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Buddhism as Cultural Capital in Thailand

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Abstract

This article examines Buddhism as cultural capital in Thai society, drawing upon sociological and anthropological perspectives on cultural capital. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's tripartite framework embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital—it explores how Buddhism functions historically and contemporarily as a vital resource shaping Thai identity, morality, and institutions. The study illustrates how Buddhist values and practices are embodied in personal habits, objectified in sacred spaces and religious artifacts, and institutionalized in education and governance. It then analyzes contemporary challenges facing Buddhism as cultural capital, including consumerism, digital culture, and globalization. While these forces transform the meanings and practices of Buddhism, they also reveal its adaptability as a living resource that continues to guide cultural continuity and social change. The article concludes that Buddhism remains both a resilient and contested form of cultural capital, whose significance lies in its capacity to balance tradition and innovation in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Buddhism, Cultural Capital, Thailand

Introduction

Buddhism has long been regarded as the cultural foundation of Thai society, shaping not only religious practices but also everyday life, values, and social structures. As the majority religion, embraced by more than 90% of the Thai population, Buddhism has functioned beyond its spiritual dimension to serve as a reservoir of cultural resources that define the nation's identity and collective memory (Phra Dhammapitaka, 1996). In this sense, Buddhism is not merely a system of belief but also a form of cultural capital that provides symbolic power, social legitimacy, and cultural continuity in Thai society (Kaewthep, 2009). Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is beneficial for analyzing this phenomenon. He posited that cultural knowledge,

traditions, and symbolic practices accumulate in society and operate as forms of capital—resources that can be mobilized for social and symbolic advantage. Within the Thai context, Buddhism constitutes such capital, transmitted through rituals, festivals, artistic expressions, moral values, and educational traditions. These practices not only reflect spiritual devotion but also generate cultural legitimacy, reinforce moral norms, and preserve national identity. Despite the forces of globalization, modernization, and the challenges of consumerism and digital culture, Buddhism continues to play a vital role in sustaining Thai cultural capital. It remains a source of ethical reference, social cohesion, and cultural creativity that can be mobilized for contemporary development in education, the creative economy, and community resilience (Keyes, 1994; Tambiah, 1976). This article, therefore, aims to examine the role of Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand by analyzing its mechanisms, dimensions, and significance in shaping and sustaining Thai cultural identity across historical and contemporary contexts.

Cultural Capital in Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

The concept of cultural capital was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s as part of his broader theory of practice. Cultural capital refers to the non-material resources—such as knowledge, skills, education, tastes, and cultural practices—that individuals accumulate and utilize to gain social mobility and recognition within a given society (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike economic capital, which relies on financial resources, cultural capital operates through symbolic systems that grant legitimacy, authority, and social distinction.

From a sociological perspective, cultural capital manifests in three forms:

1. Embodied cultural capital long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, such as manners, worldviews, and values.
2. Objectified cultural capital cultural objects like books, artworks, temples, and artifacts that carry meaning and prestige.
3. Institutionalized cultural capital formal recognition of cultural competence through credentials, titles, or affiliations (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997).

These forms of capital are not merely personal assets but also embedded within social structures, shaping power relations and reinforcing social hierarchies.

From an anthropological perspective, cultural capital is closely related to the study of culture as a system of meanings, symbols, and practices that structure everyday life (Geertz, 1973). Anthropologists highlight how cultural capital is not only transmitted through formal education but also through rituals, traditions, and community practices. Cultural capital thus serves as a mechanism for cultural reproduction, whereby values and norms are passed across generations, sustaining collective identity and cultural continuity (Erickson, 1996).

In combining sociological and anthropological insights, cultural capital can be understood both as a resource that shapes individual life chances and as a collective asset that sustains cultural heritage. This dual perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing Buddhism in Thailand,

where religious knowledge, rituals, and institutions serve simultaneously as symbolic resources for individuals and as cultural wealth for the nation.

Buddhism as Cultural Capital in the Thai Context

When applying Bourdieu's (1986) framework of cultural capital to Thai society, Buddhism can be seen as one of the most significant cultural resources that shapes social values, practices, and identities. The religion operates not only as a spiritual tradition but also as a form of capital embedded in daily life, rituals, art, and institutions. These dimensions can be categorized into embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital.

1. **Embodied Cultural Capital: Buddhist Values and Practices** Bourdieu's notion of embodied cultural capital emphasizes long-lasting dispositions, habits, and skills acquired through socialization. In the Thai context, Buddhism has served as a crucial mechanism for shaping such dispositions across generations. From early childhood, Thai individuals are introduced to Buddhist teachings through family practices, temple activities, and formal schooling. These teachings—centered on the concepts of karma (action and moral causation), mettā (loving-kindness), and sīla (morality)—are not merely abstract doctrines but are embodied as practical guides for everyday living (Keyes, 1993).

