



this emblematic structure, ensuring it remains a source of identity and wisdom for years to come.

Keywords: Lanna Pulpit, Aesthetics, Identity, Wisdom

Introduction

The Lanna Kingdom, which flourished from the 13th - the 18th century in what is now Northern Thailand, has left a profound legacy in art, architecture, and Buddhist practices (Angela S. Chiu, 2017, p. 2). Central to this legacy is the Lanna pulpit, a distinctive feature of Buddhist temples that embodies the aesthetics of identity, wisdom, and cultural heritage intrinsic to the region. The pulpit, or Dhammasa serves not only as a platform for monastic discourse but also as a canvas showcasing the intricate artistry and symbolic narratives of Lanna culture (Swearer, 2010, p. 45).

The importance of the Lanna pulpit is multifaceted as physical manifestation of spiritual teachings, facilitating the transmission of wisdom from monks to the lay community (Tambiah, 1984, p. 78). The elaborate designs and motifs carved into the pulpit reflect local interpretations of Buddhist cosmology, intertwined with indigenous beliefs and artistic traditions (Woodward, 1997, p. 63). This fusion of religious function and aesthetic expression underscores the pulpit role in preserving and conveying the cultural identity of the Lanna people.

Artistic elements of the Lanna pulpit are characterized by intricate woodcarvings, gilded decorations, and vibrant colors, all signifying various aspects of Buddhist teachings and local folklore (Stratton & Scott, 2004, p. 112). The common motifs include mythical creatures like the **Nāgā** and Garuda, floral patterns, and scenes from the **Jātaka** tales, each imbued with symbolic meanings that convey moral and ethical lessons (Renard, 1999, p. 89). These artistic expressions not only enhance the visual appeal of the pulpit but also serve as educational tools, illustrating complex spiritual concepts in an accessible manner.

The preservation of the Lanna pulpit is crucial for maintaining the regional Buddhist cultural heritage. Modernization and changing of socio-economic dynamics pose significant challenges to the conservation of these artifacts (Cros-



by, 2007, p. 34). There is an increasing risk of deterioration and loss of traditional craftsmanship as younger generations migrate towards urban centers, leaving behind the artisanal knowledge required to create and maintain such intricate works (Singh, 2001, p. 56). Efforts to document, restore, and educate about the Lanna pulpit are essential to safeguard this cultural legacy for future generations (Lee, 2021, p. 44).

This study aims to explore the aesthetics of the Lanna pulpit, delving into how it embodies the identity and wisdom of the Lanna people and serves as a vital component of Buddhist cultural heritage by examining historical contexts, artistic techniques, and symbolic meanings, the researchers seek to highlight the significance of the pulpit within both religious and cultural context. Furthermore, the study will address contemporary challenges in preserving this heritage, advocating for strategies that ensure the continuity of the Lanna pulpit legacy.

Historical Context of the Lanna Kingdom

The Lanna Kingdom, often referred to as the “Kingdom of a Million Rice Fields,” was a significant political and cultural entity in Southeast Asia. Lanna played a crucial role in shaping the regional history through its unique blend of indigenous and external influences (Wyatt, 1984: p. 85).

In 1296, by King Mangrai, Lanna established of Lanna Kingdom marked the unification of various Tai principalities in the region. He strategically chose Chiang Mai as the capital due to its fertile lands and strategic location along trade routes (Ongsakul, 2005: p. 47). Under his rule, the kingdom was expanded territory and influence, forging alliances and occasionally engaging in conflicts with neighboring states like Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (Vickery, 1995: p. 200).

Lanna was renowned for its rich cultural heritage, particularly in art, architecture, and religion. The kingdom embraced Theravada Buddhism, which became deeply integrated into its society and governance (Swearer, 1999: p. 112). The construction of magnificent temples such as Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Luang exemplifies the kingdom architectural achievements and religious



devotion (McDaniel, 2008: p. 75). These temples are not only served religious purposes but also acted as centers for education and community gatherings.

