ON THAI PROVERBS AND SAYINGS...

DUANGTIP SOMNAPAN SURINTATIP

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PREFACE

The "Genius, Wit and Spirit of a Nation, are discovered by their Proverbs," this dictum of Bacon puts in a nutshell the intention of the National Identity Board to publish this collection of Thai proverbs and sayings which first appeared in a series of weekly radio broadcast, *Food for Thought,* sponsored by the National Identity Office, on Radio Thailand's External Service.

As the series and its subsequent appearance in a local English language newspaper has been well received by the public, it is hoped that the illustrated and slightly modified version of certain selected adages will provide an interesting and entertaining reading for a wider audience as well as a useful reference for those interested in discovering for themselves the genius,wit and spirit of the Thai people. Besides, the author's attempt to match each Thai adage with its English equivalent should make the reader appreciate the fact that despite apparent differences, the mind of man concerning elemental things is much the same the world over.

The National Identity Board wishes to convey its appreciation to the author, Dr Duangtip Somnapan Surintatip, a member of the Board's Sub-committee for the Production of Foreign Language Documents, for her permission to bring out the collection. Thanks are due also to the Editorial Board of the above-mentioned Sub-committee without whose contribution and support this publication would not have been possible.

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February, 1985.

INTRODUCTION

"Man, regardless of cultural differances, tends to have the same fundamental ideas when it comes to proverbs and sayings." This statement heads the weekly column *Food for Thought* in the *Nation Review* where each article is published after it has been broadcast on the shortwave English language service of the national radio. It is this belief that inspired me to embark on the series a few years back. Each article has been written with both Thai and foreign public in mind whether they are reading their Sunday paper or listening to the radio programme. I have a dual purpose to accomplish: telling the foreign audience something about Thailand and her culture as well as making the Thai audience aware of the wealth of our cultural heritage and the existence of matching adages in the English language. Inevitably, the collection abounds in needless repetition since each article was originally meant to be complete and intelligible in itself.

To write about Thai proverbs and sayings on their own is no easy task, particularly in view of comparative paucity of research into their origins and derivations, but to find their counterparts in the English language is even harder. I begin by reading a few books and articles available on the subject and then rely heavily on the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* for quotation of English equivalents. Otherwise, much of the explanation and the task of matching the proverbs together are due entirely to observation and conversation with friends and family members. True to their oral tradition, proverbs and sayings can have a number of variants, especially in the case of Thai ones. The majority of them have been passed on down the generations through repetition in everyday conversation. This has necessitated a great deal of work to arrive at the most acceptable versions. Since the original series has never been intended as a scholarly research or thesis, I have confined myself to explaining the proverbs and adding a few thought-provoking comments at the concluding section of each article. These observations are my own personal views and not necessarily endorsed by the National Identity Board.

Although the line dividing proverbs and sayings is thin and often blurred, attempts have been made to separate them from each other. Quite arbitrarily, proverbs are taken to mean those adages that are sententious and didactic while sayings are those that describe and observe human behaviour often with a tinge of humour and sarcasm. In order to preserve the full flavour of the Thais' healthy and down-to-earth nature, improper and rather crude proverbs have not been omitted in this publication. Should the reader find any of them offensive, all he has to do is to "turn a blind eye" and pass on to the next article.

To facilitate the reader in his search for certain proverbs, each article is preceded by a title page headed by an English proverb which has been arranged in the alphabetical order of the most significant word in each, followed by a transliteration of the matching Thai proverb, based on the system prescribed by the Royal Institute (see Appendix), then the proverb written in the Thai script. Only one English proverb is given on each title page while all the matching Thai proverbs are spelled out and illustrated by original drawings for the publication. An index of all English proverbs mentioned is provided while cross-references are indicated when appropriate. It must be mentioned also that this collection is by no means an exhaustive anthology of Thai proverbs and sayings owing to the limited space available.

This work on Thai proverbs and sayings owes its existence to the concerted efforts of a number of people whose names cannot be mentioned individually and to whom I am indebted. Nevertheless, I should like to express my sincerest thanks to the National Identity Office for having considered the collection worthy of publication; to the Editorial Board for invaluable comments and practical advice; and to the Amarin Press for the printing and art work.

This collection of Thai proverbs and sayings is not meant to be the final word on their interpretation. It is hoped that the reader would find in it some useful ideas and phrases to enliven and spice their conversation and writing. Only by repeating them could these traditional adages be preserved and passed on to the future generations. Should this happen, I would consider myself more than amply rewarded.

Duangtip Somnapan Surintatip
February, 1985.

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ON THAI PROVERBS AND SAYINGS...

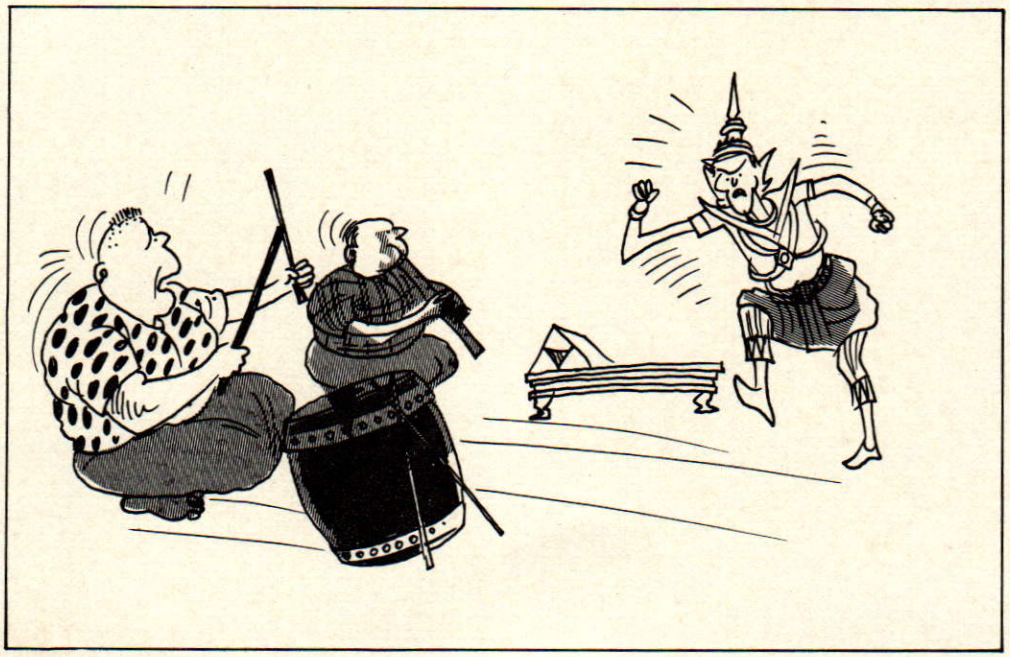
A bad workman blames his tools.

Ram mai di, thot pi thot klong

รำไม่ดีโทษปี่โทษกลอง

When you don't dance well,

you blame it on the flute and the drum.



This popular Thai saying may be phrased differently to parallel with its English equivalent: "A bad dancer blames the orchestra." Although it is in one sentence, there is an internal rhyme and the use of repetition — a regular feature of Thai proverbs and sayings.

Ram means to dance, particularly the traditional Thai dance, whether classical or folk dance. *Ram* is the root from which the word *rabam,* or a dance is derived. *Ram* may be used as a compound when joined with other words; for example, *ten ram* or to dance Western style, *ram lakhon* or to dance a classical dance, *ram wong* or to dance in a circle in the folk style. *Mai di* can be used either as adjective or adverb, meaning no good or not well, a phrase which most foreigners quickly pick up on their arrival in this country. The verb which is repeated twice in the saying is *thot* or to blame or to incriminate. It is a useful word to learn since it also appears in other compounds such as *kho thot* or to excuse oneself, to apologize, *yok thot* or to pardon, to forgive, *tham thot* or to punish, *long thot* or to penalize. *Thot* which appears in all these compounds is in fact a noun meaning an offence or punishment. As for the two musical instruments that are blamed: one is *pi* and the other is *klong*. *Pi* is a Thai flute, a generic term for wind instruments which produce a rather piercing sound, not unlike the Western pipe or the trumpet. There is quite a variety of this type of instruments; for example, *Pi Chawa, Pi Nok, Pi Nai,* and *Pi Kaeo. Klong* is a generic term for all the drums, such as *Klong Yao* or the tomtom, *Klong Khaek,* or the double-headed drum and many others. Taking the flutes and the drums together, they represent a small orchestra, enough for a dancer to dance by.

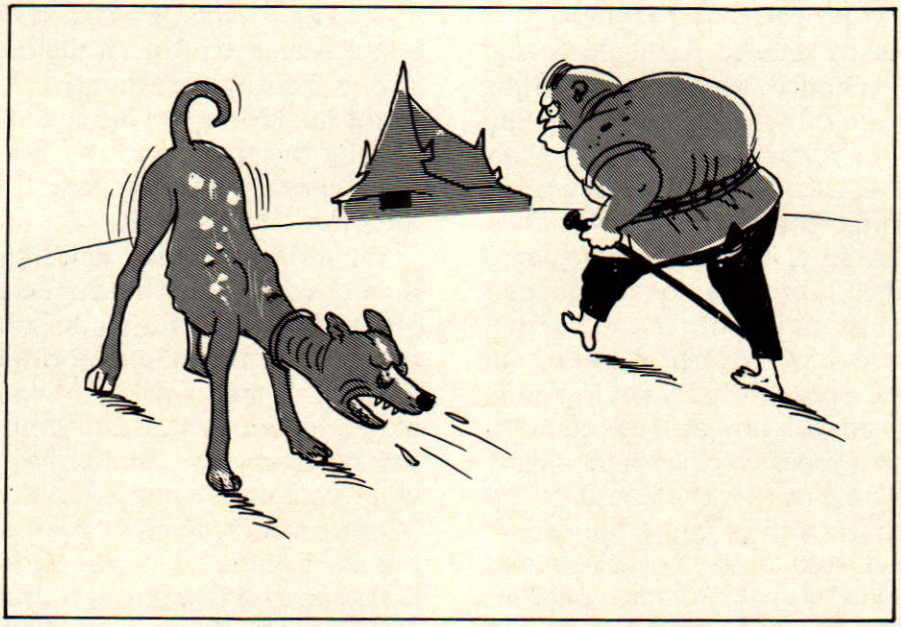
What the Thai and English sayings convey is an observation of human behaviour. Very often when one fails to do something, one seeks to put the blame on others and never oneself. A bad workman would of course blame his tools if he could not execute his job satisfactorily. Similarly, a bad dancer would blame the music if he or she came a cropper. Both sayings openly condemn this human foible and by the same token urge everyone to act responsibly and be prepared to accept the blame if he does not succeed in his work. After all no one is perfect, there must be something we can't do well however versatile we are. So the best we can do in the circumstances is to face up to it and learn to live with ourselves.

Barking dogs seldom bite.

Ma hao mai kat

หมาเห่าไม่กัด

Dogs that bark do not bite.



This pair of Thai and English proverbs are more or less identical. There are no difficult words in the Thai proverb. The noun *ma* is a colloquial term for the dog, politely referred to as *sunak* in the written language. *Hao,* to bark, and *kat,* to bite, are the two most common verbs associated with dogs in any language, while *mai* is simply a negative adverb qualifying the verb "to bite".

The proverb is an ancient one and although there has been no research on its antiquity, it is safe to say that the similarity between the Thai proverb and this thirteenth-century English proverb is purely coincidental. This goes to show that man does think alike despite the cultural differences. Even the French have a proverb which corresponds exactly to the Thai proverb: "Chien qui aboie ne mord pas."

The English proverb is different from the Thai and French proverbs in that it is less categorical. After all, the adverb "seldom" is used instead of the negative form in "Barking dogs seldom bite." This refusal to generalize is characteristic of the English mentality since there certainly are exceptions and barking dogs do sometime bite. Despite this reservation, the English proverb carries the same message as its Thai equivalent. People who brag a lot about their bravery hardly ever fight when cornered, just like dogs which make a lot of noise will rarely bite a stranger.

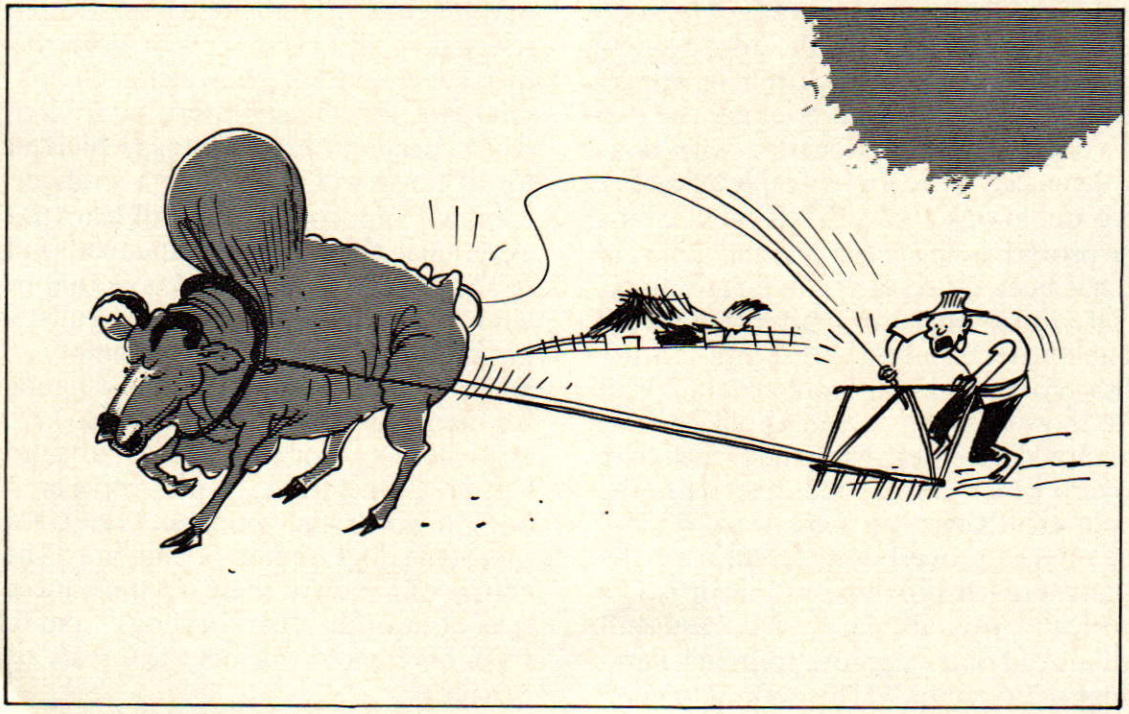
Now I suppose we have all learned from experience that there is some truth in these proverbs. Very often we know that people who are loud-mouthed are really quite harmless and their threats are empty. Their ability to strike whether literally or figuratively has been used up in the verbal show of strength. However, it is not advisable to take the proverbs as gospel truth. Some people are brave both in words and action and one does find that some dogs both bark and bite. The best course of action in these circumstances is to steer clear of the "barking dogs" and refrain from finding out whether the threats are real or empty.

Beat the dog before the lion.

Ti wua krathop khrat

ตีวัวกระทบคราด

Beat the ox by hitting the harrow.



Quite often our forefathers relied on their most common occupations to coin a saying. As we all know, agriculture, in particular rice farming, is the occupation of the majority of Thai people. When the farmer prepares his land with the help of *khrat* or a harrow, either for breaking clods of earth or removing weeds, he usually uses *wua* or an ox to pull it over the fields. Now, an ox is a prized possession of a farmer, being his draught animal, and he most certainly would not wish to beat it and perhaps injure it unnecessarily. Therefore, while working on the field, the farmer would hit the harrow instead to coerce the ox to move on. The Thai saying in fact makes use of two verbs for to hit: one is *ti* which is a straightforward verb for to beat or to hit; the other is *krathop* which does not only mean to hit, to strike against, but also to affect, to refer to indirectly and slightingly. The double meaning of *krathop* helps explain the meaning of the saying: one beats the harrow because it will affects the ox. Often when one is not in the position to harm someone directly, one will turn to somebody else more defenceless in the hope that the other person will be hurt, no matter how indirectly. The injury afflicted by proxy could be devastating if the victim is closely or secretly associated with this other person one wishes to harm. Just to give a few examples, a distraught wife may beat her own children to get her own back on the husband or the in-laws; an angry foreman may suspend a factory girl who is known to be his boss's mistress, so forth and so on. All these actions may be described as *"Ti wua krathop khrat"*, or to beat the ox by hitting the harrow.

The corresponding English saying is rather easier to understand: "Beat the dog before the lion." The lion is the King of Beasts and no one in his right mind will attempt to beat it directly. On the other hand, the dog is a harmless pet, defenceless enough to be beaten in front of the powerful lion. This show of strength hopefully will cow the lion into submission or at least show it that one is not really afraid of its might.

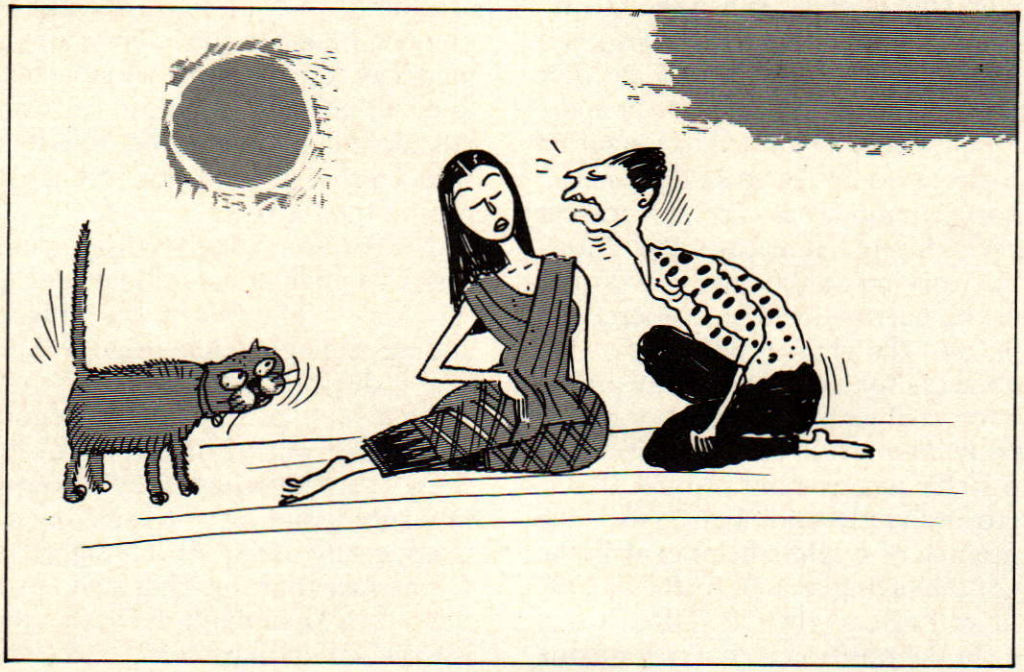
The fact that the Thai saying sometimes starts with *Ya* or don't shows that the practice is frowned upon by society. To try to have your own back on anyone is bad enough, but to inflict the injury on someone else who cannot defend himself is definitely unethical.

Beauty without grace is a violet without smell.

Suai tae rup chup mai hom

สวยแต่รูปจูบไม่หอม

If a woman has only a beautiful body,
you won't find that she smells sweet
when you kiss her.



Women have often been discussed in old proverbs and sayings. This pair of proverbs must have been coined by members of the opposite sex since they reflect a certain attitude which the modern liberated woman may or may not accept.

The Thai proverb is elliptical to say the least. Although there appears to be only two parts to the proverb, there are actually three sentences. The first sentence, *Suai tae rup* leaves out the subject "a woman" and the sentence really reads "a woman who is beautiful only in body." The second part of the proverb *chup mai hom* comprises in actual fact two sentences. The verb *chup* or to kiss requires a subject "you" and an object "her", making up a clause: "when you kiss her". The last phrase *mai hom* omits the subject "she" and the sentence should read "she does not smell sweet."

Unlike the English proverb, "Beauty without grace is a violet without smell," the Thai proverb does not spell out that which is lacking. Grace certainly counts a lot in the Thai concept of an ideal woman, but there are a host of other accomplishments and qualities besides. Culinary expertise is definitely much sought after and we are reminded of a famous saying: *"Sa-ne plai chawak/phua rak chon tai"* or "The charm at the tip of the ladle will make your husband love you till death." * Submissiveness is another highly-rated virtue since women are expected to be only *"chang thao lang"* or the hind legs of an elephant, following the lead of her lord and master. To this we may add eternal fidelity, tact, thrift...the list is endless. It is amazing that the women have not come up with another list of demands on their menfolk. As to be expected, there is a conspicuous absence from this list of ideal qualities — brains. Women are never expected to be brainy and least of all to make demands on their men.

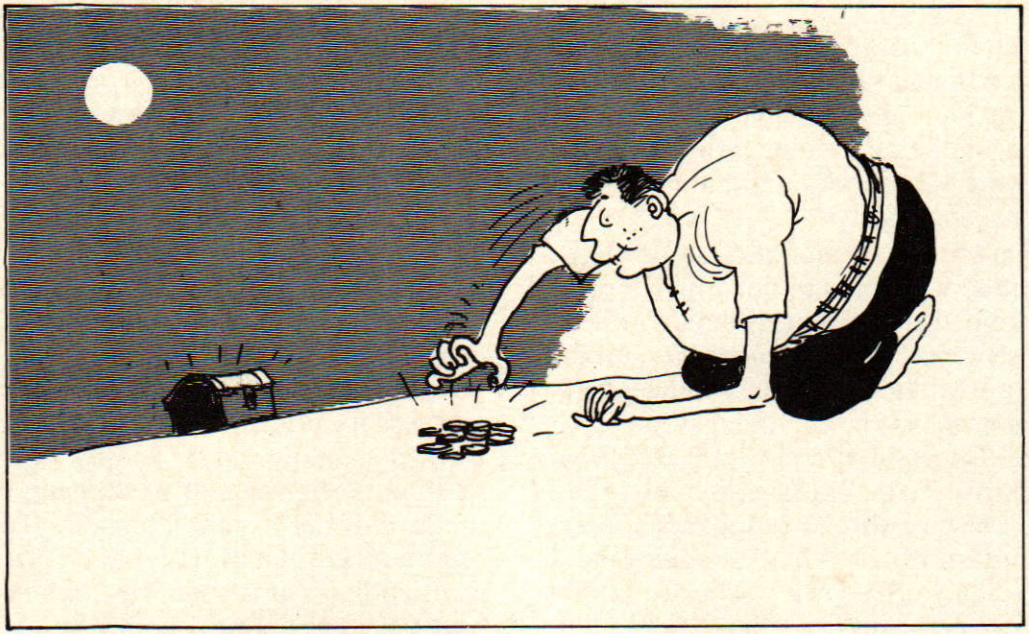
* See also pp.182-183

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Sip bia klai mu

สิบเบี้ยใกล้มือ

Ten cowrie shells near the hand.

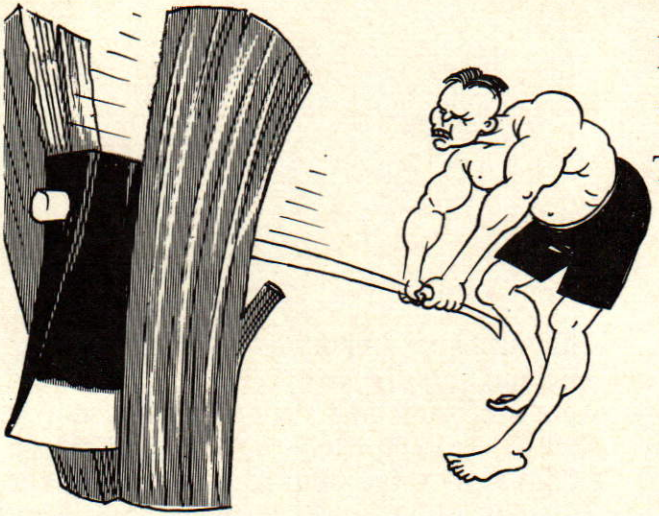


Both the Thai and English proverbs make use of the same key metaphor — that of the hand or *mu* in Thai. The hand represents the act of possession. If you have something near the hand or *klai mu,* it is more than likely that you can take possession of it by just grabbing it. The English proverb is even clearer; if you have something in the hand, you already possess it. Even if you have only one bird, it is better than hoping to catch two more.

But why ten cowrie shells? This metaphor may not be evident to foreigners, although it is quite obvious to all Thais. It represents a very small amount of money since *bia* or cowrie shells were once used during Ayudhya period as money. They were imported in shiploads from overseas and their value fluctuated according to their availability in the country. The mean rate was 800 shells to a *fuang* while 2 *fuang* equalled one *salung* or a quarter of a baht. It was King Mongkut or King Rama IV of the Rattanakosin or Bangkok period who introduced the first mint to Thailand, with machinery imported from Birmingham, England. By the year 1862 when tin coins were issued for small denominations, cowrie shells were completely replaced and ceased to have any value. But let's go back to our proverb. Although *sip bia* might not be very much, the money was near the hand so you would do well to settle for it. It is better to aim at something which is within our grasp than at something beyond our reach.

The famous English proverb was first recorded in the early fifteenth century in Latin: *"Plus valet in manibus avis unica fronde diabus."* Although the same metaphor — that of the hand — was used, it belonged to a hunter and not to a villager as in the Thai proverb. The one bird you have caught is more valuable than two that you hope to catch.

The popularity of these two proverbs bears witness to the timelessness of their message. It teaches us to be moderate in our aspirations and to be contented with what we already have. But whether we should listen to it or not is a totally different proposition.

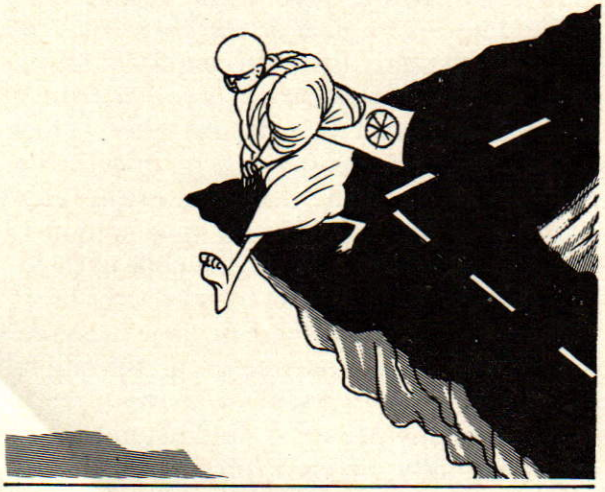


To call a spade a spade.

Khwan pha sak

ขวานผ่าซาก

To split hard wood with an axe.



Then trong

เถรตรง

To be as straight as a senior monk.

There is a couple of Thai and English sayings which involve comparable occupations and describe the same human characteristic—that is outspokenness. The Thai saying calls for some explanation even for native speakers. *Sak* in this context refers to a variety of hard-wood tree which is excellent for charcoal production. Its botanical name is *Erythrophloeum teysmannii* of the species *Leguminosae*. A certain confusion arises over the meaning of this word because *sak* more popularly means a carcass, carrion or remains. This interpretation makes no sense of the saying, however, since the remains naturally give way easily under the pressure of an axe. And more to the point, why should one use an axe to cut up a corpse in the first place? Actually, this ancient saying describes the action of a wood-cutter. In order to split the hard timber for firewood or charcoal burning, he has to exert a great deal of force. The action is compared to some people's way of expressing their opinion. Their straight talk may be too forceful and without their knowing it, cut the listener to the quick.

The English saying involves a gardening tool—a spade. The saying dates to the early sixteenth century and originally cites a fig as well as a spade as examples of plain talks. Although it has been asserted that it was the Macedonians who were gross and had not the wit to call a spade by any other name than a spade, the imagery used is certainly that of a gardener or a fruit grower who habitually uses a spade to cultivate his fig trees.

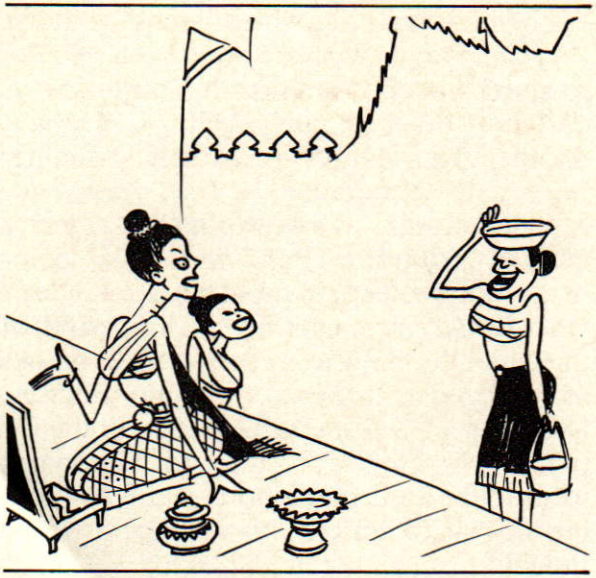
The Thai saying has a touch of disapproval to it, something which is absent in the English saying. We have often been told not to speak out the harsh truth plainly for we may hurt other people's feelings. There is another Thai expression which is slightly better in its connotation — *Then trong* — or to be as straight as a senior monk. *Then* is derived from the Pali *thera* or a senior monk who has been in monkhood for at least ten *phansa,* a phansa being the period of three months in the rainy season when monks are obliged to stay at their monasteries. Despite such a respectable imagery, the expression is used, according to dictionary, to describe someone who is too frank and has no wit to conceal his feelings or to be flexible.

To carry coals to Newcastle.

Ao maphrao hao pai khai suan

เอามะพร้าวห้าวไปขายสวน

To take coconuts to sell in the orchard;



Ao paeng nuan pai khai chao wang

เอาแป้งนวลไปขายชาววัง

To take face powder to sell to palace ladies.

Old proverbs often mirror the life-style of the people who first thought them up. This pair of Thai and English adages tell us something about the livelihoods of the inhabitants of the two countries. The English proverb is well known to the Thais as it is one of the few taught at school in English classes.

The first line of the Thai couplet is relatively straightforward. The key word here is *maphrao hao* or ripe coconut, the sort one uses its flesh to make coconut milk for cooking. *Ao pai* means to take, to carry and *khai* means simply to sell. The word *suan* can mean either a garden or an orchard, but in this context, it must be the coconut grove. Now then, if one tries to sell coconuts in a coconut grove, imagine what kind of business one would have. The meaning of this saying is even clearer when one thinks of the rest of the saying which is less well-known : *"Ao paeng nuan pai khai chao wang"*, or "taking face powder to sell to palace ladies." The *chao wang* or palace ladies in the old days were famous for *paeng nuan* or face powder which they made for their own use and even for sale. Their powder was usually beautifully scented and delicately made in tiny pellets; therefore their product was of much higher quality than the ordinary face powder and they would certainly not buy your lowly product.

The English saying more or less states the same message. Newcastle-upon-Tyne has always been the centre of coal mining in England. It is the county town of Northumberland and the heart of industrial Tyneside as well as a port for Scandinavian trade. Although the first literary record of the saying appeared as early as 1583, it is still true today that Newcastle has no need for imported coal. Both sayings are an observation of the fact that sometimes one simply wastes one's energy doing something that has been done before or trying to teach or give other people what they already know or have.

What is even more remarkable about these sayings is the way they give us some idea about the Thai and English ways of life. Thailand is a country where agriculture is the major occupation of its population in as much as England is an industrialized nation. It is only natural that our forefathers chose to coin their sayings according to their familiar surroundings, and in this way made them that much more memorable.

When the cat's away,

the mice will play.

Maeo mai yu nu raroeng

แมวไม่อยู่หนูระเริง

When the cat's away, the mice will frolic.

The Thai saying and its English equivalent are built around the same metaphor. In fact they are so much alike that we suspect that there might have been some cross-cultural borrowing. *Maeo* and *nu* or the cat and the mouse are traditional enemies since the former preys on the latter. In Thailand, the cat is not regarded only as a cuddly pet but also as an efficient agent of rodent control. This uneasy relationship between the cat and the mouse is the origin of the English and Thai sayings.

Apart from the two key characters which we have dealt with, the Thai saying contains two actions: *mai yu* or to be away, to be absent for the cat, and *raroeng* or to rejoice, to frolic for the mice. The word *raroeng* can also be an adjective meaning cheerful, merry or mirthful. The Thai saying is therefore not a direct translation of the English one, since to play means *len* in Thai. The saying has been adapted to the Thai situation to the extent that we have often heard a second line, coined to rhyme with the original one: *"Maeo ma langkha poeng."* This may be translated as: "When the cat comes, the roof goes to pieces." The key word here is *poeng* to rhyme with *roeng* in *raroeng;* it is a difficult word to translate since it can mean a number of things such as to be defeated or destroyed thoroughly or severely. When used with a roof or *langkha,* presumably it means that the roof is completely destroyed, in this case because the mice in their multitude scramble and stampede for shelter in the flimsy thatched roof of a traditional Thai-style house.

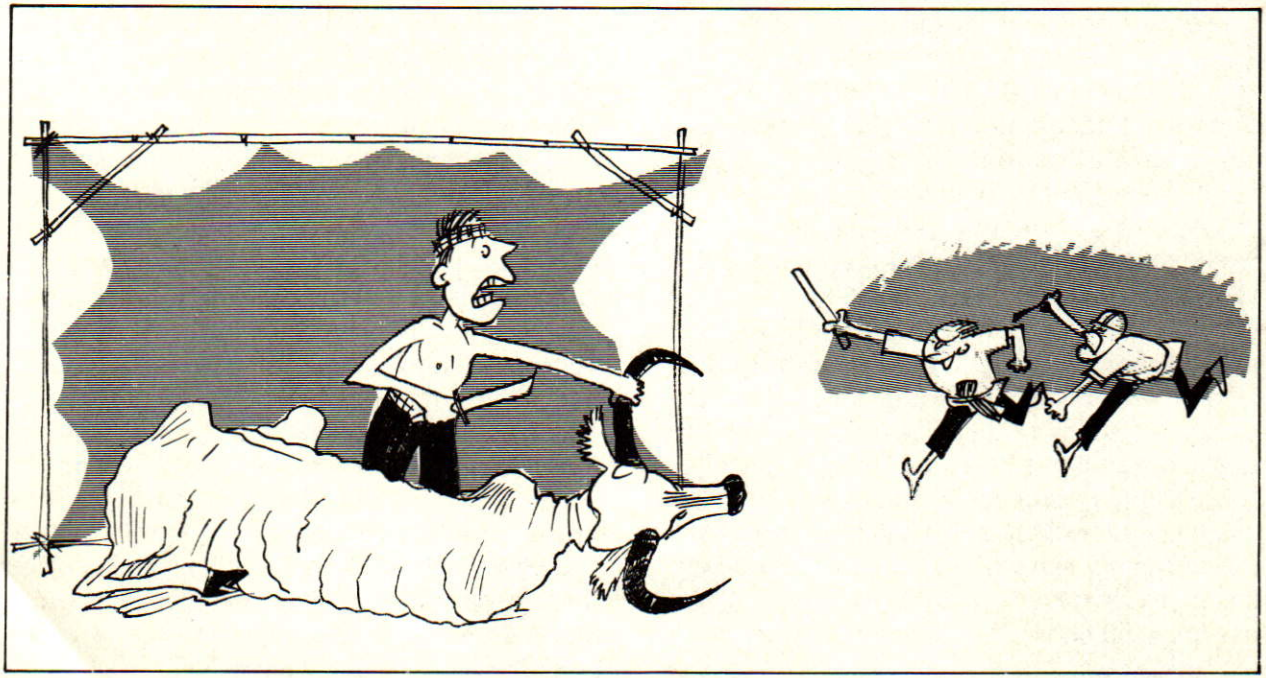
The English saying dates back to the fifteenth century with a Latin original: *"Mus debaccatur, ubi catus non dominatur."* Its meaning is the same as that of the Thai equivalent: when the boss turns his back or goes away somewhere, the subordinates are apt to enjoy themselves or relax, a luxury they cannot afford in his presence. The sayings may be applied to any such relationship where there is a dominating character in a group : parents/children, teacher/students and so on. However universal and perceptive this observation may be, we can only hope that it does not happen to us either way, since neither role is exactly enviable.

To catch somebody red-handed.

Chap dai kha nang kha khao

จับได้คาหนังคาเขา

To catch somebody with the hide and horns.



This Thai saying clearly reveals something about our country and the people who inhabit it. The saying is used when we catch somebody in a felonious or criminal act or immediately after it. To fully appreciate its meaning, we need to understand how the majority of Thai people live. Farming is still the major occupation in the country and farmers up and down the country still rely on water-buffaloes and oxen to help them farm the land. Cattle rustling is one of the major crimes in upcountry areas since they are practically the only visible and movable property on a farmstead. All the would-be rustler has to do is to wait for the right moment when the owner is not keeping an eye on the cattle, say after nightfall or when the kid who looks after the herd has fallen asleep in the hot midday sun. Once a buffalo or an ox is stolen, it is often killed and skinned immediately to prevent the owner from identifying it. Now the saying *"Chap dai kha nang kha khao"* originates from the cattle rustling that we've been discussing. *Chap dai* simple means "being able to catch", the object being a rustler which is not mentioned but understood. The other key word is *kha* which means to get stuck in other context than this one. Here we may translate it as it appears in the phrase *kha nang kha khao* or the rustler is caught with the hide and horns or the carcass of the animal which he has just killed. There is a variant of this saying which we've come across: *"Chap dai kha lang kha khao"*. Instead of *nang* or cowhide or skin, here we have *lang* or the back of an animal. According to this version, the thief is caught while riding on the back of the stolen buffalo.

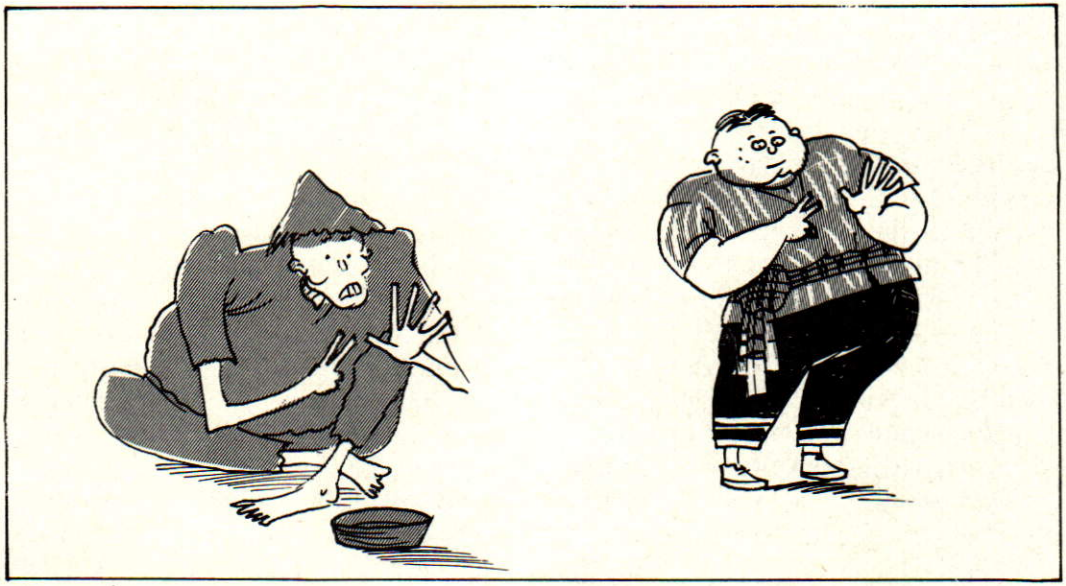
The idea behind the Thai saying is the indisputable proof of a crime. The English saying also keeps this idea in "To catch somebody red-handed." The criminal's hands are still bloody from the murder and since he is caught in the act he has no time to wash the victim's blood off his hands. It is remarkable how the saying is repeated nowadays without the speaker giving a thought to this rather morbid and macabre imagery. Likewise, the Thai saying is now used very currently by most people and only a few of us would bother to find out its actual meaning.

Every cloud has a silver lining.

Chua chet thi/Di chet hon

ชั่วเจ็ดทีดีเจ็ดหน

Bad seven times, good seven times.



Sometimes a proverb attempts not only to teach but to give moral support to those who care to listen. This pair of Thai and English proverbs seem to inject new hopes into those in despair. Only the message of the two proverbs link them together, as, we shall see, there is no ostensible similarity between them whatsoever.

The Thai proverb is quite an exceptional couplet in its symmetry and simplicity. Both lines of the couplet consist of only three syllables. *Chua* and *di* are antonyms; *chua* which means bad, evil, wicked is contrasted with *di* which means good, both by their meaning and by their position at the beginning of each line. The rest of each line means exactly the same thing: *chet thi,* and *chet hon,* both mean seven times. The word *thi* is chosen to rhyme with *di* in the second line and thus links the couplet together. Despite the fact that the proverb contains practically not a single difficult word, its meaning may not be apparent to non-native speakers. What the proverb is saying is this: there are ups and downs in one's life; the bad patch you are going through now may be just one of the many you can expect as a member of the human race and you are still entitled to better times which will come some day.

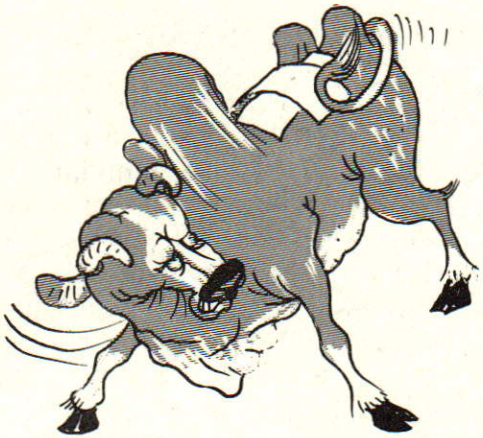
The English proverb says much the same thing: "Every cloud has a silver lining." The cloud is a familiar poetic metaphor for trouble and doom, and the silver lining represents good in evil or hope amidst despair. The poetic imagery of the proverb should surprise no one, since it was the poet Milton who first composed these lines in "Comus" in 1634: "Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud Turn forth her silver lining on the night?" But the expression most probably became better known to the public and turned into a popular proverb with these lines from the "Mikado" of the late nineteenth century: "Don't let's be downhearted! There's a silver lining to every cloud."

Both proverbs do in fact provide some consolation when we need it most. They teach us to be patient and stoically face up to the bad times that we're going through. And if things don't get better quickly enough, we can still look forward to our quota of good fortune or to the day when the cloud will pass away.

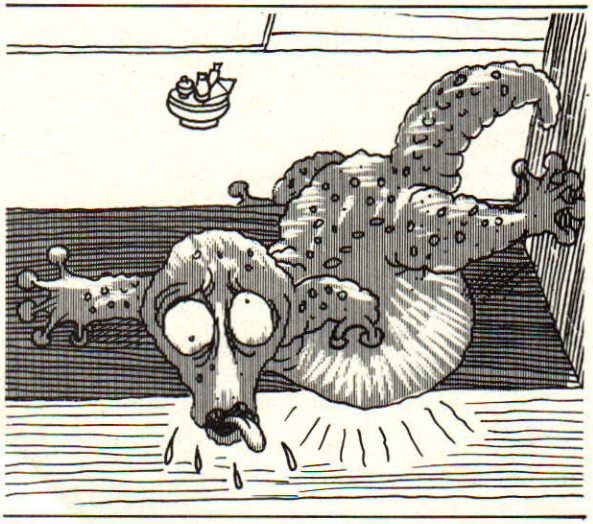
He that commits a fault, thinks everyone speaks of it.

Wua sanlang wa

วัวสันหลังหวะ



The bull with a gaping wound on its back.



Kin pun ron thong

กินปูนร้อนท้อง

Eating lime and having a burning stomach.

This group of proverbs in both Thai and English make rather acid observations. The Thai adages are still in current use most probably because of their choice of striking metaphors.

The first Thai saying is *"Wua sanlang wa"* or "The bull with a gaping wound on its back." The key word here is *wa* which describes the state of the wound. With a gaping wound that does not heal easily on its back or *sanlang,* the bull or *wua* has to be constantly on a lookout in case some nasty flies get at it. Any approaching flies or insects will be immediately warded off whether or not they intend to alight on the wound or not. The bull is likened to a person who is constantly on his guard and takes imaginery offences totally unintended.

The other Thai saying is equally short, although definitely more obscure. *"Kin pun ron thong"* or "Eating lime and having a burning stomach." The saying has omitted its subject which in actual fact is a gecko or *tukkae* in Thai. It is a tropical house lizard, bearing colourful patterns on its body which can grow to over a foot long. It has a nasty habit of lurking in dark corners behind doors and emits the woeful sound from which its name is derived. The gecko is never an endearing animal in this part of the world, probably because all Thai children have been indoctrinated by their elders that if they cry a lot the gecko will come and eat their liver. This myth has never been substantiated in much the same way as the myth from which the saying is derived. That is the gecko constantly cries out because it has eaten some lime or *pun* which is normally used as a spread on betel leaves that are chewed with areca nuts. Now the lime burns its stomach and gives it so much pain that it cannot stop hollering. Therefore, if you have done something wrong, you will be like the gecko which constantly proclaims its fault by acknowledging it loudly.

