

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THAI LITERARY
CONVENTIONS : A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Chapter I : Introduction

1. Background :

A part of the study of the Thai traditional literature is to learn about the language, thoughts, culture and society of the former times which persist until today. A part of the culture is expressed through literary conventions. They form the basic and indispensable knowledge of the study of literature.

2. Purpose :

2.1 To study Thai literary conventions in terms of their history and development.

2.2 To generate a search for new approaches to the study of Thai literature.

2.3 To prepare a new reference book for all levels of Thai literary study.

3. Scope :

Due to the time limit, only the poetical genre is selected in order to narrow down the scope of study to a level of manageability. Additionally, under the demands of metricality and poetical styles, literary conventions are more discernible in poetical works than prosaic ones.

4. Definition :

For the sake of clarity, the writer will give definitions of some words here.

4.1 Sociolinguistic : "the study of language in relation to society..." (R.A. Hudson, 1980 : 1).

4.2 Tradition : "a mode of behavior or standard produced by a group as distinct from an individuals; and serves to intensify group consciousness and cohesion." (Julins Gould & William L. Kolb, 1965).

4.3 Convention : "a practice, usage or rule of conduct or behavior on what may or may not be done by members of a given group or community." (Julins Gould & William L. Kolb, 1965).

To sum up, the writer defines the convention as an expression of tradition within the contexts of Thai society and culture.

Chapter 2 : A Chronological Description of the Thai poetical literature

As mentioned in Chapter 1, only the poetical genre of Thai literature is selected in order to narrow down the scope of study. The study covers the periods of Sukothai up to King Rama VI of the Bangkok Period. (Prior to the overwhelming dominance of prose in the Thai literary production). The Thai literature under our study is divided into 6 periods : Sukothai, Early Ayudhaya, Medieval Ayudhaya, Late Ayudhaya, Thonburi and Bangkok.

(Please see the details from the overhead projector)

In conclusion, various types of poetical literature were produced during the period from Sukhothai up to Bangkok.

They are plays, didactic literature, religious literature, stories from the Jataka, Niras literature, Lilit literature, Pleang Yaw and other miscellaneous genres such as the Klong and Klon.

Chapter 3 : The Categorization of Thai literary conventions

Folkways is the ways that people in society do things in daily life. Though folkways maintain no legal authority, they also help providing order to the society. Convention is somewhat like folkways.

As said in the chapter 1, the conventions are an expression of tradition. In creating a literary work, the poet usually makes use of traditional rules in order to express his feeling or belief; as if the rules are codes with meanings which are readily intelligible to the readers. The literary traditions prevailed in Thai literature are centered on the themes of love, sorrow, rites, thoughts and sense of beauty. These forms of expression licensed by traditions can be called "literary conventions".

3.1 Conventions for the expression of love:

The expression of love is often met in the poetical works, because love is the symbol of natural feelings of human beings. However in the didactic literature, women are often told to keep her feeling of love from being noticeable. They have no right to express this kind of feeling, unless they want to invite contempt upon themselves.

In Niras literature, the expression of love is metaphorically alluded to nature by names of tress, places etc. that the poet has observed on his journey which separates him from his beloved. And the poet shows his love for his sweetheart by trusting her with the powerful, either deities or kings. This convention of expressing deep concern with the beloved's safety and fidelity can be seen in Niras from the Ayudhaya Period up to works written under King Rama VI.

The Samuthakhos Kham Chanda comes out of the tradition in this regard when the heroine yearns for her departed husband explicitly in the same manner as only men would do in Thai literature.

Another convention of love expression typical to Thai literature is an earnest wish of a man to be born in his next lives as the harmonious opposites of his beloved. For example, if she were to be born a branch of a tree he would have been a bird, if she a stream, he a fish etc.

Rama VI's heroines such as Mathana and Usa, unlike their predecessors in former literatures, express their feeling of love by saying to themselves while they are alone. The deviation from the convention in these cases indicates the weakening power of the convention.

3.2 Conventions for the expression of sorrow.

The expression of sorrow can be clearly represented in the time of separation between two loving characters. The

men and the women have an equal right in expressing this kind of feeling.

3.3 Conventions of the expression of rites.

It is customary in Thai literary texts to devote quite a big section to an exposition of ritual performances or ritualistic actions. The treatment of the rituals, strictly observed by all poets, might have been a reflection of firm belief in rituals and animistic beliefs in the society.

3.4 Conventions expressing thoughts

In the expression of thoughts, the poet often shows that the man is undeniably the chief of the family, consequently an ideal man should have a strong mind and body, while an ideal woman should be polite, quiet, obey her elders, be faithful to her husband and do what she is commanded.

3.5 Convention expressing the sense of beauty

The expression of the sense of beauty is the important in poetical works. A Sanskrit text literary appreciation gives its name : "Sauvarasacani"

We can see the expression of beauty in the description of nature, the royal palace and other royal regalias, and the most important in the world: the feminine beauty.

The beauty of the gentle sex is usually enumerated from one part of her body to another, such as her face, eyes, eye-brows, nose, cheeks, teeth, lips, ears, arms, legs, body.

Very often these parts are compared to other natural beings such as certain parts of plants or animal which are conventionally regarded as beauty. For example, a beautiful arm of a girl is compared to an elephant's trunk which alludes to its straightness, roundness as well as its delicate form.

In a later period, the conventions expressing the feminine beauty alter to an expression of the total beauty of the whole person rather than an enumeration of each part of the girl's body.

Chapter 4 : A Sociolinguistic analysis of the Thai literary conventions

Sociolinguistics studies the structure of language within the social contexts in which it is learned and used. The relation of language to society is more or less comprehensible when taken into account the social psychology, sociology and anthropology. However, the language of poetry is emotive, it expresses feelings and attitudes towards the matters referred, while objective facts are not completely ignored. It is simultaneously an approach empirical as well as idealistic.

It is well accepted that culture has influence on a poet's works, because the poet himself has mental as well as material life in a particular culture. But at the same time, the poet undeniably influences the society and culture to which he addresses himself as well. He can put up his point of view

in his works which may affect the pattern of thinking and behavior of the people. Examples which show the influences of the society to the poets are numerous in the Thai literature. The belief in the magic and animism of the Thai people reflects repetitively in literary texts. The hierarchization of language reflects the rigid social hierarchy of the Thai social system. And since Thai society is strict in the personal and social conducts of women, poets also emphasize the ideal conducts for women in their works. On the contrary, poets sometimes deviate from old traditional expectation and introduce new ideas that may shock the society; for example, the expression of love of the heroine in the King Rama VI's plays.

On the expression of love, we can see a tint of male egoism such as in the literary convention of comparing the beloved couples to complementary things, men are always placed in better positions like a swan while the woman being a cave, or the man a bee, the woman a flower. Intentionally or not, the comparison suggests greater freedom and feeling of superiority among men.

Chapter 5 : Conclusion

Thai literary conventions provide a good foundation for the understanding of the traditional Thai society and thinking. Therefore they are the basic and indispensable knowledge for the study of literature which should not be neglected anymore.

Contrary to the West, the Thai emphasize the beauty of poetical works on the originality within the convention only.

Besides, a search for new approaches to the study of Thai literature presented here should generate more energetic attempts by others to bring in fresher air to the study of Thai literature.

FOOTNOTE

Contrary to the West, the Thai always use first names in addressing other persons.

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