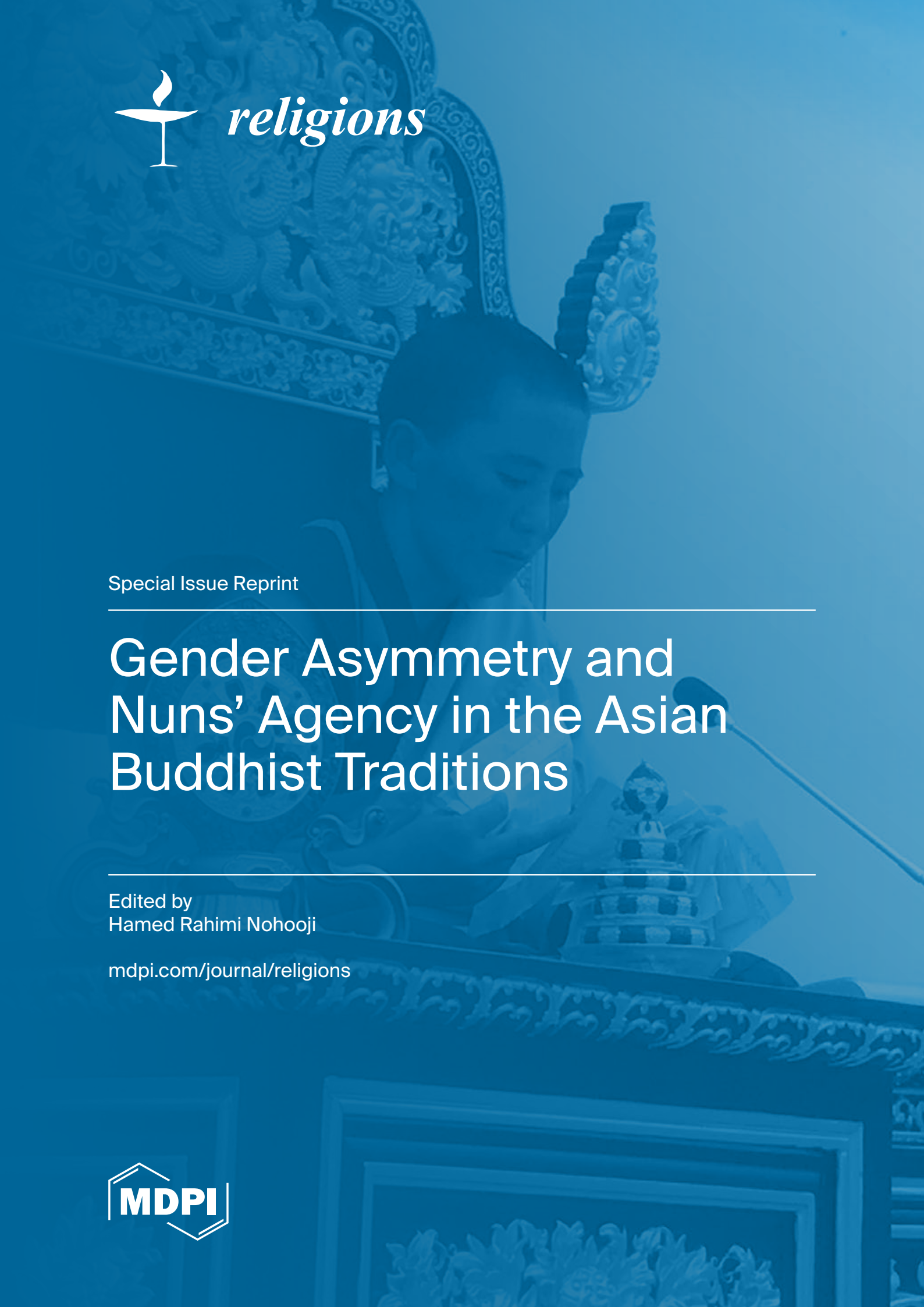

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Special Issue Reprint

# Gender Asymmetry and Nuns' Agency in the Asian Buddhist Traditions

Edited by
Hamed Rahimi Nohooji

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Editor

**Nicola Schneider**

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# About the Editor

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Nicola Schneider is an anthropologist specialised in the Tibetan cultural area. She is the author of *Le renoncement au féminin. Couvents et nonnes dans le bouddhisme tibétain* (2013, Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest) and several articles on Tibetan Buddhist nuns and female saints (*khandroma*). From 2018 to 2021, she was a guest professor at the Department for Tibetan Studies at the University of Bonn. She is currently lecturing at the INALCO University in Paris and an associate researcher at the East Asian Civilizations Research Centre.

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*Editorial*

# Editorial: Gender Asymmetry and Nuns' Agency in the Asian Buddhist Traditions

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Looking at early Indian Buddhist texts and inscriptions, we can generally find gender pairing within the terminology deployed, a situation which is replicated in many texts related to monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) and in teachings addressed by the Buddha to either his male or female disciples (Skilling 2001). However, these stand in stark contrast with the living Asian Buddhist traditions, where gender asymmetry seems to be more often the rule than equality or equity. This is especially so when it comes to monasticism, where women are generally relegated to the second rank, mainly for two reasons: first, they do not always have access to the same level of education as their male counterparts and are therefore not credited with the same erudition; second, in some countries, they are excluded from the major, and in others from, all ordination rites. Thus, we have, on the one hand, full-fledged monks, and on the other, female religious practitioners whose status is more or less ambiguous depending on the Buddhist country and its tradition, whether Theravāda, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna. The ambition of this volume is to demonstrate how nuns navigate between egalitarian gender principles and asymmetric social conditions.

The contributions in this Special Issue offer new, comparative perspectives on gender asymmetry among the different Asian Buddhist traditions.[1] Based on ethnographic and historical case studies across Asia, the authors' common aim is to focus in particular on the attitudes, perceptions, experiences and actions of the Buddhist nuns themselves. This leads directly to discussions of the manifold gender asymmetries with which nuns are confronted and which impact their lives in different ways, as well as to show how these female monastics can at time overcome obstacles through their own actions or agency.

## 1. Locating Gender Asymmetry

The dearth of written sources on the history of female monasticism in Buddhism is one important point with which both nuns and researchers have to struggle. Texts do exist which supposedly date from the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni or a few hundred years later on and which have been translated into different Asian, and now also Western, languages. However, there are only very few written sources on the later spread and development of the nuns' order in countries outside of India, in contrast to what can be found on the monks' order. Therefore, a certain creativity is needed to understand the history of female monasticism, and most of the time even this can only be done partially (see Scott, Seeger and Wu in this volume).[2] As is the case for women more generally, Buddhist nuns have not been given much space within the written tradition: neither have they themselves been prolific authors whose texts have been transmitted to posteriority nor has there been much written about female practitioners by male authors. The question remains if nuns were even permitted to transcribe their own histories.[3] It is, therefore, all the more important and interesting, whenever possible, to get an insight into nuns' thinking through their own writings and essays (see Seeger, Ninh, Cho, Bianchi and Péronnet in this volume), interviews (see Bianchi and Campo in this volume), or through classical ethnographic fieldwork (see Cho, Li, Price-Wallace, and Schneider in this volume) and online research (Walker in this volume).

Gender asymmetry also reflects different social trajectories. On the one hand, Asian men and women are not treated equally in their respective Buddhist environments from

the time they grow up until they come of age. Even today, many Burmese and Thai boys become monks temporarily as a rite of passage in order to access adulthood, in contrast to girls, for whom ordination is more a voluntary act concerning mostly those from high social classes, the future donors Carbonnel (2015). On the other hand, women from different Asian countries become nuns for varying reasons. Thus, some nuns seek higher education with an emphasis on Buddhist knowledge—as in Taiwan, for instance, where general schooling is a prerogative and many choose to study in official universities, these days earning Bachelor, Masters or PhD degrees in Buddhist Studies, which they then use in their efforts for (Buddhist) social engagement (see Li 2004; Tsomo 2009); others simply hope to get access to an education otherwise beyond their reach when, for example, living in the hinterland without any appropriate schooling system, as is the case for many in Tibet. While some countries prioritize girls and young women becoming nuns as early as possible before having their first sexual experiences with the opposite sex. Conversely, in others nations such as China, it is rather seen as an advantage to engage in monastic life only after being married and having children, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the family and its lineage.[4] An exception was Mongolia, where the population was so small that women were simply prohibited from becoming nuns in the past. Only elderly women, who had been married, were allowed to renounce worldly life, and most of them chose to live near monasteries without joining them officially (see Bareja-Starzyńska 2022).[5] This custom continues today, even though in recent decades some Mongolian women have become nuns (Tsomo 2020).

Buddhist nuns relate to kinship in different ways, most often according to the gender norms and values of their society.[6] Some renounce lay life by cutting all family ties, i.e., with their parents, husbands and eventually their children, thus finding their place in the new monastic family. Others wish to continue to pay their filial debt while living as monastics and choose to stay close to their own families and even teach about filial gratitude to parents and grandparents, as in the case of some nuns in Cambodia (see Walker in this volume).

Buddhist nuns are disadvantaged in many ways, but they are also creating new avenues to improve their lives. Many female monastics do not enjoy the same economic favors as monks—either because they are perceived as having less merit and/or because lay people think their ritual services are less effective, as in Zangskar or Thailand, for instance.[7] Furthermore, the internal regulations for nuns sometimes stipulate the need to travel in groups, which makes it more difficult for them to move around for asking alms as in Tibet. Additionally, even when they are supported by important donors, it happens at times that their institutions and thus their properties are taken over by monks, as is the case in Thailand and in Cambodia (see Seeger and Walker in this volume). The material conditions of many nuns are thus more precarious than those of their male counterparts, which is often related to the lack of religious endowments dating back to the past.

Until recently, Buddhist nuns did not have access to the same level of education as their male counterparts. In some regions, such as Thailand and Tibet, monastic universities were strictly reserved for men, and only in recent decades have similar institutions for women opened up (see Lindberg Falk 2007 and Schneider in this volume). In others, such as China, nuns have to struggle in order to enroll in one of the few institutions that accept Buddhist women, the number of educational institutions being insufficient to accommodate all those wishing to join (see Campo this volume). As a result of these difficulties, nuns are often not credited with the same knowledge as their male counterparts, something that, in turn, also effects their economic conditions.

In some Buddhist countries, like Vietnam and China, nuns have demanded equal rights with regard to religious education since the beginning of the twentieth century (see Ninh and Bianchi in this volume). In Taiwan, where nuns have largely outnumbered monks for several decades, but where formal monastic education in monasteries has been for much of history closed to them, these nuns have now joined academic Buddhist curriculums in universities; some of them are even taking part in exchange programs abroad, thereby

acquiring new knowledge and prestige (see Li in this volume). Thus, monastic life also has a significant leveraging effect by providing educational resources for women in many countries today. Additionally, as a result, these new resources are enhancing women's engagement in Buddhism.

Furthermore, nuns have rarely occupied leadership positions. This has always been the case for most Buddhist countries, with several exceptions. One exception is the Chinese nun Longlian, the first woman active at the leadership level in the Buddhist Association of China (see Bianchi 2017 and in this volume). Another is Rurui, founder and head nun of Mount Wutai's Pushuo temple and Buddhist Institute for Nuns, who was nominated "Chinese Cultural Personality" in 2016 (see Péronnet in this volume). Korean nuns, for their part, are expressing discontent because of this perceived gender inequality: the many promises made to them of gaining access to more leadership positions have not been kept, and there is no change in terms of all the higher positions in the *saṃgha* being constantly redistributed to monks (Cho in this volume).

## 2. The Thorny Issue of Ordination

One of the main causes of gender asymmetry is the ordination status of women in Buddhism. Nuns, unlike monks, are excluded in some countries from one and sometimes from all of the rituals that gradually transform a woman into a nun: on the one hand, there are full-fledged monks or *bhikṣu*s, and on the other, nuns who are either equated with lay devotees, *upāsikā*s—notably most nuns in Theravāda countries—or only semi-ordained, *śrāmaṇerikā*s, (as in India, Mongolia, Nepal, Tibet, countries whose tradition is Vajrayāna Buddhism). However, there are also some who are fully fledged nuns, *bhikṣunī*s, as in China, Taiwan, Vietnam or Korea. Japan forms an exception: the tradition of ordination according to the *Vinaya* ceased in the nineteenth century and monks now live a married life, practicing what Yoshiko Ashiwa calls a "fictitious celibacy" (2022). Within this constellation, where the eldest son inherits the status and the temple house of his monk-father (Caillet 2009), wives have an ambivalent status in the "temple family" or "temple home". Japanese Buddhist feminist groups qualify this condition as a double subordination: the male domination of a wife to her husband and the domination of a disciple to her master as a monk's wife (Ashiwa 2022).

The disparity of nuns' ordination status has not only resulted in a marked asymmetry between women and men, it also raises the question of how to name these female religious practitioners, especially those who strictly speaking do not belong to the Buddhist monastic community, the *saṃgha*, which only encompasses *śrāmaṇerikā*s and *bhikṣunī*s. In the literature, we can find many terms to designate them, such as "lay nun", "quasi-nun", "non-ordained nun" or "female semi-monastic". Not only does this terminology sound awkward in English and other Western languages, which generally borrow their vocabulary from Christianity, but many of these words are also misleading in our understanding of female Buddhist practitioners. When it comes, for example, to *mae chi*s (literally meaning "honored mother"; Thailand), *thilashin*s (literally the "one who holds the precepts", Burma), or *ṭūn jīs* (also *yāy jīs*, both literally meaning "grandmother ascetic"; Cambodia), those women with *upāsikā* precepts who have renounced family to dedicate their entire life to religion, they distinguish themselves from other female lay devotees not only through their appearance, insofar as they wear distinctive robes, but also in their lifestyle. Following strict celibacy precepts, they often elaborate their own community rules, whereby many of the latter stem directly from the *Vinaya* (see Seeger this volume). Additionally, if nuns in some countries are not allowed to wear the official monastic robes used by monks, as in Thailand, Burma or Sri Lanka, for example, they have their own colors that distinguish them clearly from the laity and thus mark their monastic status. As for the *śrāmaṇerikā*s, found either in countries where Tibetan Buddhism is practiced (Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Indian- and Nepalese Himalayas) or in those where full ordination is existent (China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea), they are often referred to in Western languages as "novices". Even though this "translation" might accurately render the status of those nuns who have the option to take

subsequently full ordination, it seems to me that it should be abandoned for those who practice Tibetan or Vajrayāna Buddhism. The term "novice" in English comes from Latin "novus" or "new", and refers to an "apprentice" or "beginner". However, a Tibetan nun who is unable to take full ordination in her own tradition, and even an elderly nun who has been practicing for decades, would be termed a "novice". We therefore propose to translate the Sanskrit term *śrāmaṇerikā* rather by "semi-ordained nun", thereby underlying the fact that she belongs to the Buddhist monastic community, but without having taken all the precepts relating to full ordination.[8] To sum up, for all the above-mentioned reasons, the common position taken by the authors of this volume is that it is appropriate to refer to all these female Buddhist practitioners, regardless of their ordination status, as "nuns" who somehow form a uniform group.

Full ordination and the re-establishment of a proper nuns' order in those countries where it does not exist has been the subject of many debates and studies in recent decades, especially after the founding, in 1987, of Sakyadhītā ("Daughters of the Buddha"), the first ever international association for Buddhist women.[9] In several Theravāda traditions, such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Nepal and in some Vajrayāna traditions such as in Nepal and India, full ordination has meanwhile been implemented. However, these new *bhikṣunī*s are not always acknowledged as such, either by local *saṃgha*s—mostly represented by monks—or, sometimes, even by concerned governments. Thus, in some cases, there exists a "fundamental lack of official institutional recognition on the part of the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*" (see Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā 2022).[10] Worse yet, in other countries, as in Nepal, for instance, nuns who have received full ordination abroad have been continuously threatened, often leading them to choose self-exile.[11] It is thus not surprising if many of the Tibetan and Himalayan nuns interviewed by Darcie Price-Wallace (in this volume) express their concern about the fragility of the re-establishment of full ordination and the problem of maintaining so many extra precepts; however, they interpret this fragility not only in negative terms but also positively, to the extent that it allows the opening up of new possibilities.

