with modern discourses of morality. Social relations have changed to the extent that Vessantara’s treatment of Matsu and his two children is no longer morally acceptable, even in striving for a legitimate spiritual goal: Perfection and enlightenment. It is extremely difficult now to justify Vessantara giving away his two children and his wife for the sake of spiritual attainment.

The story also goes against the morality of economic development, and Khukrit’s criticisms are very much couched in this language, written as it was at the time that Thailand had just entered the era of national ‘development’ (kan phatthana). The Vessantara Jataka was the exemplary narrative about the concept of than. But the concept of than as the central activity of merit-making among the Thai people was coming under increasing criticism from the country’s leaders on economic grounds.\(^5\) A very large proportion of the income of most rural people at the time was spent in acts of than, in religious ceremonies, building temples, providing for the local monks, etc. The logic of economic development, however, saw many such acts of giving as a wastage of capital which could be put to more productive purposes for the ultimate benefit of the nation.

In the same way that the practice of giving as presented in the Vessantara Jataka is being questioned, the practice of asking for gifts - begging - is also being reexamined. The former Cabinet recently approved a ‘Beggars Bill’, drafted by the Public Welfare Department, designed to outlaw beggars, known in Thai as khor than, literally ‘those who ask for than’. Begging is big business in Thailand. A recent survey showed that 60% of beggars earned more than 300 baht a day, which is over twice the minimum daily wage, and there are many who earn more than this.\(^6\) The intent of the bill is ostensibly to stop criminal rackets organizing and exploiting gangs of beggars, sometimes by coercion, for financial gain. But the appearance of beggars in the streets of Bangkok (particularly the old and frail from the rural regions, especially the northeast) is also an embarrassment for the government of a rapidly developing country lauded in international economic circles. Behind the bill there is a new moral notion that the practice of khor than is a shameful activity. The bill has provisions for beggars to be arrested and sent to job placement agencies. Those who have diseases will be sent to medical centres while those who have mental problems will be sent to mental hospitals.

\(^5\) Field Marshal Sarit, who was responsible for prioritizing economic development both as policy and ideology during his Prime Ministership (1957-63), opposed those Buddhist teachings which he considered inimical to economic development; Niels Mulder, Inside Thai Society: Interpretations of Everyday Life, Bangkok, Duang Kamol, 1994, p. 100.

Those who play music for money are not classified as beggars and are exempt from the bill’s provisions since they are considered to be working for money.\(^7\)

Somchai Ninlathit notes that the bill overlooks the deep-rooted culture of giving in Thai society.\(^8\) In rural society - out of which many beggars come - begging was a common activity. In times of crisis where there was not enough rice because of drought, flooding or other factors, ‘begging’ and ‘giving’ were a normal part of social life. Somchai writes that among the Lao it was not unusual for whole villages which had suffered poor harvests to travel to other more prosperous villages to ask for rice. People were glad to give, not least because the uncertainties of agricultural life meant that the situation could be reversed in the future. This was the old meaning of khor than, a term without the connotations of shame it has today. This system of ‘begging’ and ‘giving’ was part of a premodern economy with its own morality. The Buddhist virtue of giving described in the Maha chat fitted in well with the ‘gift economy’ which was a natural part of agricultural society. But in Thailand’s transformation to modern capitalist society what was once seen as a normal activity is now regarded as shameful. Contemporary attitudes behind the ‘Beggars Bill’, therefore, reveal a conflict between premodern and modern moral notions concerning giving.

In many respects it would seem that the Vessantara Jataka and its message have indeed almost entirely disappeared in Thailand. Yet if one looks closely the ideas the story expressed can still be seen, sometimes in new, unusual forms. And while Thai politics and society have changed immeasurably since the Fifth Reign, it is tempting to see a continuity in the political culture that links leadership, virtue, and the act of giving.

It would be hard to overemphasise even today the social and religious importance of giving in Thai society. It is obvious to foreigners who spend time in Thailand and are showered with gifts wherever they go. In Thailand, if you interrupt people who are in the middle of eating they will never fail to offer you food. One of the most important personal qualities which parents, relatives and teachers try and instill in Thai children, is to be ‘ua fua phua phae’, or ‘mi nam jai’, meaning to be generous, willing to give. The act of giving is perceived in more than just material terms. For example, teachers are thought to be givers of knowledge; monks give the gift of the dhamma or religious knowledge, to the laity. Giving in Thailand pervades virtually every area of social life, including religion, education, business, politics, and social

---

\(^7\) The bill defines beggars as ‘those who live by begging with words or acts to encourage the public to put money into their bowls without providing work or property’.

\(^8\) Somchai Ninlathit, ‘Khor than: kan prasomprasan lae kan plianplaeng wathanatham khong sangkhom chonabot’ (Beggars: Cultural Adaptation and Change in Village Society), Private Circulation, 13 April 1993.

219
relations generally. There is a Thai saying that ‘giving and taking are systems of friendship’.9

The act of giving remains central to the Thai practice of Buddhism. Every morning all over Thailand, monks come out from the temples to receive food and provisions which the laity is only too willing to give. Indeed, the very existence of the monkhood as an institution is dependent on the free act of giving. A visit to a temple is not complete without a gift to the monks or the temple, whether it is merely incense, candles and lotus flowers, or something more substantial. Throughout the year there are festivals (thord kathin, thord pha pa, etc.) organised to donate (often very publicly) money to temples. Today, perhaps the biggest Buddhist ceremony of the year is the thord kathin, when monastic robes and other items required by the monkhood are presented to the temples. It is a ceremony in which the king himself also participates, in the capacity of greatest patron of the Buddhist religion in the kingdom. These festivals also attract big businessmen, as well as the ordinary laity. During my fieldwork in Thailand in 1992-3, Montri Pongpanich, the leader of Thailand’s Social Action party, gave 44 million baht (= US$1.76 million) as part of one of these festivals. Gifts of such amounts by people of this status are certainly not uncommon.

