

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Wats Pho, Paknam, Phuphanudomdham and Bangjakreang use temple revenue to ensure the success of their temples and their goals of providing community support and leadership. Such support and leadership can be achieved through the work of the monks, who require very little to support their lifestyle. The high level of patronage usually results in temples receiving more financial support than they need. Therefore, these wats are able to make regular and annual donations to their communities and in the general area. Such reciprocal support on behalf of the wat has become commonplace. Three of the four temples here have committees whose function, among other things, is to assist in determining how excess funds can best serve their communities. The four temples are able to pool the funds and redistribute them into common goods that modern economics has difficulty justifying investment into. These common goods include education, welfare for the poor and/or sick, and general community development.

In order to understand the economic transactions that take place between the Thai Buddhist temples and their communities, one must first understand the original goals, expectations and purpose of the Buddhist temple. Buddhist temples were a major institution in the Thai community. Thai people centered their lives around the daily interactions with the temple. Temples were used to celebrate first life, transition into adulthood and death. They were also a place for the sick and disabled to receive treatment and assistance as needed. The Buddhist monks who resided at the temples served the community as teachers, mediators, and leaders. In short, the Thai Buddhist temple was the indispensable part of the Thai community. In return for the services provided, the Thai Buddhist temple only required food to feed its residents and manpower to attend to day-to-day responsibilities. This relationship was obviously very beneficial to the community as it was to the Buddhist religion.

As the nation of Thailand became involved with the international community, the institutions of the people underwent change and reform. Religion was not immune to

these reforms. King Chulalongkorn introduced major changes to Thai Buddhism. By outlawing the Thai form of indentured servitude, he caused many temples to lose a virtually free source of labor. This single reform had a huge impact on the temple's ability and responsibility in maintaining itself within the community. Accompanied by the changing style of urban patronage, many Buddhist temples faced the option of adjusting to new means of support or falling into neglect and decay.

King Chulalongkorn also introduced secular education in Thailand, his own children being among the first to receive it. The elite of Thailand followed his example as the revered king, and sent their children to receive secular education instead of the traditional temple school education. The effect this had on the Thai Buddhist temple was not an obvious consequence. Instead of losing its role as the institution of education, the Thai Buddhist temple was actually given more responsibilities in educating the people. King Chulalongkorn wanted the Thai people to be educated and he requested that the Buddhist temples also take up this cause for the people. Ultimately, these reforms meant increased responsibility at the same time the temples were experiencing a loss of income once provided as cheap labor. The Thai Buddhist temple had to adjust to the community it belonged to. Only by understanding the obstacles that the temples faced can one understand why they developed in the manner that they did.

In modern day Thailand the Thai Buddhist temple is still a major institution. Its basic principles have remained constant; however, its interaction with the community has changed over the years. The temple must give greater consideration to its financial circumstances. The temple abbot must provide for its community and patrons, above the need of nearby residents. Neglect in this responsibility could result in the collapse of the temple.

It is the financial interaction between the community and the wat that this research has attempted to explore. The four temples studied give an interesting insight into how they interact with the communities they belong to. By taking a close look at the case studies presented here, an individual profile of temple/community economic relationship emerges.

Wat Phuphanudomdham used a significant portion of its total income on various community development projects, including an annual summer class for upwards of 600 students. Through its lay representative, the wat also received a government grant to build a road allowing greater access to the local community. Despite being a rural temple, it has adjusted itself to the style of patronage made necessary in the urban centers of Thailand. To this temple's benefit, its abbot has been able to retain primary control of the temple's economic resources, a factor shown to strengthen social ties within the area. Based on this profile, Wat Phuphanudomdham should expect increasing patronage from local households.

Wat Pho, said to be the spiritual center of Bangkok, also follows the profile of patronage received from outside the local area. In Wat Pho's case, this temple is the center of traditional Thai arts and culture. It is also an institution of education and tourism. The financial support it receives must be used to support many more community services than practically any other temple in the nation. Local shop houses and various merchants around Wat Pho, who are not necessarily regular patrons of the wat, also receive benefit from the temple in the form of increased business. Despite its unique responsibility, Wat Pho still regularly redistributes its excess income to many people and in institutions in and around Bangkok. Furthermore, the complicated nature of this temple requires an organized and efficient system of accounting which strongly deters the possibility of abuse.

The other royal temple profiled here, Wat Paknam, has also developed a comprehensive accounting department. The temple's annual accounts are published for all patrons. Meant to thank all for their support, this practice also strengthens lay trust and social ties. Wat Paknam's patrons are primarily local Bangkok residents (in addition to the royal family). This style is an example of an urban temple which has successfully blended traditional and modern methods of patronage. Because of its patronage, Wat Paknam is able to support a relatively large residential monk population, in addition to economic contributions of over half of its annual income in the five years shown above.

Wat Bangjakreang is over 400 years old, showing the strength and capability of Buddhism and the Buddhist wat in a changing society. It is a private temple that does not receive regular patronage from the royal family. Instead, it relies on its community and its abbot. Considered by the abbot an average sized temple, this wat has never needed a professional accountant, nor has it kept financial records in a detailed fashion. This lack of transparency has not caused a problem with its patrons as social ties are strong. In addition, Wat Bangjakreang has continually given scholarships to many students in the community, in addition to construction of a local primary school, flood banks along the nearby river, and housing to those in serious financial difficulty, among other services many wats provide.

Almost all of the temples researched here reported annual losses. As stated before, most temples also failed to report income received from land holdings, assets and capital accounts. This discrepancy highlights the largest problem in this research; all data were reported by the temples themselves. Thai Buddhist temples do not need to report to any independent organization nor are they expected to make their financial transactions transparent. The only other problem was the communication barrier and cultural misunderstandings that occasionally took place in the course of research. Despite these problems, this research serves as a strong base for further research into the economic relationship between the community and the Thai Buddhist temple.

Communities of all of the temples studied here receive economic benefit from the temple's presence that would not otherwise be available. The status, roles and responsibilities of the Thai Buddhist wat are dynamic, just as other religious institutions. Thai Buddhist temples have the support, trust and good faith of the people because they are able to keep up with the needs and expectations placed on them. This support has remained constant, even during times of societal, internal change in the Sangha and change in the operation of the wats. Temples and their abbots are accustomed to the responsibility of successfully maintaining their wats in a society with a capitalist economic system.