

# That Phnom Relic: The Politics of Cultural Hegemony and Social Space in the Thai–Lao Borderland

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the politics of Theravada Buddhist symbols in the dominant cultural ideologies and social spaces of the Thai-Lao borderland. We used qualitative research methods to study historical data and conduct fieldwork to find information so it could be reinterpreted within the framework of cultural hegemony and linked to the social and cultural dimensions. The results revealed that the original form of That Phnom relic was based on Hindu cosmological concepts, transmitted through Cham and Khmer art and architectural influences. It was probably built to worship Hindu deities, and later when the Lan Xang Kingdom spread its influence over the Mekong River basin, it was converted into a Lan Xang-style Buddhist reliquary. A legend that the Buddha's breastbone relic was housed there was created to explain the change to Buddhist culture. The legend also generated the belief that any king who maintained Phra That Phnom would accrue great merit and power that would enable the country to prosper. Therefore, this relic became the symbol of prosperity in the state and was supported by royal power. Later, when Siam expanded its power over Laos, the Siamese rulers renovated and maintained the structure based on the King of Siam's taste in art. In political relations involving Laos, Siam, and France, Phra That Phnom was contested because of its pervasive symbolism and its value as a social space during the establishment of several modern states. This situation reflects the politics of several Theravada Buddhist states in mainland Southeast Asia and reveals much about the conflict for control over this region and its people.

**Keywords:** That Phnom relic, Theravada Buddhist culture, politics of cultural hegemony, social space, Thai-Lao borderland

## Introduction

Although the border separating Thailand and Laos at the present time is the Mekong River, historically, this area formerly was defined by the social and cultural homeland of the Lao people, encompassing both the left and right banks of the river. In this area, there is a sacred reliquary known as That Phanom, a Buddhist chedi reputed to contain the breastbone of the Buddha, which serves as a spiritual anchor for the Lao people and other ethnic groups in the central Mekong River region. That Phanom Chedi was originally a structure influenced by Hindu cosmological concepts, transmitted over time through Cham and Khmer art and architecture (see Saisingha, 2012; Chuwichian, 2014: 42–43). Later, it was converted into a Buddhist reliquary. In the traditional state era, the region where That Phanom is located was a hub for travel and commerce among Vietnam, Lao Lan Xang, and Siam (Khamprom, 2003: 39–40; Sriwongsa, 2019b: 113–114). When different states came to power, they would seize this region because of its strategic location in terms of traffic, transportation, and commerce.

There have been frequent power struggles between the Theravada Buddhist states of Southeast Asia. Buddhist symbols, such as images of the Buddha and pagodas, were adopted by monarchs as state emblems. When one party triumphed and seized control of the area, that party typically appropriated Buddhist symbolism as a sign of its superiority<sup>1</sup>. In this context, That Phanom Chedi became a sacred symbol, representing the state's prosperity and bolstering the authorities' political power.

Academic studies of That Phanom have focused primarily on history, archaeology, and Buddhism (Walliphodom, 1975), as well as

<sup>1</sup> For example, when the King of Champasak ruled over the indigenous Kha people, he exerted his power by seizing a sacred Buddha image from them to establish it as a symbol of the city's spiritual authority. However, after Siam successfully annexed Champasak as a vassal state and discovered that it possessed an important and valuable Buddha image, orders were given to transport it to Siam as a symbol of merit and royal prestige for the Siamese monarch (see Bangperng, 2022). Similarly, when King Taksin of Thonburi conquered the Kingdom of Lan Xang in Vientiane, the Emerald Buddha was taken from Laos to Siam, where it became a spiritual center and a sacred symbol of the Siamese state (see Sattayanurak, 2021).

on the development and significance of the relic (Maneechoti, 2011; Karnthak, 2011), and the culture or ethnic group associated with it (Klangprapan, 2012). Kesinee Sriwongsa (2019a) studied the origin of Phra That Phanom, in an effort to explain its significance in Siamese state power. She did not discover why That Phanom relic was used as a conduit for state political relations or why it has been used to seize social and cultural spaces and people in struggles between local and global powers.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to investigate the ways in which various groups have used That Phanom as a symbol to enforce cultural hegemony and political acceptance. In their struggles for cultural hegemony and social spaces, interactions between Laos, Siam, and France were significantly linked to the border region where That Phanom is located. The Lao kingdom of Lan Xang initially controlled the monument. However, when the Siamese overcame Lan Xang, they seized and replaced certain elements of the structure with those that complemented their culture in order to establish power and resist French colonial invasion. What are the historical, political, and sociocultural significances of each period's actors? This is the research topic that this article will investigate.

