



The Buddha Images: Faith of Lanna, Intellectual Power of the Beliefs and Relationship with the Northern Communities

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Abstract

This research aims at studying the Lanna myths of the Buddha's images in Lanna local to analyze the meaning and main symbols and relationship with social structure of Lanna local, to analyze function of the Lanna myths of the Buddha's image as data of important intellectuals with the way of life, folk and cultural society.

In this research paper, by comparing the meaning of symbols of the myths, both main functions and situation, four myth paradigms; first, the symbol meaning of behavior; second, the symbol meaning of body movements; third, the symbol meaning of supernatural powers; and forth, the symbol meaning of the origin, a builder and nicknames.

Moreover, in analyzing the values and power of the myths of the Buddha image also reflects the Lanna communities by comparing and contrasting the detail in the aspects concerning the ethnic identity, custom practice, relation of religious belief and gender relation; the myths also reflects the sacred narratives, such transformation symbolizes the development of the religious beliefs in the Lanna local societies.

Key words: Buddha images, intellectual power of the belief

Introduction

The belief in the Buddha image which is referred to as "God" in Lanna culture can be considered as the wisdom heritage that has been passed on to the community. This reflects that Lanna ancestors have created the wisdom that is based on the culture root in close relation to the structures of society, economy, and politics from the past to the present (Udom Rungriansri, 1990: 848). The folk

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concept of Buddha image is a very interesting issue in studying local wisdom, value, and the distinguishing aspects which are reflected through folklore; especially, the myth of Buddha image from Lanna people's perception. The study of the roles and the meaning of Lanna people's belief in Buddha image does not only help to explain Lanna cultural context, it also helps clarify the local human mind which is of benefit to the young generation in continuing their ancestors' intellectual force. It can be said that the religious belief or "spiritual source" is one of the effective factors in promoting the potentials of community. Such faith is significant in explaining cultural context which indicates how local people develop their thinking process.

In the present social condition, there are Buddha images found in hotels which are called "hotel Buddha image". The images are used for decorating hotel rooms, lobby, and gardens. The religious arts usually found in Buddhist temples are also found in a hotel, bathrooms, bedrooms, and convention halls. There are many opinions widely made towards this social phenomenon. The situation reflects that the society has been changing to the era of "globalization" where people do not pay attention to the cultural structure which may lead to the conflicts and other related problems. The researcher, therefore, decided to find the answer to the question on the system of the belief in "*Buddha image*" which would reflect the ways of life in Thai culture including what Lanna people have in their mind. Through the local wisdom perspective, it is hopeful that the younger generation will treasure the value and the importance of the culture root which is a heritage that has been passed on from generation to generation till now. The emphasis and the explanation on the meaning of the Buddha image through narratives, myths, traditions, rituals, and related beliefs may lead to the more understanding on the meaning of the Buddha image in the community point of view. Moreover, the study of the myth of Buddha image which is called "myth of God" is rarely found. The study area is 8 provinces located in Lanna community, and the work is scoped only on the study of the most important and the most well-known Buddha images in the study area, and the clues of the belief related to those Buddha images are still found.

I will now present how to analyze the myths of Buddha image in terms of meaning and symbol related to the social structure in the Lanna context.



The Myths of Buddha Image in the Northern Thailand

Lanna people have considered “*Buddha image*” or “*Buddha sculpture*” as the center of faith in the community. For them, the Buddha image is not only a sculpture representing the Lord Buddha; but the sculpture can also give miracle phenomena of the profane. Although this is not exactly the concept of Buddhism, it possesses the idea of folk Buddhism. Therefore, the Buddhism concept in this sense is related to the miracles and the supernatural power of the Lord Buddha; especially, the power in protecting cities and people from all devils and damages.

The myths of sacred Buddha image in Lanna culture found in several areas are supportive to such idea of supernatural power; for example, the power of providing water, rain, and fruitfulness. This supernatural power of the Buddha will be executed only by request through worship and/or rituals. This role of Buddha image is related to how Lanna people live their lives. It also indicates the strong relationship between the Buddha image and those people. The image plays its role as a symbol of Buddhism, a powerful religion that can bring peace and fruitfulness to the community.

Lanna people also have the concept that the Buddha image plays other roles; for example, the role of fortune-teller, and the treatment for sickness. This is based on the belief that the image is related to the fortune forecast and the capability in treatment for sickness. Such concept is widely spread in the north and the northeast of Thailand, including in the ethnic groups of Tai Lue, Tai Khuen, and Laos which can be evident in many temples in those areas. This belief of the Buddha image has influenced the ways of life of Tai ethnic people, who are Buddhist, as well as people in Lanna.

