The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols as a Marker of Lao Migrations and Identity in Thailand

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Abstract

While most studies of Buddhist art and structures in Southeast Asia seem to focus on the nature of Buddhist worship (rituals and beliefs) as well as on meaning and technique of the art, itself, Buddha idols can also be seen as cultural markers with a political purpose. In copying the Khmer King Jayavarman VII who fashioned Buddha idols in his own likeness in the late 12th century, at least one Lao King, Setthathirat/ Xayasettha/ Sayasetthathiraj (called Chaychetta in Thailand), in the 16th century, also fashioned Buddhas in his likeness and of members of his family. Many of these Lao royalty Buddhas are identified and worshipped in Thailand, as are other Lao Buddhas, providing a track of different eras of Lao influence and voluntary and forced migrations while also serving as markers for reflections on Lao and Thai identity, the role of Buddhism, and history and change in the region.

Keywords: Thailand, Laos, Lan Xang, Setthathirat, Chaychetta, Buddhism, identity

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Introduction

In the city of Nong Bua Lamphu ("Lotus Lake"), one hundred kilometers south of Vientiane and the Lao border, in the Issan region of northern Thailand, where the Thai government has erected statues and shrines to promote worship of an early 19th century Lao lord, Phrawo Phrata, who died fighting against the reassertion of Lao authority here, the main figure of worship is not this ill-fated lord. It is, in fact, the Lao 16th century King Setthathirat, who ruled over most of Issan during the era of the Lan Xang ("One Million Elephant") Empire from its newly repositioned capital of Vientiane.
Although the story presented in the Tourist Administration of Thailand ("TAT") guide to

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the city and province, and in most scholarship by Thai and foreign historians, archaeologists, religious studies scholars, and art historians, is that the people of Nong Bua Lamphu and elsewhere in Thailand are worshipping "Buddhas" and "Buddhism" and its precepts, the statues that they are bowing to here, including that of Phrawo Phrata, are not "Buddha". Like many "Buddha" idols in Thailand and Laos, the central "Buddha" statue at Wat Si Khun Mueang/ Wat Khon Chum Nam Ok Bo has a name that all of the locals know. It is "Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha", the "Royal Buddha Setthathirat" (using the name "Chaiyachettha" that is used in Thailand as the form of the name for King Setthathirat, one of many spellings that also includes Phrao Chao Jayachetariraj and Chaichetthathirach).

In the city of Nong Khai, some 20 km east of Vientiane, along the Mekong and also in Thai Issan, the city's main worship "Buddha" also has a name and is, in fact, not Buddha and not a male. The Buddha is "Phra Sai" at the Wat named for it (Wat Pho Sai/ Pho Chai). It is well recognized as an image of a young daughter of the same Lao King, Setthathirat. Another "Buddha" in Nong Khai in Wat Si Muang Nong/ Si (Khun) Muang, close to the Mekong River, is also known as Setthathirat. Both in Bangkok, the Thai capital, and in Nakhon Nayok Province, about 100 km east of Bangkok, the idols worshipped include the "Phra Som"/"Phra Serm", an idol of King Setthathirat's older daughter.

In Nakhon Phanom and nearby Tha U-Then, some 300 km east of Vientiane in eastern Issan, on the Mekong, two "Buddhas" worshipped here are copies of the symbol of royal authority in Laos, including that of the former Lan Xang capital of Luang Phrabang, the city of the "Royal Beautiful Buddha". One, worshipped Buddha, the Phra Seng, may be an idol representing another one of Setthathirat's children, while a second one is a copy of the "Phra Bang".

The "emic" (internal) perspective given by the Lao and Thai governments and peoples today as to their religions and worship is that they are worshipping the Buddha and the teachings of Buddhism (including non-materialism and low consumption, peace and non-violence, study, and equality in human relations).

The "etic" (external) perspective observed by outsiders and acknowledged by the Thai and the Lao is that a large number of the "Buddhas" being worshipped are actually images of Setthathirat and his family and of royalty and blend with the worship of statues of authority figures that both the Lao and Thai governments continue to build today (often expensive and monumental objects of bronze and other metals). Many of the statues are mixes of precious metals and are in temples with other monumental objects including towers built by the Kings. The real worship here may be political authority and hierarchy, wealth, empire and ethnic lineage (such as ethnic ties of the Lao to their kings in the absence of other cultural markers of identity).

Recent articles on Buddhism in Thailand and Laos have highlighted the way that the religion merged aspects of Brahman elite worship with Buddhism such that Kings that the religion itself embedded worship of the kings and hierarchy in ways that have institutionalized royal control, well beyond simply using the religion as a form of "legitimacy" but (Skilling, 2007; Grabowsky, 2007). Anthropologists have also commented on the worship cults of kings in the region that extend to statues, with such worship viewed as separate from Buddhism because the statues are outside of wats (Evans, 1998).

In contrast to the usual studies in archaeology of Buddhas, by artistic style and in

reference to specific philosophical teachings and symbols, and also in contrast to the common anthropological approach to the study of identity through rituals and psychologies of meaning, this piece combines a traditional cultural geography approach with that of political anthropology and material culture. It looks at culture from the perspective of markers of objective physical presence and of power relations, as seen from an outsider's "etic" perspective rather than an insider's "emic" view.

This piece begins to re-examine some of the "Buddhas" of the Lan Xang era during the period of Setthathirat as a possible attempt to create a worship cult similar to that of the Khmer King Jayavarman VII, whose monuments and personalized ("Buddha") statues can also be found in Issan and in Laos up the Mekong River. The article also seeks to examine the spread and continued worship of other key Lao imperial Buddhas in Thailand with Lao expansion in the 14th to 18th centuries during the era of Lan Xang, followed by forced migrations under the Thai in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It also examines the claims of "theft" of Lao Buddhas from Vientiane in 1828 as a form of war booty by the Siamese or capture of worship symbols to be placed within the Thai hierarchy of authority and control in an attempt to examine how current elites also use these specific statues and Buddhism in the context of worship cults and authority structures.

Background:

While the Mon peoples living in the areas of contemporary Thailand and Laos seem to have largely followed Buddhism during the 8th to 11th century, both the Khmer kingdoms that began to conquer parts of this territory, coming from the southeast, and the various Tai groups (Tai Lao, Tai Yuan, Tai Lu and others) that began to enter this region from the north and northeast, did not. All of them faced similar issues of conquest in confronting these populations and in adapting to these territories. The question was how they would establish control over the peoples and lands (issues of extermination, assimilation, or accommodation) and how they would define their own identities as empires on these territories. Though the Tai peoples were of common origin (and the Siamese and Lao may be of common origin as Tai-Lao, coming down the upper Mekong) (Chamberlain, 1998), they also had to make these decisions in confronting each other. While there are few contemporaneous records of the history and while much of the history has been destroyed, they did leave trails of art in the form of "Buddha" statues that may also tell the story if they can be deciphered.

Although the Mon "Buddhist" peoples whom the Tai groups encountered are historically viewed as practicing forms of Buddhism that are similar to those of the religion that is recognized today and that was historically developed in India, there is in fact no written record that clearly identifies the religious practices and the forms of belief and worship that existed, how it merged with local beliefs and evolved. What is clear from historic remains is that Indianization that entered the Gulf of Thailand around the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. (largely from the Gupta Empire and perhaps a sign of Gupta imperialism (Author, n.p.1)) brought both Brahman/Hindu religious gods and symbols alongside Buddhism. Although Buddhism largely replaced Brahman worship in the region after the fall of the Gupta Empire from the 6th century, in the Haripunjaya Mon imperial kingdom in the north of Thailand, the Mon Dvaravati regions in Issan (eastern,

Mekong area) and Laos, and in areas falling under Nan Zhao in northern Thailand and Laos and possibly further south in Thailand towards the Gulf (Author, n.p.2), possibly indicating that the masses (following Buddhism) had thrown off outside kings (whose ceremonial power was reinforced through Brahmanist ceremonies for elites), there was some reintroduction of Brahman elite worship from conquests by the Chen La Khmer in the 6th and 7th centuries (throughout Thai Issan) and then from the 9th to 12th centuries with the spread of Angkor throughout Issan, Laos and much of central and parts of northern Thailand.

In the view of some archaeologists, the type of Buddhism that did exist and continued to emerge in Thailand was actually one that merged much of the symbolism and idea of Brahman elite worship within the practice of "Buddhism" but without the specific gods or worship symbols of Brahmanism (e.g., linga and yoni worship) (Skilling, 2007).

Under Khmer rule in southern Issan, even though Angkor still followed Brahmanism, King Jayavarman VI (1090 – 1108), established Buddhist worship at Phimai, though the first "Buddhist" King of Angkor (or perhaps just one of its regions) is generally considered to be Dharanindravarman II (1150 – 1160), a half century later, whose son, Jayavarman VII (1181 – 1218) ultimately converted the royal religion of Angkor to Buddhism. In giving up Brahmanism, however, Jayavarman VII seemed to add a change into the concept of Buddhism that is visible in his major monuments in Angkor and throughout many citadels in the area of Cambodia, as well as in worship throughout the empire into Thailand and Laos. He placed his image on towers in Angkor Thom and Banteay Chmarr (in northwest Cambodia on the Thai border and the pilgrimage route from Angkor to Phimai) as well as on Buddhas.

Jayavarman VII is said to have made 23 statues of himself that he spread throughout the Angkorean Realm and that are termed the "Jayabuddhamahanatha" ("Jaya-Buddha-Great Savior"/ "Great Protector of the Victorious Buddha") in establishing the ideal of the the ideal of the righteous Buddhist monarch (*dhammara¯ja*) (Grabowsky, 2007). Though apparently only four of the 23 are reported, one of them is in the center of Vientiane, at the That Luang, carved in green sandstone, where it remains today (Jacques, 2005). In moving the Lan Xang capital to Vientiane and then rebuilding the 12th century Angkorian Khmer temple on what may have been a much earlier (perhaps Gupta era, 4th – 5th century) with a tower style emblematic of his reign, Setthatirat also directly confronted the Jayavarman VII statue and this tradition of Buddhist kings. (Ngaosrivathanas, 2009, p. 21). Another is in Sukhothai, which was a Khmer regional capital before the arrival of the Tai-Lao (Sukhothai) conquering it, so the model of a king as Buddha was also known to Sukhothai, which means it also would have been known to Lan Na and Ayutthaya, as well. (The other two Jayavarman VII Buddhas are in Phimai and Angkor).

