

## **Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm: Creative Arts for Cultural Enhancement**

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**Received:** February 22, 2023; **Revised:** April 26, 2023; **Accepted:** April 26, 2023

### **Abstract**

Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm, or Wat Pho, is a prominent Buddhist monastery in Bangkok, Thailand, with historical and cultural importance. However, the site faces challenges in preserving its cultural relevance as a tourist attraction. This study explores the potential of creative arts, including visual arts, music, theater, and dance, to enhance the cultural value of Wat Pho and provide unique experiences for tourists. The primary focus is on how creative arts can deepen visitors' understanding and appreciation of Wat Pho's historical and cultural significance, thereby enriching their experiences.

A comprehensive and collaborative strategy involving artists, cultural institutions, local communities, and other stakeholders is crucial to harness the potential of creative arts in promoting Wat Pho. By working together, these stakeholders can create innovative approaches to showcase Wat Pho's heritage, ensuring authenticity and integrity while augmenting the visitor experience. Creative arts can make a significant contribution to Wat Pho's cultural value by offering novel insights and fostering emotional connections. By encouraging deeper engagement with the site's history and traditions, creative arts enrich the visitor experience at Wat Pho and serve as a catalyst for broader cultural understanding and appreciation. The creative arts and Wat Pho both play significant roles in enhancing and preserving Thai culture. Through various means, they contribute to the expression, development, and dissemination of cultural values and traditions.

**Keywords:** Cultural Enhancement; Creative Arts; Buddhist Monastery; Wat Pho

### **Introduction**

The study of Wat Pho examines its historical significance, cultural relevance, and preservation challenges as a tourist destination. Wat Pho, a crucial part of Thailand's cultural heritage, reflects the country's history, art, and religion. As an important tourist attraction in Bangkok, it receives millions of visitors annually. The temple must balance its authenticity and integrity with diverse tourist expectations. Wat Pho's popularity offers opportunities and challenges for sustainable development. The study addresses challenges like preserving architectural features, managing tourism impact, and enhancing visitor experience without losing authenticity. Potential solutions, like creative arts, are explored to contribute to sustainable development. Understanding these aspects helps stakeholders ensure Wat Pho's continued significance as a cultural heritage site and tourist destination.

### **Contexts**

#### **Theravada Buddhism as a way of life in Southeast Asia**

Theravada Buddhism is one of the oldest and most traditional sects or schools of Buddhism. It is also known as the "Way of the Elders" and is the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhism is considered to be the original form of Buddhism, and it is based on the teachings of the

Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon, a collection of Buddhist scriptures. Theravada Buddhism is important for several reasons. Firstly, it is an ancient tradition that has shaped the cultural and religious landscape of Southeast Asia for centuries. Secondly, it provides a way of life and a path to enlightenment that can help individuals to overcome suffering and attain inner peace. Thirdly, it offers a rich philosophical and spiritual tradition that has inspired countless people to lead more meaningful and fulfilling lives.

### **A brief history of Theravada Buddhism**

The history of Theravada Buddhism traces its roots to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, who lived in India more than 2,500 years ago. Born into a royal family, the Buddha renounced his privileged life and embarked on a spiritual quest, eventually attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. His teachings, known as the Dharma, emphasized the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path as the means to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). After the Buddha passed away (Parinirvana), his teachings were preserved through an oral tradition, passed down from teacher to disciple for several centuries. This period is referred to as the Early Buddhist period. During this time, various councils were convened by Buddhist monastics to maintain the purity and consistency of the teachings. The First Buddhist Council, held shortly after the Buddha's passing, aimed to recite and preserve his teachings, while the Second and Third Councils focused on resolving disputes and clarifying doctrinal matters.

