

# Comparative Tai Toponymic Analysis: Lao Village Names in Laos<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A few studies by Thai scholars have succeeded in demonstrating that village names in different regions in Thailand reflect features of the landscape. A preponderance of Isan toponyms with *ban* as head noun are followed by descriptives such as *nong*, *non*, *khok*, *na*, *don*, *huai*, *dong*, *hua*, *kham*, *tha*, *kut*, *wang*, *phon*, *ta*, *pa*, *law*, *nam*, and *thung*. All of these words describe local environments.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, the land is a map. The term *nong* (pond) is highest in frequency because many Isan villages are situated near ponds, sources of water supply, indicating scarcity of water in a notoriously dry region. Second in occurrence is *non* (mound), pointing to early settlement areas in which villages were built on elevations in the landscape but near ponds and streams.<sup>4</sup> In the western region of Thailand, a quarter of all village names involve references to water, a sign of a more watery milieu.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to make a preliminary survey of Lao village place names in Laos and to compare the high-frequency descriptives there to those found in studies of other regions and countries settled by earlier Tai groups. Pranee Kullavanijaya, in her comparative study of place names in Guangxi province and northeastern parts of Thailand, found many references to natural features in the landscape shared by linguistically related speech groups.<sup>6</sup> Many place names are identical in both countries, further demonstrating the common cultural practice of naming a new place after the name of the old. The Lue who, generations ago, migrated from Sipsongpanna into Laos and northern Thailand followed this practice. In conducting a comparative toponymic analysis of Lao village place names, the history

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<sup>3</sup> Phaithun Piyapakon, "Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai: Wikhro Ruup Baep Thang Phumisat Khong Nam Thuapai" [Place Names of Rural Village Settlements in Northeastern Region: Geographic Pattern Analysis of Generic Terms], *Journal of Language and Culture* 13, no. 2 (1994): 49-60.

<sup>4</sup> Srisakara Vallibhotama, "Traditional Thai Villages and Cities: An Overview" in *Culture and Environment in Thailand* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1989): 359-71.

<sup>5</sup> Sujaritlak Deepadung, "Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand," *Manusaya* 6, no. 2 (1998): 31-66.

<sup>6</sup> Pranee Kullavanijaya, "Village Names in Guangxi Province and the Northeastern Part of Thailand," in *Collection of Papers on the Relationship between the Zhuang and the Thai* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996): 120-132.

and direction of migrations of earlier Tai groups into Laos and parts of Southeast Asia is clarified.

### Tai Languages: Cultural Practices in Naming Villages

At the level of the *ban* (village), the “pan-Tai” naming process has demonstrated remarkable continuity over time and space. A look at the land mass covered by villages named with *ban/man/wan* is quite amazing. Names given to villages have a democratic quality about them. They are not designed as statements of power; instead, they comment on natural surroundings: mountains, cliffs, hills, rivers, streams, ponds, marshes, flowers and fish, and so on. They encapsulate more of what might be considered older Tai vocabularies, spoken rather than written, and colored by the imagination of the peasants’ predilection for taking clues from the environment and creating a cognitive map of their immediate world. For a people who lived and moved in a semi-tropical world, what better way is there to understand navigate and that world than to mark it with features of the landscape? In a paper titled “Place Naming of the Thais and the Zhuangs,” Maneepin Phromsuthirak writes, “Similar place names are found to be used widely by the Thais and the Zhuang.”<sup>7</sup> The table below is taken from her study.

**Table 1:** Comparison of geomorphological features used in Thai and Zhuang Place Names. (Superscript numerals indicate tone levels and/or contours on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is low and 5 is high. Thus, 22 would be mid-level; 24 mid-rising; 41 high-falling.)

<u>English</u>	<u>Thai</u>	<u>Zhuang</u>
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>
Mountain	pha: <sup>24</sup>	pla: <sup>24</sup>
<u>Mountain</u>	dO:yj <sup>33</sup>	do:i <sup>24</sup>

The catalog of head nouns used to name places in both Zhuang and Thai include:

- a mountain or a hill
- the regions near a mountain
- water resources (the preponderance of names)
- woods and forests
- settlements and occupations of the landowners
- the animals and plants commonly found in the region
- local legends or folktales

<sup>7</sup> Maneepin Phromsuthirak, “Place Names of the Thais and the Zhuangs” (paper presented at the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies, Northern Illinois University, De Kalb, April 3-6, 2005), 1-14.

Some contrasting differences between Thai and Zhuang naming practices are the choices in naming a Zhuang village after a taste, such as sweet, bitter, or spicy. The Thai and the Lao, on the other hand, like to name or rename places using “elevated” Pali, Sanskrit and Mon-Khmer borrowings or the name of an important person. Zhuang place names, especially those higher than the village level have been replaced with Chinese designators. In these latter instances of renaming, the history encapsulated in the earlier name is obliterated

In concluding her article, Maneepin Phromsuthirak voices concern over the loss of place names and their history.

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 “ba:n<sup>41</sup> soN<sup>24</sup> plhaj<sup>33</sup>” – the village where there are a lot of Song Pluei trees. People do not know the plant so they have changed the word “สง” to “สงฆ” – a monk. This can lead to the disappearance of Thai words denoting animals, plants and geographical characteristics in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed by others, including the people living in areas where age-old place names have been transformed from what once had deep meaning and bound up the identity of the local residents to something alien in sound and meaning.<sup>9</sup> Place name changes in Isan seem to have intensified under the reign of King Chulalongkorn. One illustration of renaming activities during that period came to the attention of the Thai public in mid-January of 2006 when their Prime Minister, Taksin Chinawat, visited Aat Samat District in Roi-Et Province in a series of meetings billed as a campaign to “solve the problem of poverty.” This “reality show,” as it was dubbed by the press, was broadcast on cable TV. The *Manager* newspaper provided interesting background on the history of the name changes of the district, much to the bemusement of readers. According to the *Manager*, Amphur Aat Samat was “established” in 1897, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The first provincial administrator was Prince Manthanaanukaan. From the beginning, it was called Amphur Sa-but (Pali-Sanskrit: lotus pond). It got its name from the large swamp filled with red lotuses behind the Amphur office. Nowadays, the swamp is called Hu-ling or “Monkey’s Ear” Swamp. Later on, in 1913, Um Phamarsut, the district chief at the time, held the view that the majority of the population lacked knowledge and ability in a variety of things. They did not show much desire to contribute to the well-being of the community or to cooperate in improving the economy in any way. So, in order to cultivate interest among the people and get them enthused about developing their own economy, he changed the name of the Amphur to Aat Samaat, which translates as “Might be Capable.” This anecdote illustrates perfectly the point made earlier about the historic Sanskritization of Tai

