The Peter David Koret Collection of Tai Narrative Manuscripts at the University of California, Berkeley: Introduction and Index

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Abstract—This article introduces and contextualizes an extraordinary archive compiled by the late pioneer of Lao literary aesthetics, Peter David Koret (1959–2020). This 98-box, 233-fascicle collection, now housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, is one of the most extensive gatherings of Tai-language narrative texts in North America. Written on palm leaf and bark paper in various Tai languages, the collection's 137 manuscripts illuminate Koret's career-long exploration of the poetic beauty and pan–Southeast Asian circulation of traditional verse novels. To facilitate further research into Lao, Khuen, and other understudied Tai literary cultures, a full catalog with citations and paratextual details—cross-referenced to the summary index in this article—is presented in a separate online appendix.

Keywords: Lao Literature; Manuscripts; Noncanonical Jataka Tales; Southeast Asian Buddhist Literature; Tai Khuen Literature

Introduction

The Peter David Koret Collection of Tai Narrative Manuscripts is among the largest of its kind outside of Southeast Asia. Acquired across at least three decades by the late Dr Koret (1959–2020), the manuscripts reflect his deep expertise and wide-ranging interests in traditional Southeast Asian verse and prose. Koret was a pioneering American scholar of Lao and other Tai narrative literature, with a special emphasis on the complex and rarely studied aesthetic structures of classical Lao poetry. The manuscripts he collected represent his specific research interests as well as his broad appetite for reading, translating, and appreciating Southeast Asian verse and prose. As with the suite of manuscripts he gathered, Koret's scholarship opens our eyes to the delicate metrical forms, rich emotional textures, memorable plots, winsome underdogs, and sly wisdom that characterize traditional Tai literature beyond the royal court.

This survey article introduces this important collection, now housed at the University of California, Berkeley, and contextualizes it vis-à-vis Koret's intellectual interests and contributions. Koret's peripatetic journey as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer, graduate student, faculty member, educator, and independent scholar enabled him to collect and work with manuscripts across several countries. The Berkeley manuscripts reflect the depth of his engagement with one of the least studied forms of nominally Buddhist literature in Southeast

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Asia: vernacular-language traditional novels, primarily in verse, that adopt the generic framework of noncanonical jataka tales. With few exceptions—including, notably, a tranche of astrological and ritual texts—the manuscripts in this collection record the traditional novels that Koret focused on in his PhD dissertation (Koret 1994), mostly in the Lao language from Laos, along with parallel examples in the Lao/Isan language from northeast Thailand and the Tai Khuen language from eastern Shan State, Myanmar. It is precisely Koret's enduring focus on these traditional novels—as opposed to the more explicitly Buddhist texts typically foregrounded in most Southeast Asian manuscript collections—that make the collection so valuable for readers and researchers.

The present article unfolds in four sections. I begin with an overview of Koret's life and his intellectual contributions to Southeast Asian studies, with a special focus on his work on traditional novels and prophetic literature. This overview is accompanied by a tentative reconstruction of when and where Koret acquired each of the main categories of manuscripts in the Berkeley collection. I then turn to a more detailed physical and philological overview of the manuscripts, with an emphasis on their value as witnesses for the study of traditional Southeast Asian novels. In the penultimate section, I detail the methods I used to organize, analyze, and catalog this collection. For reasons of space, the full catalog of the collection is available only in the separate **Online Appendix**, which provides details on the title, subject, origin, date, and paratextual features of each manuscript, along with citations of parallel manuscripts in print catalogs and online databases.[2] The final section of this article offers a simple alphabetical index that gives a bird's-eye view of the collection and facilitates cross-referencing.

Peter David Koret: A Life in Southeast Asian Letters

Koret's manuscript collection mirrors several distinct phases in his life.[3] Born in 1959 in Rochester, New York, his first extended stay in Southeast Asia was as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, a stint that began in 1984, just two years after he graduated from Bard College with a BA degree in [English] Literature. During his years as a teacher for the Peace Corps, Koret developed fluency in the Thai and Lao/Isan languages, the latter due to an extended stay in northeast Thailand, including in a contiguous group of provinces in the middle of the Isan region: Kalasin, Mahasarakham, Roi Et, and Yasothon. In 1990 and 1991, he spent increasingly long periods in the Lao PDR, especially in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where his PhD dissertation began to take shape.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Koret studied closely with a range of traditional scholars, librarians, and modern academics in Bangkok, Isan,

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[3] For many of the details in this section, I am indebted to Michel Lorrillard of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), who generously shared of his friendship with Peter over the decades. For additional facets of Koret's biography, see Shih 2021: 99–100, compiled by Peter's friend Karen Sprinkel.

and Laos.[4] During this period, especially in 1990 and 1991, he kept an assiduous schedule of photographing traditional manuscripts from monastic libraries, university collections, and government repositories. Remarkably, he then transcribed many of the images by hand into modern Lao script in a sprawling set of notebooks. This rigorous, time-intensive, and indeed quasi-monastic practice of reading and writing gave Koret unparalleled mastery over a significant body of traditional Lao narrative literature. At the same time, he never ignored the oral dimensions of Southeast Asian literature. Gregarious, outgoing, and uncommonly witty in Lao and Thai, he cultivated a wide range of friendships across both sides of the Mekong. These networks allowed Koret to ground his understanding of classical literary texts within modern-day speech patterns and performance practices, and to frame his academic interventions within existing Lao and Thai scholarly dialogues.

