

The Symbolic Appearance of “Mara” in Thai Temple Murals.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand how ‘Mara’ is used symbolically in Thai murals as well as the meanings this satanic entity can convey based on both traditional and folk mural paintings. Literature concerning Buddhist history, Semiology, and Jakobson’s communication model were employed as tools for a study. As this was a qualitative study, textual analysis was also used to examine murals found in Buddhist temples painted between the late of the reign of Ayutthaya up to the reign of Rama VII when Thailand evolved from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy (1656-1932). The research was conducted in 27 temples, 14 provinces located in the four regions of Thailand.

The results showed that the symbolism used to convey the meaning of Mara related directly with perceptions of the world. The murals were influenced by stories found in historical Buddhist literature as well as the Ramayana (Thai version: Ramakiet). Symbolic images that stand out for Maradhiraja include: 1) the body of a giant, 2) a halo, 3) the number of arms of the deity’s body dropping from 1000 to between four to ten holding weapons to demonstrate his awesome power, 4) the color of his body turning to green, gray and black, or strong tones that convey the connection between wickedness and immorality, 5) the use of body language (nonverbal communication) in theatrical performance to demonstrate his godly character.

When analyzing the military forces of Mara, the symbolism that stands out includes: 1) presenting in the form of a giant with long pointed fangs so that he looks evil and vindictive, like a killer. 2) a very ugly entity that conveys that if the body is ugly so is the mind. 3) Mara taking the form of foreigners to show the force of weapons, like guns or rifles, and outside of Buddhists. 4) the deterioration or decay of his body as the results of meritorious action performed by a human. Nonverbal communications given by Mara can be divided into: 1) the viewpoints of those up high and 2) the lack of order, chaos, and disunity.

The methods of conveying the symbolic meanings of Mara include: Binary opposition between good and evil, 2) personification to demonstrate how desire is reflected by Mara, 3) intertextuality of Mara in various forms of literature, 4) Assigning signs and code to the symbolic of painting language, and 5) the use of influential or powerful witnesses to emphasize what is

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correct through communication methods that are similar to concepts used in traditional and folk mural painting.

Introduction

An important primary role and function of communication in every period is socialization, particularly to express thoughts of “to do good brings good over time”, or “righteousness overcomes evil”. This can be clearly seen in the Thai Buddhist temple mural paintings, which became extremely popular during the reign of Rama III, or the early to mid 19th century, and followed a trend known as, “Traditional Inspiration”. This has continued up to the present digital age as it offers artists virtually infinite possibilities for expression, demonstrating the power of visual culture.

For the most part, these mural paintings are very large and durable, and they serve as a communication vehicle for stories in Buddhist historical literature, Thai literature, tradition and culture. They are used to serve as a reflection of life and history. Through these murals, one can learn about important events of the past. They are valuable as works of art and historical artifacts, expressing ethical, or moral principles. They are also an important national heritage that must be preserved. The Division of Mural and Antiquities Preservation of the Department of Fine Arts (1990) has divided Thai murals into two classifications: traditional, painted by royal artisans, and folk, painted by local artisans. The latter express popular local customs and beliefs.

When examining these murals based on semiotics, it is found that these murals, particularly those that deal with traditions, employ both signs and codes that can be clearly distinguished and defined. While the locally produced murals do not demonstrate an apparent plan, they still attract attention because of their reflections of history, thinking and beliefs of the local populace, whether or not they are trying to influence locals as far as proper behavior or ethics.

Overall, the subjects of the popular murals produced by the artisans give importance to, or focus on, the deity Maradhiraja, or Mara, which has an important role in Buddhist history, or scripture of the same name. For this, the artists require a larger space than would be required for other mural subjects, to express his furious, warlike demeanor and those of his army of followers. The murals are usually found on the wall of the entrance door to the temple, or chapel, across from the principal Buddha image. The artisan who painted or paints these murals must be a master, a teacher, as the image is one of a giant and it takes much talent and skill to convey lifelike emotion and movement that will surprise and mesmerize the viewers as is seen in the mural painting “The assault of Mara” at Wat Khongkharam in Ratchaburi province.



