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The Integration of Chinese and Thai Silk Art in Royal Ceremonial Fans: A Case Study of the Commemorative Fan for the Cerebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall

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ABSTRACT
The Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, located within the Bang Pa-In Summer Palace, was completed in 1889 as a Chinese-style pavilion funded and dedicated to King Rama V by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Siam. This paper takes the Commemorative Fan for the Celebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall as its primary object of study, combining analyses of form, silk craftsmanship, and decorative motifs to examine the interaction and integration of Chinese and Thai silk art in royal ceremonial objects. Furthermore, it explores the silk trade and the networks of Chinese merchant families that underpinned this artistic and cultural exchange. The study reveals that the commemorative fan serves as a tangible embodiment of Sino – Thai cultural hybridity, merging symbols of Siamese kingship with the artisanal aesthetics of Chinese silk weaving. Beyond its role as a ceremonial emblem within the royal court, the fan also stands as a material witness to the entanglement of silk, belief, and power in the late nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS
Commemorative fan; Export silk; Silk trade between China and Thailand; Sino–Thai cultural exchange; Rama Ⅴ

1 Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, under the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), Siam underwent a profound transformation toward political and cultural modernization. While pursuing reforms to strengthen the nation, Rama V simultaneously sought to preserve traditional religious systems and royal ceremonial practices. As integral components of the royal ritual apparatus, court ceremonial objects were not only extensions of religious devotion and monarchical authority but also embodied complex layers of cross-cultural interaction.

Compared with the extensive scholarship on the influence of Chinese art in Thai Buddhist architecture, painting, and sculpture during the reigns of Rama II to Rama V, relatively little attention has been paid to the use and adaptation of Chinese silk within Siamese Buddhist and court art. Previous studies of commemorative fans have primarily focused on their ritual or institutional functions, with limited attention to their artistic and material-cultural dimensions. Yet since the early Rattanakosin period (1782–1868), the large-scale importation of Chinese silk profoundly shaped local fan design and ceremonial aesthetics, giving rise to a hybrid Sino–Thai artistic idiom.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the Commemorative Fan for the Celebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, a royal gift produced for the dedication ceremony of the Wehart Chamun Hall at the Bang Pa-In Summer Palace. Integrating iconographic analysis, material culture study, and archival research, the paper examines the fan's form, silk craftsmanship, and decorative patterns to illuminate how Chinese and Thai silk artistry interacted and were reinterpreted within royal ritual contexts. Moreover, it explores the pivotal role of Chinese merchant families in mediating these artistic and cultural exchanges during the reign of Rama V. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Sino – Thai artistic syncretism and opens new perspectives on regional art histories shaped by the intersections of silk, belief, and power.

2 Analysis of the Form and Craftsmanship of the Fans

2.1 Structure and Function

To celebrate the completion of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, King Rama V commissioned multiple commemorative fans as royal gifts. Three fans are extant today: two are housed in the Bangkok National Museum and the Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissadeva Mahathera) Residence Museum (Figure 1), while the third is in a private collection (Wesuwan 2013, p. 13). Each fan measures 97 cm in total length, with a fan leaf width of 36 cm. The main body is made of silk and shaped like a palm-leaf fan, with a *ruyi*-shaped holder on both the front and back, bound with braided edging. There is no finial at the top, and the handle is made of bamboo.

These three fans belong to the *pad-rong* (พัดรอง) type of royal ceremonial fans, literally translated as secondary fan (Rattanaphon 2013, p. 32). *Pad-rong* fans were important ritual objects offered by devotees to monks and were essential for monks during preaching. In royal ceremonies or religious rituals, monks would hold the *pad-rong* fans while officiating

and bestowing blessings on participants.