The association between figures of authority and giving is, today, still very strong. The television news programmes regularly show scenes of giving, such as the King giving monastic robes to the monks in kathin ceremonies, or the Prime Minister, senior ministers, politicians, armed forces officers, the police, or provincial governors, giving assistance of various kinds to villagers, such as blankets, food, etc. In 1995 when severe flooding was affecting large parts of the country senior political figures, including then Prime Minister Banham Silapa-acha, were often seen on television and pictured in newspapers giving out relief assistance to victims of the floods.

The ‘culture of giving’ is often self-consciously seen by some Thais as a cultural attribute distinguishing the Thai from other nationalities. A report in the Bangkok Post English language newspaper in July 1995 quoted an unnamed Thai foreign affairs analyst who noted that the Thai ethic of giving had a strong influence on Thai investment practices in other countries.

Differences in custom can ...work to Thailand’s advantage...It is much easier for Thais to reach Burmese people than it is for nationals of other countries. Thais enjoy a comparative advantage by virtue of their readiness to give...Burmese people do not give so readily. The idea of giving, or hai-than as Thais know it, is not as much part of their culture.

9 Asiaweek, 3 November 1995, p. 22.
This difference .... may be one reason why Burmese people clearly appreciate the giving of Thai people.10

In 1995 there was an interesting example of this type of thinking put into practice in the service of Thailand’s diplomatic relations with its neighbouring countries. The Thai Department of Foreign Affairs organised a royal short kathin trip to Thailand’s Theravada Buddhist neighbours, Laos, Cambodia and Burma. The delegation was made up of royal representatives, high ranking military officers, and staff of the Department of Foreign Affairs. They travelled to the most important temples of these countries. In Cambodia the delegation visited the temple used by King Sihanouk and the Cambodian royal family, where they were met by Prince Norodom Sirivudh, secretary-general of ruling FUNCINPEC party. In Laos they travelled to the temple where the Supreme Patriarch of the Lao Sangha resides, where they were received by the Lao deputy Foreign Minister. And in Burma they chose to visit the temple which is said to be frequented by members of the SLORC junta, where they were met by the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister. The delegation donated monastic robes and provisions sponsored by the Thai king. Each temple was also given half a million baht ($US20 000) in donations from the Thai king, embassy staff and other Thai and local Buddhists who joined in the merit-making. General Siri Thiwaphan, the Commander of the Third Army and leader of the delegation called the trip an ‘overwhelming success’.11 Another short kathin trip is being planned but this time it will also include the southern Chinese province of Yunnan which borders Laos and Cambodia, where there are large numbers of Buddhists, as well as Vietnam, whose government is also gradually allowing its Buddhists more freedom of expression. Needless to say, all of these regions also fall within the locus of rapidly expanding Thai business investment.

In the popular practice of Buddhism, giving is performed as part of the practice of making merit. Indeed, the phrase ‘to make merit’ in Thai is commonly referred to as ‘tham bun hai than’, illustrating the centrality of the act of giving in merit-making. One gives in order to accumulate merit in the future. This future reward is known in Thai as anisong, and there is a very large religious literature on the types of rewards for various acts of giving. The monkhood is often described using the evocative metaphor of the ‘field of merit’ (na bun), which highlights the belief that, like in the rice field, in this field of merit people will reap what they sow.

In religious thinking, giving for the sole and conscious purpose of expecting some future reward is frowned upon. Indeed, strictly speaking, this type of giving would not be classified as than at all. On the contrary, ideally, the gift associated with

---


Police officer and Buddhist monk giving out relief assistance to flood victims of Nakhon Sawan province; from Daily News, 2 May 1995
merit-making is unselfishly made. And much of the giving which occurs in Thai society outside the sphere of religion is spontaneous, unselfconscious, and disinterested. The practice of giving in Thai society seems to be a naturalized activity of everyday social interaction.

Strictly speaking than is a very idealised form of giving. It is, or should be, an entirely disinterested act. One gives freely without any expectation of reward. In its highest religious expression it is a form of cultivation of the mind, related to Buddhist ideas of selflessness and non-attachment. In Thailand, as elsewhere, there exists a broad spectrum of giving, ranging from than, or the completely disinterested, pure, selfless act of giving, to forms of giving which are made in the real expectation of some future reward or reciprocation, through to full-blown commercial exchange. Often, the exact form and meaning of an act of giving is ambiguous, lying somewhere along that spectrum. This is certainly not to say that all gifts come with strings attached, nor that the public acts of giving by political figures are imitations of the pure than-style giving of Vessantara. They are, however, part of one continuum.

There is a popular Thai folk-story which demonstrates the more instrumental function of giving. There was a wealthy man who had a son whom he wanted to marry to a capable woman. He made an announcement seeking a woman to be his son’s wife. Many women applied. To decide which one would be the most suitable he asked only one question: how would they use one fish to enable the entire household to eat for one year. Most women answered by giving methods of preserving food. One woman replied that she would ferment the fish, another said she would salt it, while another said she would dry it. But then one that she would cook a big pot of fish curry and would give a plate of it to every home in the village. The rich man was very intrigued with this woman’s answer and asked her, ‘if you give away all of your food in one day how are we going to have enough for a whole year?’ The woman replied, ‘if you give things to people, people will always give something back to you. This is the way you will have enough food for the whole year’. Of course, it was this woman who became the son’s wife.

