The Chinese Rabbit Seller and Other (Extra)Ordinary Persons: Reflecting on Agency in Traditional Central Thai Mural Painting

Irving Chan Johnson
National University of Singapore

Abstract—This article explores the often overlooked images of ordinariness one finds in Thai temple mural painting. Through redirecting the scholarly gaze away from more traditional concerns with narrative, style and function, I show how seemingly banal scenes of the everyday are sites through which to locate subjective understandings of cultural and political identities. I do this by critically reflecting on my own work as a Thai mural painter in Singapore and showing how my situation within a diasporic Thai ritual universe transforms visual representations of Buddhist texts into fascinating engagements with the extraordinary, thereby inserting agency into a genre where artistic presence and viewership is largely silent.

Once upon a time in the citadel of Paranasi (present-day Varanasi), the Buddha-to-be (*phothisat*) was born as a prince named Temi.[1] Paranasi's massive palace with its elegant spires, gabled roofs, thick walls and lacquered wood windows resembled the finest royal architecture found in central Siam.[2] Outside the city walls, far from the musings of court life and reserved decorum, a Chinese man sold rabbits.[3] His canvas shoes, bamboo hat, long-sleeved shirt and baggy trousers distinguished him from the city's ethnic Thai residents. His hair flowed down his back in a neat queue, its sinuous form resembling that of the "flowing tail" pattern (*lai hang lai*) commonly seen in traditional Thai motifs. The rabbits attracted a little boy, who squatted in front of the furry creatures, perhaps in anticipation of taking one home.

[1] In this article, all Pali words are transcribed according to standard Central Thai pronunciation.

[2] I refer to Siam not as a political territory encompassing present-day Thailand but as the area surrounding and adjacent to the Chao Phraya basin, primarily the old capitals of Ayutthaya, Thonburi and present-day Bangkok (Rattanakosin).

[3] Merchants and market vendors have traditionally been painted by Thai muralists as either Chinese men or Thai women (Skilling 2007). The lack of ethnic Thai men in the trading economy was common throughout much of historical Siam and continues to this day (Napat and Gordon 1999: 8).

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Figure 1. The Chinese rabbit merchant and Thai boy

Many lifetimes later, the Buddha-to-be was born as Prince Nemirat. Having taken up an offer to preach to the gods, Nemirat decided to visit the Netherworld on his way to Indra's heavenly abode. Here he came across a curious creature. The anthropomorphic being had a body that resembled a giant spotted rabbit, but with a head that was unmistakably that of our Chinese pet trader. Lapin-like ears protruded from his woven hat. The strange apparition inhabited a Thai Theravadin hellscape—a universe marked

Figure 2. Full scene of the stories of Temi and Mahachanok (above)

by pain and suffering.[4] Yet, this was also a whimsical topsy-turvy world where the tormented smiled broadly despite their intense pain. In the midst of this nightmarish

[4] On visual renditions of hell in traditional Thai painting, see Brereton (1986). Murals painted in the mid to late 19th century often showed condemned souls not only being tortured but also enjoying themselves as they played music, danced and laughed.

landscape, a pale child ghost drank milk from a bottle and Adolf Hitler burned under a thick cauldron.

Figure 3. The rabbit trader as a ghoul

Figure 4. Adolf Hitler as fuel

The Chinese rabbit seller moves silently between scenes that detail the past ten lives of the Buddha (*thosachat*).[5] I painted this classical Theravadin narrative across one wall of Wat Uttamayanmuni's large preaching hall (*wihan*) between 2012 and 2019.[6] The temple is one of seven Thai Theravadin temples in Singapore, a nation state demographically Chinese and Mahayanist in its ethnic and religious make-up.[7] Interspersed within stock scenes derived from the *thosachat's* core episodes, such as Temi lifting his chariot, Mahachanok's shipwreck and Nemirat's fantastic journeys, are a milieu of unnamed characters doing ordinary things. The rabbit seller, intoxicated villagers, French Jesuit missionaries in the imagined garb of the Versailles court, turbaned Persians (Iranians), frolicking mermaids and Singaporean soldiers made up a small community of fascinating, but much overlooked actors through which Thai ethno-cultural identity, space and artistic agency project themselves on concrete walls.[8] These

[5] In popular Thai Theravadism, the Buddha was born 550 times prior to attaining full Enlightenment as Prince Gautama. However, most central Thai muralists paint only the last ten of these sacred biographies (Skilling 2009). Some Thai temples may contain additional stories as well as narratives derived from the non-canonical Pannasa Jataka compendium and local folklore (Baker and Pasuk 2019).

[6] As of 2020, the mural project is yet to be completed and I continue to paint at the temple.

[7] Singapore's population of approximately 5.7 million people is largely Chinese, the majority of whom practice a syncretic blend of popular Taoism and Sino-Mahayanism. Since the 1950s, Theravada Buddhism (Thai, Sinhala, Burmese) has made its way into the religious make-up of the Chinese "Buddhist" population, resulting in the mushrooming of Thai temples across the island.

[8] Traditional Central Thai painting often depicted Europeans/Caucasians as dressed either as stylized French

characters exist as Cartesian binaries to the main *dramatis personae* in the mural around whose elite lives the tales and their corresponding morals are spun.

