Buddhist Soft Power and the Cultural - Political Nexus in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the architecture of Buddhist soft power within the dynamic relationship between the Sangha and the modern state in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Drawing on Joseph Nye's theory of soft power and Michel Foucault's discourse on power, the research highlights how Buddhism functions as a symbolic resource that reinforces political legitimacy and shapes national cultural identity. The Sangha is approached not merely as a religious institution but as a moral actor actively engaged in constructing public discourse, contributing to social governance, and fostering regional diplomacy. In the context of globalization and secularization, Buddhist soft power has undergone significant transformations, shifting from traditional ritual domains to digital platforms, interfaith dialogue, and cultural diplomacy. In doing so, the study offers deeper insights into the "Sangha–State nexus" as a distinctive form of power in Southeast Asia, while proposing a new analytical framework to interpret the role of Buddhism in the moral and political order of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Southeast Asia, Buddhism, Sangha, Interfaith Dialogue.*

Introduction

Throughout the political–religious history of Southeast Asia, Buddhism has consistently occupied a central role in shaping moral foundations, national identity, and the legitimacy of the state. Beyond its function as a religion, Buddhism operates as a symbolic domain in which values of compassion, wisdom, and the Middle Path are translated into principles of governance and instruments of political authority. From the Dhammarāja model of the righteous king in Thailand, the Sāsana–State framework in Myanmar, to the Vietnamese Buddhist ideal of *Quốc An Dân* ("protecting the nation, bringing peace to the people"), the relationship between the Sangha and the state has always been mutually constitutive: the state safeguards Buddhism as the spiritual foundation of the nation, while the Sangha confers moral legitimacy and soft power upon the state in social life. Entering the twenty-first century, this relationship is undergoing profound restructuring under the forces of globalization, secularization, and digital transformation, forces that simultaneously expand the reach of religion while imposing new constraints on Buddhism's role in public governance and regional diplomacy.

Although Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" (1990) has been widely applied to explain the cultural and ideological appeal of nations, the study of Buddhist soft power remains a significant gap in international scholarship. Southeast Asian Buddhism, with its transnational monastic networks, institutionalized structures, and capacity to generate moral discourse, represents a paradigmatic case of non-state soft power. Yet most existing studies have focused primarily on cultural or devotional aspects, while the political dimension and the Sangha's role as a locus of authority have often been overlooked. This omission has limited our understanding of how Buddhism functions as a symbolic power within modern state systems.

Theoretically, this research approaches the Sangha–State relationship as a network of power constructed through discourse, symbols, and policy. This analytical framework moves beyond the simplistic dichotomy of "religion versus politics," allowing Buddhism to be understood as an inseparable component of the architecture of soft power in modern states. The analysis draws upon Nye's theory of

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soft power, Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, and Peter Berger's concept of the "sacred canopy" to explore how Buddhism sustains influence through persuasion, symbolism, and moral legitimation.

The central aim of this study is to elucidate the mechanisms and structures of Buddhist soft power in the interaction between the Sangha and the state in Southeast Asia, through comparative analysis of Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It seeks to identify how Buddhism, via the institutional role of the Sangha, contributes to political legitimacy, shapes public discourse, and extends influence in regional cultural diplomacy. At the same time, the study evaluates the transformation of Buddhist soft power under the impact of globalization, digitalization, and the rise of secularism.

Accordingly, three guiding questions are posed:

How has the Sangha functioned as a structure of soft power in its relationship with the modern state in Southeast Asia?

In what ways do different forms of "sacralization of power" and "politicization of religion" manifest across national Buddhist models?

To what extent can Buddhist soft power maintain its moral and cultural role in shaping national identity and regional diplomacy amid globalization and shifting regional orders?

