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Sealed Manuscripts in Laos: New Findings from Luang Prabang

Abstract: This article discusses two palm-leaf manuscripts from the former Lao royal capital of Luang Prabang which contain royal decrees. Both manuscripts are dated from the mid-nineteenth century when the kingdom of Luang Prabang was still a tributary state of Siam. Attached to the manuscripts are well preserved royal seals authenticating and legitimising the royal decrees sent to provincial governors. The materiality and iconography of the seals as well as the contents of the decrees are analysed against the background of the use of seals in the manuscript culture of Laos and neighboring Tai speaking regions.

In early August 2013, a team of Lao researchers made an astonishing discovery in the *Sala Hong Tham* (lit., ‘Hall for keeping Buddhist scriptures’) of Vat Saen Sukharam, one of the most prominent monasteries in Luang Prabang, during an inventory of manuscripts. In the bottom drawer of one of the cabinets were found two palm-leaf manuscripts, each of which bearing royal seals made of stick-lac still firmly attached to the palm leaves. This type of sealed manuscript is very rare in the Thai and Lao world and has so far been little studied.¹ Thus, given its special historical value, it was decided to transfer these two sealed manuscripts to the collection of the monastery’s museum, a building next to the abbot’s abode.²

In this article I will give first a brief overview of the use of seals as symbols of authority in written documents from Laos and present-day Northern Thailand. Thereafter, I will discuss the two manuscripts, dated from the mid-nineteenth century, with regard to their materiality followed by an analysis of their contents in the context of other extant sources from the same period. Finally, an annotated English translation of the manuscripts will be provided.

1 Sealed palm leaves were not unknown in Tamil manuscript culture as Eva Wilden shows in her analysis of the use of palm-leaf as writing support in Tamil literature in the first millennium. See Wilden 2012/2013, 71.

2 As for the manuscript collection of Vat Saen Sukharam, see Bounleuth 2015.

1 Seals as symbols of authority in ancient Laos and Northern Thailand

As the French historian and epigraphist Michel Lorrillard has shown, the use of seals as symbols of royal authority in Laos dates back to the fifteenth century when the kingdom of Lan Sang, founded in 1353, became a Chinese vassal state.³ Since the founding in June 1404 of the Pacification Commission (*xuanwei si*) of Lao-wo, as the Chinese called the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang (lit., '[Country of] the Million Elephants'), tribute missions were regularly sent to the Imperial Court until the early seventeenth century.⁴ Only the bearers of seals issued by the Ming Court were recognized as rightful rulers. The unauthorized use or destruction of such seals would result in severe punishment.⁵ When issuing memorandums for the Imperial Court, the rulers of Lan Sang and other Tai vassal states would authenticate them with a Chinese seal.⁶ Lorrillard provides a few examples of Chinese seals used by Lao rulers, including one of nine or ten characters engraved in a cartouche of a stone inscription dated 1577.⁷ The use of Chinese seals by Lao kings appears until the early nineteenth century, but it still needs to be investigated how genuinely Lao inscribed seals – the earliest of which date from the seventeenth century – have evolved from the Chinese model.

3 Lorrillard 2015, 8–10.

4 The *Ming Shilu* ('Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty') has a total of 96 entries recording relations between Ming China and its Lao vassal state of Lao-wo. Most of the entries are from the fifteenth century with only seven from the sixteenth and four from the seventeenth century. See Wade 2005.

5 The *Ming Shilu* reports, for example, that '[i]n the year Chinghua 7, 5th month, on *bingshen* day (1471), the official seal of the Military-cum-Civilian Pacification Commission of Laos was burnt and destroyed by bandits (the Kaeo). Officials were sent to find out the truth [before] casting [another one] for them', quoted from Liew-Herres 2006, 18.

6 Though no original memorandum from Lan Sang or Lao-wo has been found so far, at least one manuscript copy of a memorandum from the Pacification Commission of Cheli – the Tai Lü polity of Sipsòng Panna in southern Yunnan – situated to the north of Lan Sang has been preserved in the archives of Toyo Bunko in Tokyo. It is a bilingual (Chinese-Tai) memorandum sent by the ruler of Cheli, Tao Sam Pò Lütai (r. 1457–1497) to the Ming Court. The Tai version of this document is written in the so-called tamarind pod script (*tua aksòn fak kham*) and bears the ruler's seal at the bottom. See Liew-Herres et al. 2012, 353–357.

7 This inscription has been found at Don Hon, a small island situated in the Mekong river 150 km downstream of Luang Prabang. Since 1915 this inscription has been preserved in a museum in Hanoi. See Lorrillard 2015, 13.

