

Chapter II: the emerging middle class struggle for identity

Spiritual void of the middle class

Due to the rapid socio-economic growth starting in the '60s and '70s and the increase of higher education, the development of "a commercial and professional middle class distinct from the aristocratic-bureaucratic-commercial establishment" (Jackson 1989: 32), has emerged.

Religion as part of the center Thai polity can be seen going through some changes during the mid '90s with the popularity of the Buddhist sect known as the Dhammakaya. The Dhammakaya's Buddhist reforms reflect middle class realities and sensibilities toward a society of capitalism and free enterprise, of which this sector was born from. The growth of the middle class innately brought with it a "spiritual void" or a natural need of a substitute for the traditional communities that can provide them with "the sense of community, close bonding and fellowship" which has been lacking in the wider urban society.

As the Sangha authority traditionally only dealt with a simple two class division in Thai society, the royal/elites and the peasantry, this new middle class is placed in a position that's disenfranchised from their traditional roots and reality.

“The inactivity of the traditional temples and the ecclesiastical authorities and their inability to come to terms with contemporary problems has frustrated the middle class,” says (Chalermripinyorat 1999).

Along with a growing “spiritual void,” the middle class has also been blocked from economic expansion through their exclusion of the patron client system, or what Jackson calls the “patronage network.” He says, “the personality based patronage system developed under Sarit Thanarat and his successor Thanom Kittikachorn is becoming an increasing barrier to further economic expansion as more and more [new] businesses compete for contracts and market shares,” (Jackson 1989).

But with money free flowing, the “ruling elite” expands from government officials and the few flourishing business people to also encompass the growing number of middle class citizens. Emerging from an expanding higher education sector, the middle class sector has given rise to what are variously termed the ‘cultural industries’- media, advertising, fashion, design, marketing- and the ‘expressive professions’- teaching and lecturing, therapeutic and social work, (Muggleton 2000).

But as a rising class fraction they also act as middle class missionaries, promoting and disseminating their ideologies and cultural tastes to a wider audience through these new and “influential positions” considerably strengthening the economic position of the middle class in its competition for power with the establishment.

Religion plays an integral role influencing social change as it has roots in Thai tradition and establishment. Buddhism is one of Thailand’s three core values defining Thailand’s center polity that can be utilized as well as protected under the laws of national security. According to Jackson, in the reign of King Mongkut, Buddhism was

“purified” to reject local and regional superstitious beliefs in order to “support and intensify the religious focus on the royal Buddhism of the Thai court.” Mongkut’s reforms laid the theoretical groundwork for the development of a religious absolutism that paralleled and legitimated the political absolutism of the Thai monarchy in the second half of the 19 century,” (Jackson 1989: 46). In other words, the utilization of scientific Western enlightenment was to ‘modernize’ old Siam, but the broader aim, however, “was not to erase its distinctive tradition, but rather to safeguard it by strengthening the country and preserving its independence vis-à-vis Western encroachment.” (E.Cohen 1991: 56).

Similarly, by utilizing the authority of religious forms “which had traditionally been used to legitimate the political position of the regional elites,” (Jackson 1989), it is possible for new theoretical groundwork to be created as a vehicle supporting ideologies and concerns of a new modern middle class society while at the same time fortifying a position of power in the establishment.

The outlining of the present middle class position in Thai society fosters a framework for the emergence and success of the Dhammakaya movement, which could be attributed as “nothing but a response to the wider socio economic transformation in the Thai social context,” (Chalermripinyorat 1999: 4).

Contemporary reform Buddhist movements stress that Buddhist doctrines should conform to rational and scientific standards of analysis. Jackson states “Reformist Buddhism is based on a thoroughgoing demythologization of the religion’s doctrines...with an emphasis on human life in this world...and a religious validation of the hope for socio economic development and material prosperity,” (Jackson 1989: 48).

An analysis into the Dhammakaya movement and its tactics can help make sense of its popularity among Thailand's middle class sector as well as an understanding of the ongoing relationship between streams of tradition and modernity.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya was founded by Phra Phadet Dattajivo and Phra Chaiboon Dhammachayo on the teachings of Luang Phor Sot (1881-1959) of Wat Paak-naam. The Dhammakaya movement did not exist in anything like its present form during the lifetime of Luang Phor Sot. In fact it was Dattajivo and Dhammachayo that have been the driving forces behind the Dhammakaya movement and its rapid development. In 1969, the two student followers of Luang Phor Sot established the Center of Buddhachak for Dhamma Practice in Northern Bangkok, which later became the Dhammakaya Temple in 1977.

