



The Dhamma Script Cultural Domain as a Contested Space in the Tai-Lao World

Volker Grabowsky

Department of Thai Language and Thai Culture
Asia-Africa-Institute, University of Hamburg

Abstract

This article seeks to explore first the interconnectedness of the Tai-Lao polities (*mueang*) in the “Dhamma Script Cultural Domain” (DSCD) by focusing on the region’s historical sources that are imbedded in the manuscript culture based primarily on the unique Dhamma script. This manuscript culture with its distinct local variants was essential for shaping and preserving ethnic identities among the various Tai ethnic groups such as Lao, Tai Yuan and Tai Lue. A short overview of the cultural, political and economic interrelationship within the DSCD will be provided. Then it will be briefly discussed how the disintegration of the DSCD in the wake of colonialism and the rise of nationalism as well as the emergence of the modern nation-state has been reflected in the narratives of the indigenous historical sources. The central focus will be on the intricate question whether the DSCD can form a meaningful geographical space for the Lao history or the “history of the Lao people” both with regard the period before the emergence of the modern nation-state and thereafter.

Key words: the Dhamma Script, the Tai-Lao World

Introduction

The “Dhamma script cultural domain” (DSCD) comprises an area of more than 400,000 square kilometres, with a population of roughly 30 million inhabitants, of which more than 80 percent are native speakers of Tai languages. The earliest evidence of the Dhamma script, probably a derivative of the ancient



Mon alphabet of Hariphunchai, is from the year 1376.¹ The earliest datable evidence of the Dhamma script used for writing a vernacular Northern Thai text that has been identified so far is inscribed on the pedestal of a Buddha image housed in Wat Chiang Man in the city of Chiang Mai. This inscription dates from 1465. It comprises two short lines (mentioning the names of Buddhist dignitaries who supported the casting of the Buddha image as well as the name of the laywomen who sponsored it), that are preceded by two lines written in Pali. The diffusion of the Dhamma script in the Upper Mekong region has still to be studied thoroughly. However, based on our present state of knowledge, we may assume that the script spread from Lan Na to Chiang Tung and Chiang Rung (Sipsong Panna) no later than the mid-fifteenth century. It ultimately reached Lan Xang, where it made its first documented appearance in 1520/21 in a monolingual Pali palm-leaf manuscript kept at the Provincial Museum in Luang Prabang (formerly the Royal Palace).²

Unlike Sipsong Panna and Chiang Tung, Lan Sang developed a secular script nowadays called “Old Lao script” (*tua aksorn lao buhan*). Though influenced by the Fak Kham script of Lan Na, the secular Lao script also shows traces of independent development. Following the disintegration of Lan Na in the wake of the Burmese conquest of 1558, Lan Chang became the most significant polity in the DSCD for almost two centuries.

1. The DCDS before the emergence of the modern nation-state

The Mekong River and its tributaries served as a cultural corridor linking the oral and written literatures of the Tai-Lao peoples who live in the Mekong River basin from the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna and the Tai Khuen of Chiang Tung in the north to the Tai Yuan of Lan Na and finally to the Lao of the Khorat Plateau and Champasak in the south. The same holds also true with regard to political and dynastic bonds among the Tai *mueang* as well as with regard to economic and trade relations.

¹ It is a Pali inscription of one single line discovered in the early 1980s on a golden leaf in a *cetiya* in Sukhothai. The inscription runs over four lines. Three lines are written in Thai language and Sukhothai script; only the fourth line, containing a Pali phrase, uses the Dhamma script. See Udom 1999: 2363.

² For details, see Grabowsky 2008: 16.



1. *Political and dynastic bonds.* They are clearly reflected in the region's historical literature, such as the *tamnan* and *phuen*. The *Nithan Khun Bulom*, for example, is a good case in point. According to the myth of origin of the Lao found in this chronicle, the king of the celestial deities (*thaen*) sent his own son, Khun Bulom (Borom) to bring order and ensure prosperity and well-being in Mueang Sua, the predecessor of Luang Prabang. The various extant versions of the *Nithan Khun Bulom* may contradict each other on several details, but they all agree that the founder-king sent off his sons to found new *mueang* or polities in the wider Mekong region.

