

EAP1398

Methodology Report

Background

Luang Prabang has maintained its fame and status as a centre of Lao Buddhism until present times. The ancient and exceptional manuscript culture of Laos has survived colonial rule (1893–1954), civil war (1954–1975), and modernization in a globalized world. Unlike in many parts of the world, the production of manuscripts in Laos did not stop during the 20th century, where traditional ways of writing have been preserved by monks and lay scribes until present times. The ancient manuscript mentioned above is also the first documentary evidence of the Dhamma (Tham) script in the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang. This sacred script is a special feature of Lao writing culture. It originated in the neighboring Northern Thai kingdom of Lan Na – probably as a derivative of the ancient Mon alphabet of Hariphunchai - in the late fourteenth century and made its way south through the Mekong river basin. As its name indicates, this script was used for the writing of the Buddhist scriptures and other religious texts

Lao manuscripts were mostly inscribed with a stylus on rectangular cut and cropped palm-leaf sheets varying in length. Each sheet had two holes; a cotton string was passed through the left one, making it possible to bind several palm-leaf sheets together as one bundle, or fascicle (*phuk*). Recent research estimates that more than ninety percent of Lao manuscripts are “palm-leaf books” (*nangsü bai lan*), though there are some regional variations as in some Tai Lü minority areas in the northeast mulberry paper dominates as writing support. According to traditional Buddhist beliefs, no matter whether they were written carefully or not, manuscripts should not be treated disrespectfully, or kept in a demeaning place. The texts that manuscripts contain, especially the ritual ones, should not have any insertions or later additions. Any person who breaks this rule would lose the respect of devout Buddhists.

It was our principal aim to carry out the identification, digitization, conservation and safe storage of important palm-leaf and leporello manuscripts from monastic collections of the eight royal monasteries in the area of the Buddhist city of Luang Prabang. The manuscripts were sponsored by the kings or members of the royal family, and by the Supreme Patriarchs of Laos, other senior monks, high-ranking officials and prominent laypersons. These manuscripts, though unique and prominent, are all in an endangered condition.

Materials and contents

The collections of manuscripts from the eight monasteries consisting of Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, Vat That Luang, Vat Sangkhalok, Vat Xiang Thong, Vat Long Khun, Vat Phonsai, Vat Siphutthabat, and Vat Xiang Yün have been inventoried and described with regard to their physical or material characteristics as well as their contents, and then digitized. Colophons and other paratexts (such as prefaces and titles) were transcribed into modern Lao

and translated into English. Roughly 70% of the manuscripts have such colophons which in most cases mention not only the date when the writing of the manuscript was finished, but also the names of sponsors and donors of the manuscripts and, more rarely, the name of the scribes. Besides, a number colophons also provide additional information about donors and scribes, such as their professional and geographical background.

After the digitization and research, the original manuscripts are now stored in situ at their original places under safer and more accessible conditions. They were all cleaned before the digitization process started, and in the case that palm-leaf fascicles were torn, a new “binding” by cotton strings was made to assure proper storage. All documentation and digitization work was carried out at the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang which is based at Sala Thammavihan in the compound of Vat Suvannakhili, a structure depending from the Lao Buddhist Fellowship, Luang Prabang Province.

The vast majority of these palm-leaf manuscripts contain one single text running over one palm-leaf fascicle, although others contain more than one, and some even run up to ten or more fascicles. However, many of the multi-fascicle manuscripts are not complete and have one or more missing fascicles. A number of manuscripts comprised of a single fascicle may have originally been part of a larger multi-fascicle manuscript, with the remaining fascicles having been lost. Some manuscripts are complete and in good physical condition while others are lightly or severely damaged with parts of the text missing. The manuscripts, palm-leaf and paper manuscripts, contain various texts through religious and secular.

The eight collections are as follows:

1. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram contains totally 8,328 fascicles; 1,192 fascicles/volumes or 14.31% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.
2. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat That Luang contains totally 1,639 fascicles; 236 fascicles/volumes or 14.39% have been digitized. The reason is that many single-text manuscripts contain many fascicles, and there are up to ten of these manuscripts containing the same text as well.
3. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Sangkhalok contains totally 1,760 fascicles; 384 fascicles or 21.81% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.
4. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Xiang Thong contains totally 2,018 fascicles; 572 fascicles or 28.34% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.
5. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Long Khun contains totally 1,435 fascicles; 668 or 46.55% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.
6. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Phonsai contains totally 480 fascicles; 88 fascicles or 18.33% have been digitized. The reason is that many manuscripts are severely damaged by water and stuck together could not separate or use any longer.

7. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Si Phutthabat contains totally 99 fascicles; 38 fascicles or 38.38% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.

8. Collection of the manuscripts of Vat Xiang Yün contains totally 2,264 fascicles; 756 fascicles or 33.39% have been digitized. As many manuscripts with one story but contain many fascicles, even up to ten and with many copies even up to ten as well.

Selection for the digitization and identification

After examining the physical conditions and contents of the manuscripts, the selection was made. The certain material were excluded from the digitization were not due to age, data protection or copyright. However, the manuscripts identified as significant and qualified for digitisation were as follows:

1. All manuscripts comprising one single fascicle with a unique title;
2. All manuscripts sponsored by the Supreme Patriarch, other senior monks, or by members of the royal family, high ranking officials, and prominent laypersons.
3. In cases where of one specific text several extant manuscripts could be identified, the selection of manuscripts to be digitised was made based on the quality of handwriting, age, and completeness of the text.
4. The documented and digitized manuscripts are written in Dhamma scripts including Tham Lao, Lao Buhan (Old Lao), Lan Na and Tai Lü scripts. Manuscripts written in Khmer and modern Thai scripts were excluded from the project. Exceptionally, one notebook from the collection of Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram has been digitized, as its content is considered of great importance.

Digitisation process

The manuscripts have been carried to the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang, where the digitization and research was taking place, according to the following steps:

1. The manuscripts have been examined and selected for digitization.
2. The manuscripts were given an EAP number and inventory sheets were made.
3. The manuscripts were cleaned with 90-degree alcohol.
4. In case, the manuscripts had inks were faded, we restored with carbon mixed sesame oil.
5. The manuscripts were digitised by taking photographs using a platform.

The digitization of palm-leaf manuscripts was carried out starting with the recto side of the first palm-leaf folio, the next image shows the verso side of folio 1 (above) together with the recto side of folio 2 (below), followed by the image showing folio 2 verso with folio 3 recto, and so on. The last image of a digitized manuscript shows only the verso side of the last palm-leaf folio. This method of digitization has also been applied to the paper manuscripts of which the large majority were mulberry paper leporello manuscripts either made of *sa* or *khòì* paper colloquially

called “mulberry paper”. Apart from such folded books, there were a few paper manuscripts, whose folios were sown along on of the narrow sides in a kind of stab-stitched binding.

A total 3,935 codological units (3,910 palm-leaf fascicles, 2 leporello-style and 5 folded paper manuscripts, 10 paper notebooks) have been digitised in this way resulting in a total of 97,263 digital images.

Luang Prabang, 31 August 2023

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Khamvone Boulyaphonh', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Khamvone Boulyaphonh

Project Lead