Addressing these questions not only clarifies the distinctive features of Buddhist soft power but also contributes to redefining the role of religion within the political–cultural power structures of Southeast Asia. Through discourse analysis, policy examination, and cross-national comparison, this study proposes a new theoretical framework, "the soft power nexus of Sangha and State", as a model for interpreting the reciprocal interaction between the symbolic authority of the Sangha and the political power of the state. The findings are expected to broaden scholarly understanding of Southeast Asian Buddhism and enrich global discussions on religious soft power, public ethics, and cultural diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

Scholarly interest in the relationship between the Sangha and the state in Southeast Asian Buddhism has grown considerably. Yet, most existing studies remain focused on historical and sociological dimensions, while the perspective of soft power has not been fully explored. In *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Nye (1990) argues that soft power derives from attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, thereby offering a new lens to understand religious influence beyond traditional political frameworks. Nevertheless, direct applications of this concept to religion remain rare, with notable exceptions such as Haynes (2012) in *Religious Transnationalism and Soft Power*, where religion is conceptualized as a transnational instrument of influence through moral discourse and cultural identity.

Within Buddhist studies, Southeast Asian scholars have examined the Sangha's role in shaping modern states. Swearer (2010), in *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, contends that Buddhism establishes the moral axis of political legitimacy, where "the king and the Sangha share a common moral space." Deegalle (2006), in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, demonstrates that Buddhism can serve as a powerful political resource while also being vulnerable to exploitation for consolidating authority. Analyses of Myanmar by Houtman (1999) and Walton (2016) emphasize the politicization of the Sangha, portraying the monastic community as both a moral symbol and a socio-political force capable of shaping public opinion.

In the Thai context, Keyes (1989) highlights the tripartite relationship of "Nation–Religion–Monarchy" as a distinctive pillar of soft power. In Vietnam, works by Nguyen T.T. (2008) and Tran V.G. (2013) primarily trace the historical development of Buddhism but pay limited attention to its soft power dimension in modern governance. More recent studies by Crosby (2020) and Jerryson (2021) on Buddhist diplomacy have expanded discourse into the realm of religious diplomacy, yet a comprehensive analytical framework for the Sangha–State relationship through the lens of soft power remains underdeveloped. The current research gap thus lies in integrating soft power theory with socio-political analysis of Buddhism to explain how the Sangha functions as a moral and cultural agent of influence in contemporary Southeast Asia.

To address this gap, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining religious studies, political science, anthropology, and international relations. Discourse analysis is employed to identify

how Buddhist–political narratives are constructed, reproduced, and utilized as instruments of state legitimation. A comparative regional analysis is then conducted across four key cases: Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, to illuminate divergent models of Sangha–State relations.

The research relies primarily on secondary sources, including government documents, constitutions, Sangha laws, national speeches, and both regional and international academic works. Additionally, qualitative interviews with scholars and senior monks (where feasible) are incorporated to provide endogenous perspectives. All data are processed through content analysis and theoretical induction, with the ultimate aim of constructing a new analytical framework, "the soft power nexus of Sangha and State", to interpret the reciprocal interaction between the symbolic authority of the Sangha and the political power of the state in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Buddhist Soft Power and the Sangha–State Relationship in Southeast Asia

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (2004: 5) opened a new pathway for analyzing political and social authority. Nye defines soft power as "the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion," grounded in culture, values, and policies that generate persuasion and legitimacy. Unlike hard power, which operates through military or economic means, soft power relies on trust, consensus, and voluntary cohesion. In Southeast Asia, Buddhism, with its moral heritage, cultural depth, and sacred symbolism, emerges as a distinctive form of soft power, simultaneously civilizational and socially directive, capable of shaping collective ethics and reinforcing political foundations.

Applying Nye's framework to Buddhism, however, requires adjustment. Nye's model places the state at the center, whereas Buddhist power is primarily exercised through the Sangha, a self-governing religious institution that both parallels and occasionally transcends state authority. Michel Foucault (1980: 93) conceptualizes this as a form of micro-power, permeating the social body through knowledge, ritual, and moral discipline. Complementing this view, Peter Berger (1967: 33) emphasizes religion's role in constructing a "sacred canopy", a system of meaning that legitimizes and sustains social order.

