

NOTES

A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF WAT UMONG THERA JAN (CHIANG MAI)

by

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This "Note on the history of Wat Umong Thera Jan" is an abstract of a part of an article which, due to other work, I shall not be able to put into printable form for some time to come. However, since Jao Chün Sirorot, who spends so much energy, love and money in restoring Wat Umong, has asked me for at least five years to let him and the monks know more about the place they enjoy so much, and since friends often have asked me for some bare facts and the conclusions to which I have come, without lengthy discussion of details, just something to ponder about—I therefore agreed to set up this Note¹.

Until now (1974) the history of Wat Umong Thera Jan (Monastery with caves for the monk Jan) is still not well known.

Legend has it that the founder of Chiang Mai, King Mang Rai, in about 1300 A.D. built the monastery for the highly learned but sometimes mentally deranged monk Jan (Pāli canda "moon"). This monk, it is said, used to stroll away from his monastery into the forest and would then not be available for consultation when needed. Therefore, the King had Wat Umong built, and the caves decorated with paintings of trees, flowers and birds so that the monk could wander around in them and could still be easily found.

However, archaeological and historico-philological findings do not quite agree with that.

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- 1) This Note results from research work done by me at the Lan Na Thai Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.—Wat Umong Thera Jan is about 5 km southwest of Chiang Mai, beyond the airfield, at the foot of Dòì Suthep. One of its attractions is a network of vaults made of bricks and decorated with paintings.

Although the monastery is still awaiting proper archaeological investigation, I have been assured by experts, both Thai and foreign, that the paintings in the caves as well as in the crypt under the *jedi* (P. *cetiya*), do not go back to Mang Rai's time, but date from a later period, perhaps between 1380-1450. According to the same expert opinions, the present shape of the *jedi* suggests an even more recent date, approximately between 1450-1550.

None of the usual chronicles or inscriptions seem to mention Wat Umong. As far as I know, only one written source may perhaps refer to the monastery: Banha Thera Jan, "The problems of (i.e. composed or solved by) the monk Jan". This work, by an unknown author, obviously was composed several hundred years ago. Its original is lost, but a number of later copies still exist in the form of palm leaf manuscripts; the languages used in them are Yuan (Kham Müang, i.e. the language of Chiang Mai and North Thailand) and Pāli; the script is Yuan.

This work, in the form handed down to us, seemingly was not intended to be a biography of the monk Jan, nor to be a history of Wat Umong, but, as its title indicates, to present the "problems", which are recorded in detail, including questions and answers. Still, it gives some historical data. Unfortunately, these are not always chronologically arranged but are scattered here and there throughout the text, which often makes it impossible to place them in their historical context, and even to say with certitude (at least from the versions known to me) that the text indeed refers to Wat Umong. Moreover, the text mentions two Wat Umong; besides, it contains a number of errors, and some of the manuscripts differ on certain points.

However, by comparing the facts mentioned in the manuscripts with the usual historical sources and present-day toponymes, and then trying to arrange them in chronological order, it seems to me that the results of such an investigation may point to the Wat Umong in question as being one of the two Wat Umong mentioned in the text, and further that the results harmonize more with the archaeological findings mentioned



Fig. 1. The jedi of Wat Umong There Jan, seen from the south.
Foto: Hans Penth 1970.