A seal is called *chum* (จຸ່ມ) in ancient Tai. The Shan rulers (or *cao fa*) used seals to issue official letters and often appointed their main wives to keep the seals and to stamp documents with these seals.⁸ The owners or keepers of such seals were called *chao chum*, literally ‘Lord of the Seal’, and exercised considerable political influence. The Lan Na and Sipsòng Panna chronicles call inscribed seals *lai chum* (ลายจຸ່ມ), or refer to them when accompanied by an additional written paper document as *lai chum lai chia* (ลายจຸ່มลายเจีย).⁹ This term appears in twenty-three inscriptions (dated between 1560 CE and 1638 CE) scattered over the Lao province of Vientiane and the Thai province of Nong Khai.¹⁰ The *lai chum lai chia* were kept in the *hò chia kham lüang* (หอเจียคำเหลือง) or ‘[Archives of the] Golden Pavilion’ at the Tai ruler’s palace.¹¹

In the following several examples of inscribed artefacts bearing seals are given. Iconographic features of these seals are discussed to put the two sealed palm-leaf manuscripts into wider perspective. A royal seal that was once attached to a silver plate inscription has been preserved in Northern Thailand (see Fig. 1). The seal, issued by Queen Wisutthithewi,¹² has a lotus design on the front and the queen’s official name, Somdet Chao Ratchawisut (สมเด็จพระราชวิสุทธิ), on the back. The seal was made of dark brown stick-lac, 5 cm in diameter. The silver plate resembling the shape of a palm leaf is now broken into two pieces. It is inscribed on both sides in Thai Nithet script and Tai Yuan (Lan Na Thai) language. The inscription, dated 1567 CE, contains a royal decree exempting the inhabitants of a cluster of five villages in a district south of Chiang Mai from corvée labour in recognition of their taking care for a temple-monastery (*wat*) under royal patronage.¹³

⁸ Somphong (2001, 240) reports that in the Shan state of Hsenwi the governors of subordinate *müang* had to pay obeisance to the *nang chum* when sending tribute to the court of the *chao fa*.

⁹ Liew-Herres and Grabowsky 2008, 41; Liew-Herres et al. 2012, 43.

¹⁰ Lorrillard 2015, 20, n. 29.

¹¹ See the mention of this expression in the Chiang Mai Chronicle (Wyatt and Aroonrut 1995, 200).

¹² Queen Wisutthithewi (also spelled Wisutthathewi) ruled the kingdom of Lan Na from 1564 until 1578. She was the last ruler of the Mangrai dynasty before the country was placed under Burmese suzerainty. See Sarassawadee 2005, 116.

¹³ Sarassawadee 2005, 118; see also the German translation of the inscription in Grabowsky 2004, 448.

Fig. 1: Royal seal of Queen Wisutthithewi of Chiang Mai, dated 1567 CE. Courtesy of Dr. Apiradee Techasiriwan, Archive of Lan Na Inscriptions, Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

Three royal seals from the Tai Khün principality of Chiang Tung in eastern Burma, an area which belonged to the kingdom of Lan Na until the mid-sixteenth century, have recently been published. All three seals are made of dark brown stick-lac but are no longer attached to their original object, which might have been a plate made of silver or another type of metal or a palm leaf. The two seals, each measuring 6–7 cm in diameter have the exalted Khmer-Pali title of the Chiang Tung ruler – *Somdet Kemādhīpatirājā* (สมเด็จพระมาธิปติราชา) – inscribed in Tamarind Pod (*Fak Kham*) script on the back. Both seals bear the images of two peacocks facing each other. As the peacock became a state symbol emblazoning the ruler's seal only after the Burmese conquest (1558),¹⁴ the seals probably date from the second half of the fifteenth or first half of the sixteenth century. The third seal, measuring 4 cm in diameter, bears on the front side of the image a war elephant adorned with a *howdah* on its back, while the reverse side has been inscribed with the words *Phraya Khaek Müang Khemmarat* (พระยาแขกเมืองเขมรรฐ), the title of the liaison officer, a high-ranking minister in charge of foreign affairs.¹⁵

¹⁴ Originally the special animal of Chiang Tung was the lion while the neighbouring polity of Moeng Laem chose a golden swan. See Lamun 2007, 36.

¹⁵ The three seals are reproduced in black and white images and documented in detail in Panpen Kruathai and Silao Ketphrom 2013, 289–309.

Fig. 2: Royal seal from Chiang Tung, Burma, c. sixteenth century, front and back sides (Panpen and Silao 2013, 289).

An elephant also features as the iconic symbol on the front sides of two seals, each of which are attached to mid-nineteenth-century royal edicts written in Lao Buhan (Old Lao) script on palm-leaf.¹⁶ The back sides of the seals have texts inscribed in Lao Buhan script as well. The inscription of the first seal reads *Brah Rāja-ājñā* (พระราชอาญา), meaning ‘Royal decree’.¹⁷ The second seal bears the inscription *Phaya Luang Chum Phu Nòi Soek Khua* (พญาหลวงจุ่มพูน้อยเสกขวา), ‘The great seal-carrying official of the Phu Nòi, right-side combat’. This title most probably signifies a high-ranking Lao military officer in charge of dealing with the Phu Nòi, a Tibeto-Burman minority living in the remote province of Phong Saly near the Lao-China border. French social anthropologist Vanina Bouté discovered these two sealed manuscripts, along with several others, all made of dark brown stick-lac, during her field research on the ethnogenesis and integration of this group, which has adopted various features of neighbouring Tai societies, including Buddhism (see Bouté 2018).

¹⁶ Of the manuscripts to which the seals were originally attached only fragments are left which do not contain any dates. However, there are fragments from other manuscripts kept by her owner in the same small box which have dated from the year CS 1206 (1845/46 CE). I am grateful to Vanina Bouté for sharing with me the information contained in these fragments.