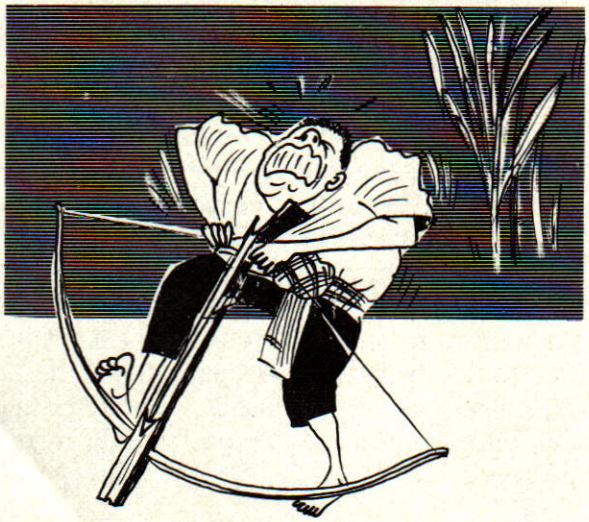
We have found at least three English proverbs in this group. The first one dates to the early sixteenth century: "He that commits a fault thinks everyone speaks of it." Another proverb dates back to mid-seventeenth century: "Faulty stands on his guard." The last one is undated but rather more popular: "He that has a great nose thinks everybody is speaking of it." With these proverbs in mind, we shall probably learn to conceal our guilt better next time round.

To count one's chickens before they are hatched.

Pai hen nam reng tat krabok

ไป่เห็นน้ำเร่งตัดกระบอก

To cut the bamboo stem before you see the water;



Pai hen krarok reng kong na-mai

ไป่เห็นกระรอกเร่งโก่งหน้าไม้

To draw your bow before you see the squirrel.

Hunting used to be a major livelihood of upcountry people when our country was densely forested. It is therefore natural to find the metaphor of a hunter in this proverb in couplet form. The couplet itself hinges on a series of repetition and rhymes. There are two key expressions which are repeated in both lines: *pai hen* and *reng*. *Pai* is the poetic version of *mai* or not in Thai, so *pai hen* literally means "do not see." *Reng* means to hurry and often appears in the compound *rengrip* which means "to be in hurry." In the first line, what you do not see is *nam* or water, and in the second line, *krarok* or a squirrel. The word *krabok* which you are in a hurry to cut or *tat* denotes a water-container made of bamboo stem, still a popularly used utensil in upcountry areas. Very often it is used not only to contain water but also palm juice which is naturally fermented overnight and becomes ready for consumption the next day as home-made wine. The word *krabok* rhymes with *krarok* in the second line. Although the squirrel is chosen here for an external rhyme, it represents in fact any small game preyed upon by a hunter with his *namai* or bow. *Kong namai* means to draw or to arch a bow. Actually, *namai* is a crossbow to be precise, since a bow is known as *thanu* in Thai.

The hunter imagery of the Thai proverb contrasts with the domestic imagery of the sixteenth-century English proverb. In the Thai proverb, you can imagine a hunter on the lookout for water and games while on a hunt in the forest, whereas in the English proverb, you see a farmer counting his eggs, expecting all of them to hatch as young chicks.

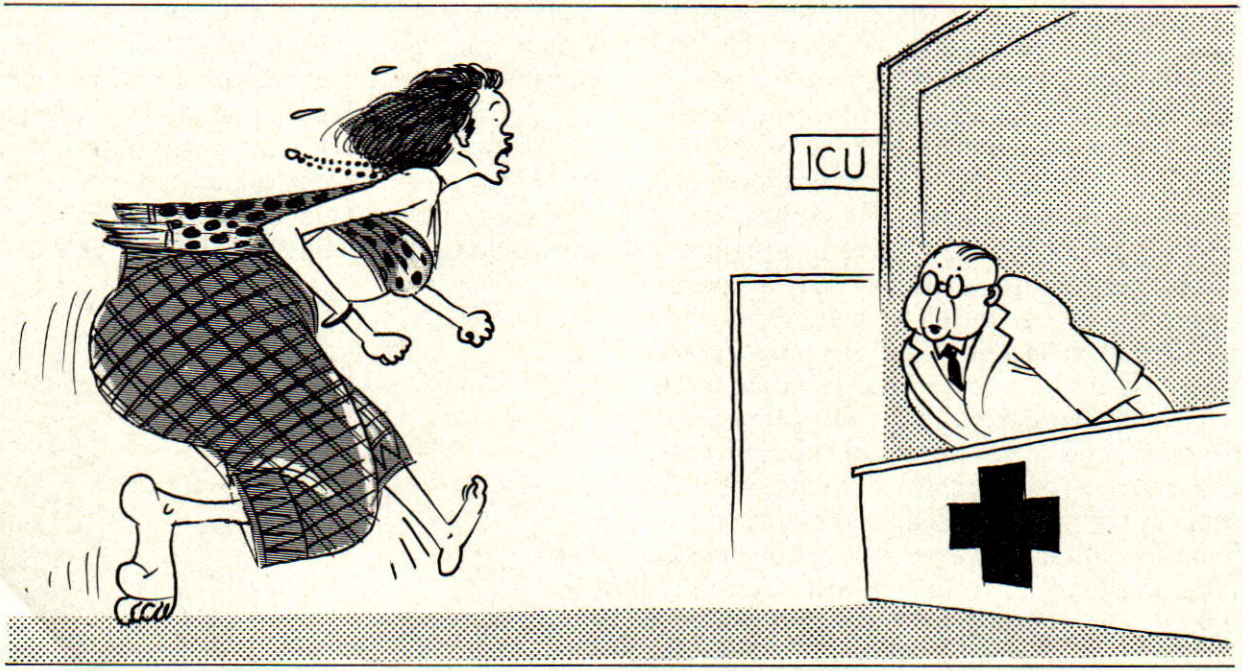
Both proverbs warn us against having high hopes and expectations for something which may not materialize. This rather pessimistic viewpoint makes no allowance or provision for advance planning if we take it too seriously. On the other hand, the sobering recommendation may indeed cool our heads and save us from disappointment if our plan actually falls through in the end.

Don't cross the bridge till you get to it.

Ya ti ton pai kon khai

อย่าตีตนไปก่อนไข้

Don't beat yourself before the fever (arrives).



These two proverbs teach us not to be over-anxious about what the future has in store for us. They are both presented in the Imperative Mood, denoted by *Ya* in Thai.

The meaning of the first part of the Thai proverb is rather obscure: *Ya ti ton* means literally "do not beat your body up". This seemingly masochistic habit can be a little better explained by another version of the proverb: *"Ya ti ton tai pai kon khai,"* or "don't beat yourself to death before you are actually ill." Obviously, the proverb relies on a metaphor involving physical afflictions: hitting yourself is painful, perhaps even more so than being ill; therefore don't hurt yourself by fretting over the illness which may or may not afflict you. What the proverb is trying to tell us is: don't anticipate troubles, real or imagined, until they actually arrive. Your nervous energy may have been uselessly exhausted in anticipation of some obstacles which eventually fail to materialize. It is better to just wait and see how things work themselves out.

The English proverb: "Don't cross the bridge till you get to it," is sometimes put in the affirmative: "Cross one's bridges when one comes to them," or in the negative with a slight difference: "Don't cross one's bridges before one comes to them." All these versions depend on the imagery of a traveller making his way through life's winding path. He may have to negotiate a number of narrow bridges over troubled waters before he safely reaches his destination. The bridge in the proverb symbolises the landmark or the turning-point in our life or the trials and tribulations that we have to go through as a human being. Unlike the Thai proverb's fever or illness which symbolises troubles and obstacles, the English proverb's bridge is more neutral. It can be a wish, a dream, a target of one's ambition, in other words, a future happening which may or may not materialize. Since no one, not even the best astrologers, can accurately predict what the future has in store for us, the proverb teaches us to be patient and take things as they come.

To cry one's eyes (heart) out.

Ronghai namta pen sai luat

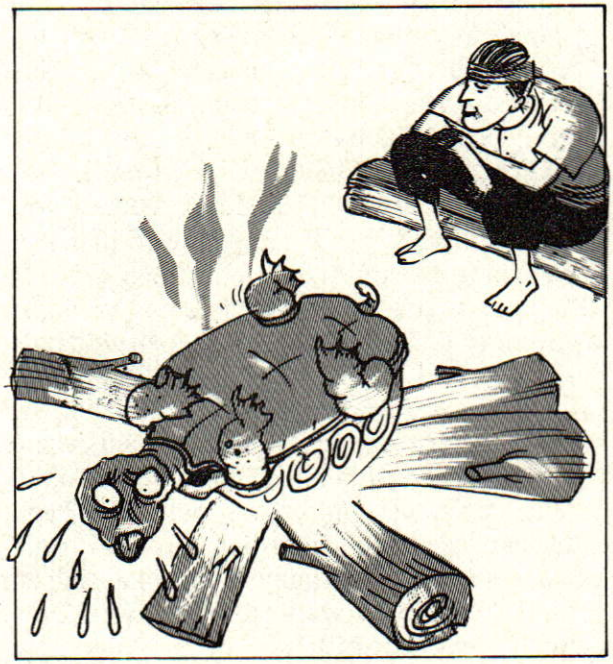
ร้องไห้น้ำตาเป็นสายเลือด

To cry until one's tears turn to a stream of blood.

Ronghai namta pen phao tao

ร้องไห้น้ำตาเป็นเผาเต่า

To cry like a turtle being grilled.



It is interesting to compare the ways the Thais and the English look at man's expression of sorrow or the act of crying. Of the two Thai sayings, the first is relatively easy to explain away. The stream of blood or *sai luat* is obviously a result of excessive crying which gives one bloodshot eyes. The tears or *namta* streaming down from these red eyes naturally remind us of blood. The term *namta* is a good example of how a Thai word is made up: *nam* means water and *ta* means eyes; therefore water of the eyes is logically tears. The term *ronghai* is exclusively used for crying in sadness, distinguishing it from *rong* which means to cry out, to yell or to holler.

The other saying takes us to the realm of exotic foods. The sea turtle is a choice delicacy among coast-dwellers. Both its meat and eggs are sought after until the animal is very nearly extinct in this part of the world. The large sea turtle is relatively defenceless. It is also a creature of habit and will keep coming back to the same spot on the beach for its egg-laying. The slow-moving turtle can be easily caught simply by being turned upside down. To prepare it for food, the connoisseurs prefer to roast it alive over a large bonfire. It has been observed and reported that its tears keep streaming down relentlessly while undergoing the horrible ordeal. How one can enjoy its meat afterwards is beyond comprehension. Still, enough tears from a large number of turtles must have been observed until the metaphor can be used in an old saying such as this.

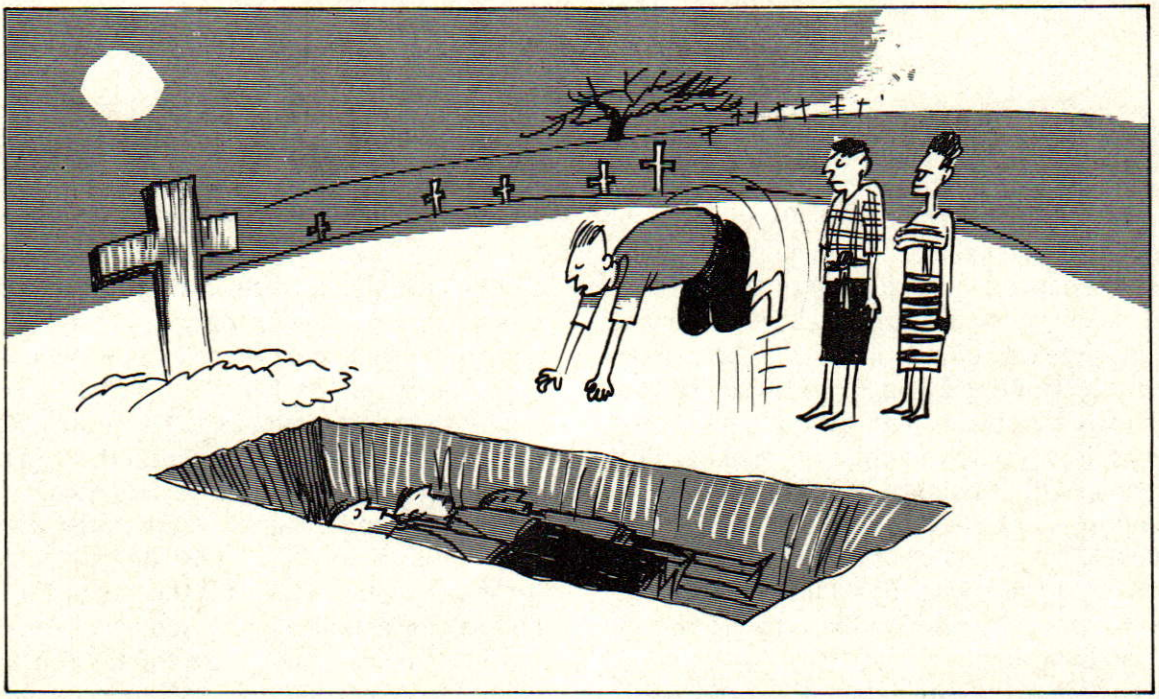
The English sayings are equally gruesome when looked at closely. "To cry one's eyes or one's heart out" imply that the eyes are so sore that they fall out of the sockets. As for the heart, we leave it to your imagination. One thing is certain — the crying person is not a pretty sight and deserves a great deal of sympathy.

To cut off one's nose to spite one's face.

Tai prachot pacha

ตายประชดป่าช้า

To die to spite the graveyard.

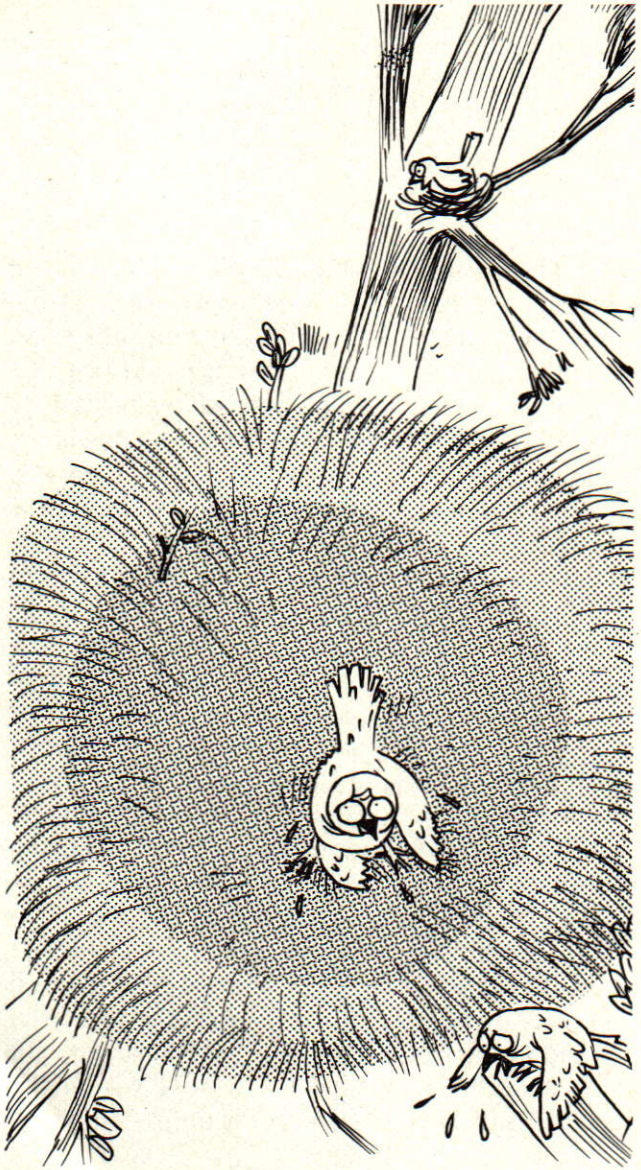


It is rather surprising how a number of sayings are built on some really gruesome imagery and yet their message is the only thing we think of when we actually repeat the sayings. It is rare that we ever pause to consider how the sayings were coined in the first place. This pair of Thai saying and its English equivalent is a case in point.

The key word in the Thai saying is the same as in the English saying: *prachot* or to spite, to annoy. In fact the verb *prachot* in Thai embraces both wounding remarks and conduct which one directs toward someone else. Now if one is resolved to die in order to hurt *pacha* or a graveyard, a cemetery, one is simply wasting one's effort for nothing and hurting oneself in the process. The graveyard is unlikely to be concerned over your life or death. If anything, the undertaker may even welcome a new business for the cemetery.

The English saying "To cut off one's nose to spite one's face," means approximately the same thing. If you dislike your ugly face, there is no point in hurting it by cutting off your own nose. Your face will be even more hideous, let alone the actual pain involved. In other words you only injure yourself by vindictive or resentful conduct. This ancient saying was first recorded in Latin in the year 1200 and has been kept alive over the centuries. Like the Thai saying, it has become so well integrated into the language that the macabre imagery is not often analysed or discussed.

What these sayings try to convey is a warning against rash and impulsive behaviour when one is angry. Sometimes one is foolish enough to take a course of action which can only be detrimental to oneself in the long run, simply because it seems the quickest way to show one's displeasure. Very often the sweet taste of revenge does not last long. In the Thai saying, you won't feel any at all since you have to die to vindicate your anger. And in the English saying? Well, the thought of a face with a great big hole where the nose once was is a sure enough deterrent against such a rash act.



Cut your coat according to your cloth.

Nok noi tham rang tae pho tua

นกน้อยทำรังแต่พอตัว

Little birds build nests according to their size.

It is believed that folk wisdom is timeless and universal. Against the background of worldwide economic gloom, this pair of Thai and English proverbs seems to confirm the belief because they are still applicable now as they were centuries ago.

The Thai proverb relies on a metaphor which is at once familiar and poetic. *Nok noi* is a poetic turn of phrase since it is alliterative and the choice of the adjective *noi* instead of *lek,* both meaning small or little, to qualify *nok* or bird, belongs firmly to the Thai poetic tradition. However, the prosaic *tham rang* or to build a nest brings the statement back to the realm of the familiar. This is reinforced by another common expression *tae pho tua* which literally means "just enough for the body".

Although it may be difficult for city-dwellers nowadays to see for themselves bird nests on branches of the fast-disappearing trees, let alone how their owners actually build nests larger or smaller than their size, it is still relatively easy to observe such phenomena in the countryside. The proverb reminds us of our sylvan past, of an environment where the sight of little birds building their tiny nests was so common that whoever coined this proverb found inspiration in this natural activity.

The English proverb is based on a more down-to-earth metaphor, using the language of a tailor for its instruction. Obviously, the size of a coat should correspond to the available material, otherwise the tailor will be in trouble, especially when the same type of material may be unobtainable afterwards. This choice of metaphor is equally apt, although we must admit that very few of us would attempt to make a coat for our own use nowadays. But when the proverb was first recorded in sixteenth-century England, it must have been common enough for a housewife to make clothes for her family.

The message of the proverbs is particularly relevant for all of us trying to make ends meet and coping with galloping inflation. If we haven't got much, spend according to our means. And if we have a lot stashed away, well, save it, and only spend the money on what we really need.

To do good by stealth.

Pit thong lang phra

ปิดทองหลังพระ

To apply gold leaf to the back of a Buddha image.

Some Thai sayings do give away our very habits and thoughts. This saying could never be thought up by any other people except by the Thais. It is not enough to be a Buddhist, you would have to be a Thai Buddhist to pay respect to Buddha images in this fashion.

It is customary in this country to pay homage to Buddha images by lighting incense sticks and candles and offering a bunch of lotus buds or fresh flowers while saying your prayers. For special Buddha images, those which are highly venerated because of their great miracles, the devotees go one step further by applying thin sheets of beaten gold or gold leaf to the images. This embellishment is considered an act of merit in itself, presumably because not all Buddha images have been properly gilded. In actual gilding, gold leaf is also used but it is applied to a surface made tacky by a special lacquer glaze. Some devotees rub the surface of the Buddha image with garlic to make the gold leaf stick better. But most simply rub it on where they see fit. Usually the gold leaf is applied to the front part of the Buddha image where it can be reached, although some ailing people believe that one should choose that part of the body that is giving one the trouble, hoping that the Buddha image will heal it. Now if one applies the gold leaf to the back of the image, presumably no one will ever notice it and one's attempt to embellish the image will be in vain. Nevertheless, the act of merit has been accomplished, and a good deed has been carried out though unnoticed.

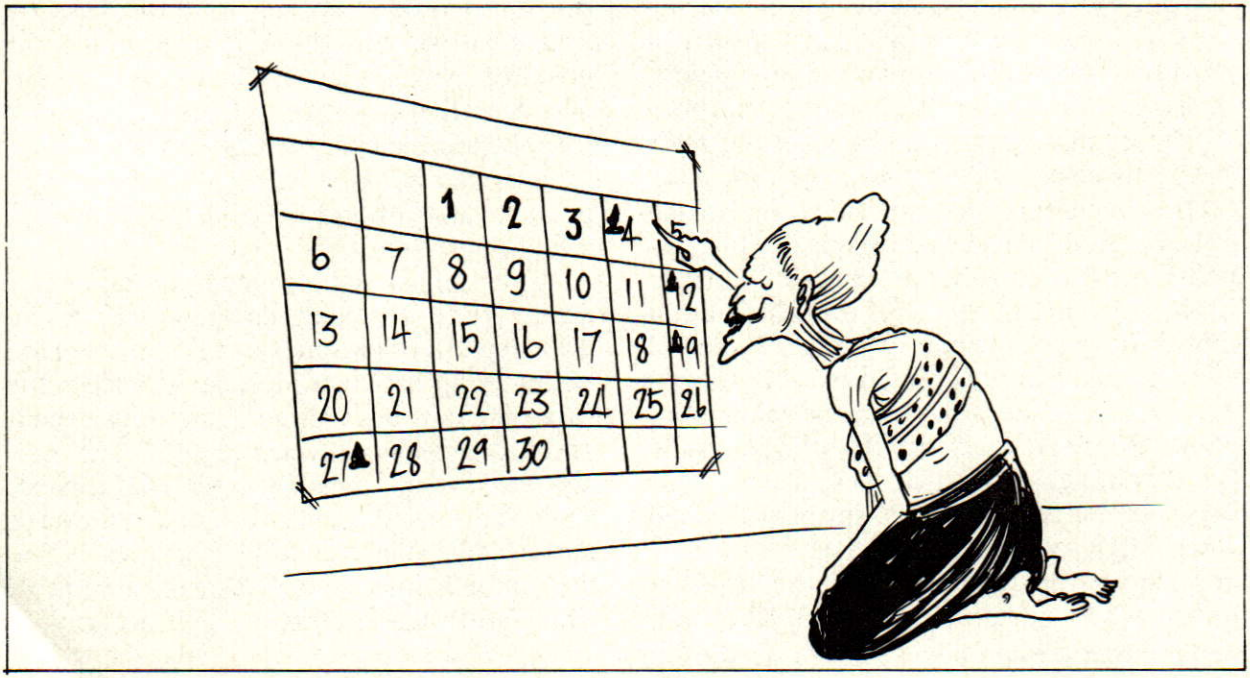
The English saying needs no elaborate explanation. If you do good by stealth, you do it secretly and quietly. Like in the Thai saying, your satisfaction is derived from the fact that you have done something decent and not from any reward or gain. The message has a special meaning in the Thai context, since very often people are too ostentatious about their merit-making activities. The metaphor is immediately apparent to most Thais and thus applicable even literally.

A dog has his day.

Wan phra mai mi hon dieo

วันพระไม่มีหนเดียว

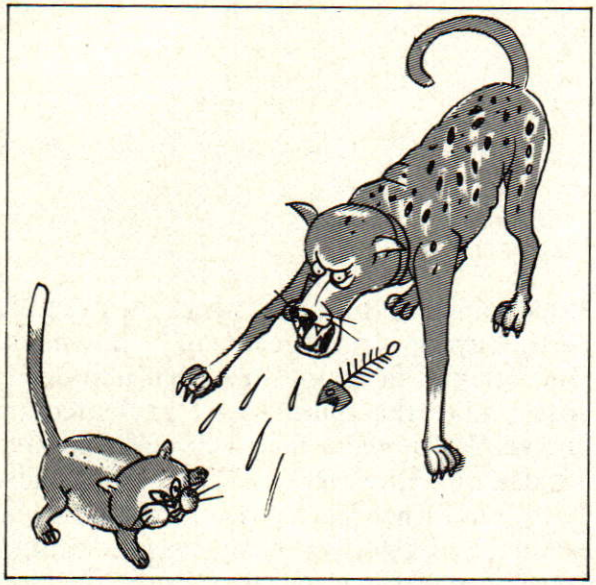
Buddhist holy days do not take place only once.



Sometimes proverbs and sayings are words of encouragement that help boost our sagging morale. These two sayings illustrate this point by different metaphors that converge on the common emphasis on a special day.

The Thai saying chooses the Buddhist way of life as its metaphor. Every Buddhist knows or should know that there are four holy days or sabbaths in one lunar month. Until King Mongkut founded the Dhammayutika school in mid-nineteenth century, the Buddhist sabbaths had been observed uniformly on the eighth and fifteenth day of both the new and waning moon. The new Dhammayutika school has been observing the holy days one day later, that is on the ninth and first day of the new moon and the waning moon. On these holy days devout Buddhists go to the temple to offer food to monks and listen to their preaching. The holy days in short offer every Buddhist an opportunity to make merit and to observe the Buddha's precepts. This equal opportunity in itself represents hope for every Buddhist, hence the meaning of the saying. If one seems to be down and out today, it does not mean that all hope is lost. Like the opportunity presented by the sabbaths, every man will one day have his chance. However, the saying is normally used in a rather less uplifting context. For example, if one, for some reason, cannot have his own back on the offending person there and then, he may choose to cry out this particular saying as a sort of threat. On the other hand, the saying may be used in a more general context as words of consolation to some unlucky person who feels that he has been hard done by.

The English saying opts for the metaphor of a favourite pet — the dog — to offer the same kind of consolation. It has two variants: "A dog has his day," or "Every dog has a day." No matter how low you have sunk, there is hope for you yet, since the dog is given this chance at least once in its' lifetime. Mind you, that chance is usually viewed as the very last resort if one remembers the English expression: "not even a dog's chance," meaning "no chance at all."

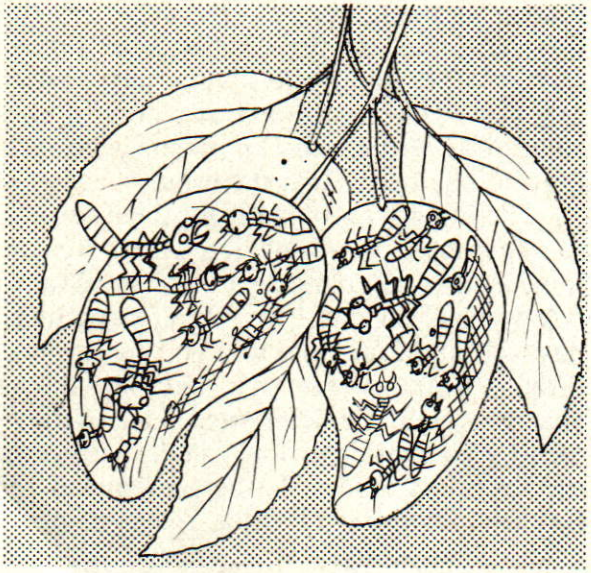


Like a dog in the manger.

Ma huang kang

หมาหวงก้าง

A dog jealously guarding a fishbone.



Mot daeng
faeng phuang mamuang

มดแดงแฝงพวงมะม่วง

Red ants guarding a cluster of mangoes.

This group of sayings relies on animals for comparison. Two of them feature the same animal — the dog — while the third picks on a familiar insect — the ant.

The gist of these sayings is that there is a certain type of person who is so selfish that he prevents others from enjoying something that is useless to himself. Let us look at the first Thai saying: *"Ma huang kang."* We know that the dog or *ma* does not care much for fishbones or *kang,* short for *kang pla.* Yet it refuses to let go of the fishbone, lest the cat might have a go at it. As for the *mot daeng* or red ants in the second Thai saying, they swarm around the mangoes which they do not particularly like. This makes it very difficult for other animals or man to pick the mangoes for fear of being stung by the vicious insect. The word *faeng* which normally means to hide is obviously chosen here to rhyme with *daeng* in *mot daeng.* This particular saying is often used to refer to a married men who could not possibly marry some beautiful girl he assiduously courts and yet refuses to let any other more eligible suitors near her.

The English saying "Like a dog in the manger," comes from an Aesop's fable. The dog refuses to let the horse and the ox eat the hay or oats in the manger that it cannot eat. The dog in this case is compared to a selfish person who would not let others share what he cannot have. Come to think of it, the dog in the English saying is far more selfish than the dog in the Thai saying, since Thai dogs sometimes eat fishbones for lack of better food. It may simply want to guard the fishbone for itself only, not wanting other animals to share it, whereas the dog in the Aesop's tale definitely cannot eat the hay and would not let any other animal eat it either.

These sayings have one point in common — that is they condemn selfishness or egoism. The instinct of self-preservation which is necessary to the survival of man may be carried a little too far and we have to learn to control it. Since not every one can behave like a saint, let's just be kind and allow others less fortunate than we are to have what we cannot use.

As dull as ditch (dish) water.

Bua pen ya ru

เบื่อเป็นยารุ

As unappetising
as a bitter laxative.

Bua pen nam ya yen

เบื่อเป็นน้ำยาเย็น

As unappetising
as cold fish curry.

This group of Thai and English sayings coincidentally hit on some liquid substance as their metaphor to express the same idea — that of immeasurable boredom.

To the uninitiated, *ya ru* can pose quite a problem. Although the saying is quite popular still, very few of us these days have any idea of what it is. I have been told that it is one of those traditional preparations of Thai herbal medicine. Apparently, *ya ru* is quite an effective laxative but it is so bitter that one would rather remain constipated than risk its unpleasant taste. Sometimes, people say *ya mo yai* or a kind of herbal medicine to express the same idea. Literally, *ya mo yai* means "medicine in a big pot". The expression tells us something about the most common way to prepare traditional medicine. All the prescribed ingredients, most of which are medicinal plants, are put to boil in a big earthen pot, filled with water. The patient is made to drink the liquid for quite some time every day until the herbs have lost their potency. If he is not then cured, another pot of herbs will be boiled up again, probably with new ingredients. We can imagine how the poor patient cannot bear the sight of the medicine, let alone the taste, while he is being treated. This is why when something is dull and positively boring, we call it *ya mo yai.*

Still on the same topic, we have another saying: *"Bua pen nam ya yen."* This time, the liquid you are fed up with is not a medicine, despite its name *nam ya.* This is a kind of fish curry eaten with *khanom chin* or the rice vermicelli. The curry actually looks like a thick soup, since all the ingredients, including the fish, are completely ground. It is best eaten hot, therefore when it is cold or *yen,* it is no longer appetising.

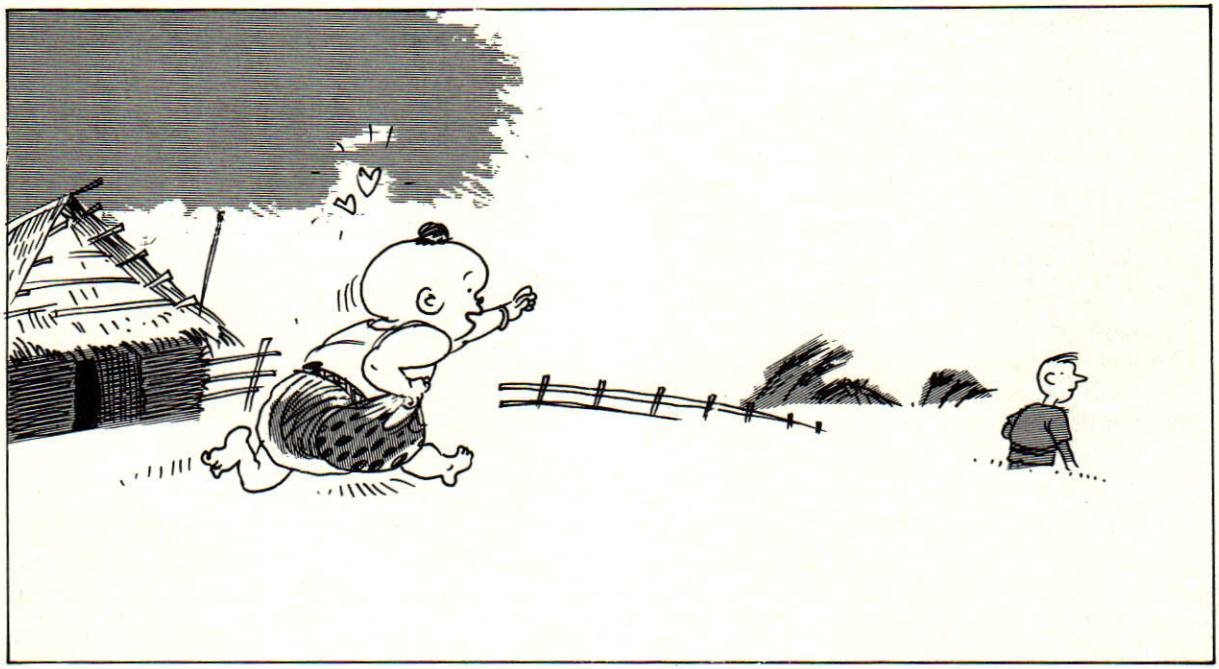
The English saying, "As dull as ditch water" dates back to the early eighteenth century. Water in a ditch is probably stagnant and dirty. The other variant: "As dull as dish water," is a little more understandable. Obviously, the water which has been used for washing up dishes cannot have been very interesting from any point of view.

Early ripe, early rotten.

Ya ching suk kon ham

อย่าชิงสุกก่อนห่าม

Don't hasten to ripen
before being nearly ripe first.



These two proverbs rely on identical imagery to convey the same message. The common imagery here is that of a fruit. In the Thai proverb, there are two words describing the two stages of ripening: *ham* which means nearly ripe or half ripe and *suk* which means ripe. A fruit has to go through the first stage of being *ham* before it ripens properly. Now if the process is hurried artificially, bypassing the intermediate stage, the fruit will not mature in a satisfactory manner. It will not have the naturally sweet taste, and will rot very quickly. The proverb also contains an interesting word: *ching* which apart from to hasten, to race, means to compete or even to capture. The proverb is normally referred to in a very special context. It is used as a warning to young people, especially young girls, who show signs of being promiscuous or wish to get married before they are old enough to know what they want. Sometimes, the proverb is used in a more general context, referring to people who wish to do things before the right moment. In other words, everything has to take its natural course. To hurry it before the proper moment is to court disaster.

The English proverb "Early ripe, early rotten," has another variant: "Soon ripe, soon rotten." While using the same imagery, the English proverb spells out the consequence more explicitly than the Thai proverb. It is also more preoccupied with the idea of being too quickly spent or burned out before the right time. This idea is conveyed in a related group of English proverbs which concentrate solely on untimely wedding — a warning to under-age people in the same vein as the Thai proverb. For example, "Early wed, early dead," which was first quoted in the early seventeenth century as "Early bridals, make early burials." Or this one: "Who weds ere he be wise, shall die ere he thrives."

In this day and age, we can almost dismiss the threat of an early death implicit in these proverbs although people do age more quickly if they have children early. The proverbs' warning is still applicable, however, if we think of the high divorce rate among couples who marry young. It has been proved that maturity is an essential ingredient in a successful marriage. So if you don't want your married life to rot before its time, wait until you are ripe first.

You cannot eat your cake and have your cake (it).

Ya chap pla song mu

อย่าจับปลาสองมือ

Do not catch fish with both hands.

Proverbs tend to tell us a lot about the life-style of the peoples who repeat them. This Thai proverb has a number of English equivalents, two of which will be selected for comparison, since each of them, in its own way, also reveals something about the English life-style.

Because of the brevity of the Thai proverb, it can be misleading to non-native speakers. If we look at the literal translation of *chap pla song mu* "catching fish with both hands," we will see that it could also mean "using both hands to catch a fish", in which case, surely, the fish will be caught easily and the proverb will become quite meaningless. Although there is no indication anywhere in the proverb as to its real meaning, the word *ya* or "don't" obviously hints that it is not a good thing, and the literal interpretation cannot be right. Of course, native speakers never have any problem since they have known the proverb since childhood and have heard it repeated in poetry and songs. The message of the proverb is simply, don't be too greedy and want to have all the good things at once. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice one thing for the other and set your priority right.

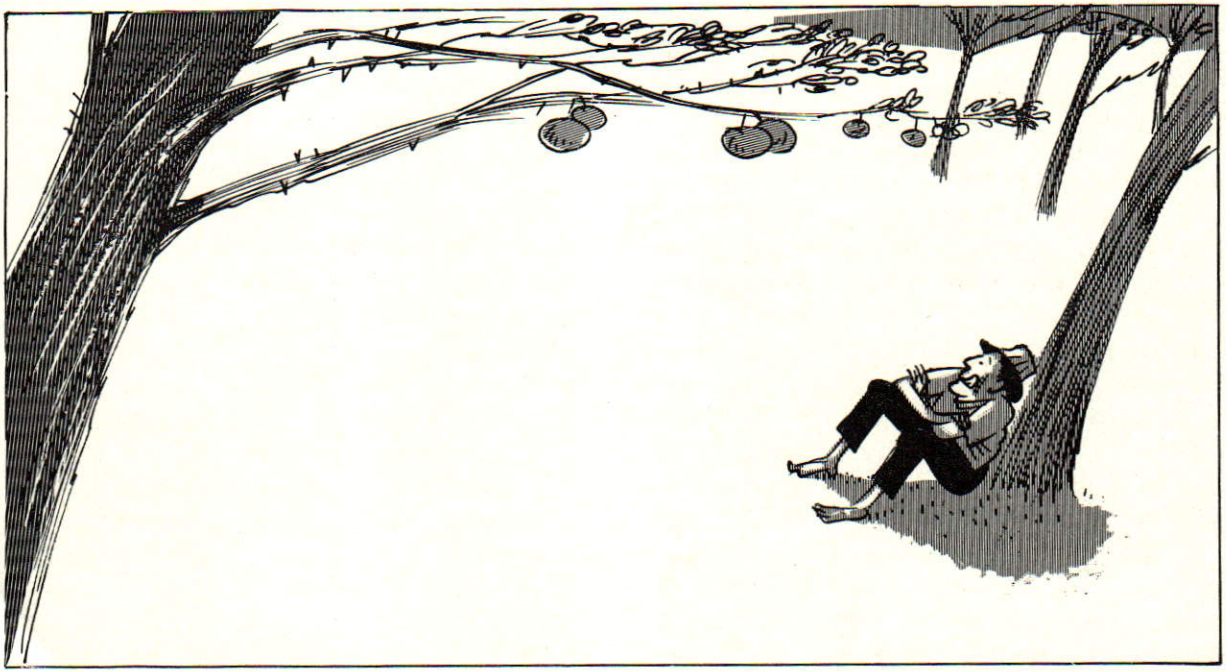
We should point out here that fish is the staple diet, the main source of protein for the Thais. Fishing is not just a pastime in this country. It has been and still is one of the oldest occupations of its population. To the majority of Thai people, the feat of catching two fish with both hands is, to say the least, impossible. Now the English also rely on one of their most common foods for a proverb which matches the Thai adage. "You cannot eat your cake and have your cake." or simply "You cannot eat your cake and have it." Once the cake has been eaten, it will not be in your possession any longer. Another well-known proverb also reveals something about the English life-style: "You cannot sell the cow and sup the milk" or "You cannot sell the cow and drink the milk." Just like fishing to the Thais, dairy farming is an important occupation in Britain, and the metaphor would be immediately understood by the inhabitants of that country. It is evident that our forefathers very often relied on their own occupations and pastimes to capture the imagination of their compatriots. From fishing, to eating and farming, a slice of their life has been preserved for us to this day.

He that eats the hard shall eat the ripe.

Ot prieo wai kin wan

อดเปรี้ยวไว้กินหวาน

Forego the sour for the sweet.



Now and then we have two matching Thai and English proverbs that carry the same message, use the same metaphor, but express the idea from opposite angles.

The fruit imagery has been chosen for the Thai proverb. There are two terms here normally associated with fruit : *prieo* or sour and *wan* or sweet. *Ot* is a verb which has a lot of meanings to it: to forego, to abstain or to refrain from. It is used in a number of compound words; for example, *otyak* meaning to starve or literally to refrain from having any appetite; *otthon* meaning to endure; and *lua-ot* meaning to be unbearable. In the context of the proverb, we should forego the sour or unripe fruit and save it until it becomes sweet or ripens. In other words, we should save up for the future and be prepared for hard times ahead.

The seventeenth-century English proverb also chooses the fruit imagery to counsel us to be prepared for the future. But instead of recommending restraint, the proverb advises us to eat what fruit there is, even if it is unripe or hard. By enduring hardships, symbolised here by the unripe fruit, we should reap the fruit of our labour eventually in the form of the ripe fruit.

Despite the opposite viewpoints, both proverbs arrive at the same end. They teach us to endure immediate hardships for the sake of a secure future. Whether or not we choose to eat the sour or hard fruit, we are practising self-denial. In the Thai proverb, we learn to be patient and to save up. In the English proverb, we have to work hard until our labour pays off.

This type of counsel is in direct contrast with a host of other opportunistic proverbs, represented by the thai proverb: *"Nam khun hai rip tak"* or "When the water rises, hurry to collect some,"* and the English proverbs: "Make hay while the sun shines," and "Strike while the iron is hot." In actual practice, both schools of thought are equally handy for a quick quotation to justify whichever course of action already taken often by the same person.

* See also pp. 81, 102-103.

Familiarity breeds contempt.

Len kap ma ma lia pak

เล่นกับหมาหมาเลียปาก

If you play with a dog,
the dog will lick your mouth;

Len kap sak sak ti hua

เล่นกับสากสากตีหัว

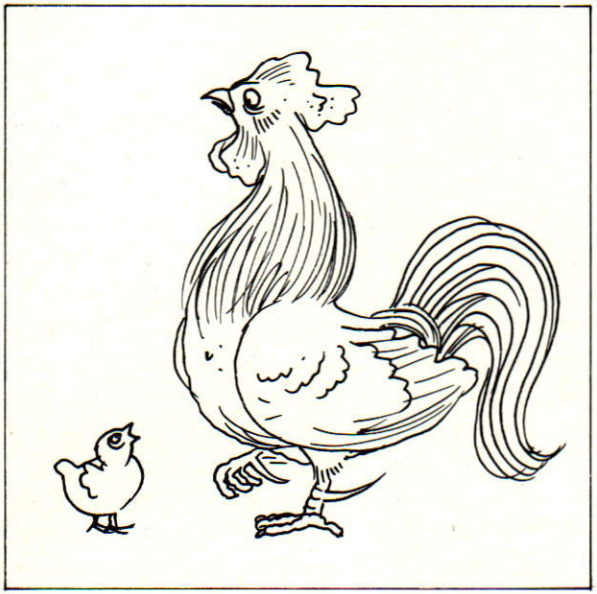
If you play with a pestle,
the pestle will hit your head.

The Thai proverb is in the form of a couplet whereas its English equivalent is rendered in a terse statement. The couplet relies on a double metaphor, taken from a homely setting. The key word here is *len* or to play and *len kap* simply means to play with, *kap* being a preposition. To play in this context should be taken in the sense of play or fool around with first a dog or *ma,* then a pestle or *sak.** Both objects are not highly esteemed by the Thais, and are often used in a derogatory fashion. This is evident by the fact that both terms have their equivalents in polite usage: *sunak* for dog and *mai ti phrik* for pestle. Therefore, if you play around with them, you are bound to demean yourself in the process. The dog will *lia pak* or lick your mouth, a loving gesture perhaps in the eyes of dog-lovers, but decidedly not a desirable one in the eyes of the hierarchy-conscious Thais who normally regard the dog as a lowly animal.

The meaning of the second line of the couplet is rather more obscure than that of the first line. Chosen to rhyme with *pak* in the first line, *sak* or a pestle is an indispensable cooking utensil in a Thai kitchen where chili paste or *nam phrik* is a favourite condiment. Nevertheless, the object is often used as a rude term, quite possibly because of its shape. Its derogatory meaning is further accentuated by being juxtaposed with *hua* or head, the most esteemed part of the human body according to the Thai tradition. If you mess around with a pestle, this lowly object may *ti hua* or hit the most respected part of your body. The message carried by these lively phrased lines is a warning against acting in a familiar or friendly fashion with people who are lower than you in terms of age or status, since you are likely to be insulted by them once they think they know you well enough.

