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Samsaric Salvation: Prosperity Cults,  
Political Crisis, and Middle Class Aspirations  
in Bangkok



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## Abstract

A lifestyle of consumption and the struggle for upward social mobility are central aspects of everyday life for Asia's emergent new urban middle classes, not least in competitive Bangkok. In this paper, I argue that the transforming nature of Buddhist religiosity in urban Thai society cannot be considered outside of the overarching framework of social and political aspirations. Thus, while the merit-power nexus linking position in the social hierarchy with Buddhist merit accumulated from past lives is a pervasive 'official' discourse and continues to be deployed for legitimacy purposes by Thai political elites vying for power, religious commodification and the proliferation of a wide variety of prosperity cults suggests not only a declining belief in orthodox Buddhist concepts like merit and karma, but also a market-driven shift towards material wealth as the most important basis for power and status in Bangkok. Meanwhile, the emergence of middle class reformist Buddhist movements has provided ideological bases for challenges to the established political order.

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## Contents

Introduction: The Deities Downtown .....	7
Political Legitimation and the Merit-Power Nexus .....	10
Prosperity Cults and Modern Reformist Movements.....	15
Conclusion.....	21
Bibliography .....	22



## Introduction: The Deities Downtown

It is just after New Year, and Dao has asked me to accompany her to some of the Hindu shrines which dot Ratchaprasong, in central Bangkok, where she plans to burn candles and incense, and offer garlands of flowers for luck. As she muses to me in a matter-of-fact fashion, ‘It can’t hurt’. At Ratchaprasong, Dao meets up with some friends, white-collar office workers like herself, at the chic shopping mall Central World Plaza<sup>1</sup>, where they have sushi for lunch at a Japanese restaurant and check out the new white Blackberry Curve. It is a typical afternoon for them in Bangkok, where a popular (and pressing) pastime for both the elite as well as the emulating and aspiring middle classes is to see and ‘be seen’.

We pop outside to the conveniently located Erawan, Ganesh, and Trimurti shrines to squeeze in a spot of propitiation before Dao continues her socializing. It is the middle of a characteristically clammy Bangkok day and the Erawan Shrine is crawling with Thais and tourists alike who are there to pay reverence to Brahma and ask for wishes to be granted. It escapes me how even an omnipotent, omniscient god can hear their prayers, when one would be hard-pressed to hear one’s own thoughts over the racket of music, people, traffic, and hawkers. According to Dao, one can avoid this problem by coming at dusk or twilight, when no one else is around and there is less competition for Brahma’s ears.

Dao also sometimes sports a Jatukham<sup>2</sup> amulet (believed to bring good fortune and provide protection) on a chain around her neck – along with a rotating array of designer handbags, the latest a brand new Louis Vuitton. She frequents astrologers (*moh duu*) and abstains from eating beef because one of them has told her it would affect her chances of finding a prospective husband. In a few days, she also plans to

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1 In late May of 2010, less than 6 months after fieldwork took place, CentralWorld Plaza and numerous other commercial sites in Bangkok were burnt down in the arson attacks following the military’s dispersal of red-shirted anti-government protestors who had occupied central Bangkok for months. I address this topic in a separate paper.

2 Ngah, a *som tam* vendor I interviewed from Buriram, revealed that much of her family’s small amount of surplus cash was ‘invested’ in the best Jatukham amulets they could afford (the price of amulets correlates with rareness and perceived potency – although obviously, the more costly an amulet, the more potent it is believed to be). During the height of the craze, newspapers and television reports related stories of people literally trampling one another to purchase ‘new releases’ of amulet lines, and documented the soaring prices of the rarest amulets. At one point, it seemed as if every second person in Bangkok was displaying a Jatukham amulet on their chest, usually hung from a heavy gold chain. For more on the Jatukham amulet craze, see Pattana (2008).

pay her respects to the City Shrine of Bangkok as well as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew), situated at the Grand Palace.

Not far away from the Erawan Shrine on Rama I road lies Wat Pathum Wanaram, squeezed in between CentralWorld and another prominent upmarket shopping mall, Siam Paragon. On the grounds of the temple, near the entrance, is a small shop. According to the sign, it sells ‘Dhamma and Snacks’. Inside is an array of Buddhist literature (much of it written by the late reformist monk Buddhadasa), CDs, and comic books, as well as meditation clothes and various offerings one can purchase to donate to the monks. I come here many mornings to find office workers and socialites sitting quietly in repose in the lotus position before heading off to their respective demanding jobs or social calendars. Like the Hindu shrines just a short stroll away on the footbridge system which connects major parts of downtown Bangkok, the convenient location of Wat Pathum in this fashionable and trendy part of the city adds greatly to its appeal amongst time-poor Bangkokians.

