

Preserving Temple Murals in Isan: Wat Chaisi, Sawatthi Village, Khon Kaen, as a Sustainable Model¹

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ABSTRACT—Wat Chaisi in Sawatthi village, Sawatthi District, located about twenty kilometers from the bustling provincial capital of Khon Kaen, is a unique example of local cultural heritage preservation that was accomplished solely through local stakeholders. Its buildings, as well as the 100 year-old murals on the ordination hall, have been maintained and are used regularly for merit-making and teaching. The effort was initiated by the abbot and is maintained through the joint effort of the *wat* community, Khon Kaen Municipality, and various individuals and faculties at Khon Kaen University. This paper will examine the role of local leadership in promoting local cultural heritage.

Introduction

Of the more than 40,000 Buddhist *wats* in Thailand seventeen percent, or nearly 7,000, are abandoned.² Of those still in use, many are becoming increasingly crammed with seemingly superfluous new structures, statues, and decorations, funded by people seeking fame or improvement in their karmic status. Still others are thriving because of the donations they attract through their association with what is sometimes called “popular Buddhism,” a hodgepodge of beliefs in magical monks, amulets, saints, and new rituals aimed at bringing luck and financial success (Pattana 2012).

Yet countless others are in a moribund state, in some cases tended by one or two elderly, frail monks who lack the physical and financial resources to maintain them. Both situations are related to the loss of cultural heritage, as countless unique

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² There were a total of 40,717 *wats* in Thailand as of December 31, 2004, of which 33,902 are in current use, according to the Office of National Buddhism. See <http://www.dhammathai.org/watthai/watstat.php>, accessed March 20, 2015.

old buildings throughout the country have been torn down and replaced by generic modern ones based on a Central Region model provided by the Department of Religious Affairs.

Against this background, Wat Chaisi stands out. Located in what I call the Isan Heartland (Brereton and Somroay 2010), the center of Thailand's northeastern region, about twenty kilometers from the bustling provincial capital of Khon Kaen in Sawatthi village, its modest but inimitable, century-old ordination hall and the unique murals covering it are the basis of local pride and spiritual focus. Through regular activities based around the story depicted in the murals and local Lao-Isan ethnic traditions,³ Wat Chaisi is a source of stability and cohesion for the villagers of Sawatthi even as the province where it is located is among those experiencing the nation's greatest rate of growth and construction.⁴

Twenty-five years ago, however, Wat Chaisi was in a state of decline as the result of having been without permanent resident monks for three decades. The temple was revitalized when the current abbot, Phra Khru Bunchayakorn, a native son of Sawatthi who had moved away with his family as a child, returned and led the community in renovating the ordination hall, restoring its traditions, and renewing the people's faith. The process has enabled the village to experience a sense of empowerment, identity, and self-esteem.

Using this temple as a model that might inspire others, this paper will identify key leadership, organizational, and communication factors that have contributed to the preservation of cultural heritage at the local level in northeast Thailand. It should be noted that this preservation was accomplished without any intervention, promotion, or support from either the Tourism Authority of Thailand⁵ or the Fine Arts Department.

Tradition and change

As recently as forty years ago in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies, the village monastery served as the hub and the heart of community life; it functioned as a spiritual center, gathering place, school, medical dispensary, fairground and more. A large percentage of men were ordained at some point in their life for varying periods of time and most boys received their education as novice monks. Temple buildings, while modest by today's standards, were a source of local pride and cohesion as

³ The vast majority of people in the Northeast are of Lao ethnicity with ancestors who migrated to Thailand for various reasons, sometimes as prisoners of war.

⁴ Land prices in Khon Kaen in 2013 rose more than 30 percent, but, a glut of housing began to appear early in 2015. See Sasithorn (2015), Somluck (2013), Kanana (2015).

⁵ However, in 2014 the local Khon Kaen branch of the Tourism Authority was planning a pilgrimage-style tour for Thais to a number of Isan wats, including Wat Chaisi, and sent a group of representatives to discuss plans with the abbot.

they were built through communal effort and support. Each temple was distinct, with a design that emerged from the imagination, resources, and local tastes of the community.

