

# To Be or Not to Be an Artist:

## Rethinking the Social Complexities of Thai Mural Painting

TIFFANY K. HACKER

National University of Singapore

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tiffany Hacker is a MA by research student at the National University of Singapore and a graduate of the School of Oriental and African Studies. She will continue her research on Buddhist mural paintings next year in Laos as a Fulbright recipient. (seahk@nus.edu.sg)

### Introduction

Before I embarked on my fieldwork in Thailand in 2006, I considered all Thai mural painters to be artists. They paint commissioned work on temple walls therefore it seemed logical to call them artists. However during my first visit to national artist Ajarn Chalermchai Kositpipat's temple-in-the-making at Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai, I confronted the reality that not everyone contributing to the temple's artistic endeavors are considered "artists."<sup>1</sup> My interest in mural depictions transformed into a desire to understand the social complexities between the central Thai artists and northern Thai folk artists working behind the scenes at Wat Rong Khun. I discovered that in Thai mural painting it is not so much the stories and the morals painted that are important to the local audiences, but who paints the murals. The man behind the brush embodies the soul (*chi*) of the painting, and canvasses a template narrating the way people imagine their local histories.<sup>2</sup> In northern Thailand a northern Thai folk artist (*sa-la*) may not possess the skills of the central Thai craftsman (*chang kian*) or the formal fine arts training of an artist (*sin*), but he paints from his soul to preserve his understanding of regional Buddhist mural painting. The *chang kian* and the *sa-la* represent two different groups of craftsmen and folk artists in Thailand. To call

a *sa-la* a *chang kian* ignores their efforts to stand out as regional folk artists and generalizes their work as a part of central Thailand's visual discourse.

In central Thailand, there is commonly only one artist (*sin*) creating the mural while several craftsmen (*chang kian*) work behind the scenes. The artist creates the scenes and works closely with the temple patrons, while the craftsmen creatively fill in the details of the murals. In northern Thailand, a local folk artist (*sa-la*) performs the role of both artist and craftsman. Despite his efforts, the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok never considers the *sa-la*'s work as art and he is seldom recognized as a regional specialist. The following essay seeks to better understand the art of mural



Figure 1: National artist (*sin*) Chalermchai Kositpipat (second from right) entertains fans of his artwork at his temple Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai.



**Figure 2:**  
Craftsman  
(*chang kian*)  
Sook paints  
the Defeat of  
Mara scene  
in the ordi-  
nation hall  
of Wat Rong  
Khun.

painting in Thailand by exploring the lives of the painters and the social complexities they encounter as artists in Thailand today. On my first day of fieldwork at Chalermchai's temple outside of Chiang Rai in 2006, we enthusiastically toured the complex. As we entered the ordination hall I met the men behind the murals. Sook, a muralist from Kanchanaburi in western central Thailand, considers himself a *chang kian*. Daily, Sook executes the murals Chalermchai designs, as a craftsman – not an artist. As we exited the ordination hall, in between his multiple mobile phone conversations, interruptions on his walkie-talkie and fans queued to sign his printed artwork, Chalermchai introduced me to a third group of craftsmen called *sa-la*, which means craftsman in Kham Mueang, the language of the Thai Yuan people in Lanna, northern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> These craftsmen differ from Sook and Chalermchai because they are local folk artists from northern Thailand and share a common Lanna culture, in contrast to Chalermchai and Sook who are from central Thailand. Chalermchai explained the details of the creative processes behind his work to

me as we staggered through the crowds at the temple he calls “Heaven on Earth (*suwan bon din*)” and I realized that to study contemporary mural painting in Thailand I need to first understand the men behind the brush.

