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### Buddhism in the Lanna Era in the 13th Century

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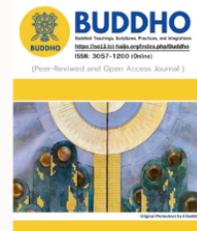


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## Buddhism in the Lanna Era in the 13th Century

Anan Chitawan\*

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### Abstract

This study examines the formative role of Theravāda Buddhism in the emergence and consolidation of the Lanna Kingdom during the thirteenth century. Focusing on the reign of King Mangrai and the foundation of Chiang Mai in 1296 CE, the research analyzes how Buddhism functioned not merely as a religious system but as a structural foundation for political authority, social organization, education, and artistic expression. Drawing upon historical, textual, and art-historical sources, the study demonstrates that the incorporation of Haripunchai's Mon Buddhist heritage and the adoption of the Sri Lankan (Lankavamsa) ordination lineage were decisive in institutionalizing orthodox Theravāda Buddhism in Lanna. The findings reveal that the ideology of dhammarāja legitimized kingship through merit-making, temple patronage, and the protection of the Sangha, while monastic institutions became centers of literacy, scriptural transmission, and ethical formation. The development of Tai Tham script and palm-leaf manuscript culture further localized Buddhist knowledge and reinforced regional identity. Additionally, Lanna's distinctive artistic and architectural forms embodied Buddhist cosmology and expressed the integration of religion with communal life. The study contributes new knowledge by demonstrating that political consolidation and religious institutionalization in Lanna were mutually constitutive processes. Buddhism operated as a comprehensive civilizational framework, structuring governance, education, moral economy, and cultural production. This integrated model of Buddhist statecraft provides important insights into the historical relationship between religion and political authority in mainland Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Lanna Kingdom, Theravāda Buddhism, Dhammarāja, Sangha Institution, Buddhist Kingship

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**Introduction**

The thirteenth century represents a formative period in the political and cultural consolidation of the Lanna Kingdom in the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia. Established by King Mangrai in 1296 CE with the founding of Chiang Mai as its capital, Lanna rapidly emerged as a significant regional polity in what is now northern Thailand (Bankston, 2022; Thailand Travel Bag, n.d.). The consolidation of Lanna authority over surrounding principalities—including the incorporation of the former Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai—was accompanied by the institutionalization of Theravāda Buddhism as the kingdom’s central religious and ideological framework. This process was not merely devotional but structural, shaping governance, social organization, and cultural production.

Buddhism functioned as a foundational pillar in the formation of Lanna statehood. Royal patronage of the Sangha and the construction of temples (*wat*) reinforced political authority while simultaneously embedding religious institutions within the fabric of everyday life. Temples operated as multifaceted institutions: beyond serving as centers of ritual practice, they functioned as sites of education, repositories of manuscripts, venues for dispute resolution, and hubs of communal identity. Through sustained patronage and institutional integration, Theravāda Buddhism became a legitimizing discourse that linked kingship to moral righteousness and cosmic order.

Within Lanna political thought, the monarch was conceptualized as a *dhammarāja*—a ruler whose sovereignty derived not solely from military or hereditary power, but from adherence to and protection of the Buddhist moral order. The adoption of Theravāda traditions influenced by Sukhothai and Sri Lankan lineages further integrated Lanna into broader trans-regional Buddhist networks, facilitating scriptural exchange, monastic reform, and artistic development (Bankston, 2022; Wonglangka, 2024). By the late thirteenth century, the Sangha had assumed a structurally embedded role in Lanna society, serving as educators, legal consultants, ritual specialists, and custodians of ethical norms.

Consequently, Buddhism in Lanna cannot be understood as a peripheral or purely spiritual tradition. Rather, it operated as a civilizational framework that shaped political legitimacy, legal consciousness, artistic expression, and communal life. The integration of Theravāda Buddhism into the institutional and symbolic order of the kingdom laid the foundation for a distinctive Lanna Buddhist culture that would endure in northern Thailand for centuries (Bankston, 2022; Saensa, 2023).

