

ທໍາສະໝຸດດິຈິຕອລທັງໆສີ່ໃບລານລາວ



The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts¹

by Harald Hundius and David Wharton²

Abstract

Scholarship in Lao monasteries extends back over five centuries and has produced a huge number of texts containing resources for the study of Buddhism and Lao culture. Much has been achieved in the survey and inventory of the country's traditional literature over the past 100 years, and more recently in the physical preservation of texts. The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts builds on this previous work by providing detailed searches of inventory data for almost 12,000 manuscripts and making digital images of the texts available for study. It is unique in Southeast Asia in providing online access to such a large number and variety of primary literary sources. It is broadly representative of the national literary heritage.

Introduction

Scholarship in Lao monasteries extends back over five centuries and has produced a huge number of texts containing resources for the study of Buddhism and Lao culture. Much has been achieved in the survey and inventory of the country's traditional literature over the past 100 years, and more recently in the physical preservation of texts. The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts builds on this previous work by providing detailed searches of inventory data for almost 12,000

¹ Several sections of this article have been adapted from information available on the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts website, at www.laomanuscripts.net. The text of the website was written by David Wharton and Harald Hundius.

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manuscripts and making digital images of the texts available for study. It is unique in Southeast Asia in providing online access to such a large number and variety of primary literary sources, and, although it does not yet include samples of all the ethnic groups that possess written literature, it is broadly representative of the national literary heritage. The project was implemented by the National Library of Laos in collaboration with the University of Passau and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, and funded by the German Research Foundation and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. The project has the full support of the Government of the Lao PDR, which granted permission for the manuscript collection to be made accessible via the Internet. This article will provide an overview of traditional Lao literature and of survey and preservation work to date, followed by an introduction to the online library.

Traditional Lao Literature

Laos possesses a rich literary tradition dating back to the 15th/16th century AD.³ Most works have been handed down through continuous copying and have survived in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts, which were traditionally stored in wooden caskets and kept in the libraries of Buddhist monasteries. A small proportion of texts were written on other materials, such as mulberry (*sa*) paper, which is much less durable than palm-leaf. Although monasteries have been seats of learning in the country since ancient times, in recent decades, tens of thousands of invaluable manuscripts have faced the threat of destruction.

The majority of Lao manuscripts are from the Theravada Buddhist tradition, most commonly in bilingual versions, i.e. Pali texts with more or less elaborated Lao translations or commentaries, which shed light on the local interpretation of the Pali texts. In addition, extra-canonical works, such as the Jataka narratives – a considerable number of which are thought to originate from local Southeast Asian traditions – form an important part of the literary heritage of Laos. Indeed, many of these legends are among the most popular texts used by the monks in their recitations and sermons given to the lay people; they deserve special interest because they contain valuable information about the social life and values in the Buddhist societies of the region. Other texts contain a wide range of works about history, traditional law and customs, astrology, magic, mythology and rituals, traditional medicine and healing, grammar and lexicography, as well as poetry, epic stories, folk tales, and romances.

There also exists a vast array of other literary traditions belonging to the various ethnic groups that form almost half of the total population of Laos. Although the majority of these traditions are oral, notable examples of written literary traditions include the Hmong, Mien, and Thai Dam. These texts are generally more difficult to access, and inventories of Lao literature have focused largely on the Lao and Tai texts stored in Buddhist monasteries. Given the remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity within Laos, much work remains to be done in recording and preserving its many written and oral literatures.

Today, there are on-going efforts to keep stories derived from traditional literature alive amongst the younger generation in Laos, especially through the

³ The oldest known dated manuscript in the DLLM collection is a monolingual Pali copy of part of the Parivāra (PLMP Code 06018504078_00), in Tham Lao script, dated CS 882 or CE 1520, kept at the Provincial Museum in Luang Prabang (formerly the Royal Palace).

publication of youth-oriented adaptations of well-known folktales. This is in response to a perceived loss of Lao cultural values due to the modernisation process and the influence of modern entertainment media, such as television and computer games. Many traditional tales are timelessly appealing to children, and these materials are being integrated into reading promotion programmes in primary schools throughout the country. And yet, even though there may be a measure of success in preserving knowledge of these stories, the physical manuscript tradition itself faces even greater challenges. In Thailand and Myanmar, the arrival of the printing press hastened the demise of the production and reading of handwritten texts, and the fact that they are still inscribed and read in Laos at all may well be a reflection of the country's comparatively underdeveloped publishing industry. However, in Laos today, even in monasteries, television or videos are likely to have more appeal than manuscript repositories. Similarly, while Pali language and the Tham script are still taught in monastic schools, English language and other secular subjects are generally seen as being of more practical use in improving job prospects for students, the vast majority of whom will disrobe upon graduation.

