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Lao Buddhist Role in ASEAN Scenario 2022 A.D.

Author & Corresponding Author*

1. Boonnum Vongkheaw *

Affiliation:

1. Souphanouvong University, Lao PDR

Email: boonnum.vongkheaw@gmail.com

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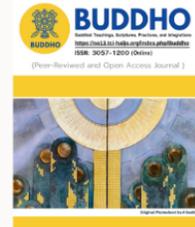


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Lao Buddhist Role in Asian Scenario 2022 A.D.

Boonnum Vongkheaw*

Abstract

Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the cultural, social, and political landscape of Laos. In the context of the Asian scenario in 2022, Lao Buddhism continues to serve as a key force in regional religious diplomacy, socio-economic development, and interfaith dialogue. This study examines the influence of Lao Buddhism within the broader Asian framework, analyzing its contributions to regional Buddhist networks, its responses to contemporary challenges such as globalization and modernization, and its role in fostering peace and cultural preservation. Drawing on historical and contemporary sources, this paper explores how Lao Buddhism maintains its traditional values while adapting to an evolving regional context. The findings highlight the importance of Lao Buddhist institutions in promoting ethical governance, transnational Buddhist cooperation, and sustainable development in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Lao, Buddhist, Role, Asian

Introduction

Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the cultural, social, and political landscapes of Asia for centuries. Among the many Buddhist traditions in the region, Lao Buddhism holds a unique position due to its deep-rooted Theravāda practice, which influences both the religious and secular aspects of Lao society. The role of Lao Buddhism in the Asian scenario in 2022 remains crucial as it continues to foster spiritual values, social cohesion, and diplomatic relations with other Buddhist and non-Buddhist nations. Lao Buddhist institutions and monastic communities have actively engaged in regional discussions on ethical leadership, environmental sustainability, and interfaith dialogues, contributing to a broader understanding of Buddhism's relevance in contemporary times (Skilton, 2021).

As globalization intensifies, the interactions between Lao Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions, particularly those in Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, demonstrate both the resilience and adaptability of religious practices. In addition to its traditional roles in moral

guidance and education, Lao Buddhism has increasingly participated in transnational networks promoting peace, social welfare, and ecological preservation (Gabaude, 2020). Understanding the evolving role of Lao Buddhism in 2022 provides insight into its impact on regional stability and cultural exchange, reinforcing the idea that Buddhism remains a key element in fostering harmony across Asia.

Lao Buddhism and Communism

The relationship between Lao Buddhism and communism is complex, shaped by historical, political, and ideological factors. Since the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, the communist government has maintained a delicate balance between Buddhist traditions and socialist principles. While Buddhism remains a significant cultural and spiritual force in Lao society, the government has exercised control over religious institutions to align them with state policies and national unity (Evans, 2019).

Unlike in other communist countries where religion faced severe suppression, Laos has adopted a more accommodating approach, recognizing Buddhism's influence on national identity and social cohesion. Monks and Buddhist leaders have played roles in promoting socialist ideals, such as community welfare and moral responsibility, aligning Buddhist teachings with the principles of collective progress. However, religious freedoms remain monitored, and any political involvement by monastic communities is restricted to avoid conflicts with state ideology (Stuart-Fox, 2021).

Despite these constraints, Lao Buddhism continues to thrive, adapting to modern socio-political realities while maintaining its spiritual essence. The interaction between Buddhism and communism in Laos highlights the adaptability of religious traditions within state-controlled environments and underscores the enduring significance of Buddhist ethics in shaping national policies and governance.

Lao Buddhism and Significant Roles

In 2022, Lao Buddhism continued to play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering regional cooperation within the ASEAN framework. A notable example is the collaborative effort to restore Wat Longkhoun Srikhounnaram, a significant Buddhist temple in Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Luang Prabang Power Company Limited (LPCL) co-hosted an ancient Kathin ceremony at the temple, emphasizing the importance of cultural preservation and community engagement. This initiative not only aimed at the physical restoration of the temple but also sought to uphold the spiritual values of the local community, reflecting the deep-rooted Buddhist traditions in Laos.

Furthermore, the Tai Puan, a Buddhist Tai-Lao ethnic group, have significantly contributed to the cultural tapestry of Laos. By the 13th century, they had established an independent principality in the Plain of Jars region, which prospered from overland trade in metals and forest products. Their Buddhist heritage continues to influence the region's cultural and spiritual practices, underscoring the integral role of Buddhism in Lao society.

These instances highlight how Lao Buddhist practices and institutions are interwoven with national events, contributing to the country's cultural identity and playing a vital role in both spiritual and societal development.

