

The Preservation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts in the Lao PDR¹

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Historical Background

The Background of Lao Palm-leaf Manuscripts

The culture and beliefs of Buddhism as inscribed in old documents prescribe a type of thinking which places great value on social consciousness, love and harmony based on family relations and mutual help at all levels of society, and having loving kindness and compassion for all people. Palm-leaf manuscripts read in sermons in the temples have been transformed into the beliefs and practices of the laity, and various traditions from the Royal Palace at the centre down to householders in the distant countryside, and remain in the daily life of people up to the present day, so one can certify that this culture has been deeply rooted in the concerns of the Lao people for the last six to seven centuries.

Certainly the loss of independence over two or three periods for almost two hundred years brought both physical and mental cultural losses, until almost nothing remained. What is most clear is that when the country was colonised, the learned monks and intellectuals were oppressed and not allowed to be active or lead in any way. Some of the higher echelons who were still governing had to follow their masters for their own benefit and their families or perhaps they did not know better. But despite this, the populace still did not abandon their beautiful culture which they preserved and venerated, even though they were perhaps unable to study it deeply. It is for this reason that there are still palm-leaf manuscripts in Laos to be seen and used by the present generation up to today.

Two Major Periods of Loss

The first major losses occurred when Vientiane was razed to the ground at the beginning of the 19th century, and a number of manuscripts were removed and others burnt together with hundreds of monasteries.

Another major period of loss was during the 1963-72 carpet bombing centred on Xiang Khuang and Hua Phan together with parts of other provinces. Xiang Khuang, which used to be a bastion of writing civilisation and inscribing palm-leaf manuscripts (the

¹ This paper is a translation of the Lao original, Paper 4 of this collection.

literature of the story of *Thao Hung or Thao Cheuang* of which Maha Sila Viravongs discovered an original palm-leaf manuscript in the Thai National Library was copied from Bane village, in Xiang Khuang province). However, a recent survey of palm-leaf manuscripts in all of Xiang Khuang province found only 3,880 fascicles in 98 temples, or an average of 40 fascicles per temple, of which the majority were newly copied manuscripts. Compare this with statistics from areas where no one has destroyed or plundered manuscripts in the temples, where there are as many as 2,000-4,000 in each temple, as in Luang Phabang for example.

The losses during these two periods were material and quantitative losses which arose from conditions in the region, but even more important are losses in popular use and in the quality of manuscripts when they are not studied, are abandoned and disregarded, and their importance overlooked in favour of new infatuations which come from within us and of which we ourselves are the cause.

Periods of Cultural Revival: Restoration and Obstacles

Cultural Revival from 1928-40: the Chanthabouly Buddhist Institute

The Lao people have been fortunate in having people who lead restoration efforts of old palm-leaf manuscripts in two periods. The first period was from 1928-40, when the Chanthabouly Buddhist Institute was established through an initiative of Chao Phetsarat. Many French scholars who were interested at that time in research and in making an inventory were able to restore both the quality and the quantity by establishing Pali schools throughout the country, setting up short training courses for Buddhist monastics, and then an important movement to copy palm-leaf manuscripts and renovate temples. When conducting a survey of palm-leaf manuscripts in every province from 1989-2000, we still saw traces of the revival in the culture of the study and teaching of Tham remaining in every location from Phongsaly to Champasak (schools for monastic study, many palm-leaf manuscripts that were inscribed during that period, and the construction of temples by monks who had studied in Vat Chan at that time²).