Previous Surveys and Inventories

Almost all of the early surveys and registrations of manuscripts were undertaken by French scholars and their Lao assistants. Though now outdated in many respects, these surveys have remained 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 a useful overview of traditional Lao literature in a Western language.⁴ His *Liste générale des manuscrits laotiens*, which is provided in the final part of his study, is a list of two principal collections existing at the time – the Bibliothèque Royale de Luang Prabang (catalogued by M. Meiller, 1181 entries) and the Bibliothèque de l'École française d'Extrême Orient (338 entries). Several other inventories of monastery or library holdings undertaken during the period from 1900 to 1973, by both Lao and French scholars, list a total of 3,678 manuscripts from 94 monasteries in nine provinces. 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. In the 1950s and 1960s, Henri Deydier, Pierre-Bernard Lafont and Charles Archaimbault worked on the EFEO inventory, researching and analyzing manuscripts. An *Inventaire des Manuscrits des Pagodes du Laos*, building on the previous work of French scholars, was conducted under the leadership of Pierre-Bernard Lafont in 1959 and covered 83 monasteries altogether: 13 in Luang Prabang, 25 in Vientiane, and 45 in Campasak.⁵ Other related catalogues during this period, though valuable tools in themselves, were of limited collections and were not intended to be representative of Lao literature as a whole.

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 was only in the mid-1980s – with the end of the Cold War and among changes in the global political climate – that national awareness of the importance of

⁴ Louis Finot, "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 17, no. 5 (1917): 1-128.

⁵ Pierre-Bernard Lafont, "Inventaire des manuscrits des pagodes du Laos" *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient* 52, no. 2 (1965): 429-545.

literary works re-appeared. 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 were invited to discuss the state of manuscript conservation in their home communities, and to exchange views on what should be done in order to safeguard the remaining manuscripts that were in danger of being forgotten in the monastic libraries. As a result of this meeting, the 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.⁶ In the course of this project (1988-1994) approximately 128,000 fascicles were inventoried from some 250 selected monasteries in Vientiane Capital and the provinces of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Bolikhamsai, Khammuan, Savannakhet, and Campasak. In the years that followed, a more comprehensive survey was undertaken by the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme.

The Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme

The Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme (PLMP) of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture was supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs through its cultural assistance programme from 1992 until 2004. The main objectives were to help the Lao PDR physically preserve its national literary heritage; to revitalise public awareness of its value; to help build the local capacity for the field preservation, research, and dissemination of these resources through 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; to microfilm documents of historical or cultural importance; to support the revitalisation of traditional literature in religious life as well as its integration into the modern public education system; to guide and assist in the creation of scientific and technical tools such as databases, study material, textbooks, and specialized computer software; and to develop academic and human resources capable of assisting teachers and researchers in using the manuscripts at institutions of higher learning.

The programme responded directly to local needs and the work was carried out with strong community participation. Under the guidance of a mobile preservation team of three, which was joined by locally recruited volunteers, manuscripts were systematically scrutinized, reassembled, cleaned, titled, classified according to their content, and entered into a computerized database. Throughout the programme, none of the material – including the most damaged or decayed palm-leaves, wooden covers, manuscript wrappings and storage chests, or any other local artefacts – was removed from its original site. Where necessary and feasible, damaged documents were restored and repaired and then stored in an appropriate way (i.e. safe from termites, mice and mould).

One of the outstanding results of these efforts is a library of microfilm recordings collecting approximately 12,000 selected texts – including a large number of parallel versions or additional copies, which are necessary for serious scholarly work. The master copy is stored at the Lao National Film Archive and Video Centre, while a working copy is kept at the National Library of Laos, and a

⁶ National Library of Laos, *Inventory of Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Six Provinces of Laos* (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1994).

second copy at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Germany. This collection is by far the most extensive to date and can be regarded as representative of the national literary heritage. It comprises almost 500,000 frames, which on average contain about 6-8 palm-leaf pages, giving a total of some 3-4 million recorded manuscript pages.

The criteria for selection in the microfilming process included historico-cultural importance, cultural diversity or regional representation, age (all manuscripts over 150 years old) and quality of the manuscript. Within these general guidelines, and whenever the condition of the manuscript allowed, priority for microfilming was given to extra-canonical literature, manuscripts which were thought to represent indigenous literary traditions, and texts of a non-religious nature.

