Development of the Library Idea

The library organisation, initially called the Wachirayan Library (hor samut wachirayan), was established by the Thai court in fits and starts in the early 1880s. Part of the reason for the library’s shaky beginnings can be put down to the fact that the concept of a library - meaning a repository of books - was a new one to the Thai kingdom. Although there already existed royal collections of manuscripts held at the palace or royal temples, collections of books held in the temples throughout the kingdom called hor trai, as well as private collections, these did not have quite the same function. They were selective in the works they chose to house - mostly Buddhist in content. The idea of the library in late nineteenth-century Siam was to be more encompassing, aiming to house the full variety of written works found within the Thai kingdom. If the object of knowledge of the hor trai was the dhamma, the object of the knowledge contained in the library was the peoples of the Thai kingdom.

Underlying the foundation of the library was a new conception of the nature of knowledge. The library’s principal function was professed to be the ‘improvement’ or ‘increase’ of knowledge, a catch-phrase associated with many of the reforms of the Fifth Reign. This is a significant shift from the former dominant ideal of learning in the Thai kingdom - the understanding of the dhamma through the Buddha’s teaching. One meaning of dhamma can roughly be translated into English as ‘the truth of things’ (sometimes rendered in modern Thai as sacha tham) or ‘the nature of things’. In Buddhist thinking this truth was opposed to the concept of maya or illusion. The Buddha, by virtue of his enlightenment, had achieved total understanding of this truth, and taught this knowledge as the dhamma, which was later preserved in the canonical

---

6 In honour of King Rama IV, whose monastic name (prior to becoming king) had been Vajiraṇāṇa (phonetically in Thai, ‘Wachirayan’); ibid., p. 16.

7 For the difficulties in the library’s establishment and the slow progress in its early years, see ‘Prawat hor phra samut wachirayan’, Wachirayan, 1, October 1894, and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Tamna phra samut hor phra monthian tham hor phuthasatsanasangkhaha le hor samut samrap phra nakhorn (History of the Book Hall, the Palace Dhamma Library, the Buddhist Collection and the City Library), Cremation Volume, Phra Intahenya (Sarakham Wattha), Bangkok, 1969, pp. 31-2.

8 ‘Prawat hor phra samut wachirayan’ (History of the Wachirayan Library), Wachirayan, October 1894, p. 5.

9 Ibid., pp. 24-5, pp. 127-9, pp. 133-4. There are a number of phrases in Thai in use at the time which convey this general sense: ‘charoen wichakan thang puang’, ‘chak chung panya khwan ru’, ‘charoen wicha’, ‘charoen khwam ru’. In the preface to a new textbook for teaching Thai, Munlabot banphakit, King Chulalongkorn wrote that the purpose of the book was to instruct youths in the Thai language, ‘for the increase of their knowledge, that they might become proficient in the use of the alphabet and the tone markers, correctly, expertly, clearly, and widely, and for the future benefit of the government’; quote from D.K.Wyatt, The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969, p. 68 (Wyatt’s translation).
scriptures. Studying the dhamma as revealed by the Buddha in the scriptures, then, could be said to be a finite exercise.\(^{10}\) Theoretically, at least, it was possible to attain a complete understanding of this truth.\(^{11}\) Knowledge in this sense, therefore, could be said to be a finite entity. This idea is reflected above all in the maintenance of an unchangeable canon of Buddhist scripture, the Tripitaka, in which the dhamma in its entirety was contained. Even though commentary played a most important role in Buddhist learning, it was effectively an exposition of the truths which already lay in the canon, rather than an addition to, or improvement on the canon. Chronicles record Tai kings and rulers ordering the copying of the Tripitaka and Commentaries, not the improvement of them. Indeed, the scriptural recensions (sangkhayana) called by kings like Rama I were to cleanse the supposed corrupted texts and to return the scriptures to their original pure state.

Other fields of knowledge besides Buddhist scripture, such as the tamra or ‘manuals’ on astrology, medicine, sorcery, law, and military science, for example, were founded on a similar ideal. Knowledge of each particular subject existed as a complete and fixed entity, usually having been ‘revealed’ by a teacher in the distant past. Often conceived of as having originated in completeness and perfection, such bodies of knowledge could not be improved upon, and their transmission (through the copying of manuscripts, and especially the teacher - student relationship) placed paramount emphasis on the preservation of their original form. For example, an old Thai legal code, the Dhammasasatra (Thai: thammasat) begins by stating that ‘...This Dhammasasatra ...was first enunciated in Pali by the sage Mano [Manu] and has been handed down by ancient scholars...’\(^{12}\) In practice, of course, additions, omissions, and alterations to bodies of knowledge occurred regularly. Indeed, it was this flexibility, rather than rigidity, which was one of the defining qualities of the tamra genre. Changes to the

---

10 Note, however, that in the Thai Buddhist tradition studying the scriptures was by no means the only path to understanding the dhamma. Meditation was a highly developed practice which shared the same aim. There is a long history of division within the Thai Sangha - and those of other Theravada countries - between text-based Buddhist learning (khambathura), and the practice of 'insight mediation' or (vipassana thera).

11 Nidhi writes of this old conception of knowledge and learning that 'knowledge of the highest truth (khwan ching paramat) was the end of all learning', Nidhi Aeusrivongse, ‘Lok khong nang nopamat’ (Lady Nopamat’s World) in Pak kai lae bai rua: ruam khwan riang wa duai wannaham lae prawatisat ton ratanakosin (Quill and Silt: Essays on Early Bangkok Literature and History), Bangkok, Amarin, 1984, p. 366.

original form could be explained as attempts to restore that knowledge to its original, perfect form as laid out by the first teacher.\textsuperscript{13}

In theory, at least, knowledge had been conceived of as fixed and unchanging, certainly not increasing. Indeed, the mere preservation of knowledge was seen as a battle in itself. The Buddhist idea of \textit{antarathan}, of the gradual and inevitable disappearance of the \textit{dhamma}, still had a powerful hold on Thai conceptions of the nature of knowledge, as Chulalongkorn himself readily acknowledged.\textsuperscript{14}

By the late nineteenth century, however, partly as a result of the court’s increased contact with and awareness of new and ‘foreign’ knowledges both outside as well as within the kingdom,\textsuperscript{15} knowledge had begun to be perceived as something which could be ‘accumulated’, ‘increased’. The sense in which knowledge from \textit{within} the Thai kingdom could also be accumulated was directly related to the fact that the political integration of the Thai state in the last decades of the nineteenth century was bringing the court into contact with different kinds of knowledge as never before - sorcery, local history and legend, divergent forms of regional and local Buddhist practice - contained in palm leaf and other kinds of manuscript. Furthermore, unlike the Buddhist canon, books - both manuscripts and printed works - existed in ever-increasing numbers. Since books were regarded as the receptacles, and to a certain extent even the symbols of knowledge, this brought with it the implication that knowledge itself was also limitless. A central collection of books, the library, which was continually expanding, was an essential instrument for the process of knowledge accumulation.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{14} See \textit{Phra ratch phitthi sip sorng duan, phra ratchaniphon phra bat sondet phra chula chorm kao chao yu hua (Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months by King Chulalongkorn)}, Bangkok, Sinlapa Bannakan, 1973, p. 430-3.

