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1 Introduction

A Community in the Making

Nestled in the heart of a tranquil Silicon Valley neighborhood, a Thai Theravada Buddhist temple glistens in the bright morning sun. Tiers of glazed green terra-cotta tiles with orange trim adorn the roof, echoing the amber foothills nearby.[1] Eight birdlike golden "sky hooks" affixed to the curling roof finials add a dash of exotic flavor. More than fifty thousand two-inch squares of gold leaf gild the chapel's architectural highlights. Above the south doorway, the emblem of Thailand's Queen Sirikit is inscribed at the center of a triangular gable. On the gable above the west doorway is an imaginative rendering of a hybrid bird: a mixture of the American bald eagle and the Garuda bird, Thailand's national emblem. Two thirty-foot-long gold, green, and red railings, fashioned to resemble guardian serpents, flank the chapel. Boundary stones, white on the bottom and gray on top, encircle the chapel to mark the division between mundane and sacred space. A few feet from the driveway, five flags—the national flags of Thailand and the United States, the California state flag, the Buddhist flag, and the temple flag—fly side by side. Trees planted through the years by Queen Sirikit, three princesses, a former prime minister, and high-ranking monks, each memorialized with a plaque, catch the visitor's eye.

This temple—Wat Thai of Silicon Valley (hereafter referred to as Wat Thai)—was founded in 1983 by a small group of professional men and women, Thais and non-Thais.[2] Today, the temple community in-

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cludes Asian migrants from Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, as well as a considerable number of White Americans and a handful of Latinos and African Americans. Although most regular temple participants are Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists,[3] Christians, Catholics, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims take part in a variety of temple activities, crossing religious as well as ethnic and racial boundaries.

Many regard Wat Thai as the anchor of the community. I repeatedly heard: "No temple, no community." This ethnography examines how the participants—regardless of their cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, and gender differences—practice Buddhism in building a temple and creating a middle-class community in Silicon Valley. A temple provides cultural space for people to socialize and gain a feeling of solidarity, especially for those who feel that their numbers are small and that they are widely scattered. Thais and those associated with them use the temple as a platform to raise Thai cultural visibility, display class respectability, and forge alliances with White Americans in Silicon Valley and elites in Thailand. Building and maintaining a temple have become ways to practice their American citizenship and perform their spiritual and cultural existence with dignity.

These Thai and non-Thai, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, immigrant and non-immigrant Americans *do* have different reference points, practices, and preferences. They often see themselves and others through multiple lenses—ethnicity, race, class, and gender—in both local and transnational contexts.[4] They are not intimidated by competing cultural ideas and practices. Encountering and intermingling with people of different backgrounds at the temple—just as they do at work or school—has become routine. Despite confronting misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, and discrimination in daily life, many realize that they are more alike than different as they share numerous interests, concerns, and dreams for themselves, their children, and the world.[5]

When I first visited Wat Thai in 1996, the chapel was still under construction. A bevy of monks and volunteers worked feverishly, adding final touches to the decorations and preparing the temple for the mid-June 1997 demarcation rituals. The chapel changed day by day, week by week. On June 14–15, 1997, seventy Thai monks from temples throughout the United States and eighty-one monks from Thailand, headed by His Eminence Somdet Phramaharajamangalacarya, gath-

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ered at Wat Thai. The demarcation rituals they performed transformed Wat Thai into the first Theravada temple in Northern California qualified to conduct all Buddhist rituals within its purified chapel space. These rituals have historical and symbolic significance, reproduce Buddhist consciousness, and transplant Buddhism to the United States.

During these demarcation ritual days, the temple attracted a variety of visitors. A Thai woman who had traveled from New York to participate in the rituals said to me: "In Thailand, it is hard to see big monks. In the United States, big monks come to visit us." This is so because the Thai state regards overseas Thai as a potential resource and Thai temples as *the* institution for reaching out to migrants and their descendants.[6] Another woman expressed gratitude to the city for not prohibiting the building of the temple. A number of White men joined in the rituals with their Thai spouses. Mothers and grandmothers assisted children and grandchildren in gilding boundary stones and placing money in donation boxes to make merit (*thambun*), whereby they transfer economic capital into religious capital and display moral worth. Some visitors enjoyed seeing the photographs that recounted the temple's history; others remarked on the short essays written in Thai by students at the temple school. Men, young and old, took advantage of this auspicious opportunity to become ordained temporarily as novices or monks. Women took the Eight Precepts to be ordained as nuns. People used the word "happy" and the phrase "feel good" over and over. Happiness can mean different things to different people. However, at this moment, the participants expressed a shared sense of happiness from seeing the chapel acknowledged as legitimate by local authorities and the Supreme Sangha Council of Thailand.

