**Community-driven Care of Lanna Palm Leaf Manuscripts**

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**Abstract**

Palm Leaf Manuscripts (PLMs) are an important part of heritage from the Lanna culture of northern Thailand. The purpose of the paper is to explore the practices and attitudes towards managing PLMs in three communities in Northern Thailand with a view to developing a community centric understanding of sustainable care for PLMs. The study was based on interviews analysed thematically. It was found that Buddhist beliefs in earning merit and the cultural value of PLMs underlie community involvement. Leadership was also important, though models of leadership were different in each case. External organisations such as universities play a key role in cataloguing, preserving and using PLMs. Digitisation although central to the value to external organisations does not really promote community access. Reflecting on the drivers and challenges in the three villages, a model of community-driven care for PLMs is proposed.

**Keywords**

Palm leaf manuscripts, community-based participation, community involvement, Lanna culture, Thailand

**Introduction**

Historically, in parts of northern Thailand, particularly in what was formerly the Lanna Kingdom, palm leaf manuscripts (PLMs) were an important means of documenting knowledge. Monks, novices, and other ordained people made and used them (Digital Library of Northern Thai Manuscripts (DLNTM), 2016; Ongsakul, 2005). Reflecting Indian and Sri Lankan influences, the content of the PLMs mainly relate to the Buddhist religion (Ongsakul, 2005). Indeed, the Lanna Tham alphabet used on PLM inscriptions was believed to be a sacred language (Injan, 2002; Ongsakul, 2005; Veidlinger, 2007). But PLMs were also used to record local wisdom in various domains, such as history, astrology, literature, local folklore and medicine (Veeraprajak, 2011). As such they are an important part of local culture worthy of care and preservation.

Though PLMs are easily accessible in temple museums and the Hor Trai, halls where Buddhist texts are usually kept in monasteries, they have been significantly devalued since the Lanna kingdom was united with Siam, now known as Thailand, in 1939. Since unification, the Lanna people were obliged to learn the Thai language, which led to people losing interest in studying Lanna Tham scripts, knowledge of which became confined to monks and a very few lay people (Ongsakul, 2005; Wyatt, 2003). The predominance of the Thai language and the era of printed documents worsened the situation for PLMs in Thailand still further. Today, even many of the monks who are directly involved with the PLMs cannot read Lanna Tham script (McDaniel, 2008; Veidlinger, 2007). Many PLMs have been damaged or destroyed through insect attack, humidity and biodegradation, and general neglect (Abhakorn, 1997).



**Figure 1.** A PLM that was attacked by insects

Nevertheless, local communities, both monks and lay people, remain interested in caring for PLMs, even if they lack expertise in handling ancient documents or the financial support to obtain the tools and equipment needed (Jarusawat, 2017; 2019; Jarusawat et al., 2018). In this context, this study explores the practices and attitudes towards managing PLMs in three communities in Northern Thailand (Ban Hong, Ban Saluang Nai and Pa Tum Don) with a view to developing a model of community involvement in sustainable care for PLMs.

**Literature review**

A growing regional interest in PLMs must be set in the context of a wider revival of Lanna cultural forms, such as its costume, dance, martial arts, music, cuisine and handicrafts. Traditional music has seen a major revival, for example (Akins, 2013). One vehicle for this is wisdom classrooms where the public are taught about a range of traditional practices, such as the Lanna Wisdom School. Naturally this is not a case of unchanged traditions simply being reproduced. Some traditions are lost, others reinvented (Akins, 2013). Nor is the revival always unconnected to more material considerations such as the commercial value of reviving traditional culture to promote tourism (Schedneck, 2017).

