



Eugene Ford. *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. 392 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-21856-5.

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Published on H-Buddhism (September, 2019)

Commissioned by Thomas Borchert (University of Vermont)

In 1953, some fifteen years before he would preside over the horrific bloodletting of the Vietnam War's second half, Vice President Richard M. Nixon made a trip to Southeast Asia that would prove to be deeply transformative. Dispatched to the region by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Nixon received instructions "to visit as many countries as possible" (p. 49). After stops to Indonesia and Malaya, Nixon made his way through Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, a stretch he described as "fascinating and frustrating." During his time in northern Vietnam, Nixon traveled by jeep to the mountainous front lines of the war between the French and the Viet Minh. What Nixon saw struck him as "highly educational"; he came away profoundly critical of the French, attributing their problems in Indochina to their racism and arrogance. Nixon concluded that the French had failed to stop the communist-dominated Viet Minh because "they had not sufficiently trained, much less inspired, the Indochinese people to defend themselves" (p. 50). Nixon left the region convinced that he had made a special connection with the "common man" of Southeast Asia. Back in Washington, he argued that the United States needed to do more to counter the appeal of the communist propaganda that the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China were directing at Southeast Asian societies.

In the course of his fact-finding travels, Nixon came across early efforts by various US government entities to bring Buddhist leaders into the free world's anticommunist cause. He saw programs that funneled money and advice to Buddhist leaders with the intention of getting them to see the threat to religious freedom that communism ostensibly posed. Nixon was impressed by the potential value of the low-cost efforts, and no doubt saw these programs as better alternatives to the deadly military morass that France found itself in. Nixon is perhaps the most famous American historical figure in Eugene Ford's *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia*, but he is not unique. Ford's excellent study examines efforts by numerous Americans—scholars, diplomats, and spies—who believed that Buddhism could be used as an anti-communist defensive weapon. Like the young Nixon, most were astute enough to recognize the distrust that many Southeast Asians had for the Western powers in the postcolonial period. But also like Nixon, most of them overestimated their ability to understand the complex cultural, social, and historical forces of Southeast Asia sufficiently to create effective propaganda there.

Cold War Monks is a fascinating historical study of geopolitical rivalry set against the backdrop of several overlapping cultural and social

struggles. Ford explores numerous and multifarious layers of conflict as Asian and Western historical actors aim to outfox their rivals and enemies by exploiting the anxieties of the superpower competition. US government agencies compete to beat out other agencies (namely the CIA and United States Information Agency) for influence and resources while ostensibly working together to manipulate Southeast Asian Buddhism. Meanwhile, Buddhist leaders work to sideline their intra- and interorder rivals by presenting themselves as the most politically reliable institutions in the anticommunist fight. Among the many “cold wars” that Ford explores are those waged between Thailand’s competing Buddhist orders, Mahanikay and Thammayut, as they vie to define Thai Buddhism in a transitional age. Other nonviolent struggles involve the rivalries of various Buddhist organizations that compete to dominate the global narrative about Buddhism. Ford traces efforts by organizations such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) and the Buddhist Association of South Vietnam to gain influence in international affairs. The rivalries set against parallel rivalries is one of the more fascinating elements of this valuable study. They give this thoroughly researched Cold War study strong dashes of intrigue and danger befitting the period.

The Americans in Ford’s study run the gamut from hapless to heroic. They are quick to identify the “un-Christian” nature of communism, and conclude that something like Christianity is needed to counter it. But they are less certain of how to do it. Their impulse to neutralize communism’s appeal with religion is summarized notably by an American senator who exhorts his countrymen to fight the Cold War with “the Atomic bomb in one hand and the cross in the other” (p. 41). Ford’s study suggests that many of the American representatives entrusted to this difficult and complex mission were not up to the task. They face numerous obstacles, many of them self-imposed. The first is their ignorance. With a few notable exceptions, the Americans have only the most rudimen-

tary understanding of Buddhism, never mind the arcane rivalries and competitions underway among the various orders. America of the 1940s and ‘50s possessed a relatively tiny community of scholars with expertise on Theravada Buddhism; the subset of scholars willing to join the secret program is miniscule. The second obstacle is the naïveté of American political culture in the first decades after World War II. Many American government representatives were uneasy about employing Buddhism as a geopolitical defensive weapon because of the almost uniquely American prohibition against allowing any one religion to play a central role in government matters, a traditional taboo expressed as “mixing church and state.” Further complicating the Americans’ mission is their fear that conservative Christians at home will object to American support for foreign Buddhist groups. Working behind the thin cover of civilian cultural foundations, CIA teams and other US government entities search for ways to use Buddhism for civic action programs. To their frustration, they find that Southeast Asian Buddhism is hardly ripe for political manipulation by any foreign power.

