

halt because of their falling out and because the prince returned with his wife, Katya, to Siam in 1906. His presence made letters unnecessary. The king remained aloof until a few years after the young couple had a son and the king, feeling alone as a “progressive” amidst his kin-officials, confided in Prince Chakrabongse about his disappointments in the pace of Siam’s reforms.

Readers who know this dramatic family tale will be gratified that they not only have access to the letters in English, but can read the original Thai documents as well. Narisa Chakrabongse has worked with the British Library to make the original correspondence by her grandfather available to the public online (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/chakrabongse-collection-of-thai-royal-letters>). This is even more remarkable given the contingent way that the letters, which easily could have slipped into private archives, made it to the library. Narisa learned that Christies would soon auction a box of what she suspected were her grandfather’s letters. She then had to negotiate for her ownership of them. Her birthright, as a descendent of the prince who authored the letters, was challenged because someone sought to purchase the letters for a different member of the royal family, the late King Bhumiphol. “The whole matter was very traumatic, with various parties in Thailand being divided as to whether I should fight to get the letters back” (10). It is suggestive of the continued delicacy of handling any information about Thailand’s ruling elites. The letters now are properly preserved and accessible to all.

Tamara Loos

Devotion: Image, Recitation, and Celebration of the Vessantara Epic in Northeast Thailand by Thomas Kaiser, Leedom Lefferts and Martina Wernsdörfer. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-89790-500-9. €38.00. 2,595 Baht.



The *Vessantara Jātaka*, arguably the best-known Buddhist story in Mainland Southeast Asia, is reenacted every year in villages and cities throughout Northeast Thailand and Lowland Laos in an elaborate three-day festival known as *Bun Phra Wet*. Until now, this complex multimedia event has been known outside of Thailand to only a small number of Westerners, mainly academics. This new book introduces the festival to a global audience for the first time and does so with meticulous attention to detail. The volume served as the catalog for an exhibition organized at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, in cooperation with the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, from

20 June 2017 to 15 April 2018.¹ A useful map in the Foreword on Page 9 indicates the areas in Northeast Thailand and Laos relevant to the material in the text.

This epic tale is the story of the Buddha's penultimate life. In this existence as Prince Vessantara (Phra Wet), he practiced the virtue of generosity (*dana*) to the ultimate degree by giving away all that was vital to his kingdom and dear to him personally. Having practiced generosity his entire life, the defining moment occurred when he donated the kingdom's rain-giving elephant to a group of Brahmins from a drought-stricken area. This act resulted in his banishment from the royal city to the forest accompanied by his devoted wife, Maddi (Matsi) and their two young children. There, he willingly gave the children to the Brahmin Jujaka (Chuchok) who wanted them as servants, much to the distress of Matsi. Finally, he gave her away as well, to a deity disguised as a Brahmin. In the end the family was reunited and welcomed back into the royal city in a grand procession. By perfecting *dana* to the ultimate degree, Phra Wet attained sufficient merit to be born into the world and attain enlightenment as the Buddha Gotama.

Phra Wet's merit is celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm each year in Northeast Thailand and part of Laos through *Bun Phra Wet*, in which the local temple and the surrounding area are symbolically transformed into the landscape of the *Jātaka*. In this environment, the story is recited by monks and reenacted through a procession in which laypeople, mainly women, carry a long horizontal cloth scroll (*pha pra wet*) painted with the main events of the story. About one meter in height and ranging from 50 to 100 meters in length, the scrolls are divided into the thirteen chapters of the story. The procession moves through the village to the temple where the scroll is hung inside the meeting hall (*sala*). Participants partake of the merit made through this ritual reenactment of the life and generosity of Phra Wet.

For those totally unfamiliar with the topic, this richly informative and sumptuously illustrated volume provides an introduction to the *Vessantara Jātaka*, Buddhist ideas of merit and merit-making, and aspects of Theravada Buddhist material culture and ritual in Southeast Asia. For specialists in Thai art, Buddhism and ethnology, it opens a direct window into every step of a unique tradition of the ethnic Lao people who adhere to this regional practice in the midst of national integration and globalization. And for those interested in *pha phra wet* and local mural paintings, it provides high-quality color photos of five rare, previously unpublished scrolls. Photographs by Martina Werdorfer of vertical scrolls (*thangkas*) from the "Tibetan" version allow for comparisons of the two traditions.