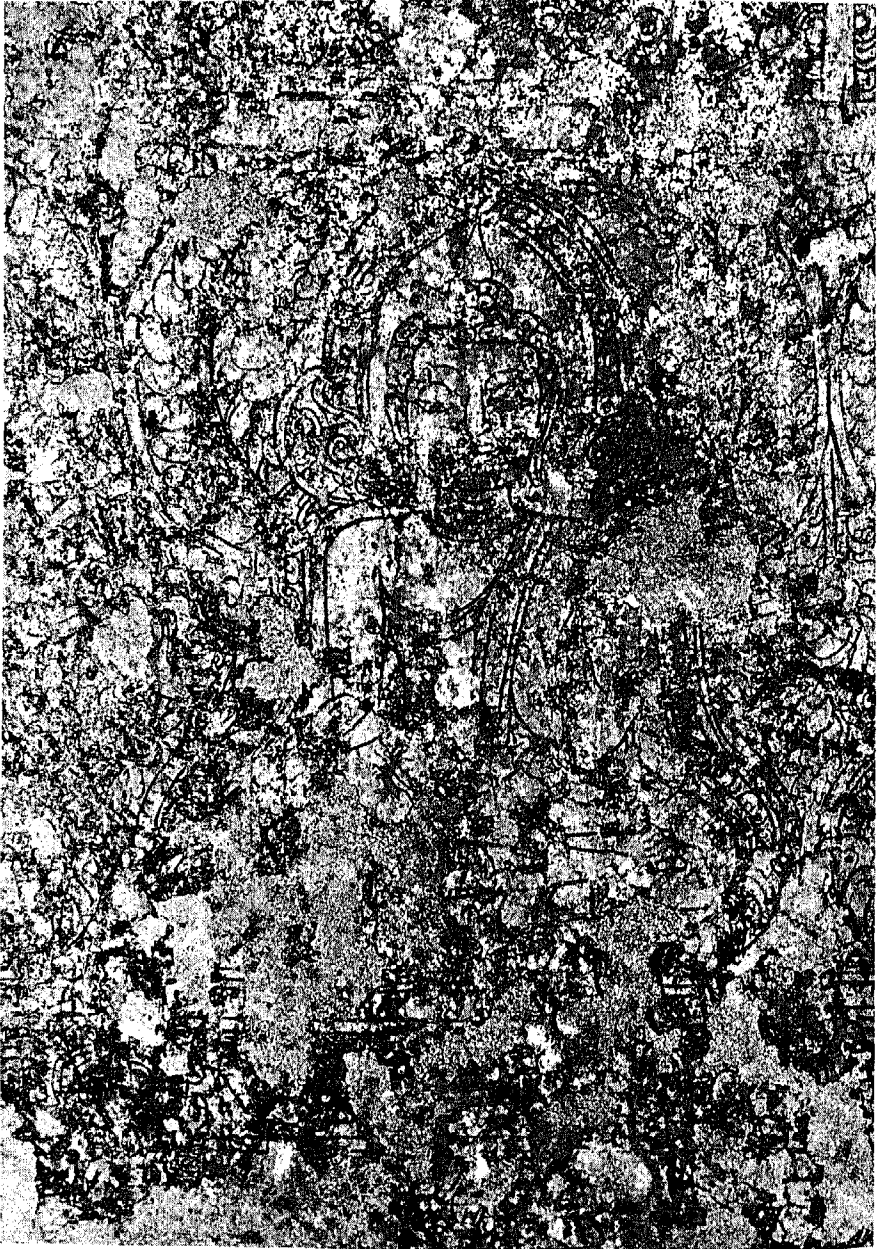


Fig. 2. Wall painting in the crypt under the jedi.

Foto: Hans Penth 1970.