In this article I move away from concerns with didactic narratives and art historical discourses of style, school and evolution, to look at the peripheries of painted space on temple walls or the "image on the edge", as Michael Camille (1992) aptly terms it.[9] Taking off from Camille's discussion of non-religious images as symbols of resistance and individuality in medieval European art, I ask the question of how a decentering of the scholarly and artistic gaze away from traditional concerns with standard Buddhist biographical storytelling and their visual representations towards the cacophony of voices at the margins provides one with a new and creative way to think about art and personhood. This is especially interesting in a genre like traditional Central Thai mural painting, where artistic voice and reflexivity are often missing from the literature.[10] The "margins", in this instance, do not just appear at the sides of painted space but envelop the mural in a myriad of fascinating positionalities. In writing about the art of medieval illuminated manuscripts, Kathleen Walker-Meikle notes that images of cats and mice comprise a menagerie of marginalia that "bear no relation to the text in question, whether theological, liturgical or romance, but simply intended to amuse and entertain the reader" (2019:3). Justin McDaniel (2014) suggested that academics (both Thai and non-Thai) need to divorce themselves from the "condescending" hegemony of textuality to relook at Thai temple murals from the viewpoint of painters, monks, and the lay men and women who were largely unconcerned with the stories and their purported messages. Through engaging with pictorial representations of the marginalia in Thai painting—scenes and characters of the ordinary—one encounters an (extra)ordinary text in which the artist's experience takes precedence over telling and meaning. This is especially so when one considers the reasons why characters like the Chinese rabbit seller are painted from the perspective of the muralists themselves. My article thus shifts the scholarly analysis away from viewing Thai murals as repositories of Buddhist teaching or stubborn aesthetic histories, to seeing murals as repositories of a silent creativity and a window into unwritten/undiscussed experiences (Napat and Gordon 1994, 1999).[11]

David Wyatt (2004) in *Reading Thai Murals* notes the "conundrum" of the Thai temple mural. He argued that Thai artists used their murals not only to express Buddhist tales, but also hidden and oftentimes personal agendas ripe with considerations of self, other, temporality, power, sex, and religion. I reflect on Wyatt's conclusion through

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or Portuguese from the 17th century. This practice continues to the present day in the way generic Caucasians (*farang*) are illustrated in "traditional" type visual art (Smith 2011, No 1986, Peleggi 2012).

[9] Central Thai mural paintings often depict urban landscapes enveloped by heavy walls and massive gates. Scenes of rural life are rarely illustrated. When non-regal people are portrayed, they usually exist as part of the city, inhabiting spaces outside the walls rather than in rice farming villages.

[10] I use the term "Central Thai" broadly to encompass the artistic style most commonly seen in the visual art of Bangkok and neighboring provinces. There is a diversity of "styles" even within a single genre based on history, form and technique. Within the category of Central Thai painting, Thai artists often make a distinction between the art of Ayutthaya, Phetchaburi, Nonthaburi, Thonburi and Bangkok. See for instance the works by Van Beek and Tettoni (1999), No (1963) and Preecha (1980).

[11] Although this article focuses on Thai temple murals, a similar argument can be made for other genres of traditional Thai painting, for example, manuscript illustrations and hanging banners (*phra bot*).

analyzing my own work as a Thai mural painter living and working in Singapore. Why did I paint a rabbit seller on a temple wall outside of Thailand? Why was he Chinese? And why rabbits? Through locating the answers of these seemingly simple questions in a self-reflection of my craft as a painter, my thinking as an anthropologist and my social and ritual positioning as a Thai Buddhist man living in Singapore, I demonstrate how these often overlooked marginalia are, in fact, rich sites through which artists and audiences have for a long time engaged with larger questions of what constitutes cultural identity, history and experience.

Thai and Euro-American scholarship on mural painting in Thailand, have largely focused on murals objectively through emphasizing the development of the art, its canonical and extra and non-cannonical content, iconography, production techniques, conservation practices and possible symbolic/didactic meanings (Nue-On 2013; Boisselier 1976; Matics 1992; Bhirasri 1959; McGill 2009; Ringis 1990; Piyachada and Razyan 2014; Intralib 2004; Wenk 1976; Jaiser 2009, 2010; Uthong 2002; Santi 2000, 2005; Listopad 1984; No 1983, 1981; Wiyada 1979; Ferguson and Johanssen 1976; Lyons 1990; Pichai 2011; Wray et al. 1972; Brereton 2010; Brereton and Somroay 2010; Pairote 1989; Sone 1983, 1985; Somporn 2014; Wanippha 1992).[12]

Most of these works include a mention of ordinary scenes of non-narrative textuality albeit in passing. To date, the only book published that focuses fully on the everyday in Thai murals is Uthong Prasatwinitchai's (2003) *Phap Phut (Talking Images)*. Nonetheless, the volume eschews scholarly discussion, focusing only on the photographic images from temple murals across the country. Several Thai mural painters have written art manuals and pattern books (*tamra/kalawithi*) which detail the methodologies of traditional art focusing on techniques of drawing, painting and composition (Suwat 2012, 2016; Om 2002). Many of these textbooks celebrate the art style of the author and include the artist-writer's biography without discussions on personal inspiration and subjectivity. The lack of agentive material in these writings about Thai painting creates an impression of artistic absence and the mistaken notion of aesthetic rigidity masked under the pretext of an essentialized "tradition" (*prapheni*). The latter is a problematic term, commonly used by Thai art historians, teachers and painters, to refer to the presumed classicism of (Central) Thai painting prior the advent of Western aesthetics with its focus on a culturally-defined 'realism' and personhood.