Inside the chapel, the hall was full of monks and laypeople chanting, meditating, and listening to Somdet Phramaharajamangalacarya's Dharma talk. Outside, under white awnings, people purchased offering packages, Buddha statues, and pendants blessed by the monks. Improvised donation boxes of all sizes and shapes were everywhere. Luang Dae, the head monk at Wat Thai of Los Angeles, the first Thai temple founded in the United States, who was known as one of Wat Thai's most diligent advocates, did some spontaneous fundraising after the rituals were completed. He grabbed a donation canister, sat it next to himself, then passed out miniature Buddha images and blessed individuals by sprinkling them with a few drops of water. Luang Dae visually reminded participants that giving matters when it comes to

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practicing Buddhism. Giving is often interpreted as a way to cultivate detachment from the material world. A crowd of men and women gathered around him, some with money in hand to donate.

The Buddhist practices described herein are dynamic, minute, sometimes unpredictable, and, above all, far more complex and interdependent than we have imagined. These two days of celebrations can be viewed as an allegory for building a Theravada temple and establishing a dynamic community. The flow of people, including monks in the United States and from Thailand, as well as the flow of symbols, money, and Buddhist practices significantly contributed to Wat Thai's very existence. Moreover, what the temple members did for these two days—feeding monks and visitors, cleaning and maintaining the temple, raising money for the temple, meditating, participating in rituals, and articulating their cultural identities—is what they do here throughout the year.

Today, Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States. The generally agreed on estimate of the number of American Buddhists is 2.5 million–4 million.[7] A majority are Asian Americans.[8] Nearly every Buddhist school and sect can be found in cosmopolitan cities such as Los Angeles and New York (Tanaka 2011: 4). Los Angeles has become "the most complex Buddhist city in the world" (Eck 2001: 148). In *A New Religious America* (2001), Diana Eck argues that America has been transformed into the most religiously diverse nation in the world.

Although American Buddhism has been characterized as diversifying the American religious landscape (Queen 1999: xviii), most popular literature on American Buddhism focuses narrowly on meditation, self-help, and "white converts" (Jones 2007: 217–219; Kapleau 2000; Morreale 1988, 1998; Pirsig 1974; Prothero 1996; Suzuki 1970; Watts 1957). For a long time, articles in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, the Buddhist periodical with the largest circulation in the United States, contributed to this tendency but more recently has broadened its scope (Tweed 1999: 76). In this country, meditation alone among Buddhist practices seems to have captured people's attention; the idea that spiritual practices are internal and superior privileges meditation. To date, little has been written about how temple communities engage in a varied array of activities, including how they build their temples through the *joint* efforts of Asians and non-Asians; what monks do besides teaching meditation and conducting rituals; how temples orches-

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trate spiritual practices through materiality and physical labor; or how participants forge class alliances. Furthermore, no study has examined how a diverse assemblage of participants at a *single* Buddhist temple crosses ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries.

To fill these gaps, this ethnography focuses on what participants *do*—how they practice Buddhism—and the meanings that they assign to their conduct. All activities—meditating or attending rituals, carving out cultural space, merit making, teaching the Thai language, cooking at the food court—are regarded as Buddhist practices. Many believe that *everything* they do influences their spiritual trajectory.

Participants at Wat Thai are both active agents and subjects of hybrid cultural principles and socioeconomic forces. How they engage in self-making and are being made as they build a multifaceted community constitute the heart of this book. Self-making refers to how people negotiate with regulations and institutions in working toward individual and shared goals based on particular circumstances. Being made refers to the ways in which people are informed and shaped by various regulations, ideologies, and socioeconomic conditions. The activities they organize and participate in, what they say, and their multiple identities are deeply informed by their family, schools, the larger society, and the localities where they live and work, a crucial aspect of being made. Throughout this book, self-making and being made are always in dialogue and in process and demonstrated in multiple configurations instead of a singular one. The actors at Wat Thai need to be understood within, not outside, structural constraints, market operations, and cultural forces.

Participants often refer to Wat Thai as a diverse temple. Diversity is a modern concept. The notion of "human diversity"—"the variety of human life" (Hannerz 2010: 544)—suggests that difference is informed by history, religious beliefs, sex/gender, rights, practices, and interpretations. "Diversity" is a fuzzy term. There is no general agreement about what it means. The diversity discourse "generally exclude[s] whites" (Doane 2003: 15). Scholars, however, do agree that it is not enough to see diversity in relation only to ethnicity, race, languages, religion, and other variations (Eisenlohr 2012; Hershock 2012; Jindra 2014: 324; Lamphere 1992; Sanjek 1998; Vertovec 2007). Steven Vertovec (2010: 1) suggests that we have to explore "the relationships between how diversities (and the groups within a varied social array) are imagined, how they related to social, economic and geographical characteristics,

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how such depictions reflect or influence social interactions, and how political systems of diversity governance themselves utilize or create depictions of diversity." Put simply, diversity is not just differences but the differences that involve power relationships informed by politics, social structures, public discourse, and access to resources.