Even Art, a Sino-Thai schoolteacher originally from the province of Nakhorn Sawan who has accompanied me there one morning, finds it a remarkable location for a Buddhist temple. Surveying the surrounding urban-scape of skyscrapers and shopping malls looming over our shoulders, he comments, ‘This is truly a *wat* for city people.’ He sometimes comes to meditate himself at Wat Pathum with his sister and brother-in-law, who own a cosmetic enhancement clinic (one of many in beauty-obsessed Bangkok) in Ratchathewi, a few stops away on the skytrain line. According to Art, the current interest in meditation (*nang samadhi*) is less concerned with making merit than with cultivating one’s individual self (*pattana jitjailkuap kum arom*) in order to help one cope better with stress, a sentiment echoed by others with whom I spoke who participated in meditation sessions. It also has other benefits – several businesswomen I knew with demanding and hectic working lives frequented meditation retreats and workshops held in exclusive city hotels and swanky beachside resorts, offering them a chance to relax, as well as an important opportunity to forge and maintain social contacts.

During my fieldwork in Thailand, I did come across stories such as that of a certain Lambourgini-driving businessman who desired to renounce his material success in order to pursue a Buddhist life of worldly detachment. It is a narrative which echoes that of the Buddha’s earliest disciples, nobles and aristocrats who enjoyed the finest worldly pleasures but who yet found human existence meaningless and filled with suffering. However, for the most part, I came across people like Dao or Art, who sought not to escape *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth, but to better their present situations.



Teeming with shopping malls, downtown Bangkok epitomizes the intense contemporary preoccupation with consumption, and the brash, secular materiality it represents perhaps renders it an unlikely site for expressions of the sacred and spiritual. Nevertheless, the inextricable intermingling in Bangkok of these two spheres, which have conventionally been considered separate from one another in approaches to the study of religion and social life, is not at all unique. It has also been observed in many others of the world's millennial metropolises, with pervasive religious commodification and the proliferation of 'cults' and religious movements well-documented phenomena in today's increasingly urbanized societies.

The emergence of 'new', primarily urban, middle class groups in Asia and across the rest of the world is another epiphenomenon of the forces of globalization. These newly affluent, primarily urban, middle class groups, much like the middle classes in Thailand, are frequently linked to lifestyles of consumption, from which scholars argue they derive much of their identity (Abaza 2001; Chua 2000; Gerke 2000; Jaffrelot & van der Veer 2008; Pinches 1999; Young 1999). Yet, in today's consumer society of designer handbags, luxury cars, and shopping malls, what role does religion play in the lives of the educated, politicized, and cosmopolitan new urban middle classes in Asia and beyond? What is the significance of spirituality in connection to status competition, prestige, and political struggle? And, what kinds of faiths are to be found in modern, rational educations and secular worldviews?

Although the soteriological striving for 'proximate' rather than 'radical' salvation (Spiro 1970) is nothing new, the pervasive influence of global markets, the unraveling of multiple trajectories of modernity, numerous emergent new middle classes, the rise of consumption and commodification as defining characteristics of social life, and the extreme religious diversification and transformation that have accompanied these phenomena, have added new twists to the ever-present tension between this-worldly and other-worldly salvation.

Thailand is just one context where such questions are more critical than ever. As a result, in this paper, I examine the persistence of discourses linking Buddhist virtue with power and status, which yet contrast profoundly with a system which in practice rewards effort, education, and ability to a small extent, but social connections and the use of monetary payments to a greater extent. Accordingly, I suggest that it is necessary to take into account the surrounding milieu of intense social competition which defines everyday life for Bangkok and much of Asia's new urban middle classes in order to gain a better understanding of why phenomena such as prosperity cults have emerged so strikingly in these contexts. I also suggest that contemporary

politicized religious movements evince both continuities and discontinuities in the deployment of Buddhism as an instrument of political legitimation in Thai society.

## Political Legitimation and the Merit-Power Nexus

Just a few months after my most recent field trip to Bangkok, Ratchaprasong (and surrounding downtown Bangkok) became the site of a months-long demonstration on the part of members of the red-shirted anti-government protest movement known as the United Front for Dictatorship against Democracy (UDD). The UDD were agitating for an end to what they claim is the unfair system of elite privilege and entitlement which relegates the rural and urban poor to the status of second-class citizens. As violence spread throughout a burning Bangkok, the demonstration eventually ended on 19 May 2010 with an army crackdown and the lingering promise of yet more turmoil ahead. It is the latest chapter in an intensifying crisis of legitimacy for the establishment elite in Thailand, who have long drawn on Buddhist discourses for purposes of political legitimation.

