

***Châak* and other Chong place names: Linguistic remains of a Mon-Khmer people in eastern Thailand**

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1. Problem

For many years there have been accounts of Chong settlements in Thailand, and they tend to make two propositions: (1) The Chong people stayed in a limited area of Chanthaburi province; (2) In the past the Chong people had occupied large areas of eastern provinces of Thailand.

The first proposition can be found in well-known sources such as the official dictionary of *Ratchapunditsathan* (2525:258), Mor Plad-lay's *Dictionary of Siamese Language* (1873), and Crawford (1856:383) who wrote as follows:

The wild race of the Chong inhabits the mountains to the east of the province of Chantibun, on the eastern side of the Gulf, and the Kariengs have their locality to the north of them (sic).

The latter proposition, that Chong people used to inhabit areas other than Chanthaburi, can be found in a travelogue by Sunthorn Phu who derogatively referred to the Chong people in his frequently-quoted travelogue, an account of his journey to a locality now a part of Rayong province:

*k^hrán léew lāa fàa t^háaw t^hâan bitùrōη
pāj bâan p^hōηk^hố tâη rīm fàη k^hlōωη
dūu nùm sǎaw c^hāaw bâan rāmk^hāan cìt
mâj nâa k^hít k^hâw nāj klōωn ?àksốωn sànsốωη
lúən wōηwāan wāan k^hruīə pēn c^húə c^hōωη
mâj muǎən nốωη nuík nâa nám tāa kràdēn*

'Then I took leave from my respected father,
And went to the village of Phong Khor upon the canal.
Seeing local lads and maidens, I felt annoyed
That they were unfit for my verse.

Because all were grown from the Chong roots,
And so contrasting from you that I was close to tears.

(*Nirat Muang Klaeng*, quoted from Surekha 2530:1)

This passage has been cited by many who try to advocate the hypothesis that the Chong people were the indigenous people of eastern Thailand. Local writers favor the hypothesis that Chong people had been the first people to live in eastern Thailand, yet more evidence is needed to verify such a claim. However, other evidence to support this hypothesis is rare. More hard facts to verify the hypothesis need investigation.

My study is an effort to look at the linguistic evidence, namely, place names that might be another data source for investigation whether the Chong people had inhabited a far greater area than they do now in Chanthaburi. This paper will also try to draw meanings from those Chong-derived 'names' and consider the cultural implication in relation to the Mon-Khmer language family, especially Chong settlements in eastern Thailand.

2. Definitions

2.1 The Chong word **châak** means "abandoned clearing covered with undergrowth"; this topological noun is found only in names of communities (sub-districts and villages) in Chonburi, Rayong, Chanthaburi, and Trat provinces. In the areas bounded by the geographical distribution of *châak* (see Map 1 & 2), we will find other place names that make little sense in the Thai language yet are more meaningful to those who has an elementary knowledge of the Chong language.

2.2 **Chong** is a minority language belonging to the Pearic branch of the Mon-Khmer sub-family, akin to Pear, Samre, and Chu'ung (Saoch) in Cambodia. The language is still spoken by the Chong ethnic group now living mostly in the northern district of Khao Khtichukut, Chanthaburi province.

2.3 **Place names** refer to the names of geographical locations and they usually reflect natural or social features of those particular locations. The spatial extent of each place name may vary from local to regional areas. In most cases, the meanings of place names are understandable to local residents. The origins of these names may be dated far back in time. They may be derived from diverse linguistic roots and form part of the cultural and linguistic history of each locality or a country. In this paper, I sometimes use the term place names interchangeably with **geographical names**, or proper names of particular geographical entities known to people in a country where they are located. Oftentimes, a place name may form part of a geographical name. However, there are cases of Chong-derived geographical names becoming **conventional names** in Thai or being transformed into the national language. For examples, see Table 1.

3. Methodology

This study is based on the systematic query of a village names database. Much of my analytical discussion about Chong place names is drawn from the recollections of my conversations and interviews with Chong speakers in Khao Khitchakut district of Chanthaburi province during the past few years.