Most of the research done on the re-establishment of full ordination is based on texts, in particular canonical prescriptions as laid down in the *Vinaya*, the monastic code. Two authors in this volume have examined how several male Buddhist masters in the past have already tried to re-establish or introduce full ordination for women. Anthony Scott (in this volume) draws on the writings of two famous Burmese monks who, in the first half of the twentieth century, tried to find a solution by combining textual arguments with proleptic access into the Buddha Śākyamuni's knowledge of the future. This shows, as already remarked by Roloff (2020, p. 2) in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, that "the question of full ordination for women is mediated by multiple layers of textual authorities." (See also Jyväsjärvi 2011). As for Fan Wu (in this volume), when revisiting textual passages mentioning fully ordained nuns in Tibet, she is able to demonstrate how these serve mainly to edify their masters and less so the *bhikṣunī*s themselves.

In the process of re-introducing full ordination, many Buddhist countries have looked to China and Taiwan while also casting doubt on the validity of the Chinese female ordination lineage, especially with regard to dual ordination—that is, ordination by *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣunī*s. In her article on Chinese female monasticism, Ester Bianchi (in this volume) shows that Chinese masters shared the same concern from the end of the Republic of China (1911–1949) on, and that this has led to a wide expansion of dual ordination, even though ordinations carried out by *bhikṣu*s alone were (and are) always considered to be fully legitimate. After the revival of religion in the 1980s, dual ordination progressively became the most common procedure for *bhikṣunī* ordination in Mainland China and even the *gurudharma*s, eight "heavy rules" that are never to be transgressed—and which are generally interpreted as a subordination of nuns to monks (Wijayaratna 1991)—have been met with a new surge of interest. Furthermore, some nunneries, as in the case of the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns (see Péronnet in this volume), insist that nuns respect the two-year period of a probationer (*śikṣamāṇā*) as prescribed by the *Vinaya* before

taking full ordination, thereby significantly increasing the length of their training and learning. The upholding of an additional two-year probationary period, the respect of the eight *gurudharma*s, and the procedure of dual ordination all participate in creating an asymmetry between nuns and monks. Nevertheless, this asymmetry is interpreted in a positive way by some Chinese nuns: "It is what sets nuns apart from monks to mark them as distinctively pure" (Péronnet in this volume). However, it also leads to the dependency of nuns on monks, in that the former need the *bhikṣu* community both to organize new *bhikṣunī* ordinations and for other matters—whereas monks can organize their own ordinations independently from nuns. Indeed, also, nuns must go to (?) the monks and request their permission to receive exhortation during *upoṣadha* (the bi-monthly confession ritual), whereas monks do not need nuns for any of these major monastic rituals. Thus, the asymmetrical reciprocity between the two Buddhist orders can be described as a relation of asymmetric dependency in which nuns cannot organize and lead their monastic life without monks.

Gender asymmetry between men and women is a facet of living Buddhism, and it seemed to us that it deserves to be explored in more detail, taking into account of, if not all, at least as many different Asian Buddhist traditions as possible. Nevertheless, Buddhist nuns continue to be not only subjects of discrimination and subordination in many areas, but through entering public debate, they are also exerting more and more agency within the monastic system and, more generally, within their respective societies. In doing so, they are supported at times by their families, lay people, monks and in some cases even by the government. The very fact that, statistically, the female religious communities in Asia continue to attract many women today shows that becoming a nun is always a significant choice or decision, even though the reasons might vary from country to country, as well as between individuals in a given context. We hope that this volume will contribute to a better understanding of contemporary Buddhism, its pitfalls, and also its positive developments.

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## Notes

1 This volume is a follow-up of a conference on 'Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education" held in May 2022 at the University of Perugia. I would like first and foremost to thank Ester Bianchi for hosting and co-organizing the conference with me. After a first stage had taken place in Paris (University of Nanterre) as part of the ANR project SHIFU, headed by Adeline Herrou, in January 2015, Esther Bianchi was as convinced as I was that it would be worthwhile to continue and widen the perspective by integrating even more Asian Buddhist traditions. I am also grateful to the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, who not only sponsored the conference in Perugia, but who kindly allowed us to postpone it several times due to COVID restrictions. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the conference participants and discussants who contributed to the conference and to this volume, bringing up many new ideas, stimulating comments and suggestions.

2 Other textualist approaches to the dearth of information on Buddhist nuns can be found, among others, in Schopen ([2012] 2014) and Langenberg (2020).

3 For example, in the autobiography of the nun Orgyan Chokyi (1675–1729), it is clearly stated that her master expressly forbade her to write her own life story (Schaeffer 2004).

4 In Tibet, nuns who have been ordained after marriage and childbearing are addressed by a particular term: *genchö* (*rgan chos*), literally an "elder" religious person, which is slightly pejorative because it implies a certain degree of impurity.

5 These elderly religious women in Mongolia have a similar status to that of the Tibetan *genchö* mentioned above.

6 For more on monasticism and kinship, see Herrou and Krauskopff (2009) and Wilson (2013).

7 For nuns and the economy of merit, see Gutschow (2004) and Lindberg Falk (2007).

8 By the way, in Tibetan Buddhism, many monks also chose not to be fully ordained, leading a monastic life either as *upāsaka* or *śrāmaṇera*.

[9] To name just a few studies on full ordination, see Li (2000); Seeger (2008); Mohr and Tsedroen (2010); Kawanami (2013); Salgado (2013). On Sakyadhītā, see Tsomo (1988).

[10] Something similar took place in Tibetan Buddhism after two groups of Karma-Kagyü nuns were fully ordained in Hong Kong, respectively in 1984 and 1987. After their return to India and a long-awaited audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, no solution could be found to integrate those new *bhikṣunī*s who had been ordained into a foreign lineage with its own rituals into the Tibetan *saṃgha*. The result is that only one out of the three surviving ethnically Tibetan nuns wished to be considered as a *bhikṣunī* (Personal communications August 2012).

[11] Personal communication with Dhamma Vijaya (February 2022), a Theravāda nun. For more on the Theravāda movement in Nepal, see Gellner and LeVine (2007).

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*Article*

# The Embodiment of Buddhist History: Interpretive Methods and Models of *Sāsana* Decline in Burmese Debates about Female Higher Ordination

**Tony Scott**

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**Abstract:** The mid-twentieth century was celebrated in Theravāda civilizations as the halfway point in the five-thousand-year history of the Buddha's dispensation, the *sāsana*. Around this time in Burma, fierce debates arose concerning the re-establishment of the extinct order of Theravāda nuns. While women were understood as having a crucial role in supporting and maintaining the *sāsana*, without a sanctioned means of higher ordination, they were excluded from its centre, that is, as active agents in *sāsana* history. In this paper, I explore what was at stake in these debates by examining the arguments of two monks who publicly called for the reintroduction of the order of nuns, the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1868–1955) and Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (1881–1950). I will show that both used the enigmatic *Milindapañha* (*Questions of Milinda*) to present their arguments, but more than this, by drawing from their writings and biographies, it will be seen that their methods of interpreting the Pāli canon depended on their unique models of *sāsana* history, models which understood this halfway point as ushering in a new era of emancipatory promise. This promise was premised on the practice of *vipassanā* meditation by both lay men and especially women, the latter who, through their participation in the mass lay meditation movement, were making strong claims as dynamic players in the unfolding of *sāsana* history. The question of whether the order of nuns should be revived therefore hinged on the larger question of what was and was not possible in the current age of *sāsana* decline. Beyond this, what I aim to show is that mid-twentieth-century debates around female ordination concerned the very nature of the *sāsana* itself, as either a transcendent, timeless ideal, or as a bounded history embodied in the practice of both monks and nuns.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Theravāda; Burma; Myanmar; nuns; bhikkhunī; Gender; meditation; vipassanā; Pāli

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## 1. Introduction

The framing question of this paper is what is and is not possible in the present age of the *sāsana*, conventionally held in Burma[1] to be a time of decay and decline in the Buddha's dispensation. The Pāli word *sāsana* (B. သာသနာ *sāsanā*)[2] "can refer to a body of ideas (and texts) which claim to convey the Buddha's teaching outside of any historical or material embodiment" (Schober and Collins 2018, p. 6). This definition we may call an "idealist" denotation of the term, yet the word *sāsana* also has a less abstract denotation as "a bounded entity" that "continues its existence in time", both as an "ideology" but also in the form of relics, monasteries, stupas, and crucially for this paper, in monks and nuns (Schober and Collins 2018, p. 6). Hence, *sāsana* is both an ideal captured by the Buddha's "timeless" teachings, but also a type of tangible instantiation and institutionalization of these teachings in texts, monasteries, and the monastic community (P. *saṅgha*). While Juliane Schober and Steven Collins contrast *sāsana* with *vaṃsa*, the latter being closer to what we mean by the word "history", in what follows, I use *sāsana* to signal the unfolding of the ideal of the Buddha's teachings in concrete, embodied form over historical time. My working construal of the term is an attempt to capture in this paper the ways discourses about

the *sāsana*'s past, present, and future motivated and were mobilized by different religious, social, and political actors in Burmese Buddhist debates about the higher ordination of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*) in the mid-twentieth century. My point is that the competing answers to the question about the possibilities of the current stage of *sāsana* decline given during the last century directly impinge on the spiritual capacity of women, and on whether the *sāsana* of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-sāsana*) should or should not be revived.

The point of this paper is not to evaluate the merits of the different arguments for or against re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, to prosecute my own interpretation of the relevant Pāli texts, nor to delve into the actual details of the debates themselves, but rather, to furnish these debates with further historical context, that is, to discuss the different conceptions of history at play during a formative period in the first half of the twentieth century when these debates were unfolding. To this end, I focus on the case of the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်း ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော် Maṅḥ kvanḥ jetavan Cha rā tau, also known as Ūḥ Nārada, 1868–1955; hereafter, the Mingun Jetavana),[3] a Burmese scholar-monk and pioneer of what Ingrid Jordt calls the "mass lay meditation movement" (Jordt 2007). In 1949 he published his *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Questions of Milinda*), and in this text, the Mingun Jetavana puts forward his call to reinstate higher ordination (P. *upasampadā* B. ရဟန်းခံ *ra hanḥ khaṃ*)) for women, thereby promoting the revival of the Theravāda order of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*) in twentieth-century Burma. My focus is on how the Mingun Jetavana makes his case, that is, by reverse engineering his interpretation of the pronouncements of the Buddha on *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* with the concept of methods for future monks (P. *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*s), a concept rooted in the higher forms of knowledge (P. *abhiññā*s B. အဘိညာဉ် *abhiññāṅ*), psychic and supernatural powers wrought through the practice of meditation.[4] By invoking the concept of methods for future monks and by arguing for the possibility of the *abhiññā*s in this present period of *sāsana* history, I demonstrate that the Mingun Jetavana is trying to transcend what Bhikkhu Bodhi (2010) calls the conversative Theravāda "legalist" argument for why women can no longer become *bhikkhunī*s by deploying a reverse prolepsis where the Buddha has purposefully embedded future flexibility in the Vinayapiṭaka that attends specifically to the conditions of the present, a flexibility into which the Mingun Jetavana claims special access. In short, the Mingun Jetavana is arguing for a new model of *sāsana* history.

While Bodhi (2010) has previously written about the Mingun Jetavana's calls to re-establish the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, my contribution to understanding these debates in mid-twentieth-century Burma is to highlight the dynamic between methods of textual interpretation, models of *sāsana* history, and the ways the mass lay meditation movement had radically transformed the soteriological landscape for women. Simply put, the mass lay meditation movement, based in part on the *satipaṭṭhāna* ("foundations of mindfulness") method of *vipassanā* ("insight") meditation formulated by the Mingun Jetavana, had changed the role of women in terms of service to and practice of the *sāsana* by the mid-twentieth century, and for the Mingun Jetavana, the intentions of the Buddha in laying down the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in the Vinayapiṭaka needed to be reconsidered, or rather, recovered, in lieu of this transformation. To perform this radical act of recovering the Buddha's intention for the present, the Mingun Jetavana invoked the concept of *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*s, interpretative methods "hidden" in the canonical text upon which he was commenting, the *Milindapañha*. My own argument is that these "methods for future monks" were "activated" in the *bhikkhunī* debate not just because of the current non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but because of the belief by the Mingun Jetavana and others that by the mid-twentieth century, the *sāsana* had entered an era of liberation (B. ဝိမုတ္တိခေတ် *vimutti khet*) where practitioners of *vipassanā* meditation could once again attain to the highest stages of the Theravāda path (Stuart 2022, p. 115).

To support and further contextualize my interpretation, I compare the arguments of the Mingun Jetavana to those of Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (အရှင် အာဒိစ္စဝံသ Arhaṅ Ādiccavaṃsa, 1881–1950; hereafter Ādiccavaṃsa), another Burmese scholar-monk calling for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the first half of the twentieth century. Hiroko

Kawanami introduced the arguments of Ādiccavaṃsa in a ground-breaking 2007 article, but by putting these two figures in conversation, and by exploring elements of Ādiccavaṃsa's biography, I submit that this monk was also motivated by a new scheme of *sāsana* decline when interpreting the Buddha's proclamations on *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*, likewise using the *Milindapañha* to suggest his own radical historical model in line with the idea of the *vimutti khet*. Putting together the writing of these two monks alongside their biographies is generative in not only providing further historical context to their arguments, but also in highlighting the "complicated interlinking between vernacular biography and vernacular history" where the actions and achievements of the singular subject are "not readily confined in time and place" (Houtman 1997, p. 312). In other words, these biographies shed light on the models of *sāsana* history used *and* embodied by the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, models not always made explicit in their written works but which motivated their larger projects and visions for the future of Buddhism. Hence, this paper will demonstrate that calls for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in mid-twentieth-century Burma cannot be separated from emerging beliefs in the vitality of the Buddha's *sāsana*, which for the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, had been rejuvenated through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation by lay women and men alike.

To set out the context in which the Mingun Jetavana was writing, I will begin this paper by presenting the conservative argument against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, briefly discussing in Section 1 the liminal status of non-ordained, female ascetics in twentieth-century Burma and how the rise of the mass lay meditation movement has transformed the soteriological potential for both women and men. Yet, despite this new horizon for female practitioners, there is still resistance to reallowing their *upasampadā*, a position epitomized by elite scholastic monks who believe that it is a de facto impossibility given the absence of an officially sanctioned Theravāda *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* today and the requirement that women be ordained by both female and male monastics. While conservative Theravāda legalists put forward their objections to reallowing *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* as the most literal reading of the pronouncements of the Buddha recorded in the Vinayapiṭaka, the argument of the Mingun Jetavana in favor of female ordination is based on the same set of canonical texts. After introducing the Mingun Jetavana in Section 3 and outlining how the supernormal *abhiññā*s motivate his interpretative methods in Section 4, we turn in the Section 5 to an overview of his argument. Covering eleven pages of his commentary on the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana proposes that women can be ordained by monks alone until a quorum is reached and the universally accepted two-sided method involving both monks and nuns is possible. I point out in this fifth section that this argument rests on the Mingun Jetavana's distinction between two types of regulation laid down by the Buddha, root regulations (P. *mūla-paññattī*s) and supplementary regulations (P. *anupaññattī*s). My purpose in analyzing the Mingun Jetavana's proposal here is to demonstrate that for him, this distinction between different types of regulations only makes sense if one takes the Buddha to have known the future, our present, for according to the commentator, the supplementary regulation concerning the ordination of *bhikkhunī*s by monks was meant to apply precisely in the current historical moment—in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could fulfil the requirements of a two-side ordination. Yet, what right does the Mingun Jetavana claim to discern the nature and function of this supplementary regulation? To answer this question, I turn to the Mingun Jetavana's first biography, written by his disciple and erstwhile personal attendant, U Tikkhācāra (Ūḥ Tikkhācāra; hereafter Tikkhācāra) in 1957, two years after the Mingun Jetavana's passing. According to this biography and the legacy it helped establish, the Mingun Jetavana was a *buddhamataññū*, "one who knows the intention of the Buddha". With this status, which I explain in Section 6, the Mingun Jetavana invokes the supreme commentarial conceit, understanding the Buddha as addressing him directly through the *Milindapañha* and outside millennia of accrued local tradition.

