Limericks and Rhyme in Thai

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Without rhyme, poetry does not exist in Thai (Siamese). So state the Thai poets and critics (Mosel, 1961, p. 9; Ná Nákhoôn, 1964, p. 17). In the past 20 years or so, a renewed interest in rhyme in Thai has begun to emerge (Bickner, 1991; Bofman, 1984; Chitakasem, 1972, 1991; Cooke, 1980; Gedney, 1989; Hudak, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1992; Kuo, 1980). Research on rhyme and poetry in other dialects and languages of the Tai family has also begun to appear (Compton, 1979, 1992; Hartmann, 1984, 1992). All of these studies agree that rhyme creates not only the basic stanzaic patterns but also the main aesthetic pleasure found in poetry. In classical Thai poetry, two types of rhyme (sąmphät) exist: external rhyme (sąmphät nōok) and internal rhyme (sąmphät naj).

EXTERNAL RHYME

External rhyme occurs between the end syllable of one line (wák) and another syllable in the following line. This general external pattern can be further divided into a major round (rûat jâj), which links the end syllables of two lines, and a minor round (rûat lek), which links the end syllable of one line with one of the early syllables, usually the third, in the following line. In both cases a couplet is completed. The following example of klōn poetry from ānaw of Rama II (1809-1824) provides examples of both couplet types (Hudak, 1986, pp. 41-42). In this Thai example and in others in this essay, slight changes have been made in the transcription system used in the original.

dōokmáaj thúk phan kō bandaan
bōokbaan keesōn khácoon klin
phummárēet rōn rōŋ boojbin
prāsān sian phian phinphåat khoŋ
‘Flowers of every kind bloom and produce fragrant pollen floating through the air. Bees fly in a circle buzzing, uniting their sounds like the sounds of an orchestra.’

In the above example, klīn and bin in line 2 and line 3, respectively, complete the major round. The final syllable khoŋ in line 4 completes another major round with the last syllable of the second line of the next stanza. The minor round occurs between the end syllable, daaan, in line 1 and baan, the second syllable in line 2. Note that a minor round is not completed with bin, the end syllable of line 3, and with phin in line 4 because phin is not one of the first three syllables in the line.

In his article, “Ancient Thai Teases,” Charles J. Algaier (1987) offers a collection of 13 teases or limericks that have been “handed down orally from generation to
generation” and have been used primarily with children (p. 182). He goes on to make the following statement (p. 182): “Rhyme is a common feature, with reduplication and onomatopoeia occasionally occurring to fill them out.” In fact, rhyme is present in every one of the forms. appearing in both external and internal patterns.

The simplest external rhyme scheme, as in the following limerick, corresponds to the minor round. In this case, the end syllable in line 1, ñæk, rhymes with lêek in line 2, and khii in line 3 rhymes with mii in line 4:

1. tûm ñæk
   maa lêek tûm dii
   tûm sâj khii
   mài mii khon ñaw
   ‘The big jar is broken, trade it for a better one; no one will take the jar containing shit.’
   large clay jar-break
   come-exchange-jar-good
   jar-put in-shit
   not-have-person-take

A similar pattern occurs in limerick number 2, with tâi and rái in lines 1 and 2 as well as dii and khî in lines 3 and 4 completing the minor rounds:

2. ūan túi? - tâi?
   kîn marâi? cîm khî
   ūan màj dii
   kîn khîi cîm marâi?
   ‘Hey fatso, eat melon dipped in shit! Being fat is no good; eat shit dipped in melon.’
   fat-(intensifiers)
   eat-bitter melon-dip into-shit
   fat-not-good
   eat-shit-dip into-bitter melon

A variation occurs in limericks 3 and 4 where there is no rhyme between the end syllables in the second and third lines, as there is in the above examples:

3. khîi màa såam sôek
   paj bôok mèejaaj
   mèe jaaj màj jùu
   càp ñii núu tènraëam
   ‘You ride a horse three measures to go and tell your mother-in-law; if she isn’t there, you grab the girls and dance!’
   ride-horse-three-cubits
   go-tell-mother-in-law
   mother-in-law-not-be
   grab-DEROG.-you (child)-dance

