

BOOKS WRITTEN ON LEAVES: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONSERVATION AND PROMOTION OF THE PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPT HERITAGE IN AN GIANG PROVINCE, VIETNAM**Chau Huy Ngoc – Nguyen Duc Thang¹***(Received 04 November 2024; revised 14 January 2025; accepted 10 Februar 2025)*

Abstract

Palm-leaf manuscripts are significant heritage artifacts of South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures, including the Khmer community in the South. The recognition of the "Knowledge and techniques of writing on palm leaves of the Khmer people" from Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên districts in An Giang province as part of Vietnam's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage underscores their cultural importance. Despite this recognition, the preservation and promotion of palm-leaf scriptures remain challenging due to various factors. This article examines global studies on the preservation and enhancement of palm-leaf manuscripts to glean international insights. Based on these findings, the article offers recommendations to improve the preservation and promotion of these manuscripts in Tịnh Biên and Tri Tôn districts, An Giang province.

Keywords: palm leaf manuscripts, books written on leaves, An Giang, conservation, international experience

1. Problem statement

Palm-leaf manuscripts preserved in Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagodas in An Giang province represent a significant cultural heritage of the Khmer community. The expertise and techniques involved in creating these manuscripts, particularly in the Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên districts, have been officially recognized as part of Vietnam's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, as per Decision No. 217/QĐ-BVHTTDL, issued on January 23, 2017, by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. This recognition underscores the cultural value of palm-leaf scriptures, highlighting their importance not only to the local Khmer community in An Giang but also at the national level.

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In response, the People's Committee of An Giang province has launched a project aimed at preserving these manuscripts. This includes initiatives for digitizing both the images and text content, as well as implementing strategies to conserve the writing techniques, achieving notable results thus far. For the continued enrichment of the cultural, historical, and social significance of these manuscripts, it is essential to promote their value beyond the immediate community and reach a broader audience across the nation. This effort requires not only the dedication and initiatives of all stakeholders but also the integration of insights from global research on palm-leaf manuscripts. Such international perspectives can provide valuable reference experiences to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to study, preserve, and promote the heritage of palm-leaf manuscripts in An Giang and beyond. However, until recently, studies on palm-leaf manuscripts in Vietnam remain scarce with none tackle the international literature for proposing recommendations for the conservation and promotion of these precious texts for contemporary use. This article serves the role of filling the gap of such an important issue.

2. Research methods

Due to the limited number of studies on palm-leaf manuscripts in Vietnam—such as those focusing on the Cham manuscripts in Ninh Thuận by Truong Van Mon (2016), the Khmer manuscripts in An Giang by Nguyễn Văn Lùng and Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh (2021), and the contributions of these manuscripts to An Giang tourism by Đào Ngọc Cảnh and Ngô Thị Ái Nhi (2018)—this article adopts a general review method. This method primarily draws upon research conducted on palm-leaf manuscripts over the past two decades by scholars from North America, Europe, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The general review approach enables a comprehensive examination of various aspects of palm-leaf manuscripts and identifies new research avenues that warrant further exploration and validation in specific local contexts. This methodology aids researchers in developing both conceptual and practical frameworks for future studies, enriching their own work as well as that of other scholars. After performing bibliographic search and refinement, twenty eight documents were utilized for this article. Among the documents, twenty five are materials published in English reflecting the scarcity of research on palm-leaf manuscripts in Vietnam. Other than Vietnam, the works employed in this article cover a diverse range of geographical areas including India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Southern China, manifesting the widespread distribution of palm-leaf manuscripts in Asia.

The data collected during this research process have been systematized and categorized into key topics: the origin and current presence of palm-leaf books globally, their historical, cultural, and practical values, and the strategies for their preservation and promotion through various activities. This structured organization offers a clearer understanding of the multifaceted nature of palm-leaf manuscripts and their significance.

3. Findings

3.1. *Origin and the presence of books written on leaves in the world today*

The origins of using palm leaves, including *Corypha umbraculifera*, as a medium for writing in South Asia and later Southeast Asia remain uncertain. A significant reason for this uncertainty is the practice of re-copying damaged text to preserve its content, after which the original manuscripts were often destroyed or ritually released into rivers and streams (Sah, 2002). The few surviving manuscripts from before the 10th century date back to at least the 2nd century AD. However, references to leaves as writing materials suggest that by the 5th century BC, they were being used to record Buddhist scriptures (Sah, 2002).

