

## *Further Observations on the Thai chǎn Poetic Conventions*

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During the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) with its flourishing Indic culture, the *chǎn* meters assumed a prominent position in Thai poetry. With Sanskrit and Pali counterparts, these meters consist of syllables defined as light (*láhǔ?*) and heavy (*kháru?*) and arranged in invariable numbers and sequences.<sup>1</sup> After the addition of rhyme schemes, approximately six different meters appeared regularly in the *chǎn* compositions.<sup>2</sup> Following the Ayutthaya period, other more popular verse forms gradually replaced the *chǎn* meters. With the composition of *ʔnláráat kham chǎn* in 1913, however, a *chǎn* revival occurred. Because of the great concern for proper literary types and forms at this time, this revival emphasized the fulfillment of the light and heavy syllable sequences. Authors of the new compositions adhered rigidly to the descriptions of each *chǎn* meter outlined in the *chǎntháák*, the Thai versification textbooks. Approximately twelve new meters began to appear in the new compositions, and these meters also became a part of the Thai literary corpus.<sup>3</sup>

In comparing the older *chǎn* compositions with those written during the 1913 revival, many Thai critics claim that the early compositions do not closely follow the light and heavy syllable sequences and, therefore, contain numerous errors. In fact, these early compositions are not filled with errors. Errors seem to appear because the compositions are examined in their printed form. These same so-called errors disappear when the meters are

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<sup>1</sup> For the Thai *chǎn* meters, a light syllable consists of a short vowel followed by no final consonants. The glottal stop that follows a short vowel in spoken Thai but has no consonant symbol in this position in written Thai is ignored. A heavy syllable ends in a long vowel or any vowel plus a final consonant.

<sup>2</sup> The six meters found in the pre-1913 *chǎn* compositions include *ʔinthárawichian chǎn* 11, *wásántādilòk chǎn* 14, *toodòkkà? chǎn* 12, *maalinii chǎn* 15, *sàtháaraa chǎn* 21, and *sàthunlávikkilítà? chǎn* 19.

<sup>3</sup> The twelve new meters that began to appear regularly in the post-1913 compositions include *ʔintháwong chǎn* 12, *wagsàthà? chǎn* 12, *kammálaa chǎn* 12, *phúchonkhápáyáat chǎn* 12, *ʔupeenthárawichian chǎn* 11, *ʔupàthitaa chǎn* 11, *sáalinii chǎn* 11, *ʔupàcháat chǎn* 11, *cittàpàthaa chǎn* 8, *maanávákkà? chǎn* 8, *witchummaalaa chǎn* 8, and *ʔiithisà? chǎn* 20.

recited with their characteristic rhythms. Each recitation employs specific poetic conventions that produce the required light and heavy syllables. Examined and explained in earlier studies (Hudak 1985: 107-119; 1990), these conventions include 1) syllable breaking—the division of monosyllabic words into two syllables; 2) syllable cross-over—the division of a word between hemistiches (*wák*); 3) the addition of normally silent syllables on Indic loanwords; 4) the alternate pronunciation of syllables; 5) the syncope or muting of short vowels; 6) the reduction of vowels in weakly stressed syllables or words; 7) the use of syllables ending in a short vowel and a final nasal as a light or heavy syllable; and 8) the use of prefixed syllables ending with *-am* as a light or heavy syllable. Upon closer examination of several older compositions, a number of additional observations regarding these conventions and their use can be made.<sup>4</sup>

The first observation concerns the reduction of vowels in weakly stressed positions or vowel reduction. Vowel reduction generally occurs in non-final syllables of disyllabic and polysyllabic words. Syllables in word-final position receive the greatest stress. In these syllables, the vowels substantially shorten, although they may not be as short as natural short vowels. Once shortened, these vowels may then qualify as light syllables even though they are spelled with orthographic long vowels (a heavy syllable). Thus, in the following example, the initial syllable *daa* in the disyllabic word *daabòt* (*wák d*) is reduced, making it a light syllable. It is spelled, however, with a long *aa* (\* indicates a light syllable and 0 a heavy one).

*ʔintháráwíchianchǎn* 11

	0 0	* 0	0	
a.	<i>ʔaawâat</i>	<i>phrálaan</i>	<i>lian</i>	
	temple	lawn, grounds	cleared, polished	
	* *	0	* 0	0
b.	<i>dùcà</i>	<i>wen</i>	<i>sùwan</i>	<i>sǎn</i>
	like	mirror	gold	construct, create
	0	0	* 0	0
c.	<i>mii</i>	<i>rûup</i>	<i>phrásàtcàphan</i>	
	have	picture	personal name	

<sup>4</sup> The older compositions examined include *Sàmùttákhôot kham chǎn*, *Bunnoowâat kham chǎn*, and *Sǎa khooh kham chǎn*.

	*	* 0	* 0 0
d.	<i>thá</i>	<i>daabòt</i>	<i>banpháchaa</i>
		hermit	state of becoming

Clean, cleared, resembling golden mirrors, the temple grounds glisten. And there stands a statue of Satcaphan's ordination.

