

Book Review

Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America’s Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia

By Eugene Ford. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 392 pages, ISBN 9780300218565 (hardcover), \$40.00.

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According to Dr. Eugene Ford, his book tells “a story of twentieth-century Southeast Asian Buddhists engaging with one another and with the international world” (2). And what a story it is, involving characters, some quite unscrupulous, from the US, the USSR, the PRC, Japan, India, Burma, Ceylon, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaya/Malaysia, and Taiwan. According to the author, two interrelated questions drove his inquiry. First, “How was the Cold War experienced *within* the secretive and staid world of Thailand’s Buddhist monkhood?” (2). Drawing on ample evidence, Dr. Ford argues that “under the pressures of the Cold War, [the] twin planks that were the foundation of Thailand’s monastic culture loosened and finally fell away.” Ford defines the twin planks as abstention from “overt political involvement” and eschewment of “internationalism” (288).

Second, Ford asks, “was it possible to write an international Cold War history from a Southeast Asian Buddhist perspective?” (2) This question is particularly interesting to me as a scholar of twentieth and twenty-first-century transnational Buddhism.

While this book pays special attention to developments in Thailand, it presents something broader and more multilayered than a history of contemporary Thai Buddhism, and many of the sources on which it is based originate outside of Thailand. Its deeper purpose is to reveal the contours of a Buddhist political history in which Southeast Asia’s national borders are transcended by connections and perceptions among Buddhists of different nationalities, as well as other international protagonists. Thus it demonstrates the real mechanics of religious politics throughout the region during the four decades in question (12).

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The author successfully answers these questions through careful use of archival materials—many previously ignored—from a number of institutions, including the Thailand National Archives, several Thai universities, the US National Archives, and the Asia Foundation at Stanford's Hoover Institute. Interviews with key religious and secular figures in Thailand, Laos, and Washington, D.C. further strengthen the study.

The narrative is coherently organized, though some level of detail might not appeal to those without a prior interest in the topic. Here I shall briefly list the main points of each chapter and mention some highlights. Chapter one, "The Buddhist World and the United States at the Onset of the Cold War, 1941-1954," starts by describing the attempt by militant Zen Buddhists to gain influence in Thailand during the Japanese occupation. After WWII, while building a military alliance with Thailand, the US government realized the strategic potential of Buddhism as an additional weapon in their arsenal to fight the Cold War. The laboratory for such a strategy was in Burma, whose government had, since 1948, hoped to "incorporate Burmese Buddhism into an anti-Communist program" and had communicated this to the US government (25). The US also began its support of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB), "the most significant institutional expression of a new postwar pan-Buddhist solidarity" (32). In addition to the book's insights regarding the WFB, we learn how the US government shaped (and was shaped by) this "postwar pan-Buddhist solidarity" through the Committee for a Free Asia, renamed "Asia Foundation," funded by the CIA until 1967 after which time it was paid for by USAID (US Agency for International Development) (226).

Seeing that the end of colonial rule and of WWII accelerated growth of Buddhist nationalisms and international exchange, the author could have included more about pre-war networks and communication between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhists within Asia as well as with Buddhists elsewhere in the world. For example, Dr. G.P. Malalasekera, a scholar and congress member from Ceylon, spoke with the Chinese Buddhist reformer Ven. Taixu (1897-1947) about a World Buddhist Federation, and when Malalasekera founded the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950, he credited Taixu with the idea. And in Vietnam, the early Buddhist associations and institutes authorized by the French rulers to *pre-empt* possible anti-colonial protest came to be the springboard for Buddhist nationalism in the 1950s and '60s.

Chapter two, "Washington Formulates a Buddhist Policy, 1954-1957," explains how President Eisenhower's government, together with American religious groups, developed a policy that sought to balance the US government stance on separation of state and religion with the pursuit of high-stakes Cold War interests. Vice-President Richard Nixon's 1953 diplomatic tour of Indochina, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Malaya confirmed to the US government the urgency of countering Communist powers (especially China) in Southeast Asia through religious policy and PSYOP (psychological operations). The Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Asia Society were key in implementing this policy, as was the Asia Foundation, which by the end of the 1950s had offices throughout Southeast Asia. Ford's work thus enlarges our understanding of the Cold War during the 1950s, as typical narratives about

this topic usually focus exclusively on Red China, the Korean War, and the McCarthy witch-hunts.

Chapter three, “Thailand and the International Buddhist Arena, 1956-1962,” discusses the rise and fall of the activist and “globe-trotting” (78) monk Phra Phimolatham, who was deeply involved in power struggles in the two main Buddhist orders (and thus government factions) in Thailand. Phimolatham’s international vision of Buddhism and his support of U Ba Khin’s *vipassanā* movement, along with other positions he took, made him a controversial figure in Thailand. The Cold War led to many odd relationships, such as Phimolatham’s association with the Moral Rearmament Army, founded by an American Lutheran minister (with headquarters in the Caux-Palace Hotel in Caux, Switzerland, and a center on Lake Huron’s Mackinac Island!). For a time, the Moral Rearmament Army enjoyed some influence in Southeast Asia, and the US dealt with it cautiously.

In chapter four, “Reforming the Monks: The Cold War and Clerical Education in Thailand and Laos, 1954-1961,” we learn how the Asia Foundation sought to strengthen Buddhist education in order to better fight Communism. The Asia Foundation supported initiatives for Thailand’s two Buddhist universities and for rural secondary schools with the hope that Buddhist monks would become involved in rural development (read: nation-building). In Laos, the Asia Foundation and USIS (US Information Service) labored to shore up Laotian Buddhist institutions against Communist inroads.

