

## Script as the Narrator : Oral Tradition and Literacy in Tay Maaw Chronicles

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## **Script as the Narrator: Oral Tradition and Literacy in Tay Maaw Chronicles**

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### **1. Introduction**

Papers presented at the symposium highlighted the seemingly contradictory nature of the written medium in traditional mainland South–east Asian society, and readers may well wonder if some of the topics discussed actually fall within the category of literacy, or more properly pertain to the realm of oral narrative. South–east Asians have undoubtedly possessed and used scripts for over a millennium. Inscriptions in local languages, such as Mon, Burmese, Khmer and Tai scripts derived from Indian writing systems, appear from the seventh century at least. Furthermore, as symposium papers so ably demonstrated, various ethnic groups still employ their own scripts in their daily life in addition to the national writing systems stipulated by the governments of nation–states, such as Thailand, Laos Vietnam and Myanmar (Burma). But the central issue raised is not the presence or absence of scripts, or whether people are lettered or unlettered, but how scripts function in local societies and what purpose they really serve.

Critics have pointed out the unbalance in access to knowledge that derives from inequality in educational opportunities created by modernisation. This approach, while relevant to modern education in national languages, can hinder our understanding of the historical role of scripts in mainland South–east Asia. Access to knowledge in traditional societies invariably remained limited, not only owing to social and economic factors, but also due to human conceptions of scripts. Different cultures embraced their own individual ideals about their functions. The Latin maxim, “*verba volant et scripta manent*” (“Words fly away, the written word is permanent”) espoused a use of the script incongruous with that of traditional mainland South–east Asia. Unlike post–printing period Europe, the notion that writing constituted an enduring and unchanging record more reliable than the spoken word did not prevail here; the recopying of manuscripts always involved alteration in diction which often raised doubts about veracity; scribes made corrections and additions to suit the tastes of the age as well as the whims of their patrons. For the general population of mainland South–east Asia, the spoken word remained an important means of transmitting all kinds of knowledge, in spite of the presence of a written culture.

The recent illuminating study by Daniel Viedlinger has greatly contributed to our understanding of the historical evolution of Pali manuscripts and inscriptions in the Lan

Naa kingdom. His empirical research shows that the custom of writing Pali manuscripts there began and flourished simultaneously during the golden age of the Kingdom in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but suffered severe setbacks during the period of Burmese suzerainty (1558–1804). Probably owing to Burmese influence, things took a turn for the better after the restoration of Tay rule by King Kawila during the early nineteenth century, when the written word finally gained a degree of general acceptance unprecedented in the past, though Lan Naa monks no longer composed great Pali texts.

Perhaps, his most important finding is the ambiguous attitude exhibited by different groups towards the wealth of Buddhist writing that literate people created in Lan Naa society. The ambiguity lies in the way monks and layman eschewed the written word as a source of knowledge and stuck to the oral tradition despite an increase in manuscript copying. Viedlinger argued that what inspired scribes and sponsors in their literary endeavours was an ardent desire to gain merit (*puna*), and that the pursuit of merit caused them to choose the construction of permanent monuments such as Buddha images and *cetiyas* over the written word; after all they were “pleasing to the eye and more tangible than manuscripts” (Viedlinger 2006: 206). He suggests that this ambiguity may be connected with an ingrained preference for the joys of auditory communication, especially “the sensuous envelope of rhythmic chanting” (Viedlinger 2006: 206), and I conjecture that it may have been this enduring partiality for the oral over the visual that actively discouraged them from seeking “*scripta manent*”. In Lan Naa people accumulated knowledge through merit rather than reading (Viedlinger 2006: 168–169), so manuscripts, or writing in general, never acquired the primacy status that they attained in early modern Europe.

In this paper I demonstrate the presence of an auditory element in Tay literature in order to sustain the argument that the adoption of scripts does not necessarily lead to the demise of oral traditions. Marshalling evidence from literary expression in Tay (Shan) Maaw chronicles from western Yunnan in China, I contend that the introduction of scripts, which some scholars regard as having heralded the advent of literacy, did not replace existing oral traditions; the two merely overlapped in mainland South–east Asia. By demonstrating the close imbrications between script and the oral, I am trying to move beyond a purely functionalist explanation of literacy. Furthermore, I question the validity of the assumption that the emergence of scripts may be interpreted as proof of the presence of literacy. The concept of literacy embodies the notion that the skills of reading and writing are essential for the everyday lives of people in the modern world, but as I shall argue below there is really no reason to assume that everyone needs to be “literate”. One person can read aloud to a multitude of people who only depend on hearing skills for comprehension. One often–overlooked fact is that scripts can enhance oral narrative by providing a written means for a literate minority to transmit texts orally to an illiterate majority. So we may conclude that the adoption of scripts does not automatically lead to universal literacy, a point that I will return to in the course of the paper.

Next let me clarify from the outset what I mean by the term Tay.<sup>1)</sup> It covers all speakers of Southwestern Tai (Tay) languages as classified by the linguist Li Fang–Kuei 李方桂, except for speakers of central Thai (Thaiklang), Lao (Northeastern Thai) and Paktay (Southern Thai). Tay groups include the Khon müang (Yuan) of northern Thailand, the Tay (Shan) of

northern Burma, the Khün of Cengtung in north-eastern Burma, the Tay; Lü (Lue) of Sipsong Panna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Ch: 西双版纳傣族自治州) in Southern Yunnan, the Tay; Nā of the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture 德宏傣族景頗族自治州 and Lincang City 臨滄市 in south-western Yunnan, the Kham:ti: of north-western Burma and the Ahom of Assam in India.<sup>2)</sup> The boundaries of Tay speakers do not extend to the central, north-eastern and southern regions of Thailand, and the Siamese (Thai) only fully integrated Lan Naa into their nascent nation in 1933. For an account of the integration of Lan Na into the Siamese state before 1933, see Ongsakul (2005: 179–213). Even Standard Thai, the official language of Thailand, can be a confusing term because it is simultaneously a synonym for the national language and a symbol for the nation (Smalley 1994: 14). In order to avoid confusion, and to clearly differentiate the Tay from the Thai, below I refer to Thailand as Siam, and the people and standard Thai language as Siamese.

