

Article

Tai Manuscripts in the Dhamma Script Domain: Surveying, Preservation and Documentation, Part 2

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1.3 Laos (Lan Sang)¹

1.3.1 Early Surveys of Lao Manuscripts

Almost all of the early surveys and registrations of manuscripts which began around the turn of the twentieth century were undertaken by French scholars and their Lao assistants. While now outdated in many respects, these remain helpful tools for researchers. Louis Finot's 'Recherches sur la littérature laotienne', published in 1917 in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient* still provides the most useful overview of traditional Lao literature. The *Liste générale des manuscrits laotiens* provided in the final part of his study is of two principal collections extant at the time: that of the Bibliothèque Royale de Luang Prabang (catalogued by M. Meiller, 1,181 entries), and of the Bibliothèque de l'École française d'Extrême Orient (338 entries).

Several other inventories of monastery or library holdings were undertaken during the period from 1900 to 1973 by both Lao and French scholars, listing a total of 3,678 manuscripts from 94 monasteries in nine provinces.² A notable initiative is the work of the Chanthabouly Buddhist Council, under the leadership of Chao Phetsarat, which asked abbots throughout the country to submit lists of their manuscript holdings between 1934 and 1936.³

Work on the EFEO inventory, plus research and analysis of manuscripts, followed in the 1950s and 1960s by Henri Deydier, Pierre-Bernard Lafont, and Charles Archaimbault. An *Inventaire des Manuscrits des Pagodes du Laos* (Lafont 1965), building on the previous work of French scholars, was conducted under the leadership of Pierre-Bernard Lafont in 1959 and covered altogether 83 monasteries: 13 in Luang Prabang, 25 in Vientiane, and 45 in Champasak.

Other related catalogues during this period, while valuable tools in themselves, were of limited collections and not intended to be representative of Lao literature as a whole. For example, George Cœdès' *Catalogue des manuscrits en*

pāli, laotien et siamois provenant de la Thaïlande (1966) lists 116 manuscripts kept at the Royal Library, Copenhagen, of which 23 are in Pali and Lan Na (Northern Thai) script, collected between 1911 and 1935. All of the so-called 'manuscrits laotiens' in this collection are in fact Lan Na manuscripts. Similar catalogues of related Ceylonese, Burmese, and Cambodian collections in The Royal Library followed.⁴

During the Second Indochina War and the years immediately following the proclamation of the Lao PDR in 1975, the country met with extremely difficult conditions. It is only since the mid-1980s, with changes in the global political climate and the end of the Cold War, that awareness of the importance of literary works has re-emerged in Laos. In March 1988, with the support of the Toyota Foundation, a conference was convened in Vientiane. Monks and knowledgeable lay people from all over Laos gathered to discuss the state of conservation of manuscripts in their home communities, and to exchange views on what should be done in order to safeguard the remaining manuscripts which were in danger of being forgotten in the monastic libraries. As a result of this meeting, a project to set up a Lao-language inventory of palm-leaf manuscripts in six provinces of Laos was initiated by the Ministry of Information and Culture with the support of the Toyota Foundation.⁵ In the course of this project (1988–1994), a total of 127,636 fascicles were inventoried from 252 selected monasteries in Vientiane Municipality and the provinces of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Bolikham-sai, Khammuan, Savannakhet, and Champasak. However, no manuscripts were microfilmed. The project helped increase awareness and understanding of the importance of the Lao manuscripts for national cultural heritage, and enjoyed the support of the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Politbureau.

1.3.2 The Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme (PLMP)

In September 1992, the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme began its work under the helm of the Lao Min-

¹ The following section is based upon several previous articles by Harald Hundius. See, for example, Hundius 2005 and 2008.

² See Centre de Recherche Artistique et Littéraire 1989, 198.

³ The total number of titles for the year 1936 is given as 526; op.cit., 195.

⁴ Godakumbura 1980 and 1983.

