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Political Evolution and Buddhist Adaptations: Exploring the Legacy of 19th-century Reforms in Thailand and Western

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Political Evolution and Buddhist Adaptations: Exploring the Legacy of 19th-century Reforms in Thailand and Western

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Abstract

The 19th century marked a significant juncture in the political evolution of Thailand, then known as Siam, characterized by encounters with Western powers and internal reforms under successive monarchs. This era witnessed a confluence of cultural and political dynamics, shaping the trajectory of Thai society. By examining the comparative approaches to cultural and political reform, specifically through the lenses of Buddhist and Western ideologies, this research aims to shed light on the complexities of governance and identity in 19th-century Thailand.

Keywords: Western Concept; Political Science

Introduction

The 19th century marked a pivotal period in the political evolution of Thailand, then known as Siam, as it navigated through diplomatic challenges and internal reforms. With the passing of King Rama I, Thailand embarked on a new era characterized by encounters with Western powers and internal transformations under subsequent monarchs (Haidt, Jonathan, & Craig Joseph, 2004). This period witnessed a confluence of cultural and political dynamics, shaping the trajectory of Thai society. In 1821, the signing of the Burney Treaty with Britain underscored Siam's engagement with Western powers, setting the stage for a series of diplomatic interactions. However, this era was not without internal strife, as evidenced by the Lao uprising in 1826 instigated by Anouvong of Vientiane (Hwa, 1971), which led to significant demographic shifts in the region. Despite conflicts with neighboring Vietnam, Siam managed to maintain its hegemonic position over Cambodia, fostering economic growth amidst geopolitical tensions.

The ascension of King Chulalongkorn in 1868 heralded a period of significant reforms aimed at modernizing the Thai state. Chulalongkorn's centralization efforts, establishment of governmental structures such as the privy council, and abolition of slavery and the corvée system marked a profound departure from traditional governance practices. However, these reforms were not without challenges, as exemplified by the Front Palace catastrophe of 1874,

which underscored the resistance to change within Thai society. The late 19th century also saw Siam assert its sovereignty in the face of colonial encroachment, notably resisting French claims over Laotian territory east of the Mekong River. This assertiveness ensured Siam's status as the only nation in Southeast Asia to retain its independence, albeit amidst ongoing renegotiations of unequal treaties with Western powers (Wyatt, 2013: 253-258).

Against this backdrop of political upheaval and diplomatic maneuvering, cultural influences played a significant role in shaping Thai society. The integration of Buddhist principles into governance, alongside encounters with Western ideas, posed both opportunities and challenges for the Thai state. The juxtaposition of Buddhist and Western approaches to cultural and political reform during this period offers valuable insights into the complexities of Thailand's historical development (Wyatt, 2013). As we delve deeper into this comparative analysis, we aim to unravel the interplay between cultural traditions and external influences, shedding light on the dynamic processes that shaped Thailand's socio-political landscape in the 19th century. By examining the divergent trajectories of Buddhist and Western approaches to reform, we can glean valuable lessons for understanding the complexities of governance and identity in contemporary Thailand and beyond. The study scope on the gaps of study as Cultural Intersections, Impact of Western Encounters, Reform Implementation and Resistance, and Contemporary Relevance.

Objective

The objective of this study aims to unravel the interplay between cultural traditions and external influences, shedding light on the dynamic processes that shaped Thailand's socio-political landscape in the 19th century.

Cultural Intersections

The Palace Revolt of 1912 was an attempt by Western-educated military officers to overthrow the Siamese monarchy, yet it ultimately failed. King Vajiravudh, reigning from 1910 to 1925, responded with extensive propaganda advocating for the concept of a unified Thai nation. Despite the unrest, Siam's participation in the First World War as a member of the Allied forces in 1917 led to its participation in the Paris Peace Conference, resulting in significant concessions including independence from extraterritorial jurisdiction and taxes, and the revocation of extraterritoriality (Wyatt, 2013: 371-373).

The relationship between Thai Buddhism and ongoing political liberalization presents an intriguing case study. While Theravada Buddhism seemingly aligns with modern democratic principles due to its ethical core, it has been overshadowed by superstitious practices and an excessive focus on merit accumulation. Despite the fundamental principles encouraging equality and opposing hierarchy, Thai Buddhism has become rigid, resisting comprehensive reform amidst significant political changes over the past three decades (Ian Harris, 1999; Keyes, 1989: 121-142).

