

## **Conserving the indigenous language of Tai northerners through community participatory activities**

by Paweena Chumbia and Juajan Wongpolganon

### ***Abstract***

*This article has been written in remembrance of Paweena Chumbia (1963-2011), a Thai teacher who dedicated herself to the conservation of the indigenous language of the Tai northerners in Mae Mo District, Lampang Province, Thailand. The aims of the article are twofold, namely, to describe and celebrate the work of this teacher who loved to teach the old Lanna alphabets to her students so that they were encouraged to use the characters in their everyday lives and also to provide an excellent example of collaboration between the Thailand Research Fund and the local people of Mae Mo District. As part of Paweena's project, funding from a Community-Based Master Research Grant (CBMAG) was used to establish a learning centre where interested people can learn the Lanna scripts. They are taught by local monks and lay people who are literate in the Lanna language.*

### **Introduction**

#### **The status of regional languages in Thai society**

One of the most important components of a culture is its language. With language, people not only expeditiously communicate; they also express their values, beliefs and world views.

When a language becomes extinct, a part of the cultural patrimony of humanity is lost.

(Barfield & Uzarski, 2009: 2).

The statement above can be applied to the situation in Thailand today. Thai society is fundamentally multicultural and multilingual, as evidenced by the number of languages spoken throughout the country. The major languages of Thailand can be divided into four main groups, these being Central Thai (Standard Thai or Siamese Thai, incorporating the 'Thaiklang' dialect), Northern Thai (Lanna or Kam Mueang), Southern Thai (Pak Tai) and Northeastern Thai (Isan).

Standard Thai or Siamese Thai is the language spoken in the central part of Thailand by roughly 25 million people. It is the national language of Thailand: the language of school instruction, media and government. There are several registers or varieties of Standard Thai, including the dialect known

colloquially as ‘Thaiklang’; generally speaking, however, all of these varieties are understood and used by speakers of the language. Northern Thai (also known as Lanna, Lannathai, Kam Mueang or ‘Thai Yuan’) comprises the group of related languages and dialects spoken in the regions in the extreme north of Thailand, in the former kingdom of Lanna (Chiang Mai), north of Tak, Sukhothai and Uttaradit Provinces. It is spoken by an estimated 5-6 million speakers in northern Thailand and northwestern Laos, making up almost 10% of Thailand’s population. Southern Thai (Pak Tai) is spoken in the former kingdom of Ligor (Nakhon Si Thammarat), in the region south of Prachuap Khiri Khan Province. There are somewhere between 4-5 million speakers of Pak Tai in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia, making up about 8% of the Thai population. The languages spoken in the northeast of Thailand, often called Northeastern Thai or Isan, are actually dialects or varieties of Lao which use the Thai script. There are somewhere between 12 and 15 million native speakers of Isan, comprising almost 25% of the Thai population. It serves as the main lingua franca in the region and surrounding provinces, with a large migrant worker community of Isan speakers also living in Bangkok.

English is considered to be the second language in Thailand and is the official language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). English is taught in Thai schools and universities and is generally understood and spoken in Bangkok. Since 1995, the Thai government has supported the teaching of English language in primary schools throughout the country with the main goal being to enable children to communicate in English and use the Internet to search for information. The focus of English language teaching in schools is on basic comprehension skills and on bringing about better understanding of other cultures, though not just American or British culture. Those who excel in English language learning at school are supported by the Thai government to take up higher education studies and pursue careers in government, trade and diplomacy (Nimkannon, 2006).

In contrast to English language teaching, the Thai regional languages have been almost totally overlooked by the majority of educational institutions and authorities. Exceptions exist where there is recognition of the value of indigenous languages, and local curricula are implemented to teach or maintain students’ home languages. There are a number of projects in which both major regional language varieties and even some of the minority languages and dialects have been taught to children and interested people both formally and informally (e.g., Premsrirat, 2008; Prapasaphong, 2012).

Ethnolinguistic studies of the languages and dialects spoken in Thailand have indicated that a natural hierarchical relationship exists between them (Smalley, 1988, 1994; Premsrirat, 2001). Standard Thai sits at the top of hierarchy as the ‘prestige’ variety, since it has been adopted officially as the national language. It is not, however, a vernacular language of any ethnolinguistic group (except in its

‘Thaiklang’ variety or dialect). In contrast, the other three regional language groups described above – Northern Thai (Lanna or Kam Mueang), Southern Thai (Pak Tai) and Northeastern Thai (Isan) – are vernacular languages as well as being the lingua franca for speakers of a wide variety of other minority languages and dialects within each region. These latter forms are nominated in the ethnolinguistic hierarchy as ‘Displaced Languages’, ‘Town Languages’, ‘Marginal Languages’ or ‘Enclave Languages’ (Smalley, 1988, 1994).

