



# Place Naming of the Thais and the Zhuangs

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## Abstract

Both the Thais and Zhuangs in Guangxi Province of China have the same methods in naming places : after geographical characteristics of the places; settlements and occupations of the landowners; animals and plants commonly found in the regions; local legends or folktales; and beliefs. Both cultures mostly use their own languages – Thai and Zhuang in naming their places and a number of these place names are remarkably similar. At present, social and political influences have great impact on the place naming of both cultures.

## Introduction

Silpakorn University and Guangxi Research Institute for Nationalities cooperated on a multi-disciplinary research project on the comparison of the Thai and the Zhuang cultures from 1992 – 2002. The topics studied were anthropology, archaeology, architecture, education, economics, social science, and languages. The subtopics for the language study were phonology, morphology, grammar, dialects, basic vocabulary, scripts, names and surnames, and place names. The research methods included documentary analysis and field work. The foremost purpose of the project was to find out how close the Thai and Zhuang cultures were.

### 1. Data

Thai place names were collected from the record of the Provincial Department, Ministry of the Interior composed of village

and district names in the 73 provinces, those of the Zhuang from Chinese researchers' studies and the study of Pranee Kullavanijaya on the village names in Donglan, Tianer, and Silin of the northern Zhuang, and in Longan, Longzhou, Napo, and Ningming of the southern Zhuang. The hypothesis was that there must be some similarities between these names.

## 2. Study Results

### 2.1 *Methods in naming places :*

Both the Thais and the Zhuangs have the same methods in naming places as follows :

#### 2.1.1 *Naming places after geographical characteristics :*

##### 2.1.1.1 After a mountain or hill, for example :

Thai		Zhuang	
khau <sup>24</sup>	no : j <sup>55</sup>	pla <sup>24</sup>	la : i <sup>21</sup>
mountain	small mountain	painter	
do : n <sup>33</sup>	ta : n <sup>33</sup>	pla <sup>24</sup>	bun <sup>31</sup>
hill	palmyra palm	mountain	slope
phu : <sup>33</sup>	kra <sup>33</sup> diŋ <sup>33</sup>	do : i <sup>24</sup>	ja <sup>42</sup>
mountain	bell	mountain	grandma
mo : <sup>33</sup> diŋ <sup>33</sup> de : ŋ <sup>33</sup>		do : i <sup>24</sup>	lau <sup>42</sup>
hill soil red		mountain	big

##### 2.1.1.2 After the regions near a mountain

Thai		Zhuang	
kiw <sup>22</sup>	lom <sup>33</sup>	tu : ŋ <sup>24</sup>	kja : ŋ <sup>24</sup>
narrow hole wind on a mountain		valley	middle
tham <sup>41</sup> maŋ <sup>33</sup> ko : n <sup>33</sup>		lu : ŋ <sup>24</sup>	ja : ŋ <sup>24</sup>
cave dragon		valley	Zhuang
hup <sup>22</sup>	phaj <sup>22</sup>	ka : m <sup>35</sup>	va : u <sup>31</sup>
valley	bamboo	cave	bat

## 2.1.1.3 After water resources

Thai		Zhuang	
khloːŋ <sup>33</sup>	luan <sup>24</sup>	baːn <sup>31</sup>	bo <sup>35</sup>
canal	big	village	pond
boː <sup>22</sup>	luan <sup>24</sup>	mo <sup>35</sup>	soːŋ <sup>24</sup>
pond	big	spring	highland
biŋ <sup>33</sup> ta <sup>33</sup>	khian <sup>33</sup>	ta <sup>35</sup>	laːŋ <sup>31</sup>
swamp	Takhian tree	river	parched
noːŋ <sup>24</sup>	phaj <sup>22</sup>	luːŋ <sup>31</sup>	heu <sup>24</sup>
marsh	bamboo	lake	green

