

Literature in Gold: The Significance of the Use of the Rama Story on Thai Lacquerware Cabinets¹

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Abstract

The Rama story, known as the *Ramayana* in India, its place of origin, and *Ramakien* in a Thai context, is a literary work that has had a deep and complex association with Thai identified societies for centuries. The Rama narrative has been widely represented in Thai culture in the form of literature, performance and visual depiction.

Through a study of the Rama story as used on black and gold lacquerware cabinets designed to hold the sacred Buddhist scriptures, one of the many forms of depiction in a Thai context of this narrative, this study found that the Rama story appears to have been used in a symbolic manner on the lacquerware cabinets to create the presence of Rama (Phra Ram). This is in order to convey the message of Rama acting, either in association or conjunction with the king, as the protector and guardian of Buddhism. Along with this symbolic meaning, one could also read a didactic message in the depictions of the Thai Rama story, that being to convey a lesson of the triumph of good/truth over evil/ignorance.

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Introduction

The Rama story is an important piece of world literature that is known in every culture and society in South and Southeast Asia. Known as the *Ramayana* in India, its place of origin, and *Ramakien* in a Thai context, this literary work has had a long and deep association with Thai identified societies for centuries. The Rama narrative is widely represented in Thai culture, being both a reflection of and a reflection on traditional Thai society in the form of literature, performance and visual depiction.

Among the many forms of such depictions, along with Buddhist temple paintings and sculpture, are black and gold lacquerware cabinets designed to hold the sacred Buddhist scriptures. These cabinets, a unique form of Thai art, were primarily created in the late Ayutthaya and, then most prominently, in the early Rattanakosin periods. While the Rama story in Thai has been well studied and research,³ the application of this narrative in the form of depiction on lacquerware cabinets has been less studied, particularly with respect to the role and purpose of using the Rama story in such a setting.

Notwithstanding its “Hindu-identified” nature, the Rama story has been used extensively in many clearly Buddhist settings. Why this is so, we can never be exactly sure since the artisans and sponsors did not leave any records of how or why they chose any particular element to decorate their work. However, if we look at certain factors and circumstances, a reasoned hypothesis can be formulated. In order to do that, we first need to look at the close association between this tale and Buddhism, and then at the association between the ruling monarch in Thai society, Buddhism and the Rama story in Thai, particularly the lead character, Phra Ram.

The Association of *Rama I Ramakien* with Buddhism

The question of whether the rendition of the Rama story in Thai sponsored by King Rama I (hereafter, *Rama I Ramakien*), or the Rama

³ The number of research works is too numerous to list here, but examples in English include Srisurang, “The Influence of the Ramayana on Thai Culture”; Mattani, “An Analysis of the Path of Ramayana, Parts 1 and 2”.

story in a Thai context in general, can be considered a Buddhist or non-Buddhist text is not easy to answer. Unlike in India, where most of the Rama related texts are considered to be “religious” in nature, and perhaps even “sacred”,⁴ the Rama story in a Thai context does not have any such clear associations. However, given the fact that Buddhism, particularly Theravada Buddhism, has been so thoroughly infused into Thai culture and society, it is not surprising that *Rama I Ramakien* has taken on many features associated with Buddhism.

As with many aspects of Thai culture, tradition and customs, including many pieces of Thai classical literature, there has been considerable adoption, absorption and adaptation of outside elements, both religious and otherwise. This is clearly attested by the presence of many Hindu identified deities in sacred Buddhist settings, such as Buddhist temples, with Phra Narai (Vishnu) and Phra In (Indra) being the most prominent examples. Justin McDaniel notes: “Hindu images in Thailand are part of Buddhist culture...Buddhist shrines in Thailand commonly mix Hindu and Buddhist deities...”⁵

Rama I Ramakien is, for the most part, a description of one of the classic Hindu incarnations of Phra Narai as Phra Ram to overcome some trouble in the world, similar to his other incarnations in Hindu mythology. The story includes prominent roles for the other important and familiar gods in the traditional Hindu pantheon: Phra Isuan (Shiva), Phra Phrom (Brahma), Phra In and Phra Athit (Surya). As well, *Rama I Ramakien* is full of Hindu associated elements, such as *rishi*, brahmins, other major and minor Hindu deities, and other incarnations of Phra Narai. There is no overt mention of the Buddha, Buddhism, or other elements of Buddhism. In fact, the composers of the text appear to have gone out of their way to avoid explicit references to Buddhism.

However, Rama I was a devout Buddhist and undertook many important activities to foster and uphold Buddhism, including restoring the *Tripitaka*, the Buddhist canon, and *Traiphum*, the Buddhist cosmological text. Furthermore, while the identities of the

⁴ Goldman, “A Tale for All Regions”, 14.

