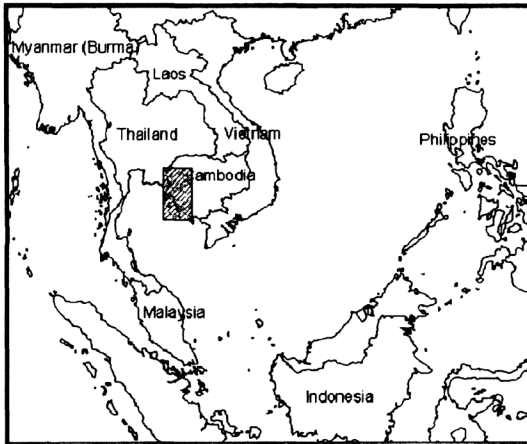# Dialects of Chong[1]

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1. Background

Chong is an ethnic minority of Thailand, whose language (Chong) belongs to the Pearic branch of the Mon-Khmer group of the Austroasiatic family. The Pearic languages, i.e. Pear, Saoch, Chong and Samre, are found in the eastern provinces of Thailand, including Chanthaburi and Trat, and in northwestern Cambodia, including Batdambang, Pursat and Kampot. Due to the rapid decrease in mother tongue transmission, it is difficult to determine exactly the current number of Chong speakers. Different studies present different numbers of Chong speakers in Thailand, ranging from merely 500 (Grimes 2000) to about 4,000 (Mahidol Ethnolinguistic Map Project, forthcoming). The latter source indicates that the largest group of Chong speakers today lives in Khao Khitchakut district of Chanthaburi province.

Map 1. Pearic Area

I started learning Chong in late 1998 with speakers from the Khlong Phlu area north of Khao Khitchakut. At that time the language was already famous for its contrastive use of 4 registers.[2] For Chanthaburi alone, there are 5 descriptive works dealing with Chong phonology both in Thai and English, plus two recent instrumental analyses of Chong 'register'. All these works are based on data from Khao Khitchakut district (Surekha 1982, Saifon 1991, Sirikarn 1987, Siriphen 2001, Huffman 1985, Theraphan 1991 and Edmondson 1996). In contrast, direct accounts on dialects of Chong are rare.

1.1 Chanthaburi Chong and Trat Chong (Kasong)

Headley (1985) sets Chong of Chanthaburi (Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *həəp*) apart from Chong of Trat by phonological criteria based on two treatments of Proto-Pearic forms: **j-* > c- and **-r/-l* > -y~-w in the case of Chong of Chanthaburi versus **j-* > s- and **-r/-l* > -r/-l in the case of Chong of Trat. To test the proposition against contemporary data, I compare lexical items from the following 'Chong' communities:

Table 1. Phonological differences between Chong and Kasong

Gloss	Chanthaburi (Chong)			Trat (Kasong)	
	Takhian Thong (Surekha, 1982)	Thung Saphan (Huffman, 1985)	Wang Kraprae (Siriphen, 2001)	Dan Chumphon	
				(Kunwadi, 1996)	(Sunee, 2002)
'drunk'	phuy	puy	puj	puul	---
'to bark'	keew	kɛɛw	keːw	keel	---
'to sit; stay'	kiy	kəy	kij	---	kil
'to plant'	chooy	chooy	cʰoːj	chool	---
'seven'	kanuuy	kanuuy	kanuːj	khanuul	---
'roast'	chaŋ	caŋ	caŋ	saŋ	---
'send'	chuun	cuun	cuːn	soon	---
'person'	kachim	cim	cim	---	kasim
'human being' or autonym	chɔɔŋ	cɔɔŋ	coːŋ	---	kasɔːŋ

(Register marks are withheld)

This shows that Chong of Trat is not only distinct from those of Chanthaburi because they have settled in far away and disconnected areas but the precedent group also possesses a different phonology. In all dialects of Chanthaburi Chong there is no use of final /-l/, which occurs in the rest of Pearic languages (Headley 1985: 446-447). Besides, Ms Sunee Kamnuansin, a Mahidol University MA student in linguistics, who is describing Kasong syntax of Dan Chumphon Sub-district, Trat province, informed me that the people whom are allegedly called Chong actually call themselves 'Kasong.' In

fact, the word Kasong means the same as Chong 'human'. Considering different autonyms and distinct phonologies, it is very controversial that one should call them 'Chong' altogether.

