with 'fate' and 'again' to rhyme with 'vain' but in so doing has departed considerably from the original. Mosel is again well off the mark in wrongly identifying the unmarked subject, as Graham had done; in fact, the poet is addressing the bird. Graham was forced to miss a link rhyme - 'again' should rhyme with 'parrot', the last syllable of the previous quatrain.

Line 7: Graham has 'vain' to rhyme with 'again' but his 'luckless' scarcely conveys the meaning of the Thai Buddhistic term *bun* meaning 'merit'. Mosel is good.

Line 8: Graham slipped here - 'feel' should rhyme with 'vain'. 'I fain your love?' Mosel seems all right, although his attention to the Thai *oei* for the last word seems an incongruous and embarrassing finale.

Apart from the verse forms, poetic diction is surely at the core of the difficulties and frustrations a translator has to face when attempting to tackle Thai poetry. Thai poetic diction consists of mostly Pali-Sanskrit or Cambodian sources as well as obscure and often obsolete vocabulary. Classical poets were required to learn such words, perhaps by memorising them and to reproduce them in their compositions. These so-called 'high style' vocabulary items form the bulk of Thai classical poetic vocabulary which is highly valued by Thai literary scholars. The first two *khlong* stanzas discussed earlier appeared to be relatively easy because they were extemporized composition. Sīprāt's masterpiece, *khlong kamsiān Sīprāt*, a *nirat* is extremely difficult. Merely to have read this poem is regarded as in itself an indication of being highly educated and well-read. The late Khun Phra Wōrawēt, a renowned scholar of Thai literature, stated that those who regarded themselves as poets or experts in poetry often asked him if he had read *khlong kamsiān Sīprāt*. (Wōrawēt 1960: p.C.) The same can be said about other classical poems of a similar
period such as Yuan Phai, Phra Lô and Thawâthotsamât. 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 kamsûan Sīprât remain obscure and that they have to make guesses when reading the poem (Wîrawêt 1960:ii). Prince Phitthaya (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 Sīprât'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 examinied in order to illustrate the complexity of such a project.10 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.
Far from your flesh I sleep so cold,
Cold to the bone in the bitter wind
That pierces me through and through.
At Bang Thoranao, exhausted by the cold,
Could I but hold your hand twined
And entwined!

First, we can see that four different expressions are used when the poet addresses or refers to his beloved: นัก Nin or perhaps นัก Nin นชาย on the first line; จิ้น the last word of the second line; เนื้อ, the last word of the third line; and เหลว, in the middle of the last line. Let us now consider the underlined words.

นัก Nin: นัก is a word familiar to students of modern Thai. As an adverb it means 'so, very', as in น้าว นัก 'so cold'. As the head of a noun compound, it often means 'the one who is good at...', as in นัก พีพ ท 'the one who is good at speaking, i.e. a speaker'. In line 1 we do not know whether นัก is an adverb modifying the verb preceding it or whether it is the head of the compound นัก Nin. But what does Nin mean? Some experts suggest it must be a variation of นิม 'soft' and thus นัก Nin is the poet's reference to his beloved -- something like 'the soft one' (Chanthit 1951:63). The next word นชาย is easier. นชาย means 'meat, flesh'. So can we have นัก Nin นชาย 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 (Witrawat 1960:17; Lanlan 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, chestra, 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 naaw 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. Wogravet (1960:17) decided it should be naaw '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. Lanlanaw (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 translate into English. The syntax is unanalysable, with mun 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 mun should be muan meaning 'good, comfortable, soft'. Mun mai 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'. (Wogravet 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) cāak maa rōn thōŋ phayaa miāŋ
    come away boat glide/rush Place name
(2) miāŋ plāaw plīw cai hāay nāa nōŋ
    town empty blow stunned with fear 0 beloved
(3) cāak maa yia maa plīaŋ ąk plāaw
    come away boat come disheartened empty
(4) ąk plāaw waay fāa rōŋ rām hāa ron hāa
    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, rāa, occurs in line 1. According to most authorities:

1. It is possible for /r/ to become /y/, for example the Thai called Rangoon yāaŋkâŋ;

2. The vowel ia in Central Thai becomes ăa in Northern and North Eastern dialects, so yia is ăa 'the boat'.

The third line of Simmonds' translation has no correspondence with the Thai original; here the translator, following the example of Khun Phra Wōrrawet, 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 Sǐprāt, Yuan Phai, and Thawāthotsonāt, 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 Krong Kao which contained mostly non-poetical high-style vocabulary as a wannakam lōo 'an ordinary or base piece of writing'. (Chanthit 1967:46).