### **Language policy in Thailand**

In 2006, the Royal Institute of Thailand convened a committee to research the language situation in Thailand and draft a national language policy ‘that would benefit the Kingdom and all its people’ (Warotamasikkhadit, 2012: 1). The policy was endorsed in February 2010. The following statement is excerpted from the rationale:

‘Language is man’s most important resource’ and it can be planned ... in terms of ‘a national and global policy’. Indeed, the vital role of one’s ‘mother tongue (MT)’ and ‘a language of wider communication (LWC)’ should be duly reinforced in the ‘Global Village of Our Braver & Never [*sic*] World’ today. (Royal Institute of Thailand, 2010: 1)

While the aim as expressed is a worthy one, it is far removed from the realities of language use and language teaching practice in Thailand. The majority of Thai people speak a home language (or ‘mother tongue’) that is markedly different from the country’s national language, Standard Thai, the language used as the medium of instruction in schools. Furthermore, the Thai government has given special prominence to English language teaching in schools and universities. The use of students’ home languages is restricted primarily to domestic and informal contexts (i.e., oral communication), and only in rare instances are traditional languages and literatures offered as a specialised field of study at university. In addition, there is an observable tendency for members of the younger generations, particularly those living in larger towns and cities, to use Standard Thai in their everyday lives – both for domestic and formal communicative purposes. Thus, it is increasingly the case that the only people who are fluent in the traditional language or dialect of their region or community are those over forty-five years of age.

As a result of these factors, many of the traditional regional and minority languages and language varieties in Thailand are in danger of dying out, and this is particularly the case for the written forms of these languages. Indeed, a situation has now arisen where the majority of speakers of every regional language and dialect in Thailand (with the exception of Thaiklang) are illiterate in their mother tongue. While the languages are still spoken widely, people can no longer read or write using the alphabetic scripts.

### History and characteristics of Lanna scripts

The Lanna Kingdom (*lanna* = ‘land of a million rice fields’) was founded at the end of the 13th century. Formerly, three writing systems were used in Lanna: Lanna Tham script, Fak Kham script, and Thai Nithet or Kam Mueang script. The Lanna people developed and used these different alphabets for various secular and religious purposes. For example, the Fak Kham script derived from the Sukhothai script which spread to Lanna and underwent changes under the influence of the existing Lanna Tham script before becoming known as Fak Kham. This type of writing was used mainly for stone inscriptions (Ongsakul, 2005). Thai Nithet script, also known as Kam Mueang script, derived from the Lanna Tham and Fak Kham scripts and was widely used in poetry relating to worldly matters (Ongsakul, 2005). However, each of these traditional scripts have gradually declined in importance within communities and are now known by only a circle of academics (Penth, 2004; Ongsakul, 2005).

Originally deriving from ancient Mon and Khom, the Lanna scripts (or *tua mueang*) are unique in various aspects, as follows:

- 1 Syllables are based around consonants.
- 2 Vowels are illustrated with diacritics which can appear above, below or around the consonant letters. However, when they occur on their own or at the beginning of a word, vowels are attached to the glottal stop symbol (the final letter in the third row of consonants).
- 3 It is a tonal language determined by a combination of the class of consonant, the type of syllable, the tone marker and the length of the vowel.
- 4 There are several groupings of letters: different types of *payanchana* (consonants) including *payanchana nai wak* (Figure 1), *payanchana nok wak*, *payanchana perm* and *payanchana piset*, unmixed and mixed vowels (Figures 2 and 3), numerals, and tone and punctuation markers.
- 5 Many consonants have an alternate form (*payanchana sagot*) used when the consonant directly follows another consonant or when it follows a consonant/vowel combination where a vowel or other marking is not taking up the space below the preceding consonant.
- 6 There are no spaces between words. Instead, spaces in a Lanna text indicate the end of a clause or sentence. Moreover, the language can also be written using the Standard Thai alphabet, so it tends to be easily transliterated into Thai. (adapted from Ager, 2012)

The figures on the following pages show some of the Lanna characters along with Standard Thai and phonetic inscriptions.

