

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 Nákhōon, 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 (**sămphàt**) exist: external rhyme (**sămphàt nōok**) and internal rhyme (**sămphàt 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 jàj**), which links the end syllables of two lines, and a minor round (**rûat lék**), 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 **kloon** poetry from *Pinăw* 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 kô bandaan	flower-every-kind-then-produce
bōokbaan keesōon khácōon klīn	bloom-pollen-spread-smell
phummárêet rôn rōng boojbin	bee-fly in circles-call-fly
prāsāan sǎaŋ phiaŋ phinphâat khōŋ	unite-sound-as-orchestra-ring

'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 **khōŋ** 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, **daan**, 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

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

- A similar pattern occurs in limerick number 2, with **tá?** and **rá?** in lines 1 and 2 as well as **dii** and **kii** in lines 3 and 4 completing the minor rounds:

- 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:

- A second major type of external rhyme occurs in the following limerick:

5. phǎmpia ponytail (braided hair)
maa lia khiikòp come-lick-wood shavings
phrá? lâj tòp monk-chase-slap
hũa bii hũa been head-crush-head flat
'Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick wood shavings! The monk will chase you,
and slap 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, **kòp** in line 2 and **tòp** 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. **săaw** and **thăaw**:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| 11. taa k̕ɛɛ | maternal grandfather-old |
| j̕aak mii mia s̕aaw | want-have-wife-young girl |
| thu̕u m̕ajth̕aaw | carry-walking stick |
| j̕akj̕ɛɛ j̕akjan | hobble-hobble |
| '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 *Phrá? Loo*, illustrates that rhyme pattern: **phon** with **hǒn**, **hǎan** with **kaan**, **bàat** with **râat** (Gedney, 1989, p. 501).

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| lêew trầ sàṅ khữn phôn | then-speak-order-leader-soldier |
| phûak pháhõn hĩam hãan | group-soldier-fierce-brave |
| rêṅ triam kaan phájúhàbàat | hurry-prepare-action-military moves |
| càttũronṅ rầat róp | fourfold army-king-glorious-fight |
| '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 **kàap**, **chǎn**, and **klóon**. The earlier **klóon** example from *ʔinǎw* 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, **been** 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. mɛɛw māj jùu | cat-not-be (in place) |
| nũu r̥aarəŋ | mouse-jovial, in high spirits |
| mɛɛw klàp maa | cat-return |
| l̥əŋkhaa pəŋ | 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, **rəŋ**, rhymes with the final syllable **pəŋ** 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 khîŋɛɛ | given to crying; crybaby |
| khǎaj d̥əkkhɛɛ | sell-edible flower for curries |
| khǎaj māj mət | sell-not-completely |
| r̥əŋh̥aaj ŋɛɛŋɛɛ | 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 *sũa khoŋ kham chǎn* illustrates this pattern (the final syllables **wii**, **tii**, and **sii**), combined with several others (Hudak, 1986, pp. 57–58):

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| prànaaŋ kan khoŋj | gather-together-wait |
| mũŋ meen tôn rəŋj | intend-look-body-trace |
| b̥ə h̥ən khaawii | not-see-cow |
| r̥əŋ jen r̥əŋ jām | quick-dusk-quick-evening |
| r̥əŋ khām r̥əŋ tii | quick-night-quick-early morning |
| ʔəŋk h̥aaj h̥aaj sii | heart-weep-look for-excellent |
| phrútsəp maandaa | 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 (Ná Nákhñ, 1964, p. 18) list several patterns of two main types of internal rhyme: vocalic rhyme (**sămphăt sàràʔ**) and consonantal or alliterative rhyme (**sămphăt ʔăksǝn**). Our earlier verse from *ʔinǎw* provides a variety of these rhymes:

Vocalic rhyme

Two rhyming syllables (**kham khiaŋ**), **sǎŋ phiaŋ** (line 4)

Two rhyming syllables separated by one syllable (**kham sêek khiaŋ**), **phan kǝ ban** (line 1)

Consonantal rhyme

Two rhyming syllables (**kham khûu**), **bòekbaan** (line 1)

Three rhyming syllables (**kham thíap khûu**), **-rêet rôn rǝŋ** (line 3)

Two sets of rhyming syllables (**kham thǝp khûu**), **-sǎan sǎŋ phiaŋ phin** (line 4)

Other types listed but not appearing in the example include: vocalic rhyme—three rhyming syllables (**kham thíap khiaŋ**), two sets of two rhyming syllables (**kham thǝp khiaŋ**), and two rhyming syllables separated by two syllables (**kham sêek ʔêek**); consonantal rhyme—four rhyming syllables (**kham thíap rǝt**); two rhyming syllables separated by one syllable (**kham sêek khûu**), two rhyming syllables separated by two syllables (**kham sêek rǝt**).