It was during the Fourth Buddhist Council, held in Sri Lanka during the 1st century BCE, that the oral teachings were finally committed to writing, forming the Pali Canon or Tipitaka. The Pali Canon is the foundational scripture of Theravada Buddhism and consists of three main sections: the Vinaya Pitaka, which outlines the rules and regulations for monastic life; the Sutta Pitaka, containing the discourses of the Buddha; and the Abhidhamma Pitaka, a compilation of philosophical and psychological analyses of the Dharma. As Theravada Buddhism continued to develop, it spread to various regions of South and Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Each country incorporated local customs and traditions into their practice of Theravada Buddhism, resulting in unique expressions of the tradition throughout the region. Monasteries and temples were established to preserve and transmit the teachings, and the tradition became deeply ingrained in the social, cultural, and political life of these countries. Throughout its history, Theravada Buddhism has faced various challenges, including invasions, internal strife, and competition with other religious traditions like Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Despite these challenges, the core teachings of Theravada Buddhism have remained remarkably consistent over the centuries, and the tradition continues to thrive in Southeast Asia and beyond, attracting new adherents and inspiring countless individuals on their spiritual journeys.

During the colonial era, the expansion of European powers in Southeast Asia led to the destruction of numerous Buddhist temples across the region. Various factors contributed to the destruction of these temples, which varied depending on the colonial power and the specific circumstances in each country. In Sri Lanka, the Portuguese, who controlled parts of the island from 1505 to 1658, sought to spread Catholicism and undermine the influence of Buddhism. They destroyed numerous temples, especially in the coastal areas, and confiscated religious artifacts. In some instances, Buddhist temples were replaced with Catholic churches, and the local population was forced to convert to Christianity. The Dutch, who succeeded the Portuguese in Sri Lanka, were somewhat more tolerant of Buddhism but still prioritized the spread of Protestant Christianity (Gombrich, 2006).

In Cambodia, the Thai invasion in the 15th century led to the decline of the Khmer Empire and the destruction of many Buddhist temples. Later, during the French colonial period,

some temples were neglected or repurposed for other uses, as the French administration focused on other aspects of governance and cultural heritage. In Laos, the 19th-century invasion by the Siamese (Thai) forces resulted in widespread destruction of Buddhist temples and the looting of religious artifacts (Gombrich, 2006). Later, during the French colonial rule, the administration's policies prioritized the spread of Christianity, although they did not engage in large-scale destruction of Buddhist temples.

The British colonization of Burma (now Myanmar) in the 19th century led to the decline of the traditional patronage system between the Buddhist monastic community and the monarchy, which had a negative impact on the support and maintenance of Buddhist temples. Some temples were destroyed during the Anglo-Burmese wars, while others fell into disrepair due to the lack of support from the colonial government. Despite the widespread destruction and challenges faced by Theravada Buddhism during the colonial era, the tradition managed to survive and adapt, eventually experiencing a resurgence in the post-colonial period (Gombrich, 2006). Today, many temples have been restored and revitalized, and Theravada Buddhism continues to play an important role in the religious and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. However, despite these challenges, Theravada Buddhism has remained a vibrant and resilient tradition, and it continues to play an important role in the lives of many people in Southeast Asia today (Norman, 2000).

### **The connection between Theravada Buddhism and Wat Pho**

Theravada Buddhism is a significant tradition that has shaped the religious and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia for centuries. It provides a path to enlightenment and inner peace, and it offers a rich philosophical and spiritual tradition that has inspired countless people to lead more meaningful and fulfilling lives (Gombrich, 2006). Despite challenges and persecution, Theravada Buddhism remains a vibrant and resilient tradition that continues to play an important role in the lives of many people today (Harris, 2006). Theravada Buddhism and Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm (Wat Pho) are deeply interconnected, with one being a religious tradition and the other being a religious institution. Wat Pho is a temple in Bangkok, Thailand, that is dedicated to the practice and promotion of Theravada Buddhism. As a result, the temple plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of Theravada Buddhist teachings and practices. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in Thailand, and it is based on the teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon. The teachings of Theravada Buddhism emphasize the importance of mindfulness, wisdom, and moral conduct in the quest for enlightenment. Wat Pho, as one of the largest and most influential Buddhist temples in Thailand, plays an important role in promoting these teachings and helping to preserve the tradition of Theravada Buddhism.