Figure 1 “The assault of Mara” during early Buddhist history Wat Khongkham, Ratchaburi

The Royal Institute’s Thai Dictionary of Literary Terms of the Sukhothai period published in 2001 stated that the meaning of Maradhiraja is the superior being Mara. Sonthiwan Inthornlip (1993) said that Maradhiraja is a deity of great beauty that resides in a high level of heaven as Phayawasawatdi Mara, one of his incarnations, and in a lower cast of deity as Mara, who serves as a guard and waits to prevent others from entering the higher abodes or attaining enlightenment.

Mara reflects the many different human desires that Maradhiraja represents. Mara is a giant terrifying being with up to 1000 arms and his hands grasping a whole range of weapons. With these and his followers, Mara prevents Lord Buddha from attaining enlightenment. After many confrontations, Mara realizes his evil ways are wrong and he casts away his weapons and with his two thousand hands, he pays homage to the Lord Buddha and returns to the heavenly realm. Through the analysis of

the communication, the hindrance or obstacles caused by Mara are conveyed through symbolic images both real and abstract that reflect specific coding. These include actual pictures of Mara as well as symbolic messages that are expressed through the context of the painting as his image is portrayed within a selection of other images.

The symbolic interpretation of Mara in Thai murals is a method of preserving ancient Thai culture. Furthermore, it provides inspiration for the creation of new artistic work and forms of communication. This is especially important for reaching and attracting the younger members of Thai society as these murals can teach youth the principles of Buddhism and how to live a moral life. This can contribute to promoting the development of knowledge and understanding of Thai culture and heritage through the use of symbolic codes, images and context that reflect the different eras from past to present.

Research Question

- 1) What are the symbols used to convey who and what Mara is in Thai mural paintings?
- 2) What are the communication methods to convey the meaning of Mara in Thai mural paintings?

Related Concepts, Theories and Research

- 1) Concepts related to mural paintings and the origins of Thai temple mural paintings, both traditional and folk, the importance and meanings of the different images.
- 2) Buddhist literature and scriptures that specifically deal with the deity Mara and the 'Assault of Mara'.
- 3) Semiology approach is concerned with how meaning is generated in texts. It deals with what signs are and how they function (Arthur A. Berger, 2013) and the different types of signs used to convey meanings, both directly and indirectly, as well as coding to manage the symbolic system.
- 4) Theories of symbolism and the relationship between human experiences and symbolism when integrating meaning with the experience of the communication receiver.
- 5) Jakobson's communication model (Jakobson Roman, 1987) was used to demonstrate the elements and functions of significance in all forms of communication. This research emphasized the poetic function of visual message in Thai mural painting.

Methodology

As this is a qualitative study, the method employed was textual analysis of Thai Buddhist temple mural paintings that deal with the "Assault of Mara" and were produced

in various temples between the late of the reign of Ayutthaya and the start of the reign of Rama VII (1656 – 1932). The selection included only those that had been designated for preservation by the Division of Murals and Antiquities Preservation of the Fine Arts Department. The temples were located in the northern, northeastern, central and southern regions of Thailand. The researcher recorded the different murals for further personal study. The samples included the murals of 27 temples located in 14 provinces. Of these 17 were of the traditional classification and 10 belonged to the folk classification.

Research Results and Discussion

1. Types of symbolism employed to convey the meaning of "Mara"

The symbolic images employed to convey the meaning of "Mara" are consistent with the outlooks of persons are influenced by Buddhist literature, particularly historical writings and scriptures. Social perceptions also have an effect on the interpretation people would have towards Mara's body and appearance. Furthermore, the context of the story are affected by symbolic images and interpretations as follows:

- 1) The dissemination of Christian ideology that was introduced to Thailand during the reign of Ayutthaya beginning in 1584 had a profound effect on the reign of King Narai. (N na Paknam, 1986)
- 2) Imperial ideologies had a strong influence on the style of mural paintings during the reigns of Rama III through Rama VI, demonstrating a Western perspective. Moreover, Wannipa na Songkhla (1992)

emphasized this influence led to the interpretation of foreigners to be mara 3) The influence of very prosperous trade through Chinese shipping during the reign of Rama III can be seen in the murals. 4) The influx of Chinese immigrants to Thailand from the founding of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty through the reign of Rama VI played a very important role in the creation murals of the Assault of Mara as did the growing influence of foreigners coming to the country. Sumaree Akechonnuyom (2005) stated that there was more than 5 million Chinese in Bangkok during the reigns of Rama IV and occurred the economic conflict between them and the Rama VI government.

