Sayings, Twisters, Riddles & Rhymes of the Lanna People

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This article is a collection and description of a variety of spoken traditions of the Lanna ล้านนา (also called Khon Muang คนเมือง) people living in the Chiang Mai province during the late 1960s. It is based upon my collection of notes, recordings and memories from a four-year period (1967-1971) when I lived in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. It relies heavily upon the literary genius of a small number of Lanna friends whose help I cherish to this day. Each original text is accompanied by a transliteration into English and a rough translation. The translation cannot, of course, match the meaning, the beauty, the humor, or the impact of the original. It is a sad sign of the times that many of these verbal gems are passing out of use. This is my attempt to preserve a few.

**Rhymes for Children**

During our four years in Chiang Mai my late wife Edith and I both worked full time – she at Chiang Mai Learning Center (an elementary school for English-speaking children) and I in the Music Department of Thailand Theological Seminary. For this reason we employed a nanny for our daughters. She was a lovable, loquacious and knowledgeable woman of very short stature named Fong Jun ฟองจันทร์. This remarkable woman had a rich repertory of riddles, rhymes and sayings and seemed to be able to produce one for every facet of a child’s life. I have noted about a half dozen of these, all of which were thoroughly memorized by our daughters and then promptly forgotten after our return to the United States. Contrary to Thai practice, I have put spaces between the Thai words to assist less experienced readers and to show the rhyme patterns more easily.

When the children were confined inside because of rain, Fong Jun would frequently chant the following rhyme to them:

ฝน ตก สุย สุย fon tdok suey suey The rain is dripping down.
จุ๊ หมา ญุย เข้า เหล่า juey ma nyuey kao lao Coax the dog indoors.
When the need arose to wipe a runny nose she would accompany the action with the following appropriate verse:

**Noses are dripping.**

**Tears are flowing.**

**Everything’s coming apart, down to the tiniest thing.**

When the girls lost their baby teeth and had toothless gaps in front she taught them a rhyme for that stage of life:

**Front teeth missing - (good for) blowing out candles.**

**Sneak a piece of liver and eat the whole pot full.**

**Bite a piece of jerky and run around in circles.**

When the girls were restless and would not go to sleep as soon as expected she would produce the following:

**Don’t fuss and wiggle.**

**The bed bugs will wake, Mr. Muen will see, Mr. Pbun will find out, Mr. Mu will spank, Mr. See will yell.**

I joked with her that if she would add another line, thus . . .

... then the whole thing could go around again like the words of “Where have all the
flowers gone?” She was quite amused by that idea, but I cannot say whether or not my suggestion has found its way into popular usage. I rather think not.

When Fong Jun rocked a little one in a cradle or in a swing she would accompany the action with a short rocking rhyme which is strong in rhythm, but far-fetched in meaning:

- โยก ยเกย เยย yoke yake uey Back and forth we rock.
- น้ำ ท่วม เหมย nam tuam make Water has risen up to the clouds.
- กะต่าย ลอย คอ gatdai loi kaw The rabbits are up to their necks.

The final example from the considerable repertory of Nanny Fong Jun expresses the pitiful state of a woman whose husband has left her for a younger woman. I cannot say why she chose to teach this depressing verse to our daughters unless it arose from her own personal experience. (We English speakers, on the other hand, teach our little ones about such creature comforts as cradles falling out of trees and about dying before we wake.)

- ป้อ ข้า เอา แม่น้า pbaw ka aow mae na My father took another wife
- บ่อ เหมยย แม่ ค่อน baw muean mae tdon not at all like my mother.
- ซิป ข้า ค่อน sip sao kon Ten or twenty more
- บ่อ เหมยย แม่ ข้า baw muean mae ka could not match my mother.
- ตุ๊ก ก็ ตุ๊ก tduk gaw tduk Now we’re dirt poor
- บ่อ มี อะยัง กิน baw me anyang ginnn and have nothing to eat.
- แป้อง ตูบ ตู้ก pbaeng tdoop joo din We built a little shack
- มด มี กิน กิ้น mot hin gaw kuen but the ants have taken over.

