

Preliminary Notes on “ the Cultural Region of Tham Script Manuscripts ”

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Preliminary Notes on “the Cultural Region of *Tham* Script Manuscripts”

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The script referred to as the *Tham* (*Pali*: dhamma) script in this essay is one of the Southeast Asian scripts of Indian origin and has been widely used in the northern part of mainland Southeast Asia. It presumably evolved from a preceding script of the *Mon*, the earlier inhabitants of present-day northern Thailand, and was adapted by the Tai speaking peoples¹⁾, the latecomers into the region, for their vernaculars since 1465 at the latest, in addition to using it for Pali religious matters (Penth 1992: 52–53, 60). It subsequently spread to present-day Laos, northeast Thailand, the Shan State of Burma and to the Sipsong Panna area in southwest China, and evolved into local variants. Despite the slight differences in their appearances, these derivative scripts, which are known by various names such as *Lue*, *Khun*, *tham Lao*, etc, are characterized by an identical system of writing. Since they all have primarily been employed for religious texts, they can collectively be called the *Tham* script (Bizot 1993: 13).

Within an extended area where the variants of the *Tham* script were used, cultural similarities of a significant degree have been observed, as supported by Hans Penth when he speaks of the “Culture of the Region of the Dhamma Letters” (Penth 1994a: 13)²⁾. The region in modern times, however, has been carved up into four separate states, i.e. Thailand, Laos, Burma and China, by politically-drawn boundary lines. With the exception of being accorded a minor status of a non-official script, the contemporary circumstances surrounding the *Tham* script within each state differ considerably. Therefore, it is not very easy to fathom the widespread regional use of the *Tham* script in pre-modern times, considering the limited use of the script in present times.

A branch of the ethnic Tai who finally occupied the northern Thai valleys have been labeled as Yuan by some neighboring people; thus the *Tham* script is sometimes presented as the Yuan script³⁾. Such an ethnic connotation is more distinctively noticeable in the case of the Tai Lue variant or the “old Tai script,” as it is called by the Chinese, in Sipsong Panna. After the succession of policy changes concerning the use of scripts since the People’s Republic of China established control in that area during the 1950s, the *Tham* script was regarded as “an accepted ethnic marker” and “a source of pride” among the Tai students there during the 1990s (Hansen 1999: 143). However, we should be wary about associating the script with emerging ethnic identities, for the *Tham* script has in no way been an exclusive feature of any particular ethnic group. It is noteworthy that linguistic groups other

than Tai speaking peoples including Mon–Khmer speaking Palaung have reportedly used the *Tham* script extensively (Sai Kham Mong 2004:256–257). Therefore, the use of the *Tham* script has not been limited to any linguistically defined community.

The *Tham* Script and the Lan Na Polity

Another appellation often applied to the *Tham* script is the Lan Na (Thai) script. Lan Na is the name of the Tai kingdom of which existing tradition claims the supposed Tai chieftain Mangrai founded the capital, Chiang Mai, at the end of thirteenth century. From the mid–sixteenth century for about two hundred years, the Lan Na region was under the Burmese kings' suzerainty. Most part of the region was eventually absorbed into the southern Tai kingdom of Siam based in Bangkok. This process of absorption started only as late as toward the end of eighteenth century, when the newly established northern chief, Kawila, chose to form an alliance with Siam in his attempt to rebel against the Burmese forces and drove them out. The privileged class of people, who claimed their inheritance from the Lan Na royalty of the Kawila family, continued to exist until 1932, when the Siamese absolute monarchy was abolished. As a consequence, in present–day Thailand, the Lan Na tradition is more often than not equated with that of northern Thailand. The pre–modern polity of Lan Na often depicted as comprising fifty-seven *muang*, however, undoubtedly extended beyond the modern national boundaries of Thailand into adjacent territories (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 195).

As described earlier, the *Tham* script had apparently originated in the area that served as the center of the Lan Na polity, yet naming the script that of Lan Na as if it were the official script of a modern state is quite misleading⁴. In fact, the Lan Na kings did not hesitate to erect stone inscriptions by using a different type of script⁵. It might be said, nevertheless, that the most extended influence of the Lan Na polity closely corresponded to the geographical area where the *Tham* script was used. When Grabowsky states that the Mon-derived religious script of Lan Na (i.e. the *Tham* script) spread in the second half of the fifteenth century throughout the “Greater Lan Na cultural area (including the Lü and Khün inhabited areas east of the Salween river)” (Grabowsky 2007: 124), he seems to refer to the expanded area of Lan Na polity during the reign of King Tilokarat (1441–1487), the ninth king of Mangrai dynasty, under whose rule Lan Na is described to have prospered in every respect (Sarassawadee 2005: 80).