⁵ McDaniel, “This Hindu holy man is a Thai Buddhist”, 317-318.

authors of *Rama I Ramakien* are not known, it is likely most were devout Buddhist as well, although some court Brahmins may have participated. Accordingly, it is not surprising that certain elements of Buddhism have seeped into the text of *Rama I Ramakien*. As Mattani Rattani writes: “Given the strong religious philosophical aspect of Valmiki’s Ramayana, particularly being Vishnuism, if the local people were not followers of Hindu Vishnuism, then they were less likely to adopt the written texts, but rather to accept oral renditions that would be adapted to suit the local religious beliefs...,”⁶ those local beliefs in Thailand being Theravada Buddhism.

Phra In and *Rama I Ramakien*

Phra In has a long association with Thai identified societies, appearing in many ancient literary works.⁷ In traditional Thai cosmology, Phra In is considered the most important deity, residing in Tavatimsa Heaven atop Mount Sumaru, the center of the universe, where he sometimes preaches the Dhamma.⁸ In Thai Buddhism, he is the primary supporter of the Buddha in his last life, as well as in his previous lives as a Bodhisattva, helping him in times of need.⁹

In *Rama I Ramakien*, Phra In has a prominent role, similar to his role in traditional *jātaka* tales. He appears in about 20% of the scenes, far more than any of the other deities, such as Phra Isuan or Phra Phrom. He acts in a wide variety of roles: as a facilitator presiding over ceremonies, such as Phra Ram’s wedding and coronation, or acting as witness and attester of the truth; as a messenger, including waking up Phra Narai when it is time for him to incarnate as Phra Ram; as a saviour, primarily helping Phra Ram or Nang Sida in times of need; as a creator overseeing the formation of the city of Ayuthaya, as well as other cities; and even in his traditional Indian role as a fighter doing battle with, and losing to, Intharachit, the son of the principal antagonist, Thotsakan. Sathiankoset in *Upakon Ramakien* notes:

⁶ Mattani, “An Analysis of the Path of Ramayana, Part 1”, 119.

⁷ Kuapan, “The God Indra in Sanskrit, Pali and Thai Literature”, Abstract.

⁸ Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 217-238.

⁹ See: Santi, *Phra In*.

“...in *Ramakien* there are some unique aspects. For example, when some serious incident occurs in various episodes, Phra In will come down to help...it seems this takes and incorporates Buddhist concepts that have permeated the thoughts.”¹⁰ However, the composers of *Rama I Ramakien* appear to have recognized the Hindu nature of the story and retained the traditional Hindu hierarchy of deities, with Phra Isuan at the top, Phra Narai and Phra Phrom next, and Phra In in a lower position.

Rama as a Bodhisattva

With respect to many renderings of the Rama story, there is evidence that there is a more overt association of the text with Buddhism. Similar to certain regional and local tellings of the Rama story, including the Khmer and versions in the north and northeast part of Thailand, in earlier renditions of the Rama epic in Ayutthaya, Phra Ram was recognized as a Bodhisattva. In the Ayutthayan texts, Phra Ram is referred to as “Phra Phutta Phong [พระพุทฺธพงค์]”,¹¹ which might be roughly translated as “one in the lineage of the Buddha”.

Furthermore, U Aung Htin, in describing Burmese drama, states:

Rama was taken to be a Future-Buddha...therefore, whereas the Hindu *Ramayana* was a religious epic, the Siamese play became merely a dramatized *Jataka* Birth Story...when the Burmese conquered Siam in 1767, they were able to take the play [the Rama epic] with them for various reasons. The play was to both nations a *Jataka* story.¹²

In Myanmar, there are some renditions of the Rama story today in which Rama is considered a Bodhisattva, which most likely is a legacy of certain texts brought back from Ayutthaya, thus further indicating that the Rama story with elements of a *jātaka* and Rama as the Bodhisattva was widespread during the Ayutthaya period. Additional evidence of the more overt Buddhist nature of the Rama

¹⁰ Sathiankoset, *Upakon Ramakien*, 151.

¹¹ Sujit, *A Ramakien Dance Drama from the Ayutthaya Period*, 23.

