

# **A Buddhist Monk's Journeys to Heaven and Hell**

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Phra Malai, the Buddhist saint known for his legendary travels to heaven and hell, has long figured prominently in Thai religious treatises, works of art, and rituals – particularly those associated with the afterlife. The story is one of the most popular subjects of nineteenth-century illustrated Thai manuscripts. The earliest examples of these Thai manuscripts date to the late eighteenth century, though it is assumed that the story is much older, being based on a Pali text from Sri Lanka. Phra Malai is mentioned in a Burmese inscription from the thirteenth century, and anonymous Northern Thai versions of the story may go back to the sixteenth century. In nineteenth-century Thailand, it became a very popular chanting text for weddings and funerals.

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<sup>102</sup> The Thai manuscripts which are the subject of this article have been digitized with the support of the Royal Thai Government to celebrate the Auspicious Occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, 5th December 2007. The digitized manuscripts are made available online at the library's Digital Manuscripts viewer [www.bl.uk/manuscripts](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts).

Monks reciting the story would often embellish and dramatize their tellings, contrary to the behavioral rules for monks which were introduced during the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century monks were banned from performing Phra Malai recitations. As a result, former monks who had left the Sangha often delivered the popular performances, dressed up as monks for the occasion, unconstrained by the rules of proper behavior for the real monks.

## **The story of Phra Malai**

Phra Malai is the legend of a Buddhist monk of the Theravada tradition, who was said to have attained supernatural powers through his accumulated merit and meditation. According to the legend, he visits heaven and hell and afterwards describes to the lay people and fellow monks what he has seen. By his visit to hell, he bestows mercy on the creatures in hell and temporarily brings relief to their sufferings. They implore him to warn their relatives on earth of the horrors of hell and how they may escape it through making merit, meditation and following the Buddhist precepts.

Back on earth, he receives an offering of eight lotus flowers from a woodcutter, which he promises to take along to heaven and to offer at the Chulamani Chedi, a heavenly stupa containing a relic of the Buddha. In heaven, Phra Malai engages in discourse with Indra, the green faced king of the gods. Eventually, he meets and speaks with the Buddha-to-come, Maitreya, who teaches him about the future of the humans on earth.

It was through tellings of Phra Malai stories that the karmic effects of human actions were taught to the faithful at funerals and other merit-making occasions on behalf of the deceased. It was also through these verbal and visual narratives that Maitreya's message of hope for a better rebirth and for attaining nirvana was conveyed. According to the Buddha Maitreya, attendance of a Vessantara Jataka performance counts as a virtue that increases chances of a better rebirth. For this reason, the story of Phra Malai is often combined with the Vessantara Jataka or The Ten Birth Tales within one manuscript.

Phra Malai manuscripts usually contain the following illustrated scenes: Devas (heavenly beings) and Buddhist monks

at the beginning of the text, monks attended by laymen, scenes of the hells showing punishments, the picking and offering of the lotus flowers, Chulamani Chedi and the talk with Indra and Buddha Maitreya, heavenly beings floating in the air, scenes of the future with people fighting contrasted by people meditating and others plucking gold and gems from wish trees.

Although the subject of hell is mentioned in the Pali canon (for example, Nimi Jataka, Lohakumbhi Jataka, Samkicca Jataka, Devaduta Sutta, Balapandita Sutta, Peta-vatthu etc.) it is believed that the legend of Phra Malai helped to shape the picture of hell in Thai society.

### **The Thai manuscript tradition**

Thai folding manuscripts are usually made from the bark of the Khoi tree (*Streblus asper*, or *Trophis aspera*). The bark was stripped from the tree, soaked in water and then beaten with wooden mallets until the bark separated into fibers. The fibers were dried on a flat surface until they gained the consistency of cardboard. After trimming the edges to 60 cm in length, the paper was folded accordion-like to form a book of about 12 cm width. The paper is of a dull cream-buff color, and the writing was done with black China ink and a bamboo pen. The front and back covers are mostly lacquered, sometimes with gilt decorations.