Through military expeditions waged by Tilokarat, Nan and Phrae came into the reaches of Lan Na for the first time and Lan Na further expanded to the west into the Shan inhabited area and in the north penetrated into the predominantly Lue Sipsong Panna area. Tilokarat was at the same time renowned for his ardent support of Buddhism, especially of monks belonging to the newly introduced Sinhalese order. The new order of Buddhism was diffused further to the north by the itinerant monks dispatched from the principal monastery in Chiang Mai, Wat Pa Daeng. In relating the advance of the Sinhalese Order into the Shan area, the Chronicle of Wat Pa Daeng tells that the monks took with them Buddha images and scriptures in a bullock cart (Sommai and Swearer 1977: 97–98; Sommai trans. 1976: 21). In this way, roughly speaking, the “Lan Na *Tham* script accompanied the spread of Buddhism” (Sarassawadee 2005: 6).

As to the relationship between the sphere of Tilokarat’s expedition and the spread of the Sinhalese Buddhist order, Swearer and Sommai put it as follows:

As Tilokarāja (Tilokarat) pushed out the borders of his northern kingdom, the Sīhala Nikāya (Sinhalese Order) continued to grow and expand. (...) until the Sīhala Nikāya becomes co-extensive with Tilokarāja’s hegemony over northern Thailand (Swearer and Sommai 1978: 29).

Swearer and Sommai go so far as to say that “Of all the monarchs of Lānnā (Lan Na) Tilokarāja best exemplifies efforts to build a single moral community unified on the sociological level by a common religious institution,” and his reign is regarded as a “model of the symbiosis between religious and political spheres” (Swearer and Sommai 1977: 31).

The “symbiotic relationship” between Theravada Buddhism and political authority throughout the history of Siam has been repeatedly discussed (Somboon 1984; Ishii 1986). Grabowsky applies a practically identical premise to the Lao kingship and Sangha as one based on mutual benefits and explains them in terms of legitimation (Grabowsky 2007: 133–136). On the other hand, Skilling, in his analysis of kingship and religion from the Ayuthhaya to the early Bangkok period, cautiously refrains from describing the pre-modern Siam as “Theravadin” or conceiving of Theravada as a “state religion” since the idea of “state religion is alien to the region of the period.”⁶⁾ Consequently, Skilling reserves “the term ‘Theravāda’ for “monastic lineage—the aggregate or series of lineages, changing with time and place, that emanate or claim to emanate from the Mahāvihāra tradition of Ceylon” (Skilling 2007: 182–183).

Skilling’s discussion suggests that political and religious spheres did not necessarily overlap with each other. The conventional discussions surrounding the symbiotic relationship or the emphasis on the royal patronage of the Sangha and the mutual benefits in the relationship seems largely due to the nature of the sources. In Skilling’s words, “for the most part, our sources are elite documents—inscriptions, laws, decrees, courtly literature” (Skilling 2007:214).

The *Tham* Script and Yuan Buddhism

Diringer, in presenting Buddhism’s part in Asia’s cultural history, writes:

A unique empire was built up: an empire, based not on political and military unity, but on the common cultural and spiritual life of politically more or less independent peoples. The scripts of the Buddhist monks became the vehicle of their culture, and widespread organization (Diringer 1982: 374).

It is assumed, though, that the spread of the most important scripts in the world over has generally followed that of religions (Coulmas 1996: 436). Therefore, Buddhism does not always seem unique in this light. Nevertheless, Keyes envisions “a unique empire” as an “imagined community” united by a distinct Buddhism endowed with common literature or

texts of which the vehicle was the *Tham* script as follows:

A written language—including the alphabetic ones used by most Tai-speaking peoples—can be read by people who speak very different dialects. Texts in the same written language can also link peoples who are not currently in direct personal contact with each other. In other words, a literature that is written with the same orthographic system can serve as the basis for people to imagine themselves as part of the same community (...) from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, there was an “imagined community” (to use Ben Anderson’s term) constituted by those who shared the same texts (mainly Buddhist) written in one of the variants of the *Tham* script (Keyes 1995: 139–141).

Keyes styles the community as the “Yuan Buddhism” world because of the centrality of the Yuan of northern Thailand in its development, stressing the importance of a shared textual tradition through which Yuan Buddhism was known (Keyes 1995: 153). Keyes writes that this community was shattered when its various subgroups (i.e. Yuan, Khun, Lue and Lao) were divided between four modern states, namely Burma, China, Laos and Thailand (Keyes 1995: 141). In what follows, bearing this line of Keyes’ proposition in mind, I would like to examine this further, especially the aptness of his notion of the “imagined community” in the said context.

