

Sovereignty, Sacred Space, and the *histoires croisées* of Wat Rachathiwat วัดราชาธิวาส

Thursday, 28 September, 2023, 13:30-15:00
3rd Floor, Mid-sized Meeting Room, Inamori Bldg, CSEAS



No
Reservation
required



Lawrence Chua
Visiting Research Scholar

Lawrence Chua is a historian of the modern built environment with a focus on the histories of transregional modern architecture and urban culture in Asia. He is currently an associate professor at the School of Architecture, Syracuse University. He has been a Scholar in Residence at the Getty Research Institute, a Marie S. Curie fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, and a fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden. He is the author of *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist felicities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021). He is co-editor of the book series *ArchAsia: Histories and Futures of Asia's Architecture, Urbanism, and Environments* for Hong Kong University Press. With the artists Julie Mehretu and Paul Pfeiffer, he is a founding board member of Denniston Hill, a queer artist of color-led arts and social justice organization in upstate New York.

In 1908, the Siamese monarchy undertook the renovation of the ordination hall or *ubosot* of Wat Rachathiwat, a Theravada Buddhist monastic complex in Bangkok that was adjacent to an 18th-century community of displaced Khmer Catholics. The historicist design integrated regional medieval idioms from Angkor with the Italian Baroque. As renovation of the *ubosot* began, Siam was compelled to recognize France's territorial claims to Angkor Wat, which lay in the former Siamese province of Siem Reap. Often framed by nationalist historiography as a "loss of territory," this event can be better understood as a shift in conceptions of sovereignty based no longer on cosmological relations but on delimited territorial claims. This change in theories of political authority was accompanied by a change in economic relations as the monarchy moved from a transregional tributary economy and began to participate in a new world economy of nation-states and empires. These changes registered across multiple scales, including architecture. The system of royal craftsmen or *nai chang* that had historically been responsible for the monarchy's built works was being superseded by a system of architect-experts or *sathapanik* and migrant construction labor. This study frames the *ubosot* as a network of historical crossings in which medieval and modern understandings of sovereignty, identity, and architecture encountered one another in an era of unprecedented political and economic upheaval. It connects the renovation of the sacred space of the *ubosot* with the delineation of territorial borders between Siam and what would become the French protectorate of Cambodia and the reorganization of labor in the building trades.