Will Khon Kaen Become "Sinsai City"?
Using an Ancient Lao Epic to Inspire a Modern Thai Municipality

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Abstract
Khon Kaen, a bustling, prosperous city in Thailand's northeast region and the capital of Khon Kaen province, is currently undergoing a housing, hotel, and retail boom as it asserts its increasingly important role as a modern educational and commercial hub and major ASEAN center. Unlike some other major Thai cities, Khon Kaen has never been known as a center of culture, despite being surrounded by rural communities rich in traditional knowledge of local music, art forms, and literature. This in part is due to the fact that it is relatively new, having been founded only a little over two hundred years ago. It is also due to previous disparaging attitudes toward the local ethnic Lao populace by the central Thai government. Several years ago community leaders, led by the mayor, made a concerted effort to find a symbol that would establish the city's identity and inspire its populace. It should be noted that the mayor and his municipal council members are ethnic Sino-Thai descendants of migrants from southern a who married local Isan woman three generations ago.) Working with a group of Khon Kaen University professors of Lao descent and the abbot of a nearby temple (all of ethnic Lao descent), they chose the heroes of the traditional Lao epic Sinsai, an intricate story of both high adventure and ethical teachings. For reasons involving national politics and policies, such a choice would have been unimaginable even as recently as thirty years ago. This paper will explore the collaboration between the major local institutions – governmental, educational, and religious – that made the adoption of Sinsai possible. It will also address the implications of this symbol, its potential impact on the future of Khon Kaen and its people.

Keywords: Sinsai City, Modard Thai Municipality, Ancient Lao Epic

Background
Khon Kaen City, for much of its relatively short history as a provincial capital, was a dusty, nondescript town in a region of Thailand that was of little interest to Bangkok. Its origin goes back to the late 18th century when the leader of a district in what is now Roi Et province came with 300 followers to establish a new community. The site shifted several times and finally settled on the west side of a lake (Bueng Kaen Nakhon), which is now a popular municipal park. Like many places in the Northeast, the city was isolated from Bangkok until the arrival of the railroad in 1942. The construction of schools, a hospital, a technical college, a correctional facility, and a recreational area followed. However, even with the addition of these basic urban amenities, Khon Kaen remained unknown nationally and unimportant to the central government. In fact, the entire Northeast, which came to be known as Isan,¹ was a neglected region that was viewed in Bangkok as backward and politically problematic because of its ethnic Lao population.
As recently as 50 years ago Isan people saw the capital as foreign, distant and daunting, and were intimidated when overbearing government officials came to visit. Furthermore, even 35 years ago the province was suspected of harboring communist sympathizers. Ethnically and linguistically, the upper part of the region is much closer to Laos and the lower part to Cambodia. Even now Isan is the poorest region of the country (if the Malay-Muslim provinces of the south are not considered), and Isan people bear the brunt of social insults (Thak, 2007, 130).

Only in the 1960s did the city start to gain some national attention, when Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat promoted it as a regional administrative center and supported the establishment of Khon Kaen University to spearhead local economic development, health services, and education. Motivated both by fears of local insurgency and the desire to reap as much financial support as he could from the U.S., Sarit was instrumental in garnering substantial amounts of USAID money for infrastructure, especially major road construction. Locally, Sarit, whose mother was from the Northeast, was viewed by some as a native son and advocate for the region, especially for Khon Kaen. A complex character, he cultivated the image of a benevolent father through his rhetoric and his frequent visits to remote villages where he slept in a tent and went about ascertaining the people's needs. At the same time, the seeming ease at which he ordered the summary execution of numerous people (including many from Isan), who were labeled communist because of their outspokenness, earned him the reputation of a tyrant. Sarit served as Prime Minister until 1963 when he died from cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 55, leaving behind a mixed legacy of accomplishment and personal flaws, including womanizing, heavy drinking, and amassing a huge fortune, sometimes estimated at the equivalent of 140 million dollars mostly gained through corruption.

