Conserving Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity: Lessons from the Chong Language Revitalization Project in Thailand

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to input into discussions among public intellectuals (PIs)[1] over critical issues facing Southeast Asia (SEA). The topic I would like to contribute is bio-cultural diversity conservation and its implications. More specifically, I will present a case study of an indigenous community in Thailand which has initiated various activities to protect local linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity.

I will first describe linguistic diversity in SEA. Many of the region's languages, and linguistic/cultural diversity by implication, are now under threat. Second, I will look at major factors exacerbating decline in linguistic diversity as well as consequences that might result. Third, I will explain global movements to protect linguistic/cultural diversity, highlighting community initiatives and linkages with biological diversity conservation as their strengths. Fourth, I will provide a case analysis on a bio-cultural conservation project led by the Chong people, an indigenous minority group living in eastern Thailand. I will describe how they have implemented the project, as well as its achievements and challenges. The article will end with a list of recommendations to protect SEA's bio-cultural diversity.

Linguistic/cultural diversity in Southeast Asia

SEA is linguistically rich. In one estimate, 1,461 languages are known[2] in the 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (See Table 1). These languages account for more than 20 percent of the world's nearly 7,000 existing languages and belong to five different language families (Premsrirat 2007, 75).[3] As 9 percent of the world's population is speaking 21.1 percent of the world's languages, this indicates SEA's complex linguistic profile.[4]

Country	# of speakers	# of languages	# of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers
Brunei	343,195	15	8
Cambodia	13,511,970	23	12
Indonesia	222,699,476	719	454
Lao PDR	5,349,894	84	47
Malaysia	19,465,720	137	85
Myanmar/ Burma	47,319,800	111	35
Philippines	100,221,395	171	59
Singapore	3,060,430	21	9
Thailand	51,668,997	74	28
Vietnam	75,650,099	106	42
ASEAN	539,270,956	1,461	779
World	5,959,511,717	6,909	3,524
ASEAN/World	9.0%	21.1%	22.1%

Table 1: Linguistic diversity in ASEAN (based on Lewis 2009).

More significantly, SEA's linguistic diversity relies on a large number of small groups. Table 1 shows the distribution of languages in each ASEAN country whose speakers number fewer than 10,000. They account for 53.3 percent (779/1,461) of all the SEA languages. Although this is considerably less than that for North and South America (77.8 percent and 76.5 percent, respectively) and Australia/Pacific (92.8 percent), it is much higher than that of Africa (32.6 percent), Europe (30.2 percent), and Central America (36.4 percent). The figure is also slightly above the average for the entire Asia region, which is 52.8 percent (Nettle 1999, 114).

While some researchers (e.g., Nettle and Romaine 2000, 9-10) point out that the number of speakers alone is not a decisive factor to predict the survival or death of languages,[5] many are concerned about the future of small-scale languages. Krauss (1992, 7) warns that as much as 90 percent of the world's languages may not survive the 21st century, as they may cease to be learned by children. After comparing available estimates, Crystal (2000) concludes that 50 percent language loss in the next 100 years is a reasonable guess. About 60 percent of the world's languages are used by fewer than 10,000 speakers (Nettle 1999, 114). In Crystal's view, then, most of these languages will go extinct before the turn of the century. Similarly, the 779 small languages in SEA are facing a very grim future. True, languages have always died out and new languages have emerged to make up for the loss in human history. However, the rate at which languages are disappearing seems accelerated (Hinton 2001, 4; Nettle and Romaine 2000, 97-98).

