

Restructuring Sangha–Monarchy Relations in King Mongkut’s Buddhist Reforms: State Buddhism and the Nineteenth-Century Siamese State-Building Project

ABSTRACT

This study examines the restructuring of relations between the *Sangha* and the monarchy during the Buddhist reforms of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and analyzes their implications for the formation of the Siamese state in the nineteenth century. This research is significant because Buddhist reform in Thailand often appears in scholarship as a purely religious renewal, detached from its broader political, ideological, and state-modernization contexts. Employing a qualitative historical approach based on library research, this study conducts a critical analysis of historical texts, religious policy documents, and academic works on Thai Buddhism, the Chakri monarchy, and Southeast Asian modernity. The findings demonstrate that Buddhist reform under Rama IV did not constitute a historical rupture but rather represented a logical continuation of long-standing *Sangha*–monarchy patronage patterns that had developed since the Ayutthaya period. These reforms produced three major transformations: the rationalization of Buddhist doctrine and practice, the bureaucratization of the *Sangha* as a state-regulated institution, and the consolidation of state Buddhism as a source of symbolic legitimacy and social cohesion. At the same time, this process generated several dysfunctions, including the erosion of *Sangha* autonomy, internal tensions between monastic orders, and ambiguities in religious identity. This study offers an original contribution by positioning King Mongkut’s Buddhist reforms as an integral component of Siam’s state-building project and political modernity. The findings enrich broader debates on religion–state relations by demonstrating how Buddhism functioned simultaneously as cultural capital, social infrastructure, and a technology of power within the Southeast Asian context.

Keywords: Sangha–monarchy relations; state Buddhism; Buddhist kingship; religious bureaucratization; Siamese state formation.

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has been the foundation of Thailand's political, social and cultural identity for centuries. With approximately 93% of the population adhering to Theravada Buddhism according to a U.S. State Department report (2020), this religion has played a vital role in shaping the legitimacy of the state and social stability. From the Sukhothai Kingdom to the modern era, the relationship between the monarchy and the Sangha has served not only as a spiritual bond but also as a mechanism for social and political governance. Historians emphasise that, in the context of Thailand being the only Southeast Asian country never to have been directly colonized (Subrahmanyam, 2024), the historical connection between Buddhism and the monarchy was one of the key factors that enabled the kingdom to maintain its sovereignty throughout the 19th century. This historical phenomenon illustrates how religion can be used for power consolidation and social integration, making it a critical issue in the study of religion-politics relations in Southeast Asia.

Entering the nineteenth century, British and French colonial pressures intensified in the Siamese region, particularly following the fall of Burma in 1885 and Cambodia in 1863 (de Vienne, 2022). This geopolitical situation compelled the Siamese kingdom to pursue modernization across multiple sectors, including bureaucracy, the military, and religious institutions. Within this context, Buddhism emerged as a strategic arena of reform aimed at reinforcing national unity while renewing the legitimacy of the Chakri monarchy. Rama IV (Mongkut)—who spent twenty-seven years as a *bhikkhu*—possessed deep insight into the internal conditions of the *Sangha* and recognized the urgent need for reform that was more disciplinarian, systematic, and grounded in the Pali canon (Soonthornthum & Orchiston, 2021). Consequently, Buddhist reform during the reign of Rama IV reflected not merely internal *Sangha* dynamics but also a political response to global pressures threatening the survival of the Thai state, making these reforms a crucial subject of scholarly inquiry.

Studies on the relationship between the *Sangha* and the monarchy during King Mongkut's (Rama IV) Buddhist reforms and their implications for Siamese state formation in the nineteenth century have developed along several major trajectories. Broadly speaking, existing scholarship may be categorized into three dominant tendencies, each emphasizing different dimensions of the religious and political transformations of the period.

The first tendency focuses on King Mongkut's intellectual life as that of a scholar-king. Several studies portray Mongkut as a key figure of early modernism in Thailand, emphasizing his mastery of Pali, astronomy, and Western thought. Works by Terwiel (1976), Wyatt (2003), and Batson (1974), for example, describe Mongkut as a leader who introduced rationalism into Siamese Buddhist practice while cultivating intellectual relationships with Western missionaries. Within this framework, Mongkut appears as a central actor in shaping Siam's image as a kingdom that was "Western-literate" and adaptable to modernity. However, this strong emphasis on intellectual biography and epistemic networks often overlooks how Mongkut's scholarly identity materialized concretely in the institutional design of *Sangha* reform and in the accompanying configurations of religious-political power.

The second tendency concentrates on the formation of the *Thammayut Nikaya* as the core of Mongkut's religious reform agenda. Studies by Swearer (2010), Keyes (1971), and Somboon (1982) argue that this order emerged from efforts to purify Buddhist practice through strict enforcement of *Vinaya* discipline, ritual rationalization, and renewed emphasis on canonical textual authority. Research within this category contributes significantly to understanding the theological character, monastic ethos, and religious practices of the *Thammayut Nikaya* as a reform movement within the traditional *Sangha*. Nevertheless, by privileging ritual and doctrinal dimensions, these studies frequently marginalize analysis of how the establishment of the *Thammayut Nikaya* also functioned as a political instrument that strengthened the monarchy's capacity to regulate and reorganize religious institutions.

The third tendency situates Buddhist reform within the broader framework of state modernization and Thai nation-building. Scholars such as Tambiah (1976), Anderson (2013), and Ishii (1986) demonstrate that religious institutions—particularly the *Sangha*—played a strategic role in constructing a centralized bureaucracy under monarchical authority. Reforms initiated during the reign of Rama IV and culminating under Rama V—especially with the enactment of the Sangha Act of 1902—are commonly interpreted as elements of a modern state project that incorporated religion into administrative governance. While this approach provides an important macro-level perspective, it tends to emphasize the Rama V period and formal institutionalization processes, thereby underexamining the foundational reciprocal relations between monarchy and *Sangha* that were established earlier during Rama IV's reign.