Before presenting the evidence from the Tay Maaw chronicles, I would like to contextualise the Tay literary oral tradition within the written culture of Siam. However, for readers to follow the argument it is necessary for them to have some idea of how Tay and non-Tay peoples utilised scripts. Since many participants at the symposium addressed the issue of the functions of scripts, I shall begin with a discussion of their main conclusions.

## 2. The role of scripts

As a broad generalisation one could argue that pre-modern South-east Asian villagers had little use for writing in their everyday lives. They originally committed important matters to memory and transmitted almost everything orally. Within the last two millenniums mainland South-east Asians have adopted Indic scripts, Chinese characters, roman scripts and Arabic letters to write their own languages. The fact that scripts did not originate in South-east Asia but were borrowed from outside, and often improvised on to record local languages, is the starting point for taking up the subject of written cultures. So the question that we must ask then is why did they need scripts in the first place? What use did they have for them?

After the introduction of scripts, kings erected stone inscriptions, Hindu Brahmans and members of the Buddhist clergy translated, wrote and read religious texts, so at first written culture must have appeared peculiarly alien to villagers, something superfluous that had little bearing on the substance of their daily lives. But it was the very foreignness of scripts that endowed them with authority and aura. Hence scripts could become symbols of power and prestige, even if the owner of the manuscript could not read them. Power and prestige derived not from the ability to read and write, but from mere possession of scripts. Therefore, the notion that written culture represented something alien but powerful was enough to motivate the average mainland South-east Asian to incorporate it into some part of his life.

In his extensive literary studies, Viedlinger has uncovered historical proof for various functions performed by the written word in the Lan Naa kingdom. They include the magical power of script to protect bearers of it from evil influence by malevolent spirits (Viedlinger

2006: 196–197), writing for communication and storage of texts, especially by royalty in the administration of their realms (Viedlinger 2006: 209–210), as well as the worshipping of manuscripts among forest-dwelling monks (Viedlinger 2006: 206–207). These themes resonate with those raised by contributors at the symposium, and highlight the close relationship between written and oral cultures.

### **The inherent power of writing and the sacredness of scripts**

One salient feature of scripts in mainland South-east Asia is that people venerate them as embodying some form of power. It is not their role as a medium for the transmission of information and ideas that people regard as important; their significance lies in their inherent power to “transform everyday discourse into sacred words of religion”, as Peter Koret phrased it in his paper on traditional Lao literature at the symposium. Koret stressed the non-reading values of written texts; people did not necessarily have to read texts aloud or silently for that matter, and the text itself often came in a physical form that made reading both difficult and inconvenient. People gained merit by transcribing or financing the copying of a manuscript. They even accumulated merit by merely decorating them with gold gilding. Needless to say, these were not peculiarly Laotian customs, but were widely popular among Theravada Buddhists all over mainland South-east Asia. Furthermore, the written medium itself endows sacredness, and Koret cited the Lao practise of presenting stories as Lao translations of Pali language Buddhist scripture texts as an example. Tsumura Fumihiko reported that *motham* (ritual specialists) in north-eastern Thailand regard palm-leaf manuscripts in Tham scripts as more sacred than texts printed in modern Siamese script. In other words, the script itself attracted people, and as I shall demonstrate in the final section of this paper, in the past Tay (Shan) chroniclers even personified the script by turning it into the storyteller.

### **Ritual use of scripts**

Both Tay and non-Tay perform their rituals with or without the aid of written documents. In some cases they even compose their ritual texts in the language and scripts of other peoples. The case of the Iu Mien (Yao) described by Yoshino Akira is most intriguing because their priests are literate in Chinese. The priests perform important rituals that involve the reading and writing of documents in that language even though many participants cannot comprehend them. The Iu Mien represents a particularly unique case, as complete dependence on a foreign language like Chinese for rituals was not typical. Though it appears that many ethnic groups utilise some form of script in their rituals, the central issue is the relationship of script to the oral tradition.

The interesting case presented by Kashinaga Masao of Tay Dam genealogies, known as *Xo phi huan*, that are written in Tai Dam script for ancestral worship, offers some food for thought about this problem. These genealogies only listed the names and surnames of deceased ancestors, so ultimately people have to rely on oral information passed down from former generations to elucidate the kin relations of their ancestors. Hence these documents really only serve as reminders of the names of deceased ancestors; descendants must depend on the memory of the living for detailed explanations of the dead. Since the oral tradition

exists side by side with the written one, Kashinaga concludes that it is not absolutely essential for people to have written genealogies for the performance of rituals. We could interpret this as representing an imperfect written culture; defective in the sense that texts could not be fully understood by readers without recourse to the oral medium. Or again, we could regard it as the use of the oral tradition to manipulate the written one. The ritual specialists who designed and authored these texts may have been reluctant to put everything down on paper precisely because a complete account of all details left no room for interpretation, a pre-requisite for the manipulation of knowledge, as I shall argue below.

