
Academic Article

PHI TA KHON IN THE BUDDHIST SOCIAL CONTEXT: SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS OF THE COMMUNITY IN LOEI PROVINCE, THAILAND

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Abstract: This study examines the role of the Phi Ta Khon tradition within the Buddhist social context of communities in Loei Province, Thailand, focusing on the interaction between rituals, folk beliefs, and Buddhist practices. It has four objectives: to explore the socio-religious context of Phi Ta Khon, to investigate its contemporary adaptations, to analyze its spiritual significance and contribution to community identity, and to propose recommendations for sustainable preservation. The research employs documentary analysis, field observations, and interviews with community elders, monks, artisans, and youth participants in Dan Sai and nearby areas over a three-year period. The findings indicate that Phi Ta Khon reflects a harmonious integration of pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs, ancestral veneration, and Theravada Buddhist teachings. The Vessantara Jataka functions as a key scriptural foundation that legitimizes the coexistence of folk elements within a Buddhist framework. The tradition embodies core Buddhist values such as gratitude, generosity, loving-kindness, and acceptance of impermanence, while also fostering social capital through strong community bonding and cooperation. However, the study identifies several contemporary challenges, including youth migration, commercialization driven by tourism, limited financial resources, environmental concerns, and the risk of losing intangible cultural knowledge. At the same time, opportunities arise from digital media, academic collaboration, and community-based management. The study concludes that Phi Ta Khon remains a significant cultural heritage that reinforces community identity and social cohesion. Its sustainable future depends on balancing tradition with adaptation through collaborative efforts among communities, religious institutions, researchers, and public organizations.

Keywords: Phi Ta Khon, Buddhist society, social dynamics, community spirit, Loei Province

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Phi Ta Khon tradition is a distinctive and unique folk religious ritual of Loei Province in northeastern Thailand. It is held during the Bun Pha Wed or rocket festival tradition, rooted in folk beliefs integrated with Buddhism. This tradition reflects the social dynamics and spiritual life of the community that has been passed down for many generations (Suwanna Saengthong, 2018; Phra Maha Wira Weerawattano, 2020). In the context of Thai Buddhist society, Phi Ta Khon demonstrates the harmonious coexistence between supernatural beliefs and Buddhist principles, as villagers believe that Phi Ta Khon commemorates the Mahachat sermon and the rebirth of Vessantara, which aligns with the principles of karma and the cycle of rebirth in Buddhism (Prasert Na Nakhon, 2019). At the same time,

it maintains the characteristics of ancestor worship rituals and seeking blessings from sacred entities according to folk beliefs.

The study of Phi Ta Khon in the dimension of Buddhist society is therefore interesting because it reflects the process of cultural adaptation and negotiation between different belief systems, including the role of religious rituals in creating community solidarity and identity. It is also a study of social dynamics occurring in local societies facing changes from globalization and modernization (Wipha Wongsawang, 2021). This academic article aims to: (1) analyze the social and religious context of the Phi Ta Khon tradition in Buddhist society; (2) study the social dynamics and changes of the Phi Ta Khon tradition in contemporary contexts; (3) analyze the spiritual dimension and the role of Phi Ta Khon in creating community solidarity and identity; and (4) present recommendations for the conservation and development of the Phi Ta Khon tradition to align with contemporary social contexts.

The significance of this study extends beyond the documentation of a single regional tradition. Phi Ta Khon represents a living laboratory for observing how pre-Buddhist animistic worldviews and canonical Theravada Buddhist teachings have been reconciled, reinterpreted, and reproduced across centuries in a specific ecological and social setting. Scholarship on Thai religious culture has long emphasized that the success of Buddhism in the region lies not in its capacity to displace indigenous belief systems but in its remarkable ability to absorb, reframe, and coexist with them (Phra Thammapidok [P.A. Payutto], 2017; Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016). The case of Phi Ta Khon provides an especially vivid example of this negotiated coexistence, because it presents within a single annual festival the veneration of ancestral spirits, the retelling of a central Buddhist narrative, and the performance of communal merit-making, all woven together without apparent contradiction in the experience of the participants.

2. ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE PHI TA KHON TRADITION

To understand the meaning and value of the Phi Ta Khon tradition today, it is necessary to examine the historical foundations and beliefs that form the basis of this tradition. This section will present an in-depth exploration of the legends and fundamental beliefs related to Phi Ta Khon, which are connected to the Vessantara Jataka and beliefs about ancestral spirits in local society. Additionally, it will explain the details of the complex rituals and festival organization process, from preparation and mask-making to costume preparation, procession rehearsals, and the actual event. All of these reflect local wisdom and community cooperation. Understanding the origins and history of Phi Ta Khon will help provide a clear picture of the evolution of this tradition and serve as an important foundation for analyzing the role and meaning of Phi Ta Khon in Buddhist and contemporary social contexts.

