

## **Contemporary Buddhist Art in Thailand: Research Areas, Related Disciplines, and Agendas**

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### **Abstract**

This study systematically reviewed research literature on contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand with a focus on characterizing main research areas and methodological approach of published works, identifying related disciplines, and proposing research agendas for future inquiries. The review relied on two databases (namely googlescholar.com and Science Direct). Inclusion and exclusion criteria and checklists were applied. Journals, conferences, dissertation and thesis relevant to the issue in this review were included. In total, 53 papers published during 2010 - 2020 were eligible for this study. The review revealed three main findings. Main research areas are culture (46%), art (38%) and history (16%). All studies were qualitative and the methodological approach was traditional, ethnographical, historical, archaeological, and innovative and technology-incorporating. Disciplines relate to Buddhism, culture, archaeology, architecture and modern technology. Future agendas should pay attention to insights from a broader perspective, a historical ecology, an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach and reassessment of Buddhism. Major trends involve mingling traditional and modern influences, the value of Buddhism for common Thais, a paradigmatic shift. Research agendas involve the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition, Buddhism from landscape perspectives, Buddhism in historical ecology, increases in technology in art, and the characteristics of art in various historical periods. This review recommends future inquiries to focus more on insights of Buddhism from a broader view of its location, a historical ecology as natural ecology and environment, promotion of an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach, and re-evaluation of the role and development of Buddhism in society.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Buddhist Art; Main Research Areas; Related Disciplines; Research Agendas

### **Introduction**

Buddhist art is now a vital part of the overall Buddhist cultural heritage in Asia. From its homeland of India, Buddhist art has spread to other parts of Asia and also adopted local artistic styles of the new host country. Among the new host countries, Thailand is one of the most outstanding. The influence of Buddhism on Thai art has a long history. The classical mainstream and indigenous artistic practices have long been influenced by Buddhism since the era of Amaravati from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD located in the region where is now known as central Thailand and that of Srivijaya from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD located in the region where is now known as southern Thailand. Its artistic tradition adopted new influences and transformed over time. It also reflects complications shaped by rapidly changing world which have tremendously affected all spheres of life, including artistic activity. This seems to mark a distinctive transition of Buddhist arts. As such, the study of the art is worth trying. Looking into details, the issue is more interesting as, through their creativity, several

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contemporary artists probe into personal or cultural identity in response to changes. In their works, some artists express their thought-provoking questions and sometimes offer critiques of contemporary changes and their contexts.

However, little is known about this as the role of Buddhism in contemporary art was ignored. A review of research studies on the role of Buddhism in contemporary art is one way to draw an insight of the role of Buddhism in contemporary art in the context of changes. This review not only sheds some light of development and current trends of inquires but also provides insights of directions for future inquiries. To fulfill the research gap, this review calls for a scrutiny of the issue with a focus on these key topic areas (namely characteristics of the main research areas of contemporary Buddhist Thai art, areas of related disciplines, and research agendas for future studies).

In order to achieve these research objectives, Systematic Literature Review (SLR), or Systematic Review, is purposefully chosen as an approach for these reasons. Above all, as the contemporary Buddhist art is characterized by its diversities of concepts, themes, and subject matters which have transformed over time, a systematic literature review is therefore the most effective approach for illuminating the movement of the art and highlighting the key to the insight of the issue. The review is a drive for the theoretical progress of disciplines as it identifies areas and redefine constructs. Unlike a traditional literature review, SLR is a protocol that minimizes chances, errors and biases and maximizes authenticity, authority, and legitimacy of evidence which a reader can assess rigor, completeness and repeatability of the research findings. SLR was chosen for this study as it aims to establish general views of specific issues and themes in the literature and previous studies under investigation by identifying, evaluating and summarizing the state-of-the-art of specific themes. As noted by Nightingale (2009), its methodological analysis provides fairer and more rigorous summary with lower biases than the traditional literature reviews.

To achieve the objectives, three research questions (RQs) were determined as follows: (1) what are characteristics of the main areas of contemporary Buddhist art studies in Thailand? (2) What are disciplines related to the contemporary Buddhist art? (3) How should research agendas for the contemporary Buddhist art be structured? To achieve this, this study adopting the guideline of Tranfield et al. (2003) comprises three stages and ten phases. Stage 1 (Planning the review) includes these three phases: (1) identifying the need assessment of the review, (2) preparing a proposal, (3) preparing a review protocol. Stage 2 (Developing the review protocol) includes these five phases: (4) paper identification, (5) paper selection, (6) assessment of paper quality, (7) data extraction, and (8) data synthesis. Stage 3 (Reporting results of the review) includes these two phases: (9) reporting the review findings and providing recommendations, and (10) getting the findings into practice.

In this paper, the contents and the structure of this paper are organized as follows. Section I (Introduction) pinpoints the research gap, research focus, rationale for systematic literature review (SLR), and research questions. Section II (Background of the Study) illustrates the term 'contemporary art', the relation between Buddhism and contemporary art, prior research on SLR and Buddhism contemporary art. Section III (Research Method) describes the research approach of this review (namely planning, conduction, and selection of the papers for review, and framework for addressing the research questions). Section IV (Results of the Study) describes the research findings regarding these three areas in response to the aforementioned research questions, including: (a) characteristics of the main areas and research approaches, (b) disciplines related to contemporary Buddhist Thai art, and (c) research agendas (namely trends and patterns reflecting the artistic style future research trends,

identified research agendas, research proposals for future research inquiries). Section V (Conclusion) presents a synthesis of the key findings in relation to the research questions. Section VI (Implications of the Study) highlights implications of the key findings and suggestions for directions for future inquiries. Section VII (Limitations of the Study) briefly explains how this review is limited.

To provide in-depth understanding of the topic under this review, the next part provides literature review and prior study.

## **2. Literature review**

The contents of the background of the study comprise the definition of the term “contemporary art,” a brief description of the development of contemporary Buddhist art, and prior research on systematic literature review and contemporary Buddhist art.