## Materials and Methods

This methodology of this project was research, that is searching for inscriptions, myths, books, texts, and various official archives related to That Phanom and relevant aspects of Buddhist culture. We conducted fieldwork to collect data in areas related to That Phanom Chedi and the Thai–Lao border region. We conducted interviews, participated in discussions, and attended significant events to collect data on the significance, meaning, and adaptations of Buddhists regarding the That Phanom relic. After obtaining this information, the researchers examined and analyzed the data, attempting to reinterpret it through its connection to history, politics, society, and culture. We sought to comprehend the implications of changes in the designs and patterns of the That Phanom

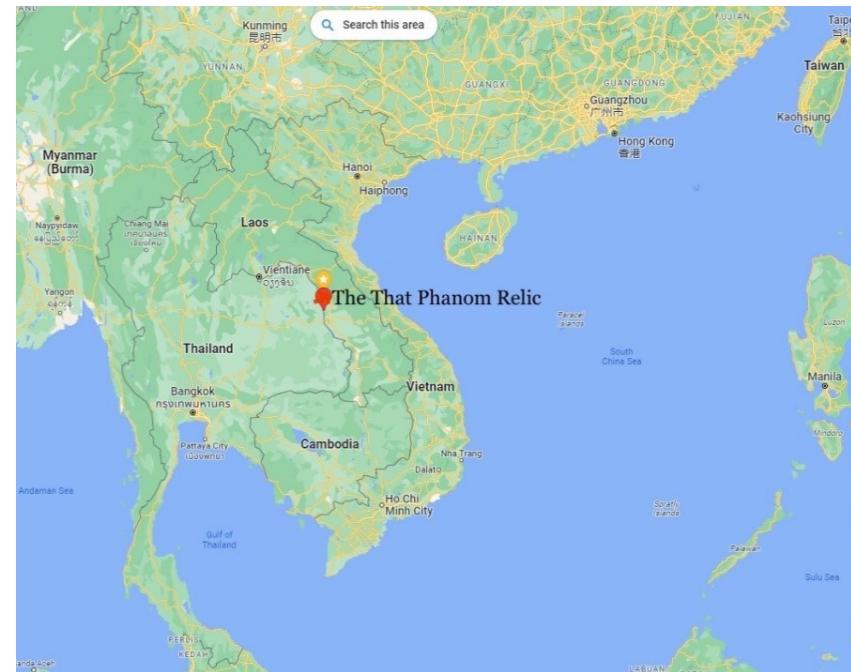
relic and the politics of social space and cultural hegemony in continental Southeast Asia, particularly those involving Thailand, Laos, and France. We did so to answer our research questions so that we could write a descriptive, analytical research article.

### The Lan Xang Kingdom: Phra That Phanom Relic and Political Implications

Lan Xang was established in 1353 during the reign of King Fa Ngum and was one of the most important kingdoms in Southeast Asia. This territory experienced ups and downs over the years. The reigns of Kings Chaisetthathirat (1548–1571) and Suriyawongsa (1638–1695) are considered the golden age of the Lan Xang kingdom. However, afterwards Lao Xang gradually became weaker and lost its independence to Siam and France. Finally, in 1975, the kingdom liberated itself from French colonialists and its citizens established the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Theravada Buddhism was an important part of the culture of Lao Lan Xang and had widespread influence. According to legend, the Buddha came to a place known as Sri Gotapura and predicted that cities would emerge in the middle of the Mekong basin, especially Nong Kan Khe Sua Nam (Vientiane), and that a pagoda containing the Buddha's breastbone would be built at Phu Kampra, which evolved into the That Phanom relic (Fine Arts Department, 1994: 66). Muang Sri Gotapura was an ancient kingdom that was influenced by Theravada Buddhism (around 536 BE) before being subsumed by the Khmer civilization between the 9th and 11th centuries, influencing Khmer architecture in this region (Thimwatanabangtherng, Kongpokanan, and Khudtawa, 2007). King Fah Ngum established Theravada Buddhism as the state religion from Cambodia to Laos around the 14th century (Wiphakphotchanakit, 1987).

Over time, Theravada Buddhism was assimilated by this society and culture, and it flourished. It not only supported the nation's rulers and bolstered the prestige of its elite, but also adapted to Lao social structures, such that it had distinct characteristics.



