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Becoming *Bhikkhuni?* *Mae Chis* and the Global Women's Ordination Movement

Lisa J. Battaglia

Samford University

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Becoming *Bhikkhuni*? *Mae Chis* and the Global Women's Ordination Movement

Lisa J. Battaglia¹

Abstract

Women's full ordination as Buddhist nuns (Pāli: *bhikkhunī*, Sanskrit: *bhikṣuṇī*) has been a contested issue across Buddhist traditions and historical periods. Today, there is a global movement to secure women's full participation in Buddhist monastic institutions. The present study examines this “*bhikkhunī* movement” in Thailand from the perspective of *mae chis*, Thai Buddhist female renunciates who abide by eight precepts yet do not have full ordination or ordination lineage. Employing an anthropological approach informed by postcolonial critical theory, my research reveals that *mae chis*, women who lead a Buddhist monastic lifestyle characterized by celibate practice and spiritual discipline, are not, on the whole, eager to relinquish their present status, fight against the existing socio-religious order, or pursue *bhikkhunī* ordination. A critical-empathic consideration of

¹ Department of Religion, Samford University. lbattagl@samford.edu.

mae chis' apparent illiberal subjectivities regarding gender hierarchy, female renunciant identity, and women's liberation brings to light goals and strategies of the global *bhikkhuni* movement that do not necessarily resonate with the motivations, aims or cultural sensibilities of the Thai white-robed female renunciates.

Introduction²

The present study examines Thai Buddhist female renunciates' attitudes toward *bhikkhuni* ordination and the global *bhikkhuni* movement. I employ the phrase "becoming *bhikkhuni*" in titling this article with three meanings in mind. First, it attests to the historical trajectory of women's yearning for fuller participation in the Buddhist monastic life—that is, the yearning to literally become *bhikkhuni*. Secondly, I deliberately render this phrase into a question—"Becoming *bhikkhuni*?"—to problematize the very grounds of authenticity on which *bhikkhuni* status purportedly stands. In other words, who counts as a Buddhist nun? This question not only fuels academic and feminist analysis, it also emerges as a reality both for aspirants who wish to secure *bhikkhuni* status and for "non-*bhikkhuni*" Theravāda female renunciates who must repeatedly negotiate their place within the lay-monastic divide. Finally, as a heuristic tool, the questioning of "becoming *bhikkhuni*" calls for critical reflection on the very desirability of *bhikkhuni* status; in other words, is it "becoming?"

² The research and writing of this article took place prior to the recent publication of Nirmala S. Salgado's *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Salgado's challenge to secular liberal feminist frameworks for scholarship on Buddhist nuns appears to be very much in sympathy with some of the arguments I make in this article.

The motivations and aspirations of *mae chis*—Thai Buddhist women who choose to adopt renunciant dress and lifestyle, yet who retain limited vows and unofficial standing within the *Saṅgha*—subvert the supposedly universal appeal and efficacy of the *bhikkhunī* role and *bhikkhunī* movement. Moreover, the seemingly illiberal subjectivities of *mae chis* regarding gender hierarchy, female renunciant identity, and women's liberation complicate and obscure foundational discourses in Buddhist feminist theorizing and activism—both on global and local levels—particularly as the rhetoric of women's rights, social justice, and women's oppression are called into question by the white-robed renunciates.

Buddhist Female Renunciation: Historical Background and Contemporary Context

According to longstanding Buddhist tradition, women have pursued the ordained life since Buddhism's inception in the fifth century BCE. This yearning is epitomized in the figure of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the historical Buddha's aunt and foster mother, who is attributed with becoming the first Buddhist nun (*bhikkhunī*). As the scriptures recount, the Buddha initially refuses Mahāpajāpatī's request that women be allowed to enter the *Saṅgha*. With steadfast resolve, Mahāpajāpatī and her following of 500 women cut off their hair, don the saffron robes, and walk 150 miles to Vesālī where the Buddha is teaching. Ānanda (the Buddha's chief attendant) sees the aspirants and, moved by their pitiful appearance, he approaches the Buddha and intercedes on their behalf. At this point in the narrative, the women's resolve becomes most poignant and palpable:

Pajāpatī is standing outside under the entrance porch
with swollen feet, covered with dust, and crying because
you do not permit women to renounce their homes and

enter into the homeless state. It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this.³

Ultimately, on the grounds that women are as capable as men of attaining enlightenment, Mahāpajāpatī and her retinue are admitted into the *Saṅgha*.⁴

From Mahāpajāpatī’s ordination some 2500 years ago to the present day, the issue of whether women should be permitted to don the saffron robes and become *bhikkhunīs* has been contested in Buddhist circles. The *bhikkhunī* issue is particularly germane in contemporary Thailand. Despite the transnational expansion of Buddhism and the subsequent flourishing of a Buddhist nuns’ community in many Asian countries, the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* never spread to Thailand.⁵ Given the pervasiveness of Buddhism in Thailand (94.6% of the Thai population of almost 67.5 million identifies as Theravāda Buddhist)⁶ coupled with the dearth of a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Thai history (until recent developments, a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* has never existed on Thai soil), Thailand emerges as a unique and provocative case study for the *bhikkhunī* movement.

Despite isolated efforts in Thai Buddhist women’s history to secure *bhikkhunī* ordination, and despite the growing contemporary

³ *Cullavagga* X, 1, 1-4. Translated in Murcott *The First Buddhist Women* 16.

⁴ While relevant sources suggest that the community of fully ordained nuns (*Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*) was established five years after the community of monks (*Bhikkhu Saṅgha*), recent scholarship reveals internal inconsistencies in the account of the foundation of the order of nuns, including chronological discrepancies. See Anālayo, “Women’s Renunciation in Early Buddhism” 86-90. For an analysis of the origins and demise of the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in Indian Buddhism, see Owen “On Gendered Discourse.”

⁵ As Collins and McDaniel concur, “[T]here is no certain evidence for ordained *bhikkhuni*-s anywhere in Southeast Asia at any time” (“Buddhist ‘nuns’ [mae chi]” 1383).

⁶ CIA World Factbook: Thailand, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed May 21, 2013).

movement to establish *bhikkhunī* ordination in Theravāda countries, to this day, the Thai *Saṅgha* and government do not recognize a *bhikkhunī* Order. Recent developments, however, call into question whether such recognition falls in the jurisdiction of the *Saṅgha Supreme Council*.⁷ Further obfuscating a *bhikkhunī* revival in Thailand, the *Saṅgha Act* of 1928 states that granting women *bhikkhunī* ordination defies *Saṅgha* regulation, and Thai penal law condemns those who wear the robes of a cleric without proper ordination.⁸ In 2003, a Thai Senate Select Committee advised that the 1928 ruling forbidding ordination for women was invalid, as it contravened the Thai constitution's principles of freedom of religion and non-discrimination against women. The Thai National Bureau of Buddhism rejected this advice. However, until recently, the *Saṅgha Supreme Council* has not publicly commented on the *bhikkhunī* revival in Thailand. Ultimately, the Thai *Saṅgha*'s stand on the issue of women's ordination is steadfast and unrelenting. The Sangha's position is grounded in a strict, legalist interpretation of the Pāli *Vinaya*.⁹ Most critically, the *Saṅgha* upholds the *Vinaya* rule that higher ordination for nuns must be conferred by two *Saṅghas*, namely the community of *bhikkhus* and the community of *bhikkhunīs*; since there are no extant Theravāda *bhik-*

⁷ See "Female monk ban talks reach stalemate" at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/451611/female-monk-ban-talks-reach-stalemate> (accessed January 4, 2015).

