



THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL OFFICE OF BUDDHISM IN PROMOTING MONASTIC ADAPTATION AMID GLOBAL SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: In the context of accelerating globalization, digital disruption, and socio-political transformation, Thailand faces an increasing demand for governance models that are both ethically grounded and culturally responsive. As a predominantly Buddhist country, Thailand possesses a longstanding tradition of intertwining spiritual leadership with communal and civic functions. Thai Buddhist monks (Phra Song), once regarded primarily as spiritual guides, were now repositioning themselves as active agents in public affairs. This study aimed to investigate the evolving roles of Thai Buddhist monks in public administration, examined how Buddhist moral principles were integrated into policy and service delivery, and identified institutional opportunities and challenges in fostering monk-state collaboration toward ethical and community-centered governance.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis over a one-year period (2023-2024). Thirty key informants were purposively selected from three stakeholder groups: Senior monks involved in community development, government officials overseeing religious and social affairs, and lay scholars or local leaders familiar with both Buddhism and policy processes. Interviews were conducted in-person and virtually, recorded with consent, and analyzed using thematic coding. Documentary sources included state policies, Buddhist canonical texts, and relevant academic literature. Triangulation was used to validate findings across different data types and perspectives.

Main Results: The study revealed a significant shift in the role of Thai monks from primarily ceremonial and spiritual duties to active involvement in diverse public functions such as health promotion, environmental sustainability, youth development, and social welfare. This change was particularly evident in rural areas with limited state capacity, and monks served as informal administrators and moral leaders. Although formal state systems remain largely secular, there was a growing appreciation of the potential for Buddhist principles to enhance governance outcomes. Core values such as Karuṇā (Compassion), Saṅgahavatthu (Social Harmony), and the Majjhima Paṭipadā (Middle Path) were being applied both formally and informally in public service initiatives, especially where



state and temple collaboration exists. However, significant barriers remain, including fragmented communication channels, a lack of formal institutional linkages between the Sangha and state agencies, and a general underutilization of monks' civic potential.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: The research showed that the integration of Buddhadhamma into public administration goes beyond symbolic references. Buddhist ethical frameworks offer concrete guidance for promoting participatory governance, conflict resolution, and equitable service provision. The study highlights how monks' involvement was not simply a religious duty but a form of moral public service, rooted in the Dhamma's emphasis on compassion, mindfulness, interdependence, and ethical leadership. These teachings serve as soft infrastructure to cultivate trust, legitimacy, and moral accountability in local governance. Moreover, monks trained in both spiritual and administrative competencies were found to be more effective collaborators with governmental and civil society actors, suggesting a new generation of hybrid civic leaders.

Conclusions: This study contributed original empirical and conceptual insights to the emerging field of religion-informed governance. It showed that Buddhist monks can function as co-governors in ethical, community-responsive, and culturally legitimate ways. Policy recommendations include establishing formal coordination mechanisms between the Sangha and state, developing integrated training programs that bridge Buddhist ethics and administrative skills, and institutionalizing participatory governance models that recognize monks as partners in public service. In a time of rapid societal change, such integrative approaches offer Thailand a culturally grounded pathway toward sustainable and ethical public administration.

Keywords: National Office of Buddhism, Monastic Adaptation, Global Social Transformations

Introduction

For centuries, Buddhism has played a central role in shaping Thai society's ethical and spiritual life. Traditionally, Buddhist monks were not just religious figures; They also acted as teachers, community advisors, and even mediators in local conflicts. With temples located at the heart of most villages, the Sangha (Monastic Community) was deeply tied to daily life, supported by close kinship-based communities and a relatively stable social structure (Buaban, 2021). The Sangha's administration was historically centralized under the Supreme Sangha Council (Mahathera Samakhom), mainly focusing on scriptural studies, discipline, and moral education in schools (Phrakru Siridhammapirat et al., 2024). This model worked well in a slower-changing world, one mostly untouched by Western thinking, globalization, or digital technologies. However, in recent decades, Thailand has undergone a significant transformation. Globalization, digital media, and shifting cultural norms have started to pull apart the traditional societal framework, especially in cities. Nowadays, many young Thais, especially those in urban areas, increasingly turn to science and secular worldviews, rather than religion. As a result, monks no longer played the central role in everyday life they once did (Berger, 1967); (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). As Berger pointed out, religious institutions in modern societies often become more private and less public.



That is what we are seeing in many parts of Thailand today traditional preaching no longer resonates strongly with younger audiences like it used to.