I call special attention to the differences informed by power relationships and the *interconnections* that underscore such a notion of diversity. Many people at Wat Thai conceive of their experiences, both transnational and local, through the lens of interconnection. All things, similar and dissimilar, are seen as in a state of flux. Something occurs because other things have changed or ended; everything is believed to be connected. For example, intermarriage by itself does not carry social significance in relation to the formation of a Thai temple. Nevertheless, when these women involve their husbands and children with the temple, they are affecting and being affected by the ongoing interplay of racial/ethnic, gender, and class relationships. Intermarriages, like diversity, are knotted within a cluster of power relationships and involve complex social interactions and webs of connections. Therefore, my analysis of the making of the temple and its community focuses on interactions, inclusion, and interdependence grounded in daily engagement with translocal forces and a range of circumstances. (I used the term "translocal" to emphasize the intermingling of transnational and local power relationships, networks, and flows.) By paying attention to the juxtaposition of different cultural principles and multiple entangled networks, I write from the position that differences are relative, temporary, and continuously being renewed in response to new conditions and power relations.

Although this book is about Buddhism as practiced in the United States, it is also about connections and relationships between and among Thai Americans, the United States, and Thailand. Thai Americans identify with the United States and Thailand because they are informed by past and current events in both countries. In the age of transnational migration, it has never been more important for us to understand how migrants engage with translocal networks and with different cultural logics. In the process of temple building, Thai immigrants not only *become* Thai Americans but also *reproduce* Thai and American culture, make their middle-class identity visible, and make the community and the physical existence of the temple felt locally. They, in fact, challenge the discourse on Americanization—how immigrants are assimilated into American society—and call our attention

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to what they have contributed to American society. In the remainder of this chapter, I situate this study within the current academic discourse on American Buddhism, the middle class, transnationalism, and gender relationships.

Reimagining American Buddhism

In the twenty-first century, Buddhist concepts and meditation have been integrated into American popular culture to an unprecedented degree. Many people, however, may not be aware that during the past 150 years in the West, the Buddha and the Buddhism we know about were greatly influenced by a Parisian Frenchman, Eugène Burnouf, who never visited Asia or met a Buddhist but who interpreted Buddhism on the basis of his translations of random Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts (Lopez 2013: 3–5).[9] Moreover, a monumental number of texts that recorded the Buddha's teachings, some written thousands of years ago in Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, classical Chinese, and other languages (along with archeological objects), remain unstudied (Schopen 2009). Many texts we do know about are copies of copies of copies that cannot be traced back to the original. However, people seem to think they know what Buddhism stands for.

It is important to keep in mind that Buddhism is an organized religion. As Gregory Schopen (1997, 2004, 2009) shows, even two thousand years ago, Indian Buddhist monks engaged with socioeconomic and legal systems, politics, cultural norms, art, mathematics, literature, and even eroticism. In *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Donald Lopez (1998: 3) reminds us that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tibetan Buddhism was sometimes described as "the most corrupt deviation" from the Buddha's teachings. Ironically, many Westerners today have developed a romantic fascination with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet before 1959 is portrayed as a utopian society ruled by a god-king in which Tibetans, located in an isolated and ecologically enlightened land, lived a happy, peaceful life, willingly following the Dharma (Lopez 1998: 11). In this simplistic view, all of the inequalities, power struggles, and politics among Tibetans and within institutional Tibetan Buddhism have somehow vanished. Such a formulation, as Lopez so eloquently states, attempts to "[deny] Tibet its history, to exclude it from a real world of which it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their agency in the creation of a contested quotidian reality" (Lopez

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1998: 11). Clearly, Buddhism needs to be analyzed in relation to history, ideologies, and socioeconomic systems.

In Thailand, Buddhism is the majority religion. The monks there have long been involved with national discourses, political and economic activities, and national identity formation (Anderson 2012; Fuengfusakul 1993; Keyes 1989; Kirsch 1978; Kitiarsa 2012; McDaniel 2011; Morris 2000; Reynolds 1978; Sanitsuda 2001; Tambiah 1970, 1976, 1978, 1984; Zehner 1990). For example, in 1973, Kittivuddho, a well-known Thai monk connected with right-wing military extremists, claimed that killing communists was not killing people "because whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types (*man*) are not complete persons" (Keyes 1978: 153). Buddhism, in various forms, continuously has been incorporated into Thai national ideologies, national identity, and everyday life.