Threats to linguistic/cultural diversity

In the SEA context, the most serious threat to linguistic diversity is probably the spread of dominant languages and the prestige value that comes with them.[6] The pressure from prestigious languages can take different forms, the most significant of which is the promotion of national/official languages through the formal education system. While minority children have both the need and right to learn national/official languages, they are often discouraged both explicitly and implicitly by teachers and parents from speaking the mother tongue. Children gradually internalize adults' view that their ethno-linguistic backgrounds are worthless. This can also lead to non-use of a minority language at home, disrupting its transmission to succeeding generations. Dominant languages can also be promoted through mass media. Movies, music/songs, and other popular cultures help powerful languages spread far and wide. The role of English as an inter-regional means of communication, in addition to its already high status as a global language, is increasing, too. The ten ASEAN countries are moving towards regional integration. The ASEAN Charter declares English as its working language (ASEAN 2007, 29). ASEAN also "promote[s] a "common ASEAN identity" and has a motto, a flag, an emblem, and even an anthem (ASEAN 2007, 29). The lyrics of the ASEAN anthem are in English. In Thailand, at least, as the next cornerstone of the ASEAN integration, i.e., the 2015 formation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), is approaching, not merely educational institutions in urban areas but also local communities, who are already experiencing the increased influx of foreign traders, tourists, and other visitors, are expressing an "urgent need" to learn English. Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Phillipson (1999) have illustrated the detrimental impacts of English over minority languages in many parts of the world.

The second factor contributing to SEA's declining linguistic diversity is physical displacement of indigenous/minority communities, which is often caused by such events as wars/internal conflicts, natural disasters, outbreaks of disease, and large-scale development (e.g., hydropower dams). Moken speakers in southern Myanmar/Burma and Thailand were struck by the 2004 tsunami. As an already endangered indigenous Austronesian language group, the Moken people, especially those living along the coastal zone, were put into very difficult circumstances. They lost housing and fishing boats, which are indispensable components of their traditional ways of life and livelihood (Skehan 2012). Bradley (1989) also reports a case of Ugong speakers. Ugong belongs

to the Sino-Tibetan language family and Ugong villagers live in western Thailand. They were involuntarily relocated from their original location due to a hydropower project launched by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. As a result, their coherence as a community was weakened. Bradley (1989) observes that the displacement disrupted the Ugong speakers' linguistic maintenance and ethnic identity.

What's lost, and what's wrong with it?

The traditional wisdom of indigenous/minority groups is encoded in their language. A clear example is ethno-botanical knowledge.[7] A more dramatic instance is the case of 49 Great Andamanese speakers who survived the 2004 tsunami because they had known which trees would not be swept away (Romaine 2007, 129). Such knowledge was presumably accessible through the Great Andamanese language. When minority groups cannot pass their language on to succeeding generations, they also cannot transmit traditionally accumulated knowledge, because such knowledge can often be fully understood only when contextualized within the entire linguistic/cultural system and thus is not easily translatable into other languages. Humans may have developed linguistic/cultural diversity as part of their evolution and survival strategies. Diversity makes available various ways to respond to rapid changes and different conditions. When one solution fails, alternative approaches can help humans survive as a species. In short, linguistic/cultural diversity can be viewed as useful resources.

To maintain or learn a minority language can also be regarded as integral to human rights (Phillipson et al. 1995). Individuals should positively identify with their mother tongue and have that identification respected by others, no matter how insignificant the language might appear to be to the rest of society. Everyone is thus entitled to learn their native language, receive basic education through the mother tongue, and fully acquire an official language. At a collective level, a language cannot be separated out from indigenous/minority peoples' rights to exist as a distinctive group, presupposing their rights to learn both native and official languages. Language rights, linguistic human rights in particular, evolve from basic human rights, e.g., non-discrimination, freedom of expression, and right to private life, as well as the right of minorities to enjoy a distinctive identity (Phillipson et al. 1995, 1-2). Linguistic/cultural diversity is thus indispensable to any society where human rights are well-respected.

Global movements to conserve linguistic/cultural diversity

The past few decades have witnessed global responses to declining linguistic/cultural diversity.[8] Hinton and Hale (2001) report various efforts to understand the critical conditions into which minority languages have been forced, as well as to delay and reverse the current global trends. Language/culture revitalization projects described by Hinton and Hale (2001) differ in goals, approaches, and attainments, reflecting diverse circumstances where such projects are being implemented. If a minority community is strong and its language is spoken at home, members can try to expand domains of language use into the entire community. In other circumstances, very few native speakers, or none at all, may remain. However, something can still be done. Fishman (1991) has designed steps of language revitalization (See Table 2). This model is based on Israel's experience of reviving Hebrew, which once ceased to be spoken, into a national language. It may not be necessary or even appropriate for every language conservation project to aim at Fishman's Step 9 (i.e., a target language used outside the community). The model is still useful to conceptualize what can be done for endangered languages at different stages.[9]