Though the names of Khun Bulom's sons and the *mueang* to where they were sent to rule differ from version to version, there is agreement about the most prominent *mueang*, namely Mueang Sua, Chiang Rung (Sipsong Panna), Chiang Mai (Lan Na), and Mueang Phuan. The latter *mueang*, situated in the Plain of Jars, was ruled by the youngest son, Khun Chet Chueang or Thao Chueang, the name of a "cultural hero" well-known among Tai peoples almost everywhere in the DSCD. According to Prakong Nimmanahaeminda's research, Thao Chueang is a mythical hero-king known not only among the Lao of the middle Mekong basin but also among the Tai Yuan, the Tai Lue, the Tai Khuen, and even among the Khamu and other Austro-Asiatic groups of the upper Mekong region.³

The legend of Thao Chueang gave rise to other cultural heroes in the DSCD. All these figures have in common that their stories are recorded by different Tai ethnic groups linking their polities together in the frame of a larger network of *mueang* sharing the same customs, the same historical fate and also the same lineage of rulers. One of these figures is Chao Fa Dek Noi, the founder-ruler of Chiang Khaeng, a small Tai Lue principality the last capital of which was Mueang Sing, situated in the far northwest of the Lao PDR. Chao Fa Dek Noi had three sons who managed to establish dynastic bonds with various Tai *mueang* such as Chiang Tung, Mueang Laem, Mueang Sing, and Mueang Luai.⁴ The legend of Chao Fa Dek Noi as well as many other chronicles and legends confirm the close relationship, based on kinship ties and dynastic bonds, between the various Tai polities in the upper Mekong valley. Among the seven polities mentioned in the legend, four – Mueang Yong, Mueang Sing, Chiang Saen, and

³ See Prakong Nimmanahaeminda's analytical study of "The Thao Ba Chueang Epic" (1987).

⁴ As for details, see Grabowsky 2003.



Mueang Luai – bestowed only the title of *chao fa* upon their ruler. The *chao fa* of the three other polities held the additional and more prestigious title of *chao haw kham*. They were the rulers of Chiang Rung, Mueang Laem, and Chiang Tung. Sharing similar social structures and political cultures, the three polities were closely knit together by marriage ties among their ruling houses.⁵

2. *Economic and trade relations.* The Tai of the DSCD lived close to each other. Although they all grew glutinous rice as their staple crop, they had different resources and skills of production. Therefore, they relied on inter-regional trading to obtain the goods they could not produce in their own locality. We may take the trade of Sipsong Panna in the far north of the DSCD as a case in point. Even more important than the long-distance trade of Sipsong Panna with China and Burma, was the impact of the local trade on the regional economy. There was not only trade among various *panna* and *mueang* of Sipsong Panna but also between them and neighbouring Tai polities such as Mueang Laem, Nan, and Luang Prabang. The local trade was carried out mainly by Tai merchants on pack oxen, and pack horses or mules. Farmers in many parts of Sipsong Panna were suffering from chronic shortages of rice. Thus they were forced to buy supplementary rice from surplus areas in exchange for a wide variety of local products, including tea, camphor, opium, seal wax, and salt⁶. Opium from I-pang was exchanged of cotton from Luang Prabang and Nan.

Tai-Kha relationship

To present the DSCD as a coherent region much emphasis was put on Tai ethnic groups. However, the polities dominated by these groups comprised a poly-ethnic population of different cultural and ethno-linguistic background. Historically the relationship between the Tai and the autochthonous mostly Austro-Asiatic groups, was of great importance as scholars like Condominas have shown. This relationship is particularly reflected in the Lao myth of origin where

⁵ These ties are reflected in the legend of Chao Saeng To, one of the mythical pre-Chueang rulers of Moeng Lue not mentioned in the *Tamnan lue sipsong pang*. Chao Saeng To, like Chao Fa Dek Noi endowed with a magical jewel found in a hornet's nest, married a Chinese princess. He had three sons, the eldest of which became his father's successor. The second son was sent to rule Mueang Laem, while the youngest son became ruler of Chiang Tung. See Lamun 2007: 30–31.

⁶ As for details on trade and commerce in Sipsong Panna, see Liew-Herres/Grabowsky/Renoo 2012: 33–35.



both groups are identified as siblings born from the same mythical gourd. From the gourds on the vine, human beings emerged, relatively dark-skinned aboriginal peoples, the “Kha”, emerging from gourds cut open with a hot poker, and the lighter skinned Tai-Lao emerging from cuts made with a chisel.