Over the past four decades Thai society's rapid modernization, urbanization, and economic growth have taken their toll on spiritual life. The ratio of monks and novices to the population has fallen by more than half (Fuller 2012) and critics, such as Phra Paisal Visalo, feel that Thai Buddhism is in a state of crisis.⁶

At the same time, Thailand has lost much diversity in the material aspects of its spiritual culture. This has been in large part due to the country's nation-building policy throughout most of the 20th century, propelled by notions of "Thainess," (Saichol n.d.), which de-emphasized regional cultural variations and ethnic roots. In terms of temple architecture, the Department of Religious Affairs issued standard designs based on Bangkok aesthetics that can be found on new temple buildings constructed throughout the country. James Stent, head of the Working Committee of the Siamese Heritage Trust of the Siam Society, has pointed out that, "Local communities in the provinces have been conditioned to believe that if they build temples... 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: 7-8).

Moreover, murals as diverse as those discussed in this paper are no longer being painted. Instead, throughout the entire country, most of the murals painted after the late 1950s closely follow, or are copied directly from prints produced by the Bangkok religious publishing company, So. Thammaphakdi & Sons (Hacker 2011; Burin 2011).

While Isan is better known for its ancient majestic Khmer ruins, which have been heavily promoted by the Fine Arts Department and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, its cultural heritage also includes numerous lesser-celebrated, modest Lao ordination halls dating from the first half of the 20th century. Known in the local Isan (Lao) language as *sim*, these buildings exhibit remarkable architectural diversity both in their form and in the murals depicted on many of them. Efforts to preserve them were first initiated in the 1980s by artist Pairote Samosorn and architect Wiroj Srisuro, Khon Kaen University professors born and raised in southern Thailand. Their perspective as outsiders perhaps enabled them to see the uniqueness of the buildings and their murals, and lobby for their preservation with local abbots who were inclined to prefer modern replacements. A survey conducted by Pairote (1989) found seventy-four temples with murals, some of which no longer exist. Within this group exists a subgroup of fifteen temples that have murals on both the exterior and interior walls of the ordination halls. This subgroup is found primarily in three

⁶ "Public faith is constantly eroded by wayward monks, their blatant abuse of the saffron robes, widespread laxity in monks' discipline, fierce competition for monastic ranks, and distortions of Buddhist teachings." See Intharachai (2015).

provinces—Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, and Roi Et.⁷ Murals found in other parts of Isan, such as those along the Mekong River, are stylistically different from those in the Isan Heartland, which are the focus of this paper (Pairote 1989; Brereton and Samroay 2010).

The ordination halls discussed here share several characteristics, including a broad low roof that extends outward on all sides to protect the murals from the effects of sunlight and rain.⁸ In addition, most have a substructure composed of the following: an eastern (front) wall consisting of three narrow bays with a door in the center; a western (back) wall of three narrow bays; and side walls of three wider bays with a window in one or two of them. Yet the façades of each *sim* are totally different, as are the stylistic features and artistic quality of the paintings. At Wat Chaisi, the façade is a complex, crowded composition of pilasters, false windows, redundant window frames, and moldings resulting in a fragmented surface divided into compartments of different sizes and shapes, with countless corners and protrusions (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). While this would seem like an unlikely background for murals, the artist has managed to completely fill in the compartments with vigorous paintings that cover every inch of the surface, even wrapping in and out of the many corners formed by the pilasters.

The narrative depicted at Wat Chaisi is *Sinsai*,⁹ one of the most popular stories depicted in Isan murals. It is often called one of three masterpieces of Lao classic literature,¹⁰ which exists in numerous forms and was extremely popular in Isan until the second half of the 20th century. The story, set in an ancient royal city, centers on the abduction of the king's sister by an ogre (Lao: *nyak*) and the efforts of her three nephews, one of whom is the hero Sinsai, to bring her back home. The plot is one of high adventure and magic as Sinsai encounters countless mammoth-sized elephants,

⁷ Numerous *sim* with murals of diverse styles are also found on ordination halls in Amnat Charoen, Ubon Ratchathani, Mukdahan, and Nakhon Phanom. In Ubon Ratchathani, Wat Thung Sri Muang's paintings reflect Central Region murals both in style and the content of genre scenes, which reflect Bangkok, rather than Isan ways of life. See Polson (2012).

