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Modern Mythology in the Life Project of Ajahn Chalmchai Kositpipat – Wat Rong Khun and the New Visual Language of Buddhist Teachings in the Thai Temple

ABSTRACT

My paper is about the new form of temple art in modern Thailand. As a traditional Buddhist country, Thailand always has been a place where visual representation in temples (wats) – was dominated by the old stories of Theravada Buddhism. The subject of my study is Wat Rong Khun, The White Temple, currently under construction in Chiang Rai in Northern Thailand. The Artist Ajahn Kositpipat Chalmchai transforms universal themes and visual quotes into a vibrant modern vision. He has made a breakthrough in the visual representation of Buddhist teachings, easily understood by ordinary worshippers (*biblia pauperum*). Wat Rong Khun apart from being the artist's manifestation of faith and the artistic peak of his career is also a normal buddhist temple in terms of functionality. The main buildings, meditation centre, accommodation for the monks and teaching areas are all planned to be exactly the same as in any other wat (Buddhist residential temple), and the construction is scheduled to be completed by 2070. The breakthrough is the iconography of the paintings and sculptural representations that fill the spaces of the interior (frescoes) and exterior of the temple grounds. This new appeal is definitely shocking not only for the Thais, who are used to and attached to more conventional places of worship, since Wat Rong Khun is full of monsters, characters from novels, as well as super heroes of American science fiction movies (e.g. Batman, Spiderman, Kung-fu Panda, and many more). This text is an attempt at an interpretation of the new meaning given to the visual content and its new context, in the light of the traditional use of space. The White Temple is not only a tourist attraction but first and foremost a wat – a temple complex for the buddhist community, in terms of

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its infrastructure and functionality. What Ajahn Kositpipat does is introduce a new understanding of the sacred space, where popular stories have been allowed to co-exist with traditional Thai motifs, and create a new language. Western culture being included in the most important sphere for Thais – the abode of religion – is the introduction of a new level of meaning where SciFi characters become icons, change their original significance, and become part of the teachings of dhamma.

KEY WORDS

Asian art, modern art, Thailand, mythology, hero, Buddhism, dhamma

The general need of human beings to mythologize the world that surrounds us all by creating stories and the search for the universal and eternal patterns that are present throughout our lives has been discussed by many western thinkers and philosophers, along with an individual's need to generalize and sanctify the path of a hero. Joseph Campbell builds an image of a myth¹ that eradicates the unknown in life. He says all the circular paths and mythical stories are in fact one and the same – the myth of a superhero that goes through similar modes in a particular journey. Each stage leads to the transformation of the hero to lead him towards the discovery of a universal truth, to pass the test of character and bravery and to reach beyond his own limitations and attain knowledge – one that liberates and at the same time allows access to the wisdom of the past generations, to be able to become a Master, or Teacher. What such a myth aims to show is the cosmic responsibility of a hero, who must hold the wellbeing of whole world in his hands. At the same time, his ethical attitude establishes a new order and recalls the forgotten norms of ethical behavior for the majority. Rightful patterns are created, and thus examples are drawn to maintain public order.

Sacrifices for humanity are also present in stories familiar from the literature of the East. In most of Hindu literature and mythology, the heroes are the gods of the pantheon. Possessing inherently paranormal and divine powers, they are able to stand up to the danger threatening humanity.²

¹ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Novato, California 2008.

² The most popular plots are the god Vishnu and his 10 avatars (incarnations) who come down on earth in the most urgent moments to rescue the world along with god Krishna, one of the most important avatars among the deities of India today; Shiva, who drinks deadly poison released during the 'churning of the ocean' (skt. *samudra manthan* legend, is mentioned in *Bhagavata Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, and the Indian epic *Mahabharata*) and thus saves the world from extermination, all at some point acting as the protector of humanity. See: M. L. Varadpande, *Mythology of Vishnu and His Incarnations*, Honolulu 2009, p. 56;

In eastern mythology we have many stories that tell us about how the divine powers interfere in the course of the world of normal people. According to Indian mythology, the era we live in now is called *kali yuga*, the time of a decline in ethics and morality, when the dharma,³ personified by a cow standing only on one leg, leans unstable in all directions, prone to fall. The final of the four *yugas*⁴ – *kali yuga* before the destruction of the world by Lord Shiva – is full of the occasions for humans to fall, and thus the extraterrestrial interference is high.

