

A Comparison between Thai and Korean Folksongs

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I. Introduction

When I heard Thai folksongs for the first time in Thailand, those sounded similar to Korean folksongs. This led me to a study to search for an answer to why Thai and Korean folksongs sound similar. I tried to get some well-known folksongs of the two countries. I could get the notated music for most of the Thai folksongs, however, unfortunately most of the Korean folksongs, I had to transcribe from sound recordings. The analysis, I executed, revealed some reasons why the folksongs of the two countries sound similar on the one hand and why they also sound different on the other hand.

The analytical tools used for this study are Scalar System, Metric Structure, Range, Repetition of A Phrase, Rhythmic Pattern or Motive, Final Note, Wider Leaps than An Interval of The Perfect Fifth, Call and Response or Antiphonal Style, Tonic *Arpeggiation*, and Transposition.

II. Similarity between Thai and Korean Folksongs

1. Scalar System

The pentatonic scalar system, consisting of “do, re, mi, sol and la” based on the movable do system, is the scalar system framing the folksongs of the two countries. Most of the transcribed notations of the folksongs show mainly the pentatonic tones, however, the actual folksongs have lots of pitch inflections, pitches out of the five tones in the pentatonic scale, which are mostly improvisational and decorative pitch modifications or additions according to the singer’s interpretation of the meaning of the text or to the instant feeling of

the performer at the moment of the performance. The pitch inflection is also common element shared by the folksongs of the two countries.

2. Range

Although some folksongs show wider ranges, such as around an octave and a perfect fifth, the common pitch range is around an octave to provide comfortable singing range.

3. Repetition of a Musical Pattern

The repetition of a musical pattern, melodic or rhythmic, is used to unify a folksong. The original oral-delivery tradition of the folksongs to the next generation is probably another reason to have the repetitive structure, which makes memorization of the folksongs easier. Frequent repetition of a short melodic fragment or a short rhythmic pattern within a folksong is a very common tool to unify a folksong, shown in almost every folksong of the two countries.

Most of the Thai folksongs show frequent motivic repetition within them. Two folksongs, *Niaong* and *Ubo Rachatani* are given as examples of this. The motive of “mi-sol-la” in the rhythm of a dotted quarter note and a eighth note followed by a note, which varies case to case, is used in the former (Ex.1), and the motive of “mi-sol-mi-re-do” in the rhythm of four consecutive eighth notes followed by a quarter note in the latter. However, *Ubon Rachathani* has an end-variant of the figure, “mi-so-mi-re-**mi**” at bar18 (Ex.2).



Ex.1 “Mi-sol-la” Motive, *Niaong*, Thai Folksong



Ex.2 “Mi-sol-mi-re-do” Motive, *Ubon Rachathani*, Thai Folksong

Likewise, most of the Korean folksongs show the frequent motivic repetition within a folksong. Here the two folksongs, *Arirang* and *Han Obaek Nyun*, are presented as examples. *Arirang* has “sol-la-sol-la” motive in the rhythm of a dotted quarter note followed by three eighth notes (Ex.3). *Han Obaek Nyun* has “la-sol-mi” motive in the rhythm of two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note and an up-4th-transposition of it (Ex.4).



Ex.3 “Sol-la-sol-la” Motive, *Arirang*, Korean Folksong



Ex.4 “La-sol-mi” Motive, *Han Obaek Nyun*, Korean Folksong

4. Final Pitch

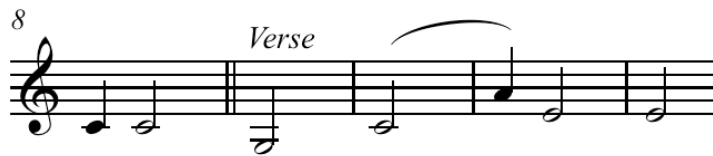
The predominating final notes in the folksongs of the two countries are “do” and “la,” considered in the movable do system, as shown in the previous examples – *Niaong* with the final “la” (Ex.1) and *Arirang* with “do” (Ex.3). Usually the final note functions as a major factor to determine the mode of a folksong. Here the mode could be understood as a key in the major-minor key system or as a mode in the church modes, such as Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, etc., or just as a general mode. Composing a song, generally a specific mode is chosen to fit the melody to the content, feeling, emotion or affection of the text.

