




# From Nan to Luang Prabang: The Buddhist Heritage of Northern Laos as Reflected in Recently Discovered Manuscript Collections

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## *[Abstract]*

Luang Prabang and Nan can look upon a glorious past as most eminent Buddhist kingdoms. During the first half of the nineteenth century both kingdoms were important centres of manuscript production. Luang Prabang has remained not only the centre of Lao Buddhism but also a place where the Buddhist manuscript culture of Laos is still alive. Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitto (1920–2007), the venerable abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam and head of the provincial Sangha, has created impressive collections of manuscripts and other documents, including historical photographs, which now are part of the cultural heritage of Luang Prabang. The analysis of colophons in manuscripts recording religious texts show some surprising aspects, such as the high percentage of laywomen who acted as the primary supporters (*mūlasaddhā*) sponsoring the making of manuscripts. In addition, there is evidence of a royal presence among the sponsors and donors. The study of colophons helps to increase our understanding of the relationship between scribes and sponsors/donors but also among different sponsors/donors when commissioning the making of manuscripts.

**Keywords:** Nan to Luang Prabang; The Buddhist Heritage; Northern Laos; Manuscript Collections

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## **Introduction**

The cultural and political significance of Nan for the whole Thai and Lao world has for quite a long been overlooked by Thai as well as international *phüin müang* scholars. But this has changed thanks to the works of the late Professor David K. Wyatt and Prof. Sarassawadee Ongsakul who translated or transcribed the Nan Chronicle (*Phüin müang nan*), though different versions of it, and to Achan Somjate Wimolkasem's admirable efforts to have the most precious mulberry paper manuscript *Anachak lak kham*, an ancient law text from Nan, inscribed as "Memory of the World". We now know that this relatively small border province of Nan is not only home of so many Buddhist heritage sites, such as Wat Phrathat Chae Haeng, but has a splendid history of its own. In the nineteenth century, Müang Nan was one of the most important vassal states of Siam equalling Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang in rank<sup>1</sup>. Until the early 1890s the territory of the autonomous kingdom of Nan was much larger than the present-day province of the same name. It comprised large areas that now belong to Phayao and Chiang Rai provinces and extended to places as far north as Wiang Phuka, Müang Sing in Laos or Müang Len in the eastern Shan areas of Burma. In fact, throughout the early Bangkok period Nan's relationship with Luang Prabang and Phrae were much more intensive than with Chiang Mai and the other *müang* in Western Lan Na.

At this juncture I would like to call into mind the endeavors undertaken by Khruba Kañcana Araññavāsī Mahā Thera (1789–1878), the Venerable Abbot of Wat Sung Men in Phrae. In the 1830s, Khruba Kañcana spent several years in Nan and in Luang Prabang to copy Buddhist texts from thousands of palm-leaf fascicles with the aim to rebuild one of the largest and best organized monastic repositories in Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia. We have two inscriptions documenting Khruba

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<sup>1</sup> These three vassal states sent considerably taller "gold and silver trees" as tribute gifts (*ratcha-bannakan*) to Bangkok than Lampang, Lamphun, Phrae or the Malay sultanates in the South. See Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 176.

Kañcana's endeavors. One inscription, inscribed on a now damaged stone slab kept at the provincial museum in Nan reads:

จุลศักราชได้ ๑๑๙๕ ตัว ปีก่าไส้ ยังมีพระมหาเถรเจ้าตน ๑ ชื่อ กัญจนะอรัญญ  
วาสี (อยู่) เมืองแพร่ เป็นเค้า และศิษย์เจ้าทั้งมวล จรดดินเทศมาเมืองแพร่ หน  
ปัจฉิมทิศเข้าถึงนี้เมืองน่านที่แล้วจึงได้นำเอานาบุญขึ้นเทิงศรัทธาภายใน  
ภายนอกทั้งมวล

ศรัทธาภายในมีพระสังฆเจ้าเมืองน่านที่นี้ ศรัทธาภายนอกมีเจ้าเมืองน่านที่นี้เป็น  
เค้า และอุปราชา ราชวงศ์ เจ้านายทั้งมวล พร้อมกันสร้างยังอักขระธรรมคัมภีร์  
ไตรปิฎกทั้งมวล ไว้อวดกพุทธศาสนา ๕๐๐๐ พระวรวงษา แล สังฆรวมธรรมทั้ง  
มวล อันได้สร้างนี้เป็นธรรมร้อยปลาย ๔ สิบ ๒ มัด จัดเป็นผูกได้พันปลาย ๖  
ร้อย ปลาย ๓ ผูก แล (...)

In CS 1195, a *ka sai* year (AD 1833/34), there was a Venerable Abbot named Kañcana Araññavāsī at Müang Phrae along with all his disciples coming from Müang Phrae, which lies in western direction, and arriving here in Nan. He created a field of merit. The principal monastic and lay supporters [were as follows]:

The principal monastic supporter (*sattha phai nai*) was the Supreme Patriarch of Müang Nan. The principal lay supporters (*sattha phai nõk*) were the king of Müang Nan, along with the viceroy (*upalaca*), the *latcawong* and all noblemen (*cao nai*). They joined in copying a complete set of the Tipiṭaka (the Buddhist canon) illuminating the Teachings of the Buddha to last [until the end of] 5000 years. The total set of the Dhamma Scriptures copied (literally: made) comprised 142 manuscript bundles (*mat*) or 1603 palm-leaf fascicles (*phuk*).<sup>2</sup>

We see here how the highest religious dignitaries, led by the Supreme Patriarch, hand in hand with the political leaders of the kingdom of Nan, led by the King and the second and third highest-ranking princes, celebrated the most meritorious endeavor of Khruba Kañcana Araññavāsī, the Venerable Abbot of Wat Sung Men, to copy a complete set of the Buddhist canon for his home monastery in Phrae. Khruba Kañcana's activities in Luang Prabang to spread the Dhamma were celebrated in a similar way in another inscription engraved on a stone slate which was discovered in Vat

<sup>2</sup> Inscription Müang Nan AD 1837, in: Phanphen Khrüathai and Silao Kethphrom 2001, pp. 43–49.

Vixun in Luang Prabang in 1887 and currently kept in the main temple hall of that prestigious monastery. The inscribed text states:

จุลศักราช ได้ ตัว ปีรวายสัน ๑๑๙๘ ยังมีพระมหาเถรเจ้าตนหนึ่งชื่อว่า กัญจนะ  
อรัญญวาสี (ที่อยู่) เมืองแพร์ เป็นค้ำ และศิษย์เจ้าทั้งมวลจรเดินทางแต่เมือง  
แพร์ (ของไทย) ยวน หนปัจฉิมทิศ เข้ามาถึงเมืองหลวงพระบางล้านช้างที่นี้  
แล้วก็ได้นำเอานาบุญขึ้นถึงเจ้าเมืองหลวงพระบางตนชื่อว่ามังธา เป็นค้ำ และ  
(เจ้า) ราชวงศ์เมืองหลวงพระบางเป็นประธาน พร้อมกันสร้างอักขรธรรมคัมภีร์  
ไตรปิฎกทั้งมวล ไวัชตกพุทธศาสนา พระวรราชาแล ได้ฉลอง ๕๐๐๐  
(พระไตรปิฎกใหม่ในวันดังกล่าวคือ) ในเดือนเพ็ญ ๔ เม็ง (ว่า) วันอังคารไทย (ว่า  
วัน) ก่าไก้ จึงแล้วบวรมวลวันนั้นแล

สังฆกรรมทั้งมวลอันได้สร้างนี้ เป็นธรรมจำนวน ๒๔๒ มัด จัดเป็นผูกได้  
๒๘๕๒ ผูก จัดเป็นเงินค่าจ้างแต่เขียน สมเด็จพระเป็นเจ้า เมืองหลวงพระบาง  
มีเงิน ตั้งเงินเจ้าราชวงศ์ ๘๕ มีเงินกลางหนัก ๑๘ ๒๐๒ บาทปลาย ๗ ก่า ปลาย  
๒ แดงเงินฝ้าย (เจ้า) ศรีธาเมืองแพร์ มีเงิน ตำลึง ๑๐ ชั่ง ๑ ปลายสลึง ๑๐ แต่  
คำปิวพอกธรรมเสริยงแผ่นแล ๑๒๘๐๐ (พระ) ธรรม (ที่) เจ้ามือ สร้างเป็นธรรม  
๓๔ มัด (พระ) ธรรม (ที่เจ้า) ราชวงศ์สร้างเป็นธรรม (...) มัดแล ๓๑

