

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 General Background

Lamphun is the smallest province in the north of Thailand, bordering Chiang Mai to the north and Tak and Lampang to the south. Lamphun is an interesting place for ethnolinguistic study because the linguistic situation there is so complex. There are many ethnic groups in Lamphun, including Yong, Lue, Khoen, Khon Muang and people from Central Thailand. For over 200 years the largest ethnic group in Lamphun has been Yong. Approximately 90% of Lamphun citizens are Yong people (Ruengdet 1978: ii). The Yong people are a good example of a community with a strong ethnic identity. They keep their own traditions and use their own dialect within the community.

In recent years the number of non-Yong people in Lamphun has increased, and the linguistic situation within the present Yong community has changed. The Yong live among a large number of Northern Thai people and use Kammuang, or Northern Thai, to communicate with them. The Yong community in Lamphun is very strong. They still preserve their own traditional customs and dialect. However, the Yong language is endangered because Yong people are sometimes embarrassed to use their language to communicate. This is because they think that whenever they speak Yong, other people, whether Northern Thai or Central Thai speakers, will laugh at them and consider them to be rural people. So they switch to Kammuang or Standard Thai. This seems to indicate some negative attitudes towards the Yong dialect.

However, nowadays Yong people have begun to realize the importance of their own dialect. There are some groups of people in Lamphun who are Yong speakers such as teachers, radio operators or government officers who have started activities that focus on Yong people, language and traditional customs. For instance, there are lectures at Pra Phut Tha Bat Tak Pha Temple, Pasaang district, Lamphun province, on such topics as “Are Yong, Khoen and Lue the same ethnicity?” There are Yong speech contests in order to preserve the identity of their ethnic group.

With all the ethnolinguistic change in Lamphun, the researcher became interested in studying the Yong community and how Yong people think about their dialect.¹

1.1 Historical Background

The Tai Yong people are named after Yong City in Shan State, Myanmar. The Tai Yong people originated in Myanmar but have lived in Thailand for almost 200 years. Their move to Thailand was not voluntary, but due to forced migration in 1805. During the eighteenth century King Phutthayotfa (Rama I) of Bangkok freed the Lanna kingdom in north Thailand from the Burmese. At that time, Praya Kavila became King of Chiang Mai. Because of the war, many of the people of Chiang Mai and Lamphun had fled into the countryside. So Praya Kavila began to collect the people who had scattered and to bring them back to Chiang Mai. Yet those people were insufficient to fully populate the city, so Praya Kavila led an army to bring the Lue people (including Tai Khoen, Tai Yai and other ethnic groups of Tai people) from Burma to Chiang Mai. This period was known as “putting vegetables into baskets, and people into towns”; the policy was that of taking the people of the defeated kingdoms back to the homeland of the victorious country (Schliesinger 2001). The Tai Yong were taken to Chiang Mai in larger numbers (about 10,000

¹ This research has interpreted Yong and Kammuang as different ‘dialects’ because of the degree of linguistic similarity. No specific claim of relationship or mutual intelligibility is made by use of the word ‘dialect’.

people) than other Tai groups. The settling of Yong people in Lamphun made the city almost entirely Yong. The whole social structure of Yong City was brought along, including the chief, his relatives, nobles, monks, soldiers and slaves. Praya Kavila gave power to the chief to rule the Yong people in the town.

From that time, the Yong became the majority people group in Lamphun. A full 90% of Lamphun citizens are people of Yong ancestry (Ruengdet 1978:ii). Most of them lived in different places in Lamphun, especially near the banks of the Kwuang, Thaa, and Ping Rivers, and some of them moved to live in nearby areas such as Chiang Mai, Lampang and Chiang Rai Provinces.

Tai Yong were originally Tai Lue speakers. The Tai Lue had migrated into Yong City and had power over the original people who lived there. They became the majority in Yong City and called themselves Yong people according to the city where they were then living. When they were taken to Lamphun, they still preserved their ethnicity by saying that they were Yong people. They also named their villages and their towns after their former cities in Myanmar, for example, Ban Viang Yong, Ban Thong, Ban Yuu, Ban Sam, etc. (Sawaeng 2001: 128). The Yong people consider themselves as separate from the Tai Lue people. Maps of Yong City and Yong community in Lamphun can be seen in Figure 1, 2 and 3.