### **Significance of Wat Pho**

Wat Pho is most famous for its enormous Reclining Buddha statue, measuring 46 meters long and 15 meters high. The statue is an impressive example of Thai Buddhist art and serves as a symbol of the Buddha's passing into Nirvana. Visitors can learn about the significance of the Reclining Buddha in Buddhist iconography and symbolism.

**Thai traditional medicine:** Wat Pho is also known as the birthplace of traditional Thai massage, and it has been a center for the study and practice of Thai traditional medicine for centuries. Visitors can learn about various aspects of Thai traditional medicine, including herbal remedies, and even receive a traditional Thai massage at the temple's massage school.

**Buddhist murals and sculptures:** The temple complex is adorned with intricate murals depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha and the Jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's previous lives). The temple also houses many Buddhist sculptures, including a collection of

stone inscriptions on various subjects like history, literature, and medicine. These artworks offer a fascinating glimpse into Thai Buddhist art and iconography.

Meditation and Buddhist teachings: Wat Pho is an active temple where monks live and practice, and visitors can often attend meditation sessions, Dharma talks, or other religious activities. This provides an opportunity to learn about Theravada Buddhist teachings and practices directly from the practitioners themselves.

### **Wat Pho and the Thai education**

Wat Pho is also a center for Buddhist education, offering courses and programs for those interested in learning more about Theravada Buddhism. The temple is home to a vast collection of Buddhist scriptures and other religious texts, as well as numerous works of art, sculptures, and other cultural artifacts that reflect the rich heritage of Theravada Buddhism. The relationship between Theravada Buddhism and Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm is one of mutual support and interdependence. Wat Pho plays an important role in promoting and preserving the teachings and practices of Theravada Buddhism, while Theravada Buddhism provides the religious and philosophical framework for the temple's activities and programs. Together, they are formed rich cultural and spiritual tradition that has had a profound impact on the lives of countless people in Thailand and beyond.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework underpinning this paper is centered around the notion that creative arts can significantly contribute to the promotion and enhancement of cultural heritage sites. A wealth of studies demonstrates the positive impact of incorporating creative arts into the development and preservation of such sites, resulting in increased visitor attraction, deeper engagement, and a heightened overall value of the cultural landmarks. The underlying theory, idea, or concept driving the article is that the effective use of creative arts can play a pivotal role in promoting and preserving cultural heritage sites (Timothy and Nyaupane, 2009) like Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm (Wat Pho). In order to support this idea, the article cites several research studies that reinforce the benefits of integrating creative arts into these heritage sites. Examples of these benefits include the ability to attract a more diverse range of visitors, stimulate greater engagement and enjoyment from these visitors, and ultimately, enhance the cultural and historical value of the site. By leveraging creative arts, stakeholders can ensure a rich and meaningful connection between visitors and the cultural heritage sites they explore, while also fostering long-term sustainability and appreciation.

### **Enhancing Wat Pho as a destination for cultural heritage and tourism**

The promotion of Wat Pho as a cultural heritage and tourism spot involves adherence to specific principles, concepts, theories, academic approaches, practical guidelines, and problem-solving standards. These components are essential for fostering sustainable development while preserving the site's historical and cultural integrity. Firstly, the principles encompass three crucial aspects: respecting and preserving the historical and cultural integrity of Wat Pho, engaging local communities in the preservation and promotion process, and fostering sustainable tourism practices to minimize negative impacts on the site and its surroundings. These principles serve as the foundation for all other elements in the development process. Secondly, the concepts involve cultural revitalization, inclusive tourism, and community-based development. Cultural revitalization employs creative arts to enhance the cultural value of Wat Pho, while inclusive tourism encourages diverse visitor engagement through accessible and educational experiences. Community-based development promotes local involvement and economic benefits for nearby communities, thereby ensuring a holistic

