

HELL SCENES IN THAI MURALS

by

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Many *wat* throughout Thailand have an elaborate portrayal of Siamese cosmology on the back wall of the *bot*. It is usually an epic scheme of hells, earth and heavens, based upon the *Traiphum* text, alleged to have been written during the fourteenth century A.D.¹ Pictorial examples may be found at Wat Ko Keo in Phetchaburi and at Wat Phutthaisawan in Ayutthaya. Other extant representations may be found at Wat Suwannaram and Wat Dusitaram in Thon Buri (figures 2, 4-6).²

King Rama I commissioned Phraya Thammapracha to rewrite this cosmological treatise in 1803.³ The monarch's personal interest in the theme may have influenced his decision to have hell scenes included among the murals in the *bot* of Wat Phra Keo in Bangkok and of Wat Yai Intharam in Chon Buri (figure 1),⁴ as well at other monasteries, including the murals in the north *wihan* and the *sala kan parian* at Wat Phra Chetuphon (Wat Pho) in his capital.

"*Traiphum*" has a Sanskrit etymology: *tri* meaning "three", and *bhumi* signifying "level" or "stage". In Siamese murals, *traiphum* is usually depicted as a compartmentalized universe

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1. Illustrated manuscripts of the *Traiphum* text were said to have been made during the fourteenth century A.D. and copied in subsequent centuries. The National Library in Bangkok preserves an early sixteenth-century manuscript, allegedly a copy of a fourteenth-century treatise. It is extremely large, and unfolds to a length of five feet. See Elizabeth Lyons, "Zur Thailändischen Malerie", in *Kunst aus Thailand* (Munich, 1963), pp. 50-51, and Nos. 301-305; Silpa Bhirasri, "Traditional Thai painting", in *The Siam Society Fiftieth Anniversary Commemorative Publication: Selected Articles from the Siam Society Journal* (Bangkok, 1954), II, p. 284; and with Dhanit Yupho, *wiwanthanakan haeng chittrakam saphanang khong thai* (Bangkok, 1959), pp. 15-16, 32-33, and figures 14-15, 58-59. Another *Traiphum* manuscript of the Thon Buri period was completed in 1776; this is now preserved at the National Museum, Bangkok. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18, 36-37, and figures 20, 68-69; and Klaus Wenk, "Thailändische Miniaturmalereien, nach einer Handschrift der Indischen Kunstabteilung der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin", in *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*. Supplementband III (Wiesbaden, 1965). The original text allegedly composed under the auspices of King Lithai in Sukhothai is still a matter of dispute in terms of its date and authorship. For a few analyses, see Michael Vickery, "A note on the date of the Traibhūmikathā", in *Journal of the Siam Society*, LXII (2), 1974, pp. 275-284; Craig Reynolds "Buddhist cosmography in Thai history, with special reference to nineteenth-century culture change", in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXV, 1976, pp. 203-220; and George Coedès, "The Traibhūmikathā Buddhist cosmology and treatise on ethics", in *East and West*, VII, 1957, pp. 349-352; and with Charles Archambault, trs., *Les Trois Mondes (Traibhumi Brah Ryan)*, (Paris, 1973).

2. Joti Kalyanamitra, *Six Hundred Years of Work by Thai Artists and Architects* (Bangkok, 1977), p. 31; and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, ed., *prachum charik wat phra chetuphon* (Bangkok, 1974), p. 47. See also Jean Boisselier, *La peinture en Thaïlande* (Fribourg, 1976), pp. 137-140; and cf. pp. 177-181. For the Wat Phra Keo depiction, see William Maxwell Wood, *Fankwei, or the San Jacinto in the Seas of India, China and Japan* (New York, 1859), p. 198, describing the murals he observed in 1822. Although the *bot* at Wat Saket in Bangkok was repainted during the seventh reign, it is supposed to adhere to the early Ratanakosin style and format; see Phra Debgunabhorn (Kiew Upaseno), compiler, *A History of Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara*, tr. Phra Piyasilo (Tan Beng Sin), (Bangkok, 1976), pp. 15, 28-29, and figures 36-37.

3. Prince Dhani Nivat, "The reconstruction of Rāma I of the Chakri dynasty", in *Journal of the Siam Society*, XLIII (1), 1955, p. 37. Cf. Frank E. Reynolds, "Civic religion and national community in Thailand", in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXVI, 1977, pp. 271-272.

4. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Vichai Poshyachinda of Bangkok whose excellent photographic archives I was able to study at length in preparation for this article. Most of the illustrations accompanying this text were kindly supplied by him.

of overlapping and interdependent units. Each section merges into its neighbor without true demarcations. This lack of specific divisions may be partly attributed to the nature of the text itself, which is long and complicated. Its 60 volumes fully describe various aspects of Buddhist cosmogony, but not as lucidly as a modern Westerner might like. No attempt is made to explain the origination of matter; the text begins by indicating the existence of an infinite number of cosmic elements similar to one another. After immense intervals of *kalpa* (time cycles), these amorphous constituents are "destroyed" and eventually "regrouped".⁵

In a typical pictorial representation as those cited above (for example, figure 1), at the center of each world is a large mountain called Phra Men (Mount Meru). Eight ocean belts may encircle this mass, while seven spherical mountain ranges usually intervene. Within the outermost ocean are four islands, the 'southern' group constituting the realm of man. Hovering above this are six minor heavens where those who practiced virtue and charity as men are reborn as *deva*. Above these lower heavens are nine stages, variously subdivided. These are the abodes of angelic beings who enjoy only the earthly senses of sight and hearing. Members existing within this state of extreme beatitude are alleged to benefit from it for 26 *kalpa* until their accumulated merit has been exhausted. Still higher are the four heavens where formless *arupaphrom*, invisible essences typifying six kinds of goodness, await release from this pleasant state to achieve *nibbana*. The diagram therefore illustrates the realms which were transcended by the historical Buddha as represented by the Buddha image placed before the pictorial scheme. Others have attained *nibbana*, but their evolution was long and difficult.⁶

Interestingly enough, graphic renditions of unhappy hell states usually occur beneath those of earth (figure 2). Somewhat comparable to European Romanesque depictions, the pictures are warnings to devotees. In the Buddhist context, however, they dramatize the extreme torments which accrue to those who cultivate greed, aversion and delusion in their minds. Hells comprise extreme and violent experiences, such as intense heat or cold, filth, demonic apparitions and unendurable suffering, to name just a few. Those who exercise their hatred on others by killing, torturing, or maiming (either on a physical or psychological level) may expect a kindred rebirth in comparable realms.

Sometimes the Siamese murals are quite repulsive. During the nineteenth century they appeared to be vividly executed to quite a few occidental visitors who took the trouble to mention them in their journals. Witness the torments described by Sir John Bowring:⁷

5. Phra Khantipalo, *Buddhism Explained* (Bangkok, 1973), p. 63.

6. The rich significance of this theme is rendered in sculptural form at Borobudur in central Java. Scholars have interpreted the design of this splendid complex in terms of ascending spheres called *dhatu*: e.g. (a) *kāma dhatu* is the earthly existence in which sensual beings are trapped within the clutches of desire and instinctive behavior resulting in various punishments, or, if members enact good deeds, they receive inconsequential rewards; (b) *rūpa dhatu* is the realm of form and intellect unhindered by the five senses; and (c) *arūpa dhatu* is the formless state transcending the lower levels. See J. Dumarcay, "Éléments pour une histoire architecturale du Borobudur", in *BEFEO*, LX, 1973, pp. 105-109; N.J. Krom and Th. van Erp *Barabudur: Archaeological Description* (The Hague, 1927); and *Beschrijving van Barabudur* (The Hague, 1920-1931). N.J. Krom identified the Sanskrit texts portrayed in the reliefs; e.g. the *Lalitavistara*, *Gandavyuha*, *Jātakamala*, and *Avadana*; see *Inleiding Tot de Hindoe-Javaansche Kunst* (The Hague, 1932), I, pp. 366-387. Cf. Paul Mus, *Barabudur: esquisse d'une histoire du Bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes* (Hanoi, 1935). Also note, Barton Sensenig, III, "The psychological symbolism of Thai Buddhist cosmology", in *Visakha Puja*, 1973, pp. 72-79; and cf. *Visakha Puja*, 1974, p. 134, for the enumeration of the realms.

7. Sir John Bowring, *Journal* (London, 1856), II, pp. 284-285. Cf. Anna Harriette Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (Boston, 1873), pp. 178-180.