Traditional Thai manuscript painters had only a limited range of colors made from available natural materials. Red and yellow ochre, as well as white were obtained from local minerals. Black was produced from lampblack, carbon or crushed charcoal. Greens and blues were mostly produced from vegetable matter (for example *Indigofera*). Only by the eighteenth century was malachite imported from China to produce a bright green color. Gold was also used lavishly. Natural pigments were mixed with the sap of a tree to improve adhesion to the paper.

The production of illustrated folding books ranks as one of Thailand's greatest cultural achievements. They were produced for a range of different purposes in Buddhist monasteries and at the royal and local courts. First of all, such books served as teaching material and handbooks for Buddhist monks and novices. Canonical

Buddhist literature, prayers (sutras) and moral teachings were also read to the lay people during religious ceremonies. The production of folding books – and even sponsoring their production - was regarded as a great act of merit making. Therefore, folding books quite often are a kind of “Festschrift” or presentation volume in honor of a deceased person.

The dating of these manuscripts is done through analysis of the calligraphy, style of painting (during the 19th century, western techniques of painting such as the use of perspective gained popularity), and the use of colors. The depiction of foliage and clouds also offers insight. Sometimes the manuscripts contain a colophon that gives a date and occasion as well as names of donors for the production of the manuscript.

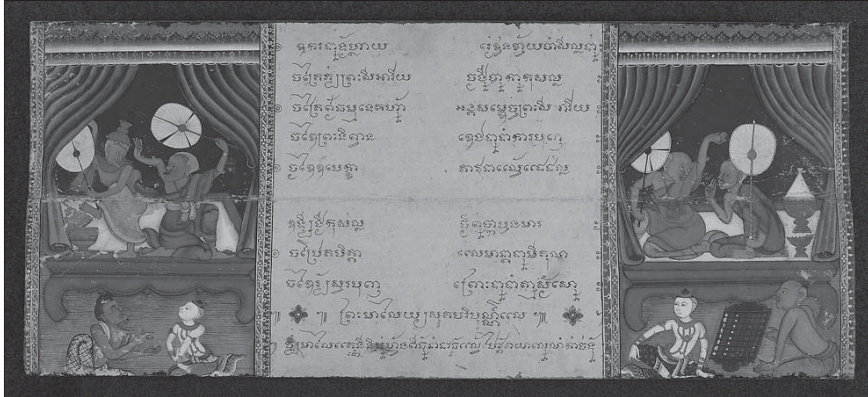
The manuscript tradition began to die out in Thailand with the spread of printing presses in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the story of Phra Malai has lost none of its popularity in Thailand and recitations of the legend are regularly carried out during funeral ceremonies at Buddhist monasteries throughout the country. The legend also has been reprinted repeatedly in books, on post cards and on posters in recent decades.



© British Library Shelfmark ORB.30/6309: Two postcards from a series of fourteen depicting the story of Phra Malai, ca 1970.

## The legend of Phra Malai in Thai manuscripts at the British Library:

### *Scenes from a Phra Malai performance*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.14838, folio 86: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with sixteen paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1849 in a colophon in Thai script at the end of the text.

The virtuoso painting style in this manuscript is the work of a fine artist, but he is not mentioned in the colophon which lists the names of the donors. They are a mother and her two children, and it is stated that they paid for the making of the manuscript as well as for fabric to wrap it in, and a lacquered and gilt chest in which to keep it. The total cost was eight *tamlung* two *baht* one *fuang* (which is equal to 1.141 lb of silver). The realistic style, with details rendered with the sharpest accuracy, reflects influence from abroad, perhaps Indian or European. This type of realistic representation was not a traditional element of Thai painting.

