The Effect of Economic Globalization on the Thai Buddhist Monks

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were: to study how economic globalization affects the Thai Buddhist Monks in the present times, to study what are the trends of globalization for the organization of the Thai Buddhist monks in economic aspects.

The samples composed of 1) Abbots from important temples in Thailand with experiences regarding economic globalization, 2) the government officials from national office of Buddhism such as the managing director and provincial director, 3) Buddhist scholars from Buddhist institution. For data collection, Buddhist scripture, the related interview were used. Qualitative data were analyzed by content analysis.

The main findings were concluded as follows: 1) Thai Buddhist Sangha emphasizes the sufficient economy, middle way, right livelihood, contentment, harmlessness to others concerning economic globalization, 2) the stability of Sangha depends on the royal patronage 3) for the future of Thai Sangha, interdependence with government must be concerned, 4) The effect of economic globalization on Thai Buddhist monks consist of a) positive aspect such as economic liberalization, prosperity, b) negative aspect such as poverty and inequality. Thai Buddhist monks should apply globalization to modernize the organization. Adjustment and acceptance should be conducted for survival and success of Sangha organization in the present time and the future.

Introduction

Globalization is the product of interdependence, which is integrated through transportation, mass markets, internet, and various other forces. In the form of globalization, mass media plays a powerful influence, which affects religion too in terms of spreading the concept, teaching, philosophy and thus, reshapes religion as the visible symbol in the globe. From time immemorial religion did play a formative role both in promoting and in resisting the emergence of globalization.

In its promoting role, Information Communication Technology has assisted in increasing the religious popularity around the world. Modernity, on the other hand, has helped in the expansion of religion all over the world. Buddhism as a religion has become quite popular in the Western countries, but has often claimed to have remained symbolic in Asia. The rise of the modern liberal state has been part of modernity that has brought the separation of the sacred from the secular, thereby restricting the role of religion in the public sphere. Thus, today, religion is accepted as a private affair of an individual. In terms of modernity/modernization, many scholars argue that religion is as an obstacle to development. For a modern secular state, privilege of religion is reduced and religion is thus dislodged from various institutions. Devout followers, however, have felt increasingly insecure in this loss of identity and thereby felt alienated to modernity and secularism. Hence, there is a situation of non-tolerance, modern culture is condemned, and of late violence has been used in attacking those, who differ. The consequence of fundamentalism has occurred to resist the modernity.
However, whether in promotion or resistance, globalization has affected the Buddhist society. It has affected in both positive and negative ways. In Theravada Buddhism as well, it is difficult to quantify or qualify the estimate effect of globalization, because of the conservative nature of the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization]. Meanwhile, it seems there is a divergence between the policy of the Thai Buddhist Sangha organization and the Buddhist goal of Nirvana or Enlightenment. Incidentally, the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] has got several opportunities and challenges in order to become more visible. The urge of this visibility will certainly make the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] more amiable and adaptable to transformation.

Globalization is an all-encompassing concept, which has affected many aspects of daily life of all, especially the Thai Buddhist society. Conceptually speaking, Buddhist precepts are extremely modern and rational but its practice in the Theravada order (as practiced in the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization]) is, unfortunately conservative. Globalization has brought in so-called contested concepts like Modernization, which is equated with Westernization today. Globalization thus is a process, which will in all probabilities, have an impact in the future discourse of the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] and the Thai Buddhist order. On its part, thus, globalization is obviously having an impact on religion. The future of the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] will depend, thus, on how it will adapt its structure, processes and framework to co-habit with the idea of globalization, especially at the economic levels. Transformation, which is the core of the Buddhist precepts, is generally relates to ideas and values at the level of praxis. It is used as interests and ideas for motivating human beings. Changes of ideas and values often become the motivational/driving factor of globalization.

This interface of globalization with Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] is producing a major modern visible change. The visible change can be observed in the ideological battle to take over world views, granted beliefs and practices. The potential to change Thai Buddhism depends on the balance between transforming the habits and the values and appropriating, absorbing and further building on the ideas of globalization. To many modern practicing Buddhist monks and scholars, even the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] or the Theravada Buddhism per say is regarded as a conservative, formal, dogmatic and nationalistic. Hence globalization provides opportunities and challenges to bring forth these changes and adopt accordingly.

