

# **Symbolic and Cultural Meanings of the Chinese Home Decoration Theme in the Early Rattanakosin Murals of the Reign of King Nangklao in Wat Ratcha Orasaram**

**Kittikhun Janyaem**

Department of History of Art and Archaeology,  
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS),  
University of London

## **Abstract**

This study examines Buddhist artwork to evaluate past human behaviour in terms of cultural adaptation in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By integrating interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and methods from art history, the environmental archaeology of human ecosystems, and the phenomenology of landscape, the CHDT mural at Wat Ratcha Orasaram is found to represent short-term cultural change (the advent of the royal preference) in Siamese society in the process of diversifying cultural selection.

Significantly, enhancing the discussion of such cultural change with phenomenological perspectives, this research discloses the power of images, the hierarchy of art, the function of murals, and human cultural-environmental interactions, defined here as phenomena of cultural change, which disclose more dynamic cultural adaptation and can be evaluated via interdisciplinary investigation drawing on philosophical theory, environmental archaeology, and art history to reveal the response of humans to cultural changes. This cultural change was the result of dynamic Siamese cultural adaptation as an active response to Chinese influence on ideas and style identified with the monarchic power of a pious king, Nangklao, and his Sinophilia. Various Chinese cultural elements, including murals of the Chinese decoration theme and Chinese-style architecture, were adapted for royal Buddhist temples under the patronage of the king and aristocrats during the Third Reign

**Key Words:** Mural Paintings | Wat Ratcha Orasaram | King Nangklao | Chinese influence |

# ความหมายเชิงสัญลักษณ์และวัฒนธรรมของภาพเครื่องเรือนเงิน สมัยรัตนโกสินทร์ตอนต้น รัชกาลที่ ๓ ในจิตรกรรมวัดราชโอรสารามฯ

## กิตติคุณ จันทรแจ่ม

ภาควิชาประวัติศาสตร์ศิลปะและโบราณคดี  
วิทยาลัยบูรพคดีและการศึกษาแอฟริกา  
มหาวิทยาลัยลอนดอน

งานวิจัยนี้วิเคราะห์งานพุทธศิลป์ เพื่อสังเคราะห์พฤติกรรมการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมของมนุษย์ในอดีตในช่วง พุทธศตวรรษที่ ๒๔ ด้วยการศึกษาผ่านแนวคิดและวิธีการศึกษาแบบสหวิทยาการประกอบด้วย แนวคิดประวัติศาสตร์ ศิลปะ (การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบ) แนวคิดมนุษยนิเวศวิทยาในโบราณคดีสิ่งแวดล้อม และแนวคิดปรากฏการณ์วิทยา ทางภูมิทัศน์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่าภาพจิตรกรรมเครื่องเรือนเงินภายในพระอุโบสถวัดราชโอรสารามฯ แสดงถึงการ เปลี่ยนแปลงวัฒนธรรมแบบระยะสั้นผ่านกระบวนการคัดเลือกทางวัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลายในสังคมสยาม

นอกจากนี้ผลจากการสังเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยมุมมองจากแนวคิดที่หลากหลายดังกล่าว ยังช่วยให้งานวิจัย นี้ค้นพบประเด็นปรากฏการณ์การเปลี่ยนแปลงทางวัฒนธรรม ประกอบด้วย อำนาจของภาพ ฐานานุศักดิ์ในงาน ศิลปะ บทบาทของภาพจิตรกรรม และปฏิสัมพันธ์ของมนุษย์กับสิ่งแวดล้อมทางวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งเผยให้เห็นพลวัตของ การปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมได้อย่างเป็นระบบที่ชาวสยามตอบสนองต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางวัฒนธรรม โดยพบว่าการ เปลี่ยนแปลงทางวัฒนธรรมดังกล่าวเป็นผลจากการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมที่ซับซ้อนสูงชาวสยามตอบสนองต่ออิทธิพล ทางความคิดและรูปแบบทางศิลปะของจีน สืบเนื่องมาจาก “พระราชนิยม” ในรัชกาลที่ ๓ ซึ่งสามารถระบุได้จาก พระราชอำนาจของพระบาทสมเด็จพระนั่งเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว ผู้ทรงเลื่อมใสในพระพุทธศาสนาเป็นอย่างมาก และพระ ราชนิยมส่วนพระองค์ในวัฒนธรรมแบบจีน จึงพบว่าองค์ประกอบทางวัฒนธรรมแบบจีนหลากหลาย เช่น ภาพ จิตรกรรมเครื่องเรือนเงินและรูปแบบอาคารอย่างเก๋งจีนนั้น ถูกนำมาปรับใช้ในการสร้างสรรค์วัดหลวงแห่งต่าง ๆ ที่ได้รับการอุปถัมภ์จากสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์และชนชั้นสูงในแผ่นดินรัชกาลที่ ๓

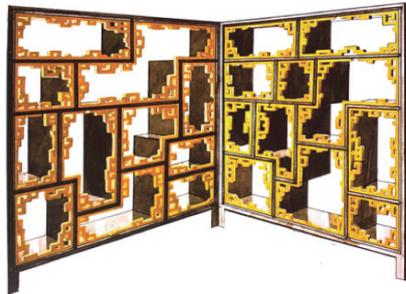
คำสำคัญ: จิตรกรรมฝาผนัง | วัดราชโอรสาราม พระบาทสมเด็จพระนั่งเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว | อิทธิพลวัฒนธรรมแบบจีน

## 1. Introduction

During King Nangklao's reign (Rama III, 1824-1851), there was a significant cultural change in Siamese art with the advent of the royal preference for Chinese art, which became predominant within traditional Siamese Buddhist art. Exterior architecture and murals inside temples changed significantly. Murals of the Chinese home decoration theme (CHDT) in the ordination hall of the royal Sino-Siamese temples of Nangklao's reign have only been analysed in terms of their aesthetics and meanings (Wilairat, 1996; Bunjopporn, 2004; Santi, 2005; Achirat, 2013), in terms of Chinese influence on ideas and style and the reasons for Chinese art's popularity for three decades as 'the royal preference art' (RPA). These studies affirm established understandings of RPA, and overlook the phenomenon of cultural change.

