



The Lanna Golden Age of Pali Literature Composition

Phisit Kotsupho

Yueng Pannengpetch

Phra Athiwat Thammawatsiri

Phra Witawat Kochakan

Phra Theeratphid Salawinphonphana

Abstract

This article explores the Golden Age of Pali Buddhist literature in the Lanna Kingdom (14th-16th centuries CE), focusing on the reign of King Tilokarat and his successor, King Kaew (Tilokapanadda). It examines the historical, social, and religious context that fostered a vibrant intellectual environment, leading to the composition of numerous significant Pali texts. The article highlights the contributions of prominent scholar monks like **Ñāṇakitti**, Ratanappañña, **Bodhiramṣī**, and **Sirimangalācariya**, whose works continue to be influential in Theravada Buddhist studies. It also analyzes the unique characteristics of Lanna Pali literature, demonstrating its deep connection to Sri Lankan traditions while showcasing distinct local developments. The lasting impact of this literary flourishing on Pali scholarship and Buddhist practice in Thailand is emphasized, particularly through the inclusion of Lanna texts like the **Mangalattadīpanī** in monastic education. This study underscores the Lanna Kingdom's significant role as a center of Theravada Buddhist learning and literary excellence during its Golden Age.

Keywords: Lanna Kingdom, Pali literature, Theravada Buddhism, Buddhist scholarship King Tilokkarat



Introduction

The Lanna Kingdom was a land with a flourishing civilization and culture, both socially and religiously, for a long time (Ongsakul, 2552, p. 45). Counting from the establishment of the Lanna Kingdom when Phaya Mangrai from Chiang Rai came to rule this region and founded a new city called Abhinavapura, or commonly known as Chiang Mai, as the capital in 1839 BE, it has been no less than 700 years to the present day (Penth, 2548, p. 123).

In terms of social culture, Lanna people are gentle, generous, and have a way of life that integrates Buddhist principles with traditional beliefs, such as the worship of guardian spirits and ancestors, in a harmonious way (Premjit, 2556, p. 87). This is considered a unique characteristic of the Lanna people or the “city way of life.”

In the political dimension, the Lanna Kingdom was an independent and sovereign state, existing alongside the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya Kingdoms (Wannasai, 2522, p. 98). A prominent Lanna ruler during the Sukhothai period was Phaya Kue Na, who invited Venerable **Mahāsumana** Thera from Sukhothai during the reign of Phaya Lithai to revive Theravada Buddhism of the original Lanka lineage (known as the **Araññanikāya**) at Wat Suan Dok (Na Bangchang, 2539, p. 156). Meanwhile, a powerful Ayutthaya king, Borommatrailokkanat, attempted to expand his power to conquer Lanna but faced the formidable might of Phaya Tilokarat, who was equally powerful (Ongsakul, 2552, p. 134). They fought many battles but neither could defeat the other. Even the names of the two kings, “Borommatrailokkanat” of Ayutthaya and “Tilokarat” of Lanna, mean “the great ruler of the three worlds” (heaven, earth, and the underworld), similar to the god deva **Nārāyaṇa**, whose name is “Phra Tri Bhuvanat.”

In the dimension of Buddhism, the Lanna land was a great melting pot that nurtured Buddhist monks into leading scholars of Buddhism in this region, no less than the monks in the Pagan Kingdom at that time, and alongside the



monks of Sri Lanka (Premjit, 2013, p. 87). When Phaya Kue Na invited Phra Sumana Thera to revive Theravada Buddhism of the **Laṅkāvaṃsa** lineage, it led to the flourishing of this lineage in Lanna, with Wat Puppharam or Wat Suan Dok as the center of propagation (Na Bangchang, 1996, p. 156). During the reign of King Sam Fang Kaen, monks from Lanna and neighboring lands like Laos and Cambodia went to study Buddhism in Sri Lanka, bringing back the new **Laṅkāvaṃsa** lineage to Lanna and establishing the Vanarattaram or Wat Pa Daeng monastery in Chiang Mai (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 112). The monks of both groups, Suan Dok and Pa Daeng, initially engaged in debates and criticisms (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 98).