Significance of the Study

The approach of Globalization as a concept is quite modern for the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order. Conceptually, Globalization as a phenomenon is related to various aspects like economics, politics, culture and even religion. The process of globalization is thus, assumedly accepted for better management and improvement. Incidentally, globalization today is accepted as a process that assists transformation of any social condition, through modernization or westernization. Thus, it is inevitable to acknowledge the process of globalization, and accommodate the tenets of globalization in the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order, which otherwise will prove detrimental for the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order to sustain in the long run.

The Thai Buddhist Sangha Order, is no doubt a conservative organization. There is clear signs of backwardness and ineffectiveness, which today, unfortunately used for defining the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization]. The Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] and the process of globalization are seemingly contradictory to the tenets of Buddhism itself.
That in itself means that the Sangha organization is to remain simple in their living, and also simultaneously work for the betterment of the Order and the society in conformity to globalization. The culture of globalization has bring in a ‘consumer culture’, which contradicts the main tenets of Buddhism, and its dictum to the Sangha (organization). Additionally, conservatism of the Thai Buddhist Sangha (organization) is regarded to be one of the key factors, which is creating hindrance for the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] to progress. Therefore, it is necessary to accept globalization to modernize any Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization]. It will certainly make it positive, more relevant and responsive to the modern demand.

Globalization is believed to be a factor that generates progress and development of many organizations, which is part of the modern demand; however, some organizations still oppose it. In practice, as of today, the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order (organization) can be certainly called as an anti-globalization organization. The reason is that the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] is an organization, which follows the doctrine and discipline of Buddhism regimentally as interpreted by the tenets of the Theravada Buddhism. In this context, it must be noted that the Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Thailand is unique and different from that, which are practiced in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The opposition to globalization by the Thai Buddhist Sangha Order [organization] may be understood by the people in general, since some Buddhist monks welcome it, while the others, especially a few Abbots and the senior monks maintain quite a conservative stand. In extreme cases, some Thai Buddhist monks gave quite a strong reactionary expression against globalization and have even condemned it, as contradictory to Buddhist principle.

**Research Question**

1) How economic globalization affects the Thai Buddhist Monks in the present times?

2) What are the trends of globalization for the organization of the Thai Buddhist monks in economic aspects?

**Research Objectives**

- **To study**
  - Buddhist conceptions on economic aspects, which are based on international relations and Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Thailand.
  - The development and progressive growth with the support of the political structure, especially the role of Monarchy; role of Economic Structure and business.
  - To understand the possible future of Theravada Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand.

- **To analyze**
  - The effect of economic globalization on the Thai Buddhist Sangha / Monks
  - The trends of globalization for the organization of the Thai Buddhist monks in economic aspects
Scope of the study

The study focuses on the effect of economic globalization on the Thai Buddhist monks since 2001 to 2010 from both positive and negative angles.

The data will be collected mostly from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources will include the data of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand based on Buddhist scripture and also from all the relevant government agencies related to the Thai Buddhist Sangha / Monks, namely; National Buddhist Office of Thailand, Sangha Supreme Council.

Research Methodology

The study aims at:

- Documentary research collected through historical and analytical methods
  
  - Primary sources such as official documents, speeches and papers
  
  - Secondary data such as books, articles, magazines, journals, newspapers, technical researches and various website etc.

- Interviewing the government personnel and monks both in senior and operational levels who are in charge with globalization matters in the:
  
  - National Office of Buddhism
  
  - The Sangha Supreme Council (Mahatherasamakom)

Research Result

1) Buddhist Conceptions on Economics

1.1) In terms of economics, it is to avoid from poverty. Wealth in Buddhist economics means the way is acquired and used. Sufficient provision is necessary as the foundation of life for both monastics and laypeople. Therefore material desire is necessary to sustain the body's health and well-being.