In CS 1198, a *rawai san* year (AD 1836/37), there was a Venerable Abbot named Kañcana Araññavāsī at Müang Phrae along with all his disciples coming from Müang Phrae [of the Tai] Yuan, which lies in western direction, and arriving in Luang Prabang-Lan Xang. He was taking a field of merit to ruler of Müang Luang Prabang whose name is Mangtha. [The King], along with the *cao latcawong* of Luang Prabang, were the principal lay supporters to make (i.e. sponsor the copying of) a complete set of the Tipiṭaka illuminating the Teachings of the Buddha to last [until the end of] 5000 years. [The finishing of the copying of this new set of the Tipiṭaka] happened on the full-moon day of the fourth lunar month, a Tuesday as the Mon say or a *ka kai* day as the Tai say<sup>3</sup>. Thus on that very day everything was accomplished.

The total number of Buddhist scriptures copies is 2852 [palm-leaf] fascicles (*phuk*) [organized] in 242 bundles (*mat*). The King of Luang Prabang paid a total of 85 *tang* as remuneration for the scribes, the *latcawong* paid [as remuneration] 18,202 *bat*, 7 *ka* and 3 *daeng*. Religious faithful from Müang Phrae paid 1 *chang*, 10 *tamliing* and 10 *saliing*. For sealing the palm-leaf fascicles a total of

<sup>3</sup> 1198 Phalguna 15 = Tuesday, 21 March 1837. This day was indeed a *ka kai* day and thus should be the correct corresponding date of the Gregorian calendar.

12,800 gold leaves were spent. The Buddhist Scriptures which the King made comprised 34 bundles, those which the *latcawong* made 177 bundles, and those which the lay supporters made 31 bundles<sup>4</sup>.

It is most interesting to note that the main contribution did not come from King Mangtha (or Manthathurat, r. 1817–1836) but from the *latcawong* – the number 3 in the political hierarchy of the Luang Prabang kingdom – who sponsored the copying of almost three-fourth of the 242 manuscript-bundles while the rest was roughly equally divided between the King and the Buddhist lay supporters from Phrae.

The unprecedented endeavor undertaken by Khruba Kañcana to spread the Dhamma in his home principality of Phrae through the support of the religious and secular orders of Nan and Luang Prabang underscores the close and even intimate relationship between the two *müang* though nowadays they belong to two different nation-states.

It is time now to turn our attention to Luang Prabang and ask for the contribution this beautiful town, situated at the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers had made to the preservation of the Dhamma, the precious Teachings of the Buddha.

In the following I will first give a short introduction into the unique collection of Buddhist documents which have been unearthed in various projects since 2005 and have culminated in the founding of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang ten years later. Thereafter, I will elaborate on the significance of manuscripts found at three recently discovered monastic repositories in Luang Prabang for the preservation of the Buddhist heritage of northern Laos.

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<sup>4</sup> Inscription Wat Wichun AD 1837, in: Phanphen Khriüathai and Silao Ketphrom 2001, pp. 279–285.

## **The Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang**

Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos, was in the past and still remains today the centre of Lao Buddhism. Traditional forms of Buddhist practice and monastic organization have persisted here more tenaciously than in other places, withstanding the manifold challenges posed by French colonialism, Marxist ideology and capitalist consumerism, with which Lao society was confronted throughout the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. Despite the town's relative geographical isolation, monks in Luang Prabang made very early use of the modern technology of photography to document both important occasions such as Buddhist rituals and ceremonies as well as daily life in the monasteries. The Buddhist Archive of Photography has collected so far more than 35,000 photos from nineteen monastic archives which document more than 120 years of monastic life (c. 1880–2006), as well as rituals, ceremonies, pilgrimages, portraits of monks and social life in its numerous forms. The collection, preservation and digitization of these photos were realized between 2007 and 2011 with the support of a generous grant provided by the British Library and its Endangered Archives Programme.

The person who made the Buddhist Archive possible and to whom we feel an immense amount of gratitude is the late Pha Khamchan Virachitto (1920–2007), who was abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam for 58 years. He was not only an outstandingly charismatic monk in his lifetime but also an enthusiastic collector of photographs, though he himself, unlike several other monks, never took the camera into his own hands. In 1993, Pha Khamchan Virachitto met the German photographer, artist and writer, Hans Georg Berger, who had embarked on a community project to document monastic life in Luang Prabang through the medium of photography. In 1995, the Venerable Abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam invited Mr. Berger to his *kuti*, his monastic abode, to show him some of his most precious photo albums. Ten years later, when the Venerable Abbot sensed

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<sup>5</sup> For a fine introduction to Lao Buddhism with emphasis on Luang Prabang, see Holt 2009 and Heywood 2006.

that his death was approaching, he asked Mr. Berger to preserve his photographic collection for posterity. If he had not done so, it is likely that all these historical photographs would have been cremated together with their former owner.

Whereas Vientiane has been heavily exposed to Thai – and later Western – influences, Luang Prabang represents Lao Buddhism par excellence to this day. Through the physical presence of the monarchy and the state administration, both Sangha and laity have always remained connected to the “grand policy” at the international level. This may help explain why Buddhist monks in Luang Prabang turned to modern technologies such as photography at quite an early date in order to document Buddhist ceremonies, rituals and monastic life.

Understood as a tool of the modern imagination, photography had already been taken up by Lao monks since the late nineteenth century. This revolutionary technology paved its way to remote Indochina only a few decades after its invention. More than 35,000 photographs from nineteen monastic archives document more than 120 years (c. 1880–2006) of monastic life, including ceremonies, pilgrimages, portraits of monks and novices and, finally, social life in its multiple forms. The huge photographic corpus, unique for the whole of Southeast Asia, documents a century which shaped the fate of Laos in many ways, as it was determined by French colonialism, foreign intervention, civil wars, the royal court, revolution and socialism, and finally, in more recent times, globalization. A special cultural understanding of the picture which is derived from the Indian tradition (*darshan*) explains why Lao abbots so tenaciously protected these large collections of photographs, the existence of which was only known among a small circle of insiders.

After Pha Khamchan Virachitto’s death in 2007, his *kuti* was opened and thousands of documents, personal letters as well as official documents which the Venerable Abbot had kept over a period of half a century were discovered. Several years later, Pha

One Keo Sitthivong,<sup>6</sup> abbot of Vat Pak Khan and Vat Xiang Thòng, who was also one of Pha Khamchan Virachitto's closest disciples – and since early 2013 Head of the Sangha of Luang Prabang province – gave permission to open two additional cupboards containing valuable historical items, by which several hundred palm-leaf manuscripts as well as mulberry paper manuscripts in leporello format came to light as well. It must be emphasized that these manuscripts were not part of the monastic library (*hò tham*) of Vat Saen Sukharam, but instead belonged to the abbot's personal collection of books and documents. Printed books, pamphlets, grey literature (such as internal documents of the Sangha used for religious and political teachings), and even a number of religious, cultural and political magazines from the 1950s to the early 1970s were uncovered, not only in Vat Saen Sukharam, but also in a number of other prominent monasteries, such as Vat Suvannakhili, Vat Xiang Thòng, Vat Mai (the former seat of the Supreme Patriarch), Vat Xiang Muan and Vat Maha That. I estimate the number of printed material to be roughly 1,500–2,000 items, of which more than 80 percent are kept either at Vat Saen Sukharam (largest collection) or at Vat Suvannakhili. More than two-thirds of the items are from either the French colonial period (1893–1953) or the era of the Kingdom of Laos (1953–1975). Almost one half of these pre-1975 printed materials were written in the Thai language and published in Thailand, reflecting the close relationship between monks in Luang Prabang and the monastic networks in neighbouring Thailand. The trial against Phra Phimonlatham

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<sup>6</sup> Pha One Keo Sitthivong was born on 3 May 1964 at Ban Naxay village in Naxaithong district, Vientiane. Between 1995 and 2001, he practiced the Vipassana meditation techniques at Vat Sok Pa Luang taught then by Pha Maha Sali Kantasilo (1933–2013), and studied at the Sangha College in Vat Ong Tue, Vientiane. In 2002, he was appointed by Pha Khamchan as chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) of Luang Prabang district. In 2013, he was appointed chairman of the LBFO in Luang Prabang province. He is the director of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang and a very socially engaged monk. He has worked extensively on developing Buddhist education in the province by creating the Buddhist Academic Institute at Vat Pa Pha O, which lies roughly 13 km to the north of the city of Luang Prabang and is the highest Buddhist educational institute in northern Laos, where more than 500 young novices currently live and study.