The Americans get their marching orders from National Security Council Directive 162/2, which calls for “mobilizing the spiritual and moral resources necessary to meet the Soviet threat” (p. 43). But where to begin? The Americans spend the first few years of the Cold War stumbling around the region looking for the right spiritual and moral resources to harness. Initially the Americans form alliances with the very un-Buddhist leaders of Thailand’s security forces, including its national police chief, Phao Siyanon. Phao was notorious for his use of torture, extrajudicial killings, lies, and various other unsavory practices to destroy his opponents (and occasionally to stop criminals, terrorists, and would-be communists). Eventually, the Americans go on to work more directly with Buddhist leaders, especially those overseeing educational institutions.

As Ford shows, these Americans do learn over time, although their successes are limited. One report by a US diplomat cautions, “we must take into account the fact that in all of the countries concerned the Buddhists are divided into at least two more or less antagonist sects and U.S. efforts must be carefully designed to avoid the pitfalls of factional jealousies” (p. 56). But if Americans at least recognize the potential risks of appearing to favor one order over another, they never fully identify successful methods for using Buddhists to convey the anticommunist message. The Americans sponsor Buddhist conferences, foreign trips abroad, and educational programs at the college level. But none of these efforts deliver the impact they seek.

To carry out the work, the CIA creates the Asia Foundation. While concealing its true intentions behind the slimmest of covers abroad, the Asia Foundation covertly funds various Thai Buddhist initiatives designed to modernize Buddhist education. The Americans hope that a broader educational perspective will encourage monks to carry out rural development programs and become anticommunist stalwarts in the communities they serve. According to CIA plans, the influential monks would make the case against communism at the village level, thus undermining the potential appeal for antigovernment insurgency. The Asia Foundation representatives maintain a light, and perhaps uncertain, hand when trying to steer Buddhist leaders toward taking up the anti-Soviet and anti-Maoist message. If they can give Thai monks a Western-style curriculum, the Americans reason, they will see both the promise of capitalist-driven development as well as the dangers of communist ideology. Their attempt to bolster the secular education modules at Thailand’s Mahmakuta University, for example, yields truly mixed results. While the Thammayut-based school readily accepts the US financial support, its conservative administrators bristle at the American pressure for fast-paced reforms. Further adding to the program’s failure is the newly cos-

opolitan attitude of the graduates. Most monks trained under the modern curriculum come away having no interest in abandoning Bangkok to return to rural areas. And the funding of a Thammayut college seems like an unproductive way of influencing the mostly Mahanikay communities of the rural heartland.

The scholar William Klausner is almost unique among the Americans working for the Asia Foundation in coming across as an admirable figure. Klausner, a student and friend of Paul Mus, came to this covert government service with degrees in Southeast Asian studies and law from Yale University. A convert to Buddhism fluent in Thai and Lao, Klausner harbors a sincere concern for the well-being of Thailand’s rural folk, especially those of the impoverished northeast. He endures considerable hardship during his many travels over the backroads of Thailand and Laos. Throughout Ford’s study, Klausner never seems to compromise his Buddhist ideals even as he carries out sometimes unseemly secret directives. But this visionary scholar is not without his blind spots when it comes to the early Asia Foundation. As Ford notes of the Asia Foundation’s original efforts, “Beneath the benign intentions, an attitude of cultural arrogance was perhaps palpable: Thai Buddhism could be saved from itself only if it indigenous Thai stewards overcame their own dysfunction to become competent partners of the foundation” (p. 129).

Ford is adept at interweaving multiple tales. In addition to tracing the covert American programs, he also demonstrates how the Cold War is responsible for drawing the Thai sangha out of its formerly insular structure to become a more regional and global force. Thailand’s independence during the colonial era left its Buddhism comparatively isolated and conservative. With no foreign power occupying Thailand, its Buddhist leaders never got drawn into secular political causes like those that flared in Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Such isolation becomes impossible in the

Cold War era, and Ford is at his best when he traces the internecine maneuvering within the Thai sangha caused by Cold War pressures.

Among the highlights of this study is an examination of the rise and fall of the charismatic Thai monk Phra Phimolatham. Born to poverty in Thailand's northeast, he achieves fame as the international face of Thai Buddhism by promoting Buddhist outreach and educational exchange throughout the world. From his position as Lord Abbot at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok, he leads high-profile delegations to various conferences and synods in countries embroiled in the tense tug-of-war between the free world and the communist bloc. During his visits to Burma, the globetrotting monk acquires a strong interest in vipassana meditation; he encourages Thai monks to copy his example by traveling abroad to study other Buddhist approaches. For those Thais unable to travel, Phimolatham establishes vipassana centers in Thailand that teach the insight meditation process. His celebrity status and embrace of foreign (especially Burmese) practices generate jealousy among the chauvinistic and conservative elements of the Thai ecclesiastical leadership. Phimolatham's tense rivalry with his fellow Mahanikay leader Kittosophana is among the more riveting struggles described in *Cold War Monks*. His downfall and ruin, as Ford illustrates, is almost a foregone conclusion. When Phimolatham undermines the candidacy of several prominent senior clerics seeking positions in the upper echelons of the Thai sangha, his jealous rivals work together to bring him down to size. Over a three-year period, they try to ruin his reputation and force him to disrobe. Phimolatham's Thai persecutors use tactics familiar to Cold War harassers in the United States. First, they try to connect him to the appearance of politically explosive leaflets critical of the Sarit government and Thailand's Buddhist leaders. Then they seek to blame him for harboring a cache of Chinese communist propaganda books that other Thai monks had brought back from Beijing. When Phimolatham sidesteps

the first clumsy attempts at framing him, a police investigation produces two young former monks who testify that Phimolatham had had sex with them at Wat Mahathat. Although one of the accusers later recants his accusation as the product of police coercion, the Thai courts continue the process of Phimolatham's ruination. With Sarit supporting the effort to destroy Thailand's most famous monk, Phimolatham's fate is sealed. He is accused of "communist activity and crimes against the internal security of the kingdom—crimes that rose to the level of terrorism" (p. 98). Phimolatham ends up serving four years in jail in the mid-1960s.

