

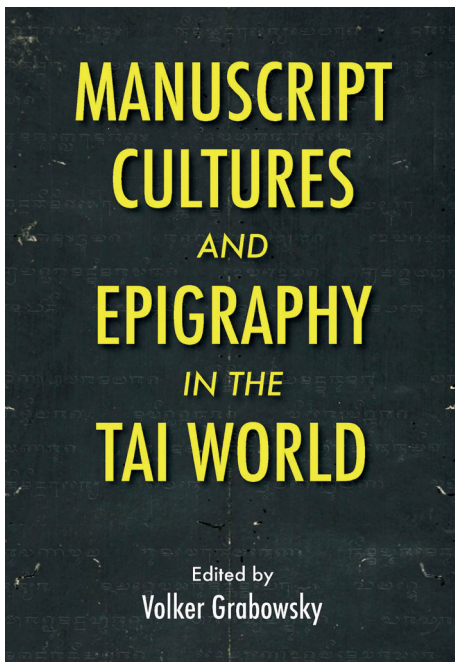
to enhance value. She concludes that while dating remains problematic “based on traditional connoisseurship”, silverware can still be “situated within the substantial corpus of Burmese art”, which “draws heavily on artists’ encounters with the world around them” (p. 37).

The catalogue itself—comprising a presentation plate, numerous bowls of different sizes, purposes and designs, a tea set, a trophy cup, cups, a centrepiece, letter cylinders, a picture frame, a belt buckle, various betel and cheroot boxes, *Dha-lwe* ceremonial swords and figures—is a delight. Each picture is large, clear and detailed, and located directly opposite the author’s erudite description and explanation of the item. It is well known how difficult silver is to photograph, yet Richard Valencia’s photographs of the collection are absolutely stunning. Indeed, the layout of the book is very ‘clean’ and modern; and the text also sufficiently large that it really is a joy to read.

Overall, this is a ground-breaking book. Although it is a catalogue detailing just one collection, albeit a very fine one, Alexandra Green has provided some thought-provoking ideas during her “initial foray” into this fascinating subject as to how we might today reconsider Burmese silverware produced during the British colonial period.

Paul Bromberg

Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World edited by Volker Grabowsky (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2022). ISBN: 978-616-215-172-9 (hardcover), 978-616-215-188-0 (paperback). 895 Baht.



Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World is an edited volume that gathers together papers presented in 2017 at the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies at Chiang Mai University. Edited by Prof. Volker Grabowsky (University of Hamburg), this book is made up of three thematic parts, each of four chapters: “Scripts, inscriptions, and manuscripts”; “Buddhist and classical literature”; and “Tai manuscripts and cultural revival”.

As its title suggests, this book addresses topics that concern the written culture of the Tai-speaking areas in Southeast Asia and beyond. In this regard, the wide geographical scope of focusing on the broad “Tai world” constitutes the book’s first originality. Most works in the social and human sciences stay within the

boundaries of the nation-states established at the turn of the 20th century in the colonial context. It must be recalled that although the word “Thai” refers today to the inhabitants of modern-day Thailand—regardless of their ethnic or linguistic affiliation—it initially encompassed different population groups speaking “Thai” or “Tai” (Chinese: 傣, *dai*) languages distributed across a vast geographical area. Although a number of populations in Asia have seen their unity undermined by territorial breakdown of the nation-state construct, the distribution of Tai ethnolinguistic groups in at least eight countries—Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, China, Vietnam, India and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia and Cambodia—makes the situation of Tai quite unique. Although Tai populations share a common basis of culture and language, they also have noticeable singularities. Some, for example, have adopted the Buddhist religion through their contact with populations previously settled in the area, such as the Khmer, Mon and Burmese, while others have not. The various scripts that are now used, or have been used within the Tai world, also reflect this diversity. The Siamese and the Lao have each developed their own “secular” script from a northern Thai model, while using specific scripts for religious writings, namely the Khom (a variation of Khmer Mul script) for the former, and the Tham (from Pali *Dhamma*) for the latter. The Tham script is also used by other Tai groups, such as the Yuon of the ancient Lanna kingdom (in present-day Northern Thailand), the Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna Xishuangbanna, in present-day Southwest China and northern Laos) and the Tai Khuen of Chiang Tung (Kengtung, in present-day Myanmar). Other Tai groups who have their own systems of writing include the Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Tai Neua, Tai Khao, Khamti and Ahom. Not all Tai writing cultures are addressed in *Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World*. This would be hardly feasible in a single volume. Yet the Tai culture is represented in its whole diversity. This wide perspective is in line with the work of the book’s editor, Volker Grabowsky, whose research over the last three decades has ranged across the history and written sources of Lanna, Laos and the Tai Lue principalities of Sipsongpanna and Chiang Khaeng.

