



# Libraries in Laos

- in wats, in public.

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**Architectural styles.** Traditional libraries are found in Laotian temples, wats, in the style of Vientiane or that of Luang Prabang, the latter being influenced from the art of Chiang Mai in Thailand. The finest examples from the third architectural style, that of Xieng Khouang, is no longer visible, as this style has disappeared due to an almost total destruction of Xieng Khouang by American bombers in the Plain of Jar area, prior to 1975.

**Libraries** (haw trai) in wats are usually small, windowless structures, resembling chapels. To a great extent they are inspired by buildings in northern Thailand. They may be built of wood on stone or of brick, and decorated with stucco or woodcarvings. Usually they are located on the wat compound close to its main structure, the sim or vihara, where the principal Buddha image is housed.

The 'haw trai' in wats served as the safe keeping of the sacred books of the Pali canon, the tripitaka. Some dates back to the 16th and 17th century and show elements of Burmese style.



Documents on paper or palm-leaf are kept in lavishly decorated or laquered wooden manuscript caskets, usually to be opened by removing a lid on top. Also standing cabinets in Thai style, with glass doors and shelves for paper editions of the tripitaka are seen.

A German supported preservation project 1992-2002 has secured many manuscripts from damage due to weather humidity, insects, animals and man. Inventories are being made in a field survey covering the whole of Laos.

There are about 1.700 registered wats in the 17 provinces of Laos. Within the six years since the start of the project (1992) a total of about 380 wats have been included in the preservation project.

Manuscripts are labeled with a new code number and bound up in white cotton bags. Still, continuous local neglect of the written treasures kept in wats make the project's aim of strengthening the



local responsibility and awareness a somewhat challenging one. The project plans to set up a bibliographical database of Lao literature.

**Folding books** in one piece folded paper lane with writings on both sides are the most commonly used format for books in Lao language. They may be illustrated with watercolored pictures. The illustrated folklore book shown on the photos with the outlook of the Lao people is now in the oriental department of the Royal Library, Copenhagen.



*Click photo to enlarge*

**Script** in Lao was created in the 14th century when Lao scholars based their written language on an early alphabet created by the Thais. The further origin of this script shows an influence from Khmer scholars who again have used south Indian scripts as models.

Written Lao proceeds from left to right, with the 15 vowel symbols in different combinations written around the 30 consonants.

**Literature.** The works of Lao literary tradition which reaches back to the 15th and 16th century have survived in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts with religious and scholarly writing which are kept at the libraries of some 1.700 Buddhist monasteries all over Laos. Some of these texts are written on 'Sa' (mulberry tree paper) which is less durable than palm-leaf documents, which may last about 1000 years if preserved well.

The Lao version of India's epic Ramayana is by far the most famous part of classical Lao literature. Also from Indian tradition are a number of life-stories, jatakas, of the Buddha.

Non-fiction and school books are published by the Government, but a Lao tradition for the writing of fiction is non-existing.

### **Wat-libraries in Luang Prabang.**

**Wat Xieng Thong.** Its sim was built in 1561 and restored in 1968. The Bodhi-tree, from which the temple derives its name, stood behind the so-called Red Chapel (haw trai) and a second haw trai nearby, called Tripitaka Chamber.



The so-called Red Chapel (La Chapelle Rouge by the French), is more precisely named The Reclining Buddha Sanctuary, according to the one-of-a-kind Buddha figure in classic Lao style which used to be housed in this building.

*Click for realaudio of street life*

Inside gold-leaf votives line the upper walls of the room. and it's



back exterior is lavishly decorated with multi-colored glass mosaic of local village life, made in the 1950's.

The sim is in classic Luang Prabang style and contains a glass cupboard with a leatherbound edition of the tripitaka.



**Wat That.** First library in Luang Prabang with public access was to be found in the lower floor of a building next to the main entrance from the street. The wat library was founded by a former head of the wat, Mang Bun Tan, who died around 1985. He had a keen interest in improvement of literacy outside the monastic circles, and in his days the library performed some of the functions of a public library. The book stock was partly sponsored by Thai and Laotian Government, but the absence of light, popular reading material in Laotian language made a non substantial impact of this library offer. The library in Wat That was



closed in 1995, to be substituted by a public library in its own premises from 1985, next to the market. A manuscript casket with Pali manuscripts on palm-leaves are to be found in the room of the present head of Wat That.

**Wat Wisunalat** (Wat Vixoun) is the oldest operating temple in Luang Prabang, constructed in wood 1513 and rebuilt in brick 1896-98 following an 1887 fire.

In the sim a manuscript casket contains palm-leaf manuscripts and a glass cabinet in Thai style displays an edition of the tripitaka in paper volumes.



**Wat Ho Xian.** Murals from 1991-92 depicting reading in folding books. In monastic quarters manuscripts preserved in white cotton bags during the field survey are already in continuous destruction due to water and insects.

**Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham** has a school room open to the outside and a roof carried by pillars.

