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The cultural significance of Buddha representations from Bangkok in a Japanese Buddhist historic site: A case study of Nittaiji Temple of Japan¹

Vannaporn Phongpheng

Abstract—The image of Bangkok as a “Buddhist City” in Asian countries was propagated through the cultural diplomacy of King Chulalongkorn. In the case of Japan, Nittaiji Temple in Nagoya is the representative of a Thai-Japanese relationship developed from such a Buddhist idea. Much iconic Buddhist art was created to symbolically present Thai-Japanese Buddhist relations. Today, this temple is an iconic Buddhist attraction in Nagoya City because of the enshrinement of a Buddha image and Buddha relics given by the state of Thailand as well as because of the good management by Thailand and Japan to develop this relationship. This study analyzes the outstanding features of Buddhist architecture, Buddhist artifacts and Buddhist practices in Nittaiji Temple that were created based on the concept of religious syncretism. Thailand has continuously sent Buddha representations, such as Buddha relics, Buddha images, Buddha footprints and Buddha inscriptions, to Nittaiji Temple to bind Buddhist relations between the two countries. Thailand and Japan have collaborated to create many symbols of the bilateral relationship based on the integration of contemporary Thai and Japanese Buddhist art. The concept of religious syncretism appears in the complexes of faith and practice by Buddhist visitors influenced by Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism coexisting with Shinto. This has resulted in Nittaiji Temple becoming an historic Buddhist site and is evidence of a successful international relationship bound by Buddhist cultural integration.

Keywords: Buddha representations, Thai-Japanese Buddhist relations, syncretism, Japanese Buddhist historic site

Introduction

Nittaiji Temple’s full title is Kakuoozannittaiji (覚王山日泰寺). It is the only Buddhist temple in Japan that was established to strengthen the relationship between Thailand and Japan based on Buddhism in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. This temple was built through the integration of “Thai-Japanese” Buddhist features which symbolically convey the relationship between the two countries and it has also become a complex of the Thai-Japanese Buddhist faith that led to the construction of a temple that is now a famous and historic tourist site in Nagoya city. Historically, the presenting of Buddha relics from Bangkok to Japan came in the period of modernization in the 19th century after colonialism had affected the region of Asia. For Thailand it was the period of Modern Siam. Japan was in the period of the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912). Siam and Japan were the only independent countries in Southeast Asia and Asia and initiated a diplomatic interaction during this time because they were confronted with the threat of colonialism by Western countries. The presentation of relics by the Buddhist state of Siam was part of King Chulalongkorn’s international diplomatic policy aimed at symbolically representing the relationship between Thailand and Japan. At that time, Buddhism in Japan was declining because of the revitalization of Shinto because, as Kiyota (1966, 49) states, the “Shinto ideology was geared to inculcate nationalism.” This crucial period was at the time of diplomacy, Manjiro Inagaki, who was inclined to bond “Siam-Japanese” relations for political and economic purposes based on the concept of religious syncretism so that an exception was made to receive symbols from Theravada Buddhism which was a new Buddhist sect and not popular with the Japanese.

Since that time Nittaiji Temple has been managed by nineteen Buddhist sects, not one specific sect. The monastery head is changed every three years and each sect has different mantra chanting. The construction that was initially built in the first two decades of the temple’s establishment was a tower enshrining the Buddha's relics in 1918 and the Phoenix Hall or large drawing room made of cypress in 1927. After World War II, Nittaiji Temple was renovated and many temple buildings were established in a creative way, both conventional and novel creative concepts appearing in constructions such as the

Figure 2. The urn of Buddha relics in Nittaiji Temple museum. All photos, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author, May 2014.
present Dharma Hall completed in 1984, the Spirit Hall in 1984, the Bell Tower in 1985, the Main Gate in 1986, King Chulalongkorn’s Statue in 1987 and the five-story pagoda in 1997.