The idea of the Kings as Buddhas was quickly integrated into the traditions of these new Tai empires by various kings starting in the 13th century, but most of the early statues of Kings that are identified from that time did not appear to merge the images of royalty into Buddhas (Apinan, 1992). Instead, they were life sized statues with crowns, suggesting that they were to be "future" Buddhas. This seems to be similar to the earlier (9th century) Nan Zhao tradition of relief carvings of kings as separate from Buddhas in the grottos around Dali in Yunnan (Author, n.p.2).

Historians report on specific kings who embraced the idea that they were future Buddhas, starting with the Sukhothai King Lithai (1346 – 68/74), grandson of Ramkhamhaeng (Skilling, 2007) and Lan Xang King Chakkaphat (King Sainya Cakkhaphat Phaen Phaeo, 1442 - 79) and every king thereafter, with many of them also calling themselves *cakkavattin* or universal conqueror (Grabowsky, 2007, at 126).

To link themselves with Buddhism and to place their stamp on it, there are two things that are clear that Kings did, but a question mark on the third; the creation of Buddhas in their own image following the example of Jayavarman VII. Each sought control of specific historic Buddhas of particular rarity and value which served as the "palladia" or protective, cult images that symbolized their power in much the same way that the "crown jewels" signified the power of royalty in European kingdoms. Two of the distinctive Buddhas that have served this role and that predate the arrival of the Tai are the Phra Keo (the "emerald Buddha", a small topaz crystal Buddha idol) and the Phra Bang (a gold, silver and bronze cast Buddha idol less than 1 m high that may be of Khmer origin). The other thing that they did was rebuild and reconsecrate the Indianized brick (or laterite and sandstone) towers that were mostly of the Khmer, possibly earlier (Gupta Empire) with specific shapes and motifs while also building newer ones as well as new pagodas, to house Buddhas and other worship objects. The various styles of lotus shapes, corn cobs, or inkwell/carafe (more typical of Lan Xang) for these towers offered an example of their power as a form of this "tower power". Although it can be debated whether they maintained the phallic symbolism of Brahmanism in creating these "Buddhist" towers on mostly Brahman structures, many architects suggest that the form and underlying motives are implicitly those of sexual representations associated with royal power as much or more than a way to reflect "Buddhist" teaching (Sudjic, 2011). None of them, however, are "face towers" like those of Jayavarman VII with his image on the towers.

Most of the attention in the study of Buddhas in the region and their relationship to political power has focused on the specific palladium Buddhas, the Phra Bang and Phra Keo and those of other Buddhist kingdoms like Lan Na but less on other named Buddhas, many of them of brick and stucco and largely immobile without destroying them, or just too large and heavy, but large numbers of them recognizable and mobile, or on the towers and their patterns of construction. Probably given the even greater difficulties of study, there is less attention on the specific patterns of destruction, disfiguration and transformation of Buddhas and what it means though the attempts to reconfigure Khmer statues, including the Jayavarman VII Buddha at the That Luang in Vientiane, are common and are often found as a result of natural damage or restoration (Author, 2015).

Art historians and religious studies experts have also focused on style of Buddha statues as a way of offering cultural markers of trade and influence, and to some extent for study of ethnic identity and interactions. But with the initial identifications and categorization of architecture and art as "religious" (e.g., "Buddhist"), there has been little focus on these objects in terms of specific political meaning or loyalties. Tour guides in Vientiane today, for example, are conscious of what they consider the "invasion" and assimilation of Thai Buddha styles in new Buddhas in Laos and what this means for Lao identity (in discussions with the author at Wat Sissaket in Vientiane in 2016) but there seems to be a reluctance by tour guides and monks to open discussions with foreigners over the meaning of worship of Buddhas that are named for royal family members.

While there are often records on the dates and processes of casting of Buddhas and specific locations and transport, there don't seem to be any explanations of the more than a few "models" or namesakes (like the three Buddhas named after Setthathirat's daughters). Nor has there been much of an attempt (if any) to try to retrace Lao patrimony and Diaspora, though there has been some recording as part of studies by the Thai of heritage that remains in Thailand (Damrong Ratchanuphap, 1973 [1925]). Neither the Lao nor Thai governments nor private individuals even with potential economic gain (in the tourism industry) seem at all interested in tracking the heritage. The author of this article tried for five years to bring the Lao and Thai governments together with several international agencies and donors (including the U.N. system and overseas Lao groups) as well as private publishers and the tourist industry, along with other governments. Indeed, while it may still be possible to try to track the heritage of Lao artisans from the Vientiane capital as well as specific artifacts in a way that could reconstruct some of what existed, this author believes that there are specific political reasons why both governments actually prefer to maintain animosities and also to destroy heritage and identity (Author, n.p.3). Most researchers seem to take this as a cue and simply follow suit.

Although it may be impossible to estimate how many identifiable Buddhas there were in Lan Xang (some preliminary methods of estimates are offered below, in connection with estimates of wats as well as estimates of specific Buddha towers ("pra thats"/"chedis"), there are in fact many that it is possible to track as a starting point.

The typical inflammatory rhetoric in publications in Laos and Thailand seeks to promote conflict and place blame rather than try to measure the heritage. The history of one of Setthathirat's main wats along the Mekong river in Vientiane, written by one of the elderly ,monks, charges that, "Most of [the] cultural varieties and precious heritages (sic) of the nation including Buddha images (sic) were taken away by invaders and foreign aggressors" (Samaleuk, 2015, at 35). Usually the blame is placed on the Thai and the order of King Rama III in 1828 that the Lao claim was to "return Vientiane to the wild animals and to leave nothing behind but weeds and water" (Ngaosyvathn, 1989, p 55), echoed by foreign works claiming that, "the Siamese made a complete holocaust of Vientiane" (Hall, 1968 at 451).

In fact, most of the stucco Buddhas were not destroyed, nor were the large immobile cast Buddhas, and many Buddhas were in fact transported by migrating Lao groups where they remain at wats in Thailand. A large cache of Buddhas remained concentrated in Wat Sisaket in Vientiane.

In the same way that Tai groups continued to worship the Buddhas of the Khmer and Mon (and in northern Thailand, the Nan Zhao), competing Buddhist groups do not seem to have destroyed this heritage but just moved it along with peoples. The Ho, pushed south by the Chinese from Yunnan in 1873, did ravage Laos, burning villages and looking for gold artifacts under Buddha towers, but there is no actual evidence that they "excavated and took away all precious, religious and cultural intinquities (sic) of the Lao people" as the Lao monk at Wat Ong Tue claims (Samaleuk, 2015, at 35), since there is no report of any Lao artifacts turning up in China or elsewhere as a result of the Ho. They left the one ton gold, silver and bronze Ong Tue Buddha in Vientiane intact, and the other named Buddhas that were taken (and protected) by the Siamese and migrating Lao were already gone some 50 and 100 years before.

Probably most of the actual damage has been international sales and neglect of Buddhas and other patrimony in recent history that are usually not mentioned in the same sentence as these past movements of objects, though their impact could be greater. The Lao government in 1955 destroyed the large stucco Buddha at Wat That Luang that dated back to Lan Xang. What has happened more recently might be described as a systematic assault by the international community on heritage and identity, if not a gang assault. Though they are only foundations, the World Bank completely uprooted the remaining brick foundations of the central Lan Xang royal wat of the kings, the Wat Klang, in order to put up its new offices (to be completed in 2016) directly on the area of royal authority along the Mekong in Vientiane. Meanwhile the Luxembourg Development's tourism project, LANITA has opened the door to the sale and destruction of an ancient Lan Xang site at the Mekong and Passak River mouth, where the French era home of Prince Souvannouvong has already been demolished (in 2015). In repaving the main road through the city partly along the Mekong, the Japanese paved over what remained of the inner city wall around the old royal palaces and wats while Chinese investors have now dried up both the royal Nong Chan lake in the city center and the That Luang marsh/lake for high rise constructions.

While sites are destroyed and Buddhas disappear in both Thailand and Laos, there seems to be an interesting linked phenomenon in both countries that may actually shed light on the meaning of Buddhas and of worship practices. Both countries continue to erect large cast bronze statues that are objects of worship in many ways parallel to those of the Buddhas in wats. Though they are not presented as Buddhas, they are all very similar in clothing and type to each other as historic political and military leaders.

Methodology of the Search

There are in fact thousands of wats and shrines with Buddha statues from fallen wats, as well as hundreds of Buddha idols in museum collections, and many more uncounted in private collections in Thailand (and now in museum and private collections overseas). While that makes it impossible to systematically identify every idol and to track its origin, it is possible to find those Lao Buddhas in Thailand that are specifically recognized as having historic importance as well as to search for and record others by using specific markers (Lao migrant communities, ancient Lan Xang communities with Lan Xang towers). Generating such a list is not a systematic inventory or full measure, but it is enough for preliminary hypothesis raising and testing.

General Research Approach to Generate Information on Lao Buddhas

The goal of this research, as part of a much larger study to record and examine the geographic distribution of heritage throughout Southeast Asia and to consider the various perspectives and uses of that heritage (conducted since 1998, with a focus in Thailand and Laos between 2009 and 2016), was to identify both the structures and the important worship objects of the Lao in Thailand by specific types, periods and origin, to map it on the geography and to offer anthropological and cultural interpretations of the history as written by various parties, as viewed by people living around it, and as interpreted by an outside observer (the author) without specific attachments to the local religion, culture, or politics (i.e., offering an "etic" perspective). In identifying heritage by

period, a goal has also been to associate heritage with particular historical figures (royalty, intellectuals, other historic figures) as a way to considering the choices they made and the impacts it had, as well as what remained and what did not remain. The research was not conducted with a specific hypothesis about Lan Xang or Buddhism. It was to look at social change, ethnicity, and environmental adaptation in the region by surveying the monuments and presentation of history.

In general, the author has been cataloguing hundreds of historical and cultural sites as a guide to helping peoples to recover, interpret and apply their lost and forgotten history so as to take pride in their past, to build understanding and tolerance with different peoples, to preserve their heritage for tourism and beauty of their communities, and to understand the historical relationships of peoples to their natural and social environments in ways that can promote healthy and sustainable communities (Author, 2012; 2013). The author has made systematic visits to every province in eastern Thailand (Issan), to much of northern Thailand and central Thailand, visiting local museums, towns and sites on local roads.

In investigating and researching sites and in travelling to sites over the course of several years (2009 to 2016), the author relied on Tourist Administration of Thailand (TAT) guidebooks, museum presentations in provinces, works of previous archaeologists surveying sites in the region (Vallibhotama, 1980, 1981; Solheim and Gorman, 1966; Damrong Ratchanuphap, 1973 [1925]) as well as architectural and artistic comparison information (Krairikish, 2012) as well as regional history (Coedes, 1968; O'Reilly, 2007; Higham, 2002; Viravong, 1964; Stuart Fox, 1998; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008, 2009; Ngaosyvatahns, 1989; Goudineau and Lorrillard, 2008; Finot, 1917; Evans, 1999).