### ***2.1 Definition of contemporary art***

The term “contemporary art” is a perplexing concept in the Thai context. In a broad sense to public audiences, it refers to an art created by living artist. In a narrow sense to non-specialists, it refers to a modern art referred to art initially emerged and progressed along its processor known as modern art. Originally, both share some commonalities. However, the contemporary art later diverged from its predecessor and developed itself as a unique artistic style. Distinguished from other styles, the contemporary art has continued to develop over time. Since its emergence up to the present, the art has adopted a myriad of disciplines, approaches, new media, and modern technology into its artistic arena. Therefore, the art is a means that artists express themselves, provide cultural commentaries and social critiques of their contemporary society, which reflect changes in their society or even redefine the art itself. By this advanced definition, the art reveals its cultural sense as it becomes part of cultural dialogues, concerning larger contextual frameworks (e.g., personal and cultural identity, community, and nationality) and is characterized by its diversities of concepts, themes, and subject matters which transform over time and progress along changes, especially in the era of globalization which has had enormous impacts on every sphere of life, including artistic creativities. The definition of “contemporary art” is, therefore, perplexing.

To gain insights of this perplexing term, the development of contemporary Buddhist art in global, regional, and local contexts below can lead to understanding of the term.

### ***2.2 Contemporary Buddhist art***

Globally, Buddhism has had influences on contemporary artists and there was a growing Buddhist perspective in contemporary culture (Jacob, 2004). The transformation of the art commenced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the art has been prevalent in all aspects of human experience, including artistic experience. Increase in the transformation has fostered a profound shift in the relation between contemporary artists and audiences. Among experienced interpreters of Buddhism, contemporary artists were perceptive to develop this intellectual tool to analyze the impact of Buddhist themes in their contemporary world while art historians and critics were insensitive to do so. As such, the artists have adopted and made use of Buddhist themes as inspiration in their creative work. Notable examples are Bill Viola’s video installation, John Connell’s sculpture, and Allan Graham’s multimedia under the theme of "Time is Memory." In addition. The Network of Buddhist Organizations in UK paid much attention to Buddhist artists of all types. In 2005, the UK Buddhist Arts Festival, entitled "A Lotus in Flower," was organized. Later in 2009, the art conference on the theme of "Buddhist Mind, Creative Mind" was held. All these activities formed the foundation of Association of Buddhist Arts.

Regionally, the creativity of contemporary Buddhist art in Asia has progressed along global changes. According to Behrendt (2014), two notable contemporary Tibetan artists (namely Tenzing Rigdol and Gonkar Gyatso) featured Tibetan diaspora and addressed Buddhist themes in their works in the exhibition “Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations.” This event marked an evolving contemporary art movement. The contemporary Buddhist artworks become vehicles of vision, artistic expression and changing perspectives on Buddhism art in the era of changes and relation between the artistic movement in the global and regional contexts.

Locally, Thailand is one of major Buddhist nations and Buddhism has influenced all areas of Thai society and culture, including art. Exploring the influence of the contemporary art on Buddhist art in the countries outside India, the country of the origin is worth. In the Thai context, the traditional Buddhist artworks was historically viewed as a worship to Buddhism. In the earlier twentieth century, while borderlines of art and life were blurred, the artists view art as part of life. The contemporary Buddhist artworks in this context primarily reflected a Buddhist theme as a source for artists and as a lens of artistic contemporary development and contemporary life. The influence on artistic creation is ubiquitous, especially in temples and monasteries. However, the traditional Buddhist Thai art which has been affected by modern life. By nature, the world of art itself has been adapting to the changing world and the artists are witnesses of the changes themselves. The world of the contemporary art is still thriving and always adapting to reflect the changing world. The contemporary artists thus work in traditions as well as transformations.

An investigation into the art in the realm of Buddhist art is worth trying because it reflects the evolution of the art and sheds some lights to the world of art, especially the influence of the modern world on the mainstream Buddhist art which was viewed as the great masterpieces of traditional art. This can substantially reflect the essence of art movement in Thailand. Traditionally, Thai artists were often influenced by Buddhism, mythology, and the demands of their patrons. In this changing world, artists are inspired by more sources. Their work sometimes simply their own. Often the work may reflect their own interests or expressions of self and their culture which integrates diversity in artists’ perspectives and expressions through forms, contents, themes and styles, denoting that it was made by those outside of the field of art. As a result, a study of the relation between Buddhist art and contemporary life calls attention to a wide range of disciplines to draw out how artists tackled with essential questions about the relation between the art and life as partially revealed in prior research in the next part.

### ***2.3 Prior research on contemporary Buddhist art***

Some previous studies on contemporary Buddhist art involve thematic contents of

Contemporary art such as relationship between religious belief and happiness (Rizvi & Hossain, 2017), mindfulness and sustainable consumption (Fischer et al., 2017), spiritual and religious treatment and psychotherapy (Viftrup et al., 2013). Other studies on contemporary Buddhist art involve development of art such as development of contemporary Buddhist art (Singsu & Sirisuk, 2020), development of contemporary art in Thailand (Mukdamanee, 2008), influence of Buddhism in historical Thai art (Bovornkitti, 2005) and form and content of intangible culture in Thai contemporary art (Guptabutra, 2018). Also, documents on Buddhism art are Buddha mind in contemporary art (Anderson et al., 2004), new perspectives on Buddhism (Mitchell & Quli, 2015) and Buddhism in contemporary Tibet (Goldstein & Kapstein, 1999). But research study on this issue is scanty. Notable examples are the journey of Tibetan artists into the contemporary art world (Harris, 2012) and reflections on Buddhism and art (Klein, 2005).

### **3. Research Method**

To minimize biases and maximize transparency and objectivity in the selection process for analysis in this, SLR was adopted as the approach to this study as it provides a reproducible, transparent and objective search of the included papers. Transparent and objective criteria for inclusion and exclusion, or rejection, of a paper were carefully defined and applied with great care. Reproducibility can be ensured by this guideline, adapted from Tranfield et al. (2003). This review comprises these seven steps: (1) planning the review, (2) defining the criteria, (3) specifying the database, (4) selecting the papers, (5) conducting the review, (6) developing a framework for RQs, and (7) data analysis. Below are details of each step.

#### **3.1. Planning the review**

This review comprises 53 research papers published from 2011 to June 2021. Two databases - googlescholar.com and Science Direct - representing the main publications in contemporary Buddhist Thai art were searched, using the keywords “contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand” which is the subject of this review.

#### **Criteria defining**

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined as follows.

##### **3.2.1 Inclusion**

An online search began with the keywords and limited to research papers published from 2011 to 2020 and in English only. Full research papers were counted as data in this review if they clearly identify the research designs. Therefore, conference papers on the subject of this review were included if they are full research papers. The contributions of dissertations and theses on the subject of this review were also included in order to enrich data analysis and establish rigorous and inclusive results of the study. The papers available from the authors' institution were also included.

