

3-2. Reviving Culture and Environment: The Challenge of the Chong People in Eastern Thailand

The Chong People and Language

The population of Chong people living in Thailand is said to be about 4,000. They live primarily near the Cambodian border in Khaokhichakhut and Phongnamron Districts of eastern Chantaburi Province. There are records indicating that they have lived there since the days of the Khmer Empire (Premsrirat 2007: 81). Chong language is the language of the Chong people, and it belongs to the Pearic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer language family, which belongs to the Austroasiatic languages.



Chong meals. Chong villagers use fresh vegetables, plants, and herbs from the forest to cook Chong food, which is spicier than Thai food.

The Chong people previously made their living from hunting and gathering. Many households nowadays, however, grow durian, rambutan, mangosteen, and other fruit to sell and thus earn stable cash income. Aside from a few, hunting and gathering is no longer practiced, but the elderly among the Chong have a lot of knowledge about medicinal herbs and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and they grow herbs and trees around their homes for food and medicine. According to older Chong in their 60's and 70's, they did not encounter people other than Chong when they were growing up, and they all spoke Chong together. Then, Chinese businessmen and Cambodian laborers started coming and eventually settling. After the end of World War II, the Thai government began promoting the use of Thai as the National language, and sent Thai language teachers to Chong villages and began teaching Thai in the schools. Use of Chong language was prohibited in some schools, and even parents began to believe that use of Chong with their children at home would inhibit their learning. So Chong disappeared from homes, and the language was no longer handed down. At present, all Chong people can speak Thai. Only about 200 people can speak Chong fluently, and of them, it is said that no one is younger than 20 (Premsrirat 2007: 81).

Beginning of Chong Language Classes for Elementary School Children

At the end of 1990, linguists working at Thailand's Mahidol University approached leaders of the Chong community, requesting them to participate in a class where graduate students were being trained to document languages unknown to them. Eventually, the Chong leaders told the researchers that their language, culture and identity were in peril of extinction, and that they wanted to revitalize their language and culture. The researchers responded, and this is how the Chong Language Revitalization Project began.

In 2000, a survey was conducted among the Chong, and it became clear that more than 95% wanted to see revitalization of their language and culture. The same year,



The Chong writing system has been developed based on Thai script. This example reads *phasaa Chong* (the Chong language).

workshops were repeated in villages to begin developing a standardized writing system for Chong, which until then had no written language. It was agreed in the end that Thai script would be adapted with some modifications to capture linguistic differences between Thai and Chong. At the same time, there was success in attaining interest from local elementary schools, and a plan was made to formally teach Chong language to children. With cooperation from scholars, a Chong language curriculum was developed. With the use of this curriculum, in 2002 Chong language classes began to be offered twice a week to third graders at Wat Klong Phlu elementary school. Now it is also being taught to 4th to 6th graders three times a week at Wat Takianthong. Students who are not of Chong ethnicity also participate in the classes.

Protecting Language Protects Nature

In the higher grades at Wat Takianthong elementary school, Chong language classes are encouraged to be held outdoors, so children go to places like the nearby national park and experience nature as they learn. Also, herbalists are sometimes invited to come as guest teachers and they walk with the students in nearby areas, collecting edible and medicinal herbs, and students learn the names and properties of the plants in both Thai and Chong. The children see for themselves in their daily lives which plants can be collected, touching them with their own hands, sometimes tasting them, and



A Chong herb doctor (far right) has been invited to teach Chong plant names and uses to elementary school children. In Chong language class, children often go outside to study Chong language and tradition in natural settings (September 2011).

in this way acquire Chong knowledge through Chong language acquisition. Another venue for environmental education is the community forest in Klong Phlu Village. In this community forest, anyone who belongs to the village can enter the forest and collect food and medicinal herbs. Cutting down trees, however, is prohibited unless absolutely necessary. In such cases, one must first perform a special ceremony to get permission from the spirits. In community forests, there are various efforts being made at forest protection, such as digging ditches to prevent spread of fires, tying colored ribbons around trees to alert people to their importance, and using solar energy to power intake and spray pumps. Children learn the wisdom that Chong people have of the forest, and they also assist in regenerating the forest by planting trees.

Will Chong be Revived?

The biggest achievement of the Chong Language Revitalization Project is that it has restored Chong confidence and their belief in themselves as a people. This point is recognized by elders, youth and even children. Teachers at the elementary schools and other non-Chong people have expressed similar opinions. The Chong Revitalization project has received attention from other ethnic groups in Thailand facing similar situations, such as the Kasong people of Trat Province and the Nyahkur people of northeast Chaiyaphum Province. While not in the same crisis situation, speakers of Northern Khmer from



Thai-Muslims from southern Thailand visit Chong villagers to learn about language and culture revitalization. Many Thai-Muslims in the south speak Pattani Malay at home (October 2007).

northeastern Surin Province and speakers of Pattani Malay, who are Islamic people living in southern provinces, visited Chong villages and learned about the Chong Language Revitalization Project. Now, all these ethnic groups have revitalization projects that have goals and structures appropriate for their languages, cultures, and ecosystems.

The initial goal of the Chong Language Revitalization Project was to have Chong language used again in the local community. For the time being, however, it does not appear to be used outside of schools. Elders in Kong Phlu Village have said that Chong is often not even spoken between spouses who are both Chong speakers¹. A non-Chong teacher who supports the project has said, “Chong language will probably disappear, but it is important to record and remember that there was an ethnic group called the Chong.” More than the initial goal, it may be of greater importance for the Chong that a tacit agreement seems to have been established within the local community regarding the value of Chong language and culture.

References

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1. Malone (2007: 214-216) makes the same observation and says that other challenges of the project include: 1) Not just a limited number of people, but the entire community needs to get involved; 2) A survey is needed on the extent that Chong language is used in homes, in particular by the elementary school children who have learned Chong at school; 3) Stable public support and funding need to be secured; and 4) It is necessary to survey the achievements of the individual activities such as the community learning center.