Doctrinally a religion of radical otherworldly salvation, Theravada Buddhism has, in practice, played a key role in projects of worldly power and status accumulation from ancient times to the contemporary era. The spread and growth of Theravada Buddhism symbiotically accompanied the rise of large and powerful Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms (Schober 1995:309). Within the context of bloody and intense succession conflicts (Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1976), a ruler's position at the apex of the Thai social hierarchy, as well as his political legitimacy and moral authority, were traditionally drawn primarily from Hindu-Buddhist *dhammaraja*<sup>3</sup> and *devaraja*<sup>4</sup> concepts of kingship, as well as possession of palladia and regalia such

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3 According to the concept of the *dhammaraja*, the king's morality and righteousness are perceived to be closely related to the prosperity of his kingdom and the wellbeing of his subjects. The conspicuous performance of Buddhist acts to revalidate one's charisma was thus an important feature of *dhammaraja* kingship. This included making pilgrimages to an important shrine, erecting new religious edifices, temples, and monasteries, or restoring old ones, supporting the Buddhist monkhood, or *sangha* (or purifying it when necessary), temporary ordination into the *sangha*, participation in merit-making rituals and ceremonies, and revision of important religious texts such as the *Tipitaka* and the *Traiphuum Phra Ruang* (Keyes 1987:38; Somboon 1993:106, 116-120).

4 A Hindu concept of absolute kingship whereby kings were believed to be incarnations or descendents of gods, or both, and accordingly worshipped, venerated, and feared (Heine-Geldern 1956:7).

as the revered Emerald Buddha (Heine-Geldern 1956; Reynolds 1978; Tambiah 1982, 1984:241).<sup>5</sup>

More recent times have seen the rise and dominance of what is referred to in the literature as ‘establishment’, ‘state’, or ‘Bangkok’ Buddhism, a homogenized form of the religion promoted vigorously – to the detriment of regionalized variations of religious belief and practice – by a succession of governments in order to buttress political authority (see Kamala 1997). Rooted in the reformist royalist Thammayut sect of the *sangha* founded by King Mongkut (Rama IV), state Buddhism has proven to be immensely valuable on both a practical and a symbolic level in consolidating the power of the Thai state. The use of Buddhist monks in government programs provided the state with a means by which to extend its control over the developing country. Moreover, Buddhism became deeply entrenched as a potent symbol of Thai nationalism.

A succession of laws pertaining to *sangha* organization and administration were integral to the centralization of the *sangha*, the homogenization of Thai Buddhism, and the emergence of state Buddhism as an institutionalized instrument of the government. State Buddhism has two main features: control over the *sangha* by the king or state, and protection and support of the *sangha* by the same parties. These ideas have existed in rudimentary form since the Sukhothai era. Nevertheless, before modern times, state control over the *sangha* was limited to royal monasteries in and around the capital city, and commoner monasteries remained completely unorganized (Ishii 1986:72). As such, state Buddhism can only be said to have emerged in its present form at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when Prince Vajiranana (who was first head of the Thammayut sect and later of the whole Thai *sangha*) commenced the process of creating a unified *sangha* in which the same Buddhist tradition would be practiced and communicated towards the laity (Keyes 1987:58).

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5 The second source of legitimacy on which rulers could draw was the possession of various palladia and regalia, relics attributed with sacral powers (*saksitanuphap*) and energy (*barami*), as well as protective virtue (Tambiah 1984:209), and which remained with the possessor only while he was virtuous and worthy. For instance, it is believed that prosperity reigns wherever the Emerald Buddha (Thailand’s most famous and revered Buddha image and the palladium of the kingdom) resides. However, in the event of kingly misrule and civil turmoil, it moves to a more worthy capital (Tambiah 1984:214). Thus, it has said to have resided in Sri Lanka, Pagan, Ayutthaya, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Angkor, and in Laos (Tambiah 1984:217).

In essence, state Buddhism performed its legitimatory function by providing interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine which justified the patterns of social and political relations and the key policies of the government of the day, as well as by reflecting a system of *sangha* administration parallel to that of the political structure. Consequently, each major shift in the political system in the twentieth century was accompanied by a restructuring of the *sangha* (Jackson 1989:63).