At the end of 1991, Koret left Laos for London to write his PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) under the guidance of Manas Chitakasem. *Whispered So Softly It Resounds Through the Forest, Spoken So Loudly It Can Hardly Be Heard: The Art of Parallelism in Traditional Lao Literature* remains the most potent account of Lao literary aesthetics to appear in any language. Koret's dissertation made several critical interventions in the field.

First, he established that the study of Lao versification had long been marred by inappropriate comparisons between Lao meters and those of Siamese court literature. The oral context of Lao literature, especially for long narrative texts, requires us to understand local metrical structures on their own terms (Koret 1994: 91–120; Koret 1999: 238–245).

Second, his dissertation continued the work of Louis Finot, Maha Sila Viravong, Anatole-Roger Peltier, and other modern chroniclers of Lao literature by placing traditional novels from the Lao and Isan traditions in conversation with Lanna, Pali, and Thai parallels. One of Koret's long-term ambitions was to establish a robust basis for interlinguistic comparison of literary works across Southeast Asia, a goal that drove his studies of the Khuen and Shan languages later in life and supported by his earlier forays into Khmer and Burmese. A key appendix to his dissertation, styled an "Inventory of Lao Literature" (Koret 1994: 406–426), represents a snapshot of his thinking on this problem in 1994. While Koret surely would have wished to improve upon this early effort, the appendix (along with his extensive bibliographies of print and manuscript sources) is still by far the most useful Western-language source for the comparative study of traditional Lao narrative literature. The full catalog in the **Online Appendix** relies heavily on these portions of Koret's dissertation for the proper identification of Lao works.

Third, his dissertation offered a fresh analysis of one of the most salient aesthetic principles of Lao and other Tai literature, what Koret called "the art of parallelism" (Koret 1995). Over a series of eight chapters and some 261 pages (Koret 1994: 121–382), he built up

[4] For details of these Lao and Thai figures during this formative period in Koret's life, see Koret 1994: v–vii.

a multitiered argument for the process by which the distinctive structures of spoken Lao developed into major and minor forms of literary parallelism. For Koret, parallel pairs of meanings between lines constituted a fundamental building block of poetic meaning. Koret devotes several chapters to uncovering the way such parallel phrases are then set in contrast with or as a prelude to a third concluding phrase, a structure that Koret terms the "AAB pattern". His analysis presented this pattern as a skeleton key for appreciating the composition and revision of Lao narrative poetry at the macro and micro levels (Ibid., 232–274). In contrast to earlier presentations that stereotyped Lao literature as excessively repetitive, he located the creative genius of Lao poets within these complex, nested deployments of parallelism (Koret 2000). The core set of narrative texts that Koret used to make his points on Lao literary aesthetics are well represented among the Berkeley manuscripts.

After completing his doctorate, Koret took up a series of positions, initially in the United States (Arizona State University and the University of California, Berkeley) and then back in Southeast Asia. Between 1999 and 2009, his research moved in two primary directions: One, Koret was engaged in the study of contemporary Lao and Thai literature, translating and commenting on a range of modern prose works. These publications are Koret's most accessible contributions to Southeast Asian studies and helped put key Lao and Thai figures on the map of world literature.[5] Two, Koret began an intensive study of prophetic texts, especially those composed in Laos and Thailand. Never one to shy away from an intellectual challenge, Koret cut his teeth with a brilliant unpacking of what is arguably the most difficult composition in this genre, the mid-19th century Lao poem *Luep pha sun* (ລຶບພະສູນ; Koret 2004). Several manuscript examples drawn from this poem appear in the Berkeley collection (items # 36, 58–61). A few years later, he published an essay that examined the historical context and structural features of a broader range of prophetic texts in 19th- and 20th-century Laos and Thailand (Koret 2007). Some of the prophetic texts cited in this essay appear among his Berkeley manuscripts as well (items # 50, 64–65)

In the last decade of his life, Koret spent extended periods in northern Thailand, first in Nan and later in Mae Hong Son. It was also at this time that he published his *magnum opus*, a 1,134–page translation of a recently discovered first-person historical chronicle of a millenarian uprising during the French colonial era (Koret 2018). *The History of Kham Thong Luang* emerged from three of Koret's core intellectual interests: his immersion in the world of Lao manuscripts, his fascination with prophetic texts and the millenarian movements they spawned, and his commitment to exploring the distinctiveness of individual Southeast Asian voices in history. Koret's unique intellectual journey—especially his decades-long investment in reading and copying manuscript sources—prepared him to complete this final major project, which was

[5] For a full list of Koret's books, articles, and presentations, which goes beyond the scope of this article, see Shih 2021: 101–104.

published just two years before he passed away from brain cancer.

