

Introduction

Lao Manuscripts and Traditional Literature: The struggle for their survival¹

Harald Hundius

Historico-Cultural Background: The cultural relationship between Laos and neighbouring regions

From ancient times the rulers of the countries of mainland Southeast Asia – not unlike their contemporaries in other parts of the world – were almost constantly engaged in military conflicts and bloody wars against each other in the pursuit of political ambitions and economic power. At the same time, however, the peoples of what is now Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, China (Yunnan) and Cambodia, have been bound together for centuries by their deeply rooted belief in Theravada Buddhism.

Between the end of the 14th and the middle of the 16th Century A.D., Chiang Mai, the capital of the kingdom of Lan Na, emerged as a center of Buddhist learning among the Tai kingdoms of the Northern region. The reputation of the famous “Pali School of Chiang Mai” spread over the entire area dominated by Buddhist Tai and Lao kingdoms, above all to the Tai Khün capital of Chiang Tung (Kengtung), the Tai Lü capital of Chiang Hung (Jinghong) in Sipsongpanna (Xishuangbanna, Yunnan), as well as to Luang Prabang, the capital, and other towns of the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang (Lane Xang) and its tributaries.

Apparently, the whole Pali Tipitaka was copied and translated into the vernacular language. Additional commentaries and sub-commentaries were written as well as historical and cosmological treatises, works on grammar and lexicography, and other learned subjects. It is widely believed that the collections of the so-called Fifty Apocryphal Birth-stories (*Paññāsa-Jātaka*) were also composed during that period. Copies of extra-canonical Jatakas, altogether comprising well over 200 titles, abound in the libraries of the region, including the Northeastern part (*phak isan*) of Thailand, up to the present time. Obviously the manuscripts were copied again and again and found their way into the most remote monasteries.

¹ This paper is based on the Keynote Address presented by the author. It also appears in Lao translation in the following paper of this collection.

Of course there were factors which facilitated the exchange of literary works among the Tai and Lao peoples. First, one has to mention the very close linguistic relationship between the languages spoken in what is now the Upper North of Thailand, Laos and Northeast Thailand. These dialects are more closely interrelated with each other than any one of them is with Central Thai. Perhaps even more important however was the fact that in the monasteries of the above-mentioned localities the same type of script was used: the so-called “Tham” script (a derivative of an ancient Mon alphabet), in contrast to more hinduized Siam where a variant of an old Khmer script had been in use for religious writings until the end of the 19th century.²

The bonds between these two major powers of Lan Na and Lan Sang became closer early in the 16th century, during the reign of King Phothisalarat in Luang Prabang (who ruled over Lan Sang from 1520 to 1550 A.D.) and were further developed when his son Prince Saiyasetthathirat was elected to ascend the throne of Lan Na in Chiang Mai in 1548.

Historical records tell us that King Saiyasetthathirat on his return to the capital of Lan Sang in 1550 took along with him, among other precious objects, a huge amount of manuscripts. From that time onwards, there was obviously an even more extensive cultural exchange between the two regions which continued well into the 20th century. To mention just one example: in 1835-36 the Venerable Kancana Mahathera from Wat Sung Men in the present province of Phrae went to Luang Prabang in order to have copies made of a huge number of important Buddhist texts (more than 2,800 *phuk*) some of which were obviously no longer extant in Lan Na.³

Therefore, the above-mentioned area of common cultural tradition may be called the “Tham Script Domain.” Or, when taking into account the extremely close relationship between the Lan Na language (also known as Tai Yuan or *kam müang*) and Lao, we may call it the “Greater Lao Cultural Domain.”⁴

² It was in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) that Siamese letters were for the first time used instead of Khôm script for the (printed) book-edition of the Siamese Pali-Tipitaka.

³ Along with various rare works written in Pali and *nissaya* texts, a complete version of the famous Paññāsa-Jātaka was brought to Phrae where it is still kept in perfect condition at Wat Sung Men until today. Based on this copy from Luang Prabang and several additional manuscripts from Lan Na, an edition of the Paññāsa-Jātaka in Siamese transliteration was prepared – with support from the Toyota Foundation – by a team of researchers from Chiang Mai University’s Department of Thai, including Udom Roongruangsri, late Assoc. Professor Bampen Rawin, and Harald Hundius, published in 1999. For more details on Khruba Kancana and the manuscripts copied at Vat Vixoun in Luang Prabang, see Harald Hundius: “*The Colophons of thirty Pali manuscripts from Northern Thailand*,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, XIV, (1990), pp. 1-173, especially 34-36.

