

Village level ethnic distribution in Nakhon Phanom in the middle Mekong corridor

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ABSTRACT

In the middle Mekong corridor, the Mekong River has been the international boundary between Thailand and Lao P.D.R. for more than a century; however, it has also been being the major transportation route for many centuries within the area of multi ethnic society. Information of ethnic distribution in village level is available in Lao P.D.R., whereas information of ethnic distribution in Thailand is available in district level. For researches on livelihood of a community, village level ethnicity is indispensable to understand the cultural and historical background. In this article, village level ethnic distribution in Nakhon Phanom province and adjoining areas in the northeast of Thailand is shown as a result of our field surveys.

1. INTRODUCTION

The mainland Southeast Asia is a land of diverse ethnic groups. In the national census of Lao P.D.R in 1995, 47 ethnic groups were officially listed (Nagata, 2000). In Thailand, district level distribution of more than 60 languages are presented based on the questionnaire survey of village level (Premsrirat et al., 2004). In the middle Mekong corridor, the Mekong River has been the international boundary between Thailand and Lao P.D.R. for more than a century; however, it has also been being the major transportation route within the area for many centuries. The Mekong River has been a glue to connect communities on the both sides of the river but not a barrier. According to field interviews to senior villagers in Thai side, their ancestors are told to migrate from Lao side, and some villagers still keep close relationship with so called brothers-and-sisters villages in Lao side.

2. OBJECTIVES

A field research project “Folk History in the Middle Mekong Corridor” or MIMEC in short, supported by the JSPS, had been conducted until early 2018 mainly in Nakhon Phanom province in the northeastern Thailand. In this project, livelihood of communities, such as village level history, tools for small scale inland fishery, traditional tools for agriculture, and food processing had been surveyed. In general, conventional or traditional way of life much depends on the historical and environmental background. Since the target area of the survey is overlaid by many ethnic groups in different periods in history, ethnic background must be indispensable information for community level surveys. In the opposite side of the Mekong River in Lao P.D.R., village level ethnic distribution can be observed through the census data, and it can provide suggestive information on ethnic distribution in neighboring areas in Thailand. But, no detailed information like in Lao P.D.R. is easily available in Thailand. So,

information on ethnic majority of the community was also surveyed in the field research aiming to share among research members including colleagues in Thailand.