The practice of writing on leaves spread from the South Asian subcontinent to both island and mainland Southeast Asia before the era of Islamization, which began in the 12th–13th centuries (Rachman, 2018), and also influenced the region now known as southern China (Li and Moore, 2014). In Bali, Indonesia, these manuscripts are referred to as lontar, derived from the leaves of the tal tree or palmyra (Kurnia and Sudarma, 2017). In Thailand, they are known as *khamphi bailan*, named after the specific type of palm leaf used (Willard et al., 2023). The Thai people in Yunnan Province, China refer to their leaf manuscripts as *bei ye* scriptures (Li & Moore, 2014).

In Vietnam, the tradition of maintaining palm-leaf books continues among the Cham and Khmer communities. They call the leaves used *buông* and since many leaf manuscripts serve religious purposes, these texts are often referred to as "*buông* leaf scriptures" (Truong Van Mon, 2016; Nguyễn Văn Lùng and Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh, 2021). This ongoing preservation highlights the cultural and religious significance of palm-leaf manuscripts within these communities.

In academic discourse, the term "palm leaf manuscripts" is commonly used by English-speaking scholars to refer to texts written on leaves in South Asia and Southeast Asia (Nguyễn Văn Lùng and Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh, 2021). Although books written on leaves vary by geographical region and specific tree species, they all originate from the Palm family

(*Arecaceae*). The primary species involved include: 1) *Borassus flabellifer* Linn (commonly known as the palmyra palm or toddy palm), whose leaves are initially flexible but become hard, thick, and rough, rendering them more susceptible to insect attacks compared to talipot palm leaves; 2) *Corypha umbraculifera* Linn (known as the talipot palm or fan palm), whose leaves serve multiple purposes—such as making fans, mats, or umbrellas—are flexible, maintain elasticity over a long period, and possess a smoother surface compared to palmyra leaves; and 3) *Corypha taliera* Roxb, characterized by thick and hard leaves that are also prone to insect attacks (Wiland et al., 2022). Based on their resistance to termites and their enduring flexibility, as well as corroborating sources of information, we propose that the Khmer's palm-leaf manuscripts in An Giang province are likely crafted from the leaves of the talipot palm, specifically *Corypha umbraculifera* Linn, which appears to be more commonly used than the other species (Wiland et al., 2022).

Today, palm-leaf manuscripts are extensively preserved in many countries that uphold this tradition, including India, Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, and China (Cerulli, 2020; Cabra et al., 2018; Elkington et al., 2009; Jarusawat et al., 2018; Tin, 2016; Parma et al., 2021; Valy et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). In addition to their areas of origin in South Asia and Southeast Asia, palm-leaf manuscripts are also housed in various locations around the world, including museums in Europe and North America (Wiland et al., 2023). As a result, these leaf books have attracted scholarly interest globally, particularly concerning their preservation and the potential for information extraction for scientific endeavors (Cerulli, 2020).

3.2. Cultural, historical, and practical values

Palm-leaf books served as the primary means of preserving and transmitting community knowledge across generations until their decline in the late 19th century. These manuscripts are not only historical and artistic artifacts but also embody invaluable intangible values. The contents inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts encompass various types of community knowledge, with religious scriptures—particularly Buddhism and Brahmanism—holding a central position. These texts are regarded as sacred objects, accessible only to individuals of noble status, such as monks and royalty, who possess the authority to read them (Truong Van Mon, 2016; Haspari, 2022). Given the prominence of Buddhist scriptures within Theravada Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia, both in religious practice and educational contexts, larger volumes typically consist of Buddhist teachings, while shorter manuscripts are often

utilized to record communal knowledge compiled by experienced community members (Chamnongsri, 2019).

Other forms of knowledge documented on palm leaves comprehensively reflect various aspects of community life, including history, moral teaching, traditional ritual instructions, community culture, and medicine (Wiland et al., 2022). This body of practical knowledge, originating from ancient times, continues to be preserved in written form. Consequently, the study of the culture and traditional life of communities that have produced palm-leaf manuscripts should be closely linked to an examination of the contents of these "leaf scriptures." For instance, in the Tai community of Yunnan Province, China, palm-leaf books are so integral to their cultural identity that the community is referred to as having a "palm-leaf culture" (贝叶文化). This designation arises because the entirety of their culture—including philosophy, law, religion, medicine, literature, and legends—is preserved on palm leaves, often in conjunction with Buddhist teachings at Southern Buddhist temples in the region (Li and Moore, 2014). Due to the significance of palm-leaf manuscripts for the Tai people, representative scriptures are highly valued and safeguarded at the Chinese Nationalities Cultural Palace in Beijing (Zhang et al., 2021). The community views the preservation of these palm-leaf books as a crucial means of maintaining their cultural heritage and ethnic identity (Li and Moore, 2014).