⁵ National Library of Laos 1994.

istry of Information and Culture (later based at the National Library). The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the project through its cultural assistance programme, with Harald Hundius from the University of Passau as advisor. The main objectives of this cooperative project were to help the Lao PDR physically preserve its national literary heritage, to revitalise public awareness of its value, build local capacity for field preservation, and for the research and dissemination of these resources through:

- a.) the systematic survey and *in situ* preservation of manuscript holdings of selected Buddhist monasteries as well as State and private collections in all 17 provinces;⁶
- b.) the microfilming of documents of historical or cultural importance, notably old and rare manuscripts, comprising about 15–20 per cent of the total number of microfilmed documents;
- c.) support for revitalising the use of traditional literature in religious life and its integration into the modern public education system;
- d.) guidance and assistance in the creation of scientific and technical tools such as databases, study materials, textbooks, specialised computer software, etc, as well as developing a new generation of academic and human resources needed for utilizing the manuscripts for teaching and research purposes in the field of traditional Lao language, literature and culture at institutions of higher learning.

This project was the first ever to cover all of the country's provinces. In addition to the more well-known collections, it also included remote monasteries, many of which had never been surveyed before.

Over the course of ten years, until the official end of the cooperative project in December 2002, the manuscript holdings of 830 monasteries (out of a total of some 2,800 at that time) had been surveyed, approximately 86,000 manuscripts (368,000 fascicles) preserved, and a central data pool created. Since December 2002, the vital work of the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme has continued under the auspices of the National Library of Laos.

As a major product of the manuscript preservation project, a collection of microfilm recordings of approximately 12,000 selected manuscripts was set up, including a large number of

parallel versions and additional copies.⁷ More importantly for the wider study of Lao culture, this collection is by far the most extensive to date and can be seen as representative of the national literary heritage. The 1,035 reels of microfilm comprise some 500,000 frames, which on average contain about 6–8 palm-leaf pages, giving a total of some 3–4 million recorded manuscript pages.⁸

The selection of the holographs was carried out according to the following criteria:

- (1) historical and cultural importance;
- (2) cultural diversity and/or regional representation;
- (3) age (all manuscripts above 150 years old) and quality of the manuscript.

Within these general guidelines, priority was given to extra-canonical literature, manuscripts representing indigenous literary traditions, and texts of a non-religious nature whenever the condition of the holograph allowed. The complete manuscript holdings of the Lao National Library (in Vientiane), the former Royal Palace⁹ and Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram (both in Luang Prabang) were included due to their historical-cultural importance. A preliminary survey indicates that the number of titles will far exceed that of previous estimates, which range from 1,163 (Finot) to 1,616 (Lafont). As the above account reflects, the number of manuscripts surveyed and microfilmed during the period of 1992–2002 far exceeds that of previous projects both in Laos and in Northern Thailand.

A number of different scripts and languages are represented in the microfilm collection of the PLMP. While the vast majority is in Lao Tham script, a considerable number of holographs are in the ancient secular Lao Bohan, Lan Na (Northern Thai), Tai Lü and Tai Nua scripts.

The subject matter of a large number of manuscripts comes from the Theravada Buddhist canon, a significant portion of which are bilingual versions with elaborated Pāli-vernacular translations that shed light on the local interpretation of these texts. The oldest manuscripts, dating to the beginning of the sixteenth century, are monolingual Pāli texts. One special

⁷ Any serious study of manuscripts must be based on the critical comparison of a sufficient number of different versions, rather than one or two random copies.

⁸ Copies of these microfilmed manuscripts are kept at the National Library of Laos, Vientiane, and at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

⁹ The collection kept at the former Royal Palace, now officially known as 'Luang Prabang Provincial Museum', comprises all categories of traditional literature and has been microfilmed *in toto*. Its collection contains more than ten manuscripts older than 300 years. See *Khao bai lan*, vol. 5, No. 11, March 1997, 2.