4. nòon klàaj
   kin raaj màa nàw
   nòon rim
   kin thàiptim thöon
   ‘If you sleep between us, you eat from the trough of a rotten dog; if you sleep beside us, you eat golden pomegranates.’
   lie-middle
   eat-trough-dog-rotten
   lie-edge
   eat-pomegranate-gold

A second major type of external rhyme occurs in the following limerick:
5. phompia
   maa lia khiköp
   phràa lâj tôp
   hūa bôi hūa bêen
   ‘Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick wood shavings! The monk will chase you,
   and slay you till your head is crushed flat!’

In lines 1 and 2, pia and lia complete the first couplet, the minor round. The final
syllables of the next two lines, kôp in line 2 and tôp in line 3, complete the major
round, the rhyming of the end syllables of two lines. (This major round also appears in
the first two examples where it links up with the second minor round in each limerick; it
is absent, however, in the third and fourth examples.) This same combination of
couplets can be found in limericks 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. (See the Appendix.) The
following example shows a variation in which the minor round has been omitted,
leaving only the major round. sãaw and thãaw:

11. taa kêe
    jâak mii mia sãaw
    thûuû mâttháaw
    jâkjêe jâkjan
    ‘The old man wants a young wife, yet he hobbles with a cane.’

The two couplet types examined so far represent two of the three major external
rhyme patterns that also appear in classical Thai verse forms. The minor round, the
simplest couplet, is the primary rhyme pattern in the verse form known as râaj, a type
of rhymed prose in which an unlimited number of lines is linked together by rhyme.
The following râaj example, taken from the literary classic Prêj? Lôa, illustrates that
rhyme pattern: phon with hûn, hân with kaan, bâat with râat (Gedney, 1989, p.
501).

léew trêt sâaj khûn phon
phûak phâhôn hiâm hân
rêj triam kaan phâjûhâbâat
câttûron râat rôp
‘Then he spoke, ordering the leader of the troops, the groups of brave soldiers, to make
haste to prepare the movement, the fourfold royal (or able) army, glorious in war…’

The combination of a minor round with a major round appears in almost all of the
classical four-line stanzas in kâap, chân, and kloon. The earlier kloon example
from Ñinaw shows both the minor and major round. In limerick 11 the minor round has
been omitted, a variation not particularly favored but also possible in classical verse
forms. Although the limerick is complete in four lines, it is probable that if another
stanza were to be added, the second stanza would duplicate the first and that the final
syllable of the initial limerick, bêen in limerick 5, would probably rhyme with the final
syllable of the second line of the following stanza, a characteristic of stanzas in succession and a normal pattern in classical verse forms.

Finally, a third type of external rhyme couplet occurs in which the rhyming couplet is separated by an intervening line as in the following:

12. mœw mâj jùu                        cat-not-be (in place)
    nûu râarœŋ                        mouse-jovial, in high spirits
    mœw klâp maa                        cat-return
    lâŋkhaa pœŋ                        roof-blows off
  ‘When the cat’s away, the mice make merry; when the cat comes back, off blows the roof.’

In this case the final syllable of line 2, rœŋ, rhymes with the final syllable pœŋ in line 4, which completes the major round. A similar pattern occurs in limerick 13, although in this case there is a rhyme between the end syllables of lines 1, 2, and 4:

13  khîŋee                        given to crying; crybaby
    khâaj dɔɔkkhee                        sell-edible flower for curries
    khâaj mâj mût                         sell-not-completely
    rœŋhâaj ŋeeŋee                        cry-imitative of crying
  ‘Crybaby! You try to sell flowers; when you can’t sell them all, you cry like a baby!’