**Figure 1** Red indicates the location of the That Phanom relic in the Thai–Lao border region, as revised based on Google Maps on July 6, 2023

Buddhism in Lan Xang had a cultural legacy that reflected its dominance in the kingdom. An important cultural relic is Phra That Phanom, a sacred symbol of Buddhism that supported the prosperity of the kingdom of Laos through the reigns of many monarchs. It was an important stupa and a sacred symbol, the spiritual center of both sides of the Mekong River.

According to archeological evidence, Phra That Phanom was originally an example of Cham and Khmer architecture, and it most likely was created to serve the Hindu religion around the 11th century C.E. Subsequently, in the 15th century, it was modified into a Buddhist-style monument. Later, *Urangkha Nithan: Tamnan Phra That Phanom (The History of the That Phanom Breastbone Relic)* was composed to tell the story of the origin of Buddhism, the emergence of

cities in the central Mekong basin, the construction of Phra That Phnom, and the conduct and political power of the king of Lan Xang. Thus, this legend is the result of the Buddhistization of local culture and beliefs.

However, the *Urangkha Nithan* legend is similar to a contemporary local legend in the Lanna region of Thailand. Somchati Maneechoti (2011: 133) hypothesized that these myths were written on palm leaves in Lao Lan Xang and Lanna Thai around the 21st century BE. (From 2181 to 2238 BE, during the reign of King Suriyawongsa, the study and composition of Buddhist texts flourished. During this time, the Kingdom of Lan Xang was an important center of Buddhist studies that attracted monks and novices from the neighboring regions (Romain, 1999).

That Phnom was regarded as a sacred symbol in Buddhism, making it indispensable to the Lan Xang Kingdom. When the Lan Xang Kingdom was prosperous, monarchs were identified as patrons, maintainers, or renovators of the chedi. Venerating and preserving That Phnom Chedi bolstered the authorities' influence and power through the merit they made in this way.

According to legend, only an exceptionally meritorious monarch had the opportunity to construct and restore Buddhist relics in the same manner as the famous figure in Buddhism in India, King Ashoka. King Chaisetthathirat—who governed the Lan Xang Kingdom in a period of peace and prosperity—was thought to be a very meritorious individual because he renovated That Phnom. King Suriyawongsa was also considered a very meritorious sovereign during his reign and came to both venerate and maintain the That Phnom relic. After renovating the structure, the king was featured in a legend that stated that he would be reborn in a land where he would promote Buddhism and then be reborn in Tusita Heaven as a deity named “Suriyawongsa Chaiyachakathephrabutra Maitreya,” who would then be reborn once again and attain enlightenment as the fifth Buddha (Fine Arts Department, 1940: 12-13; Pruess, 1976).

Consequently, That Phnom is regarded as an important Buddhist symbol, reflecting the extension of Buddhist influence over

Mekong River basin settlements and the incorporation of indigenous beliefs into Buddhist culture. It was a significant and sacred symbol that was used to support various rulers' power, merit, and prestige. The legend, *Urangkha Nithan*, is a concrete example that describes the relationship between the land, the people, the authorities, and the prosperity of the Lan Xang Kingdom.

### That Phnom Relic: Its Contested Meaning and Social Space in the Context of Lao–Thai History and Politics

#### In the Traditional Era

As a sacred symbol that was transformed into a medium for culture, ideology, and politics, Phra That Phnom has conformed to social and political conditions in terms of its design and symbolic significance. The monument was constructed and renovated over the years by the five monarchs who governed the Mekong River Basin. It originally had a Cham and Khmer design and it is famous for containing the Buddha's breastbone relic. As described in the *Urangkha Nithan* legend, they were brought by the disciple, Phra Mahakassapa in accordance with Lord Buddha's prophecy. Five-hundred years later, five arahats and Phaya Sumit Thammawongsa, the governor of Sri Gotapura, increased the height of the stupa by two floors and relocated the Buddha's breast relic to the second floor, but the stupa had not yet been given a distinct Buddhist architectural form.

