

she was ready for marriage, but also to demonstrate the importance of making merit in return for happiness and prosperity. This tradition has now disappeared, as groups of villagers produce trees decorated with gifts that are disbursed to monks through a lottery system. With the revival some ten years ago of this annual festival between September and October, the trees appear to grow taller and more ostentatious each year. Despite criticism that sees “competitions and monetary prizes for the best Salak Yom tree as a distortion of the original Buddhist values of merit making”, the festival now attracts large numbers of domestic tourists and wealthy donors.

If it seems churlish to offer criticism of the catalogue of exhibits – actually this is more mild disappointment - I would like to have seen an even broader range of artefacts displayed, including Bencharong utensils or tiles (such as those used to decorate Wat Phra Kaeo and the charming Wat Rajabophit), mother-of-pearl decorative objects or furniture, enamelled copperwares, betel sets and other paraphernalia, such as fans, used by monks during religious ceremonies. Although rarely used now, all of these objects have played an ubiquitous role in Thai Buddhist ritual, and fine examples can still be found at the royal Buddhist temples of Bangkok and in museums.

In summation, this is a “must-have” book for anyone interested in learning about Thai Buddhist art history, and provides a suitable legacy to the original Exhibition while the photos certainly do justice to the many rare and important exhibits. We should be grateful to the ACM for assembling one of the finest exhibitions ever on this subject matter.

Paul Bromberg

*The Philosophical Constructs of Wat Arun* by Chatri Prakitnonthakan (Bangkok: South East Insurance Pcl, 2013). ISBN 978-974-289-781-9.



Over the past few years, the Fine Arts Department and the Royal Institute have published high-quality versions of some of the oldest and most important Thai texts, particularly from the early Rattanakosin era. This represented a significant and very welcome change from the parsimonious policy of these bodies in the past. The result is a new wave of scholarship, based in part on these texts, which is substantially revising the history of the late Ayutthaya and early Bangkok eras.

This book could serve as a coffee-table ornament. Its stunning illustrations include a complete reconstruction of the Thonburi Illustrated Traiphum, old photos and engravings, countless maps from the 16th century to the present, computer reconstructions of Wat Arun at various points in the past, and some very high quality contemporary photography of both interiors and exteriors.

But it is the text that makes this book especially valuable. Chatri Prakitnonthakan, who teaches at Silpakorn University, is one of a small group who are making architectural history one of the most exciting areas of Thai historiography at present. His interests include the politics of architecture in the 20th century and conservation issues today, but also stretch back to the linked roles of religious philosophy and architectural design in early Bangkok.

The book has three parts. The first traces the history of Wat Arun. The monastery was probably founded (as Wat Makok) in the late 16th century on the bank of Khlong Lat, one of the canals cut to shorten the route down the Chao Phraya River from Ayutthaya to the sea. After 1767, it became the palace temple of King Taksin of Thonburi, was renamed as Wat Chaeng (dawn), and briefly housed the Emerald Buddha brought from Vientiane. King Rama II renamed it as Wat Arun and resolved to transform it into the principal relic stupa of the new capital of Bangkok by raising the *prang* from 16 to 67 metres, ensuring that it has continued to dominate the skyline of the old city centre until the present day. Subsequently, there have been many renovations and repairs, but the layout today was more or less fixed at the end of the big renovation of the Second and Third Reigns in 1842. Chatri traces the changing layout by detailed research of old maps and documents, and displays the results in neat computer reconstructions of the complex's various phases.

In the second part of the book, Chatri turns from the fabric to the texts. Many studies have concluded that the *prang* symbolises Mount Meru, the mountain at the centre of the Buddhist cosmology of the Three Worlds, and have assumed the symbolism is based on the version of this cosmology attributed to the Sukhothai era and known as *Traiphum Phra Ruang*. But Chatri shows that this text seems to have been unknown in the early Bangkok era, and argues that a new and subtly different version of the cosmology under the title *Traiphum Lokawinichai* was much more important. He also argues that this different version of the cosmology is represented in the several Traiphum Illustrated Manuscripts of the same era, especially the one known as Thonburi 10.

In this new version, the cosmology of the universe, the history of Buddhism, and the present-day world are much more closely interrelated. The sacred geography of Jambudvipa, the sites of events in the Buddha's life, and the modern geography of Southeast Asia are not separate conceptual realms but layers of a single map. Siam is at the centre of the world of Buddhism, and Siam's monarch is a *thamma racha*, a "Buddha of the world". Indra is recast from his role as a Hindu warrior god to become a divinity, who facilitates the emergence of Buddhism and serves as a model

and symbol of kingship. At the centre of this discussion is a magnificent layout of the whole Thonburi Traiphum manuscript on one single extended spread.

Chattri's argument is essentially the same as in his article on Wat Pho in this issue of *JSS*, but presented in much greater detail.

The third part of the book shows how Wat Arun was "designed as a perfect replica of the worlds and the universe according to Buddhist belief during the Early Rattanakosin period." Chattri notes that the renovation begun in the Second Reign did not only include the enlarged *prang*, as generally presented, but also a complete remodelling of the complex including some thirty new or modified buildings. This new ground plan was divided into three areas with distinct symbolism. The complex around the *prang* represents the Traiphum cosmology in great detail, and Chattri nails down the significance of each statue, image and mural. The second area to the north around the *ubosot* represents Jambudvipa, and the third area to the west around the Footprint Mondop represents Lankadvipa. The argument is presented with elaborate diagrams matching the material fabric with the imagery in the Traiphum Illustrated Manuscripts.

The text appears in both Thai and English. The translation by Bancha Suvannanonda and Steve Van Beek reads very well, although some more thought could have been given to making the technical terms in the cosmology easier for English-language readers to understand. The book's title also tries a little too hard; the Thai is more simply, *The Symbolism and Design of Wat Arun Ratchawararam*. The layout and proofing of the English text is a bit shoddy, which is a pity given the size of the overall investment in production. The book has proper annotations, bibliography, a good glossary and index in both languages.

The retail price (2,500 Baht) is expensive, but is justified by the contents, and is almost certainly subsidized by the publication's sponsors, the Southeast Insurance and Finance Group, which has Wat Arun in its logo. Part of the proceeds will go towards maintenance of the *wat*.

Anyone who is intrigued by Chattri's article in this issue should move on to this book for an extended and more heavily illustrated version of the argument. It is a major contribution to the historiography of early Bangkok, and a model for the use of images and illustrations in academic argument.

Chris Baker