

## Article

# The Adverse Impacts of Excessive Commercialization of Religious Culture on Thailand: A Study Centered on Thai Buddhism

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**Abstract:** This study examines the adverse impacts of excessive commercialization on Thai Buddhist temples through a qualitative investigation of six temples across Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. Employing cultural commodification theory, the research constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing spatial reconstruction, temporal reallocation, and functional transformation to analyze how commercial logic fundamentally alters temples' socio-cultural nature. Based on in-depth interviews with 62 stakeholders including monks, devotees, vendors, and temple administrators, the findings reveal systematic impacts: spatial conflicts between tourist and religious activities were highly frequent (48/62), disruption of traditional religious rhythms was widely reported (51/62), and declining interest among young monks in religious education was moderately observed (35/62). The research demonstrates that when commercial logic supersedes religious logic as the dominant operational principle, temples undergo fundamental transformation from sacred spaces to tourist attractions, resulting in the separation of ritual form from content, marginalization of devotees, and disruption of cultural transmission mechanisms. The study proposes differentiated management strategies including temple classification systems, designated devotee hours, and cultural protection funds to balance economic benefits with religious preservation.

**Keywords:** religious commercialization; cultural commodification; temple tourism; Thai Buddhism; sustainable heritage management



## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Background**

As a globally renowned Buddhist country, approximately 95% of Thailand's population adheres to Theravada Buddhism, with Buddhist culture profoundly influencing the nation's spiritual core and governance philosophy. Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Thailand from Sri Lanka in the 13th century, when King Ramkhamhaeng established it as the state religion. It subsequently merged with Thai animistic beliefs and became deeply intertwined with royal authority, forming a unique political-religious symbiosis. In modern society, Thai Buddhism has undergone significant adaptive reforms, with temple functions expanding from purely religious spaces to educational, medical, and community activity centers, while monks' activities are no longer confined to temples and can include participation in social services such as rehabilitation centers.

Thailand saw 35.32 million tourists in 2024, and tourism generated 1.6 trillion baht, becoming of great importance to the nation's economy. Due to this, temples, significant for tourism, are experiencing new commercial pressures. Most of the temples in Thailand have transformed from sites of faith into attractions for tourists, and some of them have modified traditional religious rituals to meet the needs of guests, earning much revenue in return. It results in significant economic gains but also poses the dilemma of balancing commercial development with preservation of culture.

### **1.2. Research Questions**

It is a prevalent convention to receive monetary assistance through donations and fees associated with religious services. Nevertheless, the nature of commercialization is undergoing a transformation, as it begins to influence organizational dynamics, with the generation of profit becoming more significant than other managerial objectives, and the impact of mass tourism consuming substantial amounts of religious assets. This change influences not only the management of temples but also the cultural and spiritual roles of Buddhist traditions within Thai society.

The core questions of this research focus on exploring what adverse impacts excessive commercialization have caused on Thai Buddhist culture, what the underlying causes of these impacts are, and how to balance religious cultural preservation with economic development. Specifically, the research will examine how commercialization changes temple management methods, the structural impacts these changes have on different stakeholder groups, and the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms. Through systematic analysis, this study aims to provide theoretical foundations and empirical data for balancing religious cultural preservation and economic development.

### **1.3. Research Significance**

This research holds significant theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, existing studies mostly focus on the positive impacts of religious culture on economy or tourism, with limited exploration of social contradictions and cultural conflicts that excessive commercialization might trigger. Through systematic analysis of Thai Buddhist commercialization phenomena, this research fills the theoretical gap in studies of excessive religious cultural commercialization, enriches the connotations of religious sociology and cultural commodification theory, and provides a new analytical framework for understanding balanced cultural and economic development.

In terms of practical significance, as a country with highly developed tourism and religious culture, Thailand's Buddhist commercialization experience offers valuable references for other developing countries. Through empirical investigation, this research identifies problems arising from excessive commercialization and analyzes their causes and mechanisms, providing scientific basis for Thailand's religious cultural preservation policy formulation. These findings can also give practical guidance for sustainable tourism development, helping balance economic benefits against cultural heritage, preventing harm to religious cultural authenticity through excessive development.