Chapters five, six, and seven take up the question of Vietnam, which loomed large in US Buddhist policy formulation during the 1960s and 1970s as well as in Buddhist affairs within Southeast Asia. Chapter five chronicles the Thai and international Theravāda responses to the “Buddhist Crisis” (as it was then termed) in South Vietnam that began with a violent clash between the government of Ngô Đình Diệm and Buddhist activists in Huế. The ensuing “Buddhist Struggle” movement (again, as it was then termed) was marked by factional fighting in both Buddhist and government circles and necessitated complex American maneuvering, including the Asia Foundation’s civil society initiatives. Chapter six details how the Vietnam War tested the limits of Thai Buddhist conservatives’ (and the World Fellowship of Buddhists’) disingenuous stance of political noninvolvement for Buddhist clergy (199). In some cases, monks from Thailand and Vietnam increased exchanges, as the US continued to promote its own interests on all fronts. Chapter seven shows how the Thai Buddhist hierarchy confronted many challenges between 1967 and 1975: wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, student uprisings, worker and farmer activism, and a succession of military rulers.

This period also saw the rise of the right-wing monk Kittivudho, who became “notorious for advising his Buddhist followers that killing communists ought not be considered sinful, and for sanctioning the violent repression of Thailand’s leftist movements” (11). Chapter eight, “The Rage of Thai Buddhism, 1975-1980,” addresses not only Kittivudho but also covers the critical years when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was established, and the Pathet Lao in Laos and Pol Pot in Cambodia came to power. A Thai Buddhist “Holy War” (266) against alleged Communist enemies coincided with US military withdrawal from Thailand. Especially

interesting is Ford's discussion of the Buddhist "mental gymnastics" (268) that were required to explain and justify violence and killing in two cases: the Japanese occupation of Thailand, which was in part justified through militant Zen ideology (13-21), and Kittivudho and his supporters, who carried out anti-Communist campaigns (266-270).

Kittivudho's justification of violence to protect nation, religion, and monarchy (267-269) reverberates today. As Ford notes, "the termination of the Cold War has not erased the imprint of his militant Buddhist ideology. This can be detected today in the violent response of some Thai Buddhist clergy to the ongoing Malay Muslim insurgency in Thailand's south" (294-295) and in Buddhist anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar.

The conclusion brings the book's focus back to shifts inside the Thai religious establishment during the Cold War by tracing the careers of "internationalist" Phimolatham and right-wing Kittivudho, and ties together the main themes of the book.

In a future study, Ford or others might explore how engaged Buddhism emerged from Cold War Buddhist politics. The complex figure of Sulak Sivaraksa (a Siamese Buddhist intellectual educated in both Thailand and the UK) needs more scholarly attention and is a perfect example of how difficult it is to categorize the politics of Thai Buddhists (and, similarly, Vietnamese Buddhists) active during the Cold War. Sulak is renowned in overseas Buddhist circles as the founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (founded in 1989), as a champion of human rights and sustainable living, and as a critic of consumer culture. Yet in 1963, Sulak received Asia Foundation support for his journal *Sangkhomsat Parithat* (Social Science Review), and a Congress of Cultural Freedom grant (also CIA-funded) for a Filipino journal (326n32). Even if he was unaware of the CIA involvement, his (and other engaged Buddhist leaders') relationship to the West was complicated. Finally, the book invites a comparative critique of the knowledge produced by colonial Orientalists with that of academics employed by US government in overt and covert capacities, as the latter helped create Southeast Asia area studies.

A few specific comments: I am wary of blanket terms like "Western consumer culture" (192) and would like to hear more about the relationship (or lack thereof) between Western consumer culture and the declining (or rising?) role of monks and nuns in certain Buddhist traditions. In addition, I would not use the term "Buddhist radical" (187) to describe Thích Tịnh Khiết: he was the Supreme Patriarch of the United Buddhist Church of South Vietnam and felt responsible for reaching out to the United Nations and the World Fellowship of Buddhists, among other entities, regarding the Buddhist crisis in South Vietnam. Plus, is "Zhao Buzhu" (189) the same person as Zhao Puchu, the influential lay Buddhist leader in China? Finally, why didn't the publisher ask for diacritics? The bibliography has *Nhât, Hanh* rather than *Nhât Hạnh, Thích* or *Thích Nhất Hạnh*. The name of the eminent Theravāda leader in South Vietnam is Thích Pháp Trí, not Thich Tri Phap, as written in the index.

In sum, due to its analysis and its sheer quantity of revelations, as well as the excellent suggestions for primary and secondary resources, this book will inspire those interested in Buddhism and politics, the sangha in modern times, Cold War studies (including covert

operations), and American foreign policy. Scholars in Buddhist Studies, regardless of the sub-field or degree of interest in Cold War politics, will learn about some of the seemingly countless configurations that global Buddhism entails. It was globalization (whether one calls it imperialism or not) that drove the development of Buddhist Studies in Europe and later in the United States. When Kittisophana, the Thai supreme patriarch, visited the United States in 1963, the high-quality work produced by Buddhist Studies scholars at American universities both impressed and worried him: might the West “overshadow Thailand as a center of Buddhist learning?” (148) This revelation spurred his interest in Thailand’s Buddhist universities and Buddhist scholarship in general. *This is global Buddhism.*