

**MON BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN PAKKRET DISTRICT,
NONTHABURI PROVINCE, THAILAND DURING THONBURI
AND RATTANAKOSIN PERIODS (1767-1932)**

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Abstract

This research examines the characteristics of Mon Buddhist architecture during Thonburi and Rattanakosin periods (1767-1932) in Pakkret district. In conjunction with the oral histories acquired from the local residents, the study incorporates inquiries on historical narratives and documents, together with photographic and illustrative materials obtained from physical surveys of thirty religious structures for data collection. The textual investigations indicate that Mon people migrated to the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya in large number during the 18th century, and established their settlements in and around Pakkret area. Located northwest of the present day Bangkok in Nonthaburi province, Pakkret developed into an important community of the Mon diasporas, possessing a well-organized local administration that contributed to its economic prosperity. Although the Mons was assimilated into the Siamese political structure, they were able to preserve most of their traditions and customs. At the same time, the productions of their cultural artifacts encompassed many Thai elements as well, as evident from Mon Buddhist temples and monasteries in Pakkret. The stylistic analyses of these structures further reveal the following findings. First, their designs were determined by four groups of patrons: Mon laypersons, elite Mons, Thai

laypersons, and elite Thais. Second, their spatial organizations illustrated various degrees of cultural contacts and exchanges between the Mons and Thais. Third, their aesthetic expressions could be categorized into three types: traditional Mon, traditional Thai, and royal eclecticism.

Keywords: Buddhist architecture; Mon; Thonburi to Rattanakosin periods; Pakkret

Introduction

Historical records disclosed that Mon kingdoms existed in the geographical area which was known today as southern Myanmar (Burma) even before the birth of Christ. Boasting much social, political, and economic advancement, the Mon kingdoms contained successive dominions of Thaton, Martaban, and Hanthawaddy. Struggling to protect themselves since they were founded, the Mon kingdoms eventually fell under the power of the Burmese in 1757.

The demises of the Mon states in Myanmar were an important factor that led to immigrations of Mon people, as prisoners of war and as displaced persons, to present Thailand (Siam) during the kingdoms of Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin (Bangkok) (Wongpolganana, 2006).¹ After migrating from their homeland, the Mons dwelled together in self-governed settlements, allowing them to be a distinct social and ethnic entity. At first, they were less connected to the rest of Siamese society and maintained their distinctive cultural heritage, many of which were gradually incorporated into Thai cultures, such as language, dress, traditions, and customs. One the most obvious examples could be seen from religious structures, owing to the fact that the Mons were widely recognized for their devotion to the Buddhist faith as demonstrated by the commission of numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries in their communities (Ocharoen, 1976).

Resettled in many parts of Siam, Mon immigrants and their descendants were granted similar legal rights as the native Thais. Being integrated into the power structure of the Thai dominions, including by means of inter-ethnic marriage, Mon people enjoyed the freedom of expression for their cultural practices, regardless of successive social and political changes during Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin periods (Bunjoon, 2007).² In this regard, examples of socio-political developments that fostered the interactions between the relocated Mons and native Thais also consisted of two key historical occurrences.

¹ In this research, the term “Siam” referred to the absolutist kingdom whose monarchical rule ended in 1932, whereas “Thailand” denoted the democratic nation after the 1932 revolution, despite the fact that the constitutional government continued to use “Siam” as the name of the country until 1939.

² In the King Rama V period, official policy was to decrease use of Mon’s language and increase use of Thai language (Ocharoen, 1976: 238-273).

(1) After the war with Burma between 1765 and 1767 Siam initiated a large-scale recruitment for laborers from various ethnic immigrants to restore the kingdom.

(2) During the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910), Siam went through its comprehensive reformation, focusing on the modernization and Westernization processes, in order to become a civilized nation-state to combat Western colonialization in Southeast Asia. Aside from the administrative, political, educational, economic, and religious transformations, the naturalization of Thai citizenship for various diaspora groups residing in the kingdom happened as well.³

Occasioned by the abovementioned circumstances, the designs of Mon religious structures in Thailand could be arranged into three aesthetic classifications: (1) traditional Mon featuring similar architectural expressions to those of Mon Buddhist temples in Myanmar, (2) traditional Thai, which accounted for the largest typological group, and (3) royal eclecticism combining Mon with stylistic elements from other sources or influences, such as Burmese, Chinese, and Western architecture.

Accordingly, the upcoming investigations on Mon Buddhist architecture evolved around a couple of research questions. (1) What were the characteristics and/or stylistic elements commonly found in Mon temples and monasteries, whether the completely built or refurbished ones? (2) What were the causes contributing to the utilizations of those attributes and components in the designs of Mon Buddhist structures in Pakkret area, which once served as a major checkpoint⁴ for waterborne traffics along the Chao Praya river during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods? (Ramkomut, 1999)

³ The reformation went into full swing after 1892 when King Rama V transformed Siam into a modern nation-state through an implementation of centralized bureaucratic system. At the same time, the naturalization process enabled various ethnic immigrants to become Thai citizens. In order to maintain national unity, they were required to be proficient in the use of Thai language, apart from declaring their oath of allegiance to the sovereign. Gradually assimilated into the socio-political hierarchy of Siam, the naturalized citizens were indispensable for the economic expansions of the kingdom (Techatewaporn, 2012: 94).

⁴ Located between the city of Ayutthaya and Chao Praya River, Pakkret was a site for levying taxes and immigration screening. As a result, the area also served as a commercial center and a stopover point for travelers.

Fundamental to explorations of the said problematizing premises were reviews of existing academic literature. For instance, Boonpook (2010) presented an overview of the history and descriptions of temples in Pakkret based on oral narratives from local people. Moreover, Hongsakaola (2005) examined the influences of Burmese architecture in a Mon pagoda at Wat Poramaiyikawas in Pakkret in order to identify the stylistic origin of the Phramaharamun pagoda, erected during the reign of King Rama V.

In a nutshell, these architectural studies begged additional enquiring into the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts that constituted the transformations of the Mon identity between the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin eras in terms of archival research. To cite some prominent examples, Ocharoen (1976) undertook an investigation on the status and roles of Mon emigres in Thai society from the mid-Ayutthaya to early Rattanakosin periods. Chanteang (1997) provided a detailed analysis on the duties of Mon officials in Ayutthaya between 1584 and 1767. In addition, Deepadung (1999) looked into a two hundred year-span since 1782 regarding the development of Mon's social roles during the Rattanakosin era, whereas Bunjoong (2007) recounted the stories of Mon women in Siamese royal court between 1782 and 1932.