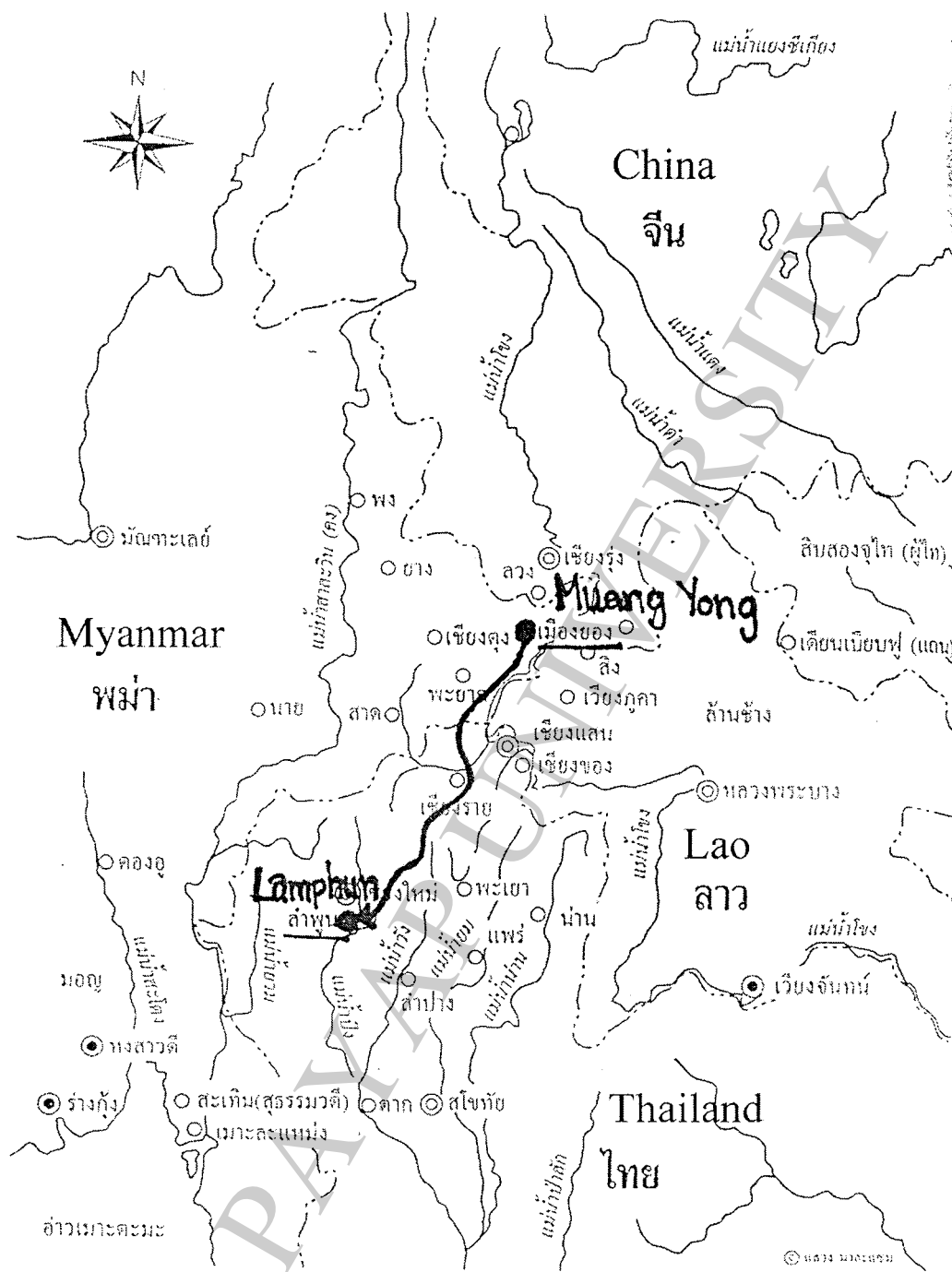


Figure1: Map of the Yong city and the direction of Yong immigration to Lamphun Province in 1805 (Sawaeng 2001).