### **1.4. Research Objectives and Innovation**

This research aims to thoroughly explore the manifestations, impact mechanisms, and response strategies of excessive Buddhist commercialization in Thailand. This study will try to find the various forms in which commercialization appears in how



temple space is utilized, how the time of temples is organized, and even what function they have. It will also try to understand exactly what these changes mean for religious practice, devotee experience, or how a given culture is passed down over generations. By analyzing the demands and contradictions from the different stakeholders, it can reveal the deep social repercussions of commercialization and put forward some optimal suggestions for preserving religious culture while developing the economy.

The originality of this research lies in the application of qualitative research strategies that allow for the construction of a three-dimensional analytical framework that considers the effects of commercialization in terms of micro daily routines that pile up into macro structural variations—i.e., spatial re-construction, temporal re-allocation, and functional re-transformation. Through the alteration of Buddhist temples' physical settings, temporal routines, and societal roles, commercial demands seriously shape their socio-cultural features. This analytical framework goes beyond conventional research models that mostly focus on commercialization's economic benefits or surface transformations. To make research findings more universal, the study also specifically looks at the different commercialization traits of temples of different sizes.

## **2. Literature Review**

Research on religious commercialization has received widespread academic attention in recent years. Cultural commodification theory provides an important analytical framework for analyzing religious commercialization, exploring the meaning transformation process that cultural elements undergo when entering market exchange systems. In the religious domain, commodification refers to the meaning transformation process triggered when religious symbols, spaces, and rituals enter the commodity exchange sphere.

Regarding sustainable development of religious tourism, research in Bali explored sustainable and inclusive development strategies for spiritual tourism in the post-pandemic era, emphasizing the importance of balancing commercial development with cultural preservation (Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). Studies on religious heritage tourism in Spain found complex interactions between cultural tourism and religious heritage, where commercialization may lead to loss of authenticity in religious sites (González-González & Fernández-Álvarez, 2022).



Policy-level impact mechanism research analyzed the effects of religious tourism policies on religious development, finding that believer-led religious development models are superior to temple-led models (Liu & Lee, 2024). Specific research on Thailand's tourism industry questioned Thailand's "quality tourism" model, pointing out that this model may exacerbate wealth concentration rather than promote sustainable development (Nawat et al., 2024). Through research on community tourism in Thailand, scholars proposed a classification framework based on heritage consumption, revealing differentiated impacts of various types of heritage commercialization (Pham Hong et al., 2021).

Research on environmental impacts of rural religious tourism explored the relationship between religious tourism development and rural environmental health, emphasizing the key role of community participation in sustainable development (Rawal & Sah, 2022). Studies on political-economic factors found that political instability significantly affects Thailand's tourism development, providing new perspectives for understanding external factors' impact on religious tourism (Saha et al., 2022).

On specific manifestations of Thai Buddhist commercialization, recent research deeply analyzed how Thai Buddhism has transformed into modern prosperity worship, revealing profound changes that commercial logic brings to traditional religious practices (Servaes, 2024). Through research on Nepal's Lumbini World Heritage Site, scholars explored concepts of "imported Buddhism" versus "co-creation," providing comparative perspectives for understanding Buddhist commercialization in cross-cultural contexts (Shinde, 2021).

Historical perspective research documented in detail the transformation of modern Buddhist practices in Thailand, demonstrating how commercialization affects monastic life and ritual practices (McDaniel, 2011). Analysis of urban Thai Buddhism from the perspective of political functions revealed Buddhism's legitimacy construction and conflicts in the modernization process (Jackson, 1989). These studies collectively form the theoretical foundation for understanding Thai Buddhist commercialization, yet still lack in-depth exploration of commercialization's micro-mechanisms and its differentiated impacts on various stakeholders.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**



### **3.1. Theoretical Framework Construction**

This research constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of commercialization impacts based on cultural commodification theory. Cultural commodification theory explores the meaning transformation process when cultural elements enter market exchange systems, manifesting in the religious domain as profound changes triggered when religious symbols, spaces, and rituals enter commodity exchange spheres. This theoretical framework encompasses three core dimensions: spatial reconstruction, temporal reallocation, and functional transformation.

