

On the “7-Elevenization” of Buddhist Murals in Thailand: Preventing Further Loss of Local Cultural Heritage in Isan

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Abstract

Thailand's local cultural heritage includes early 20th century Buddhist murals painted on ordination halls (*sim*) in Isan, including a specific group in Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, and Roi Et that shares certain distinct features. Each set of murals is unique in composition, narrative imagination, and artistic ability. Murals like this ceased being painted after 1957, however, when notions of nation building and “Thainess” superseded the value of indigenous cultures and their expression in art and literature. The ordination halls built since then are generally based on generic designs of the Department of Religious Affairs in Bangkok. Moreover, murals are now painted on assembly halls (*ho jaek*) rather than ordination halls and reflect a central Thai aesthetic based on the posters produced and sold by the So. Thammaphakdi Company in Bangkok. The condition of the old murals that remain varies greatly, with the best example of preservation being at Wat Chaisi in Khon Kaen province. The temple is actively used for festivals and educational activities by the village community, university professors, students, and Khon Kaen municipality. This paper recommends that the remaining murals be preserved by forming a consortium of abbots, wat communities, and academics at universities in Isan where murals are located, with Wat Chaisi serving as a model.

Keywords: local cultural preservation, Isan, murals, *sim*, Wat Chaisi

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บทคัดย่อ

มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมถิ่นอีสานของไทยกลุ่มหนึ่งคือ ภาพฝาผนังโบสถ์ (ลิม) ที่ศิลปินพื้นบ้านเขียนไว้ตั้งแต่ต้นพุทธศตวรรษที่ 20 พบมากตามจังหวัดทางภาคอีสานตอนกลาง ได้แก่ จังหวัดขอนแก่น มหาสารคาม และร้อยเอ็ด ภาพฝาผนังแต่ละชุดนั้นมีความเด่นด้านการสร้างสรรค์ศิลปะ จินตนาสร้างเรื่องราว และความสามารถทางศิลปะท้องถิ่น อย่างไรก็ตาม หลังจาก พ.ศ. 2500 ปรากฏว่าการเขียนภาพฝาผนังได้หยุดชะงักไป เมื่อความคิดเรื่องการสร้างชาติและกระแสความเป็นไทย มองไม่เห็นคุณค่าของวัฒนธรรมพื้นถิ่นรวมทั้งการแสดงออกซึ่งวัฒนธรรมเหล่านั้นด้วย โบสถ์ที่สร้างขึ้นหลังจาก พ.ศ. 2500 ส่วนใหญ่จะทำตามรูปแบบโบสถ์ของกรมการศาสนาในกรุงเทพมหานคร ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น ปัจจุบันนี้ภาพฝาผนังซึ่งเขียนตามผนังวิหาร และสะท้อนถึงศิลปะความงดงามแบบภาพกลาง ล้วนได้แบบอย่างมาจากโปสเตอร์ซึ่งร้าน ส. ธรรมภักดีผลิตจำหน่ายที่กรุงเทพมหานคร ภาพฝาผนังแบบเดิมที่ยังมีอยู่ก็มีสภาพเปลี่ยนไปมาก ที่พอจะเห็นเป็นตัวอย่างได้ดีที่สุดอยู่ที่วัดชัยศรี จังหวัดขอนแก่น วัดนี้ใช้เป็นสถานที่จัดงานประเพณีและจัดกิจกรรมทางการศึกษา โดยชุมชนชาวบ้าน อาจารย์มหาวิทยาลัย นักศึกษา และเทศบาลนครขอนแก่น บทความนี้เสนอแนะว่า ภาพฝาผนังโบสถ์ที่ยังคงสภาพอยู่ควรได้รับการอนุรักษ์ โดยการสร้างกลุ่มผู้สนใจอันประกอบไปด้วย เจ้าอาวาสวัด ชุมชนของวัด และนักวิชาการในมหาวิทยาลัยในภาคอีสาน โดยมีวัดชัยศรีเป็นแบบอย่าง