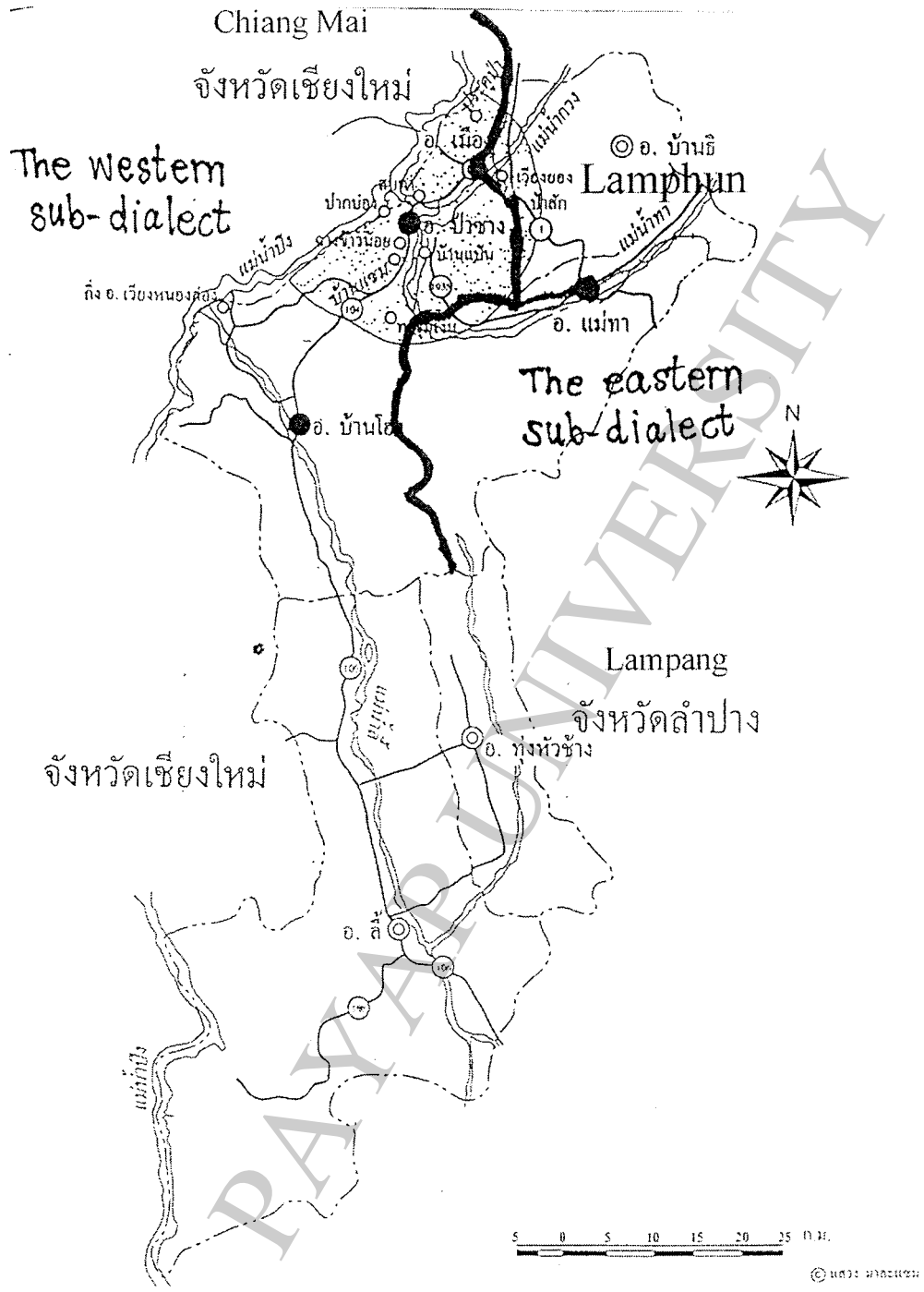


Figure 2: Yong community in Lamphun Province (1805) (Sawaeng 2001).