For part of this period, while living in Vientiane, the author maintained ties with the Lao Institute for Social Sciences, History Department and with other government organizations working on history and culture and tourism, starting with the year of the 450th anniversary of Vientiane as the Lan Xang capital of Setthathirat (2010).

For the purposes of this article, material has been culled from a large database of sites that were visited and sites that were reported but not yet visited and fit into categories of Buddhas that are mobile and immobile and that are either directly identified as Lao from the period of Lan Xang and the Lao kingdom of Vientiane, before 1828 or for which there is a good indication that they may be Lao (in a wat next to a Lao pra that or in a wat of a Lao migratory community).

Since a number of Buddhas in the study were linked directly with Setthatirat and his family, there was also an attempt to try to classify and compare these idols with any that were similarly identified and remain in Laos itself, to see if they fit any particular pattern. This is described in the Results section, below.

Difficulties in Research and Classification

While it may seem relatively straightforward to visit wats, view and record information about Buddhas, the task is much more difficult. Generally, the older the idol, the more important it is, the more it is available for worship (i.e., exhibited) and publicized, and the more that it is written about it. This seems to be the case no matter the cultural or geographic origin of the idol in Thailand, with no apparent discrimination or suppression of information about Buddhas even originating in Lan Xang or representing Lan Xang royalty. At the same time, there does not seem to be any way to

measure this or to know whether or how the current treatment differs from that in the past. By contrast, idols (and temples and structures) that are identified with other religions like Brahmanism, that do not fit with current religious ideology are ignored, or they are remade or transformed into Buddhist worship sites and idols, with the earlier and actual history ignored. For many older objects in Thailand, generally before the 8th century, actual archaeological history is often rewritten to fit with mythologies of Buddhism and information has no confirmable historic basis, but that is not the case with objects created in the Lan Xang era, though it is with those "found" and used as symbols of power in that era (like the Phra Keo and Phra Bang) (Author, n.p.3).

In many cases, Buddhas are named, often with linkages to political authority as "Royal" Buddhas ("Pho Luang") and these names can be helpful in offering information about them, but often the names are generic such as "Gold Buddha" or "Big Buddha" that offer no historic information while other names are suggestive of some kinds of relationships like the "Child Buddha" but leaving only speculation.

Problems in recording and identification include the following:

- It is very hard to even see most Buddha idols. In most wats, monks do not leave the temples open and the historic Buddhas are inside main temples that are locked for protection.
- There is very little information at most wats. Little is posted and there is often little agreement about it. Monks are not concerned with the history.
- Identification is difficult because inscription stones are often moved. Bronze Buddhas have also often been moved. There are rarely writings or dates on the Buddhas or accompanying inscription stones. There are Lao semas at a number of Mekong sites like Phon Phisai but they are ancient Lao and not translated.The process is a bit like identifying old family photographs in a relative's albums. The keepers of the albums knew the people in the photos at the time they were taken, but they do not put captions on their photos. Fifty years later, almost all of the information is gone.
- Many of the Buddhas have been "renovated" in ways that change the facial features or the entire form of the statue. Even if there were distinguishing markers that could be used to identify the models for the Buddha idols that go beyond specific artistic style of given periods (e.g., personal birthmarks, scars), they don't appear on Buddha idols.

Baseline Numbers and Patterns of Buddha Idols

In the capitals of Tai empires like Sukhothai and Lan Na, there are very clear associations between kings and members of the royal family, specific temples that they constructed and pra thats/chedis that served as their funeral towers, as well as specific idols that they constructed at these sites. Although the assumption that these Buddhas that are directly associated with kings and royal families are not images or representations of these historic figures, at least in particular eras, this practice of construction in the capitals and then throughout the empire (either by the same kings or by local leaders under those kings, often members of the royal family itself or married into it) offers some way of calculating the number of Buddha idols one might expect to exist for Lan Xang and their original locations.

The pattern that appears in Luang Prabang starting in 1342 and partly in

Vientiane before it was capital and then when it became a capital is that kings and local governors established specific temples as their worship sites and maybe funerary sites. Sometimes there are also sites for queens (the Phon Sai in Vientiane is associated with Setthathirat's wife), for kings in waiting (Setthathirat's temple in Chiang Mai could fit this pattern there, though he was also considered the ruler there) and for the Maha Uparat ("Vice King") usually sent to a second city. In Laos, there are specific stupas and sometimes associated stucco Buddhas and bronze Buddhas, some immobile (due to size) and most mobile associated with kings. In some cases, wats are connected with other family members, which makes counting even more difficult, such as two small wats for brothers of Setthathirat in Vientiane (Wat Pa Po and Wat Pa Sai). That could be the pattern with Buddhas, similar to the Pharaohs of Egypt building statues at their pyramids. In the case of Tai empires, there also appear from the time of Sukhothai and Lan Na to be key statues at major points of the empire: borders, strategic areas, and major cities.

There is no inventory of Buddhas in Lan Xang and no way to guess what existed at given times other than by accounts of succession of kings, construction of particular wats, and expansion of the empire. There are contemporary accounts of the numbers of wats in Vientiane but not of the Buddhas. The total number of wats in Vientiane before 1827 was: somewhere between 50 and 120. The Ngaosrivathanas (2009) cite sources that counted 120 temples (A.H. Franck, 1926), 42 (Delineau, 1893), or 62 (Raquez, 1902). The total number of kings was: 50 over 500 years, which roughly correlates with the number of royal family wats that appear in Vientiane. Note, however, that this is just Vientiane and does not include the large expanse of Lan Xang throughout Thai Issan.

There do not appear to be any counts of the number of Lan Xang stupas that were built by 1820 in Vientiane, areas of Lan Xang that are in contemporary Laos, and the areas of Lan Xang that are now in Thailand (almost half of the land area of the empire). Not all wats have visible stupas but for those that did, many of these brick stupas are only visible by excavation since only the bases remain and they may have disappeared, with the ruins buried. The number of Lan Xang Buddhas (not counting the Mon or Khmer Buddhas that were precious, such as the Phra Keo) could have been 50 to 100 in Vientiane and several dozens more throughout Issan. Some may have had stucco Buddhas, some immobile bronze, some moveable bronze, and some more than one type, some with less. Sites with older Buddhas from Sukhothai and Mon would not have needed additional special Buddhas. So this also makes counting difficult.

This author's best guess would be to look for some 150 special Buddhas of the Lan Xang era of all types, including the immobile stucco and immobile cast. Since less than one fifth of this number seems to be recorded and remaining in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, one might expect to find up to but not much more than 100 in Thailand. However, there are now well more than 50 Buddhas in the Ho Phra Keo and Wat Sisaket and there is also no way of attaching many of them back to specific wats or to specific people, which would reduce the total. Many more may be in museums and in private collections as a result of theft.

Results

The survey locates some 34 identifiable Lan Xang era Buddha idols in Thailand (that are immobile and that are mobile, including nearly half; some 16 that may have been moved from Vientiane as a result of Siamese invasions: some 5 that were reported taken by the Siamese not including one reported lost and copied, 6 moved by migrating Lao from their original locations, and 5 with unclear histories). These include the pre-Lan Xang era palladium Phra Keo Buddha and copies of it and the Phra Bang. These are out of some possible 100 speculated Buddha idols, though possibly the number located is actually closer to the actual number of created idols.

A large number of these (6 defined, probably 2 others, possibly 12 more; i.e., up to 20 of the 34) seem to be idols of King Setthathirat and his family or possibly later kings, fueling the idea that Lao Buddha worship is royalty worship alongside worship of objects of wealth (gold, silver, bronze, emerald) collected by kings. Placement also suggests that the idols served to mark off territorial power, confirms other indications that they were used to define political power, and promoted identity through linkages with the power of ancestral kings like Setthathirat.

Overview of the Survey Information

The idols can be classified and examined in a series of categories: those that are royal Buddhas of Laos in two types (the palladium Buddhas, Buddha idols of King Setthathirat and his immediate family that seem to be images of the family, possibly later royal family, and related worship idols), Setthathirat era Buddhas that may or may not be likenesses of the king, and several other Lao Lan Xang era Buddhas of various types that may or may not be idols of the royal family from different eras. The idols that are surveyed are presented and described in a series of tables in the appendix and then analyzed by category, below. Each idol is presented by name (if known) and site of current location, time of creation if known, a short description of material, size and characteristics as well as how it is viewed and identified, and a capsule history of the area in which it is found and its relationship to Lao settlement (area of the Lan Xang empire and/or area of Lao migrations or other).

Annex Tables 1(a) includes those four immobile stucco "Buddhas" in Thailand that are identified by various authors (three referenced in the work of the Ngaosrivathanas, 2008) or identified locally (one by this author) as idols of Lao Lan Xang King Setthathat (1550 - 1571), that can be seen in the area of Issan, Thailand not far from Vientiane as well as one other mentioned in sources (the Ngaosrivathanas, 2008) that may be an error or misidentified. Two Buddhas in Luang Prabang, Laos, that are also mentioned as King Setthathirat are included for comparison purposes. Table 1(b) identifies a statue of King Setthathirat's wife in a wat in Vientiane, that is distinctly a statue but not a Buddha, though the Ngaosrivathanas also suggest that there is a Buddha of Setthathirat in the same wat.

Annex 2 lists some 12 Buddhas that can be found in Thailand (11 in Issan and 1 in Chiang Mai) that are speculatively Setthathirat era Buddhas in a likeness of King Setthathirat and one other that monks mentioned to the author but that the author is unable to locate. There are also two Vientiane Buddhas, one cast of metals under orders of Setthathirat and another of stucco that was destroyed in 1955 but that can be seen in

photos. Of the 10 identified, one is cast of metal and too big to be moved and one other is metal and transportable but 8 others are stucco. Six of the 10 can be identified as built during the time of Setthathirat's rule while the other four are likely built during the Lan Xang era according to information from monks and by appearance but could be later than the era of Setthathirat. The idol in Chiang Mai was built by Setthathirat during his period of rule there (1546-48), when he was still a Prince of Lan Xang while his father ruled until he returned to Lan Xang, leaving his Queen, Colapaphe to rule as regent over Lan Na (1548 – 51).

Annex 3 lists only one Buddha. It is a stucco Buddha in an area of Lao migrations of 1779, but it is a copy of a Vientiane Buddha and may or may not be a copy of a Setthathirat idol though it has a different name.