The present Thai political scene has been defined of late by incessant turmoil pertaining to an intense succession crisis in the wake of an aging king and an unpopular heir. Within this conflict, key players on all sides of the conflict have drawn on religiously charged imagery and discourses in attempts to justify their moral authority and validate their claims for political supremacy. Nonetheless, the protracted nature of the conflict highlights in striking fashion the difficulties in claiming political legitimacy within the context of a widespread belief that the *sangha* has lost its purity and sanctity. This is the result of bureaucratization, corruption, frequent headline-grabbing scandals involving the laxity of monks in upholding the *Vinaya* code of conduct, involvement in politics and the national development programs of the Sarit era of the late 50s and early 60s. This weakening of one of the Thai ruling establishment's main sources of authority has exacerbated the political crisis of legitimacy it has experienced since the beginnings of contact with the West and the overthrow of the absolute monarchy.

It is also indicative of a decline of belief in merit and karma to explain an individual's position at the apex of the Thai social hierarchy and his concomitant right to rule. This is drawn from a fundamental paradox in Theravada Buddhist cosmology: the notion that as an individual progresses closer to achieving nirvana, or non-existence, he or she is reborn into a better *samsaric* existence. This paradox in turn forms the crux of the merit-power thesis, which holds that as the result of accumulation of *bun* (Buddhist merit) accumulated from past existences, all sentient beings, from heavenly deities, to humans, to the lowliest insect, occupy varying positions in an enormous cosmic hierarchy with the king at the very apex (Hanks 1962; 1975).

Historically, Buddhist cosmological notions linking position on the social hierarchy with an individual's store of Buddhist merit (*bun*) accumulated from past lives were laid out in a text authored by King Lithai of the Sukhothai era (approximately 1238-1428 CE) called the *Traiphuum Phra Ruang* ('The Three Worlds of Phra Ruang'), which was a description of the structure of the universe, the relationship between merit and power (which placed the king at the apex of the social hierarchy), and the

cyclical processes of death and rebirth for sentient beings. The cosmo-ideological underpinnings of *Traiphuum* discouraged social and political protest and encouraged people to accept the suffering of present status by justifying an individual's social position as a consequence of his or her past karma (Somboon 1993:114). It is an official ideology that has been deployed by the Thai ruling elite to great effect, linking inseparably power, social status and religious virtue and leading – theoretically at least – to the ‘magico-religious view that right is might’ (Wilson 1979:282; see also Wilson 1962).<sup>6</sup>

The merit-power paradigm has also been highly influential in scholarly understandings of Thai social structure. As Lucien Hanks (1962:102) has argued, within such a system, social status is not fixed by birth, and ‘a man rises because of merit and is accepted without regard for his humble origin. Indeed, a humble origin implies a considerable store of merit and might increase his prestige.’ Consequently, this leads to a high degree of social mobility, for,

[b]y emphasis on status rather than person, the Thai equip themselves for mobility and a transient position. To a greater extent than in the West, the insignia transform the person. To a lesser degree do people speak slightingly of the ‘newly arrived’ or seek flaws in the clothing that intends to make the gentleman. Thus, the uniqueness of the person, his personal identity, subserves his position on the hierarchy (Hanks 1962:103).

However, Basham (1975:14) has questioned the validity of such culture-personality approaches, arguing that fieldwork interview data reveals a number of findings that run contra to the merit-power nexus, including the notion that belief in merit is not at all uniform among Thai, that ‘merit’ can vary in meaning from ‘chance’, to ‘character’, to the usual concept of ‘karmic’ merit, and that the degree of acquaintance shared by individuals will affect the likelihood of ‘merit’ – in its strict Buddhist sense – being accepted as a relevant explanation of observed phenomena. In other words, as Basham (1989:129) points out,

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6 Geertz (1980:102) has similarly argued that in the classic Balinese state, ‘the ceremonial life of the classical *negara* was as much a form of rhetoric as it was of devotion, a florid, boasting assertion of spiritual power...there is an unbreakable inner connection between social rank and religious condition. The state cult was not a cult of the state. It was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine.’ In other words, ‘the state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies, its semiotic capacity to make inequality enchant’ (Geertz 1980:123).

many Thai who attend merit-making ceremonies, and comport themselves in public as if they subscribed wholly to merit (including, reporting belief to stranger-interviewers), express skepticism concerning merit in more private contexts. Those who *do* profess belief in the concept in a variety of contexts – and, thus, who can probably be considered ‘true’ believers – find its explanatory value dwarfed by more mundane explanations for events which signal fortune or misfortune for those they know personally (see also Basham 1982).

Evers (1979:173) additionally suggests that the merit-power explanation is a line of thought that ‘confuses ideology and social reality’, while Juree and Vicharat (1979:420-421) agree that equating or explaining Thai cultural patterns in terms of a Buddhist world view commits two errors: ‘First, it fails to explain a vast area of human emotions and attitudes that affect daily social interaction. Second, it precludes or renders stagnant other innovative explanations of the causes, origins, and nature of Thai behavior and personality...[leading] to errors, not of misconception, but of oversimplification and limited applicability.’