\textsuperscript{15} The court’s encounter with new kinds of knowledge from outside the kingdom, eg. astronomy, geography and other Western sciences, during the Third and Fourth Reigns is well known to scholars of Thai history. For the court’s awareness of new knowledges from China and the West before this period, see Nidhi Aeusrivongse, ‘Lok khorng nang nophamat’, pp. 344-8. For the court’s concern with ‘foreign’ knowledges \textit{within} the kingdom, see below.

\textsuperscript{16} The thinking of the Thai court must certainly owe some of its inspiration to the Western idea of the library. Chartier writes of ‘The dream of the library [...] that would bring together all accumulated knowledge and all the books ever written... ’ Yet whereas Chartier argues that this ‘dream’ can be found ‘throughout the history of Western civilisation’, in the Thai kingdom it seems to be a distinctly modern idea; cf. Roger Chartier, \textit{The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries}, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994, p. 62.
Whereas the centre of Buddhist learning had been the dhamma, it could be said that the focus of the new learning was the book and writing (nangsu). This is not to say writing had no role in Buddhist learning, but that writing was more a means to a clearly defined end: the understanding of the dhamma. Religious knowledge could be obtained by oral, as well as literate means, or through meditation. Monks studied the dhamma, rather than books per se. Scholarship which was centred on books, however, was concerned with whatever knowledge each particular book might contain. King Chulalongkorn gave particular encouragement to this new learning, making it the foundation of the education reforms carried out during his reign. In an address to the first batch of graduates from the first school based on Western educational models, Suan Kulap, in 1884, Chulalongkorn remarked that, ‘the study of books (wicha nangsu) is the highest form of study’.

Books, moreover, came increasingly to be seen as the possessions of nations. Indeed, part of being a nation was to possess books, and perhaps more importantly, to be seen to possess books. A significant function of the library was to display to other nations the fact that the Thai nation, too, could be counted among those nations which possessed a collection of books. On the opening of the new Wachirayan Library of the Capital in 1905, Chulalongkorn gave the following reason for the establishment of the library: ‘Prosperous cities overseas have city libraries to house and preserve collections of all their books, because they are the scholarly possessions (withayasombat) of the nation (chonchat). [The library] is considered an important part of government. Such a library, however, does not yet exist in Siam... The establishment of this library will be of benefit and will bring honour (kiatiyot) to this country. Undoubtedly such ‘honour’ meant acceptance and perhaps even a certain measure of respect by the colonial powers.

The connection between books, the library and nationhood is reiterated in an address by King Vajiravudh at the opening of the library’s new premises in 1917:

The library...is evidence of the progress (khwam charoen rung ruang) of our beloved Thai nation (chat). A nation that has no books (nangsu) and no histories (tamnan) is considered barbarian (muan khon pa). In fact, our nation has possessed many books and histories for a long time, but

---

17 Even today, the phrase an nangsu, which is equivalent to the English ‘to study’, literally means ‘to read books’.

18 ‘Wicha nangsu...pen wicha an prasoet’, ‘Phra ratchadamrat nai phrаратathan rangwan nakrian thi rong rian phra tamnak suan kulap mua pi raka phor sor 2427’ (King’s Speech at the Awards to Suan Kulap Students in the Year of the Cock, 1884) in Prayut Sithiphan, Maharatchakwi priya maharat ramluk chor por ror, chomaihet phrаратchaniphon phrаратchahatthalekha phrаратчапрапроп phrаратadamrat phraboromratchowat (Chulalongkorn the Great. Beloved King, the Great Royal Poet: Records, Writings Correspondence, Announcements, Commands). Part 1, Bangkok, 1984, pp. 146-9.

19 Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 1.
they are scattered around, and have not been gathered together into one place. Some foreigners have said that the Thai nation has no books or histories. This has offended me and all of you for a long time now; they should not be allowed to say such things. So we have tried to establish the library as evidence to foreigners...that Siam is not an uncivilised country. It is civilised (charoen ma laew) and possesses many books and histories...20

Vajiravudh’s address makes explicit the perceived association between books, the library, and a country’s level of ‘civilisation’.21 An accomplished essayist, poet and dramatist, Vajiravudh took a special interest in things literary. Vajiravudh was the most bicultural of all Thai kings, having spent the formative years of his youth being educated in England.22 He would have been well aware of European discourses on modernity, progress, and civilization, and the significance of writing and literacy within these discourses. For Vajiravudh, the possession of books, made manifest by the institution of the library, was an attribute of being ‘civilised’.

In the eyes of the Thai elite at the time, ‘civilisation’ to a large extent simply meant having a history. In a speech to the Historical Society founded by the king in 1907, King Chulalongkorn refers to

barbarian countries (muang pa thuan) that do not know books or tradition, and so know only one or two generations of their own history...23

Books were tangible evidence of a nation’s past, hence their great value to ‘civilised’ nations. A lack of books was interpreted as an absence of a credible history, and consequently indicative of a lack of ‘civilisation’.

These statements point to an insecurity among the Thai elite in the early twentieth century in regard to the kingdom’s books, and to what extent they provided evidence of the ‘civilisation’ of the Thai nation. Part of the source of this insecurity was the international political climate of the time, in which one of the justifications of colonial rule was ‘la mission civilatrice’. If books were a symbol of civilisation, the library


21 Variously denoted in Thai documents of the period by the word (or phrase based on the word) charoen, or sometimes siwilai; and opposed to the word (or phrase based on the word) pa, meaning ‘wild’, ‘of the jungle’, ‘savage’, etc.


23 ‘Samakhom sup suan khong buran vai prathet sayam, phra ratchadamrat khong phrabat somdet phra chulachormklao chao yu hua’ (Society for Research into Siamese History, King Chulalongkorn’s Speech), Sinlapakorn, 12, 2, July 1966, p. 42.
provided a measure of support against such arguments of European imperialism. In a speech in 1907 to the Historical Society which King Chulalongkorn had founded to research into the history of the Thai nation (located, significantly, at the Wachirayan Library), the king expressed his regret at the apparent lack of books in the Thai kingdom, which he saw was a result of the many wars which had wracked the nation throughout its history, as well as the (uncomfortable) fact that the Thai seemed to have been less interested in literary pursuits than other nations.²⁴ It was partly for this reason that besides responsibility for the collection of books, King Chulalongkorn also entrusted to the library (particularly in its early days) the task of encouraging the writing of Thai books.²⁵ This task was later, in the Sixth Reign, entrusted to the Literary Society (wannakhadi samosorn), which was specially established for the purpose.²⁶ Books and the library, therefore, were important symbols of a civilised nation.