However, when Phaya Tilokarat ascended to the throne after Phaya Sam Fang Kaen, he supported the return of the Sihala Sangha to Chiang Mai for propagation, while also providing patronage to the existing **Araññanikāya** Sangha (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134). Due to the dedication of the new Sihala Sangha to the study of Buddhist texts, especially the Pali language, the existing Sangha also had to strive to improve themselves and compete in studying the scriptures (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 101). This was considered a competition in doing good for Buddhism, leading to monks becoming proficient in the Dhamma teachings, grammar, and phonetics, enabling them to accurately examine the main Buddhist scriptures.

As a result of the Lanna monks' expertise in Pali, a Buddhist council was held in Chiang Mai, Lanna, in 2020 BE at Wat Bodharam or Wat Chedi Chet Yot (Penth, 2005, p. 234). This was considered the 8th Buddhist council, called the "Aṭṭhama **Saṅgāyana**," and the first council held in Lanna or Thailand (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115). The result of the council was the inscription of the Pali Tipiṭaka onto palm leaves, known as the Lanna script Pali Tipiṭaka, which took one year to complete.

This led to the great flourishing of Buddhism during this period, with its fame spreading throughout neighboring countries. As a result, King Tilokarat was bestowed the title "Phra Chao Siri Dhammacakkavatti **Lokarāja Mahādhammi-karāja**, Phra Chao Nakhon Ping Chiang Mai." The Tipiṭaka revised during Phaya



Tilokarat's reign is considered one of the most important Buddhist scriptures in Lanna, passed down to the present day (Wannasai, 1979, p. 189). There is evidence that Phaya Phothisarath, the ruler of Lan Xang, requested a copy of the Lanna script Pali Tipiṭaka to be kept in Luang Prabang (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 145).

From the reign of Phaya Tilokarat (1884-2030 BE) to the reign of Phaya Kaeo or Phaya Tilokapanṇatti (2038-2068 BE), a period of 84 years, almost a century, the country was peaceful, the Sangha was united, and there was strong support for Buddhism (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134). This led to the emergence of many Buddhist scholar monks who composed Buddhist scriptures in the Pali language, known as the works of Lanna master monks. The era of Phaya Kaeo can be considered the golden age of Buddhist literature or the highest peak of Buddhist literature in Lanna, as many scholar monks emerged during this time (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115).

Each of them composed important Buddhist and historical texts in Pali, such as Phra **Ñānakitti** who composed the **Yojanā Vinaya** and **Yojanā Abhidhamma**, Phra Ratanappañña who composed the Vajira **Sāraṭṭhasaṅgaha** and the **Jinakālamāli**, Phra **Bodhiramsī** who composed the **Cāmadevivamsa**, and Phra **Sirimangalācariya** who composed four texts: **Vessantara Dīpanī**, **Cakkavāla Dīpanī**, **Saṅkhyā Pakāsaka Ṭikā**, and **Mangalattadīpanī**, composed in 2067 BE (Phrabrahmarajapanya, 1987). Another text, whose author is unknown but widely known, is the "**Paññāsa Jātaka**," or "**Siṃhemā Paññāsa**" as it is called in Myanmar, which is a collection of folk tales composed in Pali, imitating the style of the **Jātaka** tales.

These are the results of the golden age of Lanna governance, with righteous kings who patronized Buddhism (Penth, 2005, p. 234). The aforementioned atmosphere was a crucible that produced many scholar monks who could compose Buddhist texts in Pali with mastery. These texts are used by the three Thai monastic orders today as the core curriculum for Pali studies in levels 4-7 (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 105). The teachings from these texts, translated into Lanna or other local languages, are all important Buddhist teachings that



have shaped the traditions, customs, and Buddhist way of life of Lanna, leaving a legacy for future generations to this day.

Land and Kingdom

Land

The original territory covered areas of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, and Mae Hong Son provinces (excluding Phrae and Nan, which were independently governed) (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 115). The territory expanded during King Tilokarat's reign (1984-2030 BE), capturing Phrae and Nan (1984-1994 BE, constructing Phra Chao Thong Thip at Wat Suan Tan, Nan province) and thus incorporating Phrae and Nan into the kingdom (Penth, 2005, p. 212). The influence extended to the Shan States of Burma, Kengtung, Mong Nai, Mong Hsipaw, Mong Yong, the Xishuangbanna area, and Luang Prabang (Wannasai, 1979, p. 167).