¹² Htin, *Burmese Drama*, 37, 43. In this regard, the *Dasaratha Jataka* is also noted.

story during the pre-Rama I period is the King Taksin version, of which Prince Dhani says that, while the poetry is crude, is noteworthy for its “frequent allusions to Buddhist metaphysics in the dialogues.”¹³

A Hindu-Identified Narrative with Buddhist Tendencies

Therefore, we can see that *Rama I Ramakien*, while being on its surface a Hindu-identified story, has many connections with Buddhism, including not only the prominent inclusion of Phra In, but also the use of the Rama story in sacred Buddhist settings, such as temples and on lacquerware cabinets. As Forest McGill and Pattaratorn Chirapravati state: “...the legends of Rama could be interpreted in Buddhist terms and seen as occurring in a Buddhist context... .”¹⁴ Accordingly, one might venture to classify this text as a “Hindu-identified narrative with Buddhist tendencies”.

The Association between Phra Ram, the King and Buddhism

Having established that the Rama story, particularly *Rama I Ramakien*, is a tale thoroughly infused with Buddhist elements, the implication of this in relation to the role of the king in Thai society will now be explored. This necessitates an understanding of the role of the king with respect to Buddhism, the king in his divine role, as well as the relationship between the king, Phra Ram and the Rama story.

It has long been established that the Thai kings could be looked at to carry out a number of roles in fulfilling their duties as the ruling monarch. Three of these can be identified as *Devaraja*, *Buddharaja* and *Dhammaraja*.

***Devaraja* – The King as Identified with Phra Narai**

The recognition of kings in South and Southeast Asia as having divine origins, particularly being associated with the Hindu deities, either by comparison with or as an incarnation of, has been well established. Robert Goldman makes this clear by stating generally

¹³ Dhani, “Review of Books-The Ramakien of King of Thonburi”, 83.

¹⁴ McGill, *The Kingdom of Siam*, 166.

an Asian (Hindu) ruler is “a *bhumyam devah*, a god on earth – who may be viewed as a composite of the *lokapalas*, the divine world guardians... ”¹⁵

In the Thai context, the aspect of the king’s divinity is integrally connected with the Brahman influenced coronation ceremony for kings where the principal gods, Phra Isuan and Phra Narai, are invited “to animate” the new king.¹⁶ As part of the coronation ceremony, the eight weapons of sovereignty are presented to the king, including “Trident and Discus... attributes of the gods Siva and Visnu, and symbolize the king’s identification with those gods.”¹⁷

Phra Narai incarnates, including his incarnation as Phra Ram, to bring peace and order to the universe and protect the people from evil and injustice. This is the traditional role of the Thai king as well, and thus the connection between Phra Narai and the king is clear. Suchit Wongthet explains one way of seeing how this concept was well established in the early Ayutthaya period is by examining the use of royal ceremonial barges in the form of a naga for the funeral ceremonies of the kings: “Accordingly, when the ruler passed away, a naga boat would be built to carry the body along the river, similar to Phra Narai sleeping on the back of Anantanakkarat.”¹⁸ Furthermore, in the current Rattanakosin period, the very name of the current ruling dynasty, Chakri [จักรี], comes from a reference to one of the attributes of Phra Narai (Vishnu), the discus (*chakra* – จักร), and shows another connection between the kings and Phra Narai.

***Buddharaja* – The King as Bodhisattva**

The Thai kings have frequently been recognized, or even self-identified, as a Bodhisattva, a superior person who has accumulated enough merit to be not only the supreme ruler, but also a buddha to be. This idea of the king as a Bodhisattva, as a descendant of the Buddha,

¹⁵ Goldman, “A Tale for All Regions, A Text for All Seasons”, 17.

¹⁶ Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, 31; Reynolds, “Sacral Kingship and National Development”, 101.

¹⁷ Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, 106.

¹⁸ Suchit, *Royal Barges and Barge Processions, Where Do They Come From?*, 42-44.

or even as the Buddha himself, has a long history. The beginning of the chronicles of Jeremias Van Vliet, a Dutch merchant in the Ayutthaya period, entitled “The Short History of Occurrences in the Past and the Succession of the Kings of Siam as Far as is Known from the Old Histories”,¹⁹ recounts how the people believed that the first king of Ayutthaya was the Buddha and, accordingly “...the Siamese kings are not addressed with anything less than with the name of Phra Phuttha Chao.” He explains how the people believed that the first king made the law and established the religion and how the subsequent kings were accepted as successors of the Buddha.²⁰

Rama I is a prime example of a ruler who took his duty to foster and protect Buddhism to heart. As previously mentioned, he was a devout Buddhist and undertook many important activities to uphold Buddhism, which he considered to be in decline when he assumed the throne. Baker and Pasuk make this clear when they state:

The new Bangkok monarchy was celebrated as defenders of Buddhism against the destruction (though Buddhist) Burmese... The king thus had not only to build and protect Buddhism from enemies, but also to undertake other ‘royal duties.’ Most of all, he had to prevent the decline and eventual eclipse of Buddhism as foretold in the texts, especially by periodically purifying the Sangha, and making corrected recensions of the texts.²¹

As further evidence of how the Thai kings during the early Rattanakosin period embraced this role, both Rama I and Rama III were very active sponsors of the building and restoration of many important temples, including Wat Phra Kaeo, Wat Phra Chetuphon and Wat Suthat. In this regard, it should be noted that these temples incorporate many depictions and representations of the Rama story into their design and adornment.