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**Historical Formation of Lanna and the Establishment of Theravāda Buddhism**

The formation of the Lanna Kingdom in the late thirteenth century must be situated within the broader transformation of Tai polities across mainland Southeast Asia. This period was characterized by dynamic shifts in political alliances, expanding regional trade networks, and the circulation of religious ideas, all of which contributed to the emergence of mandala-style polities in the upper Mekong basin. Within this context, King Mangrai (r. 1259–1317) consolidated several Tai principalities and, in 1296 CE, established Chiang Mai as the capital of Lanna. Strategically positioned between Sukhothai to the south, Pagan (Bagan) to the west, and the Mon polity of Haripunchai to the southeast, Lanna occupied a critical geopolitical nexus that enabled sustained political negotiation and cross-cultural exchange (Wyatt, 2003; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017).

A decisive episode in Lanna's consolidation was the conquest of Haripunchai (present-day Lamphun), a prominent Mon Buddhist center with deep historical roots. Prior to Lanna's ascendancy, Haripunchai functioned as an important locus of Theravāda Buddhism, preserving Mon religious traditions, sacred relic cults, and monastic institutions influenced by Dvaravati and Sri Lankan lineages (Skilling, 2009). The annexation of Haripunchai thus represented more than territorial expansion; it entailed the appropriation of established religious prestige and institutional authority. By integrating Haripunchai's monastic infrastructure into the emergent Lanna polity, Mangrai embedded Buddhist institutions within the ideological architecture of kingship. In this way, religious capital became instrumental in legitimizing political authority and fostering a shared regional identity.

The thirteenth century also witnessed the extensive diffusion of Theravāda Buddhism—particularly the Sri Lankan (Lankāvamsa) ordination lineage—throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Reform movements originating in Sri Lanka promoted stricter adherence to the Vinaya and sought to standardize ordination procedures, thereby reinforcing doctrinal and institutional orthodoxy. Emerging Tai polities, including Sukhothai and Lanna, actively pursued affiliation with the prestigious Sri Lankan lineage as a means of enhancing religious legitimacy and aligning themselves with a broader transregional Buddhist ecumene (Skilling, 2009; Swearer, 2010). Lanna's formal adoption of Theravāda Buddhism as the dominant state-supported tradition thus reflected both doctrinal commitment and participation in an expansive network of religious exchange linking Sri Lanka to the Tai world.

The institutionalization of the Sangha in Lanna consequently functioned as both a religious reform and a political strategy. Monastic communities were organized under recognized ordination lineages, Pali scriptural study was promoted, and temples developed into centers of ritual performance, education, manuscript production, and community administration. The consolidation of monastic discipline signaled Lanna's integration into the wider Theravāda

ecumene while simultaneously grounding royal authority in Buddhist moral cosmology. Central to this ideological configuration was the conception of the king as dhammarāja—a righteous ruler who governs in accordance with the Dhamma. This model articulated a reciprocal relationship between royal patronage and monastic legitimacy, wherein the Sangha sanctified kingship and the monarchy sustained the institutional stability of Buddhism (Swearer, 2010).

Accordingly, the historical formation of Lanna and the establishment of Theravāda Buddhism should not be understood as discrete developments but as mutually constitutive processes. Political consolidation facilitated religious institutionalization, while orthodox Theravāda Buddhism provided symbolic, moral, and cosmological capital to the emerging state. By the close of the thirteenth century, Buddhism had become structurally embedded within Lanna's governance, social organization, and cultural production, thereby laying the foundations for a distinctive northern Thai Buddhist civilization that would flourish in subsequent centuries.

### **Buddhism, Kingship, and Monastic Institutions in Lanna**

In the political imagination of the Lanna Kingdom, kingship was inseparable from Buddhist moral cosmology. The ruler was conceived as a dhammarāja—a righteous king who governed in accordance with the Dhamma. This model of kingship, widespread in Theravāda Southeast Asia, provided not merely religious symbolism but a normative framework for political authority. Royal legitimacy rested upon the king's accumulation of merit (*puñña*), his patronage of the Sangha, and his visible commitment to upholding moral order (Swearer, 2010; Wyatt, 2003). In Lanna, this ideology was operationalized through temple construction, relic enshrinement, scriptural sponsorship, and the formal protection of monastic institutions.