⁸ Namely, the *Saṅgha Act* of 1928 forbids Thai monks from ordaining women as *sāmañerī* (novice), *sikkhamānā* (probationer) or *bhikkhunī*, and Thai penal law states that a person who is not properly ordained, but wears the robes of a cleric, can be sentenced to imprisonment, or fined, or both. Proponents of *bhikkhunī* ordination argue that these regulations contradict Thai constitutional law and are contrary to the spirit of the Buddha. See Seeger "Bhikkhunī."

⁹ As the central reference point for deciding legal matters concerning Theravāda monastics, the Pāli *Vinaya* has important ramifications for the *bhikkhunī* ordination debate. See Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Legality of *Bhikkhuni* Ordination."

khunīs, proper ordination cannot be performed and the Order of Buddhist nuns cannot be revived.¹⁰

Female aspirants have implemented creative hermeneutical strategies to circumvent this obstacle—primarily through securing ordination by the *bhikkhu Saṅgha* alone, seeking ordination from the recently reestablished Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni Saṅgha*, or turning to the East Asian Dharmaguptaka *bhikṣuṇī* lineage to orchestrate dual ordination. However, this “catch-22” has proven to be virtually insurmountable on an institutional and popular level. In effect, these alternative avenues and methods for *bhikkhuni* ordination are not considered viable or orthodox by Thai Buddhist conservatives and legalists or by the *Saṅgha Supreme Council*. When female aspirants have sought *bhikkhuni* ordination outside Thailand, most notably in Sri Lanka, their ordination is not regarded by the Thai *Saṅgha Council* as pure Theravāda and thus is rendered inauthentic.¹¹ The perception of a “broken” monastic lineage compromises the legitimacy and integrity of present-day female Buddhist renunciates and their institutions (Mrozik 363).

Two notable attempts to instate the *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand are illustrative. In 1928, sisters Sara and Chongdi Bhasit pursued *sāmaṇerī* (novice) ordination; four years later they received *bhikkhuni* ordination from progressive monks in the *bhikkhu Saṅgha*. The Thai *Saṅgha* considered the women’s ordinations by the *bhikkhu Saṅgha* alone to be invalid. The young sisters were imprisoned and forcibly disrobed. One newspaper decried the women’s ordination as a heretical act deserving of the death sentence (*Kabilsingh Thai Women*). In a formal proclamation (which came to be known as the *Saṅgha Act of 1928*), the Thai *Saṅgha* for-

¹⁰ This *Vinaya* rule comes to be known as the “dual ordination” rule.

¹¹ See Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Legality of *Bhikkhuni* Ordination.”

bade *bhikkhus* from orchestrating or participating in *bhikkhunī* ordination.

Attempts to revive the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* ceased for some time. In 1956 Voramai Kabil Singh reignited the revolutionary spirit when she received eight precepts and started to wear light yellow robes to distinguish herself from the local white-robed *mae chis*. Fifteen years later, Ven. Voramai Kabil Singh sought full *bhikkhunī* ordination through the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage outside of her native Thailand in Taipei, Taiwan. Though Ven. Dhammananda did not ask for validation, the Thai Theravāda *Saṅgha* refused to validate her ordination and the Thai general public viewed her as a *mae chi*. Nonetheless, unlike Sara and Chongdi, Voramai remained in the robes, in large part owing to changes in Thai society and her ability to negotiate with authorities and avoid conflict (*Kabil Singh Thai Women*).¹² Though limited in terms of expanse, longevity, and scope of influence, these isolated incidents can be considered the first and second waves of the Thai *bhikkhunī* movement.

In part as a corrective to women's (seemingly) precarious lot in Theravāda Buddhism, and in part as a testimony to the veracity of the *bhikkhunī* category in Buddhist history, a movement for women's full ordination in the globalized Buddhist world—aptly termed the “*bhikkhunī* movement”—has made its presence in Thailand. The Thai *bhikkhunī* movement is spearheaded by Venerable Dhammananda (née Chatsumarn Kabil Singh), daughter of Voramai Kabil Singh and staunch advocate of *bhikkhunī* ordination who has pursued the saffron robes herself. The contemporary *bhikkhunī* movement is the “third wave” of Thai

¹² Voramai Kabil Singh is the mother of Professor Chatsumarn Kabil Singh. Chatsumarn's research into the ordination lineage of Chinese Buddhist monks convinced her mother to travel to Taiwan for ordination. Chatsumarn was influenced by her mother's pursuit of ordained status and her establishment of the first temple by and for Buddhist women (*Songdhammakalyani*).

Buddhist women's activism, as Ven. Dhammananda herself indicates.¹³ Broadly speaking, the goals of the global *bhikkhunī* movement are to revive the lineage of Buddhist nuns where it has been broken, to reinstate the *bhikkhunī* order where it has died out, and to introduce the community of Buddhist nuns where it has been absent.¹⁴ The global *bhikkhunī* movement—with its emphasis on gender equity, social activism, and women's pursuit of higher ordination—is the fruitful outcropping of the “auspicious coincidence” of Buddhism and feminism (Gross 26; Owen “Toward” 17). From Mahāpajāpatī’s barefoot march some 2,500 years ago, to the progressive stance taken by Ven. Dhammananda and her contemporaries, the yearning and resolve to “become *bhikkhuni*” spans millennia.

The movement for women's full ordination in Theravāda Buddhism hinges on the goal of restoring what was lost, or perhaps what

¹³ Venerable Dhammananda received full *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka on February 28, 2003 and is now abbess of *Songdhammakalyani* temple/monastery. In a BBC news program, “Al Jazeera: Everywoman” (Buddhist Nun: Interview with Dhammananda Bhikkhuni), Ven. Dhammananda admits that by wearing the saffron robes and “just sitting here” she is “already making a statement” that “this is a space for women that we never had in our country.” For a clip of the news program, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJMbI1UazK0> (accessed October 16, 2014). For reference to this “third wave” of Thai Buddhist women’s activism, see Thai Bhikkhunis: Articles, “Gender Discrimination,” February 2009, <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org> (accessed August 16, 2009).