Annex 4 includes only mobile Buddhas that are identified with Lan Xang. There are 19 of these, including one stone that is now covered with stucco. One other may be a recent copy of a Buddha that existed during the Lan Xang era and was lost in the river (the Phra Souk).

These 33 idols can be classified and interpreted as follows:

I. The Royal Buddhas of Laos: Identification and Classification (Identified): If (and it is a big "if"), the Buddhas built by King Setthathirat are really part of a worship cult of Setthathirat (either directly of his image or of Buddha idols associated with him directly in some other way), it is possible that more than half of the Lao Buddha idols in Thailand are part of a worship cult of King Setthathirat while another 15% are worship of the palladium Buddhas that represent royal authority. There is a strong suggestion here that either Lao Buddhism since the period of Lan Xang, or perhaps the Buddhist worship by the Lao today in Thailand as a marker of their identity, or both, center around worship of an ancestral king and symbols of royal authority, perhaps in place of Buddhism.

Table 1 takes the data from the annex tables and summarizes them for analysis.

Table 1: Classification of Lao Buddhas in Thailand

Category of Idol	***Number in Sample***	***Rough Percentage***
Lao Royal Family		
King Setthatharat	4	12%
Other Buddhas constructed by Setthathirat that may be his image	7	21%
Possibly Setthathirat or other Monarch	11	33%
Setthathirat Children (Som and Sai)	2	6%
Other Suggested Siblings of Som and Sai, not including lost Suk statue or copy	2	6%

King Setthathirat, Children and Suggested	8	24%
Possible King Setthathirat Total	**19**	**57%**
Palladium Buddhas and Copies		
Phra Keo	1	3%
Copies of Phra Keo and Phra Bang	2	6%
Other Possible Palladia	2	6%
Gold Buddhas named for the metal (including one overlap with possible Setthathirat Buddha)	2	6%
Total Paladium Buddhas	**5**	**15%**
Not identifiable or categorizable	8	24%
TOTAL	**34**	**100%**

This table is rather startling. How credible is it really?

The Phra Bang and Phra Keo palladium Buddhas are well recognized in the literature. The Phra Sing Sang in Mukdahan and the gift Chiang Saen Thong Thip are just this author's speculation. These are just a small part of the table.

The worshipped gold buddhas, the Ong Teu ("One Ton") precious metal Buddha is also well known and is named for its weight in precious metal. The "Luang Poo Kham" may or may not actually be "Kham" ("Gold") and may just be glittering bronze, but Buddha idols in the region are frequently named as "Kham" or "Thong" ("Bronze") and it is not wrong to document that what is being worshipped is an idol named for its precious metal and not for a particular Buddhist precept such as "equality" or "peace", and pagodas are routinely named for military victory ("Xay") or (military) unity ("Samakhee").

The identification of Buddhas with specific kings is much less reliable. However, there is very specific historical mention of Buddhas cast in Vientiane either in the likenesses or representation of three of King Setthathirat's daughters, Som, Suk, and Sai (in orders of oldest to youngest) and there is a cult around these Buddhas continuing in Thailand. There are also two Buddha idols that are the symbols of the cities of Nakhon Nayok and Nakhon Phanom that are both identified on site as connected with these three daughters, suggesting that they are also family members (the Phra Ruk Pak Daeng and the Phra Seng). That is already four specific Buddhas for the children of Setthathirat. It is not clear if there were Buddhas cast for any of Setthathirat's sons during his reign. After Setthatirat's death there was a disorderly succession, including rule by one of his generals, and Setthatirat's son Nokeo Koumane did not rule until 1591, some 20 years after Setthathirat's death. Perhaps this created confusion in the worship statues of the family.

While the evidence that the Ngaosrivathanas use for identifying Buddha idols as Setthathirat is not clear and may be wrong, at least two Buddhas in Thailand are clearly identified as Setthathirat; the one in Nong Bua Lamphu and one at the Phra Keo ruin in Si Chiang Mai, just across the Mekong River from Vientiane.

Figure 1 presents some of these Buddhas in a "family portrait" of Buddha images. Included are the idol of Setthathirat from the Phra Keo ruin in Si Chiang Mai and the four

Buddhas that are mentioned as his children, found in four cities in Thailand. It is hard to see these idols as actual representations of living people, but the statue that is said to be Setthathirat's Queen is not a Buddha idol and it is also more of a representation of a figure than an actual portrait that could be used to identify a specific person on the base of particular facial or body characteristics.

Although there is no direct historical linkage of two other Buddhas to specific people, the Phra Chao Ong Luang ("Royal King") Buddha that is called the "Luk Lek" ("Iron Child") in Mukdahan, and the Luang Po Pra Luk ("Royal Child Buddha") also suggest that they are members of a Lao royal family.

Figure 1: King Setthathirat and Family as Buddhas/Statues (six images below)

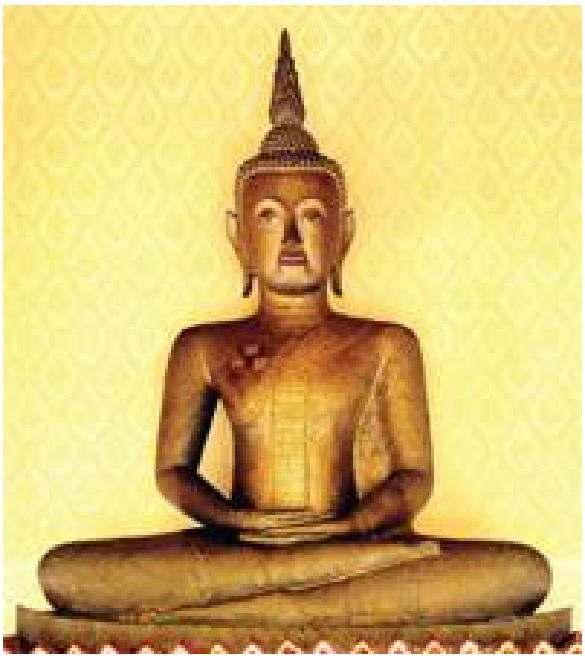
Setthathirat Buddha in the Phra Keo Wat Ruin in Si Chiang Mai

Statue Said to Be Setthathirat's Wife (Colapaphe) in Wat Im Peng, Vientiane

Phra Som, Wat Pathum Wanaram, Bangkok

Phra Sai, Wat Phra Chai, Nong Khai

Phra Seng, Wat Si Thep, Nakhon Phanom



Phra Rup Pak Daeng, Nakhon Nayok

Photo Credits: Hue Nhu (1 and 2) ; Phra Rup Pha Deng from Thailand Travel website photo from http://www.thailandg.com/684/Nakhon-Nayok/Travel-and-Transport/Luang-Phor-Daeng-Wat-Pak-Brahmanee.html ; Phra Sai on Google Map, from Billionmore website at: http://www.billionmore.com/article/article.php?id=69 ; Phra Seng on Google Map, from Eddie Hawkins; Phra Som on Google Map, from forums.apinya.com

There are certainly many reasons for confusion in identifying Buddhas as Setthathirat, himself, or other Lao kings. Part of that confusion exists among the experts. The Nong Khai museum, for example, identifies a stucco Buddha from the Wat Yod Keo, in Vieng Khuk, an ancient town across the Mekong River and a few kilometers east of Vientiane and facing the town of Hat Sai Fong on the Lao side, that was the ancient gateway to Vientiane by boat to the That Luang marshland, from about the 7th to 14th centuries, as well as a gateway south to the area of Bang Phuan, where a Setthatirat era stupa is built atop a site much like that of the That Luang, with Khmer influence and possibly an earlier temple terrace of the Gupta Empire (4th – 5th century) (Author, n.p.1). The Wat Yod Keo, itself, has laterite columns that suggest Khmer influence.

This Buddha idol head that is said to be Setthathirat is pictured in Figure 2. Next to it are two similar Buddha heads that are found in the Wat Palei Lai, that are described as from the 14th century. The classification of this Buddha as Setthathirat seems to be a mistake. But that highlights the lack of agreement on how to identify a Buddha as Setthatirat. It also raises the question of whether there already was a practice of other kings in the region copying Jayavarman VII and creating Buddhas in their image. In the 14th century, Vieng Khuk and Hat Sai Fong were under the Sukhothai empire. In 1342, the Tai-Lao leader Fa Ngum established his rule over this area and apparently replaced Sukhothai sovereignty. But there is no record of Fa Ngum Buddhas. Did Sukhothai King Lue Thai create Buddhas in his image in the early 14th century? Did an early Lao King like Samsenthai (1373 – 1417)?

What this seeming mis-identification of a Buddha as Setthathirat suggests is that the worship of Setthathirat, himself, may match the worship of Buddha in the region's pagodas. No matter what the actual facial characteristics of statues in wats, they are all called "Buddhas". Yet, for those Buddhas in wats built by Setthathirat, they are known as "Setthathirat Buddhas" whether or not they are the actual image of Setthatirat, himself. The understanding may be that worshippers are worshipping Setthathirat in multiple versions of his image.

Figure 2: Setthathirat (?) or a Sukhothai King? (three images below)

Stucco Buddha in Wat Yod Kaew, Vieng Khuk, Identified in Nong Khai as Setthathirat

Stucco Buddha in Hat Sai Fong, Identified as around 14th Century (Sukhothai?)

Stucco Buddha in Hat Sai Fong, Identified as around 14th Century (Sukhothai?) (Karlstrom, 2009, at 186-7)

Photo Credits: Hue Nhu (Photos 1 and 2); Karlstrom (Photo 3)

Figure 3 presents a number of the Buddha idols that are identified as "Setthathirat" side by side, along with two Buddhas (the two "Ong Tue", "One Ton" gold, silver and bronze Buddhas) cast by Setthathirat from the same precious metals and at the same time that he cast the Buddha idols of his three daughters.

It is clear that there is no uniform style of these Buddhas as with the Jayavarman VII. Some Buddhas are standing and some are seated. There also does not appear to be any unifying characteristic or feature that differentiates them from a Buddha or that reflects a specific characteristic of Setthathirat. So what identifies them as "Setthathirat" other than the popular notion that they are "Setthathirat"? And where does it come from?

Logically, one might think that the two "Ong Tue" Buddhas, one in Vientiane and one across the Mekong River in Tha Bo, at the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, would also be named for Setthathirat. Instead they are named only for their weight in precious metal, but they are also viewed as Buddhas that Setthathirat cast. And despite being given the same name, they are also a bit different in appearance. Is their worship the worship of the teachings of Buddha, or of huge amounts of gold, of Setthathirat, or of the power and wealth represented by Setthathirat and the Lan Xang empire at its height?

Figure 3: Which Ones are Setthathirat? (six images below)

1. 
2. 
3. 