When the Lan Xang Kingdom expanded its political and cultural influence over the Mekong River basin, such stupas were modified in accordance with the Lan Xang architectural style via Theravada and Langka Buddhism (Walliphodom, 1975; Maneechoti, 2011: 47-48). Around 1690, King Suriyawongsa, lost power as a result of chaos in the Vientiane palace, and his ministers usurped his authority. Members of the royal household who had suffered from this coup sought refuge, relying on Phrakru Phonsamek, a loyal and respected monk, who had advised the monarch and was highly disciplined and skilled in the arts. He led these individuals and troops southward along the Mekong River

(Fine Arts Department, 1941). When he arrived at That Phanom Chedi, he amassed warriors to transform the structure into a Lan Xang-style Buddhist chedi. He increased the height of the stupa by 43 meters and altered the base of the second floor into a lotus shape made of masonry and cement. Similar to Phra That Luang Chedi in Vientiane, the upper portion of the chedi was fashioned into a square bell shape. The top of the chedi was a protuberance with a short, stout form (Fine Arts Department, 1979: 29-33).

Thus, in 1692, under the influence of Phrakru Phonsamek, That Phanom was converted into a Buddhist chedi that reflected Lao culture. Kiattisak Bangperng (2015) argues that the restoration of That Phanom by Phrakru Phonsamek was a significant turning point in the monument's history, as it marked the transformation of a symbol of Cham and Khmer culture into one of Lao Buddhist culture, and the chedi became a supportive emblem of the ideology and prosperity of the rulers of this Theravada Buddhist state.

However, as political and cultural powers shifted, That Phanom came to represent social and political relations in various power struggles. In the 1780s, Siam extended its control over the regions and people of Laos from southern Laos (Champasak) to northern Laos (Vientiane, the capital of Laos). When Siam took control of the Lao people, it initially allowed them to govern their country in accordance with their indigenous culture as long as they paid tribute to Siam (Wiphakphotchanakit, 1987). Siam acknowledged the significance and location of That Phanom as a symbol of the Lao people, and as long as the Lao maintained cordial relations with Siam, That Phanom would remain a symbol of the achievements of Lao rulers, the prosperity of the state, and the spiritual heart of the Lao people.

Later in the 19th century (1826), a Lao monarch named Chao Anuwong attempted to establish independence from Thai rule. He raised an army across the Mekong River to fight the Siamese army under the King of Siam (Rama III) and was able to advance to the inner city of Nakhon Ratchasima. However, he was surrounded and defeated after the Siamese employed a strategic battleplan, and he was taken to

Bangkok and executed. Siam began thereafter to devote more cultural and political attention to Laos. Siam increased its power and attempted to maintain cultural hegemony over Laos in the hopes of making the Lao people politically subservient. During this period, Siam began to perceive the significance of That Phanom Chedi as part of the Lao people's cultural heritage.

After defeating the Lao monarch, Rama III constructed the Bowon Sathan Sutthawat temple in Bangkok to venerate the Buddha and he vowed to accomplish further, similar feats. In this regard, he also constructed a replica of Phra That Phanom at this temple. This re-creation added a circular flower decoration to the top of its square lotus, a style that had never been used in Lan Xang art. However, this was the personal preference of Rama III, who favored decorating pagodas with floral motifs. Therefore, the restoration of That Phanom, the construction of other temples, and the construction of the replica of That Phanom at the center of Siam's political authority (Sriwongsa, 2019b) were intended to demonstrate Siam's dominance over Laos. These events also represented the political and social relationship between Siam and Laos. However, before the restoration of That Phanom could be completed, Rama III passed away (Thipakornwong 1963: 62-69). Later, the chedi was inherited by King Pinklao, who rebuilt it in a Siamese art style, with a tall and slender lotus-shaped apex that served as a model for later periods.

### **The French Colonial Empire**

During the 1850s and 1860s, the Siamese state increased its cultural hegemony when King Rama V confronted the French colonial powers that governed Indochina, which was the state's peripheral region. However, Siam and France implemented their respective political policies in significantly different ways. The French government was more popular with the population than that of Siam, as was demonstrated by a report prepared by the Siamese governors who were dispatched to rule the provinces of Laos. One of the Siamese governors, Luang Monyothanuyok, served in the city of Wang Kham, adjacent to

Vietnam, which was a French administrative region. He reported to the grand ruler, Prince Prachaksinlapakhom—the representative of Siam stationed in the Lao Puan provinces—that the French were contributing to the happiness and comfort of their citizens on the Vietnamese side, so they moved their families to reside in French territory across the Vietnamese border. He sent a report to Siam urging them to adopt the French method of employing civil servants to provide labor in Wang Kham City so that they would not have so many problems (National Archives, Rama 5, Matt. 2.59, Volume 3, cited in Khamphrom, 2003).