1.2 Yong Culture

The Yong people were not the only group that migrated to settle in Lamphun. There were also other small groups who were resettled in the same region along with the Yong, namely the Khoen and Lue people. The ethnic diversity has made Lamphun a city with much social and cultural assimilation. However, as the majority group of people in Lamphun, the Yong have maintained their ethnic identity strongly. Schliesinger (2001b) described aspects of Yong culture such as costume and crafts, homes and villages, ceremonies, myths and beliefs, etc. Schliesinger states that Tai Yong people have their own traditional handicrafts of weaving and dyeing. Tai Yong women are excellent weavers of cotton vests, phaa sins (a woven traditional skirt), blankets and many other textile products. The Yong women wear simple phaa sins and short-sleeved blouses, which they weave themselves in different styles. They cover their hair with an upright plain white turban. Men dress in short pants and a blue vest. Most of the Yong in Lamphun live mainly among their group members.

The traditional Tai Yong house is a solid wooden building, raised on poles about two meters above the ground. There is not much furniture inside a traditional Tai Yong house. They sit and sleep on the floor, and the few things that they keep inside the house are placed either on the floor or in a small cabinet. The houses are located in rather large compounds.

The Tai Yong economy is based on agriculture, handicrafts and small trade. They grow rice, cassava, cotton, tomatoes, garlic and onions, and these agricultural products are sold in the markets of Chiang Mai. Many kinds of animals such as buffaloes, pigs, chickens or ducks are also raised for sale. Tai Yong villages are ruled by their own ethnic leaders under the Thai administration system. The religion of the Tai Yong is Buddhism, but they still honor the four guardians spirits of the land and the ancestral spirits as Tai people generally do in Northern Thai.

1.3 Language Family

According to Schliesinger (2001a), Tai Yong belongs to the Tai-Kadai group of the Austro-Thai language family. The Tai language division is subdivided into three branches: Central Tai, Northern Tai and Southwestern Tai. Tai Yong is in the Southwestern Tai group (Smalley 1994: 298) (Figure 4).

Linguistic research among the Tai Yong community in Lamphun province shows that the Yong dialect can be divided into two sub-dialects. The eastern sub-dialect is spoken in Mae Tha district and in the eastern area of Muang district. The western sub-dialect is spoken in Pasang and Ban Hong districts and in the western area of Muang district. The tone pattern of the two sub-dialects is different. The tone pattern of the eastern sub-dialect is similar to the Tai Lue dialect of Sip Song Panna in China, whereas the tone pattern of the western sub-dialect is similar to the Tai Lue dialect in Muang Yong in the Shan State of Burma (Schliesinger 2001b: 153).

The linguistic faculty of Mahidol University in Nakhon Pathom, have classified Tai-speaking groups in Thailand into twenty groups. Tai Yong was considered to be one of the Tai-speaking groups. Yong and Lue dialects are very similar. The main difference is accent. According to a comparison between Yong and Lue dialects, and between Yong and Kammuang dialects, Yong is more similar to Lue than to Kammuang (Reungdet 1978: ii).