## 2.1.2 Naming after woods and forests

Thai		Zhuang	
doŋ <sup>33</sup> pha <sup>33</sup> yuŋ <sup>33</sup>		doŋ <sup>24</sup>	heːŋ <sup>24</sup>
forest	Dalbergia cochinchinensis	forest	chopping block
paː <sup>22</sup> dεːt <sup>22</sup>		doŋ <sup>24</sup>	haː <sup>33</sup>
wood	sunshine	forest	thatch grass

## 2.1.3 Naming after settlements and occupations of the landowners

## 2.1.3.1 After settlements of the landowners

Thai		Zhuang	
baːn <sup>41</sup>	maj <sup>22</sup>	baːn <sup>31</sup>	na <sup>55</sup>
village	new	village	front
miɑŋ <sup>33</sup>	suaŋ <sup>24</sup>	baːn <sup>31</sup>	laŋ <sup>35</sup>
twon	heaven	village	back
Thai		Zhuang	
kuaŋ <sup>22</sup>	chom <sup>33</sup> phuː <sup>33</sup>	kuːŋ <sup>55</sup>	leːŋ <sup>55</sup>
region	Chomphuu tree	region	dry
yaːn <sup>41</sup>	yaːw <sup>33</sup>	kuːŋ <sup>55</sup>	kon <sup>24</sup>
region	long	region	bamboo

ba:n <sup>41</sup>	yuan <sup>33</sup>	lu:ŋ <sup>24</sup>	ja:ŋ <sup>24</sup>
village	Vietnamese	valley	Zhuang
ba:n <sup>41</sup>	khε:k <sup>22</sup>	lu:ŋ <sup>24</sup>	ja:u <sup>31</sup>
village	Indian valley	Yao	

### 2.1.3.2 After occupations of the landowners:

	Thai		Zhuang
na: <sup>33</sup>	no: j <sup>55</sup>	na: <sup>31</sup>	va: ŋ <sup>24</sup>
field	small	field	wide
ra: j <sup>41</sup>	kaw <sup>22</sup>	na <sup>31</sup>	la <sup>24</sup>
farm	old	field	steps
suan <sup>24</sup>	kluaj <sup>41</sup>	na <sup>31</sup>	tɕa: u <sup>55</sup>
orchard	banana	field	lord
ta <sup>33</sup> la: t <sup>22</sup>	bon <sup>33</sup>	heu <sup>24</sup>	pe: k <sup>33</sup>
market	upper	market	vegetable
ta <sup>33</sup> la: t <sup>22</sup>	nia <sup>24</sup>	heu <sup>24</sup>	va: i <sup>31</sup>
market	north	market	buffalo
ba: n <sup>41</sup> chaŋ <sup>41</sup> lo: <sup>22</sup>		ba: n <sup>31</sup> ka <sup>55</sup> mou <sup>31</sup>	
village	mould maker	village kill pig	
	Thai		Zhuang
ba: n <sup>41</sup>	ba: t <sup>41</sup>	li <sup>41</sup>	ti <sup>41</sup>
village	alms-bowl		onomatopoetic word for flute sound (Most of villagers are flute players)

### 2.1.4 Naming after the animals and plants commonly found in the reions :

	Thai		Zhuang
suan <sup>24</sup>	kluaj <sup>41</sup>	ko <sup>41</sup>	puk <sup>31</sup>
orchard	banana	tree	pomelo
tha: <sup>41</sup>	cha: ŋ <sup>55</sup>	na <sup>31</sup>	to <sup>42</sup>
pier	elephant	field	wasp

phu: <sup>33</sup>	sia <sup>24</sup>	lu:k <sup>33</sup>	ɲu: <sup>31</sup>
mountain	tiger	valley	snake
suan <sup>24</sup>	phɪŋ <sup>41</sup>	pla <sup>24</sup>	ku:k <sup>33</sup>
garden	bee	mountain	tiger

