

CASE #1

Preservation Workshops with Restricted Resources

Preserving Cham Manuscripts in Vietnam

AUTHORS:

Danielle Spalenka

Director, Digital POWRR Project

University Libraries

Northern Illinois University

danielle.spalenka@gmail.com**Hao Phan**

Curator, Southeast Asia Collection

University Libraries

Northern Illinois University

hphan@niu.edu

OVERVIEW:

The case study focuses on how to organize a workshop that helps local communities preserve their archival materials with limited resources. It describes the content and challenges of a workshop that assisted archivists and communities in Vietnam for a project preserving the ancient manuscripts of the Cham, a group of minority people in the country. The workshop took place in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from the August 5–7, 2014.

DATE:

January 2016

KEYWORDS:

Developing Countries | Diverse Holdings | International Archives | Manuscripts | Preservation | Southeast Asian Archives

Introduction

The case study focuses on how to organize a workshop that helps local communities preserve their archival materials with limited resources. It describes the content and challenges of a workshop that assisted archivists and communities in Vietnam for a project preserving the ancient manuscripts of the Cham, a group of minority people in the country. The workshop took place in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from the August 5-7, 2014.

In 2012, funded by a pilot grant from the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library (EAP531), Hao Phan, curator of the Southeast Asia Collection at Northern Illinois University and one of the authors of this report, conducted two field trips to Vietnam, to learn about the existence of [Cham manuscripts](#). Based on the survey, it is estimated that at least 3,000 manuscripts still exist in Cham communities. The majority of the manuscripts, considered precious cultural heritage of the Cham and important primary resources for Southeast Asian Studies, are in endangered status due to the lack of proper means for preservation in the tropical climate of Vietnam.

In 2014, funded by another grant by the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP698), Northern Illinois University Libraries worked with local partners in Vietnam on a one-year project from July 2014 to July 2015, to help preserve these [Cham manuscripts](#).

The project included two main components: assisting local people preserving Cham manuscripts, including providing a preservation workshop, and digitizing about 500 selected Cham manuscripts.

Key Ethical Issue and Reason for the Case

From the historical perspective, the Cham are an important minority group in Vietnam. Cham people once had their own kingdom called Champa, which was established around the seventh century. Throughout its history Champa was frequently at war with the neighboring country of Vietnam from the North and eventually eliminated by the Vietnamese in 1832. The Vietnamese army killed many Cham people in the nineteenth century as Champa was forcefully merged into the territory of Vietnam. There are only about 162,000 Cham living in Vietnam today, concentrated in Central Vietnam and the Mekong Delta region. Most of the Cham in Vietnam are peasants living in extreme poverty. The two main religions of Cham people are Hinduism and Islam.

The kingdom of Champa left behind an impressive cultural heritage that can still be appreciated today through the remains of its ancient architecture and especially its written records. Cham scripts were initially based on Sanskrit but later developed into a distinctive writing system that contained several different scripts: *akhar patau havap*, *akhar rik*, *akhar yok*, *akha tuel*, and *akhar thrah*. *Akhar thrah* is the script used for the past few hundred years and found on most of the manuscripts in existence. Cham manuscripts include two main types: palm-leaf manuscripts

and paper manuscripts. They were created between three hundred years and fifty years ago. The content of the manuscripts is rich and diverse, including prayers, instructions for ritual practices, literature, community and family history.

Although archives in France and Vietnam have collected a few hundred Cham manuscripts, it is estimated that there are at least 3,000 manuscripts still available in the Cham villages located in Central Vietnam, mostly in the two provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan. This estimation was based on observation from the two field trips to Vietnam in 2013 and 2014 conducted by Hao Phan, one of the authors of this case study. There are about thirty Cham villages in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan, and in each of the villages that Mr. Phan visited, he viewed at least one hundred manuscripts. Local Cham scholars estimated a much higher number of the existing manuscripts.

