

Review Article

Piriya Krairiksh, *The Roots of Thai Art*, translated by Narisa Chakrabongse (Bangkok: River Books, 2012).

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Dr. Piriya Krairiksh, the renowned – and some would say, controversial or even iconoclastic – author and scholar of Thai art, published his latest book *Rakngao haeng sinlapa thai* in Thai language in 2010. This long-awaited volume, the zenith of a career devoted to teaching and research, was translated into English as *The Roots of Thai Art* by Narisa Chakrabongse last year for the benefit of a wider international readership. It is this English version that I have the pleasure to review.

Piriya's study proposes nothing less than a comprehensive new theory for understanding Thai art. In so doing, his beautifully illustrated volume goes far to challenge, perhaps even convince, those sceptical of the general reasonableness of his views regarding the development of the early Mon and Khmer civilisations which planted the roots of Thai art before the advent of Tai kingdoms in the region of present day Thailand from *circa* late in the 13th century onwards. Thus, it goes well beyond the structure of courses Piriya has given for a number of years in Thai universities, and offers more than a glimpse into his numerous past scholarly publications in both Thai and English. In addition, the author's intention is to follow this work with another volume covering the modern period to the present.

Where most scholars of ancient Thai history and art willingly bind themselves to a few crucial pieces of historical and epigraphic evidence, Piriya almost perversely disregards what is "known to be true." He has long refused to accept the conventional chronology and typology of early Thai art and archaeology as initially labelled by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès (Dvāravatī, Śrīvijaya, Lop Buri periods, etc.).

Piriya's position is clear from the introduction where he summarises his views and theories as they evolved over thirty years of academic research. His purpose with this divergent approach, to which I shall return below at length to contest the paradigm, is mainly "to look at the changes in the various sects and schools of Buddhism as the catalyst for changes in Buddhist art in Thailand." He proposes that stylistic or iconographic evolution in images of the Buddha necessarily reflect the evolution of doctrinal or philosophical thinking. That framework, according to Piriya, obviates "any further need of historical structures to determine the periodisation"

(p. 19). It also allows for the art of different “religious styles” to be created during the same period.

An even larger and sound purpose of the book is to emphasise the study of artworks by a method of analysis with four criteria that the author proposes as follows (p. 11): “1. Establishing that the piece is genuine and is not a recent fake. 2. Establishing the exact nature of the piece and its intended purpose. 3. Analysing the content of the work, studying the various symbols that may appear on the piece in order to understand its history. 4. Establishing the date by comparing the piece with other definitively dated works, which are inscribed with a date, or analysing the evolution by comparing it with securely dated works, which have been studied using other disciplines such as history or archaeology.”

The rest of the book is divided into two large, albeit uneven, chapters: “Preparing the Ground for Thai Art” (pp. 28-125) that covers the period from the mid 5th through the 9th centuries and “The Forging of Thai Art” (pp. 128-377) that extends from the mid 9th to the end of the 13th centuries. In these chapters, Piriya investigates a wide selection of imported and locally made artworks and monuments, mostly religious in nature, in search of the beginnings of “Thainess.” These origins arose in the visual arts when indigenous Mon, Khmer, and “Southern people” allegedly introduced during the first millennium elements of Indian and – this is new – Chinese civilisations and adapted them to their ideas and culture before passing them to the Tai people. To this reviewer’s mind, Piriya’s assumption – that the ancient “Chinese culture” played a large role in fashioning what we know as “Thainess” (p. 29) – is unsubstantiated for, as we shall see below, the early material and epigraphic evidence found in Thailand still overwhelmingly favours Indic beliefs and customs.

Nonetheless, Piriya’s balanced attitude towards the study of early Mon and Khmer art is to be valued. Furthermore, his tenacious efforts to show the significant impact of Tantric Buddhism in Khmer art found in Thailand will hopefully send a clear signal to Thai academia. For instance, this is one of the few widely available and accessible publications in English that demonstrates in such detail how the temple of Phimai was the product of a Buddhist Tantric environment (pp. 309-321).¹

The author supports his observations with a convincing and excellent selection of colour photographs and drawings. His descriptions and thorough dating of the artefacts are good and useful even if they are by no means undisputed. I am only in disagreement regarding the dating of a few items listed in the book. For example, I would date a good deal later, by at least one or even two centuries, the following sculptures which are considered by Piriya – perhaps just passing on what others have written before him – as the “oldest” or “earliest” in their respective categories: the *Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa* or “*Viṣṇu*” image from Chaiya dated to the early 4th century

¹ For an earlier attempt, see Gosling (2004: 124-137) who however affirms on p. 136 that “even at Phimai, Tantrism appears to have been of limited importance.”

