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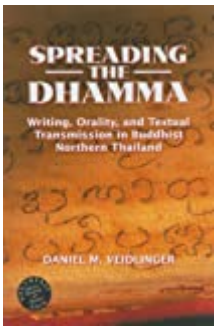

Daniel M. Veidlinger. *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand.* Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, Memory Series. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. 259 pp. $52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3024-3.

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Buddhist Manuscript Culture and History in Southeast Asia

Recent years have been fortunate to witness a gradual intensification of academic interest in the Pali and vernacular Buddhist manuscript cultures of Southeast Asia.[1] Scholars of the region have increasingly begun to draw on the careful study of manuscripts to inform a variety of projects in Buddhist cultural and literary history, anthropology, codicology, and philology.[2] In case there was any doubt, such scholarship has laid bare the rich analytical possibilities of engaging with manuscripts as more than simply vehicles for the conveyance of texts. Gone are the days when Burmese or Cambodian manuscripts were of value to Buddhist studies only insofar as they served as the basis for critical Pali editions or translations into European languages. Informed by and occasionally in conversation with scholarship on the manuscript cultures of insular Southeast Asia, India, medieval Europe, and the Middle East, this new work suggests the promise and importance of taking manuscripts seriously as complex material, textual, and aesthetic objects whose social, discursive, and ritual lives are worthy of study in their own right.

A major recent contribution to this burgeoning field of Southeast Asian Buddhist manuscript studies, and to the history of Buddhist engagements with textuality more generally, is Daniel M. Veidlingerâs important first book *Spreading the Dhamma*, based on his doctoral dissertation for the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago (2002). While the book has much to offer as a history of premodern manuscript culture in the Northern Thai polity of Lan Na over the longue durÃ©e from the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, Veidlingerâs discussions are directed by a broader set of ambitious questions concerning the development and function of literacy and its relationship to orality and the transmission of Buddhism and Buddhist texts in the region. Specifically, *Spreading the Dhamma* is interested in investigating âthe forms in which [premodern Buddhists in Lan Na] actually encountered [Buddhist texts] and ... how these experiences might have affected the way they construed and practiced their religion.â A further and related aim is âto assess the attitudes that different sectors of society held

regarding orality and writing during the periods under studyâ (p. 4). These investigations unfold in the context of the bookâs central historical thesis, that over the course of the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries Lan Na witnessed a rise, decline, and finally a renaissance of literate Buddhist culture.

Veidlingerâs introduction sets forth the methodological and theoretical parameters of the study, arguing for the relevance of recent media and literacy theory (drawing on the work of Marshall McLuhan, Ruth Finnegan, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and others) in approaches to premodern Buddhist manuscript and textual culture. He then discusses the impressive array of Pali and vernacular primary sources used for the project, which comprise an extensive range of published Northern Thai and Tai chronicles (including material written both in Lan Na proper and further afield in Nan and the Tai Khoen region centered at Chiang Tung in present-day Burma); colophons of surviving manuscripts produced in Lan Na; and epigraphic texts, artifacts, and archaeological data.

Chapters 1-3 are devoted in large part to a close reading of the chronicles to explore the status of literacy and rise of written texts in the Buddhist culture of Lan Na prior to the inauguration of two centuries of Burmese suzerainty over the region from 1558 CE. Here, four chronicles are particularly important: two in Pali, *Camadevivamsa* (*Legend of Queen Cama* [CDV], attributed to c. 1410 CE [1998]) and *Jinakalamali* (*Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror* [JKM], c. 1528 [1968]); and two in the vernacular, *Tamnan Mulasasana Wat Pa Daeng* (Chronicle of the Red Forest Monastery [TPD], in Tai Khoen, date unknown [1968]) and *Tamnan Mulasasana Wat Suan Dok* (Chronicle of the Flower Garden Monastery [MS], in Tai Yuan [or Northern Thai], c. 1420-1500). (It should be noted here that aside from briefly mentioning that âit is difficult to assign an accurate dateâ to these chronicles [p. 66], Veidlinger does not delineate the codicological, text-critical, or philological problems that lurk behind their attributions [or indeed those of any of the other textual sources utilized in the study]. He appears to accept as reliable their published versions and the dates assigned to them by other scholars, although he does not explain why doing so is justified. Given that so much of his ensuing argument hangs on the fact that certain chronicles were written by certain individuals at certain times, this failure to explicitly address fundamental questions concerning textual compilation, transmission, and variation constitutes a crucial limitation of the study.)