Wyatt (2004), Brereton (2010, 2015) and Cate (2003) have looked at Thai mural art as canvases upon which creative agency and diverse personalities acted out issues of sexuality, politics, marginality and global modernities. Nevertheless, their historical and ethnographic treatises are primarily written *about* art and artists, rather than foregrounding personal questions about the meaning of the art and image from the viewpoint of artists or viewers of the art. This article adds to these discussions by attempting to bridge the gap between writer, artist and audience in thinking through issues of seeing and identification in the production of a temple mural faraway from Thailand's sovereign

[12] Writing about wall paintings in Theravadin Southeast Asia, Jonathan Walters (2003) argues that narratives of the previous lives of the Buddha were not didactic discourses since the actions of the bodhisatta *(phothisat)* as protagonist were impossible for lay viewers to achieve. Rather, the stories engulfed viewers in a shared Buddhist communalism.

borders. In my mural the rabbit vendor appears dressed as a quintessential 19th century Chinese man. His skin is fair, his eyes small and sharp, his nose flat. He does not wear the patterned chintz of his Thai compatriots, preferring instead a pair of plain trousers and cloth shoes. He takes on multiple personas as the stories progress across the *wihan*'s high walls. Nevertheless, his ethnic identity as a Chinese man in the 19th century remains unchanged and attests to the grammatical rules of classical Central Thai painting, within which genre I worked. This included the separation of scenes with both zigzag lines (*sin thao*) and rocky formations, a two-dimensionality of form, lack of a vanishing point and depth, stock human and animal portrayals, intensely dark backgrounds, and a liberal use of gilding and pattern work. Early Bangkok-period (1782-1851) mural painting, sometimes referred to as "traditional Thai painting" (*jittakam thai prapheni*) by Thai artists and scholars, visually defines characters according to a particular set of culturally constructed ethnic histories.[13] Albeit executed in commercial acrylics, rather than a more subdued palette of natural pigments, my painting—as with mural paintings throughout most of Buddhist Southeast Asia since the 17th century—traversed multiple temporal and experiential terrains. In the tale of Mahosot, the Chinese man is a soldier; in the story of Narathaphrom, he begs for gold from Princess Ruja on a night illuminated by a full moon, and in the tale of the Withun, he is a smiling father. Like the groping mermaids swimming in the ocean above him, the unnamed character's Chinese-self (as defined through his visual form) lives silently in the shadows of the intricacy and formality that is often associated with classical Central Thai visual renditions of the sacred and powerful.[14] The latter are constructed according to a strict sense of Indic-derived composure, their bodies decorated with gold leaf and fine line work. Royal and ageless, these protagonists and their retainers—wives, children, ministers, servants, musicians and minor officials—do not display emotion other than a faint smile, even under the most dire of circumstances.[15] Their slender figures adhere to a strict tapestry of fixed movements (Brereton 2010). Even when the Buddha-to-be was born as an animal, his movements are controlled in their visual portrayal as if to emphasize his regal and sacred nature. The giant dragon Phurithat, for instance, is traditionally shown coiled

[13] The early Bangkok period as used in this article coincides with the reign of the first three kings of the Chakri dynasty (1782-1851). Traditional Thai artists often associate this period as the Golden Age of Thai painting in Central Thailand, prior the heavy influence of Western aesthetics in the visual art of subsequent reigns. Nua-On (2013: 2) defines *jittakam thai prapheni* as one where the content, style and technique of the work adheres to a local form that harks back to "ancient Thai craftsmen" (*chang thai boran*).

[14] Stories from the last ten lives of the Buddha involve protagonists who are either royalty or have close associations with the court both human and heavenly. The prominence of the court and its complex maneuverings in these tales and in their visual representation (e.g. scenes of palaces, processions and court life) also appear in Burmese murals from the 17th to the late 19th century (Green 2018:155). Green (ibid) pointed out that this focus on kingly power in wall art was a means of symbolically affirming popular Theravadin ideas of regality being the result of unmatched merit accumulation and thus enveloping temple-goers within a shared Buddhist *communitas* that legitimized the political culture of the day. On the associations between Theravada narrative literature and kingship in Thailand, see also Jory (2002, 2017).

[15] Court Brahmins are often portrayed as elderly men in Central Thai paintings from the early Bangkok period. Some servants/retainers, although inhabiting courtly realms, are painted as grotesque with wide nostrils, bald heads, and fat cheeks. This could be an artistic attempt at breaking away from the tiresome monotony of standardized facial expressions that monopolize visual space in palace scenes.

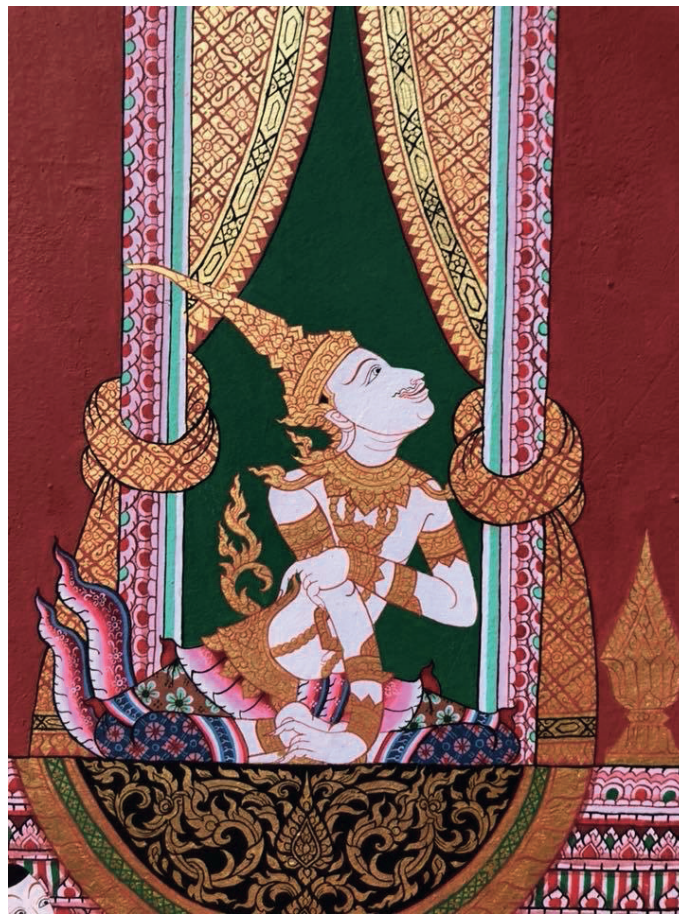

Figure 5. Royal figure

around an anthill, as he engages in deep meditation. This image forms the core pictorial episode in a tale that focuses on the Buddhist perfection of moral conduct. Chaos often surrounds the closed-eyed serpent. In Wat Uttamayanmuni's murals, terrified female dragons in human form flee towards a river, as they notice a snake catcher approaching Phurithat. Amid the commotion, one of the dragons loses her gold cloth skirt, exposing bare pink buttocks—a moment of lightheartedness in an otherwise solemn and emotive scene.

