

An Overview of the Art of Wat Moeng Bò in Jinggu

Hanli ZHOU

Pu'er University, Pu'er, Yunnan Province, China

ABSTRACT

Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County, located in southwestern Yunnan and administratively part of Pu'er Prefecture, is primarily inhabited by the Han, Dai, and Yi ethnic groups. Dai's migration history traces back to the 13th century when A Zhibu and his followers from Moeng Mao introduced the Lik script and Theravada Buddhism to Jinggu. Over time, the Tham script was widely used in religious contexts. Wat Moeng Bò, built in 1644 by the Jinggu ruler (*caofa* in Dai) Dao Hanchen, served as a Theravada Buddhist monastery for the royal family. Although destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, local communities later reconstructed it with government support, with major reconstructions completed in 2000 and 2013. Preserving original elements, such as the pedestal and reliefs of the twin pagodas, reflects a commitment to maintaining its historical integrity. Architecturally, the main hall (*vihāra*) and ordination hall (*ubosot*) of Wat Moeng Bò¹ show strong Burmese influences, while the pagoda structures align with the Dai Yuan style of Lan Na. Murals inside the main hall, written in Lik script, narrate local Buddhist stories. Geographically situated between Dehong and Sipsòng Panna, Jinggu has absorbed diverse influences, making its Theravada Buddhist culture of particular scholarly interest. Wat Moeng Bò exemplifies this cultural synthesis and remains a key religious site for the local Dai community. This paper analyses the historical and architectural significance of Wat Moeng Bò, drawing from Chinese classical records and local Lik script documents, to explore the broader religious and cultural development of the Dai people in Jinggu.

KEYWORDS

Art of Theravada Buddhism Temple; Wat Moeng Bò; Jinggu; Architectural style

1 The history and reconstruction of the Wat Moeng Bò

Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County, situated in the southwestern region of Yunnan Province, falls under the administrative jurisdiction of Pu'er Prefecture. According to the JGXZ (1993, 12 and 481), before establishing the People's Republic of China, it was historically referred to as the Weiyuan Sub-prefecture. The region's administrative history can be traced back to the second year of Yuanfeng during the Western Han dynasty (BC 109) when it was part of Yizhou County in the Ailao region. In the Tang dynasty, under the governance of the Nanzhao Kingdom, Weiyuan City was founded in CE 765. Over successive dynastic periods, from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the Weiyuan Sub-prefecture underwent multiple administrative restructurings, eventually being placed under the jurisdiction of Pu'er Prefecture during the Qing period. To avoid confusion with Weiyuan

¹ Wat means monastery in Dai. Wat Moeng Bò means Moeng Bò monastery (Mengwo fosi 勐卧佛寺 in Chinese).

County in Sichuan, the area was renamed Jinggu County in 1914 during the Republic of China era.

Wat Moeng Bò, located in the northwestern section of Weiyuan Town, was originally constructed during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties by Dao Hanchen, the local Dai ruler², serving as an official religious site for the ruling family.³ It became known as the Burmese Monastery due to its Theravada Buddhist association. As recorded in *The Local Gazetteer of Weiyuan Sub-Prefecture* (vol. 8):

The Great Burmese Monastery is situated outside the north gate of Weicheng. There are more than 100 Burmese monks in the monastery who shave their heads and wear yellow clothes. They are referred to as Burmese monks. The monastery contains two pagodas, each standing approximately three Zhang (about 9.99 meters) tall, built by the aboriginal officer Dao Hanchen. A Burmese (bodhi tree) grows in the middle of the left pagoda, with branches extending from stone crevices and lush leaves. The stone of the pagoda remains intact, and at dusk, birds gather and sing atop the structure. The Burmese monks considered this a wonder, calling it the 'pagoda tree.' To this day, it remains as such.

大緬寺在威城北門外,寺內有緬僧百餘人,皆剃髮,用黃布裹身,名緬和尚。寺中有塔二座,高三丈余,昔土官刀漢臣所建。左塔中生緬樹,其枝從石縫內周圍伸出,枝葉甚茂,塔石不崩,至晚眾鳥聚集歡鳴于上,緬僧皆稱奇焉,名曰塔樹,至今猶然。

Like many religious sites, Wat Moeng Bò suffered significant damage during the Cultural Revolution, with the pagodas being destroyed multiple times. Nevertheless, the foundations of the pagodas remained intact. An interview with Mr Dao Zhongbang, a direct descendant of the last *tusi* (*caofa*), reveals some reconstruction information. Following Chinese reforms and the reinstatement of religious freedom policies, the local government allocated 8,000 RMB in 1985 to restore the pagoda foundations. This restoration enabled the monastery to once again serve as a religious site for the local community. A comprehensive restoration of Wat Moeng Bò commenced in 2000, following a detailed design and a multi-party fundraising effort, and was completed over four years. The restoration process involved artisans from Jianchuan (Dali), Moeng Ka (Yongping, Jinggu), and Myanmar. Jianchuan craftsmen were responsible for wood carving, Burmese artisans undertook the cement carvings, and the ancient construction team from Moeng Ka managed the overall design, drawing, and painting.⁴