¹⁴ Three organizations—Sakyadhita: The International Association of Buddhist Women, the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, and the Committee for Bhikṣuṇī Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition—are instrumental in the contemporary global *bhikkhunī* movement. See their objectives and mission statements, respectively, at: <http://www.sakyadhita.org>, <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/mission/>, and <http://www.bhiksuniordination.org/> (accessed January 4, 2015).

was stolen—as historical record and contemporary scene prove.¹⁵ Opinions regarding the establishment of a Theravāda Buddhist *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand are diverse, often contradict each other, and rely on a variety of approaches, sources, and interpretive strategies (Seeger “Bhikkhunī” 176). While the myriad responses by the Thai monastic *Sangha*, Buddhologists, feminists and sociologists in connection with this debate are beyond the scope of this article, my purpose is to provide a window into the perspectives and opinions of a representative group of Thai Buddhist women: namely, *mae chis*, female renunciates who wear white robes, shave their head and eyebrows, and observe eight or ten Buddhist precepts.¹⁶

***Mae Chi* Identity**

Despite the absence of the *bhikkhunī* category in Thai history, there have long been female Buddhist renunciates in Thai society. Historically and traditionally, the majority of women who aspire to lead a monastic lifestyle dedicated to Buddhist practice become white-robed *mae chis*.¹⁷ The

¹⁵ In addition to the forced disrobing of Sara and Chongdi Bhasit in 1932, I refer to recent accounts of pioneering Theravādin *bhikkhunīs* who have been forced to disrobe, have disrobed under immense pressure, or have been imprisoned for donning the saffron robes. See, for example, the story of Burmese ex-Bhikkhunī Saccavadi at <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2010/02/16/saccavadis-story/> (accessed January 4, 2015).

¹⁶ The eight precepts are to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, intoxicants, eating after noon and before dawn, dancing and other forms of entertainment, and adorning the body; the ninth and tenth precepts are to refrain from using luxurious or high seats or beds and to refrain from handling money, respectively.

¹⁷ *Mae chis* are not mentioned in the *Tipiṭaka*, but the canonical literature makes reference to householders (*gihī*) and lay devotees (*upāsakas*, *upāsikās*) who wear white. The moral practices and precepts observed by these white-clad individuals are unclear. See

exact origins of *mae chis* remain unclear, although historical data indicates that they have existed in Thailand for at least several hundred years.¹⁸ While *mae chis'* beginnings are “wrapped in mists” (to borrow I.B. Horner’s phrase describing the hazy beginnings of the Buddhist monastic order of almswomen), so *mae chis'* present-day status is fraught with ambiguity.¹⁹ *Mae chis* exist in a categorically nebulous and liminal space between laywomen and female monks. *Mae chis* follow a form of Buddhist monastic life without formal ordination and, while they typically observe eight or ten precepts, they do not observe the 311 rules of the *bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* found in the Pāli *Tipitaka*. *Mae chis* adopt renunciant dress and lifestyle; however, they do not enjoy fully sanctioned and canonical status. Given these considerations, and for accuracy and clarity vis-à-vis *mae chi* and *bhikkhunī* status, I have chosen to consistently refer to *mae chis* as “female renunciates.”²⁰

While monks are highly visible in Thailand—indeed, it is typical to see monks in the morning on their daily alms round, walking in the marketplace, or leading a public “*Dhamma talk*” on the grounds of the

Salgado 943. For further analysis of categories of female Buddhist renunciation in Southeast Asia, see Collins and McDaniel.

¹⁸ For further historical data regarding *mae chis*, see Kabil Singh *Thai Women* 36, Kabil Singh “The Role of Women” 229, and Muecke 224.

¹⁹ See Horner 102.

²⁰ For the purpose of this paper, I have deliberately chosen to employ the term “nun” only in reference to *bhikkhunis*. Given their unofficial and non-canonical status, it is problematic, as well as misleading, to use the terms “nun” and “*mae chi*” interchangeably. Even in its parental Western Christian context, the term “nun” comes loaded with overtones of fully sanctioned and canonical status, as does the term “*bhikkhuni*” in a Buddhist context. For an explication of both emic-Buddhist and etic-interpretive vocabularies that have been used to describe Buddhist “nuns,” see Collins and McDaniel.

local temple—*mae chis*, on the whole, maintain a much lower profile.²¹ Locating *mae chis* in the Thai social and religious landscape is further obscured by their indeterminate status between the lay and religious realms. The virtual invisibility of *mae chis* in contemporary Thailand is palpable. In large part, their marginalized existence is due to the fact that many *mae chis* receive little, if any, familial, social, or institutional support for pursuing the monastic path. Recent data, however, suggests an improved situation for *mae chis*, including increased access to education and increased recognition as worthy religious persons (or “fields of merit”) by monks and laity (see Seeger “Changing”). In contrast, it has long been the ideal in Thailand that every boy should be ordained as a novice on a temporary basis.²² Thai women do not share the cultural expectation or obligation to ordain; nor do they share the expedient institutional or cultural support to do so. Typically, when a man expresses the wish to ordain, he receives public support and encouragement; the same cannot be said for women (Pipat).

The fact that *mae chis* are not technically part of the *Saṅgha* is visually reiterated by their appearance: *mae chis* don white robes rather than the traditional orange robes worn by *bhikkhunīs* and *bhikkhus* of the Theravada tradition. This separation is further reiterated by nomenclature. The female renunciates are not designated with the comparable Pāli female title to a *bhikkhu*; rather, the epithet of “*mae chi*” is Thai for

²¹ This does not account, however, for exceptional *mae chis* that are renowned for their accomplishments in meditation, the teaching of Pāli, *Dhamma* studies, or even clairvoyance. Likewise, popular *mae chis* such as Mae Chi Sansanee of Sathira-Dhammasathan in Bangkok have been the subjects of much media attention for their social and psychological work. See McDaniel and Collins 1384-1400.

²² Entering the monkhood for a short period of time represents a male initiation rite in Thai society (see Keyes). It appears, however, that this trend is shifting with modernization and urbanization.

“mother ascetic” or “female ascetic.”²³ Additionally, while monks receive a Pāli *dhamma* name upon ordination, *mae chis* typically keep their lay names after ordination.

The majority of *mae chis* reside in mixed-gender temples with monks; they do so with the permission of the abbot and often occupy peripheral spaces in the monk-dominated temple compound. However, since the *mae chi* institution is not technically part of the *Saṅgha*, the white-robed renunciates can form their own communities separate from temples and the *Saṅgha*’s administration. While independent all-female renunciant communities have been on the rise in recent decades in Thailand, these “nunneries” are often built on private land owned by *mae chis* or their families (Falk “Making Fields of Merit” 28). Most single-sex *mae chi* “nunneries” belong to temples and thus fall under the jurisdiction of a *bhikkhu Saṅgha*. Though *mae chis* are not technically part of the *Saṅgha*, they are not wholly independent from it either.

On an institutional level, the ministries of the Thai government disagree over the status of *mae chis*. The Department of Religious Affairs classifies *mae chis* as laywomen; thus, they do not receive government subsidized medical care or education (as do monks). Moreover, they are excluded from census data and absent from official records. Thus, obtaining accurate statistical information regarding the *mae chi* population is problematic. Recent estimates range from nine thousand to more than twenty thousand *mae chis* in Thailand (Upamai). The Ministry of Communications also considers *mae chis* to be laywomen; thus, *mae chis* do not reap the travel and transportation benefits allotted to *bhikkhus* and male novices. However, the Ministry of the Interior groups *mae chis* un-

²³ The ambiguous identity of *mae chis* as a group is apparent in the contested etymology and literal meaning of the term as it relates to female Buddhists. See Kabil Singh *Thai Women* 36-37.

der the category of “skilled ordinands,” and thus they are prohibited from voting and political activity. *Mae chi* status is vague and contradictory. Though *mae chis* look like ordained women, in reality they are not officially nuns in the same sense as *bhikkhunīs*. *Bhikkhunī* and *mae chi* are two categories of Buddhist female asceticism, one reaching back to the Buddha’s time, the latter a Thai creation.