Dattajivo and Dhammachayo were two Kasetsart University graduates who were "dissatisfied with what they saw as the stagnant and increasingly irrelevant ritualism of the sangha and who turned to Luang Phor Sot's teachings for a form of Buddhism acceptable to young university educated Thais," (Jackson 1989: 208).

What they came up with were teachings that solidified abstract Buddhist concepts by terms of consumerist-like forms of concrete transactions. The concept of nirvana has been constructed to seem more attainable to the present day life of everyday people. No more was the notion of building karma for lifetimes and kalpas, followers of the Dhammakaya are now able to achieve that state of enlightenment through intense meditation and "buying" merit.

The Dhammakaya teaching revolves around the notion that there exist layers of tangible bodies within us all that will lead us to enlightenment or nirvana. The "purest" of

these bodies appears in the form of a “pure white lotus shaped Buddha image that will lead us into nirvana,” (Suwanna 1990: 400) and can only be attained through deep meditation.

An assertion made by the Dhammakaya is that the highest form of this spiritual body called Dhammakaya (kaya means body) is what the Lord Buddha referred to when he declared, ‘Those who see the Dhamma, see me.’ Suwanna states that this teaching also claims that “all meditative practices lead to the Dhammakaya and there is no other way to nirvana except this way,” (Suwanna 1990: 401).

This claim is in contrast to earlier Theravada interpretations in which the word “Dhammakaya” metaphorically referred to the spiritual essence of the Buddha in his state of perfect wisdom. But the Dhammakaya teachings insist that this spiritual body exists as a literal reality, in other words, “a personalized and concrete form of true wisdom,” (Apinya, p172). This “demythologitizing” or reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines is the Dhammakaya’s way of molding ideas and reassuring in theological terms, the hope for development and material prosperity to the middle class.

“The religious reformists justify their radically empirical view of Buddhist doctrine by rejecting most of the post canonical commentaries on the scriptures which support metaphysical interpretations of the doctrine as non Buddhist or Brahmanical accretions which obscure the true message of the Buddha,” (Jackson 1989: 48). This is the framework of the Dhammakaya’s path to a religious indulgence. The Dhammakaya knows “metaphysical interpretations” of religious teachings have become less and less relevant to the middle class consumerist, so they took the initiative to translate the teachings in a language and context that’s easier for people to grasp.

The world of global capitalism opened up opportunities for economic wealth and with it the growth of a new middle class. This realm of capitalism fostered the middle class conception of gratification and the method of obtaining it. The method is quite simple: to attain happiness, you first must work to make lots of money, then you can spend it on all the happiness you need. The initial burden is “how to make money,” but with the economic advancement in Thai society, that question has been overcome by the middle class, which brings them to the next question, “can money buy everything I need?” It is this middle class pattern of thought that Muggleton says are “characterized by a ‘postmodern’ lifestyle orientation based on a pursuit of pleasure, creative self expression and stylistic innovation,” (Muggleton 2000: 51).

The Dhammakaya teachings give people instant gratification as their spiritual needs are handed to them in a “ready to be served” fashion. The Dhammakaya teachings crystallize merit making or “tum boon” process into money transactions allowing the capitalist logic of “the more you donate, the more merits you receive,” (Chalermripinyorat 1999: 11), to take form.

The Dhammakaya Temple made a statement in the Nation saying “only a few people have the spiritual strength to do good deeds and expect nothing in return, while most people still need incentives...to encourage people to do good, sometimes we need to use tricks,” (Chalermripinyorat 1999: 12). Apinya states that “for them the survival of Buddhism requires that some of the logic of the market or ways of the ‘world’ be adopted,” (Apinya 1993: 169).

These “tricks” led the Dhammakaya to aim big like most capitalists do. The multi million baht Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya intended by followers to become the Buddhist centre of the world reflects the “capitalist dream” or the final fruit of hard work which they can retire to after their money making days are over, or to put it in theological terms, after the great apocalypse. Chalermripinyorat cites an article in the Dhammakaya’s monthly magazine regarding the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya which says, “To overcome the calamity [of the great apocalypse] there are two possible answers; one is to achieve the high level of Dhammakaya meditation, and the other is to make donations in order to have the donor’s name inscribed in the structure of Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, where all victorious entities will reside as soon as possible.”