Step 1	Find out linguistic situation of the community.
Step 2	Use available materials to reconstruct the language.
Step 3	Document the language of elderly speakers.
Step 4	Develop second-language learning programs for adults.
Step 5	Enhance cultural practices to support use of the language at home and in public.
Step 6	Develop intensive second-language programs for children, especially at school.
Step 7	Use the language at home as the primary language of communication.
Step 8	Expand the use of the language into broader local domains.
Step 9	Expand language use domains outside the community.

Table 2: Steps to language revitalization (adapted from Fishman 1991; Hinton 2001, 6-7)

While languages can be revitalized in different ways, many researchers and practitioners emphasize the central role played by a community. Speakers of a minority language must take the lead and make decisions at major steps along the revitalization processes. Around a strong community initiative forms a network of scholars and experts, school administrators and teachers, artists and writers, (local) government officials, funding agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). At a more practical level, good documentation of an endangered language is crucial. Developing orthography, if a target language has never developed one, seems a very common strategy and is needed when the language is taught in school.

One noteworthy approach towards linguistic/cultural diversity conservation is linking with biological diversity protection. This has stemmed from the observation that linguistic/cultural and biological diversity overlaps and is high around the Equator (Maffi and Woodley 2010). Nettle and Romaine (2000, 165) see minority groups as the stewards of diversity. They know how to utilize the natural environment without modifying it irrevocably. The insignificantly altered environment in turn reflects upon their language and culture. Such interactive processes might eventually result in observed bio-cultural diversity hotspots in the world. Maffi and Woodley (2010) list 45 projects to protect global bio-cultural diversity.

I will now turn to a particular language/culture revitalization project. This project has been in

practice for more than 10 years. A case study will illustrate how linguistic/cultural diversity can be revitalized. It will also complement the existing literature (e.g., Hinton and Hale 2001; Maffi and Woodley 2010) in which examples from SEA are underrepresented.

Chong and their language

The Chong people are an indigenous minority that are believed to have lived in eastern Thailand since the time when the area was still under the rule of the Khmer Empire (Premsrirat 2007, 81). Khaokichakhut and Pongnamron districts in Chantaburi province are particularly heavily populated by Chong. Premsrirat (2007, 81-83) explains that the Chong language belongs to the Pearic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer language family of Astroasiatic languages, alongside Kasong and Samre spoken in the adjacent Trat province on the Thai-Cambodia border. Another Pearic-speaking group, Chung, is found in Kanchanaburi province of western Thailand. Both Chong and Kasong speakers told me that their languages are mutually intelligible.[10]

According to Premsrirat et al. (2009, xvii), the basic word order of Chong is Subject-Verb-Object (e.g., I-eat-lunch). A modifier, such as an adjective, follows the head of a phrase, such as a noun (e.g., house-big). Chong and Thai share quite a few words. Most, if not all of these have presumably been lent to Chong from Thai, which belongs to the Tai-Kadai language family (Lewis 2009).

On the other hand, Thai is a tonal language but Chong is not. Chong has instead developed four different ways to vibrate the vocal cords, called 'registers', to differentiate lexical meanings. Thus, *saap,* when pronounced with creaky voice means 'bright' in Chong. When pronounced without creakiness, it means 'tasteless' (Premsrirat et al. 2009, xv).

Chong villagers explained to me that their ancestors were hunter-gatherers. They became gradually influenced by the dominant Thai and started cultivating rice. These days, many Chong families still plant rice, but mostly for home consumption. Instead, they grow cash fruits in orchards, especially, durian, rambutan, and mangosteen, and sell them to traders and at local markets. This brings them stable cash income. Unlike some other ethnic minorities in Thailand and elsewhere, the Chong are not facing severe livelihood or economic challenges. Despite considerable changes in their lifestyle, the Chong people, especially elders, retain much knowledge of herbs, plants, and other non-timber products in forests. They grow grasses and trees in home gardens and utilize them for food and medicine. A few Chong people still hunt.