⁶ The material preservation entailed the removal of dust and cleaning with high-grade alcohol, changing the binding cords, adding wooden covers and replacing the old worn cloth covers, as necessary.

genre is extra-canonical works, the bulk of which consists of narrative literature, especially *Jātaka* stories, a considerable number of which are thought to originate from local South-east Asian traditions. Many of these are among the most popular texts used by the monks in their recitations and sermons given to the lay people. They deserve special consideration because they contain valuable information about social life and values as well as the *conditio humana* in the Buddhist societies of the region. Other manuscripts contain a wide range of works about history, traditional law and customs, astrology, magic, mythology and ritual, traditional medicine and healing, grammar and lexicography, as well as poetry and epic stories, folk tales and romances, and other genres. Examples of important texts found within the course of the project include:¹⁰

a.) three complete sets of bi-lingual (Pāli-Lao) *Paññāsajātaka* collections as well as some twenty bundles representing other incomplete sets of these famous ‘Fifty Apocryphal Jātaka’, which are believed to be of Southeast Asian, perhaps Lan Na, origin. Preliminary examination has shown that these manuscripts offer some revealing clues about the transmission of texts between Lan Na and Lan Sang;

b.) several old copies—some written in Tai Lü script—of the *Balasāṅkhyajātaka* (dating from the middle of the eighteenth century), an epic extra-canonical birth story well-known throughout the Dhamma Script Domain and formerly also very popular in Laos (evidence of this is to be found, for instance, in the murals of Wat Si Saket, Vientiane);

c.) copies of the *Chronicle of Chiang/Siang Khaeng*, an ancient principality in the Lao-Burmese borderland (with Müang Sing as its last capital), written at the beginning of the twentieth century;¹¹

d.) about one hundred mulberry paper manuscripts written in Tai Nüa language and script—some of which date from the mid-eighteenth century—from Luang Namtha province. Most of these works are hitherto unknown outside the region of their origin in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Sub-Prefecture of Yunnan;¹²

¹⁰ Further research will certainly bring to light more unknown texts or works of particular importance.

¹¹ This manuscript has been edited, along with other Tai Lü texts from Müang Sing, in the English translation and transcription into the modern Thai alphabet jointly by Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin. See Grabowsky/Renoo 2008.

¹² An annotated catalogue of these manuscripts will be produced by the Na-

e.) a privately owned palm-leaf manuscript entitled ‘Lam Cüang’, apparently representing a copy of the famous semi-historical epic poem *Thao Hung Thao Cüang*, was inventoried during field work in Sainyabuli province in 1997.

Many of these works are not known outside the Dhamma Script Domain and still await systematic study by the scholarly community. Very few have been edited properly or translated into a Western language, and research based on the study of primary sources remains very limited due to their inaccessibility. These texts will allow for a comprehensive analysis of the development of the Lao language and comparative studies of Buddhism, literary traditions and intellectual history.¹³

The PLMP was designed as a cultural development project rather than for research or archival purposes. The core idea was to make the Lao people more aware of their cultural heritage while leaving it *in situ*, so that local people would be proud of their cultural assets and develop greater appreciation of the value systems to be found in traditional literature. An implicit aim of the project was for this local knowledge to contribute to the debate on the place of traditional values in modern Lao society (i.e., in the context of rapid development and modernisation) and related development policies, such as state educational policies and curricula. In this way, the project enhanced awareness of national and ethnic cultural identities and gave the Lao people a means to keep traditional values meaningful for future generations. It also provided a platform for the research and dissemination of Lao literature and culture (and related research in Southeast Asian and Buddhist Studies) by making texts accessible to the regional and international scholarly community through the microfilm collection housed at the National Library. As such, the impact of the programme went beyond that of physical manuscript preservation or of an academic research project.

Examples of the implementation and impact of the project stemming from this approach are:

a.) Before starting preservation work, orientation workshops were held in order to demonstrate the importance of traditional literature and its relevance for the present and the future. Recognising and enhancing the role of the Buddhist monasteries and communities as active guardians of the literary heritage and traditional knowledge, the project was devised as a multiplying agent by promoting self-help initiatives. During their participation in preservation work,

tional Library, through a three-year project funded by the Toyota Foundation.