Ascribing that much faith into Dhammakaya’s idea of “merit making” can cost a believer thousands of baht, but it seems to be worth it as communities like the Muang Keaw Manee condominium complex sprout up near the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya. Located in direct view of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, the “utopian community” provides a recreation center comprising of a 200-seat modern seminar center, sauna room, exercise room, swimming pool and more interestingly ‘Dhamma Theatre’ together with a shopping arcade, minimarts, restaurants, hair salons, laundry service shops, and the list goes on. The secular world of capitalism put faith into the motto “money can buy anything” for this middle class and the Dhammakaya is there translating it into familiar Buddhist terms.

After examining the Dhammakaya’s approach to Buddhism, their tactics sometimes seem manipulative, as if they were taking advantage of a needy and confused

middle class that is rather new to their placement in society. Their motives between making a profit and instilling faith seem to be blurred.

The purchase of almost 2,000 rai (800 acres) of farmland around the original site of the monastery in order to develop an area for ascetic practices in the style of the forest monk tradition caused uproar as local farmers in the area had to relocate. After complaints from those displaced by the expansion of the monastery's grounds, the Dhammakaya Foundation which manages the movement's finances agreed to pay 300,000 baht compensation to each displaced family," (Jackson 1989: 208).

Dattajivo was cited by former Prime Minister MR Kukrit Pramoj as saying something to the effect that the Dhammakaya Temple complex intends to expand continually and that 100,000 rai (about 40,000 acres) would not be enough land, to which he commented, "this does not sound like the words of a monk, but the words of a financier who has several million baht and who is looking for land to build a resort," (Suwanna 1990: 402).

A leading Thai historian and outspoken critic of Thai society, Nithi Eaosriwongse, says that "in the age of globalization, the enormous and complex interconnection of the world in terms of politics, economic and culture make it impossible for people to foresee their own situation and even make sense of the complicated world system. As a result, a number of emerging cults come into play, providing them with easy comfort."

Religion is just one aspect of social change occurring as a result of a "modernizing" Bangkok. The socioeconomic factors making up this new Bangkok create new discourses that need to be addressed in new dialogues. It is within these new

dialogues that the people engaged find resolution or comfort from the conflicting streams of tradition and modernity. We can see the two streams clash both inside and outside the borders of social acceptance/centre polity as the Dhammakaya explodes into controversy.

A nine issue allegation against Phra Dhammachayo was made by the House committee on religious affairs, comprising of:

1. the violation of rules on the construction of Buddha statues
2. the misinterpretation of Buddha's teachings
3. the promotion of miracles
4. the commercialization of merit making
5. improper conduct by the abbot towards female followers
6. the accumulation of land plots
7. the temple's business empire
8. the financial irregularities related to donations
9. the ordination of female novices

(Chalermripinyorat 1999: 14)

According to Chalermripinyorat, the House Committee on Religious Affairs finally concluded its report on the Dhammakaya controversy and abbot Phra Dhammachayo was removed from his position as abbot on grounds of "threatening national security, violating religious principles, and undermining the monarchy," (Chalermripinyorat 1999: 15).

According to the Nation, former abbot Phra Dhammachayo and two of his close aides, Kamolsiri Klisuwan and Maiyarit Pitawanic were accused of dereliction of duty and malfeasance and of embezzling 95 million baht from the temple. According to the article, police officials said Dhammachayo was accused of "siphoning off 96 million baht to buy jewelry for one of his female followers and financing his trips abroad."

The Dhammakaya illustrates some middle class conflicts and its struggle for identity amidst the changing lifestyle of modern society. Though government officers in charge of “security matters” have been keeping a watchful eye on the Dhammakaya, “they are not concerned about the religious content of its teachings. Rather what worries them is its manpower mobilizing capabilities which are believed to pose a potential political threat.” (Apinya 1993: 178). It’s the same “manpower mobilizing capabilities” that keep all forms of cultural expressions within reach of the hegemony process. And with media as the apparatus for disseminating information, expression and opinions, it is no doubt closely safeguarded.

The battlefield- Thai media

To hear or see society’s particular life and meaning, one must enter the popular culture battleground mentioned above, referring to the mass media, the infrastructure that filters out society’s spectrum of cultural expression. An investigation into the mass media infrastructure shows us how and why exposure to subcultural perspectives are connected, though greatly distorted and limited before it reaches the general population.

