



Reworking the Role of Buddhism in Thailand's Consumer Culture

By Katria Bolger

For over 2,000 years, Theravada Buddhism has informed the Thai national identity. Thai values are fed by numerous principles that are fundamental to Buddhism, from its concern with mindfulness to its encouragement of modest, materially minimal living. Even for non-practicing Thais, Buddhist values of compassion and humility have figured in the formation of the Thai consciousness, affirming themselves in the country's reputation among tourists as well. However, Buddhism is now being forced to re-assess its relevance in a 21st century Thai society saturated by a consumer culture that appears to run counter to the non-materialistic principles of Buddhism.

Thailand has seen accelerated economic growth in the past two decades, coinciding with a drastic decline in spiritual activity. With its newfound wealth, Thailand's cities have been host to an upsurge of shopping malls, nudging themselves into the Thai landscape alongside its trademark, ancient temples or *wats*. In the process, Buddhist temples, once embodying the social core of Thai villages, have been reduced to colourful, decorative show pieces. Similarly, monks' moral and community authority has been reduced and conferred to political leaders and social activists. Statistics indicate that there are now five monks for every 1,000 Thais today, in comparison to the 11:1,000 ratio in 1980. Monks and temples have become static, sedentary symbols of tradition, debilitated by the

lack of monks and insufficient donations to sustain relevance in their communities.

A case study of a northern Thai village shows how monks are re-fashioning their traditional roles in a more materialistic culture. In this case, the monks of the local monastery admitted that ancient Buddhist traditions were quickly being replaced by more modern behaviours and approaches. For example, the monks in this village have relinquished the tradition of collecting and distributing food in the village in favour of calling a local restaurant to have takeout delivered. Most villages in the area have one or two full-time monks, who are often elderly and sick, suggesting that the appeal of the monk tradition holds less for younger people than it did before.

The Thai *Sangha*, or monastic community, is increasingly linking their traditions to consumer culture. One example is the involvement of the *Sangha* in retail businesses that supply products for monks to the tune of 10 billion baht, or 32 million dollars. "Monk Supply," a store situated on the outskirts of Bangkok, resembles a North American big box store, bearing a variety of religious candles, clothes, prayer devices and statues for Buddhist monks. Their revenue is fuelled by monks and young Buddhist men, expected to assume monk status for at least one period in their life. In this way, monks are finding niches in the consumer market to buoy their relevance and sustain their

communities. Another marketing technique has been to emphasize the importance of meditation – in particular, in urban life – as an antidote to the stressful, over-crowded cities. In this way, modern Buddhism strives to demonstrate its dynamism and relevance outside the temple.

The use of social media among 21st century Buddhist monks has further aggravated their reputation by documenting and circulating scandals in the *Sangha* among the public. In recent years, Thai social media has captured footage of monks hosting parties and consuming alcohol in monasteries, as well as watching pornographic videos. The latest scandal involves a jet-setting fugitive monk who has been accused of engaging in excessive consumption, promiscuity and crimes ranging from statutory rape to manslaughter. In June 2013, a YouTube video surfaced that showed a monk taking a private jet ride with a Louis Vuitton carry-on. Since then, a long list of darker secrets has emerged, including stories about this particular monk's accumulated assets, which equal an estimated 1 billion baht. Increased visibility through scandals of this nature has seriously undermined the monks' relevance and perceived legitimacy.

Divergent opinions have emerged on how effectively the *Sangha* can integrate itself within Thailand's fast moving, materialistic culture. The Thai *Sangha* has been criticized in some quarters for neglecting to mend the gap between monks and mainstream society. In order to extend their role into modern life more readily, critics state that the doctrinal dichotomy between spiritual and material life needs to be re-assessed. The social and spiritual must be reconciled and the Buddhist believer must assume a more exterior, socially conscious role, as the inner mind interacts with its environment. Monks must further expand their networks on both local and more extended levels to include villagers, NGOs, and progressive business people, among others. For example, a group of monks called the 'development monks' emerged in the 1970s to help identify local needs in the

community and relied on Buddhist principles to respond to them. Similarly, some argue that the Thai *Sangha* must do a better job of asserting their notions of a moral economy and promote social Buddhist ethics.

In 21st century Thai society, Buddhism is re-fashioning its role as it struggles to maintain its relevance. With shopping malls fast replacing temples, and secular surpassing spiritual education, there is a real need to re-assess the place of temples and monks in this new, fast paced, technologically driven society. Buddhism can evolve with more emphasis on social media, for example, to convey transparency and to strike up a more dynamic relationship with sympathetic followers. The increasing materialistic culture of Thailand does not have to lead inexorably to the diminishing of Thailand's distinct, Buddhist-influenced national identity. Thai values and traditions that draw from Buddhism do not have to be toppled, simply re-purposed, to stay relevant