(1903–1989),<sup>7</sup> abbot of Vat Mahathat Yuvarajangsarit, during the regime of the staunchly anti-communist Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat was closely followed by Lao monks, at least by those from or residing in Luang Prabang. The many pamphlets and monographs related to the Phra Phimonlatham case found at various monasteries in Luang Prabang provide clear evidence of that interest.

### **Manuscript collections**

The vast majority of books and pamphlets are religious in nature, but the abbots also kept over an extended period of time materials related to politics, social issues, natural sciences, law, secular literature, philology and astrology. Of special importance are notebooks which some leading abbots used as diaries or sometimes as a means for recording administrative matters.

The vast majority of the roughly 1,200 personal letters kept at Vat Saen Sukharam are letters sent by Buddhists, both monks and laypersons, to the Venerable Abbot, Pha Khamchan Virachitto, starting from 1947 when he became abbot and continuing over a period of almost sixty years until the abbot's death in 2007. However, a few letters were written by Pha Khamchan himself; these are either letter-copies which the abbot wrote to fellow high-ranking monks or state officials or are letters addressed to laypersons which were never sent for reasons which are still unknown. The content of the letters pertains in most cases to private matters, sometimes being related to laypersons seeking personal advice. After 1975, a large number of Lao laypeople fled to foreign countries, and it is amazing to see how many of them maintained contact with Pha Khamchan over large distances and extended periods of time. Thus, we find exciting reports about the living conditions of Lao refugees in Thailand, the United States, Canada, Australia, France, Germany and many other countries.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> His last honorific title was Somdet Phra Buddhachan (At Asabha Mahathera).

<sup>8</sup> As for the Pha Khamchan's correspondence and its value as a historical source for the relationship between Sangha and laity in contemporary Laos, see

As for the more than 4,800 administrative documents kept in Pha Khamchan's *kuti*, they are of immense value for understanding the organizational structure of the Sangha, its relationship with the state – prior to the socialist revolution and thereafter – and the social history of Luang Prabang. In this respect, I would like to mention the detailed census lists for Vat Saen Sukharam and many other monasteries which have been recorded since the 1950s. They not only list the names of monks and novices, their age at ordination, their duration of stay in the monkhood and their villages of origin, but also provide data on their family and social background, and in some instances even their ethnic affiliation.<sup>9</sup>

The most impressive written treasure Pha Khamchan Virachitto left behind is his impressive personal collection of more than 400 palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts stored in Western style cabinets. In addition, a number of manuscripts were stored in an ordination hall (*sim* สิม), the sermon hall of a temple (*sala hong tham* ศาลาโรงธรรม) and a museum (*phiphithaphan* พิพิธภัณฑ์). Interestingly, Pha Khamchan Virachitto's manuscript collection, which he had built up for his personal use over half a century, comprises not only numerous manuscripts, but also a variety of modern publications and printed materials which may have influenced the content found in some specific manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> His abode was a centre for storing both religious and secular knowledge. However, after Pha Khamchan Virachitto's passing in 2007, the manuscripts in his collection were not preserved as quickly as they should have been. In consequence, some of them became damaged due to various causes which are very typical in the humid climate of South and Southeast Asia: "stains and spots, discolouration of the ink, insect damage, damage due to fungus, loss of flexibility, [and] splitting of the various layers of the palm-

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Khamvone 2015.

<sup>9</sup> For details, see Grabowsky and Berger 2015, Appendix 3.

<sup>10</sup> The whole collection of manuscripts, books, journals, personal correspondences and historical photographs collected by the Venerable Abbot over a period of almost six decades has been analyzed in various articles in the volume of Grabowsky and Berger 2015.

leaves”.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript collections from Vat Saen Sukharam – along with similar collections held in several other monasteries – have been inventoried, documented and digitized in the project “Rare manuscripts of great Buddhist thinkers of Laos: Digitization, translation and relocation at the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang” (EAP 691). In the final phase of the project, which had been supported by the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme from February 2015 until July 2016, our research team made a surprising discovery.

After a first survey, conducted in late March 2016, it became clear that at least a substantial number of manuscripts from this corpus had been donated by abbots and monks of neighbouring Vat Si Mungkhun, or by monks from other monasteries and laypeople of the surrounding communities, including members of the traditional nobility of Luang Prabang and even by the King of Luang Prabang and other members of the royal family. Though several manuscripts are from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the bulk dates from the first half of the twentieth century. The overwhelming prominence in this manuscript collection of scribes, sponsors and donors associated with Vat Si Mungkhun makes it most likely that these manuscripts were originally kept in the monastic library (*hò tai*) of Vat Si Mungkhun, which nowadays is used as a monk’s dormitory (*kuti*) and no longer contains any manuscripts. Later on, these manuscripts were transferred from Vat Si Mungkhun’s library to their present location for still unknown reasons. There are 541 manuscripts in the Vat Si Bun Hüang (VSB) collection, comprising a total of 861 fascicles (*phuk*). Of these manuscripts 353 (two thirds) are dated and only 188 (one third) are undated.<sup>12</sup> The oldest manuscript in the VSB collection, which can be dated accurately, is a fragment of the Nagarakhaṇḍa, the thirteenth and last section (*khaṇḍa*) of the Vessantara Jātaka (BAD-21-1-0485); the date when the writing was finished corresponds to Thursday, 5 September 1799 of the Gregorian calendar. There are even two older extant

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<sup>11</sup> Agrawal 1982: 85.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see the catalogue of the Vat Si Bun Hüang manuscript corpus in Khamvone and Grabowsky 2017; and Grabowsky 2019.

manuscripts whose dating is less certain. The dating of manuscript BAD-21-1-0477, containing a *Maha Vibak* (“Great Retribution”) text (January 1783) is less precise and contains internal contradictions. More certain is the dating of an untitled manuscript BAD-21-1-0478 which contains a Vohāra text. The colophon records a date whose components points to Thursday, 12 October 1662 as the likely day when the scribe finished the writing of the manuscript. The most recent manuscript in the Vat Si Bun Hüang collection is from 1982. Thus, the whole collection covers a time span of 320 years. In a project supported by the Centre for the Studies of Manuscript Cultures in Hamburg (CSMC) these manuscripts were inventoried, catalogued and digitized from October 2016 until August 2017.

Among the four other monasteries was also Vat Xiang Thòng, probably the most famous monastery of Luang Prabang, visited by hundreds of thousands of Lao and foreign tourists every year. During the 2014 survey of manuscripts in the monasteries of Luang Prabang town in preparation of the above-mentioned project EAP 691, the research team of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang discovered a large collection of manuscripts in Vat Xiang Thòng, which were stored in eight wooden boxes (*hip tham*) in the storage room of a monk’s abode (*kuti*). We learnt that these manuscripts were kept in the abbot’s living quarters for decades and have been moved to the monk’s *kuti* when the abbot’s abode was renovated in 2013. All these manuscripts had not been inventoried by the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme in the 1990s. Shortly after the discovery the team started conducting the preservation work and the manuscripts were classified, arranged in order and wrapped in protective cloth. Later in 2015, the manuscripts were moved again to a beautiful temple hall or *sala* which is located next to the *kuti*. In July 2016, the Buddhist Archives asked for permission from the abbot of Vat Xiang Thòng to borrow the manuscripts and keep them temporarily at the Buddhists Archives for the purpose of documentation and digitization.