In Lanna culture from the past to the present, people have strongly placed their faith on the Buddha image. This highly sacred tradition of casting Buddha statue had significantly linked to the political success. The worship of the Buddha image might bring victory to the city, signaled the political authority, led the city to have more colonies, and brought good luck to the rulers. This idea is corresponding to the belief of many Tai ethnic groups which express their faith by in making the Buddha Image with the Gesture of Subduing Mara. It was believed that the person who did worship of such sculpture would overcome all enemies due to the sacredness of the image. Amulets of small Buddha were also made to protect the soldiers during the war time. This is the reason why Buddha image can access into every level of social class, from the ordinary people



to the rulers. The sacredness of the image brings peace, fruitfulness, and efficiently keeps the monarchy institution stable. This can be interestingly considered as the political strategy executed through the “identity of Buddha image”.

Meaning of Main Symbols in the Buddha Image Myths of Lanna

Buddha-image myth is a narrative on the history and all the phenomena related to Buddha images. Buddhists in different areas have the narratives constructed from their imagination through their faith in the Buddha (Paramin Jaruwat, 2006: 202). Some are about the history. Some are about the miracles. Some are about the unique characteristics of the Buddha images in each area.

The meaning of the Buddha-image symbol signified by its postures

The researcher has found that most of the Buddha-image myths in Lanna reflect the Buddha's behavioral expression of Lanna cultural thinking system. The Buddha image in a sitting posture is not only related to the Buddha history as in the Buddhist principal concept; but also signifies the relation agreeable among the soil, the water, and the fruitfulness. The Buddha image in standing posture indicates the link of the situation and the phenomenon occurred when the Lord Buddha was coming to the land of Lanna. The standing posture also signifies the belief related to the fertility of water as most images in the posture are giving the gesture of observation and looking at the places and the environments including the forecast on the well-being of that place (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมแจ้ง – a relic myth of Chom Jang). Other postures like walking and sitting do not only signify the thought of making known the Buddhism from India or Lanka; but also indicate the importance of Lanna as one of the sacred lands where the Lord Buddha traditionally came so that the people in that place would have a chance in making a holy merit by offering food to the Lord.

The meaning of the Buddha's walking in Buddha-image myths signifies through an interesting dimension the link among the people, the society, and the unique of local Lanna. The Buddha's eating is another meaningful behavior that is always found in Lanna Buddha myths. The Buddha's eating or having food is considered a part of the monk practice. Lanna people viewed that the Buddha came to give all creatures the Dhamma instructions, and the Buddha's visit is not a coincidence but it is a consequence from the good deed of all creatures; it is a “*Bun Nun Nam*” (บุญหนุนนำ): good deed brings all good things. Based on the



Dhamma instructions, it is believed that the people will practice the good deed to be supportive to the prosperity of the Buddhism in the area. The sleeping posture is a signal to remind that once the Buddha came and slept at the area. The sleeping behavior implies to the primitive concept of the primitive people in sleeping on the ridge in the rice field for protecting their food land. The posture is a symbol to signify the Buddha's supernatural power that can give people the fruitfulness, and be a safeguard over the rice fields, the source of their food. The image also represents the life and the spirit of Lanna people. The last posture is flying, floating in the air. The Buddha's flying found in the Buddha myths reflects the supernatural state of the Buddha (ตำนานพระเจ้าเลียบโลก). It also tells about the supernatural power that can give peace and happiness to the people (Siraporn Nathalang, 1996: 75-76). The flying (from the heaven) is called "earth visit" (การเสด็จเลียบโลก). Its purpose was to give Dhamma instructions to the creatures in the land of Lanna. This is another symbolic meaning showing that Buddhism is a supreme religion brought to earth from the heaven as the person who brought the Dhamma instructions was from the heaven. The visit from heaven is a miracle and a supernatural power to exorcise all the evils and give peace and happiness to human beings.