Almost all Tai myths of origin reflect the political and military conflicts as well as the social and ethnic interaction between invaders and the indigenous population. The latter are called by various names. Besides the generic term “Kha” and the more neutral term *kha mon*, “hill people”, Tai chronicles use the derogatory ethnonyms “Thamila” and “Milakkhu”. The *Tamnan lue sipsong pang*, which deals with the earliest history of Sipsong Panna, reports that the first seven Tai Lue villages in Mueang Alawi, an old name for Chiang Rung, had to defend themselves against the overwhelming power of the Thamila, who are recognised as the original population of Mueang Alawi. The chronicle describes an ancient polity in which the Tai and Thamila coexisted peacefully under the leadership of their respective nobility.⁷ Nonetheless, harmony was frequently interrupted by violent disputes over the control of agricultural resources. The Thamila finally succumbed to the militarily superior Tai and became their vassals. The result was an economic division of labour with the Tai cultivating wet rice in the plains and the Thamila practicing slash and burn agriculture on the slopes of forested mountains.

The chronicles of Chiang Tung, Mueang Yong, Mueang Laem,⁸ Mueang La, and many other Tai polities represent the historical relations between Tai and Kha in a quite similar manner. One Thamila leader who receives special mention in the *Tamnan lue sipsong pang* is Chao Chueang Han. He was feared and respected by the Tai because of his bravery. This legendary hero, endowed with supernatural powers, figures prominently in Tai Lue folk-tales. In at least one of the versions of the Mueang Lue Chronicle, Chao Chueang Han and the founder of the kingdom of Mueang Lue, Phaya Chueang, merge into one and the same person, thereby reflecting the close inter-ethnic relationship between “Tai” and “Kha”.

⁷ For more details, see Liew Herres/Grabowsky/Renoo 2012: 15–16.

⁸ Mueang Laem Chronicle, ff 13–17. The Mueang Laem Chronicle abounds with references to clashes between forces loyal to the *chao haw kham* and Lahu rebels. Tao Fai Son (Suan), the seventeenth ruler of Mueang Laem, was murdered (in 1683) in his own palace by a Musoe commando who wanted to rescue a “Musoe” (Lahu) girl that the Tai ruler had abducted and made his mistress (ff 40/2–41/9).



Panorama of Tai polities in the DSCD

The DSCD was never politically united under one single rule, perhaps except a very short period in the middle of the sixteenth century when King Phothisalalat (r. 1520–1548) ruled the kingdoms of Lan Sang and Lan Na as a kind of “personal union” by sending his fourteen-year old son Settha Wangso, a grandson of late Lan Na king Ket Klao, to ascend to the vacant throne in Chiang Mai in July 1546. However, two years later when Settha rushed back to Luang Prabang to quell a rebellion following his father’s death, the western and southern sections of Lan Na separated from Lan Sang electing a prince from the Shan principality of Mueang Nai as new king whereas most of the northern and eastern parts of Lan Na remained loyal to the new Lao king who forfeited his claims as ruler of Chiang Mai only as late as 1551 but kept control of the northern and eastern half of Lan Na thereafter. Even after the Burmese conquered Chiang Mai, Sai Setthathilat continued the struggle of resistance against the Burmese in which he received support from Lan Na loyalists in the Chiang Saen-Chiang Rai region.

The division of Lan Na into two contending core areas further intensified during the centuries that followed the Burmese conquest in 1558. In 1701, the whole region of Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai was separated from Chiang Mai, and fourteen years later Chiang Saen became the centre of a large Burmese military zone extending far to the north until the borders of Sipsong Panna. In 1727, Chiang Mai revolted against Burmese rule. Following several months of internal strife, Chao Ong Kham, the exiled king of Luang Prabang who was a scion of the ruling dynasty of Chiang Rung, was finally invited to become the new legitimate ruler of Chiang Mai which enjoyed three relatively peaceful decades under a king who was both of Lao and Tai Lue descent.⁹

In the early Bangkok period the upper north of present-day Thailand became a dependency of Siam. However, the political and administrative unity which had existed during most of the fifteenth and at least during the first quarter of the sixteenth century was not restored and was probably no longer feasible. In 1802, Kawila, ruler of Chiang Mai, travelled to Bangkok where King Rama I bestowed upon him the title *chao prathetsarat* accepting him as a high-ranking vassal. The King acknowledged the supremacy of Chiang Mai

⁹ Sarassawadee 2005: 122–124.



over the formally separate principalities of Lampang and Lamphun. Like Chiang Mai, the latter two vassal states were ruled by members of the Kawila clan. Chiang Mai was the political centre in the western half of Lan Na.¹⁰