Geographically, the Lanna Kingdom in the north is bordered by the Daen Lao Range, with the Thongchai Range in the west, and the Phi Pan Nam Range and Luang Prabang Range in the east (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 23). The area is rich in natural resources, abundant forests, and sources of major rivers such as the Ping, Wang, Yom, Nan, Mae Kuang, Pai, Yuam, Moei, Tuen, Chaem, Kok, Lao, and Ing rivers (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 56). The primary occupations include agriculture, farming, and forestry, primarily situated in valley plains in key city basins like Chiang Rai-Phayao and Chiang Mai-Lamphun, with some areas engaged in the forest industry (Wannasai, 1979, p. 89).

Kingdom:

The Lanna Kingdom was established by King Mangrai in 1839 BE, integrating the Hariphunchai Kingdom under Queen **Cāmadēvī** from the 13th century (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 115). Chiang Mai became the capital city, and the kingdom consisted of various ethnic groups, with the largest group referring to themselves as “Khon Mueang” (city people) (Penth, 2005, p. 118). Historically, the Lanna Kingdom flourished with high civilization and cultural development (Wannasai, 1979, p. 167). The Mangrai Code was the ancient law for governance,



and the kingdom covered key cities such as Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Chiang Saen, Nan, Phrae, Phayao, Mae Hong Son, Kengtung, and Xishuangbanna (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 78). The primary language was Lanna or Tai Tham, though other dialects like Khün and Lü were also spoken (Penth, 2005, p. 124).

Religiously, the traditional beliefs in spirits and ancestral worship were prevalent (Premjit, 2013, p. 87). Buddhism, introduced to the region, became the primary spiritual foundation, integrating traditions such as the annual temple and relic worship ceremonies (Na Bangchang, 1996, p. 156). Lanna culture is characterized by unique customs and traditions that blend ancient beliefs and Buddhism, such as the temple worship, New Year celebrations, Yi Peng Festival (lantern festival), and the alms-giving ceremony on the full moon of Wednesday (Peng Phut) (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 92). The society values high social cohesion, gentleness, hospitality, and sincerity towards outsiders (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 98).

Currently, the Lanna Kingdom remains in the upper northern provinces, with Chiang Mai as the cultural, economic, educational, and tourism center (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134). The government has expanded higher education institutions from the central region to the provinces, with Chiang Mai University being the first regional university (Penth, 2005, p. 289). Other state universities include Maejo University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, and Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, along with private institutions such as Payap University, MCU Chiang Mai Campus, MBU Lanna Campus, North-Chiang Mai University, and Far Eastern University (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115). Other provinces also have significant educational institutions like Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai, Phayao University, Lampang Rajabhat University, Yonok University, and Thammasat University Lampang Center (Wannasai, 1979, p. 201).

Indigenous People of Lanna:

According to the *Cāmadevīvaṃsa* and the *Jinakālamālī*, the original



inhabitants of Lanna during Queen Cāmadevī's time were the Lua and Mon people, led by Khun Wilangka (Penth, 2005, p. 118). When the Lanna people settled, they called themselves “Khon Mueang,” speaking the “Khon Mueang” language with their own script known as “Tai Tham” (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 115).

Periods in Lanna History

In terms of social, political, and administrative aspects, the land of Lanna has undergone various eras, from its inception to its peak and eventual decline. There are two primary perspectives on this:

Hans Penth, a scholar specializing in inscriptions in Northern Thailand, divides Lanna society into four periods (Penth, 2005, p. 123):

1. The Era of the Tai Migration and Settlement in Lanna (1600-1804 BE): Before King Mangrai (204 years).
2. The Founding Era of Lanna (1804-1914 BE): From King Mangrai to King Kuena (110 years).
3. The Golden Age of Lanna (1914-2068 BE): From King Saenmuangma to King Kaew (105 years).
4. The Decline of Lanna (2068-2101 BE): After King Kaew to the Burmese conquest (33 years).

Surasawadi Ongsakul, a historian from the Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, divides Lanna society into three periods (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134):

1. The Founding Era of Lanna (1839-1898 BE): Early Mangrai dynasty to the end of King Payao's reign (59 years).
2. The Golden Age of the Lanna Kingdom (1898-2068 BE): From King Kuena to King Kaew (170 years), reaching its zenith during King Tilokarat's reign (1984-2030 BE).
3. The Decline and Fall of Lanna (2068-2101 BE): From King Kaecharat (2068-2081 BE) to the Burmese conquest (2101 BE) (33 years).