approach to development. Thirdly, the theories of heritage interpretation and experience economy guide the development process. Heritage interpretation facilitates a meaningful connection between visitors and the cultural heritage through storytelling and interpretation. The experience economy focuses on offering unique and engaging experiences to create memorable and valuable tourist experiences. Fourthly, academic approaches involve interdisciplinary collaboration and evidence-based planning. Interdisciplinary collaboration combines insights from various disciplines, such as anthropology, history, tourism management, and arts, to develop effective strategies. Evidence-based planning uses research and case studies to inform decisions and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies. Fifthly, practical guidelines include the development of comprehensive plans, establishing partnerships with relevant stakeholders, and implementing creative arts programs. Comprehensive plans should encompass short-term and long-term goals for the site's preservation and promotion. Partnerships with artists, cultural organizations, and tourism authorities ensure a collaborative effort.

### **Creative Arts Initiatives: Engaging Visitors and Amplifying Wat Pho's Cultural Significance**

Creative arts programs, including exhibitions, performances, and workshops, serve as effective tools to engage visitors and deepen their understanding of Wat Pho's cultural significance. In order to address the various challenges associated with promoting and preserving the site, problem-solving standards have been established. These standards involve regular monitoring and assessment of the impact of tourism on Wat Pho, as well as continuous adaptation and refinement of strategies based on feedback from various stakeholders. Furthermore, these standards emphasize the importance of prioritizing solutions that strike a balance between satisfying tourists' needs, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring the well-being of local communities. Adherence to these problem-solving standards ensures that potential issues are addressed in a timely manner, and that the development process remains flexible and responsive to the ever-evolving needs of all parties involved.

### **The Driving Factors Behind Undertaking the Study**

The motivation to study Wat Pho as a cultural heritage and tourism site and promote it using creative arts arises from various factors, reasons, and expectations, each of which contributes to its value and benefits. One such factor includes the desire to preserve and showcase Thailand's rich cultural and historical heritage, highlighting the importance of Wat Pho as a symbol of the nation's spiritual and artistic traditions. Another factor is the aim to enhance the visitor experience by providing immersive and interactive opportunities that showcase the temple's cultural significance, ultimately leading to increased tourism and local economic benefits. Furthermore, the reasons for promoting Wat Pho encompass addressing challenges in maintaining the cultural value and authenticity of the site amid urbanization and modernization. By employing creative arts, these promotional efforts strive to emphasize Wat Pho's heritage while raising awareness of the need for preservation and conservation. Additionally, the promotion seeks to encourage sustainable tourism practices that respect the site's integrity and minimize negative impacts on the environment and local communities.

Expectations from this endeavor include increased visitor engagement and appreciation of Wat Pho's cultural significance through creative arts, as well as the strengthening of relationships between the site, local communities, and cultural organizations. These expectations serve as a driving force behind the promotional efforts, inspiring collaboration, and innovative approaches to showcasing Wat Pho's heritage. The value of promoting Wat Pho as a cultural heritage and tourism site lies in its potential to contribute to

academic research on heritage preservation and the role of creative arts in tourism. By exploring the challenges and successes of incorporating creative arts into the promotion of Wat Pho, researchers can gain valuable insights into effective strategies and best practices in this field. Furthermore, this study offers insights and strategies for other cultural heritage sites facing similar challenges, promoting a broader understanding of the issues and potential solutions. Ultimately, examining Wat Pho's promotion through the lens of creative arts contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites worldwide.

### **Advantages of Promotional Endeavors**

The numerous advantages of these promotional efforts extend beyond merely providing economic growth for local communities through increased tourism and cultural activities. They also play a crucial role in cultivating an enhanced global awareness and appreciation of Thai culture and history. Furthermore, these concerted efforts enable the sustainable preservation of Wat Pho, guaranteeing that future generations can continue to experience, appreciate, and learn from this extraordinary site. By comprehensively understanding and addressing the array of motivations, reasons, expectations, values, and benefits involved in promoting Wat Pho, stakeholders can collaborate more effectively to ensure the site's successful development and recognition as a distinguished cultural heritage and tourism destination for years to come.