### **Scripts as a source of traditional knowledge and secrecy**

Proficiency in reading and writing in Tay society was confined to monks, nobles and specialist laymen. Possession of literary skills made it possible for them to explain texts about traditional knowledge to others. Texts covered a wide variety of subjects, such as history, folklore, literature, divination, astrology, calendar and religion. Some could only be understood by a limited number of people, which gave the literate an opportunity to exercise control over knowledge of their contents. For instance, manuscripts concerning divination or astrology involved procedures that called for some sort of interpretation, and in most cases two or more interpretations were possible. Literate ritual specialists and astrologers were as reluctant as their illiterate shaman counterparts to disclose the key skills and methods of interpretation. This encouraged them to shroud their script/text in a veil of secrecy, a move that facilitated their manipulation of the interpretation of knowledge.<sup>3)</sup>

Though literacy derived its power and prestige from interpretative skills, it does not logically follow that everyone has to acquire the ability to read and write. If magical or esoteric power could be attained by the mere possession of scripts/texts, then there really was no urgent need to become literate. A well-known case is the mass conversion to Protestant Christianity of Miao in Yunnan and Lahu in Kengtung in northern Burma during the early twentieth century. Neither of these ethnic groups had their own scripts, so they eagerly awaited their arrival, which they thought would grant them some form of equality with their culturally advanced literate neighbours, the Tay and Han Chinese. The urgent desire for a script led to their conversion; the converts revered the bible that the missionaries gave them as a long lost book originally written in their own script, which Han Chinese had stolen. What was the real reason behind the extraordinary conversion of hundreds of people in a few days? Kataoka Tatsuki has argued that the primary motivation for conversion lay in their craving for the esoteric power that they believed the scriptures embodied, rather than out of any yearning for proficiency in reading and writing.<sup>4)</sup> The conversion of the Miao and the Lahu led to the emergence of messianic movements in both cases, a fact that reveals a close connection between the acquisition of a divine script and the longing for the appearance of a messianic leader to deliver them from subjugation. Leaving aside the issue of literary skills, here the notion of literacy evidently bears a symbolic meaning that includes mystical power.

One would expect to see a decrease in the secrecy surrounding script/texts with the spread of education in national scripts and printing technology, but the case study of villages in Khon Kaen province, North-eastern Thailand by Tsumura indicated an opposite trend.

He has shown that while the printing of Siamese script editions of palm-leaf manuscripts has caused the original Tham script versions to cease to function as mediums for the transmission of knowledge, the changeover to Siamese writing has actually augmented the degree of secrecy surrounding Tham scripts. Palm-leaf manuscripts and even the tool for inscribing them, the lekcan, have assumed an increasingly secretive and magical meaning.

### **Political role of scripts**

The possession of a culture of writing has important political implications for minority peoples. First, and foremost, it furnishes them with a sense of security about their existence and forms the basis for making claims for ethnicity within the framework of the modern nation-state; the mere possession of a script can put minority groups on the same level as the majority. Of course, the relationships between writing, hierarchical organisation and the recording of history cannot be overlooked. For instance, written genealogies function as a means of assessing eligibility of heirs for appointment as rulers; ascription in the line of pedigree constituted a major criterion for gauging the eligibility of contenders in succession disputes. I do not intend to belabour this topic here, but merely wish to draw attention to literacy as a means of opposing outside culture.

Traditional scripts may be interpreted as a way of asserting cultural authenticity; each traditional script has undeniable relations with a specific ethnic group, whether Tay or non-Tay. The introduction of national scripts, however, has wrought changes on the relationship between literacy and the state for both groups. The demise of traditional scripts brought about by national education has also had ramifications on the intellectual and social life of people in mainland Southeast Asia.

Isra Yanatan examined how Tay intellectuals in Sipsong Panna have mobilised script to negotiate their cultural identity with the Chinese government. He argued that the reform of the old script in 1956 to create a New Tay Lü (Lue) script, that was unrelated to Buddhism and traditional Tay literature, functioned effectively as a tool for the socialist state to control the Tay. This has led to the emergence of a pattern in which Tay intellectuals in urban areas publish in Chinese, while those in rural areas write in the old script. Isra regarded the latter as important transmitters of traditional knowledge who even produce VCDs for sale at local markets.

We cannot overlook the changes caused by the decline in knowledge of local scripts that has accompanied the spread of education in national languages all over mainland Southeast Asia. The predicament of ethnic groups varies depending on the country of residence. Baba Yuji showed how the loss of the ability to read ritual texts written in their own script has altered the way in which Tay Lü (Lue) villagers in Nan, Northern Thailand understand the rituals that they perform for guardian spirits, as well as the history of their ancestor's migration from Sipsong Panna. Since they can no longer read documents about rituals, traditional songs and migratory history written in Tay Lü, new groups that include school teachers have assumed responsibility for organising rituals. At present, documents written in Siamese and Siamese translations of the history of their migration are distributed to participants, and villagers no longer consider it important that ritual knowledge be

transmitted by traditional ritual specialists. Differences in the infiltration levels of national language education have greatly affected knowledge of traditional culture among rural people.

For the non-Tay, Yoshino pointed out that during the mid-1990s, the Mien cultural revival movement turned ritual Chinese texts into symbols of ethnic identity at a time when the need for literacy in Chinese as a criterion for male social status in Iu Mien society had declined. This may be seen as a response to the sense of crisis created by the new experience of linguistic and cultural integration into Siamese society through education and deep apprehension about their future as an independent ethnic group, but the interesting thing is that they chose a borrowed script as a symbol of their identity. With their youth learning Siamese script at schools it may be an attempt to demonstrate to the Siamese that the Iu Mien, too, have had a script in the past.

### **Nationalism and the writing of ethnic history**

Though the workshop did not focus on the issue of ethnicity, some participants did demonstrate political motives for the use of scripts by ethnic groups. They did not debate the issue of whether we can validly apply the concept of ethnicity to non-Tay Kha groups, but some of them did draw attention to groups that have written their own versions of history as a means of advocating individual ethnic identity in their political struggles during the twentieth century. In many cases, they have adopted the language and scripts of other peoples to achieve their purpose.