The Buddhist vision offers quite a different model of a hero transcending the reality to the Hindu one. By rejecting the importance of the ritual offerings to the gods as the only factor enabling the *moksha*,⁵ it opens the path towards the *nibbana*⁶ as the journey of an individual walking completely alone whose

Mahabharata, Book I: *Adi Parva*, Section XLV: *The Quest of the Amrit*, [in:] *Access to Insight*, [online] <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rama/ry045.htm> [accessed: 13.04.2015].

³ Sanskrit term *dharma* means the religious order – the truth, the law, as well as individual righteousness. *Southeast Asia: A historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, Vol. 1, ed. K. H.Ooj, Santa Barbara, California 2004, p. 282.

⁴ The Sanskrit term *yuga* refers to the four ages of the world which are: 1) Krita or Satya Yuga, the ideal or golden age, when neither hatred nor envy, nor fear existed, and there was only one veda, one god, one law and one ritual, with a selfless attitude of each caste towards their duties. It was equivalent to 1,728,000 human years and Dharma – the bull – stands stable on four legs; 2) Treta Yuga, in which rightful behavior and morale declines by a quarter and sacrifice appears as a way of maintaining the dharma, which necessitates rites and ceremonies. Human behavior becomes intentional, while expecting reward in exchange for the rites, along with a decline in the sense of duty. It is equal to 1,296,000 human years. Dharma – the bull – stands on three legs; 3) During Dvapara Yuga righteousness declines by another quarter. Ritual is dominant and the four Vedas are known and studied by the chosen few. Desires and diseases distress humankind along with growing injustice. It is equal to 864,000 human years and dharma – the bull – stands on three legs; 4) In Kali Yuga, the dark period of decline – the dharma/righteousness is only of one quarter its original value. Knowledge has been forgotten and the times are dominated by evil. Humans are weakened by greed, anger, hunger and diseases and humanity has no goal. Kali yuga is equal to 432,000 human years. Dharma-bull stands unstable on one leg. It is supposed to be the last period, before the world undergoes the ritual and cyclical destruction in the *tandava* dance of Lord Shiva, accompanied by his damaru drums, to be recreated by Lord Vishnu. See: *The Rider Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, eds. S. Schuhmacher, G. Werner, London 1999, p. 435.

⁵ *moksha* (sanskrit), according to the holy hindu texts, means the ‘liberation, final salvation, end of the cycle of rebirths called *samsara*’, when an individual self, the soul *atman* joins the *brahman*, absolute and eternal being and consciousness. R. Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, Santa Barbara, California 2004, p. 161.

⁶ *nibbana* (pali term for sanskrit term *nirvana*) means freeing oneself from the circle of rebirth by extinguishing three fires: greed, hatred and delusion. See: R. Gombrich, *How*

fate is fully dependent on his deeds.⁷ The Buddha himself is the central figure. In Eastern cultures, mythology is present in everyday life and religion, while the West has put such stories into fairy tales. What comes to light is the main change between Eastern and Western cultures – the faith in living and experiencing mythology and the Buddhist temple is the place where the meeting of the sacred and secular life is justified.

Thailand, being a former part of the Khmer empire, was strongly influenced by elements of the Hindu pantheon, especially Shiva and Vishnu, but also by both the *Theravada* and *Mahayana* schools of Buddhism, coming from the Mon tribes, as well as from Sumatra. For many centuries it was at the crossroads of artistic traditions from India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Indonesia until it developed its own style along with the foundation of the Sukhothai kingdom in the mid 13th century.⁸ Since then Thai art and architecture in temple complexes (called *wats* in Thai) has been dominated by the visual scenes of Buddhist iconography of *Theravada*⁹ school and images of the kings as *devaraja* – “god king”¹⁰ and *dharmaraja*.

The visual representations, as in all the Buddhist temples, were always first and foremost didactic. Their aim was to teach, instruct, to elevate the moral level of those who saw them.¹¹

Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings, London, New York 2006, pp. 65–69; *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, red. D. K. Swearer, Albany, New York 1989, p. 144.

⁷ The essence of the Buddhists teachings is *dhamma* (skr. *dharma*), here understood in ethical categories and is strictly connected with one’s own doings and intentions of deeds. See: J. R. Carter, M. Palihawadana, *Dhammapada*, New York 2000; *Dhammapada: The Path of Dhamma*, ed. by Access to Insight, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, [online] <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/index.html> [accessed: 13.04.2015].

⁸ S. Van Beek, *The Arts of Thailand*, New York 1999, p. 7.