Centralisation of the Kingdom’s Books

The new ideal of learning required, above all, books of every variety, and the concentration of the kingdom’s literary heritage into one place was one of the major tasks of the newly established Wachirayan Library. In the early years of the library’s foundation during the 1880s the collection of books progressed relatively slowly. The basic problem seems to have been that the library was not yet an official state organ, but more of a ‘club’ (samakhom),²⁷ albeit one with the king’s active support. There were funding problems (the library had to rely on membership fees and sales from its ‘magazine’), and members were too busy with official government business to devote proper attention to the library’s needs, particularly as the administration of the library was not part of their official duties.²⁸ It appears at this stage as if the concept of the library and its use to the state had not yet been fully grasped. In 1889 King Chulalongkorn, who had been instrumental in the founding of the Wachirayan Library in the early 1880s, stepped in to take direct control of the management of the library. The king donated books from the royal collection, a sum of money for renovations to

²⁵ Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 27.
²⁶ ‘Phua cha ut nun wicha taeng nangsu thai...’, ibid., p. 104.
²⁷ Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 32.
²⁸ Ibid.
the library building, and arranged for great festivities to be held to celebrate the establishment of the library.29

The single most significant step in the movement to centralise the kingdom’s corpus of written knowledge came in 1905 when the king ordered the amalgamation of three major collections of books, the Wachirayan Library, the Hor monthian tham, and the Hor phuthasatsanasangkha ha, into one organisation which was named the Hor phra samut wachirayan samrap phranakhorn, or ‘the Wachirayan Library of the Capital’.30 The library became an official state organ, with state funding, under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (krasueng thammakan).31 It is from this period that the library began to assume the status of a ‘national library’.

As for those collections which had been merged with the old Wachirayan Library, the Hor monthian tham (‘The Royal Dhamma House’) had been created by Rama I in 1783, a year after coming to power, to house the Royal Edition of the Tripitaka. It later came to hold other royal editions of the Tripitaka, as well as Mon and Sinhalese editions, and other books on Buddhism.32 The Hor phuthasatsanasangkha ha (‘The Buddhism Collection’) was a much more recent collection, founded by Chulalongkorn in 1900, with the intention of gathering together in one place works on Buddhism. It included the various khorm (Khmer) script editions of the Tripitaka, the Commentaries and Sub-Commentaries, Buddhist treatises, Pali Grammars, Translations, Sermons (nangsu thetsana), Thai printed works on Buddhism, Jatakas written in various poetic metres, Lao, Mon, Sinhalese, Japanese, and Sanskrit works on Buddhism, Buddhist works printed in Roman characters, books on research in India, (like the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society), stone inscriptions (silacharuk) with Buddhist references, and anything else related to Buddhism.33 Again, the nationalising function of the library is evident, given the role that Buddhism was to play in the coming years as emblem of the Thai nation.


30 Later known in English as the ‘Wachirayan National Library of Siam’, cf. G. Coedès, (Chief Librarian), The Vajiratana National Library of Siam, Published by the Authority of the Council of the National Library, Bangkok, 1924, pp. 3-6. The library’s official name in Thai was not ‘nationalised’ until the 1930s, after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, when the ‘Wachirayan’ (King Mongkut’s monastic name), was dropped from the library’s name, which then became ‘Hor samut haeng chat’ - ‘the National Library’, the name it retains today; see Hor samut haeng chat: chak adit thung patchaban (The National Library: Past and Present), National Library, Fine Arts Department, Bangkok, 1983, p. 67.

31 Tamnan hor phra samut. pp. 1. 44.

32 Ibid., pp. 2-12.

33 Ibid., pp. 32-5.
The Hor phutthasatsanasangkhaha shared the ethos of the Wachirayan Library - with which it was amalgamated only five years after its establishment - in the sense that it was ‘universal’ in its aims. It can be seen as an attempt by the court to centralise the entire corpus of Buddhist written knowledge, the extent and heterogeneity of which was becoming increasingly apparent to the Thai court during the Fifth Reign. It was during this period that the court was confronted with a growing Western scholarship on Buddhism. This scholarship, moreover, concerned itself not only with the same Pali texts on which the Thai Buddhist tradition was based, but also with other Buddhist textual traditions which were quite alien to the Thai kingdom. Western Buddhist scholars such as Max Müller, Rhys Davids and others were in the process of identifying what they saw as divergent strains of ‘Buddhism’: the tradition based on the Pali texts and that based on the Sanskrit, the ‘southern’ school and the ‘northern’ school, Hinayana and Mahayana.34 ‘Scholarly’ members of the Thai court - and this included the king - who imbibed this scholarship became increasingly aware that the ‘Buddhism’ of the Thai kingdom was only one amongst many ‘Buddhisms’.35 The collection of these foreign works on Buddhism was one way of keeping track of this rapidly expanding corpus of Buddhist scholarship, as well as discovering the relationship of Thai Buddhism to all the other ‘Buddhisms’. For example, in his researches about the history of Buddhism in the Thai kingdom Chulalongkorn consulted old Pali Buddhist histories from former Tai kingdoms such as the Chinakalamali, the more recent Phongsawadan Chiang Mai, as well as Buddhist works from Japan in translation.36 A number of members of the Thai court, including the king, were members of the Pali Text Society; the influence of the foreign publications on Buddhism in the works of the Thai court during the period is obvious.37

But even apart from foreign Buddhist scholarship the Thai court was being faced with a myriad of different Buddhist texts and practices which it was discovering in its own kingdom - the other ‘foreign’ knowledge referred to above. This discovery was the result of policies which intensified from 1892 to centralise the kingdom’s political,


35 See the exchange of letters between Chulalongkorn and Prince Naritsaranuwatiwong in 1904 on the subject of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism; Phra ratchatathanakha phra bot somdet phra chula chorm kiao chao yu hua song phra ratchawichan thiap lathh phra phutthasatsana fai hinayan kap mahayan lae ruang sang phra bot luang (King Chulalongkorn’s Correspondence on the Subject of the Comparison of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism, and the Construction of the Royal Chapel). Cremation Volume, Nai Kawi Wianrawi, Bangkok, 1966, pp. 8-57.