Taken together, these three tendencies reveal that scholarship on Mongkut's intellectual biography, the formation of the *Thammayut Nikaya*, and Siamese state modernization has developed substantially yet remains fragmented. To date, few studies have systematically examined the reciprocal relationship between the *Sangha* and the monarchy during the Rama IV period as a mutually reinforcing mechanism of political legitimacy. Previous research often separates religious and political dimensions or shifts analytical focus to the administrative reforms of Rama V, thereby failing to capture how Buddhist reform under Rama IV constructed a framework of power relations that later underpinned the institutionalization of both the *Sangha* and the state. This gap underscores the need for a more integrated analysis of *Sangha*–monarchy power dynamics within the context of nineteenth-century Buddhist reform in Siam.

Accordingly, this study aims to explain the mechanisms of interaction between the *Sangha* and royal authority during the reign of Rama IV through three primary objectives. First, it identifies the factors that led Mongkut to view Buddhist reform as a political strategy for confronting colonial pressures and strengthening the state. Second, it analyzes how the *Sangha* was mobilized as a source of legitimacy and an instrument for social order under monarchical rule. Third, it examines how reciprocal relations between monarchy and *Sangha* shaped a model of “national Buddhism” that later formed the foundation of the Sangha Act of 1902 and subsequent reforms. Through this focus, the study addresses a gap in existing scholarship and proposes a new analytical framework for understanding the politics of religion in Thai history.

This article argues that Buddhist reform during the reign of Rama IV did not merely constitute an effort at religious purification but represented a political strategy to consolidate monarchical legitimacy through the structural integration of the *Sangha* and the state. In this configuration, the relationship between king and *Sangha* functioned as a mutually beneficial arrangement: the *Sangha* supplied moral legitimacy, orthodoxy, and social support, while the monarchy provided patronage, regulation, and an institutional framework that reinforced religious authority. As a result, Mongkut's reforms produced a religion-state relationship that not only shaped the trajectory of reform under Rama V but also laid the foundations for a model of "national Buddhism" that endured well into the twentieth century. This argument provides the analytical basis for rereading *Sangha*-monarchy relations as a political-religious process of mutual production rather than a unidirectional exercise of power.

METHOD

The units of analysis in this study comprise three primary elements. First, the study examines the institutional structure of the *Sangha* before and during the reign of King Mongkut. Second, it analyzes the exercise of royal authority as reflected in decrees, administrative reforms, and political strategies. Third, it investigates key textual artifacts—including royal proclamations, monastic regulations, canonical translations, and contemporary chronicles—that document both the processes and the impacts of these reforms. Together, these units enable an integrated analysis of religious, political, and textual dimensions.

This study adopts a qualitative-historical research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2020), selected because the phenomenon under investigation—religious reform in nineteenth-century Siam—is deeply contextual and embedded within long-term socio-political developments. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to explore the interpretive meanings underlying reform initiatives, while a historical design facilitates the reconstruction of institutional change across successive reigns. The study employs a multidimensional approach that combines historical reconstruction, socio-political interpretation, and textual analysis, as no single method sufficiently captures the complexity of *Sangha*-monarchy interactions. This design enables the study to explain why reforms occurred, how they were implemented, and what implications they carried for religion-state relations.

The study draws on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources include royal chronicles (such as *Ratchaphongsawadan*), legal documents concerning the *Sangha*, royal decrees issued during the reign of Rama IV, Pali canonical texts along with their Siamese translations, and archival materials published by the Office of National Buddhism. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, historical monographs, socio-political analyses, and contemporary academic studies on *Thammayut* reform. The use of diverse sources allows for triangulation across factual, doctrinal, and political data, which is essential for achieving a historically grounded understanding of the reform process (Heale & Forbes, 2013; Sciberras & Dingli, 2023).

Data collection relies on library-based research techniques, including archival research, systematic literature review, and textual sampling. The study conducts library research using both digital and print collections from the National Archives of Thailand, monastic libraries, and academic repositories. Source selection follows clearly defined inclusion criteria: documents must originate from or directly relate to the period spanning the reigns of Rama I through Rama V, address Buddhist institutional regulation or royal policy, and provide insight into monastic discipline, political intervention, or doctrinal standardization. Exclusion criteria apply to texts lacking clear historical attribution, later commentaries unrelated to institutional reform, and materials with uncertain provenance. These procedures ensure the reliability and authenticity of the sources analyzed.

Data analysis proceeds in three stages. First, historical reconstruction maps key events, institutional transformations, and socio-political conditions that shaped the reform process. Second, thematic textual analysis applies to royal decrees, monastic regulations, and canonical translations in order to identify patterns of authority, legitimacy, and doctrinal standardization. Coding categories develop inductively and include themes such as monastic discipline, royal patronage, centralization, and orthodoxy. Third, socio-political interpretive analysis links textual findings to broader contexts, including colonial pressure, state modernization, and dynastic legitimacy. The study also applies a comparative framework to contrast Mongkut's reforms with developments in earlier reigns (Rama I–III) and subsequent reforms under Rama V. These analytical steps enable the study to explain both the processes and the underlying logic of *Sangha*–monarchy interaction in nineteenth-century Siam.

RESULTS

1. *The Foundations of Sangha–Monarchy Relations in Thailand before the Reforms of King Mongkut*

The findings indicate that prior to the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV), the relationship between the *Sangha* and the monarchy in Thailand had developed through a long and layered historical process extending from the Ayutthaya Kingdom to the early Chakri Dynasty (Larsson, 2022). This relationship did not emerge incidentally but took shape through ideological and institutional structuring, in which *Theravāda* Buddhism functioned as the foundation of royal legitimacy as well as a mechanism for sustaining the moral and social order. Within this framework, the *Sangha* operated not merely as a religious community but as a symbolic and practical institution integrated into the political system of power.

During the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), the concept of *Dhammarāja* served as the principal normative framework for political legitimacy. The king occupied the position of a ruler who governed in accordance with *Dhamma*, bearing moral responsibility for protecting the Three Jewels (*Buddha*, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*), while the *Sangha* functioned as a spiritual authority that provided ethical and cosmological justification for the royal order. This arrangement produced a relatively stable symbiotic pattern, as Tambiah observes: “*the Buddhist monkhood legitimated secular authority, while the state provided material support and social prestige for the Sangha*” (Tambiah, 1976). Through temple patronage, the

conferment of religious titles, and the regulation of monastic life, royal authority gained religious validation, while the *Sangha* secured material support, social status, and influence within society.