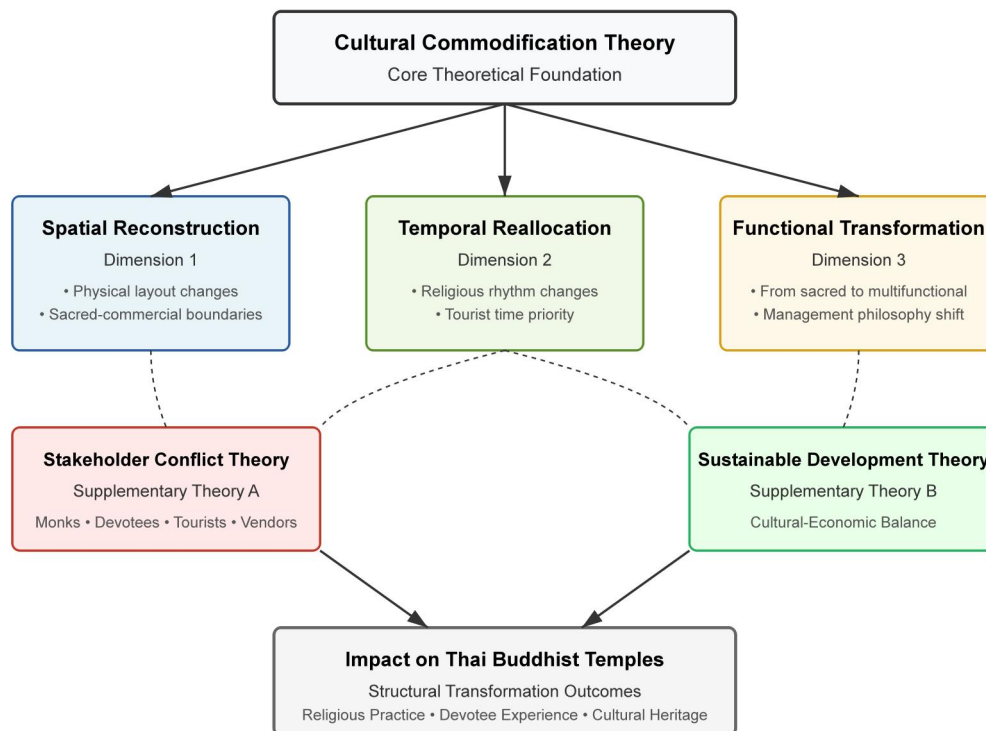
The way that commercial buildings change the architectural design and cultural significance of places of worship is the main focus of the spatial reconstruction dimension. When commercialization forces space usage to get reorganized, it blurs boundaries between areas designated for commercial business and areas meant for religious practices, yet traditional temple spatial layouts embody specific religious principles. The temporal reallocation aspect looks at how religious time patterns get affected by commercial activities. Temple daily operational patterns get changed by commercial logic introducing linear time and efficiency ideas, which conflicts with traditional religious time concepts that stress cycles and holiness. The functional transformation aspect looks at how temples transform from purely religious sites into multi-use spaces, requiring major changes to operating methods, management approaches, and belief systems. As shown in **Figure 1**, this three-dimensional framework integrates cultural commodification theory with complementary theoretical perspectives to analyze the transformation of religious spaces under commercial pressures.

#### **Figure 1**

*Theoretical Framework for Analyzing the Impact of Commercialization on Thai Buddhist Temples*

## Theoretical Framework for Buddhist Temple Commercialization Analysis

Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework of Thai Buddhist Commercialization Impact



Note: Solid arrows indicate direct relationships; Dashed lines indicate supplementary connections

Stakeholder conflict theory offers supplementary viewpoints for comprehending inconsistencies between various groups. This theory analyzes the various demands and conflict mechanisms of monks, devotees, tourists, vendors, and the government, among other actors, in the commercialization process. By highlighting the trade-off between long-term cultural value and immediate economic gains, sustainable development theory offers evaluation standards for striking a balance between cultural preservation and economic development.