Chong elders can remember 50 to 60 years ago when other ethnic groups were rarely seen in the community. At that time, Chong was the language of village life. Then, Chinese traders and Cambodian workers started to visit and to gradually settle down. After World War II, the Thai government began to emphasize the use of Standard Thai. Thai teachers were sent to the Chong community to teach Standard Thai at local and temple schools. Some Chong can recall that they were explicitly discouraged from speaking Chong at school. Chong parents were also made to believe that using Chong at home would delay their children's acquisition of Thai and hinder their academic performance. The transmission of the Chong language to future generations was thus disrupted. Premsrirat (2007, 81) estimates that at present "fewer than 2,000 people still speak some Chong" and that "good Chong speakers may not number more than 200". Most Chong under the age of 20 do not speak Chong.

Chong Language Revitalization Project[11]

In the mid-to late-1990s, linguists teaching at Mahidol University in Thailand visited Chong villagers to research Chong. The linguists also asked Chong speakers to help their students practice transcribing the language. While working with the Mahidol researchers, Chong elders started voicing concerns over their dying language, culture, and identity. The elders also expressed a desire to revitalize the Chong language and culture. The Mahidol linguists agreed to help the Chong community with their expert knowledge and experience. This marked the beginning of "the Chong Language Revitalization Project (CLRP)" (Malone 2005, 213-214; Premsrirat et al. 2007, 33-39).

A committee to implement the CLRP was formed under Chong initiatives. Some linguists at Mahidol University joined the committee as advisors. From June to August 2001, the CLRP committee, as one of its first activities, conducted a survey to find out how strongly community members would support the CLRP. The committee analyzed responses from 1,742 villagers and found that the overwhelming majority, more than 90 percent, had replied favorably on the CLRP (Premsrirat et al. 2007, 42-44). Later in the same year, the committee held a series of community workshops to develop Chong orthography. Chong people used the Thai scripts as a base but modified them to accommodate certain features that are distinctive to Chong, including the four registers. This resulted in a set of Chong scripts. With the newly invented Chong orthography, Chong villagers were encouraged into writing short stories. Chong youths added artworks and illustrations and turned them into basic readers (Premsrirat et al. 2007, 54-117).

The next step taken by the CLRP committee was to approach a sympathetic principal at a local elementary school, who agreed to have Chong taught as part of the school curricula. The committee then tasked themselves to develop a Chong language teaching curriculum by adapting the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach as one of the major teaching methods. The committee also gave trainings to fluent Chong speakers

who had a strong commitment to the teaching of Chong. Finally, in mid-2002, Chong language classes started at the Wat Klong Phulu Elementary School. Grade 3 children, including some non-Chong descendants, began to learn Chong once a week at school (Premsrirat 2007, 118-139).[12]

Linkages with environmental conservation

The CLRP, as the name implies, was originally designed mainly, if not exclusively, to revive the Chong language and culture. It was natural, however, that some CLRP activities were oriented towards conserving the natural environment in the Chong community because that was the subject in which Chong people had much knowledge, experience, and interest. For instance, the Chong class at the Wat Thakiangthong Elementary School, which started in 2007, emphasizes field experience at Grade 6. Children often visit places outside school, including a nearby national park, and learn Chong while enjoying local flora, fauna, and the landscape. In one class I observed, a Chong herb doctor was invited. He took the whole class outside, sampled various plants, showed and named them in Chong and Thai to the students, and explained how useful they were. He encouraged the children to take notes in Chong and Thai, ask questions, and see, touch, and chew some leaves and seeds.

Another venue for environmental education is a community forest located in the Klong Phulu Village. A Chong leader explained to me that any villager could enter the forest and pick plants for food and medicine. Cutting trees is banned, however. If it is unavoidable, villagers have to hold a special ceremony to ask for the tree spirit's permission. Color-coded ribbons are tied to some trees to alert visitors that they are protected. Children are sometimes brought to the community forest to learn Chong and ethno-botanical knowledge encoded in it from elders. They are also sometimes asked to help plant trees to maintain the forest.