Figure 1 Commemorative fan for the cerebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, 1889, Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissadeva Mahathera) Residence Museum, Bangkok. Photo: Siyu Wu

2.2 Craftsmanship and Design

The front of the fan (Figure 2) features a bright yellow silk base with red printed patterns. The central motif is a scroll in Thai imitation of Chinese calligraphy. The top of the scroll bears the inscription เทียน เม่ง เต้ย (the Chinese pronunciation of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall in Thai), and the lower inscription reads การเฉลิมพระที่นั่งเวหาศจำรูญ วันที่ ๓ มกราคม รัตนโกสินทรศก ๑๐๘, meaning the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall celebration on January 3, Rattanakosin Era 108 (1889). At the scroll's tail, the silk shows the ice-crack ground pattern typical of Qing-dynasty textiles. The square seal bears the royal emblem จปร of King Rama V (Chanwich 1995, p. 157), while the circular seal features the Thai script สยาม for Siam. The scroll is surrounded by tassels of *ruyi* knots, fly-whisks, and dragon pearls, interspersed with plant motifs such as wheat, plum blossoms, and pods. The fan holder on the front bears the inscription จปร สยาม in a style resembling cursive script.

Figure 2 The front of commemorative fan for the cerebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, 1889, Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissadeva Mahathera) Residence Museum, Bangkok. Photo: Siyu Wu

The back of the fan (Figure 3) is made of red-ground brocade, using untwisted red silk thread for the warp, with the weft woven in satin. The pattern wefts are highly colorful—yellow, deep red, pink, sky blue, light blue, light green, and off-white—interwoven with the red warp in a 1/4 Z twill for structural stability. The design is formed through supplementary weft. The central design is a five-clawed soaring dragon weaving through clouds, with sky-blue horns and light-green claws and mane. A yellow dragon coils among *ruyi*-shaped clouds, with the gaps filled with peonies, orchids, and flaming pearls. The back fan holder bears จปร สยาม in a seal script style.

Comparison of the three fans' backs shows that the dragon bodies were preserved when cutting the fan leaves, with only the whiskers and tails truncated. The fan in the Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissadeva Mahathera) Residence Museum contains a weaving error along a line in the lower jaw mane, whereas the other two fans have no such error. Therefore, this red-ground brocade was woven on a *yun* brocade drawloom. At that time, this type of loom was found only in mainland China.

(a) Supreme Patriarch (Phae Tissadeva Mahathera) Residence Museum

(b) Bangkok National Museum

(c) private collection

Figure 3 The back of commemorative fan for the cerebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall, 1889

The design of the soaring dragon is stylistically similar to the dragon patterns on *zhang* velvet padding with clouds and dragons (Figure 4) in Qing dynasty. This *zhang* velvet was woven with red warp and weft to form a plush ground, with gilt threads in the pattern weft interwoven with the red warp to create motifs (Miao 2017, p. 94). The dragon's tail rises high, the head is lifted, and it winds among peonies and auspicious clouds. Notably, in both textiles, the dragon's whiskers emerge from below the eyes, differing significantly from typical brocaded satin where whiskers extend from the nose or mouth corners.

Figure 4 *Zhang* velvet padding with clouds and dragons, Qing Kangxi period (1662-1722), Palace Museum, Beijing. Photo: Palace Museum, Public Domain

3 The Interaction and Re-creation of Chinese and Siamese Silk Art

3.1 Transmission of Chinese Brocade

During the nineteenth century, external trade system in Siam operated under royal authority but relied heavily on Chinese merchant communities settled in the kingdom (Duan 1993, p. 170). These merchants not only shipped Siamese products to China by junk but also formed a vast maritime network across the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca in Malaysia, and the Southeast Asian archipelago. When John Crawfurd visitedBangkok in 1821, he observed that nearly all large-scale foreign trade in Siam was handled by Chinese traders. They transported local products such as rice, tin, timber, and bird's nests to European ports along the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia, in exchange for manufactured goods from Europe and India (Crawfurd 1915, pp. 4-5). This transnational commercial activity not only elevated the economic status of Chinese merchants in Siam but also allowed many of them to accumulate wealth, gain royal trust, and enter the administrative apparatus, such as the Department of the Left Pier.