There is no evidence that the Siamese government responded to Luang Monyothanuyok's proposition regarding how to handle the people under Siamese rule. However, Siam was probably aware of the situation after some people from the northeast part of Siam fled to French territory. Apparently, Siam had become an agent of barbarism and tyranny. Eventually, Siam softened its rule over the left bank of the Mekong to encourage migration to the right bank of the Mekong or Isan, the areas also under its control.

However, when the French controlled Cambodia and Vietnam, they explored the artifacts of the various Khmer provinces to determine the borders of their jurisdiction and transported numerous antiquities back to France in 1859 (Nana 2004: 126-138). They also began exploring antiquities on the left bank of the Mekong River that were influenced by the Khmer civilization and the Lao people. This was completed so that Laos could also become a French colony (Singhhatthit, 1956). France employed its own archeological, architectural, and cultural methods as a strategy to establish hegemony over other lands and people.

During this period, the right bank of the Mekong, in areas like Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon, still featured Khmer-style architectural structures, including Arogyasala (Ku Phanna), Phu Phek Temple, Prasat Narai Jeng Weng, and That Phanom, which also bore traces of Khmer artistry. During the French colonial period, Somdet Krom Phraya Damrong Rajanubhab inspected the region, noting several Khmer-style temples and observing that part of the local population was of Khmer or Kham descent. Although these people were considered

“others” within Siam’s territory, he deliberately recorded and interpreted them as “nothing but the Thai race” (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1962: 427-432; 2021: 157-158). Upon his return, the Siamese state initiated reforms in the Lao territories, consolidating Isan’s governance under Siam’s central authority.

Siamese rulers attempted to dominate local art by interpreting local artifacts to separate them from the influence of the Khmer and the Lao. They also transferred these artifacts to Bangkok (Prakitnonthakarn, 2019) or modified them to match the characteristics of being Thai and even by replicating that art in the center of Siam or Bangkok.

France classified the Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese as “people under the command of France” during its colonial rule of Indochina. Siam, likely realizing the significance of this, imitated the French classification by reclassifying the Lao people of the northeast as “people under the command of Siam.” This led to a problem of interpretation, creating a controversy between the administrations of Siam and France (Soonthavanich, 2022: 230).

During a visit to Europe in 1897, King Rama V brought up this issue in an attempt to resolve the conflict, viewing it as a good opportunity to restore Siamese–French relations. However, it seems that the building of negotiations and relations did not proceed as he had hoped. Seven years later, however, in 1904, the main conflicts between Siam and France were resolved through the Franco-Siamese Treaty (Soonthavanich, 2022: 229-231). Opposing France, King Rama V centralized power by reforming the local region. He instituted a bureaucratic command structure to demonstrate to the Western colonists that Siam was a modern state with its own jurisdiction, establishing a new governmental structure. He simultaneously exercised cultural hegemony and military and administrative authority. By that time, the French government had usurped Siamese sovereignty (both governmental and military) from the Mekong River bank to a range of 25 kilometers, establishing a demilitarized zone (Royal Thai Navy, 2006: 39).

France’s quest for dominance and modern nation-state borders used culture as a crucial tactic. According to the French, the French

argued that the Khmer and Vietnamese had historically exerted significant influence over the land and the Lao people. Thus, when the Vietnamese and Khmer fell under French control, the land and people belonged to France (Army Training Command, 1941: 74). As it was located on the frontier between Thailand and France, That Phanom Chedi was regarded as a symbol of the region and the culture of Laos, which the French wished to control. Leaving significant Lao sacred relics with their original symbolic forms and meanings would have meant the French colonial power could expand across the Mekong River and take control of the region under Siamese control.

Phraya Damrong Rajanubhab, the dominant force in Siam's government and a key figure in the establishment of the Siamese nation-state, also regarded That Phanom as a significant national symbol. It would be a significant loss if his colonial adversaries acquired it (Khampron and Paripunyo, 2019:19). Thus, he went to assess the situation with government officials in the Phra That Phanom area, which after his return, became Phra That Phanom district.

Later, the square lotus atop That Phanom was extended to make it appear taller. This modification caused the round Lao-style lotus apex to become even more slender and lofty, making the artistic patterns more similar to those of Thailand. The Siamese governing class carried out this modification to demonstrate the extent of Siam's hegemony to the French colonial empire. It was a strategy to contest France's social and cultural hegemony, forcing it to recognize this region, its people, and their culture as part of Siamese territory (Sriwongs, 2019a: 41-62).

