The Battle Spirit: The Cultural Essence of Buddhist Temple Murals
in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract

The murals found in Buddhist temples across Thailand play a significant role in the country's social fabric and are integral to the safeguarding efforts of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage. The research aims to explore the essence of murals in 24 Buddhist temples in Isan, delving into the principles guiding their creation. The author explores the intrinsic meanings embedded in these murals and deconstructs the cultural essence of Isan through a qualitative study. The investigation reveals the core essence of Isan's murals as the "battle spirit," intricately woven across individual, societal, and national levels. Serving as conduits for Buddhist teachings on an individual scale, these murals reflect moral struggles between good and evil. Societally, they mirror diverse ethnic cultures, fortifying identity in a "battle of consciousness." Nationally, they exemplify Intangible Cultural Heritage, contributing to soft power competition. From an international standpoint, they are integral to the ongoing global "battle" for cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Northeast Thailand, Murals, Cultural Identity, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Buddhist Art*

Introduction

Thai murals encapsulate the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism, serving as conduits for imparting Buddhist teachings and shaping the conduct of believers. Within Theravada cosmology, there exist the "three worlds," (ไตรภูมิ, traiphum) and the destinies of sentient beings in these realms are dictated by the karma (กรรม, kam) and merits (บุญ , bun) accrued in their past lives.[1] It is a common belief that most sentient beings undergo cyclic rebirths within these three worlds.

The pivotal determinant influencing reincarnation in Theravada Buddhism is merit. The more merit and virtues that one accumulates in the world, the benefits extend beyond the individual to encompass relatives and friends in their subsequent rebirths. Consequently, the interplay of merit, karma, and reincarnation forms the foundational world view of Theravada Buddhism, profoundly shaping the conduct of Thai individuals across various facets of life. Consequently, the practice of "merit-making" (ทำบุญ, thambun) has emerged as a significant aspect of Theravada Buddhism within Thai society. Numerous events within Buddhist temples, including the creation of palm leaf manuscripts and the painting of murals, are intrinsically connected by the ethos of merit (Pornsawan Amaranonta, 2008: 41). These activities have given rise to crucial symbols within Theravada temples, particularly in murals, which are imbued with profound religious, literary, and humanistic values, making them of paramount importance for scholarly research.

Thai murals serve as expressions of local cultures. Muralists, which include monks, artists, and painters, create these murals by drawing inspiration from Buddhist teachings, local customs, legends, and personal beliefs in honoring Buddhist temples. However, the introduction of Western science during the reigns of King Rama IV (A.D.1851-1868) and King Rama V (A.D.1868-1910) had a profound impact on the cosmology of Thai Buddhism and altered the context in which murals were produced. In particular, the murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand, a region that is also called Isan, were influenced by the general environment as well as ethnic factors; this makes Isan's murals distinctive among Thailand's regional cultures.

Compared with central Thailand, the murals in Isan exhibit clear differences in the expression of visual language and themes, giving rise to distinctive local characteristics. Relevant discussions are explored by Brereton (2010:187-190), Pimwadee (2014:3-4), and Noivangklang (2006:293-294). Through content analysis, Brereton et al. established that Isan's murals are deemed 'unique' due to the distinctive styles of the painters (Pimwadee, 2014:4; Brereton, 2010:19). However, these assessments often overlook the dynamic interactions between the murals and their surroundings and neglect a thorough examination of the environment's influence on muralists.

For instance, the Laotian ethnic group (also referred to as Lao) extends across the border between Isan and Northern Laos, forming the majority population in this region. Although local murals have traditionally depicted motifs rooted in Laotian cultural traditions, such representations are seldom addressed in studies focusing on Isan. In particular, while the Laotians constitute the dominant ethnic group in both Thailand and Laos – and simultaneously a transborder people – the ways in which murals reinforce ethnic boundaries be-

tween the two nations have rarely been examined. Consequently, the study of Isan murals extends beyond purely aesthetic interpretation to encompass social issues concerning ethnic and cultural identity. In essence, while Isan's murals are unique, the question arises as to what distinct local features they embody. Is there a consistent cultural phenomenon substantial enough to formulate plausible arguments about the production process of Isan's frescoes, thereby affirming their distinctive local characteristics? This constitutes the central inquiry of this paper.

Building upon the aforementioned research question, the author conducted fieldwork from 2017 to 2019, involving multiple visits to Isan to identify the creation rules governing Isan murals. The author divided the region into three areas: the Mekong River, central, and southern zones (see Figure 1). Data were collected from murals in 24 Buddhist temples (see Figure 2) located in the provinces of Loei, Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Ratchathani, Khon Kaen, Roi Et, and Nakhon Ratchasima. The collected materials comprised 22 murals, one cave mural, and one scroll painting (ม้วนผ้าผะเทวด, muan pha phathewat) used as texts for analysis. This paper focuses on the rules governing the creation of these murals based on their themes and content. It should be noted that aesthetic aspects such as composition, form, line drawing techniques, and color are not the main focus of this textual analysis, which constitutes a limitation of the present study.
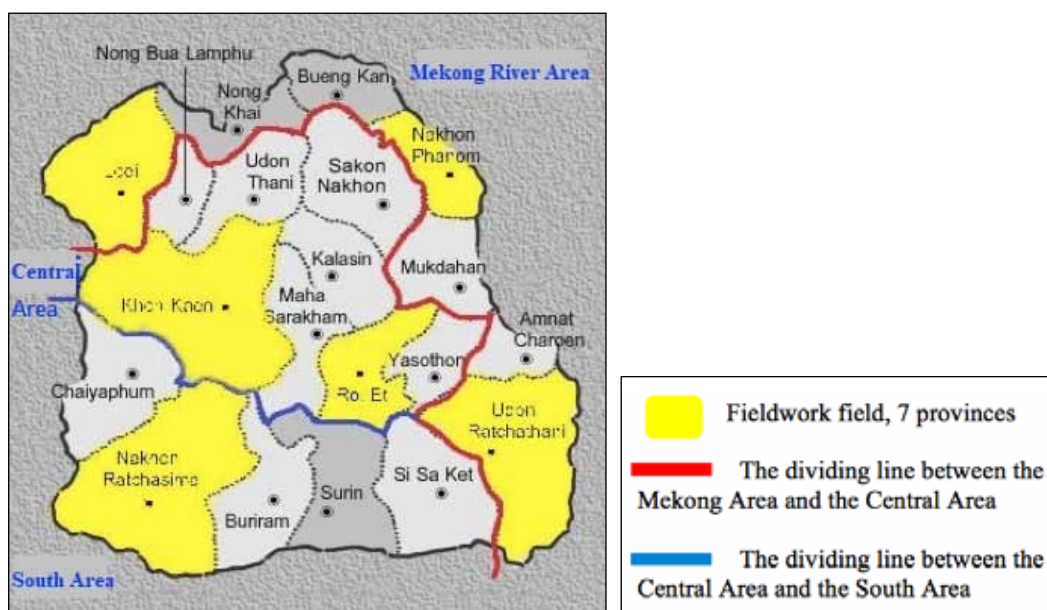

Figure 1. Map of the study area where the fieldwork was conducted.