The local revival of interest is echoed in academic interest around PLMs. Indeed, there is extensive literature on them, but primarily written by scholars of Buddhism and Thai culture (McDaniel, 2018). More information related topics are with the challenge of preserving them, and such matters as digitisation and producing metadata schemas to enable effective retrieval (Lertratanakehakarn, 2014; Manmart et al., 2012). Most of such literature focuses primarily on technical aspects. A particular focus is digitisation. Influenced by western concepts, many university libraries emphasise the digitisation of PLMs: for example, the National Library of Myanmar, Kerala University Library in India, Kelaniya University Library, and Peradeniya University Library in Sri Lanka, have sought to develop digital libraries of PLMs (Alahakoon, 2003; MacFarlane, 2020; Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe, 2013; Sahoo, Mohanty, and Dash, 2015; Mohamed Sageer and Francis, 2014; Weerabahu, 2019). The concept of digitization is believed by many libraries in Thailand and other countries, to be the best method for preserving ancient manuscripts (Kumar et al., 2009). Yet there is growing recognition that truly sustainable approaches to information services especially relating to cultural heritage imply community participation.

One of the most influential models of community participation is Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation, developed in the context of policy development. This captures the degrees of participation from non-participation through tokenism to citizen control. Non-participation relations are more like public relations to gain consent to a pre-set plan. Informing is the first step up the ladder towards participation, but there is a risk that this is top down and one way. Consultation is the second step, but again there is risk that this is mere window dressing. Placation is the enlistment of a few token representatives onto governing bodies, but falls short of letting real power go. Citizen Control can be achieved in three levels according to Arnstein: through partnership where power is really shared; delegation where citizen delegates hold power; and full citizen control. There have been many attempts to update this model, particularly for global south contexts (Choguill 1996), but it remains a useful reference point. Another useful model is that proposed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) (2007) which has five layers of participation from informing, consulting, involving, collaborating to empowering. These offer useful generic starting points but it is important in finding a model to consider both the specific cultural context and the specificity of the heritage context.

Ganjanapan (2001) is well-known in the region for developing a concept of community participation reflecting local needs. He advocated the importance of community involvement because he believed that neither individuals or the state could be trusted not to take an exploitative perspective on communal resources (such as forests). Yet this does not take us much further in the context of contemporary cultural heritage.

A number of models of community participation also exist specifically for LIS contexts such as that proposed by Sung and Hepworth (2013). They suggest that there are eight keys to Modelling Community Engagement, namely: accountability and hierarchy; belonging; commitment; communication; flexible approach; expertise and familiarity; genuineness; relevance; and sustainability. The two main factors affecting community engagement and activities in the community are the influence of authority and willingness to learn. But examined closely this model does seem to be very specific to a western context, with data drawn entirely from the UK, with its longstanding democratic conditions but lack of religious consensus. Thailand is a very different cultural context.

Thus we have useful reference points but we lack well developed models that are both relevant to the regional context and the needs of cultural heritage. Also, significantly, the story tends to be told from the point of view of external agencies with power making room for community participation, rather than thinking about how the community itself has energy and forms of local leadership that might be driving care for heritage. We do have one other useful starting point: In a previous paper the authors analysed community participation in the preservation of Lanna PLMs (Jarusawat et al., 2018). The paper contrasted the viewpoints of different stakeholders in how they valued PLMs. However, it did identify a model of an upward spiral of growing community participation echoing the five levels proposed by IAPP, but adding a lower level “support” and recognising the role of leadership and on the other by expert activities. This was again presented from the point of view of external agencies promoting increasing community participation. The current paper seeks to shift the focus away from collecting institutions to study three cases where bottom-up initiatives to preserve PLMs were found. This should enable us to model community-driven processes of participation.

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that aims to explore the views of participants about a social phenomenon and so interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection. Data from three communities, Ban Hong, Ban Saluang Nai, and Pa Tum Don, were collected from January to June 2019. These villages were chosen because they are places where PLMs are well-known to be kept with care and have active participation from the local community. So they should be seen as examples of current good practice rather than representative of common practice. Individual participants were selected on the basis of a mix of purposive and snowball sampling.