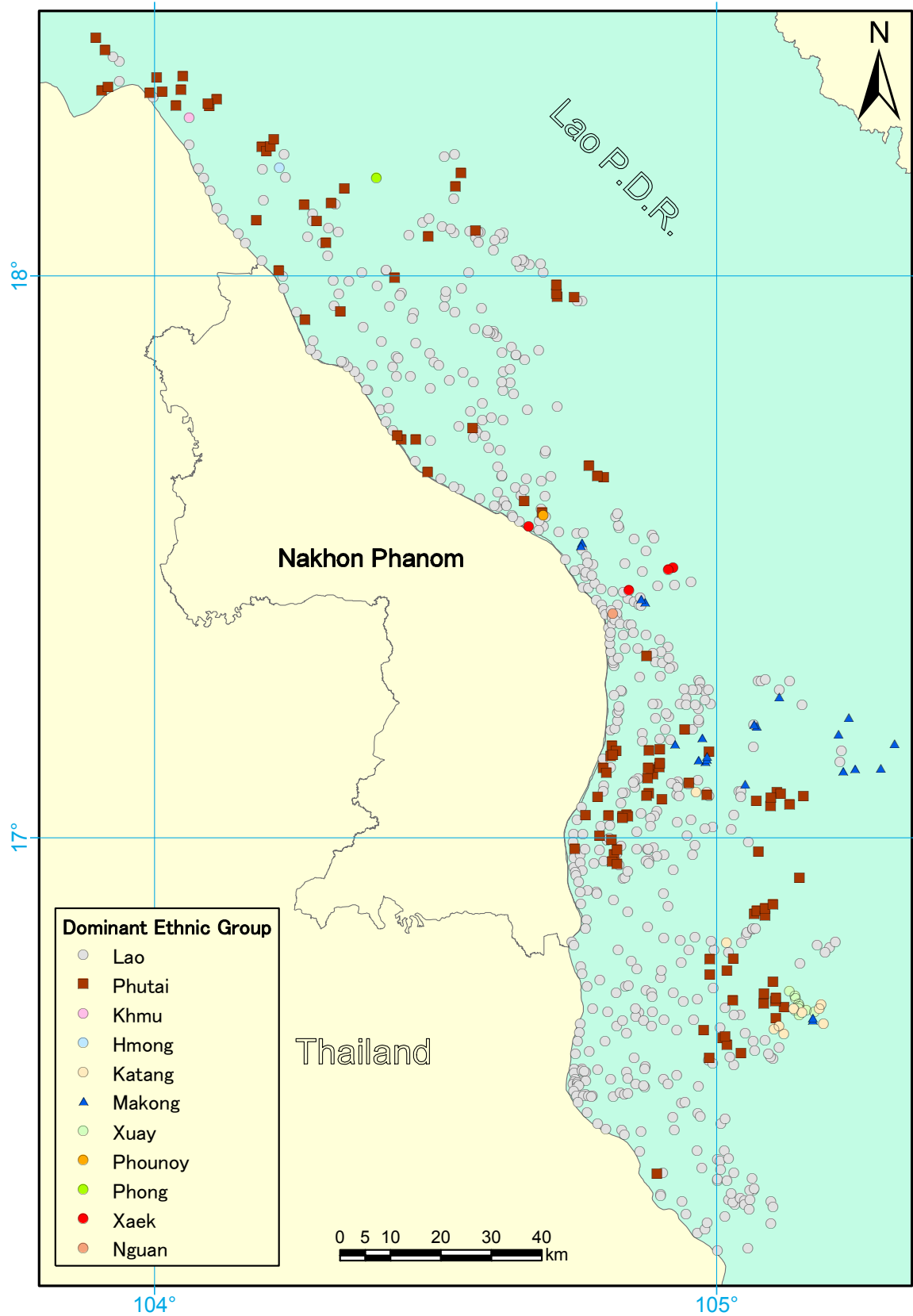


Figure 1. Ethnic distribution on the left bank of the Mekong River

3. METHOD

During the MIMEC project, more than 30 villages we visited to conduct field surveys on livelihood of communities. On these occasions, interviews on ethnicity in neighboring villages in addition to the surveyed village were done to senior villagers. Thus, information on dominant ethnic group of about 160 villages in Nakhon Phanom province and nearby was collected.

4. DISCUSSION

Ethnic distribution on the left bank of the Mekong River in Lao P.D.R. is shown in Figure 1. Village level data of eight districts located near the Mekong River are used, namely Pakkading in Bolikhamxai province; Thakhek, Nongbouk, Hinboun, and Xebangfay in Khammouan province; Kaysone Phomvihane or former Khathabouly, Outhoumphone, and Xaybuly in Savannakhet province. In Figure 1, the mark show the most dominant ethnic group in a village. Among 47 ethnic groups listed officially in the census in 1995, 11 groups have their dominant communities in village level in this area. Lao, ethnic but not nationality, is the biggest group in this area, and, Phutai is the second. Makong villages marked by a dark blue triangle are found many in Xebangfay district. Xaek villages marked by a red circle are found in Thakhek district. In about 80% of villages, the ratio of the first dominant group in a village is more than 90%, and in only 1% of villages the ratio of the first dominant group is less than a half. According to such data from the census, it can be said that many villages in this area are mono ethnic communities.

In Nakhon Phanom province on the right bank of the Mekong River, eight ethnic names shown in Table 1 are widely accepted among people. In the questionnaire sheet prepared for the area of northern Northeast Thailand in the nationwide survey, Thai Kha was regarded as an alias name of Thai So (Premsrirat et al., 2004). But in exhibitions in museums and in festival attractions in Nakhon Phanom, these eight ethnic names are always emphasized as ethnic diversity of the area. The names employed in Nakhon Phanom do not correspond one-to-one to the names used in the census of Lao P.D.R.

Ethnic distribution on the right bank of the Mekong River in Thailand is shown in Figure 2. Village level data obtained by our field surveys are used. So it must be reminded that not

Table 1. Ethnic names

Nakhon Phanom, Thailand	Lao P.D.R.
Thai Lao, Thai Kaloeng, Thai Yo	Lao
Phuthai, Thai Kuan	Phutai
Thai Saek	Xaek
Thai So, Thai Kha	Makong

Note: For reference only

all villages are shown. Ethnic names in Figure 2 are based on the official classification prepared by the provincial government of Nakhon Phanom. Figure 2 can show dominant areas of Thai Lao, Thai Kaloeng, and Thai Yo, separately, whereas those differences in Lao P.D.R. cannot be available.