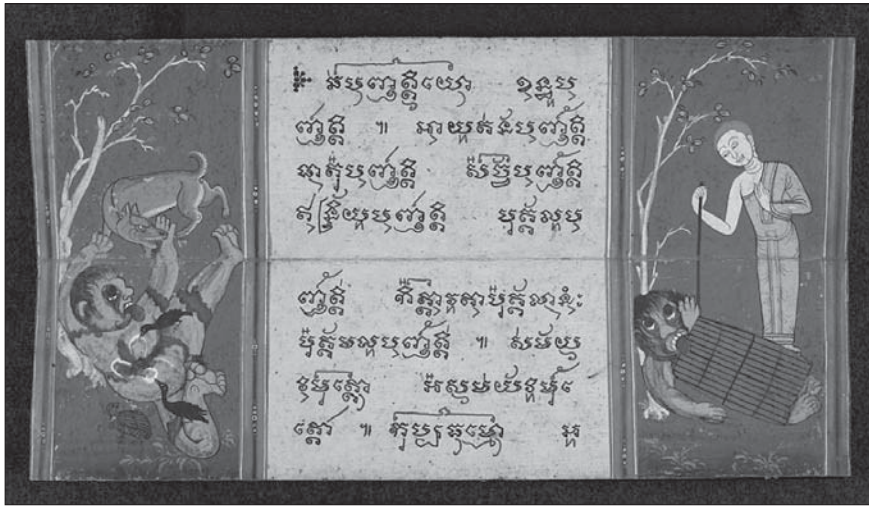
The satirical scene of pretend monks, reciting the Phra Malai text when ordained monks were forbidden to do so, and with lay people seated below them (including both noblemen and commoners) clapping hands and playing a board game, reflects very well the real practice of Phra Malai performances during the 19<sup>th</sup>



century. The delicate characterization of the figures, the coloring, shading, and quality of detail, are all exceptional in Thai painting of this period. The high level of sophistication is surprising at a time when most artists were adhering to traditional norms.

The date given, 2392 in the Buddhist era, the Year of the Monkey, is equivalent to 1849 AD, at the end of the reign of King Rama III.

### *Phra Malai visits the hell of thieves*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.13703, folio 10: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) made from Mulberry paper containing twenty paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Pali canon), written in Khmer (Khom) script in black ink with red tone marks for use in recitation.

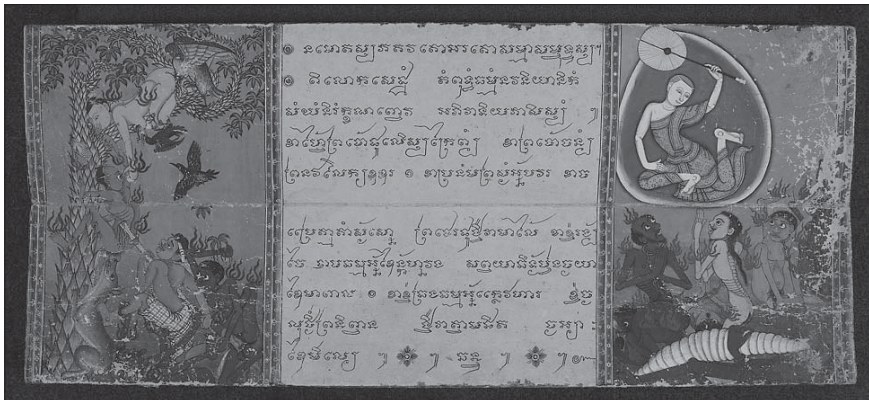
Although providing no information on when it was made, this striking manuscript has the main characteristics of early nineteenth century Thai painting with dark background colors, large scale of figures, and distinctive draughtsmanship with firm yet still relatively fluid lines. The monk Phra Malai here has similarities with the features of a Thai standing Buddha figure.

The illustrations show Phra Malai's visit to the hell of thieves. It is believed that the soul of a deceased person will first of all meet Yama, the Lord of Justice, who presides over the Buddhist hells.

Yama will decide about the reincarnation of that person according to their *karma*, which is the result of their actions of body, speech and mind during their previous existence. Those who have offended the Buddhist laws will have to reside in one of the Buddhist hells for a definite length of time until their *karma* has exhausted its cumulate effect before they can be reborn on earth or, eventually, in heaven.

