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Appropriations Panel

Appropriation as Conquest in the Buddhist Architecture of King Chulalongkorn

Introduction

During the period of the fifth reign and especially when King Chulalongkorn assumed full authority in the 1880s, the ruling elites began to construct the idea of Siam as bounded entity with distinctive national heritage. For instance, it was during this period that Siam's ruling elites began to engage in defining and uncovering national heritage of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya following the British model for the study and preservation of antiquities. Although the fifth reign is widely regarded as a period of administrative and cultural unification under the absolute monarch, this paper will show that the idea of national purity did not manifest in Buddhist architecture at this time. By looking at the built form, spatial arrangement and architectural motifs of royal monasteries during the period of the Chakri Reformation, we can see that King Rama V appropriated and assimilated architectural motifs from all over the world, including Europe as well as Java, Sri Lanka and Cambodia. This paper aims to argue that, via these appropriations, King Rama V expressed Siam's status as the foremost center of the Theravada Buddhist world while synchronously drawing on European motifs to express cosmopolitanism, modernity and equality with the west.

Transformation of architecture and planning arrangement

The first royal monastery constructed under King Rama V's order was Wat Ratchabopit (Monastery of the Royal Ruler) which he built in 1869 to celebrate his ascension to the throne¹. Although the monastery was constructed on a small scale, it had highly elaborated details and took twenty years to complete. Its structure was supervised by Prince Phra Ong Chao Pradit Worraakan who was also a royal craftsman within Krom Chang Sib Moo or Royal Guild² and it was finished by Prince Krom Muan Supprasat Suppakit who also served King Chulalongkorn as a personal guard and followed the king to Europe³. The planning arrangement and architectural preferences were influenced by the royal monasteries of his father, King Mongkut. This monastery employed double layered holy markers to delineate the monastery following King Mongkut's preference, and the plan of the monastery was very compact similar to other monasteries of King Mongkut. Wat Rachabopit also echoed King Mongkut's design in that it used the architectural style of Sukhothai and a Sri Lankan bell shaped pagoda. However, the unique character of this monastery is the circular corridor embracing the pagoda at the center and the perpendicular axis of the two gateway pavilions that attach to this ring corridor. The circular corridor embracing pagoda and connecting Ordination hall and shrine was similar to the Tooparam pagoda ruins at Anurathapura, the ancient Buddhist city of Sri Lanka.

¹ Sudjit (Sawetjinda) Sananwai, *Kan Suksa Ruang Kan Okbab Satapattayakram Wat Ratchaborpit Sathit Mahasimaram* [Study of Design of Wat Ratchaborpit Sathitmahasimaram], (Bangkok: Graphic Art 28, 1998) 43.

² Ibid 62.

³ Ibid 63.

However, there is one feature of Wat Ratchabopit that was also strikingly different from monasteries of King Mongkut. Although the exterior of main buildings were constructed with Thai ornament, the interior were decorated in a Gothic style with the structures of point-arches and buttresses. The west side area of the royal monastery served as a royal cemetery and several tombs were erected in Gothic architecture in 1884 (2427)⁴. It was likely that these Gothic features were added after King Chulalongkorn had been to visit several colonial cities in Burma, Singapore, Java and Malaya, as the majority of British colonial buildings and church structures in these towns were adorned in simple Gothic architectural motifs.

In 1877, his second monastery, Wat Thepsirinrawas (Monastery of Queen Thepsirin), was constructed and the royal ordination hall was also in a Sukhothai style. The chief commissioner was Prince Krom Muan Chareonpol Poonsawas. This monastery also took almost 25 years to finish the major structures⁵. However, over the duration of its construction, the planning arrangement changed. The shrine with the pagoda top roof and an ordination hall were place next to each other with a Bodhi Tree in between. The gateways were constructed in the form of the crown or Mongkut. The design of this shrine was initially similar to King Mongkut's ancestral shrine at the Emerald Buddha Precinct, but this gigantic construction scheme was finally abandoned and its original foundation was removed in 1922 (2465)⁶.

⁴ Ibid 93.

⁵ *Prawat Wat Thepsirinrawas* [History of Wat Thepsirinrawas], Cremation Vol for Phra Sasanasopon, 16 Jan 1999, (Bangkok: Mahamakut Ratchawittayalai Press, 1999)

⁶ Ibid 6, 26, 74.

Instead, Rama V established a Buddhist school in 1890(2433) under the new Mahamakut Ratchawithayalai University that began to teach the Buddhist canon and Pali language using modern methods⁷. The two public school buildings were constructed in 1895 (2438) at the north side of the front area and, in 1906 (2449), it became the teacher training school⁸. This school later became one of the most famous public schools in Bangkok. Again, these school buildings were constructed with Gothic style architecture and details. The large area of the public and monastic school distinguished this monastery from the traditional monastery. King Chulalongkorn's abandonment of the original plan to shift to constructing a modern monastery school signified his departure from the old world of building sacred Buddhist structures in favor of modern education.

