

The Development of the Alphabet, Characters and Orthography in the Stone Inscriptions of Isan

Somchai Lamduan

*Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture
Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District
Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province, Thailand*

Songkoon Chantachon

*Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture
Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District
Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province, Thailand*

Sittisak Jambadaeng

*Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture
Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District
Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province, Thailand*

Abstract

Stone inscriptions are part of the cultural heritage of North-Eastern Thailand, a vast area incorporating nineteen provinces. These inscriptions can be found in every North-Eastern province and record ancient written information. The writings date from the twelfth to the twenty-fourth Buddhist era, spanning a total of twelve-hundred years. Having stood the test of time, stone inscriptions have diversified and developed from their origins in the Vatteluttu of Southern India to their spread into the North-Eastern area of Thailand during the Jenla Era of Prince Jidsen, or King Mahentaraworaman. These inscriptions arrived in Thailand between the twelfth and fourteenth ages of Buddhism, evolving to adopt the ancient texts of Mon and Khom. These developments held for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the Khom script saw further developments until the eighteenth century. However, there are missing records of Mon stone inscriptions in Isan from the twelfth to the twentieth century. The twenty-first to the twenty-fourth centuries encompass the era of the Thai-Lao letter system, for which there are two distinct types of alphabet: the Dharma Alphabet and the Thai Noi Alphabet. The Dharma Alphabet was used in the Sukhothai and Lanna Kingdoms, especially in the latter through inheritance from Sukhothai. Around the twenty-first century, the Dharma Alphabet spread into the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang, from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and finally to the territories of North-Eastern Thailand, what constitutes the Northern and Central regions of modern day Isan. The Thai Noi Alphabet is the lettering found in books and scripture and is derived from the stone inscriptions of King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai Kingdom. This form of writing spread into Northern Lanna at the beginning of the nineteenth Buddhist Era and reached the Lang Xang Kingdom of King Photisarath. In the twenty-first century, the development of characters into five forms was complete: the original Southern Indian Vattluttu template, the subsequent Ancient Mon Alphabet, the Ancient Khom Alphabet, the Dharma Alphabet and the Thai Noi Alphabet. The duration of the development lasted approximately twelve-hundred years. The evidence of this development is extensive in the North-East of

Thailand, whereas other regions have a relative scarcity of consistent and continuous information.