2.1 Legends and Fundamental Beliefs

The Phi Ta Khon tradition is rooted in folk legends connected to the story of the Vessantara Jataka, which is the most important Jataka in Buddhism. The legend tells that when Prince Vessantara returned from the forest to the city after completing his merit-making practices, villagers and celestial beings dressed in masks and unusual costumes to welcome him with joy (Loei Cultural Office, 2017). This unusual attire later became the prototype for Phi Ta Khon costumes today. However, in-depth studies found that Phi Ta Khon likely originated from beliefs about ancestral spirits and the souls of the deceased that existed in local society before Buddhism spread in. These beliefs were then interpreted and integrated with Buddhist narratives, especially the story of Vessantara, to align with the society's main belief system (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016; Weerasak Wongnark, 2022).

The fundamental beliefs about Phi Ta Khon reflect the villagers' perspective on the relationship between the human world and the spirit world. Phi Ta Khon are not frightening or dangerous entities but representatives of ancestors returning to join merit-making ceremonies with their descendants. It is

an expression of respect and remembrance of ancestors, which aligns with the principle of gratitude (katanyu-katavedita) in Buddhism (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020).

A closer reading of the Vessantara legend within the Phi Ta Khon narrative illustrates how Buddhist hagiography has been adapted to serve as a vehicle for folk religious expression. In the canonical Vessantara Jataka, the bodhisatta's return from the forest after his ultimate acts of giving is described as the joyous culmination of a moral journey. Local oral tradition in Loei Province extends this narrative by imagining that, alongside human villagers, the spirits of the forest and the ancestors also emerged to greet the returning prince, and that their unusual appearance gave rise to the masked figures of Phi Ta Khon (Loei Cultural Office, 2017; Wanlayalak Songsiri [Ed.], 2007). This embellishment performs important cultural work: it provides a Buddhist warrant for the continued presence of non-human entities within the festival while simultaneously locating the community's ritual practice within the sacred geography of the Jataka tradition.

Anthropological research on mainland Southeast Asia has consistently shown that folk beliefs about ancestral spirits predate the arrival of Buddhism and continue to shape ritual life in rural communities. In the case of Dan Sai District, where Phi Ta Khon is most strongly rooted, the belief in *chao pho Kuan* and *chao mae Nang Tiam*, the tutelary guardian spirits of the locality, remains a fundamental organizing principle of the annual festival cycle (Local Researchers of Dan Sai, 2007; Songsiri [Ed.], 2007). The merit-making festival of *Bun Luang*, of which the Phi Ta Khon procession forms a part, is initiated only after the tutelary spirits have been formally consulted and their consent obtained through a medium known as the *chao pho guan*. This ritual precedence of local spirits over the Buddhist ceremonial calendar is not regarded as a contradiction by community members but as the proper ordering of sacred relationships within the village cosmology.

Figure 1

Illustration of the Vessantara Jataka story at Wat Neramit Vipassana, Loei Province



Source: <https://museum.socanth.tu.ac.th/general/phi-ta-khon/>

2.2 Rituals and Festival Organization Process

The organization of the Phi Ta Khon festival involves a complex process requiring community cooperation, divided into several stages: preparation, mask-making, costume preparation, procession rehearsal, and the actual event (Suchart Srisawat, 2018). Each stage has its own meanings and associated rituals. Phi Ta Khon mask-making is considered an important folk art, where artisans use natural materials such as coconut fronds, bamboo, and local wood to craft masks, then decorate them with

vibrant colors. Mask designs range from scary to comical, reflecting the diversity of imagination and creativity within the community (Wattana Chandee, 2019).

Figure 2

The 2023 Bun Luang Festival and Phi Ta Khon Masked Procession



Source: <https://travel.kapook.com/view269327.html>

The first day of the festival consists of listening to the Mahachat sermon at the temple, which clearly connects Phi Ta Khon with Buddhism. Villagers gather to listen to the sermon together before the Phi Ta Khon procession around the village and temple grounds on the following day. The procession includes Phi Ta Khon dressed in various costumes, dancing, singing, and performing comedy to entertain spectators (Loei Cultural Office, 2021). The Phi Ta Khon festival also involves other religious rituals such as alms-giving, sermon listening, and merit-making, reflecting the harmonious integration of folk beliefs with Buddhism. Additionally, there are social activities such as mask decoration competitions and procession contests, which help create solidarity and enjoyment within the community (Wipha Wongsawang, 2021).

The mask-making process deserves particularly close attention because it embodies the transmission of tacit knowledge that lies at the heart of the tradition. Master mask-makers, known as chang, learn their craft through a long apprenticeship that typically begins in adolescence and continues over many years (Juladit, 2013; Wattana Chandee, 2019). The principal material of the mask is the huad, a flat bamboo basket used for cooking sticky rice, which is deconstructed and reshaped to form the face. A separate long piece of carved palm wood becomes the elongated nose characteristic of Phi Ta Khon, and the horns and teeth are fashioned from the sheath of the coconut palm or from additional strips of bamboo. Each material carries its own symbolic associations: the rice basket connects the mask to the sustenance of the household, the palm wood to the forest spirits, and the coconut sheath to the renewal of life.

The painting of the masks, which takes place in the weeks immediately preceding the festival, is the stage at which individual creativity asserts itself most strongly. While older mask designers drew on a restricted palette of natural dyes and a limited repertoire of motifs, contemporary mask-makers freely incorporate commercial pigments, glitter, and iconography drawn from popular culture, including superheroes, political figures, and cartoon characters (Suchart Srisawat, 2018; Khruaviriyanphan, 2020). This openness to innovation has been a source of debate among cultural conservators, some of whom argue that the tradition's authenticity lies in the preservation of older forms while others maintain that the willingness to absorb new imagery is itself a defining feature of Phi Ta Khon. Field observations suggest that the community tends toward the latter view, regarding each new generation of masks as a legitimate contribution to an evolving visual tradition.