Until recently, there has been virtual silence about *mae chis*, their lives, and their roles in Thai Buddhism.²⁴ Academic accounts of *mae chis* approach the subject from two general, and often overlapping, directions: studies highlight the “betwixt and between” status of the white-robed Buddhists, or studies emphasize the subordinate and unsatisfactory position of *mae chis* in Thai society. Beyond liminality and insecurity, the *mae chi* institution is shrouded in terms of marginalization and oppression:

Mae jis’ lack of self-esteem, coupled with negative social attitudes, have resulted in their extremely low status. Marginalized, undereducated, and economically unsupported, mae jis are alienated in Thai society, garnering little support even from working women who feel that mae jis do not adequately represent their voice in Buddhism. At best, the majority of Thai people prefer to ignore them.

(Kabilsingh *Thai Women* 39)

Prevailing stereotypes of *mae chis* include abandoned women, elderly women with no place else to go, or women who have failed at love. By and large, with the exception of some remarkable individuals, *mae chis* as a category “are not particularly admired or respected” (Van Esterik

²⁴ Pivotal ethnographies on *mae chi* identity include Brown, Falk *Making Fields of Merit*, and Battaglia.

“Laywomen” 74). Fundamentally, the *mae chi* institution is deemed “a poor substitute” for the *bhikkhuni* ideal (Tomalin 386).

With the rise of the movement for *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand, one is compelled (albeit tenuously) to conclude that *mae chis* desire—or more aptly, *should* desire—to become *bhikkhunīs*. Any viewpoint that diverges from this formula tends to be explained away in one of three mutually reinforcing ways: (1) *mae chis'* reluctance to seek *bhikkhuni* status is seen as an unfortunate effect of women's socialization; (2) *mae chis'* contentment with their present situation is regarded as mere complacency and/or the internalization of patriarchal norms; and (3) *mae chis'* lack of impetus to fight for higher status (which is uncritically equated with *bhikkhuni* status) is cast in terms of an uninformed or veiled perspective—in other words, they do not know what is in their own best interest.

Through these discourses, *mae chis* become objects of our attention, concern and sympathy; however, such formulations are exceedingly problematic, particularly as *mae chis'* agency and subjectivity are lost or muted. While *mae chis* surely have to contend with inferior treatment, non-egalitarian circumstances, negative stereotypes, and discrimination in some contexts, this does not mean that they *are* inferior or experience themselves as fundamentally oppressed. Academic and popular discourses on religious women in Thailand paint a rather bleak picture of *mae chi* status and, implicitly or explicitly, uphold the *bhikkhuni* movement as a beacon of light in an otherwise dismal landscape. Yet, actual interviews with *mae chis* reveal a more varied and complex terrain than is often depicted. Indeed, as the following ethnographic data reveals, *mae chis* may not interpret their present situation and religious status in the terms of subordination and alienation imposed on them.

Navigating Contested Terrain: The Perspectives of *Mae Chis* on the *Bhikkhuni* Movement

The following arguments and perspectives are based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Thailand (particularly in Chiang Mai and the surrounding region) in 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2009, as well as data I collected at the 9th Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2006, the 11th Sakyadhita Conference in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in 2010, and the 12th Sakyadhita Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2011.²⁵ Many cultural domains and methodological tools inform this study: fieldwork-based ethnography (my own and that of others), Buddhist textual sources, cultural analysis, and cross-cultural, postcolonial feminist theory. This comparative approach provides a rich and multidimensional account of the struggles, goals, and motivations of renunciant women in a contemporary Theravāda Buddhist context.²⁶

As the following analysis of *mae chis*' testimonies reveal, Thai Buddhist women who would seemingly welcome the idea of a *bhikkhuni Saṅgha*—namely, *mae chis* who already live a monastic lifestyle dedicated to the *Dhamma*—do not, on the whole, exhibit the aspiration to become

²⁵ I gathered information primarily through interviews, both structured and unstructured, personal correspondences, and participant-observation. The *mae chis* I interviewed comprised a wide array of occupations, with concomitant variations in status, prior to donning their white robes. These included a former beauty queen, a lawyer, an economist, a banker, an electrical engineer, a doctor, and a mother, among others. Ages spanned from the mid-twenties to seventy-three. Further, the tenure of monasticism ranged from a *mae chi* that had been ordained for less than a year, to one who had been a *mae chi* for almost fifty years.

²⁶ I do not claim or aspire to present a definitive or universal truth about *mae chis*. Rather, I consider my work to be one possible interpretation of the lives, experiences, and practices of female Buddhist renunciates in Thailand at a particularly germane time in Buddhist women's history.

bhikkhunīs and are not eager participants in the *bhikkhunī* movement. *Bhikkhunī* ordination is at once an issue in the forefront—stirring controversy and attracting global attention—as well as an issue in the shadows—institutionally marginalized by the Thai *Saṅgha* and, more significantly, not demanding the participation of Thai religious women at large.²⁷ *Mae chis'* views on *bhikkhunī* ordination reveal that many of the white-robed renunciates do not express interest in, or have the means or desire to push for, the establishment of the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Thailand. Moreover, the self-understandings and subjectivities of *mae chis* appear to be at odds with liberal feminist interpretations of, and discourses about, gender hierarchy and women's oppression. One of my initial interviews with a *mae chi* on the subject of the *bhikkhunī* movement and her own religious aspirations yielded the following response:

I don't agree why we have to fight for *bhikkhunī*. . . . [There is] no need to get that high. No need that we have to compete with the monk. Women still give respect to [the] monk. They are superior. It is nature that masculine is more superior to feminine. This is nature. Why [do] we have to strive to make a big fuss of it? We do our own beauty.²⁸

As suggested in this *mae chi*'s testimony, interpretations of and attitudes toward *bhikkhunī* ordination center on three overarching themes: resistance to the notion of 'fighting' for rights, acceptance of hierarchy as

²⁷ Recent studies concur with my findings and indicate that *mae chis* are not particularly compelled to pursue *bhikkhunī* ordination. The majority of *mae chis* Falk interviewed did not aspire to become *bhikkhunīs* and reported that they would rather develop themselves spiritually as *mae chis* (see Falk "Making Fields of Merit" 92, 258). Hiroko Kawanami's research on the position of Burmese Buddhist nuns (*thilashin*) on *bhikkhunī* ordination reports a similar trend (see Kawanami).

