

King Rama III-Period Murals and their Chinese Home Decoration Theme

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ABSTRACT—The reigns of King Rama II and King Rama III are considered the height of Chinese artistic influence in Thai Buddhist art. Painting is an evident example; different Chinese culture-related mural themes were painted in many temples during this time. One of those themes portrays various arrangements of Chinese furniture and decorative articles. These are often assumed to display Chinese altar arrangements, but their elements and artistic styles show that these paintings portray various Chinese home decoration styles. There are two social factors probably causing this theme to be popular in this period: the Siamese elites' attraction to realism and liberation from old convention; and their perception of China as the most powerful country.

Introduction

There is much Thai and foreign literary evidence of the long relationship between China and Siam, involving the exchange of various aspects. Through this contact, Chinese art and culture had great influence in Siam.

The reign of King Rama III (1824–1851) is a period in which the relationship between China and Siam was especially close, as described in contemporary accounts by Siamese and foreigners. In particular, this was a golden age for Chinese influence on Thai Buddhist art. Before this period, Thai traditional art was dominant, and Chinese art had a subsidiary role. However, in King Rama III's reign, the situation changed. Chinese architectural elements appeared in many temple buildings, and Chinese themes, such as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, appeared in murals in many ordination halls and assembly halls.

One element in these murals was the portrayal of Chinese home decoration styles. In this article, I will discuss the significance of this theme and its social background.

Chinese altar or Chinese home decoration?

Among the murals from the reign of King Rama III, there are some showing various Chinese objects such as vases, candles, mirrors, trees, flowers and fruit, all

arranged on Chinese furniture of various types (see Figure 1).

Prince Damrong Rajanubhab was the first scholar who commented on this. He believed it was associated with the “Garden of the Right”¹ built during the reign of King Rama II in the Grand Palace. After his accession in 1824, King Rama III did away with this establishment, and many articles from this place were donated to temples. As a result, artists depicted these objects in mural paintings (Damrong 1964: 48–49). However, Prince Damrong did not give a name to this kind of painting.

More recently, scholars have called this theme “Chinese altar” style (Youngrot 1996: 81; Rasameewong 1984: 32), suggesting that these murals portray a Chinese form of altar arrangement. Nevertheless, I believe the theme is related to Chinese home decoration.

In some temples such as Wat Ratcha-orasaram (see Figure 2), Wat Chandaram, and Wat Sampraya, this theme was painted on the four main walls of the ordination hall. In others such as Wat Sudat (Figure 3) and Wat Prachetuphon (Wat Pho), it appears only on small areas such as doors and window panels.

Typically a Chinese altar is arranged with one incense pot, two candle holders, and two vases (Figure 4). The two vases are omitted in some cases (Figure 5). One or more tables are used for placing these five main articles and other votive food.² If several tables are used, the smaller ones are at the front with the largest behind, giving an appearance of steps (Figure 5).

I found that few paintings of this group conform to the concept of a Chinese altar (Figure 6). Most of the paintings depict domestic articles such as porcelain, furniture, stationery, and decorative objects. These arrangements are reminiscent of Chinese home interiors with many decorated rooms, including the one for an altar worshipping gods and ancestors. Thus, I think “Chinese home decorations” is the most suitable name.

Wat Ratcha-orasaram as the place of origin

The meaning of any icon or motif may change across space and time. To understand its original meaning, we need to locate the oldest occurrence. In our case, that is the mural from the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram.

Dating

There is no written evidence to date these paintings, but there are clues in several historical accounts.

Records show that the future King Rama III had the temple constructed in 1817 (*Bangkhunthian* 1967: 190). The account by the British envoy Sir John Crawford

¹ The “Garden of the Right” was a private garden, situated on the right side of Chakrapatpiman Throne Hall, hence the name.