Table 1
Steps in Organizing the Phi Ta Khon Tradition Festival

No.	Step	Duration
1	Preparation and planning meetings	1–2 months before festival
2	Mask-making and costume preparation	3–4 weeks
3	Procession and performance rehearsal	1–2 weeks
4	Listening to Mahachat sermon at temple	First day of festival
5	Phi Ta Khon procession around village and temple	Second day of festival
6	Competitions and various activities	Second–third day

Source: Synthesized from field data (2022)

3. PHI TA KHON IN THE BUDDHIST SOCIAL CONTEXT

The uniqueness of the Phi Ta Khon tradition lies in the harmonious integration of folk beliefs with Buddhism, reflecting the special characteristic of Thai Buddhism's flexibility and ability to accommodate local beliefs harmoniously. This section will analyze the complex relationship between Phi Ta Khon and Buddhism, focusing on the process of belief integration, the role of monks in connecting and supporting this tradition, including the use of temple grounds as the center for organizing the event. Additionally, it will explore Buddhist principles reflected through the Phi Ta Khon tradition, such as the principle of gratitude, the principle of giving, loving-kindness and compassion, and the principle of karma. Although Phi Ta Khon may appear to be merely a festive celebration and entertainment, in reality it contains profound moral values and Buddhist principles. Understanding this dimension will help reveal the depth and spiritual meaning of the Phi Ta Khon tradition as part of Thai Buddhist society.

3.1 Integration of Folk Beliefs and Buddhism

The Phi Ta Khon tradition exemplifies the integration of folk beliefs and Buddhism, creating a unique form of religious practice. This integration did not occur suddenly but was the result of a long process of cultural negotiation and adaptation. Buddhism, which entered the region in ancient times, did not completely replace local beliefs but was adapted and integrated with existing beliefs, creating a belief system acceptable to the community (Phra Thammapidok [P.A. Payutto], 2017).

The interpretation of Phi Ta Khon through the Vessantara Jataka is an example of this integration process. Originally, Phi Ta Khon may have been related to beliefs about nature spirits and ancestors, but when Buddhism became established in society, these beliefs were reinterpreted through Buddhist narratives. Linking Phi Ta Khon to Prince Vessantara's return from the forest helped elevate this folk tradition to have Buddhist religious meaning, making it acceptable and valued within Buddhist society (Wanlayalak Songsiri [Ed.], 2007).

The process by which Buddhism absorbed and reframed earlier local beliefs in the Loei region should not be understood as a single historical event but as a sustained dialogue that continues into the present. The ecclesiastical authority of the sangha, represented locally by the abbots of village temples, has been instrumental in providing the doctrinal scaffolding within which folk practices can be given Buddhist meaning (Phra Thammapidok [P.A. Payutto], 2017). At the same time, the persistence of specialists in ancestral communication, such as the chao pho guan of Dan Sai and similar mediums in neighboring districts, attests to the survival of a parallel religious competence that the sangha has accommodated rather than suppressed. The result is a layered religious economy in which monastic and folk specialists each perform functions that the community regards as complementary rather than competing.

From the perspective of Buddhist scholars, the integration process illustrates important doctrinal principles regarding the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth. The cultivation of respect for ancestors, the propitiation of local guardian spirits, and the observance of communal festivals all belong to the sphere of conventional truth, which Theravada Buddhism has traditionally treated as a legitimate and even necessary foundation for ethical and spiritual development (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020; Phra Maha Wira Weerawattano, 2020). The ultimate goal of the dhamma, the cessation of suffering through insight into the three marks of existence, is not undermined by these conventional practices provided that the practitioner understands their proper place. In this sense, the participation of villagers and monks alike in the Phi Ta Khon festival is entirely consistent with a sophisticated Theravada worldview in which the everyday life of the community is valued as the ground from which deeper practice can grow.

3.2 Buddhist Principles Reflected Through Phi Ta Khon

Although Phi Ta Khon may appear to be merely festive and entertaining, it actually reflects several Buddhist principles, including the principle of gratitude (*katanyu-katavedita*), the principle of giving (*dana*), the principle of loving-kindness and compassion (*metta-karuna*), and the principle of karma (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020).

The principle of gratitude is clearly manifested through the belief that Phi Ta Khon are ancestral spirits returning to participate in merit-making ceremonies. The welcoming and honoring of Phi Ta Khon reflects gratitude towards ancestors and remembrance of their goodness, which is a fundamental principle emphasized in Buddhism. The principle of giving appears through the festival organization that requires participation and sacrifice from community members, including donations of money, food, and labor to ensure the festival's success. Giving in this context is not done with expectation of reward but for creating merit and community solidarity (Prasert Na Nakhon, 2019).