36 Ibid., p. 34.

37 See my discussion of this point in Chapter 4.
religious and educational administration, which in turn resulted in the court acquiring a more intimate knowledge of the kingdom’s constituent parts. The king himself made many trips up-country (sometimes incognito) and observed at first hand the customs and religious practices of his subjects. Knowledge from the kingdom’s interior in some cases included religious texts and practices that were at great variance to those favoured by the court. In the case of the Lao territories, for example, religion was perceived to be so corrupt (suam) that, according to Prince Wachirayan in 1901, any attempt at religious reform (by the court) would be tantamount to ‘setting up a new religion’. The gathering together of the kingdom’s religious texts into one place was, together with surveys ordered by the king to examine village religious practice, and up-country visits by the king and members of the court to observe village religious life first-hand, was part of the process by which the Thai court sought to gain a better knowledge of the kingdom’s religious identity. And given the all-pervading role of religion in the rural areas this knowledge became more and more important as the court tightened its administrative control over the Thai kingdom.

The amalgamation of these Buddhist collections with the Wachirayan Library into one central library is symbolic. It can be seen as the consolidation of the ‘library’ concept: a repository of the kingdom’s books, gathered together regardless of their content. To a certain extent it also represents the subordination of the corpus of Buddhist works to the library, by the very fact of the inclusion of these Buddhist works in the library collection. It was as if Buddhist knowledge was being subordinated to - or more accurately, subsumed within - a broader corpus of knowledge about the Thai kingdom. Whereas the Hor monthian tham had been the symbolic centre of Buddhist knowledge in the old Thai kingdom, the Wachirayan Library of the Capital became the centre of a new kind of knowledge. This knowledge, derived from the kingdom’s books, was to help give substance to a newly emerging and, for many in the Thai court, still inadequately understood idea, the concept of the Thai nation.

38 See, for example Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot: Phra ratcha hattha lekha - lai phra hat (Prince Patriarch Wachirayan’s Collected Writings: Correspondence between the Prince and the King), Bangkok, Mahamakut, 2514, (1971) p. 54; the survey ordered by the king into religious practice throughout the kingdom, in Pramuan phra niphon somdet phra maha samana chao krom phraya wachirayan warorot: lai phra hat kia korn kan suk sa (Prince Patriarch Wachirayan’s Collected Writings: Writings on Education), Bangkok, Mahamakut, 2514, (1971) pp. 1-123; and Prince Wachirayan’s trip to the north of the kingdom to inspect monastic discipline, in Prince Patriarch Wachirayan, Raya thang somdet phra maha samana chao sadet traut khama song monthon fau nau phor sor 2457 (Prince Patriarch’s Inspection of the Sangha in the Northern Monthon, 1914), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1961.

39 Lai phra hat kia korn kan suk sa, p. 313; for Chulalongkorn’s perception of the corruptness of Lao religion see ‘Phra ratchadamrat kae phra song nai kan thi cha traut sorp phra traipitok, pi chuat, 2431 (1888)’ (Royal Speech to the Sangha on the Recension of the Tripitaka, Year of the Rat, 1888) in Prayut Sittiphan, op. cit., p. 154.
An important indication that the library was becoming the new, dominant centre of knowledge in the Thai kingdom was that its custodians were a different order of 'scholars' than those of the previously dominant sources of knowledge. The latter - the monkhood, scribes, astrologers, brahmans, royal pandits, and others - were being eclipsed at the elite level by a new group of men of the aristocracy and the nobility who held the highest executive positions in the government of the Fifth Reign. Indeed, the most active figures in the library organisation were those who were simultaneously carrying out the enormous transformations of the Thai kingdom in the Fifth Reign. Among them were King Chulalongkorn himself; the Crown Prince Vajiravudh, Prince Sommot Amoraphan, for many years the king's private secretary; Prince Damrong, Minister of Education and later Minister of the Interior; Prince Phanurangsi, Minister of War; Prince Devawongse, the long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs; Prince Phichit Prichakorn; Prince Naritsaranuwatiwong; Prince Naret Worarit, Minister of the Capital; Prince Narathip Praphanphong, one-time Minister of Finance; and many others. Each year the presidency of the library changed, so that by 1905, twenty-one princes had held the position. The library, therefore, was an institution operated by and in the interests of the agents of executive power in the Thai kingdom.

Collection and Preservation

Old documents (ekasan boran) will never be produced again. Their condition is deteriorating all the time, and eventually there may be none left at all. This would be an enormous loss for the nation, as the nation’s people would not know their own past. We must realise, therefore, the importance of preserving (sanguan raksa) and restoring (burana) these old documents... (National Library publication, 1986)  

This quotation from 1986, coming a century after the establishment of the Wachirayan Library, nevertheless carries with it the same sentiment as that which animated the library’s early efforts to collect and preserve the kingdom’s books. The preservation of the kingdom’s literary inheritance was seen to be of crucial significance. From the early years of the twentieth century we can trace the origins of this new concern among the leading members of the Thai court to collect and preserve the kingdom’s books through the institution of the Wachirayan Library. And it is during this period that the association between the kingdom’s literary corpus and the idea of the Thai nation gradually begins to emerge.

40 Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 18-19.

41 Ekasan boran (Ancient Documents), National Library, Krom Sinlapakorn, Bangkok, 1986, p. 3.
In accordance with the ideal of ‘increasing knowledge’ one of the basic functions of the library was the collection of books of all kinds. However, it is apparent that the library in fact devoted most of its attention to the preservation of manuscripts and other written material found within the kingdom. The frequent references to ‘preservation’ (raksa) made by court documents of the period indicate the court’s deep concern for the kingdom’s books. The preservation of knowledge had been a traditional concern of Theravada Buddhist kings, especially in relation to Buddhist knowledge. Buddhism was always seen to be in danger of decline and disappearance. The pancha antarathan, or five stage decay and eventual disappearance of the Buddhist religion prophesied by the fifth-century Sinhalese scholar Buddhaghosa, is a motif present in inscriptions and texts from Tai-Buddhist kingdoms dating at least from the fourteenth century. Maintaining or preserving the Buddhist religion, from the construction of temples, the support of the monkhood, through to the copying of the sacred scriptures, in particular the Tripitaka, was considered a basic duty of the king. In the late nineteenth century there was a similar concern at the Thai court for the preservation of knowledge, but this included the entire corpus of the kingdom’s written works, in particular palm leaf and samut khoi manuscripts, rather than just the Buddhist scriptures. And it was books about the Thai that the library seems to have been most interested in acquiring and preserving. Even the books the library ordered from overseas were mostly works about the Thai kingdom.