Ikeda Kazuto demonstrated how the rise of Karen nationalism during the 1920–1930s motivated authors to compile their own histories in order to legitimise themselves as an ethnic group in the eyes of the Burmans, the majority group. They wrote their books in Burmese, not in Karenic languages. To convince the Burmans of their legitimacy as Buddhists and as a *lumyo* (ethnic group), Buddhist Karen authors stressed their historical participation in the universal system of “*thathana*” and claimed to have had their own kings in the past.

One important aspect not discussed in detail at the symposium was the affect of the digital revolution on the oral tradition. The account of rural intellectuals in Sipsong Panna producing VCDs about their local history based on traditional texts by Isra Yanatan is a welcome exception. In the past scholars have tended to treat orality and literacy as separate entities, but digital technology has narrowed the gap between them. Laymen now photograph sermons by renowned monks with digital and video cameras and sell VCD’s of their performances. I have seen market vendors in Mäng: Khön (Chinese; Mangshi 芒市) in southwestern Yunnan peddling VCDs of Tay monks from Burma visiting Chinese temples and picturesque scenic spots around Lake Erhai in Dali, Yunnan. It is the auditory effect of the narration in Tay by the monk that enthralls viewers as much as the visual beauty of the panoramic landscape. In his paper, Murakami Tadayoshi pointed out that a major duty of literate monks is oral performance for lay people. With the benefit of digital technology, Pali scripture chanting and sermons are now reaching increasingly larger audiences, circulating more conveniently than manuscripts and books in many cases. The emergence of the internet and alternative forms of private media is slowly, but steadily, making traditional and



contemporary oral culture more accessible to local people, but it remains to be seen what effect it will exert on literacy.

Written culture has undoubtedly been deeply affected by the advent of new technologies for transmitting knowledge. At the stage of handwriting, the circulation of manuscripts remained restricted to a small number of literate people, but the introduction of the printing press greatly increased the volume of literature available. The widespread use of national scripts has given rise to a number of changes. First, the replacement of traditional scripts has deprived them of their function as a medium for knowledge transmission. Second, the substitution of national scripts for traditional ones has promoted the ideologies of national governments. Tsumura's case of the interchange of Siamese for Tham script, which expedited the dissemination of Bangkok-packaged Buddhism amongst the local people, may be cited as an example. The substitution of scripts can clearly cause shifts in the content of knowledge transferred and affect the power and prestige of the traditional specialists who originally manipulated them.

### **3. The oral consumption of literature in Siam**

Next let us turn to the issue of the oral tradition in Tay literature. The techniques that Tay authors employed for telling their tales in literary works can throw light on the relationship between the written and oral traditions. In the past, the Tay in northern Burma consumed their literature through oral performances, so authors, in effect, composed for listeners, not for silent readers. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that their literary productions often exhibit features characteristic of auditory presentations.

One can achieve a deeper level of analysis by observing how a subject changes over time rather than by simply observing it in a motionless state. This is hard to do for the Tay, because no studies have been undertaken on the dynamism of their literary expression. For instance, we know little, or next to nothing, about connections between society and literary expression, or what factors instigated shifts in literary techniques, if indeed any ever took place. Tay written culture generally appears static, as if it has stood still since time immemorial, but by reference to the oral and written tradition in pre-modern Siam, I hope to be able to identify some comparative perspectives useful for the interpretation of Tay written culture. Needless to say, the close similarities in language and basic culture between the Siamese (Thai) and various Tay peoples aid in making this approach viable.

The fine studies by Nidhi Eoseewong provide us with some firm benchmarks. He has argued that the expressive techniques, as well the contents of Siamese literature, changed with the rise of bourgeois culture during the early Bangkok era (1782–1855). The emergence of a market economy closely linked to overseas trade caused a decline in status derived from birth, which had constituted the main principle of the *sakdina*, and resulted in the ascendance of “wealth and property” as a new qualification for position in society (Nidhi 2005a: 124). This shift brought about a transformation in the mentality and worldview of the Siamese elite as expressed in poetry, early prose work, biographies of the Buddha, texts for chanting the Jataka tales, manuals of behaviour and revisions of the royal chronicles. He identified increased emphasis on experienced reality in literary works and interpreted

this new trend as indicating a conversion on the part of some early Bangkok authors to the notion that knowledge can be attained by human effort “without the aid of religious texts, gods or *rishi* holy men” (Nidhi 2005c: 249–250). The gradual spread of the idea of reality as an unfixed entity, which changed with the accumulation of new knowledge throughout different types of human experience, weakened the hold of former concepts over the Siamese mind. It rendered the old view of reality, as something permanent and eternal, increasingly less tenable.

According to Nidhi, the Siamese primarily transmitted their language and culture by oral means and did not utilise writing much before the mid–nineteenth century (Nidhi 2005a: 4). Although consumption of bourgeois literature during the early Bangkok era still relied on listening to reading, authors came to place more emphasis on techniques that encouraged listeners to exercise their imaginations rather than rely on the aids of performance and music that characterised drama. In order to facilitate reading with the ear, they adopted a prose style with simpler wording, one that did not stress rhyme or the use of elegant vocabulary, but aimed at some level of characterization and more detailed portrayals of scenes and events (Nidhi 2005a: 128).