Historically, Buddhism in Southeast Asia has extended beyond faith to function as a system of soft power, integrating morality, culture, and politics. Donald Swearer (2010, p. 42) observes that Buddhism operates as a public moral system, where doctrine and ritual underpin social order and political legitimacy. In Thailand, the "Nation–Religion–King" model transformed Buddhism into a symbolic pillar of the modern state; in Myanmar, the Sangha has acted both as guardian of morality and as a voice of resistance against political authority. Stanley Tambiah (1976: 59) argues that Buddhism's enduring appeal lies in its "capacity to mediate between the sacred and the secular," enveloping state power in religious legitimacy.

The Sangha–State relationship reflects a reciprocal bond between monastic communities and political authority in constructing, maintaining, and legitimizing moral–political power. Ian Harris (2007: 21) describes this relationship in Cambodia as a form of "symbiosis and political negotiation": the state supports the Sangha to consolidate legitimacy, while the Sangha relies on state patronage to preserve order and religious unity. In Myanmar, Matthew Walton (2016: 88) highlights Buddhism's creation of a "moral political logic," wherein the state is seen as protector of the Dhamma, while the Sangha serves as moral advisor to ruling elites. In Vietnam and Laos, this relationship manifests as a form of "soft socialism," where the secular state recognizes the Sangha as a cultural–moral partner in building a disciplined and humane society.

Religious soft power in Southeast Asia is also the product of a complex historical, cultural, and political trajectory. Prior to Buddhism's dominance, the region was characterized by syncretism between indigenous animism and Hindu cosmology, where political authority was legitimized through sacred cosmological symbols (Wolters 1999: 57). The transmission of Theravāda Buddhism from Sri Lanka (11th–13th centuries), through centers such as Pagan, Sukhothai, and Angkor, restructured moral foundations and political symbolism. During the colonial era, Buddhism was redefined as national identity and a vehicle of anti-colonial resistance (Herbert 2002: 78). In the twentieth century, Buddhism was integrated into modern nation-state structures: in Thailand, institutionalized through the Sangha Act and royal rituals (Reynolds 2012: 51); in Cambodia, as a resource for post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction (Harris 2007: 24); and in Vietnam, following *Đổi Mới*, as a channel of cultural diplomacy contributing to the image of a peaceful nation within ASEAN. In the era of globalization, transnational monastic networks, international Buddhist conferences, and intercultural educational initiatives have created a new "soft space" where Southeast Asian moral values and identity transcend borders (Haynes 2014: 96).

The Structure and Mechanisms of Buddhist Soft Power in Southeast Asia

In the historical and political trajectory of Southeast Asia, Buddhism has functioned not merely as a religious tradition but as an institutionalized structure of soft power, closely intertwined with state formation and the legitimation of political authority. The Sangha - operating simultaneously as a religious community and a social institution, has become a mechanism of moral regulation and a reservoir of soft power for the state, forging a durable reciprocity between politics and religion. As Stanley Tambiah (1976) observed, in Buddhist monarchies the king was regarded as a *Dhammarāja*, a patron of the Sangha, thereby legitimizing political authority through moral recognition by the monastic order. This arrangement created a "circle of legitimacy": the state protects the Dhamma, while the Sangha sustains moral and social order. In modern contexts, Buddhist soft power has been institutionalized through cooperative mechanisms between Sangha and state, such as religious supervisory bodies or national monastic councils, which ensure administrative oversight while preserving Buddhism's sacred authority (Keyes 1987). Steven Collins (1998) describes this as the "bureaucratization of Buddhism," reflecting the synthesis of modern administrative governance and religious symbolic power.

Thailand exemplifies this process most clearly. Since the reign of King Rama IV, Buddhism has been centralized into a hierarchical administrative system, with the Supreme Sangha Council overseeing the entire nation (Jackson 1997). The monarch is perceived as embodying justice, compassion, and wisdom, the three core values of Buddhist soft power, and the alignment of royal authority with the Dhamma has reinforced the legitimacy of the monarchy (Swearer 2010). In practice, the Sangha participates in community development, youth education, and poverty alleviation, transforming moral appeal into instruments of social governance (McCargo 2009). At the same time, Thailand exports Buddhist soft power through cultural diplomacy, promoting its image as the "global center of Theravāda Buddhism" (Taylor 2017).