(fig. 1.96, pp. 100-101); the *candraśāla* or *kuḍu* dated to the 5th century (fig. 1.120, p. 116); the bronze Buddha image in so-called “Amarāvātī style” dated to the mid 5th century (fig. 1.15, p. 48) which might just as well be in the “late Anurādhapura style” and therefore considered the product of “Theravāda” workmanship rather than of the “Mahāsāmghikas”; and, finally, the low relief in Tham Phra Photisat depicting the enthroned Buddha teaching simultaneously to Viṣṇu and Śiva figures which Piriya dates in the early 6th century (fig. 1.16, p. 49). Yet, later, the author contradicts himself, stating that Śiva as a god is actually never represented anthropomorphically before the 7th century (p. 111).

Piriya’s courageous attempts to date almost everything are nonetheless helpful and should serve as benchmarks for future adjustments. Even where there might be issues regarding the actual date of an object, the sequence – that is the “relative chronology” – is likely to be correct in the end. This is therefore an important contribution to the field because, when there is not a single securely dated object from the early period, we must reliably depend on the conjectures of such competent scholars as Piriya to compare meticulously one work with another.

But whether or not the casual reader actually accepts the chronology and all identifications proposed by the author is a minor concern, for the real merit of the book probably lies elsewhere. Piriya has given us a valuable catalogue – that is a visual tool – too often lacking in Thai art. In practical terms, the book is an inventory of sculptures, objects, and monuments created in pre-modern Thailand. Although not every single monument or artefact is included, the coverage is far more complete and detailed than in any other previous catalogue or work. From the standpoint of the representative importance of artworks, very little has been overlooked that is available in Thai public museums and private collections. Regrettably, no mention is made of the substantial material held in foreign collections.

Returning to the concept of “sectarian affiliations,” as the Ariadne’s thread that guides the organisation and classification of the artworks throughout the volume, this approach is far from convincing and might possibly be the main critical problem with the book. The author first published his theory in 1998-99 as a new framework for studying Buddhist art in Thailand (Piriya B.E. 2542). Piriya’s views, however, were, until recently, largely disregarded outside of the country.

Presented here in a new fashion, Piriya’s reasoning holds that most ancient artworks from the region of present day Thailand served the Buddhist religion, and Brahmanism as well to a lesser extent, so they ought to be classified into “schools” according to the so-called “school” or “sect” that inspired their creation. In this perspective, stylistic or iconographic differences reflect doctrinal or philosophical differences. Hence, Piriya presents the ancient Buddhist art in Thailand up to the 13th century in four main groups: the Śrāvakayāna or Hīnayāna “school” (pp. 46-73), the Mahāyāna “lineage” (pp. 74-92), the Tantrayāna “school” (pp. 236-331) and the Theravāda school (pp. 332-371).

Here, I must raise certain fundamental objections as regards the author's methodological paradigm and terminology. Categories such as "Theravāda," "Mahāyāna," or "Tantrayāna" are somewhat artificial and very fluid in practical use; and they certainly do not account for the huge diversity and complexity of Buddhism in the region over the centuries. These terms are never found in Southeast Asian inscriptions. Tantrayāna, a 20th century neologism, is not a "school" or even a "sect," but only a system of practices that did not exist separately from Mahāyāna, which itself did not exist separately from the Śrāvakayāna "schools" as a Vinaya system. The foundation of the idea that these labels represent separate "schools" or "sects" is probably a 19th century European misunderstanding of the nature of religion. In modern Nepal, for example, a Śākya or Vajrācārya Newar Buddhist takes ordination and practices first Śrāvakayāna or "the way of the hearers." Then he takes Mahāyāna vows and, later, Vajrayāna or Tantrayāna vows. Accordingly, the space of the temple has different sections or floors for each practitioner (cf. Gellner 1996).

"Hīnayāna" – a term no longer used in scholarly writing – or, rather, Śrāvakayāna implies different ancient monastic lineages (*nikāya*) of which Theravāda is the single surviving example in Southeast Asia. While Theravāda is a *nikāya* in terms of the Saṅgha – that is first and foremost a Buddhist "lineage" – "Mahāyāna" or "Tantrayāna" are not, although all these groupings may reflect ways of seeing the world differently. Indeed, Theravāda is also often used by scholars to name a series of characteristics such as a focus on the worship of the historical Gautama Buddha; as such it could be a valid term to use in a certain context. But when it comes to art, the "lineage" of the monks probably had little to do with the artworks that were made and what they looked like in terms of style or iconography. Even though objects made to be housed in a monastery or temple eventually had to meet with the approval of the resident monks, basically a *nikāya* has no inherent connection to art styles or to iconographic forms.

