

Envisioning the Buddhist Cosmos through Paintings: The Traiphum in Central Thailand and Phra Malai in Isan

Dr. Bonnie Pacala Brereton

Lecturer, College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

Researcher, Research Group on Local Affairs Administration

Abstract

Thai Buddhists derive their understanding of the Buddhist cosmos from images they see in paintings and/or hear described in recitations or sermons based primarily on one of two texts: the *Phra Malai Sutta* and the *Traiphum* (*Three Worlds*). Both texts are non-canonical and both exist in multiple versions or “tellings” (Ramanujan: 1991). The former is a narrative about the arahat-monk, Phra Malai, and his visits to hell and heaven, while the latter is an encyclopedic collection of treatises that describes in great detail the various realms of the Buddhist universe and the beings inhabiting them. This article examines visual depictions of *Phra Malai* and the *Traiphum*, each a selected “telling,” in strikingly different socio-historical and cultural contexts: *Phra Malai* in early 20th century Isan village scrolls and murals the *Traiphum* in post-Ayutthaya murals in and near Bangkok. It will demonstrate the impact on visual conceptions of the Buddhist cosmos by the social, political and historic circumstances in which they were created.

Keywords: Buddhist cosmology, Traiphum, Phra Malai, murals, Isan

Introduction

Thai Buddhists derive their understanding of the Buddhist cosmos from images they see in paintings and/or hear described in recitations or sermons based primarily on the *Phra Malai Sutta* and the *Traiphum (Three Worlds)*. Both texts exist in multiple versions or “tellings,” both are non-canonical and both describe the beings residing in the various realms of the Buddhist cosmos and the reasons they were born there. *Phra Malai* is a relatively straightforward narrative that frames a sermon about Buddhist teachings through the tale of a monk whose supernatural powers enable him to travel beyond the human realm to the hells and to Tavatimsa Heaven. Most tellings are intended for an audience of commoners attending a festival or a funeral.² *Traiphum* texts, by contrast, were all composed by or attributed to kings for purposes of legitimizing their power and charisma.

Phra Malai – The story and the sermon

Phra Malai, in its various tellings, relates the story of the saintly monk who lived long ago on the island of Lanka and used his supernatural powers to fly to the hells to bestow mercy on the beings there. After relieving their suffering, he returned to the human realm to ask their relatives to perform acts of merit on their behalf.

Then one morning as he was going on his alms rounds, Phra Malai met a poor man who presented him with eight lotuses he had just picked. After accepting the offering, Phra Malai flew to Tavatimsa Heaven to present the flowers at the Culamani Cetiya, where the hair relic of the Buddha is enshrined. There he met the god Indra, who had built the cetiya, and the two carried on a conversation in question and answer format.

Phra Malai inquired about the future Buddha, Ariya Metteyya, known in Thai and Lao as Phra Si An, who resides in Tusita Heaven, and was told that he would come to worship the cetiya that very day. As the two were conversing, a series of deities, each surrounded by progressively larger and larger retinues, arrived to worship the reliquary. In each case, Indra told Phra Malai how that deity had earned sufficient merit to be born in heaven. Each had practiced an act of *dana* or generosity, for example, by feeding a starving bird, offering food to a monk, sponsoring cremations, presenting robes to the Sangha, planting bodhi trees, cleaning the temple grounds, and building a cetiya of sand.

²Although a “royal version” of Phra Malai also exists, attributed to an Ayutthayan era prince, it is considered a work of classical literature, rather than a popular religious text.

Finally, Metteyya arrived and after worshipping the cetiya, greeted Phra Malai and asked about the people of the human realm. Phra Malai replied that there are many kinds of people – some wealthy, some poor, some good, some bad, but that they all performed acts of merit because they wanted to meet Metteyya in the future. The bodhisattva then gave Phra Malai a message to take back to the human realm: those who wanted to meet him should listen to the recitation of the entire *Vessantara Jataka* in one day and one night and bring offerings numbering a thousand of each item. This practice would enable them to be reborn when Metteyya was on earth as the Buddha. Metteyya then described future events, including the deterioration of Buddhism and society that would occur after Gotama Buddha's teachings had been in place for 5000 years. Widespread physical and moral degeneration would lead to an outbreak of bloodshed in which the vast majority of people would die. However, a small number of wise people would survive by retreating into caves, and then emerging to form a new society based on morality. Gradually conditions would improve and a utopian era would come about, and at that time Metteyya would be born in the human realm and help the people to free themselves from the ties of greed, hatred and delusion. The text ends with Phra Malai's return to the human realm to deliver this message. And the poor man who had presented him the eight lotus blossoms was reborn in heaven.