In 1893, France seized the left bank of the Mekong River in Laos after advancing against Siam. However, That Phanom's location on the right bank was difficult to control. Phraya Damrong Rajanubhab applied the concept of cultural hegemony to administrative reform in the Isan region. Shortly after he arrived in the northeast, several monuments were erected in this area and Bangkok in a style similar to That Phanom Chedi, including That Si Khun, That Prasit, That Tha Uthen, That Renu, That Nakhon, and That Champa. All of these buildings were constructed in the period between 1897 and 1922, during

Siam's struggle against the French colonial empire. This was one of the cultural hegemony strategies employed to connect Laotian territories on the right bank of the Mekong River to Siam.

However, the restoration of That Phanom Chedi was also a way to integrate the Lao people into Thai culture. On the one hand, the restoration of That Phanom was a strategy to fight the French colonial empire; on the other, using it as a spiritual symbol boosted the morale of the Lao people. People in this region naturally became more receptive to Siamese authority when their symbols were given significance.

By restoring and renovating That Phanom, Siam attempted to display its high regard for Lao architecture. However, its new style did not accurately reflect the former Lao design. The round form (in the style of Lao art) was supplanted by a square lotus in the Siamese style on the top. Thus, That Phanom grew taller and more slender, to resemble Siamese architecture. This was a sign of Siamese cultural hegemony in terms of ideology, politics, and people.

Conflicts over Buddhist symbolic objects were common occurrence in Theravada Buddhist states. When a state prevailed, it adopted and modified the sacred Buddhist symbols of the losing state as its own. Given this, Siam, upon conquering and governing Laos, not only had cultural and ideological dominance over its people, but it also contested and diminished the prosperity of Laos by taking seizing its sacred Buddhist objects and taking them to Siam (Narupiti, 2017). Numerous significant Buddha statues and structures that were historical evidence of Laos's prosperity, were all claimed by Siam, including the Emerald Buddha from Vientiane, Phra Phuttha Butsayarat Chakkraphat Phimonmanimai from Champasak (Bangperng, 2022; Gampurith, 2012), and Phra That Phanom, the subject of this study. Thus, claiming sacred objects in Theravada Buddhist states was a way to build social and political significance, aristocratic prestige, and governing authority. To appropriate sacred symbols was to diminish the enemy's power, merit, and prestige and to undermine its morale. By claiming these sacrosanct symbols, the winner's merit and prestige were enhanced, promoting the prosperity of the state.

### The Conflict with French Indochina

In the 1940s, the strategy of using Phra That Phanom's cultural symbolism to support political power reemerged. In Siam following internal conflicts, the People's Party transformed the government from an absolute monarchy into a democracy to be known as Thailand. Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram was appointed prime minister. In the context of World War II, this period is known as the “conflict with French Indochina.” France requested that Thailand refrain from invading Indochinese territory. Thailand stated that it would only agree if France returned the Lao provinces that Thailand once governed along the Mekong River's border, namely, Champasak province in southern Laos and Chaiburi province in northern Laos (Bangperng, 2021: 80).

In terms of cultural politics, the conflict with Western powers motivated Thailand to portray itself as a civilized nation. Under the supervision of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram, the Thai government implemented a nation-building policy that sought to unite various cultures in the name of the Thai nation and Thai-ness. Therefore, the new government had to urgently promote cohesion and gain support for its new system. One strategy was to cultivate Thai culture and nationalism through the arts. In this era, all art was created to play a role in the nation-building process, particularly in the context of the war to regain territories in French Indochina and lost during World War II, as Thailand aspired to become a major power in Asia (Prakitnonthakarn, 2009: 136-143). During this same period, several European nations used art for political purposes, for example, fascist art in Italy and Nazi art in Germany.

The Thai minister at the time, Lt. Gen. Prayoon Pamommontri, went to assess the Isan government and observed that That Phanom Chedi was an important sanctuary, revered by the locals. Therefore, he proposed that restoring it could convince tens of thousands of Indochinese citizens to become part of the Thai state (Maneechoti, 2011).

Thus, the government established an entity called the “Fine Arts Department” to handle this matter, and Luang Wichitwathakan was appointed as its director general (Fine Arts Department, 1979: 34).

