

# The Fat Men of Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam

ชายอ้วนแห่งวัดเกาะแก้วสุทธาราม

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## Abstract

The murals of Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam, Phetchaburi have been well-studied. However, Wat Ko's "Fat Men" figures – one in the Retreat to Pālelaiyaka scene and another in the Awakening scene, have largely been overlooked by English-language scholarship. Several scholars have claimed that there are no representations of Chinese in the temple, however, other sources have identified this character as a Chinese monk. In this article, I explore the following question: Who exactly are the Fat Men? Relying on visual analysis of this mural panel, I draw comparisons with Chinese art and argue that one of them is a caricature based on Budai, the Chinese Mahayanist representation of Maitreya, the Future Buddha. Apart from relevant secondary scholarship, I draw upon descriptions of Phetchaburi and the Chinese presence there from the primary accounts of visitors and travellers to Siam to supplement my analysis. Next, I discuss the possibility of the two Fat Men being Phra Sangkachai, who is often mistaken for Budai in a Thai context. Lastly, I offer a brief discussion of the significance of the Fat Men in wider scholarship.

จิตรกรรมฝาผนังที่วัดเกาะแก้วสุทธารามหรือวัดเกาะถือว่่าเป็นที่รู้จักและศึกษากันในวงกว้าง อย่างไรก็ตาม ภาพของบุรุษรูปร่างอ้วนท้วม 2 คน คนหนึ่งได้ภาพพระพุทธในเจ้าในปางปาลิไลยก์ อีกคนหนึ่งได้ภาพปางสมาธิยังคงเป็นที่ถูกมองข้ามในงานเขียนวิชาการที่เป็นภาษาอังกฤษ นักวิชาการจำนวนไม่น้อยมีความเห็นว่าในวัดไม่มีภาพที่แสดงถึงชาวจีน แต่บางแหล่งก็ชี้ว่าภาพที่กล่าวมานั้นเป็นภาพพระจีน ในบทความนี้ผู้เขียนได้เปรียบเทียบภาพทั้งสองภาพกับศิลปะจีนและให้ความเห็นว่าหนึ่งในสองภาพนั้นเป็นภาพเชิงล้อเลียนที่มีพื้นฐานจากพระบู๊ไ้ (Budai) ซึ่งเป็นภาพแทนพระศรีอริยเมตไตรยในแบบจีน นอกจากนี้ข้อมูลมุขัตยภูมิที่เกี่ยวข้องแล้วผู้เขียนได้ใช้หลักฐานอ้างอิงปฐมภูมิจากบันทึกของชาวต่างชาติที่เข้ามาในสยามที่มีการพูดถึงชาวจีนในเพชรบุรีเพื่อประกอบการวิเคราะห์ หลังจากนั้นผู้เขียนได้พูดถึงความเป็นไปได้ว่าบุรุษอ้วนทั้งสองคนคือพระสังกัจจายน์ที่มีกเป็นที่สับสนกันกับพระจีนบู๊ไ้ได้ในไทย สุดท้ายผู้เขียนได้สรุปบทความด้วยการพูดถึงความสำคัญของ “บุรุษอ้วน” ทั้งสองในการศึกษาเชิงวิชาการในภาพรวม

**Keywords:** Budai, Sino-Thai relations, Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam, Fat Monk

## Introduction

Having escaped the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767, Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam, a common temple in the Phetchaburi province, is regarded by most to be a vestige of Ayutthayan glory.<sup>1</sup> The remarkably well-preserved murals, dated to 1734 based on temple inscriptions, feature images of the Buddha performing the Eight Great Miracles and episodes from his first seven weeks post-Enlightenment (Skilling and Pakdeekham 2010). Xenophobic sentiments underpin these murals, manifesting as antagonistic foreign characters who either doubt the Buddha or try to do him harm (Figure 6). These foreigners “represent the Other of Buddhism, and hence of the Siamese people” (Peleggi 2012: 62). Thus, these murals have often been used as a lens into how the Siamese perceived and interacted with the foreign presence in the region during the early 18th century (Jaiser 2010; Peleggi 2012). Serving as didactic tools, the murals affirm the superiority of Buddhism, specifically the Theravada sect, over other foreign faiths (Peleggi 2012: 62).