The oldest extant murals, and one of the finest examples are on the *sim* at Wat Si Maha Bodhi in Wan Yai Sibdistrict, Mukdahan. An interesting group of diverse murals is also found in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom province. They include Wat Pho Kham, Wat Buddha Sima, and Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi in Amphoe That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom Province (Pairote 1989). The murals at these three *wats* are significantly different from each other and from those in the Isan Heartland and are found only on the interior *sim* walls. At still another temple, Wat Pho Chai Na Pheung in Na Haew district, Loei province, the murals are not on the *sim* but on the *wihan* interior, primarily on the interior walls with a few on the exterior (http://isan.tiewrussia.com/wat_phochai_napuang/). This *wihan* is stylistically similar to those in the Luang Prabang area, just across the river.

⁸ Unfortunately, the roof at Wat Chaisi was replaced by a tall, narrow Central style roof.

⁹ The story is known by several names including *Sang Silpa Chai*, *Sang Sinchai* and others. There are numerous versions or "tellings" of the story in various languages.

¹⁰ This was the opinion of Maha Sila Viravong, "the most respected and authoritative scholar of Lao history and culture." The other two masterpieces, according to Maha Sila, are the *Vessantara Jātaka* and *Thao Hung Thao Cheuang*. See Chamberlain (1989-90).



Figure 1. Wat Chaisi, Sawatthi Village, Khon Kaen (all photos by the author)

Figure 2. Wat Chaisi, north wall with false windows, scene from Sinsai





Figure 3. Wat Chaisi, left side of entryway, hell scenes and descriptions

Figure 4. Wat Chaisi, hell scenes



nagas (mythical Southeast Asian water serpents), and giants, many of whom have supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly, shape-shift, and regenerate new heads when decapitated during battle. *Sinsai* himself is endowed with super-human archery skills and the ability to communicate with the huge mythical birds (Lao: *khрут*, or *garudas*) that come to his help.

In addition to being an adventure story, *Sinsai* is filled with Buddhist teachings and Thai/Lao values such as non-attachment, karma, sacrifice, harmony, unity, and gratitude to parents that the hero expounds throughout the narrative. Moreover, the



Figure 5. Wat Photharam, south wall; life in the Isan countryside goes on as usual during the dramatic scenes from the Life of the Buddha.

Figure 6. Wat Photharam, north wall



most famous versions ¹¹ follow the typical *jātaka* format of a story that is narrated by the Buddha about a past life ending with a final passage in which all of the story's characters are identified with persons in the Buddha's present life.¹²

¹¹ Some versions of the story state that it is a *Jātaka*, a story of one of the previous lives of the Buddha. In fact, these versions include a passage identifying every character with a personage in the life of the Buddha, just as the *Jātakas* do. However, the story is not found in either the canonical or local collections of such birth stories.

¹² While the story resembles the Southeast Asian non-canonical Fifty *Jātakas*, it is not found in any of the collections of these stories, of which there are several.