Interestingly, the mural's theme was defined in an art historical framework to argue that it was that of a Chinese altar, based on its functional change as a religious offering donated by the King, according to the above argument of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1917) (Usawadee, 1984; Wilairat, 1996; Bunjopporn, 2004). This theme is found only in respectful places - royal temples and the Buddha image hall in the Grand Palace (Bunjopporn, 2004; Wilairat, 1996). This limited range of locations supports this study's argument for a hierarchy of art. Conversely, the same art historical framework was recently applied to more valid evidence of decorative etiquette and furniture design at the Qing court to redefine the mural's theme as the CHDT because the Chinese articles on the mural of Wat Ratcha Orasaram represents the Bogu-Jia (博古架) - an irregular arrangement of shelves for displaying items - that was popular among Chinese nobles (figures 1-2), which this study agrees with (Achirat, 2013: 39). Her proposition is reasonable as it is demonstrated by the arrangement of a mural's elements: flower mobiles on the window panels, the room's view from inside a house on the lower walls, and the Bogu-Jia furniture on the upper walls (figure 3). Significantly, all of these materials create ubosot (an ordination hall) to resemble a Chinese interior, decorated with altars, precious items, furniture, flowers, fruits, and stationery.

Although scholars have employed different sources, their explanations contribute consistent arguments about the occurrence and characteristics of RPA murals, possibly inspired by the Siamese elite's taste for Chinese-style home decoration, and significantly driven by the social and intellectual context. These suggestions seem to overlook aspects of the phenomenon of cultural change such as the power of images, the hierarchy of art, the function of murals, and human cultural-environmental interactions. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate these overlooked aspects.



**Figure 1:** (above left). Bogu-jia shelves. (Jiaqing 2004: 158)

**Figure 2:** (right). Early Qing furniture at the Qing court. (Jiaqing, 2004: 158)

**Figure 3:** (below). The CHDT mural inside ubosot of Wat Ratcha Orasaram. Photographed by Pariwat Chiamchit.

Hence, it is essential to investigate the symbolic and cultural meanings of the CHDT by considering the landscape context of the murals in the new environment of the Sino-Siamese Buddhist temples, and whether, and how, the CHDT changed symbolic and cultural meanings in Nangklao's reign. This research aims to evaluate how 'a phenomenology of landscape' can explain the significance of the CHDT and this cultural change.

This study first addresses the comparative art history of the original Chinese cultural context of home decoration and the Sino-Siamese murals. Secondly, a phenomenology of landscape is employed alongside the environmental archaeology of human ecosystems to evaluate new dimensions of the phenomenon of cultural change in terms of 'the dynamic-cultural adaptation as an active response' of the Siamese to Chinese art in the advent of RPA, examining (1) the relationship between the landscape of Wat Ratcha Orasaram and its creators' experience, and (2) Siamese perceptions of Chinese culture based on historical documents.

## 2. The definition of the royal preference art (RPA)

The 'royal preference art' refers to the personal fondness for Chinese art of King Nangklao (Rama III, the Third Reign) of Bangkok between 1824 and 1851. This reign marks a period of close relationship between Siam and China, as the king expertly earned income from the Siam-Chinese junk trade which he used to construct and restore numerous temples (Crawford, 1967; Thiphakornrawong, 1963). King Nangklao built and restored over 40 Buddhist temples and employed Chinese

designs, symbolism, artisans, and materials; the architectural structure followed that of Chinese pavilions, dragons replaced traditional Siamese naga on the superstructure, while chrysanthemums, cranes, scenes from Chinese legends, and the CHDT replaced the traditional Siamese iconography on the murals inside some temples. This style was named the ‘royal preference’ (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 35; Sakchai, 2008: 290). Chinese furniture was imported to decorate temples and elites’ homes. As a result, plenty of artworks were created and techniques were improved and developed across the artistic disciplines during his reign (Santi, 2001). However, this Chinese trend declined in the Fourth Reign as King Mongkut (Rama IV) revived traditional Siamese architecture, and Western aesthetic influence increased (Sakchai, 2008: 309). Thus, kings played a major role in determining aesthetic fashions. How was this new cultural wave of Chinese influence responded to by the Siamese? The ‘RPA’ potentially represents significant cultural change and had a significant impact on traditional Siamese Buddhist art in the early Rattanakosin period.

### **3. Theory and Methodology**

This study applies interdisciplinary approaches to evaluate the phenomenon of cultural change through the investigation of the CHDT murals as follows.

#### **3.1 Art history**

The art history literature is evaluated in terms of the studies of the CHDT murals mentioned in the previous section, which were generated by art history based on comparative study. Significantly, the above-mentioned literature has only analysed the aesthetics and meanings of the murals according to an art historical framework, to illustrate the Chinese influence on ideas and style, and to investigate the occurrence of an unprecedented theme in the advent of RPA. However, this study employs the art history to evaluate the change of symbolic and cultural meanings of the CHDT murals in Wat Ratcha Orasaram.

#### **3.2 Environmental archaeology of human ecosystems**

Environmental archaeology yields information on past human behaviour (human adaptations and changing of cultural environments) through the reconstruction of past environments. (Butzer, 1982). Arguably, such interactions with particular ecologies play a major role in human cultural change, which is always designated as a passive response of humans to external physical and biological factors in the environment according to the evolutionary paradigm (O’Connor and Evan, 2005: 13-15).

As the cultural change of RPA was a result of the cultural interaction of human ecosystems in the Third Reign, this study uses the concept of the human ecosystem to understand Wat Ratcha Orasaram and other similar temples in terms of the spatial, economic, and social

interactions of communities with environmental matrices, as well as the cultural adaptation approach (Butzer, 1982) to examine adaptive systems, stimuli for change, and the process of cultural selection in the advent of RPA. Hence, by employing the ecological analysis of humans to examine short-term change (Dincauze, 2000: 75) as a framework with a cultural adaptation approach (Butzer, 1982: 281), the landscape of the CHDT and Siamese adjustment in the advent of RPA (represented by the murals of the CHDT) can be understood as an active response of cultural selection by the Siamese to the introduction of Chinese art in Nangklao's reign. By employing different kinds of evidence from the murals and historical literature, ecological analysis yields an effective explanation of cultural change in a cultural environment.

### 3.3 A phenomenology of landscape

By employing an interpretation in terms of the symbolism of landscape (place) and social memory, phenomenology is important for accessing the deemed manner in which people understand and experience the world such as ritual performance, cosmology, symbolism, and aspects of the human mind to understand of why particular locations were chosen for habitation and the erection of monuments (Tilley, 1994). Even though phenomenology concerns human perception that should be perceived through subjective thought (Heidegger, 1993), people's perceptions do not only emerge as cognitive subjectivity. This study argues that perception must encompass all notions of subjects, objects, consciousness, nature, environments, and landscapes (places) as the subject (self-thought) and the world (objectivism) flow together through the body. This creates relationships between human bodily experience and phenomena in the world (landscapes), where perceptions emerge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

This study acknowledges that Wat Ratcha Orasaram was shaped by such religious, symbolic, social, economic, and cultural factors. The manner in which Siamese understood and experienced Chinese culture is key to the phenomenological approach applied in this study. The symbolic and cultural meanings of the CHDT landscapes must be prioritised in examining people's perceptions, which allows the human mind to be understood. By analysing their perceptions, dynamic cultural adaptation as an active response can be evaluated. By selecting the CHDT murals of Wat Ratcha Orasaram as representative of Chinese culture over the traditional Siamese Buddhist art of the early Rattanakosin murals, this study aims to analyse the phenomenon of cultural change in the advent of RPA by examining the landscape context of the murals and the experiences of their creators.