The building and restoration of temples (*wat*) and stupas (*chedi*) functioned simultaneously as acts of devotion and declarations of sovereignty. Monumental religious architecture materialized the king's merit and projected his authority across the sacred landscape. The sponsorship of relic shrines in particular reinforced cosmological claims, situating Lanna within the broader Buddhist sacred geography of the Theravāda world (Skilling, 2009). Royal patronage extended beyond architecture to include the copying of Pali scriptures, support for monastic ordination lineages, and the organization of ecclesiastical hierarchies. In this reciprocal relationship, the Sangha provided moral endorsement and ritual legitimacy, while the monarchy ensured material and political protection.

Closely intertwined with this ideology of kingship was the institutional development of monasteries as centers of religious, intellectual, and social life. In Lanna society, temples were not confined to ritual functions; they operated as educational institutions, scriptural libraries, and communal gathering spaces. Monks were custodians of literacy and learning, responsible for teaching Pali canonical texts, meditation practices, ethical precepts, and cosmological

knowledge. Through sermon literature and ritual instruction, they shaped moral consciousness and social norms, embedding Buddhist ethics within customary law and community governance (Swearer, 2010).

The consolidation of monastic education also stimulated literary and scriptural developments. The emergence and refinement of the Tai Tham (Lanna) script were closely connected to the preservation and transmission of Buddhist texts. Palm-leaf manuscripts containing Pali canonical works, commentaries, chronicles, and vernacular sermon literature became central to the intellectual culture of the kingdom. Scriptoria within monasteries facilitated the copying of texts, thereby strengthening doctrinal continuity and linking Lanna to transregional Theravāda networks (Skilling, 2009). The textualization of Buddhism in local scripts not only preserved orthodoxy but also localized religious knowledge, enabling the formation of a distinct northern Thai Buddhist identity.

Thus, the integration of Buddhist kingship and monastic institutionalization created a mutually reinforcing system of religious governance. The king embodied moral sovereignty through merit-making and patronage, while the Sangha institutionalized ethical education and textual transmission across the kingdom. Rather than functioning as separate spheres, monarchy and monasticism constituted a single socio-religious structure in which political authority, intellectual production, and spiritual practice were deeply interwoven. This symbiotic relationship ensured that Buddhism in Lanna was not merely a personal faith but a structural foundation of statecraft, education, and social organization.

### **Art, Architecture, and the Social Embodiment of Buddhism in Lanna**

The consolidation of Theravāda Buddhism in thirteenth-century Lanna found visible expression in the development of distinctive artistic and architectural forms. Religious art was not merely aesthetic; it functioned as a material articulation of cosmology, kingship, and communal identity. Emerging Lanna styles drew upon multiple cultural currents, particularly Mon-Dvaravati traditions inherited from Haripunchai, the refined Buddha image aesthetics of Sukhothai, and architectural influences from Pagan (Bagan) in Upper Burma. Through this synthesis, Lanna gradually developed its own regional idiom within the broader Theravāda artistic world (Swearer, 2010; Woodward, 1997).

Architectural forms such as bell-shaped stupas (*chedi*) reveal clear Mon and Sri Lankan precedents, symbolizing the Buddha's presence through relic enshrinement and representing the cosmic axis (*axis mundi*) of Buddhist cosmology. These stupas were often integrated within monastic compounds that included wooden *vihāra* (assembly halls), ordination halls (*ubosot*), and scripture libraries (*ho trai*). The preference for wooden superstructures, adapted to the ecological environment of northern Thailand, became a hallmark of early Lanna religious architecture. Ornamentation, including multi-tiered roofs and intricate carvings, visually

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reinforced hierarchical cosmological order while simultaneously expressing royal and communal devotion.

Buddha images from this formative period likewise demonstrate both transregional influence and local innovation. Serene facial expressions, elongated forms, and flame-like *uṣṇīṣa* elements reflect Sukhothai stylistic currents, yet Lanna artisans gradually introduced distinctive facial features and proportions that conveyed spiritual composure and meditative inwardness. These images functioned as focal points of merit-making, meditation, and ritual practice, embodying the ideal of awakened kingship and moral perfection. In this sense, religious art in Lanna was didactic as well as devotional: it visually communicated doctrinal ideals and reinforced ethical aspirations within the community.

The architectural and artistic landscape of Lanna was inseparable from the social life of Buddhism. Monasteries were not isolated sacred spaces but dynamic centers of communal activity. Ritual calendars structured agricultural cycles and social rhythms, linking cosmological time with everyday existence. Merit-making festivals, relic celebrations, and communal ordination ceremonies reinforced collective identity while generating religious merit for both individuals and the polity as a whole. These practices created a shared moral economy in which spiritual accumulation and social cohesion were mutually reinforcing (Swearer, 2010).

