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# The Chester Beatty Collection of Siamese Manuscripts in Ireland

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# The Chester Beatty Collection of Siamese Manuscripts in Ireland

## **Abstract**

This article demonstrates the importance of the Chester Beatty Library's collection of Thai manuscripts and more broadly highlights the importance of including the study of Ireland in the history of the study of Asia. I hope it also encourages future scholars to look to Ireland when writing the intellectual history of exchange between Asia and Europe. Even though Ireland was not a colonizing power, indeed, it was colonized for most of its pre-modern history, its libraries and museums attest to a people that spread far and wide across the globe sometimes as a point of necessity and sometimes in the spirit of exploration.

## **Keywords**

Dublin, Ireland, Chester Beatty Library, Siamese, Thai, Manuscript, Buddhism, Collection, Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, collecting, intellectual history, museum studies, Asia, Europe

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*Thai Manuscripts*  
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Dedication 1

## *Articles*

Illuminating Archives: Collectors and Collections in the  
History of Thai Manuscripts  
JUSTIN MCDANIEL 3

Henry D. Ginsburg and the Thai Manuscripts Collection at  
the British Library and Beyond  
JANA IGUNMA 22

Cultural Goods and Flotsam: Early Thai Manuscripts in  
Germany and Those Who Collected Them  
BAREND JAN TERWIEL 82

Thai Manuscripts in Italian Libraries: Three Manuscripts  
from G. E. Gerini's Collection Kept at the University of  
Naples "L'Orientale"  
CLAUDIO CICUZZA 106

Manuscripts in Central Thailand: Samut Khoi from  
Phetchaburi Province  
PETER SKILLING AND SANTI PAKDEEKHAM 125

Manuscripts from the Kingdom of Siam in Japan  
TOSHIYA UNEBE 151

The Chester Beatty Collection of Siamese Manuscripts  
in Ireland

JUSTIN MCDANIEL 174

Siamese Manuscript Collections in the United States

SUSANNE RYUYIN KEREKES AND JUSTIN MCDANIEL 202

*Reviews*

Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, eds. *The Medieval  
Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*

BENJAMIN C. TILGHMAN 239

Christopher Wright, Maria Argyrou and Charalambos  
Dendrinios. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Greek Manuscript  
Collection of Lambeth Palace Library*

GEORGI PARPULOV 242

Orlanda S. H. Lie, Martine Meuwese, Mark Aussems,  
Hermina Joldersma. *Christine de Pizan in Bruges: “Le livre de  
la cité des dames” as “Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen”*

HANNO WIJSMAN 247

York’s Archbishops’ Registers Revealed

ALEXANDER DEVINE 251

*Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections,*  
and Jeffrey F. Hamburger, William P. Stoneman, Anne-Marie  
Eze, Lisa Fagin Davis, and Nancy Netzer, eds. *Beyond Words:  
Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections*

JESSICA BRANTLEY 256

*List of Manuscripts Cited*

263

# The Chester Beatty Collection of Siamese Manuscripts in Ireland

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JUSTIN MCDANIEL  
*University of Pennsylvania*

SOMETIMES THAI MANUSCRIPTS FIND themselves in very unpredictable places—on distant islands off the edges of distant continents. Ireland is at the far end of Europe. Despite the great distance of this island from Thailand, it has become home to well-maintained repositories of rare Siamese/Thai manuscripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## *Why Ireland?*

Alfred Chester Beatty (1875–1968) was not from Ireland, but he decided to leave a large portion of his rare manuscript collection to his adopted country. He was born in New York in 1875 and as an adult went by the moniker A. Chester Beatty. He was an engineer and had no formal training in Thai, Asian history, Buddhist studies, or manuscripts. Instead, he spent most of his days running large copper mines in the Rocky Mountains in the western United States. After he made his fortune in copper and following the untimely death of his wife, Grace, he moved with his two young children to

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1 An earlier version of this article appears as part of a two-article series with Yohei Shimizu in the *Eastern Buddhist* 45, no. 1 & 2 (2016).

London in 1912, eventually remarrying, to Edith Dunn, another New Yorker. Because of his interest in minerals, he started using some of his fortune to acquire rare rocks and gems, as well as small collections of Chinese snuff bottles and rhinoceros horn cups that were popular at the time. There is little available information about why he went from collecting these small and rare rock, ceramic, and stone items to collecting manuscripts. It might have been the general popularity of Egyptian and Persian art in London at the time, or the encounters he had with Chinese laborers in mines in the western United States. He also might have been trying to distinguish himself as a newcomer to the old moneyed elite of London's social clubs. Most likely it was a combination of many reasons that prompted him to start collecting general "Orientalia." These early purchases in London eventually led Edith and him to travel to Asia, first to Egypt in 1914 and then to Japan in 1917. In the former, they purchased manuscripts, including ornamented Qur'ans, and even a Cairo vacation home. In Japan, he acquired his first Chinese and Japanese paintings, including an especially nice collection of *ebon* (絵本, books of paintings) from Nara (Japan). Strangely enough, Edith and Chester Beatty never traveled to Siam, but its art would soon play a major role in their collections.

What started as a leisure pastime soon turned into a lifetime obsession. Edith and Chester started to concentrate on preserving textual material. Their collections are primarily rare European, Persian, Islamic-Indian, and Arabic manuscripts (totaling over 2,700 pieces). The latter includes fine examples of different styles of Arabic calligraphy and miniature painting. The European collection includes several thousand rare early printed codices and drawings, as well as papyri and the earliest known copies of the book of Revelation and the Gospel of Saint John. These collections grew very large, which led the Beattys to worry about their documentation and preservation. Therefore, late in life they turned toward the idea of building a museum/library in which their collections could be studied and shared with the public.

Because of the assistance he provided in acquiring war materials for the British resistance against the Nazis, Chester Beatty was knighted after World War II. However, being of Irish descent and apparently disillusioned with British postwar politics, he decided to move his family to Ireland in 1950,





FIGURE 1. Manuscript reading room of the Chester Beatty Library. Photograph by author.

where he was able to purchase a large enough estate on Shrewsbury Road in Dublin to house a large portion of their collections. In 1957, after independence from Britain, the young Irish government made Beatty its first honorary citizen. He returned the honor by leaving the bulk of his collections to Ireland upon his death. They sat as an odd curiosity off the well-beaten paths of Dublin's tourist and museum circuit. Even my mother, who grew up in Dublin as a lover of libraries and museums, never visited it. However, that all changed in the year 2000 when the collections were moved to the magnificently renovated and reimagined Chester Beatty Library at the Dublin Castle. Now the material can be examined closely by scholars from many different countries and is appreciated by tens of thousands of visitors a year.

### *The Siamese Collection at the Chester Beatty Library*

While the Islamic and European collections have been relatively well documented and featured in major exhibitions and printed catalogues, the Asian



FIGURE 2. Portrait of Chester Beatty. Courtesy Chester Beatty Library archives.

collection (featuring thousands of pieces from non-Islamic India, Mongolia, China, Japan, Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand) has not been published. However, the Burmese collection has been extensively studied by Sinead Ward and is expected to be published soon. Henry Ginsburg, the late curator of Southeast Asian material at the British Library, undertook a preliminary evaluation of the Thai manuscripts in the late 1990s. He was the first person to inform me of the collection, and his notes proved very useful when I was first opening the manuscript boxes meticulously stored and preserved in Dublin.