This symbiotic pattern did not end with the collapse of Ayutthaya but was reproduced and institutionalized during the early Chakri Dynasty (Rama I–III) in the context of post-crisis state reconstruction. The state actively reorganized religious life through the codification of *Sangha* law, the re-editing of the *Tipiṭaka*, and the appointment of monastic officials as part of broader efforts to consolidate central authority. However, this process generated ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it successfully restored the prestige of Buddhism after a period of destruction; on the other hand, as Ishii notes, “royal patronage restored Buddhism after Ayutthaya, but at the same time made the *Sangha* increasingly dependent on political power” (Ishii, 1986). Religious restoration thus proceeded in parallel with the strengthening of the *Sangha*’s structural dependence on the state.

Historical evidence further shows that the excessively close relationship between the *Sangha* and the monarchy gradually contributed to internal degradation within the monastic institution. The involvement of some *bhikkhu* in economic activities and patronage networks with local elites and aristocrats blurred the boundary between ascetic life and worldly interests. Swearer observes that “many monks became economically active and closely tied to local elites, weakening the image of renunciation that once defined the *Sangha*” (Swearer, 2010). These practices not only weakened adherence to *Vinaya* discipline but also eroded the moral authority of the *Sangha* in the eyes of lay communities, widening the gap between the normative ideals of Theravāda Buddhism and actual monastic practice.

The structural vulnerability of *Sangha*–monarchy relations became particularly evident with the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. The collapse of political order coincided with the fragmentation of the *Sangha*, demonstrating that religious institutions overly dependent on state power lacked resilience during periods of political disintegration. Wyatt emphasizes that “when Ayutthaya collapsed, the *Sangha* fragmented, showing how vulnerable religious institutions were when overly dependent on the state” (Wyatt, 2003). This episode exposed the fragile underside of *Sangha*–monarchy symbiosis: stable under conditions of political continuity but highly vulnerable in times of crisis.

Accordingly, before King Mongkut’s reforms, *Sangha*–monarchy relations in Thailand had developed as a historically robust foundation marked by significant structural problems. While this relationship successfully sustained political legitimacy and long-term social stability, it simultaneously produced institutional dependency, monastic disciplinary decline, and a crisis of spiritual legitimacy within the *Sangha*. These conditions constituted the historical and structural background that generated the perceived need for fundamental reform in the mid-nineteenth century, which subsequently materialized in King Mongkut’s Buddhist reform project.

To clarify the historical patterns and structural implications of pre-reform *Sangha*–monarchy relations, the findings are summarized in a synthetic table outlining periods, relational mechanisms, and their effects on the *Sangha*.

Table 1. Foundations of *Sangha*–Monarchy Relations in Thailand before the Reforms of King Mongkut

Historical Period	Form of <i>Sangha</i>–Monarchy Relation	Main Mechanisms	Impact on the <i>Sangha</i>
Ayutthaya (1350–1767)	Religio-political symbiosis (<i>Dhammarāja</i>)	Temple patronage, cosmological legitimacy	High prestige, early institutional dependency
Post-Ayutthaya	Fragile and fragmented relations	State collapse	<i>Sangha</i> disintegration
Early Chakri (Rama I–III)	State institutionalization of the <i>Sangha</i>	<i>Sangha</i> law, monastic offices	Structural stability, political dependency
Pre-Mongkut	Close but problematic relations	Elite patronage, economic involvement	<i>Vinaya</i> degradation, legitimacy crisis

In summary, the data indicate that prior to King Mongkut’s reforms, the Thai *Sangha* occupied an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it remained a central institution in social life, education, and moral guidance. On the other hand, its dependence on royal patronage and entanglement with political structures weakened monastic discipline, diminished spiritual authority, and fostered institutional fragmentation. A relationship that initially functioned as mutually reinforcing gradually became imbalanced: the *Sangha* gained protection and social status but lost spiritual autonomy. These problems intensified under external pressures from Western powers during the first half of the nineteenth century, which demanded institutional and intellectual adaptation that the traditional *Sangha* struggled to provide.

The findings further reveal several interrelated structural patterns shaping the long-term dynamics of *Sangha*–monarchy relations in Thailand. The first pattern is political–religious symbiosis, in which the *Sangha* and the monarchy mutually reinforced power and legitimacy. From the Ayutthaya period through the early Chakri Dynasty, the *Sangha* supplied moral and cosmological legitimacy to the king through the concept of *Dhammarāja*, while the monarchy guaranteed material support, social status, and institutional protection for the *Sangha*. This symbiosis formed the historical foundation of Buddhist kingship that sustained long-term political stability and social cohesion.

Gradually, however, this symbiosis produced a second pattern: institutional dependency of the *Sangha* on the state. Strong royal patronage—manifested through religious appointments, monastic regulation, and temple administration—integrated the *Sangha* increasingly into political power structures. As a result, the *Sangha*’s internal autonomy in regulating discipline, education, and spiritual life diminished, and the institution functioned not only as a moral authority but also as an instrument of monarchical stabilization.

A third pattern involved disciplinary decay and internal fragmentation within the *Sangha*. Weak centralized oversight, combined with the involvement of

some *bhikkhu* in economic activities and local patronage networks, produced significant regional variation in monastic practice. *Vinaya* discipline no longer operated as a uniform standard but depended on local authority and proximity to political elites. This fragmentation reflected the weakening of institutional integrity and the blurring of boundaries between ascetic ideals and worldly interests.

The accumulation of these patterns culminated in a crisis of spiritual legitimacy on the eve of nineteenth-century reform. Declining Buddhist education, limited mastery of canonical texts, and the growing association of monastic life with social-ceremonial functions rather than ascetic discipline and liberation eroded the *Sangha's* moral authority in the eyes of lay followers. Although the *Sangha* continued to serve as a center for ritual and communal life, its authoritative role as a spiritual exemplar and guardian of Theravāda orthodoxy steadily weakened.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that King Mongkut's Buddhist reforms did not constitute a historical anomaly or merely a personal initiative. Rather, they represented a rational response to long-standing structural crises embedded in *Sangha*-monarchy relations. The reforms emerged as a systematic effort to address institutional dependency, restore monastic discipline, and reconstruct the *Sangha's* spiritual legitimacy in the face of internal challenges and external pressures in nineteenth-century Siam.