Moreover, the kingdom economy thrived on agriculture, handicrafts, and trade. Lanna's strategic position along the overland trade routes between China and the rest of Southeast Asia facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture (Grabowsky & Turton, 2003: p. 58). The production of lacquerware, textiles, and silverwork became notable exports, contributing to the kingdom wealth and international recognition (Renard, 2002: p. 33).

Lanna political system was characterized by a hierarchical structure with the king at the apex, followed by nobles and commoners. The society was organized into "Muang" (city-states), each governed by local lords who pledged allegiance to the king (Ongsakul, 2005: p. 123). This system allowed for regional autonomy while maintaining overall unity and order within the kingdom.

Throughout its history, Lanna engaged in the complex relationships with neighboring kingdoms; diplomatic marriages, alliances, and conflicts which were common as Lanna navigated its position among more powerful states. Notably, the kingdom faced repeated threats from Burmese invasions, which eventually led to periods of Burmese dominance over Lanna in the 16th century (Wyatt, 1984: p. 137).

Several factors contributed to the decline of the Lanna Kingdom, including internal strife, economic challenges, and external pressures from more dominant powers like Burma and Siam. By the late 18th century, Lanna became a vassal state under Siamese control (Grabowsky & Turton, 2003: p. 102). The formal integration into Siam occurred in the early 20th century, leading to significant administrative and social changes in the region (Renard, 2002: p. 54).

The historical context of the Lanna Kingdom is essential for understanding the cultural and political landscape of Northern Thailand today. Lanna unique traditions, language, and artistic expressions have left an indelible mark on the regional identity (McDaniel, 2008: p. 98). Thus, the efforts to preserve Lanna heritage continue reflecting the kingdom enduring influence on contem-



porary Thai society.

The Lanna Kingdom rich history showcases the complexities of regional politics, cultural development, and economic interactions in Southeast Asia. Its legacy persists in the cultural fabric of Northern Thailand, offering valuable insights into the regional past and its impact on present-day identities.

The Lanna Pulpit: Function and Symbolism

The Lanna Kingdom is renowned for its rich cultural and artistic heritage (Freeman, 2001, p. 15). Among its most significant contributions to Buddhist architecture is the Lanna pulpit, a structure that embodies both functional utility and profound symbolism.

Functionally, the Lanna pulpit serves as a platform for monks to deliver sermons and teachings during religious ceremonies. Elevated above the congregation, it facilitates better acoustics and visibility, ensuring that the Dhamma—the teachings of the Buddha—reaches all attendees (Swearer, 2004, pp. 67-68). This elevation also symbolizes the spiritual ascent and the higher plane of understanding that the teachings represent.



Figure 1: The Lanna pulpit at Wat Phra That Lampang Luang

Symbolically, the pulpit is adorned with intricate carvings and motifs



that reflect Buddhist cosmology and local folklore. Common decorations include depictions of mythical creatures like the **Nāgā** (serpent deities) and the Garuda (a legendary bird-like creature), which represent protection and the interplay between earthly and celestial realms (Woodward, 1997, p. 112). The use of gold leaf and vibrant colors not only enhances aesthetic appeal but also signifies enlightenment and the impermanence of material wealth (Freeman, 2001, p. 23).

The architectural design of the pulpit often incorporates elements symbolizing Mount Sumeru, considered the center of the universe in Buddhist cosmology. This connection elevates the pulpit from a mere physical structure to a representation of the cosmos, bridging the human and the divine (Woodward, 1997, pp. 115-116). The monk ascent to the pulpit mirrors the spiritual journey toward enlightenment, reinforcing the sanctity of the teachings delivered from it.

Furthermore, the craftsmanship of the Lanna pulpit reflects the communal devotion and artistic excellence of the Lanna people. Artisans spend years mastering wood carving and gilding techniques, passing these skills down through generations. Thus, the pulpit becomes a vessel not only for spiritual teachings but also for preserving cultural identity (Freeman, 2001, p. 30).

In conclusion, the Lanna pulpit is a profound embodiment of function intertwined with rich symbolism. It is a testament to the Lanna Kingdom dedication to Buddhism and its commitment to artistic expression. Understanding its multifaceted roles offers deeper insights into the regional religious practices and cultural achievements.