This shift was further compounded by the lack of institutional support for monks to adapt to today's challenges. The National Office of Buddhism (NOB) oversees religious affairs. However, it focuses mostly on maintaining ceremonies and rituals rather than equipping monks with skills for the modern world (Thaisuntad, 2023). Training programs in areas like digital tools, communication, or sustainable development were still rare and often not well organized. On top of that, there was a disconnect between national-level religious policies and the realities faced by local temples. This created a patchy approach to reform, where some areas make progress while others fall behind Phrarat Sittivetee et al. (2023). It is worth noting that religious institutions do not have to become irrelevant. Casanova (1994) argued that they can still have a positive role in social development if there's real collaboration across sectors, including policy, academia, and civil society. Similarly, Satasut (2019) pointed out that any successful Buddhist reform would need cooperation between the state, the Sangha, and civic groups.

Interestingly, Keyes (1989) discussed how Buddhism has historically had the power to influence Thai politics and society, especially during times of change. That potential still exists today, but the NOB must take a more strategic role to harness it. This project looks at how the NOB actually helped the Sangha adapt to today's fast-changing world. It's not just about giving monks new skills; It's also about bridging religious life with the real-life struggles people face now. The research also tries to find down-to-earth, long-term ways to make that more effective. At the heart of it, this isn't only about preserving Buddhist traditions. It's about making sure that Buddhism can still guide people morally in a world that's constantly shifting.

Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the evolving roles of Thai Buddhist monks in public administration, examined how Buddhist moral principles were integrated into policy and service delivery, and identified institutional opportunities and challenges in fostering monk-state collaboration toward ethical and community-centered governance.

Methodology

Stakeholder Engagement:

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how the National Office of Buddhism (NOB) in Thailand supported Buddhist monks in adapting to ongoing global social transformations. To gain a broad yet detailed understanding, key stakeholders were purposively selected (Charmaz, 2014). Participants were drawn from three core groups: 1) Senior officers and policymakers at the NOB (5 Participants); 2) Monks actively engaged in digital outreach and social initiatives across urban and rural communities (10 Participants); and 3) Academics, policy experts, and laypeople with close interactions with the monastic community (5 Participants). The diverse composition of stakeholders allowed the research to reflect a wide spectrum of experiences, expectations, and insights related to monastic adaptation in a rapidly evolving socio-cultural context.



Implementation Process:

The research was conducted between June 2023 and May 2024, covering both central administrative locations and community-based temples. Instruments for data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. These tools were validated by experts in Buddhist studies, public policy, and governance to ensure relevance and reliability. The semi-structured interview guide focused on themes such as institutional strategy, leadership roles, digital engagement, and policy implementation processes. The research also made use of digital communication platforms, like LINE and Zoom, which proved especially helpful when geographic constraints limited in-person interaction.

Data Collection:

Three main data collection methods were used: First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants across policy and practitioner levels. The flexibility of this format allowed participants to expand on their views, particularly in areas relating to policy design, challenges in religious adaptation, and their personal or institutional experiences with digital and community initiatives; Second, focus group discussions were held with monks and laypeople who regularly interact, allowing for rich, interactive dialogue about the evolving role of monastics in the digital era. These sessions surfaced key concerns and hopes about the sustainability of monastic roles in contemporary society; And third, documentary research was used to examine policy texts, internal reports from the NOB, strategic frameworks, and academic work related to religious governance and adaptation strategies. Digital tools were essential throughout the data collection phase. Online interviews via Google Meet and Zoom provided flexibility and a more relaxed environment, which often led to more open and detailed responses. Informal communication through messaging apps also allowed for follow-up and clarification without disrupting the daily routines of the participants.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by elements of narrative analysis to capture contextual nuances. Audio recordings from interviews and focus groups were transcribed and reviewed to identify recurring patterns, ideas, and themes such as policy gaps, technology integration, and public expectations of the monkhood. Codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting both the challenges and strategic opportunities faced by the NOB. Throughout the analysis, triangulation was employed to ensure credibility, comparing findings across sources and methods. An audit trail was maintained to document decisions and analytical steps, supporting transparency and dependability (Morse & Richards, 2002). This approach aimed to produce actionable insights and policy recommendations that align with the lived realities of Thai monks and the structural role of the NOB in shaping religious life in a changing world.