Luang Wichitwathakan renovated That Phanom by using reinforced concrete from the base of the square lotus to the top of the pagoda. It became 23 meters tall and was shaped like an inverted, slender, square lotus crown. He stated that Phra That Phanom held significant archaeological and spiritual importance for the people. The taller it rose, the farther it could be seen, inspiring and attracting people's faith. Furthermore, it was believed that only those with great merit could undertake the restoration of Phra That Phanom (Wichitwathakan, 1962: 152-153), especially when increasing its height, as such a task required someone with profound merit. This renovation made That Phanom slimmer and taller. It followed the Thai pagoda style, distinct from the Lao style, which features a low, rounded form. When the apex of the pagoda was completed, it was adorned with intricate Thai traditional designs<sup>2</sup> resembling the *phum khao bin* (lotus bud) pattern, with cascades tiered up to the top. The intention to connect the pagoda to Thai culture was evident in the choice to decorate its apex with the *phum khao bin* design, which is a symbol of the formerly prosperous capital city of Sukhothai. Sukhothai is a source of pride for the Thai state because it was a powerful, sovereign kingdom that was not ruled by the Khmer Empire (Na Paknam, 2007: 269). It holds historical significance and boasts a rich language, culture, and artistic tradition. Luang Wichitwathakan, who led the renovation of Phra That Phanom, stated that the Sukhothai-style chedi, characterized by the *phum khao bin* shape, embodies the true essence of Thai art. He praised the intricate patterns from the Sukhothai era as exceptionally beautiful, noting that at the time, the Fine Arts Department, under his leadership as director general, was compiling these designs (Wichitwathakan, 1962). He emphasized that Sukhothai culture serves as an excellent model and

<sup>2</sup> These designs incorporated the traditional Thai *kranok* motif, harmoniously blended with the *pūrṇa-ghāṭa* or *puranakata*, depicting pots overflowing with floral patterns, commonly found in the Lanna region. However, Luang Wichitwathakan referred to Lanna as “Lanna Thai,” viewing it as intricately connected to the cultural richness and prosperity of Sukhothai. The study of Sukhothai culture, he argued, could be enriched by examining Lanna Thai culture, as certain elements absent in Sukhothai are often present in Lanna Thai traditions (Wichitwathakan, 1962: 131-132). I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Dr. Samerchai Poonswanan for his insightful observations regarding the *pūrṇa-ghāṭa* pattern.

urged a progressive rather than regressive approach. Culture, he argued, symbolizes advancement and growth. According to him, Thailand stagnated because it abandoned Sukhothai's cultural heritage in favor of foreign cultures, mistakenly believing them superior. He believed that Thailand would have been far more prosperous if the Sukhothai cultural foundation had not been neglected for 500 years (Wichitwathakan, 1962: 137–144). He called for a revival of Sukhothai culture to recover the progress lost over the centuries and envisioned a future where Thailand would thrive by embracing its cultural heritage. Sukhothai art has been described by Thai art historians as classical art or the Golden Age of Thai-ness. In the context of nationalist archaeological knowledge, Thai scholars have largely reproduced and reinforced this description. Therefore, the restoration of That Phanom incorporated the *phum khao bin* style of Sukhothai to enhance the upper portion of the monument (Figure 2). This was consistent with Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram's emphasis on the advancement of Thai-ness.



Figure 2 Left: *Phum khao bin*-style chedi in Sukhothai; middle: *Phum Khao Bin*-style sketches (Office of Technician Ten Group, Fine Arts Department, n.d.); right: examples of *Phum khao bin*-style of That Phanom relic in the present day

The renovation of That Phanom resulted in the narrowing of the pagoda's spire, following Thai prototypes; moreover, it was decorated with Thai art patterns (the *phum khao bin* pattern) to connect it with cultural Thai-ness, which was the dominant cultural hegemony

competing for social space at the time. The taller and more majestic that Phra That Phanom became, the more it inspired and attracted people's faith, drawing them towards Thai cultural influence. As a result, the people in the region also developed a stronger sense of Thai-ness. However, the use of reinforced concrete at the pagoda's peak in That Phanom's renovation did not include measures to strengthen its underlying structure. The concrete exerted tremendous pressure on the foundation of the chedi. Thirty years later, on August 11, 1975, after heavy and continuous rain, water that had accumulated caused the weight of the chedi's peak to become so great that the base was unable to support it. As a consequence, That Phanom collapsed and had to be rebuilt over the next two years.

