

The 2024 GSGS Research Grant Report

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Research Topic: Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism in the Reign of King Rama X

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Research Expenses: Airfare and train tickets (TYO – BKK – TYO) ~200,000 JPY

Research Objective:

This research aims to bridge the gap between Thai scholars' work on religion and politics and the analyses of international academics, such as Tomas Larsson, Edoardo Siani, and others, who have extensively explored Thai politics and Buddhism. By integrating these perspectives, the study will gradually unfold their contributions to understanding politics, religion, and nationalism in Thailand, particularly during the reign of King Rama X. The analysis advances the argument that contemporary political controversies in Thailand—ranging from issues of dictatorship and coups, monarchy reform, royal assets, and military control—can be better explained through the lens of Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism, rather than through the framework of royal nationalism alone. Existing works often overlook the crucial religious dimensions, which this research seeks to address.

Moreover, this research seeks to develop the framework of Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism further, highlighting the interplay between secular and spiritual elements in Thai politics. During King Rama X's reign, state mechanisms have increasingly adopted Buddhist narratives once propagated solely by religious institutions. The study also aims to contribute to two levels of academic discussion: first, with scholars focused on contemporary Thai politics, monarchy, and Buddhism; and second, with those studying the intersection of Buddhism and state power, illustrating how Thai Buddhism distinguishes itself from other Buddhist traditions globally, and how these religious discourses operate under the new reign.

Achievement:

Fieldwork and interviews with informants in Thailand have revealed the organizational dynamics of small units involved in event planning. These interviews, combined with field trips, helped to both validate and expand upon the previously gathered data. The process typically begins with “Letters” being sent to the governors of each province, as they head the Provincial Volunteer Administration Center, requesting cooperation in organizing “Jit Arsa Praratchatarn” (Royal Volunteer) events. These events are held on royal-related days, such as birthdays or death anniversaries, and are themed around the expertise of the commemorated royal figure—whether a warrior, medic, legal scholar, or athlete. Once provincial cooperation is established, each province coordinates with its chain of command, which includes local administrative authorities, the military, and other agencies like municipalities, to participate in the events. For instance, the July 4th celebration, which honors King Rama X's sister known for her contributions to science and medicine, reflects these fields in the event's theme. The events begin with an opening

ceremony, during which superior officers lead a homage to royal images, followed by the group chanting “We do good with our hearts” three times. The ceremonial part concludes with a group photo, after which community development activities like cleaning or waste collection take place.

The researcher was informed that all participants must wear the designated uniform: a blue cap and yellow scarf bestowed by the King, along with a yellow shirt. Those who have undergone training at the Jit Arsa School wear name tags, with the colors on the hem of the scarf indicating the training level. For example, a purple hem represents Queen Sirikit’s color, and the caps feature the royal ciphers of King Rama X and Queen Suthida. Some volunteers, especially from governmental sectors like the police and military, may overlap their volunteer activities with office hours, and some of the community work might be pre-done by machinery to ease the workload and enhance photo opportunities. Additionally, the cooperation of various government departments, such as Provincial and Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (PAO and SAO), police departments, and the Provincial Electricity Authority, is essential in supporting these events. This hints that, although portrayed as under royal patronage, the Royal Volunteer projects partially draw upon taxpayer resources.

As the researcher analyzed, the process reveals a distinctive hybrid chain of command, where the Royal Volunteer Administration Headquarters, largely staffed by military personnel, initiates the event by sending a “Letter” to the Provincial Hall. From there, the governor issues another “Letter” to subordinate officials at various levels, organizing participation from central, regional, and local authorities. This structure allows for an atypical dynamic in which military personnel hold sway over civilian authorities and vice versa. The integration of military and civilian officers is crucial for ensuring the execution of these events. Informants also pointed out that the implementation of many of these activities is led by government officials, the military, or the police, and it is rare for independent volunteers to initiate such events without this leadership. Events are typically expected to generate “images and reports” to be passed up the chain of command, though it remains unclear to whom governors and military officers report, aside from the 904 Royal Volunteer Headquarters and Centers, which are run by high-ranking military personnel and royal officers close to King Rama X.

Moreover, some informants revealed to the researcher that many volunteers, often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, participate in these events in hopes of securing stable careers in the civil service, military, or police, though limited education and opportunities can hinder their ambitions. These volunteers are often drawn to the uniforms worn by officials, as they represent power and authority. Becoming a Royal Volunteer offers these individuals a chance to gain visibility and build personal and political connections with influential figures, a crucial aspect of Thailand's patronage system. Initially, the author believed the Royal Volunteer events were limited to Thailand’s 77 provinces. However, further research revealed that the 904 Royal

Volunteer project extends internationally, likely facilitated by Thai embassies abroad, indicating the global reach of the Thai state’s volunteer program through its government chain of command.