The disciplinary fields through which co-authors address the broader Tai cultural world constitute the second originality of this book. While social anthropological studies on Tai populations have multiplied in recent decades, works based on primary sources from the premodern period have become significantly scarce. It is all the more regrettable, as a number of scholars such as George Cœdès, A.B. Griswold, Hans Penth, and David Wyatt, just to mention a few, have in the past shown the richness and value of the written cultures of Thailand, Laos, and the Shan states of Burma, and have paved the way for further research. Moreover, as Volker Grabowsky rightly states in his introduction to the volume, recent decades have seen many projects to survey, collect and digitise manuscript and epigraphic corpora, which are now waiting to be studied by scholars (p. 1). It is therefore the great merit of this collective work that it brings together current specialists working on the history, literature and various written sources of this rich and diverse cultural area.

The first part of the book gathers studies on the material culture of the premodern Tai written world, that is, the epigraphic and manuscripts corpora. All four chapters deal not only with the literal content of the texts, but also with their material aspect. Michel Lorrillard and François Lagirarde’s respective contributions examine the stone

inscriptions of Lan Xang (Laos) and Lanna (Northern Thailand) through an innovative reading that seeks to determine the “epigraphic habit” (p. 45), as Latinist Ramsay MacMullen puts it,¹ in force in these kingdoms in the 15th and 16th centuries. They raise questions about the condition of production of inscriptions, their social function, their “tangible” meaning, and the reasons for the eventual decline of this cultural practice. Lorrillard, in particular, highlights the differences between the epigraphic corpora of Lanna and Lan Xang, which reflect different visions based on different political, economic and cultural dynamics. Lagirarde emphasises the function of inscriptions in the Lanna kingdom to publicise “an already written act” (p. 78), which is often of legal nature, but also has symbolic significance.

The following two pieces, by Peera Paranut alone and by Peera with Manasicha Akepiyapornchai, examine understudied texts of the Siamese (central Thai) tradition. The first article surveys different techniques of “encoding” texts as taught in two linguistic treatises, *Pathom Mala* and *Cindamani*, and reveals an unexpected dimension of Thai literacy. The second studies a corpus that is not well known in Thai studies, namely a collection of manuscripts written in Sanskrit and Tamil with the Grantha script, which are used in rituals by the Brahmanic priests of Bangkok. Here also, the authors do not limit their study to the literal content of these manuscripts, but also look at them as ritual objects and question the way they are received, understood, used and transmitted.

The second part of the book deals with Buddhist and secular literature in the Siamese and Lao traditions. Again, chapters go beyond the analysis of literal contents, as they address other aspects of the texts. Silpsupa Jaengsawang scrutinises the paratexts of the Lao *Anisong Pha Wet*, belonging to the *Ānisaṃsa* (“advantage”) or *Salong* (“celebration”) genre, preached in Buddhist ceremonies and rituals—in this case the Bun Pha Wet festival, which celebrates the *Vessantara-Jātaka*, the ultimate previous life of the Buddha. Paratexts provide information about donors, scribes and sponsors of the manuscript copies of this homiletic Buddhist text, as well as the religious ideologies and conceptions that lie behind their production.

Bonnie Brereton takes another look at the Phra Malai legends, which were the subject of a monograph she published in 1995,² and which relate the visits made to heaven and hell by this compassionate monk. Her article analyses miniature paintings, found in some Phra Malai manuscripts of the Siamese tradition, illustrating pairs of monks taking part in funeral scenes. Brereton provides a ground-breaking interpretation of scenes that Western scholars had labelled as “naughty monks” (p. 203) by showing they, in fact, depict a form of comical chanting known as *cham uat phra*, which monks performed before a dead body in order to entertain mourners, who might stay one day or several days in the house before a cremation takes place.

In the third article in this section, Jana Igunma discusses the differences between three versions of the classic epic tale, *Sang Sinchai*, known as *Sai Sinsai* in Laos,

¹ Ramsay MacMullen (1982). The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire. *The American Journal of Philology* 103(3): 233–246.

