

Buddhist murals of northeast Thailand

From the classic Stanley Tambiah's 1976 tome that blended cosmological and historical studies with a scientific mind in the application of the 'galactic polity,' through Professor Thongchai Winichakul's widely celebrated *Siam Mapped* (1994), to Kenon Breazeles' globalization of Thai history in *From Japan to Arabia* (1999), the field of Thai studies has remained innovative for at least the past three and a half decades of English language scholarship. This tradition continues with Bonnie Pacala Brereton and Somroay Yencheuy's exploration of *Buddhist murals of northeast Thailand*. However, Brereton and Yencheuy's contribution not only works within this tradition of Thai studies, it also creates a further bridge to the cultural flows between Lao and Thai through an articulation of the visual world of Isan.

William Noseworthy

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ISAN, THE NAME FOR THE 'HEARTLAND' of the Lao people in Thailand, was derived from Sanskrit by the central Thai government in the twentieth century and means simply 'northeast'. Currently Isan is a collection of Thai provinces with a population of predominantly ethnic Lao peoples, and is perhaps best known as rural farmland – although recent happenings suggest that this region could be at the forefront of global developments in sustainable organic rice production and solar energy. Furthermore, as was demonstrated by the twenty-nine year academic career of Achan Pairote, who recognized the unique and often underreported value of Isan village Buddhist murals, the current volume fills a substantial void through an appreciation for the visual culture of Isan.

In the realm of Archeology, Isan is known for one of the oldest sites in Southeast Asia, namely the Korat Plateau, and its location within the field of the Mahayanist Dvaravati culture. However, with the rise of the *mandala* of Lan Xang (derived from an old Sinitic term for 'southern river'), which linked Buddhist authority through a Theravadin Angkorean Queen, the region became more closely tied with the *mandalas* of the Thai, Khmer, and Burmese Theravadin cultures. Thus, the conception of *sima* space as a designation for sacred bounds, was adapted from the Theravadin Pali language tradition into the context of Lao murals, which bound the exterior of ordination halls or *sim*. Incidentally as a sign of the blended influence of Isan culture, Vietnamese built most *sim*. (9)

Amongst the localized images depicted upon the mural walls of Lao *sim*, are the *phi* spirits. These potent local 'gods of the soil' have been explored most recently through John Holt's latest *Spirits of the Place* in Laos, where Holt argued that Spirit cults have survived amongst the lowland Lao Luom (ethnic Lao, in Laos and Isan) through a process of Buddhacization. The presentation of Brereton and Yencheuy's work therefore can be placed in conversation with Holt's. While in Holt's work the locality of Lao culture is the lens to examine the topic of Buddhism, in the work of Brereton and Yencheuy the lens of Buddhism is used to aptly explore localizations of Lao Luom. Amongst this localization of style and form, readers will not only note a detail-driven yet readable explanation of the *Vissantara Jataka*, the *Pha Lak Pha Lam* or *Pha Lam Sadok* (the *Lao Ramayana*), and *Sai Sin* epics (presented in Chapter 5), but also the particularly soothing, earthy indigo and reddish brown tones of the Isan style.

The reddish brown and indigo tones of the Isan-Lao style are perhaps one of the strongest unifying themes throughout this well-organized ten-chapter work. Yet, other themes include the localization of practice and reinterpretation of culture as Isan moved from Lao control to be contested by the French and central Thai in the nineteenth century. At the same time a rise of wandering forest monastics and millenarianism revived a reinvigorated Buddhist practice in the area.

As Brereton and Yencheuy note, local Buddhist practice still enjoys a relatively millenarian slant. Each year, sometime between April and February, the festival begins with a recitation of a local version of the *arhat* (From Pali: an individual in the fourth and final stage of enlightenment; a 'never-returned'). The monk *Phra Malai* journeys to the hell realm and to the *Tavatimsa* heaven to bring back the

admonitions of the Buddha of the future: *Maitreya*. The festival then continues through the fulfillment of a number of these admonitions, one of which is fulfilled as monks recite the *Vassantara Jataka*, not in the scriptural language of Pali, but in Lao. Brereton and Yencheuy argue that this festival is portrayed in murals on thousands of *wats* throughout the Isan region. (48) The veneration of the future Buddha is certainly not uncommon in the Theravadin world. At the same time, the popular conception of *Maitreya* is more often thought of in association to the Mahayanist texts of the Lotus Sutra (VN: *Pháp Hoa kinh*) and the Amitabha Sutra (VN: *A Di Đà Kinh*).

The veneration of *Maitreya*, combined with Brereton and Yencheuy's assertion that Vietnamese workers constructed many of the *sim*, raises the question of long overlooked Vietnamese influence on Isan culture. This question is certainly worth pursuing through further cultural and historical research. Nevertheless, with a marvelous collection of murals depicted in full color photographs, clearly written descriptions, and a fine dedication to Isan-Lao culture, *Buddhist murals of northeast Thailand* represents a fine contribution to the fields of Art History, Thai-Lao Studies, Buddhist Studies, and examinations of localizations within Southeast Asian cultures. As such, *Buddhist murals of northeast Thailand* can be enjoyed by a wide audience of families, K-12 teachers, and academes alike.

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Below: Details from murals discussed in the book.

