

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BUDDHIST ARCHIVE

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Multi-faceted Perspectives on the Buddhist Archive of Luang Prabang: The Case of the Chaṭṭha Saṅghāyana and the Buddhist Jayanti

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The participation of Lao monks and laypeople in the Sixth Great Buddhist Council and the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in Burma and Sri Lanka linked Lao Buddhism to the rest of the Theravada world. Compared to the Buddhist orders of larger Theravada countries like Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka, the Lao Sangha played only a minor role in the proceedings of these events. For many people in Rangoon or Colombo, this may have been the first time in their lives that they had even heard of Laos. This article has attempted to explain how the memories of these events were preserved in photographic evidence and written documents by members of the Lao delegations to Burma and Sri Lanka, notably by those Lao monks from the old royal capital of Luang Prabang. It has become evident that these different kinds of sources – commemorative photos, diaries, internal documents of the Sangha, and official publications – provide corroborative evidence for reconstructing this fascinating pilgrimage.

A number of issues need further research. It would be interesting to learn more about the exchange of views between the members of the Lao delegations and Buddhists – monks as well as laypeople – from other countries. The contact with Thai monks at the Chaṭṭha Saṅghāyana seemed to be quite intimate, which is not astonishing, as Lao and Thai people can easily communicate in their respective languages without needing translation. As for communication with participants from other countries, there was obviously a language barrier which had to be overcome. Some Lao monks, like Pha Khamchan, had a reasonable command of Pali, the lingua franca of Theravada Buddhism, and could therefore hope to establish communication with fellow monks from Burma and other countries through this ecclesiastical language. Some laymen, accompanying the members of the Lao Sangha, had a good command of English, as was the case with Mr. Khamchan Pradith. Much more important for establishing channels of communication with local monks and laypeople, however, was the presence of the young Lao student-monks who had ordained in Burmese and Sri Lankan monasteries (Figure 7.18).

One is also tempted to speculate that a quite unique mulberry paper manuscript, found in 2011 in the *kuti* of Pha Khamchan Virachitto, was used by Pha Khamchan and fellow members of the Lao delegation as a dictionary or glossary to facilitate communication with the Burmese (both monks and laypersons). The manuscript, running over 44 folios, written recto and verso, starts with a short introduction into the Burmese alphabet and writing system, followed by a list of 2,385 words and phrases. The list is divided into three columns.²⁶ The first column contains the Burmese word in Burmese script and the second column has the same word written in phonetic transcription using the Tai Khün variant of the Dhamma script. The third column, finally, gives a translation into Tai Khün also written in the Dhamma script. It is unclear where and by whom this manuscript was produced, as it does not contain a colophon.

Given the close relations between Luang Prabang and the Tai Khün polity of Chiang Tung, especially with regard to the flow of monks in both directions, it could be possible that a Tai Khün monk from Chiang Tung came to Luang Prabang to help compile this glossary. The translations contain numerous

²⁶ The mulberry paper manuscript – length: 62.0 cm, width: 23.0 cm – comprises 44 folios or 88 pages of which 5 are void (pages 26 and 85–88). The manuscript has the inventory number BAD-13-02-063. A detailed analysis of this unique document will be reserved for a separate article.

Siamese words (e.g. *arai* = what; *thammai* = why?) and hybrid Siamese-Tai phrases (e.g., *cao yu thi nai* = where are you?). This makes it seem more likely that the compiler (or scribe?) consulted both a Burmese-English and an English-Thai dictionary. Otherwise, the terms would have been directly translated into Lao or the related Tai Khün dialect. As the manuscript contains neither a colophon recording the name of the scribe, nor the location nor the date of its composition, we must look for other internal evidence to determine whether the manuscript could have been used during the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana. The Burmese-Tai Khün glossary is intersected on page 66 by a letter written in Burmese script and language which is then followed by a translation into Tai/Lao language and written in the Dhamma script. In this letter, the scribe expresses his gratitude to a good friend of his, a Chinese businessman in Rangoon. The letter is dated “Rangoon, 20 March 1940”. From this we may surmise that the manuscript was probably completed at a time not much later than that date and we cannot rule out the possibility that it found its way from Burma to Luang Prabang sometime before 1954.

This article has tried to demonstrate how different categories of primary sources kept within the Buddhist Archive in Luang Prabang – photographic as well as written evidence – are, when viewed in kaleidoscopic fashion, capable of providing multi-perspective corroborative evidence for reconstructing developments and events pertaining to the history of Lao Buddhism in the twentieth century. Our case study here, the Lao participation in the Sixth Great Buddhist Council and the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations, shows that this method might be very useful in shedding some light into otherwise almost completely unknown terrain.