**Table 1.** Summary of participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Role/Occupation** | **Ban Hong** | | | **Ban Saluang Nai** | | | **Pa Tum Don** | | |
| **No.** | **Age** | **Gender** | **No.** | **Age** | **Gender** | **No.** | **Age** | **Gender** |
| Abbot/Vice Abbot | 1 | 40s | M | 1 | 50s | M | 1 | 10s | M |
| Government Officer (Retired) | 1 | 60s | M | 1 | 90s | M | 2 | 60s | M |
| 2 | 60s | F |  |  |  | 1 | 60s | F |
| General Worker (Retired) | 1 | 60s | M | 2 | 70s | M |  |  |  |
| 2 | 60s | F | 3 | 50s | F |  |  |  |
| Government Officer |  |  |  | 1 | 50s | F | 1 | 40s | F |
| General Worker |  |  |  |  |  |  | 2 | 50s | M |
|  |  |  |  |  |  | 1 | 40s | F |
| Student |  |  |  | 2 | <20 | F |  |  |  |
| **Total** | **7** (M=3, F=4) | | | **10** (M=4, F=6) | | | **8** (M=5, F=3) | | |
| **25** | | | | | | | | |

Note: the vice abbot who was interviewed in PaTumDon was 17 year old.

Table 1 presents the occupation, age, and gender of the 25 interviewees involved in the study. A semi-structured interview (30 – 90 minutes per person) was conducted. The questions were divided into three parts which were 1) personal information e.g. age and occupation; 2) their involvement in PLM management; 3) their views on how PLMs should be managed, and more specifically who should be involved (clergy, lay people, external parties) and what each of their roles should be. The specific interviews questions used were:

1. What is your involvement with palm leaf manuscripts (PLMs)?
2. Are PLMs important to you, if yes how?
3. How do you think PLMs are important to Lanna?
4. What is the situation of PLMs in your community? And Thailand more generally?
5. How should Lanna cultural knowledge should be protected?
6. What role and potential role does the community have in this?
7. How should PLMs be stored?
8. What do you think about digitization of PLMs?
9. How are Lanna/local people involved in looking after PLMs? How should they be involved?
10. What should be the role of experts and libraries in looking after PLMs?
11. How can libraries facilitate community to develop collections (such as of PLMs or other cultural material)?

The interviews were conducted on site, such as in temples, enabling the interviewer to be shown relevant material by participants and for her to observe some of what was happening in context. Several relevant ceremonies and training events were observed, and, with permission, photographed. In another case a participant led the interviewee to his house to show her how he looked after PLMs he owned. These observations enhanced understanding of local practice in context helping to inform the data analysis.

After the data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 11. The data was analysed following the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming themes and final write up. The themes identified were 1) Religious beliefs 2) Community values 3) Leadership offering vision, passion, and dedication 4) External agencies supports 5) Sense of belonging 6) Building trust and continuity 7) Activities 8) Transformation and flexibility 9) Representative 10) Cultural pride, 11) Volunteering and 12) Sustainability. The participants were anonymized by using coded identifiers for names to protect their confidentiality.

**Findings**

***Ban Hong***

At Ban Hong, community involvement in the PLMs had originated in the activities of the local abbot, over two decades. As a novice he had developed the practice of using PLMs for ritual chanting. Later he had spent a number of years studying the PLMs for a doctorate. Thus, his interest was both religious and informed by scholarship. It was his special personal interest in PLMs that had driven community involvement. He had shared some of his knowledge with novices. In later years he had encouraged a group of around 20-30 lay people to be actively involved in PLMs too. They did not have direct knowledge of the PLMs, so their involvement was confined to helping in cleaning and making covers for the PLMs (Figure 2). The abbot had also run courses for village members to learn about such things as the religious ideas contained in the PLMs and Lanna astrology and herbal medicine, but this was more to raise awareness of PLMs than to teach in-depth knowledge.

Thus participation was very much premised on the Abbot's leadership.

“It all depends on the leader, if the abbot wants it to be done. If he calls us to help, we will come. But if he doesn't do it, the PLMs will remain silent."

“If the abbot calls, we come together again. […] We don't want to let what has been done in the past go to waste so it is still there in the future. PLMs will remain for survive for those who can read them and they can perhaps find content for a textbook on medicine.”