**Tongue Twisters**

All of the tongue twisters I learned in Thailand were composed of a succession of monosyllabic words, reminiscent of the oldest layer of the Thai language as spoken by the Tai groups who migrated south from the southern regions of China beginning about fifteen hundred ago. The first tongue twister I learned in Thai
uses eighteen consecutive utterances of the “s” letter “ส” (Saw Sua). This twister is also found in the central region around Bangkok. The Lanna term for tongue twister is เล่นเสียงสัมผัสพยัญชนะ (twisted words).

สาร แสน สวย ใส่ ซิ่น ส้ม ใส่ สาย สร้อย สาม เส้น
Sao saen suay sai sua see som sai sin see saed sai soi sam sip song sen
(A beautiful young girl wore an orange blouse and a saffron skirt and round her neck she wore thirty-two silver necklaces.)

The second example which I recall was taught to me by a music student named Sohng (ทรง) who was enrolled at the Thailand Theological Seminary. It is in the Lanna dialect and uses 14 consecutive explosions of the hybrid “p & b” (ป) sound not found in English.

ปู ปั๋น ไป ป่า ไป ปะ ปู ปี ปาก ปอ ป้อด
pu pun pai pa pai pa pu pia pao pi pak paw pen pawd
(Grandpa Pun went into the woods and met Grandpa Pia who was blowing a pipe so hard that his cheeks almost exploded.)

Another student named Waiwit (ไววิทย์) from the province of Chiang Rai taught me a twister with just enough gruesomeness in its meaning to delight many listeners. It plays on the sound of the hybrid “t & d” - also not found in English. There are 13 mono-syllables, all starting with the letter ต (taw tao).

ต๊ก โต ติ่ง ตั้ง ตัน ตำ ต้า ตอ ตาย ตอง แตก ต้ม
tok to tin tang tok ton tan tum taw tai tong taek tom
(A sticky-footed lizard fell out of a palm tree and crashed onto a stump, splitting its gut open with a "Pop.")

I am sure that these three represent only a small percentage of the twisters to be heard around Lanna land. The learning of them has given me a great measure of delight.
Waiwit (meaning literally “quick of mind”) taught me another rhyme which is a border-line tongue twister. The following bit of bad luck is full of alliteration and onomatopoeia in which the Thai and Lanna languages are so rich. I have left several pairs of words un-translated to emphasize their function as “sound words.”

ไอ ก้อก ไอ ก้าก
ai kawk ai kaek
I coughed a “kawk - kaek.”

ไอ ก้าดัก ก้าดัก
ai gadawk gadaek
I coughed a “gadawk - gadaek.”

ไอ ตขก ตขิง
ai tdok kundai
I coughed till I fell downstairs.

ไอ กู้ ก็้ดิ้น
ai tuuk gading
I coughed till I rang my bell.

ไอ ลูก ก้าดิ้น
ai luuk gadueak
I coughed till my Adam’s apple shook with a “gadaew – gadaew.”

Old Lanna Wisdom

I spent a good deal of time in the remote rural areas of Northern Thailand before it was fashionable to call it Lanna. The word “Lanna” was known to the Kon Muang (native people) but it was not used extensively until the surge of positive northern national identity which occurred in the 1990s. On one of my field trips to look for Pin Pia players I arrived in the village of Ban Pucha in Lampoon Province. The village was home to four such players – a rarity in those days. One of the players, Nai Boon (นายบุญ) told me just how rare the Pin Pia was. The subject of rarity led him to launch into an old Lanna saying which begins on that subject and then moves to three others. I took time to learn it carefully and note it down properly. When I had mastered it I would spring it on them during subsequent visits – to their great delight. Here it is:

ของ เกียม หา ญาก
kong kiam ha nyaak
Rare things are seldom found,

ข้าว บ่อ ตาก ต่ำ ปึก
kao baw tdaak tum buek
Soggy rice is hard to pound,

ฝ้าย หึด ตอ บ่อ เขา
fai huek tdaw baw kao
A frayed string is hard to thread,

สาว เฒ่า บ่าว บ่อ ฮัก
sao tao bao baw huk
An ancient maid will never wed.
This folk rhyme is an example of the popularity of the 16-syllable verse (4 lines of 4 syllables each). The Lanna word “not” (บ่อ) seems to be an exception to the rule and is not counted as one of the 16 syllables, perhaps because it has a light accent and “leans” into the following syllable. My translation follows the Western tradition of rhyming final words in lines. A more common rhyme scheme in Thailand is to rhyme the last word of a line with the second word of the next. Finally, I must say in fairness to “ancient maids” that I have heard variants of this verse which read:

บ่าว เดจ สาว บ่อ ฮัก bao tao sao baw huk An ancient bachelor will never wed.

The second example I heard from time to time was from elders who used it to caution the younger generation to choose their friends carefully else they take up the habits of those around them. This rhyme was also a favorite anecdote in sermons preached on the subject of following the correct path. It follows the popular 16-syllable pattern, with four lines of four syllables each.

เมื่อ ก่อน เดิม นั้น mua gone duem nun A long time ago
dดวง อยู่ ใน จิ้ง douang yuu nai king A maggot was in the ginger.
pี้ มา สู จิ้ง pua ma huu king Before he knew it
จิ้ง อยู่ ใน ดวง king yuu nai douang The ginger was in the maggot.

The drum maker, Nai Noi NaKampan (น้อย ณ คำปัน) had a son named Nai Boon Tdueng (บุญเติง) from whom I learned the following Lanna incantation. It is a tongue-in-cheek magic spell which begins with the traditional “Omm” word from Sanskrit. The entire first line follows the form of a spell in the “abracadabra” manner. The remainder of the spell is pure parody.

โอม ขะ ลึก ตึ๊ก ตั๊ก omm kaluek tduek tdak Ommmm . . . Abracadabra
หมา เขี้ยว หัก ma kieow hak A dog with broken teeth
ขบ ญ บ่อ ขา kop guu baw kaow cannot bite me.
JAANG PUU TAOW  
LAI GUU BAW TDUN  
GAWN LA NEUH

An old elephant  
May chase but not catch me.  
So be it!

The nine-stage Lanna saying on the **Stages of Life** gives a pithy and humorous description of each decade of human life. It is a very popular piece of folk wisdom which I heard from the mouths of many people around Chiang Mai. It seemed to be one of those bits of lore which almost everybody seemed able to recite. This version was written down for me by Rev. Thanit Osiripaibul (อาจารย์ ธนิต โอศิริไพบูลย์) a native of Chiang Mai and now the pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Covina, California.

**Age 10 - Cold bath, no problem**

sip pi aab nam baw nao

**Age 20 - Chase girls without tiring**

sao pi aew sao baw gai

**Age 30 - Your physique has no limit.**

sam sip pi baw nai sungkan

**Age 40 - You work like thunder.**

si sip pi nyia gan muan fa pa

**Age 50 – Young girls’ insults don’t hurt.**

ha sip pi sao noi da baw jep jai

**Age 60 - You cough like a mad buck.**

hok sip pi ai muan fan koak
I have heard instances in common speech when a speaker might wish to convey which decade he has reached without revealing the exact number of his years. Thus a man of 56 years might drop the hint that he has reached the stage “when girls’ insults no longer hurt.”

**Spoonerisms**

The literary phenomenon of the “spoonerism” is found in Thai and in the Lanna dialect. However, instead of an exchange of initial consonants as in English (“pea soup” becoming “sea poup”) there is an exchange of vowel sounds (“pea soup” becoming “pou seap”). Although the vowel sounds are exchanged, the tones of the words remain in their original places. This practice is called “backward talk” (พูดกลับ by the Thai and ถูปิ้น by the Lanna). Backward talk is sometimes used to semi-disguise the ugliness of an insulting sexual remark. Examples of this unsavory practice will not be cited here.