In this study, I draw particular attention to the Awakening and Retreat to Pālelaiyaka Forest mural panels on the Southern wall. In the bottom half of the Paleiyakka Forest mural sits a jovial, rotund figure accompanied by a lady (Figure 1). Meanwhile, a solitary plump male, his body only visible from the waist up, stands in the bottom half of the Awakening episode (Figure 2). The two figures, whom I term the “Fat Men”, have curiously been neglected by English language scholarship. As figures incorporated into Wat Ko’s murals, they would naturally fall under the established pattern where each represents certain historical people or ideas; hence, the inclusion of the Fat Men in these scenes was certainly not coincidental nor unrelated. Thus far, there is no theory on the identity of the grey Fat Man (Figure 2), but some have identified the sitting Fat Man (Figure 1) as a Chinese monk (Pāknam 1986: 34).<sup>2</sup>

These interpretations are cursory and lack further analysis or elaboration. Therefore, in this study, I seek to introduce a more nuanced discussion of their identities and attempt to tackle the question of who the Fat Men are. Based on visual analysis of the figures, I argue that Fat Man #1 is a satirical character based on Budai, the Chinese Laughing Buddha. Next, drawing upon relevant secondary scholarship and primary accounts of the region by travellers and traders, I discuss the premise of my argument. Centring my paper on the identity of the Fat Men, I also examine the common conflation between Budai and Phra Sangkachai, a Thai arhat with similar iconography. By viewing the Fat Men through the lens of ethnicity and religion, my paper calls for a closer examination not only of contemporaneous temple murals but also of early Sino-Thai relations in the Siamese region’s other port cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam will be abbreviated as Wat Ko

<sup>2</sup> For this discussion, the seated figure will be termed Fat Man #1 and the grey figure as Fat Man #2.



Fig.1 The Retreat to Pālelaiyaka Forest scene in Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam, Phetchaburi province. Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.





Fig.2 The Awakening scene in Wat Ko.  
Source: Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.

## Who are the Fat Men?

Better known as the Chinese Laughing Buddha, Budai (布袋) was a historical Chan Buddhist monk who lived during the late Tang Dynasty and was deified posthumously. His association with the Future Buddha, Maitreya Bodhisattva, stems from the poem he recited before death, in which he was implied to be the Bodhisattva (Chang 2010: 24). Due to striking similarities between the depiction of Fat Man #1 and Budai's iconography, I argue that the former was initially based on the latter. However, there are some differences which suggest that the Fat Man may not necessarily be Budai, but a caricature instead.

### *Fat Man #1's Traits*

“Somdet Phra Chao went to stay at Pālelaiyaka Forest.” (Skilling and Pakdeekham 2010: 176)

The inscription of the mural panel, featured above, describes the episode depicted, providing the necessary rhetorical context but containing no information about the Fat Man in this scene. Hence, my investigation of his identity relies solely on visual clues.

Fat Man #1 sits on the ground, one leg folded before him and the other propped up, upon which he rests his outstretched arm. His other arm rests upon a circular object, perhaps a bolster pillow. The elongation of his earlobes is a classic sign of eminence and elevation that points to his identity as a religious figure (Lagirarde 2013: 152). Another clue pointing to his religious association is his attire. He wears his orange-brown robes not in the manner of the Theravada tradition, with the left shoulder covered and the right shoulder exposed, but instead with shoulders are covered, exposing his chest and round pot belly, which is perhaps his most telling feature.

Stretching across his wide face is a mischievous toothy grin, a jarring contrast to the gentle, serene smile that graces the lips of the Buddha behind him. His jovial expression is out of place not only within the context of the Pālelaiyaka Forest episode but also in the temple. In the story, Buddha seeks refuge in the Forest after a serious disagreement broke out between the factions of his followers (Leksukhum 2001: 48). There, he meets and is served by the Pālelaiyaka Elephant and Monkey, which the panel depicts. The mood within the upper half of the panel is a mellow and austere one, as both the Elephant and Monkey kneel before the Buddha and gaze up adoringly, demonstrating their utmost devotion. In stark juxtaposition, the Fat Man's nonchalance, as signalled by his back turned to the adoration scene, coupled with his facial expression, creates an air of playfulness, perhaps pointing to a comic function.