As a result of our research, we found that the manuscripts had been

collected and used by the late abbot, Sathu Nyai Mao Manivansa Maha Thela (1921–2001), during the second half of the twentieth century. At least five manuscripts had been sponsored by the abbot himself. One photograph from the collection of Vat Pak Khan shows the Venerable Abbot teaching one of his pupil novices using a palm-leaf manuscript as teaching material. This provides factual evidence that the Venerable Abbot used the manuscripts not only for preaching to laypeople during Buddhist ceremonies but that he also taught his disciples to learn and use the manuscripts. Based on the fact that a number of manuscripts from the corpus under study come from Vat Pak Khan, where Sathu Nyai Mao had been monk until 1940, we can assume that the Venerable Abbot had moved the manuscripts from Vat Pak Khan to Vat Xiang Thòng for security reasons at a time when Vat Pak Khan was lacking an abbot. He could do this because Vat Pak Khan was later placed under his supervision.

The corpus of registered manuscripts kept at the abbot's abode of Vat Xiang Thòng comprise 637 palm-leaf manuscripts with a total of 735 fascicles (*phuk*) as well as five mulberry paper manuscripts. The manuscripts, as far as they are dated, cover a period of more than two and a half centuries (AD 1724–1983). Out of this total, 519 palm-leaf manuscripts and five paper manuscripts have been inventoried, catalogued and digitized from September 2017 until February 2018, also with the support of the CSMC in Hamburg. The remaining manuscripts were actually printed in the Thai script on palm-leaf and thus were beyond the scope of digitization and cataloguing within the frame of this project. It has to be stressed that these manuscripts were not accessible to the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme in the 1990s whose inventory and documentation was restricted to the monastic library (*hò trai*) of Vat Xiang Thòng.

The last and by far the largest corpus of manuscripts which has been digitized are almost 1,500 manuscripts from Wat Maha That, one of the most ancient monasteries of Luang Prabang. The monastery, built by King Saysetthathirat in May 1548, is a focal

point of the most important festivals of the Buddhist Year and for keeping the tradition to preserve an important part of Luang Prabang's Buddhist heritage. During the Lao New Year festival, this monastery is the point for starting the traditional process of *hae vò* (palanquin procession) to Vat Xiang Thòng. In February 2017, the research team of the manuscript project of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang visited the monastic library at Vat Maha That, which is located on the right side of the temple hall (*sim*), to examine the manuscripts. Though the team found most of the manuscripts still in good physical condition, in a number of boxes the manuscripts were already damaged by insects, some of them severely, and many manuscripts were not arranged properly. Moreover, most manuscripts do not have any inventory numbers, indicating that they had not been inventoried by the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme run by the National Library and supported by the German Foreign Ministry in the 1990s, probably because these manuscripts were kept in the abbot's abode (*kuti*) and used exclusively by Sathu Nyai Phui Thirachitta Maha Thela (1925–2005), a great intellectual monk and abbot of Wat Maha That, during his life time. The digitization of this large corpus of manuscripts which has been in a highly endangered state after the death of the Venerable Abbot, has been supported by the “Digital Repository of Endangered and Affected Manuscripts in Southeast Asia” (DREAMSEA) since September 2018 and was finalized by the end of May 2019.

Whereas the personal collection of manuscripts kept by Pha Khamchan Virachitto in his living quarters contained a high percentage of such multiple-text manuscripts, in particular among the mulberry paper folding books, they are rare in the Vat Xiang Thòng collection. Several secular or non-religious texts do not appear in any of the manuscripts from this collection, for example customary law texts, philological and astrological treatises, and the wide field of secular literature, apart from a few folk tales (*nithan* นิทาน). Texts related to white magic (*sainyasad* ไสยศาสตร์) and rites and rituals (*phithikam* พิธีกรรม) are as rare as medical treatises

(*tamla ya* ตำรายา). The collection contains several dozen chronicles almost all of them have to be classified as “Buddhist chronicles” (*tamnan phutthasatsana* ตำนานพุทธศาสนา). In the following section the variety of manuscripts from Luang Prabang with regard to their textual contents is briefly analyzed for the Vat Xiang Thòng corpus as a case study.

A significant number of manuscripts from Vat Xiang Thòng (139) contain texts from the Pali canon and thus can be classified as belonging to the categories of Vinaya, Suttanta or Abhidhamma. Of almost equal importance are the popular Jataka stories, dealing with the previous lives of the Buddha, representing one-fifth of the manuscripts of the Vat Xiang Thòng corpus. The large number of Jataka texts written on palm-leaf is not surprising, either. This suggests that the Jataka stories, dealing with the previous lives of the Buddha, are not only well-known to the Lao people of Luang Prabang, but are also very popular. Among the many Jataka stories, the Vessantara Jataka is the most popular one. It tells the story of one of Buddha’s lives immediately before he was born as Siddhattha Gotama. The story is about the compassionate Prince Vessantara, who gives away everything he owns, including his children, thereby displaying the virtue of perfect generosity or *dāna*. It is also known as the *Thet Mahasat* (Great Birth Sermon), familiar to Lao Buddhists under the name *Phavet* or *Phavetsandòn*. Phavet is also the name of a traditional festival, Bun Phavet, which is held some time around the fourth lunar month of every year. The festival lasts two or three days, with the story of Prince Vessantara being recited all day on the final day of the festivities. The story, composed in verse form and comprising thirteen chapters or *kan* (กัณฑ์), is chanted aloud by monks and novices with years of experience preaching all of the chapters. The text combines Pali words and phrases with the respective Lao translation.<sup>13</sup> According to the tradition, three of them – *Himaphan*, *Thanakan*, *Kuman* – are usually divided into two volumes. As a consequence of this sub-

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<sup>13</sup> Vessantara Jataka, known among Lao Buddhists as Phavet or Pha Vetsandòn, is the last story of the Jataka, which is a series of 547 canonical tales recounting the past lives of the Buddha. See Bounleuth 2016: 110.

division, the story of Prince Vessantara is composed and written on sixteen fascicles of palm leaves. However, many of the Jataka manuscripts from the Vat Si Bun Hüang collection comprise only one of the thirteen *kan*, not the complete text.

Besides the Jataka tales (100 manuscripts), *Anisong* (Pali: *ānisaṃsa*) texts (69 manuscripts) are featured most prominently in the Vat Xiang Thồng collection of manuscripts.<sup>14</sup> *Anisong* texts are generally known under the terms *Salòng* or *Sòng* in Lao. These popular texts, inscribed mostly on palm-leaf, mulberry paper and other kinds of paper, are used for performing sermons or preaching. These short homiletic texts, which rarely contain more than twenty folios, are about the rewards of merit or literally the “advantage” which a believer may expect to receive from performing a particular religious deed. More surprisingly, collections of manuscripts also include titles referring to non-Buddhist rituals, such as a marriage ceremony (*Anisong taeng ngan*) in which monks are not supposed to intervene in this region of Southeast Asia. In truth, *Anisong* could be seen as a paradigm of the principle of what we might call “Buddhization by means of text”, that is, the legitimisation of a given practice by its written record with a sacred script (the Dhamma script<sup>15</sup>) on a sacred object (the manuscript). In this way, any local custom may become unquestionably “Buddhist” if it is included as a subject in an *Anisong*.

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<sup>14</sup> As Arthid Sheravanichkul (2009 and 2010) has shown in his seminal study of gift-giving in the Thai and Lao world, the kind of gifts recommended in *Anisong* texts pertain to (a.) giving alms to the Sangha (food and medicine, robes and cloth, ritual offerings such as flowers and lamps, sponsoring the construction of temple buildings, copying of religious texts); (b.) producing objects of worship (images, stupas); (c.) constructing public works (bridges, roads, hospitals, schools) and (d.) giving gifts in ceremonies or festivals (celebrating a new house, funerals, the Buddhist New Year, etc.). The manuscripts of Pha Khamchan Virachitto’s collections containing *Anisong* are analysed in Bounleuth 2015b and Bounleuth 2016: 130–136.

