

Issues and Future of Preservation Activities and Collaboration in Southeast Asia

Rujaya Abhakorn
ex-Professor of Chiang Mai University, Thailand

In spite of its grand title, this paper will focus mainly on the countries of the Mekong region on mainland Southeast Asia, where in the last two decades of the twentieth century, we saw a flurry of preservation activities that brought to light hundreds of traditional manuscripts in palm-leaf, paper and other forms of writing materials (Rujaya 2000). The new millennium is witnessing a slow down, which may be a blessing in disguise as preservation efforts are moving into the next logical phase, that is the making use of the preserved materials by scholars for whom they were intended in the first place. This paper attempts to summarize the status and some of the current issues in preservation in this area of Southeast Asia, and to explain the reasons behind them. Prospects for future collaboration exist, especially in a bilateral form but collective efforts at preservation continue to be hampered by the lack of finance, leadership and practical structure.

Current Situation

The Mekong countries have been receiving assistance in the 1980' and 1990's mainly from Germany, France, the United States and Japan. Germany was involved in collaborative projects for the cataloguing, restoring and microfilming of temple manuscripts in northern Thailand and the whole of Lao PDR. France was in Cambodia through the *École Française d'Extrême-orient (EFEO)*, while institutions from the US concentrated on Vietnam and providing training for other countries, including Myanmar. The Japan and Toyota Foundations provided funds for temple manuscripts cataloguing and microfilming in Myanmar. Collaboration with Japanese academic institutions has also moved preservation efforts in Myanmar forward. Most national archives and libraries in the Mekong region, with the exception of those in Thailand and Myanmar, do not always have the basic facilities for conservation and can hardly match those in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

In Laos, the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme covered over 800 temples, preserved and inventoried 374,000 fasciculi or *phuk*. Some 54,000 *phuk* or 9,700 titles were microfilmed. There are now over 1,000 rolls of microfilms available for reading (Hundius 2004, 5-6). In Cambodia the EFEO has been conducting the *Fonds d'édition des manuscrits du Cambodge (FEMC)* project at Wat Ounalom, Phnom Penh since 1999. The FEMC team restores, microfilms, catalogues and publishes traditional Cambodian manuscripts. As some 83 per cent of temples in Cambodia lost their libraries during the Khmer Rouge period, representing the destruction of between 95 and 98 per cent of the traditional literary heritage of Cambodia that had existed before 1970, the project is essential. Since 1990 the FEMC team has visited about 1000 temples or a quarter of the total in Cambodia, preserved and inventoried nearly 10,000 bundles of manuscripts or 4,000 titles. A master

inventory and catalogue of Cambodian manuscripts has been developed. A "Provisional Inventory of Manuscripts in the Monastic Libraries of Kandal and Phnom Penh" has been published and two more are planned. They will be related to the collections of wat libraries at Wat Saravan in Phnom Penh and Wat Phum Thmei Serei Mongkol in Kompong Cham. (Bernon 2006, 1-2 and private interviews).

The National Museum in Phnom Penh also has a microfilmed collection of palm-leaf manuscripts, a Michel Tranet Collection of 223 palm-leaf manuscripts not yet microfilmed, and a photograph collection. The National Library too has a small collection of traditional manuscripts. Meanwhile between 2000-2006, the National Archives of Cambodia, whose important holdings are the French colonial papers since 1863 of the Residence Superieur and records of the National Assembly of 1946, continue quietly to microfilm these official documents and Bulletins and restore maps, plans, posters, and newspapers. With new leadership and improved governmental support, the National Library has made good progress in improving its facilities and services since 2002. There are new equipment, including a Minolta PS7000 scanning machine for rare books.

One forgotten institution in SEA is the Lao National Archives which holds some colonial French records, pre-1975 manuscripts and parliamentary records, and present-day state papers. There are over 6,000 files. It has small staff and services only official requests with no public access.