The inhabitants of this hell have to endure painful punishments, which include having their extremities bitten or chopped off their bodies, their intestines pulled out by wild birds, being nailed at tree trunks, being restrained and pierced with spears. Phra Malai brings comfort to the sufferers of this hell and promises to teach their relatives to follow the Buddhist precepts. The small turtle, which is often used as a lucky charm by business people in Thailand, possibly symbolizes greed which leads to offences like fraud, deceit, and theft.

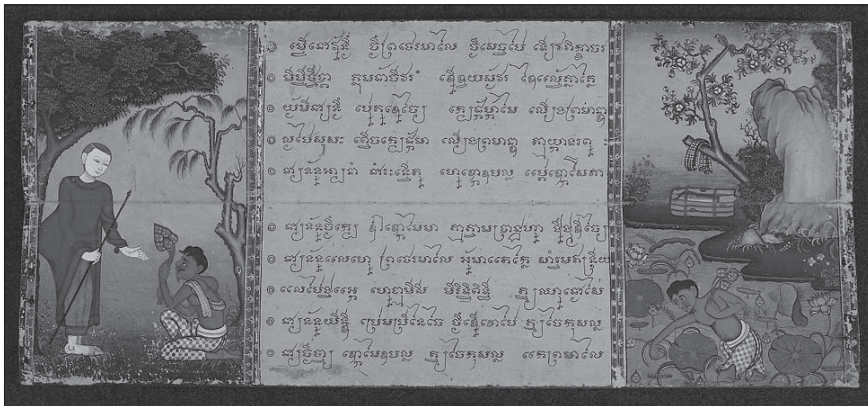
### *Phra Malai visits the hell of adulterers*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.14838, folio 9: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with sixteen paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1849 in a colophon in Thai script at the end of the text.

The paintings on this folio show unusual bright colored hell scenes, each with a sky-blue background. Phra Malai is floating in a huge red aureole above the heads of the inhabitants of the hell of adulterers. It is believed that giant worms eat up their innards, wild animals bite them, and hell guards with spears chase them up *kapok* trees, which have a height of about 10 miles. The trees have flaming thorns as sharp as knives made of steel. The sufferers in this hell can be seen begging Phra Malai to teach their relatives in the human realm, Jambudipa, about their fate and to tell them to make merit on their behalf. A certain Indian or European influence is being reflected in the realistic style of painting, which was not a traditional element of Thai painting and emerged only during the nineteenth century.

### *Phra Malai receives a lotus offering*



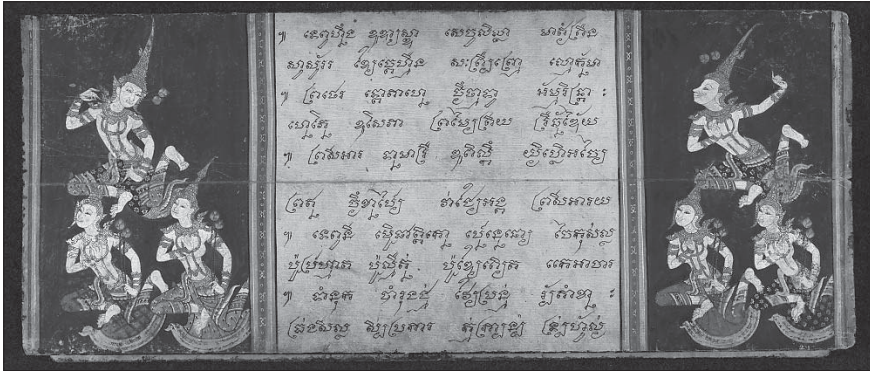
© British Library Shelfmark Or.14838, folio 29: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with sixteen paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1849 in a colophon in Thai script at the end of the text.

These two paintings show one of the most popular scenes from the legend of Phra Malai. A poor woodcutter picks lotus flowers in a pond and presents them to Phra Malai to carry to heaven as an offering to be laid down at Chulamani Chedi, the heavenly stupa.



