

Sub-Project A08

Anisong (Ānisaṃsa) Manuscripts from Luang Prabang (Laos) in Comparative Perspective

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Description of the Project

The project studies several corpora of manuscripts bearing one of the most popular and wide-spread Buddhist texts in the Tai-Lao world, which are preaching or homiletic texts called anisong. Those manuscripts, generally rather short (rarely more than twenty folios), expose the rewards in terms of merit, or literally the "advantage" (anisong < Pali ānisaṃsa), which a believer may expect from a particular religious deed. Manuscripts containing anisong texts, written on palm leaves or mulberry paper, are used in various kinds of rituals and ceremonies carried out by monks and novices. Because they deal with and act as an incentive for offerings made to monasteries and the community of monks (sangha), they serve an important function in the social and economical relationship between laity and Sangha. On the basis of numerous dated exemplars available, anisong manuscripts may also be seen as a testimony of customs and ritual practices of local Buddhism over at least three centuries until now.

The main corpus comprises 287 manuscripts from Luang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of Laos where the social practice of anisong is still alive. This corpus, which for a greater part includes paratextual elements on their colophons (date, name of the scribe, donor's intention or wishes, etc.), will be compared with a microfilmed collection of almost 300 manuscripts from northern Thailand containing anisong texts and with another collection of more than 40 Tai Lü manuscripts from northern Laos and the Chinese province of Yunnan.



Palm leaf Manuscript "Anisong het bun van koet", dated Saturday, tenth waning day, twelfth lunar month, B.E. 2531. This date corresponds to 3 December 1988 of the Gregorian Calendar.

Objectives

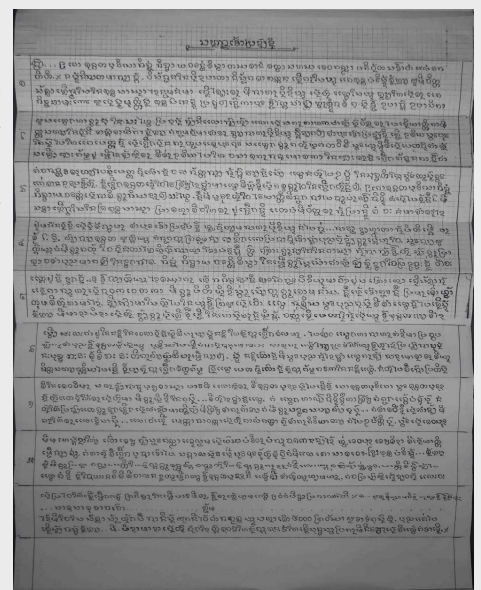
The main purpose of the project is to study the use of Tai-Lao anisong manuscripts in rituals, ceremonies and liturgy. In particular, it seeks to address the following questions: What do the paratexts (notably the often lengthy colophons) reveal about the scribes, sponsors and donors of the manuscripts, their social background and personal aspirations? How are the various anisong parts connected with one another and to the classical Buddhist texts they may refer to?

How is the content (anisong as a text) related to ritual and practical use of the manuscript (anisong as an object)? In which social and cultural contexts have the manuscripts been used at the time of their making and what later "life" did they experience? How do the manuscripts reflect the interaction between the Sangha and Laity and more generally, how are they involved in the religious life?

In parallel to the study of the anisong manuscript as a carrier of text, the project also includes field research which is particularly appropriate to undertake a synchronic analysis about the situation of these manuscripts in present-day local Buddhism (declining/mutating/resurging). In a broader sense, the project asks what the anisong manuscript culture says about ancient and contemporary Tai-Lao societies.

The Dhamma Script Cultural Domain

Tai Buddhist communities in Northern and Northeast Thailand, Laos and within some adjacent regions in Burma and China belong to a broad cultural and religious ensemble defined by the use of the Tham script (< Pali dhamma), probably a derivative of the ancient Mon alphabet of Hariphunchai (present-day Lamphun, Northern Thailand). From the fifteenth century up to the modern period, this script was the main medium of written communication in this part of peninsular Indochina, as is evident from thousands of manuscripts and stone inscriptions found in the area. Though primarily used for religious purpose, Tham script was also used in secular material as narratives, chronicles, legal texts, astrology treatises, including protective tattoos and magical diagrams. Populations belonging to the "culture of Tham letters" are part of the Tai ethnolinguistic group but differ noticeably from other groups of this family, whatever these are Buddhist or not.



Undated manuscript on paper, titled "Salong khao salak, salong khao padap din".