The principle of loving-kindness and compassion is reflected through the festival organization that emphasizes enjoyment and happiness for everyone. Phi Ta Khon does not discriminate by class or social status; everyone can participate as both performers and spectators. The comedy and entertainment created by Phi Ta Khon also helps reduce stress and create happiness for the community. The principle of karma appears through the belief that making merit during the Phi Ta Khon festival will bring auspiciousness and good results in the future. The connection to the Vessantara story, which exemplifies the perfection of virtues to attain Buddhahood, also emphasizes the importance of doing good and accumulating merit.

Beyond the four principles already discussed, the Phi Ta Khon tradition expresses a fifth Buddhist virtue that is less often named but no less important: equanimity (*upekkha*) in the face of impermanence. The festival centers on an explicit encounter with spirits of the deceased, a confrontation with mortality that in other cultural settings is often sanitized or avoided altogether. Participants and spectators alike are invited to stand face to face with the dead, to laugh with them, to dance among them, and to share merit with them (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020; Juladit, 2013). This ritualized encounter cultivates a form of emotional balance that Theravada Buddhism identifies as the mature fruit of meditative practice: the capacity to accept the reality of death without either suppression or despair. Older informants repeatedly emphasize that participation in Phi Ta Khon teaches them that death is not to be feared because those who have died remain present within the community and continue to be loved and remembered.

Taken together, these Buddhist principles are not simply overlaid on the Phi Ta Khon tradition from the outside but are woven through its fabric in ways that shape both the form and the meaning of the festival. The integration operates simultaneously at the level of explicit narrative, through the Vessantara Jataka that provides the festival with its scriptural anchor; at the level of ritual grammar, through the sequence of merit-making activities that frame the procession; and at the level of ethical

practice, through the moral expectations that govern participation. For a community to sustain such a multi-layered religious synthesis across generations requires considerable ongoing investment of interpretive labor by monastic teachers, community elders, and ordinary participants. The continued vitality of Phi Ta Khon is therefore best understood not as the passive survival of an inherited form but as the active and collaborative accomplishment of a community that takes its religious life seriously.

4. SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE PHI TA KHON TRADITION

The Phi Ta Khon tradition is not static and unchanging but is a social process that is dynamic and constantly adapting to respond to changing contexts. This section will analyze the social dynamics of the Phi Ta Khon tradition in three important dimensions: adaptation in the era of globalization, including the use of modern technology, development as a cultural commodity, and the involvement of commercial tourism; the influence of tourism on the form and meaning of the tradition, both positive and negative; and the role of the state and public policy in supporting and promoting local traditions. Studying these dynamics will help understand how the Phi Ta Khon tradition has adapted and changed for survival and relevance in contemporary society while maintaining its core essence and cultural meaning, reflecting the flexibility and adaptability of local culture in the era of globalization.

4.1 Adaptation in Contemporary Social Context

Over the past several decades, the Phi Ta Khon tradition has faced challenges from social and economic changes. The migration of young workers to large cities, the introduction of modern technology and media, and changing lifestyles have all impacted the transmission and organization of the festival (Wipha Wongsawang, 2021).

However, the community has adapted to preserve this tradition by utilizing technology for publicity through social media, creating online networks for coordination and experience sharing, and using digital media to record and disseminate knowledge about Phi Ta Khon (Suchart Srisawat, 2018). Support from the government and related organizations has played an important role in conserving the tradition through budget allocation, organizing training and capacity building for community members, and elevating the event to a festival that attracts tourists, which helps generate income and economic opportunities for the community (Loei Cultural Office, 2021).

The demographic dimension of these changes deserves particular attention. Census data and regional labor studies indicate that a significant proportion of working-age adults from Dan Sai, Na Haeo, and Pak Chom districts spend at least part of each year working in Bangkok, in the eastern economic corridor, or abroad in countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Israel (Suwanna Saengthong, 2018; Wipha Wongsawang, 2021). This pattern of circulatory migration has transformed the annual festival into a time of homecoming, when family members return to participate in the preparations, the procession, and the accompanying household rituals. Far from being weakened by the migration pattern, the festival appears to have gained additional emotional weight as a focal point of belonging for people whose daily lives unfold at some distance from the natal village. Interviews with returning migrants repeatedly emphasize that their participation in Phi Ta Khon is a primary means of maintaining their identification with the community of origin.

Technological adaptation has unfolded in several overlapping phases. In the early 2000s, the introduction of inexpensive digital cameras allowed community members to document the festival in new ways and to share images through printed albums and early online forums. The subsequent rise of smartphone-based social media platforms, particularly Facebook and later TikTok, has transformed every participant into a potential content producer and every performance into a potentially global event (Khruaviriyaphan, 2020; Thai PBS, 2025). Community-organized Facebook groups now serve as year-round coordination platforms for mask-makers, performers, and sponsors; they carry announcements of

preparatory meetings, disseminate rehearsal videos, and provide informal archives of past festivals that new participants can study. These digital infrastructures have effectively extended the temporal and spatial boundaries of the festival, which is no longer confined to a few days in a single location but now persists as a continuous distributed conversation.

4.2 Tourism and Sociocultural Impacts

Developing Phi Ta Khon as a tourist destination has both positive and negative effects. Positively, tourism helps generate income and economic opportunities for the community, makes young people see the value of the tradition and have motivation to continue it, and helps spread local culture to be widely known (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016).

