

Reconsidering the “Museum Effect” in Modern Thai Buddhism and Art

Justin T. McDaniel¹

Abstract

Modern Thailand is a land of museums. There are museums of Medical Oddities (Sirirat Hospital in Thonburi), Prisons (Mahachai Street in Bangkok), History of Asylums and Mental Health Museum in Thonburi), the House Museums in Nan, Pichit, Trang, and other provinces, and many others. This article will look at a variety of religious museums in Thailand such as the museums founded by Lek Wiriyabun and small monastic museums. Although many post-modern theorists and post-colonial historians have seen museums as tools of the state or royalty, these religious museums are independent and idiosyncratic. Instead of enforcing a single-ideal of Buddhism in Thailand or supporting any normative notion of Nationalist history, they expand the way we think about Thai Buddhism and further dissociate it from the “Theravāda” or even the “Thai.”

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of California, Riverside CA.

Introduction

Over the past 40 years, scholars of Southeast Asia have often focused on the relationship between Buddhism and nationalism and nation-building.² Their studies have been foundational to the way we understand the connections between culture and power and the creation of things like national languages, national flags, national holidays, anthems, and ministries. These are designed to create a sense of being Thai among the population, a love of country and religion, a willingness to pay taxes, an active participation in civic events and historical commemorations, a respect of leaders, and a general acceptance of civil obedience. These reforms, institutions, and policies have created benign citizens and connected being a good Buddhist to being a good Thai national.³

Despite the historical accuracy, solid research, and critical nature of these studies, there is often an assumption that these policies and reforms work, are coordinated, and are all-encompassing. Research data is often limited to documents produced by the elite. Members of the Thai elite like King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong, Prince

² The numbers of studies about "Buddhism and the State" in Southeast Asia (in English) is truly staggering. This has been a scholarly obsession for forty years caused partly in no doubt by the popularity of neo-Marxist trends in the field, the student revolutions in Thailand in the 1970s, and the influence of Charles Keyes and Stanley Tambiah's excellent studies on the subject. See References Noted for a sampling of some of the more prominent and recent publications.

³ Much of the scholarship on Buddhism, the State, centralization, and elite reform echoes studies of Thai political and royal history that only mention Buddhist reform peripherally. The thesis in all of these studies is to see a slow movement from decentralization to centralization, from chaos to reform, from diversity to homogeneity in administration, education, law, and sanctioned cultural production. See for example, Abbot Low Moffat, *Mongkut: the King of Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961); Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life: A History of the Kings of Thailand* (London: Alvin Redman, 1960); David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and John Blofeld, *King Maha Mongkut of Siam* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1987).

Wachirayan, Prince Narit, King Mongkut, King Bhumibol Adulyadej and others are reduced to single-minded autocrats and ideologues and used as examples of the chauvinism of a nation-building machine. Elite monks are seen as tools of royal and political leaders. Instead of being seen as complex human beings, scholars reduce them to indigenous texts which can be only read one way. There is also a sense of nostalgia or longing for a premodern Thailand not yet corrupted by the trappings of Westernization and modernity (which are often equated). Reading these studies from afar, one would assume that states in Southeast Asia have near total power in controlling the cultural, economic, and political lives of its citizens. States loom, monarchs speak, citizens kneel. Western scholars have a hegemonic tendency to see modernity as singular and Western.⁴

One of the greatest tools of the powerful and the elite is the museum. Many have echoed Foucault's criticism of the negative manner in which museums shape and control the way we come to know beauty and history.⁵ Douglas Crimp, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Craig Clunas, Ruth Philips, and others have seen museums as imperialist

⁴ However, recent work by Pattana Kitiarsa, David Chandler, Craig Reynolds, Olga Dohr, Philip Taylor, and Shawn McHale have shown that the religious lives of people in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia are heterodox and idiosyncratic. Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond the Weberian Trails: The Anthropology of Southeast Asian Buddhism in Review," *Buddhism Compass* (forthcoming); Craig Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Exploring Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Shawn McHale, *Print and Power* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Olga Dohr, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Lieu Hanh in Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); David Chandler and Alexandra Kent, eds., *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