The waves of communication through which mass media in Thailand is controlled filter all ideologies and forms of expression that pass through. Definitions of what are socially acceptable, governed by the “ruling elites,” perpetuate itself through the process of hegemony, a process greatly accelerated via a mass media infrastructure. Ideologies foreign to those of the “ruling elites” are prone to reinterpretation (sometimes distortion) and a reconstruction into society allowing sense to be made out of ideologies unfruitful to their reality.

The process of hegemony is essentially a realignment of the ideologies already in place within a society. The three pillars comprising the polity of the Thai nation, which are to be protected under the name of national security- the monarchy, religion and the Thai nation- are seen shifting and changing in shape to accommodate in accordance with the rest of the modernizing world.

According to Alagappa, any ideology that slights or endangers these traditional institutions is by definition unacceptable to the ruling elite, because “they have been termed the civic religion of Thailand, which provides the legitimacy and basis for all political activity, including rebellion.”

As technology advances and the “information warfare” become stronger, defining the borders of what a threat to national security actually constitutes can become unclear. “Territorial integrity which in its contemporary form includes land, air and sea space can be violated in several ways,” Alagappa states, “but apart from overt military attack directed at the state it is difficult to classify the other numerous infringements as threats to national security.”

Freedom of expression is one such “infringement” as mass media can be used to propagate cultural codes contrary to the endurance of central Thai polity. When the “ruling elites” are threatened by the media, Alagappa says, “the state must implement security through non alignment...by creating regulatory mechanisms to facilitate resolutions through peaceful means, or give reality to conceptions of regional order to regulate power in region,” in other words distorting the media as a “peaceful medium” to make people believe there is “regional order”- the problem is that it is the “ruling elites” who define what is threatening.

With each advent of modernization and foreign ideologies, new angles in the name of national security are used to manipulate censorship into the network of “freedom of expression” to keep the central polity of the Thai nation central to those controlling it.

Alagappa explains democracy and capitalism have intertwined and extended itself to influence Thailand’s media situation through the arguments of national security. As economic well being has become a basic goal of all political units in the last part of the twentieth century, Alagappa states, “economic well being can be seen as a prerequisite to the pursuit of National security as it provides the means to make the state less vulnerable to external pressure and makes possible the allocation of necessary resources to counter internal and external threats.”

This is important when we take a look at Thailand’s economic boom in the ‘90s and how free market philosophy broke down Thailand’s media ownership from the state to also include the private business sector. After the May 1992 Demonstrations, among the list on the reform agenda was re-regulating the state media so the Thai public can have more rights and freedom to information and communication. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) was restructured to “include academics in communication, representative from women, children and consumer groups.”

Aside from restructuring the NBC, the government deregulated the broadcast system by introducing a new television channel open for private bidding, (Ubonrat 1999: 2). Out came iTV, the new UHF television station run by a consortium of ten business partners in 1996 and an air of free speech settled.

These deregulations were in fact part of the “economic liberalization process that went hand in hand with the larger picture of the economic boom years. The free market

philosophy was, thus, put into practice and it was welcome by the middle classes.”

(Ubonrat 1999: 2)

As time went on Ubonrat states that this media expansion during the economic boom period did not actually signify a greater degree of freedom of communication, but rather “it demonstrates the economic expression of the middle classes and of global capitalists who are in a better position to capture the media space.” (Ubonrat 1999: 1) This created a new middle class “ruling elite” instating a media reform more conducive to a “free market” rather than free speech.

They believed “that deregulating the broadcast media would naturally lead to freedom of speech and communication.” The problem with this is that the lower middle class and the peasants without a hand or power in business get swept out of the realm of free speech. As Ubonrat states, “the re-regulation agenda in the ‘70s has been transformed to a deregulation agenda for which economic rights to information and communication took priority over political and cultural rights,” (Ubonrat 1999: 3).

Thus, creation and distribution of ideas and culture have become monopolized by the not only the state, but now also a handful of media corporations- of which Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra plays a very big part of with his Shin Corp. All this did to the freedom of information cause was broadened the “ruling elite” to also include the new business men running media corporations.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his administration have proved the “ruling elite” can successfully manipulate the media without any drastic recourse. Even with the 1997 Constitution giving “officials or employees in a private sector undertaking newspaper or radio or television broadcasting businesses” the right to “enjoy their

liberties to present news and express their opinions under the constitutional restrictions without the mandate of any State agency, State enterprise or the owner of such businesses” in Article 41, no one has yet been penalized for infringing upon media freedom. Article 41 still lacks enforcement, and there’s no indication that law-makers are in a hurry to introduce such penalty clauses.