The above genres of literature supplied a contextual background for subsequent ethnographic studies on how changes in the social fabric of Mon immigrants could affect the aesthetic attributes of Mon Buddhist architecture, as evident from Jiratatsanakul, Chaturawong, and Supasiri's (2007) investigations on the architectural forms of Buddhist temples in Mon communities Chaturawong's (2011) essay on Mon Buddhist monasteries in the lower region of Burma coupled with Sagunngam's (2012) thesis on developments of the settlement forms of Mon communities in Karnchanaburi province.

Taken together, all the aforementioned scholarly works not only offered multidimensional guidelines and frameworks for conducting a systematic research on the dynamism that instituted changes in architectural characteristics and stylistic elements of the Mon temples and monasteries in Pakkret district, but also testified that those structures were products of a living culture which was constantly evolving. In effect, apart from celebrating cultural diversity, the proposed studies aim to promote appreciations for the

values of peaceful coexistence, social interactions, and cultural exchanges among various ethnic groups that had always been integral constituents of the Thai society from the past to the present day.

Materials and Methods

In examining the physical characteristics of Mon Buddhist architecture commissioned between 1767 and 1932 in Pakkret district, the methodological approach of this research encompassed the following investigative sequences:

(1) Data collection on the Mon history in Nonthaburi province and their temples erected between 1767 and 1932 relied on studies of textual, photographic, and illustrative materials, such as archival documents, photographs, drawings, as well as research articles and scholarly books, e.g. *History of All Kingdoms (Volume 1)* (Department of Religious Affairs, 1983) and *The Temples in Pakkret* (Boonpook, 2010). The information and knowledge gained from those sources was later cross-examined with narratives from oral histories acquired from the residents of Pakkret.

(2) Physical surveys were carried out to record and verify the aesthetic characteristics and/or stylistic elements found at thirty Mon Buddhist structures in Pakkret area. The fieldworks were accompanied by ethnographic investigations on those case studies via personal interviews with both the community leaders, knowledgeable persons, along with local people and scholars. The interview results were subsequently consulted with the textual, photographic, and illustrative materials to assess their historical accuracy.

(3) The verified data and information was organized, classified, and structured into relevant categories for subsequent enquiries.

(4) Analytical probes into the well-prepared collections of data took place under the inquisitive framework of identifying the aesthetic characteristics and stylistic elements found from the case studies, together with articulating the explanations why those attributes and components were brought into their designs.

(5) Conclusions were drawn from the findings with respect to the lessons learned from the creation, transformation, and preservation of the Mon identity embodied in Mon Buddhist architecture.

Results and Discussion

1. A brief history of the Mon community in Pakkret district

After the demise of the last Mon kingdom in 1757, Mon people endured hardship and misery under the Burmese rule, prompting their exodus to Siam during the final years of Ayutthaya kingdom. Even with the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese for the second time in 1767, the Mons continued to migrate to the newly found Siamese kingdoms of Thonburi (1767-1782) and later Rattanakosin (Bangkok),⁵ particularly during the first four decades of the Bangkok era (1782-1824) when the regime struggled for its survival through a series of long and bitter wars with the Burmese (Saisingha, 2013).

Amidst these chaotic and bloody periods, the Mon fought on both sides. Many arrived in Siam as prisoners of war. The Mon immigrants and war captives alike were pressed into the Siamese servant system as both agricultural laborers and combatants in the armed forces. Consequently, Siamese court officials ordered Mon communities to be set up in several strategic locations around the capital city (Ibid.).

One of such urban settlements was Pakkret. Although the Mon diaspora inhabited in the area since the kingdom of Rattanakosin, the size, population, and strategic importance grew substantially during the Thonburi era and remained so after the Siamese capital was relocated to Bangkok. Situated on both banks of the Chao Praya River was a key checkpoint on the river route into Ayutthaya for collecting taxes and for screening persons entering the city. After 1767, this once prosperous and fertile community was dissented, and it was not until the mid-1770s when Pakkret was revived. As stated before, aside from repopulating the area, the Mon immigrants, both laypersons and clergymen, also restored, enlarged, and developed Pakkret into a spiritual center of the Mon diaspora and their progenies.

Accordingly, it was not surprising to discover that within its 36.04 sq. km. territory, Pakkret sheltered more than one hundred Buddhist temples, shrines, and monasteries. The hearts of each village that constituted this riverside community were always occupied by some kinds of Buddhist religious structures, demonstrating that the pattern of urban settlements here

⁵ One during the Thonburi period (1774) and twice during the Rattanakosin period (1815-1824) (Ocharoen, 1998: 43-75).

evolved around the constructions of places to practice Buddhist rituals and abodes for the clergymen (Ocharoen, 1976). In addition, historical records shown that commissions of new temples together with restorations of the dilapidated ones accounted for a major social affair among the local denizens. At first, however, those structures were modest and made of simple materials, such as bamboo and elephant grass, owing to the economic hardship and political turbulence during the wars with the Burmese from 1767 to 1824 (Boonpook, 2010).

With the Burmese threats subsided, the Bangkok regime esthetically engaged itself in foreign trades, especially with Chinese merchants. (Sattayanurak, 2015) As the economy and wealth of the kingdom rapidly expanded, various Buddhist temples and monasteries were built and renovated. On that basis, the Mon immigrants arriving in Siam between 1815 and 1824 found themselves living in greater material comfort. (Ocharoen, 1976) As the older generations of Mon diasporas increasingly enjoyed greater economic prosperity and their higher social status in the Siamese political structure, royal sponsorship and patronage from the Siamese ruling elites played a crucial role not only for the commissions and restorations of temples in Pakkret, but also in other affairs of Buddhism. For instance, King Rama III (Nangklao, r. 1824-1851) bestowed royal endowment for Mon monks who attained the rank of priests.