To better distinguish Chong of Chanthaburi and of Trat, it is then legitimate to apply the distinction of Chong and Kasong. This not only agrees with their different autonyms, but also highlights their distinct phonologies. Therefore, in subsequent mentioning of 'Chong' in this paper I specifically mean Chanthaburi Chong. However, those who are interested in the relationship between Chong and Kasong, which is not a primary issue in this paper, should further compare their vocabularies from available sources (Kunwadi 1996, Surekha 1982, Huffman 1985, Siriphen 2001) to find more details.

1.2 Chong lɔɔ and Chong hǝǝp

The first attempt to categorize Chong dialects dates back to Martin's French publication in 1974. Martin proposed that the Chong language can be divided into two dialects: Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *hǝǝp*. She provides some examples of the difference between Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *hǝǝp* that can be grouped as differences in final consonants, consonant clusters and vowels.

Table 2. Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *hǝǝp*

Gloss	Chong *lɔɔ*	Chong *hǝǝp*
'root'	reet	rih
'head'	toot	toh
'column'	caŋ	kraŋ
'pig'	cok	krok
'fish'	méev	mĩiv
'fire'	pleev	pliiv

Source: Martin (1974)

Headley (1985) elaborated on Martin's work and proposes that /-t/ and /-h/ are different treatments of *-s in Chong *lɔɔ* (*-s > /-t/) and Chong *hǝǝp* (*-s > /-h/). However, my survey of recent studies has found further distinctions within Chong dialects, especially between dialects of northern and southern Khao Khitchakut, which other linguists have held as a unitary Chong *lɔɔ* proper (i.e. Huffman 1985; Edmondson 1996).

2.   Research Methods

To verify my assumption about the inadequacy of the two-way division of Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *hǝǝp*, I collected data in some Chong villages, especially in Khao Khitchakut district. In the beginning I elicited data from 8 primary villages by using a 303-item basic wordlist. After I analyzed

the results, I selected about 32 words that represent sharp differences and tested them in 3 other villages. All in all, this paper is based on survey data from 11 villages.

I then linked the results of my survey with geographic features of the studied areas on GIS platform in order to construct dialect maps that display linguistic data. With the pattern found in these maps, I propose a reconsideration of the Chong *lɔɔ*-Chong *hǝǝp* distinction in Chanthaburi province.

3. Locations and Variants

Chanthaburi province can be divided into coastal areas and hinterlands (Webber 1976). The Soi Dao Mountains, including Khao Khitchakut, lie from north to south, dividing the inner Chanthaburi into west and east. On the west side, Chong villages locate in two clusters (Takhian Thong in the north and Phluang in the south), on the east side is Pong Nam Ron district. Together with subsequent linguistic evidences, I propose that Chong dialect areas could be divided as (1) Northern Proper, (2) Southern Proper and (3) Eastern Proper.

The following survey data are referred to by the abbreviated name of villages: CK = Cham Khloh, KP = Khlong Phlu, NK = Nam Khun, TT = Takhian Thong, PK = Phang Kalaeng, TI = Thung Ta-In, KT = Krathing, TP = Thung Saphan, WP = Wang Kraphrae. The first 10 villages are located in Khao Khitchakut district, and the last one is in Pong Nam Ron district, Chanthaburi province.

3.1 Final consonant

My survey results confirm Headley's proposition (1985) that *-s is the boundary between Chong *lɔɔ* and Chong *hǝǝp*. Data from Khao Khichakut agree with *-s > /-t/ (CK, KP, NK, TT, PK, TI, KT, and TP), while such from Pong Nam Ron is clearly *-s > /-h/ (WP).