Even though Edith and Chester Beatty did not travel to Siam/Thailand, Beatty worked with two collectors to find rare manuscripts (Edith concentrated on collections of paintings). Chester chose his collectors well: the acquisitions team at the famous Luzac Oriental Bookstore on Great Russell Street in London and H. G. Quaritch Wales (a well-known scholar of Siamese history and religion and grandson of the Bernard Quaritch, one of the

greatest book collectors in European history).<sup>2</sup> H. G. Quaritch Wales sent manuscripts that he acquired in Thailand to Beatty, who then would decide whether he wanted to purchase them. For someone who could not read any South or Southeast Asian language, Beatty had a good eye and picked a high-quality and diverse collection of manuscripts. From correspondence held at the Chester Beatty Library, the largest number of manuscripts in the Thai collection was purchased between 1929 and 1942. A letter from Wales in 1936 states that Beatty had by that time acquired a representative selection of manuscripts from Thailand, and records in 1944 show that he already had fifteen rare Thai manuscripts. However, there was a second stage of collecting that added to this “representative collection” with purchases recorded in 1952, 1953, 1954, and 1956, nearly doubling the size of his Thai collection. These were mostly purchased through Wales, except in May 1953, when six additional manuscripts were purchased through the auspices of Luzac Oriental Books at Sotheby’s auction house. Beatty was quite eager in his attempts to find additional Thai manuscripts and even paid for an advertisement in 1953 in the *Times (London)* stating that Luzac was seeking Thai manuscripts (to be sold to him). Wales went to Thailand himself in 1956 with the promise that Beatty would pay between seventy-five and one hundred pounds for each Thai manuscript he found. However, Wales stated that there were no good examples left on the market and that the National Library in Bangkok was not selling any of its collection.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately for Beatty, Wales was correct. Edith and he had certainly amassed an excellent collection that represents well the range of textual genres (especially for illuminated manuscripts) in

2 The shop Bernard Quaritch Ltd. Rare Books and Manuscripts is still a major source for rare Asian, American, and European books today.

3 I want to thank Laura Muldowney and Sinead Ward for their help in researching Chester Beatty’s collecting practices and for describing to me the correspondence between him and his acquisitions experts. I also want to thank Celine Ward and Fionnuala Croke for their support and assistance at all stages. I consulted several sources for information on Beatty’s life, including Charles Horton, “‘It Was All a Great Adventure’: Alfred Chester Beatty and the Formation of his Library,” *History Ireland* 8, no. 2 (2000): 37–42; and Brian Lavery, “Arts Abroad: An Irish Castle for Religious Manuscripts,” *New York Times*, 17 July 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/17/books/arts-abroad-an-irish-castle-for-religious-manuscripts.html>, accessed 13 July 2015; as well as information from the Chester Beatty Library’s website.

Siam. They also acquired one manuscript that is not found in any other known collection, to which I now turn.

### *A Sports and Agriculture Manuscript?*

In the last section of this essay is an overview of some of the most notable manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library, as well as a few images. However, before going into this, I want to discuss one of the strangest Thai manuscripts I have ever come across (figs. 3–9). In the stately reading room of the Chester Beatty Library, I unwrapped an old mulberry paper manuscript that had been listed in the library’s unpublished catalogue as a Phra Malai text in thin mul script from Siam. However, as I gently paged through the libretto-style manuscript, marked by water stains, worn edges, and fading illuminations, I discovered that not only was the catalogue description incorrect, but this was not even one text. There were depictions of seemingly drunken—or perhaps just ignorant—monks chanting while children played dice-like games in front of them, amorous couples stealing embraces in monasteries, hunters shooting animals, women smoking opium, a man stirring a cauldron full of human heads, golden reliquaries surrounded by colorful flags, monks sweeping a cloister, heavenly beings, a Chinese opera performance in front of a crowd of boisterous children, lecherous men, fighting thugs, and neglectful parents. A series of scenes depicts half-naked women seducing a man in the forest and a tree from which naked women hang as fruit. There is even a drawing of a monk reading a manuscript while another monk transcribes it. There are other paintings of woodland creatures, birds, flowers, and mountains. The text on the “A side” of the manuscript is indeed a version of the Phra Malai story, but only one painting seems to even remotely connect to that story.<sup>4</sup> The other

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4 See Naomi Appleton, Sarah Shaw, and Toshiya Unebe, *Illuminating the Life of the Buddha: An Illustrated Chanting Book from Eighteenth-Century Siam* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2013). They provide a very useful tool in the book by abandoning the use of European pagination conventions. In the past, experts in Siamese manuscripts followed the European model for describing vellum and parchment codices. Namely, they referred to the front and backs of each



FIGURE 3. Funerary scene of four monks chanting. This painting seems to ridicule the monks, as they are not paying attention to the ceremony and seem disorganized and confused. The bottom panel of the painting is of an offering table with Chinese-style offerings. CB Thai 1330.



FIGURE 4. Daily life scenes of farmers and hunters. CB Thai 1330.

side of the manuscript is a completely different text, the *mātikā* of the *Dhammasaṅgani*, the introduction to the Abhidhamma. The Phra Malai is in vernacular Thai, while the *mātikā* (an introduction that is a type of Pali

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page—recto and verso. This works well for the codex, but not for concertina or folding-style manuscripts used in Siam. Therefore, Appleton, Shaw, and Unebe use the simple “A side” and “B side” because Siamese manuscripts are long, accordion-style manuscripts that when pulled out can stretch over thirty feet. The text should be read down one side first and then the entire manuscript flipped over and the back side read as one long text. In essence, the reader only turns the page (meaning the entire manuscript) once, not every folio. One unfolds or stretches a Siamese *samut kboi* often, but only turns the page once. These authors respected the medium they were using and did not attempt to fit the study of Siamese manuscripts into the conventions of European ones.



FIGURE 5. A Chinese person smoking opium from a manuscript catalogued as “Sports and Agriculture Manuscript. CB Thai 1330.



FIGURE 6. Scene of a crowd fighting, laughing, and generally acting badly at the performance of a Chinese opera in Thailand. CB Thai 1330.

table of contents) is in Pali. There is evidence that at least two, if not three different scribes worked on it, and perhaps up to four different artists. However, only one author name appears (Phra Dhammavuddhi Bhikkhu; in a different scribal hand from the text), and there is no date or patron listed. Some paintings were left half-finished. The text and images do not match, and there is seemingly no order to the latter.



FIGURE 7. Illustrations of unfinished Thai pavilions and monks writing manuscripts from a manuscript catalogued as “Sports and Agriculture Manuscript.” CB Thai 1330.

I sat back, scratched my head, and tried to figure out why these random images and two texts might go together. The scribes who worked on the text were well trained. The different scribal hands were all steady. Spelling and grammar had normal inconsistencies found in most manuscripts, but nothing strikingly awful. These scribes were not amateurs. The illuminations were of mixed quality, but not particularly sloppy. One of the painters was very talented in terms of the ability to add detailed patterns to silk sarongs and flower petals. The manuscript was made of high-quality and thick mulberry (*kboi*) pulp, and the wide variety of pigments used revealed a patron with disposable income. I thought to myself, perhaps some of the scenes like the fighting thugs, drunken or ignorant monks, lecherous men, gambling, and amorous couples were supposed to represent different levels of hell. The story of Phra Malai, which has been popular with storytellers, muralists, scribes, and illuminators for centuries in Thailand, reminds one of Dante’s journey past the abyss and into various levels of hell. Although Phra Malai is not led into hell by Virgil, he is a monk who descends into its various levels and sees the *contrapasso* punishments for those who are greedy, hateful, deceitful, violent, and filled with lust. However, hells are almost universally depicted in manuscripts very graphically, with severed limbs, burning flesh, torture chambers, and voracious animals and vegetation;

depicting daily scenes of realistic vices, gambling, sex, addiction, and fighting as metaphors for levels of hell does not have precedence.