¹³ See also Kanlaya 2005 and Hundius 2005.

local people were instructed and trained in the basic methodology for preserving manuscripts to enable them to advise and help monasteries not directly covered by the programme. The participation of high-ranking officials from both central and local government, representatives of the Lao Front for National Construction, together with senior representatives of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship and respected community leaders, added to the perception of this work as a historical undertaking of national importance.

b.) The participatory nature of the project united the government, Buddhist monks and the people in a common effort to preserve their national cultural heritage. This influenced the grassroots perception of monks and the manuscript tradition, as well as national educational policies for monastic schools, such as the reintroduction of Buddhist Studies and the study of traditional literature into the curriculum. Buddhist institutions of higher learning throughout the country also improved their teaching in the subjects of Buddhism, Lao and Pali language, and Tham script through financial assistance provided by the project. Other funds were provided to the Department of Lao Language and Literature of the National University of Laos to promote the study of traditional literature.¹⁴

c.) Over the course of the project, 22 volumes of a quarterly Lao-language newsletter were published, which contained news from the various field sites where the survey and microfilming was taking place, together with short extracts from palm-leaf manuscripts which had been found in those locations. The *Khao bailan* or 'Palm-leaf News' stimulated each location to take pride in and talk about the number of manuscripts in their possession, and to be willing to take better care of them. An additional 14 booklets about traditional customs, laws and literature were also printed.

d.) Seeing that the ongoing preservation efforts were beyond the resources of the National Library alone, the project established four provincial Manuscript Preservation Centres in selected monasteries in different regions of the country:

¹⁴ Additional support was provided by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the Toyota Foundation, Japan, for academic exchange and research projects at the National University of Laos (NUOL). During his three-year DAAD-supported visiting professorship at the Department of Lao Language and Literature (1996–99), Volker Grabowsky initiated the research project 'Literature of the Late Lan Xang Period: Compilation, Translation and Analysis of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts', which received substantial financial support from the Toyota Foundations over the period of 1998 to 2004. The project resulted in the edition and analysis of various nineteenth-century Lao literary works. See Department of Lao Language and Literature 2001, 2002, and 2004.

namely in Vientiane (for the Centre), in Luang Prabang (for the North), and in Savannakhet and Pakse (for the South). Their role is to serve as examples of well-kept monastic libraries, centres for the study of traditional literature, and to advise and assist monasteries which were not included in the project in preserving their manuscript holdings. In addition, these centres hold annual manuscript preservation festivals or *bun bai lan*, during which the entire manuscript holdings are taken out of their repositories, unwrapped and inspected for signs of damage, cleaned if necessary, re-wrapped, and carried three times around the ordination hall (*sim*) in a dignified procession.¹⁵ These festivals are organised and funded by local communities, without any outside support, demonstrating their ownership and sense of achieving merit or *het bun*.

e.) In its final phase, the project convened the 'International Conference on the Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination and Research Perspectives', which was the first of its kind. Held in Vientiane in January 2004, it attracted more than 120 participants and observers, including scholars, monks, researchers, and specialists from Laos and neighbouring countries, as well as academics from Australia, France, Germany, Japan and the USA. The collected conference papers were published in November 2005.¹⁶

The national Library of Laos started a new three-year project in October 2007 to produce a Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (DLLM) through digitising the PLMP microfilm collection and producing a linked bilingual inventory to enable search for manuscripts via Lao and English-language websites and at offline workstations.¹⁷

To be continued in the next issue

¹⁵ The procession of the manuscripts and the annual *bun bai lan* festival are in fact 'imported' traditions. They originate from previous preservation work undertaken in the Lan Na region in the late 1980s in the course of the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts Project, coordinated by the Centre for the Promotion of Arts and Culture, Chiang Mai University. The Tai Lü community of Ban Yuan, Chiang Kham district, Chiang Rai province, was the first to organise them. When video recordings were shown in other monastic communities, this activity was enthusiastically taken up. The annual inspection of the library holdings has been a tradition at Wat Sung Men, Phrae province, the resident-monastery of Khruba Kancana, for many generations.

¹⁶ See The National Library of Laos 2005. The conference was jointly funded by the Japan Foundation and the Toyota Foundation.

¹⁷ The DLLM project is jointly implemented with the University of Passau and the State Library of Berlin, Germany. It is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The website will be officially launched in January 2010 at <http://www.laomanuscripts.net/>.

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