Throughout Thailand, temple murals—despite variations in style and content—occur within lifeworlds that are both real and imagined in their representation.[16] This visual bridging of temporalities is achieved using scenes of the ordinary. These scenes transform Buddhist narratives into intimate local (Thai) experiences of banality. Kings, queens and members of the court in traditional Central Thai mural art are often portrayed as "receiving respect, deference, adoration, services and tribute from their followers and from the common people" (Napat and Gordon 1999: 5). It is through depictions of the unassuming, however, that a new visuality emerges. Marginalia encapsulate how one

[16] A similar observation can be made for temple murals in Cambodia, Laos and Burma (Myanmar)—which primarily depict similar tales and scenes, albeit with local variations.

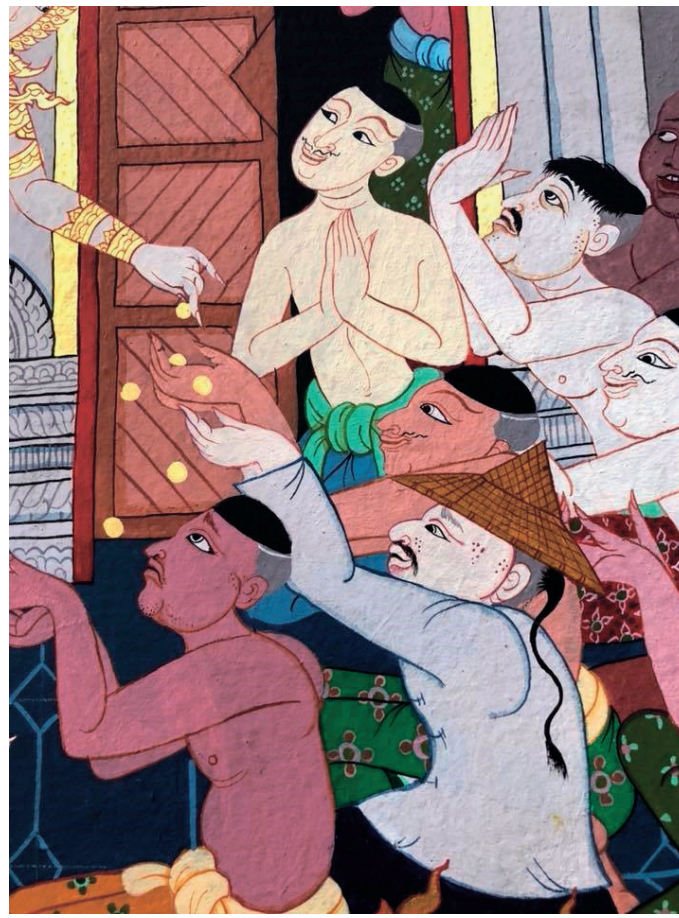

Figure 6. Beggars

sees and thinks about what it means to create religiously inspired art in a temple at a particular time and place. This becomes even more intriguing and poignant when one thinks of Thai wall paintings within the frame of diasporic and transcultural spaces.

Wat Uttamayanmuni and Thai mural art in Singapore

Unlike other Thai temples in Singapore, which maintain close historical, political and cultural affiliations with Thailand, Wat Uttamayanmuni traces its beginnings to Malaysia. The temple was established by Phra Wijaranayanmuni, chief Thai Buddhist monk of the northeastern Malaysian state of Kelantan in 1962, three years before Singapore gained independence from Britain.[17] Wat Uttamayanmuni is a branch temple (*wat sakha*) of Wat Uttamaram, a large and old monastery in Kelantan's Pasir Mas district,

[17] Commonly referred to by Kelantanese Thais as Pho Than Khron (Venerable Khron), Phra Wijaranayanmuni (1876-1962) was born in the ethnic Thai village of Ban Bangsek in Pasir Mas. His was ordained by Phra Khru Kiu (Ophat Phutthakhun) the first Kelantanese Thai monk to have received an ecclesiastical appointment as Head of the Kelantanese Monkhood (*jao khana rat mueang Kelantan*) by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Kelantan remained a part of Siam until the ratification of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1910 when the state became part of British Malaya.

Figure 7 (left). The *wihan* at Wat Uttamayanmuni.
Figure 8 (top right). Monks sitting in front of the mural during a religious ceremony.
Figure 9 (bottom right). Merit-making ceremony in the *wihan* with Thai and Singaporean participants.

a short distance from the international border separating Thailand from Malaysia.

Kelantan is primarily a Malay and Muslim state. Thai Buddhists number some 10,000 individuals or about one per cent of the population.[18] Kelantanese Thai monks have always been avid travelers, moving great distances across the Malay peninsula, into Thailand and beyond. This mobility, coupled with their popular repute as magical practitioners by local Malay and Chinese groups has led to a number of monks establishing temples in non-Thai spaces, particularly in Chinese enclaves across Malaysia (Golomb 1978, Johnson 2008).[19] To date there are Kelantanese Thai branch temples in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor and Singapore.