3.1 Data

Place names studied in this paper are from the computerized database developed by the 'Ethnolinguistic Maps of Thailand Research Project' of Mahidol University. This database derives its raw data from community names (province, district, sub-district, and village) collected by the Ministry of Interior. With this database, I can make the computerized query regarding the distributions of particular names in particular areas. A complementary source of data is the *Ratchapunditasathan's* Glossary of Geographical Names.

3.2 Analyses of place names

3.2.1 Syntactic order

As my major data source are from community names, which are usually held as proper names, I need to extract from them the general names that refer, more or less, to natural or man-made geographical features. For example, in the village names *Baan Khao Noi* and *Baan Châak Yai*, the words *Khao* and *Châak* are considered as primarily relevant to this study. In addition, in the village name like *Baan Bung Ch'nanng Lang* include the apparent Khmer traces of *bung* 'pond' and *ch'nanng* 'pot,' and so they are also both considered as relevant data.

3.2.2 Meanings

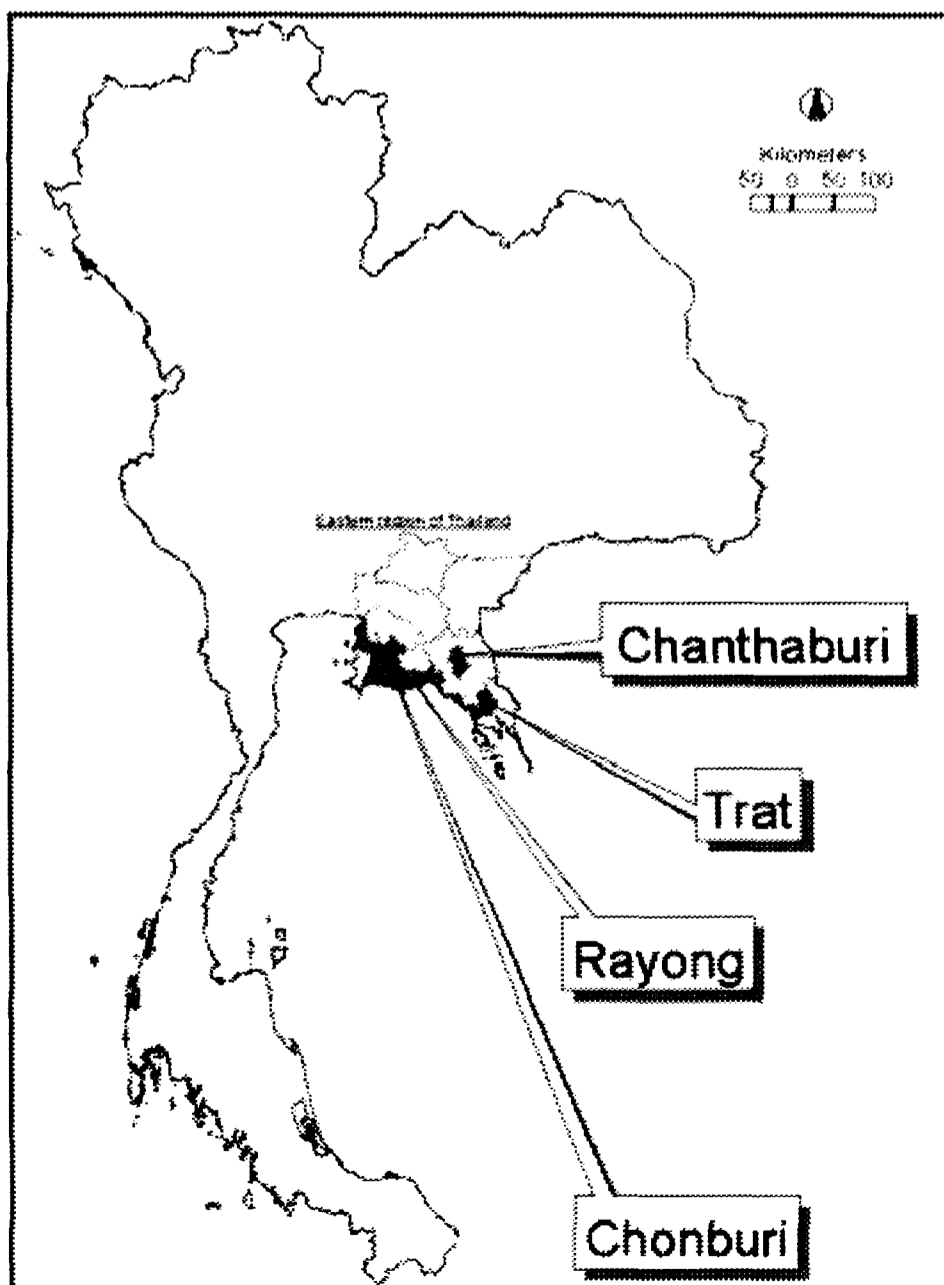
Because the prime objective of this study is to investigate the linguistic traces of non-Thai place names in eastern Thailand, not the comprehensive analysis and description of such names in general, I decide to apply selective treatment on my data. That means I would pick certain terms that are not usually considered as topological nouns in Thai; therefore, one cannot conveniently find their meanings in Thai dictionaries. Some of these names merely become 'proper names' designating only some particular communities though their original meanings point to geographical features surrounding those communities. In this study, such 'original' meanings of those names are considered more important than their current use as proper names.