However, tourism may also bring undesirable changes, such as emphasizing aesthetics and entertainment over religious meaning, modifying rituals to suit tourists, and gradually losing traditional values. Therefore, it is necessary to create a balance between tourism development and cultural value conservation (Weerasak Wongnark, 2022).

Empirical studies of cultural tourism in comparable Thai settings have identified a characteristic set of trajectories that communities typically follow as the numbers of visitors increase. In the earliest stage, tourism tends to be welcomed without qualification because the economic benefits are obvious and the cultural costs are not yet visible. In a middle stage, conflicts begin to emerge between the expectations of visitors and the priorities of local practitioners, particularly around the scheduling, duration, and aesthetic presentation of rituals. In a mature stage, successful communities develop explicit governance mechanisms that regulate the interface between the ritual community and the tourist audience, while unsuccessful communities experience a gradual hollowing out of the tradition as it becomes increasingly performed for external consumption (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016; Traveloka, 2025). The Loei communities have, on the whole, moved into the middle and early mature stages of this trajectory, and the development of local governance capacity is therefore a matter of urgent practical concern.

Specific mechanisms have already been put in place to manage the tourism interface. The Dan Sai Cultural Tourism Network, a coalition of community-based tourism operators and temple committees, has developed a set of guidelines that distinguish between publicly accessible festival activities and those reserved for community members only (DASTA, n.d.; Loei Cultural Office, 2021). The consultation of the guardian spirits, the opening of the merit-making ceremony, and certain restricted rites are protected from tourist observation, while the main procession, the mask competition, and the accompanying market are open to all visitors. This two-tier structure preserves the integrity of the most sacred elements of the tradition while allowing the economically productive components to develop under conditions of broader participation. The distinction is communicated to visitors through interpretive signage, through guided tours led by trained community members, and through informal social enforcement by participants themselves.

4.3 The Role of Youth in Tradition Continuation

Youth are an important group for continuing the Phi Ta Khon tradition into the future. However, studies found that youth today have less interest in the tradition compared to their parents and grandparents due to having more leisure time options and greater interest in modern activities (Suwanna Saengthong, 2018).

To address this issue, communities and related agencies have organized activities to attract youth, such as Phi Ta Khon learning camps, teaching mask-making and performance in schools, organizing competitions with attractive prizes, and creating channels for youth to express creativity through new mask designs and performances (Wattana Chandee, 2019). Additionally, social media has become an effective tool for attracting youth through creating interesting and contemporary content, using digital

marketing strategies to generate buzz and interest, and creating spaces for youth to participate in producing content about Phi Ta Khon.

The changing role of youth in the tradition is best understood through the concept of generational interpretation. Where the grandparents of today's young participants typically encountered Phi Ta Khon as an inherited obligation woven into the rhythm of the agricultural year, the current generation engages with the tradition through a wider set of entry points, including academic study in schools and universities, participation in creative competitions, volunteer work with cultural tourism organizations, and online fan communities (Khruaviriyaphan, 2020; Suchart Srisawat, 2018). Each of these entry points brings with it a different framing of what the tradition is and what participation means. A high school student who first encounters Phi Ta Khon through a school cultural studies module will tend to engage with it as an object of knowledge and pride; a young artist who designs masks for competition will engage with it as a creative resource; a tourism volunteer will engage with it as an economic opportunity; and a social media fan will engage with it as an aesthetic phenomenon.

The task facing community educators is not to privilege any one of these entry points over the others but to build connections between them so that young participants can eventually encounter the deeper ritual and spiritual dimensions of the tradition through whichever doorway has first drawn them in. Successful educational initiatives in Dan Sai and neighboring districts have adopted precisely this integrative approach, combining formal classroom instruction with hands-on mask-making workshops, intergenerational dialogue sessions with elders, supervised participation in rehearsals and processions, and guided reflection on the Buddhist principles that underlie the festival (Juladit, 2013; Wattana Chandee, 2019). Over a three-to-five-year cycle, young people who enter the program through any single doorway typically acquire familiarity with most of the others, and a proportion go on to take leadership roles in mask-making, performance, or festival administration.

Table 2
Changes in Phi Ta Khon Tradition Over the Past 30 Years

Aspect	In the Past (30 years ago)	Present
Participants	Mostly community members	Many tourists
Mask materials	Natural local materials	Mixed with modern materials
Publicity	Word of mouth, posters	Social media, websites
Funding source	Villager donations	Government and private sector support
Festival duration	2–3 days	3–5 days with various activities

Source: From survey and interviews with community elders (2022)

5. SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS AND COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS

Beyond the ritual and entertainment dimensions, the Phi Ta Khon tradition has profound spiritual meaning and performs important functions in creating social capital for the community. This section will explore three related dimensions. First is the spiritual meaning that Phi Ta Khon communicates, in terms of connecting the human world with the spirit world, expressing gratitude to ancestors, and reflecting beliefs about karma and the cycle of rebirth. Second is the role of Phi Ta Khon in creating social capital—bonding capital, bridging capital, and linking capital—that helps strengthen relationships and solidarity in the community. Third is the relevance of Phi Ta Khon to community cultural identity, which helps create pride and a sense of belonging to the community, especially in an era when young people may feel disconnected from their original community. Understanding these dimensions will help reveal the true value of Phi Ta Khon beyond external entertainment and serve as an important foundation for sustainable conservation and development of the tradition.