¹⁹ Baker, *Van Vliet's Siam*, 195-244.

²⁰ Baker, *Van Vliet's Siam*, 197.

²¹ Baker, *A History of Thailand*, 32.

Dhammaraja – The King as Protector and Guardian of Buddhism

It has long been established that the rulers of Thai-identified territories during the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin periods have been looked at and expected to govern with dhamma. They have been expected to both propagate and protect Buddhism as part of their role and duty as the ruler. The ruling monarch has typically been the primary force in ensuring that Buddhism flourishes in the areas under his command. In addition to the propagation of Buddhism, the king has been tasked with preserving the religion from evil forces bent on making the faith impure or from decay from within.²² The activities he might engage in include building monasteries, sponsoring the production of Buddhist texts, and overseeing the proper conduct of monks. David Wyatt states when discussing the efforts of Rama I in the early part of his reign:

As the patron and protector of Buddhism in his kingdom, the king considered it his responsibility to provide a framework, legal and institutional, in which monks could fulfill their responsibilities in order that the moral decay of the age might be arrested and Buddhism might again flourish...Particularly striking are the parallels drawn between the Bodhisatta – the King, the Great Elect – and King Rama I. Both arose out of troubled times in order to create moral order.²³

Furthermore, as part of the royal coronation ceremony, the king makes a pledge to protect the religion. H. G. Quaritch Wales, in describing the coronation ceremony of Rama VII, noting that this ceremony was likely very similar to those of earlier kings, explains that at one point:

The Pandit for this point advanced to the foot of the throne, and having made due obeisance addressed the King in Pali to the following effect – ‘...may he remain on earth further protecting the kingdom, as well as her Buddhist Religion and her people.’²⁴

²² See Reynolds, “Sacral Kingship and National Development”, 100-101.

²³ Wyatt, “The ‘Subtle Revolution’ of King Rama I of Siam”, 23, 26.

²⁴ Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, 78-79. Also, Baker and Pasuk, in their translation of the Palace Law of Ayutthaya, state: “The ceremony today is based on a form recreated by King Rama I from memories of the practice in late Ayutthaya.” Baker, *The Palace Law of Ayutthaya and the Thammasat*, 70.

Reference to these three principals, *Devaraja*, *Buddharaja*, and *Dhammaraja*, can all be found in the Invocation to *Rama I Ramakien*, emphasizing and affirming the application and recognition of Rama I in these roles:

- *Devaraja*: "...like Phra Narai."²⁵
- *Buddharaja*: "Cultivating the path of a śraddhādhika bodhisattva, one predominate in faith, Having the intention to be the omniscient one."²⁶
- *Dhammaraja*: "His Majesty is the defender of the faith."²⁷

These references, so clearly associated with the text of the Rama story, as well as many other elements, can lead to the identification of the Thai king with a fourth element – *Ramaraja*.

***Ramaraja* – The King as Identified with Phra Ram**

The connection between Phra Narai and the king in a Thai context clearly highlights the association between the Thai kings and Phra Ram, the incarnation of Phra Narai. Srisurang Poolthupya, a well-known scholar of Thai culture, makes the observation regarding this concept by stating: "In addition to Buddhist virtues, the king should strive to make his rule resemble *Ramarajya* or the ideal reign of Rama regarded as the golden age... the king is divine like Rama in the *Ramayana* and the *Ramakien* and he must strive to be as good as Rama."²⁸

This idea can be seen both symbolically and through the various pieces of literature that have been composed over the years. One of most obvious symbolic connections has been with the selection of names which incorporate some reference to Rama or Phra Narai as used by the royal rulers of the Thai-identified kingdoms, from the most famous of the rulers of the Sukhothai realm, King *Ramkamhaeng*, to the monarchs of the recent Chakri reign, most of whom incorporate the word "Ramathibodi" in their names.

²⁵ *Ramakien of Rama I*, Vol 1, 1: "ปางพระนารายณ์".

²⁶ *Ramakien of Rama I*, Vol 1, 1: "ศรัทธาธิกูป่าเพ็ญ, ปองเป็นพระสรรเพชญ์".