This unprecedented project not only covered every province in Lao, but it managed to include remote monasteries – many of which had never been surveyed before – in addition to the more well-known collections. Over the course of ten years, until the cooperation project officially ended in December 2002, the manuscript holdings of over 800 monasteries were surveyed, and approximately 86,000 texts (368,000 fascicles) preserved. The inventory data sheets for these texts are kept in hard copy at the National Library of Laos. Although this is far more extensive than any previous survey, it must be seen in context; there are over 4,000 monasteries (*vat*) in the country.⁷ What is more, the selection of texts for microfilming further reduced the sample – texts within the DLLM collection are in fact from only 380 locations.

The German Foreign Office supported a follow-up phase of the project from January 2003 to December 2004, during which time provincial Manuscript Preservation Centres were set up in selected monasteries in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Campasak provinces. Their role is to serve as examples of well-kept monastic libraries, to act as centres for the study of traditional literature, and to advise and assist the monasteries that were not included in the project in preserving their manuscript holdings. In addition, these centres hold annual manuscript festivals (*bun bai lan*), during which the entire manuscript holdings are taken out of their repositories, unwrapped, inspected for signs of damage, cleaned if necessary, re-wrapped, and carried three times around the ordination hall (*sim*) in a dignified procession.

The best way to preserve the manuscripts would be to preserve the traditional use and copying of the texts, and to use the local palm-leaf technology which has proven to last for 500 years. Unfortunately, while every effort should be made to prevent the loss of this tradition, it appears unlikely to succeed on the required scale. In all likelihood, the best modern technology for the long-term storage and retrieval of surrogate copies is high-quality microfilm, which can be passively stored and easily read. Digital surrogates – which must be actively stored and are always in danger of having their particular format lapse into obsolescence – do of course have the great advantage of being easy to transfer and to search.

It is important to see manuscript preservation as an ongoing task, rather than a project conducted over a limited time period. This is very clear on the ground in Laos, but it is not the perspective of project-driven funding. Preservation work and

⁷ According to statistics released by the Lao Buddhist Fellowship (*Salup luam sathiti kan pok khong song thua pathet khong ongan phutthasanasamphan lao*), in 2005-2006 there were altogether 3,656 monasteries with residing monks and 826 deserted monasteries.

related research continues to this day, supported by the Lao Government and other project funds based at the National Library of Laos. However, the results of efforts to encourage *in situ* local participation and ownership of the preservation process are mixed, and the National Library's resources are insufficient to centrally manage the large number of collections found throughout the country, many of which are in danger of deterioration.

The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts

The aim of the digital library is to complement ongoing manuscript preservation work in Laos by making the extensive PLMP microfilm collection of primary sources easily accessible and, thereby, to facilitate the study of Lao literature and culture within Laos and overseas. It is unique in Southeast Asia in providing online access to such a large number and variety of primary literary sources. As mentioned above, the DLLM collection can be seen as broadly representative of the Lao national literary heritage. It comprises religious and non-religious works, and indigenous traditions as well as texts from the "greater tradition" found in Southeast Asian states with Indian cultural influences, and it also includes examples of all the major languages and scripts used by the ethnic Lao and Tai groups found in the country.

The collection contains over 900 monolingual Pali texts, including the oldest dated manuscripts, which are from the early 16th century. Almost 75 percent of the manuscripts are bilingual texts containing Pali-vernacular translations, glosses, and elaborations. Such bilingual texts, where the vernacular can provide important information about local understanding or interpretation of the Pali, are increasingly appreciated by scholars for the insights they provide into the functions of the text in the real life of people, and as pedagogical tools. The collection also offers an opportunity to study a mass of extra-canonical Buddhist literature, which provides insight into how societies used, practiced, and taught Buddhist values.

The website and all inventory data are mirrored in both Lao and English, and interested readers are invited to view the web application online at www.laomanuscripts.net. Search fields include title (both auto-complete and by browsing alphabetical lists), ancillary term, language, script, category, material, location, date, and PLMP code number. Search results can also be filtered to show only texts with illustrations or only texts with colophons, and a map interface (using GIS data for Lao villages) shows the distribution of texts for any search criteria. The project also plans to add a feature enabling online searches of handwritten terms within the digital images themselves; such a feature would, which will significantly enhance research possibilities.