#### 4. Wat Ratcha Orasaram and the CHDT murals

Wat Ratcha Orasaram is examined, paying attention to its murals as representative of Chinese artwork.

##### 4.1 Wat Ratcha Orasaram

This temple is located on the Thonburi side of Bangkok. It was restored in 1821 by Prince Chetsadabodin, who was later crowned King Nangklao (Thiphakornrawong, 1963: 348). Significantly, this restoration was the personal commission of Nangklao. He controlled and inspected the restoration of all artistic works constructed with his favour (Santi, 2005: 202). As a result, Wat Ratcha Orasaram was Nangklao's first royal Sino-Siamese temple. Also, its ubosot (an ordination hall) and assembly hall were the first Sino-Siamese Buddhist buildings (figure 4) (Sakchai, 2008: 22).

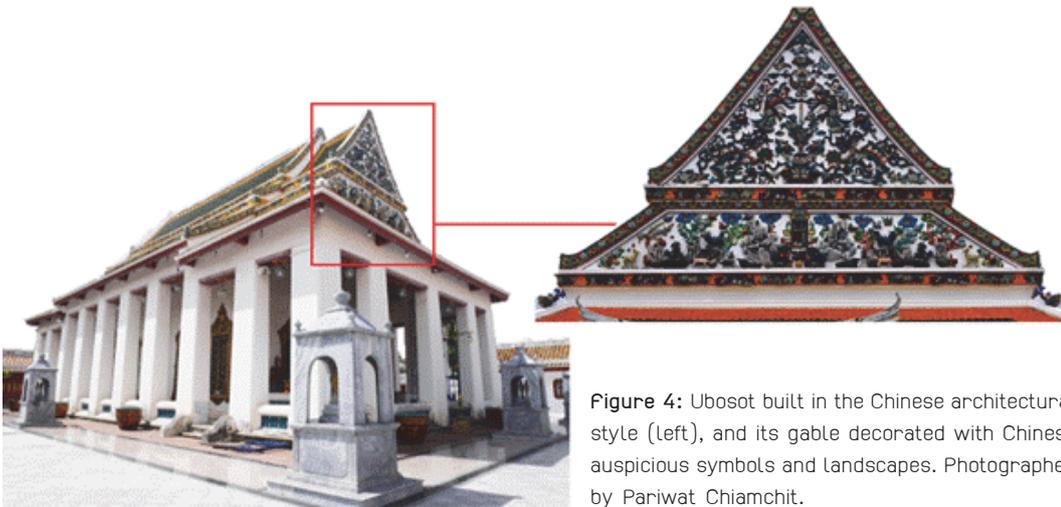
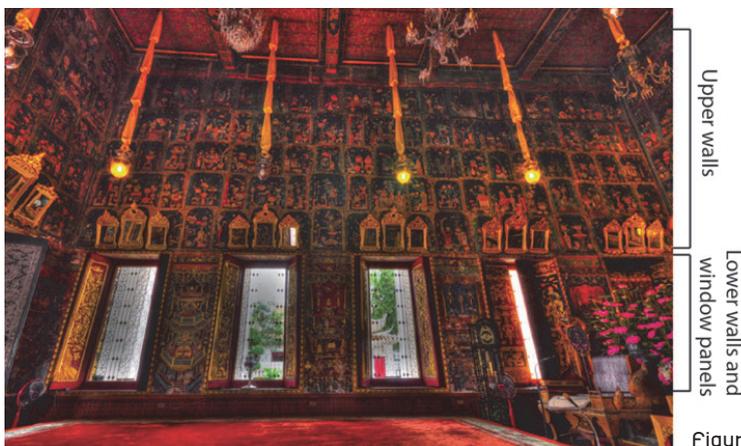


Figure 4: Ubosot built in the Chinese architectural style (left), and its gable decorated with Chinese auspicious symbols and landscapes. Photographed by Pariwat Chiamchit.



Upper walls  
Lower walls and window panels

Figure 5: Murals inside ubosot.

#### 4.2 Details of the murals

According to a poem composed by Phraya Chaiwichit (Pueak) in the Third Reign, the Teochiu artisans from Sampheng were a major group involved in restoring all parts of Wat Ratcha Orasaram (Khanakammakan Chamra Prawattisat Thai, 1982: 211). Thus, the CHDT murals in ubosot were painted by these Teochiu artisans as a new instance of RPA (Prayoon, 1982: 123; Santi, 2005: 204). These murals are found in three areas of ubosot (figure 5): the window panels, the four upper walls, and the four lower walls of the four sides. Additionally, the door panels are painted with Chinese soldiers and dragons as guardians, and the ceiling is painted with Chinese auspicious symbols: peonies, lotuses, chrysanthemums, pomegranates, and butterflies. The upper walls are distinguished by being divided into 296 panels, each containing various Chinese elements such as flowers, trees, incense burners, vases, and mirrors. They were arranged on pieces of Chinese furniture and enclosed with irregular panels (square, rectangular, and L-shapes), which represent the shelves known as duobao (多宝格). They were painted in a realistic perspective by applying a gradation technique, decorated with a meander or key-pattern, to the inner background, and creating openwork with motifs in the upper corners (figure 7) (Achirat, 2013: 39; Wang, 1990: 82).

