
The Soft Power of Buddhism: Fostering Social Harmony and Cultural Identity in Thai Society

Phramaha Danai Srichan¹ Phra Thongjaroen Khotdinkhao²

Phramaha Sarayut Nonthapa³ Phra Phra Dhammanan Sankaew⁴

Wat Aranyawiwek, Buengkan¹ Wat Thakhoinang, Sisaket² Wat Seesamakeetham, Buengkan³

IBSC, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya⁴

E-mail: dsrichan@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article investigates the profound influence of Buddhism as a soft power for fostering social harmony and cultural identity in Thailand. Through historical analyses, sociological perspectives, and contemporary case studies, the study elucidates how Buddhism permeates Thai society, impacting governance, familial relationships, and communal rituals. The exploration of Buddhist teachings, ethical values, and institutional frameworks underscores the pivotal role of the Sangha (monastic community) in promoting solidarity, resilience, and moral integrity among Thai citizens. Additionally, the report examines the dynamic interplay between Buddhism and socio-political dynamics, addressing the challenges and opportunities for preserving Buddhist traditions amidst rapid social change and globalization. By illuminating the connections between religion, culture, and social cohesion, this study provides insights into the enduring significance of Buddhism as a unifying force in Thai society.

Keywords: Buddhism in Thailand; Soft Power; Social Harmony; Cultural Identity; Thai Society

Introduction

In the context of international relations, soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through cultural appeal, values, and ideologies, rather than coercion or monetary incentives. Buddhism, with its profound philosophical and ethical teachings, serves as a significant source of soft power in Thailand. As a predominantly Buddhist country, Thailand leverages the soft power of Buddhism to enhance social harmony, preserve cultural identity, and bolster its international image. However, leveraging Buddhism as a soft power tool does not come without its limitations and challenges. One notable challenge is the risk of politicizing religious beliefs, which can lead to sectarian tensions and undermine the very

principles of compassion and non-violence that Buddhism espouses (McGovern, 2022). Additionally, the increasing influence of modernity and globalization may dilute traditional practices and beliefs, leading to a potential disconnect between younger generations and their cultural heritage (Gupta & Verma, 2021). Furthermore, the rise of digital technology poses both challenges and opportunities for Buddhism's soft power, as it can facilitate the spread of misinformation or extremist interpretations while also providing platforms for positive engagement and community building (Srinok et al., 2021). This paper explores the multifaceted role of Buddhism as a form of soft power in Thai society, demonstrating how it contributes to social cohesion, cultural preservation, and national identity. By examining the integration of Buddhist principles into various aspects of Thai life, this study underscores the importance of Buddhism in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Thailand (Pham & Nikolaeva, 2021; Srichampa, 2015).

In recent years, the concept of soft power, particularly within the realm of religion, has garnered increasing attention in academic and diplomatic circles. Religious Soft Power, as explored by scholars such as Bettiza and Henne (2023), encompasses how states utilize religion as a tool in their foreign policy agendas. This phenomenon is particularly pertinent in regions where religion plays a significant role in societal and political dynamics. Steiner (2016) delves into the question of whether Religious Soft Power holds consequential implications in today's world, highlighting the intricate interplay between religion, politics, and international relations. Furthermore, studies such as Shmushko's (2022) ethnography of Buddhist practitioners in Wutong shed light on the role of Buddhism as a form of Cultural Soft Power, influencing both local and global contexts. Additionally, Ponka et al., (2017) examine Buddhism as a resource of "soft power" in the context of China, elucidating the strategic use of religious identity in shaping domestic and international perceptions.

Buddhism's soft power extends beyond the spiritual realm, influencing education, governance, and cultural practices. The religion's teachings on compassion, mindfulness, and ethical living promote social stability and community support, which are essential for maintaining social harmony (Arphattananon, 2020). Temples act as community centers, facilitating social interactions and charitable activities that strengthen communal bonds (Prabnok, 2018). Additionally, Buddhist festivals and temple architecture play a crucial role in preserving Thai cultural heritage and fostering a sense of national pride (Karimova, 2022).