The meaning of the Buddha-image symbol signified by its characteristics

The characteristics signify the meaning of the image in the same way as the postures do. The characteristics of the Buddha images described in the Buddha-image myths give some clues about Lanna thinking system. The halo of the Buddha image does not only suggest the relation between a phenomenon and the fascinating supernatural power originated from the accumulated merit of the Lord Buddha (Carol Straton, 2004: 47); but also indicate the supernatural power of merit of the northern royal spirits (ผีเจ้านายฝ่ายเหนือ) and other royal spirits guarding the residence and the towns (ตำนานพระนอนลำปาง- myth of reclining Buddha, Lampang province). The characteristics of the heads of Lanna Buddha images signal that the heads with local characteristics have the significance different from Buddhism principal concept. They indicate that the Buddha has a great power to give water, peace, and happiness without any dangers. According to the local thought, the Buddha's head characteristics also have some relation to the water fertility. The local thought behind the description of the Buddha images' faces in many myths in different versions imply that the faces are very difficult for human to form. As a result, those faces were mostly made by the supernatural power;



especially, Indra (พระอินทร์). In addition, the images' faces are also presented in the form of woman's face. This characteristic reflects the combination of gender: male and female, into the Buddha images' faces. This is a very interesting thinking of Lanna people in refusing the idea of gender differentiation.

Besides, the story of the images' eyes is communicative to the local thought. According to many studies of Lanna Buddha's images, there were different descriptions on the Buddhism principal concept of the images' eyes; especially, the green color. Green is a color that refers to the king of Naga, the creator of a green emerald (ตำนานพระเจ้าตาเขียว ลำพูน-a myth of the green eyes, Lamphun province). This implies to the supernatural power being a safeguard for Buddhists. The green eye is considered a symbol of a great guard, a symbol of hospitality. It is like a "wishing crystal" (แก้วสารพัดนึก) for the local people when they are in troubles and feel insecure. The bodies of the Buddha images explained in different myths reflect the great supernatural power of the Lord Buddha. The large-bodied size of the image is a symbol which is related to Lanna thought of addressing the Buddha image, "*Phra Chao Ton Luang*" (พระเจ้าตนหลวง) which means the large-bodied god. The large-bodied size is like the center of the universe which is regarded as "*Sao Phra Ming Muang, Phra Mai Muang*" (เสาพระมิ่งเมือง, พระมหายเมือง) or a sacred city pillar of luck bringing peace and happiness to the town. The feet of the Buddha's images also reflect the relation to the local culture. The footprints of the Lord Buddha in Lanna land were for the local beings: both human and non-human. This phenomenon indicates the acceptance and the respect to Buddhism by all kinds of beings with no discrimination. The high number of footprints evidence that Lanna is a sacred land of "*Muang Buddha*" (เมืองพุทธ) or a city of Buddhists which is marked by the Buddha's traces which are found every where: on tops of the mountains, in the jungles, in the fields, or in the river.

The meaning of the Buddha-image symbol signified by its functions and supernatural power

Lanna Buddha myths give some clues that Lanna people view that Buddha image represents "*Phra Ming Muang/Phra Mai Muang*" (พระมิ่งเมือง/พระมหายเมือง) which is a community spiritual center that is powerful like a guardian god (Suraphon Domrikun, 2006: 143). Moreover, the images are also related to the rulers or royal family as evidenced by the Buddha image which had been traditionally constructed as a guardian god for each ruler of Lanna since the



ancient time. One of the outstanding Buddha images is “*Phra Chao Kha king Mungrai*” (พระเจ้าคำคิงมั่งราย) which interestingly expresses Lanna thought of the relationship system between the ruler and the Buddha images.

Other important function and supernatural power of the Buddha image are the perception of the image as a place for containing the Lord Buddha's relic and for covering a Buddha's footprint which is considered as a significant symbol of Buddhism. This is regarded as the emphasis of the higher sacredness of that Buddha image. From Lanna viewpoint, the contained relic functions as a “*mind*” to fulfill the Buddha image for completion. This is agreeable to the Lanna belief in “*Khwan*” (ขวัญ) which is another form of mind residing in a human's body (Prakong Nimmanhem, 1999: 2). Lanna people view that the Buddha images are alive so fulfilling the relic is like completing the power of life and mind into the image. Furthermore, footprints are meaningful as a place for containing water which is significantly linked to the fruitfulness. This is related to the images' functions which are mostly about the role as “*Phra Bandan Nam Bandan Phon*” (พระบันดาลน้ำบันดาลฝน) or a god of rain who is believed powerful in giving rain for fruitfulness. The god is like the person who controls the major energy source of Lanna life since the Buddha image is locally addressed with the names in relation to water; for example, *Phra Chao Phon Saen Ha* (พระเจ้าฝนแสนห่า: god of ten-thousand rains), *Phra Chao Sai Phon* (พระเจ้าสายฝน: *god of falling rain*), and *Phra Chao Phon* (พระเจ้าฝน: god of rain). The images are also perceived as “*Phra Borkhet lae payakorn*” พระบอกเหตุและพยากรณ์: god of prognostication). It is believed that the Buddha image is a sacred object which can give prognostication for people and city.

