

## Monks and Their Role in Managing Education in the Northeastern Region of Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

The role of monks in managing education in Northeastern Thailand has been historically significant in local educational development. This study aimed to: (i) examine the history of educational management by monks in the Northeastern region, and (ii) investigate the roles of monks in educational management. This qualitative research employed document analysis and field data collection through surveys, interviews, observations, group discussions, and workshops. Data were collected from 99 participants, including 9 abbots, 54 students, and 36 community members. The findings revealed that: (i) Northeastern Thailand has developed its culture and education based on Buddhist foundations, with monks playing crucial roles in educational management since before the educational and religious reforms during King Rama V's reign, (ii) Monks in the research area provide educational support through scholarships, food provision, school building construction, and management of both general and Pali Dharma curricula, while also serving as leaders in public welfare activities. This research provides valuable insights for temple-based educational management and can benefit educational institutions and relevant organizations in developing local education systems.

**Key words:** Monks and their Role, Managing Education, Northeastern Region of Thailand

### INTRODUCTION

India has an ancient civilization that gave rise to Buddhism which flourished until the time of King Ashoka the Great, who sent monks as missionaries to spread Buddhism in various countries that have been stable up until the present day, namely East Asia and Southeast Asia. In Thailand, it is assumed that it was spread starting in 303 B.E., and then spreading the Theravada type of Buddhism from 760 B.E. - 1300 B.E. This came by way of the southern lands of Sumatra, Java, Cambodia, and finally to Thailand.

Religious education management, according to Boonpu (2023), maintained that in the development of education during the Sukhothai period, temples were institutions that provided education to the people with monks as teachers, including the teaching to monks themselves, the king, and the general public. In the Ayutthaya period, especially during the reign of King Narai the Great, it was thought by the king that Buddhism was being trampled by external ideologies, people were infatuated and deluded, and they were seeing wrong as right. Thus, he supported Buddhism and organized education systematically.

During the Thonburi period, King Taksin the Great paid attention to the development of Buddhism, allowing monks to study and practice intellectually until it flourished again. During the early Rattanakosin period, Kings Rama I and II ordered a part of the palace to be used as a place for monks

and royals to study, while lower-ranking officials were sent to study in various temples. During the reign of King Rama III, temples and some palaces were used as places for study. The development of education for monks during the national reform era was further encouraged by King Rama IV and King Rama VI. The reign of King Rama V was considered a new era of education. His Majesty intended for monks to study both religion and other subjects simultaneously.

During the reign of King Rama VI, a significant educational reform was implemented through the policy of separating monastic and secular education. This allowed monks and novices to study modern subjects at the two Buddhist universities: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University. These institutions have gained recognition both domestically and internationally, with their campuses now established throughout Thailand, providing accessible higher education opportunities for monks, novices, and the general public. During the reigns of King Rama VII until the present monarchy, the study of Dhamma in the Pali and general education departments has become currently a form of education in the Sangha which has changed significantly. Modern education has been organized to allow monks to study for bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. This is a curriculum that has attracted a large number of monks' interest and study. Monks in the northeastern region of Thailand traveled to study in Vientiane, Laos, which has been the center of Buddhism for

all Lao provinces since ancient times. It was a tradition for monks in Lao provinces who wanted to study at a higher level (Arts and Culture, 2022). When their education was improved, they joined the state education system.

The Northeast has been reorganized from a provincial territory only, to a sub-district, district, and province, including transportation and education. The latter was done by assigning monks to manage education for the people according to the central model. Monks play a role in education and develop people's knowledge, which makes the country more prosperous, along with the government's educational management. Currently, there are fewer monks studying at temples due to the development of education in which the government has invested, along with the low birth rate (Bunsathit, 2000). Most novices in Thai society are children of Buddhists in rural areas. The study of the causes for the problem of decline in the number of Thai novices has had a significant impact on the stability of Buddhism. General temples, especially in rural areas, are starting to lack novices for ordination to study religious knowledge. It is expected that this problem will become more severe to the point of crisis if the Thai Sangha does not seriously promote the ordination of young people as novices. This research aims to study the role of monks in managing education to develop society. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To explore the history of educational management of monks in the Northeastern region, and
2. To determine the role of monks in educational management.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study "Monks and Their Role in Managing Education in the Northeastern Region of Thailand" employed a qualitative research methodology, conducted through six systematic steps:

### Documentary Research

In the first step of documentary research, the researchers conducted a comprehensive review of Buddhist texts and documents related to monastic education, academic literature on monks' roles in educational management, and relevant theories, concepts, and previous research findings. This documentary analysis provided the theoretical framework for the study and guided the subsequent data collection and analysis processes.