In compiling the inventory data, the handling of titles was particularly challenging. The actual titles appearing on the texts are complex in terms of orthographic variants, the common use of ancillary or supplementary terms indicating the genre of the text, and the fact that a manuscript may contain several distinct works, each with its own title. Another common problem is that a single work may have more than one title, and, in addition, alternative titles may sometimes be found within the same manuscript. For example, the extra-canonical Jataka story with the Pali title *Tepadumā*, is found with the following titles: *Tepathumma*, *Lam tepathumma*, *Tepathumma kumman*, *Tepathumma bua hom*, *Bua hom*, *Lam thao bua hom*, *Lam thao bua hong*, *Bua hom bua hong*, *Bua hom bua hiao*,

or *Thao bua hom bua hong bua hiao*.

The purpose of the inventory database is to enable users to access images of the primary sources, and the design of the user interface for searching the collection aims to make this process as straightforward as possible. The title search list was therefore simplified as much as possible; it contains a standardised main element of each title as well as alternative titles, but it does not include orthographic variants or ancillary terms. An additional “Ancillary Terms” search option is provided for approximately 35 of the supplementary terms found in titles, including genres of text such as *salong*, *tamnan*, *jātaka/sadok*, translated renderings such as *śabda/sap*, *nissaya/nisai*, *vohāra/vohan*, metric forms such as *khong*, *kham kon*, *samāsa/samat*, as well as titles and terms of address such as *kampha*, *cao*, *thao*, *nang*, *phanya*.

Manuscripts for which the titles are not found are entered as “Untitled (*survey title*)” in the digital collection, where *survey title* is the title that was assigned when the text was identified during the PLMP survey. All other discrepancies between the title used in the digital library and the previous survey title are noted under “Remarks.” In the case of orthographic variants, the inventory data preserve the diversity of the originals (within the limitations of modern Lao orthography), while simplifying the title search terms to the most commonly used forms.

The rendering of titles in modern Lao script and in Romanised form also aims to make the title search list as simple as possible for users. The Lao title search list is therefore written according to the orthographic principles introduced by the post-1975 government, whereby the writing of Lao words follows their pronunciation, while the orthographic variants and historical linguistic evidence found in the texts are preserved in the main inventory data. Likewise, a simple Romanisation is used in preference to a linguistically more accurate system using diacritics or special symbols. The system very closely follows the revised Royal Thai General System of Transcription for Central Thai,⁸ which is a broad, phonetically-oriented transcription with no distinction of vowel length or of tonal phonemes.

For the benefit of Pali scholars, titles of monolingual Pali manuscripts are also Romanised according to the standard system used in the Critical Pali Dictionary (CPD).⁹ PDF guides to the Romanisation system used for Lao and to the rendering of Pali consonants in Lao script and their Romanisation are available via the website at http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/pages/about_collection.html#4. For non Lao-language vernacular texts such as Lan Na, Tai Lue, and Tai Nuea, Romanisation is also based on the title found on the original, using the same system as for Lao language texts, but based on the present pronunciation in the original language rather than the modern Lao phonology and orthography.

To minimise possible confusion arising over the Lao rendering and the Romanisation system used, the title search list and other search options are provided as alphabetical lists through which users can browse, rather than relying upon typing in data. The Lao script rendering of all data is also provided in

⁸ Nitaya Kanchanawan, “Romanization, Transliteration, and Transcription for the Globalisation of the Thai Language,” *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Thailand* 31. no. 3 (2006): 832-841.

⁹ V. Trenckner et al., *A Critical Pali Dictionary*, vol. 1, 1924-1948; vol. 2, 1960-1990; vol. 3, 1992-1994. (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1924). When searching for titles of monolingual Pali texts, the Romanised Lao title is given before the Romanised Pali. This means that when selecting titles, Pali titles beginning with ‘D’ or ‘Dh,’ for example, are found under the tab for ‘T.’ It may therefore be preferable for Pali scholars who are unfamiliar with the Lao rendering of Pali to type the CPD Pali title (with or without diacritics) into the auto-complete box under Title Search.

parentheses after the Romanisation. The DLLM Romanisation system is designed as a practical tool to access the digital images of primary sources, which is the main purpose of the web application.

The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts is unique in Southeast Asia in providing online access to such a large number and variety of primary literary sources. In doing so, it is also bridging the gap between the 'ancient' manuscript tradition and modern Internet technology, which is still in its early development in Laos. The project also seeks ways to enhance networking and coordination with related manuscript preservation and inventory projects in neighbouring countries and overseas, particularly in the development of digital libraries.