5.1 Phi Ta Khon and Creating Collective Consciousness

The Phi Ta Khon tradition is an important mechanism for creating and maintaining the community's collective consciousness through the participatory process of organizing the festival, which requires cooperation from all sectors of the community, from planning, preparation, organization, to evaluation (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020).

This participation is not limited to the festival days but begins months before through village meetings, collaborative mask design and making, performance rehearsals, and fundraising. These processes help create a sense of shared ownership and pride in the community's identity (Suchart Srisawat, 2018). Additionally, Phi Ta Khon serves as a platform where community members can express their creativity and identity through unique and diverse mask designs, and performances that include comedy, social criticism, and reflection of community issues, making Phi Ta Khon more than a religious ritual but a space for social and cultural expression.

The collective consciousness generated through Phi Ta Khon has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Synchronically, the festival creates an intensified experience of shared presence among the several thousand villagers who participate simultaneously in preparation, performance, and observance. Diachronically, the same festival establishes a sense of continuity with previous generations whose mask-making techniques, ritual sequences, and story-telling conventions are being re-enacted in the present (Phra Maha Sombat Sammapanyo, 2020; Songsiri [Ed.], 2007). Durkheim's classic sociological analysis of collective effervescence captures part of this phenomenon, but it must be supplemented by a specifically Buddhist understanding of the continuity of merit across generations and by a specifically Thai understanding of the moral bonds that tie descendants to ancestors. The distinctive contribution of Phi Ta Khon to community life is precisely this simultaneous activation of horizontal and vertical connections.

5.2 Creating Solidarity and Social Capital

Organizing the Phi Ta Khon festival helps create solidarity and strengthen the community's social capital in multiple dimensions: bonding capital, bridging capital, and linking capital (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016).

Bonding capital arises from strong relationships within the community through working together in organizing the festival, sharing resources, and helping each other. Bridging capital arises from building relationships with other communities through knowledge exchange, competitions, and cooperation in organizing events. Linking capital arises from relationships with government agencies and the private sector that support the festival. The creation of social capital through Phi Ta Khon also has broader effects on community development in other areas, such as collaborative problem-solving, infrastructure development, and strengthening community organizations. The social capital created from Phi Ta Khon is therefore an important foundation for sustainable community development (Wipha Wongsawang, 2021).

The forms of social capital generated through the Phi Ta Khon festival can be measured, at least partially, through their spillover effects on other domains of community life. Field studies have documented that villages with strong festival traditions tend also to exhibit higher rates of cooperation in agricultural labor exchange, more effective management of common pool resources such as water and forest, and greater participation in village-level governance (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016; Suchart Srisawat, 2018). While causal inference in such comparative studies must be drawn with care, the pattern of correlation is consistent and suggests that the trust, reciprocity, and communicative habits cultivated during the festival carry over into other arenas of collective action. In this sense, investment in the festival is not separate from investment in community development but is one of its most effective instruments.

Bridging capital, which connects the community to other communities, has taken on particular importance as inter-village cooperation has become necessary to manage shared tourism infrastructure, regional branding initiatives, and joint applications for government support. The annual Phi Ta Khon festival now includes formal exchanges with delegations from Isan communities that maintain related masked traditions, including the Boon Luang celebrations of other Loei districts and the Phi Ta Klon traditions of the upper Mekong region (DASTA, n.d.; Thai PBS, 2025). These exchanges have produced practical benefits, including the diffusion of improved mask-making techniques, the development of shared curricular materials for schools across the region, and the emergence of a broader Isan regional identity that reinforces rather than competes with local village identities.

5.3 Phi Ta Khon and Cultural Identity

Phi Ta Khon is an important symbol of the cultural identity of the Loei Province community that differentiates it from other communities. Having a unique tradition helps create pride and a sense of belonging to the community among members, especially young people who may feel disconnected from their original community due to migration and changing lifestyles (Prasert Na Nakhon, 2019).

The cultural identity that Phi Ta Khon creates is not static and unchanging but is a dynamic process where each generation participates in interpreting and creating new meanings for Phi Ta Khon. Accepting external influences and integrating new elements makes Phi Ta Khon's identity contemporary and relevant to the lives of new generations. Preserving and developing cultural identity through Phi Ta Khon must therefore create a balance between conserving traditional practices and adapting to modern contexts. Creating space for young people to express creativity and participate in determining the direction of the tradition is necessary to ensure Phi Ta Khon remains meaningful and important to the community in the future (Weerasak Wongnark, 2022).

The relationship between cultural identity and individual biography deserves more detailed attention than it has received in previous studies. For many residents of the Loei communities, participation in Phi Ta Khon marks key transitions across the life course: a child first observes the festival from a parent's arms, begins to participate actively during middle childhood, takes on costume-wearing and performance responsibilities during adolescence, assumes organizational duties during middle adulthood, and finally moves into advisory and ceremonial roles in old age (Suwanna Saengthong, 2018; Local Researchers of Dan Sai, 2007). This lifelong trajectory of participation gives the festival a depth of personal meaning that cannot be captured in any single synchronic description. When an elder speaks of Phi Ta Khon, that person is speaking not only of the festival as it exists today but of a lifetime of experiences of the festival, each layered on top of the others.