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 tûŋ (line 4, no. 6)

Consonantal rhyme

kham khûu - tùm tèek (line 1, no. 1), **khwák khîi** (line 3, no. 7),

mũan mɛɛw (line 2, no. 9), **mũan mǎa** (line 4, no. 9)

kham sêek khûu - bîi hǎa been (line 4, no. 5), **měn khîi mǎa** (line 3, no. 8)

kham sêek rǝt - thũu májtháaw (line 3, no. 11), **mɛɛw klàp 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 (**râarəŋ**, line 2, no. 12), or they are common words in common grammatical structures (**khăaj māj môt**, 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—**râaj**, **khloong**, **kàap**, **chăn**, and **kləŋ**—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.

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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, **hũalóon** rather than the usual **hũaláan** 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. tùm tēek | large clay jar-break |
| maa lēek tùm dii | come-exchange-jar-good |
| tùm sàj khii | jar-put in -shit |
| māj mii khon ʔaw | not-have-person-take |
| 'The big jar is broken, trade it for a better one; no one will take the jar containing shit.' | |
| 2. ʔuan tú?- tá? | fat-(intensifiers) |
| kin mará? cím khii | eat-bitter melon-dip into-shit |
| ʔuan māj dii | fat-not-good |
| kin khii cím mará? | 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 máa sǎam sòk ride-horse-three-cubits
 paj bòok mējaaj go-tell-mother-in-law
 mējaaj māj jùu mother-in-law-not-be
 càp ʔii nũu tēnrabam grab-DEROG.-you (child)-dance
 '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. nɔɔn klaaŋ lie-middle
 kin raan mǎa nǎw eat-trough-dog-rotten
 nɔɔn rim lie-edge
 kin thápthim thɔɔŋ eat-pomegranate-gold
 'If you sleep between us, you eat from the trough of a rotten dog; if you sleep beside us, you eat golden pomegranates.'

5. phǎmpia ponytail (braided hair)
 maa lia khiikòp come-lick-wood shavings
 phráʔ lâj tòp monk-chase-slap
 hǎa bǐi hǎa bɛɛn head-crush-head flat
 '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. phǎmpia ponytail (braided hair)
 maa lia bajtɔɔŋ come-lick-banana leaf
 phraʔ tii klɔɔŋ monk-hit-drum
 taluŋ tũŋ chɛɛ (imitative sounds)
 or, (talùm tũm mɛŋ) (imitative sounds)
 'Hey, you with the braids! Come and lick the banana leaf! The monk beats the drum, boom, boom, cha-boom!'

7. hǎalóon bald head
 koon mǎj mǎj shave-new-new
 khwák khiikàj scoop up-chicken shit
 sǎj hǎalóon put on-bald head
 'Bald head, your head is freshly shaven! Pick up chicken shit, and put it on your head!'

8. phǎmcùk topknot hairstyle
 khlúk námplaa mix-fish sauce
 mǎn khii mǎa smell foully of-dog shit
 nǎŋ cǎŋŋòŋ sit-cowardly, quietly, dumbly
 'Hey, topknot! You mix fish sauce with your hair! You smell like dog shit, and you sit quietly like a coward!'

9. phǎm máa hair-horse
 nâa muǎn mɛɛw face-like-cat
 duu paj léɛw look-go-already
 nâa muǎn mǎa face-like-dog
 'With your hair cut in bangs, your face is like a cat, but the longer I look, your face is like a dog.'
10. sǎm nám-nâa as befits-face, looks
 kalaa hǔa cǎ? coconut shell-head-puncture
 lûuksǎaw khraj mǎ? daughter-who-suitable, fitting
 jók hâj paj lǎj lift, raise-give, go-utterly
 'It serves you right: Your skull is cracked! If you can find a girl that will accept you, take her away!'
11. taa kɛɛ maternal grandfather-old
 jàak mii mia sǎaw want-have-wife-young girl
 thuǔu májtháaw carry-walking stick
 jákjɛɛ jákjan hobble-hobble
 'The old man wants a young wife, yet he hobbles with a cane.'
12. mɛɛw mâj jùu cat-not-be (in place)
 nǔu rǎarǎɛ mouse-jovial, in high spirits
 mɛɛw klǎpmaa cat-return
 lǎŋkhaa pǎɛ roof-blows off
 'When the cat's away, the mice make merry; when the cat comes back, off blows the roof.'
13. khiŋɛɛ given to crying; crybaby
 khǎaj dǎɔkkhɛɛ sell-edible flower for curries
 khǎaj mâj mòt sell-not-completely
 rǎɔŋhâaj ŋɛɛŋɛɛ cry-imitative of crying
 'Crybaby! You try to sell flowers; when you can't sell them all, you cry like a baby!'