### 3.2. Research Methods and Data Strategy

This study uses a qualitative research approach, gathering primary data through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Because the goal of the study is to examine various commercialization impact mechanisms and how various stakeholders interpret these mechanisms, qualitative methods were chosen rather than merely quantifying the impact of commercialization. The intricacy and dynamics of the commercialization process can be captured by qualitative research, which also reveals





profound sociocultural mechanisms that quantitative research finds challenging to access.

Using multi-case comparative analysis, the study chooses six temples in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket for in-depth examination. Stratified sampling principles are used in the case selection process: two large temples that primarily serve foreign tourists, two medium-sized temples that primarily serve domestic tourists, and two small temples that primarily serve local communities. This method of selection guarantees the diversity and representativeness of the sample, exposing distinct commercialization traits of different kinds of temples.

Data collection uses theoretical saturation to determine sample size. In-depth interview subjects include 18 temple administrators, 12 monks, 24 regular devotees, and 8 vendors, totaling 62 cases. Interviews adopt semi-structured formats, focusing on themes including temple historical changes, commercial development status, and daily religious life changes. Participant observation is conducted for approximately one week at each temple, combining non-participant and participant observation methods, recording activities at different times, space usage, and group interaction patterns. Document analysis supplements historical background and policy environment information, including government documents, temple archives, news reports, and other secondary materials.

### **3.3. Research Design and Implementation Path**

Research design follows inductive logic, progressing from empirical observation to theoretical construction. The research hypothesizes that commercialization produces structural impacts on religious practices, devotee experiences, and cultural transmission by changing temples' spatial, temporal, and functional configurations. Variable definitions include: independent variables as degree of commercialization (tourist numbers, commercial facility scale, ticket revenue, etc.), dependent variables as religious cultural impacts (ritual changes, devotee participation, cultural identity, etc.), and mediating variables as stakeholder interaction mechanisms.

Data analysis employs thematic analysis, encompassing three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding conducts line-by-line analysis of raw materials, extracting initial concepts; axial coding establishes connections between concepts, forming categories; selective coding integrates



categories, constructing core theory. The analysis process maintains fidelity to raw materials, seeking balance between theoretical abstraction and empirical description.

Research reliability and validity assurance employs triangulation strategies. Data triangulation cross-verifies through multiple data sources; method triangulation cross-validates through interviews, observations, document analysis, and other methods; researcher triangulation achieves consensus through team members' independent coding and discussion. Important findings undergo member checking, with preliminary analysis results fed back to some interviewees to confirm interpretation accuracy. Research ethics considerations include obtaining informed consent, protecting interviewee privacy, and avoiding interference with religious activities.

## 4. Research Conclusions and Optimization Suggestions

### 4.1. Main Research Findings

Through in-depth investigation of six temples, this research found that commercialization has produced systematic impacts across spatial, temporal, and functional dimensions. In the spatial dimension, temples have universally implemented functional zoning, establishing dedicated tourist routes separated from devotee religious activity areas. At peak tourist seasons, tourist activity spaces expand and devotee religious spaces shrink correspondingly. This spatial transformation causes not only changes in physical functions but, moreover, the replacement of spatial cultural meaning: places originally made for quiet religious contemplation now function as noisy marketplaces. **Table 1** encapsulates multi-dimensional impacts from commercialization. Based on qualitative analysis of 62 interviews with various types of interviewees, it shows how spatial, temporal, and functional changes affect different interest groups.