In the eastern half, close to the Lao border, the principality of Nan played a similar role *vis-à-vis* the small vassal state of Phrae. Early nineteenth-century European reports confirm that both Nan and Phrae entertained close relations with Luang Prabang. Very few Westerners visited Phrae and Nan before the end of the nineteenth century. A British map of 1870 still shows the territories east of Lampang as “unexplored”. Neither David Richardson nor William Courperous McLeod, the first European who ever visited Chiang Tung and Chiang Rung, were able to travel to Phrae, Nan, and even Luang Prabang further to the east. In 1837, McLeod mentions a lack of interest in Nan and Phrae on the part of the Chiang Mai prince, “who is now the controlling authority over the territories of Labong (Lamphun) and Lagong (Lampang)” whereas Nan and Phrae were completely independent from Chiang Mai, maintaining close relations with Luang Prabang.¹¹ The differences between Nan, Phrae, and Luang Prabang on the one hand and Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang on the other hand were evident to most contemporary Western observers. Thus in the early nineteenth century, when almost the whole DSCD had come under Siamese suzerainty, the region was grouped into four clusters of polities:

- a.) Chiang Tung and Chiang Rung (Sipsong Panna): They were Burmese and/or Chinese vassals.
- b.) Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Lampang: They were Siamese vassals.
- c.) Luang Prabang, Nan, and Phrae: They were Siamese vassals; Luang Prabang maintained, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century, also ties with China.
- d.) Vientiane and Champasak (until their demotion in 1829): They were Siamese vassals and – in the case of Vientiane – maintained at the same time tributary relations with the Vietnamese imperial court at Hue.
- e.) Lao *hua mueang* of the inner region of the Khorat Plateau (such as Kalasin and Khon Kaen): Siamese dependencies supervised by the governor of Khorat.

¹⁰ Ibid. 150–154.

¹¹ Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 7.



It should be noted that important vassal states like Chiang Mai, Nan, and Luang Prabang had their own dependencies, the rulers of which were sub-vassals (i.e. vassals of vassals) of the Siamese King. These sub-vassals had to take the oath of allegiance twice, first, to the king of Bangkok and, secondly, to the Tai ruler who was their direct suzerain. For example, Sipsong Chuthai was a dependency of Luang Prabang, Wiang Pukha and later Chiang Khaeng (on Luang Nam Tha province) dependencies of Nan.

Lao historians and historians of Laos often perceive the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a period of decline. There is no doubt that the split-up of the Lan Sang kingdom into three separate political entities in the early eighteenth century and their later incorporation into the Siamese orbit seriously weakened the Lao domains politically. But in other respects the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not at all a period of decline for the Lao people. Seen from a demographic perspective, this period was one of steady expansion, indeed. The political fragmentation of Laos (Lan Xang) since the early eighteenth century helped foster the migration of the Lao southwards along the Mekong. Political dissidents, e.g. those members of ruling dynasties who felt being excluded from power, took their followers in search of land and founded their own *mueang*. They were the driving force for what the Tai and Lao call “the founding of villages and towns” (*kan sang ban paeng mueang*).

The destruction of Vientiane in the aftermath of the Lao-Siamese war of 1826–28 and the large-scale resettlement campaigns of the 1830s until 1850s led to significant demographic changes. In the first three decades following the conquest of Vientiane, at least 100,000 Lao were forced to leave the eastern bank of the Mekong and to resettle in territories on the western bank or in the interior of the Khorat Plateau. The famous Lao epic of the late Lan Sang period, *Phuen Viang*, gives testimony to these large-scale deportations, which were resisted in particular by the inhabitants of Mueang Mahasai in the valley of the Kading River.¹² This area as well as the Plain of Jars were most severely affected by Siamese resettlement campaigns. Numerous Lao migrated voluntarily into territories on the right bank after their homes on the left bank had been continuously raided and devastated. Within a few decades the demographic centre of gravity

¹² *Phuen wiang samai cao anu* 2004: 173–185.



of the Lao had thus moved from the trans-Mekong territories in the east to the Khorat Plateau in the west. It ought to be mentioned that the large expansion of ethnic Lao settlements in a region which was, before then, dominated by Mon-Khmer speaking groups like the Suai or Kuy, facilitated the gradual assimilation of the latter groups by the newly arrived Lao settlers.