I am not suggesting for one moment that literary techniques of the Tay underwent a similar sort of transformation as that of the Siamese. No export economy or bourgeois culture ever appeared in non–Siamese Tay areas, and authors there never set out to eulogise elite groups that relied on commerce and trade. Literature in these areas clearly exhibited different characteristics to that of the early Bangkok era, but it did share features common to those of Ayutthaya–period Siam. Nidhi’s findings are important for this study because they demonstrated the oral nature of literary expression that originally prevailed in pre–modern Siam. The Tay in northern Burma also passed down their language and culture orally, and like the pre–modern Siamese, they composed their literature for the ear and not for the eye. Evidence from Siam reveals two salient features of literary production for oral consumption. First, training for composers relied on oral methods of instruction. Nidhi made the point that village poets learned their craft, which is how to compose verse forms of folk literature and how to improvise their own rhymes, by listening to teachers; they mastered the art by embellishing on verses created by teachers. He stressed the lack of dependence on the written word. Since the whole composition process remained oral, he singled out on–the–spot improvisation as a feature that distinguished folk literature from that of the court (Nidhi 2005a: 11). Second, the use of text scripts restricted creative composition. He cited court literature as an example. The court recorded literature in written form, but the very act of fixing a drama text downgraded the major oral skill of that genre, namely the ability and talent to improvise verse (Nidhi 2005a: 39–40). Tay authors composed their literary texts in rhymed verse for recitation. Though we know little about the training of Tay authors, they too, like their Siamese counterparts, must have studied through oral instruction. My interviews of writers in Mäng: Khön revealed that they still learn to improvise their own rhymes by this time-proven method. Though authors now put words down on paper thus creating fixed texts, their listeners continue to consume the literature through recitals; listeners appreciate the euphonious voice of the reciter, especially the melodious rise and fall of the tones. From time to time in the ongoing analysis I shall refer to these features

that have left a strong imprint on Tay literary expression.

#### 4. Tay Maaw chronicles

Many Tay sub-groups possess scripts of their own. As Michel Lorrillard mentioned in his paper, Tay, Siamese and Lao peoples have a long history of employing two scripts and languages for specifically different purposes. The Siamese, especially those at Sukhothai, used Fak Kham script and Siamese language for secular matters and Khmer script and Pali language for religious subjects. Also, the Yuan of Lan Naa employed the Fak Kham script for secular affairs and Tham or Dharma letters for religious subjects (Penth 2000: 41).<sup>5)</sup> The Yuan used Tham or Dhamma letters from the fifteenth century at least, while the Tay Lü (Lue) and Lao of Luang Prabang all adopted variant forms of it as Buddhism spread east of the Salween River.

Research by Tay (Shan<sup>6)</sup>) scholars has revealed that *lik; tho, ngök*, (literally bean sprout letters) was the earliest Tay script to be used west of the Salween River. They assign its origin to the Tay: Maaw: (Mao Shan) who reside in the basin which straddles the international Sino–Burmese border between Nam. Kham: and Mäng: Maaw: (Chinese; Ruili 瑞麗), where the Mäng: Maaw: Kingdom flourished from the mid–thirteenth to mid–fifteenth centuries. The Tay: Nä, who dwell in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture 德宏傣族景頗族自治州. and Lincang City 臨滄市 in south–western Yunnan, still employ this script extensively today in both its old and new forms. Present scholarship holds that scripts used by other Tay west of the Salween, such as the *lik; to;mon:* or circular letters of northern Burma along with the Kham:ti; and the Ahom scripts, derived from *lik; tho,ngök*.<sup>7)</sup>

Chronicles, commonly known as *Bün: Mäng:* or *Khä: Mäng:*, are extant for each polity in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. These texts, mainly written in *lik; tho,ngök*., serve as excellent source materials for our study because their authors definitely composed them for listening rather than for reading. The monk, or monks, who authored the *Mäng: Maaw: Chronicle (Saa: Mäng: Pu: Tün: Khä: Mäng: Ko: sam, pi*, or the *History of the Royal Lineage of the Ko: sam, pi (Kingdom)*, finished sometime after 1770), specifically stated in the opening passage, “I (*kon: li:*) have assembled and arranged (the sources) into stanzas, transcribed and translated (*thut, pën,*) them, and have now (completed) their compilation into stories (*pun*) for **reading aloud**” (YSSMGZCGB 1988: 251 bold type my emphasis). The author plainly had an oral audience in mind when he mentioned “reading aloud”.

At this point I should like to distinguish between the composition of chronicles for listeners and the recording of oral accounts in general. Nidhi pointed out that oral history in the form of documents “preserved in memory and passed on from generation to generation by oral transmission” existed alongside written chronicles in Siam during Ayutthaya and afterwards (Nidhi 2005d: 299). The ultimate aim of putting verbal accounts down on paper was to construct a permanent text. The words recorded what scribes heard at the time of presentation, and the resultant written version made further oral embellishment redundant. The fixing of texts removed doubts about arbitrary alterations by oral presenters, and thus put auditory traditions on a par with other literary accounts in the sense that now they could

only be changed in the process of transcription. The *tamnan* form of history in the Lan Naa Kingdom, which many scholars regard as recording legends (*nithan*) rather than accurate historical accounts, most probably derived from an oral tradition associated with monasteries (Nidhi 2005d: 299, footnote 13). In the next section I shall discuss Tay historical texts, which authors specifically composed for hearing by assembled audiences, and will discuss Nidhis' findings again there.

## 5. Recitation of Tay texts

In the past, the Tay composed all types of secular and religious texts for chanting to the laity either at the Kyöng: (monastery) or at village festivals. Even today, villagers in the basin of Mäng: Khön commission out to professional writers the production of historical accounts to honour monasteries, water wells and other structures of importance in their villages. The author, or someone with a euphonious voice, recites the text at a public celebration that the whole village attends along with outside guests. These texts are always written in rhymed verse, a feature that of course facilitates their oral presentation.<sup>8)</sup> In his symposium paper, Murakami Tadayoshi related how the Tay (Shan) in Maehongson, Thailand, expect that their *cale*: or scribes be capable of transcribing Buddhist texts as well as be skilled at reciting them in an aesthetically pleasing voice. Unfortunately, as yet no one has uncovered information about when, where and for how long public recitals of chronicles took place, or even who attended them in the past, but we do know for certain that authors penned these texts for the ear. As I have argued elsewhere, chroniclers strived to disseminate a particular view of history rather than the bare facts, and oral consumption served their purpose admirably by drumming the narrative into the heads of a large assembled audience. The historical interpretation embedded in their presentations gradually turned into historical memory shared by the populace at large (Daniels 2004: 67; Daniels 2006: 43).