What the author conveniently brands "Theravāda" or "Mahāyāna art" would in all probability have to be defined in terms of a ritual culture and evolving practices largely dependent on the lay community, artist workshops and patrons. Indeed, Piriya has not sufficiently noted the importance and the complex nature of patronage in religious art. Just as there were lineages of monks, there probably were associated "lineages" of artists and craftsmen who worked for different patrons at the same time, even if the latter were of different religious persuasions. The choice of art forms was thus likely part of a complex of ideas in which local aesthetics, inspiration from other regions, copies of famous images, and ritual practices all played a certain role. Moreover, as we know, the Theravāda tradition does not totally preclude Mahāyāna or Tantric practices. There was often continual interaction in the past. This has been acknowledged on several occasions by the author himself (pp. 60, 62, 343-344, 383), therefore implicitly dismissing his own theory.

The casual reader might find astonishing, for instance, Piriya's suggestion that

the “Mahayana (school) favoured images of the Buddha seated in the meditation posture” (p. 76), and by the later statement that Buddha images seated “with legs pendant” (p. 77) were also a common theme in the Mahāyāna tradition. Buddhist art was neither so prescriptive nor doctrinaire. “Theravāda art,” if there is such a thing, could also depict Buddhas seated in meditation or with legs pendant, as can be discovered through scanning this comprehensive volume (figs 1.36 and 1.37, pp. 60-62; figs 1.40-41, pp. 64-66; figs 2.335, 2.337-42, pp. 333-336; fig. 2.344, p. 337; fig. 2.366, p. 347).

It is also noteworthy that Piriya only applies these “sectarian” divisions to Buddhist art and monuments and does not follow the same convention when classifying Brahmanical temples beyond the obvious Vaiṣṇava/Śaiva distinction (pp. 192-235). He writes that “it is not possible to say, based on an examination of the philosophy and beliefs, that such and such a temple belonged to a particular sub-sect within Shaivism” (p. 192), recalling that “most [in fact all] Hindu temples in Thailand were Shaiva.” Since Brahmanism and Buddhism often developed in tandem, it would have been perhaps judicious to propose this statement for *all* religious and sacred structures, not just Brahmanical ones, including Buddhist *stūpas* or *caityas*. In all likelihood, these monuments did not exclusively belong to a particular Buddhist tradition or “sect” since, as Prapod Assavavirulhakarn has rightly emphasised, a *stūpa* is “a public treasure” and “not the specific domain of any one sect” (2010: 104).

In addition, I do not believe that a study of artworks alone can be sufficient to establish the presence of specific schools of Buddhism in the region. Using an ancient translation of the 7th century Chinese travelling monk Yi Jing, which is none too clear, Piriya interpreted the under cloth style on early Buddha images as an indication of certain “sectarian affiliations” (pp. 46, 48, 52-53). I have not been able, however, to find as much detail on the subject as he seems to find in Yi Jing’s account (spelt as “I-tsing” in the bibliography). Furthermore, there is no evidence that the different modes of wearing the robe can be traced to specific “Buddhist sects” in iconography. In India, certain aspects of Buddhist iconography were shared by Brahmins and Jains alike, for example in the Mathura workshops. In Southeast Asia, there was a wide range of robe styles for various Theravāda *nikāyas* and sub-*nikāyas* over the centuries and in different countries and cultures. Dispute about how to wear the robe was a serious contention in Burma and Siam, both Theravāda countries, up to the modern period. In Thailand, most Buddha images are uninscribed and, when they are inscribed, the Buddhist affiliation is never given.

In this vein, the evidence of inscriptions that come from Thailand cannot be ignored, even though they may not always support the author’s argument. To some degree, his somewhat cavalier dismissal of pertinent epigraphic records may be seen as vexing. Admittedly, no Buddhist “sects” are ever mentioned directly in ancient inscriptions and no “citation” or “quotation inscriptions” are recorded other than

in Pali, thus only pointing to the presence of a Theravāda lineage in the central region of today's Thailand (Skilling 2002; Prapod 2010: 72-81). To this day, similar citation inscriptions in Sanskrit or hybrid Sanskrit, which would possibly attest to the presence of the (Mūla)sarvāstivādins or Mahāsāṃghikas, as assumed by Piriya, are not found in Thailand, except for a few published inscribed tablets from Yarang, Pattani Province (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002: 179-180).