On the international stage, Thailand utilizes Buddhism to enhance its cultural diplomacy and global influence. The promotion of Buddhist teachings and cultural practices helps to cultivate a positive global perception of Thailand as a center of peace and spiritual wisdom (Srichampa, 2015). By participating in global discussions on sustainable development and ethical governance through the lens of Buddhist principles, Thailand positions itself as a moral leader, contributing to its soft power (Mahaseth & Khatoon, 2024).

The examination of Buddhism as a soft power in Thailand highlights its significance in promoting social harmony, preserving cultural identity, and enhancing international relations. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Buddhist principles are interwoven with Thai cultural practices, educational systems, and public policies, creating a unique and cohesive socio-cultural environment.

Buddhism as Soft Power

Buddhism serves as a form of soft power by promoting Thailand's cultural diplomacy and enhancing its international image. The religion's principles of peace and compassion resonate globally, attracting tourists and fostering international goodwill. This section delves into how Buddhism's soft power specifically impacts the social and cultural aspects of Thai society.

1. Promotion of Social Harmony

Buddhist teachings emphasize ethical living, mindfulness, and compassion, which significantly contribute to social harmony in Thailand. The principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and compassion (karuna) encourage individuals to engage in peaceful and cooperative behaviors, reducing social conflicts and fostering a supportive community environment (Pham & Nikolaeva, 2021). This moral framework, deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, promotes altruism and volunteerism, which are vital for community development and social stability (Arphattananon, 2020).

Temples play a central role in this social harmony by acting as community hubs where people gather for religious ceremonies, social events, and charitable activities. These interactions strengthen community bonds and provide a support network for individuals, particularly in times of crisis. The involvement of monks in community welfare and conflict resolution further underscores the importance of Buddhism in maintaining social cohesion (Prabnok, 2018).

2. Cultural Identity and National Unity

Buddhism is a cornerstone of Thai cultural identity, influencing various aspects of daily life, traditions, and national celebrations. The religion's integration into cultural practices helps preserve Thai heritage and fosters a strong sense of national identity. For instance, Buddhist festivals such as Visakha Bucha and Makha Bucha are not only religious events but also national holidays that reinforce cultural traditions and collective memory (Karimova, 2022). These celebrations provide opportunities for Thais to reconnect with their cultural roots and instill a sense of pride and belonging.

The architecture and art of Thai temples, which often feature intricate designs and symbols unique to Thai Buddhism, serve as cultural landmarks. These structures are pivotal in cultural tourism, attracting millions of visitors annually and showcasing Thailand's rich heritage to the world. This cultural tourism enhances Thailand's global image, contributing to its soft power by promoting an appreciation of Thai culture and values (Srichampa, 2015).

3. Education and Ideological Influence

Buddhist teachings are deeply embedded in the Thai education system, shaping the moral and ethical perspectives of students. The inclusion of Buddhist principles in school curricula emphasizes values such as respect, discipline, and empathy, which are essential for the development of responsible and ethical citizens (Arphattananon, 2020). This educational influence ensures that Buddhist values are passed down through generations, maintaining their relevance in modern society.

Moreover, the ideological influence of Buddhism extends to public policies and governance. Thai leaders often invoke Buddhist principles to justify policies and promote ethical governance. This alignment of political and religious values enhances the legitimacy of the state and fosters a sense of moral authority and social trust (Khobragade, 2022).

4. Global Cultural Diplomacy

Buddhism's role in Thailand's cultural diplomacy cannot be overstated. By promoting Buddhist teachings and cultural practices globally, Thailand enhances its soft power and fosters international goodwill. Programs that involve the exchange of Buddhist monks, cultural exhibitions, and international seminars on Buddhism help disseminate Thai culture and values worldwide. These initiatives not only boost Thailand's cultural influence but also contribute to a positive global perception of the country as a center of peace and spiritual wisdom (Srichampa, 2015).

