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**Creating Many Narratives? Prince Phra Wet Scrolls in
Lowland Laos and Northeast Thailand**

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Part I – Introduction

● **Festival** The Bun Phra Wet, the most important Theravada Buddhist festival in Northeast Thailand and Lowland Laos, celebrates the life of Phra Wetsandorn. ● **Recitation** The festival includes far more than the recitation, the Thet Mahachat, for its impact. The long, painted scroll, *phaa yao Phra Wet*, carried by the villagers and circumambulated around the *sala* and hung on its inside, ● **Recitation** enclosing the space of the recitation that will take place the next day, symbolizes the festival's other meanings. These meanings are legitimated by the festival's designation as *Bun Phra Wet*, a festival larger than simply *Thet Mahachat*. ●

Procession

● **Some possible meanings in the Bun Phra Wet**

Giving (giving it all . . .)

Family and community

“salvation”, merit-making

Separation

Wives from husbands

Children from parents

Sovereign from citizens

Journey – pilgrimage – annually, with “pre-Buddha”

Hardship, poverty, and wealth

Fertility – rains, increase

Struggle and celebration, success and failure

Mistakes

Humor

● **Examining scroll** The scroll and other material aspects of the festival remain lightly described and largely unanalyzed in the Bun Phra Wet literature.¹ The scroll and its journey to the temple lay out a framework for understanding aspects of the story. Preparing offerings, transforming the temple space, and making a journey with the scroll require the villagers’ *physical* participation and cooperation over several weeks. ● **Chart** Thus our attention shifts from the individual states of *being* implied in and through the recitation, to the communal processes of *actively becoming* participants in a merit-making community through the manipulation of objects. We argue that the festival’s material culture reveals how ‘the things that people make, make people.’²

● **Objects and Subjects**

● **Giving elephant** Notice of these issues comes from dealing with things. Discarding precious goods as a step towards the realization of Buddhist truth is crucial in the Vessantara Jataka. The practical and often ambiguous challenges of overcoming material attachments pose contradictions – since giving can be both selfless and selfish, as humans are enmeshed in social relations. ● **Giving Children** The Prince offers his kingdom’s sacred elephant, his riches, his

children, and finally his wife, as gifts that others have requested. ● **Giving Matsii** As we all know, the people of Northeast Thailand and Laos have been long accustomed to daily activities which require them to separate from things as well as their loved ones. The Bun Phra Wet gives them a chance to act out these occasions and deal with ambiguities embedded in daily life.³

● **Procession to sala** The movement of things and people in the festival reconfigures both the space and time of the celebrants and actualizes these various meanings. To make the Prince, his family, and his subjects ‘present’ in the ritual, the *sala* is remade into the spaces of the Phra Wet narrative – simultaneously the Prince’s forest hermitage and the royal palace. These transformations require community-wide organization and participation, an active becoming that binds individual participants as collective citizens of the kingdom and as the Prince’s subjects.

● **Summary** In general, merit accrued through gifting thus unites the material and the social in a single conceptual frame, as people exchanging goods and services create a moral community and ethical subjectivities. The political subjectivities of the inhabitants of Isaan and Laos are expressed as well.

● **Map** This paper draws on ethnographic observations, interviews and scroll documentations that we conducted in over 200 *wat* from late 2007 until earlier this year. ● **Unrolling the scroll** While the Wetsandorn Jataka remains prominent in popular, visual, and religious culture throughout Mainland Southeast Asia, the scrolls we examine here are concentrated in the “ethnic Lao” areas of the region.

● **Procession into wat** First, we analyze the role of the *phaa yao Phra Wet* in the festival and its relationship to both the story of the Prince and to the Isaan and Lao villagers celebrating his life. Carrying the scroll binds the community of this time and space together. It also transforms this group into that long-ago community that welcomed Phra Wet back to his

kingdom. But the goal is future rebirth in the time of Maitreaya, as the same community.

● **Women making *kan mak beng*** Two major arenas of preparation are required, most of which can be taken care of by the elderly men and women of the village. Women are responsible for producing Phra Wet's objects, known as *khruang hooy-khruang phan* or 100 things-1000 things. ● ***Kuluphan*** But the celebration also includes references to past celebrants through the *kuluphan*, a container made by the first people to celebrate a Bun Phra Wet, which holds many of the 100's of things that total 1,000, which is also brought out for the ceremony.

● ***Rajawat*** These royal and other items within the sala create a royal space, the *ratchawat* (both Phra Wet's forest retreat and palace). It is defined by a fence or latticework of crossed bamboo slats, with banana and sugar cane stalks, coconuts and other items at the four corners. ● ***Rajawat & Thaamaat*** It also encloses the preaching chair or chairs, *thaammaat*, from which the monks recite. ● ***Thaamaat*** The *thaamaat* is often decorated with small woven bird and animal images, flowers, food in packets, and bunches of bananas on stems, which listeners can eat during the recitation and will certainly take with them when it is over. ● ***Thaamaat with scroll in background*** The scroll defines this area and, in so doing, produces a stage on which the important transformations implicit in the story can take place.