The rise of such organizations as the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) is another important story in this volume. From its origins in newly decolonized Ceylon and Burma to the transfer of its secretariat to never-been-colonized Thailand, the story of the WFB reads as a fascinating counterpoint to the US government's covert Buddhist-related programs. WFB leaders envision an organization that will remedy the world's social ills by popularizing Buddhist tenets in lands in Asia and beyond. Hampered by its fear of being even remotely political (a mirror image of the Americans' fear of mixing church with state), the WFB leadership accomplishes little more than preaching to the converted. Its many international conferences are underwhelming in their scope and effect. As Ford observes, "Few among the Americans would have disputed that the WFB, despite its lofty rhetoric, had only the faintest real-world influence" p. 163). After significant financial help from the Asia Foundation, the WFB fails "to chalk up a single substantive achievement" in its first eleven years.

One WFB director epitomizes the ambiguity and contradictions that repeatedly undermine the fellowship's ambitions. Princess Poon (Poonpit-samai Ditsakun) is both the daughter of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the architect of the modern Thai state, and the mentor to Jit Phumisak, the

intellectual leftist firebrand who lost his life trying to tear it down. Princess Poon proves to be a savvy navigator of Cold War tensions, steering the WFB away from political activism while maintaining direct communication with the Dalai Lama, Pope Paul VI, and Soviet diplomats (p. 207). Her combination of royal aloofness and unpredictable actions makes her a difficult figure for any foreign entity to control. Poon confounds the WFB's shadowy American influencers by announcing at one conference that "no act is more contrary to our Constitution than the exploitation of Buddhism for political ends" (p. 221). But it is precisely Poon's strict principles that end up undercutting the WFB's own mission to effect global change.

Thailand gets the most attention in Ford's study. But he also includes developments in other Buddhist countries of the region, including Ceylon, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Vietnamese Buddhism casts a long shadow over the events in *Cold War Monks*. Ford shows how events in Hue and Saigon rattled the Thailand-based Cold War warriors seeking to understand the differences between the unpredictable political activism of Mahayana Vietnam and the relatively conservative activism of Theravada Thailand. This effort at drawing connections between the two Buddhist traditions gains urgency when two Thai monks immolate themselves in apparent imitation of the Vietnamese suicides (pp. 173-74) in the early 1960s. Among the more fascinating episodes that Ford examines is the effort by American agents to have Thai Buddhists rein in the antigovernment Buddhist activists of South Vietnam. Predictably, the Thai intervention fails to cool Buddhist demonstrations in South Vietnam, further underscoring the limited grasp of the Americans who sought to manipulate Buddhist leadership across the region.

But if Thai Buddhism is a relatively sedate entity throughout much of the Vietnam War, it makes up for it quite tragically after 1975. Thailand sees its own overtly political Buddhist lead-

ers rise to prominence in the years immediately after the communist North Vietnam crushes the Saigon regime. But unlike in South Vietnam, where Buddhist monks shocked the world by committing suicide to protest authoritarian rule, a Thai monk horrifies the world by stating that "killing communists is not a sin" when done to protect a Buddhist state. Ford gives the strange case of the ultrarightist monk Kittivudho the attention it deserves with a thorough examination of the charismatic monk's inflammatory speeches (which his followers now dispute) and educational programs. Ironically, it is only when the United States gives up trying to weaponize Buddhism against communism that Thailand sees its national faith get turned into a deadly antileftist force. Ford's study concludes with nightmarish episodes of bloodshed as various Thai political actors invoke the leftist boogymen to justify the massacre of college students at Thammasat University and other sites in October 1976. Even though the Americans are exiting the region when rightist vigilante groups and security forces slaughter scores of innocent students, I would argue that their historical fingerprints, however faint, can certainly be found at the scene of the crime.

Eugene Ford's *Cold War Monks* is a great resource for scholars in several fields and subfields. Scholars of Buddhism, the Cold War, Southeast Asian history, and diplomatic history will benefit from reading this excellent study. But nonspecialists will also find this book worth their time. Often, *Cold War Monks* reads like a spy thriller. It is populated by historical figures who are both personas and persons; they have public faces that conceal private missions and stated policies that elide secret agendas; and they show remarkable strengths that belie very human frailties.

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Citation: Richard A. Ruth. Review of Ford, Eugene. *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. September, 2019.

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