คำสำคัญ: การอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่น อีสาน ภาพฝาผนัง ลิม วัดชัยศรี

The preservation of cultural heritage – especially local cultural heritage – is seldom addressed in the climate of rapid urbanization, globalization, and technological development that pervades Thailand today. In terms of Buddhist material culture, over the past several decades countless unique temple buildings reflecting the country's diverse ethnic groups and their historical experiences have been torn down or simply left to fall into ruin. The buildings that replace them in most cases are based on generic designs of the Department of Religious Affairs, resulting in the proliferation of homogenous Bangkok-style buildings throughout the entire country. Much of the loss of local cultural heritage can be traced back to the central

government's focus on nation-building and its arbitrary imposition of notions of “Thainess” for much of the 20th century (see Sattayanurak, Saichol, n.d.) The result has been cultural homogenization as seen in what James Stent, head of the Working Committee of the Siamese Heritage Trust of the Siam Society calls “monotonous building styles that lack spirit and to traditions that lack soul” (Stent, 2012:8).

People in many regions far from the capital, he writes, “have been conditioned to believe that if they build temples in their communities in the styles that their ancestors developed, then they will be looked down upon by officials—they will be seen as ‘provincial’ so better to adopt accepted Bangkok styles” (Stent, 2012:8).

These developments have contributed to both a lack of appreciation among people throughout the country for their own culture and to a widespread lack of interest in knowing about the past among Thais in general. Moreover, Buddhist monks have generally done little to change the traditional idea that sponsoring a new temple building brings greater merit than does maintaining an old one.² The resulting phenomenon of virtually identical buildings cropping up everywhere is reminiscent of the explosive growth of 7-Eleven minimarts shops throughout the country.³ In both cases, they are functional, predictable, and monotonous – attributes that might be appropriate for a minimart, but not for a Buddhist temple building.

² A notable example occurred right across the Mekong River, in Vientiane in 2000 when a wihan covered with murals depicting early 20th century *Pha Lak Pha Lam*, the Lao Rama story, was torn down to be replaced by a new building.

³ See <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lite/topstories/333420/cp-all-to-operation-7-eleven-in-neighbouring-countries>.

Village Temples and Murals as Cultural Heritage

At one time the term “cultural heritage” was applied solely to the study of ancient monuments, as countries around the world sought to establish a national identity growing out of a glorious, and sometimes mythologized, past. In Thailand this can be seen in the Fine Arts Department’s renovations of historical/archaeological sites. Sukhothai, for example, has become associated with a “golden age” of prosperity under a wise, just, and paternalistic monarch. For example, see Peleggi (2004).

Now, however, cultural heritage is understood to include not only ancient monuments, but also vernacular (local) culture, community culture, intangible culture, “local wisdom,” and more.⁴ It is no longer the exclusive domain of the elite. Thus, in Isan (the northeast region), cultural heritage includes not only the grand stone monuments of Prasat Phimai and Phanom Rung but also less well-known, modest, ephemeral objects like *pha yao Phra Wet* (long cloth scrolls with paintings of the *Vessantara Jataka*) (see Lefferts and Cate, 2012), wooden Buddha images, and village mural paintings.

These murals – which are the focus of this paper – date from the first half of the 20th century and are located primarily on the walls of small ordination halls known in the local Lao/Isan language as *sim*.⁵ Those in the

⁴ As exemplified by The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00006>

⁵ One *wihan* is also covered with murals on the interior. It is at Wat Pho Chai Na Pheung in Na Haew district, Loei province (http://isan.tiewrussia.com/wat_phochai_napuang/). The wat was founded by migrants from the Luang Prabang area, just across the river. Other wats with murals can be found at Wat Pho Kham, Wat Buddha Sima, and Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi, in Amphoe That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom Province and at Wat Thung Sri Muang at Ubon Ratchathani (Pairote, 1989). See also Polson also (2012). The Art of Dissent: The Wall Paintings at Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani. The Journal of Lao Studies, 3(1), 91-127. Retrieved from <https://www.laostudies.org/system/files/subscription/JLS-v3-i1-Oct2012-polson.pdf>

