

SCANNING THE PAST

Pages of history are being digitised as part of a global effort to protect written heritage

By Yanapon Musiket



IN CHARGE: Pensuwan Nakhapreecha, director of Chiang Mai University Library.

Earlier this year, Unesco launched the World Digital Library website (www.wdl.org) with the aim of making available on the internet significant primary material from countries and cultures around the world.

Pages of rare books, as well as films and photographs have been digitised and are now readily accessible from every corner of the world.

Today in Thailand, a group of librarians at Chiang Mai University are working on a similar project.

Founded in 1964 as the first provincial university in Thailand, Chiang Mai University is recognised as one of the most important academic institutions in the country, especially in the northern region. The institute has on staff a number of professional scholars and researchers in various fields. Last year, Chiang Mai University Library was awarded a grant by the EMC Heritage Trust, a funding project set up by US-based IT solutions company EMC that offers finance to libraries and museums worldwide as part of its mission to digitise and preserve items significant to a country's heritage.

"I believe we were chosen because of our commitment and our practical proposal. Also, rare items that we planned to digitise are not only important to Thailand, but also to neighbouring countries that have roots in the Lanna kingdom," said Pensuwan Nakhapreecha, director of Chiang Mai University Library.

Called the "Digitisation Initiative for Traditional Manuscripts of Northern Thailand", the project beat 325 applications from 34 countries, and was announced as one of seven winners of a \$12,000 (409,000 baht) grant. Among the other recipients were the Edgar Allan Poe Museum, where the writer's manuscripts and memorabilia are kept, and the Music Library of the St Petersburg Philharmonic orchestra, which has one of the most significant musical collections in Russia.

Twenty years ago, a group of researchers from the Centre for the Promotion of Arts and Culture and the Social Science Research Institute of Chiang Mai University visited local temples to microfilm their manuscripts and archives. They discovered manuscripts made of mulberry paper, tree bark and palm leaf, written in old northern Thai scripts and in Pali, some dating back to the 16th century.

Research covered almost 1,000 temples in the region, including the northern part of Laos, southern Yunnan in China and the Shan states in Burma.

Ms Pensuwan said the project was started by former director of Chiang Mai University Library and renowned scholar of Lanna culture Prof Rujaya Abhakorn, who is now an adviser to the digitisation programme that stemmed from his earlier project.

"Prof Rujaya and his team worked closely with the locals. Staff were sent to microfilm the documents, leaving the originals in the hands of the owners. It was a laudable mission, because recently researchers have gone to check on the original archives and most of them had been left unprotected and many pieces have gone missing," explained Ms Pensuwan.

"I was told that researchers stumbled on ancient manuscripts in the local market. A stack of mulberry paper documents, which might have contained important literature, were sold as cigarette paper, or a local witch doctor would boil rare books and then drink the water, believing it would be 'magic medicine'."

As a result of the project, Buddhist sutras, local literature, traditional herbal knowledge and ancient law texts were recorded on 350 reels of microfilm. They were supplemented by a collection of rare donated books and publications that now belong to the library. Ms Pensuwan revealed that digitising all these was not an easy task.

"Some people may think that to digitise a document is as easy as photocopying a book — just put it in a machine and press 'start' — but that's wrong," she said.

Items that are ready to be digitised, including microfilmed items and rare books written in Thai, are sent to the digitising staff, a group of librarians who received special training from the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre, at the beginning of the project.

In the basement of Chiang Mai University Library, librarian Sineenard Somboonaneek sits quietly with a high pile of boxes behind her desk in the Preservation Unit.

Ms Sineenard serves as an expert for the project, whose responsibility is to restore ancient manuscripts.

"In 2006, I attended a training course on preserving rare books and manuscripts at the National Library of Thailand, because the library had become very concerned about the preservation of old documents, even before we started the digitisation project," said Ms Sineenard.

"I follow the standards of the National Library and use similar materials and techniques to repair these decomposing



WORK IN PROGRESS: Some of the books and manuscripts at Chiang Mai University.



LEFT: Preparing to scan palm-leaf manuscripts.

TOP: Librarian Sineenard Somboonaneek repairing a traditional scripture book called *Samud Khoi*, made from the bark of a Siamese rough bush tree.

ABOVE: Microfilmed palm leaf manuscripts being digitised.

manuscripts and keep them in the best shape. As you can see now, these mulberry sheets or palm leaves need to be cleaned and repaired before being handed over to the interpreter," Ms Sineenard said, describing the delicate process.

Experts in northern Thai scripts and Pali were hired to translate the manuscripts before placing them in the scanner. Ms Pensuwan explained that the repair and interpretation stage is very slow, but also the most important part of the process.

"The documents in our hands can roughly be categorised into three groups — literature, traditional herbal instruc-

tions and Buddhist scriptures," she said.

In addition to the technical staff, a group of librarians writes an abstract of each piece and catalogues it.

Once the digitising process is complete, Chiang Mai University Library will open a website to promote the digitised works and allow students and researchers from all over the world to easily access them.

With regard to the national importance of the material, Ms Pensuwan said that the committee is aware of the controversial nature of some of the documents, and the importance of some of the information sources, and is planning to provide limited

access to these. A year after the project started, however, Ms Pensuwan admitted that it was taking longer than planned, and was over budget.

"We agreed among the staff that once we really began the project, we were bound to face conditions and problems along the way that we had to pay attention to or resolve," she recalled. "But we are very proud of this project and hope that once it is complete we can be a model for other libraries and institutions, so that they can preserve their heritage in their own communities, just as we are doing now in Chiang Mai." ■