However, obstacles have arisen from modernisation since World War II up to the present. In the midst of the political struggle to gain the complete independence of the country, areas that were at peace rushed to modernise and received a new culture without any choice in the matter. For more than 40 years householders and monks mostly abandoned the use of palm-leaf manuscripts, and it can be said that in some places they are still not used at all, while in others they are used only in rituals and traditional ceremonies. The monastic education system became almost totally secular and many hundreds of thousands of palm-

² Interview with a 92 year-old man in Na Koung Hat Kiang village, 1993.

leaf fascicles were left at random. In many of the temples surveyed, the manuscript chests had not been opened for 30-40 years, manuscripts were burnt during the cremation of monks according to superstition, were abandoned for termites to eat, and the rain leaked into many hundreds of chests. There was no determined study, but still some efforts to propagate Buddhist teachings to householders who wanted to listen to sermons. The new habit of the monks then was to copy from manuscripts written in Tham script or from Thai books into modern Lao, or even worse to use Thai books to give a Thai-sounding sermon. And some of these very same books of Buddhist teachings which were printed in Thai script had been written from Lao palm-leaf manuscripts! This shows the great loss in the popularity and value of manuscripts in and of themselves.

The Cultural Policy of the Lao Government and Palm-leaf Manuscripts

In 1988, there was a second piece of good fortune when the government's cultural agenda, which corresponded with the wishes of the Lao people, met and became acquainted with the policies of other countries throughout the world through global meetings organised by UNESCO. The representative of the Toyota Foundation from Japan came to meet and discuss the Lao government's cultural policy (at that time, Mr. Houmphanh Rattanavong was the head of the UNESCO cultural committee and I was a committee member as well as being the secretary). The Ministry of Culture agreed to take appropriate steps to work for the conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts, initially by organising a national seminar with Prof. Yoneo Ishii, the honorary consultant of the Toyota Foundation, as resource person. This initial knowledge stimulated the Ministry and our technical experts to do conservation work.

Following that national seminar from 10-13 March 1988, the Ministry established a committee responsible for an inventory of manuscripts in the three provinces of Vientiane, Luang Phabang and the Capital to carry on this work from 1988 to 1991. Then a proposal was made to the Toyota Foundation for the three additional provinces of Khammouan, Savannakhet, and Champasak, and to include some temples in Bolikhamsay province.

Obstacles and Successes

During this time the project encountered many obstacles such as:

- Making an inventory of old manuscripts was new work, about which we had no previous knowledge (we invited Assistant Prof. Sommai Premchit, and expert in the conservation of Lan Na manuscripts, to be our advisor for the first three years, while on the Lao side a senior researcher, Achan Maha Samlith Bouasisavath, was advisor). The survey methodology had not yet been agreed upon, and in every aspect the understanding of the population was one of reserve and veneration towards the manuscripts, which they kept hidden away (only bringing out new ones to show us).

- Travel was extremely difficult since we had no vehicle and the only way was to go 70-80 km by motorbike, since there was not yet much public transport, so the survey work could only be done part time, during the dry season.
- The regular staff at that time mostly still saw palm-leaf manuscripts as out of date and unscientific, did not see them as the highest cultural artefacts of the country, and still had many doubts. However, the Ministry of Culture, under the leadership of Mr. Thongsing Thammavong and with the direction of Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit from the Politburo, decided that this work should succeed. This was because of their firm belief that the palm-leaf manuscripts were an essential element in attempting to free ourselves from foreign cultural influences which had enveloped the country for many decades. They believed that the manuscripts, which are informative, entertaining and educational (both religious and secular) would help to revive traditional knowledge and wisdom in Lao society so that this invaluable heritage would continue to have a role to play. By the year 1992, the upper levels perceived this work as really helping to cultivate indigenous knowledge among the population in local areas.

