

Temporal distribution of community temples in Northeast Thailand

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ABSTRACT

In Thailand, every community temple is registered with the government. The registration records show the year of establishment, the sect, and the year of land registration. Temporal distribution of community temples may suggest or support histories of expansion of rural communities, since a temple has been an important psychological symbol of the community.

1 INTRODUCTION

As in many countries, a religious facility in Thailand has been an important psychological symbol of the community, and is also an important sign that a community has attained stability to support it. A ruin of temple shows there used to be a community in the past using the temple for social and spiritual activities. The distribution of temples may, therefore, represent the distribution of local communities. In this paper, temporal changes of distribution of temples in Northeast Thailand, based on lists of more than 11,000 temples is discussed.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Temple Lists

In Thailand, every active community temple regardless of newly established or reopened has been registered to the Religious Affairs Department, Ministry of Culture¹. Many volumes on the history of temples in the kingdom were published, and one volume includes the temples in two or three provinces on an average (The Religious Affairs Department, 1994). Contents are rich descriptions on temple, *i.e.*, the name of temple, the name of village, the size of land, the name of a chief priest, the religious sect, the year of establishment, and the history of temple.

The temple lists, used for this study, are like commonplace books prepared by the staff in the National Religious Center, Ministry of Education, probably for their convenience. For each district (*amphoe*), these records include the name of temple, the sequential number (*mu*

¹ In 1994, the Religious Affairs Department was under the Ministry of Education.

thi) of administrative village (*muban*) in sub-district (*tambon*), the name of sub-district, the year of establishment, the year of registration, and the religious sect.

The temple lists used in this study covers 16 of 19 provinces (*changwat*) in Northeast Thailand including more than 11,000 temples. The three missing provinces are Kalasin, Roi Et, and Yasothon, which locate along the middle reaches of the Chi River, one of the two major branches of the Mekong River in the region. While it would be useful to cover the whole Northeast area of the region to gain regional perspective; the area covered by the present study, still offers a new insight through the integration the basic information on temples into a GIS.

2.2 NETVIS

Spatial information system application Northeast Thailand Village Information System (NETVIS, Nagata, 1996; 2002) have been described before. The prime unit of the NETVIS is an administrative village, or *muban* in Thai. The present study area includes about 27,000 *muban* Geo-referenced information representing the central location of settlement was collected for the use in the NETVIS. In the present study, the information on temples was integrated into the NETVIS.

2.3 Identification of Location

Community temples in Thailand generally come in two types. One is so-called a temple in settlement, or *wat ban* in Thai, and the other is so-called a temple in forest, or *wat pa* in Thai. The former type was usually located just next to the settlement at the time of its establishment, and at present, it is located almost at the center of the settlement after the residential area expanded. The latter type was usually established in the forest nearby.

There is no information on the type of a temple in the temple lists. But the religious sect may suggest the type. In Thailand, there are two major Buddhism sects, *mahanikai* and *thammayut* in Thai. It is said that a *wat ban* is usually the *mahanikai* sect, and a *wat pa* is usually the *thammayut* sect. In the temple lists, 91.1%, 5.4%, and 3.5% of the temples are the *mahanikai* sect, the *thammayut* sect, and unknown, respectively. Many of the sect-unknown temples are probably one of the two sects. Unknown category could not be properly categorized owing to the lack of adequate information. Further investigation need be done using the original volume of the history of temples.

In the topographic maps of 1:50,000 scale, there are two marks showing a temple, or *wat* in Thai. One is a monastery without a convocation hall that is call as *bot* or *ubosot* in Thai. The other is a monastery with a convocation hall. The latter type is regarded as fully established temple. Both types of temple are found in the maps with a proper name, suffixed by *wat*. A cursory reading of topographic maps published in 1970 suggests that there are more temples of the former type than those of the latter type.