His third monastery, Wat Niwet Thammaprawat was constructed in 1878 at his summer palace, Bang Pa-In Palace near Ayutthaya. The monastery was built in a Gothic style on the linear axis plan on an island outside the palace facing the Chao Praya River. Moreover, its subsidiary structures such as the chanting pavilion (Sala Suad Mon), portico and tower housing Buddha images and the Buddhist library (Hor Trai) were also constructed in a Gothic style. The residence of the abbot was built in Baroque-Victorian Ginger Bread architecture and the interior space was adorned with stained glass windows. The stained glass depicting King Chulalongkorn's image was originally made in France and the other ten windows portrayed the ten images of Bothisattava from the last ten Jataka stories⁹. Again this monastery also was built for the Reform Buddhist Sect or

⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁸ Ibid, 71.

⁹ Saroj Dhitikiattipong, *Guide to Wat Niwet Dharma Prawat in incorporating Bang Pa-In Palace*, (Bangkok: M&E Company Limited, 1999), 29.

Thammayutika Nikaya and also a modern Buddhist school under Mahamakut Ratchawittayalai University.

His fourth monastery, Wat Benjamaborpit Dusitwanaram, was constructed in 1899. The monastery is known as the Marble temple and became the icon of Thai Buddhist architecture¹⁰. The king had four major purposes for this monastery; first, it was the monastery of his new palace at Suan Dusit; second, it was the museum of Lord Buddha statues; third, it was the college for Mahanikaya monks; and finally it was the masterpiece of Thai craftsmanship¹¹. The architect of this monastery was Prince Krom Muan Narissaranuwattiwong, the king's half brother. The ordination hall was designed in a crucifix plan which had never been used before in Thailand. As many Thai architects and scholars point out, the proportion of the ordination hall and the spatial arrangement of the cloister embracing it echoes those of Khmer Angkor¹². At this monastery, Italian engineers and craftsmen were hired to assist the construction and marble finishing¹³. The interior space was adorned with stained glass motifs from Florence in a Thai ornament pattern¹⁴. The exterior decoration employed white marble from Carrara, Italy¹⁵. The pavilions in front of the ordination hall were constructed in a Javanese style while the

¹⁰ For instance see the website of Tourism Authority of Thailand at <http://www.tourismthailand.org/bgsm/html/59.html> (Extracted March 19,2005) and *D.K. Travel Guide Thailand*, (London: D.K. Publishing, 1999), 102-103.

¹¹ Manop Akkaradej, *Satapattayakram fee Prahat Somdet Chaofah Krom Praya Narissaranuwattiwong* [Architecture of Prince Narissaranuwattiwong], (Bangkok: Public Relation Division Department of Fine Arts, 1995), 78; 87.

¹² Ibid 91 and interview with Professor Somkid Jiratassanakul at School of Architecture, Silpakorn University in January 15, 2003.

¹³ Phraratchakittimethee, *Pramuan Akkasan Samkan Nueng Nai Ngan Satabana Wat Benjamaborpit Dusitwanaram*[compilation of document about the construction of Wat Benjamaborpit] Cremation vol. Somdet Phraputtashinnawong, March 25, 1995 Vol.1, (Bangkok: Ammarin Printing, 1995) 221-254 citing National Archive R5 S6:83/13 and R5 S6 :83/25-38.

¹⁴ Manop Akkaradej, *Satapattayakram fee Prahat Somdet Chaofah Krom Praya Narissaranuwattiwong* [Architecture of Prince Narissaranuwattiwong], (Bangkok: Public Relation Division Department of Fine Arts, 1995), 79.

¹⁵ Phra Ratchakittimoli, *Prawat Wat Benjamaborpit Dusitwanaram*[History of Wat Benjamaborpit Dusitwanaram], (Bangkok: Ammarin Printing, 2000), 91.

decoration of Khmer style lion statues adorned the main entrance. The 52 Lord Buddha statues along the cloister were transported from all over the country of Siam and many of them were duplicated from Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Cambodia¹⁶.

The planning arrangement was significantly different from the previous reign in that the residential area occupied two third of the total monastery space. The residential quarter was comprised of public school buildings and abbot residences in Baroque style architecture, a large scale library and museum in Thai style, and the residential quarter.