⁵ See Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, trans. Anon (London: Routledge, 1970) and "Different Spaces," in *Aesthetics: the Essential Works*, Vol. 2, edited by J. Faubion (London: Allen Lane, 1998): 175-185.

tools.⁶ Svetlana Alpers coined the term "museum effect" to describe the ways museums culturally construct ways of seeing.⁷ They enforce a "detached viewing" of objects.⁸ They become distant and untouchable. This criticism of museums has been taken up in Buddhist and Thai Studies as well, most notably by Stanley Abe and Maurizio Peleggi.⁹ The latter sees the establishment of the National Museum, the National Library, the Siam Society, the Archaeological Society, among other royal and colonial semi-institutions in Siam in the early twentieth century as tools of elite power and display. Peleggi states that this "antiquarianism [promoted by the elite] signaled a departure from the worldview orientated by the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, which postulates the inexorable decay of all physical entities."¹⁰ While these institutions of social control certainly can be seen as subtle and not so subtle ways foreign scholars and princes attempted to define history, beauty, tradition, and science for the Thai people, there are a number of museums in Thailand, mostly Buddhist, which are spaces where individual agency is celebrated and the supposed

⁶ Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. H. Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983) 43-56; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992); Craig Cunlas, "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 413-446; Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998) 49-71.

⁷ Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Steven Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1991) 25-32.

⁸ Diana Eck, "Excerpts from Darshan," *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 167; Richard Davis, "From the Lives of Indian Images," *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 180.

⁹ Stanley Abe, "Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West," *Curators of the Buddha*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 63-106; Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007) 154-161.

¹⁰ Peleggi 156.

unyielding cultural control of the royal family and the government is questioned.

The Elephant Belly Monastery and other Museums created by Lek Wiriyabun

Foucauldian criticisms of museums state that they have been tools of autocratic states, colonialists, and hegemonic ideologies. However, there are many museums in Thailand which defy any notion that museums are tools of the State or propaganda stages for the royal family. In this paper, I am mostly concerned with looking at museums which are related to religious belief and history. However, the line between religious and secular museums in Thailand is often fuzzy. Take for example the three museums designed by Lek Wiriyabun, the first owner of Mercedes-Benz franchises in Thailand. Lek has founded the "Sanctuary of Truth," the "Ancient City," and the "Erawan Museum." He was also the original sponsor of the famous Erawan Shrine in downtown Bangkok. The first museum, located in Pattaya, and, as yet, unfinished, claims to be the largest wooden structure in the world and is covered with carvings of Hindu deities, planets, stars, Buddhas, animals, and flowers. There is a plaque in English and Thai (also included on their website) that sums up the philosophy of the museum:

This sanctuary of truth was conceived out of the vision that human civilization has been achieved and nurtured by religious and philosophical truth. This sanctuary was created not from hubris but from goodness drawn from religion, philosophy and art. Man cannot be born and exist without seven creators. The Sanctuary of Truth presents seven creators through carved wood sculptures which adorn its interior. They are: Heaven, Earth, Father, Mother, Moon, Sun and Stars. On top of the four spires of the sanctuary, the four elements that will lead to the ideal world according to eastern philosophy are presented. A wood sculpture of a celestial body (Deva) holding a lotus flower, representing the establishment of religion, the pillar of the world; a wood sculpture of a celestial body holding a child and leading and elderly person, which represents life bestowed upon human beings; a wood sculpture of a celestial body holding a book representing the continuation of immortal philosophy; a wood sculpture

of a celestial body with a pigeon perching on his hand, symbolizing peace. On top of the tallest, central spire is Kalaki mounting a horse, the symbol of Phra Sri Ariyametrai. Phra Sri Ariyametrai was the last Bodhisattva to achieve enlightenment in the world and become the fifth Buddha in the Bhadra era, i.e., the present era... This work indicates that human art is only dust and will ultimately become one with the universe. Physical beings deteriorate, ravaged by the time, but truth and goodness are immortal. Materialistic pleasure is a superficial physical and external joy. True happiness found in intrinsic spiritual pleasure. Ideals make human life more meaningful. Determination to go to the ideal world is something desired by all men. Every belief, every religion and every philosophy leads there by different paths. [sic]¹¹