There is information on the sequential number of the administrative village in the lists but not its name. The number seems to be useful to identify the village; however, this is insufficient to identify precisely. The sequential numbers are not reliable at all, since they are reassigned without careful consideration when the upper level administration is reorganized. Reliable descriptions in the lists are the name of the temple and the name of the sub-district for identifying the location of a temple in a topographic map.

So far about 10,000 temples have been identified their location, or more exactly, each identified temple is given an ID number used in the NETVIS to link to a corresponding administrative village.

3 RESULT

3.1 Before A.D. 1600

Figure 1 shows the distribution of temples that were established before A.D. 1600, or B.E., Buddhist Era, 2143. According to this figure, densely populated areas before A.D. 1600 are supposed to be a) Si Chiang Mai, Tha Bo, and Muang Nong Khai; b) Ban Phu and Phen, which are neighboring areas to a); c) Sung Noen, which lies to the southeast of Khorat; d) That Phanom, which lies to the south of Muang Nakhon Phanom; and e) Dan Sai in the west of Loei Province.

Si Chiang Mai, Tha Bo, and Muang Nong Khai are on the right bank of the Mekong River opposite to Vientiane. In the 16th century, the king of Lan Xang Kingdom transferred the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane. By this century, Laotians started to migrate to Northeast Thailand.

Sung Noen area is one of the centers of Sri Janasa Empire. Muang Sema is one of the important sites of the empire (Srisakra *et al.*, 2000-2004).

3.2 Before A.D. 1700

The distribution of temples that were established before A.D. 1700, or B.E. 2243, is shown in Figure 2. Area around Ubon Ratchathani is notable for its rapid rising. Ubon Ratchathani is located near the meeting of two major rivers, Chi River and Mun River.

Populated area around Sung Noen was expanding to Phak Thong Chai, Muang Nakhon Ratchasima, Non Thai in the 17th century.

3.3 Before A.D. 1800

In the 18th century, it is supposed that the Ubon Rachathani area held a dominant position in Northeast Thailand. Local settlements had been expanding steadily in this century. The distribution shown in Figure 3 may suggest that the Thung Kula Rong Hai area between the Chi River and Mun River began to be reclaimed in earnest in this century.

3.4 Before A.D. 1900

By the year A.D. 1900, suitable lands for rice cultivation in Northeast Thailand were almost reclaimed and this region could support a big population. In this presentation, data of three provinces along the Chi River is missing; however, it is easily supposed that areas along the Chi River in these provinces may have had dense population of temples as same as areas in Maha Sarakham and Ubon Ratchathani (Figure 4).