5. Leaps Wider than An Interval of the Perfect Fifth

Some folksongs use the wide leaps, such as a major sixth, a minor sixth or a minor seventh. Repetition of a specific wide interval provides a special flavor to the folksongs. Thai folksong *TangWai* shows repetition of the minor seventh (Ex.5) and the Korean folksong *BangA TaRyung* the leaps of the major sixth (Ex.6).



Ex.5 Interval of Minor Seventh *TangWai*, Thai Folksong



Ex.6 Interval of Major Sixth, *BangA TaRyung*, Korean Folksong

6. “Call and Response” or Antiphonal Style

Some of the folksongs of the two countries show the “call and response” in a wide sense or antiphonal style. The Thai Ramwong folksong, *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo* (Ex.7) and some Korean folksongs, including *SinGoSan TaRyung* (Ex.8), show the antiphonal style.



Ex.7 Antiphonal Style, *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo*, Thai Folks song



Ex.8 Antiphonal Style, *SinGoSan TaRyung*, Korean Folksong

7. Tonic Arpeggiation

Some of the folksongs use the major or the minor tonic *arpeggiation* as a framework to build a melody. The three Thai Ramwong folksongs, *Law Tching Na Dah Rah*, *Lah* and *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid*, show the major or minor tonic *arpeggiation* at the beginning part. Ex.9 shows the major tonic *arpeggiation* in *Law Tching Na Dah Rah*. The Korean *KyungBokGung TaRyung* shows the minor tonic *arpeggiation* at the beginning of the song (Ex.10).



Ex.9 Major-Tonic *Arpeggiation*, *Law Tching Na Dah Rah*, Thai Folksong



Ex.10 Minor-Tonic *Arpeggiation*, *GyungBokGung TaRyung*, Korean Folksong

One interesting point to make is that the two Thai folksongs, *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid* and *Lah*, and the a Korean *KyungBokGung Taryung* show just one non-tonic-chord-note throughout, the C note in the former and the A note the latter, and those note are read as “Re” in the movable do system. See Ex.10.

III. Difference between Thai and Korean Folksongs

1. Scalar System/Transposition

Some Thai folksongs show transposition, which is not found in the Korean folksongs. The scalar system used in the folksongs having transposition within them does not look like the pentatonic system, however, viewing them having transposition, they clearly stay in the pentatonic scalar system, which makes reading the whole songs easier and clearer. *OmTuk* shows a transposition from a minor key to D minor key (Ex.11), *KanTreum* from E minor key to A minor key and then back to E minor key (Ex.12), and *Lah* from Bb major key to C major key with the final of “D” note – Dorian mode (Ex.13).



Ex.11 Transposition from A minor to D minor Key in *OmTuk*, Thai Folksong



Ex.12 Transpositions from E Minor to C Major Then Back to E minor Key in *KanTreum*, Thai Folksong