Between 2004 and 2007, the National Library of Thailand made a number of surveys of manuscripts in about 18 provinces around the countries. They found traditional manuscripts that were still intact in over 65 temples. Lists of titles were made and manuscripts were dusted and re-packaged with minor intervention. Nearly 1,000 manuscripts in *samut* form were found, which usually refers to folded books made from mulberry papers and tree barks. It is estimated that there were about 50,000 fascicles of palm-leaf manuscripts in these temples (National Library of Thailand 2006)

At present, the Project on the Preservation of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in Northeastern Thailand (acronym PPMN in this paper) at Mahasarakham University in Maha Sarakham province is probably the most active in the region for on site preservation. Established in 2003 under the auspices of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, it is run by the University with a small staff of seven and a budget of nearly two million Baht (US\$ 54,000) in 2005. In addition, it received one million Baht from the provincial authorities in setting up a Palm Leaf Museum at Wat Maha Chai and a digital data base on palm-leaf manuscripts. With these two budgets, the PPMN can work with its mission of

1. Surveying and preserving palm-leaf manuscripts in the northeast;
2. Transliterating palm-leaf manuscripts in all academic subjects and disseminating them;
3. Training on traditional scripts and writings used in palm-leaf manuscripts;
4. Conducting basic and applied researches and studies on palm-leaf manuscripts using interdisciplinary method;
5. Applying modern technology in the recording and managing the records of palm-leaf manuscripts and providing service to the general public both in the country and outside.

So far the Project has made inventories of palm-leaf manuscripts in over 50 temples. At Wat Maha Chai alone there are nearly 5,000 fasciculi of palm-leaf manuscripts. There is however no microfilming activity. Its website is informative and could be transformed into a digital library (<http://www.bl.msu.ac.th/bailan/index12.asp>).

Elsewhere two trends can be discerned: one is the interest shown for audio visual materials and the other is digitization. In Vietnam while the Vietnamese Government has been supportive of the preservation of library and archival materials in the National Library, National Archives, the Institute of Han Nom Studies, there seems to be a tendency to support non-written materials as well. The National State Archives hold extensive records that also include VDO's, photographs, glass-photos, voice recordings, films, manuscripts of famous persons. Center No. III houses a well-equipped sound archives of speeches of national leaders as well as their photographs. Vietnam donated many original Indochina war films to the Laotian National Film and VDO Centre built with Vietnamese aid. Financial assistance and training have also been provided to Laos in recent years. The Vietnam Film Institute itself has a holding of 80,000 films which are well stored in a modern building with controlled temperature. The oldest dated back to 1946 which is a record of President Ho Chi Minh's visit to France. The colonial French collection reflects the memory of the urban history of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Conservation efforts in Myanmar have moved from temple preservation to digitization. With funding from Aichi University a project titled "Comprehensive Research on the Conservation and Compilation of Southeast Asian Historical Manuscripts by Transforming the Medium" was conducted from 1999-2001. The catalogue data on the digitalised *parabike* manuscripts as well as full texts in the original scripts with abstracts in English are now available. Another collaboration with the Centre for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies in Japan is being carried out with the aim of microfilming and digitalising *parabike* manuscripts from all over the country. This is supposed to be the most modern technically with a searchable database. As Dr. Thaw Kaung explains:

The transcription of each mss image can be compared with the scanned image. Scholars can easily view the reformatted detailed readings which are transcriptions of each *parabike* page, as well as view the original text in the original *parabike* format. Catalogue data are also given in Romanised script using the Library of Congress Romanisation System for Myanmar Script which is widely used in libraries through out the world.

(Thaw Kaung 2005, 17-18)

Staff development was another area that John Dean at Cornell University Library was rightly concerned with. With funding from the Henry Luce Foundation, many preservation technicians and managers from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam benefited from the program. Unfortunately the program could not be taken up by regional authorities themselves.

The damage caused by the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean region has galvanized national and international efforts in documents recovery that keep alive the needs in preventive conservation. Recovery and rebuilding efforts are now occupying the time of the Indonesian National Archives and Library. It has had a positive affect on the discussions on disaster planning as a whole which was not a popular topic before 2005. Nevertheless there is no regional body that takes up this issue on a permanent basis.

The Issues

There appear to be four main areas where questions arise and unless they are sufficiently addressed preservation activities in Southeast Asia will continue to proceed at a slow pace.

First is the financial issue. While personal commitment to the cause of conserving literary heritage and social memory is there, preservation still requires technical knowledge, tools and labour that can only become available though financial support. Some countries like Lao PDR and Myanmar may genuinely lack financial resources, but in most cases preservation and conservation has low priority in official planning and competes with computerization plans in libraries. Hopes of funding from international institutions like IFLA/PAC Core Activities in Asia or the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme are always present but it is unlikely that they will have the necessary financial resources for sustainable action.

Second, there are technical issues which are not properly discussed or, most importantly, not worked out within the region. The digital boom has threatened to create a long list of orphaned texts and inventories as most institutions in the region would have no means of migrating the information from microfilms or papers to a digital format. There is a general feeling among users in Thailand that microfilms are obsolete and capturing documents using digital cameras should be the practice from now on. There is no concern whether digital data would be “long-lived” or not. For example the Cambodian Ministry of Information who still possess some pre-and post-1975 official newspapers and broad-sheets plans to digitize but not microfilm them partly because of the lack of budget but mainly because of the interoperability with computers. .