Table 3. Correspondence of /-t/ and /-h/

| Gloss	Khao Khitchakut	Pong Nam Ron
'barking deer'	/loːt/	/loh/
'grease'	/pit/	/pih/
'old'	/cʰit/	/cʰih/
'tail'	/pʰat/	/pʰah/

3.2 Consonant cluster

The correspondence between /c-/ and /kr-/ was accounted for in Martin (1974) and Headley (1985) reconstructed the Proto-Pearic *cr- in the word *crɛːŋ 'ring.' My data attest that in Chanthaburi Chong the cluster *cr- splits into /c-/ and /kr-/ (/cɛːŋ/ and /krɛːŋ/). However, the distribution of this phenomenon is not of the same pattern as that of /-t/ and /-h/. Whereas Martin (1974) indicates no variation within Chong lɔɔ, my study testifies that there are at least two sub-divisions within Chong lɔɔ as spoken by people of the North and South Khao Khitchakut.

Table 4. Correspondence of /c-/ and /kr-/

Gloss	Khao Khitchakut		Pong Nam Ron
	North[3]	South	
'harvest'	/cuːt/	/kruːt/	/kruːt/
'pig'	/cɔk/	/krɔk/	/krɔk/
'pillar'	/caŋ/	/kraŋ/	/kraŋ/
'ring'	/cɛːŋ/	/krɛːŋ/	/krɛːŋ/
'river bank'	/coːŋ/	/kroːŋ/	/kroːŋ/
'run'	/coːk/	/kroːk/	/kroːk/

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[3]There are exceptional cases in Ban Nam Khun (NK) where 'river bank' is /kroːŋ/ and 'run' is /tʰɯː/, which means 'escape' in other villages.

