

Searching and Preserving Lanna Palm Leaf Scriptures of Temples for Creating a Learning Source of the Northern Thailand

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Abstract

Searching and preserving Lanna palm leaf scriptures of temples have been done to create a systematic local learning source of the Northern Thailand. The working process starts with selecting the temples that have the ancient scriptures but do not have systematic management. The next step is to make a list, make a searching index and copies of scriptures that do not overlap with the existing ones. Finally the new copies are added into the database. The benefit of this study is that the database can be an ancient local wisdom learning source for the new generations and can be a national treasure.

Keywords: Searching; Preservation; Lanna wisdom; Local Learning Source

Introduction

Literatures and archeology are the valuable cultural resources because they are the components of culture system of human society. They reflect the progress of objects and abstracts that our ancestors created, are the historic evidences that showed the uniqueness and history of community, and are the social capital that is developed to be learning sources and community potentials.

Literatures and archeology of Buddhism are a kind of cultural valuable resources. They are important as foundation of systematic thinking, local wisdom and a root of Thai cultures. The evidences of these are presented through elegance and fineness of monasteries, pagodas, Buddha image halls, Lanna palm leaf scriptures, Thai long books which were made of pulp from trees of the family Uricaceae, pulpits and etc. They also include abstract resources such as knowledge, intellects, Buddhist doctrines, beliefs and etc. These evidences have deep meanings and are important for the new generations' learning and social living.

For Thailand, Lanna or the upper Northern part of Thailand have many the literatures and archeology as mentioned above more than the other parts. It was found that there are 410,775 Lanna scriptures, not less than one million Lanna literatures which most are concerning Buddhism, and other kind of

literatures such as folktales, ancient laws, herbal medicines, astrology, ethics and worships.

Survey on Lanna palm leaf scriptures

The survey, called in Thai “Khuttham”, is a work about exploration on Lanna palm leaf scriptures in various temples in order to know numbers, titles, and conditions of suitable preservation. The survey found that currently there are many scriptures which have been kept in unsuitable storages. Some were destroyed by animals, heat, and moistness. Some were pressed for a long time in the stale storages. All are causes of the damaged scriptures.

Our works are therefore an attempt to prolong the scriptures. We have got much collaboration from scholars, organizations, and institutes to do that. The work starts with exploring numbers of the scriptures, making a list secondly, take microfilms thirdly, and finally making a database of the scriptures' name list. Another benefit of this work is to make monks and novices pay more attention on the scripture keeping.

The temples selected for this study are located in the following provinces.

- 1) Chiang Rai: There are 12 scriptures which have been kept around 62 to 85 years. The temples are located in Mae Lao, Mae Jun, Pan, and Muang Districts.

- 2) Payao: There are 32 scriptures which have been kept around 60 to 258 years. The temples where are located in Muang and Mae Jai Districts.
- 3) Prae: There are 253 scriptures. The oldest scripture is around 428 years. Most of them are from Soong Men temple where are located in Soon Men District. The rest are from the temples in Muang and Song Districts.
- 4) Nan: There are 78 scriptures. The oldest scripture is around 515 years. The temples are located in Muang, Song Kwae, Pupieng, Wiengsa, Tawangpa, Ban Luang, Toong Chang, Mae Jarim, Santisook, Chiengklang and Pua Districts.

Background of Lanna palm leaf scriptures

Thai ancient people favored to record their stories and knowledge on the leaves of Fan Palm tree which is a kind of tropical plants in South East and Eastern Asia. The palm leaves in Thailand have physical differences from ‘Palmyra Palm’, a kind of palm leaves, in India. They are softer, thinner and more light-colored so they are more easily crooked. As resulted, they are more quickly end of life than the Palmyra Palm (Somboonaneek, 2012).

The fact that the palm leaves are organic matters so they can disintegrate after recording the letters or symbols. They might be decayed

before we discover them. Thus, it is difficult to indicate the first appearance of recorded palm leaves. However, it was found that the ancient people recorded Sutras of Buddhism on the palm leaves since 500 years before Christian era (WantanaKitisriworapun, 2004).

In India, it was found that in Orissastate, the people began to popularly inscribe information on the palm leaves since the 6th century. However, it was less used after papers came into India around the 11th century. At present, in Orissathe palm leaves are used in Arts, handicrafts, and religious ceremony. They are not used for recording the information anymore. Besides, in the past the recorded palm leaves were found in Japan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand.