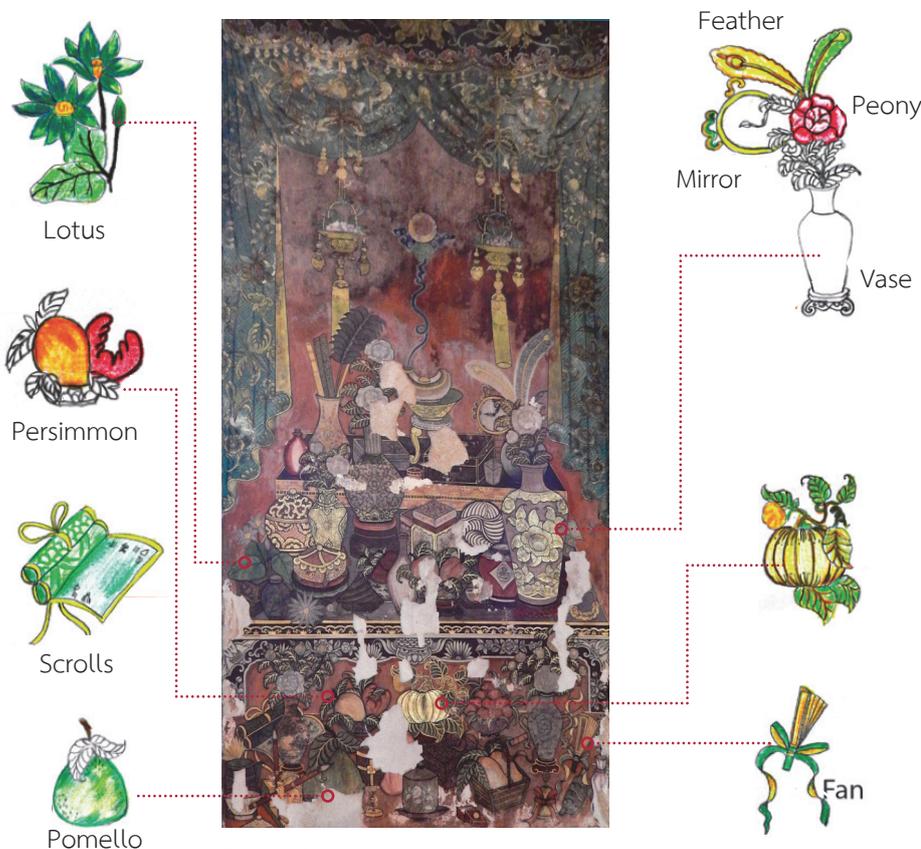


Figure 6: Murals on the lower wall

On the lower walls, the murals are divided into spaces by windows and doors. Each panel portrays Chinese home decorations. Long curtains are painted on the sides of each panel, showing a view through a window or door into a house's rooms (figure 8). Additionally, hanging flower baskets are painted on the window panels and the lower walls, showing the decoration inside a Chinese house. Significantly, these features are similar to the decoration on doors and window frames in Chinese residences (figure 9) (Achirat, 2013).



**Figure 7:** (left) The gradation technique and the openwork.

**Figure 8:** (middle) Murals on the lower wall.

**Figure 9:** (right) A home interior with a window, curtain, and openwork on the upper left, Qing Dynasty. (Beurdeley 1979: 55)

#### 4.3 Symbolic and cultural meanings of the CHDT

This section examines the original Chinese context of the articles found in the CHDT murals in Wat Ratcha Orasaram, which are further analysed in terms of changing symbolic and cultural meanings in the next section. As examined in section 3.2.2, the display cabinets, duobaoge, are the main type of furniture in the CHDT murals. Apart from this furniture, various Chinese objects are displayed on the duobaoge shelves and other furniture as categorised in table 1. Significantly, these Chinese objects were used as interior decoration in Chinese residences as they embody auspicious meanings, bringing everyone in the house secular happiness (Williams, 1976). These Chinese articles embodying profane auspiciousness in Chinese culture, these symbolic meanings support the function of CHDT as decoration in respectful or religious buildings.

**Table 1:** Chinese objects in the CHDT murals

Types	Chinese articles on the murals
animals	bat, butterfly, dragonfly, unicorn
fruits	Buddha’s hand, persimmon, pomegranate, pomelo, pumpkin, watermelon
flowers	chrysanthemum, lotus, peony
Plants	coral
miscellany	book, incense burner, fan, feather, mirror, paintbrush, scroll, stool, table, teapot and cup, vase



Figure 10: Duobaoge of the early Qing (left) and late Qing period (middle and right). (Jiaqing, 1996: 235-238)



Figure 11: Bogu-jia: stand-alone shelves. Courtesy of Xiaoxin Li.

In terms of cultural meaning, the CHDT murals show pieces of furniture that were used in Chinese elites’ daily lives by the 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The main type of furniture shown is display cabinets, both integrated shelves, ‘Duobaoge’ (meaning ‘shelf of many treasures’) (figures 10, 11), and stand-alone shelves, ‘Bogu-jia’ (博古架) (meaning ‘shelf of antiquities’). These display cabinets became popular in the Qing period (from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century) in both simple and elaborate forms as the Qing invention (Wang, 1990: 82).

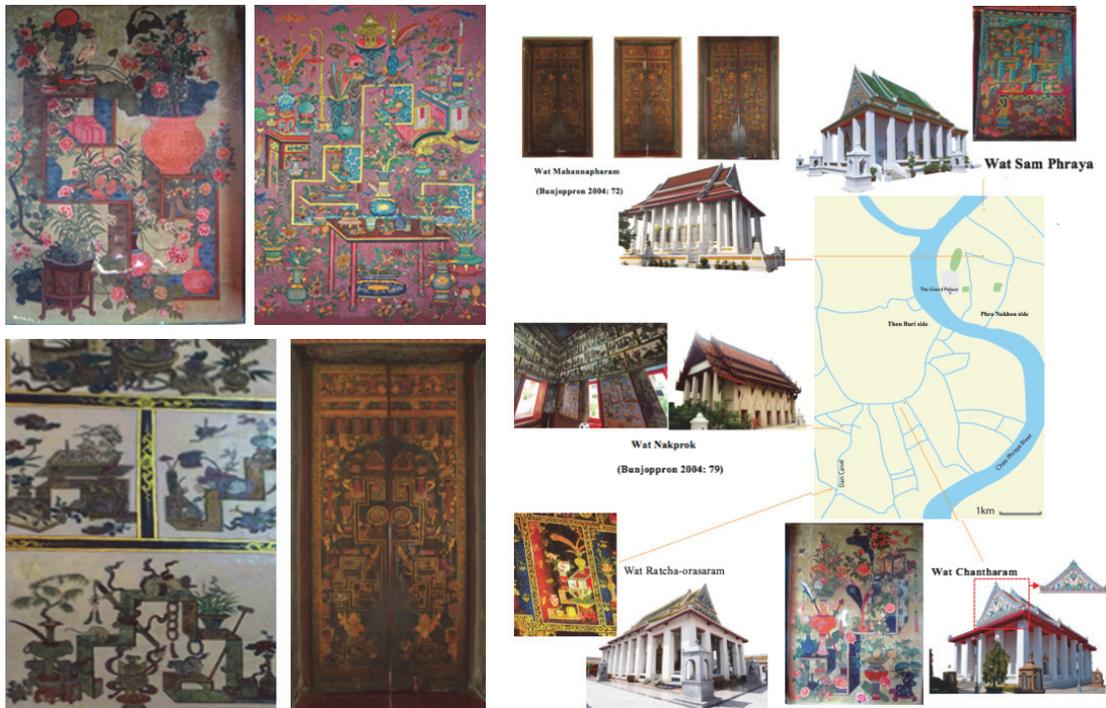


Figure 12: The duobaoge and bogu-jia of Wat Chantharam, Wat Sam Phraya (above: left to right), Wat Nak Prok, and Wat housing Mahanapharam (below: left to right).