Map 2. Distribution of /-t/ and /-h/
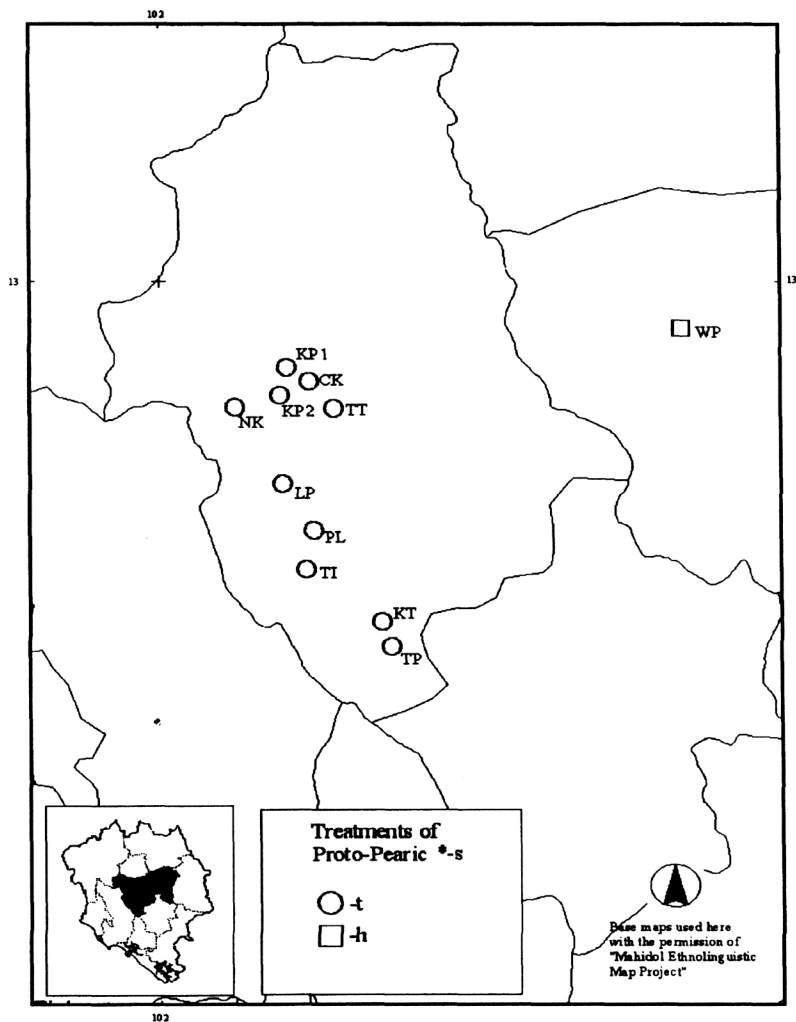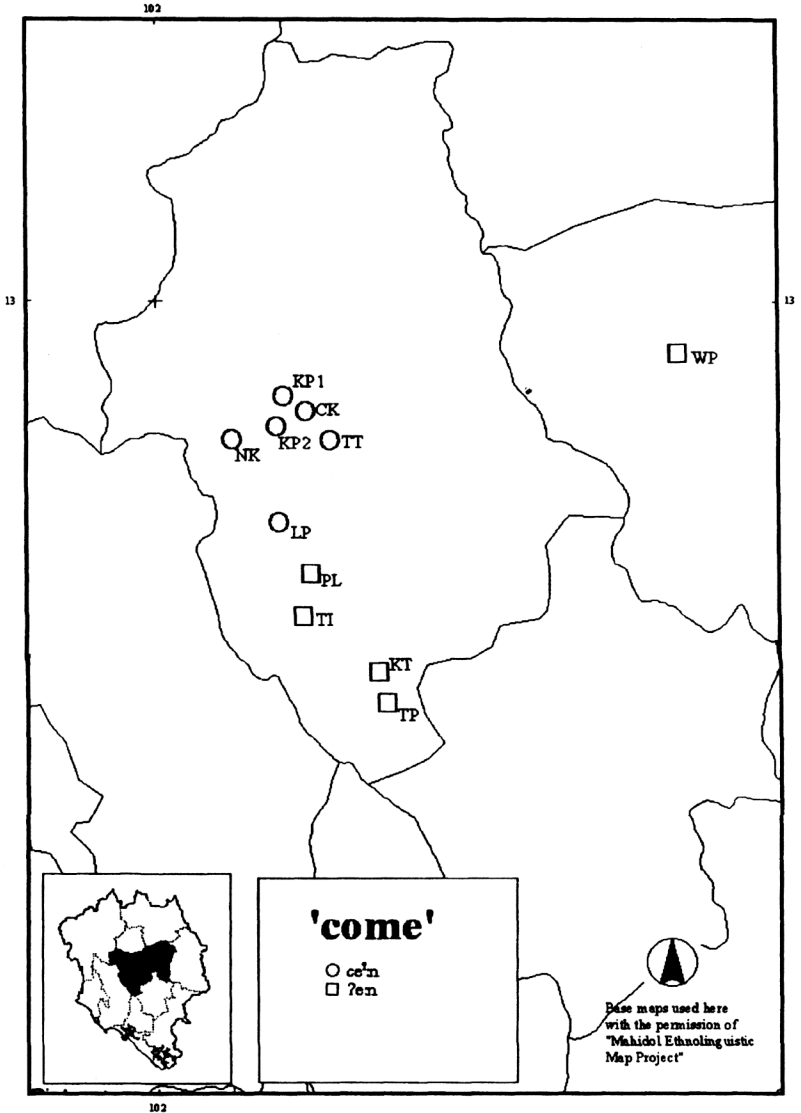
Map 3. Distribution of /c-/ and /kr-/
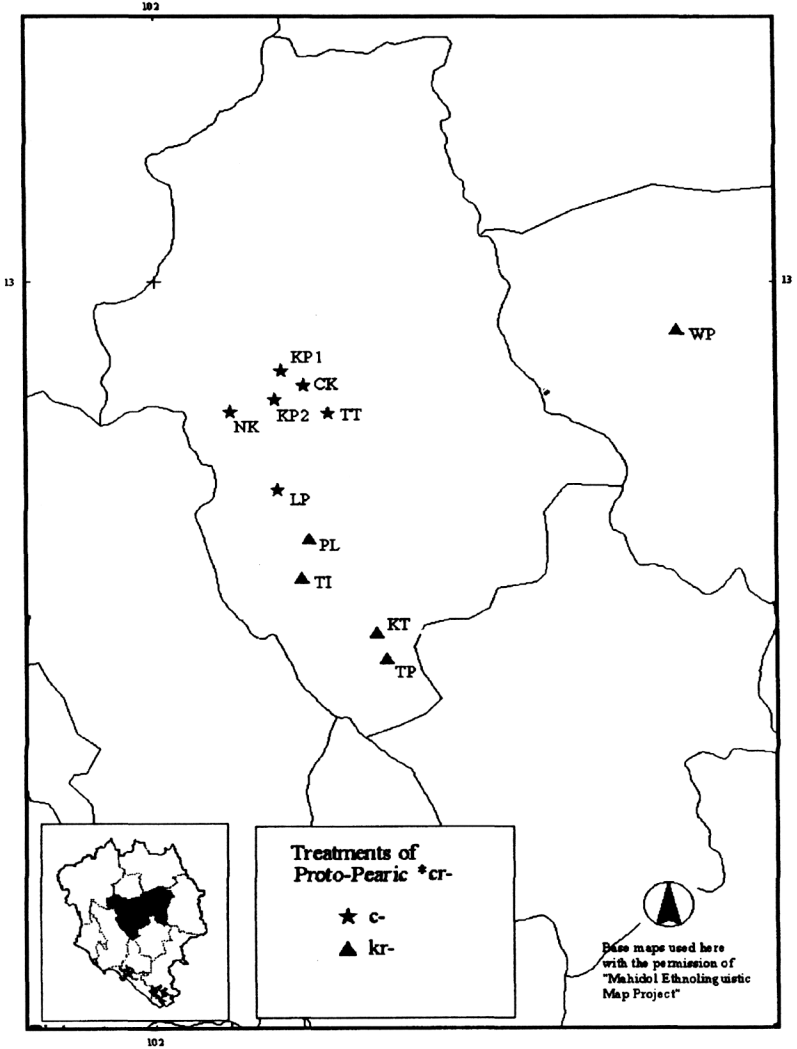
3.3 Lexical variants