The English proverb has a classical origin and a long history in English literature. It is also a word of warning against being too friendly with undeserving people. At least this was its accepted meaning right up to the sixteenth century. Chaucer, the great fourteenth-century English poet put it slightly differently: "Men seyn that 'overgreet hoomlynesse engendreth dispreisynge,' " which could be rendered in modern English as "Excessive familiarity gives rise to insults." This meaning is closer to the Thai proverb than another current interpretation of the English proverb which is viewed from the opposite standpoint. That is if you know someone well, you may lose your respect for that person. According to this interpretation, we are the one who will show our contempt or disrespect towards the other person, or the dog that will lick this other person's mouth.

* See also pp.123,133

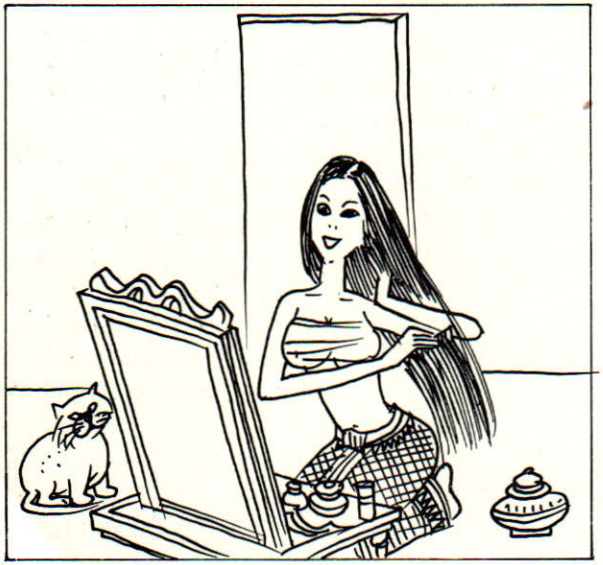


Fine feathers make fine birds.

Kai ngam phro khon

ไก่งามเพราะขน

A chicken is beautiful
because of its feathers;



Khon ngam phro taeng

คนงามเพราะแต่ง

People are beautiful
because they are dressed up.

This pair of proverbs may be grouped under the same category as those which rely on identical imagery. Instead of a single metaphor, the Thai proverb makes use of two, one for each line of the couplet, to convey the message. The first metaphor — that of a chicken or *kai* and its feathers or *khon* — immediately reminds us of the English proverb since a chicken is very close to a bird and both rely on their plumage for their beauty. The second metaphor merely repeats the same idea to drive home its point. *Khon* means either human beings or people without specifying their gender. The word *taeng* poses some problem because it can mean a number of things, such as to decorate, to make-up and to dress oneself as in *taeng tua*. Actually, one is tempted to interprete the metaphor as that of a finely dressed and beautifully made-up woman, since it is inappropriate in everyday usage of the Thai language to qualify a man with the adjective *ngam* or beautiful. The couplet is linked by a repetition of the phrase *ngam phro* or "beautiful because" in both lines and by the clever use of an external rhyme—*khon* and *Khon*—the two words are essentially distinguishable only by their different tones.

The English proverb is also very cleverly phrased. The word "fine" appears twice. Its position is symmetrical and the whole effect is enhanced by an alliteration — fine and feathers. The same message is conveyed by the English proverb as by the Thai one: external appearance counts a great deal since your beauty depends upon it. In fact the Thai proverb goes one step further and decidedly extols art at the expense of nature. You are nothing without your clothes and your make-up. The proverb is sometimes used in Thai as an excuse to be overdressed or heavily bejewelled. On certain occasions, we use it to express our surprise at the unexpected transformation of a plain Jane into a ravishing beauty through her finery.

As they stand, the proverbs may or may not meet with your approval depending on individual beliefs. After all, it is arguable that natural beauty and your innate qualities are much more desirable for the simple reason that they last longer and cannot be taken away from you.

Flies are easier caught with honey
than with vinegar.

Nam ron pla pen

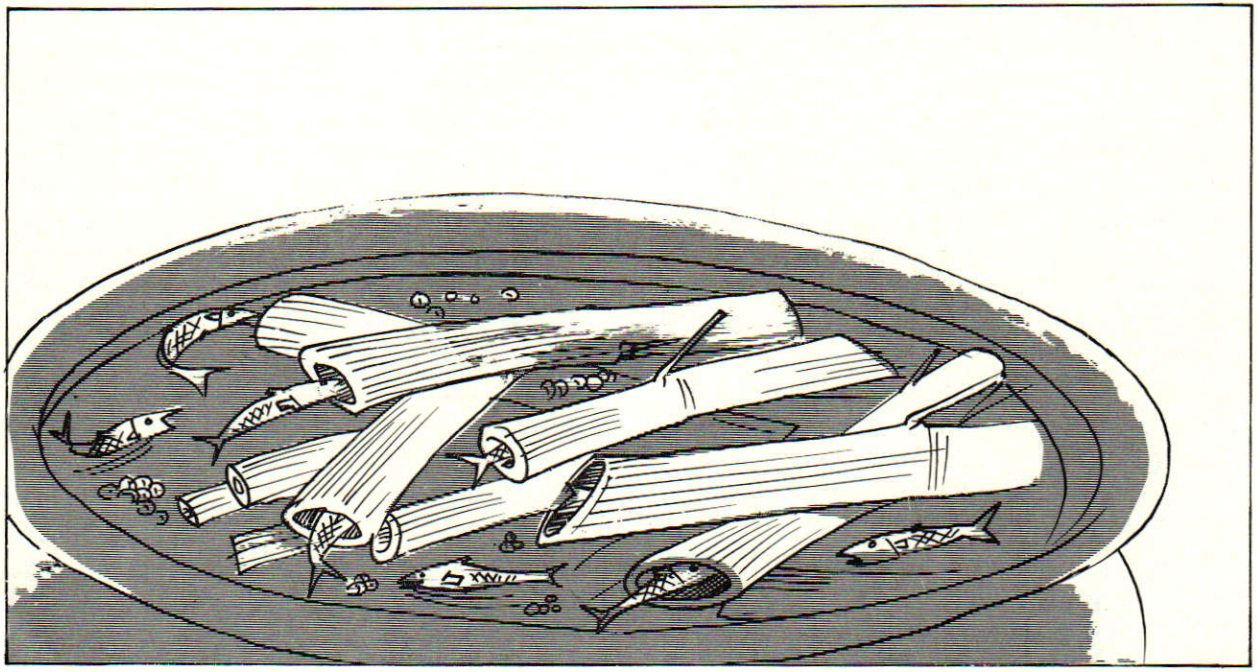
น้ำร้อนปลาเป็น

In hot water the fish lives;

Nam yen pla tai

น้ำเย็นปลาตาย

In cold water the fish dies.



The key word in the Thai couplet is *pla* or fish. The rest of the proverb is made up of antonyms which are arranged in such a way that they are juxtaposed to one another, both in position and in meaning. Both lines of the proverb start with *nam* or water: *nam ron* or hot water in the first line and *nam yen* or cold water in the second line. At the end of each line we have two verbs describing the fish's action: *pen* or to live and *tai* or to die. The two lines are further linked with an external rhyme: *pen* and *yen*.

To fully understand this seemingly contradictory proverb, we have to appreciate the way some people liked to cook their fish soup in this country. Apparently, there was a soup the main ingredients of which were the fry of the freshwater fish mullet or *pla chon* and the chopped up stems of *phak bung,* a freshwater vegetable, which tastes somewhat like the watercress. The idea is to stuff the hollow stems of the vegetable with the fish fry. So the stems are chopped up in such a way that they are closed at one end. The fry are put in a pan of cold water which is slowly heated up. While the water is getting hotter the fry will seek shelter in the cooler stems and end up being trapped in there. These stuffed stems were regarded as delicacies and the soup was once relished by the gourmets of bygone days. Obviously if the fry are poured straight into hot water, they will probably try to escape by jumping out of the pan, or at any rate the stems will not be stuffed properly. By using cold water to begin with, the fish fry will feel at ease and eventually trap themselves the way they are expected to.

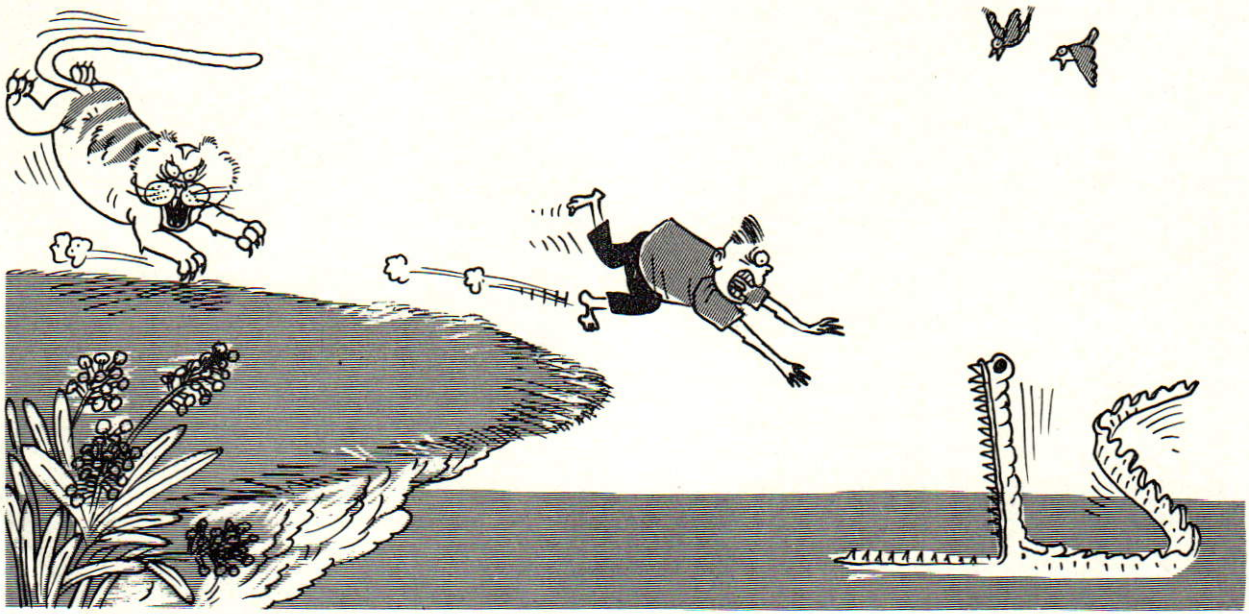
The proverb teaches us to be diplomatic and not to rush things with harsh action or words in our attempt to get someone to comply with our wish. Very often, we find that persuasion is more effective than force. The same idea is expressed in the English proverb: "Flies are easier caught with honey than with vinegar." We can't deny that the sweet taste of honey attracts flies in the way that vinegar cannot. The other English proverb spells out the message: "Kindness does more than harshness." It is up to us to choose between cold water, honey and kindness on the one hand and hot water, vinegar and harshness on the other.

Out of the frying-pan into the fire.

Ni sua pa chorake

หนีเสือปะจระเข้

Escape from the tiger; meet the crocodile.

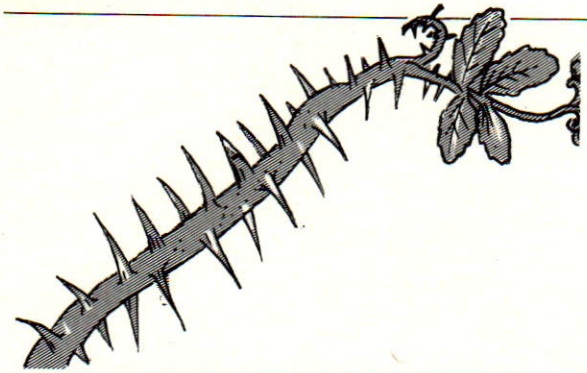


The Thai proverb's use of imagery immediately reminds us that Thailand was once full of jungles where wild animals roamed at will and represented a real hazard for hapless travellers or intrepid hunters. There are two verbs in the whole proverb: *ni* or to flee and *pa* or to meet, to run into. Even the choice of vocabulary in the verb *pa* dates the proverb to ancient times, since *pa* is now considered archaic and only appears in the compound *phop pa* which means to socialize or to get together.

Both the tiger, *sua,* and crocodile, *chorake,* are symbols of danger, the tiger being the fiercest and most dangerous animal on land, while the crocodile being its equivalent in water. So it is bad enough for the unlucky traveller to have just escaped from the tiger, the worse is still to come in his encounter with the crocodile. The meaning of this observation is straightforward: one misfortune may be compounded by another and there is practically nothing one can do about it except facing up to it.

Like the Thai proverb, the English equivalent does not offer any solution and is merely an observation. But quite unlike the Thai proverb, it makes use of totally homely imagery, based on a kitchen scene. Instead of a human being, the subject seems to be some small animal, quite likely a fish that could be cooked alive in a frying-pan and could jump out of it only to land in the raging fire in a stove beneath the frying-pan.

Both sayings are vivid enough, though the English one is decidedly more striking in its urgency and requires less imagination in picturing the hopelessness of the situation. The Thai proverb does need some explanation as far as Westerners are concerned since the tiger and the crocodile are no longer familiar animals, only to be encountered in the zoos or in jungle stories and films or in shops selling accessories made from their skins.

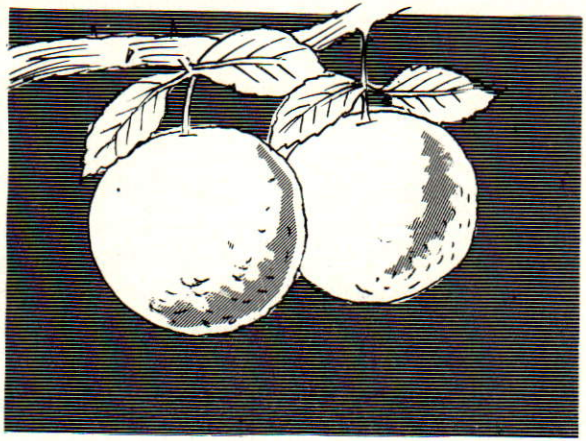


A genius is born, not made.

Nam laem mai mi khrai siam

หนามแหลมไม่มีใครเสี้ยม

A thorn is sharp without being sharpened;



Manao klom kliang mai mi khrai klung

มะนาวกลมเกลี้ยงไม่มีใครกลึง

A lime is round and smooth without being turned.

Chang phuak koet nai pa

ช้างเผือกเกิดในป่า

A white elephant is born in the wild.

We have heard often enough that proverbs and sayings reveal middle-of-the-road kind of wisdom, that it is rare that they actually take sides with an extreme position. But old sayings sometimes seem to refute this norm, possibly because they were coined long before the controversy started. Here we have a couple of Thai proverbs and one English equivalent that are in favour of nature as opposed to nurture.

The first Thai proverb is in the form of a couplet, and hinges on a double metaphor, one for each line. In the first line, we have *nam* or a thorn and in the second line, *manao* or a lime. Each adjective qualifying the subject of each line denotes its natural state: *laem* or sharp for a thorn and *klom* or round and *kliang* or smooth for a lime. The couplet is linked by the repetition of the phrase *mai mi khrai* which literally means "there is no one," but is being translated here in the passive voice. The two verbs that appear in the couplet represent man's efforts, *siam* or to sharpen, and *klung* or to turn.

What the proverb tries to tell us is this: nature does all the work; if you are intelligent, it is because of your genetic make-up. You owe absolutely nothing to nurture or the way you have been brought up, your environment and education. The metaphor of a sharp thorn has a further meaning to it since it implies an acute intellect, a sharp mind, whereas that of a round and smooth lime probably implies versatility, all-roundedness, and the ability to survive in adverse circumstances.

The second Thai proverb has a more egalitarian ring to it. But first we must get one point straight. A white elephant or *chang phuak* in the Thai language has nothing to do with the English meaning of it. Instead of being a troublesome and useless possession, the white elephant is highly treasured in Thailand and neighbouring countries. An oriental king's might is measured by the number of white elephants discovered and captured during his reign. By definition, white elephants can only be found in the wild. In other words, nature yields wonders, including such treasures as the white elephants. Because of this proverb, the white elephant has also come to mean somebody who manages to distinguish himself because of his superior intellect and abilities despite his upcountry background or even lowly origin. Once you are born a genius, you will prove yourself as such no matter where you are born. Therefore, despite its egalitarian connotation, the saying still advocates nature at the expense of nurture.

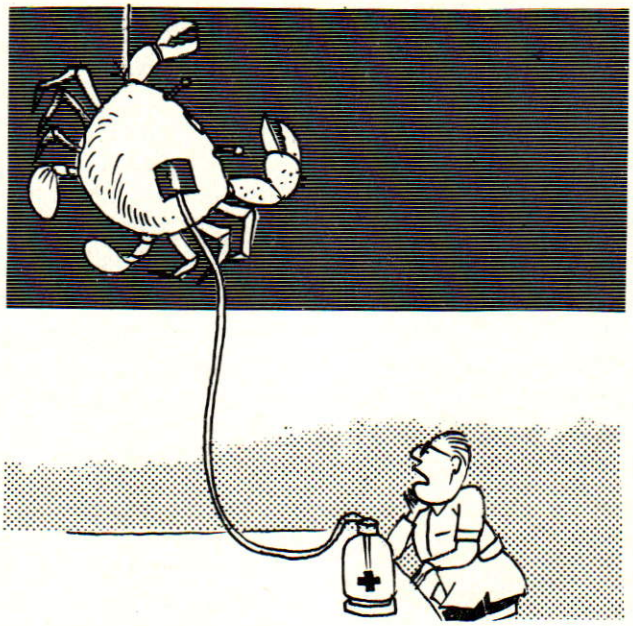
The English adage : "A genius is born, not made" is unequivocally on the side of nature. Of course, all liberal thinkers and reformers will never accept this adage as truth. For once, we can tell whether we are conservative or liberal from our agreement or disagreement with these old proverbs.

To get (wring) blood (water, milk) from a stone.

Rit luat kap pu

รีดเลือดกับปู

To squeeze blood from a crab.



The key imagery used in both sayings is *luat* or blood. The Thai forefathers chose to *rit* or squeeze blood from *pu* or crab. This is because the crab has no red blood as such. It is an impossible task, therefore, to obtain any blood from a crab, no matter how hard you may try. The Thai saying is used in a rather special context. We know that the poor are by definition penniless, so it is not only unkind and uncharitable to try to squeeze any money from them, but it is also most probably impossible. The saying is normally used as an observation of such attempts perpetrated by some wealthy persons. There is definitely a strong degree of disapproval of such action, hence sympathy for the poor implied in the saying. Incidentally, there is a less popular variant of this saying. Instead of *rit,* the saying sometimes starts with *ha* in *"Ha luat kap pu"* or "To look for blood in a crab." This version is less forceful than the other, a fact that probably explains why it is also less popular.

The English saying "To get blood from a stone" needs less explanation. We all know perfectly well that there can be no blood in a stone, so it is definitely impossible to try to obtain any from it. The saying is more general than the Thai adage and describes simply an attempt to seek something of a person that he does not have. This old saying dates back to the sixteenth century and over the years has acquired a number of alternatives. Instead of "to get," we can say "to wring", and instead of blood, we can say "water" or "milk." Even the stone can be replaced by a flint in some variants. Of course, we find the verb "to wring" very close to *rit* or "to squeeze", but the English people characteristically prefer the less dramatic "to get". Come to think of it, our crab is very much like a living stone, because of its hard, stone-like shell.

All is not gold that glitters.

Khang nok khrukhra khang nai tatingnong

ข้างนอกขรุขระข้างในตึ๊ดติ๋งโหน่ง

The exterior is rough, the interior is smooth;

Khang nok suksai khang nai pen phrong

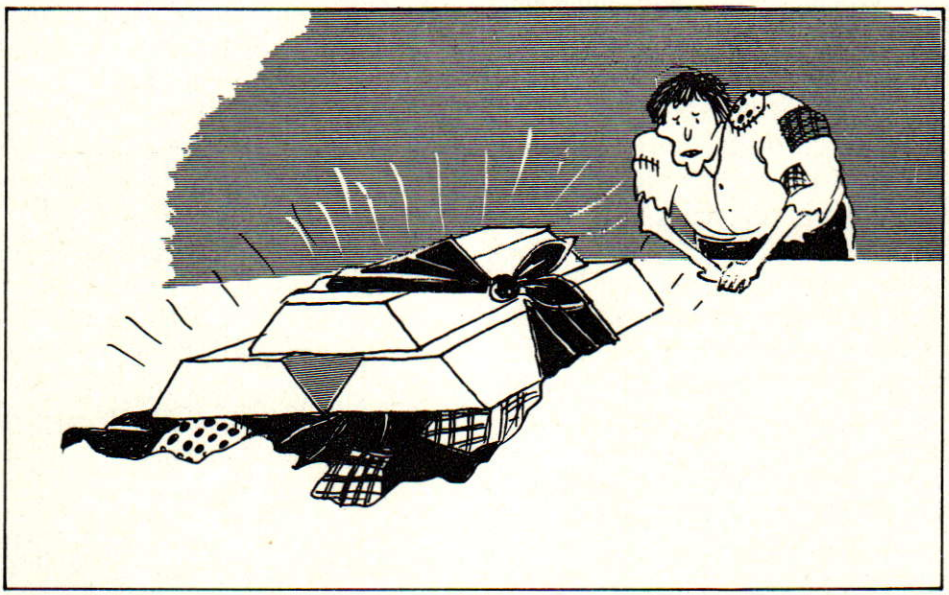
ข้างนอกสุกใสข้างในเป็นโพรง

The exterior glitters, the interior is hollow.

Phakhiriu ho thong

ผ้าขี้ริ้วห่อทอง

The rag that wraps up gold.



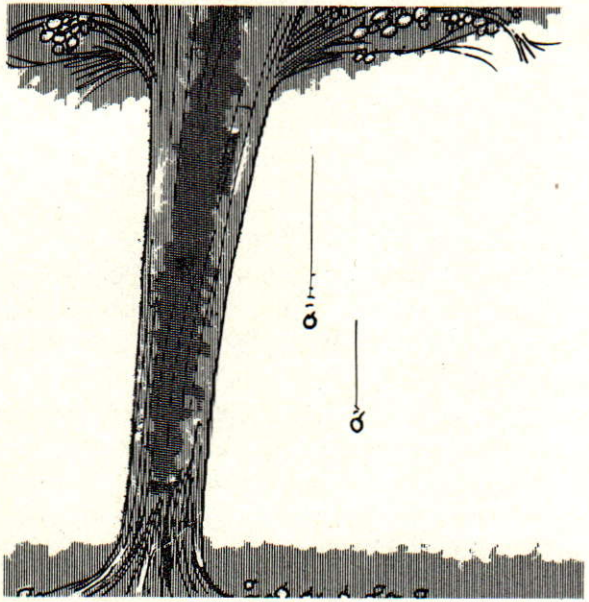
This group of Thai and English proverbs rely on the same key metaphor, while differ in their details. The first Thai proverb is a couplet, both lines of which contain two compound nouns which are the opposite of each other, both in meaning and in position: *khang nok* and *khang nai* or the exterior and the interior. Since the second line of the proverb is often quoted instead of the whole couplet, we shall look at it first.

The exterior is *suksai,* a compound word that is used to describe something which shines or glitters, such as gold. Even now in everyday usage, the word *suk* is preferred to all others when one talks about gold ornaments which have a high percentage of the pure metal, like in *thong suk,* a phrase which incidentally was a popular name in the past and still is in upcountry areas. So what we have here is a warning against external appearance which may be deceptive.

In the first line of the proverb, the exterior is *khrukhra* or rough, while the interior is *tatingnong*. This adjective is onomatopoeic, representing a sound that comes from tapping a smooth metal surface, such as gold. Since the word is rather unusual in any other context, we suspect that it is put there at the end of the line to rhyme with *phrong* at the end of the second line.

This idea of deceptive appearance as expressed in the first line of the couplet — the rough may conceal the smooth — is nicely captured in another Thai saying, again involving gold: *"Phakhiriu ho thong"* or "The rag that wraps up gold." The saying is used very often to refer to very rich people whose appearance resembles that of a pauper. The gold metaphor is consistent throughout, whether straightforwardly used as in this other saying, or implicit in the couplet through the sound *tatingnong* or the colour *suk*. It is this metaphor which the English proverb also relies on: "All is not gold that glitters."

Like in the Thai proverb, we are being warned not to take the external appearance for the essence of an object or a person. The opposite may be true and it may be too late before we find that out. What we should do is to defer our judgment on a person until we are in a better position to do so. And when? Until we know that person inside out of course.

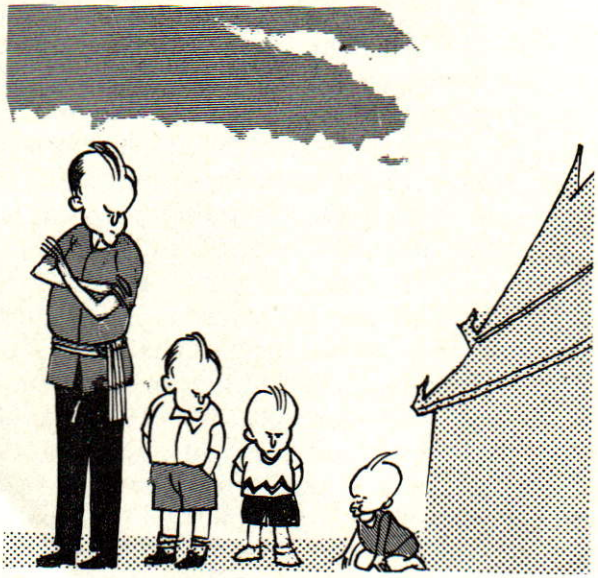


Goose and gander and goslings,
are three sounds but one thing.

Luk mai yom lon mai klai ton

ลูกไม้ย่อมหล่นไม่ไกลต้น

A fruit naturally drops not far from the tree.



Chua mai thing thaeo

เชื้อไม่ทิ้งแถว

A descendant does not leave his lineage.

It is remarkable how folk wisdom expressed in proverbs generations ago has now proved to be scientific truth. This group of proverbs states a proposition that present-day geneticists are busily working on. Despite their general hypothesis, there seems to be two schools of thought both in the Thai proverbs and their English equivalents. In the first group, we have proverbs which say

that children take after their parents while in the second group that a child takes after the parent of its own sex.

There are at least two Thai proverbs and a matching English one which fall under the first school of thought. The first Thai proverb uses a simple metaphor to capture the idea. *Luk mai* is an archaic term for *phonlamai* or fruit and *ton* is short for *ton mai* or a tree. *Lon* means to drop or to fall on the ground, qualified here by the adverb *yom* which is closest in meaning to "naturally" in English. *Mai klai* is not far, a common expression indeed when we talk about directions. So a fruit would normally drop off in the vicinity of the tree which bears it. If you want to identify which kind it is, all you have to do is to look at the tree nearby. In other words, a child will be like its parents and will exhibit all of the parents' characteristics.

The other Thai proverb *"Chua mai thing thaeo"* is more obscure and has a slightly different meaning. *Chua* is a ubiquitous term for an agent that propagates, from yeast to germs and even seeds. In this context, *chua* means a descendant, a scion, more like the Thai word *chua khai*. *Thaeo* normally means a line, a row, and should be interpreted as lineage in this context. Therefore, a descendant does not normally step out of line and still exhibits certain talents or characteristics of his parents or ancestors. The proverb is used more in the sense of a compliment or in admiration, particularly when one's offspring becomes as famous as the parents.

The English proverb, "Goose and gander and gosling, are three sounds but one thing," is probably the closest in meaning to the two Thai proverbs. The baby in this group resembles its parents so much that one thinks of them as a unit.

The hypothesis of this first category of proverbs is rather indisputable. What we know about genes and chromosomes seems to confirm what our forefathers were saying all along. Children will inherit certain traits from both parents, and if their personalities and characters may be moulded by upbringing and other environmental influences, the physical likenesses will always be there. The second category of proverbs, which insists that a child will take after the parent of its own sex, does not have the same scientific back-up. This group of proverbs will be treated separately under "Like mother, like daughter."*

* See also pp. 90-91

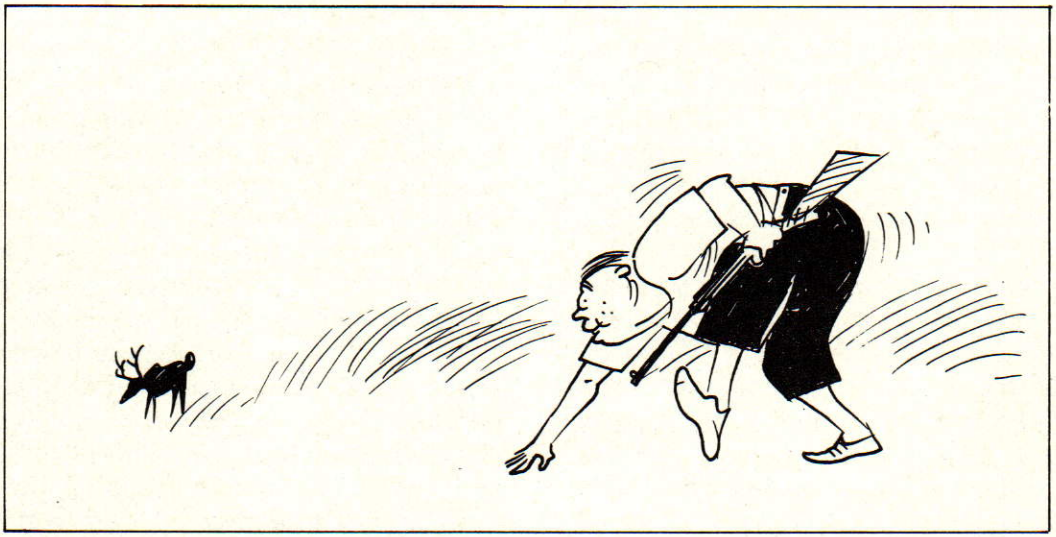
Haste makes waste.

Cha pen kan / Nan pen khun

ช้าเป็นการ นานเป็นคุณ

Slowness is achievement;

A long time is an advantage.



We have noted before that proverbs tend to expound popular wisdom and steer clear of all extremes. A lot of them, for example, teach us to be careful and not to rush things.

The Thai couplet extols the virtue of slowness instead of condemning haste. The two lines are linked together by an external rhyme — *kan / nan*. Both sentences start with words having practically the same meaning: *cha* means slow and *nan* means a long time. Quite often, the two words are used together as a compound *chanan* meaning a long time. An additional link is provided by the repetition of the word *pen* or to be in both sentences. In the first sentence, slowness is achievement or *kan* and in the second sentence, a long time is an advantage or *khun*. In other words, if you take your time, you will achieve what you set out to do. This proverb may be expressed differently in Thai: *"Cha cha dai phra lem ngam,"* or "Slowly, slowly you will get a fine knife," A proverb based on the craft of a blacksmith who should spend some time working over the knife he is making.*

The English proverb: "Haste makes waste" was first recorded by the English poet Chaucer in the late fourteenth century in a totally different version: "In wikked haste is no profit." In fact, there are several variants of this proverb. There is a full-length version that goes: "Haste makes waste, and waste makes want, and want makes strife between the goodman and his wife." Or a shorter version: "The more haste, the less (worse) speed," to which may be added the rest "quoth the tailor to his long thread." Other proverbs on the same idea include: "Great haste makes great waste;" "Make haste slowly;" and "No haste but good speed." These are only a few among a host of similar adages.

This homely advice against speed may seem a little out-of-date nowadays when everything must be executed at great speeds. The computer is helping us to retrieve information at the push of a button while the superpowers are competing in an arms race that may destroy the whole world for us also at the push of a button. Maybe it's time to listen to all these old proverbs again before it is too late.

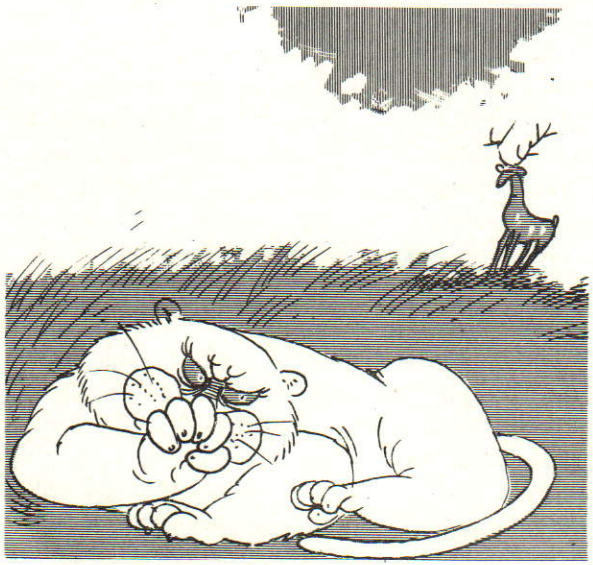
* See also pp. 138-139

To hide one's light under a bushel.

Khom nai fak

คมในฝัก

To be sharp inside the scabbard.



Sua son lep

เสือซ่อนเล็บ

The tiger hiding its claws.

A great number of Thai proverbs and sayings tend to rely on imagery that bears witness to the fact that our forefathers were either peace-loving farmers or hard-working hunters or craftsmen. Here we have a saying which reflects another aspect of our ancestors' life-style—that of a warrior who was entirely at home with a sword.

The first Thai saying could only have been coined by a fighter and said to another who was equally well versed in the art of fencing. It refers to his sword resting inside its scabbard. A good fighter takes care of his sword since his life depends on its sharpness. However, in this case its sharpness is not tested and is more or less hidden inside the scabbard. Such a sharp sword is compared to a keen intellect or a wealth of knowledge whose owner chooses not to disclose to the outside world when the moment is not ripe. We use the saying to refer to a person who may not appear at all intelligent or knowledgeable but who actually is. His abilities are only revealed on very rare occasions through his action or statement when he feels that it is appropriate to do so.

The English saying comes from a passage in the Bible, comparing wisdom or knowledge to light, hidden away under a measuring device or bushel. Its meaning is slightly different from the Thai adage in that it refers to someone who is modest about his abilities and good qualities. The person in the English saying refuses to show off out of modesty whereas the person in the Thai saying waits for the right moment and the right audience to do just that. Nevertheless, there is one common feature — the idea of hiding one's abilities and not revealing them to the public.

The same notion appears in another Thai saying, although this one has a mixed connotation both good and bad. We say *"Sua son lep"* or "The tiger hiding its claws" when we talk about someone who dissimulates his qualities — good or bad. Our forefathers must have been hunting enough tigers to be wary of them even when they hide their claws and look harmless.

There is no denying that we do feel a certain degree of admiration for a person with such behaviour, because either we hardly ever come across him or, more likely, we wish other people will be charitable enough to give us the benefit of the doubt when we remain silent on certain occasions.

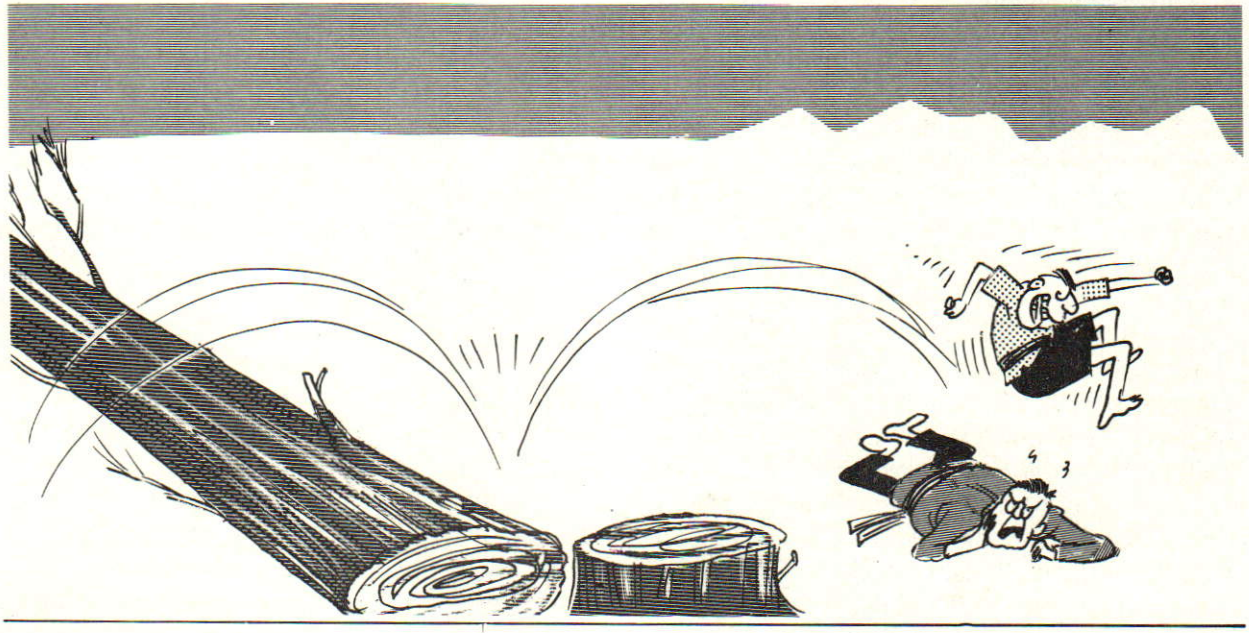
Don't hit a man when he is down.

Mai lom kham dai/Khon lom ya kham

ไม้ล้มข้ามได้ คนล้มอย่าข้าม

You may step over a fallen tree;

Don't step over a fallen man.



The Thai proverb expresses its message in two short sentences, which form a rather loose kind of couplet. Two key words are repeated to provide a link for the couplet: *lom* and *kham*. *Lom* is a verb, meaning to

fall, used here in its past participle form as an adjective qualifying first *mai* or a tree, then *khon* or man. Both *mai lom* and *khon lom* are placed at the beginning of the sentence, a position highlighting the significance of the words which are in fact direct objects of the verb *kham* or to step over, to cross. *Kham dai* means one may step over; *dai* when placed after the main verb denotes an invitation or a permission. *Ya kham* means don't step over; *Ya* denotes an Imperative Mood in the negative. Both key words, *lom* and *kham* are used first in their literal sense, followed by their figurative sense in the second sentence. A fallen tree may indeed be crossed over literally, but to step over a fallen man is altogether a different proposition. A fallen man is not just simply someone who has tripped over something and has fallen over on his face. The expression implies that the person is down and out, whose fortune is at a low ebb. Therefore, to step over that unfortunate person means to belittle, to denigrate, or to show contempt for the man. Quite often, it means to take advantage of or even to actively harm that defenceless person. What the proverb really says is: "You must respect the dignity of man as you are also a human being. It goes against human decency to harm a defenceless person."

At this level of interpretation, the English equivalent: "Don't hit a man when he is down" perfectly carries the same idea. Incidentally, the English proverb is sometimes quoted differently, starting with an infinitive: "To hit (kick) a man when he is down." Since the proverb made its first appearance in the sixteenth century, a variety of verbs has been used — from strike, beat to trample. Its interpretation has been consistently associated with the honour of manhood, of the winner against the loser. The Thai proverb, on the other hand, goes a little further beyond this manly behaviour interpretation. It may be taken as a warning against possible reprisal from that defenceless person once he has recovered his strength. A fallen tree is perfectly harmless and you may do what you wish with it, but a fallen person may rise again. Then, and only then, you will feel the full force of his strength which may be more than you can handle.

By hook or by crook.

Mai dai duai le ko ao duai kon

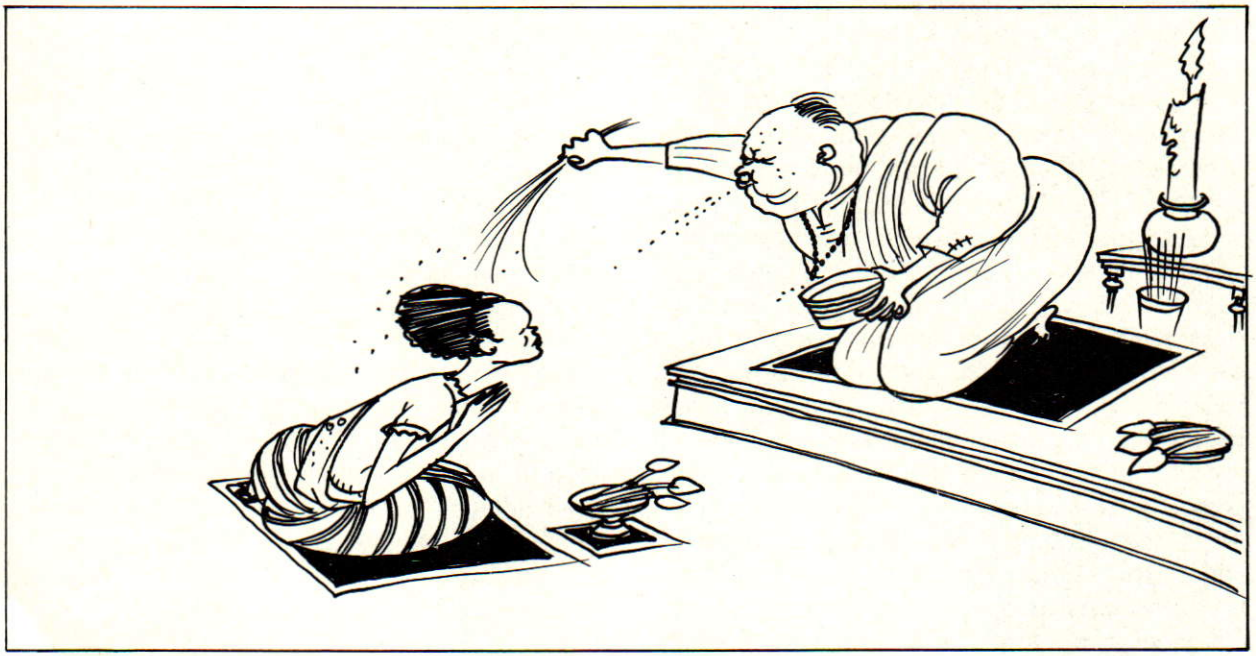
ไม่ได้ด้วยเล่ห์ก็เอาด้วยกล

If you can't get it by trickery, use ruse;

Mai dai duai mon ko ao duai khatha

ไม่ได้ด้วยมนต์ก็เอาด้วยคาถา

If you can't get it by a prayer, use a spell.



Sometimes a short English proverb can be matched by a lengthy one in Thai, particularly if the Thai proverb is in the form of a couplet such as this one. The couplet relies a great deal on repetition. There are in fact only two expressions being repeated twice, both lines starting with the expression *mai dai duai* or "cannot get by" and using the expression *ko ao duai* or "then get by" to suggest the alternative. There are four choices being suggested in both lines, each line containing similar choices. In the first line, we have *le* and *kon* which are often used as a compound meaning trickery, ruse, a strategem, an artifice. In the second line, the choices are more exotic because of a greater degree of difficulty involved. We have *mon* and *khatha,* which taken together mean spell, magic or incantation. There is a slight difference between the two words here which is worth pointing out. *Mon* comes from Sanskrit *mantra* or Vedic hymn. It can also mean Hindu or Buddhist devotional incantation. In Thai we say *suatmon* for to prayer and *paomon* for to chant a spell. Now the word *khatha* has its origin in both Pali and Sanskrit. It means in general a composition in verse, and in particular a special stanza of four lines. In Thai *khatha* has somewhat changed its meaning and is used in the sense of a spell or magic. The two lines of the couplet are linked by an external rhyme: *kon/mon* which serves to reinforce the repetition of the two expressions.