The story demonstrates an important principle that the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote about in his seminal study of the gift in so-called ‘archaic’ societies. That is, the gift, although apparently freely offered and received, in fact carried with it three major obligations. These were first, the obligation to give; second, the obligation to receive; and third, the obligation to reciprocate. These principles can be applied to certain acts of giving in Thai society. In actual practice the principles are much more subtle than they sound. In particular, reciprocation of the gift may not take place

---

for some considerable time (if at all), it may be in a very different form, it may not balance the value of the original gift, and it may seem almost unrelated to the original gift. Indeed, direct and immediate reciprocation of a gift would be appear inappropriate, if not very rude, for it would signal an unwillingness to continue the relationship initiated by the gift.

The practice of giving is something which establishes a relationship. It binds two parties together in relations of obligation in a way that is quite different from the types of exchange in trade and commerce. Whereas commercial relations take place between equals, are unbinding, and end when the exchange is completed, in a relationship of gift exchange the two parties are not equal, the exchange is fundamentally binding, and the relationship is actually strengthened when the gift exchange takes place. Gift exchange is based on an economy whose rules are unwritten, subtle, and personalised.

In Thai the debt of obligation that receipt of the gift incurs is commonly known as bun khun. Bun khun can be translated into English as ‘debt of gratitude’. The etymology of the phrase is significant because it derives from Pali Buddhist moral terminology, from which so much of the language of giving in Thai culture derives. Bun khun is the moral tie which binds the receiver to the giver in the gift relationship.

Besides the images of generosity associated with the ‘legitimate’ authority figures associated with state power mentioned above, Thailand’s gangsters, who are doing increasingly well in Thailand’s economic boom today, also stake their reputation on their benevolence. And much of this benevolence comes with the ties of bun khun. Ockey’s study of Thailand’s chao pho (‘godfathers’) demonstrates that the success of the chao pho is dependent on their ‘charitable’ activities, including financial assistance for villagers and huge donations of money to monasteries. As a result the chao pho enjoy considerable popular support at the local level. In recent years many have entered national politics since, with the ongoing decline in political influence of the military and the bureaucracy, a position in the parliament relies more than ever before on such local support. Although the acts of ‘giving’ indulged in by the chao pho have a morally positive flavour, they also create an unspoken debt of gratitude or bun khun with the

---


14 Bun comes from the Pali puruṣa, meaning merit or good deed; khun comes from the Pali khuna, meaning goodness, virtue.

15 The concept of bun khun has been discussed at length by Mulder, see Niels Mulder, Inside Thai Society: Interpretations of Everyday Life, Bangkok, Duang Kamol, 1994, pp. 41-54.

receiver which must be fulfilled. Ockey gives an example of how this ‘system’ works from an interview with one of the supporters of a well-known chao pho on Thailand’s rapidly developing eastern seaboard:

People come and ask for help and [he] helps them, for example, finds them work...To his followers who are close to him, he gives them sales work, by giving them some of the whisky he distributes to sell. He doesn’t take a profit. Whoever can make a profit, he gives them all of it...From this point, when there is an election, [he] will ask for help and everyone will help - and without asking for money from him.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69, n. 71.}

This chao pho continually has people coming and asking him for financial assistance. Ockey notes that as mayor he has spent twenty million baht of his own money on his municipality and donated ten million baht to monasteries. Such ‘charity’ has made this particular chao pho one of the most influential figures in the region. His authority surpasses even that of the provincial chief of police - nominally an agent of state power.\footnote{Ibid., pp.68-9.} Two of his sons are involved in national politics and he has close links with the leader of the Chat Thai party, Banharn Silpa-cha, as well as with many other senior political figures at the national level.

Giving has always been a part of Thailand’s political culture, and the increasing democratization and decentralization of the political system seems to be giving new expression to this old practice. The two general elections in Thailand in 1995 and 1996 have demonstrated how important the practice of ‘giving’ is - in the form of vote-buying - for all the political parties. Since the gradual withdrawal of the military from Thai politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the consequently enhanced importance of elections to the formation of governments, the role of vote-buying in Thailand’s political system has greatly increased. Vote-buying is often regarded as the major obstacle preventing Thailand from evolving into a ‘real’ democracy. Over the last two years there has been intense and sustained criticism of the practice by Western observers, as well as by Bangkok’s middle-class media. What is rarely commented upon is the fact that cash handouts are often far more useful to the average farmer in a rural electorate than election promises. It is interesting to note how effective such money handouts were in securing votes, especially in the rural areas. Voting was done by secret ballot (and there do not appear to have been any major irregularities in this regard), so there was no way for parties to check whether electors had in fact voted for them until after the election. Yet that did not stop parties handing out hundreds of millions of baht to secure votes. They
knew that in general, people would reciprocate the gift that they had received, which is what, in fact, generally happened.