#### **Exclusion**

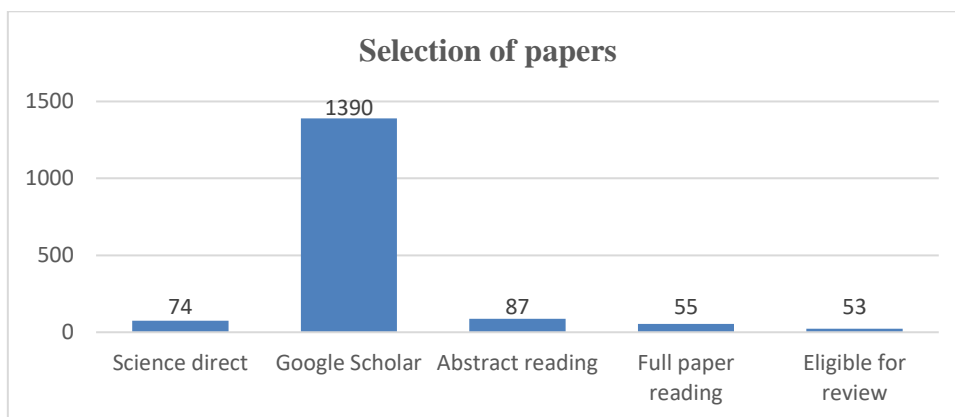
The papers in symposiums were excluded as they are too succinct. As books, workshops, And annual meetings are not research studies, they were also excluded.

##### **3.3 Specifying database**

The databases were specified according to the criteria. The papers were drawn from these two data bases. Google Scholar.com, Science Direct. They are also available at other sources, including: academia.edu, researchgate.net, cambridge.org, semanticscholar.org; JSTOR, Elsevier, legacy.orst.go.th, Taylor & Francis, academic.oup.com, oxfordre.com, repository.au.edu, journals.equinoxpub.com, Citeseer, jstage.jst.go.jp, scholarlypublications, journals.openedition. Org, thaiscience.info, journals.lib.washington.edu, magazines.odisha.gov.in, philpapers.org, brill.com, researchrepository.rmit.edu.au, ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk, tel.archives-ouvertes.fr, crossasia-repository.ub.uni, journal.nu.ac.th, siamese-heritage.org, aptspress.org, and jstage. Jst.go.jp and so04.tci-thaijo.org.

##### **3.4 Selecting papers**

The papers were searched by Mendeley Desktop Software. The selection considered search strings in numerous publishers' electronic databases. The papers from more than 50 databases that the keywords are present in the title were identified. In order to increase credibility of results, a wide range of sources was preferred. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. The selection can be photographically summarized as seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Selection of papers

Figure 1 presents the selection of papers among total 1,464 papers, 74 papers were drawn from Science Direct and 1,390 papers were drawn from googlescholar.com. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 87 papers were selected. After reading 87 abstracts, 55 papers were selected. After reading 55 full papers, 53 papers were eligible for this review.

### 3.5 Conducting the review

In this review, conducting the review followed the paper filter process as shown in Table

2. A backward search was also performed but only when it was necessary in order to understand the context of the paper, and was not included in the study.

**Table 1** Paper filtering process

Filtering stage: Paper count	
Database extract: 1,464	
Science Direct: 74	Google Scholar: 1,390
Abstract reading: 87	
Full paper reading: 55	
Eligible for review: 53	

Table 1 displays papers filtering process. The first stage of the process is paper count. In this stage, 1,464 papers were extracted the two databases at the beginning of the process under the search keywords “contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand.” After the filtering and reading stages, 53 papers were eligible for the review.

### 3.6 Developing a framework for the research questions

This review developed operational definitions to characterize the main research areas, what discipline relates to contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand, and how research agenda should be structured. The “characteristic” refers to research areas and methodological approaches of contemporary Buddhist art. A “discipline” refers to a field of study. A “research agenda” refers to trends and patterns, future research agendas, and research proposals for future inquiries.

### 3.7 Data analysis

The data analysis involves data extraction, content analytical process, and data synthesis.

A spreadsheet was developed in order to facilitate data analysis. The spreadsheet included these issues: data identification (e.g., databases, titles of journals and papers, year of publication, institution of the first author, and sector in which the study was developed), contents of the study (e.g., research objectives, RQs, methodological approach, and results of the study and major findings), areas of related disciplines, research trends and patterns, and proposals for future research agendas.

The review process above could be summarized as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** *SLR protocol summary*

<b>Subject of the review</b>	<b>Contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand</b>
RQs	RQ 1: What are characteristics of the main research areas of Contemporary Buddhist art research studies in Thailand? RQ 2: What are disciplines related to the contemporary Buddhist art? RQ 3: How should research agendas for the contemporary Buddhist art be Structured?
Dates of publication	from 2011 to December, 2020
Databanks	Google Scholar.com, Science Direct, so04.tci-thaijo.org; academia.edu, researchgate.net, cambridge.org, semanticscholar.org; JSTOR, Elsevier, legacy.orst.go.th, Taylor & Francis, academic.oup.com, oxfordre.com, repository.au.edu, journals.equinoxpub.com, Citeseer, jstage.jst.go.jp, scholarlypublications, journals.openedition. Org, thaiscience.info, journals.lib.washington.edu, magazines.odisha.gov.in, philpapers.org, brill.com, researchrepository.rmit.edu.au, ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk, tel.archives-ouvertes.fr, crossasia-repository.ub.uni-journal.nu.ac.th, siamese-heritage.org, aptspress.org, and jstage.jst.go.jp.
Search criteria	Full text in English; peer reviewed; title, abstract and keywords, online search, dissertations, theses, conferences, electronic databases
Inclusion criteria	Research papers focusing on the subject of this review and keywords i.e. “contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand”
Exclusion criteria	Papers in symposiums, books, workshops, and meetings
Keywords	Contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand
Tool for analysis	A spreadsheet includes: (i) identification of the papers (namely database, titles of journals and papers, year of publication, institution of the first author, and so on); (ii) contents of the papers (e.g., research objectives, RQs, methodological approach, and results of the study and major findings); (iii) methodological approaches; (iv) areas of related disciplines; (v) research trends and patterns; (vi) proposals for future research agendas;

Table 2 displays SLR protocol summary. The summary includes subject of the review, research questions, and dates of publication, databanks, search criteria, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, keywords, and tools for analysis.

