A Problem on the Origin of the Pāli Canon of Khom Script Manuscripts: Found in Thailand and Cambodia

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1. Background
Dhammachai Tipitaka Project (DTP) was launched in 2010 for creating a database of palm-leaf manuscripts focusing on at least four traditions: Sinhalese, Burmese, Khom (Khmer), and Tham scripts which have been found in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (SEA). However, with regard to Khom script palm-leaf manuscripts available in the project, all of them are the manuscripts found in Thailand. And it remains unclear whether the palm-leaf manuscripts in Siam and Cambodia are in the same lineage. In order to clarify the origin of Khom manuscripts in Thailand and Cambodia, a history of transmission of Theravada Buddhism and the Pāli canon of Khom manuscripts in SEA and theirs current situation in Thailand and Cambodia must be studied.

2. Overview of a History of Theravada Buddhism and Transmission of the Pāli Canon in Thailand and Cambodia

2.1. Chronicles and Historical Records on Theravada Buddhism and Movement of Sangha and the Pāli Canon in Siam
Crucial chronicles and historical reports of Buddhist history starting from the Buddha and continues through each period in Siam, include “Jinakālamālī,” “Saddhammasaṅgaha,” “Saṅgītivaṁsa,” “Syamupadasampada: the adoption of the Siamese Order of priesthood in Ceylon,” and “Establishment of Siamvaṁsa in Lanka.” The Jinakālamālipakorn (Thai translation from Pali text in Khom manuscripts) shows interesting information related to Theravada Buddhism and the movement of sangha in the area of recent Thailand as follows.

"... In the period of king Keu Na (≈1356–1386 CE), Sumana Thera, the Sukhodaya monk went to
Ayojjhapura (Ayutthaya) to study with many Buddhist schools and came back to Sukhodaya. However, after he heard about Udumbara Mahāsāmī who came from Lanka to Rāmaṇa, he went to Rāmaṇa to study with him, by whom he was then re-ordained. ...” (Trans. from p. 108)

“... King Thammaraja of Sukhodaya (≈ 1347–1371 CE) sent his envoy to invite monks from Udumbara Mahāsāmī’s school, Udumbara Mahāsāmī sent Sumana Thera back to Sukhodaya. The king built Ambavā Temple (Wat Pa Ma-Muang) for Sumana Thera. ...” (Trans. from p. 109)

“... Finally, Sumana Thera went to Chaing Mai. The king Kue Na (≈ 1356–1386 CE) of Lānnā built Pupphārām Temple (Wat Suan Dok) for him. ...” (Trans. from p. 118)

“... In the Cullasakkaraja 879 (≈ 1517 CE), the king Bilakapanattā told the kings of vassal states to pay homage to three groups (gaṇa) of sangha, the Sihala Buddha image and Tipiṭaka. ...” (Trans. from p. 149)

In *Jinakālamālīpakorn*, it seems that there were many ancient kingdoms and cities in the area of recent Thailand, and these ancient kingdoms had cultural and religious (especially Buddhist) relationship with each other for a long time. Through the information about the Sumana Thera in the chronicle, Theravada Buddhism already existed in these ancient kingdoms before 14th century but its origin is unclear. It seems that Buddhism appeared in this area by many groups of Sangha. For example, in Lānnā, there were three groups (gaṇa) of the sangha: Nagaravāsī, Pupphārāmavāsī (Suan Dok order), and Araññavāsī (Wat Pa-Deang order). Buddhist transmission in this area was active among many groups of people such as the king, laypeople, and monks themselves.

Moreover, the chronicles also show the information about Tipiṭaka as follows:

“... Cāmadevī (≈ 7th century) came by ship to Haripuñjaya with 500 servants and 500 elder monks who were well versed in the Tipiṭaka. ...” (Trans. from *Jinakālamālīpakorn* [Thai] p. 92)

“... At that time Phra Chao Siridhammacakka (the great king Bilaka) (≈ 1383 CE) had invited many hundreds elder monks who were well versed in Tipiṭaka to revise the Tipiṭaka for one year at Mahabodhāram. Then he built the Tipiṭaka repository. ...” (Trans. from *Saṅgītivinīśa* [Thai] p. 342)

“... In the year 2043 BE. (1500 CE) the king Bilakapannattā had built the palace at Wat Phubbārām and the Buddha image was enshrined there. One year later, the king ordered to made the ceremony for celebration of golden Tipiṭaka (golden edge) and its manuscript repository. ...” (Trans. from *Jinakālamālīpakorn* [Thai] p. 135)