Although economic prosperity via foreign trades and commerce continued through the reigns of King Rama IV and V, Siam experienced multidimensional changes as a result of its reformation process as explained earlier. Nonetheless, the commissions and restorations of temples in Pakkret still received financial supports from the kings and court officials alike, as illustrated by the construction of Wat Sao Thong Tong during the reign of King Rama IV along with refurbishments of Wat Sapan Sung, Wat Singh Tong, Wat Tha Kwain, and Wat Nong Klang during the reign of King Rama V (Boonpook, 2010).

As the pace of modernization and Westernization intensified, Siam was drastically transformed in many aspects. In order to make the kingdom into a modern nation-state and combat Western colonial encroachments, the sovereign utilized the course of reformation as a vehicle to consolidate his administrative power by establishing a centralized bureaucratic system. His

efforts were strengthened by implementations of modern communication and telecommunication systems namely railways and telegraph, buttressed by reforms of education and tax systems, as well as the abolition of slavery (Sattayanurak, 2015).

The aforementioned changes generated numerous far-reaching consequences that affected all ethnic groups dwelling in the kingdom. Apart from the naturalization of Thai citizenship, tangible examples could be seen from the cultural policies in creating the national culture and identity, calling for the use of central Thai dialect as the national *lingua franca*. At the same time, the languages of ethnic immigrants, both verbal and written ones like those of the Mons, were marginalized (Ocharoen, 1976).

In the built environment, the developments of railways, bridges, and roads led to the dominance of land transportation in Siam, which eventually eclipsed and replaced waterways as major routes for moving goods, products, supplies, and people. For that reason, the tax checkpoint at Pakkret gradually lost its importance and ceased to exist during the reign of King Rama VI (Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925). Be that as it may, the Mon community in Pakkret had continued to prosper and remained so until the present day.

2. The development of Buddhist architecture in Mon temples

Archival research disclosed that the designs of Mon Buddhist temples and monasteries commissioned in Pakkret were determined by four groups of patrons: (1) Mon laypersons, (2) elite Mons, (3) Thai laypersons and (4) elite Thais. In tandem with the Mon immigrants and native Thais, the users of those religious structures encompassed other ethnic groups who shared similar cultural practices, ontological views, and spiritual beliefs as well. Erected and/or refurbished between 1774 and 1932 during the Thonburi and Rattanakosin eras, the ages of the thirty case studies could be arranged into five chronological orders (Figure 1-2).

(1) Before 1774, prior the Mon exodus to Siam, three abandoned temples already existed in Pakkret area, which were Wat Sao Thong Tong, Wat Bo, and Wat Hong Tong.⁶

⁶ Even before 1757, Mon people already migrated into Siam to escape death and destruction from wars with the Burmese, and began to settle with several geographical parts of the kingdom, including Pakkret area.

(2) From the first migration in 1774 to the second one in 1815, twenty-one temples were built or reconstructed. These structures could be divided into three subcategories:

(A) Nineteen deserted traditional Siamese temples were restored by Mon laypersons. In addition to the renowned Wat Poramaiyikawas, their names included: Wat Sao Thong Tong, Wat Bo, Wat Chim Pli Suthawas, Wat Pai Lom, Wat Tong Kung, Wat Klang Kret, Wat Bang Pood Nok, Wat Sri Rattanaram, Wat Koo, Wat Sanam Nue, Wat Chom Poo Rai, Wat Pa Lay Lai, Wat Makham Tong, Wat Na Bot, Wat Bot Sor Kotanya, Wat Po Nue, Wat Po Tai, and Wat Kee Lek.

(B) Wat Choeng Tha, a traditional Siamese monastery in badly deteriorated physical condition, was renovated by the elite Mons.

(C) Wat Tarn, a new Mon temple, was raised by Mon laypersons.

(3) During the second migration between 1815 and 1824, Mon laypersons restored Wat Chim Pli Suthawas, which was later refurbished by the elite Thais. During the same period, additional architectural commissions took place, which could be split into two subdivisions:

(A) Two old Siamese monasteries, Wat Prod Ket and Wat Hong Tong, were restored by Mon laypersons.

(B) A Mon Buddhist temple, Wat Bang Jak, was rebuilt by Mon laypersons.

(4) After the third migration in 1824 up to 1892, a Mon temple, assumed a new Thai name as Wat Klang Kret. The renames also occurred to other Buddhist religious structures in Pakkret as shown below.

(A) Originally restored by Mon laypersons, two Siamese monasteries were subsequently renovated by the elite Thais before receiving their new titles as Wat SaoThong Tong and Wat Poramaiyikawas.

(B) Repaired by Mon laypersons, two Siamese monasteries were refurbished by the elite Mons, and renamed to Wat Koo and Wat Choeng Tha.

(C) Other six Mon temples were put up or rechristened as the followings:

i) Reconstructed by Mon laypersons, a Siamese Buddhist shrine was transformed into a Mon temple under the title of Wat Tam Nak Nue.

ii) Four new Mon temples, Wat Pak Klong Pra Udom, Wat Taey, Wat Bang Pood Nai, and Wat Singh Tong, were erected by Mon laypersons.

iii) At the same time, another new Mon temple, Wat Koh Paya Jeng, was built by the elite Mons.

(5) From the height of the reformation process in 1892 to the end of royal absolutism in Siam in 1932, twenty-nine Mon temples and a Siamese Buddhist monastery in Pakkret were initially restored by Mon laypersons before they were the elite Thais renovated them. One of the most widely recognized examples was Wat Sao Thong Tong.

Temple	Thonburi 1767	Migration 1774	Rattanakosin 1782	Migration 1815	Migration 1824	Reform of the absolute monarchy 1892	Democratic transition 1932
Wat Chim Pli Suthawas	△	●	☆	●	●	●	●
Wat Pai Lom	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Sao Thong Tong	△	●	●	●	☆	☆	☆
Wat Tong Kung	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Bang Jak			●	●	●	●	●
Wat Pak Klong Pra Udom					●	●	●
Wat Prod Ket	△	△	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Klang Kret	△	●	●	●	+	+	+
Wat Tarn		●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Tam Nak Nue	△	+	+	●	●	●	●
Wat Taey					●	●	●
Wat Bang Pood Nok	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Bang Pood Nai					●	●	●
Wat Sri Rattanam	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Hong Tong	△	△	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Koo	△	●	●	●	□	●	●
Wat Bo	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Sanam Nue	△	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wat Singh Tong					●	●	●
Wat Chom Poo Rai	△	●	●	●	●	●	●