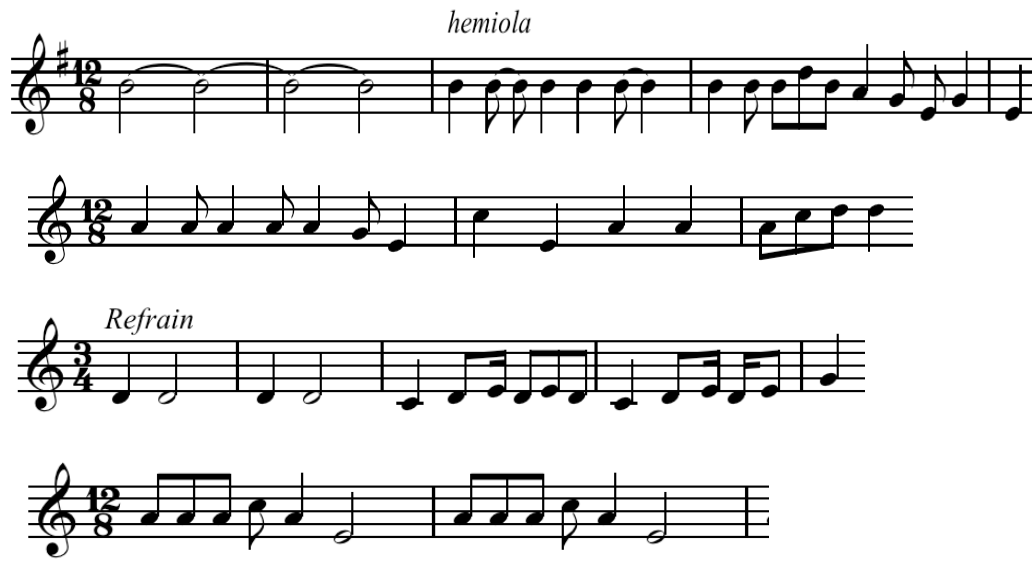
Ex.13 Transposition from Bb Major to C Major key in *Lah*, Thai Folksong

2. Metric Structure

The metric structures between Thai and Korean folksongs are considerably different. Majority of Thai folksongs is in duple meter, mostly in 2/4, 4/4 or 2/2 meter – All of the Thai-folksong-excerpts for this study are in duple meter. The duple time highly probably signifies that the folksongs are meant to accompany dances (Ex.14). On the other hand, majority of Korean folksongs is in compound meter, best transcribed into 12/8 time, with frequent *hemiola* – All of the excerpts of Korean folksongs chosen for the study can be considered to be in the compound meter, although some of them with an affection of sadness or requiring slow tempo were transcribed into triple meter of $\frac{3}{4}$. (Ex.15).



Ex.14 Duple Metric Structure of Thai Folksongs; *Tang Wai*, *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo*, *OmTuk*, *Lah* (from top to bottom)



Ex.15 Compound Metric Structure of Korean Folksongs; *GyungBokGung TaRyung*, *SinGoSan TaRyung*, *BangA TaRyung*, *Baet Norae* (From Top to Bottom)

3. Final Note

As mentioned previously, the common final notes shared between the Thai and Korean folksongs are “do” and “la.” However, some Thai folksongs show the final on “re” and some Korean folksongs on “sol.” Exx.16-17 show the final on “re” in the Thai folksongs, *Yuan Yuan Yuan* and *Klai Pai Ik Nid* and Exx.18-19 show the final on “sol” in the Korean folksongs, *TaePyungGa* and *Doraji TaRyung*.

The modality of the scales used for the Thai and Korean folksongs are different from the Church modes in the Western Music Tradition. However, I think the general modality, including major and minor keys, is the most commonly used scalar system before the influence of the major-minor key dominance of the European common practice era to all around the world including Thailand and Korea.



Ex.16 Final “re,” *Yuan Yuan Yuan*, Thai Folksong



Ex.17 Final “re,” *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid*, Thai Folksong



Ex.18 Final “sol,” *TaePyungGa*, Korean Folksong



Ex.19 Final “sol,” *Doraji TaRyung*, Korean Folksong

4. Repetition of A Musical Pattern

Although the repetition of a musical pattern is commonly used as a unifying tool in the folksongs of the two countries, the specific ways to use it are different. There are three kinds of musical pattern: phrasal, rhythmic and motivic repetition.

A. Repetition of Phrases

Phrasal repetition defines musical form or structure of folksong. Some of the Thai folksongs show a preference for consecutive repetition of a phrase, such forms as **aabb'** in *OmTuk* (Ex.20), **aabc** in *KanTreum* and *ToeyKhong* (Ex.21), and **abb'cd** in *Niaong* (Ex.22).