The historical significance of Wat Moeng Bò, its successive restorations, and its cultural relevance to the Dai people of Jinggu exemplify the intricate blending of Burmese and local architectural and religious traditions. The site remains an important religious and historical landmark for the region, embodying the enduring cultural heritage of the local Dai community.

2 The architectural structure of Wat Moeng Bò

The architectural layout of Theravada Buddhist structures generally consists of three main components: the Main Hall, the Ordination Hall, and the Pagoda. Wat Moeng Bò includes mountain gates, side gates, twin pagodas, an ordination hall, the main temple hall, and monks' dormitories, covering an area of 3.335 hectares. The twin pagodas, placed symmetrically on both sides of the main hall, are significant for their distinctive feature: one pagoda is enveloped by a banyan tree, while the other contains a banyan tree at its centre. This phenomenon is linked to a local legend in which the *Chaofa* and the architect, after completing the monastery, dreamt of Avalokiteśvara placing Buddha's relics between the twin pagodas, soon followed by the growth of banyan trees that symbolically entwine the pagodas.

A stone-paved road runs between the twin pagodas, leading to the main hall. In front of the hall

2 The so-called *caofa* in Dai, lit. the lord of the heavens, also known as the *tusi* in Chinese, symbolises the native office.

3 For more details, see JGTSSX (1993: 1–5).

4 For more details, see 'Moeng Bò Temple' (2011, 1–10).

stands a large incense burner with a Buddha statue and a merit box inscribed with the words “Shantian Fuguo,” where worshippers leave donations during festivals like Songkran. The main hall is built in a heavy-duty beam structure, resembling traditional Chinese architecture, with a multi-tiered roof covered in orange-glazed tiles, featuring carvings of dragons and elephants. According to Buddhist scriptures, these carvings reflect the mythical scene of Buddha’s birth, symbolized by nine dragons spraying water and ten elephants offering flowers. The entrance is aligned with the mountain gate, flanked by symmetrically carved lattice doors and windows featuring common floral motifs from the Dai region. The front porch is supported by wooden dragon carvings, adding a sense of grandeur and protection, with bells hanging from the four eaves.

Inside, the main hall has a rectangular layout with four rows of columns and a circular gallery. A single Buddha statue is positioned between the third row of pillars, surrounded by murals depicting the life of the Buddha. Small statues of Buddha and Rantau Rani (Avalokiteśvara in Dai culture) are placed on the Buddhist altar, offerings from the local devotees. During the Songkran festival, worshippers often adorn these statues with plastic flowers and sesame oil. The abbot mentions that the smaller statues flanking the Buddha represent Phrachao Sava Ka, the Buddha’s close disciples, identified as Ananda and Mahākāśyapa, who are revered for recording the Buddhist scriptures.

To the left of the main hall is a smaller building, known in Dai Nüa as “Wu Su,” reserved for senior monks during ordinations and important ceremonies, where women are forbidden entry. It mirrors the architectural style of the main hall but lacks a corridor and has a more austere design. On the right are the monks’ living quarters (kuti), similarly styled with an archway porch. These spaces not only house monks but also serve as places for worship, meditation, and community blessings. Historical photographs of revered monks, Su Lingda and Zhen Dasang, are displayed within the quarters.

While the architecture of Wat Moeng Bò is deeply rooted in the Theravada Buddhist tradition and local Dai folklore, its design exhibits strong influences of Mahayana style, particularly in its pavilion-like structures, blending seamlessly with Han architectural elements.

3 The twin pagodas of Wat Moeng Bò

The twin pagodas, located north and south of the main hall, reflect the traditional Theravada Buddhist architectural style. Built 300 years ago and reconstructed in 1985, the banyan-encompassed pagoda stands 10.74 meters high, while the pagoda-encompassed banyan reaches 7.2 meters. Uniquely, a large tree has replaced the upper arc-shaped part of the pagoda, and the tree now towers over the pagodas by nearly twice their height, with the structures spaced 30 meters apart.

Constructed of red sandstone with a square foundation, the pagodas feature a tiered, Chinese Ya-style design. Each side of the base measures 4 meters and is adorned with embossed patterns. Four stone statues of “Ai Xiang Nong” (Hercules) were originally placed at the corners, though one was lost during the Cultural Revolution. The upper portion of the pagodas is chain-gourd-shaped, using vertically laid black bricks. In front of the pagodas lies a merit box, an incense burner, and a small feeding monastery. During festivals, Dai people visit the site for worship, offering incense, money, and sticky rice.