In a society where literacy was chiefly confined to males, but not necessarily to all males, the recitation of texts probably constituted a more efficient method of dispersing ideas and information than the circulation of hand-copied manuscripts because it had the capacity to reach a larger audience (Daniels 2006: 21–26). Tay writers west of the Salween River seem to have been mainly male, though some female authors, such as Caw; Naang: Kham: Ku, have been identified. By appealing to the ear as a medium of communication, composers managed to overcome age and gender barriers, thus ensuring that their presentations could be enjoyed by all members of rural society. Through listening *en masse*, villagers must have arrived at a similar understanding of their past history, which served to strengthen their sense of belonging to a particular polity.

Nidhi Eoseewong has shown how regular recitations of the *Mahachat* (the Jataka or accounts of the previous lives of the Buddha before his final incarnation as Siddhattha) in Siam from the late Ayutthaya period imbued people with “ideals which the society considered important” and became so firmly set in their imaginations that people “grew up with a deeply-held belief in them” (Nidhi 2005b: 208). Monks and layman employed visual aids such as motifs carved in papaya to complement the auditory effect of these presentations. The recitations of chronicles in Mäng: Khön may have generated similar results to those

of the *Mahachat* by successfully implanting ideas into the heads of listeners. Oral instruction by frequent repetition and admonition probably gained widespread popularity over mainland South-east Asia during the pre-modern period because it appealed to the masses.

Tay authors applied a variety of words to describe the act of chanting or reading chronicles aloud to an audience. For instance, the *Mäng: Khön, Chronicle* (*Khä: Mäng: Mäng: Khön*), a historical text that we will cite extensively below, used words like *pew:* (to preach sermons), *hö: pew* (to read aloud or recite books), and *oy; aan*, (to read books in a melodious tone) (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 299). Also, it should be noted that the word *aan*, in Tay can either refer to reading aloud or reading silently.

Rhyme made Tay texts efficacious for public recitations at festivals and on other social occasions. Authors generally composed chronicles and other histories in a recitation verse governed by simple rules. Dehong Tay has six tones, but chronicles written in verse did not demand adherence to a strict set of tonal patterns for sounds within lines as seen in the modern-style verse (*jinti shi* 近體詩) developed in Tang China; the only single steadfast regulation was that one word in every line had to rhyme with another word somewhere in the next line. For instance, in Dehong chronicles the last word of the first stanza in a couplet has to rhyme in sound and tone with the third last word from the end of the second stanza.

First Stanza	0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ①
Second Stanza	0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ① 0 0

Although tradition placed no restrictions on the number of words in each line, nor prescribed the compulsory use of any other literary techniques such as parallelism, et cetera, authors often employed internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance and other devices suitable for musical recitation to enhance euphony. Nevertheless, the rule of rhyme did constrain the presentation of materials because it encouraged writers to resort to repetition and padding as aids for comprehension. Not surprisingly, this literary style did not lend itself to concise expression.

Hence the demands of composing for the ear influenced how an author chose to write a story. Tay listeners expected to be entertained by the sound of rhymes and the euphony of words. But over attention to techniques for amusement did affect, sometimes adversely, the sequence of dates and events in chronicles, thereby making them difficult to read as a historical text, despite success as an auditory presentation. The renown doyen of Tay literary studies in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Gong Suzheng 龔肅政, stressed this point in his postscript to the recently published new Tay script version of the *Mäng: Khön, Chronicle*. He commented;

“The use of words for recital in the composition of this book about the history of the country (*mäng:*) has made it long-winded, and brought confusion into the arrangement of the story, but this has been done to facilitate recital in a melodious tone, which is sweet to the ear and enters the heart of the listener” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 299).

Despite confusion in the text, the main themes always seem to have got through to the audience. Listeners did not need to follow the narrative word-by-word; repetition and

padding ensured that they could follow the story and at least still understand the general gist even if their concentration lapsed for a while. In any case, peers, friends and relatives familiar with the story often expounded the contents privately and could always be relied on to elucidate the more complicated passages if necessary. Thus oral presentation of script-composed chronicles played a great role in the dissemination of various versions of history among the general populace. The recitation of texts served a double purpose: it had a didactic effect on the listener and functioned as a means for the spread of knowledge.

## 6. Personification of the Tay Alphabet

Next we shall examine a peculiar literary device that clearly highlights the relationship between script and oral presentation. The authors of the *Mäng: Khön, Chronicle* and the *Chronicle of Mäng: Khön, Its Rulers and Monasteries* personified the letters of the Tay alphabet, turning them into a speaker who recounted the tale. The conversion of the alphabet into a narrator endowed an inanimate script with an animate quality. Storytellers frequently refer to the letters of the alphabet in the short breaks interspersed throughout the text. These interludes may have been inserted in order to mark a change of topic or simply to break the monotony of the narration, or perhaps as a pause, a suitable point for the oral presenter to take a rest. Below I give seven examples selected at random from these texts.