The abbot had also reived the Tak Tham tradition as a way to involve local people. Tak in the Lanna language means to dry, and Tham, in this context, refers to the PLMs. Tak Tham is the ancient Lanna tradition that people bring out the PLMs from where they are stored to clean and dry them in the sunlight. This process is occasion for a big celebration prior to the PLMs being taken back to where they are kept.

A group of people playing a board game

Description automatically generated

**Figure 2.** Community members in Ban Hong cleaning PLMs in the temple building

A group of people sitting in a room

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**Figure 3.** Novice monks and community members at the closing meeting with scholars in Ban Hong

The Abbot had also connected to a German research foundation and a local university who had catalogued and microfilmed the PLMs in the 1990s.

Scholars actively seek to involve the community in the care of PLMs when they visited for scholarly purposes. At the start of the visit they trained community members and novice monks to clean PLMs. At the end of the visit they organized an event at which they reported back to the community about what they had discovered, such as the total number of PLMs, about some of the interesting content found and how the material had been classified. This helped the community understand more about the value of PLMs. Figure 3 illustrates a training session where experts (from Chiang Mai Rajabhat University) were reporting back to an audience of monks and community members at the end of a visit.

***Ban Saluang Nai***

The story in Ban Saluang Nai was somewhat different. Rather than being led by a cleric, a middle-aged lay woman had recognised PLMs as a vehicle to teach teenagers about the value of their culture. She had formed a group of around a dozen 12- to 13-year-old children who were being trained to appreciate local culture and in the future to act as guides to religious tourist visitors (mostly Thai people). A strong motivation for her was the desire to promote traditional Buddhist values and counter what was felt to be the pernicious influence of social media on young people. Further reinforcing this, learning the Lanna language was among the subjects in a number of Wisdom classrooms she organised, as events held to promote traditional culture. She could have developed other forms of involvement for the children, but it was significant that the focus was on the traditional religious practices, such as PLMs. It was apparent that social cohesion around shared social values was a key element of her thinking. She commented:

“We need come to help develop the community to be better. Not to change the community, we want to maintain a society like this as warmth community and live like brotherhood help each other take care of each other. […] We are a supportive community. Our community is about unity and reconciliation. We help each other in the community. We are a compassionate society. We'll cultivate together like this. It's fun. We love being here. Other villagers live individually or independently. Our community is the best.”

She also wanted to run classes for young people to read and write the script, something that had happened in the past.

A limited number of PLMs purely of religious content had been digitized by a religious foundation. More recently she had reached out to Chiang Mai Rajabhat University which was planning to do more digitization and cataloguing. Now the woman was also seeking external support from Chiang Mai Rajabhat University to establish a community museum exhibiting the PLMs that were kept at the temple. However, as with other connections communities made to expert groups these were often one-off projects, whereas the community desired a long-term relationship.

An inhibiting factor in this case was that the woman was very active to preserve the PLMs had a lack of knowledge about the PLMs herself.

She said: “The community should be involved in thinking, making decisions, planning, not waiting for orders so we can operate spontaneously.”

“Right now, we are building a Tripitaka hall or monastery library which is the temple repository for the Buddhist scriptures. I hope in the future, this will be for the place to be connected to the activities. By using activities linked to the space to create a tradition in the community. All of these ideas must be shared by all community members.”

***PaTumDon***

The case of PaTumDon was different again. Here the abbot was not greatly interested in the temple's PLMs and was too old to be very active himself. Rather the driving force was a group of retired men who had strong religious feelings and spent a lot of their free time in the temple. The temple was a social focus for their group. Their chief involvement with the PLMs were activities such as cleaning PLMs, because they had limited ability to read or use them. As one villager from PaTumDon commented:

“If we have a body of knowledge that everyone knows together and uses it continuously, it will be taken care of. If we don't teach Lanna Tham writing and the knowledge from PLMs isn’t published, it won’t. If there is no reader to read it, it is just a piece of paper or a palm leaf.”

Another activity was weaving covers for PLMs. They had organised training so that local women could be involved in making PLM covers. The weaving was itself a traditional practice.