During the next decade both the city and Khon Kaen University grew, as the emphasis on infrastructure development continued with little interest in promoting local culture. The central government's main concern was with instilling a sense of national identity and unity among its citizens; Isan people, like those elsewhere, were expected to conform to customs dictated by Bangkok (Kamala, 1997:5). For much of this time school children not allowed to speak the local language in class, and not surprisingly, spoken and written knowledge of the local dialect was not valued.

The years immediately following Sarit's death were characterized by continued military rule, interrupted by a brief period of democracy from 1973 to 1976, ushered in by two famous student demonstrations calling for democracy. However, military rule was imposed again after a bloody coup in 1976, and many student activists fled from Bangkok to hide in jungles in remote parts of the country, including Isan, sometimes joining local democracy or civil rights movements. For several years the government refocused its efforts on promoting security and national identity, while tracking down those it considered to be communist. In Khon Kaen province some villages were among those termed “sii chomphu” or "pink," (Guthrie, 2007, 174), and the government sent soldiers to maintain political control. In 1979, one of Sarit's protégés, Chamnan Pocchana, was appointed governor with the task of "quell[ing] the insurgency and maintain[ing] stability by reasserting Bangkok's control over the region" (Guthrie, 2007, 174). One of his first acts in this position was to commission the casting of a bronze statue of his former boss to remind local people of Sarit's role as "father of the people during disturbed times" (Guthrie, 2007, 174).

Most of the 1980s were years of reconciliation with General Prem Tinsulanonda, serving as Prime Minister after coming to power in 1981 after averting a political crisis. This decade was also one of both
significant economic growth in Thailand and a reconciliation agreement fostered by Major General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh under which the insurgents were granted amnesty in return for turning in their weapons and swearing allegiance to the government. Yet, the government seems to have sent a mixed message to the people of Khon Kaen, for the Sarit monument, commissioned four years earlier, was finally cast in Bangkok in 1983, twenty years after his death, and set up in front of a city park. Ten years later, Sarit was once again remembered in a series of white plaster bas relief depictions of incidents from his life were erected at the site. Now both the statues and the reliefs are now largely ignored by city residents, despite that fact that Sarit's ashes are interred at the statue's base.

The Region Redefined

Following the end of the Cold War, new ways of viewing mainland Southeast Asia and new attitudes evolved among former adversaries. The governments of Thailand and Lao PDR, after a series of fits and starts punctuated by several border skirmishes, established trade relations that culminated in the opening of the Indo-China Market in 1988. Academic, tourist, and business exchanges soon sprang up along with partnerships and MOUs between educational institutions on both sides of the border. Exchanges included not only commodities but also cultural artifacts and knowledge. Language and ethnic studies programs were created in many universities throughout the country. The first Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River linking Nong Khai with Vientiane was completed in 1992, followed by another in 1997, connecting Mukdahan to Suvannakhet and a third in 2011, linking Nakhon Phanom with Khammouan.

Significantly, the area bordering the Mekong River began to be recognized as a region of ecological, ethnic and cultural diversity as seen in the creation of KKU's Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region and Mekong studies programs at other universities. Diversity was suddenly being valued, as were "local wisdom," including local knowledge, products, crafts, dialects, and customs. Isan and the cultures of its diverse ethnic subgroups began to capture the attention of the Thai Tourism Authority and the growing Thai middle class who had the time and the means to travel. Khon Kaen, as the heart of the Northeast, had become part of many itineraries, but it still lacked an identity, a historic narrative, uniquely scenic location or landmark, cultural symbol, or hero. Apart from Sarit, various motifs, including the khaen (bamboo mouth organ) and a heartwood log, and others have appeared and sometimes still appear around town but none of them, not even the ubiquitous dinosaur, have managed to capture the essence of Khon Kaen.