The many places where Koret lived in Southeast Asia between 1984 and 2020 were also the sites where he acquired the manuscripts in the present collection. Koret did not make an inventory of his collection, so we are left to make educated inferences about when and where he acquired the manuscripts now housed at the University of California, Berkeley. Most of the manuscripts in the Lao Buhan script—which comprise the bulk of the collection (items # 2–36, 40–52, 55–64, 74)—were likely purchased at antique vendors at the Talat Sao in Vientiane in 1990 and 1991. Koret may have purchased a smaller number from similar dealers in northeast Thailand during his sojourns there in the late 1980s. It is possible that some of these manuscripts may have been gifted to him by local custodians; further research is needed to determine the exact provenance of individual items. Another significant group of manuscripts in the collection are in the Tham Khuen script from Kengtung, Shan State, Myanmar (items # 111–134). These were likely acquired by Koret sometime after completing his doctorate in 1994, but it is difficult to determine exactly where or when; northern Thailand and Shan State are equally possible. The Khuen manuscripts, the Lanna handwritten and printed examples (items # 81–110), and the lone Tai Lue piece (item # 1) may have been obtained in the last decade of Peter's life when he was living in northern Thailand or during his trips to Shan State. The last significant group of materials in the collection, namely the printed palm-leaf "manuscripts" in Thai script and in the Isan language (items # 75–80), may have been purchased at Buddhist bookstores in Bangkok and northeast Thailand over a longer period, perhaps from the late 1980s to the early 2000s.

Overview of the Collection

In considering the collection as a whole, what is most remarkable is the strong consonance with Koret's research projects over the decades. His acquisition of these materials, largely from market vendors (for the Lao Buhan manuscripts in particular) and booksellers (for the printed materials in manuscript form), was far from random. Apart from a few ritual and astrological examples, Koret purchased manuscripts that aligned with his specific areas of focus, namely Tai narrative literature in verse, in prose and, to a lesser extent, Tai prophetic texts. The indubitable strengths of the collection lie in the narrative texts, particularly those in the Lao and Khuen languages, along with smaller numbers in Isan, Lue, and Lanna (items # 1–35, 37–38, 40–49, 74–80, 92–137). The remaining non-narrative manuscripts, while relatively few, are nonetheless impressive in scope, containing genres such as didactic verse (items # 50–53, 55–57), secular poetry (# 36, 58–63), prophetic texts (# 50, 64–65), and traditional manuals for ritual, medicine, and astrology (# 66–70, 72–73, 81–86, 88–91). Taken together, the collection cuts a distinctive portrait of Southeast Asian written texts composed between the late 17th and early 20th centuries, with a special emphasis on literary materials

and practical manuals that fall outside of the normative Buddhist Canon. The emphasis on "secular" literature—that is, less explicitly Buddhist works oriented more toward laypeople than monastics—is very much in keeping with Koret's intellectual path. Since most surviving monastic collections in Southeast Asia are strongly tilted toward Buddhist compositions in Pali or in a Pali-vernacular bitextual format (Walker 2022), the collection's focus on vernacular titles is a distinctive strength.

The primary scripts found in the collection include Lao Buhan (Old Lao script, known as Thai Noi/Tai Noi in northeast Thailand **[Figure 1, top; Figure 3; Figure 4]**), four distinct variants of the Tham script, including Tham Lanna **[Figure 2, bottom]**, Tham Lao **[Figure 1, bottom]**, Tham Lue **[Figure 2, top left]**, and Tham Khuen **[Figure 1, middle; Figure 2, top right]**, along with modern Thai script (for script tables detailing these writing systems, see Walker 2026b). The languages featured include all those associated with the scripts above, namely Lao, Lanna (Tai Yuan/northern Thai), Lue (Tai Lue/Dai Lue, spoken in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan province, China, as well as in diaspora communities in Laos and Thailand), Khuen (Tai Khuen/eastern Shan, centered in the former state of Kengtung in northeastern Myanmar and in Khuen-speaking areas across the border in northern Thailand), Isan (the variety of the Lao language used in northeast Thailand and nowadays most commonly written in standard Thai script), Thai (central Thai/Siamese), along with a few shorter passages in Pali.

The date and location for the production of the manuscripts can be discerned as follows: The Lao-language manuscripts appear to be mostly from Laos itself rather than northeast Thailand; information in the colophons indicates that they were mostly produced by Lao scribes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in what was then the French protectorate of Laos **[Figure 4]**. A few of the protective wooden boards even feature stickers with prices in kip, the currency of Lao PDR. This evidence is in keeping with the basic facts of Koret's life, notably his frequent trips to the Talat Sao market in Vientiane in 1990 and 1991. The Lanna handwritten manuscripts and the single Lue manuscript lack dated colophons, but based on their condition and paleography, they also likely date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Lanna manuscripts are surely from northern Thailand. The lone Lue example includes paratexts in modern Thai script and, as such, spent as least part of its life in northern Thailand. A few of the Khuen manuscripts on palm leaf feature colophons that indicate they were produced in the early to mid-20th century; most were likely inscribed in and around Kengtung, Myanmar. The printed texts in manuscript form in the Isan and Lanna languages were produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Thailand by leading printers of Buddhist books in Bangkok[6] and northern Thailand.[7] The most

[6] Items # 75–80 were printed by Luk S. Thammaphakdi; on this influential Buddhist publishing house, see Wolfson-Ford 2019: 147–148; also Silpsupa 2024: 88–93.