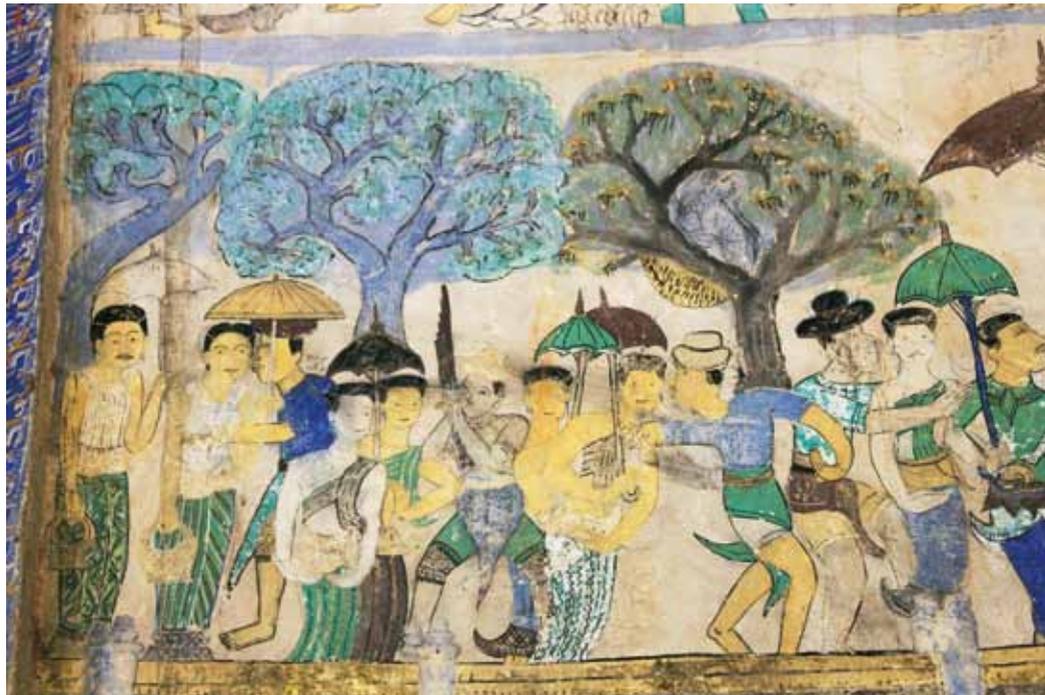


Figure 7. Wat Sa Bua Kaew, east wall, left of door, detail of mural of Phra Lak Phra Lam mural

Sinsai is depicted on murals at several other temples in the region, all of which differ in the specific scenes represented, as well as in craftsmanship, and conception.¹³ Those at Wat Chaisi lack the fine line drawing of murals at Wat Photharam in Maha Sarakham (Figure 6) and Wat Sa Bua Kaew (Figure 7) in Nong Song Hong district, Khon Kaen.¹⁴ Yet Wat Chaisi's murals are among the most memorable because of their explosive energy and idiosyncratic composition. In addition they are the best known in the region because of the temple's frequent activities.

History

As related in a booklet assembled by the abbot (Bunchayakorn n.d.), Wat Chaisi was founded in 1900 and, as was often the case, the *sim* was built later, in 1922, and the murals were painted after its completion. The *wat* flourished under the first two abbots, but after the death of the second one in 1960 there were no monks in residence on a regular basis and Wat Chaisi experienced a series of problems. Many old objects were lost as there was no one to look after them and the *wat's* position as a place of knowledge and a spiritual center for the community was in a state of crisis.

It was not until 1989, when Phra Khru Bunchayakorn, the current abbot, came to Wat Chaisi that the situation improved. A Sawatthi village native, Phra Khru

¹³ See Figures 1, 2, and 3.

¹⁴ Yet at Wat Sa Bua Kaew and Wat Photharam not all murals are of equal quality but are the work of more than one artist of differing skills.

Bunchayakorn was born in 1962 and moved with his family when he was a young child to a village in Nong Khai province, some 170 kilometers away. After completing a course of study in Bangkok at the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, in 1989 he ordained at a *wat* in Nakhon Phanom. Shortly afterward, the villagers in Sawatthi invited him to preside at Wat Chaisi. Only twenty-seven at the time, he made an effort to learn as much about the *wat*, its history, and the murals by talking to village elders. He learned about the *wat*'s illustrious past under its founding abbot, who had designed the remarkable *sim*, which was then in need of repair. Rather than replacing the *sim* with a new one, as so often happens, he set out to repair the old one and use the murals as a focal point for the *wat*'s restoration both as a place and as a community. Like many others of his generation, he had heard the *Sinsai* story when he was a child, but was not familiar with the many details of this complex epic. He gradually learned to identify scenes in the murals with events in the narrative by talking with villagers as well as with Khon Kaen University professors familiar with local Lao Buddhist literature. Under his leadership, more and more people were able to identify the scenes depicted in the murals. Eventually the *Sinsai* theme became a symbol for the community and the villagers decided to rename their streets with names of characters and places from the story.