Figure 13: A map showing the location of Sino-Siamese temple housing Third Reign CHDT murals in Bangkok.

#### 4.4 The distribution of CHDT murals in other temples in Bangkok in the Third Reign

Apart from Wat Ratcha Orasaram, additional four Sino-Siamese temples, executed in Bangkok – Wat Sam Phraya, Wat Chantharam, Wat Mahanapharam, and Wat Nakprok - house the CHDT murals from the Third Reign, resembling to Wat Ratcha Orasaram, but differ slightly in details (figure 13). They were painted later than those of Wat Ratcha Orasaram. Every mural portrays duobaoge and bogu-jia shelves as the main furniture type for displaying precious Chinese objects (figure 12). These particular shelves are the shared element in every Third Reign CHDT mural.

All ubosot of these temples have a Chinese architectural structure, except the traditional Siamese one of Wat Nak Prok, as shown by the masonry building, gables decorated with Chinese auspicious symbols and landscapes, roofs covered with Chinese tiles, Chinese door guardians embellishing the doors, and window and door panels painted with Chinese floral motifs.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 The CHDT: from Chinese household to Siamese Buddhist temple

This part aims to answer the first research question, ‘How did the symbolic and cultural meanings of the CHDT murals change during Nangklao’s reign?’ by employing the comparative study of the art history of the original Chinese cultural context of home decoration and the context of the Sino-Siamese murals, so as to ground the occurrence of cultural change.

#### 5.1.1 Re-visiting the original symbolic and cultural meanings of Chinese home decoration during the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries

During the Qing, contemporary with Nangklao’s reign, the duobaoge and bogu-jia shelves were fashionable among Chinese elites of the Qing court (figures 14-15) (Wang, 1990: 82). This court fashion was followed by aristocrats, rich officials, and merchants such as the mansion of Liu (figure 16). Considerably, objects displayed on these shelves were artefacts, continuing the Ming antiquarian tradition, and most objects represented auspicious emblems, sophisticatedly used during the Qing period, such as Buddhist symbols of luck (e.g. the flower vase of peace, flowers, and goldfish) or coral for good fortune; even the display of boxes and vases together symbolized harmony and peace (figure 17). These emblems reflect beliefs in benevolence, filial piety, and faithfulness related to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (Lo et al. Vol.4, 2011: 6).



Figure 14: (left) Emperor Yongzheng (1722-1735) in his library at the Yuanmingyuan. Courtesy of The Palace Museum, Beijing, China.

Figure 15: (right) Duobaoge shelves in the Shufangzhai of the Palace Museum, Beijing, China. (Jiaqing, 1996: 34)



Figure 16: Chinese paintings showing duobaoge (above) and bogu-jia (below) in a local aristocrat's house in Canton, 1801. (Lo et al Vol.3, 2011: 122,124)

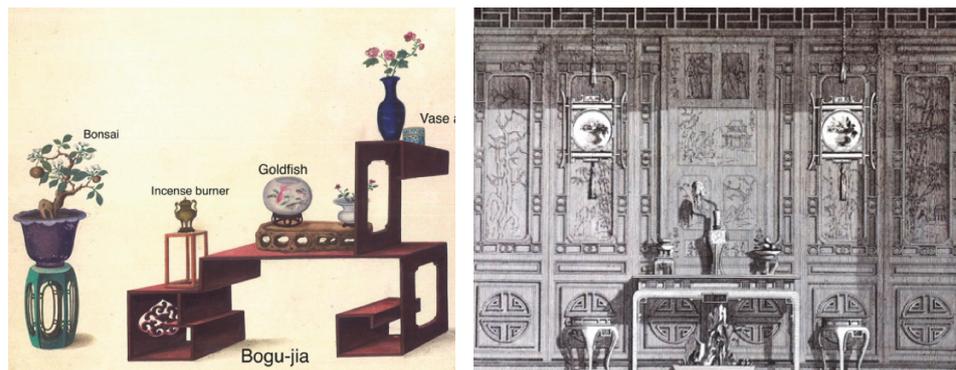


Figure 17: (left) An exported Cantonese painting displaying auspicious items on a bogu-jia. 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Lo et al Vol.4, 2011: 18)

Figure 18. (right) A drawing of a Cantonese interior. (Chambers, 1968)

Furthermore, these auspicious items were a serious concern in Chinese home decoration, as recorded in the book *Xian qing ou qi* by Li Yu, a Ming-Qing scholar and decorator (1611-1680) (Beurdeley, 1979: 52-57). This decorative style captivated many Western travellers. For example, William Chambers (1968: 9), a British architect, went to China in 1753 and described a rich Cantonese merchant's house (figure 18) as decorated with goldfish, citrons, corals in vases, and copper vessels symbolising great esteem; Osmond Tiffany (1849: 73, 83), an American, visited Canton in 1844 and noted that people decorated houses, temples, and furniture with auspicious emblems, and also mentioned the use of *duobaoge* in Cantonese shops.

Consequently, this study agrees with Bunjopporn (2004) that *duobaoge* murals have never been found in any temple or common person's residence in China, as proven by paintings of Chinese temples from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (figure 19) and Tiffany's comment that "the interior of Buddhist temple was decorated with the scenery of island and its rural" (Tiffany, 1849: 190). This section has shown that auspicious emblems were attached to home decorations. Notably, it is difficult to gain a complete account of Chinese interiors from paintings. However, they do provide crucial information, there were accounts of them in Western travelogues, and Cantonese paintings were exported in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 19: The hall of Vairocana (left) and its temple (right) in Canton. (Lo et al. Vol.5, 2011: 86,54)

### 5.1.2 The change in symbolic and cultural meaning of the CHDT murals

As discussed in section 5.1.1, it is clear that the CHDT murals of Wat Ratcha Orasaram present Chinese interiors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which auspicious emblems are depicted and retain the original symbolic meanings with which they were created (figure 20), as peonies, vases and citrons are all emblematic of good fortune and peace, butterflies symbolise joy, books symbolise knowledge, and citrons were also offered in porcelain bowls for religious sacrifices



Figure 20: Chinese auspicious emblems in a CHDT mural, Wat Ratcha Orasaram. Courtesy of Silpakorn Library.

However, by considering the landscape context of the murals, this study argues that the cultural meanings of the Chinese interior were reinterpreted as they were presented in the most sacred Buddhist building, the ubosot. Prior to the RPA, the arrangement of traditional Siamese murals was precisely organized around the Buddha's lives and Buddhist cosmology, which created a functional relationship between murals and the principal Buddha image in the hall (Samerchai, 1996: 116). Conversely, the new CHDT murals were not directly relevant to the Buddha; instead, they were indirectly related through the auspicious meanings of symbolic mundane everyday objects - flower vases, swastikas, goldfish, etc. - under Chinese beliefs.