**Nittaiji Temple, the memorial to Thai-Japanese Buddhist relations**

The structure inside the Temple that Thais and the Japanese pay homage to is the Buddha image in the attitude of Subduing Mara (พระพุทธรูปปางมารวิชัย) donated by King Chulalongkorn and now entitled Phra Buddha Sakyamuni (พระพุทธศักยมุนี) by King Bhumibol. This main Buddha image of the Nittaiji Temple is proof of the shared faith of Thai and Japanese Buddhists. As well as this there are Buddhist events conducted by Nittaiji Temple to celebrate and commemorate the Buddha relics in the pagoda on holy days of Japanese Buddhists. As for the Buddhist architectural features, Buddhist artifacts and the Temple museum, Nittaiji Temple differs from other temples in its creations inspired by the Buddhist bibliography such as the statues of Mahaakassapa and Ananda at the main gate, the construction of the pagoda, designed in the Gandhara-Japanese style, where relics of Buddha are enshrined and the Buddha image in traditional Thai style surrounded by Japanese decoration. In addition, in the “Temple museum” there are Buddhist artifacts such as Buddha’s foot print and Buddhist inscriptions narrating the stories of Phra Malai. As a Buddhist tourist destination, Nittaiji Temple is famous for its temple fair where the traditional Buddhist lifestyle is conjoined with modern activities. The elaborate details are as follows;

The presenting of Buddhist representatives from Bangkok has been a way of prolonging “Thai-Japanese” Buddhist relations from the era of King Chulalongkorn to the reign of King Bhumibol. After the enshrinement of Buddha relics at the Golden Mountain of Bangkok, a Buddhist mission was sent by the government to Emperor Meiji with a portion of Buddha relics from King Chulalongkorn. In addition, the king also presented a rare Buddha image in the attitude of Subduing Mara (พระพุทธรูปปางมารวิชัย) in the Chiang Saen art style: a thousand-year-old Buddha statue. This Buddha image represented the status of Siam as the old Buddhist kingdom and the center of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The characteristics of the Buddha figure were those of King Chulalongkorn’s favorite Buddha image style
and implied the desire for a peaceful and secure nation.

Apart from the main Buddha image “Phra Buddha Sakyamuni” (พระพุทธศักยมุนี), there are large numbers of Buddhist artifacts presented by the kings and crown prince of Thailand as well as the
Japanese-Siam Association; these include the Buddha footprint, Buddhist inscriptions and small Buddha images. All are archived in the temple museum.

Memorial construction in Nittaiji Temple, the symbol of Thai-Japanese Buddhist relations

In Nittaiji Temple, there are memorial constructions created to present the relationship between Thailand and Japan. Firstly, there is King Rama V’s monument and the two elephants in between unveiled by HRH Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn in 1987 in order to mark 100 years of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Japan.

Secondly, the bell in the Bell Tower inscribed in the Thai alphabet with “Buddha Sakyamuni” (พุทธศักยมุนี) and the great seals of the realms of King Chulalongkorn (จุฬาลงกรณ์) and King Bhumibol (ภูมิพล).
The outstanding characteristics of Buddhist art in Nittaiji Temple reflecting the influence of the enshrinement of Buddha relics

After the end of World War II, there was little movement to develop Buddhist relations with Japan, South Asia and Southeast Asia countries. Morrow (2008) explains that Burma and Sri Lanka established Theravada Buddhist monasteries and organizations but these were not popular and had no tradition to support them as with the establishment of the Burmese “World Peace Pagoda” by the “Japan Shakya-muni True Dharma Society” in 1956 or the establishment of “The Japan Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre” or “Lankaji” in 1984. Among the new movements, Thailand was the first and only Buddhist Kingdom in Southeast Asia that had successfully established a Theravada Buddhist temple prompted by the diplomatic efforts of King Chulalongkorn. Up to the present, these have been widely popular among the Japanese for Buddhist activities. The intention of prolonging and strengthening “Thai-Japanese” Buddhist relations also appears in the creation of iconic Buddhist constructions and Buddhist arts by famous Japanese artists with the support of both Thailand and Japan.
Since Nittaiji Temple is a Theravada Buddhist temple, the main construction built following the Theravada temple creation concept was the pagoda for Buddha relic enshrinement and the main Buddha image enshrined in the main hall. However, there are also some novel creations in the construction. The pagoda is a good example. The position and the characteristics of Buddhist art can be seen in the north of the Temple site but not in its height or location, on the mountain, unlike pagodas in Thai temples which copy the model from Buddhist cosmology. The pagoda was also created by a famous artist, Mr. Chuta Ito, from Tokyo University. The construction was in Gandhara style which also blended with Japanese art in features such as the top decoration in gold leaf in Gandhara style, the angular characteristics and the basement of the pagoda in Japanese style, with material made of granite in modern Japanese proportions.