This strange combination of Christian (the dove), Buddhist, Hindu, and New Age symbols and vague ideas neither reinforces State and Sangha ideals, nor attempts to define a national ideal of beauty or history. In fact, this museum is transformative, it calls for action, for world peace, and other dreams, because Lek states emphatically in the introduction to his second museum "I strongly believe that the morality of the world's population is deteriorating."¹²

Lek's second museum, the "Ancient City" or Muang Boran, claims to be the largest open-air museum in the world (Lek liked things big!). It is the physical manifestation of his vision of history. It is a 200 acre park in the southern suburbs of Bangkok (Samut Prakan province). It, like the Sanctuary of Truth, is extremely popular with school groups and families who take picnic lunches and spend their days wandering around Lek's creations. Here though, Lek has not created original art. Instead he has sponsored the building of full to-scale replications of famous monastic buildings, royal palaces, village homes, statues, monuments, and natural wonders from every region of Thailand. Not

¹¹ Cited from a pamphlet and plaque available at the museum. See also <http://www.sanctuaryoftruth.com/>.

¹² Lek Wiriyabun, *Guide to Muang Boran* (Bangkok: Viriya Business Company, 2004) 4.

all of the buildings are replications; some were actually old buildings which he re-established at the park/museum. Now there are 116 sites including a merchant ship, the chedi of Phra Mahathat in Ratchaburi, a teak monastic library, the Si Thep Chedi from Petchabun Province, as well as an entire floating market (which features prominently a nineteenth century Thai Catholic floating chapel), a rebuilt Northern Thai village, nineteenth century barber shops, and a footprint of the Buddha from Saraburi Province. He even had an entire mountain cliff constructed to replicate the mountaintop Hindu shrine of Khao Phra Wihan. On the surface, this museum could be interpreted as a gross example of reinforcing royal and national territorial claims and fixing borders. Monasteries, palaces, and villages are brought or replicated from every region of Thailand. This could be seen as a way of centralizing the “Thai” ideal to combat secessionist notions. It could also be interpreted as homogenizing diverse artistic traditions and cultures under one national flag. These are certainly legitimate criticisms and the simple fact that all of these structures are included in one park can subtly establish the integrity of the nation. However, interpretations such as these do not explain Lek’s (and the foundation which runs the museum) inclusion of a Catholic church, the village house of the fictional character Khun Paen, a botanical garden inspired by a Sunthorn Phu poem, a statue of Kuan Yin, various Hindu deities, and a Lao library. These items are not described as Thai, in fact, Lek does not describe the museum as “Thai” at all. He simply calls it “Muang Boran.” “Muang” is a pre-national designation for an independent city-state.¹³

¹³ For more information on the term “muang” and other geographic/political designations in Thai and Lao see Olivier and Jana Raendchen (eds.), “*Baan-muang*: Administration and Ritual,” *Tai Culture* 3.2 [Special Issue] (1998). See also McDaniel, “Transformative History: the *Jinakālamālipakaranam* and *Nihon Ryoiki*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25.1 (2002): 151-207.

The royal palaces are not given more prominence than the village homes, the Buddhist monasteries are not treated as more important than a poet's house or a merchant's shop.

