Sovereign Yet Subordinate
The Use of Buddhist Discourse During the Reigns of King Rama IV, V, and VI in Siam (1851-1925)

BROOKE SCHEDNECK
Arizona State University

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY
Brooke Schedneck is a Ph.D. candidate in Asian Religions at Arizona State University. Her scholarly interests include religion and modernity, religious biography, and contemporary issues in Buddhist studies. Brooke is currently conducting research in Thailand through a Fulbright grant for her dissertation project tentatively titled “Discourses of Meditation: Reinterpretations through Buddhist Travel.” She has been published in Contemporary Buddhism and The Buddhist Studies Review.

During the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV; 1851-1868), King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; 1868-1910) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910-1925), Siam (present-day Thailand), witnessed its Southeast Asian neighbors become colonized. Not wanting to lose sovereignty to Western imperial powers, the Siamese managed to navigate their own way through a modernization process, thereby avoiding complete subjugation. However, they were not fully sovereign as Western powers continually infringed on their territorial claims. These encounters with modernity have affected the nation-building process and the selective appropriation of aspects of Siamese culture to form a national integration. One of the main elements used to create this national culture was Buddhism. Thus I will look at the time period during these three reigns to understand how Buddhism reflects this sovereign yet subordinate status.

Buddhism in Siam was both a space in which Siamese people were able to negotiate their identity in the face of Western hegemony through what scholars have labeled 'alternative modernity,' as well as a space that demonstrated its growing gravitation and accommodation toward Western ways of thinking. To show how the tradition was a resource for identity creation, I will discuss how Buddhism was a major part of Siam’s alternative modernity by looking at the ways Buddhism was used as a unifying force in outlying regions of the emerging nation. I will also use the issue of polygamy to illustrate how a Buddhist alternative modernity was exemplified. To demonstrate the changing perspectives on Buddhism during the colonial encounter, I investigate writings of early Siamese ‘modern’ Buddhists, such as King Rama VI Vajiravudh and the Minister of Foreign Treasury, Chao Phraya Thiphakorawong. Siamese Buddhists currently talk of their tradition as rational and scientific in accommodation to the Western worldview.

I am arguing that the Siamese Buddhist tradition mirrors the socio-political situation during this period. Politically, Siam was not fully submissive to an imperial authority, but she was also not fully in control of her own territory. Religiously, the country was not fully changed by Western moral standards, but was affected by Western ideas of logic and science. This paper shows how the category of religion is not only used to
enhance and create identity, but also to produce an affiliation with the other. It shows how religion can be redefined and repackaged in modernity.

**Buddhist Alternative Modernity**

During the period under study, Buddhism was a crucial resource for identity formation. Because of the intimate relationship between Buddhism and secular life in Siam, Buddhism has been the focus of attempts to create a distinctive Siamese identity. Non-Western modes of identity creation, such as those expressed by Siam, have been dubbed by scholars as ‘alternative modernities.’ The idea of alternative modernities emerged in the last decade, as scholars began to recognize that certain postcolonial practices took forms other than the modernity in the West. The literature largely revolves around the theme that modernity is not one process but many. Jonsson, however, reminds that alternative modernities do not “deny commonalities, but highlights variation in relation to culture, region, and other contextual factors.”\(^4\)

Instead of looking at modernity as a singular concept scholars have investigated various avenues of space and identity. Alternative modernities look at models as unique— that represent neither Western modernity nor non-Western traditions. This new perspective brings awareness of how modernity operates and spreads in different contexts.\(^5\) Dilip Gaonkar asserts that Western forms of modernity cannot be fully avoided because modernity began in the West. Yet sites of alternative modernities show the differences in non-western countries’ self-understandings—each site exists within a unique context.\(^6\) Each site experiences a unique encounter and conflict of worldviews that produce alternative modernities,\(^7\) exhibiting varying combinations of convergence and divergence with Western modernity.\(^8\)  But Gaonkar also argues that the West does not impose its modernity on these alternative sites, but rather people make themselves modern, give themselves identities, and appropriate modernity in their own fashions.\(^9\)

Siam is such a site of alternative modernity and this theoretical work can be used to show how the Siamese experience of modernity is created by the Siamese themselves. Knauft writes that alternative modernities highlight how “actors negotiate their desire for economic success or development vis-à-vis their sense of values and commitment to longer-standing beliefs and practices.”\(^10\) In this way the Siamese used selected elements from both modernity and tradition to construct a new reality. Scholars such as Justin McDaniel have argued that Siamese Buddhists should not be seen as victims of modernity and globalization but rather as arbiters of innovation, as negotiators with modernity, who neither passively accept nor ignore it.\(^11\) Tamara Loos has also located Siam as a site for alternative modernities in her book *Subject Siam*. Loos defines alternative modernity as a notion of power that is modeled on European thought but is also formulated against it.\(^12\) By locating the key aspects of local culture and power structures, the Siamese challenged the hegemony of European modernity. Buddhism was one of the key sources of discourse used to consolidate state power and national identity.