External rhyme patterns in which a line is skipped (limerick 12) and in which another line is added (limerick 13) are also common in the classical verse forms of khloŋ and kàap. The following kàap example taken from suña khoo kham chân illustrates this pattern (the final syllables wii, tii, and sîi), combined with several others (Hudak, 1986, pp. 57–58):

prânaŋ kan khooŋ                        gather-together-wait
mûŋ meen tön rœŋ                         intend-look-body-trace
bô hên khaawii                        not-see-cow
rœŋ jen rœŋ jâm                         quick-dusk-quick-evening
rœŋ khâm rœŋ tii                      quick-night-quick-early morning
ʔôk hâj hâa sîi                        heart-weep-look for-excellent
phruûtsûp maandaal                    cow-mother
  ‘They waited together and then looked for traces of the body. But still they did not see Khawii, the cow. Quickly came the dusk and evening. Quickly came the night and early morning. They wept looking for their mother.’
INTERNAL RHYME

Internal rhyme occurs between two syllables within a line. While not required for poetry as external rhyme is, internal rhyme, nevertheless, is where the poets excel; and poetry without internal rhyme is considered very poor. Thai literature books (Na Nakorn, 1964, p. 18) list several patterns of two main types of internal rhyme: vocalic rhyme (sāmphat sārā?) and consonantal or alliterative rhyme (sāmphat pāksōn). Our earlier verse from Pīnāw provides a variety of these rhymes:

Vocalic rhyme
Two rhyming syllables (kham khiaŋ), siaŋ phiaŋ (line 4)
Two rhyming syllables separated by one syllable (kham sēek khiaŋ), phan kō̂̄ ban (line 1)

Consonantal rhyme
Two rhyming syllables (kham khūu), bō̂kbaan (line 1)
Three rhyming syllables (kham thīap khūu), -rēet rōn rōŋ (line 3)
Two sets of rhyming syllables (kham thōp khūu), -sāan siaŋ phiaŋ phin (line 4)

Other types listed but not appearing in the example include: vocalic rhyme—three rhyming syllables (kham thīap khiaŋ), two sets of two rhyming syllables (kham thōp khiaŋ), and two rhyming syllables separated by two syllables (kham sēek ðëek); consonantal rhyme—four rhyming syllables (kham thīap rōt); two rhyming syllables separated by one syllable (kham sēek khūu), two rhyming syllables separated by two syllables (kham sēek rōt).

While limericks tend to be viewed as slight, at times almost insignificant, poems filled with common, and frequently vulgar, lexical items, they nevertheless provide examples of the internal rhyme patterns outlined previously:

Vocalic rhyme
kham khiaŋ - luŋ túŋ (line 4, no. 6)

Consonantal rhyme
kham khūu - tūm tēek (line 1, no. 1), khwák khīi (line 3, no. 7),
mûn mēw (line 2, no. 9), mûn māa (line 4, no. 9)
kham sēek khūu - bīi hūa bēen (line 4, no. 5), mēn khīi māa (line 3, no. 8)
kham sēek rōt - thūu májthāaw (line 3, no. 11), mēw klāp maa (line 3, no. 12)

Two points need to be made about the internal rhyme patterns appearing in the limericks. First, most of the internal patterns are consonantal or alliterative types. Vocalic rhyme patterns are probably absent because they figure so heavily in the
external patterns. Second, many of the alliterative patterns are fortuitous. That is, they are already part of the lexical item (rārōoŋ, line 2, no. 12), or they are common words in common grammatical structures (khāaj māj mōt, line 3, no. 13). Fortuitous or not, these lexical items and grammatical structures help to create the melodious sounds associated with Thai poetry.