— from *Bunnoowâat kham chǎn*<sup>5</sup>

Similar shortenings also occur in naturally unstressed words, such as prepositions, pronouns, demonstratives, and classifiers.

The earlier studies of the *chǎn* conventions concluded that the poets generally exploited vowel reduction in grammatical function words and in disyllabic and polysyllabic words, but they tended to avoid vowel reduction in content words, particularly if the reduction, as a result of the meter, produced distortion (Hudak 1985: 115). Further examination of the older classics, however, demonstrates that the poets did exploit vowel reduction in content words when those words occurred in natural rhythm groups. Typical rhythm groups of this type include syntactic phrases such as noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and predicates. In these phrases, stress frequently falls on the final syllable of the rhythm group in which case the remaining vowels in the group reduce. In *wák d* of the following example, both occurrences of *rúu*, a heavy syllable, appear in light syllable positions. The vowel, however, reduces because it does not receive full stress in either of the two rhythm groups. The word *rûŋ* receives full stress in the final position of the first rhythm group, and *trii* in the final position of the second rhythm group. In both cases, the natural rhythm groups of three syllables fit the rhythm groups of the meter (\*\*0 and \*00).<sup>6</sup>

*ŋintháráwíchianchǎn 11*

	0 0	* 0	0
a.	<i>praakaan</i>	<i>pràkòɔp</i>	<i>khoom</i>
	walls	equipped with	torch
	* *	0	* 0 0
b.	<i>sàwàaŋ</i>	<i>sěeŋ</i>	<i>sàmdə</i> <i>can</i>
	bright	rays of light	the same moon

<sup>5</sup> Stanza 68, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Thai tends to fall into natural rhythm groups of two and three syllables.

	0	0	* 0 0	
c.	<i>cēm</i>	<i>cēēŋ</i>	<i>thíwaawan</i>	
	bright	make clear	day	
	*	*	0	* 0 0
d.	<i>bò</i>	<i>rúu</i>	<i>rûŋ</i>	<i>rúu</i> <i>raatrii</i>
	negative	know	dawn	know evening

Torches on walls flicker, the interior becomes day from rays of moon-bright light. Whether dawn or dusk, no one knows.

—from *Bunnoowâat kham chǎn*<sup>7</sup>

The second observation concerns rhyme, which played a significant role in classical poetry (as well as in much modern poetry, although the comments here apply to the classical). In the classical verse forms, rhyme functioned as a major building block of the stanza as well as a major source of aesthetic pleasure. In most cases, the poets rhymed syllables that ended in the same vowel or in the same vowel and final consonant. No distortions of syllables or words occurred in the production of these rhymes. To produce the required rhyme at other times, however, the poets needed to distort syllables. In these cases, they often resorted to the conventions used to produce the light and heavy syllables in the *chǎn* meters. Those conventions most often employed for rhyme include the following:

**Syllable breaking and syllable carry-over.** In the following stanza of *sàtthunlāwikkilīṭā? chǎn* 19, the final syllable of *wák a*, *daa*, must rhyme with the final syllable of *wák b*. The final syllable of *wák b* should read *phaan* 'young'; this reading, however, fails to produce the rhyme. Accordingly, the syllable is split with the final consonant plus an added vowel carried over to the initial position of *wák c*, which requires a light syllable. *Wák a* and *wák b* then rhyme, *daa* and *phaa*; and *wák c* begins with a light syllable *nā*. Some readings would have *lá* as the light syllable because *phaan* ends with an orthographic "l" (พล).

*sàtthunlāwikkilīṭā? chǎn* 19

	0	0	0 *	* 0 * 0	* * 0
a.	<i>ṭāa</i>	<i>ṭāa</i>	<i>ṭōorá</i>	<i>yúphintháphaan</i>	<i>phánídaa</i>
	oh	oh	young girl	young, beautiful girl	young, betrothed woman

<sup>7</sup> Stanza 66, p. 9.

	0	0	*	0	0
b.	<i>phít</i>	<i>pháktrà</i>	<i>phian</i>	<i>phaa-</i>	
	gaze	face	like	young	

	*	0
c.	<i>ná</i>	<i>can</i>
		moon

Oh my young love, my youthful loved one, you with the face  
of the young moon.

—from *Sàmùtthákhôot kham chán*<sup>8</sup>

**Syllable addition.** Here, a long syllable, *traa*, has been added to *kràphát* in *wák b* to rhyme with *kaa* in *wák c*:

*ʔintháráwíchian chán* 11

	0	0	*	0	0
a.	<i>lânthom</i>	<i>rádom</i>		<i>dàat</i>	
	frangipani	gather together		plentiful	

	*	*	0	*	0	0
b.	<i>dùcà</i>	<i>lâat</i>		<i>kràpháttraa</i>		
	like	spread down		band together		

	0	0	*	0	0
c.	<i>kêew</i>	<i>kanníkaa</i>	<i>kaa-</i>		
	china box tree	lotus	screw pine ( <i>Pandanus</i> )		

	*	*	0	*	0	0
d.	<i>rákèet</i>	<i>klin</i>	<i>kamcɔɔn</i>	<i>lom</i>		
	<i>tectorius</i> )	smell	spread about	wind		

Frangipani gathers in profusion, banding into bouquets. The  
wind wafts fragrances from pines, lotuses, and the China box's  
green blossoms.