The Ancient City Museum and park allows children to climb around the "ruins" and eat sticky rice while sitting on the backs of stone horses and or on the verandas of palaces. There is no detached regard of high art here. In fact, visitors sit in some of the monastic buildings in the museum and chant. Many patrons offer candles and incense while prostrating to Buddha and other images. The buildings and statues are treated ritually as they would if they were in actual monasteries. This same religious activity is seen in Lek's third museum, his masterpiece, the Erawan Museum. It is hard to describe the scale of this museum. It is a giant iron three headed mythical elephant that can be seen from miles away. The elephant statue stands 130 feet tall and 120 feet long and weighs 250 tons. Inside the elephant's leg there is an elevator which takes people to its belly, in which there is a very large Buddhist sermon hall. Patrons can look out a window in the elephant and see a park below with elaborate fountains and gardens. Underneath the giant elephant is a museum of Chinese, Thai, Indian, and European artifacts. In the belly of the elephant, there is a gallery of Buddha images and an altar where visitors can prostrate, offer gifts, meditate, and regard the ceiling covered with stars and swimming mermaid-like creatures. The massive iron support columns underneath the elephant's belly are covered in not only Buddhist and Hindu bas-reliefs, but also scenes from the Christian Bible. The three headed elephant is based on the mythical Airāvata (the traditional mount of the god Indra) who, Lek believes, protects Thailand (which is strange considering it was formerly the royal symbol of the Lao kings and was on the pre-Communist Lao flag). Lek claims that he got the idea from a dream and from a conversation with "a Western visitor" who had suggested to him the idea of building a huge monument in the shape of an apple. Lek considered the symbol of the elephant to be more "Asian" and decided to build the Erawan elephant. He believed that since the elephant was the mount of the king of the gods, it was also the center of the universe and being in the belly of the center of

the universe would become the “spiritual heart of the land.”¹⁴ Since Lek believes a global spiritual renewal is needed for the salvation of humanity, all religions and philosophies would be appropriate if held in the belly of his elephant in the center of the world.

Lek’s New Age visions are rather bizarre and even could be considered the ravings of a wealthy megalomaniacal elderly man (he passed away in November, 2000). However, his museums are a good example of a Thai religious repertoire. His ideas and works, and their popularity (his museums certainly receive many more visitors on a daily basis than does the National Museum of Thailand), show that any definition of Thai religion which sees canonical or orthodox Theravāda Buddhism as central and all other Indic, Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Yuan influences as peripheral is suspect. It also shows that the value of objects is not defined by their ability to express Buddhist ethical norms of impermanence or non-attachment. It also shows that neither the State nor the royal family has tried to autocratically control the nation’s cultural or artistic production. In fact, Lek’s ethics are defined by a combination of Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist teachings, as well as beliefs in astrology and the powers of transcendental meditation. Instead of being a nationalist, Lek promotes universalism. Lek’s museums question what it means to be Thai and Buddhist; they do not reinforce a central religious or cultural ideal, the need for monks as mediators of enlightenment, or the Buddha as the most important spiritual figure in the life of a Thai person. He combined symbols, beliefs, objects, and mental geographies that are culturally available in modern Thailand into his own repertoire. Unlike others, though, Lek seemed little concerned with security or invulnerability (although many entreat the Erawan Brahma statue for protection and good health). Individuals assemble and express their own constantly changing repertoires; they do not simply reproduce accepted values, aesthetics ideals, or visual protocols.

¹⁴ See Vanchai Tan, *The Erawan Museum: Convergence of Dreams, Faith, and Gratitude* (Bangkok: Viriya Business Company, 2006) introduction. See also <http://www.erawan-museum.com/>

Curiosa and Collections

You do not need to be rich in Thailand to start your own museum. Personal religious repertoires are often expressed through small monastery and house museums. Louis Gabaude and Paritta Chalerm-pow Koanantakool have recently written on monastery museums in Thailand. Gabaude notes that Thai monasteries have often had small rooms that display gifts the monastery has received as well as "local crafts, or local archaeological finds, curiosa collected by the abbot, or collections of Buddha images or amulets."¹⁵ Added to these museums are some new museums which are dedicated to famous monks like Than Achan Fan Acaro or Achan Man Phurithatto. When I was a monk, our monastery had a small museum for Luang Pu Sao Kantasillo, the former abbot and famed teacher of Achan Man. Paritta shows that these museums also do not contain solely Buddhist objects. They promote local handicrafts such as bamboo fish traps, wooden bowls, and silk skirts which are not for sale, but give villagers a place to protect and be proud of their family's heritage. Paritta notes that this "tangible heritage" is extremely important in these rural monasteries which promote local cultural items without reference to national ideals.¹⁶ However, just as these museums are not strategic tools of the powerful, I would also caution against seeing them as solely tactics of the rural poor to usurp power and prestige. These monastery museums are often storehouses of items that are seen as historically or ritually valuable, but are not being used in daily religious or pedagogical activities. They are often locked, dusty, and unorganized. For example, the museum at Wat Lai Hin in rural Lampang Province when I visited

¹⁵Louis Gabaude, "A New Phenomenon in Thai monasteries: The Stūpa Museum," *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*, eds. Pierre Pichard and François Lagirarde (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2003) 169.