⁹ Theravada Buddhism lit. ‘teaching of the elders’. Known as the orthodox school, also called Hinayana or Pali school. Today, as only surviving element of the Hinayana school, it regards itself as the school closest to the original form of Buddhism. Its canon written in Pali comes, according to the view of the Theravadins, directly from the mouth of Buddha himself. See: *The Rider Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, op. cit., p. 369.

¹⁰ The cult of *devaraja* was particularly present and well-established in the Khmer Empire of Cambodia. See: M. York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, New York 2005, p. 109.

¹¹ They functioned as a *Biblia Pauperum*, operating with the simple, clear and direct visual language of images, illustrating basic moral values as taught by Buddha and then remembered and written down by his most eminent students. Here aesthetics was subordinate

The representations varied greatly, according to what the particular monks residing in the *wats*¹² found important to depict, mostly depending on the Abbot's line of teaching.

As John Listopad mentions in his article 'The Life of the Buddha and the Tosachat in Thai Mural Painting'¹³ there are two types of Dhamma in Theravada Buddhism: *Lokuttara Dhamma* and *Lokiya Dhamma*, the first – the so-called 'Lower Dhamma of this world' and *Lokiya* – referring to the higher transcendent *Dhamma*.¹⁴ As for each and every individual, this abstract term has a different meaning and these two levels of teachings evolved gradually. The first (*Lokuttara Dhamma*) is aimed at those who are bound to the forms and values of this world, while the other (*Lokiya Dhamma*) is intended for the religious perfection. *Lokuttara Dhamma*, the *Dhamma* of the forms and worldly values (and rules), is the one taught through Thai mural painting.

In general, the artist, whether an architect, sculptor or a painter, while working for the temple, was always anonymous. Similarly to the construction of Christian Chapels or Cathedrals, the work done for the Buddhist Temple is considered as both a way to gain merit for the future and as a sign of the artist's religious expression and devotion.¹⁵ When in the service of a religious community, artists are given all the basic necessities; sustenance, humble accommodation and materials, as well as being showered with gifts from the community.¹⁶

to functionality. Whenever damaged, they were immediately restored, as their main purpose was the continuity of education.

¹² *Wat* is a Thai monastery complex, with many buildings that serve the various ceremonial purposes of the *sangha*, the buddhist community of monks and lay people. The most important buildings of each *wat* is the *ubosot/bot* where the ordination ceremonies take place, *vihaan* – building for the prayers of lay community, *sala* – often used as school or shelter for the buddhist travellers, *mondop* used as library, and others, each with its own typical and characteristic structure. Some *wats* also include an area for the monks, *kutis* – small allotment rooms.

¹³ J. Listopad, *The Life of the Buddha and the Tosachat in Thai Mural Painting*, [online] <http://www.umich.edu/~hartspc/acsaa/LLLabelPdf/81LL.pdf> [accessed: 9.02.2015].

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ S. Cate, *Making Art, Making Merit: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*, Honolulu 2003.

¹⁶ If the communities cannot afford to hire an artist to come and work on spot, the paintings were made on paper or wooden panel and then displayed in the *Sala*, a pavilion for lay teaching. It should be mentioned here that Thai temples were centres of general lay education until the end of the 19th century. In 1871 King Rama V established the first school. However, until now the teaching still takes place in the temples. Technically, if executed in the temples, they were made on the layer of lime plaster, with tempera technique, easily damaged due to many leakages, as well as unprofessional repairs of the foundations and courtyards with cement, causing the exfoliation of the paint.

The most popular scene that occupies the whole upper register of the walls opposite the main Buddha statue is the “Maravijaya” scene – The Victory over Mara. When Mara’s daughters fail to distract Lord Buddha from his meditation, Mara comes along with his demon army demanding Buddha to stop. Lord Buddha asks the earth to be the witness of all the merit he did in the past. Earth goddess Torani wrings water from her hair, which symbolises the gifts that Buddha gave to others in his past lives, and the water is so plentiful that it floods and washes away Mara’s army. Whoever survives, along with Mara himself, starts to worship Lord Buddha.¹⁷

Revolution can be seen in contemporary Thai artist Ajahn Chalermchai Kositpipat and his astonishing new vision of a Buddhist monastery in Chiang Rai in Northern Thailand, Wat Rong Khun. This charismatic artist decided to make a breakthrough in the classical understanding of a Buddhist temple and the reception of a sacred space.¹⁸ Ajahn Chalermchai is well known for his unique attitude towards sacred art, adding to it elements of political plots and popular culture, especially of the United States.¹⁹ Wat Rong Khun has been under construction since 1997 and is planned to be a classical Buddhist monastery in function, including all the pavilions and buildings for both lay worship and monastic rituals, including monks’ *kutis* and a meditation centre (*Phutthawat* – an area dedicated to Buddha, and *Sanghawwat* – living quarters for the monks, a kitchen, and a *sala* for laymen). From an architectonic point of view *Wat Rong Khun* alludes to a classical Thai monastic style, including the functionality of the buildings (some of them still to be erected), symbolic pond surrounding the main structure of the *vihan*, narrowing upward stilt constructed pavilions, ceramic tiles covering the roofs and specific decorative