Perhaps I was grasping at straws. Why would illuminations of heavenly and peaceful nature scenes be mixed in with these depictions of monks and laypeople acting improperly? Moreover, the *mātikā*, even though it is also a very popular text for scribes, usually does not appear in the same manuscript as the story of Phra Malai. It is a Pali liturgical text that is chanted at funerals. As I stress in the introduction to this special issue, neither the Abhidhamma text nor the commentaries include specific instructions on how to conduct rituals, nor does their content have any relation to them. Still, Abhidhamma texts are used at cremation ceremonies, and individual syllables from the Abhidhamma can be used for ritual protection. Cambodian, Lao, and Thai monastic teachers have used the Abhidhamma in just these ways. Despite the content though, monks in the region often use sections from the Abhidhamma, especially terms in the *mātikā* of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, as a guide when chanting and giving sermons in end-of-life rituals. These terms and phrases are chanted and drawn on *yantra* in constructing an ephemeral fetus that will pass from this life to the next. The most obvious time to construct a new fetus is at a funeral; death demands new birth. Knowing the foundational “mother-like” words from which the entire Theravāda Buddhist philosophical complex arises not only enables a teacher to transmit information about the nature of thought, desire, sensory perception, emotion, and intention, but also enables him or her to create new life.<sup>5</sup> This is explicitly seen in another genre of Abhidhamma, the *Abhidhamma chet kamphi*. The *Abhidhamma chet kamphi* (Seven books of the Abhidhamma) is a genre of texts well known by both the elite and common people in Laos and Thailand. There are several versions. Often only the titles of the texts and short excerpt verses are employed in Pali, and then they are expanded upon in the vernacular in the course of a ritual and following sermon. In modern times, monks chant in front of the funeral pyre only the Pali sections of the Thai and Pali

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5 For an overview of the ritual uses of the Abhidhamma in Thailand, see Justin McDaniel, “Philosophical Embryology: Buddhist Texts and the Ritual Construction of a Fetus,” in *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Vanessa R. Sasson and Jane Marie Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91–106.



*Abhidhamma chet kamphi* and *Abhidhamma chet kamphi ruam* (the latter is longer and contains additional sections); the actual full text of the Pali Abhidhamma source text is not chanted. Sections from the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* are often chanted at the beginning of a funeral, in Thailand perhaps the most common and frequent time for public chanting in Pali, which the vast majority of laypeople and monks cannot understand (the meaning of the texts matters little compared with their ritual power). A funeral is an occasion when large groups of laypeople come in contact with monks. Chanting the syllables from the titles of the texts of the Abhidhamma helps guide the consciousness of the deceased to a favorable rebirth.

This is also related to a little known funerary custom where monks write four syllables on a small piece of paper. These syllables stand for the four major subjects of the Abhidhamma (as outlined in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*): *ci* for *citta* (mind), *ce* for *cetasika* (mental factors or concepts), *ru* for *rūpa* (matter), and *ni* for *nibbana*. This piece of paper with the four syllables is placed inside the corpse's mouth to guide the dead person to a favorable rebirth. It is also common for sections of the Abhidhamma to be chanted as monks walk alongside the corpse being taken for cremation. In Laos, these syllables as well as the first syllables of the names of the seven books of the Abhidhamma are directly related to parts of the body. There in particular the seven texts are also associated with animals, which in turn protect the parts of the body. For example, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* is connected to the eye, which is protected by the rhinoceros; the *Dhātukathā* is connected to the nose, which is protected by the tiger; the *Mahāpatthāna* is connected to the internal organs, which are protected by the lion; and so on. The Phra Malai vernacular text about levels of hell and the Pali *mātikā* about the nature of the mind are quite different texts in terms of content and language. They are linked in that they are often both presented at funerals/cremations.

I returned to the manuscript to look for more clues, and found them on the first leaf. Attached to the inside of the cover was a little label in English that appeared to have been typed on a very old typewriter. It read simply: "Siamese manuscript written in Cambodian character. On the occupations, sports, agriculture etc. of the Siamese. With 15 double leaves illustrated. 22.10 pounds." The original catalogue number of 2456 had been crossed out by a later collector and listed as MS. 1329, and then crossed out again and

listed as MS. 1330. Since on the inside cover (which is often blank) we find the name of Phra Dhammavuddhi Bhikkhu followed by the Thai verb *kbian* (to write) in red ink as well as a scribal hand different from the other hands in the main text, I have come to tentatively believe that this manuscript was actually made for a Western collector. The subject title clearly reflects a person who could not read the content of the text. This is not a text about sports or agriculture. Perhaps the scenes depicting hunting and game playing led a Western collector to believe that it was a guide to local sports. This would have been a good manuscript to collect because it is different from most of the Phra Malai, Abhidhamma, *jātaka*, or *kammavācā* manuscripts available in the markets of Southeast Asia at that time (and today). The scenes painted are relatively rare, and the fact they all are in one manuscript makes it even stranger. Did a monk or an artist take a partially completed Phra Malai manuscript and have it made directly for sale to a foreign collector? Was this designed not for ritual use, but as a contrived cultural product?

There are often half-written or partially illuminated Thai manuscripts in collections. In other cases, we find large manuscripts that start off beautifully but by the end of the first few leaves are incomprehensible and sloppy. This manuscript had many of these issues. Sometimes these are manuscripts that were too inconsistent and with which artists and scribes could hone their craft. This would explain why the texts in this manuscript were worked on by several different scribes. The two texts' relatively consistent grammar and spelling suggests that perhaps different scribal students transcribed one teacher's reading of these most common (and therefore useful for training scribes) texts. This appears more probable when we consider that illuminators and scribes rarely worked together as well as that images and text rarely appear alongside each other in Thai manuscripts. Illuminations have one audience: the vast majority of Thai laypeople, nuns, and monks who could not read the Khmer, Khom, Mul, or "Cambodgian" script and/or could not understand Pali. On the other hand, texts have another: a monk or nun trained to read both the Khom script and both vernacular and Pali languages. This person would conduct sermons or lead chanting. The paintings, which were probably done later (the scribes in Thailand always left room for paintings in the large margins of the manuscript), may have been either: (1) the results of a student

carrying out a teacher's assignment to practice different scenes, or (2) salacious and entertaining scenes painted in order to fetch a good price from a collector. The fact that several of the paintings were incomplete may be evidence for both possibilities. The manuscript includes pencil lines and partially painted figures, so it might have been sold to an available collector before it was finished. Bangkok had many Western collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and I imagine this manuscript was started in the 1880s. Or, perhaps the student or students working on the manuscript paintings for practice were called off to other duties and left their work unfinished. The lives of monks and artists in cities are often like this: they are moved by their abbots or patrons to different monasteries and workshops with little warning, have family crises and need to disrobe or return home quickly, are put on a new assignment or commission suddenly, fall in love and lose interest in their duties or training, and so on.

The reason I describe this one manuscript in the collections of Chester Beatty in Ireland is to illustrate just a few of the benefits and problems that arise when a scholar unwraps a manuscript. The nature of the medium, the writing tools, the available materials, and the professionals that work on the texts all contribute to what are very often cacophonous cultural products. This manuscript has many voices and sources all pulling the text apart and giving collectors, cataloguers, conservationists, translators, and art historians the gift of very long days spent on very few pages. Not only does this one manuscript contain many different voices, these voices are also largely faceless. We have only one name, which could have been added later. We do not know the identities of the scribes or the illustrators, not to mention the patron, the producer of the paper, the mixer of the pigments, or the planter of the mulberry tree. We do not know and probably will never know how many hands the text passed through before being purchased by Chester Beatty's *in situ* collector. We have one box, one label, all of which were added later. However, it is these unknowns and the skills needed and years spent trying to make some of them less unknown that make the study of manuscripts fascinating. By sourcing the materials, comparing the orthography, translating the inconsistent texts, and tracing the chain of collectors, we can answer much larger questions about local economics and divisions of

labor, trade and material history, cultural preferences, the rise of “Asian” collections in the West, and religious requirements. Manuscripts are much more than the semantic meaning of the words they contain. The intellectual reward is in the struggle to figure out one at a time.<sup>6</sup> This indeed is one manuscript that reveals much without saying much.