The symbols that stand out in the murals depicting the Assault of Mara are as follows:

1) His image depicted as a very large giant that when evaluated seems very evil. These paintings seem to have been influenced by the evil character in the epic drama, the Ramakien (Ramayana), Thaksakun. Still, enormous differences can be seen in the images of Mara in the 'traditional' murals when compared to the locally produced 'folk' murals. The symbol that really influences his evil impression is his long pointed fangs.

2) A second symbol is the 'halo', which does convey that Mara is a deity. This is often found in the traditional murals, but hardly seen in the folk murals. Surasak Chareonwong (1982) explained that 'halo' always signify to deity in the traditional murals.

3) The symbolism of Mara being depicted with as many as 1000 arms each hand holds a different weapon, which then reduce to just 4 to 10 arms, demonstrates his massive power.

4) Color is used as a symbolic technique with the Mara giant painted in green, grey or black as these colors represent evil. This latent meaning was based on principle of psychology of color (Chalood Nimsamer, 1989) 5) Body language is also employed as Mara's poses mimic theatrical gestures to convey that he is a deity while seen riding a carriage or on the back of an elephant. This appearance represented the poetic function visual message in terms of Jakobson's communication model. (Jakobson Roman, 1987) It shown that aesthetics value is necessary as tools to persuade the audience to follow the content of paintings.

The symbolism of the military forces of Mara can be divided into two classifications: fantasy and realism.

A. Mara as depicted in fantasy murals

The symbolism in the mural paintings demonstrates the influence of Buddhist literature and the Ramakien. Mara is depicted as a giant described in these different stories and drama along with the angel-like animals in the mythological known as Himavanta, which is further explained below.

1) Mara is depicted as a very large, strong, evil and murderous giant. The contextual analysis conducted in this research found

the giants in the army of Mara in both the traditional and folk temple murals differ in some of the details and dress, but what stands out in both is Mara's long, pointed fangs. In addition, the giants are divided into ranks by their sizes and positions. The general is then the largest and is seen riding on an elephant. The commanders also wear crowns will be riding animals from Himavanta. Meanwhile, lower ranked leaders are painted wearing clothes similar of villagers, and the lowest ranked giants will have smaller bodies like those of villagers. At the same time, will be misshapen and ugly in appearance and be posed in evil-appearing positions and gestures to incite fear in those attempting to attain enlightenment.

2) Other images of Mara've been influenced by literary works other than Buddhist stories such as the tale of Hanuman, the Mermaid, a part of epic Ramakien, and the Oceanic Butterfly from the Thai classic Phra Aiphaimani. This is seen clearly in the bodies of Mara and his troops that clearly reflect those described in these different stories. Gestures of Hanuman and Oceanic Butterfly can be fierce and frightening as well as aggressive in nature while their eyes are bloodshot, techniques employed in the depictions of Mara. These characteristic of their bodies was influenced by the literary but some images were distorted by the imagination of the artists. (The Division of Mural and Antiquities Preservation of the Department of Fine Arts, 1991)

3) Mara's army is then shown with a large

number of mythological animals from the heavenly realm of Himavanta, but those included in the Assault of Mara are ugly, often with human features, or the creatures are a combination of human and animal, to convey a sense of impermanence, as well as the meaning of good begets good and vice versa. These creatures are depicted traditional and folk temple murals. They are also used to distinguish the different ranks of Mara's army.

B. Mara as depicted in realistic murals

These murals reflect real life through depictions of people and animals encountered in daily life.

1) Pictures of foreigners as the soldiers of Mara

Pictures of foreigners are seen often in Thai art. When they are employed, the works are called, "Pictures of twelve languages". (Division of Mural and Antiquities Preservation of the Department of Fine Arts, 1991) During the period that covers this research, there were as many as 12 different nationalities that came to Thailand. They can be divided as follows:

a) Foreigners with the power depicted as Mara : Both the traditional and folk temple murals would employ Western characters forming the army of Mara. These could reflect the soldiers who came to Asia to train local troops in Western military strategies. These characters then serve as a sign for the power of Mara's army, holding rifles, often with bayonets as well as dressed in uniforms. All of these signs were represented directly

denotative meaning following the visual experience artists. This presentation is the first level of meaning in semiology approach. (Arthur A. Berger, 2013, Barthes Roland, 1999)

b) Foreigners who want to take Thai territory depicted as Mara : Again the force and power of foreign troops are depicted in the murals painted at the beginning of the Ratanakosindra era, or founding of Bangkok as the country's capital, as the influence of imperialism grew and touched the borders of the kingdom. At the beginning of the 20th century, Thailand lost some territory to the French. (Wannipa na Songkhla, 1992). Both the traditional and folk murals then depicted Westerners as Mara's troops in the Assault of Mara as a reflection of the period's events and the evil that this represented for the people.