In short, people who are in positions of power are held to have risen through such factors as wealth, ability, or connections, and in fact, merit and power are perceived by ‘true’ believers to be mutually incompatible due to the amoral quality of power (*amnaad*) (Basham 1989:131). Ultimately, Basham (1989:128) concludes that although ‘the merit and power theme is an integral part of conscious, overtly held Thai culture and not merely an anthropological construction’, there is nonetheless ‘the tendency to grant it excessive explanatory power’, when it might be best considered as part of Thai ‘official culture’. Nevertheless, he contends that, ‘for power-laden contexts, or those in which clients are in surfeit and patrons in short supply, overt behavior which suggests subscription to the merit and power nexus are likely to continue, at least on the part of subordinates’ (Basham 1989:134).

The continued importance of the merit-power nexus to Thai political culture and within the context of the current political conflict is significant. The present king, Bumiphol Adulyadej, has based his political authority on cultivating a charismatic public image of Buddhist worldly detachment, a classic ‘world conqueror and world renouncer’ (Tambiah 1976). In other words, his charisma (*barami*) is drawn from a carefully cultivated *devarajaldhammaraja* image (see Gray 1986; Jackson 2009; Stengs 2008) and the impression that he is above politics, all of it articulated in elaborate ritual and ceremonial machinery reminiscent of the Geertzian (1980) theater state. This is something which obscures the considerable political influence he exerts through strategically placed proxies, dubbed by McCargo (2005) as ‘network monarchy’, with Privy Council (the king’s advisory committee) head Prem Tinsulanonda as the most prominent agent.

Crucially, the king's perceived Buddhist virtue and charisma, and hence, his popularity amongst the people, is something that the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, is seen to lack. In the wake of the king's ill health and the weakening monarchy, a formidable and strategic challenge to power has been made on the part of billionaire telecommunications mogul Thaksin Shinawatra. Yet, even though Thaksin was (and still is) immensely popular amongst a large number of lower class and rural voters, who are the decisive voting bloc in Thai elections, his attempts to challenge the king's rule have to this point been unsuccessful. This is because he is seen as lacking the king's moral authority, and hence, legitimacy, amongst Bangkok's influential middle and upper class elite, who, through yellow-shirt-sporting mass demonstrations of their own under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), have conveyed their refusal to accept both Thaksin, and the voting mandate of the rural voters.

Fielding for much of his presence in Thai politics an endless barrage of corruption allegations – and a conviction for which he is now living in exile – Thaksin represents the elite privilege, entitlement, and cronyism that the middle classes in particular resent as being a substantial barrier to their own upward mobility. This has – in addition to what are seen as the self-serving motives behind his actions in the name of democracy – contrasted strongly with the selfless *bodhisattva* ideal that the king is better able to publicly project and (albeit with the help of draconian *lèse majesté* laws) maintain.

## Prosperity Cults and Modern Reformist Movements

Thailand has long been observed to be an extremely hierarchical society. Yet, rather than creating a more equal social system, the last several decades of economic development created even greater inequalities and vastly complicated the older feudal class system, with one of the most salient developments being the emergence of a new, highly heterogenous, urban middle class. While it is true that middle class status confers a degree of material comfort and security, the fact remains that middle class life in urban Thai society is riddled with anxieties associated with either projecting or maintaining respectable middle class status, or negotiating upward social mobility.

Nowhere is this struggle more intense than in Bangkok, where the cutthroat nature of social competition comprises a stark contrast to popular outsider stereotypes of Thais as the easygoing, cheerful, '*mai pen rai*' ('never mind') people, and Thailand

itself as ‘The Land of Smiles’. While more opportunities are now available to achieve such aspirations (through more widely accessible education, for instance), they are also circumscribed by the extremely pervasive use of social connections and monetary payments in order to get ahead. This is something which has played a significant role in consolidating the power and privilege of the elite.

Adding to previous scholarly critiques of the merit-power thesis, my field research confirms that ‘official’ discourses connecting worldly power and status with Buddhist virtue are jarringly at odds with the reality of everyday life in competitive Bangkok. In fact, of the more than one hundred Thais that I surveyed on the issue, I came across few who attributed social status to karma. Furthermore, while respect and reverence have traditionally been accorded to those in positions of seniority such as parents, monks, and teachers, many informants complained to me that people were now *krengjai* (‘deferential’) towards those who are wealthy (or who projected an image of such).