My association with Wat Uttamayanmuni goes back a long time. I was born in Singapore and brought up by my Kelantanese Thai mother and American Caucasian father as a Theravada Buddhist. As a family we would go to the temple for ritual and social events and were personal friends with the monks who lived there. I have always been fascinated by Thai art. The intricacies of the designs coupled with the exciting stories that enveloped them stirred my artistic imagination, and I remember spending many hours drawing and copying Thai patterns on scraps of paper and in my school books.

[18] On the history and ethnography of the Kelantanese Thai community, see Winzeler (1986), Johnson (2012), Mohammed Yusoff (1982, 1987, 1993), Kershaw (1969), Golomb (1978).

[19] The most recent of these moves out of Kelantan's Thai Buddhist heartland has been in the proposed establishment of a "Malaysian" temple in Bodhgaya, India. Wat Theravada Thai Malaysia temple was the brainchild of a Thai abbot in Kelantan.

I enjoyed going to Thai temples to experience art. The walls of Wat Uttamayanmuni's Central Thai-style *wihan* were, however, whitewashed and undecorated.[20] Why the previous abbot of the temple did not have murals painted remains uncertain although many Kelantanese Thai temples do not have murals.[21] For many years, I felt an artistic unease surrounded by these walls. Their nakedness stood in stark contrast to the intricate designs that decorated the building's gable, windows and doors. When I started teaching Thai art at the National University of Singapore in 2010, I decided to approach the abbot—a man with whom I had been friends for a long time—to see if he was interested in having the walls illuminated. He agreed on condition that the murals remain true to Thai classicism, or "classic" as he called it, so as to showcase the finest of Thai visual art to Singaporean temple visitors. I was not paid for my work, nor did I request payment.[22] As a Buddhist, I viewed my art as both a means to acquire merit (*bun*) through illustrating sacred biographies and, in the process, beautifying temple space.[23] Not being paid had its perks that went beyond the spiritual—it allowed me to work at my own pace unperturbed by deadlines.[24]

Painting the (extra)ordinary

Thai mural art was (and continues to be) used in the consolidation of sacred space via the production of beauty through text and color. Thai artists rarely signed their works although this has changed with the new commercialization of temple painting since the 1970s and, more recently, with the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram that allow painters to showcase their creations and advertise

[20] Since the 1970s most Kelantanese Thai religious buildings have been built according to national (Bangkok) Thai aesthetics. Traditional Kelantanese buildings comprise a bricolage of artistic styles—southern Thai, Malay, Chinese and European. On the standardization of religious architecture in Kelantanese temples according to Thailand's national aesthetic, see Johnson (2010). Wat Uttamayanamuni's wihan was built to resemble a large ordination hall (ubosot). The abbot at the time, however, did not consecrate the building for use in ordination rituals through the ceremonial installation of nine foundation stones around the structure.

[21] Perhaps the earliest (and only) account of murals in Kelantan appeared in a report in the Straits Times, the English language newspaper of British Malaya, in 1937. In it, an individual named Vincent De Bondy wrote of his visit to Wat Bai, a temple in the Thai village of Baan Balai, in the district of Bachok in Kelantan. He observed a "series of pictures" painted in the temple's main hall including depictions of hell. He wrote that "the pictures were crude and lacked artistic merit, but they were deeply impressionistic, and emblematic in their simple form of the many points of similarity that exist in various creeds" (*Straits Times*, 4 July 1937: 14).

[22] Thai mural painters today often charge fees for their work, which is measured in terms of area to be painted. This is not a new practice. Saran (1991) has shown that elite patrons often paid handsomely for the work of well-known or skilled painters in Bangkok in the early 19th century. Skilling (2007) observed that many donors in the early Bangkok period not only inscribed their names on the objects presented to monasteries, but also the amount the object cost.

[23] Traditional Thai Theravadism locates the accumulation of merit through the production and/or presentation of objects of beauty, value and use to temples and monks, including murals, statues, scripture cabinets, and so forth (Schmit 2010, Skilling 2007).

[24] After I had initiated my work at Wat Uttamayanmuni, the abbot presented me with donations he received from devotees as part of the Thai New Year celebrations. Thais, more so than Singaporean Chinese, often give me small amounts of money (either as personal donations or through collective fundraising efforts) as their way to share in the merit of the work.

their services. Like medieval European wall painters, Thai mural painters had for a long time worked with the cultural logic of art for art's sake, and the sake of art was for the perpetuation of religion (Pattaraporn 2009). This, of course, did not mean that mural painters eschewed attempts to inject individual agency into their work. Temple visitors and monks sometimes point out unique features of the paintings—as distinguishing marks of a particular artist rather than of a story per se. Often, they remember stories *about* painters—he lived here, his name was so and so, he did this or that—more so than what was painted on the wall. Thai art historians (Wiyada 1979; No 1983, 1988) have noted how Central Thailand's famed muralists such as Phra Ajaan Nak, Khru Khong Pek, Khru Thong Yu and Khrua In Khong painted the walls of some of Bangkok's most beautifully illustrated monastic buildings in the 19th century. Yet very little is known about their lives and inspirations due to a dearth of personal record keeping. Sometimes paintings become catalysts through which to think about other issues. For example, one monk, when showing me the murals in his temple in Bangkok, narrated stories not about the life of the Buddha or the artists who painted them, but of how national concerns with heritage and preservation had led to rifts between Thailand's Fine Arts Department and his temple's abbot over the ownership of the temple and its wall art. He lamented how the abbot had had his hands tied when it came to repainting the damaged murals in his temple, much of which had been lost. For the most part, however, murals remain silently ignored by both monks and worshippers alike.

