IMAGES OF HEAVEN AND HELL IN THAI
LITERATURE AND PAINTING

Bonita Brereton

Descriptions of heaven and hell have provided some of the most stimulating images for the Thai artist’s imagination. The most commonly depicted accounts of heaven and hell in the Thai language are found in (1) the Nimi Jātaka; (2) the Trayphuum, or “Three Worlds,” cosmological treatises; and (3) the various versions of the legend of Phra Maalay, peripatetic arhat. This paper will briefly survey these written accounts and some of the ways in which Thai painters have responded to them over the years.

The Nimi Jātaka

The Nimi Jātaka is one of the oldest texts containing descriptions of hell represented in Thai painting. Textual and epigraphic sources indicate that a jātaka collection was known in Sukhothai by the first half of the fourteenth century A.D. and possibly earlier.

In the Nimi Jātaka, the Bodhisattva, as King Nimi (or Neemí Rāat, as he is known in Thailand), is taken by Matali, Indra’s charioteer, to meet the gods of Tavatimsa heaven. Matali takes the scenic route to this abode, passing by the various hells and heavens before they reach their destination. As Matali stops his chariot at each abyss, Nimi asks about the horrible punishments that he sees. Matali replies by enumerating the sins that led to each punishment.

After having seen the hells, Nimi is taken to the various heavenly mansions where he learns how the deities in each abode came to be reborn there. Unlike the hells, which are quite distinct from one another, the heavens are described in rather similar terms, as are the deeds performed by those who inhabit them. Thus, in each of the mansions “shining bright” dwells one who has given alms, kept the holy days, and followed the precepts. Nimi finally reaches Tavatimsa
Bonita Brereton

heaven and discourses with the gods before returning to the human realm, where he renounces the worldly life.

This story, as one of the last ten jātakas, is often depicted in Thai mural painting. And, as is the case with the other jātakas of this group, the depiction is reduced to a single scene readily identifiable to the Thai Buddhist. In this instance the depiction is of a king seated in a golden chariot with a celestial assembly in the upper part of the background and a group of hell beings in the lower part.

Wat Yay Intaaraam, Chonburi, dating from around the second quarter of the nineteenth century and restored in the early twentieth century, houses a typical example. The opposing themes of heaven and hell have inspired a composition made dramatic by a zig-zagged band that divides the composition horizontally. The upper half of the composition, depicting Tavatimsa heaven, is serene and elegant. A multitiered palace, walled court, and rows of seated devatā give this scene a sense of order and balance. Nimi sits in the center on a glittering throne, flanked by Indra and Brahma, with the other brilliantly clad devatā seated respectfully below.

In terms of its content, composition, and static quality, the upper half of this mural typifies depictions of the heavens seen throughout Thai painting. These paintings are among the most beautiful in Thai art and it is obvious that they were done by the most talented and experienced artists. However, the absence of any desire, emotion, or drama makes them, in certain respects, less interesting than the scenes of hell.

By contrast, the lower half of the composition is unstructured and chaotic. A melange of murky, twisted forms wends its way toward Nimi’s approaching chariot, while others, lost in their individual suffering, are oblivious to its arrival. The grotesque figures seem to include representatives from each of the hells. Sinners are boiled, broiled, burned, stabbed, and impaled, in some cases nose to nose with another hell being, an accomplice in sin, no doubt.

To the twentieth-century Western observer the hell scene in the Nimi Jātaka is hardly frightening, nor perhaps was it intended to be even in its time. Rather, its purpose may have been to present the hideousness of the lower elements of the human mind, in contrast to the heights to which it can potentially rise, as indicated by the upward thrust of the dividing line. Since this is a jātaka, the details of each specific are less important than the role played by the Bodhisattva. Nimi passes from this abyss to the realm above, and teaches the
Images of Heaven and Hell

viewers that they have the potential to do the same.