<sup>15</sup> As for the origins and spread of the Dhamma script, see Grabowsky 2008.



**Table: Distribution of texts of the Vat Xiang Thòng collection according to genres**

Genre	หมวด	No. of fascicles	In percent	No. of manuscripts	In percent
General Buddhism	ธรรมะทั่วไป	2	0.4	2	0.4
Vinaya rules	พระวินัย	25	4.4	25	4.8
Suttanta doctrine	พระสูตร	117	20.6	109	20.4
Abhidhamma doctrine	พระอภิธรรม	8	1.4	5	1.0
Buddhist tales	นิยายธรรมะ	43	7.6	43	8.3
Jataka tales	ชาดก	125	22.0	100	19.1
Prayers	บทสวดมนตร์*	35	6.2	35	6.7
Anisong (blessings)	อาณิสงส์	70	12.3	69	13.2
Rites and rituals	พิธีกรรม	1	0.2	1	0.2
Monolingual Pali	คัมภีร์บาลี	5	0.9	4	0.8
Buddhist chronicles	ตำนานพุทธศาสนา	72	12.7	69	13.2
Secular chronicles	ตำนานเมือง	1	0.2	1	0.2
Customary law	กฎหมาย	---	---	---	---
Didactics	คำสอน	33	5.8	32	6.1
Medical treatises / White Magic	ตำรายา / ไสยศาสตร์	19	3.3	19	3.6

Genre	หมวด	No. of fascicles	In percent	No. of manuscripts	In percent
Folktales	นิทาน	---	---	---	---
(Secular) Literature	วรรณคดี	10	1.8	7	1.3

### The contents of the colophons

Apart from the dating, colophons reveal a lot more about the background of the manuscripts, its production, purpose and usage. Colophons appear at the end of the manuscript. They either directly follow the main text from which it is separated by a blank line or by smaller-sized letters, or they appear on the recto side of an additional folio. As Hundius (1990) indicates in his definition, Tai-Lao manuscript tradition lacks a clear distinction between the writer or author of a manuscript and a copyist. Lao manuscripts usually use the terms *phu taem*, *phu khian*, or *phu litchana*<sup>16</sup> for denoting the scribe who would call himself *kha* (“serf [of the Buddha]”). Besides, a number of colophons also mention a *phu sang*, literally the “maker” of a manuscript.

Some colophons of our corpus are scribal colophons (28 manuscripts). The vast majority of manuscripts with colophons (323), however, express the wishes of their sponsors and donors. While few manuscripts have colophons which are exclusively scribal,<sup>17</sup> many more record the names of both the scribe and the persons who sponsored the making of the manuscript and donated it to the Sangha. In general, the intentions for making the donation and the wishes expressed in the colophons pertain to the principal monastic or lay supporters, the religious faithful (*mūlasaddhā*) who took the initiative of making the production of the manuscript possible (cf. von Hinüber 2013, XLVIff.).

<sup>16</sup> From Pali: *likhita*, “written”, “inscribed”, past participle of *likhati*, 3. Pers. Sg. of *likh* = “to write”, “to inscribe”.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the manuscripts BAD-17-1-0375 and BAD-17-1-0414.

The three wishes that seem evenly distributed over all periods are that the writing of the manuscript will eventually lead to *nibbāna* (“the splendid city, the peak of *nibbāna*”), that it will lead to obtain merit (*puñña*) or rewards of merit (*phala ānisaṃsa*) either for the writer, the sponsor and donor, his family or other people, and that the copying of the manuscript and/or its sponsoring and donation to the Sangha will be a support (*kamchu*) for the Teachings of Buddha (*sāsana*) to stay until its completion of 5,000 years, counted from Buddha’s entering of the *parinibbāna* (see Veidlinger 2006: 164–165). This basic purpose is grounded in the widespread belief among the Tai and Lao that the complete degeneration of Buddha’s Teachings will be reached after 5,000 years. Whereas the intention of the sponsor and donor to extend the lifespan of Buddhism is expressed as a standard phrase in almost all of the longer colophons and even in most of the rather short ones, the wish to be reborn in the age of Buddha Metteyya (Ariya Maitreya) is restricted to only a handful of colophons, a wish expressed in different phrases, either in the Lao vernacular (the first two example) or in Pali (the last two examples):

May [we] be born in the period of the Buddha named Ariya Metteyya. (ขอได้เกิดพร้อมพระเจ้าตนชื่อว่าอริยมุตไตรย) [BAD-17-1-0327, dated 23/01/1818].

May I be born in the period of the Teachings of the future Enlightened One named Ariya Metteyya. May I be ordained [as a monk] to gain perfection under the guidance of Pha Ariya Metteyya and then achieve arahantship under Pha Ariya Metteyya. May I receive the royal gift and listen to the preaching of Pha Ariya Metteyya (ขอให้ผู้ข้าได้ร่วมในศาสนาพระพุทธเจ้าตนจักลงมาตรัสสัพพัญญู ภายหน้าตนชื่อว่าอริยมุตไตรยเจ้า ขอให้ผู้ข้าได้บวชสร้างบารมีในสำนักพระ อริยมุตไตรยเจ้า ขอให้ผู้ข้าได้รับพระราชทานฟังพระธรรมเทศนาของพระอริยมุตไตรยเจ้าแล้ว) [BAD-17-1-0173].

*Nibbāna paccayo hotu me metteyya santike niccaṃ dhuvam dhuvam.* (May this be a condition to reach *Nibbāna* at the residence of [Ariya] Metteyya, continuously and forever), (นิพพาน ปรจจโย โหตุ เม เมตเตยย สนติเก นิจจํ ทูวํ ทูวํ) [BAD-17-1-0366, dated 2/12/1812].

Ayaṃ me dānaṃ hontu me metteyya sanike yāva nibbānaṃ sukhaṃ hontu me. (May this donation be a condition for me to meet Metteyya bringing me the happiness of Nibbāna (อัย เม ทานั โหนตุ เม เมตเตยย สนติเก ยาว นิพพานั สุขั โหนตุ เม) [BAD-17-1-0440, dated 09/10/1971].

**Table: Contents of colophons**

		BAD-17-1-0375	BAD-17-1-0436
<b>Era</b>		CS 1276	BE 2516
<b>Lunar calendar</b>	<b>Year</b>	<i>kap nyi</i> (Year of the Tiger)	<i>ka pao</i> (Year of the Ox)
	<b>Month</b>	Seventh lunar month	third lunar month
	<b>Fortnight</b>	Third waning day	twelfth waning day
	<b>Day of the week</b>	Fifth day of the week (Thursday)	second day of the week (Monday)
	<b>Zodiac day</b>	<i>poek si</i>	---
	<b>Corresponding to</b>	AD 1914, June 11, Thursday	AD 1974, February 4, Monday
<b>Time</b>		---	<i>nyam kòng laeng</i> (time of the sunset drum, 13:30 – 15:00 h)
<b>Initiator</b>	<b>Scribe</b>	Phummapaññā (monk)	Bhikkhu Sukhapaññā
	<b>Sponsor/donor</b>	Phummapaññā (monk) with elder sister (procuring the palm leaves)	Buddhist layman Nai Vaen and his wife Sao Nang from Ban Pak Lao (town quarter)
<b>Title</b>		<i>Sòng sangkhan</i> (Benefits from sponsoring New Year celebrations)	<i>Akalavattasutta</i>
<b>Objective</b>		To ensure the continuation of Buddhism over five thousand <i>vassa</i> (rains-retreats)	To ensure the continuation of the Teachings of the Buddha until the end of five thousand years

<b>Wish</b>	May this merit support our parents, brothers, sisters and all relatives. If they were exposed to suffering, they would move to a good place. If they are already at a good place, they should move to an even better place; thus hundred shall be equivalent to hundred, ten thousand and one hundred thousand definitely.	May we gain only happiness and prosperity as our wishes, definitely.
<b>Concluding phrase (in Pali)</b>	Nibbāna paccayo hontu no (May this be a condition for us to reach Nibbāna.)	Idaṃ dhammadānaṃ nibbāna paccayo hontu (May my dhamma-gift be a condition to reach Nibbāna).