The term “Yuan Buddhism” was supposedly coined by the American Presbyterian missionary William C. Dodd (1857–1919) (Cohen 2001: 229) and appeared in his posthumously published book *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese* (Dodd 1996, originally published in 1923). Keyes explicitly follows Dodd, but Dodd himself actually wrote about “Yûn Buddhism” and did reveal wide differences of belief and practice among the Yûn Buddhists, writing “while nominally the ecclesiastical polity of Buddhism is hierarchical, practically among the Yûn it is independent: so much so that one might almost say that each monastery is a law unto itself” (Dodd 1996: 317–318). Dodd, at the same time, went to the trouble to outline common features from Raheng (Tak) up into Yunnan entirely from “Yûn books” (presumably Yûn Buddhist written materials in the *Tham* script) as favorable “providential preparations of the soil” where the seeds of Christianity would be sown (Dodd 1996: 320–336).

The commonly shared interest of the Christian missionaries in local languages and scripts were primarily driven by their proselytizing intentions. They were most interested in what sort of scripts their targeted people could read, for they usually carried along and used the Bible and other written materials during their evangelizing travels, which they would prepare in the respective local language and script (Terwiel 1996: x). For that purpose, the “Laos Mission” with which Dodd was affiliated set up the first press to print the *Tham* script in Chiang Mai in 1892 (Swanson 1984: 51). In order to produce printed literature, the Laos Mission even made attempts to standardize the *Tham* script, grammar, spelling and usages (Swanson 1987 (2006): 11). By doing so, they contributed, if unintentionally, in the historical evolution of the *Tham* script, instead of standing aloof from the script’s destiny of seemingly becoming obsolete⁷.

Dodd’s contention of “Yûn Buddhism” should also be considered in the context of

such evangelistic activities. Dodd is known to have been the chief proponent and apologist for the expansion of the Lao Mission (Swanson 1984: 41) and his book, *The Tai Race*, has been regarded as “one of the fullest expressions of the mission’s dreams for expansion beyond Siam” (Swanson 1984: 193). Swanson has summed up the essential nature of Dodd’s research in *The Tai Race*, where Dodd used an inductive method to provide irrefutable data to prove that the various Tai ethnic groups he studied all spoke dialects intelligible to his Laos Mission (Swanson 1990: 10). To what extent those various Tai peoples themselves were conscious of their relatedness was left out of Dodd’s consideration but the question is quite relevant if one should speak of an “imagined community.”

The indisputable example of Dodd’s method for religious expansionist ends was presented as the Presbyterian claim during the course of the so-called “Kengtung question” contested between the American Presbyterian Lao Mission and the American Baptists over the territorial rights for evangelical activities in Chiang Tung (Kengtung) (Swanson 1984: 117–120). Dodd is said to have played a leading role in preparing the Presbyterian arguments to associate Chiang Tung with the sphere of the Lao Mission, insisting upon the common ground between Chiang Tung and northern Thailand through “Yûn Buddhism.” Their booklets printed in the *Tham* script could apparently be read by the Khun people in Chiang Tung (Terwiel 1996: x). It is significant to note that “Yûn Buddhism” in this context was recognized or discovered by the missionary’s zeal for expansion, in short, it was an imposed view from outsiders. No such term as “Yûn Buddhism” had been known among the local people at that time. As Burke adequately explains, viewed from outside, frontiers often appear to be objective and even be mappable, and maps tend to create sharp dividing lines in the continuum of “contact zones” (Burke 2008: 119). The territorial claim either of the Presbyterians or of the Baptists depended on where to draw the lines or which map to use⁸).

Recent recognition of Yuan Buddhism can be found in treatises of anthropologists such as Cohen as well as Keyes. Cohen poses the “Yuan Buddhism” tradition as nurtured between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Lan Na but also shared by other Tai-speaking peoples who periodically came under Lan Na’s political influence. He enumerates the following features as common among the Yuan Buddhists: 1) a script called *Tham* 2) religious literature (written in the *Tham* script) 3) an accommodative attitude towards popular animistic religiosity 4) a belief in *ton bun*, “holy men,” literally “source of merit” (Cohen 2001: 229).

In his discussion on the *ton bun* tradition, Cohen considers it as the most salient feature of Yuan Buddhism. Khruba Bunchum Yanasangwarorand is one of four exemplars of the modern *ton bun* tradition introduced by Cohen. Davis, who focuses on the area of Sipsong Panna, also resorts to the notion of the “Yuan Buddhist” and even states that Khruba Bunchum and his followers purport to “the Yuan Buddhist geography as a unified space outside of national borders,” which may someday turn into a political entity (Davis 2005: 172). On the other hand, Cohen, in an attempt to highlight the uniqueness of the *ton bun* tradition of his “Yuan Buddhism”, compares it with the forest-monk tradition of northeast Thailand at the time when modern Siamese state Buddhism began to undermine existing traditions (Cohen 2001:228).

