Further Observations on the Thai ชัน
Poetic Conventions

Thomas John Hudak

During the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) with its flourishing Indic culture, the ชัน meters assumed a prominent position in Thai poetry. With Sanskrit and Pali counterparts, these meters consist of syllables defined as light ({l auprès}) and heavy (khárú?) and arranged in invariable numbers and sequences.\(^1\) After the addition of rhyme schemes, approximately six different meters appeared regularly in the ชัน compositions.\(^2\) Following the Ayutthaya period, other more popular verse forms gradually replaced the ชัน meters. With the composition of ฉัตร ชัน in 1913, however, a ชัน 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 ชัน meter outlined in the ชันทัลักษณ์, 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.\(^3\)

In comparing the older ชัน 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

---

1 For the Thai ชัน 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.
2 The six meters found in the pre-1913 ชัน compositions include รินทรารวิชีน ชัน 11, วัสสัณดิลlok ชัน 14, ทุ่ดั่งก้า? ชัน 12, maalini ชัน 15, สัทธาราค ชัน 21, and สัททุนล้wวิคกิลลิตة? ชัน 19.
3 The twelve new meters that began to appear regularly in the post-1913 compositions include รินทาวอง ชัน 12, วาณสัทท่า? ชัน 12, คามาล้า ชัน 12, พรุชองกษัปยำaat ชัน 12, รุpeenthrarawichian ชัน 11, รุpåttthitäa ชัน 11, sàålìnii ชัน 11, rùpåcháat ชัน 11, cíttápáthaa ชัน 8, maañáwákka? ชัน 8, wîchtummaalaa ชัน 8, and rìithísâ? ชัน 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 syncopation 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.  

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 daabot (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).

\[\text{?inthára?ichianchán 11}\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
 0 & 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
a. & ?aawâat & phrálaan & lian \\
temple & lawn, grounds & cleared, polished \\
 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
b. & dúcà & wen & sùwan & sán \\
like & mirror & gold & construct, create \\
 0 & 0 & * & 0 & 0 \\
c. & mii & rûup & phráșátcâphan \\
have & picture & personal name \\
\end{array}
\]

4 The older compositions examined include Sàmùthákhoót kham čàhn, Bunnoowâat kham čàhn, and Sña khoo kham čàhn.
d. thá daabót banphâchaa
    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 chân

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

The earlier studies of the chân 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, pro-
duced distortion (Hudak 1985: 115). Further examination of the older clas-
sics, 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 vow-
els in the group reduce. In wák d of the following example, both occur-
cences of ruû, 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 ruû receives full stress in the final posi-
tion 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).

Tinhárâwîchîânhân 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>praakaan</th>
<th>prâkɔɔp</th>
<th>khoom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>walls</td>
<td>equipped with</td>
<td>torch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>sàwàan</th>
<th>sèn</th>
<th>sàmɔɔ</th>
<th>can</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bright</td>
<td>rays of light</td>
<td>the same</td>
<td>moon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Stanza 68, p. 9.
6 Thai tends to fall into natural rhythm groups of two and three syllables.
Torches on walls flicker, the interior becomes day from rays of moon-bright light. Whether dawn or dusk, no one knows.

—from Bunnoowáat kham chán⁷

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 chán meters. Those conventions most often employed for rhyme include the following:

**Syllable breaking and syllable carry-over.** In the following stanza of sàtthunláwikkiilitá? chán 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 ná. Some readings would have lá as the light syllable because phaan ends with an orthographic “l” (ゎゎ).

sàtthunláwikkiilitá? chán 19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>*</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>*</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>*</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>?ää</td>
<td>?ää</td>
<td>?córá</td>
<td>yúphintháphaan</td>
<td>phánídáa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>oh</td>
<td>oh</td>
<td>young girl</td>
<td>young, beautiful girl</td>
<td>young, betrothed woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

⁷ Stanza 66, p. 9.
Oh my young love, my youthful loved one, you with the face of the young moon.

—from Sàmùtthákhôot kham chân

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

?intha?awîchian chân 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a.</th>
<th>lânthom</th>
<th>rádom</th>
<th>dàat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frangipani</td>
<td>gather together</td>
<td>plentiful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>b.</th>
<th>dûcà</th>
<th>lâat</th>
<th>kràpháttraa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>like</td>
<td>spread down</td>
<td>band together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>c.</th>
<th>kee\textsuperscript{w}</th>
<th>kannikaa</th>
<th>kaa-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>china box tree</td>
<td>lotus</td>
<td>screw pine (\textit{Pandanus})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>d.</th>
<th>râkèct</th>
<th>kîin</th>
<th>kamcoön</th>
<th>lom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tectorius</td>
<td>smell</td>
<td>spread about</td>
<td>wind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

—from Bunnoowâat kham chân

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

---

8 Stanza 1412, p. 171.
9 Stanza 75, p. 10.
following example, the alternate pronunciation ruući’i ‘light, splendor’ in wák c is used to rhyme with stí in wák b. Other possible pronunciations, inappropriate for this stanza, include rúći? and rúcci.

### ?intháráwichiancán 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. klîp</th>
<th>klèt</th>
<th>kåtchâa</th>
<th>màt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>flower petal</td>
<td>scale</td>
<td>band</td>
<td>gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. prâdâp</td>
<td>làat</td>
<td>càrun</td>
<td>stí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decorate</td>
<td>plentiful</td>
<td>shining</td>
<td>splendid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. sàlåp</td>
<td>râtná</td>
<td>ruući</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternating</td>
<td>jewels</td>
<td>splendid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. krâcañ</td>
<td>cåt</td>
<td>krâcañ</td>
<td>båñ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limpid</td>
<td>arrange</td>
<td>decorative band</td>
<td>to screen of leaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

— from *Bunnoowâat kham chân*[^10]

**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 syncopation, 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 *chân* meters with the conventions used to produce light and heavy syllables. These conventions, however, were also used in the non-*chân* meters to produce rhyme[^11] and syllables. In the following *kåap*

[^10]: Stanza 45, p. 6.
[^11]: The other classical meters include râay, khloog, *kåap*, and *kloôn*. Light and heavy syllables were defined only for the *chân* meters.
chàṇ 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 thawi'ip 'continent' (with wi'ip the final syllable). This reading, however, fails to produce the rhyme with rii (from bûri) in wák 1c and sî 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 chàṇ 16

1. a. ṭaagraaw thâaw thûa sâa kon
story repeat all over all

b. thán phîn phuuvâdôn
all land earth

c. leé râatsâdôn thûk bûri
and populace every city

2. a. rûng nán sayômpôcon sî
dawn that maiden choosing splendid
her husband

b. thûk thît thûk tháwi
every direction every continent

c. pà thâaw thâ-g-lâ y 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 Sàmùthákhôot kham chân

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

12 Stanzas 851 and 852, p. 106.
ated syllables for rhyme. But these conventions were not restricted to the chăn 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

Hudak, T. J.


Maharatchakhru, Phra, King Karay, and Paramanuchit Chinorot