Artistic Aesthetics of the Lanna Pulpit

Among its significant contributions is the Lanna pulpit, a central element in Buddhist temples that exemplifies the regional unique aesthetic principles (Woodward, 1997, p. 112). The Lanna pulpit, known locally as the “**Dhammāsa**,” serves not only as a platform for monastic teachings but also as a canvas showcasing the intricate artistry of Lanna craftsmen (Freeman & Stadtner,



2010, p. 85). Crafted predominantly from teak wood—a material abundant in Northern Thailand—the pulpits are adorned with elaborate carvings depicting mythological creatures, floral patterns, and scenes from Buddhist lore (Nimmanahaeminda, 1980, p. 47).

A defining characteristic of these pulpits is the meticulous wood carving techniques employed. Artisans utilize deep relief carving to create dynamic, multi-layered images that convey depth and movement (Brown, 1996, p. 58). The carvings often feature the *Nāgā* (serpent deities) and the Garuda (mythical bird), symbolizing protection and the transcendence of earthly desires (Chantharak, 2005, p. 73).

In addition to wood carving, the application of lacquer and gold leaf enhances the pulpit visual appeal. The use of gold leaf not only signifies the sacredness of the space but also reflects light, illuminating the temple interior and creating an ethereal ambiance (McGill, 2009, p. 129). This interplay of light and shadow is a deliberate aesthetic choice, emphasizing the spiritual enlightenment that Buddhism advocates (Wijeyewardene, 1986, p. 214).

The pulpit structural design often incorporates multiple tiers and spires, drawing inspiration from the traditional Lanna pagoda architecture (Woodward, 1997, p. 115). These tiers are symbolic of the Buddhist cosmology, representing different levels of existence and the path towards *Nibbāna* (Freeman & Stadtner, 2010, p. 88). The upward orientation of the spires guides the devotee's gaze skyward, reinforcing the connection between the earthly realm and the spiritual plane (McGill, 2009, p. 132).

The color symbolism plays a significant role in the aesthetic of the Lanna pulpit. Dominant hues include red, black, and gold—each carrying specific connotations. Red symbolizes life force and vitality; black represents the mysteries of the unknown; and gold denotes purity and enlightenment (Chantharak, 2005, p. 76). The strategic use of these colors enhances the pulpit spiritual significance and visual impact.



Furthermore, the integration of glass mosaics and mother-of-pearl inlays adds a layer of complexity and brilliance to the pulpit appearance (Brown, 1996, p. 62). These materials catch and refract light, contributing to the overall luminosity of the structure. This technique reflects the Lanna artisans' mastery of combining different mediums to achieve a harmonious aesthetic (Nimmana-haeminda, 1980, p. 52).

In conclusion, the artistic aesthetics of the Lanna pulpit are a testament to the regional rich cultural and religious heritage. Through the fusion of intricate woodwork, symbolic motifs, and thoughtful use of materials and colors, the pulpit embodies the spiritual ideals and artistic excellence of the Lanna Kingdom (Woodward, 1997, p. 118).

Interplay of Indigenous Beliefs and Buddhist Cosmology

The integration of Buddhism into various cultures has resulted in a syncretism between Buddhist cosmology and indigenous beliefs, enriching the spiritual landscapes of regions where Buddhism has spread. This interplay has led to unique expressions of Buddhist practice that reflect local traditions and cosmological understandings.

In Southeast Asia, the incorporation of animistic and ancestral worship practices into Buddhism is evident. In Cambodia, Buddhism coexists with the indigenous belief in “Neak Ta”, local spirits believed to inhabit natural features like trees and stones (Harris, 2005: 37). This fusion demonstrates how Buddhist cosmology adapts to encompass local spiritual entities, providing a comprehensive worldview addressing both soteriological concerns and everyday life.



Figure 2: Lanna Pulpit at Wat Phra That Hariphunchai

Similarly, in Tibet, the pre-Buddhist Bon religion significantly influenced Tibetan Buddhism. Elements such as the belief in a multitude of deities and spirits, and complex rituals for appeasing them, were integrated into Tibetan Buddhist practice (Samuel, 1993: 56). Tibetan Buddhist cosmology thus reflects a layered understanding of the universe, where *Samsāra* intertwine with indigenous cosmological concepts.