2. The disintegration of the DSCD in the wake of colonialism

The Siamese-Lao war of 1826–1828 is usually called the “Chao Anu rebellion” in Thai historiography but Lao historians speak – more accurately though not without nationalist sentiments – of a “war between Bangkok and the Lao”. The official Lao history, the *Pavatsat Lao* commissioned by the Ministry of Information and Culture in 2000, attributes the crushing defeat of the Lao forces to the wide-spread defeatism and lack of patriotism among the Lao “feudal” elite on both banks of the Mekong, including the Tai Yuan rulers of Nan and Phrae as well as the Phuan ruler of Siang Khuang in the Plain of Jars.¹³ However, the real loss of Lao nationhood happened with the arrival of colonial powers in the late nineteenth century. Whereas Thai historians tend to portray Siam as a victim of French and British colonial ambitions, Lao historians view Siam rather as an imperialist and expansionist power colluding with her European, notably French, “rivals” to dismember Laos. The *Pavatsat Lao* stresses the advantages that the government in Bangkok gained from the settlement with France in 1893:

“The population on both banks of the Mekong rose up to fight for independence; especially the local Lao soldiers who served in the Siamese army to resist the French were unwilling to die for Siam. This caused the Siamese to lose all military strongholds on the left bank of the Mekong and all the islands of the river. Thus the Siamese did no longer possess the hope to occupy the whole of Laos, a vast territory larger than that of Siam [proper]. Therefore, they agreed on the partition of Laos. They thought that this division would weaken the strength of the Lao people, preventing them from launching further uprisings. Thereafter they ruled and suppressed the Lao population with ease”.¹⁴

¹³ Ministry of Information and Culture 2000: 444.

¹⁴ Ministry of Information and Culture 2000: 502.



In the end, as a result of the Franco-Siamese Convention the Lao lands became divided between two “colonial powers”, as the *Pavatsat Lao* concludes that the treaty divided the Lao people into two different political entities: “The result was that the Lao on the right bank of the Mekong River became servants (*khoi kha*) of the Siamese, and those on the left bank servants of the French.”¹⁵

Which reactions did the haggling of colonial powers cause among the peoples living on both banks of the Mekong River and, in particular, among their traditional political and social elites? We know very little, if anything, from contemporary Western reports. Siamese sources are almost silent on that issue as well. Nevertheless, there are some rare sources that provide insight into the perspective of the local population. Such a perspective is reflected in a manuscript found at Ban Ta Pao near Mueang Sing which, according to its colophon, was completed on 20 March 1905.¹⁶

Nine years earlier, the French and British had divided the principality of Chiang Khaeng, the capital of which was present-day Mueang Sing in the Lao province of Luang Namtha. There is hardly any doubt that the demise of Chiang Khaeng, the end of its political autonomy as well as significant changes of the long-established social order, motivated Phaya Luang Phawadi, a high-ranking nobleman, to write the Chiang Khaeng Chronicle. The loss of sovereignty *and* the territorial division of the country stand in the centre of this unique historical document. But Chiang Khaeng is not only portrayed as a victim of colonial power politics; its historical legacy as a semi-independent tributary state, which maintained flexible relations with more powerful neighbours, stands against the new concept of sovereignty introduced by Britain and France. Thus the first part of the chronicle is not just a record of better days in a distant past; it also reflects the indigenous and traditional model of power relations, a potential challenge to the model imposed by the colonial powers.

What can we learn from the conflict in and around Chiang Khaeng with regard to the fate of the DSCD on the eve of Western colonialism? First of all, the European colonial powers looked at the Upper Mekong region solely under the perspective of how to draw a clear dividing line between

¹⁵ Ibid.: 503.

¹⁶ Grabowsky and Renoo 2008: 59.



their respective spheres of influence. The negotiations about the founding of a buffer state were subordinated to this dominant interest. The historical tradition of the region was of importance to the British and French only in so far as it could be manipulated to justify their own territorial claims.¹⁷ The Mekong offered the colonial powers a border that could easily be defined and controlled. But this border created by foreign powers divided traditional polities possessing political and cultural identities that had developed over centuries. For the Tai Lue in the Upper Mekong, as well as for the Lao in the Middle Mekong, their river was never a border, as their settlements extended to both banks of the river. The traditional pattern of tributary relations based on “multiple overlords” with overlapping margins of suzerainty enabled the Tai polities of the region to survive. European notions of sovereignty brought an end to the previous political autonomy. It was sacrificed for the new concept of uncontested sovereignty of nation-states which had to define internationally recognised borderlines.