Khon Kaen Today: Sinsai Appears

By 2006 significant changes were starting to take place that were transforming Khon Kaen into one of Thailand's major urban centers of growth and investment. These changes are manifest now with a spiraling increase in the number of new hotels, housing estates, and apartment buildings. Whereas only three years ago there were fewer than 10 hotels listed on online websites; today there are over 50. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the number of new student residence halls, condominiums, and housing estates. Rice fields are being transformed into housing estates and throughout the city, countless buildings only a few decades old are being demolished to make way for new ones. The main entrance to the city has been redefined by the construction of the Central Plaza shopping mall.
and a new gate and the renovation of the city pillar shrine, making what was once a swamp the most vibrant, upscale part of town.

Moreover, Khon Kaen has finally has adopted a symbol, and even more significant is the fact that the symbol is the Lao epic story *Sinsai*. Its visible manifestation can be seen in sculpted figures of the story's most distinctive character, Siho, a mythical animal that is part-elephant, part-lion (*khotchasi*). Blue and in color, regal in bearing, these figures grace the remodeled city pillar (*lak muang*) shrine, several intersections, and lamp posts all along the broad, brightly-lit boulevard in front of the new Central Plaza mall (see fig. 1).

The adoption of this symbol came about through the collaboration of municipal leaders and Khon Kaen University faculty members along with the influential abbot of a Buddhist monastery on the city's outskirts. About seven years ago the mayor, Mr. Peerapol Pattanaweeradej, one of the city's wealthiest businessmen, then into his second term in office, wanted to promote Khon Kaen as a livable city and instill in its people a sense of civic-mindedness, cohesiveness, and pride in their local heritage. At the same time he was looking for a heroic symbol that would appeal to adolescent boys as an alternative to the bionic super-characters from popular Japanese and Korean media.

Mr. Peerapol's search led him to organize a contest in which residents were invited to submit their ideas. The most appealing entry was a drawing of an archer in a graceful stance, his bow drawn, representing the character *Sinsai*. After consulting members of the city council well-versed in local culture, Mr. Peerapol learned what the story was about, its background, and its multi-faceted potential as a means of achieving his goals.

**The Sinsai Story: What's it all about?**

The *Sinsai* epic has long been one of the favorite tales of the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong River. Formerly, it was recited by monks in their sermons and performed in the local shadow play (Brereton and Somroay, 2009) and in traditional Lao *moh lam* singing. The traditional means of transmission was through palm leaf manuscripts, many of which exist in temple collections and libraries in both Isan and Laos. Throughout Isan the epic is depicted in lively mural paintings on numerous village Buddhist ordination halls (*sim*) dating from the early twentieth century see fig. 2). A classic Lao Buddhist story, *Sinsai* is considered by some to be a treasure house of Buddhist ethics and timeless social values, including justice, honesty, friendliness, concern for others, civic-mindedness, unity, sufficiency, and others. The story most likely grew out of a local oral tradition, passed along through story-telling and monks' sermons. The best known early version was written in the 17th century C.E. in what is now Nong Bua Lamphu province, north of Khon Kaen. A brief summary is found in the appendix, and it essence is presented very briefly below.

*Sinsai* is set in the distant past in the mythical royal city of Pengchan. It is an adventure of family loyalty and jealousy, bravery and cowardice, magic and malice as three brothers seek to rescue their aunt who before their birth had been abducted by a demon (Lao: *nyak*). The story lends itself to visual depiction because the brothers' journey takes them through dense forests where they come upon fantastic vegetation, such as a tree whose fruits are young maidens, and wondrous creatures like the half-bird, half-human *kinnaris*. Moreover, the trio themselves have unusual physical characteristics: *Sinsai* was born holding a sword and bow and arrow, Sang Thong (whose name means "Golden Conch") is a human whose lower body is encased in a shell, and Siho has the body of a lion and the head of an elephant. Each has magical powers of some kind, such as *Sinsai's* super-human
archery skills or Sang Thong's ability to change physical form. Working as a team, they repeatedly defeat their opponents, including the demon, and in the end bring their aunt back to the royal city. Along the way, Sinsai disseminates Buddhist teachings to those he defeats, thus giving the epic the moralistic quality the mayor was seeking.

