

CONFERENCE REPORTS

“Benefits of the Ethnolinguistic Mapping Project of Ethnic Groups in Thailand” Seminar, held on February 8, 1993, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

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An historic seminar (for Thailand) was held at Mahidol University on February 8, 1993. It was organized jointly by Mahidol’s Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development (ILCRD) and the Office of National Culture Commission (ONCC). The purpose of the seminar was to brainstorm about the possible advantages and uses of the Ethnolinguistic Mapping Project which is presently being carried out by Mahidol’s ILCRD under the sponsorship of the ONCC.

The word “historic” seems especially appropriate for the seminar as it was, to my knowledge, the first time that people from various government ministries and academic institutions gathered together to focus their thinking on the ethnic minority groups in Thailand. Previously, according to one speaker, the existence of these ethnic groups had been largely ignored in Thailand in the interest of preserving national unity. As 1994 is the United Nations’ “Year of Ethnic Groups” and as national unity has become a fact, it seems fitting that Thailand chose this time to look at its minority language groups, of which it has an abundance.

After the official opening, Dr. Suwilai Premsrirat of ILCRD introduced the Ethnolinguistic Mapping Project. The purpose of this project is to survey and map the many large and small ethnic groups of the country, i.e., those groups of people who are distinguished by language, culture and ancestry. The expected results of the survey will consist of:

1. geographical maps showing the location of the various ethnic groups according to province, district and sub-district,
2. computer software maps which will also provide village names (in addition to province, district and sub-district locations),
3. handbooks giving summaries of the characteristic features of the language and culture of each group.

Dr. Suwilai expressed the hope that all this information will lead to a better understanding and acceptance of the differences in customs, beliefs and thinking

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of the ethnic groups, which in turn has the potential to aid development workers in doing realistic planning for those groups.

Mrs. Sawitri Suwansathit of the ONCC described many ways in which the results of the mapping project could be used in the future. Among these are the following:

It can be used as a basis for further research in various disciplines (i.e. linguistics, anthropology, education, etc.).

It can be used in education, such as:

1. helping school teachers prepare and then teach a recently introduced subject called "local studies" which aims to broaden the students' awareness of local customs and culture.

2. helping education planners to know where the teaching of Central Thai should be emphasized.

3. helping government officials in some areas to know what languages and cultures they should study in order to get their work done more efficiently.

It can be used in the ONCC's plan to set up ethnology museums in various areas of the country.

It can be useful for Interior Ministry officials in doing realistic planning for areas with ethnic groups, as well as in solving problems specific to those areas. It is, for instance, hoped that the information gathered will be useful in realistic planning for economic development in these areas, because, in general, the economic situation in the areas where ethnic groups are located is not good.

Following these two main speakers, the seminar participants divided up into three discussion groups. Group 1 discussed the possible benefits of the mapping project in relation to communication, Group 2 in relation to development, and Group 3 in relation to education. The groups also prepared recommendations which were presented later in the seminar. These recommendations (many of which were quite innovative) are all listed in the seminar proceedings published by Mahidol University (in Thai). I will just summarize those which I perceive to be the main ones.

An effort should be made to build up the self-image and self-confidence of minority group people, because self-confidence is the ground on which development can flourish. One way to do this is by acknowledging their existence and the value of their language and culture. Creative ways should be used to achieve this.

Local cultures as well as local knowledge should be respected, that is, taken into consideration by officials and others working there. They should also be preserved. One way to preserve detailed information about the culture is to publish it in a cultural encyclopedia.

More detailed studies into local cultures and languages should be conducted. This should not only be left to scholars and government agencies in Bangkok. Others, including NGOs and local academic institutions, should get involved.

People from the ethnic groups themselves should also be encouraged and trained to study their own culture and language.

Development workers in ethnic minority areas should be trained to gain an understanding of the local language and culture. They can then adjust their methods more realistically.

As for education, there should be follow up studies in other related fields. One area that needs further study is the problem associated with the proper methods of teaching Thai speaking and reading skills to minority language speakers. National policy makers in education should become aware of the realities of the ethnic groups and set policies that reflect these realities. Local education authorities could then be expected to be able to work out the details of such policies; but they need the support of the authorities in Bangkok.

The Ethnolinguistic Mapping Project should be ready for distribution in approximately early 1995. The plan is to make it available on computer diskette and in hard copy.

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The 26th International Conference of Sino–Tibetan Languages and Linguistics 13-17 September 1993

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The 26th International Conference of Sino-Tibetan languages and Linguistics was held on 13-17 September 1993 at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan. It was organized by a Japanese committee with Yasuhiko Nagano as the chairman. The conference theme was *Ethno-linguistic and Historical Survey of Sino-Tibetan*.

The keynote speech was given by Tatsuo Nishida (National Center for Science Information System) on *A Personal View of Sino-Tibetan Language Family*. The opening panel discussion was on *Problems and Progress in Sino-Tibetan Linguistics*. Discussants were James Matisoff (U.C. Berkeley), William Baxter (U. of Michigan), David Bradley (La Trobe U.), Sun Hongkai (Chinese Academy of Social Science), Dai Qingxia (Central Institute of Nationalities), and Tatsuo Hishida (National Center for Science Information System).

Workshops on various language families in many interesting areas of study were held on 14-16 September. Workshops on Burmese, Tai, Austro-Tai, Tibetan,