Many people in the Thai print media and academia have singled out for particular criticism the former Prime Minister, Banharn Silpa-acha, for his alleged practice of ‘money politics’. During the election campaign last year he was dubbed by the media, the ‘walking ATM’. The media pointed to his home province of Suphanburi, 150 kms northwest of Bangkok, which is like a personal fiefdom because of the influence of Banharn and his family. Banharn’s brother and daughter are also Members of Parliament. Suphanburi stands out as one of the most developed provincial cities in Thailand outside Bangkok. It has excellent roads, new hospitals, schools, and many other development projects are underway; commercial activity in Suphanburi is booming. In the last few elections Banharn has polled more individual votes than any other Member of Parliament in the country, over 218 000 in the 1995 election. He has frequently been accused of using state funds to enrich his own electorate. In the debate over the former government’s first budget which was handed down in late 1995, the Democrats Party attacked the government on the issue that the lion’s share of the Highway Department’s budget for provincial road construction had gone to Suphanburi, and to the home provinces of several other senior Cabinet Ministers.19

In the most recent election of November 1996 the New Aspiration Party led by General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was targeted by the Thai press as one the worst parties in terms of its indulgence in vote-buying. In one TV interview, Democrats leaders Chuan Leekphai quipped that the Democrats would have a hard time parting the NAP’s ‘purple curtain’ in the northeast - purple being the colour of the five hundred baht note. The Far Eastern Economic Review’s post-election feature on the problem of money politics noted how one NAP candidate handed out half a million baht to temples in his province of Chiang Mai, and openly admitted to using money to ‘help’ people, because this was ‘the system in Thailand’.20 The high-profile Solidarity MP from Buriram, Newin Chidchob, who was involved in a well publicised vote-buying scandal in the 1995 elections, was also quoted as saying that ‘...I’ve never done anything immoral. My goal is to get as much money as I can for the people of Buriram.’21

The cases of these provincial politicians are typical of the political culture in Thailand in the rural, rice-growing electorates which still account for most seats in the Thai parliament. Here, people vote for personalities rather than national parties, for the

19 The Bangkok Post, 26 September 1995.


21 Ibid., p. 17.
very rational consideration that they have more to gain by doing so. This can be shown by the voting figures in the two recent elections, where politicians in this mould in general gained many more votes than politicians who stood on a party platform. It was mainly politicians of this kind who formed the governments after the elections.

The question needs to be asked, then, whether this represents the last vestiges of a premodern political culture that will eventually make way for a ‘cleaner’ Western style democratic system, or whether it is an alternative political culture with its own deeply rooted moral underpinnings - still inadequately understood by most political commentators. Will Thailand’s continued economic development and increasing status as a regional power lead to the evolution of modern Western democratic norms, as the modernization paradigm would have us believe, or rather, will it reinvigorate older, equally sophisticated notions about authority and social relations which have a long history among the Tai peoples?

Most political commentators see Thailand’s political culture in moral terms. There is a widespread perception that Thailand’s political system is fundamentally ‘corrupt’. The Far Eastern Economic Review saw the November 1996 election as one of ‘dirtiest’ in history, and regards Thailand’s democracy as hampered by ‘corruption’, and ‘sleaze’. Much of what is today collectively referred to as ‘corruption’, can also be seen as forms of giving. Bribery, kickbacks, ‘tea money’ or ‘under-the-counter’ payments, secret commissions and so on, can all be construed as gifts of various kinds. It is, of course, obvious that a bribe is different from a gift, and I do not argue that all corruption is really harmless gift-giving. And I do not believe that corrupt and dishonest behaviour is any less common in Thailand than in other countries. But I would argue that in Thai society there is great ambiguity about the dividing line between the two, particular when there is a preexisting culture of giving, to which a moral system is attached, and you have a continuation of personalized authority structures. In many cases, too, the legal system lags behind modern notions of legality. Cries of systemic corruption in Thai society and politics fail to acknowledge this. The logic behind the moral condemnation of Thailand’s political system would mean that most of the Thai electorate must be seen as ‘corrupt’. It is interesting that in Thailand the English word ‘corruption’ is often used untranslated (‘khor rap chan’), which suggests that it is a modern concept, lifted from a culturally foreign Western discourse.

Nevertheless, the state in Thailand has taken a number of courses of action to sanction those kinds of giving which are deemed corrupt. First, receiving gifts is officially banned by the Thai bureaucracy. The Counter Corruption Commission (Por.Por.Por.) has been set up to investigate allegations of corruption against senior members of the bureaucracy. Another, extreme measure of dealing with alleged

---

corruption occurred in February 1991, when officers of the Class Five faction of the Chula Chorn Klao Military Academy overthrew the elected Chatichai government in a coup d’etat on the grounds of gross corruption. Once in power, the NPKC junta (ror, sor, chor.) seized the assets of a number of former Cabinet members deemed to be ‘unusually wealthy’ - a euphemism for corruption. The thrust of many of the attacks launched by the Opposition against the former coalition government led by Prime Minister Banharn was also aimed at alleged corrupt activities. Allegations of corruption have thus become a political weapon in the contest for state power.

As for measures introduced to prevent corruption in the political sphere, a limit of 1 million baht is placed on the amount of money individual candidates can spend in their election campaigns. There have been high profile media campaigns urging people not to sell their votes. An independent monitoring body has been set up, called ‘PollWatch’ (ongkorn klang), to report any corrupt activity during the campaign. However, it is fair to say that the effectiveness of all these measures has been minimal. In regard to bureaucrats accepting gifts, it is not necessarily the case that officials always seek bribes in order to oil the wheels of bureaucracy, nor that people are constantly offering bribes for such favours, but rather that it is almost impossible to stop people from giving, even when there is no ostensible favour demanded. It is reminiscent of Mauss’ first principle, the obligation to give.

Although the Counter Corruption Commission has investigated many cases of alleged corruption, very few cases have ever been prosecuted in court. The Commission is something of a paper tiger. As for military-backed coups d’etat, the current elected government in Thailand is made up of many of the parties and politicians that were overthrown in the 1991 coup. Given the current political and economic climate it is highly unlikely that another such coup could ever be attempted, let alone succeed, on such grounds as alleged corruption. Finally, despite the high profile campaign against vote-buying and the tenacious activities of PollWatch, the 1996 election was the most expensive in history, with an estimated twenty billion baht ($US1 billion) given away by all political parties in vote buying. All efforts by the state to restrict such ‘giving’ appear to have failed.