Within this trading framework, Chinese silk occupied a prominent position as a highly popular luxury commodity. Trade records indicated that between 1800 and 1850, as many as eleven types of Chinese silk textiles were exported to Siam, including patterned silk, satin with dragon, and printed silk(Mahatthanobon 1997, pp. 177–178). These textiles not only generated significant profits for Chinese merchants who resold them but also fulfilled the ceremonial needs of the Siamese royal court. The patterns, weaving techniques, and color schemes of Chinese silk were irreplaceable by local Thai textiles and became potent symbols of status, prestige, and refined taste among the Siamese elite.

Thian Chotikasathian, the highest-ranking official of the Department of the Left Pier, was appointed head of the Construction Committee of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall (Chantavanich 1997, p. 220). In the late reign of Rama III, he opened a trading house called Chieng Heng along the Chao Phraya River, specializing in junk trade and import–export

activities. His business dealt in rice, tin, pepper, timber, and bird's nests, while importing porcelain, tea, and silk from China for sale in Siam (Ye 2018, pp. 84–85). His family maintained close ties with the Siamese royal court and controlled key links in the silk supply chain, thus serving as a crucial intermediary between royal demand and market supply. It is therefore highly probable that the brocade with dragon used for the commemorative fans was procured through this family's trading network.

3.2 Re-creation of Fan Forms and Techniques

The traditional *pad-rong* fan has an oval-shaped leaf and evolved from the palm-leaf fan during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), becoming popular around 1883 (Sriworaphon 2004, p. 86). In contrast, the Commemorative Fan for the Celebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall adopts the contour of the Chinese palm-leaf fan (Figure 5). Its upper part is broad and the lower part narrow, with gently concave arcs along the top and bottom edges and deeply curved inward lines at the waist. The palm-leaf fan in China derives from the fan held by Han Zhongli—one of the Eight Immortals in Daoist legend—and is therefore also called the *zhongli* fan. It symbolizes the dispelling of evil and the invocation of blessings (Lee 2017, p. 16), embodying strong elements of Chinese folk belief.

Figure 5 Chinese palm-leaf Fan, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Palace Museum, Beijing. Photo: Palace Museum, Public Domain

As an important motif in Chinese popular religion, the imagery of the Eight Immortals spread to Siam with Teochew and Hokkien immigrants (Zhang 2019, p. 13). Their cultural symbols gradually integrated into the Thai Buddhist artistic system. For instance, the ordination hall of Wat Pho features a mural depicting the Eight Immortals, while ceramics in the same temple decorate Eight Immortals motifs. In Buddhist rituals, the use of palm-leaf-shaped fans also appeared in Siam. A palm-leaf manuscript illustration already shows a performer dressed as a monk holding a short-handled palm-leaf fan during a funeral vigil (Igunma 2022; Figure 6). This fan bears floral patterns, with the handle running through the body and ending in a finial. Its form more closely resembles that of the *pad-rong* fan.

Figure 6 Palm-leaf Manuscript Illustration, 1841, British Library, London. Photo: Palace Museum, Public Domain

In the early period, *pad-rong* fans were often made with imported silk and embroidered by Chinese artisans to enhance their refinement value. As high-quality fabrics gradually became more accessible in Siam, the embroidery work was increasingly undertaken by local craftsmen (Sriworaphon 2004, p. 84), leading to the widespread use of *pad-rong* fans across royal and monastic contexts. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, indigenous printing and dyeing techniques in Thailand had become more sophisticated. Combined with a growing aesthetic fatigue toward intricate embroidery, printed silk began to replace embroidery as the prevailing fashion (Sriworaphon 2004, p. 83).