In Mongolia, the interaction between Shamanism and Buddhism led to a unique cosmology. Mongolian Buddhism absorbed shamanistic practices, incorporating them into its rituals and cosmological views. The reverence for the sky god “Tengri”, a central figure in Mongolian indigenous belief, was assimilated into Buddhist cosmology (Bold, 2001: 82). This Syncretism facilitated the acceptance of Buddhism among the Mongolian people, aligning Buddhist teachings with their traditional cosmological framework.

The adaptation of Buddhism in Japan also illustrates this interplay. Shinto, the indigenous spirituality of Japan, emphasizes the worship of “Kami”, spirits associated with natural phenomena. The concept of “Honji Suijaku” posits



that Buddhist deities manifest as Shinto Kami to save sentient beings (Grapard, 1992: 211). This doctrine allowed for a harmonious relationship between Buddhist cosmology and indigenous beliefs, leading to a syncretic religious environment.

These examples underscore the flexibility of Buddhist cosmology in accommodating indigenous beliefs. The syncretic practices not only facilitated the spread of Buddhism but also enriched its cosmological narratives. This interplay has allowed Buddhism to remain relevant and responsive to the cultural contexts in which it is practiced.

Therefore, understanding this interplay is crucial for appreciating the diversity within Buddhist traditions. It highlights the dynamic nature of religious cosmologies and their capacity to evolve through intercultural exchanges. Future studies could further explore how this syncretism affects contemporary Buddhist practices and the preservation of indigenous traditions.

The Lanna Pulpit as Cultural Heritage

The Lanna pulpit, an integral element of Northern Thailand religious and cultural identity, stands as a testament to the rich heritage of the Lanna Kingdom. Flourishing between the 13th – 18th centuries, the Lanna Kingdom developed a unique artistic and architectural style distinct from other regions in Thailand. The pulpit, known locally as “**Dhammāsa**”, serves not only as a platform for monastic teachings but also as an embodiment of intricate craftsmanship and religious symbolism.

These pulpits are renowned for their elaborate woodwork, featuring detailed carvings that depict scenes from Buddhist cosmology, local folklore, and nature. Artisans employ traditional techniques passed down through generations, utilizing indigenous materials like teak wood to create these masterpieces. The carvings often include motifs of mythical creatures, such as **Nāgā** (serpent deities) and Garuda (mythical birds), which hold significant meaning in Buddhist and local beliefs.



The artistic significance of the Lanna pulpit extends beyond its aesthetic appeal. It plays a crucial role in religious practices, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere during sermons and ceremonies. The visual narratives carved into the pulpits serve as educational tools, illustrating moral lessons and Buddhist teachings for the lay community. This intertwining of art and religion underscores the pulpit's importance in preserving and conveying cultural values.

Preservation of the Lanna pulpit is vital for maintaining the cultural heritage of Northern Thailand. Modernization and economic development pose threats to these traditional structures, as newer architectural styles and materials replace historical ones. Efforts by local communities, scholars, and cultural organizations aim to document, restore, and protect these pulpits. Such initiatives not only safeguard the physical artifacts but also ensure the continuation of traditional craftsmanship and religious practices associated with them.

International recognition of the Lanna pulpit's cultural value has also grown. UNESCO has highlighted the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage, which includes traditional craftsmanship and oral traditions associated with artifacts like the pulpit. Its conservation programs focus on educating younger generations about the significance of these cultural assets, fostering a sense of pride and responsibility towards heritage preservation.

In conclusion, the Lanna pulpit is more than a religious fixture; it is a cultural symbol that encapsulates the artistic ingenuity, spiritual devotion, and historical legacy of the Lanna people. Protecting and promoting this heritage is essential for sustaining the region's cultural identity and ensuring that future generations can appreciate and learn from these profound expressions of human creativity.