Hence, in terms of comparative art history, this cultural change signifies the consistency of meaning and the use of the murals; their cultural meanings were reinterpreted in terms of their functions, from those of actual household interiors in exported paintings to those of murals in religious buildings. Though set in a Buddhist landscape, the CHDT murals retained the original symbolic meanings of their Chinese profane auspicious emblems. This dichotomy may imply the use of profane art to convey good wishes for mundane bliss, and to fulfil both the sacred and profane wishes of worshippers, who conducted their sacred activities in this Buddhist landscape.

## 5.2 The CHDT as representative of Siamese cultural adjustment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

This part aims to answer the 2nd research question, 'How can the 'phenomenology of landscape' explain the significance of the CHDT, and evaluate the cultural change in Nangklao's reign?' by employing interdisciplinary approaches: a phenomenological approach within the phenomenology of landscape's theoretical framework, and a cultural adaptation approach from environmental archaeology. The relationship between temples and creators, Siamese perceptions of Chinese culture, the landscape of the CHDT, and Siamese cultural adjustment are analysed to evaluate the phenomenon of cultural change - the power of image, the hierarchy of art, the function of murals, and human cultural-environmental interactions - in the advent of 'RPA'.

### 5.2.1 The relationship between the CHDT's landscapes and creators King Nangklao

This study examines the background of his taste for Chinese art and his religious roles. By reinvestigating, this study suggests that when he was a director of the port department, he mainly oversaw commerce with the Chinese and earned huge profits from both the royal and his own junk trade, leading to King Loetla calling him “Chao Sua” (the great merchant) (Burney, 1911:80; Nidhi, 2005: 74). This commerce played an important role to Nangklao's Sinophilia and, critically, brought changes to vast areas of life in Siamese society, such as the fashion for Chinese literature, the employment of Chinese labour (e.g. Chinese artisans and labourers), the tax-farming system operated by the Chinese, and the elite's fondness for Chinese art (Vella, 1957). Historically, Nangklao was such an expert in the Siam-Chinese junk trade that he was able to construct and renovate many temples (Thiphakornrawong, 1963). Much money for the temples' restoration and construction came from his trading profits, as noted by Sir John Crawfurd (1967: 131), a British envoy, during his 1822 visit to Wat Ratcha Orasaram. Hence, in agreement with previous studies (Sakchai, 2008; Khaisang, 1982), Nangklao's taste for Chinese art was enhanced by his communication with Chinese traders. Furthermore, Nangklao's experience with Chinese art can be seen in his design for the royal Chinese-style Garden ‘Suan Khwa’ (Damrong, 1962: 24). As he supervised this project, he must perceive Chinese art as such, especially the design of the southern Chinese garden. Many Chinese products were imported to decorate this garden, even boats (Damrong, 1962: 202). Moreover, his personal habit of decorating his palace with Chinese mirrors and lanterns was recorded by John Crawfurd (1967: 85).

Secondly, in terms of his religious roles, Nangklao was a truly pious king. He patronised Buddhism and encouraged Buddhist temples as knowledge centres (Sakchai, 2008). Nangklao encouraged monks to give daily sermons in the palace, and every day presented breakfast and lunch to monks before having his own meals; indeed, he also commissioned the compilation of a new edition of the Tripitaka, the principal text of Buddhism (Crawfurd, 1967: 85; Manop, 1988: 14).

Significantly, he not only directly patronised temple construction, but also persuaded princes, nobles, and the rich to gain merit by building temples (Thiphakornrawong, 1963: 351). This includes those temples housing CHDT murals: Wat Sam Phraya was renamed and categorized as a royal temple by Nangklao, and was restored by three aristocratic brothers in 1823; Wat Chantharam was renamed by Nangklao and renovated by Phraya Surasena in 1843; Wat Mahannapharam was created by Prince Annop with a grant from Nangklao in 1850 (Bunjopporn, 2004; Thiphakornrawong, 1963). During his reign, forty-one temples were restored and three new temples were built by Nangklao himself; thirty temples were constructed and renovated by royal

kinsmen and nobles. The total number was seventy-four temples, of which eighteen were built in the Sino-Siamese style of RPA and five decorated with CHDT murals (Khaisang, 1982; Thipha-kornrawong, 1963: 343-354).

### Chinese

This section focuses on those Chinese merchant lords and labourers directly involved with Nangklao's temple restoration and construction. Jao-sua or merchant lords - traders on behalf of the king and senior nobles - were Chinese patrons of the temples, rich from official posts granted by the King to promote their status. The most intelligent became Choduek, helping the Siamese court to import Chinese items (purpose-built crockery for the palace), and working in the royal court. Many of the principal jao-sua were Hokkien, and others were Hakka and Teochew. These families tried to seek bonds of formal patronage with the royal family to raise their social status, by propitiating patrons with gifts in order to be rewarded with a higher rank. Many daughters of jao-sua became some of Nangklao's 242 wives (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009: 34-35).

Under royal encouragement, these wealthy Chinese merchants funded the repair and construction of Siamese Buddhist temples and Chinese shrines, as well as digging canals as trading highways. For example, Phra Boriboon Thanakorn (Phuk Saetan), a Chinese merchant lord, constructed Wat Nak Prok in the Third Reign.

Unfortunately, there is little written evidence regarding Chinese labourers' work in the royal projects. However, a poem praising the beauty of Wat Ratcha Orasaram, written by Phraya Chaiwichit in the Third Reign, mentions that Nangklao employed Teochew from Sampheng to renovate Wat Ratcha Orasaram (Khanakammakan Chamra Prawattisat Thai, 1982: 211). One of the King's great expenses was Chinese employment for temple construction (Vella, 1957). These Chinese had migrated from Guangdong, especially Canton, in southern China, and earned their living by constructing temples (Naengnoi and Freeman, 1996:27). They must have had some experience with actual duobaoge in Canton in order to have painted the CHDT elaborately in the Sino-Thai temples.

As examined earlier, this study argues that the experiences of these two groups of creators indicates the relationships between them and the CHDT's landscapes. Clearly, the King's Sino-philia was demonstrated in his own temples by his piety and the physical and financial support of the Chinese. His piety may also have persuaded other royals and nobles to create Buddhist landscapes and artworks in the Chinese style. The patronage system between Siamese elites and the Chinese enhanced Siamese cultural adjustment to Chinese art because of the transmission of Chinese cultural perceptions to the Siamese. Indeed, due to the collapse of Ayutthaya in 1767, numerous Siamese craftsmen moved to Burma (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2017: 257). Skilled

Siamese artisans were critically scarce during the early Rattanakosin period. Relying on Chinese artisans and their skilful masonry allowed Nangklao's massive projects to be finished in a shorter time (Sakchai, 2008: 67). Therefore, the Chinese arguably contributed to the CHDT's landscape as a source of culture and investment.