In the United States, Buddhism has also absorbed nationalistic ideologies, such as assimilation and Americanization. Moreover, American Buddhism is influenced by the notion of individualism and by the association of culture only with ethnic minorities, not the majority; in addition, it continues to be classified along ethnic and racial lines.

The Politics of Classification

American Buddhism has long been divided into two categories: "immigrant Buddhism" and "white [convert] Buddhism"—or, as it is referred to in the literature, the "two Buddhisms" (Layman 1976: 262–263; Prebish 1979: 51, 1993: 187). Constructing categories has become the core of the two Buddhisms discourse (Table 1.1). Immigrant Buddhism or ethnic Buddhism is described as ritual-centered and is largely practiced by Asian immigrants and their descendants who were born into the faith (Nattier 1998: 188–190). Convert Buddhists tend to be depicted as well-educated, well-traveled, elite and middle-class White Americans whose primary interest is meditation (Coleman 1999: 95–98; Fields 1994, 1998; Fronsdal 1998: 178; Machacek 2001: 69; Morreale 1998; Nattier 1998: 190; Numrich 1996, 2003). In contrast, the class status of Buddhist immigrants often is assumed to be working class or is simply ignored.[10]

The two Buddhisms paradigm has been refined for decades, reducing social complexity to a set of simple contrasts and erasing the vigor and diversity of practices. Classification schemes are informed

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TABLE 1.1. TWO BUDDHISMS PARADIGM

Immigrant Buddhism	White Buddhism
Immigrant Buddhists	White converts
Ritual-oriented	Meditation-oriented
Working class	Middle class

by power relationships (Hacking 1990), and attempts to map Buddhism are no different. As Rick Fields (1994: 55) pointed out, "It is mainly white Buddhists who are busy doing the defining. . . . [T]hey're defining it in their own image," and through such a discourse meditation becomes the "real Buddhism." These binary categories are bred from asymmetries of power and reinforce the existing racial stratification. Helen Tworkov, former editor-in-chief of the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, exemplified this propensity when she stated, "The spokespeople for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the white middle class. Meanwhile, even with varying statistics, Asian-American Buddhists number at least one million, but so far they have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism" (Tworkov 1991: 4). Tworkov not only positioned herself as a spokesperson for American Buddhism but also denied the contribution of Asian Americans in reterritorializing Buddhism by building temples and by introducing Buddhism to America. Such a discourse, as Joseph Cheah and Wakoh Hickey point out, reflects ethnocentrism, White privilege, and racialization (Cheah 2011: 129; Hickey 2010: 1). The line between interpreting behavior informed by social systems and suggesting that one kind of behavior is superior to others may be fine, but it is not insignificant.

Sometimes a simple omission misrepresents a diverse community. For example, Paul Numrich (1996: 65) chose to "exempt" the husbands of Thai women, most of them White, from his study because these men did not practice meditation. Such an omission reinforces the assumption that meditation is the key marker of American Buddhism and excludes the demographically significant number of Whites who go to the temple with their wives to participate in activities other than meditation. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, half of Thai American women and the majority of Thai immigrant women are married to non-Thai men (Hidalgo and Bankston 2011: 88). More important, intermarriage between Thai women and Farang men creates cultural

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space for interactions and conversation, and works with and against racial/ethnic ideology. Thus, taking intermarriage into account is crucial for illustrating the formation of Thai American Buddhist temples.

The categories "White convert" and "immigrant Buddhist," therefore, fail to capture the ambiguity of practitioners who cross the boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism. Luang Pho, the abbot, often said to visitors of different faiths that "Buddhism is just a brand name. . . . [O]ne does not need to be an American to eat a hamburger." From his perspective, one does not need to be a Buddhist to practice Buddhism. Some White Americans are also unaware of the connection between meditation and Buddhism; those who do know the connection often are ambivalent or even afraid of being stigmatized by openly self-identifying as Buddhist (Cadge 2005: 24, 165–169). Others practice both Christianity and Buddhism. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2009, a large number of Americans attend worship services of more than one faith or denomination; about 24 percent of them attend services weekly and about 59 percent attend services monthly.[11]

Some scholars have resisted these binary categories. Thomas Tweed (1999: 71–75) suggested paying attention to hybridity and the ambiguity of Buddhist identities. He proposed the category "sympathizer" or "night-stand Buddhist" to include those who read books about Buddhism and practice meditation but do not identify with Buddhist organizations. In a similar vein, Jeff Wilson (2009a: 840–841) used the metaphor "purple" America instead of an America broken down into blue states and red states to problematize the two Buddhisms dichotomy. Despite these new perspectives, we have little firsthand knowledge about how a heterogeneous community is established and how hybrid cultures and identities are constructed at a temple.[12] For that reason, a book that does justice to a diverse community is needed.

