

Art as a “System of Action”: Buddha Images in the “Golden Age” of Lan Na, c. 1355-1525 CE (1898-2068 BE)¹

Angela Chiu²

Abstract

Most scholarship on Thai art has depicted the Buddha image as an iconographic representation, a way to make merit, or a political symbol. These one-dimensional meanings hardly explain why the Emerald Buddha and other famous images have come to be so highly revered by the Thai people. This paper considers the Emerald Buddha and four other statues which apparently become famous in the “golden age” of Lan Na from c. 1355-1525 CE (1893-2068 BE). Chronicles written during this time by monks detailing the histories of these statues may help us to understand how people regarded Buddha images and how certain images came to be seen as extraordinarily powerful or more worthy of veneration than other Buddha images. This paper highlights how the structure and themes of these chronicles focus on the sphere of social interactions among the images, patrons and monks. The statues’ embodiment of ideas of lineage and place is presented in the chronicles as the fuel which gives them their special power.

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² Ph.D. student, Department of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. The author may be reached at 166409@soas.ac.uk.

Introduction

The mid-fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries CE, extending from the reign of King Kuenā (r. 1355-1385 CE) to that of King Kaeo (r. 1495-1525 CE), is often called the "golden age" of the Northern Thai kingdom of Lan Na, which had its capital at Chiang Mai. During this period, Lan Na, and its great rival kingdom to the south, Ayutthaya, began to centralize around notions of kingship, state and religion. No previous Thai kingdoms had achieved the territorial size, prosperity and relative cohesiveness that Lan Na and Ayutthaya did at this time. This achievement involved not only a strengthening of military and political systems, it also involved cultural development, particularly through the spread of Buddhism and the association of the religion with kingship. The amount of royal religious donations reached an unprecedented scale in the Thai kingdoms at this time. In particular, Buddhist statuary images proliferated as never before. Indeed, the Emerald Buddha, which is now the palladium of Thailand, was probably produced in this period in Lan Na. Yet in conventional art histories, the meaning of the Buddha image has been little explored; it has been defined as an iconographic representation, a commodification of merit, or a motif of the politically powerful. Such definitions give us limited help in answering questions such as why so many Buddha images were made or why certain images, such as the Emerald Buddha, came to be more revered than others.

This paper will suggest that images were valued not only for their symbolic value but because they embodied local conceptions of lineage and place, which enabled images to have an active and influential role in the lives of the people of Lan Na. The fact that images could embody powerful meanings for Lan Na people in the golden age is suggested by a distinctive genre of literature: the category of *tamnan*, or Thai chronicles, which focus on Buddha images. Each of these documents presents the history of a certain statue. Some of the statues have been highly venerated through to the present.

This essay considers five Buddha images discussed in the texts listed below. These texts include individual *tamnan*, as well as abbreviated versions of the statue histories which are embedded within the well-known Lan Na chronicle the *Jinakālamālipakaraṇam*, said to

have been written by Ratanapañña Thera of Wat Padaeng near Chiang Mai between 1516 and 1527 CE.

Sihing Buddha Image: (Thai: *Phra Phuttha Sihing* [พระพุทธสิหิงค์]; Pali: *Buddha Sihinga, Sīhalapatimā*)

There are three well-known images which are claimed to be the original ancient Sihing image currently located at the Phutthaisawan Chapel at the National Museum in Bangkok, at Wat Phra Sing in Chiang Mai, and at the Office of Government and Justice of the city of Nakhon Si Thammarat. The Sihing chronicle, according to its text, was written in Pali by a monk, Bodhiramsī, who also apparently composed the chronicle *Chamathewiwong* (*Cāmadevīvaṃsa*). Scholars estimate that he wrote the Sihing Buddha image chronicle in the first half of the fifteenth century.³ Texts about the Sihing Buddha to be considered in this article include:

- *Story of the Sihing Buddha* - Trans. Saeng Monwithun (SBSM)⁴
- *P'ra Buddha Sihinga* - Trans. Camille Notton (SBCN)⁵
- "The Account of the *Sihinga* Image", *Jinakālamālipakaraṇam* - Trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (SBNJ)⁶

³ Because of evidence in the text, Phiset Chiechanphong and others have dated the chronicle to the reign of King Sam Fang Kaen of Chiang Mai (r. 1402-1441 CE). (See Phiset Chiechanphong [พิเศษ เจียจันทร์พงษ์], "Chronicle Predictions Which Were Wrong [ตำนานพยากรณ์ที่ผิดพลาด]," *Looking for the Lords* [หาพระ หาเจ้า] (Bangkok: Matichon [กรุงเทพฯ: มติชน], 2545 BE [2002 CE] 5.) Hans Penth assigned a date of c. 1410 to the chronicle. (Hans Penth, "Literature on the History of Local Buddhism," *Buddhist Literature in Lan Na* [วรรณกรรมพุทธศาสนาในล้านนา], ed. Phanphen Krueathai [พรรณเพ็ญ เครือไทย] (Chiang Mai: Suriwong Book Centre [เชียงใหม่: สุริวงศ์บุ๊คเซนเตอร์], 2540 BE [1997 CE]) 81.)

⁴ Phra Phothirangsi [พระโพธิ์รังสี], *Story of the Sihing Buddha* [นิทานพระพุทธสิหิงค์], trans. Saeng Monwithun [แสง มนวิฑูร] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department [กรุงเทพฯ: กรมศิลปากร], 2506 BE [1963 CE]). (In Thai)

⁵ Camille Notton, trans., *P'ra Buddha Sihinga* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1933).