He also directed the writing of the booklet mentioned earlier (Bunchayakorn n.d.) that includes a summary of the *Sinsai* story, a list of the traditional twelve-month Lao merit-making festivals (*heet sipsong*),¹⁵ and the history of Sawatthi village and the *wat*. According to the booklet, Sawatthi was established in 1794, when the area was still covered with forest.¹⁶ Its founding is connected to an incident in which a runaway elephant determined the site where the village would be built. Elephants play auspicious roles in many Buddhist stories and historical chronicles, and the site is described as having traces of an earlier glorious culture. In fact, it is highly likely that the village is the site of a city dating back to the Dvaravati civilization that flourished from the 6th to the 13th centuries in several parts of Thailand. Archaeological remains connected to Dvaravati in Isan include tall sandstone boundary markers known as *bai sema*, one of which is housed at Wat Chaisi along with fragments of others which were found by villagers working in their paddy fields some years ago. Much of this information about local history is known among the villagers and it contributes to their sense of pride in their community.

¹⁵ For a description of the traditions, see: <http://isaan-life.blogspot.com/2011/11/12-traditions-heet-sipsong-month-1-in.html>.

¹⁶ According to the booklet, one day three men from a nearby village brought their elephants to feed in the forest, but one of the elephants went into musth (a frenzied state when hormones are at a high level during mating season) and fled. They pursued him, but were astonished to find him standing quietly on a hilltop, no longer in musth. As they looked over the surrounding area, they noticed traces of a moat, several ponds, *wat* buildings, pieces of broken pottery, and the remains of a kiln, indicating that an ancient city must once have existed there. The men returned home to tell others and many of them moved there, believing that it had once been a glorious place.

The objects are all housed at the *wat*'s modest local culture museum along with a collection of pottery, traditional village implements for farming and harvesting, and other miscellanea. The *wat* also has a simple assembly hall, or *ho jek*, made of bamboo where religious and educational activities as well as seminars are held.

To keep the *Sinsai* story alive among the younger generations, the abbot has organized regular weekend sessions and camps where youths can choose to learn to decipher the murals, make copies of the paintings, and learn to perform the story in *moh lam* (folk opera) and shadow play.¹⁷ The activities are completely voluntary as Phra Khru Bunchayakorn wants to reach those who are truly interested rather than compelling anyone to attend. The abbot sees *Sinsai* as a story that teaches ethics, morals, ancient history, government, and concepts of war and peace. Interest in the epic has spread to several faculties and administrative offices at Khon Kaen University, which has sponsored several conferences on the topic of *Sinsai*. Likewise, the students' traditional Isan musical ensemble has incorporated *Sinsai* in its name (*khana pong lang sinsai*). Special activities held at Wat Chaisi in conjunction with Buddhist holidays are often attended by groups of teenagers from Laos. Groups of university students have visited the *wat* on their own to make videos of their visit.¹⁸

Wat Chaisi's other regular activities include observing the traditional Lao-Isan monthly festivals mentioned above, some of which are no longer practiced at many other *wats*, especially those in urban areas. One of these festivals, *Bun Khao Jii* (roasted sticky rice festival), held in February, is devoted to a weekend full of pursuits devoted to the *Sinsai* story. Daytime activities on Saturday include art workshops based on the murals and seminars led by academics from Khon Kaen's three universities¹⁹ on topics related to historical, religious, and philosophical aspects of the epic. The evening is devoted to performances of parts of the story accompanied by bands playing modern versions of traditional music with guitars, keyboard, drums, etc. Participants include academics from the region, students, monks, villagers and Khon Kaen municipal officials. On early Sunday morning, long before daybreak, participants gather on the temple grounds sitting on mats by the light of the full moon to roast sticky rice balls over small charcoal stoves (Figure 10). At dawn they present the rice balls and other offerings to the monks who walk in procession receiving alms.

In addition to coordinating such multi-community events, Phra Khru Bunchayakorn has been a resource for professors and doctoral students at three universities in Khon Kaen city who have done research on the *Sinsai* epic (see Chob 2007; Sowit 2010, 2012a, 2012b). He is a frequent participant in seminars on Lao literature organized by Khon Kaen University. In addition, he has also served as a key

¹⁷ For an account of traditional Isan shadow play, see Brereton and Somoray (2007).

¹⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBxhFL98_iI

¹⁹ Along with Khon Kaen University, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University have branches in Khon Kaen.