**Unity through Buddhism**

During the reigns of three successive Siamese kings of the Chakkri dynasty, Loss argues that Siamese elites began to realize that a centralized kingdom needed to be created if Siam was to stave off colonization. She writes of these three reigns, “King Mongkut created the Thammayut Buddhist sect of Theravada Buddhism; King Chulalongkorn rationalized and conflated it with the modernizing state; and King Vajiravudh fused it with nationalism.”\(^13\) In the early nineteenth century, Siam consisted of several small kingdoms with Bangkok at the center. After interactions with Western powers, the Bangkok kingdom sought to lessen the smaller kingdoms’ independence by pulling them further into the emerging geo-body.\(^14\) As will be seen, Buddhism was an integral part of the unification strategy.

The starting point for a national Buddhism began with the reformed Buddhist sect called Thammayut created by King Mongkut while he was a monk, prior to his ascension to the throne. This sect was wedded to Siamese modernity and state power, and it was eventually used to create a national identity. Mongkut found that the Buddhist tradition brought unity to Siam and because of this, protected the nation against threats of instability.\(^15\) This sect removed what Mongkut perceived as superstitious and magical elements of culture from Buddhism and emphasized a literal interpretation of the scriptures and a strict ascetic form of practice. While more of these characteristics will be discussed in...
a later section, it should be clear that there were regional variations of Buddhism within the kingdom and the rationalized Thammayut sect was chosen as the one kind of Buddhism that could bring unity to the emerging nation.

After Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn continued to formalize and centralize the Buddhist sangha as part of a national integration through his father’s Thammayut sect. King Mongkut established the principles for a national religion but King Chulalongkorn took this further to create a single national institution, concerning himself with deviant practices in the outlying regions. Chulalongkorn sought to negate difference by promoting social structures including Buddhism that were part of the main ideology of the nation. During his reign, no distinctive structures of Buddhism, especially in Northern Thailand, were permitted. Buddhism was unified as a sign of a modern nation—the sangha mirrored the government with a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure. The king enacted these sangha reforms in response to pressures from British and French colonialists. If Siam’s government and social structures were not in order, these Western powers might have used this as an excuse to take power in Siam. These reforms thus aided the unifying process while forcing regional forms to disappear. The elimination of autonomous practices and beliefs, Keyes argues, helped to create a national Buddhist identity.

The Sangha Act of 1902 was the main governmental action that brought all monks under a hierarchy that included a standardized set of texts and practices. Before this time there was no attempt to integrate the diverse traditions. One reason for this act was the “fear that regional Buddhisms were intimately linked with regional political autonomy.” Because of this law, Reynolds writes “the center was in a position to ‘enforce’ a standard of Buddhist practice whenever diversified ethnic and regional traditions might differ from Bangkok Buddhist practice.” Prince Wachirayan, the supreme patriarch of Siamese Buddhism from 1900–1921, became the head of the sangha under King Chulalongkorn. He sent administrative monks from Bangkok to inspect monasteries in the outlying regions to report on their progress in complying with the unification procedures. These administrative monks sought to reform regional Buddhism and convert them to the more rational Thammayut Buddhism. Kamala Tiyanich writes that this control over regional practices “illustrates just how much the Bangkok elite acted like a colonial power, imposing its own rules and language over local customs.”

That Siamese thought their country unique through its religious tradition is evidenced also by King Vajiravudh. With the work of Buddhist unification already in place, Vajiravudh focused on highlighting aspects of Buddhism that provided moral order and structure such as including time for Buddhist prayers in schools, police stations, and in army barracks. Buddhist teachings provided a moral grounding in education as well as the national administration system. Vajiravudh disagreed with modernists who sought to abandon old rituals in favor of Western models. Instead, he argued that because Siam was not a Western country, modern Western notions should be adopted selectively and only when useful. He therefore hoped to create a distinct modernity for Siam without copying Western forms. King Vajiravudh decided that Siam and Buddhism were inseparable and thus Buddhism must have a significant influence in helping to navigate Siam through modernity. Under Vajiravudh the Siamese did not link the idea of ‘civilization’ to Christianity but remained firm in their beliefs of Buddhism. But at the same time, Siam needed confirmation from leading countries, which had already created and maintained this new ethos of civilization, Winichakul writes, to survive and maintain their dignity. As I will show, Siamese leaders used Buddhism to attract Western countries’ sensibilities as well but first we will look at another issue, in which Siam used Buddhism to reject Western models.