The palm-leaf manuscript inventory project which the Toyota Foundation of Japan had answered the call and supported for those 6 years achieved the expected result in that it was able to successfully survey and to make an inventory, to clean and provide covers, and put in order altogether 127,636 fascicles in 252 temples. This was the result of all the dedicated efforts, the responsibility of the manuscript committee, the proud work of our expert resource people, the whole-hearted cooperation of local authorities, monks and novices, and the truly amazing voluntary efforts, devotion and faith of the population. The Vice Minister of Culture himself, Mr. Bouabane Vorakhoun, went to visit and inspect the project at some field sites, such as in Bolikhamsay and Khammouan provinces, where he saw for himself old people, local representatives of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), young men, women, and children going to the temple in order to clean the manuscripts. Some people took the old manuscript wrapping-cloths to wash, others brought their own new cloths to donate as wrapping cloths, while others made donations to the temple, with some specifically for manuscript conservation, and at night they paraded the manuscripts around the sermon hall, making the atmosphere like that during an important festival, with the whole village feeling comfortable and cheerful, and believing firmly in what they were doing. It was probably the first time in the history of his work as Vice Minister that he had sat in the middle of a temple hall to give an address and to talk with monks, old people and local representatives of the LFNC. The times that we met with and talked to the local people, confirmed without doubt that palm-leaf manuscripts are the historical foundation and the cultural heart of the nation, which also attested to the age-old civilisation of the country.

The success of the Lao palm-leaf manuscript inventory project in every aspect depended upon important support in the form of very significant funding and other support

from the Toyota Foundation in Japan, which was the donor and gave encouragement to all our resource people. This success also laid the foundation for the people and monastics in every locality to gradually build awareness and understanding, and in many places they were able to arrange the manuscripts by themselves much better than before. It is a fact that during this period our palm-leaf manuscripts were conserved for future days.

1992-2002: The Lao-German Cooperation Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme (PLMP)

The conference to summarise lessons from the previous project, held at the end of 1991, brought more popular support and requests for an inventory of the manuscript holdings of every temple in each province. In the same year, myself, some project members and leaders from the Ministry undertook a study tour to Chiang Mai and other provinces in northern Thailand to learn lessons from the work of the Chiang Mai University Centre for the Promotion of Arts and Culture (CPAC) in surveying and conserving Lan Na palm-leaf manuscripts in eight provinces, together with the important work of microfilming, which required significant funding support. This project – the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts Project – was funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1987 to 1991, with Dr. Harald Hundius as Senior Academic Advisor. On the advice of Dr. MR Rujaya Abhakorn, the Director of CPAC, we discussed with Dr. Hundius the possibility of also requesting support from the German government, which showed great kindness in responding to a 10-year project proposal submitted at the beginning of 1992. This Lao-German Cooperation Project ran from September of that year until September 2004 (including two additional follow-up years). The fundamental principle of this project was to further expand the work of the previous project with the addition of the following steps and methods:

1. The material preservation of manuscripts, which entails the removal of dust and wiping with high-grade alcohol, changing the binding cords, adding wooden covers and replacing the old worn-out cloth covers with new white cloth.
2. Surveying and recording information in the main inventory (and then making a modern information storage system).
3. Raising awareness and mobilising the public to recognise and understand the high value of palm-leaf manuscripts in religious history and artistic and literary works, etc. through organising conferences in each province and related radio broadcasts and newspaper articles, and through having local public participation in the conservation work.

4. Microfilming of old, rare and important manuscripts, comprising about 15-20 percent of the total number of microfilmed documents.
5. For propagation and dissemination, by this time our methodology for reaching the local population was further refined, with more public relations and fostering the participation of local leaders, at least in the provincial level meetings (which were aimed at the public before work began) by inviting those in power in district level local government to attend. Other than the district office of the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Lao Front for National Construction, and monastics, who were the main target group, the work of inviting local people was a very animated activity, and was handed over to the creativity of the local people themselves, and was sometimes aimed at lower or upper high level school students, the village Women's Union, and in some places novices constituted the work force.
6. For dissemination through writing and publication, the project encouraged young researchers to publish and disseminate eight works of old Buddhist teachings, literature and poetry, starting with writing and publishing of a book of traditional laws from old texts that were written many decades ago, such as *Mounlatantai*, which was edited by Achan Samlith Bouasisavath. When Achan Samlith saw that this kind of book was of interest to the reading public, he followed up with more writing and establishing a new independent publishing project with funding support from the Toyota Foundation for six years. Besides this, our project published a quarterly newsletter containing current 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 during the survey. "Palm-leaf Manuscript News" stimulated each location to be proud and to talk about the number of manuscripts that they had, and to be willing to take better care of them.
7. The project contributed to the reintroduction of Buddhist Studies as well as the study of traditional literature in the curriculum of monks' education. Buddhist institutions of higher learning throughout the country have improved their teaching efficiency in the subjects of Buddhism, Lao and Pali language through financial assistance provided by the project. Additional funds were provided to the Department of Lao Language and Literature of the National University of Laos to promote the study of traditional literature.

