



Reclining Buddha: Conservation and Restoration by Participation of the Community in the Northeast of Thailand

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Abstract

The Reclining Buddha was one of crucial statuary patterns of Buddha images in the study of history - archaeology. Reclining Buddha images were spiritual anchors for northeastern people for a long time. The study of the Reclining Buddha history and the enhancement of community participation would be important for conservation of Buddhism. This qualitative research aimed to study the history of Reclining Buddha images and sculptures in the northeastern part of Thailand, and to find out a guideline for community participation in preserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha images. The data were collected through document analysis, surveys, interviews, participant observations, and focus group guidelines. Participants were key informants, general informants, and general informants from five provinces in the northeastern part of Thailand. Then, the collected data were verified by the triangulation technique. The study revealed that the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand could be divided into three main periods: the Dvaravati period, the folk art period, and the present period. The Reclining Buddha characteristics were the combinations of thirty-two characteristics of a Great Man (Mahapurusa Laksana) and local arts. The communities played important roles in conservation and restoration of the Reclining Buddha images with the support from local organizations. To conserve these cultural heritages, the stakeholders should enhance conservation activities, academic activities, and travel activities. Moreover, the development of Buddhism temples to be cultural learning centers would provide more tourist attractions that made more incomes to the communities.

Keywords: Reclining Buddha/ Conservation/ Restoration/ Community Participation/ Northeast

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Introduction

The northeastern part was one of the most civilized historical areas of Thailand, especially for the cultures that related to Buddhism. Therefore, numerous tourists and researchers were interested in this area.

Buddhism came to Southeast Asia or Suvarnabhumi long time ago and it played significant roles in Thai culture. Sriaroon (2003) stated that the creation of Buddha images started when people in the area turned to believe in Buddhism before the development of states and kingdoms. According to archaeological evidences in Thailand, Buddha images of Amaravati, Gupta and Pala schools were found in the southern and northern parts of Thailand. These images were from 11th Buddhist Century. Thai archeologists divided Buddha images in relation to their artworks into Dvaravati period, Srivichai period, Lopburi period, Chiangsaen period, Sukhothai period, Ayuthaya period, Thonburi period, and Rattanakosin period. Buddha images in Dvaravati period were the oldest and they were heavily influenced by Indian culture. The common attitudes of the Buddha images were Vitarka Mudra (teaching gesture), Abhaya Mudra (repelling the ocean / pacifying the relatives), Maravijaya (triumphing over Mara), and Dhyana Mudra (meditating). The less familiar attitudes were Thawai Netra (standing posture with arms crossed in front of the waist with the right hand covering the left hand), Praditsatarn Roi Prabatha (making a footprint posture), Pratub Yeun (standing posture), Um Bart (standing posture and holding an alms bowl with both hands), Nark Prok (sitting and being protected by the Naga King), Leelaa (walking posture), and Sai Yat (reclining posture). It could be concluded that there were four main postures of Buddha images – sitting, standing, reclining, and walking. These postures appeared in the scene of the Buddha performing the Twin Miracles of fire and water or Yamaka-Patihariya at Sravasti.

The northeastern civilization had been developed since the ancient time. According to the archeological findings, the northeastern area of Thailand included evidences from Dvaravati period, Lopburi period, Ayuthaya period, and Rattanakosin period.

The development of Buddhism in the northeast of Thailand had started since 12th Buddhist Century. Boundary markers of temples, votive tablets, stone Buddha images, metal Buddha images, porcelain Buddha images, bronze Buddha images, sandstone Buddha images, and Reclining Buddha images were discovered in the area. The evidences of Buddhism were found not only in northeastern part of Thailand, but also in Laos. They were called Lan Chang Buddhist Art or Laos Buddhist Art.



It was found that the Buddhist art related to the Reclining Buddha had continued from Dvaravati Buddhist Art to Lan Chang Buddhist Art and the current Buddhist Art.

The stone Reclining Buddha image from Dvaravati period was one of the most valuable Buddha images of Thailand. The Reclining Buddha images were not common postures found because it was the last position of Buddha before he died that some people believed that was unfortunate. Moreover, the long proportion of the Reclining Buddha images could be problematic when building a construction to cover them. However, the Reclining Buddha images had been continuously created. Since these images were related to local arts and the community beliefs, they were essential evidences for the study of history – archaeology and Buddhist art.

The Reclining Buddha images were created to recall the Buddhists of the Buddha's death and Parinirvana (Nirvana after death). These images reminded people to be mindful in their lives because nothing lasted forever even the Buddha had to follow the cycle of birth and death.

The Reclining Buddha images were believed to be Buddha images for people who were born on Tuesday. This is because the Buddha lay down and entered his Parinirvana on Tuesday. Though people recognized the Reclining Buddha images as a representation of the Buddha lying down during the moment of his Parinirvana, there were nine attitudes of the reclining Buddha. In Thailand, the general attitudes were the attitude of teaching Asurindarahu and the attitude of entering Parinirvana. Other attitudes were usually found in paintings.