The four kinds of criteria as above that are used by Cohen for outlining Yuan Buddhism are not concurrent everywhere. There is no more mention by Cohen of other criteria than *ton bun* tradition, such as the script or literature, to distinguish Yuan Buddhism from the northeastern tradition. Given the unmistakable relatedness of the scripts and literature between the two regions, it seems better to deal with them as a contiguous entity in contrast to the Siamese tradition. Then the geographical coverage of “Yuan Buddhism” becomes blurred and Cohen’s criteria cannot be consistently applied. All in all, the notion of Yuan Buddhism seems to have been utilized for the convenience of each advocate to summarize a general outsider’s viewpoint without substantively clarifying what is meant.

It is assumed that before the Bangkok based royal Sangha started to integrate local monasteries into the centralized Sangha administration beginning with the Sangha Act in 1902 and the modern state Buddhism became dominant⁹⁾, the regional Buddhism in question was obviously different from its present form as well as other forms practiced by neighboring Buddhists in those days¹⁰⁾. In terms of monastic rules, regional Buddhism was frequently seen as lax by outside observers. Eating after midday, for example, was not regarded as an offence. As the monasteries that were embedded in the local community served many functions necessary to community life, the monks were versed in various kinds of knowledge in addition to Buddhist teachings and were skilled in crafts involving manual labor (Kamala 1997: 23–40, 166–168)¹¹⁾.

The *Tham* script was taught in these multi-functional monasteries by versatile monks so they could perform one of their principal duties of chanting scriptures but the script conveyed other non-Buddhist knowledge as well. To learn the *Tham* script was not just to learn how to read orally or recite and how to write or copy by incising with a stylus, but also to learn to acquire the skills required for making actual manuscripts, mostly from palm leaves, at the request of the members of the community. This materialization of writing then entailed learning skills to handle and treat them¹²⁾.

The Pali Buddhist World in Mainland Southeast Asia

At this point, I would like to quote from Veidlinger a passage with a focus on the *Tham* script as follows.

In time, the characteristic Lan Na Dhamma (*Tham*) script became so strongly identified with the region itself that we can now virtually delineate the borders of Lan Na based on where manuscripts employing this script have been found (Veidlinger 2006: 4).

In this passage, Veidlinger suggests a fairly tangible geographical area based on existing manuscripts. Furthering this discussion, I tentatively call the suggested geographical entity, i.e. where manuscripts employing the *Tham* script have been found as “the cultural region of *Tham* script manuscripts.” Although it looks like another external perspective, it differs from an arbitrary mapping dependent on each outsider’s motivation, as it should only be affirmed by the manuscripts in situ. I, however, do not agree with Veidlinger in identifying the region with Lan Na polity for the reasons as stated earlier and insist on the enduring materiality of the manuscripts. By identifying the region with Lan Na polity, speculative

aspects have crept into Veidlinger’s statement such as contained in preceding lines in the same paragraph as above, where he writes:

The dissemination of Pali texts played a large role in the cultural development of Lan Na both before and after the Burmese conquest. The monks and the rulers wished to accompany the expansion of their influence with the extension of Buddhist institutions and practices, and these were supported by canonical and commentarial texts (Veidlinger 2006: 4).

Firstly, it can be pointed out that the dissemination of Pali texts did not always coincide with the spread of the *Tham* script and, secondly, the monks and the rulers may not have always worked in concert.

With regard to the first point, I am particularly concerned about an issue which has been noted often (Penth 1994b: x; Hinüber 2000a: 122; Hinüber 2000b: 198) but seems to have not been taken very seriously. It is the fact that, the chronicle of *Jinakālamāli* (abbr. as *JKM*), the best-known Pali text, regarded “the best” of Pali works among those presumably produced within the relevant historical region, has not survived in the form of a *Tham* script manuscript. Yet, by totally bypassing the issue of manuscripts, the *JKM* as a Pali language printed text has been studied “the most,” because its content has been considered “of the historical value” (Hinüber 2000a: 122). The story of “introduction” or “re-introduction” of Buddhism into the region has invariably relied heavily on the *JKM*, and more substantially and problematically, the *JKM* has provided “essential elements for a solid framework of Lan Na’s history” (Penth 1994b: ix).

Ratnapañña, as the *JKM* says, composed the text in Wat Pa Daeng near Chiang Mai between 1516 and 1528¹³) and it is usually presumed that he wrote in the *Tham* script. However, none of the surviving *JKM* manuscripts have been found either in northern Thailand or in the *Tham* script. The known *JKM* manuscripts are reportedly in Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Sri Lanka and written in the Khmer script or Sinhalese script. Penth conjectures a text story that Ratnapañña’s manuscript presumably with the *Tham* script was brought to central Thailand during the Ayutthaya period where it was copied rather unsatisfactorily in Khmer script and from there copies reached Phnom Penh and Sri Lanka (Penth 1994b: x). These inferences compel one to perceive another level of encounter or cultural interaction, that of Pali language literature crossing the supposed boundary of the postulated Yuan Buddhism world.