To what extent was the early spread of Buddhism in Northern Thailand dependent on the circulation of written Buddhist texts? In chapter 1, âMonks and Memory: The Oral World,â Veidlinger argues that fragmentary epigraphic evidence dated to the seventh through thirteenth centuries CE suggests that the Mon, whose culture in Thailand predates the attested emergence of Tai-speaking communities by over half a millennium, may have been in possession of written Buddhist texts (including a âgolden Tipitakaâ [p. 39]) and may have placed a relatively high value on writing. However, judging from chronicle accounts, inscriptions, and a lack of manuscript evidence, early Tai civilization in the North between the thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries did not share similar ideas about literacy, and was characterized by a predominantly oral encounter with Buddhism.

The evidence and argumentation marshaled to support the latter claim in chapters 2 and 3 are fairly complex. In chapter 2, âEarly Thai Encounters with Orality and Literacy,â Veidlinger shows that the earliest surviving Northern Thai chronicles have very little to say about the importance of writing in Lan Na before the late fifteenth century and narrate the arrival of Buddhism in the region in terms which indicate that only the oral transmission of texts occurred at the hands of *bhanaka*s (reciters of scripture) and *tipitakadhara*s (monks who had memorized the scriptures and communicated them without textual support; though it could be argued that such individuals memorized written texts, as is the case with monks attempting to become *tipitakadhara*s in modern Burma). Veidlinger admits that writing would not have been entirely unknown during this period, but maintains that its use was significantly restricted and had only negligible impact on Buddhist learning or culture.

Veidlinger documents a gradual shift in perceptions of Buddhist literacy in the slightly later chronicles, JKM and TPD, which allows him to argue that from the late fifteenth century Buddhist texts were becoming increasingly available and important to certain monastic communities in Lan Na. What was responsible for this shift? In chapter 3, âGolden Age, Golden Images, and Golden Leaves,â Veidlinger shows that the JKM and TPD were composed by members of a new âforest-dwellingâ (*arannavasi*) lineage that arose in the mid-fifteenth century. Their compilers belonged to a fraternity traced to a group of monks led by Nanagambhira who had studied and received reordination in Lanka in the 1420s and subsequently disseminated this ordination throughout Lan Na. Unlike the earlier lineages present in Lan Na–the âFlower Gardenâ lineage centered on Wat Suan Dok (of which the

compiler of the MS was a member) and the putative (and perhaps Mon-affiliated) âCity Dwellingâ (*nagaravasi*) order of the CDVâs author–this new *arannavasi* fraternity placed a higher value on the written word. According to Veidlinger, their views regarding the importance of written texts were perhaps borrowed from Lanka where writing played a more pronounced role in religious activity. Gradually this new fraternity garnered royal patronage and support from King Tilaka (r. 1441-87), and under his grandson King Bilakapattanu (r. 1495-1526), âPali culture in Lan Na reached its zenithâ (p. 82). Veidlinger suggests the provocative hypothesis that one of the reasons why Lan Na kings might have been interested in the ânew technology of writingâ proffered by the *arannavasi*s is because it allowed them a greater degree of âlegitimizingâ Buddhist authority and control over scripture (pp. 97-98). By sponsoring the copying of written texts, kings could involve themselves more essentially in the patronage and dissemination of the *dhamma*, which had previously been the sole prerogatives of *bhanaka*s. The earlier fraternities that upheld the oral tradition would have perceived the *arannavasi* promotion of writing as a threat, and Veidlinger suggests that controversies over the status of writing may have been integral to inter-monastic rivalry and competition of the time.

Veidlinger is aware that taking these chronicles as evidence for this historical shift in literary mentalities and practices invites the criticism, often levied against indigenous historiography throughout Southeast Asia, that chronicles simply cannot be used as documentary sources in this way since they were written not to record factual events but to present specific arguments used to articulate the authenticity and prestige of monastic or (in the case of royal chronicles) royal lineages. He refers to certain chronicles or narratives that can be used as historical sources as âseriousâ or âscholarlyâ while others are dismissed as âfanciful talesâ (pp. 12-13). The former seek to âavoid egregious anachronismâ while the latter are ânot bothered by such considerationsâ (p. 177). But can we so readily distinguish between the âhistorical accuracyâ of some chronicles and the depiction of only a âlegendary pastâ in other works (p. 185)? Given that so much explanatory weight is placed on the testimony of chronicles, readers may have benefited from a more critical discussion of their reliability.