2. **Early Socialization and Moral Formation** Embodied Buddhist capital begins within the family, where parents encourage children to pay respect to monks, participate in merit-making rituals, and internalize ethical guidelines such as the Five Precepts (pañcasīla). Such practices instill dispositions of respect for hierarchy, mindfulness of consequences, and compassion toward others. These early experiences form part of what Bourdieu calls habitus: an embodied structure of perception and behavior that shapes how individuals navigate social life (Bourdieu, 1986). In rural settings, especially, children often accompany their families to temple ceremonies, festivals, and communal activities, embedding Buddhist values as part of their collective identity (Ishii, 1986).

3. **Meditation and the Cultivation of Dispositions** Meditation practices, including mindfulness (sati) and insight (vipassanā), also serve as key forms of embodied cultural capital. Meditation not only promotes mental discipline but also shapes individuals' emotional regulation, patience, and ability to focus qualities valued both in religious and secular contexts (McMahan, 2008). In Thailand, meditation retreats have expanded beyond monastic circles to include laypeople, students, and even corporate employees, indicating the flexibility and continued relevance of embodied Buddhist practices in modern society.

4. **Ritual Participation and Social Identity** Participation in rituals such as tham bun (making merit), kathin (robe-offering ceremonies), and ordination rites for young men reinforces communal bonds and personal identity. For instance, temporary ordination remains a significant rite of passage for Thai males, symbolizing moral maturity and social respectability (Cook, 2010). Such embodied experiences confer symbolic capital by associating individuals with moral

legitimacy and social honor. These practices highlight how religious embodiment functions as both personal cultivation and social positioning.

5. **Gendered Dimensions of Embodied Capital** Embodied Buddhist capital also reflects gendered patterns. While men traditionally embody religious capital through ordination and monastic scholarship, women often embody it through devotional practices, temple patronage, and roles in sustaining merit-making rituals (Seeger, 2009). This gendered embodiment demonstrates how Buddhist values and practices are distributed differently yet integrally across Thai society, reinforcing the interdependence of religious habitus within family and community life.

6. **Continuity and Transformation** While traditional forms of embodied Buddhist capital remain strong, modern influences such as consumerism and digital media are transforming how values are embodied. For example, young Thais may engage with Buddhist teachings through smartphone apps or YouTube sermons rather than temple visits. Yet even in these new forms, the embodied capital persists; mindfulness techniques, compassion-oriented practices, and ritual participation remain crucial dispositions shaping personal and social life.

Objectified Cultural Capital: Buddhist Material Culture and Symbolic Power

In Bourdieu's framework, objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods and artifacts that embody symbolic value. Within Thai Buddhism, these include temples, scriptures, sacred images, ritual objects, and artistic expressions. These tangible forms do not merely reflect religious devotion but function as cultural resources that can be mobilized for social legitimacy, aesthetic recognition, and even economic exchange.

1. **Temples as Cultural Centers** Temples (wat) represent the most prominent objectified forms of Buddhist capital in Thailand. They are not only places of worship but also centers of education, community gatherings, and artistic expression (Swearer, 2010). Their architecture—characterized by ornate stupas (chedi), vihāras (assembly halls), and murals depicting Jātaka tales—embody symbolic meanings that link local communities with the cosmological and ethical universe of Buddhism. Temples thus serve as both religious and cultural landmarks, anchoring collective memory and social identity.

2. **Sacred Objects and Amulets** Amulets (phra khruang rang) and statues of the Buddha are perhaps the most widespread objectified forms of Buddhist capital. Amulets function simultaneously as objects of devotion, social markers of prestige, and commodities in religious economies (Tambiah, 1984; Jackson, 1999). They confer symbolic power upon their owners, believed to provide protection, charisma, and fortune. The widespread trade and collection of amulets illustrate how religious symbols circulate within broader social and economic fields, blurring boundaries between faith and commerce.

3. **Texts and Scriptures** Pāli scriptures, commentaries, and Thai vernacular Buddhist texts constitute another form of objectified capital. The preservation and recitation of canonical texts during rituals reinforce communal knowledge and transmit doctrinal legitimacy. Manuscripts and

inscriptions—often housed within monastic libraries—also serve as markers of scholarly and cultural authority (Skilling, 2009). The textual tradition thereby functions as a repository of knowledge, anchoring Buddhism within both local and transnational intellectual networks.