The book begins with a wide-ranging essay by Kaiser, curator at the Ethnographic Museum, who previously organized an exhibit on Indian narrative scrolls. Reaching out to readers unfamiliar with the story and festival, he recounts the essential events of this long, complex, seemingly foreign narrative. Kaiser's essay is thoughtful and broad-sweeping, as he endeavors to explain the regional celebration of this story in the wider context of historical Buddhism and even world religions. His references and texts include sources as diverse as the Old Testament, Theravada and Mahayana

¹ An audio recording of the recitation can be found at <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/ausstellungen/DEVOTION.html>

texts, a 6th century BCE Sanskrit play based on the Ramayana, a Tibetan version of the epic and passages from translations of other Jātakas (Horner, 1975). After explaining the essential concepts of Buddhist doctrine and cosmology, history, and the transmission of the teachings from India to Southeast Asia, Kaiser discusses the events in *Vessantara Jātaka* in more detail, with quotes from Tibetan, Chinese, and Sinhalese translations as well as the one from the Pali by Cone and Gombrich (1977).

Kaiser's thorough discussion also includes the biography of the Buddha, the role of Buddha images and narrative art, acts of worship, and the transmission of Buddhism to Southeast Asia. From then he recounts the politicizing of the epic by certain kings of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya who commissioned inscriptions and poetic revisions of the epic that correlate them with Vessantara. Kaiser finally brings the discussion into the events taking place on the ground during a *Bun Phra Wet* with an analysis of the main characters of Vessantara (Phra Wet) and Maddi (Matsi). The prince's apparent obsessiveness and lack of sympathy is contrasted with his wife's optimism and strength, while the Brahmin Jujaka (Chuchok) is sometimes less a villain than a hapless fool who loves his wife as much as food.

Kaiser's essay is followed by that of ethnologist Lefferts, who has been documenting and writing about *Bun Phra Wet* in its entirety for nearly two decades. Lefferts takes the reader through all the steps from planning to enactment to cleanup. He points out that it is imperative for the festival to be well organized and he takes us behind the scenes to see the 'stuff' of the event and the work that goes into it by the community and the temple, including the setting of a date, agreeing on a budget, inviting monks to come, booking musicians and singers who will perform at night, creating the special objects to be used in the festival, and more. Preparing the site essentially transforms the *wat* compound into a palace fit for royalty as well as the forest hermitage where Phra Wet completed his quest.

The 'stuff' also symbolically replicates Phra Wet's gift-giving by the members of the community who make or donate 1000 copies of each object including candles, incense sticks, and balls of sticky rice. The relevance of the number 1000 is its correspondence to the 1000 verses (*katha*) believed to have been spoken by the Buddha when he told the story of his previous birth. The number is also mentioned in the Phra Malai text recited before the *Jātaka*, in which the Bodhisattva Metteyya states that those who want to meet him when he is the Buddha should follow this practice of donation when they participate in the Vessantara Jātaka festival.

Even those of us who have attended many of these festivals have much to learn from this essay. For example, we learn that women who carry the scroll consider certain chapters of the story more auspicious than others and prefer to hold this section of the scroll while they walk. Other examples are the placement of sticky rice balls around the *wat* area as an invitation to any unknown spirits that may be nearby to listen to the recitation, and the items offered to Phra Upakut, the living spirit who guards the festival. Lefferts's long-term study of *Bun Phra Wet* adds a historical perspective that informs us of ways in which the festival has changed. We learn of the different varieties of recitations that are now available: a straightforward reading by each of the monks, a combination of reading and 'singing', and a more recent innovation of 'singing' in

which various individual monks assume the roles of characters such as Phra Wet, Matsi, Chuchok, and the children. The one single weak point is Lefferts' slightly muddled recounting of the Phra Malai story, which is recited as a preface to the *Vessantara Jātaka* explaining the reason for the festival (pp. 62-63).²

A catalog, "Pha Phra Wet – the Vessantara cloths" follows, written by Lefferts with contributions by Kaiser. For art historians familiar with the topic, the glorious photos of these fantastic scrolls are the most exciting part of this richly informative book. Ranging in date from the early 20th century to 1972, few others have survived the ravages of climate and pests, and scrolls so diverse and detailed are no longer painted. In recent years, scrolls have become simplified and standardized, with the majority made in only two villages. Five of the scrolls in the exhibit were borrowed from temples in Northeast Thailand: the Ban Phek scroll from Wat Ban Phek, Sisaket, painted by Pradit Lam Saeng, dated 1967; the Ban Tha Muang scroll, owned by Wat Pasakdaram, Roi Et, created in the early 20th century; three fragments, including one devoted entirely to Phra Malai, from Wat Ban Sing, Bān Sing, Yasothon, early 20th century; the Wat Ban Krachaeng, from Ban Krachaeng, Sisaket, painted by Chang Sathien Sam, dated 1972; and the Bān Khana Mai scroll, owned by Wat Khanavaraman, Sisaket, created by Wijitsin, dated 1967. The other is from the collection of Moesgard Museum of Aarhus University, Denmark, from Ban Phran Muan, Udon Thani, painted by Phat Khanchomphu, ca. 1928.