In contemporary times, Thailand's engagement in global discussions on sustainable development and ethical governance, framed within Buddhist principles, positions the country as a moral leader on the international stage. The alignment of Buddhist ethics with global sustainability goals highlights the relevance of traditional wisdom in addressing modern challenges (Mahaseth & Khatoon, 2024).

In summary, Buddhism's soft power in Thailand extends beyond mere religious influence, deeply impacting social harmony, cultural identity, education, governance, and global diplomacy. Through these multifaceted contributions, Buddhism not only enriches Thai society but also elevates Thailand's standing in the global community.

Buddhism as a catalyst for social harmony

Buddhism has been intricately woven into the fabric of Thai society for centuries, permeating various aspects of life including ethics, morality, governance, and art. As the predominant religion in Thailand, Buddhism holds a central place in the hearts and minds of the Thai people, shaping their worldview and societal norms. The moral principles espoused by Buddhism, such as compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness, serve as guiding principles for individual conduct and collective behavior. Moreover, Buddhist rituals and ceremonies punctuate the rhythm of Thai life, providing occasions for communal bonding, spiritual contemplation, and moral reflection (Karimova, 2022; Prabnok, 2018).

1. Principles Promoting Social Harmony

- Metta (loving-kindness): Encourages compassion and empathy towards others.
- Ahimsa (non-violence): Advocates for peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution.
- Paticcasamuppada (interdependence): Fosters a sense of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

One of the most salient manifestations of Buddhism's soft power lies in its capacity to promote social harmony and cohesion within Thai society. The emphasis on compassion and loving-kindness in Buddhist teachings fosters a sense of empathy and interconnectedness among individuals, transcending social divisions and fostering solidarity. The ethical framework provided by Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of inner virtues such as mindfulness, patience, and compassion. These virtues play a crucial role in maintaining social order and resolving conflicts through peaceful means. For instance, the principle of non-violence

encourages individuals to engage in peaceful and cooperative behaviors, reducing social conflicts and promoting social stability (Srichampa, 2015).

The Buddhist teaching of "sila," or ethical conduct, also significantly contributes to social harmony. By adhering to moral precepts such as refraining from harm, theft, and dishonesty, individuals cultivate trust and reliability within their communities. This ethical framework is not only personal but extends into public life, influencing societal norms and legal structures that prioritize collective well-being over individual gain. Buddhist and worldly teachings emphasize the importance of harmony and respect. Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood involve moral restraint refraining from lying, stealing, committing violent acts, and earning ones living in a way harmful to others. If there were a growing consensus around flourishing-based ethics that balanced individualism with relatedness, the public would be willing to bring laws, rules, and regulations into greater accord with that consensus.

Meditative practices like mindfulness (vipassana) help individuals manage stress and develop emotional resilience, leading to more harmonious interactions. The emphasis on non-attachment (anatta) reduces conflicts driven by material desires or egoistic pursuits. Mindfulness at work and meditation aid the practitioner in stress management, prevent errors in judgment, and ensure the strengthening of a healthy doctor-patient relationship. Together, these Buddhist principles create a cohesive societal ethos that values peace, cooperation, and shared identity cornerstones for enduring social harmony in Thai society. The principles of compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness resonate throughout Thai society, creating a foundation for a harmonious and peaceful way of life

Buddhist teachings also permeate the governance of Thai society. Leaders often draw upon Buddhist principles to justify policies and promote ethical governance, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the state and fostering social trust (Khobragade, 2022). This alignment of political and religious values ensures that governance is viewed through a moral lens, promoting transparency and ethical behavior in public administration.

2. Role of Monastic Communities

- Monasteries (Wat) serve as community centers, providing spiritual guidance, education, and social services.
- Monks act as mediators in conflicts and exemplify virtuous living, inspiring societal norms.