Both his physical features and attire align with standard depictions of Budai. Figure 3 features one of the earliest depictions of Budai – a sculpture carved into the Feilai Feng grottoes in the Zhejiang province, where the historical monk was born and lived. Meanwhile, Figure 4 features a Dehua Budai sculpture from the neighbouring Fujian province, dated to the 17th-18th century. Based on the two images, it is easily observable that despite the difference in the medium and dating, the iconographic traits of Budai, from his facial expression and physical features to his seating position, have been standardised in a transhistorical and transregional manner.





Fig. 3 Budai Sculpture in the Feilai Feng grottoes, 11th Century, China  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hangzhou\\_2006\\_18-23.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hangzhou_2006_18-23.jpg), G41rn8, 2006, CC BY-SA 4.0



Fig. 4 Dehua Sculpture of Budai, 17th-18th Century, China. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum.  
Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42545>, The Metropolitan Museum, CC0 1.0 UNIVERSAL

### *Deviations in Iconography*

One key difference between Budai and this Fat Man is the presence of “hair” in the depiction of the latter. At first glance, it seems like he simply has a messy head of flattened hair that is parted in the middle. On closer inspection, the original and distinct contour of his bald head is clearly visible under the hair as a separate layer (Figure 5). Furthermore, relative to the other depictions of hair within the temple, his supposed hair is rather translucent. For example, in Figure 6, the receding hairlines of the foreign mahouts appear opaque and are clearly incorporated into the character design. The same can be said of the ginger locks and hats of the French Jesuits. This separation of layers, unique to the Fat Man’s character, suggests that his hair could either be added on after the initial figure was painted or that it is merely damage to the walls. His (original) bald head would once again an iconic trait of Budai. Given the persistence of Budai’s iconography and the striking similarities between the two figures, I argue Wat Ko’s Fat Man was based on Budai as a reference.



Fig. 5 Close-up of the Pālelaiyaka Forest scene.  
Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.





Fig. 6 Taming the Dhanapāla Elephant scene in Wat Ko  
Source: Photo courtesy of James Lao, 2023.



While I can conclude that Fat Man #1 was based on Budai, I do not claim that he is the latter, due to other unmistakable deviations from the latter's standard iconography. For example, the Fat Man's pants are decorated with a cross-hatched design that is reminiscent of Indian trade cloth (Figure 7).<sup>3</sup> Budai's cloth bag, which he is named after, has been replaced with a pillow in this depiction. More obvious is his female companion who peeks out from behind his robes (Figure 8). Traditionally, Budai would be depicted with boys or male arhats instead (Little 1992: 264). Her slit-like eyes, rounded hair bun and beaded headband, which contrast with the round eyes, teardrop-shaped tufts of hair and elaborate gold headdresses Thai women are often depicted with, suggests that she is also intended as not being a Thai person. The partial obscuring of her face creates a sense of mystery. So, who is she and what is her relationship with the Fat Man? These deviations reflect intentional artistic choices to alter the identity of Fat Man #1, thus transforming him into a caricature of Budai.



Fig. 7 Indian Trade Cloth (Patola), 19th century or earlier, Gujarat region. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum  
Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/308007>, The Metropolitan Museum, CC0 1.0  
UNIVERSAL

<sup>3</sup>I would like to credit Darryl Lim Kangfu for bringing this to my attention.



Fig. 8 Close-up of the Female Companion in the Forest scene  
Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.

### *Seeing Budai*

For my comparison to be accurate, it rests on a simple premise – the painters of Wat Ko could base the Fat Man on Budai because they have seen the image of Budai. Within China, Budai is a popular deity due to his association with wealth and abundance, with depictions of him flourishing from the 13th century onwards (Chang 2010: 27). Since Budai is a folk deity with Chinese origins, it would be fair to assume that the transregional circulation of Budai images and worship was carried out by members of the Chinese trade diaspora.

Phetchaburi's trade relations with China began as early as the 13th century with the sending of tribute (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 51). These trade relations continued well into the 15th-16th century, as Phetchaburi (Peperim) was listed as a "port in the Kingdom of Siam on the China side" by the Portuguese diplomat, Tome Pires (1944: 105). In the 17th century, Chinese junk ships would still regularly dock at port cities such as Phetchaburi (Prypri), as noted by Dutch merchant Jeremias Van Vliet (Van Ravenswaay 1910: 68). These accounts by European visitors demonstrate how Phetchaburi has been the receiving end of Chinese traders, who also serve as cultural carriers, for centuries. How does this sustained reception of Chinese people and culture manifest?