In an effort to widen the scope and import of my argument, I turn in the second half of this paper to the figure of Ādiccavaṃsa, introduced in Section 7. Like the Mingun Jetavana, Ādiccavaṃsa argued for the higher ordination of women in his 1935 book, *Bhikkhunī-*

*sāsanopadesa* (ဘိက္ခုနီသာသနောပဒေသ *Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*) (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935). While the details of their arguments are roughly the same and likely developed in unison, I explore in Section 8 how Ādiccavaṃsa does not rely on his own special access into the rationale of the Buddha, but rather, insists upon the consistency of the Buddha's enactment and revocation of regulations while also putting forth a creative reading of the timeline of *sāsana* longevity. As we see in Section 9, perhaps more controversial than his call to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was Ādiccavaṃsa's belief that the Buddha's teaching could last longer than the 5000-year limit sanctioned by the Pāli commentaries and still espoused by the Burmese monastic hierarchy. Even though Ādiccavaṃsa is not explicitly associated with the mass lay meditation movement, for him, the longevity of the *sāsana* is not predetermined but contingent on the commitment to meditation by both male and female practitioners, alluding to the concept of the *vimutti khet*, or age of *vipassanā* liberation. This view is not expressed explicitly in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, but in his *Cha rā tau arhaṅ ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* (ဆရာတော် အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသ အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ *The Biography of the Sayadaw Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa*), written 15 years after Ādiccavaṃsa's passing at a time when *vipassanā* meditation was politically ascendent and culturally dominant. By using his biography to highlight the model of *sāsana* history motivating Ādiccavaṃsa's argument, my contention in this ninth section is that Ādiccavaṃsa's impetus to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* represented his recognition that women too were capable of reaching the ultimate stage of enlightenment in this age of *vipassanā* liberation. My reason for bringing Ādiccavaṃsa into this paper is thus to highlight in Section 10 that this same model of *sāsana* history motivated the argument of the Mingun Jetavana, a pioneer in the very movement that was transforming the role of women in the *sāsana*. What is critical to realize is that both authors rely on the *Milindapañha* and its relatively recent canonical status to make their case, for the dilemmatic question arises in this text about the ability of a lay person to survive if they reach the highest stage of Theravāda practice, that of *arahant*ship, without renouncing the householder life as a monk or nun. This dilemma is an especially acute problem for women who do not have recourse to higher ordination. I therefore argue that both the Mingun Jetavana's and Ādiccavaṃsa's attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* should be seen as a direct response to the *Milindapañha*'s dilemmatic question and part of a broader project, that of legitimizing the soteriological landscape reopened by the mass lay meditation movement in the age of *vipassanā* liberation. In this sense, the history of the *sāsana* becomes embodied in the figure of the nun herself.

**2. Conservative Argument Against**

In contemporary Burma there are several layers of distinction used to demarcate the proximity of one person or group to the centre of the *sāsana*. In the broadest division, only fully ordained male monastics (P. *bhikkhu*, B. ဘုန်းကြီး *bhuṇḥ krīḥ*) are considered "inside the *sāsana*" (B. သာသနာဝင် *sāsanā vaṅ*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 120), literally, in the "lineage of the *sāsana*", since their role is to protect, promulgate, and realize these teachings through scriptural learning, the pursuit of moral perfection, and the practice of meditation. Since the Theravāda community of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*) is said to have died out in what is now Burma sometime in the twelfth century (Falk and Kawanami 2017, p. 40),[5] women are without a current pathway to higher ordination (P. *upasampadā*, B. ရဟန်းခံ *ra hanḥ khaṃ*), at least according to conservative elements in present-day Theravāda, who do not recognize the validity of other lineages of nuns in Mahāyāna or other Buddhist contexts. According to this conservative reading, women are thus "axiomatically excluded" from being insiders of the *sāsana* (Jordt 2005, p. 44). If we take "*vaṅ*" in the term "*sāsanā vaṅ*" as "history" (P. *vaṃsa*), we may reframe this situation to say that women are therefore outside the historical unfolding of the Buddha's *sāsana* in time and space, at least according to the monastic hierarchy of monks in Burma. There are, however, semi-lay female renunciants, or *thilashin* in Burmese (B. သီလရှင် *sīla rhaṅ*), women who occupy an elevated position compared to ordinary laypeople as "those carrying out duties for the *sāsana*" (B. သာသနာဝန်ထမ်း *sāsanā van thamḥ*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 121). Legally recognized by the Burmese govern-

ment as a rights-bearing religious vocation, these *thilashin* inhabit a liminal status somewhere in between renouncing the householder life and the domestic sphere, taking eight or 10 precepts of the higher moral order, shaving theirs heads, donning robes, and pursuing a "noble celibacy" while also handling money and preparing food for themselves or their male monastic patrons (Jordt 2005, pp. 44–45). In a conservative reading, the closest to the *sāsana*'s centre a woman can aspire is to take up the life of a *thilashin* while sponsoring the novitiate ceremony of her son, thereby becoming both a supporter and an "inheritor of Buddhism" (B. သာသနာမွေ့ *sāsanā mve*) (Houtman 1990a, p. 121). This orthodox interpretation does not prevent women in Burma from striving to develop the *thilashin* vocation into a parallel institution of "the *sangha* with the hopes of reproducing in shadow form the function of the earlier bhikkhunī order" (Jordt 2005, p. 44). Yet, given their disproportional access to the merit economy of Burma and conventionally thought to be lacking the karmic charisma (B. ဘုန်း *bhunḥ*), or "innate spiritual superiority acquired through accumulated merit" (Harriden 2012, p. 7), the best Burmese women have been able to create through the institution of the *thilashin* is a simulacrum of the extinct *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and the extant order of monks (P. *bhikkhu-saṅgha*), at least in the eyes of the monastic establishment in Burma.

The standard rationale for designating an individual or group as "inside" or "outside" the *sāsana* has come under considerable strain over the last century, as what Gustaaf Houtman calls "performative criteria" have arisen redefining how people manifest and realize their relationship to Buddhism in Burma (Houtman 1990a, p. 123). In the realm of textual learning (P. *pariyatti*), Rachelle Saruya (2022), building on the work of Chie Ikeya (2011), Erik Braun (2013) and Alicia Turner (2014), has shown how women in Burma, by leveraging anxieties around colonial rule, missionary education, and the rise of print technology, collectively created a "demand" for lessons on the Abhidhammapiṭaka, thereby providing lay women access to a subject previously reserved for elite scholar-monks and shifting trends in knowledge production in the process. In terms of the practice of the Buddha's teachings (P. *paṭipatti*), the rise of insight, or *vipassanā* meditation in the first half of the twentieth century and its extraordinary spread among the lay population meant that, in the words of Jordt, "people from all walks of life [could] engage en masse in the penultimate training leading to the stage of enlightenment" (Jordt 2005, pp. 43–44). Due to the advent of the "mass lay meditation movement", combined with an increased access to formerly elite learning opportunities, the role of lay people in the protection, perpetuation, and realization of the Buddha's *sāsana* underwent profound transformation in the twentieth century. This transformation was especially pronounced for women, who make up a preponderance of those undertaking *vipassanā* practice. It was in this context that some Burmese women began to agitate for a renewed responsibility within the *sāsana* itself, joining efforts in Sri Lanka and India to re-establish the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* by importing *vinaya* lineages from East Asia. One such woman was the scholar-nun Saccavādī, known in Burmese as Ma Thissawaddy (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). Her landmark and contentious case from the early 2000s came to be known as the "Bhikkhunī Bhāvābhāva Vinicchaya" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206), or the "Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns".[6]

This transformed soteriological landscape, however, has not appeared to influence the arguments put forth by conversative, Theravāda legalists against reinstating the higher ordination for women. Writing in 2015 about efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the twenty-first century, Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa, the rector of the International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University and a high-ranking member of the country's ecclesiastical hierarchy, represents the contemporary legalist position of senior monks in Burma, stating that

> [i]n the idea of some people, there was another way to revive [the] *Bhikkhunī-sāsana*. A bhikkhuni-aspirant went to the side of Chinese *Mahāyāna Bhikkhunī* to get bhikkhunī ordination as the first step; they obtained [the] second ordination from the *Theravāda* monks as the second step. So, this form of "hybrid" dual ordination of *Mahāyāna bhikkhunī* and *Theravāda bhikkhus* started in India

> and the number of bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka is more than hundreds now. (Nandamālābhivaṃsa 2015, p. 29)

What Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa is describing is the method followed by Saccavādī, whose preceptors were Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s ordained by Taiwanese nuns in Bodhgaya, India, in 1998 (Ashiwa 2015, p. 19).[7] Yet, for Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa and the monastic hierarchy he represents, the "bhikkhunis ordained by this 'hybrid' [. . . ] *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* method are not real Theravada bhikkhunī in the viewpoint of *Theravāda*" (Nandamālābhivaṃsa 2015, p. 29). As Burmese monastic-scholar Janaka Ashin explains, the argument here is that the Dharmaguptaka *vinaya* lineage maintained by these Taiwanese or Korean preceptors and passed on to their Sri Lankan initiates was "in some way contaminated because of the Mahāyāna beliefs of those who follow them" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206). For Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa and others, the problem is that *bhikkhunī*s in China, Taiwan, and Korea "follow a different code of rules, adopt different procedures for establishing the boundary, *sīmā*, within which ordination is to be carried out, and do not employ Pāli for conducting legal acts" (Anālayo 2017, p. 10). This argument belies the strict neoconservative self-image carefully crafted by elite monks in Burma (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 208), a self-image which Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa demonstrates when he stresses that

> Myanmar Sayadaws (senior monks) who follow strictly the treatises of *Pāḷi* (original text), *aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries) and *ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries) do not accept this new *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* because bhikkhunī ordination is not possible anymore. The impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. If there is a *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha,* then there is a possibility for bhikkhunī ordination. According to the Vinaya rules, a candidate should obtain ordination from *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* for the first time and then ordination from *Bhikkhu-saṅgha* for the second time. That means, the candidate should obtain the ordination from both *saṅghas.* As there is no more *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* anymore, bhikkhunī ordination is impossible. (Nandamālābhivaṃsa 2015, pp. 28–29)

While offering his sympathy for the plight of female renunciants in Burma, Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa is essentially externalizing the decision, reducing it to a matter of immutable scriptural fact and historical reality. His claim that the "impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*" essentially invalidates the existence of *bhikkhunī*s in other Buddhist countries, meaning he denies the validity of those who tried to "transplant" or "repurpose" the lineages of other Vinayapiṭakas into the Theravāda context. By thus denying the validity of these "Chinese Mahāyāna lineages", Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa reveals his own neoconservative, literalist interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism and the Pāli canon on which it relies. My aim here is not to pass judgement on this position or assess its relative merits or accuracy,[8] yet by extending our historical scope to the first half of the twentieth century, we will see that the existence or non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is not so much a matter of scriptural record, but like so many other issues of *vinaya* orthodoxy, contingent on modes of scriptural interpretation influenced by the accretion of local tradition and hermeneutical convention. American-born monk Bodhi emphasizes this point, writing that "Theravāda jurisprudence often merges stipulations on legal issues that stem from the canonical Vinaya texts, the *aṭṭhakathās* (commentaries), and the *ṭīkās* (subcommentaries) with interpretations of these stipulations that have gained currency through centuries of tradition" (Bodhi 2010, p. 116). In other words, the possibility of reinstating the higher ordination for women in the Theravāda context depends on regimes of interpretation and exegetical mores, themselves determined by the conventions of a given, local tradition.

The contingency of these regimes of interpretation is exemplified by the fact that the Mingun Jetavana interpreted the same Vinayapiṭaka and its commentaries in a fashion diametrically opposed to the position of conservative Theravāda legalists, using his own

interpretative methods based on the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*s ("methods for future monks") to argue that the Buddha actually intended his words to be used to re-establish the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* far into his future—our present. In what follows, I first examine the person of the Mingun Jetavana and his commentary, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, laying out his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the twentieth century, which relies on the Buddha's knowledge of the future and the Mingun Jetavana's ability to recognize and decipher the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*s embedded in the *Milindapañha*.

**3. Mingun Jetavana**

Widely considered an *arahant* (B. ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) of the twentieth century—one who has reached the highest stage on the Theravāda path to nirvana—the Mingun Jetavana is an enigmatic figure in the history of twentieth-century Burmese Buddhism. As a pioneer of one of the major lineages of Burmese *vipassanā*, which Kate Crosby describes as a "modernised reform method of meditation" (Crosby 2013, p. 12), he was responsible in part for liberalizing contemplative practices traditionally seen as the vocation of virtuoso male monastics, making them accessible in the local vernacular for un-ordained women and men. At the same time, he based his "reform method" in Pāli canonical texts like the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*), reflecting a "preoccupation with origins" which effectively functioned to "obscure previous [vernacular] literature" on meditation (Skilton et al. 2019, p. 4).[9] Aside from the Mingun Jetavana's technique, which came to be known as the "*satipaṭṭhāna* method" in his lifetime (Caṃ rhanḥ 1954, p. 14), perhaps his greatest legacy was the establishment of the first-known meditation centre in Burma in 1911 (Houtman 1990b, p. 2), a place to which "all the people wishing to attain [nirvana] would be warmly welcome[d] [. . . ] to practice vipassanā" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 47). Indeed, the concept of the meditation centre was arguably the key institutional driver of the mass lay meditation movement in twentieth-century Burma,[10] since it allowed for monastics and lay people to practice together in the same space according to roughly the same technique.[11]

The Mingun Jetavana was not just known as a pioneer of *vipassanā* meditation but as an accomplished Pāli scholar who has been referred to by Htay Hlaing, a biographer of Burmese monks writing in the early 1960s, as an "unknown *tipiṭakadhara*" (B. လူမသိသော တိပိဋကဓရ ဆရာတော်ပါပေ *lū ma si so 'tipiṭakadhara' cha rā tau pā pe*) (Ṭheḥ lhuiṅ [1961] 1993, p. 448), one who had memorised large parts of the Pāli canon and could recite them by heart. The Mingun Jetavana's scholastic work on Pāli canonical and commentarial texts included many "judgment" texts (P. *vinicchaya*) on the Vinayapiṭaka, or code of monastic discipline, and he was known by Htay Hlaing's informants as being very strict in *vinaya* matters, even when it came to the monks in his meditation centres (Ṭheḥ lhuiṅ [1961] 1993, p. 451). Indeed, according to his first biography from 1957, the Mingun Jetavana demanded that any monk who enters his regime of *vipassanā* practice must have memorized the monastic code (P. *pātimokkha* B. လွတ်မြောက်ခြင်း *lvat mrok khraṅḥ*) for both *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s, "understanding them comprehensively" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 110). This emphasis on memorizing and understanding the monastic code for nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-pātimokkha*) by the Mingun Jetavana stands in contrast to the current state-sponsored examination syllabus for *thilashin*s in Burma, who instead of studying the Vinayapiṭaka, are tested on the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* (*Manual of the Path for the Delicate*) at the primary, or "root level" (B. မူလတန်း *mūla-tanḥ*),[12] and the *Dhammapada* (*Verses on the Dhamma*) at subsequent levels (Saruya 2020, pp. 158–59). As Saruya points out, the former text was originally written by the Ledi Sayadaw (လယ်တီ ဆရာတော် Ley tī Cha rā tau, also known as Ūḥ Ñāṇadhaja; 1846–1923) "as a *vinaya* for the youth" (Saruya 2020, p. 159), testifying to the ambiguous status given to *thilashin*s by the monastic establishment and government of Burma.