The word Sook uses to address Chalermchai – *sin*, short for *silpa*, is a contemporary word in the Thai vocabulary. The conceptual origins of the word began in 1932 when King Vajiravudh commissioned an Italian sculptor by the name of Corrado Feroci to create a series of patriotic public sculptures to represent the rise of the modern nation-state in Bangkok. By the 1930s and 1940s Feroci's commissions shifted from the court to early-Italian fascist art constructed by Phibun's dictatorship (Poshyananda 1992: 52). During this period Feroci introduced not only a new style of politicized art to Thailand, but also the concept of artist as a civil servant (*chang kian*). It was not long before Feroci “fell in love” with Thailand and decided to make the newly established Fine Arts Department in Bangkok (FADB) his home, changing his name to Silpa Bhirasri (Philips 1992: 6). Contemporary Thai art became synonymous with his name Silpa (pronounced in Thai, *sin-lipa*), or *sin* for short. Henceforth the distinction between those

who created art as a *sin* and those who created crafts as *chang kian* was more clearly defined, constructing a new category in Thai social hierarchies.

In contrast, the title *sa-la*, craftsman, embodies a long history of artistic exchange between the Lanna Kingdom in northern Thailand and Burma. The origin of the term *sa-la* stems from the Burmese dialect word *saya*, or

teacher.<sup>4</sup> In Kham Mueang the term was first used over 200 years ago when Burmese merchants began to trade their goods in the northern regions of what is today contemporary Thailand. The word *sa-la* is one example of many culturally loaded words in Thai society ex-



**Figure 3:** Local northern Thai craftsmen (*sa-la*) work behind the scenes at Wat Rong Khun for artist Chalermchai Kositpipat.

Table 1: Definitions of Artist, Folk Artist, and Lanna Artisan in Thailand

<i>silpa</i> (pronounced sin)	<i>chang kian</i>	<i>sa-la</i>
Artist	Central Thai craftsman	Northern Thai folk artist
A formally trained professional artist usually from the Fine Arts Department at Silpakorn University in Bangkok or another foreign (commonly western) University. This word originates from the Thai nickname for the artist Feroci, Ajarn Sin. The sin is considered a creative innovator in regard to his style and art product.	A craftsman of any origin in Thailand who creates traditional art products to sell at the market for a living. Does not have to be formally trained, but usually refers to a person who has attended a technical school for art. The <i>chang kian</i> 's product reflects education and creativity, but derives from traditional styles and medias.	Specifically a northern Thai folk artist of Lanna origin, originating from the Burmese dialect word, <i>saya</i> or teacher. Similar to a <i>chang kian</i> , the <i>sa-la</i> produces folk art for profit, but his market is the local Lanna community rather than tourists at the market. The primary concern of the <i>sa-la</i> is maintaining his unique Lanna Thai identity, specific to the northern regions of Thailand.

pressing a deviation from the national (i.e. central Thai) discursive framework. To begin, *sa-la* represents a specific group of folk artists from a specific place in Thailand. The only people who identify with this word are Lanna people speaking Kham Mueang. In the standard Thai language (central Thai), which is the predominant dialect in Thailand, *sa-la* is an unknown word. Although it is only one word, this title represents social divisions between those who use it in their everyday discourse and the *sin* and *chang kian* who are unaware of the word in central Thailand. *Sa-la* is therefore, associated with a marginal group of folk artists in northern Thailand who are not defined by the FADB in central Thailand.

A *sa-la* and a *chang kian* share similar careers as mural painters in Thailand. However the more time I spent with *chang kian* and *sa-la* it became clear that the *sa-la* understand their job as mural painters to be unique to northern Thailand. This experience led me to retrace my steps in Bangkok and Chiang Mai and to rethink the social complexities of the men behind the murals. I began in Bangkok to learn the stories of Tong and Yoi, who they are and how they differ from the *sa-la* in northern Thailand.