According to Christopher Tilley (1994:14), perceptual-cultural identity is a bond with place, and self-identity can be found through place. This study argues that the CHDT murals and buildings at Wat Ratcha Orasaram embody Nangklao's perceptual-cultural identity through Chinese culture, and mark the creation of his self-identity as a Sinophile through the Buddhist temple, which was presumably chosen as this location was in the residence of his great-grandmother.

### 5.2.2 The power of image and the hierarchy of art

Investigating the experiences of the Siamese elite and the Chinese together with the place of the CHDT murals reveals the relationship between temples and their creators. That is, King Nangklao's Sinophilia was portrayed in his own temple by his piety and the physical and financial support of the Chinese. Significantly, his piety also potentially persuaded other royals and nobles to create Buddhist temples and artworks in the Chinese style in which the CHDT murals were produced. According to Christopher Tilley (1994), perceptual-cultural identity is bonded with place, and the self-identity can be found through place. This study argues that the CHDT murals and places at Wat Ratcha Orasaram embodied Nangklao's perceptual-cultural identity with Chinese culture, and mark the creation of his self-identity as a Sinophile through this Buddhist temple, which was presumably chosen as this location was the residence of Nangklao's great-grandmother. The imitative trend of the CHDT murals was executed in the same royal place of the Sino-Siamese ubosot. Thus, this study argues that the CHDT murals potentially embody the power of images (Freedberg, 1989), which constitutes the imitation of murals within these landscapes. Moreover, inclusion of the CHDT murals in ubosot potentially shows their strong power to replace traditional Buddhist murals, which had been retained since the Ayutthaya period. Also, the CHDT murals embodied the power of an absolute monarch that efficiently drove fashion, as elites attempted to imitate the royal example for prestige and favour, showing the intertwined relationship between creators and temples. This can be demonstrated by those CHDT murals in the ubosot of the five Sino-Siamese temples of the Third Reign (in 4.4).

Likewise, it essential to argue that the landscape (place) of the CHDT murals reinforced their embodiment of the hierarchy of art, as they were only included in royal contexts, from their original use in the Qing court to the royal places of the Siamese elite. Notably, the duobaoge also appears in the royal chapels, Ho Phra Sulalai Phiman (figure 21) and Ho Phra That Monthien (figure 22), and on the painted screen at the entrance of Chakraphat Phiman hall (the King's bed

chamber) in the Grand Palace of Bangkok (figure 23). These CHDT murals were said to be painted in the Second Reign in full Chinese style, unprecedented in previous reigns, as a result of the junk trade with China (Santi 2005: 205). These two chapels house the gold cinerary urns of kings and queens, and a number of significant Buddha images, respectively (Manop, 1988: 13, 53).



**Figure 21:** The CHDT murals in the antechamber of Ho Phra Sulalai Phiman, showing bogu-jia and duobaoge. (Manop, 1988: 36)



**Figure 22:** The CHDT murals in the antechamber of Ho Phra That Monthien, showing bogu-jia. (Naengnoi et al, 1988: 76)



**Figure 23:** The painted screen at the entrance of the King's bed chamber, showing bogu-jia. (Naengnoi et al, 1988: 78)

Considerably, the relationship between the CHDT's places and creators suggests that the CHDT murals were only produced among the Siamese elite. However, it has recently been suggested that the CHDT was a low form of art transferred from Canton via exported Chinese glass paintings by originally lower-class Chinese in Siam (Jessica Lee, 2016). This study disagrees, and argues that looking at the original context of the duobaoge and the visits of Siamese emissaries to the Qing court (where they may have observed real duobaoge), which inspired the royal Chinese garden of Suan Khwa at the same time as the renovation of the royal chapels, shows that the CHDT murals retained an authentically royal theme as seen in the royal Siamese places in they were installed. Thus, this study argues that the CHDT murals retained the authenticity of the royal theme as seen in the royal Siamese places in which they were displayed.

### 5.2.3 Siamese cultural adjustment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

This section employs the analysis of human ecosystems under short-term change as a theoretical framework with a cultural adaptation approach (Butzer, 1982; Dincauze, 2000) to understand the landscape of the CHDT and Siamese cultural adjustment in the advent of RPA, represented by the CHDT murals. These analyses are synthesised with the results of the above

phenomenological analyses to evaluate the human cultural-environmental interactions of the CHDT murals, showing cultural adjustment as an active response of cultural selection by the Siamese.

Firstly, this section will examine landscape of the CHDT at Wat Ratcha Orasaram. As David Clarke (1968) argues, a cultural system is comparable to an information system. In a particular environment, fundamental interactions emerge within this system showing adjustment to new information, which creates innovation (Butzer, 1982, referring to Clarke, 1968). This study argues that RPA constituted innovation that was compatible with existing information (traditional Siamese art), as it was a result of the cultural interactions of human ecosystems in the Third Reign; that is, the religious landscape of Wat Ratcha Orasaram adapted to cope with the natural environment's constraints, as seen in its Chinese-style masonry superstructure, more durable in extreme climatic conditions than traditional wooden structures (Khaisang, 1982), which also strongly matched traditional Siamese Buddhist culture.

Arguably, this change was significant for the production of the CHDT murals, as the whole area of Wat Ratcha Orasaram was Chinese-style as a result of Nangklao's Sinophilia. Therefore, the CHDT murals, previously only appearing in the Grand Palace for private royal access, were brought in to embellish the ubosot of this temple. From this point, it is possible to assume that these CHDT murals marked public access to the King's taste, because the place's role of the ubosot was that of a public building accessible to monks and the common people. Although there is no written evidence of the purpose of the CHDT murals, comparing contemporary evidence of 'temples as knowledge centres' (figure 24) at Wat Yannawa (Nangklao's construction of a Chinese junk-shaped temple as a memorial to the junk's role in enhancing the new capital's economy) and Wat Pho (Nangklao's encouragement of the encyclopaedic compilation of old Siamese knowledge in stone inscriptions) potentially supports the argument that the CHDT murals served the public as a source of knowledge rarely accessible to lower-ranking people.



Figure 24: Wat Yannawa (left) and the stone inscriptions (right) at Wat Pho, Bangkok

Secondly, Siamese cultural adjustment is examined here. From the advent of RPA, the social environment of the Third Reign involved a diverse range of international trade and people. Notably, humans only respond to changes that they perceive, and only to factors that affect resources or living conditions. This perception is effective only in response to short-term change (Dincauze, 2000). The advent of RPA represented by the CHDT murals marks such short-term cultural change. As a result of the embodiment of the king's Sino-philia and monarchical power, RPA and the CHDT murals were significantly perceived and responded to by the Siamese elite during the Third Reign only; thereafter, they gradually declined in the Fourth Reign as King Mongkut revived traditional Siamese architecture and Western culture began to be influential (Khaisang, 1982).