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The American poet Angelou, in recounting the name change forced on her by the woman who hired her as her servant as the “horror” of being “called out” of one’s name, renaming as an act of “dominion.” Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays, *The Language of Names* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 76.

names: the transformation of the extremely common Tai place name of *nong bua* (lotus pond) to its Sanskrit translation as *สระบุศย์ sabu*, (lotus pond).<sup>10</sup>

In another study, Pranee Kullavanijaya reports that the four most common Zhuang village names had the following head nouns in their largely two-word place names: *naa* (field), *ban* (village), *rung/lung* (plain surrounded by hills), and *bak* (mouth, opening – of a river).<sup>11</sup> But even in Zhuang itself, a significantly higher number of villages with *rung/lung* in their place name were found in southern Zhuang as opposed to northern Zhuang dialects. The higher incidence of this particular term turned out to be a distinctive dialect marker that is probably directly related to the geomorphology of the region – namely, the higher prevalence of plains surrounded by mountains in the southern Zhuang region. In the four Thai provinces (Loei, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, and Udon), the most frequent head nouns were *nong* (swamp), *naa* (rice field), and *non* (small hill). Again, these names are a reflection of the features of the landscape, which explains the predominance of *naa* (rice field) as a toponym and cultural marker of both the Thai and the Zhuang. Such findings demonstrate that the national border that separates southern China from the rest of Southeast Asia is an artificial boundary that functions as a barrier to understanding the commonalities of the cultures in the borderline areas and their shared history.

Several excellent studies on Thai toponyms have been published in the Thai language. One that stands out in particular for Isan, or Northeastern Thailand, is a paper by Phaithun Piyapakon titled “Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai: Wikhro Ruup Baep Thang Phumisat Khong Nam Thuapai” (Place Names of Rural Village Settlements in Northeastern Region: Geographic Pattern Analysis of Generic Terms). His conclusions were summarized in part as follows:

The generic names of rural village place names in the northeastern region which showed the highest frequency were Nong,<sup>12</sup> followed by Non, Khok, Na, Don, Huai, Dong, Hua, Kham, Tha, Kut, Wang, Phon, Ta, Pa, Law, Nam, Thung respectively... Apparent natural and cultural features in the area were employed in naming villages. Thus, generic names mainly indicated basic locational factors and the environment of particular rural settlements, such as water supply, dry land, farming land, topography, local flora and fauna, ancient settlement sites, and names of the persons who were important in forming the village.

<sup>10</sup> Somchai Sumniengngam reports in “Renaming in Thai Society” that the renaming of Thai people occurred at least as early as the Ayuthaya period and has continued up to the present. This phenomenon is based on the belief that the change to a new name spelled with auspicious letters can change the lives and fortunes of persons who find themselves in unhappy straits. In these cases, the power to rename is in the hands of those who command a knowledge of the auspicious spelling of names.

<sup>11</sup> Pranee Kullavanijaya “Village Names in Guangxi Province,” 123.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the second most common village name head noun in the Northeast was *non* (mound), which is a common physiographic feature of that region. Srisakra Vallibhotama points out that human settlements in the Northeast were “all located on mounds near streams and swamps, which were used as water sources. Rice was cultivated in the surrounding fields. In the Sakon Nakorn basin, where there were invariably streams near settlements, there was no apparent attempt at irrigation.” “Traditional Thai Villages and Cities: An Overview,” in *Culture and Environment in Thailand* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1989), p. 365. The Khmer style of agriculture and water management was taken up by the Lao who settled the northeastern part of Thailand. This is in stark contrast to the “ditch-dike” mode of agriculture of the Tai groups in the southern China, northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma.

Furthermore, generic names were meaningful and revealed various features which developed homogenously in the region, and they could be incorporated with geographical terminology.<sup>13</sup>

On the western side of Thailand, Sujaritlak Deepadung (1998) has carried out a sophisticated analysis of the semantics of place names in her paper titled “Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand.” She does not provide a list of the most frequent head nouns appearing in the village names, but, under the category of “Geographical Features,” she reports that, of the 4,916 village names considered in the study, there are 1,941 names beginning with thirty different words that are related to water in some way.<sup>14</sup> This appears to be in stark contrast to place names in Isan.

### Lao Village Names in Laos

Now, using photographs of settlement patterns and data published in 1973 as our base point, we will take a preliminary look at Lao village names in Laos. Data for the study comes from *Lao Official Standard Names*, a gazetteer that contains approximately 21,000 entries for places and features in Laos. It includes the place names of other ethnic groups: Mon-Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese in particular. The basic name coverage corresponds to that of maps at the scale of 1:250,000. Entries include the names of first- and second-order administrative divisions, populated places of all sizes, various other cultural entities, and a variety of physical features. Most of the entities can be identified and located by the approved name or a recognizable variant of the approved name on one or more of the following sources:

1. *Joint Operations Graphic* (Ground), Series 1501, Army Map Service/U.S. Army Topographic Command, 1967-1969| scale 1:250,000
2. *Laos: 1:50,000* Series L7015, Army Map Service/U.S. Army Topographic Command, 1965-1969.

The quality of the names in this gazetteer varies widely since fewer than fifty percent of the names were available in Lao script on official source materials, and because many names derive from languages other than Lao. Normalization of the spellings of particular words has been minimal.

Below is a segment of the spreadsheet that is going to be used in a larger research project that will employ GIS software to map the points and assist in analytical tasks.