CONCLUSION

To most, limericks are probably viewed as examples of oral literature, short anonymous poems with a minimum number of lines, simple structure, common lexical items, and rhymes that in many cases occur accidentally. And as for most oral literature, dating the time of composition is virtually impossible. The most that can be said is that they seem to have been around forever and that they have been handed down from generation to generation. Algaier (1987) terms them “ancient teases.” Given that limericks as examples of oral literature probably predate formalized verse patterns, they thus provide evidence of early attempts at rhyme and the formalization of rhyming lines into stanzas. In the 13 examples collected by Algaier, it was demonstrated that limericks are based on three basic external rhyme patterns and that these patterns also create stanzas in the classical verse types. In an earlier study (Hudak, 1986), I showed that the five verse forms found in classical Thai poetry—rāaj, khłooŋ, kāap, chān, and kloon—are all based upon these same three external rhyme patterns. Similarly, limericks consist of grouped lexical items that eventually became formalized into the recognized internal rhyme patterns. While arriving at a date for the first appearance of a verse form is probably impossible, oral literature more than likely holds valuable clues from where many of the learned patterns originated.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

The following 13 limericks appeared in Algaier’s 1987 article. With the exception of order, minor changes in the transcription system used, and the definitions, they appear as they did in that article. In limerick no. 7, *hûláoon* rather than the usual *hûlâaan* is glossed as ‘bald head’; this may be an intentional change for the purposes of rhyme with the word *koon* ‘shave’ that occurs in the following line.

1. túm têek
   maa lêek túm dii
   túm sâj khíi
   màj mii khon ?aw
   ‘The big jar is broken, trade it for a better one; no one will take the jar containing shit.’
   large clay jar-break
   come-exchange-jar-good
   jar-put in shit
   not-have-person-take

2. ?úan tú?- tá?
   kin màrâ? cîm khíi
   ?úan màj dii
   kin khíi cîm màrâ?
   fat-(intensifiers)
   eat-bitter melon-dip into shit
   fat-not-good
   eat-shit-dip into-bitter melon
‘Hey fatso, eat melon dipped in shit! Being fat is no good; eat shit dipped in melon.’

3. khii màa sǎam səok
   paj bəok məentjaaj
   məentjaaj màj jìuu
   cəp ?ii núu tênrabam
   ‘You ride a horse three measures to go and tell your mother-in-law; if she isn’t there, you grab the girls and dance!’

4. noon klaŋ
   kin raŋ màa nàw
   noon rim
   kin thápthim thọon
   ‘If you sleep between us, you eat from the trough of a rotten dog; if you sleep beside us, you eat golden pomegranates.’

5. phòmπia
   maa lia kʰikòp
   phrá? lâj têp
   həa bii həa bəen
   ‘Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick wood shavings! The monk will chase you, and slap you till your head is crushed flat.’

6. phòmπia
   maa lia bajtən
   phra? tii klən
   taln təŋ chee
   ‘Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick the banana leaf! The monk beats the drum, boom, boom, cha-boom!’

7. hùalōon
   koon màj màj
   khwák kʰiikəj
   sàj hùalōon
   ‘Bald head, your head is freshly shaven! Pick up chicken shit, and put it on your head!’

8. phòmçúk
   khluək námplaa
   mən khii màa
   nə̀n cəŋəŋən
   ‘Hey, topknot! You mix fish sauce with your hair! You smell like dog shit, and you sit quietly like a coward!’
9. phôm màa
   nāa múñan mèew
   duu paj léew
   nāa múñan màa
   'With your hair cut in bangs, your face is like a cat, but the longer I look, your face is like a dog.'

10. sōm nāmnàa
    kalaa hūa cò?
    lūuksàaw khraj mò?
    jòk háj paj lòo j
    'It serves you right: Your skull is cracked! If you can find a girl that will accept you, take her away!'

11. taa kèe
    jàak mii mia sàaw
    thūu májtháaw
    jákjèe jákjan
    'The old man wants a young wife, yet he hobble with a cane.'

12. mèew màj jùu
    nūu ràarçèi
    mèew klàpmàa
    lànkhaa pòòŋ
    'When the cat's away, the mice make merry; when the cat comes back, off blows the roof.'

13. khìŋgèe
    khààaj dòkkhèe
    khààaj màj mòt
    ròŋhàaj nèèŋgèe
    'Crybaby! You try to sell flowers; when you can't sell them all, you cry like a baby!'