central Isan provinces of Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, and Roi Et comprise one of three distinct groups, as classified by Pairote (1989: 264).⁶ Each *sim* is distinct, illustrating the diversity of ideas and practices that existed prior to centralization policies imposed by the Bangkok government and the Sangha in the early 20th century.⁷ And, each comprises a valuable component of cultural heritage as it represents a vernacular architectural form springing from a devotional expression that will never be duplicated. The murals painted on the walls of these *sim* likewise represent an equally valuable aspect of local cultural heritage. At some temples, the murals are on both the interior and the exterior of the *sim*, a feature not found elsewhere in Thailand (see fig. 1, exterior of Wat Sa Bua Kaew, Khon Kaen province).⁸

Moreover, it must be emphasized that these paintings are not weak imitations of “classical” murals found in the Central Region, but rather ingenious compositions based on local versions of Buddhist stories and local ways of imagining and telling them. The creativity of the artists is evident in the animated figures, impressionistic foliage, and unique compositions that grace the *sim* walls (see fig. 2, Wat Sa Bua Kaew, detail). Females, with their hair pulled up and dressed in *phasin* (tube skirts) with Lao weaving patterns have a sweet, charming elegance, while males exude vigor and flirtatiousness. The figures, resembling shadow puppets, are two-dimensional and iconic, and arranged in clusters within larger compositions. The murals, particularly

⁶ The three groups are the following: an actual local group, as seen in murals in central Isan provinces of Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, and Roi Et; a Bangkok influenced group, in Khorat; and a Lanchang-Bangkok influenced group, along the Mekong River.

⁷ Kamala Tiyanich (1997) describes this diversity and its demise so well.

⁸ It should be noted that murals are found at other temples in Isan, but they do not share the characteristics of this group, either because the *sim* style is architecturally different or because the murals are not on both the interior and exterior.

those on the exterior, consist of several registers that meander across the walls.⁹ For this reason, following the story line requires considerable effort on the part of the viewer. Moreover, there is no standardized location for the starting point of a narrative – it could be on any almost wall; and on some *sims*, scenes from two or more stories share a wall. An example is Wat Ban Yang in Maha Sarakham province, where exterior wall space includes scenes from three narratives: *Life of the Buddha* and the *Vessantara Jataka* (seen in fig. 3) as well as *Phra Malai*. Yet, every wat is different: for example, at Wat Sanuan Wari in Khon Kaen, the vast majority of the exterior is devoted exclusively to scenes from *Sinsai*, except for a hell scene on the west wall.

Another characteristic of early murals is the presence of one or more bawdy scenes or details with a sexual content, particularly when the *Vessantara Jataka* is depicted. Critics from outside the region, especially westerners,¹⁰ sometimes find such scenes offensive, but they are probably unaware that such scenes are often found the cloth scrolls (*pha phra wet*) as well. These scrolls are carried in ritual processions during *Vessantara Jataka* festivals (*bun phra wet*) which are occasions of great joy and fun; participants, walking in procession, often share bottles of home-made whiskey along the route. Moreover, some wats celebrate *bun phra wet* during festivities for Songkran, the Thai and Lao New Year, which occurs in mid-April, and which “[a]mong the early Tai...was intended to ‘reenact the early high female status and to help the renewal of...nature through ritual sexual intercourse.’”¹¹

⁹ In some cases the murals resemble some of the long cloth scrolls (*pha phra wet*) carried in processions during Bun Phra Wet (*Vessantara Jataka* festivals) and it is possible that the murals evolved from the more ephemeral and less costly cloth scrolls. I have suggested this to Leedon Lefferts and Sandra Cate.

¹⁰ See Jaiser (2009: 79).

¹¹ Sommai and Dore, *Lan Na Traditions*, 175, cited in Kamala (1997, 28- 29).