Area	Province	Subdistrict and district (in Thai)	Buddhist temple	Buddhist temple (in Thai)	Year of production	Type of mural	Religious theme(s)	Other themes	Features of Northeastern Thailand
South	Nakhon Ratchasima	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครราชสีมา	Wat Sakae	วัดสะแก	1687	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครราชสีมา	Wat Pa Sala Wan	วัดป่าสาลวัน	1932	Mural			
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครราชสีมา	Wat Sa La Loi	วัดศาลาลอย	1939	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
Central	Khon Kaen	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองขอนแก่น	Wat Sanuan Wari	วัดสนวนวารีพัฒนาราม	1922	Mural	Vessantara	Sinsai story	Vessantara Festival, Lao literature
		ต.บ้านไผ่ อ.บ้านไผ่	Wat Phatthanaram	วัดกลางมิ่งเมือง	1541	Mural	Bhuridatta Jataka		Naga worship
	Roi Et	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองร้อยเอ็ด	Wat Klang Ming Mueang	วัดเหนือ	1805	Mural	Three worlds	Local history and traditional Isan festival	
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองร้อยเอ็ด	Wat Nua	วัดเหนือ	1889	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales		Vessantara Festival
Mekong River	Ubon Ratchathani	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองอุบลราชธานี	Wat Tai Phrachao Yai Ong Tue	วัดใต้พระเจ้าใหญ่องค์ตื้อ	607	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales, Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell		Vessantara Festival
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองอุบลราชธานี	Wat Liab	วัดเลียบ	1895	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales	Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองอุบลราชธานี	Wat Thung Si Mueang	วัดศรีเมือง	1813	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Vessantara	Portraits of the Kings of Thailand	Vessantara Festival
	Nakhon Phanom	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครพนม	Wat Okat	วัดโอกาส ศรีบัวบาน	1451	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha	The Naga protects the Buddha on Mekong river	Naga worship
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครพนม	Wat Srithep Pradittharam	วัดศรีเทพประดิษฐาราม	1859	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Vessantara	Portraits of the Kings of Thailand	Vessantara Festival
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองนครพนม	Wat Mahathat	วัดมหาธาตุ	1917	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Bhuridatta Jataka	Ramakien	Naga worship
		ต.หนองแสง อ.เมืองนครพนม	Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi	วัดหัวเวียงรังษี	1929	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
		ต.อรัญญิก อ.เมืองนครพนม	Wat Aranyikawat	วัดอรัญญิกาวาส	1777	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
	Nong Khai	ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองหนองคาย	Wat Thai	วัดไทย	1817	Cave mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha	Various Naga stories	Naga worship, Isan folklore
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองหนองคาย	Wat Pho Chai	วัดโพธิ์ชัย	1827	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales, Three worlds	Various Naga stories, Naga fireballs festival	Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Isan folklore
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองหนองคาย	Wat Srikunmuang	วัดศรีคุณเมือง	1857	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales		Vessantara Festival
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองหนองคาย	Phra That Klang Nam	พระธาตุกลางน้ำ	1857	Mural	New Buddha images		
		ต.ในเมือง อ.เมืองหนองคาย	Wat Sa Kaeo	วัดสระแก้ว	1552	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
	Loei	ต.กุดป่อง อ.เมืองเลย	Wat Si Phum	วัดศรีภูมิ	1560	Scroll painting	Vessantara		Vessantara Festival
		ต.ด่านซ้าย อ.ด่านซ้าย	Wat Phon Chai	วัดโพนชัย	1654	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales	Naga murals	Vessantara Festival
		ต.กุดป่อง อ.เมืองเลย	Wat Maha That	วัดมหาธาตุ	1656	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka Tales	Ramakien, Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		ต.เชียงคาน อ.เชียงคาน	Wat Srikhunmuang	วัดศรีคุณเมือง	1982	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales, Vessantara	Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		ต.ด่านซ้าย อ.ด่านซ้าย	Wat Neramit Wipatsana	วัดเนรมิตวิปัสสนา		Mural	Ten Jataka Tales	Naga murals	Vessantara Festival

Figure 2. Data on the murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand. Source: National Office of Buddhism. Collated by the author.

Literature Review

According to Chunlathat Phayakharanon, murals are regarded as a form of national art in Thailand, embodying the characteristics and style of "Thai-ness" (ความเป็นไทย, khwam pen thai) (Phayakharanon, 1983:255). Rooted in the spirit of merit-making, murals have come to serve as a symbolic embodiment of temple art. They not only enhance the aesthetic quality of sacred spaces but also reinforce the spiritual significance of merit. Consequently, the act of viewing murals generates an interactive cognitive cycle among the artwork, the devotee, and the concept of merit. This literature review is organized into three sections: the first examines the historical development of Thai murals; the second discusses the current state of research on Isan murals; and the third explores how mural themes in Northeast Thailand reveal the interrelationship between mural art and Isan culture.

The Development of Thai Murals

In terms of location, Thai murals can be categorized as those found on rocks, in caves, pagodas, and Buddhist temples. Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci) was among the first scholars to conduct a systematic survey of murals in Thailand. Commencing in 1957, he led a research team of painters in a comprehensive effort to document, photograph, and preserve murals across the country. This initiative compiled data on 25 ancient murals spanning more than a thousand years, from 13 provinces and representing diverse historical periods – including the Dvaravati, Srivijaya, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya eras, as well as the Thonburi and Rattanakosin periods (Bhirasri, 1959:3, 7-12). In total, the study recorded one mural from the Dvaravati era, one from the Srivijaya era, two from the Sukhothai era, ten from the Ayutthaya era, one from the Thonburi era, and ten from the Rattanakosin era.

As far as the murals of Buddhist temples and pagodas are concerned, Bhirasri's findings indicate that those from the Sukhothai period are the earliest surviving examples. For instance, the Jataka engravings on the stone walls of the hidden tunnel (อุโมงค์, umong) at Wat Si Chum (วัดศรีชุม) in Sukhothai Province date back more than 700 years. Unfortunately, due to the passage of time, very few murals from the Sukhothai period remain apart from those at Wat Si Chum. In contrast, a greater number of ancient murals from the Ayutthaya period have survived. One notable example is the stupa murals at Wat Yai Suwannaram (วัดใหญ่สุวรรณาราม) in Phetchaburi Province (Figure 3).

Despite the prosperity of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, it ultimately fell to Burmese invasion, which resulted in the destruction of much of its cultural heritage. The subsequent Thonburi Kingdom lasted only fourteen years, ending in 1782. Consequently, the Bangkok (Rattanakosin) Kingdom stands out for its abundance of surviving murals. For example, the Grand Palace (พระบรมมหาราชวัง) was constructed during the reign of King Rama I (A.D. 1782–1809), who commissioned palace muralists to depict the "Three Worlds," including stories of the Jataka and the Buddha, in Wat Phra Kaeo (วัดพระแก้ว). Moreover, 178 murals illustrating episodes from the Ramakien (Figure 4) adorn the inner walls of the Grand Palace – an enduring masterpiece of Thai visual art.