⁴ Until well into the second half of the 20th century, the people of Northern Thailand used to be called “Lao” or “Lao phung dam” (“Black-bellied Lao” – referring to the old custom of tattooing among the male population of Lan Na) by the Siamese or “Western Lao” by French scholars like George Cœdès. Cf. for instance the title of his pioneering study *Documents sur l’histoire politique et religieuse du Laos Occidental*, BEFEO XXV, 3, (1925), which deals with indigenous Pali chronicles of Lan Na,”

Research, Preservation and Dissemination of Lao Literature up to 1988: A brief overview

Southeast Asian Studies is a comparatively young academic discipline, with roots going back to the 19th century. Serious research on Laos only started at the beginning of the 20th century, a few years after the country had been incorporated into French Indochina, with mainly French scholars doing most of the pioneering research work. We need only mention names such as Henri Parmentier, Louis Finot or George Cœdès, the major works of whom are still valuable sources up to the present time. For instance, Louis Finot's *Recherches sur la littérature laotienne* from 1917, if outdated today in many respects, still provides a useful overview on traditional Lao literature, and the *Liste générale des manuscrits laotiens* provided in the final part of the study remains a helpful tool for researchers up to the present.⁵ It seems that almost all of the surveys and registrations of manuscripts which began around the turn of the 19th-20th century were undertaken through French initiatives.

The last and most important survey of Lao manuscripts before the change of the political system in Laos was conducted under the leadership of Pierre-Bernard Lafont in 1959. Altogether 83 monasteries were covered: thirteen in Luang Prabang township, twenty-five in Vientiane Municipality, and forty-five in Champasak. The work benefited from a number of previous surveys, e.g. work on inventories of monasteries in Luang Prabang carried out by Henri Deydier who died before his work could be completed, and of course Louis Finot's *Liste générale des manuscrits laotiens* from 1917 mentioned above, which includes only holographs from monasteries in Luang Prabang.

After collating the data from these three provinces, Lafont arrived at a surprising result: out of a grand total of 1,616 titles - apart from basic Buddhist texts (Abhidhamma, Jataka, and collections of *gāthā*) - no more than 32 were common to all three regions! Based on this finding, a conclusion is presented which states that, setting aside the basic Buddhist works, there is no such thing as a homogenous Lao literature; instead there exist "three literatures essentially spread over three regions."⁶ It will be interesting to see whether this assumption can be verified when confronted with the data available today.

or see one of his last works, the *Catalogue des manuscrits en pâli, laotien et siamois, provenant de la Thaïlande* (Copenhagen 1966), where all of the *manuscrits laotiens* described are in fact from Lan Na.

⁵ Cf. Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient (BEFEO) XVII, 5, 1917.

⁶ "On peut donc écrire que mis à part les ouvrages bouddhiques de base, il n'existe pas une littérature homogène, mais trois littératures dont la diffusion est essentiellement régionale." See P.-B. Lafont, *Inventaire des manuscrits des pagodas du Laos*, BEFEO, LIX, Paris 1959, quoted from Centre de Recherche Artistique et Littéraire [ed.], *Sammana bailan thua pathet khang thi nūng*, Vientiane 1989, p. 288, 430 resp.

It took some time before the Lao themselves made substantial attempts to preserve their literary heritage and turned to the serious study of their culture and literature. However, particularly during the period of cultural revival between 1928 and 1940, endeavours were undertaken by Lao intellectuals and administrators - under the leadership of Prince Phetsarat and assisted by foreign researchers - to organize renovations of monasteries and religious buildings. Furthermore, a number of palm-leaf manuscripts were registered and copies made. A selection of important works was also transliterated into modern secular script and printed by the Chanthabouly Buddhist Council to be distributed to Buddhist schools throughout the country.

However, it seems that despite the efforts of personalities such as Prince Phetsarat, Nhoui Abhay or Maha Sila Viravong, the academic study of indigenous literature did not enjoy the same attraction by the Lao élite as did French culture and civilization.

Obviously it was the change of the education system with its emphasis on general education that was the most important factor in the decline of the status and the reduction of the function of the Buddhist monasteries as traditional agents of learning and knowledge. The study of literary heritage was seen as less essential than it had been before. A reduction of subjects relating to Buddhism in the school curricula also contributed to an increasing neglect of manuscripts kept in monastic libraries.

As far as classical literature is concerned, it was only after achieving political independence, in the mid-1950s, that the first national institution responsible for literary activities was founded in Vientiane: the Comité Littéraire. In the following years until 1975, no less than about seventy editions of traditional literary works were for the first time made accessible to the general public.