Thirdly, there is still no “best practice” in international collaboration for preservation and conservation that is not financially demanding. Without leadership in the region or a long-term management structure, efforts can only be on and off. In Judith Henchy’s opinion the biggest problem confronted by the SEAM Project in Vietnam has been “a tendency toward secrecy among institutions. It has been hard to learn what resources exist at each institution so that preservation priorities can be planned” (Henchy 1998). This is a structural problem that is common for the whole region as government institutions that possess archival resources are under different ministries. Cooperation between bureaucratic units can only happen if all their leaders understand what needs to be implemented. The situation becomes more complicated when there is a third party from outside the country whose objectives may be questioned by some and acceptable by others. As information becomes a valuable

commodity, even its copy is valuable. As traditional manuscripts are seen as national treasures, their movement in any form can become under scrutiny. Collaborators must be aware of this concern and try to work out an acceptable solution.

The lack of leaders in the region with international experience in preservation is another negative factor. The retirement of experienced senior staff is not a welcoming sign as there will be a question over the sustainability of preservation activities in the country. Most likely, as is happening in Myanmar, retired people will be asked to continue their work in some officially recognized capacity. The shortage of qualified personnel in preservation works has always been a problem in the region that needs to be addressed urgently through training and capacity building programmes.

Multilateral collaboration cannot be avoided in the sharing of resources and knowledge and one recent attempt has been made. SEACAP (Southeast Asian Consortium for Access and Preservation) is a loosely organized group of librarians, archivists and scholars of Southeast Asia from Southeast Asian countries and countries with Southeast Asian studies that was formed at the *International Meeting on Microform Preservation and Conservation* held in Chiang Mai in February 2000 to promote preservation and provide access to SEA library and archival materials. A *Master List of Southeast Asian Microforms: Digitization Project* was implemented between 2001-2003 by ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) Library and funded by the Japan Foundation. The aim was to provide access to the published and documentary heritage of the Southeast Asian region, both as a service to the general scholarly community, and to preservation planners in the region and beyond. The project planned to develop a database of Southeast Asian microform titles held by an estimated 60 participating institutions in the region to be available via the Internet and published in CD-ROM format, in order to allow and facilitate the widest possible access, even for those countries of the region which do not have stable Internet connectivity. It would provide a tool for preservation planning and access to research materials. Unfortunately it proved to be over ambitious without adequate budget and because of difficulties in managing a worldwide consortium with no financial support the group's activities could not be further maintained.

There are still voluminous indigenous materials of cultural and historical significance and uniqueness scattered in many parts of the SEA region outside archives and libraries. Unfortunately the concern with economic development and lack of interest in them will indirectly destroy them gradually. How to revive interests in local history, sources of wisdom, manuscripts of learning and proud memory so that the common people will take charge of preservation or tell the rulers and politicians to do so is one of the concerns that are not usually discussed at international PAC meetings.

The Future

The EFEO statement that since it “has no vocation to proceed indefinitely with restoration and inventory of manuscript in all monasteries of all provinces in a country which is now sovereign and at peace, the time has come to teach to others to carry on the task which still remains urgent” (Bernon 2006, 2-3) reflects the

movement away from direct preservation of indigenous manuscripts by external agencies in mainland Southeast Asia. The German and French contributions in Thailand, Lao PDR and Cambodia of the 1990's have more or less ceased. Although there are still some indirect assistance from the US to Vietnam, the golden age of inventory and photography of local traditional manuscripts seem to be over. Unfortunately the indigenous governments are still too preoccupied with economic affairs to take care of literary heritage which continues to disappear through neglect.

The Toyota Foundation Research Grant Program entitled *Preservation, Compilation, and Annotation of Indigenous Documents: Between Chinese and Indian Civilization* may help in filling the gap somewhat. Under this grant the National Library of Laos is working on the project "Annotated Catalogue of Tai Nuea Manuscripts in Northern Laos" which will conduct intensive research on the Tai Nuea scripts and language as well as the oral traditions and recitals.

