A Comparative Study of Buddha Images Between the Dali Kingdom of China and the Ayutthaya Mural Paintings of Wat Khongkharam Thailand

LI Li-Ping
Dali University, Dali, China

This paper is based on the Indian Buddhism arts, especially Hinayana, and it gives a comparison between the mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam and the Buddha images in Dali Kingdom of China. This paper also aims at analysing the origin, the development, and the major premises of artists in Buddhism Arts. Furthermore, I would like to collect related materials and give a recreation as well.

Keywords: mural paintings, Buddhism arts, Dali Kingdom, Wat Khongkharam

Introduction

With the booming of the economy, the technological communications integrate and dilute different cultures into one another more deeply and frequently than before. Together with this comes the opportunity to understand and appreciate ancient and profound cultures, that still bind nations together.

Personally speaking, I used to appreciate Thai traditional arts rather than to research into them. It is only when I moved to Thailand that I got the chance to understand the real beauty of Thai traditional arts. It seems to me that only when I was trying to understand the culture of a country I managed to appreciate its arts at the same time, especially its traditional arts.

When considering Thai culture, or even the living of Thai people, we cannot talk without paying attention to their religion, namely, Buddhism. It is easy for a lay man to notice that Buddhism is present everywhere in Thai people’s life, and the religion has been speak highly by the local people. Consequently, Buddhism influence Thai arts in everywhere.

My hometown is Dali, located in Yunnan province, China. Dali is an amazing county, which also bears cultural relations to Thailand. Dali used to be the capital city of the ancient Nanzhao Kingdom and also the Dali Kingdom. At that time, the boundaries between these kingdoms had stretched to the Northern part of today’s Thailand. Nowadays, at the southern part of the chinese province of Yunnan, called Xishuangbanna, we find the Dai and Zhuang ethnic groups, their languages resembling the Thai language to a large degree. At the same time, Buddhism flourished in Dali as well.

Buddhism originates in India, and was transmitted to the world from around 2nd B.C., and its prosperous
period was in the South East Asians States. The British author A. K. Warder mentioned the different branches and origins of Buddhism in his book, *Indian Buddhism*. He divides Buddhism into Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

The Theravada Buddhism prospers around the areas of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and also the southern Dali area of Yunnan province of China. Theravada Buddhism was transmitted from southern India forward to Sri Lanka and then to the most part of South East Asia. At that point, Buddhism in Dali was totally different from the one found in Thailand.

Buddhism in Dali belongs to the branch of Mahayana Buddhism, so that every royal temple at that time was designed according to the characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism; it left a great deal of heritage to the present day, for example Chongsheng Temple, Hongsheng Temple and many others. However, Buddhism in Dali also was influenced by Esoteric Buddhism, so that many researchers propose that Dali is a place which was influenced by both the Esoteric Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. On the other hand, The image of Acarya Avalokitesvara was proved to be taken from the Guanyin image of South East Asia (by Helen B. Chapin in *Yunnanese Images of Avalokitesvara*).

**Research Method**

The present study on the subject of “A comparative study of Buddha Images between the Dali Kingdom of China and the Ayutthaya Mural Paintings of Wat Khongkharam Thailand” uses the literature research together with the descriptive research, seen in the following aspects:

1. The artistic characteristics and language in Wat Khongkharam, Thailand;
2. The artistic characteristics and language in paintings in Dali period, from Chinese artist, ZHANG Sheng-wen;
3. Comparing these two different artistic languages and techniques, and applying these into real works.

**Findings**

Thai people believe that the presence of the Buddha statues is implicit in the area of folk customs and also in the rise and fall of individual fortunes. So, Buddhism art history in Thailand, with the rise and fall of Buddhism in Thailand, derives from art history, both to be understood in its historical context, and with his attachment to leaving space for imagination. This should be seen as Buddhist art, in addition to its aesthetics and religious components, but it also has a special significance.

**The Buddha Images in Wat Khongkharam in Thailand**

The Buddhist art of the Ayutthaya period can be devided into three stages, which are: the Prophase of Ayutthaya, Interim Art of Ayutthaya, and later period of Ayutthaya. The murals of Prophase of Ayutthaya do not form its own specific style. Its art forms are influenced by Khmer art. The murals of this period which compare well with other periods display stiff strokes, dignified atmosphere, and dull imaging. Generally, we find three main colors which are red, black, and white. Part of the murals use gilding. The theme of that period’s mural works is basically stories of Buddhism. There are a series of figures of Buddha appearing in the pictures, lining and sitting. And they match with the shrines as decoration. Their creative thinking is more than conservative.