His last work was Wat Rachathiwas. The construction began in 1909 which was only less than a year before the end of his reign and two years after his second trip to Europe. This monastery was another example reflecting the influence of Angkorian architecture. This monastery has long history associated with King Mongkut's religious reform movement. The main ordination hall of this monastery was built in a Chinese style and became dilapidated during King Chulalongkorn's reign. The king started to renovate this monastery by appointing Prince Narissaranuwattiwong as his chief commissioner for the renovation. Following the king's intention, the main ordination hall was altered significantly to reflect Angkorian motifs but the interior mural painting was carried out by an Italian artist. The decision making process in the renovation of this monastery connoted the influence of Western concepts of preservation of antiquity. We can see the king's conformity to ideals of preservation from his letter to Prince Patriarch Wachirayan Warorot. Describing his investigation of the existing condition of the ordination hall at Wat Rachathivas, King Chulalongkorn stated the following: "the structures built in the reign of King Rama III., the pagoda was renovated with poor

¹⁶ For more detail of the list of Buddha Statues see *Prawat Wat Benjamaborpit* 163-166

architectural craftsmanship and it was not older than eighty years”¹⁷. In the traditional context, the ruler who renovated monasteries never cited the age or quality of architectural craftsmanship found in Buddhist structures as a reason to reconstruct them. Rather, they renovated temples to make merit by upholding the Buddhist religion. In contrast, the age and architectural significance were the major considerations of British-led preservation movement. That Rama V gave such a reason to renovate the monastery indicated a paradigm shift in the meaning of Buddhist architecture within the nation. Besides the construction of the ordination hall and pagoda in the sacred precinct, his public school and Buddhist school were also major considerations in the renovation process.

Conclusion

Why and how did King Chulalongkorn’s ideas about monastery construction change so significantly during this period? It is clear that his first monastery in the Reform style reflected his political struggle as a boy king (he was around seventeen when the first one was constructed) who tried to assert his legitimacy as a rightful successor of King Mongkut against the old nobles whose majority had controlled the bureaucracy. However, when he assumed his power in the mid-1880s, his political leadership was threatened more by external forces of colonial power than by internal ones. The French took over Hue in 1884 and four years later the former Siamese principality of Sipsong Chao Thai fell under French colonial government. As everyone knows, in response to colonial encroachment, King Chulalongkorn initiated the centralization for his government administration and educational modernization. Examining the design and

¹⁷ letter from King Chulalongkorn to Prince Patriarch Wachirayan Warorot, June 12-19, 1908 from *Prawat Wat Rachathiwas*, (Bangkok: Suwat, 2000) 45-55

motifs of the monasteries, we can see how these political changes were expressed via Buddhist architecture during Rama V's reign.

The monastery as a Reflection of Rama V's administrative and educational policies and his response to the "lost territories"

Firstly, using architectural motifs, Rama V sought to reassert Siam's historical status as overlord vis-à-vis Cambodia. As the French laid claims on the territory of Cambodia which was historically regarded by ruling elites as a vassal state of Siam, we can see that the architectural motifs in King Chulalongkorn's monasteries echoed the historical connection between Siam and Cambodia. The monastic architecture built during the latter part of his reign, such as Wat Benjamaborpit and Wat Rachathiwas, employed more Khmer architectural patterns recalling the style of late Ayutthaya and Early Bangkok periods before King Mongkut. For instance, the symbol of Lord Vishnu riding on Garuda was foregrounded again. This symbol had been used extensively during the late Ayutthaya period, and as many scholars have argued, this symbol and other architectural motifs signified the Siamese rulers' absorption of Angkorian culture through conquest. These icons and architectural preferences reflected Siam's long history of cultural ties with Cambodia and its superior status as the conqueror.

Secondly, Rama V's monastery construction also reflected his concern with modernizing the administrative and educational systems in order to establish Siam's parity with the West. For example, at Wat Benjamaborpit, the bas-relief sculptures found on ten panels located at the front gables of the cloister were symbols of his ten ministries. Moreover, the mural paintings of the monastery were not images of Trai Phum cosmology connoting sacred geography but rather represented eight pagodas from his major vassal states which were later incorporated into the nation of Siam. The use of

actual stupas located in territory of former vassal states asserted his political authority over these dependencies¹⁸. It connoted that he was the divine ruler at the center of cosmology as well as a worldly ruler who controlled his former dependencies via modern administration.

Thirdly, the stylistic combination of architectural details reflected the Siamese ruling elites' experiences in Europe and Western colonial towns in Asia. The architectural embellishment of Wat Benjamaborpit was in a traditional Thai style with some decorative patterns from both Javanese and ancient Khmer architecture, while its unique materials included Carrara marble and stained glass from Florence, Italy. These multicultural details point to the Siamese ruling elites' practice of emulating western colonial powers who collected artifacts of the kingdoms they colonized or encountered along their travels.