A particular dimension in this village was that many of the people were migrants from Burma and the majority of the local villagers, who were Christian, were uninterested in the temple. So, participation represented a form of cultural pride, linked to the idea of Lanna culture, Buddhism and ethnic identity. This remained a minority of the community in the village and the participants were worried about how the interest could be passed on to future generations.

The group had the idea of cooperating with the scholars from Chiang Mai Rajabhat University to reproduce content from the PLMs in easy to absorb forms, such as comics and pieces of artwork. The connection to scholars at CMRU was key to the dynamic ways PLMs might be continued to be used. Yet it also created a form of dependence, which villagers regretted. As one interviewee commented:

“Developing community engagement is not easy. So, it is very important to have the external agencies or the experts as the middleman to promote the work. Also, it must be ensured that the activities are designed well for elders, otherwise, they would not be able to conduct the works by themselves. Then, everything would stop when the experts or external agencies leave.”

***Digitisation***

Because the value of digitisation is discussed in the literature, it is worth reporting on the theme of community responses to the process. Here views across the villages were similar. External partners who worked with the villages usually saw digitisation as a key part of the strategy for the long-term preservation and access for the PLMs. The villagers were mostly in favour of digitisation: it symbolised the cultural significance of the PLMs. However, although accessing the PLMs in digital form was theoretically convenient, the community was not ready to do so in many ways. Only a minority could read the PLMs, either from learning from the abbot in Ban Hong or from being monks themselves in the past. But this was a minority, so where PLMs were not translated they remained inaccessible even if digitised. There was also a complaint that reading the PLMs on computers was not easy and caused sore eyes. As a result usually the digital images of the PLMs were printed out, but that was very costly, as a member from the Ban Hong community commented. Other members from the Ban Hong community mentioned that the people who preferred reading PLMs in digital versions were few since it took a lot of time and was seen as confusing.

Further the community were often lacking the technology or skills to access digital content: “The community members do not have devices to access the digital files of the PLMs,” mentioned one of the members from the PaTumDon community. Another member from the same community stated that “We do not know how to access the digital form of the PLMs because we are elderly.”

**Discussion**

Table 2 summarises the main features of the three cases. The cases offer some contrasting elements and common themes. A common feature of all three cases was the importance of a focus of leadership, based on a passionate belief in the value of PLMs. But critically the pattern of leadership in the three cases was rather different. Given the religious significance of PLMs it was not surprising that leadership often lies with a cleric as at Ban Hong. As respected community figures, the abbot is highly likely to have a strong influence on the lay community. However, the other villages demonstrate the viability of lay leadership. The case of Ban Saluang Nai is particularly striking given the traditional exclusion of women from religious leadership – indeed women were traditionally not even allowed to touch PLMs. The case reveals how far social attitudes have evolved. The character of the community members involved also differed: at Ban Hong and PaTumDon it was primarily elderly people, whereas at Ban Saluang Nai it was the young.

Underlying these differences many elements were common. We have already referred to the need for a leadership focus. The foundation for community involvement was a mixture both of religious belief, particularly faith in earning merit through activities around the PLMs as sacred objects, but also the strong influence of the religion on daily life. Given that the vast majority of Thai people are Buddhists this is a powerful force. This was further linked to a strong sense of cultural pride and desire for social cohesion. Attempting to sustain or revive Lanna culture and its associated cohesive social values was a strong driver in Ban Salung Nai and PaTumDon.

In addition, external organisations, particularly research institutions played a critical role because local people had limited knowledge of reading the script or of technical issues such as preservation practices or cataloguing. External partners brought knowledge, expertise and sometimes financial support. But only trusted institutions were involved in this way and collaborating with external organisations did not always happen smoothly. External partnerships also tended to lack continuity, with an intervention relating to a particular project and when this was complete the relationship was lost, whereas the local community sought sustained engagement. Community involvement was enthusiastic, but inherently limited by lack of knowledge of the scripts to practices such as cleaning and making covers.