¹⁷ The Tosachat – In Thailand the last 10 incarnations before the last birth as Buddha Shakyamuni is called the Tosachat (Dasa jataka). It corresponds to the Mahanipata section of Jatakas, although the Thais changed the sequence. Each jataka of the Tosachat is an illustration of one of the ten Paramitas, principle virtues which all living beings should practice. See: S. Shaw, *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*, New Delhi, New York 2006; M. L. M. Jumsai, *Ten Lives of Buddha*, Bangkok, 2000.

¹⁸ The term Ajahn is an often collocation to address or describe a monk in Thailand, though its literal meaning is ‘teacher’. This comes from the function of the monks, who are the teachers of Dhamma, but also means a teacher in general, here an art teacher and respected artist.

¹⁹ Ajahn Chalermchai is a well known Thai artist, graduate of the department of decorative arts and traditional painting of Silapakorn University, Bangkok. He is well known for his political aspect in decorating the buddhist shrines. He was one of the twenty six painters that decorated together the Thai temple in Wimbledon, England in 1988.

elements of the roof – *lamyongs* in the form of a *naga*²⁰ and *Garuda's wing*²¹ at the same time. Everything is flooded with a visual storm of details and movement of uneasy figures taken from Science Fiction movies or novels and then mixed with traditional Thai elements e.g. *Kinnaras* (male and female creatures, half-human and half-bird). The building of the main *vihaan* is white, baroque, richly decorated with mirror mosaics reflecting all the surroundings, expressing stress and motion to a European eye, as if in the storm of the massive waves of an ocean.

Ajahn Kositpipat, despite his innovatory vision for the sphere that is the least susceptible for change, does not break with tradition as one might think from first glance – instead, he transforms the elements of culture that surround him and his society, in particular the popular culture of American Science Fiction movies and popular literature as if adapting the level of teaching to the perception level of the young and modern generation, the majority of whom were brought up on Western cinema. As modern Thailand is strongly divided between the loudly shouted effects of westernisation and the quiet but strongly standing pillars of tradition (which indisputably walks hand in hand with religion) the artist seems to use a stimulus familiar to all – the heroes of our childhood.

Inside the *vihaan*, the main preaching hall, the teaching of Dhamma is dressed in a totally new outfit, using new stories as a medium. On the main wall, behind the large white statue of the Buddha and the figure of the respected monk,²² the abbot of the monastery, two ideals prevail – dhamma and the family. We can see boats filled with monks preaching the dhamma as well as the laypeople, including the boat with the artist himself and his family.²³ All boats float peacefully through the levels of heavens towards the central Buddha image – the Nibbana.

²⁰ *Nāgas* are the mythological divine serpents, inhabitants of the underworld, existing since beginning of the world. See: S. K. Tiwari, *Tribal Roots of Hinduism*, New Delhi 2002, p. 177.

²¹ *Garuda* is the *vahana* (skr), the vehicle of one of the hindu trinity, the god Vishnu, considered the king of birds. Beliefs in Hindu gods coexist with Buddhism in many buddhist countries.

²² In Thailand it is noticeable in the *wats* that the figures of the patron monks, the spiritual guides and protectors of the temple, often very renowned nationwide, are executed with extreme precision and detail, in non-melting wax.

²³ Here Ajahn Chalemchai breaks with the general tradition of an incognito artist. Wat Rong Khun is his life project and also the reason for his growing fame, as the *White temple*, as it is known to the Western world is one of the most visited tourist spots in Thailand.

For Ajahn there are two main paths to Nibbana – following the Buddha’s teaching and a rightful family life. The two combined and practiced together are the key to the Enlightenment. The one who lives so is always supported by the *thevadas*,²⁴ the deities dwelling in the heavens. The four kinds of suffering are portrayed blooming inside the lotus buds that grow from the ocean of illusion.