42 Cf. the fourteenth century inscription ‘Silacharuk nakhorn chum lak thi 3’ in Prachum silacharuk (Collected Inscriptions), Book 1, Bangkok, 1978, p. 63; there is reference to the prophecy in the Sangitayavamsa, written in the reign of Rama I, (Phra Wanarat Sangkhitiyawong: phongsawadan ruang sangkhlayana phra thammawinai (Sangitayavamsa: Chronicle of the Recension of the Scriptures), trans. Phraya Pariyathammathada (Phae Tanlaksanon), Cremation Volume, Somdet Phra Phuthachan (Wanathitiyan Mahathera), Bangkok, 1978, pp. 558ff), and in the Pathomsomphothikatha, written by Prince Patriarch Paramanuchitchinorot in the Third Reign, (Pathomsomphothikatha (Story of the First Enlightenment), by Prince Patriarch Paramanuchit Chinorot, Department of Religion, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1962, pp. 552-562). As late as 1888 King Chulalongkorn criticised the continuing belief of many people in the panchaantarathan prophecies, stating that it was patently untrue and a hindrance to the nation’s future progress, cf. Phra ratchaphithi sip sorn duan (Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months), Bangkok, 1973, pp. 430-3.

43 The king’s maintenance of the Buddhist religion is an important theme in Buddhist chronicle traditions, present in such northern chronicles as the Tamnan mulasatsana and Jinakalamalipakarana of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, through to Chaophraya Thipakorawong’s chronicles of the first four reigns of the Chakri dynasty, the Phra ratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin, composed early in the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

44 The lack of urgency in the collection of printed works stemmed from the library’s concern that the kingdom’s manuscripts were in greater danger of being lost forever, whereas printed works on the whole were in no such danger. By 1922, however, printed material was being produced in such great quantities that the king legislated that printers were required to send two copies of every printed work to the Wachirayan Library, within one week of the date of publishing; Maenmat, op. cit., p. 26.

45 Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 48, 63-7.
The library's special concern for the preservation of the Thai kingdom's books is clearly expressed by Prince Damrong in 1917, who, in his capacity as library president, wrote

...there are many old books in Thailand (muang thai) which have never been printed. These books are scattered around everywhere, and are in danger of disappearance, because of fire, rain, insects, and foreign book-buyers who take them overseas. These books are an important possession (sombat) of the nation (chat), and are found nowhere else apart from in Thailand. Since they are the property of the Thai nation (chat thai), we should hurry to search for and collect these books before any others, and look after them at the Wachirayan Library of the Capital.46

Such anxiety for the preservation of the kingdom's books stemmed from the idea that civilized nations were expected to possess books. For this reason they needed to be gathered together and 'preserved' at the library. Failure to do this would inevitably lead to the loss of this attribute of nationhood.47

The progress of the Wachiryan Library through the 1890s, particularly in relation to the activity of collection, coincided with the implementation of 'revolutionary' administrative reforms in the Thai kingdom, whereby the Thai court took direct control of provincial administration, effectively destroying the political autonomy of the provincial nobility. For much of the time that Damrong was obtaining books for the Wachirayan Library he was also head of the Interior Ministry, which was the vanguard of the administrative reform. The push to centralise administrative power was, in a sense, paralleled by the library's efforts to centralise the kingdom's books, and indeed, the Interior Ministry apparatus was instrumental in the location and appropriation of the kingdom's written records. Soon after the establishment of the new Wachirayan Library of the Capital in 1905 an announcement was made by the library that the king had ordered the library to be set up, and that the library wished to collect editions of the Tripitaka, scriptural translations (khamphi plae roi), and 'Thai books', and that book owners were invited to donate their books, or to allow their books to be copied, or to sell their books to the library. This announcement was communicated to the thesaphiban (provincial administration) officials, who were under the control of the Interior Ministry,

46 Ibid., p. 47.


184
with the order to make it widely known.48 In some cases the library would simply request temples to send their entire collection of manuscripts to the library.49

Searching for books up-country was a difficult and time-consuming operation, because it was not known where books might be kept. Books were widely scattered throughout the kingdom and one might spend considerable efforts searching for meagre rewards. The library asked its staff to help in this regard by looking for books when they were on holiday (wela wang ratchakan). The owners of books were to be told that the library was willing to pay reasonable prices for their books. Some owners, though, refused to sell or would agree to sell only at (in the library’s view) excessive prices. Eventually when it became more widely known that the library was offering to purchase books, book owners, both commoners and nobility, actually began to bring their books to the library to sell. Middlemen (nai na) began to appear, who purchased books around the country and then either brought them to the library for resale, or sold them to Western collectors, depending upon who offered the higher price.50 The means by which many of these middlemen obtained their books were in Damrong’s opinion questionable, but, he pointed out, if one were to press them on this matter it might very well have the undesirable effect of ‘scaring them off’, and discouraging them from selling their books to the library. Thus it was library policy not to inquire into the origins of books offered for sale.51

The demand for books created by the library and private collectors made the book trade at this time a very lucrative business. Damrong had rivals, both Westerners and Thai, whose interest in collecting books he described with obvious disapproval as ‘antiquarian’.52 These rival collectors would pay high prices for certain books, in particular those with illustrations, or with similar aesthetic appeal. The particularly worrying aspect of this situation for Damrong, stemming from the anxiety for the preservation of the kingdom’s books mentioned above, was that increasing numbers of books were being obtained by foreigners and taken out of the kingdom. On his travels to

48 Ibid., p. 47.

49 Coedes, op. cit., p. 25.

50 Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 61.


52 ‘Phuak len sa som khong kao’, literally ‘hobby collectors of old things’ is the term Damrong uses; Nithan bornnakkhadi, p. 133.
Europe in 1929 Damrong found a great number of Thai manuscripts in libraries in London and Berlin, including a royal version of the Traiphum dating from the Thonburi period, which had been purchased for one thousand baht, a small fortune at that time.53

‘Strange Books’

Among the great numbers of books that were flowing into the library were those which the library officials referred to as nangsul plaeu plaeu, ‘strange books’.54 The library had a special interest in these ‘strange’ books, and even specifically asked temples to inform them if they possessed any such books, in order that it might obtain or copy them.55 What were these ‘strange books’, and why were they ‘strange’?

There seems to have been two categories of ‘strange books’. One included those works which had been written by members of the Thai aristocracy and nobility at some time in the past, and had been rediscovered as a result of the library’s efforts. The content of these books often contained material of great interest to the court’s historical investigations. Damrong recalls that one of the most remarkable finds was made by a library official, who discovered an old woman about to burn a pile of manuscripts. Having asked if he could read the manuscripts, he discovered that one of the manuscripts was a dynastic chronicle (phongsawadan) of the kingdom of Ayuthaya, dating from the seventeenth century - a century older than any other existing chronicle.56 ‘Strange books’ were also found among those books obtained from the Front Palace (wang na), including historical records of events in the reigns of the early Chakri kings. One such work, the ‘Memoirs of Princess Narinthewi’, recorded the disputes between the Royal Palace (wang luang) and the Front Palace (wang na) in the First Reign, written from the perspective of the Front Palace.57 Many ‘strange books’ found nowhere else, some dating from the late Ayuthaya period, were also found in Phetburi, an important town in the kingdom of Ayuthaya. It was said that during the Burmese campaigns against Ayuthaya in the eighteenth century, monks had hidden manuscripts in the caves near the town, where they had managed to escaped the ravages of the

53 Ibid., pp. 141-2. Damrong regretted that he did not also check the libraries in Paris, which must also have contained sizeable numbers of Thai books.