Arguably the Mingun Jetavana's most consequential contribution to Buddhist scholarship in Burma was the composition of two commentaries written in Pāli on texts added

to the canon in Burma in the last century and a half,[13] which he published as *aṭṭhakathā*s, the most authoritative form of commentary in Theravāda literary history.[14] Assigning his two Pāli commentaries the name "*aṭṭhakathā*" was a rather audacious move given the textually conservative nature of Burmese Buddhism since at least the time of King Bodawpaya (ဘိုးတော်ဘုရားမင်း Bhuiḥ tau bhu rāḥ maṅḥ, r. 1782–1819) (Pranke 2008, p. 1). For it is claimed, at least by his followers, that the Mingun Jetavana's commentaries were the first new *aṭṭhakathā*s composed in at least five centuries, if not a millennium,[15] and I have found no evidence that any other author since that time has labelled their text using the prestigious title "*aṭṭhakathā*".[16] While his first such commentary, the 1926 *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Disclosure of the Canon*), was relatively uncontroversial and mostly relegated to elite scholarly circles, his second, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Questions of* [*King*] *Milinda*) created an uproar among the monastic elite and forced the U Nu administration of the parliamentary period (1948–1962) to intervene and confiscate several hundred copies of the text (Bha rī Ukkaṭṭha 1949, p. 15) (Bollée 1968, p. 315). Started around 1938, finished in 1941 (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 84), but not published until 1949, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* is the first-known commentary of its type composed for the c. 3rd-century B.C.E. *Milindapañha* (*Questions of* [*King*] *Milinda*),[17] which features a fictional and expansive dialogue between a Greek-Bactrian monarch and a South Asian monk. The controversy over the commentary, which is well documented in newspapers of the time and apparently even spurred the government to introduce legislation in response (Huxley 2001, p. 134), was over two contentious issues: calls by the Mingun Jetavana to reform the robe-giving ceremony (P. *kaṭhina-kamma*), a major component of monk-lay relations in Burma, and his promotion of the full ordination of women as nuns. What is unique about his attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is that the Mingun Jetavana not only bases his argument in scriptural interpretation—the same set of texts offered by conservative monks like Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa above—but in the Buddha's ability to see the future when formulating the different layers of rules around *bhikkhunī*s in the Vinayapiṭaka. According to the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha thus embedded in his texts or those that resulted vicariously from his enlightenment (such as the *Milindapañha*, which is said to have come some five centuries after the Buddha's passing) "methods handed down to future monks" (P. *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno*), an important feature of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* also noted by Madhav Deshpande in the landmark introduction to his 1999 edition of the text (Deshpande 1999, p. 7).[18] The task of the commentator, then, is not just to explain the words and phrases of the root text, but to discover such hidden "interpretive methods" and reveal their relevance for the Buddha's future, our present. To appreciate the nature of his argument, which is tantamount to claiming the ability to decipher the intention of the Buddha, it is necessary to first understand the role of the higher forms of knowledge in the Mingun Jetavana's controversial commentary, known in Pāli as the *abhiññās*.

## 4. Higher Forms of Commentary

After the prefatory and introductory sections of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana titles the first chapter of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* (*Chapter on Previous Connections*), which consists of sixty-five pages in the transliterated edition by Deshpande (1999). The subject of this chapter is the past lives of the two protagonists, King Milinda and the monk Nāgasena, and how they come to debate in the royal city of Sāgala, identified with "modern day Siālkot in the Punjab" (Aston 2004, p. 98). In the root text there is a palpable phantasmagoric quality to this chapter, which features millions of monks flying to the Himalayas, Nāgasena's teacher reading his pupil's mind, and devas in heavenly realms being reborn in human form. These fantastical episodes pulsate throughout the root text and while they are often not the focus of contemporary scholarship on the *Milindapañha*, which has been concerned more with the philosophical and philological aspects of the work, they are the primary subject of exegesis for the Mingun Jetavana, whose goal in the

first chapter is to explicate the role of these higher forms of knowledge underlying the narrative momentum in this chapter.

The *abhiññā*s, often translated as "supernormal" or "psychic" powers, are forms of "intellectual, perceptual, and instrumental knowledge, an understanding and control over the 'natural' order of things, such that it allows the knower to change that order" (Gómez 2010, p. 542). This "understanding and control" over nature is achieved through one-pointed concentration (P. *samādhi*) leading to the states of total absorption (P. *jhāna*s) which grant the practitioner powers and abilities beyond the normal human range, like those seen in the first chapter of the *Milindapañha*, where vast stretches of time and space are collapsed to make the narrative possible. Referring to his own age—the age of *sāsana* decline—the Mingun Jetavana outlines the higher forms of knowledge in the first page of his commentary on the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, emphasizing that those

> who obtain the knowledge of the various supernormal powers are not many, [those] who obtain the knowledge of the divine ear are not many, [those] who obtain the knowledge of reading other's minds [. . . ], [those] who obtain the knowledge of past lives [. . . ], [those] who obtain the knowledge of the divine eye [. . . ], [those] who obtain the knowledge of the future [. . . ], [those] who obtain the knowledge of karmic results are not many, they are only few, [as] person[s] endowed with the *magga* (path) and also endowed with the *phala* (fruit) are only few as well.[19]

All told there are seven *abhiññā*s listed here.[20] For the majority of his exegesis on the first chapter of the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana describes these higher forms of knowledge as found in the root text with extensive quotations from the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa, sometimes for several pages. The reason the Mingun Jetavana takes such pains to explicate these *abhiññā*s early in his commentary is because they effectively constitute the epistemology of his exegetical technique. This function is especially true for the knowledge of the future (P. *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*), which motivates and makes possible the Mingun Jetavana's attempt at reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in twentieth-century Burma.

To appreciate how the exegetical epistemology of the higher forms of knowledge functions in this attempt, consider that in the introduction to his transliteration of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, Deshpande labels the Mingun Jetavana a "religious reformer" who "couched these reformist ideas"—like the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*—"as doctrines passed on [by the Buddha] to future monks (*anāgatabhikkūnaṃ esa nayo dinno* . . . )" (Deshpande 1999, p. 7). According to this concept as formulated by the Mingun Jetavana, the *Milindapañha* contains quasi-esoteric lessons or hitherto-hidden methods of interpretation that were embedded for monks far into the future, when the conditions for such lessons and methods would be conducive for the full ripening of their relevance. The special capacity claimed by a commentator like the Mingun Jetavana is the ability to discover such interpretive methods "for future monks" (P. *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ*) in the root text, to recognize past utterances or proclamations scattered throughout the Pāli canon and elucidate how they bear on the present moment. This process of identifying latent methods imbedded by the Buddha for future generations is exactly what the Mingun Jetavana does when introducing the issue of higher ordination for *bhikkhunī*s in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*.

## 5. Mingun Jetavana's Argument for Reviving the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*

The point in the *Milindapañha* at which the Mingun Jetavana makes his intervention regarding the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is in a dilemmatic, two-pronged question (P. *ubhato-koṭika pañha*) in the *Meṇḍakapañhakaṇḍa* (*Chapter of Questions on the Ram*) concerning the longevity of the *sāsana*, a perennially debated question in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. In the *Milindapañha*, King Milinda asks Nāgasena about an apparent contradiction between two statements made by the Buddha concerning the duration of his teachings: in the *Cullavagga* of the Vinayapiṭaka, it is said that the *sāsana* will only last 500 years, which stands in contrast to a statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Great Complete Nirvana*)

recounting the Buddha's final months, where, "in response to the question put by Subhadda the recluse", the Buddha replies that "if in this system the [monks] live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahant*s" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186). The first statement, as Nāgasena explains, is in reference to the Buddha's decision to admit women into the *saṅgha* as *bhikkhunī*s, at which point he predicts that as a result of permitting female ordination, the *sāsana* will last half as long, from 1000 to 500 years.[21]

After explaining Nāgasena's resolution of this prima facie dilemma, which dismisses the apparent contradiction by clarifying that the first statement refers to the temporal range of the *sāsana*, while the second statement was made in the context of the "actual practice of the religious life" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186), the Mingun Jetavana pivots to invoke the epistemology of the *abhiññā*s, asking "[b]ut in regard to this question [about the disappearance of the *sāsana*], this method is handed down to future monks. What is this method handed down to future monks?"[22] In answering his own question, the Mingun Jetavana sets up a juxtaposition with two statements by the Buddha found in the Vinayapiṭaka concerning the ordination of women: the first is "I allow, o *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s;"[23] the second statement is "a female undergoing a probationary course (*sikkhamānā*) who has been trained in the six *dhamma*s for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders."[24] The first statement refers to the ordination of 500 "Sākyan" women from the royal court of the Buddha's father, who were admitted into the *saṅgha* through a ceremony overseen only by monks after Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's maternal aunt and stepmother, accepted the eight "heavy rules" (P. *garudhamma*s) of respect towards *bhikkhu*s, thereby becoming the first *bhikkhunī*.[25] The second statement is the sixth *garudhamma* itself, which was a prerequisite for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's own ordination and which tradition has taken to apply to all subsequent *bhikkhunī*s as well. According to the sixth *garudhamma*, in order to enter into this probationary period, the female candidate must first be granted permission by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.[26] While it is true that in the absence of such a *saṅgha*, a woman cannot even embark on this preliminary stage to becoming a *bhikkhunī*, it is further stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma* that a female probationer must seek ordination from both orders, meaning first the *bhikkhunī-* and then the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* The inability to meet these two criteria, that of being admitted as probationers by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and then receiving a two-sided ordination from both monks and nuns, is considered by conservative legalists as the major barrier to ordaining women as *bhikkhunī*s in the present age. However, for the Mingun Jetavana, the real problem is that monks alive today consider these two statements made by the Buddha as being in conflict. The apparent juxtaposition here is that either women are to be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* alone, or by both the *bhikkhunī-* and the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, but that both scenarios cannot be valid at once.

The Mingun Jetavana's purpose in setting up this juxtaposition is to show that these two statements are in fact not in conflict, but rather, both point in their own way to the underlying intention of the Buddha, namely, that "with respect to the two utterances the meaning is shown in each case just that a woman should be ordained."[27] What the commentator is doing in this instance is actually setting up his own dilemmatic, two-pronged question, effectively emulating the logic of the *Milindapañha*. Taking on the role of King Milinda, the interrogator of the root text, the Mingun Jetavana writes the following:

> [According to] one [view], the woman who is to be ordained is to be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*. [According to] another [view], the woman to be ordained is to be ordained by both [the female and male] *saṅgha*[s]. Future *bhikkhu*s holding such wrong views, having seized on a particular meaning for the sake of explaining their wrong views, [will say] according to their opinion, "O Friend, if it was said by the Tathāgata, 'I allow, o *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s,' with this utterance, the utterance [also spoken by the Tathāgata] 'A female undergoing a probationary course who has been trained in the six dham-

> mas for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders' [should then be considered] wrong."[28]

In this quote, the Mingun Jetavana is describing future monks, future, that is, to the Buddha, meaning he is obliquely calling out his contemporaries. Their views are "wrong" (P. *micchā*) in so far as they are arguing for the exclusivity of one utterance by the Buddha in contrast to the other (e.g., *yam vacanaṃ, tam micchā*). In the next part of this passage, the Mingun Jetavana writes that other future monks may say, in contrast to the first position, that

> "if it was said by the Tathāgata 'a female undergoing a probationary course who has been trained in the six *dhamma*s for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders,' indeed according to this [statement], [the Tathāgata's] utterance 'I allow, o *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s,' is likewise wrong.[29]

As the Mingun Jetavana has framed the issue of the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* above, there are essentially two positions held by future monks, both standing in opposition to each other:

> Is it not then that a two-sided ordination has been prohibited [by the statement] that a woman should be ordained by the one[-sided] *bhikkhu-saṅgha*? [Likewise, is it not then] that a one[-sided] ordination by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* is prohibited for a woman [by the statement] that a women should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha*? Therefore, one [statement] prohibits the other, [for] one [view of future monks] is that a women should be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, another [view of future monks] is that a women should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha* [of both monks and nuns], this is as such a two-pronged question (*ubhato-koṭika*).[30]

Hence, either ordination by one side of the *saṅgha* (i.e., *bhikkhu*s ordaining *bhikkhunī*s) is permitted, negating other options, or dual ordination alone is permitted, carried out first by *bhikkhunī*s then sanctioned by *bhikkhu*s, thereby invalidating the one-sided option. The one-sided method is that which was carried out for the 500 Sākyan women who followed Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and is one means proposed by those presently wishing to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (see, e.g., Anālayo 2017). The second method,[31] where the ordination ceremony is essentially carried out twice, first by *bhikkhunī*s, then by *bhikkhu*s, is the preferred means prescribed by Theravāda conservative legalists like Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa seen above. This preference for the two-sided method has itself become convention, for as Bodhi reminds us, "[f]rom the time the bhikkhunī saṅgha reached maturity until it demise, the dual-saṅgha ordination was regarded in Theravada countries as mandatory" (Bodhi 2010, p. 106). Yet, the binary framing of the two positions is deliberately simplistic and diametrical on the part of the Mingun Jetavana, for in the spirit of the *Milindapañha*, the role of Nāgasena is to demonstrate that the two-pronged questions put forth by Milinda are in fact fallacious (S. *ābhāsa*) because the apparent "alternatives are not [really] opposed to each other" (Solomon 1976, 1:508). Hence, the key to overcoming such a dilemma is to reveal that there is ultimately no conflict between the two statements, crucial in this case since both are spoken by the Buddha—held to be incapable of contradiction by all parties in this debate.

According to the Mingun Jetavana, the inability of monks to "answer and analyze this two-pronged question at present"[32] causes some of his co-religionists to argue for the exclusivity of these dueling positions, without realizing that both statements can be true under different circumstances. In clarifying these circumstances, the Mingun Jetavana writes that "in this matter we state: the Blessed one said, 'I allow, *o bhikkhu*s, the *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s.' Additionally, that utterance of the Blessed One is a resolution (*pariccheda)* because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*."[33] In other words, the reason why this regulation was initially laid down by the Buddha is because at that moment in the history of the *sāsana*, there was no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, an extenuating circumstance necessitating the single-sided ordination of the 500 Sākyan women by *bhikkhu*s alone. Simply put, there was no other way to bring them into the history of the *sāsana* and fulfill the Buddha's (purportedly reluctant) wish. In contrast, for the Mingun Jetavana, the second

statement pertaining to the two-year training period of any prospective *bhikkhunī* is a regulation referring to "the practice of the female novice,"[34] the normal course of progress for a trainee under ideal conditions. Put another way, the first statement is about the evolution of the *sāsana* more broadly, while the second statement is about "a two-stage *procedure* for dual ordination" (Anālayo 2017, p. 18) (emphasis added).[35] Hence, just as Nāgasena's resolution of the two statements about the longevity of the *sāsana* (concerning its 500-year span in contrast to the Buddha's reply to Subhadda), the first statement allowing monks to ordain nuns is for the Mingun Jetavana temporal in nature, one contingent on historical circumstances, while the second statement about a candidate for ordination first seeking permission from the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* to enter the two-year training period refers to the actual practice and proceedings of the spiritual life, one that assumes all other attendant conditions have been met, such as the existence of a contemporaneous *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.[36] The Mingun Jetavana has thus mapped this same relationship between the two statements made by the Buddha about the longevity of the *sāsana* in the *Milindapañha* onto the contemporary issue of re-ordaining women as *bhikkhunī*s, such that in his analysis of the two-pronged question, "one [regulation] is far away from the other. One is not shared with the other. One is not mixed with the other."[37] With the correct analysis, then, the Mingun Jetavana claims there is no contradiction at all.

The key to understanding the Mingun Jetavana's strategy here is in recognizing that for him, these statements represent two distinct forms of regulation laid down by the Buddha. The regulation invoked by the Mingun Jetavana that comes first in the historical sequence of events is the sixth *garudhamma*, where a female novice must undertake a two-year probationary period first sanctioned by other *bhikkhunī*s. According to the Mingun Jetavana, this stipulation is known as a "root regulation" (P. *mūla-paññatti*) that was forward looking in nature. It is "forward looking" insofar as it was meant for the *bhikkhunī*s-to-be, because when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepted it along with the other seven *garudhamma*s, the conditions could not possibly be met, as there was then no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could sanction a candidate's status as a probationer or ordain her after the two-year training period. Indeed, for the Mingun Jetavana, the "eight important rules for the *bhikkhunī* [Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī] were spoken [as a whole], made known to the not-yet-arisen *bhikkhunīs* with the status of a root regulation."[38] As a result of this situation of historical absence, when it came time for the 500 Sākyan women to be ordained, the Buddha made what the Mingun Jetavana considers a "supplementary rule" (P. *anupaññatti*), one meant to apply in cases where the root regulations could not be honoured because of extenuating circumstances. In this case, the circumstance was the fact that there was at that time no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that the 500 Sākyan women could turn to, so in order to ensure their *upasampadā*, the Buddha "made known [a rule] with the status of a supplementary regulation, saying 'I allow, o *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s.'"[39] According to this reading, the two rules do not negate each other but are complementary, one modifying the other under special circumstances.