It is no surprise that the quality of most of those editions, when looked at with critical eyes, was not very satisfying. Of course they did not, and could not, meet the standard of editorial principles as commonly practiced in European countries like France, England or Germany where works of national fame and importance are edited with an utmost amount of scholarly methodology and diligence.⁷

However, the publication of Lao classical literature shows that the newly independent country, small as it was when compared to its neighbours, nonetheless could boast a rich literary heritage. Besides, for the general public the high-speed printings in modern Lao script of epic masterpieces such as *Campa si ton*, *Khatthanam*, or *Siao sawat* were sufficient; and those stories were well-known to most Lao who listened to them when attending sermons given by monks in their *vat* or when *mò lam* performances were held at funerals, weddings, or village festivals.

⁷ However, one has to keep in mind that the same editorial practices were also in common use in Thailand and other neighbouring countries at that time, and are often met with even today.

As far as the curricula of Lao institutes of higher learning or public schools both at secondary and at primary levels are concerned, the subject of Lao classical literature remained under-represented.

1988-2003: A New Zest for Preservation, Dissemination and Research

During the war, in one of the most disastrous periods in Lao history, a huge number of monasteries together with their libraries containing invaluable manuscripts were destroyed by the bombings.⁸ In the years immediately following the proclamation of the Lao PDR, the country met with extremely difficult conditions. These problems further aggravated the poor situation of manuscripts so that at times the very survival of Laos' literary heritage seemed to be at risk.

So in March 1988, with the support of the Toyota Foundation, a conference was convened in Vientiane attended by monks as well as knowledgeable lay people from all over Laos who were invited 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 an "Inventory of Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Six Provinces of Laos" was initiated by the Ministry of Information & Culture with the support of the Toyota Foundation. Mme. Dara Kanlaya was appointed project leader and Assoc. Professor Sommai Premchit, of Chiang Mai University, assisted as external project advisor. In the course of this project (1988-1994) manuscript holdings – altogether about 128,000 fasciculi (*phuk*) – were inventoried from some 250 selected monasteries in Vientiane Municipality and the provinces of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Bolikhamxay, Khammouane, Savannakhet, and Champasak.

In September 1992 another project started: the German-funded *Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme*. This co-operation project, again run under the helm of the Ministry of Information & Culture, was also led by Mme. Dara Kanlaya until it was transferred to the National Library in 1997, when Mme. Kongdeuane Nettavong became project leader.

The project came to an official end in 2002 and results were handed over to the Lao National Library in the same year. In the course of ten years about 830 monasteries in all of the seventeen provinces were surveyed, their manuscript holdings – altogether about 368,000 *phuk* – preserved and inventoried and a central data pool created. Perhaps most important for the study of Lao primary sources is the collection of microfilm

⁸ As we learned only recently, in the whole of Xieng Khouang province just one village appears to have been spared, including the *vat* and its library.

recordings of selected manuscripts, comprising some 1000 rolls of 30m each.⁹

Thus we may say that by the work carried out during the past fifteen years the physical survival of the Lao literary heritage has been secured - despite the fact that about seventy percent of the total number of monasteries remains to be inventoried.¹⁰

Furthermore, two of the basic obstacles for seriously engaging in the study of written Lao sources have been removed:

1. The lack of reliable up-to-date inventories of a sufficient number of libraries in each of the seventeen provinces, and, thanks to the microfilms,
2. The difficulty of having access to the manuscripts.

Some of the major achievements in the fields of research and dissemination of traditional literature that have been made in the past few years should also be briefly mentioned:

One of the most famous works of ancient literature has been re-edited, accompanied by a translation into modern prose, ample notes, as well as by a glossary of difficult terms: *Mahakap Thao Hung Thao Cüang* (Vientiane 2000; part I).¹¹ This edition, while being based on Maha Sila's pioneering edition of 1943 (in Siamese script), represents a major step forward in so far as the text has been carefully rechecked against the original palm-leaf manuscript written in *Lao buhan* script - the only copy known of today - which is kept in the National Library in Bangkok.