²⁸ Interview by author. July 30, 2003. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

a natural part of life, and the desire for *mae chis* to be recognized as religious women in their own right. During the course of my fieldwork, corollary concerns also surfaced, including: critique of proper motivation, the perception that social standing is irrelevant to spiritual pursuit, and skepticism about lineage purity.

Among the *mae chis* I interviewed, many expressed the view that “fighting” for *bhikkhuni* status is a largely undesirable approach. As one *mae chi* asserted,

[To be a] female monk is good also, but to fight to be a female monk—not for me; because Buddha teaches people to recognize their duty instead of asking for their right. If you are good at your duty, people around you respect you.²⁹

For many *mae chis*, “rights” language conflicts with the religiously sanctioned and culturally appropriate language of duty. Yet, it is not difficult to expose the double standard with respect to women’s ordination. As one critic of conservative, traditionalist Thai Buddhism rejoined: “This is not about rights. It is about justice. Why, when a woman wants to be ordained, does it mean she is demanding more rights, but when a man wants to be ordained, he is seen as doing his duty?” (Achakulwisut).

Within the Thai Buddhist monastic framework, the language of individual rights is a rather alien and inappropriate discourse. Thai Buddhist culture lacks a long-established tradition of individual rights. This is not to suggest that you cannot defend the idea of human rights on Buddhist grounds or with Buddhist sources.³⁰ In fact, many supporters of

²⁹ Interview by author, June 1, 2006, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

³⁰ Damien Keown and others have demonstrated this. See, for example, Keown, Prebish, and Husted; Tsomo *Buddhist Women and Social Justice*.

the *bhikkhunī* ordination movement invoke both “human rights” and “justice” and make their case on Buddhist grounds. However, viewing the ordination debate through the lens of “individual rights” does not resonate with the allegiances, concerns, or self-understandings of many Thai religious women. The self-identity of *mae chis* is largely defined in terms of the Thai culture and Buddhist tradition to which they adhere. As Lucinda Joy Peach critiques, to impose “individual rights” language on Thai religious women “fails to accord due respect to women’s acceptance of their religious tradition’s gender role prescriptions, and attributes to religious women a kind of false consciousness” (72). Peach further elucidates how human rights language fails to recognize Thai women’s own sense of self-identity and moral agency:

Buddhist cultural constructions of identity, especially female identity, contrast sharply with the conception of persons as individuals who have “rights”—that is, valid claims which they are entitled to assert against all others and for which they receive government protection—the premise of human rights laws. Because Buddhist women in Thailand (as well as elsewhere) are viewed as—and are socialized to be—embedded in social relations of family, kin, and community, rather than as self-determining, independent individuals, it is unreasonable to expect that they will think of themselves as possessing “human rights,” much less have the personal and social resources to assert them. (72)

In a Buddhist cultural context devoid of a tradition of individual rights—and devoid of a tradition of a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*—the idea of “choosing” between remaining a *mae chi* or fighting for *bhikkhunī* status may be inappropriate and even unintelligible. Moreover, adopting “rights” lan-

guage might further deter support from the *bhikkhu Saṅgha*, a very real concern for many *mae chis*.³¹

The absence of a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Thai history arguably affects women's imagination and sense of possibility. Chatsumarn Kabil Singh highlights the consequences of this lacuna on the female psyche:

Buddhist women in general do not even dream of becoming *bhikkhunis*, since it is beyond their power of imagination to envision a *bhikkhuni Sangha*. At least this is true in Thai society. When women have never had any role in the *Sangha* for the over seven hundred years that Thailand has been a nation, how is it possible for them to think otherwise? ("The Problem of Ordination" 163)

When I interviewed *mae chis* about what changes would need to occur in order to successfully establish the *bhikkhunī* Order in Thailand, one *mae chi* replied: "The last *bhikkhunī* is finished. It is impossible. There is not an original one of Thai."³² Another *mae chi* rejoined, "Very difficult to reinstate the Order. We never had one from the days of Buddhism. Thais have never known a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*."³³

For many conservatives and legalists, the issue of reviving the women's Order boils down to a singular verse in the *Vinaya*, namely the Buddha's instruction that a woman should seek *upasampadā* (full ordination) from a dual *Saṅgha*, that is, from both the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* and the

³¹ As one monk cautioned, "[I]f the *bhikkhunī* movement remains immersed in the rights-oriented western mind-set, it will alienate monks, some of whom have already shown animosity and a refusal to cooperate" (Achakulwisut). It is also worth noting here that according to the *Saṅgha Act of 1928*, Thai law forbids monks to participate in ordaining women, an issue addressed earlier.

³² Interview by author. June 9, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

³³ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

bhikkhu Saṅgha.³⁴ This requirement for dual-*Saṅgha* ordination is integral to the Theravāda tradition's conception of the *bhikkhunī*; indeed, the Pāli *Vinaya* is "scrupulously consistent in restricting the use of the word '*bhikkhuni*' to those who have fulfilled the dual-*Saṅgha* ordination" (Bodhi "The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination" 105-106). It is noteworthy that *mae chis'* responses to the *bhikkhunī* issue mirror those of "conservative Vinaya legalists" (to borrow Bhikkhu Bodhi's phrase): "It is impossible."³⁵

Yet, *mae chis'* perceptions of *bhikkhunī* ordination must not be understood solely or unequivocally in terms of lack of tradition or lack of cultural imagination. Far from lacking imagination, the *mae chis* I interviewed did not particularly aspire to become *bhikkhunīs* for a myriad of complex and intersecting reasons. As these renunciant women negotiate the demands of traditional and modern modes of authority, their views on the *bhikkhunī* ordination issue signify the adoption of a legalist, conservative position. Recalling Peach's commentary on "women's acceptance of their religious tradition's gender role prescriptions," we must be ever wary not to ascribe to *mae chis* a "kind of false consciousness" (Peach "Human Rights" 72). As self-identified Theravāda Buddhists and practitioners on the renunciant path, *mae chis'* seeming acceptance and pronouncement of views and arguments similar to those espoused by Theravādin traditionalists bespeak continuity of religious identity and faithful adherence to tradition. Nonetheless, the prospect that *mae chis* ascribe to the views and objections of "conservative Vinaya legalists" throws an interesting wrench into the global *bhikkhunī* movement.

³⁴ Vin II: 255, cited in Bodhi.

³⁵ As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, "The main legal objection that conservative Vinaya legalists raise against a revival of bhikkhunī ordination is that it must be given by an existing bhikkhunī saṅgha, and to be a purely Theravāda ordination it must come from an existing Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha" (Bodhi 104).

