

“Art world” of yunnan theravada buddhist murals from the perspective of art sociology: a case study based on murals in Jingzhen buddhist temple

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Abstract. From the perspective of art sociology, this article adopts the research paradigm of “art world” and “cultural production” to carry out a case study on murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple in Xishuangbanna and explore the “production” and “autoproduction” process of Theravada Buddhist murals, thereby concluding that the “production” of Theravada Buddhist murals is not the achievement of individual painter, but proves to be co-generated by the “art world”, namely the cooperative network composed of members of the Buddhist Temple Affairs Management Committee, the village group, believers, and painter, under the regulations and influence of various realistic social factors; while due to the publicity and sanctity of Theravada Buddhist murals as well as the particularity of its audience, the relevant “autoproduction” has facilitated the continuous sound interaction between the “production” and “autoproduction” of Theravada Buddhist murals.

1 Research questions

Theravada Buddhism is the main religious form in the Sino-Burmese border areas such as Xishuangbanna, Dehong, Lincang, Pu'er, Baoshan in Yunnan Province, which is believed by minorities like the Dai, the Blang, the Achang and the De'ang nationality. And the Dai people form the majority of Theravada Buddhism believers. Murals in Theravada Buddhist temple turn out to be not only a major artistic characteristic that distinguishes Theravada Buddhism from Han Buddhism, but also one of the art forms that conveys Buddhist doctrines while playing a subtle part in educating the masses, regulating ethical behaviors, and inheriting the ethnic culture. This article intends to draw on the research paradigm of Howard Becker's “art world” and Richard Peterson's “cultural production” to

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analyze and then develop a structural understanding of the “art world” of Yunnan Theravada Buddhist murals from the perspective of art sociology (see Figure 1 below):

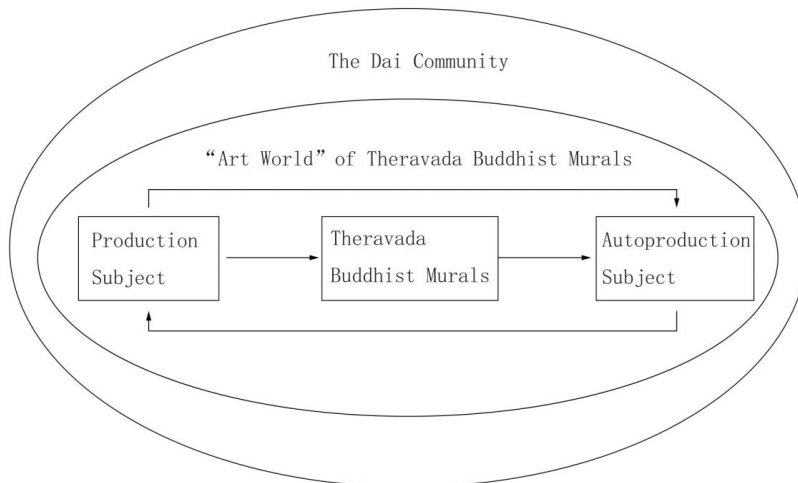


Fig. 1. Structure of the “art world” of theravada buddhist murals.

This article attempts to analyze the murals’ “art world” based on a case study of the murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, thereby revealing the social connotations of Yunnan Theravada Buddhist murals.