### Overviews of the Collection

Siamese/Thai, Tai (Tai Lue, Tai Khoen, Tai Yai/Shan), and Lao manuscripts cover a wide array of subjects, materials, and languages. Most were produced between the late fifteenth and early twentieth centuries on palm leaf (*bailan*), streblus asper bark (*khoi*) paper, paper leaf mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), cotton, or silk, and include rare pigments like Prussian blue, chrome yellow, vermilion, and gamboge. Their languages include the Indic classical Pali language, as well as Khmer, Thai, Lao, Mon, Shan, Tai Leu, Sanskrit, and Siamese/Thai. Scripts also come in a wide variety. Often one finds single Pali-language manuscripts composed in Khmer/Cambodian script painted by a certain Lao artisan living in Thailand that is either etched into a palm leaf with a small knife or painted with gold, silver, or black ink. To put it simply—these manuscripts reveal a multilingual and diverse group of people all learning Buddhism in different ways. Such manuscripts were often put on display and read to crowds at dramatic performances, royal decrees, or Buddhist sermons. Some were even hung as banners. Techniques of manuscript production and illumination in Siam influenced Cambodian, Burmese, Malay, and Lao texts and paintings. Portuguese, French, Chinese, and British influence is also seen in the ways Siamese experimented with shadowing, background, and format in the nineteenth century. The contents of Siamese/Thai, Tai, and Lao manuscripts include the earliest legal

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6 I also provide a description of this manuscript and an expanded overview of problems in manuscripts studies more generally in Justin McDaniel and Lynn Ransom, eds., *From Mulberry Leaves to Silk Scrolls: New Approaches to the Study of Asian Manuscript Traditions*, The Lawrence J. Schoenberg Studies in Manuscript Culture 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1–15.

codes in Southeast Asia, chronicles of the lives of famous nuns, monks, and royal family members, cosmological maps, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha (*jātaka*), funerary sermons (*Abhidhamma chet kamphi* [in Pali, *Gambhīra*] and Phra Malai), great battles and royal coronations, ethical codes, guides for classical dancers and musicians replete with paintings of instruments and costumes, and recipes for magical elixirs and herbal medicine. There is even an entire collection of manuscripts that contain illustrated manuals on how to care for elephants, cats, and horses. Manuscripts are often the only visual witness we have to pre-modern Siamese and Lao culture, and they provide information to not only religious studies and jurisprudence scholars, but also environmental historians and botanists.

In 2008 and again in 2012 I had opportunities to photograph and closely examine the Siamese/Thai and Lao collection at the Chester Beatty Library. I was able to clear up some questions that Henry Ginsburg had when viewing the collection, and to finish documenting each of the manuscripts, which he sadly did not have a chance to read in full before he passed away in 2007. I took full photographs of CB Thai 1343 and CB Thai 1302, and partial photographs of the others. In 2012, scholars and friends from Japan, Tanabe Kazuko and Shimizu Yōhei, were also present and looked at 1310 and then several (mostly “three worlds” [*Traiphum*]) manuscripts on their own. They will describe these manuscripts in a future publication. Below are the results of my findings. It is not an exhaustive list of the entire Siamese/Thai and Lao Chester Beatty collection, but it certainly will provide future scholars and enthusiasts with an introduction to the collection and its most notable features.

### CB THAI 1309 [AC 135/1953]

Present catalogue title: “Thukata so’n butr.” This title seems slightly wrong. This text is actually not a standard didactic text like the “Phu son lan” (Grandfather Teaches Grandchildren) popular in Laos and northeastern Thailand. Instead, it seems to be a letter written by a noble person with the common nickname of “Thukata” who was perhaps a minor member of the royal family writing a letter to his sons in the mid-nineteenth century as he

is preparing to leave for a trip abroad. Under the reign of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, many members of the royal family and noblemen were sent to Europe and Japan to study. Even though the first printing press in Bangkok was opened in 1835, they did not become easily accessible until the late nineteenth century, when wood pulp paper did as well. The text is on white mulberry paper and in black squid ink, which one commonly sees in texts by nobles in the mid-nineteenth century. There is no date, but Henry Ginsburg was right in his identification of a date equivalent to 1850, although this seems to be a reference to an earlier event and begs further investigation.

The first page of text reads “nā blai than oi” (“this is the last page”), which seems strange considering it is clearly the beginning of the text. This may have been written by a later archivist in Thailand who did not open the text.

The last twelve pages are blank, which also suggests that the author was not sure how long his letter to his children would be and ordered a standard fifty-page notebook.

The letter is in flowery prose. It is a vernacular text without any conscious attempt to display Pali lexical or grammatical skills. The letter begins with an address to two children from their *bida* (father). He tells them that he needs to go on a journey, but will be home soon. The last few pages are a strange list of pithy pieces of advice that merit further examination.

## CB THAI 1310

This manuscript is notable for a number of reasons. First, it actually has a price on it. It was purchased for twenty-five pounds, most likely by Wales for Beatty. Today it would probably sell for well over twenty thousand pounds. Dated to 1797, it is the oldest dated Siamese manuscript in the collection. The illumination and the text, as is normal in Siamese illuminated manuscripts, largely do not go together. The illustrations are representative scenes from the ten birth stories (*dasajātaka*), but the text is the Phra Malai. There are scenes from all ten *jātakas* (*Temiya*, *Nimi*, *Bhuridatta*, *Vidhura*, and so on) and two from the *Mahājanaka*. Like CB Thai 1319

below, there are other paintings of corpse meditation on the reverse side of the manuscript. There is one illustration from the Phra Malai story, an iconic scene of four men fighting that represents the decline of humanity. The fifth painting in the manuscript does not fit with the others. It depicts a woman dressed in white robes (perhaps a rare depiction of a *mae chi* or Thai nun). However, unlike nuns who are often barefooted or wearing simple sandals, the woman in the painting is wearing golden shoes.

This text, fortunately, has a short colophon. It informs us that this manuscript was sponsored by a man and woman (Pan and Muan) in 1797.

Text is in Siamese/Thai with Khom script. There are numerous corrections and marginalia in pencil and other marks; see, for example, folio 44 on the A side. This text was obviously commonly read and used in rituals. There are no page numbers.

The second side starts with text, not illumination. In fact, unlike many illuminated manuscripts, the illustrations do not begin until the seventh folio/B side.

## CB THAI 1319

This is an 1897 Phra Malai text (figs. 8 and 9). It is a good complement to CB Thai 1310, which was written exactly a century earlier, in 1797. Comparing the two manuscripts, a student can see the not-so-subtle changes that took place over a century of Siamese manuscript production. This manuscript is very clean, and the script is thin, sharp, and angular. There is no separation by columns. The text is in Siamese/Thai with Khom script. Henry Ginsburg provided no extensive notes on this manuscript.

Some notable features include:

1. On the A side, the last eight pages (four folios) are blank. This is perhaps because these pages were prepared for future illuminations that were never finished. We often find blank pages at the ends of manuscripts, but not as commonly in the middle of manuscripts. When we do, they are most likely pages left blank by scribes for illuminators.