The *phaa yao Phra Wet*

● **Ubun scroll** *Phaa yao Phra Wet* are routinely a meter wide and extend usually from 25 to 45 meters in length. ● **Outside salawat** ● **Scroll hanging in salawat** In older and smaller open-walled structures – the *sim* and *salawat* – these long bolts of white cotton cloth have enabled rural *wat* to hang the visual equivalent of mural.⁴

We could say this scroll is a long, potentially awkward object, but the people of Northeast Thailand and Laos designed it and invented a way to perform with it. Thus while

reasons for the scroll's existence remain speculative, we note that the procession with the scroll and the transformation of the *sala* into Wetsandorn's hermitage provide opportunities for imaginative, heightened interaction with the material objects that reconfigure the landscape.

● **Artist painting** Scrolls are, for the most part, made locally, on commercially produced cloth. ● **Scroll writing** All the scrolls we surveyed include at least one scene of each *kan* or chapter, always captioned. ● **Phu Thai band** One scroll includes a local rock band, labeled 'Phu Thai', clearly identifying the celebrants in the scroll with those carrying or otherwise viewing the scroll, who live in a Phu Thai community.⁵ Note also the handicapped people in the picture and the name of the thesaban on the garbage bin. These localized details serve to locate a story of long-ago into the here-and-now.

● **Invitation** Through these strategies the scroll moves from pictures to active engagement. The scroll becomes a manuscript, recites the story, and complements the recitation by the monks. Before villagers install the scroll in the *sala wat*, they take it to an area outside the *wat* grounds designated as *paa*, "jungle" or "forest," representing the site of Phra Wet's exile after having been asked to leave his kingdom.⁶ One of laity, usually the head of the *wat* committee, asks Phra Wet, often a monk, to return to the city from which he has been exiled. ● **Characters** Phra Wet agrees – sometimes reluctantly – and joins his wife, children, and parents: community members dressed as the story's characters. ● **Jujok**

● **Carrying scroll** One monk in Laos told us that to bring the cloth back is, literally, to bring the Prince back, since the spirit of the Prince is in the cloth. We have also been told that the procession often speeds up as it nears the *wat*. Why? "Because Phra Wet is anxious and happy to get home." The community's physical return matches and recreates the visual return depicted on the scroll.

● **Nakhon procession** The procession with the scroll reenacts the 12th and 13th *kan* of the story. It presents the conclusion before it has been recited. Thus the next day's recitation is anti-climatic; the people have already participated in the merit of the story when they processed with the scroll.

● **Title: Coen Phra Wet** For "ethnic Lao" the festival and the scroll procession assert these people's rights to civilization as members of a *muang*, a place housing royalty. The procession brings into the story an active element only implied in the recitation; the people of the *baan* become the story's central actors.

● **First Chart** The invitation to Phra Wet to return to the *muang* reverses the movement from *muang* and *baan* which has taken place with the family's exile to the Himaphan forest and Chuchok's quest for the children. ● **Scroll scene** While, historically, ethnic Lao have predominantly lived in *baan*, their villages have always been associated with *muang*.⁷ For Tai peoples, to assert residence in a *muang* is to assert that one is "civilized", that one is a member of a recognized social and political unit.⁸

● **Scroll bird** Many Tai peoples consider the forest a weird and dangerous place.⁹ The Himaphan forest, through which five journeys are made over the course of the story, is depicted as full of terrible and wondrous beasts. ● **Second Chart** Villagers, Jujok, and royalty make five separate journeys into and out of the forest.

● **Scroll invitation** However, equally importantly, in undertaking the procession with the scroll, the people of the *baan* living today replicate this hazardous trip into the forest to ask Phra Wet and Matsi to return. ● **Procession** And, once the people have made their way into the *paa*, they know they must return, this time with Phra Wet and Matsi, over the same long distance, in a grand procession.

● **Chart Three thus**, as villagers move from *baan* to *paa* and then return to *muang*, they align their *baan* with a center of civilization. They return with the insignia of civility, a member of the royalty, Phra Wet, to their civilized place.

Each local community has its moment of *muang*-dom, as it holds its Bun Phra Wet. The Bun highlights each local community in turn and the abilities of that *baan/muang* to mobilize material and resources to welcome its ruler. Thus, not only does the Bun Phra Wet locate villagers spatially between *muang* and *paa*, the wild, it also re-locates and re-replaces them in a social hierarchy. The Bun Phra Wet festival – expressed visually, materially, and in performance – gives expression to this-world political structures and social positions of ethnic Lao.

