

## Indigenization of Southeast Asian Buddhist Architecture: Case Study of a Burmese Monastery at Wat Upagupta, Chiang Mai

Chotima Chaturawong

Daijoro Chihara stated that Hindu-Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia is divided into three periods: (1) the period of early Indianization from the first to seventh centuries (insular) and the first to ninth centuries (mainland); (2) the golden period of maturity of Indian inspiration from the eighth to tenth centuries (insular) and the ninth to 13th centuries (mainland); and (3) the period of indigenization from the tenth to 16th centuries (insular) and the 13th onwards (mainland).<sup>1</sup> Although Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist architecture was first inspired by that of India, it underwent Southeast Asian localization from the beginning, based on available materials and craftsmanship.

The level of localization greatly increased and developed during the indigenization period starting around the 13th century in mainland Southeast Asia. This was when Buddhism began to decline in India and Sri Lanka became an important center of Theravada Buddhism, spreading it to Southeast Asia along with Buddhist art and architecture. Thereafter, Buddhist architecture in Southeast Asia was further developed, and new styles blending local beliefs and craftsmanship were created, for instance, in Thailand and Myanmar.

A Burmese Buddhist monastery at Wat Upagupta, Chiang Mai provides an example of such indigenization of Southeast Asian Buddhist architecture between the 19th and

the 20th centuries. During this period, the Burmese monastery (*kyauung* in Burmese) was a multipurpose edifice built on piles. It combined public and private areas – namely, a Buddha shrine, an assembly hall for dhamma preaching and ceremony practice, dwelling places of monks and novices, and storage. The funds for building the monastery at Wat Upagupta were donated by U Pan Nyo who came from Moulmein around 1870-1873 and later became a well-known Burmese teak merchant in Chiang Mai and northern Thailand. At that time, Chiang Mai was a vassal state of Siam (central Thailand) and was about to be annexed by the Siamese government. Chiang Mai was formerly the capital of the Lanna Kingdom, which is referred to administratively as Northern Thailand at present. The Lanna Kingdom was founded in the 13th century and was under Burmese rule for over 200 years prior to becoming a vassal of Siam in 1774. U Pan Nyo was a wealthy teak merchant who donated money to build and renovate Buddhist architecture as well as other public works, such as streets and bridges.

Architecture built and reconstructed by U Pan Nyo had various designs, such as Shan, Pa-o, Mon, Burmese, Tai Yuan

(indigenous northern Thai), and colonial styles. The important buildings constructed by U Pan Nyo between 1890 and 1910 in Chiang Mai included his house and Wat Upagupta. The monastic compound of Wat Upagupta consisted of a monastery as the principal architecture, a stupa, a Buddha shrine (*wihan*), and a rest house.<sup>2</sup> Wat Upagupta originally had two compounds, a Tai Yuan and a Burmese one. However, at present the Burmese compound has been replaced by *Phutthasathan*, Chiang Mai (Chiang Mai Buddhist Practice Building).

The monastery at Wat Upagupta and U Pan Nyo's house shared similarities in architectural floor plan, materials, decorations, and style, and both were built by the same group of carpenters and workers. The architectural design of his house was perhaps associated with his birth planet, Jupiter, for a person born on Thursday. This is because his house faces the west, Jupiter's direction in Burmese astrology. The house has a north-south axis with the Ping River to the east. It was probably built by artisans from Lower Burma using two-story bungalow architecture, constructed with brick on the ground floor and wood on the upper floor [Figs. 1-3]. During the 19th and 20th centuries,