Buddhist monasteries serve as centers of community life, providing not only spiritual guidance but also social services such as education, healthcare, and disaster relief (Pham & Nikolaeva, 2021). These monasteries are pivotal in strengthening communal bonds, as they offer spaces for people to engage in social activities and charitable work, thus fostering a supportive community environment (Arphattananon, 2020). Furthermore, the involvement of monks in community welfare and conflict resolution highlights the importance of Buddhism in maintaining social cohesion (Prabnok, 2018).

3. Rituals and Festivals

Buddhist rituals and festivals, such as Vesak and Loy Krathong, reinforce community bonds and collective identity. These events provide opportunities for communal activities and reinforce shared values.

Overall, Buddhism's role in promoting social harmony in Thailand is multifaceted. It provides a moral and ethical framework that guides individual conduct, fosters community cohesion through social services provided by monasteries, and influences governance practices. This integration of Buddhist principles into various aspects of Thai life contributes to a stable and harmonious society, demonstrating the profound impact of Buddhism's soft power on social harmony in Thailand.

Buddhism's pervasive presence in Thai society shapes worldviews, behaviors, and cultural expressions, illustrating its profound impact on the country's social fabric and identity. This practice involves generating feelings of love, compassion, and goodwill towards oneself and others. They believe that showing respect and kindness towards others is essential to good relationships. This relationship creates a framework within which generosity, compassion, and mutual encouragement can grow.

Buddhism and Cultural Identity Formation

Beyond its religious dimensions, Buddhism serves as a cornerstone of Thai cultural identity, shaping language, literature, art, and architecture. The proliferation of Buddhist temples (wat), stupas (chedi), and religious festivals (wian tian) underscores the pervasive influence of Buddhist symbolism and iconography in everyday life. Moreover, Thai literature, such as the Jataka tales and the Ramakien (Thai adaptation of the Ramayana), incorporates Buddhist themes and moral lessons, thus reinforcing the cultural resonance of Buddhist narratives. In contemporary Thailand, the celebration of Buddhist holidays, such as Songkran

(Thai New Year) and Visakha Bucha Day (commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha), serves as occasions for communal bonding, family reunions, and spiritual rejuvenation.

1. Cultural Identity Through Buddhist Festivals and Traditions

Cultural identity in Thailand is deeply intertwined with Buddhist festivals and traditions, which serve as vital expressions of the nation's collective ethos and values. One of the most significant manifestations of this cultural identity is found in the celebration of Buddhist festivals such as Songkran, Loy Krathong, and Visakha Bucha Day. These events are more than mere religious observances; they are communal experiences that reinforce social bonds and national unity.

Thailand is a nation deeply rooted in Buddhist culture, rich artisanal tradition, spirituality, and annual festivals. Events such as Songkran, the Thai New Year, and Loy Krathong, the Festival of Lights, are deeply rooted in Buddhist traditions and serve as important cultural celebrations. During Songkran, the Thai New Year festival, water-splashing rituals symbolize purification and renewal. This tradition fosters a sense of belonging among participants, as communities come together to celebrate shared beliefs in merit-making and respect for senior members in the communities and family elders. Similarly, Loy Krathong's enchanting ceremony of floating lanterns on water bodies reflects themes of letting go and gratitude, promoting a collective consciousness focused on harmony with nature and paying respect to the goddess of water.

Visakha Bucha Day commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of Buddha. It is marked by nationwide activities such as temple visits, meditation sessions, and candlelit processions. These practices not only honor spiritual heritage but also instill a common identity rooted in Buddhist teachings. Through these vibrant traditions, Buddhism's soft power subtly shapes Thailand's cultural identity while nurturing social cohesion. The historical and cultural connections between India and Thailand, as exemplified through the interaction of these two religious traditions, continue to shape Thai Buddhism.

2. The Influence of Buddhism on Thai Education and Morality

Buddhism profoundly shapes Thai education and morality, acting as a cornerstone of the nation's cultural and ethical framework. From early childhood, Thai students are introduced to Buddhist teachings through formal education and temple activities, instilling values such as respect, humility, and compassion. Schools often incorporate Buddhist

principles into their curricula, emphasizing moral conduct alongside academic achievement. This fusion of spiritual and educational practices fosters a holistic development approach that prioritizes character building.