Data grouped under lexical variants are more ambiguous than those cited in the first two categories. Some items could not be clearly explained. For instance, differences in vocabulary such as 'come' could be pronounced /ceː^{ʔ}n/ on one hand and /ʔeːn/ on the other hand. This could be interpreted as a phonological variant, but I could not find any other examples of this sort. For the time being, therefore, I group it under lexical variants. The same reason applies to /t^{h}a^{ʔ}t/ and /sa^{ʔ}t] 'nail'.

Table 5. Lexical Variants

Gloss	Khao Khitchakut		Pong Nam Ron
	North	South	
'cattle'	/ŋuə/	/soːŋ/	/soːŋ/
'come'	/ceː^{ʔ}n/	/ʔeːn/	/ʔeːn/
'mud'	/plɔː^{ʔ}k/	/p^{h}luʔ/	/p^{h}luʔ/
'nail'	/kət^{h}a^{ʔ}t/	/sa^{ʔ}t/	/sa^{ʔ}ːh/
'play'	/leːŋ/	/liːt/	/leːŋ/
'roof'	/kəbuːj/	/pɔːk tɔŋ/	/kəbuːj/
'shrimp'	/p^{h}ɨ^{ʔ}t/	/kra^{ʔ}ːw/	/kəpi^{ʔ}ːh/
'ugly'	/siʔdoː/	/mɔʔ ʔih/	/mɔʔ ʔih/

Map 4. Distribution of 'come'

It is interesting that most Chong speakers, especially among Khao Khitchakut locals, recognized many lexical variants used by their counterparts. The clearest example is /siʔdoː/ 'ugly' that is widely used among Takhian

Thong speakers. Phluang speakers, on the other hand, use /mɔʔ ʔih/ that literally means 'beautiful not' to describe the similar quality. Informants in Phluang proper told me that only *bâan bon* 'upper village' people use /siʔdoː/. It is notable that these lexical variants are not as evenly distributed in geographical terms as in the cases of the final consonant and the consonant cluster.