1. Setthathirat Buddha in the Wat Phra Keo Ruin in Si Chiang Mai
2. Setthathirat Buddha in Suwannakhuha Cave
3. Ong Tue, 4 m high Buddha at Wat Ong Tue, Tha Bo
4. Ong Tue, 4 m high Buddha at Wat Ong Tue, Vientiane
5. Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha, Nong Bua Lamphu
6. Standing Setthathirat, Wat Sene, Luang Phrabang

4. 
5. 
6. 

Photo Credits: Hue Nhu (1,3); Suwannakhuha and Nong Bua Lamphu photos from Thai Ministry of Culture (http://www.m-culture.go.th/nongbualamphu/images/2Travel.pdf); Wat Sene photo on Google Map (from Pallych72)

The Spread of Setthathirat Statue Buddhas (Speculative):

Whether or not the Buddhas that Setthathirat built are his actual image, their placement is indicative of attempts to mark both the center and the reach of his Lan Xang empire in much the same way that Jayavarman VII seemed to place his Buddha statues at the center and some key corners of the Angkorian Empire.

Table 2 analyzes a total of 20 Buddha idols that are either recognized as Setthathirat (4 in Thailand plus 2 in Luang Prabang) as well as 12 speculative in Thailand plus 2 in Vientiane, noted in Annexes 1(a) and 2. Although there are more speculative Setthathirat Buddha idols in Laos, these are not included in the table. However, in order to avoid distortions in the findings, the author checked sites along the Mekong River on the Lao side and found only one area with a speculative Setthathirat Buddha (across from Phon Phisai and the mouth of the Huai Luang, and near to the mouth of the Nam Ngum River, some 40 km east of Vientiane, described below).

Table 2: Distribution of Recognized and Speculative Idols of Prince/King Setthathirat

Location	***Number***	***Rough Percentage***
Major Centers		
Capitals (Luang Prabang, Vientiane/ Si Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai)	6	30%
Vientiane and Si Chiang Mai alone	3	15%
Gateways (Rivers to and from Vientiane)	4	20%
Regional Centers	5	25%
Total Capitals and Centers	**15**	**75%**
Areas of Strategic Control	2	10%
Holy Natural Sites	1	5%
Conquest and Reconsecration	1	5%
Lan Xang Borders (including Chiang Khan, Ban Phai)	**6**	**30%**
TOTAL	**20**	**100%**

The table suggests that about one third of the sites are consistent with Lan Xang's imperial borders while another 30% were in the capitals of Vientiane, Luang Prabang and (temporarily, in alliance with Lan Na when Prince Setthathirat was King there) Chiang Mai. There is a large concentration of sites on the rivers and gateways into the capital of Vientiane around the Mekong, and Huai Nam Mong, including the holy site at the start of the river, at Suwannakhuha. There are also sites at five regional centers.

The sites are mapped in Figure 4, which shows this more clearly. Sites are clustered around Vientiane and also arranged at areas of Lan Xang's borders in Thailand, around Issan. The later Lao migration area of Ubon and its Buddha idol that may be a copy of Setthatirat is also included for reference.

Some sites are missing here and they point to areas where more research may be needed to identify Buddhas that have perhaps been moved or destroyed, or where the

Buddhas that exist there now and are not Setthathirat could be other kings, particularly areas where there was construction by Vientiane's last King Chao Anou.

The sites that Setthathirat reconsecrated (ancient sites that were from the Khmer era and possibly earlier 4th – 5th century Gupta Empire) with towers rarely seem to have Buddhas from the era of Setthathirat. The author speculates that the destroyed Buddha at That Luang in Vientiane (in 1955) could have been Setthathirat but it may have been later. The other ancient sites where Setthathirat built pra thats are the Bang Phuan, just south of the Mekong about 20 km east of Vientiane, the That Sikhottabong near Thakhek in central Laos, and the That Phanom, south of Nakhon Phanom. There are Buddhas at all of these sites and those at the last two are associated with Chao Anou.

The only possible Setthathirat Buddha idol that this author has identified on the Mekong going east is the one mentioned above across from Phon Phisai, at Wat Manosila in the village of Simano Tai. The Buddha idol here is inside of a small tower, much like the Setthathirat Buddha at Nong Bua Lamphu. However, there are also no Setthathirat Buddha idols mentioned around Phon Phisai, where there are also temples of Setthathirat and his father, Phothisarat.

There are speculative Setthathirat Buddhas in regional centers in the center of the empire in Issan at Nong Bua Lamphu and nearby Si Bun Rueang, as well as two in Loei city some 40 km east of the mountain border at Dan Sai where there is a speculative mobile Setthathirat at a site of one of his towers, but the map shows an absence of sites in northern Issan where there were important regional centers. No Setthathirat Buddha idols are identified in Sakhon Nakhon or Nong Han, where one might expect them.

While the holy site of the Suwannakhuha cave is marked with a probably Setthathirat Buddha, the nearby holy mountain site of Phou Couviens/ Phu Prabat does not seem to have any where one might expect one.

Although not included in this analysis, there are other stucco Buddhas of the Lan Xang era that might have attributions to other Kings. For example, just inside the western gate of the Vientiane citadel, at Wat Im Peng, a stucco Buddha in a small exterior shrine is identified as "Inthathiraj" or "King Intha". This may be an idol of King Inthavong, Chao Anou's brother and predecessor, in the early 19th century.

Figure 4: Setthathirat Immobile Buddhas, 16th Century

The Spread of Lao Buddhas in Thailand:

Of 17 mobile Buddha idols that may have been taken from Vientiane (including the Phra Souk that is identified by lost in the Mekong) out of an unidentified total, only a small number seem to have been taken to Bangkok as war booty or symbols of power and conquest. More seem to have been taken with Lao migrant communities (forced migrated or factions allying with the Siamese) that remain part of worship in those communities as well as by the Thai there not of Lao descent, today.

Annex 4 reports a total of 20 at 19 sites. The table analyzes 18 of these, not including the gift Buddha from Lan Xang to Lan Na or the Setthathirat Buddha in Dan Sai, Loei (reported on a different table), and not including the Phra Suk that was lost in the Mekong and copied, but including one speculative site in Singburi that the author has not visited and adding the Phra Keo in Bangkok for a total of 19.

Of these, we can only be certain that 10 were moved by the Thai or by migrating Lao under rule of the Thai, since another 9 of these could have simply existed in the area of Lan Xang during the era of Lan Xang. Moreover, of 6 idols moved to Bangkok and Ayutthaya, the two in Ayutthaya could have been given as gifts during the era of Lan Xang.

All that is really clear is that the Thai moved the three Buddha idols of Setthathirat's daughters, losing one, bringing one to Bangkok and leaving another in Nong Khai, and that they also took the Phra Keo and a copy of the Phra Bang to Bangkok.

There is simply no evidence here of the massive theft of Lan Xang Buddhas that the Lao claim occurred at the hands of the Siamese. Moreover, at least two important Lan Xang Buddhas, the Phra Rup and the copy of the Phra Keo, in Ubon, stayed with Lao migrants, not with the Siamese. Similarly, not only did the Phra Sai remain with the Lao community in Nong Khai, but the important Phra Seng and copy of the Phra Bang were either brought to or remained in the area of east Issan, in Nakhon Phanom, on the Mekong, where there are also Lao communities and where they are close to the Lao border. It is also possible that the Phra Som, brought to Bangkok and placed in a wat outside of the central citadel, also remained with a Lao community.

Table 3. Mobile Lao Buddhas Identified in Thailand

Location/Type of Transfer	***Number***	***Rough Percentage***
Lao Migration in 1770s or 1820s	**4**	**20%**
- Palladium or Copies of These	1	5%
- Royal Buddhas (Phra Rup)	1	5%
Transfer to Capitals (Ayutthaya, Bangkok), not counting the lost Phra Souk	**6**	**30%**
- Theft of Palladium/Power Objects	3	15%
- Possible Movement with Lao Community (Phra Som)	1	5%
- Possible Gift	2	10%
Not Recorded	**9**	**45%**
- Palladium or Copies	2	10%
- Royal (Phra Sai)	1	5%
TOTAL	**19**	**100%**

The spread of these Buddha idols is shown in Figure 5. This map also partly follows the placement of existing Lao communities in Thailand, today, both remaining in Issan from the Lan Xang era and in some of the areas where they were forced migrated by the Siamese, though with many important areas not included (such as Nakhon Ratchasima).

Figure 5: Lao Moveable Buddhas, pre-19th Century, Found in Thailand

Discussion

The worship of Lao Buddhas in Thailand that are associated directly with or are idols of Lan Xang King Setthathirat and members of the royal family, or that are the palladium Buddhas of Laos or simply aggregations of precious metals and wealth, raises questions about both the actual worship of Buddhism and about the construction of Lao (and Thai) identity.

Is there really "Buddhism" in Thailand and Laos, or is what is called "Buddhism" really just a spirit and royalty worship cult that is just an extension of earlier Tai animist "phi" (spirit and "ghost") worship that now just uses the veneer of Buddhism as part of ritual to promote ancestral allegiance? Are the Lao and Thai really worshipping the teachings and the symbols of Buddhism, or just cloaking their existing leaders and spirits in Indian robes and symbols in order to fit into a larger hierarchy?

If ideals of peace, humility, harmony with nature, and equality are all trumped by worship of the statues of kings, of material objects and power of those kings (gold and glitter), promoting wars and nationalism in the name of those kings, and for hierarchies of power and wealth that also continue and that are reinforced by those symbols, would it not be more appropriate to call the religions of Thailand and Laos, "modern Indianized ancestral king and spirit worship cults" than Buddhism?

It may not be "new" to note that the Lao and the Thai worship statues of political leaders and also continue forms of animist worship and superstitions. But it may be new to find this so deeply embedded in the idols of Buddhas, in wats. What is it that the Lao and Thai are actually worshipping in their pagodas?

Others have commented before on statue worship and cults in the region (Evans, 1998; Grabowsky and Pappe, 2011) as well as on superstitions and materialism that seem to be reflected in the worship of the Ong Tue Buddhas, with worship of a ton of precious metal. In Thailand, very recently, the worship of statues has now extended to a new cult where people worship their own "Child Angel" ("Luk Thep") dolls and even have monks bless them in the pagodas (BBC, 2016).

For a long time now In Thailand, worship of the King and the King's family as well as of the monarchy itself is essentially a state religion that is legally enforceable with imprisonment and there are shrines and images of the royal family everywhere in Thailand. That seems to be a direct continuation of the earlier tradition and/or for the Lao, a reinforcement of the Lao worship of their past royal family in Thailand.