Though it might seem a subtle distinction to us, for the Mingun Jetavana, recognizing these different types of regulation is crucial, as "this supplementary regulation did not achieve the state of being universal[ly applicable] (*sādhāraṇabhāvaṃ*) in regard to both sanction[s] and injunction[s] declared [by the Buddha] before and after [this secondary regulation was promulgated]."[40] What the Mingun Jetavana means here is that the ordination of *bhikkhunī*s by *bhikkhu*s did not become a root regulation that would have been in conflict with other root regulations, but was only valid under certain conditions, never having been outright revoked by the Buddha nor generally applied in all circumstances. In other words, this secondary regulation allowing monks to ordain nuns in no way conflicts with the other root regulations around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* but is designed for only certain circumstances, according to which its relevance is "actualized" and then only. As Bodhi also stresses this point,

> [t]here is nothing in the text itself, or elsewhere in the Pāli Vinaya, that lays down a rule stating categorically that, should the bhikkhunī saṅgha become extinct, the bhikkhus are prohibited from falling back on the original allowance the Buddha gave them to ordain bhikkhunīs and confer upasampadā on their own to resuscitate the bhikkhunī saṅgha. (Bodhi 2010, p. 123)

Instead, it has become traditionally accepted in conservative Theravāda circles that this supplementary rule no longer applies, a localized and entrenched interpretation that the Mingun Jetavana is trying to dispute by his own unique reading of the Vinayapiṭaka.[41] When responding to a contemporary peer questioning his position on the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana reaffirms his view above, emphasising that the "supplementary rule laid down by the Buddha has been unbreakable for 5000 years of the Buddha's dispensation" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 91). That is to say, given the contextual nature of the Vinayapiṭaka, where the interpretation of "case law" has to attend to the actual causes and conditions for the Buddha's proclamations, this secondary regulation is only applicable under the right circumstances, namely, in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In this sense, the "original allowance" that monks could ordain nuns "could be considered a legal precedent" (Bodhi 2010, p. 120), one which has never been overturned. The logic then is inescapable for the Mingun Jetavana: since the Buddha did not revoke this supplementary rule, and since we currently find ourselves in the repeat historical situation where there is no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the supplementary regulation is once again in effect, just as it was for the 500 Sākyan women. As such, the Mingun Jetavana boldly declares the validity of his own interpretation, embedding it in a stock phrase from the Pali canon that collapses the distinction between the time of the Buddha and the twentieth century: "Thus this is indeed permitted by the Blessed One, the one who knows, the one who sees, the Worthy One, by the completely and fully Awakened One, [that] a woman should at present be thus ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha.*"[42]

### 6. *Buddhamataññū*: One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha

By couching his own admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation in this stock phrase, which resembles countless other declarations of the Buddha's knowledge found in the Pali canon,[43] the Mingun Jetavana is essentially claiming that this is the view the Buddha held all along, but which future monks—his contemporaries—were unable to appreciate. Yet, the Mingun Jetavana's unique interpretation as a commentator is not just that the Buddha set up the dynamic between root and secondary regulations to instill an element of ad hoc flexibility in how the *vinaya* was to be executed, but that he foresaw the very historical moment in which we now find ourselves, namely, the non-existence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. My argument is that this resolution of the two apparently contradictory positions around the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is only possible because the Mingun Jetavana, with the higher forms of knowledge as his epistemological foundation, has collapsed the distinction between the age of the Buddha and his own time. He is able to do so because of the underlying concept of omniscience at play in the Vinayapiṭaka, a set of texts which "express the Buddha's omniscience by demonstrating the Buddha's knowledge of time" (Heim 2018, p. 184). If we accept this play of omniscience, alluded to by the two participles "the One who sees, the One who knows" (P. *jānatā passatā*) in the stock phrase above, pronouncements in the Vinayapiṭaka "must be judged not as literal, frozen truths, but as enactments in time" (Gold 2015, p. 118), enactments which unfold according to changing historical circumstances in the life course of the *sāsana*. In more practical terms, Ben Schonthal likens the Vinayapiṭaka to a "living constitution" that has a certain amount of built-in plasticity to respond to the "changing needs of monks" (Schonthal 2018, p. 14). What is vital for our discussion here is that this plasticity in how and when the different regulations are applied is no accident, at least according to the commentarial tradition inherited by the Mingun Jetavana. While early layers of the Pāli canon were ambiguous about the omniscient status of the Buddha, by the commentarial period, we find "expressions like '*atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti*'" used to refer to the Buddha, claiming that he is

one who "knows everything concerning the past, future and present" (Endo 2016, p. 57). The Mingun Jetavana patently agrees, reaffirming in the middle of his argument for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that "all bodily[, vocal and mental] action of the Blessed One [i.e., the Buddha] was preceded by wisdom and accompanied by wisdom. In the past, perfect knowledge was unobstructed. In the future it will be unobstructed. In the present it is unobstructed."[44] In this statement we see that for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha's wisdom is manifest not just in the past—in the Vinayapiṭaka as an historical set of rules—but in the Buddha's future, which has become our present. Such is the critical role that knowledge of the future plays in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, not because the Mingun Jetavana possesses this higher form of knowledge himself but because he is commenting on the words of the Buddha, for whom the obstructions of past, present, and future did and *do* not exist.

Working with the Buddha's omniscience in the background, the Mingun Jetavana is able to admit that the statement, "I allow, o *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s to be ordained by *bhikkhu*s", is "an utterance of the Blessed One spoken in the past, a determination because of the non-existence regarding the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* [at that moment,]" while at the same time claiming it is

> also [a statement] for the future, which is a resolution because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. It is also a resolution [by the Buddha relevant] to the present because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* [in our own time]; having seen with unobstructed perfect knowledge and omniscient wisdom, [the ordination of *bhikkhunī*s by *bhikkhu*s] is to be allowed.[45]

The supplementary rule in question, according to the Mingun Jetavana, was therefore never abrogated or limited because it was meant precisely to apply to the current situation. Thus, for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha, using his knowledge of the future "saw" that "in the future too, the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* will be non-existent."[46] His allowance that *bhikkhu*s could ordain *bhikkhunī*s was not just an expediency applicable to the 500 Sākyan women, as claimed by conservative Theravāda legalists, but a latent means for someone like the Mingun Jetavana to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* 2500 years after the Buddha's passing. Hence, one "should not ignore", in the warning of the Mingun Jetavana, "the sphere of authority of the wisdom of omniscience."[47]

What is most remarkable and perhaps the most contentious about the epistemology of commentary on display here is that by invoking the concept of the methods handed down to future monks, the Mingun Jetavana understands the Buddha to be directly addressing him. For he asserts that in this matter, "the *saṅgha* must be informed by a monk who knows the intention of the Blessed One, who is experienced and competent."[48] In this way, the Mingun Jetavana is ensconcing himself securely within "the sphere of authority of the Buddha's wisdom of omniscience". As a result, he boldly claims, at the end of his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, that "we will know the wish of the Blessed One. We will see the face of the Blessed one like (*saṅkāsa*) the full moon. With the desire to [re]create the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* foremost [in his mind], a monk should cultivate [the teaching] with virtue, in the celebrated place of the Blessed One."[49] This affirmation is rather extraordinary within the context of the neoconservative Theravada orthodoxy of Burma, because the Mingun Jetavana is not just trying to interpret his text, but is putting words into the mouth *and* mind of the Buddha, trying to speak on behalf of the Buddha himself. Put another way, the Mingun Jetavana is making a demand on the intention of the Buddha as expressed in the Vinayapiṭaka, which has major ramifications in a tradition that sees itself as the curator of the Buddha's original and unadulterated teachings. In fact, the Mingun Jetavana is referred to by his present-day disciples as the *buddhamataññū*, or "one who knows the intention of the Buddha".[50] Such a pretension may have been even more controversial than the argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, for as he says above, the Mingun Jetavana is effectively acting "in the celebrated place of the Blessed One (P. *bhagavato thomite ṭhāne*)". As Bodhi explains, "[f]or monks to attempt to reconstitute a broken

bhikkhunī saṅgha, it is said, is to claim a privilege unique to a perfectly enlightened Buddha, and no one but the next Buddha can claim that" (Bodhi 2010, pp. 104–5). Yet, such a claim is exactly what is being made by the Mingun Jetavana in invoking the intention of the Buddha, representing the pinnacle and the boldest conceit of the commentarial vocation.

Ultimately, then, the Mingun Jetavana's argument for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* amounts to a sort of "reverse prolepsis" made possible by the epistemology of the *abhiññā*s not just as powers that collapse time, but as the substratum over which the history of the *sāsana* unfolds. By including knowledge of the future in his list of the higher forms of knowledge, the Mingun Jetavana is setting up what Jonardon Ganeri refers to as the "proleptic" function of commentary, where "an agent might be engaged in an activity of self-consciously addressing a future audience whose socio-political and intellectual context is unknown" (Ganeri 2011, p. 68). Opportunities for proleptic interpretations by commentators are abundant "when the intellectual 'context' is a Sanskrit [or Pāli] knowledge system, an entity conceived of by its participants as possessing enormous longevity" (Ganeri 2011, p. 68). In trying to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana is leveraging the proleptic potential of the Pāli literary world, except in this case, he is applying prolepsis in reverse, since the agent is the historical Buddha, and the Mingun Jetavana has to work backwards from the present to know this agent's intention. Crucially for this commentator, because of the different model of history presented by the *abhiññā*s, the enlightened agent in question actually does know the "socio-political and intellectual content" of the future, at least within the hermeneutical circle, thereby animating the concept of methods handed down for future monks underlying the whole *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*. Such a future, however, is not limited to the disappearance of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but also includes the rise of the mass lay meditation movement in which the Mingun Jetavana was so central. For the Mingun Jetavana, this is a crucial fact, because the rise of *vipassanā* meditation for lay people has utterly transformed the soteriological landscape for women in twentieth-century Burma. To appreciate the full framework within which the Mingun Jetavana makes his argument, then, we must attend to the soteriological ramifications of this movement, for what is at stake is not just the ordination of women, as pressing as that is, but the vitality of the *sāsana* itself. This concern, I argue, is also what we see in the advocacy of Ādiccavaṃsa, a junior contemporary of the Mingun Jetavana who argued for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in part based on his own readings of the *Milindapañha*. To therefore widen the scope of this argument and contextualize my discussion on discourses about *sāsana* decline in twentieth-century Burma, I will leave the Mingun Jetavana for the moment and attend to the controversial vision of *sāsana* history offered by Ādiccavaṃsa, before tying this vision back into the broader project of *vipassanā* meditation advanced by the Mingun Jetavana.

## 7. Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa

A gifted scholar and progressive thinker, Ādiccavaṃsa had diverse interests not limited to Buddhism. Going against the monastic consensus at the time about the centrality of Pāli and Burmese in religious education, Ādiccavaṃsa was an Anglophone who spent over ten years in England starting in the late 1920s (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 108). In addition to English, he "pursued further studies in [. . . ] Hind[i], Sanskrit, Urdu, Bengali, and Japanese script in India, Sri Lanka and England. He had [a] desire to write Buddhist literatures into these languages" (Tejinda 2017, p. 42). According to Janaka Ashin, "Ādiccavaṃsa twice refused to accept the coveted *Aggamahāpaṇḍita* title [as a foremost Pāli scholar in Burma] because he did not want to be complicit with the colonial authorities" and even went so far as to declare that "he was not sure that Buddhism was the highest truth, and that if he found a higher truth he would accept it in preference to Buddhism" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 109; see also Kawanami 2007, p. 231).[51] As these statements indicate, Ādiccavaṃsa was not against reforming the neoconservative Theravāda Buddhism in his native Burma, becoming "an advocate for vegetarianism for both monks and the laity (Janaka Ashin 2016,

p. 112). He also "allow[ed] laypersons to wear shoes in his monastery in Yangon" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 133), demonstrating his relatively liberal attitude to Buddhism.

This liberal attitude was also evident in Ādiccavaṃsa's approach to reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In 1935, he published a monograph in Burmese of over 297 pages titled the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*. As the title indicates, Ādiccavaṃsa advocates for reinstating full ordination for women in Burma, deploying some of the same arguments that the Mingun Jetavana would use in his *Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā* that the latter started three or four years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* was published. Although in his 2017 thesis Ashin Tejinda suggests that the Mingun Jetavana followed the lead of Ādiccavaṃsa, the timeline and provenance of these arguments are not so clear, and it is probably more accurate to see such ideas as generally percolating amongst subsections of the monastic and lay community before their proclamations in print. For instance, in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa references the Mingun Jetavana when giving his initial rebuttal to opponents of his ideas, citing the latter as an authority in the Pāli canon and implying that the Mingun Jetavana either shared or was sympathetic to his views around re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 22).

A second link between these two is the fact that the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* was first written at the behest of the Mingun Jetavana's prominent lay student and the meditation teacher, U Myat Kyaw (ဦး မြတ်ကျော် Ūḥ Mrat kyau also known as မင်းကွန်းဓမ္မကထိက ဦး ပဏ္ဍိဓမ္မ Maṅḥ kvanḥ dhammakathika Ūḥ Paṇḍidhamma, 1884–1947; hereafter Myat Kyaw (Pruṃḥ khyau 2009, pp. 332, 334)). Maung Maung refers to Myat Kyaw, who was previously a *bhikkhu*, as "[o]ne of the most influential and dedicated founders of meditation centres intended specifically to take in lay aspirants for the serious pursuit of the Buddha's *dhamma*" (Maung Maung 1980, p. 113), claiming that in "the early 1930s, his was the most widely known and accepted of the meditation centres exclusively organized and run for the lay public" (Maung Maung 1980, p. 114).[52] In the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa explains that his monograph partly arose from a casual conversation between Myat Kyaw, Ādiccavaṃsa, and others[53] on the possibility of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and without explicit permission, Myat Kyaw reported on the conversation and had it published in a newspaper under a pseudonym (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 5–6). The resulting controversy in the public sphere compelled Ādiccavaṃsa to write on this subject, especially after Myat Kyaw beseeched him to intervene in the ensuing debate (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 7–9). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti*, the 1965 biography of Ādiccavaṃsa, adds that Myat Kyaw "made copies of the finished manuscript with a typewriter and sent them to the leading scholarly monks (*piṭaka sayadaw*s) throughout the Myanmar nation to receive [their] opinions"[54] (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 16). Given the intimacy between the Mingun Jetavana and Myat Kyaw, and between Myat Kyaw and Ādiccavaṃsa, it is likely that the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa were aware of each other's ideas around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and may have even developed their arguments in collaboration. What makes them both unique, however, is their willingness to attach their names to such views and assert their arguments in print and for posterity.

As a result of publishing his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, Ādiccavaṃsa was roundly criticized by other monastics and lay people in Burmese newspapers in 1934 and 1935, with an action taken against him called a *pakāsanīya-kamma*, what Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates as an "information-transaction" where the lay community is informed that the charged individual is a "changed man whose actions no longer reflected the will of the [monastic] Community" (Ṭhānissaro 2013, II:1289). At its core, the *pakāsanīya-kamma* is "a public accusation of wrongdoing" (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220), meant to advance an open and civil censure of an individual monastic without actually taking formal action against the individual within the confines of the monastic code.[55] While Ādiccavaṃsa was not forced to disrobe (as he did not commit an identifiable *pārājika* offence), Kawanami describes the monastic hierarchy as "subjecting [him] to a prolonged period of isolation" because of his publication, during which he "was excluded from all *Saṅgha* activities" (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* points out that one of the lay people leading the charge

against Ādiccavaṃsa in the proceedings was U Saw (ဦး စော Ūḥ co, 1900–1948), the would-be prime minister of Burma from 1940–1942 and the person executed for the assassination of General Aung San in 1947 (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 22), indicating that the whole affair was highly politicized and of national import. After the public condemnation of Ādiccavaṃsa in the *pakāsanīya-kamma*, he composed a second book detailing the events, *Bhikkhunī areḥ puṃ kyam* (ဘိက္ခုနီအရေးပုံကျမ်း *Story of the Bhikkhunī Affair*). In this text, which is 434 pages long, Ādiccavaṃsa lists the arguments for and against his earlier monograph, cites the main people involved in his *pakāsanīya* censure, and further explains his reasons for wading into the controversy.[56] While the *Bhikkhunī areḥ puṃ kyam* is an important text in need of further study, I will limit my discussion here to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, comparing Ādiccavaṃsa's argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* with that of the Mingun Jetavana.