²⁷ *Ramakien of Rama I*, Vol 1, 1: "พระองค์เป็นศาสนูปถัมภก".

²⁸ Srisurang, "The Influence of the *Ramayana* on Thai Culture", 271.

Another interesting connection between the king and Phra Ram can be seen in the tradition of the royal barges that was previously mentioned. Given the many barges with head adornment representing the simian army that protected Phra Ram, the symbolism of the king riding in such a procession is evident.²⁹ In this regard, it might be noted that Rama I was quite active in restoring and establishing the tradition of many of the vessels that we see today.

With respect to *Rama I Ramakien*, John Cadet described this text as the “scepter”, that is the royal imperial power or authority of the Thai monarchy.³⁰ As well, many have pointed out the portrayal of Phra Ram as the ideal king, a ruler who upholds the ten kingly virtues, [ทศพิชราชธรรม], essentially making Phra Ram and Rama I, the sponsor of this rendition of the Rama story, and subsequent rulers, one and the same.

Another factor that should be taken into account when analyzing the relationship between the king and Phra Ram is the fact that the Rama story has been generally considered as a part of the king’s royal regalia. In Thai this is usually referred to as “*rachupaphok* [ราชูปโภค] or *rachopaphok* [ราชโภค]”, literally, “equipment of the monarch”.³¹ This is evident from an early period when performances of the Rama story were only undertaken in the royal palace. This is also evident, particularly from the time of Rama I, by versions of the Rama story in Thai being almost exclusively royal compositions, *phra ratcha niphon* [พระราชนิพนธ์]. Other than some libretto for performance, all the major texts, other than regional and local versions, of the Rama story were written directly by or under the sponsorship of the ruling monarch. The Rama story was considered generally intimately associated with the monarch, making use of the text a form of high art, as well as something venerable and auspicious, further highlighting the connection between the king and Phra Ram.

²⁹ See Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, 113.

³⁰ Cadet, *The Ramakien*, 23.

³¹ *Dictionary of the Royal Institute*, 951: “เครื่องใช้สอยของพระราชธา”.

Phra Ram as the Guardian of Buddhism

While the role of the Hindu deities with respect to Buddhism is varied, what is certainly clear is their role as guardians and protectors. Dietrick Seckel, when discussing deities in Buddhist art, notes:

Ancient Indian deities were taken over by Buddhists, who entrusted them with various functions: to bring good fortune and aid in times of distress, to promote good and ward off evil, to ensure due order in the natural and moral world, and above all to protect and worship the Buddha, his doctrine and the Buddhist community.³²

In the Thai context, it has been noted that “this situation came about from the belief that Hindu deities have great power and sacred force giving them the necessary attributes to act as guardians defending against evil elements.”³³ This can be seen in the role of Phra In, as discussed above, as well as the clear role of the relationship between Phra Narai and the king.

The principal reason for Phra Narai to incarnate as Phra Ram, as well as in his many other incarnations, is to bring peace and order to the world and vanquish the evil beings causing trouble. In this regard, the role of Phra Narai as a guardian and protector is quite well established, and can be traced to the origin of Vishnu in Indian Hinduism. One of Vishnu’s 1,000 names, and the one that forms the basis of his popular name in Thai, is Narayana, of which one meaning is “...he who is the abode of ‘*nār* (= ether)’, i.e., the whole universe’s shelter.”³⁴ Thus, Phra Narai in his many incarnations is always looked upon as the great preserver of the world, protecting all living beings from wickedness.

As seen in the water oath ceremony established in the early Ayutthaya period, Phra Ram is called upon to be a witness and thus give legitimacy and protection to those taking the oath.³⁵ As well, there

³² Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 243-244.

³³ Arunsak, *Hindu Deities, Guardians of Buddhist Sites*, 15.

³⁴ “Vishnu sahasranama”.

³⁵ Plueang Na Nakhon, *The History of Thai Literature for Students*, 54-55: “สืบหน้าเจ้า อสุรชวยดู / พระรามพระลักษมณ์มณฑลชวักออร”.

have been many pieces of literature from many periods that stress the power and, thus protective quality, of Phra Ram; for examples *Verses in Homage to King Rama I*, *Nipphan Wang Na*, and *Nirat Verses of Chachoengsao*.³⁶

Celestial Door Guardians

A possible further clue to the role of Phra Ram as a guardian and protector lies in the use of “celestial door guardians”, called *thep thewaraban* [เทพทวารบาล] in Thai. Images of celestial door guardians have been used since the early Ayutthaya period, frequently appearing in many forms and manner on the outside and sometimes inside the doors and windows of Buddhist structures. Helmut Loofs-Wissowa, describing the development of door guardians from the early periods, noted: “Thus, door-guardians were guarding something very important and very precious. Not unlike the later development in Buddhism, where they were supposed to guard the Buddha Himself, dvarapala were thought in Hinduism to guard nothing less than a divinity.”³⁷