Phra Malai, then, is a sermon about essential Buddhist teachings that is framed by the story of the magical monk. Through his journeys and conversations with the beings he meets in far-distant realms, those in the human realm learn about the nature of the cosmos and the future Buddha. The teachings include the role of karma and merit-making in determining one's future status. By describing the beings in the other realms of the Buddhist universe and how they got to be born there, the text presents specific examples of actions and consequences. The text also emphasizes the importance of observing Buddhist practices, especially participating in the *Vessantara Jataka* or *Bun Phra Wet* festival, and supporting the Sangha. Thus, *Phra Malai* can be called an egalitarian text, for it demonstrates that merit can be made in many ways, by people of any social class, in ways as basic as offering lotuses to a monk. At the same time, *Phra Malai* is also a promotional text in that it emphasizes the practice of *dana*, or giving, to support Buddhist institutions, particularly in the context of the *Vessantara Jataka* festival.

Origins of Phra Malai

While vestiges of *Phra Malai* can be found in Sri Lankan texts, the first Southeast Asian version of the existing text appears to have been written either in northern Thailand or Burma in Pali (Brereton, 1995; Supaporn Makchang, 1978; Collins, 1993). Both a collection of ancient

legends and a 1201 C.E. Burmese inscription mention the recitation of the *Malai* story followed by the *Vessantara Jātaka* on the full-moon night of the Burmese month corresponding to October-November (Denis, 1963; Ba Shin, 1960), a practice that exists in Northern Thailand and the Shan State of Myanmar today.³ The story later evolved into numerous versions in various Tai languages to serve different functions. While certain versions, including the Central Thai *Phra Malai Klon Suat* and the northern *Malai Phot Lok* were and still are recited at funeral wakes,ⁱ the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong River know the story best through a two-part text known as *Malai Meun-Malai Saen*, which is recited at Bun Phra Wet or Vessantara *Jataka* festivals.

***Phra Malai* in Isan Painting**

In Isan, *Phra Malai* scenes are most seen commonly on the *pha pra wet* (cloth scrolls depicting scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka*) that are carried in procession during the Bun Phra Wet festivals mentioned above. The first scene usually occurs at the beginning of the scroll and depicts the monk among the hell beings; the second usually occurs at the end and depicts him at the Culamani Cetiya in Tavatimsa Heaven. However, the compositions vary greatly and in some scrolls the two scenes occur at the very beginning, before the *Vessantara Jataka* scenes.³ In any case, the *Phra Malai* narrative is usually condensed into two iconic scenes: hell and heaven, with no depictions of the future events mentioned in Metteyya's sermon.⁴

This same kind of shorthand is also found in traditional Isan mural paintings on the walls of small ordination halls known in Lao as *sim*, dating from the early decades of the 20th century. These buildings are similar to French colonial structures made of stone and mortar constructed by Vietnamese builders, that began to replace older wooden structures at this time. This new medium allowed for a remarkable burst of creativity: one-of-a-kind buildings covered with paintings, often on the exterior.⁵ The paintings are equally unique, with no standardized pattern in their location on the walls, composition or combination of narratives.

³ I have also seen a *pha phra wet* scroll depicting *Phra Malai* in the human realm accepting the lotuses from the poor man in a composite scene with his visit to Tavatimsa Heaven.

⁴ Scenes of fighting and bloodshed, representing the devolution of society, as well as idyllic renderings of the devout Buddhists standing beneath a wishing tree are a part of the repertoire of accordion-folded paper manuscripts (*samut khoi*) of *Phra Malai Klon Suat* produced in the Central Region. These manuscripts,

however, unlike murals, were not made to be viewed publically but were commissioned to make merit and were used for chanting the text as funerals

⁵ Murals are also found on some *sim prong*, ordination halls that are open in the front, have a back wall that extends to the ceiling, and open side walls that reach less than half the distance to the ceiling.

Phra Malai was one of the texts most frequently depicted, as well as Isan-Lao versions to the *Vessantara Jataka* and local Buddhist epics like *Sinsai* and *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. A study by Burin Pleengdeekul of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University

examined the earliest remaining murals in Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham, and Roi Et provinces, and found that *Phra Malai* appeared in 15 out of 20 temples painted before 1957. The depictions at each temple are unique, and are sometimes limited to *Phra Malai* appearing in hell, as at Wat Sanuan Wari in Khon Kaen province, to scenes of the monk in all three realms at Wat Ban Yang in Mahasarakham province. In both cases, the *Phra Malai* scenes are on the south exterior wall, but they differ vastly in the amount of detail, composition and rendering of figures. Moreover, minimal scenes of *Phra Malai* and Indra seated next to the Culamani Cetiya are sometimes found.