Each scroll is complex and unique in its composition, coloring and representation of figures. Some begin on the right end and move to the left; others move in the opposite direction, and one has a uniquely circular movement. In some scrolls the chapters are separated by natural features like trees and rocks rather than the decorative borders used today, while in others boundaries are fluid. In another each chapter is divided into two or three registers stacked vertically. Colors also vary, from the natural pigments used in the older scrolls to acrylic paint in the newer ones. While the children, Kanha and Chali, are usually depicted as expressionless, in one of the scrolls they are unusually pitiful, pulled by Chuchok on a vine to which they are tied, naked and weeping.

The final essay, "Choegyl Drimed Kuenden: The prince who gave up everything to attain enlightenment," by Martina Wernsdorfer, Asia curator at the Ethnographic

² The correct version of the story from the *Malai Muen-Malai Saen* is as follows. Phra Malai, a monk with supernatural powers enabling him to fly to hell and heaven, was on his alms rounds one morning when he encountered a poor man who had picked eight lotuses while bathing in a pond. The man presented them to the monk, asking that through this offering he might never again be born poor. After accepting the lotuses, Phra Malai deliberated over what to do with them and decided to present them at the Culamani Cetiya in Tavatimsa Heaven, where the Buddha's hair relic is enshrined. He flew there and met Indra, and witnessed the arrival of a series of deities coming to worship, each surrounded by progressively larger and larger retinues. In each case, Indra told Phra Malai how the deity had earned sufficient merit to be born in heaven, each through an act of *dana*. Eventually the Bodhisatta Metteya arrived from his abode in Tusita Heaven to worship the relic. He asked Phra Malai about the inhabitants of the human realm and the monk replied that they made merit in diverse ways, all in the hope of meeting Metteya when he came to be born as the next Buddha. Metteya advised him to tell the people that they should participate fully in the *Vessantara Jātaka* festival in one day and one night by listening to the recitation and presenting various kinds of offerings, each numbering 1000. They should also avoid committing sins and practice *dana*.

Museum, presents noteworthy comparisons from the “Tibetan” tradition, which is based on a translation from the Pali and differs from the original in two significant ways. The first is that the prince does not give away an elephant, but a wish-fulfilling jewel belonging to his father. The second is that he does not give away his wife, but his eyes, which he cuts out and presents to a blind Brahmin beggar. The essay also discusses some of the ways in which the story is presented, including a highly acclaimed film made in Bhutan in two versions, one in Tibetan and another in Dzongkha; a play featuring episodes from the story performed by nuns in Kathmandu; and street theater in Himachal Pradesh, northern India. In the latter, key scenes are painted on scrolls (*thangka*), several examples of which are included.

The book’s few shortcomings are minor, indeed, and are limited to some of the photos of temple murals, with details that are hard to see, most likely a result of having been reduced in size to fit the book’s format. For example, if the photo of the mural at Wat Pa Rerai, Maha Sarakham (p. 30) had been enlarged, cropped, and perhaps lightened, the details would be more visible. The same is true of the mural at Wat Ban Yang in Maha Sarakham (p. 71). In other instances, the relevance of the photo is questionable, as in the detail of a mural at Wat Sa Bua Kaew (p. 43), with a caption stating only that a battle is raging outside the city walls in the upper part of the photo, in contrast to the bucolic village scene below, which includes a woman giving birth and a man holding what appears to be a child with deformed limbs.³

Nevertheless, *Devotion: Image, Recitation, and Celebration of the Vessantara Epic in Northeast Thailand* is superb and its title, which puzzled me before I read the book, is most appropriate. The first word, “Devotion” calls attention to the sentiment of the local participants as well as to Phra Wet’s willingness to sacrifice his family in his quest to be born as the next Buddha, in juxtaposition with Matsi’s dedication to the family’s survival. The remainder of the title evokes the multifaceted nature of the *Bun Phra Wet* festival and that it is, indeed, a celebration of the sharing of merit. The book deserves to be celebrated as a major achievement on the part of all who contributed to it, not only the authors, but also the artists, temples, museums and villagers.

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³ The scene is from *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the Lao version of the Rama epic, and the infant is probably the deformed child who was later reborn as Hapmanasun, the character corresponding to Ravana.