Veidlinger seeks to preempt this criticism through a survey of roughly contemporary epigraphic and manuscript sources from Lan Na that corroborate the chroniclesâ depiction of the âambivalent attitudes towards writingâ that prevailed in Lan Na before the rise of the *arannavasi*s (p. 63). Although the distinctively Lan Na (Dhamma or Tua Muang) script makes its appearance in epigraphy only in the mid-fifteenth century, there are Northern Thai inscriptions found in Lamphun and Phrae written in versions of the Sukhothai script dated to nearly a century prior. Yet there is scant inscriptional record of the production of written texts and the building of libraries before the late fifteenth century, and no manuscripts survive from this period.

Compelling and well argued though this account is, the fact that it relies on several *argumenta ex silencio* may leave some readers unsatisfied. Perhaps the strongest countervailing evidence in favor of an early value placed on writing in Lan Na comes from the very fact of the compilation of the CDV and the MS, as these are quite plausibly the earliest written chronicles, if not some of the earliest dated examples of literature of any genre (assuming that their dates are correct), from anywhere in Southeast Asia. Burma, whose extensive corpus of donative inscriptions attests to a vigorous and widespread monastic manuscript culture at Pagan from the thirteenth century, preserves no written chronicle literature dated prior to the very end of the fifteenth century at the earliest (and here this date is open to dispute). As Veidlinger rightly celebrates, Northern Thailand is responsible for some of the earliest dated examples of palm-leaf manuscripts found anywhere in the Buddhist world: âat least eleven extant manuscripts from the fifteenth century and over a hundred from the sixteenth centuryâ (p. 104), the earliest of which is a fragment of a Jataka dated 1471 CE (though this is followed closely in 1472 by a vernacular legal text entitled *Avaharn* [on theft, p. 56]). But does the argument that no earlier manuscripts survive have direct bearing on the claim that manuscript production began only in the late fifteenth century? Here again comparisons with neighboring Burma are instructive. Despite numerous inscriptional references to libraries and the making and donation of manuscripts on a variety of textual supports (metal, mulberry paper, slate, palm-leaf, etc.) during the period c. 1200-1600, no surviving manuscripts (including ornamental âtamarind-seedâ *kammavaca* manuscripts [p. 115]) have been securely dated to before the early seventeenth century (though carbon dating of manuscript fragments released from Pagan-era *cetiya*s (reliquary mounds) may soon revise this).[3] This leaves us with the inscriptional evidence. Indeed, there is little epigraphic record of manuscript culture in Lan Na before the late fifteenth century, but there are only a handful of inscriptions from the region during this period; the silence of such a modest corpus is not

conclusive.

Chapter 3 and chapter 4, âThe Text in the World: Scribes, Sponsors, and Manuscript Culture,â show that following the arrival of the *arannavasi*s we begin to find more epigraphic and chronicle references to manuscript culture and that writing, and perhaps especially writing in Pali, comes to play a more important role in Northern Thai Buddhism. Veidlinger offers a reconstruction of some of the salient features of the manuscript culture of this period, including illuminating discussions of the identity and social status of donors, aspects of the scribal process, the economic value of manuscripts, and the various modes through which texts were aurally/orally engaged and corrected and commented on. It is during this âGolden Ageâ (a phrase often invoked in Lan Na studies but whose analytic utility deserves further scrutiny) that a number of original Pali texts were composed, such as those by the monks Ratanapanna (the author of the JKM), Sirimangala (the author of the influential *Mangalatthadipani* among other texts), and the commentator Nanakitti, all of whom were probably affiliated with the *arannavasi* order. Here the reader may have benefited from a more in-depth presentation and discussion of some of these texts: to what extent does their content, structure, form, etc. shed light on their compilersâ approaches to literacy and orality and the higher value they placed on textuality? In further support of the claim that the *arannavasi*s were responsible for the growing prestige of Buddhist literacy, Veidlinger shows that many of the oldest surviving manuscripts were in fact copied or sponsored by monks who regarded themselves as members of this fraternity.