⁶ Ratanapañña Thera, *The Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror, Being a Translation of the Jinakālamālipakaraṇam of Ratanapañña Thera of Thailand*, trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (London: The Pali Text Society, 1978) 120-126.

Emerald Buddha Image: (Thai: *Phra Kaeo Morakot* [พระแก้วมรกต], *Phra Ratanapatima* [พระรัตนปฏิมา]; Pali: *Ratanapaṭimā*)

Likely the most famous Buddha image today in Thailand, the Emerald Buddha is now housed in Wat Phra Sri Ratanasadaram (also known as Wat Phra Kaeo) in Bangkok and is the subject of homage in certain Thai royal rituals. The text of the Emerald Buddha chronicle states that it was written in Pali by the monk Phromarachapanya (Brahmarājapaññā), aged 23 years, ordained for two years and living at Wat Doi Mahathamaracha. Scholars have estimated that Brahmarājapaññā wrote the chronicle in the mid to late fifteenth century.⁷ Texts about the Emerald Buddha to be considered in this article include:

- *Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha* - Trans. Saeng Monwithun (EBSM)⁸
- *Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha* - Trans. Camille Notton (EBCN)⁹
- “The Account of the Jewel-Image”, *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam* - Trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (EBNJ)¹⁰

⁷ Hiram W. Woodward, Jr. dated the chronicle to the second half of the fifteenth century and suggested it was based on the Sihing chronicle, which he dated to the first half of the fifteenth century. (Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., “The Emerald and Sihing Buddhas: Interpretations of Their Significance,” *Living a Life in Accord with Dhamma: Papers in Honor of Professor Jean Boisselier on his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Natasha Eilenberg, M.C. Subhadradis Diskul and Robert L. Brown (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1997) 503.) Phiset Chiechanphong suggested that the writing of the Sihing chronicle occurred in the mid-fifteenth century and was inspired by the approaching 2,000th anniversary of the Buddhist Era which was around 1457 CE. (Phiset Chiechanphong [พิเศษ เจียจันทรพงษ์], “Introduction [คำนำเสนอ],” *The Emerald Buddha: Mythological Accounts and Historical Interpretation* [พระแก้วมรกต: ตำนานพระแก้วมรกต], ed. Suchit Wongthet [สุจิตต์ วงษ์เทศ] (Bangkok: Matichon [กรุงเทพฯ: มติชน], 2546 BE [2003 CE]) 16-17.)

⁸ Phra Phromarachapanya [พระพรหมราชปัญญา], *Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha* [รัตนพิมพวงศ์], trans. Saeng Monwithun [แสง มนวิฑูร] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department [กรุงเทพฯ: กรมศิลปากร], 2510 BE [1967 CE]). (In Thai)

⁹ Camille Notton, trans., *The Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha*, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1933).

¹⁰ Ratanapañña Thera 139-145.

White Crystal Buddha Image: (Thai: *Phra Setangkhamani* [พระเสด็จ
คามณี], *Phra Kaeo Khao* [พระแก้วขาว]; Pali: *Setaṃgamaṇī*)

The White Crystal image, housed at Wat Chiang Man in Chiang Mai, is today considered to be one of the most important images in the northern region of Thailand. The version of the chronicle published by Camille Notton, which is a French translation of a text in a northern Thai language, does not contain the name of the author or the date of composition, but the story ends in the reign of King Kaeo of Chiang Mai (r. 1495-1525 CE), suggesting its possible time of original composition. The text about the White Crystal Buddha to be considered in this article is:

- *P'ṛā Setaṃgamaṇī* - Trans. Camille Notton (CBCN) ¹¹

Flaming Buddha Image: (Thai: *Phra Sikhi Phutthapattima* [พระสีขี
พุทธปฏิมา]; Pali: *Buddhapaṭṭimā Sikhī*)

This image is not known to exist anymore, as far as I am aware. Because the Flaming image is discussed in the *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṃ*, its history appears to have been known by the time of the *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṃ*, which was written between 1516 and 1527 CE. The text about the Flaming Buddha Image to be considered in this article is :

- “The Account of the Buddha-Image Sikhī”,
Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṃ - Trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (SKNJ) ¹²

¹¹ Camille Notton, trans., *P'ṛā Setaṃgamaṇī* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1936). (In French)

¹² Ratanapañña Thera 155-158.

Sandalwood Buddha Image: (Thai: *Phra Phuttharup Kaenchan* [พระพุทธรูปแก่นจันทร์]; Pali: *Candanapaṭimā*)

The Sandalwood Buddha image is distinctive among this group of images because it is referred to in Buddhist lore across Asia. For instance, in the account of the tenth-century Chinese pilgrim, Fa Xian, a sandalwood statue was the first image ever created of Gotama Buddha. While the Buddha was away preaching in Tāvatisa heaven, King Pasenadi of Kosala made the statue as a remembrance.¹³ The Thai chronicle extends the story to say that the image moved from the city of Kosala in today’s India to the northern Thai region. As this chronicle is summarized in the *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam*, the story was probably in circulation by the early sixteenth century. The image does not seem to exist anymore in Thailand. The text about The Sandalwood Buddha to be considered in this article is :

- “The Account of the Sandalwood Image”,
Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam - Trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (SWNJ)¹⁴

These *tamnan* share a similar narrative structure. They begin hundreds of years in the past with a description of how a particular image was produced and consecrated. Then they provide a chronology of who possessed the statue, at what times and where, up until the time of the writing of the chronicle. Due to the narrative focus in the chronicles on the movement of the images across Asia over time, I call this group of statues ‘travelling images.’