The Lanna Pulpit in Academic Discourse

The academic studies have highlighted the Lanna pulpit as a symbol of the intertwining of art and religion in Northern Thai culture. According to Freeman and Warner (2001, p. 112), the pulpit is often elaborately decorated

with carvings depicting Buddhist cosmology and local folklore, reflecting the syncretism of beliefs in the region. These carvings are not merely ornamental; they serve as visual aids that reinforce the teachings delivered from the pulpit.

The construction techniques of the Lanna pulpit have also been a subject of scholarly interest. Srisuchat (2004, p. 85) notes that traditional woodworking methods were employed, utilizing interlocking joints without the use of nails. This technique not only showcases the advanced woodworking skills of Lanna artisans but also symbolizes the interconnectedness of the community and the teachings of Buddhism.

In terms of stylistic features, the pulpit often incorporates *Nāgā* (serpent deities) motifs and lotus flowers, which are significant in Buddhist iconography (Smith, 2010, p. 47). The *Nāgā* represents protection and the guarding of sacred spaces, while the lotus symbolizes purity and enlightenment. These elements are meticulously carved and sometimes inlaid with gold leaf, indicating the importance of the pulpit within the temple hierarchy.



Figure 3: Dissemination of knowledge about the pulpit to the public at the Tourist Service Center, Lamphun Province, on June 25, 2024.



Recent research has focused on the preservation of Lanna pulpits amid modernization. Charoensri (2018, p. 23) discusses the challenges faced in conserving these structures due to environmental factors and the loss of traditional artisanship. The study emphasizes the need for sustainable preservation methods that involve local communities and knowledge transmission to younger generations.

The Lanna pulpit role extends beyond the religious sphere; it is a testament to the region historical and cultural identity as globalization influences local practices, academic discourse underscores the importance of preserving such artifacts. The pulpit is not only a piece of religious furniture but also a cultural symbol that encapsulates the artistic heritage of the Lanna Kingdom.

Conclusions, the Lanna pulpit remains a focal point in the study of Southeast Asian art and architecture. Its intricate designs, construction methods, and symbolic meanings offer valuable insights into the religious and cultural fabric of Northern Thailand that ongoing academic interest and preservation efforts are essential in ensuring this emblematic structure continues to be appreciated by future generations.

Conclusion

The Lanna Kingdom, which thrived from the 13th - the 18th century in Northern Thailand, has left an enduring legacy in art, architecture, and Buddhist practices. Central to this heritage is the Lanna pulpit, or “**Dhammāsa**”, a unique feature of Buddhist temples that embodies the region identity, wisdom, and cultural heritage. Serving as both a platform for monastic discourse and a canvas for intricate artistry, the pulpit plays a multifaceted role in transmitting spiritual teachings and preserving cultural values.

Functionally, the Lanna pulpit elevates monks during sermons, symbolizing spiritual ascent and facilitating better acoustics and visibility. Symbolically, it is adorned with elaborate woodcarvings, gilded decorations, and vibrant colors, depicting Buddhist cosmology, local folklore, and mythical creatures like



the Nāgā and Garuda. These artistic elements not only enhance visual appeal but also serve as educational tools, illustrating complex spiritual concepts and moral lessons in an accessible manner.

The pulpit design often incorporates elements representing Mount Sumeru from Buddhist cosmology, connecting the structure to the universe and bridging the human and divine realms. The use of traditional materials like teak wood and techniques such as interlocking joints without nails showcases the advanced woodworking skills of Lanna artisans and symbolizes community interconnectedness.

The preservation of the Lanna pulpit is crucial amid modernization and shifting socio-economic dynamics. Challenges include environmental deterioration, and the loss of traditional craftsmanship as younger generations migrate to urban centers, leaving behind the artisanal knowledge required for creation and maintenance. The academic discourse emphasizes sustainable preservation methods involving local communities and the transmission of knowledge to future generations.

Thus, the Lanna pulpit stands as a cultural symbol encapsulating the artistic ingenuity, spiritual devotion, and historical legacy of the Lanna people. It represents the intertwining of art and religion and serves as a vital component of Buddhist cultural heritage. Ongoing academic interest and preservation efforts are essential to safeguard this emblematic structure, ensuring it continues to be appreciated and serves as a source of identity and wisdom for future generations.

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