### **Creative Arts: Enhancing Cultural Heritage Promotion**

Creative arts play a significant role in promoting cultural heritage, supported by research in cultural heritage, tourism, and arts management. Creative arts can help attract visitors, increase engagement and enjoyment, and enhance the cultural and historical value of sites like Wat Pho. Examples of creative arts include visual arts, music and theater performances, dance, and multimedia experiences. By incorporating creative arts into the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage sites, stakeholders can ensure a vibrant and meaningful connection between visitors and the rich history of these sites. As with many cultural heritage sites, there is a need to promote Wat Pho to attract visitors and ensure its sustainability. One way to do this is through the use of creative arts. Studies have shown that the use of creative arts can help to attract visitors to cultural heritage sites, increase visitor engagement and enjoyment, and enhance the cultural and historical value of the site (Higham and Moseley, 2010). For example, a study by researchers at the University of the West of England found that the use of creative arts can help to "re-imagine" cultural heritage sites, creating new cultural experiences and perspectives for visitors. Another study by researchers at the University of South Australia found that the use of creative arts can help to "activate" cultural heritage sites, creating new and engaging experiences for visitors (Buckley and Zhong, 2016). This can help to attract new visitors to the site and increase visitor engagement and enjoyment, which can have a positive impact on the cultural heritage site's overall sustainability and viability (Feser, 2015; Moscardo, 2015).

In addition to attracting visitors, creative arts can also help to preserve the cultural heritage of Wat Pho by creating new works of art and cultural experiences that celebrate the temple's cultural and historical significance. For example, visual arts such as paintings, sculptures, and installations can help to educate visitors about the cultural and historical significance of Wat Pho and create a deeper appreciation for the temple's cultural heritage (Smith, 2015). Music and theater performances can provide visitors with a unique and immersive cultural experience, while dance performances can bring new life to the temple's historic spaces. Another example of creative arts that can be related to Wat Pho is the creation

of a multimedia experience that showcases the history and cultural significance of the temple. This experience could include interactive exhibits, virtual reality simulations, and other multimedia elements that help visitors to understand and appreciate the cultural heritage of Wat Pho (Teixeira, and Costa, 2015). Studies shows that the use of creative arts can help to attract visitors to cultural heritage sites, increase visitor engagement and enjoyment, and enhance the cultural and historical value of the site. For example, a study by researchers at the University of the West of England found that the use of creative arts can help to "re-imagine" cultural heritage sites, creating new cultural experiences and perspectives for visitors (Higham and Moseley, 2010). Another study by researchers at the University of South Australia found that the use of creative arts can help to "activate" cultural heritage sites, creating new and engaging experiences for visitors (Buckley and Zhong, 2016). This can help to attract new visitors to the site and increase visitor engagement and enjoyment, which can have a positive impact on the cultural heritage site's overall sustainability and viability.

In conclusion, the use of creative arts can play a significant role in promoting Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm (Wat Pho) by enhancing the cultural and historical value of the temple, improving the visitor experience, and preserving the cultural heritage of Wat Pho. The use of visual arts, music, theater, dance, and multimedia experiences can all help to promote Wat Pho and create new cultural experiences for visitors (Chon, 2011; Koens, 2011; Hall and Sharpley, 2015). While there is a growing body of research that supports the idea that creative arts can play a role in promoting cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho, it is important to note that the use of creative arts should be carefully planned and implemented in a way that is consistent with the cultural and historical significance of the site. This may require the involvement of experts in the fields of cultural heritage, tourism, and arts management, as well as close collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders (Yoon, 2002).