The structure of the chronicles was probably influenced by Sri Lankan texts about relics such as the chronicle of the famous Tooth Relic (*Dāthāvaṃsa*), traditionally said to have been written in the fourth century in a Sinhalese language and translated into Pali in the thirteenth century by Dhammakitti Thera.¹⁵ Although in general the

¹³ Samuel S. Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World, Translated from the Chinese of Hsien Tsiang (A.D. 629), Volume I* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1906) xlv-xlv.

¹⁴ Ratanapañña Thera 174-180.

¹⁵ Bimala Churn Law, *On the Chronicles of Ceylon*, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal Monograph Series, Vol. III (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1947) 22-23.

style of the Thai image chronicles resembles that of Lankan texts such as this, the image chronicles differ in important aspects of objective and theme.

Story of the Sihing Buddha Image

To provide an example, let us look at the chronicle of the Sihing Buddha image. The following summary is based on SBSM, Saeng Monwithun's translation.

The action of the story begins on the island of Lanka 700 years after the Buddha's death or *nibbāna*. At that time there were three kings ruling on Lanka, and the *sāsana* (religion) was flourishing there thanks to the efforts of twenty *arahants*. One day the kings asked the *arahants* if they had ever seen the Buddha when he was still living. The *arahants* said they had not. A long-lived *nāga*, or serpent deity, then appeared and said that he had seen the Buddha. The *nāga* transformed his body into the form of the Buddha.

When the kings and the people of Lanka saw the image of the Buddha, they became filled with joy and venerated the image with various offerings. The three kings decided to produce a copy of the Buddha image in metal. Craftsmen were called to cast the image. Groups of different kinds of deities, such as *asuras*, *garuḍas*, *gandhabbas*, *devas* and *yakkhas*, came to contribute metals such as gold, silver and brass. At that time, while the kings were observing the production, one of the kings saw a craftsman who was not following royal orders. He struck that craftsman on the finger. Later, when the casting was completed, it was discovered that one of the fingers of the statue had a defect. Upon observing what had happened, the *arahants* made a prophecy. They said that in the future the Buddha image would go to *Jambudīpa*, where a king with faith in the *sāsana* would repair the image's finger. They also prophesied that at the two-thousandth anniversary of the Buddha's *nibbāna*, there would be a righteous king ruling in Lanka who would bring the image back to the island.

The Sihing image was venerated from then on by men and deities for many years. One-thousand five-hundred years after the Buddha's *nibbāna*, there was a righteous king named Ruang (Pali:

Roca) in the city of Sukhothai (*Sukhodaya*). He journeyed down to Nakhon Sri Thammarat (*Nagara Siridhammarāja*), where he was informed by the king of that city that on Lanka island there was a Buddha image with great power. Upon hearing this, Ruang determined to possess the image and so sent an emissary to Lanka to ask for it. The emissary told the king of Lanka about Ruang's strength and cleverness, and the king agreed to Ruang's request to possess the Sihing.

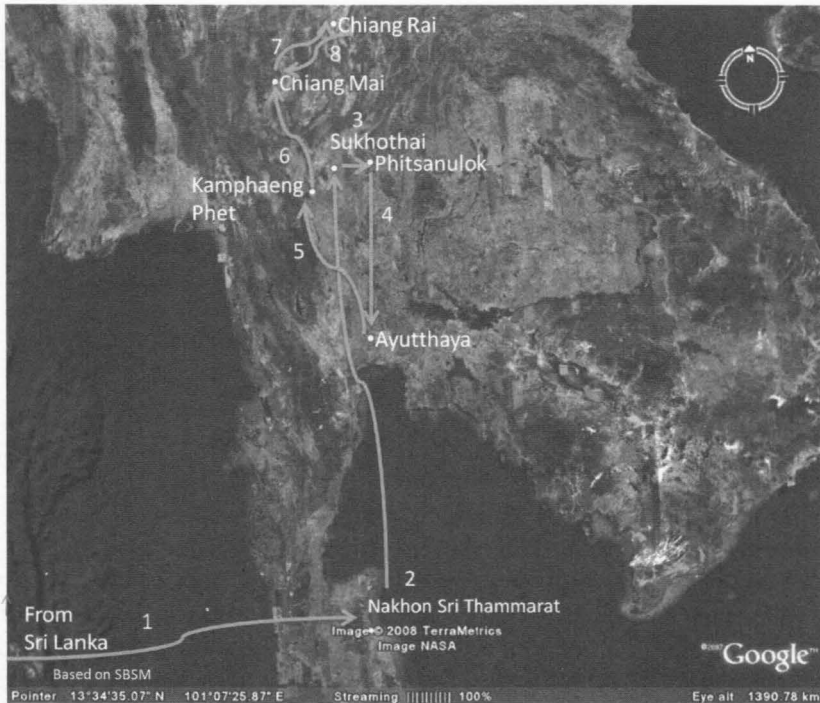
The Sihing image was then sent away from Lanka by boat, but in the middle of the ocean the boat was struck by a storm and smashed to bits. All of the people on board died. The Sihing fell into the sea but did not sink. It floated along, beautiful in its splendor.

