A HISTORY OF RESEARCH

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Buddhist Collections of Luang Prabang: A History of Research (2005–2015)

Laos is still the least researched civilization of mainland Southeast Asia. This has historical rather than cultural reasons. The geographic isolation of Laos, the only land-locked country in Southeast Asia, its subjugation to foreign rule since the late eighteenth century, and its involvement as a "sideshow" in the Indochina wars of the last century certainly contributed to this neglect. While the modern nation-state of Laos is a product of French colonial rule, its historical roots date back to the Kingdom of Lan Xang Hòm Khao (literally, "[Land of] the Million Elephants and the White Parasol"), founded in the mid-fourteenth century by Fa Ngum (r. 1353–1373/74), an exiled prince from Müang Sua (nowadays Luang Prabang), who unified the politically fragmented, Lao-inhabited areas of the middle Mekong valley with the military support of his father-in-law, the Khmer ruler of Angkor. This first Lao kingdom prospered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when it was, for most of the time, on equal par with her neighbours Vietnam, Siam, and Burma. Its disintegration in the years 1707–1713 led to the emergence of three separate kingdoms – Luang Prabang in the North, Vientiane in the Centre, and Champasak in the South – each of which claiming to be a legitimate successor of Lan Xang. Of these three Lao kingdoms, only Luang Prabang survived Siamese suzerainty (1778–1893) and French colonialism (1893–1953) as an autonomous political entity.

Laos is the name of a multi-ethnic nation-state whose official name since December 1975 is "Lao People's Democratic Republic" (Lao PDR). In a broader historical perspective, however, Laos also refers to the cultural domain of the former kingdom of Lan Xang and the wide areas where Lao speaking populations (more than 20 million nowadays) have been living for centuries, and which share the same religious traditions. These areas include the bulk of the Khorat Plateau, Thailand's Isan region, where today five times more Lao native speakers live than in the Lao PDR itself. Any study of Lao Buddhism has to recognize this geopolitical, historical, and cultural background. Although Lao culture is essentially Buddhist, less than two-thirds of the seven million inhabitants of Lao PDR are adherents of Theravada Buddhism. Most of the country's non-Buddhists are "animists", practitioners of ancestor worship, notably among the Khmu, Hmong, and many other of the about four dozen ethnic minorities.

According to a standard view shared by most scholars of Lao history, Theravada Buddhism came to the Lao lands quite late and in several waves: The first wave started shortly after the founding of the Lan Xang kingdom by Fa Ngum whose wife was a princess from Angkor. At the request of his daughter, the Khmer king sent a religious mission to Luang Prabang to help Buddhism take root in Lan Xang. This mission brought monks from Cambodia and Sri Lanka, along with a complete collection of Pali texts,

including the Tipitaka, and two sacred Buddha images to the new capital. Thus, Buddhism first entered Laos from the South and strengthened Khmer influence on Lao culture. A second wave of Buddhism reached Lan Xang from the North in the mid-fifteenth century. Following a period of political turmoil, which lasted more than a decade, Lao rulers forged close religious and political ties with the kingdom's western neighbour Lan Na, which by the 1470s had developed into a major centre of Buddhist learning in Southeast Asia. The "Lan Na school" of Buddhism in Lan Xang was reinforced during the reign of King Phothisarat (1520–1547/48), who married a princess from Chiang Mai and sent a mission to Lan Na in 1523 to bring back copies of the entire Buddhist canon, as well as other religious texts, and to invite learned monks to gather at a great monastic council in Luang Prabang. This event marked the third wave of disseminating Buddhism, which resulted in a deep and penetrating embodiment of Buddhism in Lao society. Following the incorporation of Lan Na into the Burmese sphere of power in the mid-sixteenth century, Lan Xang even became the heir of Lan Na's erstwhile flourishing Buddhist culture. This is evident from the dissemination of Lao Buddhist literature throughout the middle Mekong river basin and beyond, even at times when political authority in the Lao world had been weakened.

Studies of Theravada Buddhism and its social practice have a clear focus on Sri Lanka and Burma, followed by Thailand and Cambodia. Laos is still largely an unexplored territory in the field of Buddhist studies. Marcel Zago's groundbreaking study *Rites et cérémonies en milieu bouddhiste lao* (1972) was the first comprehensive Western study of Lao Buddhism. Thereafter, several stimulating anthropological and historical studies enriched our knowledge of contemporary Lao Buddhism. Studies of Buddhist practice in rural Laos and northeastern Thailand (f.e., Condominas 1998 and Hayashi 2003) have to be mentioned in this context, as well as Justin McDaniel's seminal research on monastic education in Laos and northern and northeastern Thailand (2008). A perceptive study of the role of the Buddhist monastic order, the Sangha, in the rapidly changing social and political environments since the 1970s, is Patrice Ladwig's PhD thesis *From revolution to reform: Ethics, gift giving and the sangha-state relationships in Lao Buddhism* (2007). The latest endeavour to put Lao Buddhist religious culture into historical perspective is John C. Holt's monograph *Spirits of the Place* (2009).

These significant contributions have enhanced our knowledge of Lao Buddhism. However, an in-depth historical study on the relationship between religion and politics in the course of social modernisation is still very much in need. A short overview of modernising currents in Lao Buddhism prior to 1975 was already provided by Zago (1972). The political instrumentalisation of the Sangha by the Royal Lao Government and its ideological adversary, the Pathet Lao, was analysed by Lafont (1982) and Stuart-Fox (1996). Evans (1998) points at the revitalisation of Buddhism since the late 1980s and its instrumentalisation in the wake of a post-socialist policy of national identity. The newly defined relationship between religion and politics is reflected in the revival of Buddhist rituals in the former royal capital of Luang Prabang (Platenkamp 2008). In a community project of documentation during the 1990s, the monks of Luang Prabang and Hans Georg Berger elaborated photographs that illustrate such changes (Berger 2000).