The meaning of the Buddha-image symbol signified by its history, *Sla* (สล่า: constructor), and designation

According to most Lanna Buddha myths, the history of Buddha images is not only from India and Sri Lanka; but is also originated at the place where it was found that it is the community located in Lanna land. The richness of Buddha images in Lanna land can be witnessed everywhere: in a mountain, in a jungle, in a field, in a small community, or in a river source (ตำนานพระเจ้าดอยจ้องเชียงราย- a myth Buddha images, Chiangrai province). This reflects the thought of spiritual area among Lanna people about the richness and the stability of Buddhism since the ancient Lanna time. The concept of *Sla* (สล่า: constructor) who constructs



a Buddha image also reflects Lanna thinking (Udom Rungriangsri, 1990: 1239). Based on different Lanna Buddha myths, the constructors consisted of different groups of beings i.e. human: ordinary people, rulers, and royal family; non-human: deva, and supernatural beings. Such concept signifies the miracle and the supernatural power attached to the image.

The last point obtained from the study of these myths is about the meaning of the Buddha image symbol in Lanna culture as signified through the image designation. The designation of any image in Lanna culture is made based on the posture, the unique characteristic, the material used for construction, and the method of construction. The addresses for Lanna Buddha images also signal the local identity. The words used for designating the images are from Pali and Sanskrit languages, dialects, and languages used by any ethnic groups which had an important role in Lanna land since the ancient time. Those words could be classified from the ordinary ones to the more powerful with sacredness. The sample of dialect designation of the images are *Kaew Khao* (แก้วขาว), *Kao Tue* (เก๊าตื้อ), *Kha King* (คำคิง), *Khaeng Khom* (แข่งคม), *Ton Luang* (ตนหลวง), *Nung Kone* (นั่งโคโน), *Than Chai* (ทันใจ), *Tab Tao* (ตับเตา), *Khon Muang* (ขอนแก่น), *Pu Kha* (ปู่คา), *Pa Ket Thi* (ป่าเก็ดตี้), *Khao Kard* (เขากาด), *Doi Jong* (ดอยจ้อง), *Pan Tong* (ปันตอง), *Lan Tue* (ล้านตื้อ), *Pha Ng-ao* (ผางงา), *Kwan* (กว้าน), *Nung Din* (นั่งดิน), *Phon Saen Ha* (ฝนแสนห่า), *Hua Kud* (หัวกุด), *Phra To* (พราโต), *Aun Muang* (อูนเมือง) and *Saen Saew* (แสนแซ่ว). These aspects are signs of an effort to form a local identity with combination of the Buddha image as the representative of the Lord Buddha to become a “local god” representing the local belief for local people, Lanna people to concentrate their faith in the same symbolic object of sacredness.

The Value and Power of the Buddha Myths towards Lanna Society

The analysis showed that there are many different aspects of the value and the power of the Buddha myths towards Lanna people: the value of the explanation of ethnic identity, the value of the explanation of custom and tradition, the value of the explanation of the relation in religious belief, and the value of the explanation of the relation in gender of male and female.

The value of the explanation of ethnic identity, it was found that the important aspects repeated in Lanna Buddha myths are the explanation of identity through the way to choose a suitable location for settlement, Buddhist way of



Lanna, multi-Buddha way, and Buddhist way of kingdom and political administrations (Rattanakorn Settakun, 1999: 1).

The value to the explanation of custom and tradition, it was found that the traditional worship to the Buddha images which consists of the instructions for worship and celebration of Buddha images, the ordination, the placement of Buddha image's heart, and the opening of the Buddha image's eyes. The merit making by taking care of the Buddha images has the related traditions as follows: offering three robes and Lanna flags to the image, offering servants to the image, offering rice and wood fuel to the image, and offering small lamps to the image. The traditions related to the wish of fruitfulness are the god's life lengthening, and the water pouring on the image as the god's representative.