The Golden Age of the Lanna Kingdom: Key Components and Conditions

Regarding the golden age or the prosperous period of Lanna society, the author classifies it into two aspects:

The Golden Age of the Kingdom:

Hans Penth defines the golden age of Lanna to encompass various significant events (Penth, 2005, p. 212):

1. Strong Military Forces (Political Stability)
2. Knowledgeable Monks in Dhamma and Vinaya (Strong Religious Institutions)
3. Just Laws (Rule of Law)
4. Skilled Craftsmen Creating High-Value Art (Lanna Sculpture)
5. Advanced Agricultural and Irrigation Systems (Mueang Fai System)
6. Economic Stability (Well-being of the People)

Among these six components, Hans Penth highlights the adoption of Theravada Buddhism from Lanka as the most crucial factor for the golden age (Penth, 2005, p. 212). This was brought to Chiang Mai during King Kuena's reign by Venerable Sumana Thera from Sukhothai, who established Wat Suan Dok as an Aranyavasi (forest monastery) (Na Bangchang, 1996, p. 156). This tradition continued, leading to ordinations in the Lankan style on rafts in the Kalayani River.

During King Tilokarat's reign, the new **Laṅkāvaṃsa** sect (Sihala) was specially supported, leading to a flourishing scholarly pursuit of the Pali Canon, resulting in many scholars who wrote significant Pali texts (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134).

The economic factor also contributed to the golden age. Both rulers and the populace actively supported Buddhist activities, including building numerous monasteries and casting Buddha images (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 92). Royalty and nobility often donated land for the benefit of the monasteries and provided



labor to maintain these religious sites (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 101).

The Golden Age of Buddhism in Lanna:

The author outlines the key events that shaped and developed the golden age of Buddhism in Lanna into four periods:

Before King Tilokkarat's Reign:

During King Sam Fang Kaen's reign, a new monastic group that had studied in Lanka, known as the Sihala sect or Lanka New Sect, settled at Wat Pa Daeng (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 112). This group emphasized Pali studies and strict adherence to the Vinaya, leading to conflicts with the older **Araññanikāya** sect, which they accused of improper practices (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 98). These conflicts were addressed through debates and rulings, often mediated by the king.

King Tilokarat's Reign (1984-2030 BE):

King Tilokarat was a major patron of Buddhism, supporting the Lanka New Sect and appointing their leaders to high positions (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134). He built several significant temples, including Wat **Mahābodhārāma** (Wat Jed Yod), where a significant council was held to review and purify the Pali Canon in 2020 BE (Penth, 2005, p. 234). This council, recognized as the 8th Buddhist Council, was attended by over 100 learned monks and resulted in the authoritative Pali texts used in Lanna (Na Bangchang, 1996, p. 156).

King Yod Chiang Rai's Reign (2030-2038 BE):

King Yod Chiang Rai continued religious activities, including the purification of boundary markers for ordination halls (Ongsakul, 2009, p. 134). He also conducted major religious ceremonies, reinforcing the kingdom's commitment to Buddhism.

King Kaew's Reign (2038-2068 BE):

King Kaew, also known as King Tilokapanadda, was a devout support-



er of Buddhism (Penth, 2005, p. 289). His reign saw significant construction and renovation of temples, support for all three major monastic groups, and the promotion of Pali studies and scriptural composition (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115). This period is marked by the prolific output of Pali literature, with numerous significant texts being written by Lanna scholars.

The Peak of Pali Buddhist Literature in Lanna

King Kaew's reign (2038-2068 BE)

King Kaew, also known as King Tilokapanadda, gave significant support to scholars who were well-versed in Pali, leading to the creation of many important religious texts in the Pali language (Phrabrahmarajapanya, 1987).

The tradition of composing treatises to explain the words and meanings in the Tipiṭaka has been affirmed by many scholars to date back to the time of the Buddha (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 105). Notable works include the Nettippakaraṇa and Peṭakopadesa, composed by the eminent disciple **Mahā Kaccāna** Thera. Approximately 400 years after the Buddha's time, the Milindapañha was another prominent composition (Na Bangchang, 1996, p. 156).