Figure 1 Temples Established before A.D. 1600



Figure 2 Temples Established before A.D. 1700

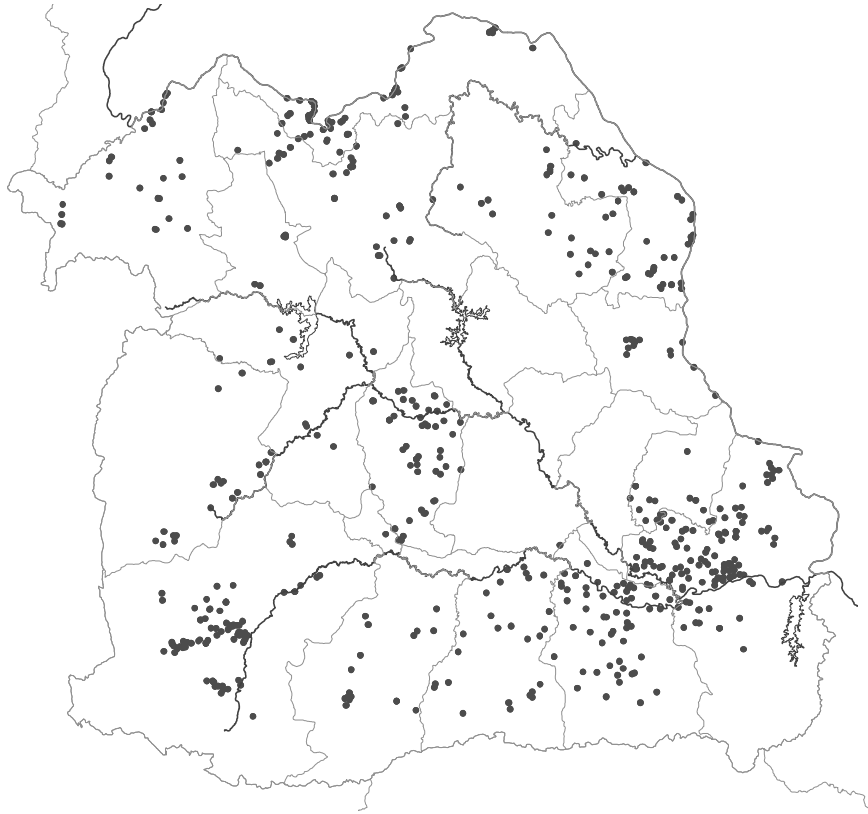


Figure 3 Temples Established before A.D. 1800

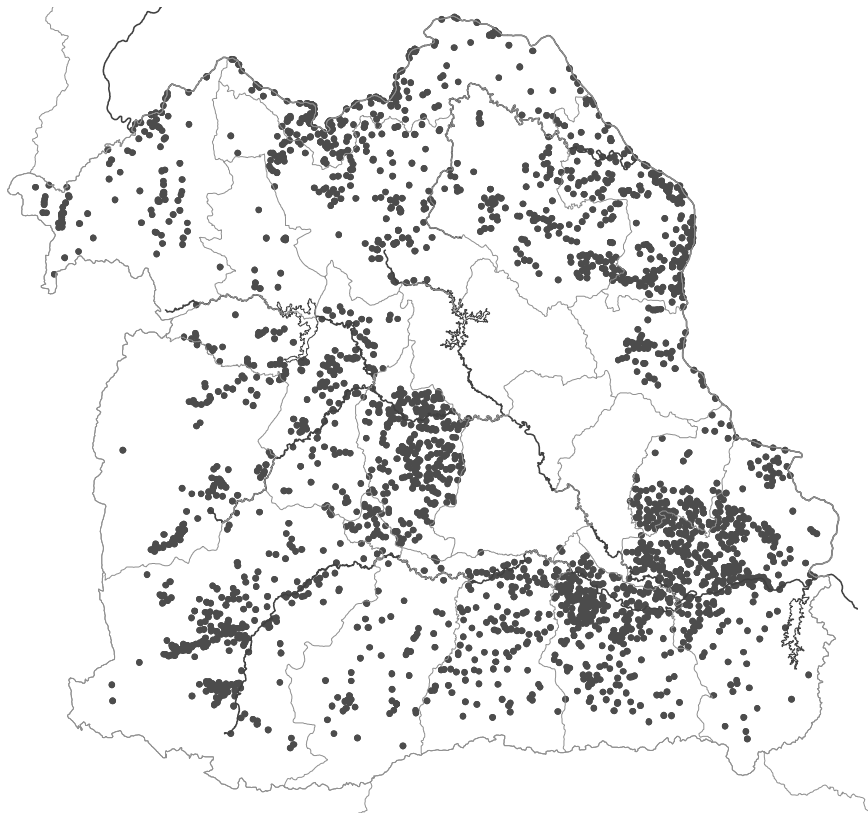


Figure 4 Temples Established before A.D. 1900

4 DISCUSSION

This study is a preliminary since field verifications of the lists remains to done and also the information need been corroborated other sources of material. Regardless of limitation, spatio-temporal visualization of temples initiated in this study can offer clues or supporting information on temporal expansion of rural communities.

Further basic issues regarding the data used are a) to cover the region completely by integrating the data of three remaining provinces; b) to classify temples on the basis of management, *i.e.*, management by a village-level community, or by a district-level community.

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