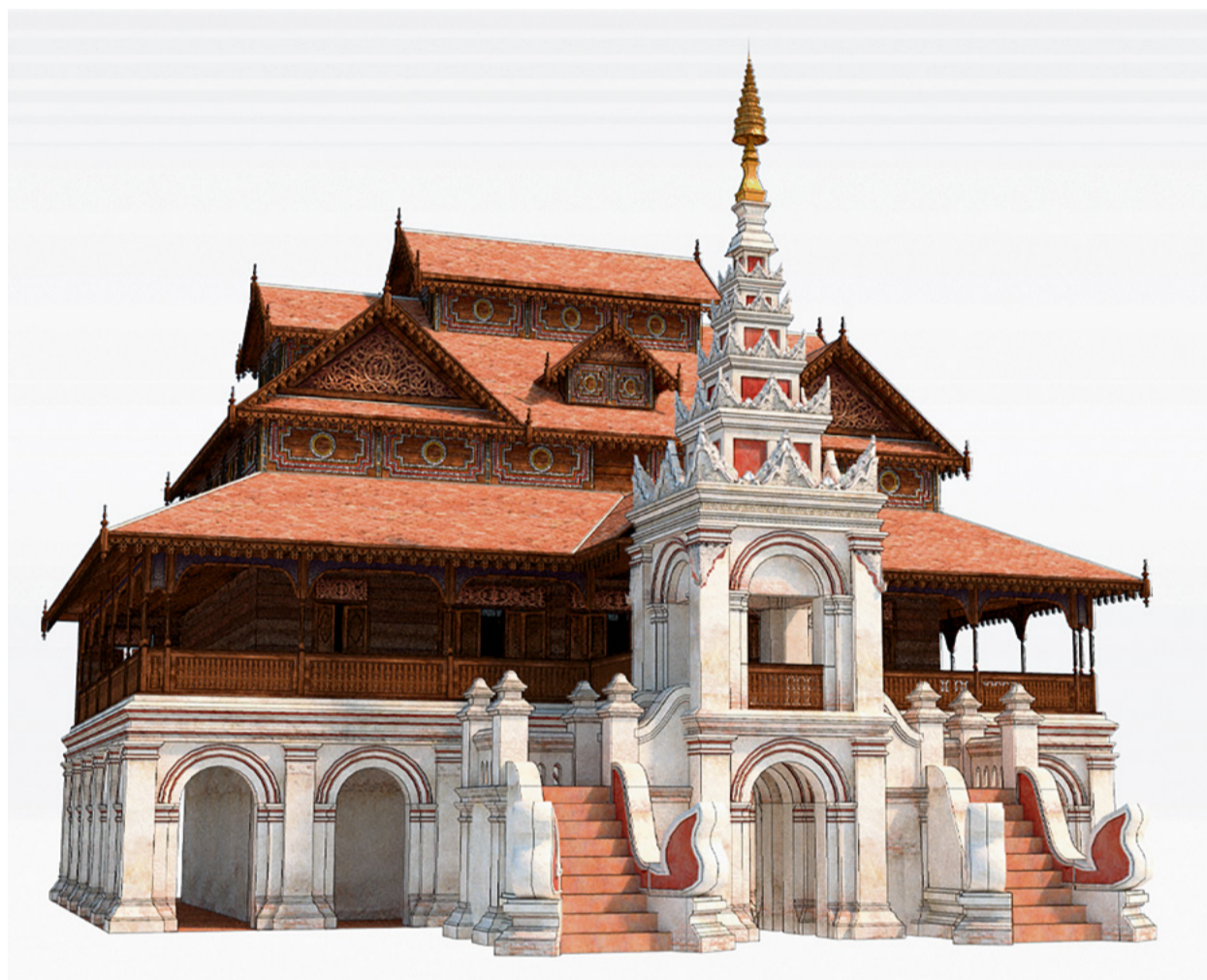


Fig. 1 (left): Architectural restoration of the monastery at Wat Upagupta based on old photographs (Drawing by Patcharapong Kulkanchanachewin in 2022).

Fig. 2 (top right): Front side of U Pan Nyo's house (Photo by Chotima Chaturawong in 2012).

Fig. 3 (bottom right): Back side of U Pan Nyo's house with the Buddha house shrine to the rear (Photo by Chotima Chaturawong in 2012).