¹⁶Paritta Chalerm-pow Koanantakool, "Contextualizing Objects in Monastery Museums in Thailand," *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia*, eds. François Lagirarde and Paritta Chalerm-pow Koanantakool (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in collaboration with École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2006) 149-167.

in 2001 had not been opened for some time and, according to the abbot, remains locked for long periods of time. The museum at Wat Indrawihan dedicated to Somdet To is only opened once a year for ten days and even then is not a popular place in the monastery even during the festival. The library and museum at Samnak Santisuk, the oldest nunnery in Thailand, is not open to the public and is rarely even visited by the nuns in residence there.

Modern Thailand is a land of museums. There are museums of Medical Oddities (Sirirat Hospital in Thonburi), Prisons (Mahachai Street in Bangkok), History of Asylums and Mental Health Museum in Thonburi), the House Museums in Nan, Pichit, Trang, and other provinces, and many others. Anake Nawigamune has studied a variety of house museums throughout Thailand, especially in his home province of Songkhla in the south.¹⁷ These include a museum dedicated to cameras and a museum dedicated to clocks. I mention these various small “secular” museums, because they are similar in their size and extremely local patronage to monastery museums. Their opening hours are limited, they have few trained staff, and they are designed for the purposes of simple display rather than providing detailed information, a coherent theme or *raison d’être*. There are often the personal creation of local historians and eccentric collectors.¹⁸ Sometimes they are assembled for particular occasions, like a visit from a royal family member or for an anniversary of the founding of an organization. A good example is the personal museum of the monk Phra Athikan Sian Thitayano of Wat Ko in Phetchaburi, which displays various things from Chinese lacquer to old currency from various countries, to elephant tusks, to palm-leaf (mostly medical) manuscripts. Another example is the sculpture park, called Salakaeoku, created by the artist, Luang Pu Bun Leua Surirat,

¹⁷ Anake Nawigamune, *Nana phiphithaphan* (Bangkok: Saeng Daet Phuan Dek, 2549 [2006]) and Anake Nawigamune, *Sombat Muang Songkhla* (Bangkok: Filasatai, 2550 [2007]).

¹⁸ I thank Christine McDaniel for conversations and advice about this issue. I also thank her for years of pulling me away from books and taking me to these museums.

who, until his death in 1996, spent two decades building monumental sculptures of Buddhist, Hindu, and local deities. Some of these statues measure over 70 feet tall and are scattered over a large park near the Mekong River in Nong Khai Province. Although Luang Pu Bun was a Lao national and had started his sculpture park directly across the river in Laos, he fled the communists in 1974 and continued his life's work on the opposite bank. Luang Pu Bun, although he was not a monk and had trained as a shaman in Vietnam, took a title usually reserved for monks. Moreover, he told many of his followers that he was actually half-man, half-snake (indeed many of his sculptures are snakes and mythical snake-like nagas), and had been granted his talents when he fell in a hole as a child and was instructed by snake spirits. His body was mummified when he died and some of his followers believe that part of him continues to live on as a snake. The bricolage at Luang Pu Bun's park and Phra Athikan Sian Thitayano's personal museum does not attempt to create a single image of Theravāda Buddhism, Thai culture or ethnicity.

Conclusion

These museums expand the way we think about Thai Buddhism and further dissociate it from the "Theravāda" or even the "Thai." The place we call Thailand today has been crisscrossed by trade routes, pilgrims, armies, colonists, and tourists for centuries. In a sense, it has been globalized long before the rise of television and jets. Despite the considerable efforts of those in the elite or scholars to define Thai culture or Theravāda Buddhism, the ability for Thai agents to consciously and unconsciously develop their own repertoires, religious or otherwise, has quietly and rather effortlessly prevailed.

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