1.2) For another matter, it is the Right livelihood. Any trades that involve weapons, poisons, drugs, alcohol, or any trade in human beings or animal flesh must be avoided. In addition, if people have sufficient wealth, they should see to the reasonable comfort of themselves and their families and then use excess in generous sharing with others in investment, in their business, in prudent savings against possible future misfortunes, and in giving to deserving religious persons.

1.3) There are two kinds of desire related to economics. That are (1) Tanha, the desire for pleasure objects. Using the example of eating, people who are driven by Tanha will seek to satisfy the blind craving for sensual pleasure which, in this case, is the desire for pleasant taste. Here, satisfaction results from experiencing the flavor of the food. and (2) Chanda, the desire for well-being. Chanda is based on wisdom and is thus part of the process of solving problems. When people are guided by Chanda, desires are directed to realizing well-being. In the sense of economics, chanda is more believed as the better mental states, moral
behavior and economic activity, that are linked in the cause and effect stream. It might be noted chanda is the right action for economics.

1.4) The term 'poverty' is misinterpreted in many ways. There are familiar Buddhist concepts such as contentment (Santutthi) or limited desires (Appicchata). Poverty (Daliddiya) has no place to be praised or encouraged in Buddhism. For the possession of wealth in the Pali Canon, the monks, who are not expected to seek wealth, to be a frequent recipient of offerings is sometimes regarded as a good quality. There are two factors must be concerned. For the one hand, the main theme in the scriptures is wealth that is acquired and used. On the other hand, this does not mean that monks are encouraged to own possessions. If a monk is rich in personal possessions, it is evidence of his greed and attachment and he cannot be said to conform to Buddhist principles. The right practice for monks is to own nothing except the basic requisites of life.

1.5) For this matter, it is contentment and paucity of wishes accompanied by commitment to the development of the good and the abandonment of evil that are praised. Even contentment and paucity of wishes are to be qualified, that is, they must be accompanied by effort and diligence, not by complacency and idleness. The monk contents himself with whatever he gets so that he can devote more of his time and energy to his own personal development and the welfare of others. In other words, while it may be good for a monk to gain many possessions, it is not good to own or to hoard them. It is good rather to gain much, and give much away.

1.6) For this study it can be summarized that there are two characteristics of Buddhist Economics; 1) realization of true well-being. Buddhism is full of teachings referring to the Middle Way, the right amount and knowing moderation, and all of these terms may be considered as synonyms for the idea of balance or equilibrium. Knowing moderation is referred to in the Buddhist scriptures as Mattaññuta. It is the defining characteristic of Buddhist economics. 2) There is no harming oneself or others. This is another important principle and one that is used in Buddhism as the basic criterion of human action, not only in relation to consumption, but for all human activity.

1.7) The teaching of Buddha emphasizes mindfulness, prosperity and equality. For mindfulness, it can help in our work against consumerism, sexism, militarism, and the many other isms that undermine the integrity of life. For prosperity, it is self-reliance, self-dignity, pride in one's culture, contentedness, generosity, and mindfulness. In Buddhism, income and wealth are not indicators of prosperity. Buddhism values a peaceful life in which one relates harmoniously to all sentient beings and the environment. For equality, it doesn't mean sameness. Some people need more than others. A sick person, for example, requires more resources than a healthy person. Equality tends to denote a process by which the middle classes and the poor strive to be like the rich and powerful. But equality could also be attained if the rich were to live more simply and share some of their wealth.

2) Role of Monarchy and Political Support

2.1 Buddhism and Monarchy

Theravada Buddhism influenced the conceptions of kingship in various ways such as paradigmatic dhammaraja, the righteous monarch, who governs justly and righteously as the embodiment of the ten royal virtues. It is the symbol of monarchy in Southeast Asia. With royal virtues, king is needed for protection and for the sake of honor and security. Thus Buddhist kingship is essentially based on the concept of righteousness. It is understood that under the reign of Buddhist king in Thailand, Sangha and people live life peacefully.
Following traditional expressions of monarchical support for Buddhism and Sangha, the king developed material aspects such as building about many new monasteries and restoration of the old ones.