[7] Items # 92–100 were mostly printed by two



Figure 1: Palm-leaf manuscripts in different scripts; top: Lao Buhan script (item # 8, *Nāng īng dāi* ນາງອີງດາຍ, 1894 CE); middle: Tham Khuen script (item # 113, *Tutiya mālaiya* ᩈᩩᨲᩥᨿᩮᩣᩋᩣᨿᩮᩣᩃᨿᩣᩴ, early to mid-20th c.); bottom: Tham Lao (item # 37, *Kinnali* ᨠᩥᨶᩴᨶᩃᩤ, 1896 CE) © Trent Walker



Figure 2: *Sa*-paper manuscripts in different formats prior to cataloging; top left: stab-stitched manuscript in Tham Lue script (item # 1, *Suthon*, late 19th or early 20th c.); top right: leporello-folded manuscripts in Tham Khuen script (item # 123, *Pāet lāeng ʻǭk yǭt* ᩋᩮᩥᩣᨦᩃᩮᩫᩣᨿᩬᨲ, 1993 CE); bottom: leporello-folded manuscripts in Tham Lanna script (items # 81–91, various manuals for rituals, medicine, and astrology, late 19th or early 20th c.) © Trent Walker

recent documents in the collection are the Khuen manuscripts on paper, which Koret may have purchased in Myanmar or from Khuen communities in northern Thailand. The colophons of these indicate that they were all produced around 1993 and 1994 in Kengtung, Myanmar.

In terms of format, the collection consists primarily of handwritten texts, fitting the traditional definition of manuscripts. A substantial minority, however, are printed texts in formats that match or imitate traditional manuscripts (Silpsupa 2024: 85–99). These include the Isan-language texts, printed in Thai script on palm leaves stacked in the ordinary pothi format, as well as some of the Lanna-language texts, printed in Thai script on cardboard folded into the traditional leporello format. Both groups of texts have the format, feel, and function of manuscripts, despite the circumstances of their production. Most of the texts they transmit were transcribed directly from handwritten sources and are generally not available in a modern book format. The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley also has a sizable collection of such materials from Cambodia and central Thailand; a similarly large collection at the Library of Congress was cataloged in this journal by Ryan Wolfson-Ford (2019: 148–154).

Regarding the traditional handwritten manuscripts that make up the bulk of the collection, there are two primary formats: 1) the palm-leaf (*Corypha lecomtei* or *Corypha umbraculifera*) manuscript in stacked pothi format, typically bound through one or two string holes and enclosed with heavy wooden boards; and 2) the accordion-folded leporello manuscript, made from bark-pulp paper harvested from the *sa* (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) or *khoi* (*Streblus asper*) tree in Southeast Asia.[8] The former type is carved with a metal stylus before being rubbed with ink, while the latter is inked directly on the page with a traditional dip or quill pen (Peera 2022: 75–78). Most of the pothi-style manuscripts in the collection were bound with a single thin string, though a significant number of the Lao manuscripts were bound with two thick strings. None of the examples used wooden pegs to hold multiple fascicles together. Most of the Lao-language palm-leaf examples were bound between wooden boards, but none of their Khuen counterparts were.[9] A third manuscript type, found only in one example in the present collection, is the stab-stitched manuscript, typically fashioned of doubled sheets of *sa* paper and inked with traditional pens in a manner analogous to the leporello (Helman-Ważny et al. 2021; Sowmeya et al. 2024: 120–122).

Each manuscript format can be found in a variety of different dimensions **[Fig. 1; Fig. 2]**. The single stab-stitched example follows a traditional format used among the Lue and other Tai groups in Yunnan and along the Chinese border in Southeast Asia (Wharton 2017: 49; Apiradee 2018: 41; Helman-Ważny et al. 2021: 144–145). Leporello-folded manu-

publishers still active in northern Thailand, namely Lampang Sangkhaphan in Lampang and Tharatong (Thara Thong) in Chiang Mai.

[8] For material analyses of comparable manuscripts, see Helman-Ważny et al. 2021: 159–165; Sowmeya et al. 2024: 122–123; 127–133.

[9] For more on various pothi binding options in Southeast Asia, see Ciotti 2023: 157–169.



Figure 3: Detail of scribal colophon from item # 13, *Sang sinsai* ສັງສິນໄຊ, 1876 CE (Lao Buhan script) © Trent Walker

scripts can vary widely in size. The largest ones in the collection are the handwritten single-volume Khuen examples, some of which are as large as 50 × 20 × 20 cm (length by width by height), while the smallest are the printed Lanna examples, each fascicle of which measures only about 40 × 5 × 0.5 cm. Palm-leaf manuscripts tend to cluster around two main sizes (Walker 2018: 21–23). The long-format examples are around 50 to 60 cm long x 5 cm wide and vary widely in height, depending on the number of folios/leaves. The tallest or thickest examples in the collection contain over 400 folios, stacked to a height of 25 to 35 cm. Short-format palm-leaf manuscripts are equal in width, but tend to have a much shorter horizontal length, typically between 20 to 30 cm. Their height varies depending on the number of leaves, but the longest ones in this collection are about 100 folios, reaching around 15 cm in height.

Though the manuscripts themselves are of relatively recent vintage, many of the texts they record date back several centuries. The lengthy Lao narrative epic in verse, *Sang sinsai* ສັງສິນໄຊ, is typically attributed to the late 17th century, though without contemporary material evidence (Koret 1994: 14). There are two copies of this text in the collection (items # 13–14); one example, copied in 1876 **[Fig. 3; item # 14]**, is also the oldest dated manuscript cataloged here. Other early dated examples, all in the Lao language and Lao Buhan script, include *Thāo sangkhathat* ທ້າວສັງຄະທັດ from 1883 (item # 26), *Nāng īng dāi* ນາງອີງ ດາຍ from 1894 **[Fig. 1, top; item # 8]**, *Kinnalī* ກິນນະລີ **[Fig. 1, bottom; item # 37]** and *Mūnla čhanti* ມູນລະຈັນຕິ from 1896 (item # 25), and *Thāo nyī* ທ້າວຍີ່ from 1897 (item # 40). Most of the remaining dated manuscripts hail from the 20th century, with a significant cluster between the 1910s and 1940s **[Figure 4]** and another in the early 1990s **[Fig. 2, top right]**.[10] For almost all the texts represented in the collection, save those with an authorial colophon, no date of composition is known. Most of the narrative

[10] Whenever the colophons include sufficient calendar data, I calculate the most likely solar dates through the SEAC software program developed by Lars Gislén (https://www.particle-nuclear.lu.se/lars-gislen/downloads) on the basis of the work of J.C. Eade (1995).