Understanding the intricate interaction between Buddhist orders and political structures in Thailand requires insight into its historiography. Thailand's avoidance of formal

Western colonization is often attributed to strategic maneuvers by Siamese monarchs. However, evidence suggests Siam faced colonial pressures in the 19th century, with modernization efforts under Chakri monarchs resembling those of colonial administrators, resulting in the integration of the Buddhist sangha into a political structure reflecting elements of internal colonialism (Benedict R., 1978).

The shift in political order in 1932 marked the end of absolute monarchy, yet Thailand continued to be influenced by a "modernized" Buddhist sangha under a regime marked by alternating military rule and brief periods of electoral politics. Despite the gradual institutionalization of electoral politics in the 1980s and 1990s, Thai Buddhism remains intertwined with earlier political institutions, hindering its adaptation to more pluralistic and liberal politics since the 1970s, highlighting the role of Buddhist orders as the state's collaborators (Ithaca, 1981). Despite the formal institutions comprising the Thai Sangha, the institution lacks the unity it appears to have. In reality, different monks and abbots exercise significant autonomy in their daily activities. While many monks engage in society-oriented activism, focusing on community development, traditional medicine, conservation, and moral teaching, there remains a substantial proportion dedicated to state involvement. Additionally, a robust tradition of forest monks, devoted to meditation and simplicity, persists. However, the Thai Buddhist sangha as a whole struggle to adapt to Thailand's rapidly changing culture and economy (Taylor, 1993).

Despite this, Buddhist thought played a relatively minor role in the political developments post-1973, with little input from the orthodox sangha. Thai politics shifted towards pluralism and liberalism, forbidding monks from radical demonstrations or openly criticizing the political order. Any monk involvement in such activities was publicly condemned. However, the monastic community's support for conservative ideals remained unquestioned. The sangha lacked the resources to thrive in a more transparent political regime with a robust civil society, as governmental and non-governmental groups assumed communal functions previously held by monks. Moreover, the business dealings of temples faced closer scrutiny from the media (Sanitsuda Ekachai, 2001).

Historically, temples provided young men, especially from disadvantaged families, with opportunities for education and improved livelihoods through the monastic order. While monks in Thailand are prohibited from handling cash, they earn considerable income through services like blessings and selling religious items. However, this financial incentive risks skewing monks' goals and contributing to disciplinary violations. Moreover, the decline in rural populations makes it challenging for temples to sustain sizable monastic communities, leading to a loss of faith in the sangha and decreased participation in religious activities (Sanitsuda Ekachai, 2001).

As a consequence, traditional Theravada Buddhism faces persistent strain, leading to a defensive mindset and a sense of being under attack among the sangha leadership. Renowned historian Nithi Aeusriwongse argues for major structural restructuring of the sangha, advocating for the restoration of temples to their historical roles as educational centers operated with active community participation. However, successive Thai governments since 1962 have shown no interest in repealing the 1962 Sangha Act for legislative reform (Nithi Aesurivongse, 1993). Any such reform would likely trigger a backlash

from conservative forces, leaving Buddhist practice in Thailand primarily confined to private homes.

Interactions on an official level among monks from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma are relatively limited, with exceptions such as a few monks maintaining personal relationships across borders. The Thai military reacted strongly in 1989 when nine Thai monks traveled to Laos, viewing it as a risk to national security. Regional conferences of Buddhist clergy, sponsored by international organizations, tend to focus more on social concerns than purely religious topics, but only a small subset of the Thai sangha with a socially engaged and internationalist perspective typically attends these gatherings.

Historically, Buddhism has been viewed by the Thai people as a source of national identity. The writings of Buddhadasa, born in 1906 and passing away in 1993, have had a significant impact beyond Thailand. Buddhadasa emphasized the separation of essential Buddhist teachings (dharma) from superstitious beliefs like fate (kharma), aiming to free Thai Buddhism from cultural traditions. He envisioned Buddhism as a universalist religion accessible to all, regardless of nationality, without assigning any special significance to Asia or an Asian Buddhist identity (Suwant to). Since Buddhadasa's passing, Pra Dhammadipok (Prayudh Payutto) has emerged as Thailand's most distinguished scholar-monk.