2. King Mongkut's Buddhist Reforms and the Restructuring of the Sangha in Siam

The study indicates that King Mongkut's (Rama IV, 1851–1868) Buddhist reforms did not emerge abruptly. Instead, the reforms accumulated through his long monastic experience, his strategy to construct a new form of religious authority, and his political need to confront modernization and colonial pressure. The reforms rested primarily on Mongkut's 27 years as a *bhikkhu*, which shaped him as a "reformer-in-waiting." During this period, Mongkut directly observed the deterioration of the *Sangha*: weakened compliance with *Vinaya*, the growing prominence of popular ritual and "superstitious" elements, and the involvement of some *bhikkhu* in profit-oriented activities that reduced Buddhism's public prestige (Somboon, 1982). These empirical observations pushed Mongkut to seek a new model of orthodoxy through re-ordination in the Mon tradition, which he regarded as stricter in *Vinaya* discipline. This step did not merely express personal ascetic commitment; it also established a new foundation capable of challenging the mainstream *Sangha*. Tambiah argues that this decision also carried political calculation because it created the nucleus of a reformist order later known as the *Dhammayuttika Nikāya* (Tambiah, 1976).

Alongside the project of disciplinary purification, the data also show that Mongkut pursued a reform agenda grounded in scripturalism. He reasserted the authority of the *Tipiṭaka* and *Pāli* study as the standard for legitimating practice, while he criticized doctrinal distortions that had become routine in everyday monastic life. This framework subsequently became the ideological backbone of *Dhammayut*: strict discipline, restrictions on folk ritual, and an orientation toward "canonical essence" (Ishii, 1986). At the same time, Mongkut's monastic period revealed another crucial dimension: his openness to Western knowledge, including language, science, and astronomy, which broadened his view of Buddhism's role in

a modern world. Lopez notes that Mongkut's engagement with Western languages and sciences enabled him to frame Buddhism as a rational system capable of dialogue with science (Lopez Jr, 2002). In this context, Mongkut's capacity to combine scriptural authority with the language of modernity allowed him to "speak in two languages"—the religious language of *Pāli* and the language of Western science—which, according to Jackson, made him a distinctive figure who could harmonize tradition and modernity (Jackson, 1989).

The subsequent evidence confirms that Mongkut's reform did not remain at an ideological level; he translated it into institutional transformation. The emergence of the *Thammayut Nikāya* in the early nineteenth century marked an important turning point: the order promoted a more ascetic and disciplined monastic life, emphasized *Pāli* recitation and study, and restricted folk rituals such as spirit propitiation, divination, and magical practices not grounded in the *Tipiṭaka* (Tambiah, 1976). Politically, the order functioned as an "elite monastic community" closely associated with Mongkut and, after he ascended the throne, it received state patronage. Jackson argues that *Thammayut* operated as a "religio-political alliance" that strengthened Chakri monarchical legitimacy amid colonial pressure and religious competition, while it also opened a pathway for expanding state intervention in *Sangha* affairs (Jackson, 1989). Mongkut nevertheless maintained strategic flexibility: he did not abolish the *Mahānikāya* but allowed a dual system in which *Thammayut* coexisted with it, while *Thammayut* simultaneously functioned as a normative model that indirectly "shifted standards" of monastic life (Wyatt, 2003).

As king, Mongkut reinforced reform through organizational and administrative policy. He intensified the integration of the *Sangha* into the state apparatus by introducing an ordination registration system (1859) to control "wandering monks" and to prevent ordination from becoming an escape from social obligations (Hall, 1981). He strengthened the *Thammayut* administrative center at Wat Bowonniwet as a hub for monastic education and elite cadre formation (Keyes, 1971). He also developed hierarchical offices and territorial oversight through regional supervisors so that disciplinary and educational policies could reach local levels (C. J. Reynolds & McVey, 2018).

In education, Mongkut's reforms aimed at standardizing knowledge outcomes. He established offices for *Dhamma* study and examination systems (*Nak Thamm* for *bhikkhu* and *Thammaseuksa* for laypeople), and he used Thai as the medium of instruction to broaden access and unify standards (Ishii, 1986). Tambiah notes that success in particular examinations even carried social consequences, such as exemption from military conscription, which underscores the socio-political significance of Buddhist education as an institution (Tambiah, 1976). Educational reform also relied on modernization of knowledge technologies through the printing of scriptures and textbooks in collaboration with Dan Beach Bradley, which shifted transmission away from a predominantly oral mode toward a broader textual culture (T. Reynolds, 1991). Mongkut also promoted the learning of science, geography, astronomy, and foreign languages to prepare the *Sangha* for global change (Wyatt, 2003).

Finally, Mongkut reformed practice and ritual in pursuit of “purification” and “rationalization” of Buddhism. He standardized morning–evening chanting and liturgy to provide the *Sangha* with a uniform ritual language (Swearer, 2010). He enforced regulations on robes and ceremonial comportment to display *Vinaya* discipline and to build the public image of a “pure *Sangha*” (Ishii, 1986). At the same time, Mongkut criticized the use of amulets, spirit cults, and magical practices as elements that “polluted” *Dhamma–Vinaya*, and he promoted *Vipassanā* meditation and *Pāli* study as the foundations of practice (Swearer, 2010; Tambiah, 1976). Western scientific influence also appeared in his critique of the traditional *Traiphum* cosmology, as he organized ritual to signal that Buddhism could align with modern rationality. Mongkut’s reforms therefore produced a simultaneous transformation: he pursued internal purification of the *Sangha* while he also reorganized Buddhism as a cultural–political resource for the state.