Multifaceted American Buddhism

Buddhist temples serve as multifunctional centers and play an important role in engaging with political, cultural, and socioeconomic activities in American society (Ama 2010; Asai and Williams 1999; Cheah 2011; Chen 2008; Nguyen and Barber 1998; Seager 1999; Suh 2004; Van Esterik 1999; Williams and Queen 1999; Wilson 2012). To date, more research has been conducted on Mahayana than on Theravada Bud-

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dhism. Mahayana Buddhists came to the United States much earlier and outnumber Theravada Buddhists. Chinese and Japanese migrants have been bringing Mahayana practices and beliefs to the United States for more than a hundred years. In contrast, most Theravada Buddhists—Burmese, Cambodian, Laotian, Sri Lankan, and Thai—arrived in the United States after 1970. Within Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, there are many schools and lineages. Some are mentioned below. These existing labels are used as shorthand to echo historical, geographic, and cultural differences.

Numrich published the first book about immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples in the United States in 1996. He compared a Thai Buddhist temple in Chicago with a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in Los Angeles. Numrich (1996: 66–68) argued that immigrant Buddhists and American converts within the same temple formed "parallel congregations" that "intersected" but did not "interact," because the immigrants were ritual-oriented and the converts were meditation-oriented.

After Numrich, Wendy Cadge (2005) compared a Thai immigrant temple in Philadelphia with an insight meditation center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, composed largely of White participants. Instead of focusing exclusively on the differences, the crux of the two Buddhisms paradigm, Cadge mapped out some of the *similarities* between the two groups. She showed that immigrant and White practitioners draw on Theravada history and share a commitment to meditation and the Dharma (Cadge 2005: 46, 101) and that each group has been influenced by different interpretations of what it considers Buddhism to be (Cadge 2005: 5, 98–102). Emphasizing what White meditation practitioners and Thai immigrants share becomes Cadge's strategy for problematizing the premise of the two Buddhisms schema.

In comparison, Jeff Wilson (2012) illustrates how five groups, which identify with separate lineages, practice at a single temple, Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond, Virginia. He calls our attention to regional characteristics by showing that the members of different lineage groups, predominantly White, use the same temple space, in part because of limited resources, opportunities, and the small number of Buddhists in the South (Wilson 2012: 5, 119, 126). Although each group maintains its distinctive Buddhist lineage and practices, the members mingle, learn from one another, and find something they all share. The story that unfolds at Ekoji is, as Wilson (2012: 7) points out, "one of intersecting, not parallel lines."

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Most scholars have focused on Buddhism practiced by *a single ethnic/racial group*. Their work shows the complexity within the group. For example, scholars have found that Zen *centers* tend to focus on meditation and Buddhist studies, but Zen *temples* tend to focus on memorial and funeral services and cultural events (Asai and Williams 1999: 20). Although Japanese Zen meditation has become increasingly popular in the United States, Japanese Shin Buddhism, which rejects meditation and the precepts, has declined (Bloom 1998: 45). Nichiren Shōshū and Soka Gakkai Buddhism have developed into something quite different in the United States from the forms they take in Japan (Hurst 1992). Meanwhile, a noticeable number of Soka Gakkai participants are African and Hispanic Americans (Tanaka 2007: 116).

Cultural differences also appear in the few studies of Theravada Buddhist practitioners. Some scholars have observed that Thai immigrants are noted for respecting monks' leadership and knowledge (Cadge 2005; Numrich 1996), whereas others observe that Cambodian migrants have tended to distrust monks, in part because monks with spiritual standing were massacred during Pol Pot's regime (Douglas 2003: 164; Smith-Hefner 1999: 50). More recently, new kinds of relationships have developed between Thai and Cambodian laypeople and monks in the United States. Many Thai Buddhists are not afraid to challenge a monk's authority, while new Cambodian monastic leaders have tended to earn the trust of the community through their deeds.

Whereas most recent scholarship focuses on Buddhist practices within an ethnic group, a few scholars have compared Buddhist and Christian practices within the same ethnic group in different locations. Okyun Kwon (2003) maps out the socioeconomic and religious characteristics of Christian and Buddhist Korean Americans in addressing questions such as, Why do more Korean Protestants than Buddhists immigrate to the United States? Carolyn Chen (2008) wrote a rich ethnography about how Christianity and Buddhism differently enable Taiwanese immigrants to adjust to life in America. Taiwanese Buddhists make more conscious effort than do Taiwanese Christians to prove themselves in order to gain social acceptance in a predominantly Christian society (Chen 2008: 79–81). In studying senior Nisei (second-generation) Japanese Americans, Peter Yuichi Clark (2003: 61) notes that Buddhist Nisei and Christian Nisei share compassion despite their different faiths. In the same spirit but in different ways, Cambodian Americans cross the boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism

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(Douglas 2003: 171; Ong 2003: 228). Indeed, boundary crossings occur not just between Buddhist branches and schools but also between religions. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of knowledge about Buddhist and cultural activities conducted by different ethnic, racial, and faith groups within the same institution.