The results of the review and the findings of the review were then reported as seen in the next part.

## 4. Results of the review

The results of the review are presented based on RQs. In response to RQ 1 (What are Characteristics of the main research areas of contemporary Buddhist art research studies in Thailand?), the characteristics of the main research areas deal with main research areas and research approaches. In response to RQ 2 (What are disciplines related to the contemporary Buddhist art?), the disciplines related to the contemporary Buddhist art involve this topic i.e., disciplines related to contemporary Buddhist art research studies. In response to RQ 3 (How should research agendas for the contemporary Buddhist art be structured?), research agendas identify trends and patterns, propose future research agendas, and research proposals for future research inquiries. Below are details of each part.

### 4.1 Characteristics of the main research areas

All studies in this review were based on qualitative method and characteristics of the studies include main research areas and research approaches. The characteristics of contemporary Buddhist art research studies in Thailand involve the main research areas and research approaches. Below are details of each characteristic.

#### 4.1.1 Main research areas

The main research areas found in the selected papers could be summarized as seen in Table 3

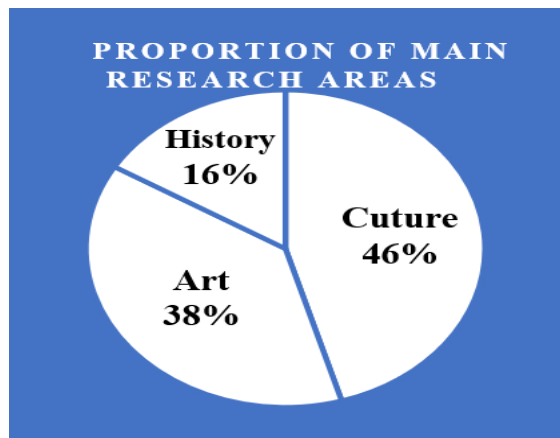
**Table 3** *Distribution of research areas*

Main research areas	Raw data (papers)
Culture	25
Art	21
History	9
Total	55

Table 3 displays the distribution of the main research areas in this review. The three main areas consist of culture (n. = 25 papers), art (n. = 21 papers) and history (n. = 9 papers). The majority of the research studies indicates that culture is the most popular research area in the contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand and more than one third of the papers involves culture. Almost half of the papers involves to art. Only nine papers involve to history. This indicates that culture and art play crucial role in the contemporary Buddhist art.

The proportion of the main research areas above can be photographically presented as seen in Figure 2.

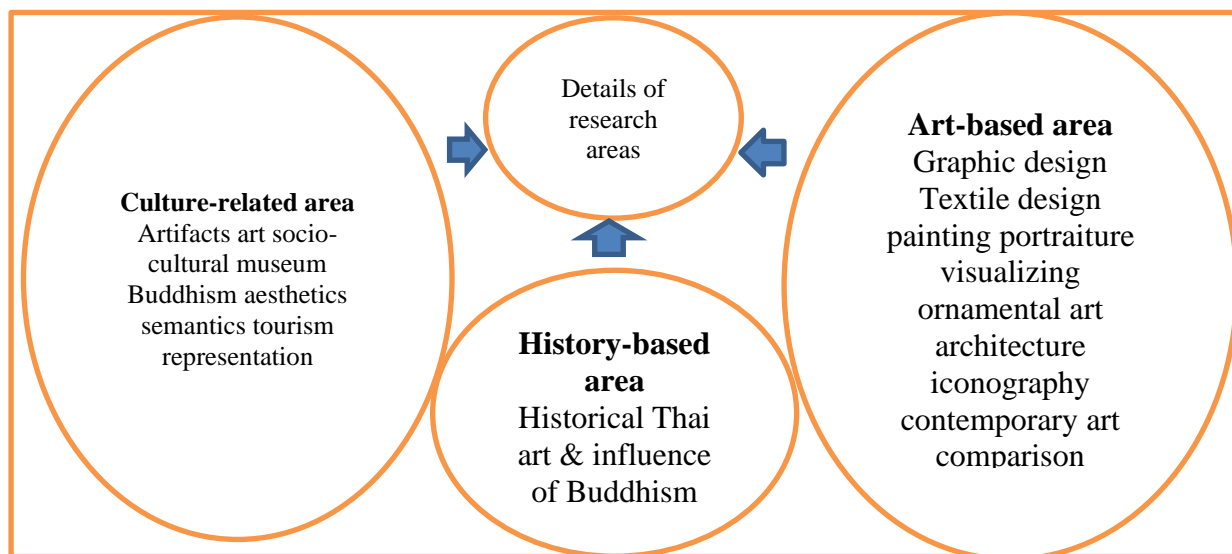




**Figure 2** *Proportion of main research areas*

Figure 2 displays the proportion of main research areas in the studies of the contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand, consisting of culture (46%), art (38 %) and history (16 %). The majority of the research studies (84%) involves culture and art while the minority of the studies engages with history. This indicates that culture and art play crucial role in the contemporary Buddhist art.

Looking into details of the main research areas, a summary of each area can be photographically presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** *Details of each research area*

Figure 3 illustrates the details of each of the three research areas of the studies in this review. First, culture-related contemporary Buddhist Thai art studies involves a wide variety of socio-cultural topics such as artifacts, art, museum, Buddhism, representation, semantics, aesthetics and tourism, including: Chaiwat et al. (2014), Guptabutra (2018), Kyaing (2019), Murphy (2013), Panyagaew (2018), Phonpho (2014), Revire (2020), Sethaseree (2011), Singso and Sirisuk (2020), Sirisuk et al. (2015), Lavy (2012), Phanon (2015), Tratchotipan (year?), Rod-ari (2018), Chang (2017, July), Lucas (2013, December), Peleggi (2021), Pornmuttawarong and Euchukanonchai (2019, November), Ritpen (2012), Janyaem (2020), Ghor and Chung (2007), Neigenfind (2020), and Sermsri (2017).

