



Chinese Elements in Thai Temple Murals During The Time of Rama III

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Abstract

During the reign of Rama III (1788-1851) of the Bangkok Dynasty (1824-1851) in Thailand, which is equivalent to the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty in China. At that time, Thailand was a powerful country because of its maritime trade. Due to their strong belief in Buddhism, a large number of Buddhist temples were built and restored in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. This period was the most frequent period of cultural and economic exchanges between China and Thailand, which contributed to the spread of Chinese art in Thailand. In addition, the King Rama III was a big fan of Chinese art, and the Thai temple murals of this period show a great number of Chinese elements. This is of great value not only for the study of the representative art styles in the early Bangkok dynasty in Thailand, but also for the study of the spread and use of Chinese art overseas.

Keywords

Bangkok dynasty, Thai murals, Rama III, Chinese elements, Chinese culture

1. Introduction

The history of Thai art shows that the art of painting in Thailand can be traced back to pottery with intricate curves and geometric patterns excavated from the sites of the Bronze Age to the early Iron Age of the Banqing culture (3600BC-200 AD).

By the Sukhothai Dynasty (1238-1438), Hinayana Buddhism began to become the state religion of Thailand. Influenced by Buddhism, paintings were mostly based on Buddhist stories, and frescoes were one of the most important categories of paintings in Thailand. As the main place for spreading Buddhism, Buddhist temples are important places for cultural education and skill transmission, apart from preaching and holding ceremonies. In order to increase the sense of cultural identity of the faithful, the painter incorporates the clothing, food, shelter, and transportation of the local people into the murals, combining imagination and reality while preserving the local cultural characteristics of the painter's era (Liu Qiujuan, 2018).

During the Ayutthaya Dynasty (1350-1767), temples were built and the walls were spectacularly painted with frescoes of preaching scriptures (Wu Dawei, 2021). In terms of expression, gold leaf has been found to decorate the picture, from which the influence of the Ceylon, Thai Huafuri, and Sukhothai art periods can be seen.

The history of the Thonburi Dynasty (1768-1782) was very short and did not produce many murals.

And in the era of Bangkok Dynasty (1782-now), it is the most brilliant and glorious period of Thai Buddhist temple murals, and also the most perfect period of Buddhist temple murals with national characteristics, and in the era of Rama III (1824-1851) is the golden age of temple murals, with the increasingly close economic exchanges between China and Thailand and the arrival of a large number of Chinese immigrants, the Chinese images in the

murals increased a lot, and a large number of Chinese people were heavily influenced by the Chinese style. The King Rama III had a keen interest in Chinese art and Chinese culture and was committed to incorporating Chinese culture into the temples he built. The history of Thai art therefore refers to this period as "the art of the king's preference" (Hu Chuntao, 2019).

2. Thai temple murals

2.1 Overview of temple murals in Thailand

Thai Buddhist temple murals are colorful, with soft and smooth lines, imaginative compositions, continuous and interlocking plots, magnificent images and with many characters. It is the result of the collision of many cultures and the long time of self-improvement, forming a mural belonging to the oriental painting system, with a unique national color. In Thailand, Buddhist temple murals are also known as "Thai traditional paintings" and "Thai ancient paintings".

2.2 History of temple murals in Thailand

The development of Buddhist temple murals in Thailand is generally discussed in the context of the Sukhothai dynasty (1219-1438) with the stone murals in the tunnels of the Sai Chon temple on the outskirts of Sukhothai. There are more than 50 stone frescoes, which are line drawings in stone, originally in red and black, and the subject matter is mostly the story of the Buddha's life. In many places, the stone murals also reflect the cultural characteristics of the Thai people, such as certain features of the head of the Bodhisattva and the oval-shaped headlight, and the shape of the ribbon on the bouquet of flowers. Ayutthaya Dynasty (1350-1767) Buddhist temple murals are free and lively in expression. The lines are heavy and clear, and the early colors are monotonous, mostly in black, white and red. In terms of expression, gold leaf has been found to decorate the picture, from which we can see the influence of Ceylon, Thailand Huafuri, Sukhothai art period. In the later period, there were more colors than former. Red and creamy yellow were used to highlight the figures in the paintings, and gold leaf decoration was popular at that time. The painting of trees, landscapes and other natural scenery in the paintings has been influenced by Chinese painting.

Unfortunately, due to the war and rain, most of these murals have been destroyed and few are left. The history of the Thonburi Dynasty (1767-1782) was very short and politically unstable, and there were no frescoes created.

The early period of the Bangkok Dynasty was the golden period of the most brilliant and glorious Buddhist temple murals in Thailand, and it was also the period when the national characteristics of Buddhist temple murals were most perfectly expressed. The later period saw a gradual decline in the development of Buddhist temple murals until 1932, the year of Rama VII, when the development of Buddhist temple murals came to a halt. This time can be subdivided into three periods:

The first is the Antiquity Period (1752-1837). The antique period was during the period of Rama I-II, when the new dynasty's rule had just been established from the war of restoration against foreign invasion, and everything needed to be restored. The frescoes of Buddhist temples in this period began to develop and flourish with the construction of Buddhist temples. The artists basically inherited the tradition of frescoes from the Ayutthaya Dynasty and followed the rules and regulations. In terms of color, they made good use of red, and accustomed to use black or black blending color as the base. The picture is often divided by a jagged line frame. The faces of gods, Buddhas, kings, and other high-ranking figures are expressionless, and the faces of a thousand Buddhas are one dimensional.