² Another example can be seen from *Daily Life in the Forbidden City*, Figure 460

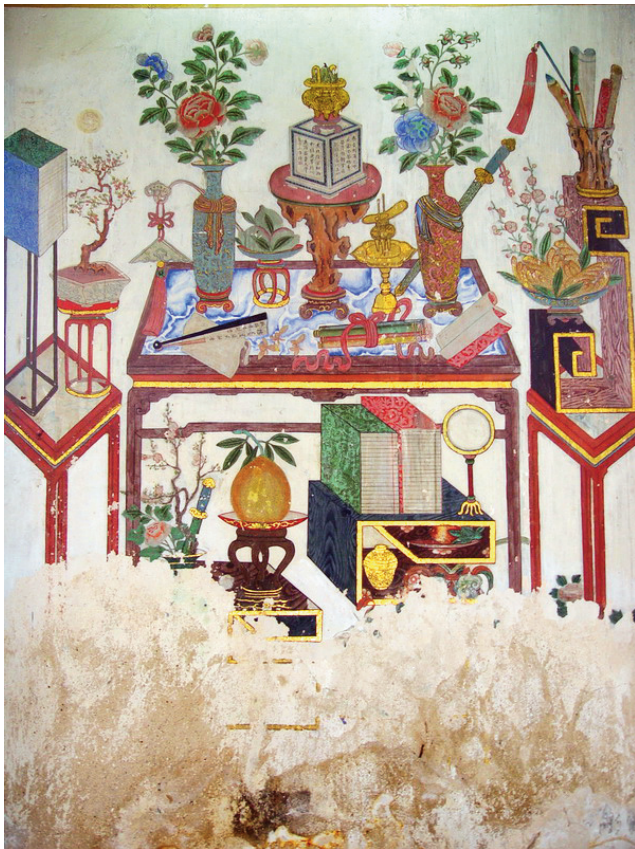


Figure 1 (left). Mural in Wat Phakhininat, Third Reign (photographed by Sakchai Saisingha)

Figure 2 (below). Murals inside the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram (photographed by the author)





Figure 3 (above). Murals on a window panel of the assembly hall, Wat Sudat (*Two Centuries of Wat Sudatsanadepwararam*, p. 152)

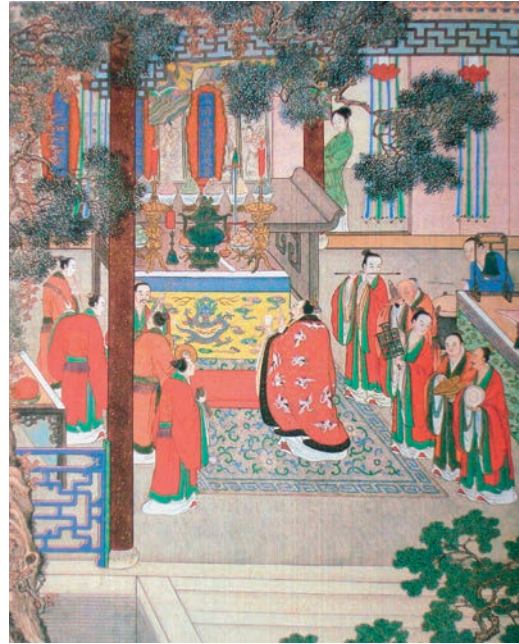


Figure 4 (below). Five main altar articles, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) (photographed by the author)

Figure 5 (above right). Illustration from *Jin Ping Mei*, 1700 AD (Sarah Handler, "Side Tables, a Surface for Treasures and Gods," Fig.7)

Figure 6 (right). Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (audio-visual department, Silpakom University Library, Thapra Campus, slide code 0330)



shows that the construction of the ordination hall in this temple was already finished by the time of his visit in 1822, and that preparations were being made to install the principal Buddha image for the building (Crawford 1967: 130–131). By this time, the murals inside this ordination hall would have been started, and the concept and scheme of the painting would have been set.

The year 1822 falls in the Second Reign. The construction and renovation works on all the other temples in which murals have this theme were started in the Third Reign. Hence the mural in the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram is the oldest with the “Chinese home decoration” theme.

Details of the paintings

The paintings of Chinese furniture and decorative objects are found in three areas of the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram: the four upper walls; the four lower walls; and the window panels. The door panels are decorated with guardians in the form of Chinese soldiers, and the ceiling has Chinese auspicious symbols such as butterflies and pomegranates.