The above text story of *JKM* clearly indicates a broader space of Pali literary Buddhism encompassing multiple centers distributed in Mainland Southeast Asia as well as in Sri Lanka. Set in the frame of the Pali literary world, the focal question about the interpretation of *JKM* has become what the words in the narrow sense of a text mean, or, in other words, the *JKM* text has become an interpretable object to decode which must be self-sufficient (cf. Coulmas 1996: 160). Then one must consider historical contexts and their implications when using the *JKM* text to represent the regional tradition of our concern, as long as there is no verification of the known text being identical with the original urtext.

In relation to the afore-mentioned second point, it is interesting to note that the religious interactions in the context of Mainland Southeast Asian history have not always fluctuated

in conjunction with changes of political spectrum. One notable instance is the status of Vientiane during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as an important regional center for religious studies. Well after its zenith of political and economic prosperity, Vientiane attracted monks from Siam and Cambodia (Ivarsson 2008: 120–126), while the King of Vientiane had fallen in vassal relationship with the King of Siam. Even under the French colonial rule, there existed a close relationship between Laos and Siam, and also between Cambodia and Siam, in the religious sphere, “de facto running against the integrity of French Indochina” (Ivarsson 2008: 121).

A local tradition, which the present writer has collected in Yasothon in today’s northeastern Thailand, exactly relates an exemplary case of a monk who travelled from Yasothon to Vientiane for religious studies (Iijima 2005: 344). And extraordinarily, the heaps of surviving palm–leaf manuscripts of Pali Buddhist texts located in Yasothon well attest the flourishing of Pali Buddhist studies in Vientiane. Almost all of these manuscripts were in the *Tham* script and had undoubtedly been produced in Vientiane in the early nineteenth century (Iijima 2005: 345–346).

After the destruction of Vientiane in 1828, Bangkok, the capital of Siam became the religious metropolis for the Lao monks as well as the monks from Cambodia. In 1918, an anonymous French writer noted:

It is there [in Siam] that the sacred texts are compiled and printed; it is from there they [the texts] are dispersed (Ivarsson 2008: 120–121).

It is unclear what actually constituted the above–mentioned printed sacred texts, but the medium of the underlying “religious community” (Anderson 1991: 12) was the sacred language of Pali. The difference of scripts that were mutually transcribable did not seem to pose an insurmountable obstacle as suggested by the text story of the *JKM* and the *JKM* could safely belong to an imaginable community through the shared medium of the Pali language. By modifying Keyes’ remark of an “imagined community,” it may be said that literature written in the sacred Pali language can serve as the basis for literary intellectuals to imagine themselves as part of the same community, if purported. Such imagined communities represented by Christendom with Church Latin, defined as “classic” by Anderson, were not the kind of imagined communities of modern nations. The actual scope and plausibility could be explained only when one examines the relationship between the limited strata of literatus and their societies (Anderson 1991: 14–15).

Apart from the European Middle Ages, in respect of Lan Na society at the time when the *JKM* was composed, Veidlinger gives the impression that while a literate culture most certainly existed among the Buddhist elite, it was marginal to the bulk of monastic activity (Veidlinger 2006: 66–67) and that writing played a minor role even in the transmission of the Pali Buddhist texts (Veidlinger 2006:61). The order of Wat Pa Daeng where the author monk Ratnapañña resided was the most scholarly and literate elite group somewhat detached from local communities. Accordingly, Yuan Buddhism seems to have been established at the very periphery of the larger religiously imagined community, if linked to it. The *JKM* provides the link, but, it is a rather peculiar fit within the local society in terms of its elitist

nature and in that its link with the regional *Tham* script manuscripts culture is missing.

The Cultural Region of *Tham* Script Manuscripts

As an attempt towards a breakthrough, McDaniel focuses attention to the rural monasteries outside the former capital city of Chiang Mai. In contrast with Chiang Mai where royal power and monastic scholarship were intertwined, these grassroots monasteries rarely appear in the elite documents, yet they have produced their own abundant manuscripts that are replete with local legends. McDaniel concludes that “there was great intellectual activity in rural Northern Thai monastic institutions before 1902” (McDaniel 2008: 76–77).

McDaniel’s research among the vast archives of the *Tham* script manuscripts in Laos and northern Thailand has just revealed the lack of orthographic consistencies. McDaniel attributes inconsistency in script to four reasons: (1) there was no over-arching authority in place that determined what was the proper spelling of different words; or no large-scale educational institutions to enforce the standards (2) scribes were poorly trained (3) the spelling is phonetic; texts were for oral performance and teaching, not for reading silently (4) the highly mobile nature of monks and of the population in general led to speakers of Shan Khoen, Leu Lao, Yuan, Thai, Khamtu, Mon, Hmong, Burmese, and other languages living and working together; historical evidence of a highly mobile monastic population (McDaniel 2008: 144–145).

