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THE ART OF BUDDHISM IN THE KHMER EMPIRE AND BEYOND And Present-day Thai-Cambodia Border Conflict

Ashley Thompson, ed., *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2022, 314 pages, SGD 56/USD 48.

Early *Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology* examines the emergence of post-Angkorian Theravada Buddhism across the Khmer Empire, territories that now constitute the present-day Cambodia and Thailand. This volume addresses a vital gap in the extant literature by adopting a transregional framework that seeks to transcend the national boundaries that have traditionally circumscribed art history and archaeological inquiry in this region. The volume editor emphasizes this need, as she clarifies, “The present volume is a response to a growing sense of the need and potential for breaking down the national barriers which have long defined the bulk of art historical and archaeological research on Cambodia’s post-Angkorian or Middle period” (p. 1). Despite its subject of inquiry being art history and Buddhism, it nevertheless covers topics concerning the politics of know-



ledge production, such as borders and formation of national identities, especially in those fluid times; and in the context of this volume, how art (from the decline of the usage of Sanskrit to the emergence of Theravadin Buddhism, the pervasiveness of the Pali texts, and the Bayon art style of Cambodia) subtly illustrates the underlying political and social dimension of power. For this reason alone, if not for many other reasons, is this work worthy of serious reading and scholarly exploration.

The introductory chapter (chapter 1) establishes the conceptual parameters of the volume by situating Theravada Buddhism within existing historiographical traditions and, more critically, by interrogating the taxonomic ambiguities that situate the tradition in Cambodia's modern period. Terms like "Post-Angkor," "Middle," and "Early Modern" are shown to reflect distinct ideas of national identity, ideas that are shaped more by Western epistemological constructs and thinking than by local traditions (pp. 17-20). Chapter 2 looks at historical evidence for Theravada across the Khmer empire. The limited archaeological traces from the Angkorian period raise ongoing questions in the extant literature about how Theravada is defined. Chapter 3 turns to the Jataka tales, especially the Vessantara-Jataka (the Great Birth Sermon) and the Sibi-Jataka (a Jataka tale describing the various incarnations of the Buddha, in which King Sibi is believed to have been the Buddha in a past life). Although these stories were less prominent in Angkorian art and texts, their material presence shows that Theravada was active in the region before the post-Angkorian era. The variety of Jataka tales depicted in the stupas and art forms also suggests that both Sanskrit and Pali were used, challenging the common historiographical narratives.

Chapter 4 moves the focus to present-day western Thailand and studies Buddha sculptures at Tham Phra (Buddha Cave) in Ratchaburi province, near the Myanmar border. Tham Phra, or the Buddha cave, contains a wooden shrine with several Buddha images. The chapter groups these sculptures into four categories based on similarities with art from Northeast India and Angkor (p. 172). It closely examines the details and cross-regional connections, showing that Buddhist and Theravada practices continued beyond the time of Jayavarman VII of the Khmer Empire. Chapter 4 surveys Theravada Buddhist structures in central Angkor during Cambodia's Middle Period. It looks at terraced platforms devoid of artistic embellishments. The chapter suggests that this simplicity might perhaps reflect Theravada beliefs or could be due to limited resources in the area.

Chapter 6 presents new findings from the Western Prasat Top at Angkor Thom, revealing multiple construction phases from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries CE, including the discovery of Chinese ceramics that help date the site. In contrast, Chapter 7 revisits the definitional challenges introduced in earlier chapters (Chapters 1 and 2). Here, the chapter offers a detailed iconographic analysis of the four Buddhas (i.e., Jina Buddha, Dasadisabuddha, Pancabuddha, and Dasabodhisattva) across Khmer and Thai material culture, and explores their origin within Mahayana, Theravada, or syncretic Buddhist traditions.

Finally, the concluding chapter (chapter 8) with a catalog of over three hundred Ayutthaya and Lan Xang Buddha images deposited in the south gallery of Preah Pean at Angkor, dates them stylistically to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The scale and timing of importation suggests that Angkor Wat functioned as a pilgrimage destination for Theravada devotees, highlighting the site's role as a

center of transregional connectivity and regional activity during this period (p. 288).

Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict

Though the book deals with Buddhism, art history, and archaeology, it nevertheless does offer some intriguing insights into some pressing political problems. The recent border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over disputed territory near the ancient Khmer period temples, Preah Vihear and Ta Muen Thom (in July and December 2025, along with other minor skirmishes in the early part of 2026) is a vivid illustration of such difficulties. The Bayon art style of Cambodia, which this book extensively deals with, of the “post-Angkor” period, is to be found throughout what we today call the borderlands of Thailand and Cambodia. Indeed, the conflict between the two antagonist states is over the contested territory in what was then the ancient Khmer Empire. However, with the formation of modern nation states, the demarcation of boundaries was done along arbitrary ethno-linguistic or religious lines based on the findings of some technical experts (Goettlich 2025) that subsequently accompany any such reconstitution of the state, bringing with it a rise of new national consciousness and the need to retain what is “our” land or territory.

Any such notions of national territory would have been alien to many in the context of the ancient Khmer Empire. If, for instance, anyone even cursorily glances at the extent of the ancient Khmer Empire, one would find present-day Thailand and Cambodia falling within this ancient empire. It was an empire that was diverse and built upon the cultural interaction between the Sanskrit civilization, Mahayana Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism across the Pagan, Khmer, and Dai Viet Empires.



As the author adroitly reasons, “How can we envisage premodern “Khmer-Thai” situations without having recourse to the modern prism by which nations appear *pre-destined* as such by the *apparent natural correlation between ethno-linguistic identity and territorial borders* (italics added)” (p. 14). The delineation of the boundaries of modern nation-states tends to project national demarcation as a picture of reality that is perennial and immemorial, thus establishing the ‘reality’ or the ‘truth,’ such as “this territory belongs to us,” and so forth. When we refer to the historical records, we find that such ‘reality’ is only a recent construct of the modern phenomenon of nation-states. Yet, once such realities are established as national ‘facts,’ whatever the verity of such claims, they are seen to be the ‘reality’ or the ‘truth’ backed by facts. And all efforts are geared to re-establishing, re-constructing, and re-interpreting the perceived and imagined order or ‘reality’. This is what the book takes pains in illustrating, even in terms of art historiography and archaeology of the Theravadin Buddhist-inspired art and stupas across what we know as modern Cambodia.

The book stresses that, “While modern Cambodia is clearly demarcated in territorial terms, ‘early Theravadin Cambodia’ is not, and the one does not correspond to the other” (p. 13). Hence, one cannot study, for instance, the ‘Theravadin art of Cambodia’ because there was no Cambodia at that time. Indeed, such historiography assumes the erroneous existence of ‘Cambodia’ in the interpretation and understanding of the Theravadin Bayon art style of the “post-Angkor” period.

Additionally, this logic also reduces art to nothing more than “the embodiment of the physical traits of ‘Khmer’ or ‘Thai,’ but also a window into the moral rectitude, intellectual capacity and creative flair of these so-defined peoples” (p. 15). This is tellingly illustrated in the field of historical art, where the interpretation of the art and its style is

reduced to a truncated factor such as national ethno-identity. The book revealingly states,

Just as European nation states were drawing national borders between ‘Cambodia’ and ‘Siam,’ so were historians tracking the origins and historical limits of these same states, with the one process feeding the other in a mutually reproducing loop. The racial categorization figuring in this conjoined political and academic demarcation of the region is nowhere more evident than in the art historical field, where arts are classified according to national styles identified with the physical features of the ‘races’ thought to have inhabited the lands in question (p. 15).

The book subtly informs us of the discreet nature of “worldmaking,” a concept illustrating “the ways we make what we make—call the versions [sic] or worlds as you like—and of the criteria we use in judging what we make” (Goodman 1984, 94). By virtue of making our world (i.e., worldmaking), be they a nation-state, an ethnic group, a linguistic community, a religious sect, and so on, we ipso facto also set the criteria of judging and demarcating what constitutes our (i.e., the) ‘reality’ or the ‘truth.’ In the same manner this volume seeks to show how such a distorted prism provides misconstrued accounts of the existence of Cambodia, in its present form, during the emergence of Theravada Buddhism toward the ‘post-Angkor’ period. Instead, the editor of this present volume highlights the need to see how Theravada Buddhism shaped the emerging Cambodia, and how that emerging Cambodia in turn shaped the emergence of Theravada post-Angkor, illustrated by the Bayon art style, which is the subject of the present volume.



This volume, in the final analysis, though dealing with art history and Buddhism as its object of investigation, nevertheless allows us to generously peek into the manufacturing of reality, and thus of knowledge production that justifies and validates the ‘reality.’ It is an essential introductory read for those trying to grasp the complicated and divisive nature of political issues, such as border and national identity construction.

Note on the Reviewer

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