Within the murals, natural elements draw heavily from Chinese painting aesthetics as seen by the winding branches of the trees that call to mind Chinese landscapes (Figure 1, Figure 9). Within Phetchaburi province, the door guardians on the shutters of the roughly contemporaneous Wat Yai Suwannaram were also painted in Chinese style (Srinuan 1984: 48-50). On the most basic level, the painters of Wat Ko (and Phetchaburi) have at least been exposed to Chinese art.





Fig. 9 Trees in the Buddha Mucalinda scene in Wat Ko.  
Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.

During the late Ayutthaya period, images of Budai were produced as Dehua wares (Figure 4), which were also a type of ceramic ware being traded between Ayutthaya and early Qing China (Bisalputra 2017). Contemporaneously, images of Budai as chinoiserie (Figure 10) became popular in Europe (Dierks and Lagerweij 2022: 186; Porter 2002: 396). Given Ayutthaya's prominence as a port city facilitating trade between East and West, images of Budai could easily have exchanged hands there. Tome Pires (1944: 106) also notes that the junks docked in port cities such as Phetchaburi would travel upstream to Ayutthaya (Odia) via river, drawing a link between Phetchaburi and the trade scene of Ayutthaya. This points to the possibility of Budai images passing through Phetchaburi. If Budai images were consumed in a region as far and foreign as Europe, it would be far more likely that Phetchaburi, which was geographically closer in proximity and had direct trade ties with China, would have received images of Budai as well.



Fig. 10 Scent Container with Figure of Budai Heshang, by a French artist between 1745-1749.  
Collection of the Walters Art Museum. Source: <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/14256/perfumer-cassolette/>,  
The Walters Art Museum, CC0 1.0 UNIVERSAL

### ***The Other Fat Man***

As the only rotund and jovial figures featured in Wat Ko’s murals, it comes as no surprise that the two Fat Men might be conflated and taken to be the same individual. However, despite similarities, I am hesitant to conclude that Fat Man #2 is based on Budai as well.

“Somdet Phra Chao sat on the throne of awakening beneath the Phra Mahā Bodhi tree.” (Skilling and Pakdeekham 2010: 175)

Just as in the case of the Forest episode, the inscription in the Awakening panel makes no reference to the corresponding Fat Man figure, hence, my analysis once again relies on visual observation.

One difference is the unmistakable presence of hair on Fat Man #2. Dark and opaque, his hair is clearly incorporated into his character design and emphasised, quite ironically, by the conspicuous bald patch in the centre of his head. Given that baldness is an iconic trait of Budai, this key difference sets the two apart. The grey colour palette used to depict him is also unique, as it is rare for anthropomorphic figures, and much less for religious figures, to be painted as such. Juxtaposed with the golden skin of the Buddha and the beige skin of the human figures, local and foreigners alike, the greyness renders him rather lifeless. In fact, in later periods, grey skin was used in association with ugly, villainous characters (Figure 11). Is Fat Man #2’s grey skin a coincidence or could it point to a more sinister identity?



Fig.11 The villain of the Culla-Paduma Jataka tale depicted with grey skin in Wat Khongkham, Ratchaburi province, 19th century. Photo by Winnie Lim, 2023.



Apart from these key differences, there are limited similarities between the two Fat Men. Budai's iconic traits, such as his exposed round belly, his cloth bag, and his lounging pose are not expressed in this panel. Since the representation of his body is truncated, there is not enough information about him to draw a detailed comparison. Therefore, while the mystery of Fat Man #2's identity cannot be determined here, I hope my emphasis on differences between him and his fellow Fat Man encourages a more nuanced consideration of his identity.