Murals like these ceased being painted in the middle of the 20th century, as demonstrated by Khon Kaen University lecturer and artist Burin Pleengdeekul (2011). His groundbreaking survey of murals in the provinces of Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham and Roi Et pointed to 1957 as a turning point in terms of both the themes and styles of murals painted. Before 1957, local Buddhist *jatakas* like *Sinsai* and *Phra Lak Phra Lam*¹² were popular, along with the local versions of the *Vessantara Jataka*, *Phra Malai*, *Life of the Buddha* (three main events),¹³ and to a lesser degree the *Thotsa Jataka* or *Ten Jatakas*. Local *jatakas*, in fact, as Kamala (1997) points out in her richly descriptive book on forest monks, were the stories that regional Buddhists throughout the country preferred to listen to even more than the *Life of the Buddha* as the hero embodies “an ideal of human conduct, the bodhisattva ideal.” Moreover, after working hard in the fields, “villagers did not want to sit through a boring discourse. But they were willing to sit through the day and long into the light listening to a *jataka*,” hoping to be entertained (Kamala, 1997: 33-34).¹⁴

After 1957, however, local *jatakas* like *Sinsai* and *Pha Lak Pha Lam* were no longer painted. These changes coincide with changes in government priorities under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who took power as prime minister after staging a coup d’etat.¹⁵

¹² I have included *Sinsai* as a local *jataka* even though it is not found in any of the Pannysa *Jataka* collections because it functioned as a *jataka* in that its hero is a bodhisattva and the narrative includes a final section (*muang chadok*) identifying each character in the story with one in the life of the Buddha.

¹³ The events illustrated were the Bodhisattva’s departure from the palace, his attainment of enlightenment and touching the earth, and his death and final nirvana. The many other events sometimes seen in Central Region murals are not found.

¹⁴ Kamala (1997) tells of Luang Pu La in San Kanphaeng District, Chiang Mai: “Villagers listened to stories word by word...A well-turned phrase brought an exclamation of satisfaction or a gale of laughter” (34).

¹⁵ For a detailed account of martial law under Sarit, see (Thak Chaloemtiarana, 2007).

Martial law had the effect of exerting conformity in every aspect of life, including Buddhism.

This was particularly true in the Northeast because of its proximity to Laos and a shared culture with the people of Laos. "Under martial law," Kamala (1997:229) writes, "any nonconformist monk—whether a town monk, village monk, or forest monk, and no matter what his tradition—was at risk of being labeled a communist and imprisoned without bail or trial." She quotes a high-ranking monk who was arrested, forced to leave the Sangha, and jailed for five years, as saying,

it was very easy in those days to be accused of being a communist. 'Evidence' of the most tenuous kind could be produced: the fact for instance, that I am from the Northeast: an area where 90 percent of the population are poor farmers. Obviously, it was whispered, a breeding-ground for agitators. (Kamala, 1997: 229-230)

It is likely that this attitude on the part of those in power played a role in the demise of local Lao *jatakas*.

Moreover, the murals painted after 1957 changed dramatically in their location, composition, and conception. They began to be painted on the interior of the assembly hall rather than on the *sim*; and the meandering panoramas of the past that had occupied an entire wall were replaced by individual scenes, each enclosed in a frame with a label identifying it and its sponsors.

The differences in the style of the figures are equally striking. Rather than being flat and iconic as before, they have become more solid-looking and naturalistic and they are dressed in the costumes seen in

Central Thai dance drama rather than the local clothing of earlier murals.¹⁶ Western perspective is usually incorporated into the composition, with mountains and roads receding into the background; and brightly-colored acrylic paint rather than natural pigment is used. Perhaps most significantly, the composition of the murals at all the wats is virtually the same, as they are all inspired by and often copied directly from prints produced by the Bangkok religious publishing company So. Thammaphakdi & Sons. The differences between the pre- and post-1957 murals can be clearly seen by comparing fig 4, an early 20th century rendition of a Vessantara Jataka mural depicting Matsi's encounter with animals in the forest with a modern version in fig. 5. In the former, the scene is part of a much larger landscape of the forest, while in the latter, it is isolated and set in a frame.