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<sup>13</sup> Phaithun Piyapakon, “Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai,” 50.

<sup>14</sup> Sujaritlak Deepadung, “Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand,” 35.

Name	Designation	Map Reference	Latitude ° , N	Longitude ° , E
BA, NAM	STM	46704	20 06	104 44
A, PHU SEE POU BO	MT	46704	20 08	104 41
BA BI, PHOU	HLL	46714	15 48	105 34
BAC, NAM	STMI	46703	19 52	102 35
BAC, NAM	STM	46703	20 35	102 35

The first column in the gazetteer lists the place names more or less in English alphabetical order. The second column contains designations or abbreviations of designations of the entities to which the names apply, as listed below. Because practically all geographic terms have varied meanings, the senses in which many of the designations are applied in this gazetteer were stated in the list to reduce ambiguity. The compilers of the gazetteer caution: "It should be noted also that the differentiations of terms that can be made in any gazetteer will vary with the quality of the maps of the area and with the nature of the entities that are named. In Laos some of the features do not fit precisely into the categories used to designate them and others could be designated in two or more ways."<sup>15</sup>

## Designations

ADMD	first-order administrative division (khwaeng); second order a.d. (muang)
CAVE	cave (underground cavity, usually in soluble rock)
CMPM	military camp
CULT	cultivated area (includes rice fields)
DAM	dam (barrier constructed across a stream to impound water)
FRST	forest
GLD	glade (natural opening in a forest or woods)
HLL	hill (landform with moderate relief, moderate to low elevation)
HLLS	hills
ISL	island
LCTY	locality (minor area of unspecified or mixed character, indef. boundaries)
LK	lake
LKI	intermittent lake (seasonal water body; dry to marsh or water hole)
MNQR	quarry
MRSH	marsh (wetland w. grasses, bushes, few or no trees)
MT	mountain (moderate to high elevation; small summit area)
MTS	mountains; mountain range
PASS	pass (way over or between mountains)
PCLI	independent political entity

<sup>15</sup> *Lao Official Standard Names*. Prepared by the Defense Mapping Agency Topographic Center, Washington, D.C. 1973, p. i.

PK	peak (separately named summit)
PLAT	plateau (elevated area of flat to rolling surface)
PLN	plane (low relief, slope and elevation)
PND	pond (small standing water body)
PNDI	intermittent pond
PPL	populated place (city, town, village, settlement)
PPLQ	abandoned village
PPLW	destroyed village
RDGE	ridge (elongated, narrow relief, fairly continuous crest)
RGN	region (united by history, people, landscape, or other conditions)
RH	rest house (for travelers)
ROAD	road
RPDS	rapids
RSV	reservoir (large impounded body of water)
RUIN	ruins (in a state of ruin; not of great antiquity or archeological interest)
SINK	sinkhole
SLP	slope (less steep than a cliff)
SPUR	spur (short sloping ridge extending laterally from mountain or other elevation)
STM	stream (river or other running fresh water body, perennial)
STMI	intermittent stream (seasonal)
STMX	section of stream (separately named part of stream, not delimited by confluences)
SWMMP	swamp (wetland, generally with trees)
TMPL	temple
TNL	natural tunnel
WTLD	wetland (marsh, swamp, poorly drained with mix of trees and grass veg.)

The geographic coordinates are listed in a separate column with longitude based on Greenwich. Coordinates were generally read to the nearest minute and are for finding purposes only. For precise location, large-scale maps will need to be used. Coordinates for populated places were read at the map symbol, and, for other entities occupying limited sites, at the mouths or lower ends of streams, at the summits of mountains and hills, and near the centers or midpoints of most other features.

### Area Number

The 5-digit number indicates the first-order administrative division (*khwaeng*/province) in which the place or feature is located (as listed below):

46700 Laos (general)	46709 Savannakhet
46701 Houakhong	46710 Saravan
46702 Phôngsali	46711 Attapu
46703 Luang Phrabang	46712 Champasak
46704 Houaphan	46713 Borikhan
46705 Xaignabouri	46714 Vapikhamthong



46706 Vientiane	46715 Xédôn
46707 Xiangkhwang	46716 Sithandon
46708 Khammouan	

The general number (6700) is used for international features and for features in two or more first-order administrative divisions.

In the 1960s, the Pathet Lao redrew the border of the western area of Luang Prabang province to establish the new province of Oudomxai. In 1982, the new province of Bokeo was created around Houayxay. The gazetteer used in our study does not reflect those changes.

### Glossary of Generic Terms

According to the compilers of the gazette:

[T]he following terms appear in the generic parts of standard names in the gazetteer. The English term or terms which correspond to each local term were applied after objective study of cartographic and other source materials, and do not necessarily reflect dictionary or other normalized usages. The parenthetical abbreviations (Ch), (Fr), (Kh), (L), (Th), (UKh), (V), and (?) designate respectively, Chinese, French, Khmer, Laotian, Thai, Upland Mon-Khmer (which comprises a number of related languages and dialects), Vietnamese, and uncertain. Those not so designated are Lao.<sup>16</sup>

Bung	pond, marsh
Chaîne (Fr)	mountain range
Chang (Ch)	mountain
Ching (Ch?)	stream
Chong (Th)	pass
Co (UKh)	mountain (s), spur
Col (Fr)	pass
Dak (UKh)	stream
Dan (UKh)	hill
Dèo (V)	pass
Doi (Th)	hill, mountain
Doi phu (Th)	mountain
Don	island
Dông (UKh/L)	hill, mountain
Doy	hill, mountain
Hat	rapids
Ho, hô (Ch?)	stream

<sup>16</sup> Glossary terms labeled (Th) also have cognates in Lao, such as *doi* and *doy*; *houay* and *huai*. The first word in the list, *bung*, appears as a Lao word, when in fact has been borrowed from Khmer. *Lao Official Standard Names*, p. iii.



