

THE LAO SANGHA AND MODERNITY

A Buddhist Archive in Luang Prabang

The royal city of Luang Prabang was and continues to be the centre of Lao Buddhism. Although Lao society was confronted with challenges in the 20th century such as French colonialism, Marxist doctrines and capitalist consumerism, traditional forms of Buddhist practices and monastic organization were tenaciously preserved World Heritage Town (since 1995).

Introduction



Between 2006 and 2011, two British Library supported major research projects assembled, digitized, identified and listed highly endangered collections of historic photographs from 14 Buddhist monasteries in Luang Prabang, and helped to create the Buddhist Archive of Photography (BAP). Its collection of 35.000 original prints and negatives, and related documents, cover 120 years of the history of Lao and Theravada Buddhist photography. The archive contains unique information on sociology, anthropology, history, religion and spirituality of one of the least researched civilizations of Southeast Asia. This unique corpus of historical photographs of the Buddhist Sangha of

Luang Prabang represents challenging and dramatic century for Laos. Pha Khamchan Virachitto (1920–2007), the Venerable Abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam and owner of the most important collection of photographs, left an enormous correspondence that he led over many decades with monks and laypersons in Laos, Thailand and the Lao diaspora. Recently a large corpus of documents has been discovered in several monasteries of Luang Prabang. These documents include rare, published and unpublished, printed material on Lao Buddhism, society, politics, and history, administrative documents and statistics, magazines and journals, as well as diaries and handwritten notes by leading monks. In the personal abode (*kuti*) of Pha Khamchan Virachitto also more than one hundred palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts have been unearthed. They reflect the intellectual interests of this most influential and venerated monk of Luang Prabang during the last three decades.



Research question

Based on an extensive corpus of historical photographs and written documents, the project seeks to explore how Buddhist institutions, from the highest levels of the Sangha hierarchy to individual monasteries and monks, have defined their social responsibilities, educations programmes, and political roles since the colonial period until the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 and thereafter. Furthermore, the life and work of Pha Khamchan Virachitto will be analysed as a special case study of an intellectual and charismatic monk.



Aim and Objectives

This project will reconstruct the social and political role of the Lao Sangha. Both the BAP database and the correspondence between Phra Khamchan Virachitto will be the most important sources used for conducting research. This correspondence has been collected systematically, edited and, when necessary, translated into excerpts. Almost 300 palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts have been studied for preparing a bilingual Lao-English catalogue. In addition, numerous documents of the Sangha contained within

the BAP have been documented, inventorised, digitised, and analysed as well. Finally, Thai and French archives have been or will be consulted to get additional insights into the development of Lao Buddhism during the pre-1975 period. These diverse sources will be verified via structured interviews with Buddhist dignitaries and laypeople. Our research hopefully shed new light on and provide new insight into the religious as well as social history of modern Laos.

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