### 2.1.5 Naming after local legends or folktales

#### 2.1.5.1 After local legends or folktales :

Thai	Zhuang		
dɔ:n <sup>33</sup> ya:j <sup>33</sup> hɔ:m <sup>24</sup>	pɔ <sup>33</sup>	ŋa <sup>24</sup>	
hill grandma Hom	father	Ngai	

Don Yai Hom, situated in Nakhon Pathom province which is 65 kilometers south of Bangkok, was named after grandma Hom who brought up Lord Phan, traditionally believed to be the establisher of the Great Stupa of the province. Po Ngai village was named after a father and daughter who once lived here.

#### 2.1.5.2 After the beliefs :

Thai	Zhuang		
the: <sup>33</sup> pha: <sup>33</sup> rak <sup>55</sup>	ka:m <sup>35</sup>	ai <sup>24</sup>	
deities protect	cave	deities	

There is traditional belief that both places are protected by deities.

However, there are some small differences in place naming between the Thais and the Zhuangs. The Thais like to name the places after important people's names, such as "am<sup>33</sup> phə:<sup>33</sup> si<sup>22</sup> ri:n<sup>33</sup> thɔ:n<sup>33</sup>" for Sirindhorn District-named after the name of H.R.H. Princess Maha Cakri Sirndhorn, or after the names of the place founder, such as "ba:n<sup>41</sup> som<sup>24</sup> sak<sup>22</sup> phat<sup>55</sup> tha<sup>33</sup> na<sup>33</sup>" – the village named after the name of Mr. Somsak Chaengsongnoen who founded the place. The Zhuangs like to name places after the founder only, such as "ba:n<sup>31</sup> la<sup>31</sup>" - the village named after the Lor family who founded the place.

The Thais also like to name places after important sites in the area, such as "ba:n<sup>41</sup> pɔm<sup>41</sup>" – named after a fort found in the

village. This method of naming places does not appear in the Zhuang region.

Some places of the Zhuangs are named after various tastes, such as “t a : t<sup>35</sup> v a : n<sup>24</sup>” sweet cliff; “l u : k<sup>33</sup> h o m<sup>31</sup>” - bitter village; “b a : n<sup>31</sup> m a : n<sup>33</sup>” - chilli hot village. There is no such name in Thailand.

### 2.2 Place names structure :

Thai place names are composed of one to five lexical items while most of those of the Zhuangs contain lexical items; those having three and four items are rarely found, and only one place name in Dognlan in the northern Zhuang has six lexical items – i.e. l a i h o n<sup>24</sup> l a i l a e<sup>24</sup> l a i l a e<sup>24</sup>.

Most of Thai and Zhuang place names contain two lexical items of which the first is the main word, the second the descriptive. The first item can denote geographical characteristics of the places, settlements and occupations of the landowners; or condition, for example :

Thai		Zhuang	
n o : η <sup>24</sup>	b u a <sup>33</sup>	k a : m <sup>55</sup>	v a : u <sup>31</sup>
marsh	lotus	cave	bat
b a : n <sup>41</sup>	m a j <sup>22</sup>	b a : n <sup>31</sup>	k a u <sup>55</sup>
village	new	village	old
m a : <sup>33</sup>	n o : j <sup>55</sup>	n a <sup>31</sup>	v a : η <sup>24</sup>
field	small	field	wide

There is some difference, since the Zhuang usually use the words indicating directions as the first item, such as

k j a : η <sup>24</sup>	b a : n <sup>31</sup>
middle	village
k u n <sup>31</sup>	t a m <sup>55</sup>
upper	pond
l a <sup>55</sup>	m o <sup>35</sup>
lower	spring

### 2.3 The language used in place naming :

2.3.1 Both the Thais and the Zhuangs use their own languages in naming places, and foreign languages such as Cambodian, Pali, and Sanskrit are also found in Thai place names, and Chinese in those of the Zhuangs, for example :