Table 2. Synthesis of King Mongkut’s Buddhist Reforms

Reform Dimension	Policy	Primary Aim	Impact on Sangha–State Relations
Personal foundation (27-year monastic period)	Observation of <i>Sangha</i> decay; re-ordination in Mon tradition	Establish a <i>Vinaya</i> -orthodox model	Ideological basis of reform and Mongkut’s moral authority
Formation of a reformist order	Emergence of <i>Thammayut Nikāya</i> ; asceticism and scripturalism	“Purify” practice in line with the <i>Tipiṭaka</i>	Elite <i>Sangha</i> aligned with monarchy; a new normative standard
Administration and bureaucratization of the Sangha	Ordination registration (1859); regional supervisors; office hierarchy	Control quantity/quality of <i>bhikkhu</i> ; administrative integration	<i>Sangha</i> becomes a governance unit; stronger central oversight
Education and knowledge production	<i>Nak Thamm/Thammaseuksa</i> exams; Thai as medium; printing; modern sciences	Standardize competence and expand access	Education becomes a channel of socio-political legitimacy
Ritual and praxis	Standardized chanting; robe rules; critique of superstition; <i>Vipassanā</i>	Rationalize and purify	“Rational Buddhism” supports state modernization

In simpler terms, the data show that King Mongkut’s reform constituted a large-scale change on three fronts at once: he restored *bhikkhu* discipline in accordance with *Vinaya*, he built a more orderly and state-supervised *Sangha* organization and education system, and he standardized Buddhist ritual and

practice so that it became more uniform, grounded in the *Tipiṭaka*, and less entangled with magical or “superstitious” practices. Mongkut initiated this reform because he had long witnessed the *Sangha*’s problems during his monastic years, and he prepared a reformist model (*Thammayut*) before he gained political authority as king and implemented it on a wider scale.

The analysis also identifies several interrelated patterns that shaped the direction of *Sangha* transformation in the mid-nineteenth century. The first pattern concerns the character of “reform from within.” Mongkut did not rely solely on top-down royal authority; he rooted change in his personal monastic experience over 27 years. This long period allowed him to observe the *Sangha*’s internal crisis—ranging from weakening *Vinaya* discipline to practical deviations—and to reflect on it through critical engagement with canonical texts. As a result, Mongkut’s reform secured dual legitimacy: it operated as a royal project and as an authentic response to problems within monastic life.

The second pattern involves the elevation of scripturalism and rationalization as new standards of Buddhist life. Through the formation of the *Thammayut Nikāya* and policies in ritual and education, Mongkut positioned the *Tipiṭaka* and *Vinaya* as primary references, while he gradually marginalized practices rooted in folk belief and “superstitious” elements. This orientation produced a form of “rational Buddhism” that not only emphasized doctrinal purity but also opened space for dialogue with modern knowledge. Mongkut’s reform thus did more than correct internal deviations; it also reconfigured Buddhism so that it could meet the demands of early modernity.

The third pattern concerns the bureaucratization of the *Sangha* and its integration into state structures. Ordination registration, hierarchical offices, territorial supervision, and standardized education show how Mongkut restructured the *Sangha* into a semi-bureaucratic institution that the central authority could regulate and monitor. This transformation shifted the *Sangha* from a relatively autonomous religious community into an integral component of state governance. Monasteries no longer served only as spaces of ascetic discipline; they also functioned as administrative units that supported education, social discipline, and the transmission of values aligned with monarchical authority.

The fourth pattern highlights the political function of religious reform as a strategy of legitimacy and state resilience. Under intensifying Western colonial pressure, Mongkut’s creation of a more disciplined, educated, and standardized *Sangha* provided a cultural–political resource for the Chakri monarchy to preserve stability and sovereignty. Buddhist reform therefore cannot be separated from the broader project of state modernization, in which religion supplied symbolic legitimacy and simultaneously operated as an instrument for strengthening political authority.

Overall, the findings show that King Mongkut’s Buddhist reforms combined internal purification of the *Sangha* with an agenda of state modernization. The reforms produced a *Sangha* that became more standardized, more rationalized, and more closely integrated with the monarchy, while also providing a structural foundation for further codification under Rama V.

3. *Sangha–Monarchy Relations in Buddhist Reform under Rama IV*

The study shows that during the reign of Rama IV (Mongkut, 1851–1868), *Sangha*–monarchy relations did not merely reproduce a traditional patronage pattern. Instead, they evolved into an active politico-religious mechanism in which the monarchy acted as the principal driver of reform, while the *Sangha* underwent restructuring as a socio-political instrument and a source of symbolic legitimacy for the state. The distinctiveness of this period lies in Rama IV's position as a king with an exceptionally strong monastic background. His twenty-seven years as a *bhikkhu* endowed the monarchy with substantial “internal capacity” to formulate religious policy. As a result, reform did not rely solely on material patronage but proceeded through systematic policy design encompassing education, ritual, discipline, and institutional governance of the *Sangha*.

First, the monarchy functioned as both driver and patron. Rama IV initiated the standardization of education—most notably through the strengthening of the *Nak Thamm* examination system—curricula, and the role of royal temples as academic centers. Ishii identifies this development as a turning point because, for the first time, evaluation and training within the *Sangha* operated through formal mechanisms under direct royal supervision (Ishii, 1986). In ritual and discipline, the monarchy also acted as a standard-setting authority by regulating robes, chanting procedures, temple spatial organization, and the codification of *Uposatha*. Tambiah interprets these measures as a strategy to “reconfigure the *Sangha*” so that it aligned with ideals of rational and “pure” Buddhism and presented a representative image before Western powers (Tambiah, 1976). At the same time, royal patronage provided political protection for the reformist *Thammayut* order to develop amid the dominance of the *Mahānikāya*. Reynolds emphasizes that support from the throne—through personnel, financial resources, and legal authority—constituted a prerequisite for the survival and growth of *Thammayut*.

Second, the reform positioned the *Sangha* as a socio-political instrument. In a dispersed agrarian society, village temple networks represented the most effective nodes for education, social cohesion, and the dissemination of moral values. Reform rendered these monastic networks more standardized and, indirectly, expanded the reach of state control to the local level. Reynolds stresses that the reorganization of monastic networks enabled rural populations to fall within the orbit of state oversight mediated through religious authority. Externally, the reformed *Sangha* also functioned as the nation's “spiritual face,” demonstrating that Siam possessed an orderly and rational religion—a symbolic strategy to counter the “barbaric” label often used by Western powers to justify intervention (Swearer, 2010). Moreover, the consolidation of religious authority through standardization and the strengthening of *Thammayut* contributed to national identity formation. Ishii characterizes this concentration of authority as a movement toward “state religion” that underpinned political cohesion (Ishii, 1986).