“... Buddhist council (1788 CE) in Siam was convened by the king Rama I at Mahāthāt temple ...” (Trans. from *Saṅgītivinīśa* [Thai] pp. 445–446)

“... In 1967 BE (≈ 1424 CE), 25 elder monks in Chiang Mai such as Phra Mahādhammagambhīra with eight monks from Kamboja (Khmer or Lavo) in total 33 monks went to Lanka for studying...
Buddhist and oral literature in Sinhalese script...” (Trans. from Jinakālamālīpakorn [Thai] p. 121)

“... Dhammakitti ... He was the person who was an expert in Tipiṭaka and many scriptures such as sadda-sattha, with great wisdom and be respected by the Lanka people. ... He did merit so much there, re-ordained by Thera and go back to his hometown Ayodhaya.” (Trans. from Saddhammasamgaho [Pali] p. 90)

“... The king ordered also to be sent to Ceylon a gold image of Buddha, the ‘Karmawakya’ (formulas) prescribed for the fourfold religious acts of priests, written on leaves made of gold, copies of Pratimokkha, Mahaniddesa, written in native characters, Pratisambheda and many other doctrinal books which were not found in Ceylon, offerings to the sacred foot print and to the shrines; and also presents and letters to King Kirtisri ...” (Syāmūpadasampadā: The adoption of the Siamese order of priesthood in Ceylon p. 57)

“... The envoy from Ceylon listed the manuscripts which were not found in Ceylon. The manuscripts would be given when the sangha go to Ceylon.” (Trans. from Reang Praditsathan Phra Song Siamvong nai Lanka Thavip [Thai] p. 137)

“... The envoy from Ceylon brought 97 manuscripts (which were not found in Ceylon) and the letter to the minister of Siriwattanaburi to Ceylon at culasakaraja 1118 (≈ 1756 CE).” (Trans. from Reang Praditsathan Phra Song Siamvong nai Lanka Thavip [Thai] p. 209)

In 7th century, there is no direct reference to Tipiṭaka, but there is information about Tipiṭakadhara, monks who were well versed in the Tipiṭaka. The chronicles mention several instances of creating or revising a full set of Tipiṭaka in Siam. For example, in 1383 CE, Tipiṭaka was created by the order of the great king Bilaka of Lānnā at the temple Mahābodhārām. In 1500 CE, Tipiṭaka was created by the order of the king Bilakapanattā. One year later, the king sponsored a ceremony to celebrate the Tipiṭaka (golden edge) and its manuscript repository. In 1788 CE, Buddhist council was convened by the king Rama I at the temple Mahāthāt. The pieces of evidence also show that the exchange of Buddhism between SEA and Ceylon started actively from the 13th–14th century. For instance, monks in SEA started going to Ceylon for studying and being re-ordained in Lanka sect. The kings sent envoys for Buddhist activities. Even though Buddhist scriptures were exchanged sometimes, there is no evidence about exchanging a full set of Tipiṭaka between SEA and Ceylon.

2.2. Historical Records and Related Topics on Theravada Buddhism Movement of Sangha and the Pāli Canon in Khmer

It is difficult to find out chronicles or historical records about Khmer in 13th–15th century. However, there is indirect information about Buddhism in Khmer at that time. In A Record
of Cambodia: The Land and Its People by Zhou Daguan, the record by Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan of his stay in Cambodia in 1296–1297, Zhou described about Theravada style monks and palm-leaf manuscripts as follows:

“Zhugu shave their heads and dress in yellow. They leave their right shoulder uncovered, and otherwise wrap themselves in a robe made of yellow cloth and go barefoot. ⋅⋅⋅ They chant a very large number of scriptures, which are all written on piles of plamya leaves put together in an extremely orderly way.”

However, Chandler⁴ and Reid⁵ claimed that the Theravada monks, known by a Thai phrase “Zhugu” or “Chao Kru,” were not patronized by the Khmer court at that time.