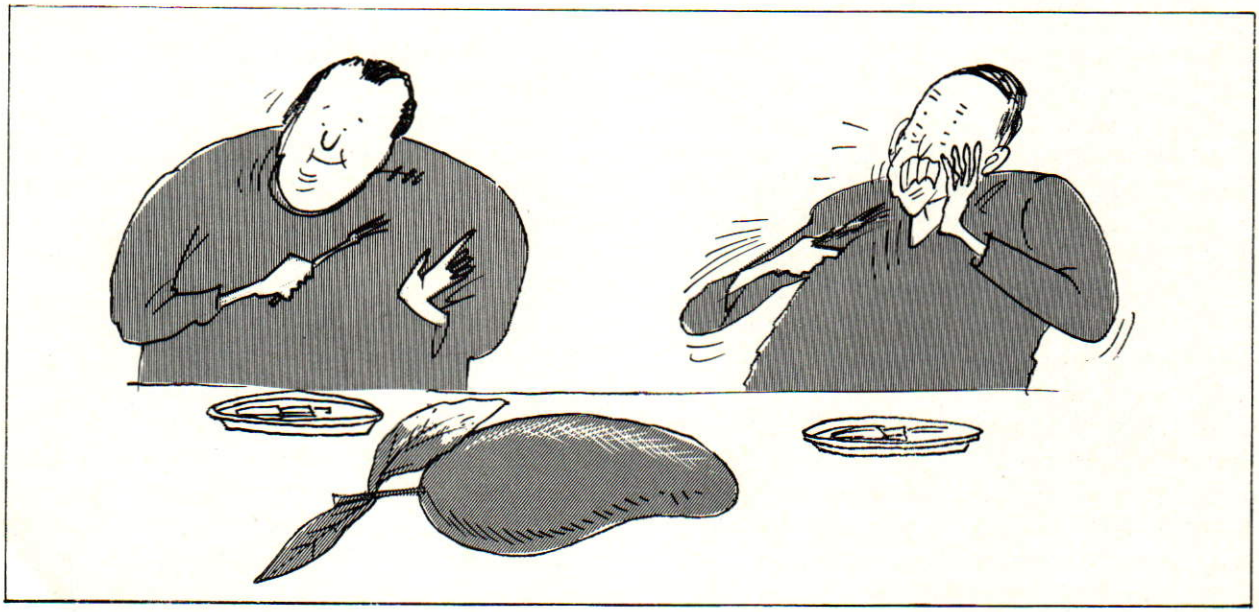
The message of the saying is relatively simple when compared with its vocabulary. It is an observation of efforts being made to obtain whatever is desired by fair or foul means. If you fail with all your tricks, try magic because it might work. In English, one simply says to do something "by hook or by crook" to describe this kind of efforts. This fourteenth-century saying relies perhaps on the imagery of a shepherd; if he can't get hold of his sheep by a hook, then he can use his staff or a crook to help him get it, since it also has a rounded hook at one end. On the other hand, a crook also means a dishonest person or a bend, so if you can't get something by a straight means or by hook, try the devious one or by crook.

He has honey in the mouth
and a razor at the girdle.

Pak wan kon prieo

ปากหวานก้นเปรี้ยว

Sweet mouth, sour bottom.



In the world of fundamental truth of proverbs and sayings, outright hypocrisy has always been roundly condemned. There are at least two pairs of Thai and English proverbs which frown upon beguiling words uttered by a person who harbours the darkest thoughts.

The first pair which we shall look at rely on more or less the same key metaphor in the first part of both proverbs — to have a sweet mouth or honey in the mouth. The expression *pak wan* or sweet mouth is immediately understood in either language. What is rather puzzling in the Thai proverb is the second half: *kon prieo* or sour bottom. The most accepted explanation of this seemingly ambiguous metaphor concerns one of the most popular fruits in this part of the world — the mango, or *mamuang* in Thai. Any connoisseur of the mango can tell us that if the fruit has not ripened properly, only the top end where it is attached to the branch is sweet, the bottom and tapered end is invariably sour. Now we normally use the same words to describe the mango's top and bottom ends as those to describe the human head and bottom: *hua* or head for the top end and *kon* or bottom for the other end. Since the mango has no mouth, its sweet top is replaced by the mouth so that the metaphor can also apply to man. This simple substitution is quite effective, although it tends to confuse the uninitiated. A mango which is not sweet throughout is like a human being who talks sweetly and kindly but is deep down a caustic character. His sweet mouth hides the nasty side of his nature and perhaps his evil intentions.

The hypocrite is described in detail in this sixteenth-century proverb: "He has honey in the mouth and a razor at the girdle." If you have honey in the mouth, it means you talk mellifluously in the literal sense of the word. But if you also carry a razor at the girdle or the belt around your waist, obviously you are hiding your real intention of hurting the person to whom your sweet words are addressed.

A honey tongue, a heart of gall.

Pak prasai namchai chuat kho

ปากปราศรัยน้ำใจเชือดคอ

His mouth does the sweet talking
while his heart cuts your throat.

This pair of proverbs again describes the hypocrite whose false heart is hidden beneath sweet words. The contrast between the heart and the mouth in these proverbs is even more pronounced than that in the preceding pair.

There are two difficult words in the Thai saying which probably call for some explanation. *Prasai* has its origin in Sanskrit and has a number of meanings: respect, hospitality and kind disposition, and talking in a kind and friendly manner. The word has come to mean "making a speech" in modern usage, but obviously in the proverb it still keeps its original meaning of talking hospitably and kindly, in other words, talking sweetly. The other tricky word is *namchai,* a compound made up of *nam* or water and *chai* or the heart, the mind. When used with the verb "to have" as in *mi namchai,* it means sympathy, kindness and so on. Used on its own as in this proverb, *namchai* is merely descriptive and should be rendered by "the heart." What the heart does is rather gruesome: *chuat kho* literally means to cut the throat of someone. We are instantly reminded of the earlier English proverb: "He has honey in the mouth and a razor at the girdle." The razor in question was probably a cut-throat razor, in which case the heart's desire was simply represented concretely.

The English proverb "A honey tongue, a heart of gall," dates back to the fourteenth century. Again we find the same contrast between the mouth and the heart. Honey and gall represent contrasting tastes, sweet and bitter. Unlike the preceding Thai proverb *"Pak wan kon prieo",* or "Sweet mouth, sour bottom," the English proverb contrasts sweet with bitter and not with sour. At any rate, the two metaphors used in the English proverb have become classic to the extent that no one stops to think these days that gall is in fact the bitter bile juice produced by the liver, and everyone simply associates it with bitterness, and rancour.

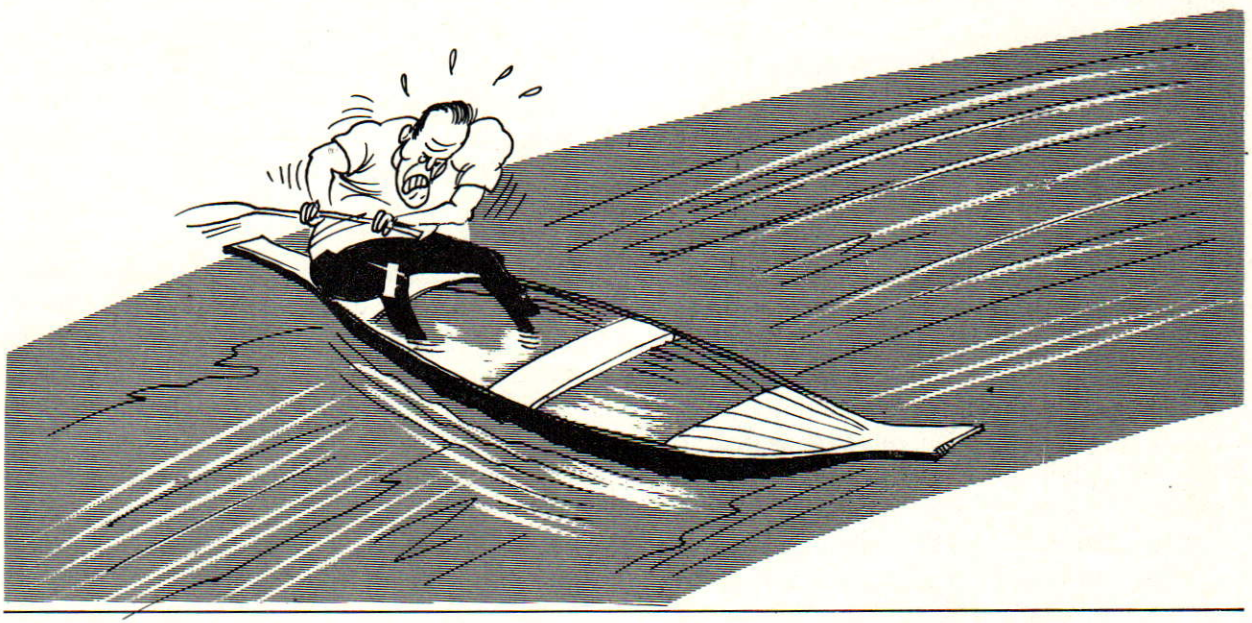
This group of Thai and English proverbs condemns false and beguiling words uttered by a hypocrite with evil intentions. We are warned against them in the process, both as their potential victim and perpetrator.

It is ill (evil) striving against the stream.

Nam chieo ya khwang rua

น้ำเชี่ยวอย่าขวางเรือ

When the current is strong, don't steer your boat across it.



The similarity of metaphors being used in both Thai and English proverbs here is rather striking. The fast-flowing stream and strong current have the same impact in the mind of our ancestors from the opposite sides of the globe.

The first part of the Thai proverb is relatively straightforward: *nam chieo* actually means strong current; *nam* which normally means water takes on a different meaning in this context. The second part of the proverb is more difficult to explain word by word. We are now familiar with the word *ya* meaning don't since it appears in most Thai proverbs. *Rua* is a general term for boat or vessel in Thai, whereas *khwang* when used as a verb means to obstruct, to bar, to block and so on, If taken literally, to *khwang rua* should mean to place the boat transversely. However, in this context, it probably means to obstruct the current by steering the side of the boat against it.

To the inhabitants of this country where waterways are still used as the most convenient and economical transportation network, the proverb rings true immediately. We know that a boat may easily capsize if we attempt to row it across the strong current in this manner. Likewise, it is futile or even dangerous to try to impede or obstruct a more powerful force. If you are a subordinate, it is against your own interest to argue with your superior or to disobey him.

There are at least two English proverbs that make use of the same metaphor to carry the same message: "It is ill (evil) striving against the stream," and "The stream stopped swells the higher." The second proverb has two other variants: "The current (tide) stopped swells the higher." In these two proverbs, the emphasis is shifted to the stream and unlike the Thai equivalent, the boat is left out. In the first proverb, one can be either swimming or rowing and in the second proverb, the action involves the current alone. The meaning of the second proverb is also slightly different: if you try to stop someone who is really determined, it is not only useless but you may even get the opposite result.

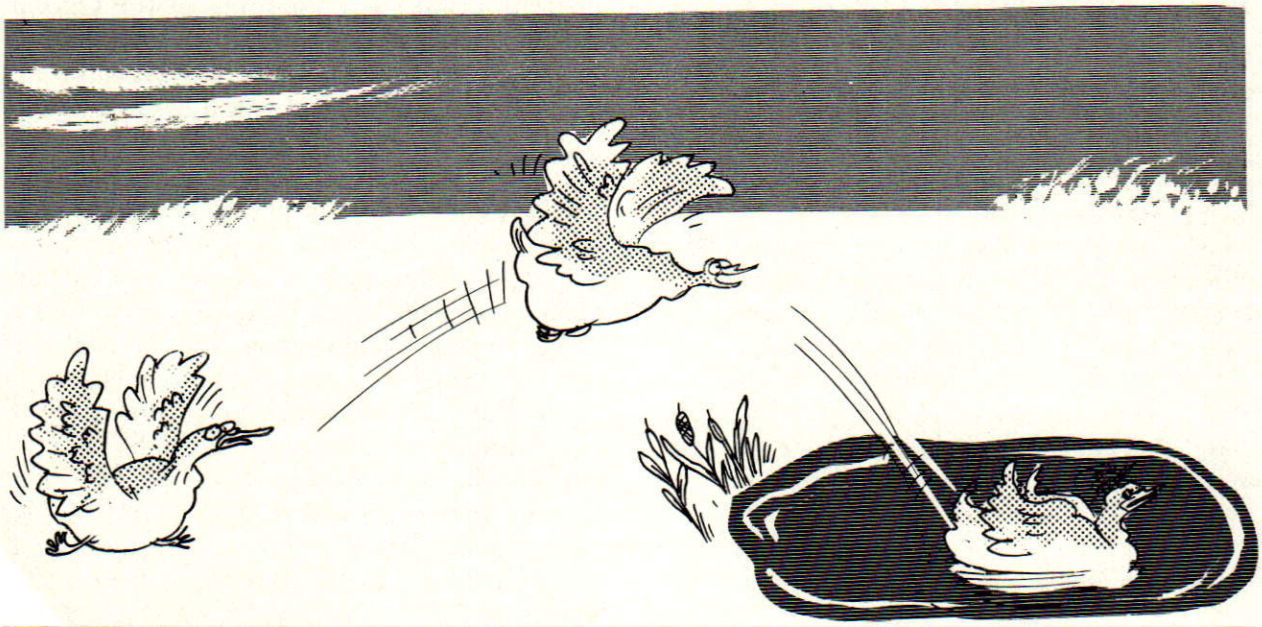
For this particular Thai proverb that recommends compromise and conciliation, there is another English proverb first recorded by Chaucer: "Oaks may fall when reeds stand the storm." Again, the imagery is borrowed straight from nature and the proverb makes sense without much explanation. But whether one should entirely agree with these proverbs is another matter. Sometimes one comes to a point when it is necessary to stick to one's principle and then one may find that it is not that easy to simply follow the current or bend like reeds under the storm.

Jack of all trades, and master of none.

Ru yang pet

รู้อย่างเป็ด

To know in the manner of a duck.



There is a Thai saying which is an observation on human behaviour and which may or may not be acceptable to some of us. Interestingly, our forefathers have picked a familiar farmyard animal — *pet* or the duck — to make their observation. Unlike European countries where ducks are found and hunted almost exclusively in the wild, Asian countries are the home of domestic ducks, raised for their eggs and meat. Thailand is no exception and farmers must have been keeping ducks here for so long that they found time to watch the animal's behaviour and cited it as a case in point. Now we all know that the duck is a fowl that can swim and fly. But it is unable to match a fish or a bird in either activity. In other words, the saying tries to tell us not to follow its example. There is no point in knowing how to do a lot of things but badly. The message of the saying is: it is better to be a specialist than a generalist.

The English saying that matches this one was first coined in the first half of the eighteenth century and has since been quite popular. We often hear it as an expression in "Jack of all trades" which means a person who can turn his hand to anything. The expression has somewhat lost the connotation of the original saying which clearly condemns superficial knowledge. Like the Thai saying, the English adage insists on mastery of a single skill, or a branch of knowledge. According to this school of thought, an in-depth knowledge of a subject is far more desirable than a global view of knowledge in general.

Now some of us may have heard of the Renaissance idea of a perfect gentleman. A character like Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, was highly praised by his contemporaries for being highly versatile. In those days it was not enough for a man to be a great scholar, he must be able to ride, shoot, dance and sail, as in Raleigh's case. All the accomplishments expected of an Elizabethan courtier seemed almost impossible to the modern mind. Yet we still admire such versatility however remote it may seem. Nowadays we have a lot of specialists about who find it very hard to become a Jack of all trades or to know a lot of things like the duck. But an expert is expected to know everything and to solve all problems — a feat quite beyond his training. So, perhaps it is high time we reversed the trend or learned to accept the specialist's limitations.

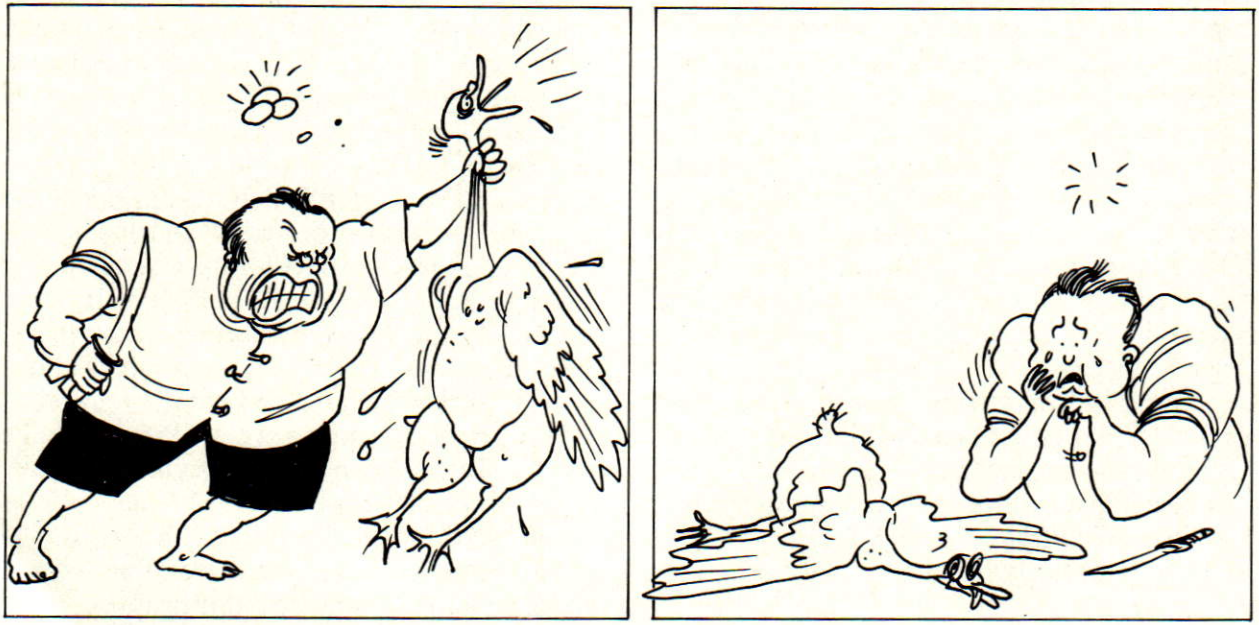
To kill the goose

that lays the golden eggs.

Lop mak lap hai

โลภมากลาภหาย

Excessive greed, lost windfall.



Thai proverbs are often remarkable for their pithiness. The condensed form somehow reinforces their didactic quality. This Thai proverb is a good example of such proverbs.

It consists of two phrases which are linked together by an alliteration and a symmetrical pattern. The first phrase, *lop mak,* starts with the consonant l, just like the second phrase, *lap hai.* Not only that, there are exactly two syllables in each phrase and the two middle syllables have the same dropping tone — *mak* and *lap.* The meaning of each word is also quite straightforward: *lop* means greed or avarice and *lop mak* means a lot of greed, excessive greed; *lap* is a windfall or an unexpected gain and *hai* is here used as a past participle of the verb to lose. In other words, if you are too greedy, your luck will run out.

The English proverb "Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs" dates back to the fifteenth century. It comes from an Aesop's tale which is equally well-known. The fable tells the story of a man who had a goose that laid a golden egg every day. After a while, he decided that this was not enough and wanting all the golden eggs at once, he killed the goose. But to his great disappointment, he found not a single golden egg in the goose's stomach and learned at the end that he had destroyed the source of his good fortune for nothing.

Both the Thai and English proverbs caution us not to be too grasping and to be contented with what we have. If we push our luck too far, we may end up with nothing like the man in the fable. The Thai proverb was originally the moral lesson given at the end of the same Aesop's tale, but somehow the moral remains as a proverb, while the English proverb in fact summarizes the plot of the fable in one sentence. This kind of middle-of-the-road wisdom may not appeal to some people who could always find other equally popular proverbs to contradict it. In Thai, we have for example *"Nam khun hai rip tak"* or "Collect water while the tide is high," while in English, we can always quote "Make hay while the sun shines" or "Strike while the iron is hot."* Faced with this dilemma, it is up to us to decide which course of action we should take. After all, a lucky streak or a windfall is always an isolated incident in one's life, so why not enjoy it while it lasts.

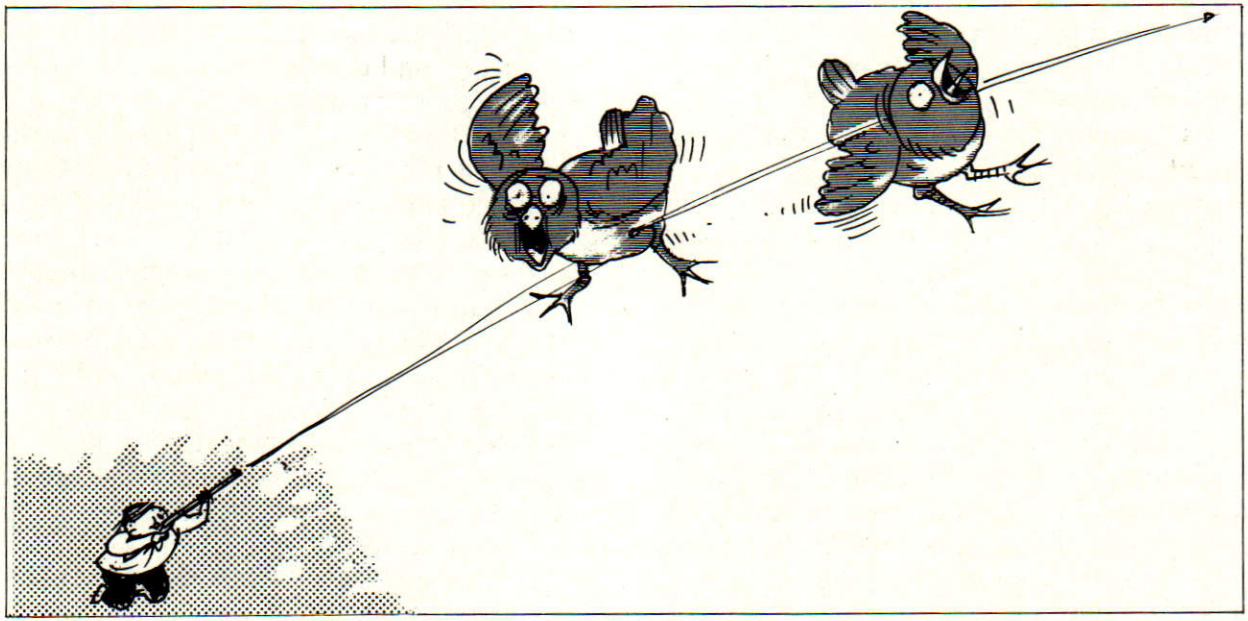
* See also pp. 47, 102-103.

To kill two birds with one stone (bolt, sling).

Ying thi dieo dai nok song tua

ยิงทีเดียวได้นกสองตัว

Firing one shot and obtaining two birds.



There are some Thai proverbs which are so close to their English equivalents that we suspect there might have been some cross-cultural borrowing. Since there is as yet so little research on the origin of each Thai proverb and it is highly unlikely that the English in those days knew anything about Thai culture, we would like to assume, rightly or wrongly, that certain Thai proverbs have been adapted from the English originals. After all, the English proverbs themselves are very often the direct translations of some Latin proverbs.

Take this Thai proverb which is practically a translation of the English equivalent as an example. Despite our translation, the proverb does not really specify the kind of weapon used to kill the birds. The verb *ying* is a general term for shooting and you can shoot with a gun or a bow or even a sling. So our first rendition of the proverb may be misleading after all, and if a sling were used, then the two birds would be killed with one stone, because you would then use it only once or *thi dieo*. *Dai* means to obtain or to get and *nok song tua* means two birds, *tua* being the so-called numerative noun for birds, taking its place after the number. So, instead of being direct like the English saying and its infinitive "to kill", the Thai version concentrates on the action of shooting and its consequence.

The English saying has other less well-known variants. You could say, for example "To kill two birds with one bolt" or "To kill two birds with one sling." And how about this seventeenth-century version "To kill two flies with one flap?" It has been established that the English saying made its first appearance in 1590, although there was a line from Ovid bearing the same message.

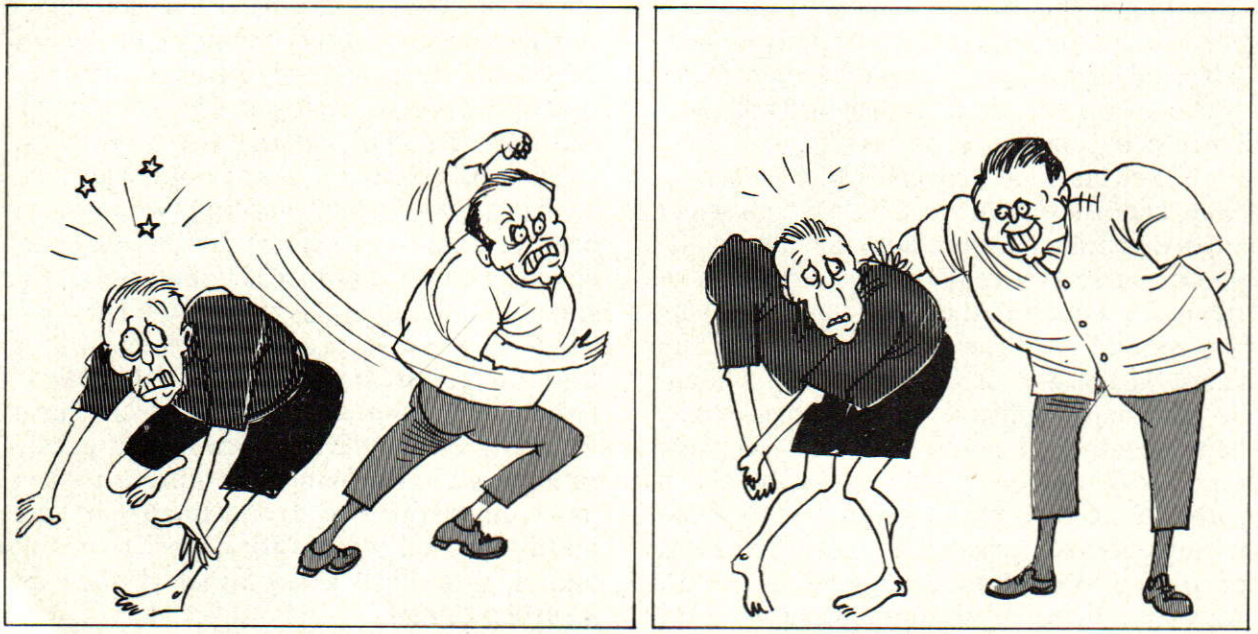
The idea of accomplishing two tasks by only one spurt of effort has a universal appeal, hence the immense popularity of the saying. The Thai saying avoids the verb "to kill" possibly because of the prevailing Buddhist culture but retains the "two birds" from the original. This shift of emphasis from the act of killing to the actual gain is rather ingenious. You must admit that it is much more appealing to contemplate in your mind two plump birds for dinner than two hapless little birds being knocked down by a ruthless killer.

A kiss after a kick.

Top hua laeo lup lang

ตบหัวแล้วลูบหลัง

Slapping the head, then stroking the back.



One of the characteristics of proverbs and sayings is the way they reveal, sometimes quite unassumingly, certain customs and beliefs of a people. Such is the case with this pair of Thai and English proverbs.

Taking a glance at the Thai saying, the uninitiated will probably fail to appreciate the import of the casual act of slapping someone on the head in this part of the world. We know, of course, how the Thais attach great importance to this organ of the body. According to custom, the head is the most respected part because it is there that the *khwan* or the protective and guiding spirit of a person resides. The greatest slight and injury one can show to another person is a slap or even a stroke on the head. The observance of this particular custom is universal and has other accompanying refinements; for example, a person of lower station, either in age or in rank, should not hold his head higher than that of another person of higher station. He should make his head appear lower either by bending his body while walking past the other person, or sitting lower, or even prostrating himself, depending on the rank of the respected person. Against this background, the innocent and harmless act of casually slapping someone on the head takes on another meaning. You will have inflicted upon him the greatest injury imaginable, and afterwards you will be trying to make up to him by stroking him gently and consolingly on the back.

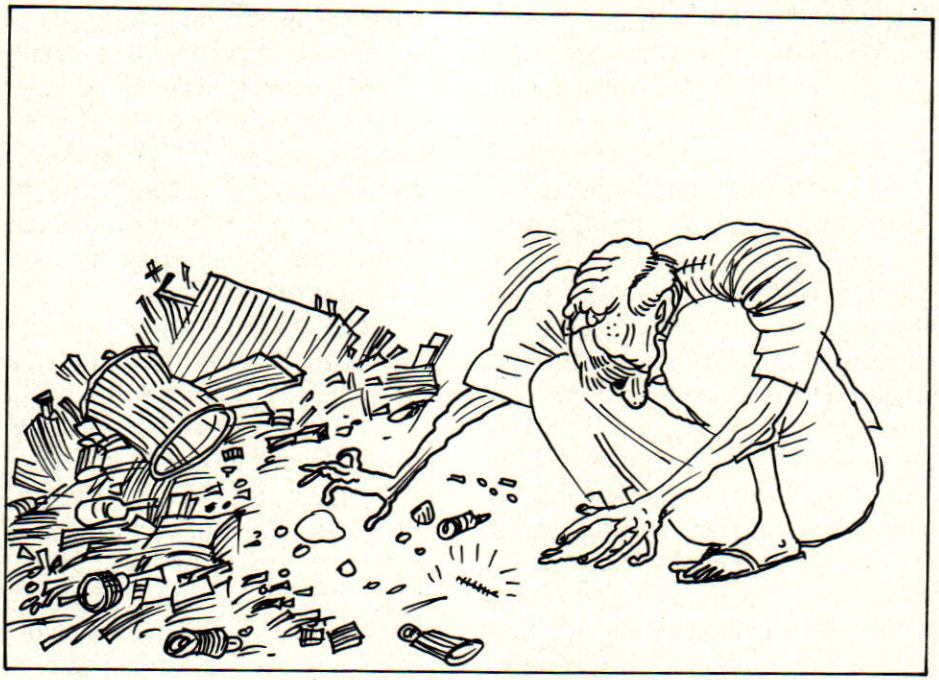
The English saying is much more straightforward. A kick is a real physical injury and its meaning is apparent to all. The choice of the word "kiss" in the saying is really quite clever. Not only because of its alliterative effect, but also because of its being the most affectionate act in the Western tradition. As for the message of these sayings, we must admit that it is not always wise to try to make up for our wrongdoings with such contrary acts. Often, the hurt is not easily forgotten or forgiven. Our best course of action is not to inflict the pain in the first place.

Let sleeping dogs lie.

Ya fun foi ha takhep

อย่าฟื้นฝอยหาตะเข็บ

Don't turn over the rubbish to look for a centipede.



The Thai proverb is unusually packed with archaic and somewhat obscure vocabulary, unlike its more straightforward English equivalent. Apart from *ya* or "don't" which rhymes with *ha* or "to look for", every other word in the proverb needs some explanation even to untutored native speakers. Starting with the verb *fun;* its current usage is rather different from that appearing in the proverb; for example, we use the verb *fun* intransitively for recovering or regaining consciousness or one's social position. There is a compound verb *funfu,* which in modern usage means to revive, to resuscitate. In the context of the proverb, *fun* means to turn over, or to disturb, in this case, a pile of rubbish, or *foi.* This noun *foi* is in fact the shortened version of the modern *munfoi* or rubbish, more commonly known as *khaya. Takhep* also poses some problem since not many of us know that it can also mean a tiny nonpoisonous centipede-like reptile and not just the seam of a garment. We have deliberately chosen the word centipede in our translation for lack of a better word to describe the animal in one concise term. In fact, centipede is *takhap* in Thai, and both *takhap* and *takhep* look very similar despite the difference in their size. In this proverb, the rubbish heap stands for the past and *takhep* or the centipede-like creature for troubles or misdeeds. The proverb explicitly warns us against reviving old troubles which have been buried deep in the past, since they may again poison our lives unnecessarily.

The English equivalent, "Let sleeping dogs lie," recommends much the same course of action. If you wake up sleeping dogs, they may attack you since they have been disturbed. Dogs here represent troubles which have been put to rest or sleeping. This English proverb dates back to the fourteenth-century poet, Chaucer, who was on record as using it first in "Troilus". This is how Chaucer put it: "It is nought good a slepyng hound to wake." A hound is a hunting dog and one can easily guess how the proverb has evolved over the centuries. There is one other English proverb which is often used as a variant of this proverb: "Wake not a sleeping lion." Again the lion and its reputed might suggest the potential trouble that will ensue if you revive the past misdeeds.

Like cures like.

Nam yok ao nam bong

หนามยอกเอาหนามบ่ง

If a thorn pricks you, use
a thorn to draw it out.

Of the two proverbs, the Thai one is much more picturesque than its English equivalent on account of its vivid metaphor. The key word here is *nam* or a thorn. When a thorn pricks you, we now say *nam tam* rather than *nam yok, yok* being an archaic term and nowadays used with other terms to denote aches and pains, such as *puat yok, khlet yok*. If the expression *nam yok* is no longer used in everyday usage, the expression *ao nam bong* is still very much alive. In fact, to draw a thorn or a splinter out in current Thai is to *bong,* and one normally uses an equally pointed instrument such as a needle to do this. This practice actually substantiates the proverb to a great extent, at least as far as thorns and splinters are concerned.

The English equivalent : "Like cures like" is in turn based on a Latin proverb : *"Similia similibus curantur",* which probably explains its conciseness. The message of the two proverbs is simply: if something hurts you, the best remedy for it is more of the same thing. In other words, if an enterprise goes wrong, you should take it as a lesson and use it later to launch yet another one of the same nature. This time, you will be much wiser and unlikely to make the same mistake again. The gist of the message is, therefore, one harmful or damaging situation can be got rid of or averted by yet another of the same nature. This reminds me of two more English proverbs more or less on the same topic, one being a variation on the other : "Danger itself the best remedy for danger", and "Without danger, we cannot go beyond danger." In fact, one sixteenth-century English author relied on a metaphor similar to the one used in the Thai proverb to drive home his point: "As one nayle is driven out by an other, one danger is expelled by an other."

Like all proverbs, there is always the other side to the coin, and there is no absolute guarantee that you will not get into more trouble as a result. For we all know that experience can be valuable only when one learns from it, and uses it as guidelines for future undertaking.

Like mother, like daughter.

Du chang hai du hang

ดูช้างให้ดูหาง

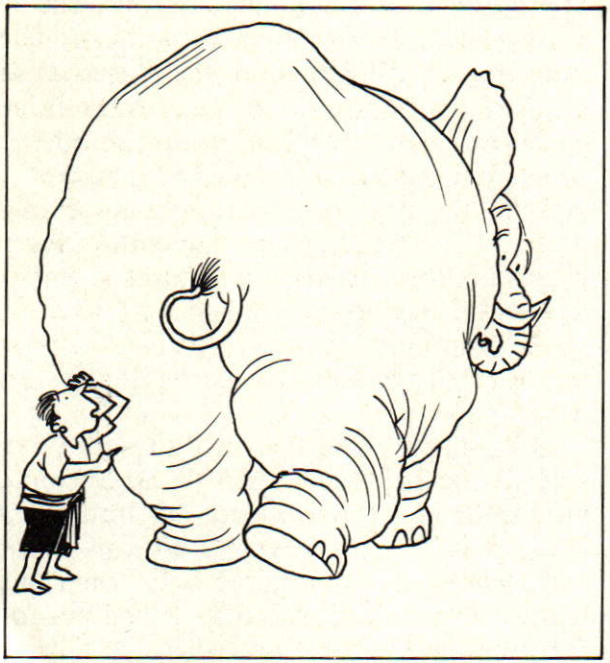
When you look over an elephant,

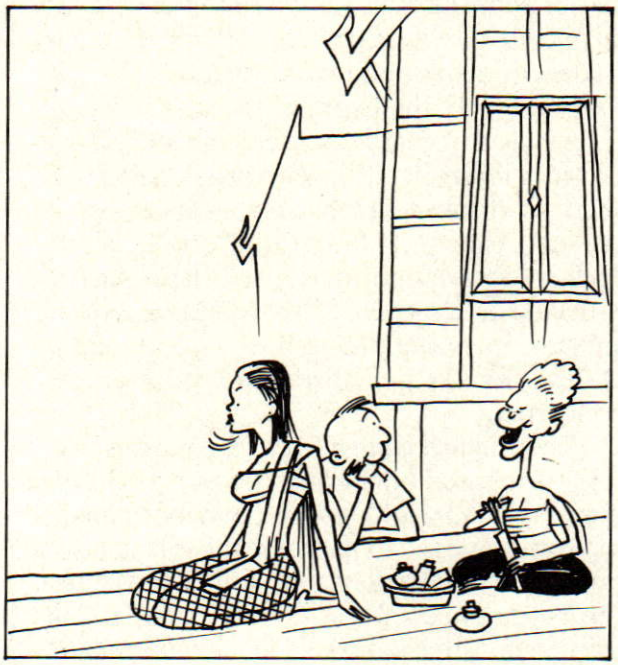
look at its tail;

Du nang hai du mae

ดูนางให้ดูแม่

When you look over a girl, look at her mother.





As we mentioned earlier, there seem to be two schools of thought as far as hereditary traits are concerned in both Thai and English proverbs. We have dealt with the first category* and will now take up the second category which seems to insist that a child will take after the parent of its own sex.

The Thai proverb is in the form of a couplet, having only one key word: *du* which normally means to look. However, in this context, *du* has two different meanings. When it is followed by *chang,* or elephant and *nang* or woman, it means to look over, to inspect, or even to look for. Then, when it takes the objects *hang* or tail and *mae* or mother, *du* now means to look at, to examine. When you inspect an elephant which you wish to buy, you are advised to look at its tail. Incidentally, the other version of this first line goes *"Du wua hai du hang",* or when you inspect a cow, look at its tail. The tail of both an elephant and a cow will tell whether the animal has a pedigree according to Thai beliefs. As a matter of fact, the art of elephant inspection is an ancient one, and has been written down in voluminous tomes, with a lengthy chapter on the different types of tails and what they say about the owners. Apparently, such an art about cows also exists, although less well known and not so widely believed as that of the elephants.

The second line of the couplet, while telling us that a daughter takes after her mother, reveals a lot about the Thai attitude towards women. It seems that one looks over a prospective bride in much the same way as one would an animal one wishes to buy. However, we must remember that in the old days, open courtship was actively discouraged and most matches were arranged by parents. The poor would-be husband probably never got so much as a glimpse of his future wife, so the next best thing was her mother. Incidentally, there is an offshoot of this proverb which goes on to say that *"Du hai nae tong du thung yai",* or if you want to be sure, look at her grandmother as well. This reminds me of another English proverb that seems to say just that, without specifying the sex of the offspring: "The mother's side is the surest."

The thesis of this group of proverbs, as we know, has not yet been proved definitively, and could open up a new area of research for scientists. A girl does not necessarily resemble her mother, nor a boy his father. Even worse, how can we be sure that the mother's ascestors are the best indicator of her offspring's character, as the last proverb suggests? Still, it is fascinating to know that not only the Thais but also the English suspected long ago that there was such a thing as heredity and confidently stated it, going by their observation alone.

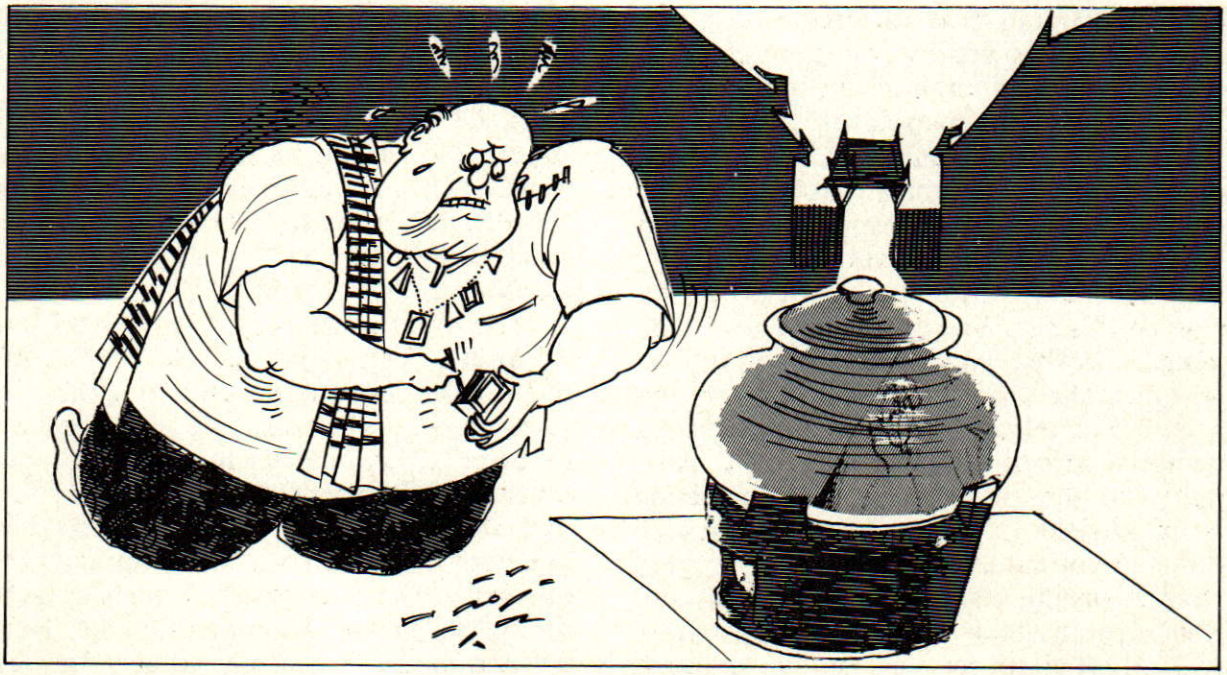
* See also pp. 62-63

A lion may come to be beholden to a mouse.

Setthi yang ruchak khat fai

เศรษฐียังรู้จักขาดไฟ

Even a rich man may find himself in need of fire.



The virtue of humility is taught in this short Thai proverb. The word *seṭṭhi* in Pali or *sreṣṭhin* in Sanskrit from which the Thai word was derived has a number of meanings, including a cashier, a treasurer, a wealthy merchant, a millionaire and the foreman of a guild. In the Thai language, we normally take it to mean a wealthy or a rich man. It is one of those rare words with a feminine counterpart: *setthini* or a rich woman. In the proverb, the rich man represents both sexes. The rest of the proverb is rather idiomatic: *yang ruchak,* literally means: "even him knows" and *khat* means to lack, to be in need of something, in this case, *fai* or fire. Taken together, it means "Even a rich man may find himself in need of fire." No matter how rich you are, you may still have to depend on other people for something that money cannot buy such as fire which can cook your food or to give you light in darkness. The proverb's message can be stretched to cover also all kinds of powerful people who may find themselves in difficult circumstances where their well-established influence fails to serve them.

The English proverb dates to the fifteenth century when it first appeared in an Aesop's fable. There is an easier version of the proverb which we have come across: "A mouse may be of service to a lion." In this tale, the mouse helps free the lion trapped in a snare by gnawing at the string with its sharp teeth. It is interesting to note that although the tale is equally well known in this part of the world, the Thais have a different proverb altogether for the same concept.

Both proverbs remind us of life's vicissitudes. We are strongly advised to be humble, for our fortune may change one day and we may be rendered helpless. Our best course of action is to cultivate and maintain good relations with fellow human beings, however lowly or insignificant they may seem to us at this moment in time.

Look before you leap.

Du tama tarua

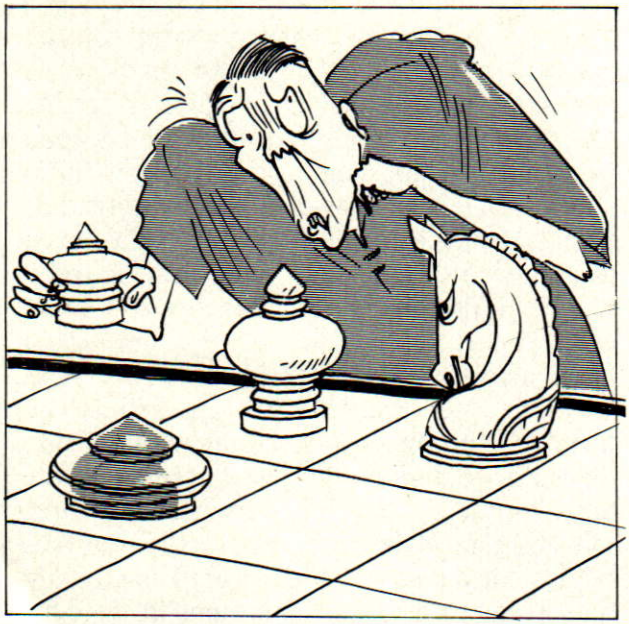
ดูตาม้าตาเรือ

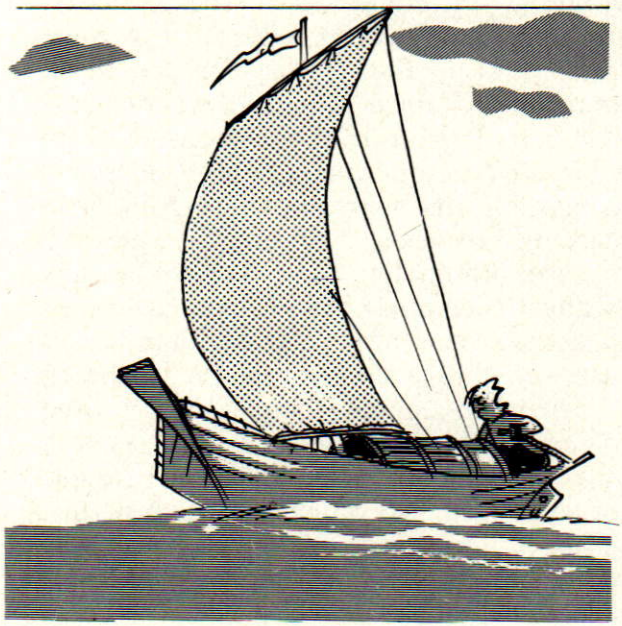
Look at the moves of the horse and the ship.

