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

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## Academic Review Articles

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

Nongluk Phanthanaphruet\*

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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 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.

### **Part 1: 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 struggles 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 Aesuriwongse 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.

## **Summary**

The comparison between the Buddhist approach and the Western approach in political sciences is based on ethics and culture. This comparison takes place through two major dimensions: the Ethical of Political Repression Comparison Buddhist and Western Approaches and the Cultural of Political Reform Comparison Buddhist and Western Approaches. Both of these comparisons are analyzed in detail below. This occurred roughly around the same time as the

founding of Hindu political traditions. During the same time period as the Middle Ages were developing in Europe, the concept of righteous monarchy was developing in South and Southeast Asia. Monks are seen as role models for how laypeople should conduct themselves in Theravada Buddhist traditions. This is partially due to the monks' otherworldly ambitions (lokiya), but it also has a lot to do with the fact that the standardized discourse on ethics can be found in the monastic standards known as the Vinaya Pitaka. This book is also known as the Pali Canon. Political ideas that are prevalent in Western culture, such as democracy, pacifism, human rights, and ecology. Communities holding this attitude. These communities have attempted to influence the policies of their respective governments, even in the face of often fierce resistance. Similar to other religious traditions, Buddhism may be said to exhibit both similarities and differences. Not only can similarities and differences in democratization be explained by these likenesses and variations, which are arrayed around political theology and differentiation.

Because the majority of Thai residents are members of Theravada schools, Thai Buddhists have become a focal point in the political culture. The Thai Buddhist religion is an intriguing case study of a faith that has an uncertain connection with the political liberalization and change that is currently taking place. On the one hand, it would appear that Theravada Buddhism contains many features that are extremely compatible with modern democracy. An ethical message that is built on tolerance and the search for individual pursuit of good behavior and enlightenment is at the core of its teachings. In the same amount of time that the political system of Thailand has been through significant change over the past 30 years, the Thai Buddhist religion has become rigid and is in dire need of a comprehensive reformation. Although none of Thailand's constitutions have ever explicitly declared that Buddhism is the national religion, each one has included a clause stating that the monarch is a practicing Buddhist.

Larry Diamond has argued that religion is an important part of political culture and that it should, as a result, have a significant influence on democracy; however, he does not have anything specific to say about the relationship between Buddhism and democracy. This was seen through western political approach. In addition, Western culture has a significant challenge in discouraging the still-armored socialism of the Soviet Union by the use of opposing military strength. Because of the effective restriction of governmental power, Western civilizations and capitalism developed into what they are today. In the future, it's possible that Western governments will no longer have the power necessary to maintain competition and to protect themselves.

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