Ex.20 **aabb'** Form, *OmTuk*, Thai Folksong

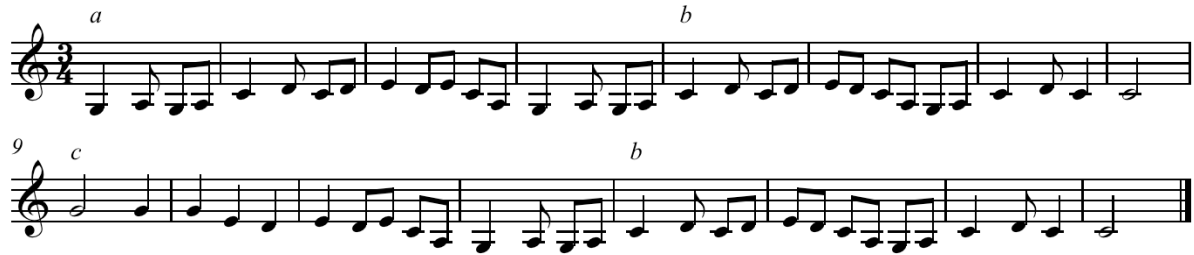


Ex.21 **aabc** Form, *KanTreum*, Thai Folksong



Ex.22 **abb'cd** Form, *Niaong*, Thai Folksong

However, Korean folksongs show a preference for non-consecutive repetition, such forms as *abcb* in *Arirang* and *BaetNorae* (Ex.23) and *aa'ba* in *Doragi Taryung* (Exx.24).



Ex.23 *abcb* Form, *Arirang*, Korean Folksong



Ex.24 *aa'ba*, *Doraji Taryung*, Korean Folksong

B. Repetition of A Short Rhythmic Pattern

Most of the Thai folksongs show predominant repetition of short rhythmic patterns. And in general they show a specific and salient rhythmic pattern, four consecutive eighth notes followed by a longer note than a eighth note (Ex.25, *Jjoy*), which sometimes appears in

slightly modified forms, such as a form in which the first two notes are modified into a dotted eighth and a sixteenth note respectively (Ex.26, *Niaong*) or another form in which the first four notes are modified into two pairs of the two-note combination of a dotted eighth note and a sixteenth note (Ex.27 *Yuan Yuan Yuan*).



Ex.25 Four Consecutive Eighth Notes Followed by A Longer Note, *Jjoy*, Thai Folksong



Ex.26 A modification of The Rhythmic Pattern, *Niaong*, Thai Folksong



Ex.27 Another Modification of The Rhythmic Pattern, *Yuan Yuan Yuan*, Thai Folksong

Sometimes the pattern is expanded by interpolating two of the pattern creating a longer pattern having eight consecutive eighth notes followed by a longer note than a eighth note (Ex.28 *Jjoy*) or by interpolating two of any five-note patterns (Ex.29 *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo*).



Ex.28 Interpolation of Two of The Pattern, *Jjoy*, Thai Folksong



Ex.29 Interpolation of The Patterns, *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo*, Thai Folksong

In the Thai Ramwong folksongs, composed to accompany dances, these patterns are predominating throughout almost without exception (see Ex. *Yuan Yuan Yuan*). Thus, other folksongs than Ramwong folksongs, dominantly having the rhythmic patterns, highly probably would have been intended to accompany dances.