¹⁷ *Brah* (Lao: *Pha*) is an honorific prefix, *rāja* (Lao: *lasa*) means ‘king’, and *ājñā* (Lao: *atnya*; Pali: *āñā*) means ‘command, order, or authority’.

Fig. 3: Seal attached to a palm-leaf, from a Phu Nòi (Phunoy) village in Phong Saly province, Laos; courtesy of Dr. Vanina Bouté from the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CNRS-EHESS).

2 The sealed manuscripts from Vat Saen Sukharam

Let us now return to the two sealed manuscript discovered at Vat Saen Sukharam. The manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0797 comprises only one single folio written in Lao Buhan script on both sides (recto: 4 lines, verso: 3 lines). The leaf is 57.4 cm long and 5.2 cm wide. Attached to the left-hand margin of the recto side is a seal stating: *Pha Akkha Mahesiya* (พระอัครมเหสียา, literally, 'Her Majesty the Principal Queen'). The round-shaped seal has a diameter of 5.5 cm and the seal wax spills out to the verso side of the leaf. Furthermore, on the right-hand margin of the recto side is a small piece of white paper (measuring 3 × 4.4 cm) on which the following text is written with blue ink in modern Lao script: '1976 (pink ink), [the manuscript is dated] CS 1226, BE 2407, 1864 CE (112 years ago)' (1976 ເມື່ອ ຈ.ສ. 1226 ພ.ສ. 2407 ຄ.ສ. 1864 [ໄດ້ 112 ປີ]). This means that the manuscript which contains the text of a royal decree was issued by the Queen of Luang Prabang in 1864 and rediscovered in 1976, probably by Pha Khamchan Virachitto (1920–2007), the then abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam. The palm-leaf folio has ten holes of different sizes which slightly affect the legibility of a few passages.

The palm-leaf manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798 comprises five folios written in Lao Buhan script on both sides (6 lines for each side), except for the last folio where only the recto side is written on (5 lines) and the verso side is left blank. The five leaves are of the same size and measure 56.8 cm in length and 5.3 cm in width. Attached to the left-hand margin of the recto side of the first palm-leaf folio is the front side of a seal stating: *Brah Rāja-ājñā* (พระราชอาญา), meaning ‘royal decree’ or ‘royal order’. The octagonal seal measures 5.8 cm in diameter and encompasses all five folios. The reverse of the seal attached to the verso side of the fifth and last folio does not bear any symbol. On the right-hand margin of the recto side is a small white piece of paper (measuring 3.8 × 4.3 cm) on which the following text is written in blue ink: ‘1976 (pink ink), [the manuscript is dated] CS 1219, BE 2400, 1857 CE (119 years ago)’ (1976 ເມື່ອ ຈ.ສ. 1219 ພ.ສ. 2400 ຄ.ສ. 1857 [ໄດ້ 119 ປີ]). This means that the manuscript which contains the text of a royal decree was issued in 1857 by the King of Luang Prabang (i.e. Chantharat, r. 1852–1871) and, like the first manuscript, was rediscovered in 1976, probably by Pha Khamchan Virachitto himself. The fourth palm-leaf folio has one 1.5 cm long crack/hole which runs over the fourth line but only slightly affects the legibility of some words. Though both manuscripts are written in the secular old Lao script, the final consonants of a number of words are borrowed from the subscript variants of the corresponding Dhamma (religious) script characters. The two seals do not only differ with regard to their shapes, circle (Queen) versus octagon (King), but also with reference to their colours. Though both seals are made of dark brown stick-lac, only the front side of the King’s seal is gilded, emphasizing his highest authority as ‘Lord of the Land’ (*chao phaendin*) and ‘Lord of the Great Life’ (*chao maha sivit*).

3 Contents of the royal decrees

The Queen’s decree is rather short. It stipulates the issuing of letters to a number of officials admonishing them to act according to the royal orders. Most of these officials hold the high rank of *Saen* (literally, ‘one hundred-thousand’), while others are of slightly lower ranks, such as *Thao* or *Phia*. Their responsibilities are unspecified with the exception of Thao Khamphan who is identified as *lam* (ລ່າມ), a term which in modern Thai and Lao refers to a translator or interpreter, but in the traditional Tai polities signified the liaison officer in charge of taking care of visitors having an audience with the king.

The King’s decree begins with his long, exalted title as Lord of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol, which runs over more than one

line. The first part of the decree, running over the first two palm-leaf folios, deals with a legal conflict between a high-ranking official, Saen Phòng Si Mùn, and many of the commoners (*bao phai*) who had originally been under his supervision. The commoners, liable to corvée labour, accused their patron (*mun nai*) of bad treatment, such as arbitrary punishment and unlawful seizure of property. Dating back to the reign of the previous king, Sukkhasoem (r. 1839–1850), the dispute was solved in 1857 by the incumbent ruler, King Chantharat (r. 1851/1852–1871) who decided to allow the four household clusters comprising 90 households (*lang hüan*) each to opt for alternative patrons. At the end, 78 households decided to stay with their old patron while the remaining 282 households opted for other patrons that they trusted more. Given the scarcity of manpower in pre-colonial Laos and most other parts of Southeast Asia, mistreatment of the common people by the aristocratic class had its limits. In general, commoners had considerable leverage for negotiation when being confronted with excessive demands from their patron; the choosing of new patrons as expounded in this royal decree from Luang Prabang also appears in nineteenth-century Siam whose ruler was the overlord of the King of Luang Prabang.¹⁸