In addition to their cultural significance, palm-leaf manuscripts serve as valuable historical documents, particularly when analyzed alongside other historical sources. In certain regions of India, these manuscripts are regarded as crucial historical resources, utilized by researchers to compare and identify new events (Meher, 2009). Similarly, in Myanmar, palm-leaf manuscripts are considered important historical records. Kaung (2008) demonstrated that a palm-leaf text documenting the Burmese court's envoys sent to the Qing Dynasty during Emperor Qianlong's reign, when analyzed in conjunction with ancient Chinese documents and the Burmese king's official letter to the Qing Dynasty—preserved at the National Palace Museum in Taipei—has elucidated significant events in Myanmar's history. Therefore, beyond their role as cultural artifacts, palm-leaf books possess substantial potential as important historical sources for the communities that created them.

Besides cultural values, the knowledge written on the leaves still has practical applications today, especially in the field of medicine. Some common diseases mentioned in the leaf books in Myanmar include some gynecological diseases, fever, smallpox, gout, diarrhea, epilepsy

and urinary tract diseases, etc. (Tin, 2016). Research by Elkington et al. (2009) used modern pharmaceutical techniques to determine the effectiveness of tuberculosis treatment of herbs recorded in leaf books kept at the Traditional Medicine Research Center in Laos as well as commonly used by local physicians. The results showed that some herbs showed the ability to inhibit the tuberculosis virus by up to 45%, some by nearly 100%. In Sri Lanka, traditional medical knowledge from leaf books continues to be applied in indigenous medicine, which is an important factor in preserving and promoting the identity of this country's medicine (Ransara et al., 2021). Thai scholars also emphasize the practical application of medical knowledge recorded in leaf books (Jarusawat et al., 2018).

In addition, the knowledge documented on palm leaves continues to have practical applications today, particularly in the field of medicine. In Myanmar, various common ailments noted in palm-leaf manuscripts include gynecological diseases, fever, smallpox, gout, diarrhea, epilepsy, and urinary tract infections (Tin, 2016). Research by Elkington et al. (2009) employed modern pharmaceutical techniques to assess the efficacy of herbal treatments for tuberculosis, as recorded in the leaf books housed at the Traditional Medicine Research Center in Laos, which are also commonly utilized by local practitioners. The findings indicated that some herbs were effective in inhibiting the tuberculosis virus by as much as 45%, with others achieving nearly complete inhibition. In Sri Lanka, traditional medical knowledge derived from palm-leaf manuscripts continues to be integral to indigenous medicine, playing a critical role in the preservation and promotion of the nation's medical identity (Ransara et al., 2021). Additionally, Thai scholars recognize the practical applications of the medical knowledge documented in these manuscripts (Jarusawat et al., 2018).

Thus, leaf-written texts represent a valuable heritage for ethnic communities in Southeast Asia. They serve not only as sacred objects that record religious scriptures but also as a means of transmitting culture and preserving community identity. Moreover, these manuscripts encapsulate knowledge about the past while maintaining relevance in contemporary applications. As Wiland et al. (2023:84) aptly stated:

Texts should be handled and stored with care, as demonstrated by the decorated cupboards and chests they are traditionally stored in. Manuscripts should be allowed to be viewed by the communities who hold them in great regard, with the possibility of being handled if appropriate as part of the culture of reverence. Each part of the palm leaf manuscript has a hidden meaning for the cultures who created them and represent a community's ancestral crafts and beliefs.

3.3. *Conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts*

As organic materials, the quality of leaves used for writing manuscripts inevitably declines over time due to environmental influences and internal processes. This deterioration is almost an unavoidable phenomenon. Wiland et al. (2022) identified several factors that affect the quality of palm-leaf manuscripts, with the first two groups being the most significant:

Inherent Material Deterioration: As organic materials, palm leaves are subject to aging over time, leading to increased vulnerability and brittleness. The compounds initially used to treat the leaves lose their effectiveness, resulting in a loss of elasticity.