Just as framing the ordination debate in “rights” language was implicitly deemed a foreign imposition, so *mae chis* questioned the motivations of female aspirants for pursuing *bhikkhuni* ordination. Consider the following *mae chi*’s critique of proper motivation vis-à-vis *bhikkhuni* ordination:

To want to get *bhikkhuni* ordination for equality is not the proper reason. The only reason is because the Buddha said it is a very good way to attain enlightenment. Proper motivation means to come out of the cycle of *samsara*. If you do not have this motivation, you will not inwardly attain the vow.³⁶

Regarding Ven. Dhammananda, a leading proponent of the *bhikkhuni* movement in Thailand, one *mae chi* expressed the view, “Her organization was politically motivated not spiritually motivated. The reason she wants *bhikkhuni* ordination is for women’s rights.”³⁷ The motive of fighting for equality was deemed not only improper, but also antithetical to realizing the spiritual fruits of the monastic life.³⁸ Echoing the sentiment that fighting for *bhikkhuni* ordination is a radical and unorthodox gesture, one *mae chi* explained, “some women are liberal and wanting to be *bhikkhuni*.”³⁹

It would be grossly reductionist and misleading to portray the issue of introducing full *bhikkhuni* ordination into Thai Buddhism as a

³⁶ Interview by author. June 20, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁷ Interview by author. May 31, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

³⁸ As Falk also discovered in her ethnographic research, *mae chis* who expressed interest in seeking higher ordination as *bhikkhuni* were “commonly accused of egotism and seen as greedy for status, an undesirable condition considered a sign of spiritual weakness” (“Making Fields of Merit” 6).

³⁹ Interview by author. June 19, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

struggle between traditional Buddhism and a secular western feminist agenda. However, it must be noted that attempts made by Thai Buddhist women to change Buddhist practices surrounding gender are often seen as an attempt to “Westernize” the religion. In Thailand, feminism and demands for women’s human rights are typically regarded as egotistical and aggressive, and are consequently viewed with suspicion (Ito 122-123). Indeed, the *bhikkhuni* movement has been critiqued as a “Western feminist imposition” (Tomalin 393).⁴⁰

As expressed by many *mae chis*, fighting for and demanding status as *bhikkhunis* contradicts Buddhist principles and signals attachment to worldly concerns. However, in an interesting interpretive maneuver, the explicitly Buddhist motivation and basis for introducing the *bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in Thailand is neglected. In other words, proponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination who argue their case on Buddhist grounds are conspicuously absent from these “Western feminist imposition” discourses.⁴¹ There is growing consensus that change will need to be administered from the top down for the *bhikkhuni Saṅgha* to be fully realized and legitimized in Thailand. As one *mae chi* commented on the issue, “If there is a will, there is a way. They (Theravāda Thai *bhikkhus*) do not have a will to ordain *bhikkhuni*.⁴²

⁴⁰ As Tomalin observes, “[I]n Thai society generally, there is a perception that the practice of women wearing the orange robes is an attempt to make ‘women like men’ and hence the *bhikkhuni* movement can fall foul of the critique that it is a ‘Western feminist imposition’” (393).

⁴¹ Briefly, these arguments include: references to the fourfold assembly prescribed by the Buddha; the example of the Buddha’s ordination of women; establishing an unbroken Theravāda *bhikkhuni* lineage; and engaging in critical analysis of the *Vinaya*, particularly rules pertaining to women’s ordination and ordination procedure.

⁴² Interview by author. June 20, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Another overarching theme that emerged from *mae chis'* responses to the question of *bhikkhunī* ordination entailed the acceptance of hierarchy as a natural part of life. With respect to women's status, gender relationships in Thailand are commonly accepted as being hierarchical in nature. As one *mae chi* indicated, "We don't have to get equal role to monks but we can learn to live like the monks."⁴³ Society in Thailand is understood in terms of relationships of relative inferiority and superiority (Mulder 85). Individuals are seen as lower or higher, younger or older, weaker or stronger, subordinate or superior, junior or senior, poorer or richer, and rarely equal, in relation to one another (Podhisita 39). Within this hierarchical framework, people are "mutually unequal" and have different roles, duties, and obligations to which they are ethically bound. Those who do not know or accept their role threaten the well-ordered hierarchy, or "good society," and eschew their ethical duty to their respective social position; consequently, they are deemed immoral (Mulder 131). In accordance with this hierarchical worldview, one *mae chi* described women and men as spiritual but not social equals. She based her view on nature, explaining, "Nothing is equal in nature. Look at nature—it is balance. There is unity in balance." Using her hand as a model, she further illustrated the notion of difference but balance: "Fingers are not the same—one long, one short, but in harmony, like man and woman."⁴⁴

In Bhikkhu Thanissaro's view, the relegation of female renunciates to a secondary status vis-à-vis monks is alleviated to some extent by Buddhist teachings on hierarchy: namely, "it is a mere social convention, designed to streamline the decision-making process in the community, and based on morally neutral criteria so that one's place in the hierarchy

⁴³ Interview by author. Chiang Mai, Thailand. July 30, 2003.

⁴⁴ Interview by author. June 5, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

is not an indication of one's worth as a person" (4). Thus, a privileged or subordinate position within the social hierarchy does not bear on one's ontological worth or soteriological potential. Consider, for example, women's testimonies of liberation in the *Therīgāthā*, the enlightenment poetry of early Buddhist nuns.⁴⁵ Many *mae chis* share the view that one's place in the social hierarchy is not an indication of one's potential or capability for enlightenment.

Yet, from a grass-roots perspective, hierarchy is a double-edged sword. On one hand, *mae chis* indicate that hierarchy is not necessarily regarded as an impediment to spiritual progress. On the other hand, while in theory hierarchy functions only on the mundane level of social convention, it can have very real and deleterious effects on the livelihood of renunciant women. In particular, hierarchy is at times appropriated by monks to defend male superiority or internalized by Buddhist women as indicative of women's lower merit. The popular Thai belief that being born a woman is itself the result of previous bad *kamma* is often used to explain and justify the hierarchy of male over female. Moreover, women's exclusion from the official *Saṅgha* is often regarded as 'evidence' of their spiritual inferiority (Peach 71).

Recall the claim of the *mae chi*, "It is nature that masculine is more superior to feminine." Another nun related that she was happy being a *mae chi* and did not want to be a *bhikkhunī*. However, when asked

⁴⁵ The *Therīgāthā*, or "Verses of the Women Elders," were passed on orally for six centuries before being committed to writing in the first century BCE. Part of the *Tipiṭaka*, this collection of seventy-three poems depicts nuns' enlightenment experiences. As Murcott suggests, "The model that the nuns of the *Therīgāthā* provide is one where women have the capacity to realize and understand the highest religious goals of their faith in the same roles and to the same degrees as men" (10).

whether she would want to be a woman or a man in a future rebirth, she replied, “Man.”⁴⁶ Further, consider the following *mae chi*’s testimony:

I accept some limited capability of woman. I sometimes think I want to be a man. I am really not [a] liberated woman but I don’t like to be humiliated or looked down on. I like the Middle Way. I think men and women can share. We have equal rights but in a submissive way. But as a woman give respect to man. I don’t want to be aggressive and fight for woman’s rights, but want the men not to look down on me as a human being. No differentiation of male and female. I would like to be accepted as a human being. No human being is perfect.⁴⁷