Figure 1 is one of the murals in Wat Khongkharam. In this picture, monks are separated and have each their
own space. Between every two monks, a Buddha is being worshipped; besides, all figures are arranged in rows and they are identical in appearance with a pattern of exercitation as well as backlight. The monks are in meditation posture and piously worship on bended knees. It is said that this picture demonstrates the monks’ lives at that period. The painting is not in bright color but is scrupulously painte, well composed and it has great decorative value. In addition, by observing the line formed by the monks, you can discern something similar to the ancient Egyptian paintings stenography, representing objects in perspective in order to highlight the figures.

Figure 1. Wat Khongkharam.

Due to the long time span of the building of Wat Khongkharam, the mural paintings were not all made at the same period. As for this picture, its artistic style is much closer to former Ayuthaya’s, since all Buddha figures are arranged in rows and painted in red, black, and white. The following picture shows the panorama of the whole fresco.

It can be seen from this picture that the shape and style of the interval ornaments are also distinct.

The main mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam belong to the mid-Ayutthaya art (see Figure2). The shapes of Buddha figures were influenced by the art of Sukhotai period. All figures wear monk robes, which lean from the left shoulder to the navel until the ankle. The features of these figures include slender arms, neat fingers, husky statures, graceful postures, and serene composure. Besides, the use of backlights in lotus form and the round and mellow faces are characteristics of Buddha figures in prosperous time,s with a slight difference of the mellow face to the oval one from the Sukhotai period.

Figure 2. Wat Khongkharam.
Among the mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam there are another two patterns like Alams and Nirvan besides Exercitation. The Buddha figures are in different shapes. It is stated explicitly in section 3. In terms of color, the mid-Ayutthaya fresco break the tradition of only using red, black, and white (see Figure 3). Since then, the Buddha figures have become bright and colorful and have developed a preference for golden color. People then focused on depicting figures in Triloka and told stories about the Sutras. Such as Sakyamuni’s ten times incarnation before becoming the Buddha and the Shanshi prince’s return to the city.

![Figure 3. The specific characteristics of Wat Khongkharam.](image)

The composition of these mural paintings is precise, and the plot of each story is clear. In the painting techniques of the buildings, the trees are obviously influenced by Chinese painting landscape. Why do we choose the mural paintings of the Ayutthaya period as the research object? It is correlative with the special background of Ayutthaya period. The name of Ayutthaya comes from the ancient Indian country of Ayōdhya, which means “unconquerable” in Sanskrit. During this period, Thailand attached great importance to trade. So a lot of people from all over the world did business here. At that time, China was ruled by the Ming dynasty, which was the most prosperous in the history of chinese navigation. Therefore, in Ayutthaya, Chinese merchants and travellers would be found in numbers, passing through on their way to other places, or living there. This large commercial intercourse had improved art and cultural exchanges.

Wat Khongkharam, like most of the traditional paintings in Thailand, described the life of the predecessor in Hinayana Buddhism, Catholicism, and the Three Boundaries. The topic of these scenes is very famous and popular in Thailand, just a few parts are a description of the culture and customs of Thailand, which are very different from the mural paintings in any other temples in Thailand.

There are many learning points about the era and the craftsmen in history. One of the points is that Mongols built the temple, because the archaeologists have discovered many Mongolian words. In 1974, the buildings of the temple were placed the world culture prestige. Now, more and more people have joined the organization of research and protection. In many years, our offspring can see the resplendence of the culture and be proud of them.
The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG Sheng-wen (张胜温) at Chinese

In the past, due to poor information, cultural exchanges took a long time and were a long process.

Figure 4. The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG Sheng-wen.

The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG Sheng-wen (see Figure 4), from the Southern Song Dynasty (960-1279), is a representative work of paintings during that time, and so is another famous painting called “Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival”; both were known as the “Great pride of the North-South”, in 1180 A.D. At that time, Dali belonged to the province of Dali, and in this period of Buddhist art, a big difference can be seen between Dali and the Central Plains of China; that is a legacy of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Tang Dynasty Buddhist art was in full bloom for hundred of years, and through thousands of kilometers of walking, reached Dali.

Therefore, The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG Sheng-wen includes Chinese Buddhist art elements, and it is quite similar to the Tang Dynasty Buddhist art style.