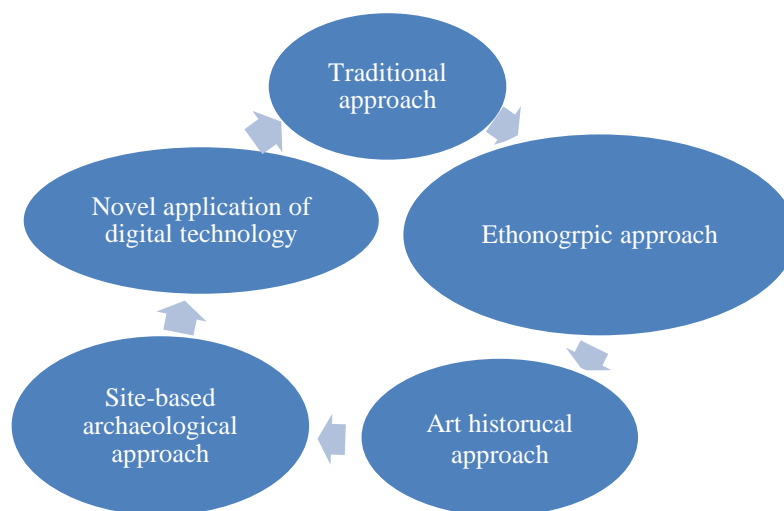
Second, the art-based areas engages with a multiple artistic styles, media and forms: Thai graphic design (Akama et al., 2012; Karnchanapayap & Chaetnalao, 2021), textile design (Pornmuttawarong & Euchukanonchai, 2019, November), painting (McDaniel, 2014), portraiture (Botero, 2011; Peleggi, 2015), visualizing (Wisetchat, 2013), ornamental art (McDaniel, 2014), architecture (Peleggi, 2021; Praebaisri & Noobanjong, 2019), iconography (Grunin, 2018; Revire, 2011, 2013), contemporary art (Veiga, 2018), comparison of arts (Grunin, 2018; Murphy and Revire, 2014; Revire, 2018; Sundstrom, 2015; Syafrony & Suwanpratest, 2016; Tepsing, 2015; Krairiksh, 2014).

Third and lastly, the history-based studies include these studies: Botero (2011), Bovornkitti (2005), Peleggi (2013), Peleggi (2015), Patra (2017), Revire (2012, 2013, 2016), Rod-ari (2015) Tapasilo, (2019). and Sooksawasdi (2013). These studies illustrate historical Thai art in relation with the influence of Buddhism. The benefits of these studies led to insights of the evolution of contemporary Buddhist art as well as the current contemporary Thai art.

It is also interesting to look into methodological approaches of the studies in this review to draw a complete picture of characteristics of the main research areas as seen in the next part.

#### 4.1.2 Research approaches

Drawn upon the review, the methodological approaches could be identified as five groups: traditional approach, ethnographical studies, art history approach, the site-based archaeology, and a new approach. The major approaches could be photographically presented below.



**Figure 4** Five major research approaches

Figure 4 illustrates five major research approaches. Below are details of each approach.

First, a traditional approach in this review involves these methods: describing; classifying; highlighting; summarizing; using common stylistic features through categories, commonalities and differences; incorporating studies on historical accounts, documents, and illustrative and photographic materials acquired from surveys of religious exhibits. This approach mainly focuses on relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition in the modern context. Like the Thai society which has evolved in response to internal and external influences, art itself is also dynamic and has evolved according to its surrounding context. One notable example is Praebaisri and Noobanjong (2019) which explored Mon Buddhist architecture during Thonburi and Rattanakosin Periods (1767-1932), employing a traditional

method to figure out studies on historical accounts and documents and photographic and illustrative materials acquired from surveys of thirty religious exhibits for data collection.

Second, the majority of the studies employ ethnographic approach emphasizing on the nature, development, and spread of Buddhism all over Thailand, relations between monasticism and the society, and how orthodox viewpoints and suppositions about Buddhism can be re-evaluated in light of the insights of historical ecology and landscape archaeology approaches. For instance, Singsu and Sirisuk (2020) traced the development of contemporary Buddhist art in northeast of Thailand. Similarly, Murphy (2013) traced the development and spread of early Buddhism in the Khorat plateau in northeastern Thailand as well as central Laos during the Dvaravati period. In the north of Thailand, Sooksawasdi (2013) Buddhist sects in Lān Nā, starting from the reigns of King Tilōk to Phayā Kāo (1441-1525) through the studies of dated bronze Buddha images in Chiang Mai. In the south of Thailand, Turee (2014) explored mural painting in the south of Thailand through the multi-cultural integration for contemporary style. It should be noted that this ethnographical study also employed mixes approaches, incorporating Buddhist art, archaeological sites and art history approach. Notable examples are Grunin (2018) in Trinakirana mudra in Buddhist iconography of Myanmar and Thailand, Clark (2011) in icon and image in modern Thai art, Kuphanumat (2011) in creativity and styles of Thai art based on the Buddhist belief in the threefold marks of existence (namely impermanence (aniccā), non-self (anattā) and misery or suffering (dukkha)), Akama et al. (2012) in Thai graphic design with a focus on a review of graphic design history as well as the role of graphic designers in Thai society, and Pattanachoti (2019) in the evolution and influences of Thai contemporary art through overlay imaging and individual, overlay memories, and spiritual identity.

Third, art historical approach is an attempt to understand the role of Buddhism to the society and the environment, its influences and its development. One notable example is the study by Sirisuk et al. (2015) which explores the works of Naga art in the Northeast of Thailand. It is a large ethnically diverse region with a long social history that represents religion, belief, political change and development. These are the factors that affect the way of life, arts and culture, for example, many Naga artworks appear in this region. Some studies use historical method to describe past events, illustrate present patterns, and anticipate future directions. This method may formulate a hypothetical concept and then test the concept for potential deviations. In the other example is the study by Wanviratikul (2014) that historically traced the influence of Egyptian lotus ornament of traditional Thai lotus shape decorative ornament. This study borrowed a historical method of qualitative research to verify a hypothetical idea that the evolution of lotus ornament from its origin in Egypt to Thailand. This was an attempt to illustrate the present Thai lotus ornament (e.g., Kranok or Lai Thai) in terms of a passage from the origin to Thailand, metamorphosis of the original shape and artistic connotation.

Fourth, a site-based archaeological approach usually focuses on religious architecture, monuments, remains, and others. One notable example is the study by Syafrony and Suwanpratest (2016) which compared the significances of Garuda in society, arts and architecture in Indonesia and Thailand. Their study found that common stylistic features (namely highlights, commonalities and differences) remain relatively unchanged and visually neglected while its different features attract attention and how the wider environment influenced these factors.