Figure 3. The mural of Yaisuwannaram Temple, Phetchaburi Province. Photo by the author.

Figure 4. Hanuman pursues mermaid Suvannamaccha, The Grand Palace in Bangkok. Photo by the author.

The influence of Buddhism on Thai art dates back to the Sukhothai period. During this era, monks may have been the earliest Thai artists, laying the foundations for various art forms, including mural painting. Many important Thai artworks were created not for aesthetic enjoyment but for religious and missionary purposes (Bovornkitti, 2005:356). Notably, the relationship between murals and Buddhist sculptures is particularly significant. Bhirasri, in his analysis, compared the line compositions and decorative motifs of Thai paintings with those of Buddhist sculptures, suggesting that the stylistic development of Thai painting may have been profoundly influenced by sculptural forms (Feroci, 1952:148).

Regarding the relationship between Buddhist statues and paintings in Thailand, it is important to note that Buddhist statues predate the Sukhothai Kingdom, whereas the use of paintings to propagate the Buddhist faith likely began during the Sukhothai or Ayutthaya

periods (cf. Feroci, 1952:147; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1968:2). Chronologically, the development of Thai Buddhist statues precedes that of paintings, making it reasonable to infer that the Sangha may have used statues as templates for painting. This practice would have established conventions for artistic creation, including the depiction of figures and painting techniques. Consequently, the forms, styles, and lines of statues naturally influenced paintings, including murals, a notion supported by Bhirasri's research.

Bhirasri emphasized the primacy of lines in Thai painting, asserting that the quality of a work depends entirely on the lines, including their thickness, shape, and color. By comparing lines and decorative patterns in Thai paintings with those of Buddhist statues, he highlighted the sculptural influence, revealing features of Indian, Khmer, and Sukhothai-style graphic modeling across different periods. This influence persisted into modern times, eventually intersecting with the impact of Western art on Thai murals (Feroci, 1952:148-150, 153-154). Furthermore, Bhirasri observed notable similarities in composition and color techniques between certain murals and illustrations in ancient Thai manuscripts, leading to the inference of a connection between the murals and ancient illustrations (Feroci, 1952: 150-151).

In summary, Thai Buddhist temple murals reflect the characteristics of their respective periods, with their development closely tied to the surrounding environment. As Bhirasri's research demonstrates that the form, composition, and color palette of traditional murals could have been shaped by the influence of earlier Buddhist statues or ancient illustrations, it ultimately stemmed from artists' observation and imitation of their environment. The interrelationship between artistic creation and the environment is evident not only in murals shaped by sculptural influence but also in later sculptures that emulate mural imagery. Piriya Krairiksh, in his study of Thai Buddhist sculpture, highlights HRH Prince Krommaphra Paramanujit Jinoros (กรมพระปรมานุชิตชิโนรส, A.D. 1790-1853) who was inspired by the Buddha's historical narratives and designed thirty-seven distinct postures for Buddha images. During the same period, artists drew from contemporary murals, resulting in the creation of numerous small bronze Buddha statues (Krairiksh, 2008: 504, 525). In this light, any examination of Isan murals must take environmental factors into account to better understand the interconnections between murals and other elements of their surroundings. The topic of mural–environment relationships will be further explored in the following discussion.

The Study of Isan's Murals
Buddhist temples in Thailand consist of groups of buildings, including the image hall of the Buddha (วิหาร, wihan), the ordination hall (พระอุโปสถ, phra ubosot), the stupa (เจดีย์/ปรางค์, chedi/ prang), The hall (ศาลา, sala), the bell tower (หอระฆัง, horrakhang), the library (หอไตร, hotrai), and the house where monks live (กุฏิ, kuti) (Döhring, 2000:17; Phayakharanon, 2012:1-5). The image hall serves as the primary worship space in the temple, where believers engage in the veneration of the Buddha and perform meritorious deeds. In contrast, the ordination hall is specifically dedicated to monks' practice and the observance of precepts. A noteworthy architectural distinction between the image and ordination halls is the presence of "bai sema," (ใบเสมา) a stone used to demarcate sacred areas; typically, it is positioned around the ordination hall (Döhring, 2000:32).

The ordination hall is referred to by various names in different regions. In Isan, for instance, it is known as "sim" (ສິມ) in the local dialect. The term "sim" originates from Pali, signifying "border." Isan's sim structures are constructed on either land or water. (Samosorn, 1989:258-259; Nimlek, 2006:17-32). To enhance their sanctity, locals have adorned the inner and outer walls of these structures with murals since ancient times, a practice less common in other parts of Thailand (see Figure 5). This uniqueness has made sim an integral element of Isan's cultural landscape (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:9-12).

Traditionally, due to the narrow interiors of sim, women were prohibited from entering to avoid influencing monks during Buddhist services. However, such restrictions no longer apply. In efforts to educate women, murals have been painted on the outer walls of sim since ancient times (cf. Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:5, 9, 12; Bovornkitti, 2005:360; Nimlek, 2006:17-18). Over time, this practice has evolved into a local custom in Northeast Thailand.

The murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand can be classified into two categories: scroll paintings and wall murals. Although these art forms differ in technique – painting on cotton versus painting on walls – both embody the Buddhist concept of merit-making. In Isan, scroll paintings are closely associated with local festivals, most notably the Vessantara Festival (บุญพระเวส, bun phrawet), which is celebrated across Northeast and Northern Thailand as well as Northern Laos. Traditionally, scroll paintings depicting the Vessantara Jataka or other Jataka tales were indispensable to these festivities. During the festival, villagers paraded the scrolls through their communities, displaying them as part of the ritual celebration (cf. Brereton, 2010:190; Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:660; Lefferts, 2006/2007:149-152)

Upon the conclusion of the ceremony, the scrolls were hung within temple precincts, serving as murals to sanctify the sacred space (see Figure 6). However, as permanent temple murals became increasingly popular, the production of scroll paintings gradually declined. Today, only a few villages in Isan continue the tradition of processional scrolls (Brereton, 2010:190), marking a significant transformation in the formal development of Isan's mural art.

Figure 5. *Sim* murals in Northeast Thailand, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province. Photo by the author.

Figure 6. The scroll painting hanging in the ordination hall, Wat Si Phum, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

The study of Isan's murals commenced in the late 1980s when Khon Kaen University began presenting papers on the subject, drawing attention from the academic community (Yanpisit, 2017:163-164). Pairote Samosorn and his team gained prominence for their research project, the 'Investigation of Isan Murals,' conducted in 1982, as a collaborative 5-year effort between Khon Kaen University and the Toyota Foundation of Japan. The research team gathered 11 murals in Isan for analysis and identified their uniqueness, indicating that Isan's folk customs and festivals often appear in the paintings. Samosorn stressed the importance of Buddhist temple murals as Isan's cultural heritage that warrants protection (Samosorn, 1989:11-13; 115; 151-154; 297-304).