Hong (UKh?)	stream, intermittent stream
Hou	cave
Houay	stream, intermittent stream, stream section
Huai (Th)	stream
Kaeng (Th)	rapids
Kèng	rapids
Khao	mountain
Kho (Ch?)	stream
Khong (UKh?)	mountain, spur, hill
Khouèng	first-order administrative division
Kiou	pass
Ko (UKh)	mountain, spur, mountain range
Kông (UKh)	mountain
Kouan (Ukh)	hill, mountain
Lèng (Ch?)	mountain
Liang (Ch)	mountain
Massif (Fr)	mountain(s), mountain range
Mènám	stream
Môc, môk (UKh)	mountain, hill
Muang	second-order administrative division
Na	cultivated area
Nam	stream, intermittent stream, stream section
Ngoc, ngok (UK)	peak, mountain
Nong	lake, pond, intermittent lake, pond, marsh
Núi (V)	mountain
Ô (Kh)	stream
Pha	hill(s), mountain, peak, ridge
Phnom (Kh)	mountain
Phou	hill, mountain, peak, ridge, spur, slope, mountain range
Phu (Th)	hill, mountain
Plateau (Fr)	plateau
Sala	rest house
San	mountain, peak
Sayphou	ridge, mountain range
Song (V)	stream
Suôi (V)	stream
Tam (UKh)	stream
Tham	cave, natural tunnel
Thiu khao (Th)	mountain range
Thong	plain, wetland
Tom, tôm (UKh)	stream, intermittent stream
Tonlé (Kh)	stream
Vang	pond
Vat	temple
Xé	stream, intermittent stream

(Transliteration System (BGN/PCGN 1966 System adopted by the Commission Nationale de Toponymie (CNT))

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### Common Names for Lao Villages (with frequent occurrences)

The following list of village names is preliminary and partial. Names are ordered, as in the gazetteer, in English alphabetical order (which was not always strictly adhered to). No indications of tone were originally given (which added to the difficulty of recovering the Lao orthography), so we have provided them in the list. Transliterations in the gazetteer varied considerably, and future studies will necessitate major consultation with Lao maps. But even in Lao, orthography is not consistent (i.e., standardized) and reflects dialect differences that must be taken into account. Many names were not included because they seemed too few and insignificant or because they appeared as non-Lao at this stage of preliminary investigation (due to transliteration problems). The list of village names is presented in its current state for rough comparison with studies of place names in Thailand (the west and northeast, in particular) and China (the Zhuang of Guangxi, in particular).

The term **ban** (village) is the head noun. In this first look at the semantics of Lao toponyms, we are focusing only on the first (**bolded**) descriptive following the head noun because it is this second element in the village name that will most likely reveal the most prominent feature of the landscape chosen for naming purposes. By proceeding thus, we will be able to further test the hypothesis that speakers of Tai languages tended, by and large, to name their villages after features of the landscape. The land is a map, a cultural artifact. What this map should reflect is the ecological niche that the ethnic Lao people occupy in Laos.<sup>17</sup>

Ban **Ang** – 7 occurrences

**aaŋ B3:** 1) hollow/depression; 2) reservoir, basin/pool/pond; 3) wash basin; washtub.

Ban Ang (4)  
 Ban Ang Kham  
 Ban Ang Lang  
 Ban Ang Noi

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Ban **Bak/Pak** – 13 occurrences (Note: see Ban Pak – 170 occurrences)

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<sup>17</sup> The letter + number combinations (e.g., **B2**) that follow our IPA transcriptions indicate the tone of the syllable according to the William J. Gedney system for determining tones in modern dialects that have developed from a Proto-Tai tone system, which he outlined in his article, “A Checklist for Determining Tai Tones” published in: Robert Bickner, John Hartmann, Thomas Hudak, and Patcharin Peyasantiwong, eds. *Selected Papers on Comparative Tai Studies*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia 29, Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989:191-207. Lao tones vary from north to south. For a picture of the shapes of the regional tones of spoken Lao, please visit: [www.seasite.niu.edu/lao](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao).

**paak DL2:** 1) mouth; jaws; beak/bill; 2) orifice/ opening; throat; 3) entry, mouth [of a river]; 4) muzzle; 5) to say, speak, converse; 6) to inform; 7) classifier for nets, seines.  
Lao orthography:

Ban Bak  
Ban Bak Ngai [Yai]  
Ban Bak Noi (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bakèng  
Ban Bakeu  
Ban Ba Kham  
Ban Bak Kuk/BakKut  
Ban Bak Mane  
Ban Bak Pong/Ban Phou Pakpong  
Ban Baktheung  
Ban Baktou  
Ban Bakxébangfai/Pakxébangfai

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Ban **Bo** – 32 occurrences

**boob3:** 1) hole, hollow/depression, cavity; 2) source, spring, well; reservoir; 3) (fig.) source, origin, initial cause; 4) deposit, mine, shaft, pit, quarry; 5) oil well/bore hole.

Ban Bo (12)  
Ban Bo Nua  
Ban Bo Bon  
Ban Bo Dèng  
Ban Bo Hè  
Ban Bo Boi/Boy  
Ban Bo Léék  
Ban Bo Ma  
Ban Bo May  
Ban Bon Na  
Ban Bo Na Ngoua  
Ban Bo Pha  
Ban Bo Pha Teu  
Ban Bo Phou  
Ban Bo Sane  
Ban Bo Sao  
Ban Bo Tai  
Ban Bo Tay  
Ban Bo Tèn (a major salt mine in northwest Laos, near the Chinese border)  
Ban Bo Thun  
Ban Bo Nèng

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Ban **Boua** – 8 occurrences (Note: *bua* often appears frequently as a secondary modifier

of other bodies of water, such as marshes and so forth.)