The Fine Arts Department appointed committees and subcommittees to collaborate on the restoration and reconstruction of Phra That Phanom. The Subcommittee on the Design and Preservation of the Original Art of That Phanom felt that its architectural style should be the same as the one applied during the People's Party era because it was more beautiful, had greater artistic value, and was the style that people were familiar with. It would also adhere to the principles of international restoration and the Fine Arts Department's principles regarding the restoration of ancient monuments, according to which ancient monuments that are revered or well known to the general public should be restored without altering their appearance, color, or shape, as this would cause the ancient site to lose its value and sanctity.

Therefore, the current form of That Phanom reflects the same Thai-influenced architectural style. That Phanom Chedi was restored during the People's Party era and decorated with Thai art patterns and is regarded as completely Thai. A strong emphasis on Thai-ness, representing the significant pagodas of the Thai state, can be seen in the insistence on preserving the original style from that era (Figure 3). Somdet Krom Phraya Damrong Rajanubhab, son of King Mongkut, brother of King Chulalongkorn, army commander, and director general of the Education Department, elevated That Phanom to become one of

Thailand's most important pagodas (Damrong Rajanubhab and Mom Chao Chongchittanom Diskul Foundation, 1995).



**Figure 3** A kiosk depicting the development of That Phanom Chedi, from the 11th to the 20th century (from left to right). It was open to the public so that visitors could observe the evolution of the chedi on the occasion of the annual That Phanom Worship Ceremony in 2020

After the reconstruction, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) and Her Majesty Queen Sirikit returned the Buddha's breastbone relic, which had been safely stored in a casket along with valuable items discovered during the collapse of Phra That Phanom in the newly rebuilt Phra That Phanom. This act demonstrated to the public that That Phanom's significance as a national religious site was not limited to northeast Thailand. The practice can also be seen as upholding ancient traditions and demonstrating charisma in maintaining That Phanom according to Lao tradition, as the king of ancient Laos did in the past.

Nonetheless, if we observe the reconstructed design of That Phanom after it had collapsed, we can see that the symbols are significantly different. The height of That Phanom has been substantially increased through reconstruction. The size of the square lotus was increased to a height of about 57 meters (see number 5 in Figure 3).

Instead of returning to the Lao style of art, the shape was again altered to be more distinctively Thai, becoming taller and narrower than before, with a more distinct *phum khao bin* pattern, making it evident that Thai culture was supplanting Lao culture. Ultimately, the form and details of That Phanom were replaced by Thai designs to dominate and establish cultural hegemony, usurping the area and the people's ideas of what it means to be Thai.

Thus, it is evident that in the past, Phra That Phanom had a Lao architectural style that supported the authority and charisma of the Lan Xang king and reflected the grandeur of the Lao kingdom. It was a sacred symbol embedded in the consciousness of the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong River. With the arrival of French and Siamese colonial powers, however, the Mekong River became the border between Laos and northeast Thailand, which has been renamed Isan or Isan Thai. During the transitional period, the Thai state incorporated cultural Thai-ness into the designs and symbols of That Phanom, coupled with administrative authority and bureaucracy in order to transform the Lao people into Thai citizens. Today, That Phanom Chedi is situated within what is known as the Isan region of Thailand on the right bank of the Mekong River. As a result of the success of these projects, the Thai government established its cultural hegemony over the region's inhabitants. Consequently, That Phanom has become a symbol of "Thai-ness" in Isan Thai.

## Conclusion

That Phanom relic reflects the politics of various Theravada Buddhist states in mainland Southeast Asia, depicting power struggles over the region and its people. Cultural hegemony is the established global/colonial and local strategy to achieve political legitimacy. In addition to military might and dominance, this prevailing ideology and material culture were necessary for the conquest of Laos and Siam. Furthermore, cultural hegemony is essential to the legitimacy of governments. Siam may have taken inspiration from its French colonial counterparts,

who used culture and ethnicity to legitimize their rule over the Vietnamese, Khmer, and Laos. Therefore, Buddhism, which is the culture of both the left and the right banks of the Mekong River basin, was interpreted and symbolically transformed to construct a nation-state and a cultural identity. In power relations between Laos, Thailand, and France, the case of That Phanom demonstrates that symbols were utilized as a controversial mechanism for cultural hegemony. Understanding the symbolic politics of That Phanom enables us to comprehend the state of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the context of the politics of cultural hegemony and the social space between states. It shows that not only military and governmental tactics, but also the struggle for cultural hegemony through Buddhism are the mechanisms of power.

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