Monastic education also plays a significant role in shaping Thai youth. Temporary ordination in monasteries is a common rite of passage for young boys, providing them with an immersive experience in Buddhist teachings and discipline. This exposure cultivates a deep sense of responsibility, mindfulness, and social ethics that extends into adulthood. In the field of education, Buddhism has been instrumental in shaping Thai educational systems. Monastic life is highly respected, and many young Thai men undertake temporary ordination as monks, known as “novices,” as a rite of passage.

Ethical conduct, which is itself a foundation of Buddhism, becomes internalized, so that behavioral choices are made with great care and personal responsibility. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of Buddhism reinforces community cohesion by promoting altruistic behavior and social harmony. Public rituals and festivals rooted in Buddhist traditions serve as communal bonding experiences that strengthen societal ties. The emphasis on merit-making activities encourages acts of generosity and kindness within communities.

For the lay community, the Buddha emphasized the importance of unity and concord through the four bases of social solidarity (sangaha-vatthu). These principles are celebrated annually with various rituals at Buddhist temples throughout Thailand, fostering a sense of community and shared values. Acts of kindness, as promoted by Buddhist teachings, are infectious and reciprocal, helping to create kindness-aware individuals and communities. This focus on compassion and ethical behavior is deeply integrated into both formal education systems and everyday life practices in Thailand.

By incorporating Buddhist principles into the educational framework, Thailand nurtures individuals who embody moral integrity and contribute positively to societal harmony. Schools often include teachings on mindfulness, respect, and compassion, which are essential for developing responsible and ethical citizens. These values are not only taught but also practiced through school activities and community service programs, reinforcing their importance in daily life.

This integration of Buddhism into education underscores the religion's influence in shaping ethical citizens committed to social well-being. It highlights how Buddhist teachings support the development of a morally conscious society, where individuals are encouraged

to act with kindness, integrity, and a sense of duty towards their community. The symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and Thai education exemplifies the religion's soft power in shaping both individual character and societal norms. By fostering a culture of moral awareness and ethical behavior, Buddhism plays a crucial role in promoting social harmony and national unity in Thailand.

Buddhism in Thailand plays a crucial role in the preservation of cultural identity, serving as a unifying force that transcends boundaries of ethnicity, language, and region. The teachings of Buddhism emphasize compassion, morality, and mindfulness, which are deeply ingrained in the fabric of Thai society. Through temple rituals, ceremonies, and observances, individuals are connected to their roots and heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and identity. Moreover, Buddhist practices such as meditation and moral precepts provide a moral compass for individuals, guiding their behavior and decisions in a way that upholds traditional cultural values. By promoting inner peace and harmony, Buddhism contributes to overall social cohesion and stability within Thai communities, enhancing the sense of cultural identity and collective consciousness. The continued influence of Buddhism in Thailand thus serves as a powerful tool for the preservation and promotion of the country's rich cultural heritage.

Impact of Buddhism on Thai cultural traditions and customs

Over the centuries, Buddhism has deeply influenced Thai cultural traditions and customs, shaping the country's social fabric and identity. The teachings of Buddhism have permeated various aspects of Thai society, from art and architecture to daily rituals and beliefs. The emphasis on compassion, morality, and mindfulness in Buddhism has fostered a strong sense of community and social harmony among the Thai people. Buddhist practices such as meditation and merit-making have become integral parts of Thai culture, guiding individuals towards inner peace and self-improvement. Moreover, Buddhist principles have played a significant role in shaping Thai ethical values and moral codes, influencing behavior and decision-making at both individual and societal levels. As a result, Buddhism continues to serve as a cornerstone of Thai culture, enriching and preserving its unique traditions for future generations to come.