According to the process of cultural selection proposed by Patrick Kirch (1980: 122), the short-term change of the advent of RPA was a form of diversifying selection; that is, the two adaptive aesthetic cultures of the traditional Siamese and the exotic Chinese coexisted and developed simultaneously, as shown by many temples being embellished in both styles in the Third Reign. This selection was caused by two kinds of stimulus: (1) the external stimuli of Chinese migration and the diffusion of exotic Chinese culture through trade, and (2) the internal stimulus of innovation in Sino-Siamese architecture. These two kinds of stimulus intertwined to reinforce the advent of RPA. However, the phenomenological arguments of the previous section affirm that the cultural adjustment of RPA was clearly the result of monarchical perception and decision, following the argument of Karl Butzer (figure 25) that "adaptive response is the result of human perception and decision making" (1982: 293).

This study argues that the CHDT murals embody the human cultural-environmental interactions of cultural adjustment as an active response of cultural selection by the Siamese. That is, the CHDT murals represent the advent of RPA, which constitutes the arbiter of aesthetic cultural change on behalf of Nangklao. Based on integrated phenomenological and ecological analysis, the CHDT murals potentially represent short-term cultural change and its impact on early Rattanakosin Buddhist art, because the CHDT murals were an aesthetic adaptive innovation through which the Siamese elite adjusted Chinese art to their traditional Buddhist art. Arguably, this adaptation was an active response as it was the arbiter of cultural change, which was perceived and approved from the King to the Siamese elites. Also, this adaptive response yielded dynamic cultural adaptation, because human perception and decision-making can be disclosed through phenomenological experiences and adaptation (Butzer, 1982).

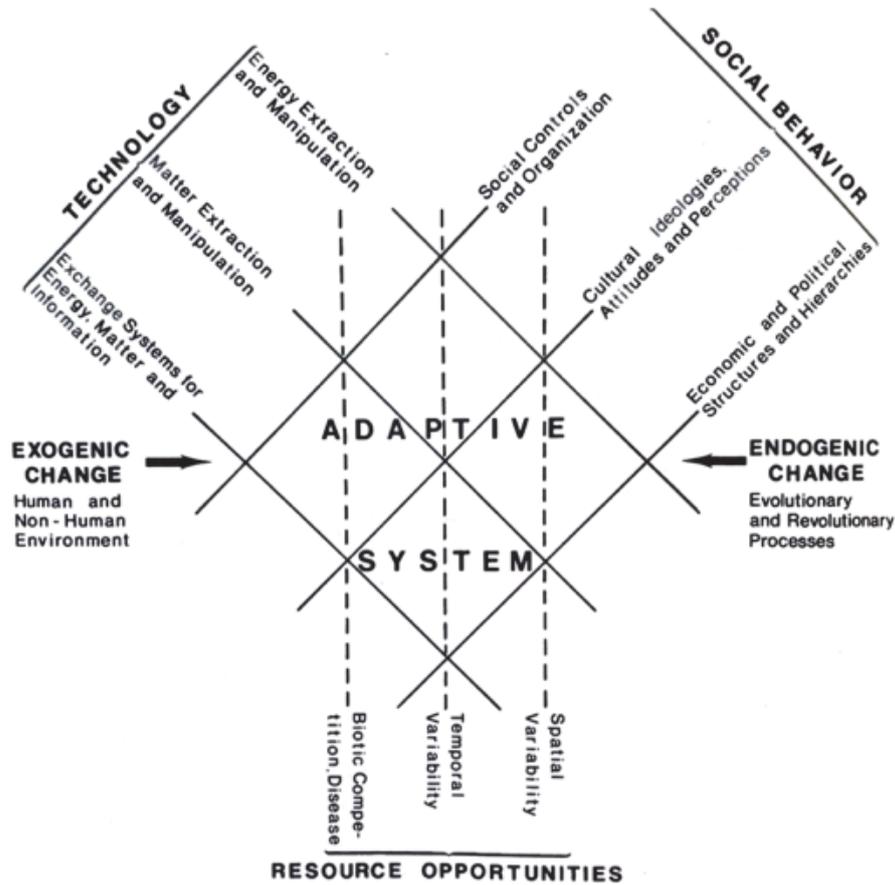


Figure 25: The model of an adaptive system. (Butzer, 1982: 286)

This section has shown that ecologically-founded investigations of human behaviour are better than analogical arguments for evaluating the interaction between humans and their environments during short-term change, because they allow dynamic adaptive systems to be systematically identified. By synthesising this approach with phenomenological arguments, the CHDT murals can be analysed to show their power, hierarchy, and human cultural-environmental interactions in terms of cultural adjustment.

## 6. Conclusion

By employing an interdisciplinary approach based on art history, the environmental archaeology of human ecosystems, and the phenomenology of landscape, this study can answer the two research questions as follows.

Firstly, by employing art history to compare the original Chinese cultural context of home decoration and its context in the Sino-Siamese murals, as well as by investigating contemporary travelogues (Chambers, 1968; Tiffany, 1849) and Chinese accounts (Beurdeley, 1979), this study argues that the cultural meaning of the CHDT was reinterpreted in terms of its function changing from that of being an actual household interior to that of the subject of murals in religious buildings. Though in Buddhist ordination halls, the Chinese emblems depicted in the CHDT murals retained their original symbolic meanings of profane auspiciousness, within the sacred context of the Buddhist landscape of Wat Ratcha Orasaram. This dichotomy implies the use of profane art to convey good wishes for mundane bliss, and fulfilled both the sacred and profane wishes of the worshippers, who conducted their sacred activities in this Buddhist landscape.

Secondly, phenomenological data (experiences of Siamese and Chinese in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the phenomenology of landscape potentially disclose more dimensions of the significance of the CHDT, which has previously been assessed via analogical arguments. This study has uncovered the phenomenon of cultural change, evaluating cultural change in Nangklao's reign.

Consequently, this study has evaluated the cultural interaction of human ecosystems in Nangklao's reign, marked by the cultural change of RPA, through the Buddhist artworks of the CHDT murals. This study encourages using an interdisciplinary framework to generate more outcomes. As demonstrated in this study, art history potentially cooperates with phenomenology and environmental archaeology, and yields further dimensions of aesthetic cultural changes. Remarkably, it is inevitable to complete the fundamental process of conventional analogical study since this conventional method considerably strengthens information. However, synthesising proper data, theories, and methodologies arguably enhances art history to reveal substantial results rather than the conventional analogical arguments.

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