FIGURES 8 (LEFT) AND 9 (RIGHT). Illuminations depicting Phra Malai on his travels through various realms of existence, from an 1897 Phra Malai text. CB Thai 1319.

2. There is a long colophon in the beginning. The colophon is in Thai with Thai script, unlike the rest of the manuscript, which is with Khom script. This is common to see in late manuscripts as many scribes at this point were not trained in writing Khom script and could therefore merely copy previous manuscripts. New additions to manuscripts like colophons and commentaries are often in Siamese/Thai script.
3. This text starts with two *deva* paintings. Further down there is a third set of *deva* in gold ink with a black background, rather than black ink on white paper. While one might think it is strange that this third set appears in the middle of the manuscript because doing so would hide it from the casual observer, large manuscripts like this one are opened in the middle due to their weight distribution on a table or altar for reading.
4. The first narrative illustration is on the twenty-seventh folio (fifty-third page), a depiction of Phra Malai visiting hell and parents with what seems to be a ghost child. This could depict parents who long to see their deceased child and are projecting their aspirations to Phra



Malai. However, it also could be a sign of Phra Malai's superior vision. He is comforting the parents by telling them that he can see their deceased child and looks after him. Finally, the child could represent a *kuman thong* (golden ghost child) who stands in protection over the living, often family members or skilled practitioners who have learned to summon and control ghosts.

5. There is a correction in blue ink (ballpoint pen) on the last page of the first side.
6. On the second side of the manuscript, the first illumination is not found until page 15, where the illustrations become very realistic. There are scenes of *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation, the practice of monks meditating while looking at corpses. Such scenes are relatively common in Siamese manuscripts of the late nineteenth century and less so in earlier ones. The images seem to be for instructing and inspiring monks. They are similar to the murals found in the *ubosot* (ordination hall) of Wat Sommanat in Bangkok.<sup>7</sup> The paintings are smudged at points. The question remains here of why there would be paintings of such different subjects in the same manuscript. Was the illustrator trying to tell a story? Was he or she trying to provide

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7 They depict in detail the stages of *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation, including *lobitaka* (meditation on a bleeding corpse), *puḷavaka* (meditation on a worm-infested corpse), *vipubbaka* (meditation on a festering corpse), *vicchiddaka* (meditation on a corpse cut into two), *vikkhāyitaka* (meditation on a gnawed corpse), and *hata-vikkhittaka* (meditation on a scattered corpse). There is a manuscript (watercolor on mulberry paper with black lacquer covers) dated to the early nineteenth century acquired by Henry Walters labeled mistakenly as the "Abhidhammavaranaṭṭhāna" instead of the "Abhidhamma-vaṇṇanā-ṭṭhāna," which depicts similar scenes of different stages of a decomposing body with a monk seated in meditation. There is also one I am in the process of analyzing and cataloguing in the University of Pennsylvania manuscript collection. The detail of birds consuming the body, as well as a caption in Khom script on the eighth folio that reads "vikhatiyam" (a type of corpse meditation), indicate that the content and the sequence of the murals may have been inspired by these earlier illuminated manuscripts (although the painting style is very different). I thank Pattaratorn Chirapavati for pointing out this manuscript to me, as well as Hiram Woodward for sending me detailed photographs of the manuscript (W. 716 in the Walters Collection). There are also similar murals of this meditative practice in Wat Boworniwet, specifically the *Wihan Phra Sasada*, another *wihan* built under the direction of King Mongkut.

instruction through image? Was this just a collection of different paintings and the story did not matter? Were the paintings just seen as individual examples of the artist's skill? Or, perhaps, for the artist's own practice?

7. There is one illustration of a monk speaking with *deva* in front of European-style street lamps. This use of European architectural forms and objects was also common on mural paintings and in manuscripts in the late nineteenth century.
8. On the second side of the manuscript are more Phra Malai scenes, like the common one of a man clad in a white robe meditating in a cave while four men fight (which, as mentioned earlier, represents normal society in the age of Buddhist decline) with knives. Another scene that appears of commoners beneath jeweled trees is also from the Phra Malai story.
9. There are other ornamented pages, but nothing particularly notable.
10. The pages are not numbered.

## CB THAI 1349

Present unpublished catalogue description states: "Abhidhamma Northern Thai script." This description is wrong; it is in central Siamese script. The manuscript is quite modern, probably composed in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. These manuscripts generally have a greater range of pigments, a thinner and finer script, smoother paper, and, as to be expected, show less wear around the edges. More recent manuscripts also occasionally show signs of being "made to order" for foreigners or display rather than ritual use. It is the *Abhidhamma chet kamphi*. The cover title is in gold script on black *samut kloi* (mulberry) paper.<sup>8</sup> The paper is in excellent condition; the script has faded significantly in parts, but the text is

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8 For more information on the materials used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Siamese manuscripts, please see the thorough Jo-Fan Huang, "A Technical Examination of 7 Thai Manuscripts in the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries," n.d., [https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~anagpic/2006pdf/2006ANAGPIC\\_Huang.pdf](https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~anagpic/2006pdf/2006ANAGPIC_Huang.pdf), accessed 25 July 2015.

largely readable. It is primarily in Pali with occasional vernacular Siamese/Thai words. The title reads: “phra abhidhammatta[sangha]ha pariccheda 7 khamphri pururana (purana).” This is a standard text for chanting at central Siamese/Thai funerals.<sup>9</sup> The first leaf of the manuscript reads: “davasattativithāvuttā vatthudhammāsalakkaṅṅā tesanthāniyathāyokhang pavakathāmi samuccayaṃ // akusalasam khahomissakasamkhaho bodhipakkhiya samkhaho sabba samkha hoceti samucaya samkha hocatuvitho veditabbo.”<sup>10</sup> The last leaf reads: “cattāri ariyasaccāni dukkham ariyasaccam dukkham samudayo ariyasaccam dukkhanirodho ariyasaccam dukkhanirodhakkhāmi ni paṭipadā ariyasaccaṅṅa ettha panacetasikasukhumarūpanibbāna vasena ekunasatta.” The latter is the standard “four noble truths,” which may seem strange as an ending to a ritual funeral chanting text drawn creatively from parts of the Abhidhamma and *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, but it is also a common way of offering a blessing at the end of many Thai ritual texts.

This is a very common text; however, for the enthusiast it is particularly well preserved and clear, and the script is particularly beautiful.

## CB THAI 1351

Present catalogue description: “palm leaf, Northern Thai script.” This is accurate. This manuscript is missing one wooden cover. The gold and red lacquer on the sides of the leaves is in good shape. There is one binding string missing. The date in the colophon appears to be Culasakkarat 1198, although it is a little hard to read. This would make the text from 1836. Like many manuscripts in 1836 it was probably copied under the direction of Phra Kaṅcana Mahāthera at one of several monasteries near Wat Sung Men (or indeed at Wat Sung Men itself) in Phrae Province, Northern Thailand.

The first leaf states that the text is a *vohāra*, and like most *vohāra*-type texts, it is a mixture of Pali and Thai. The script certainly is similar to that

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9 For a longer description of this type of manuscript, see McDaniel, “Philosophical Embryology.”