**8. Argument of the *Bhikkhunī-Sāsanopadesa***

The first question that arises is what was so controversial in the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* that made public figures like U Saw bring a *pakāsanīya-kamma* against its author? The obvious answer is that Ādiccavaṃsa was arguing against received orthodoxy in reinstating the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and like the Mingun Jetavana, using the Pāli canon to do so. In fact, Ādiccavaṃsa's argument is strikingly similar to that of the latter, as both advocated for the single-ordination method where *bhikkhu*s ordain *bhikkhunī*s. According to Ādiccavaṃsa, the situation is quite simple, for the "*Bhikkhunī Saṃgha* can be revived as long as [the] *Bhikkhu Saṃgha* wh[ich] can give ordination in accordance with the first rule exists" (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 47).[57] The reason for this allowance is because, like the Mingun Jetavana, Ādiccavaṃsa takes the Buddha's declaration that *bhikkhunī*s can be ordained by *bhikkhu*s as being still valid (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 72–73). Part of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument rests on the fact that when the Buddha meant for one set of rules to override earlier pronouncements, he explicitly abolished the initial rule. For example:

> With regard to the *Bhikkhu* ordination, the Buddha originally prescribed "*Bhikkhus*, I allow giving of higher ordination by taking three refuges". Later the Buddha said, "From this day on, *Bhikkhus*, I abolish ordination by taking the three refuges that I had prescribed *Bhikkhus*, I allow ordination by *Ñatticatutthakammavācā* (*kammavaca* of *four ñatti*)". Just as the Buddha officially abolished *Bhikkhu* ordination by taking the three refuges, here also [in the case of the one-sided ordination of *bhikkhunī*s by *bhikkhu*s], he should have officially withdrawn the first rule if he had a desire to abolish it. This case is very significant. He did not withdraw the first rule. Therefore, it is still valid.[58] (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, pp. 44–45)

What we see in this excerpt from the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* is Ādiccavaṃsa making his own claim on the intention of the Buddha without recourse to the Buddha's knowledge of the future or other *abhiññā*s. Instead, he is arguing for the consistency of the Buddha in laying down the rules for ordination as found in the Vinayapiṭaka, using an analogous case to imply that we should not treat the ordination of women as some separate category distinct in kind from the ordination of men. In this instance, Ādiccavaṃsa is being a literalist in his hermeneutics in upholding the integrity of the Pāli canon, contending that the absence of a clear abrogation of the regulation that *bhikkhu*s can ordain *bhikkhunī*s is a positive sign that the Buddha never meant for this rule to lapse, even with the introduction of the sixth *garudhamma* stipulating that women should be ordained by *bhikkhunī*s first. The implication here is that if the Buddha wanted to abolish the method of singled-sided *upasampadā* for women, he would have explicitly done so.

Yet, while the Mingun Jetavana makes a subtle distinction between this sixth *garudhamma*, which he sees as a root regulation, and the declaration by the Buddha that *bhikkhunī*s can be ordained by *bhikkhu*s, which he takes as a supplementary regulation meant to apply in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Ādiccavaṃsa again deploys a more literal reading of the *garudhamma*s as a whole, focusing on their Pāli designation as *ovāda*. He points out that

the Pāli word *ovāda,* which means "admonishing; instruction; counsel" (Cone, s.v. *ovāda*), implies that these conditions are not binding but "a kind of a provisional code that was drawn up before any problem had actually come about" (Kawanami 2007, p. 236). To this end, Ādiccavaṃsa bluntly states that the "Eight *Garudhamma*s are not rules. In *Aṭṭhakatha,* they have been used as a metaphor like rules. Indeed, they are an agreement of women to become *Bhikkhuni.* If the *Garudhammas* are accepted as an agreement, it was intended to be used only for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to become a *Bhikkhunī*"[59] (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 48). As this above quote indicates, Ādiccavaṃsa also takes the *garudhamma*s to be problematic and is interpreting them figuratively, as "metaphors" meant to guide the practice of *bhikkhunī*s, but which are not binding. Since they are not binding, he believes the inability to follow their letter should not disbar a woman from receiving the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*.[60]

The reason why Ādiccavaṃsa must mitigate the authority of the *garudhamma*s to advance his argument is because according to the sixth *garudhamma*, female candidates must be ordained by both sides of the *saṅgha*. In this process, the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* performs the ceremony first after the candidate has been "questioned about various obstructions to ordination, among them issues relating to a women's sexual identity" (Bodhi 2010, p. 122). Only after the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* has ordained the candidate, the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* then performs essentially the same procedure, without carrying out this potentially sensitive line of questioning. Yet, despite the temporal precedence afforded the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in this procedure, the entire process must still be sanctioned by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, meaning that "[i]n this arrangement, it is still the bhikkhu saṅgha that functions as the ultimate authority determining the validity of the ordination" (Bodhi 2010, p. 122). Simply put, it is the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* that oversees the ordination of women in the end, even in the presence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha.* Ādiccavaṃsa argues the same point, writing that

> [a]ccording to the *Pāli* word, *"ekato upasampann*[*ā*]*ya"* [(by being ordained by one side)] *Bhikkhunī ordination* has not yet completed and it is just for the sake of clearance in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṃgha.* The interrogation in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṃgha* was permitted merely to relieve the shyness and fear of female candidates. Hence, permission only for interrogation is obvious. Consequently, it should not be in vain to benefits of all women folks and Buddha *Sāsanā* due to the lack of the *Bhikkhunīs* who have duty merely for an interrogation.[61] (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 46)

In this line of thought, Ādiccavaṃsa is interpreting the sixth *garudhamma*'s requirement of a two-sided ordination as more a guideline or best-case scenario, meant to spare potentially reluctant female candidates the embarrassment of revealing personal details to *bhikkhu*s. Again, he is claiming that this regulation should not be seen as binding or used as an obstacle to block the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* but was rather a means to remove any impediments which might "interrupt the carrying out of ordination" for women (Anālayo 2017, p. 20). Indeed, as Bodhi makes clear from his own reading of the "variant cases section attached to the [relevant] bhikkhunī" monastic rules (*pācittiya*s 63 and 64), "the Vinaya did not regard as invalid an upasampadā ordination that failed to fully conform to the procedures laid down in the eight garudhamma" (Bodhi 2010, p. 128), adding further evidence to Ādiccavaṃsa's figurative reading of the *garudhamma*s as helpful but not compulsory instructions.

It is not surprising, then, that when responding to the efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* by Saccavādī in Sri Lanka, the state monastic hierarchy (the State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka နိုင်ငံတော်သံဃာ့မဟာနာယကအဖွဲ့ *Nuiṅ ṅaṃ tau saṃghā. mahānāyaka aphvai.*) of Burma composed a judgement that, according to Kawanami, "focuses on the nature of the *garudhamma* rules" (Kawanami 2007, p. 234). This judgement, titled *Bhikkhunī vinicchaya cā tamḥ* (ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း *Record of the Bhikkhunī Decision*; hereafter the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya*),[62] in essence builds its case on the sixth *garudhamma* rule necessitating that a female candidate for *upasampadā* receive her ordination from a dual *saṅgha*. While Ādiccavaṃsa takes this rule (and the other seven *garudhamma*) to be unnecessary, and while the Mingun Jetavana

understands the *garudhamma*s as root regulations that can be modified or amended in conjunction with supplementary regulations, the "Burmese *Saṅgha* holds that th[e sixth *garudhamma*] is a major ruling, which is binding, and therefore the 'dual' ordination stipulated in it has to be adhered to at all costs" (Kawanami 2007, p. 235). Although the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* was written in 2004, almost seventy years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* of Ādiccavaṃsa, it represents the orthodox perspective of the state-sanctioned monastic establishment in Burma, one that was likely inherited from the monastic hierarchy in the first half of the twentieth century. By undermining the status of the *garudhamma*s, Ādiccavaṃsa therefore was not just (seen to be) reinterpreting the Pāli canon but undermining the official interpretation of the Burmese monastic community, or rather, the right of the *saṅgha* hierarchy to make such final pronouncements over what does and does not count as orthodox opinion. Hence, while the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* are what ostensibly "attracted the attention of the general public, [. . . ] they were alerted to the fact that seemingly [Ādiccavaṃsa] was trying to challenge the authority of the *Saṅgha*" (Kawanami 2007, p. 231). To do so, or at least to be perceived as doing so, is much more provocative than advocating for the reinstatement of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, for it potentially subverts the monastic hierarchy's monopoly on interpreting the Pāli canon and their view of *sāsana* history as a whole.

**9. Beyond the 5000-Year Limit of the *Sāsana***

The purpose in taking this detour into the arguments of Ādiccavaṃsa is to demonstrate that the controversy around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* must thus be understood as one aspect of the centuries-old debate in Burma around the longevity of the *sāsana*. This connection is clear given the canonical account of the Buddha's early reluctance to admit women into the monastic community, where it is said he feared doing so would shorten the timespan of his teachings by one half. The *garudhamma*s, also at the centre of debates around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, were instituted, according to the commentarial explanation, to prevent just such a decline after allowing women to ordain as *bhikkhunī*s. Hence, when stating its opinion against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* of the State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka quotes the preeminent Burmese scholar monk, the Mingun Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်းဆရာတော် Maṅḥ kvanḥ Cha rā tau, also known as, Ūḥ Vicittasarabhivaṃsa; 1911–1993), not to be confused with the Mingun Jetavana, who signals the highest of stakes in this debate: "In the world, [the] danger [to] the Buddha *Sasana* actually appears because some monks are trying to revive [the] *Bhikkhunī sāsana*"[63] (Bhv trans. Tejinda 2017, p. 81). At issue, then, is nothing less than the survival of the *sāsana* itself. It is no surprise, then, that almost the final third of Ādiccavaṃsa's *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, from pages 219 to the conclusion on 297, is devoted to discussing the various timelines for the disappearance of the *sāsana*. These timelines include what is found in the Pāli canon, the Pāli commentaries, the views of Burmese monks like the Ledi Sayadaw, the position of Ādiccavaṃsa's contemporaries, and the views of Ādiccavaṃsa himself. The position of Ādiccavaṃsa on the timeline of the *sāsana*, it appears, was considered unorthodox and catalyzed in part the initial hostility to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*. When discussing the newspaper headlines of those protesting Ādiccavaṃsa's publication, the author of the 1965 *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* states that alongside the effort to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Ādiccavaṃsa's contention that "'the life of the Buddha's *sāsana* also is more than 500 [years, that] it may be longer because one wants for it to be longer than 6000 [years]' has surely been disturbing to dogmatic people who have already formed the opinion that says, 'the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* is not able to exist at all. The age of the *sāsana* is also [5000] years only'" (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, pp. 16–17). The 5000-year timeline of the Buddha's *sāsana* is not found fully formed in canonical texts but "appear[s] for the first time in the commentarial literature of the Pāli tradition" (Endo 2013, p. 136). Despite the many discrepancies in the accounts of this process of degeneration among the various commentaries (Endo 2013, p. 135), the 5000-year duration of the *sāsana* is taken as the orthodox model in Burma, with any aberrations meeting with strict monastic sanction or even harsh state repression.[64]

Ādiccavaṃsa partly develops his position on the longevity of the *sāsana* based on the *Milindapañha*, the same text that the Mingun Jetavana comments on and uses to propound his own theory for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*,[65] demonstrating yet another link between these two. Coming in between the Pāli canonical texts and the commentaries, Toshiichi Endo clarifies that the *Milindapañha* "shows a new classification of the disappearance of the True Dhamma, a step further than its canonical interpretation, and this classification can be regarded as a link connecting the Canon to the commentaries" (Endo 2013, p. 127). Indeed, the *Milindapañha* is considered paracanonical in all Theravāda countries except Burma, where it was officially endorsed as part of the Pāli canon (as the last book in the *Khuddakanikāya*) during the 1871 Fifth Council, which took place in Burma under King Mindon (မင်းတုန်းမင်း Maṅḥ tunḥ maṅḥ, r. 1853–1878), the penultimate monarch of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885). The canonical status of the *Milindapañha* is thus important for Ādiccavaṃsa's textual argument because it affords the statements found in the *Milindapañha* precedence over the commentarial accounts of the longevity of the *sāsana* used to support the conventional view. To make his case that the *sāsana* will last more than 5000 years, Ādiccavaṃsa examines the same two-pronged, dilemmatic question that the Mingun Jetavana uses to introduce his arguments for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, namely, the apparent contradiction between the Buddha's prediction that the *sāsana* will last only 500 years on account of admitting women into the *saṅgha* and the prediction to Subhadda the recluse that "if in this system the monks live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahant*s" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186).

In terms of the first statement, Ādiccavaṃsa deploys a creative reading of the root text, taking the numbers referenced by the Buddha as more figurative than literal. In the *Cullavagga* of the Vinayapiṭaka (Vin II 256; see also A IV 278), the Buddha says that without the ordination of women, the *sāsana* would have lasted for 1000 years (P. *sahassaṃ*), but due to the admission of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and the subsequent Sākyan women into the *saṅgha*, the *sāsana* would now last only 500 years. In Ādiccavaṃsa's interpretation of this passage, "because [the word] '*sahassa*' is an indefinite number—the meaning says [something like] 'many thousands' [of years]" (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 256). If we take the Pāli word for "1000" to be an indefinite number, as Ādiccavaṃsa suggests, it follows

> then [that] in this *Bhikkhunī-khandhaka* [(*Chapter on Bhikkhunīs*) in the Vinayapiṭaka], the Buddha saying "*sahassaṃ*" is merely [tantamount to] 'one thousand,' it did not imply the [real] quantity. Actually, it is like weighing the pros and cons and [to teach otherwise] is like preaching [based on] an assumption (*parikappa*). The [correct] meaning is if in the event that the *sāsana* will have one thousand [of some ratio], by allowing women to be *bhikkhunī*s, the *sāsana* now will have 500 [according to the same ratio] only. It means that [the given duration] has decreased in half.[66] (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 255–56)

In what we may call a latitudinal interpretation of the root text, Ādiccavaṃsa is claiming that the Buddha was not saying the *sāsana* will only last 500 years compared to 1000 if women had never been ordained, but rather, that it will merely decrease in half, with "1000" a sort of synecdoche for a long period of time, similar to how "10,000" is used as a rounded shorthand for an extremely large quantity in classical South and East Asian texts. Instead of lamenting the fact that women have decreased the life of the *sāsana*, Ādiccavaṃsa's point is that the Buddha was "weighing the pros and cons" of his decision, such that while the life of the *sāsana* will be decreased by half, it was still worthwhile to admit women because hypothetically, twice as many people will reach nirvana. To Ādiccavaṃsa, this interpretation of the "indefinite" number given in the Pāli canon affords him the freedom to not only increase the lifespan of the *sāsana* beyond 1000 years, but to even transgress the commentarial limit of 5000 years. To claim otherwise and insist on these actual quantities is, in his opinion, to base one's understanding on an assumption (P. *parikappa*), an assumption that has becomes crystallized and reified as unimpeachable tradition. It is this very tradition of interpretation that Ādiccavaṃsa is questioning here.