The second is the heyday (1837-1852). The heyday was during the reign of Rama III, when the regime was stable, the economy was recovering, the building of temples was popular, and Chinese culture was promoted in Thailand due to the king's advocacy. Therefore, the murals of Buddhist temples in this period were highly influenced by Chinese painting. The lines were soft, the composition was harmonious, the subject matter was broader, and the painting techniques were more mature. The painting style was soft, elegant and witty, with vivid images of common people and rich expressions, which pushed the art of Thai Buddhist temple frescoes to the peak and was rich in national characteristics.

Third, the period of decline (1852-1932). After the period of Rama IV, Western culture poured into the whole Asia with the invasion of colonialists. Buddhism was affected, the construction of Buddhist temples gradually decreased, Buddhist temple murals began to decline, and painting was heavily influenced by Western countries.

3. Chinese Elements in Temple Murals of the Rama III Period

3.1 Chinese decorative motifs and styles in temple murals of the Rama III period

The mother themes with Chinese elements are divided into three categories.

The first category is Chinese deities and figures, of which the God of Doors is the most common. In addition, there are statues of Chinese deities such as the Eight Immortals and the Three Stars of Fortune and Longevity, as well as some fictional character images. Popular novels and literary works such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *The Legend of the Gods* were brought to Thailand and translated into Thai, and are well loved by Thais, and the related dissemination of images can also reflect the reception of Chinese literature in Thailand.

The second category is Chinese motifs as well as Chinese utensils, the most typical of which is the bogu shelf. The common decorative objects on the bogu shelf include tripods, goblets, pots, four treasures of the literary house, vases, and bronze mirrors. In addition to these, there are auspicious animals such as dragons, phoenixes, unicorns and butterflies and floral and fruit motifs such as peonies, plum blossoms and peaches, as well as geometric motifs such as cloud patterns and Chinese knots (Lin Cymbidium, 2017).

The third category is Chinese architecture and landscape. This category of decorative masters creates a Chinese space for the architecture in the murals, and is a reflection of Chinese architectural styles and landscape concepts in the murals. In addition to this, the arrangement of rocks and mountains is also an important decorative tool in mural decoration, and these landscape images using Chinese landscape painting techniques provide a Chinese style narrative space for the characters' stories.

3.2 Chinese Painting and Painting Techniques

During the reign of Rama III, a large number of Chinese entered Thailand, including many Chinese painters, the most famous was GuKhong Pei, the royal painter of Rama III. They brought with them Chinese techniques of painting expression, specifically in the painting of landscapes, birds, flowers, and figures. Thai temple frescoes borrowed the traditional landscape painting style and followed the traditional Chinese landscape painting expression, and the flower and bird painting techniques are as numerous as the landscape painting in temple frescoes, and the techniques are mainly double outline flat painting and double outline haloing. The technique of figure painting also uses outlining and vignetting, with bright and brilliant colors. The paintings are vivid and easy to understand, and also have a strong storytelling character.

4. The integration of Chinese and Thai cultures during the Rama III period

The Bangkok Dynasty had deep ties with the Chinese in Thailand and was founded by Chao Phraya Chokri, who was originally a general under King Cheng Shin of the Thonburi Dynasty. Zheng Xin was a national hero of Chinese descent in Thailand who led the Siamese people to fight against the Burmese invasion, unified the country, and established the Thonburi Dynasty. This established a stable relationship between Chinese culture and native Thai culture at the royal level. Domestically, the early rulers of the Bangkok Dynasty not only developed an easy-to-implement immigration policy, but also appointed Chinese to important government positions, raising the political status of the Chinese.

With the increase in trade between China and Thailand, the number of Chinese in Thailand has also risen sharply, forming Chinese agglomerations and villages. In these gathering areas, the Chinese maintained their cultural traditions by opening schools and enrolling Thai students, through which the Thai people gradually learned about and accepted traditional Chinese culture. Rama III also set up Chinese prefects and inspectors throughout the country (Chen Liuling, 2018). It is evident that the Chinese were deeply integrated into the social governance structure of Thailand, and Chinese migration to Thailand inevitably had a deep impact on Thai society in terms of daily living habits, ethics and morals, which not only influenced the high ranking royalty but also brought extensive influence to the common people, which was also the policy reason for the great achievements in culture and arts at that time.

Traditional Chinese culture is implicit in the packaging and promotion of goods, which unconsciously reinforces the Thai people's familiarity and affinity with Chinese culture in the daily circulation of goods. In terms of religious beliefs, China's beliefs and reverence for Buddhism match with the devout Buddhist beliefs of the Thai people, so the two countries naturally have consistency and commonality in spirituality. There are exchanges between China and Thailand in temple construction, Buddha statue making, and Buddhist painting.

At the level of technique, the murals of the early Bangkok dynasty introduced Chinese pigments and line painting. While Chinese line and ink painting is more abstract. It is a cultural visual image with symbols, the fact that the Thai public can accept Chinese painting shows that there is still a regional identity between China and Thailand in a pan-regional area, and also shows that there is a long history of cultural exchange between China and Thailand.

5. Conclusion

The context of the Rama III period brought a great change in Thai fresco art, from the inclusion of foreign objects in the paintings to the interaction between the frescoes and the Buddha statues, and a new wave of artistic thinking can be seen in the frequent appearance of Chinese elements on the frescoes, reflecting the popular lifestyle of the time and the attempts of the builders of the monasteries to build them with a great deal of individual creativity. This is very different from the traditional emphasis on the content of the scriptures and the educational significance of preaching, following the traditional attitude of obedience.

After tracing the entire political, economic, cultural and social environment of the Rama III period, looking back at the development of this art discipline, we find that the development of mural painting in the early Bangkok dynasty benefited from the general background of cultural relaxation. Economic exchanges brought mutual learning and cultural integration. Regardless of painting techniques, creative themes and motifs are deeply influenced by foreign cultures, especially the influence of Chinese culture, which greatly expanded the Thai Mural painting of the field.

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