3.4 The breathy voice ambiguity

Apart from the distinctions in the final consonants, the consonant clusters and the lexical difference, there is another ambiguity when we look through the wordlists in Surekha (1982) and Saifon (1991) on one side, and Sirikarn (1987) and Huffman (1985) on the other side. We will find that initial plosives that co-occur with the 3rd register (breathy voice) are interpreted as an aspirated series in the first two of the above sources and as an unaspirated series in the latter two. As proposed in the co-occurrence chart of registers and initial consonants, Theraphan (1991:145) also finds no occurrence of aspirated plosives with the 3rd register. The first two works account for Takhian Thong dialect and the latter three for Phluang dialect.

Huffman (1985:361) acknowledges slight aspiration in the initial plosives, which precede 'lax' or breathy vowels. Therefore, there are two possibilities: first, Surekha (1982), and Saifon (1991) mistake 'breathy' unaspirated plosives for aspirated ones; second, there might be different degrees of aspiration in initial plosives occurring with the 3rd register in various dialects of Chong. I had selected some of these discrepancies and included them in my wordlist questionnaire.

My findings verify that in Takhian Thong proper, the initial plosives that occur with the 3rd register (breathy voice) are pronounced with stronger aspiration than those in Phluang proper, which carry weaker aspiration. However, the Pong Nam Ron dialect is the least ambiguous in this aspect because the initial plosives that occur with the 3rd register are clearly unaspirated. Impressionistically, I would suggest that each of them represents the Chong's 3rd register with a different emphasis. While the Takhian Thong dialect emphasizes aspiration, the Pong Nam Ron dialect emphasizes low pitch and lax articulation, with less aspiration and breathiness. The Phluang dialect is in the middle of this continuum.

Table 6. Breathy Voice and Aspiration

Gloss	Khao Khitchakut		Pong Nam Ron
	North	South	
'drunk'	[pʰừj]	[pʰừj]	[pừj]
'morning'	[pʰà:ŋ]	[pʰa:ŋ]	[pà:ŋ]
'water'	[tʰà:k]	[tʰà:k]	[tà:k]
'alcohol'	[kʰrà:ɲ]	[kʰrà:ɲ]	[krà:ɲ]

However, my survey results could only confirm that different descriptions of the 3rd register in the Chong language (Surekha 1982; Saifon 1991; Sirikarn 1987; Huffman 1985) are justified. In order to verify this distinction, more data and a different analytical procedure, which are not within the scope of this study, are essentially needed.