Afterward, Noivangklang (2006) conducted a study focusing on the two major basins in the Nakhon Ratchasima Plateau – the Sakhon Nakhon and Nakhon Ratchasima basins – using geographic boundaries. The analysis involved murals from 17 Buddhist temples across 17 provinces, exploring the themes of Isan's murals. Noivangklang divided Isan's murals into three styles: dharma, Thai-Isan and Rattanakosin according to the painter's style (Noivangklang, 2006:283, 296). Although Noivangklang does not clearly define the three styles of murals, he highlights the differences in Isan's mural styles.

Brereton, a scholar specializing in mural research in Northeast Thailand, conducted an analysis of the murals within three sim structures located in Khon Kaen Province, central Isan, in 2010 (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010; Brereton, 2010). Subsequently, over the next few years, she authored a series of papers focusing on the stylistic elements and literary characteristics of murals in Northeast Thailand. In her cross-disciplinary research, in addition to image analysis, she addresses the ethnic literature of murals and the history of Isan (Brereton, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

Among other Thai scholars, Kittanut Yanpisit has traced the development of research on Isan murals in 2017 and 2023. In 2017, he analyzed studies from the 1960s to 2016, dividing them into five periods and noting that research on Isan murals had become increasingly diverse and in-depth (Yanpisit, 2017:161-171). Building on this work, Yanpisit (2023) further expanded his discussion of the development of Isan mural research and framed these murals as valuable local cultural heritage from the perspective of the "creative economy." He examined how policies could integrate murals with cultural tourism, education, and the creative industries, thereby enhancing their social and economic significance (Yanpisit, 2023:6-15).

Meanwhile, Pimwadee Eomthurapote (2014) scrutinized sim murals in Isan based on Plato's representation theory, noting that murals serve as tools to comprehend Buddhist cosmology and explain how people connect the real and material worlds. Subsequently, several books focusing on sim murals were successively published, including works by Prasasvinitchai (2010) and Atipatayakul (2013), contributing to increased interest in Isan's murals.

In terms of studies spanning nearly four decades, except for Brereton, most of the research on Isan's murals is grounded in content analysis. Although some studies mention regional elements, they do not discuss the relationship between murals and regional culture, ignoring the interaction between the murals and the environment. Therefore, summarizing the rules of mural creation based on the specific characteristics of Isan's murals becomes challenging, and this constitutes the research objective of this paper.

Themes of Isan's Murals

> The historian cannot help dividing his material into 'periods,' nicely defined in the Oxford Dictionary as 'distinguishable portions of history.' To be distinguishable, each of these portions has to have a certain unity; and if the historian wishes to verify this unity instead of merely presupposing it, he must try to discover intrinsic analogies between such overtly disparate phenomena as the arts, literature, philosophy, social and political currents, religious movements, etc. (Panofsky 1957:1).

The themes depicted in murals are often closely linked to local culture. The concentration of a particular mural style in a given location can be attributed to the underlying cultural context, frequently shaped by local artists and the broader cultural milieu. As Panofsky noted, the defining characteristics of a period should be consistent across its various artistic expressions. Accordingly, the coherence of Isan culture is reflected in the thematic elements portrayed in its murals.

Popular mural themes also exhibit regional variations. Narratives such as the Three Worlds, Ten Jataka Tales (ทศชาติชาดก, thotsachat chadok), and Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell (พระมาลัย ท่องแดนนรก, phra malai thong daen narok) are widespread across Thailand. In particular, the dramatic portrayal of the Rama epic is especially prominent in central Thailand, whereas the Vessantara Jataka, which emphasizes the virtue of generosity, is more strongly represented in Northeast Thailand (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:30; Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:651-652). In the following paragraph, several recurring themes identified in murals are discussed.

Ten Jataka Tales

The Ten Jataka Tales originate from Theravada scripture and revolves around the Buddha's preceding births in both human and animal forms. Within these narratives, the future Buddha manifests as a king, an outcast, a deva, or an animal. Regardless of the form he assumes, he exemplifies a virtue as indicated by the respective story. According to the scripture, there are more than 500 Jataka stories in total, and Thai Sangha chose the last Ten Jataka Tales as models of practice (see Figure 7), representing ten virtues that are also known as ten paramis (สิบบารมี) (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. Ten Jataka Tales, Wat Maha That, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

No.	Thai	English	Virtue	Popular in Isan
1	เตมิยชาดก	Temiya Jaataka	renunciation	
2	มหาชนกชาดก	Mahaajanaka Jaataka	energy	
3	สุวรรณสามชาดก	Suva.n.nasaama Jaataka	loving kindness	
4	เนมิราชชาดก	Nemiraaja Jaataka	resolution	
5	มโหสถชาดก	Candakumaara Jaataka	wisdom	
6	ภูริทัตชาดก	Bhuuridatta Jaataka	morality	✓ A Naga story
7	จันทกุมารชาดก	Mahaanaaradakassapa Jaataka	patience	
8	มหาพรหมนารทกัสสปชาดก	Pu.n.naka Jaataka	equanimity	
9	วิธุรชาดก	Mahosadha Jaataka	truthfulness	
10	มหาเวสสันดรชาดก	Vessandara Jaataka	generosity	✓ Vessantara Festival

Figure 8. List of Ten Jataka Tales Reference. Source: Collated by the author.

While the Ten Jataka Tales are documented in Buddhist scripture, they maintain a long-standing connection with the social memory and ancestral history of the Laotian people residing along the border of Thailand and Laos. This has contributed to their popularity in the Isan region. For Laotians, the Ten Jataka Tales serve not only as a cultural feature but also as a significant reference for the creation of Laotian literature and art (Pranee, 1989:28).

Two stories in Ten Jataka Tales are especially popular in Isan: Bhuridatta Jataka (ภูริทัต ชาดก), which features Prince Naga as the protagonist; the other is Vessantara Jataka (เวสสันดร มหาชาติ). Because the locals of Isan believe that the Naga, with special magic power, lives in the Mekong River, Bhuridatta Jataka is especially loved by Isan's residents (see Figure 9). Regarding Vessantara Jataka, since the Vessantara Festival holds significant importance for Laotians, the related story circulates in Northeast Thailand. According to Vessantara Jataka, the Buddha was Prince Vessantara in a previous life. Vessantara diligently practices generosity, considered the greatest kindness created by the Buddha in all his lifetimes. He eliminates his ego and relinquishes everything, including a sacred white elephant, his two children, and his beautiful wife, to attain the highest level of generosity.

The Laotians of Isan divide the story into 13 sections and represent it through 13 images during the Vessantara Festival (see Figure 10). They believe that attending the temple to listen to the story of Vessantara during the festival will accumulate merit, leading to a better afterlife. In view of this, Vessantara Jataka is commonly featured in scroll paintings or murals within Isan's temples.

Figure 9. Part of Bhuridatta Jataka, Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.