## Malacca Sultanate as a Thalassocratic Confederation (1400-1511): Power Structure of the Pacified States

Nasha Rodziadi Khaw

The Sultanate of Malacca is one of the many historic thalassocratic states which thrived from the inter-regional trade in maritime Southeast Asia. Though often viewed as a unified kingdom, it was in fact a loose confederation of various coastal and riverine polities, with its economic and political center situated at the port of Malacca. The main port was strategically positioned as the narrowest chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca, enabling the rulers to exert full control over the sea traffic and even to coerce the trading vessels to harbour at their port-city. The emergence and continuity of Malacca as a thalassocratic state always

revolved around enhancing its ability to funnel as much wealth as possible to its main port, generated mostly from local and inter-regional trade. The political expansion of Malacca was to maintain strategic control over coastal settlements so that wealth could be generated at the main port through commodity exchange. Conquest for Malacca would not necessarily mean direct expansion of territory, but rather the acquisition of strategic control over coastal outposts, rival ports, and centers of production in order to reap as much profit as possible from the seaborne trade.

Information regarding the territorial expansion and administration of Melaka can be found in the Portuguese and Malay accounts: the *Suma Oriental* (written in 1512), *Book of Duarte Barbosa* (written in 1516) and the *Salalatus Salalatin* (compiled in the mid-16th century). All these materials provide important narratives as well as first-hand accounts of how the Sultanate of Malacca evolved and expanded from its founding by Parameswara until its demise under Sultan Mahmud Shah. These materials also give important information about how Malacca administered and exploited its subjugated territories. During the peak of Malacca's power in the early 16th century, the sultanate covered most of the Malay Peninsula, Riau-Lingga islands, and south-eastern Sumatera. However, careful study of these historical accounts shows that the power structure of the sultanate was far from centralized or symmetrical. In Malacca's capital, the rulers were supported by merchant-aristocrats and urban ruling elites. Malacca's political framework was derived from its form of economy, which focused on controlling and capitalizing on the movement of people and goods by establishing and maintaining a network of subordinate groups

with different degrees of loyalties. From these historical accounts, it is suggested that within the large area under the political influence of Malacca, there were five levels of political control [Fig. 1].

The first level – marked in red in Figure 1 – covers the area of Malacca's center of population, possibly at the narrow strip of land between the Kesang river to the Malim river. It was ruled directly by the Sultan through his high officials known as the Bendahara, Temenggung, Laksamana, and Penghulu Bendahari. This area often consisted of the capital city as well as the main ports and settlements. The second level, marked in purple, was ruled indirectly by the royal court through the local chieftains appointed directly by the Sultan. They were known as *Penghulu* or *Mandulika*, who probably administrated the area according to Malaccan laws. The territories included Linggi, Klang, Jugra, Selangor, and Perak. These areas were also known to be rich in tin. The Sultan-appointed officials had to exercise tight control over these territories to maintain Malacca's monopoly over the export of such resource. The third level, marked in yellow, comprised semi-autonomous territories granted by the Sultan to the

Fig. 4-6: Spatial organization of the Burmese monastery at Wat Upagupta (Drawing by Patcharapong).

Fig. 4 (top): First possible type.  
Fig. 5 (middle): Second possible type.  
Fig. 6 (below): Third possible type.

Key to figures 4-6  
1. Buddha hall  
2. Main hall  
3. Residence of monks and novices  
4. Sleeping area of the abbot  
5. Sleeping area of other monks  
6. Living quarters of novices



bungalow-style architecture spread across polities colonized by the British, such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Burma. The ground floor was likely U Pan Nyo's office, where he conducted his teak business. The living areas were situated on the upper floor, which has verandahs wrapped around the north-, west- and south-facing sides. The house originally had three outer staircases: two principal ones used separately by men and women (located to the front or west) and a minor one to the southeast that connected to a one-story kitchen on the ground level.<sup>3</sup>

While U Pan Nyo's house and his monastery at Wat Upagupta had corresponding elements, the monastery was more important and grander than the house. The principal roof of the monastery has two tiers, and its front porch is surmounted by a brick *pyatthat* ("spire") roof [Fig. 1]. It faces north, which is the same direction that monasteries face in Lower Burma.