Deconstructing, Resuscitating, and Disseminating Sinsai

For Sinsai to succeed in representing Khon Kaen, it was essential for Mr. Peerapol to have the support of the Khon Kaen community. By networking through his municipal council members, the mayor met a number of lecturers at Khon Kaen University and the local branch of the national Buddhist university, known as Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University, from the fields of Buddhist history, art, performance, and cultural preservation. One, a retired lecturer who had been born in Isan, studied Buddhism in India, and spent over ten years as a Buddhist monk, had a weekly radio talk show discussing the story and its teachings. Another was writing a dissertation on Sinsai, still another came from a family of traditional moh lam singers. This network also brought the municipal officials into contact with the abbot of a nearby temple, Wat Chaisi, who was using the Sinsai murals on the walls of the ordination hall to teach the story and its principles to young teens. The abbot had already been so successful at promoting Sinsai in the village where the temple is located that the villagers have renamed their streets after characters in it.

The network of Sinsai advocates soon broadened to include academics and performers in neighboring Maha Sarakham province as well as across the border in Laos. In Vientiane the group met with descendants of a highly respected Isan scholar, the late Mahasila Viravong, who had attained a high rank in the Buddhist monkhood, studied with elite Thai intellectuals in Bangkok, before moving to Laos where he produced a prose edition of the epic. There, his descendants have established a group known as the Sinxay Society (the Lao spelling, based on French transliteration) that focuses on the epic as a literary treatise and a source of teachings. Interestingly, Sinsai is also undergoing a revitalization in Lao PDR, where it has long been a part of the secondary school curriculum. A modern rendition of it was performed at the opening ceremony of the 25th Southeast Asian Games in Vientiane in December 2009, featuring Sinsai shooting his arrow to light the torch.

As mentioned earlier, Sinsai now appears in many forms throughout Khon Kaen. The first visible manifestation of the story appeared on the lamp posts, when over 100 figures of the distinctive Siho were erected along Central Plaza. Larger versions of the same sculpture are found at key intersections around town. Gradually, Sinsai and Sang Thong lamp post sculptures appeared on other downtown streets. Meeting rooms in city hall, like the street signs in the Wat Chaisi village of Sawatthi, were renamed after characters and places in the story. In an effort to publicize and explain its background and significance, the city sponsored the publication of several books by local academics on the history and meaning of the Sinsai epic and its depiction in temple murals (see Chob, 2007 and Sowit, 2009).

To reach adolescents – one of the mayor's goals – Sinsai was made the theme of the "Sinsai Games," when the city played host to the province's annual sports competition for secondary schools. In addition, a curriculum featuring the Sinsai story that includes reading and writing units in Thai Nói, a local but obsolete script, has been created as an elective course in the Khon Kaen municipal schools that will be mandatory in 2013. The city has also sponsored the creation of animated versions of the Sinsai story available on CDs and Youtube. This year it has incorporated scenes from the story, based on mural paintings at a nearby Buddhist temple (Wat
Sanuan Wari in Ban Phai district, Khon Kaen province) into bus stop benches in town. The Siho sculptures on the lamp posts are also based on the depiction of Siho at this wat.)

The grandest of all the Sinsai projects so far has been a modern multi-media dramatic version performed in February, 2011 at the newly constructed, chic Central Plaza, currently the most prestigious venue in Khon Kaen. The city organized the gala three-day event in collaboration with faculty members from Khon Kaen University and nearby Maha Sarakham University, Khon Kaen municipal schools, and colleagues in Vientiane. The main feature was a dance-drama by a troupe from Maha Sarakham University with supporting roles by secondary students from Khon Kaen municipal schools. The performance was preceded by the opening of an exhibition of local children's drawings and recitation of verses from Sinsai by teenagers from the Sinsai Society in Vientiane. Sponsors included Central Plaza as well as two dozen local businesses. Significantly, Sinsai was billed not as a Lao epic but as a great work of literature from the Mekong Region, thereby skirting issues of ethnic and national identity.