Piriya's earlier study of the Chedi Chula Prathon *jātaka* and *avadāna* plaques in Nakhon Pathom (B.E. 2517) in part avoided such dependence on epigraphic "truths." However, it would seem to be going to the other extreme to devalue insistently the importance of early Pali inscriptions from central Thailand or their absence hitherto in other parts of the country, such as the Northeast. Despite this, Piriya also sees traces of Theravāda artistic activities on *sema* stones from northeastern Thailand (pp. 338-342). To demonstrate his point, the author uses the stele that illustrates the return of the Buddha to Kapilavastu (fig. 2.347) which shows his former wife Yaśodharā using her hair to wipe his feet, "something that does not appear either in the Pali or Sanskrit scriptures,"² Piriya confesses (p. 338); so why should he assume that it is "Theravāda art"? Another interesting *sema* stone (fig. 2.348) is identified by Piriya as a scene from the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* when the Bodhisatta Mahājanaka leaves his wife Sīvali to become an ascetic with a *khakkhara* or rattling staff in hand, quite similar to the example from Chedi Chula Prathon (p. 59, fig. 1.32). His identification, far from certain, overlooks the fact that the *khakkhara* is a peculiar implement not traditionally found among Theravāda monks but yet prevalent in several other Buddhist Vinayas (Revire 2009).

From the preceding, doubts can be seriously cast regarding several rigid identifications made by the author. There is no evidence whatsoever to assert that, for example, images of Amitābha Buddha – though certainly popular in China during the Sui and Tang periods (*circa* 6th-10th centuries) – "inspired the creation of images [...] in the area inhabited by the ancient Mon in the upper part of the Gulf of Thailand" (p. 88). More precisely, Piriya interprets throughout the volume the standing Buddhas that display the same argumentation gestures with both hands (*vitarkamudrā*) as representing the descent of the Buddha Amitābha, accompanied by the two Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, to welcome the soul of the dead to the Pure Land of Sukhāvatī. This is speculation at best and is not supported by epigraphic records. Indeed, not a single occurrence of Amitābha Buddha is attested in inscriptions from Thailand. The only conclusion is that the significance of such a peculiar iconography limited to Mon and Khmer art has been lost.

The above problem of identification is perhaps linked to Piriya's insistence on naming all the Buddha images he studies. The crowned Buddhas are a good illustration of this habit. Whether the image is seated or standing, and depending on

² This episode does appear though in a late northern Thai text titled "Bimbā's Lament" (Swearer 1995: 550-551), a remarkable example of narrative continuity.

the hand gestures or *mudrās* it performs, the author systematically identifies each crowned Buddha as Amitāyus, Bhaiṣajyaguru, Maitreya, Śākyamuni, or Vajrasattva (pp. 276-283, 285-287, 354-357). But again, none of these Buddha images is identified by inscription. In fact, not a single Buddha has ever been designated by a proper name (be it Gautama, Maitreya, Dīpaṅkara, etc.) in the corpus of inscriptions from pre-modern Thailand. Buddhas, when mentioned, are only vaguely designated by epithets such as Jina, Sugata, Śrīghana or Tathāgata. Until further evidence is given, it would still be more prudent to identify these Buddhas merely as “Śākyamuni,” the archetype of all past, future, and transcendental Buddhas while admitting, with Piriya, that “one image can often be interpreted on several levels” (p. 244).

In the light of very recent scholarship, the identification of sculptures known to Piriya as “Vajradhāra” (p. 285, fig. 2.250) would probably need to be reassessed. Since such images are always found near “chapels of hospitals” (*ārogyasāla*), Hiram Woodward (2011) has recently postulated that these ought to be interpreted as Bhaiṣajyaguru. But Piriya’s conflation of the famous Buddhist triad of the Bayon style made of the Buddha, Lokeśvara, and Prajñāpāramitā with the Medicine Buddha (Bhaiṣajyaguru) and his two attendants (Candravairocana and Sūryavairocana) is poorly supported by evidence (p. 286, fig. 2.252). Much of Piriya’s analysis is likewise merely asserted and often goes uncorroborated, while he tends to classify anything unusual as of foreign manufacture, often either Indian or Chinese.