Chapter 5, âTurning over a New Leaf: The Advance of Writing,â addresses the mid-sixteenth-century twilight and subsequent demise of the brief Golden Age following the Burmese conquest of the region by King Bayinnaung. Based on the evidence of dates in colophons to extant manuscripts he has surveyed, Veidlinger argues that âafter about 1610 … there is a sudden, precipitous drop in manuscript production.â He attributes this drop to âa series of insurgencies aimed at wresting independence from the Burmese,â which the Burmese met âwith a more systematic program of repressionâ (p. 136). He also speculates that the Burmese may have âactively discouraged Lan Na manuscript cultureâ and use of the local script in the interest of disintegrating the âLan Na identity and with it the potential for rebellionâ (p. 137). Although far more research is required on shifts in literary and cultural practices during the âBurmese periodâ of Northern Thai history, and arguably much of what is written here regarding the ill-intentions of the Burmese is overstated,[4] Veidlinger shows that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a literate Pali culture persisted in certain areas, such as Wat Hai Lin outside of Lampang, where the *arannavasi* monk Kesarapanna collected and sponsored the recopying of a number of manuscripts. Nonetheless, he documents a âwaning of scribal cultureâ especially during the mid- to late eighteenth century when much of the region was in a perpetual state of insurgency and counterinsurgency (p. 139). After the Burmese were expelled from Chiang Mai by a joint Lan Na-Ayutthaya alliance in 1775, Veidlinger traces a gradual resurgence in manuscript making and literary activity in Lan Na and the neighboring polity of Nan through a reading of the late *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (1998) and *Nan Chronicle* (1994). Here he suggests that it is possible that European, Siamese, and Burmese values regarding literacy may have been partially instrumental in stimulating this renaissance. Some readers may have reservations about the degree to which foreign influence (whether here or as above in the case of Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century) is invoked as a principal catalyst for the local promotion of literacy.

The final chapter, chapter 6, âOverlooked or Looked Over? The Meaning and Uses of Written Pali Texts,â stands out from the rest of the book in that it departs from the chronological trajectory of the foregoing, and instead approaches all the Northern Thai evidence from various eras collectively. The first section of the chapter is devoted to an interesting analysis of the motivations donors had for sponsoring manuscripts based on the testimony of colophons. Unfortunately, nowhere in *Spreading the Dhamma* does Veidlinger provide an entirely transparent account of the number of manuscript sources he has surveyed (though see pp. 15, 91-93). Nor does he speculate about how representative his samples may be of the general character of all the manuscripts produced in the region during certain periods. Are there some or many monastic collections he has not gone through? Approximately how many manuscripts or libraries remain to be accounted for? Such information would have been helpful to the reader, and its absence makes some arguments difficult to appraise. While it is the case that the colophons he cites reflect differing donor desires (for rebirth during Metteyyaâs reign, for merit, for *nibbana*, for wisdom, etc.), and that these motivations may have changed over time, the extent to which we can generalize these claims is not entirely certain.

The final part of chapter 6 is devoted to a very instructive questioning of the presence of a âcult of the bookâ in Lan Na and the degree to which writing qua

writing was perceived to have a âhieratic functionâ (p. 177). In dialogue with work by Gregory Schopen and Daniel Boucher on the book cult in early Indian Buddhist monasticism, Veidlinger discusses Northern Thai attitudes toward the veneration of manuscripts, the power of *yantra*s, (symbolic diagrams of magical, protective, or auspicious texts), and rituals of installing written materials in *cetiyas* or Buddha images. Veidlinger shows that manuscripts were not perceived as âembodying the same degree of numinous power possessed by other meritorious items associated with the Buddhaâs presence, such as relics or imagesâ (p. 203). While I would disagree with some of the statements of this chapter–for example, Veidlingerâs supposition that âcolophons that equate the words in the manuscript to Buddha imagesâ (such as those that are often found in Burma) are âin some way a vestige of Mahayana influenceâ (p. 177)–this section serves as a useful comparative counterpoint to recent studies of Cambodian and Siamese approaches to Buddhist textuality that emphasize the sacredness of writing and the ritual veneration of manuscripts and other written texts.