The deities of the ocean saw the Sihing and informed the king of Nakhon Sri Thammarat that the Sihing was drifting in the water. The king then sent a boat which brought the Sihing to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, where the king led the whole population of the city in venerating the image with special offerings. The king asked the Sihing to perform miracles. The image floated into the sky, emitting a *rasmī* (radiance) of six kinds in all directions.

Then King Ruang invited the Sihing to sit on his head, and the Sihing did so. The Sihing was then transported to Sukhothai with a huge amount of offerings, and Ruang, for the rest of his life, worshipped it continuously.

After Ruang died, his successors likewise venerated the Sihing without pause. Later King Ramathibodi (*Rāmadhipati*) of Ayutthaya (*Ayodhya*) conquered Sukhothai. Ramathibodi permitted the king of Sukhothai, Luethai (*Lideyya*), to go to rule in Phitsanulok (*Dvisākhanagara*) and Luethai brought the Sihing image with him there. After Luethai's death, the Sihing image was sent to Ayutthaya.

Map of the Travels of the Sihing Buddha Image According to SBSM



At that time, a king named Yanadit (*Ñānatissa*) was ruling in Kamphaeng Phet (*Vajirapākāra*). He heard of the prestige and power of the Sihing and desired to have it. He dispatched his mother to Ayutthaya. Her beauty caught King Ramathibodi's eye and she duped the king into allowing her to take the Sihing. She placed the Sihing on a boat which transported it to her son King Yanadit at Kamphaeng Phet.

At that time, King Mahaphrom (*Mahābrahma*) of Chiang Rai (*Jamrāya*) learned of the virtues of the Sihing image. He determined to possess it and threatened war against King Yanadit of Kamphaeng Phet. Yanadit did not want to fight and passed the Sihing to Mahaphrom. Mahaphrom took the Sihing to Chiang Mai (*Nabbisi*), to

show his brother King Kli (*Kilanā* or *Kuena*, r. 1355-1385 CE). Mahaphrom then transported the Sihing Buddha to Chiang Rai, and there he had the image's defective finger repaired, fulfilling the prophecy of the *arahants* of Lanka.

Later, King Sirirachabut (*Lakkhapurāgāma* or *Saen Mueang Ma*, r. 1385-1401 CE) brought the Sihing image to Chiang Mai. He venerated the Sihing with an extremely large amount of offerings. The king's successor, Wichaidit (*Tissa* or *Sam Fang Kaen*, r. 1402-1441 CE), also worshipped the Sihing image constantly.

The chronicle ends with a reiteration of the prophecy of the Sihing image's return to the island of Lanka at the 2,000th anniversary of the *sāsana* and a comment on the prestige of the Sihing image and its great veneration in Chiang Mai.

Travelling-image *Tamnan*: Lineage Structure

This summary illustrates the Thai chronicler's style of writing, which combines Buddhist themes with local history and legend. Chronicles like these have been of interest for modern historians as sources of factual information such as regnal titles, ancient city names, and events such as wars between states. However, because the present statues in Thailand appear stylistically to date no earlier than the fourteenth century, many observers doubt that the statues were created as deep in the past as the chronicles say. However, it is worthwhile reading these documents not only for what they say, but also for how they say it. Studying the structure and themes of these *tamnan* may help us to illuminate how people of the golden age regarded statuary images.

The Thai travelling-image chronicles, because they each describe the origination and subsequent 'life' of a statue, could well be classified as biographies. As noted earlier, the inspiration for this form of composition in Lan Na was probably stories of Sri Lankan relics such as the *Dāthāvamsa*, the chronicle of the Tooth relic. The *Dāthāvamsa* narrates the Tooth's journey from the Buddha's funeral in what is now northern India to the Lankan royal court.¹⁶ The

¹⁶ Dhammakitti Thera, *The Dāthāvamsa: a history of the Tooth-relic of the Buddha*, ed. and trans. Bimala Charan Law (Lahore: Moti Lal Baharsi Das, 1925).

Dāṭhāvaṃsa and the travelling image chronicles both list the royal patrons of their respective objects of homage. In the story of the Tooth relic, the prince and princess of Dantapura were appointed to bring the Tooth from Dantapura to Lanka. Their journey occupies much of the text of the chronicle. However, the two royals are depicted as rather fearful and uncertain. The Tooth chronicle emphasizes the supernatural abilities of the Buddha, as manifested by both his Tooth relic and an *arahant* who protects the Tooth, and relates how these abilities propelled the Tooth's journey from India to Lanka: the Buddha's magical powers converted the heretics, triumphed over deities and enabled the religion to prosper in Lanka. The purpose of the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, like other Lankan relic stories, apparently was to establish the relic as an authentic relic of the Buddha and thereby legitimize Sri Lankan religious and political authority.¹⁷ The continuous string of miraculous adventures presented in the chronicle of the Tooth relic provides a contrast to the travelling-image stories' focus on the lineage of royal patrons and these patrons' activities. The differences between the Tooth's story and the travelling-image stories must arise, at least in part, from the differing local political and social environments of Lanka and Lan Na. The Thai statue chronicles appear to have taken inspiration from Lankan chronicles but represented an innovation, not a copying.