The upper walls have a distinguishing characteristic: they are divided into panels of varying shapes, each containing a different arrangement of Chinese decorative objects (Figures 2, 7).

Youngrot (1996: 81–88) suggests that the artisans had to determine the most suitable composition for the walls. They aimed to present various arrangements of home decoration. If the artisans simply painted them together on the large space of the upper walls, each component would probably be too large, and the overall painting would be disorganized. They solved the problem by dividing the walls into panels and then painting one arrangement of home decoration in each panel.

Youngrot’s idea is very interesting. However, there is some evidence showing that those panels served another aim. In each panel, the artisans applied a gradation technique to the inner side (Figure 8) and the motifs in the upper corners (Figure 9). If the idea proposed by Youngrot was the case, why did the artisan have to employ this technique? The artisans expected these panels and their decorative motifs to represent something real. I think that the panels actually represent a large array of shelves ornamented with openwork at the upper corners of each shelf.

Among the new furniture styles created in China under the Qing Dynasty was *Bogu-Jia* (博古架), a complex and irregular arrangement of shelves for displaying decorative objects (Figure 10; Wang 1990, p. 82). This furniture was popular among the Chinese elite, as seen from paintings of the period (Figure 11). One important feature is that the shelves have varying forms such as rectangular, square, and L-shapes. The painted shelves on the upper four walls share the same characteristic. Hence, it is likely that the mural in the upper section is a representation of *Bogu-Jia*.

The paintings on the lower walls are in a dilapidated condition, but fortunately



Figure 7 (above). Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (photographed by Sakchai Saisingha)

Figure 8 (left) and 9 (opposite). Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (photographed by the author)

Figure 9 (opposite). Detail of Figure 8 showing gradation technique (photographed by the author)





were photographed earlier (Figures 6, 12, 13). This area is divided into bays by the doors and windows.

Each bay depicts home decorations in Chinese style. The top of each bay has motifs that resemble openwork (Figure 15), and the sides are painted as long curtains (Figures 13). These features were found similar to a decoration style for door and window frames in Chinese houses (Figure 14). As a result, each section appears as a view through a door or window into the rooms of a house decorated with Chinese furniture, altar and valuable ornaments.

The window panels depict flower baskets decorated with numerous floral motifs and hanging like mobiles (Figure 16). A simpler version can be found in the paintings on the lower walls (Figure 13), showing that such baskets were used for ornamenting the interior of a house.

In traditional Thai murals, the paintings on the four walls have a certain pattern: for example, the back wall is based on Buddhist cosmology; the front wall usually has a scene of the Lord Buddha subduing Mara; the upper part of the side walls shows the assembly of gods paying homage to the presiding Buddha and the lower part has scenes from Jataka tales or the life of the Buddha. All are based on Buddhist scriptures and texts.

In the same way, the murals in the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram have a relationship. The upper sections of the four walls portray Bogu-Jia furniture with Chinese home ornaments; the lower sections are like views into the rooms of a house; and the window

panels show mobiles in the form of flower baskets. All of these elements make the ordination hall resemble the interior of a Chinese house containing many things such as furniture, precious things, flowers, fruit, stationery, and altars.

In the Third Reign, according to some Siamese and foreign accounts, the Siamese elite, especially those in the royal court, favored Chinese styles of garden and home interior in the decoration of their residences (Thiphakornrawong 1961, pp. 100–101; Crawford 1967, p. 85). There is no written evidence explaining the theme of the