This elongated painting of Buddhist art from the Dali artist ZHANG, along with his disciples, took more than two or three years to be drawn. The parts displaying the highest artistic skills are drawn by ZHANG, and the entire painting has a very high artistic value. As for ZHANG himself, there is no relevant records in history. But from his name we can figure out. “ZHANG” is one of the most common surname of The Bai ethnic group in China, and in Bai language, it means “Create Buddha’s people”. This argument is proposed by Cultural Studies expert Professor YANG Xiao-dong in Nanzhao; in his view, the artist’s name may not be real, but similar to a stage name, or to a title for someone good at something. Just like students call the teacher by his/her title.

And ZHANG also masters Chinese painting techniques, which is not surprising, because Dali as a “literature of the state” in the Song Dynasty, many young students were sent to Chinese parts and learning culture, when Nanzhao (653–902 A.D.) and Chinese areas maintained good relationship. After the famous “Tianbao Rebellion”, a lot of Chinese went into exile to Dali, and Chinese culture spread here.

A fine work kept in the National Palace Museum, The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG Sheng-wen, dated between 1173 A.D. and 1176 A.D., is an extremely valuable work of the Dali Kingdom. This painting consists of three sections: an imperial procession; a Buddhist pantheon including Buddhas, Bodhisattvas,
Guardian Kings, Dharmapālas, etc.; and kings of the 16 great realms. Its rich contents are quite useful in studying the history, religion, social customs and art about the kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali (937–1253 A.D.), both located in Yün-nan on the southwest border of China.

The Long Roll of Buddhist Images was drawn by artist ZHANG Sheng-wen. The beginning this painting was made a picture book used to buddhist ceremonies and art creation. And then a long time without any record until the king of Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), Qian-Long (King, 1436–1449 A.D.) got it, but it Soaked by a flood. Some parts of the picture are missing and misplaced because of numerous remounting. The iconography of “The Long Roll of Buddhist Images” is extremely complex, with many problems worthy of investigation and research.

However, as we mentioned before, this painting was drawn by ZHANG and his apprentices, thus in this work, the painting style are diverse and the drawing levels also not even. In the preservation process, there has been some damages and losses; so we can only study and be concerned about one part of this artefact of high artistic value and some of the Buddha statues.

All form a large iconographic unit. The Shakyamuni Buddha (see Figure 5) is at the center in this series, with 16 pages balanced on each of the left and right sides. In the section containing Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha sits in the middle of a thousand-petalled lotus. The Shakyamuni Buddha hands movements mean is teach, and it can be concluded that this section depicts Shakyamuni Buddha passing on Buddhist Law to teach, symbolized by the handing on of his thought to his disciple.

From this Buddha’s clothing, we can see, it belongs to Chinese Buddhist art style, because of the large size and many folds on clothes. This feature is one of important features in Chinese Buddhist art, Buddhist art throughout the world, in addition to the early Gupta era in India, monks have been wearing a loose robe at this time, and no specific number of folds. Without country or region, the Buddha has such feature, found also in the Thangka Tantric school in Tibet.

![Figure 5. The Long Roll of Buddhist Images.](image)

Many serious people may not understand, in the abovementioned picture (see Figure 5), but it is clear to see the number of lotus petals, and how it shows that he was said that Buddha sat on one thousand lotus; in fact, on top of each petal, there is a small lotus. The artist is really distinctive in the composition ingenuity and clearly trying to be different. This model originally also includes Buddha body accessories, these type of accessories
were usually found in esoteric school only, we can see from these details, showing that the The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG represents Dali as the best integration of Han Chinese and Tantric Buddhism. It is not an overstatement.

![Figure 6. Shakyamuni Buddha’s meeting First-original.](image1)

![Figure 7. Shakyamuni Buddha’s meeting second copy.](image2)

Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the contrast between the original and copy; in the whole picture, except for the statues which are the same, but the used tones had a major change. This is because the early Buddhist art basic raw materials were from the Indian region, and later with social development, the Silk Road declined. These materials became obsolete. By the Qing Dynasty(1636-1912), it had practically disappeared. In addition to this, there is a certain gap between the art style and artistic level. The original works were precise; content was abundant, the characters were layering in a vivid style, the overall style was uniform. As for the Buddha’s shape, the backlight and the umbrella’s application are Tantric Buddhist in art style.

Actually, as for the whole painting of The Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG, cultural integration runs through it. In the existing Long Roll of Buddhist Images by ZHANG (length: 1635.5 cm, height: 30.4 cm), we find a total of 134 images (a picture), 600 kinds of characters, like the Buddha and Bodhisattva statues. The comparative study is focus on Buddha itself. In the works, artistic style and artistic language are the same as above-described, the model features will be researched more deeply in the following sections.