There are several reasons that the manuscripts are not well preserved, even though they are considered a precious family heritage. First, many Cham today are unable to read Cham scripts and thus find no practical use for the materials in their daily lives. Second, due to the lack of financial means, the manuscripts holders are currently unable to perform the annual ceremonies called *Pambang akhar* (reporting to ancestors) and *Pahuor akhar* (purifying manuscripts) in which sacred manuscripts are removed from their storage for inspection. Some manuscripts holders believe that keeping “deserted books” in the house is bad luck, leaving the manuscripts at risk of being discarded into a river. Third, most Cham people are not aware of the value of Cham manuscripts as research materials for scholars outside the community. Finally, the manuscripts are housed in unstable storage conditions, which leave them at great risk of deterioration. Without an effort to save these manuscripts, they would soon disappear, resulting in the loss of a precious cultural heritage of an important minority people in Southeast Asia.

Institutional Context

“Digitization of the Endangered Cham Manuscripts in Vietnam” was a collaborative project between Northern Illinois University Libraries and the Center for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The project was funded by a grant from the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library (EAP698). Supported by the Arcadia charity fund, since 2005 EAP has funded more than 780 projects worldwide that helps preserve archival materials in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration. EAP typically funds projects that help relocate the endangered materials to professional archives or digitize the materials when they cannot be relocated. EAP is particularly interested in enhancing local capabilities to manage and preserve archival collections by way of training local archivists and the project staff.

The project consisted of two main components:

- 1) Assisting the people in Vietnam preserving Cham manuscripts. To achieve this objective, the project provided two means:

- First, it provided a three-day workshop in Vietnam that trained local archivists, Cham scholars, and the project team on how to preserve manuscripts. Members of the digitization project team would then train the manuscripts owners in Cham communities when travelling to Central Vietnam to digitize the manuscripts.
- Second, it provided acid-free archival boxes to manuscripts owners so that the manuscripts could be better stored within the community. Relocation of the manuscripts from the villagers' homes to an archive would meet many obstacles. Many religious manuscripts cannot be removed from the communities because they are currently being used for ritual practices. Given the destitute economic situation of the Cham communities Vietnam, financial compensation is expected by manuscript holders in order for the manuscripts to be relocated; a condition that is beyond the funding scope of this project. The area currently lacks an archival facility well equipped to preserve a large number of fragile manuscripts, contributing to the obstacle of relocation.

2) The project digitized, by photographing, about 500 selected manuscripts to preserve the content of the manuscripts and make them accessible online for scholarly research. The British Library, Northern Illinois University Libraries, and the Center for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam will hold digital copies of the manuscripts.

In addition to these two specific tasks, the project helped raise awareness among Cham people of the endangered status of the manuscripts and their value as research materials for scholars worldwide.

Narrative

Developing the three-day workshop required keeping the scope of the project in mind while also being mindful of local practices and resources. Preserving the endangered Cham manuscripts not only required physically preserving the materials, but also involved raising awareness of the research value of the manuscripts and their endangered status to the Cham people. Even though the Cham have preserved the manuscripts for centuries, many no longer see the practical use for the manuscripts. Danielle Spalenka, then serving as the curator of manuscripts at Northern Illinois University (NIU) and who had previous experience in paper conservation, developed and presented the workshop to demonstrate simple preservation techniques. Hao Phan, curator of the Southeast Asia Collection at the NIU Libraries and principal investigator of the project, served as the translator and coordinator for the workshop.

Planning and conducting the three-day workshop required being mindful of resources available locally as well as being respectful to the cultural history and context of the materials. In this

sense, applying the Western archival approach to preservation proved to have limitations in developing a community-centric workshop. Some challenges include the following:

- 1) Many tools and techniques used by archivists in Western countries are not available in Vietnam. Preservation in Western archives begins with providing a stable storage environment, while archival facilities in Vietnam often lack adequate temperature control. Basic tools used in Western archives, such as acid-free boxes and folders, are too expensive for most local institutions. Cham homes, where many original manuscripts are still located, lack temperature and humidity control. The Cham people in villages simply do not have the economic resources to store the manuscripts by Western standards. Manuscripts are often kept mixed with personal family papers, left out in the open within the homes of caretakers, or in leather suitcases. These conditions only contribute to the deterioration of manuscripts.
- 2) Archival principles such as provenance were often impossible to determine for Cham manuscripts. Most manuscripts contain only the names of the villages where the writing took place but not the time when the manuscripts were created. A manuscript was often used for writing over a long period of time, recording different subjects. Applying the principle of provenance – a vital part of arranging and describing manuscripts in the West – proved to have limitations to this unique set of manuscripts.
- 3) Each paper and palm-leaf format would also require different preservation needs, adding to some of the challenges in preparing workshop content. Preservation resources in the West focus primarily on paper preservation. Many older Cham manuscripts were written on rice paper, which is not a traditional paper format in the West. Resources used by Western archivists do not typically cover palm-leaf preservation.
- 4) The lack of awareness of the endangered status of the manuscripts by local people was in some ways a greater threat to the manuscripts than the lack of preservation resources. Although the manuscripts were kept for hundreds of years, many Cham today no longer see the practical value in preserving the manuscripts. The government of Vietnam, although recognizing the value of Cham cultural heritage, has not made an effort to preserve the endangered Cham manuscripts.
- 5) The British Library, who facilitated the grant funds, had specific requirements for collecting metadata and provenance for the digitization portion of the grant. This involved following the principles of arrangement and description followed by archives, including: provenance, collection, series, record group, etc. Training was needed to explain in simple terms why archival principles such as records series, hierarchy, and provenance, were just as important as preserving the physical manuscripts. The project team members that worked with the Cham included scholars and college students, not professional archivists. It was critical to provide detailed yet simple instructions for their training.

Based on these challenges, the approach to developing the workshop centered on providing practical strategies to preservation that can be implemented in communities with limited

resources. The focus of the preservation sessions became doing a hands-on demonstration for workshop attendees. By providing a hands-on demonstration, workshop attendees would be confident that the skills learned in the workshop could be applied in the field. Furthermore, a hands-on demonstration could aid in the language barrier.

The three-day workshops were divided into four half-day sessions, with the third day focused solely on techniques for digitization. Attendees of the workshop included about 30 librarians and archivists in Ho Chi Minh City, administrators of Cham institutions in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan, local Chamic Studies scholars, and members of the digitization team.

The first session focused on collections management and principles of appraisal. Drawing off *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Frank Boles, the principles of context and provenance were introduced. The concepts of original order and record series were presented, using Cham manuscripts as a case study. The overall objective for this first session was to convey that preserving the origin and context of the manuscript is just as important as preserving the physical object.

The second session focused on practical techniques for preserving paper and palm-leaf manuscripts, which are the most common formats of the Cham manuscripts. The content drew heavily from the works of *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts 2nd Ed.* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler (Society of American Archivists, 2010), *Conservation of Manuscripts and Paintings in Southeast Asia* by O.P. Agrawal (Butterworths, 1984), and *Conservation and Preservation of Palm-leaf and Parabaik Manuscripts* by John F. Dean (Cornell University, 1997). However, many of the techniques for conservation outlined in these works included tools not available in Vietnam. Furthermore, the fact that many of the Cham manuscripts were not being stored in temperature-controlled environments was the major contributing factor to deterioration. How was the instructor supposed to teach preservation techniques when the most important factor to preservation—the storage environment—was not available? The instructor used the techniques outlined in these three works but then researched what tools and resources were available in Vietnam. When the issue of pest control was presented, the instructor discussed with the workshop attendees alternative ways to eliminate and prevent insects using local resources. For example, using native plants like citronella and cinnamon can keep insects away without harming the manuscripts. These may not be the ideal solutions, but they showed that preservation could be improved using simple local resources.

The third session offered hands-on demonstration of preservation techniques. Providing attendees the chance to work on basic preservation techniques would engage attendees and increase the likelihood of the skills put to use in the field. The preservation techniques were broken into two sections: one for paper manuscripts, and one for palm-leaf manuscripts. Each session identified the different formats and discussed common biological and environmental factors causing their deterioration. The instructor brought examples of paper with common preservation issues and set up stations for participants to try their hand at repairing the paper. A station for mending tears, removing metal fasteners, and cleaning dirty paper (some from inactive mold) using basic tools was set up to allow interaction between the instructor and the

attendees. The instructor also brought common tools that are used by archivists in the United States that could also be found in Vietnam. For example, to clean a document in otherwise excellent condition, an eraser can be gently applied to the dirty area and cleaned away with a soft bristle brush. For tears in a document, she stressed to never use tape and to provide a stable environment to prevent further tearing. Since common mending resources may not be available in Vietnam, she introduced a simple solution of stabilizing the manuscript in between two pieces of rice paper. Rice paper is widely available in Vietnam and is free of chemicals that could possibly cause damage to manuscripts. This was an especially important factor given that acid-free boxes and folders are not easily accessible in the Cham communities.

