

2022-23 Chevening Fellowship at the British Library

Manuscript Textiles in the Southeast Asian Collections

This fellowship will be hosted by the Asian and African Collections department. The British Library holds about 3000 manuscripts from Southeast Asia, forming the largest and most significant collection of Southeast Asian manuscripts in the UK. Highlights include illustrated paper folding books from Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, rare palm leaf manuscripts from Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos and Thailand going back to the seventeenth century, royal letters in Malay from the courts of the archipelago, some of the earliest known Batak divination manuals from Sumatra, as well as rare royal letters and edicts from Vietnam and Thailand.

Within this body of material, recent British Library projects have brought to light a significant number of manuscript textiles— either wrapped around or attached to manuscripts as a form of protective cover - without or with only minimal documentation and cataloguing data. Often the textiles were custom-made for one particular manuscript, and in this case these objects could be made from valuable hand-woven silk brocades, printed cotton or imported materials like chintz and silk damask. Specially designed textiles were commissioned to add meritorious value to a manuscript or to an entire set of manuscripts. Sometimes discarded textiles like monks' robes, used and new clothes of people who had passed away unexpectedly, or leftover pieces of cloths made for other purposes were used to create manuscript textiles.

The provenance of these manuscript textiles is often difficult to establish due to the lack of recorded information in the Library's catalogues and historical handlists. It is obvious that some of the manuscript textiles are of a later date than the manuscripts themselves, and some originate from a different place than the manuscripts they belong to, since there was a practice to replace worn out manuscript textiles with new ones.

This Chevening Fellowship project provides an opportunity to survey, assess and research these under-researched and often fragile Southeast Asian manuscript textiles, in order to provide comprehensive catalogue records and to help plan and inform future conservation work and public engagement.

About Chevening

Chevening is the UK government's international awards scheme aimed at developing global leaders. Funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and partner organisations, Chevening offers fellowships to mid-career professionals to undertake a bespoke short course in the UK.

Chevening provides a unique opportunity for future leaders, influencers, and decision makers from all over the world to develop professionally and academically, network extensively, experience UK culture, and build lasting positive relationships with the UK.

About the British Library

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and a public-facing cultural institution. We care for collections that encompass all fields of knowledge and a wide range of formats in hundreds of languages, covering 3,500 years from some of the earliest written records to the digital collections of the present day. This rich and diverse resource presents countless opportunities to support traditional and digital research and cultural engagement with scholars and organisations across the globe.

[British Library Chevening Fellows](#) are based at our St Pancras site in London and benefit from a unique research and professional development experience. They are embedded in their host department, but also in the Library's wider postgraduate research community. The fellowship projects that we offer enable new types of research, inform strategy and foster international collaboration, and we deeply value the insights and expertise that Chevening Fellows bring.

Southeast Asian collections are made available through a number of platforms, such as the [British Library Treasures](#), the [Discovering Sacred Texts](#) resource and the [Digitised Manuscripts](#) catalogue, to encourage their use for education and research and promote understanding and enjoyment of Southeast Asian culture. Information about the collections, the work of the Library's curators, research collaborations and other projects is also published regularly on the [Asian and African studies blog](#). In addition, the [Endangered Archives Programme](#) facilitates the digitisation of archives at locations around the world, which includes a range of manuscripts and archival material in Southeast Asia.

Key Responsibilities

- Review, identify and research the British Library holdings of Southeast Asian manuscript textiles dating mainly from the 18th to the 20th century, starting with an existing list of around 50 items
- Document the materials, estimated age, country of origin, technique of creation and general condition of each item and, where possible, recommend which items should be prioritised for conservation treatment
- Work closely with the Library's curators to share information about Southeast Asian manuscript textiles internally, especially with colleagues in the Library's Conservation Centre, and externally with organisations in the UK and internationally that we are collaborating with
- Help promote the collection of Southeast Asian manuscript textiles more widely through blog articles and collection highlights on the Library's webpage, to encourage further engagement with the collections

Deliverables

- A spreadsheet with metadata, to include information such as type (wrapper, book cover, bag, sleeve), material, age, country of origin, techniques, inscriptions, decorations/imagery, condition, conservation needs, additional comments/recommendations for conservation after examination of manuscript textiles in the Southeast Asian collections



- An article about the project on the Asian and African Studies blog or in an external newsletter/journal
- A show & tell session/staff talk on Southeast Asian manuscript textiles in the collection
- A small display of Southeast Asian manuscript textiles in the Library's public spaces (in collaboration with the supervising BL curator)

Development Opportunities

- Staff-level access to unique British Library collections and research resources including access to staff training courses, workshops and talks
- Work experience in identifying and examining special collection material, and in identifying collection care needs
- Hands-on training in metadata systems, cataloguing processes and bibliographic standards
- Introduction to the British Library's Conservation Centre, with a focus on textile conservation
- Opportunity to gain experience in disseminating project outcomes and engaging different audiences through various communication channels
- Opportunity to become familiar with the work of the [Endangered Archives Programme](#), which has helped digitise manuscripts and archival material in Southeast Asian countries
- Opportunity to enhance spoken and written English through work practice and collaboration with colleagues
- Networking opportunities across the British Library and a range of external networks in the UK and internationally
- Opportunity to gain confidence in the production of writing for different audiences in English and native languages, with support from curators

Benefits

- 12-month period of project-based activity at the British Library
- Living expenses for the duration of the fellowship
- Return economy airfare from home country to the UK
- Up to £1,000 from the British Library for approved project-related expenses
- Access to a programme of cultural events and activities organised by the FCDO and the Chevening Secretariat
- Access to a highly regarded global network of over 50,000 Chevening Alumni

Candidate Requirements

- Degree or professional/work experience in a subject relevant to Southeast Asian textiles and/or Southeast Asian manuscripts cultures
- Experience in a museum, library, archive, textile conservation, manuscript digitisation, academic or other relevant environment
- Good communicator with some experience of using social media and/or writing for online/non-specialist audiences in English or their native language
- Interest in curatorial and cataloguing work

Individuals must be residents in their home country at the time of making their application.

This fellowship is open to candidates from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

Application and selection timeline

3 August – 2 November 2021	Application period for Chevening British Library Fellowships. Applications open at 12:00 (midday) BST and close at 12:00 (midday) GMT.
November 2021 – January 2022	Sifting of applications against eligibility criteria.
February 2022	Applications are shortlisted for interviews by the British Embassy.
March – April 2022	Shortlisted candidates are interviewed by panels at the British Embassy.
June 2022	Following your first interview, you may be invited to attend a second online interview with the British Library.
End of June 2022	Announcement of interview results.
September 2022	Commencement of Chevening Fellowship in the UK.