Dhammadipok, recipient of the UNESCO prize for peace education in 1994, is more closely associated with establishment views compared to Phuttathat, with a less universalistic perspective. Several of Dhammadipok's publications include the word "Thai" in their titles, emphasizing the beneficial aspects of Thai Buddhism while contrasting them with negative aspects of other civilizations, especially Western society. As discourse in business and management studies challenges assertions of Thailand's culturally unique national character, an alternative "universalism" based on market philosophy has emerged. Dhammadipok has criticized the implementation of ideas like "globalization" and "reengineering" in Thailand, arguing that while commentators emphasize the positive aspects of globalization, negative consequences such as environmental degradation and intense business competition are overlooked (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1987). He also opposes the concept of reengineering, viewing it as a means to intensify corporate rivalry.

Dhammadipok believes that Western civilization's misconception of human superiority over nature, derived from Greek culture, has led to environmental degradation and human suffering. He aims to safeguard the religious particularism of Thai Buddhism from secular and quasi-universal threats posed by Western commercial culture, opposing secularism and cultural homogenization on multiple fronts. His thinking reflects the limited engagement of mainstream Thai Buddhist thought with liberal ideas, consistently aligning his principles with a conservative and nationalist agenda, representing the traditional sangha with his advocacy.

Thai Buddhism, in conveying ideas to the outside world, may present a deceptive image. While religious tolerance is lauded, it is not widely practiced, with a rigid hierarchy among senior monks leading to continuous competition for titles and rankings. Charles Taylor's elucidation of the concept of "civil society" reflects hopes to establish autonomous social structures free from state tutelage, as seen in movements like Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980s (Taylor, 1990: 95), amidst the prevailing Western perspective aiming to create areas of freedom within Leninist dictatorships (Nattaya Chetchotiros, 1995).

According to this perspective, the eventual overthrow of dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe was facilitated by the establishment of civil society, characterized as an arena of independent associational activity free from state interference. Civil society, viewed both in the Marxist sense of nongovernmental private economic activities and in the European liberal sense of "political society," began to reemerge amidst economic reforms in the 1980s (Yang, 1989: 59; Solinger, 1991: 1-5, 26-30). Transactions between economic corporate groups increasingly occurred without hierarchical administrative mediation, enhancing horizontal integration within civil society and distancing it from the state (Yang, 1989: 59).

The emergence of organizations like the Institute for the Study of the Development of Agricultural Economy and the Beijing Stone Group Corporation, masquerading as independent voices for society, signaled the purported revival of civil society. However, this revival fell short of the public sphere envisioned by Jurgen Habermas, characterized by free discussion of broad interests and viewpoints by citizens (Habermas, 1991: 398). While Habermas's idealized public sphere aligns with the liberal view of civil society, it remains distant from social reality, according to Philip Huang (Huang, 1991: 320-321), but central to understanding the origins of democracy.

The political culture of the West is rooted in three fundamental experiences: constraints on government power, separation of government from religious and economic/scientific institutions, and public engagement in democratic processes, with a hierarchy among these elements. Limited government, capitalism, and democracy are seen as interdependent, although inconsistencies and conflicts persist within these Western beliefs. European history demonstrates how the rivalry among princes enabled subjects to escape control, leading to relatively secure property rights and the emergence of urban autonomy (Collins, 1986: 42).

The dispersion of political authority in Europe fostered secure property rights, incentivizing labor and allowing for cultural unity amidst political fragmentation. This environment laid the groundwork for representative councils and parliaments, paving the way for increased political participation.

There are no such thing as secure property rights for the productive stratum of society so long as the government is not constrained in its authority to act capriciously. There are not many incentives to create, specialize according to one's comparative advantage, or trade if producers and merchants do not have property rights. It is impossible to avoid economic stagnation if property rights are not protected to some degree, since this has been the fate of Buddhist civilizations throughout history. However, the importance of minimal government cannot be overstated for another reason. It seems conceivable that inventions will be stifled by unrestrained governance. In a Europe that was divided and fractured, local rulers had the ability to stifle innovation and advancement inside their principality or kingdom; however, this is no longer the case. Even in the worst case scenario, nations the size of England, France, or Spain have the potential to be considered European creative. In addition, migration and refugees fleeing political or religious repression, famine, and other forms of oppression helped to disseminate innovations over a significant portion of Europe.