## The Men Behind a Bangkok Mural: Tong and Yoi

For over sixteen years, Tong and Yoi have painted the walls of the ordination hall at Wat Tridosadepvoravihara (Wat Tri) in the Banglamphu neighborhood of Bangkok. From Monday through Friday, Tong and his colleagues paint national artist Chakraphan

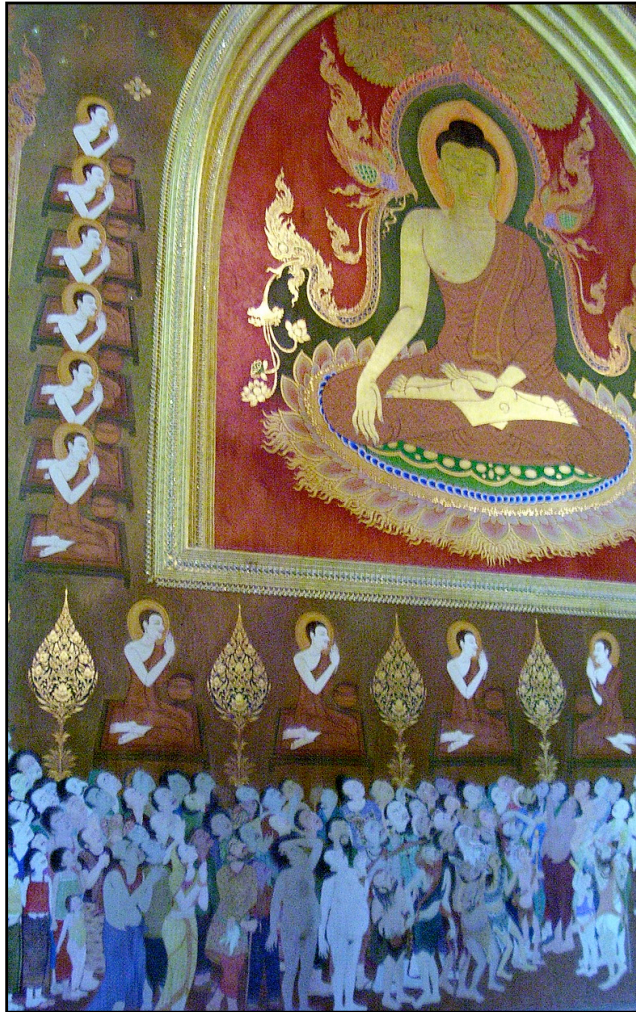
Posayakrit's murals: not only as an act of merit (*tham bun*) and to preserve history, but as a commissioned job as *chang kian*. For Tong, the definition of mural painting is not purely didactic, as Wray (1972: 16) suggests or religious as Boisselier (1976) claims. Instead, for the muralists Tong and Yoi, it is a way of life influenced by the world outside the walls of the ordination hall and articulated on the canvassed walls within. As Cate notes, during the past century "agencies of modernity," such as the development and growth of the Thai government's Fine Arts Department, the Por-chang School of Fine Arts and Silpakorn University, shaped the tradition of Thai mural painting and confined it to the discipline of art history (2003: 7). The study of Thai mural painting in the twentieth century defined Thai mural paintings as "Thai art", and thus became part of the national discourse on contemporary Thai identity (Cate 2003). However, Thai mural painting should be understood from alternative perspectives in addition to the traditional art history understanding



Figure 4: Tong paints on national artist Chakraphan Posayakrit's murals at Wat Tridosadepvoravihara in Banglamphu, Bangkok.



Figure 5: The Enlightenment scene located behind the main Buddha image and outlined with Swarovski crystals in Wat Tri, Bangkok.



of pictures painted on walls. Specifically, the study of Thai mural paintings should consider actors, such as Tong and Yoi and their patron national artist Chakraphan Posayakrit. As Cate states, “the significance of their places and practices of mural painting – including relationships between temple abbot, painter, the patron; modes of training; and artists’ intentions – cannot be separated from the diverse public discourses that shape and interpret those practices” (2003: 7).

In contemporary Thailand, education divides those who become *sin* and those who remain *chang kian* in a mural painter’s life. Tong and Yoi formally studied Thai mural painting at Porchang Academy in Bangkok, but not at the Fine Arts Department of Silpakorn University like Chakraphan and Chalermchai. The Porchang Academy prepares students to work as *chang kian* while students attending the Fine Arts Department at Silpakorn University have the opportunity to

become a teacher (*ajarn*).