The lotus pond is richly embellished with rocks, flowers, bushes and a tree. The woodcutter's *pakama* (a shoulder or head cloth) is hanging on the tree, whereas his knife and wood can be seen orderly arranged under the tree. The flowering tree with a bird and the rock could both derive from Chinese painting style. However, they had become typical features of the Thai painting style during the nineteenth century. The left-hand scene, where the bouquet is presented to the monk, is a calm and peaceful one with trees and flowers on a bright background.

### *Phra Malai visits the heavens*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.14115, folio 40: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with 22 paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Pali canon) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink.

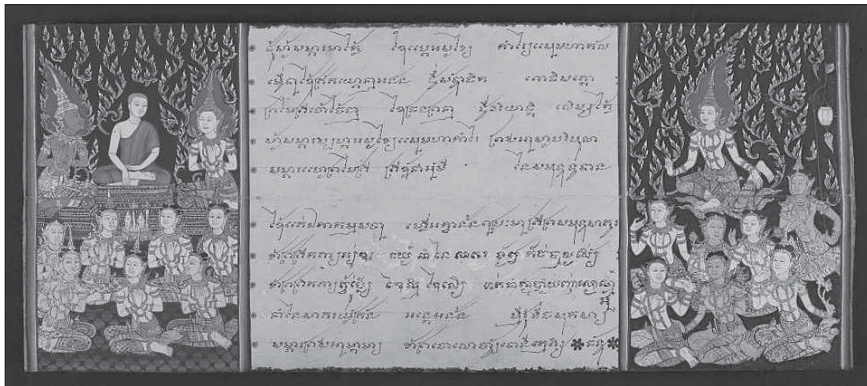
The illustrations in this folding book are carefully and finely painted and are works of great artistic merit. The paintings stand in the tradition of early nineteenth century painting, but the cursive writing style bears more the characteristics of a style that was used during the second half of the nineteenth century. The scenes in heaven are standard ones in Phra Malai manuscripts, but rendered here on dramatic black grounds richly set with golden decorations.

On the folio shown here the denizens of heaven are floating in the air, the upper ones being male *devas* and below them their female counterparts. Each of them carries a pair of pink lotus flowers,

symbolizing purity. The pink lotus is regarded as the supreme lotus and is attributed to the historical Buddha. *Devas* are believed to inhabit the Buddhist heavens, however, they are not immortal nor omnipotent or perfect. They live for very long but finite periods of time, ranging from thousands to millions of years. When they pass away, they are reborn as some other sort of being, perhaps a different type of *deva*, perhaps as a human or something beyond comprehension. Their existence is a result of their *karma* as much as this is the case with humans.

The typical Thai headgear and dresses - which occur not only in manuscript and mural painting, but also in classical theatre performances – have been painted with outstanding accuracy in these illustrations.

### ***Phra Malai meets Indra and Buddha Maitreya***



© British Library Shelfmark Or.6630, folio 56: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with fourteen paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1868 in a colophon in Thai script at the end of the text.

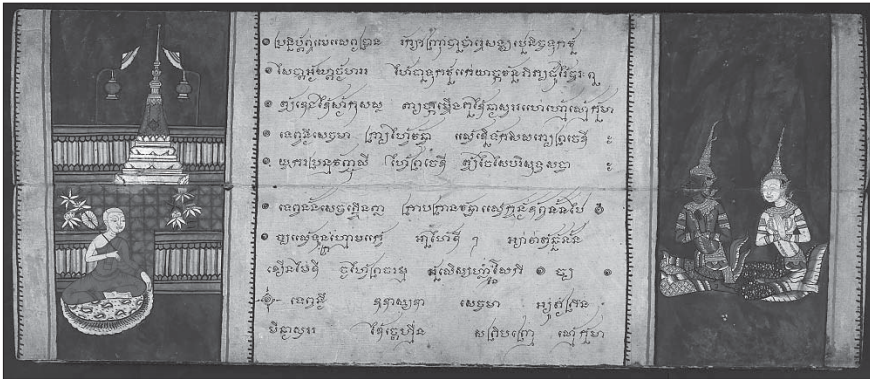
This manuscript was produced in the year when King Rama V ascended the throne. The elaborate painting style in all fourteen illustrations is outstanding. The artist, a superb craftsman of lines and colors, used the background space for densely painted and

delicately detailed patterns which remind of the decorations on Thai Benjarong porcelain.