The second part of manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798 continues to discuss the mutual dependence and respect for aristocratic officials (*thao khun*) and commoners (*bao phai*) and the need to treat the latter decently. This request is most strikingly expressed in the following appeal to the country's ruling class:

ถ้าและผู้ที่ยังมานะดั่งช้างแวง อยู่โดยเอาราชการสมคว่ำให้ค่า สมพอดีให้ดี สมพอผูกให้ผูกมาใส่
ราชการ คั้นมาถึงหน้า เวียกแล้วให้แก่ใส่ราชการ อย่าเอาเบียดเอาเงิน อย่ารักเงินแสนได้ให้รักไฟ
แสนเมือง หล่มให้พ้อมกันพาย หงายให้พ้อมกันขี้ ให้เก็บผักใส่ซ้า เก็บข้าใส่เมือง เมืองแสนใด
จักเป็นราชการ สลอมพระเจ้จพระคุณกำหนดพระราชมหาราพระองค์

If someone is still disobedient and stubborn when performing public work, then reprimand him when he deserves to be reprimanded, beat him when he deserves to be beaten, and tie him when he deserves to be tied [and] lead him to do his work for the crown. When he has been tied you must untie him after having reached the workplace so that he can do his work. Do not take his money. Instead of loving enthusiastically the people's money (*ngoen thai*), you shall love enthusiastically the people (*phrai müang*) [themselves]. If you have capsized you should be ready to row, if you are lying on your back you should be

¹⁸ In fact, the kingdom of Luang Prabang comprising roughly the northern third of present-day Laos, was a vassal state of Siam since 1779. Whereas the Lao kingdoms of Vientiane and Champasak in the centre and the south of Laos lost their status as a tributary state, Luang Prabang retained its status until 1893 when the French seized control over all Siamese territories on the left bank of the Mekong River.

ready to ride (meaning: you have to stick together in good and bad times.) Gather vegetables and put them into the baskets, gather subjects and put them into the müang. As for any public work that will support the glory of His Majesty the King [...] (fol. 3^v, ll. 5–6)

The underlined phrase (in Thai/Lao: *Kep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang*) is widely regarded as a Northern Thai saying that characterizes the forced resettlement of war captives from regions in the present-day Shan State and Sipsong Panna to present-day Northern Thailand during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁹ The saying was popularized by the late Kraisri Nimmanheminda who rendered it into English as ‘Put vegetables into baskets, put people into towns’.²⁰ Turton suggests that the most literal translation is ‘Gather vegetables (and/to) put [them] into basket(s), gather *kha*²¹ (and/to) put [them] into the *müang*’ (see Turton 2000, 16).

As Kraisri did not provide any written evidence for the saying, suspicions arose that the saying might even have been composed by Kraisri himself. However, the sealed manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798 found at Vat Saen Sukharam clearly confirms the authenticity of the saying which is also documented in another Lao royal decree from the same period. That decree is written on a white cotton cloth measuring 96 cm in width and 163 cm in length.²² It is an official letter sent from the ruler of Luang Prabang (เจ้าครหลวงพระบาง), a vassal of the Siamese King, to Phrachaiyawongsa, the *uparat* or deputy governor of Müang Lan Mat, dated ‘seventh month of the *ka pao* year [*Cula*]sakkarat 1215’

¹⁹ See Grabowsky 1999 and 2004.

²⁰ Kraisri 1965. See also Grabowsky 2001.

²¹ *Kha* (ข้า) is a generic term used by the lowland Lao to designate the autochthonous, predominantly Mon-Khmer speaking tribes of the highlands. Today they make up almost one-fourth of the population in Lao PDR. In pre-colonial times the *kha* probably constituted a majority of the population, notably in the Luang Prabang region (note that the first Lao census under Sam Saen Thai in the early fifteenth century counted 400,000 Kha but only 300,000 Tai-Lao!). Many *kha* moved to the lowlands, where they increased the agricultural workforce of the Lao rulers and – over several generations – eventually became ‘Lao’.

²² This textile manuscript has been kept in the Thai National Library, along with several dozen other manuscripts from Hua Phan province in northeastern Laos called *bai chum* (sealed letters), which are published in two volumes. The first volume compiles those 21 *bai chum* written on textiles (Phimphan 2001), while the second volume publishes another 47 *bai chum* written on thin mulberry paper (*kradat phlao*) or industrial ‘Western’ paper (*kradat farang*), along with an analysis of the whole collection of 68 manuscripts (Phimphan 2013). The *bai chum* manuscript on textile is published as document no. 9 in volume 1 (Phimphan 2000, 121–124).

(June/July 1853).²³ The *bai chum* textile manuscript written in black ink runs over 47 lines and is authorized by a large red stamped royal seal with a flower pattern measuring 23.2 cm in width and 22.5 cm in length.

Fig. 4: Royal seal of the ruler of Luang Prabang, dated 1853, in Bai Chum document No. 9 (Phimphan 2000, 17).