1. Buddhist art and architecture as expressions of Thai cultural identity

The intricate paper-cutting techniques of Southern Thailand, as discussed in Virunanont (2020), serve as a tangible manifestation of the deep-rooted cultural identity

intertwined with Buddhist beliefs in the region. This traditional folk art, passed down through generations, reflects not only aesthetic beauty but also the spiritual and communal values inherent in Thai-Buddhist culture. The detailed study of paper characteristics, engraving methods, and pattern designing reveals a harmonious blend of artistic expression and religious symbolism that permeates Thai society. Moreover, the preservation of this art form at auspicious events and cultural ceremonies underscores its significance in maintaining distinct identities within the broader framework of Thai cultural heritage. Similarly, the historical influence of Buddhism on art genres, architecture, and social harmony in India, as discussed in (A. R. Raina et al., 2023), emphasizes the transformative power of Buddhist teachings in shaping national cohesion and promoting cultural diversity. In essence, Buddhist art and architecture in Thailand not only showcase the rich artistic traditions but also act as profound expressions of Thai cultural identity deeply rooted in Buddhist principles.

2. The role of Buddhist monasteries in community life

Buddhist monasteries in Thailand serve as the epicenters of spiritual, cultural, and social life. These sacred institutions are more than places of worship; they are dynamic community hubs that foster social harmony and cultural identity. Monasteries play a crucial role in shaping the ethical and moral fabric of Thai society by offering a space for meditation, reflection, and learning. Monks, who are highly respected figures, guide on moral issues and life challenges, thus reinforcing communal values rooted in compassion, mindfulness, and generosity.

Buddhist temples serve as important spiritual and cultural centers. Visiting these places of worship offers an insight into the varied religious traditions that thrive on the island and the harmonious integration of different cultural influences. Monastic education, provided in Buddhist temples, has played a significant role in imparting knowledge, instilling moral values, and nurturing a sense of community among the Thai population. Monks, who rely on alms for their sustenance, serve as a reminder of the importance of selflessness and compassion in everyday life. Monasteries also function as centers for education. Many Thai children receive their primary schooling within these walls, where they not only gain academic knowledge but also learn about Buddhist teachings and practices that promote social cohesion. During festivals and important ceremonies like ordinations or funerals, monasteries become gathering places where community members reaffirm their shared cultural heritage through rituals and collective activities.

The center of education comprised temples, schools, and universities. Education path is done through standardized education policy, namely the obligation to teach the language and history of Thai and Buddhist teachings. Moreover, the physical presence of monasteries often enhances local economies by attracting tourists interested in experiencing authentic Thai culture. This influx helps sustain small businesses while preserving traditional crafts and practices.

Thailand has a rich cultural legacy, and visitors interested in studying this side of the nation will discover a plethora of cultural attractions to explore. In essence, Buddhist monasteries in Thailand act as vital pillars that support both individual well-being and collective identity, thereby underpinning the soft power of Buddhism within Thai society.

1. The Role of the Sangha in Fostering Social Cohesion:

Central to the perpetuation of Buddhism in Thailand is the Sangha, a monastic community comprising ordained monks (bhikkhus) and nuns (bhikkhunis). The Sangha serves as a moral exemplar and custodian of Buddhist teachings, providing the populace with spiritual guidance, educational opportunities, and social welfare services. Through the ritualized practices of almsgiving (pindapata) and merit-making (tam bun), lay devotees establish reciprocal relationships with the Sangha, thereby reinforcing social bonds and communal solidarity. Moreover, the Sangha's involvement in philanthropic activities, disaster relief efforts, and moral arbitration contributes to maintaining social order and mitigating social conflicts.

3. Case Studies: Community Development Projects in Thailand

These case studies illustrate the impactful role of Buddhist-inspired community development projects in Thailand. By addressing education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability, these initiatives demonstrate how Buddhist principles can be effectively applied to enhance social welfare and community resilience.

3.1 Dhammachai Education Foundation

The Dhammachai Education Foundation, associated with the Dhammakaya Temple, focuses on educational initiatives aimed at instilling Buddhist values and ethics in the younger generation. The foundation runs several schools and educational programs across Thailand, emphasizing character development, moral education, and academic excellence. The foundation's initiatives have reached thousands of students, promoting a balanced development of intellectual and moral capacities. By focusing on ethical education, the

foundation helps foster a sense of social responsibility and community involvement among young people.