I. Cosmological diagram, Wat Yai Intharam, Chon Buri.



2. Hell tortures, Wat Dusitaram, Thon .Buri.



3. Convicts tortured in Temiya Jataka, Wat Khongkham, Ratchaburi.



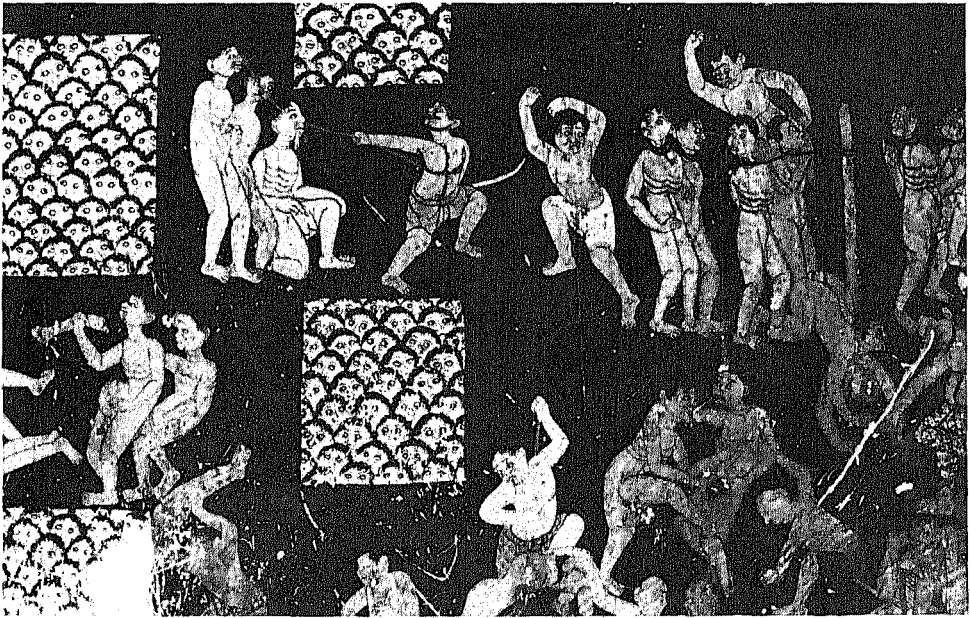
4. Phra Malai visits hell, Wat Dusitaram, Thon Buri.



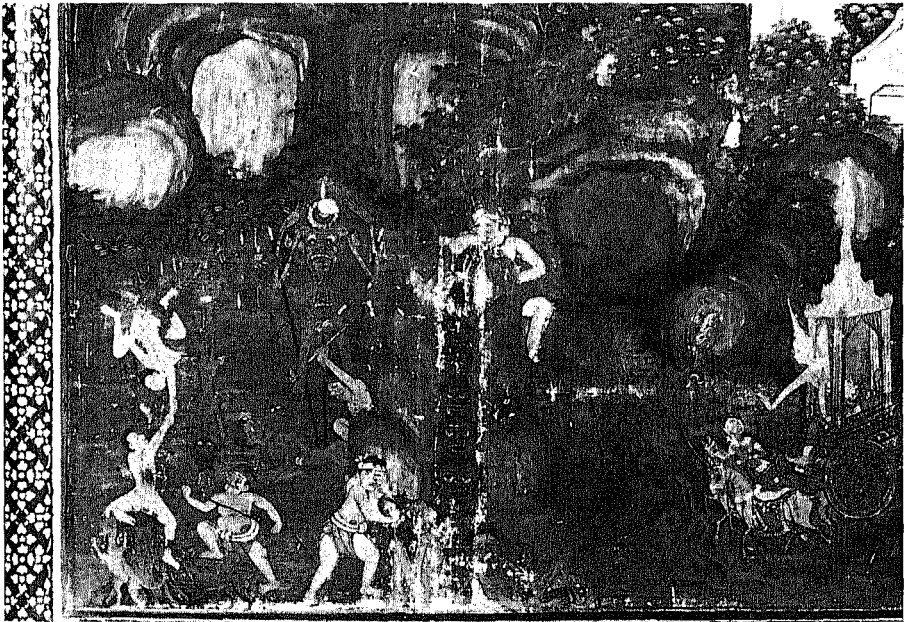
5. Hell tortures observed by Phra Malai, Wat Dusitaram, Thon Buri.



6. Victims in hell, Wat Dusitaram, Thon Buri.



7. Hell tortures, Wat Yai Intharam, Chon Buri.



8. Nimi Jataka, Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.

"... one man was undergoing the operation of eating his privat parts, as a punishment for incontinence; a glutton was seen reduced to starvation; a wine-bibber was laid on his back, exposed to the burning sun; a liar had his tongue cut out; an incompetent doctor was being squeezed to death under the stone with which they prepare their medicines. Flaying, scalping, burning alive, and multitudinous other horrid forms of death, were being inflicted, most of them having reference to some particular crime committed in the body..."