The script in this manuscript is more cursive in style than usual in this type of manuscript. Some letters in the text render letters from the modern Thai alphabet more than letters from the Khmer alphabet.

On the left, Phra Malai is seated on a plinth in heaven conversing with the green-colored god Indra and Maitreya, the future Buddha who came down from the Tusita heaven to meet the monk. Two rows of heavenly beings fan out below the three main figures in an inventive, bold pattern which is rarely seen in manuscripts. On the right side, Buddha Maitreya is floating above other devas before a bright blue background. The elaborate structure of the paintings and the rich coloring are unusual, though highly effective.

### *Phra Malai offers the lotus at the Chulamani Chedi*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.16353, folio 91: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with ten paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Colophon at the end of the text in Thai script.

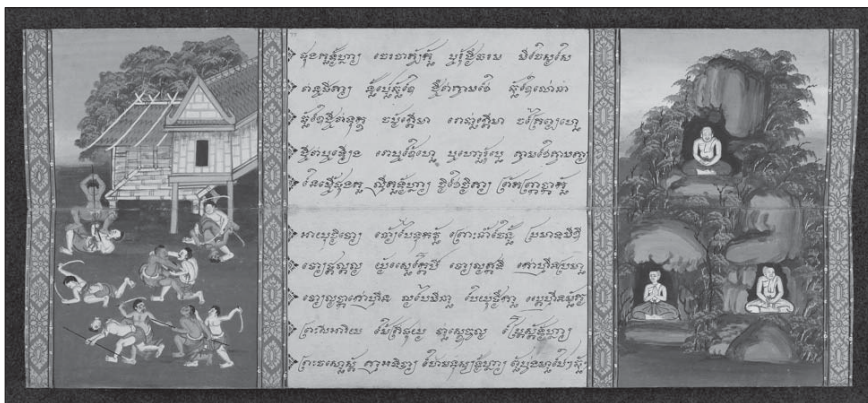
Written in thin Khmer script, this manuscript can probably be attributed to the second half of the nineteenth century, although the paintings resemble more the style of the early Bangkok era. It could as well be a copy of an earlier manuscript. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, a practice of nearly exact copying of Phra Malai manuscripts emerged. According to the colophon, the manuscript was produced on occasion of a funeral to help the deceased reach a state of Nirvana.

Illustration on the left side shows Phra Malai offering a poor woodcutter's lotus flowers at the stupa known as Chulamani Chedi. The stupa is believed to be situated in the Tavatimsa heaven. It is surrounded by a blue glazed wall, and the floor it stands on is covered with brown tiles. Left and right of the stupa green Chinese-style lanterns hang on rods. In older manuscripts, the rods usually hold Buddhist banners. The base of the stupa could be white marble, the green centerpiece could be made of jade, and the top is gilt. Altogether the compound reminds the viewer of the Buddhist temples built in Bangkok during the reign of King Rama V.

Phra Malai sits on a carpet at the entrance to the chedi, carrying his fan. The lotus flowers in front of the chedi have a rather unusual shape in this painting.

The illustration on the right side shows Indra together with a female deva sitting down in prayer.

### *Phra Malai learns about the future of the human world*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.16100, folio 78: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with seventeen paired illustrations showing The Ten Birth Tales and Phra Malai. The text is in Pali language and in Thai, written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1894 in a colophon in Thai script on the first page.