4. Buddhist Art and Cultural Identity

Buddhist art, including sculpture, murals, and ritual music, functions as a symbolic marker of Thai cultural identity. Images of the Buddha are not only devotional objects but also aesthetic representations of spiritual ideals. The replication and circulation of such art forms across Thai society reinforces shared cultural identity, while also serving as a resource for tourism and national branding (Taylor, 2016).

Objectified Buddhist capital, therefore, embodies a dual role: it sustains spiritual and cultural meanings while also participating in political, economic, and global circuits. These objects anchor Buddhism materially in Thai society, offering tangible symbols that mediate between the sacred and the secular.

Institutionalized Cultural Capital: Authority, Education, and State Legitimacy

Institutionalized cultural capital, in Bourdieu's sense, refers to recognized forms of cultural value legitimized by institutions—such as educational systems, bureaucracies, and legal frameworks. Thai Buddhism has historically been institutionalized in multiple ways, providing enduring legitimacy to both religious and political structures.

1. Monastic Education and Literacy Historically, Buddhist monasteries functioned as the primary institutions of literacy and education in Thailand. Monks provided instruction in reading, writing, and Buddhist teachings to young boys, embedding Buddhist values into the very structure of knowledge transmission (Ishii, 1986). This educational role institutionalized Buddhism as a gatekeeper of cultural knowledge and social mobility. Even today, monastic schools continue to provide alternative education for underprivileged children, extending the reach of institutionalized Buddhist capital.

2. The Sangha as an Institution The Sangha the monastic community represents a highly organized and institutionalized form of Buddhist authority. Governed by hierarchical structures such as the Supreme Sangha Council, the Sangha functions as both a religious authority and a political actor, closely linked with the Thai state (Taylor, 2016). State recognition of the Sangha reinforces its institutionalized legitimacy, while also subjecting it to regulation and reform. The Sangha thus embodies institutionalized capital by monopolizing religious authority and shaping national identity.

3. Buddhism and the Thai State Buddhism's institutionalization extends beyond the Sangha into the Thai state apparatus. The monarchy has historically positioned itself as a patron of Buddhism, reinforcing the symbolic legitimacy of both religion and kingship (Tambiah, 1976). The state's endorsement of Buddhism as the de facto national religion provides legal and political recognition, embedding Buddhist authority within national identity and statecraft. National

holidays, public rituals, and constitutional references to Buddhism reinforce its institutionalized position.

4. Institutionalized Buddhism in Global Contexts In recent decades, institutionalized Buddhism has also taken transnational forms. Thai Buddhist organizations have established international temples, meditation centers, and missionary networks, extending institutional authority abroad (McDaniel, 2011). This global institutionalization reinforces Thailand’s image as a guardian of Theravāda tradition while contributing to the international prestige of Thai Buddhism.

Institutionalized Buddhist capital thus operates at multiple levels—local, national, and global. It legitimizes authority, sustains educational functions, and reinforces national identity, while simultaneously adapting to new global and political contexts.

Contemporary Analysis: Buddhism as Cultural Capital in the Age of Consumerism, Digital Culture, and Globalization

While Buddhism has historically served as a profound source of cultural capital in Thai society, the forces of modernity—particularly consumerism, digital culture, and globalization—have reshaped its manifestations and relevance. These dynamics simultaneously challenge and redefine how Buddhism functions as embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital.

1. Buddhism and Consumerism In contemporary Thailand, Buddhism has increasingly intersected with consumerist practices. Religious rituals, amulets, and sacred objects are often commodified, transforming objectified cultural capital into items of exchange within market economies (Jackson, 1999). Temples market meditation courses to urban professionals seeking stress relief, while “merit-making” has at times been framed in transactional terms, where donations are linked to expectations of karmic returns (Kitiarsa, 2005). Although critics argue that this commodification undermines spiritual authenticity, it also demonstrates Buddhism’s adaptability, as it remains relevant in consumer-driven societies by integrating into new economic frameworks.

2. Buddhism and Digital Culture The digital era has profoundly altered the transmission and embodiment of Buddhist cultural capital. Online sermons, live-streamed meditation sessions, and the proliferation of Buddhist teachings on social media platforms allow individuals to access religious practices beyond traditional temple settings (McDaniel, 2017). This digital mediation democratizes access, particularly for younger generations who are more digitally native, thereby reconstituting embodied cultural capital in new ways. At the same time, digital Buddhism creates new tensions: while it expands access, it also risks superficial engagement, where religious teachings are consumed as fragments within fast-paced digital environments.