The most prolific period for composing Pali commentaries (**aṭṭhakathā**) occurred in Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura era (10th-11th centuries BE), while the peak of **ṭīkā** (sub-commentary) compositions was during the Polonnaruwa era, also in Sri Lanka. In Thailand, eight notable new Pali literary works were identified, including Vessantara **Dīpanī**, **Cakkavāḷa Dīpanī**, **Saṅkhyā Pakāsaka Ṭīkā**, **Mangalattadīpanī**, **Vajirasāraṭṭhasaṅgaha Ṭīkā**, **Malaiyavatu Dīpanī Ṭīkā**, **Loka Sannatthana Coḷatthānkhatī**, and **Paritta Saṅghaṭṭhakathā** (Phisit Kotsupho, 2002, p. 105). These works exhibit influences from Sri Lankan commentarial literature while also displaying unique developments in Thailand.

During King Kaew's reign, the flourishing of Buddhist literature marked the peak of Pali literary composition in Lanna (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115). Several notable scholars emerged, composing significant Pali texts that continue to be esteemed:



1. Venerable **Ñāṇakitti Thera**: Composed around ten treatises, including the **Yojanā Vinaya** and **Yojanā Abhidhamma** (Phrabrahmarajapanya, 1987).

2. Venerable **Ratanappañña Thera**: Composed the **Vajira Sāraṭṭhasaṅgha** and the **Jinakālamālī** (2059 BE) (Phyarattanapanya Thera, 1974).

3. Venerable **Bodhiraṃsī Thera**: Composed the **Cāmadevivamaṃsa** (Phrabodhirangsi, 1920).

4. Venerable **Nanda Ācariya**: Composed the **Sāraṭṭhasaṅgha**.

5. Venerable **Suvaṇṇaraṃsī Thera**: Composed the **Paṭṭhama Sambodhasaṅgha**.

6. **Suvaṇṇadīpa Thera**: Composed the **Aheggusaraṭṭhadīpanī**.

7. Venerable **Sirimangalācariya**: Composed four notable treatises:

1. **Vessantara Dīpanī** (completed in CS 879, 2060 BE, at **Vihāra Suan Kwan**)

2. **Cakkavāḷa Dīpanī** (completed in CS 882, 2063 BE, at **Vihāra Suan Kwan**)

3. **Saṅkhyā Pakāsaka Ṭṭkā** (completed in CS 882, 2063 BE, at **Vihāra Suan Kwan**)

4. **Mangalattadīpanī** (completed in CS 886, 2067 BE, at **Suññakara of Veluvanārāma**, or **Wat Phai Kao Ko**)

One additional work, “**Paññāsa Jātaka**” or ‘**Siṃhemā Paññāsa**’ in Burmese, is known widely but its author remains unidentified. It comprises local folklore written in Pali, mimicking the style of **Jātaka tales**.

Venerable **Sirimangalācariya** is renowned for his exceptional scholarship, profound knowledge of Pali, and expertise in the principles of Buddhism (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 105). He meticulously composed treatises, integrating narratives and substantiated references to facilitate future study. His works, such as the **Mangalattadīpanī**, reflect an unprejudiced academic approach, presenting all perspectives before allowing the reader to form an informed judgment. This unbiased methodology exemplifies the ideal qualities of a scholar.

Despite being a native Lanna monk with a different vernacular, Ven-



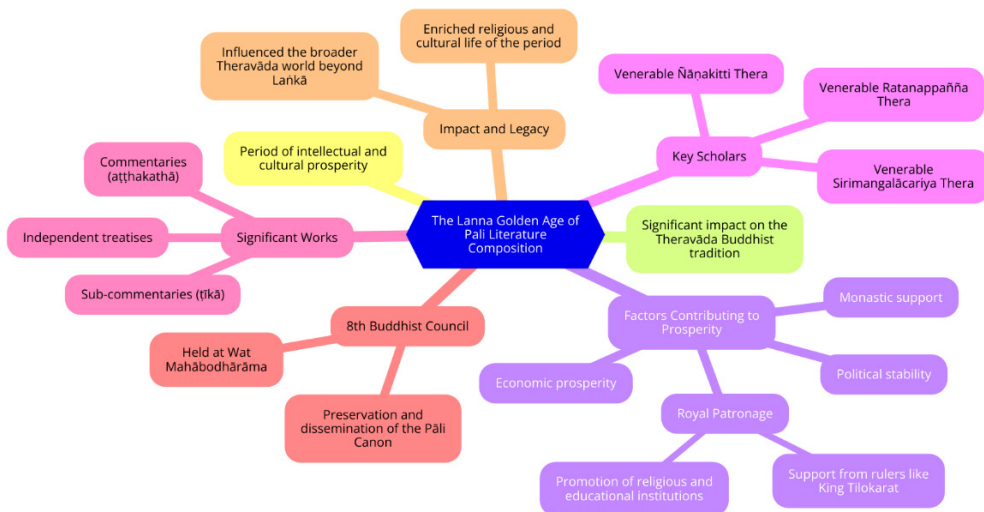
erable **Sirimangalācariya** Thera excelled in Pali, crafting texts with remarkable fluency and precision. His writings adhere strictly to factual information, showcasing thorough research and academic integrity.