	Thai		Zhuang
bɨŋ <sup>24</sup>	ka : n <sup>33</sup>		ba : n <sup>31</sup> moe <sup>33</sup> chun <sup>33</sup>
pond	black		village Maple village
Thai	Pali		Zhuang Zhuang Chinese
na <sup>55</sup> khɔ : n <sup>33</sup> pa <sup>33</sup> thom <sup>24</sup>		na <sup>31</sup> bo <sup>35</sup> yen <sup>33</sup>	
town	first	field pond district	
Pali/Sanskrit	Pali	Zhuang Zhuang Chinese	
ra : t <sup>41</sup> sam <sup>24</sup>	ra : n <sup>33</sup>	hua <sup>33</sup> shan <sup>33</sup>	
people	Happy	cliff painted	
Sanskrit	Cambodian	Chinese Chinese	

It is noteworthy that the Thais and the Zhuangs use their own languages in names containing two lexical items.

2.3.2 Similar place names are found to be used widely by the Thais and the Zhuangs :

	Thai	Zhuang
field	na : <sup>33</sup>	na <sup>31</sup>
village	ba : n <sup>41</sup>	ba : n <sup>31</sup>
pond	bo : <sup>22</sup>	bo <sup>35</sup>

A number of Zhuang place names used in many regions are the same as those widely used in the north and the northeast of Thailand, for example :

	Thai	Zhuang
mountain	pla : <sup>24</sup>	pla <sup>24</sup>
	do : j <sup>33</sup>	do : i <sup>24</sup>
	Thai	Zhuang
	phu : <sup>35</sup>	bo <sup>33</sup>
cliff	ta : t <sup>33</sup>	ta : t <sup>35</sup>
river	na : m <sup>55</sup>	nam <sup>24</sup>

forest      doŋ<sup>33</sup>                      doŋ<sup>24</sup>

2.3.3 The Thais use a wider range of vocabulary in place naming, for example :

	Thai	Zhuang	
mountain	pha : <sup>24</sup>	pha <sup>24</sup>	
	do : i <sup>33</sup>	do : i <sup>24</sup>	
	khaw <sup>24</sup>		
	phu : <sup>33</sup>	bo <sup>33</sup>	
hill	kɛw <sup>22</sup>		
	khuan <sup>33</sup>		
	kho : k <sup>41</sup>		
	do : n <sup>33</sup>		
	dɛn <sup>22</sup>		
	nə : n <sup>22</sup>		
	no : n <sup>33</sup>		
	pho : n <sup>33</sup> (northeastern dialect)		
	mə <sup>33</sup> (northern dialect)		
	san <sup>24</sup>		
cliff	ta : t <sup>22</sup>	ta : t <sup>22</sup>	
narrow hole	kiw <sup>22</sup>	keu <sup>35</sup>	
on a mountain		keŋ <sup>24</sup>	
		kem <sup>42</sup>	
valley	hup <sup>22</sup>	ɕo : ŋ <sup>33</sup>	
		tu : ŋ <sup>24</sup>	
	Thai	Zhuang	
		lu : k <sup>33</sup>	
		lu : ŋ <sup>24</sup>	
		ru : ŋ <sup>42</sup>	
cave	tham <sup>41</sup>	ka : m <sup>55</sup>	
water way	khlo : ŋ <sup>33</sup> - canal	ri <sup>35</sup> - stream	
	khon : n <sup>33</sup> - canal	hui <sup>35</sup> - brook	
	daj <sup>33</sup> - small canal	ta <sup>35</sup> - river	