However, this diversity in building and painting styles soon came to an end when ideas of national identity and a uniform “Thainess” were promoted under the regime of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who came to power in a coup in 1957. Murals became more standardized, following the promotion of images drawn by Phra Thewaphinimmit, a Fine Arts Department art and archaeology lecturer, and his collaboration with the Bangkok-based religious publishing company, So. Thammaphakdi & Sons (Hacker, 2011). The Fine Arts Department aesthetics at the time, according to Hacker (2011), favored realism, which “was closely linked to the strength and unity of a nation.” Similarly, the So. Thammaphakdi series was in accordance with ideas being promoted regarding the idea of “one Thai identity” supposedly shared by everyone throughout the nation. In the late 1950s the company began to print sets of posters and postcards depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha and the *Vessantara Jataka*.

Subsequently, the murals that were painted not only in Isan, but throughout the country, followed the So. Thammaphakdi model, with Westernized renderings of figures and landscape, each scene or chapter enclosed in a frame (Lefferts & Cate, 2012: 68). Although *pha phra wet* were also affected by this development as well as by the trend toward mass production in Isan, where most scrolls are made in two villages (Lefferts & Cate, 2012: 70), unique scrolls can still be found, demonstrating the vitality of a living local tradition. Isan paintings – both scrolls and murals – were and for the most part still are commissioned by local residents, often as a group effort solely for the purpose of making merit. A record of such a group effort can be seen on the walls of Wat Udom Pracharath in Kalasin province, dating from the first half of the 20th century.

***Traiphum* treatises**

The *Traiphum* is an encyclopedic compilation of earlier Buddhist texts filled with a superabundance of details, some of which are highly concrete, and others highly Abstract. *Traiphum* treatises provide a broad and elaborate vision of the Buddhist universe, consisting of three worlds: 1) the World of Desire, which includes a total of eleven realms; 2) the World with only a Remnant of Material Factors, consisting of 16 realms; and 3) the World without Material Factors, consisting of four realms. (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982: 358). The World of Desire includes the three realms found in *Phra Malai* texts: the human realm, the realm of the hell beings, and the heavenly realms. With each level, these realms and their inhabitants become progressively Abstract and increasingly difficult to depict in pictorial form.

There are three famous *Traiphum* texts; all are complex compilations from Pali and Sanskrit treatises, all were written or commissioned by kings and reflect royal themes. The first, attributed to Phya Lithai of Sukhothai around the year 1345 CE (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982:5), is described by its translators as “a royal text, and expression of the orthodox Theravada tradition.” The text, presented as a sermon, includes excerpts from parts of the *Sutta* and *Abhidhamma* of the Pali canon as well as from commentaries and doctrinal texts (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982:18). It includes an extremely technical account of the Three Worlds (which are broken down into thirty-one realms) and “the process and mode of birth in each” (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982:29).

The second *Traiphum*, commissioned by King Taksin after the 1767 destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese, and the third commissioned by King Rama I, also have a strong royal focus and were efforts to reestablish order in the kingdom during an extended period of chaos and reconstruction. Incorporated into both are many works of Buddhist literature based on earlier works lost in the wars that were inserted into the *Traiphum* in order to recreate the glory of the past. The latter two versions were greatly expanded to include numerous other texts, such as the *Ten Jatakas* and even a brief telling of *Phra Malai*.

The cosmos in Central Thai murals: The *Traiphum*

The *Traiphum* poses many challenges to its illustration in painting as it contains highly specific measurements of the elements of the cosmos, such as the heights of the hells, the Sumeru mountain, and the oceans and mountains surrounding it, all of which are cited in units called *yojana*, roughly 10 miles (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982: 67). At the same time, the

Traiphum also refers to realms and beings that are virtually impossible to represent in painting. For example, the World without Material Factors includes the realm of infinite space and the realm of infinite mental process which are inhabited by beings that have only minds, but not bodies (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982: 259).

In Central Thailand, particularly in and around Bangkok, the *Traiphum* theme became part of a standardized pattern of wall paintings during the reign of King Taksin and the first three reigns of the Ratanakosin period. The Traiphum appears on the wall behind the main Buddha image; Mara's attack on Gotama as he is about to attain enlightenment and the Earth Goddess Thorani wringing out her hair, sweeping away Mara's army are on the opposite (entrance) wall; and scenes from the last ten *Jatakas* are on the side walls (Green, 2013:177). Green argues that the placement of these murals was motivated by the desire to define universal order as a basis for the Thai social and political hierarchy (Green, 2013: 181). These reigns followed the destruction of the kingdom of Ayutthaya when the kings were focused on reestablishing order. This pattern can be seen at Wat Dusidaram in Thonburi and Wat Saket in Bangkok.