The Sihing and other travelling-image chronicles describe the statues as going on the move whenever the merit of whoever possessed them was exceeded by the merit of someone else. This connection between the image's residence and a host's merit may be an echo from the Buddha's life story. The Buddha wandered for twenty years and then for a twenty-five-year period lived in just two places, Jeta's Grove (*Jetavana*) and the Eastern Monastery (*Pubbārāma*); as Ratanapaṇṇa Thera, the author of the *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṃ* noted, this was due to

¹⁷ Kevin Trainor has discussed how Buddha relics in Lanka, such as the forehead-bone relic and the right-collarbone relic, and their stories were important on the island for evidencing the linkage between the Buddha and the authenticity of the practice of the Buddhist religion in Lanka. (Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lanka Theravada Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).)

the immense virtue of the two patrons' families.¹⁸ The statues likewise gravitated away and towards potential patrons according to the patrons' merit. Thus, for example, in the chronicle of the Sihing Buddha, King Ramathibodi of Ayutthaya lost the Sihing when he was seduced by the Queen Mother of Kamphaeng Phet and permitted her to take the statue away.¹⁹ In the Emerald Buddha chronicle, the king of Angkor lost the statue after he ordered an unduly harsh punishment for the son of an official.²⁰ Through a travelling statue's movement, people were connected across time and space by the statue. These include famous figures of the past. The Sihing Buddha image story features Ruang, a name which may signify the great thirteenth-century King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai. The eleventh-century King Anuruddha of Pagan plays a role in the histories of the Emerald and Flaming Images. Chamathewi (*Cāmadavī*), the first queen of Hariphunchai (*Haripuñjaya*), also features in the story of the Flaming Image. The statues create a network of relationships, linking eminent past figures to sovereigns ruling in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The recounting of each image's story takes the form of a lineage. The biography of each image envisions history as a lineage of meritorious people.

¹⁸ Ratanapañña Thera 49.

¹⁹ SBSM 58; SBCN 37, and SBNJ 124.

²⁰ EBSM 42-43; EBCN 26-27, and EBNJ 144.

Patrons of Travelling Images

Emerald Buddha	Sihing Buddha	White Crystal Buddha	Flaming Buddha	Sandalwood Buddha
Monk Nagasena	Kings of Lanka	King Ramaracha of Lopburi	King of Rammana	King Pasenadi of Kosala
King Anuruddha of Pagan	King Ruang of Sukhothai	Queen Chamathewi of Hariphunchai	King Anuruddha of Pagan	King of Suwannapum
King of Angkor	King Phokhunban of Sukhothai	King Mangrai of Chiang Mai	King of Angkor	King Adicca of Suwannapum
King Athit of Ayutthaya	King Lithai of Sukhothai	King Khram of Chiang Mai	Queen Chamathewi of Hariphunchai	King Khamdaeng of Tak
King Wichienprakan of Kamphaeng Phet	King Namthum of Sukhothai	King Sam Fang Kaen of Chiang Mai	King Suthamma of Tak	King of Sob Soi
King Mahaphrom of Chiang Rai	King Luethai of Sukhothai	Prince Suriyawong of Ayutthaya	King of Ayutthaya	A hunter of Bang Phlu
Minister Son of Lampang	King Ramathibodi of Ayutthaya	King Muang Yot of Chiang Mai		Monk Abhaya of Balima
Minister Utharasunom of Lampang	King Yanadit of Kamphaeng Phet	King Kaeo of Chiang Mai		Moli, a layman of Phayao
Minister Sunom of Lampang	King Mahaphrom of Chiang Rai			Phya Yuthit Chieng of Phayao
	King Sirirachabut of Chiang Mai			Monk Thammasenabothi of Asok Monastery
	King Wichaidit of Chiang Mai			Great Minister Muen No Thep of Phayao
				King Kaeo of Chiang Mai

Based on EBSM, SBSM, CBCN, SKNJ, and SWNJ

Why Are Some Buddha Images More Powerful Than Others?

In his study of northern Thai image consecration ceremonies, Donald K. Swearer noted that during consecration monks transform Buddha images into appropriate surrogates of the Buddha through a process of chant, sermon and performance of the Buddha's life story.²¹ Thus, the effectiveness of any image in representing the Buddha rests on the proper execution of the consecration ceremony with appropriate monastic personnel. Provided that this is done, all consecrated Buddha images should theoretically be equivalent in terms of their value to devotees seeking to make merit. Yet certain Buddha images—such as the travelling images—have clearly been seen to be more worthy of offerings than others. Why is this so?

Many observers have pointed to the importance of a statue's resemblance to the Buddha. As A.B. Griswold remarked, "In order to inherit some fraction of the infinite power the Buddha himself possessed, an image *must* trace its lineage back to one of the legendary 'authentic' likenesses, such as the sandalwood figure carved at Kosala by artists who knew him personally."²²

The meaning of 'resemblance to the Buddha' may refer not only to physical appearance but also to certain correspondences with the Buddha. Other travelling images in our set are not specifically stated to look like the Buddha but do have a connection to him. The Sandalwood Buddha was said to have been created by the king of Kosala during the Buddha's lifetime. The White Crystal Buddha, long before its production, was prophesied by the Buddha to make the *sāsana* resplendent. However, the Emerald Buddha is not described in its chronicle as having an appearance like the original Buddha; it was sculpted by the gods for the monk Nāgasena, who lived centuries after the Buddha's death, and no mention is made of a resemblance or prophecy linking the image to the Buddha himself.

Of course, Buddha images are also connected to the Buddha through the relics installed in them. Nāgasena had seven relics of the

²¹ Donald K Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004) 230.

²² A.B. Griswold, *Dated Buddha Images of Northern Siam, Artibus Asiae Supplementum XVI* (Basel: Ascona, 1957) 17.

Buddha established in the Emerald Buddha. Likewise, the White Crystal Buddha contains five relics bestowed by the king of the gods. The Flaming image was carved from a stone on which the Buddha had sat while preaching.