The Reclining Buddha images were created to remind the Buddhists of no permanent self; however, some images were abandoned due to many reasons. These images may be far away from communities or they were not well known. People in the communities may be not interested in conservations. In addition, there were insufficient information managements, and the routes to the images were in poor conditions. The enhancement of local traditions and rituals may improve the community participation in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha. People in the communities should have opportunities to reflect their problems and realize the values of their cultural arts and social cultures. According to the mentioned circumstances, the study of community participation in preserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha was conducted.



Objectives

1. To study the history of Reclining Buddha in the northeastern part of Thailand.
2. To study the Buddha Images and Reclining Buddha sculptures the northeastern part of Thailand.
3. To find out a guideline in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand.

Methodology

This research was a qualitative research conducted using document analysis and field study. The informants were local scholars, monks, and people who were related to the temples where the Reclining Buddha images were located in Roi Et Province, Kalasin Province, Khon Kaen Province, Chaiyaphum Province, and Udon Thani Province. The data were collected through surveys, interviews, participant observations, and focus group guidelines. The focused topics were the history of the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand, and the community participation in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand.

Findings

The study revealed that the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand could be divided into three main periods: the Dvaravati period, the folk art period, and the present period. The Reclining Buddha characteristics were the combinations of thirty-two characteristics of a Great Man (Mahapurusa Laksana) and local arts.

The Reclining Buddha images in Dvaravati period were made of stone, porcelain or metal. They had quite the same characteristics i.e. the square face, lotus-bud halos, large hair curls, a rather flat nose, protruding eyes, curved and connecting eyebrows, thick lips, the fold of cloth on the left shoulder extended down to the chest or the navel, big hands and feet, and resting on carved lotus base - pointing downwards and upwards or only upwards.

The Reclining Buddha images in Dvaravati period that were studied could be categorized into two ages. In the first age, the image faces were influenced with Indian Gupta styles and they looked a bit rounder and longer than the second age. It



was believed that the images in the first age were made by the craftsmen who were professional in Indian arts. Later on, the second age images were created by the local craftsmen who were not as professional or the images were influenced by local styles.

All of the Reclining Buddha images in the targeted temples were not aged over 100 years. These images were the present period art that imitated ancient Buddha arts and combined them with the local arts.

The study of the community participation in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha images in the northeastern part of Thailand were as follows:

Putthanimitr (Phu Kao) Temple, Kalasin Province

People in the community participated in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha image. They cleaned the areas around the Buddha image, provided garbage bins for each type of wastes, and primarily repaired the image and the temple.

Intarapratarnporn Phu Por Temple, Kalasin province

Community members took parts in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha image by cleaning the areas, discarding the weed, trimming the trees around the Buddha image, and building staircases to the second Reclining Buddha image. The fallen stones along the roadside were neatly fixed with cement. Furthermore, plenty of garbage bins were provided. The Reclining Buddha image and the temple were primarily restored with cement to reduce the damages.

Praputthasaiyatr Phu Wiang Temple, Khon Kaen Province

People in the community also cleaned the areas, discarded the weed, and trimmed the trees around the Buddha image and the temple. To lessen the accident because of slippery paths, they wiped the algae off the fields. In addition, more waste bins were prepared. In order to restore the Buddha image, the monks and local people recommended the use of good quality paints or gold leaves instead of the use of cement. This temple was located away from the community; therefore, the monks were generally responsible for conserving the Reclining Buddha image.

Prathart Nong Sam Meun Temple, Chaiyaphum Province

Community members could participate in the conservation and restoration of the Reclining Buddha image by cleaning and discarding the weed the areas, especially in rainy season. They could help preparing sufficient waste bins and managing the garbage. They were also required in basic restoring of the Buddha image e.g. cleaning and repainting. Since the temple was located far from the village, the monks mainly took care of the image.



Sra Kaew Temple, Roi Et Province

People in the community had discussed about the conservation and restoration of the Reclining Buddha image; however, they did not start various activities. The accomplished activity was providing the waste bins inside and outside the buildings.

Paa Phu Kon Temple, Udon Thani Province

The temple was newly built in a vast area containing a Vihara (Buddhist assembly hall), an administration building, toilets, and a parking lot. It had a large budget that was sufficient for management. The community members could only learn some information and join the temple events.

The guideline for community participation in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha image were as follows: local organizations had to play a significant role as mentioned in the government decentralization policy. To conserve these cultural heritages, the stakeholders should enhance conservation activities, academic activities, and travel activities. Moreover, the development of Buddhism temples to be cultural learning centers would provide more tourist attractions that made more incomes to the communities. In addition, the young generation should learn about their social cultures and conserve the Reclining Buddha images as cultural heritages. This would lead to sustainable development of the community and the country.

Finally, the participation of the five communities in conserving and restoring the Reclining Buddha images were rewarding, and it could be a model for other communities.

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