● **Coen Phra Wet** The villagers' invitation to Phra Wet is crucial. It signifies their agreement that they shall be governed by a monarch. However, they do not merely acquiesce to be ruled; they negotiate a compact between themselves and their Prince.

● **Chart Four** An extremely popular monk who is featured in *thet lae*, singing, performances of the Phra Wet story, presented me with the following summary: The King approaches his son and twice asks him to return. Phra Wet refuses both times. In desperation, the citizens of the Kingdom, who originally asked the King to exile the prince, ask the Prince a third time to return to the *muang*. Only then does Phra Wet agree.

Thus, Phra Wet's kingship is a matter of negotiation with his people; it is not imposed, but accepted because they recognize Phra Wet's meritorious behavior, resulting good karma, and the benefits that accrues to them by his rule.

● **Elephant with flags** Northeast Thailand scroll processions today demonstrate that current citizens now come to agree with today's ruler and his Kingdom. Flags – both the Thai national flag and the yellow flag of Thai Buddhism – are ubiquitous during this festival along the

procession route. They not only greet and inform passers-by that a Bun Phra Wet is taking place, but also state that this is a community of loyal Thai subjects.

● **2 Scroll scenes with flags, soldier** Interestingly, on a few scrolls, Thai and Lao standards also appear. ● **Scroll with monarch** Seldom, however, do we see overt reference to the current monarchy in these dramatizations

It is clear, however, that this annual celebration is a celebration of a settled location in its physical – *baan-paa* – as well as in its social organizational – *satsana-muang-baan* – contexts. That this occurs across a wide stretch of territory among many millions of people is an indication of its power.

Conclusions

● **Procession** This paper summarizes fieldwork in Northeast Thailand (Isaan) and Lowland Laos – among “ethnic Lao” populations – concerning the most important and largest Theravada Buddhist ritual in these areas. The Bun Phra Wet occurs throughout Isaan and Lowland Laos in almost every village wat and in a large percentage of urban ones.

● **First conclusion** The *Wetsandaun Chadok* is a story with multiple meanings and multiple readings/performances in different contexts, times, and places. The Bun Phra Wet, while originating in the texts and readings of the Phra Wet Jataka, is a ritual with goals and results markedly different from the ritual with which it is most commonly compared, the Central Thai *Thet Mahachat*. First, through the procession of the *phaa yao Phra Wet* from *paa*, forest, to the reconfigured *muang*, the festival reflects and reinforces the Tai dialectic concerning location, between civilized and wild. In doing this for each celebrating community, it provides a way for community members to see themselves as participating in the larger Tai socio-political world. While, among ethnic Lao this ceremony takes place under the aegis of Theravada Buddhism, it

regenerates the negotiated agreement between ruler and ruled at the core of Tai social organization.

● **Second conclusion** Secondly, the re-enactment of crucial, selected segments of Phra Wet's life emphasizes the common goal of a co-operating congregation moving toward better, more prosperous rebirths. At the same time, the extraordinary length of these scrolls, requiring communal participation to carry them, joins with the multitudes of things to show off village wealth. Together these things and these performances demonstrate the integral role of objects in creating a community of moral and political subjects. ● **Laughing woman** ● **Thank you slide**

¹ (Brereton 1995, Collins 1998, Cone and Gombrich 1977, Condominas 1998, Formoso 1992, Klausner 2509/1966, 2000, Suriya, et al. 2543/2000, Tambiah 1970, Spiro 1971).

² (Miller 2005:38, also Henare, et al. 2007).

³ (Cassiniti . . .)

⁴ Brereton (2010) surmises that the *pha yao phrawet* in Isan predate interior murals. We would argue this remains speculative, since such scant evidence exists for versions of either interior wall murals or scrolls earlier than about 150 years ago.

⁵ Cate analyzes (2003) the narrative strategy of Thai muralists inserting genre scenes and details of the 'everyday' of their viewers as a means of drawing viewers into the action; scroll painters likewise engage their viewers similarly.

⁶ In some communities, the scroll may not be carried, but hung before the ceremony, or the story may be depicted on wall paintings. In these occasions the procession still happens, but the people carry flowers with which to decorate the *sala*.

⁷ Richard A. O'Connor, "Siamese Tai in Tai Context: The Impact of a Ruling Center," *Crossroads* 5 (1990): 1-21; Hayashi Yukio, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: religion in the making of region* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003); Leedom Lefferts, "The Historical Demography of Developing Areas: A Theoretical and Research Frontier," *Sociological Research Symposium V*, ed. J.S. Williams, A.M. Schwartzbaum, and R.F. Ganey (Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, 1975), 64-69; Leedom Lefferts, "Frontier Demography: An Introduction," *The Frontier: Comparative Studies*, ed. D.H. Miller and J.O. Steffen (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 33-55

⁸ (Turton 2000, Thongchai 2000)

⁹ (Formoso 1990).