Example 1:

“Oh, you the *kaa*; *khaa*: and *ngaa*: letters that are competent enough to record the language of humans, you can put their words down on clean sheets of water-made paper for people to hear. Since these letters of the alphabet have transformed themselves into the intelligent and immortal celestial *Kaa*; *ko*, bird, now, you my golden bird can lead in narrating the lineage of the rulers and the history of the country (*mäng*) so that everyone can understand it clearly through hearing” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 239–240).

Example 2:

“Oh, you the *kaa*; and other letters of the alphabet which possess the wisdom to transmit the history of the destiny of the *caw;phaa*” and write it up as a story; without your ability to recall and recount we would not be able to know the origin of the history, and thereby be deprived of hearing it” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 277).

Example 3:

“Oh you black *kaa*; and delicate *taa*; letters that comprehend the myriad paths of wisdom, you really rejoice in writing up the reigns of the *caw;phaa*’s who inherited the lineage of the great rulers of the country (*mäng*:). Later in happy and joyous times when you sit ruling over the country, you shall become a script that will last for millions of years before passing away. Why don’t sickness and death accord with the wishes of our hearts? Old age and death, which control one’s body, stealthy superintend, but it seemed as if the illustrious chief wife (*maa*, *haa*, *te,wi*,) would protect her son who ruled the country (*mäng*) forever. Why then when the calendar reached a *lap paw*. (water buffalo) year, the fourth year in the reign of

the Emperor Tongzhi 同治(1865), did the chief wife fall sick and fail to recover, despite ingesting and applying many different types of medicines?” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 279–280).

Example 4:

“How could the thorough narration of this history of the country (*mäng*), which is finely woven like threads intermeshed in a roll of silk, be accomplished without the nineteen *kaa*;, *khaa*;, *ngaa*: letters of the alphabet. These letters record on *saa* bark paper the account of Faang Aap;faa” going up to Weng: Se (Yunnan Fu 雲南府 present day Kunming 昆明), expounding it for the people to hear” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 289).

Example 5:

“Oh you, the fine tip of the brush which by dipping into ink marks down the *kaa*; and *khaa*: letters of the alphabet, (in order to) relate the tale of the lineage, you should go back in time to recount the age when the lord and his lady ruled the country (*mäng*:)” (Gong Suzheng, Jin Xingming & Mo Aiwu 2002: 291).

Example 6:

“Oh remember, oh remember, people say that you should hear clearly and delight in understanding. Now we have compiled a book imbued with the Dharma to show to ladies and gentlemen so that they can see and comprehend. If the story which has turned into a leaf written with the *kaa khaa* letters is not suitable, then I kindly request that young, middle-aged and elder people tell me so. In this way it will become a permanent (*thaa, waa, laa*) written record that will endure into the future for eternity (*hüng lön*,). Now, I only ask that the advantages of the merit of the Buddha and the Dharma protect me. Oh the fragrant *caam*: flower, we are now going to continue to relate the story of the merit (*saa; thaa,*) of the glorious monk from Nöng Mäng: (village), and tell of his unabated wish to offer *dana* and *sila* all the time” (*Lik; Khä; Mäng: Mäng: Khön, Khä; Khun Khä; Kyöng: Saam Khä;*).

Example 7

“The shining letters narrate about the noble monk with a dharma heart. The pure book (*phun*), which weaves the letters together and puts them onto the white bark of the *saa* tree, has made (the story) resplendent in Mäng: Khön, where we reside, so you should listen and carefully remember it. Since (the book) has existed for a long time and over the many years that have passed the letters have spoken out and already informed the King, the seal holding Tusi 土司of the whole basin of the country of Mäng: Khön, about it” (*Lik; Khä; Mäng: Mäng: Khön, Khä; Khun Khä; Kyöng: Saam Khä;*).

These passages show that the chronicler did not only personify the alphabet as a narrator, he also actually metamorphosed the script itself into the author of the story. It is the script that possessed the power to record the tale, and therefore it is the script which enabled humans to put the story down on paper for reading aloud in the first place. In other

words, the device of personification turned the letters of the Tay alphabet into a medium for the transmission of history by oral recitation. In Example 1, the alphabet transformed itself into a mythical *Kaa; ko*, bird, which has the ability to read the text aloud for an audience, while in Example 5, it is the writing brush that enabled the script to fashion the history of the *mäng*: into a form suitable for listening.

Example 3 represented the script as the embodiment of the ruler, an attribution that emphasized the vital role it played in transmitting the history of the royal line. In summary, this sort of personification revealed two things. First, the Tay alphabet made the writing of history possible, thereby making consumption by listening possible. Second, script is durable and long-lasting, a point driven home by the short comment “shall become a script that will last for millions of years before passing away”, which draws a sharp distinction between the permanency of script and the ephemeral nature of human life; written script is almost eternal while the sojourn of people on earth is transitory. Script is significant because it can preserve stories for recital to people of future generations.

But here, permanency is not related to the acquisition of knowledge through silent reading. As seen in Example 6, though the *Kaa* and *Khaa* letters of the Tay alphabet preserve something everlasting, and even though the book (more properly the manuscript) itself is regarded as a truly permanent record, the author does not envisage consumption by silent reading; the listeners are instructed to “hear clearly and delight in understanding”. The knowledge contained in the script is saliently meant to be imparted by auditory means.

Tay script occupied an intermediary position between oral and written cultures. Script facilitated reading by providing the texts for listening, but listeners did not have to be literate to follow presentations; knowledge of script was not a prerequisite condition for listening. Since script aided listening by arranging stories in a fixed coherent form, it follows that literacy supported oral recitation. It was not essential for everyone to be able to read and write; the illiterate could listen to the literate, and this was sufficient to imbue them with the perceptions and sentiments of texts. This confinement of literacy, of course, allowed a small number of literate people to manipulate interpretations of the written word. This endowed them with power and prestige, which as I noted above was the case with shamans and fortune tellers.