### *The Question of Phra Sangkachai*

Any discussion of Budai, the Chinese Laughing Buddha, in a Thai context would also warrant the mention of Phra Sangkachai. Sangkachai is an arhat known for his ability to articulate the dharma teachings clearly as well as for authoring the first Pali Grammar (Sangkachai Buddha n.d.). His "ugly" characteristics, namely his pot belly and hunched back, were self-induced to avoid the inappropriate attention he used to receive when he was attractive (Sangkachai Buddha n.d.; Lagirarde 2013: 153).

Due to his pot belly, Sangkachai and Budai are often mistaken for each other. Lagirarde (2013: 152) observes that Budai statues have been installed in Theravadin monasteries as Sangkachai, and vice versa in Chinese temples. Despite this conflation, I maintain my argument that Fat Man #1 was based on Budai and should not be confused as Phra Sangkachai.

Except for the pot belly, there are key differences between Sangkachai's iconography and that of Budai, which local artisans since the Sukhothai period have been cognizant of and have upheld (Lagirarde 2013: 152). Since he hails from the Theravada tradition, Sangkachai would be depicted with his robes as such (Figure 12), distinct from the Mahayanist style Budai and the Fat Men. He is also usually depicted "sitting in virasana or vajrasana, the hands together in samadhi" (Lagirarde 2013: 153). Neither of the two Fat Men exhibit these traits; hence, iconographically, it is hard to mistake either of them for Sangkachai.



Fig. 12 Gilded Sangkachai, 18-19th Century, Thailand. Collection of the British Museum. Source: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_1859-1228-158](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1859-1228-158), The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Based on the rhetorical context of the episodes, it is also illogical that either of the two Fat Men is Sangkachai. Within the temple, the two Fat Men serve as comic figures, indicated by their facial expressions. While Thai mural paintings are not particularly known for their depth and dimensionality, in the two mural panels, distance between the Fat Men and Buddha is created by the use of trees as dividers and the use of perspective, where the Fat Men are proportionally larger, giving the illusion that the Buddha recedes into the background (Figure 1, Figure 2). While the Fat Men and the Buddha exist within the space of the same mural panels, there is a sense of separation between them.

In contrast, Sangkachai can be characterised by his devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, and depictions of him reflect this through his pose and serious expression. As a deity, he is respected by followers as seen by the elevation of his images, relative to other images of Buddha's disciples, and the creation of dedicated devotional spaces for him (Lagirarde 2013: 150). The characteristics of Sangkachai are inconsistent with the portrayal of the Fat Men, and, therefore, it is highly unlikely that the two are meant to represent Sangkachai.

## Final Discussion

In summary, while the identity of Fat Man #2 remains a mystery, I argue that Fat Man #1 is a caricature based on Budai due to key similarities in iconography. Inconsistencies in the iconography and rhetorical contexts suggest that the two figures should not be conflated with the Thai arhat Phra Sangkachai, hence eliminating another potential interpretation. Given the trade and economic context of early 18th century Ayutthaya, China and Phetchaburi, it is probable that the painters of Wat Ko had gained exposure to images of Budai and used this as a reference.

My identification of the Fat Man as the caricature of a Chinese deity is significant, as previously Wat Ko was thought to contain no depictions of Chinese (Jaiser 2010: 73; Peleggi 2012: 61). This study thus prompts a re-examination of the figures depicted in Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam and elsewhere so as to form a larger corpus of Chinese figures in Thai murals. This study also prompts future researchers to inspect early modern Sino-Thai ethnic relations more closely using the lens of religion. The early modern Chinese presence in the region, be it Ayutthaya or Phetchaburi, has largely been studied either from the economic lens, emphasising their roles as traders and merchants, or the political lens, emphasising their roles in court. In comparison, their roles as carriers of religion have not been investigated thoroughly.

The appearance of a Budai caricature within the temple's murals points to the Wat Ko community's naturalisation and incorporation of Chinese religion and associated material culture, likely experienced through said traders, into the community's social and religious worldview. A broader and more in-depth study of the Fat Man in conjunction with Wat Yai Suwannaram's Chinese door guardians could yield more insight into how Chinese religion and aesthetics were circulated via the movement of both people and objects, and subsequently perceived or received by the local community. Such new insights could fill a gap in scholarship pertaining to the Chinese diaspora in early modern Siam as well as Theravada-Mahayana Buddhist interactions during this period. Therefore, the figures of the sitting Fat Man and his female companion hold research potential and warrant more attention.



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