3. *The DSDC in modern Lao historiography*

This section deals with the question of how modern Lao historiography draws on the DSCD as a point of reference for Lao history. The ground floor of the National Museum in Vientiane exhibits an historical map designed to represent the territoriality or geo-body of the Lao nation. Showing the alleged territorial extension of the Lan Sang kingdom during the reign of king Fa Ngum, this map radiates a fascination that is partially the result of its being an anachronism. The boundaries of Lan Sang, reaching from Sipsong Panna in Yunnan to the Cambodian province of Stung Treng and from Sipong Chuthai in North Vietnam to Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand comprise all territories that have ever been under the suzerainty of Lao rulers, albeit at *different* periods. The main fascination, however, arises from the irony that this map must have been adapted from a Thai map of the 1930s depicting the territorial claims of Greater Thailand. The border lines of the Siamese administrative circles (*monthon*) and their names *prior* to the introduction of the *thesaphiban* system (in 1892) are still visible (for example, Lao Phung Dam, Lao Phuan and Lao Kao). The territorial space of the Lao nation emerges simply by the amputation from the geo-

¹⁸ See Grabowsky 2011: 62–63.



body of Greater Thailand of all provinces considered to be cLaoe by the pre-twentieth century Siamese elite.¹⁸

For reasons of fairness we have to admit that at least four-fifths of the ethnic Lao today live outside the borders of the Lao PDR. The vast majority of them, 15-18 million people, inhabit the northeastern region of Thailand (Isan). For more than three generations Thai nationalist discourse has denied their Lao identity. To call the Lao speaking population of Northeastern Thailand “Khon Isan” or “Thai Isan” reflects a Bangkok-centred perspective. It is therefore understandable that Lao historians seek to challenge the pan-Thai myth created by the Thai nation-state, according to which the people of the Khorat Plateau possess a “Thai” identity.

While contemporary Lao historiographers include not only the right bank of the Mekong River but also Lan Na and even Sipsong Panna in the geo-body of the Lao nation, they have difficulties in integrating the “local” histories of these “lost territories” into the overarching “national” narrative that focuses on the large royal centres Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The *Pavatsat Lao* mentions, for example, the implementation of Siamese administrative reforms in Isan and Lan Na during the late eighteenth century but it fails to discuss in any depth the political, social, cultural, and economic developments in these two regions which nowadays are part of the Thai nation-state, though it has to admitted that developments in the three administrative circles (*monthon*) of Isan are given relatively much more attention than those in Lan Na (one short paragraph on page 484).

A completely different perspective on the DSCD is reflected in a quite different historiographical work composed in the Lao PDR. It is neither written by a professional historian nor authorised by the communist party leadership. In a certain way it can be called “history from below”. This quite challenging work is a manuscript, composed probably in 1987 by a man called Noi Insongkariyawong. The manuscript runs over 160 pages, each of which has 18–20 lines, written on European-style paper, called *cia falang* in Lao. The manuscript is a compilation of miscellaneous texts related to the history of the entire Dhamma Script Cultural Domain. The Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme catalogued this manuscript, kept at Ban Wiang Nuea, Luang Nam Tha district, under the code 03.01.03.14 and gave it the artificial title *Pawatsat lao-tai* (Lao-Tai History). On the first 30 pages the manuscript provides abridged histories of Lan Na, Siam, and finally Lan Xang. They are short genealogies recording the



reigns of important kings rather than giving a comprehensive historical narrative. It is followed by a more detailed account of Lao history since the establishment of French colonial rule until the founding of the Lao PDR (pp. 30–42). The main purpose of Noi Insongkariyawong's "Lao-Tai" history, however, was apparently to put the local histories of two *mueang* in north-western Laos – Luang Nam Tha (pp. 44–75) and Mueang Sing (pp. 76–109) into the historical context of the DSCD as a whole. This purpose is underscored by the final part of the manuscript (pp. 110–160) which is a collection of chronicles, or fragments of chronicles, from Lan Na, Lan Xang and Sipsong Panna.

We do not know the author's biography, his social background or ethnic affiliation. However, judging from the style and the content of the text, we may suggest that he possesses – if he is still alive – a good knowledge of the history of the region as well as the Tai Lue language and the Dharma script. The text contains only very few orthographical mistakes. The form of the letters resembles the Lan Na or Tai Yuan variant more than the Lao or Tai Lue variants of the Dhamma script. Thus we might assume that the author is – or was – at least partially a member of the Tai Yuan ethnic group.