**Table 2.** Community involvement in PLM care

| **Community** | **Role** | **Key Participants** | **Community Involvement** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ban Hong | Leader/ Initiator | Abbot | * Cleaning PLMs (2019-) * Making covers for PLMs (2019-) * Lanna Tham classes to teach people to read the script (2017-) |
| Working group/Doer | Group of elderly lay people |
| Supporter/ Provider | External agencies, e.g., experts in PLMs, government organizations |
| Saluang Nai | Leader/ Initiator | Middle aged lay woman | * Young tour guide program (planned) * Lanna Tham classes for young generations to raise awareness (planned) * Tak Tham ceremony revival (planned) |
| Working group/Doer | A group of young people |
| Supporter/ Provider | External agencies, e.g., experts in PLMs, government organizations |
| PaTumDon | Leader/ Initiator and Working group/ Doer | A group of elderly laymen from a particular ethnic group | * Cleaning PLMs (2019-) * Making covers for PLMs (2019-) * Adapting PLMs into easy-to-understand forms (planned) |

In all three cases the initiative has a strong "bottom up" driver from the community rather than primarily initiated by external entities such as scholars or heritage collecting organisations. Yet there is a degree of dependence on external expertise. In terms of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, the role of external entities was one of partnership, where local people offered access to the PLMs to scholars and libraries in return for access to their expertise. Their expertise was needed for interpretation, translation, cataloguing, and preservation, including through digitisation.

Examining the participation within the community itself, four inter-woven factors appear to be critical: leadership, religious beliefs, respect for Lanna cultural heritage and social values emphasising social harmony. There was a strong sense of a need for a strong leadership figure with a vision for the importance of PLMs. Participation in PLM related activity was also driven by Buddhist beliefs. PLMs were considered holy objects and it was believed that merit could be earned in participating in activities related to them. PLMs also had strong cultural associations and along with other forms of traditional knowledge were being revived out of a strong regional interest in traditional cultural heritage. Social values towards authority and community (themselves shaped by Buddhism) appeared to play an important role in explaining the response to leadership. An attraction to respect for leadership figures is combined with a strong sense of community and desire for harmonious social relations.

Nevertheless, community involvement was found among a minority of citizens. A major barrier to further engagement was lack of ability to read/write the script. Relatively few local people could read or read and write the Lanna Tham script. Digitisation did not always involve transliteration and translation and digital objects were regarded as inaccessible anyway. More fundamentally there is a pattern among young people of turning away from Buddhism and traditional social values that poses a long-term challenge to the relevance of PLMs. In this context the efforts being made at Saluang Nai to involve young people are particularly significant.

***A model of community-driven care for PLMs***

Based on the key elements identified in the three villages, the researchers propose a model of the key components for community-driven care of Lanna PLMs visualised in Figure 3. This centres on the community, in contrast to the model presented in Jarusawat et al. (2018) which was more of a model of how external partners try to create and sustain local participation. In the new model it is recognised that the energy behind sustained care lies in the community itself.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

**Figure 4.** A Model of Sustainable Community-driven Care of Lanna PLMs

Community involvement in managing PLMs was underlain by religious beliefs especially the Buddhist notion of merit, which is believed to be received from doing good deeds. This belief constitutes a strong connection that binds people in the community together and so when associated with the PLMs is a powerful cohesive force. But it is quite abstract and some effort has to be made to associate it with PLMs. It is further linked to value placed on cultural heritage and community values emphasising harmony, but these seem to be eroding especially among young people.

Thinking about the development of momentum behind PLMs as a process: In the early stages, participation by the community is usually shaped by a leader who brings vision, passion and dedication towards the PLMs. In all three cases this was critical, though the individual or group offering leadership was different in each example. It requires time. Responding to this leadership people in the community are gathered for activities or events which can help move the community up a series of steps towards the potential for sustainability. A sense of awareness and ownership starts to be established and the community members begin to recognise the value of PLMs. Community involvement in the activities or events related to the PLMs develops, at the basic level through regular cleaning activities among members, female members making woven cloth to cover the PLMs, taking donations for activities or management related to the PLMs. This has the potential to develop into more advanced level, in-depth activities such as initiatives such as the Tak Tham ceremony, efforts to teach the Lanna script and the local guide project at Saluang Nai. Ongoing participation is the key to sustain the existence of the PLMs in the community. Mangkhang (2017) has suggested that effective leaders in the Thai context attempt to create learning communities. This suggestion chimes with the study findings.