Myanmar presents a different model, where Buddhism serves both as a moral foundation and a force of political resistance. Matthew Walton (2016) characterizes Burmese Buddhism as a "moral political logic," in which the state is viewed as protector of the Dhamma, while the Sangha acts as moral advisor to ruling elites. Yet, at various moments, the Sangha has also become a voice of dissent, particularly during democratic movements. The 2007 monk-led protests, known as the "Saffron Revolution," demonstrated how Buddhist soft power can be mobilized as a socio-political resource, simultaneously reinforcing legitimacy and challenging state authority.

In Cambodia, Ian Harris (2007) describes the state–Sangha relationship as one of "symbiosis and political negotiation": the state supports the Sangha to consolidate legitimacy, while the Sangha relies on state patronage to maintain order and religious unity. After the Khmer Rouge, Buddhism was reconstructed as a resource for social reconciliation and national rebuilding. In Laos, Buddhism operates within a socialist framework, where the secular state recognizes the Sangha as a cultural–moral partner in shaping a disciplined and humane society. This model may be termed "soft socialism," reflecting the fusion of centralized administrative management with the preservation of Buddhism's sacred moral authority.

Vietnam illustrates the restructuring of Buddhist soft power within a socialist state framework. The establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) in 1981 created a nationwide religious organization balancing internal autonomy with state coordination (Nguyễn, 2019). Buddhism became a strategic partner in building "socialist morality" and strengthening national unity. Since 2015, Vietnamese Buddhist soft power has expanded beyond national borders, linked to public diplomacy and cultural cooperation. International events such as the United Nations Vesak Celebrations (2014, 2019) affirmed Buddhism's role in nation branding and soft foreign policy (Tran 2020). Domestically, Buddhism continues to serve as a moral pillar of community life through charity, education, environmental protection, and sustainable development (Le 2021). Yet, the centralized model of the VBS also raises challenges regarding pluralism and intellectual creativity within Vietnamese Buddhism (Taylor 2018).

From these cases, Buddhist soft power in Southeast Asia can be summarized as operating through three interconnected mechanisms:

Institutionalization within the state – Buddhism functions as a tool of political legitimation.

Socialization through the Sangha – Buddhist ethics are translated into collective behavior and social order.

Internationalization via religious diplomacy – Buddhist identity becomes a form of national soft power.

Thus, the structure and mechanisms of Buddhist soft power in Southeast Asia reflect both the endogenous integration of religion and politics and Buddhism's adaptive capacity in the context of modernization and globalization. Through the fusion of morality, institutions, and national identity, Buddhism has emerged as a spiritual pillar and a distinctive instrument of soft power in the political–cultural order of the twenty-first century.

Buddhist Soft Power in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Perspective

When the cases of Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are placed within a comparative analytical framework, it becomes evident that Buddhist soft power in Southeast Asia does not exist as a uniform phenomenon. Rather, it represents a diverse spectrum shaped by complex interactions between religion and the state. These variations are determined by historical contexts, institutional structures, and national development strategies, producing distinct models of how Buddhism is mobilized as a source of soft power. From the institutionalization of religion under monarchy in Thailand, to the symbolic national religion in Myanmar, the socialization model within one-party politics in Cambodia and Laos, and finally the institutionalized cooperation in Vietnam, we can identify a multidimensional and nuanced spectrum of Buddhist soft power.

In Thailand, Buddhism serves as the axis legitimizing monarchical authority. The Sangha functions both as the custodian of morality and as a stabilizing mechanism for society, while the king, regarded as *Dhammarāja*, the protector of the Dhamma, embodies the legitimacy of the state (Keyes 2016). This structure reinforces national soft power by sacralizing political authority through religious symbolism. Yet, its deep reliance on monarchy as a symbolic core has increasingly been challenged by democratization and globalization, raising questions about the adaptability of Buddhist soft power in modern politics.