In Thailand, the first recorded palm leaves were used in religious works. Monks from Sri Lanka, who came to Thailand for propagation of Buddhism since hundreds years ago, spread this wisdom to Thai people. For Lanna area, the recorded palm leaves were used during Queen Chamdhevi to Phra Muang Kaewage. It was the same time that Buddhism came into Lanna. The Lannaoldest palm leaf scripture is 'Tingsabat' which was inscribed in B.E 2014 (Somboonaneek, 2012).

Appearance of palm leaf scriptures

Palm leaf scriptures can be divided into 2 types. The first is Nungsue Pook, which has the 22 inches long size. The second is Nungsue Kom, which has the 12-14 inches long size. Both of them are 2 inches wide and used for inscribing the stories of Buddhism and the tales of the Lord Buddha's former birth.

The followings are the components of palm leaf scriptures.

- 1) Characters: Most are Khmer, E-sarn Dharma, Lanna Dharma, Mon, Burmese, Sinhalese, and Thai.
- 2) Languages: Most is Pali or Bihar. The rest are Standard Thai, Thai E-sarn, Thai Lanna, and Sanskrit.
- 3) Lines on the palm leaves: Most are the engraved lines. The rest are the ink and the golden lines respectively. The golden line is always used in the first page. At present, the lines are printed by a high technology machine.
- 4) Stories: Most are the doctrines of Buddhism.
- 5) Prakup: It is a kind of sticks which is used for pressing on the two side of a scripture.
- 6) Clothes: They were used for wrapping the scriptures.

- 7) Labels: After wrapping the scriptures with the cloth, people always paste a label in order to name and indicate the numbers of the scriptures.
- 8) Ropes: They are used for fastening the clothes in order to prevent the scriptures from dust and insects.
- 9) Kaka year: It is a cradle which is used for placing the scripture on when reading.

Process of inscribing the scriptures

Firstly, bind the sticky threads with a wooden frame. Secondly, smear the wet soot ball on the thread. Thirdly, put the thread on a palm leaf. Fourthly, flick the thread until the color of soot appeared on the leaf. Do it again on another side of the leaf. Fifthly, place a palm leaf which has the lines on a cradle. Sixthly, inscribe the information above the lines on the both sides of palm leaf by a spike. After this step, the white letters will appear on the palm leaf. Seventhly, glaze the sooth mixed with wood oil on the inscribed palm leaf. Eighthly, scatter the hot sands on the glazed palm leaf. Lastly, wipe the sooth with a clean cloth ball. Wipe many times until remain the soothing the letters and the other spaces are clean. This way makes the sooth ingrain on the letters for many hundred years.

Preservation and restoration of the scriptures

Because the ancient palm leaf scriptures are the organic matters, they are easily decayed. They are also composed of the glucose so they can be the food of insects. Frequently, therefore many scriptures were destroyed by the insects. Besides, the weather of Thailand is in tropical zone. The moistness and hot weather can ruin the scriptures, too. For these reasons, the preservation and restoration works are so important (Wantana Kitisiworapun, 2004).

The most suitable temperature for keeping the scriptures is during 20-25 degree Celsius. The humidity control should be during 50-60 percentages. Therefore, it is recommended to keep them in an air-conditioned or an airflow room with installing the window and door screens. Moreover, should avoid the sunlight and prevent them from the dust. The accurate storage is to put the scriptures in cloth bags or wrap them with mulberry papers. Lay them down in horizon in order to avoid breaking the scriptures.

Lanna Wisdoms from the palm leaf scriptures

The wisdoms that found from the scriptures are about Lanna law, Lanna local medicines and herbs, black magic knowledge, Thai traditional medicine, Thai language teaching and Buddhist doctrines. They are the sources of Lanna wisdoms that have been inherited from one generation to another generation

for hundred years ago. Another words, they are the valuable Lanna cultures that are the uniqueness of Lanna people.

Conclusion

The palm leaf scriptures are one of the crucial ancient documents of Lanna people. They recorded many important Lanna histories so they are historic evidences. They are also the valuable cultural heritage because they inscribed the stories of Lanna customs, traditions, and arts. They also recorded the Lanna wisdoms including law, medicines and herbs, black magic, Thai traditional medicine, Thai language teaching and Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, the benefit of this study is that the database can be an ancient local wisdom learning source for the new generations and can be a national treasure.

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