Despite the lack of personal nomenclature, Thai mural painters were, after all, artists (*chang*) and their desire to express creativity and the self was materialized through a play with style and content. Murals were not only sites for individual expression within a rigid grid of an imagined traditionalism, but also spaces through which complex issues of meaning and visuality were engaged. These meanings often remain the silent prerogative of the artist and a mystery to the perplexed viewer and researcher. In her recent book on Burmese temple murals from the 17th to the late 19th century, Alexandra Green (2018) observed how Burmese wall paintings—like their Thai contemporaries—showcased the life of the Buddha and his previous incarnations within local cultural settings. She concluded that this artistic process of "Burmasisation" of Theravadin visual aesthetics allowed temple-goers to "consider themselves as participants in the biographies depicted, not as the *bodhisatta,* but as his cohorts. Devotees became part of the exceptional community of the Buddha, established as contemporary Burmese society by details displaying the fashions of the time" (ibid., 103). Green argued for the importance of understanding spatial configurations in the production of Burmese Buddhist identity through the interactive arrangements between the principal Buddha image, walls and visual art. Such an analysis makes sense when taken in its historical and cultural context. How, then, would one understand temple murals in non-indigenous spatial settings—in particular, when an older established form is produced in a new locale?

Soon after initiating my mural project at Wat Uttamayanmuni, I realized that I had become preoccupied with the idea of space through which varied readings of ethnic and cultural identity revolved. Wat Uttamayanmuni was (is) a Thai temple in Singapore. But within the Thai Buddhist cultural universe, it was marginalized by being part of

a Malaysian Thai monastic establishment.[25] The monks at the temple were Malaysian citizens and hailed from Kelantan. There was a strong feeling of both distance and familiarity between the temple and Thai Buddhism's Bangkok-centered administration. As I painted, I jostled with the question of what Thai identity meant to those who viewed my art on the walls of the *wihan*. I wanted my art to reflect the lived reality of the world in which the temple existed—one that bridged multiple "scapes" forged by flows of ideas surrounding ethnic, cultural and national identifications (Appadurai 1996).

The Chinese rabbit seller was a personal attempt at bridging a national Thai cultural and aesthetic past and the Singaporean present. The merchant's ethnicity (as marked by his stereotyped facial features and dress) harked back to the murals painted in Bangkok during the First to Third reigns. The choice in painting a Chinese man into the mural was deliberate. The majority of Singaporean laity who visited Wat Uttamayanmuni were Chinese, and Chinese influence in the temple was undeniable. Statues of Chinese divinities, particularly the Mahayanist Quan Yin, decorate the temple's many altars. The temple's large gateway has the name of the temple written in Chinese characters framed by a Sinicized swastika. Many of the practices in which the monks engage are in response to the Chinese presence—there are celebrations of Chinese New Year, the Hungry Ghost Month and annual ancestor worship events. Perhaps the most common ritual involves the monks blessing Thai amulets brought to them by their Chinese owners.[26] Although Theravadin in flair and flavour, these ritual acts and visual forms point to the strong Chinese presence in the temple. When seen from the point of view of the artist, the Chinese merchant situated the mural within a larger discourse of Thai art history and chronology that neatly compartmentalized artistic styles into distinct periods in time. It also pointed to the social and cultural demographics of the primarily Sinicized contemporary nation state the painter inhabited. Having completed one story, I decided to include the Chinese man in subsequent narrative episodes, as a means by which to situate my viewers within a classical Thai visual genre that was both traditional in form yet contemporary in its location.

The Chinese rabbit seller is an (extra)ordinary character. He encapsulated a complex discourse on what ethnic cultural identity means from the margins of the Thai aesthetic and political universe. His form not only gave artistic credence to the genre and its painter—it located my work within an older tradition of art with its rigid rules of composition but also acted as a tool in which to bridge an old Theravadin textuality with the Singapore modern. Green (2018: 103) observed that through inserting aspects of the present into their wall paintings (e.g. textile designs, architecture, fashion), Burmese

[25] The monks at the temple, although part of Singapore's Thai Buddhist ecclesiastical assembly that includes all Thai Theravadin monks in the country regardless of citizenship, worked primarily under the directives of the Sangha Council of Kelantan, Malaysia. Issues of monastic control, temple management and so forth were the prerogative of the Kelantanese council.

[26] Thai Theravada Buddhism is a popular religion among many Chinese Singaporeans. The syncretic nature of popular Taoism and Sinicized Mahayanism does not prevent its adherents from attending the ritual events of other religious traditions. For many Chinese Singaporeans, Thai Buddhism is often associated with magico-animistic type practices that revolve around the cult of monks and amulets. On Thai Buddhism in Singapore, see Seah (2009).

artists symbolically brought temple-goers into a Buddhist presence where myth, religious doctrine and temporality intertwined. By the late 17th century large segments of Central Thai temple walls were devoted to depictions of rocks, trees, village life and ordinary men, women and children doing very "ordinary" things, possibly reflecting an increasingly egalitarian shift in the way society defined itself (Baker and Pasuk 2017: 240). Nue-On (2013) rightly observed that such scenes provided viewers with a window into the past. Yet as with the photographic image, this "past" was a carefully curated one and its selection thought through by the artist. Outside of the elaborately gilded palaces, people played games, went to the market, urinated, had sex, got drunk, gambled, gossiped, and at Wat Uttamayanmuni, they sold rabbits and took selfies on their phones.[27]

Like the medieval graffiti that dotted many church walls in England, as discussed by Matthew Champion (2015), these individuals were a voice through which both viewers and artists understood the present. Thai artists refer to marginalia as simply *kak* or the "dregs" of the painting. The term, although carrying a negative association when used in the linguistic context of defining something of unimportance and, hence, to be disposed of, is a specific referent in Thai art practice. Napat and Gordon (1999: 4) noted that the *kak*

> refers to the genre part of the mural painting that contains portrayals of ordinary people and their lives as distinct from the scenes of deities and rulers. It is used by experts apparently without derogatory connotation towards ordinary people. However, it must be said that the word contains its own meaning. Dregs are after all found at the bottom, and this has never been a prestigious position. It is also the usual location of ordinary people in the paintings.