Du thit thang lom

ดูทิศทางลม

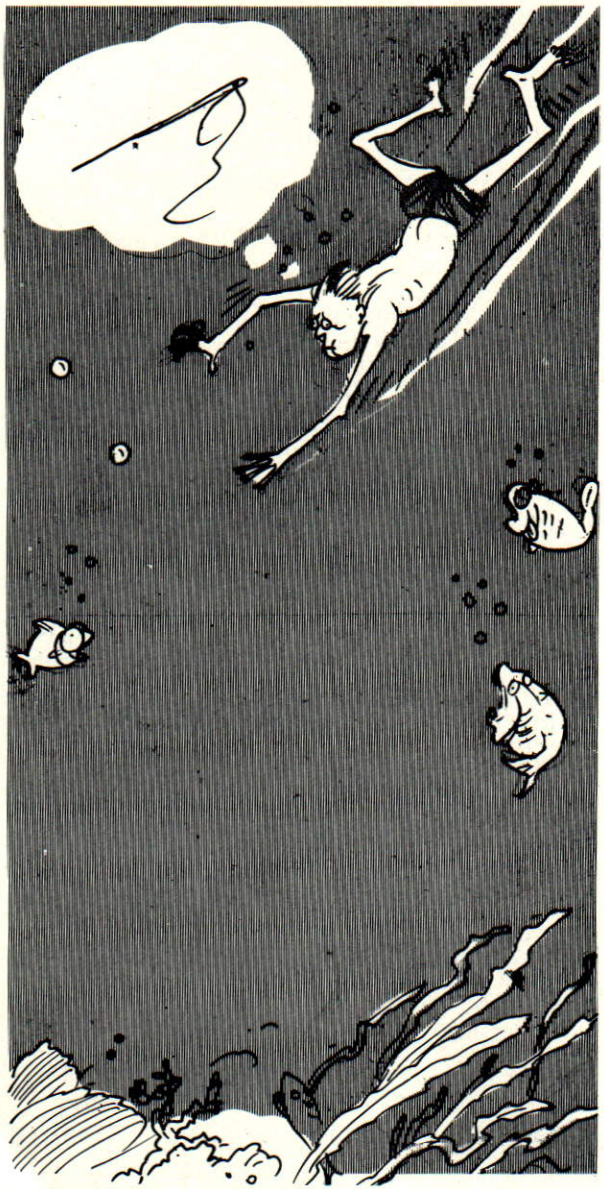
Look at the direction of the winds.





The Thai life-style is reflected in this ancient Thai proverb. It uses one of the most popular games in Thailand as the basic metaphor — the game of chess. In order to appreciate the meaning of the proverb, we must first know something about the Thai chess game. Our chess-board is similar to the international one, having sixty-four squares. Each player also has sixteen pieces to begin with, and the object of the game is likewise to give checkmate. Like the English chess, there are six types of pieces in the Thai chess. The king or *khun* is guarded by two bishops or *khon*. Instead of a queen, we have a piece, smaller even than the bishops, called *met*. Instead of knights and castles, we have *ma* or horses, and *rua* or ships. The remaining eight pieces are called *bia* and serve the same function as the pawns. The moves of the Thai horses and ships are similar to those of the knights and castles while those of our bishops and queen are more restricted. Of all the Thai pieces, the horse will be immediately recognizable to foreign chess-players, since it has exactly the same shape and the same move as the knight. The ship bears no resemblance to a ship and is simply a squatter version of the bishop. With less mobile bishops and queen, Thai chess-players naturally have to watch out more for the wide-ranging horses and ships. This probably explains why their moves are cited in the proverb. The message of the proverb is a warning against any hasty move we may take. We should look ahead into the future before embarking on a difficult enterprise so that we may overcome obstacles and problems which may await us.

This note of caution is also conveyed in the English proverb, "Look before you leap." There is a variant of this proverb in the original fourteenth-century version: "Look ere you leap." Obviously, an athlete has to measure the distance before he starts the race. Another English proverb, "See which way the wind is blowing," relies on the metaphor of a sailor or navigator of a sailing ship. Come to think of it, the same warning may also be similarly expressed in Thai: *"Du thit thang lom,"* or "Look at the direction of the winds."



To look for a needle
in a haystack.

Ngom khem nai mahasamut

งมเข็มในมหาสมุทร

To dive for a needle
in the ocean.

The common metaphor here is a needle, one of the smallest household objects. The act of searching for *khem* or the needle is the key concept in both proverbs. Since the needle in the Thai proverb is somewhere in the depth of the ocean or *mahasamut, maha* meaning great and *samut* waters, the search is expressed by the verb *ngom* which means to dive for or to look for something under water. We know what this popular proverb means : what we are doing is humanly impossible to accomplish, therefore, it is not worthwhile doing it at all. Once the minute needle has sunk to the bottom of the ocean, it is impossible to retrieve it, not only because of its size, but also because of the great depth of the ocean. The Thai preverb is sometimes used as an expression. When we are discouraged by the magnitude of the task in hand, we could say that the task is just like diving for a needle in the ocean.

Instead of the ocean, the English proverb chooses to look for the needle in a haystack. Now we all know that a haystack is a tightly packed pile of hay or dried cut grass, ready for storage, to be used as animal feed during the long winter months of the northern hemisphere. A needle which has been dropped in such a pile of hay will never be found because it will be entirely covered by the mass of hay. When used as an expression, we could say "Like a needle in a bottle (or a bundle) of hay."

Since the proverbs are quite different in their details but very close in their imagery, it goes to show that man of different cultures does have similar thoughts. Incidentally, it is entirely in the Thai literary tradition to choose the ocean to portray the deepest imaginable depth. The human mind has been described as deeper than the deepest ocean because the latter can still be reached, whereas the former is unfathomable.

You can't make an omelette
without breaking eggs.

Dai yang sia yang

ได้อย่างเสียอย่าง

To get something, one must sacrifice something.

This simple Thai proverb has a rather colourful equivalent in English. Despite its simplicity, the Thai proverb has been coined with a skilful use of contrast and repetition. *Dai* means to gain or to acquire, being contrasted here with *sia* which means to lose. *Yang* which means something is repeated, giving the proverb its balance. Taken together the proverb literally says: gaining something, losing something. However, what it actually means is rather more complex. One interpretation has already been given: if you want to get something, you must sacrifice something else. Another interpretation is equally acceptable and is often used as a kind of consolation: you may have lost something, but you have also gained something else in return.

The English equivalent has another variant: "Omelets are not made without breaking of eggs." It seems to correspond more to the first interpretation of the Thai proverb. The idea of sacrificing something for something else instead is comparable, although the English proverb has somewhat shifted the emphasis here. An omelette is a sum total of a number of eggs; it is a whole which is greater than its parts. A more balanced proverb would probably run like this: "You can't eat an egg without breaking it." But then, that is another story. What strikes us here is the picture the proverb conjures in our mind. We can see a busy cook just about to make a mouth-watering omelette but undecided whether she should break those farm fresh eggs...

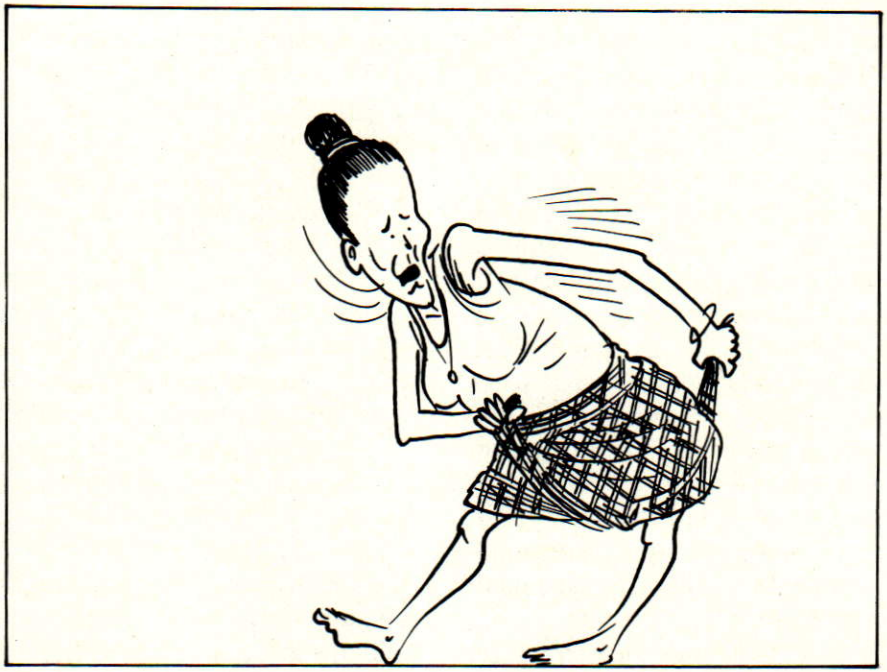
The message of these proverbs is quite realistic. In this world we can never hope to gain all the time. Usually, we win some, we lose some. To think or hope otherwise immediately brands you as being too greedy. We are all competing in the game of life and we have to abide by the rules of the game. There can only be one winning team in a given match, and if we end up with a draw, we may count ourselves lucky.

To make both ends meet.

Chak na mai thung lang

ชักหน้าไม่ถึงหลัง

Pulling the front but failing to reach the back.



This old Thai saying reveals something of our life-style in bygone days. The saying is still current and used in everyday conversation but very few people actually bother to find out how it was derived.

To understand the meaning of the Thai saying, we probably have to look at the way the Thais were dressed in the old days. Before the advent of modern dressmaking, the Thais habitually used a length of cloth to wrap round the lower part of the body. The women had an extra piece for the upper part, but the men made do with one piece or at best wore another piece of cloth loosely over the shoulders with both ends hanging loose at the back when going to the temple. Now there are endless ways to wear the bottom piece, the more popular ones being in *chongkraben* fashion, which is not unlike the dhoti of the Hindus, or simply as a wraparound or *phanung*. Whichever way the cloth was used, it had to be of a certain length, sufficient for the girth of the body with a little extra for the chosen style. And one usually started with the front end of the cloth first before proceeding to wrap the rest of the cloth around the back until the body was entirely covered. Obviously when you are poor, you cannot afford to buy a good length of cloth. Consequently, when you pull the cloth at the front or *chak na,* it does not reach the back or *thung lang*. We still use the saying to describe someone who fails to earn enough to meet his expense, although nowadays the men no longer rely on just a piece of cloth, while the women only keep the fashion going in upcountry areas.

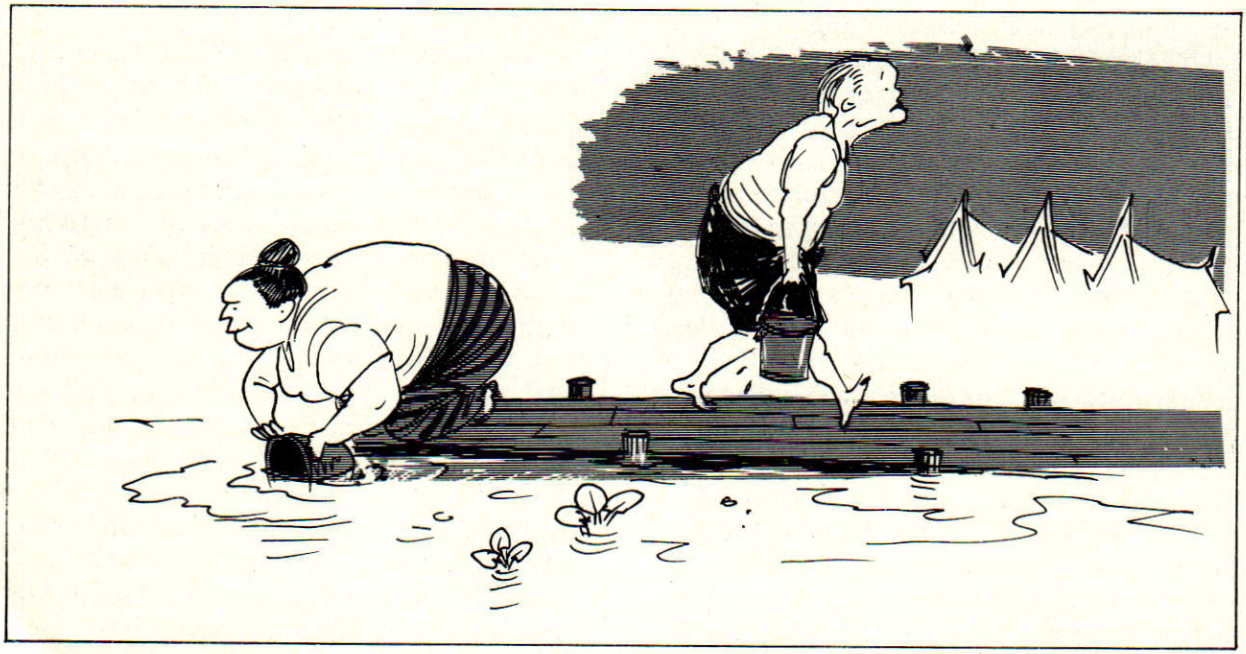
The English saying, "To make both ends meet," or "To make ends meet," can be used both negatively and affirmatively unlike the Thai equivalent which only appears in the negative. One explanation has it that both ends are the ends of a belt. Spending money is like putting on a belt. Your income is the belt while your expenditure is your girth. If you earn too little, what you earn or the belt, will not cover what you spend or your waist. This explanation brings the English saying much closer to the Thai saying than we imagined. It also ties up with another English expression which has been adopted in the Thai language in translation: "to tighten one's belt" or *"Rat khemkhat"* — an action usually undertaken when you want to make both ends meet.

Make hay while the sun shines.

Nam khun hai rip tak

น้ำขึ้นให้รีบตัก

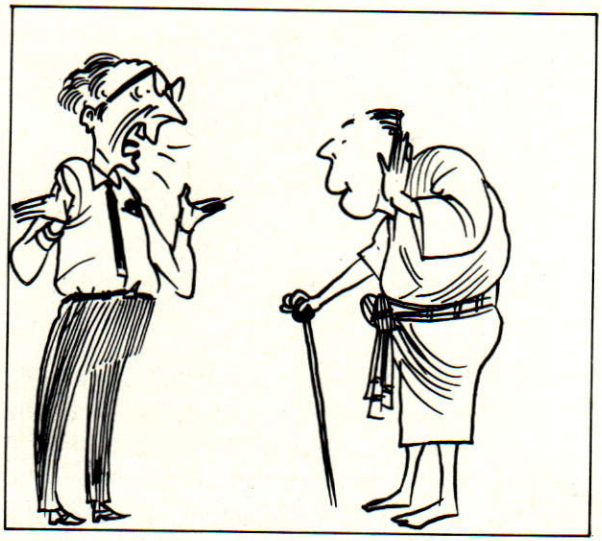
When the water rises,
hurry to collect some.



The proverbs in this group illustrate the life-style of our forefathers like so many other proverbs. The Thais have always lived on the banks of some waterway which in days of old served as the country's communications network and source of water for everyday use and farming. In the absence of running or tap water supply, the Thais have always used river or canal water for washing or other domestic use, while preserving rain water for drinking only. Therefore, when the river is full at high tide or *nam khun,* it is advisable to collect or *tak* water in a hurry or *rip*. *Tak* implies the whole process of dipping a vessel, such as a small bowl, a dipper, or a spoon, into a larger container where some uncountable substance is kept, including all kinds of liquid, rice, sugar and so on, down to taking whatever substance thus collected for further use.

The sixteenth-century English proverb is also indicative of the kind of society that was, and still is. One has to be a farmer to be concerned over the right kind of weather for hay making. The English proverb itself has an equivalent in English which uses the imagery of a blacksmith at work: "Strike while the iron is hot." It dates to the fourteenth century and was first used by none other than Chaucer in "Troilus". Both proverbs conjure up a peaceful village scene in a rural society where hay must be made after a harvest and horses must be shoed after a season's toil.

Against this peaceful and leisurely setting, the proverbs recommend haste and speed, while advising against delay and procrastination. Taking this advice too literally, one can become an opportunist and put expediency before principle. Be that as it may, the proverbs' message is still useful. At least they can be cited as justification for some unseemly action by people with a guilty conscience.



Manners maketh man.

Samniang bok phasa

สำเนียงบอกภาษา

The accent tells the language;

Kiriya bok trakun

กิริยาบอกตระกูล

The manners tell the family.

This old Thai proverb is the cornerstone of our culture. It is both conservative and class-conscious. Not only does the accent or *samniang* of a person betray his maternal tongue, it also indicates the original region where he comes from and even the social class he belongs to. In a hierarchical society such as ours, the way we address one another immediately defines the relationship. In other words, the language or *phasa* that we choose in our conversation automatically classify our social status whether we like it or not. The second line of the couplet is linked with the first by an external rhyme: *phasa/kiriya*. *Kiriya* or manners can also reveal your origin or your family. The word *trakun* also denotes your lineage or your family background. So, according to the proverb, if you come from a good family, you will assuredly have good manners. Conversely, an uncouth person must be low-born for he has not been taught the proper manners during his formative years.

The English proverb: "Manners maketh man" or its more modern variant: "Manners make the man" dates back to mid-fourteenth century. Although the proverb then advocated good manners, it did not try to encourage a person to behave well to show good breeding. By the seventeenth century, the proverb had become definitely egalitarian: "Be he borne in barne or hall, Tis maners makes the man and all." In other words, whether you are low or high born, it is your manners that make you the man that you are. By appealing to man's basic rights, this interpretation of the proverb managed to persuade man to observe social decorum and civility.

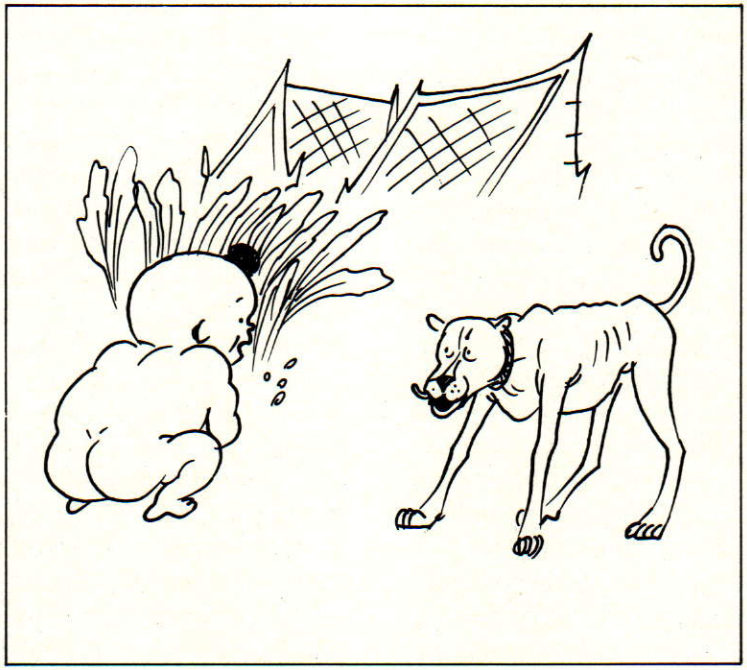
It is also fair to say that good manners are important in all oriental cultures and not necessarily confined to our culture. At the beginning of this century, in 1902 to be precise, a curious statement was made by A.R. Colquhoun, an English author, in support of the fact: "It is the gravest mistake to... introduce the freedom of speech and laxity of manners characteristic of modern Europe and America into the East, whose people are still under the impression that "manners maketh man."

A new broom sweeps clean.

Khi mai ma hom

ขี้ใหม่หมาหอม

The dog finds new shit sweet-smelling.



Thai sayings and proverbs can be as earthy as they come, especially when they picked on the dog and its naughty habits. This saying consists of only four words. For special effect, the sentence is inverted and starts with the object *khi mai,* literally meaning "new shit" or "fresh stool". The subject of the sentence, *ma,* or the dog, is placed after the object, followed by the word *hom* which in this context means "to find something sweet-smelling". The saying reveals an otherwise unmentionable aspect of the dog — that is its eating habit and its preference. With modern sanitation, the dog may not have it its own way any more. But one can imagine what it was like in the old days when the saying was coined, or even now in some rural areas where toilet facilities are primitive or non-existent. The observation, crude as it is, also tells us something about the human nature. Like the dog, we prefer novelties. If something is new, it will capture our attention. We may even fool ourselves into believing that it is better than what we already know. That this is not always true may be realized after so many mistakes have been made.

The same caution is given in the proverb, "A new broom sweeps clean." Just because the broom is new, we may find that it works better than it actually does. This idea is conveyed in a few more English proverbs; for example: "One story is good till another is heard," and "What is new is fine." In the first proverb, we are warned not to pass hasty judgment when we come across a new concept or theory because there may be better ones already discovered or waiting to be discovered. The second proverb is quite explicit since it categorically spells out the human preference for a new fad.

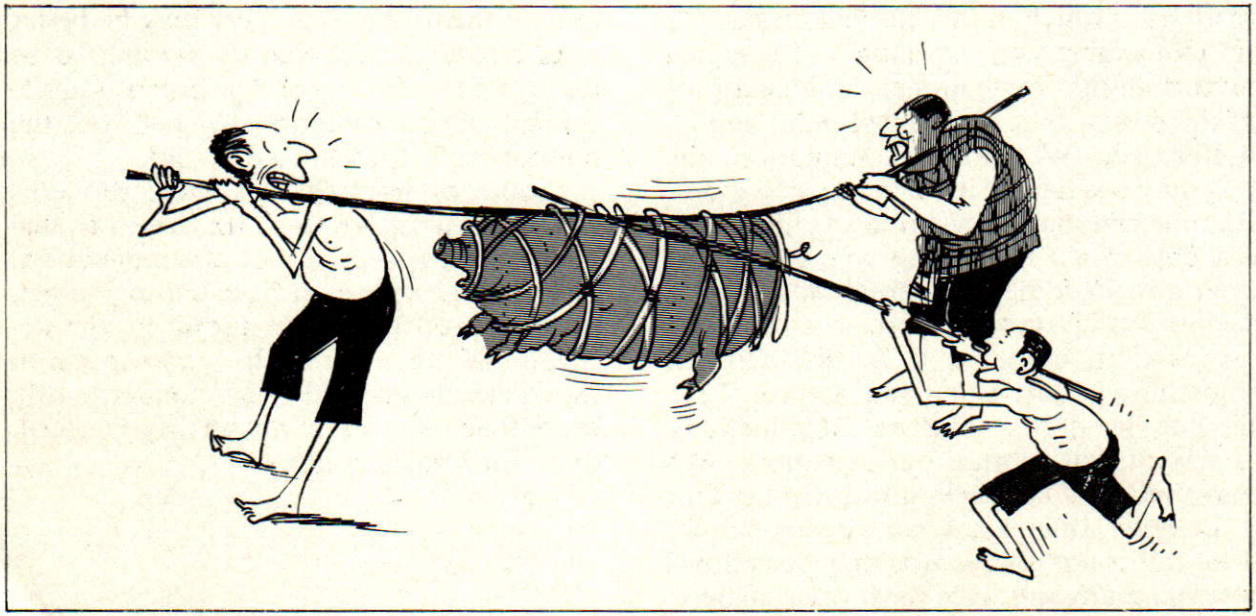
Some of us may find these proverbs rather conservative since they seem to discourage our acceptance of any innovation. But if we look at them from another angle, we may even find them useful in our decision-making. After all, we know from experience that new ideas are not necessarily better than old ones, although they just seem that much more exciting.

Don't poke your nose into other men's affairs.

Mu khao cha ham
ya ao khan khao pai sot

หมูเขาจะหามอย่าเอาคานเข้าไปสอด

When the pig is about to be carried,
don't thrust another pole in between.



This proverb does not really have an English equivalent as such because of its specific connotation. There are a number of things we can infer from the proverb that tells us something of the Thai life-style. In this part of the world, it is not uncommon to transport *mu* or a pig one by one by carrying it or *ham*. The act involves two people carrying a pole from which hangs the pig trussed up with rope. This particular way of carrying things by means of a pole is popular in Thailand. Usually, only one person does the carrying, placing the pole on his or her shoulder and balancing the weight by hanging two baskets from both ends of the pole. In this case, the pig is too heavy and has to be lifted by two people, each balancing the end of the pole on his shoulder. Now the proverb mentions another pole or *khan* which should not be thrusted in between or *sot,* presumably by a third person, because it will tip the balance, making it impossible for the couple to carry the pig.

The proverb is normally used to describe two lovers who are about to make love and are rudely interrupted by a third person. Sometimes, it does not have to be the act of love but of courtship which is interrupted by an interfering person. Occasionally, the proverb is used to refer to a matrimonial pact which is disrupted by other people — that is when a couple is just about to be married, or when a lady's hand is being asked by the groom's parents or a go-between, and then somebody else comes along and interferes in the arrangement. To a certain extent, the proverb is used to condemn unnecessary interference in other people's affairs, particularly when a deal is about to be made. But because the original innuendo is at the back of everyone's mind, this wider implication is usually forgotten.

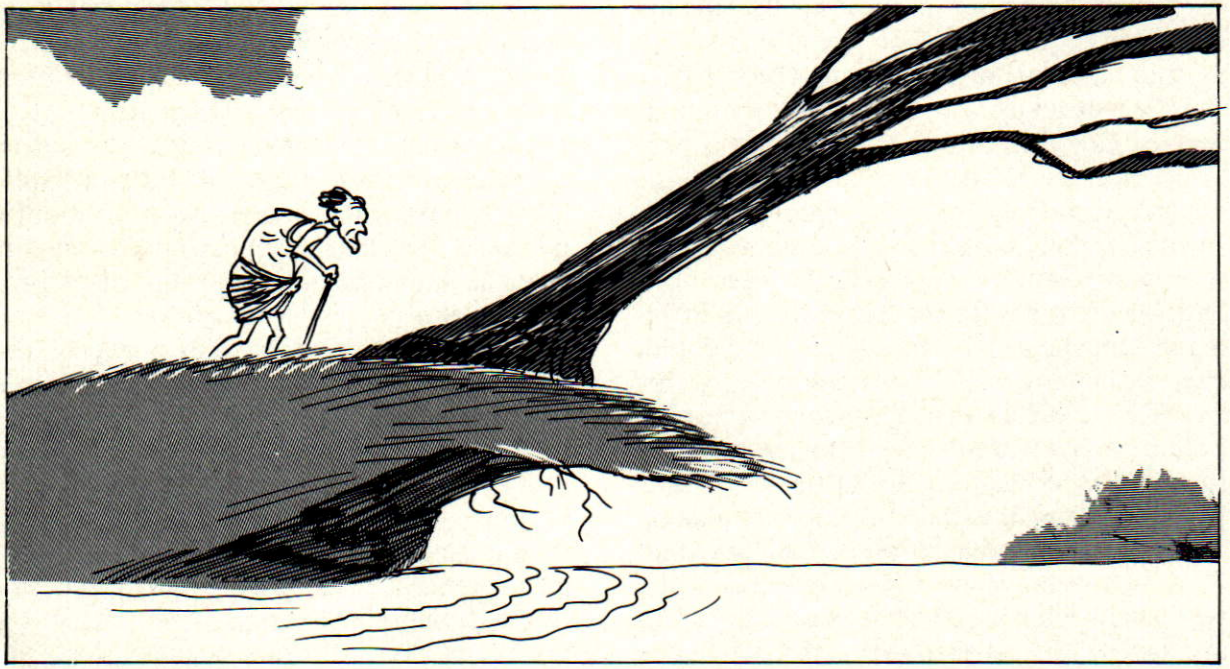
There are a few English proverbs that carry this idea though; for example: "Don't poke your nose into other men's affairs," or a similar one: "To put one's nose into everything," which has a rather picturesque variant: "To put one's nose into every man's pot." As we can see, the advice is more general and these English proverbs tell us to mind our own business, rather than not to interfere in other people's love life.

To have one foot in the grave.

Mai klai fang

ไม้ใกล้ฝั่ง

A tree near the bank.



Old age and the approach of death call for a sobering caution in any culture. The Thais choose a nature imagery for their saying while the English a poignantly realistic one.

It is relatively easy to explain the literal meaning of the Thai saying. We are by now familiar with the word *mai,* short for *ton mai* or a tree. The preposition *klai,* with a dropping tone, means near, the opposite of *klai,* with the middle tone, which is an adverb meaning far. What the tree is standing near is *fang* or the river bank in this context.

We have earlier on attempted briefly to explain the imagery used without touching on its meaning. A man is here being compared to a tree. If the tree is close to the river bank, it is more likely for its root to lose its grips on the firm soil than say, another tree further inland. Given a few more years of erosion, the tree will be gone. Therefore, if a person is like *mai klai fang,* he has reached a ripe old age and will soon pass away.

The English saying, "To have one foot in the grave," captures very much the same idea. When a person has reached old age, he has nearly stepped into the grave; at any rate, one of his feet is already there. Soon the other foot will join the one waiting and the owner, with both feet in the grave, may lie in peace. The English saying dates back to the sixteenth century and has since kept up its popularity despite or because of its rather macabre imagery. We must admit that it is more comforting to be like a tree near the river bank than to have one foot in the grave.

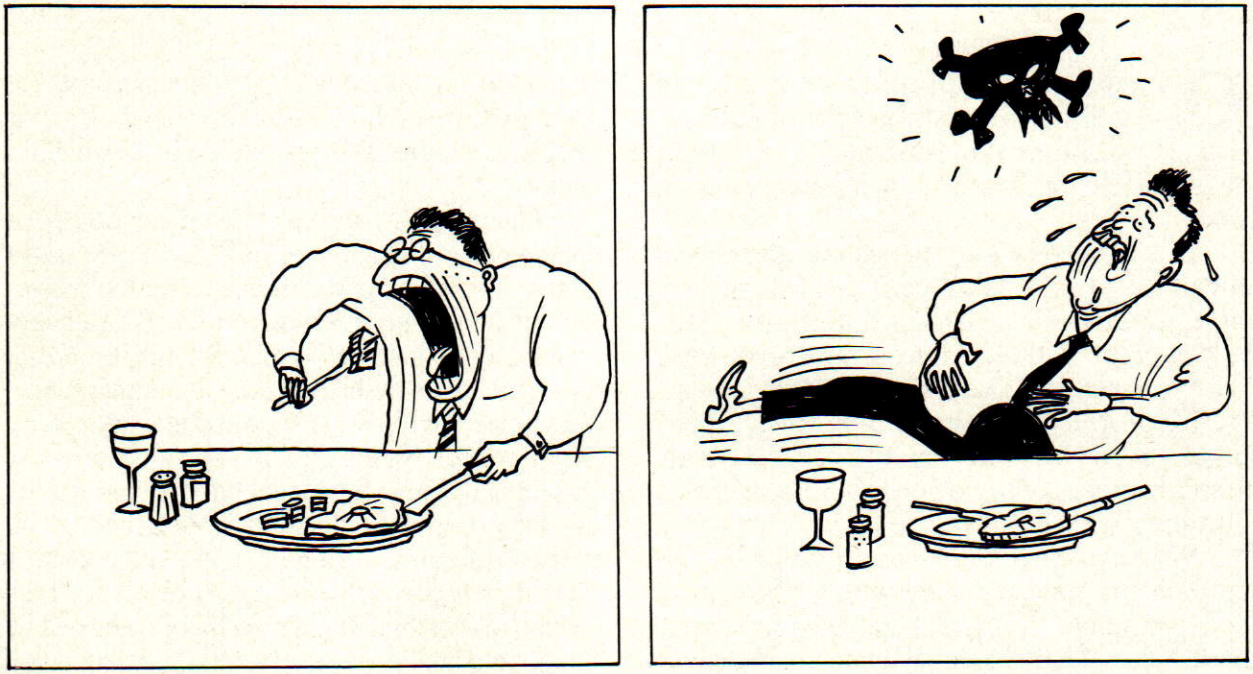
Both sayings offer sobering thoughts and prepare us all to face up to the inevitable. No one can live forever and what counts is how you make out when you are still alive.

One man's meat is another man's poison.

Lang nua chop lang ya

ลางเนื้อชอบลางยา

Some like meat; others like medicine.



The Thai saying is phrased in an archaic way with only one verb *chop* or to like for two sentences. The common verb is put in the middle, flanked by the two short clauses : *lang nua* and *lang ya*. *Lang* is an archaic term now replaced by *bang* or some in modern usage. In this context, *lang* denotes some people in the first clause and other people in the second clause. As for the objects of the two clauses: *nua* or meat appears in the first one, and *ya* or medicine in the second one. The symmetrical pattern of the saying is highly unusual but effective, borne out by the fact that the saying is one of the most memorable and popular in our language.

The English equivalent is surprisingly very close in its choice of words: "One man's meat is another man's poison." The favoured object is again "meat" just like in the Thai saying; presumably most people except vegetarians do like to eat meat. As for the object of dislike, the English saying has chosen a stronger word than medicine in the Thai version. Poison can kill whereas medicine usually cures. However, they both have something in common: they are bitter and definitely the opposite to the taste of meat.

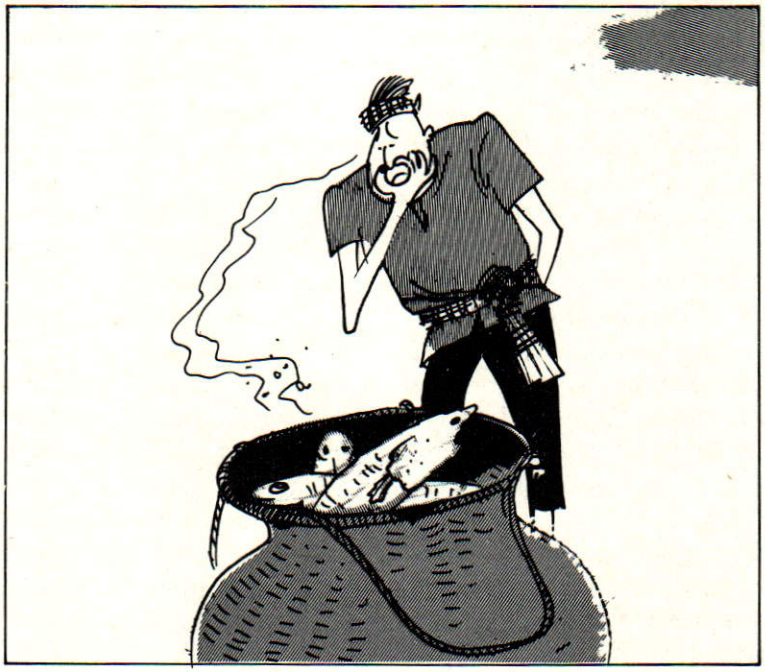
The meaning of the saying is very direct and hardly needs any explanation. What goes down well with some people may produce the opposite effect on others. In other words, you've got to allow for individual preferences and must not attempt to apply the same rule to everyone. This simple message advocates individualism and freedom of choice, concepts which are cherished in the free world. One may well wonder of course whether this kind of saying is allowed in a totalitarian regime, where everyone must toe the official party line regardless of one's own likes or dislikes. It is encouraging to note that the sayings exist in both Thai and English; this means that the two peoples fundamentally treasure freedom no matter how they express their thought.

One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.

Pla tua dieo nao men mot thang khong.

ปลาตัวเดียวเน่าเหม็นหมดทั้งข้อง

One rotten fish makes the whole catch stink.



This couple of proverbs mirrors the life-style of the people who first thought them up like so many others. Our translation of the Thai proverb is by no means a word-by-word rendition of the original statement. In fact, there are two separate sentences in the proverb: *Pla tua diao nao* or "Only one fish rots;" and *men mot thang khong* or "The whole container stinks." The first sentence is straightforward enough: the two key words are *pla* or fish and *nao* which is both verb and adjective, rot or rotten, but used here as a verb. *Tua* is a classifier for fish and animals in general, and *tua dieo* means only one as opposed to *nung tua* or *tua nung* or one fish. The second sentence that follows is rather more complicated to explain: *khong,* the subject of this sentence, comes right at the end and its literal meaning is the bamboo container one uses to hold the catch. *Thang khong* means the whole content of the container, in other words, the whole catch. Now the verb of this sentence is in fact *men* which means to give off a bad odour, to stink, to smell, to rank and so on. *Men mot* means all of it stinks, thereby emphasising *thang khong* or the whole catch.

The underlying message of this saying is: a member of any group can ruin the reputation of everyone else in that group by his isolated misconduct. The English saying: "One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel" has a variant which is even more explicit: "The rotten apple injures its neighbours." What is remarkable about these sayings is the way they let us catch a glimpse of the two cultures at their very root. It is a fact that the Thais have always relied on fish as their major source of protein. Just think of the most common form of greeting when a guest visits a Thai home; we normally ask the visitor: *Kin khao kin pla ma ru yang* or "Have you eaten rice and fish?" for the plain "Have you eaten?" and how about the Sukhothai stone inscription which says that the kingdom is a land of plenty because "in the water there is fish, in the fields there is rice..." From time immemorial, our forefathers' life has been intimately linked with fish. No wonder they have chosen the metapher to drive home their message. The same can be said for apples and England though not perhaps to the same degree. The apple is an indigenous fruit of England and apple orchards can be found up and down the country. It is by far the most popular fruit which also appears in a host of sayings and idioms; for example, the well-known adage: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" or the expression "the apple of one's eye." A saying which involves the apple metaphor guarantees its catchiness and leaves no doubt as to its meaning.

To cast pearls before swine.

Si so hai khwai fang
สีซอให้ควายฟัง

To play the fiddle to a water buffalo.

Yun kaeo hai wanon
ยื่นแก้วให้วานร

To hand over a gem to a monkey.

Kai dai phloy **ไก่ได้พลอย**

The chicken acquires a precious stone.

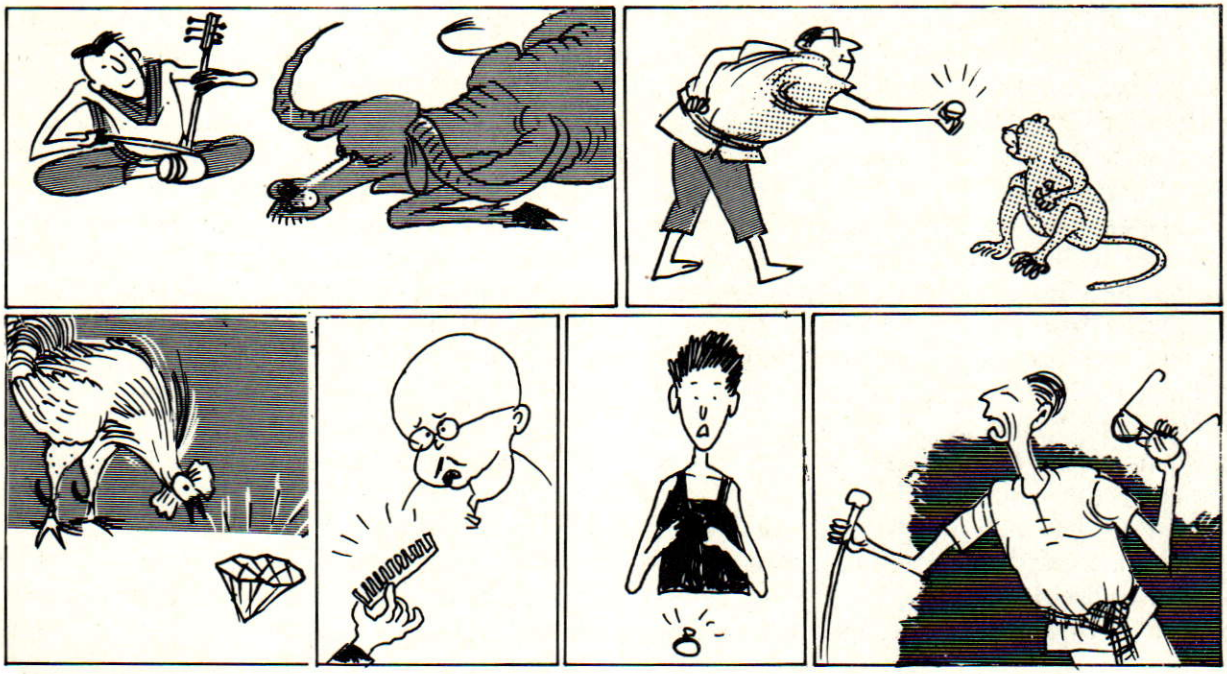
Hua lan dai wi **หัวล้านได้หวี**

A bald man acquires a comb.

Niu duan dai waen
นิ้วด้วนได้แหวน

A severed finger acquires a ring.

Ta bot dai waen
ตาบอดได้แว่น A blind man acquires a pair of spectacles.



This group of adages are sayings rather than proverbs, in the sense that they do not carry some advice or warnings but are more of an observation, and not a pleasant one at that. The familiar English saying means simply that you are wasting your time in trying to give something precious to a person who does not appreciate its worth. In other words, do not bother with those who fail to appreciate you and what you have to say.

Now the Thais have a lot of sayings which are very close in meaning to this English saying. In the first saying, you *si so* or play the fiddle or the violin. *So* is the Thai stringed instrument, our version of the Western violin. There are basically three types of this instrument: *so duang, so u* and *so sam sai,* each producing different tones, with the *so sam sai* being the most difficult to play. *Khwai* is the water-buffalo, which despite its usefulness to farmers, is considered the most stupid animal in this part of the world, somewhat like the proverbial donkey in the West. Therefore, to make music for the most stupid animal is a total waste of time, since the music will fall on deaf ears.

The second saying is closer in its imagery to the English saying. *Kaeo* normally means glass in everyday usage, but in this context and in poetic usage, it means a precious stone, a gem or a jewel. *Wanon* is the Thai pronunciation for the Sanskrit *vanara* or monkey, commonly referred to as *ling* in colloquial Thai. Like the pearls of the English saying, the gem will never be appreciated by the monkey.

If we take the English saying, "To cast pearls before swine," one step further and look at it from the recipient's point of view, we could interpret the saying as an observation of a mis-match. The swine in question does not deserve the pearls and will never know what to do with them. In other words, a useful or precious object can be worthless to those who cannot use it or are not aware of its worth. The Thais have a lot of short sayings for this kind of observation, used somewhat in an ironic or even derogatory fashion. For example, "The chicken acquires a precious stone;" "A bald man acquires a comb;" "A severed or amputated finger acquires a ring;" and finally, "A blind man acquires a pair of spectacles." These rather cruel and sarcastic comments are straight to the point and make no allowance for physical defects and afflictions. Perhaps the gentle Thais are not so gentle after all if these caustic sayings are taken into account.

Penny wise and pound foolish.

Thi lot ta chang

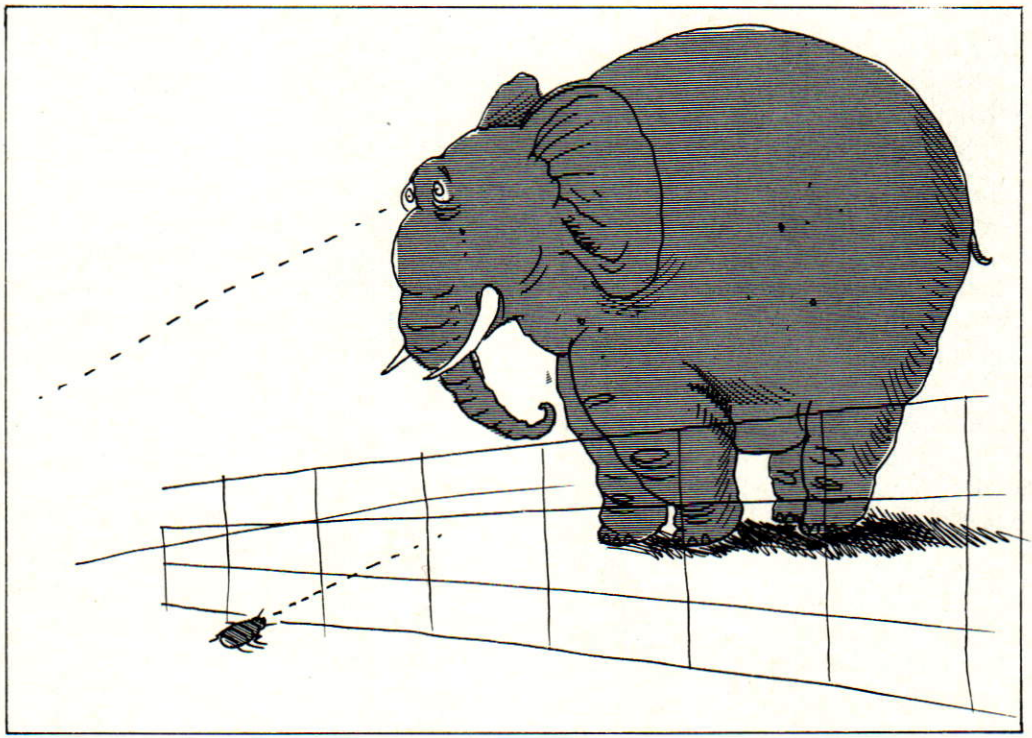
ถี่ลอดตาช้าง

Little things escape an elephant's eyes;

Hang lot ta len

ห่างลอดตาเล็น

Big things escape a mite's eyes.