c) Foreigners or non-Buddhists depicted as Mara : Foreigners of other religions, Christian, Muslim or other faiths were also used to depict Mara's troops in the chapels of Thai Buddhist temples as a symbol of the evil of those who do not worship the Lord Buddha. This concept appeared in Thai mural painting since the late of the reign of Ayutthaya period. (N na Paknam, 1986)

d) Foreigners who threaten the Thai economy depicted as Mara : Ethnic Chinese were used to depict Mara as they came to Thailand on their ships (junks) as traders. This reached a peak during the reign of Rama III, the early to middle 19th century, continued through the reign of Rama VI that ended in

the early 20th century. They were seen as merchants and traders who came to gain wealth and riches in Thailand that they would take back to China. Thus, they were seen stealing from the kingdom and contributing nothing to Thailand's economic growth. (Sumaree Akechonniyom, 2005). Thus, characterizations of them were employed to depict Mara's army.

2) The symbolic influence of using human bodies to depict Mara

The symbolic influence can be seen in the skin colors of the characters in the mural paintings as well as the deterioration of their bodies caused by torture and suffering.

a) Ugly, misshapen, black evil bodies to depict Mara

The atrocious image is first conveyed through the color of their skin as Thai's believe that a black body represents evil. Good persons are then shown with either white or golden skin tones. (Surasak Chareonwong, 1982, Samerchai Poolsuwan, 1998, Anick Thavichaahart and Grit Thonglert, 2014)). This is why these colors have long been used to represent heavenly entities and royalty.

b) Human bodies that are suffering as they are tortured

The bodies that are seen deteriorating because of torture are seen in the form of common villagers or those with bad karma. Meanwhile, the daughter of Mara goes to strike the Lord Buddha following his enlightenment, but she is transformed into a beautiful woman. After this, because

she disturbs him, the Buddha transforms here once more, but now into an ugly old hag to present to all that age is impermanent and we all get older. (The Division of Mural and Antiquities Preservation of the Department of Fine Arts, 1991).

The human bodies used in the Assault of Mara can show people can find beauty by doing good or will suffer from acting badly.

c) Mara as a dead body

Mara, represented as death, is a being that has forsaken life, which can be achieved by doing good deeds. Buddhist literature tells of a prince who enters heavenly realms where deities and angels stand between him and those seeking to enter, including the old, injured, dead, and ordained monks. The prince then decides to ordain as well. (The Division of Mural and Antiquities Preservation of the Department of Fine Arts, 1991). Thus, Mara here serve as a symbol that influences humans to ordain and seek enlightenment.

3) Animals of this world

The animals depicted in the temple murals of the Assault of Mara represent actual animals of this world, including elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes, monkeys, and snakes, which all have symbolic meanings. Furthermore, the symbols for Mara and his troops can be divided into 2 classifications, as follows:

a) Mara and his troops bearing ill will from above

The direction of movement for the group of mural paintings of the Assault of

Mara has also been examined. In virtually all of the temple murals Mara's troops are pictured at a 45o angle above those seeking enlightenment creating the impression that the army is looking down upon the people and attacking from their heavenly realm.

b) Mara and his troops as chaos

The chaos depicted in the murals reflects the confusion felt by the people, which is caused by Mara and keeps them from experiencing a sense of wellbeing and calm. The symbolism reflected in both the traditional and folk murals presents chaos and confusion that humans must fight by making merit through good deeds as taught by the deity Phra Maethorani to survive and attain nirvana.

The direction of movement and the chaos depicted in the mural shown the connotative meaning according to the principle of spatial organization. (Gillian Rose, 2001) and the basis of visual elements. (Chalood Nimsamer, 1989).