Environmental Factors: Conditions such as light, temperature, and humidity can cause blistering, cracking, and splitting. The most prevalent damage arises from insects, including termites, cockroaches, bookworms, and, to a lesser extent, rodents and molds that create holes in the leaves. Additionally, leaves can become stained by dirt or water, promoting mold growth. Environmental factors also contribute to oxidative and acidic degradation, which can result in fading and deterioration of the protective compounds applied to the leaves.

Usage Damage: Handling can lead to local delamination, frayed edges, broken leaves, and loss of sections. Improper restoration techniques further exacerbate this damage.

Improper Storage: Inadequate storage conditions contribute significantly to the deterioration of palm-leaf manuscripts. Traditionally, these texts should be wrapped in cloth and stored in specialized wooden boxes or hung on designated racks. However, improper practices, such as stacking them on shelves or in warehouses, increase the likelihood of breakage. Without controlled environmental conditions, such as those found in large museums, the degradation of palm-leaf manuscripts accelerates. Therefore, maintaining a controlled environment is essential for prolonging the lifespan of these valuable artifacts.

It is evident that palm-leaf manuscripts are vulnerable to adverse effects from the external environment during both storage and use. To mitigate these impacts, it is essential to store these manuscripts in controlled environmental conditions, particularly with regard to humidity and temperature. Zhang et al. (2021) compared the preservation conditions of leaf-written books at the Chinese Nationalities Culture Palace in Beijing with those at a private museum in

Shanghai, highlighting the critical importance of environmental control in safeguarding these documents.

At the Chinese Nationalities Culture Palace, a stable temperature of 16–22 °C and humidity levels of 45–60% were maintained within a properly designed storage room and cabinetry system, allowing for minimal damage to the manuscripts. In contrast, the private museum in Shanghai housed leaf books in glass cases under conventional room conditions, which experienced temperature fluctuations between 17–33 °C and humidity levels of 60–80%. These conditions failed to meet appropriate storage standards, leading to significant deterioration, including mold growth on the leaf blades (Zhang et al., 2021).



The Underground storeroom of Cultural Palace Library of Nationalities in Beijing (China)

(Source: Zhang et al., 2021)

The findings from this study underscore that storage conditions are vital for the physical preservation of palm-leaf manuscripts. To ensure effective preservation, Wiland et al. (2023) recommended maintaining the storage environment at a temperature of 16–19 °C with humidity stabilized at 50±5%.

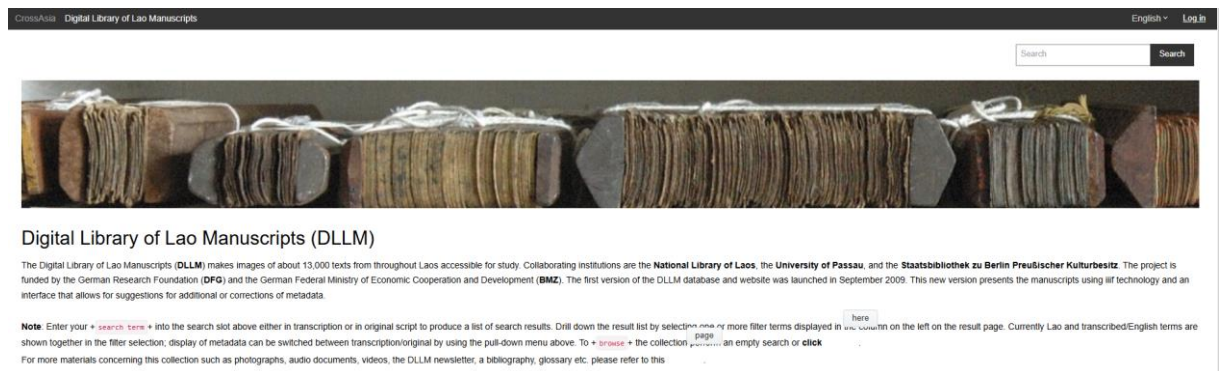
In addition to the essential requirements of temperature and humidity control, palm-leaf manuscripts must be stored in specially designed sealed boxes to ensure their preservation. Research has shown that placing these manuscripts in glass cabinets under standard conditions can negatively impact their quality (Zhang et al., 2021).