Figure 4: Detail of scribal colophon from item # 29, *Thāo kāp lāng* ທ້າວກາບລາງ, 1932 CE (Lao Buhan script) © Trent Walker

works took the form represented in manuscripts between the mid-18th and early 20th centuries, paralleling developments in narrative literature across mainland Southeast Asia.

A detailed philological study of the paratexts found in this collection, including the scribal colophons, exceeds the scope of this article. The full catalog includes information regarding which manuscripts have colophons and some of the details contained therein. I conclude this section with an illustrative example of a scribal note: the colophon from item # 29, a copy of the Lao verse novel *Thāo kāp lāng* ท้าวกาบลาง or *Lord Bamboo Sheath* (Peltier 1988: 410). After completing the main text, paginated from folios 1–125 (each having a recto and verso side), the scribe added the following colophon on the final unpaginated leaf:

> śa || baḥ busḍaḥsăṅkḷāṣ tai 2475 ṫûa ṗī kāp săn dai vā ṗī vạk tœn 9 k̇hœn gāṁ 1 văn 3 _ khā bḷaḥ cô ācān bæṅ tai k̇hian lœaṅ jāṣ k̇haṅ / || cunlaḥsăṅkḷāṣ t̄ai băn 294 ṫûa ṗī || ◯ || bḷaḥ âṅ 50 jāṣ dāv kāp lāṅ hai āv ◯ bå băn jāṅ ṫī hḷĕk mœaṅ hḷvaṅ lâṅ / mā ẏū mœaṅ viaṅ căn || k̇hå hai phū k̇hā mī bḷaḥ- ◯ hẏā ṗănyā ăn lœk læp _ k̇hå hai mī cai ạn ◯ nạm k̇hô su nai dāṁ cāṁ sīn suṣ bāṁbĕṅ / ṫai kæv k̇hå hai t̄ai thœṅ hạṅ nīlaḥbān jaḥhvăn yạt _ k̇hå hai tai kœṣ hạṅ vaḥṫīṅ kæv ḅāk jaḥhvăn t̄æ dạn _ k̇hå ẏā tai ṫi ṫian k̇hay ācān phū k̇hian _ | (transliteration follows Walker 2026a).

[May there be] p[rosperity!] Buddhist Era 2475, Lesser Era 1294, a *kap san* year, a monkey year in the Thai reckoning, ninth lunar month, first waxing day, a Tuesday

> [equivalent to 2 August 1932]. I, Master Phaeng, wrote down this story of the Lord [from] the *Fifty Jatakas* titled *Lord Bamboo Sheath* for Uncle Phan, a blacksmith from Luang [Prabang] who has come to reside in Vientiane. May I be endowed with deep and keen wisdom and intelligence. May I be of humble heart, that I may penetrate the Dharma, uphold the pure precepts, and cultivate the Three Jewels. May I reach the lofty level of Nibbāna, peak of the heavens, and may I be reborn in the crystalline heavenly plane of [Ta]vatiṁ[sa]! Please don't criticize me, the scribe.

While a thorough study of the colophons attached to Lao literary manuscripts remains a desideratum, we can nevertheless discern some general patterns in this example. First, after a brief opening invocation, the scribe records the date the manuscript was copied in the Buddhist Era (*buddhasakarāja*), the Lesser Era (*cullasakarāja*), or both, along with various other calendrical data. Next, the scribe—almost always a male monastic or former monk—names himself (Master Phaeng) and/or his sponsor (Uncle Phan), and, more rarely, the location where he performed his work (Vientiane). Scribal colophons almost always repeat the title of the work in question (*Lord Bamboo Sheath*); in this case, the scribe positions the work as a noncanonical jataka, though this novel is not part of any known *Paññāsajātaka* ("Fifty Jatakas") collection in Pali. The scribe then declares his aspirations for worldly and supramundane benefits, culminating in Nirvana. Finally, he adds a short apology for any shortcomings in his craftsmanship. In broad outline, these features align closely with the scribal colophons produced in non-royal contexts in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Silpsupa 2022: 159–166; 223–231; Walker 2018: 74–98). Master Phaeng's 1932 colophon is on the long side for the Koret collection; others include only a subset of the features found in this example.

Archival and Cataloging Methods

When Koret passed away in 2020, the bulk of his manuscripts, notebooks, and printed materials were under the custodianship of a friend in Oakland, California. In 2021, this friend arranged for them to be donated on Koret's behalf to his onetime employer, the University of California, Berkeley. They were received by UC Berkeley's South/Southeast Asia library through the efforts of Virginia Shih, Curator for Southeast Asia and Buddhist Studies Collections. Shih coordinated the archiving of the collection, including commissioning archival boxes for the manuscripts, and later arranged for the collection to be transferred to UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Under her supervision, Koret's extensive collection of printed books in Thai, Lao, Burmese, Khmer, and other languages will be incorporated into UC Berkeley's library catalog in the future (Shih 2021: 92–93). In 2021, Shih recruited me to

begin the cataloging process for the palm-leaf and bark-paper manuscripts in the collection, a process that would ultimately take four years and multiple trips to Berkeley to complete.