Ex.30 Salient Rhythmic Pattern in Thai Ramwong Folksongs, *Yuan Yuan Yuan*

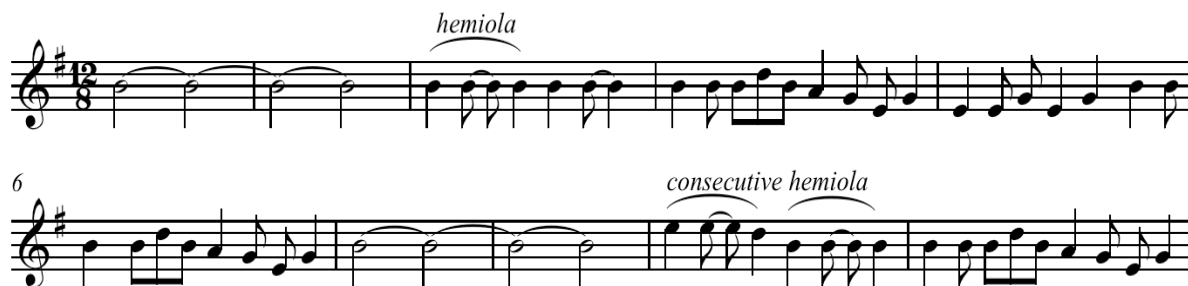
However, the repetition of a short rhythmic pattern is less dominant in Korean folksongs. And some Korean folksongs show two factors not appearing in the Thai folksongs, *hemiola* and triplet. *Hemiola*, a momentary metric switch from a quicker triple to a slower triple meter, appears in *SinGoSan Taryung* (Ex.31), *TaePyungGa* (Ex.32) and *GyungBokGung Taryung* (Ex.33), and triplet in *BangA Taryung* (Ex.34).



Ex.31 *Hemiola, SinGoSan TaRyung, Korean Folksong*



Ex.32 *Hemiola, TaePyongGa, Korean Folksong*



Ex.33 *Hemiola, GyungBokGung TaRyung, Korean Folksong*



Ex.34 *Triplet, BangA TaRyung, Korean Folksong*

C. Repetition of A Short Melodic Pattern

The Thai folksongs, *Jjoy*, *OmTuk* and *KanTreum* share the melodic fragment of “re-mi-re-do-(la)” and *Yuan Yuan Yuan* and *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid* “mi-sol-mi-do-re” based on the movable do scalar system (Ex.35).

Jjoy



OmTuk



KanTreum



Ex.35 Shared “re-mi-re-do-(la)” Melodic Fragment among *Jjoy*, *OmTuk* and *KanTreum*,
Thai Folksongs

OmTuk and *KanTreum* share a longer melodic fragment of “do-re-mi-sol-re-mi-re-do-la” (Ex.36). The sharing of melodic fragments makes the folksongs sound very similar. This kind of sharing melodic fragment among several folksongs does not appear in the Korean folksongs.

e minor:

5. Mirroring of A Melodic Figure or Melodic Retrograde

18

6. Occasional Leaps Wider Than the Interval of The Perfect Fifth

Some Thai folksongs, such as *Jjoy*, *TangWai* and *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid*, show the leap of an octave (Ex.38).

Jjoy



TangWai



Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid



The image displays three musical examples of octave leaps in Thai folk songs. Each example is written on a single staff in treble clef. The first example, 'Jjoy', is marked with a '32' above the staff and shows a melodic line with a leap from a lower note to a higher one. The second example, 'TangWai', is marked with a '9' above the staff and shows a longer melodic line with a similar leap. The third example, 'Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid', is marked with a '10' above the staff and also shows a melodic line with an octave leap. All three examples use eighth and quarter notes with various rests and phrasing marks.

Ex.38 Leap of An Octave, *Jjoy*, *TangWai*, *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid*, Thai Folksongs

And some others show the consecutive wide leaps to opposite direction, such as a falling minor sixth leap directly followed by a rising minor sixth leap in *Tah Mong Tah* and a falling minor seventh leap directly followed by a rising minor seventh leap in *Ubon Rachathani* (Ex.39). These characters do not appear in the Korean folksongs.

Tah Mong Tah



Ubon Rachathani



Ex.39 Consecutive Wide Leaps to Opposite Direction, *Tah Mong Tah* and *Ubon Rachathani*, Thai Folksongs

7. Tonic Arpeggiation

The Thai folksong *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid* shows the minor tonic *arpeggiation* directly followed by the major tonic *arpeggiation* at the beginning (Ex.40).