พยัญชนะในวรรณคดี				
ก	ข	ง	ค	ฅ
ก	ข	ง	ค	ฅ
ก [g]	ข [k]	ง [ŋ]	ค [k]	ฅ [ŋ]
1	1	3	3	3
<hr/>				
จ	ฉ	ช	ซ	ญ
จ	ฉ	ช	ซ	ญ
จ [tʃ]	ฉ [tʃ]	ช [tʃ]	ซ [s]	ญ [j]
1	1	3	3	3
<hr/>				
ด	ต	น	บ	ป
ด	ต	น	บ	ป
ด [d]	ต [t]	น [n]	บ [b]	ป [p]
1	1	2	3	3
<hr/>				
ท	ถ	ด	น	บ
ท	ถ	ด	น	บ
ท [t]	ถ [t]	ด [d]	น [n]	บ [b]
1	1	3	3	3
<hr/>				
พ	ฟ	ภ	ม	ย
พ	ฟ	ภ	ม	ย
พ [p]	ฟ [f]	ภ [p]	ม [m]	ย [j]
1	1	3	3	3

Figure 1 – Thai *payanchana nai wak*  
(taken from Ager, 2012)

สระ (Vowels)				Vowels			
Lanna	Independent	Thai	IPA	Lanna	Independent	Thai	IPA
— ๓	ຂຸ	— ๓	[a]	— ๓	๓	๓	[u]
— ๔	ຂຸ๐	— ๔	[a:]	— ๓	๓	๓	[u:]
— ๕	ຂຸ	— ๕	[i]	— ๓	๓	๓	[e:]
— ๖	ຂຸ	— ๖	[i:]	— ๓	๓	๓	[æ:]
— ๗		— ๗	[u]	— ๓	๓	๓	[o:]
— ๘		— ๘	[u:]	— ๓, ๓		๓	[aj]
				— ๓		๓	[am]

**Figure 2 – Lanna vowels transcribed into Thai and IPA**  
(taken from Ager, 2012)

สระผสม (Mixed Vowels)				Mixed Vowels			
Lanna	IPA	Lanna	IPA	Lanna	IPA	Lanna	IPA
— ๓	[e]	— ๓	[ua]	— ๓	[ɤ]		
— ๔	[æ]	— ๓	[ua:]	— ๓	[ɤ:]		
— ๕	[o]	— ๓	[ia]	— ๓	[aj]		
— ๖	[o:]	— ๓	[ia:]	— ๓	[aj]		
— ๗	[aw]	— ๓	[wa:]	— ๓	[aj]		
— ๘	[ɔ]	— ๓	[wa]				
— ๙	[ɔ:]						

**Figure 3 – Lanna mixed vowels transcribed into Thai and IPA**  
(taken from Ager, 2012)

### Conserving Lanna scripts by way of community participatory activities

In 2009, while studying for her Masters Degree in the Strategy Development Program at Lampang Rajabhat University, Paweena Chumbia was granted a Community-Based Master Research Grant (CBMAG) from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) through which she was able to implement and facilitate a collaborative project between the Mae Mo community and Lampang Rajabhat University.

Her project aimed to develop a strategy to conserve and transfer the old Lanna scripts and involved the collaborative participation of people from Moh Luang village in Mae Mo *tambon*.

Paweena invited community members including teachers and philosophers, representatives from local organisations and networks, and other interested people to participate in her project, with a total of 50 people volunteering to be involved. The instruments she used for data collection consisted of a community context survey form, questions raised in group discussions, questions raised from group meetings and an evaluative questionnaire focusing on participants' satisfaction. The data were analysed qualitatively by means of cross-referencing content relationships and her findings were presented as a case study report (Chumbia, 2009). Some of these findings are summarised below.

Firstly, Paweena's research revealed that there had been no attempt to conserve and transfer the old Lanna scripts in Mae Mo. In part, this was due to a lack of instructional materials and resources. In order to address this problem, Paweena devised a development strategy involving the following steps:

- 1 Building up better understanding and a process for conserving and transferring the old Lanna scripts
- 2 Creating instructional materials
- 3 Providing lessons on the old Lanna scripts
- 4 Setting up learning resources in the community in order to conserve and transfer the scripts.

As she was conducting her fieldwork, Paweena was offered a number of medicinal texts, mantras and ritualistic inscriptions which were written using the Lanna characters. These were engraved on both palm leaves and homemade paper known as *kradad sa* (mulberry paper) or *pab sa*. Paweena used these texts as resources in her meetings and lessons with the community members at Moh Luang. As she was interested and skilled in drawing and calligraphy, she later designed textbooks and learning materials with Lanna scripts for use at her school and at the learning centre which was established in the village.