**buA A3:** (bot.) lotus (*Nelumbium speciosum*).

Ban Boua (7 occurrences)

Bou Loy/Loi

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**Ban Bok/Bôk – 8 occurrences**

**bok/bOk DS3:** dry land, land; shore/bank; arid (barren) land.

Ban Bok/Bôk (8 occurrences)

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**Ban Bon/Bôn – 10 occurrences**

**bon/bOn A3:** place, space/expanse.

Ban Bon (5 occurrences)

Ban Bôn Phao

Ban Bôn Phouk

Ban Bôn Sien

Ban Bôn Tai (2 occurrences)

Ban Boun Tane/Poung Tan

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**Ban Bong/BOng/POng – 20 occurrences**

**bon/bOn A3:** type of rattan (used for making light furniture).

**pOn A3:** a hole, opening/aperture/orifice; slit/slot/crack; passageway.

Ban Bong/BOng (5 occurrences)

Ban Bong Het

Ban Bong Kasea/DongKasèn

Ban Bông-Nam

Ban Vang Boun

Ban Boun Bao

Ban Boun Bouy

Ban Boun Hao

Ban Boun Kè

Ban Boun Kha

Ban Boun Hè

Ban Boun Kho

Ban Boun Hoang/Dang

Ban Boun Mai

Ban Boun Nam/Nom

Ban Boun Pad

Ban Boun Phao

Ban Boun Quang/Dang

Ban Boung Sèng Heur/Hen  
Ban Boung Sôm Khôp

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Ban **Bouak** – 6 occurrences

**buakDL3**: man-made pond; reservoir; puddle/pool; hollow cavity/depression; excavation.

Ban Bouak  
Ban Bouak Bô  
Ban Bouak Hai  
Ban Bouak Hia  
Ban Bouak Meo  
Ban Bouak Seua/Sua

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Ban **Buam** – 11 occurrences

**buamA3**: swamp, marsh; quagmire.

Ban Bouam  
Ban Bouam Dad Noi/Noy  
Ban Bouam Fay  
Ban Bouam Nong  
Ban Bouam Hèn  
Ban Bouam Phay/Fay  
Ban Bouam Phèk  
Ban Bouam Phou  
Ban Bouam Phouk  
Ban Bouam Phouok  
Ban Buam/Buôm Nghiou

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Ban **Bung** – 25 occurrences

**bun/punA3**: swamp, marsh; place where wild animals gather (attracted by salt).

Ban Bung (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bung Buoc  
Ban Bung Chan/Chang  
Ban Bung Houa Ha/Houana Nua  
Ban Bung Houana Kang  
Ban Bung Houana Tai  
Ban Bung Kang (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bung Kham  
Ban Bung Kwang/Dang  
Ban Bung Man  
Ban Bung Na Di/ Na Dy

Ban Bung Phang/Phand  
 Ban Bung Sai/Xai  
 Ban Bung San  
 Ban Bung Savang Nua  
 Ban Bung Savan Tai/Tat  
 Ban Bung Souay/Souei  
 Ban Bung Talouong  
 Ban Bung Thalé  
 Ban Bung Va  
 Ban Bung Xai  
 Ban Bung Xang  
 Ban Bung Xé

From this point on, we shall list only the total occurrences of each toponym and not the full name of each village bearing it as first modifier because, at this point in our analysis, we are primarily interested in gross environmental features.

Ban **Din** – 11 occurrences  
*din A3*: earth/land/soil; ground.

Ban **Don/Dôn** – 150 occurrences  
*dOOn A3*: island.

Ban **Dong/Dông** – 130 occurrences  
*doŋ A3*: jungle; thick forest; thicket; undergrowth.

Ban **Ggang** – 18 occurrences  
*ñaan A4*: (bot.) a tall, resin producing timber tree (*Dipterocarpus alatus*)

Ban **Hat** – 160 occurrences  
*haat DL1*: sandbar, sand bank/shoal; island; sandy shore/bank; spit of land.

Ban **Hai** – 20 occurrences  
*hay A1*: jug, pitcher, jar.

Ban **Hin** – 50 occurrences  
*hin A1*: stone, rock.

Ban **Hua** – 94 occurrences  
*hua A1*: head; source of a river.

Ban **Huay/Houei** – 1,080 occurrences  
*huay C1*: small mountain river/torrent; brook/stream; gorge/canyon/ravine.

Ban **Keng/Kèng/Ken/Kang** – 155 occurrences  
*keŋ B2*: rapids; underwater rocks; reefs.

Ban **Khok** – 54 occurrences  
*khook DL4*: waterhole.

Ban **Na** – 680 occurrences  
*naa A4*: irrigated rice field; cultivated area.  
 Ban **Non** – 33 occurrences  
*noon A4*: height; hill/knoll, embankment, mound; plateau, upland /elevation;  
 mountainous, hilly terrain.

Ban **Nong** – 400 occurrences  
*n00ŋ A1*: lake, pond; swamp/marsh/bog.

Ban **Pak** – 170 occurrences  
*pak DS2*: mouth, jaws, beak/bill; orifice, opening; opening/mouth of a river.

Ban **Pha** – 200 occurrences  
*phaa A1*: rock, cliff, mountain.

Ban **Phu** – 60 occurrences  
*phuu A4*: mountain, hill/hillock/knoll.

Ban **Sala** – 13 occurrences  
*saa A1 laa A4*: pavilion, closed veranda; hall in a temple; rest house.  
 Ban **San/Sang** – 67 occurrences  
*san A1*: back; mountain chain/range/ridge.

Ban **Thông** – 87 occurrences  
*th0ŋA4*: channel or a river or canal.

Ban **Vat** – 10 occurrences  
*vatDS4*: temple.

Ban **Vang** – 36 occurrences  
*vaŋ4*: pond.