Furthermore, Taylor suggests that ‘to many new middle-class Thai, the mainstream metaphysical religion contains inherent contradictions which do not connect with rational and empirical bases of the contemporary, economic, and technological order’ (1989:112). Accordingly, I would argue that skepticism concerning the place of traditional Buddhist beliefs in modern society (Jackson 1989; Schober 1995; Suwanna 1990; Taylor 1989, 1990) is expressed in modes of popular religiosity amongst the Thai middle class. As Dee, an accountant working in Silom who worships the Chinese Mahayanist deity Kuan Im<sup>7</sup> (also known as the ‘Goddess of Mercy’), pointed out, ‘People feel like when they take offerings to the *wat*, they don’t get anything back.’ For a large number of similarly-minded middle class individuals, religiosity is oriented not towards traditional forms of merit-making for the sake of accumulating good karma, but towards prosperity cults, which are arguably more logically consistent with what is viewed to be the most significant basis of power and success in contemporary Thai society – namely wealth (for a more detailed discussion, see Vorng 2009). The coexistence of prosperity cults and barriers to social mobility has also been noted by Martin (1995), who observes that Pentecostals and early British Methodists both experienced limitations to advancement because of ‘ceilings’ in societies with rigidly inherited class systems.

John and Jean Comaroff have written extensively and influentially on ‘occult economies’, which they define as the ‘deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for

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7 ‘Kuan Yin’ is the Chinese language version of her name.



material ends' (1999:279). They further characterize this phenomenon as a 'capitalism that presents itself in the gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005:202). Additionally, occult economies are linked to the increasing relevance of consumption in shaping selfhood, society, identity, and epistemic reality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:293).

In Thailand, a combination of factors, including the state's retreat from imposing a centralized model of national religious culture and the concomitant rapid expansion of the market economy in the 1980s and 90s led to a similar proliferation of occult economies based on a diverse range of prosperity religions which linked supernatural forces with commerce, market speculation, and luck-based wealth creation (Jackson 2009:370; see also Roberts 1995 for examples in other social contexts). Phenomena such as the booming trade in amulets, cults (*latthi phithi*) centering around charismatic monks and certain spirits and deities (e.g. the Kuan Im, King Chulalongkorn/King Rama V, and Princess Phra Suphan Kanlaya cults, as well as cults revolving around charismatic monks such as Luang Phor Ngen and Luang Phor Khun), the production and sale of religious products such as hagiographical publications and DVD and CD recordings, religious festivals, pilgrimages to sacred sites, and practices relating to the huge Thai lottery industry, have become common elements of the Thai religious landscape (Jackson 1999a and b; Pattana 2008; Taylor 2008; Wilson 2008).

The commercialization of Thai Buddhism and the phenomenon of prosperity cults are broadly referred to in Thailand under the umbrella term *phuttha phanit* ('commercial Buddhism'), which 'represents a religio-cultural space where popular Buddhism has converged with market economy, consumer's practices and the quest for personal and cultural identities' (Pattana 2008:121). Within the discourses and practices of *phuttha phanit*, 'individuals' wealth, luck and success are positioned at the forefront, rather than conventional Buddha's teachings' (Pattana 2008:139). Furthermore, according to Pattana (2010:565), this conversion of 'religious symbols and institutions into marketable profit and consumable commodities' means that piety and devotion emphasize consumption rather than obligation. He additionally (2008:120-121) suggests that while merit (*bun*) and charismatic power (*barami*) are 'cosmic and social indicators of a person's status in the Thai cultural world...in the prosperity cults, *bun* and *barami* [are] symbolically and materially reduced to moral capital or religious-sounding idiom to encourage people to achieve wealth and power by means of religious commodities.'

In addition to the prosperity cults, Thailand has seen the emergence of Buddhist reformist groups such as Santi Asok (an ascetic Buddhist movement founded by the monk Phra Bodhirak Bhikku) and the Suan Mok group (founded by Buddhassa Bhikku) which emphasize this-worldly religious attainment and social activism for lay devotees as well as monks. The new movements are associated with anti-establishment, reformist ideological systems, and manifest a distinct dissatisfaction with conventional political structures. As with prosperity cults, the appeal of the reformist movements is indicative of widespread disillusionment with the *sangha* and its perceived loss of sanctity as a result of transgression of Vinaya rules, corruption, and involvement in government programs. As such, these movements can also be seen as 'attempts to fulfil the roles of the traditional *Sangha* organisation, which has become inactive, non-committed, and uninformed' (Suwanna 1990:405). Because the legitimacy of the political establishment has long been predicated on the sanctity of the *sangha*, the *sangha's* lack of spiritual potency has produced an opening for challenges to the established political authority.