Yet, it is perhaps his reading of the second statement, the Buddha's prediction to Subhadda, that is most critical for Ādiccavaṃsa's argument. According to him, "the word that was preached to Subhad[da] with the saying: 'If these monks completely act according to the intention to live well, the world does not cease to have *arahant*s' is the phrase that shows the power of practice"[67] (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 231). Ādiccavaṃsa goes on to explain that according to the interpretation given in the *Milindapañha*, "if there is practice, [the *sāsana*] continues to exist. The fact that the *saṅgha* is keeping [the precepts] and as long as [this practice] does not disappear, it is likely that the noble *sāsana* will continue to exist and be prominent"[68] (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232). When glossing what he means by practice, Ādiccavaṃsa follows the *Milindapañha* and gives the Pāli word *paṭipatti*, which refers both to the moral life (P. *brahmacariyā*) and training in meditation. Elsewhere in this same passage, Ādiccavaṃsa uses the Burmese word *kyaṅ. vat* (B. ကျင့်ဝတ်), which means "code of conduct; rules of conduct; moral code" (MAA, s.v. *kyaṅ. vat*). The idea of moral practice is the obvious referent here, but by examining the account given in the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument, we see an orientation towards taking *paṭipatti* as rather more concerned with the practice of meditation. In discussing the Buddha's prediction, Ādiccavaṃsa's biographer writes that

> In like manner, after coming to know with all certainly the age of the *sāsana*, that by continuously and correctly keeping all [the Buddha's] teachings of the good *dhamma* (*saddhamma*), we realize again that the *arahant* is incapable of ceasing to exist. Therefore, in this age, there are many people who carry out *paṭipatti* practice to attain nirvana, and [many] are doing so successfully.[69] (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 27)

As reported by the biographer, the force of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument about the longevity of the *sāsana* is not just that the *sāsana* will last longer than 5000 years, but that *arahant*s—beings who have reached nirvana according to Theravāda soteriology—still exist today. This interpretation runs counter to the commentarial timeline of *sāsana* decay, which sees the stages of the path culminating in nirvana as increasingly harder if not impossible to obtain as history progresses. Indeed, it is implied in the commentary on the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the *Manorathapūraṇī*, that the ability to reach nirvana will disappear after the first two thousand years after the Buddha's passing (Endo 2013, p. 129). Writing in the middle of the third millennium after the Buddha, Ādiccavaṃsa is flouting the commentarial account of the disappearance of the *sāsana*, suggesting, at least according to his biography, that "if one really acts with [proper] intention and strives in the *paṭipatti* practice of the *vipassanā* [meditation] stages in conformity with the Buddha['s teaching], one is able to become not only a stream-entrant (B. သောတာပန် *sotāpan*), a once-returner (B. သကဒါဂါမ် *sakadāgām*), or a non-returner (B. အနာဂါမ် *anāgām*), but an *arahant* (B. ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) in the present" (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 28). We must be cognizant of the fact that Ādiccavaṃsa's biography is coming fifteen years after its subject's passing, and thirty years after the publication of his controversial book, at a time when *vipassanā* has a great deal of political and cultural capital. It is possible that the author of the biography is reading his interpretation back into the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, but given Ādiccavaṃsa's connection with the famous meditation teacher, Myat Kyaw, and his reference to the Mingun Jetavana in support of his arguments, it is not unlikely that Ādiccavaṃsa was influenced by the rise of the mass lay meditation movement when writing his tract to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.[70] In this way, his *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* not only advocates for reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* but for reimagining the whole life course of the *sāsana* according to the "power of practice".

## 10. Opening the Path

After this discussion on Ādiccavaṃsa's *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa* and his controversial view of the longevity of the *sāsana*, we are now in a position to return to the animating question of this paper, namely, what is and is not possible in the current *sāsana* age? More to the point of our discussion, the question now becomes, how does a shift in what is possible

motivate the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*? To understand the connection between the vitality or decline of the *sāsana* and female ordination, we must return to the Mingun Jetavana and the *Milindapañha*. According to the Mingun Jetavana's disciples and those in his lineage, the rise of the lay-centred, mass-meditation movement dramatically transformed the landscape of the Buddha's *sāsana* in twentieth-century Burma. In his biography, Tikkhācāra, explains how he views the role of his teacher in the history of Buddhism:

> Now, it is exactly half of sāsana, as it is 2500 years after the Buddha's demise. It exactly coincides with the Venerable Mingun [Jetavana] Sayādawgyi's 45-year mission accomplished by rediscovering and revealing the path of mindfulness that has now shone in all directions. It is exactly during half of sāsana's lifespan that [the Mingun Jetavana] rediscovered and revealed the Path [to Nirvana] to the people home and abroad. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, pp. 129–30)

Note, first of all, the equivocation between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana here, namely, that the Mingun Jetavana's teaching mission is said to have lasted 45 years, the same length of time ascribed to the Buddha's own period of teaching in the Pāli canon. In making a further parallel between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, Tikkhācāra cites a prediction (B. တဆော့ *ta bhoṅ*)[71] said to be about his teacher, then offers a poem based on this prediction:

> Almost half of sāsana, a peerless monk—endowed with great accumulation of merit and with profound wisdom powerful like *the weapon of diamond*—will appear on earth in the same way as Venerable Moggaliputta [from the *Kathāvatthu*] and Venerable Nāgasena [from the *Milindapañha*].
>
> He would set up the victory flag at the tip of the raft sailing it to [nirvana]. Anybody wishing to follow him should shine the light of mindfulness-based wisdom removing the darkness of delusion. Hypothetically, he may be on this planet just to represent the Buddha himself. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 130) (emphasis in original)

At this point, it is important to note that this biography is not to be taken as an accurate portrayal of the life of the Mingun Jetavana, with its obviously mythic portrayal of its subject. Instead, I want to suggest something even more provocative, following Houtman: this biography is to be taken as an encapsulated history of the *sāsana* itself. Indeed, in the Burmese context, there is a certain "fuzziness" when it comes to demarcating the history of a single individual and the history of the *sāsana* in general (Houtman 1997, p. 312). This fuzziness means that the history of the *sāsana* often collapses into and is reflected by the life of an individual, which is precisely what is seen in this biography of the Mingun Jetavana from 1957. By thus deploying and reinterpreting predictions around the half-way point of the Buddha's *sāsana*, his biographer and community of monastic and lay meditators elevate the Mingun Jetavana to the position of Nāgasena, who was reborn in human form to solve the dilemmas of King Milinda and protect the *sāsana* for future generations. Yet, even more than this, the Mingun Jetavana's biography positions him as a stand-in for the Buddha, a crucial claim because in this position, part of the Mingun Jetavana's mission is not just to spread the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, but also to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*—just as the Buddha did when first ordaining Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. Hence, like Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha*, the Mingun Jetavana is a surrogate for the Buddha himself, with his actions having epic ramifications for the *sāsana* in the centuries and millennia to come.

Aside from the equivalency set up between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, what is also evident from the above biographical narratives-cum-history is that for praxis-based communities in mid-twentieth-century Burma, *vipassanā* had opened up a new era in the history of the *sāsana*, "revealing the Path to Nirvana" in the words of Tikkhācāra. This path is one in which people, both monastic and lay, could now attain stages of enlightenment previously thought to be out of reach this far removed from the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. The Mingun Jetavana mentions as much in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

when he is arguing for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, writing that "the true *dhamma* of spiritual attainments (*paṭivedha*) will last five thousand years,"[72] meaning that the higher stages of the path are still possible in his own time, not just the pursuit of learning (P. *pariyatti*) or the outward signs of the religion (P. *liṅga-dhamma*).[73] Ādiccavaṃsa clearly agrees, citing the Ledi Sayadaw's observation that there are no canonical teachings that preclude the possibility of attaining the states of total absorption or the higher forms of knowledge at present (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232). Another prominent group that upheld the twentieth-century rejuvenation of the *sāsana*'s vitality is the meditation community that developed around U Ba Khin (ဦးဗခင် Ūḥ Ba khaṅ, 1899–1971) and which traces itself back to the Ledi Sayadaw. Daniel Stuart explains that U Ba Khin held the view that two and a half millennia after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, which was celebrated in Burma in 1954, "the clock of *vipassanā* ha[d] struck" (Stuart 2022, p. 116), meaning that the *sāsana* had entered an era of liberation (ဝိမုတ္တိခေတ် *vimutti khet*) where practitioners of *vipassanā* could once again attain to the highest stages of the Theravada path (Stuart 2022, p. 115). According to U Ba Khin, "[t]he *Vimutti* Era is the first 500 years that come after [the first] 2500 years of the *sāsana*. The current time ([i.e., the mid-twentieth century]) is included in the *Vimutti* Era, and so people should practice meditation" (Stuart 2022, p. 115 fn. 205). By this reckoning, then, the era of liberation would last from approximately 1954 to 2454, a remarkable claim that contrasts sharply with the views of more conversative elements of Theravāda Buddhism who adhere to the timeline of decay outlined in the Pāli commentaries.[74] Yet, such optimistic viewpoints in the *vimutti khet* were becoming increasingly widespread throughout the course of the twentieth century, for in the words of Jordt, "there was social recognition of a corps of enlightened lay people whose status in penultimate terms marked them as a different class of beings altogether" (Jordt 2005, p. 49). Indeed, it was commonly accepted that there were millions of people in Burma who had, since the early 1950s, reached varying levels of enlightenment through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation (Jordt 2005, p. 48). The majority of these were lay people, and the majority of these lay people were women. In this way, "[t]he mass lay meditation movement has had the greatest significance for women because it has provided women with an alternative institution for practice, one that permits them access to the highest goals and achievements in the religion" (Jordt 2005, p. 50).

This demographic trend was not lost on the Mingun Jetavana, especially because many of his foremost disciples were female. For instance, there is Daw Kusala who practiced under the Mingun Jetavana as a lay women from 1909, eventually becoming a *thilashin* (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 124). Somewhat remarkable for a *thilashin*, who tend to focus more on scriptural learning than meditation (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism, p. 64), Daw Kusala "established a meditation center where she had been teaching vipassanā meditation for almost 40 years. Even some monks practiced under her guidance. Thus she was a highly respected [meditation teacher]" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, p. 124). Though not disciples of the Mingun Jetavana directly, Htay Htay Lwin also mentions several other prominent *thilashin vipassanā* teachers, such as Daw Kummārī from Ayemyo Nunnery, who wrote the *Nibbāna-pavesanī kyamḥ* (*Treatise on the Entry into Nirvana*) in 1927 on how to practice meditation (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism, p. 83).[75] With such honoured and presumably high-ranking female meditation teachers and practitioners, the possibility naturally arises that some of these women could achieve the ultimate fruit of Theravāda soteriology, that of becoming an *arahant*. As Jordt explains, with the rise of the *vipassanā* movement and the dawn of the *vimutti khet*, "enlightenment itself [was] no longer seen as the exclusive purview of the [male monastic] sangha" (Jordt 2005, p. 59). Herein lies the tension that people like the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, I argue, were trying to address in their push for the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*s: being a female, defined de facto as outside of the *sāsana*, does not fundamentally bar one from becoming an *arahant*, especially as *vipassanā* opened up a window of increased soteriological potentialities. Yet, as Jordt has aptly questioned, why are there then virtually no reports of female *arahant*s in Burma, despite their obvious

proficiency as lay meditators, and despite the "rather strong tradition of women anāgāmi (third stage enlightened beings)" in the country (Jordt 2005, p. 58)?[76]

The answer might lie, not surprisingly at this point in our discussion, in another two-pronged question in the *Milindapañha*. There is a passage in which King Milinda puts to Nāgasena the following dilemma: "Venerable Nāgasena, your people say: 'Whosoever has attained, as a layman, to Arahat-ship, one of the two conditions are possible to him, and no other—either that very day he enters the [monastic] Order, or he dies away, for beyond that day he cannot last'"[77] (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1894] 1963, II:96). This quote attributed to the canon, as the translator T.W. Rhys Davids signals in a footnote, is so far untraced in any extant material, meaning that it only survives in this text. Yet, given that the *Milindapañha* is included in the Pāli canon in Burma, the above dilemma cannot be so easily dismissed. As John Frank Brohm shows, it's prescription even caused some tense moments in lay-meditation centres, as the following story from the 1950s illustrates: "Two young men were observed who had received their ordinations in great haste because they were adjudged to have achieved arahantship as laymen (adjudged, that is, by members of their meditational group). It was said that the layman who accomplishes such a rare and remarkable feat must enter the monkhood quickly 'or die'" (Brohm 1957, p. 352). A similar anecdote from the translation of the *Selected Discourses of the Webu Sayadaw* concerns U Ba Khin, Chairmen of the Subcommittee for Paṭipatti at the Buddha Sāsanā Nuggaha Association (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနုဂ္ဂဟအဖွဲ့. *Buddha sāsanā nuggaha aphvai.*) during the parliamentary period. In this role, U Ba Khin was receiving numerous reports from meditation centres throughout the country claiming "that there were a large number of Path and Fruition State winners ranging from teenage girls to elderly people", which caused great concern amongst the "popular Pāli scholars" and government officials who formed the subcommittee (Bischoff 2003, p. 33). The inclusion of "teenage girls" in the lists of meditators reaching the highest stages of *vipassanā* practice must have been especially alarming to those on the subcommittee, since it upended both the lay-monastic and male-female divide in Burmese Buddhist soteriological hierarchies. We can only guess how many times similar events played out at places like the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha ("Meditation Centre of the Mahasi Order") (B. မဟာစည် သာသနာ့ ရိပ်သာ *mahācañ sāsanā. rip sā*), where a lay person was deemed an *arahant* and forced to ordain as a monastic. Indeed, with almost a million people conventionally acknowledged to have achieved one of the stages of enlightenment since the founding of the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, the numbers suggest that more than a few lay people have been recognized as *arahant*s over the decades, a social fact regardless of whether such designations are valid or not. While this is a scenario that poses no existential problem for men, who have a pathway towards ordination and can choose to continue living as *arahant*s, what about for women and the "teenage girls" mentioned above?

As the Panditarama Sayadaw (ပဏ္ဍိတာရာမ ဆရာတော် Paṇḍitārāma Cha rā tau, 1921–2016; hereafter the Pandita), a disciple of the Mahasi Sayadaw (မဟာစည် ဆရာတော် Mahācañ Cha rā tau, also known as ဦး သောဘန Ūḥ Sobhana, 1904–1982) and thus in the "teaching" lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, explains, "[h]aving eradicated craving, the arahat can continue to exist only if he is supported in the robes. Lay life requires motivations and actions that an arahat is no longer capable of experiencing in his psychophysical process. Accepting the food and resources of the laity make the extension of his life possible" (Jordt 2005, p. 59). Here, then, is a contemporary explanation of the passage found in the *Milindapañha*, one that Nāgasena himself does not offer but which accords to the *saṅgha*-centric paradigm of neoconservative Burmese Theravāda. A layman who reaches *arahant*ship might not have the desire or "biological" drive to live but can enter into the merit economy as a monk and, out of compassion, become a rarefied field of merit for lay donors. In contrast, women, without the option of higher ordination (at least according to one view), cannot rely on such support from the laity and "thus have no [such] material institutions that could support them in this [enlightened] embodiment" (Jordt 2005, p. 59). In the absence of officially sanctioned higher ordination, "if a woman today attains arahatship", according to the Pandita, "she will take her *parinibbāna* (full Nibbāna) within

seven days" (Jordt 2005, p. 59). In other words, because a woman cannot enter into the *sāsana* as a monastic and become a worthy field of merit, upon reaching the highest stage of the Theravāda path through *vipassanā* meditation, she must surely perish within seven days, just as Nāgasena demands (though for him, it would be within the same day). Such an explanation from a mainstream monastic scholar like the Pandita explains why there are no known accounts of female *arahant*s in twentieth-century Burma: because if they did reach this stage, which is principally possible, they have prematurely perished before word spread of their achievement.

It is therefore not difficult to see the glaring asymmetry here: in principle, women have as much potential as men to achieve the highest stages of meditation practice but doing so would lead to their early demise. Thus, despite the sophisticated and detailed textual arguments put forth by the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, I submit that it is this asymmetry that ultimately catalyzed their advocacy. To support this conclusion, upon interviewing a high-ranking monastic figure in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, I was told that the primary reason he pushed for the ordination of women was because of the Mingun Jetavana's compassion for his *thilashin* and lay women disciples, facing the prospect of perishing if they were to become *arahant*s through *vipassanā* practice under his watch. Though this admission could not be found in print, such a rationale given by present-day members of his lineage demonstrates that the Mingun Jetavana's actions are interpreted through the dilemmatic question about lay *arahant*s in the *Milindapañha*, an *ubhato-koṭika pañha* that sits uncomfortably with the twentieth-century belief in the *vimutti khet*. Able to attest to their ability in meditation himself and promoting his *vipassanā* method as one that could lead to nirvana in the present age of *sāsana* vitality, the Mingun Jetavana thus saw it as his role as a teacher to clear a path for women who had perfected themselves through practice. To argue for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was simply consistent with his larger program, a logical conclusion following his formulation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, his creation of the first set of meditation centers, and his teaching of lay women and *thilashin*s. In a sense, then, the Mingun Jetavana merely unleashed the "power of practice" mentioned by Ādiccavaṃsa's biography, a power which, when combined with the widespread belief in the *vimutti khet,* created a set of paradoxes in Burmese Buddhist culture that could not be addressed by textual arguments alone.