People of many different backgrounds live under the same roofs, study together in the same classrooms, and work together at the same job sites because the United States is made up of migrants from all over the world. Social interactions and collaboration among people of different backgrounds are part of everyday temple life. Nevertheless, scholars tend to focus on temples along ethnic lines and associate ethnicity with a reified culture. The dominant discourse, as Gerd Baumann (1996: 17) pointed out, "reduce[s] all social complexities, both within communities and across whole plural societies, to an astonishingly simple equation: 'Culture = community = ethnic identity = nature = culture.'"

It is crucial to pay attention to those who join the temple by crossing racial boundaries and those who are members of more than one religious community. In this book I treat the differences among Thais as seriously as the differences between Thais and non-Thais. Having the same country of origin may mask some significant distinctions. At Wat Thai there are members of three major ethnic groups who come from Thailand: the ethnic Thai, ethnic Chinese, and ethnic Lao of northeastern Thailand (Isan). People have different statuses, experiences, and educational attainment within each ethnic group. Some have had many more transnational engagements than others because of their economic capital or legal status. The members of different ethnic groups may bond with one another in one context and reinforce negative stereotypes against another ethnic group in another context. Participants from other ethnic and racial groups also bring their history, faith, and practices to the community. Heterogeneity within a community plays a crucial role in a study such as this one.

Whiteness

The rich literature on Whiteness asserts that White Americans enjoy certain privileges and are projected as worthy citizens (Bonilla-Silva 2012; Lipsitz 1998; McIntosh 1989; Ong 2003; Rothenberg 2002; Sacks 1994; Wildman 1996). Long ago, Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 15, 147) pointed out that *not* talking about color-consciousness is a White privi-

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lege; seemingly neutral color-blindness actually supports White racism by refusing to acknowledge the links between racial ideologies and socioeconomic structures. Whiteness carries symbolic capital, standing for American and middle class. Asians, regardless of their American citizenship and socioeconomic status, do not automatically possess the same measure of symbolic capital. As Toni Morrison (1992: 47) has observed, "Deep within the word 'American' is its association with race. . . . American means white."

Like skin color in the United States, skin shades in Thailand are etched with specific meanings. In Buddhism, the "color of one's mind" is considered much more significant than the "color of one's body" (Wiyada 1979: 118). Black-minded people are bad; white-minded people are good. In between is a variety of people with "other colored minds" (Wiyada 1979: 118). The color of one's mind, or moral worth, is depicted in temple murals by means of skin color. The hierarchical order descends *vertically* from the Buddha, who is "whiter than white," to angels, monks, laypeople, and those in hell (Wiyada 1979: 118). Because lighter skin shades impart higher status, people with lighter skin are located in the upper part of a mural; those with darker skin are considered of lower status and are located in the lower part. The cosmic world and the social world intersect in the painting. Such a belief is further reproduced through the idea of karma in Thai popular culture. Those with light skin are perceived as having more positive karma than those with dark skin (Weisman 2001: 234).

Although Thailand was never a colony, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Thai nation-state introduced Western manners, modes of dress, hairstyles, and family surnames so its Thai subjects would appear "modern" (Reynolds 1991: 7; Thongchai 1994: 4-5; Van Esterik 1996: 213, 2000: 96–108). Light skin is further associated with beauty and is a sign of being modern in Thai society (Mills 1999: 106). Historically, "Thai nationalists," as Jan Weisman (2001: 232) notes, have "denigrated Black people as models of behavior that is to be avoided by Thai, while presenting Whites (whose phenotype is also greatly preferred) as models to be emulated." Thai national ideologies generate a racial continuum similar to that in the United States, with White at the top and Black at the bottom.

The legacy of colonialism and of associating Whiteness with modernity has had a profound impact on how Asians and Asian immigrants view Whites and America. Today many Filipinos still "equate

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American with white and often use these two terms interchangeably" (Espiritu 2003: 159). Burmese, too, equate "American" with "white" (Cheah 2011: 76). Thai people use a special term, "Farang," to refer to White people without distinguishing their ethnicity. I adopt the term "Farang" to reflect this notion. I argue that Thai transmigrants are subject to both Thai and American ideologies when deciding whom to marry, with whom to forge alliances, and whom to include in the temple power structure.

