

A Regional Approach to the Study of Tai Toponyms*

John Hartmann
Northern Illinois University
jhartman@niu.edu

In investigating place names and the power to name places in the “Tai” speech domain, one logical place to begin is with one of the earliest categories of Tai toponyms: *muang* (Siamese เมือง). Comparative-historical linguistics reveals that the fundamental meaning of *muang* was ‘basin or plain’, which is a geomorphological term. In the Tai-Dehong language of Yunnan, *muang/meng* still carries the meaning of ‘open plain’ (Luo Yongxian 1999:102). Subsequently, the meaning of the word *muang* shifted to reflect a geopolitical realization as ‘chiefdom, kingdom, town, nation’, depending on size, power, and historical period. These socio-political *muang*, large and small (some no larger than 10 km.²), were originally connected to a chain of several villages or *ban* governed by a sophisticated communal irrigation system. A map search of the Tai domain, which covers southwestern China and much of the northern stretches of mainland Southeast Asia, confirms that places named with *ban/man/wan* or *muang/meng* as Noun Heads are ubiquitous.

As early Tai speech communities grew and came into contact with Han migrants in a process often referred to as Sinicization, or with other linguistic groups, new regional patterns and practices of naming prominent places emerged in place of or in addition to declaring a place to be a *muang*. An early candidate for renaming was *chiang/chieng*. This label appears to have been borrowed from or imposed by Nan Chao for the purpose of establishing a system of prefectures. Places formerly declared to be *chiang* ‘town’ are found in the northern half of the Tai speech domain outlined roughly by Chieng Rung (Yunnan). Keng Tung (Burma), Chiang Mai (Thailand), and Xiang Khuang (Laos). Hoang Luong (2004) has brought to light the obscured record of a second region where places were designated as *chiang*, principally in the Tai region of northwestern Vietnam, but even including Hanoi itself, which at one time was called Chiang Lo (Co Loa). Places labeled *vieng/wiang* have the same general regional distribution but lower frequency. The function of a *vieng* ‘citadel, palisade’ was principally one of providing defense for a *chiang*.

As Tai groups moved southward into Laos and Thailand, they came into contact with the Mon and Khmer in a region that had long been Sanskritized. Urban centers in the lower portion of Thailand were given wondrous, often multiple names incorporating *nakorn* ‘planned city’ borrowed from Pali-Sanskrit *nagara*; *krung*, a word borrowed from Mon *kreng* ‘seat of a king’; *huri* ‘(elegant) town’ borrowed from Pali-Sanskrit *bhumi*. The practice of renaming is epitomized in the multiple appellations bestowed on Bangkok, ‘village of the olive tree’. In sum, “new name equals new identity equals new power” (Kaplan and Bernays 1997: 86).

Villagers, on the other hand, have persisted in following the practice of naming new *ban* as they had named their old ones, namely to reflect features in the landscape, to encapsulate local folklore, or to remember places from which they had moved. However, in numerous instances, original village names have been changed by central governments that either wanted to make place names conform to reflect their own speech and sense of power or to exhort or inspire; and largely out of ignorance of local dialects and histories of indigenous names. Because many village names reflect the local geomorphology, environment, indigenous knowledge, and local cultures, these name changes contribute to a loss of age-old wisdom, the colorful history of early settlements, and our understanding of significant migration routes and settlement patterns. It is now possible, however, to employ modern technology such as satellite images and GIS, coupled with a return to reading local histories and earlier maps, to create a new geography as a means to restoring the past and illuminating regional patterns of human behavior.

* Diacritics are not included in the italicized words in this abstract.