Although the monastery of Wat Upagupta no longer exists, the ground floor is assumed to have no function or to have been used as a storage facility.<sup>4</sup> There are three possibilities for the way in which space was organized on the upper floor: the first is parallel to the spatial organization of monasteries in Moulmein, Lower Burma; the second and third share similarities with Pa-o and Shan monasteries in Lower Burma and northern Thailand. These three types of spatial organization have a porch entrance to the north with two outer staircases separating laymen and laywomen. The upper floor was surrounded by a covered verandah on three sides facing the west, the north, and the east. However, the three types differed in terms of the location of the Buddha hall, where Buddha images were enshrined and where monks and novices had their living quarters.<sup>5</sup>

The first type of spatial organization probably placed the Buddha hall to the east and the main hall to the west. The residence of monks and novices was situated to the south [Fig. 4]. This spatial organization is typical of monasteries in Moulmein.

The second type of spatial organization was likely similar to that of U Pan Nyo's house with the main hall at the center and the Buddha shrine as a detached structure to the rear. The main hall was flanked by two bedrooms to its right and left. The former to the east was the abbot's sleeping area, while the latter to the west was reserved for other monks [Fig. 5]. These two rooms probably included a raised platform in the front, a place reserved for monks to receive guests and for novices to study. Another raised platform was erected in front of the Buddha shrine and reserved for monks and laymen. The floor plan was similar to that of Nat-kyun Kyaung, a Pa-o monastery, in Thaton, Burma.<sup>6</sup>

The third type of spatial organization resembled that of Pa-o and Shan monasteries

in Lower Burma and northern Thailand, such as Leip-in Kyaung in Thaton and monasteries at Wat Si Rong Mueang, Lampang<sup>7</sup> as well as at Wat Chong Pan and Wat Nong Kham, Chiang Mai. This was similar to the second type of spatial organization mentioned above, except that the Buddha shrine was not a detached structure and to its rear were possibly the living quarters of novices [Fig. 6].

The spatial organization of the Burmese monastery at Wat Upagupta was not similar to that of the Tai Yuan in Chiang Mai, the Siamese in Bangkok and central Thailand, nor the Burmese in Mandalay and Upper Burma. Instead, it shared similarities with Buddhist monasteries of the Mon, Shan, and Pa-o in Lower Burma and provides an example of the indigenization of Southeast Asian Buddhist architecture during the 19th to 20th centuries.

**Chotima Chaturawong** trained as an architect and is Associate Professor in history of architecture at the Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, Bangkok. Her work has focused on architecture in Myanmar, Southeast Asia, India, and Sri Lanka. Email: [chaturawong\\_c@silpakorn.edu](mailto:chaturawong_c@silpakorn.edu)

Notes

- 1 Daigoro Chihara, *Hindu-Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), pp. 7-13.
- 2 Kalya and Srisuda Thammaphongsa, *Tamroi Rong Amat Aek Luang Yonakanphichit: Phaya Taka* [On the Trail of Prefect, Luang Yonakanphichit: A Buddhist Monastic Donor] (Chiang Mai: Rajabhat University Chiang Mai, 2017), pp. 159, 161. Srisuda is a granddaughter of U Pan Nyo.
- 3 Kalya and Srisuda, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- 4 However, Kalya and Srisuda stated that it was used as a dhamma school in 1947. Kalya and Srisuda, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- 5 Also see these three architectural floor plans in Chotima Chaturawong, "U Pan Nyo: Siam and Burma Relations during the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Centuries" (in Thai), in *Proceedings of the Seminar on the 70th Anniversary of Thailand-Myanmar Diplomatic Relations* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 2018): 157-176.
- 6 See information of Pa-o Buddhist monasteries in Thaton and northern Thailand in Itsareeya Nunchai and Chotima Chaturawong, "Pa-o (Taungthu) Buddhist Monasteries in Thailand and Thaton, Myanmar" (in Thai), *Najua: History of Architecture and Thai Architecture*, 16 (January-June 2019): 8-31, <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/NAJUA/article/view/178287/139567>.
- 7 See its architectural floor plan in Chotima Chaturawong, "Burmese Monasteries in Chiang Mai and Lampang" (in Thai), *Najua: History of Architecture and Thai Architecture*, 5 (September 2007): 38-65.