2.2) Ecclesiastical Honorific Title under the Political Patronage

Incidentally, there is an ecclesiastical honorific title awarded for promoting individual monk into Sangha hierarchy. This award is called Samanasak. It served as a refined index or rank in secular society. Samanasak signifies the rank and status of an individual monk in the Sangha hierarchy. This award is conferred upon the monks by the king in order to give a lasting honour. It becomes obviously tied to administrative positions within Sangha. Under the Sangha administration, monks of various ranks are either the Sangha governors of major provinces or the abbots of important royal monasteries or both. This rank or honorific award has continued with some revisions and modifications till today. The award of honorific titles for Sangha is conferred by the king.

2.3) Land Donation and Monastic Income

It has been a long-established tradition that when a new king ascend to the throne, a new royal palace and new royal monastery must be happened along with monarchical position. The magnificence of the buildings signified the extent of the king's pious concern for the well-being and prosperity of the religion and the Sangha. In the sense of economic structure, Land donation and ecclesiastical stipend are concerned for this study. The Thai Sangha enjoyed a considerable income from the land. Nowadays, the everyday business of the monastery properties is administered by the lay committee are supervised and closely controlled by the National office of Buddhism. Nevertheless, in practice, the abbot of the monastery still enjoys his prerogative in making decisions about whom the monastery estate should be rent to. Even the cost is not too much for tenant, it is appeared that in the city monastery, the Sangha can earn much more money for prosperity and material development throughout the lay committee.

2.4) Buddhist Commerce

Meanwhile, prosperity and wealth of Buddhism and Sangha are related to the belief and modern concept such as capitalism, materialism and so on. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand's economic boom has created a mood of national confidence. It influenced all aspects of social, cultural, and religious life. Religious life is overshadowed by materialism. Materialism is seen as the form of belief in order to support the demand of Buddhist people in the society. The form of belief through materials become appeared as the trading of Buddhism. It is called "Buddhist commerce" or Buddhhabhanich. Buddhist Commerce is used to criticize the process of faith and belief of people in Buddhism to be the instrument for gaining income. There are the various forms of commerce such as Buddha Coins, locket, talisman, statue, and so on. The price of holy objects depends upon the number of belief; not following the reasonable factor. There are activities just to be interpreted for material wealth in monastic community via dispelling bad luck ceremony, life span extension ceremony, Increasing fortune ceremony.

2.5) Capitalism and Mundane rather than Transcendence

After modernization program in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) has been implemented, development in various aspects is conducted continuously. The effect has been happened to Politics, Economics, Society and Buddhism and Sangha as well. Modernization is concept of Westernization, Capitalism and so on. It means that development is emphasized on material matter. Meanwhile, Buddhism is regarded as spiritualism. Incidentally, economic
policy is most important for government policy in both domestic and international level. This policy has been successful and led to well-being of people in the country. Obviously, this policy has been occurred to support society and also Buddhism indirectly. When people become rich and prosperous, they can offer food and necessary things for monastery. In contrast, if society is poor, there is no support for monastic community. This success of policy under the modernization development programme of king is confirmative through the prosperity of monastery in the present time. In Thailand, Buddhist monks live life to get peaceful state, while they struggle to be comfortable with monastic status. It is the balance between spiritualism and materialism. Afterward, the concept of globalization has transform society into materialism, capitalism and so on. Under the political patronage, Sangha organization try to support government in order to get something in return. In terms of interdependence, Sangha falls into the materialistic attachment along with government policy and Westernization. Incidentally, Sangha instruction concentrates on donation. Most of monks who are representative for preaching, try to motivate, persuade lay followers to donate material things. This is contrary toward Buddha’s saying as appeared namely: giving the teaching of Lord Buddha as charity overcome all other kinds of giving.

2.6) The Future of Buddhism in Thailand

It can be noted that the future of Buddhism depends on the three factors: (1) political dependence, (2) education system, (3) propagation. These factors indicate about the stability and decline of Buddhism and Sangha. Political dependence may leads to the weakness of organization if the leader has no righteousness. Education system is understood good in the sense of development. Anyway Buddhist education in the mentality such as meditation is the best. To follow the educational system of secular can make Buddhism and Sangha confuse and finally lost the leading role in the society. Lastly propagation depends on the way to propagate. If Buddhist monks still preach for the material well-being, Buddhism will be undermined, and there will be no one concerning enlightenment. Nevertheless the future of Buddhism depends on adaptation into modern way, simultaneously following Buddhism is the index to investigate the future of Buddhism in both way; good or bad.