Chronicle of Laos compiled by Maha Sila Viravong in the modern period claimed that in Fā Ngum period (1353 CE), Lān Xāng became the most prosperous and expanded over many cities by the support of Khmer king. He obtained a Khmer princess as his wife. Fā Ngum introduced Buddhism into Laos through the suggestion of his wife who was a Khmer princess. However, in this point, Stuart-Fox mentions as follows:

“... Fā Ngum is also credited with introducing Buddhism into Laos, though this is manifestly incorrect. Discoveries at Luang Phrabāng make it certain that Buddhism was known well before the time of Fā Ngum, ...”⁶

According to the data, in the golden period of Khmer kingdom, Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism had its influence in this area. However, when Theravada Buddhism became flourishing in SEA, the Khmer kingdom was degenerated and became a vassal city of the stronger kingdom. There are a few pieces of indirect evidence about Theravada Buddhism in Khmer. Even though it is likely that Theravada Buddhism also has expanded to Khmer since long ago as early as other kingdoms in this area, there is no evidence about creating or exchanging Tipiṭaka in Khmer. Although the Laos chronicle shows that the king Fā Ngum introduced Buddhism into Laos via Khmer, there is no clear information about Tipiṭaka.

3. The Current Situation of the Pāli Canon of Khom Manuscripts in Thailand and Cambodia and Its Related Theories.

Khom palm-leaf manuscripts which have been discovered recently in Thailand were made from the period of post-Ayutthaya to the king Rama V of Rattanakosin. Generally, we may
know the year and the origin of a palm-leaf manuscript through its colophon. However, more than eighty percent of Khom manuscripts do not have colophons which creates difficulty in determining its origin and age precisely.\(^7\) We can only approximate the age of palm-leaf manuscripts roughly from the pattern on its first or last page, an emblem of a king who ordered their creation, its edition or letter style.

For the situation of Khom manuscripts in Cambodia, there is only a small section of palm-leaf manuscripts in National Library of Cambodia and some of them were copied in a form of microfilm. École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and Fonds d'édition des manuscrits du Cambodge (FEMC) are organizations which had surveyed and copied some manuscripts to microfilm in Cambodia in the latest decade. However, a number of manuscripts were destroyed in the recent war and the Pāli canon of Khom script manuscripts were found in a small amount. There are researchers who mention the Pāli canon in Cambodia. For example, Olivier de Bernon, in his *The Status of Pāli in Cambodia: from Canonical to Esoteric Language*, mentions that the term Tipiṭaka as used in Cambodia does not specifically refer to the Pāli canon itself, but rather to all Buddhist scriptures. The first full set of the Pāli canon of manuscripts was sent to King Ang Duong of Cambodia in 1854 CE by King Rama IV of Siam. Furthermore, Ian Harris mentions in *Cambodian Buddhism* about Khom script that Thai Buddhist literature has always been written in the Khom script because the sacred Khom script has been thought to possess a magical efficacy hallowed by traditions stretching back many centuries. About the Tipiṭaka, in 1854 CE King Ang Duang requested Bangkok to send a completed version of the Tipiṭaka in Pali to Cambodia and a group of Thai monks consequently brought some eighty bundles of manuscript to Udong.

4. Conclusion

Many topics relating to Buddhist transmission and the Pāli canon continuously appear in the chronicles or historical documents of Siam. On the other hand, in Cambodia, there is only a small amount of information and most of it is indirect data.

A large number of Khom script manuscripts were discovered recently in Thailand but in Cambodia, the situation of the Khom script manuscripts is different. Only a small number of Pāli canon Khom script manuscripts were found. It is likely that most of them were destroyed during the war in Cambodia. Moreover, in the past, creating a full set of Pāli canon
was not an easy task. It was normally created by a great king in that period, not by a small ruler, and sometimes Pāli canon was used in a politic way such as diplomatic symbol.

There are more evidences and information about Pāli canon that appears in the chronicle or historical documents seems to support the theory that the Khom script manuscripts of Pāli canon in Cambodia are influenced by those from Thailand. However, the origin of the Khom script manuscripts in both countries remains unclear. A preliminary comparative study of selected texts of the Pāli canon in Khom manuscripts found in Thailand (Wat Phanan Cheong and National library in BKK) and Cambodia (Wat Saravorn), reveals some interesting issues needing further research.

Notes

1) Agree with the content in Wat Pa Ma-Muang inscriptions (1361 CE).
2) Agree with the content in Haripuñijapuri inscriptions (1500 CE).
3) Zhou, Daguan, and Peter Harris. A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People, 52–53.
6) Stuart-Fox, Martin. A History of Laos, 10.
7) The data from catalog of Khom palm leaf Manuscript of the Pāli canon are kept in National Library 1,192 bundles only 151 bundles have their colophons.

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