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the roles and adaptations of Thai Buddhist monks within the evolving landscape of Buddhist public service amidst global socio-political transformations. Conducted over a one-year period (2023-2024; B.E. 2566-2567),



the research adopts a dual-method approach: In-depth interviews and documentary analysis. This methodology aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) advocacy for context-sensitive, exploratory inquiry into complex human phenomena, particularly within spiritual and value-laden domains. Furthermore, the study draws on Phramaha Pongthep Papakro (Loprsoet) (2021) interpretive framework, which emphasizes religious agency and the performative dimensions of Buddhist civic engagement as essential to understanding public religiosity.

Stakeholder Engagement:

To ensure a multidimensional perspective, the research identifies and engages three key stakeholder groups: 1) Senior monks actively involved in community development and social service; 2) Government officials responsible for religious affairs and administrative oversight; and 3) Academics and community leaders with expertise in Buddhist ethics and socio-cultural transformation. A total of 30 participants (10 From Each Stakeholder Group) were selected through purposive sampling, based on their expertise, experience, and relevance to the research objectives. This was a deliberate sampling strategy supported by triangulation of perspectives, enhancing the credibility of the findings, and was consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018) principles of rigorous participant selection in qualitative research.

Implementation Process:

The research commenced with an extensive literature review focused on Buddhist principles of governance, moral leadership, and public service delivery. Insights from this review informed the development of the interview protocol and guided the thematic framing of the study. Following institutional ethical approval, participants were contacted and provided with clear information about the research purpose, confidentiality, and their rights as informants. Interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and virtual formats, depending on participant availability and geographic location. Each interview lasted approximately 15-30 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent, then transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Concurrently, the study undertook document analysis, reviewing policy papers, canonical Buddhist texts, state administrative guidelines, and recent academic literature relevant to Buddhist public administration. The analytical procedures adhered to accepted standards for documentary analysis in qualitative research.

Data Collection and Data Analysis:

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and systematic document analysis. The study applied thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, discursive themes, and institutional tensions. Coding was conducted manually using an iterative process, with findings regularly validated through peer debriefings and analytical memos to enhance inter-coder reliability and confirmability. Methodological triangulation, the integration of interview data with documentary sources, was employed to strengthen the validity of the findings and ensure data convergence. This was a comprehensive analytical strategy that enabled the construction of an empirically grounded understanding of how Thai Buddhist monks contributed to public administration,



particularly within a Buddhist moral framework that was increasingly shaped by globalization, digitalization, and shifting societal values (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as shown in Figure 1.