3) The Effect of Economic Globalization on the Thai Buddhist Monks

Economic globalization, simply speaking, thus, comprises of globalization of production, markets, competition, technology, corporations and industries. Every unit of this world is affected by either a positive or a negative way. From the positive aspect, there are: 1) economic liberalization, 2) prosperity. The negative aspect often loosely comprise of: 1) poverty 2) inequality. It is an inadvertent fact, thus, that the economic aspect is having a spillover effect on the social aspect of human beings. Religion, or religious aspirations of any society is also part of it, and from this perspective it is imperative that the Theravada Buddhism, the predominant religion of Thailand, and its paraphernalia, i.e., the Thai Buddhist Sangha Organization is also getting affected.

From the positive angle, economic liberalization, which is an offshoot of globalization, is a privilege gained from the Thai monarch, who encouraged economic development, with removal of controls. The examination and verification of financial accounts has been waived. From the perspective of prosperity, no doubt there is luxury for monastic community. Thus, if success is measured by material progress, then globalization is successful for the Thai Buddhist Sangha Organization. If again, happiness is interpreted as the ultimate goal, and well-being is measured in terms of prosperity, which means accumulation of wealth, then the standard and the richness of the monastic community has
certainly being raised. However, in terms of measurement of the monastic quality, it is yet to be done, and is in doubt.

From the negative angle, the main concern is poverty, which consists of two factors. They are as follows: 1) there is material poverty in the age of capitalism and consumerism, especially in the Buddhist Temples in the remote area of Thailand. It is impossible for them to get the same facility like the Buddhist Temples enjoy in the city area. 2) There is seemingly a spiritual poverty with the advent of materialism. Thai Buddhist monks are more concerned to follow the way to get rich, even when it is not approved for the monk. That is why, there seems to be a lack in their spirituality. So far as inequality is concerned, there are three factors. They are as follows; 1) Inequality of resources. It recognizes wealth as the key resources. The idea of resources naturally include the number of other goods that Buddhist monks find useful in the achieving their aims of life. 2) Inequality of income; the issue of income inequality arises between the nation especially between developing and developed country. Within a nation [may read Thailand in this context], there is disparity of earnings of the Buddhist temples, which often leads to inequality of income corroborating to inequality of privileges, education and wellbeing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the Buddhist context, globalization is often perceived as an inevitable process of adjustment and accommodation. It usually implies the existence of certain global trends that we need to cope up with for survival and success. The benefit of globalization toward Sangha organization eventually is the media, internet and related others. Thai Sangha or representative of it should invest fund into technology to propagate Buddhism. This is the channel to widen Buddhism in the right way. More importantly, Thai Sangha shouldn’t work reactively, but work proactively to perform Sangha as the global society requires. In the industrial world, there is no time to visit monastery for Buddhist people, so Sangha have to understand situation and then make decision wisely. Thus under the stream of globalization, Thai Sangha must use proactive propagation strategy and consider media and internet as the instrument for the Buddhist development.

As mentioned earlier, in terms of economic globalization, wealth or well-being is interpreted as the form of happiness. However, in The Art of Happiness: A Hand Book for Living, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that: “Although it is possible to achieve happiness, happiness is not a simple thing. There are certainly many levels. In Buddhism, for instance, there is a reference to the four factors of fulfillment, or happiness: wealth, worldly satisfaction, spirituality, and enlightenment. In this context, the standpoint of Sangha has been challenged by economic globalization. Thus, in order to preserve the Buddhist Order, it is necessary to preserve the Sangha as well. At the present stage, the Sangha structure is orderly with strict hierarchical division, however highly centralized in character. The preservation of Buddhist Sangha in this globalized world requires adjustments and acceptance of alternative methods. That in itself brings in the basic argument of this research as to whether the Thai Buddhist Sangha organization is ready to accept the change, which is indeed a necessity.

References