Perhaps one need not read these sentiments in terms of eternal, fixed natures but rather as a statement about fixed natures during the current lifetime. In Buddhist cosmology, beings take on different forms in different lifetimes; thus, identity as male or female is not fixed for eternity. Women and men have the possibility of experiencing existence as male or female every rebirth (Van Esterik *Materializing Thailand* 73). Intensely identifying oneself with one particular gender or another is, as Karma Lekshe Tsomo notes, “ultimately just another example of ego exerting its territoriality” (*Sakyadhītā* 23). In response to the popular belief that a woman needs to be reborn a man to attain enlightenment, or the corollary sentiment that a woman has a lower birth than a man, one *mae chi* challenged: “No. That is a point of view. We (women and men) are not different, so many past lives.” She then emphasized that women have particular sufferings and strengths: “menstruation, giving birth, have to use surname from husband; even though women have their own abilities

⁴⁶ Interview by author. June 17, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴⁷ Interview by author. July 30, 2003. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

and power. Buddha allowed women to be nun.” Later, she added, “Women and men are spiritually equal. But physical difference, power difference.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, the Buddhist teaching that women and men are soteriologically equal—implicit in the Buddha’s acceptance of women into the *Sangha* and explicit in his explanation of women’s spiritual capacities—coupled with the Buddhist belief in rebirth and the underlying doctrine of *anattā* (no-abiding-self), confirmed for this *mae chi* that gender is relevant conventionally but not ultimately.

A related theme that surfaced when gathering data on the subject of *mae chis*’ attitudes toward *bhikkhuni* ordination entailed the perception that social standing is irrelevant in the spiritual quest. The common opinion was that the possibility of achieving the highest goals of Buddhism does not rest on one’s status as a *bhikkhuni* versus a *mae chi*.⁴⁹ One *mae chi* expressed the view, “You can study and practice the *Dhamma* as a white-robed nun, and if you are dedicated to your practice, you can achieve the same results. There is no need to become *bhikkhuni*.”⁵⁰ Another *mae chi* declared, “I am happy to be a nun (*mae chi*). If I am a *bhikkhuni*, I am happy to be a *bhikkhuni*. Whatever you are just do your best.”⁵¹ This sentiment again found expression: “To be female monk is not important. What is important is training the self, first, and guiding others after. If you have lay life, follow and know *dhamma*. You can teach laity better than monk or nun who does not know. It’s not what you are but what you can do.”⁵² These viewpoints reflect the Buddha’s emphasis

⁴⁸ Interview by author. June 5, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

⁴⁹ Similar to the opinions expressed by Thai *mae chis*, Bartholomeusz finds that the majority of Sinhala lay nuns she interviewed would not choose to become *bhikkhuni* even if it were possible (11).

⁵⁰ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

⁵¹ Interview by author. June 1, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

⁵² Interview by author. June 5, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

on *kamma*—action—as determining who you are. The opinion that one's status is irrelevant on the spiritual path is also widely heralded by opponents of women's ordination who argue that it is not necessary for women to become *bhikkhunī* because they can attain the fruits of Buddhism as *upāsikās* (laywomen).⁵³

Many *mae chis* expressed the opinion that instead of pushing for *bhikkhunī* status, they wanted to be recognized as *mae chis*, as women who have gone forth in their own right. A *mae chi* confided, “For me, I don't want to be a *bhikkhunī*. I perform according to the *Vinaya* eight precepts. We can be our own, in a certain way.” She continued, “We are satisfied the way we are. No need to strive for *bhikkhunī*.”⁵⁴ Another *mae chi* shared, “*Mae chis* are certain in their own roles but support *bhikkhunī*. But asking if they want to change to *bhikkhunī*? That depends on the individual.” She then espoused the “neutral path” of *mae chis* on the issue: “we are not against it, but not a strong desire either.”⁵⁵ This sentiment was echoed by another white-robed renunciate: “*Mae chi* don't see a need for a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*.”⁵⁶

The apparent skepticism *mae chis* exhibit toward *bhikkhunī* ordination is further compounded by the apparent freedom and power *mae chis* garner from their “betwixt and between” status—freedom and power many *mae chis* are reluctant to relinquish. Many *mae chis* voiced con-

⁵³ Two examples suffice to illustrate. On the *bhikkhunī* ordination issue, one monk rejoins, “Everyone is equal in practicing *dhamma*. Forms are not necessary. What matters is the mind . . . That's all that counts. Who needs to be ordained?” (Ekachai “What Has Become of Goodwill?”). Another monk reiterates that ordination is not necessary for women to lead a spiritual life: “The robe is only a uniform. Women can practise (sic) as well without the robes of *Bhikkhuni*” (Ekachai *Keeping the Faith* 77).

⁵⁴ Interview by author. July 30, 2003. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

⁵⁵ Interview by author. June 21, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁵⁶ Interview by author. May 31, 2006. Chiang Mai, Thailand.

cern that becoming a *bhikkhunī* would limit the roles and activities in which *mae chis* currently engage, such as overseeing nursery schools and sheltering at-risk women and children. As one *mae chi* explained, “Nuns (*mae chis*) are already ordained as *mae chi*. They don’t feel it is necessary and it is too difficult. Social work, social service, handling money, traveling, they (*mae chis*) do this now; they couldn’t do this as *bhikkhunī*.⁵⁷ Another *mae chi* contrasted the severely restricted life of a *bhikkhunī* with the relative freedom of movement and action as a *mae chi*: “(By becoming *bhikkhunī*) we would have to give up the social work we are doing as a white-robed nun. In this lifestyle (as *mae chi*), there is greater freedom in their practice.”⁵⁸ A well-respected female renunciate who does not particularly advocate that extant Buddhist renunciates pursue *bhikkhunī* vows felt passionate that *mae chis* should simply have more access to teachings and practice opportunities, and that they should be afforded the due respect that would come from a healthy Buddhist society.⁵⁹

Lastly, lineage purity also emerged as a complex and somewhat paradoxical concern. One *mae chi* explained the Thai reluctance to accept newly ordained *bhikkhunīs*: “*Bhikkhunī* today come from Sri Lanka. They are a mixture of the Mahāyāna line. Thais don’t see it as a pure form (of Theravāda Buddhism). Thais won’t encourage it.”⁶⁰ Another *mae chi* described the problem inherent in mixing traditions for *bhikkhunī* ordination:

If you see a Mahāyāna monk or novice, you respond with that in mind. If you see a Theravāda monk or novice, you respond with that in mind. If a (white-robed) nun (*mae*

⁵⁷ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

⁵⁸ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

⁵⁹ Interview by author. June 20, 2006. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁶⁰ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

chi) is serious and determined in her practice and wins the respect of the people, the people will respect her. Mixing Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions: people don't know how to respond. For example, Chatsumarn Kabil Singh: they don't know where to or how to respond. They see it as a confusion of practices, not a clear practice.⁶¹

The reaction of *mae chis* toward women who have secured *bhikkhunī* ordination by circumventing the dual-ordination rule—that is, by pursuing ordination outside Thailand or by turning toward Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs*—reveals the importance of lineage purity in the Theravāda mindset. As recent scholarship suggests, it also reveals a misunderstanding of the ordination issue from a legal Vinaya point of view.⁶² (It must be noted that there has never been a distinctively “Mahāyāna” ordination lineage. All ordination lineages derive from pre- and non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, even when they are found in forms of Buddhism that are doctrinally Mahāyāna.)⁶³ Paradoxically, while *mae chis* resist reviving the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* through perceived Mahāyāna lines, the *mae chi* institution itself does not carry proper ordination lineage and cannot be traced back to the foundational texts of Theravāda Buddhism, the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*. The argument that the Buddha himself ordained *bhikkhunīs*, a lineage that *mae chis* cannot claim, does not seem to permeate *mae chis’* sense of the validity and integrity of the *mae chi* category.