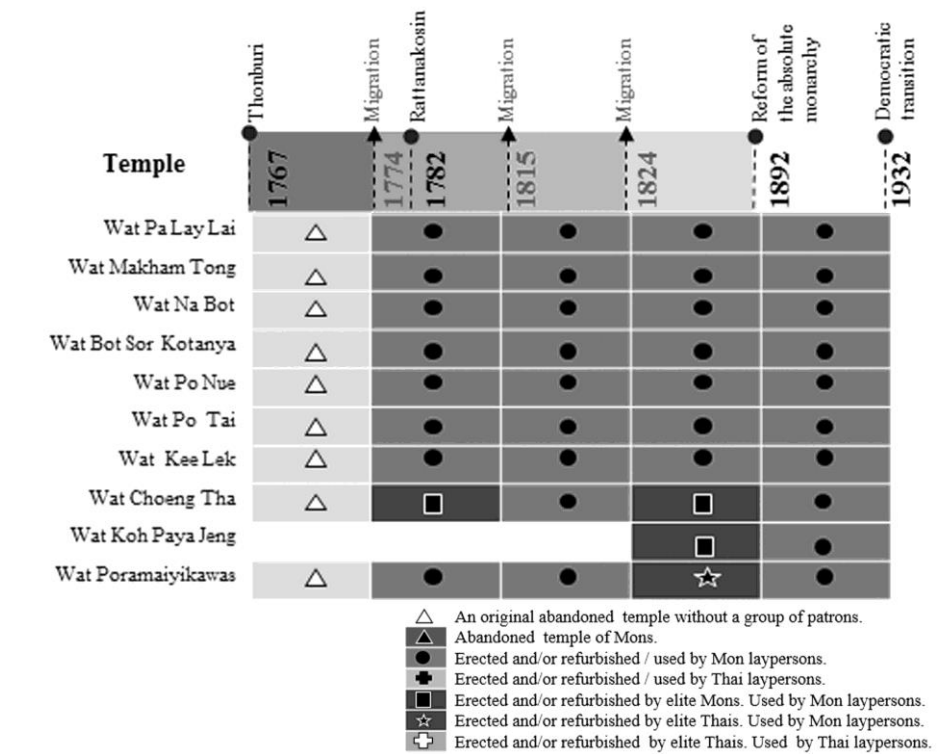
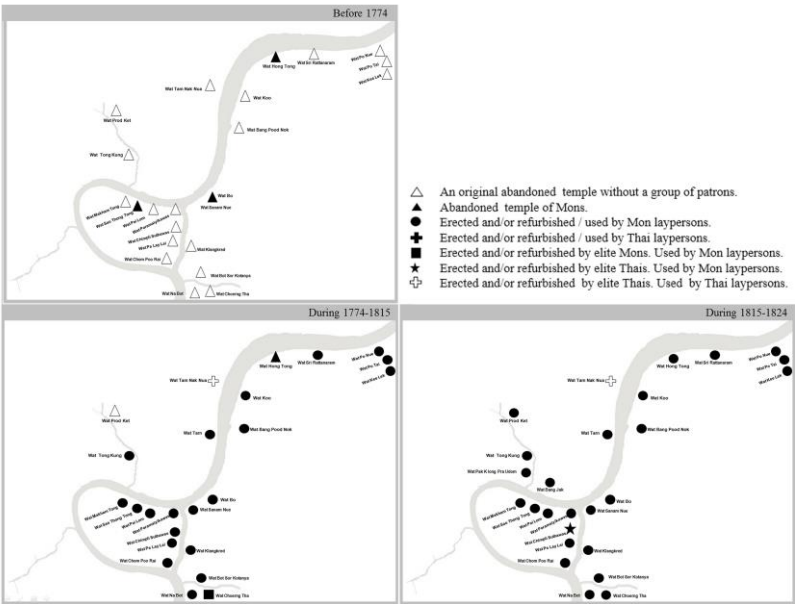


Figure 1: The Mon Temples in Pakkret Constructed Between 1774 and 1932



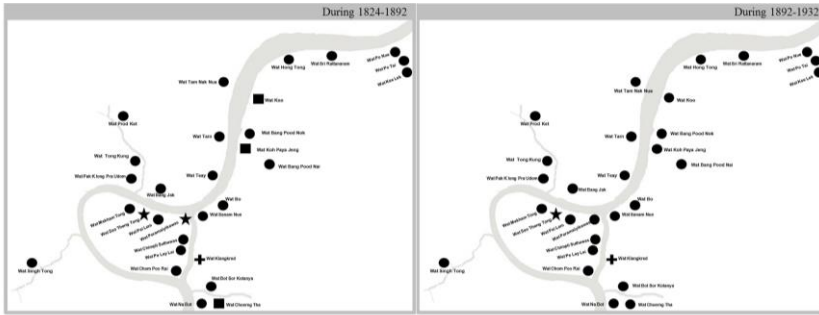


Figure 2: Locations of Mon Temples in Pakkret from 1774 to 1932

3. The characteristics of Mon Buddhist architecture in Siam between 1767 and 1932

(1) Data collected from the archival research and physical surveys lent an empirical ground to classify the spatial configurations of the thirty Buddhist structures in Pakkret into two typological groups: the Mon and traditional Thai styles.

(A) The Mon style: The placements of built forms were conditioned by pedestrian traffics and relationships to their surroundings. However, the principal building usually stood independently from the rest of other structures in the monastic ground. For instance, the main pagoda either sat in front of the temple and next to the riverfront, or on the same axis as the ordination hall (*ubosot*). Mostly erected or restored by the Mons laypersons, the example of Buddhist temples in this category were Wat Hong Tong, Wat Poramaiyikawas, Wat Bang Jak, Wat Sri Rattanaram, and Wat Sao Thong Tong (Figure 3).

(B) Traditional Thai style: The placements of built forms were systematically arranged toward a certain direction as demonstrated by the locations of the main pagoda and *ubosot* on the same axis. Originally commissioned during Ayutthaya period, the majority of temples in this group were later abandoned before being renovated by both Thai and Mon laypersons, such as, Wat Klang Kret, Wat Poramaiyikawas, Wat Pai Lom, and Wat Choeng Tha, etc. (Figure 4).