The length of the colophons varies considerably. Many colophons are rather short, providing only the date when the (often unnamed) scribe completed the writing of the manuscript, followed by a brief statement that the merit gained from the making and donation of the manuscript might support the Teachings of the Buddha (*phuttha-satsana*) to last until the end of 5,000 years. Other colophons are relatively long and may even run over more than one side of a palm leaf. Apart from the dating, the recording of the names of scribe and principal sponsor, the mention of the motives and intentions for making the manuscript, the aspirations a scribe or sponsor/donor had for the good results of the acquired merit, some of the longer colophons also contain some personal expression, including biographical details. The structure of such colophons is analyzed in the following chart discussing two samples which are from different periods and whose sponsors/donors come from different social background.

One of the most interesting colophons with regard to the wishes and aspirations of a sponsor/donor is recorded in the unusually long colophon of manuscript BAD-17-1-0221, titled *Maha munlanipphan* (Pali: Mahā Mūlanibbāna Sutta). The principal initiator, the main sponsor of this manuscript, was a laywoman named Sao (Ms.) Suk from the town quarter of Ban Khili who dedicated it to a *chao ku*, a deceased person to whom the donor had caused harm in one of his previous lives and who threatens to return in this or a future life to take revenge by causing harm to the wrongdoer in various ways. By donating a palm-leaf manuscript bearing a famous Sutta text and offering gifts to the *chao ku* or *phaya kam chao*, the donor longs for redemption from this looming harassment. The manuscript, dated 18 April 1942, states in its colophon (folio 40 recto and verso):

จุลศักราช ๑๙๔๒ (ปี) เต่าชะ (สะ) ง้า เดือน ๖ ออกใหม่ ๑๔ คำ วัน ๓ รจนา แล้วตามยามกองงาย หมายถึงสาวสุขบ้านคีรี มีใจใสศรัทธาสร้างหนังสือมหามูล (นิพพาน) ผูกนี้ ทานให้หาพระยากำเจ้า อันผู้เข้าได้ปะได้ปานไว้แก่พระยากำเจ้านั้น บัดนี้ ผู้เข้าได้กระทำมาแล้วยังเครื่องกิริยาบุญทั้งหลายผู้นี้ ผู้เข้าก็นำมาแก้ไข มาบูชาเจ้ากูให้เจ้ากูจงเสด็จลงมาโถมรับจับเอาเครื่องกิริยาบูชาของผู้เข้านี้ มีหนังสือมหามูลนิพพานผูก ๑ กับข้าวตอกดอกไม้ และข้าวน้ำโภชนาอาหารหลายประการต่าง ๆ ทุกเรื่องพร้อมมา ๆ ขอให้เจ้ากูจงเสด็จลงมาในกาลเดี๋ยวนี้ด้วยเทอญ ผู้เข้าชื่อว่าสาวสุข ได้ปะพระยาเจ้านั้น บัดนี้ผู้เข้าขอมาแก้มาแก้ไขเสียในกาลบัดเดี๋ยวนี้เทอญ ประการหนึ่ง ครั้นว่าเจ้ากูมารับเอายังเครื่องทั้งหลายผู้นี้แล้วขอให้เจ้ากูจงโปรดผู้เข้านี้กระทำชำระโทษภัยกล่าวคือว่าพยาธิโรคา สรรพสิ่งอันตรายภายใน และภายนอกขอกขันธสันดานในตนตัวของผู้เข้านี้ ชื่อว่าสาวสุขนี้แด่เทอญ ประการหนึ่งขอให้ผู้เข้ามีอายุมันยืนยาวได้ร้อยชวชวบเข้าให้มันเพียงเท่าที่เข้าแต่ก็เข้าเทอญ ขอให้เจ้าผู้รับเอาแล้วจงให้ผู้เข้านี้ มีอายุมันยืนยาวได้ร้อยชวพันวัสสาแต่ก็เข้าเทอญ นิพพานัง ปรมัง สุขัง

In CS (sic!) 1942, a *tao sang* year, the fourteenth waxing day of the sixth [lunar] month, the third day of the week,<sup>18</sup> the writing was finished at the time of the morning drum (*nyam kòng ngai*). Sao Suk [from] Ban Khili village had the religious faith to sponsor the making of this manuscript titled *Maha munla [nipphan]* to dedicate as the benefit for *phaya kam chao* to whom I made an oath. Now I have prepared these offerings to fulfil [the oath for] *chao ku*. May *chao ku* come down and receive my offerings including this *Maha*

<sup>18</sup> 1304 Vaisakha 14 = Tuesday, 28 April 1942.

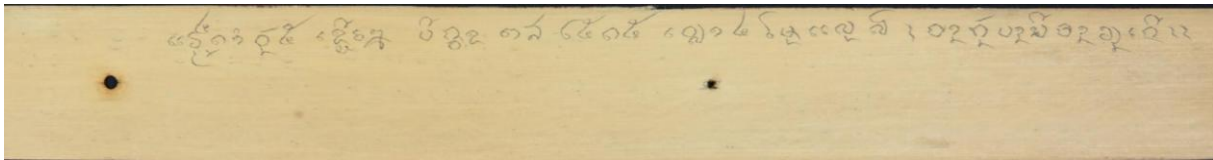
*munlanipphan* manuscript, popped rice, flowers, rice, water, food and other miscellaneous things. May *chao ku* come down right now. I, Sao Suk, made an oath with *phaya chao kam*. Now may I fulfil [the oath] right now. On the one hand, if *chao ku* receives these offerings, may *chao ku* help me to clear all dangers that are diseases and various kinds of dangers both inside and outside of the physical and mental bodies of mine whose name is Sao Suk. Moreover, may I have longevity to last until one hundred and twenty years, exactly. May *chao ku* receive my offerings and help me to have longevity of one hundred and twenty thousand years. Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ. (Nibbāna is the highest state of happiness.)

### **Scribes, sponsors and donors**

Only a small amount of colophons in the 524 manuscripts of the Vat Xiang Thong corpus record the names of scribes. The vast majority just state that the writing was accomplished at a certain date, directly followed by the names of the leading and initiating monastic or lay supporters (*mūlasaddhā*) and their intentions for sponsoring the making of the manuscript. Only 28 colophons explicitly mention the scribe's name and, in some cases (10), also his affiliation to a certain monastery, village or town quarter. Three-fifths of the known scribes were members of the Sangha, either abbots or other monks, and in some cases also novices. Two-fifths of the scribes were laymen among whom four are called *achan* ("learned man"), sometimes also called by its short form *chan*, while most of the other lay scribes were former monks (*thit* or *khanan*) or novices (*xiang*).

In most colophons the names of the leading monastic or lay supporters (*mūlasaddhā*) who commissioned the making of manuscripts, are mentioned prominently. Their intentions and wishes are recorded. In the case the scribe's name also appears in a colophon, his role is clearly of secondary importance. In the colophon of manuscript BAD-17-1-0288, for example, the mother of a woman called I (Ms.) Chanthi dedicated the manuscript of an

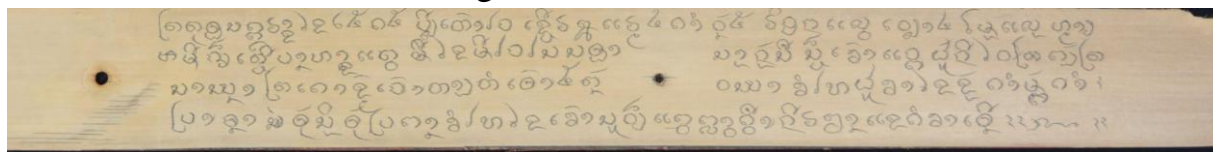
*Anisong* text titled *Sòng thung lek* (Benefits derived from making an iron flag) to her deceased daughter so that the benefits resulting from that donation would have a positive impact on her daughter’s further rebirths. The scribe, a monk, humbly expresses his own wish in the final sentence: “Chao Mòm (monk) Tan was the scribe, may I get a large share of the merit.” (เจ้าหม่อมตันเป็นผู้รจนา ขอส่วนผลบุญนำหลาย ๆ แต่ทอน) A few manuscripts have separate scribal and donor’s colophons, both written by the scribe. The colophon of manuscript BAD-17-1-0402, which contains also an *Anisong* text (about the benefits derived from the distribution of rice), first has the scribal colophon on folio 7 verso, running over one single line:



แรม ๔ ค่ำ วัน ๕ เดือน ๘ ปีชวด พ.ศ. ๒๕๑๕ เวลา ๔ โมงแลงแล จารย์พันธ์  
บ้านสีถานเขียนน้อ

On the fourth waning day of the eighth [lunar] month, the fifth day of the week in the Year of Rat, BE 2515. [The writing was finished] at 4 p.m. Chan Phan from Ban Sithan was the scribe.