## Discussion

Because Tai peoples have historically tended to follow agricultural practices related to rice irrigation, practices that require living on or near bodies of water, it comes as no surprise that the most frequent village names are associated with water sources, followed in frequency by the term *naa* (irrigated rice field). By far the most frequent Lao village name has *huay* (stream) as its chief modifier (1080 occurrences), which reflects the huge expanse of windward, rain-capturing and stream-drained mountains, especially in the north of Laos. Next in frequency are places with *naa* (rice field) as the first order descriptive (700 occurrences). In ranked order from high to low,



the major village toponyms (using the spelling conventions of the gazetteer) were approximated as follows:

Flowing bodies of water:

- 1080 – *huay* (small mountain streams, brooks, torrents, gorges)
- 240 – *nam* (river)
- 170 – *pak* (river mouth)
- 155 – *keng* (rapids)
- 94 – *hua* (head or source of water)
- 87 – *thong* (channel of a river, canal)

Contained bodies of water:

- 400 – *nong* (lake pond, swamp)
- 54 – *khok* (waterhole)
- 36 – *vang* (pond)
- 23 – *bung* (swamp)
- 11 – *buam* (swamp)
- 6 – *buak* (man-made pond)

Landforms associated with bodies of water, usually flowing:

- 160 – *hat* (sandy shore, beach)
- 150 – *don* (island)

Elevated areas:

- 33 – *non* (knoll, mound)

Cultivated areas:

- 700 – *na* (irrigated rice field)

Mountainous areas:

- 200 – *pha* (cliff)
- 60 – *phu* (mountain)
- 60 – *san/sang* (mountain top, mountain range)

Forested area:

- 130 – *dong* (jungle, forest)

From this frequency list, which is far from complete, we cannot determine directly where the majority of the ethnic Lao people had settled at the time the gazetteer was drawn up, i.e. the 1960-70s. However, with the high frequency of villages named with *naa* (rice field) as their first modifier, indications are that most had settled in lowland areas close to sizeable water resources that they could engineer for controlled paddy cultivation.

The toponymic naming practices of the Tai have not been based exclusively on environmental markers, as with most of the ones listed in this paper. Historical events

and changing cultural influences have also participated in the process. Before the emergence of the modern nation state, Tai villages were governed by petty chiefs (*jao*) in a *mandala* system of petty chiefdoms (*müang*) competing for control over human resources. The chief of one petty state would send out small armies of men to conduct “sweeps” of villages in a competing state and relocate their inhabitants, by force and sometimes in chains, if necessary, to augment the population of his own polity. The Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna seem to have been a convenient source for the rulers of Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang. Emerging Siam went as far afield as the Phuan area near Xieng Khwang in northern Laos and the Tai Dam villages in northwestern Vietnam in order to meet their manpower needs in building their new capital at Bangkok and to block Vietnamese control of the area’s population.<sup>18</sup> To cite just one seemingly benign example of the practice of relocating an entire village population, we might consider the case of Ban Lu (Lue Village) of Ban Phanom, located two and a half kilometers from the center of modern day Luang Prabang, and known for cotton and silk weaving. It is claimed that they were “invited” by King Kisarath to take up residence there. It is also the case that places change names over time. Luang Prabang underwent a process of deliberate name change in three historical stages. Starting with its original name, Muang Sva, it changed to Xieng Tong-Xieng Dong, and then changed again to Luang Prabang. Place names encapsulate histories.

### Future Directions

In the introduction to this paper it was noted that the Tai-Zhuang of Guangxi province tended to name their villages with the head noun *na* (rice field), *ban* (village), *bô* (pond), and *doi* or *pha* (mountain or cliff). These names have their counterparts in Lao village names too, indicating the geomorphologically narrow environmental niche and basic agricultural and village naming practices shared by Tai agriculturalists. The lands they settled were their map. The next step in this study of Tai village names will be to investigate the instances of Tai village names occurring beyond political borders and create a continuous mosaic that adequately illustrates the extent of their “village world” and the manner in which village names vary over space, reflecting many of the material features of the local environment. Many ethnic Lao settled the Isan (Northeast) region across the Mekong in present-day Thailand. Village names there are associated with water and rice fields too, but the geography and climate, especially the rainfall averages, differ considerably from the more mountainous environments of Laos. From an environmental standpoint, village names are a repository of local knowledge concerning flora, fauna, and geophysical phenomenon, a kind of oral commentary or testimony about their world as it was once seen by them. Those contrasts—and continuities—will present still more interesting discoveries to research and discuss.

The Zhuang practice of naming a village that designates a particular taste or memorializes an important person—a practice that has become common in Thailand—

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<sup>18</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 99; Kennon Braezeale and Sanit Samuckkarn, *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos*, Southern Asia Studies vol. 31 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University South Asia Studies, 1988).

did not appear in the data. The practice of naming a new village after one from which a group split off (either voluntarily or as a result of forced migrations) can be documented among many Tai groups. Indeed, it is a common phenomenon. Personal names and place names are often evocations of past memories.

In the appendices to this paper, we show how GIS technology was used to study places named *pak* (river mouth) based on data obtained from *Gazetteer to Maps of Thailand*. The same GIS tools will be employed in a more extensive study of place names in Laos, which will include place names of other ethnic groups.