Besides a pervasive disenchantment with the ability of traditional Buddhism to meet the demands created by a modern society, the increasing popularity of the cults in recent years is also associated with the ongoing struggle for power between the establishment elite and the new middle class. Essentially, the latter has pushed for a degree of political participation commensurate with its growing economic significance. Thus, the popularity of the movements can be seen, on one level, as a reflection of this ongoing political struggle. Just as traditional Buddhism has been used as an instrument of legitimation by the established Thai elite, so these newer interpretations of Buddhism advocated by the religious movements have served a similar purpose. The ideological system espoused by each movement resonates with and hence becomes popular with certain sections of urban Thai society. In sum, as Jackson (1989:115) argues,

the largest movements, in terms of the numbers of lay adherents, tend to be those whose interpretations of Buddhist teaching and practice reflect the political aspirations and economic interests of a certain section of Thai society, and which consequently attract significant numbers of followers from that social stratum. Most of the larger urban Buddhist movements thus have a socially identifiable audience and it is possible to characterise such movements in terms of the socio-economic position of their audiences as being pro-establishment, anti-establishment, intellectual-professional, lower middle class, and so on.

These new religious movements are crucial to an understanding of contemporary Thai Buddhism. Their reformist, rationalist interpretations of the doctrines depict

an image of society which departs from the authoritarian rule of past and present Thai society. Furthermore, the leaders of the cults make strong claims, based on their interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine, about the inherently democratic quality of Buddhist principles and the importance of liberal social values and the social and political rights of individuals (Jackson 1989:123-124).

Buddhadasa, for instance, was strongly influenced by the religious reforms initiated by Prince Mongkut and Prince Wachirayan. He was the first Thai Theravada thinker to incorporate concepts from the Mahayana and Zen traditions of Buddhism, as well as key ideas from other religions, especially Christianity, in his teachings. One example is his utilization of the Mahayanist concept of 'emptiness' as the central realization of the *dhamma* in practice. He has also argued that parallels exist between certain Christian and Buddhist concepts. For instance, he contends that the notion of the *dhamma* or natural law can be equated with God, and that *nibbana* corresponds to the Christian idea of salvation (Suwanna 1990:399).

Despite his eschewal of personal involvement in politics, Buddhadasa has been an important intellectual and political influence on contemporary Thai Buddhism. He was the first Buddhist reformist in Thailand to expound Buddhism outside the state ideology and was highly critical of the existing political system (Suwanna 1990:398). However, as opposed to other reformist monks, Buddhadasa was based away from Bangkok and *sangha* politics, and was happy to simply write, publish, and lecture. Thus, he was not perceived as a threat to the administration of the *sangha* or as attempting to gain political power in the *sangha* hierarchy (Jackson 1989:128-129). Rather, his political significance lies in 'the actions of those who use his ideas and interpretations to justify their criticisms of the establishment and political authoritarianism' (Jackson 1989:132). Examples of such individuals include the lay Buddhist social critic Sulak Sivaraksa and former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang, the latter of whom is a prominent member of the ascetic movement Santi Asok.

While Buddhadasa's critique of the *sangha* and the political establishment is primarily theoretical, the controversial monk Phra Bodhirak (who is also strongly influenced by Buddhadasa's writings) and his religious movement, Santi Asok, have put this theoretical rejection of the teachings of establishment Buddhism into practice by rejecting the administrative authority of the *Mahatherasamakhom* (Council of Elders) and refusing to be absorbed into either sect (*Mahanikai* and *Thammayut-nikai*) of the official *sangha*. During his early years as a monk, Bodhirak gave numerous fiery sermons which won him both supporters and enemies in the Buddhist establishment (Suwanna 1990:403). These sermons included criticisms of other

monks at Wat Asokaram, where he was ordained and where he stayed for two years after his ordination, for being lazy, eating meat, smoking, and chewing betel nut (Jackson 1989:160). He eventually left the monastery and with his followers set up a religious centre in Nakhorn Pathom Province (Suwanna 1990:403).

Santi Asok's slogan is 'eat little, use little, work a lot, and give the rest to society'. The group advocates a return to a simple, agricultural way of life, attacking capitalist consumer culture and modern materialism as the source of many social ills (Schober 1995:321). Whilst there is overlap between Buddhadasa's and Bodhirak's supporters, the latter's emphasis on strictness in practice as opposed to the doctrinal logical consistency means that he appeals to a less highly educated section of the middle class, who perceive Buddhism more in terms of personal practice, than Buddhadasa's supporters, who tend to see Buddhism in terms of ideas and ideology (Jackson 1989:166).