3.3 Geographical distribution of place names

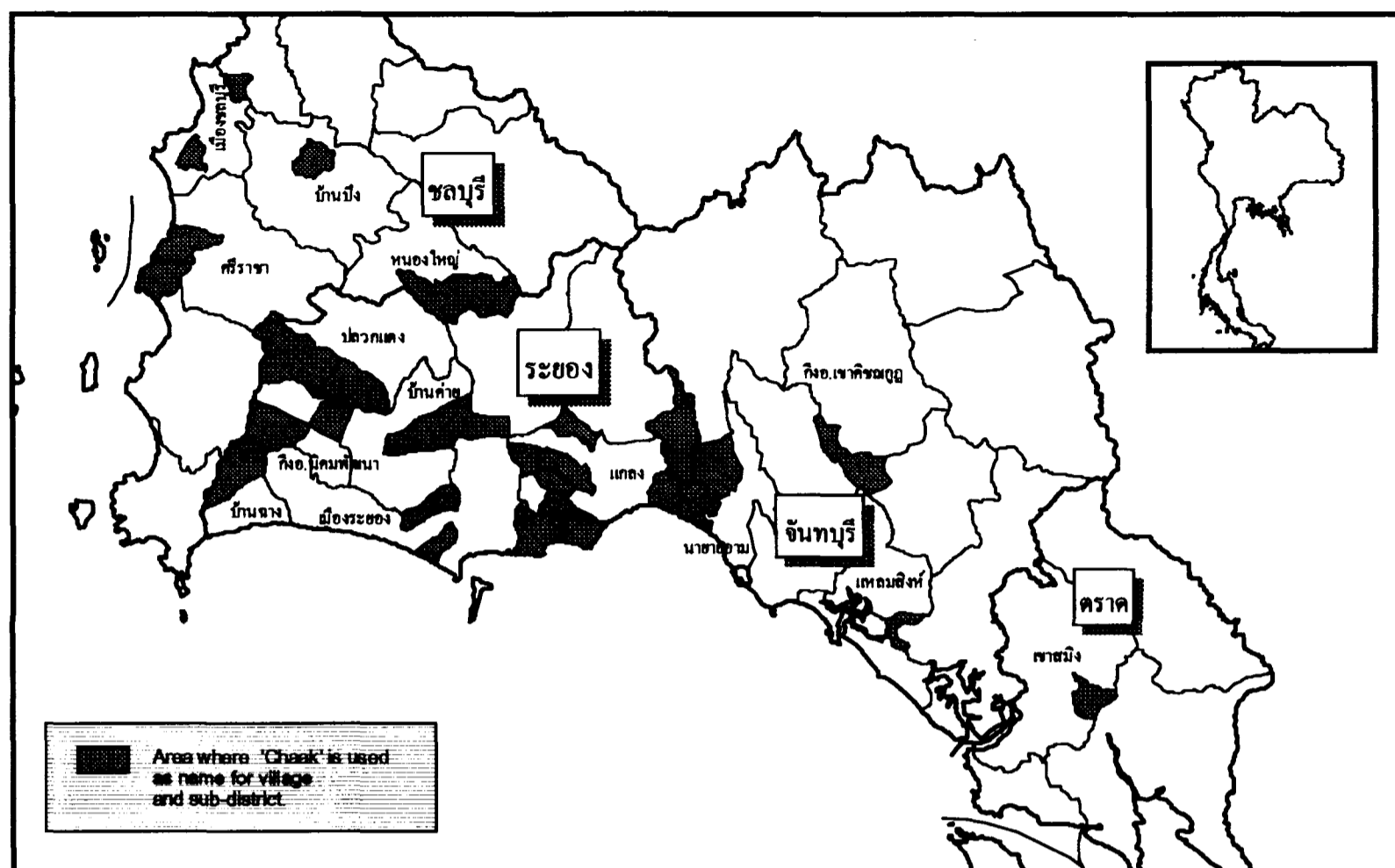
To better illustrate my case when discussing geographical distribution patterns of particular terms, I resort to basic map-making. The maps will demonstrate to readers how some names are bounded to a specific area. In this study, more attention is given to names that are found only in specific areas, in this case only in the four eastern provinces of Thailand, than words that are common also in other areas.