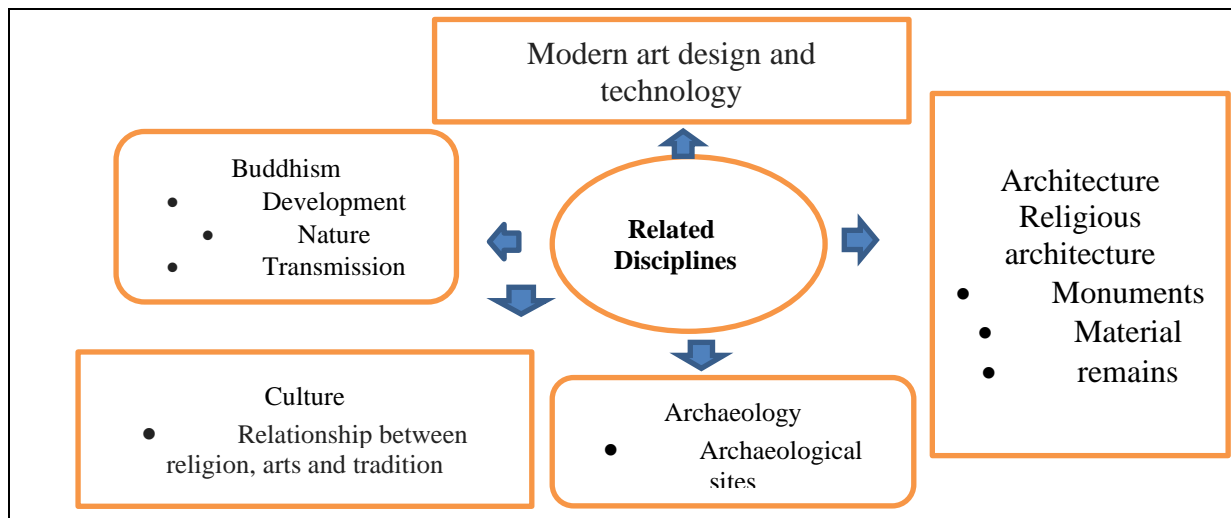
Lastly, a novel application of digital technology is being used to help visualize different forms and to better illustrate the evolution of forms. Instead of comparing styles by shifting attention between the previews images, viewers can now appreciate different styles, watching

one style transformed into another. This technique was applied to the study by Buddhist sculptures. One notable example is the study by Wisetchat (2013) which moved beyond a traditional approach, adopted a novel approach, and applied an innovative technique of digital “blend-shape animation” which yielded vivid visualization and delicacies of different styles to illustrate style evolution effectively. The method enabled full appreciation of commonalities and differences while various styles are being technologically compared through metamorphosis of styles. Other notable examples which incorporating novel application and technological advances are a review of the role of Thai graphic design culture (Akama et al., 2012) and features that transform the physical and natural landscape (Phonpho, 2014) in relation to lotus flower and Thai way of life in religion, art and tradition (Revire, 2011), in reviewing the reclining Buddha image in the Dvaravati art tradition (Chang, 2017, July) in Naga Art in Buddhist temples of Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand, and in a study of Bhadrāsana Buddha Images since the first millennium of Thailand (Revire, 2012).

Drawing upon the review, it can be concluded that all studies are based on qualitative research method. The majority of studies employed one single instrument (Singsu and Sirisuk, 2020; Grunin, 2018; Murphy, 2013; Janyaem, 2020; Sethaseree, 2011; Turee, 2014; Phonpho, 2014; Revire, 2012; Sirisuk et al., 2015; Wanvirkul, 2014). Some studies employed mixed or multi-methods (Guptabutra, 2018; Sooksawasdi, 2013; Lucas, 2013, December; Syafrony and Suwanpratest, 2016). A few studies employed field research (Chang, 2017, July; Praebaisri and Noobanjong, 2019).

#### 4.2 Disciplines related to contemporary Buddhist art research studies

Research studies regarding the contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand related to five disciplines as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5** *Disciplines related to contemporary Buddhist art research studies*

Figure 5 illustrates disciplines related to contemporary Buddhist art research studies. There are five disciplines. First, the Buddhist-related study deals with the development, nature and transmission of early Buddhism art throughout Thailand: in the northeast, the development and transmission of contemporary Buddhist art in the northeast of Thailand (Singsu & Sirisuk, 2020), and the development and spread of early Buddhism in the northeastern Thailand and central Laos in the Dvaravati period (Murphy, 2013); in the north of Thailand (namely religious sects in Lān Nā, between the reigns of King Tilōk and Phayā Kāo (1441-1525) through studies of dated bronze Buddha images in Chiang Mai (Sooksawasdi, 2013); and in the south of Thailand through studies of mural painting in multi-cultural integration for contemporary images (Turee, 2014).

Second, the cultural approach involves the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition. The studies include the relations of lotus to Thai lifestyle in terms of arts, religion, and tradition (Phonpho, 2014), pendant-legged Buddha Images in the Dvāravatī artistic styles and tradition (Revire, 2011); Mon Buddhist architecture (Praebaisri & Noobanjong, 2019), Bhadrāsana Buddha images from first-millennium Thailand (Revire, 2012), temple traditions on giants at the gates (Lucas, 2013, December), and Buddhist cultural remains of Sri Ksetra (Kyaing, (2019).

Third, the archaeological-related study focuses on Buddhist art or archaeological sites primarily concerning iconography (Grunin, 2018; Clark, 2011), style (Kuphanumat, 2011), local artistic design (Sirisuk et al. 2015), Naga art in Buddhist temples (Chang, 2017, July) and influences on arts (Pattanachoti, 2019; Wanviratikul, 2014).

Fourth, the architecture-related study directed toward religious architecture, monuments, and material remains: Mon Buddhist architecture in the Thonburi and Rattanakosin periods (1767-1932) (Praebaisri and Noobanjong, 2019) and a comparison of the significances of Garuda in society, arts and architecture in Indonesia and Thailand (Syafrony & Suwanpratest, 2016).