The So. Thammaphakdi prints have had a pervasive impact on murals not only in Isan, but throughout the entire country. In an MA thesis on murals in northern Thailand, Hacker (2011) relates that wherever she travelled, people were familiar with the company's postcard sets that she carried with her.¹⁷ The images, drawn by Phra Thewaphinimit, a Fine Arts Department art and archaeology lecturer, were promoted in the 1950s through his collaboration with the company's founder. The aim of the two men was to create simplified images of traditional Thai Buddhist stories by incorporating Western perspective and naturalistic human forms that could be easily

¹⁶ One could compare this change to the difference in Christian art of the Eastern Orthodox versus the Roman Catholic traditions.

¹⁷ However, they were not familiar with the source of the scenes in the murals "No one," she writes, "seemed concerned or interested with the name So. Thammaphakdi, even though their temples were adorned with the Phutthaprawat series images from ceiling to floor" (p. 91).

understood by laypeople (Hacker, 2008: 65).¹⁸ The Fine Arts Department aesthetics at the time, she states, favored realism, which “was closely linked to the strength and unity of a nation” as seen in the Democracy Monument which includes “images of masculine men contributing to one another’s labor, the core foundation of a nation” (76). Similarly, the So. Thammaphakdi series was in accordance with Luang Wichit’s idea of “a Thai mono-identity or, the idea of one Thai identity” shared by everyone throughout the nation (78).

Following market success and nationwide distribution, the posters have come to represent a new “Thai” style despite the fact that the series originated in Bangkok and excludes local understanding of the stories depicted (*Life of the Buddha*, *Phra Malai* and the *Vessantara Jataka*, all of which have different regional “tellings” or versions). Murals copied either directly or indirectly from So. Thammaphakdi posters/prints are now painted throughout Thailand by travelling craftsmen skilled at copying or painting from memory. Hacker (2011:107) asserts that many painters “do not rely [directly] on the posters and postcards to paint their murals, and some are not even aware of the relationship.” However, in 2013 I witnessed murals being painted in the assembly hall of Wat Si Khun Muang, Loei province by a Chiang Mai artisan copied directly from photocopies of So. Thammaphakdi posters he had hung there to make it convenient for local people to choose the picture they wished to sponsor (see fig. 6).

A comparison of murals at various wats reveals only minor variations arising from differences in the talents of the painters. Moreover, details reflecting current tastes are often included, as can be seen in recently painted Vessantara Jataka murals at Wat Khi Lek in Khi Lek village, Ubon Ratchathani province. In fig. 7, we see the Chuchok chapter, featuring the

death of the gluttonous Brahmin Chuchok, whose intestines have burst open after he consumed a huge amount of food, set in a modern house with a tile floor. Chuchok is tended by his wife Amittatha and two other women all wearing generic tube skirts and upper body cloths. A hint of cleavage is evident, reflecting a look that has gained popularity among young women over the past few years. The scene has a solemn, antiseptic quality about it, with Chuchok’s intestines lying neatly on his abdomen after having burst open. In the foreground is a variety of western food, including several kinds of bread, a bowl of apples, and a whole roast chicken. The mural, by a Roi Et painter, mirrors changing social and economic conditions in Isan, where modern amenities and international foods have become part of the local landscape, as have marriages between local women and older foreign men.¹⁹

This is in sharp contrast to earlier paintings, which treat Chuchok’s excessive eating with humor, such as fig. 8 from Wat Sanuan Wari in Khon Kaen province. Here, the high point of the chapter is related in onomatopoeic style in the caption: “*thong phram taek tum tai*” which can be roughly translated as, “the Brahman, his belly bursting open in a bang, bit the dust.”

What can be done to preserve local ordination halls and murals?

The new generic murals are obviously very popular among Thai people throughout the country. They have become an expected component of a new or remodeled assembly hall that is clean, bright, and comfortable, and thus a source of pride and unity for a community. Yet, as this paper has argued, the old murals and the *sims* on which they are painted comprise

¹⁹ With the large number of marriages between Isan women and European men, one cannot help but wonder the extent to which local women identify with the Amittatha-Chuchok motif.