The Rama story, in some form or another, has been used as the basis for the depiction of many celestial door guardians on the windows and doors of numerous temples, including Wat Phra Kaeo, Wat Suthat, Wat Phra Chetuphon, Wat Bowonsatansuttawat, Wat Pho Bang O, Wat Kaeo Phichit, and Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. Wat Suthat is particularly interesting in the use of both celestial door guardians on the inside of the doors and windows of the *ubosot*, mainly taken from the many incarnations of Phra Narai, as well as the placement of *phap chap* images³⁸ from the Rama story above the windows: “These figures serve the purpose as guardians of the temple, similar to those in the wihan.”³⁹

³⁶ Chamniwohan, *Verses in Homage to King Rama I*; “*Nipphan Wang Na*”; “*Nirat Verses of Chachoengsao*”.

³⁷ Loofs-Wissowa, “Reflections on Door-Guardians”, 331.

³⁸ *Phap chap* are depictions of stylized hand-to-hand combat that often represent dance poses. See Buntuean, *Paintings of Ramakien at Wat Suthat*, 64.

³⁹ Phiraphat, *The Architectural Study of Wat Suthat Thepwararam*, 81: “ทำหน้าที่ที่เป็นเทพผู้พิทักษ์รักษาพระอาราม คล้ายกับการเขียนภาพหลังบานหน้าต่างของพระวิหารหลวง เช่นกัน.”

Similar to the celestial door guardians on the inside of windows and doors of temples, the placement of statues at the gates to the Buddhist temples can be considered to have equivalent meaning and purpose. Seckel notes the origin of these figures, called *Dvārapāla*, from ancient India and the Far East having been derived from the Indian *yaksa* and “...is the protector of the Buddha, of his sanctuary and his doctrine... [that] ...stand in pairs to the left and right of the entrance to a temple.”⁴⁰ This would appear to be the origin of the placement of such characters from the Rama story in Thai Buddhist temples.

Given the similarity between the doors on the cabinets and doors on a temple, and the sacred nature of what was contained inside the cabinets, that is the Buddhist canon, the concept of door guardians was adopted for use on the lacquerware cabinets, appearing on about 10% of the cabinets. One could say that these celestial door guardians were included on the cabinets in order to act as guardians of the sacred scriptures inside the cabinets, and by analogy, to guard and protect the Buddha and Buddhism. In this regard, the image of Phra Ram in the form of celestial door guardian appears on nine cabinets in the National Library Collection

Therefore, to the extent that the Thai king undertakes his role as *Ramaraja* being closely identified with Phra Ram, then Phra Ram would conversely also be closely identified with the Thai king, including his role to guard and protect Buddhism. Accordingly, this leads one to conclude that Phra Ram, representing the ruling monarch or vice versa, as well as in his general role as guardian and protector, would also be considered a protector or guardian of Buddhism.

The Association between Phra Ram as the Protector of Buddhism and Depictions of the Rama Story

To answer the question of why depictions of the Rama story were used on the lacquerware cabinets we must first look at some of the theories as to the meaning and purpose of classical Thai painting

⁴⁰ Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 246.

and the use of images in sacred settings. Combining these theories and views with the above analysis of the association of the king with Phra Ram will help support the hypothesis of Phra Ram as the protector and guardian of Buddhism.

While there is certainly a decorative aspect to the use of images to adorn walls and spaces, this does not help explain the choice of subject matter used in various settings. Accordingly, other purposes for the use of specific depictions must exist. These purposes can generally be classified as either being for didactic purposes or for their symbolic function. While the didactic purpose of mural paintings and other depictions has been well discussed and generally exposed,⁴¹ the symbolic function has been less explored. Neperud and Stuhr, in a study of Native American art, note that “traditional visual cultural art forms hold social, ceremonial, or spiritual symbolic significances... .”⁴² This concept can certainly be applied to classical Thai painting as well.

Robert Brown, an eminent art historian, analyzed a number of Buddhist monuments from India, Indonesia and Thailand and concluded that in many cases the use of depictions and images was not intended for decorative or didactic reasons: “these visual images...are not present on the monuments to tell stories at all, but are there with an iconic function.” He concluded that the placement and organization of the depictions, mainly images of *jātaka* tales, were there “... functioning within the context of the monument as a whole and with particular non-narrative roles defined by their location and uses.”⁴³ He notes how many of the depictions could not readily be seen by the regular viewer, and even if they could be viewed, there is often such a lack of narrative content that they could not possibly be understood by anyone who did not already have an intimate knowledge of the story, “...in other words, no one could look at the images and sit down and

⁴¹ See Piriya, *Buddhist Art of Thailand*, 406; Ringis, *Thai Temples and Temple Murals*, 87; Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals*, 1-4.