The resulting overall picture of “the cultural region of *Tham* script manuscripts,” to which McDaniel’s research contributes immensely, is fragmentary as might be expected. The scribes used a variety of dialects and had different skills, and most manuscripts that were orally produced (McDaniel 2008: 143) seem to have been rather consciously intended to be consumed locally. Knowing these circumstances, it is unimaginable that those people familiar with the *Tham* script in some way or other, being dispersed over an extended area, would “imagine themselves part of the same community” on the ground that “literature that is written with the same orthographic system can serve as the basis” for such imagining as Keyes claims (Keyes 1995: 139–141). This is because, first, it is difficult to regard their common script as being characterized with “the same orthographic system.” The common component of texts, as assumed by Keyes, could be recognized only by eliminating layers of inconsistencies abounding in the materialized texts of the hand-written manuscripts and varieties of local interpretations based on them (McDaniel 2008: 85).

Accepting McDaniel’s confirmation of “a lack of a regional unified approach to the study of Buddhism,” I concur completely with McDaniel in the significance of using manuscripts:

Heightened attention to orthography demonstrates the benefits of using manuscripts rather than printed texts or transliterations when studying Southeast Asian religion and literature (McDaniel 2008: 145).

When no unified orthographic system is discernible among the manuscripts, then what are the positive implications of proposing an entity associated with the *Tham* script manuscripts? I maintain that it is still arguable that variants of the *Tham* script could be regarded identical

as stated at the outset of this paper, in spite of omnipresent orthographic inconsistencies found even “on one line of a folio” (McDaniel 2008:145).

To illustrate a point of identification, frequent uses of common abbreviated forms might be pertinent examples. There are irregular spellings or abbreviations, which have been widely used among scribes of the *Tham* script¹⁴). In such irregular spellings, words and phrases are written in unique and simplified combinations of symbols, and since pronunciations cannot be accurately represented, this strongly suggests oral/aural method of transmission or teaching. The origin of these special spellings is not clear, but some cases are supposed to have been used to save space (Kobkan & Messenger 1995: 44)¹⁵). McDaniel explains, by paraphrasing Johnson, that such economy in spelling and little concern with proper orthography are because of a “closed system” (Johnson 2000: 612) where the manuscripts were written (or dictated and copied by a scribe) with the intended, usually “professional,” reader/audience in mind (McDaniel 2008: 146)¹⁶). The striking fact is that such almost identical anomalous combinations are widespread from the northernmost Sipsong Panna to the remotest village in northeast Thailand. This phenomenon cannot be explained as the result of an overarching authoritative act of standardization, which never occurred. We could only imagine a chain of transmission personified by the “highly mobile nature of monks and of the population” (McDaniel 2008: 145).

Direct links between present-day northern Thailand and northwestern Laos have been well documented and are incontrovertible (McDaniel 2005: cf. Somcet 1993). Apart from the frequently cited passage from the *JKM* which states that the Lan Na king Phya Kaeo sent a monk with sixty volumes of Tipitaka to the king of Lan Sang in 1523¹⁷), the famous nineteenth-century monk Khuba Kancana’s activities which linked Luang Prabang court and a northern Thai monastery provide sufficient proof of the continuous interaction between the two areas. My own grassroots research in Xaignaburi and Nan has also substantiated that people were able to transgress modern national boundaries with ease. And their movement has yielded exchange and production of manuscripts in the *Tham* script, as I wrote:

The circumstances by which these manuscripts were mixed up was probably related to the travelling nature by which they were circulated across the region by a variety of villagers and monks on the move. One should bear in mind that a significant characteristic of palm-leaf manuscripts in general is their portability. Thus one does not always have to connect the origin of manuscripts and the content therein to the places where they are finally located. (Iijima 2003: 171–172.)

Lorrillard seemingly makes a similar point that it is necessary to treat the inventories of surviving manuscripts collections carefully, “as they only reflect the current state of the heritage in any given place,” and continues that they “do not themselves sufficiently bear witness to the development of an area’s literary heritage, as they do not allow us to see the historical events which influenced, in both positive and negative ways, that development” (Lorrillard 2006: 144–145).

Admitting that no individual bundle of palm-leaf manuscripts would tell a reliable story of any remarkable historical event, I would emphasize the importance of the on-site

inquiries of manuscripts. The mere presence of manuscripts are telltale signs of people’s engagement and of the existing “textual community” (cf. McDaniel 2003: 17–21) in respective locality and the likely communication networks of which the locality constitutes a focal point. Therefore, “one must rather try to trace the history of manuscripts’ journeys in conjunction with human movement, whether it be a small company’s trip or large-scale migration” (Iijima 2003: 172). A history of the large palm-leaf manuscripts collection located in Yasothon in northeast Thailand, mentioned earlier, should be an exemplary case resulting from such inquiries (Iijima 2005). My survey has amply attested to the connection between Yasothon and Vientiane in the past, and given further clues for approaching the historical background.