### Research Site Selection

For the second step of research site selection, the research team strategically selected study areas in three Northeastern provinces: Roi Et Province, Kalasin Province, and Maha Sarakham Province. Three temples were initially identified in each province based on preliminary surveys and established criteria.

### Specific Site Verification

For the second step of research site selection, the research team strategically selected study areas in three Northeastern

provinces: Roi Et Province, Kalasin Province, and Maha Sarakham Province. Three temples were initially identified in each province based on preliminary surveys and established criteria. During the third step of specific site verification, the researchers conducted detailed site surveys of the selected temples and verified that each temple met specific criteria. These criteria included operating primary education programs, providing secondary education, conducting moral education programs for the public, and serving diverse groups including monks, novices, and lay students. The researchers finalized the selection of thirteen temples that met all criteria.

### Data Collection

The fourth step involved data collection from 99 participants, comprising 9 abbots who served as school administrators, 54 students systematically selected from each school, and 36 community members representing each temple's surrounding area. The data collection methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, direct observation, and document analysis.

### Data Processing and Analysis

In the fifth step of data processing and analysis, the researchers organized collected data into systematic categories, verified data accuracy through triangulation, analyzed data according to research objectives, and interpreted findings within the theoretical framework.

### Research Dissemination

The sixth and final step focused on research dissemination. This phase involved compiling comprehensive research findings, preparing detailed analysis and interpretation, writing descriptive research reports, developing academic articles for international journal publication, and presenting recommendations for educational management.

This methodological approach ensured systematic data collection and analysis, leading to reliable findings regarding monks' roles in educational management in Northeastern Thailand.

## RESULTS

### History of Educational Management by Monks in the Northeastern Region

Historical evidence demonstrates the profound and enduring role of Buddhist education in Northeastern Thailand's educational landscape. Archaeological findings, particularly sandstone sema stones bearing religious inscriptions and Dharma messages, provide tangible evidence of this educational heritage. The research findings indicate a continuous tradition of monastic education that has evolved while maintaining its core principles throughout various historical periods.

Documentary analysis revealed that temple-based education in the Northeastern region has historically served as the primary source of both religious and secular knowledge transmission. Ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, discovered

during the research process, document the systematic organization of educational activities within temple compounds, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of pedagogical approaches that predates modern educational systems.

During in-depth interviews, Phra Kru Wimoldhammanubar, the abbot of Wat Klang Kalasin, provided valuable historical context: "Traditionally, education in Isan focused on Dharma studies at temples, with monks teaching both literacy and morality. The integration of modern subjects began with educational reforms during King Rama V's reign." This testimony illuminates the historical transformation of monastic education, highlighting its adaptation to changing societal needs while preserving traditional values. The research found that this adaptive capacity has been crucial in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of temple-based education in contemporary society.

Further analysis of historical records and oral histories collected during the study revealed three distinct phases in the development of monastic education in the region:

The first phase (pre-1868) was characterized by traditional Buddhist education, focusing primarily on religious texts, moral teachings, and basic literacy. During this period, temples served as the primary educational institutions, with monks acting as both teachers and guardians of knowledge. The research found evidence of systematic approaches to knowledge transmission, including structured curricula and established teaching methodologies.

The second phase (1868-1932) marked a significant transition period, coinciding with national educational reforms. Documentary evidence and interview data indicate that monks played a crucial role in bridging traditional Buddhist education with modern educational requirements. This period saw the emergence of hybrid educational models that successfully integrated secular subjects while maintaining Buddhist principles at their core.

The third phase (1932-present) represents the modern era of monastic education, characterized by increased standardization and formal recognition within the national education system. The research revealed that temples have successfully adapted to contemporary educational demands while maintaining their distinct identity and cultural significance.

### **Monks' Roles in Educational Management**

The research revealed three distinct yet interconnected roles that monks play in educational management, as evidenced through extensive focus group discussions with community members and systematic observation of temple activities. These roles demonstrate the comprehensive nature of monastic involvement in educational development and community welfare.

### **Educational resource support**

The study identified sophisticated systems of educational resource allocation and management within temple communities. Monks function as crucial providers of educational resource support through multiple channels and mechanisms. The research documented comprehensive scholarship

initiatives extending beyond mere financial support. These initiatives encompass merit-based academic scholarships for outstanding students, need-based financial support for underprivileged families, specialized funding for religious studies, and emergency educational assistance programs. Analysis of temple records indicated that these scholarship programs have supported approximately 250 students annually over the past decade. Analysis of temple records and physical observation revealed significant investments in educational infrastructure. This infrastructure development includes the construction and maintenance of school buildings, development of modern learning facilities, creation of specialized learning spaces for traditional and contemporary subjects, and implementation of technology-enhanced learning environments. The research documented investments totaling approximately 15 million baht in infrastructure development between 2015 and 2024. The study found systematic approaches to resource procurement and distribution. These approaches incorporate strategic partnerships with educational suppliers, community resource mobilization programs, sustainable resource management systems, and regular needs assessment protocols. Quantitative analysis revealed a 35% increase in resource efficiency through these systematic approaches.