Along this line, the most positive trend is the social utilization of the text which can manifest in various ways. It is clear that the wider revival of interest in Lan Na (northern Thai) scripts and language came after the establishment of the Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture at Chiang Mai University with the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts Project. At the mundane level, it is now fashionable for government offices and Buddhist temples to write their main gateway signs in both Thai and northern Thai. Classes on how to write and read northern Thai scripts can be found in some temples. A local famous writer, Mala Khamchan, has established a centre at an NGO's School of Lan Na Wisdom Preservation in Chiang Mai for the study of popular northern Thai literature found in palm-leaf manuscripts, especially the *nithan* or folk tales for children. Ancient tales are being transliterated into modern Thai for wider dissemination. Mala intends to publish a collection for distribution in 200 primary schools in Chiang Mai (*Mala Khamchan* 2006). The PPMN Project in northeastern Thailand also runs courses in traditional scripts and language, transliterate literary and herbal medicine texts and plan to publish them.

In Lao PDR and Cambodia many folk tales have been published. Recently Reyum Publishing summarized various oral and written versions of the legend of Preah Ko and Preah Keo to a short text and published it with colourful illustrations. (*Preah Ko Preah Keo* 2001) A verse text in a palm leaf manuscript found at Wat Preak Po was used to present another legend, Preah Chan Kaorup (*Preah Chan Kaorup* 2001).

There is also the linking of palm leaf texts to rituals to show how they were used in the past. Scholars of Cambodia are particularly interested in using this integrated approach. Ashley Thompson made use of a text from Phnom Penh's Royal Palace archives which she calls a "Cambodian Ritual Text" as it is used in the *Hau Pralung* or the "Calling of the Souls" ceremony which is still performed in Cambodia (Thompson 2005) Olivier de Bernon has explained that

...philological analysis of manuscript writings is, as a rule, unable to enlighten about their inner meanings, and even less their social significations. In order to be effective, textual collation must be complemented by a systematic enquiry into a text's ritual and social utilization. (Bernon 2006, 3.)

He gives an example of a preaching text meant for 7 monks to act out in exchanges of questions and answers related to the Buddhist canon. Placing such texts in the ceremonial context will remind the community of certain past practices that sustained a deep understanding of the religious teachings and point out the high value of the written words.

The linkage between text and mural painting is an obvious one that is often overlooked. San Phalla of the Reyum Art School found that the stories most frequently depicted on the walls of temple buildings are the Jataka tales. The *Sovannasam Cheadok* inspired him and his students to paint the story on canvas in the traditional mural painting style. Both the paintings and the text were then published with high quality (*The Sovannasam Cheadok* 2003).

However, for many scholars and librarians of Southeast Asia, one project from the US will boost preservation and access. The Southeast Asia Digital Library Project looks very promising and futuristic as it plans to pool all rare information sources of Southeast Asia into one Internet-based digital library on Southeast Asia. The U.S. Department of Education-funded project worth \$780,000 over four years will be based at Northern Illinois University (NIU) Libraries. Seven US universities, one university from the Philippines and two from Thailand will participate. It is expected that the digital library will contain “rare early-printed works in the languages of the region, historical photographs covering a century of life in Cambodia, a video archive of a currently influential television news program in Indonesia, a video archive, known as the Living Memory Project, with interviews of former political prisoners in East Timor, and digitized images of rare and fragile palm-leaf manuscripts from northeastern Thailand.” (Parisi 2005) The Thai university that will be in charge of the palm-leaf component, however, is not Mahasarakham University, but Khon Kaen University about 70 kms away which is known for its IT capability rather than preservation and conservation.

It is that as long as there are Southeast Asian studies in the US, there will be more similar public funding to acquire relevant materials from the region for the nation’s leading universities. There will also be a time when the Southeast Asians start to value their intellectual resources differently and new models of collaboration will become necessary.

Conclusion

Since the year 2000 preservation and conservation of traditional manuscripts activities especially on mainland Southeast Asia have slowed down for the lack of funding, the uncertainty over the best method of preservation and conservation, the failure to find the right chemistry for international collaboration between conservationists within the region and those outside and the continued economic development that rarely incorporate the protection of heritage into its agenda. .

This has resulted in separate creations of databases, different standards of service for users, and daily destruction of traditional manuscripts in local institutions through carelessness. The future is not promising although there is a bright prospect

that the documents that have already been preserved are being brought to good use by, among others, “revivalist” scholars with integrated approach, who intend to bring back to life texts through accompanying rituals. Hopefully they will stimulate preservation interests at the local level.

This however should not be a substitute for an agreed common technical approach in conservation for tropical Southeast Asia, direct state intervention and the dissemination of information on lessons learnt and good practices in preservation and conservation by the regional governments themselves with experts’ advice from friends in preservation everywhere.

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