As Tong filled in the details of the scenes showing his friends being chased up a coconut tree by a barking dog, he explained to me that many things in life shape a mural. For example, Thai puppetry (*Hun Lakorn Lek*) influences his perspective depicting movement; the news on the radio he listens to while painting impacts the actions of the people at the border of the mural (*ruub kaak*); the personality of his colleagues determines the faces he paints on their personal characters hidden in the scenes of the mural; and the requests of his supervisor Ajarn Chakraphan, the mural creator, instructs the visual layout of the murals. Inspiration for the details Tong and Yoi paint comes from all walks of life in Thailand: performance arts and music, mass media, temple tourism and personal relationships all contribute to his execution of a mural painting.

Yoi signaled me over to the table where he was having coffee inside the ordination hall (*bot*). He proceeded to unroll the blueprints to the unfinished murals. With his hand holding down one corner of the blue-print, a coffee mug on the adjacent corner and my hand on the other, he explained his and Tong’s task in mural painting versus Ajarn Chakraphan’s. Like Sook at Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai, Tong and Yoi are the master artist’s assistants: they paint the plans created by well-known commissioned artists.

Historically, mural painters were usually monks studying in the temple where they resided, although some traveled long distances to paint temples in other regions. For example, the monk who painted the ordination hall at Wat Choltarasinghe in Narathiwat was from Songkhla. The ordination hall is painted in the southern-style at Wat Choltarasinghe, but the murals at the temple where the monk resided are painted in the Bangkok-style. Today the tradition has changed, and commissioned artists hire assistants to paint their murals. Who pays for the murals and the amount paid varies per temple. In northern Thailand, I was told that a single panel of a mural begins at 18,000 Thai Baht, and the artist’s pay may start at as little as 9,000 Thai Baht (250 USD) per mural section.





Figure 6:  
Mural detail: Yoi  
paints himself into the  
murals at  
Wat Tri

Tong, Yoi and Sook complete the paintings drafted by the master artists and give their personal touch by filling in the details along the borders of the murals. Tong emphasized Ajarn Chakraphan's authorship of the murals, a similar experience during my conversations with Sook in Chiang Rai. However the details and creativity tucked into the corners of the murals were uniquely his, and he did not hesitate to show them off. Also like Sook, Tong and Yoi described themselves as *chang kian* and Ajarn Chakraphan as *sin*. Ajarn Chakraphan and Ajarn Chalermchai will be known for the murals once they are finished, not Tong, Yoi or Sook.

Just as the stories jumped from scene to scene, so did our conversation. I asked them where I should begin reading the murals on the wall and Yoi commented that temple mural paintings are not required to follow a format or include specific stories. Today, these decisions are left up to the temple's abbot and the head mural painter. Contradicting introductory books on Thai mural painting (Matics 1992; Wray 1972), Yoi and Tong explained that if the wall ends before they finish the *Wetsandon Chadok* then so be it, it will remain an incomplete version of the story.

In between the hellish world of earthly desires and *nibbana* I sat on the floor and observed the social atmosphere. Each Wednesday at Wat Tri, a local *Lakorn Lek* puppet group rehearses for their upcoming performance. A Bangkok policeman, still in uniform, guided the puppeteers in unison as the music played softly in the background. To my right, Tong perched on the scaffolding and painted scenes for the next mu-

ral. To my left, Tong's colleague Yoi read the newspaper while listening to the radio. The national anthem blared through the speakers and although no one stopped to notice, it was already six o'clock.

### Northern Thai muralist: Lang Nan

Until I left Tong and Yoi at Wat Tri in Bangkok, I did not completely understand the social divisions between the murals they painted and the murals of local northern mural painters. At this point, I understood all mural painting to be art because the FADB defined Ajarn Chalermchai's murals as such. My understanding was also shaped by the literature concerning Thai mural painting, which excludes folk art as a discipline of mural painting. When I left Wat Tri to study with local mural painters in Chiang Mai, it quickly became clear that there is a social division between the fine art I experienced at Wat Tri and Wat Rong Khun and the mural painting I would discover, painted by Lang Nan (Uncle Nan). As so truthfully explained by Chatri



Figure 7:  
Bangkok policeman  
(far left)  
directs  
Lakorn Lek  
rehearsal  
at Wat Tri  
every  
Wednesday

Prakitnonthakarn (2006: 7), “actually, the royal arts are just one side of the coin. A thorough understanding of the Thai identity cannot ignore the other side, the folk arts and crafts that derive from the everyday life of commoners, who constitute most of the Thai population.”