In the course of three other research projects undertaken by scholars from the Department of Lao Language and Literature, the National University of Laos, in co-operation with Prof. Volker Grabowsky, University of Münster, Germany, two interesting historical poems have been published, *Kap müang phuan* and *San lüp phasun*. Both editions are accompanied by informative introductions and glossaries. An edition of another important work, *Phün wiang*, has followed. The text of both of the

⁹ In fact, the project may be seen as a direct offspring of a previous undertaking in the upper North of Thailand in the years 1987-1991: the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts Project, which was coordinated by Chiang Mai University's Center for the Promotion of Arts & Culture (Director: Dr. MRW Rujaya Abhakorn) and also funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs through its Cultural Assistance Program. (For more details, see paper presented by Sommai Premchit). For more details of the Lao project, see paper 27 of this collection, by Dara Kanlaya.

¹⁰ That does not mean of course that there is no need anymore to continue preservation work; on the contrary: the "Manuscript Preservation Centers" established in Luang Prabang, Vientiane Municipality, Savannakhet, and Pakse within the framework of the Lao-German *Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme*, besides representing library models in their respective regions, are also expected to carry on preservation activities in the future.

¹¹ Part II was published in 2005.

latter works is based on a critical scrutiny of a considerable number of manuscript copies both from Laos and Northeast Thailand. The aforementioned projects were made possible by grants provided by the Toyota Foundation, Japan.¹²

Now that much of the groundwork has been accomplished, in order to safeguard Lao literature and Lao cultural identity in a sustained manner the following questions have to be addressed:

1. What steps must be taken to keep alive and integrate into modern society the moral values and the wisdom contained in traditional literature?
2. What perspectives can be identified for potential future research activities, and what measures are needed to enlarge the number and enhance the capability of Lao researchers in the field of Lao language and literature?
3. What status should the subject of Lao language, literature, and culture be given within the Lao educational system, including at primary and secondary school levels?
4. What can the study of old Lao language and literature contribute to counterbalancing the influence of high-tech entertainment flooding the country through foreign media and the internet?¹³
5. How can the perceptive faculty of the aesthetic beauty of old Lao language and poetry be preserved and sharpened, in particular among the young generation?

Potential Research Perspectives

The newly won access to a huge amount of primary sources (thanks to the microfilms) will enable a wide range of potential research perspectives, such as:

- An annotated catalogue of the manuscripts microfilmed during the past ten years.
- Evaluation of the microfilmed data for research in the field of historical linguistics: e.g. the historical development of the Lao language: lexicons, syntax, idiomatics, language usage, etc.

¹² For information about research works written in the general field of humanities up to the beginning of the 1990s, see P.-B. Lafont (ed.), *Les recherches en sciences humaines sur le Laos* (Actes de la Conférence Internationale organisée à Vientiane 7-10 Décembre 1993), Paris 1994.

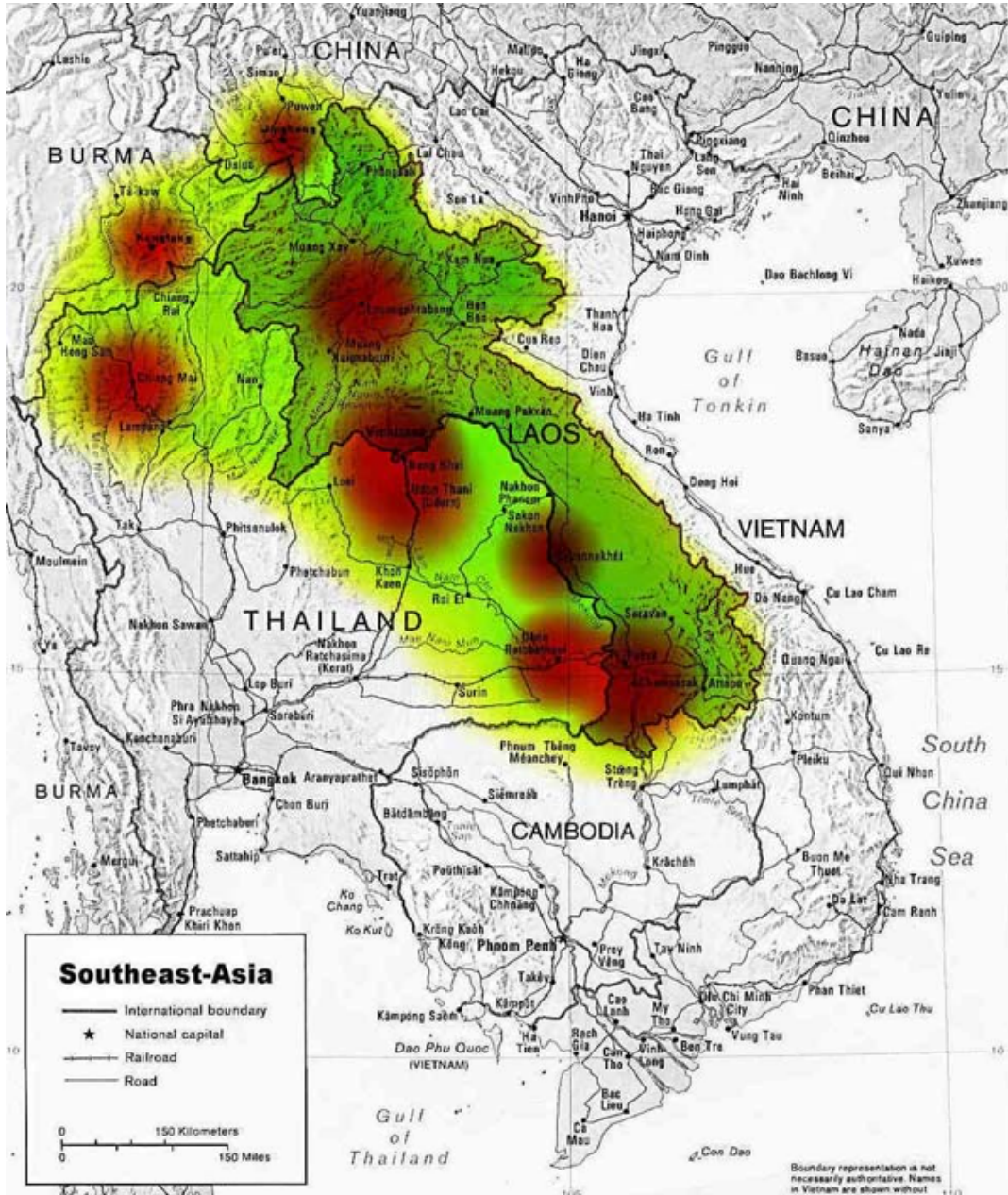
¹³ Most people will agree that it is the influx of the globalized entertainment and consumption “culture” which poses perhaps the most serious threat to the survival of the “wisdom of the ancestors,” and “the good and beautiful things” of the past in the hearts of Lao youngsters.

