Until the modern period the Theravāda Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia supported monasteries by making land and labour endowments. The Buddhist monkhood or Sangha in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos has always been highly dependent on lay people to sustain it with donations of food and shelter because the Theravāda monastic disciplinary code, the Vinaya, forbids monks from engaging directly in commercial transactions and limits monks to eight articles for their personal possession and use. In earlier centuries when the economies of these societies were largely agricultural and when economic exchange was primarily in labour and in kind the king, members of his court and the royal and noble families would set aside fields and orchards in perpetuity for the benefit of the Sangha. Sometimes the endowment would include agriculturalists to work the lands or craftsmen and labourers to keep the buildings and monuments in good repair, to maintain the monastery grounds, and to protect the Sangha's property from vandals and thieves.

In Thailand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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1) According to the Pāli canon, the eight “requisite” articles are the three robes, the bowl, a razor, a needle, a girdle and a water strainer. All other property is held jointly by the Sangha.
changing economic and social circumstances forced the Siamese monarchy to reassess the ways in which it had traditionally supported the monasteries, and during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) the administration of monastery lands and labour endowments was altered in light of these new circumstances. The transition to a money economy was gradually making wage earners out of corvée workers, of whom monastery labourers were one category, and the piecemeal decline of the corvée system, which took place over many decades, is evident in much of the documentation from this period. Among the Siamese government measures which contributed to or reflected this decline were the emancipation laws which began in 1874 to free men and women held in bondage; administrative regulations, issued in association with the Sangha Law of 1902, which attempted to “rationalize” the financial administration of monasteries; and the Military Conscription Act of 1905, which made it clear that monastery labourers had ceased to exist as a legal category. After this date a monastery could no longer appeal to the government and request that the terms of a labour endowment be fulfilled.

In its reassessment of support for the monasteries the Siamese government collected data from provincial and Bangkok monasteries, and it is possible to extract from this data a picture, albeit a tentative and qualified one, of the economics of monastery support. But the conclusions that one might venture to draw from government reports, statistics and correspondence are beset with limitations. Evidence for the administration of monastery lands and labourers before the nineteenth century is, of course, slender, but a coherent, cogent account of monastery finances and support may not be possible even after the Siamese government began to keep Western-style files in the 1880s. The fact that the government was only just beginning to collect data on a kingdom-wide basis and preserve it in a central location means that the data are sketchy and discontinuous even for a single Bangkok monastery. Since the government and monastery records cited here are biased toward the capital and a few other regions of long-standing historical importance (Ayudhya and Angkor), this study is regrettably