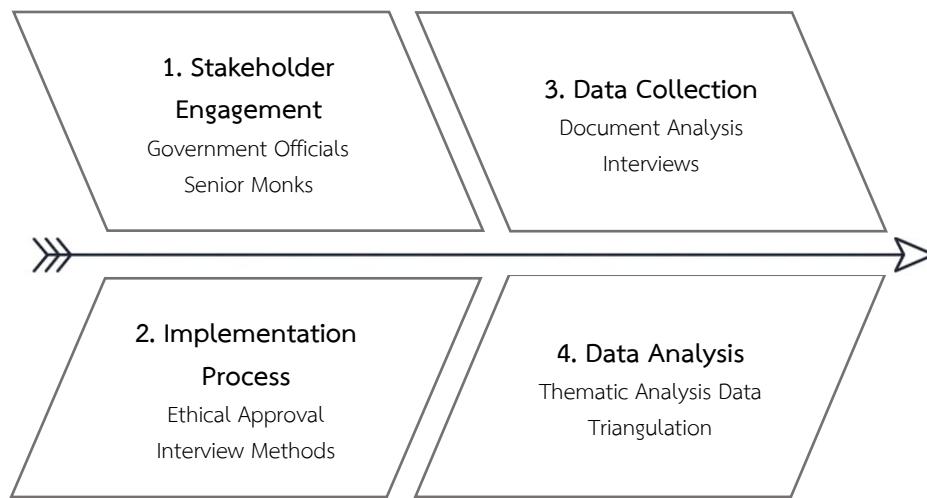


Figure 1 Analysis of the Roles of Thai Monks in Public Administration

Results and Discussion

Findings Related to Objective 1: The Evolving Roles of Thai Buddhist Monks in Public Administration Amidst Global Social Transformation. The findings related to the first research objective revealed a significant transition in the functional roles of Thai Buddhist monks, from traditional religious and ceremonial responsibilities to more diverse and engaged roles in contemporary public affairs. The study showed that monks were increasingly involved in community development, conflict mediation, social welfare, and environmental stewardship, marking a paradigmatic shift from purely spiritual figures to quasi-public actors within the broader governance framework. This transformation was deeply influenced by forces such as globalization, changing socio-cultural dynamics, and the evolving relationship between religious institutions and the state. As Larsson (2018) emphasizes, the Thai Sangha should not be viewed as a monolithic religious entity but as an institutionally governed body integrated into the apparatus of the modern Thai state. This institutional structure has led monks to assume dual roles: As moral-religious leaders and as informal agents of public administration. Monks were frequently called upon to serve as intermediaries between state agencies and grassroots communities, to offer moral legitimacy in policy discourse, and to safeguard cultural continuity amid external disruptions. This aligns with Phrakru Arunsutalangkarn (2023) argument that effective monastic leadership in the context of globalization requires a redefinition of temple governance incorporating principles from modern public administration, such as participatory decision-making, transparency, and responsiveness. Interview data reinforces these theoretical insights. Senior monks recounted their involvement in village planning committees, youth education programs, and public health campaigns. Community members also acknowledged the monks' moral authority and their ability to influence local decision-making processes in ways that elected officials often cannot. One informant noted that "The abbot was



the only person that everyone listened to during village meetings, even the local council." Thus, the evolving role of Thai Buddhist monks reflects not merely a passive response to global pressures but a strategic adaptation to the demands of contemporary governance and socio-cultural transformation. By leveraging traditional Buddhist values within modern governance frameworks, monks were increasingly positioned as hybrid actors merging spiritual legitimacy with civic functionality to support ethical, inclusive, and community-based public service delivery.

Findings Related to Objective 2: The Integration of Buddhist Principles into Public Administration and Policy Implementation in Thailand. In addressing the second objective, the study uncovers a nuanced yet evolving interface between Buddhist moral philosophy and contemporary administrative practices in Thailand. The analysis of interview data from monks, government officials, and community leaders revealed a growing acknowledgment of the relevance and utility of Buddhist ethical principles in supporting good governance, participatory policymaking, and social cohesion despite the predominantly secular framework of formal public institutions. While state administrative systems continue to rely on legal-rational norms and standardized procedures, stakeholders increasingly recognize the value of Buddhist teachings in addressing governance challenges such as conflict resolution, inclusive service delivery, and community empowerment. Notably, senior monks and village leaders consistently referred to core Buddhist concepts such as *sanghavatthu* (Principles of Harmonious Social Relations), *karuṇā* (Compassion), and *Majjhima paṭipadā* (The Middle Path) as guiding values for ethical leadership and public integrity. These moral tenets, according to several respondents, can serve as normative frameworks that enhance public administration by promoting moral discretion, deliberative consensus, and social equity. For example, participants cited cases where local temples cooperated with subdistrict administrative organizations (SAOs) to co-produce public services ranging from health education and poverty alleviation to environmental sustainability projects. Such initiatives reflect an emergent form of faith-based collaborative governance rooted in local Buddhist traditions. These findings align with Subrahmanyam (2018) conceptualization of Thai Buddhism as engaged in a "Worldly Deal," a strategic blending of spiritual values with state-led development and regulatory regimes. Moreover, the work of Phra Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto) (2009) reinforces the view that enduring social transformation must be grounded in moral cultivation and spiritual consciousness, rather than being solely dependent on technocratic reform or institutional restructuring. The data suggest that Buddhist moral frameworks, if appropriately integrated, can enhance the soft infrastructure of public governance in Thailand by embedding a culture of mindfulness, ethical responsiveness, and communal responsibility. While this integration remains informal and uneven, particularly more prominent in rural areas, it shows clear potential for supporting localized, culturally embedded, and ethically grounded approaches to public administration. To sum up, the incorporation of Buddhist thought into Thai public administration represents both a promising and feasible trajectory. It offers contextually appropriate alternatives to enhance institutional legitimacy, social trust, and



participatory governance, especially amid the broader uncertainties of global political and economic transformation.