Figure 10. Thirteen pictures of Vessantara Jataka, Wat Phon Chai, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell
Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell is a story described in the three worlds from the Thai stand-point (see Figure 11). There are many legends surrounding its origin. Thais believe that it originated in northern Thailand in the 15th century and spread to central Thailand in the 17th century. Since then, it has become a story known in every household (cf. Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:658-659; Matics, 1979:38). It is said that the hell of the three worlds is gloomy and terrifying, and the dead are judged. The image of evil ghosts in hell resembles a person with a slender neck, a big mouth, and a large belly. Not only can this figure not eat, but it also experiences a cycle of death and suffering in hot and cold hells. Escape from such a spiritual realm is impossible until the karma of the deceased is eliminated. Since Phra Malai's story is instrumental in understanding Buddhist cosmology, temples often draw series of murals described in the book to educate believers.

Ramayana
The Ramayana is an Indian epic that was introduced into Southeast Asia and evolved into several versions. King Rama I rewrote the Ramayana into the Ramakien, which became a traditional script for Thai drama. As Ramakien is a royal work, the murals of the Grand Palace in Bangkok are based on it. Correspondingly, the Ramayana theme is fairly common in the decorations of Buddhist temples in central Thailand (see Figure 12).

The aforementioned themes are all depicted in Isan's murals, and different themes convey distinct cultural meanings. The majority of murals are deeply rooted in cultural contexts, with only a few being entirely imaginary. Isan's temple murals are shaped by religious, ethnic, and political influences. The guidelines governing mural creation can be observed at the individual, societal, and national levels. While artists may not always be consciously aware of these cultural contexts during the creative process, they serve as carriers of culture. Therefore, when muralists in Isan create art, their cultural background and ideology become manifest alongside the content of their murals. In what follows, the author delves into the inherent rules guiding mural creation in Isan, aiming to comprehend the interaction between murals and the environment, and subsequently deconstruct Isan's culture.

Figure 11. Part of Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell, Wat Mahathat, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.

The Creation Rules of Isan Murals
The field data is outlined in Figure 2, indicating that the majority of murals in Isan's temples are associated with religious themes, as these murals serve as conveyors of Buddhist teachings. A closer examination reveals that 71% (17 out of 24) of Buddhist temples

have skillfully integrated the Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Lao literature, and Isan folklore into their murals, creating distinctive local characteristics. The structures of these themes illustrate the features of Isan's murals, encompassing religious, ethnic, and historical elements, and embodying the 'spirit of battle,' which is interconnected at the individual, societal, and national levels. The author organizes this information in Figure 13's table and provides further explanation.

Figure 12. Ramakien mural, Wat Maha That, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

Province	Buddhist temple	Features of Northeastern Thailand	Battle of Spirit （individual）	Battle of Consciousness （society）	Battle of ICH （country）
Nakhon Ratchasima	Wat Sakae		✓		
	Wat Pa Sala Wan		✓		
	Wat Sa La Loi		✓		
Khon Kaen	Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram	Vessantara Festival, Lao literature	✓	✓	✓
Roi Et	Wat Klang Ming Mueang	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Nua	Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
Ubon Ratchathani	Wat Tai Phrachao Yai Ong Tue	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Liab	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Thung Si Mueang		✓	✓	✓
Nakhon Phanom	Wat Mahathat	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Okat	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srithep Praditharam	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Aranyikawat		✓		
Nong Khai	Wat Thai	Naga worship, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Pho Chai	Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srikunmuang	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Phra That Klang Nam		✓		
	Wat Sa Kaeo		✓		
Loei	Wat Si Phum	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Phon Chai	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Maha That	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srikhunmuang	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Neramit Wipatsana	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓

Figure 13. Content Analysis of Murals of Buddhist Temples in Northeast Thailand. Source: Collated by the author.

The "Battle of Good and Evil"
As far as individuals are concerned, the murals convey Buddhist teachings. The codes of good and evil within them correspond to the psychological states of the audience, contributing to the overarching 'battle of good and evil.' The tradition of employing images or symbols for Buddha worship and the transmission of Buddhist teachings dates back to ancient India during the construction of pagodas. Consequently, stupas, including decorative carvings, served as a medium for Buddhist art. The use of myths and images as a method for propagating Buddhism aids in the public's understanding of Buddhist teachings (Song, 2002:27-28). Hence, it is not difficult to understand why the main sources of stories shown in murals come from Buddhist scripture or literature, because murals can satisfy Buddhists' belief in producing merit and also spread Buddhism. This is why themes such as Three Worlds, Ten Jataka Tales, and Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell could become mainstream in Thailand, because these storylines, highlighting good and evil, embody the core values of Buddhism – three worlds and merit (see Figure 14 – to inspire good deeds among the public.

Figure 14. Mural depicting three worlds and merit-making, Wat Nua, Roi Et Province. Photo by the author.

The concept of the three worlds has existed since the Sukhothai period. The Siam king at the time laid the foundation for Theravada Buddhism; in addition to allowing monks to preach, he also established monasteries to preserve the fragmented Pali scripture, which later became the source of editing the three worlds (Reynolds, 1976:206). In AD 1345, Prince Lithai of the Sukhothai Kingdom, who later became Phra Maha Thammaracha I (พระมหาธรรมราชาที่๑), reorganized Pali scripture and compiled it into Three Worlds, which has been handed down to this day. The so-called "three worlds" refers to the formless realm, the formed realm, and the realm of desire, which can be further divided into 31 realms. The realms that sentient beings will go to are all determined by the karma and merits of their previous lives. In other words, three worlds and merit are a set of mutual concepts, and also comprise the core meaning of Buddhist temple murals.

The three worlds and merit of Theravada Buddhism form the concept of causality, which is used by Thais to create a meaningful world and to define how the world works. In particular, the ideas of the three worlds and producing merit have had a profound impact on Thai

society. Thus, most Buddhist temples make murals to promote the principle of causality. For believers, the good and evil codes conveyed in murals always remind people "to stay away from all evil and to cultivate good." Therefore, as far as individuals are concerned, the creation rules surrounding murals belong to the "battle of good and evil."

The "Battle of Consciousness"
In terms of society, murals reflect ethnic groups' cultures because ideology can be shaped and ethnic identity can be strengthened through murals in a concept called the "battle of consciousness." According to Figure 2, up to 71% (17 out of 24) of Buddhist temples incorporate elements of Isan's culture. They showcase local festivals, traditional customs, attire, and Naga legends to establish their distinctive characteristics. Many of these local cultures have connections to Laotian culture along the border between Thailand and Laos. The Laotians of Thailand and Laos are bound together by the Mekong River. In the past, there was no boundary between the two banks of the Mekong River. However, today's Mekong River has become the national border between the Laotians of Thailand and Laos. This transformation is attributed to the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1983, which altered the ethnic consciousness of Laotians on both sides of the river.

After the implementation of the Franco-Siamese Treaty, the Thai government labeled the Laotians on the right bank of the river as "Isan people" through education to distinguish them from Laotians in Laos (Mikusol, 2002:93-105). In contrast, Laos vigorously advocated for a sense of "Lao-ness" and carried out language reforms. The present-day Lao language is shaped by French, Vietnamese, and Marxism-Leninism influences, diverging from the Isan dialect, which is influenced by Thai (Fry, 2002:34).