A few factual errors have also slipped into the text. For example, the Khao Ngu inscription is not in Pali and Mon, but probably a mixture of Mon-Khmer and Sanskrit (p. 60). The Noen Sa Bua inscription in Khmer and Pali, formerly dated to 761 CE (p. 61), is now dated to the 10th or 11th century (Revire 2012: 153). Furthermore, the inscription on the pedestal of the Grahi Buddha, dated 1279 or 1291, Year of the Rabbit, is not the first time that the Chinese astrological year was mentioned in Thailand (p. 354); the aforementioned Noen Sa Bua inscription also refers to the Year of the Ox, possibly 941 or 1061 CE. Besides, the “Southern people” did not employ Pali and Mon (p. 131). Moreover, there is no Pali or Mon inscription on the back of the colossal Buddha from Wat Phra Men (p. 64, fig. 1.40) and there is no evidence that the Buddha today at Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya (fig. 1.41), originally came from Wat Phra Men in Nakhon Pathom (Revire 2010: 84-85). Additionally, it was Mahākāśyapa or Kassapa the Elder, one of the great disciples of the Buddha, not the past Buddha Kassapa, who is mentioned in the legend of Maitreya as a transmitter of the Dharma to the future Buddha (p. 81). In the same vein, Purāna Kāśyapa or Kassapa is not a “King” but a defeated Brahman sage who defied the Buddha at Śrāvastī and later committed suicide rather than having to “convert to Buddhism” (pp. 334-335). Lastly, “Rest houses of fire” should be simply relabelled as “houses of fire” (*vahnigrha*), since this is the only term attested in the Preah Khan inscription of Angkor.

Several typos have also found their way in. For example, “Dvarvati” for Dvāravatī (p. 31), “Wat Pai” for Wat Sai (p. 68), figures 2.204 and 2.205 should be inverted, contradictory numbers are given for lists of past Buddhas on p. 363 and p. 367, and so on. I also noticed a number of misspellings of certain Pali terms probably lost in translation from the Thai: Mount “Kukutpata” for Kukkuṭapada (p. 81), “Kambojasangkhapakkha” instead of Kambojāsaṅghapakkha (pp. 343, 383-384), “*Visesvisuddhimagga*” for *Visuddhimagga* (p. 368); “*khamawasi*” and “*aranyawasi*” (p. 383) for *gāmaṅvāsī* and *araññavāsī*, etc. These ought to be corrected should a second revised English edition be forthcoming.

Another small reservation concerns the bibliography where the English text has not been updated to reflect recent works since the time the Thai text was originally composed. Why, for example, refer to Robert Brown’s unpublished dissertation on Dvāravatī wheels (1981) instead of the published Brill version (1996)? Why refer to Sheila Hoey Middleton’s article published in 2002 and not the sequel in 2010 where she presents new information as to how the Buddha image in figure 1.21 (p. 52) excavated in India reached the Bangkok National Museum? Where are the references to Michel Jacq-Hergoualc’h’s exhaustive work on the Malay Peninsula (2002), to the foundational study of “Theravāda Buddhism” by Prapod Assavavirulhakarn (2010), or other important contributions on Buddhist Southeast Asian inscriptions and sealings by Peter Skilling (e.g. 2002, 2008)?

In this English edition, the bibliography should also have been adapted and harmonised between the references in Thai and other languages (e.g. “Piriya Krairiksh” or “Krairiksh, Piriya” but not both entries). For the sake of a wider audience, the following authors should have preferably been referred to in their original languages rather than through Thai translations: Bowring, de Choisy, Coëdès, Conze, Faxian, Groslier, Jacques and Snodgrass.

In conclusion, this book will be greatly appreciated by all for its wealth of visual illustrations and its fresh interpretations. While the author’s unique staccato style may appear annoying and rather obscure (and surely created translation problems), it is definitely provoking. The succinct summaries of the various chapters and sub-sections assist the casual reader, as does the addition of a useful illustrated glossary and a general index at the end of the volume. However, to go into all of the scholarly details regarding certain omissions, inconsistencies, inaccuracies and errors would need the kind of investigation that exceeds the duty of this humble review.

Although this brief appraisal of Piriya’s work is critical, particularly regarding “sectarian affiliations,” my conclusions are very much based upon the application of the critical approach favoured by the author. His effort to re-evaluate Coëdès and Damrong’s pioneer classification of Thai art, still present in many Thai museums, is commendable; however, I fear that his attempt to replace it with “sectarian affiliations” will, in the long run, go over the heads of most people – students and curators alike – and be rejected by scholars. In the end, though, I hope it will be recognised by Achan

Piriya that my modest observations, whether correct or incorrect, are merely offered in honour to his important contribution to Thai scholarship over the years.

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