Another reason why the Reformation and the spread of Protestantism were significant for the development of European civilizations is because of their emphasis on individual conscience. The primacy of the person in the relationship between God and believers was

discounted by many Protestant churches, who instead placed an emphasis on the primacy of individual responsibility and consciences, or even on the priesthood of each individual believer. These concepts made their way to Britain and North America earlier and to a larger extent than they did too much of the rest of Continental Europe. It does not appear to be a case of simple accident that countries descended from the Anglo-Saxons were among the first to usher in the Industrial Revolution as well as the spread of democratic concepts and institutions (Ostrom, Elinor & Vincent Ostrom, 2004). If an individual is directly accountable to God for their actions. If all believers are equal before him or equally at his mercy, then individual initiative as a restriction of worldly power and priestly authority is strengthened. Additionally, people were better equipped for subsequent forms of democratic government by the influence of covenantal theologies and self-governing congregations.

Conclusion

This study has examined the comparison between the Buddhist approach and the Western approach in political sciences through two principal dimensions: the ethics of political repression and the culture of political reform. The analysis demonstrates that both traditions possess distinct philosophical foundations shaped by historical, theological, and cultural contexts.

The Buddhist political tradition, particularly within Theravada contexts such as Thailand, emphasizes moral governance, righteous leadership, and ethical self-cultivation. Rooted in canonical texts such as the Vinaya Pitaka, Buddhist political thought places strong emphasis on discipline, moral responsibility, and the exemplary role of monastic communities. In Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism significantly influences political culture, religion remains intertwined with state legitimacy, especially through constitutional recognition of the monarch as a Buddhist. While Buddhist teachings promote tolerance, compassion, and individual moral development—values compatible with democratic principles—the institutional structure of Thai Buddhism has shown rigidity amid rapid political transformation.

In contrast, Western political approaches are grounded in traditions of liberal democracy, human rights, secularism, and institutional checks on power. Thinkers such as Larry Diamond have emphasized the role of political culture, including religion, in shaping democratic development. Western political systems evolved through the limitation of centralized authority, particularly in response to authoritarian regimes and ideological conflicts such as Soviet socialism. This historical trajectory contributed to strong institutional frameworks aimed at safeguarding competition, rights, and accountability.

The comparison reveals that while Buddhism and Western political thought differ in theological orientation and institutional design, both contain ethical foundations that can support democratic governance. However, tensions arise when traditional religious structures encounter modern political liberalization. The Thai case illustrates that compatibility between Buddhism and democracy depends not only on doctrine but also on institutional reform and cultural adaptation.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

1. Buddhist institutions, particularly in Thailand, should consider reforms that enhance transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness while remaining faithful to core teachings. Modern administrative frameworks can coexist with traditional ethical values.
2. Governments influenced by Buddhist traditions should emphasize moral education for political leaders, integrating principles such as compassion (*karuṇā*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and ethical governance into public service training.
3. Structured dialogue between Buddhist monastic communities and democratic policymakers can bridge the gap between religious ethics and liberal democratic values.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future research could conduct empirical case studies comparing Buddhist-majority democracies (e.g., Thailand, Sri Lanka) with Western democracies to assess measurable impacts of religious culture on democratic consolidation.
2. Further investigation is needed into how monastic institutions can actively contribute to democratization without compromising spiritual authority.
3. Scholars may explore how constitutional frameworks can integrate Buddhist ethical principles without establishing religious dominance.
4. Future studies could examine how Buddhist and Western ethical frameworks respond to emerging global challenges such as populism, nationalism, and declining trust in institutions.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no competing financial interests, personal relationships, institutional affiliations, or professional engagements that could have influenced the research, interpretation, or presentation of the findings in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the highest standards of academic integrity, transparency, and scholarly responsibility. The study is based on historical analysis, textual interpretation, and review of secondary academic sources concerning 19th-century political reforms in Thailand (Siam) and their interaction with Buddhist institutions and Western political thought. As the study does not involve human participants, surveys, interviews, experimental procedures, or animal subjects, formal informed consent procedures were not required. No personal data were collected, stored, or analyzed. The research relies exclusively on publicly available historical records, scholarly literature, and documented political and religious developments. All sources have been cited appropriately to ensure intellectual honesty and to avoid

plagiarism or misrepresentation. The author has taken care to present interpretations of Thai Buddhist institutions, Western political philosophy, and historical political events with academic neutrality and respect for cultural and religious sensitivities. The study does not involve animals and therefore does not require compliance with animal welfare regulations.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest arises when an author's financial, personal, academic, religious, or political affiliations could reasonably be perceived as influencing the objectivity, interpretation, or presentation of research findings. Such conflicts may include financial sponsorship, institutional pressure, advisory roles, political engagement, or ideological commitments that may bias scholarly judgment. The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose. The research findings and conclusions are presented independently and are based solely on academic analysis and documented historical sources.

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