Despite the good intentions of the drafters, media freedom is being trampled upon more blatantly than during any previous democratically elected government.

Thaksin is known to have used some of his immense wealth for political purposes. He is founder of the country’s main telecoms company, Shin Corp and as one editor said in a Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) article dated May 2001: “It seems to be the case that any newspaper that is against him will be barred from advertising from Shin Corp or its subsidiaries.” He says one newspaper in particular, business bi weekly Prachachart has had Shin advertisements withdrawn. It was Prachachart which in September 2000, first exposed the controversial handling of Thaksin’s assets leading to his Constitutional court case, of which he was later acquitted.

Months after Thaksin’s election in 2000, his Shin Corporation’s took over Thailand’s first and only independent television station, iTV. Once recognized for its aggressive and in-depth political news coverage, iTV has been reduced to another puppet in the hands of the “ruling elite” with the subsequent sacking of 23 news employees who had voiced objection to interference by the management and have been known to criticize Thaksin.

The Thaksin government then wasted no time in exercising its control over the state-owned media. Channel 11 and Channel 9, owned respectively by the Public

Relations Department and the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand, became the first casualties. News commentators considered to be "critical" of the government were quietly extracted. News reports seen as too negative about the administration were phased out.

Kavi Chonkittavorn, managing editor of the Nation relates an incident he said happened in early May of 2000. According to the FEER article, Kavi said, Special Branch police contacted the Nation editor Pana Janviroj and asked for details of government sourcing for a May 4 2000 report criticizing Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai's visit to Burma. "We know the police special branch had been asked to do this by the Foreign Ministry," says Kavi. "This is the first time I've heard of such a thing. It is shocking and disgraceful."

So how is the Thaksin administration getting away with such things? As one of the richest men in Thailand, Thaksin can do just about anything in this capitalist oriented society. Like Alagappa says, "as the traditional institutions do not provide an adequate basis for the political and economic organization of modern Thailand...they have been supplemented with trappings of democracy and capitalism," (Alagappa 1987: 40).

Thaksin's advertising power with the Shin Corp. can easily be used to manipulate the media to his favor with little persuasion. "It is not new for Thai prime ministers to feel upset by criticism and somehow try to influence the press," says Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, head of Chulalongkorn University's communication arts faculty in the May 2001 issue of FEER, "But Thaksin is a relative political newcomer and he seems to react more visibly." She adds, "He also has big business friends around him. It is the capitalists who are in power so the press have to get around this factor because if they criticize the

government, they are also criticizing big capitalists,” who in turn are the advertisers that keep the press in business.

“Thaksin’s stake in an independent television network, the allocation of his own firms’ considerable advertising budget among news outlets and his apparent attempt to purchase a major newspaper group all testified to his willingness to use his immense personal resources to control the flow of information to the Thai public,” (Montesano 2002: 92).

Media freedom is thus still in the hands of the “ruling elites” who have control over policy making. “National security issues are seldom the subject of public discussion and therefore public input into security policy making is almost nonexistent,” (Alagappa 1987: 32). The people simply accept the hegemonic perceptions and policies of those in power. While this situation continues unaltered, the base of the elite group has broadened to include the growing middle class into the center of polity.

The problem with that is they entered the polity with capitalism as its main proponent. The media solely becomes economic expressions of the middle classes and of global capitalists who are in positions to capture, control and manipulate the media space. In other words, media freedom exists as an infrastructure for the growing “ruling elites” who have control over either, money, policy making or both. Issues of national security can thus be realigned into this infrastructure in such a way as to keep dominant ideologies in place. As long as the “ruling elites” can use national security as a means to justify censorship, media freedom in popular culture will always be first and foremost about economics rather than social expression.

As there is an infrastructure of disseminating dominant ideologies, there are also infrastructures (albeit not as domineering) of the marginalized ideologies taking form in interpretive ways as we will further examine. It is this space outside the confines of dominant ideologies that subcultures can work to freely express themselves, and in its greatest triumphs, expand the boundaries of popular culture.