Several factors eased my cataloging work. For one, the manuscripts are largely in excellent condition, though many would benefit from thorough cleaning. Most are complete, meaning that the texts they contain can be read from beginning to end, with no missing pages. This is true of all the Thai- and Tham Khuen-script manuscripts, as well as most but not all of the Lao Buhan manuscripts. When pages are missing, it is typically the first few and the last few only. For scholars of literary narratives in the Lao and Khuen languages, the presence of so many complete or nearly complete versions of both well-known and rare texts makes this collection particularly valuable. Along with manuscript collections in Laos, Myanmar, and north and northeast Thailand, the manuscripts gathered here serve as key witnesses for future editions of Tai literary works. Koret's choice to focus on complete manuscripts in good condition suggests that he formed his collection with such an aim in mind.

The folded-paper manuscripts in Tham Lanna script as well as some of the short-format palm-leaf manuscripts in Lao Buhan and Tham Lao script comprise unique collections of texts, usually for ritual, medicinal, magical, predictive, or astrological purposes. Following Silpsupa Jaengsawang's terminology for Lao documents, these are mostly "multiple-text manuscripts", produced by a single scribe all at once, rather than "composite manuscripts", produced by multiple scribes over a period of time (Silpsupa 2022: 36–44). As bespoke compilations organized by the individual scribe or scribes who created them, these manuscripts do not usually bear distinctive titles. Several of the Lanna examples feature a range of diagrams and illustrations, mostly with astrological connections **[Fig. 2, bottom]**. In lieu of a native-language title, I have provided a short descriptive title for each of these manuscripts, followed by a more detailed account of the contents, where appropriate. Several short-form palm-leaf manuscripts written in Lao Buhan and Tham Lao scripts were compiled from originally separate manuscripts; these meet Silpsupa's definition of composite manuscripts. Whenever possible, I have tried to separate these items into their constituent parts, though in the case of some of the astrological examples (e.g., items # 66–67), this task proved beyond my abilities.

For the narrative manuscripts on palm leaf, I began the cataloging process by making sure all the leaves were in the correct order. This entailed untying the original strings, sorting the folios by their native pagination systems (numeric, alphabetic, or both in combination; see Bounleuth 2016: 59–62; Silpsupa 2022: 81–83), and then retying the manuscripts in their proper sequence, with the old strings when possible or new ones if the old ones had deteriorated beyond repair. Most of the manuscripts were already in the proper order, save perhaps a few folios. Some examples were nearly entirely mixed up. Such disarray was most likely the condition Koret acquired these manu-

scripts in; for the ones he read and used himself, he would have presumably restored them to their original sequence. Reordering the folios was a particularly important step for identifying the titles in multiple-text and composite manuscripts. Many examples that on cursory examination seemed to represent only a single text in fact contained several different items. These multiple-text and composite manuscripts have each been assigned a single box to preserve the way scribes and local librarians grouped them over the years. In the catalog, however, they are notated as separate items for the convenience of researchers.

In contrast to the traditional manuals, few of which present their own native titles, it was possible to identify a secure title or titles for almost all of the narrative manuscripts. Koret presumably would have been able to find his way around his own manuscript collection easily, given his expertise in the literary genres represented. But for the present researcher, this task was initially quite daunting. A minority of the manuscripts were wrapped in pieces of newspaper that included Koret's handwritten notes, typically just a title in Lao script. A few other manuscripts bore white stickers on their wooden covers, upon which Koret had also written a title identification. For reasons unknown to me, not all the titles found in the newspaper wrappings were accurate, in contrast to those on the stickers, which almost always provided the correct title. To ensure that the titles provided in the catalog are as accurate and useful as possible, I focused my identification work primarily on two pieces of paratextual information: (1) marginal notes concerning the title, generally found on the left margin of the first page of Lao Buhan examples and on separate front and rear cover pages for Khuen manuscripts **[Fig. 2, top right]**; and (2) scribal colophons, almost always found in the last few leaves of a given manuscript, which often mention the title along with the copy date and the name and aspirations of the scribe and/or sponsor **[Fig. 1, top; Fig. 3; Fig. 4]**. Since the most frequently lost folios of palm-leaf manuscripts are those at the beginning and the end, in some cases these paratexts were no longer available. In these cases, I gratefully rely on Koret's handwritten identifications, with the caveat that some of his notes may have gotten inadvertently mixed up over time. Whenever possible, I have checked my identifications against similarly titled manuscripts available through online databases of Southeast Asian manuscripts.