⁴² Neperud, “Cross-Cultural Valuing of Wisconsin Indian Art by Indians and Non-Indians”, 250. In this regard, the framework espoused by Neperud and Stuhr was used in a paper presented by Ampai Tiranasar entitled “Thai Traditional Art and Art Education”. Ampai, “Thai Traditional Art and Art Education”.

⁴³ Brown, “Narrative as Icon”, 65.

write a story that would be close to the actual word text.”⁴⁴ This would mean that the viewer did not need to be “taught” the story or moral lesson since they already knew it, thereby making the didactic function of the depictions less relevant.

Brown goes on to discuss the concept of the manifestation of a deity in the Indian Hindu sense and applies that idea to the function of the images to manifest the Buddha, that is to make him readily apparent to the viewer. He explains: “They certainly refer or relate to stories, but their recognition by the worshiper is not to allow them to be read but to make the monument meaningful by clearly manifesting the Buddha.”⁴⁵

This symbolic use of narrative images in Buddhist settings is echoed by Charlotte Galloway in a detailed study of the Buddhist narrative imagery at Pagan in Myanmar. She also notes the location and setting of many of the carved reliefs in high places or where there is insufficient light to see them, concluding: “In this position the Jatakas became symbols of the merit-making process rather than being objects of close study.”⁴⁶

The eminent Thai art historian and scholar, Jean Boisselier, provided a conceptual framework for analyzing classical Thai painting in his seminal work, *Thai Painting*. Boisselier espouses the opinion that essentially all classical Thai painting, of which he unequivocally includes lacquerware, rather than being merely decorative, has two primary purposes. One is didactic to teach moral lessons, mostly of a Buddhist nature, and the other is symbolic, which he describes as including “...an expression of Buddhist apologetics and worship, but above all it is symbolic,” that is, expressions of a formal defense or justification of Buddhism. He goes on to state: “Thai painting never lacks deliberation; nothing is depicted without a profound reason.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Brown, “Narrative as Icon”, 98.

⁴⁵ Brown, “Narrative as Icon”, 77.

⁴⁶ Galloway, “Buddhist Narrative Imagery during the Eleventh Century at Pagan, Burma”, 166.

⁴⁷ Boisselier, *Thai Painting*, 19; 23.

Ramakien – The Symbolic Element

This profound reason espoused by Boisselier can be understood if we combine Brown's analytical framework, as described above, with the concept of Phra Ram as the guardian and protector of Buddhism. By doing so, we can clearly see a symbolic function for the use of the Rama story on the lacquerware cabinets. First, while the placement of the images on the cabinets does not make them difficult to see, other than perhaps those on the back of the cabinet, one might wonder whether the cabinets were kept in a place that was readily accessible to the general viewer. It seems likely that, to the extent they were used to keep sacred manuscripts and other precious items, they would have been kept in separate areas with limited access, such as a *ho trai* or manuscript library, or perhaps in a senior monk's quarters. Second, the level of knowledge of the Rama story was likely very high given the widespread dissemination of the story in Thai society. Most people would have been intimately knowledgeable of the story, and would not have "learned" anything by viewing the images on the cabinets. Third, while some of the depictions have fairly complete narrative detail as might be found on a mural painting, a large number of the images have limited narrative content, very often just a *phap chap* image or single character. Given the knowledge of the story, such images would have been sufficient to identify the presence of the Rama story, and thereby, the presence of Phra Ram.

Therefore, applying Brown's analytical framework, as well as Boisselier's view that Thai paintings have a symbolic purpose, we can conclude that the presence of images from the Rama story on the lacquerware cabinets had an iconic function, which was to "manifest" the presence of Phra Ram. His symbolic manifestation would allow him, in association and identification with the king, to fulfill his role as protector and guardian of the Buddhist scriptures inside the cabinet, and thus by extension, as protector and guardian of Buddhism.

The concrete element that supports the hypothesis of Phra Ram as symbolic guardian of Buddhism is the physical location of the images from the Rama story on the lacquerware cabinets, as well as in other Buddhist settings. On the cabinets, the images literally

surround the sacred contents inside, not only at the primary point of entry, the front doors, but also on the sides, and even the back at times, creating an impenetrable barrier to anything that could cause harm or destruction to the sacred words of the Buddha.