3.2. Wat Phra Dhammakaya's social outreach programs

Wat Phra Dhammakaya, one of Thailand's largest and most influential temples, conducts extensive social outreach programs aimed at community development and social welfare. These programs address various aspects of community life, from healthcare to environmental conservation. Initiatives such as tree planting campaigns and environmental education programs aim to promote sustainability and environmental stewardship. Environmental projects have raised awareness about sustainability and encouraged community participation in conservation efforts.

3.3 Mae Fah Luang Foundation

The Mae Fah Luang Foundation, established by the late Princess Mother Srinagarindra, focuses on sustainable community development, particularly in Northern Thailand. The foundation's holistic approach integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions to uplift local communities. Doi Tung Development Project, this flagship project involves transforming the opium cultivation area into a model of sustainable development through alternative livelihoods, education, and healthcare. This project has significantly improved the quality of life for local communities, reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development Vocational Training and Education, provides vocational training and education to residents, enabling them to develop skills for sustainable livelihoods. These programs have empowered residents with skills and opportunities for economic self-sufficiency.

Modern Challenges to Traditional Buddhist Practices

In contemporary Thai society, traditional Buddhist practices face a multitude of challenges arising from rapid modernization and globalization. One significant issue is the encroachment of consumerism, which increasingly diverts attention away from spiritual pursuits toward materialistic goals. This shift undermines the core Buddhist values of simplicity and detachment from worldly possessions. Moreover, urbanization has led to physical and cultural distancing from temples, traditionally the epicenters of community life and spiritual guidance.

So far in contemporary Thai Buddhism, change seems to have been identified with or have resulted from the clash and conflict between tradition and modernization.

This could be attributed to the core values of Buddhism that help people take lightly their concerns and navigate through hardships serenely.

The younger generation, in particular, finds itself caught between the fast-paced demands of modern life and the time-intensive rituals that Buddhism prescribes.

With the rapid increase of modern communications, creating an ever-shrinking world, Buddhism, which originated in the East, finds itself locked in contact with contemporary Western culture.

Another pressing challenge comes from digital technology. While it offers new avenues for spreading Buddhist teachings through online platforms and social media, it also introduces distractions that pull individuals away from meditative practices essential for mindfulness and inner peace. Additionally, secular education systems often do not incorporate religious teachings as robustly as before, resulting in a diluted understanding of Buddhist principles among young Thais.

Meditation is a core aspect of Buddhist practice, and in Thailand, meditation retreats are popular among both locals and tourists seeking spiritual growth and inner peace. However, temple schools remain a place for learning modern, secular subjects, the Buddhist Dhamma (teachings of the Buddha), and Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism. Lastly, political dynamics occasionally exploit Buddhism for nationalist agendas, complicating its role as a unifying force in society. These modern pressures collectively threaten to dilute the essence of traditional Buddhist practices in Thailand's evolving cultural landscape.

The Future of Buddhism's Soft Power in Thai Society

The future of Buddhism's soft power in Thai society appears poised for both continuity and transformation as the nation navigates modernity and globalization. As Thailand continues to develop economically and technologically, the core principles of Buddhism (compassion, mindfulness, and community cohesion) remain deeply ingrained in the societal fabric. These values are likely to persist as guiding forces for social harmony, even as younger generations adopt more globalized lifestyles (Cogan, 2024). Moreover, it appears promising, with ongoing discussions on the intersection of religion, morality, and gender identities (Ocha, 2023). The influence of Buddhism in Thailand extends beyond individual spirituality to societal communication and ethical conduct (Tangpatomwong, 2021). As Thailand navigates complex issues like gender diversity, ethical dilemmas, and international relations, the continued

integration of Buddhist principles into societal norms and policies is crucial for shaping a harmonious and culturally rich future for Thai society.