For confirming the titles of Lao and Khuen literary narratives, several resources proved especially useful. For Lao narrative texts, particularly those in verse, Koret's "Inventory of Lao Literature and Index of Titles", which appears as an appendix to his 1994 dissertation, is an invaluable tool. Whenever possible, for the entry of each Lao literary narrative in the catalog, I have provided a citation of the page number from Koret's inventory, since his work offers ample references to Lao- and Thai-language publications concerning the narratives in question. In addition, Lao texts summarized in Louis Finot's classic overview (1917) or Anatole-Roger Peltier's more detailed survey (1988) are cited by their respective page numbers. Isan-

language printed manuscripts that have parallels in the Library of Congress collection are cited by the corresponding page and item number in Wolfson-Ford's catalog in JSS (2019). For Khuen narrative texts, mostly in bilingual Pali-Khuen prose, Peltier's trilingual guide (1987) is essential. For each of the applicable Khuen manuscripts, I have referenced a corresponding text by item number in Peltier's 1987 book. For titles not found in the publications discussed above, I have cited parallel digitized manuscripts by code number (for details, see Abbreviations in the **Online Appendix**). My primary intention in citing these print and online resources is to allow researchers to quickly connect to other relevant sources for the study of the manuscript in question.

For ease of reference, I have divided the manuscripts into eleven groups in terms of primary language (Lue, Lao, Isan, Lanna, and Khuen) and format (stab-stitched *sa* paper, long-format palm leaf, short-format palm leaf, leporello-folded *khoi* paper, leporello-folded *sa* paper, printed palm leaf, printed leporello, and photocopied leporello). Each group contains between 1 and 33 boxes of materials, for a total of 98 custom-sized, archival-standard clamshell cardboard boxes, each of which Virginia Shih specifically commissioned from the Preservation Department at UC Berkeley Library. Each box often contains a single item, that is, one manuscript in the pothi, leporello, or stab-stitched format. As mentioned above, many manuscripts consist of several distinct titles, and I have cataloged these as separate items. The 98 boxes therefore contain a total of 137 distinct items, each of which is cataloged as a separate title. For narrative texts in verse, it is common for the entire text, even if it stretches to hundreds of folios, to be contained within a single fascicle, a bound portion of text often known as a *phuk* ᨾᩩᨠ ("that which is tied together; a bundle") in various Tai languages. For prose texts and for more specifically Buddhist compositions, however, including those in Pali and in bitextual Pali-vernacular formats, it is conventional to bind off portions with string after a certain number of folios, often around 24 (two full cycles of the traditional alphabetic pagination system). This convention was extended to leporello manuscripts and to printed texts in the pothi and leporello formats, meaning that a single text or item may consist of multiple separate fascicles. To the untrained eye, each fascicle may look like a separate manuscript; this is especially the case for multi-volume leporello manuscripts divided into separate fascicles **[Fig. 2, top right]**. The 137 items thus comprise a total of 233 fascicles, ranging from just a handful of folios to well over 400, the longest being 489. The average fascicle in this collection is closer to 60 folios, meaning the entire collection may be around 15,000 folios or 30,000 pages in length.

The manuscripts that Koret collected thus form an impressive collection that illuminates his core research interests, with notable strengths in long, complete, and well-preserved copies of Lao and Khuen narrative works. To extend Peter Koret's intellectual legacy and to facilitate new studies of Lao, Khuen, and other Tai literary and Buddhist tradi-

tions, the digitization of this collection at UC Berkeley, should funding support be obtained, would be a welcome development. For the time being, the manuscripts are available to researchers on-site at the Bancroft Library; the collection has already played a critical role in the hands-on teaching of manuscript studies to graduate and undergraduate students at UC Berkeley and Stanford University. Since the manuscripts are in the United States and will eventually be findable through American library databases,[11] the present catalog foregrounds the American Library Association–Library of Congress (ALA-LC) romanization system for titles as opposed to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) preferred by this journal.[12] These ALC-LC romanizations are always supplemented by original script versions, modern Thai- or Lao-script conversions and Indic-based graphic transliteration (Walker 2026a) in the full catalog presented in the **Online Appendix**.

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Summary Index

To make finding selected manuscripts as painless as possible, I close this article with a summary index, composed of two separate lists: 1) Alphabetic Index of Titled Items, and 2) Alphabetic Index of Untitled Items. These are organized by English alphabetical order for the standardized ALA-LC titles and include item numbers for easy cross-referencing with the catalog. Titles that are represented by multiple items in the catalog, sometimes in different formats or languages, thus appear under a single entry in this format, as in *Pāt lāeng ʻǭk yǭt* (# 97, 123, 132). For readers already familiar with Southeast Asian literature, these lists are intended to provide a rapid way to gauge the scope of the collection and find manuscripts of interest.

Alphabetic Index of Titled Items

ʻĀi rǭi khǭt (# 99)
ʻAlǭng hǭi khāo (# 125)
ʻAlǭng mot som (# 120)
ʻAlǭng phra čhao din nīeo (# 127)
ʻAlǭng ying dāo (# 126)
ʻAnāthapindika (# 115)
ʻĀnisong būat (# 110)
ʻIn sai sāt (# 44)
Būa hom būa hǭng būa hīao (# 35)
Būa hǭm pan kāp (# 128)
Čhampā sī ton (# 15)

[11] For an overall catalog entry for the collection, see: https://search.library.berkeley.edu/permalink/01UCS_BER/ergbi/alma991086575265106532.