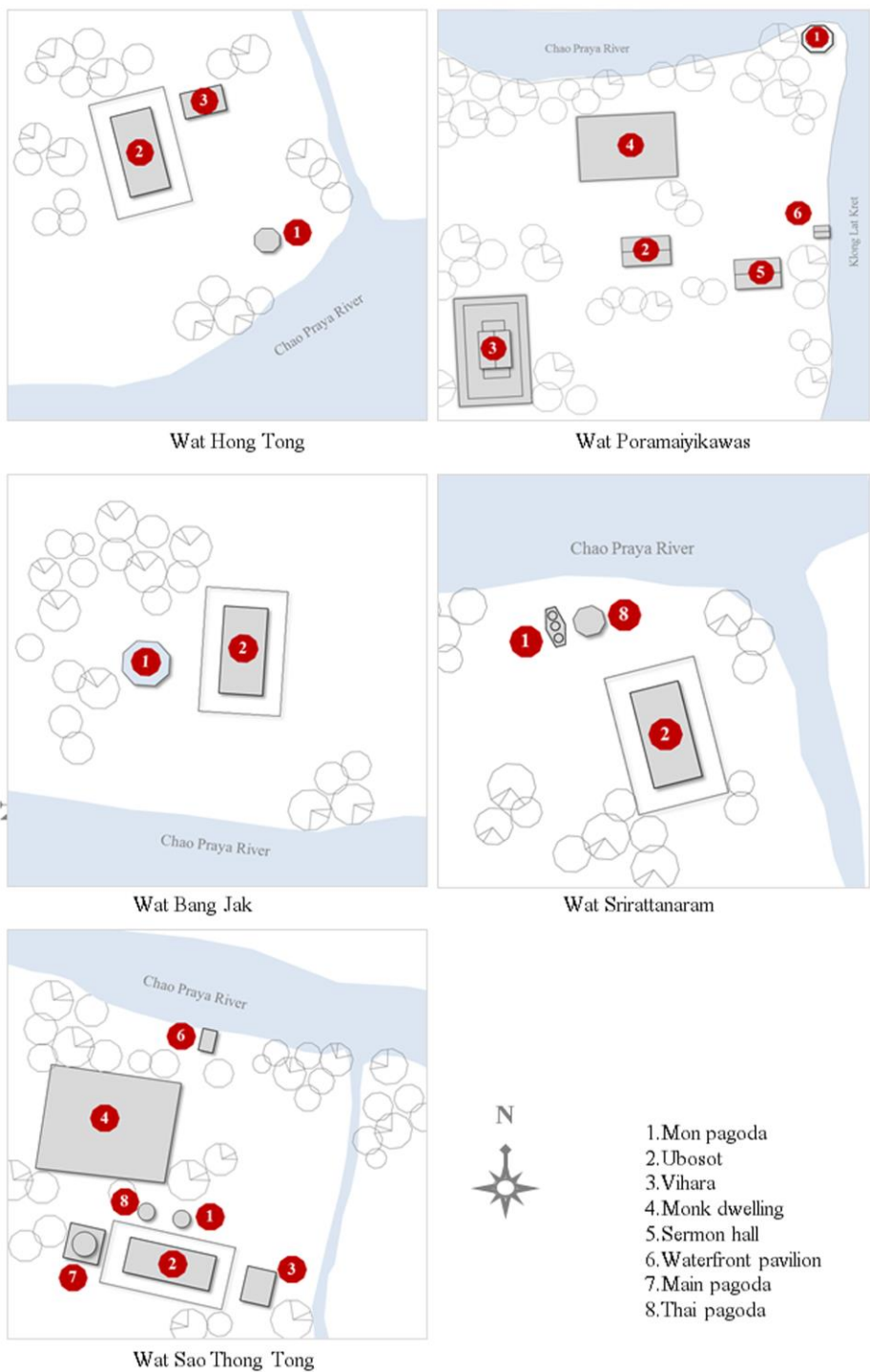


Figure 3: Spatial Layouts of Buddhist Temples in Mon Style



Figure 4: Spatial Layouts of Buddhist Temples in Traditional Thai Style

(2) The physical surveys in conjunction with reviews of existing scholarly literature suggested that the aesthetic expressions of the selected case studies could be organized into three types: traditional Mon, traditional Thai, and royal eclecticism.

A) Traditional Mon: This group encompassed Buddhist temples and monasteries built by Mon laypersons, exhibiting similar architectural characteristics and elements to those of Mon Buddhist temples in Myanmar. Notable examples were the so-called “*Kalayani Sima*” style⁷ of Bot Pae Loi Nhum (floating raft ordination hall) at Wat Poramaiyikawas in Pakkret, which was used for performing religious rites and rituals by Mon monks (Figure 5). Its main pagoda dwelled on a sizable “*Yokket*” base, an octagonal pedestal with the extended slope on all sides consisting of two layers of lotus decorative patterns

⁷ The *ubosot*’s name was created by Phra Jao Tham Chedi and came from the name of the river where the monks went to ordination in a boat parallel to the middle of the river in Langka Tawee (today’s Sri Lanka), in order to create a pure monk.

without stairs, or “*Patuksin*” plinth. Although the stupas (*chedis*) at the corner on each floor of the main pagoda were unadorned, decorations were evident from the surfaces of satellite *chedis* situated around the main pagoda on their “*Patuksin*” podiums (Saisingha, 2014).

In sum, the abovementioned aesthetic features derived from historical precedents set by religious structures erected at important places of worship not only in southern Myanmar, such as the Shwedagon and Shwemawdaw pagodas, but also at other sites deemed sacred to Buddhist evangelism in Southeast Asia.⁸ Taken as a whole, detailed geometrical analyses insisted that the superstructures of those built forms could be divided into three kinds: round-based, square-based, and “boat-based” pagodas (Figure 6-8). The last kind, in particular, was highly favorite by the elite Thais during the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin eras, as exemplified by the main pagoda and sermon hall at Wat Poramaiyikawas (Figure 9).

(B) Traditional Thai: Constituting the majority of the case studies, nearly all were commissioned during the Ayutthaya period in traditional Siamese style and subsequently left unattended. Their restorations resulted in amalgamations of Thai and Mon architectural designs, which essentially illustrated various degrees of cultural interactions between the two ethnic groups, as shown by Wat Klang Kret, Wat Chim Pli Suthawas, Wat Sao Thong Tong, Wat Tong Kung, Wat Prod Ket, Wat Pa Ley Lai (Figure 10).