In Laos, the government, much like the Thai government, has also constructed statues to specific Kings for worship, including Setthathirat at the That Luang, though there has been an avoidance of documenting Lao history and culture outside of the country's current borders or identifying the country's Buddhas directly with particular kings like Setthatirat. The goals seems to be to eliminate the worship of the monarchy other than for the last Vientiane King, Chao Anou, whose worship the French promoted as a way to help establish a nation-state antagonistic to Thailand and defined by its current leadership. Their goal seems to be to establish identity based on loyalty to the current regime and its foreign sponsors (though now increasingly including Thai investors, particularly in hydropower).

While Soviet Russia's gift statue of the second to last king, Sissavong Vong, in 1974, with his hand on the constitution, ironically remain in Vientiane, but with modest

worship (Evans, 1998), the effort to promote worship of the leaders of the current government since 1995, such as the half-Vietnamese leader, Kaysone Phomvihane, Prime Minister and President from 1975-93 (pictured on the currency and in statues in front of government buildings at the regional level, as well as in front of the new national museum in Vientiane, 6 km from the Mekong) have not drawn much of a worship cult. The Lao government has also avoided promoting much of a cult around the "Red" Prince Souphannouvong, titular President from 1975-91, probably in fear of bringing attention to the royal family; recently demolishing his French era home on the Mekong. Private worship largely focuses on photos of his brother, Prince Petsarath, the last Vice King ("Maha Oupharat") who served as Prime Minister under the French and American era regimes and died in 1959. Nevertheless, it appears that the view of identity in Laos, to create markers of difference with the Thai, whose culture has common roots, is to focus on different leaders and their worship, the different writing script of the language, and some different clothes and foods rather than any deeper cultural differences. While the Lao government allows for worship at pagodas and private fundraising for them, the destruction and sale of Lao heritage far surpasses that in the past.

In Viet Nam, the practice of ancestral leader worship and worship of the current leadership is also direct, even with much weaker Buddhist traditions. Ancestor worship, the Chinese religious practice, continues in Viet Nam in the households and in community temples ("dinh") and spirit temples ("den") and with it, there has long been a worship of powerful regional kings. In Viet Nam, there is often a worship of couplets, of the King and his general (e.g., Ly Thai To and Ly Thuong Kiet, from the 11th century) that is viewed today in an emerging worship for political leader Ho Chi Minh and his more recently deceased general, Vo Co-Author Giap. In addition to public worship shrines, statues of Ho Chi Minh are now increasingly worshipped in pagodas, including one in the Vietnamese community pagoda in the center of Vientiane, Laos.

The data on the worship of Lao Buddhas seems largely to confirm what anthropologist Marvin Harris noted about Buddhism and other major global religions, nearly 40 years ago, as essentially means of serving nationalist political goals, generally favoring elites.

"The demystification of the world religions begins with this simple fact: ...the ruling elites who invented or co-opted them benefitted materially from them. By spiritiualizing the plight of the poor, these world religions unburdened the ruling class of the obligation of providing material remedies for poverty. By proclaiming the sacredness of human life and the virtue of compassion toward the humble and weak, they lowered the cost of internal law and order. At the same time, by convincing enemy populations that the purpose of the state was to spread civilization and a higher moral code, they substantially lowered the cost of imperial conquests" (Harris, 1979, at 110).

The worship of ancestral King Buddhas, wealth, and national palladium symbols seems to be the additional element to add to this list.

Conclusion:

Although this article does not focus on the construction of identity of the estimated 20 million Lao (in *Thai Studies* in 2004) within the borders of Thailand today, who continue to be assimilated into Thailand along with the Lao Phuan (from the

northeast of Laos), one of the remaining markers along with the Lao alphabet and Lao foods and clothing is the worship of royal Lao Buddha idols personified by King Setthathirat and members of the royal family including his daughters. This specific idol worship, while described as "Buddhism", may actually be continuing to connect the Lao with their kings in a form of ancestral worship within the form of Buddhism, inside wats.

Rather than focusing on the teachings of Buddhism, it may make more sense to look more closely at the actual form of the worship of idols, towers, and their connection with Kings, power and wealth, as well as to look at the development of Buddhism in Lao and Thailand in terms of cultural continuities from early Indianization and the transfer of a Brahmanism cult of the leaders alongside the cults of Buddhism for the masses, and to consider how these have merged.

The version of Buddhism in Issan appears to have been to replace the Buddha with the king and to replace the linga and lotus fertility and power approaches with the "tower power" of local kings as well as palladium Buddhas as signs of central authority.

If Setthathirat and his family are being worshipped today in areas where Lao Buddha idols are found, it may also be that several other kings are being worshipped as Buddha idols, as well. In areas of Issan and along the Mekong, it may be that the Buddhas of Vientiane's last King, Chao Anou, are Chao Anou. Similarly, some of the early Sukhothai Buddhas, including those of "U-Thong" style with long faces, may be images of kings. Perhaps what is reported as the artistic style of "U-Thong" Buddhas is a representation of royal family members with ties to U-Thong who had these particular features.

The current attempts to create Lao and Thai identity by governments through maligning each other for historical events that occurred two centuries ago and by promoting worship of specific Kings and family members in order to promote an identity based on hatred and mistrust, may in fact be how identity was constructed historically between the two groups. On the other hand, it neglects any positive focus on cultural identity and difference that has meaning in the modern world. The data on Lao Buddhas presented in this study seems to suggest that the Siamese theft and destruction of Lao Buddhas is grossly overrepresented, particularly in comparison to damage done to heritage that continues today.

In blaming each other and also refusing to work together to protect heritage that is being destroyed, to promote pride in heritage that flows over borders, and to welcome the tourist revenue that it would also bring, it is also glaring that neither country focuses on the actual genocide of the Khmer, reported as some 300,000 in 1819 in the area of Khorat, which led to the forced relocation of Lao onto their lands and was a prelude to the 1827 war between Vientiane and Khorat (Ngaosrivathana, 2010 at 165). Despite their Buddhism, neither country has yet to deal with these not so distant genocides and other human rights violations.

This study also opens the door to reconstruction of Lao culture and re-imagination of Vientiane through the tracking of its Buddha idols as members of the royal family, and tracking of some of the Lao migrations. Scholars may wish to try to reconstruct Vientiane and its crafts villages, as well, by noting the spread of traditional Lao craft villages in the Lao migrations into Thailand, though this is only a small sample of crafts and many have changed, with many historic products no longer available or of value (e.g., stic lac; war elephants; clay pipes; essential oils).

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Annex 1(a): Identified (Immobile) Setthathirat Buddhas, 1560 (2 in Laos used for reference, 4 identified and 1 unidentified in Issan)

Buddha Nam and Site Name	***Location***	***Dating of Buddha***	***Characteristics of Buddha***	***History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)***
Laos				
?, Wat Pha Mahathat/ Wat That	Luang Prabang	Setthathirat era	Stucco Buddha Described as one of three by Ngaosrivathanas (2008) (Not visited)	Capital of Lao/ Lan Xang from 1342 to 1560
Phrachao Sip Paend Sork, Wat Saen/ Wat Sene/ Wat Sensoukaram	Luang Prabang	Setthathirat era, 1560	Standing Stucco Buddha Described as one of three by Ngaosrivathanas (2008). The Buddha is outside in a pavilion (built in 1980) and is about 4 m high with long arms at its side. The facial features are no longer distinctive.	Capital City of Lao/ Lan Xang until moved to Vientiane around 1560
Issan (East), Thailand				
Wat Si (Khun) Muang/ Si Muang Nong	Nong Khai	Setthathirat era	The Standing Stucco Buddha Statue in this wat near the Mekong, is three meters high and has been freshly painted gold color. The body and hands are elongated. It is described as one of three such stucco standing Buddhas by Ngaosrivathanas (2008). [See photo in Figure 3]	The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side)d, with Nong Khai in the middle.
Tham Suwannakhuha,	Nong Khai province		In the center of this huge mountain grotto is a 2+ m high (with another 2 m of a naga headdress behind it) stucco seated Buddha from the time of Setthathirat that has distinctive features. [See photo in Figure 3] There is an inscription stelae about 2 m high from the Lan Xang era (maybe same as the Setthathirat statue), and some small pra thats.	See above. This is the mountain source of the Huai Nam Mong river that heads to the Mekong River around Tha Bo, just east of Vientiane.
Wat Phra Keo/ Pak Keo Phra That (in the Thai Military	Si Chiang Mai, Nong Khai	1560	There is a large stucco seated Buddha on the temple ruin, facing the Mekong in the area of the Phra Keo of Si	Si Chiang Mai is the name given to the part of the Vientiane capital of Lao Lan Xang that is across the Mekong and is now under Thai

Camp)	Province		Chiang Mai. [See photo in Figure 1 and Figure 3] The Ngaosrivathanas claim that the Buddhas may have been brought here in 1779 though it is hard to see how a stucco Buddha was moved (2008).	control. The area of this wat was within the city walls that were built on both sides of the river.
		Setthathirat era	Standing Stone Buddha (?). The Ngaosrivathanas mention a standing Buddha here (2008). [Not Located]	See above.
Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha, Wat Si Khun Mueang/ Wat Khon Chum Nam Ok Bo	Nong Bua Lamphu	Not dated but identified as Setthathirat	The eroded stucco seated Buddha is about 2 meters high and is placed within what may have been a brick tower from an earlier era since there are Khmer ruins here in this wat. [See Photo in Figure 3]	Nong Bua Lamphu is an ancient Lao/ Lan Xang era town within the ambit of Vientiane to the south, in a small valley.

Annex 1(b): Identified (Moveable) Setthathirat or Family Statues in Wats, 1560 (0 in Laos, 1 in Issan)

Buddha Nam and Site Name	***Location***	***Dating of Buddha***	***Characteristics of Buddha***	***History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)***
Issan				
Unnamed, Wat Im Peng	Vientiane (?)	Setthathirat era, 1566	There are two standing female Buddhas here of stone, of different dress and proportions. The Wat brochure describes them as Setthathirat's wife (probably Colapaphe) and the wife of the Pegu king, Bouvangnong [Bayinnaung] with the suggestion that these are statues related to a peace treaty. [See photo in Figure 1]	Vientiane came under Lao /Lan Xang control as of 1342 and served as a second capital, becoming the main capital in 1560 as the empire began to expand southwards in Issan and also in northern, central and southern Laos. It was less vulnerable to attacks from the north, down the Mekong, but still came under attack from the Burmese and Vietnamese in the 16th century and then the Siamese in the 18th century.