Conversations with Lang Nan revealed to me what mural painting means to those outside the FADB in Bangkok. Everyday people, such as Lang Nan, began to shape my perspectives on Thai mural painting and they became the focus of my study for the remainder of my fieldwork in Thailand. Lang Nan is a folk artist, a *sa-la*. Unlike the muralists in Bangkok I worked with, Nan executes his paintings alone. Without a team of painters, Lang Nan draws his inspiration from printed art depicting the Buddha’s life to preserve Buddhist stories for the local devotees in his northern Thai community.

Lang Nan was born to a Buddhist family in the northern Thai town of Fang, over sixty years ago. He grew up studying in his neighborhood monastery as a novice and learned the art of mural painting from the senior monks during his free time. It was not long after Nan entered his teenage years that he left the monastery. As a young novice, he was caught with a photograph of a local girl, on whom he had a crush, hidden under his pillow. Nan believed this was the one place where the senior monks would not catch him, but he was wrong and soon after, he disrobed. He practiced painting his new-found love’s Indian facial features, which would much later become the defining characteristic of his mural paintings. When I met Nan in February 2007, one of the first photos he shared with me was the black and white picture of him and his late wife as a young couple. He asked me the rhetorical question, ‘*suay, ma?*’ (Isn’t she beautiful?). And we laughed, because there was no other answer than, ‘*suay mak mak*’ (Yes, very very beautiful). Nan pointed out her almond-shaped eyes and bright smile,

and candidly joked that she was well worth disrobing for. Nan teased, “Since the Buddha and my wife were both *khawk* (foreigners, in this case referring to Indians) I try to paint them as such.” He explained, “If the figure isn’t realistic and the gestures are not accurate, the people cannot understand the meaning behind the mural.” Nan’s murals emphasize realism for didactic purposes. If the lay onlooker cannot understand or relate to the scene in the mural painting he believes the painting quality to be substandard.

Lang Nan’s style is not that of the national artists, which Sook, Tong or Yoi paint. Instead, Lang Nan paints a style copied from Buddha postcards printed by the S. Thammapakdi & Sons Printing Company in Bangkok. These postcards traveled to northern Thailand in the early-1960s, and became the most popular style of mural painting in contemporary history. However, the FADB does not consider this style “art” because of *sa-la*’s lack of creativity when copying directly from the postcard to the temple wall. Therefore, painters such as Lang Nan are commonly excluded from studies on Thai mural painting. Since Nan’s primary concern for painting the murals is realism he is attracted to and undisturbed by painting in the uncreative Buddha postcard style.

Nan commented on the differences between his style and the style of Chalmchai at Wat Rong Khun and Chakraphan at Wat Tri in Bangkok:

*If someone wanted me to paint in that (Bangkok) style I would remind them how difficult it is for others to understand. In the story of Buddha, the scenes are also not separated and it’s just confusing in the traditional styles. For example, the place of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death are in different locations, so it is confusing when painters paint the scenes on one wall without clear scene dividers.*

For Nan, he paints in the Buddha postcard style for didactic reasons but openly critiques its lack of aesthetic appeal. Nan commented, “When Siddhartha



Figure 8: Lang Nan finishes his mural project at Wat Sri Don Sattad in Chiang Dao (2007).



leaves his palace, the character still has on his crown. But Siddhartha wasn't Thai, he was Indian so he wasn't wearing a Thai crown and his face was Indian, not Thai." Nan argues that the *sa-la* should not reinterpret historical depictions of the Buddha or Buddhist stories from their original content for purely artistic endeavors because this may confuse the lay observer.