(C) Royal eclecticism: As implied by its title, this category incorporated both refurbished and newly-built Buddhist temples and monasteries sponsored by the monarchy. Directed by the regal preferences, their aesthetic expressions combined stylistic attributes and constituents from various sources. Examples could be observed from the Chinese influences in the massive design of the *ubosot* at Wat Koh Paya Jeng (Figure 11), constructed by the elite Mons in accordance with to King Rama III’s fondness for Sinic culture. Others included Western design influences at the pavilion, entrance to the *vihara* (praying hall) of the reclining statue of Buddha, and cloister around the *vihara* at Wat Poramaiyikawas (Figure 12), which was devised by the elite Thais to suit King Rama V’s keenness for Western arts and architecture.

⁸ Buddhism was transmitted to the Mon kingdom by boat during the reign of Ashoka Maharaj.



Figure 5: Illustration of Bot Pae Loi Nhum (Floating Raft Ordination Hall) from Bot Pae Painting, Scripture Hall, Wat Bowonniwet, Bangkok (Source: Pitchaya Soomjinda, 2014)

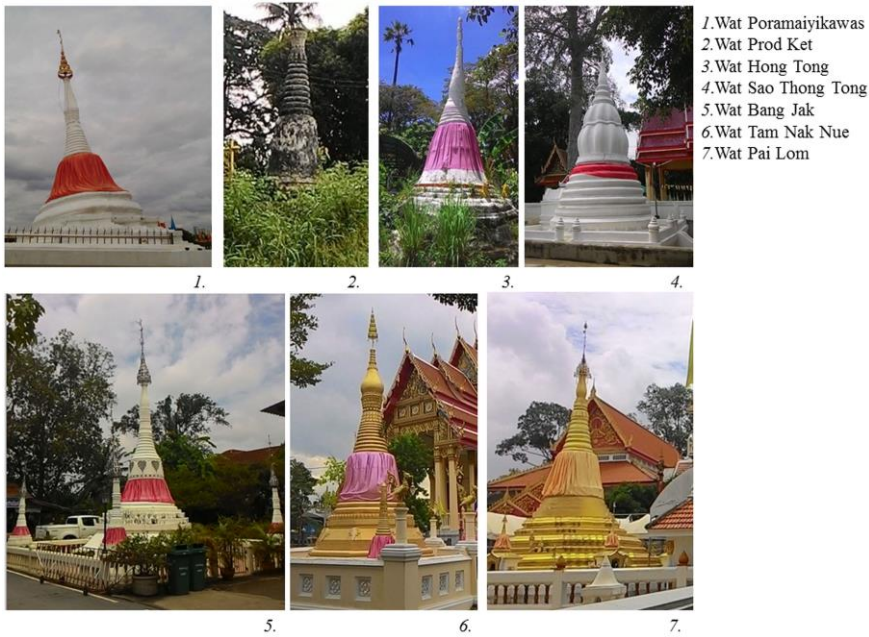


Figure 6: Examples of the Round-Based Pagodas in Pakkret Area



Figure 7: Examples of the Square-Based Pagoda at Wat Koo in Pakkret



Wat Chim Pli Suthawas



Wat Sri Rattanaram

Figure 8: Examples of the "Boat-based" Pagodas in Pakkret Area



Main pagoda



Sermon hall

Figure 9: Examples of Reconstructed Mon Buddhist Structures by the Elite Thais.



Figure 10: Examples of Traditional Thai Buddhist Architecture in Pakkret



Figure 11: The Ordination Hall at Wat Koh Paya Jeng



Figure 12: Examples of Western Influences in the Royal Eclecticism Style from the Architecture of Wat Poramaiyikawas

(3) Moreover, inquiries on Buddhist symbolism and iconography further pointed out that the decorative patterns of Buddhist structures in Pakkret area could be ordered into three stylistic classifications.

(A) Mon style: Buddhist temples and monasteries employed images and/or symbols signifying the identity of the Mons in terms of an ethnic group or cultural entity. For instance, the mural painting at Wat Koo (Figure 13) displayed illustrations of the *hamsa* pillar in front of a pagoda and temple, denoting the existence of Mon people dating back to the age of Gautama Buddha as narrated by the *Hanthawaddy* legend.

(B) Traditional Thai style: Decorative ornaments in Buddhist structures contained symbolic and iconographic contents commonly found in the arts and architecture of Siam during Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods, such as figurative representations of Vishnu and Garuda deities on gables at Wat Chim Pli Suthawas, Wat Klang Kret, and Wat Koh Paya Jeng (Figure 14).

(C) Royal eclecticism style: regal preference dictated the integrations of decorative elements from several foreign sources into the designs of Buddhist temples and monasteries in Pakkret as well. To cite some examples, owing to King Rama III's penchant for Sinic culture, buildings in Wat Poramaiyikawas, Wat Koo, and Wat Chim Pli Suthawas sheltered a number of Chinese and Western sentinel paintings, together with Chinese stone dolls (Figure 15). Likewise, Western-style ornaments, which were popular during the reign of King Rama V, could be sighted from the stucco walls, window shutters, insignias, ceilings, and royal emblems in both the interior and exterior of the *ubosot* and *vihara* at Wat Poramaiyikawas (Figure 16).



Figure 13: Mural Paintings at Wat Koo Portraying the *Hamsa* Pillar

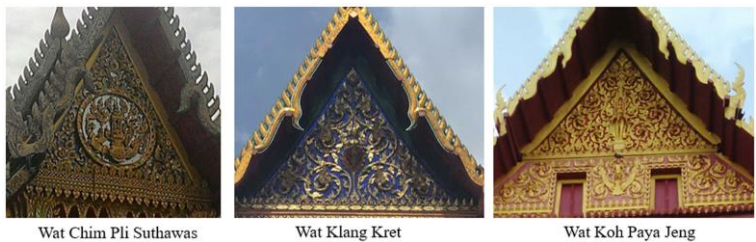


Figure 14: The Gables of Edifices at Wat Chim Pli Suthawas, Wat Klang Kret, and Wat Koh Paya Jeng.



Figure 15: Couples of Chinese and Western Sentinel Paintings in Combination with Chinese Stone Doll Figures at Wat Poramaiyikawas.

