
**REREADING *THE THREE WORLDS ACCORDING TO KING RUANG* BASED UPON ITS ROOTS
IN THE TIPITAKA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of Thai Buddhist cosmology contained in the old manuscript named, *the Traibhumikatha* (*Tebhumikatha*). This manuscript had been compiled and revised for first public edition in 1912. The final text was entitled *the Trai Phum Phra Ruang* and it has been translated into English in 1979 as *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*. The dissemination of this text began since the rise of Thai kingdom, thus it is regarded as one of the literary classics of Thai culture. The text has often been interpreted as an attempt to make Theravada Buddhism more accessible to the masses. It subsequently has been appropriated by folk culture as documenting the literal existence of heavens and hells and the accumulation of merits through several lifetimes. This paper aims to move beyond this more superficial reading of text to a deeper interpretation based upon the concept of impermanence (*Anicca*) which is a dominant concept of Theravada Buddhism. Impermanence represents a cosmological view based on the law of three marks of existence (*Tilakkhana*). It also determines the features of time, space, and beings as contingent and not independent of other things. Therefore, it is used in this study as a key to disclose a new meaning of this text based upon its deeper narrative, the Tipitaka. And with the notions

applied from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory, the rereading of this text represents an attempt to fill the gaps in the traditional interpretation which overlooks the attainment of Nibbana at present lifetime and in modern interpretation which lacks a sociocultural dimension.

Keywords: Tebhumikatha; Three Worlds According to King Ruang; Thai Buddhist Cosmology

Introduction

The Three Worlds According to King Ruang (*Trai Phum Phra Ruang*)¹ is a Thai literary work concerning with Theravada Buddhist cosmology. It was composed in the 14th century, presumably by King Lithai of the House of Phra Ruang. Being written in Thai makes it distinct from other Theravada cosmological texts written in Pali in accordance with the Buddhist scholastic tradition. This might contribute to its popularity because it made the Three Worlds more accessible to laypeople who did not understand Pali. In brief, the Three Worlds is a compendious narrative joining a cosmological system with moral system. The author applied several ideas from the Tipitaka suttas to construct a comprehensive worldview and used it to guide the people about how to live their lives properly in such a world. The contents of the Three Worlds range over the metaphysical cosmos at large to the human world. It expounds the Theravada contents such as the nature of beings in this cosmos, the origin of mankind, the origin of human society, the fall of mankind, the cosmic destruction, and the rebirth of cosmos, including the salvation or the paths to liberate oneself from this cosmos.

Nevertheless, due to the change of worldview since the time of scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, people have become increasingly skeptical about certain religious beliefs. They considered many religious beliefs as superstition and sought to demystify those beliefs to make them rationally acceptable. In the context of Thailand, one can see the emergence of monastic reform led by King Mongkut (Rama IV)