Indigenization of Southeast Asian Buddhist Architecture: Case Study of a Burmese Monastery at Wat Upagupta, Chiang Mai

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The level of localization greatly increased and developed during the indigenization period starting around the 13th century in mainland Southeast Asia. This was when Buddhism began to decline in India and Sri Lanka became an important center of Theravada Buddhism at present. The Lanna Kingdom was founded in the 13th century and was under Burmese rule for over 200 years. U Pan Nyo was a wealthy teak merchant who donated money to build and renovate Buddhist architecture such as shrines, pavilions, and storage. The funds for building the monastery at Wat Upagupta were donated by U Pan Nyo who came from Moulmein around 1870-1873 and later became a well-known Burmese teak merchant in Chiang Mai and northern Thailand. At that time, Chiang Mai was a vassal state of Siam (central Thailand) and was about to be annexed by the Siamese government. Chiang Mai was formerly the capital of the Lanna Kingdom, which is referred to administratively as the Lanna Kingdom as of Chiang Mai and Thai as of Chiang Mai. The Lanna Kingdom was founded in the 13th century and was under Burmese rule for over 200 years. U Pan Nyo was a wealthy teak merchant who donated money to build and renovate Buddhist architecture as well as other public works, such as streets and bridges. Architecture built and reconstructed by U Pan Nyo had various designs, such as Shan, Pa-o, Mon, Burmese, Tai Yuan (indigenous northern Thai), and colonial styles. The important buildings constructed by U Pan Nyo between 1890 and 1910 in Chiang Mai included his house and Wat Upagupta. The monastic compound of Wat Upagupta consists of a monastery as the principal architecture, a stupa, a Buddha shrine (wihan), and storeroom. The monastery at Wat Upagupta and U Pan Nyo’s house shared similarities in architectural floor plan, materials, decorations, and style, and both were built by the same group of carpenters and workers. The architectural design of his house was perhaps associated with his birth planet, Jupiter, for a person born on Thursday. This is the third level, marked in purple, was ruled indirectly by the royal court through the local chieftains appointed directly by the Sultan. They were known as Penghulu or Mandulika, who probably administrated the area according to Malackan laws. The territories included Linggi, Rengi, Jengi, Selangor, and Perak. These areas were also known to be rich in tin. The Sultan-appointed officials had to exercise tight control over these territories to maintain Malacca’s monopoly over the export of such resources. The third level, marked in yellow, comprised semi-autonomous territories granted by the Sultan to the Malay Sultanate as a Thalassocratic Confederation (1400-1511): Power Structure of the Pacified States

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The Sultanate of Malacca is one of the many historic thalassocratic states which thrived from the inter-regional trade in maritime Southeast Asia. Though often viewed as a unified kingdom, it was in fact a loose confederation of various coastal and riverine polities, with its economic and political center situated at the port of Malacca. The main port was strategically positioned as the narrowest chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca, enabling the rulers to assert full control over the sea traffic and even to coerce the trading vessels to harbour at their port-city. The emergence and continuity of Malacca as a thalassocratic state always revolved around enhancing its ability to funnel as much wealth as possible to its main part, generated mostly from local and inter-regional trade. The political expansion of Malacca was to maintain strategic control over coastal settlements so that wealth could be generated at the main port through commodity exchange. Conquest for Malacca would not necessarily mean direct expansion of territory, but rather the acquisition of strategic control over coastal outposts, rival ports, and centers of production in order to reap as much profit as possible from the seaborne trade. Information regarding the territorial expansion and administration of Malacca can be found in the Portuguese and Malay accounts: the Suma Oriental (written in 1512), Book of Duarte Barbosa (written in 1516) and the Salatasul Salatinat (compiled in the mid-16th century). All these materials provide important narratives as well as first-hand accounts of how the Sultanate of Malacca evolved and expanded from its founding by Parameswara until its demise under Sultan Mahmud Shah. These materials also give important information about how Malacca administered and exploited its subjacent territories. During the peak of Malacca’s power in the early 16th century, the sultanate covered most of the Malay Peninsula, Riau-Lingga islands, and south-eastern Sumatera. However, careful study of these historical accounts shows that the power structure of the sultanate was far from centralized or symmetrical. In Malacca’s capital, the rulers were supported by merchant–slaves and Arab–Malay elites. Malacca’s political framework was derived from its form of economy, which focused on controlling and capitalizing on the movement of people and goods by establishing and maintaining a network of subordinate groups with different degrees of loyalties. From these historical accounts, it is suggested that within the large area under the political influence of Malacca, there were five levels of political control (Fig. 1).