Apart from the city arena, Sinsai activities have been taking place at Wat Chaisi through collaborations between the abbot and professors at Khon Kaen University. Especially noteworthy is the incorporation of Sinsai into an annual local Buddhist festival, for the past three years. And, in the academic arena, the KKU campus was the venue of a seminar and art exhibition on Sinsai earlier this year. It featured paper presentations by academics from Khon Kaen and Vientiane as well as members of Mahasila Viravong’s family. It ended with an informal concert of traditional Lao music played on the khaen.

Sustainable or Not? Implications for the Future

Will the Sinsai epic continue to thrive in Khon Kaen to the point that it eventually does become its symbol? Or, to use the rhetoric of development, to what extent is it sustainable? Here it may be instructive to examine a somewhat similar, though not parallel, situation in Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand that dates back over 700 years. Formerly the capital of "Lanna" (the kingdom of a million rice fields) that was incorporated into the Thai nation in the early 20th century, it started gaining fame for its culture in 1996, the year of its 700th anniversary.

Several decades earlier, recalls Vithi Panitchpong, a retired Chiang Mai University art professor, "the government did not want people to know about their ethnicity, they wanted a unified, centralized, Thailand." He explained, "it's the policy of the government to teach one country, one flag" (Farrell, 2009). As in Isan, northerners were discouraged from speaking their local dialect. However, ultimately in Chiang Mai, the local Northern Thai language became the focal point of poetry contests and performances, a manuscript conservation project, and signage throughout the Chiang Mai University campus. Gradually the art department taught Chiang Mai people about their origins, reinstated local music, and reinvented local music, dance and costumes, some of which were more elaborate than those of the past. These cultural elements proved to be attractive to Westerners, and, in the words of Vithi, "a market was born, Lanna Inc. suddenly became the most lucrative business in Chiang Mai" (Farrell, 2009).

Khon Kaen appears to be on a similar trajectory, as the music and dance programs of KKU’s Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts have been reinvigorated through the hiring of new music and dance teachers, designing of elegant dance costumes, and re-branding of the Isan musical ensemble as the "Sinsai ensemble." Both the dancers and the musicians have performed abroad to enthusiastic audiences.
Moreover, *Sinsai’s* place in Khon Kaen will most certainly be bolstered by the EU-sponsored, four-year Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalisation Programme (ICMRP) that was inaugurated early this year. Housed in an office at the College of Local Administration (COLA), it has a budget of approximately 540,000 euros. Like the *Sinsai* resurgence, it is built around collaboration, in this case among COLA and four municipalities in Khon Kaen province (Khon Kaen, Muang Phon, Ban Phai, and Chum Phae). The project aims to revitalize both Isan language and cultural forms, including performance and dress. Part of its proposals, in fact, are modeled after those that already exist in Chiang Mai, such as signage in the local language and promoting the wearing of local dress once a week. ICMRP’s COLA creator and project officer, John Draper, a British applied linguist and former English language lecturer at KKU, is hopeful that the long-term effects of the project will transform perceptions of Isan people and their culture both within and outside the region (Draper (2012, 1).

Whether *Sinsai* will do the job it was intended to do remains to be seen. The groundwork is in place, but whether a symbol emanating from an ancient Lao epic can be embraced and held in esteem by an urban Thai populace depends on many factors. The story has already been domesticated and groomed to eliminate the bawdy elements found in traditional local entertainment, such as *moh lam* singing and shadow play, which are rife with sexual innuendoes (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2007). While it has been recast in new forms and media, including cartoon videos and book illustrations that some observers criticize as too "cute" and inauthentic, some of these revisions and updates are probably necessary if the story is to attract a young audience.

Ultimately, *Sinsai* has a good chance of surviving because, unlike earlier symbols, its promotion has been a collaborative effort by elected city officials, local academics, members of the Buddhist monkhood, and the community. Moreover, because of changes in the political climate, a Lao epic has been accepted, domesticated, and billed as a regional literary treasure. The story is still not known to most urban residents, many of whom grew up in other parts of the country, however, so regular activities, such as an annual *Sinsai* fair, will be needed to disseminate it.