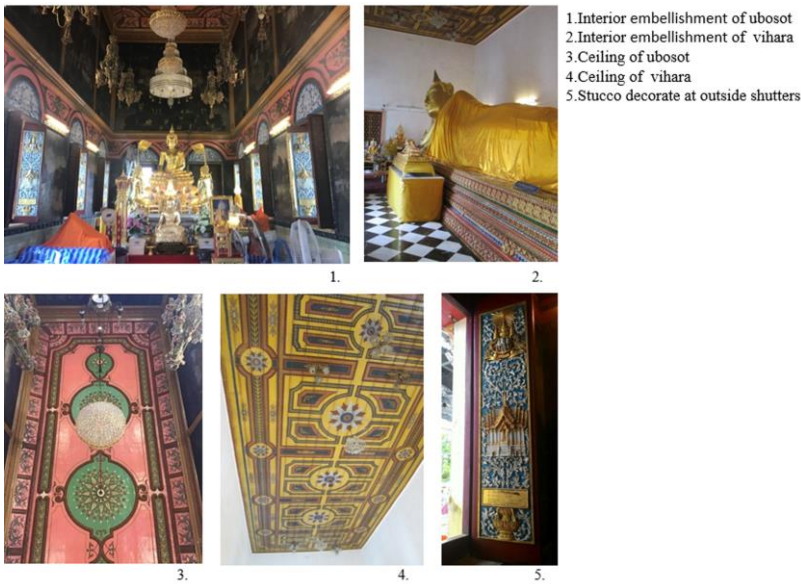


Figure 16: The Interior and Exterior Embellishments of the *Ubosot* and *Vihara* at Wat Poramaiyikawas

Discussion

The preceding findings and analyses recapitulated that Mon immigrants continually entered Thai kingdom, especially from the Thonburi to early Rattanakosin periods, due to protracted armed conflicts with the Burmese to gain political dominance in the Southeast Asian region. Amidst the lengthy wars, they were displaced and settled along at many strategic sites along the Chao Praya river. Among those locations was Pakkret, which grew into one of the largest Mon diaspora communities in the central region of Thailand.

Jiratatsanakul et al. (2007) elaborated that the policy of forced relocations of the Mons and other ethnic immigrants, such as the Laotian, Khmers, and Chinese, until the reign of King Rama III brought considerable political and economic benefits to Siam. While fulfilling the needs to safeguard the kingdom from its regional adversaries, namely the Burmese, not only did the developments of those enclaves generated a large sum of revenues but also offer large pools of readily available laborers for the state.

As the Mons became the largest population group in Pakkret, increasing numbers of Mon Buddhist temples and monasteries commissioned between 1774 and 1815 reflected a rapid expansion of their settlements together with the continuous growth of Mon immigrants into the area. Nevertheless, in spite of their daily contacts with the Thais, the Mon diasporas still observed their own ways of practicing Buddhism. According to Ocharoen (1976), the Mons in Pakkret renovated existing or abandoned religious structures out of their necessity and respect to the Buddhist faith. Apart from serving social and civic purposes like holding a public gathering, the restored temples operated chiefly as a sacred ground for conducting religious ceremonies. Because there were the relatively limited amounts of human and financial resources in Pakkret at that time, those refurbished places of worship made a performance of basic spiritual rites and rituals possible when the Mon community was still in its infantile phase of developments.

Correspondingly, Chaturawong (2011) suggested that Mon people maintained their tradition of employing not just the *ubosot*, but other types of Buddhist structures such as the *vihara* to accommodate virtually all kinds of religious activities. So, cultural contacts and exchanges between people of

different ethnic origins, in fact, occurred throughout the monastic ground. Accordingly, the physical surveys coupled with ethnographic enquiries provided a basis for this study to argue that the aesthetic expressions of most Mon temples incorporated several Thai stylistic influences, resulting in their hybridized designs as seen from both the layouts and decorative ornaments of the *ubosots*, *viharas*, *chedis* and pagodas at Wat Pa Ley Lai and Wat Klang Kret as obvious cases in point.

The said observations were accompanied by another remark by Saisingha (2013) that during the reigns of King Rama I (Phutthayotfa Chulalok, r. 1782-1809) and Rama II (Phutthaloetla Naphalai, r. 1809-1824) were the time of restoring the kingdom the Burmese's sack and destruction of Ayutthaya. As a consequence, the majority of artworks were executed in terms of Ayutthaya revivalism style, whose symbolic and iconographic contents functioned under an inherited framework of the Hindu-Buddhist "Triphumikatha" cosmological worldview (Prakitnonthakarn, 2006). Hence, on the one hand, it was not surprised to discovered that the Mon Buddhist architecture in Pakkret area featured many stylistic traits similar to those of the Siamese religious structures built during the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanasosin eras.

For instance, Saisingha (2014) wrote that some Mon pagodas did not strictly adhere to the typical Mon pattern of round-based structures, but instead introduced the square-based or boat-based designs of *chedi leam*. In this regard, knowledge obtained from examinations of published academic literature inferred that the stylistic deviation might be occasioned by fashionable cultural practices by Siamese court, as exhibited the constructions of boat-based pagodas at Wat Yannawa, *prangs* at Wat Chakkrawat, Wat Ratburana, and Wat Nang Chee in Bangkok during the reign of King Rama III.

Yet, on the other hand, even though adopting various degrees of Thai artistic influences, scenes from mural paintings adorning the walls of Mon religious structures in Pakkret testified that the Mons were able to preserve the core of their cultural inheritance, such as the monastic rules and regulations for Mon clergymen, mythical beliefs about the dissemination of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, and legend of the Hanthawaddy city. More telling evidence could be perceived from constructions of Bot Pae Loi Nhum (floating raft

ordination halls) to hold monks' activities as explained earlier, whereas integrations of the *hamsa* pillar were normal for Mon pagodas, of which designs derived from Mon pagodas in southern Myanmar.

In any case, analytical probes into historical records reaffirmed that Mon Buddhist architecture in Pakkret was never a sole creation by Mon people, but always involved some sorts of contributions from our collaborations with other ethnic groups. On that account, this research noted that the Mon pagoda and sermon hall at Wat Poramaiyikawas, whose commissions were sponsored by King Rama V, bore many architectural characteristics comparable to those of Buddhist sermon halls and pagodas in Myanmar. Such a comparison was substantiated by the fact that the structures in Pakkret were erected after the sovereign visited British India and Burma in 1871. The remark was further corroborated by another investigation, revealing that pagoda at Wat Poramaiyikawas was stylistically akin to the Shwedagon Pagoda (Hongsakaola, 2005).