Innocent examples of backward talk are found in courting riddles and rhymes - the subject of the following section. A girl being asked her name by a suitor might turn her name backwards, then give the boy a synonym for the backwards version as a riddle to test his acumen and to assure him that she is not an easy catch. Example:
He:  น้อง จื้อ อะหยัง ครับ  
      nong chue anyang krup

May I ask your name?

She:  ข้าเจ้า จื้อ บ่อ แตก เจ้า  
      kajao chue aeng baw tdaek jao

My name is “an unbroken bowl”

If he is quick witted he will realize that “an unbroken bowl” is also “good bowl” and that “good bowl” is a spoonerism for her name, thus:

แอ่ง บ่อ แตก is a synonym for แอ่ง ดี which turns into อี่ แดง (her nickname)

aeng baw tdaek                      aeng dee                      ee daeng

There are two examples of backward talk which have moved from their origins in courting rhymes into every-day speech in the Chiang Mai region. These are the pairs of words which mean “got one already” and “can’t take another one.”

มี แล้ว is turned into แมว ลี้
mee laew                      maew lee

เอา แถม is turned into แอม เถา
aow taem                      aem  taow

These two pairs are often heard together to form the meaning, “I’ve got one (some) already, I can’t take another (anymore). This most often implies that “I am committed to some one and cannot get involved with another.” The following example is lifted from a popular courting verse:

เปิ้น แมว ลี้ เปิ้น บ่อ แอม เตา ส่ง
Pbuen maew lee pbuen baw aem taow song
(I’ve got one already – I can’t take another.)
Another example of backward talk is the pair of words:

โตย กั๋น (to go together) which turns into ตัน กowie
tdowy gun tdun gowy

I heard this pair of words used in a little verse expressing jealousy towards a friend who was having more success with the opposite sex.

ขอ ณี ต้า koi pbuen lum I envy them so,
ณี ไค ตัน กowie pbuen dai tdun gouey the way they go together.
อา ณี คาน โค้ย ai kaw tdan t douey I’d like such a favor (alm),
ถด แย่ ขี้ ณี sak gouey kee pbia even the tiniest portion.

A final example which I recall from Chiang Mai is a short warning not to speak or act too quickly without considering the consequences. It involves exchanging the second and last vowels of a four-word phrase, thus.

กิ่น หนุม เม่อ แต่ ginn noon mua laeng (Eat jackfruit in the evening . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . “eat crow” next day)
แหนง เม่อ ลูน naeng mua loon

I will cite one more example of backward talk which was heard frequently in the 1960s. It was used to express pleasure or displeasure in a given situation. The word pair:

เปิง ใจ pbueng jai (I’m pleased)
ไป เจิง pbai jueng (same meaning - hidden)
This pair was also heard in the negative form to express displeasure thus:

ฮา บ่อ เปิง ใจ๋ ฮา บ่อ ไป๋ เจิง
ha baw pbai jueng ha baw pbueng jai
(I’m upset) (same meaning - hidden)

**Courting Riddles and Rhymes**

After the work of the day a young man would bath, eat supper, put on fresh clothes, apply a sprinkling of white body power, grab his musical instrument (if he played one), usually a fiddle called Salaw (สะล้อ) or a lute called Sueng (ซึง) or a stick zither called Pin Pia (พิณเปิ๊ยะ). Then he would set off through the un-electrified village towards the home of the girl of his desire, playing his instrument along the way. Arriving at the house he might tease the girl out of her room to listen to him play. If the girl’s parents approved of the young man they would allow her to come out into the front porch-like room to listen to the hopeful musician. If their approval was more generous they might retire into the back room, leaving their daughter alone with the suitor, provided that both of them were engaged in an activity which kept both of their hands busy in the approved manner. If the parents heard the spinning wheel in motion and the musical instrument still sounding they knew that the potential lovers were interacting at the acceptable degree of intimacy.