And elsewhere as well across “the cultural region of the *Tham* script manuscripts,” there seems to have been a myriad of routes connecting local communities that stretch both long and short distances. The well-trodden route over mountain terrain linking Xaignabouli villagers with Nan province (Iijima 2003: 170) has never been mapped, yet it certainly existed. There must be many other footpaths often untraceable on existing maps today. Although in part, “ancient” or “premodern routes” (Davis 2006; 88: cf. Borchert 2008) may seem to have become recently active with the impact of globalization, one should not instantly equate “new transnational ethnic discourses and technologies” (Davis 2006: 88) that are emerging with “the mode of self-identification within ‘traditional’ referential perspective” of villagers that originated in pre-modern times (Iijima 2003: 173–174). Likewise, I maintain that texts coded on floppy disks and CDs are not the same as texts on palm-leaf manuscripts, since clues to further historical investigations should lie in the very “thickness” (to be mentioned) (Saito 2009) of the texts¹⁸).

Thus the transmission of palm-leaf manuscripts may be traced in conjunction with trails of human movements. If the *Tham* script manuscripts, copied orally/aurally, transcended local differences to a certain culturally meaningful degree, then our postulation of the cultural region should be useful as a relevant heuristic viewpoint. Although it can be considered as “a way of countering fragmentation” (Burke 2008: 118), the whole point is that this view never implies homogeneity within the geographically bounded space but suggests more a tapestry of interwoven networks with various dialectal colors of thread. Such “networks are never a unitary whole but rather the open-ended context of the community” (Tanabe 2008: 11). McDaniel put it precisely: “There are reading cultures and textual/interpretative communities that have operated without borders and outside the view of kings and soldiers” (McDaniel 2005: 392). Then there seems to be no need to confine our researches to northern Thailand and Laos as McDaniel does, so far as the *Tham* script manuscripts are found more extensively beyond this area.

As for the spread of the *Tham* script in the Shan State area, only the Khun variant in the eastern Shan state tends to be noted. Sai Kam Mong, however, has demonstrated the extensive use of the “Yuan” script among “the early Shan” and stated that “the early Shan had practiced not only the Yuan sect of Buddhism but also followed the Yuan practices of using mantra, incarnation, and occult sciences” (Sai Kam Mong 2004: 243–260). My recent findings from researches in Hsenwi in northern Shan state also show that Yuan Buddhism and the *Tham* script were prevalent there until the early twentieth century (Iijima 2007:

473–477)¹⁹). These facts imply that the Salween River never constituted a decisive dividing line in those days at least in religious and cultural spheres, while the same river has been often regarded as the western boundary of the Lan Na polity (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 196–197)²⁰). It has been chronicled that the military operations launched by Lan Na kings did not always stop at the river-bank (Aroonrut and Wyatt 2000: 171, 190–193). Therefore, in the discussions of “the cultural region of the *Tham* script manuscripts,” in addition to exploring how the religious tradition penetrated deep into the Shan State, the question of political influence is well worth asking anew.

At the conclusion of preliminary notes, it may suffice to say that ordinary villagers would certainly never have had a sense of belonging to such a community as the extended cultural region of *Tham* script manuscripts. Even the great traveling monks may perhaps have only been acquainted with several nodes of a large network and chances for imagining beyond their experiences might have been scarce. At this moment, Keyes’ supposition of an “imagined community” seems anachronistic not so much in that he envisions a non-existent historical entity²¹) but in that he regards people as an imagining and reflexive agency whom we might encounter in the midst of post-modern environments today (cf. Tanabe 2008). While we cannot meet people in the past, we still can witness historical materials in the form of manuscripts that exist as a vestige of human lives. Saito’s call for “returning thickness to texts” (Saito 2009) is an appropriate suggestion in view of the state of study on the *Tham* script manuscripts nowadays, when microfilmed texts are partly available and digitalization of them is at hand. I propose at this juncture to return to the materiality (cf. Tracy 1998) and living contexts of manuscripts. In doing so, I take the notion of cultural region to be a point of view for analysis rather than an already constituted object of inquiry being imbued with all kinds of assumptions imposed by self-serving ideologies of observers from without.

