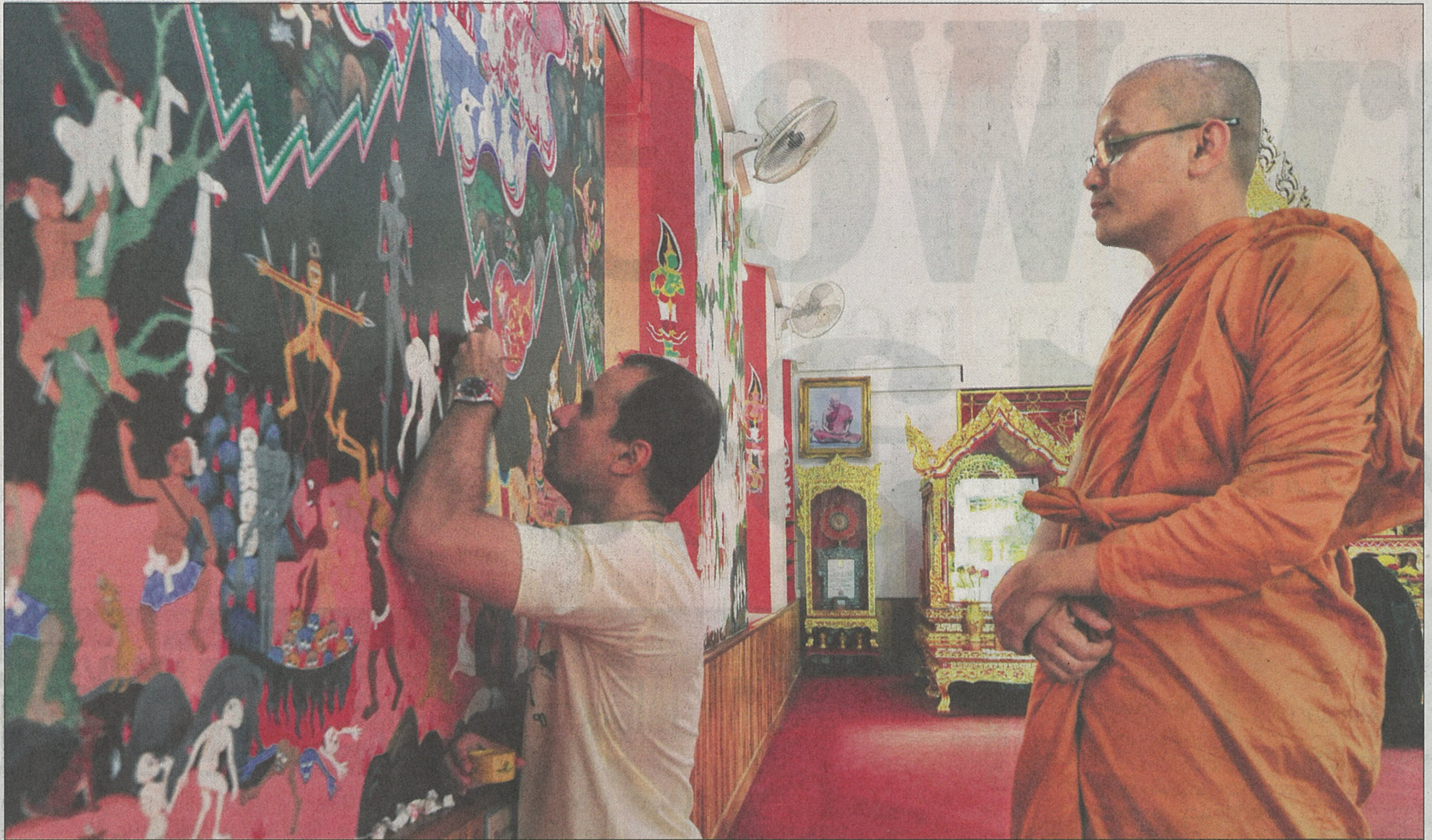


Dr Irving Johnson working on a wall painting in Uttamayanmuni Temple, under the appreciative eye of Abbot Phrakhr Udom Dhammavithes. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



By MELODY ZACCHEUS

INSIDE Uttamayanmuni Temple in Choa Chu Kang, the biggest of six Thai Buddhist temples in Singapore, one man has quietly taken on a project that could span decades.

Associate professor Irving Johnson of the National University of Singapore South-east Asian studies is spending most of the school break at the temple's main shrine, filling its white panels with scenes from religious texts.

It is a dream come true for the 42-year-old Singaporean who worshipped at the temple as a child with his Thai Buddhist mother.

He had spent many an afternoon dreaming about painting the walls to resemble the elaborate murals that adorn the walls of its majestic counterparts in Bangkok.

"I've been trapped in a cycle of work year-to-year. I'm finally fulfilling my dream. There is an intense feeling of satisfaction in seeing colour

# Buddhist values brought to life, artistically

## Murals are anthropologist's labour of love at temple

and stories light up plain cement," he said.

Dr Johnson, who started on the murals in 2012, estimated that it would take 30 years to transform the shrine's 30 or so panels into a rich tapestry of paintings.

Each panel has more than a hundred hand-painted characters, each about the size of a tea cup. It is so detailed the sa-

rons of the upper-class female characters are painted with different patterns.

Such a massive undertaking usually requires a team of 20 skilled Thai artists to complete over a decade.

Dr Johnson has completed two stories from the past lives of Buddha, including the story of the determined prince Mahachanok, who is

saved from a shipwreck by the goddess of the ocean.

The temple could do with this artistic addition, said Abbot Phrakhr Udom Dhammavithes. "Eventually Singaporeans won't have to fly to Thailand to enjoy Thai Buddhist art... it will be right in our own backyard," he said, adding that the murals help convey Buddhist values.

Built in 1963, in a relatively quiet neighbourhood in Hong San Terrace, the temple receives about 5,000 visitors on occasions like Vesak Day.

Dr Johnson, an anthropologist who did O- and A-level art, gets help sometimes from students, worshippers and his mother. They fill in the acrylic base layer of each painting.

The self-taught classical Thai artist then adds in tones, secondary colours and other details such as gold leafing. He has also weaved in modern references: A scene depicting heaven and hell shows Nazi leader Adolf Hitler crushed under a boiling pot of oil.

While his eyesight has worsened since he started painting, Dr Johnson said: "It's not about me. It's about leaving behind a legacy and making the temple even more traditional while enlivening its walls to befit its status as a social gathering place for the Thai and Singaporean community."

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