"A Culture of No Culture"

Once while teaching a class on Buddhism, I asked my students, "Why can one find Buddha statues but no statue of Jesus at Whole Foods?" One answered, "Buddha is cheerful and pleasant, not miserable or suffering like Christ." Buddha is perceived as a kind of free-floating image untouched by culture, politics, and history. Romanticized Buddhism exists not only in popular culture but also in academic discourse. Janet McLellan (1999: 26–27) claims, "The development of non-Asian Buddhism has had no historical links to western culture, government, power, or politics. . . . Among Asian Buddhists, the transmission of and belief in traditional doctrines and scriptures are expressed as part of their cultural heritage." She applies the concept of culture to "Asian Buddhism" but takes "non-Asian Buddhism" for granted. In fact, Western culture and politics have had a profound impact on modern Buddhism. As Edward Conze (1975: 146) pointed out a long time ago, "Until Europeans wrote about them, the 'Buddhists' were happily unaware that they were 'Buddhists.' What they were preaching, practicing, and meditating about was not Buddhism but the 'holy dharma.' . . . Buddhism was an abstraction, coined by unbelievers for their own convenience." Today, the prevailing prejudice toward Buddhist rituals is, to a certain extent, underscored by the Protestant prejudice against Catholic ritualism and superstition (Snodgrass 2009: 29, 40; Yang 2008: 18). When meditation is idealized, few scholars pay attention to the confluence of commerciality and materiality on meditation practices (Padgett 2000).

Schopen warns against romanticizing meditation. On the basis of his examination of the archeological evidence and the rarely studied and voluminous Mulasarvastivda Vinaya—Buddhist legal texts for governing monks in northern India in the early medieval period—

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Schopen noted that the Buddha, as recorded by Mulasarvastivda monks, was more than just a wise man; he was also a shrewd businessman and a sophisticated lawyer. Consequently, Mulasarvastivda monks neither gave up their personal property nor renounced money (1997, 2004, 2005, 2009). Schopen contends that the Sangha, or community of monks, at that time meant something closer to an economic corporation than a monastic community. In his 2009 UCLA Faculty Research Lecture, Schopen pointed out, "In short, we are not normally aware that the same Buddha who taught 'all things are impermanent' also taught his monks how to use and service a permanent endowment." In other words, from the beginning Buddhism has been subjected to time-specific socioeconomic systems and norms, just as it is today, although in different forms.

Denying the impact of culture on non-Asian Buddhism and meditation is similar to what Sharon Traweek (1988: 162) diagnoses as "a culture of no culture." Drawing from her study of high-energy particle physicists, she shows that these elite intellectuals believed that they revealed the secrets of nature, so that neither their science nor they themselves had anything to do with culture (Traweek 1998: 78). However, these scientists, as she illustrates, *do* have a culture. They share notions of time, space, and the social order.

The physicists are not alone. Larry Rosenberg, founder of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, regards breathing meditation as "an ideal way to teach Buddhism in the West, because it does not carry the 'cultural baggage' other methods do" (Cadge 2005: 96, citing Rosenberg and Guy 1998). Accordingly, "cultural baggage" refers to the religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and cultural identity—but not meditation—that immigrants carry with them to the United States (Cadge 2005: 29; Nattier 1998: 190). Jack Kornfield claims that "insight meditation" is free of "the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition" (cited in Fronsdal 1998: 167; Prebish 1999: 152). Kornfield is known for making a great effort to combine meditation and psychotherapy (Cheah 2011: 67; Fronsdal 1998: 167–170). Nevertheless, combining meditation with psychotherapy is taken for granted because meditation is assumed to be free of cultural baggage and psychotherapy to be scientific. Furthermore, the category "baggage Buddhism" or "ethnic Buddhism" refers to Buddhism as practiced by Asian immigrants (Nattier 1998: 190). Through such a discourse, "culture" equals "ethnic minorities." Meditation is romanticized as "real"

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Buddhism; rituals are marginalized as cultural baggage. The former becomes spiritual and natural, and the latter religious and cultural.

It is true that breathing is natural, not cultural. It is also true that meditation does not involve monks, candles, incense, kneeling, and bowing. However, the moment one connects breathing with understanding one's body and mind or with low self-esteem, fear, or anger, breathing and looking inward become cultural acts. Meditation is appreciated and preferred because it fits neatly into the cultural fashions of America—psychology and individualism. Individuals, nevertheless, are impossible to be separated from, but rather constantly communicate with, social systems and ideologies (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 6, 13).