Generally speaking, scenes of hell are customarily painted in drab, dark colours. It they are part of the total *Traiphum* scheme, they are partially hidden behind the principal *bot* image, and they have to compete with the brighter tonalities of earth and resplendent heavens in the cosmological display. Perhaps the best examples may be found at Wat Dusitaram in Thon Buri (figure 2) where victims are tormented by animal-headed demons. Their tortures are much more extreme than comparable ones to be observed in the Temiya Jataka, the first tale of the Siamese *Thosachat*. One representation may be seen at Wat Khongkharam in Ratchaburi (figure 3).⁸

The duration of the distress seems without end, the pain is so intense. Some Siamese calculations assume that there may be 5,120 hells in which every conceivable form of suffering is allocated to those guilty of evil deeds, both physical and mental. In other words, as suggested by the quote above, punishments suit the crimes. The *Traiphum* enumerates each retribution at great length and in minute, gruesome detail.

However, some beings who are not born immediately in a hell state are known as *pret* (Sanskrit: *preta*), a kind of wandering ghost afflicted with unsatisfied cravings, especially hunger and thirst. They are said to be the misers of the world, those greedy people who hoarded their wealth and did good to no one, perhaps not even themselves while they were alive. Strong attachment to material possessions brought them to this wretched state. They failed to acquire good *kamma* during their lifetime on earth. Usually they are represented with a gigantic belly, a long needle-like neck, and a microscopic mouth. Since this type of creature cannot consume enough food or drink, he is in eternal torment which is merely a symbol of his craving after material possessions which has led him to this impasse. These spirits are supposed to dwell in just one type of upper hell which overlaps with life on earth. As indicated above, there are supposedly well over 5,000 varieties of these states of wretched existence in the Siamese tradition. In general, the artists tended to concentrate upon eight particular hells which suit the evil deeds of their inmates. To enumerate all of these would be too lengthy here. Suffice it to say that they were either extremely hot or cold, possessed mutilating fiends, and involved multiple 'deaths'. The tortures lasted thousands of *kalpa* until the evil *kamma* was exhausted.⁹

Likewise in Siamese lore, a large number of individuals become *phi*, immaterial beings strongly attached to the place of their birth and/or earthly existence. Present in the depiction

8. This *jataka* is the first of the Siamese series, but it is No. 538 of the cycle adhered to by the Pali Text Society, London, wherein it is entitled "Muga-Pakkha (Temiya)". See Elizabeth Wray, Clare Rosenfield, and Dorothy Bailey, *Ten Lives of the Buddha* (Tokyo, 1972), pp. 23-30; and Elizabeth Lyons, *The Tosachat in Thai Painting* (Bangkok, 1963), pp. 6-8.

9. Prince Damrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-161; and Phra Khantipalo, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-57. Cf. Phra Ratanawethiyo, *Prawat wat phra chetuphon lae phra phuttha-rup samkhan* (Bangkok, 1962), p. 12; and Ernest Young, *The King, dom of the Yellow Robe* (London, 1907), pp. 312-315.

of earth, they are believed to meddle in its affairs after death. Also, they are customarily thought to be extremely dangerous, very mischievous, and demand constant propitiation by those who are still living.¹⁰

The tripartite system of heavens, earth, and hells is said to rest upon a vast ocean frequented by a gigantic fish which causes earthquakes (note figure 1). The sea is supported in space by a great wind. All of these details are of course a literal interpretation of cosmology. This extremely complex and intricate subject has provided Siamese artists with a fascinating topic which could be filled with miscellaneous vignettes¹¹— not least of which are noticeable in their portrayals of the hells. Most Theravadins adapted the cosmological plan in a rather schematic manner, thereby incorporating features of their own cultural traditions instead of relying on former Indic interpretations. The usually unmetaphysical Siamese artisans seem to have specialized in depicting the *kāma dhātu* realm to the fullest extent, understandably because the other transcendental states could not be successfully visualized, and the bulk of devotees would know little about the *Traiphum* text and its profound philosophical significance. What they could understand about the cosmos came from ancient stories of the Himaphan (the heaven of Brahmanical-Buddhist conception, which, no doubt, alludes to the Himalaya ranges), and from experienced nightmares. The worshippers might hear a sermon on this subject; perhaps they would take a few moments to look at the illustrations of the delights and torments which were partially obscured by the Buddha image in the *bot*. However, this theme would hardly touch the inner psyche of most Siamese. One probable reason for this is because the Buddha tended to side-step the topic in the first place. Even though He was omniscient, He refrained from elaborating upon the subject of cosmology since He had other intentions for his disciples: *viz.*, to teach the *dhamma* to all people in relation to their intellectual potential. Nevertheless, despite His careful omission of cosmological speculations, later commentators were quite willing to fill in the gaps. Therefore, the Siamese paintings stand toward the end of a long tradition which was embellished as it passed through Sri Lanka and various southeast Asian regions.