The pagodas are engraved with Buddhist scriptures and mythological depictions. Among these are representations of the Jade Emperor Jade Emperor⁵, Phrachao (Dai: Buddha), Hunhuang gatan (Dai: Tanseng on his *Pilgrimage to the West*), Nanmu Nuona (Dai: peacock princess), call Chao

⁵ The so-called Pra Ying in Dai is the Supreme Deity of Taoism. For more details, see Ibid.

Shutun (Dai: Moengban Jia prince), Jin Nali, Jin Nara (Dai: female god birds and male god birds), Vessantara (namely Wordship white elephant), Zuzha ge'a (Dai: beggar), Nan Jinbu (Dai: the girl who eats crab), Guo Pileng (Dai: the eclipse) and so on. Animals and plants reliefs refer to: De'an Baihou (Dai: inverted lion), Niewen (Dai: flying dragon), Ma Mie (Dai: Pegasus), Nuo Yong (Dai: Peacock), Gang Hen (Dai: red deer), Ma Wanda (Dai: sunflower), Nanmu Dao (Dai: golden gourd), Dun Gui (Dai: Plantain Leaves), Mao Wuwo (Dai: lotus), Da Wen (Dai: the sun), En La (Dai: teapot) etc., as well as lotus flowers and plantain leaves, are intricately carved into the reliefs, symbolizing religious and cultural beliefs of the Dai people.

4 An Overview of the Murals of Wat Moeng Bò

According to the head of the Dai Culture Association, the murals at Wat Moeng Bò draw inspiration from the "Tan Ga Pai" tradition. The mural on the ceiling of the main hall's front porch illustrates the origin story of the Buddha, featuring a crane, five Buddhas, nine dragons, and ten elephants. In this narrative, the crane represents the mother of the Buddha in a past life, who lays five eggs. These eggs are swept away by the sea and cracked by different beings—a hen, a cow, a turtle, a woman, and a dragon. Each egg is given a specific name in Dai, such as Gagu Shenta (menas hen), Guona Gama Na (means cow), Gasha Bei (means turtle), Guoda Ma (means woman), and Mie Daiya (means dragon).

When the fifth Buddha is born, nine dragons spray water, and ten elephants collect flowers as offerings. After their hatching, the Buddhas begin to practice their faith. Unable to determine the eldest among them, they vow and seek divine guidance. God, moved by their sincerity, sends a deity in the form of a crane to resolve the issue, but the crane fails. Ultimately, they meditate, deciding that the first Buddha whose lotus blooms will be the eldest. Guoda Ma, whose lotus blooms last, secretly exchanges his lotus with Mie Daiya's, becoming the fourth Buddha. His deceit results in humanity suffering from seven forms of hardship, which the Buddhist scriptures and five precepts aim to alleviate. Local believers interpret this story as a moral teaching, encouraging people to do more good deeds to overcome these sufferings.

The murals along the walkways on either side of the main hall also bear symbolic meanings. Wang Yuanzhou, a local artist and designer, created these murals drawing from Buddhist scriptures. One mural features a javelin, a divine weapon from the sky, which cannot be lifted by most people. Another element is a green circle, representing an artefact from the sea that only the Dragon King can use. Additional motifs include a celestial brush, leaves that restore life, Sun Wukong's yellow bag (which can hold anything), and a bolt for the gate of the 32-story heaven, which can only be unlocked with Buddha's guidance. The murals also depict a foot drum unique to Jinggu Dai culture and a golden gourd used to capture devils. These treasures said to appear during times of great worldly difficulty, are rarely used by Buddha, as his compassion prevents him from harming souls. Furthermore, carvings of twin dragons, phoenixes, and motifs such as "the fish gossip" reflect Han Chinese cultural influence on the Dai monastery, representing the blending of Dai and Han traditions.

The murals inside the main hall were created by Wang Yuanzhou and his three sons, members of the Jinggu Ancient Construction Team. Based on Theravada Buddhist stories and culture, these works were approved by the Jinggu Buddhist Association.

5 The sculpture of Wat Moeng Bò

The traditional art of Weiyuan Town showcases three primary forms of sculpture: wood, stone,

and cement carvings, each with distinct cultural significance. The wood carvings at Wat Moeng Bò are predominantly found on structural elements like doors, windows, eaves, and ridges, featuring motifs of flowers, elephants, and dragons—symbolic representations rooted in local culture. Stone carvings, visible primarily on the twin pagodas, depict figures such as peacocks, the Buddha, and mythical tales like *Tang Seng's pilgrimage*. Meanwhile, the cement carvings along the promenades of the main hall narrate stories from Buddhist scriptures, incorporating symbols deeply connected to Dai traditions.