	rɔŋ <sup>41</sup>	- small canal	nam <sup>24</sup>	- river
	tha:n <sup>33</sup>	- stream		
	huaŋ <sup>41</sup>	- brook		
	na:m <sup>51</sup>	- river		
	mɛ: <sup>41</sup>	- river		
	mɛ: <sup>41</sup> na:m <sup>55</sup>	- river		
	lam <sup>33</sup>	- river		
water	kut <sup>22</sup>	- swamp	bo <sup>35</sup>	- pond
	kwa:n <sup>55</sup>	- swamp	lu:n <sup>31</sup>	- pond
	buŋ <sup>22</sup>	- swamp	ti:ŋ <sup>42</sup>	- pond, marsh
	biŋ <sup>33</sup>	- swamp	saen <sup>24</sup>	- pond
	bo: <sup>22</sup>	- pond	tam <sup>31</sup>	- pond
	saʔ <sup>22</sup>	- pond	mung <sup>31</sup>	- pond
	miəŋ <sup>24</sup>	- pond	mo <sup>55</sup>	- spring
	buak <sup>22</sup>	- pond	ki <sup>31</sup>	- marsh
	no:ŋ <sup>24</sup>	- marsh		
	tha <sup>33</sup> le: <sup>33</sup> sa:p <sup>22</sup>	- lake		
	Thai		Zhuang	
part of water resources	khok <sup>55</sup>	- river bend	raen <sup>24</sup>	- deep pool under a river
	khuŋ <sup>55</sup>	- river bend		
	lə:ŋ <sup>33</sup>	- river bend		
	waŋ <sup>33</sup>	- deep pool under a river		
	sop <sup>22</sup>	- estuary		
	ʔa:w <sup>22</sup>	- bay		
	lɛ:m <sup>24</sup>	- cape		
settlements	chiaŋ <sup>33</sup>	- town	ba:n <sup>41</sup>	- village
	miəŋ <sup>33</sup>	- town	ma:n <sup>31</sup>	- village
	wiaŋ <sup>33</sup>	- town	həu <sup>31</sup>	- market
	ba:n <sup>41</sup>	- village		
	ta <sup>33</sup> la:t <sup>22</sup>	- market		

woods/ forests	doŋ <sup>33</sup>	- forest	doŋ <sup>24</sup>	- forest
	pa : <sup>22</sup>	- wood		
	law <sup>22</sup>	- small wood		
occupations	na : <sup>33</sup>	- field	na <sup>31</sup>	- field
	raj <sup>41</sup>	- farm	rei <sup>42</sup>	- field

### 3. Discussion

3.1 The main occupation of the Thais and the Zhuangs was rice planting; this can be seen in the wide use of the word “na :<sup>33</sup> ; na<sup>31</sup>” - field. At that time these people had small settlements at the level of village – “ba : n<sup>41</sup> : ba : n<sup>31</sup>”, which had to be near a pond - “bo :<sup>22</sup> , bo<sup>35</sup>” in order to sustain life.

3.2 If the Thai used to live in the same area with the Zhuangs, they must have separated from the latter very long time ago since they have a wider range of vocabulary for place names.

3.3 Most of the Zhuangs in Guangxi formerly settled in the valley, as can be seen in a number of such place names, but they do not have words related to the sea as do the Thais. It means that the Thais have separated from the Zhuang before the latter came to live near the sea like in the present.

3.4 Place names in Zhuang may one day disappear since they are gradually replaced by Chinese names, whereas Thai place names denoting geographical characteristics of the place are gradually replaced by important people’s names, and more and more Thai place names are replaced by Pali and Sanskrit words due to the lack of knowledge of Thai plants and animals; for example the name “ba : n<sup>41</sup> soŋ<sup>24</sup> pl̩aj<sup>33</sup>” - the village where there are a lot of Song Pluei tree. People do not know the plant so they have changed the word “สง” to “สงฆ์” - a monk. This can lead to the disappearance of Thai words denoting animals, plants, and geographical characteristics in the future.



## 4. Conclusion

The study of the place naming of the Thais and the Zhuangs indicates that though the Thais and the Zhuangs may not have the same ancestors, they must at one time have lived near each other. What is most noteworthy is that their languages are ethnically related.



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