54 Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 58ff.


56 Nithan bocanakhadi, p. 136.

57 The book was Chotmaihet khwan song cham khonng kromaluang narinthurathewi; cf. Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 58-9.
Burmese. The ‘strangeness’ of such works, therefore, was due to the fact that they were recently discovered and threw new light on the kingdom’s history.58

There were also books considered strange for another reason. These were the palm leaf manuscripts (bai lan), which contained knowledges which were often quite alien to the librarian officials.59 Among them were the treatises describing strange rituals, magical signs, diagrams and spells. Writing from a modern, rational standpoint Damrong describes these texts as containing ‘very strange things...which most people know nothing about; but the miraculous claims these books make are usually quite unbelievable...’60 There were other reasons why, as a vehicle of the written word, the palm leaf manuscript had something of a dubious reputation by the turn of the century. In rural areas palm leaf seems to have been used almost exclusively for a wide range of religious-literary genres, often considered backward by the Thai court.61 In the kingdom’s hinterland printing had yet to gain a strong foothold. In a report to the king in 1899 on the state of religion in Prachinburi, Wachirayan commented on the ignorance of the local monks, who would not read printed books as they were believed to be books teaching Christianity.62 While palm leaf had been used at the Thai court (for religious writings) until quite recently, it had now been overtaken by print. 1893 is something of a landmark in this respect with the publication the first royal edition of the Tripitaka printed on paper. All former royal editions of Tripitakas dating from the earliest Buddhist kingdoms had been inscribed on palm leaf. With the rapid expansion of print at the end of the nineteenth century, the palm leaf manuscript had, for the new Thai

58 Tamman hor phra samut, pp. 57-8.

59 For palm leaf manuscripts referred to as ‘strange’, cf. ibid., p. 39.

60 ‘Ruang plaek plaek...an mai khrai mi khrai ru, tae mak mai na chua khunawiset thi uat ang nai nangsu nan’; Nithan boranakhadi, pp. 132-3.

61 On collections of palm leaf manuscripts see Banchi ruang nangsu nai hor phra samut wachirayan (Catalogue of the Books in the Wachirayan Library), phak thi 1, phanaek bali, Cremation Volume, Prince Somnot Amoraphan, 1916, which lists religious books in ‘Lao’ scripts collected by the Wachirayan Library from the north, most of which are written on palm leaf; pp. 87-103; More recent catalogues of manuscripts held in temple libraries in the provinces show similarly the domination of palm leaf manuscripts, see Rai chu nang su boran lanna ekasan microfilm khorng sathaban wichai sangkhom, mahawithayalai chiang mai phor ser 2521-2533 (Catalogue of Ancient Lanna Literature on Microfilm, University of Chiang Mai Social Research Institute 1978 - 1990), Chiang Mai, 1991; and Banchi samruat ekasan boran (Catalogue of the Survey of Ancient Documents), 14 Parts, Maha Sarakham, 1981-1990. Collections of manuscripts at Nakhorn Sri Thammarat Teachers College, and Sathaban taksin khadi suksa (Institute of Southern Studies) in the South, do contain a certain amount of literature written on ‘samut khoo’ type manuscripts (referred to in the South as nangsu bu), but the earliest examples date only from the late nineteenth century.

62 Lai phra hat kia kap kan suksa, p. 33. This shows the connection in the popular consciousness between printing technology and the Western missionaries, who had introduced printing into the Thai kingdom in the 1830s.
intelligentsia, become something of a symbol of the past. While that past could be the past of orthodox Buddhism or of the great deeds of Thai kings, it might also be that of arcane knowledges, of rural backwardness, and even of rural revolt. Indeed, it was millenarian prophesies of imminent catastrophe inscribed on palm leaf manuscripts and recited throughout the region that played a central role in fomenting the uprisings in the northeast at the turn of the century.63

Both categories of book were perceived to be strange because they contained knowledge largely unknown to the library officials. In a sense the library officials were discovering knowledge about the Thai kingdom. Finding strange books of historical value created particular interest among the Thai elite who were becoming increasingly conscious of the existence of a Thai history. Such books seemed to provide clues to a ‘lost’ history of the Thai kingdom. Strange books of the other kind revealed information about the vast, little-known interior of the Thai kingdom, as well as of the peoples who inhabited it. Increasingly this new knowledge was being characterised by the institution of the library as ‘Thai’ knowledge - knowledge about the Thai nation.

Classification

The large numbers of books now flowing into the library necessitated a scheme of classification so that this collection of books might have some kind of order for its users. Indeed, the library was itself a classificatory system. From its inception in 1905 the Wachirayan Library of the Capital divided its books into three broad categories: books on ‘Buddhism’ (nangsu phra satsana); foreign language books (nangsu tang prathet); and ‘Thai’ books (nangsu thai).64 By Damrong’s own admission this system was far from perfect. One of the greatest problems was that most of the ‘old’ books contained in the library collection were ‘religious’ in content, including almost all of the older books in the Thai language. So a modified classification system was implemented, based on language: books written in Pali language were classified under the category of ‘Buddhism’; those written in Thai under the category of ‘Thai’; and those written in all other languages under the category of ‘Foreign’. This modification was, however, also problematic, and the scheme was not always adhered to.65

63 Nithan boronakhadi, pp. 137-142.
64 Tamman hor phra samut, p. 71.
65 See, for example, Banchi ruang nangsu nai hor phra samut wachirayan; ostensibly a catalogue of the library’s books in Pali, it also includes translations of Pali works in both Thai and ‘Northern Thai’.  

188
The implementation of this three-fold classification scheme is significant not so much because of its effectiveness in classifying the kingdom’s books, but rather because of the underlying conception of the character of knowledge in the Thai kingdom implied by such a scheme. It effectively distinguished three broad realms of knowledge in the Thai kingdom: Buddhist, Thai, and Foreign.

Of the three categories it is the category of Thai, and its distinction from the other two categories that is most remarkable, for it indicated the existence of a separate body of knowledge, a Thai knowledge. As a category of knowledge, Thai was a recent invention. This is not to say, however, that the books contained in this category had only recently been composed (although some were); books in this category were of various genres, had been written in different places and at different times, under different circumstances, and for a diversity of purposes. It was only now, for the purposes of the library, that they came to be united as sources of knowledge about the Thai nation, and hence gave substance to the category of Thai books. In this sense the category of Thai acted, as it were, retrospectively, since it imposed the new category of Thai upon this diverse assortment of books that had been inherited from the past and appropriated by the library.