Total disorientation for the viewer is caused by the sight of the rear wall, which is usually devoted to a depiction of the scene of ‘Maravijaya’ – the defeat of Mara. Here instead of a traditional depiction we witness another monster – a huge snake-like dragon, whose body is made of weapons, spitting with fire monstrous beings, and all kinds of technology created to defeat other humans. The waves in the colour of hot lava might refer to the flood made by Torani in Jatakas, but here it seems to be the opposite, they do not symbolize merit, but rather the bad *karma* and evil deeds committed by humanity – the burning of the World Trade Center Towers, the bombing of Hiroshima, explosions, volcanic eruptions etc. The monster himself has his clear sight blinded by the smoke, but the dark face of Osama Bin Laden is clearly visible in one of his eyes, and in the other – the equally dark face of George W. Bush. This strongly implies the artist’s attitude to political events on the global arena, emphasizing the role of the United States of America in sparking armed conflicts and its fight for the resources in the Middle East. The monster itself, the Mara of today, is the personification of the greediness of the contemporary Western world, and shows that the leaders of the conflict in fact do constitute the same body of evil samsaric²⁵ consequences.

The most surprising, however, are the figures of heroes from popular American Science-Fiction movies, e.g. Neo from *The Matrix*, Spiderman, some of the Transformers, Star Trek, *Kung-Fu Panda*, Harry Potter, Avatar etc. Most of them are well-known characters from American Science Fiction movies. All form a world of allegory. At first sight the temple seems not to be a sacred space, but instead the meeting point of mutual and multicultural influences, sometimes scary and shocking. The popular culture of the United States is familiar to all Thais, and is present in many strata of commercial life, although its presence in the sacred space of a Buddhist temple is a total

²⁴ *Thevada* is a being in the shape of an angel, still governed by the law of karma (pali canon: *kamma*), and thus as a result of a worthy life it can be reborn in heaven (which is of seven different levels) and again come to be reborn on earth as a human being. It is believed, that only as a human being one can achieve *nibbana* and final freedom from *samsara*, the cycle of lives.

²⁵ *Samsara* is the freeing oneself from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. See: K. Trainor, *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide*, New York 2004, p. 58.

novelty. The first question springing to one's mind is 'What does it all mean'? The position of the recognizable and friendly protectors of world harmony is not clearly obvious. They are juxtaposed with the deadly and fierce monster of the end of the 20th century (let's recall that the project began in 1997, but most of it is to be executed in the years to come, before 2070²⁶) and developing in the 21st century along with human greed and injustice. The most immediate connotation and interpretation, considering the location of the characters spread all over the rear 'evil wall', is that they might be taken at first glance as enemies, in opposition to the teachings of morality, as the assistants of a personified delusion. This is what cinema does – it creates an illusionary reality to believe in, strong enough to change one's behaviors and beliefs. They can be easily interpreted as the representatives of a threat which is being consistently introduced by Western culture in the East. The fact that the culture of the West is treated by the elder generation of Thais as immoral, commercial and empty of traditional values, would incline to this interpretation of the visual representation of superheroes. Situated all around the central figure of the demon, they 'surf' and fly around between his arms and tentacles as if they were his assistants, an army of small but powerful superheroes strengthening his siege. They appear to be everywhere like ants, filling every possible space even between acts of destruction, e.g. the attack on the World Trade Center Towers, erupting volcanoes or burning spaceships. All elements seem to correspond; building one coherent image of the growing in power of Evil and his supportive forces, assisting in the process of destruction by deepening the illusion of what is good and right.

However, being on the side of the 'dark force', they do not personify Evil. Being depicted without a strict context, they rather aim at reminding the viewer of 'the happy moments of everybody's childhood' as Ajahn Chalerchai mentioned himself when meeting him briefly in May 2014. As symbols of the innocent years of youth when everyone had some ideal heroes protecting the morality and order of the world, they seem to recall those virtues and values all humans once believed – that they would always win against injustice. Each of them, whether Spiderman, Neo, Avatar, brings peace when fighting the oppressor in their various vivid stories.

²⁶ The project for the completion of the temple is fully pre-planned by the artist, although due to the earthquake which occurred on 5.05.2014 with its epicenter close to the Chiang Rai province, much of the temple structure suffered. Thus Ajahn Chalerchai has closed the space of the *vihan* for the coming years in order to ensure the safety of the visitors and for the renovation of damaged frescoes.

The believer, when entering the White Temple, becomes Campbell's 'hero of a thousand faces'. He enters the sphere of the sacrum within the context of contemporary popular culture. Modern mythology is present both in the characters of superheroes of XXI century, and in the reinterpretation of classical Thai art.

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