Lao Buddhist institutions and monastic communities have been actively participating in regional discussions on ethical leadership and environmental sustainability. One notable organization is Lao Buddhism for Development, which collaborates with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) to address environmental concerns, human rights, and conflict resolution across Asia (International Network of Engaged Buddhists, n.d.). This engagement reflects a broader trend among Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia, where monastic leaders integrate traditional teachings with contemporary environmental activism. For instance, Thai Buddhist monks have undertaken environmental stewardship initiatives, demonstrating the potential for religious institutions to influence ecological conservation efforts (Harris, n.d.).

Roles and Action in AESAN Summit in 2022

In 2022, Laos hosted the 17th East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on November 12–13, 2022. The East Asia Summit is an annual meeting of national leaders from the East Asian region and adjoining countries. EAS has evolved as a forum for strategic dialogue and cooperation on political, security, and economic issues of common regional concern and plays an important role in the regional architecture. Buddhism, as the predominant religion in Laos, plays a significant role in shaping the country's cultural and social identity. The Lao government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith, with Buddhism being paramount.

This religious backdrop influences Laos's diplomatic engagements, including its participation in regional summits. During the 17th East Asia Summit, Lao leaders emphasized the importance of cultural and religious ties in fostering regional cooperation. The shared Buddhist heritage among ASEAN member states serves as a foundation for mutual understanding and collaboration. For instance, the cultural exchange between Laos and Vietnam, highlighted by the inauguration of the Bo De Pagoda, underscores the role of Buddhism in strengthening bilateral relations.

Laos participated in the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits held in Cambodia, where significant decisions were made, including granting Timor-Leste official observer status and in-principle approval for ASEAN membership. Laos, as a member state, supported these initiatives, reflecting its commitment to regional integration and cooperation.

Additionally, Laos was involved in the 17th East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on November 12–13, 2022. The summit served as a platform for strategic dialogue on political, security, and economic issues of regional concern, with Laos contributing to discussions aimed at enhancing regional stability and prosperity. While Laos did not host the ASEAN Summit in 2022, it has been actively preparing to chair the ASEAN Summits in 2024. This upcoming role underscores Laos's dedication to advancing ASEAN's goals and fostering collaboration among member states.

In summary, while the 2022 ASEAN Summit was held in Cambodia, Laos's active participation underscored its commitment to regional cooperation. The nation's Buddhist heritage continues to influence its diplomatic actions, fostering unity and collaboration within the ASEAN community. During the 2022 ASEAN Summit, Laos played a supportive role in key decisions and participated in high-level discussions, demonstrating its ongoing commitment to ASEAN's objectives and regional integration efforts.

Conclusion

Lao Buddhism continues to play a vital role in shaping the cultural, social, and diplomatic landscape of Laos and the broader ASEAN region. The interplay between Lao Buddhism and communism demonstrates the adaptability of religious traditions within a state-controlled system, ensuring their continued relevance in shaping national values and policies. In the ASEAN scenario of 2022, Lao Buddhism contributed to regional cooperation through cultural preservation, ethical leadership, environmental sustainability, and interfaith dialogue. Its influence was evident in Laos's active participation in ASEAN summits, where shared Buddhist heritage facilitated diplomatic engagements and strengthened regional ties. As globalization advances, Lao Buddhism remains a cornerstone of national identity and a key player in fostering harmony and cooperation within ASEAN.

Suggestions

1. **Strengthening Regional Buddhist Collaboration** Enhancing cooperation between Lao Buddhist institutions and other ASEAN Buddhist communities can help foster deeper cultural and religious understanding, leading to stronger diplomatic ties.
2. **Promoting Buddhist Environmental Initiatives** Encouraging Buddhist monks and communities to take an active role in ecological conservation can help address environmental challenges in Laos and the broader ASEAN region.
3. **Expanding Educational Outreach** Supporting Buddhist education and ethical leadership programs can equip future generations with the knowledge and values needed to promote peace and social cohesion.
4. **Encouraging Interfaith Dialogue** Establishing more platforms for interfaith discussions can help promote tolerance and mutual understanding among ASEAN member states with diverse religious backgrounds.
5. **Enhancing Digital Engagement** Utilizing digital platforms to spread Buddhist teachings and engage younger generations can ensure the continued relevance of Buddhism in a rapidly changing world.

Body of Knowledge

The study of Lao Buddhism in the ASEAN scenario of 2022 contributes to several academic and practical fields:

1. Religious Studies, provides insights into the resilience and adaptability of Theravāda Buddhism within a socialist governance system.
2. Political Science and International Relations, explores how religious values influence diplomatic relations and regional cooperation within ASEAN.
3. Cultural Studies, examines the role of Buddhism in preserving national identity and cultural heritage in Laos and its impact on regional exchanges.
4. Environmental Studies, highlights Buddhist initiatives in ecological conservation and sustainability, emphasizing the integration of traditional teachings with modern environmental efforts.
5. Social Development, investigates how Buddhist institutions contribute to community welfare, ethical leadership, and social cohesion across Southeast Asia.

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