The group requires strict moral behavior from its members. This includes following the 'Ten Commandments', basic guidelines for behavior which include abstaining from eating meat, eating more than once a day, taking any addictive substances, sleeping between 5am and 6pm, wearing shoes, using a bag or umbrella, owning money or other unnecessary things, making or sprinkling holy water, making Buddha images and amulets, and performing sacrificial rites involving the use of fire, smoke, or water (Suwanna 1990:403; Taylor 1989:121). As Suwanna (1990:403-404) suggests, these rules are a direct critique of Thai monks in general who, as has been mentioned earlier, are perceived to have lost touch with core Buddhist values. Among monks, nuns, and lay followers, there is a strong sense of community, as is evidenced by their communal mode of living, the group's self-reference as '*dhamma* family', and the reference to Bodhirak's teachings as 'Chao Asok', meaning Asok tribe or clan (Taylor 1989:122). Moreover, members distinguish themselves from the mainstream Thai *sangha* and laity by the wearing of reddish-brown robes for monks (*sangha* monks wear saffron-colored robes) and traditional peasant dress codes for lay members (Schober 1995:322).

The Santi Asok group has been criticized for supporting the election campaigns of prominent lay followers, the most well known being the political activist and former governor of Bangkok, General Chamlong Srimuang (Schober 1995:322). Chamlong became a strict follower of Bodhirak in the 1970s, adopting vegetarianism and celibacy, as well as other austere practices normally only followed by *dhutanga* (ascetic) monks (Jackson 1989:182-183). He later went on to form the now-dismantled Phalang Tham ('Force of the Dharma') political party. Jackson (1989:187) suggests that 'Chamlong's strict Buddhist asceticism can be interpreted as part of an attempt

to integrate the religious and secular bases of political legitimation in Thailand...by directly participating in and usurping the practice-based religious authority of the *sangha*'. Whilst Chamlong's lifestyle and strong moral political stance has attracted significant support among the Bangkok middle class, detractors have also criticized him for being extremely conservative. Most recently, he has become heavily embroiled in the current political crisis as one of the key leaders of the PAD, and members of Santi Asok have been prominent at the yellow-shirted protests under the banner of the 'Dharma Army'.

## Conclusion

The continued deployment of the merit-power nexus in Thai political culture, particularly within the context of the current political crisis, shows that it is still an important official discourse of political legitimation in contemporary struggles over power. However, the nature of the relationship between state, religion, and society is changing. These transforming dynamics are highlighted especially clearly in investigations of Buddhist middle class religiosity in Bangkok. In this paper, I have argued that in order to make sense of this religiosity and to appreciate its significance, it is necessary to take into account the broader context of middle class social and political aspirations – for wealth, status, and a political influence commensurate with growing cultural and economic relevance.

The push to achieve these aspirations is especially timely within the context of the weakening of institutionalized 'state' Buddhism and the resultant crisis of legitimacy experienced by the ruling elite. However, the difficulties involved in moving upwards – including barriers of ethnicity and race, education and upbringing, and other forms of social capital – and the monopolization of the elite in terms of opportunities render highly appealing the possibilities (no matter how remote) offered by prosperity cults such as that surrounding the Jatukham amulet craze or the worshipping of potent spirits and deities such as Brahma, Kuan Im, or King Rama V. In addition, the prosperity cults comprise a further indication of declining belief in orthodox metaphysical concepts such as merit and karma.

Reformist movements like that of Suan Mok and Santi Asok have provided Buddhist ideologies to legitimate the political agendas of certain segments of the middle class, and hence appear to represent alternative visions of society. However, the question remains whether, in facilitating the status and political aspirations of the

middle class attempting to move upwards within an established social order, they actually contribute to reproducing the social order rather than providing the impetus to reform it.

Important questions remain unasked concerning the intersection of aspirations and religiosity within that large segment of the Buddhist middle classes of Asia whose soteriological strivings are oriented not toward the achievement of nirvanic non-existence, but rather, a more enjoyable samsaric existence of attachment to worldly pleasures, power and influence. To be specific, missing from the discussion is a detailed investigation of exactly how these phenomena figure into processes of status competition and status differentiation amongst middle class groups. This is a particularly striking gap in light of the constant attention directed towards consumption and commodities as markers of middle class lifestyle and identity, as well as the characteristic emphasis on achieving upward mobility in middle class life. It is a pressing avenue of research, and may possibly offer a productive comparative basis for the study of middle class religiosity in Asian megacities where similar kinds of phenomena can be observed.

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