The colophon of the manuscript’s sponsor/donor is inscribed on the recto side of the following folio 8:



พระพุทธศักราชได้ ๒๕๑๕ ตัว ปีเต่าใจ เดือน ๘ แรม ๔ ค่ำ วัน ๕ รจนาแล้ว  
เวลา ๔ โมงแลง หมายถึงเขียนเพื่อ บ้านหาดแก้ว ได้มีใจใส่ศรัทธาสร้างหนังสือ  
สองข้าวแจกผู้กินไว้กับศาสนาพระโคตมเจ้าตราบต่อเท่า ๕ พันวัสสา ขอให้ผู้ข้า  
ได้ตั้งค้ำค้ำค้ำปรารถนาทุกสิ่งทุกประการ ขอให้ได้เข้าสู่เวียงแก้ว กล่าวคือว่า  
นิพพานแด่ก็ข้าเทอญ

In Buddhist Era 2515, a *tao chai* year, on the fourth waning day of the eighth [lunar] month, the fifth day of the week,<sup>19</sup> the writing

<sup>19</sup> 1334 Pratomashada 19 = Thursday, 29 June 1972; or 1334 Toutyashada 19 = Saturday, 29 July 1972.



was finished at 4 p.m. Xiang Fua from Ban Hat Kaeo had the religious faith to sponsor the making of this manuscript titled *Sòng khao chaek* (Benefits derived from distributing rice to the deceased) to support the Teachings of Gotama Buddha to last until the end of five thousand years. May all my wishes be fulfilled. May I enter Nibbāna, definitely.

Sometimes a scribe acted as a co-sponsor, together with a close relative. This is clearly the case in the colophon of manuscript BAD-17-1-0284 which mentions a person named Phummapannya (Bhūmipaññā), probably a monk, as the scribe whose unnamed elder sister (*üai* ເື້ອຍ) donated the palm-leaves for making an *Anisong* manuscript title *Sòng sangkhan* (Benefits derived from sponsoring a New Year festival).<sup>20</sup> The merit obtained from this donation is dedicated to their deceased parents, brothers and sisters.

Though scribes were many monks and novices, with former monks and novices making up the rest, the vast majority of sponsors/donors were laypeople. Our analysis of the names of monasteries and home villages of scribes and sponsors/donors reveals that almost one half of the “leading monastic supporters” (i.e., monks and novices) were based at Vat Xiang Thòng (which is not surprising), followed by those based at Vat Pak Khan (4). Half of the 91 manuscripts recording the home villages of the “leading lay supporters” point at two town quarters situated in the immediate neighbourhood Vat Xiang Thòng, namely Ban Xiang Thòng (22) and Ban Kang, which neither is surprising. Astonishing, however, is the relatively high number of manuscripts (9) commissioned by sponsors coming from the village of Ban Koen in the northwestern

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<sup>20</sup> Sommai Premchit (1992: 176) explains it as follows: “The word *Sangkhan* or *Songkran* in standard Thai is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sankranti*, or *sankhara* in Pali, meaning the shift of the sun from one sign of zodiac to another, and particularly in this case from Pisces to Aries.” The *Sòng sangkhan* text explains the arrival of the Sun deity (*suriyathevabut*) and how it crosses to Aries (*lasi mek*) at the beginning of the New Year. During the crossing over towards (the) Aries, people get various kinds of suffering, diseases, disaster. But when people welcome the “arrival of Aries” through meritorious gift-giving, they will be safe in safety. The text also says that the tradition of pouring water in veneration of the Triple Gems and the sprinkling of other elderly relatives with fragrant water is included in the New Year merit-making. The rewards of merit focus on longevity, prosperity and finally a good rebirth.

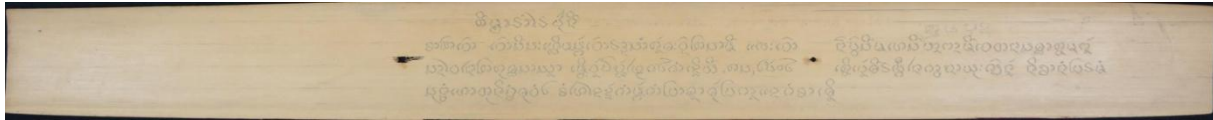
province of Luang Namtha, situated more than 200 km north of Luang Prabang. We surmise that Saen Chan, the aristocratic sponsor of all nine manuscripts,<sup>21</sup> was a local official in Luang Prabang who wanted to express his connectedness with his far-away home village rather than “making” the manuscripts in Luang Namtha and bringing them to Luang Prabang thereafter.

The principal lay supporters who sponsored the making of manuscripts were mostly couples with the name of the husband mentioned first, followed by the wife’s name. The couple would include their children (*luk* ลูก), grandchildren (*lan* หลาน), great-grandchildren (*len* เหลน), or simply the “whole family” (*phanthuvongsa* พันธุ์วงศ์) as beneficiaries of the merit resulting from the donation. A surprisingly large number of colophons (in 86 manuscripts) mention a woman as the principal lay supporter, either alone or together with her husband whose name would be listed in second position. These women are recognizable by their titles *sao* or *nang* for younger or middle-aged women, *pa* (“aunt”) for elderly women, or simply *mae òk*, which means “laywoman”. One is tempted to speculate that in cases where a woman was the only leading lay supporter, she was either an unmarried woman or a widow; in the latter case children and other family members would explicitly be mentioned as beneficiaries. Many of the sponsors were members of the nobility or aristocrats as their titles such as *phia*, *phanya*, *mün* or *saen* indicate. A total of six manuscripts can safely be identified as sponsored by members of the royal family; this is far less than in the manuscript collection recently discovered at Vat Si Bun Hüang with 18 royally sponsored manuscripts (see Khamvone and Grabowsky 2017). One of the most prominent royal sponsors was Prince Saloemsak Rasasamphanthavong and his wife, Princess Buasi, who commissioned one manuscript (BAD-17-1-0437) in 1961/62 in commemoration of Prince Saloemsak’s birthday. The colophon is immediately visible as it is written – unlike the main text – not on the full length of the palm-leaf but

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<sup>21</sup> See the manuscripts BAD-17-1-0008, BAD-17-1-0014, BAD-17-1-0015, BAD-17-1-0028, BAD-17-1-0029, BAD-17-1-0031, BAD-17-1-0332, BAD-17-1-0369, BAD-17-1-0540.

only on the last two thirds of the recto side of folio 33 leaving the first third (on the left side) blank. It reads:



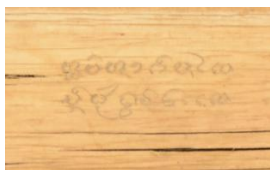
พิมพ์ว่าไรพูกนี้ ข้าพเจ้า เจ้าศรีเฉลิมศักดิ์ เจ้าราชสัมพันธ์วงศ์ พระสามี และเจ้า  
นางบัวสี มเหสี บ้านกวาง มีเจตนาศรัทธาพร้อมกันสร้างไว้ในพระพุทธศาสนา  
เมื่อวัน ๖ ออกใหม่ ๑๔ ค่ำ เดือนยี่ พ.ศ. ๒๕๐๔ เพื่อเป็นที่ระลึกในคราวอายุ  
ครบนั้น นิพพานัน ปรหม์ สุขุ โหตุ นิจจัน ทูว์ ทูว์ ขอให้ได้ตั้งค้ำค้ำปรารถนา ทุก  
ประการแด่ กัข้าเทอญ

This manuscript titled *Phimpha hamhai*, I, Prince Saloemsak Rasasampanthavong, the [royal] husband and Princess Buasi, the queen, from Ban Kang had the religious faith to sponsor the making of the manuscript to support the Teachings of the Buddha on the sixth day of the week, the fourteenth waxing day of the second [lunar] month BE 2504<sup>22</sup> in commemoration of the anniversary of my birthday. *Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ hotu niccaṃ dhavaṃ dhavaṃ* (Nibbāna is the highest state of happiness, continuously and forever.) May our wishes be fulfilled, definitely.