Polygamy

Polygamy symbolized Siam’s status as ambiguously modern. Western powers considered an emphasis on monogamous marriage to be an index of civilized cultures. However, Siam refused to rid itself of polygamy, not wanting to share in a similar course of modernity as the West. Even though Buddhist doctrine does not favor polygamy, it does not explicitly forbid it. Some Siamese promoted polygamy as part of Siam’s “distinctive Buddhist heritage.” Through this distinction from the West, Buddhism was again linked with Siam’s alternative modernity. King Vajiravudh argued against following Western standards of modernity when he stated that monogamy in European family law is a result of Christian doctrine, while Siamese
family law should be based on Buddhism. He states simply that both Christianity and Buddhism are right in their marriage laws, but one works for Europe, and the other for Siam. Again, he does not write that polygamy is advocated within the Buddhist tradition but that it is not immoral. However, becoming involved in adulterous relationships, is immoral. He argued that because polygamy was sanctioned by the Buddhist religion, the practice could not be abandoned without admitting that the tradition was lacking and Christianity superior. Thus, because Buddhism was linked with polygamy, much was at stake for this issue in the modernization process.

A public defense of polygamy as a Buddhist practice was produced by the Minister of Foreign Treasury, Thipakorawong, in his book Nangsuu Sadaeng Kijjanakā (Book Showing a Variety of Things) in 1867. In the passage concerning polygamy, Thipakorawong finds that the Buddha did not condemn nor support polygamy and that it is not forbidden in the precept concerning sexual misconduct. The Buddha said having many wives was a cause of greed and delusion but he didn’t explicitly prohibit polygamy as one of his precepts: he offered criticism but no formal rule. Thus he asserts Siamese Buddhists are free to practice polygamy or monogamy as it is not an injunction of the religion as in Christianity. Because the practice is not disallowed within Buddhist law, it also should not be disallowed under Siamese law. Thus, Thipakorawong defends polygamy using his knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings and formulates this against Western practices of monogamy and Christianity similarly to Vajrajñāth.

We have seen that the encounter with Western powers during the advent of modernity caused the Siamese to retain a unique, united national identity using Buddhism. But there were also ways in which Buddhism was used to attract and accommodate Western forms of modernity. Through the overall encounter with the West the Siamese were impressed by the technological and scientific findings introduced by missionaries and colonial officials. Because of this, they strove to place their alternative modernity alongside the Western model.

While Siam proved its separation from the West through a standardized form of Buddhism and the sanction of polygamy, the leaders also emphasized certain aspects of Buddhism, showing its attraction to Western forms of modernity. In the mid-nineteenth century the intellectual atmosphere of the elite expressed more concern with modern sciences than traditional beliefs. They began to see superstitious practices as less civilized and educated whereas the elite strove to appear modern and civilized. Buddhism was a way to demonstrate this distinction. One of the main characteristics of modern Buddhism for Siam was a return to an ideal past, before Buddhism had been corrupted by protective magical practices. This ideal past, thus for modern Buddhists, more fully coheres with Western modernity. During this period the Siamese argued that at its core, the essence of Buddhism is rational and dependent on empirical analysis.

**Siamese Modern Buddhism**

During the three reigns of Rama IV, V, and VI, prominent modern Siamese attempted to demonstrate that their tradition was compatible with Western ideas. Unlike Western modernity where Christianity was contrasted with secular rationality, in Siam, superstitious aspects of Buddhism were counterposed by rational forms of Buddhism. This rationalized Buddhism was separated from foreign religions but modern Buddhists were more interested in being separated from non-doctrinal and unorthodox forms of Buddhism. Reynolds concurs that “the modernizing tendencies that gained strength during the nineteenth century tended to undercut the traditional cosmological orientations within Buddhism, at least among certain segments of the elite.” The examples below show how Siamese Buddhists created this idea of a modern Buddhism in light of their interactions with Western ideas.