The symbolic resources provided by Phi Ta Khon are also deployed in contexts far removed from the festival itself. Images of Phi Ta Khon masks decorate public buildings in Loei Province, appear on tourist promotional materials produced by provincial and national government agencies, and have become a recognized visual shorthand for the region in Thai popular culture more generally (Thairath Online, 2025; Traveloka, 2025). Local entrepreneurs have developed product lines featuring Phi Ta Khon motifs, ranging from textiles and ceramics to jewelry and stationery. The commercial circulation of these images has raised legitimate concerns about cultural commodification, but it has also reinforced the recognition of Phi Ta Khon as a distinctive regional contribution to Thai cultural life, thereby strengthening the pride and sense of ownership that community members feel toward the tradition.

6. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CONSERVATION

Although the Phi Ta Khon tradition has great importance and value to the Loei Province community, in the current era this tradition faces several challenges that may affect its sustainability and continuation in the future. This section will analyze important challenges, including the problem of

youth labor migration, changes in lifestyles and values, budget limitations, and pressure from commercialization and tourism. However, alongside these challenges, there are also several opportunities for conservation and development of the tradition, such as using digital technology for dissemination and awareness creation, development as a quality cultural tourism destination, creating collaborative networks, and integration into local education curricula. This section will present an in-depth analysis of these challenges and opportunities, along with proposing balanced management strategies to enable the Phi Ta Khon tradition to continue and develop sustainably alongside the community in the future.

6.1 Current Challenges

The Phi Ta Khon tradition faces several challenges in the current era. First is the problem of youth labor migration to work in large cities, resulting in a shortage of manpower for organizing the festival and transmitting knowledge and skills to the next generation (Suwanna Saengthong, 2018). Second is the change in lifestyles and values of community members, especially young people who are more interested in modern activities than local traditions. Competition with entertainment media and various other activities makes it difficult to attract young people's interest.

Third is the budget problem for organizing the festival. Although there is support from government and private sectors, it is often insufficient and inconsistent, requiring reliance on villager donations which may be limited in some years (Wattana Chandee, 2019). Fourth is pressure from commercialization and tourism, which may lead to changing the nature of the tradition to meet tourist demands rather than preserving traditional values. Finding a balance between commercial development and conservation is therefore an important challenge.

A fifth and increasingly pressing challenge concerns the environmental sustainability of the festival itself. The traditional materials used for mask-making, including bamboo, palm wood, and coconut sheath, are drawn from local ecosystems that are themselves under pressure from land-use change, climate variability, and over-harvesting (Wattana Chandee, 2019; Khruaviriyaphan, 2020). Mask-makers have observed that the quality and availability of these materials have declined over the past several decades, forcing some practitioners to substitute imported or synthetic alternatives that alter both the aesthetic and the symbolic qualities of the finished masks. The waste generated by the festival, including discarded costume fabric, food packaging, and decorative materials, has also become a significant management concern as visitor numbers have grown. Community leaders are now beginning to incorporate environmental stewardship into festival planning, but the integration of ecological considerations with cultural and ritual priorities remains an unresolved challenge.

A sixth challenge relates to the documentation and transmission of intangible ritual knowledge. Although the visible components of the festival, including the masks, costumes, and procession, are extensively photographed and videotaped, the less visible components, including the prayers and invocations used to open the festival, the precise sequences of merit-making rituals, and the specialized knowledge held by the *chao pho guan*, are much less systematically recorded (Songsiri [Ed.], 2007; Na Nakhon, 2019). Several of the specialists who hold this knowledge are now elderly, and their passing without adequate transmission would represent an irreversible loss. Efforts to address this challenge, including systematic oral history projects, apprenticeship programs for younger specialists, and collaborations with academic researchers, have been initiated but remain under-resourced relative to the scale of the task.

6.2 Development Opportunities

Despite facing challenges, there are several opportunities for conserving and developing the Phi Ta Khon tradition. First is using digital technology for dissemination and awareness creation through

creating interesting content via social media, producing documentaries, and creating online platforms for learning about Phi Ta Khon (Phra Maha Wira Weerawattano, 2020).

Second is developing Phi Ta Khon as a quality cultural tourism destination by creating tourism routes connecting with other tourist attractions in Loei Province, developing community products related to Phi Ta Khon, and upgrading service standards, which will help generate income and sustainability for the community (Loei Cultural Office, 2021). Third is creating collaborative networks among communities, educational institutions, government agencies, and the private sector to support integrated conservation and development, conducting research and development to create new knowledge about Phi Ta Khon, and developing sustainable support mechanisms (Kanchana Kaewthep, 2016).

Fourth is integrating Phi Ta Khon into local education curricula by teaching the story and meaning of Phi Ta Khon in schools, organizing hands-on learning activities, and creating pride in local cultural identity among youth (Weerasak Wongnark, 2022).