Third, the reform operated through an asymmetrical mechanism of mutual legitimation. The monarchy gained transcendent legitimacy through the king's image as *Dhammarāja* and protector of religion, while the *Sangha* received status, legal protection, and resources to sustain its authority. Under Rama IV, Mongkut's monastic authority made royal intervention more acceptable as a legitimate “purification,” while new disciplinary, educational, and structural systems elevated

the *Sangha*'s prestige as a powerful socio-cultural institution. The data nevertheless indicate that this reciprocity lacked symmetry: control over appointments, resource allocation, and legal frameworks remained concentrated in royal hands, thereby reducing *Sangha* autonomy (Tambiah, 1976).

Fourth, the *Sangha*-monarchy relationship exhibited clear limits and contradictions. Strong state intervention constrained religious autonomy, and the formation of *Thammayut* introduced new boundaries that generated tensions with the *Mahānikāya*. Swearer notes that some *Mahānikāya* circles perceived reform as biased toward a small group closely aligned with the king (Swearer, 2010). Furthermore, when the *Sangha* functioned as an instrument of the state, its spiritual role risked being overshadowed by political functions, producing ambiguity for lay followers: the *Sangha* appeared simultaneously as a religious institution and an extension of state authority (Ishii, 1986). The most fundamental contradiction lay in the tension between Theravāda ideals of renunciation and autonomy of practice and state demands for social regulation and the production of political loyalty.

Fifth, these relations generated an institutional legacy that laid the groundwork for Rama V's policies. The integration of the *Sangha* into state bureaucracy and the experiments in institutional organization under Rama IV became prerequisites for national codification measures such as the Sangha Act of 1902. Reynolds argues that without Rama IV's "experiments," Rama V's unification of the national *Sangha* system would have been far more difficult. Another legacy involved the strengthening of an ethos of "rational Buddhism" as a cultural shield against colonial pressure. Wyatt observes that Rama V later mobilized reformed Buddhism as a "cultural shield" in diplomacy and identity affirmation (Wyatt, 2003). At the same time, the inherited *Thammayut*-*Mahānikāya* dualism created problems of "unequal coexistence" that Rama V had to manage (Tambiah, 1976).

Table 3. Sangha–Monarchy Relations in Rama IV's Reforms: Functions, Mechanisms, Impacts, and Contradictions

Relational Aspect	Primary Form	Policy or Practical Mechanism	Impact
Monarchy as reform driver	Active driver and patron	Standardization of education and ritual; protection of <i>Thammayut</i>	More systematic reform; strengthened royal legitimacy
<i>Sangha</i> as socio-political instrument	Tool of social governance	Village temple networks; <i>bhikkhu</i> standardization	Stronger social control; standardized public education and morality
<i>Sangha</i> as "diplomatic face"	Symbol of Siamese civilization	Rational Buddhism as state image	Countering "barbaric" stigma; anti-intervention strategy
Mutual legitimation	Reciprocal legitimacy	King as <i>Dhammarāja</i> and protector; patronage and law	Political stability and enhanced <i>Sangha</i> prestige

Limits and contradictions	Asymmetry and resistance	<i>Thammayut</i> bias; bureaucratization; reduced autonomy	Internal fragmentation; spiritual-political ambiguity
Legacy for Rama V	Foundation for codification	<i>Sangha</i> -state integration; rational ethos	Sangha Act 1902; diplomacy and modernization

During Rama IV's reign, the king did not merely "support" religion; he directly regulated and directed Buddhist reform. Consequently, the *Sangha* functioned not only as a religious institution but also as a social network that assisted the state in maintaining education, morality, and social stability. The relationship proved mutually beneficial: the monarchy secured moral legitimacy as protector of religion, while the *Sangha* gained protection, status, and resources. At the same time, the relationship generated problems, including power asymmetry favoring the monarchy, potential inter-order conflict between *Thammayut* and *Mahānikāya*, and diminished *Sangha* autonomy. Over the long term, this pattern formed a critical foundation for Rama V's subsequent policies that nationally codified the *Sangha*.

The data reveal a first pattern marked by a shift from traditional patronage to monarchy-led reform. Under Rama IV, the king's role expanded beyond material or symbolic support to encompass the design, direction, and enforcement of religious policy. Royal authority enabled the systematic formulation and implementation of standards in education, ritual, and monastic discipline. Buddhist reform thus became a planned and coordinated state project rather than a purely internal initiative of religious communities or a product of spontaneous *Sangha* dynamics.

A second pattern shows the transformation of the *Sangha* into an instrument of socio-political governance. Standardized *bhikkhu* training and strengthened temple networks allowed the state to disseminate education, build community cohesion, and extend administrative influence to the village level. In an agrarian society characterized by dispersed populations and limited bureaucratic capacity, the *Sangha* effectively extended state capacity to govern society while maintaining its proximity to everyday religious life.

A third pattern demonstrates an asymmetrical mechanism of mutual legitimation between *Sangha* and monarchy. On one side, the *Sangha* reinforced the king's image as *Dhammarāja* and protector of religion, thereby providing moral and cosmological foundations for political power. On the other side, the *Sangha* increasingly depended on state recognition, regulation, and patronage. This dependence shifted the *Sangha* from a relatively autonomous religious partner toward an institution integrated into the monarchical power structure.

A fourth pattern underscores that religious modernization produced structural contradictions. Integrating the *Sangha* into the state reduced religious autonomy, generated tensions between *Thammayut* and *Mahānikāya*, and produced ambiguity in the *Sangha*'s role as both a spiritual institution and a political instrument. These contradictions show that reforms aimed at disciplining and modernizing Buddhism simultaneously generated new dynamics that risked weakening the *Sangha*'s spiritual function for some segments of the laity.