## 7. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated the difficulty of separating the oral from the written tradition in the non-national scripts of mainland South-east Asia. The papers at the symposium along with the evidence presented here for the Tay testify that the consumption of the written word relied on auditory rather than visual means. In other words, reading texts aloud took precedence over silent reading, which furnishes further evidence for the argument that the adoption of scripts does not necessarily lead to the demise of oral traditions. Given the fact that the oral tradition played such an important role in written cultures, the title of the symposium may have been a misnomer. Perhaps the organisers should have named it “Written and Oral Cultures in Mainland South-east Asia”, rather than simply “Written Cultures in Mainland South-east Asia”.



By incorporating an analysis of the imbrications of oral and written cultures, this article tries to move beyond a purely functional explanation of scripts as a sign of literacy that signalled the advent of ubiquitous written culture. Though functions need elaboration, this approach seems to have impeded deeper analysis of the connection between the oral tradition and the construction of the power and prestige of literate specialists. The concept of restricted literacy proposed by Jack Goody during the 1960s aimed to explain the factors that prevented “the realization of the full potentialities of literacy” (Goody 1968: 11–20), but the papers at the symposium demonstrated that it is perfectly normal for oral culture to co-exist with the written word in some societies. Scripts have been empowered as symbols of magical and esoteric power in pre-modern times and as symbols of ethnicity today, but nowhere has modernisation resulted in the complete elimination of the oral tradition in mainland Southeast Asia. This strongly suggests that oral culture does not necessarily have to be viewed as a hindrance to literacy, but that there maybe a complementary relationship between both of them.

The drawback of the functionalist approach lies in its assumption that the art of narration would disappear as literacy and instruction spread through books. It failed to account for the fact that oral culture overlaps with written culture, and that literacy does not necessarily lead to its complete eradication. It also overlooks the tendency for specialists of traditional scripts, who rely to some extent on oral culture, to change their strategies for survival in order to maintain their power and prestige. Such specialists have a vested interest in ensuring the continuance of the oral component of literacy.

In the upshot, the scripts of minority groups have proven uncongenial to unification. In pre-modern times, Tay rulers did not display much interest in standardising their writing systems, so orthography of the same script often differed according to locality. No ethnic group in Tay-dominated areas ever created a nation-state, and none of the numerous scripts have ever been adopted as a national script. In practise, now minority scripts merely serve the needs of small regional societies, or, in many cases, individual ethnic groups. More research is required to find out exactly how they overlap with, and are embedded in, oral culture in local society.

Another topic for further research is the rehabilitation of minority scripts that has arisen in reaction to excessive nationalism on the part of the majority. Increasing politicisation of scripts as ethnic symbols has spawned a revival. Various ethnic groups, and sometimes academics, are promoting the use of some of these scripts, but how much of this is the invention of tradition, and how much of it is a return to the original script awaits further examination.

## Notes

- 1) In this article I basically follow the romanization system for Tay words set out in Shintani (2000) with the exception of terms that are already well known by other orthography.
- 2) This vast poly-ethnic region was named the Tay Cultural Area by the Japanese linguist Shintani Tadahiko. He conceptualised it as a region where both Tay and non-Tay ethnic groups were bound together into a loosely coherent whole by Tay language and culture which had diffused out among

the non-Tay over a long period of time due to political domination by Tay polities in the past. See Shintani (1998), pp. 2–18. Of course, the close similarities between the languages and cultures of the Tay all over northern mainland South-east Asia, Yunnan and south China had already been pointed out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became well-known in Siam and elsewhere through the publication of Dodd (1923) which included photographs of various Tay groups.

- 3) For a general account of the relationship between interpretation and power (see Leach 1954: 192), and for secrecy as a method of protecting technical knowledge in medieval Europe (see Long 2001: 71–101).
- 4) Kataoka (1998) criticised Tapp for stressing the acquisition of reading and writing skills, but it should be pointed out that in his 1989 book Tapp did discuss the esoteric mystical and magical side of the Hmong attitude to scripts and showed how they still attached importance to possession of their own scripts during the 1960s and 1970s (see Tapp 1989: 126–130).
- 5) (Penth 2000: 41)
- 6) The term Shan has been extensively used in English since the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the Tay who reside to the west of the Salween River. Apart from those residing within the territory originally controlled by the Konbaung dynasty who, so to speak, constitute the Shan proper, the word Shan prefixed with a place name has been used to denote other subgroups, for instance Khamti Shan for those in the Khamti area of remote north-eastern Myanmar, Ahom Shan for those in Assam, India, and Chinese Shan for those dwelling in south-western Yunnan, China. Since the word Shan is a Burmese appellation for them, in this paper I use the autonym Tay as a general term for all members of this group west of the Salween. See Shintani (1998) and Daniels (2002) for accounts of the Tay and Shan.
- 7) For a description of the *lik; tho, ngök*, the *lik; to; mon*: and the Khamti scripts (see Sai Kam Mong 2004: 83–166).
- 8) The day of the public celebration is the deadline for the submission of the manuscripts (in Mäng: Khön the *lik; yaat*, genre is popular), which are usually written on large sheets of Chinese paper (*ce;nam*). Though professional authors do refer to information that they glean from interviews with the commissioning body and any brief notes that the body may provide, such data is fragmentary and never sufficient to work up into a full narrative. Therefore writers have to creatively compose these rhyming texts as literary works of their own, and in this sense they differ sharply from the historical chronicles which authors usually compiled by revising and enlarging on already existing texts. *Lik; yaat*, for instance, are not usually composed as fresh versions of an older work, but completely new works written for the occasion. This account is based on observations of and information gained from a source of mine in Mäng: Khön who is a professional writer of *lik; yaat*, texts.

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