

Creating alternative landscapes in rural Theravada Buddhist Northeast Thailand

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Every people “culturalizes” its landscape. The quotidian landscape of the rural peoples of Theravada Buddhist Northeast Thailand has been described as a series of concentric circles with the village (*mubaan*) and its temple (*wat*) at the center, rice fields (*naa*) surrounding this, and then forest (*paa*) beyond that.

The thesis of this paper is that this view is too stagnant and deprives villagers of the dynamic, imagined, views they take of themselves in their environment. Specifically, this paper focuses on the constructions and reconstructions villagers make of their surroundings as they live Theravada Buddhism within, on, and through it. Over the course of festivals and ceremonies this landscape is constructed and reconstructed to permit the performance of and reflect aspirations for individual, familial, and communal success.

Additionally, trips out of the usual rural Isan landscape provide opportunities for the application of Theravada Buddhist concepts

Of specific interest is the construction that takes place during the “Annual Festival”, the Bun Phra Wet, the parade and recitation of the Vessantara Jataka. In this festival, the village becomes a *muang* and the *wat* becomes a palace. At the same other, more quotidian enterprises exist on this landscape, providing for a plethora of read meanings and opportunities. Other festivals and ceremonies provide other occasions for constructing place with alternative meanings. Additionally, funerals create oppositions between a reversed world and the hopefully Buddhist present. However, this present involves complicated relationships with other worlds inhabited by spirits of the deceased with which the people attempt to make contact through gifts.

Surveying a number of these alternative landscapes provide us with a better understanding of the complex worlds inhabited by rural Theravada Buddhist religionists.