Annex 2: Possible (Immobile and Mobile) Setthathirat Buddhas, Sethattirat Era (2 in Laos for comparison; 12 in Thailand, including 1 not located)

Buddha Nam and Site Name	***Location***	***Dating of Buddh***	***Characteristics of Buddha***	***History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)***
Laos				
Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue	Vientiane	1566	This is a 4 m high specially cast Buddha of gold, bronze and silver, said to contain one ton of precious metal. [See Photo in Figure 3]	Vientiane came under Lao /Lan Xang control as of 1342 and served as a second capital, becoming the main capital in 1560 as the empire began to expand southwards in Issan and also in northern, central and southern Laos. Setthathirat consecrated this ancient temple from the Mon period by casting this huge Buddha after moving the capital to Vientiane in 1560. It is said to have been finished about the time of an invasion from Burma without information on the model used.
?, Wat That Luang [Destroyed]	Vientiane	Lan Xang	This was a huge seated stucco Buddha. [Visible in Photos (Ngaosrivathana, 2009, p. 35) but destroyed in 1955]	Setthathirat rebuilt the tower at That Luang that dates to at least the Angkorian Khmer era of Jayavarman VII, whose statue is on the site, and possibly to the 4th – 5th century according to legends of the city. There is currently a worship shrine for Setthathirat here at the Wat That Luang Neua where a monk protects the memory of Setthathirat but there is no Buddha at the shrine. Setthathirat would have likely placed a Buddha near to the tower.
Issan, Thailand				
Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue	Tha Bo, Nong Khai	Setthathirat era, 1569 (7 years to build)	This is also a 4 m high specially cast Buddha, made after the one of the same name in Vientiane, but it has a dark color to it. [See Photo in Figure 3]	The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled this area across the Mekong from Vientiane and it was already a second capital in the early 16th century with structures of Setthathirat's father, Photthisarath, extending from here at the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side).
?, Wat Thuen	Nong Khai province	Said to be Lan Xang era	The stucco Buddha here has been reconstructed with an entirely new face. This is an old temple with brick remains and a Lan Xang era pra that.	The area is on the Huai Nam Mong River, about 30 km from the Mekong and about about half way to Suwannakhuha and was long an area of Lan Xang.

?, Wat Cham Rong? [If it exists. There are sites along the Mekong with Lan Xang era Buddhas that we do not list.]	Nong Khai	Said to be a Wat of Setthathirat	Monks in Nong Khai say that there is a Setthathirat Buddha at a site with this name but we have been unable to locate it. It may be an old name for one of the wat ruins with Stucco Buddhas along the Mekong east of Nong Khai.	[Same as above]
Phra Chai Sri Sumang/ Luang Pho Sriwichai, Wat Po Sri/ Hai Sok	Si Bun Rueang, 40 km south of Nong Bua Lamphu	Built by Setthathirat, 1663 (though some sources say the wat is later, 1767)	The wat is recognized locally as linking to the Wat Si Khun Muang in Nong Khai where there is a Setthatirat era Bronze Buddha. [Not visited] 	Nong Bua Lamphu is an ancient Lao/ Lan Xang era town within the ambit of Vientiane to the south, in a small valley. Si Bun Rueang, 40 km south, is directly on the Pong River which is a major tributary into the Chi River and part of Lan Xang expansion from the time of Setthathirat and earlier. Photo from: http://www.m-culture.go.th/nongbualamphu/images/2Travel.pdf
Luang Pho Yai, Wat Mahathat	Chiang Khan, Loei	1564	This is a several meter tall, standing stucco Buddha. It is called the "Large Royal Idol" but no features are linked to Setthathirat.	This is a corner of the Mekong River as it comes south from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and it was long a part of Lao/ Lan Xang in its control of the river .
?, Wat Sisonghak/Si Songrak/ Srisongrak	Dan Sai, west of Loei	The tower and wat are built by Setthathirat, 1560	The Buddha idol has a headdress of 7 nagas and is shown only once each year. It has similarities to the one in Suwannakhuha. [Seen only in photos on site at the wat].	The wat is recognized locally as linking to the Wat Si Khun Muang in Nong Bua Lamphu This is the border of Lan Xang and Ayutthaya with the stupa in recognition of the border agreement.
?, Wat Phon Chai	Loei center	Lan Xang, 16th century	This is a 3 m high stucco Buddha with the long ears of	Loei is in a river valley connecting to the Mekong River and along the mountains that create a

			Lao Buddhas.	western border of Issan and Lan Xang.
Pra Chao Yai, Wat Pra Jiao Yai	Ban Phai, south of Khon Kaen	?	The large stucco Buddha, called the "Big King Buddha" is about 3 m high and 2 m across. With its big lips and almond eyes, this gold leaf covered idol looks like a Lan Xang era Buddha from roughly the 16th to 18th centuries. There is no pra that.	The area is on the Chi River valley and is about as far south as Lan Xang extended, directly south of Vientiane about 200 km, probably reaching here around the time of Setthathirat. (The furthest southwest expansion may have been another 80 km further west to the mountains but it is possible there was Lao Lan Xang expansion here a bit further south.)
?, Wat Klang	Suwannaphum	16th to 19th Century	The seated stucco Buddha here could be from the 16th century, time of Setthathirat. The two small brick pra thats seem later.	This area marks a southern border of the Lan Xang empire (or maybe of the later Vientiane Kingdom) into Issan. The founders of Khon Kaen are described as a migrating group from Roi Et and Suwannapoom/ Suvannapum in 1797 under a chief named Piamuangpaen, coming first to the town of Baanbungborn. In Roi Et, Katiyawongsa led (forced or voluntary defecting/Siamese allying Lao) migrants from Mueang Thong (Suwannaphum) in 1775 at the time of the Siamese conquest of Lao.
?, Wat Pra That Phon Than/ Pon Tan	Just South of Yasothon, near the Chi River	Lan Xang era,16th century.	The 3 m high, 2 m wide stucco Buddha that monks say is a Lan Xang Buddha from the 16th century. This is typical of those generally found closer to Vientiane, with an image that could possibly be that of Lan Xang King Setthathirat	Lao were here during the Lan Xang era and then during migrations in the era of Phra Wo from Ubon just to the southeast (described below) in the late 18th century.
Phra Chao Yai ("Big King"), Wat Hong/ Wat Srisarat	Phutthaisong District, Sisa Raet village	1657, but the wat is dated 1850	This is a seated, life-sized, ("Big King") Buddha idol in Laterite covered with stucco, Lao Style.	The age and description of this site suggests that a Lao community was forced migrated here, probably from Vientiane though perhaps Lao Phuan (Lao originating from Xieng Khuang, northeast of Vientiane) from elsewhere, after the destruction of Vientiane in 1827. However, the dating of the Buddha and the fact that it is stucco and probably immobile suggest a Lan Xang era Lao community here at a southern border.

Chiang Mai				
Phra Supunyachao/ Suppunyuchao, Wat Chiang Yeun	Chiang Mai, outside the northern gate	1546 - 48	This was a homage temple with a giant seated stucco Buddha. The stupa is connected with Lan Xang ruler Setthathirat who was selected King here while his father was King of Lan Xang, at the time Lan Na was crumbling.	Neither Lao or Thai historians are very clear on the relationship that existed between Lan Xang and Lan Na when "Prince" Setthathirat served as "King" of Lan Na; whether it resulted from conquest or a de facto alliance (against the Burmese and the Siamese) and tributary relationship. There is an indication that Lan Xang did attack Lan Na in an attempt to absorb it under Setthatirat that failed. Whatever it was, the period is limited to rule by Setthathirat and his wife.

Annex 3: Possible (Immobile and Mobile) Copies of Setthathirat Buddhas by Lao in Thailand, Later Eras

Buddha Nam and Site Name	***Location***	***Dating of Budd***	***Characteristics of Buddha***	***History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)***
Issan, Thailand				
Pra Chao Yai Indra Plaeng, Wat Luang/ Maha Vanaram/ Wat Indra Plaeng Mahaviharan	Ubon Ratchathani	1779	The large stucco and gold leaf covered Buddha here, 5 m high and 3 m wide, is Lao style and is claimed to be one of three; described on site as a copy of one from Vientiane. [There is a Buddha of this name that we describe below, taken from Vientiane to Ayutthaya, the Phra Im Plaeng that is a small bronze. Is this a "large" ("Yai") copy of it?] It is more like the large stucco Buddha at the Wat Im Peng (dated to the Sukhothai period) and the one from Si Chiang Mai in Figure 1 than it is like the Ong Tue Buddhas.	This is the founding temple of the Lan Xang royalty who arrived here during the period of the Siamese occupation of Vientiane and the split of allegiances among the Lao royalty and regional leaders. Chao Phra Ta (the father of the lord Thao Kham Phong who founded Ubon under the Siamese), moved to this area from the east (Champassak) under the armies of Taksin in the late 18th century. Lao accounts see Phra Wo (Voraphita) as a traitor, furthering attempts to destabilize the Vientiane (and Champassak) royalty of Chao Anou by creating another faction on the "Thai" side of the river. This is an area of large Lao migrations and the center for other migrations westwards in southern Issan.
Pra Chao Im Peng Yai, Wat Phu Im Peng	Nakhon Phanom	1779 (?)	[Wat photo and description in the Nakhon Phanom Museum, but site not visited and not located. Is it the Wat Phra Indra Plang?] Information in the museum describes a stucco Buddha that is said to be one of three and similar to one in Vientiane. It sounds like it is linked with the Pra Chao Yai Indra Plaeng in Ubon that was built by Lao migrants but it is possible that it has an earlier date.	Nakhon Phanom was long an area of Lan Xang on the Mekong, with wats in the town dated to the 8th century, and the Buddhas in the Wat Pho Si and Wat Si Thep suggest that this was a Lan Xang town. The area history does not make it clear if there were Lao migrations here.