In the Thai moral-religious tradition, the act of giving known as than was once held to be the highest degree of virtue that could be attained. In the context of Thailand’s modern political system, however, it is as though there has been a reversal of this situation. The practice of giving in politics is represented by most political observers as,

---

23 Ibid., p. 16.
at best, morally ambiguous, and, at worst, 'corruption'. Modernization in Thailand has led to the deterioration of a gift economy and the current domination of a commercial economy, and in the process this has led to conflict between the moral codes deriving from the two different forms of economy.

One of the essential problems regarding the ethic of giving is that it is has difficulty fitting in with the economy of a modern nation-state. The ethic of giving referred to here belongs to a time when authority was personalised, rather than embodied in national institutions. People owed their political allegiance and their taxes to, and received protection from, the king, princes, the king's officials, the local nobility, down to regional and local men of influence, and even religious figures, rather than to the nebulous idea of the nation-state. Thailand was one of the world's last Absolute Monarchies, overthrown in a bureaucratic coup only in 1932. In Thailand the institutionalisation of authority associated with the creation of a nation-state is still incomplete. In many respects personal authority remains far more effective than institutional authority. It is this feature that complicates the practice of giving in Thai society and leads to perceptions of corruption. One can see the problem quite clearly when the obligations that politicians owe to their own local electorates (in terms of development funds, etc.) come into conflict with their obligations to a national electorate, which the concept of the nation-state requires and which the parliamentary system is ostensibly designed to serve.

A second major change that complicates the practice of giving is the continuing expansion of the modern capitalist economy in Thailand, and of course, in countries all over developing Asia. The result of this is that social relations regulated by commercial exchange are entangling themselves more and more with relations which had once been based largely upon gift exchange. It is precisely because this older kind of exchange can not be measured using the analytical tools of modern economics that it is not really understood, and in many cases left to fall into the new, make-shift category of 'corruption'. The modern science of economics has its own (usually unstated) moral gauge. Giving can not be measured in the same way that economists measure Gross Domestic Product, official exchange rates, capital investment, and so on. In fact, the whole practice of hai than and its associated forms of giving would appear to be largely invisible to the science of economics, despite the billions of baht which are exchanged in Thailand each year in its name.

24 Interestingly, on the other hand commercial exchange, which was previously looked down upon by the Thais out of moral considerations and left largely to the Chinese, is now not only regarded as morally acceptable, but preferable to the gift.
What does over seven centuries of the cultural influence of the **Maha chat** mean in present day Thailand? To what extent does modernization wipe out the past? Does ‘culture’ really have any influence on social and political formations, or are these things determined more by the logic of economic development? Is it inevitable that Thai cultural forms will converge with modern Western models?

In the view of Thai anthropologist Somchai Ninlathi, the reason for the appeal of the Vessantara Jataka to the villagers of Thailand is that it is a story of a ruler with ‘khunatham’ or virtue. As part of the **bun pha wet** festival among the Lao of northeast Thailand a special ceremony is performed known as the **hae pha wet**, or ‘Procession of Prince Vessantara’. This is a re-enactment of the triumphant return of Vessantara from exile to the city of Siwi at the end of the story. Villagers march to a wooded area near the village which symbolises the Wongkot forest where Vessantara had been exiled. A monk recites a passage from **nakhorn kan**, the final chapter in the story, and the villagers collectively carry a long length of cloth on which the story of the Vessantara Jataka is painted. The whole procession marches back into the village, led by the monk. Symbolically the villagers are receiving the virtuous ruler back into their village. As to the nature of his virtuous authority, it is perhaps best evoked by the description of the procession scene from the **Maha chat**:

```plaintext
Fung prachachon kor prachum chuan kan sin thang puang
ma nang biat siat thang sorrng khang thanon luang ya ae at
tang khon kor somanat yin di khoi rap sadet phra
yori khattiaphisek si sanuttiwong
an at hai sap sing prasong sap phokhai
```

Crowds of citizens gathered together, every one
Lining both sides of the main road in throngs
All happily awaiting the noble ruler of the Sammata lineage
Who might give them the things and riches they desired

---


APPENDIX

THE THIRTEEN CHAPTERS (KAN) OF THE VESSANTARA JATAKA

The Vessantara Jataka is divided into thirteen ‘chapters’, called in Thai kan, from the Pali kanda. The basic content of the thirteen chapters is as follows:¹

1. Kan thotsaphorn (the Ten Gifts): The story opens by describing the Buddha’s visit to Kabilaphat (Kapilavatthu), the land of the Sakya clan. The Buddha’s relatives do not show him the proper respect. The Buddha performs a miracle. His relatives pay homage to him. A red coloured rain falls, making wet those who wish to be wet, leaving dry those who wish to remain dry. The Buddha remarks that this is not the first time that such a rain has fallen. At the request of the audience he tells the story:

The previous incarnations of Phutsadi, Vessantara’s mother, are described. Phutsadi’s incarnation in heaven as the chief wife of Indra (Sakka), king of the gods, is related. Indra tells Phutsadi that she must be born on earth. Indra grants Phutsadi ten wishes. One of Phutsadi’s wishes is to give birth to a charitable king. Indra grants the wishes.