Due to the influence of national identity, the ethnic identity of Laotians, who used to be one family on both sides of the Mekong River, has changed. Although the Mekong River functioned as a geographic border in its early history, the reformation of language, education, and politics in Thailand and Laos has now established it as a delineation influencing the language and identity of Laotians on either side of the Mekong River. This shift not only created distinctions between Laotians in Thailand and Laos but also instigated a struggle for consciousness concerning cultural identity. Despite the cultural similarities between Laotians on both sides of the Mekong River, there has consistently been a political"battle of consciousness"aimed at fostering distinct perceptions between Laotians in Thailand and Laos.

The Vessantara Festival and Naga worship embody longstanding traditions among Laotians. Rooted in Theravada Buddhism and inspired by the Vessantara Jataka, the festival finds artistic expression in scroll paintings and murals during celebrations at Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand and Northern Laos. Moreover, mural themes often reflect the surrounding geography. Shared across Thai and Laotian cultures is the belief in the Naga, a majestic serpent with a crest, residing in the Mekong River as a guardian of the Buddha and the local communities. Hence, the Buddhist temples located in the Mekong River region have a particularly high proportion of Naga murals. For example, Wat Okat, Wat Thai, and Wat Pho Chai express Naga worship through exquisite murals, showing a scene of Naga accompanying the Buddha on the Mekong River (see Figure 15). Laotians worship the Naga and paint images of it in murals. An illustrative example is the Bhuridat-

ta Jataka, narrating the Buddha's rebirth as a Naga prince (Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003: 1–27). For this reason, the Naga theme is frequently portrayed in murals adorning Buddhist temples along the banks of the Mekong River.

Figure 15. Naga protects Buddha in the Mekong River, Wat Okat, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.

As a result, festivals and myths related to the Naga, such as stories and the Fireball Festival, are recorded in murals (see Figure 16). For example, the sim of Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, located in the remote village of Khon Kaen, one can observe both the Vessantara Jataka and Sinsai stories decorating the inner and outer walls.[2] As an epic originating in Laos, Sinsai holds significant literary importance in its place of origin, and its cultural influence has expanded into Northeast Thailand. Furthermore, there are images of the Naga at the entrance and windows of sim, indicating Naga worship by locals, who view the Naga as a powerful guardian (see Figure 17).

Figure 16. Naga Fireball Festival, Wat Pho Chai, Nong Khai Province. Photo by the author.

Figure 17. Naga protects the entrance of the temple, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province. Photo by the author.

These murals, which embody Isan's traditional culture, festivals, and folktales, not only highlight the region's local wisdom but also share common themes with the Lao communities across the border. Consequently, questions of cultural recognition have become central to the political management of Lao populations along the Thai–Lao frontier. To differentiate the closely related Thai and Lao cultural identities, the integration of Thai nationalism into northeastern culture emerged as a key strategy. In addition to implementing reforms in language and education, the central government promoted the ideals of the Thammayut order (ธรรมยุติกนิกาย, Dhammayuttika Nikaya, Thammayut) throughout the Northeast. This policy directly influenced the development of Buddhist art in the region, including temple architecture and mural painting.

The Thammayut originated in 1833 as a monastic reform movement initiated by Prince Mongkut (later King Rama IV). It emphasized strict Vinaya observance, a return to scriptural study (pariyatti), and a rationalist approach to Buddhist doctrine that sought to purify popular, syncretic practices. Supported and institutionalized by the Chakri monarchy, Thammayut became an instrument of monastic modernization and state religious policy in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Siam (Dhammasakiyo, 2006:34-36, Bangperng, 2020:1163, 1169).

Immediately after the reign of King Rama IV, the Thammayut order began expanding into northeastern Thailand in 1851, with its first presence in the Ubon area. This expansion unfolded through several channels, including royal patronage, the dispatch of centrally trained monks to rural areas, and the establishment of Thammayut institutions by local elites who had been ordained or educated in Bangkok (Bangperng, 2020:1163-1165). For example, Supatnaram Temple (วัดสุปัฏนาราม, 1853) in Ubon Ratchathani Province was regarded as the first Thammayut monastery founded in the region, which served as a key institution for disseminating central religious policies and education. (Buddhist Monastery Department, 1995:371; Phra Phrom Muni, 1936, cited from Bangperng, 2020:1162)

These institutional mechanisms generated both administrative and aesthetic impacts. Monasteries affiliated with the Thammayut order tended to emphasize canonical narra-

tives, adopt standardized iconographic models, and promote textual literacy in religious instruction. These emphases shaped mural commission practices, influencing stylistic approaches, thematic choices, and narrative structures so that they aligned with Siamese artistic conventions and diverged from Lao mural traditions.

This distinction can be observed in both old and new monasteries across Isan. For example, the old murals at Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram in Khon Kaen Province preserve the Sinsai stories, which belong to the Lao folk narrative tradition. After the signing of the Franco–Siamese Treaty in 1893, however, the Laotians in the Isan region became Thai citizens under Siamese rule. Consequently, temple halls were constructed according to plans prescribed by Bangkok's authorities, and murals began to follow the aesthetic framework of Thai traditional art, discouraging the depiction of themes rooted in Lao culture – such as Sinsai – in Northeastern Thailand. In addition, in some temples, mural placement also shifted from the ordination hall (known in Isan as sim) to the monastery's sermon hall (Yanpisit, 2023:4). These transformations reflected deliberate efforts to differentiate Isan's artistic practice from that of the Laos and illustrated how the Siamese administrative structure shaped the visual and cultural expression of Isan murals.

Criteria such as the artist's identity, textual elements, and linear design have become instrumental in distinguishing works originating from Thailand and Laos (see Figure 18). Differentiating murals by artist and painting style makes Isan's murals distinct from Laotian ones, representing an invisible contest of cultural consciousness. The introduction of Siamese artistic conventions by the Thammayut order – including Thai stylistic features and Thai painting pattern – further contributed to the distinctiveness of Buddhist murals in northeastern Thailand compared with those in northern Laos.

The Bhuddhaisawan Chapel (พระที่นั่งพุทไธสวรรย์), located within the National Museum in Bangkok, is renowned for its murals executed in the Early Rattanakosin style. Thutongkinanon conducted a systematic analysis of the chapel's colors and techniques, revealing that its distinguishing features include the use of the Thai Line and vibrant tonal contrasts to differentiate figures and visual planes, thereby creating a sense of depth and a mysterious ambience that evokes faith. In addition, Siamese artisans were also adept at applying gold pigment to specific details – particularly the Buddha's body – to distinguish it from other figures and motifs within the composition (Thutongkinanon, 2011:125-127).The chromatic and technical characteristics associated with the Siamese style remain evident in many contemporary Isan temples. The murals of Wat Pho Chai วัดโพธิ์ชัย in Nong Khai Province, for instance, clearly reflect the influence of Siamese artistic conventions.