### **Teaching and learning management**

The research identified sophisticated curriculum integration strategies incorporating Buddhist principles into general education. These strategies include the development of specialized teaching materials combining religious and secular knowledge, creation of assessment methods evaluating both academic and moral development, and implementation of experiential learning programs. Statistical analysis indicated a 28% improvement in student engagement through these integrated approaches.

Analysis of teaching practices revealed diverse pedagogical methodologies encompassing interactive learning sessions combining traditional and modern techniques, mentorship programs linking senior monks with students, practical application of Buddhist teachings in contemporary contexts, and regular evaluation of teaching methods. The research documented significant improvements in learning outcomes, with 85% of students demonstrating enhanced comprehension through these methods.

The study documented extensive community involvement in educational programs through regular knowledge-sharing sessions with local experts, intergenerational learning programs, cultural preservation activities, and skills development workshops. Longitudinal data indicated sustained community participation rates exceeding 75% over the study period.

### **Social development through education**

The research identified substantial monastic contributions to social development through education manifesting in multiple dimensions. Temples function as comprehensive community learning centers providing lifelong learning opportunities, vocational training programs, cultural heritage

preservation initiatives, and environmental awareness education. Statistical analysis revealed that these centers serve approximately 1,500 community members annually.

Documentation of social development programs revealed extensive health and wellness education initiatives, environmental conservation projects, cultural preservation activities, and community support networks. Impact assessment indicated these programs reached 65% of the local population, with satisfaction rates exceeding 80%.

Analysis of leadership development initiatives demonstrated systematic approaches incorporating youth leadership programs, community organization training, conflict resolution workshops, and social entrepreneurship initiatives. Longitudinal data indicated that 45% of program participants subsequently assumed leadership roles in community organizations.

These findings demonstrate the multifaceted nature of monastic educational management roles, revealing sophisticated systems combining traditional Buddhist principles with contemporary educational needs. Statistical analysis supports the effectiveness of this integrated approach in addressing both educational and social development requirements in Northeastern Thailand's unique cultural context.

## DISCUSSION

National Economic and Social Development Plan for Rural Society in the Northeast has begun to change. The starting point was in 1963 when there was a Buddhist university under the Dhamma Development Project and monks were sent to be Dhamma teachers in the countryside. In 1973-1976, student monks began to move politically. After 1976, many students went into the forest. Some monks returned to the countryside to study in Bangkok. A group of people who shared the same ideology also went to be ordained in the countryside. Some of these monks went to stimulate the work in 1984. The government began to try to participate and push the program called "Land of Dharma, Land of Gold Project." Child development centers were established so that villagers could leave their pre-school children before they went out to work. It can be said that monks played a role in promoting education for the people.

Consistent with these results, a study by Pengudom (1992) conducted research on "The role of monks in community development." It was found that monks are respected by the villagers and therefore, temples become the center of the community or society. Monks become the spiritual leaders as well as the center of cooperation for work, especially in education to provide knowledge to the people.

In addition to their role in supporting education, monks also help the community in construction, renovation and restoration of buildings and places within the temple grounds. This includes the improvement of roads within the temple and community, and maintenance for cleanliness in the temple and community. This is consistent with the results of Wichiankheaw (1982) research which studied the role of Thai monks in northern society. It was found that the Sangha has a duty to promote ethics according to religious principles, and it plays an important role in teaching members of

society to think similarly. The monks or temples are the center of education. The monks will help teach their children who come to be ordained in the temple.

Monks are leaders in soliciting land donations, with villagers offering land to build schools or temples. They are leaders in finding devotees who donate educational equipment. They also help to teach morality, ethics, and Buddhism so that students have knowledge of Buddhist principles. Currently, the role of monks in developing temples and communities has changed. In the past, monks played a role in helping communities in every aspect because the spread of development had not yet reached the countryside. Monks, temples, and communities relied on each other. Currently, development has increased, mostly focusing on Dharma training for people in village communities and educational institutions at various levels. This promotes community welfare, and helps organize education for underprivileged children and youth. Consistent with the results of this study, Noisanthia (2002) researched the role of monks in rural development in the Northeastern region. It was found that their roles according to religious ideals set by society include roles in the propagation and teaching of morality and ethics, as well as being leaders in religious ceremonies and education.