Considering all these elements, I argue that King Chulalongkorn's building program for his royal monasteries represented his claims to legitimacy as a cosmopolitan Theravada Buddhist monarch in a new global context of competing colonial powers and world religions. In the architectural embellishment of his royal monasteries, we can see an amalgamation of traditional Buddhist space and modern space. For instance, the mythical icons reflecting the Buddhist cosmological order were used to compose abstract symbols of his regalia and ministerial emblems reflecting his absolute authority. Moreover, the collection of 52 Buddha images from around the nation and the world found at Wat Benjamaborpit signified far more than just the King's continuing support for Theravada Buddhism. On the one hand, this collection of Buddha image replicas

¹⁸ From Chatri Prakitnontakan, "Wat Benjamaborpit lae Kati Chakrawalinyom Samai Mai[Wat Benjamaborpit and new cosmological ideology]" in Silpa Wattanatham, Vol. July 2003, 80-96

reflected the Western practice of building museums to house important national artifacts. On the other hand, I argue that this collection of Buddha images also reflected Rama V's conception of himself as the last independent ruler in the Theravada Buddhist world¹⁹. This was because with the advancement of British colonial power in India, Sri Lanka and Burma, these kingdoms had witnessed the loss of their Buddhist monarchs and the decline of Theravada Buddhist Studies. The archive shows that Rama V was acutely aware of this disappearance of Theravada Buddhist rulers, and that he sought to position himself as the guardian of this world religion on behalf of other Theravada Buddhist nations including Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.²⁰ Moreover, it is important to note that King Chulalongkorn was not alone in this assessment²¹. In fact, by entrusting the king with the protection and distribution of the Lord Buddha relics uncovered at a new excavation site in India, the government of British India also recognized King Chulalongkorn as the last independent Theravada Buddhist monarch²². In light of this, the

¹⁹ Chatri Prakritnontakan describes in detail how King Chulalongkorn and Prince Damrong obtained important Buddha images in “Wat Benjamaborpit lae Kati Chakrawalniyom Samai Mai[Wat Benjamaborpit and new cosmological ideology]” in *Silpa Wattanatham*, Vol. July 2003, 80-96 but Chatri could not explain why King Chulalongkorn and Prince Damrong also collected Buddha images from the independent countries outside Siamese sphere such as Sri Lanka, Japan, Burma and Cambodia.

²⁰ As he mentioned in his speech for Buddhist re-convocation ritual of new tripitaka, King Chulalongkorn declared that

“All Buddhist kingdoms in the past were used to borrow Tri Pitaka from one another for reference when at need but now Burma and Ceylon are under the British, the rulers were not Buddhist ... and do not uphold Buddhist religion. Monks practice Buddhist alone without state support. If there are more vice than goodness, the Dharma would be falling apart. For Cambodia, it is now under the French and is depleted. There is not enough wealth to support Buddhist religion. For the Laos which is under Siam, now its rulers and people believe more in evil spirit and let it penetrated into Buddhist. We could no longer trust in their Tripitaka. Siam now is only one country with Buddhist prosperity. It is the auspicious time to conduct investigation of Tripitaka for the strong foundation to continue Buddhism in the future.”

Extracted from Prince Wachirayan Warorot, *PhraVinaipidok Mahapang lem I*[Vinaya Vol 1], (Bangkok: Mor Por Tor, 1902).

²¹ The study of letters of Sri Lankan monks to Siamese key ecclesiastical persons depicts the solicitation of Sri Lankan monks to King Chulalongkorn as a Buddhist protector who could negotiate with non-Buddhist colonial authority. see more detail in unpublished writing of Anne M. Blackburn, “Global Flows, Plural Locations: 19th-century Colombo in Relation to Bangkok.” To be published in *Global Flows and the Restructuring of Asian Buddhism* in an Age of Empires, edited by Richard Jaffe.

²² There are several claims of Rama V as the world Buddhist monarch by both Thai and British officials in National Archive R 5 S 11 No. 1/11, 2/11, 12/11 cited in Department of Religious Affairs, *Prawat Wat*

collection of fine Buddha images from all over the world signified not only Rama V's position as the righteous king at the center of a Siamese Buddhist geography, but also his view of himself as the sole independent Buddhist monarch in the world context. The traditional images, icons, buildings and spatial arrangement of Rama V's temples were mixed with western craftsmanship in order to create a new place for Siam as the center of Theravada Buddhism in the modern world.

Sakes Ratchaworamahawiharn lae Chotmai het Raung Prhasareerikathat Muang Kabilapas [History of Wat Sakes and Royal Chronicle of Lord Buddha Relics from Kabilapas], Cremation Vol. Supreme Patriarch Yoo Yanotayo, (Bangkok: Prime Minister Office Printing, 1965) 32-129.