4. “Châak,” what is it and where is it located?

During the past few years, I have had opportunities to visit Chanthaburi province to study the Chong language. Throughout the course of my study, I have become sensitive to the word *châak*. I have seen the word time and again on signposts along the road. No Thai dictionaries could cure my curiosity. The *Ratchapunditsathan’s* Glossary of Geographical Names only list *châak* as part of proper names for mountain, field, and village without providing specific meaning of the word. When I try to locate the communities’ names which *châak* is part of, I found that its occurrences are bound within Chonburi, Rayong, Chanthaburi, and Trat. Klaeng district is where *châak* is most frequently found (see Appendix). It should be noted that this district has been believed to be a Chong homeland in the past.



Map 1. Geographical distribution of Châak



Map 2. Geographical distribution of *Châak* (Zoomed-in picture)

4.1 A tentative meaning of *châak*

I first observed the use of *châak* in actual speech when a Chong speaker said to me with disapproval about a Chong folk who left his farmland so untended that it became *pàa châak* ‘a kind of forest; grove’. I asked the speaker about the meaning of *châak*. He paused for a while and told me it was the same as *phrii see* ‘forest + rattan’ in Chong. I had tried to ask other Chong speakers about the exact meaning of *châak*, yet without receiving any clearer definition. The word seems to convey the meaning of ‘cleared land’ and ‘wilderness’ at the same time. From my comprehension, its entity lies between regularly cultivated land and un-tilled wilderness, or forest.

In the appendix attached to this paper, one can see that the majority of words that come after *châak* can be categorized in three major sub-groups: (1) *châak* + ‘a kind of flora’ (2) *châak* + ‘ethnic/personal name’ (3) *châak* + ‘spatial attributes’. I interpret these patterns as supporting the idea that *châak* is a special kind of space closer to human community, also more subdued than a forest, yet far from being a regular farm.

Although the use *châak* can be found in everyday speech among Chong speakers, its meaning still sounds vague and flexible. On one hand, we find Chong’s *baay* ‘dry-rice cultivation field’ (similar to Thai *râi*), *sεε* ‘wet-rice cultivation field’ (similar to Thai *naa*), and *suan* ‘garden’ (same as Thai). On the other hand, we find Chong’s *phrii* ‘forest’ (similar to Thai *pàa*) where the people rely on its natural goods. But *châak* seems to locate in the buffer space. If I

understand it right, the distinction of *châak* comes from the notion that this term implies man-made feature of such particular space. Yet it also implies short-termed human activity in that space.