At these sites, the Traiphum is reduced to an Abstraction of Mount Meru, the central mountain of the Buddhist Universe, which painted on the wall behind the main Buddha image, as a result of which the Buddha looks as if “he was physically at the central axis of the universe, represented by Mount Meru” (Green, 2013: 176-178). The Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment and victory over Mara are on the opposite wall, and scenes from the life of the Buddha and the *Ten Jatakas* on the side walls. On the lower register beneath Mount Meru are hell scenes either from the *Traiphum*, the *Nemi Jataka* (in which a virtuous king takes a tour of hell), or *Phra Malai*. Several writers have commented on the long association of kingship and the Buddha or bodhisattvahood which are part of the Buddha’s biography and its implications in Thailand. Patrick Jory, for example, has discussed the use of the Buddha’s moral perfections and charisma in the political discourse of pre-modern Thailand, where kings were idealized as bodhisattvas in order to enhance their authority (as discussed in Green, 2013: 176-178).

While the images can be read for their narrative teachings, they can also be read as components in a political message. As Green writes, “Each of the images from the Traiphum through the Jatakas and the life of the Buddha had strong political undertones of both a general and a historically specific nature” (Green, 2013:188). The fact that these temples were close to

the capital and that many connected to or sponsored by royalty reflects the notions of kingly leadership behind their creation.

The mural scheme described above influenced the repertoire of temples in Central Thailand until the reign of Rama III (r. 1824-51), when Prince Mongkut, the future Rama IV (r. 1851-68), undertook a series of religious reforms that influenced “the creation of an alternative artistic iconography associated with greater attention to Western scientific concepts and denigration of mythological themes” (Green, 2013:182). Upon Mongkut’s accession to the throne in 1851, “the *Traiphum* was viewed as incompatible with contemporary ideas and therefore was rarely depicted”(Green, 2013:182). Instead, numerous other themes emphasizing orthodox practice, such as monks meditating on corpses and laypeople presenting robes to the monks began to dominate at royal temples. Thus, it can be said that the content of murals, particularly in and around Bangkok, was subject to changing trends, both political and social.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the sources of images of the Buddhist cosmos found in early 20th century murals in Isan and those in the early Ratanakosin period in Bangkok. In Isan, the cosmos is imagined through the story of Phra Malai and his journeys from the human realm to the hells and to Tavatimsa Heaven. The story is best known locally through a pair of texts, *Malai Meun Malai Saen*, which are recited at the Bun Phra Wet festival before the recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka*. An integral part of this festival is a procession in which people carry a long cloth scroll depicting the 13 chapters of the Jataka and two iconographic scenes from *Phra Malai* (one with the monk in hell, the other with him in Tavatimsa Heaven). These two scenes are also depicted on traditional local murals, and it is possible that mural painters drew their inspiration from the scrolls. While the compositions of these scenes and their locations on the walls vary from one wat to another, the murals provide images of the Buddhist cosmos that are clear-cut and easy to understand.

By contrast, the murals painted in and around Bangkok during the reign of King Taksin and the first three reigns of the Ratanakosin period depicted representations of the Buddhist cosmos from *Traiphum* texts that were written by or attributed to Thai kings and reflect royal interests and themes. This trend came to an end under the influence of Rama IV and his emphasis on orthodox Buddhist practice.

Notes

It would be useful to conduct research into the history of the practice in Keng Tung, Eastern Shan State, Burma, where the tradition is strong. (See Sengpan Pannyawamsa, 2007).

Malai Pok Lok (*Malai Helps the World*), a brief text that is confined to the monk's visit to the hells, is still recited at funeral wakes in the North. *Phra Malai Klon Suat*, a much longer text that includes the complete Phra Malai story with an expanded section of the hells, was traditionally chanted in a number of different melodies by four monks at funeral wakes in the Central Region and the South, has been becoming less popular in recent decades.

The practice of reciting a similar pair of texts (*Malai Ton* and *Malai Plai*) before the Vessantara Jataka takes place among the northern Thai.

In the *Traiphum* the World of Desire consists of four realms of loss and woe, (the hells, the realm of animals, the realm of suffering ghosts, and the realm of *asura*), the realm of humans, and seven realms of happiness. For more details of the 31 realms that comprise the Three Worlds, see Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982: 358.

However, their contention that it is also “a sermon that seeks to make the Dhamma more accessible to the laity” assumes that “the laity” is high-class, literate, well-versed in complex Buddhist concepts, and with sufficient means

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