The seeming verticality inherent in visual representations of power in traditional Central Thai painting has been noted by Sandra Cate (2003). In her reading of the mural, *kak* inhabit the lower registers of the painting. In practice, however, *kak* are found both inside and outside palace walls and are not restricted to marginal spaces at the bottom. The location of *kak* was defined by the non-textual spaces of the scene. In other words, the *kak* did not contribute to the main narrative at hand, but rather, embellished the Buddhist narrative with an everydayness that was both real and ideal. In Central Thai mural art characters who comprise *kak* were painted in both the strict non-emotive style as seen in royal and sacred figures (*tua lakhon*) and in a more diverse, lively and realist mode. The artistic rules in illustrating *kak* are, for the most part, gendered. Men have wide nostrils, wearisome eyes and large lips often parted to expose buck teeth (Suwat 2016). This figurative and bodily exaggeration also encompasses ethno-racial stereotyping. For instance, Persian *kak* characters are often painted with large noses, as are Caucasians. Women are rarely portrayed in

[27] Sex scenes are common in temple murals across Thailand (Sone 1971, Uthong 2003). Brereton (2010: 191) associated the popularity with sexual images in northeast Thai mural painting with the tradition of bawdy humor in many of the performing arts of Southeast Asia. I was reminded by Wat Uttamayanmuni's abbot not to have "too many" such scenes in my painting, as my Singaporean audience "may not be able to accept it." On eroticism in Thai temple art, see also McDaniel (2014: 17n) and Napat and Gordon (1999).

Figure 10. Man taking a selfie. My pet cat is asleep next to him.

such a grotesque manner—even when the image is used to visually communicate a base or comedic action, such as defecating, urinating or sexual play, almost all female figures adhere to the strict rules of classical human portrayal that apply to both elite characters in Central Thai art.[28]

[28] Exceptions to the rule exist. Female *kak* who display emotion in their facial characters are often used in the representation of older women.

Luke Schmidt (2010) rightly observed that Thai Buddhist devotees rarely look at murals, and when they did, this experience was often fleeting—their main gaze being directed at the building's principal Buddha image. Based on my experience as a painter, I noticed that the *kak,* more so than the nobles, functioned to direct the way temple visitors saw my mural. As I painted, temple-goers often watched me in silence, their eyes exploring the wall in all its ornateness. Sometimes they would come up to talk and ask about the paintings. "Look, there are two rabbits fighting," pointed out a Singaporean man recently to a pair of hares boxing outside the gates of Jantakumarn's city. "I love the Europeans," he added, as his gaze was directed at the two Frenchmen being spied upon by a Thai woman. His friend pointed to a man taking a selfie at the bottom of the wall. "Yes, it's an iPhone," I said matter-of-factly. "I tried to recreate my phone in the painting," I explained jokingly. The bespectacled middle-aged Chinese man laughed as his eyes picked out more nuggets of marginalia. Neither he nor his friend seemed concerned about the story being painted. I noted a similar disinterest in storytelling amongst non-Chinese temple-goers, primarily Thais from Thailand and Kelantan. When they did look at the wall, they often pointed to the *kak*, giggling and, on rare instances, questioning and taking pictures.

"You should paint people drinking *kratom*," suggested Khun Jin, a monk in his twenties residing at Wat Uttamayanmuni.[29] He was referring to a scene within the story of Jantakumarn which depicted a group of *kak* engaged in a drunken fraternity. "This is my favorite scene," he laughed. He had earlier taken pictures of it on his cellphone and uploaded them to his Facebook page. In the mural, the men drank beer—Tiger, Chang, Leo and Heineken. One man guzzled down a bottle of Mae Khong whisky, pouring it directly into his mouth. They supplemented their beverages with a barrel of KFC chicken and a roast pig. "A Singaporean had complained about this scene saying it was inappropriate to show such debauchery on a temple wall," added the young monk. "I explained to him that this is a reflection of Thai society. Thais like to drink," he laughed. Khun Jin cheekily suggested that I add to the already controversial scene by illustrating *kratom* (*mitragyna speciose*) leaves being boiled in a pot next to the party. The juice of boiled *kratom* leaves with their opiad-like effect is a common and cheaper alternative to commercial canned beers and whisky throughout much of rural Thailand and Kelantan. Although Kelantanese Thais have been drinking *kratom* juice for a long time, its global popularity as both a stimulant and health supplement has only recently hit the news across Malaysia. We laughed at the idea in both its absurdity and realism and as a marker of the Kelantan of today. I replied that the painting was complete, and I did not desire to add to it even though the idea sounded fun. "Then just add it to the next story," insisted the monk excitedly. "Perhaps in the story of Wetsandon?" he suggested, referring to the last life of the *photisat* which I had yet to paint. "And don't forget to paint in a policeman coming to arrest the *kratom* drinkers!"

In traditional Thai paintings, *kak* provide the artist with a space to articulate an experience of the tale and its telling in a manner that was light-hearted and creative

[29] In the Tumpat-Tak Bai dialect of southern Thai spoken by Thais in Kelantan, young monks are referred to by the honorific *khun*. Senior monks who have obtained the monastic rank of abbot are titled *Than* or *Pho Than*.