2 Content analysis of murals in Jingzhen buddhist temple

Located in the Bajiaoting Scenic Area, Jingzhen Village, Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, the Jingzhen Buddhist Temple was built before 1701 AD (the 40th year during the reign of Qing Emperor Kangxi, or Year 1603 in Dai calendar), and consists of an octagonal pavilion, a main hall, a drum room, a monk dorm, an ordination hall, pagodas and a mountain gate. The pavilion was announced by the State Council in 1988 as a national key cultural relics unit subject to special protection. Now 15 monks live in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, among which there are 1 abbot “dubi” (dubi: The name for the abbot of Theravada Buddhist temples in Xishuangbanna, which also indicates the third class of the ten monk classes of Theravada Buddhism in Dai minority area.) 2 Buddha followers “foye” (foye: The second class of the ten monk classes of Theravada Buddhism in Dai minority area in Xishuangbanna.) and 12 little monks (little monk: According to Dai traditions, a boy has to lead the life of a monk for a period of time in temple after reaches a certain age, and such boys are commonly known as “little monks”. Nowadays, boys in village can become a little monk in the village temple at the age of 7. They will learn Buddhist scriptures and Dai culture in the temple during the holidays, and go to school at other times.) The Temple is also provided with the Buddhist Temple Affairs Management Committee (hereinafter referred to as the Committee), which comprises dubi, bozhang (bozhang: transliterated from Dai language; the temple administrator who has practiced Buddhism as monk to the class of “dubi”, and is then voted by the villagers as bozhang after resuming secular life. This is a post responsible for holding Buddhist ceremonial rituals and participating in temple affairs management.) and two administrators (Administrators refer to the staffs who take charge of administrative affairs of the temple. They are generally males who resume secular life from Buddhism practice and enjoy a great prestige in the village.)

There are altogether 110 murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, which are mainly rendered on interior and exterior wall of the main hall as well as outer wall of the monk dorm, which seem to resonate and then merge with the magnificent temple constructions.

The Temple's south-facing main hall contains 27 murals mainly on the upper half of its interior wall, which are embellished beneath with liquid-gold-stenciled pagoda and lotus patterns. The murals, which unfold from the wall above the front gate orderly and encompass four interior walls within the hall, have portrayed Shakyamuni Buddha's biography from his birth, tonsure, attainment of Buddhahood to the final nirvana. Each mural is of the same height, and the length was designed in light of the wall size and the story content. There are 65 murals on the exterior wall of the main hall, with two on each side of the south-wall gate: the one with bold characters against a white wall on the left has recorded the merits of tributes from all walks of life when the Temple was rebuilt; while the purgatory painting on the right consists of six smaller pictures featuring cruel and gory scenes. A total of 44 murals, which stretch from the right side of the west wall to the north wall, depict the Buddha tale Wessantara Jatakas (Wessantara Jatakas is the jataka of Shakyamuni Buddha, which mainly concerns the Buddha's relation of his story of attaining Buddhahood after ten world reincarnations to monks in the temple.) by the technique of progressive differential-curving plates. Another 29 murals, which are spread from right to left over the east wall, trace the history of Jingzhen Village and this Buddhist temple: It is said that a father and his son got lost in the mountains, but were then guided by the deity to a treasured land wedged between hills and waters, where they tamed the land hard, learnt to farm, hunt and practice martial arts, and led a happy life. With the advent of the Buddha, the village life became all the more orderly. As the war broke out later, someone popped up to snatch the land. With the Buddha's blessing, the villagers fortunately held their homeland, at the expense of their general's life. In order to commemorate their hero, they passed down this story from generation to generation, and the sacrificed general has also been respected as the ancestor blessing and protecting the village.

18 murals are distributed on the outer wall of the monk dorm. From the right side of the dorm gate, they have related Shakyamuni's life story in sequence: the connotation of his name, the avatar, the garbha, the birth, the physiognomy by a man of practice after his birth, his martial arts and archery learning, his rescue of a white goose caught by the hunter, the marriage, his roams out of the four doors, (The Buddhist tale says that Shakyamuni walked out from the four doors of the imperial palace and saw the old, the sick, the dead, and the monk, from which he came to realize the agony of life and the truths of attaining wisdom. Then he determined to become a monk for Buddhist practices. This tale is thus called "Shakyamuni's roams out of the four doors")..his visit of wife and children before leaving home, the tonsure, his meeting with the king during the practice, the Zen training, the ascetic practice, his acceptance of gopis offering (forsaking asceticism), the exorcistic practice, as well as his ultimate sermon and Buddhahood attainment. Below each mural are relevant definitions provided in Dai language and Chinese, so it's clear that the target audience of the murals should be monks who understand Dai language and ordinary viewers who do not read Dai writing.