Finally, there is the question of how Khon Kaen will be impacted by the opening of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, when the number of people passing through and coming to visit the city will undoubtedly increase dramatically. ASEAN is already promoting tourism, trade, and the region’s diverse products. *Sinsai* might very well succeed in establishing an inspiring native symbol for Khon Kaen that evokes local pride and good will in a way that the heartwood log, the dinosaur and General Sarit were never able to do.

**Appendix: Brief Summary of the Sinsai Story**

Long ago in the royal city of Pengchan there lived a king named Kusalat and his wife, Chantha. The king had a beautiful younger sister named Sumontha who was very dear to him and to all who knew her. One day a *nyak* or ogre named Kumphan, who was endowed with magical powers, transformed his body into that of a giant bird and flew to Pengchan. As he flew over the city, he saw Nang Sumontha walking in the palace garden. He immediately fell in love with her so he captured her and carried her off to his city.

When the king learned what had happened, he decided to go out and look for his beloved sister. Though he searched far and wide, he could not find her. But along the way he acquired seven beautiful wives who joined his first wife in the palace.
Eventually, two of Kusalat’s wives, through the intercession of the god Indra, gave birth to baby boys who were extraordinary in both their form and their magical abilities. One wife gave birth to a child that was part elephant and part lion and was named Siho. The other wife gave birth to twins, a human holding a magical sword and bow who was called Sinsai; and a boy whose lower body was encased in a shell, who was named Sang Thong, meaning the Golden Conch.

Around the same time the other six wives gave birth to sons who were quite ordinary. These six women feared that the sons of Nang Chantha and Nang Lun - A Sanskrit-derived name, created by Bangkok authorities, referring to its location relative to the capital - would become rulers because they had magical powers. Consequently, they conspired to force the king’s fortune teller to tell the king that those three sons would bring bad luck to the city. Phaya Kusalat believed him and had his soldiers force the two women and their three children out of the city.

The mothers and their infant sons settled in the forest where the god Indra made a palace for them replete with everything they needed. By the time Sinsai turned seven, he had already grown wise beyond his years and he used his archery skills to win the loyalty of the garudas (mythical birds) and the nagas (mythical water serpents).

Meanwhile back in Pengchan, the six ordinary sons of Phaya Kusalat were also growing up. The king still missed his younger sister, Nang Sumontha, so he sent the six young men to find her and bring her back to Pengchan.

The six princes went to the forest, where they met Sinsai, Sang Thong and Siho. In talking to each other, the nine princes discovered that they were related. The six ordinary princes were overjoyed and made a plan to trick the others into searching for their aunt so that they could get the credit.

So the nine brothers went into the forest, along the way attacked by numerous fierce beings, including poisonous snakes, nyak, and gigantic elephants, all of which they defeated. The six princes were terrified and hid in the forest.

Sinsai then entered the city of Kumphan, who had gone out to search for food. Sinsai took this opportunity to call on Nang Sumontha and ask her to return to Pengchan. His aunt did not want to return, however, because she had fallen in love with the nyak after having lived with him so long. Just then Kumphan returned and fought with Sinsai, but neither prevailed. Finally with the help of Siho, he was able to defeat the nyak and kill him.

Nang Sumontha then agreed to return with Sinsai, who led her to the city of Pengchan, where she was united with her brother. Sang Thong, Siho, and their mothers returned, too and they all became as happy as they once were.

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1 A Sanskrit-derived name, created by Bangkok authorities, referring to its location relative to the capital.
2 Thak (2007:224) writes that after Sarit’s death, his heirs fought over the division of his huge fortune and his seven children contested his will. The case drew the attention of the media, and it was revealed that he had used government funds to support over a hundred mistresses and invest in over 45 companies. He also had stocks, large bank accounts and "a tremendous amount of land" (Thai, 2007, 224).
3 Interestingly, several initiatives to promote and protect local village temple art and architecture were initiated at Khon Kaen University by academics who were not of Isan-Lao heritage. They include Bangkok native Dr. Vanchai Vatanasapt, who served as university president and
head of the KKU Center for Art and Culture, as well as artist Pairote Samosorn and architect Wiroj Srisuro, both from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south. The three were instrumental in conducting research and publishing two books.