—from *Bunnoowâat kham chán*<sup>9</sup>

**Alternate pronunciations.** The syllables of many loanwords in Thai may be pronounced with either long or short vowels. Depending upon the needed rhyme, the poet selected the appropriate pronunciation. In the

<sup>8</sup> Stanza 1412, p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> Stanza 75, p. 10.

following example, the alternate pronunciation *ruucii* 'light, splendor' in *wák c* is used to rhyme with *síi* in *wák b*. Other possible pronunciations, inappropriate for this stanza, include *rúci?* and *rúci*.

*ʔintha ráwíchianchǎn* 11

	0	0	* 0	0
a.	<i>klìip</i>	<i>klèt</i>	<i>kàtchǎa</i>	<i>mâat</i>
	flower petal	scale	band	gold
	* *	0	* 0	0
b.	<i>pràdàp</i>	<i>dàat</i>	<i>càrun</i>	<i>síi</i>
	decorate	plentiful	shining	splendid
	0	0 *	0 0	
c.	<i>sàlàp</i>	<i>rátná</i>	<i>ruucii</i>	
	alternating	jewels	splendid	
	* *	0	* 0	0
d.	<i>kràcaan</i>	<i>càt</i>	<i>kràcaŋ</i>	<i>baŋ</i>
	limpid	arrange	decorative band of leaves	to screen

Flower petals in bands of gold, sparkling in splendor, follow  
limpid jewels in bands of leaves.

—from *Bunnoowâat kham chǎn*<sup>10</sup>

**Other conventions.** Prefixed syllables ending with the vowel *am* and syllables ending with a short vowel and final nasal could be used interchangeably as light or heavy syllables. This interchange, consequently, allowed for the possibility of rhyming light syllables with heavy ones, although this does not seem to have been exploited to any great extent. Vowel reduction of a long vowel plus final nasal might also produce a rhyme or near rhyme with a syllable ending in a short vowel plus final nasal. Only syncope, because it eliminated a syllable, was not used as a source of rhyme.

Throughout this discussion, emphasis has been placed on the production of rhyme in the *chǎn* meters with the conventions used to produce light and heavy syllables. These conventions, however, were also used in the non-*chǎn* meters to produce rhyme<sup>11</sup> and syllables. In the following *kàap*

<sup>10</sup> Stanza 45, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> The other classical meters include *râay*, *khloong*, *kàap*, and *klōon*. Light and heavy syllables were defined only for the *chǎn* meters.

*chàbaŋ* 16 example, the rhyme scheme requires the final syllable of *wák* 1c to rhyme with the final syllable of *wák* 2a and 2b. The final word in *wák* 2b should read *tháwîip* 'continent' (with *wîip* the final syllable). This reading, however, fails to produce the rhyme with *rii* (from *bùrii*) in *wák* 1c and *sîi* in *wák* 2a. (Note that rhymes have been indicated in boldface below.) Accordingly, the syllable has been split and the final [-p] plus an added vowel moved to the initial position of *wák* 2c where they function as an independent syllable. Syllable breaking and carry-over, here, serve to create both a rhyming syllable (in boldface below) and a needed syllable in the following *wák*.

*kàap chàbaŋ* 16

1. a. *ŋaŋraaw* *thâaw* *thûa* *săakon*  
           story       repeat   all over   all
- b. *tháŋ*   *pháin*   *phuuwádon*  
          all       land       earth
- c. *lee*       *raatsàdɔɔn*   *thúk*   ***bùrii***  
          and       populace       every   city
2. a. *rûŋ*       *nán*       *sayǝmphɔɔn*   ***sli***  
          dawn       that       maiden choosing   splendid  
    her husband
- b. *thúk*       *thít*       *thúk*   *tháwii*  
          every       direction   every   continent
- c. *pà*       *tháaw*   *tháŋ-lăay*   *muun*   *maa*  
          noble       whole group   complete   come

And the story was repeated all over the earth by the people in every city. At dawn to that splendid ceremony, when she chose her husband, from every direction, from every continent, came all the groups of nobles.

—from *Sàmutthákhôot kham chǎn*<sup>12</sup>

The preceding discussion of the *chǎn* poetic conventions outlines their multiple uses. For the *chǎn* meters, they were instrumental in producing the necessary light and heavy syllables. At other times, they also cre-

<sup>12</sup> Stanzas 851 and 852, p. 106.

ated syllables for rhyme. But these conventions were not restricted to the *chǎn* meters. In all the classical verse forms, poets used these conventions to produce additional syllables for metrical purposes and for rhyme. Clearly, this careful and extended use of the conventions in all the classical verse forms helps to demonstrate the sophisticated levels that the art of Thai poetry has reached.

## References

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