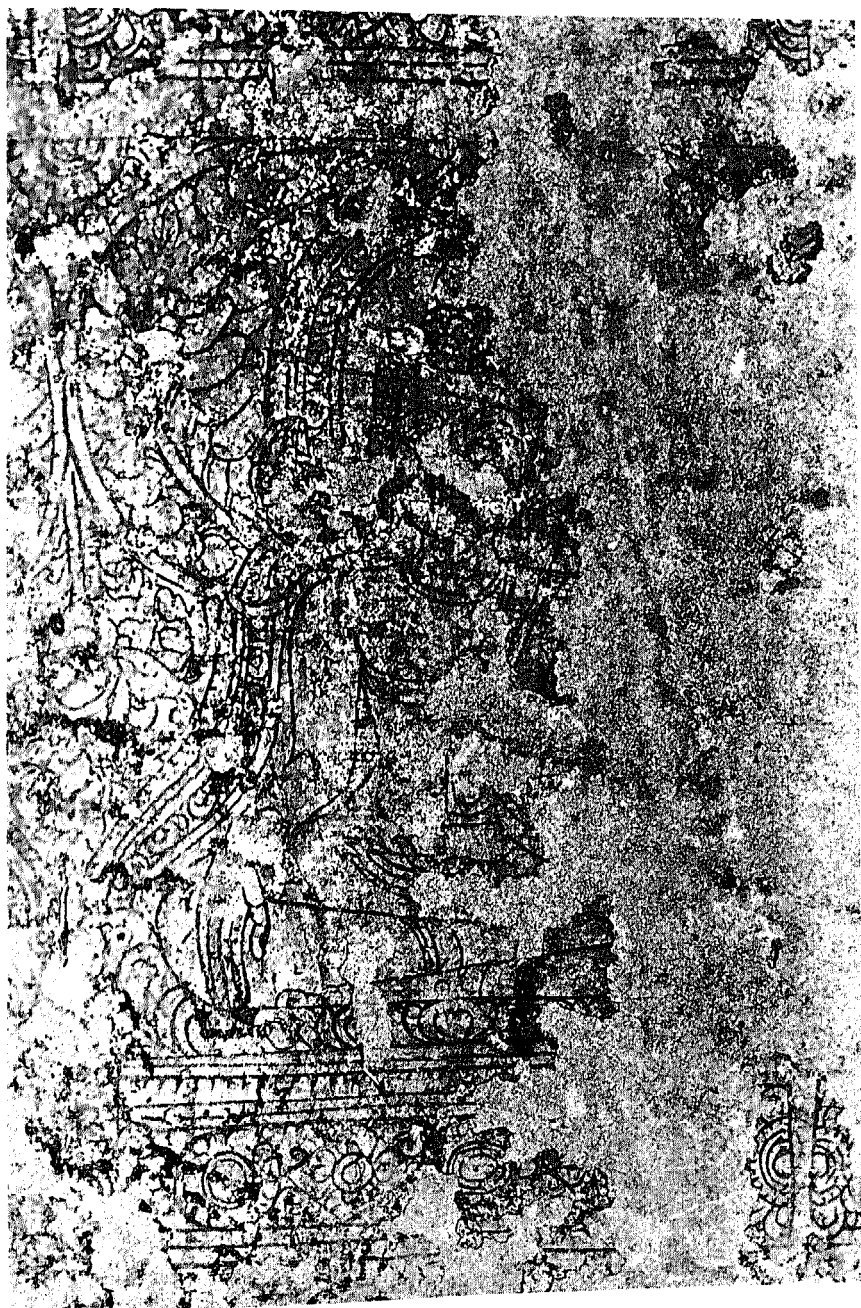


Fig. 3. Wall painting in the crypt under the jedi.
Foto: Hans Penth 1970.



Fig. 4. Wall painting in one of the caves.

Foto: Hans Penth 1965.

than with the legend. Here are the main events according to the text, together with the conclusions at which I arrived :

Circa 1360-1370, the later monk Jan was born in a village which the text calls Ban Phai (Bamboo-Village) and places in the M^uang Wua (Cow-District). I do not know where that was, but am inclined to think that (a) the village was not too far from D^oi Suthep because later in the text the monk is said to have ascended the mountain without making it appear that it was a long journey, and that (b) the village was to the south or southwest of Chiang Mai, because the teacher of monk Jan's own teacher is said to have lived in Wat D^oi Kham which lies about 4 km southwest of Wat Umong.

In 1378, he was ordained novice in the monastery of his home village. At the age of 17, he came to Chiang Mai or further studies, and while there, he lived in Wat Phot N^oi or Wat Ph^oi N^oi at the Chiang Mai market (kat Chiang Mai). Again, I do not know where that was, but am inclined to think that it may have been either close to the present-day Chiang Mai Gate (Pratu Chiang Mai) because many roads of former Chiang Mai seem to converge on that spot, or close to Wat Phra Sing which is known to have been a market place before it was founded in the middle of the 14th century.

He was ordained monk in Chiang Mai, presumably at the age of 20. Three years after his ordination, says our text, and seven years after the Buddha's relic had been brought from Wat Suan D^ok to the top of D^oi Suthep, thus about 1380-85, he went up D^oi Suthep and for several days and nights recited holy texts, by which means he hoped to gain supernatural intelligence in order to learn and understand quickly the Buddhist Canon (Tipiṭaka). While he was thus reciting, a beautiful goddess approached him, questioned him about what he was doing there and then asked if he would leave the monkhood once he had gained intelligence. When he replied in the negative, she handed him the desired intelligence as something small to eat. Taking the intelligence from her, he also grasped her hand, and for this immodest act she told him that in the future, he would be mentally deranged.