## Wat-libraries in Vientiane.

**Wat Si Saket.** Located opposite the Presidential Palace it is the oldest temple still preserved in Vientiane. Built in 1818 and since spared from Thai destruction.





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Outside the colonnaded terrace surrounding the sim and facing the street Thanon Lan Xang, is a raised haw trai, tripitaka library. The structure is well proportioned and with a Burmese style roof. Inside the square building a large wooden cubbord used to contain scriptures which are now to be found in Bangkok due to Thai looting. A balcony for silent reading is facing the now not so quiet street. Of the four wooden doors only one is original, the other three were restored in 1913.



The temple is currently included on World Monuments Watch, listing the 100 most endangered sites worldwide 1998-99.



**Haw Pha Kaew** is the former royal temple of the Lao monarchy. The interior of the sim is now the closest to a National Museum we can find in Vientiane, displaying fine examples of Buddha images in stone, bronze or wood. Also on display are palm-leaf manuscripts and three Lao manuscript caskets. One is presently not on display, but the other two are masterpieces, both of gilded wood, bois dorè, from 19th century, one casket also with a decoration in semi-precious stones.

**Luang Prabang Public Library.** First library in Luang Prabang with public access was to be found in the lower floor of a building in Wat That as described ealier. The library in Wat That was closed in 1995, to be substituted by a public library in its own premises from 1985, next to the morning market in the middle of the town. This building was renovated in October 1998.



The public library is placed under the Ministry of Information and Culture in Vientiane and headed by Mr. Boumkhang from the Information and Cultural Department in Luang Prabang. It is located next to a building of similar size: Childrens Cultural Centre, Literature and Mass Culture Section of the same department.



The three rooms of the library contains a protected cubboard with registered palm-leaf manuscripts, and a collection of Lao non-fiction books for school children and adults. A public school is found on the other side of the street, and during the library's opening hours children are crossing the street between the two.



The book collection numbers a few hundred items, all registered in a book catalogue. Borrowers' cards are kept in the library with charging out noted on the card. The library also has some periodicals from Laos and China, and a much used subscription to Lao daily newspapers. In English language is found a few non-fiction illustrated books featuring U.S.A., weeded and transfered from USIS in Singapore.





**Royal Palace Museum (Haw Kham)** in Luang Prabang was constructed in 1904 as a residence for the royal family and remained so until the change in regime in 1975. The museum displays the most prized standing Buddha image, the Pha Bang. The reading room and library of the king, Sisavang Vong until 1959 and Sisavang Vatthana until 1975, is in the residential quarters at the back of the reception rooms, furnished with polished dark glass cubbords containing reading material of local origin as well as from the West.

**National Library, Vientiane.** Following a number of changed locations the National Library is now to be found in a stately building on Thanon Setthathirat in Vientiane. During the Japanese occupation in World War II app. 10.000 foreign books were removed from the National Library. After the war the book stock was slowly built up from scratch (1966: 6.000 volumes). Book donations came from the Soviet Union in particular.



The tasks performed by the National Library are indeed multifold and varied. Next to its function as an academic library it is deeply involved in the cradling and coordination of library services throughout all Laos. Not to mention the occasionally library education as an one-two-three months in-service training for staff from other libraries. A few years from now, the library education is expected to be changed into a more theoretical curriculum at the University of Vientiane.

**The library system** of Laos is not based on a common governmental law, and all public libraries in Laos are to be considered local branches under the National Library. Public libraries are presently found in Luang Prabang, Oudamsay and Pakse.

Three bookmobiles are in Laos serving areas without a local public library. One of these being attached to the National Library as a donation from the Japanese government and serving the suburbs of Vientiane.

School libraries with reading rooms are widely distributed, to a great extent supported by Ecoles Sans Frontiers (ESC). Book cases to unfold and containing childrens' books are circulating between these reading rooms.

**The National Library** on its two floors has a section with reference books, a periodical section, a manuscript section and sections for books divided according to language: Lao, English, French and Russian. The card catalogue is divided into the same four languages.



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Presently a number of book donations in Russian language are being weeded from the collection. An audio/visual collection of records with Russian music and some videos are kept in the offices of the library. Access to world wide web and on-line information retrieval is still to come, but e-mail has been introduced.

The library is deeply involved in the above mentioned German-supported preservation project for Lao manuscripts, and from 1992-98 more than 370 monasteries have been visited. Of these monasteries 270 have received an individual inventory and binded data sheet.

A total of 175.000 fasciculi (phuuk) of manuscripts covering over 30.000 titles have been documented and preserved. Microfilm operation of old and significant documents in Vientiane and Luang Prabang numbers 470 rolls, with a total of 28.000 fasciculus.

Of the two deputy directors interviewed in December 1998 at the National Library, Oudomsavanh Kenenouvong and Bounleuth Thammachak, the latter is also deputy director of the manuscript preservation project.

In 1990-92 UNESCO has sponsored three library volunteers from the West to help organizing the library techniques of the library. This impact is still to be felt in the library, but as the government's priorities presently are centered on the development of the school system, library budgets are limited.