3. Buddhism and Globalization Globalization has opened Thai Buddhism to transnational flows of ideas, practices, and influences. The exportation of Theravāda meditation traditions—particularly Vipassanā and mindfulness—into global contexts exemplifies the institutionalization of Buddhist cultural capital on an international scale (Wilson, 2014). Conversely, global religious

pluralism and secular values challenge the centrality of Buddhism within Thai identity. Younger Thais, influenced by global discourses of individualism and rationalism, often re-interpret Buddhist practices less as religious obligations and more as personal, psychological, or cultural resources (Cassaniti & Luhrmann, 2011).

4. Challenges and Opportunities Taken together, these forces both destabilize and invigorate Buddhism as cultural capital. Consumerism risks reducing Buddhism to commodified symbols; digital culture can dilute depth in favor of accessibility; and globalization can erode traditional authority while simultaneously elevating Buddhism's global prestige. The key challenge lies in negotiating these shifts while preserving the depth of Buddhist teachings. Yet these developments also present opportunities for Buddhism to continue serving as an adaptable reservoir of cultural capital—one that evolves alongside Thailand's changing socio-cultural landscape.

Conclusion

This study has examined Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand through the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's typology of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. The analysis demonstrates that Buddhism has long functioned as a foundational cultural resource shaping Thai moral dispositions, social practices, symbolic systems, and institutional legitimacy. As embodied cultural capital, Buddhist teachings and practices cultivate ethical habitus that guide everyday behavior, social relationships, and emotional discipline. As objectified cultural capital, temples, sacred objects, scriptures, and artistic expressions materialize Buddhist values and anchor collective memory, identity, and symbolic authority. As institutionalized cultural capital, monastic education, Sangha governance, and state patronage reinforce Buddhism's enduring influence within educational, political, and national frameworks.

The findings further reveal that Buddhism as cultural capital is neither static nor immune to contemporary social transformations. Consumerism, digital culture, and globalization have reshaped how Buddhist meanings are produced, circulated, and embodied in Thai society. While commodification and digital mediation raise concerns about superficial engagement and the erosion of doctrinal depth, these processes also illustrate Buddhism's adaptability as a living cultural resource. Globalization, in particular, has both challenged Buddhism's centrality within national identity and enhanced its transnational visibility through the global dissemination of meditation and mindfulness practices.

Overall, the study underscores that Buddhism remains a resilient yet contested form of cultural capital in Thailand. Its continued relevance depends on its ability to negotiate tensions between tradition and innovation, sacred meaning and market forces, institutional authority and individual interpretation. Recognizing Buddhism as a dynamic cultural resource rather than a fixed heritage allows for a more nuanced understanding of its role in sustaining Thai cultural identity while responding creatively to contemporary social change.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

1. **Cultural and Educational Policy** Educational institutions and policymakers should integrate Buddhist ethical principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and moral responsibility into curricula in ways that emphasize critical reflection rather than rote ritualism. This approach can strengthen embodied cultural capital while remaining compatible with pluralistic and modern educational frameworks.

2. **Temple and Community Engagement** Buddhist temples should be supported as cultural centers that balance spiritual functions with community education, social welfare, and cultural preservation. Programs that encourage intergenerational participation can help sustain Buddhist cultural capital amid rapid social change.

3. **Responsible Use of Digital Media** Religious institutions and educators should adopt digital platforms strategically to disseminate Buddhist teachings while maintaining doctrinal depth and ethical integrity. Digital content should complement, rather than replace, experiential learning and communal practice.

4. **Cultural Economy and Tourism** Policymakers and cultural practitioners should promote Buddhist heritage within the creative economy and tourism sector in ethically responsible ways that avoid excessive commodification and respect the spiritual significance of religious symbols and sites.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. **Comparative Studies** Future research could compare Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand with its role in other Theravāda or Mahāyāna societies to identify similarities and divergences in institutionalization, embodiment, and global adaptation.

2. **Generational Perspectives** Empirical studies focusing on younger generations could provide deeper insights into how digital culture and globalization reshape embodied Buddhist capital, moral identity, and religious engagement.

3. **Gender and Power Dynamics** Further research could examine gendered distributions of Buddhist cultural capital, particularly the roles of women in sustaining religious practices, merit-making economies, and community networks.

4. **Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Approaches** While this study is primarily theoretical and qualitative, future research could incorporate surveys, interviews, or ethnographic methods to assess how Buddhism functions as cultural capital across different social classes and regions in Thailand.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research findings or the interpretation of the results presented in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on theoretical analysis and secondary sources. No human participants, personal data, or sensitive information were directly involved. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic standards of integrity, transparency, and scholarly responsibility.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any situation in which an author's financial, institutional, or personal relationships could inappropriately influence or be perceived to influence the research process, interpretation of data, or presentation of findings. The authors confirm that no such conflicts of interest exist in relation to this study.

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