Findings Related to Objective 3: Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Collaboration Between the Sangha and State Institutions in Ethical and Community-Centered Governance. In examining the third research objective, the study identified a complex interplay of structural and cultural factors that shape the degree and quality of collaboration between the Buddhist monastic community (The Sangha) and formal state institutions in advancing ethical, community-oriented governance. While there were notable initiatives that showed successful partnerships, significant challenges remain, particularly in terms of institutional coordination, communication, and mutual legitimacy. A primary obstacle revealed through stakeholder interviews was the lack of institutionalized communication channels and the absence of formal coordination mechanisms between the Sangha and state administrative bodies. Many monastic respondents expressed concern that key policies related to moral education, social development, and community welfare were often crafted and implemented by secular authorities without substantive consultation with religious leaders. This was disconnected, resulting in fragmented efforts, missed synergies, and, in some cases, conflicting interventions. These findings resonate with Jones (2008) who argue that while Buddhism in Thailand retains a significant cultural authority, its involvement in state-led reform processes was frequently symbolic or tokenistic, rather than integrated in a meaningful or operational capacity. This was institutional marginalization that limited the capacity of monks to contribute to normative policy discourse and value-based program design, despite their historical role as community leaders. Conversely, the study also highlights several promising opportunities for functional collaboration. Notably, decentralized Sangha networks have independently initiated programs that address urgent social needs, particularly in rural and underserved communities. These include health education campaigns, environmental preservation efforts, and youth rehabilitation programs. Such activities underscore the potential of monastic leadership as an embedded local governance actor, particularly in areas where state presence was minimal. The work of Phra Krawibulkijisunthorn (2011) supported this perspective, emphasizing that effective Sangha governance anchored in collective planning, participatory leadership, and spiritual ethics can serve as a foundation for morality-driven local governance. Furthermore, the study found that monks who have received formal training in public administration, development studies, or social work exhibit greater confidence and capacity to engage with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and cross-sector stakeholders. This points to a critical policy lever: The development of integrated capacity-building programs that blend Buddhist moral teachings with modern governance competencies. Joint training initiatives facilitated by academic institutions, state agencies, and the Sangha Supreme Council could foster shared knowledge systems, administrative fluency, and collaborative problem-solving across institutional divides. To sum up, the pathway toward enhanced monk-state collaboration lies in the National Office of Buddhism (NOB) erization of dialogue, mutual



capacity enhancement, and the recognition of monks not merely as religious figures but as co-governors in ethical, culturally resonant, and community-driven development. Such an approach would strengthen Thailand's pursuit of holistic governance models that were both normatively grounded and practically inclusive.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study provides a significant and original contribution to the interdisciplinary discourse on religion and public administration by highlighting the dynamic and evolving role of Thai Buddhist monks within contemporary governance frameworks. In contrast to earlier scholarship that has often portrayed the Sangha as a static or insulated religious institution, this research presents empirical evidence of the gradual transformation of monastic roles in response to globalization, state decentralization, and emerging community needs. Through a triangulated qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with monastic leaders, state officials, and lay scholars, the study offers rare and context-rich insights into how monks function as both spiritual custodians and civic actors. This dual role not only redefines traditional religious authority but also positions the Sangha as an active stakeholder in public policy processes, community development, and ethical governance. The research expands the body of knowledge by demonstrating how core Buddhist moral principles, including *Karuṇā* (Compassion), *Saṅgahavatthu* (Social Cohesion), and the *Majjhima Paṭipadā* (Middle Path), were being operationalized within public administration and policy implementation in Thailand. These findings provide concrete examples of value-based leadership practices rooted in Buddhist teachings, particularly in domains such as social welfare, environmental stewardship, and conflict mediation. Moreover, the study contributed a novel perspective by critically examining the National Office of Buddhism (NOB) interface between the Sangha and state actors. It identifies key limitations such as fragmented communication, lack of formal collaborative frameworks, and policy disjunctions while also highlighting emergent best practices and avenues for institutional innovation. Of particular note was the proposal to develop integrated training programs that combine Buddhist ethical foundations with contemporary administrative competencies, thereby creating hybrid leadership models suited to culturally embedded and ethically conscious governance. The study bridges a critical gap between normative Buddhist philosophy and the practical mechanics of public sector governance. It offers a culture-informed alternative governance paradigm that was especially relevant for societies undergoing rapid transformation yet seeking to preserve spiritual continuity and moral coherence. In doing so, the research advances both theoretical and applied understandings of religion-informed governance, and positions the Thai Sangha as a viable contributor to the future of participatory, ethical, and community-centered public administration in Southeast Asia and beyond, as shown in Figure 2.