Ex.40 Minor Tonic *Arpeggiation* Directly Followed by Major Tonic *Arpeggiation*, *Klai Khau Pai Ik Nid*, Thai Folksong

However, the Korean folksong *GyungBokGung Taryung* shows a major-minor tonic *arpeggiation* in which a G major tonic *arpeggiation* is combined with an e minor tonic *arpeggiation* consecutively (Ex.41).



Ex.41 Major-Minor Tonic *Arpeggiation*, *GyungBokGunk Taryung*, Korean Folksong

And the two Korean folksongs *BaetNora*e and *HanObaekNyun* show a tonic *arpeggiation* throughout the songs as a predominating melodic-structural device with rarely used non-tonic-chord tones.



Ex.42 Tonic *arpeggiation* throughout a song, *BaetNoare*, Korean Foksong

IV. Conclusion

The Table 1 shows the overall summary of the reasons for the similarity and difference between the Thai and Korean folksongs. The similarity comes from the shared elements, the pentatonic scalar system, the comfortable singing range, the general repetition of musical patterns, the final notes, the wide leaps, antiphonal style, and the tonic *arpeggiation*. The difference comes from the methods or preferences to deal the musical elements mentioned above on a detail level: the preference for the transposition in the pentatonic scalar system or not, the preference for duple or triple metric structure, the

preference for the final on “re” or “sol,” the preference for the consecutive or non-consecutive formal repetition, the preference for the predominating rhythmic pattern or the less dominating with *hemiola*, the preference of the shared melodic pattern among several folksongs or just within a folksong, the mirroring of a melodic figure or not, the preference for the consecutive wide leaps to opposite direction or not, the preference for the minor tonic *arpeggiation* directly followed by a major tonic *arpeggiation* or the major-minor tonic *arpeggiation* or the tonic *arpeggiation* throughout a folksong.

Table 1. A Comparison of The Musical Tools And Styles between Thai and Korean Folksongs

Similarity	1. Pentatonic Scalar System		
	2. Comfortably Singable Range		
	3. General Repetition of A Musical Pattern within A Song – Short Rhythmic and Melodic Patterns		
	4. Final Note – Mostly on “Do” and “La”		
	5. Wider Leaps than The Perfect Fifth Interval		
	6. “Call and Response” or Antiphonal Style		
	7. Tonic <i>Arpeggiation</i>		
Difference		Thai	Korean
	1. Scalar System	Transposition	None
	2. Metric Structure	Duple	Triple
	3. Final Note	Some on “Re”	Some on “Sol”
	4. Repetition of A	a. Consecutive Formal	Non-consecutive

	Pattern	Repetition	Formal Repetition
		b. Rhythmic Pattern: Predominant	Less Predominant with <i>Hemiola</i>
		c. Melodic Pattern: -. Within A Song -. Share by several songs	Only within A Song
	5. Mirroring of a Melodic Figure	Very Rarely but Yes	None
	6. Leaps Wider Than P.5 th Interval	-. An 8ve -. Consecutive leaps to opposite direction	None of These
	7. Tonic <i>Arpeggiation</i>	A Minor Tonic Directly Followed by Major Tonic <i>Arpeggiation</i>	-. Major-Minor Tonic <i>Arpeggiation</i> -. Tonic <i>Arpeggiation</i> throughout A Song

I think that the musical ideas, from the overall formal structure to the detail embellishment, come from the language, and the meanings, emotions or affections of the text or poem, attached to the folksongs, provide the meanings, feelings, emotions or affections to the musical sound of the folksongs. Unfortunately, I could not execute the analysis of the folksongs based on the textual meanings due to my lack of knowledge on the Thai language. However, next time when I get enough knowledge on the language, I would like to expand this study further including the detail relationships between the textual meanings and the musical elements.