The intricate wood carvings, especially on doors and windows, often depict scenes from Theravada Buddhist scriptures. A prominent series of twelve sculptures on the main entrance window details pivotal moments from *Shakyamuni's life*. These include his journey towards Buddhahood, his ascetic practices, his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, and his sermons that eventually led to his spiritual leadership. The sequence captures key moments: his birth, marriage, struggle during meditation, and eventual enlightenment. A particularly significant scene recounts Shakyamuni's visit to Jinggu, where, according to local legend, his stay gave rise to the observances of *Khao Phansa* and *Ok Phansa*.⁶

Cement carvings on the promenade also convey rich narratives, such as the tale of a devout female believer whose ashes transformed into silver and copper after her death. Additionally, there is a depiction of Buddha's confrontation with the demon O Luo Ba, symbolizing the triumph of wisdom and compassion over violence and ignorance. The carvings reflect both religious devotion and cultural integration, blending Theravada Buddhist teachings with local Dai legends and folklore.

Overall, the art and architecture of Wat Moeng Bò represent a synthesis of Theravada Buddhism, local Dai culture, and regional influences, offering profound insights into Jinggu's religious and cultural history.

6 Conclusion

The architecture of Jinggu's Theravada Buddhist monasteries represents a compelling blend of styles, deeply rooted in both local Dai culture and external influences. For instance, Wat Qiannuo (Qingfo Monastery), built during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, showcases a combination of traditional Dai elements alongside Han architectural features. Wat Hong Wu, established in 1644, incorporates a unique octagonal pavilion, merging Dai and Han styles, with the Buddha statue reflecting the Tai Lü artistic traditions of Sipsong Panna. Similarly, the murals in the main hall of Wat Mang Dao highlight key aspects of Dai traditional culture, with animal motifs that closely resemble those found in the monasteries of Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand.

A particularly striking example is Wat Moeng Bò, which features the pagoda-encompassing banyan tree, an architectural phenomenon seen in both Jinggu and Dehong, though grander in the former.

While the main hall of Wat Moeng Bò adheres largely to Han architectural principles, the structure as a whole exemplifies the distinctive syncretism found in Jinggu's Buddhist architecture. Overall, the unique synthesis of these influences—Dai, Han, and Tai Lü—shapes the architectural identity of Jinggu's Theravada Buddhist temples, reflecting both the region's cultural heritage and its broader artistic connections.

⁶ *Khao Phansa* marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, a three-month retreat during the rainy season when monks stay in monasteries for intensive meditation. *Ok Phansa* marks the end of this retreat, allowing monks to resume their travels and public activities.

About the Author

Hanli ZHOU, She got her doctoral degree at the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia, Asia-Africa Institute, University of Hamburg. She is working as an assistant professor at Pu'er University, Pu'er, Yunnan Province, China

Funding

The research for this article was partially funded by the project (No. 20BZS141) of The National Social Science Fund of China (Zhongguo guojia shehui kexue jijin: 中国国家社会科学基金). This article was written using the author's fieldwork note dated November 17, 2009, and first presented at the 10th International Buddhist Research Seminar, which was held from May 15 – 16, 2019, at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Nan Sangka College, Nan Province, Thailand.

References

- [1] Xie Tiren 谢体仁 (Contributor in Qing Daoguang 18 years). 1837. *Weiyuan tingzhi* 威遠廳誌 [The Local Gazetteer of Weiyuan Sub-Prefecture].
- [2] Dao Yongming 刀永明 trans. 1990. *Jinggu tusi shixi* 景穀土司世系 [Genealogy of the Jinggu native official]. Kunming: Yunnan minzhu chubanshe. JGTSSX in abbreviation.
- [3] The Management of Moeng Bò Temple of the Tai and Yi Peoples of the Jinggu Autonomous County 景谷傣族彝族勐卧总佛寺管理小组 (ed.). 2011. *Mengwo foshi* 勐卧佛寺 [Moeng Bò Temple]. Unpublished.
- [4] The Committee of Compiling the Local Gazetteer of the Tai and Yi Peoples of the Autonomous County of Jinggu in Yunnan 云南省景谷县傣族彝族自治县志编纂委员会 (ed.). 1993. *Jinggu Daizu Yizu Zizhixian Xianzhi* 景谷傣族彝族自治县縣誌 [The Local Gazetteer of the Tai and Yi Peoples of the Autonomous County of Jinggu]. Chengdu: The Sichuan cishu chubanshe. GJXZ in abbreviation.