In view of the content of murals in the Temple, it follows that murals in the main hall are rich and complete in content: they embrace not only plentiful beneficence-related enlightenment tales on Buddha jataka but also the Buddha's experience and beneficence stories concerning the "Eight-phase Enlightenment", (The "Eight-phase Enlightenment" is a typical symbol of Shakyamuni's life. Theravada Buddhism is slightly different from Han Buddhism, in that the former divides the Buddhahood attainment into eight sessions, which including the avatar, the garbha, the birth, the ascetic practices, the exorcism practices, the enlightenment, the dharma-cakra-pravartana, and the nirvana.) as well as the historical legends of the village and the Buddhist temple, which have distinctly broken through pure

religious significance, permeated the secular life of the masses, and highlighted their enlightenment value. Murals in the monk dorm, which differ slightly from those in the main hall, have largely portrayed Shakyamuni's life course of breaking away from the worldly shackles and cultivating himself into a Buddha. According to the classical explanation of Shakyamuni's "Eight-phase Enlightenment", the murals in the monk dorm skip the two phases "dharma-cakra-pravartana" (preaching and delivering Buddha dharma) and "nirvana", but add episodes like the Buddha's pathama jhana in childhood, martial arts and archery learning, and Zen training, hence highlighting the edification of monks' meditated Buddhist practices. The aforementioned differences in mural content between the main hall and the monk dorm are apparently the outcome of selection. And such selective arrangements, as a vital session in the process of mural production, will necessarily have specific purposes and significance.

So from the "art world" perspective, whether or not the production of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, be it the selection of content or the establishment of production activities, is the creation of individual painter or a collective production action? If it is a collective action, is there any division of labor in it? Has the production of mural, which is a traditional form of ethnic religious art, established its specific mechanism? Is there any distribution system for murals in Buddhist temple? How is the autoproduction process of such murals? These are major issues to be discussed in this paper.

3 Analysis of production mechanism of theravada buddhist murals

Howard Becker, art sociologist, published a paper entitled *Art As Collective Action*, which touches on the important term "art world" for the first time in 1976. Subsequently, in 1982, he officially published *Art Worlds*, a landmark masterpiece in the sphere of art sociology, in which he provides a lucid but profound explanation of the viewpoints above, holding that "art world", in simple terms, refers to "a network of cooperation between the participants". Becker pointed out that an artwork is done jointly by various different participating characters rather than individual artist. What these characters share in common is that they all not only participate and play different parts in the production of artwork, but also develop some direct or indirect connections with the artist. Becker concluded that "art is produced by the art world instead of the artist" On this basis, he further derived the "genetic approach", an approach to the analysis of works of art sociology that "scrutinizes the focus of work production in the moulding process". Inspired by Becker's "art world" theory and "genetic approach", the author has analyzed the production mechanism of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, and explored the "art world" in its production process.

3.1 Production process of murals in jingzhen buddhist temple

When the author went to Jingzhen Buddhist Temple for survey in May 2018, the painting of murals in the Temple had just been completed. The author has conducted unstructured interviews with the abbot dubi and the painter, observed the painting process of the same painter's team in other Buddhist temples, and displayed the whole process of mural production.

The dubi of Jingzhen Buddhist Temple introduced to the author that he had been in this temple for 26 years. He was a little monk from the age of 10, and it had been 6 years since he became the abbot. The Temple was rebuilt for three times during his stay here. The new murals were completed in five months by a painter invited by the Committee in January.

The mural content was redesigned in terms of the old murals in the temple, while the expenses were backed by tributes donated by the believers when the temple was renovated.

