Saphao: Lan Na Perception on a Journey Across the Ocean

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Abstract

Saphao is a Lan Na word equivalent to the Central Thai samphao referring to a Chinese style ocean-going merchant ship or junk. There are many archaeological traces such as terracotta seals, medals and stucco motifs found in many sites in Thailand depicting the connection with India, the Jambūdvīpa, and Sri Lanka. Some of those present the journeys by one-mast vessels and also brigs. Several folk jatakas composed by Lan Na monks, as scholars, during the 15th - 16th Centuries A.D. referred to a journey made by samphao namely, Suwannasangaraja jātaka and Chanthakataka jātaka for example. Although the jātakas did not give any detailed description of the samphao and the journeys made by them, several Buddhist documents of several sects in Lan Na contain records of the trips made for the purpose of perpetuating Buddhism from its origin in Sri Lanka via such transportation as the samphao.
The ‘crossing the great ocean’ conveys both the concrete and abstract meanings which include crossing over the samsāra or the process of life and death (birth, aging, sickness and death) transcending the Lokīya, the worldly and mundane, comforts to Lokutara, the supramundane or absence of such unpleasant conditions. Several objects of sacrifice dedicated to certain important chedis containing the Buddha relics in the Lan Na tradition include saphao kham (golden junk) which is also part of the sacrifice in certain Lan Na rites. In some Lan Na folk rites practiced for the merit dedicated to a woman who died in giving birth to a child it is required to have a model of saphao to carry all kinds of fishing equipment. This is to assist the dead woman who died soaking in blood and amniotic fluid to ride on it and get released to be born again. Part of the merit dedicating phase accompanying the rite says that may the merits gained from this rite be like a crystal and golden ship taking the unfortunate person to the next life.

This article aims to investigate the allusions to saphao in the various contexts of Lan Na society in the past, especially those related to Buddhist history, social history and its culture.

**Key Words:** Saphao; Jātaka; Paññāsa jātakas; Lan Na; Sri Lanka
“GATE GATE PĀRAGATE
PĀRASAMGATE
BODHI SVĀHA”

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THE HEART SUTRA

Saphao (read as “sa-pao”) is a word in the dialect of Lan Na - the area in the upper north of Thailand. The word refers to a Chinese ocean-going vessel in particular. It is the variation of the Central Thai word “Samphao” which refers to an ocean-going vessel of any nation or style. Samphao or junk became a symbol of trade across the ocean between Siam and other countries. King Rama III of the Chakri Dynasty (A.D. 1824-51) himself had a base of the chedi at Wat Yannawa in Bangkok made into the shape of samphao (Figure 1) lest future generations would not recognize or know what a samphao looked like.

Figure 1 Wat Yannawa, New Road, Bangkok, behind the Vihāra is Chao Phraya River.
In the past there was a type of jātakas known as “Paññāsa jātakas” composed by some Lan Na scholars. The story involves a journey using a saphao as a means of transportation, for example Suwannasangkharaja jātaka and Chanthakataka jātaka. Some Lan Na rituals also called for the making of a saphao to be dedicated to a woman who died in childbirth. In this case the saphao must be five meters long and containing all kinds of fishing equipment. It is believed that in this way, it will release the soul of the dead woman from the unpleasant circumstance so that she can be reborn. A chant accompanying the offering of the saphao says, “May the merit made here be like a golden saphao taking the unfortunate person to the next life” (Buppha, 1999: 6705-07).

This article will explore the overall picture of saphao in various contexts of Lan Na society as related to archeology, history, literatures and ritual traditions.

Connection between Jambūdvīpa and Southeast Asia

A number of pieces of evidence discovered from several ancient communities in Thailand proved that there were trade connections by the sea with Indian merchants such as those in Nakhon Pathom in Central Thailand and those in Khuan Lukpat in Khlong Thom District, Krabi Province, in the south of Thailand. Several trading ports in the south of Thailand and the Malay Peninsula also shown that, there were goods transported by land from the west coast to the east coast (Suphadradis, 1979).

Archaeological evidence of terracotta seals, especially those found in the ancient city of Nakhon Pathom (Prapatsorn, 1999: 21), bear an image of a boat (Figure 2). They were single-mast sailing boats, boats with the support of ropes fore and aft and boats with large rudder and outriggers with some human figures on them. There was also a metal coin found at the archeological site at Khuan Lukpat (Mayuree, 1984: 137) with the image of a bull with a hump (Figure 3) while the other side of the coins bears the image of a boat (Figure 4) that looks like the boat on the terracotta seal of Nakhon Pathom. This boat with a double
Figure 2  A single-mast sailing boat with outrigger on the terracotta seal, Nakhon Pathom National Museum. (Photo: Fine Arts Department)

Figures 3 and 4  A metal coin found in the archeological site at Khuan Lukpat, Khlong Thom, Krabi. (Author’s photographs)

mast and no outrigger makes it more slender. Although the coin has no human figures, the support ropes fore and aft can be seen clearly.

There has been a significant study of Indian ancient ships by Dieter Schlingloff. In the article “Kalyānakārin’s Adventures: The Identification of an Ajanta Painting,” Schlingloff believes that the parallels to Indian ships are not to be sought in Indochina, but in the contemporary Roman ships (Schlingloff, 1976: 19). This hypothesis may have to be verified by archaeological evidences from Nakhon Pathom and Kuan Lukpat in Krabi Province. The study of Schlingloff verified
that the mural painting in cave no. 1 at Ajanta, once interpreted as Mahājanaka, is the Kalyānakārin story because there is only one story in Buddhist literature in which a blind man, whose eyes were put out by his brother on a voyage, is mentioned in connection with a shipwreck (Schlingloff Ibid: 6).

It also seems that his interpretation that Indian ships were never found in Indochina was confirmed too. Schlingloff’s assessment came from the comparative study between Indian vessels in the painting in the cave no. 1 at Ajanta (Figure 5) and other sites from Andhra (Figure 6), 2nd century A.D., with the multiple masts sailing vessels in

**Figure 5** Voyage of Kalyānakārin and his evil brother, Cave No.1 Ajanta. (Schlingloff 1970)

**Figure 6** Junk Boat drawing of Schlingloff from Andhra, 2nd century. (Schlingloff 1970)
Schlingloff said that apart from multiple masts, the Borobudur ships have nothing further in common with the Indian ships. A further contrast between the pictures of Indian and Borobudur ships lies in the latter being equipped with an outrigger, which is totally absent from all representations of Indian ships (Schlingloff Ibid: 19). It looks like the terracotta seal from Nakhon Pathom which show the vessel with the outrigger, could agree with Schlingloff’s assumption.

According to this statement, the assumption of the Fine Arts Department that the vessel in the terracotta seal from Nakhon Pathom resembles those found in west Bengal in northeast India (Prapatsorn Ibid) (Figure 8) has to be reconsidered. On the contrary, the medal found at Kuan Lukpat with double masts has no outrigger. This can be explained by the fact that the Indian ships played a significant role only in the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea; that is from the west coast