A similar concept of surrounding or protecting the point of entry from harm and danger can also be applied to the depictions of the Rama story in other Buddhist settings. The images are almost universally placed in a position to guard the entrances, either doors or windows, or to provide a protective barrier surrounding the sacred space. This can be seen most prominently at the *ubosot* of Wat Phra Chetuphon with the placement of images on the doors and the bas-relief frieze that surrounds the building. John Bell, in his PhD dissertation regarding Wat Phra Chetuphon, noted this factor:

The sculpted frieze encircles the bot to create a sheltered zone. Rama's moral clarity and his force of arms allow the pacifistic world of the Sangha to exist unhindered within. The symbiotic relationship between royal and monastic authority is rendered symbolically clear. The frieze protects the temple...⁴⁸

At Wat Phra Kaeo, the famous mural paintings based on *Rama I Ramakien* surround not only the *ubosot* with the highly revered and sacred Emerald Buddha image, but also the Phra Mondop with a copy of the *Tripitaka*, which itself is housed in a cabinet with images of the Rama story surrounding it on all four sides. At Wat Suthat, the doors and windows of the *ubosot* are protected by images of Phra Narai and *phap chap* depictions from the Rama story.

Another manifestation of this concept of Phra Ram's protective role of the Buddha can perhaps be interpreted from the depictions of the scene of Overcoming Mara on the walls of many Buddhist temples that include characters from the Rama story. Typically, the characters can be seen on one side marching within Mara's army, and then, after the flood caused by Phra Thorani, fighting against Mara's troops. Alexandra Green notes: "The large size and prominent position of this mural not only add force to Theravada Buddhist tenets, but

⁴⁸ Bell, "Wat Phra Chetuphon", 117-118.

also indicate the king's power and ability to protect the kingdom."⁴⁹ Accordingly, the placement and use of this mural can be perhaps be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Phra Ram providing support to defend the Buddha – the forces of good/truth fighting the forces of evil/ignorance.

Ramakien – The Didactic Element

In conjunction with the symbolic role described above, the Rama story as depicted on the lacquerware cabinets can also be said to have certain didactic elements. The analysis of the depictions on the cabinets indicates that a large portion of the images fit into a common and consistent theme of the triumph of the side of moral good and righteousness, or truth – as represented by Phra Ram, his younger brothers and his supporters – over immoral evil and unrighteousness, or ignorance – as represented by Thotsakan, his family and allies. Srisurang makes this clear by stating: “The Ramakien is, therefore, the symbol of victory of the good over the evil. Rama is also the symbol of good kingship, of sacred power of the king whom everyone must obey, serve, and show absolute loyalty.”⁵⁰

The way this element is generally portrayed is in the choice of episodes, albeit likely chosen for their popularity and familiar, that typically depict a scene of triumph of Phra Ram, the side of good or truth, over that of Thotsakan, the side of evil or ignorance. With an emphasis on scenes of battle, where the side of Phra Ram always triumphs, this idea is reinforced. This can also be seen in the many *phap chap* images with the “good” character always in the top or dominant position, and the “bad” one in the lower or defensive position. This is intended to show that the good side will always triumph over the bad side and that truth will always win out over ignorance.

⁴⁹ Green, “Creating Sacred Space”, 179.

⁵⁰ Srisurang, “The Influence of the Ramayana on Thai Culture”, 275.

Conclusion

From this discussion, it seems clear that there is quite a bit of overlap between the symbolic and didactic functions of the depictions of the Rama story on the lacquerware cabinets. While a lesson of correct moral action can be read from the images, to a greater extent, such images appear to have the purpose of merely to remind the viewer of the idealism as projected in the story. Such reference can serve the purpose of conveying the lessons to be learned from the tale without the need to present any detailed depiction. One could say this is a kind of “didactic symbolism”, combining the elements of a symbolic function to manifest the presence of the protector Phra Ram with the elements of a didactic function to emphasize the triumph of truth over ignorance. The appearance of Phra Ram – or any character associated with him, primarily, Phra Lak or Hanuman – serves both to project a moral message, as well as manifest a protective force, thus having both a didactic and symbolic role.

This study also highlights a complex and profound feature of Thai society in the use of an ostensibly secular tale in sacred space, thus accentuating the capacity of Thai culture and tradition to adopt and absorb from the outside what is deemed appropriate and then adapt it to local use and conditions. This study has detailed a particularly vivid aspect of this defining feature of “Thainess” by exploring the use of a Hindu-identified story to adorn antique lacquerware cabinets designed to hold sacred Buddhist scriptures with intricate and elaborate images in gold and black – a rich legacy of “Literature in Gold”.

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