Trayphuum Texts

*Trayphuum*, or “Three Worlds,” texts are encyclopedic works that describe, in Theravada terms, the various realms of the universe, the creatures that inhabit these realms, and the way to the ultimate realm of nirvana. Also included are recounts of tales and sermons concerning Buddhist ethics and principles.

The earliest known *Trayphuum* text written in Thailand is attributed to Phraya Lithay of Sukhothai around the year 1345 A.D. This work, the *Trayphuum Kāthāa*, or *Sermon on the Three Worlds*, is a synthesis of more than thirty canonical texts and commentaries. It includes, among other things, vivid descriptions of conditions in the eleven realms of the sensual world. These are the realms of the hell beings, animals, suffering ghosts, *asura*, and humans, as well as the six realms of the *devatā*.

Only three *Trayphuum* manuscripts, consisting primarily of illustrations with very little written material, are believed to have survived the Burmese attack of 1767. The oldest extant copies thought to contain the full text date from 1778 and 1787 and are not illustrated.

Following the fall of Ayutthaya, Phya Taksin, in an effort to restore the religious and cultural foundations of the Thai realm to the new kingdom, ordered the rewriting of a *Trayphuum*, and in 1776 A.D. at least two illustrated manuscripts on the subject were completed. His successor, Rama I, later sponsored the compiling of two editions of the treatise, the second of which was completed in 1802. This text, the *Trayphuumlūdek Wīnītchāy Kāthāa*, is much more comprehensive than any of the earlier works and includes innumerable legends and descriptive accounts not found in them. Its published form comprises 1,532 pages, compared to the 373 of Lithay’s work.

The oldest extant illustrated *Trayphuum* manuscripts appear to be more closely related to the 1802 compilation. The format of illustrated “Three Worlds” manuscripts is that of accordion-folded pages of continuous illustrations, with brief explanatory passages and labels. One such manuscript is believed to date from the early eighteenth century. It is housed in the National Library, Bangkok, but
Bonita Brereton

in 1964 a copy made by Naay Fua Haribhitak was given to the New York Public Library. On the basis of comparing descriptions of hell in the Lithay and Rama I texts with these visual depictions, several observations can be made. The first concerns the rather large number of illustrations—more than a dozen—devoted to scenes of hell beings and suffering ghosts (Thai, prèet; Sanskrit, preta). In the Trayphuum manuscripts, the space devoted to these spheres occupies only a minor part of the total text. However, in the New York manuscript, an unexpected profusion of hell scenes is found, gradually deteriorating in artistic quality from the first to the last. The same is true of the 1776 Trayphuum in Berlin, where more than a quarter of the illustrations are devoted to this subject.

The second observation involves the composition of the hell scene and the degree to which it corresponds to the written description. The works of Lithay and Rama I are somewhat ambiguous in describing the specific characteristics of some of the hells. On the one hand, both texts mention eight major hells, boxlike in form, the walls, ceilings, and floors of which are fiery hot iron. These hells are said to be located one beneath the other, surrounded by a number of auxiliary hells on all sides. However, the texts do not specify whether these are separated in the same manner as the major hells, or whether they merge with one another. Moreover, although each hell is characterized by one to four specific punishments, some of them, such as flaming coals, boiling cauldrons, and vicious elephant-sized dogs, may be found in other hells as well.

An example of the artists’ responses to descriptions of this nature can be seen in a depiction of Roruva hell in the New York Trayphuum. This hell is mentioned briefly in the Lithay text, but not discussed. In the Rama I version it is described as being full of sharp, metal, lotus plants that cut the hell beings to pieces. In addition, the text specifies that flames dart through the bodies of the hell beings, entering by way of one of the nine bodily openings and exiting through another. In the New York manuscript, the first of these punishments can be seen in a square in the center of the composition, where two spiky lotus plants and parts of six hell beings are visible. The second punishment is depicted in the upper left corner, where a hell being with flames issuing from his mouth is being forced to lie facedown on a bed of flames.

This composition is noteworthy for its complex organization. As mentioned above, the center of the composition is marked by a