The boy might break the ice by asking what the girl had to eat for supper. Her answer might contain some code words to reveal her level of interest for him. For example, there is a kind of curry called “gaeng bafuk” which rhymes with the word “huk” (the word for “love”). This would be a sign of encouragement for the boy. If she answered that she had a bowl of another food (which might rhyme with the word “disgusting”) then he might as well set his sights on another girl.
If the boy felt emboldened by her response he might include the following verse in this song told to me Dr. Boon Chom.

หญัง มา งาม แต๊  You are so beautiful
เจ้า แม่น เจ้า สาย  like a sparkling crystal.
ไค่ ตาเย เป็น ใส  Let me come back as a louse
ติด อง ผา แต่ง  in the corner of your blouse.
ไค่ มัด นอง แฝง or live in the knot
ติด แจ่ง ผา คลอง that holds your skirt.

This sentiment above is reminiscent of that expressed by Romeo while gazing at Juliet – “O that I were that glove upon her hand, that I might touch her cheek.” He might continue with a piece of flattering entreaty thus:

น้อง แดง ดี ฮัก Dear little one, my Love,
เจ้า แม่ งาม สวย You are such a beauty.
อ้าย ขอ อยู่ โตย I’d like to be a member
ปben อาว บาน นี of your household.

She might test him by declaring that he already has someone and that he should not go looking for another.

ปben เมา ลี You’ve got one already
บะ แอม สา สอง and can’t take another.
กี เห้า น้า แฝง An extra passenger
ซวน สอง จัง สม will capsize the boat.

He might respond with the following bit of bravado:

เห้า ของ อาย นี This boat of mine
ปben เห้า สมай is a modern boat.
If she wants to tease, taunt or test him further she might give out this four-liner which I learned from Amnuey Kalumpat (นายอำนวย กลำพัด):

ก้า ปาก ว่า แต่  your words sound true,
น้า ใจ๋ บ่อ ต่ำ  but your heart doesn’t agree.
เป็น ฟู่ เอา งาม  Your flirting words are
น้า ใส สาย หน้า  like cold water in my face.

He retorts by turning her words to his advantage:

ก้า ปาก ว่า แล้ว  Whatever my words,
ก็ แล้ว ใจ๋  my heart always agrees.
ปาก ว่า จะ ใด  If my mouth says one thing,
ใจ่ ก็ ว่า อัน  my heart says the same.

If the girl is bold enough to want the suitor to know that she is available, she might utter the following four-line gem, according to Paw Nan Tda (พ่อหนานตา) of Sarapee District:

บ่อ มี สัก นิด  I’ve got no one,
บ่อ ติด สัก ไหนอยู่ nobody at all -
เหมือน ลม ปั๊ด ดอย as sure as the wind
บ่อ ดิน บ่อ ตัง cannot rattle a mountain.

If she is even bolder she might invite him up to sit with her, using another four-liner which comes in many variations. I will cite three of them.

มา เดี๋ยว มา เดี๋ยวนะ  Come in, come in,
นั่ง เมื่อ ถึง ทัน come sit up close.
ไฟ หัน จัง ทัน Don’t worry if we’re seen.
ของ เอา หลาย ใด This is our matter alone.
A variant to the fourth line above is:

กรรม เวร ของ ข้า  gum wane kong ka  It is our fate to be together.

A humorous variant on the same rhyme was told to me by Dr. Boon Chom.

มา เคย มา เคย  mah tdueh mah tdueh  Come in, come in,
จะ ไป นั่ง ตัด ติ้ง  je pbai nang tdat tdong  but don’t sit in the center.
ฝ่าก จะ ไหล่ ลง  faak je lai long  The floor slats might separate
ต้อง จะ ไหล่ ตอน  tdong je lai kawn  and the joints all run together.
(In other words, “don’t sit so far away from me!”)