However, in the Emerald Buddha chronicle, it is clearly stated that the image performed miracles and was venerated *before* the relics were installed. When the sculpting was finished, Nāgasena placed the statue on a throne inside of a beautiful image hall, and gods, *arahants*, the king and the people came from all directions to pay homage to the image. While the offerings were being presented, the statue performed miracles “as if it were alive” for seven days and seven nights during which gods and humans paid homage to it with an abundance of offerings, including thousands of umbrellas, flags and lotuses, with exclamations of joy and the playing of thousands of musical instruments such that “the earth was as if it was going to collapse with the sound of music and shouts of approval resounding.” After this, the relics were installed in the statue.²³

It is notable that in the Sihing Buddha chronicles, there is no indication of relics being associated with the statue at all. The image was at a third-hand remove from the Buddha: it was created by craftsmen who were told what the image looked like by kings and *arahants* based on their recollection of the image generated by the *nāga*. There is no mention of relics entering the statue during consecration. It would appear that while the installation of relics (or a claim of relics being installed) is quite common for Buddha images, the relics were not necessarily the main source of power or legitimacy of the image, at least based on the evidence in the image *tamnan*. Buddha statues were not merely vehicles for other kinds of relics.

The material of the sculpture is another source of the special power of images in our set. The Emerald Buddha was made from the radiant *Amorakot* jewel, which was a jewel with 750 jewels as an entourage and guarded by genies on the *Vipulla* mountain. It was brought down from the mountain by Indra, king of the gods. The White Crystal Buddha was made from a special jewel donated by Indra: it was the emblem which he wore on his head. The Flaming Buddha, as stated above, was made from a black stone which had

²³ EBSM 30-31. See also EBCN 16-17 and EBNJ 142.

provided a seat for the Buddha. The Sandalwood image was not made from any particularly scarce material, but the fragrant wood may have been seen to have special properties or associations. The Sihing, however, does not seem to be made from any special alloy, although it is stated in the chronicle that the metals were contributed by gods.

The association of certain materials with divinities may suggest a reason for the unusual power of some of the images. Robert Lingat observed that the Emerald Buddha and other statues were often viewed as being inhabited by guardian spirits. According to the Flaming Buddha image story, the Buddha during his lifetime came to a place near Ayutthaya and delivered a sermon while seated on a black rock. The rock then became an object of veneration for the local people until a ruler had it sculpted into five Buddha images.²⁴ Lingat suggests this story is an explanation for how a rock worshipped by local people as an animist spirit was changed into a Buddhist monument by a pious devotee of the *sāsana*. Likewise, the Emerald Buddha could perhaps have been made from some particularly sacred green stone.²⁵ Lingat is surely correct in describing the means by which some places and things associated with guardian spirits were integrated by early devotees into Buddhism. On the other hand, not all famous statues were created out of objects of animist worship. The Sihing, as well as the Pra Bang, another statue of the same period which is today an important image in Laos, are made from bronze alloy. Possibly these alloys were seen as being auspicious, but this is not indicated by the chronicles, which describe the alloys only generally. In fact the *tamnan* says that when the Sihing was at Ayutthaya, it was placed in a hall with many other bronze Buddha images and the people could not see how the Sihing was different from the other images.²⁶ It would, thus, be quite possible that the Sihing and other statues came to be viewed as powerful for reasons

²⁴ SKNJ 155-156.

²⁵ Robert Lingat, "Le Culte du Bouddha d'Émeraude", *Journal of the Siam Society* 27.1 (1934) 34-36.

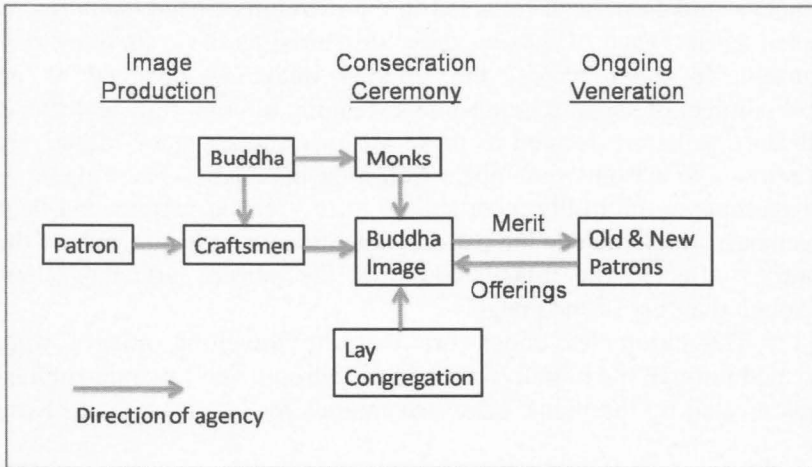
²⁶ SBSM 56-57. Later in the story, the Queen Mother of Kamphaeng Phet visited the hall of images in order to obtain the Sihing for her son, the King of Kamphaeng Phet. She was unfamiliar with the Sihing and so bribed the curator of the images to help her identify it (SBSM 58 and SBCN 37). This also suggests that it was not made of any obviously special material.

other than their materials and that the claim for divine contributors came *after* the statues were already famous.