A statue of Nang Thoranee, the earth goddess who witnessed the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment, was also cast at this time and erected at the site of the city pillar. For a discussion, see Guthrie (2007, 174).

Prem was able to negotiate with a branch of the military known as the "Young Turks."

I have seen no explanation as to why it took over three years after the statue was commissioned to have it dedicated. Thak cites the text on the plaque at the base of the statue as "a partial explanation. It reads: 'Thailand's 11th Prime Minister, served from February 9, 1959 to December 8, 1963. [Field Marshal Sarit] was a person who administered the country with bravery, resolution, and firmness that help build stability for the nation. Furthermore, he was the person who initiated the National Economic and Educational Development Plan that permitted every region in the nation to become modernized [charoen] equally. In the Northeast, Khon Kaen province quickly developed and modernized. Therefore, the people and government officials of Khon Kaen joined together to build this monument to commemorate his good deeds. It was not dedicated until on May 31, 1984 in a ceremony officiated by the crown prince on behalf of the King (Thak, 2007, 255-257). 'Thak points out that in the context of Thai beliefs, having the ashes interred would make it spiritually powerful but this does not seem to be the case. One local observer commented that Sarit lost whatever popularity he had in Khon Kaen because "he destroyed the identity of the Northeast and undermined its social integration for the sake of national identity and security." On the other hand, attempts to revive the image of Sarit as a hero continued into the 21st century. In 2001, the Thai newspaper, The Nation, in an opinion piece reported that the provincial education office had recommended commissioning "a booklet commending Sarit as a national leader, which will be supplementary reading for primary-school pupils. "Dictator Sarit's image burnished," The Nation, July 24, 2001, Accessed October 27, 2012). However, the project never took off.

These include apart from various Lao groups, Tai Dam, Phu Tai, Khmer, and others.

Figures of dinosaurs became popular after bones of these ancient reptiles were found in Khon Kaen province, but not in the city, in 1976.

For manuscript collections that include Sinsai in Laos, see (http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/) Accessed October 28, 2012.

In Khon Kaen Wat Chaisi, Wat Sanuan Wari, and Wat Sa Bua Kaeo; in Maha Sarakham, Wat Burapha; in Roi Et, Wat Klang Ming Muang, and Wat Pratu Chai; in Ubon Wat Thung Si Muang; in Nakhon Phanom, Wat Phuttha Sima; and in Loei, Wat Phochai Na Pheung. See Brereton and Somroay, 2010.

The author is usually identified as Thao Pang Kham, a poet during the reign of Phra Chao Suriyawongsa Thammikaratch (1643-1698 C.E., the golden age of Buddhist literature in Laos).

(These fantastic beings are mentioned in the Thai Buddhist cosmological treatise known as the Traiphum or Three Worlds Text, see Reynolds and Reynolds (1982: 291).

This is also true of Phra Lam, the hero of the Lao Rama epic, Pha Lak Pha Lam.

Beings with this form are known as khotchasi.

James Chamberlain, an American linguist anthropologist who has lived in Laos for over 30 years, notes that in Lao SInxay (the Lao spelling) "evolved into a political parable (with Nyak Khoumphanh [Kumphan] portraying the evil Americans) and one of the few pieces of traditional Lao literature to be taught/mentioned in the classroom. Of course no one reads the original anymore, just watered down summaries, or cartoonesque children's books (email communication).

The municipal schools are under the authority of the city rather than the Ministry of Education, and thus have more autonomy in their curriculum. 25 The festival, bun khoa jii, involving offerings of sticky rice, is traditionally held in Isan and Laos on the fullmoon night of the Lao lunar month corresponding to early February, as part of a 12-month tradition of festivals. 26 In some versions of the story, the adversaries decide to make a truce, and Kumphan returns to the royal city as the acknowledged spouse of Nang Sumontha. This is the ending that appeared in the dance-drama performed in Khon Kaen.
References


Dictator Sarit’s image burnished,” The Nation, July 24, 2001,


