



Thailand's Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man

Patrick Jory

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Since the 2006 coup d'état, Thailand has been riven by two opposing political visions: one which aspires to a modern democracy and the rule of law, and another which holds to the traditional conception of a kingdom ruled by an exemplary Buddhist monarch. Thailand has one of the world's largest populations of observant Buddhists and one of its last politically active monarchies. This book examines the Theravada Buddhist foundations of Thailand's longstanding institution of monarchy. Patrick Jory states that the storehouse of monarchical ideology is to be found in the popular literary genre known as the "Jtakas," tales of the Buddha's past lives. The best-known of these, the "Vessantara Jataka," disseminated an ideal of an infinitely compassionate prince as a "bodhisatta" or future Buddha an ideal which remains influential in Thailand today. Using primary and secondary source materials largely unknown in Western scholarship, Jory traces the history of the "Vessantara Jataka" and its political-cultural importance from the ancient to the modern period. Although pressures from European colonial powers and Buddhist reformers led eventually to a revised political conception of the monarchy, the older Buddhist ideal of kingship has yet endured."

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