This proverb is another one of those which rely on animal imagery to drive home their messages. The couplet makes use of two pairs of antonyms and one key word. The first pair is *thi* and *hang;* they are both adjectives normally used to denote distances. *Thi* means closely spaced whereas *hang* means loosely spaced when used in the context of, for example, weaving pattern. Otherwise, *thi* can also mean frequent and *hang* can mean far, far off, and distant. But the meaning about spacing applies in this context since we are talking about something that the animals may or may not notice. The two animals in question represent the largest and smallest ones in the animal kingdom: *chang* or elephant and *len* or mite. Presumably, a big animal like the elephant will not notice tiny pattern, while a minute animal like the mite will not notice large pattern. The key word *lot* simply means to escape the notice and it is repeated twice, once in each sentence, in the expression *lot ta*. The two lines are held together by an external rhyme: *chang* and *hang,* a device familiar to all Thai proverbs in couplet form.

Even when all the words have been explained, we are still a long way away from fully understanding the derivation of the proverb. One interpretation has it that the elephant is like a big spender who fails to see the significance of small sums of money whereas the mite is like a stingy person who is bent on saving even the tiniest sum and fails to notice it when big sums of money are being spent foolishly. It may help us a little to know that *thi* and *hang* can also mean being careful or careless with money in Thai usage. We have an expression in Thai *mu hang tin hang* or loosely spaced out hands and feet to describe a spendthrift, someone who is careless with his money, presumably because he lets it slip through them too easily.

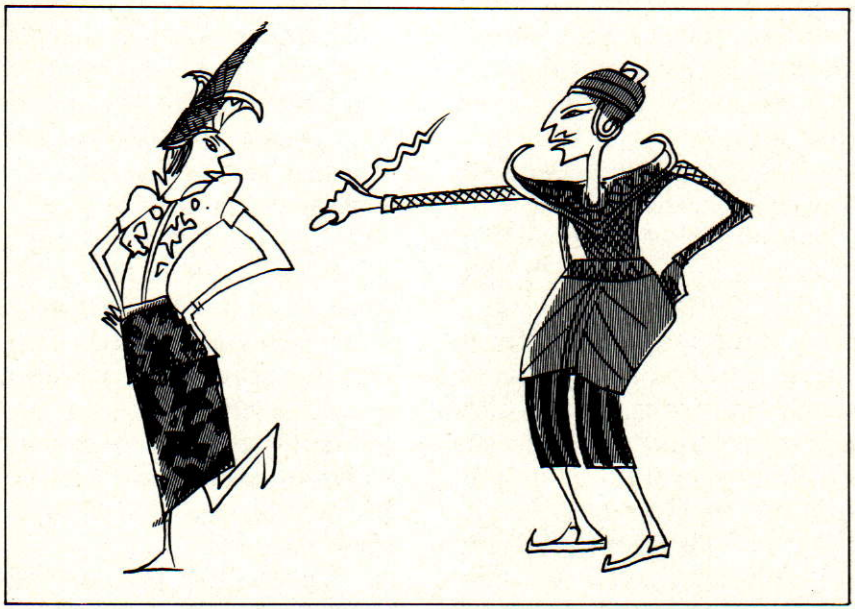
The English proverb "Penny wise and pound foolish," teaches moderation in one's spending habit. We should not behave in the fashion of the elephant or the mite otherwise we may find ourselves being careful with small sums and careless with big sums.

The pot calls the kettle black.

Wa tae khao I-nao pen eng

ว่าแต่เขาอิเหนาเป็นเอง

Blaming other people, I-nao himself does it.



Although there is no research into the historical usage of Thai proverbs and sayings, there is a saying whose origin can be approximately dated. It features a famous hero from a well-known drama in verse, "I-nao", of the early Bangkok period. Since the tale was written by King Rama II who reigned from 1809-1824, the saying may be dated from that period when the drama enjoyed hugh success as a court performance of *Lakhon Nai*. Its literal translation given here does not really explain the meaning

of the saying. Despite its obscure literary allusion, it can be matched by a relatively straightforward English saying.

At the risk of going into even more obscure details to explain the Thai saying, a brief account of the drama in verse may be relevant here. "I-nao" was derived from a popular Javanese legend. The protagonist, I-nao, was a prince from the city of Kurepan, who had been betrothed since childhood to Butsaba, his cousin from the city of Daha. Never having seen the beautiful princess, I-nao spurned the intended union and consorted with another lady, Chintara. However, the sight of beautiful Butsaba was enough to change his mind, and overcome by a passion for the princess, I-nao abducted her. Taking this account as our guideline, the saying: *"Wa tae khao, I-nao pen eng"* may be interpreted as an observation of a very human phenomenon: often one fails to recognise one's own weaknesses and denounce them in other people. I-nao's taste for beautiful girls has caught up with him and made him abduct the girl he has once rejected.

Despite its literary allusion, the saying is phrased in a simple language. *Wa* means to blame or to talk ill of someone, and *tae* is a preposition here meaning only. *Khao* is a third person pronoun, which from the literary background probably means other suitors who also fall in love with Butsaba. In any case, the word *khao* rhymes with I-nao and thus links the two phrases together. *Pen eng* is an idiomatic expression which means to do it or to act like it oneself. Sometimes, in modern usage, we add the word *sia* and say *pen sia eng*. So in this context, I-nao who once derided other people and even rejected Butsaba had to eat his words and also fell in love with her.

The English saying is much more down-to-earth than its Thai equivalent. Instead of the high-born prince, we have as protagonists two familiar kitchen utensils : the pot and the kettle. The pot calls the kettle black because it fails to realise that it too has been blackened by the kitchen soot. Incidentally, there is another variant of the saying, dated back to the seventeenth century: "The kettle calls the pot black brows." In either case, neither the pot nor the kettle is aware of the fact that they are both equally dirty and it is useless to point out each other's bad point.

There is hardly any point in emphasizing the universal truth of these sayings. Although, the sayings are often used casually as a comment on human behaviour, there is no harm in giving heed to its more serious implications. We know very well that other people's faults are easily recognisable in our eyes. Whether we are guilty of the same or not is another matter. The sayings warn us not to pass judgment hastily on others before making sure that we, ourselves, do not harbour the same foibles.

Practise what you preach.

Pak wa ta khayip

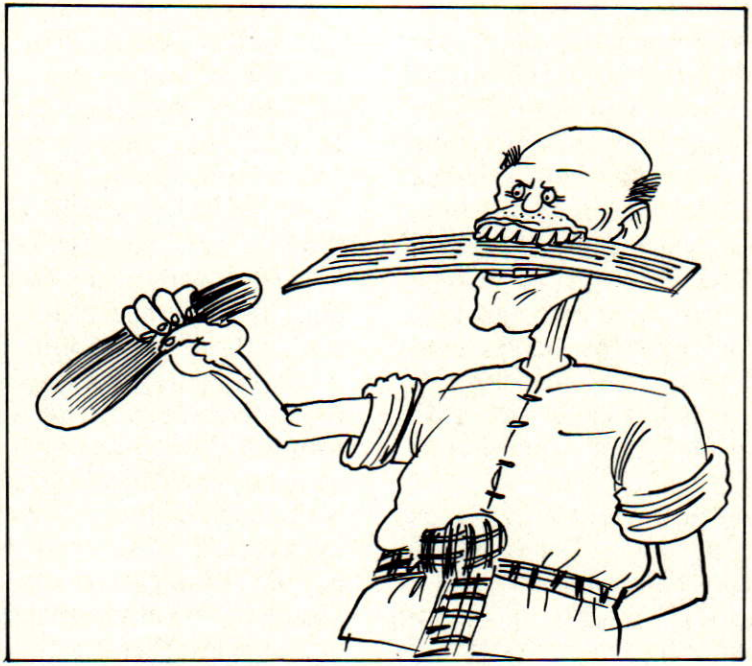
ปากว่าตาขยิบ

The mouth criticizes while the eye winks.

Mu thu sak / pak thu sin

มือถือสาก / ปากถือศีล

The hand holds a pestle
while the mouth utters Buddhist precepts.



Of the two Thai proverbs, the first one is easier to explain. *Pak wa* means "The mouth criticizes or admonishes someone" while *ta khayip* or "the eye winks in approval," so to speak. In other words, some people actually condone the practice which they seem to be criticizing.

The other Thai proverb is slightly more complicated. The common verb here is *thu* which in normal usage means to hold or to carry. Its literal meaning may be applied to the first sentence of the couplet. A hand may well carry a pestle or *sak*. This is a common cooking utensil used with a mortar for pounding rice or chili paste which is the basic ingredient in Thai cooking. This utensil, as we mentioned earlier, is a rather rude object for some reason.* If your hand holds a pestle, you may well use it as a weapon and you are poised to strike. Besides, this lowly object is contrasted with *sin* or the Sanskrit *sila,* meaning the Buddhist precepts, which is metaphorically held by your mouth. The *Pañcasilaṁ* as it is called in full consists of 5 don'ts: do not kill; do not steal; do not commit adultery; do not lie; and do not drink. Your action does not correspond to your professed beliefs in the Buddhist precepts. In other words, you do not practise what you preach.

The English proverb advises that one should be consistent and honest in one's conduct. If you publicly disapprove of something, you had better act accordingly. Likewise, if you tell people how they should behave, you yourself must be the model of that kind of behaviour. In short, don't be a hypocrite.

It could not have escaped our notice that the second Thai proverb is very close in meaning to preaching in English. To profess or utter the Buddhist precepts in Thailand where Buddhism is the major religion is tantamount to preaching even though you are not a priest or a monk.

* See also pp.49, 133

Put another man's child in your bosom,
and he'll creep out at your elbow.

Ao luk khao ma liang

เอาลูกเขามาเลี้ยง

Bringing up another man's child;

Ao miang khao ma om

เอาเมี่ยงเขามาอม

Keeping another man'a savoury
in the mouth.

The Thai proverb is in the form of a couplet. The two lines are linked by a repetition of the compound verb *ao ma* or to take. The verb is broken up here by two words: an object and its qualifying adjective, *khao,* short for *khong khao* or his/her. If you *ao khao ma,* you are taking something which belongs to someone else. In the first line, you take *luk* or an offspring, a child, In the second line, the object is *miang* or a kind of savoury. The external rhyme *liang /miang* connects the couplet. *Liang* means to raise or to bring up anything from bees to human beings. Sometimes it appears as a compound in *liang du,* meaning to look after or to take care of, because *du* means to watch over.

The second line of the proverb refers to a certain eating habit which is fast disappearing. *Miang* and the way it is consumed *om* need some explanation. *Miang* is a general term for a kind of snack. Normally, it is made by wrapping certain types of aromatic and edible leaves over finely diced or chopped up ingredients into a dainty mouthful. The ingredients are sometimes fresh, sometimes cooked. The leaves can be fresh or pickled; and the concoction may be eaten with a sauce, with fried flat pieces of plain crispy rice, or on its own. However, the *miang* in the proverb is most likely the kind which used to be a favourite snack in northern Thailand. Its main ingredient is fermented tea leaves, usually wrapped over sweetish titbits, but more rarely accompanied simply by a pinch of salt. The *miang* is kept in one's mouth or *om* until it becomes tasteless. Now, one can never get the full flavour of it if it has already been in someone else's mouth. It is obviously better, the question of hygiene aside, to pop a fresh *miang* in your mouth and suck it right from the start for complete satisfaction. Hence, whether it be somebody else's child or snack, you will surely waste your time over it. Adoption is a high-risk enterprise. You can never be sure of the child's affection or gratitude towards you in later years. Besides, the child's unknown parentage or dubious origin may prove to be a source of problem that plagues you all through your life.

Adoption is warned against in more poetic terms in this early seventeenth-century English proverb: "Put another man's child in your bosom, and he'll creep out at your elbow." We can almost visualize a woman cradling a baby in her arms, and the way the ungrateful child stealthily slips away when she is off her guard.

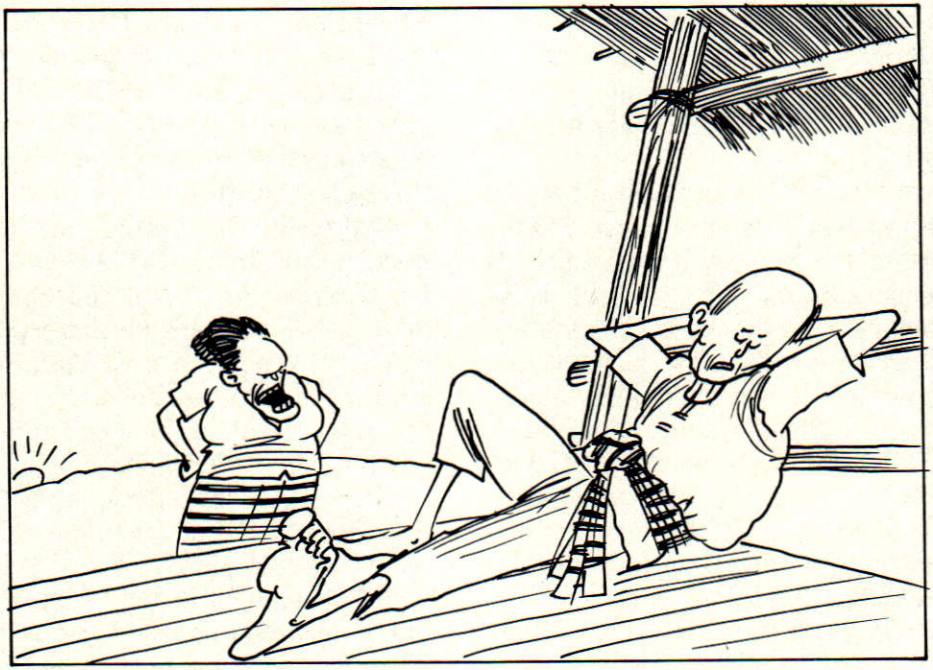
In some way, these ancient proverbs may soon become obsolete with the ever-growing popularity of test-tube babies, fertility drugs, and new techniques in artificial insemination. What's the point in adopting a child when you can produce your very own with the aid of advanced technology?

Never put off till tomorrow
what can be done today.

Ya phat wan prakan phrung

อย่าผัดวันประกันพรุ่ง

Don't put off today
by pledging tomorrow.



Instead of emphasizing the task in hand, the Thai proverb concentrates more on the time factor: *wan* or day, and *phrung,* the shortened form of *phrung ni* or tomorrow. *Phat wan* means to put off a date or to postpone an engagement. The verb *phat* is interesting in itself, because even native speakers often make a mistake and use the verb *phlat* as in *phlat pha* or to change clothes. This is due perhaps to the fact that *phat* also means to stir fry, such as in the famous *khao phat* or fried rice of the Oriental cuisine, which seems somewhat too mundane to share the same verb as to postpone or to procrastinate. *Prakan* normally means to guarantee or to bail, but when used with *phrung* in this expression, it may be interpreted as to promise or to pledge for tomorrow.

What the proverb warns us is simply: if you have anything to do, do it today, tomorrow may be too late or the same opportunity may not present itself again by the time tomorrow comes. As we mentioned earlier, the English language is rich in proverbs of this nature. Apart from "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today", another English proverb which we are familiar with is perhaps: "Procrastination is the thief of time." If you keep putting off the job in hand, you will waste your time in the process and your job will never get done in time. There is of course one other English proverb in this category, urging us to get down to our work as soon as possible: "Well begun is half done." Although the proverb has over the years taken on an extended meaning that if you give your work a good start, you have completed at least half of it, when it was first recorded in Latin by Horace as "He who has made a beginning, has half done" the proverb was indeed an appeal for an early start.

The Thai proverb *"Ya phat wan prakan phrung"* which extols the virtue of today may be equated with another English proverb: "One today is worth two tomorrows." Again what must be done should be done today as tomorrow may never come.

To put one's foot in it

Kwaeng thao ha sian

แกว่งเท้าหาเสี้ยน

To look for a splinter by wagging one's foot.

Ha hao sai hua

หาเหาใส่หัว

To look for lice to put on your head.

Ao mu suk hip

เอามือซุกหีบ

To stick one's hand in a cane press.

A lot of proverbs and sayings rely on parts of the human body to express an idea. There is a group of such sayings in Thai and English that teach us not to meddle in other people's affairs unnecessarily. For some reason, or perhaps coincidentally, each of the five sayings, three in Thai, and two in English, uses some parts of the body as its metaphor.

The foot seems to be a favourite here since it appears in one Thai and one English saying. The Thai saying, "To look for a splinter by wagging one's foot," may be matched by the English, "To put one's foot in it." The Thai saying is remarkably simple in its choice of words. *Kwaeng* means to wag, to shake, to swing. In this context, you are courting trouble if you carelessly wag your bare foot or *thao* about until it catches a splinter or *sian* on the floor-board. The English saying also implies certain carelessness on your part. You are not looking where you are going. Before you know anything, your foot is caught in the trouble, or the mess that may be lying about on the ground.

The next part of the body is the head for the Thai saying and the neck for the English one. We say "To look for lice to put on your head." Obviously, nobody in his right mind would be looking for *hao* or lice to infest his own head. You are again courting trouble because everybody knows how difficult it is to get rid of lice in one's hair. The English saying which has a similar meaning is: "To stick one's neck out," or as the Americans sometimes say: "To stick one's chin out." One explanation has it that a boxer should not stick his neck or chin out and should, on the contrary, be protecting this part of the body if he wants to stay clear of trouble.

The last saying in this group is in Thai, using the hand or *mu* as it metaphor. *Hip* in this context is not just an ordinary box as the Thai word commonly refers to, but a sugar-cane press or *hip oy*. If you stick your hand in the press or *suk hip,* you can imagine the consequences for yourself. The saying warns you not to ask for trouble when it is none of your business.

All these rather exotic sayings seem to bear the same message. Be careful. Watch your words and steps. You will be better off minding your own business than meddling in other people's affairs.

To put one's head in the lion's mouth.

Luang kho ngu hao

ล้วงคองูเห่า

To put one's hand in the cobra's throat.

This pair of Thai and English sayings relies on more or less the same imagery. It is relatively easy to guess why the Thai saying should be built on the imagery of the cobra's mouth, and why the English saying the lion's mouth. *Ngu hao* is considered one of the most dangerous poisonous snake in this part of the world while the lion is traditionally the most powerful and dangerous beast. If you stick your hand in the cobra's throat, obviously you are daring the devil himself. Actually the verb *luang* in Thai means to delve or to dig into something, so it is far more risky than just to put one's hand in. And to dig into the cobra's throat, you'll have to pass through its venomous fangs, so the feat is extremely formidable. We sometimes use this saying to describe the burglary of a house belonging to any law-enforcement officer. The higher the rank of the householder, the more daring the burglary seems to be in the eyes of the observer.

The English saying dates back to the sixteenth century. Another well-known version of the saying seems to be "He that has hand in the lion's mouth" which is very close to the Thai saying. However, the English saying is more general than the one in Thai and it may be applied to an extremely dangerous situation one is confronted with, or which one has to go through. Of course, to put your hand in the lion's mouth is not so risky as to put your head in it, and this twentieth-century version of the saying makes it as vivid and powerful as the one in Thai.

What strikes us most about this pair of sayings is the way our forefathers chose the most dangerous animals in their eyes to construct the sayings. Man is vulnerable when confronted with these beasts, and yet he is intrepid enough to risk his life for the sake of excitement, thrill or even notoriety. To take a chance is obviously basic to human nature. If we can't do it ourselves, we enjoy doing it by proxy. This is why both sayings have a lasting appeal since by just repeating them, we begin to feel the full force of the risk involved already.

To be as quiet as a grave (mouse).

Ngiap pen pao sak

เงียบเป็นเป่าสาก

To be as quiet as blowing on a pestle.

There is one characteristic of sayings in any language — that is although the message of the saying is clear to most people, its derivation is open to interpretation. This is the case with this Thai saying which also uses the pestle imagery. As we have explained earlier*, the pestle or *sak* is an indispensable kitchen utensil in Thailand. We use it to pound all kinds of paste in a mortar or *khrok*. The resulted concoction is the main ingredient for the numerous curries for which Thai cuisine is justly famous. In the old days, or even in upcountry areas today, the pestle was used to pound rice grains to get rid of their husks. Hence its full name *sak krabua* or *sak khao bua, khao* meaning of course rice. We did emphasize the point that the Thais for some reason do not regard this very useful object kindly. Some even refuse to refer to it by its proper name, preferring to use a euphemism — *mai ti phrik* — or the stick to pound the chili. Still, probably because of its prevalence in everyday life, the pestle appears in several sayings such as this one: *"Ngiap pen pao sak"*

The message of the saying is quite clear: "To be as quiet as blowing on a pestle," means to be very very quiet. Why this should be so is another matter. Some people claim that the pestle is an oblong object, looking very much like a flute (or more like an oboe). Now if you blow on a flute, it will emit some sound, whether you can play the instrument or not. Try blowing on a pestle, you will get no sound whatsoever. Yet others put forward a different interpretation: the pestle normally makes a lot of noise when you use it for pounding. In fact in the old days, a would-be suitor just went by the kitchen to listen to the noise the daughter of the house was making with her pestle. If she was hard-working, and therefore could make him a good home, her pounding would be rhythmic and incessant. The young man could then decide whether to take her on or not. Now if you use the pestle to blow on, obviously you will make no noise whatsoever. Both interpretations seem reasonable enough, and it's up to you to choose either one of them. Incidentally, you could say in English "As quiet as a grave" or "As quiet as a mouse", depending on the object being described, a place for the former and a person for the latter.

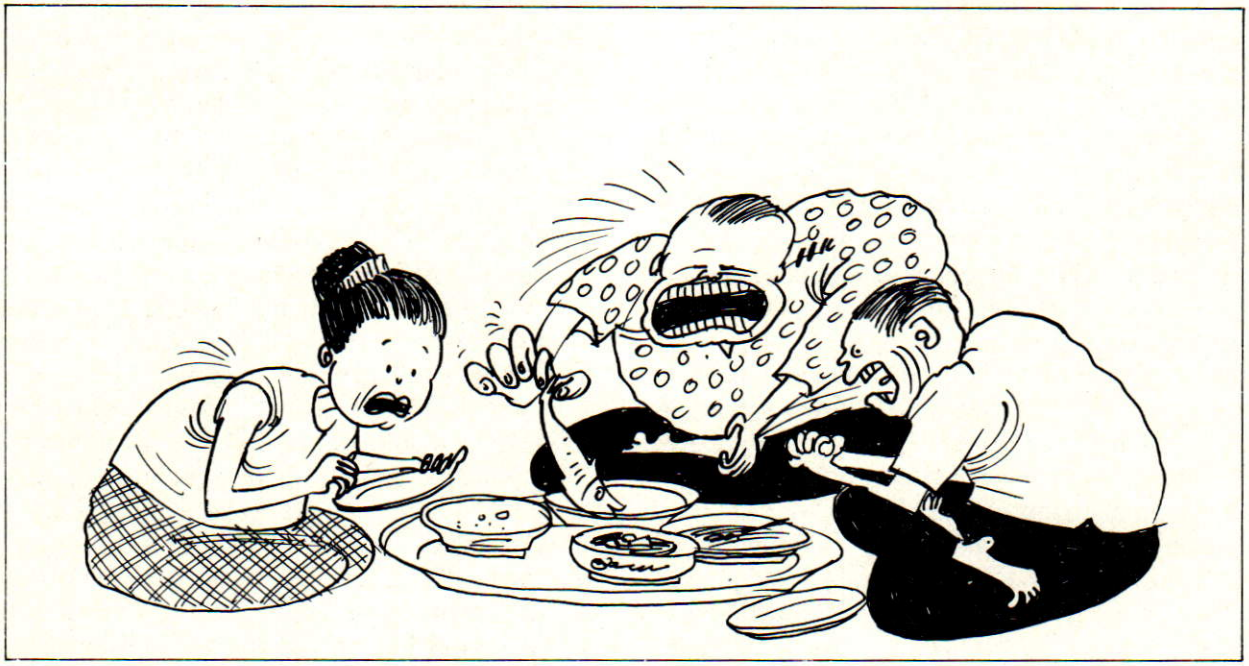
* See also pp. 49, 123

To reap what others have sown.

Chup mu poep

ชุบมือเปิบ

To dip one's hand and eat.



The Thai saying's choice of imagery has preserved an aspect of the traditional life-style of Thai people. Its literal meaning may seem initially rather remote to that of the English equivalent but it conjures up a picture that takes us right back to the days when eating with one's hand was a common and even polite practice.

Before the advent of forks and spoons in Thai society, our forefathers had developed the art of eating with their hands to perfection. Before eating, both hands must be washed thoroughly, preferably in scented water. Each diner would be presented with a tiny bowl of clean water, perfumed by floating rose petals or jasmine flowers. Only the right hand was used, however, as the left hand was preserved for other less uplifting tasks. The act of dipping one's hand in the washing bowl appears in the saying as *chup mu*. After washing, one could then proceed to eat. Now one was expected to eat in a refined manner and only the fingers not the palm, for example, were supposed to hold the mouthful of food. If the diner had no manners, he might be said to *poep* or to wolf down his food in large handful. Therefore, if you *chup mu poep,* it implies that you have not participated in the actual preparations of the meal. All you do is to sit down, wash your hand and gobble up what others have cooked and prepared. In other words, you are taking advantage of others and enjoy the fruit of other people's labour. Although the art of eating with one's hand is now lost among city-dwellers, it is still very much alive among upcountry people. This may explain why the saying is still very popular and is often used to condemn all opportunists in our society.

The English saying "To reap what others have sown," has its origin in an agricultural society that England once was. It must have been coined by farmers who had experienced this kind of injustice. If a farmer has tilled the land and sown the crops, it is natural that he expects to reap the field himself. The harvest should be his by right since he has toiled for it from the beginning. If somebody else comes along and reaps his crops, then that person is taking advantage of the hard-working farmer. To reap what others have sown or to eat what others have prepared are equally unjust and roundly condemned in both sayings.

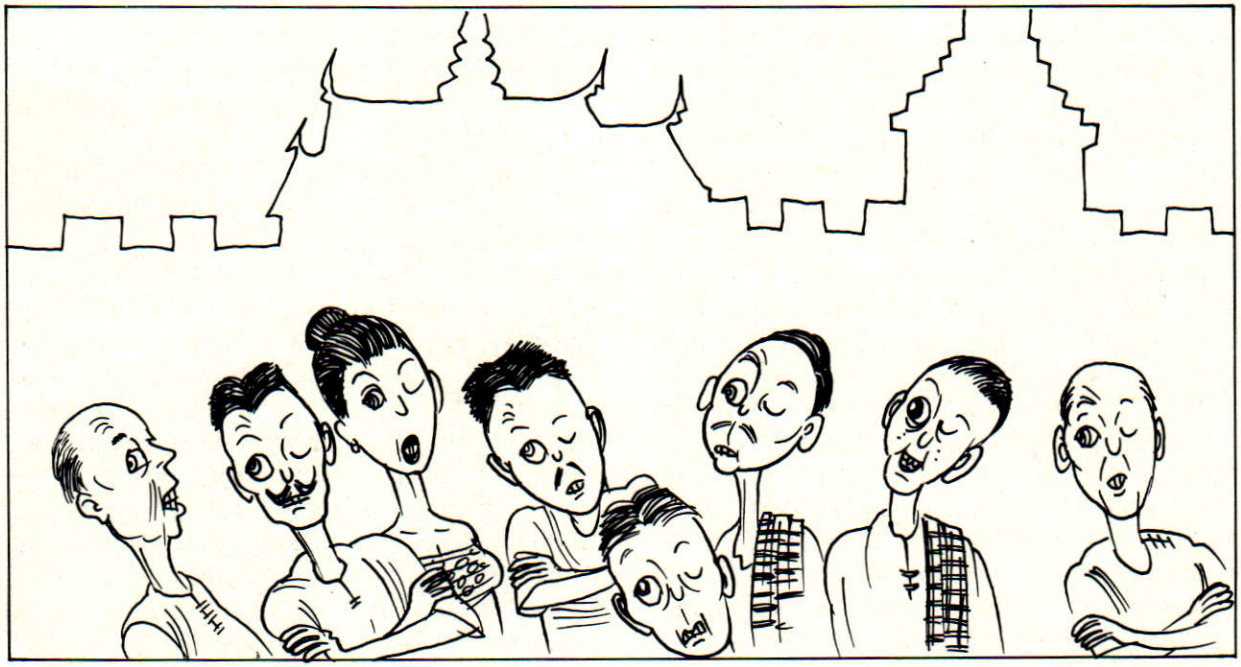
When you are at Rome, do as Rome does.

Khao muang ta liu hai liu ta tam

เข้าเมืองตาหลิ่วให้หลิ่วตาตาม

When you enter a town where people wink,

wink as they do.



One of the characteristics of proverbs which we have noted is their middle-of-the-road attitude and the resulted advice. This Thai proverb and its equivalent seem to offer a rather conservative piece of advice that must have appealed to the masses for generations.

The Thai proverb is phrased in a complex sentence whose key words are *liu ta,* a compound meaning to wink, since *ta* here means eyes. The first phrase of this complex sentence is typically elliptical. *Khao muang* means to enter a town, whereas *ta liu* is used here as an adjectival phrase qualifying that town, meaning where people wink. The second phrase of the proverb is in the Imperative Mood: *hai liu ta* can be captured in one word in English: wink, and *tam* is an adverb meaning accordingly. Therefore, the whole proverb may be rendered as "When you enter a town where people wink, wink as they do."

The English equivalent is an ancient one dates from, understandably enough, Roman times. When translated into English, we have either: "When you are at Rome, do as Rome does," or "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." The message carried in this proverb is exactly the same as the one expounded in the Thai proverb. If you are a newcomer or a stranger in any organization or society, try to conform to the mores or customs of that society. Although the reason for this behaviour is not spelled out in the proverb, it is fairly obvious. If you want to be accepted by members of that community, it will not serve your cause at all by acting differently or rejecting the cherished beliefs of the society.

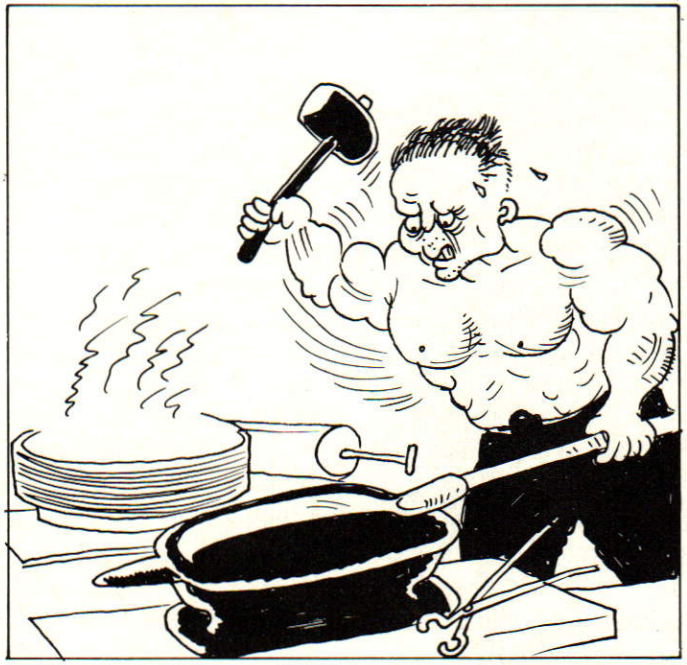
For once, there is no harm in adhering to this appeal to conform. The proverb is especially relevant to students in an exchange programme, for example. Students are normally remarkable for their anti-establishment attitude and behaviour wherever they are. However, it is their own society they are rebelling against. There is no use, to say the least, to rebel against an alien society where they are sent to learn its culture and get to know the people in that host country. We can think of a lot of situations where the proverb's message may come in handy. If only the tourists will listen to this advice, a lot of local prejudices and hostile attitudes entertained by the native inhabitants may no longer exist.

Rome was not built in a day

Cha cha dai phra lem ngam

ช้าช้าได้พร้าเล่มงาม

Slowly, slowly, you will get a fine knife.



The Thai proverb and its English equivalent teach us to take our time when we are doing something so that we might obtain the finest result or end product. The adverb *cha* or slowly is repeated twice for special emphasis. *Dai* means to get, to obtain, in this case, *phra,* which is an archaic word for some sharp objects, including a big knife with a long blade, a scythe or even a sickle. *Lem* is sometimes referred to by grammarians as a classifying or numerative noun, peculiar only to the Thai language. If you want to talk about a knife in Thai, you have to take care of the knife's classification or *lem,* as in *mit nung lem,* or literally "knife one lem." The classifier *lem* may be used to classify other objects quite different from a knife, such as books, carts, needles, or those similar to a knife, such as axes, spears, swords and so on. In the proverb, the knife is qualified by the adjective *ngam,* meaning beautiful or fine. The proverb thus relies on the metaphor of a blacksmith at work. If he takes his time, he is bound to produce a fine specimen.

In the English language, there are several ways to convey this message, particularly those under "haste".* The one quoted here relies on comparable imagery of construction and creation, although the English proverb is on a much larger scale, since it is a big city and not a mere knife which is being constructed. If you are undertaking a grand and difficult project, you must realize that it will take some time to complete and you must be patient to see the project through. In other words, take your time if you want to do something well. Apart from this proverb, there is one other which contains the word "slow"; this is "Slow but sure." You may seem to be doing something too slowly for the observer's liking, but you certainly know what you are doing and you can guarantee that your achievement will be satisfactory to all concerned.

There is a lot to be said for the message conveyed by these proverbs. All of us who live in big cities must have felt the pressure to get things done quickly in order to meet some deadline or schedule. This hectic pace is unknown to upcountry people who are still taking things easy and manage to get things done to the satisfaction of all. Perhaps all of us ought to slow down a little and ponder over what we are doing at the moment. After all, most difficult decisions and work have been successfully carried out after careful consideration, which often means wait and see, or take your time until the problem finally works itself out.

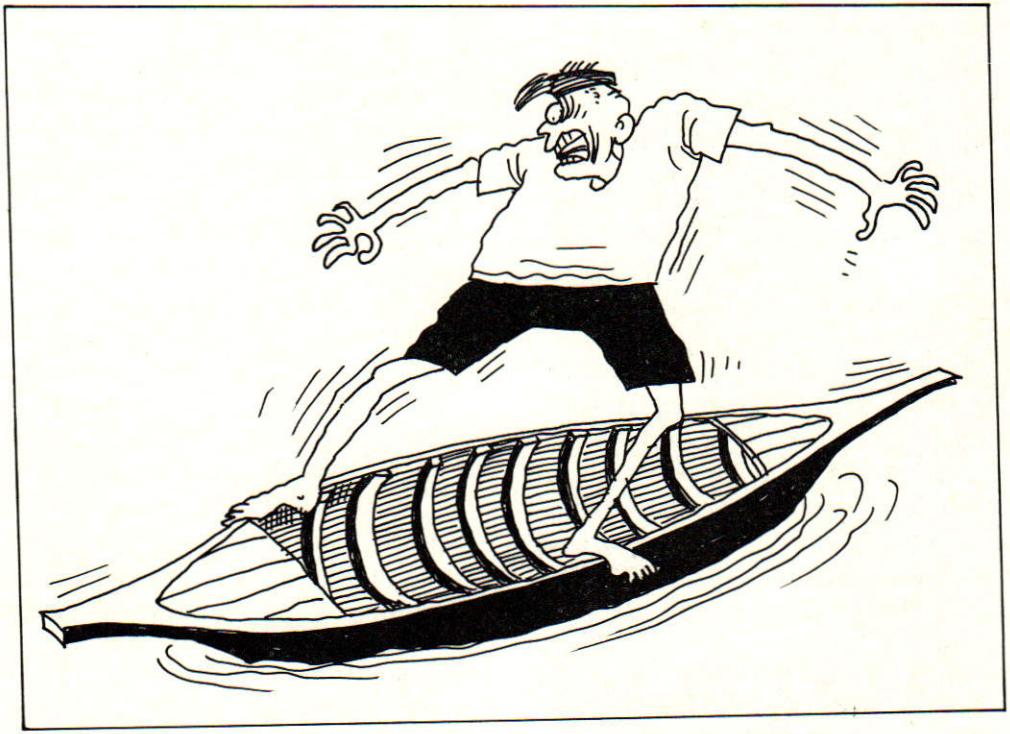
* See also p.65

To run with the hare
and hunt with the hounds.

Yiap rua song khaem

เหยียบเรือสองแคม

To step on both gunwales of a boat.



This is another pair of proverbs of the "life-style" category which reflects everyday life of the respective people of origin. The Thai adage is a popular one and often used as an interdiction, preceded by *ya* or the negative imperative "don't". Although its precise derivation is very much in dispute, the saying tells us one thing for certain: the Thais were familiar with boats, enough to coin a proverb based on their use. We were once a people whose life depended on water-borne transportation. Even now, except for those living in urban centres, the Thais still use boats instead of cars. Their villages sprawl along both banks of meandering rivers or straight canals. Since the boat plays an important role in a Thai's life, his survival and livelihood may well depend on his boatmanship.

The meaning of the proverb is important to the understanding of its possible derivation. We normally take it to mean someone who takes both sides in an argument or a dispute, trying to win favour with both parties at once. If this is the case, it is bad if not downright dangerous to be standing astride, legs apart, with your foot on each gunwale or *khaem* of a boat. You may not be able to maintain the balance after a while, and the narrow boat, used in this part of the world may well capsize. That's one way to look at it. Another school of thought believes that by balancing yourself on the boat, with your foot on each side of it, you think only of your survival. We must admit that this interpretation has its merit but quite improbable in actual practice, since the narrow boat is notorious for being so unsteady that it is difficult enough to keep one's balance, being seated, let alone standing. There is a third interpretation, claiming that your feet are balancing on gunwales of two boats, which afford you a better chance of surviving. Some people actually go so far as to take the saying to condone a person's ability to survive under all adverse circumstances — an interpretation which may be ruled out, considering its frequent use as an interdiction.

The English proverb "To run with the hare and hunt with the hounds," can only be coined by a sportive people who were keen and still are on hunting like the British. You have to take sides in a hunt — either with the hunted or the hunter — as you should in real life. Failure to do so under certain circumstances may well brand you as being hypocritical and not impartial as you sometimes fancy you are.

To set (people) by the ears.

Siam khao khwai hai chon kan

เสี้ยมเขาควายให้ชนกัน

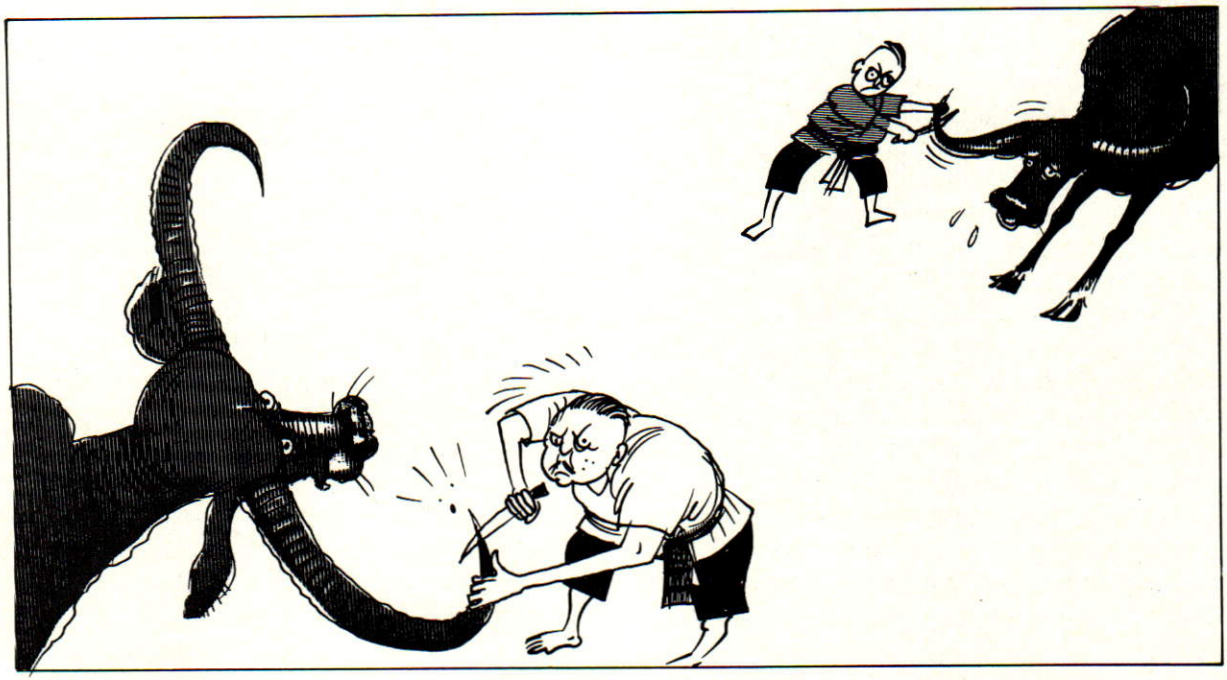
Sharpening buffaloes' horns to make them fight each other.

Yu hai ram tam hai rua

ยุให้รำตำให้รั่ว

Urging (someone) to dance;

pounding (a mortar) until it leaks.



The Thai saying refers to a once-popular sport in upcountry areas. Not unlike the English, the Thais have always had a passion for betting. Animals of all kinds — fish, cocks, crickets, beetles — and of course bulls and buffaloes, are made to fight in make-shift or permanent arenas for on-lookers to bet on the likely winners. It is in fact quite an art to train these animals to fight and there is a great deal of pre-fight preparation. Much of it involves enhancing the fighting animal's natural weapons. In this case, it is the buffaloes' horns or *khao khwai* which are sharpened or *siam* to ready them for the fight. *Chon* normally means to collide with or to run into something, but in this context, it simply means to fight. As for its message, what you are doing is to actively encourage two people to fight or quarrel with each other either for your pleasure or for some other motives.

The sixteenth-century English saying, "To set (people) by the ears" not only has the same message but also refers to a fight. An explanation has been offered that the animals this time are dogs. To make dogs fight each other, the owners would have to grab the dogs' ears and make them face each other. This explanation is quite plausible since dogs can get irritated when their ears are rudely manipulated. Substitute dogs' ears with people's ears and the subtle implications become quite apparent.

We also have another popular saying in Thai which makes the same point. *"Yu hai ram tam hai rua"*, which may be interpreted as "Urging (someone) to dance, pounding (a mortar) until it leaks." Again, both phrases imply coercion and disruption. In the first instance, people are prodded on to dance or to take unseemly action, whereas in the second instance, a mortar which is whole is misused until it cracks and leaks.

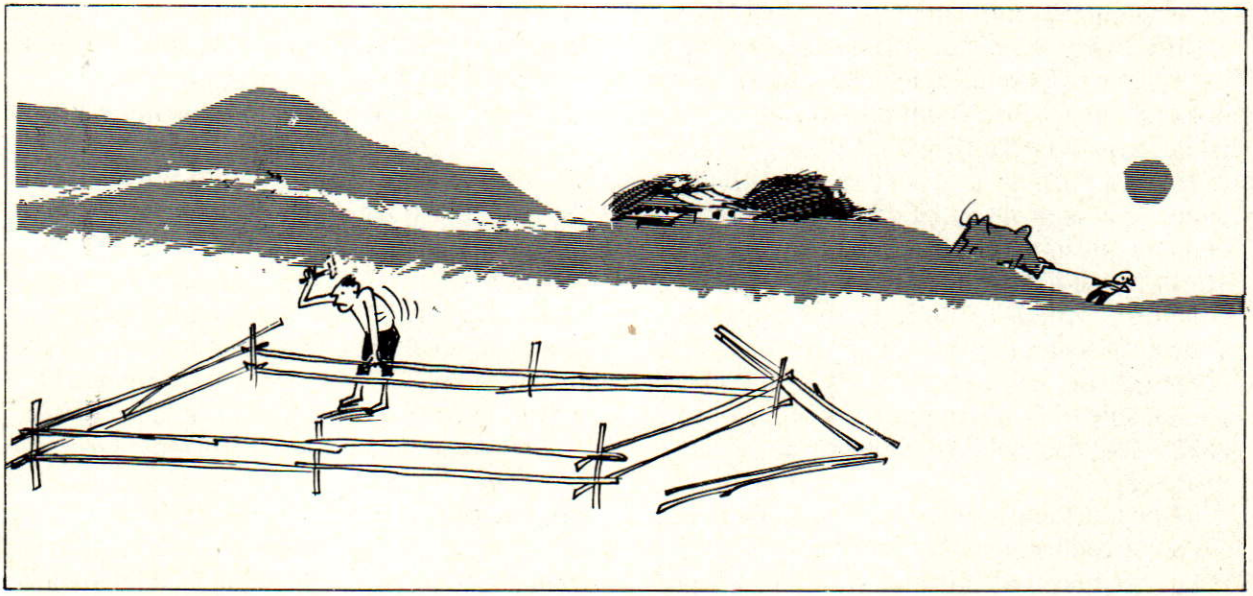
These sayings definitely frown on this course of action. To manipulate other people for your own benefit is hardly ethical, but to disrupt their relationship, to destroy their unity, is not something to be tolerated.