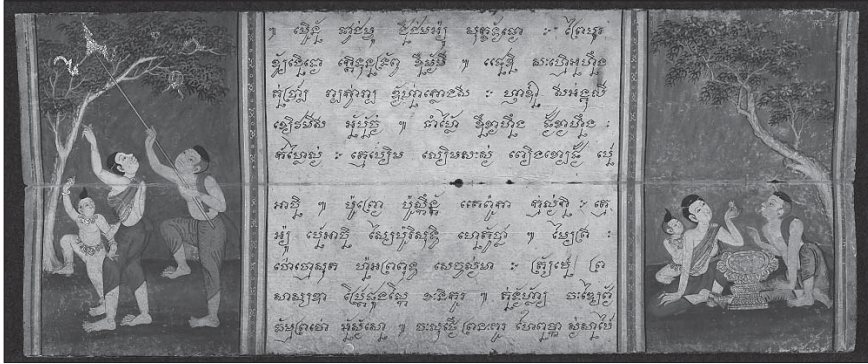
Bequeathed to the British Library in 2004 from Doris Duke's Southeast Asian Art Collection, this lavishly illustrated manuscript is distinct in its realistic painting style which shows the Western influence of the nineteenth century. Although it was produced towards the end of the Thai manuscript tradition, it is an outstanding example. The paintings are all very detailed with a refined color sense. The text is cursive written in a fine hand.

In addition to the illustrations resembling scenes from The Ten Birth Tales and Phra Malai, this manuscript contains two large paintings. One shows a monk's funeral on two folios, whereas the other stretches over five folios depicting Mount Meru.

According to the legend, the future Buddha Maitreya informed Phra Malai during his visit to the heavens about the future of the human world. It is said that Buddhism would deteriorate after Buddha's teachings had been on earth for five thousand years. Violence, incest, chaos and war would bring mankind to extinction. Only a few wise people would be able to hide in caves, sitting in meditation and prayer until the Buddha Maitreya is reborn in the human realm.



*Phra Malai learns about the wish trees of the future*



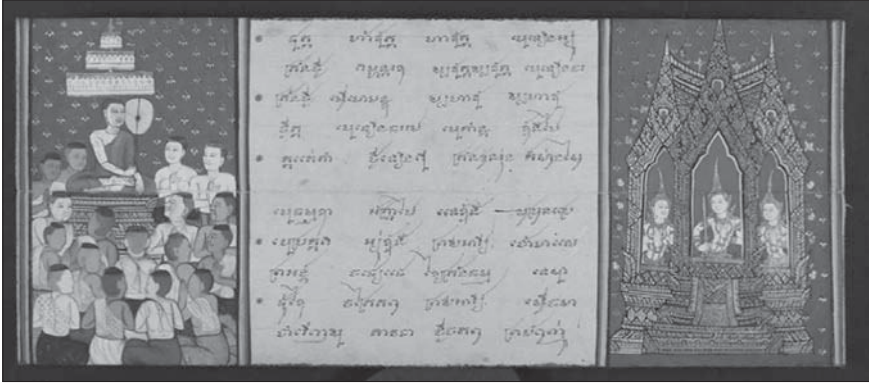
© British Library Shelfmark Or.14115, folio 75: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with 22 paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Pali canon) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink.

These two paintings illustrate what Phra Malai learned from the future Buddha Maitreya about the wish trees which would grow when he is reborn into the human world. At that time, all humans who had followed the Buddhist way of life, who attended recitations of the Vessanara Jataka and made merit in their former lives would be reborn as well. The earth would flourish with vegetation, villages and towns would be thickly populated with healthy and handsome people. Huge wish trees would grow on earth to provide humans with goods and valuables.

The lively, realistic style of painting suggests that the manuscript is from the second half of the nineteenth century, probably more towards the end of the century. This is supported by the slightly cursive script of the text.

The illustrations show a family plucking valuables from a wish tree on the left side, whereas on the right they enjoy food from a golden tray. Their outfit and hairstyles were typical for commoners during the nineteenth century.