One particular aspect of the Siamese conception of hells is the legend of Phra Malai who is said to visit the wretches there. An impressive representation may be found at Wat Dusitaram (figure 4): Phra Malai is seen hovering in a flame halo above sinners in a boiling cauldron. A few make the *wai* gesture beseeching succour from the benevolent saint, while to the left a *pret* with an enormous stomach seems to salute the gracious benefactor. Other tortures involve being devoured by large birds or having enlarged hands (figure 5). The subject of Buddhist hells has been painted at many monasteries, but nowhere is the rendition as fearsome and didactic as it is at Wat Dusitaram. Crouching, frog-headed creatures are subdued by the presence of the monk (figure 6). Curious sinners crowded into box-like compartments peer

10. Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, "The *phi*", ed. Margaret Coughlin, in *Journal of the Siam Society*, XLII (2), 1954, pp. 153-178; and Walter A. Graham, *Siam* (London, 3rd ed., 1924), II, 280-291. Evil *phi* were thought to be responsible for various diseases; *ibid.*, II, pp. 287-291; cf. Mgr. Jean Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam comprenant la topographie, histoire naturelle* (Paris, 1854), I, pp. 339-344; and Dr. Rudolf Hofbauer, "A medical retrospect of Thailand", in *Journal of the Siam Society*, XXXIV (2), 1943, pp. 183-185.

11. Graham, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 220-221. Cf. parallels with Laotian conceptions of the universe in Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants* (London, 1884), pp. 198-202. The Indian heritage is obvious; see William M. McGovern, *A Manual of Buddhist Philosophy*, I, *Cosmology* (London, 1923), among others.

out at him. The same type of motif was likewise employed at Wat Yai Intharam in Chon Buri (figure 7), although the latter portrayal is executed in greater detail. Renditions of this theme are not exclusive to murals. Representations of this theme are also found in illuminated manuscripts and on the lacquer boxes containing such texts, usually read during ceremonies related to the deceased. Phra Malai was said to have been a disciple of the Buddha who frequented both heavens and hells. Nevertheless, in Siamese tradition he is a figure who alleviates some of the suffering in various hell states.¹²

Siamese artisans likewise showed an interest in hell scenes when they rendered the Nimi Jataka, one of the *Thosachat* referred to above. One good example of this theme may be seen at Wat Matchimawat in Songkhla (figure 8). The noble king is seen in a grand royal chariot as he visits a hell characterized by a totem-pole-like stack of heads in the center of the panel. In this portrayal the hapless victims are tortured by demons represented as ordinary commoners one might observe in other *jātaka* murals. One particularly gruesome detail is the distortion wherein the victim's head has become his stomach. He seems to scream in horror as a fellow sinner in human form is hacked to pieces by a turbaned demon. All of these grisly vignettes are placed within a landscape setting of simplified boulders.¹³ This tale provides an opportunity for vivid portrayals of the nether realms which are alleviated to a certain extent by the juxtaposition of the depictions of radiant, multilevel heavens.

12. Silpa Bhirasri, *Thai Lacquer Works* (Bangkok, 1963), pp. 7-8 and figure 6; and with Dhanit Yupho, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19, and figures 23 and 75. Note also, Chomphunut Phongprayun, *chitrakam thai* (Bangkok, 1969), pp. 32-35.

13. Although this is the fourth tale in the Siamese series, it is No. 541 in the Pali Text Society edition. See Wray *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-52, 112, 116, and plates 4 and 11; and Lyons, *Tosachat*, pp. 11-12 and figure 7 at Wat Yai Intharam, Chon Buri. The theme was carved on the *stūpa* railing at Bharhut in India, second century B.C.; see Alfred Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*, trs. L.A. and F.W. Thomas (London, 1967), p. 55. The earliest evidence in Siam seems to be the slate slab in the *mondop* at Wat Sri Chum, Sukhothai; note Alexander B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok, 1967), p. 42.