Nan cannot say if his mural painting style is unique to northern Thailand, but he sees his work developing over the years. The origin of his style does not seem to concern him, especially since his murals are so popular in the northern regions. During our conversation in Chiang Rai at Wat Don Satad I placed a set of the Buddha postcards on the floor of the meditation hall (*sa-la*) in front of us. Nan looked carefully at the Buddha postcards and looked up at me after several moments of silence and said, "my finished product here is about the same as this in the end, but I don't care. My work is still unique. How? I am a *chitakorn*, a *sa-la* that's how." In Thai, *chit* means heart or soul and *korn* means hand; when the two words were combined by Nan, he described the uniqueness of his work as painted from the soul. Nan's sentiment is not unique: many *sa-la* I encountered expressed a similar passion for their work.

In my experiences, Lang Nan's sentiment was also shared with the monastic community in Chiang Mai. Phra Yueng, a monk from Wat Tha Kham, and I spoke about my experiences with local mural painters such as Nan. Without mentioning my experiences with *sin* from Bangkok or local *sa-la*, Phra Yueng openly shared with me, "When we build and paint, we paint from our soul. Silpakorn University in Bangkok sends restoration artists and they have the skill to make our temples beautiful, but they have no northern soul (Phra Yueng 2007)." The 'we' Phra Yueng spoke of referred specifically to local artists, the *sa-la* painting their ordination and prayer halls in the Buddha postcard style. Phra Yueng was not aware of the social divisions between local folk artists and the *sin* from the FADB, but he had experienced many people comparing northern folk art and folklore to what he felt are the traditions of central Thailand. For Phra Yueng, the only mural painters he



Figure 9: Lang Nan's murals from Wat Sun-ton Meung Neua in the Doi Sakhet area outside Chiang Mai (Buddhist Year, 2040). Although his murals are copied from the Buddha Posters printed in Bangkok, his signature is creating Indian facial features on the characters.

appreciates in Chiang Mai are those who call themselves *sa-la*, folk artists creating with the local people in mind. The product, whether a copy from a Bangkok Buddha postcard or a classical Lanna rendition, is equal in his perspective if it is created by a *sa-la*.

I asked Nan if he considered himself an accomplished artist (*sin*). His eyes widened, and he replied "no, no, no... I am a not a *sin*, I am a *sa-la*." Until this moment, I was almost convinced by Nan's claim that he was not concerned with fine art trends and debates in Bangkok. I asked Nan, "what is a *sa-la*?" He replied, "it's Kham Mueang for folk artist, or craftsman (*chang kian*). Before this day I understood the muralist as either a craftsman (*chang kian*) or an artist (*sin*), but I had never before understood the importance and status behind the northern Kam Mueang term *sa-la*.

It often occurred during my fieldwork that local mural painters in northern Thailand understood their work as unambiguous styles distinct from the murals produced in central Thailand. Nan paints the murals with the intentions that the images preserve northern Thai Buddhism for the Lanna people, a skill a *chang kian* or even a *sin* may not possess. It is clear that the intention of a local *sa-la* represents the interests of the local people and therefore, his product was to be understood as Lanna – despite its origins and FADB interpretations. By insisting that his work is that of a *sa-la*, the local mural painters, such as Lang Nan, resist the dominant art discourses in the Thai nation state.

The images influencing the murals and the finished product of the *sa-la* may appear to be the same as *chang kian*, but since he himself is Lanna, so is his

Figure 10:  
Original S.  
Thammapadi &  
Sons Printing  
Company Buddha postcards,  
1959. *Sa-la* such  
as Nan copy the  
style and scenes  
from these post-  
cards and paint  
them on the  
temple walls.  
Nan believes  
that the clear  
division of  
scenes and the  
realistic images  
help people to  
more clearly  
understand the  
story.