² Bonnie Pacala Brereton (1995). *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.

which is based on the *Suvaṇṇasaṅkha-jātaka* of the *Paññāsa-jātaka*—the non-canonical collection of fifty past lives of the Buddha. Through this comparative study, she highlights that a “classical” work, such as *Sang Sinchai*, is not an unique text, but, like the *Phra Malai* legends, a “literary motif” (p. 248) that is subject to adaptation and evolution according to place and time.

Lastly, Sutheera Sapayaphan examines eleven manuscripts of the *Phra Rot Meri*, which belongs to the genre of *bot lakhon nok* or “plays performed outside the royal court” (p. 255). This study also analyses paratexts, including accompanying songs, lists of names, wages and dates of performance, which indicate the actual use of play manuscripts for performances.

The third part of the book offers an overview of the manuscript tradition in contemporary times. To a certain extent, it balances the image that one might have of the production and use of manuscripts as a disappearing culture, at best surviving only as a testimony of the past. Phibul Choompolpaisal draws up a much welcome inventory of the important collections of Tai manuscripts and the related projects of digitisation and compiling databases. He underlines the immensity of this corpus and the low proportion of texts that have been thoroughly studied, at least in the Western academic world, and draws a contrast with the renewed interest among local scholars. This relates to the observation made at the beginning of this review about the scarcity of contemporary studies on the primary sources of the Tai world.

Volker Grabowsky’s contribution focuses on the collection of documents assembled at the Buddhist Archive Centre in Luang Prabang (Laos), which continues the efforts of the monk Khamphanh Virachitto (1920-2007), abbot of the Khili Monastery, to collect photographs, printed works, correspondence and various documents related to the Lao Sangha. This archive also includes a substantial collection of Buddhist manuscripts brought back from various places, which had previously not been catalogued. Taken together, this archival collection represents an extraordinary resource for studying the history of Buddhism in Luang Prabang in the 20th century.

Achariya Choowonglert’s article departs from the other contributions by focusing on non-Buddhist Tai populations, in this case living in the Thanh Hoa region of Vietnam. This study reminds us that literacy and handwriting culture do not necessarily go hand in hand with the “Indianisation” process, even if the writing systems of these populations—Tai Dam, Tai Khao and Tai Deng—are indirectly derived from Indian models. Politically and culturally subjugated by the Kinh, the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam, the Tai populations see the maintenance of their language, their literature, their writing system and their handwritten culture as a means both to signal their uniqueness and to claim a part of the Vietnamese national unity. The central authorities have been ambivalent about such cultural revitalisation. In the past, they opposed the claim to singularity, but now tend to promote it.

In the last chapter of the book, Roger Casas observes a similar ambivalence in contemporary China towards the Tai Lue populations living in the Xishuangbanna prefecture of Yunnan province. In particular, Casas describes the phenomenon of the resurgence of the Tham script, which, as explained above, is the system traditionally used by the Tai Lue for writing religious texts. He describes how the Tai Lue have made

use of new communication technologies, including Unicode fonts, input systems and social networks, in an attempt to revitalise what is rightly seen as a cultural marker. He leaves, however, the question open as to the actual capacity of the traditional script “to remain an active link with a rich cultural tradition and a source of pride for Tai speakers in Sipsongpanna” (p. 402).

Contrary to what its title suggests, *Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World* is not a general presentation of the Tai written culture. Most contributions examine neglected topics or little-known documents, or explore innovative approaches for studying different corpora within the Tai world. The quality of the contributors’ articles is very high, and hence it is unfortunate that this standard is not matched in the production of the book, especially the illustrations, which are small format in black and white. The absence of a map of the concerned geographical area in Southeast Asia is to be regretted, as it would have helped to visualise the distribution of the Tai population in mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China, as well as the contact between them and with neighbouring civilisations. Also missing are a couple of important related references in the bibliographical apparatus, such as George Coëdès’ documented catalogue of the collection of Northern Thai and Lao manuscripts held at the Royal Library of Copenhagen³ and Oskar von Hinüber’s more recent catalogue of the Wat Lai Hin monastic library in Lampang (Northern Thailand).⁴ Needless to say, these minor shortcomings are too light to detract from the high value of this book, which definitely contributes to the knowledge of the Tai world, and more broadly to that of Southeast Asian literacy.

Gregory Kourilsky

³ George Coedès (1966). *Catalogue des Manuscrits en Pāli, Laotien et Siamois provenant de la Thaïlande. Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs etc. in Danish Collections*, Vol. 2. Part 2. Copenhagen: The Royal Library.

⁴ Oskar von Hinüber (2013). *Die Pali-Handschriften des Klosters Lai Hin bei Lampang in Nord-Thailand*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.