A fifth set of opportunities concerns the development of sustainable material and ecological practices that align the festival with broader commitments to environmental stewardship. Experiments with locally sourced, biodegradable mask materials have yielded promising results, and several community workshops have begun to train younger mask-makers in techniques that combine traditional aesthetic principles with improved sustainability profiles (Wattana Chandee, 2019; Khruaviriyaphan, 2020). Similarly, the introduction of reusable serving ware, the organization of systematic waste separation during festival days, and the use of solar power for temporary lighting have all begun to reduce the ecological footprint of the event. These practices can be further developed through partnership with regional environmental organizations and through integration with provincial sustainable tourism frameworks, producing a festival that serves as a model for the reconciliation of cultural continuity with ecological responsibility.

A sixth opportunity lies in the development of research partnerships with academic institutions that can support the systematic documentation of the tradition and the training of a new generation of scholar-practitioners. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and several other Thai universities have expressed interest in expanding collaborative research programs focused on Phi Ta Khon, and international interest in the tradition has generated additional partnership possibilities with researchers in the broader field of Southeast Asian religious studies (Phra Maha Wira Weerawattano, 2020; Juladit, 2013). Such partnerships can produce the kind of rigorous scholarly documentation that supports both academic understanding and community advocacy, while also providing training opportunities for young community members who wish to develop expertise in the study and stewardship of their own tradition. The successful development of these partnerships depends on the establishment of clear protocols for ethical research, including provisions for community consent, benefit-sharing, and the return of research products to the originating community.

Table 3
Strategies for Conserving and Developing the Phi Ta Khon Tradition

Dimension	Strategy	Main Responsible Party
Education	Integrate into local curriculum, organize learning camps	Schools, learning centers
Communication	Use digital media, create interesting content	Community, youth
Economy	Develop community products, cultural tourism	Community enterprise groups
Management	Create database, develop management systems	Community organizations, SAO
Networks	Create collaborative networks, exchange learning	All sectors

Source: Synthesized from the study (2022)

7. CONCLUSION

The Phi Ta Khon tradition is an important cultural heritage of the Loei Province community, reflecting the complex and harmonious relationship between folk beliefs and Buddhism. Through study in the Buddhist social context, it was found that Phi Ta Khon is not merely a religious ritual or festive celebration but also serves as an important social mechanism for creating solidarity, transmitting moral values, and maintaining the community's cultural identity.

The social dynamics occurring in the Phi Ta Khon tradition reflect the community's ability to adapt to change. The use of digital technology, development as a tourism destination, and creation of collaborative networks are all strategies the community employs to preserve and develop the tradition to align with modern contexts. The spiritual dimension of Phi Ta Khon shows the profound meaning that goes beyond external entertainment. Phi Ta Khon serves as a medium connecting the human world with the spirit world, the past with the present, and folk beliefs with Buddhism. Participation in Phi Ta Khon rituals is therefore more than just attending an event but an expression of being part of the community and maintaining cultural continuity.

Although the Phi Ta Khon tradition faces challenges from social, economic, and cultural changes, there are still opportunities and potential for sustainable development. Creating a balance between conservation and development, providing space for youth participation, and building cooperation among all sectors will help ensure that Phi Ta Khon remains meaningful and important to the community in the future. This study suggests that the conservation and development of the Phi Ta Khon tradition must be viewed in broader dimensions, not just preserving external forms but also maintaining the meaning, values, and social functions of the tradition. Encouraging communities to own and participate in determining the direction of the tradition, along with appropriate external support, will help Phi Ta Khon continue to exist and develop sustainably alongside the community.

Several specific recommendations emerge from the preceding analysis. For community leaders, the primary recommendation is to invest in the development of governance capacity that can balance the multiple pressures on the tradition. This involves the formation of clearly constituted coordinating bodies with representation from temple committees, mask-making guilds, youth groups, and tourism operators; the development of explicit guidelines distinguishing protected ritual components from publicly accessible components; and the establishment of transparent mechanisms for the allocation of shared resources and benefits. The experience of other Thai communities that have successfully navigated similar transitions suggests that such governance investments pay substantial long-term dividends even when their short-term costs appear considerable.

For government agencies and public funders, the primary recommendation is to support the development of community capacity rather than to specify the forms that the tradition should take. Public support is most effective when it strengthens the ability of community members to make their own decisions about the future of their tradition, and least effective when it imposes standardized formats or quantitative performance targets that do not fit the local context. Specific forms of effective support include multi-year rather than single-year funding commitments, flexible administrative arrangements that accommodate the traditional calendar of the festival, technical assistance for documentation and archival work, and regulatory frameworks that protect the community's ability to manage its own cultural patrimony.

The ultimate significance of the Phi Ta Khon tradition extends beyond the boundaries of Loei Province and beyond the specifics of Thai religious and cultural history. In an era marked by rapid globalization, accelerating environmental change, and the erosion of traditional forms of community across much of the world, the sustained vitality of a ritual tradition such as Phi Ta Khon offers a significant testimony to the possibility of maintaining meaningful connections to place, to ancestry, and to transcendent meaning even under conditions of profound transformation. The tradition shows that

fidelity to inherited forms and openness to contemporary change are not necessarily in opposition but can, under the right conditions, reinforce one another in the living practice of a community that takes seriously both its past and its future. This broader lesson, as much as the specific details of the festival itself, justifies the continued scholarly, institutional, and moral attention that the Phi Ta Khon tradition deserves.

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