Mr. Yan, painter of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, said that he had served as a Buddha follower for five years when he was young, and at the age of 20, he started to learn mural painting from a master painter in the Temple. Up till now, Mr. Yan's first mural is still left on the wall of the monk dorm of Manzai Longzhongfo Temple. By this year, he has been a painter for almost 25 years. His murals can be seen in some other temples in Xishuangbanna, such as Dafo Temple, Zongfo Temple, Manduan Buddhist Temple and Manchuanman Buddhist Temple. In the past few years, Mr. Yan has also been invited to Buddhist temples in Myanmar for mural painting, the price of which was calculated as per square meter. Relevant expenses are backed by the temple or sometimes funded by people living in the village where the temple is located. The content of murals is determined by dubi, bozhang of the temple, and village cadres; if the mural is a *dāna* (*dāna*: transliterated from Dai language. It refers to alms giving to the Buddha and monks, that is, the tributes by believers, which is one of the major modes of faith in Dai people's traditional religious life. The purpose is to accumulate blessings through tributes. There are various forms of *dāna*, which mainly include scripture *dāna*, pagoda *dāna*, *kasaya dāna*, and mural *dāna*, etc.) by the believers, the content will be up to them, and mostly concerns Buddhist parables, the history of Buddhist temple and village, or Dai myths and mascots (e.g. elephant and peacock). When it came to the differences between mural painting today and 20 years ago, Mr. Yan recalled that before the 1980s, painters tended to use bamboo brush and color with plant juices, and the coloration didn't last long; but nowadays, they use professional brushes and color with acrylic and oil paints, and the results are much better than they were. When spoke of the painting techniques, he told the author that he had been painting for over 20 years, so he was so familiar with it that he can start painting directly without outlining. Yan has four post-80s apprentices. Since he himself was a self-taught mural painter, he required his apprentices to enjoy painting murals, take on hardships, and love the Dai culture. For now, Mr. Yan's works have been put on display in various local cultural exhibitions, and other folk artists like him are increasingly valued by the local cultural management department.

3.2 “Art World” in the production process of murals

Becker holds that “all artistic work, just like all human activities, involves the collective action of a group of people, usually a large group. Their cooperation allows the artwork that we finally see or hear to be formed and continue. Artwork always lets out signs of such cooperation, which may be brief, but would often become more or less customary, hence generating the so-called collective action mode of art world.” The production of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple is exactly the collective action of a group of people. The entire process of mural painting, from preparation to completion, will first undergo a meeting of the Committee held by the dubi to discuss the theme of mural painting: To paint or not? To paint what? Where to paint? How much will the painting cost? When to paint? With approval of the Committee and the village group, the abbot will invite the painter on behalf of the temple to confer on specifics of mural painting. Then the painter will design the mural layout, and calculate the painting area, the scheduled time of completion, and the costs as required by the temple. It follows that the constituent elements of art world in the production process of temple murals include the Committee, the painter, leader of the village group, and sometimes the government administrations, which jointly constitute the art world network of murals. Among them, the Committee and the village group leader will determine the necessity of mural painting, the thematic content of murals, as well as the location of painting; the painter takes charge of designing the overall layout, the painting

style, painting techniques, and the characters of murals. Specifically speaking, in discussing the mural theme, the abbot and the Committee have to not only refer to the content of original murals to exhibit historical inheritance, but also attach importance to the embodiment of Dai culture in murals so that they can serve to educate the believers. The painter, by virtue of his experience as monk, acquaintance with murals, and 20-odd-year career in mural painting, becomes a participant in the mural production process. The village leader or the government administrations, however, would offer suggestions in accordance with the demand of villagers, the expenses and policies, and the situations. Evidently, participants in the art world of mural, despite their out-of-sync involvement, would perform different duties, so the creation of murals relies on that each participant can “do the right thing at the right time”

Meanwhile, based on the theory of “production of culture perspective” proposed by Richard Peterson in the 1970s, the production of cultural products also reflects the regulatory value of culture, thereupon “transferring people’s concern in culture itself to the context of cultural production perspective”. In *The Production of Culture Perspective*, he introduced “six facets of production” of culture, which include (1) technology; (2) law and regulation; (3) industry structure; (4) organization structure; (5) occupational careers; (6) market. In view of the production process of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, opinions from the Committee members will be influenced by their perception of mural culture, understanding of Theravada Buddhist culture, and devotion to the Dai culture, which, however, are subject to ethnic culture, religious belief, and social order. The painter’s inspirations in mural painting, while being affected by his personal life experience and painting career, derive fundamentally from a great variety of factors like religious belief, the traditional ethnic culture and the modern culture, as well as the market economy. The village group and the government administration’s gate-keeping role in mural production is not only under the influence of political, economic, and cultural factors, but also stands for the opinions and demand of villagers and believers. In this process, disagreement and contradiction inevitably emerge between the Committee, the painter, government administrations, and the believers, but these parties will eventually reach a consensus and jointly accomplish the production of murals through constant exchanges and interaction.