The “Come in, come in” pattern has many variants, some serious, some tongue-in-cheek like the one I learned from Ajan Thanit:

หั่ง เคย หั่ง เคย  nang tdueh nang tdueh  Come in and sit -
บ่อ จับ ตี้ ไผ  baw jai tdee pai  No seats are reserved.
ตี้ หัว คัน ไธ  tdee hua kun dai (except the very top step
เป็น ตี้ หมา โก่ง  pben tdee ma gong  is for the spotted dog)

Courting flatter can take an insulting turn in this silly verse, which I believe is used only in hypothetical situations with imaginary girls whose beauty is not greatly admired. It uses at 3-4-3-4 syllable pattern instead of the more common 4-4-4-4 pattern:

งาม เตะ เตะ  ngam tdae tdae  She’s a beauty,
เหมือน เปา ยอง ต่อ  muean pbae yong tdaw  like a goat squatting on a stump.
งาม เตะ น้อ  ngam tdae naw  A real beauty
เหมือน ต่อ ไฟ ไหม  muean tdaw fai mai  like a fire-burned stump.
In another four-liner the boy assures the girl what a fine provider he would be for her, but may have overstated his case.

If the boy were rebuffed in his amorous endeavors he might give the girl a mild warning as in this verse taught to me by Rev. Prachuab Dechawan (อาจารย์ประจวบเดชวรรณ) of Chiang Mai.

If the boy wishes to show distain or contempt for his rejection he might use the following words taught to me by the same Rev. Prachuab:

(She is as important to me as the hair on my shin.)
There is considerable Lanna folklore surrounding the subject of the front steps of the house and the pottery container used to wash the feet before entering the house. In the olden days each house had a large water crock (โอ่งน้ำ) at the base of the steps to the house. All visitors would remove their sandals and wash their feet using a coconut dipper to dip water from the crock. There was a saying that an extra large water crock outside a house indicated that a beautiful girl lived inside (to accommodate the unusually high traffic of male visitors). A variant on the beautiful girl/water crock connection was a saying which commented upon the wetness or dryness of the top step. It insinuates that if you have a beautiful daughter you should not expect your front steps to be stay dry.: 

สาวงามอยู่บ้านใดหัวคันใดตึงบ่อแห้ง
sao ngam yuu ban dai hua kun dai tdueng baw haeng
(Wherever a beautiful girl lives the front steps will never dry out.)

Conclusion
If my representations of these saying, twisters, riddles and rhymes do not match the perfection of the original it can be attributed to the passage of thirty-seven years since I first heard them and committed them to memory. I hope that native Lanna speakers will seize their heritage so that the words of Amnuey Kalumpat may not totally come true. In a recent letter me he lamented thus: “Present-day people of Chiang Mai are throwing their valuable heirlooms away and chasing after cheap, modern and mostly foreign trinkets. I don’t know what we can to shake them awake.”
Credits

I am grateful to the following informants from whom I have learned these miniature literary gems:

Fong Jun - our loving and lovable nanny
Waiwit Suriyakam - a student at Thailand Theological Seminary
Sohng Kam Rong - another student at Thailand Theological Seminary
Nai Boon - a farmer and Pin Pia player from Hang Dong
Rev. Thanit Osiripaibul - native of Chiang Mai and current pastor in Covina CA
Rev. Prachuab Dechawan - close friend and pastor of a church in Las Vegas
Paw Nan Tda - an encyclopedia of Lanna knowledge who lived in Sarapee District
Dr. Boonchom Ariwong - a medical doctor in Chiang Mai
Nai Amnuey Kalumpat - musician, raconteur, impresario, radio announcer

I offer special thanks to Rev. Thanit Osiripaibul (above) who proof-read the manuscript for misspellings in Thai and to my wife Helga, who did the same for the English.

Thanks also to Rev. Prachuab Dechawan (above) who also read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestion. During my years in Chiang Mai 1967-1971 Prachuab and I formed a vaudeville-like act called “The Prachuab and Gerry Show” in which we re-enacted courting scenes and conversations, I playing the boy and he the girl. We entertained at parties, schools, house warmings and the like. It was from this endeavor that I learned many of the courting rhymes mentioned above.