10 The first sign of vernacular is the final “ng”; however, this is a common way of rendering the Pali “ṃ” in Thai script.

used by students of Phra Kañcana Mahāthera.<sup>11</sup> It is an anthology of ethical sermons that states that it is drawn from the “Suttanta Piṭaka, Vinaya Piṭaka, and Abhidhamma Piṭaka” (that is, the three “baskets” composing the Pali canon). However, this is a common claim for sermon manuscripts from Northern Thailand, and indeed many of these sermons (both their Pali and vernacular sections) are the product of local invention as well as preachers’ creative engagements with and direct quotations (usually from memory) from apocryphal and canonical Pali texts. Often the sermons begin with the phrase “Phra Buddha Chao desanā wā” (“The Buddha gave a sermon on . . .”) followed by a short Pali phrase and a longer, elaborate, and expansive vernacular translation/explanation. This was not a random collection of texts placed together haphazardly: the leaves seem to be in order and the gold and red lacquer on their sides is consistent, suggesting that it is a complete text.

The last leaf states that the text is drawn from the “Pakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Suttanta”; however, because of wear, the title is difficult to make out.

## CB THAI 1352

This is a manuscript from Northern Thailand written on mulberry paper. The first line gives the date of Culasakkarat 1206 (1844), which would make it very old for a mulberry-paper manuscript. Mulberry paper was used more in the late nineteenth century. In fact, the date is a little unbelievable based on the ink quality, which seems to be newer (1890s). It has nice handwriting and consistent orthography, which also might suggest a slightly later date. In the margin is a title: *Dhammasatra pakkaraṇa* (Legal text commentary). These were not very common from this date, which would make this text quite rare. The text is in the Northern Thai (Lanna/Yuan/Kham Muang) vernacular but uses some Pali technical words when describing laws. The

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11 For more information on Phra Kañcana Mahāthera, see Justin McDaniel, “Two Buddhist Librarians: The Proximate Mechanisms of Northern Thai Buddhist History,” in *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual, and Art*, ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober, and Claudia Brown (London: Routledge, 2009), 124–39.

first word after the colophon—(strangely) on the first page—is “Srisukkhawasadi” (the honorific form of “welcome”). The text then states that its message will “spread throughout the *triloka* [three worlds].” *Triloka* is glossed as “lok an sam sassadhammakhanuttammang an ben kap duang dharma haeng baeb rissa chao khana an udom.” This type of extended description of simple Pali words is characteristic of *vohāra* gloss texts.<sup>12</sup> What follows is a *vohāra*-type gloss/commentary on a legal text (unidentified, but based on Sanskrit-style Indian Dharmaśāstra texts). *Vohāra* texts based on legal texts are very rare. It is a “complete” manuscript (meaning that the whole text is intact) with some notes in margins as well as small flower drawings used as sentence and section breaks. There is another colophon at the end: “hai piccharana du hai di di” (“take heed and pay close attention to what you have just read”).<sup>13</sup>

### *Notable Manuscripts That Warrant Further Investigation*

#### CB THAI 1302

This manuscript is remarkable not just for its content and illustrations, but for what was found in its box in the Chester Beatty Library (figs. 10 and 11). It is a Siamese divination manuscript. These manuscripts were popular in the late nineteenth century, and there has recently been growing interest in them. For those who wish to learn more about the genre, I highly recommend M. L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati’s *Divination au royaume de Siam: le corps, la guerre, le destin*.<sup>14</sup> What is remarkable about the example found in the Chester Beatty is that there is a handwritten (pencil) French translation

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12 For a detailed study of *vohāra* manuscripts, see Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), ch. 4.

13 *Hai* is spelled *heu* in the standard Northern Thai idiom.

14 M. L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, *Divination au royaume de Siam: le corps, la guerre, le destin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires France, 2011).



FIGURE 10. Leaf from a Siamese divination manuscript from approximately 1845. CB Thai 1302.

on loose-leaf paper from around 1845 included in the box. The translation, while rough and mistaken in several sections, may have been the first French translation of a Siamese manuscript. At the end of the translation, the translator states that the text was very difficult to read and that he or she abandoned the project before completion. Nearly every translator of Siamese manuscripts from this period ended up doing the same, as they are certainly challenging to read and the divination manuscripts have complex symbols and codes about which there were (and are) few available scholarly reference works and resources. The translation was mostly likely completed before 1847, because the box also contains a letter from the counsel of Portugal dated 1847. Although the author of neither the translation nor the original manuscript is provided, the former could be the work of Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix (1805–1862), who was the vicar apostolic of Eastern Siam and a close confidant of King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam. He was also an accomplished linguist and scholar of the Siamese language, who in 1854 wrote the first Siamese–French–Latin–English dictionary. His dates of residency in



FIGURE 11. Leaf from a Siamese divination manuscript from approximately 1845. CB Thai 1302.

Siam—1838 to 1862—and his access to manuscripts would make him a likely candidate. The use of certain French words to translate Siamese words in the manuscript also closely follows Pallegoix’s later dictionary.<sup>15</sup>

The label on the inside of the box states: “Siamese magical manuscript Phrom Maxa.” I assume “Phrom Maxa” is an attempted rendering of Siamese *phrommachat* (in Sanskrit, *brahma-sāstra*), the general Siamese term for a technical text related to the sciences of protection, prognostication, and astrology. The price paid for this manuscript by the Chester Beatty Estate was seventy-five pounds.

### CB THAI 1331

Present catalogue description: “Palm leaf, Pali text (Sangini, Vibhanga pakarana sankhep, Dhatukatha atthakatha, Puggalapannati atthakatha,

<sup>15</sup> Presently, I am seeking out examples of Bishop Pallegoix’s handwriting to compare with this French translation. This may be Pallegoix’s own translation.

Kathavatthu atthakatha, Yamaka atthakatha, Mahapatthana [sic].” This is a list of the seven books of the Abhidhamma; however, it is not completely accurate. The manuscript is not the full text of these seven volumes of the Abhidhamma, but rather the sections of the *Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha* used for chanting at funerals. It is a common text without many notable features. However, it is rather beautiful (most likely produced for the funeral of a high-ranking official) and thus particularly valuable, demanding preservation and scholarly investigation.

### CB THAI 1343

This is another one of the strangest Siamese manuscripts I have come across (fig. 12). Its illustrations alone demand that we give it further attention. They are related neither to the text nor to other Siamese or Pali Buddhist texts, and seem to be ornamental. The items used therein are fascinating: seven *kinnara* (half-man/half-bird mythical creatures commonly found in art in South and Southeast Asia), and paintings of deer, Persian and Western people, the armies of Mara, and several types of flowers.<sup>16</sup>

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16 *Kinnari* are commonly depicted in Thai statuary, murals, and framed paintings, as well as on ornamental door panels and window shutters. The textual sources speak of seven *kinnari* sisters or a couple—female *kinnari* and male *kinnara*. They are half-human/half-birds popular in South and Southeast Asian mythology. However, in the *Mahābhārata* (in both the *Adi* and *Vana Parva*), the *Bhagavata Purāna* (see Purnendu Narayana Sinha, *A Study of the Bhagavata Purana; or, Esoteric Hinduism* [Benares: Freeman & Co., Ltd. 1901], 26–27), and the *Viṣṇu Purāna* (see Wilson Horace H. Wilson, trans., *The Vishnu Purana* [1840], <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/vp/index.htm>, accessed 13 July 2015), the male *kinnara* are half-horse/half-human and presented as one of the Himalayan tribes of superhumans. The horse changed to a bird in Southeast Asia, for reasons that are not entirely clear (it may have been due to there not being many horses or horse stories in the region). Despite the change, the basic story in the *Adi Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* and later Southeast Asian stories is of undying love and attachment between a married couple living without children alone in the forest. The most popular dramatic dance performance in Southeast Asia is probably that of the female *kinnari* and male *kinnara*.



