



Attractive Elements for Promoting Cultural Heritage Tourism at Wat Thai Watanaram, Mae Sot District, Tak Province

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Abstract

This literature review examines the distinctive characteristics of Wat Thai Watanaram, located in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, as a borderland religious site that embodies the cultural and artistic identity shaped by Burmese–Mon influences in Thailand. The study highlights three key aspects: architectural features, gold ornamentation, and the temple’s socio-cultural role within the multicultural context of the Thai–Myanmar border region. Findings reveal that the temple is distinguished by its tiered Pyatthat roofs, intricate gold leaf decorations, and vibrant colors characteristic of Burmese art. Beyond its architectural and artistic value, Wat Thai Watanaram functions as a spiritual and cultural hub for a diverse community—Mon, Burmese, Thai, Karen, and Chinese—through shared religious practices and local festivals. Moreover, the temple’s extensive use of gold ornamentation transcends aesthetics, symbolising sacredness, faith, and the construction of cultural identity in a borderland setting. The review recommends further research on the conservation of border temple art and advocates promoting the site as a center for cultural education and sustainable heritage tourism.

Keywords: Wat Thai Watanaram, Burmese Architecture, Thai–Myanmar Border, Multi-culturalism, Temple, Mae Sot

Introduction

Wat Thai Watanaram is located in Tha Sai Luat Sub-district, Mae Sot District, Tak Province, Thailand. It is recognised as one of the most culturally and historically significant temples along the Thai–Myanmar border. Positioned near the Moei River, which serves as the natural boundary between the two countries, the temple embodies a fusion of artistic and cultural elements from both Thailand and Myanmar (Office of Culture, Tak Province, 2018). The temple has a long-standing history, originating as a site for meditation and religious practice for Mon and Burmese monks during the early settlement of Mon communities in the Mae Sot area. Over time, it evolved into a prominent religious institution recognised for its spiritual significance, artistic value, and role as a community hub (Jongrak, 2012).



Architecturally, Wat Thai Watanaram reflects strong Burmese influences, featuring tiered Pyatthat roofs, bell-shaped stupas, and intricately carved wooden decorations. The temple grounds also house a monumental Burmese-style seated Buddha image in the Maravijaya posture, prominently situated in the temple park (Department of Religious Affairs, 2017). Furthermore, Wat Thai Watanaram functions as a religious and cultural center for Thai–Mon–Burmese communities in Mae Sot. It hosts various cultural and religious events such as the Tan Khun Khao (rice offering) festival, the end of Buddhist Lent, traditional Mon dance performances, and Burmese puppet shows. These activities position the temple not only as a sacred site, but also as a space for preserving and transmitting local cultural heritage in a multi-cultural context (Sombun, 2019).

In the broader context of borderland cultural and architectural studies, Wat Thai Watanaram serves as a vital case study for understanding the convergence of Lanna, Burmese, and Mon Buddhist art. The aim of this article is to explore the temple's architectural features, historical background, and socio-cultural role in order to gain insight into the dynamics of multiculturalism along the Thai–Myanmar border.

1) Distinctive Features of Wat Thai Watanaram

1.1. Burmese–Mon Architecture

A distinctive feature of Wat Thai Watanaram is its Burmese-style architecture, which can be seen in the structures and elements throughout the temple compound—such as the pavilions, the ordination hall, and the pagodas. Of particular significance is the use of tiered, spired roofs known as Pyatthat, a distinctive hallmark of traditional Burmese religious architecture (Department of Religious Affairs, 2017). The temple is further embellished with intricately carved wooden decorations in Burmese patterns, showcasing refined craftsmanship and reflecting profound religious devotion (Sombun, 2019).

Figure 1 Tiered Pyatthat roofs of Wat Thai Watanaram (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)



1.2. The Large Maravijaya Buddha Image

Another distinctive feature and symbol of Wat Thai Watanaram is the large Maravijaya Buddha image, which is enshrined outdoors in the temple's park. Standing over 20 meters tall, the statue reflects influences from both Burmese and Mon artistic traditions, particularly in its serene facial expression and graceful proportions. This Buddha image is not only a sacred object of deep reverence for devotees, but also serves as a prominent landmark that attracts religious tourism (Netdao, 2020).