Another example is the position and Buddhist art of the arahant statues at the main gate. There is a convention to building gate guardians at the main gate of Mahayana Buddhist temples in East Asian Buddhism. The guardians are believed to protect Gautama Buddha against evil. Nittaiji Temple follows this concept but slightly differs in that there are a couple of arahants, Ananda Arhat and Mahakasyapa Arhat. This novel creation follows Buddha’s biography rather than symbolizing the significance of the genuine Buddha relics archived in
Apart from the two iconic Buddhist constructions that reveal the influence of the enshrinement of Buddha relics on aspects of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist artistic creation, Nittaiji Temple upholds its status as a center of Buddhist life for chanting activities and funerals because of its cemetery for leading business families of Nagoya city such as the owners of the Toyota Motor corporation and Takisada Textile, and has been developed into a tourist destination.
The cultural significance of Buddhist representations

In terms of tourist destinations, Nittaiji Temple is located at the center of Buddhist activities and is surrounded by old shrines, a museum and shopping areas. From this position, there are two points that should be considered: the integration of Theravada Buddhism and other sects and the management of Buddhist historic sites as tourist destinations. Nobukiyo (2015) states that to visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples was a traditional way of travelling for the Japanese in the pre-modern period. For this reason, Nittaiji Temple was possibly known to the Japanese people since its earliest enshrinement but increasingly managed to welcome visitors in the 1980s because there were important constructions built in this period. The official webpage of Nittaiji Temple explains that, before this time, there were large numbers of old Japanese shrines in the precincts of Nittaiji Temple’s location. They were eighty-eight hallowed spiritual spots and an enshrined statues hall was opened from 1909 and they are now


Nittaiji Temple, the centre of Buddhist activities

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Figure 11. Old shrines around Nittaiji Temple.

Figure 12. Flea market at Nittaiji Temple.
The cultural significance of Buddhist representations

still open for paying homage. The decision made by all the Buddhist sects to establish Nittaiji Temple here was the intentional selection of a sacred site for Japanese. Today, old Japanese people visit these sacred sites especially on the 21st of each month for shopping and chattering in the flea market at the temple.

Interestingly for the conduct of relevant Japanese Buddhist activities related to the homage of Buddha relics, these festivals have led to a coexisting faith in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism activities and have significantly promoted Nittaiji Temple as a famous site for Buddhist practices. The pagoda is open for these special days to commemorate significant Buddhist events including the Nirvana assembly or “Nehan-kai” (Feb 15), Buddha’s birthday assembly or “Hana-matsuri” (April 8), and Buddha’s attainment assembly or “Jodo-kai” (December 8) as well as the Japanese Equinox assembly days including the Spring and Autumn Equinox assemblies on June 15 and November 15.

As far as tourist management is concerned Nittatiji Temple is intended to be the center of Buddhist activities in a modern context. Adding to the attractiveness of the location is a flea market in front

Figure 13. Japanese Buddhists pay homage to the Buddha image
of Nittaiji main hall and a shopping street with small souvenir shops and coffee shops to complement the monthly flea market outside the Temple. Although shopping and paying homage in temples are now general activities for Buddhist tourists in Japan, Nittaiji Temple has the distinct characteristics of a traditional atmosphere for products and generations of shoppers. Older Japanese and housewives visit to buy fresh fruit, fish, dried herbs, clothes, flowers and Buddhist altar fittings.

In conclusion, the success of the Buddha image and the Buddha relic enshrinement at Nittaiji Temple is cultural diplomacy. In this context, Buddha representations play an important role in this Japanese Buddhist historic site having historical, national, social and artistic significance. Nittaiji Temple has gradually managed to become the center of Buddhist activities and also reveals the identity of Japanese Buddhist culture where Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism are integrated and coexist with Shinto. The complex union of such faiths appears in Buddhist arts, Buddhist practices and a temple location that has been established and managed to suit Japanese Buddhist culture.

Notes
1 This paper is partially developed from a PhD Dissertation in the Thai Studies program, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University entitled “‘Civilized Bangkok’ in Globalization: The Representation of Bangkok in official tourist guides, 1998-2013,” under supervision of Associate Professor Dr. Suchitra Chongstitvatana, Institution of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. The research for this article was funded by The Royal Golden Jubilee PhD Program, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). I wish to thank Associate professor Toshiya Unebe, the Department of Indian Studies at Nagoya University, Japan for guiding me round Nittaiji Temple and giving valuable suggestions.
2 This title includes the word “覚王” referring to the Lord Buddha, “日泰” meaning to Japan and Thai. The last word “寺” is temple.

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