Traditionally, palm leaf books in Southeast Asian countries are stored in wooden boxes, often wrapped in special paper or layered cloth for protection (Zhang et al., 2021; Wiland et al., 2023). In Nepal, where constructing standard storage facilities may not be feasible, palm-

leaf manuscripts are wrapped in layers of *lokta* paper, which is produced using traditional methods. These wrapped manuscripts are then placed in specially designed cardboard storage boxes that incorporate insulation and moisture-proof properties. The lids of these boxes are treated with *polypropylene* to enhance water resistance, thus creating a relatively stable environment for the manuscripts within (Wiland et al., 2023).

Thanked to their organic nature, palm-leaf manuscripts inevitably deteriorate over time with use. Currently, these texts are primarily utilized for research purposes, which necessitates the digitization and classification of the information contained within them. This approach not only aids in conservation efforts but also facilitates research and accessibility to these documents. Moreover, while standard facilities for storing palm-leaf manuscripts are still under development, digitization presents an immediate and cost-effective solution (Sah, 2002).

In Laos, starting in the 1990s, the National Library of Laos, with the support of international organizations from Germany, initiated the collection and preservation of palm-leaf manuscripts stored in over 800 pagodas across the country. This effort included digitization, allowing researchers to access tens of thousands of documents with advanced features for information retrieval.



The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts Project

(Source: <https://digital.crossasia.org/digital-library-of-lao-manuscripts/?lang=en>)

Similarly, India is currently engaged in a project to digitize millions of microfilm copies derived from leaf texts collected over several decades. Additionally, smaller-scale digitization initiatives are also taking place in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Thailand (Chamnongsri, 2019). These efforts highlight the global commitment to preserving and providing access to the rich knowledge contained in palm-leaf manuscripts.

Conservation efforts are most effective when the heritage-producing community actively participates in the process. Li and Moore (2014) noted that interactions with the national community and socio-economic changes affecting the Tai ethnic group in Southern China have led to a decline in interest among the younger generation in traditional culture, including the significance of Theravada Buddhism in their lives. This growing indifference poses a threat to community identity, which includes the preservation and promotion of the heritage associated with their palm-leaf manuscripts.

To counteract this trend, initiatives aimed at highlighting the value of heritage within the Tai community in China have focused on revitalizing the practice of reciting sutras from palm leaves at Theravada Buddhist temples in the region (Chen, 2014). Leeka et al. (2015) argue that effective conservation must begin with the community's recognition of the importance of palm-leaf manuscripts, a recognition that can be fostered through collaboration among the government, temples, and community members. Additionally, Jarusawat et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of cooperative efforts between the community and researchers. They assert that palm-leaf books are not only vital cultural resources for studying history and other intellectual pursuits but also play a critical role in shaping community identity.

3.4. Promotions of palm-leaf manuscripts

In conservation efforts, promoting the values of palm-leaf manuscripts is an essential area of focus globally. It is crucial to raise awareness of the significance and importance of these texts among the communities that own them, as this understanding can empower community members to actively participate in conservation efforts and foster pride in their heritage (Li and Moore, 2014).

Hapsari (2022) illustrated that the revival of Hindu rituals associated with palm-leaf manuscripts by the Balinese in Indonesia has enhanced community engagement in activities surrounding these texts, which are considered sacred. This revival has evolved into a movement, inspiring the predominantly Muslim community to organize prayer sessions on a larger and more formal scale than previously conducted (Hapsari, 2022).

Moreover, building community awareness is paramount. Leeka et al. (2015) recommended organizing scientific seminars that involve various stakeholders, particularly influential community members, monks, and scholars, to foster a correct understanding of palm-leaf manuscripts and dispel any superstitions associated with them. Such initiatives can play a

vital role in strengthening community connections to their cultural heritage and enhancing collective efforts to preserve and promote the significance of palm-leaf manuscripts.

The restoration of rituals associated with palm-leaf manuscripts serves not only the internal promotion of community heritage but also contributes to the development of unique tourism products. Chen (2014) highlighted this phenomenon in his study of the Thai community in China. Similarly, the heritage of palm-leaf manuscripts in Bali, Indonesia, has long been leveraged as a tourism asset. The Gedong Kirtya Museum, established in 1928 during the Dutch colonial period, was created for the purpose of collecting and cataloging palm-leaf manuscripts in Bali. Today, it stands as a renowned tourist destination, housing a collection of palm-leaf scriptures written in ancient Javanese, ancient Balinese, and Sanskrit.