Thutongkinanon argues that the colors and techniques of the murals in the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel not only exemplify Siamese artistic conventions but also embody Thai wisdom (ภูมิปัญญาไทย, phumipanya thai) (Thutongkinanon, 2011:127). This notion of "Thai wisdom" metaphorically represents the ideology of Thai nationalism, distinguishing it from Western and neighboring cultural frameworks. In this sense, the murals of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel encapsulate a multifaceted process – from the creation by Siamese painters to the audience's viewing experience – that conveys Buddhist teachings while simultaneously constructing a Siam-centered cultural identity through the organization of visual elements such as line, color, form, and composition.

When Siamese artistic conventions were introduced to the Isan region through the Thammayut order, muralists who worked under the influence of nationalist ideology similarly replicated Siamese color schemes, compositions, and techniques to reconstruct the viewer's religious experience, contributing to the formation of Isan's distinct cultural character and aligning it more closely with the cultural identity of Siam.

The promotion of Isan culture's distinctive features as a means of differentiating it from Lao culture has long been a key objective of state policy in northeastern Thailand. As early as 2011, under the sponsorship of the European Union, the region implemented the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (2011–2016) across four municipalities in Khon Kaen Province.[3] The program involved teaching Isan as a mother tongue, developing a multimedia cultural archive, and designing and installing multilingual signage to create a new linguistic landscape that would legitimize and revitalize the Thai-Lao/Isan language and culture (Draper, 2017: 59–71). The initiative was premised on the promotion of the "Thai-Lao" language – a term used specifically to describe the Isan people, distinct from the "Lao" or "Laotian" identity of neighboring Laos. This distinction underscored the cultural and linguistic differentiation between the Thai and Lao spheres of identity.

After the Mekong River became the official border between Thailand and Laos, differentiation was required not only in language but also in the visual expression of Buddhist temple murals on both sides of the river. From a social perspective, murals embody ethnic culture. They affirm the locality and legitimacy of Isan's cultural identity while simultaneously reinforcing the distinctiveness of Laotians in Isan from those in Laos. In this sense, the guidelines governing mural production in Isan articulate cultural identity and form an integral part of this ongoing "battle of consciousness."
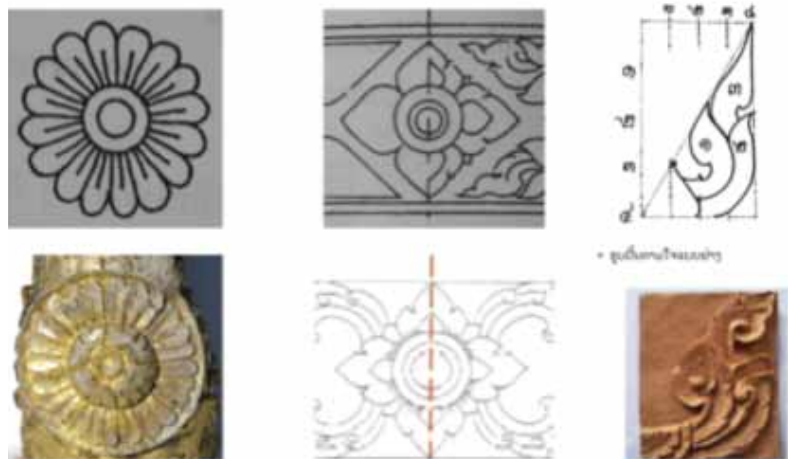

Figure 18. Thai painting pattern (upper) and Lao painting pattern (lower), collated by the author.

The "Battle of Intangible Cultural Heritage"

Lastly, from a national perspective, local murals that embody the value of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) are often interpreted by the state apparatus as part of the broader "battle of ICH." This recognition and interpretation by governmental institutions further shape the overarching understanding and contestation within the realm of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The previously mentioned struggle for consciousness among Laotians on both

sides of the Mekong River, at the national level, also manifests as a contest over Intangible Cultural Heritage between Thailand and Laos.

Many scholars have studied Isan's murals since the 1980s and identified the following characteristics, organized by the author (cf. Brereton, 2010:187-191; Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:25-40, 45-48, 53, 69-72; Noivangklang, 2006:290-297):

• First, use local themes and emphasize the narrative features of the images.
• Second, the content presents a frank and simple amateur style.
• Third, there are rough lines and unique color skills.
• Fourth, the characteristic images are diverse.

However, the challenge arises because these four features are also observable in the Buddhist temples of Northern Laos, where Laotians constitute the dominant ethnic group. This similarity arises from the shared themes, styles, and functions of murals in both Isan and Northern Laos. Consequently, distinguishing Laotian art in Thailand and Laos primarily depends on the factor of the artist.

In essence, artists from Thailand and Laos have shaped the dominant artistic styles in their respective countries. Differences in ideology and creative approach have resulted in murals adorning Buddhist temples in both nations with distinct aesthetic characteristics. Furthermore, the training of artists in Thailand and Laos is closely tied to each country's cultural policies. Examining these policies is therefore essential to understanding the disparities in cultural capital – encompassing art institutions, artistic talent, and knowledge – between the two nations.

Regarding cultural competition, Thailand and Laos each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Although Thailand had an early start, it has undergone rapid Westernization, whereas Laos has retained much of its traditional culture. Thailand's tourism industry began developing in the 1960s, accompanied by the active establishment of art institutions to cultivate local talent. In 2016, Thailand passed the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 (**พระราชบัญญัติส่งเสริมและรักษามรดกภูมิปัญญาทางวัฒนธรรม พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๙**), thereby enhancing its cultural heritage protection system (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2016). In comparison, Laos lagged behind in terms of art institutions and cultural policies. In fact, Laos was once ahead of Thailand in protecting cultural heritage following its reform and opening up in 1986. However, Thailand ultimately surpassed Laos in cultural heritage protection, in part due to the latter's weaker institutional follow-up.

After the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism in the 1980s, Laos gradually developed its art and literature under the influence of UNESCO and the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage. In addition to establishing the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism to revitalize culture, Laos implemented a series of cultural protection programs from the 1990s onward, including the Preservation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts Program (1992), the Preservation of Lao Weaving Program (1996), the Preservation of National Important Historic Sites Program (1990), the Revitalization of Ancient Lao Literature Project (1998), and the Preservation of Religious Culture Program (1979). In 2009, Laos signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Conven-

tion), seven years earlier than Thailand. Moreover, the Lao government enacted the Law on National Heritage of Lao PDR in 2005, which was amended in 2013 and promulgated in 2014. The revised Article 11 defines the scope of intangible cultural heritage, including local cultural creations, social practices, folk literature, beliefs, traditional songs and dances, languages, and traditional medicine, thereby affirming their cultural value and encouraging the Lao people to preserve local wisdom (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Lao PDR 2014).

These initiatives led Thai scholars at the time to conclude that Laos had established and effectively operated a management system for local, national, and world-class cultural heritage that surpassed Thailand's (Sornwichai and Unaprom 2012: 2). However, within just a few years, Thailand caught up by developing the Draft Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, publishing the Draft Amendment to the Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015, passing the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 in 2016, and signing the ICH Convention in the same year. To date, Thailand has announced nine batches of national ICH lists encompassing 395 items (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2025), thereby taking the lead in terms of soft power. Despite having enacted cultural laws and preservation programs, Laos still lags far behind Thailand in terms of artistic capital, as Thailand had developed tourism, art, and culture more than thirty years earlier than Laos.

