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 Siamese History, 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 northeastern Thailand. However, Breereton 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.

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References


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 Lao 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 Pia Naree, 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 Mahayanaist 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 Angkorian Queen, the region became more closely tied with the mandalas of the Thai, Khmer, and Burmese Theravadin cultures. Thus, the conception of 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 temples. 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 Poor 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 Buddacization. The presentation of Breereton 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 Breereton 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 Visantere jatoka, the Pho Lak Pho Lam or Pho Lom Sedik (the Lao Ramaayana), 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 raised the question of long overlooked Vietnamese influence on Isan culture. This question is certainly not uncommon in the Theravadin world. At the same time, the popular conceptions of Mystery is more often thought of in association to the Mahayamist texts of the Lotus Sutra (VN: Pháp hie binh) and the A弥tha Sutra (VN: A, Di dĩ Kinh).

The veneration of Maitreya, combined with Breereton 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 northeastern 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 northeastern Thailand can be enjoyed by a wide audience of families, K-12 teachers, and academics alike.

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Below: Details from murals discussed in the book.