Currently, the museum preserves 4,520 palm leaf scriptures stored in specially designed wooden boxes that undergo a treatment process to prevent termite infestation. Additionally, the museum offers activities for visitors to learn how to read and write on palm leaves. These experiences are particularly appealing to tourists, as they not only acquire skills in traditional writing but also gain insights into the tools and methods used by ancient people to document significant events. Through these activities, tourists also have the opportunity to appreciate the artistic value of these creations (Parma et al., 2021). This integration of cultural heritage and tourism not only promotes community identity but also fosters economic development through cultural engagement.

In addition to being a heritage that draws tourists, palm-leaf manuscripts also serve as a valuable resource for researchers, both domestic and international, seeking to access historical documents, consult experts, and engage with the communities that maintain these leaf books. Cerulli (2020) described a journey through various palm-leaf manuscript archives in India, highlighting that these locations attract scholars from around the globe interested in studying Indian culture and simultaneously draw donors who wish to invest in conservation efforts.

The gathering of scholarly interactions focused on these manuscripts, which preserve ancient knowledge, is likely to lead to new discoveries that can illuminate the past. This is exemplified by Kuang (2008), whose research uncovered significant historical insights through the study of palm-leaf documents. The potential of these manuscripts as a conduit for academic exploration underscores their importance not only as cultural artifacts but also as critical resources for understanding and preserving historical knowledge.

3.5. The conservation and utilization of palm-leaf manuscripts in Vietnam, particularly in An Giang province

Currently, research on palm-leaf manuscripts in Vietnam remains limited, and comprehensive statistics regarding the total number of these texts nationwide are lacking; available data are primarily restricted to individual provinces. Studies by Truong Van Mon (2016) and Nguyễn Văn Lùng and Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh (2021) indicate that these manuscripts are predominantly preserved within two communities: the Cham Ahier in the South-Central Coast and the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. The majority of these texts are located in religious institutions associated with the Cham and Khmer peoples. Additionally, some manuscripts are preserved and exhibited in museums, while a few are retained in private homes (Phú Văn Hãn & Trương Quang Đạt, 2023).

The Cham Ahier community primarily preserves palm-leaf manuscripts in the provinces of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận. These manuscripts are stored in various locations, including the Cham Cultural Research Center in Ninh Thuận Province, which houses 12 manuscripts; the Ninh Thuận Provincial Museum, with 7 manuscripts; the Cham Cultural Exhibition Center in Bình Thuận Province, containing 4 manuscripts; and the Bình Thuận Provincial Museum, which holds 5 manuscripts. Additionally, individual homes in Bình Thuận Province contain 11 manuscripts (Bá Minh Truyền, 2023).

For the Khmer people in the Mekong Delta, palm-leaf manuscripts are predominantly found in Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagodas (Phú Văn Hãn & Trương Quang Đạt, 2023). Notably, An Giang Province is one of the regions that houses the largest number of palm-leaf manuscripts belonging to the Khmer community in Vietnam. Within An Giang, these manuscripts are preserved in 30 out of 65 Khmer pagodas located in the Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên districts, encompassing over 103 sets of Buddhist scriptures that include a total of 736 manuscripts. Each set of manuscripts is approximately 100 years old (Sở Nội vụ tỉnh An Giang [An Giang province's Department of Home Affairs], 2019). Furthermore, the knowledge and techniques associated with writing palm-leaf manuscripts among the Khmer people in Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên districts were recognized as part of the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2017.

Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of palm-leaf manuscripts, authorities at both central and local levels, alongside the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagodas, universities, and community members, have dedicated efforts to preserving and promoting this invaluable cultural heritage. Notably, the People's Committee of An Giang

Province issued Decision 2608/QĐ-UBND on November 8, 2021, which approved a project focused on the preservation and promotion of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage titled "Knowledge and Techniques of Writing on Bông Leaves of the Khmer People in An Giang Province." This initiative aims to sustain and transmit the unique values of Bông leaf scriptures to future generations until 2030 (Trọng Tín, 2021).



*Palm-leaf manuscripts stored in a Khmer Buddhist temple in An Giang province
(Source: Trong Tin, 2021)*

Furthermore, the Central Committee of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Executive Committee of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in An Giang Province, and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities at Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, organized a workshop titled "Preserving and Promoting the Intangible Cultural Values of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts" on May 10-11, 2023. This event marked the first workshop dedicated to palm-leaf manuscripts.