Keywords: Stone Inscriptions, Development, Alphabet, Characters, Orthography

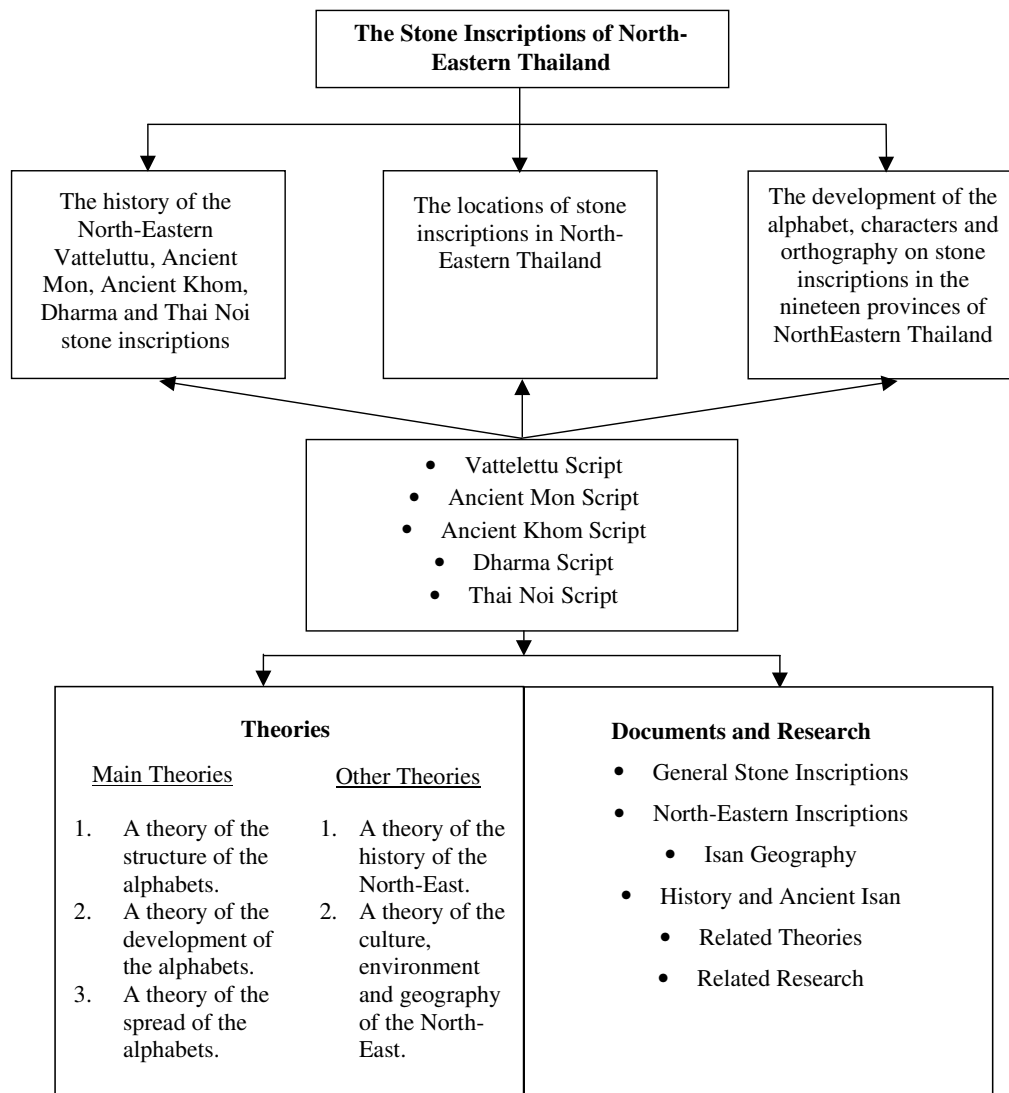
1. Introduction

Throughout the world, nations are keen to develop and recognize heritage sites, so to benefit from their management as tourist destinations. The majority of world heritage sites have some archeological and cultural interest (Yod Santasombud, 2005, pp.4-5). Stone inscriptions are considered an important part of national heritage and as such, understanding of the development of alphabets, characters and orthography on the stone inscriptions of North Eastern Thailand is necessary. Through this education, will a greater knowledge of the heritage of Isan be obtained, as suggested by *The Inscriptions of Thailand: Book 5* (1986, p. 2). This book helps to distinguish the link between pre-historic and modern life. The stone inscriptions of the North-East will reflect the principle beliefs and values of the ancient community and its Brahman, Hindu or Buddhist leaders. The knowledge of these origins will help current society improve the lives of the people towards a brighter future.

2. Research Methodology

This qualitative research aims to 1) study the cultural history of the North-Eastern Vatteluttu, Ancient Mon, Ancient Khom, Dharma and Thai Noi stone inscriptions, 2) study the location of these inscriptions and 3) study the development of the alphabet, characters and orthography on stone inscriptions in the nineteen provinces of North-Eastern Thailand. The information for this study was obtained by research of documents provided by the Department of Fine Arts, Thai Ministry of Culture and field study. The sample was selected by a purposive sample method and is divided into key informants, casual informants and general informants. Data were collected by survey, interview, observation and focus group discussions (Somsak Srisantisuk, 2002, p. 39). Data were examined with a three-way analysis in line with the aims and the results of the research were presented by a descriptive method.

Figure 1: Research Concepts in the Study of The Development of the Alphabet, Characters and Orthography in the Stone Inscriptions of Isan



3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The History of Stone Inscriptions in North-Eastern Thailand

Ancient text books record stories of the North-East from the twelfth to the twenty-fourth centuries. When counting backwards from the latest version to the earliest versions, the development of the alphabets can be seen as a chain. The Thai Noi alphabet was adapted from the fonts of King Ramkhamhaeng (Surasak Sisamang, 2002, p. 36). King Ramkhamhaeng created his alphabet by himself from Vatteluttu, Ancient Khom and Ancient Mon scripts. The Lanna people however created an adapted Dharma Alphabet based upon the Ancient Mon Alphabet in Lampoon, which had in turn been adapted from the Vatteluttu of South India. Two further types of Ancient Mon and Ancient Khom script came from local wisdom and modifications to Vatteluttu text. Various kinds of alphabet were developed because people wanted flexibility in their writing and desired variety for decorative purposes. People wanted the alphabets to be more beautiful and reflect the desires of the community (Inscriptions in Thailand, Books 4: 1986, p. 13). The Vatteluttu script of Southern India was developed by Ashoka the Great and is chiseled into many commemorative Buddhism locations, such as Lumbini. Lumbini is one of the four most attractive places for pilgrimage that sprang up in places pivotal to the life of the Buddha.

3.2. The Locations of Stone Inscriptions in North-Eastern Thailand

The geography of Isan is divided into 2 parts. These are Khorat Fossa and Sakon Nakhon Fossa. An important mountain range of Isan is the Phu Phan mountain range in Sakon Nakhon Fossa. Phetchabun Mountain is between the North-Eastern and Northern parts of Thailand. Dong Phraya Yen and Phanom Dong Ruk Mountains separate Thailand and Cambodia. Three important rivers are the Mun, Chi, and Mekong River. These geographical locations are associated with the spread of stone inscription in the Northeast. A key feature of the inscriptions is their location on the walls of caves or the sides of mountains. Some are located along the river and others share a location with ancient objects, in the Buddhist temples and in local villages. Vatteluttu is found mostly around the Mun and Chi Rivers. Ancient Mon stone inscriptions are found mostly in the middle of the North-Eastern region: Chaiyaphum, Roi-Et, Maha Sarakham, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani and Kalasin Provinces (Thai Inscriptions: Book 2, 1986, pp. 28-29). Its northernmost location is in Sakon Nakhon province. The stone inscriptions containing the Dharma and Thai Noi Alphabets are Thai-Lao inscriptions. They are located in the northern area of North-East Thailand: in Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Nong Bua Lamphu, Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham, Yasothon and Ubon Ratchathani provinces, primarily because this area is where the original Thai-Lao communities settled in history.

