The National Languages of the five countries participating in the Mekong River program—Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Thai, and Vietnamese—represent only a few of the many languages, regional dialects, and local linguistic variations in the region. Some of the earliest settlers in the lower Mekong likely spoke an Austroasiatic language of which Khmer and Vietnamese are modern examples. Speakers of tonal Tai languages migrated from southern China and began to supplant the Khmer in much of the central Mekong in the first half of the second millennium. Today, Thai and Lao are two of dozens of Tai languages spoken in the region. With Khmer, they share a script derived from Sanskrit. Vietnamese adopted the Latin script in the twentieth century.

A dialect of Chinese is spoken in Yunnan; however, several minorities in the province, such as the Naxi and Yi, speak other Sino-Tibetan languages. Some of these minorities, such as the Lisu, migrated to Southeast Asia, where many first settled in uninhabited upland areas.

(Above) Festival participants have written the name “Mekong River” in Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese (top to bottom).

(Below) Cham children often study Arabic, the language of Islam. The Cham write their language in the Arabic alphabet. Photo by Vu Hong Thuat, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.