The decree deals with several aspects of local administration in Müang Lan Mat, a dependent *müang* of Luang Prabang situated in present-day Hua Phan province close to the Lao-Vietnamese border. One main aspect of this document concerns the control of manpower. The Lao king admonishes the local administration not to exploit the population by raising excessive taxes. On the contrary, the work force is required to be treated decently. Moreover, the local authorities are given advice to encourage people who had fled to outlying regions to return to areas under government control. In this very context the saying *khep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang* appears as part of a long phrase which is

²³ ใบจุ่มเข้านครหลวงพระบาง พระราชทานพระไชยวงษาอุปราชเมืองลานมาศ แต่เมื่อศักราช ๑๒๐๕ ตัว, in Phimphan 2000, 117–124.

almost identical with the one quoted above from the palm-leaf manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798 that was produced only four years later. It says:

ถ้าแต่ผู้ใดยังมานะสรวาขัดแย้งกระด้างกระเดื่องอยู่บ่อยโคด เอาใจใส่ราชการเราพระองค์ตั้งนั้น
สมพอคำให้ คำสมพอดีให้ผู้สมพอผู้ให้ผู้มาใส่ราชการ ถ้าและผู้มาถึงหน้าเวียงแล้วให้แก้
ปล่อยใส่เวียงใส่การ อย่าเอาเบี้ยอย่าเอาเงิน อย่ารักเงินแสนไทยให้รักไพร่แสนเมือง หล่มให้พร้อมกัน
พายหางยให้พร้อมกัน ขวี่ ให้พร้อมกันเก็บผักใส่ซ้าเก็บข้าใส่เมือง เชื่องฉันใดจักเป็นบ้านเป็นเมือง
เป็นรีตเป็นคลอง เป็นราชการ คำหนูนพระราชสมภารพระองค์เรา

If anyone resists the *corvée*, then reprimand him, when he deserves to be reprimanded, beat him when he deserves to be beaten, and tie him when he deserves to be tied [and] lead him to do his work for the crown. When he has been tied you must untie him after having reached the workplace so that he can do his work. Do not take his money. Instead of loving enthusiastically the people's money (*ngoen thai*), you shall love enthusiastically the people (*phrai müang*) [themselves]. You have to stick together in bad times, you have to stick together in good times. Gather vegetables [and put them] into baskets and gather people [and put them] into the müang. Thereby the *ban-müang* (country, political domain) and the *hit-không* (written: *rit-khlông*: customary laws, administrative rules) will be built up. This is an activity for the crown (*ratchakan*) supporting His Majesty the King always more extensively.²⁴

Is it possible that the quotation was a kind of standard phrase used whenever admonishing provincial governors to treat the King's subjects with benevolence so that 'the Teachings of the Buddha will prosper ever more in the future, and the people of the country will live in peace and happiness'?²⁵

4 Conclusion

The role and function of seals in Lao and Thai manuscript cultures is still under-researched. While there are quite a number of extant paper manuscripts and manuscripts written on textiles which bear seals as symbols of royal or state authority, sealed palm-leaf manuscripts containing royal orders or decrees are quite rare. The two well-preserved sealed manuscripts recently discovered in the monastery of Vat Saen Sukharam in the old royal capital Luang Prabang in northern Laos bear royal decrees dealing with administrative issues in the provinces (mostly related to the outer province of Hua Phan near the border to

²⁴ Lines 35–37 of the manuscript, see Phimphan 2000, 123. The translations offered above is slightly improved from the one provided in Grabowsky 2001, 69.

²⁵ Line 38 of *bai chum* no. 9. See Phimphan 2000, p. 119 and 124.

Vietnam), in particular with the organization and treatment of manpower. Though only a few other sealed palm-leaf manuscripts of that kind have survived so far, it seems that they were part of a more widespread cultural practice. This article includes two of these unique manuscripts, translated for the first time into English, in the hope of encouraging further in-depth investigation (see the Appendix below).

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Appendix

Translation of manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0797

Fig. 5: Manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0797, recto side.

Recto side:

/1/ In Cunlasakkalat [cs] 1226, on the fifth day [of the week], on the twelfth day of the waning moon of the eleventh lunar month, in a *kap chai* year,²⁶ Her Majesty the Queen issued the decree that the royal page (*mahat lek*) Sathu Komsi Phaisai to the right-hand side, the royal pages to the left-hand side, including /2/ Phu Nyai Si Sonsai, the official sitting on the feet of the throne, Phu Nyai Kosa Hatsakot, and Thao Khamphan, [the official] in charge of the royal treasury, issue letters for the Phu Nòi Nguang Kang, commoners of both sides, namely Saen Phòng Luang Sulinyawongsa one letter, Saen Phuak one letter, /3/ Saen Sutthamma one letter, Saen Khattiya one letter, Saen Siwongsa one letter, Saen Phòng Si Ban one letter, Phia Su one letter. Of these seven officials (*chu*), Thao Khamphan is the liaison officer (*lam*).²⁷ If the decree of Her Majesty the Queen requests someone to go, he has to act according to the orders of his own *lam* /4/ in every respect. Do not disobey, do not persuade other people to work for you. This is unfair and will be punished. Saen Phòng Luang Mai, Thao Chanthani, Saen Luang Kuan, Saen Wong, and Saen Si – these five officials (*chu*) are [under one] liaison officer. If the decree of Her Majesty the Queen ... [End of page]

²⁶ 1226 Karttika 27 = Friday, 25 November 1864.