¹⁸ Hacker (2008: 76) writes that Tewaphinimmi was influenced by Corrado Feroci, often known as the ‘father of Thai modern art’, whose work embodied classical 18th century European art forms.

a valuable cultural heritage which should be preserved. Moreover, there is a growing interest in preserving the murals among academics, artists, art historians, and the general public, as evidenced by the number of Facebook pages and websites devoted to Lao/Isan culture,.

Only a few wats have old *sims* that are still in use. The best example of preservation and active use is Wat Chaisi in Ban Sawatthi, Khon Kaen (fig 9). There, the nearly 100-year-old murals on the interior and exterior of the *sim* have been preserved through the joint work of the abbot, local village community, and Khon Kaen University professors. Aesthetically, while these murals lack the delicate line and Impressionistic-looking brushwork, they are highly original in their composition and energy. Moreover, they are the best preserved and are used regularly for teaching and diverse activities by numerous stakeholders. The *sim* is still used for ordinations and the temple compound has regular activities centered around the subject of the murals, which depict the Lao epic *Sinsai*. The wat is a source of pride for Sawatthi villagers, who are all familiar with the wat's history and the murals' content. They are also proud of the interest shown not only by Khon Kaen University but also by the two Buddhist universities in Khon Kaen²⁰ as well as the municipality and various institutes in Vientiane.²¹

Unfortunately, not all Isan wats with traditional *sims* have been so fortunate, including some that received generous financial support. And it is interesting that in three such cases, the impetus for conservation and

preservation came from the outside, unlike Wat Chaisi, where it came from the abbot. The first such case is Wat Sa Bua Kaew in Nong Song Hong District, Khon Kaen province, mentioned above. After the Siam Society received a report in 1998 from a member that the wat had recently installed a new Central Region style roof whose narrow eaves offered no protection from the rain and sun, grants were raised totaling 2,705,000 baht for a new roof. Funding from the Siam Society, the Dutch ambassador, and several Thai corporations was sufficient to replace the roof with one whose wide profile was more appropriate and closer to the original. When the roof was completed in 2001, a dedication ceremony was held, featuring the Thai King's sister, Princess Kalayani Watthana, and a delegation from Sri Lanka. As a result, the wat is well known and has received many visitors. However, it has never initiated any activities related to the subject matter of the murals (*Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the Lao version of the Rama epic). While the *sim* remained in good condition for several years, when I visited it last year, the base was crumbling in places and the area surrounding the *sim* was overgrown with weeds.

Another case involved a project initiated by a regional university to promote education and protection of murals at Wat Photharam and Wat Pa Rerai in Maha Sarkham province. The project received a grant of a million baht (over US \$30,000) from the American Ambassador's Fund for training sessions for teachers, local government officials, elementary school students, local weavers, and others. The sessions were led by university lecturers and Tourism Authority of Thailand officials to teach the villagers about the murals. Weavers were encouraged to incorporate motifs from the murals into their textile patterns and students were taught how to draw pictures based on them

²⁰ Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University have branches in Khon Kaen.

²¹ They include the Children's Poetry Reading and Folk Singing Project, led by Daravong Kanlagna, which teaches children to read and sing Lao poetry by using important literary works. In cultural circles "Sinsai" has also become a kind of brand name to suggest traditional culture and literature. One such venture is the Sinxay Cultural Club, which promotes Lao culture.

and to act as guides. A local shadow puppet troupe was engaged to perform and teach children how to make puppets and perform the stories seen in the murals. In the end, an official ceremony involving all parties, including US Embassy staff, was held in which certificates were handed out to all the participants. However, after the funds were exhausted, the activities ceased.²²

Wat Na Khwai in Amphoe Muang, Ubon Ratchathani province is still another example of where sensitive renovation has preserved the building and its original aesthetic (see <http://isan.tiewrussia.com/wat_bannakai/#>). The exterior walls have been repaired and tastefully painted, and a new roof has been installed mirroring the shape of the one that it replaced. However, the *sim* is now a lifeless a museum piece, its door locked, its murals unseen.