External agencies such as Universities, research centres and libraries with expertise in PLMs play a vital role by promoting general awareness, providing training on how to clean manuscripts, cataloguing and publishing PLMs, studying the PLMs, and returning some of their newly acquired understanding to the community. External agencies help smooth community-based participation. Problems for the community such as lack of funding and lack of technical knowledge to manage the PLMs appropriately are solved. This has to be premised on mutual respect, given that the motives for the different parties are rather different. The community’s motive focused on religion; external partners were mostly cultural. However, long term collaboration remains challenging. It takes time to build up trust. External partners tend to work with a village within a particular project then move to another village at the end of it.

In the communities’ view, external financial support to establish the PLMs learning centres organized by the community was needed. Furthermore, it was thought that the content in the PLMs had the potential to be presented in adaptations such as in songs, art pieces, comics, photos, and literature. Services and activities for the young generation, such as hand-writing practice classes, Lanna Tham script classes, and reading PLMs (and other ancient types of texts such as Pub Sa, books made from mulberry bark) were also needed in the future.

Although digitisation figures heavily in the plans of external partners, it does not seem directly relevant to how community engagement could be accomplished. For the local community it was engagement with the material objects that triggered their interest. They often did not have the technology to access digital versions and of course they could not read the scripts.

The model is not intended to suggest that there is a single pathway that would fit all communities. The overall guideline for the PLMs’ sustainable preservation is suggested to the communities as an open-ended path; each community is able to choose their own way and apply it for themselves.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored different ways that local communities in northern Thailand are becoming involved in managing PLMs as valuable religious and cultural objects. Three cases were examined in depth and the differences and similarities in how they had developed analysed. Common was the basis of motivation in religious beliefs especially relating to earning merit. This was reinforced by growing interest in cultural heritage. Leadership, though coming from different sources in the three cases, was also important in stimulating and directing interest. Expert external partners also played a critical role in terms of training people to clean PLMs and raising understanding and awareness. Involvement was limited by the loss of the ability to read and write the Lanna Tham script. Building on this analysis a model of sustainable community involvement in PLM management is proposed.

The research reveals some intriguing aspects that point to the need for further exploration. Given the apparent importance of leadership but the differing paths taken by the communities involved, it would be intriguing to explore local experiences of leadership for leaders and those who follow them, to establish commonality in what leadership means in this context. It would also be useful to explore the emerging nature of the learning communities created around PLMs. Another important aspect of the case is the way in which local traditions are both revived and reinvented. PLMs are part of a wider revival of Lanna culture, at the same time there are aspects of the case, such as the increasing involvement of women, that reveal the extent to which this revival involves cultural change too. Understanding how this works would be important to sustainable community involvement. The current study examined three cases where the community is actively engaged with PLMs. A fuller understanding of why other communities engage far less is needed. For example, is this simply linked to the strength of Buddhist belief in the locality and how far can leadership work in such a context? This work would help further develop the model presented here to apply in contexts where the community is currently less committed but where some of the underlying favourable conditions exist.

There is clearly a need for libraries, archives and other heritage institutions in the region to become involved and to include local people in initiatives to describe and preserve PLMs. Ultimately, it is local communities that own the PLMs. Local communities continue to value them for religious and cultural reasons. Existing practices of sharing information learned in the process of cataloguing and digitisation are valuable. Working with local leaders and communities to build interest and awareness is important, if ultimately it is community leaders that have the key role. Digitisation, while of value to preserve PLMs, does not necessarily make them much more accessible to local people. Transliteration and translation might be given greater emphasis, because a major barrier is lack of widespread ability to read them. Presenting material from PLMs in alternative forms such as comic books, as imagined at Pat Tum Don, would also help widen understanding of their relevance. As would integrating them into other cultural initiatives such as wisdom classrooms, especially those directed towards the young, and modelled at Saluang Nai. It is important that long term relationships develop between local communities and external agencies.

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