*Phra Malai teaches lay people about his journeys to heaven and hell*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.6630, folio 71: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with fourteen paired illustrations. The text is in Pali language (extracts from the Abhidhamma scriptures) and in Thai (Phra Malai), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1868 in a colophon in Thai script at the end of the text.

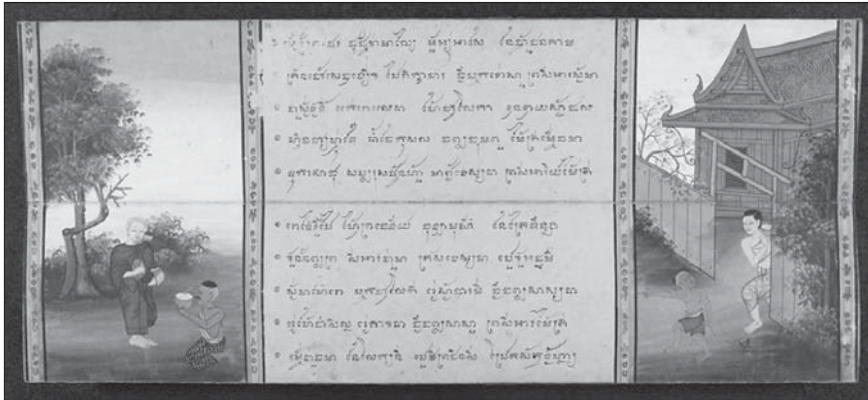
These two paintings from this finely illustrated manuscript depict the scenes of the monk Phra Malai telling his story to lay people, and of Buddha Maitreya in a heavenly pavilion with two attendants (*deva*). The scenes are set on a blue background with a floral wallpaper design which was very popular in Thai manuscript painting during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

On the left side, Phra Malai sits on a pedestal with a three-tiered white-and-gilt umbrella above his head. He is surrounded by female and male lay people attentively listening to the story of his journeys. The faces of some figures in this illustration remain unfinished, which provides us with insights into the methods of making this kind of miniature painting.

The pavilion in the illustration on the right side has similarities with the heavenly pavilions that are often depicted in illustrated Thai Buddhist cosmologies known as *Traiphum* (*The Three Worlds*). The very detailed depiction of the architecture of the building

together with the three figures sitting inside it make this illustration an outstanding example of Thai manuscript painting.

*Phra Malai receives offerings from the lay people*



© British Library Shelfmark Or.16101, folio 89: Illustrations from a Thai folding book manuscript (*samut khoi*) with seventeen paired illustrations and gilt and lacquered covers. The text is in Pali language and in Thai (Phra Malai and Ten Birth Tales), written in thin Khmer (Khom) script in black ink. Dated to 1894 in a colophon in Thai script at the beginning of the text.

The illustrations in this folding book depict scenes from the Ten Birth Tales and the legend of Phra Malai. They are finely painted in decent colours, and those concerning the Ten Birth Tales are lavishly adorned with gilt. Most of the illustrations are set before the background of a realistically composed landscape with trees, bushes, rocks, meadows, hills, rivers, and even village scenery.

The illustrations on the left side of folio 89 depict Phra Malai on his morning alms round receiving food offerings from a layman who kneels before the monk. The man is dressed like a Thai commoner during the nineteenth century and wears a moustache of the kind that became very popular during the reign of King Rama V. He offers a bowl of rice to the monk, a practice that remains an important part of life in Thailand to date.

The painting on the right side shows a young child with a spin top and a female commoner rushing out of their compound. Behind the fence, one can see a traditional Thai-style wooden house, which, quite unusually, stands of the ground instead on wooden pillars.

Under growing European influence towards the end of the nineteenth century, scenes from life became an end in themselves, and with the western painting style came trends towards realism in the rendering of figures and settings, and finally of three-point perspective in space and landscape. Altogether, the adoption of these elements from the west (together with the introduction of the printing press) had a largely negative effect on Thai manuscript painting, which practically came to an end in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

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