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, A Rhythmic Pattern or A 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.

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 probably is a 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 as shown in Exx.1-2.

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 as in Exx.3-4.

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 commonly used final notes in the folksongs of the two countries are “do” and “la,” considered in the movable do system.

5. Leaps Wider than An Interval of the Perfect Fifth

Some folksongs use wide leaps. Repetition of a specific wide interval provides a
special flavor to the folksongs, such as shown in Exx.5-6.

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 as in Exx.7-8.

Ex.7  Antiphonal Style, *Thoe Ram Chang Nah Doo*, Thai Folksong
7. **Tonic Arpeggiation**

Some of the folksongs use the major or the minor tonic *arpeggiation* as a framework to build a melody. Ex.9 shows the major tonic *arpeggiation* in a Thai folksong. And Ex.10 shows the minor tonic *arpeggiation* in a Korean folksong.
III. Difference between Thai and Korean Folksongs

1. Scalar System/Transposition

Some Thai folksongs show transpositions as shown in Exx.11-13

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 as shown in Ex.14. The duple time highly probably signifies that the folksongs are meant to accompany dances. On the other hand, majority of Korean folksongs is in compound meter, best transcribed into 12/8 time, with frequent hemiola as shown in Ex.15.

Ex.14  Duple Metric Structure of Thai Folksongs; *TangWai, 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

Some Thai folksongs show the final on “re” and some Korean folksongs on “sol” as presented in Exx.16-19. 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
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 a folksong. Some of the Thai folksongs show a preference for consecutive repetition of a phrase, such forms as $aabb'$ as shown in Ex.20, $aabc$ in Ex.21, and $abb’cd$ in 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 Ex.23 and *aa′ba* in Ex.24.
Ex. 23  
**abc b** 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 as shown in Ex.25. Two modified patterns of it are shown in Exx. 26 and 27.
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 as shown in Ex. 28 or by interpolating two of any five-note patterns as shown in Ex. 29.

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. Thus, other folksongs than Ramwong
folksongs, dominantly having the rhythmic patterns, might be 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* is shown in Exx. 31-33. And triplet is shown in 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

Some Thai folksongs share the melodic fragment, such as “re-mi-re-do-(la)” as shown in Ex.35.

Jjoy

OmTuk
5. Mirroring of A Melodic Figure or Melodic Retrograde

A Thai folksong shows a mirroring of a melodic figure as shown in Ex.37.
6. Occasional Leaps Wider Than the Interval of The Perfect Fifth

Some Thai folksongs show the leap of an octave as shown in Ex.38.

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 as shown in Ex.39.
7. Tonic Arpeggiation

A Thai folksong shows the minor tonic arpeggiation directly followed by the major tonic arpeggiation as shown in Ex.40.

However, a Korean folksong shows a major-minor tonic arpeggiation in which a G major tonic arpeggiation is combined with an e minor tonic arpeggiation consecutively as shown in Ex.41.
And some Korean folksongs show a tonic *arpeggiation* throughout as a predominating melodic-structural device with rarely used non-tonic-chord tones as shown in Ex.42

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Thai</th>
<th>Korean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pentatonic Scalar System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Comfortably Singable Range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. General Repetition of A Musical Pattern within A Song – Short Rhythmic and Melodic Patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Final Note – Mostly on “Do” and “La”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Wider Leaps than The Perfect Fifth Interval</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. “Call and Response” or Antiphonal Style</td>
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<td>7. Tonic <em>Arpeggiation</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Scalar System Transposition</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Metric Structure Duple</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Final Note Some on “Re”</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Repetition of A a. Consecutive Formal</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-consecutive</td>
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### Pattern Reiteration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Formal Repetition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Rhythmic Pattern:</td>
<td>Predominant</td>
<td>Less Predominant with <em>Hemiola</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Melodic Pattern:</td>
<td>- Within A Song</td>
<td>Only within A Song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Share by several songs</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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| 5. Mirroring of a Melodic Figure | Very Rarely but Yes | None |

| 6. Leaps Wider Than P.5th Interval | - An 8ve | None of These |
| | - Consecutive leaps to opposite direction | |

| 7. Tonic Arpeggiation | A Minor Tonic Directly Followed by Major Tonic Arpeggiation | -. Major-Minor Tonic Arpeggiation |
| | | -. Tonic Arpeggiation throughout A Song |

I think that the musical ideas, from the overall formal structure to the detail embellishment, basically come from the language. And the meanings, emotions or affections of the text or poem, attached to the folksongs, provide the meanings to the musical sound of the folksongs. 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.
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.