It is too late to shut the stable-door
when the steed is stolen.

Wua hai lom khok

วัวหายล้อมคอก

To build the cattle-pen after the cow is lost.



Both porverbs use remarkably similar imagery to convey the same message. They could have been coined by farmers and horse-breeders who depended on the horse and the cow for their livelihoods.

The Thai adage is very simple and concise. *Wua* is a general term for a cow or a bull and if used in the plural for cattle. *Hai* means to lose, used as a past participle in this proverb. The second phrase contains also two syllables: *lom khok*. *Lom* normally means to surround, but used in this context with *khok* or the cattle-pen, it means to build or to set up the pen. In fact, *lom* can also be used with a fence as in *lom rua* or to set up a fence, since the idea is to build the pen or the fence around an area. The imagery here is typical of a Thai community setting which is predominantly agricultural. The cow in the proverb is normally kept as a draught animal since Thai farmers commonly use bullock-carts for transporting their produce while preferring buffaloes for ploughing. It is a common occurrence to lose your cows because rustling is still a major crime in rural areas.

The English proverb also has a farm setting, although the horse in question is probably kept for racing. After all, England is famous for horse-racing and home of several fine race-courses. Whichever the case may be, the message is the same: the stable-door should have been properly closed so that the thief would find it impossible to steal the horse. The other variant of the proverb : "To shut the stable-door after the horse has bolted," is less explicit about the theft because the horse may have escaped on its own free will.

The underlying message of these proverbs is a piece of advice which is timeless in its application: preventive measures come too late in some situation because the damage has already been done and any attempt to rectify the wrong may be in vain; the implication being that one should think of possible loopholes and obstacles in an undertaking and plan in advance to overcome them.

You cannot make a silk (velvet) purse out of a sow's ear.

Yom maeo khai

ย้อมแมวขาย

Dying the cat to sell it.

Phakchi roi na

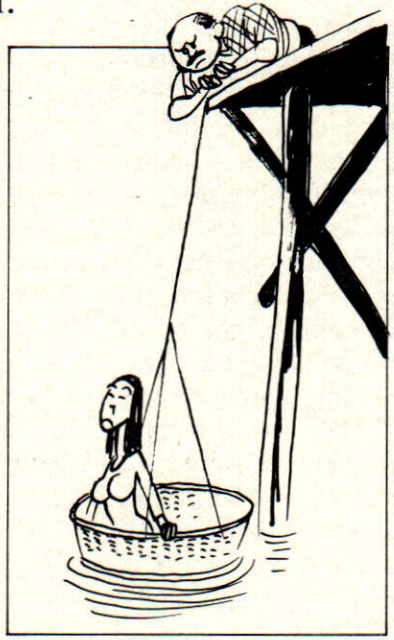
ผักชีโรยหน้า

Sprinkling parsley on the surface.

Sai takra lang nam

ใส่ตะกร้าล้างน้ำ

Putting in the basket to wash.



One of the key concepts that run through proverbs and sayings is "Truth will come to light", no matter what people may try to do to conceal or distort it. This group of sayings makes an observation to the effect through disparate but colourful imagery.

The first Thai saying uses the metaphor of a cat or *maeo*. If you have to *yom* or dye the cat in order to *khai* or sell it, obviously the cat must be rather dull in colour. With a more glossy and colourful fur, the owner may fetch a good price for it. Therefore, if you have an object or an idea to sell and you make it look or sound better than it really is, you are condemned by this saying. The saying may be used as a direct observation when the situation calls for or in retrospect after someone has already been duped.

The second Thai saying relies on the metaphor of cooking. *Phakchi* is Chinese parsley or coriander leaves, commonly used as garnish in Thai cuisine. *Na* which normally means face refers to the surface or the top of a dish in this context. If you *roi* or sprinkle some parsley on top of the dish you are preparing, hopefully, it will improve the look if not the taste of the dish. Consequently, if you are doing something in a *pakchi roi na* sort of way, you are doing it just for effect or presenting the best aspect of your work to whoever is going to inspect it. Although the degree of deceit here is less than in the first saying, the saying is definitely a criticism of your action, particularly of the lack of seriousness and depth in that action.

The third Thai saying also chooses the metaphor of food preparation. *Takra* is a basket where you put perhaps some vegetables to *lang nam* or clean with water. The saying can only be applied to a specific situation when a young girl's reputation is redeemed after an illicit love affair by being sent away or married off. Like the salad in the basket, the fallen girl is cleansed and her reputation restored in the process.

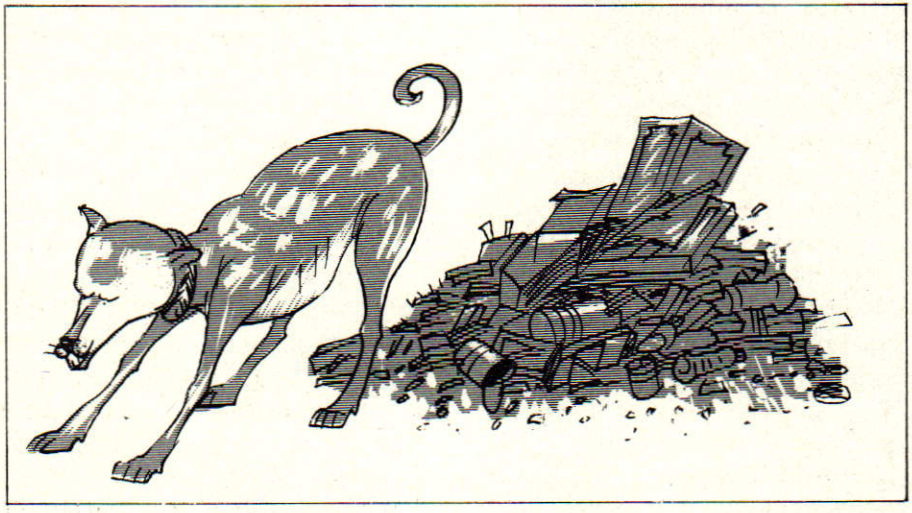
The English saying dates to the early sixteenth century. The metaphor used is that of a resourceful farmer's wife trying to make an expensive-looking purse, like silk or velvet, out of the lowly material available — a sow's ear. A sow is a female pig, therefore it must be considered lowest of the low in the eyes of male chauvinists in those days. A sow's ear, by the same token, is the dirtiest and most worthless article imaginable in Western countries, where pig's ears are not consumed as a delicacy as they are in the East.

There is no smoke without fire.

Mai mi foi ma mai khi

ไม่มีฝอยหมาไม่ขี้

The dog doesn't shit where
there is no rubbish.



At the risk of generalization, it may be said that our fascination with the dog and its excrement has spawned a whole series of earthy proverbs in the Thai language. We have chosen this particular proverb not because it is crude but because it reveals our forefathers' knack for observation as well as captures in one sentence the ambiance in which the dog lives in Thailand. The proverb starts with a seemingly mundane statement: *"Mai mi foi"*. *Foi* is short for *munfoi* and the statement literally means "There is no rubbish." Then comes the shocking rejoinder: *"Ma mai khi"* or "the dog doesn't shit." The inversion is probably intended to disguise the crude statement and cushion its impact on unwary ears.

The dog's habit represents malicious gossip and rumour, while the rubbish heap represents its source. In some way, the metaphor chosen aptly symbolizes the whole dirty business of the grapevine. But what can we infer from the proverb on the subject of ambiance? For one thing, it is obvious that in this country dogs are allowed to roam freely and to choose their favourite haunts. Dog meat is not considered a delicacy here and the dog does not have to fear for its life. Food is abundant for dogs if they are clever enough to find it—in temple grounds or at rubbish dumps. Stray dogs are rounded up by the authorities about once a year when the long hot summer arrives in their attempts to prevent rabies. But otherwise a great number of Thai dogs lead a relatively carefree existence, without demanding owners, without leads and collars and the daily walks — all the dreary routine which dogs in Western countries are subjected to.

The English equivalent is quite innocuous in comparison with the Thai proverb. When there is fire, there's sure to be smoke. So when there is some fishy business going on, people are sure to find out and start talking about it.

Both proverbs encourage us to investigate into rumours however improbable they appear to be. But very often, the proverbs are abused and quoted instead to lend credibility to the most malicious gossip. We will do well to keep this in mind next time we hear either of the proverbs repeated.

To nourish (cherish) a snake (viper, serpent) in one's bosom.

Liang luk sua luk chorake

เลี้ยงลูกเสือลูกจระเข้

To raise tiger cubs and baby crocodiles.

Tham khun bucha thot

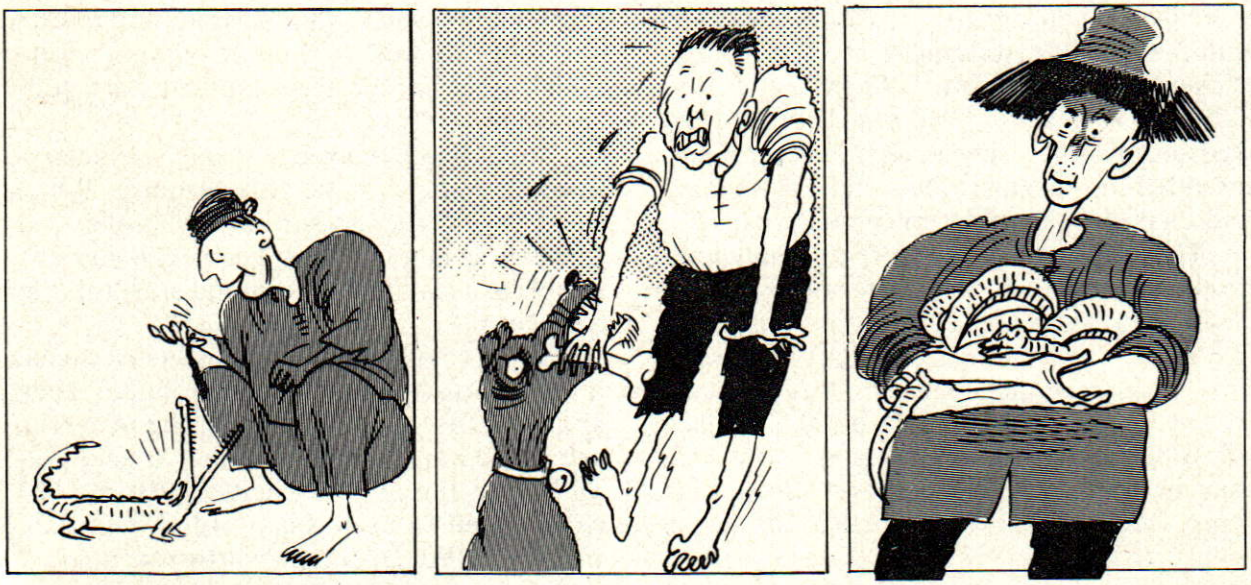
ทำคุณบูชาโทษ

To do a good deed in homage of a bad return.

Chaona kap nguhao

ชาวนากับงูเห่า

The farmer and the cobra.



The key concept in this group of proverbs is the idea of raising or taking care of a wild and dangerous animal. The first Thai proverb uses the verb *liang* which is very close in meaning to the English nourish. *Luk sua* and *luk chorake* are the young of tigers and crocodiles, representing all the most dangerous animals in the tropics. The message of the proverb is quite easy to guess: if you try to raise the young of these dangerous animals, you will be in trouble once they reach maturity because they can never be absolutely tamed. In other words, when you try to help ungrateful people, you may find that the only reward from that kind act is trouble. We have another Thai proverb which expresses the same idea: *"Tham khun bucha thot,"* which may be literally translated as "To do a good deed in homage of a bad return." You mean well in your action but all you get in return is ungratefulness and endless trouble.

The English proverb: "To nourish a snake in one's bosom" originates from an Aesop's tale which tells a story about the farmer who helped warm up a freezing snake by holding its rigid body in his bosom. When the snake was revived, it bit the poor farmer. So the treacherous snake is likened to an ungrateful and treacherous human being who repays his benefactor with an evil deed. Incidentally, this English proverb has a number of acceptable variants; for example, instead of to nourish, one can say to cherish or to nurse, and instead of a snake, other alternatives have been used, such as a viper or a serpent.

The Aesop's tale is quite well known in this country and for a quick reference we normally say just the title of the tale *"Chaona kap nguhao"* or "The Farmer and the Cobra". So it is quite interesting that the Thais' forefathers had thought of the idea before the Aesop's tale reached this shore and made up the proverb with similar imagery.

He that sows good seed,

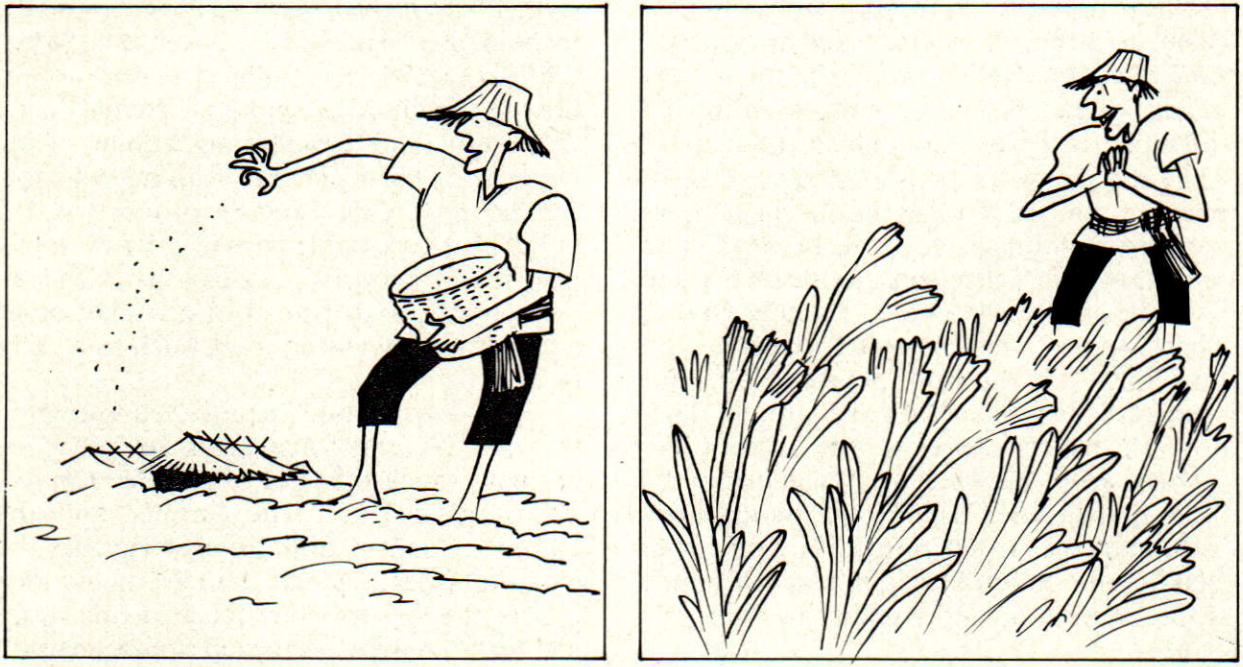
shall reap good corn.

Tham di dai di/Tham chua dai chua

ทำดีได้ดี ทำชั่วได้ชั่ว

Good deeds beget good results,

while bad deeds beget bad results.



A great number of popular Thai proverbs can be traced back to the teachings of the Lord Buddha. One of these is given here to demonstrate the fundamental truth encapsulated in it. It appears in the form of a couplet and relies on a series of repetition. There are two key words: *tham* or to do and *dai* or to receive. Both words are repeated in each line and serve as a link to the whole structure. Each line in turn contains an internal repetition which helps bring home the message forcefully. The word *di* or good is repeated in the first line and by contrast, the word *chua* or bad is repeated in the second line. *Tham di* literally means "to do good" while *dai di* literally means "to receive or acquire handsome returns." The second line *Tham chua dai chua* simply states the opposite of the first: if you commit an evil act, you will be sure to come to a sorrow end.

This Buddhist proverb underlies the concept of *karma*. To put it simply, we Buddhists believe that we are responsible for every single deed that we commit be it good or bad. Good deeds unfortunately do not cancel out any wrongful acts. All will eventually produce their corresponding results sooner or later and their perpetrator will enjoy or suffer the fruits of his action. The concept is rather more complex than this simplified interpretation but at least it goes some way towards explaining the proverb.

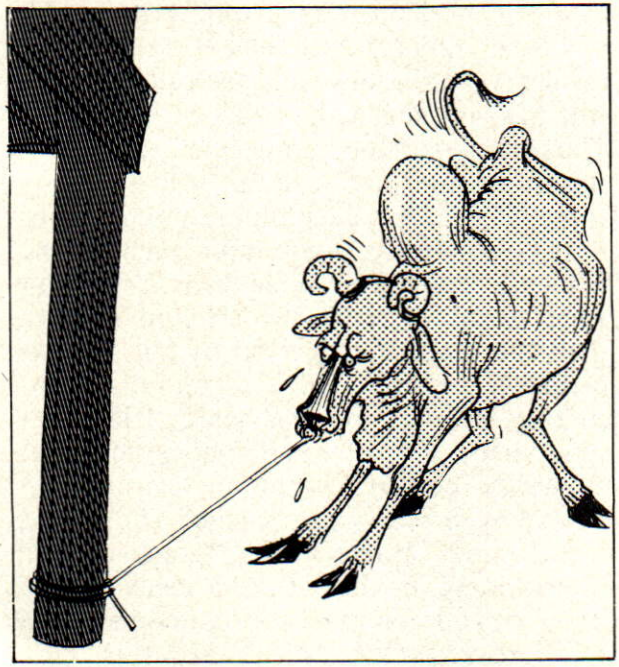
The English proverb dates back to the fifteenth century. It makes use of an agricultural metaphor which is in keeping with the major occupation of the English people at the time. There is another sixteen-century proverb on the topic: "He that sows virtue, reaps fame." The agricultural metaphor here drives home the message clearly by substituting "virtue" for "good seed," and "fame" for "good corn." Interestingly, neither of them spells out the opposite action and its consequences as the Thai proverb does.

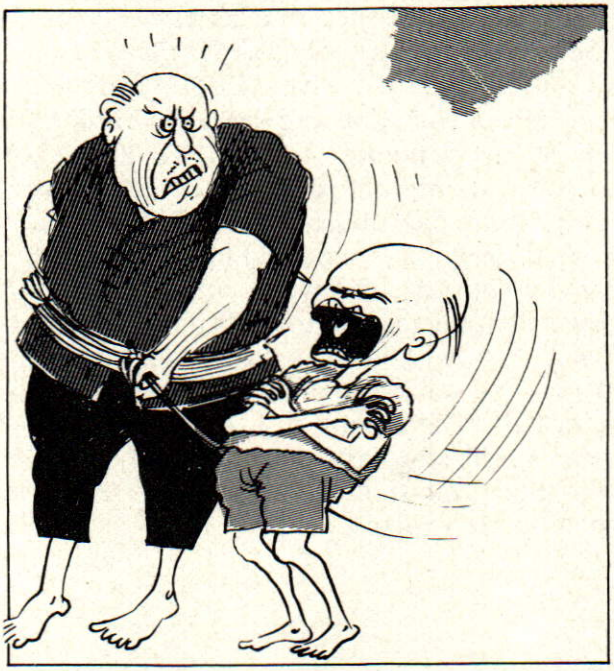
Spare the rod, spoil the child.

Rak wua hai phuk /Rak luk hai ti

รักวัวให้ผูก รักลูกให้ตี

If you love a cow, tie it up;
If you love your child, beat him.





These two proverbs rely on practically the same imagery to express an authoritarian viewpoint. The Thai proverb appears in the form of a couplet. Two key words are repeated in both lines: *rak* and *hai*. Whereas *rak* simply means to love, *hai* is a little more complicated. It normally means to give or to provide when used in the Indicative Mood. In this context, *hai* is used to represent the Imperative Mood, meaning to let or to allow. The two lines are linked by an external rhyme: *phuk* and *luk* meaning to tie up and a child respectively.

In this couplet, the two objects of love are quite dissimilar: *wua* or a cow, a bull or an ox, in the first line, and *luk* or your offspring in the second line. What you are advised to do to them is equally unpleasant from the point of view of the cow and the child. The cow is to be tied up while the child is to be beaten or *ti*. This authoritarian message has far wider implications than the simple piece of advice it seems to give.

The English equivalent spells out the second line of the Thai proverb. If you do not beat your child, he will be spoiled, so you had better punish him for his own good. Both proverbs have normally been taken literally and often cited as an excuse for corporal punishment. However, the seemingly explicit advice should not obscure the hidden message of the proverbs — that is, too much freedom is detrimental and you have to be cruel to be kind. Whether you agree with this viewpoint or not depends on your upbringing and the way you look at life in general. It is no longer a simple question of whether you should beat your child but of the extent to which you allow the people in your charge to have freedom of action and choice. This eleventh-century proverb may have lost its appeal to the twentieth-century audience, particularly when seen against the background of modern psychology and the progress made in terms of human rights. But if we stop and think over the import of the proverbs, we should be able to see that the message lies at the heart of all restrictive regulations imposed by an authoritarian regime on its people. The masses must be protected and if necessary punished for their own good. At this point, we may well ask after Juvenal: "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" (Who is to guard the guards themselves?)

Speech is silvern, silence is golden.

Phut pai song phai bia

พูดไปสองไพเบี้ย

If you talk,

(you'll get) a small sum of money;

Ning sia tamlung thong

นิ่งเสียตำลึงทอง

If you remain silent,

(you'll get) a lot of gold.

The Thai proverb is remarkably similar to its English equivalent, both in content and phraseology. It appears in the form of a couplet, with an external rhyme *bia* and *sia* linking the two lines. *Phai* in the first line was an old denomination no longer in use in this country. In the old days, the baht currency was broken into 4 *salung;* 1 *salung* had 2 *fuang* and 1 *fuang* had 4 *phai.* So a *phai* was worth about 3 *satang* if one thinks of the modern currency, with the baht having 100 *satang*. *Song phai* was a coin, equivalent to about six *satang; song phai bia* is a way of saying the *song phai* coin, since *bia* or cowrie shells were used before the coin was minted.*

The second line of the proverb has *tamlung* as its key word. *Tamlung* was a weight measurement which is also no longer in use. One *tamlung* equals 4 baht in weight. The Thais still use the baht to measure gold nowadays, causing considerable confusion among foreigners, since baht is also the currency. This is due to the fact that the old baht coin was minted in pure silver which weighed exactly one baht. One baht weight equals 15 grammes or .529 oz., so 4 baht or 1 *tamlung* of gold is 60 grammes or just over two ounces.

Once the Thai proverb is fully explained, it is evident that the nineteenth-century English proverb is simply another version of exactly the same idea. We are advised to consider our words carefully before uttering them for in some cases it is more profitable not to say anything at all. The only trouble with these proverbs is if they are strictly adhered to, there can be no exchange of views and sharing of ideas. Worse still, they can be cited as a cover-up by those people who have no ideas at all in their heads. In this case, their silence is not even silvern, let alone their speech.

* See also p.11

Take care of the pence,
and the pounds will take care of themselves.

Mi salung phung prachop hai khrop baht

มีสลึงพึงประจบให้ครบบาท

If you have a quarter,
save until you make it up to a baht.

The Thai proverb is only the first line of a quatrain, which is only a portion of a famous literary work in verse. For once we know for certain where the proverb comes from. It was written by the renowned poet of the Bangkok period, Sunthorn Phu, who was born in 1786, only four years after the founding of Bangkok as the capital city of the kingdom. The poet reached the height of his fame during the second reign when the king appointed him the court poet. After a period of eclipse during the third reign, the poet was reinstated in the fourth reign and died at the ripe old age of 71 in 1855. The quatrain appears in his book of proverbs for women or *Suphasit Son Ying,* a rambling work in verse containing over two hundred quatrains, which teach women, both unmarried and married, how to conduct themselves according to contemporary values. Although there was no record of its composition date, the historian Prince Damrong placed it around 1837-1840 when Sunthorn Phu was out of favour with the reigning monarch and had to earn a living through his works. Much of the advice given by the poet is now outdated but this particular proverb has withstood the test of time because of its universal truth.

Let's take a look at the proverb. We are told not to throw away even a small sum of money. *Salung* equals 25 *satang* or a quarter in Thai currency, the smallest coin in current circulation. Since one baht is worth just under 5 US cents by the current exchange rate, a *salung* or a quarter of that is worth just a little over one cent. If you have only a quarter, says the proverb, what you should do or *phung* is to *prachop,* another way of saying *banchop,* or to make it meet or to complete, *hai khrop baht* or until it totals a baht. The rest of the quatrain completes the message, as a free translation of it shows:

> Don't deprive yourself of anything you need.
> If you have a little, spend a little, carefully,
> Don't overspend for you'll be poor in the long run.

The proverb teaches us not to waste even the smallest sum of money, then we shall never have to go short of anything we really need. This is also the message of another English proverb: "Waste not, want not," which dates back to late eighteenth century. There are other older proverbs with a similar message: a late sixteenth-century one: "Penny and penny laid up will be many;" and a mid-seventeenth-century proverb: "A penny saved is a penny gained (got)." Come to think of it, the poet Sunthorn Phu was much more generous with his initial sum than his English colleagues. He started with a quarter while the rest of them chose a penny, the smallest denomination of the English currency.

To take something with a pinch (grain)
of salt (snuff).

Fang hu wai hu

ฟังหูไว้หู

Listening with one ear and keeping the other ear.

The imagery here is sense organs and their corresponding functions. The Thai proverb is open to interpretation although its message is clear to all. The key word being repeated here is *hu* or ear; *fang* means to listen, so *fang hu* may be translated as listen with one ear. *Wai* is a very useful word in Thai and may be used in a lot of compound words, but in this context, it means to keep. *Wai hu* therefore means to keep the other ear. What you should keep the other ear for is not spelled out in the proverb but we can assume that you should keep it for listening to the other side of the story. When you hear one version of any story, do not believe it entirely, you must keep your ear open for other versions of the same tale.

The English proverb is a direct translation of a medieval Latin expression: *cum grano salis* or with a grain of salt. This is why the English proverb has another variant: "To take something with a grain of salt." There is one other less popular variant of this proverb: "To take something with a pinch or a grain of snuff." The first version implies the act of eating while the second that of breathing. What it means is you must not take everything whole at its face value. The food you eat should be mixed with salt while the air you breathe should be mixed with some snuff. That extra something you take with whatever you are imbibing symbolizes caution or incredulity on your part.

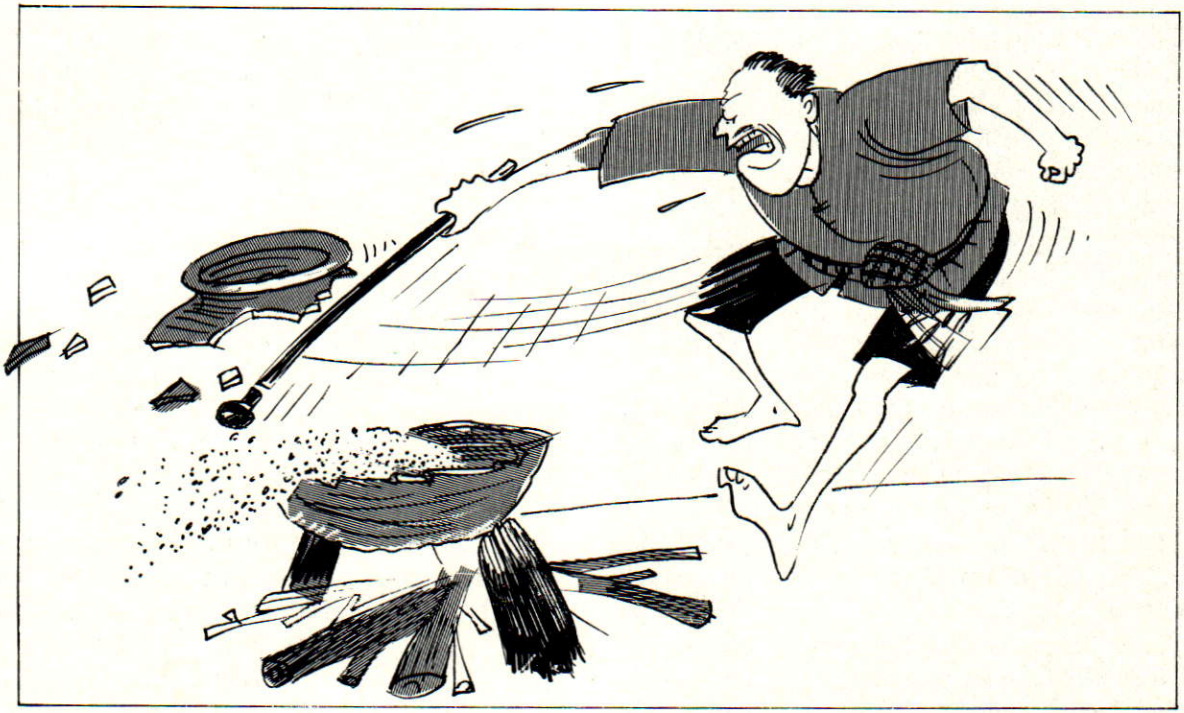
Whichever sense organ you use to establish contact with the outside world — your ear, your mouth or your nose — you should exercise caution. The proverbs' message teaches you not to believe what you hear straightaway, and always be on your guard against lies. Incidentally, if you adhere to this advice, we say in Thai that you are not a person with light ears or *"Mai pen khon hu bao"*. The extra weight you put on your ears in this case is very much like a grain of salt or snuff you take.

To take the bread out of one's mouth.

Thup mo khao

ทุบหม้อข้าว

To smash the rice pot.



Both sayings are built on similar imagery — the staple food of the inhabitants of their respective countries of origin, rice for the Thai and bread for the English.

The vivid and forceful imagery of the Thai saying makes it both memorable and effective. The verb *thup* refers to a number of actions: to hit, to bang one's fist, to smash, to break and so on. *Mo khao* is a pot used for cooking rice which in this context is definitely the earthen pot with a narrow neck and a small lid often found in upcountry areas. Although electric rice-cookers are fast replacing these earthen pots in the towns, upcountry people still find it most handy to cook their rice in these old-fashioned pots for obvious reasons — the pots can be produced in the village from local clay and easily replaceable; they also work beautifully on charcoal or wood fire and need no electricity, an unobtainable luxury still in some part of the country. If the pot is smashed, there will be no food to eat for that day at least. Remember also that rice is synonymous with food in Thai usage as in the expression *kin khao* which means more than just "to eat rice" but the whole idea of having a meal or food. As rice is our staple diet, to smash the rice pot of a family to pieces is tantamount to destroying that family's livelihood.

The English saying "To take the bread out of one's mouth" dates back to the seventeenth century. As bread is the staple diet of the English, to snatch it from someone's mouth equals to deprive him of his livelihood or take away his living by competition or otherwise. The saying may also be used to condemn those irresponsible fathers who take the bread out of their children's mouths by drinking and gambling.

There is a slight difference in the usage of the Thai and English sayings. The Thai saying can sometimes refer to your own action while the English one usually requires a second party. In Thai, the saying may be made a little more specific in this case by the addition of the phrase *tua eng* or oneself at the end of it. Therefore, when you *"Thup mo khao tua eng"* or "smash your own rice pot", you only have yourself to blame.

To talk a mile a minute.

Phut pen toi hoi

พูดเป็นต่อยหอย

To talk like someone cracking shells.

Phut nam lai fai dap

พูดน้ำไหลไฟดับ

To talk like water flowing (and) a fire is put out.

The ability to talk fast and a lot in some people has fascinated others and spawned a number of sayings on the topic. The first Thai saying needs some explanation for untutored ears. *Phut* is the key word in both sayings, meaning to talk. The act of talking is likened to *toi hoi* which is a rather unusual expression. *Toi* normally means to hit, to box, but in this context, it means to crack open shells, particularly oyster shells. If we ever observe a hard-working fishermen at work when he tries to dislodge oyster shells from rocks, we will notice that his hammering and pounding is not only loud but fast and constant. This practically uninterrupted noise of hammering is likened to the noise of uninterrupted chattering. Since the original noise is clearly unpleasant, the chattering is regarded more or less in the same light.

The other Thai saying is even more unflattering to anyone who happens to be extremely articulate but fails to control this rare gift. *Nam lai* means flowing water while *fai dap* means a fire is put out. Put in another way, words flow from your mouth in such a volume that if they were water they could put out a fire easily.

These sarcastic comments find their equivalent in a number of English sayings. If you talk very fast and rarely stop talking, you can be said "to talk a mile a minute." In other words, all the syllables which you only take a minute to deliver are a mile long if laid out one after another. If you "talk nineteen to the dozen," it probably means that you actually use as many as nineteen words to say something that could be expressed in only a dozen words. Obviously, you talk faster than ordinary people, but what you say is also unnecessarily long-winded and probably nonsensical. And "to talk the hind leg off a donkey?" — presumably, what you say is so boring and lengthy that it lasts longer than what a donkey, traditionally associated with longevity among other things, could stand.

It is hard to teach an old dog tricks.

Mai kae dat yak

ไม้แก่ดัดยาก

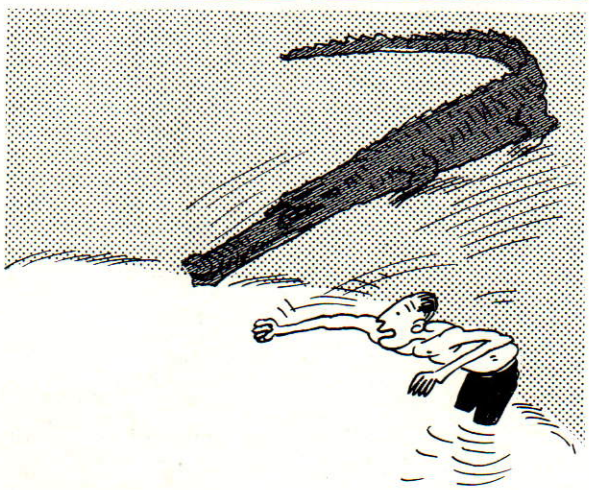
It is hard to bend an old tree.

By coincidence, both sayings involve traditional pastimes of the Thais and English. The art of *mai dat* or the Thai version of the Japanese bonsai has a long history in the Thai culture and is now enjoying a revival. It involves a special method of cultivation which through constant pruning and bending of the plant's twigs, stunts its growth, resulting in an artifically dwarfed potted plant or small tree. A young sapling is normally selected for the purpose, hence it is difficult or *yak* to shape or *dat* an old tree or *mai kae*. The Thai saying is inverted for special emphasis on *mai kae* which is in fact the object of the main verb *dat*.

The English saying reveals the legendary fondness of the English for animals, particularly dogs. It dates to the early sixteenth century when it appeared in another version: "It is hard to make an old dog stoop," until the seventeenth century when the present version was used. Another popular variant is often found: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

It does not take much imagination to guess how the sayings originated. The Thai saying must have rung true and was instantly recognized as such among the learned gentlemen of the court and the nobility who had plenty of spare time to tend their plants. From that select circle, the saying could have spread to the general public until it became accepted by all. As for the English saying, their national preoccupation must have been instantly registered by all dog-lovers as real experience. The casual, confiding tone in which both sayings are expressed also help to make them memorable, an indispensable quality of all good sayings.

These sayings are an observation of the fact that education should start at an early age, since only young mind can be bent at will. If you wish to inculcate certain values in a person, you have to start when his mind is still fresh and receptive. The modern theory of indoctrination and Aldous Huxley's warning in "Brave New World" merely confirm what our forefathers had known all along.

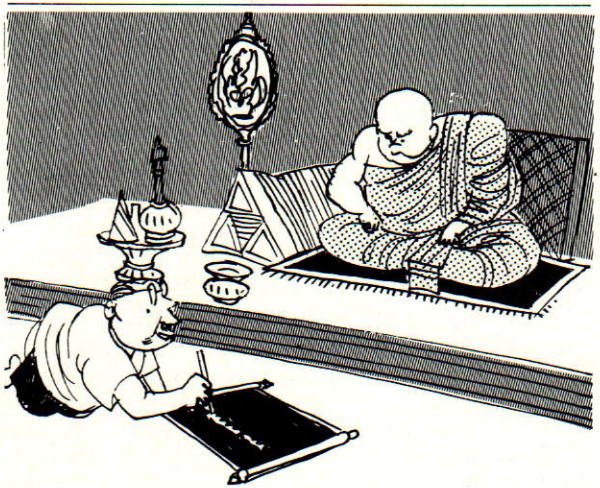


Teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

Son chorake hai wai nam

สอนจระเข้ให้ว่ายน้ำ

To teach a crocodile to swim.



Son nangsu sangkharat

สอนหนังสือสังฆราช

To teach the Supreme Patriarch to read and write.

The first Thai saying uses the imagery of a crocodile or *chorake* instead of a fish for an animal that can swim very well for good reason. The crocodile often lies in waiting for an unsuspecting prey, so it is a wily animal under an unassuming disguise. Moreover, it is a dangerous animal for anyone to play around with and is best be avoided. Likewise, when you see an unassuming person who appears to be stupid, do not attempt to teach him anything because he may know more than you do and you risk making a fool of yourself in the process.

The key word in both Thai sayings is *son* or to teach. Unlike the verb to teach in English that takes both direct and indirect objects, *son* only takes a direct object. Another verb is needed, *hai,* to introduce an infinitive or an indirect object, like in *son hai,* meaning to teach (someone) to do something. In the first saying a crocodile is taught *hai wai nam* or how to swim. In the second one, it is the turn of a *sangkharat,* a term derived from the Sanskrit *saṃgha + raja,* meaning the head of the Buddhist Church or the Supreme Patriarch. The saying illustrates well the usage of the verb *son*. The direct object of the verb is now *nangsu* or book, and the indirect object is the Supreme Patriarch which sometimes appears after *hai* but omitted here. *Nangsu* in this context takes on a different meaning because *son nangsu* means to teach reading and writing or simply to teach. It is futile and presumptuous to teach the Supreme Patriarch who is a very learned person, particularly when monasteries were the seat of learning in this country until the last century.

The early eighteenth-century English proverb is obscure in its meaning, although its message is quite straightforward. Grandmothers certainly have more experience than you, having lived longer and been through it all before, therefore it is useless to try to teach her.

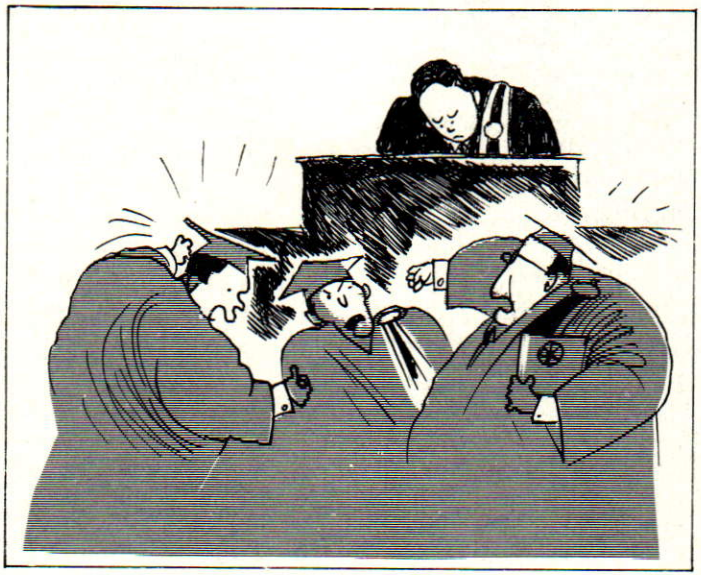
This group of proverbs and sayings show great respect for experience and knowledge. One must not presume to give advice to those who are more experienced and more knowledgeable. They provide a useful caution for those who think they know everything, and seize every opportunity to show off their knowledge however shallow and rudimentary to all and sundries. With these sayings at the back of one's mind, one may probably become more modest and selective in one's choice of audience.

Too many cooks spoil the broth.

Mak mo mak khwam

มากหมอมากความ

Many lawyers, many cases.



For the same message, the two proverbs rely on completely different imagery: a law court for the Thai proverb and a kitchen scene for the English equivalent. The word *mo* in the Thai proverb normally means doctor or physician in colloquial Thai, but in this context, it is short for *mo khwam,* a colloquial term for lawyer otherwise known as *thanai khwam. Khwam* in this context means legal cases or law suits; therefore the proverb can be explained more fully in these terms: if one consults too many lawyers, one is bound to be confused by all the details and explanation offered by each and everyone of them. An alternative interpretation has it that if you know or hire many lawyers, you are likely to be encouraged to have many lawsuits. What the proverb really says is this: a lot of advice or helping hands are not necessarily a good thing; often one can carry out one's work successfully if one relies on one's own judgement or counts on a few reliable and trustworthy associates.

The English equivalent is much more picturesque. Immediately, the proverb conjures up a scene in a gleaming kitchen instead of the gloomy law courts and their lawyers. A light-hearted note is struck when one imagines a host of busy cooks hovering around a large cooking pot, each armed with a ladle in one hand and a spice jar in the other, trying to season and stir the broth in the pot all at the same time. Obviously, no palatable soup will ever be concocted by so many expert cooks. The English proverb says exactly the same thing as the Thai equivalent: you are better off sometimes if you just work on your own or in a small select group.

Both proverbs recommend self-reliance or even individualism. However, they do not rule out the spirit of true cooperation. "Too many cooks" already implies that one or a few cooks would do, and similarly, "many lawyers" does not cancel out the service of one or a few good lawyers. Whether the end product is a broth or a legal case, you must be prepared to be selective in the choice of your advisers and if necessary, to go it alone. Despite their sound advice, the proverbs have often been used unfortunately as an excuse by stubborn people who do not wish to listen to others. One may even argue that the proverbs warn against the committee system for decision-making whereby a lot of opinions must be heard before a concensus can be reached. Judging from the existence of so many working-groups and sub-committees within large and unwieldy committees, it is high time we listened to this advice.

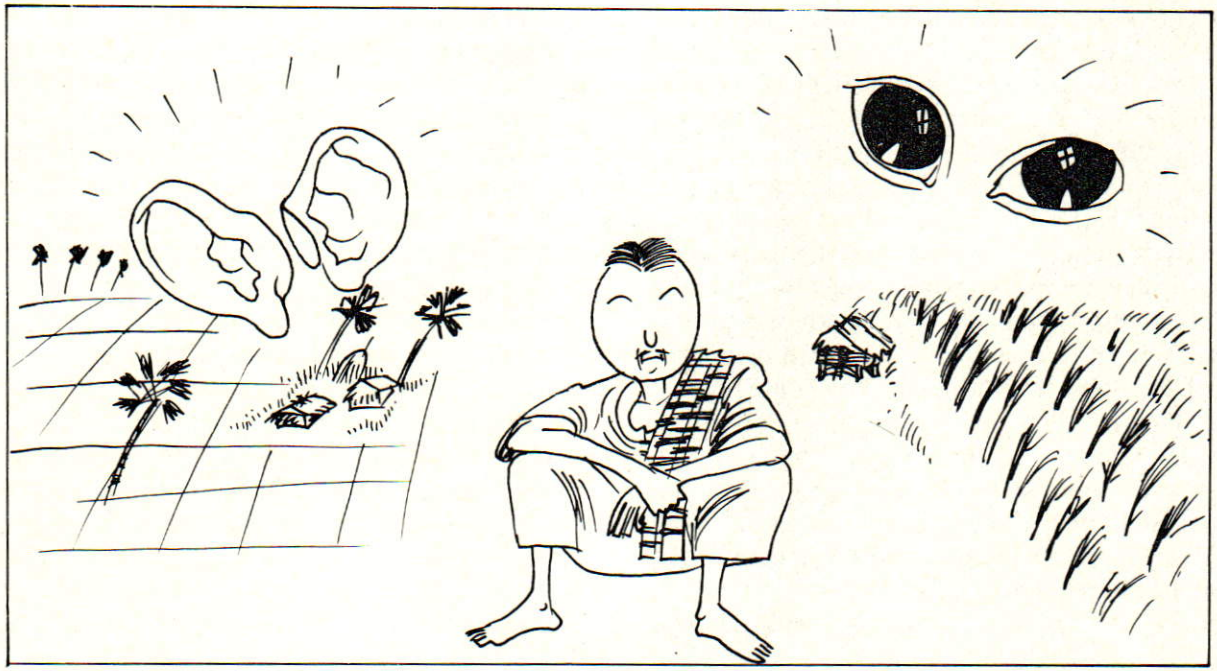
To turn a blind eye.

Ao hu pai na / Ao ta pai rai

เอาหูไปนา เอาตาไปไร่

To take the ears to the paddy field;

To take the eyes to the plantation.