The value to the explanation of the relation in religious belief, Lanna Buddha images show that there are different types of relations in religious belief which reflects types of the beliefs: the conflict between the belief in animism and Buddhism, the compromise able relation between animism and Buddhism (Amara Pongsapit, 1996: 263), and the relation between Buddha image myths and the ritual traditions. In addition, there is also a presentation of the value to the explanation of the relation in gender of male and female. The relation reflects the difficulties and the gender bias on the value of being female including the effort in negotiating and assigning the new meaning to the value of woman. The significant point is that the myth and the ritual related to the Buddha image is cultural information reflecting the Lanna wisdom of belief indicating the local identity, and the wide-spread of the faith in Buddha image in Lanna culture. As a result, the sacred myths and narratives have been constructed and exist in the cultural information source of Lanna people. The creation of tradition, ritual, and different kinds of beliefs were also made. The study of Lanna Buddha image myths as the reflection of its value and importance in signifying the power of narratives towards a community helps fulfilling and supporting us to have a clearer vision on the unique characteristics suggesting Lanna identity.

Finally, the study of the value and the power of the Buddha-image myths towards Lanna community is considered another "body of knowledge" suggesting the ancient wisdom and knowledge arisen from the accumulated experience which has been passed on from generation to generation. Lanna people since the ancient time have a clever wisdom which have been reproduced through the different versions of local myths to help solving problems and adjusting themselves to



the changing society. The knowledge does help Lanna society exist with peace and happiness till present.

Conclusion

The objectives of this research are to analyze and compare the myths of Buddha images found in Lanna land. The study area consisted of 8 provinces in the north of Thailand: Chiangmai, Chiangrai, Lamphun, Lampang, Prae, Phayao, Nan, and Mae Hongson. Folklore methods with combination of other cultural sciences were applied to analyze and interpret the content of the myths, the folk belief, and the traditional rituals related to the worship of the Buddha images. The data were collected from verbal interview and literary information. 109 issues were collected.

The survey for data collection on the myths of Buddha images in Lanna land showed that some names of the Buddha images were found different: Phra Chao Khang (พระแก้วขาว), Phra Chao Ta Khiew (พระเจ้าตาเขียว), Phra Chao Phla-la Khang (พระเจ้าพลละแข้ง), Phra Chao Un-Muang (พระเจ้าอุ่นเมือง), Phra Chao Nang Din (พระเจ้านั่งดิน); some were the same: Phra Chao Tan Jai (พระเจ้าทันใจ), Phra Chao Ton Luang (พระเจ้าตนหลวง), Phra Kaew (พระแก้ว), Phra Chao Lan Thong (พระเจ้าล้านทอง), Phra Yuen (พระยี่น), Phra Non (พระนอน), Phra Chao Thong Tip (พระเจ้าทองทิพย์). However, the popular name of the Buddha images in Lanna is “*Phra Chao*” (พระเจ้า) which means the sacred Buddha image.

The analysis of the content and the meaning of the Buddha images in Lanna myth indicated that there was the similarity of the significant situations and behaviors found in different myths such as the meaning of the gestures of the images like sitting, walking, standing, eating, sleeping, and flying. These gestures were informed in relevance that the Buddha's particular gesture is considered special and easy to remember. Moreover, it was found that there were some unique characteristics of each image like the halo, the head, the face, the eyes, the body, and the feet. Some myths told that these special characteristics were all made by the supernatural power. The meaning of the image that had been repeated was about the important behaviors and situation on the supernatural power related to the responsibility for protecting the towns, protecting the rulers, commanding for water and rain, and telling the future. The myth also told its meaning through the significant behaviors and situations related to the image for example, the stories about the history of the Buddha image, the sculptor who made the Buddha image, and the names of the Buddha image in Lanna culture.



The analysis of the value and the force of the Buddha myths towards Lanna community revealed that there were different aspects for example, the value in explaining the ethnic identity, the custom and tradition, the relation in religious beliefs, and the relationship between man and woman. Such significance can be viewed that the myths and the rituals of the Buddha images were the cultural information reflecting local wisdom and folk belief in Lanna culture, and the local identity. It also reflected the popularity and the widely respect to the images in Lanna area. Consequently, the sacred myths of Buddha image were kept in Lanna cultural information box. Besides, many customs, traditions, rituals, and beliefs in different concepts were formed. The study of Lanna Buddha image myths serves as a mirror to reflect the value and the significance of the images as well as the force of myth towards the community. This helps us to deeply understand 'Lanna identity' more.

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