Malaccan hereditary nobles to be ruled in his name. The areas included Muar, Batu Pahat, Beruas, Manjung, Rupert, Singapura, Siantan, and Bentan. These were coastal and riverine settlements located at the strategic chokepoints of the Strait of Malacca. Being

administered semi-autonomously by the high officials loyal to the Sultan enabled the territories to serve as important outposts to control the sea traffic, for the defensive and economic interests of Malacca.

The fourth level, marked in green, was composed of autonomous kingdoms ruled by local rulers who were subordinate to Malacca. They included Rokan, Siak, Kampar, Inderagiri, Pahang, Kelantan, and Lingga, which were mostly potential rival ports pacified by Malacca. They were free to conduct local affairs, except in passing a death sentence, which required the Sultan's approval. They also needed to send regular tributes and army personnel when requested. The pacification of these ports was meant to keep them under control, so that they would not rise up and threaten the commercial and military interests of Malacca. These ports often consisted of resource-rich coastal polities strategically positioned along the trade route, but with less political strength than Malacca. The fifth level, marked in orange, consisted of independent kingdoms with nominal allegiances to Malacca. Malacca had no effective political control over them, possibly owing to the distance and their political

leverage, especially in terms of their military strength and ties with other regional powers. They probably had strategic partnerships in trade with Malacca, especially in the export of certain commodities such as rice and gold. They included Kedah, Pattani, and Jambi, which are all located at the northern and southern ends of the Straits of Malacca. Finally, there were maritime polities, which were not part of the Malacca political confederation, and often became its rivals, such as Aru and Pasai.

As a maritime confederation, Malacca's consolidation of power had less to do with direct political dominance over territories or settled populations than with the control over the movement and distribution of goods and commodities in favor of its main port. As a result, the form of Malacca's political control over its territories varied widely and was extremely asymmetric in nature. The different areas within the empire were administered with varying levels of political control, from direct rule by the court to a nominal recognition of suzerainty by local rulers. Due to economic necessity and demographic factors, such a system evolved organically to form a confederation that was structured by a fluid and adaptable network

of relations between the dominant political center and its subordinate settlements. This was due to the fact that different areas would offer Malacca distinct strategic and economic advantages. Thus, in order to effectively capitalize on all of them in the interests of Malacca, there must have been particular forms of political arrangements for specific subordinate groups, depending on their economic strength, geostrategic location, and political leverage. Such was the true nature of Malay maritime statecraft, a complex and dynamic organization of political and economic bonds established between local chieftains, merchant-aristocrats, and the dynastic rulers.

**Nasha Rodziadi Khaw** is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia. He received his Master's Degree (Archaeology) from Universiti Sains Malaysia and PhD (Archaeology) from University of Peshawar. He specializes in Historical Archaeology and Epigraphy-Palaeography. His research interests cover the history and archaeology of early Malay kingdoms as well as the epigraphy of the Malay Archipelago. E-mail: [rnasha@usm.my](mailto:rnasha@usm.my)

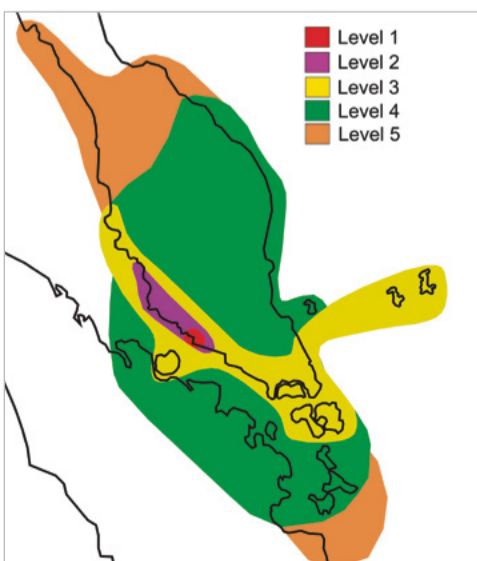


Fig. 1: Levels of political control within the Malaccan Sultanate (Figure by the author, 2022).