Notes

- 1) The term “Tai” is used to refer to any group that speaks a language belonging to the Tai language family.
- 2) Penth does not mention northeast Thailand. Grabowsky and Turton present an idea of a cultural “zone” similar to that of Penth but include only the Yuan, Khun, and Lu inhabited area, with the Lao area totally left out (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 197).
- 3) Although it is said that some of the ancestors of the northern Thai people earlier used the term Yuan themselves (Smalley 1994: 81), the most common self-designation among the local people in today’s northern Thailand is *khon muang* (“country folk” or the “people of the principalities”) and they refer to the *Tham* script as *tua muang* (“script of the country”). cf. (Iijima 2003:165–166 and n. 3).
- 4) For a stimulating discussion on writing and the state especially in South Asia, see (Kelly 2006: 27–30).
- 5) The script frequently used in the Lan Na stone inscriptions is called Fak Kham (tamarind–pot) script, showing its derivation from the old Sukhothai script. The oldest inscription erected by a Lan Na king is dated 1370 A.D. and its script is the same as Sukhothai contemporaries. On the

grounds of stone inscriptions in the Fak Kham script, Penth speculates that “they were regarded primarily as official, secular documents” and that the Fak Kham script was “the official script of Lan Na and other northern kingdoms” since it was employed in their diplomatic notes to China (Penth 1992: 52–53).

- 6) Ishii, having acknowledged that the Thai constitutions lack provisions expressly making Buddhism the state religion, states that Thai Buddhism represents the true form of “state religion” because Thai Buddhism has rightfully such a history and nature (Ishii 1986: 35–40).
- 7) Ironically, the bulk of the Mission Press’s business came from the Siamese government (Swanson 1984: 51) and through its business the Mission Press contributed to the spread of Siamese power into the region.
- 8) Before the Christian missionaries, the British administrators encountered the dividing line between the different scripts at the same location. An episode in the course of British annexation of the Shan States beginning in 1885 occurred because of the different scripts. A number of Proclamation sheets in Western Shan Script [Shan Script] were sent by the British Superintendent for distribution in a so-called Shan state to the east [Muang Sing] where the population was composed largely of Lu who had a script of their own [i.e. *Tham* script] and could not understand or read the Western Shan script “served no useful purpose” (Mangrai 1965: 248–249).
- 9) For a careful assessment of the actual impact of institutional changes since the Sangha Act of 1902, see McDaniel 2008: 99ff.
- 10) Saeng lists twelve points as the unique characteristics of ‘the Buddhism in Lannathai’, including the belief in and the devotion to *ton bun*, as well as the influences of Mahayana Buddhism and the Burmese tradition (Saeng 1980: 91–98).
- 11) Sanguan witnessed that monks in Chiang Mai and the countryside had engaged in miscellaneous construction works up to the 1930s and expressed regret over the prohibition of such practices in the 1960s (Sanguan 1969: 240–241).
- 12) For the unintended consequences of the materialization of writing, see (Veidlinger: 2006: 5).
- 13) For a more detailed estimation of the date of composition and supposed author(s), see (Penth 1994b: vi).
- 14) Some examples are shown in (Kobkan and Messenger 1995: 44–47).
- 15) It is interesting to compare with “telegraphically economical” written text in South Asia, where the student’s first act was memorization and perfect recitation and “they really did not care about their graphic techniques” (Kelly 2006: 19). This in turn resonates with the following remark on Lan Na Buddhism by Veidlinger: manuscripts, if they existed at all in the region at the end of the fourteenth century, were regarded as very marginal to the practice and maintenance of Buddhism (Veidlinger 2006: 49).
- 16) According to Johnson, “In general, reading cultures dependent on writing by hand seem to work as closed systems where the script has just combination of characteristics to suffice for the purpose and context of the reading” and “ancient papyrus documents can be extremely difficult to read, since they are typically written by professionals for professionals and are highly formulaic in content” (Johnson 2000: 612).
- 17) (McDaniel 2005: 382) (Lorrillard 2005: 371). Lorrillard, dubbing the *JKM* a historically reliable religious chronicle from Chiang Mai, writes that the passage “fits perfectly with the Lao evidence,” since the first *Tham* inscription in Laos carries the date of 1527.

- 18) Following the recognition of materiality of written texts, “all the physical, material objects (including but not confined to written texts)” are “demanding interpretation in order that the principal ideas of a culture or a religion may be understood” (Tracy 1998: 392).
- 19) The *Tham* script manuscripts that I personally inspected in Hsenwi are written on locally made papers but Sai Kam Mong has reported palm-leaf manuscripts as well.
- 20) (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 197) cites a passage of a version of the Chiang Mai chronicle as evidence for the sixteenth century notion of boundaries but it is possible that the chronicle text was compiled in later centuries.
- 21) However, “in a wider sense,” it seems permissible to jump to such a rush conclusion of “community” based on a shared script, as Coulmas supplies a definition of “writing community,” “as scripts take on an emotional symbolic significance, they define cultural and religious spheres and thus communities” (Coulmas 1996: 556).

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