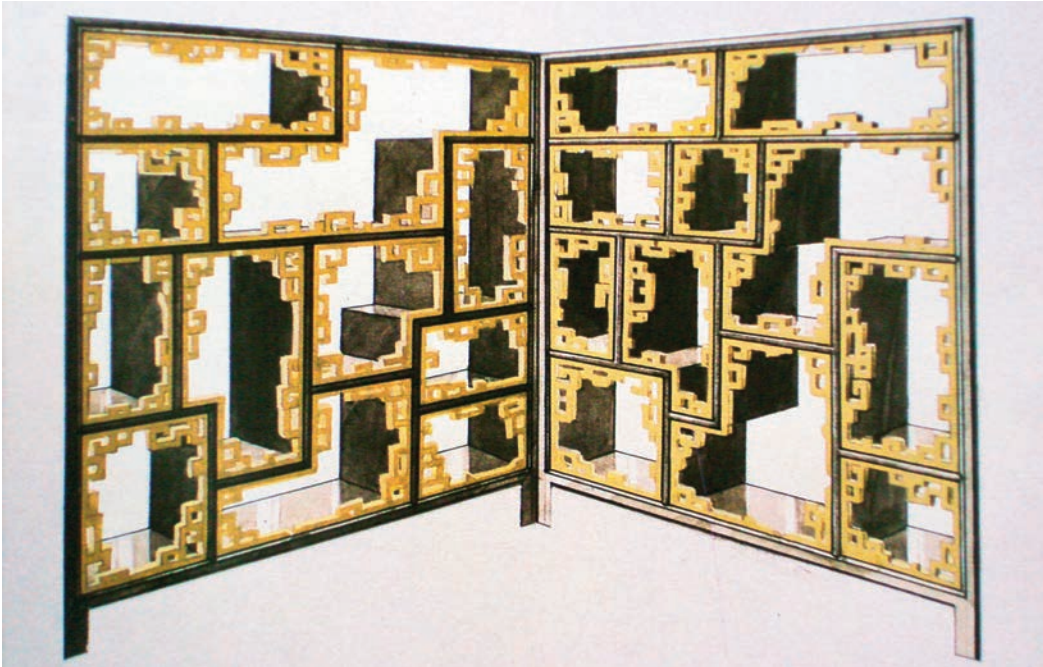


Figure 10 (above). *Bogu-jia* shelves (Jiaqing Tian, "Early Qing Furniture in a Set of Qing Dynasty Court Paintings," 12a)



Figure 11 (left). Qing Dynasty painting (Jiaqing Tian, "Early Qing Furniture in a Set of Qing Dynasty Court Paintings," 12)

Figure 12 (below). Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (audio-visual department, Silpakorn University Library, Thapra Campus, slide code 0330)





Figure 13. Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (audio-visual department, Silpakorn University Library, Thapra Campus, slide code 0330)



Figure 14. Chinese painting showing a home interior with a window, curtains and openwork motifs at upper left, Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, Pl. 75.)



Figure 15. Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (photographed by the author)

murals in the ordination hall of Wat Ratcha-orasaram. However, this group of paintings coincides with the popularity of Chinese home decoration among the Siamese elite. This shows that the new trend for home decoration was probably the reason for the occurrence of this new painting theme.

The social and intellectual background

John Crawford visited the palace of Prince Jesadabodin, the future King Rama III, and his account shows that the prince decorated his residence with Chinese furniture



Figure 16. Murals inside the ordination hall, Wat Ratcha-orasaram (photographed by the author)

(Crawford 1967: 85). This reflects his favor for Chinese art to some extent. Thus, the prince was probably responsible for transposing this style into the murals.

Why did Prince Jesadabodin prefer this secular and realistic theme over the traditional representation of Buddhist themes? And why did he choose Chinese style?

Most scholars have attributed the popularity of Chinese-influenced art in this era to the prince's personal preference for this art. They have pointed out that Wat Ratcha-orasaram was constructed under his patronage and that every building in the complex shows Chinese architectural elements. They argue that once he succeeded to the throne, Chinese style became more popular because elite and commoners followed the preference of their king (Rasameewong 1984: 33).

While this may be true, other reasons may also be important. During the Second Reign, Prince Jesadabodin was not alone in his taste for Chinese culture. King Rama II had the "Garden of the Right" in the Grand Palace built in a Chinese style. Prince Sakdi Ponlasep³ had Wat Paichayon Ponlasep built in an architectural style similar to Wat Racha-orasaram, as did Phraya Phetpichai⁴ with Wat Prodkedchataram. What was behind this trend of thinking among several members of the elite? I believe there were two intellectual currents at work: a rejection of tradition and embrace of realism; and admiration of China as the most superior country.