[12] For the ALA-LC system for Thai, see: https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/thai.pdf (revised 2011); for Lao, see: https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/lao.pdf (revised 2012). When discussing titles and other Tai-language terms outside of their strict presentation at the head of each catalog entry and in the indices, I follow the RTGS system. Pali and Sanskrit words, when discussed outside of a title, are romanized according to the standard system of ISO 15919:2001 (https://www.iso.org/standard/28333.html). The conversion of Khuen, Lanna, Lao, and Lue titles to Thai script follows typical Thai conventions. Lao and Isan titles are romanized according to the ALC-LC system for Lao; for Khuen, Lanna, and Lue titles (for which there is no ALC-LC system), I have followed the ALC-LC system for Thai. I have adjusted the romanization of the Khuen and Lue titles slightly to match local pronunciation (notably by de-aspirating selected consonants). For the Lanna titles in Thai script, I have retained the unmodified Thai ALC-LC system.

Čhanthakhāt (# 23)
Čhittakumān tham čhāng sām ngā (# 129)
Čhiwahā lin kham (# 92)
Čhōdokkasatthī (# 114)
Dūan sām khai nam (# 54)
Hā (# 71)
Hā nǭi (# 62)
Hǭi hai (# 101)
Hǭk dǭn (# 27)
Kā yǭm (# 121, 122)
Kaisǭn dǭk būa (# 64)
Kāp pha munī (# 50)
Khun thưng khun thūang (# 6, 74)
Kinnalī (# 37)
Lātthanā pha vēt (# 73)
Mæ rāng 32 phūa (# 103)
Mahāvong tæng ʻǭn (# 20)
Mahāwičhaiyyačhādok (# 117)
Manīčhan (# 130)
Manīčhantakuman khai sæng (# 96)
Matchā phrayā plā chǭn (# 100)
Mū hin (# 94, 95)
Mūnla čhanti (# 25)
Nāng ʻīng dāi (# 8)
Nāng ʻǭlaphim (# 47)
Nāng khưn dǭk mai (# 118)
Nāng kinnarī (# 109)
Nāng patāčhārā saʻūn (# 93)
Nāng phom hǭm (# 75)
Nāng phom pan (# 131)
Nyā sǭn lān (# 56)
Pæ kham (# 137)
Pæt læng ʻǭk yǭt (# 97, 123, 132)
Panhā phrayā ʻin (# 108)
Pannyāphala (# 12)
Pathomma mālaiya (# 112)
Phainyalāt (# 9)
Phanyā khankhāk (# 32)
Phayā čhakkawatti (# 133)
Phin sāi sǭn lōk (# 55)
Phon hā ngœn hā kham (# 102)
Phrayā bāo nǭi (# 111)
Phuttha thamnwāi (# 65)
Pū sǭn lān (# 53)
Sālā nok ʻīang mōng (# 77)
Sīa khǫ sātā khāt (# 69)
Sīeo phī sīeo khon (# 134, 135)
Sin sai (# 13, 14)
Som sa khưt (# 36, 59)
Som thī khưt (# 58, 61)
Sōphā sǭn lān (# 57)
Sunantakumān (# 136)
Sūt khuan lūang (# 68, 72)
Sut thī ʻāo (# 60)
Suthon (# 1)
Sutthanū (# 98)
Suvannasanyām (# 45)
Suwannamēk mā khon kham (# 124)
Takkatæn mō kham (# 76, 79)
Tamnān phā tæk (# 119)
Tamnān phanyā ʻin (# 38)
Tēčhō yāmō (# 104)
Thammadā sǭn lōk (# 105, 106)
Thāo čhūang hān (# 18)
Thāo kālakēt (# 22)
Thāo kālathā (# 11)
Thāo kam kā dam (# 2)
Thāo kamphā kai kæo (# 5, 31)
Thāo kamphā pā dæk pā samǭ (# 3)
Thāo kamphā phī nǭi (# 24, 41)
Thāo kāp lāng (# 29)
Thāo kham fǭng (# 42)
Thāo kham sǭn (# 43)
Thāo khunlū nāng ʻūa (# 17, 19, 21)
Thāo lin nǭi (# 10)
Thāo mā nyui (# 4, 16, 48)
Thāo nyī (# 40)
Thāo phā khāng nāng kham khāng (# 30)
Thāo sangkhathat (# 26, 34)
Thāo suvannakhīrī (# 78)
Thāo tao (# 28, 33, 46)
Thāo ten dǭn (# 7)
Tulaka (# 116)
Tutiya mālaiya (# 113)
Visutthinyāthikālasūt (# 80)
Wisutthiyā (# 107)

Alphabetic Index of Untitled Items

Lanna magic and astrology manual (# 82)
Lanna magic and healing manual, including magical spells and healing rites (# 89)
Lanna magic, astrology, and ritual manual (# 81)
Lanna medicine and magic manual, including medicinal recipes, magical spells, and healing rites (# 90, 91)
Lanna medicine manual (# 83, 84)
Lanna ritual texts, including liturgies for *kammaṭṭhāna* meditation and healing rites (# 85)
Lanna ritual texts, including protective text on the *pāramī*, calling the spirits of rice, calling the spirits of buffalo, calling the spirits of candles, and other ritual texts (# 86)
Lanna ritual texts, including texts for calling the spirits (# 88)
Lao astrology manual (# 66)
Lao medicine and astrology manual (# 67)
Single-leaf fragments of assorted Lao Buddhist texts in bilingual prose (# 39)
Unidentified fragment of Lao verse narrative (# 49)
Unidentified Lanna legal text (# 87)
Unidentified Lao didactic text in verse (# 52)
Unidentified Lao didactic text in verse for women (# 51)
Unidentified Lao ritual text for calling the spirits (# 70)
Unidentified Lao secular poetry (# 63)

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