The role of digital technology in shaping Buddhism's soft power in contemporary Thai society is multifaceted. On one hand, social media and online platforms can serve as powerful tools for disseminating Buddhist teachings and fostering community engagement (Gao et al., 2017). They enable monks and lay practitioners to reach wider audiences, promoting mindfulness and ethical living in a digital age (Srinok et al., 2021). On the other hand, the same technologies can also facilitate the spread of extremist views or commercialized versions of Buddhism that may undermine its core teachings (Borup, 2020). Thus, the future of Buddhism's soft power in Thailand will likely depend on how effectively these digital tools are harnessed to promote authentic engagement with Buddhist values.

Looking to the future, the role of Buddhism in Thai society may evolve in several ways. One potential scenario is the strengthening of Buddhist institutions as mediators of social issues, such as mental health and community welfare, thereby enhancing their relevance in contemporary society (Craig et al., 2020). Another possibility is the emergence of a more globalized form of Buddhism that retains core Thai values while adapting to international contexts, which could foster cross-cultural dialogues and collaborations (Borup, 2018). However, these developments may also lead to tensions between traditionalists and reformists within the Buddhist community, as differing interpretations of Buddhism's role in modern society emerge (Blackburn, 2010).

However, the challenges posed by rapid urbanization, digital interconnectedness, and shifting cultural dynamics cannot be ignored. The increasing influence of secularism and diverse belief systems may lead to a more pluralistic society where Buddhism's role could evolve rather than diminish. Educational reforms that integrate Buddhist teachings with contemporary subjects can help ensure that these age-old principles remain relevant (Thailand Unveils Soft Power Strategy for Global Reach, n.d.). One major challenge is the need to adapt to a rapidly changing social and economic landscape, characterized by globalization, urbanization, and digitalization (Cogan, 2024).

This influence continues to shape and evolve Thai Buddhism, fostering cultural exchange and religious syncretism. Buddhist principles for good governance and statecraft provide frameworks for developing adaptable solutions to contemporary problems (Rau's IAS, 2023). Moreover, modern Buddhist leaders are increasingly utilizing media platforms to reach

broader audiences, thereby reinforcing cultural identity amidst change. The Sangha (monastic community) is also becoming more engaged in social issues such as environmental conservation and mental health, aligning ancient wisdom with contemporary concerns (The Government Public Relations Department, (2024).

At the same time, there are varying conceptions about what being Buddhist means, with a greater ability to spread those unique conceptions to a wider audience. Socially Engaged Buddhism's task has been to draw upon this worldview and these traditions to develop creative responses to the environmental dilemmas facing the modern world (Laskar, 2024).

In conclusion, while Buddhism's role may adapt to meet new societal needs, its foundational soft power, promoting unity and cultural identity, will likely continue to play a crucial role in shaping Thailand's future social landscape.

Conclusion

Buddhism functions as an essential reservoir of soft power within Thai society, exerting influence on social cohesion and cultural identity through its ethical doctrines and practices. The dissemination of Buddhist philosophies bolsters Thailand's international reputation as a bastion of peace and spiritual insight, thereby augmenting its cultural diplomacy. As Thailand encounters contemporary challenges, the soft power of Buddhism presents both prospects and obstacles for the nation's ambitions on the global platform. The prospective influence of Buddhism in Thailand may evolve to align with emerging societal requirements while persistently advocating for unity and cultural identity, which are vital to the nation's social fabric. The interaction between Buddhism and socio-political dynamics underscores the necessity of preserving traditions amidst swift social transformation and globalization, ensuring that Buddhism continues to function as a cohesive force. Buddhism fosters social harmony through principles such as interdependence (Paticcasamuppada) and non-violence (Ahimsa). These doctrines promote shared responsibility and peaceful cohabitation, nurturing a unified societal ethos. Buddhism is fundamental to Thai cultural identity, influencing moral values and communal life. Monasteries serve as communal centers, reinforcing collective values of compassion and mindfulness. In summary, the analysis highlights the lasting relevance of Buddhism in shaping Thailand's national identity and enhancing its international stature.

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