As a matter of fact, Laos once had the opportunity to catch up with Thailand; however, the Annual Plan (1976-1977), the Three-Year Plan (1978-1980), and a series of Five-Year Plans (1981–2016) implemented by the Laotian government primarily focused on economic growth. This emphasis marginalized art and culture, preventing the systematic cultivation of artistic and cultural talent and leaving Laos's artistic capital increasingly behind that of Thailand (cf. Aneksuk 2006:1; Nishimura et al. 2016).

The divergent trajectories of cultural policies in Thailand and Laos have, on the one hand, cultivated artists with differing ideologies and subjectively distinguished between the otherwise very similar Thai and Laotian aesthetics; on the other hand, they have created a gap in the soft power of the two countries. Thailand's cultural industry and artistic talent far surpass those of Laos, which poses a significant challenge to Laos, given that the main ethnic group in both Isan and Laos is the Laotian, sharing many cultural traits. Cultural capital, in this context, directly influences cultural representation. Consequently, once Laotian culture is transformed into a cultural heritage or tourist attraction in Northeast Thailand, its original cultural identity is relatively eclipsed.

Brereton (2012:58, 61, 63; 2015b:8-9) illustrates this with the urban development of Khon Kaen Province in Northeast Thailand, showing how the city strategically fostered urban tourism by incorporating the Laotian epic Sinsai into Buddhist temple murals, religious ceremonies, and urban design elements, as exemplified in Wat Chaisi (วัดไชยศรี) and Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram (Figures 19, 20). The Khon Kaen government skillfully navigated issues of national identity, transforming the Laotian epic into a local literary treasure. This case underscores the importance of cultural capital. For both Thailand and Laos, urban aesthetics and the preservation of murals in Buddhist temples are closely linked to the cultural industry and artistic talent. Ultimately, mastery of cultural capital determines who can prevail in the international competition for soft power.

Figure 19. Part of Sinsai, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province, the photo by the author.

Figure 20. Sinsai street light, Khon Kaen City, Khon Kaen Province, the photo by the author.

Concerning murals, they fall under the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Thailand's policies for mural protection are more comprehensive than those of Laos. Since 2007, Article 66 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๐) stipulates that communities have the right to preserve, restore, and manage outstanding local art and culture to ensure cultural sustainability (Office of the Council of State, 2007: 18–19). Subsequently, the Ministry of Culture implemented the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 in 2016, which classifies murals under the category of folk literature and languages as part of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2016). Meanwhile, the Department of Fine Arts has been developing the draft Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art, and National Museums, another key legislative framework aimed at safeguarding mural heritage. In contrast, Laos lags far behind in legislation, education, and cultural capital. Even though murals in Laos retain traditional advantages, the lack of ICH protection poli-

cies and trained personnel limits their preservation and promotion. For murals in Thailand and Laos alike, the underlying cultural capital and policies are the core factors determining the "battle" over ICH.

In conclusion, the murals in Buddhist temples of Isan encompass religious, cultural, and historical elements, with creation rules closely intertwined with Isan society (see Figure 21). At the individual level, Isan murals emphasize the causality of good and evil behavior, convey the importance of producing merit, and reflect the cultural principles of Buddhism, corresponding to what can be termed a "spiritual battle." At the societal level, these murals subtly reveal the characteristics of Northeast Thailand, highlighting the locality of Laotians and reflecting Isan artists' creative norms and ethnic identity, which can be understood as a "battle of consciousness." At the national level, although the content of murals on both sides of the Mekong River is similar, the structures governing their production and protection underscore differences in cultural capital and policy between the two countries. The set of legal frameworks exercised by the state apparatus is embedded within the murals, constituting what may be described as the international "battle of ICH."

Item	The rules for creating murals	The "spirit of battle"
Individual	Cultural rules of Buddhism	Battle of good and evil
Society	The rules of cultural identity of Isan artists	Battle of consciousness
Country	Legal rules of the state apparatus	Battle of ICH

Figure 21. Analysis of the "spirit of battle" in murals in Northeast Thailand. Source: Collated by the author.

Conclusion
This study examined the texts of murals from 24 Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand to elucidate the rules governing the creation of Isan murals and, in turn, to deconstruct aspects of Isan culture. The research findings indicate that the guiding principle underlying the production of Isan murals is the "spirit of battle," which is embedded within the murals and operates across individual, societal, and national levels, respectively reflecting the "battle of good and evil," the "battle of consciousness," and the "battle of ICH."

The creation principles of Isan murals are closely intertwined with local religious, ethnic, and political elements, giving rise to distinctive regional characteristics. The phenomenon of the "localization of art" has been a recurring theme throughout Thailand's history. For instance, Buddhist statues from different periods exhibit unique artistic styles while simultaneously reflecting multicultural fusion. In essence, the dual aspects of "local characteristics" and "cultural integration" continually shape Thai culture. Bovornkitti (2005: 356) asserted that this dynamic drives Buddhist groups in various regions to pursue distinctiveness.

The same applies to Buddhist murals. Muralists across regions on both sides of the Mekong River adapt the content of their works to the local context, thereby imbuing them with regional characteristics. It is not difficult to identify the local characteristics of Isan's murals; nevertheless, comparatively little attention has been paid to the cultural context underlying these works. This context – spanning the individual, society, and nation – is interconnected, forming a hierarchical set of rules for creation that reflects Buddhist teachings, ethnic identity, and the soft power of states through murals.

Beyond highlighting the locality of Isan's murals, this study adopts a perspective that "gazes at" the murals to examine the multifaceted relationships between Buddhist temple murals and Isan society from the inside out, revealing the "spirit of battle" embedded within. The term "spirit of battle" here does not correspond to Buddhist doctrine but rather denotes a cultural characteristic rooted in the regional context. Cultural dynamics in Northeast Thailand foster a competitive interpretation of Isan murals, as the governments of both Thailand and Laos aim to promote national identity and spirit through these works, extending their significance beyond the religious domain. Consequently, murals in Northeast Thailand acquire political implications that surpass their devotional purpose. For Isan mural artists, the creative environment shaped by the Thailand-Laos border effectively accentuates the distinctiveness of Isan murals.

Endnotes

1   The three worlds (ไตรภูมิ) – the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm – form the core of the Buddhist cosmos. The desire realm involves sensual desires, the form realm has form without desire, and the formless realm is purely mental. The three worlds contain countless small worlds, each centered on Mount Sumeru. A thousand small worlds form a small thousand-world, a thousand small thousand-worlds form a medium thousand-world, and a thousand medium thousand-worlds form a great thousand-world, collectively called the Three Thousand Great Thousand Worlds.

2   Brief Summary of the Sinsai Story. See Brereton, 2012: 63–65.

3   The four municipalities include Ban Phai (BPM), Chum Phae (CPM), Khon Kaen (KKM), and Muang Phon (MPM) in Khon Kaen Province.

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