- Similar research on the “sister languages” of Lao: Lan Na Thai, Tai Khün, Tai Lü, as well as Tai Dam.
- Studies on language and literature of the Tai Neua.
- Studies about the history of Lao Buddhism.
- Philological studies: analyzing (and perhaps editing) selected works by using not just one, but several “witnesses” (manuscript copies) by using the methodology of “textual criticism” so as to get as close as possible to a reliable text: this procedure can prove very helpful when analyzing important sources such as historical writings, works pertaining to social relations, customary law, everyday life (*conditio humana*), as well as economics.¹⁴
- Analyzing the relationship between religious and secular versions of narrative works such as extra-canonical Jatakas like *Sinsai*, *Campa si ton*, or the so-called *Paññāsa-Jātaka*, the famous collections of non-canonical birth-stories well-known in the whole of Buddhist mainland Southeast Asia.
- Studies on the dissemination or “migration” of manuscripts, literary works, *as well as the people* who carried them across the “Greater Lao Cultural Domain” and sometimes into Central Thailand.
- Studies on the relationship between monolingual Pali versions of non-canonical Buddhist Jatakas, their *nissaya* or *wohan* versions and their secular literary adaptations, as well as orally transmitted versions across the whole Lao “cultural domain” and Central Thailand.
- Comparative studies on Lao literary works versus versions to be found in Central Thailand, Northern Thailand, Myanmar, Sipsongpanna or Cambodia.
- Studies on astrology and magic, indigenous knowledge such as traditional medicine, pharmacology and healing, ...
- Etc.

¹⁴ It should not be overlooked that narrative literature, e.g. non-canonical Jataka stories which abound in Buddhist Tai countries, may also yield valuable information about social values as well as conditions of everyday life in the past, as I have tried to show in the article “Notions of Equity in Lan Na, Insights from Literary Sources,” see V. Grabowsky (ed.), *Regions and National Integration in Thailand 1892-1992*, Wiesbaden 1995.

Conclusion

The time is now ripe for an evaluation of what has been achieved, and what must be done in order to secure the continuation of efforts so as to secure an appropriate place for the national literary heritage of Laos in its home country as well as within the context of Southeast Asia's, and the world's cultural property.



Map showing the Greater Lao Cultural Domain, with major centres shown in red.

ແຜນທີ່ສະແດງຂົງເຂດວັດທະນະທັມລາວໃຫຍ່ ຈຸດສີແດງໝາຍເຖິງສູນກາງສຳຄັນໆ