The case of Wat Sanuan Wari in Khon Kaen province exemplifies still another kind of problem: an apparent lack of genuine interest in promoting modest works of local culture on the part of Bangkok authorities. Following the construction of a new *sim*, the old one continues to remain open for visitors to see and is often used for private merit-making ceremonies. When it needed some renovation, the Fine Arts Department stepped in but did a careless job of minimally patching the base of the *sim* and replacing the roof with one of unattractive galvanized sheet metal.

Conclusion

Over the past sixty years many aspects of local cultural heritage throughout Thailand have fallen into ruin or been torn down, including Buddhist ordination halls and murals in Isan. At the same time, however, a growing number of Isan academics, artists, and ordinary people are

²² (Personal email communication with Udom Buasri, one of the committee members for the project, September 15, 2014).

becoming concerned about the remaining murals, as can be seen in the number of new publications about them as well as the appearance of new websites and the frequent posts on Facebook by individuals and groups interested in Isan culture. It is obvious that a considerable amount of networking and information exchange is taking place. The question then is how this interest, sharing, and research can be channeled into a movement that will foster sustainable preservation of the murals. For preservation to be sustainable, it depends on a commitment to preserving the murals, especially on the part of local communities and individuals who see their value as cultural heritage.

Consequently, I recommend that a consortium be created, composed of abbots of the wats involved, wat communities, and academics at universities in Isan provinces where *sim* are located.²³ Wat Chaisi can serve as a model to follow, but with sufficient flexibility for each participating wat community to choose the activities it would adopt. Academics and local government officials in each area would be encouraged to form sustainable partnerships with abbots of the wats with murals or to strengthen those relationships already existing.

The consortium would encourage the wats to adopt some of the practices initiated by Wat Chaisi, such as learning to identify the scenes in the murals, organizing regular informal camps for youths, and holding annual festivals based on the theme of its murals. The festivals should include a broad base of stakeholders from diverse economic, social, and economic groups: villagers, professors, teachers, students of all ages, local government agencies, youth groups, etc. Activities would include traditional and

²³ Maha Sarakham University and Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University would be likely candidates as they are close to Khon Kaen and have faculty with specialties in art and culture.

contemporary means of telling and performing the stories depicted in the murals. Villagers would be encouraged but not compelled to attend and would likely be attracted by the opportunity to take part in entertainment and merit-making. Forums like this, it is hoped, would stimulate the sharing of knowledge about the murals and promote their preservation and protection. They could potentially lead to a greater sense of identity with, and shared pride in, local Isan-Lao culture.

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Photographs

- fig. 1 - Wat Sa Bua Kaew, Khon Kaen, exterior.
- fig. 2, Wat Sa Bua Kaew, detail.
- fig. 3 - Wat Ban Yang in Maha Sarakham province, where exterior wall space includes scenes from three narratives: *Life of the Buddha*, the *Vessantara Jataka*, and *Phra Malai*.
- fig. 4 - A modern Vessantara Jataka mural depicting the Matsi chapter in which Matsi encounters animals in the forest; from Wat Na Khwai, Ubon Ratchathani
- fig. 5 - An early 20th century Vessantara Jataka mural depicting the Matsi chapter; from Wat Ban Lan, Khon Kaen.
- Fig. 6 - So. Thammaphakdi posters and newly painted murals, Wat Si Khun Muang, Loei.

Fig. 7 - New Vessantara Jataka mural, Chuchok chapter at Wat Na Khwai, Ubon Ratchathani, depicting the dying Chuchok.

Fig. 8 - Early 20th century Vessantara Jataka mural, Chuchok chapter at Wat Sanuan Wari, Khon Kaen, depicting the dying Chuchok.

Fig. 9 - Well-preserved early 20th century murals at Wat Chaisi, Khon Kaen.