Annex 4: Specific (Mobile) Buddhas Identified as Lan Xang, in Thailand (20 total at 19 sites: 2 in traditional areas of Lan Xang; 4, possibly 6, taken in migrations; 5 taken as trophies including the Phra Sai and possibly 2 others; 1 given as a gift to Lan Na; and 3 to 5 unclear in Issan) and one copy of Lan Xang Buddha taken as a trophy but lost

Buddha Nam and Sit Name	***Location***	***Date of Buddha***	***Characteristics and Discussion of Budd***	***History of its Arrival and of Community Here***
Issan Thailand				
Phra Seng, (another member of Setthathirat's family ?), Wat Si Thep	Nakhon Phanom	1562 but the wat is much later, 1859	This is a 2 meter high seated Buddha image said to be one of the series cast at the same time as that in the Wat Pho Sai in Nong Khai. [See Photo in Figure 1]	The area is well down the Mekong river from Vientiane and nominally was recognized as a separate kingdom (Sri Gottapura) until it was probably fully absorbed into Lao Lan Xang during the time of Setthathirat, when his armies battled tribes to the west of here (Attapeu). The arrival date of the Buddha is unknown.
Copy of the Phra Bang Buddha, Wat Tai Phum	Tha Uthen, Nakhon Phanom	1465 (?)	The 80 centimeter high copy of the Pha Bang in Luang Pra Bang, has a simple face and hair style and is in the center of a small worship house built for it, flanked by two other Buddha images	Similar to above. There were said to be two copies of the Phra Bang in Luang Phra Bang. It is not clear how it ended up here. (The other is said to be in Bangkok.)
Pho Sai in Wat Pho Chai	Nong Khai	The wat is 1562 but the Buddha was not here until 1828	This is a small "gold" (bronze or gilded) Buddha, seated, about one meter high. Though described as a princess, it is not clearly feminine and the facial features are not distinctive. [See Photo in Figure 1] This is one of three Buddhas in the name of Lao princesses, daughters of Setthathirat: Som, Suk (believe lost in the Mekong), and Sai. The wall murals depict the theft of the Buddhas in 1827 as part of the destruction of Vientiane, with the Phra Sai arriving and the Phra Souk sinking. (What is being worshipped here?: the destruction of Lan Xang by Lao-Issan in sadness or Siamese in victory?)	The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side), with Nong Khai in the middle., It is said to have been taken from an identified site in Vientiane in 1828 and brought here.

"Copy" of Phra Suk, Wat Luang	Phon Phisai, Nong Khai	? The original would have been cast in 1562 and probably remained in Vientiane until falling into the river near here in 1828.	The original Phra Suk was lost in the river near here. It is not clear when this copy was cast or what it was modeled on. [It is said to be around the area of the Chedi Luang Pha Presouk, but we did not see it]	Phon Phisai is a major Lao/ Lan Xang town on the Mekong, about 60 km east of Vientiane, around the place where the Huai Luang (passing Udon Thani and possibly connecting to the Chi River that goes through southern Issan) reaches the Mekong and just across from the mouth of the Nam Ngum River on the Lao side. The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side)d, with Nong Khai in the middle.
Phra Thong and others, Wat Pho Si	Nakhon Phanom	Lan Xang	The seated Buddhas here, including the "Bronze Idol" (Phra Thong) are small and in a tiny shrine in the center, facing the river.	[See above] This one may have arrived during the Lan Xang era.
Phra Sing Sang, Wat Si Bun Reuang	Mukdahan	Lan Xang	Phra Sing Sang, looks to be a 16th century Buddha similar to those of Setthathirat's family in similar idols (like those now in Nong Khai). It is a seated Buddha with a 1 m lap and about 1.2 m high, with towered hair. - There is a palladium Buddha of Lan Na called the Phra Sing, also said to be of Sri Lankan origin and a gift from Sukhothai to Lan Na, that is now in the Wat Singh in Chiang Mai (built by founding King Mengrai's great grandson, Khan Fu in 1345). There are said to be two copies of it in Bangkok, one the Phra Buddha Sihing at the Royal Palace. We do not know if this idol is connected, though Lan Xang may have made or taken a copy.	The Lao claim that they were here as early as 1342 and the shrines in Mukdahan and legends are used to reinforce this belief. The Lao history notes that Mukdahan was an offshoot or perhaps a twin city with Savannakhet, known in the 16th century under Setthathirat as "Tha Hae" (Mineral Port) and expanding here in the mid-18th century, though then taken by the Thai. Late 18th century Lao migrations here accepted Siamese sovereignty (though with Lao local leaders) in a break with leaders in Lao under the local leader Chao Kinnari. The origin of the Buddha here is not clear. Chao Kinnari possibly brought (stole?) the bronze Buddha from Vientiane (after 1778) unless this was a

				Buddha that had been taken to Phon Sim in 1530 and was brought here. It was originally at the Wat Si Mong Khun here (the dates are not clear).
Phra Chao Ong Luang, Wat Si Mong Khun/ Si Mongkhon Tai, Royal Wat	Mukdahan City	Undated, but the wat was built in 1767	Phra Chao Ong Luang (here it is called the "Luk Lek") is shown here in copies but is not displayed. It is said to be of steel and is a tiny Buddha, claimed to have been "found in 1767" on this site.	See above
Luang Poo Kham, Wat Phou Kham in Ban Phon Thong	Around Prachak Silpakhom in Udon Thani	The provincial TAT guide notes it as Lan Xang without a date.	This is a bronze Buddha ("Royal Gold Man") that is similar in size and style to the Phra Sai. It has a heart shaped face, a tower headdress, and elongated earlobes. What makes it a bit unusual is that it seems to be a smiling face with slightly bulging eyes.	The area is around the Nong Han wetlands and a tributary to the Huai Luang.
Phra Lao Thepnimitr, Wat Phra Lao Thepnimitr	Trakan Phuet Phon, 40 km from Amnat Charoen	Lan Xang/ Lan Na era temple, with Buddha statue, 1720	"Lao Angel" Buddha? [Not Visited]	Lao began migrating to this area in the late 18th century (and earlier). The Thai claim that the area of Don Mot Daeng, along the river, was founded by Chao Phra Wo Phra Chao Voravongsa [described above in connection with the migrations to Ubon Ratchathani]. Lao accounts see Phra Wo (Voraphita) as a traitor. In their view, Siamese General Taksin, a genocidal leader whose bloody excesses ultimately led to his replacement, sought to destabilize the Vientiane (and Champassak) royalty of Chao Anou by creating another faction on the "Thai" side of the river.
?, Wat Chaiyatikaram	Phone Muang, Tambon Mai Klon, Amnat Charoen	Lan Xang Buddha, 17th – 18th Century	The statue is described as 55 cm high. [Not Visited]	Same as above.
Phra Kaeo Busarakham (copy of Phra Keo), Wat	Ubon Ratchathani	Chiang Saen, 15th century or copy, 1826, in an 1855 wat	Though a huge hall is devoted to the idol, it is a tiny carved topaz crystal. The face is clearly crystal but the body	The Phra Kaew Busarakham Buddha is is said to have been brought from Vientiane by the fleeing Lao lord Thao

Sri Ubonrattamaran/ Si Thong			seems bronze (or covered over with metal). It looks more like a warrior in decorated armor rather than a Buddha. (The original Pra Keo remains in Bangkok and the second copy is in the royal palace in Bangkok.)	Khamphong. Other sources describe this as one of two copies that were actually made later (around 1826) when the original Phra Keo was stolen from Vientiane under the Thai in the 1770s and that it was one of two used in the Phra Keo temple in Vientiane (or perhaps two if the Phra Keo temple on the Si Chiang Mai side of the city, across the river, had one). According to the Thai history, Lao refugees from the destruction of Vientiane came to Dong U Phung along the Mun River and established a city here. Here, Lao Prince Thao Khampong, titled Phra Phatumwongsa, became the first governor in 1779 and his family ruled here for four generations until 1882.
Luang Po Pra Luk ("Royal Child Buddha"), Wat Sri Thum Maram/ Si Thammaram	Yasothon	Lan Xang, 16th Century	In the new hall around the area of the pond is the 16th century Luang Po Pra Luk, ("Child Buddha"), a life sized bronze Buddha on a pedestal. Is this another member of Setthathirat's "family"?	Lao were here during the Lan Xang era and then during migrations in the era of Phra Wo from Ubon Ratchathani (described above).
Luang Pho To, Wat Maha Phuttharam	Sisaket Center	Unknown	There is a huge stucco Buddha here, some 7 m high and 3.5 m wide. Monks here say that the Buddha was a Lao Buddha taken apparently from Vientiane and black in color (not explained). There are no photos and no way to compare it because the current Buddha is bigger than the original one inside it and apparently of a different style.	Lao migrants established the original town in Muang Khuhan in 1778 (possibly earlier, 1756) and then moved the center to present day Sisaket in the early 20th century. Phraya Krai Phakdi Si Nakhon Lamduan/ Ta Ka Cha, brought the Luang Pu To from Vientiane at that time.
Ayutthaya Capital				
Phra Samphuttha Muni and Phra In Plaeng; Wat Sensanyarak/ Suea	Ayutthaya	?	Both are bronze Buddhas, roughly life sized. The Samphutta is a seated Buddha on a throne. The In Plaeng is seated with closed eyes and long ears.	These are Buddhas from Vientiane, probably taken in 1776, but they could have been brought earlier as gifts. The TAT guide says the two idols here were

				"transferred from Vientiane".
Bangkok Capital				
Phra Som/ Phra Serm, Wat Pathum Wanaram (other sources claim it is at the Royal Palace, Ho Yai)	Bangkok	1566	This is one of three Buddhas in the name of Lao princesses: Som, Suk (believe lost in the Mekong around Nong Kong village near Phon Phisai according to one account), and Sai,. It is said to be larger than the Phra Suk and Sai. [See Photo in Figure 1]	The wat is outside of the center of Bangkok about 2 km outside the citadel and the Buddha is said to have been taken in 1828 with forced migrated communities from Vientiane to serve in Bangkok. It is not clear if there was a Lao community around the wat but there may have been given that it is just outside the main citadel.
Copy of the Phra Bang Buddha, ?	Bangkok	1562	There were said to be two copies of the Phra Bang in Luang Phra Bang with one of them somewhere in Bangkok. [Not Located]	The key palladium Buddha (the Phra Keo) was taken to the palace in Bangkok and the Vientiane royalty and artisans were also moved to Bangkok but it was unclear how this copy was viewed and where it ended up or how.
Central Thailand				
Pha Som Buddha (?)/ Phra Rup Pak Daeng in Wat Phrammani	Nakhon Nayok (though questionable)	Said to be Lan Xang era.	The Lao Buddha here with red lips (the Phra Rup Pak Daeng) is described as the "brother" to the Pha Suk and Pha Sai, meaning that it is the Pha Som or another royal family member. It does not appear to be cast with the same material and is slightly darker. [See Photo in Figure 1]	This is an area of a forced migrated Lao community somewhere between 1776 and 1828.
?, Wat Khwang Weruwan	Singburi	late 18th century	There may be a 17th century Lan Xang Buddha here [Not visited]	This is a forced migrated Lao community
Northern Thailand				
Pra Chao Thong Thip, Wat Lan Thong	Chiang Saen	Before 1550	[Not visited] - Note: There is also a Chiang Saen Buddha from 1477 called the Phra Thorn Tip that is in the Wat Singh in Chiang Mai that could be this Buddha or a copy.	Setthathirat's mother was from Chiang Saen and he came here to study. This Buddha was a gift from Lan Xang.