Art as a “System of Action”

In his book *Art and Agency*, the British anthropologist Alfred Gell emphasized the importance of the social relationships created through the production, use and viewing of art objects. Art, he observed, is more than a system of aesthetics or symbols. Art objects are means by which people communicate and attempt to influence each other. As Gell stated, art is thus a “system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”²⁷

Agents and Patients in the Production, Consecration and Veneration of a Buddha image



Art as a system of action: this seems to be a highly appropriate way to think about Buddha images. Patrons are inspired to commission a craftsman to produce an image on various occasions, such as

²⁷ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 6.

celebrating a birthday or fulfilling a vow.²⁸ A craftsman is then hired to make the image. When the image is finished, the monks, the patron, and other members of the local community assemble to undertake a consecration ceremony. The Buddha is evoked by monks during the consecration. The patron and the temple's lay congregation have roles in the consecration ceremony so they also contribute their agency to the image. After its consecration, the image brings merit to the initial patron and enables him to achieve his goal. The image may continue to exert agency by drawing further patrons to venerate it. These new patrons may be moved to donate garlands of flowers, to become more faithful or to start a war to possess it. As these patrons are drawn to the image, they may inspire other patrons to follow them. Thus, a chain of agencies, involving patrons, the Buddha, craftsmen and monks, is generated.

This understanding of the chain of agencies generated by an art object seems to be well-reflected in the travelling-image *tamnan*. As noted earlier, each of these texts is structured as the recounting of a lineage. In other words, the Buddha image is depicted as an embodiment of social relationships extending through time and space. Because a patron decided to make an image, his agency effectively continued to act on worshippers well after his death. The travelling-image *tamnan* faithfully recorded the history of the patrons and their agencies, which include the patrons' intentions for the image, how the patrons affected the image, and how the patrons affected others through their use of the image.

The chronicles underscore that the travelling images were created through the initiative of specific patrons. The Emerald Buddha was created by the monk Nāgasena famous for his debate with King

²⁸ Aroonrut Wichienkeo compiled a list from various sources of reasons cited by Lan Na people for donating Buddha images. The reasons are related to: vows, politics, expressions of communal unity, propitiation of spirits, making of a last testament, birthday celebration, life prolongation, and monastery celebration. (Aroonrut Wichienkeo, "Buddha Images in Lan Na (Northern Thailand): A Study from Palm-leaf Texts and Inscriptions", *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia: Mentalities, Interpretations and Practices*, eds. François Lagarde and Paritta Chalermphow Koanantakool (Paris and Bangkok: École Française d'Extrême-Orient and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2006) 35-37.)

Milinda. The importance of this initial patron of the statue is emphasized by the fact that the first quarter of the Emerald Buddha chronicle is devoted to a narration of Nāgasena's biography, including his past lives. Interestingly, the culmination of this monk's achievements is presented not as his famous defeat of Milinda, which is in fact only very perfunctorily noted, but the creation of the Emerald Buddha. The author of the chronicle summarized the life of Nāgasena saying:

Nāgasena Thera, a person of great prestige, appeared to the whole world like the moon in the sky. He had destroyed darkness, that is, delusion, through illumination, that is, the powerful insight of the *thera*. He had them carve the Buddha image which appeared in the era of the *sāsana* and worshipped it his whole life until his attachments, that is desires, all bindings, ceased. He entered *parinibbāna* and through the *nibbāna* of the *dhātu* [components of the physical body], had no attachments remaining at all.²⁹

The Buddha image is here described as the result of Nāgasena's achievements as well as a catalyst for his further achievements. Nāgasena's agency caused the Emerald Buddha to be created; then, thanks to the merit-creating statue's agency, he was able to reach *nibbāna*. After Nāgasena, the lineage of further patrons is narrated; the themes of the image's attracting patrons of high merit and the benefits of venerating the image are carried through the rest of the text. A chain of agencies between image and patrons is described.

Another example also illustrates the significance of patrons. The author of the Sihing Buddha chronicle attributed the Sihing's powers to not only its association with the Buddha, but to the agency of its patrons also. While the image was being transported by boat across the sea from Lanka to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, the boat was destroyed in a storm. The Sihing Buddha tumbled into the ocean, but did not sink and floated on the surface of the waves. The author of the chronicle noted that this raises the question of how the presumably heavy object managed to float. The author concluded that this miracle

²⁹ EBSM 35.

was neither due to the power of the image alone nor due to the power of helpful gods: "the Buddha image Sihing has no life but has power through the strength of the wish of the arahants, the strength of the wish of the Lankan king and the strength of the wish of the Fully Enlightened One. It is not the image itself alone."³⁰ Thus, the image was miraculously propelled by the desires of lay and monastic supporters and the Buddha.

Another example highlights the way images could literally embody the agency of the people who produced them. As noted earlier, when the Sihing Buddha image was in the process of being cast, one of the Lankan kings struck a craftsman, injuring the man's finger; when the casting was finished, the Sihing was found to have one defective finger.³¹ Here the agencies of the craftsman and the king left their mark on the image. A similar story about an image with a 'defect' can provide a contrasting study of agencies. The Mahāmuni Buddha image is a famous statue in Myanmar which, according to local chronicles, was produced in the Arakan region during the Buddha's lifetime. The local texts recount that after the Mahāmuni was cast, the Buddha warned that in one of his previous lives he had broken the thigh-bone of a gardener and had cut a piece of flesh from the back of a prince, and that the karmic consequences of these two acts would be suffered by the Mahāmuni statue.³² In this story, it is the agency of the Buddha which was reflected in the image. The Sihing story on the other hand linked the defect to the agency of patrons.