1) Methods of Communication demonstrated in Thai temple murals

1) Binary Opposition

Binary opposition is an important factor of semiology seen in the study of Buddhist literature's description of the Assault of Mara. It presents the mistaken notion that Maradhiraja represents the good of supernatural powers gained through meditation by those seeking enlightenment. The opposing forces are represented by the assaulting troops of Mara (super powers) and Mara's daughter

(Buddhist dharma). This binary opposition is demonstrated in the movement of the murals, where there are clear images of characters doing good and evil and the results that follow. In terms of semiology perspective, the basic relationship of all of sign is oppositional. (Arthur A. Berger, 2013) Thus "mara" doesn't mean anything unless there is "Lord Buddha" or "evil" unless there is "good".

2) Personification

The comparison is conveyed by Mara and his army. Personification means that Mara and characters, deities and humans depicted in the murals actually represent human desires that are found in all of us.

3) Intertextuality of Mara in other literature

Symbolic meanings are created through intertextuality, incorporating how Mara is presented in other literary works into the temple murals. Intertextuality, it will refer to the use in texts (consciously or unconsciously) of materials from other, previously created texts. (Arthur A. Berger, 2013) This research found that some murals of the Assault of Mara used historical stories of the Lord Buddha along with other classics and epics as the basis of their wall paintings, including the Ramakien, Tripitika and Phra Aphaimani. Through these integrated images, viewers are presented with a clear impression of what heaven is and means as it creates an implosion of meanings of the viewers' past impressions.

4) Control of Signs through Coding

Codes in communication are used to organize different symbolic systems, particularly in traditional temple murals. The murals positioning on the opposite wall from the principal temple Buddha image above those that depict the Dasajati Jataka (Buddhist dharma) that present a minimum of ten virtues already convey the murals' importance. There is also a very fixed plan for mural placement depicting the Assault of Mara in the traditional mural paintings (Surasak Chareonwong, 1982), while the folk murals are placed to create a sense of balance rather than a form of system.

5) Code System

Symbolic coding is found in virtually all traditional temple murals while only in some of the folk murals. These are used to convey meanings for Mara and his army and include the following: 1) The use of black and dark color tones to present a meaning of evil. The research found that the color of mara's body would be in strong color tones, primarily green, black and dark grey. His troops' colors range from grey to black, which represent their immorality. This finding also appeared in Anick Thavichahart and Grit Thonglert (2014). 2) Lines another important symbolic tool employed in these murals. The first is the circular halo to demonstrate that Mara is a deity and his troops heavenly beings. There are also jagged-line dividers to distinguish the different realms, worldly and heavenly, as well as what the human characters can actually see. The uses of lines in mural paintings also shown the connotation meaning

in the perspective of semiology in visual element. (Chalood Nimsamer,1989)

6) The uses of “Earth Goddess” as powerful witnesses standing in the proper position

One of the more important symbolic tools for Mara is to use Earth Goddess (Dharani) such as those seeking enlightenment, to view and experience Mara’s wrath during the assault with his troops. (Sonthiwan Inthornlip,1993). One example is to see the Buddha under the Bhodi tree where he attained enlightenment while surrounded by others seeking to reach this same level of nirvana. This researcher found that both the traditional and folk temple murals used this method to communicate the different aspects of Mara in a number of styles, or fashions., most probably because of the different artists coming from different locales and classes adhering to different customs.

When examining these murals in relation to Jakobson’s communication model, it was found that socialization communication was presented through handsome and beautiful faces representing goodness and merit and ugliness representing evil. The artists then try to attain a balance in their murals to symbolize peace and harmony. This findings supported the poetic function of the message elements. The poetic function not only in poetry, where this function is superimposed upon the other function of language, but also outside poetry, when some other function is superimposed upon the poetic function. (Jakobson Roman,1987)

All told, temple murals are very valuable for what they teach in addition to their importance in preserving an essence of Thai culture and roots of the authentic Thai style of living.

Recommendations for future research

1) Research on symbolic communication of “What is Mara?” is parallel to research conducted on the meaning of “Goodness & Virtue”, and thus, it is recommended that further research be conducted on the symbolism employed to communicate “Goodness & Virtue” in temple murals of the Dasajati Jataka, as these demonstrate how goodness can overcome evil, in the form of Mara.

2) Symbolism related to “Mara” and “Virtue” are included in modern communication forms such as Thai traditional historical dramas performed on television or presented through animated films and programs aimed at children and young people. These could also be studied to determine the symbolism involved and its importance in promoting and preserving Thai culture.

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เอกสารอ้างอิง

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