3.5 Vowel Height

About vowel use, my survey confirms Martin (1974) that in Pong Nam Ron dialect /i/ occurs in many words that are pronounced with /e/ in Khao Khitchakut dialects. For more evidence in this respect see Siriphen (2001). Such distinction is not that clearly seen among Khao Khitchakut variants.
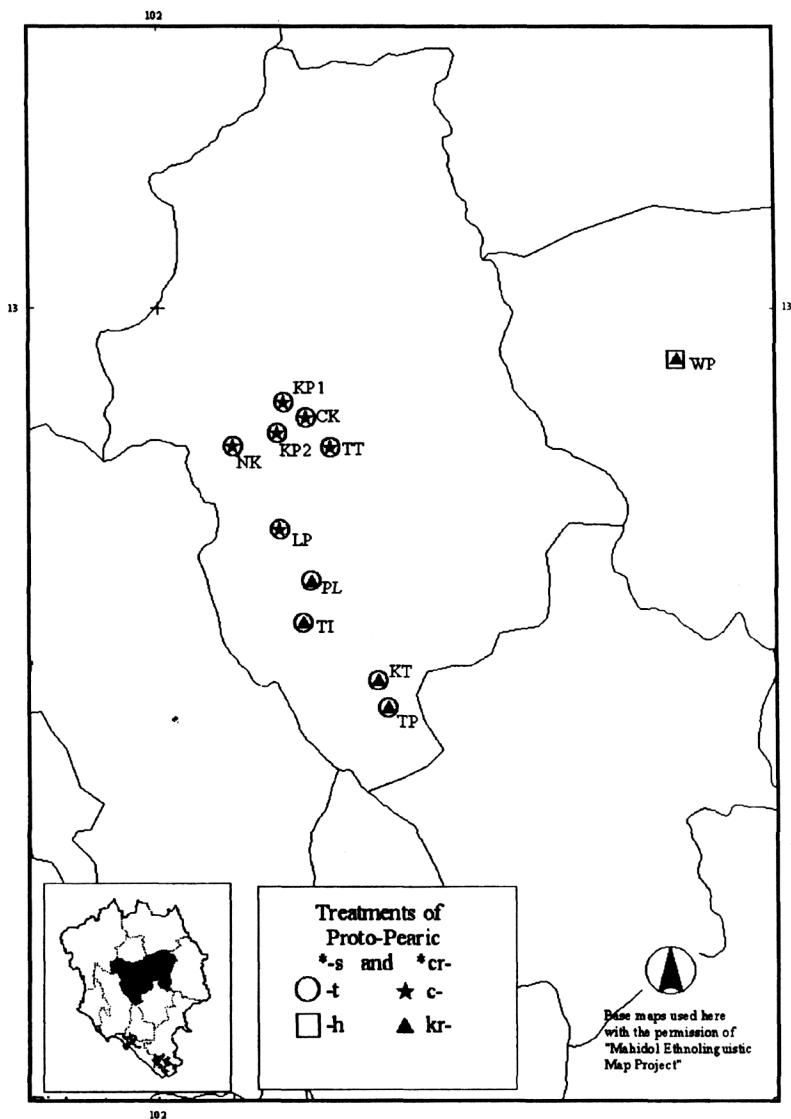
4. Chong Dialect Continuum

As the title of this paper suggests, I would like to present only a rough sketch of Chong dialects in order to support my hypothesis that it is more suitable to regard Chong areas in Chanthaburi as comprising of Takhian Thong Proper, Phluang Proper, and Pong Nam Ron Proper. For reason of uniformity, I will cite data only in §3.1 and §3.2 to confirm the hypothesis. I chose not to display data in other categories not because they are contradictory, but because it would be too awkward to present all of them here as word maps. Since the distributions of /-t, -h/ and /c-, kr-/ correspondences are more regular, they could better illustrate the dialect continuum in Chong language.

Table 7. Chong Dialect Division

Treatment of Proto-Pearic		2-way Division (old)		3-way Division (new)		
		CL	**CH**	**NC**	**SC**	**EC**
*-s >	/-t/	+	-	+	+	-
	/-h/	-	+	-	-	+
*kr- >	/c-/	+	-	+	-	-
	/kr-/	-	+	-	+	+

CL = Chong *lɔɔ*, CH = Chong *hɔɔp*, NC = Northern Chong, SC = Southern Chong, and EC = Eastern Chong

Map 5. Chong Dialect Continuum

Treatments of
Proto-Pearic
*-s and *cr-

○ -t   ★ c-
□ -h   ▲ kr-

Base maps used here
with the permission of
"Mahidol Ethnolinguistic
Map Project"

From Table 7 and Map 5 we may see that CL corresponds to NC, and CH corresponds to EC. But SC does not fit rightly into either CL or CH. Then, the problem is whether SC lɔɔ or hǝǝp. For closer social contact and mutual understanding between NC and SC speakers[4], I group them together as subgroupings of CL—CL_1 and CL_2.