Figure 8. Khon Kaen University art students use Wat Chaisi murals to inspire the creation of a cloth scroll painted with scenes from the Sinsai epic at the annual Sinsai *Bun Khao Jii* festival in February 2013.

Figure 9. Sinsai on Khon Kaen street light



advisor to officials of the Khon Kaen municipal government, which in 2005 selected Sinsai as the city's symbol.²⁰ Phra Khru Bunchayakorn also serves as district representative to the Sangha (monkhood) council and has received awards for his contributions from Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen province, the Thai Ministry of Culture, and Khon Kaen Municipality. The sustainable preservation of Wat Chaisi's murals in all likelihood would not have happened without him.

However, it should be noted that the *wat's* location—only twenty kilometers from Khon Kaen city with its three universities—is a key factor in the success of the abbot's preservation efforts. It is convenient for professors, university students, Khon Kaen

²⁰ In choosing the epic to represent Khon Kaen, the municipality erected in the busiest part of town 200 streetlight poles with figures of the story's three heroes on the finials.



Figure 10. Sawatthi villagers, students, Khon Kaen city residents, university professors and others attending the annual *Bun Khao Jii* festival stay up all night to watch *Sinsai* being performed in traditional and contemporary style while roasting glutinous rice balls which they will offer to the members of the *wat Sangha* at dawn

city officials, and visitors from Laos to visit. Moreover, the *wat* has benefited greatly from the avid interest of Khon Kaen municipal officials as the municipality has sponsored the publication of the books about *Sinsai*, mentioned above, all of which refer to *Wat Chaisi*. On the other hand, given the fate of so many small *wats*, it seems likely that without Phra Khru Bunchayakorn's leadership, the *sim* would have fallen into complete ruin and been torn down. It was he, rather than local or national government officials, outside foundations, university professors, the Fine Arts Department, or the Tourism Authority of Thailand, who took the lead in recognizing the value of the murals and preserving them.

Unfortunately, not all Isan *wats* from this group have had this kind of leadership,

including three with superb murals that received generous financial support. In these cases, the impetus for conservation and preservation came, not from the local abbot and congregation, but from the outside.

The first case is that of Wat Sa Bua Kaew in Amphoe Nong Song Hong, Khon Kaen province. In 1998, the Siam Society together with the Dutch ambassador and several Thai corporations donated a total of 2,705,000 baht after one of the Society's members reported that the *wat's* murals were being ruined by exposure to sun and rain. The *wat* had recently installed a new tall and narrow Central style roof that lacked the broad "bird wing" roof found on local *sims* for this purpose (Bilaibhan 2000: 201-2). Support was quickly marshaled, and the roof was replaced with one similar to the original. Upon its completion, a dedication ceremony was held, presided over by Princess Galyani Vadhana. 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 with either villagers or outside groups. While the *sim* remained in good condition for several years, when the author visited it last year, it appeared neglected as the base was crumbling in several places and the area surrounding the building was overgrown with weeds.

The other case involved a project initiated by the Office of Arts and Culture at Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University to promote education and preservation of murals at Wat Phoththaram and Wat Pa Rerai. The *wats* are located a few kilometers from each other in Amphoe Na Dun, Maha Sarakham. The project received a grant of one million baht (approximately US\$ 30,000) from the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. Speakers from the University and the Tourism Authority of Thailand presented lectures to teachers, local government officials, elementary school students, local weavers, and other local groups. Some villagers were initially wary of committing to a project initiated by university lecturers because of negative experiences they had experienced in the past. Students were taught how to draw pictures of scenes in the murals 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. Weavers were encouraged to incorporate motifs from the murals into their textile patterns. 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 (Office of Arts and Culture 2008). However, after the funds were exhausted, the activities ceased.

Wat Chaisi as a model of sustainable preservation

The case of Wat Chaisi's success suggests that for local conservation of temple buildings to be sustainable, several conditions need to be present. The first is an abbot who realizes the value of cultural objects and takes an active leadership role in organizing regular activities at the temple to preserve it. Here, it was the abbot,

rather than government officials or outside organizations who took the initiative in preserving the murals. Moreover, he not only preserved them but also used them as living resources in his teachings about Buddhism. At Wat Chaisi it is the *sim* and the murals – rather than a glitzy new assembly hall or colossal new statues – that comprise the focal point of temple activities.