²⁷ Though *lam* is used in modern Thai and Lao for ‘translator’, its primary meaning ‘to tie (with a rope)’ is still known in modern Thai but is the general meaning in Tai Lü and some other Tai dialects. According to the late Cia Yaencông, the institution of *pô lam* or *nai lam* was originally created to exercise tighter political control over the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous highlands of Tai polities in southwestern Yunnan but later expanded to the Tai lowlands. See Liew-Herres et al. 2012, 23–24.

Verso side:

/1/ requires someone to go, he has to follow suit in every aspect. Do not disobey, do not persuade other people to work for you. This is unfair and will be punished. According to this stipulation, Saen Phông Luang Sulinyawongsa, Saen Phuak, Saen Sutthamma, Saen Khatthiya, Saen Siwongsa, /2/ [Saen] Phông Si Ban, and Phia Su paid an audience to Her Majesty the Queen according to the customs. [...] If the liaison officer (*lam*) places any gifts /3/ beneath [the throne], let anyone of his own servants (*luk lam*) receive them. Do not rely on other officials, this is unfair. The decree goes so far. Anyone [who disobeys] will be punished.

Translation of manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798

Fig. 6: Manuscript EAP691_VSS_1_0798, fol. 1ʳ.

Folio 1, recto side:

/1/ The royal power of His Majesty, Lord of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol (*phrachao lan sang hom khao*), Parama Setṭha Khattiya Suriya Phra Rāja Vamṣā Pha Mahā Jeyya Cakravarti Bhūminnarindipatti Paramanāṭṭha Paramapabitra Phra Mahā Dhammamikarājādhirāja Chao /2/ Pha Nakhòn Müang Luang Phabang Rājadhānī has accomplished a sealed royal decree as this.²⁸ This royal decree directed at Hua Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa Uttamathani Sitthi Saiyamungkhun, Saen Phuak Chanthawongsa, Saen /3/ Sutthamarasa Bun Hüang, Saen Siwongsa, Saen Luang Chum, Saen Kham Mungkhun, Thao Phu Luang, Saen Sitthi, Saen Khatthiya stipulating that Saen Phuam and Thao Khun Sam Si Fa, who come down to rely on Khun Kwan, the *nai lam*, for paying obeisance to His Majesty the King, /4/ Lord of the Great Life

²⁸ Pronounced in Lao: Somdet Pha Pen Chao Lan Sang Hom Khao Bòromma Settha Khattiya Suriya Pha Rasawongsa Pha Maha Sainya Chakkraphatti Phumintha Narinthathipatti Bòrommanattha Bòrommabòphittha Pha Maha Thammikarasathirasa Chao /2/ Pha Nakhòn Müang Luang Phabang Rasathani Si Ongkha.

who has already passed away.²⁹ Saen Phòng Si Mün has been oppressing and mistreating all of the citizens, as I have learned. Therefore, I order the chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) to appoint an appropriate official (*thao khun*) to take /5/ Saen Phòng Si Mün to be interrogated and to explain himself. Then Saen Phòng Si Mün put himself under the shelter of Khun Kwan, his *nai lam*, who paid obeisance to His Majesty saying: '[There are] Fa Khao Saen Phòng Kao, Fa Khao Saen Phuak, Fa Khao Saen Nam Pak Theng, and Fa Khao /6/ Thao Nòt who are all under my supervision. [...] Your Majesty has been informed about this. I ask you to have mercy with Saen Phòng Si Mün and thus consider that the chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) ... [End of page]

Folio 1, verso side:

/1/ may take Saen Phuak and all three or four *fa khao* officials inside the royal court (*hò sanam*) to force them to lead a life as commoners (*bao phai*) of Saen Phòng Si Mün'. Then Saen Phuak and the three or four *fa khao* officials informed /2/ the chief minister that since Chao Maha Siwit Luang Fak Nai (i.e., His Majesty the King) had been pleased to give the order to appoint Saen Phòng Si Mün to [the rank of] *phòng*, he forced all of us to pay a fine and took gold and silver from us. We all could no longer endure this. /3/ We all thus jointly approached Khun Kwan, their *nai lam*, and made a complaint to inform His Majesty the King about our sufferings. The King was kind enough to instruct his chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) to let all of us as his subjects, as well as Saen Phòng Si Mün, to enter for an investigation and interrogation. /4/ Our allegations were heard. Saen Phòng Si Mün argued that he did not suppress us, thus it would be unfair to punish him because Chao Hak Na had issued a letter and we had acted accordingly. Thereafter, the chief minister presented /5/ the allegations made by both sides to His Majesty the King who made the judgment that the chief minister should take the money from Saen Phòng Si Mün and hand it over to His Majesty the King. /6/ The King felt mercy for both of us and for Saen Phòng Si Mün, with both sides, and he issued two letters of appointment [stipulating] that we all would no longer be dependent on [Saen Phòng Si Mün].