Rejection of tradition and embrace of realism

In the early reigns of the Rattanakosin era, members of the elite tried to liberate themselves from old conventions inherited from the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1350–1767), in particular the strictures of religion and ritual. In his study of the literature of this era, Nidhi Eoseewong noted the decline of the ritual element and the fading popularity of traditional genres. Instead, more secular literature was composed; several foreign literary works were translated, including some from China; and the prose genre, derived from China, grew in popularity (Eoseewong 1995: 53–59, 94).

Realism was also on the rise. In his reform of Buddhism, King Rama I tried to decrease supernatural and miraculous beliefs among Siamese Buddhists (Sattayanurak 2003: 110–127). Some early Rattanakosin literary works also took plots and themes from real life rather than the mythological tales which had been popular in the Ayutthaya era (Eoseewong 1995: 242, 244, 250).

Artistic production of the time was susceptible to the same trends. The adoption of Chinese architectural styles and decorative motifs reflected a desire for novelty and innovation. The traditional themes of mural painting, drawn from Buddhist cosmology and legend, were less popular than the past because they felt remote from what people encountered in everyday life. Chinese home decoration was appealing because it was secular and realistic, something that members of the Siamese elite saw in their real life.

China: The most superior country

Siam during this era was open to cultural influence from many sources, such as

³ A son of King Rama II, appointed as the Front Palace (title given to the heir to the throne) in the reign of King Rama III.

⁴ Prince Sakdi Ponlasep's advisor

Persia, China, and Europe. Why then was Chinese influence so prominent?

There are some foreign accounts showing that the Siamese considered China as the most powerful and superior nation, and favored her culture. Chinese travelers who visited Siam during the period 1781–1795 noted that the Siamese gave priority to the Chinese language, and that people who could compose Chinese poetry were greatly admired and invited to royal palaces (Masuta 2003: 142–149). Such accounts might be suspected of some patriotic bias, yet Crawford also noted that in the Siamese thoughts “the Chinese are the only considerable foreign people with whom they hold much intercourse, and whose superiority to themselves they are at all disposed to admit.” (Crawford 1967: 332) However, the Siamese attitude toward other countries was totally different: they thought that their neighboring countries and even those of the western world were all inferior to Siam (Thawornchanasan 2002: 24).

Historical events reflect these attitudes. During the early Rattanakosin period, every king on accessing the throne sent an envoy to China to ask for royal credentials from the Chinese emperor. These credentials had no significance for the king’s political authority in his kingdom and did not mean that Siam considered herself a vassal of China. They were sought in the belief that they increased the might of Siam through association with the most powerful country (Wilson 1970: 145). The Siamese court believed that China would support Siam, as shown when King Rama I sent an envoy to ask China to force Burma to return Mergui, Tavoy and Tenasserim to Siam (Khanakammakan Suebkhon Prawatisat Thai 1980: 43–44). Moreover, the Siamese elite followed some Chinese cultural practices. King Rama II ordered the construction of the “Garden of the Right” after he was informed by his envoy to China that there were garden competitions between rich men in Beijing and Guangdong (Thiphakornrawong 1961: 80), and the garden design followed the Chinese style (Narinthorntevi 2002: 340–342).

In the thinking of the Siamese elite, China was the most superior and powerful country. Hence when they sought new styles to supplant old traditions, they looked to China, the country that the Siamese elite considered superior in power and culture.

Conclusion

The motifs in the early Rattanakosin period which have been dubbed the “Chinese altar” are in fact based upon Chinese home decoration. This can be seen most clearly through a study of the murals at Wat Ratcha-orasaram, the earliest example of this style. Its occurrence should be related to the popularity of Chinese home decoration among the Siamese elite. The adoption of this theme for temple decoration reflects two general trends of this era that are, visible also in literature: first a tendency to reject tradition and embrace novelty and realism; and second a perception of China as the most superior country.

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