4.2 The 'ckaa > châak' hypothesis

Apart from Thai vocabulary, Chong language had borrowed a lot from Khmer. Even the Chong notion of elementary unit of society, *suk* 'village,' is derived from Khmer *sruk* 'country; district.' So I find it logical to look for the equivalence of *châak* in Khmer. Yet, until now, I have not found any particular word that renders the same meaning as *châak*, except for the Khmer verb *ckaa* 'clear (the land)' that could be said as semantically related to Chong/Thai *châak* as discussed in this study. For the time being, I propose that *châak* might have been derived from the Khmer verb *ckaa* (Prayun 2542: Glossary, 14). Through times, the original meaning changed from signifying the activity of clearing the land to designating a deforested space where cultivation had not been sustained.

However, the question remains unanswered as to which group of people 'named' so many places in Chonburi, Rayong, Chanthaburi and Trat as *châak*. Were they predecessors of today's Chong people in Chanthaburi? Although it might be too hasty to conclude that in areas where there are usage of the word *châak* there had been Chong people, it would not be far-fetched to assume that such areas might have been inhabited by those related to Mon-Khmer people. So far there had been no apparent traces of Mon-Khmer people in these areas other than Chong. Therefore, it is still safe to draw some provisional connections between Chong people and eastern Thailand. But we need to search for more evidence to affirm that hypothesis.

5. Other Chong place names

Within the area bounded by the geographical distribution of *châak*, we will find more place and geographical names that were derived from the Chong language. Some names could be easily identified as Chong derivation, but some are not. These names can be found only in the eastern region of Thailand, part of which is still inhabited by a Chong-speaking population. Apart from Chong place names, we can find Khmer-derived names like *บึงขันธ์* *bueng ch'nang*, pond of pot, in Pong Nam Ron District, Chanthaburi.

Table 1. Examples of other Chong place names

Name	Description	Chong Vocabulary
วังแฉ่ม	Village and sub-district names, Makham District, Chanthaburi	แฉ่ม /se:ʔm/ คนไทย (สยาม) 'Siamese people'
แกหลง	District name in Rayong province; village name in Makham District, Chanthaburi	แกรง /kre:ŋ/ แหวน 'ring'
ชำเคราะห์ (มาจาก 'ชำเคลาะ')	Village name in Khao Khitchakut District, Chanthaburi	ชำ /c ^h am/ ที่ลุ่มแฉะ 'low land' เคลาะ /k ^h lɔʔ/ หอย 'shell'
พังกะแลง	Village name in Khao Khitchakut District, Chanthaburi	พัง /p ^h aŋ/ หนอง 'swamp' กะแลง /kəle:ŋ/ ปลาจุก 'catfish'
พังอน	Village name in Pong Nam Ron District, Chanthaburi	พัง /p ^h aŋ/ หนอง 'swamp' งอน /ŋɔ:n/ หญ้าคา 'thatch'

It should be noticed that I mostly find Chong-derived geographical names from the area where there are Chong speakers (see Map 1). This is partly because many Chong speakers still remember the original meanings. However, in areas where Chong-derived names had been 'conventionalized' into Thai, it would take more time to reconstruct them back to their original meanings. In fact, there is still a lot of work to be done in that matter.

6. Conclusion

I would like to propose further that having Chong people inhabiting a great area of land in the past does not mean there were a lot of Chong people then. Instead, Chong people of the past should have been regarded as swidden cultivators who roamed the land looking for fertile ground and keen collectors of forest goods. If we accept that *châak* is a linguistic evidence of short-termed use of land by the past population of eastern Thailand who had some Mon-Khmer affiliations, it might not be too risky to interpret this as a trace of shifting cultivation practiced by Chong people. That subsistence cultivation, in vicinity of the forest, might be supported with forest goods collection. Such interpretation is consistent with oral accounts given by senior Chong speakers, which state that Chong people used to depend heavily on forest goods, especially cardamom seeds and wood tar, as income sources. This sort of livelihood required roaming a much wider area than those of lowland cultivators. It is probable that these Chong gather-cultivators had roamed the eastern lands of Thailand long before they become sedentary, small scale fruit growers.