In brief, the production process of Theravada Buddhist murals is by no means the purely artistic creation detached from the community, but something completely rooted in the ecological environment where it develops, which embraces political, economic, cultural, and religious settings. Such a social and cultural environment is the soil that breeds the art world of murals. The interactive paths within the art world of murals are connected between the Committee, the painter, and the village group. If the mural production is collective or personal *dāna* by the believer(s), there should be paths of the interactive network that connect the believer(s) with the painter, the Committee and the village group respectively. Such a network has thus constituted the art world of murals, resulting in the creation and production of Theravada Buddhist murals. Moreover, the network within the art world becomes a routine, while “in another sense, routine makes art possible, for the artists, by referring to the routine way of action, can make decisions swiftly and do the planning with ease, and then they can spend more time on concrete work. Routine makes possible the simple, effective cooperative activities between artists and supporting staff.” The author deems that it is this cooperative routine that has facilitated the generation of the mural production mechanism within the interactive network of murals’ art world.

4 Analysis of autoproduction of theravada buddhist murals

In elaborating his theory of “production of culture perspective”, Peterson referred to “cultural consumption” as the “autoproduction of culture”. The “auto-” implies that “people

will appropriate the commercial cultural elements available in their environment, and then reimagine and recombine these elements to create cultural expressions and form their unique identity.” Despite differences in context, this concept is adopted here by the author, in that its generalization of the process in which the audience would appropriate, then reimagine and recombine the cultural elements in appreciating the works of art to create cultural expressions suitable for their identity fits in well with the two characteristics of Theravada Buddhist mural, namely its integration of sacred and secular traits, and the cycle of its production and autoproduction.

After creation and production, Theravada Buddhist murals have to face the “consumer” of artworks, that is, it must enter the phase of “cultural consumption” or “culture autoproduction”. In this process, the murals’ vibrant colors, vivid pictures, and portrayal of Dai people’s daily life have not only brought about a breath of secular life to the solemn, sacred Buddhist temple, but also highlighted the appealing characteristic of Theravada Buddhist temple construction. Besides, as a religious art, mural is a bridge to communications with the Buddha, and an embodiment of worship and respect for the Buddha. Its distinctive integration of sacred and secular traits has spawned the particularity of its autoproduction, the subject of which no longer appears as the unitary religious or secular audience but covers a wider range of people. In light of the actual situation, the audience of Theravada Buddhist murals can be divided into two categories: one is the active audience, such as religious staff, believers, artists, and academic researchers, who tend to actively appreciate the murals due to its religious hue, divination ability as well as the features of ethnic culture and religious art for the sake of acquiring a sense of beauty and blessing, and meeting their demand for cultural inheritance and moral education; while the other is the passive audience like tourists who come to visit the Buddhist temple construction, so murals, as part of the construction, passively become the artworks being appreciated, and meet the audience’s need for aesthetics and understanding of Theravada Buddhist culture.

Due to the publicity and sanctity of Theravada Buddhist murals, its “cultural autoproduction” is essentially the satisfaction of audience’s needs. Different audiences have diversified needs because of their diverse social experience, education background, and social standing. Both active and passive audiences can obtain elements serving their needs from the murals, and in appreciating the artworks, they will carry out subjective imagination and integration of artistic, traditional or modern cultural, secular and religious elements therein, and autoproduce results fit for their identity.

Based on field observations and interviews, the author has drawn a conclusion that in appreciating the murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, the audiences, owing to differences in their identity, profession, education background, and purpose, carry out “subjective” imagination and integration of the different cultural elements in murals to generate tailored results of autoproduction. To be specific, religious staff like dubi, foye and little monk, out of their more profound understanding and internalization of Theravada Buddhist culture, tend to regard the painting and acceptance of Theravada Buddhist murals as part of their religious life and reverence for Buddha, which is not only conducive to their own practice, but also helps inherit Theravada Buddhist culture in the form of painting. Ordinary villagers generally view the murals as a bridge between divinity and secularity, believing that they can obtain blessings from the Buddha through joining Buddhist activities like mural *dāna* and getting educated from Buddhist parables and Dai myths in murals. Academic researchers have distinct understandings and answers to the theme and content of murals since they take different professional sides. Artists would tell that the murals, which are beautiful in representation and distinctive in techniques, do play a part in decorating the Buddhist temple construction in terms of their layout, narrative expression, coloring, character modeling, and painting techniques. Government administrations would take more