Pioneering Thai *bhikkhunīs* such as Ven. Dhammananda who receive *upasampadā* ordination in Sri Lanka, are, for the most part not considered “pure” Theravāda and are not officially accepted by the Thai

⁶¹ Interview by author. June 7, 2006. Lamphun, Thailand.

⁶² See Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Legality of *Bhikkhunī* Ordination.”

⁶³ See Bhikkhu Sujato’s book, *Sects & Sectarianism: The Origins of Buddhist Schools* at <https://sites.google.com/site/sectsandsectarianism/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

Saṅgha.⁶⁴ This resistance largely stems from the misconception that the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* who are orchestrating the Thai ordinations received *upasampadā* ordination themselves from Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs*, and thus were initiated into Mahāyāna Buddhism. Opponents fear that the mixing of different traditions and nationalities will taint the purity of the Theravāda tradition and promote the “Mahāyānization” of Theravāda Buddhism (Shizuka 189). Although not overt opponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination by any means, *mae chis* share this concern about lineage purity.⁶⁵ Indeed, the white-robed renunciates consider the *mae chi* institution to be “pure” Theravāda.

Mae Chis: Women Who Have Gone Forth

“Going forth” from home to homelessness is a central theme in Buddhist scriptures and one that applies to Thai female renunciates who pursue the monastic life. *Mae chis* are not represented in the Pāli canonical scriptures, their institution was not instated by the Buddha, and officially they fall outside of the Buddhist establishment.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, they go forth anyway.

⁶⁴ The new generation of Thai *sāmanerīs* and *bhikkhunīs* seeking ordination outside of the Thai *Saṅgha* have attracted unwanted attention and been subjected to harassment and police questioning. See Tomalin 393.

⁶⁵ The Burmese nuns (*thilashin*) in Kawanami’s study also share this wariness about “Mahāyāna” influence on their religious practice (Kawanami 238).

⁶⁶ It must be noted here that the observance of eight precepts by lay people, especially on Uposatha days, is an ancient and contemporary practice. See, for example, Bhikkhu Khantipalo *Lay Buddhist Practice: The Shrine Room, Uposatha Day, Rains Residence* found at: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/khantipalo/wheel206.html> (accessed January 4, 2015).

From a feminist perspective, *mae chis* appear to be doing anything but going forward: their actions and perspectives do not emerge as progressive from a secular western feminist standpoint, and *mae chis* are not concerned with filling this quota. Moreover, *mae chis'* ambivalence toward *bhikkhunī* ordination poses a nuanced challenge to the underlying aims, agendas, and discourses of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* movement and global Buddhist-feminist networks in support of women's full ordination in Buddhist traditions. While many *mae chis* show reverence toward the *bhikkhunis* of ancient times, most *mae chis* do not express the desire to pursue higher ordination or to introduce the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Thailand. In large part, this stance reflects adherence to Buddhist teachings and Thai cultural values, allegiance to the *mae chi* institution, an underlying contentment and satisfaction with *mae chis'* current role and status, and an implied skepticism that the *bhikkhunī* role is viable or necessarily carries more social or spiritual efficacy.

The meeting of Buddhist and feminist perspectives across cultural, spatial, and disciplinary borders proves to be fertile ground for innovation and mutual enrichment even as they bring each other into crisis.⁶⁷ For many Thai women, feminism emerges as intrinsically and extrinsically foreign, western in its orientation, and inappropriate for analyzing the position and condition of Thai women (Van Esterik *Materializing Thailand* 58). It appears that many *mae chis* fall into this category.

In this study, I have aimed to create a discursive space that allows indigenous claims to stand while making room for critical reflection and analysis. A consideration of Buddhist teachings, the monastic vocation, and Thai conceptions of gender identity, self, and society emerges as vital to an accurate and well-balanced analysis of the position of *mae chis*

⁶⁷ See Tsomo's discussion of "Buddhist Feminist Strategies" in *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* 296-297.

in Thailand. Though they are marginalized and under-supported on an institutional level, such oppressive constraints do not necessarily translate into a personal view of victimization or oppression. Despite their lack of recognition in the *Saṅgha* and their indeterminate status in Thai governmental ministries, *mae chis* are certain and steadfast in their roles as Buddhist monastic women dedicated to the religious life.

Considering the role of the pious laywoman and the emergence of eight- and ten-precept female renunciates in Theravāda countries, Bernard Faure observes that the case of the “vanishing nun” (alluding to Nancy Auer Falk’s seminal article) might reflect a shift in female religiosity “rather than a total eclipse of women” (Faure 24-25). The emergence of *mae chis* in Thai Buddhist history and the flourishing of alternative female religious roles in contemporary Buddhist movements need not *only* be read as filling a niche due to the absence of a readily available and fully-fledged *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*; these alternative forms of female renunciation can also be read as representing a need felt among Thai Buddhist women to expand and diversify their modes of religiosity beyond the *bhikkhunī* ideal set forth in early Indian Buddhism.

The socio-religious context of Thai Buddhism is rapidly changing. The emerging co-existence of white-robed *mae chis* and saffron-clad *bhikkhunīs* reveals that Thai Buddhist women “are by no means unanimous or united” concerning the question of *bhikkhunī* ordination and women’s rightful or dutiful place in Thai Buddhism (Seeger “Bhikkhunī” 175). While numbers seem to be growing, only a minority of Thai religious women are joining the *bhikkhunī* movement and pursuing the controversial saffron robes themselves. Clearly, there is a strange confluence of interests that keeps ordination of women at bay in Thai society. On the whole, *mae chis* do not exhibit the desire to pursue *bhikkhunī* ordination or to challenge existing social, religious, or gender structures. *Mae chis’* apparent preference to practice female Buddhist religiosity in

ways that are more commonly recognized and accepted in Thai society does not suggest an overt conflict with Thai *bhikkhunīs* or Buddhist-feminist organizations or supporters. To the contrary, the 12th Sakyadhi-ta Conference in Bangkok, Thailand (June 2011) was held at Sathira-Dhammasathan, a *mae chi* Buddhist community founded by Mae Chi Sansanee, and both *mae chis* and Thai *bhikkhunīs* were in harmonious attendance. Nonetheless, *mae chis'* illiberal and conservative views regarding gender identity and socio-religious roles in Thai Buddhism challenge, albeit obliquely, the aims and achievements of the contemporary *bhikkhuni* movement and basic underlying assumptions about global feminist vision and action. As the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement gains more recognition both locally and globally, it remains to be seen whether *mae chis* will put one foot forward into new saffron-clad territory or remain standing steadfastly on their familiar white-robed ground.

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