(Suwat 2016). So important were the *kak* to the Thai artist that many commercial Thai art manuals devote entire sections to illustrating *kak* in all their rawness. Like Champion's (2015) church graffiti, *kak* were "lost voices" in both painting and scholarship. It was through them, and not the stories per se, that Wat Uttamayanmuni's temple-goers (including monks) seemed to interact the most with the painting. As I attempted to

Figure 11. Drinking party

explain my mural to curious onlookers, I realized that I too often ended up pointing to the *kak* to break the monotony of Buddhist storytelling. Children enjoyed looking for rabbits in the painting. The rabbits as with the cellphone-toting man, the noble woman holding an iPad and my two pet cats, reflected the real. Between 2012 and 2017, Wat Uttamayanmuni was home to some twenty rabbits hopping around the temple's grassy garden. People would visit the temple to see the rabbits and feed them carrots. In the painting, the acrylic rabbits were silent, small and minor. They appeared in the margins of scenes, behind rocks and trees, in front of homes and palace walls. Once the rabbits came into view, other characters slowly emerged from the cacophony that was the text—a ghoul with a wristwatch, Peter Rabbit (painted after a visit to the Beatrix Potter house in the Lake District) and a Malay woman wearing a pink veil. These were not elements of neo-traditionalism in Thai painting, such as one finds in the murals of Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon or Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai. Rather, their execution and style harked back to an older form of illumination that captured a snapshot of the artist's world and of his experiences within this world.

Lively scenes of the ordinary allowed me to situate my anthropological musings

Figure 12. Thai and Singaporean soldiers, Persians, and Frenchmen in the tale of Mahosot

about identity and space within a genre that was largely focused on top-down renditions of Thai identity. The latter took the form of a standardized aesthetic template to which I carefully adhered so as to prevent my work from deviating from the stringent confines of *traditionalism* as specified in the abbot's request. In the story of Mahosot, for instance, I incorporated Singaporean soldiers into the troops of an ancient Indian king's militia. In creating the scene, I was inspired by the line of American soldiers painted on the walls

of the Phutthaiswan Chapel in Bangkok. The soldiers, although adhering to a classical Thai form with regards to the portrayal of humans, wore Singaporean uniforms. Their different colored hats represented various combat units within the Singapore military and reflected my own experience in the army. Since 1967, military service has been compulsory for all male Singapore citizens. Singaporean men who looked at the painting and noticed the soldiers were immediately able to relate to the image, not as a Buddhist tale focusing on the virtue of wisdom, but on the identity of place within the temple and of their own gendered experiences of having served in the military. Like the blonde-haired man blowing an alpenhorn on the wall of Wat Srinakharin in Zurich, images of Singaporean soldiers reinforced the temple's diasporic location within a sovereign non-Thai political universe. At a deeper level, the images brought to task issues of gender, nationalism and power. This cultural and temporal crisscrossing was a feature common in many Thai temple murals from the 19th century to the present. The soldiers inserted themselves into the mass of handsome and not so handsome *kak* soldiers in traditional uniforms of red and green.

Conclusion

One could easily interpret Wat Uttamayanmuni's acrylic rabbit seller as simply an attempt at inserting a light-hearted moment into a tale rife with scenes of torture and elite formalism. But when one thinks through the lens of the artist and the viewer (the artist is also a viewer of his art), one experiences a different take on the character and of his place on the wall. Herein lies the "conundrum" about which David Wyatt (2004) writes. The mural as painted on the wall of a Buddhist temple was not just a way to teach temple-going audiences about Buddhist virtues. In fact, most monks at the temple did not know the stories or what didactic messages were being communicated. More importantly, murals were spaces for subjective interpretations of issues that affected the lives of those who encountered them. Seemingly banal scenes of the everyday were sites of pleasure and creative potentiality in a genre where artistic rules are rigid and often uncompromising. Their meanings shifted depending on the context through which they were located and the lens through which they were being viewed. Each viewer looked at marginalia in a different way. In a diasporic space where audiences were largely unfamiliar with the texts the paintings brought to life, the *kak* encouraged thinking beyond the nation and its territorial obsessions. Unlike the Buddhist tales within which they inhabited, there was no standard reading of the *kak*'s everydayness as a visual text. Through the architecture and form of their built environment, including the murals on the walls of the *wihan*, Kelantanese Thai monks and devotees at Wat Uttamayanmuni encountered an uniform reading of what being Thai means according to the essentialized dictates of the Thai nation state and its policies of cultural nationalism. This articulation of nationalism symbolically dissolved sovereign borders and forged an imagined sphere of cultural continuity that united all Thai Buddhists in a shared aesthetic community stretching from Zurich to Singapore. Temple murals, through their depictions of the extra(ordinary), allowed artists and others to venture beyond and across the taken-for-grantedness of ethnocultural assimilation.

Persons and moments, such as that of the rabbit seller, soldiers and drunk men allowed monks and temple-goers to participate in the production of cultural personhood through interpreting what they saw. Nevertheless, interpretations are never total. They occur within defined fields of a metanarrative of identity expressed in the way artists visualized and told stories about their paintings.

In this article I have experimented with a nouvelle way in thinking and theorizing about Thai murals that moves beyond the hegemony of text, religion and histories. I do this by foregrounding the aesthetic experience that occurs at the seemingly messy peripheries of the painted frame. It was through the ordinary that artists, like others and myself, give agency to our works in a seemingly agentless genre where names are for the most part long forgotten. Images of the commonplace shape how and what viewers see on the wall: indeed, how one thinks about what one sees often with unstated political undertones such as sovereignties, traditions, nationalisms, and so forth. It was in this conundrum of color and pattern, past and present, real and mythic, that Thai mural painters reveled and expressed *their* ideas about what murals mean.

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