An issue that deserves further consideration in future research on Northern Thai manuscript culture is the degree to which Veidlingerâs central thesis about the rise, decline, and post-restoration renaissance of Buddhist textuality is borne out through an analysis of vernacular or bilingual manuscripts, and especially those containing para- or non-canonical texts. The picture of Buddhist literary culture that Veidlinger paints is one which is primarily–almost exclusively–concerned with âcanonicalâ Pali texts of the âTipitakaâ and its commentaries and sub-commentaries. These two loaded terms are often invoked but readers might have benefited from further analysis of their specific historical meanings in the Northern Thai context (e.g., on pp. 18-20, 76, 89-90). Veidlinger appears to posit a division between Buddhist and other, nonreligious literary spheres, for example, in his discussion of Lan Na legal texts. What in fact are the boundaries of the properly âBuddhistâ literary world in Northern Thailand, and were those boundaries universally accepted? Are medical, âVedic,â and legal texts âBuddhistâ or does this label apply only to the elusive âcanonâ (p. 195)? Could it be that the *arannavasi*s were interested less in the promotion of Buddhist textuality *tout court*, than in the dissemination of only particular genres of literature or individual texts that aligned with their specific vision of Buddhist orthodoxy? What was vernacular, bilingual, or Pali literary practice like outside this rarefied domain?

Spreading the Dhamma is a very welcome addition to the growing literature on manuscript culture in premodern and early modern Southeast Asia. It is also useful as a history of monastic Buddhism and Pali learning in Northern Thailand, especially during the critical late fifteenth century. It persuasively argues that Lan Na engagements with Buddhist texts were a predominantly aural/oral affair that placed great value on the powers of memory and recitational acumen, and that manuscripts were important not only as supports for this activity, but also as fields of merit making and, perhaps occasionally, as objects of devotion. Importantly, by offering a compelling account of how approaches to textuality changed quite dynamically over time in response to different pressures, it departs from unhelpful structuralist histories that depict premodern Southeast Asian Buddhist practices and mentalities as essentially static. It is likely that not all readers will be convinced by all the arguments that sustain the provocative hypothesis that the written word became centrally important to Buddhist practice in Lan Na only in the late fifteenth century. But on my reading Veidlinger successfully establishes the key point that a rise in Pali literacy (if not vernacular literacy as well) was closely intertwined with the activities and fate of the *arannavasi* fraternity and its elite and royal patrons. One of the bookâs great strengths is its recurrent engagement with the theoretical and comparative historical literature on orality, literacy, and manuscript culture, both in the Buddhist world and beyond, although it would have been illuminating to also see an engagement with recent work on these themes in insular Southeast Asia. It certainly makes good sense to compare Buddhist Northern Thailand with Burma, India, and Sri Lanka, and also with medieval Christian Europe, but mainland-insular Southeast Asian comparisons are rarely undertaken and should also be encouraged. The book should be required reading for students and scholars of Buddhist literature and premodern manuscript culture regardless of their geographical region, period, languages, or genres of specialization. It is hoped that future studies that deal with manuscript culture in Southeast Asia–in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist contexts–will engage with the bookâs varied claims to strengthen our comparative understanding of the multiple functions of writing and the written word in regional religious and political culture during the pre-print and early print era.

Notes

[1]. To avoid encoding irregularities, in what follows I do not employ diacritics in the transcription of Indic or Southeast Asian vernacular terms.

[2]. Much of this new work has relied on significant advances in the cataloging, preservation, and availability of manuscripts by local and international research organizations. There has been far more done in this regard on monastic collections in Northern Thailand and Laos than anywhere else in the region. Here the efforts of the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai, and the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme, Vientiane, (now online at www.laomanuscripts.net) deserve special mention.

[3]. On ornamental and non-ornamental *kammavaca* manuscripts as well as manuscripts written on other supports (i.e., materials) in Burma, see Christian Lammerts, âNotes on Burmese Manuscripts: Text and Image,â *Journal of Burma Studies* 14 (2010): 229-253.

[4]. See Justin McDaniel, âTwo Bullets in a Balustrade: How the Burmese Have Been Removed from Northern Thai Buddhist History,â *Journal of Burma Studies* 11 (2007): 85-126.

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