In sum, the findings indicate that Buddhist reform under Rama IV constructed a model of state Buddhism that was rationalized, administratively organized, and effective as a strategy of legitimacy and political resilience for Siam amid colonial pressure. This success, however, rested on an asymmetrical power relationship between monarchy and *Sangha*, leaving structural problems in the form of reduced religious autonomy, internal fragmentation, and role ambiguity. These conditions constituted both the foundation and the challenge that Rama V later had to address through processes of institutional codification and unification.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that *Sangha*–monarchy relations in Thailand took shape through a long historical process from Ayutthaya to the early Chakri dynasty as a religio-political symbiosis that sustained royal legitimacy while positioning the *Sangha* as a moral-social pillar. Over time, however, this symbiosis developed into the *Sangha*'s institutional dependence on the state and coincided with declining *Vinaya* discipline, internal fragmentation, and a crisis of spiritual legitimacy by the mid-nineteenth century. King Mongkut's reform (Rama IV) then emerged as a response to this crisis through a strategy of "reform from within" grounded in monastic experience, scriptural purification and the rationalization of practice, the bureaucratization of *Sangha* administration, and the reorganization of education and ritual. Under Rama IV, *Sangha*–monarchy relations grew more consolidated: the monarchy became the main driver of reform, the *Sangha* functioned as an instrument of socio-political governance, an asymmetrical form of mutual legitimation took hold, and structural contradictions surfaced and later became institutionalized and codified further under Rama V.

These findings arise because *Sangha*–monarchy relations in Thailand historically operated within the logic of Buddhist kingship. Royal political legitimacy relied on moral-cosmological justification, while the *Sangha* required state protection and resources to maintain institutional stability. When the state remained strong, patronage strengthened the *Sangha*'s position; when political structures destabilized, that same dependence made the *Sangha* vulnerable and weakened its autonomy and corrective capacity as a moral institution. At this point, internal crises—declining *Vinaya* discipline, the spread of folk ritual practices, and fragmentation in education—emerged as consequences of overly tight integration with power and weak internal standardization. Rama IV's reform occurred because Mongkut possessed two forms of capital that other rulers lacked: first, religious-authoritative capital derived from twenty-seven years as a *bhikkhu*, which made royal intervention more readily accepted as purification; and second, administrative-political capital as king, which enabled systemic reform through registration mechanisms, hierarchical organization, examinations, and ritual standardization. Colonial pressure intensified this need: the state required a rational and orderly symbol of "civilization," so it turned *Sangha* reorganization into a cultural and political strategy to protect sovereignty.

The findings align with classical scholarship that emphasizes *Sangha*–state symbiosis in Theravāda settings, especially the *Sangha*'s role in legitimating kingship and the state's patronage function for the *Sangha*. Studies such as Tambiah

underscore the reciprocity of legitimacy and patronage, while Ishii highlights institutionalization processes and the *Sangha's* dependence on political power; the present findings confirm these broad lines. Swearer and Wyatt also foreground disciplinary problems and political-crisis contexts that made the *Sangha* vulnerable, and the pre-reform data reproduce these dynamics. The novelty of this study lies in its more structured synthesis across three process layers: first, the historical foundation of symbiosis (Ayutthaya–early Chakri); second, the *Sangha's* internal structural crisis as a consequence of dependence; and third, Rama IV's reform as a project that simultaneously purified religion and built state Buddhism through bureaucratization and rationalization. In other words, the study does not treat “Mongkut's reform” as an isolated event; it frames the reform as a rational response to long-term structural accumulations and shows how it generated both an institutional legacy and contradictions that Rama V had to manage.

Historically, the findings indicate that Rama IV's Buddhist reform did not constitute a complete rupture but followed logically from a long trajectory of *Sangha*–monarchy relations that had developed since Ayutthaya—moving from symbolic patronage toward increasingly administrative institutionalization. This trajectory resonates with the concept of Buddhist kingship, which casts the king as *Dhammarāja*, a moral leader who secures political legitimacy by protecting and ordering religion (Halkias, 2013; Johnson, 2017). In Southeast Asia, and particularly in Thailand, legitimacy grounded in merit and the protection of Buddhism has long functioned as a foundational basis of monarchical authority (De Vienne, 2022; Leider, 2011). Rama IV's reform marked a transitional phase in Siam's modernization, when the state deliberately built internal cohesion through *Sangha* restructuring and simultaneously reorganized Buddhism so that it appeared rational and orderly within a nineteenth-century global order shaped by Western colonialism (Harris, 2007; Schober, 2011). Buddhism thus functioned not only as a source of spirituality but also as a technology of statecraft that sustained political authority, national identity, and sovereign resilience—a pattern that also appears in multiple configurations of Buddhist kingship across regions and historical periods (Blackburn, 2017; Daniels, 2023).

Socially, the data confirm that the *Sangha* operated as a social infrastructure reaching down to the village level and served as a center for education, public morality, and community integration. This finding accords with cross-regional studies showing that Buddhist monastic networks have historically and contemporarily acted as nodes of community development, social work, and cohesion building—from village development and welfare initiatives in Thailand (Okabe, 2014), to social rehabilitation through temples as centers of civil probation (Saithong, Peupud, Meekaew, Nikorunkul, & Lunghuang, 2025), to educational functions and value socialization in the formation of community identity (Phetchanpheng, 2021; Tian, Liu, Songsiengchai, & Siripala, 2025). When the state standardized the *Sangha* through policy under Rama IV, the effects extended beyond monastic discipline and penetrated lay social life by shaping values, behavior, and local authority structures. At the same time, studies of monastic networks and their relations with political authority across Asian contexts show that these social functions often expand alongside stronger state control (Harris, 2007; Unarokova, Sokolova, & Khakunova, 2023). In nineteenth-century Siam, the restructured

Sangha became a channel through which state power entered social space. Reform produced stability and social cohesion, but it also increased the state's capacity for oversight and obedience production at the community level. This dynamic placed the *Sangha* in an ambivalent position as both a provider of social welfare and an extension of state authority.