2. Kan himaphan (the Himalayas): the bodhisatta Vessantara is born to Phutsadi and King Sonchai of the Kingdom of Siwi, and immediately wishes to give alms. Vessantara receives a white elephant. Vessantara vows to give great alms. Vessantara marries Matsu daughter of the King of the Maddas. Matsu gives birth to a son, Chali, and daughter, Kanha. Brahmans come from the drought-stricken kingdom of Kalingkha requesting the gift of the auspicious white elephant. Vessantara gives the white elephant to the brahmans, upon which the earth shakes. The citizens of Siwi are angry at Vessantara’s gift of the kingdom’s white elephant and demand that King Sonchai exile Vessantara. The king acquiesces to the citizens’ demands and sends a messenger to inform Vessantara of his decision. Vessantara accepts the citizens’ demand but vows to perform the ‘great gift of the seven hundreds’ before he goes. Vessantara informs Matsu of the situation suggesting that she remain in the city to look after the children, and remarry. Matsu replies that she will follow her husband together with their children. Matsu describes the Himalaya region where they will be exiled.

3. Kan than kan (the Gifts): Phutsadi grieves that her son Vessantara is to be exiled. Vessantara gives the ‘great gift of the seven hundreds’: seven hundred elephants, horses, chariots, women, female slaves, male slaves, cows, foodstuffs. The earth

¹ With the one exception of ‘Vessantara’ (Thai: wentsandorn), I have rendered proper nouns in the Vessantara Jataka in the form in which they appear in the central Thai language version.
shakes. Vessantara takes leave of King Sonchai and Queen Phutasadi. Sonchai urges Matsi to remain in the city; Matsi refuses, vowing loyalty to her husband. Sonchai expresses his concern for the children. Matsi reassures him. Vessantara, Matsi, and the two children leave the city in a horse-drawn carriage, Vessantara continuing to give alms. There is another earthquake. Brahmans approach requesting the four horses drawing the carriage, which Vessantara gives. Heavenly beings in the form of deer replace the horses, but another brahman comes asking for the carriage, which Vessantara also gives. Vessantara and Matsi take to walking, carrying the two children.

4. **Kan wanapawet** (Entering the Forest): The children admire the forest’s beauty. The citizens of the kingdom of Cheta welcome Vessantara, and invite him to rule in Cheta. Vessantara declines. The princes of Cheta direct Vessantara to Mount Wongkot, where he has been exiled. They send a guard, Chetabut, to keep guard at the edge of the forest. Vessantara, Matsi and the children continue their journey. The god Indra has the god Wetsukam build dwellings for Vessantara and his family. Vessantara, Matsi, Chali and Kanha, all take vows of asceticism.

5. **Kan chuchok** (Chuchok): Story of Chuchok, an old and ugly Brahman of the Kalingkha kingdom, who begs for a living. Chuchok goes begging far away and leaves some money with a family. The family spend the money, expecting that Chuchok will not return. On his return Chuchok demands the money. The family asks if Chuchok will accept their daughter Amittada as his wife in exchange for the money. Chuchok consents. At first Amittada is hard-working which arouses the ire of the other Brahman wives, whose husbands beat and chide them for not taking the same care of them. Mocked by the Brahman wives at the well Amittada refuses to fetch water again and demands that Chuchok go and find her some servants, suggesting Vessantara’s children. Chuchok declines. Amittada threatens to leave Chuchok. Chuchok changes his mind and prepares for the journey. Before setting off for the kingdom to Siwi Chuchok receives a bad omen. In Siwi he asks after Vessantara and is told that Vessantara has gone into exile at Mount Wongkot. The citizens of Siwi drive Chuchok away. On approaching the forest Chuchok is chased up a tree by dogs. Chetabut the forest guard finds Chuchok and, suspecting his intention of taking Vessantara’s children, threatens to kill him. Chuchok deceives Chetabut saying that he is a messenger from Siwi come to bring Vessantara back to Siwi.

6. **Kan chulaphon** (The Small Forest): Chetabut explains the way to Vessantara’s dwelling, describing the forest and its natural beauty.
7. Kan mahaphon (The Great Forest): Chuchok meets the hermit Achutta. Achutta suspects Chuchok’s intention. Chuchok deceives him. Achutta describes the way to Vessantara, as well as the forest’s natural beauty, the flora and fauna.

8. Kan kuman (The Royal Children): Chuchok arrives at Mount Wongkot but delays going to see Vessantara fearing that Matsi will be there and will thwart his aim of taking the children. Matsi has a nightmare and asks Vessantara the meaning. Vessantara understands that the dream means that he will soon give the children as alms, but does not tell Matsi. Matsi takes her leave of the children and Vessantara to go into the forest and collect fruits. Chuchok sets off to see Vessantara. Arriving at Vessantara’s dwelling Chuchok greets Vessantara and then asks for the gift of the two children. Vessantara agrees to give the two children to Chuchok, but requests that he wait until Matsi returns. Chuchok refuses. Vessantara asks that Chuchok take the children to Siwi to exchange them with the king for money. Chuchok refuses. The children become frightened and hide in a lotus pond. Not seeing the children Chuchok accuses Vessantara of breaking his agreement. Vessantara goes in search of the children and, seeing footsteps leading to the lotus pond, calls the children to come out of the pond. Vessantara explains to the children that his gift of the children will enable him to achieve enlightenment, and so to deliver the world. Vessantara makes the gift of the children to Chuchok. The earth shakes. Chuchok ties the children’s hands and beats them with a vine. Chuchok slips and the children run back to Vessantara. Chuchok recaptures the children and continues to drive them off, beating them all the way. Vessantara feels intense grief for his children. The children escape once again and again run back to Vessantara pleading for him to help. Vessantara is overcome by emotion but his faculty of wisdom suppresses his emotion and he regains equanimity. The children cry for their mother as they are led away by Chuchok.