3.3. The Development of the Alphabet, Characters and Orthography on Stone Inscriptions in the Nineteen Provinces of North-Eastern Thailand

3.3.1. The Characters of the Alphabet

The characters all originate from the Vatteluttu Alphabet of Southern India. The three specific types of character that developed are consonant, vowel and symbol. In the two-hundred year period of Vatteluttu in Isan, there are only 2 improved patterns: firstly the pattern of the Janla period (Thida Saraya, 1995, p. 18) and later versions of the inscription. The Ancient Mon language also lasted two hundred years. This alphabet was derived from the Vatteluttu and all consonants and vowels on both sides of the inscriptions mark a message. Ancient Khom developed from the Vatteluttu alongside the Ancient Mon language for the first two hundred years, but in the subsequent four hundred years later, the ancient Khom developed unique models that continued until the inscriptions of King Chaiworaman VII (Inscriptions in Thailand: Books 3, 1986, p. 15). Following this period, the Ancient Khom language stopped its development. The Isan Dharma Alphabet was developed from the North Dharma Alphabet or Lanna Alphabet over a period of three hundred years from the twenty-first Buddhist era until the twenty-fourth. It is noticeable that most developments in the Dharma Alphabet were modified from Ancient Mon. This North Dharma Alphabet then developed once again to become the Isan Dharma Alphabet. The developments in the North-East appear with consonants, vowels text symbols. The Thai Noi alphabet is derived from the letters of King Ramkhamhaeng and the Fuk Kham letters of Lanna. Subsequent development is contained internally within Thailand or Isan over period of approximately three-hundred years.

3.3.2. Orthography

Orthography improved with integration of the Sanskrit and Ancient Khom into the syllables of Vatteluttu (Inscriptions in Thailand: Book 1, 1986, p. 21). The two languages have a different orthography. The Sanskrit language uses prefixes and suffixes and the spelling strictly conforms to grammar rules. The Ancient Khom language is a language of contact spelling. It will resemble distinctive languages, such as Thai, but there are criteria. So to paste a compound vowel consonant, it is similar to placing the vowel around the consonant in a position to the left, right, front, behind, bottom and top of the consonant. The Ancient Mon and Ancient Khom Alphabets are mostly similar. The difference is where the Mon inscriptions contain special characters to signify the end of a syllable, which does not appear in either the Sanskrit language or Ancient Khom. Although the Dharma Alphabet is used to inscribe Thai-Lao text, most inscriptions would contain both Thai-Lao and Pali-

Sanskrit scripts. Thai-Laos spellings normally had tones, whereas Vatteluttu, Mon Ancient Khom did not. The spelling of Pali-Sanskrit lend-words is quite confusing because it is difficult to write a Sanskrit-Pali word in the format of the ancient Thai languages. This spelling is currently visible in the modern Lao language. The current Thai language adjusts the application into some neat runes that even retain the original Pali-Sanskrit. The Thai alphabet initially used a simple orthography, but was later amalgamated with the compound word structure of the Dharma and a majority of Thai people had difficulty reading and writing sufficiently

4. Summary

The stone inscriptions of the North-East are part of the history of Isan. They began in the twelfth century with the first known inscriptions chiseled in Vatteluttu, Sanskrit and Ancient Khom. Vatteluttu developed into the Ancient Mon and Ancient Khom Alphabets, both of which spread throughout the nineteen provinces of Isan, in Korat and Sakon Fossa. The letters comprise evidence that allow deductions to be made into the lifestyle of the ancient North-Eastern Brahmin, Buddhist and Hindu communities. Vatteluttu and Ancient Khom were primarily used by Hindu groups, but the Ancient Mon, Dharma and Thai Noi Alphabets were used by Buddhist communities. These inscriptions detail the heritage of the ancient community of Isan and recorded the lives of the Thai-Lao communities in the Mekong, Chi and Mun river valleys from the twenty-first to the twenty-fourth centuries: the first modern Thai-Lao culture. This area is now known as the North-Eastern region of Thailand, containing nineteen provinces, with a majority of the citizens of Thailand.

5. Suggestions

From this research the following suggestions can be made:

5.1. The relevant agencies, such as the offices of the National Fine Arts Museum at Khon Kaen, Ubon, Roi-Et, Nakhon Ratchasima should collect and compose an exhibition of the stone inscriptions of North-Eastern Thailand for each region. Visible links between the regions should be depicted so to give a clearer picture of the overview of Isan stone inscriptions.

5.2. Suggestions for future research and research topics are:

5.2.1. The study of economic conditions, society and culture from the stone inscriptions of the North-East

5.2.2. The study of ancient wisdom from the Khom, Dharma and Thai Noi Alphabets on stone inscriptions in the North-East

5.2.3. The study Vatteluttu inscriptions in Thailand, Southeast Asia

5.2.4. The study of Ancient Mon inscriptions in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar

5.2.5. The study of society, economy, culture and environment from the chiseled letters in Dharma and Thai Noi inscriptions in Thailand and Laos.

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