What then was the nature of this Thai knowledge? The library’s subdivision of the category of Thai books provides an indication. By 1915 Thai books were divided into three sub-categories:

Boranakhadi (‘history’)
Wannakhadi (‘literature’)
Tamra (‘textbooks’ or ‘treatises’)

The three sub-categories of Thai were subdivided further into the following categories:

Boranakhadi:

phongsawadan (‘dynastic histories’)
tamnan (‘non-dynastic histories’)
prawat (‘biography’)
chotmaihet (‘official government documents’)

Wannakhadi:

klorn thet (‘poetry for sermons’)
hot lakhorn (‘drama’)

189
Manuscript of the Three Seals Law catalogued by the National Library; from Phramahakasat rai phraboromratchakriwong kap prachachon (The Chakri Monarchs and the Thai People: A Special Relationship. Committee for the Bicentennial Celebration, Bangkok, 1982.
klorn an (‘poetry for reading’)
klorn suat (‘poetry for chanting’)
klorn romg (‘poetry for singing’)
chan (‘poetry in the "chan" metre’)
khlong, lilit (‘poetry in the "khlong" and "lilit" metres’)

Tamra:

phumisat (‘geography’)
vutthasat (‘military science’)
satawasat (‘zoology’)
wechasat (‘medicine’)
athansat (‘magic/sorcery’)
silapasat (‘creative arts’)
natasat (‘dance’)
thatsat (‘alchemy/chemistry’)
tamra phraratchaphithi (‘treatise on royal ceremonies’)
tamra betalat (‘miscellaneous treatises’)
hornsat (‘astrology’)
darsat (‘astronomy’)
lekwethi (‘mathematics’)
thammasat (‘law’)
akkharasat (‘orthography’)

Thai knowledge, then, at least as it was represented in the library’s category of Thai books, was made up of the three sub-categories horanakhadi, wannakhadi, and tamra. Like the category of Thai itself the first two of these three categories, which

---

66 Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 72-3. Note that the English translations are only a very approximate guide, as the words in each language signify different bodies of knowledge.
correspond to the Western genres of history and literature, had only recently been invented. A new framework had been created to categorise existing knowledge.

**Printing and Dissemination**

While the gathering of the kingdom’s literature (or at least the literature the court considered to be worth gathering) into one central collection was perhaps the major function of the library, the library was also involved in the dissemination of a limited number of works contained in its collection, in standardised, edited form, using the technology of print. Publishing was considered by library officials to be part of the educative function of the library - theoretically the improvement and accumulation of knowledge for the nation. As Damrong wrote in 1917,

...the benefit to the country (hanmuang) of the City Library is not only the collection of books so that they become the possession of the country, but an even greater benefit is to edit (truat sorn) the books in order that they can give birth to knowledge, and then to print them so that this knowledge can be widely disseminated. It is just as if one were to distribute this possession to the people (mahachon).

It was not just any books that the library chose to publish. The criterion was that they be works based on ‘scholarly knowledge’ or ‘learning’ (pen kaensan nai thang wicha khwam ru), rather than simply books which would be popular with readers. In fact, the majority of works published by the library were either ‘historical’ or ‘literary’ works, which were two of the three classes of book making up the category of Thai books. The library’s publishing policy was thus an essential part in the construction - and dissemination - of the concept of Thai knowledge.

---

67 Neither words appear in Bradley’s Siamese dictionary of 1873 (cf. Nangsuakkharasaphithansp - Dictionary of the Siamese Language, Bangkok, 1873). Boranakhadi is used by Chulalongkorn with the obvious intention of signifying the modern discipline of history (cf. Attachak Satayanurak, ‘Khwam plian prae khorng samnuk thang prawatisat lae kan plian plaeng khorng sangkhom thai tang tae ratchakan thi 4 thung phor.sor.2475’ (Shifts in Historical Consciousness and Change in Thai Society from the Fourth Reign to 1932), M.A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1988, p. 59). As for the word wannakhadi, Damrong stated in a letter to Prince Narit, who had inquired as to the origin of the word, that it had been coined by King Vajiravudh in 1914; see San somdet (Royal Letters), Book 25, (Correspondence between Prince Naritsaranuwatiwong and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab), Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1962, p. 45.

68 Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 85.

69 Ibid., p. 86.

70 See Damrong’s list of works published by the library from 1906-1915 in Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 88-99; see also Coedès, op. cit., p. 10.
Much of the printed material published by the Wachirayan Library in the 1880s and 1890s appeared in its own regular ‘magazine’, called Wachirayan Wiset and later simply Wachirayan. While undergoing regular changes in format, the magazine contained, mostly in serial form, a mixture of Thai ‘literary’ works (mostly poetry), histories, ‘short stories’ (nithan), collections of proverbs, articles written by members on a variety of subjects including science, topical issues of the time, religion, commerce and economic activities, local and international news, and works translated from European languages.\textsuperscript{71} Besides the regular magazine the library also began to publish, through its own finances, complete works, usually of an historical or literary nature, though the volume of these publications was relatively small owing to the limitations on the library’s budget. Apart from these self-funded publications, the library also allowed private printers to publish books from the library’s own collection, in return for a percentage of the printed issue.\textsuperscript{72}

By far the greater part of the publication and distribution of books held by the library, however, was carried out through the cremation volume (nangsu ngan sop) system of publishing, to which so much printed Thai literature owes its existence to this day. The practice of printing works for distribution at cremations had advantages for both the host and the library. For the host and sponsor of the cremation ceremony, providing the financial means for publishing a particular work was a form of alms-giving for the deceased. Moreover this form of alms-giving was of a kind which ensured a particularly wide-ranging and enduring remembrance of the deceased. Printing technology enabled the product of this act of alms-giving to be distributed to thousands of recipients, a product which would also last for many years into the future.\textsuperscript{73}

For the library, cremation volumes also provided an excellent means of financing the printing of literary works. Printing was at this time an expensive business. Printing paper itself was expensive and in scarce supply.\textsuperscript{74} The demand for printed works was still relatively limited, and many of the works which the library wanted to publish and distribute had to be fully financed by the library, as it could not rely on sales.\textsuperscript{75} As

\textsuperscript{71} Cf. Wachirayan wiset, and from 1894, Wachirayan. On these magazines see Reynolds, ‘The Case of KSR Kulap’, pp. 67-8.

\textsuperscript{72} Coedès, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 10; Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 87-8, 99.


\textsuperscript{74} Sanguan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 713.