By contrast, in Myanmar, Buddhism has evolved into a form of nationalized religion, where the Sangha acts both as guardian of Bamar identity and as a significant political force. Following the colonial period, Buddhist soft power was mobilized primarily to strengthen national consciousness and resist external domination (Walton 2017). However, this inward-looking structure has often been exploited in ethnic–religious conflicts, undermining Buddhism's universal and humanitarian spirit and limiting its capacity to shape a broader regional identity.

Cambodia and Laos represent models of Buddhist socialization within one-party political systems. In Cambodia, after the Khmer Rouge era, Buddhism was restored as a vehicle of reconciliation and cultural regeneration, serving as a resource for social healing and national reconstruction (Harris 2021). In Laos, Buddhism functions as a socialist civic ethic, legitimizing state authority and guiding citizens' moral conduct (Evans 2009). Both models contribute to political stability but reveal limitations: monastic autonomy is curtailed, and religious authority risks excessive instrumentalization, reducing Buddhism's natural appeal as a source of soft power.

Vietnam illustrates a distinctive model of institutionalized cooperation. Buddhist soft power is deployed through programs in moral education, social welfare, and cultural diplomacy (Tran 2020). Collaboration between the state and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) positions Buddhism not only as cultural–social capital but also as a key channel of soft diplomacy within ASEAN and internationally. This model is notable for its pragmatic balance between state coordination and monastic autonomy, producing a flexible form of Buddhist soft power adapted to modernization and globalization.

From a comparative perspective, three salient dimensions of Buddhist soft power in Southeast Asia can be identified:

Historical-Institutional Dimension: Buddhist soft power is embedded in distinct political systems-from monarchy (Thailand), nationalist regimes (Myanmar), socialism (Vietnam, Laos), to post-conflict cultural restoration (Cambodia).

Social-Ethical Dimension: Buddhism functions as a moral framework for "civic virtue," fostering social stability and providing foundations for sustainable development.

Regional Diplomatic Dimension: In the twenty-first century, Buddhism has transcended national boundaries, emerging as a regional soft power through ASEAN, UNESCO, and United Nations Vesak celebrations, shaping Southeast Asia's identity as a "soft Buddhist center" (Berger 2017).

In sum, although each country deploys Buddhist soft power through different institutional mechanisms, all share the capacity to mobilize moral values, cultural heritage, and religious legitimacy to sustain political order, social harmony, and international image. Vietnam exemplifies a successfully

secularized and modernized model of Buddhist soft power, while Thailand and Myanmar continue to embody more traditional and sacralized structures. Cambodia and Laos, with their socialization models under one-party politics, demonstrate a stable yet constrained form of Buddhist soft power. This diversity has produced a distinctive map of Buddhist soft power in Southeast Asia, where religion operates both as an endogenous resource and as a diplomatic instrument within regional and global orders.

Country	Institutional Dimension	Social Dimension	Diplomatic Dimension
Thailand	Institutionalized under monarchy; centralized Sangha with nationwide oversight	Sangha preserves moral order, engages in youth education and community development	Exports Buddhist soft power via cultural diplomacy; promotes image as "global center of Theravāda Buddhism"
Myanmar	Symbolic national religion; Sangha both protects morality and resists political authority	Sangha acts as a social force, participates in democratic movements (e.g., "Saffron Revolution")	Limited in shaping regional identity; often linked to ethnic–religious conflicts
Cambodia	Post-Khmer Rouge restoration; Buddhism supported by one-party state	Sangha serves as a resource for reconciliation and cultural regeneration	Diplomatic role limited; focus on internal reconstruction
Laos	Buddhism within socialist framework; state recognizes Sangha as cultural–moral partner	Sangha guides civic ethics, fosters disciplined and humane society	Weak international presence; minimal role in religious diplomacy
Vietnam	Institutionalized cooperation with the state; Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (1981) balances autonomy and coordination	Sangha contributes to moral education, social welfare, charity, and environmental protection	Expands soft power through cultural diplomacy (e.g., UN Vesak, ASEAN); builds image of a peaceful nation