**Table 1**

*Multi-dimensional Impacts of Commercialization on Thai Buddhist Temples*

Impact Dimensions	Key Manifestations	Affected Groups	Representative Evidence	Frequency (n=62)
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Spatial Reconstruction	• Tourist routes separated from devotee areas•	Devotees Monks Community	“We feel like outsiders in our own spiritual home”	High (48/62)
	Commercial facilities occupy religious spaces• Sacred spaces become marketplaces			
Temporal Reallocation	• Tourist time takes priority•	Religious practitioners Regular worshippers	“Rituals have become performances”	High (51/62)
	Traditional prayers shortened• “Shift system” replaces 24-hour access			
Functional Transformation	• From sacred sites to tourist attractions • Market logic replaces religious logic •	Temple management Young monks Cultural heritage	“Young monks no longer show interest”	Medium (35/62)
	Revenue calculations override spiritual guidance			

Regarding temporal allocation, temples prioritize tourist time. Traditional morning and evening prayer times are advanced to avoid tourist peaks, with evening rituals reduced from complete to simplified versions. Temples have established “shift systems,” and although Buddhist tradition emphasizes 24-hour temple accessibility for devotees, actual opening times are now filled with tourist schedules. In functional positioning, temple management has begun using market economy language, with management criteria shifting from “sacred temple property” to “income-expenditure calculations,” from “religious guidance” to “tourist satisfaction.”

Commercialization has created varied impacts across different groups. For religious practice, traditional rituals get simplified into “performative” procedures, weakening their religious meaning. For devotee experience, they face competition for space usage rights, loss of community belonging, feeling like “outsiders” in their spiritual homes. For cultural transmission, young monks’ learning interest dropped sharply, with religious symbol systems undergoing “desacralization.”

## 4.2. Research Conclusions

This research validates and extends the applicability of cultural commodification theory in non-Western religious contexts. The study found that commercial logic accumulates from micro daily practices into macro structural transformations. When the dominant force within temple operations switches from religious thinking to commercial reasoning, in effect, what temples are fundamentally changes. The impact of commercialization on practice is form divorced from content; the impact on people



is subject to marginalization; its theoretical impact is the breaking of channels for the transmission of culture.

The study identifies three ways commercialization creates impact: spatial reconstruction alters both the physical environment and symbolic meaning of religious activities; temporal reallocation disrupts traditional religious rhythms, bringing efficiency-focused time concepts; functional transformation changes temples from purely religious sites into multifunctional spaces. These three ways work together, jointly causing fundamental transformation of temples' socio-cultural nature. Analysis indicates that obtaining short-term economic gains comes at the cost of losing long-term cultural value—an exchange that may be economically rational but culturally unsustainable.

### **4.3. Optimization Suggestions and Research Prospects**

Together, the Sangha Supreme Council and the Department of Religious Affairs could create standards for classifying temples, dividing them into three groups for distinct management. Regional tourist temples reserve 6-9 AM and 5-8 PM exclusively for devotees; community temples continue to operate solely for religious purposes with government subsidies; and national heritage temples, such as Wat Phra Kaew, may develop high-end cultural tourism with designated religious protection zones and reservation systems.

In order to foster cultural creative industries around temples, a “Temple Guardian” program could train locals to serve as cultural interpreters and integrate with Thailand’s “One Tambon One Product” initiative. Major tourist temples could use thirty percent of their ticket sales to support ritual preservation, monastic education, and community temple operations. Management committees should include monks, officials, and community representatives.

Digital technology could enable virtual tour systems and reservation platforms to control visitor flow effectively. Following Thailand’s “Sufficiency Economy” philosophy, promoting “moderate tourism” would attract visitors genuinely interested in Buddhist culture. Modern courses in cultural management could supplement traditional Buddhist education, with universities like Chulalongkorn establishing research centers to support sustainable development.

This research has certain limitations. Qualitative research methods limit external validity of results; six case samples cannot encompass all types of Thai Buddhist



temples; cross-sectional design, though capturing some longitudinal dynamics through retrospective interviews, cannot fully present the historical process of commercialization. Future research could employ long-term ethnographic methods to document dynamic commercialization processes, expand sample scope to cover temples of different sects and scales, adopt mixed research methods combining qualitative thick description with quantitative data, and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to explore commonalities and differences in religious commercialization across different cultural traditions.

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