Figure 2 The Great Maravijaya Buddha image (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)



1.3. Color and Decorative Elements

The use of vibrant colors in architectural decoration distinguishes Wat Thai Watanaram, with gold, red, green, and blue serving as hallmarks of the Burmese artistic style. These vivid tones are further enhanced by mirror inlays and gold leaf ornamentation, producing a visually striking and majestic atmosphere. This decorative approach stands in contrast to traditional Lanna art, which emphasises simplicity and harmony with nature (Jongrak, 2012)

Figure 3 The Entrance Gate of Wat Thai Watanaram
(Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)



1.4. Cultural Diversity

Wat Thai Watanaram functions as a multicultural space, reflected in the religious and cultural activities of diverse borderland communities—including Mon, Burmese, Thai, Karen, and Chinese ethnic groups. According to the Office of Culture, Tak Province (2018), the temple hosts multiethnic festivals such as the Tan Khun Khao (New Rice Offering Ceremony), Poi Sang Long (Novice Ordination Ceremony), and the Mon-style Loy Krathong Festival. These events position the temple as a central gathering place for people of various cultural backgrounds who share a common Buddhism faith.



Figure 4 People from different cultural backgrounds participated in special activity in Wat Thai Watanaram (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)

2) Gold Ornamentation at Wat Thai Watanaram

Gold ornamentation is a central feature of Wat Thai Watanaram's artistic expression, reflecting the community's profound religious faith, exquisite craftsmanship, and the strong influence of Burmese and Mon art. Several studies have highlighted the role of gold ornamentation in conveying sacredness, grandeur, and religious symbolism within the context of borderland temples.

Figure 5 Thepphanom (angelic figure) crafted on the holy column at the entrance of the main chamber of Wat Thai Watanaram (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)





2.1 Gold Ornamentation in the Context of Burmese Art

Sombun (2019) notes that the gold ornamentation at Wat Thai Watanaram closely reflects the artistic style of the Mandalay period in Burmese art. This is particularly evident in the application of gold leaf across various temple structures, including the ordination hall, stupas, and Buddha images. Common motifs include floral vines, foliage patterns, and Thepphanom (angelic figures), all of which symbolise cosmological beliefs and celestial realms, in accordance with the Theravāda Buddhist worldview characteristic of Burmese tradition.

2.2. Techniques and Materials in Gold Ornamentation

According to a report by the Department of Religious Affairs (2017), the gold ornamentation at Wat Thai Watanaram employs techniques such as gold-leaf application and colored glass inlay. These techniques extend beyond purely aesthetic purposes; they are intended to elevate the sacred space, imbuing it with a radiance reminiscent of a celestial palace or heavenly realm, in alignment with traditional Buddhist cosmological principles.



Figure 6 Golden ornaments were applied into walls, and interior elements inside the pavilion at the front corridor of the chamber of Wat Thai Watanaram (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)

2.3. Symbolic Meaning of Gold Ornamentation

Jongrak (2012) emphasises that gold ornamentation carries profound symbolic significance. The color gold represents purity, prosperity, and the highest form of merit. Within Buddhist temples, gold decorations reflect the donor's intention to offer their finest contributions to the Buddha and the religious community. Furthermore, such ornamentation functions as a form of “visual merit-making,” inspiring spiritual reflection and devotion among worshippers.

2.4. Gold Ornamentation and the Construction of Borderland Identity

The Office of Culture, Tak Province (2018), highlights the role of gold ornamentation as a tool for expressing artistic and cultural identity within the Mae Sot borderland community. At Wat Thai Watanaram, gold decoration is not merely an application of traditional Burmese art but is adapted and hybridised to align with local Thai aesthetic preferences. For instance, traditional Thai motifs are occasionally combined with Burmese patterns, particularly within the vihara (main chamber). This synthesis produces a form of “hybrid art” that embodies the multicultural character of the border region.