9. Kan matsi (Matsi): Heavenly beings in the form of three wild animals block Matsi’s way in the forest in order to stop Matsi from returning to Vessantara and finding out about the children. Matsi pleads with the wild animals and they let her pass. On her return Matsi finds the children gone. She asks Vessantara what has happened. Vessantara is silent. When she asks again Vessantara pretends to scold Matsi to relieve her distress at the children’s disappearance. Matsi continues to lament. Vessantara remains silent. Matsi goes away to search the forest for the children. She returns to Vessantara. Vessantara is silent. Matsi returns to the forest to search again. Again she returns to Vessantara, saying that she fears the children are dead. Vessantara is again silent. Matsi returns to the forest to search once again. She returns to Vessantara and taints with grief. Fearing that she is dead Vessantara is overcome with grief. Vessantara
breaks his ascetic vows and takes Matti in his lap. Matti revives and Vessantara tells her that he has given the children to the brahman. Matti rejoices at Vessantara’s great gift.

10. Kan sakkabap (Sukha/Indra): The god Indra, fearing that Vessantara may give Matti away as well, transforms himself into a brahman to ask for Matti himself so that he can return her to Vessantara later. Indra asks Vessantara for Matti. Vessantara gives Matti to Indra, unaware of his real identity. The earth shakes at Vessantara’s achievement of the gift. Matti rejoices at Vessantara’s gift. Indra returns Matti to Vessantara. Indra reveals himself to Vessantara and Matti and offers Vessantara eight wishes. Vessantara makes the following wishes: that his father King Sonchhai invite him back to his city; that he will not condemn a man to death; that he be a solace and comfort for citizens of all ages; that he not be attracted to other men’s wives and that he not fall under the power of women; that a son be born to him and that he have a long life; that heavenly food appear during the night; that his wealth increase so that he may continue to give alms and that he may never regret a gift of alms; that when he dies he be reborn in heaven and he never be reborn in a lower state. Indra grants Vessantara his wishes and returns to his heavenly abode.

11. Kan maharat (The Great King): Chuchok travels with the two children through the forest. Each night two gods disguised as Vessantara and Matti come to take care of the children while Chuchok sleeps. Gods deceive Chuchok into travelling towards the kingdom of Siwi instead of Kalingkha. Meanwhile King Sonchhai has a dream which presages the return of the children. Chuchok brings the two children to the royal city and explains how he got them. Sonchhai’s ministers criticize Vessantara. Chali defends his father. Sonchhai redeems the children by paying Chuchok a ransom. Chali describes the state of his mother and father. Sonchhai resolves to ask Vessantara to return as king of the city, and prepares an army to go and receive him. Chuchok dies through over-eating. The army sets out to Wongkot.

12. Kan chokkasat (The Six Royals): Vessantara hears the army approach and fears that he and Matti are to be killed. Matti reassures Vessantara. Sonchhai meets Vessantara and Matti. Vessantara asks after the children. Phutsadi meets Vessantara and Matti. The children meet Matti. Matti, the two children, Vessantara, Sonchhai and Phutsadi are overwhelmed by the emotion of their reunion and faint on the spot, along with everyone who is witness to the scene. The earth quakes. Indra sends a shower of rain which makes wet those who wish to be made wet and leaves dry those who wish to remain dry. The six royals revive.
13. **Kan nakhornkan (The City):** Vessantara accepts his father’s offer to him to return to rule the kingdom. Vessantara takes leave of his forest dwelling and mounts the royal elephant. Phutsadi offers garments and jewellery to Matsi. Encamped in the forest the army spends a month playing sports. Sonchai gives the order to return to Siwi. The animals of the forest express sorrow at Vessantara’s departure. Vessantara returns to the city with his family and the royal army. The citizens welcome Vessantara into the city. Indra sends a shower of gems of seven kinds to fall upon the city, which Vessantara gives as alms to beggars while keeping a portion for the royal treasury. Vessantara lives to the age of one hundred and twenty and is reborn in Daowadung (Tavatimsa) heaven.

The Buddha finishes relating the Vessantara Jataka and explains who all the characters in the Jataka were reborn as in the present time, stating that King Vessantara is himself, the Buddha.
GLOSSARY OF THAI AND PALI TERMINOLOGY USED

aksorn tham  ‘dhamma’ characters, used for writing the Buddhist scriptures. In Thailand it usually refers to religious scripts used historically in the northeast and north of the country

anisong  (Pali: anisamsa) a genre of religious texts once popular in northern and northeastern Thailand which describes the rewards one receives for various kinds of merit-making

asankheyya  an ‘incalculable’ period of time in the former Buddhist time schema

atthakatha  Pali commentary literature, as opposed to the canonical text or the Buddha’s words

bai lan  palm leaf manuscript, formerly used for inscribing religious texts

barami  (Pali: parami; paramita) perfection, supreme moral virtue, charisma, power, authority; In the Theravada tradition there are ten perfections which a bodhisatta must accumulate in order to achieve enlightenment: Giving, Moral Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Truthfulness, Resolution, Loving Kindness, and Equanimity. These ten perfections are sometimes known as thotsabarami.

bodhisatta  (Thai: phothisat) in the Theravada tradition, a being that has made a vow to achieve enlightenment through the accumulation of the Ten Perfections; usually refers to the hero of the Jataka stories, who is the future Gotama Buddha

bun pha wet  the festival of the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka among the Lao peoples

chadok  see jataka

chat  rebirth, incarnation, ‘life’

dhamma  the Buddha’s teachings; Buddhist conception of reality

jataka  (Thai: chadok) story of a former incarnation of the Buddha

Jatakatthavannana / Jatakatthakatha
Fifth century AD Pali commentary on the Jatakas believed to have been composed in its final form on the island known today as Sri Lanka. The commentary also contains verses (khatha) purported to have been uttered by the Buddha.