During the reign of King Rama V, the distinction between ceremonial hierarchy and accessibility prompted the adoption of locally printed silk for fan surfaces. The yellow printed silk used on the front of the Commemorative Fan for the Celebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall exemplifies this technical transition. The design is characterized by its precise geometric arrangement and vivid color contrasts, reflecting not only the Siamese court's aesthetic engagement with Chinese motifs but also the successful local adaptation and technological reinterpretation of imported decorative practices.

3.3 The Integration of Imagery, Belief, and Decorative Style

Although no archival record identifies the designer of the commemorative fans, it is reasonable to infer that the Chinese stylistic features of fans were closely related to the architectural style of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall itself. The hall was a Chinese-style building. Both Thian Chotikasathian, head of the construction committee, and Fak Chotikasawat, the supervising engineer, commissioned Chinese artisans to complete the project using carved woodwork and ceramics entirely imported from China(Sitthithanyakij 2019, pp. 302–303).

During the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V, Chinese export porcelain was immensely popular among the Siamese elite. The royal enthusiasm for collecting Chinese craftsmanship made porcelain motifs a key source of courtly aesthetics. In the Green Room on the third floor of the Vimanmek Mansion (Figure 7), a Siam altar table is displayed with a set of porcelain vessels decorated with identical shou (longevity) patterns, arranged with offerings of fruit and incense. Beneath them lies a Teochew-style embroidered altar cloth with dragon. The trend of contests of Siam altar table decoration soon emerged, serving as a means for upper-class families to demonstrate their wealth and cultural sophistication. The medal for a Siam altar table competition held during the reign of King Rama V (Figure 8) bears Thai inscriptions rendered in imitation of Chinese calligraphy, revealing not only the typographic influence of Chinese script on Thai visual culture but also the use of sinicized aesthetics as a strategy for expressing elite cultural identity.

Figure 7 Siam Altar Table, 1902, The Vimanmek Mansion, Bangkok. Photo: Wesuwan 2013, p. 20

Figure 8 the Medal for a Siam Altar Table Competition, Rama V (1868-1910). Photo: Wesuwan 2013, p. 203

The scroll motif on the front of the commemorative fan, designed with Thai inscriptions imitating Chinese characters and arranged in a Chinese reading order, parallels the design of the birthday banquet menu for Min Laohasethi, a Chinese-Siamese official of the Department of the Left Pier (Figure 9). Both exemplify a visual manifestation of Chinese cultural identity. This design approach was not merely an aesthetic choice but also a symbolic expression of the alliance between Chinese-heritage elites and royal authority in late nineteenth-century Siam.

The five-clawed dragon pattern on the brocade used for the commemorative fan is one of most representative imperial motifs in China. In traditional Chinese culture, the dragon represents the highest symbol of imperial power and is often found on official uniforms, ritual vessels, and architectural decorations. The dragon pattern also symbolizes Chinese people in Thailand.

Figure 9 the Birthday Banquet Menu for Min Laohasethi, 1895. Photo: Wesuwan 2013, p. 284

4 Conclusions

The Commemorative Fan for the Celebration of the Wehart Chamun Throne Hall functioned not only as a religious implement but also as a tangible embodiment of the deep integration between Chinese and Thai silk arts during the Rama V period. The transformations in its form, craftsmanship, and ornamentation mirror the Siamese court's active appropriation of Chinese artistic styles, while simultaneously reflecting the local capacity for creative reinterpretation.

With the continuous influx of southern Chinese immigrants, export silks, and associated aesthetic ideals, this artistic fusion was far from a one-directional transmission. Rather, it emerged from the dynamic interaction between the Chinese diaspora and the Siamese monarchy. King Rama V's modernization reforms relied heavily on economic support, in which Chinese merchant families played a pivotal role. The commemorative fan thus stands as a material testimony to this historical intersection, embodying a complex interplay of aesthetic selection, symbolic power, and cultural identity that characterized Siam's multicultural society in late nineteenth-century.

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