Though manuscripts kept in a monastic repository belonged to that monastery, they were frequently borrowed for various purposes, be it for being studied and copied by monks from a neighbouring monastery lacking a specific text or for being used in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies outside the monastery's compound. This explains why the scribes used to admonish all borrowers of manuscripts to return them to its original place as expressed in the following rather short colophons written in the Tham Lao script (BAD-17-1-0320): “Novice Daeng was the scribe of this manuscript. Anyone who borrows it has to return it.” (จะน้อยเนาหนังสือจัวแดงเป็นผู้ริจนา แม่นไผ่ยืมให้ส่ง). Occasionally we find ownership statements which help identify the provenance of a manuscript which does not contain any para-textual information about scribe and sponsor(s). The palm-leaf manuscript BAD-17-1-0138, containing one chapter (fascicle 2) of the Phra

<sup>22</sup> 1323 Pausha 14 = Friday, 19 January 1961.

Malai legend,<sup>23</sup> is a case in point. Lacking a colophon, it has only the ownership statement on the verso side of folio 1, reading ວັດປາກຄານ (Vat Pak Khan), indicating that this fascicle – part of a larger codicological unit comprising several fascicles – originally belonged to Vat Pak Khan, a monastery situated in the immediate neighbourhood of Vat Xiang Thòng.



Folio 1r: Title of the manuscript (Dhamma script): *Malai Saen*, fascicle 2



Folio 1v: Ownership statement (in Lao Buhan script): Vat Saen [Sukharam]

## Conclusion

Luang Prabang and Nan can both look upon a glorious, though turbulent, history as centres of Buddhist kingdoms having made most valuable contributions to the Buddhist culture of the peoples of Thailand and Laos. The unique endeavor of Khruba Kañcana, abbot of Wat Sung Men, mentioned at the beginning, demonstrates that both Nan and Luang Prabang had been thriving centres of manuscript production during the first half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it could be shown that Luang Prabang still retains its status as such a centre until present times, not only for northern region but for the whole of Laos. The production of manuscripts has not died out in Luang Prabang; Lao manuscript culture is still a living one. Intellectual monks, such as Phra

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<sup>23</sup> The story of Pha (Phra) Malai is a Buddhist legend, whose immediate model is a Pali text originally from northern Thailand. The work describes the adventures of the monk Phra Malai who is equipped with supernatural forces. After a visit to the sinners in hell as well as the gods in heaven and the future Buddha Maitreya, he returns to earth and proclaims to the people there the Buddhist teachings. Although the legend of Phra Malai is also known in Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia, manuscripts with illustrations were apparently produced only in central Thailand, especially during the nineteenth century. Because of the cathartic effect of the popular legend, it was read especially at weddings and at cremation ceremonies, by monks and laymen alike. See Brereton 1995; Denis 1965; and Collins 1993.

Khamchan Virachitto, the late abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam, have built up impressive collections of manuscripts and other documents – written as well as photographic – which represent part of the cultural heritage of Luang Prabang. The research undertaken by the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang since 2005 has resulted in a number of admirable digitization projects and catalogues that provide tools for further research on Lao Buddhist manuscripts.

The analyses of colophons recorded in these manuscripts reveal quite interesting features: Though the structure and content of the colophons of the corpus as a whole are hardly different from what we know from other Lao, Northern Thai or Tai Lü manuscripts which bear religious texts, some aspects are nevertheless astonishing, such as the relatively high percentage of women serving as principal lay supporters or the presence of royalty among the sponsors and donors of manuscripts. Moreover, several colophons also help to sharpen our understanding of the cooperation between scribes and sponsors/donors but also among different sponsors/donors in the making of a manuscript.

Even though during the last years a lot of projects have been carried out to preserve, document and digitize manuscripts in various parts of Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, still much has to be done to identify either physically or culturally endangered collections of manuscripts, both in monastic repositories and in private hands. The author hopes that his article might help raise awareness to speed up research in the diverse manuscript cultures of the Thai and Lao world which constitute a most precious heritage of the people in the region.

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#### *Vat Xiang Thòng collection*

- BAD-17-1-0008: *Nyòt tham* (Supreme Dhamma); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 7 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CE 1286, a *kap cai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0014: *Sakkaban* (part of the Vessantara Jataka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 14 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CE 1286, a *kap cai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0015: *Chulaphon* (part of the Vessantara Jataka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 18 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CE 1286, a *kap cai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0028: *Lam Mahavet* (Vessantara Jataka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 31 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CE 1286, a *kap cai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0029: *Sapphasut* (All kinds of Sutta); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 31 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CE 1274, a *tao chai* year (AD 1912).
- BAD-17-1-0031: *Thatsaphòn* (part of the Vessantara Jataka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 18 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1286, a *hap khai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0138: *Malai saen* (Phra Malai), fascicle 2; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 12 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao, Lao; undated.
- BAD-17-1-0173: *Upasamphathakammavacha*; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 30 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1282 or CS 1286 (AD 1920 or 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0221: *Maha Munlanipphan* (Mahā Mūlanibbāna); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 41 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; AD 1942, a *tao sanga* year.
- BAD-17-1-0284: *Sòng thung lek* (Benefits gained from making an iron flag); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 4 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; unknown.
- BAD-17-1-0320: *Untitled (Lam Phavetsantara; Sakkati)*; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 19 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1271, a *kat hao* year (AD 1909).
- BAD-17-1-0327: *Untitled (Lam paet mün)*; palm-leaf manuscript;

- one fascicle of 20 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; [CS] 1179, a *moeng pao* year (AD 1817).
- BAD-17-1-0332: *Himmaphan* (part of the Vessantara Jataka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 19 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1286, a *kap chai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0366: *Untitled* (Kammavaca); palm-leaf manuscript; 1 fascicles with a total number of 55 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1174, a *kap sanga* year (AD 1812).
- BAD-17-1-0369: *Salòng maha vetsantara* (Benefits gained from the sponsoring of Vessantara Jataka manuscripts); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 8 folios; language: Lao, Pali; Script: Tham Lao; CS 1286, a *kap chai* year (AD 1924).
- BAD-17-1-0375: *Sisuthon*; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 8 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1276, a *poek si* year (AD 1914).
- BAD-17-1-0414: *Niyai ngua nòi* (Story of the little calf); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 7 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1138, a *moeng khai* year (AD 1776).
- BAD-17-1-0436: *Sisuthon*; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 33 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; BE 2516, a *ka pao* year (AD 1973).
- BAD-17-1-0437: *Phimpha hamhai* (Paññā pāramī); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 34 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; BE 2516 (AD 1974).
- BAD-17-1-0440: *Niyai sangkanibat*, first fascicle; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 26 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; BE 2515, a *huang khai* year (AD 1972).
- BAD-17-1-0540: *Himmaphan* (part of the Vessantara Jataka); one fascicle of 19 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1286, a *kap chai* year (AD 1924).

### ***Vat Si Bun Hüang collection***

- BAD-21-1-0477: *Pathama vongsamarini*; palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 26 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS 1]144, a *tao nyi* year (AD 1782).
- BAD-21-1-0478: *Untitled* (*Vohan Thesana suttasom*), palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 26 folios; language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; [CS 1205], a *ka mao* year (AD 1843).
- BAD-21-1-0485: *Untitled* (*Maha vessantara*; The Great Vessantara Jātaka); palm-leaf manuscript; one fascicle of 16 folios;

language: Lao, Pali; script: Tham Lao; CS [1]161, a *kat mot* year (AD 1799).

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