kan  (Pali: kanda) chapter, canto. One of the thirteen parts into which the Vessantara Jataka narrative is divided

kap  a form of Thai verse

kap maha chat  a version of the Vessantara Jataka written in kap verse, attributed to the seventeenth century king of Ayuthaya, Song Tham
kappa  aeon or ‘world cycle’ in the former Buddhist time schema
khatha  verse in Buddhist scripture
khatha phan  the one thousand verses of the Vessantara Jataka believed to have been the actual utterances of the Buddha. They are contained in the Tripitaka, the authoritative source of Buddhist canonical scripture
khorm  old Khmer script used in the central and southern regions of the Thai kingdom for transcribing Buddhist works up until the late nineteenth - early twentieth centuries
klorn  a form of Thai verse
lae  an improvisation of the normal verbal style of reciting the Vessantara Jataka, often containing material other than that in the text of the Vessantara Jataka; later developed into a new and popular form of recitation in its own right
maha chat  literally, ‘the great life’, ‘great birth’ or ‘great incarnation’; refers to the Vessantara Jataka, the story of the last of the bodhisatta’s incarnations before the achievement of enlightenment as the Buddha
maha chat kham luang  fifteenth century version of the Vessantara Jataka attributed to the Ayuthayan king, Boromatrailokanat
muang  premodern Tai political unit, principality
nak thet  a monk skilled in the art of reciting Buddhist teachings, especially the Vessantara Jataka
nibat chadok  (Pali: nipata jataka) the Pali collection of Jatakas compiled in Sri Lanka in the fifth century AD
nithan  folktale; originally referred to a genre of Pali religious-historical narrative
pancha antarathan  the ‘Five Disappearances’: prophecy of the five stages of the gradual decline and eventual disappearance of the Buddhist religion over five millenia. First to disappear are the scriptures, followed by monastic conduct, achievement of enlightenment, the monkhood, and finally the Buddha’s relics
panyat chadok  (Pali: pannasa jataka) a collection of fifty Jataka stories believed to have been composed by monks in Chiang Mai (as opposed to the much older, semi-canonical nibat chadok collection) before the sixteenth century. These Jatakas were widely popular throughout Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia
phongsawadan  chronicle; history
phothisat  see bodhisatta
phraratchaphongsawadan
literally means 'the sacred royal lineage of avatars', referring to the Hindu notion that the king was an incarnation (avatar) of the god Narayana/Vishnu. A genre of royal chronicle used by Thai court historians from about the seventeenth century in the kingdom of Ayuthaya until the second half of the nineteenth century

phu mi bun
literally, 'man of merit'; often referring to local religious figures of authority who led revolts against the Thai kingdom

phutthangun
epithet of Thai kings before the mid-nineteenth century meaning 'future Buddha'

phu wiset
man of supernatural powers derived from his store of merit; another term for phu mi bun

prapheni
festival, tradition, custom, ceremony

rai
a type of Thai verse closest to prose, often used to relate stories of a sacred or religious nature. Most vernacular versions of the Vessantara Jataka among the Tai peoples were composed in rai verse

rai yao
a form of rai in which the phrases are longer than normal. A popular form of verse for the composition of the maha chat

suat
a form of chanting Buddhist texts (distinct from thet)

tamnan
religious chronicle; term used by Thai court scholars from the Fifth Reign to categorise a genre of religious-historical writing composed in religious or political centres outside the Thai capital

Tai
refers to the ethno-linguistic group found in mainland Southeast Asia, as opposed to 'Thai', which is more commonly used to refer to the citizens of Thailand or the ethnic group of central Thailand

thamnorng
the melody, rhythm, and style of recitation of the text of the Vessantara Jataka

tang tham luang
the festival of the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka among the peoples of northern Thailand

than
gift, charity, alms

thet maha chat
the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka

thetsana
to preach the dhamma

thort kathin
ceremony of giving monastic robes and other provisions to monks

thotsachat
the last ten incarnations of the Buddha before enlightenment, the subject of the last ten Jatakas

thotsabarami
see barami
ton bun  man of supernatural powers derived from his store of merit; another term for phu mi bun

Tripitaka  corpus of Theravada Buddhist scripture, consisting of three scriptural divisions: (i) the Vinaya; (ii) the Sutta; (iii) the Abhidhamma.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. THAI VERSIONS OF THE MAHA CHAT OR VESSANTARA JATAKA

(i) Royal


Maha wetsandorn chadok samuan thetsana 13 kan (Thirteen Chapter Recitation Version of the Vessantara Jataka), In Commemoration of the Ninetieth Birthday of Phra Ratchaphatharachan (Pleng Kuvamathera), Wat Ratchabophitsathitmahasimaram, Bangkok, Monday, 29 April, 1991.


Maha chat phra niphon krom somdet phra paramanuchitchinorot (wen tau kan mahaphon kap kan matsi) (Somdet Phra Paramanuchit Chinorot's Version of the Great Life, without the Great Forest and Maddi Chapters), compiled by the Wachirayan Library Committee, Bangkok, 1918.


(ii) Central Thai


Maha chat kham chan (The Great Life in Chan Verse), by Nor Or Luang Samruat Withisamut, Cremation Volume for Mae Bunchuai Thaphitmep, Bangkok, 1961.

(iii) Southern Thai