In fact, the whole painting displays a strong sense of cultural integration. (see Figure 6 and 7, select from the one part of it).

1. Buddhist arhat is close to the Buddha. It is obvious that this Buddhism was influence by Theravada.
2. Buddha and Avalokiteshvara are at a certain distance.
3. Dali shows monks and worldly people, common people engaging in folk custom. As noted above, ZHANG Sheng-Wen’s painting is valuable to the understand the era and art meaning. The works are not only integration of Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism together, but also influenced by Theravada Buddhism.
Thus, in research, it is a model for learning. Thailand is a Theravada Buddhist country, Buddhist art is the developed very well here. There are often comparative studies of Buddhist statues in Thai and paintings by ZHANG Sheng-wen’s. It is a great help for learners to understand Buddhist art deeply, and it also has important historical significance to exchanges two countries’ culture.

**Comparing with Postures of Art\Art Language and Style of Painting**

Buddhism Images can be divided into five parts.

Fire emblem gesture—crossed legs, lifted hand put on two legs, right hand with the center of the palm touching the right leg, fingers pointing to the earth bearing witness to the fact that they can do anything to rescue all the people. This gesture are very widespread in Thailand. You can see this gesture many times in the mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam.

![Image](image1.jpg)

*Figure 8. Compare with “ZHANG Sheng-wen”of paintings in Dali period and muralpaintings in Wat Khongkharam about fire emblem gesture.*

From the picture (see Figure 8), we can see mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam are all the same except the background of the painting, so it must come from one single artist. But in the “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings from the Dali period, the postures are different from each other, the first Buddhist image on the left, the back lights are round, this is the traditional Mahayana Buddhism; in the middle of the picture, the back lights are like fire, this belongs to Esoteric Buddhism, in the whole picture, the postures of is the same type.

Statement phase cross the legs, lifted hand are put on the lift legs, the right hand make the round position which are called “Indian claims”.

Statement phase is unusual in art Buddhism of Thai, mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam describe Theravada Buddhism, the story of the lives of the Buddha before he became the Buddha, the original story from the “Mahabharata” epic which does not include Buddha, so you can’t find the Statement phase in the mural paintings. In the “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings of Dali period, there are a lot of postures, but you can only find a difference on the back lights and the ornaments, their monk robes have inner and outer, the only different is their monk robe, former buddhist going without shoes and having lotus under the feet are seated on the Kamidana, this gesture are special in Buddhist images, specific to Dali. But according to the story of Buddhism, Buddha is sitting under the Bodhi tree and thinking, and as He leaves, at each one step there is one
lotus. In the Buddhism of Thailand, most images have crossing legs. It’s usual for big images, but without stepping on the lotus.

![Figure 9. “ZHANG Sheng Wen” of paintings in Dali period.](image)

In “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings from Dali period, you can see many postures belonging to type statement.

Busch image—the body are standing, hand lifted down representing the power to make people’s dreams all come true, the right hand rise as to pray for a present that will give people courage and fearlessness.

The standing images are unusual in China, because of the conception of Acarya Avalokitesvara in China. In order to respect Buddhism, the images of Buddhism are sitting, and the images of Acarya Avalokitesvara are standing, that’s why the image in China are standing. So it’s unusual in “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings to see a standing position.

Sometimes the images in China are sitting, they use their hands to represent the meaning, the image of standing shoeless character, and stepping on the lotus, wearing two monk robes are not Busch style and fearless in their hands.

The Busch style in Wat Khongkharam have only one representant (see Figure 10) on the left at the first which is my favorite, the character wears a monk’s robe, the back light like the half lotus, they use lavender, there is a crown on his head, his eyes looking out to the people, his arms are soft and slender, his four fingers are the same. It gives a sense of happiness and fun that transpires in the Ayutthaya and in Sukhothai eras.

![Figure 10. Compare with “ZHANG Sheng-wen” of paintings in Dali period and mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam.](image)

On other Buddhist images with red robes, the posture bears no difference as the fire emblem gestures are all the same, these are Buddhists indoors and outdoors, with no shoes and no back lights.

Birth images are represented like children, the upper part of the body is naked, down of the body ware the skirts. Their left hands point at the sky and right hands point at the earth (at these births, they would walk seven
steps to east, south, west, and north, meanwhile their right hands would point at the sky, their left hands would point at the earth, and roar like a lion; in paintings like this, it would mean the birth of Shakyamuni). But you cannot find it from my research, so I just talk about it a little.