The fourth session focused on preservation planning and storage, focusing on practical tips that help minimize the negative effects of the environment. For example, the instructor learned that while the villages did not have any way to control relative humidity, they did have access to fans to help cool the environment during the hot months. The fans could be used to help with air movement to prevent mold from settling. Other concepts such as monitoring and cleaning the storage area to prevent pests, using natural insect repellents like cinnamon and lemongrass, were incorporated into the session.

The final day was devoted to learning how to digitize manuscripts within the Cham community. While most of the day focused on how to use the camera and equipment, it also covered how to collect the provenance that would serve as metadata for the digital objects. The project staff would be traveling to the villages to digitize the manuscripts and also to provide acid-free boxes to manuscript owners. Armed with the knowledge learned in the workshops, the project staff was able to convey some of the practical preservation tips to the manuscript owners. This hopefully would reduce further damage to the manuscripts and raise awareness of their endangered status in the Cham communities.

Conclusions

The workshop proved to be successful in raising awareness among library professionals and Cham scholars in Vietnam about the endangered status of Cham manuscripts and how to help preserve them. It was also successful in using local resources to promote preservation. By tailoring the training to local conditions, the workshop provided preservation knowledge and techniques that were considered useful to the local people. The instructors received positive feedback and expressions of gratitude from the attendees about the training. During the workshop, the attendees also showed strong interest in the subjects presented. For example, they frequently asked questions on how to apply the training to the specific work at their own institution. When the instructors showed the project team how to fill out the metadata template provided by the Endangered Archives Programme, the staff immediately connected the subject of metadata to principals of provenance and appraisal presented earlier in the workshop. It was not possible to digitize every manuscript, so appraisal decisions also needed to be made in the field. A lively discussion came about on how to determine what to digitize, which led back to the earlier sessions on context and provenance. The project team working in Cham villages digitizing the manuscripts has followed closely the preservation techniques

provided at the workshop. They passed along basic knowledge of preservation to manuscripts owners in the villages, after providing them with the acid-free storage boxes supplied by the project.

The instructors themselves gained a deeper knowledge of the conditions for not just the manuscripts but also of archival facilities in Vietnam. Many techniques and resources available to archivists in the Western world are often not available to professionals in Vietnam. The archival practice is not well established in Vietnam and many professional standards used in Western countries are new concepts to a developing country. A larger portion of the workshop focused on how to keep storage spaces secure and clean while also being mindful of the specific environmental conditions in Vietnam. Preserving an endangered set of manuscripts could be possible not just by basic preservation techniques but also emphasizing basic archival principles that are doable considering the specific conditions of the location. Opportunities for further collaboration and training would be beneficial to archivists in Vietnam and in Western countries.

Discussion

The workshop was developed to raise awareness about the endangered situation of the ancient manuscripts belonging to the Cham, a minority group of people in Vietnam, and how to preserve them with the limited resources available in the country. While the instructors achieved those objectives, what made the workshop truly successful was the support from colleagues in Vietnam. We found that the librarians and archivists in Vietnam were passionate about preserving their cultural heritage, but lack the skills and resources to do so properly according to Western archival practice.

The success of the workshop hinged on providing practical techniques using resources within the country that can be useful for local archives and communities. Hence, developing the workshop required research on the background of the archives in Vietnam to make the training suitable to the local preservation practice. It was also necessary to identify local resources equivalent to archival tools used in the West.

Another challenge to the overall development of the workshop was language barrier. Although one of the instructors is a native speaker of Vietnamese, translating the technical terms between English and Vietnamese presented a challenge in some cases. We overcame this challenge by using a bilingual PowerPoint presentation and tried to anticipate some questions that might be asked by the workshop participants.