5.   The Decline of Chong Dialects

Due to disruption of intergenerational transmission, the Chong language is under threat of extinction. The most concrete sign is the decreasing number of Chong communities. However, the rate of decrease of the Chong population differs from one area to another. In the northern communities of Khao Khitchakut, Chong speakers have better maintained their language than those of the southern communities.

Recently Chong leaders of Takhian Thong and Khlong Phlu districts have initiated a language revitalization project. This project started with the making of Chong orthography based on Thai script. Later on, the group received a grant for an action research project for revitalizing the Chong language from the Thailand Research Fund. As a part of this project, I have found that Chong speakers of Takhian Thong proper not only regard themselves as a distinct group, but they are also aware of some variants between their dialect and those of Phluang proper. This sociolinguistic awareness is confirmed in my research. Such awareness is one of the reason why the speakers of northern Khao Khitchakut chose to launch the Chong revitalization project within Takhian Thong proper instead of the whole Khao Khitchakut. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the northern Khao Khitchakut dialect has a brighter future than that of southern Khao Khitchakut in maintaining the number of speakers. Meanwhile, the eastern dialect (Pong Nam Ron) is becoming extinct.

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[4]From my interviews with Chong speakers in the NC and SC areas, they claimed that they understood each other well despite some differences in pronunciation and vocabularies, whereas they knew little about Chong speakers in Pong Nam Ron district (EC).

Map 6. Distribution of Chong Population
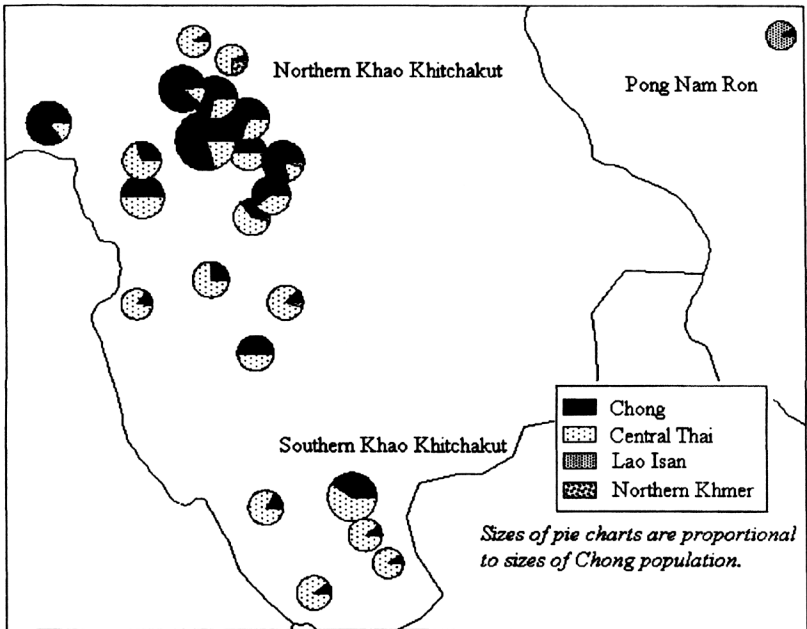
Source: Mahidol Ethnolinguistic Map Project

6. Conclusion

This research on the dialects of Chong shows linguistic and geographical bases for dividing them as three distinct groups. Therefore, I suggest that the two–way Chong *lɔɔ*-Chong *həəp* distinction be modified into a three-way distinction of northern, southern and eastern dialects.

Mountains and dense forests had long separated these groups. Only recently has modernization in Thailand cleared out forests and provided road transportation linking them together. Despite infrequent inter-group association in the past, Chong speakers have been more or less aware of some linguistic variants among themselves. Apart from major differences that can be systematically mapped, as shown in this paper, there are minor differences that are recognized by Chong speakers from village to village (for more details, see my thesis—forthcoming). I also find that maps contribute to a better understanding of the geographic distribution of Chong dialects.

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