Sociolinguistic situations in Thailand

It is useful to place the CLRP in Thailand's sociolinguistic context. In Thailand, some 70 languages (See Table 1) are hierarchically structured, with Standard Thai at the top (Smalley 1994). Standard Thai is the prestigious national language with a strong tradition of literacy and is used widely in official documents, formal education, and mass media. One below on the hierarchy are four regional languages, which are used in northern, northeastern, central, and southern Thailand. These language varieties function as a tool for inter-group communication across minority groups, too. Finally, at the bottom are various small-scale languages, such as Chong, which are spoken among indigenous and immigrant groups. These people are often multilingual and differentiate their language use depending upon where they happen to be (at home, in the neighborhood, at workplace, etc.). Smalley (1994, 4-5) names such sociolinguistic situations in Thailand as "diversity in unity". This linguistic ecology might have helped Chong, and other minority languages, survive until today.

For many years, the government of Thailand has adopted an assimilationist policy towards minorities by strongly encouraging everyone in the country towards speaking Standard Thai and becoming Thai (Premsrirat 2007, 80). It is indicative that the current Thai constitution has only one provision, Section 30, directly relating to language, and prohibiting discrimination against a person "on the grounds of the difference in origin, race, *language*…" (Constitution Drafting Committee 2007, emphasis mine). The constitution does not recognize indigenous/ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, Section 51 states that:

> Children, youth and family members shall have…the rights to survive and receive physical, mental, and intellectual development in accordance with their potentials and environment.

This provision is significant in that it can be interpreted as promoting children's rights to receive education through the mother tongue, including minority languages.

Likewise, Section 79 stipulates that:

(4) The state shall encourage and support power decentralization in education to local administrative bodies, communities,... to enable them to participate in management and develop the quality of education in compliance with the need of each locality…(6) The state shall preserve, revive, and protect arts, culture, and national traditions, good values, and folk wisdom and promote awareness thereof.

Section 79 (6) seems to give legitimacy to teaching a minority language at a state school as part of the subject of local studies. Chong language class in the CLRP is one such case. Other minorities in Thailand, such as the Kasong, Nyahkur, and Mon, are administering language class for children in similar formats.

CLRP's achievements and challenges

The CLRP has helped the Chong people regain confidence as an ethnic minority. Chong elders, youths, and children were clear about this. Non-Chong community members, such as school teachers, shared the same observation. Formal interviews and causal conservations with Chong villagers at home, school, and community gatherings all indicated that they held positive views towards the Chong language and culture. At a local wedding party, the emcee announced to the gathering, consisting of Chong and non-Chong, that the bride was a Chong descendant and that the ceremony was a mixture of Thai and Chong styles, when in fact the Chong component was only symbolic, i.e., the offering of a Chong-style basket. A certain level of local acceptance towards the Chong language/culture already existed prior to the CLRP. The project enhanced this attitude.

Being the first project of its kind, the CLRP received some attention in Thailand, especially from other minority groups, including the Kasong in Trat province and the Nyahkur in Chiayaphum province. Groups whose languages are much less threatened than Chong, e.g., Northern Khmer speakers in Surin province and Malay-speaking Muslims in southern Thailand, also came to visit the Chong community to learn about the CLRP. Mahidol University played a coordinating role to put these communities into contact with each other. All the groups have since then started revitalization projects with necessary modifications to meet their localized needs. The CLRP gave ideas and inspiration to them. Mahidol researchers also provided them with technical support.

The CLRP set its initial purpose to revive the Chong language to the degree that it would be back in use in community life. There was no indication, however, that the language was actively used in domains other than school. A few Chong elders at the Klong Phulu Village told me that they did not speak Chong even with their Chong-speaking spouses. While it might be premature now to evaluate the CLRP vis-à-vis its ultimate goal, I felt a sense of contentment among some Chong leaders that the language's status had been elevated thanks to the orthography development and elementary school teaching program. One school teacher, non-Chong but a strong CLRP supporter, also said that Chong would probably die out but that it was still important to remember that the language once existed. It is not correct to state that Chong people have given up the project's original goal. The ultimate achievement may not be as important to them as the present consensus in the community that Chong is linguistically and culturally valuable. This sentiment is certainly a CLRP product.