account of the murals' social recognition and inheritance of traditional Dai culture. Tourists or strangers, who are attracted by Theravada Buddhism's temple construction with unique Dai features, would consider the murals an accessory decoration which embellishes the temple construction and is entirely different from that in Northern Buddhist temples. Foreign tourists think that the murals are beautiful and characteristic of the indigenous peoples.

It's beyond doubt that the "autoproduction" of murals is through various audiences and channels to propel appropriate changes in mural content and form in line with the real world. From the autoproduction process of Theravada Buddhist murals, we can observe partial coupling of the autoproduction subject and the production subject of "art world", which further facilitates the interaction and virtuous cycle between mural production and autoproduction. The art world of mural prompts the mural production, while its autoproduction will in turn feedback and motivate its production. For instance, the autoproduction result of religious staff will promote the protection and inheritance of the murals; the autoproduction result of believers will deepen their understanding of Theravada Buddhism and traditional culture; the autoproduction result of painter will bring to him more inspirations and experience in creation; the autoproduction result of government administrations will enhance the importance attached to social order and cultural inheritance; the autoproduction result of academic researchers will provide the development status quo of murals and research materials for relevant protection and inheritance; the autoproduction result of tourists will help spread the unique mural art of Theravada Buddhism around via modern communication networks and attract a wider audience...All these are the feedbacks from autoproduction of murals to the "production" of art world, which have in turn motivated such "production", hence the interaction and cycle between the production subject and the autoproduction subject as shown in Figure 1 above.

To sum up, the publicity and sanctity of Theravada Buddhist murals result in the extensive, particular subject of mural autoproduction. The extensiveness is reflected in the fact that any appreciator attracted by Theravada Buddhist murals may become the subject of its autoproduction; while the particularity is manifested in its active and positive audiences mentioned earlier, which constitutes the particularity of art world in the autoproduction process of Theravada Buddhist murals, and the active audience is often coupled with the subject in the process of mural creation and production. Accordingly, among all these constituent elements of the art world of Theravada Buddhist murals, there are not only elements of producer and autoproducer but also elements of both producer and autoproducer. The interactive, inter-constituent relationships between the various elements have driven forward the cyclical development of Theravada Buddhist murals' production and autoproduction.

5 Conclusion

The article attempts to adopt the research paradigm of "art world" and "cultural production" to explore the "production" and "autoproduction" process of Theravada Buddhist murals with prominent ethnic characteristics in Yunnan. In the research process, the author has found that the theory of "art world" and "cultural production" can guide us to think over the social roots for the generation, development and transitions of religious art from the perspective of sociology. However, problems of context do exist in foreign theories' application in China. Some theories are not always completely applicable to research in China. For example, the theory of artwork distribution in the art world is exactly theoretical summary of the economic value of secular artworks in foreign market economies, which can hardly fully apply to the murals with publicity and sanctity in Theravada Buddhist temple. Accordingly, this paper emphasizes the foundation of empirical research and

theoretical induction, and puts down its roots in field study of Yunnan Theravada Buddhist murals. Based on a case study of murals in Jingzhen Buddhist Temple, it generalizes the “art world” of Theravada Buddhist murals, indicating that the “art world” is rooted in the soil of Dai community; Theravada Buddhist murals are not the achievement of individual painter, but prove to be co-generated by the “art world”, namely the cooperative network composed of members of the Buddhist Temple Affairs Management Committee, the village group, believers, and painter; while due to the publicity and sanctity of Theravada Buddhist murals as well as the particularity of its audience, the relevant “autoproduction” has facilitated the continuous sound interaction between the “production” and “autoproduction” of Theravada Buddhist murals, engendering a pervasive, continuous effect and social influence in educating the masses, regulating ethical behaviors, and inheriting the ethnic culture.

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