The key word for Thai poetry is phâirq, 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 phâirq, 'to speak euphonomously', which is a highly prized social skill (Mosel 1961:9). First and foremost, a good poem must sound phâirq 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 \textit{phaïng} to Thai ears. According to Prince Phithaya, whether a poem is good or bad depends on its \textit{rot kham}, 'the flavour of the words' - i.e. the choice of words, and the \textit{rot khwaam} 'the overall flavour' of the chosen words when put together (Phithaya 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 \textit{phaïng}.

Prince Thammâthibêt's composition of boat songs and \textit{nîrat} poems is regarded as the most \textit{phaïng} of all Thai poems. The author of a university text book on Thai literature wrote:

'\textit{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}' (Sittha 1972:135)

a vivid description of what makes something \textit{phaïng} to the Thai ears. Here is a \textit{kap} stanza from one of Chao Fâ Kung's compositions to illustrate the Thai ideas of melody and euphony, or \textit{phaïng}.

\begin{verbatim}
sõŋ sùk sõŋ sôm phâat
two happy two make love
sõŋ sùt sawâat sõŋ sùu sôm
two top of passion two make love
sõŋ sanît nîthraa rom
two close deep in sleep
klom kliaw chûu sùu sõŋ sôm
arms around each other two make love
\end{verbatim}

(Thammâthibêt 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 \textit{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 smuttness 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.¹²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sanskrit</th>
<th>meaning</th>
<th>Bekea frutescens</th>
<th>because</th>
<th>beloved far</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sāy</td>
<td>sad</td>
<td>sāy sāok dūay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>māktāq</td>
<td>tāq</td>
<td>tāq taa chanāy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandoricum indicum</td>
<td>please eye how</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sabāa</td>
<td>bāa cīt cay</td>
<td>cāk khāat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entada phaseoloides</td>
<td>mad (as if) my heart</td>
<td>cease to breathe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tōn kāyhāy</td>
<td>hāy lāew</td>
<td>khrūn hāy thāŋ naaŋ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuparis flavicas</td>
<td>cry already</td>
<td>weep for you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Thammāthibêt 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.
null
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epithet pronouns:</th>
<th>Wenk's German</th>
<th>English equivalent of German</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21. chom sawat</td>
<td>du Schöne</td>
<td>thou beautiful one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. nuan nang</td>
<td>...meiner Allerschönste</td>
<td>thou most beautiful of all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. chom ngan</td>
<td>Schon bist du zart</td>
<td>thou art beautiful, tender and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>und jung,</td>
<td>young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(same as 23 above)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. sam sangun</td>
<td>du Zarte</td>
<td>thou tender one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. sam sangun</td>
<td>dir</td>
<td>thee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. nong yao</td>
<td>dir...an Eleganz</td>
<td>thee...in elegance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dich...Glänzende</td>
<td>thee...(0) shining one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. chao chom chai</td>
<td>du blühender Lotus</td>
<td>thou, (0) blossoming lotus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dir</td>
<td>longing to embrace my (soft)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dich</td>
<td>partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liebste</td>
<td>thee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dich...Glänzende</td>
<td>best-beloved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. nong thong nopphamat</td>
<td>du, meine Glänzende</td>
<td>Thou, (0) my shining one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. kaeo komon</td>
<td>dich...Glänzende</td>
<td>thee...(0) shining one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. phyan khlao</td>
<td>dich</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. sai chai</td>
<td>dich</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. sut sai chai</td>
<td>dich</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. kaeo phi</td>
<td>dich</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. kaeo ta</td>
<td>dich</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern Thai</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mēc phēc cīn tāy</td>
<td>Lady of the Chinese silk from the South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cāw sīi wan yen</td>
<td>Lady with colours of the day cooling towards dusk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mēc phēc sīi can</td>
<td>Lady silk colour of the moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cāw wēn thalon sīi</td>
<td>Lady of the glorious mirror.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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 nīrat 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. Sunthon Phu simply used ʰᵹʰi and ṃ₃₃₃₃ (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 'archaicism' 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.¹³

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 ʰʳʰ₃₃₃₃₃.¹⁴

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.


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, Chindamanî, provides an extensive list of poetical vocabulary which it requires poets to learn and use in their composition. See Phra Hôrathibôdi, Chindamanî. Bangkok: s.n., 1969.

9. For the discussion of nirat poetry and especially khlong kamsuan Sîprât 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 Thammāthibāt is better known as Čhao Fā Kung, a renowned poet of the late Ayutthaya period.


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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