Thus, Buddhism is cultural. Culture is not a kind of inherited property but "a dynamic and potentially oppositional force which stands in complex relationship with the material conditions of society" (Brah 1987: 44). As such, a culture permeates the mutually constitutive relationships between people of Eastern and Western backgrounds, the intertwining of spiritual and mundane practices, and the interplay among different forces in the process of temple building and community-making. What Thai Americans (the majority of regular participants) and White Americans (the majority of regular non-Thai participants) do and say at Wat Thai help us see how they perceive and practice Buddhism. Therefore, the terms "cultural forces" and "cultural principles" apply to each of these groups to capture how they are influenced by different norms in certain contexts and by the same values in other contexts and how they continuously reproduce Buddhist culture.

The Middle Class: A Cultural Struggle

As mentioned earlier, in the dominant discourse on American Buddhism, Whiteness is viewed through the category of class, but immigrants are viewed through the category of race, with a hidden class message. Indeed, as many scholars have noted in a variety of contexts, American society is marked by a Black-White continuum of status (Franklin and Moss 1994; Hale 1999; Harris 1993; Makalani 2003; Omi and Winant 1986; Ong 2003). In this line of thinking, White Anglo-Saxons often are assumed to be upper class; Jews are assumed to be middle class; and African Americans and ethnic minorities are assumed to be lower class, regardless of their actual socioeconomic status (Ortner 1998: 7, 2003: 51).

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Many Thai immigrants were middle class before they came to the United States. The middle class, for them, means having a comfortable lifestyle, a stable income, a good education and owning a home. Collectively, they perceive themselves as educated, affluent, urban professionals who enjoy living a more cosmopolitan lifestyle than many Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese. They nevertheless suffer cultural and class "invisibility" (Thongthiraj 2003: 102).[13] Especially before the 1990s, few Americans knew much about ethnic Thais or Thai culture. Mary's experience was typical: "When I say, 'I am Thai,' they say, 'Oh, Taiwanese.' I say 'Thailand,' and they say, 'Oh, Taiwan.'" Among those who did know about Thailand, Thais were often associated with the "land of smiles," the sex industry, and spicy food (Thongthiraj 2003: 102). In addition, Thais were often mistaken for refugees because their economic capital was masked by skin color, a foreign accent, and immigrant status. Thus, some have found that belonging to the middle class is not enough to gain *group* cultural and class visibility.

Therefore, this book is not so much about how an individual achieves socioeconomic upward mobility as about how these individuals work together *collectively* to gain class respectability, acquire cultural visibility, accumulate social and religious capital, resist racialized profiling, and develop new gender relationships. When a temple thrives, the individuals associated with that temple are dignified. Their middle-class practices include pooling resources from Thailand and the United States to build a multimillion-dollar temple, welcoming everyone to that temple, making class alliances with those who support the community, and fostering a younger generation that is bilingual and bicultural. As Mark Liechty (2003: 265) points out, "Middle-class practice is about carving out a cultural space in which people can speak and act themselves into cultural existence." What middle-class members *do* is more important than what the middle class *is*. Class is neither a "thing" nor a "category"; it is a "cultural practice" and a "process" (Liechty 2003: 20–21, 255).

Before Liechty, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that class is not just an issue of money. It is also a matter of taste. He pointed out that just as a common taste may disclose class, gender, and educational differences, taste serves as an important social marker and is part of the process of forming boundaries and identities. Taste is embedded in the process of accumulating capital; taste shapes what types and quantities of capital individuals accumulate. Bourdieu (1987: 3–4) shows

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us that people accumulate and convert different types of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital: "In a social universe like French society, and no doubt in the American society of today, these fundamental social powers are . . . firstly *economic* capital, in its various kinds; secondly *cultural* capital, or better, informational capital, again in its different kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, *social* capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and *symbolic* capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate." Capital is a form of power: Different kinds of capital indicate different kinds of power and resources and are interconnected and convertible.

Nevertheless, there is more than one set of criteria for potential convertibility in a heterogeneous society—a point that Bourdieu failed to recognize (Ong 1999: 89). People, especially transmigrants, encounter "*a perceived mismatch* between the distinction of their symbolic capital and their racial identity" (Ong 1999: 91; emphasis added). Two kinds of incompatibilities were evident at Wat Thai: the Thai identity of White people and the middle-class identity of the Asian immigrants. Due to this perceived mismatch, racial ideologies, and the asymmetrical power relationship between Thailand and the United States, Thais and Farang experience different kinds of structural constraints. Thai Americans come to realize that it is difficult, at the least at the present time, to convert their religious capital into symbolic capital in American society. Nevertheless, the *temple* can provide cultural space where they gain access to this kind of convertibility. At the same time, Farang come to realize that their white bodies are perceived as incompatible with a Thai identity. They are racialized because of the mismatch between their Thai cultural capital and racial identity. Indeed, identity is articulated not only through self-identification but also through how they are perceived by others (Barth 1969; Eriksen 2010). The temple becomes a platform on which Thais and Farang perform and articulate their identities situationally.