29 This might refer to King Sukhasoem (r. 1838–1850).

Folio 2, recto side:

/1/ Saen Phuak and Thao Khun Sam Si Fa Khao enjoyed happiness until the *huang khai* year.³⁰ His Majesty the King had already passed away, and we all were suppressed again. Thereafter, in the *tao chai* year³¹ the investigation had not yet been cleared up. Saen Phuak and Thao Khun Thang Sam Si Fa Khao had not yet been ready to join /2/ Saen Phòng Si Mùn. Later, they were confined until the *hap mao* year.³² I, the King,³³ having a lot of mercy for Saen Phòng Si Mùn, decided to order the chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) to take Saen Phuak and Thao Khun /3/ Nai Sam Si Fa Khao into prison and punish them so that they could see the essence of their wrongdoing. We do not know whether or not they realized their deeds. Thereafter, they filed a petition to His Majesty the King asking for /4/ the chief minister to put us all, as commoners (*baò phai*), under the supervision of Saen Phòng Si Mùn. We all, though respecting the royal power to the utmost, claimed that Saen Phòng Si Mùn used to molest and suppress us all. /5/ We all put ourselves under the protection of His Majesty the King. We begged not to be placed under the supervision of Saen Phòng Si Mùn as *mun nai* (chief). /6/ We all asked for the royal support and protection of His Majesty the King in the future. Once there were 90 households of ours under Saen Phòng Kao, 90 households of ours under Saen Phuak, 90 households of ours under Saen Nam Pak Theng, ... [End of page]

Folio 2, verso side:

/1/ and 90 households of ours under Thao Nôt. Of the 90 households of ours under Saen Phòng Kao, six households consented to be under Saen Phòng Si Mùn and 84 households opted to stay with us, with Saen Siwisai as their lord. /2/ Of the 90 households of ours under Saen Phuak, 15 households consented to being under Saen Phòng Si Mùn [whereas] 75 households opted for staying with us under Saen Phuak as their chief. Of the 90 households of ours under Saen Nam Pak Theng, /3/ 31 households sought refuge under the protection of Saen Phòng Si Mùn, [while] 59 households opted for staying with us under Saen Wang as their chief. Of the 90 households of ours under Thao Nôt, 26 house-

³⁰ This was the year CS 1213 or 1851/52 CE.

³¹ This was the year CS 1214 or 1852/53 CE.

³² This was the year CS 1217 or 1855/56 CE.

³³ This was King Chantharat (r. 1852–1871).

holds sought refuge under the protection of Saen Phòng Si Mün /4/, while the remaining 64 households, including the 4 *fa khao*, opted to stay with us under the protection of Saen Bangkhom. Thus, a total of 78 households opted to stay under Saen Phòng Si Mün while the remaining 282 households, including the 4 *fa khao*, stayed with us. /5/ In the twelfth lunar month of each year³⁴ we all asked to receive the assignment to keep the grass for the King's sturdy elephants exclusively, as has been the case in the past. Khun Kwan, [our] *nai lam*, led us /6/ to have an audience with the King; this has to be done every year without exception. As for the [other] 78 households who are under the command of Saen Phòng Si Mün, they ought to perform works for his Majesty the King according to his pleasure.

Folio 3, recto side:

/1/ I, the King, have issued the order that the chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) had placed them under the command of Saen Phòng Si Mün as his commoners (*bao phai*) but they did not consent. They thus made a complaint /2/ to me in this way. I realized that their complaint was honest and justified. Therefore, I ordered the chief minister (*akkha maha senathibòdi*) to appoint Saen Phuak to the position of Saen Phòng Luang Suriyawongsa Uttamathani, /3/ to appoint Saen Siwisai to the position of Saen Phuak Chanthawongsa, to appoint Saen Bangkhom to the position of Saen Sutthamma Rasa Bun Hüng, to appoint Saen Wang to the position of Saen Siwongsa, to appoint Saen Chum to the position of Saen Luang Chum, to appoint /4/ Saen Kham Hong to the position of Saen Kham Mungkhun, to appoint Khun Chan to the position of Thao Phu Luang, to appoint Sip Wiak³⁵ to the position of Saen Sitthi, and to appoint Khanan Khattiya to the position of Saen Khattiya. They shall be ready to safeguard, look after and take care of the people of our country. /5/ Do not let them move elsewhere to the South or to the North. Even if they have been frightened and were afraid, so that they might flee to all directions to place themselves under the protection of [the ruler] of any other places, large or small, /6/ ditches and channels, mountain ridges, and dense forests wherever [people have taken shelter], Saen Phòng Luang Suriyawongsa shall appoint officials (*thao khun*) to persuade [the refugees] to return to their country to become ... [End of page]

³⁴ November–December, depending on the moon phase.

³⁵ Probably an official in charge of supervising the work (*wiak*) of a group of ten (*sip*) commoners.

Folio 3, verso side:

/1/ a human resource as before. At the end of a year taxes in cash and kind have to be paid as well as precious objects such as bracelets. [Cutting] the grass [for feeding the King's] elephants is a long-established activity. /2/ Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa and all the officials (*thao khun*) have to collect all of this. Khun Kwan, the *nai lam*, leads [them] to have an audience with the King every year as usual. Do not abandon this. /3/ Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa and all the officials (*thao khun*) shall join hands to protect the country's territory, both on land and water. These are the caves, the cliffs and rocks, the rubber trees, the bamboo canes, heartwood trees, the teeth and horns of wild animals, ivory, various kinds of deer, the forests and the highlands. /4/ The fruit of all kinds of trees, on land and water, everything which belongs to the King has to be reported and presented to the King by Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa according to the customs without interruption. /5/ Any litigation has to be examined and decided by Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa and all officials (*thao khun*). If the amount in dispute is over 200 [units] and a decision cannot be agreed upon, they have to come down and let /6/ the chief of the *tasaeng* consider the case. If the amount in dispute is over 400 [units] and a decision cannot be agreed upon, they have to come down and let the chief minister (*akkha maha senabòdi*) consider the case according to the laws of the country. With regard to the laws and customs, ... [End of page]