Ideologically, the findings show the emergence of rational Buddhism and state Buddhism as an ideological project that fused religion, modernity, and sovereignty. This pattern aligns with the concept of state Buddhism, which describes how states mobilize Buddhism as a device of political legitimation and symbolic protection in various East and Southeast Asian contexts from premodern to modern periods (Lee, 2017; McCargo, 2004; Vermeersch, 2020). In nineteenth-century Siam, scriptural purification and the rationalization of practice—through renewed emphasis on the *Tipiṭaka*, *Vinaya* discipline, and the marginalization of superstition—built a narrative of Siamese Buddhism as orderly, civilized, and compatible with science. The state deployed this narrative as an ideological strategy to counter colonial stigmas of Asian “backwardness” (Heine & Prebish, 2023). This process reflects rationalization mechanisms through which religious practices and institutions adjust to modern governance needs and state goals, a pattern also found in the bureaucratization of Buddhist organizations and the adaptation of religious teachings to administrative logics in contemporary settings (Borchert, 2008; Fee & On, 2023). At the same time, the tight linkage between Buddhism and monarchy produced an ideology of loyalty that cast religion as the symbolic support of the state and the state as the rightful protector of religion. Although this ideology effectively strengthened cohesion and political stability, scholarship on state Buddhism warns that rationalization and integration into state projects can erode the *Sangha's* moral-critical space vis-à-vis power, because universal Buddhist teachings become subordinated to national ideology and political interests (Harris, 2007; McCargo, 2004).

From a functional perspective, administratively integrated *Sangha*–monarchy relations generated several benefits: reform restored discipline and standardized education, thereby improving monastic human resources; it strengthened social cohesion through stable and uniform temple networks; it bolstered monarchical legitimacy and increased state resilience under external pressure; and it supported the construction of a relatively solid national identity through shared Buddhist symbolism. Reform also reduced practices deemed deviant and reinforced canonical orientations, thereby providing a moral-intellectual basis for society.

The data, however, also reveal inherent dysfunctions within the reform process. Bureaucratization and state dominance over the *Sangha* reduced religious autonomy and potentially weakened the *Sangha's* role as a moral counterweight to political power—an outcome that comparative research also identifies when states integrate religion into administrative structures (Gasimov, 2020; Sezgin & Künkler, 2014). The dualism between *Thammayut* and *Mahānikāya*, reinforced by preferential state patronage, generated internal tensions and unequal access to resources, resembling state-driven orthodoxy formation that often produces new hierarchies and fragmentation within religious communities (Müller, 2018). Moreover, as the *Sangha* increasingly served political and administrative functions,

identity ambiguity emerged: lay publics could perceive the *Sangha* as both a spiritual institution and a “state tool,” a condition that, in many cases, erodes trust and narrows plural religious space (Antoun, 2006; Pasuni, 2018). The heavy emphasis on rationalization and standardization also risked displacing popular religious practices too abruptly and widening the gap between institutional Buddhism and everyday religious expression—an effect also documented in studies of religious transformation under modernization and state-control logics (Jahar, 2019; Wainscott, 2017).

In response to these dysfunctions, a relevant action plan should build a governance model that balances standardization, religious autonomy, and public legitimacy. First, the *Sangha* should develop internal accountability mechanisms that do not depend entirely on state authority—for example, strengthening *Vinaya*-based ethics and disciplinary councils with transparent procedures and cross-order monastic participation—so that oversight does not collapse into political control. Second, to reduce sectarian tension, policy should promote integrative programs across *Thammayut* and *Mahānikāya* in education and resource distribution (such as *Pāli* scholarships, access to text printing, and teacher training) under equal standards, so that a “normative model” does not automatically translate into structural privilege. Third, to minimize identity ambiguity in which the *Sangha* appears as a state instrument, governance should clearly distinguish spiritual functions from administrative functions: the *Sangha* can contribute to public moral education without becoming a channel of narrow propaganda or compulsory political loyalty. Fourth, to manage tensions between rationalization and popular practice, reform should prioritize gradual religious literacy strategies rather than simple elimination. An educational approach should explain canonical bases while recognizing lay social needs, so that reform does not sever the public’s emotional ties to religious institutions. Through these measures, reform can preserve its stabilizing and modernizing functions without deepening dysfunctions such as dependence, fragmentation, and declining public trust.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Buddhist reform under King Mongkut (Rama IV) constituted a strategic and multilayered historical–institutional process rather than a merely personal or spiritual religious renewal. The principal findings show that the reform emerged from the long accumulation of *Sangha*–monarchy relations that had developed since the Ayutthaya period and reached a new configuration through the integration of monastic purification, the rationalization of religious practice, and the institutional restructuring of the *Sangha* within the framework of the state. Through Rama IV’s unique position as a monarch with deep monastic experience, Buddhism was reformulated into rational Buddhism and state Buddhism, which functioned simultaneously as a source of political legitimacy, a social infrastructure, and an instrument of Siam’s sovereign resilience amid nineteenth-century colonial pressures.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study offers both conceptual and historical insights by interpreting Thai Buddhist reform as an integral part of state formation rather than as an isolated episode of religious change. By integrating

analyses of *Sangha*–monarchy relations, Buddhist kingship, religious rationalization, and the bureaucratization of religious institutions, the study enriches the field of religion–politics studies by demonstrating how religion can operate as a technology of power as well as a source of symbolic state legitimacy. Moreover, the study foregrounds the *Sangha* as a socio-political infrastructure that mediates between state and society, while also revealing a structural ambivalence between social stabilization and the potential erosion of religious autonomy. These findings open comparative dialogue with broader scholarship on state religion, modernity, and religious governance in Asia and beyond.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it adopts a historical-qualitative approach based on secondary sources and textual analysis, and therefore does not directly capture lay experiences or local forms of resistance to reform. Second, the analysis focuses on the Rama IV period and its immediate legacy into the early reign of Rama V, and thus does not fully trace the long-term effects of these reforms on contemporary religious practice in Thailand. Future research should therefore pursue cross-national comparative approaches, micro-historical studies at the local level, or ethnographic analyses of how lay communities and *bhikkhu* perceive and negotiate the legacy of state Buddhism. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how state-led religious reform continues to be negotiated, reinterpreted, and contested within changing social contexts.

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