Lessons Learnt

During our experience in the field, we saw that in many cases where is development in a village or town, there are usually inducements to demolish or destroy the old culture. Just as in the past, in the case of Vat Mai Suvannaphoumaham in Luang Phabang, or Vat Pa Kham by its old name, which is a temple that is many hundreds of years old and which used to have an ancient Tipitaka hall which became renowned for its architecture. During the time that the French administration was doing building work in the city of Luang Phabang at the beginning of the 20th century, they destroyed this ancient Tipitaka hall in order to use the land to make a new road in front of the palace. This meant that the ancient Tipitaka hall was lost and a road replaced it. The new Tipitaka hall that we see today was built in the 1960s. Another example is the Tipitaka hall in Vat Sisaket. When the road was enlarged during the 1970s, it encroached a long way onto the temple land, and the temple had to make a wall which meets the Tipitaka hall half-way along its side. The Lao government won a global award in 1972 when they used the architectural style of the Tipitaka hall at Vat Sisaket for their display in a world exposition in Japan, but still up until today no one has thought about the future destiny of the Tipitaka hall of Vat Sisaket, which is half outside of the temple.

For the World Exhibition 2000 display in Hannover, Germany, our government used the style of the main temple building at Vat Xieng Thong as the distinguishing feature of the Lao pavilion, finely crafted from hardwood, and very graceful, which received another award. Despite this, throughout the country there are still people who wish to destroy old traditional sites, such as changing indigenous roof tiles for cement sheets and smashing 300-400 year old bricks in order to replace them with reinforced concrete. People think that these things will be stronger and longer-lasting than the traditional forms. Fences made from the heartwood of hardwood trees and more than 100-200 years old are torn down to build cement walls in their place like the walls of a prison, or cement is laid throughout the grounds of a temple, instead of planting fruit trees and beautiful local flowers that are pleasing to the eye. Temples which are suited to be centres of culture and natural beauty as in olden times will be made to disappear. All of this is according to the wishes of villagers and townspeople who want development and change in their local areas, with the understanding that this is modernisation and civilisation.

However, on the positive side, people in many areas are continuing to build new Tipitaka halls and are excited about the preservation of palm-leaf manuscripts, such as in Boten in Xaiyabouly province, and Bane Na Xone in Pak Ngeum district of the capital city, Vientiane. In some places they make a drum tower and then make a Tipitaka hall below it in order to reduce costs, and they repair the manuscript cabinets or build new ones. Over many years, we have met monastics and lay people who love and cherish the manuscripts in the temple to the point that they will not allow anyone access to see them, and take great care that strangers do not steal them.

Because of this love amongst the population, the project took the equipment to microfilm *in situ* and travelled as far as Meuang Sing in Luang Nam Tha province and Meuang Ngeun in Xaiyabouly, in order to avoid temporarily removing the manuscripts to microfilm them far away from their locality.

In the closing phase of the project, four preservation centres were established in different regions of the country in the hope that they will provide a good example for local areas. Training for regular staff has provided them with knowledge and expertise to be able to pass on advice and to go to help in local temples when required. Each centre organises an annual festival to demonstrate that taking care of manuscripts is important work of the temple and the laity, and to promote the continued study of copying and giving sermons through organising activities and methods which are of interest to the new generation.

In summary, these two projects which took place over the last 15 years have increased awareness and interest amongst the population, and can be said to be projects that have really reached the people.