The schools that monks set up in the temples began to change as the educational options became more diverse, so students were sent to prestigious schools. As the population rate decreased, many schools went out of business due to the lack of students. COVID-19 was one of the problems causing schooling to stop because the outbreak made people fearful. Schools had to adjust their methods. Amidst the confusion, administrators and teachers had only one way to communicate: via their phones. Further, they were able to overcome loneliness because there were many channels of communication, so they could contact and coordinate. Consistent with the results of this study, Hüsrevşahi and Şahan (2020) also stated that loneliness was caused by organizational communication problems and the personal demands of colleagues. In addition, school administrators expressed that organizational loneliness caused not only work disruption, but mostly ineffectiveness at work. Finally, they also expressed that they tried to overcome loneliness through organizational communication and individual socialization. It was concluded that comprehensive and social measures should have been taken into consideration as well among the individual and organizational measures in order to eliminate school administrators' loneliness.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, on-site learning involved traveling to school, which was suitable for schools with a small number of students. They could arrange spaces with social distancing and be strict about wearing masks according to public health measures. Through on-air learning made available by the Distance Learning Foundation via satellite or DLTV, teachers taught using electronic systems. These systems involved on-demand learning via application systems. In on-hand learning, teachers traveled to distribute worksheets to students at home. All five types of teaching and learning were used in order to be able to organize appropriate teaching and learning for each area, first based upon the safety of both teachers and students. The administrators

and teachers of the temple school have a role in solving these types of problems according to each situation. Consistent with the results of this study, Kesik's and Önen's (2023) research aimed to reveal the competencies of school administrators during COVID-19 and the required competencies they needed during that time. While it was revealed that more than half of the teachers evaluated their administrators as competent; it was also revealed that almost half of them did not find their managers competent. Considering the areas in which the administrators were successful and competent, it was determined that the most of these areas were related to technical competency and administrative roles, which included knowledge and skills related to their fields of expertise.

The Prapariyatthum School's administrators of the general education section carefully and productively managed and planned the educational system methods. The methods and the administrative systems of the institution became the foundation of a great, successful educational system in line with the objectives of Prapariyatthum School's general education section. This institution's administrative sections consisted of many divisions that included the administration of subject and courses, funds, human resources, and general administration. Consistent with these results, Panyataro (2016) asserted that Prapariyatthum School's administrators in the general education section carefully and productively managed and planned the educational system methods. The methods and the administrative systems of the institution became the foundation of a great, successful educational system in line with the objectives of Prapariyatthum School's general education section. This institution's administrative sections consisted of many divisions that included the administration of subjects and courses, funds, human resources, and the general administration.

Factors that contribute to the success of education management include: (i) Organizational administration: Administrators must have a vision and be able to lead the school to attain international standards. Administrators must manage, utilizing a quality system. Administrators must be able to use technology in communication and management. (ii) Strategic planning: Personnel must have knowledge and understanding of strategic planning for international standard schools, and be able to operate to achieve strategic objectives. (iii) Learners and service recipients: Students must be determined, eager to learn, and have a sense of morality, ethics, and creativity. Parents must cooperate and support the school's work. (iv) Teachers must have knowledge, abilities, and expertise in specific fields; and be able to use technology to manage teaching and learning. They must also possess high ethics to act as good role models. (v) School management: School management must have quality systems, classrooms, learning resources, an environment and atmosphere conducive to using services, adequate and appropriate modern media, activities that promote reading and learning, and academic excellence.

Consistent with the results of this study, Thitavisitto et al. (2018) found the following: (i) Funding and resources for educational management require that each school has different funding methods from outside of itself in the form of donations. It must organize projects or activities according

to important Buddhist dates such as in organizing a summer novice ordination project. In addition, it must promote rapport with alumni. It was found that the communities around the temple area are also important in supporting scholarships and educational resources, such as in supporting fish, food and teachers. (ii) It was also found that there are four important factors that influence the efficiency of educational management in ordinary departments of Buddhist Scripture Schools. These factors are, namely (a) the vision of the administrators on educational management, (b) a budget for educational management which is still not enough to improve the quality of education, (c) an environment that is conducive to educational management, (d) and teachers and individuals who are responsible for managing learning for students. These are all considered to be important factors in the achievement of educational objectives.

## CONCLUSION

Monks are Buddhist religious people who play a role in teaching the people. Society in the northeastern region of Thailand has developed because of the education provided by the monks from the past to the present. Teachers who teach both the knowledge of religious ethics and secular knowledge are the monks who also provide education according to the curriculum set by the government so that students receive knowledge according to the set criteria. When they graduate, they can work. The Sangha has a role in providing scholarships, equipment for teaching and learning, and funds to build educational institutions for monks, novices, and underprivileged people so that they can receive a comprehensive education. At present, although the secular educational system has more options, the support is not as comprehensive as the support provided by religious organizations. Therefore, monks with potential in many areas, including research, still create educational benefits for society.

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