Mongkut’s Thammayut sect exemplifies a modern form of Buddhism, which focused on rational doctrine and belief while disparaging folk practices. Mongkut sought to make monastic discipline stricter and more distinct from other sects. Mongkut and the elites of his time accepted the Christian missionaries’ critique that Buddhism was too superstitious and appropriated the rational aspects of the tradition to combat this. King Mongkut and later King Chulalongkorn, as we have learned, promoted a Buddhism that could stand up to the rationalism of Western and Christian mis-
missionaries’ critique.\textsuperscript{38} Also, Craig Reynolds traces how, among the educated elite, nature and science became separated from religion and consequently some aspects of Buddhism emerged as myth. He cites the Thamma-
yut sect as contributing to and representing a response to these changing qualities of mind with its emphasis on textual fundamentalism, rationalism, and the essentials of the Buddha’s teachings.\textsuperscript{39}

An example of modern Buddhism at the state level can also be found in the writings of King Vajiravudh. He has argued that the country’s primary religion, Theravada Buddhism, is superior, from an intellectual point of view, to religions practiced elsewhere. He compares Christianity unfavorably to Buddhism, saying that his tradition does not foster such incredible beliefs as virgin birth.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, Buddhism is superior because of its rationality. Here Vajiravudh is using Western categories of science and rational argument to judge Buddhism above other religions. He therefore creates a Buddhist worldview that is appealing from a rational Western point of view.

Another modern Buddhist, Prince Wachirayan, inherited the rationalism with which Mongkut applied to the Buddha’s teachings. He too sought to distinguish reality from myth and distrusted anything that did not stand up to rational explanation.\textsuperscript{41} Thus these new ideas about Buddhism became engrained in men of Wachirayan’s generation after Mongkut set the stage with his new and radical ideas. Wachirayan believed Buddhism had an ideal past without magical practices, and sought to return to this. In his autobiography, Wachirayan describes the shift in thinking within himself and in Siamese Buddhist students toward a more rational understanding of the teachings. He writes:

One work which struck me was the Kalama-sutta which taught one not to believe blindly and to depend on one’s own thinking. My knowledge and understanding at that time were typical of the modern Dhamma student who chooses to believe some things but not everything.\textsuperscript{42}

Thus some parts of the Buddhist tradition do not cohere with modern values and these were the passages that Wachirayan chose not to believe. Some passages he believed to have been inserted by later generations and other incredible passages he interpreted in rational ways, such as the Buddha’s victory over Mara, which he saw as an allegory.\textsuperscript{43}

He also questioned the value of the monastic institution. Wachirayan found his peers were critical of the institution, so he was reluctant to join the monkhood. But later in his life he took a more moderate view. He writes:

At the time young Siamese were inclined to say that to be ordained as a monk performed no useful service to the kingdom. Monks were lazy. They ate and went to sleep. It was a waste for the kingdom to support them. For my own part . . . I thought that monks set out to do good, but only individually.\textsuperscript{44}

Here he explains that just as one should think critically about Buddhist teachings, one also should not simply value any and every monk, but judge them individually based on each monk’s societal contribution. He finds that some monks provide useful functions for society but concludes that “in former times monks provided more strength for the kingdom than nowadays.”\textsuperscript{45}

Another example of modern Buddhist writing at this time is presented in The Wheel of the Law by Presbyterian missionary Henry Alabaster. This is a study of Siamese Buddhism published in London in 1871. Alabaster had many conversations with Minister of Foreign Treasury, Thipakorawong, about Western religions and Buddhism. Alabaster writes that in this work an attempt is made to “give a glimpse of the reasonable religious teaching and beautiful morality which lie buried among the superstitions of corrupted Buddhism.”\textsuperscript{46}

Through this work it is clear that Thipakorawong was critical of Siamese Buddhist beliefs that contradicted empirical testing and did not have canonical justification. Instead he sought to strip away the superstitious elements and find the fundamentals.\textsuperscript{47}

These descriptions of early Siamese modern Buddhism show the impact of interactions with Western powers and the changed worldview of many elite Siamese. The elite found in Buddhism a way to engage Westerners and to show that Siamese modernity is compatible with Western forms. Another way Siamese Buddhism incorporated Western modernity was through science.