Conclusion

In the context of globalization and regional integration, Buddhism in Southeast Asia has transcended its traditional role to become a strategic source of soft power, reinforcing domestic political and social order, shaping regional identity, and extending global influence. Whereas in the twentieth century Buddhism was primarily regarded as an internal resource of individual nations, the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of transnational linkages among Buddhist communities. These connections have opened new spaces of cooperation, where monastic orders, academic institutions, and civil Buddhist organizations act as agents of cultural and ethical diplomacy (Pye 2018).

The potential for inter-Buddhist cooperation derives from the universality of Buddhist teachings and the flexibility of its organizational structures. Unlike religions with centralized ecclesiastical hierarchies, Buddhism operates as a network, enabling "soft linkages" across Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions. This "unity in diversity" provides a foundation for intra-Buddhist dialogue and facilitates cross-border programs, conferences, and social initiatives. Events such as the United Nations Vesak celebrations exemplify the convergence of Buddhist soft power at the regional level, where monks and scholars from dozens of countries gather to promote global peace, ethical values, and sustainable development (Swearer 2010).

Inter-Buddhist cooperation is increasingly institutionalized through academic networks and civil society organizations, which serve as bridges between religion and public policy. Institutions such as IABU, WBSC, and ABCP function not only as forums for intellectual exchange but also as non-governmental instruments of soft diplomacy, shaping regional discourses on ethics, education, and environmental governance (Kraft 2014). In line with Nye's theory of soft power (2004), this process represents influence without coercion, whereby Buddhist values, compassion, non-self, and harmony, are transformed into regional moral norms, contributing to the construction of an "ethical Asia."

The prospects of inter-Buddhist cooperation also lie in addressing global challenges, from climate change and religious conflict to ethical dilemmas posed by technological advancement. Initiatives such as "Buddhist Climate Action" and "Eco-Temples" in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam illustrate Buddhism's potential to translate spiritual wisdom into tangible global social action (Harvey 2021). Yet, doctrinal differences, linguistic barriers, political interests, and varying degrees of secularization across Buddhist nations may hinder sustainable collaboration. Future cooperation therefore requires a multi-layered, multi-centered approach that integrates academic exchange, social engagement, and people-to-people diplomacy, rather than relying solely on symbolic conferences.

To interpret this phenomenon, a new theoretical model is needed, one that moves beyond two conventional approaches: the state-centered model, which views religion primarily as a political instrument, and the independent religion model, which emphasizes the moral–cultural role of religious communities in civil society. The Southeast Asian context demonstrates that the Sangha–State relationship does not fall neatly into a binary opposition but instead creates a hybrid space where soft power is generated and exercised through the interplay of the sacred and the political.

The proposed model of the "Sangha–State Soft Power Nexus" serves as an integrative analytical framework, drawing on classical soft power theory (Nye 2004), Foucault's concept of micro-power (1980), and Berger's social construction theory (1967), while extending into cultural, institutional, and transnational dimensions. This model identifies four core components: symbolic resources (doctrine, ritual, material symbols, authoritative figures); institutionalization (laws, ministries of religion, supreme monastic councils); mechanisms of legitimation and transmission (public discourse, national rituals, education, cultural diplomacy); and multi-level networks (from local to global, through Vesak, IABU, or ecological initiatives). These components operate cyclically, producing, legitimizing, transmitting, and reinforcing soft power within political–social space.

The theoretical contributions of this model are threefold: expanding the concept of soft power from the national to the inter-regime level; integrating Foucault's power theory to clarify the role of moral–political discourse; and providing an empirical framework with measurable indicators such as the presence of Buddhist rituals in public space, the degree of social participation by religious organizations, and the intensity of transnational cooperation.

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