One reason for the relatively slow progress in expanding our body of knowledge in Lao Buddhism is the accessibility of primary sources. Very few original documents pertaining to Theravada Buddhist thought and practice have been available to researchers, both in Laos and outside the country. This has changed only recently. Since the 1980s, several programs to document and preserve Lao manuscripts kept unnoticed in numerous monastic repositories throughout the Lao PDR and northeastern Thailand have been carried out, putting scholarly attention to the extremely rich literary and cultural heritage of the Lao people. The literature and knowledge contained in Lao manuscripts represent one very particular treasure of Laos; they were the object of a wide ranging research project, carried out at the National Library of Laos over more than two decades, where they were microfilmed, catalogued and in part translated. The "Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme" of the National Library in Vientiane, supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt) under the auspices of Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Harald Hundius (University of Passau), has been for us, in content and method, a model to follow and from which we learned. It also laid the ground for the close and ongoing collaboration of the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang with the National Library of Laos in Vientiane.

It is Luang Prabang, not Vientiane - the nation's capital and political centre - which has been the main pillar of Lao Buddhism since ancient times. Even after the transfer of the Lao royal capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in 1560, Luang Prabang maintained its position as a "a place of Buddhism and of the Three Gems", as Lao tradition holds. The thirty-three monasteries in the town itself, apart from an even larger number of abandoned monasteries and other historical Buddhist sites, give testimony to the rich heritage of Luang Prabang. It is here, at the confluence of the Khan and Mekong rivers, where the spiritual centre of Laos is based. In Luang Prabang, the Buddhist cultural heritage of Laos survived the country's vicissitudes better than in any other place of the country. Inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage in 1995, Luang Prabang has been the site of intensive documentary research on Lao Buddhism over the last twenty years (UNESCO 2004).

The foundation of the Buddhist Archive of Photography in 2005 in Luang Prabang is part of a cautious and progressive revival of Lao Buddhism that is not limited to this ancient centre of Theravada Buddhism in northern Laos, but has had an impact on the entire Lao PDR since the early 1990s. While many young people come to Buddhist institutions of learning and spend time in the monasteries, historical documents, artefacts and manuscripts that were hidden in various monasteries have come to the attention of Lao monks and researchers, who in due course involved foreign experts in projects directed at their discovery, cataloguing, conservation, and study.

Our volume presents research carried out at the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang over a period of ten years (2005 to 2015). Work on a unique collection of historic photographs taken and collected by Buddhist monks of Luang Prabang over 120 years led us to further research on historical documents, letters, diaries, sound recordings, journals and manuscripts found at the monasteries, and today justifies the designation of the institution as "Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang".

Historical photography in Laos was the first field that has been discovered in our research. Results are presented here for the first time. More than 35.000 photographs – between prints and negatives – have been digitized since 2006 at the Buddhist Archive of Luang Prabang with the support of the British Library's "Endangered Archives Programme", and are today accessible for international research.

Documents found in the abodes *(kuti)* of leading intellectual monks in various monasteries of Luang Prabang are the object of another research presented here. During the research of historical photographs, a wide range of journals, books, letters, diaries, lists and official correspondence of important monks have been discovered and were brought to the Buddhist Archives. They have been analyzed, digitized and catalogued in the frame of a research project on Lao Buddhism based at the Asia-Africa Institute of the University of Hamburg. This project has been carried out in the context of a network of competence called "Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia" (DORISEA). This network, supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), connects Southeast Asia specialists and scholars from various disciplines and fields of expertise, based at five German universities.

At the time of writing, a new research and digitization project at the Archive, again organized under the British Library's "Endangered Archives Programme", examines rare manuscripts of important Buddhist thinkers of Laos that we found in the abodes of leading monks of Luang Prabang over the last years. The largest collections of manuscripts, personally used by intellectual abbots in the old royal capital of Laos, is the collection of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela (1920–2007), abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam, who was probably the most prominent charismatic and intellectual monk in northern Laos during the second half of the twentieth century. When Pha Khamchan passed away on 9 July 2007, he left behind not only an impressive collection of historical photographs, a large collection of Buddhist art objects and paraphernalia and several hundred precious palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts, but also thousands of internal documents of the Buddhist Sangha and a personal correspondence with Buddhist laypersons that he had maintained and preserved over a period of half a century. It is largely thanks to this unusual monk-collector and archivist that a solid and in many aspects unique corpus of original sources could be established at the Buddhist Archives to reconstruct the religious, social, and political roles and activities of the Buddhist Sangha of Luang Prabang during the second half of the last century by focussing on the life and work of the Venerable Abbot Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela in a prismatic way.

The first contribution to our volume, authored by Bounleuth Sengsoulin, examines the social role of the Lao Sangha after the founding of the Lao PDR in 1975. Since ancient times, the political order (monarchy) and the religious order (Sangha) were connected with each other in a symbiotic relationship (Grabowsky 2007). Whereas the Sangha lent legitimacy to the king's role as *dhammarāja* (just ruler), the religious order could expect protection from the monarch. This close relationship was somehow damaged during the second Indochina war during which a significant minority of Lao monks supported the revolutionary Pathet Lao movement, whereas the Sangha mainstream remained