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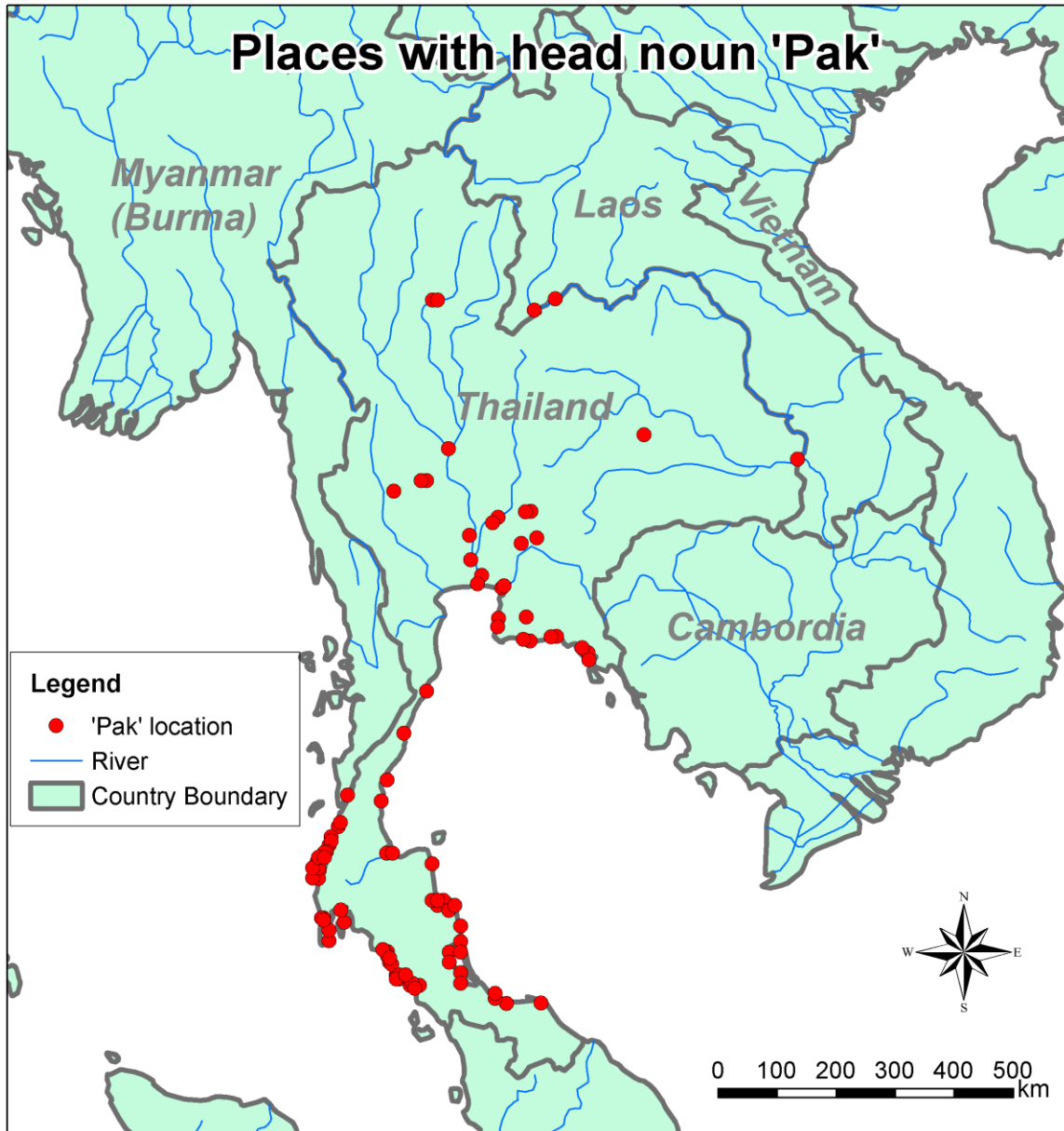
**Appendix I: Map of Laos**

**Provinces and districts**



Source: National Geographic Department

**Appendix II: GIS produced Map of Thai Places Named *pak* (mouth of a river)**



Map by Wei Luo 2007

### Appendix III: Data on Thai Place Names with *pak* as Head Noun

The uncorrelated names are preceded by an asterisk (\*) and are included in the gazetteer to serve as a complete finding list for all the English sources listed. Some items are repeats and should be removed from a final data set.

Name	Designation	Map Reference	Latitude Longitude	
			N	E
PAK AO BANG PAKONG	River Mouth	RSD/D47-17-6d	13 28	100 58
Pak Bang R. (see: KHLONG PAK BANG)	Stream	SI/D47-K	14 35	100 55
*Pak Bhanang	Town	BA/998	8 20	100 10
*Pak Bhrek	Stream	RSD/D47	13 00	101 20
PAK BHRIEW STA. (see: BAN PAK PHRIEO [CHANGWAT SARA BURI])	Railroad Station	RSD/D47	14 30	100 50
Pak Chan River (see: MAE NAM KRA)	River	BA/216b	10 10	98 40
PAK CHAN TAO DUAN	Bay	RSD/C47-21-1	8 58	98 16
Pak Chaung Noi (see: PAK CHONG NOI)	Pass (Mt.)	SI/D47-D	15 10	99 50
Pak Chaung Yai (see: PAK CHONG YAI)	Pass (Mt.)	SI/D47-D	15 10	99 45
PAK CHONG NOI	Pass (Mt.)	RSD/D47-4	15 10	99 50
Pak Chong Sta. (see: SATHANI PAK CHONG)	Railroad Station	SI/D47-L	14 40	101 25
PAK CHONG YAI	Pass (Mt.)	RSD/D47-4	15 10	99 45
*Pak Glohng	Village	SI/C47-D	11 50	99 50
Pak Goh (see: KHLONG PAK KO)	Stream	BA/216b	8 50	98 15
Pak Goh (Bangri) (see: KHLONG PAK KO)	Stream	HO/1594	8 50	98 10
PAK HAN	Stream	RSD/C47-15-7	9 06	98 14
Pak Hngao (see: BAN PAK NGAO)	Village	RSD/E47	18 00	101 50
PAK JOHNG STA. (see: SATHANIN	Railroad	RSD/D47	14 40	101 20



PAK CHONG)	Station			
PAK KHLONG BO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 28	99 20
PAK KHLONG CHAO KO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 24
PAK KHLONG CHAO MAI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 24
PAK KHLONG DUHUN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 36	99 16
PAK KHLONG KALASE NOI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 40	99 16
PAK KHLONG KALASE YAI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 36	99 16
PAK KHLONG KAMPHOM	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 22	98 24
PAK KHLONG LAK KHAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-9	7 08	99 42
PAK KHLONG LAO NON	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-2	9 40	98 32
PAK KHLONG MAI KAE0	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 30	98 26
PAK KHLONG MENG	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 30	99 18
PAK KHLONG NA KLUA	River Mouth	RSD/D47-23-3b	12 59	100 55
PAK KHLONG NAM MAO	River Mouth	RSD/D47-23-3b	12 51	100 54
PAK KHLONG NOK NGANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-2	9 44	98 34
PAK KHLONG PHANGKA LUK SON	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 26	98 26
PAK KHLONG PHRAO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 16	99 24
PAK KHLONG PORA	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 26
PAK KHLONG RAE	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-9	7 08	99 44
PAK KHLONG RAET	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-1	7 42	99 12
PAK KHLONG SA	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 28	99 20
PAK KHLONG SAI	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-8	8 08	98 38
PAK KHLONG SAM DOK	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	8 00	98 25
PAK KHLONG SAP NOI	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-5a	12 37	101 23
PAK KHLONG SUNGAI BATU	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 26
PAK KHLONG TASAE	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 08	99 36
PAK KHLONG THA CHANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 15	99 15
PAK KHLONG THA CHIN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	7 50	98 25
PAK KHLONG THUNG YANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 05	99 55
PAK KHLONG TO BAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 34	99 18
PAK KHLONG TO KHUN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 24
PAK KHLONG TRIAM	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-8	9 16	98 22
PAK KHLONG U PHAO YAI	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 20
PAK KHLONG WAI KHON	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 10	99 38
PAK KHLONG YIK	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 20