work, reflecting one expression of modern northern Thai identity. “My paintings and I are what ever you (the FADB) want to call us,” Nan told me in a moment of frustration when I asked him to describe the style of his paintings. Admittedly Nan knew that his murals were not Lanna style, but, “I cannot say why” he confessed. “I know my style comes from the *farang* (foreigner), and I can see that the scenes, colors and perspective are from central Thailand. My work reflects the need of the local northern people to learn the stories of the Buddha, not to preserve an art style.” Nan believes that his lack of originality is the primary reason that he is not famous for his mural paintings like Ajarn Chalermchai. Nan does not strive to achieve originality and creativity in his work. His objective is to fulfill the expectations of the temple devotees and guide them towards a better understanding of the Buddhist stories he paints. Nan explained, “from the local’s point of view they do not know art, but they do know that they want the stories of the Buddha to be as real as they can be.”

## Conclusion

Nan represents a collective of northern Thai mural painters with something in common. They understand their northern Buddhist art culture as distinct from Tong and Yoi’s in central Thailand. *Sa-la* such as Nan perceive the purpose of their murals to be largely didactic rather than an artistic expression, dissimilar to what Sook and Chalermchai strive for in their murals at

Wat Rong Khun. The mural styles Nan paints are not unique, and he does not refute the idea that they are directly related to the S. Thammapakdi style of Buddha postcards. For the *sa-la* the artistic style should not be the concern but rather what the murals depict, and most importantly the intention of the *chitakorn* painting it.

Experiencing mural painting through the lives of mural painters drastically differs from reading their depictions in an art history text. As I discovered, the muralists’ changing moods and inspirations shape the mural’s content and meaning. A mural painting represents many contexts for each muralist and embodies their local and regional perceptions of contemporary Thai Buddhism. I learned from Sook in Chiang Rai, Tong and Yoi in Bangkok and Nan in Chiang Mai, that a mural painter’s role in Thai society contrasts from region to region, depending on his background and formal education. Previously my appreciation of the muralist limited him to his mural. However through the stories the painters shared with me, I was able to explore the multiplicity of meaning and the social production behind the muralist and his mural painting. As I found, it is not necessarily the depictions or style that we should focus on when approaching the study of mural painting, but the histories and endeavors of the men who create them that constructs its significance.



## Bibliography

- Boisselier, Jean. 1976. *Thai Painting*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International.
- Bunreuang Sukkasem (Lang Nan). Interview. Wat Sri Don Sa-ad, Chiang Dao. 05 March 2007.
- Cate, Sandra. 2003. *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Chattri Prakitnonthakarn. 2006. "Introduction" In *Making Thai: Everyday objects of Thailand*, ed. Leenavat Teerapongkunkitchai. Singapore: Page One Publishing Private Limited.
- Matics, K.I. 1992. *Introduction to the Thai Mural*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Philips, Herbert P. 1992. *The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand*. Berkeley: Regents of the University of California.
- Poshyananda, Apinan. 1992. *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Singapore and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phra Yueng Chotiyono (Panneungpetch). Interview. Wat Tha Kham, Chiang Mai. 12 February 2007.
- Tong and Yoi. Interview. Wat Tridosadepvoravihara, Bangkok. Friday, 19 May 2006.
- Wray, Elizabeth, Clare Rosenfield, Dorothy Bailly and Joe D. Wray. 1972. *Ten Lives of the Buddha: Siamese Temple Painting and Jataka Tales*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill.
- Wyatt, David K. 2004. *Reading Thai Murals*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

4 Although *sa-la* has Burmese origins, I do not believe that mural painters such as Nan prefer to be associated with Burma than with central Thailand. I did not encounter any mural painters who knew the origins of this word outside of its local Lanna context.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Ajarn" is a polite title in Thai, meaning teacher and may be used in order to show respect to an elder that they have learned something from. Although Chalermchai was not my formal "Ajarn," he taught me a tremendous deal about contemporary mural painting in Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> All terms italicized and placed in parentheses are standard Thai language unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> "Lanna" refers to Lang Nan's northern Thai culture. The term originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Lanna Kingdom, and is now used to refer to the northern Thai Lanna people, their Kham Mueang dialect and their local histories.