This group of sayings makes use of two sense organs, the eyes and the ears, for imagery. The gist of its observation on human behaviour is this: when you do not want to get involved in some unpleasant business, you pretend that you have not perceived it. In the Thai saying, instead of using your eyes and ears, you relegate them to the paddy field or *na* and the plantation or *rai*. These places symbolize the distance between you and your sense organs. If you are a farmer, you will naturally be concerned about your crops, but not to the extent of leaving your ears and eyes in the field when you are back at home. The saying is also remarkable for its simplicity. The expression *ao pai* or to take something somewhere is the key concept here. It is repeated twice not only to provide a link for the two lines, but also to make the saying easily memorable. A further link is established by an external rhyme — *na* and *ta,* and another internal rhyme *pai* and *rai* finishes off the whole pattern.

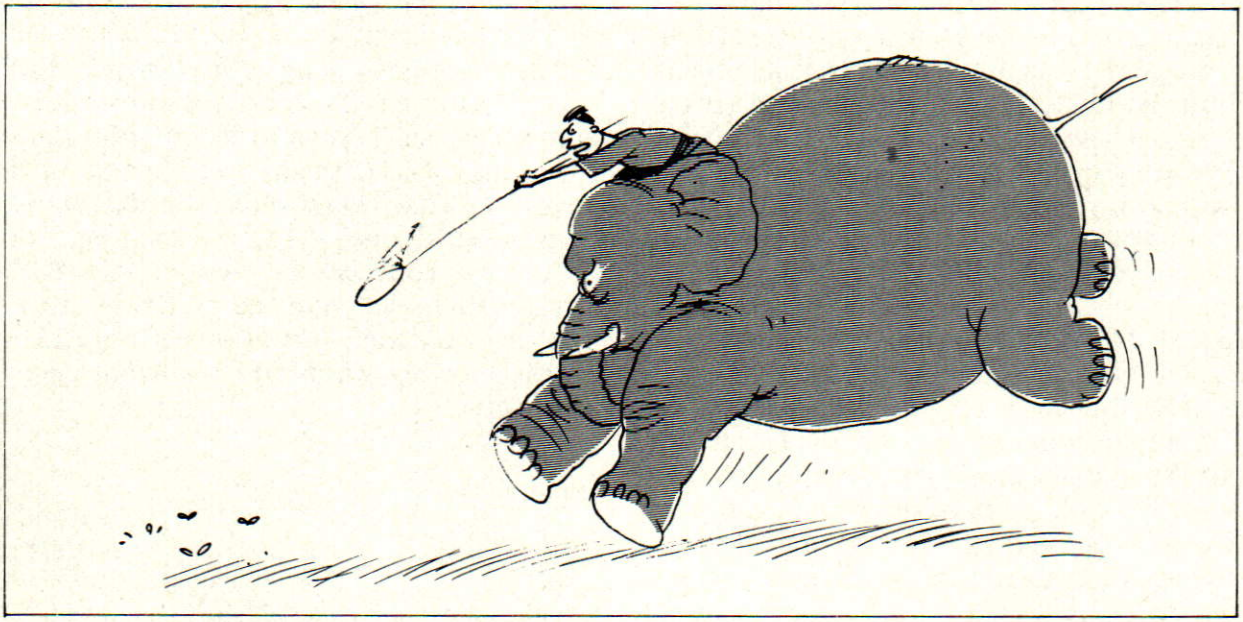
The English saying captures the same idea with a symbolic use of the eye. A blind man's eyes obviously do not see anything, so if you turn a blind eye to something, you will not see it, although you yourself are not blind. This idea of pretending not to be interested may be expressed in another similar English saying: "To turn a deaf ear". In this case, you do not want to hear something which is contrary to your plans lest it may thwart them. We have another saying in Thai which directly corresponds to the English one: *"Ao hu thuan lom,"* or "To turn your ear against the winds." Presumably, the winds carry noises, so if you turn your ears in the opposite direction of the blowing winds, they will not catch those noises.

To use a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Khi chang chap tak-ka-taen

ขี่ช้างจับตั๊กแตน

To ride an elephant to catch a grasshopper.



The Thai proverb again uses the elephant or *chang* as its imagery. It is here contrasted with *tak-ka-taen* or the grasshopper. The elephant is the largest land mammal whereas the grasshopper is a small insect, though not the smallest. If you go to the trouble of riding on an elephant's back or *khi chang* in order to catch the tiny grasshopper or *chap tak-ka-taen,* obviously you are wasting your energy on an unworthy cause. In other words, the trouble you take fails to match your target.

The English proverb highlights the eating habit of its people. Nuts of all kinds are an energy-giving food of the northern hemisphere, particularly in the winter, as we all know. The usual utensil used to crack nuts is a nut-cracker, which is not a familiar object in this part of the world. Therefore, if one uses a sledgehammer, which is a blacksmith's large heavy hammer, to crack a nut, one is undoubtedly wasting one's energy.

Both proverbs may be taken as a warning against wasting too much time and energy on a trifling matter. There is a hint of satire in both proverbs since we normally use them to ridicule any undertaking which involves a great deal of manpower and finance but eventually yields insignificant results. Besides, they also criticize the way one goes about accomplishing the task in hand, since there is every likelihood that the task will never get done for lack of proper focus. An elephant is such a big animal that to be on its back puts you that much further from the tiny grasshopper, perching at the ground level. You will do much better by simply trying to catch the insect standing on your own two feet. Similarly, a sledgehammer is far too heavy and unwieldy for a tiny nut. If you manage to hit the nut with it, you are liable to smash the nut to pieces; but it is more likely that you will miss your target altogether and you will be much better off with a nut-cracker for the job.

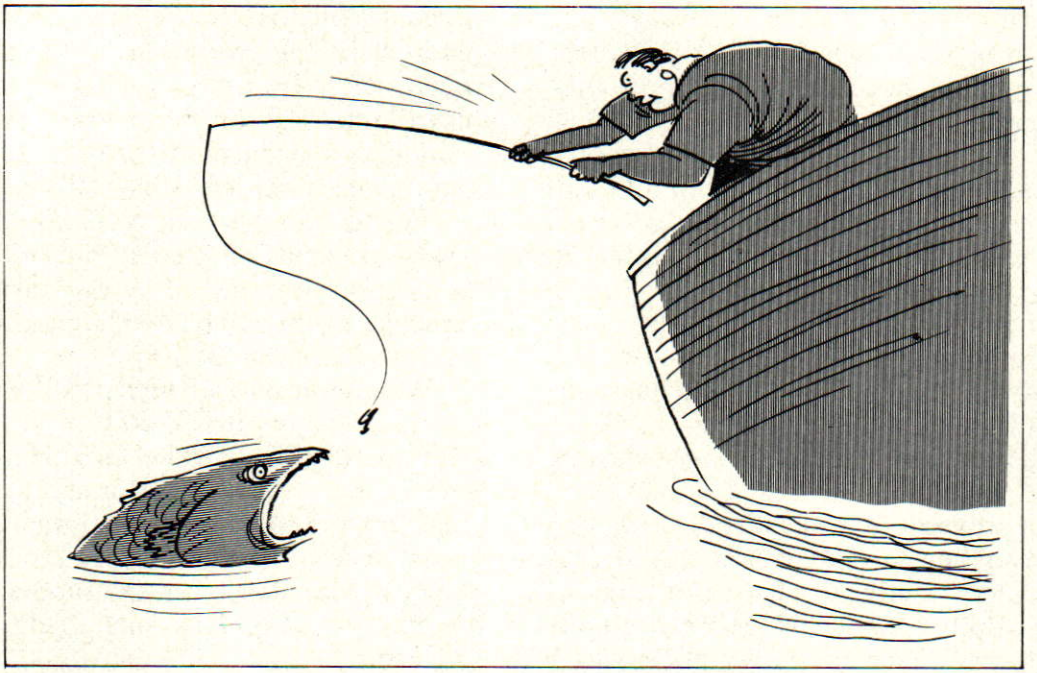
Whichever way we interpret the message of the proverbs, it is certain that we must plan in advance before embarking on a given task. The target must be clearly focussed and the means to attain it must be commensurate with the expected outcome. Both proverbs recommend moderation in all enterprises and as such their truth is universal.

Venture a small fish to catch a great one.

Ao kung foi pai tok pla kaphong

เอากุ้งฝอยไปตกปลากะพง

To use shrimps to bait a perch.



The common imagery here is the fish, used to convey the main idea of investing a little for a much bigger gain. The fish in the Thai proverb is *pla kaphong* belonging to the order *Perciformes,* or perchlike fishes, the largest group of fishes in the world today, comprising over 6,000 species that have been classified into about 150 families. Perciform fishes occur in abundance in both marine and freshwater areas of the world. There are basically two popular species in Thailand: *pla kaphong khao* and *pla kaphong daeng* or the white and red *pla kaphong*. *Pla kaphong khao* or the *Lates calcarifer* of the family *Latidae,* is a freshwater fish which also thrives in brackish water. The fish has been referred to as the Nile perch and has been found in mummified form in ancient tombs of Egypt. *Pla kaphong daeng* or the *Lutjanus sanguineus* of the family *Lutjanidae* is a carnivorous marine fish or the snapper. Both types of *kaphong* are very popular food-fish with the *kaphong khao* being of a higher class and price.

In the proverb, the fish is being baited by *kung foi* or the tiny shrimps of which there are two types, freshwater and marine. *Ao pai tok* is literally "take go fish", in other words to use something as a bait to fish with. There is another variant of this proverb: *"Ao kung foi pai tok pla thepho."* Instead of the perch, we have *pla thepo* which is a large tropical freshwater fish. The proverb obviously originates from a society that depends on water for its livelihood such as Thailand with its long coastline and a rich network of rivers and canals.

Similarly the inhabitants of the British Isles depend on fisheries for their livelihood. English fishermen must have realized that it is worth it to "venture a small fish to catch a great one." There are two more proverbs in English for the same idea: the first one is "Throw out a sprat to catch a mackerel." Instead of the mackerel, also belonging to the order *Perciformes* other fish can be used in this saying, such as a herring or even a whale. And to drive the message home for those who live inland, a freshwater fish is used in one other proverb: "You must lose a fly to catch a trout."

It is difficult to say whether the proverbs condemn this kind of calculated investment. The Thai proverb is often used neutrally as a mere observation and sometimes repeated knowingly by way of an excuse when one seems to be doing just that. The English proverbs, particularly the first two, are equally ambiguous and may be used either way, whereas the last one surprisingly condones or even recommends such an act. With the exception of this proverb, all the others seem to accept it as a fact of life. There is not much one can do to change human behaviour. If one feels that the tactic will work, use it, since it can only be to one's advantage.

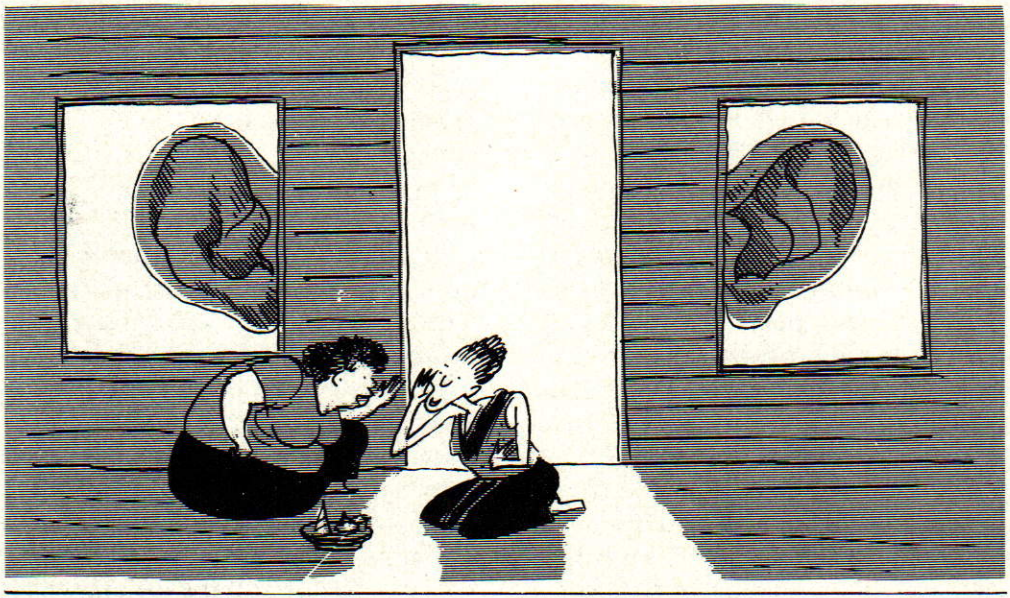
Walls have ears.

Natang mi hu / Pratu mi chong

หน้าต่างมีหู ประตูมีช่อง

Windows have ears;

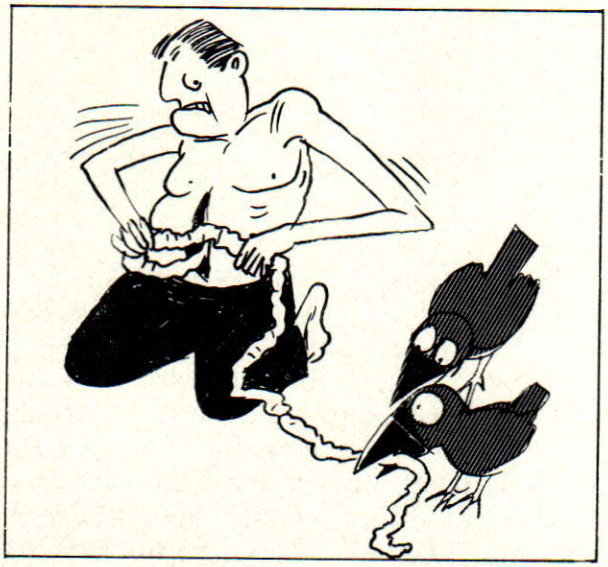
doors have holes.

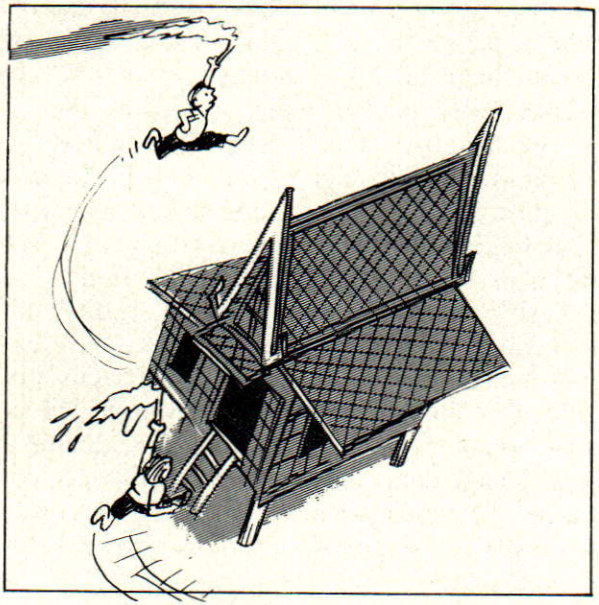


The Thai couplet and its English equivalent use remarkably similar imagery for exactly the same message. The couplet is made up of two simple sentences. Both lines repeat the same verb *mi* or to have; the object *hu* or ears of the first line rhymes with the subject of the next line *pratu* or doors, thereby providing a link for the couplet. The subjects of both sentences, *natang* or windows and *pratu* or doors are positioned in parallel to each other. The meaning of the whole saying is in fact encapsulated in the first line, "Windows have ears," and the second line of the couplet merely emphasizes the idea through a different picture. Not only do windows have ears, but doors also have cracks and holes. The term *chong* has a lot of meanings in Thai, from crack, hole, aperture, opening, to channel and passage. In this context, *chong* definitely denotes holes and apertures through which your most guarded secrets may escape.

That brings us to the meaning of the saying. It is a warning against discussing secrets even behind closed doors. It is an observation of the fact that secrets are very difficult to keep, no matter how hard you may try. There will always be someone to relay a secret, once it has been divulged. The English saying "Walls have ears" is equally explicit if not more so. Walls in the plural imply the four walls of a room, which is presumably closed when the secret is being discussed. Yet anyone can be eavesdropping your secret conversation, this time behind the walls instead of by the windows or the doors as in the Thai saying.

Although the sayings use very traditional metaphors to convey their message, the idea is somehow very up-to-date in the twentieth century. The potential eavesdroppers have now been transformed into electronic devices, strategically deployed in the most unsuspected places. Obviously, the art of spying has come a long way since these sayings were first thought of.





To wash dirty linen in public.

Ya sao sai hai ka kin

อย่าสาวไส้ให้กากิน

Don't pull out your intestines to feed the crow.

Fai nai ya nam ok

ไฟในอย่านำออก

Don't take out the fire inside;

Fai nok ya nam khao

ไฟนอกอย่านำเข้า

Don't bring in the fire outside.

Indiscretion has always met with disapproval in proverbs and sayings. This group of proverbs in fact substantiates our observation, since the idea behind them is a warning against our revealing or divulging family secrets. In this group may be included another English proverb: "It's an ill (foul) bird that fouls (bewrays, defiles) its own nest."

It is interesting to compare the use of imagery in this proverb with the first Thai proverb, "Don't pull out your intestines to feed the crow." In the Thai proverb, the crow or *ka* is an external agent. It is traditionally believed to be a bird of bad omen in this part of the world. The bird has a

foul eating habit and is believed to be partial to carrion and small animals. Here it represents the gossipmongers who will lap up any juicy bits of information which you have divulged. The imagery used for this act is not pretty. The intestines or *sai* represent one's unsavoury past or deeds. So, if you pull out or *sao* you innards to feed the hungry crow, you are abusing yourself and your own family by revealing nasty little secrets or family scandals to outsiders, or even maligning members of your own family in the eyes of the public.

The bird in the English proverb is nobody else but yourself. Birds are a tidy lot when it comes to their nests. Not only do they take great care in building their nests, but they are also careful to maintain the nests and keep them clean for their young. They must be acting unnaturally if they dirty their own homes. Likewise, a human being who talks ill of his or her spouse or members of his own family is simply degrading himself in the eyes of others. Since its first appearance in the early eleventh century, the proverb had for centuries been directed specifically against women who joked or gossiped about their husbands' inadequacy. For example, a late sixteenth-century sermon reads: "It becometh not any woman to set light by her husband, nor to publish his infirmities; for they say, That is an evil bird that defileth her own nest."

The second Thai porverb in its first line of the couplet gives the same meaning : "Don't take out the fire inside," In other words, if you have any problem or secret, keep it to yourself, and don't spread it outside your home. *Fai* or fire represents the problem here, while *fai nai* means literally the fire inside. The second line of the proverb uses the same pattern once more by repeating the three key words : *fai, ya, nam* and replacing every other word with its antonyms. This time, it's *fai nok* or the fire outside, and *nam khao* or to bring in, meaning "Don't bring in trouble from outside." The couplet recommends more than just keeping your secret to yourself, it wants you to mind your own business and refrain from meddling in the affairs of others because your action may trouble communal peace.

This extra warning is lost in the English proverb, "To wash dirty linen in public," which simply warns us not to discuss family quarrels or unpleasant personal affairs with or in the presence of outsiders. The metaphor linen represents family affairs since linen normally denotes household articles made from this type of cloth, such as bed-sheets, table-cloths, table-napkins, shirts and so on. Dirty linen like family quarrels and scandals should not be exposed to outsiders, because we will only damage ourselves in the long run.

The way to a man's (an Englishman's)

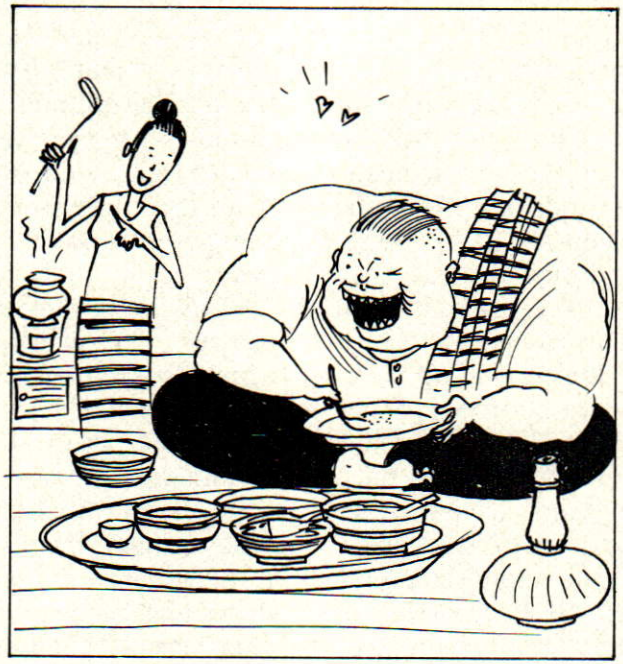
heart is through his stomach.

Sa-ne plai chawak/ Phua rak chon tai

เสน่ห์ปลายจวัก ผัวรักจนตาย

The charm at the tip of the ladle;

Husband will love you till death.



One of the characteristics of proverbs is the down-to-earth and homely quality of their advice. This Thai proverb in couplet form can be matched by an English proverb which is straight to the point. Both of them offer a piece of advice to young wives which is unlikely to meet the approval of modern-day feminists.

The meaning of the Thai proverb may be a little obscure until one realizes that *chawak* is the all-purpose ladle, made of coconut shell, used by the traditional cook to stir her concoction. As a finishing touch, the old-fashioned cook will dip the ladle in the food while it is still in a pan and taste it out of the tip of the ladle. This is the moment of truth, because if she is a good cook, she will be able to adjust the taste there and then. According to the proverb, there is no love potion more potent than the charm or *sa-ne* of her art of cooking, which is here symbolized by the tip of the ladle, or *plai chawak*. The second line of the couplet is linked to the first line by a simple rhyme — *chawak/rak* or love. The word *phua* is a familiar and colloquial term for husband which may be expressed by the more polite *sami*. The rest of the line *chon tai* simply means till death and it is up to us to interpret until whose death, his or hers. The proverb is so popular that often only the first line "Sa-ne plai chawak" is repeated as an idiom to refer to any woman who is an expert cook and who seems to have captivated her husband by her art.

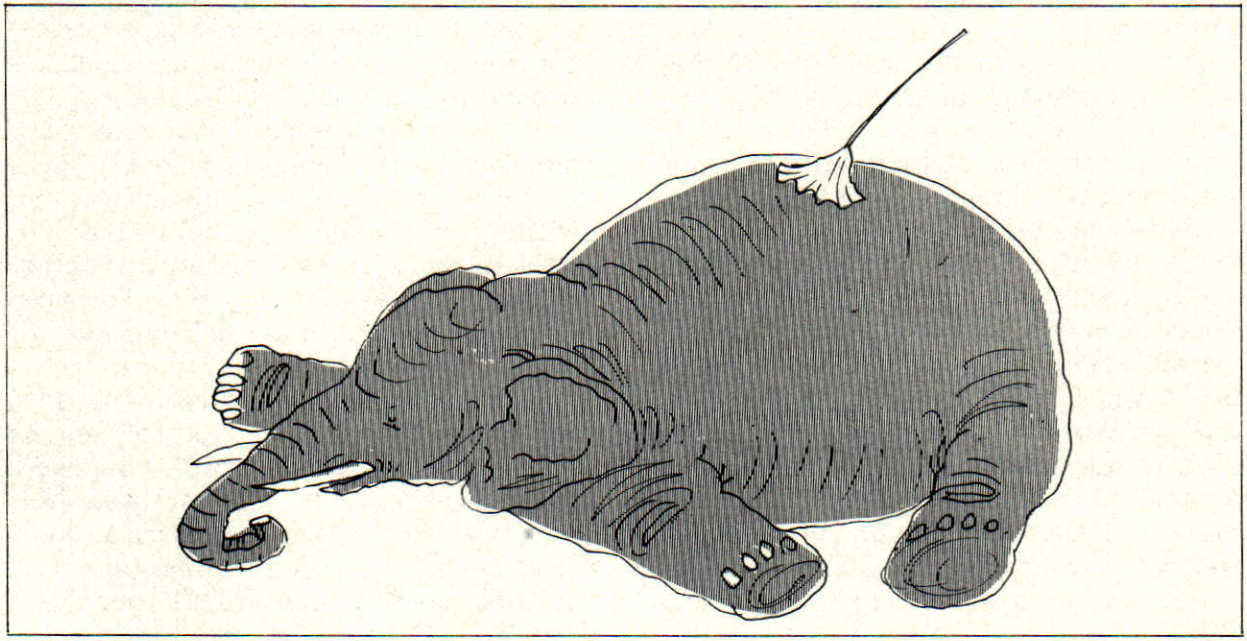
The English proverb, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach", spells out the advice in no uncertain terms. According to this realistic school of thought, a man must eat and the best way to ensure his love is to satisfy his appetite. This anti-romantic viewpoint may well find a lot of opponents — the romantics will surely disapprove the way it downgrades true love while the feminists will not tolerate its appraisal of a woman's worth. But there is definitely a lesson to be drawn from these proverbs — it you are a hopeless cook, don't marry a man who enjoys eating, otherwise your life will be a misery until your dying day.

What is done by night appears by day.

Chang tai thang tua ao baibua ma pit

ช้างตายทั้งตัวเอาใบบัวมาปิด

To cover one whole dead elephant with a lotus leaf.



The Thais are very fond of animal imagery from dogs, cats to tigers and crocodiles. There is one animal indigenous to Thailand which is often cited in proverbs — the elephant. This proverb places emphasis on the elephant by starting off with the imagery of a dead elephant. *Chang tai* may be rendered as "When an elephant dies," but in this case, the great size of the animal is stressed by the expression *thang tua; tua* is the body and *thang* means whole so *thang tua* actually means the whole body. The next clause starts with *ao* or to get. The verb *ao* can be qualified by *ma* to mean "to bring", and by *pai* to mean "to take"; therefore *ao ma* or literally "get come" means to bring and *ao pai* or "get go" means to take. The object of either verb usually appears in between as in this clause: *ao baibua ma* or to bring the lotus leaf. *Pit* here appears in the infinitive, meaning to cover although it can also mean to close in a different context.

What the proverb tries to warn us is this: when an enormous animal like the elephant dies, it is no use trying to cover the carcass with something as small as a lotus leaf. Likewise, when you have made a big mistake and tried to cover up the scandal, the cover-up will be to no avail and you are bound to be exposed sooner or later. In other words, you cannot hope to escape from the consequences of your misdeed; the bigger the mistake or scandal, the smaller is your chance to escape.

The English proverb, "What is done by night appears by day," dates to the last decade of the fourteenth century. It relies on the contrast between night and day or darkness and light, symbolizing the evil and the good. On one level, the proverb may be taken at its face value — if you do something at night, your deed will be exposed by daylight. On another level, your evil act is bound to be uncovered by the light of truth. What these proverbs amount to is this: we are being cautioned to do no evil, for we shall be caught in the end.

Who remove stones,

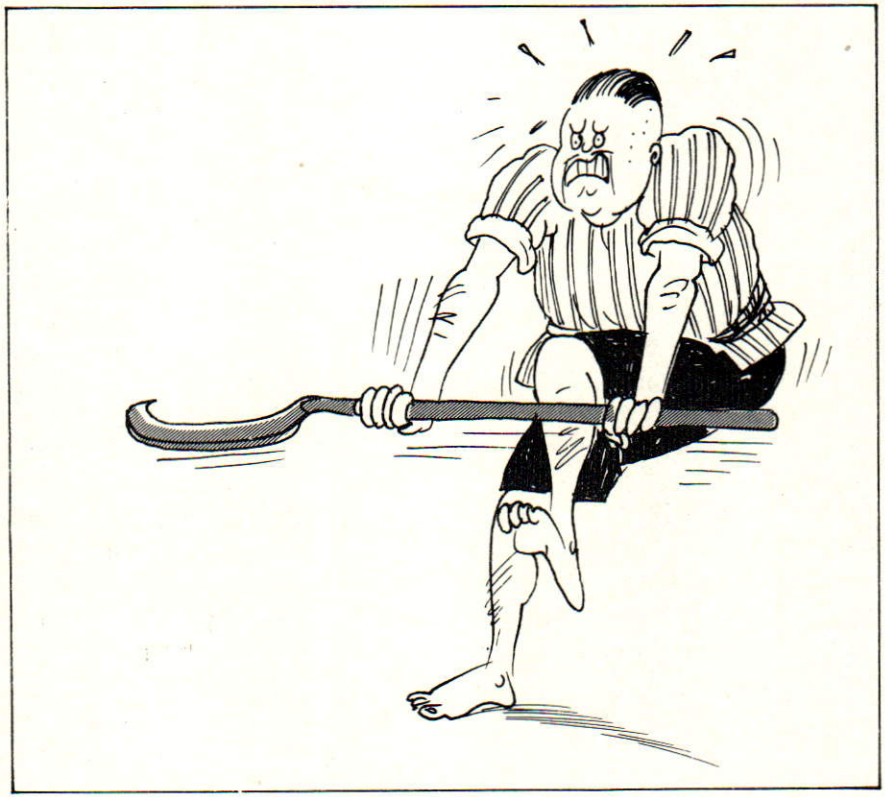
bruise their fingers.

Ya hak dam phra duai hua khao

อย่าหักด้ามพร้าด้วยหัวเข่า

Don't break the handle

of a knife with your knee.

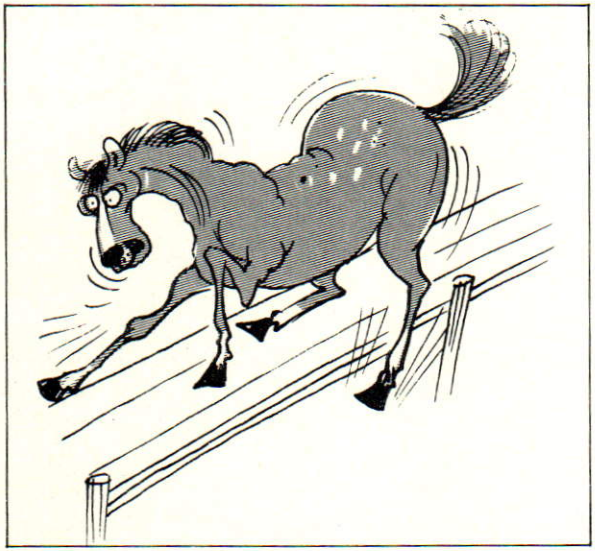


This pair of proverbs counsels moderation and tact, virtues which are as much in demand today as they were in the old days. The Thai proverb has an old-world charm about it. *Phra* is an old-fashioned knife, with a wide blade and a long sturdy wooden handle, the sort used by farmers and orchard and plantation workers to chop wood and tough weeds. The imagery used conjures up the picture of a rugged farmer who is trying to break or *hak* the handle of the knife or *dam phra* with his knee or *hua khao*. The struggle and the pain involved must be quite something. We can imagine the outcome without much difficulty — the farmer gets perhaps a badly bruised knee and the solid handle stays intact. If he persists in this impossible task, he may even hurt himself further, getting his hands gashed by the long, sharp blade of the knife.

The message carried in this proverb may be readily gleaned from the imagery itself. Do not use force against force, particularly when you know that your strength is decidedly inferior to that of your adversary. When you run into a formidable obstacle, do not tackle it head on. Use all your tact to get round the trouble even if you have to resort to delay tactics. In other words, do not force the issue and use your head instead of your emotion.

The English proverb dates back to the early seventeenth century. The imagery used could be that of a farmer or a gardener in the process of clearing the ground for cultivation. Instead of using a tool to prize the stones out, the farmer uses his own bare hands. Naturally, he gets hurt as a result, although in this case he may be able to accomplish the task.

On another level, both proverbs advocate peace and moderation. They stand against the belief of "Might is right" and its adherents. They warn us of the inevitable consequences when force is used to settle a conflict. These long-forgotten proverbs should perhaps be revived and listened to by leaders of all nations.



The wisest man may fall.

Si thao yang ru phlat

สี่เท้ายังรู้พลาด

Even a four-legged

animal can stumble;

Nakprat yang ru phlang

นักปราชญ์ยังรู้พลั้ง

Even a learned man can slip.

We often notice that proverbs not only teach but sometimes also comfort those who care to listen. This Thai proverb is in the popular form of a couplet, both lines sharing the same expression: *yang ru* which may be rendered in English by the pattern: "even...can." However, it may be translated in normal usage as "still know", *ru* meaning to know and *yang* meaning still or even.

The couplet's first line starts off with animal imagery, likening man's mistakes to those of a *si thao* which literally means "four legs". The verb *phlat,* used in the infinitive here, has a host of meanings: to fail, to slip, to err or to stumble. It rhymes with *prat* in the compound *nakprat; nak* is a Thai prefix denoting a person, and *prat* is derived from the Sanskrit *prajña* which means wise or intelligent, taken together to mean a philosopher, a learned person or a sage. What the wise man may do in the second line is *phlang*. This word usually appears in compound form in modern usage, such as *phlatphlang* meaning to make an unpremeditated error, *phlangpak* meaning to make a slip of the tongue. The word *phlang* definitely conveys the unintentional element of whatever mistake one is making. The proverb excuses all those who make mistakes without malice, since an animal that has as many as four legs may stumble and a philosopher can make mistakes despite his vast knowledge and erudition.

The English proverbs which match this particular Thai adage say exactly the same thing, although in a less colourful way. We have selected two for this discussion: "The wisest man may fall;" and "If the wise erred not, it would go hard with fools." The first English proverb is more or less a direct translation of the second line of the Thai proverb: instead of a philosopher, we have the "wisest" and "to fall" can figuratively mean to make a mistake. The second English proverb has a rather extended meaning with its condescending connotation, contrasting the wise with the fools, but it is well in keeping with the tradition of English proverbs which often use this contrast of the wise and the fools.

The worth of a thing is best known by the want of it.

Kaeng chut chung ru khun klua

แกงจืดจึงรู้คุณเกลือ

We only appreciate the worth
of salt when the soup is tasteless.

The Thai cuisine is used by this Thai proverb as a metaphor to convey the message that we must not take things for granted and that we must be prepared for the future. *Kaeng* in Thai cuisine is an all-embracing term for any liquid dish, from the wide-ranging variety of Thai-style soups to all sorts of curry. *Chut* when used in a cooking context means tasteless or bland. Therefore, *kaengchut* as a compound means all kinds of bland soup with diced meat or strips of meat and chopped vegetables as the major ingredients. However, *chut* is used here on its own as an adjective and may be applied to soup as well as curry which is not salty. *Chung* is normally an adverb, used before a verb in a principal clause of a complex sentence after a causative clause, meaning therefore, then, or consequently. It can also be rendered by "only...when" as we have done here, in *chung ru* or you only know or appreciate when... *Khun* in this context means worth or benefit, not to be confused with the polite form of address in front of a name for Mr. or Mrs. And *klua* is of course salt, such as *klua kaeng,* cooking salt, *klua pon* table salt and *klua sinthao* or rock salt.

What the proverb is trying to say is that very often we only appreciate the true value of an object or a person when it or that person is no longer available. This is why we must not be negligent and should always take every precaution to ensure that such needs would never arise. There is an English proverb which says exactly this: "The worth of a thing is best known by the want of it." And what about "We never know the worth of water till the well is dry." Instead of salt, the proverb relies on the very element that life depends on — water — to drive home this pointed message. Another English proverb uses the imagery of an animal — a cow — to convey the same idea: "The cow knows not what her tail is worth, till she has lost it." Obviously, the cow in the proverb has instinctively been using her tail to ward off swarms of insects without really appreciating its utility. Even human habits are used to carry the message, such as the way this proverb states its point: "Health is not valued, till sickness comes." This last English proverb in particular teaches us not to take our good health for granted like everything else in our lives, otherwise we shall eventually be caught unprepared.

APPENDIX

The Royal Institute's Transliteration System

The Royal Institute's official transliteration system is intended, first of all, to provide standardized Roman spellings for Thai geographical names. The Roman letters are also designed to furnish a means of indicating the various sounds of Thai words. However, the true or exact pronunciation cannot be indicated by application of the General System for several reasons:

A. The spoken language is tonal, and tonal marks are not used in the General System.

B. Thai characters for vowels, both long and short vowels, are transcribed with the same Roman letter. For the transcribed Roman letter *A*, one generalization can be made regarding whether the sound is a long or a short vowel. Usually when a Thai syllable ends with a vowel sound *A*, either written or unwritten, (rather than with a sonorant or a stop), it will be pronounced as a short vowel *if* it is the first syllable of a multi-syllable word. In Table I, under *A*, the first and fourth illustrations are examples of the application of this generalization.

C. Certain sounds of the Thai language have no equivalent in the Roman alphabet and so some Roman letters are used to represent more than one sound. For instance, the letter *O* represents two sounds, the sound o (Thai character −อ) as in S*O*NG and also the sound o (Thai character โ−) as in HOPE. Likewise, the letter *A* represents the sound a (Thai character −ะ) as in *A*CROSS and the sound ä (Thai character −า) as in F*A*THER. (It is suggested that these diacritical marking might be chosen for use in lists and textual material as an aid to pronunciation for those persons who do not read Thai syllables.)

Thus, for Thai speakers who have before them only the romanized spelling, unless they are familiar with the geographical name, or for non-Thai speakers, only approximate pronunciations can be given. Familiarity with the following consonant, vowel, and diphthong lists is recommended before proceeding to apply the transcription tables and rules which follow.

CONSONANTS

Initial K— as in S*K*I	Initial CH— as in *J*UNGLE*
Initial P— as in S*P*IN	Initial CH— as in *CH*IN
Initial T— as in S*T*ILL	Final —K as in WEE*K*
Initial KH— as in *K*EY	Final —P as in CA*P*
Initial PH— as in *P*IN	Final —T as in HI*T*
Initial TH— as in *T*ILL	Initial or Final NG as in SI*NG*ER, SI*NG*

VOWELS

A as in *A*CROSS, F*A*THER
E as in H*E*N, D*AY*
I as in B*I*T, B*EE*
O as in H*O*PE, SN*OW***
O as in S*AU*CE, S*O*NG
U as in B*OO*K, SH*O*E

DIPHTHONGS

AE as in H*A*T, H*A*D
OE as in ANOTH*ER*, F*U*R (without the r, as in spoken British English)
IA as in IMMED*IA*TE, IND*IA*
UA as in D*UA*L JOSH*UA*
AI as in *I, EYE*
AO as in *COU*NT, *COW*
UI as in ISS*UI*NG
OI as in G*OI*NG, YELL*OWI*SH
IU as in F*EW*
EO as in L*AY O*VER
OEI, OE as in FUR + *I* as in B*EE* (see above)
UAI, UA as in JOSH*UA* + I as in B*EE* (see above)
AEO, AE as in H*A*D + O as in H*O*PE (see above)
IEO, IE is like IA in IND*IA* + O as in H*O*PE (see above); CL*EO*PATRA (approximate)

* Corresponds to the *CH* listed first in Table II.
**Corresponds to the first three illustrations given under *O* in Table I.

TABLE I — VOWELS

Trans-literation	Thai Vowels[1]	Illustrations
a	–ะ ั –า –[2]	(สะพาน SAPHAN) (ลันตา LANTA) (บาง BANG) (สมุทร SAMUT)
am	–ำ	(ลำ LAM)
i	ิ ี	(สิงห์ SING) (บุรี BURI)
u	ึ ื ือ ุ ู	(สตึก SATUK) (พืช PHUT) (บรบือ BORABU) (บุรี BURI) (ภู PHU)
e	เ–ะ เ็ เ–	(ปะนาเระ PANARE) (เพ็ญ PHEN) (เขน KHEN)
ae	แ–ะ แ–	(แซะ SAE) (สะแก SAKAE)
o	โ–ะ –[2] / โ– เ–าะ –อ	(พะโต๊ะ PHATO) (ลพ LOP) (สามโก้ SAMKO) (เกาะ KO) (บ่อ BO)
oe	เ–อะ เ–อ เ็	(เซอะ SOE) (อำเภอ AMPHOE) (เนิน NOEN)
ia	เ็ยะ เ็ย	(เผียะ PHIA) (เทียน THIAN)
ua	เ็อะ เ็อ ั๊วะ ั๊ว –ว–	(เกือะ KUA) (เมือง MUANG) (ผัวะ PHUA) (บัว BUA) (ควน KHUAN)
ai	ไ– ไ– ั๊ย ไ–ย –าย	(ใหญ่ YAI) (ไผ่ PHAI) (ชัย CHAI) (ไทย THAI) (ปาย PAI)
ao	เ–า –าว	(เจ้า CHAO) (ข้าว KHAO)
ui	–ย	(กุย KUI)
oi	โ–ย –อย	(โดย DOI) (ดอย DOI)
iu	ิ๊ว	(งิ้ว NGIU)
eo	เ็ว เ–ว	(เร็ว REO) (เลว LEO)
oei	เ–ย	(เลย LOEI)
uai	เ็อย –วย	(เดือย DUAI) (ห้วย HUAI)
aeo	แ–ว	(แมว MAEO)
ieo	เ็ยว	(เขียว KHIEO)

[1] The position of the consonant bearing the vowel is indicated by the hyphen; the position of the associated vowel —— following, preceding, above, below —— is also shown.

[2] The single hyphen indicates the absence of any associated vowel-sign. Such a consonant is to be transcribed with an *a* or *o* following it, according to pronunciation; e.g. นคร N*A*KHON ; คน KH*O*N; อยุธยา *A*YUTTHAYA; อมก๋อย *O*MKOI.

TABLE II — CONSONANTS

Initial - ตัวต้น	Final - ตัวสะกด	Thai Consonants
K—	—K	ก
KH—	—K	ข ค ฆ
NG—	—NG	ง
CH—	—T	จ
CH—	—T	ฉ ช ฌ
Y—	—N	ญ
D—	—T	ด ฎ ฑ1/
T—	—T	ต ฏ
TH—	—T	ถ ฐ ท ฒ1/ ธ ฒ
N—	—N	น ณ
B—	—P	บ
P—	—P	ป
PH—	—P	ผ พ ภ
F—	—P	ฝ ฟ
M—	—M	ม
Y—	—	ย
R—	—N	ร
L—	—N	ล ฬ
W—	—	ว2/
S—	—T	ซ ทร ศ ษ ส
H—	—	ห ฮ
—	—	อ

1/ The character ท may be pronounced TH or D when it is in initial position.
2/ See Table I, where ว appears in combination with vowels. It serves as the diphthong, UA, when placed between two consonants.

GENERAL TRANSLITERATION RULES

A. Initial and Final Consonants

All consonants are transliterated as pronounced; e.g., while ร is pronounced as *R* in Thai when it is an initial consonant and must be transcribed as R, it is pronounced as *N* when it is a final letter (or terminal consonant of a syllable) and must therefore be transcribed accordingly. For example: ริม RIM and สาร SAN. Similarly, ข, ค and ฆ are transcribed KH as an initial sound and become *K* as a final letter; e.g., คล้า KHLA; โยค YOK.

B. Unwritten Vowels

All vowels pronounced but not written in Thai characters are inserted in the romanized form; e.g., นคร NAKHON.

C. Intrusive Syllables

When a single written consonant is pronounced twice, as the final consonant of one syllable and the initial of the succeeding syllable, it is to be rendered accordingly by the final and initial values respectively of the consonant. This second or repeated consonant is followed by the unwritten vowel, *A* (unless a written vowel follows the consonant), to form an intrusive syllable of a multi-syllable word; e.g., ราชคราม RAT*CHA*KHRAM, ชนบท CHON*NA*BOT, จัตุรัส CHAT*TU*RAT.

D. Hyphen

The hyphen is used where, in the case of its omission, the pronunciation of the romanized word is ambiguous; e.g., ปะอิน PA-IN, ยี่งอ YI-NGO, ปากลัด PAK-LAT.

E. Word Separation

Names are to be tranliterated word for word; i.e., in general monosyllabically in the case of native Thai words, mono-or polysyllabically as appropriate in the case of Indic borrowings. Thus, the specific term (or element) of geographical names are broken up into individual words, when, and only when, each syllable has a specific meaning; e.g., ลาดบัวหลวง LAT BUA LUANG; สุโขทัย SUKHOTHAI.

The practice of separation or non-separation is applied also to generic terms; e.g., แม่น้ำ MAE NAM, a river; ทวีป THAWIP, a continent. And, the generic term (river, mountain, island) should always be separated from the specific part of the name; e.g., เกาะสมุย KO SAMUI.

Principles for the transcription of generic terms of all geographical names are written as follows:-

a) Generic terms of physical features are to be transcribed and to precede proper names; e.g., Khao Bo Thong (***Khao*** means mountain) and Ko Yung (***Ko*** means island).

b) Generic terms preceding cultural features must also be transcribed; e.g., Thanon Maha Rat (***Thanon*** means road) and Wat Maha That (*Wat* means monastery).

c) A generic term which is not part of a geographical name and is not self-explanatory must be translated; e.g., Hua Lamphong ***Station.*** Furthermore, if a name has a meaning in English and if it is a universal name, it must be translated; e.g., Post Office, Hydrographical Department, etc.

Ref.:Royal Institute, ***Romanization Guide for Thai Script,*** Bangkok, 1982, pp.4-10.

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