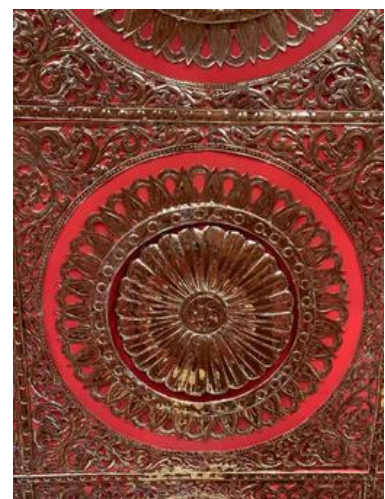


Figure 7 Golden star ornaments were applied into ceilings of the main chamber of Wat Thai Watanaram (Photo taken by Prakrit Nualpao, 2025)



3) Cultural and Religious Significance

3.1 The Temple as a Spiritual Center for the Community

Jongrak (2012) notes that Wat Thai Watanaram serves as a spiritual center for Buddhist communities living along the border—particularly among the Mon, Burmese, and Karen ethnic groups, who, like the Thais, practice Theravada Buddhism. The temple plays a vital role in fostering harmony among diverse ethnicities, acting as a sanctuary and place of emotional refuge for displaced persons and migrants in the region.

3.2. The Temple and the Preservation of Traditions and Culture

According to the Office of Culture, Tak Province (2018), Wat Thai Watanaram plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of local traditions. The temple hosts numerous culturally significant events, including the Tan Khun Khao (New Rice Offering Festival), the Poi Sang Long novice ordination ceremony, and the Mon-style Loy Krathong Festival. These events attract participants from both sides of the Thai–Myanmar border. Through such activities, the temple not only facilitates religious observance, but also contributes to the preservation of ethnic identities and the safeguarding of cultural heritage across generations.

3.3. The Temple as a Multi-Ethnic Cultural Space

Sombun (2019) analyses the role of Wat Thai Watanaram as a multi-ethnic cultural space, where various ethnic communities converge—such as Thai, Mon, Burmese, Karen, and Chinese. This diversity is evident in languages spoken, traditional clothing, cuisine, and religious practices within the temple grounds. Multiple languages, including Thai, Mon, Burmese, and Karen, are used for communication, while the coexistence of diverse ceremonies illustrates the adaptability and inclusiveness of Buddhism within a borderland context.

3.4. The Temple's Role in Shaping Borderland Religious Identity

Netdao (2020) emphasises that Wat Thai Watanaram represents a form of “borderland identity,” conveyed through its Burmese–Mon-inspired architecture, the attire of its monks, and its religious activities, which are influenced by cultural elements from both sides of the Moei River. The temple serves as a bridge between Thai and Myanmar communities, reinforcing not only cross-border relationships but also a shared spiritual and cultural identity. In this way, it serves as a central institution that encapsulates the religious and cultural interconnectedness of the Thai–Myanmar borderland.

4) Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations for Future Studies

In-depth research is needed on the construction techniques and conservation practices associated with the Burmese architectural elements at Wat Thai Watanaram, particularly its gold ornamentation, which carries substantial cultural and artistic significance. Further comparative studies between Wat Thai Watanaram and other temples along the Thai–Myanmar border are recommended to examine stylistic, cultural, and social similarities and differences, thereby supporting more holistic approaches to preservation and cultural understanding. Public participation is another research process to preserve local



wisdom and cultural heritage to maintain unique of architectural legacy of Wat Thai Watanaram.

4.2 Cultural Conservation Collaboration

Collaboration among public and private sectors, including local organisations, should be strengthened to manage and preserve the tangible and intangible cultural heritage represented by unique religious architectures and associated activities. Lifelong learning initiatives should be promoted to enhance public awareness and foster a deeper understanding of local heritage significance, particularly across multicultural communities in border areas, thereby helping to prevent potential conflicts.

4.3 Cross-border Cultural-based Tourism Development

Wat Thai Watanaram has significant potential to become a key cross-border tourist destination, particularly in promoting multicultural tourism in Mae Sot District, Thailand. It is recommended that tourism routes be developed in coordination with other Thai-Myanmar temples in nearby border areas to create an integrated cross-border cultural landscape. Additionally, co-creative local tours could be initiated to support intergenerational participation and empower community-based tourism enterprises.

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