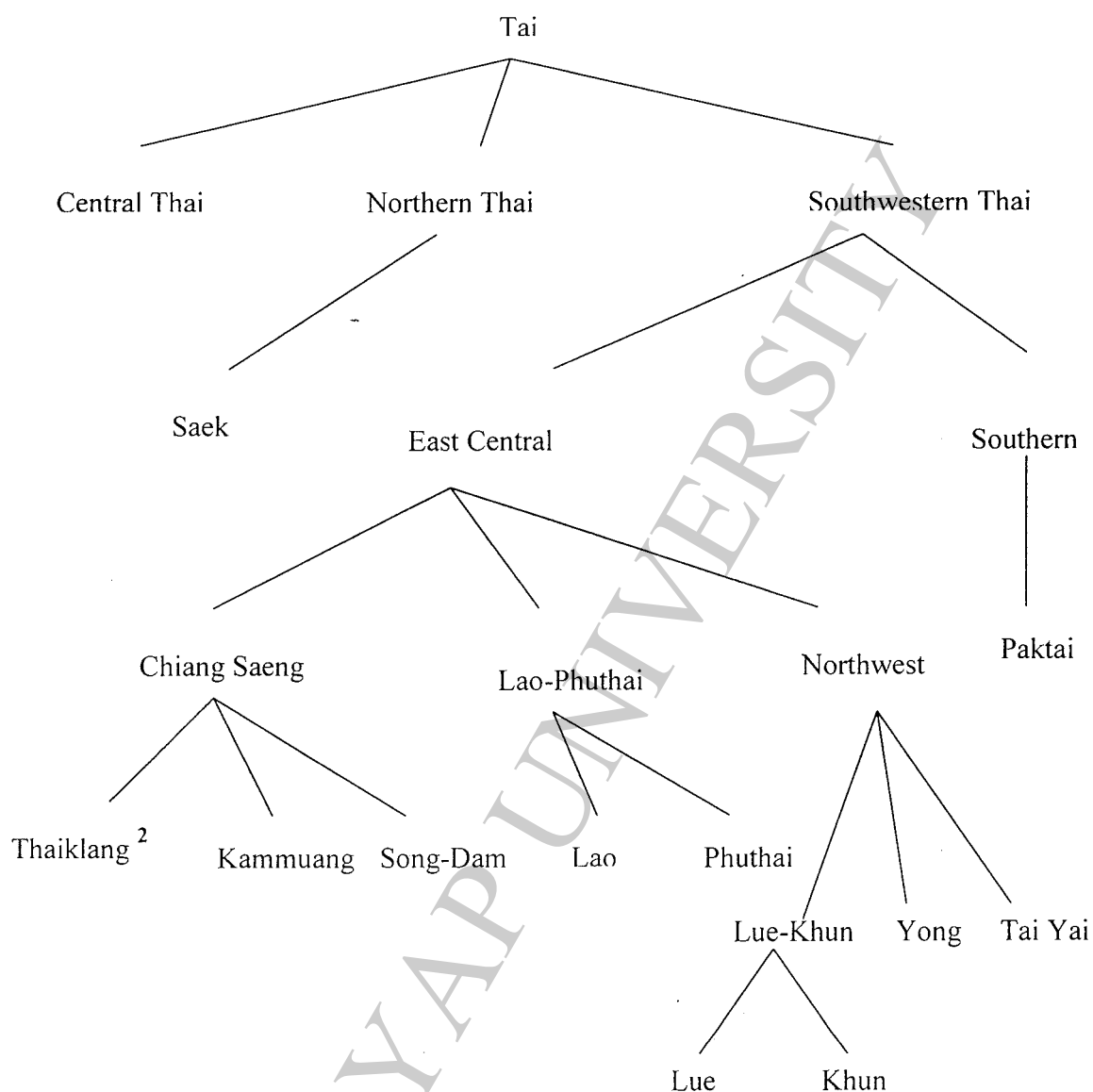


Figure 4: A language family model of the Tai language in Thailand (Adapted from Smalley, 1994).

² Thaiklang is Central Thai and it is the basis for educated Standard Thai.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This thesis has the following four objectives:

1. To explore domains of use of the Yong dialect by different parts of the Yong community.
2. To discover the attitudes of Yong people toward their dialect and other dialects spoken in the community.
3. To gain some idea of the future of the Yong dialect.

1.5 Research Questions

In order to meet the above objectives, this research has the following three research questions:

1. What dialects do Yong people use in their community? What are the important factors in the choice of dialect use of Yong people in different domains?
2. How do Yong people feel about their dialect and other dialects spoken in the community?
3. What is the long-range outlook for the Yong dialect? Will the Yong people maintain their dialect or shift to Kammuang?

1.6 Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed for this study.

1. Yong people generally use their dialect among themselves in the Yong community, regardless of age or other variables. The Yong people use Kammuang and Standard Thai with non-Yong speakers.
2. Social variables such as age, sex, educational level and place of residence affect the choice of dialect of the Yong people. The highest degree of dialect use will be found among old people, and age will prove to be the most significant social variable. Younger Yong people use Yong but in more limited domains; for example, they only speak Yong in the family or with friends who are also Yong speakers. They prefer to use Kammuang or Standard Thai to communicate in other situations.
3. Older Yong people have stronger positive feelings toward the use of their dialect than younger people. The younger age group has positive attitudes toward the Yong dialect, but they do not use it in many domains, except in their family.

1.7 Benefits of the Study

It is hoped that benefits such as the following will result from this research.

1. This research will give information about the vitality and attitudes of the Yong people in Lamphun toward their dialect.
2. This research will serve as basic information about the Yong community in Lamphun province for other researchers to compare with language patterns of similar language communities.
3. This research might help to encourage and improve the attitudes of the Yong people toward their dialect.