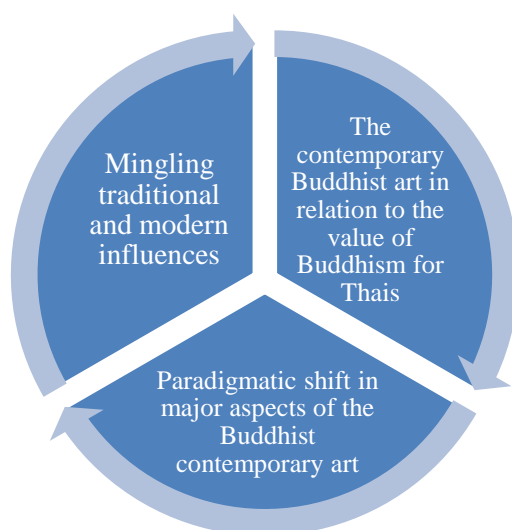
Fifth and lastly, the modern art and technology-related study engages with the evolution of the contemporary art such as the evolution of Sukhothai Buddha (Wisetchat, 2013) and Thai graphic design culture (Akama et al., 2012). Modern art design has been more accepted. Like the Thai society which has evolved in response to internal and external influences, art itself is also dynamic and has evolved according to its surrounding context.

## Research agendas

The research agendas include these three topics: (a) trends and patterns, (b) future research agendas, and (3) research proposals for future research inquiries. Below are details of each agenda.

### 4.3.1 Trends

To reflect the contemporary Buddhist artistic style, three major trends and patterns could be identified and photographically presented as follows.



**Figure 6** Trends and patterns of contemporary Buddhist research

Figure 6 illustrates major trends and patterns of contemporary Buddhist research. All selected studies all into one of these trends and patterns. First, the contemporary Buddhist art is based on mingling traditional and modern influences. In this trend, the studies on contemporary Buddhist art scholars have focused almost exclusively on the traditional Buddhist art (especially the emergence, nature, development, and spread of early Buddhism art) which has been extensively privileged over archaeological and historical evidence and was the mainstream of the Buddhist art in areas of northeast Thailand. Insights derived from archaeology and historical ecology and have evolved in response to internal and external influences. This indicated that art itself is also dynamic and has evolved according to its surrounding context.

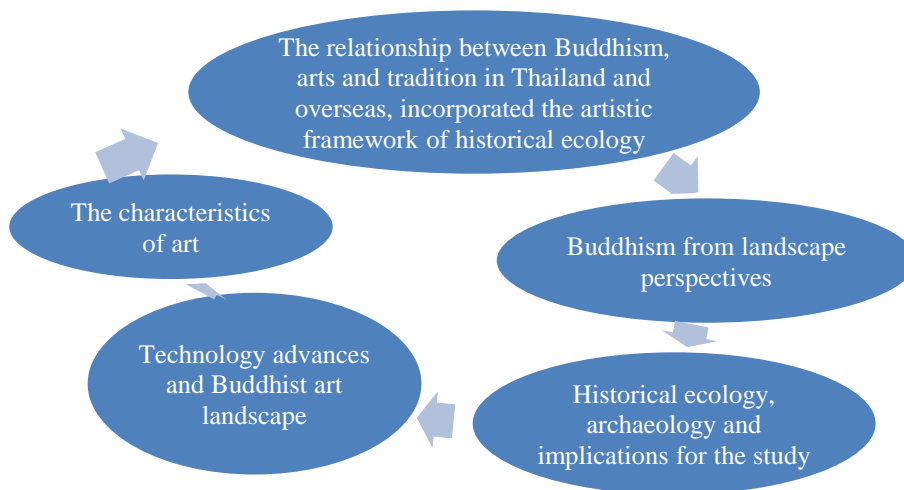
Second, there is a considerable increase in interest in the contemporary Buddhist art in relation to the value of Buddhism for common Thais. In this pattern, scholars tend to give more importance to the identity of Buddhism for Thai people nowadays and actually enters into their thinking system, taste and decision which more engages with everything in daily life as seen in the studies on the art of Naga, giants at the gate, lotus instead of Buddha images which are the main subjects of the traditional Buddhist art. This increasing interest may be a result of the fact that this style of art extends itself to the society and touches all dimensions of everyday life and does not limit itself within the boundary of a traditional style that mainly focuses on temples and monasteries. In addition, the meaning of Buddhism in Thai society is expanded into all dimensions of life that mixes with local beliefs which transforms influences of Buddhism on the development of contemporary art in response to the aesthetics of the local people.

Third, there is a paradigmatic shift in major aspects. In term of theme, there is a high tendency that the Buddhist contemporary art moves out of religious purpose to individual interpretation. Artists' individual interpretation plays a more pivotal role in artistic creativity. The meanings of Buddhism have thus been redefined into more tangible terms in the perceptions of individual public audiences. Buddha images and mural paintings in the past have developed into contemporary Buddhist art and Dharma art hidden under the country's economic and political policies and systems, tourism, and diplomatic strategies. In addition, in term of forms of art, there is a transformation from the traditional to modern methodology. There is a rising trend that incorporates technology into artwork. In the creation of contemporary Buddhist art, technology plays more crucial role in arts. Modern art designs and forms have been more accepted by artists because these forms symbolize their way of thinking and beliefs which are for the different stages of human mental and spiritual development. More than one third of the study in this involve innovations. This evidently indicates the influence of technology and globalization.

### ***Research agendas***

Five research agendas could be identified, proposed, and photographically presented as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7 illustrates research agendas in the Buddhist contemporary studies. All studies fall into one of these five agendas. The first research agenda was concerned with the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition in Thailand and overseas, incorporating the artistic framework of historical ecology. It illustrates that the relationship between relationship and the environmental of settlements without attempts to explain how the environment influenced the relationship.



**Figure 7** *Research agendas in the Buddhist contemporary studies*

The second agenda was engaged with Buddhism from landscape perspectives. Scholars see humanity and society as the primary agents in shaping the Buddhist landscape, agricultural progress, and settlement patterns.

The third agenda involving historical ecology, landscape archaeology and its implications for the study conducted by Buddhism landscape archaeologists has shifted from treating landscapes to purely physical phenomena to view these landscapes as intellectual factors that largely determine how a society is shaped, created and visualized. As a result, the audience sees and understands these features as part of the Buddhist landscape.

The fourth agenda illustrates technological advancement. Technology has more ability to shape the art and the influence of technology has increased. Technological advances include the ability to create more visible architectures that have potentials to transform the physical and natural landscape.

The fifth and last agenda describes the characteristics of art in northern Thailand in terms of the shape and elements of various historical periods representing different technical methods involving materials, shapes, lines, and colors, with the most obvious difference being the crest design and in terms of features. The main characteristic of northern Thailand was influenced by culture, as revealed by their motifs, shapes, patterns, etc.