Although direct comparison between two figures is inadequate, some facts can be overviewed on them. Concentrated areas of Makong villages in Lao P.D.R. can be found, and the area of Thai So, corresponding ethnic name of Makong in Thailand, is located upper watershed of the Mekong River than the areas in Lao P.D.R. Thai Saek villages, or Xaek

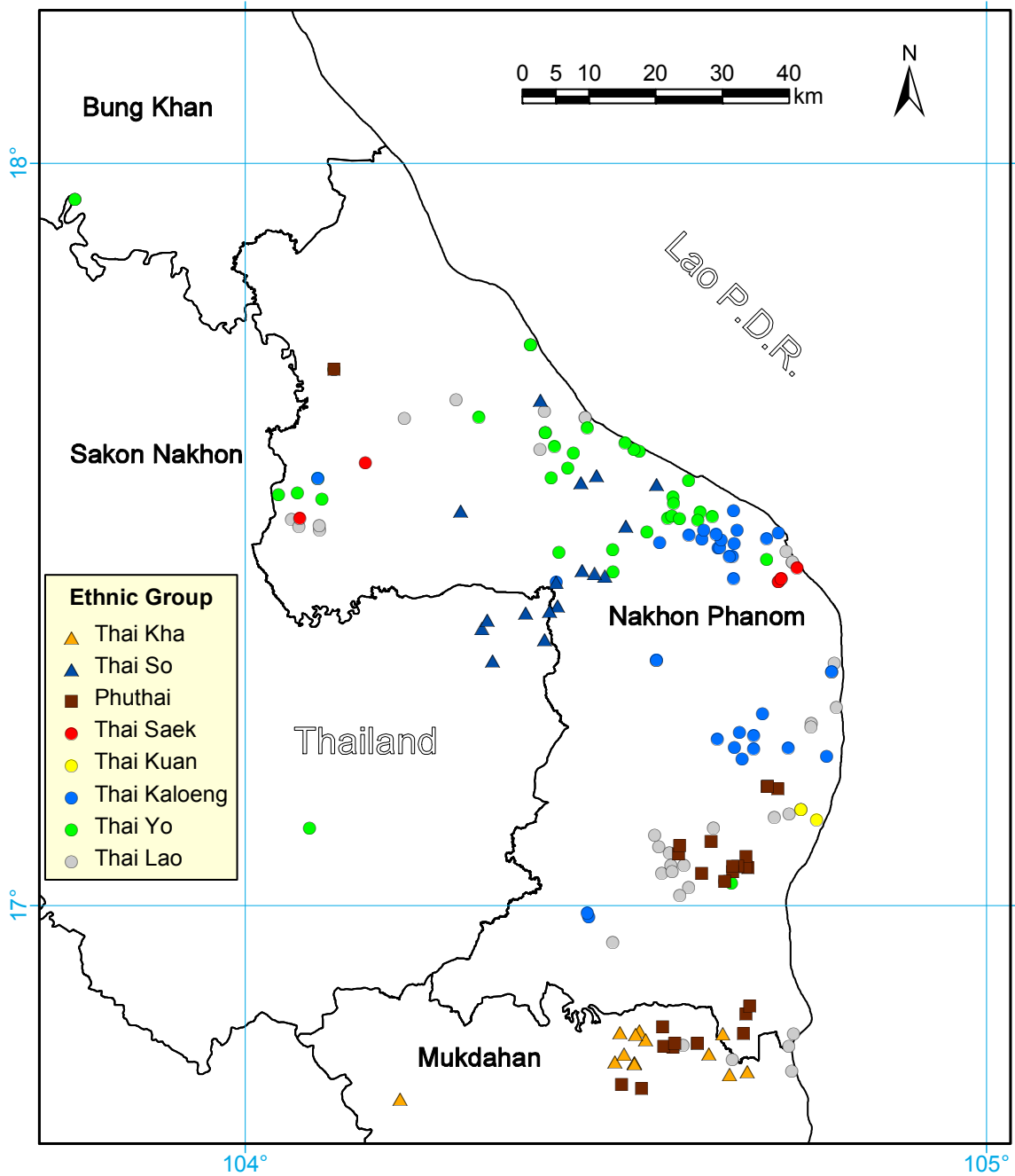


Figure 2. Ethnic distribution on the right bank of the Mekong River

villages are few in both sides of the Mekong River. Thai Kha villages are more located in Mukdahan province, and those villagers in Mukdahan call themselves as Bru rather than Thai Kha. Bru is regarded as same as So (Simons and Charles, 2018).

4. CONCLUSION

In this article, ethnic background of a community is the major issue to be explored. When we interviewed to villagers, they quickly shown their ethnic identity and not only of themselves but also of their partners and ancestors. Then, general situation of ethnic overlay was presented. Ethnic identity is of course a basic background of a community. Some leading communities practice to keep their uniqueness on culture and language. But thanks to the modern society of easy and frequent communication among the area, it seems that ethnic identity has become less important factor to determine the way of life. Almost of all villages keep historical stories of establishers of the village, and most of their original places are mentioned in somewhere in Lao P.D.R. But identifying such original places in Lao P.D.R. is not easy since place names mentioned in their records are names used in one or more centuries ago. If we identify such original places and obtain historical and ethnical background of such communities in Lao P.D.R., study issues on comparative studies among ethnic groups or among nations in the middle Mekong corridor will be more clearly raised.

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