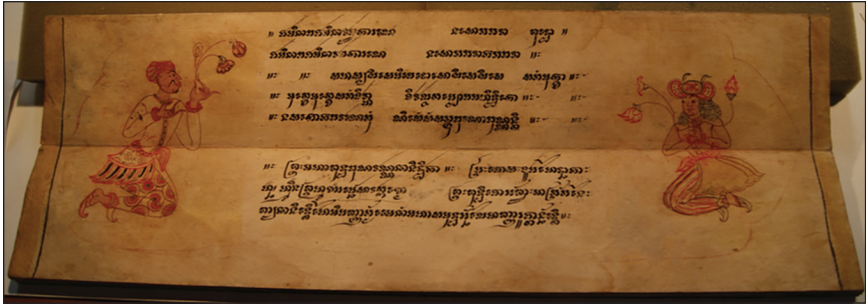


FIGURE 12. Fascinating depictions of kinnara, deer, Persian and Western people, armies of Mara, and several types of flowers. CB Thai 1343.

### CB THAI 1353

Present catalogue description: “folky.” This is a badly damaged apocryphal *jātaka* (Thai: *chadok nok nibat*) mulberry-paper manuscript that is in Tai Khoen script with elements of Shan and Lanna/Yuan/Muang script. It has crudely rendered pencil drawings and charts, and seems to be drawn from the *Sujavanna Hua Luang* cycle of stories from the Kengtung region of Burma. This text needs to be repaired and preserved, as it is a rare example of a local narrative with hand-drawn illustrations.

### CB THAI 1354

Recatalogued as *CB Lao 1*. The date and title of this palm-leaf manuscript was relatively difficult to determine. It was probably composed in the 1920s, judging from the text’s orthography and physical features. The script is one of the most full mixings of Tham (the pre-modern Lao script, related to Lanna/Yuan/Muang script in Northern Thailand and related Shan, Khoen, and Leu scripts) and modern Lao script I have ever seen, suggesting that the scribe was trained in the former but attempting to also write in the latter. Many of the final consonants are in Tham, initial consonants are often in modern Lao, and vowels are almost always converted to modern Lao. Occasionally one finds stray consonants and vowels in Tham. The

leaves are labeled in modern Lao script in alphabetical order (a, aa, i, and so on). The *kho khwai* consonant throughout the text is from modern Thai, not Lao, and the short “o” is assumed between consonants, as is the case in modern Thai. The text is most likely a manuscript from Savannakhet or Vientiane, but could even be from Mukhdahan or Northern Isan (Thailand). There is no attempt to overtly use Pali vocabulary or clauses, and it is in vernacular Lao. The text is in good condition and the script is very clear, which suggests a later date. It seems to be a narrative about a royal family, perhaps a section of the *Thao Hung Thao Chuang* (although a close comparative reading is necessary to make any definite claims; this text certainly begs more study). The first section mentions a ritual for protecting the city and calling the rain. The text also mentions a collection of different types of flowers, which may have been used in the ritual. It is a narrative certainly meant to display the writer’s use of complex vocabulary and alliteration (very poetic prose), and, unlike pedagogical and didactic texts, is not very repetitive. This text was meant for reading alone or verbatim to crowd. The dedication at the end mentions the scribe’s mother (although this is a bit difficult to read because of damage to the text).

## Conclusion

I hope that this article demonstrates the importance of the Chester Beatty Library’s collection of Thai manuscripts and more broadly highlights the importance of including the study of Ireland in the history of the study of Asia. I hope it also encourages future scholars to look to Ireland when writing the intellectual history of exchange between Asia and Europe. Even though Ireland was not a colonizing power—indeed, it was colonized for most of its pre-modern history—its libraries and museums attest to a people that spread far and wide across the globe sometimes as a point of necessity and sometimes in the spirit of exploration.

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W. 716: 192 n. 7
- Bangkok, Wat Suthat  
Wat Suthat Thep Wararam: 141–42, 142  
fig. 15
- Berlin, Berlin State Library  
Akta III F 17a 1834/1857: 90 n. 21  
MIK I 1430–32: 86 n. 12  
MIK 14745: 86 n. 12  
Ms. or. fol. 333–36: 90, 90 n. 22  
Ms. or. fol. 337–38: 91  
Ms. or. fol. 557–60: 85 n. 7  
Ms. or. fol. 3183–268: 101  
Ms. or. fol. 6563: 85 n.5, 86 n. 12  
Ms. or. fol. 6602–3: 86 n. 12  
Ms. or. fol. 7955: 86 n. 12  
Ms. or. 10612: 86 n. 12
- Berlin, Ethnological Museum  
Akte 24/3.94: 97 n. 48  
Berlin IC 13972: 96 n. 43
- Boston, Boston Public Library  
MS pb Med. 35: 260  
MS pb Med. 110.1–110.2: 259  
MS q Med. 85: 260
- Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum  
2.c.3.23: 260  
6.T.1: 259
- Cambridge, MA, Harvard Art Museum/  
Fogg Museum  
1954.127.A–B: 259
- Cambridge, MA, Houghton Library,  
Harvard University  
MS Richardson 42: 259
- MS Typ 37: 258  
MS Typ 956: 259  
MS Typ. 215: 258  
MS Typ 220: 258  
MS Typ 277: 258  
MS Typ 439: 209 n. 7, 219 n. 13  
MS 584: 258  
Thai manuscript #73: 219 n. 14
- Dresden, Dresden State Library  
6717–24: 85 n. 4  
6726–28: 85 n. 4  
6730: 85 n. 4  
25888: 85 n. 4  
33479 a: 85 n. 4  
34575: 85 n. 4
- Dresden, Ethnological Museum  
6730 Siam: 94  
25888 Siam: 100  
34575 Siam: 94
- Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen  
Ca-129: 88
- Dublin, Chester Beatty Library  
CB Thai 1302: 188, 196–98, 197 fig. 10,  
198 fig. 11  
CB Thai 1309: 188–89  
CB Thai 1310: 188, 189–90  
CB Thai 1319: 189, 190–93, 191  
figs. 8–9,  
CB Thai 1330: 179–87, 180 figs. 3–4, 181  
figs. 5–6, 182 fig. 7  
CB Thai 1331: 198–99  
CB Thai 1343: 188, 199, 200 fig. 12  
CB Thai 1349: 193–94  
CB Thai 1351: 194–95  
CB Thai 1352: 195–96