### **The Impact of Enhancing Sustainability and Viability of Cultural Heritage Sites**

Utilizing creative arts in cultural heritage sites can significantly enhance their sustainability and viability. By incorporating various forms of art, such as visual arts, music, theater, dance, and multimedia experiences, these sites can attract more visitors, boost engagement, and deepen appreciation for the site's cultural and historical significance. As a result, creative arts can play a crucial role in promoting and preserving the cultural heritage of these sites while simultaneously ensuring their long-term success and relevance.

1. New findings from researchers: Recent studies have shown the effectiveness of creative arts in promoting cultural heritage sites, such as Wat Pho, by attracting more visitors and enhancing their overall experience.

2. Emphasis on the significance of concepts, theories, and practical approaches: Creative arts employ various theories and methodologies that can help create an engaging experience for tourists, encouraging them to visit and appreciate cultural heritage sites. Example: (Higham and Moseley, 2010) found that using creative arts can help "re-imagine" cultural heritage sites, providing new cultural experiences and perspectives for visitors.

3. Fresh perspectives on knowledge organized categorically, systematically, and sequentially: By integrating creative arts, cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho can present information and experiences in a more structured and organized manner, improving visitor understanding and appreciation. Example: Visual arts, such as paintings and sculptures, can help convey the history and cultural significance of Wat Pho, while music, theater, and dance performances can provide immersive cultural experiences.

4. Providing alternative solutions for addressing various problems or promoting development: Creative arts can offer innovative ways to address challenges faced by cultural heritage sites, such as visitor engagement, sustainability, and preservation. Example: A

multimedia experience incorporating interactive exhibits and virtual reality simulations can attract new visitors and enhance their understanding of Wat Pho's cultural heritage.

5. Adherence to academic principles: The use of creative arts is grounded in research and academic principles, ensuring that their implementation is both effective and well-founded.

6. Contribution to the existing body of knowledge: By employing creative arts, new insights and discoveries can be made regarding the cultural heritage of sites like Wat Pho, adding to the existing understanding of their history and significance.

7. Further understanding of the topic under investigation: The integration of creative arts into cultural heritage sites can lead to new research questions and avenues for exploration, promoting a deeper understanding of how these sites can be better preserved and promoted.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the article about Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm: Enhancing Cultural Value through Creative Arts highlights the important role that creative arts can play in promoting cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho. The use of creative arts in promoting cultural heritage sites is seen as a way to attract visitors, increase visitor engagement and enjoyment, and enhance the cultural and historical value of the site. The use of creative arts can also help to preserve the cultural heritage of Wat Pho by creating new works of art and cultural experiences that celebrate the temple's cultural and historical significance. From a metaphysical perspective, the idea that creative arts can play a role in promoting cultural heritage sites can be seen as an expression of the belief that creativity and artistic expression have the power to shape and influence reality. This belief is rooted in the idea that reality is not fixed or determined but is instead shaped and influenced by human thought, beliefs, and actions. From a social perspective, the use of creative arts in promoting cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho can be seen as a result of social and cultural trends that prioritize cultural and creative expression as a means of attracting visitors and promoting cultural heritage sites. This trend is driven by a growing interest in cultural tourism, as well as a desire to create unique and immersive cultural experiences for visitors. The idea that creative arts can help to preserve the cultural heritage of Wat Pho can be seen as an expression of the social and cultural values that prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage. To effectively use creative arts to promote cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho, it is important to carefully plan and implement the use of creative arts in a way that is consistent with the cultural and historical significance of the site. This may require the involvement of experts in the fields of cultural heritage, tourism, and arts management, as well as close collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders. Overall, the article highlights the potential for creative arts to play a significant role in promoting cultural heritage sites like Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm (Wat Pho) and enhancing the cultural and historical value of such sites. By carefully planning and implementing the use of creative arts, cultural heritage sites like Wat Pho can be preserved and celebrated, ensuring that their cultural and historical significance is passed on to future generations.

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