Likewise, the Sihing is depicted as performing miracles not of its own initiative, but when requested to do so by patrons. As noted above, the chronicle author said that the miraculous power of the Sihing arose in part from the wish of a Lankan king. The wish was made when the king was about to invite the image to board the ship to go from Lanka to the mainland. The king expressed a wish that the image would go to *Jambudīpa* to help King Ruang of Sukhothai. He

³⁰ SBSM 46. See also SBCN 22.

³¹ SBSM 38 and SBCN 14-15.

³² Emil Forchhammer, *Report on the Antiquities of Arakan* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1892) 4-5.

also asked the image to perform miracles for the people there.³³ Later, after the Sihing arrived in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, the king of that city requested the image to perform miracles to benefit the people; the Sihing then floated up into the sky emitting radiance. Ruang requested the image to come down and sit on his head, and it did so.³⁴ The image's miraculous actions occurred because of the initiative or agency of patrons.

It should be noted that the chronicles present the statues as not only the creations of certain individuals, but as projects involving collective efforts. Each image is shown to be the outcome of group cooperation, in which monks and a variety of patrons, including kings, nobles, commoners and gods, make contributions. For instance, the White Crystal Buddha was made when King Rāma of Lopburi desired to make an image out of crystal. The head of the *saṅgha*, Kumārakassapa, lent a hand and obtained a precious stone from the king of the gods, Indra. The king had his officials and the population prepare a jewelled pavilion and a festival with music and dance. The stone was sculpted into a Buddha image by the gods Vishnu and Vissakamma with the help of humans. When the image was finished, the *devas* (gods) washed and purified it. Indra then presented five relics of the Buddha, which inserted themselves into the image through an invocation by *arahants*.³⁵ The process of production of each statue and the different people who contributed to its making are significant parts of the travelling-image chronicles, emphasizing the importance of patronage and the collaborative effort needed among craftsmen, monks, and lay devotees in order to make a Buddha image. The image embodies a collectivization of agencies.

It is notable that the gods are said to be involved in the making of some of the travelling images. The different types of deities (Indra, Vishnu, *asuras*, *nāgas*, *garuḍas*, etc.) and their roles in the production and consecration of an image are usually carefully noted by the chronicle authors. This begs the question of whether the powers of these statues derive from the gods. In the Sihing chronicle, the

³³ SBSM 44-45.

³⁴ SBSM 50-52 and SBCN 27-28.

³⁵ CBCN 6-9.

chronicle's author remarks of the significance of the contributions of its different makers:

The Sihing Buddha image had power and prestige. Whichever countries it went to, there were people who worshipped it in those countries. That Buddha image, without life and unable to speak, why then did it receive an inestimable amount of offerings, the highest homage? If there was an inquirer raising this question, the person answering must reply like this: that Buddha image is without life and unable to speak, yet our Blessed One gave it for the *sāsana*. Another point is that the Sihing Buddha image, the arahants built it and the gods having Indra and Brahma at their head assembled together to make it. Because of this, through their power, it received enormous homage.³⁶

Although this quotation might be interpreted to mean that the *arahants* and gods gifted the statue with their own special powers, it seems very unlikely that this would be a correct understanding; after all, as we saw earlier, the chronicle author had clearly pointed out that the statue performed miracles due to the wishes of patrons and the Buddha and not due to magical powers or the help of deities. Hence, the chronicle author is, in this quotation, referring to the importance of the *intentions* of the patrons to the statue's power. An important message of the chronicle is that the production of a Buddha image is a worthy, meritorious act, and this message is given emphasis by the fact that those who made the Sihing image are said here to be *arahants* and deities, devotees of superior merit. Note also that in the quotation, the Buddha is cited as the ultimate origin for this statue but not the only source of its power; the devotees are referenced specifically. What the quotation emphasizes is the importance of the collectivization of agencies of the Buddha and lay and monastic supporters in the Buddha image. Also, the participation of deities is a reminder that the Buddha is for all beings the highest object of homage.

³⁶ SBSM 71. See also SBCN 51.

Images Create Not Only a Network of Patrons, But Also of Places

The lineage of patrons in the chronicles is bound to a lineage of places. Various locations are connected by each travelling image. For example, the White Crystal Buddha was produced in Chiang Mai and travelled to Lopburi and Hariphunchai before coming back to Chiang Mai, then being sent to Ayutthaya and finally returning to Chiang Mai. The Emerald Buddha linked India, Sri Lanka, Ayutthaya, Angkor and cities in northern and central Thailand. A lineage of places, linked to the lineage of patrons, was defined, and this lineage of places made known the important place of Lan Na cities at certain times in the Buddhist Era in the landscape of the Buddhist world. The people in each city where a travelling image was established were positioned as the heirs of the Buddhist heroes of the past and as the leaders of the future prosperity of the Buddhist world.

Conclusion

The structure of the travelling-image chronicles reflects the agencies of monks, the Buddha and lay patrons which acted upon, and were in turn acted upon, by a particular Buddha image. The association of images with famous figures and places was not just a symbolic pairing, but indeed was itself depicted as the fuel which gave each image its special power. This understanding of a Buddha image, as not being merely symbolic, but as having an active orientation and its own biography, is perhaps the underlying rationale for worshippers' desire to produce images for many different occasions: to commemorate vows, to celebrate birthdays, to present a final testament. A patron sponsors an image because he wants the image to do something in the future—to be an agent—and not only to be a memorial or souvenir of the Buddha. Thai people of Lan Na understood well the capacity of images to be more than just iconographic illustrations, productions of merit or political symbols.

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