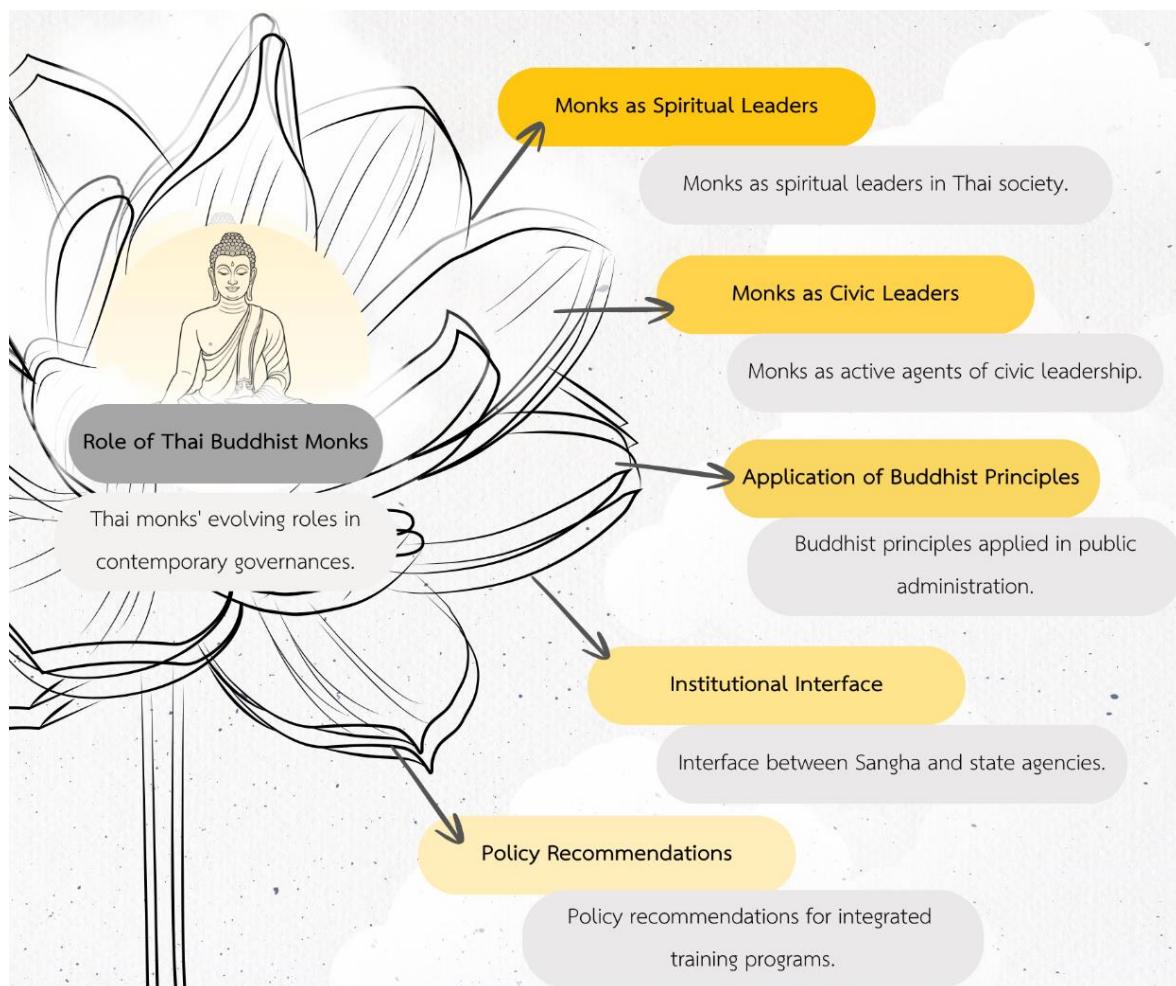


Figure 2 The Multifaceted Roles of Thai Buddhist Monks

Conclusions and Recommendations

Thai Buddhist monks were increasingly stepping beyond their traditional spiritual roles and becoming more involved in public service, especially in rural areas where government presence was limited. Global socio-political changes and evolving ties between religion and the state partly influenced this shift. Today, monks play active roles in areas like community development, policy advising, and leading social initiatives. Their approach brings together Buddhist moral values like Karuṇā (Compassion), Saṅghavatthu (Social Cohesion), and Majjhima Paṭipadā (The Middle Path) with modern public administration, creating a hybrid form of governance that emphasizes fairness, transparency, and citizen-centered service. However, this growing engagement faces challenges, particularly the lack of formal systems that allow smooth cooperation between the Sangha and government bodies. Without clear communication and collaboration, policy impact remains limited. To move forward, the study suggests a few key steps: Set up formal collaboration platforms at local and provincial levels; Create joint training programs that mix Buddhist ethics with public administration skills; And promote inclusive governance models that recognize monks as ethical guides in community decision-making. These recommendations aimed



to connect spiritual and administrative leadership better, helping Thailand build a governance system that balances moral values with effective service delivery in a rapidly changing society.

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