- CB Thai 1353: 200  
CB Thai 1354: 200–201
- Gotha, State Archive  
Ms. As. orient. No. 33: 92 n. 28
- Hamburg, Ethnological Museum  
13.54:2–4: 85 n. 6  
16.40:5: 85 n. 6  
1532:08: 85 n. 6  
1532:08a: 85 n. 6  
3033:07: 85 n. 6  
6717–28 Siam: 92 n. 30  
A 26: 85 n. 6  
A 46: 92  
A 903–4: 85 n. 6
- Hirado, Matsura Historical Museum  
A replica of the Horyuji Sanskrit manuscript. Paper manuscript.: 164–65, 166 fig. 4, 167  
Vessantara Jātaka. Paper manuscript: 163–64, 165 fig. 3
- Kyoto, Omiya Library, Ryukoku University  
Phra Malai. Paper manuscript (samut khoi): 172, 173 fig. 8
- London, British Library  
Add. MS 27370: 27  
Add. MS 20698: 247  
IOR L/MAR/A/XIII, ff. 28/29: 26  
MS Pali 207: 27  
Or 6942: 29  
Or 11827: 26  
Or 11828: 27  
Or 13652: 27  
Or 14068: 27  
Or 14179: 27  
Or 14528–29: 27  
Or 14613: 27  
Or 14722: 27  
Or 14732: 27  
Or 14559: 27  
Or 14664: 27
- Or 15245: 27  
Or 15749: 29  
Or 16009: 27  
Or 16552: 27, 39–48, 42 fig. 5, 43 fig. 6, 44 fig. 7, 47 fig. 8, 48 fig. 9
- London, Lambeth Palace Library  
MS. 461: 242, 244  
MS. 528: 245  
MS. 1176: 242–3, 245–6  
MS. 1177: 242  
MS. 1182: 245  
MS. 1183: 242  
MS. 1186: 245  
MS. 1187: 242–43  
MS. 1188: 242–43, 246  
MS. 1191–92: 245  
MS. 1194: 245  
MS. 1195: 242  
MS. 1197: 242  
MS. 1199: 242, 244  
MS. 1205: 244–45  
MS. 1214: 242  
MS. 2794: 242, 244  
MS. 2795: 244  
MS. Sion L40.2/G1: 243  
MS. Sion L40.2/G5: 242–43  
MS. Sion L40.2/G6: 242–44  
MS. Sion L40.2/G7: 243, 245  
MS. Sion L40.2/G9: 242–44  
MS. Sion L40.2/G10: 242  
MS. Sion L40.2/G11: 243, 246  
MS. Sion L40.2/G12: 242–44
- London, Royal Asiatic Society  
RAS Thai MS 2: 58, 71 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 4–6: 71 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 7: 71–72 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 8–9: 72 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 10.A–B: 72 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 13: 72 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 14: 72–73 appx. 2  
RAS Thai MS 15–20: 73 appx. 2

- RAS Thai MS 21: 73–74 appx. 2  
 RAS Thai MS 21.A-C: 74 appx. 2  
 RAS Thai MS 21.E: 74 appx. 2  
 RAS Thai MS 30: 74 appx. 2
- London, Wellcome Library  
 9541: 70 appx. 2  
 MS 801: 70 appx. 2  
 Thai 1–4: 62 appx. 2  
 Thai 5: 62–63 appx. 2  
 Thai 5/10818: 70 appx. 2  
 Thai 6–11: 63 appx. 2  
 Thai 12: 63–64 appx. 2  
 Thai 13–18: 64 appx. 2  
 Thai 19–30: 65 appx. 2  
 Thai 31–37: 66 appx. 2  
 Thai 38–44: 67 appx. 2  
 Thai 45–51: 68 appx. 2  
 Thai 52: 68–69 appx. 2  
 Thai 53–59: 69 appx. 2  
 Thai 60–61: 70 appx. 2  
 Thai 64: 70 appx. 2  
 WMS Pāli Thai 22: 71 appx. 2  
 WMS Thai Lao: 70 appx. 2
- Manchester, John Rylands Library  
 Pali MS 82: 79–80 appx. 2  
 Siamese (Thai) MS 1–4: 77 appx. 2  
 Siamese (Thai) MS 5–10: 78 appx. 2  
 Siamese (Thai) MS 11: 78–79 appx. 2
- Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek  
 (Bavarian State Library)  
 BSB cod.siam 1: 91 n. 25  
 BSB cod.siam 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 17, 18, 31:  
 86 n. 11  
 BSB cod.siam 33: 87 n. 15  
 BSB cod.siam 35: 85, 85 n. 9, 86 n. 11  
 BSB cod.siam 36, 93, 106, 107, 108, 110,  
 111: 86 n. 11  
 BSB cod.siam 98: 86  
 BSB cod.siam 129: 85  
 BSB cod.siam 130: 86 n. 11  
 BSB cod.siam 149: 85
- BSB cod.siam 189: 85  
 BSB cod.siam 193: 85
- Naples, Biblioteca Maurizio Taddei,  
 University of Naples “L’Orientale”  
 Uncatalogued manuscript, Ratanakosin  
 period: 113–18, 115 fig. 1, 116 figs. 2–3,  
 117 fig. 4, 119 fig. 5  
 Uncatalogued manuscript, Ratanakosin  
 period: 118–21, 120 fig. 6  
 Uncatalogued manuscript, Ratanakosin  
 period: 121–22, 123 fig. 7
- New York, Burke Library of the Union  
 Theological Seminary  
 Manuscript 21 (Poleman 6376): 215  
 Manuscript 22 (Poleman 6399): 215  
 Museum KP23.9/Library No. 1177: 215
- New York, New York Public Library  
 Thai/Spencer Collection manuscript  
 numbers 6, 7, 22, 25: 214  
 Siamese Manuscript no. 1: 214  
 Siamese Manuscript no. 3: 214  
 Siamese Manuscript no. 4: 214
- Osaka, National Museum of Ethnology  
 H0009692 (NME9692): 171  
 Phra Malai. Paper manuscript (samut  
 khoi): 171, 172 fig. 7
- Oxford, Bodleian Library  
 BODL. Dep. Stol. 111: 74–75 appx. 2  
 BODL. Dep. Stol. 112: 75 appx. 2  
 BODL. Dep. Stol. 113: 75 appx. 2  
 BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. a. 8(R):  
 75 appx. 2  
 BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. a. 9(R):  
 75 appx. 2  
 BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. a. 11(R):  
 76 appx. 2  
 BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. a. 23(R):  
 76 appx. 2  
 BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. a. 25(R):  
 76 appx. 2

- BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. c. 16(R):  
76 appx. 2  
BODL. Ms. Asiat. Misc. c. 27(R):  
76 appx. 2  
BODL. Ms. Pali. a. 27(R): 20  
BODL. Ms. Pali. a. 31(R): 76–77  
appx. 2  
BODL. Ms. Pali. a. 50(R): 77 appx. 2
- Pakkret, Thailand  
A Mon palm-leaf manuscript from  
Pakkret, Thailand: 143 figs. 16–18
- Phetchaburi, Thailand, Wat Pak Khlong  
1. Miscellaneous chants, late Ayutthaya  
period (Wat Pak Khlong No. 3): 136–38,  
137 figs. 5–6, 137 n. 19  
2. Miscellaneous chants, early Bangkok  
period (Wat Pak Khlong No. 1):  
136, 138–40, 139 figs. 7–9, 140 figs.  
11–14  
3. Delineation of monastic boundaries,  
CE 1874: 136, 143–6, 144 fig. 18,  
145 figs. 19–20, 146 fig. 22, 157 figs.  
22–23  
4. An astrological manuscript written in  
yellow pigment, early twentieth century:  
136, 146–48, 148 fig. 24  
5. Phra Malai Klon Suat, in Thai  
language, late Ayutthaya Khom script:  
136
- Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania  
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology  
Obj. # 29-170-11: 203 fig. 1, 205 fig. 2,  
206 n. 3  
Obj. # 29-170-12: 207 n. 5  
Ms. 89-13-251: 235–37
- Philadelphia, University of  
Pennsylvania Library  
Ms. Coll. 390, Item 2990: 223, 223 n. 20  
Ms. Coll. 390, Item 2991: 224–26,  
224 n. 23  
Ms. Coll. 390, Item 2992: 223–24,  
224 n. 21  
Ms. Coll. 990, Item 5: 229, 233, 235
- Stuttgart, Linden Museum  
Hs. 56816 siam: 98  
Hs. 56817 siam: 98
- Takasago, Jurinji temple  
Vessantara Jātaka: 168–69, 169 fig. 5
- Takasago, Shinjoji temple  
Vessantara Jātaka: 169, 170 fig. 6
- Takasago, Zenryuji temple  
Bra maṅgaladipani-aṭṭhakathā-  
maṅgalasūtra, phuuk 18: 169–70 n. 41
- Wellesley, MA, Wellesley College,  
Margaret Clapp Library  
MS 33: 259