\textsuperscript{75} Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 86.
mentioned above, the ‘educative’ value of the published work - as assessed by Damrong and the library editors - was of more importance to the library than the work’s popularity. This is where publishing by cremation volumes was so useful. It enabled the court to print and widely distribute works of ‘scholarly’ merit, with little if any cost to the library. The choice of the work to be printed could either be that of the host of the cremation, in which case the officials in charge of the various manuscript collections would find, check and edit that particular manuscript; or the library officials could themselves recommend an appropriate work to be published.  

76 Besides the advantage of publishing books at no expense to the library, the library received other benefits. A certain portion of the cremation volume issue was donated to the library, part of which was in turn sold to raise money for the library, and the remainder distributed to overseas scholarly institutions. These institutions often reciprocated the gesture by sending to the Wachirayan Library publications of their own.  

77 The production of written material as alms was not in fact a new phenomenon. One of the greatest acts of alms-giving practised by kings from the earliest times (as recorded in the chronicles) down to the present day was the production of an edition of the Tripitaka, the Theravada Buddhist canon, or other religious works, which ensured the health and survival of the Buddhist religion. This act was sometimes called thammathan, or ‘Dhamma alms’. Indeed, the first of the Sangha laws drawn up during the reign of Rama I recognised thammathan as superior to all other forms of alms-giving, in terms of the merit it produced (phalanisong).  

78 Religious works written by monks also often end with the wish that on the merit of this alms-giving (the composition of a particular work) they will be born in the age of Mettra, the future Buddha, or will attain enlightenment and nibbana. The technology of print gave a much broader section of the faithful the opportunity to practice the same kind of alms-giving, providing they possessed the financial means. This kind of alms-giving originally known as thammathan, was now sometimes called withayathan, ‘alms of knowledge’ or ‘alms of learning’, depending on the subject matter of the printed work. Initially religious works were the most common choice of works to be printed, because of the great merit this was believed to produce.  

79 Later, however, particularly with the

76 Sanguan, op. cit., p. 722.

77 Coedès, op. cit., pp. 11-13; Tamnan hor phra samut, p. 99.

78 Kotmai tra sum duang (The Three Seals Law), Book 4, Bangkok, Khurusapha, 1962, pp. 165-6. This recognition prefaces a law forbidding buffoonish recitals of the Vessantara Jataka - the recital of the Vessantara Jataka probably being the most popular example of thammathan in the Thai kingdom at that time.

79 Sanguan, op. cit., p. 718.
encouragement of the officials of the library organisation, works chosen for publication as cremation volumes were those considered to be of ‘scholarly’ value - which usually meant Thai history or Thai literature. It could be said that in the same way that thammathan was seen to ensure the health of the Buddhist religion, withayathan could be said to be nourishing and encouraging ‘scholarly knowledge’. This ‘scholarly knowledge’ (wicha khwam ru), however, consisting as it mostly did of Thai history, Thai literature, and other writings on ‘things Thai’, in fact had more the character of a specifically ‘Thai knowledge’.

Wachirayan Library Editions

Prior to publication it was considered essential that the manuscripts chosen for printing be thoroughly edited (truat chamra) by the library staff.\textsuperscript{80} Besides the obvious concern to check manuscripts for ‘errors’ of one kind or another (the library placed great emphasis on - and took great pride in - printing only texts which were as ‘correct’ as possible)\textsuperscript{81} the editing process was another important step in the library’s construction of Thai knowledge. Although it acted under the guise of checking texts to enable them to, in Damrong’s words, ‘give birth to knowledge’, editing actually functioned to characterise works of diverse origins as sources of Thai knowledge, especially ‘Thai history’ and ‘Thai literature’.

The power of print meant that the books edited by the Wachirayan Library had the effect of standardising a particular work. That is, where there might have been thousands of manuscript versions of a particular story in use throughout the kingdom, each differing in certain ways from the other (ie. language, script, literary style, narrative structure, etc.) to suit the particular needs of its author and audience, the Wachirayan Library Edition created one ‘national’ version of that work, which took its place among other ‘national’ versions to make up the canon of Thai literature. For each Wachirayan Library Edition published as Thai literature, countless other versions of the same story were excluded from the national literature, most disappearing altogether through the process of the decay of the material on which they were written.

What, then, did this editorial process involve? Perhaps the most important element of the editorial process was the inclusion in the library’s publications of a preface (kham nam, or sometimes kham athibai) to the work, usually written by Damrong. In fact, Damrong wrote more of these prefaces than any other kind of writing

\textsuperscript{80} ‘To edit’ is a rather loose translation of truat chamra; the Thai phrase also has the connotation of ‘to cleanse’, or ‘make clean’.

\textsuperscript{81} Tamnan hor phra samut, pp. 84-5.
he did, which is an indication of their importance. The function of these prefaces was to explain the book to the reader, noting the author, the date it was written, the origin of the manuscript, the reason for its composition, the reason for its publication, the value of the work for readers, the genre and nature of the work, and so on. It was through these prefaces that the library exercised its control over a particular work, effectively defining the work and its place within the world of ‘Thai letters’ for its prospective readers. In particular it was in the prefaces that the library’s system of classification, and the new category of ‘Thai’ books, was disseminated to the reading public. The library’s publication of books whose prefaces classified them as Thai was part of the process of creating a Thai literary heritage - a corpus of written works perceived of as essentially ‘Thai’.

As much as the works they accompany, many of these prefaces have themselves become ‘classics’. They have been reproduced time and time again in subsequent publications of the same work thereby exercising a controlling influence over the interpretation of these works for several successive generations of readers. The prefaces have helped reinforce the library’s original definition of the work.

Apart from the library prefaces the actual text of the work to be published was altered in certain ways to enhance the work’s status as ‘Thai’. One such area in which editing was required was in the transcription into the Thai script of the great number of works in the library collection written in scripts other than Thai. One of the most important of these was the Cambodian script (khorm). Khorm had traditionally been the script used in the Central and Southern regions of the Thai kingdom for works of a ‘religious’ nature. In fact, the great majority of works which the library classified as ‘Thai literature’, as well as many of those which it published as ‘Thai history’, were originally written in the khorm script. It would, of course, have been inappropriate to be publishing Thai literature and history using what, at that time, was considered more and more by the Thai elite to be a foreign script. While in fact, the khorm script was the main script used by monastics in the central and southern regions of the kingdom well into the Fifth Reign (and even beyond), efforts were being made to replace khorm with Thai. In 1880 the King ordered the printing of a standardised handbook of monastic chants (nangsu suat mon), which for the first time used Thai characters. Ten thousand copies of which were distributed to temples throughout the kingdom. Included in the introduction to this work were instructions explaining how to read the Pali using the new script. Since the Thai script had apparently never before been used to inscribe the Pali language, a new system of spelling and pronunciation had had to be developed.