The second factor is the role of the university professors and Khon Kaen municipal administrators. After having been attracted to the abbot's work, they began collaborating in regular activities that have benefited all parties. Academics are drawn to both the abbot and the murals as rare examples of cultural resources. At the same time, the villagers of Sawatthi feel both honored and empowered by the interest in their temple and community by academics and Khon Kaen city officials.

The third factor is the scheduling of regular activities, such as the annual *Bun Khao Jii* festival, and relating them to the murals, as Wat Chaisi has done in conjunction with professors from Khon Kaen. The predictability of such events keeps them alive in people's memories and creates an element of anticipation so that people are apt to return each year. At the same time, people who attend the event are reminded of the murals and their significance in terms of local culture.

The fourth factor is regular communication between the abbot and all of Wat Chaisi's stakeholders, including the villagers of Sawatthi, local government administrators, university professors, and Khon Kaen municipality officials. The abbot consults with villagers and local government officials in determining suitable dates for the monthly merit-making festivals. Wat Chaisi also has a website²¹ and a Facebook page, the latter being managed by a teacher at the local secondary school in Sawatthi. The page regularly posts photos of recent events like the monthly merit-making festivals and visits by student groups from Khon Kaen University and nearby secondary schools. Social media is increasingly becoming the way to communicate quickly and easily, and it is the preferred method of younger generations, who are essential for sustainable preservation.

Recommendations

The sustained participation of the temple, university members, and Khon Kaen municipality in promoting cultural preservation at Wat Chaisi is rare in Thailand. All stakeholders have benefited from the work initiated by Phra Khru Bunchayakorn and supported by academics and Khon Kaen city officials who were inspired by his example. Ideally, this partnership could serve as a model for others to follow.

There are, however, some obstacles to such a partnership at the other *wats* mentioned in this paper. The most obvious one is that many abbots do not share Phra Khru Bunchayakorn's interest in cultural preservation. The other obstacle is that of

²¹ <https://sites.google.com/site/watchaisri/home/prawati-wad-chiy-sri-2>.

distance. The three *wats* that received generous financial support for preservation do not enjoy Wat Chaisi's proximity to urban centers and universities; thus regular contact of the kind that has helped sustain Wat Chaisi's cultural activities requires a much greater commitment in terms of the time spent traveling. To be specific, Wat Sa Bua Kaew, while in Khon Kaen province, is about 100 kilometers from the capital. Wat Phoththaram and Wat Pa Rerai are about 135 kilometers from Khon Kaen city and 40 kilometers from Maha Sarakham city, which is much less prosperous than Khon Kaen. On the other hand, provincial boundaries are less significant than the fact that most of the academics, abbots, government officials, and performers in the two provinces already know each other and have worked together on other projects.

Consequently, the author recommends that for the purpose of mutual sharing of information, resources, and encouragement, a consortium be created, composed of abbots of the *wats* involved and academics in Khon Kaen and Maha Sarakham. The consortium would be led by small panel of respected persons like Phra Khru Bunchayakorn, who is well known and highly regarded in the region, and several senior university professors who are Isan natives and who have spent considerable time in the monkhood.²² Such individuals are likely to have the respect of the other abbots and could exert some influence on them. Wat Chaisi would 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 Maha Sarakham province would be encouraged to form sustainable partnerships with abbots of the *wats* with murals or to strengthen existing relationships.

The consortium would encourage abbots to adopt some of the practices initiated by Wat Chaisi, such as learning to identify the scenes in the murals, holding regular informal youth camps, and organizing an annual festival based on the theme of its murals. The festival should be aimed at including a broad base of stakeholders from diverse economic and social groups: villagers, professors, teachers, students of all ages, local government agencies, youth groups, etc. Activities would be similar to those during the *Bun Khao Jii* festival, such as discussions of the stories depicted, comparisons of the murals, and performance of the stories. Villagers would be encouraged, but not compelled to attend and would 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.

²² Two such highly respected academics, Udom Buasri and Chob Disuankok, are retired Khon Kaen University faculty members who are still actively teaching and writing. Both were members of the Sangha for over ten years and have studied Buddhist philosophy in India.

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