A few months after the initial participatory activities and the establishment of the learning centre in Moh Luang, bilingual temple signs and school signs were erected in the village. These signs were written in Standard Thai and Lanna script. As well, the Lanna scripts were used in traditional Buddhist rituals. For example, in one Buddhist festival called *tan kuay salak*, the villagers wrote their names in old Lanna scripts on long strips of paper or palm leaves and went to the temple located in the community in order to receive blessing. During the ceremony, their names were read out by the monks who randomly picked up the strips of paper or palm leaves. The person whose name was

called had to go to that particular monk and give him the alms. In return, the monk would then offer the blessing in both the Pali and Lanna languages.

In addition to the ceremonial use of Lanna scripts, a number of old secular rituals have been revitalised in the community as a consequence of Paweena's project. In former times, the villagers believed that to become more intelligent they had to sip the sacred honey through short straws made of the reed plant known as *ore paya* (which means 'the reed of wisdom'). These honey reeds were prepared by the local medicine man who recited a special mantra in the Lanna language. Another ritual for warding off misfortune involved making sacred candles on which mantras were written using the Lanna scripts. These candles are then lit until the whole candle is burnt down for the mantra to take effect.

Finally, a local ritual celebration called the procession of the elephants was revived. For the procession, bilingual banners and signs were written by the villagers on long pieces of white cloth and these were paraded through the village along with the replicas of the elephants. The elephant procession celebrates a local legend which is closely connected to the ethnic heritage of the community. Many of the villagers in Moh Luang are descended from Shan people from Burma who migrated to Lampang Province to tend to the elephants used in a Western forestry business located in Lampang town. The elephants were used to transport teak logs through the jungle. It is said that one day a Shan family lost one of their elephants in the jungle. They appealed to the guardian spirits of the jungle and promised that if their lost elephant was returned, the family would give the spirits an elephant as a sacrifice. However, when their elephant was returned the family did not want to give an elephant to the guardian spirits. Instead, they cunningly constructed an elephant lookalike from a piece of white cloth and used it to trick the guardian spirits.

Photographs and examples of Paweena's work in the community and the revitalised use of Lanna scripts in Moh Luang village which followed are provided in the Appendix to the article.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that both Standard Thai and English are vital for people's daily lives and livelihood in modern day Thailand. Proficiency in these two languages serves as an important tool for communication, education, keeping abreast of information and knowledge, seeking career opportunities and creating greater understanding of the cultures and visions of local and global communities. Additionally, Thai students should be able to communicate with people from other ASEAN nations to help facilitate the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015 (Sim, 2008).



However, equally important is the maintenance, revival and preservation of the traditional regional and minority languages and dialects of Thailand. Without the active involvement of educational authorities and local communities, these languages and dialects are in danger of disappearing permanently. The processes of language shift, socio-economic imperatives, marriage patterns and the influence of the mass media, in combination with official neglect in terms of language and educational policy and the cumulative effect of these factors on speakers' attitude towards their home languages or dialects, have created a dire situation for many of the traditional and indigenous languages and dialects of the Thai people, particularly in their written forms.

The work of Paweena Chumbia in Mae Mo District provides an excellent example of how language conservation programs can be established and maintained in regional communities. Through a process of collaboration between the government and non-government sectors, and by adopting an approach where traditional culture is at the core of the project, Paweena was able to raise awareness and reinvigorate the use of Lanna scripts with the full support of the local community. Teaching and learning about the traditional language and alphabet in both formal and informal contexts resulted in the creation of learning materials and the establishment of a learning centre and an educational network. It also paved the way for community members to reconnect with their cultural heritage by revitalising traditional customs and rituals and reacquainting them with some of the wisdom and values of their predecessors which are encoded in the traditional Lanna texts.

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## Appendix

### Photos from the project



Paweena Chumbia teaching a blind student



Hand-made teaching materials created by Paweena





Activities at the centre in Mae Mo (left and above)



Use of Lanna scripts at the *tan kuay salak* festival



Revival of the ancient elephant procession





Revival of Lanna scripts in Mae Mo



Learning materials made by Paweena and her students

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**Paweena Chumbia** (1963-2011) was a teacher of Thai at Mae Moh Wittaya School who developed a local curriculum for teaching the Lanna scripts. She was a student in the Development Strategy Program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Lampang Rajabhat University.

**Juajan Wongpolgan** is currently a senior lecturer in the English Program in the Faculty of Education at Lampang Rajabhat University. Apart from teaching English and English pedagogy, she has a special interest in indigenous cultures and local history. She was Paweena Chumbia's main advisor as she was undertaking her research project.

Email: [juajanw1@gmail.com](mailto:juajanw1@gmail.com)

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