However, the fact that Chong linguistic remains are found in many parts of eastern Thailand may not support the belief that most people in eastern Thailand are descendents of Chong people in the past. In fact, more works should be done in order to lay a common ground for sound 'histories' of Chong people and of early communities in eastern Thailand in general.

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Received: 4 March 2003

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Appendix

1. Châak in Village Names

Province	District	Sub-district	Village
จันทบุรี	นายายอาม	นายายอาม	คลองชาก
จันทบุรี	กิ่งอำเภอเขาคิชฌกูฏ	ชากไทย	ชากไทย
จันทบุรี	นายายอาม	ช้างข้าม	ชากหมั่น
จันทบุรี	แหลมสิงห์	พลั่ว	ชากใหญ่
จันทบุรี	นายายอาม	นายายอาม	ชากใหญ่
ชลบุรี	ศรีราชา	สุรศักดิ์	ชากค้อ
ชลบุรี	หนองใหญ่	เขาชก	ชากนา
ชลบุรี	เมืองชลบุรี	ห้วยกะปิ	ชากพุดซา
ชลบุรี	ศรีราชา	ทุ่งสุขลา	ชากยายจิ้น
ชลบุรี	เมืองชลบุรี	คอนหัวพ่อ	ชากสมอ
ชลบุรี	บ้านบึง	หนองชาก	หนองชาก
ตราด	เขาสมิง	ทุ่งนนทรี	ชากกลาง
ระยอง	แกลง	ห้วยยาง	เขาชากกรูด
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	ชากบก	ชากกอไผ่
ระยอง	เมืองระยอง	นาตาขวัญ	ชากขนุน
ระยอง	แกลง	กองคิน	ชากขุนวิเศษ
ระยอง	แกลง	กระแสนบน	ชากคอก
ระยอง	แกลง	ชากพง	ชากคา
ระยอง	กิ่งอำเภอนิคมพัฒนา	มะขามคู่	ชากเจ้าเดียว
ระยอง	แกลง	ชากโค่น	ชากโค่น
ระยอง	แกลง	วังหว่า	ชากตะไคร้
ระยอง	แกลง	ห้วยยาง	ชากตาด้วง
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	ชากบก	ชากทองหลาง
ระยอง	กิ่งอำเภอนิคมพัฒนา	มะขามคู่	ชากนอก
ระยอง	กิ่งอำเภอนิคมพัฒนา	นิคมพัฒนา	ชากผักกูด(คลองพลู)
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	บางบุตร	ชากมหาด

Province	District	Sub-district	Village
ระยอง	ปลวกแดง	แม่น้ำคู้	ชากมันเทศ
ระยอง	เมืองระยอง	ตะพง	ชากลาว
ระยอง	บ้านฉาง	สำนักท้อน	ชากหมาก
ระยอง	ปลวกแดง	มาบยางพร	ชากอ้อย
ระยอง	กิ่งอำเภอเนินคมพัฒนา	มะขามคู้	ชากอ้อย
ระยอง	แกลง	พังราด	ทุ่งเสาธง (ชากใน)
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	บางบุตร	มาบสองสลึง (ชากเล็ก)
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	บางบุตร	หนองคล้า (ชากยายนาค)

2. Châak in Sub-district Names

Province	District	Sub-district
ชลบุรี	กิ่งอำเภอเขาหินซ้อน	ชากไทย
ชลบุรี	บ้านบึง	หนองชาก
ระยอง	แกลง	ชากโคน
ระยอง	แกลง	ชากพง
ระยอง	บ้านค่าย	ชากบก