The first level – marked in red in Figure 1 – covers the area of Malacca’s center of population, possibly at the narrow strip of land between the Kesang river to the Malim river. The Sultan through his high officials known as the Bendahara, Temenggung, Laksamana, and Penghulu, known as Mandulika, who ruled Malacca’s capital, the rulers were supported by merchant–Slaves and Arab–Malay elites. Malacca’s political framework was derived from its form of economy, which focused on controlling and capitalizing on the movement of people and goods by establishing and maintaining a network of subordinate groups with different degrees of loyalties. From these historical accounts, it is suggested that within the large area under the political influence of Malacca, there were five levels of political control (Fig. 1).

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bungalow-style architecture spread across politics colonized by the British, such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Burma. The ground floor was likely U Pan Nyo’s office, where he conducted his task business. His house was situated on the upper floor, which has verandahs wrapped around the north, west, and south-facing sides. The main hall had three outer staircases: two principal ones used separately by men and women (located to the front or west) and a minor one to the southeast that connected to a one-story kitchen on the ground level. While U Pan Nyo’s house and his monastery at Wat Upagupta had corresponding elements, the monastery was more important and grander than the house. The principal roof of the monastery has two tiers, and its front porch is surmounted by a brick pyathat (“spire”) roof [Fig. 1]. It faces north, which is the same direction that monasteries face.

Although the monastery of Wat Upagupta no longer exists, the ground floor is assumed to have no function and thus has been used as a storage facility. There are three possibilities for the way in which space was organized on the upper floor: the first is parallel to the spatial organization of monasteries in Moulmein, Lower Burma; the second and third have similarities with Pa-o and Shan monasteries in Lower Burma and northern Thailand. These three types of spatial organization have a porch entrance to the north with two outer staircases separating laymen and laywomen. The upper floor was surrounded by a covered verandah on three sides facing the west, the north, and the east. However, the three types differed in terms of the location of the Buddha house and the part where Buddha images were enshrined and where monks and novices had their living quarters.2 The first type of spatial organization probably placed the Buddha hall to the east and the main hall to the west. The residence of monks and novices was situated to the south [Fig. 4]. This spatial organization is typical of monasteries in Moulmein.

The second type of spatial organization was likely similar to that of U Pan Nyo’s house with the main hall at the center and the Buddha shrine as a detached structure to the rear. The main hall was flanked by two bedrooms to its right and left. The former to the east was the abbot’s sleeping area, while the latter to the west was reserved for other monks [Fig. 5]. These two rooms probably included a raised platform in the front, a place reserved for monks to receive guests and for novices to study. Another raised platform was erected in front of the Buddha shrine and reserved for monks and laymen. The floor plan was similar to that of Nat-kyun Kyaung, a Pa-o monastery, which is the same direction that monasteries face and which is the same direction that monasteries face in Lower Burma.3 4

The third type of spatial organization resembled that of Pa-o and Shan monasteries in Lower Burma and northern Thailand, such as Leip-in Kyaung in Thayet and monasteries in that region. As a result, the form of Malacca’s political consolidation of power had less to do with rivals pacified by Malacca. They were free to conduct local affairs, except in rival ports pacified by Malacca. They were ruled by local rulers who were subordinate to Malacca. These ports often consisted of the commercial and military interests of Malacca. The ports was meant to keep them under control, passing a death sentence, which required the Sultan’s approval. They also needed to send regular tributes and army personnel when requested. The pacification of these ports was meant to keep them under control, so that they would not rise up and threaten the core and military interests of Malacca. These ports often consisted of resource-rich coastal polities strategically positioned along the trade routes, but with less political strength than Malacca. The political leverage, especially in terms of their military strength and ties with other regional powers, they probably had strategic partnerships in trade with Malacca, especially in the export of certain commodities such as rice and gold. They included Kedah, Pattani, and Jambi, which are all located at the northern and southern ends of the Straits of Malacca. Finally, there were maritime polities, which were not part of the Malacca political system, and their confederation, and often became its rivals, such as Aru and Passai.

As a maritime confederation, Malacca’s consolidation of power had less to do with direct political dominance over territories or settled populations than with indirect control over the movement and distribution of goods and commodities in favor of its main port. As a result, the form of Malacca’s political control over its territories varied widely and was extremely asymmetric in nature. The different areas within the empire were organized with varying levels of political control, from direct rule by the Sultan to a nominal recognition of suzerainty by local rulers. Due to economic necessity and demographic factors, such a system evolved organically to form a confederation that was structured by a fluid and adaptable network of relations between the dominant political center and its subordinate territories. This was due to the fact that different areas would offer Malacca distinct strategic and economic advantages. Thus, in order to effectively capitalize on all of them in the interest of the British, there must be particular forms of political arrangements for specific subordinate groups, depending on not only their strength, geospatial position, and location, and political leverage. Such was the true nature of Malay maritime statecraft, a complex combination of both political and economic bonds established between local chiefs, merchant- aristocrats, and the Sultan.