4. Concluding Remarks

Returning to the central question of how the DSCD can form a meaningful geographical space for "Lao History" or the "History of the Lao People" – both with regard to the period before the emergence of the modern nation-state and thereafter – the following conclusions might be drawn:

Firstly, the DSCD has never been a politically unified region. Before the emergence of the modern-nation state it consisted of a network of a few larger and numerous smaller *mueang* whose dominant ethnic groups were Tai-Lao. Therefore, the history of the DSCD is closely connected but not identical with "Lao History" or the "History of the Lao".

Secondly, The history of the DSCD is the history of many diverse Tai-Lao polities linked with each other by language, culture, similar political and social structures, dynastic relations of their elites, as well as by trade and economic relations. These common characteristics also pertain to the ethnic minorities such as Khamu, Lua, Wa, and Suai.

Thirdly, the close political bonds, including tributary relations, of the various polities in the DSCD with Burma, China, Vietnam, and since the late eighteenth century also Siam, show that the history of the DSCD is closely tied to the wider history of mainland Southeast Asia and beyond.



Fourthly, seen from this perspective, the history of territories that changed political affiliation over the centuries and belong now to nation-states other than the Lao People's Democratic Republic can still be incorporated into the narrative of "Lao History" history though not in an exclusive manner. The predominantly Lao parts of the Khorat Plateau, for example, belong to the histories of Thailand and Laos and of the DSCD as a whole. It is hoped that this article might stimulate further discussion about the scope of Lao Studies which already transcend the confines of the Lao nation-state (Lao PDR) and comprise a much wider geographical and cultural space called the Dhamma Script Cultural Domain.

References

- Grabowsky, Volker, 2003. "Cao Fa Dek Ni and the Founding Myth of Chiang Khaeng." In *Cultural Diversity and Conversation in the Making of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China: Regional Dynamics in the Past and Present*, edited by Hayashi Yukio and Thongsasayavongkhamdy, pp. 95–143. Vientiane/Kyoto: Department of Museums and Archaeology, Ministry of Culture and Information/Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University.
- , 2008. "Tai Manuscripts in the Dhamma Script Domain", in: *manucrypt cultures*, Newsletter No. 1, pp. 16–23.
- , 2011. "Recent Historiographical Discourses in the Lao Democratic People's Republic." In: *Southeast Asian Historiography: Unravelling the Myths. Essays in honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, edited by Volker Grabowsky, pp. 52–69. Bangkok: River Books.
- Lamun Chanhom (transcr.), 2007 – *Tamnan mangrai lae tamnan chiang mai-chiang tung* (The Chronicle of [King] Mangrai and the Chiang Mai-Chiang Tung Chronicle). Chiang Mai: Office of Language and Culture, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University.
- Liew-Herres, Foon Ming, Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin, 2012. *Chronicle of Sipsong Panna: History and Society of a Tai Luc Kingdom, Late-twelfth to Twentieth Century*. Chiang Mai: Mehong Press.
- Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000. *Pavatsat lao duekdamban thoeng pachuban* [History of Laos, From Ancient Times to the Contemporary Period]. Vientiane: State Printing House.



- Mueang Laem Chronicle* (in Tai Laem language und Tai Lue script), manuscript-copy made by Po Saeng Sam, Wat That Luang, Moeng Laem. 63 ff.
- Pawatsat lao-tai* (An abridged Lao-Tai history). Original kept by Maethao Buapha, Ban Wiang Nuea, Mueang Luang Nam Tha, Luang Nam Tha province, Inventory Code: 03.01.03.14 [Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme, Vientiane].
- Phuen wiang samai chao anu* (The Legend of Vientiane in the Times of King Anu). Vientiane: Research Team of the Department of Lao Language and Literature, National University of Laos.
- Prakong Nimmanahaeminda, 1987. *Mahakap rueang thao ba chueang: kan sueksa choeng wikhroh* (The Thao Ba Chueang Epic: An Analytic Study). PhD dissertation, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.
- Sarassawadee Oongsakul, 2005. *History of Lan Na*. Translated by Chitraporn Tanratanakul. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Udom Roongruangsri, 1999. "Tua mueang". In: *Saranukrom watthanatham thai phak nuea*, Vol. 5, pp. 2363–2365. Bangkok.