The reclining Buddha image—according to the gesture of the body, is laying down, the right side of the body facing to the south, with right hand support. In Wat Khongkharam you can see it, but there is no trace of it in the “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings.

Because the “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings describe a lot of Buddhist, after the middle of Buddhist art in China, you can’t see many sleeping images in the paintings in this period, but not as sculptures. Because there is a huge difference between Chinese painting and Thai paintings.

In the Buddhist paintings of Thailand, the main idea is the stories of Buddha, the Buddha’s life, in which laying down is necessary, so you can see the sleeping images. But on the fourth image on your right, they are not talking about the sleep, but the four imaginations (see Figure 11).

![Figure 11. Lying Buddha image in Wat Khongkharam.](image)

But it’s the same among images of sleep, they wear lotus crown like Busch style, compare with the former, the latter are more sensual, and looks more “S”-shaped, it feel more like the Indian Gupta Buddha. Softness is the important thing in Thai Buddhism posture. They use lines and colors to represent softness. It’s probably the value of beauty in Thailand. You can feel also in Thai traditionnal dancing, movements are delicate. This is a feature of Thai art. That is the one main difference between China and Thailand in Buddhist art posture.

In conclusion, comparing Ayutthaya Period in Wat Khongkharam images and Dali Kingdom era style in the “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings, we note that they display the same hair style, the faces are round in ZHANG Sheng-wen of paintings, following Tang Dynasty stereotypes, but in Wat Khongkharam the chin is represented as sharp, the body slim and soft and more feminine. Their dresses, except the lotus crown, the monk robe are worn and show the left arm, the dresses are up to their feet which are sholess, and no back lights. But in ZHANG Sheng-wen paintings, there are many kinds of monk robes, which have inner and outer parts, not very feminine, have three back lights: vague lights, fire lights, and lotus lights. Decoration such as umbrellas, lotuses, necklaces, and andothers. There are postures quite similar to Han Dynasty style, Tibetan style, and South-east Asian style. To sum up, the postures of Wat Khongkharam are simple, but both have interesting points.

When we know something about the cultural history and appreciation of art, we think about the Buddhist images. For example, like the head of Buddha, it represents wisdom, the middle of the brow has a spot which is called “bai hao xiang”, meaning the light; the eyes are half-open and gaze at the people, the lips are like a flower and smile, the ears are slender, and the fingers are long; it means that hand can calm people; the body is dignified, signifying clarity; the general appearance looks good, signifying everyone should show respect to them.
So you can see both Wat Khongkharam image and “ZHANG Sheng-wen” series of paintings are in a way the same; it can also be said that cultures have shared characteristics and the value of beauty is the same for human being.

Summary

Table 1

<table>
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<th>Character</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>“ZHANG Sheng-wen” paintings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
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<td>Dali</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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<td>1118 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style of painting</td>
<td>Middle of Ayutthaya Period style</td>
<td>Han, Tibet style</td>
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| Posture | The postures are the same, the bodies like female which are soft and sexy and wear the crown of lotus. No back lights, wear red monastic robe, no covering on the left shoulder, the arm like nose of elephants, the fingers are the same, robe down to the feet, feed bared, no decorate |
| Artistic characteristics | Many kinds of posture, planting vivid, the bodies are strong, there is no distinguish between male and female, the dress are traditional, the face are round, have back lights (vague lights, fire lights, and lotus lights) have decorate umbrella, jewel, feet bared. |
| Summary | Typical of the Middle of Ayutthaya Period style, especially the three worlds Buddhism story, the house and mountain have an influence on chinese paintings. |

Conclusion

Dali a has profound historical background in art design, especially in Buddhist arts. For example, the representative paintings of Dali kingdom period by ZHANG Sheng-wen, vividly reflect the importance of Buddhism.

Furthermore, the mural paintings from Wat Khongkharam, constructed in the pre-Ayutthaya period, were destroyed by wars and were rebuilt many times. There is a diverse religious heritage, such as Mongolian calligraphies, decorations, and Catholic literature and so on.

The mural paintings in Wat Khongkharam are representative works of the mid-Ayutthaya period. In these paintings we find descriptions of Buddha from birth to death, especially the stories of the lives of the Buddha before he became the Buddha. The characteristics of Buddha in this story are clear to see and easy to observe.

Buddhist Art is of course essentially religious; it is the pious spirits of Artists that compose such kind of precious artistic works for us to appreciate. So only if we are influenced by devout spirits can we appreciate and research these works in the future.
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