In essence, the above observations reiterated the importance of Pakkret area in terms of a cultural contact zone, where interactions among dissimilar ethnic groups happened. As demonstrated by the patronage of the elite Thais for the commissions and/or restorations of Mon temples, the Mon-Thai cultural exchanges were indeed complicated and therefore embodied multifaceted affairs. In a corollary view, Boonpook (2010) put forward that the sponsorships of Buddhist architecture often served as physical materializations of both the intra-and interrelationships among various ethnic factions, including their acts of power negotiations through the Siamese socio-political hierarchy manifested in built forms, as epitomized by King Rama V's refurbishment of Wat Poramaiyikawas to honor his grandmother, who was a person of Mon descents.

In addition, renovations of religious structures in Pakkret by the elite Thais, such as Wat Soa Thong Tong during the reign of King Rama IV⁹ coupled with reconstructions of several Buddhist monasteries during the reign of King Rama V, indicated that their extensive sponsorship of Mon temples took place after the end of the prolonged wars with the Burmese. With

⁹ Such as Jao jom manda Aumpa (under King Rama II), who had faith to restore Wat Sao Thong tong (Boonpook, 2010: 11).

existential threats from the Burmese invasions eliminated, foreign trades and commerce expanded, elevating Siam into one of the wealthiest kingdoms in Southeast Asia during the 19th century. For that reason, Siam became a preferred destination for immigrants from neighboring states to escape political oppression, avoid Western colonization, and seek socio-economic advancements, as shown by increasing numbers of Mon settlers in Pakkret from 1815 to 1892. The growing Mon population went hand in hand with rising numbers of newly erected Mon temples and monasteries in the area, which were supplemented by restorations of existing Buddhist structures by Mon laypersons, elite Mons, and elite Thais in the same period.

As evident from proliferations of the stylistically hybridized designs of Mon temples and monasteries in Pakkret, both the Mon-Thai or Royal eclectic buildings recapped that foreigners always played important roles in the productions of cultural artifacts in Siam. According to Saisingha (2013), during the times of kings Rama II and III, Thai artistic creations began to bear many traits of visual similitude to those of other countries especially China, whose influences reached its zenith during the reign of King Rama III by becoming Siam's largest trading partner. As explained before, the regal preference for Sinic arts and architecture could be recognized from the sculptural drawings on the entrance door of Wat Poramaiyikawas and the Chinese Doll figures found at Wat Chim Pli Suthawas in Pakkret.

Nonetheless, as Western colonial encroachments in Southeast Asia intensified especially after the British Army's victories in Burma in 1825 and in China in 1840, the Siamese regal preference switched to European cultures Prakitnonthakarn (2007). Although the aesthetic expressions of Buddhist structures commissioned between the reigns of King Rama IV and V were predominantly traditional Thai style, Western artistic elements were integrated into the designs of Buddhist temples and monasteries through the uses of imported decorative ornaments, symbols, and materials, as illustrated by a number of architectural details at Wat Poramaiyikawas.

The heyday of Mon Buddhist architecture in Pakkret, however, seemed to come to an end during the reign of King Rama V. From the beginning of the reformation process in 1892 to the end of royal absolutism in Siam in 1932, very few new Mon temples were erected. Almost all of the

architectural commissions for religious structures in Pakkret, including the royal-sponsored ones, occurred in terms of renovation projects. Jiratatsanakul et al. (2007) stated that during the succeeding reign of King Rama VI, religious reform gained priority in state affairs, leading to the institutionalization of religion (namely Buddhism) as one of the three pillars constitutionalizing the Thai nationhood.¹⁰

The creation of the national ideology thus instilled public perception and awareness of Buddhism as an integral constituent of the Thai identity. As the aesthetic characteristics of Buddhist structures were codified to convey the Thai national and cultural identity, Mon artistic expressions in Buddhist architecture dwindled. A possible explanation for the aforementioned observation stemmed from the fact that King Rama V's concept of the Thai nationhood and its identity was, in effect, a political ideology intended to generate a shared identity for the populace as Thai citizens by inducing the feelings of belonging and solidarity among different ethnic groups residing in the kingdom. Consequently, expressions of ethnic identity other than that of the Thais were suppressed by the state, forcing the people of other ethnic origins to assume a new Thai identity in order to become a part of their adopted nation.

Conclusions

The preceding analytical discussions jointly testified that Pakkret had always been a culture contact zone, where interaction among dissimilar ethnic groups happened. Shaped by the social, political, and economic contexts during the times of their creations, the commissions and/or restorations of Buddhist temples and monasteries in the area exhibited that the Mon-Thai relations were indeed complicated and therefore embodied multifaceted affairs, as shown by different types of patrons (Mon laypersons, elite Mons, Thai laypersons, and elite Thais).

As an ending note, the investigations on Mon Buddhist structures in this research essentially demonstrated that architecture often served as physical materializations of both the intra-and interrelationships among various ethnic

¹⁰ These triad foundations were: (1) nation, (2) religion, and (3) monarchy.

factions, including the acts of power negotiations through the socio-political hierarchy. As illustrated by the case studies, their spatial configurations and aesthetic expressions (traditional Mon, traditional Thai, and royal eclecticism) were caught between a polarity of a conservative force tending to maintain existing design attributes and a revolutionary force striving to introduce new elements. Whereas the conservative force brought preservation in association with the institutionalization of traditional built forms, its revolutionary counterpart via cultural contacts and exchanges sought to amalgamate or even replace existing artistic practices with foreign influences, resulting in stylistic hybridizations.

In brief, additional historical investigations further revealed that such hybridity substantially stemmed from King Rama VI's religious reform by institutionalizing Buddhism as one of the three pillars of the Thai nationhood. As Buddhism became an integral constituent of the Thai identity in public perception and awareness, the aesthetic characteristics of Buddhist structures were codified to convey the Thai national and cultural identity, while expressions of ethnic identity other than that of the Thais were suppressed, as evident from by the hybridized Mon-Thai characteristics of Buddhist temples and monasteries in Pakkret as examples.

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