Ordination, in particular, functioned as both a religious rite and a social institution. Temporary ordination of young men strengthened ties between families and monasteries, reaffirmed communal values, and transmitted ethical norms grounded in the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*). Through sermons, ritual observances, and monastic mediation in local disputes, the Sangha acted as a stabilizing force in village and urban life. Monks were moral exemplars, educators, and advisors whose authority extended beyond the temple compound into the broader sphere of social organization.

Thus, art, architecture, and ritual practice in Lanna must be understood as interconnected dimensions of a single Buddhist civilizational framework. Sacred structures embodied cosmological order; artistic forms visualized doctrinal truths; and communal rituals internalized ethical principles within everyday life. Buddhism in thirteenth-century Lanna was therefore not confined to institutional religion or royal patronage alone, it permeated social memory, cultural production, and collective identity. Through the integration of material culture and lived practice, Lanna emerged as a distinctly northern Theravāda Buddhist society whose artistic and social forms expressed both regional creativity and participation in a wider Southeast Asian Buddhist ecumene.

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## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that the formation of the Lanna Kingdom in the thirteenth century was inseparable from the institutional consolidation of Theravāda Buddhism. The conquest of Haripunchai and the adoption of the Sri Lankan ordination lineage provided religious legitimacy and doctrinal continuity, while the ideology of dhammarāja established a moral framework for kingship. The Sangha functioned not only as a religious community but also as an intellectual and social institution, shaping education, law, literacy, and communal ethics. Moreover, the development of distinctive Lanna artistic and architectural forms reveals how Buddhist cosmology was materialized within the built environment, reinforcing both royal authority and collective identity. The integration of scriptural transmission, monastic education, and ritual life demonstrates that Buddhism in Lanna was structurally embedded in governance and everyday social organization. Therefore, the thirteenth century should be understood not merely as a political founding period but as the establishment of a Buddhist civilizational order in northern Thailand. The legacy of this integration continued to shape regional identity and religious culture for centuries.

## **Suggestions**

### **Suggestions and Implementations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations may be proposed:

1. **Cultural Preservation:** Greater institutional support should be directed toward preserving Tai Tham manuscripts, temple architecture, and local ritual traditions as living expressions of Lanna Buddhist heritage.
  2. **Educational Integration:** Buddhist educational institutions may draw upon the historical Lanna model, integrating ethical training with cultural literacy and community engagement.
  3. **Policy Reflection:** Contemporary discussions on religion and governance in Southeast Asia may benefit from examining the dhammarāja model as a historical example of moral leadership grounded in ethical responsibility.
  4. **Community Development:** Temples can continue to function as centers of social cohesion, mediation, and cultural continuity, reflecting their historical role in Lanna society.
- The study highlights how religious institutions historically contributed to social stability and identity formation—an insight that remains relevant in contemporary multicultural contexts.

### **Body of Knowledge**

This research contributes to Buddhist Studies and Southeast Asian historiography by presenting Lanna not merely as a regional kingdom, but as a model of integrated Buddhist state formation. It advances the concept of Buddhist civilizational integration, demonstrating that religion, governance, art, and education functioned as a mutually reinforcing system rather than discrete institutional domains.

The study reframes Lanna as an example of how Buddhist ethical cosmology shaped political legitimacy, social hierarchy, textual culture, and aesthetic expression. This integrative framework provides a comparative analytical tool for examining other Theravāda polities such as Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lan Xang, and Pagan.

For the broader public, this research emphasizes that Lanna heritage should not be understood solely through architectural monuments, but as a historically embedded ethical-intellectual tradition. Recognition of this integrated Buddhist foundation can strengthen cultural identity, regional pride, and heritage literacy in northern Thailand.

### Future Research Directions

1. Comparative analysis of the dhammarāja ideal across different Theravāda kingdoms.
2. Philological and digital preservation studies of Tai Tham manuscript traditions.
3. The transformation of temple-based education in modern nation-state contexts.
4. The role of Buddhist institutions in contemporary regional identity politics.
5. Postcolonial reinterpretations of Lanna historiography and Buddhist state formation.

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