**Buddhism and Science**

During this period Siamese also reassessed their conception of Buddhist cosmography (how Siamese understood the makeup of the universe). Before the middle of the nineteenth century, Buddhist cosmogra-
The unquestioned use of the document ended when it had to compete with other systems of thought. By the end of Mongkut’s reign this cosmography was scrutinized as representing the Siamese modern belief system. The result was not a complete dismissal of Buddhist cosmography but rather a redefinition of the religious world in light of the explanatory power of Western science. The encounter with the West, as in other Theravada Buddhist countries, created a challenge to traditional worldview. These traditional elements came to be seen as archaic and not a part of the true teachings of the Buddha. Triggered by the Buddhist reforms of King Mongkut, Western rationalist concepts were introduced and created the possibility of a rational, secular worldview for elites. Elite Siamese denied the authority of the Traibhumī, which became labeled as useful for ethical reasons—indicting the consequences of immoral acts— but inadequate for describing the natural world.

The Nangsuu Sadhueng Kitjanukit (Book Showing a Variety of Things), by Thipakorawong can be seen as a successor or replacement of the Traibhumī. Frank Reynolds goes so far as to say that the publication of Kitjanukit represents the end of one world and the beginning of another. Craig Reynolds sees this as a “portrayal of what concerned the Siamese elite in responding to Western religion and Western science.” Thipakorawong favored scientific explanations of the world and denied the authority of the Traibhumī. He stated: “Had the Lord Buddha taught cosmography as it is in the ‘Traibhumī,’ he would not have been omniscient.” Thus Thipakorawong believed the Traibhumī was created after the Buddha’s death and it is ignorant to believe this is the true cosmography of the world. He states that the Buddha was omniscient but never spoke about his knowledge of science because he knew the people of his age would not have understood it. He asserted that whatever science would reveal in the future, it would not oppose the true and essential points of Buddhism. To show this, Kitjanukit distinguishes between the cosmography present in the Traibhumī and the explanations of natural phenomena taken from sciences such as meteorology and astronomy. Thus modern Siamese Buddhist discourse emphasizes its compatibility with science and through this link Buddhism is perceived as equal to Western forms of modernity. It is rational and follows empirical analysis. The magical and superstitious elements have been rooted out, as has the nonscientific cosmography—and Siam is left with a truly modernized, rational tradition that can connect with Western ideas and people.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Buddhism was used by Siamese people as a resource useful in forming a distinct identity separate from the Western forms of modernity during the three modernizing reigns of King Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, and Vajiravudh. Yet in other situations the Siamese have modified the Buddhist tradition to highlight to Westerners its modernity. Thus Buddhism was used to help Siam remain sovereign and maintain its own modernity but at the same time to be compatible with the Western model. Buddhism is clearly a variable and complex tradition that can be molded to suit one’s interests for desired results. Currently, Thai Buddhists are innovative, reforming, and reviewing their religion—ideas are incorporated and negotiated. This innovative modernity has a history located in the colonial encounter and subsequent modernizing process in which it is clear that Siamese Buddhists balanced the two extremes of accommodating completely to Western modernity and ignoring it altogether.


**End Notes**

1 1851 marks King Mongkut’s ascension to the throne, and 1925 marks the end of King Vajiravudh’s reign. During these three reigns Siam faced Western powers and ideas of modernization in a substantial way for the first time. The modernization process began in earnest with King Mongkut’s reign and was carried through by his two successors. I am not arguing that the monarchy was solely responsible for modernizing Siam but that their collective reigns mark a time of challenge with modernity and when much negotiation with modernity occurred.


3 See Jackson, Peter A. “Thai-Buddhist Identity: Debates on the Traiphum Phra Ruang.”


7 Ibid. p. 15.

8 Ibid. p. 17.

9 Ibid. p. 23.

10 Ibid. p. 21.


13 Loos, Tamara. Subject Siam. p. 20

14 Ibid., p. 76.


18 Ibid., p. 554.

19 Ibid. p. 555.

20 Tambiah, Stanley. World Conqueror and World Renouncer. p. 239.

21 Reynolds, Craig. The Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand. p. 266.


23 Ibid., p. 44.


25 Vella, Walter, F. Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism. p. 15.

26 Ibid., p. 530.


28 Loos, Subject Siam. p. 11.

29 Ibid., p. 122-3.

30 Ibid., p. 128.


33 Ibid., p. 206.

34 See Winichakul, Thongchai. “The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910.”


37 Ibid., p. 7.

38 Ibid., See page 213 and Chapter 11.


41 Reynolds, Craig. The Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand. p. 144.


43 Ibid. p. 30.

44 Ibid. p. 37.


47 Ibid., p. 2.


49 Ibid., p. 162.
60 Ibid., p. 7.
61 Ibid., p. 18.
63 Barme, Scot. *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* p. 23.
66 Ibid., p. 203.
68 Ibid., p. 5.
69 Ibid., p. xxi.