Notable Works:

“**Mangalattadīpanī**”: Esteemed as a model literary work, praised for its structure, language, and balance of scholarly and artistic merit (Kotsupho, 2002, p. 105). It stands on par with the “**Visuddhimagga**” by Buddhaghosa Thera, a renowned Indian commentator from the 10th century BE.

The Pali texts composed by Lanna scholars have had a lasting impact on Pali studies, particularly the **Mangalattadīpanī**, which serves as a foundational text for Pali education in Thailand (Suksawadi, 2013, p. 115). The Thai Sangha has incorporated it into the curriculum for Pali studies at various levels.

The Body of Knowledge in this Article



Conclusion

The golden age of **Pāli** literature in the **Lankā** Kingdom represents a period of remarkable intellectual and cultural prosperity that significantly



contributed to the **Theravāda** Buddhist tradition. The convergence of political stability, economic prosperity, and strong monastic support created an environment in which scholarly endeavors could thrive. The patronage of rulers like King Tilokarat was crucial in supporting the religious and educational institutions that facilitated the production of **Pāli texts**.

Key scholars, such as Venerable **Ñāṇakitti** Thera, Venerable Ratanapañña Thera, and Venerable **Sirimangalācariya** Thera, played pivotal roles in this literary renaissance. Their works, encompassing commentaries (**atṭhakathā**), sub-commentaries (**tīkā**), and independent treatises, showcased a profound understanding of the Dhamma and mastery of **Pāli**. These texts have left an enduring legacy, becoming integral components of Buddhist education and practice.

The **Laṅkā** Kingdom's commitment to Buddhism, exemplified by the 8th Buddhist Council at Wat **Mahābodhārāma**, reinforced the importance of preserving and disseminating the **Pāli** Canon. This era of scholarly activity not only enriched the religious life of contemporary **Laṅkā** but also contributed to the broader **Theravāda** Buddhist world, influencing regions far beyond the kingdom's borders.

In conclusion, the Lanna golden age of **Pāli** literature stands as a testament to the kingdom's intellectual vibrancy and cultural sophistication. The works produced during this time continue to be revered and studied, underscoring Lanna's pivotal role in the history of Buddhist scholarship. This period remains a beacon of literary and religious excellence, reflecting the enduring impact of Lanna's contributions to the **Theravāda** Buddhist tradition.

References

- Phrabrahmarajapanya. (1987). *Rattanapimphawong* (Lt. Col. Sang Manwithun, Trans.).
- Phrabodhirangsi. (1920). *Chamadevivong* (Phya Pariyattidhamma Thada, Trans.).
- Phyarattanapanya Thera. (1974). *Jinakalamali* (Lt. Col. Sang Manwithun, Trans.).
- Phisit Kotsupho. (2002). *Philosophical Concepts in Lanna Texts*.



- M.L. Surasawat Suksawadi. (2013). *Research Report on Buddhism in Lanna*.
- Penth, H. (2005). *Compilation of Lanna Inscriptions, Volume 10*.
- Sorasawadi Ongsakul. (2009). *Lanna History* (6th ed.).
- Singha Wannasai. (1979). *Mongthra Ropes Chiang Mai*.
- Somma Premjit. (2013). *Buddhist Literature in Lanna*.
- Suvaphan Na Bangchang. (1996). *Evolution of Pali Literature in Thailand*.