Malone (2005, 214-216) observes the following challenges facing the CLRP:

1) The whole community has yet to be involved. A handful of elders take the initiative on the project;
2) Domains in which Chong is used need to be expanded outside school;
3) To what extent Chong is spoken at home, especially by children who have studied Chong at school, is not known;

4) Public support, especially funding, should become stable; and

5) Achievements of some activities, e.g., the use of a community learning center, need to be assessed.

At the Wat Thakiangthong Elementary School, a few 5th graders said that they spoke Chong at home with their relatives. One teacher also shared his observation that more active Chong speakers could be found at the Thakiangthong Village than the Klong Phulu Village. It is important in future research to assess the use of Chong among children who have completed Chong class, as well as to obtain more detailed sociolinguistic data in the community. At a practical level, it is useful to encourage more adults into learning and speaking Chong.

Currently, Chong villagers are individually or in small groups pursuing different directions, including such enterprises as organic farming. Many seem to agree that local resources, bio-cultural diversity in particular, can be utilized to develop community-based eco-tourism. This was voiced at a community meeting I attended in the mid-2011. One Chong leader has invented his own scripts to write Chong with the belief that the modified Thai orthography cannot fully capture Chong's uniqueness. He uses these scripts to teach Chong in informal settings. How these diverse initiatives can be integrated into the CLRP has yet to be seen. A key is good coordination. The current state of the CLRP suggests that Chong people have started viewing the CLRP as part of community development. Another leader involved in the CLRP agreed with me on this interpretation. In that case, the bio-cultural diversity conservation framework presented here should be useful in guiding the CLRP's future. After all, linguistic/cultural vitality is a function of vitality of the community.

Implications to globalized SEA

Based on the current state of the bio-cultural diversity in SEA, as well as Chong people's experiences with the CLRP, the following recommendations are made with regard to SEA's future:

1) Much wider recognition should be established that humans, children in particular, can acquire multiple languages without much difficulty if supportive environments are provided. Suppressing minority languages, especially children's home language, is detrimental to their identity and educational attainments, among other things;

2) More public support is needed to understand linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity, as well as close inter-relationships between them, in order to view and use them as valuable resources;

3) The significance of bio-cultural diversity conservation should be incorporated into public policies and procedures. One obvious area is education. Another instance might be conducting linguistic/cultural impact assessments, not unlike environmental/social/ heath impact assessment, in development projects; and

4) Local communities, indigenous or otherwise, should be the locus of any bio-cultural diversity conservation and revitalization.

NOTES

[1]   PIs are defined as "those…academics, mass media professionals, artists, NGO activists, and others with moral authority…who are committed to working for the betterment of society by applying their professional knowledge, wisdom and experience". (Nippon Foundation 2011).

[2]   Languages are often defined socially. As such, the number of languages is always debatable. However, various figures presented here are still useful for an overview.

[3]   The five language families are Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Hmong-Yao, Sino-Tibetan, and Tai-Kadai.

[4]   Due to space constraints, discussions on linguistic/cultural diversity below focus on the linguistic aspect.

[5]   Some researchers claim that languages do not die but only sleep (Hinton 2004, 4).

[6]   See Crystal (2000) and Nettle and Romaine (2000) for more comprehensive discussions on various threats to linguistic/ cultural diversity.

[7]   See Crystal (2000) and Nettle and Romaine (2000) for more comprehensive discussions on consequences of linguistic/ cultural diversity loss.

8   Linguistic/cultural revitalization is not without its critics. See Malone (2005, 203-5) for a brief overview.

9   See also Malone (2005, 207-13) for various roadmaps to language revitalization.

10   The information and insights here and below are based on my visits to the Chong community between September 2011 and June 2012.

11   See Malone (2005) and its reference section for other writings on the CLRP.

12   Since then, Chong has been taught at different levels in local schools. As of this writing, at the Wat Thakiangthong Elementary School Chong is taught twice a week at Grades 4 to 6.

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