***Research proposals for future research inquiries***

More attention should be paid to these four issues for future research inquiries. First, more attention should be given to insights of Buddhism from a broader view of its location within the landscape and more attention should also be paid to its relation to settlement patterns as well as the role that Buddhism has in building and the way of society. Most attention should be paid to settlement patterns essential to understanding Buddhism and the art itself, and its interaction with society.

Second, more attention should be paid to a historical ecology as natural ecology and environment play an active role in shaping and determining the settlement distribution made by the society and the physical and cognitive understandings of landscapes in their habitats. Limited attention was paid to ecology and environment and the potentials and constraints that these factors provide to create Buddhist landscapes.

Third, more attention should be paid to an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach that can clarify the role of Buddhism in the society may differ greatly from the one purely based on traditional art or archaeological sites.

Fourth and lastly, the role and development of Buddhism in the Thai society should be re-evaluated solely with regard to the source of the text and the arts, but also the environment and social and political conditions. Studies regarding new features and other potential applications that have called more attention should be applied more to the study by Buddhist contemporary art.

## 5. Conclusion

In retrospect, the review renders three conclusions based on the three RQs as follows.

Above all, on the first conclusion in response to RQ 1, on characteristics of the main research areas, all studies in this review were based on qualitative method. The three main areas consist of culture (n. = 25 papers), art (n. = 21 papers) and history (n. = 9 papers). The proportion of main research areas in the studies of the contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand consists of culture (46%), art (38 %) and history (16 %). The majority of the research studies (84%) involves culture and art while the minority of the studies engages with history. This indicates that culture and art play crucial role in the contemporary Buddhist art. Each of the three research areas of the studies in this review involve these contents. First, the culture-related contemporary Buddhist Thai art studies involves a wide variety of socio-cultural topics such as artifacts, art, museum, Buddhism, representation, semantics, aesthetics and tourism. Second, the art-based areas engage with a multiple artistic styles, media and forms. Lastly, the history-based studies illustrate historical Thai art in relation with the influence of Buddhism. The benefits of these studies led to insights of the evolution of contemporary Buddhist art as well as the current contemporary Thai art.

In addition, on research approaches, the research methods of the studies in this review fall into five groups. First, a traditional approach in this review involves these methods: describing; classifying; highlighting; summarizing; using common stylistic features through categories, commonalities and differences; incorporating studies on historical accounts, documents, and illustrative and photographic materials acquired from surveys of religious exhibits. Second, the majority of the studies employ ethnographic approach with a focus on nature, development, and spread of early Buddhism all over Thailand, relations between monasticism and the society, and how orthodox viewpoints and suppositions about this phenomenon can be re-evaluated in the light of the insights of historical ecology and landscape archaeology approaches. Third, art historical approach is an attempt to understand the role of Buddhism in the society, its influences and evolution. Fourth, a site-based archaeological approach involves religious architecture, monuments, material remains, and others. Lastly, a novel application of digital technology is adopted to help visualize different forms and to better illustrate the evolution of forms rather than comparing styles by shifting attention between the preview images, viewers can now appreciate different styles, watching one style transformed into another. The majority of studies employed one single instrument. Some studies employed mixed or multi-methods. A few studies employed field research.

On the second conclusion in response to RQ 2, the contemporary Buddhist art research studies involve five disciplines. First, the Buddhist-related study deals with the development, nature and transmission of early Buddhism art throughout Thailand. Second, the cultural approach involves the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition. Third, the



archaeological-related study focuses on Buddhist art or archaeological sites. Fourth, the architecture-related study directed toward religious architecture, monuments, and material remains. Lastly, the modern art and technology-related study engages with the evolution of the contemporary art such as the evolution of Sukhothai Buddha and Thai graphic design culture.

On the third conclusion in response to RQ 3, research agendas for contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand be structured in these aspects. In brief, future contemporary Buddhist agendas for researchers should pay more attention to insights of Buddhism from a broader perspective, a historical ecology, an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach and reassessment of the role and development of Buddhism in the Thai society.

In addition, the major trends and patterns of contemporary Buddhist research fall into one of these trends and patterns: first, the contemporary Buddhist art being based on mingling traditional and modern influences, second, interest in the contemporary Buddhist art in relation to the value of Buddhism for common Thais, third, a paradigmatic shift in major aspects in term of theme (namely a high tendency that the Buddhist contemporary art attempts to separate religious purpose to individual interpretation and artists' individual interpretation) and, in term of forms of art (namely a transformation from the traditional to modern methodology incorporating technology into artwork). The research studies in this review involve these five agendas: (1) the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition in Thailand and overseas, incorporating the artistic framework of historical ecology, (2) Buddhism from landscape perspectives, (3) historical ecology, landscape archaeology and its implications in the perspectives of archaeologists, (4) increases in technology to shape the art, and (5) the characteristics of art in northern Thailand in terms of the shape and elements of various historical periods.

Lastly, on research proposals for future research inquiries, more attention should be paid to these issues for future research inquiries: (1) insights of Buddhism from a broader view of its location, (2) a historical ecology as natural ecology and environment, (3) an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach to clarify the role of Buddhism in society, and (4) re-evaluation of the role and development of Buddhism in society.

## **6. Implications**

This study provides understandings of these key issues (namely characteristics of the main areas of contemporary Buddhist art research studies in Thailand, disciplines relating to the contemporary Buddhist art research studies, and the research agenda for contemporary Buddhist art in Thailand).

In addition, this study yields insights of these key issues (namely the major trends and patterns of contemporary Buddhist research, interest in the contemporary Buddhist art in relation to the value of Buddhism for common Thais, and a paradigmatic shift in major aspects in term of theme and in term of forms of art). Insights are also concerned with key agendas (namely the relationship between Buddhism, arts and tradition in Thailand, Buddhism from landscape perspectives, historical ecology, landscape archaeology and its implications in the perspectives of archaeologists, increases in technology to shape the art, and the characteristics of art in northern Thailand in terms of the shape and elements of various historical periods).

Lastly, this study recommends proposals for future research inquiries relying on more insights of Buddhism from a broader view of its location, more inclusion of a historical ecology

as natural ecology and environment, more promotion of an analytic, innovative and technology-based approach, and more re-evaluation of the role and development of Buddhism in society.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

This review is limited to the numbers of chosen papers. Only full papers were chosen. However, in order to establish more rigorous and inclusive results of the study, the numbers of citations of published papers to be chosen for future inquiry should be taken into account in the future inquiries.

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