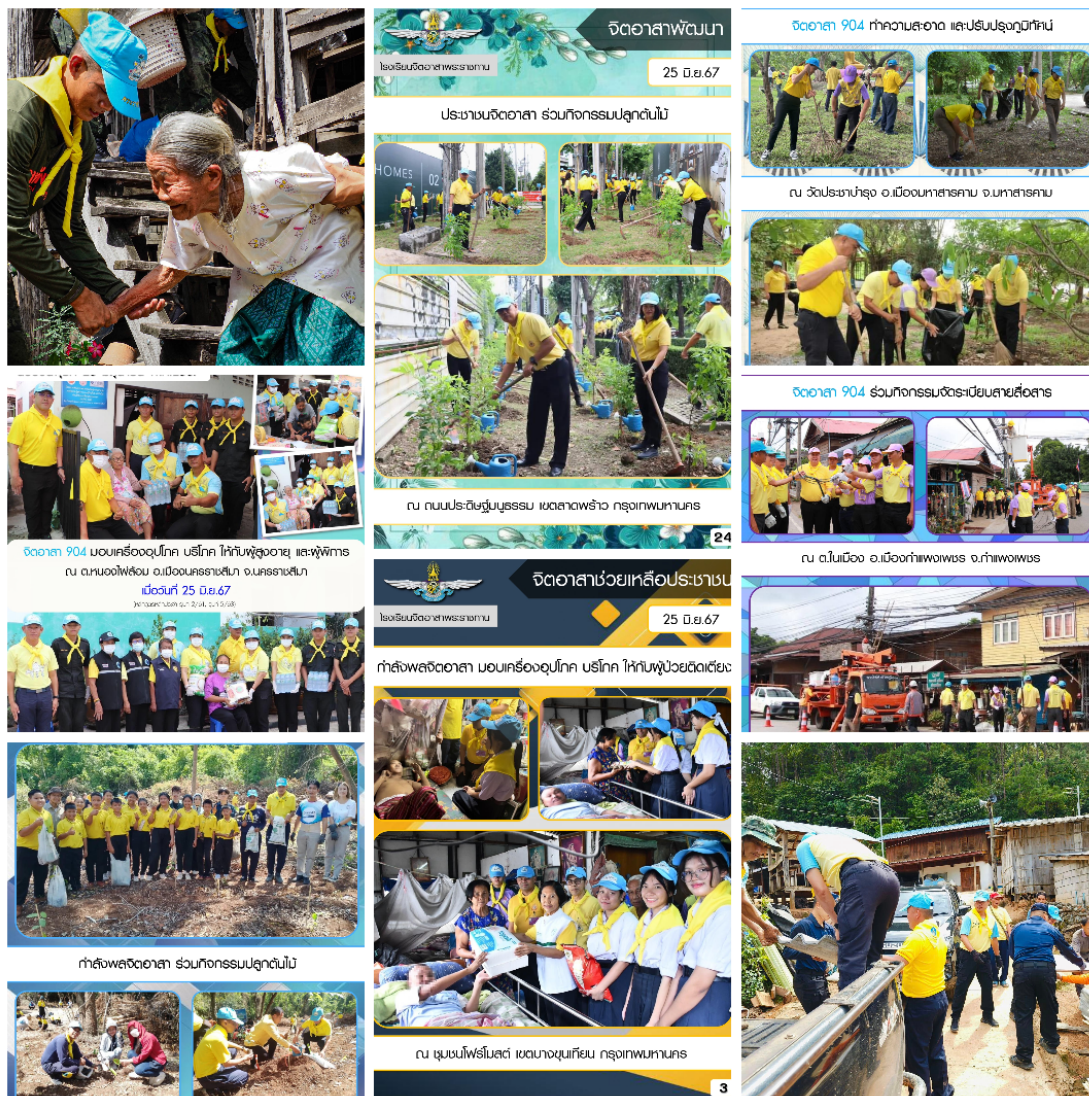


Figure 1: Royal Volunteer Activities. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/royaljitsara>.

During a field trip, a visit was also made to the Jit Arsa School, which continues to offer regular training programs to participants from diverse sectors such as government, military, police, and students. Located in the 11th Infantry Regiment near Don Muang Airport, the School’s access is restricted, requiring permission like other military bases. The training program is divided into four stations, each with a specific focus: problem-solving based on local conditions, crisis management, self-reliance, and royal-initiated study projects. The curriculum aims to instill pride in Thai culture, promote volunteerism, and enhance self-sufficiency through hands-on activities such as water management, waste recycling, forest survival, and natural health care practices. The program also emphasizes learning from six Royal-initiated Study

Centers, focusing on agricultural productivity, forest rehabilitation, coastal fishery environments, and watershed management.

The definition of “volunteer” activities at the Jit Arsa School seems broad and ambiguous, encompassing skills ranging from disaster response and active shooter training to farming and plantation techniques. Many aspects of the training appear militarily influenced, though the key emphasis is on the benevolence of the Thai monarchy, particularly King Rama X, as the ultimate patron of the Royal Volunteer project. The military officers involved in the training wear distinct uniforms, including a blue cap and yellow scarf, along with a unique “portrait card” pinned to their chest instead of a name tag. The courses, subsidized by the monarchy, are free, with training durations ranging from half a day to several months, depending on individual preferences.



Figure 2: Royal Volunteer Training Brochures. Source: Officers at Jit Arsa School.