Folio 4, recto side:

/1/ if Saen Luang Suriyawongsa has a matter, I, the King, have the mercy to let him act according to that matter, without any exception. If the laws and customs do not have [any stipulation], do not add anything, this is not permitted. As for the construction [carried out] by Saen Luang Suriyawongsa, /2/ which means the construction of houses and the making of dry and wet rice fields, he has to inform all the commoners (*bao phai*) to carry out these construction works according to the rules and traditions of the country. If they do not keep pace with these works, do not mistreat them. Do not fine and punish them. Do not exploit them. This is not permitted. /3/ As for royal works, whether they occur during daytime or nighttime, all officials (*thao khun*) have to think about such works together with Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa. They need to listen to Saen Phông Suriyawongsa's arguments. Nobody has to object. /4/ The commoners (*bao phai*) shall listen to the arguments put forward by the officials

(*thao khun*) in a similar way according to the respective positions held by commoners and officials. If someone is still disobedient and stubborn /5/ when performing public work, then reprimand him when he deserves to be reprimanded, beat him when he deserves to be beaten, and tie him when he deserves to be tied [and] lead him to do his work for the crown. When he has been tied you must untie him after having reached the workplace so that he can do his work. Do not take his money.³⁶ Instead of loving enthusiastically the people's money (*ngoen thai*), you shall love enthusiastically the people (*phrai müang*) [themselves].³⁷ /6/ If you have capsized you should be ready to row, if you are lying on your back you should be ready to ride. Gather vegetables and put them into the baskets, gather people and put them into the country (*müang*). As for any public work that will support the glory of His Majesty the King, ... [End of page]

Folio 4, verso side:

/1/ [...] please jointly consider it and make the works lawful, do not deviate. Everyone, be it the craftsmen, the servants, the wanderers, the servants of the officials, the merchants, have to pay a fine and be punished by paying a fine in kind if they do any harmful acts. /2/ If they molest [someone] they will be arrested and flogged. You need to investigate and interrogate. If a stipulation is not recorded in the law you need to tell of this and jointly stop it. Do not be indifferent or ignore this. /3/ You must absolutely not support [such attitude]. If they still suppress and molest [people] you have to be ready to tie them around

³⁶ The phrase *ya ao bia ya ao ngoen* could be understood as a request not to accept bribes from people who would like to be exempted from corvée labor.

³⁷ The phrase *ya rak ngoen saen thai hai rak phrai saen müang* is a rather complex parallel structure composed of a combination of several parallel pairs: *saen* + *rak* (to love exceedingly); *phrai* + *thai* (commoners, population at large). As an excellent analysis of the frequent use of parallelisms in traditional Lao literature, see Koret 1995. Ignoring the parallelism of the sentence discussed above, several alternative translations might be theoretically possible. *Saen*, literally 'hundred thousand' can also denote a high rank in government service. However, the rank of *saen thai* is unknown both in Lan Na and Lan Sang. Another alternative focuses on the suggestion that the word *thai*, written ທຳ in the original form and interpreted by Phimphan (2000, 123) as ທຳ, should be read, adding the tone marker *mai ek* which is often missing in old manuscripts. Then *thai* would mean 'cloth' or 'fiber bag', and the whole phrase could be rendered as follows: 'Instead of loving the money [filled in] numerous bags, love the people (*phrai*, commoners) of numerous *müang*'. This translation, however, has to be regarded as rather unlikely.

their arms and bring them to the chief of the district (*tasaeng*) who shall hand them over to the royal court where they will be punished. /4/ If there is a section recorded in the law clearly, it must be acted according to the royal power, even if /5/ all kinds of people have the desire to be subjects of His Majesty the King and place themselves under his protection. Thus, we need to be ready to persuade them with good intentions. Another clause (of the law) says that if enemies, evil persons and thieves /6/ sneak into the territory (of our country) to commit harmful acts against its people all day and night, Saen Phông Luang Suriyawongsa must mobilize the officials and commoners to fight against them until achieving victory.

Folio 5, recto side:

/1/ If someone is still rebellious and recalcitrant, he has to be punished in accordance with martial law. According to all agreements of the royal officials, the officials in charge of the elephant unit and the cavalry, /2/ volunteers, craftsmen, servants, wanderers, the servants of noblemen, merchants moving back and forth, everyone is forbidden to molest and suppress people, squeeze money, /3/ garments, cows, buffaloes, pigs, dogs, ducks, chicken, granaries, fields, but also not let their wives and daughters argue that they are [only] commoners cutting the grass for feeding the royal elephants. The royal decree stipulates just this. /4/ Whoever disobeys will be severely punished. Everyone has to follow the royal decree and refrain from doing anything beyond this royal decree. [This decree was written] on the auspicious year [cs] 1219, a *moeng sai* year, /5/ on the twelfth waxing day of the ninth lunar month, the first day of the week,³⁸ at the time of the morning drum, at the auspicious moment of 20.

38 1219 Sravana 12 = Sunday, 2 August 1857.