In addition to institutional efforts, many collectors and scholars have engaged in collecting, classifying, researching, analyzing, evaluating, compiling, and disseminating knowledge about palm-leaf manuscripts. They have played a crucial role in educating the Khmer community and those interested in this heritage. The results of these activities have significantly contributed to the preservation and promotion of the cultural value inherent in palm-leaf manuscripts.

However, the preservation of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts in An Giang province remains critically under-resourced. A primary challenge is the dwindling number of skilled artisans: the technique is currently mastered by only one individual, the Most Venerable Chau Ty (aged eighty), despite his efforts and those of local authorities to transmit this knowledge (Trần Ngọc, 2024). Further compounding this is the scarcity of suitable raw materials. The Most Venerable Chau Ty's assessment of the situation is as follows:

The Government should introduce policies to support, protect and plant more palm trees that supply the leaves for palm-leaf manuscript crafting training aiming at restoring the manuscript collection of Khmer temples [in An Giang province]. As far as I know, each temple has 4-5 palm trees in [in their yards]. Most of them are not eligible for producing good quality leaves for manuscript crafting. We now have to purchase the materials from across the border in Cambodia. (cited from Dân tộc và Phát triển, 2021)

That means, despite national-level recognition of their cultural value, the effective conservation and promotion of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts in An Giang province requires significantly more attention and resources.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Palm-leaf manuscripts represent a precious heritage, embodying significant value not only in their textual content and the organic nature of the leaves but also as instruments for cultural transmission and the reinforcement of community identity. Current global studies indicate that the conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts necessitates a dual approach that combines physical preservation techniques with the digitization of their content. This endeavor requires the active participation of multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, religious institutions, communities, and academic researchers.

Beyond conservation efforts, promoting the value of palm-leaf manuscripts is equally important. A key strategy is to engage the community by revitalizing the rituals associated with these manuscripts. Additionally, organizing conferences and seminars that bring together stakeholders—particularly community members, religious organizations, and scholars—is essential for fostering dialogue and collaboration.

Furthermore, palm-leaf manuscripts have the potential to serve as a unique tourism product, attracting not only tourists but also researchers and sponsors interested in exploring and disseminating the significance of this distinct cultural heritage. By leveraging these

manuscripts for tourism, communities can enhance awareness, appreciation, and support for the preservation of this invaluable heritage.

Based on these observations, we propose several recommendations for the conservation and promotion of palm-leaf manuscript heritage in An Giang Province:

Firstly, conservation efforts should be implemented effectively through a combination of physical preservation and digitization of the content found in palm-leaf manuscripts. For physical conservation, it is essential to establish standard preservation conditions. In instances where resources are limited, local authorities and relevant stakeholders should organize storage that minimizes environmental impacts, using preservation techniques aligned with international best practices.

Regarding the digitization of local content, collaboration with experts in information science and archiving is crucial. This partnership will facilitate the effective integration of preservation efforts with robust information management strategies. Digitization, coupled with systematic information organization, will not only aid in preserving the content of palm-leaf manuscripts but also enhance the management and accessibility of these documents for long-term use.

Secondly, it is essential to mobilize social and community resources to support activities aimed at preserving and promoting the value of palm-leaf manuscript heritage. Community members should be informed about the importance of these manuscripts and encouraged to actively participate in conservation and promotional efforts.

Given the dwindling number of individuals who possess the skills to write scriptures on palm leaves and the diminishing availability of native leaves, it is vital to arrange for Khmer Theravada monks to study abroad in countries that maintain similar writing techniques. This initiative will enable them to learn and eventually sustain these traditional practices while gradually establishing a local source for palm-leaf materials.

Additionally, the development of tourism activities centered on palm-leaf manuscripts should be prioritized, similar to successful models observed in China and Indonesia. By highlighting palm-leaf scriptures as a unique cultural asset, tourism initiatives can attract visitors, foster appreciation for this heritage, and generate resources to support its ongoing preservation.

Thirdly, conservation and promotional activities must be founded on a deep respect for community norms and cultural practices regarding palm-leaf manuscripts. These artifacts are

regarded as sacred within their communities, and it is essential to ensure that they are treated with the appropriate reverence during any form of access or interaction (Wiland et al., 2023). Engaging with the community to understand their customs and expectations surrounding these manuscripts will be crucial in fostering trust and support for conservation efforts. This respectful approach will enhance the effectiveness of preservation initiatives and promote a deeper appreciation for the cultural and spiritual significance of palm-leaf manuscripts.

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