Having returned to his village, he studied the Canon with great success: He learned its three parts, including commentaries to the Vinaya, within not quite three and a half months. He became famous in a short time. Periodically, however, he was unconscious of his doings, became restless and disappeared into the forest.

Towards the end of his reign, in the middle of the 1380's, King Kū Na (r. ca. 1355-1385) invited him to come and live in the Welukattharam (Bamboo-Monastery; P. *veḷukaṭṭhārāma*) under its head monk.

This monastery, our text says, derived its name from the fact that when King Mang Rai came to found the city-state of Chiang Mai, on that spot there was a small forest of eleven clusters of bamboo. King Kū Na had caves built in the Welukattharam, so that the monk Jan could live and wander around in them and still could be easily found. Hereafter, this monastery was called Wat Umong Wihan (either "Monastery with caves beneath the Wihan (P. *vihāra*)" or "Monastery with a wihan consisting of (or : located in the) caves").

In Chiang Mai, several times I have heard the opinion expressed that this Welukattharam is identical with Wat Umong Thera Jan, but nothing in our text seems to indicate this clearly. There are just a few indirect pointers: The head monk, called a mahāthera in some of the manuscripts, is not included among the six mahātheras living in Chiang Mai (see below); the site of this monastery would be ideal for a monk with the mental disposition of the thera Jan; there are no other similar monasteries in the neighbourhood; the large caves of Wat Umong Thera Jan and their sumptuous decoration would well point to an inhabitant highly respected and honoured by the king and his followers; the farmers in the neighbourhood still call the monastery Wat Umong Thera Jan; etc. On the whole, it seems possible to accept the identification of Wat Umong Thera Jan with Wat Umong Wihan of our text, but definite proof is missing.

If the identification is correct, then it seems likewise possible that King Kū Na did not live long enough to see the construction and embellishments of the caves finished.

According to our text, the monk also lived in another monastery situated in the walled town of Chiang Mai, which monastery King Kū Na (or perhaps his successors) had placed at his disposal, together with a number of servants.

The deep erudition of the monk became widely known in a short time; he gave advice and made decisions in both religious and secular matters, and high-ranking monks, princes and kings consulted with him. In those days, according to our text, there were six mahātheras living in Chiang Mai, all perfectly well versed in the Tipiṭaka. "In that time", our text continues, "the (Buddhist) religion had not yet come to Chiang Mai very much. When a problem arose, they (i.e. the six mahātheras) went to consult with the thera Jan. He could solve any difficulty".—For King Kū Na, upon request, he composed a kind of "guide to proper conduct", and he did the same later for King Ti Lok (r. 1441-1487).—Between 1387 (King Kū Na is no longer mentioned) and 1402 he solved a number of "riddles" or "problems", questions to test his knowledge, sent to him from monks in Kamphāng Phet; he likewise sent them riddles, which they could not solve.—He established "guidelines" not only for princely and high ranking personalities, but also for his own disciples.

The thera Jan, whom our text also calls thera Janta or Jao Janta Salom (Sanskrit śramaṇa) died at the age of 77, around 1445, in the Wat Umong Nōi (Monastery with a small cave).

This monastery is perhaps identical with his above mentioned monastery in town, and it may be possible that it is the same which is called at present Wat Umong Ariya Monthon. I have been told by some old Chiang Mai citizens that this monastery, about 50-60 years ago, was likewise called Wat Umong Thera Jan.

Hereafter, we hear nothing more about Wat Umong, but I cannot believe that the jedi and the vaults were neglected or uninhabited all the time. Judging from the embellishments on the jedi, faint remains or "shadows" of which are still visible in places, I am inclined to think that a restoration took place perhaps between 1800-1840.

At about 1900, according to local tradition, robbers forced their way into the jedi and stole everything from it.

Since about 1948, Jao Chun Sirorot and his friends have been busy in clearing and embellishing the place, repairing walls and salvaging the caves. When they began, the place was deserted and overgrown, and a layer of sand, 80-100 cm high, filled the caves in which one could only crawl but no longer walk. While removing the sand, unfortunately the whole lower part of the paintings in one cave was removed as well, because nobody suspected there were paintings!

Today, Wat Umong Thera Jan is part of the "Garden of Buddha's teachings" (Suan Phuttha Tham), and monks, nuns and a few laymen live there. Spiritually, Wat Umong is close to the School of Chaya (Wat Suan Mok).