Pak Klong (see: BAN PAK KHLONG)	Village	SI/C47-D	11 10	99 30
Pak Klong Bang Pak Bie H (see: KHAO PAK KHLONG BANG PHAK BIA)	Hill	SI/C47-O	9 00	98 15
Pak Klong Sam Kok (see: PAK KHLONG SAM DOK)	River Mouth	SI/B47-C	8 00	98 25
*Pak Klong Te	River Mouth	BA/842	7 05	99 40
PAK KRET	Collective Village	RSD/D47-17-2a	13 55	100 30
Pak Kret (see: BAN PAK KRET)	Collective Village	SI/D47-Q	13 55	100 30
*Pak Krop	Sandbar	BA/2721	12 25	102 15
*Pak Kruen	River Mouth	BA/216b	9 00	98 10
*Pak Kruen	River Mouth	HO/1594	9 00	98 10
*Pak Kura	Channel	BA/216b	9 15	98 20
Pak Moun (see: BAN PAK MUN)	Village	SGI/D48	15 20	105 30
PAK MUN	River Mouth	RSD/D48-4	15 20	105 30
*Pak Nakon	River Mouth	SI/C47-W	8 30	100 05
*PAK NAKON R	River	SI/C47-W	8 25	100 00
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SI/B47-K	6 50	101 00
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SI/C47-J	10 25	99 15
Pak-nam (see: M Samudh Prakarn)	Town	RSD/D47	13 40	100 40
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SGI/D48	12 30	102 10
PAK NAM CHAO PHRAYA	River Mouth	RSD/D47-17-5b & d	13 32	100 36
PAK NAM HUANG	River Mouth	RSD/E47-18	17 50	101 30
PAK NAM HU CHIP	River Mouth	RSD/D47-11-8a	14 18	100 29
PAK NAM LANG SUAN.	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 55	9 10
PAK NAM MUANG PHANGNGA	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21	8 20	98 35
PAK NAM MUANG PHUKET	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	7 50	98 25
PAK NAM PHAK CHUT	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	8 00	98 25
PAK NAM PHANG RAT	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-3c	12 41	101 47
PAK NAM PHAU (see: BAN PAK NAM PHO)	Collective Village	SI/D47-E	15 40	100 10
Pak Nam Phau RS (see: SATHANI PAK NAM PHO)	Railroad Station	SI/D47-E	15 40	100 10

PAK NAM PRALIAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 32
PAK NAM PRASAE	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-3c	12 41	101 42
Pak Nam R (see: KHLONG PHAK NAM)	Stream	SI/D47-L	14 15	101 30
PAK NAM RAYONG	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-1d	12 39	101 17
Pak nam reang (see: KHLONG NANG RIAM)	River Mouth	BA/998	7 40	100 10
Pak nam Reang (see: KHLONG NANG RIAM)	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 40	100 10
Pak Nam Skon (see: BAN PAK NAM SAKOM)	Village	SI/B47-K	6 55	100 50
Pak Nam Tako (see: BAN PAK NAM TAKO)	Village	SI/C47-J	10 05	99 10
PAK NAM WELU	River Mouth	RSD/D48-19-7b	12 18	102 16
Pak Narek (see: BAN PANARE)	Village	SI/B47/L	6 50	101 30
Pak Niad R (see: KHLONG PAK NIAT)	Stream	SI/B47-E	7 30	100 10
*Pak Ouan	Village	SGI/D48	15 50	103 10
*PAK PAN	Railroad Station	RSR	18 00	99 55
*Pak Panang	Village	HO/3133	8 20	100 10
*PAK PANANG	Village	RSR	8 25	100 15
Pak Pan RS (see: SATHANI PAK PAN)	Railroad Station	SI/E47-Q	18 00	100 00
Pak Paya (see: KHLONG YING)	Stream	BA/989	8 30	99 55
Pak Paya (see: KHLONG YING)	Stream	HO/3134	8 30	99 55
Pak Paya (see: BAN PAK PHAYUN)	Village	SI/B47-E	7 20	100 20
*PAK PENANG R.	River	SI/C47-W	8 05	100 20
PAK PHAN KHUHA	Bay	RSD/C47-16	9 15	99 20
PAK PHLI (AMPHOE) (see: BAN KO WAI [AMPHOE PAK PHILI])	Village	RSD/D47-12-7d	14 10	101 16
PAK PHRA	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 18
Pak Phra Channel (see: AO TO NONG)	Bay	SI/C47-U	8 10	98 20
PAK PHRA or (PAPRA) ST (see: AO TO NONG)	Bay	SI/C47-U	8 10	98 20
*PAK PHRA R	River	SI/C47-W	8 30	100 00

Pak Pun Kuha (see: PAK PHAN KHUHA)	Bay	Si/C47-P	15	99 20
*Pak Ranot	Stream	HO/3133	7 40	100 20
*Pak Ranot	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 50	100 20
*Pak Ranote	Stream	BA/998	7 40	100 20
*Pak Rat Poo-m	River Mouth	BA/998	7 10	100 20
*Pak-Sak kuwan	River Mouth	BA/998	7 00	100 50
*Pak Sak kuwan	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 00	100 50
*Pak Ta Kong	Stream	BA/2720	13 30	101 00
*Pak Tjik	Channel	BA/216b	9 10	98 15
*Pak Tjik	Channel	HO/1594	9 10	98 20