## 11. Conclusions

At issue in this paper was the relationship between exegetical methods of interpretation and models of *sāsana* history in mid-twentieth-century Burmese debates around female higher ordination. For ultraorthodox legalists in the monastic hierarchy of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism, the impossibility of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is a simple matter of reading the Pāli canon as is. This view is premised on a carefully crafted neoconservative self-image, one in which a literalist interpretation of the Vinayapiṭaka is the only valid reading, regardless of how the soteriological potential of women has changed over the course of the *sāsana*'s unfolding in the twentieth century. In the case of the Mingun Jetavana, a pioneer of the mass lay meditation movement, he uses the same set of texts to make the opposite argument, thereby demonstrating that the literalist reading of conversative legalists is in fact the product of a localized, tempered hermeneutical regime. While it was not my intention to adjudicate between these different views, the argument of the Mingun Jetavana also makes use of its own hermeneutical regime, but one that, through the concept of methods handed down for future monks, the Mingun Jetavana locates in the very mind of the Buddha. By invoking the epistemology of the *abhiññā*s in his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana claims that when laying down the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in the Vinayapiṭaka, the Buddha used his knowledge of the future to behold the full arc of *sāsana* history. For the Mingun Jetavana, this vista of omniscience prompted the Buddha to embed a degree of flexibility when it came to the interaction between supplementary and root regulations around the higher ordination of women. It is the special and provocative conceit of the Mingun Jetavana, known by his later disciples as a *buddhamataññū*, that he is

the one capable of performing a reverse prolepsis, working his way back from the present to intuit the intention of the Buddha through his commentary on the *Milindapañha*.

Ādiccavaṃsa too uses the *Milindapañha* to argue for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. While Ādiccavaṃsa's argument is essentially the same as that of the Mingun Jetavana, we see by examining the former's biography that Ādiccavaṃsa was not only challenging the monastic hierarchy's stance on bringing back higher ordination for women, but their view of the history of the *sāsana* from which women were axiomatically excluded. In this way, Ādiccavaṃsa reframed the discussion from one of *sāsana* decline, to one of *sāsana* vitality, a vitality based on the power of *vipassanā* practice. By examining the broader motivations of Ādiccavaṃsa as found in his biography, we were able to recognize that the same reconceptualization of *sāsana* history was at play in the Mingun Jetavana's thinking. For the Mingun Jetavana and other praxis-based communities in the middle of the twentieth century, the dawn of the *vimutti khet* meant that it was possible to once more achieve the highest stages of the Theravāda path, an emancipatory promise open to women as much as men. The situation, however, clearly led to a paradox, a two-pronged question much like those found in the *Milindapañha*. On the one hand, lay women are patently capable of reaching the highest stage of the Theravāda path, especially in the dawn of the *vimutti khet*; on the other hand, without an officially sanctioned means to enter into the history of the *sāsana* through the process of *upasampadā*, a female practitioner faces the prospect of prescriptive death once having achieved the state of *arahant*ship, at least according to the *Milindapañha* added to the Pāli canon in the nineteenth century. It is thus not surprising that both Ādiccavaṃsa and the Mingun Jetavana present their arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* using the very same text, the *Milindapañha*, not only because of its newly minted canonical status, but because this text is the quintessential site for working out the paradoxes found in the utterances ascribed to the Buddha spread across the Pāli canon. In this case, Ādiccavaṃsa and the Mingun Jetavana deploy the *Milindapañha*'s analyses of apparently contradictory statements of the Buddha to mediate between accretions of textual interpretation and the fluid cultural landscape of Theravāda soteriology in the twentieth century.

In her own assessment of the Burmese debates about re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* in the first half of the twentieth century, Kawanami suggests that "[m]any of the early initiatives to revive the *bhikkhunī*s have been instigated by educated monks and ambitious individuals who saw the need to introduce modern values of equality, justice and progress" into the *saṅgha* (Kawanami 2007, p. 242).[78] This crucial observation is especially apt for someone like Ādiccavaṃsa, who as we saw, was a liberal reformer in his approach to Buddhism. Yet, I have tried to show in this paper that there is another, equally important aspect to such efforts. The impetus for this paper was the question of what is and what is not possible in the present age of *sāsana* decline. For the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa, this question directly impinges on the spiritual capacity of women. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana was interested not only in re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but in reprising the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* more broadly, a co-equal but alternative means of salvation for half of the population. In principle, there is no distinction between male and female in the history of the *sāsana*, but in cultural, social, and exegetical practice, the difference is paramount. Additionally, this difference between principal and practice is precisely the Mingun Jetavana's point, that an attention to the role of practice in the *sāsana*'s longevity makes the renewal of the co-equal and parallel *bhikkhunī-sāsana* an imperative. More than just an imperative, we might further argue that for the Mingun Jetavana, leveraging his concept of *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*s, the changing soteriological landscape of the *vimutti khet* was itself foreseen by the Buddha. The goal of the Mingun Jetavana as he understood it was thus to bring the interpretation of the rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* in line with his own model of *sāsana* history, one that was becoming increasingly popular in Burmese society. In this way, we see the connection between competing models of *sāsana* history and different methods of interpretation in the debates about reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.

What side one comes down on may depend largely on how one understands and models the decline, or rather, the vitality of the *sāsana*.

By thus invoking the *abhiññā*s in his argument and claiming that the Buddha knew the future which has become our present, the Mingun Jetavana raises and reveals the stakes of the debate around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. For at issue is nothing less than the nature of the Vinayapiṭaka, or more accurately, the relationship between the Vinayapiṭaka and history. Schonthal points to the same stakes at play in efforts around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* over the last three decades in Sri Lanka: on the one hand, there is a conception of the Vinayapiṭaka as "a contemporary text used by Buddhist monks", one where the intentions of the Buddha have, for practical reasons, been imperfectly "filtered through the corrupting frame of tradition (*sampradaya*)" (Schonthal 2018, p. 24); on the other hand, the Vinayapiṭaka represents "an ideal and timeless set of procedures and disciplinary norms existing before and outside of tradition" that operate beyond the vagaries of local hermeneutical regimes (Schonthal 2018, p. 24). It is to this second sense of the Vinayapiṭaka, as ideal and timeless, that the Mingun Jetavana is committed, while conservative legalists are more beholden to their localized hermeneutical regimes, despite their literalist interpretive methods. Ironically, it is his "timeless" approach to the Vinayapiṭaka that allows the Mingun Jetavana to apply and adapt this set of texts to the exigencies of his own historical moment. Yet, if we recall once again the blurred line between biography and history pointed out by Houtman and apparent in the biographical sources used in this paper, it becomes apparent that Burmese debates around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* are so charged not just because of what they imply about the nature of the Vinayapiṭaka, nor because they involve what is and is not possible in the current age of the *sāsana.* Rather, these debates provoked such a fierce reaction from the monastic hierarchy because below the surface, they are about the ways the *sāsana* manifests in time, space, and society. In this sense, by upholding the transcendence of the Vinayapiṭaka, the Mingun Jetavana is simultaneously asserting that the *sāsana* is eminently immanent, embodied in the utterances of the Buddha, in the texts he left behind, but ultimately, in the current practice of both monks *and* nuns.

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## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| A | *Aṅguttaranikāya* |
| Bhv | *Bhikkhunī vinicchaya cā tamḥ* (ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း) [*Record of the Bhikkhunī Decision*] |
| Bio | *Buddhamataññu—aṭṭhakathā kyamḥ pru kyeḥ jūḥ rhaṅ—mūla maṅḥ kvanḥ Jetavan cha rā tau bhu rāḥ krīḥ *e theruppetti* (ဗုဒ္ဓမတညူ---အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းပြု ကျေးဇူးရှင်-မူလမင်းကွန်း ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော် ဘုရားကြီး၏ ထေရုပ္ပတ္တိ) *[One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha—Benefactor [Who] Composed Commentar[ies]—Biography of the Most Venerable Mūla Mingun Jetavan Sayādawgyi: A Pāḷi Commentator]* |
| Bu | *Bhikkhunī Sāsanopadesa* (ဘိုက္ခုနီ သာသနောပဒေသ) [*Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*] |
| Cone | *A Dictionary of Pāli* |
| D | *Dīghanikāya* |
| M | *Majjhimanikāya* |
| MAA | *Mran mā-aṅga lip abhidhān* (မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ် အဘိဓာန်) [*Myanmar-English Dictionary*] |
| Mil-a | *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* |
| Mil-ṭ | *Milindapañhā-ṭīkā* |
| Paṭṭh | *Paṭṭhāna* |
| Vin | *Vinayapiṭaka* |

## Notes

1 Also known as "Myanmar" since 1989, I shall employ the colonial-era term in this paper since most of the material to which I refer comes from the early to mid-twentieth century.

2 For foreign-language words and terms, "P". indicates that what follows is a Pāli word and "B". means the word given is Burmese, which is often a vernacularized version of the Pāli. Burmese script will be supplied for Burmese words, terms, and names followed by a transliteration according to the simplified system of Lammerts and Griffiths. An exception will be made for the names of Burmese authors who write in English and supply their own transcription of their names. Pāli words will be given according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration.

3 The Burmese word "sayadaw" is an honorific title literally meaning either "royal teacher" or "holy teacher". Gustaaf Houtman suggests that this title was popularized during the time of King Mindon and eventually became the moniker for "monks who are either over 10 years in monkhood, or are in charge of their own monasteries, in which case, it can be interpreted to mean simply 'abbot'" (Houtman 1990b, p. 278). As this title is very common, it will not be maintained in this paper after its first usage. In contrast, "Mingun" is a Burmese toponymical title which refers to the name of a place in Sagaing Township on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady River across from Mandalay. "Jetavana" is a Pāli toponym that describes "Jeta's grove" where the Buddha was said to have resided for long periods of time during his lifetime, and is usually associated with more isolated, forest monasteries further from urban centres. In this case, "Jetavana" is one part of the name of the monastery in the town of Mingun over which the Mingun Jetavana presided, hence it is necessary to use these two titles in combination to signal the specific monk being referenced here, especially because there is another, more famous monk known simply as the "Mingun Sayadaw" who was junior to the Mingun Jetavana (see page 20 in this paper). The ordination name of the Mingun Jetavana, "Ūḥ Nārada", is also unsuitable for this paper, since it is much more common and does not signal the high status afforded this individual. As "Mingun Jetavana" is a title, it will be used together with its article, in the same way one would use "the" for "the Archbishop of Canterbury". When there is an absence of the article "the", this signals that the ordination name of the individual in question is being used, such as in the case of "Ādiccavaṃsa".

4 The *abhiññā*s are usually associated not with the practice of *vipassanā*, which underlies the mass lay meditation movement in twentieth-century Burma, but with the practice of calming (P. *samatha*) meditation. Despite the Mingun Jetavana's method being known as "pure *vipassanā*" (P. *suddha-vipassanāyānika*) (Tin Than Myint 2008, p. 8), the Mingun Jetavana was meticulously focused on the *ahhiññā*s in the first chapter of his *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, and there are numerous anecdotes associating the *abhiññā*s with if not the Mingun Jetavana personally, then with figures in his practice lineage, raising questions about the relationship between *vipassanā*, the states of total absorption (P. *jhāna*s), and the *abhiññā*s in early-twentieth-century discourses about meditation in Burma.

5 Htat Htay Lwin surveys in her dissertation epigraphic evidence from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in Bagan that lists the names of several *bhikkhunī*s alongside prominent *bhikkhu*s (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism, pp. 10–12). In the late thirteenth century, a series of (possible) Mongol invasions, "highly destructive Shan incursions", unchecked growth in tax-free religious wealth, the end of the "Medieval Climate Anomaly", and a shift in maritime trade networks began to unravel the political centralization of Bagan (Lieberman 2003, pp. 119–23). As a result, Buddhism entered what Htay Htay Lwin calls a "Dark Age", during which time members of the *saṅgha* struggled to survive without centralized political support (Htay Htay Lwin. 2013. Nuns in Myanmar Buddhism, p. 14). Though not much is known about the presence or absence of *bhikkhunī*s during this period of fragmentation, the implication is that they disappeared from the territory now called "Burma" as a result of these

large-scale changes and political upheaval. Bhikkhu Anālayo, referring to similar political circumstances in South Asia, asserts that the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* disappeared after the eleventh century "when during a period of political turmoil the entire monastic community in Sri Lanka was decimated. To the best of our knowledge, at that time no bhikkhunīs were in existence elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia" (Anālayo 2017, p. 9). This statement, however, does not disaggregate the situation between the two regions, with the exact timing or circumstances of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*'s disappearance in Burma unknown at present. With the appearance of "*thilashin*" and similar titles in the historical record after the thirteenth century, it is possible there was not so much an "extinction" as a gradual transition from the state of *bhikkhunī* to a more ambiguous status as semi- or non-ordained female renunciants.

6 After passing some of the most elite scriptural exams in Burma, Saccavādī travelled to Sri Lanka to obtain a master's degree in Buddhist Studies, becoming "involved in the movement to reinstate the bhikkhunīs as it unfolded" in real time on the island (Kawanami 2007, p. 232). Eventually she received a dual ordination (P. *ubhato-saṅghe upasampadā*) from both sides of the sangha, with her upasampadā ceremony overseen by "12 monks from different countries led by [Talalle] Dhammāloka" from Sri Lanka and "12 bhikkhunī born in Sri Lanka led by Khemācārī" (Janaka Ashin 2016, p. 206). In this way, Saccavādī attempted higher ordination through the two-side method, with both monks and nuns. When Saccavādī re-entered Burma, she was "summoned by the monastic authorities for questioning" in May 2005 and imprisoned for blasphemy under sections 295 and 295(a) of the criminal code, ostensibly for undressing before the state-backed monastic council after being made to change out of her brown bhikkhunī robes (Kawanami 2007, pp. 233–34). As the authorities interpreted the situation, Saccavādī was not a proper *bhikkhunī*, because even though she received higher ordination from Theravāda monks, the nuns who also acted as preceptors where not legitimate in the eyes of the Burmese monastic hierarchy, having received their ordination from a Mahāyāna lineage.

7 There was also an earlier ordination ceremony in Sarnath, India, in December of 1996, "when ten Sri Lankan women were ordained as bhikkhunīs by Sri Lankan monks from the Mahābodhi Society assisted by Korean monks and nuns" (Bodhi 2010, p. 99).

8 For this type of assessment, see Anālayo (2017), who argues that this view held by conservative legalists in Burma and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia does not attend to the narrative logic of the Vinayapiṭaka, and implies a degree of carelessness by the Buddha when laying down the different rules behind *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* (Anālayo 2017, p. 21). In this article, Anālayo assumes a "legal reading" himself (Anālayo 2017, p. 13), thereby arguing against the conservative view on the same terms as someone like Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa. This is not the approach I am taking in this article, which tries to understand the historiography of different interpretations of the Vinayapiṭaka on this issue, without debating the admittedly important details of the Vinayapiṭaka itself.

9 The "previous [vernacular] literature" that Crosby et al. have in mind concerns the forms of meditation they refer to collectively as *boran kammaṭṭhāna*, or "old-style meditation", which is based on Abhidhamma theory but also has tantric-like characteristics borrowed from generative grammar, pre-modern obstetrics, and Ayurvedic notions of the body. Unlike *vipassanā*, where the goal is more to transform the mind or mental landscape of the practitioner, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* seeks to transform the whole body of the individual to resemble the enlightened body of the Buddha.

10 I am grateful to Ryosuke Kuramoto for pointing out the importance of the meditation centre in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, personal communication, March 2020.

11 While there were likely sites used for various forms of practice inside monasteries or other places in the centuries before, the centre established by the Mingun Jetavana was unique as a non-monastic site dedicated to the intense practice of *vipassanā*, where lay women and men could assume the role of quasi-monastics alongside monks, supported by donations and without the supposedly burdensome responsibilities of domestic life to distract from their vocation.

12 Rachelle Saruya explains that the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* is a "short text of 86 pages and outlines basic rules and regulations" for non-ordained Buddhists in Pāli with glosses in Burmese, and includes recitations, devotional formulas, wish verses, and so on (Saruya 2020, p. 159).

13 The two texts on which the Mingun Jetavana commented, the *Peṭakopadesa* and the *Milindapañha*, were both added to the Pāli canon only in Burma, as the last two books of the *Khuddakanikāya*, from at least the Fifth Buddhist Council of King Mindon (မင်းတုန်းမင်း Maṅḥ tunḥ maṅḥ r. 1853–1878) in 1871. They are not considered canonical in other Theravāda countries, a crucial point that will be readdressed later in this paper.

14 There is a hierarchy of commentarial forms, beginning with the *aṭṭhakathā* and followed by the subcommentaries (P. *ṭīkā*s) (von Hinüber 2000, p. 100), which are themselves commentaries on the *aṭṭhakathā*s (or alternatively, commentaries on texts not originally deemed canonical, see K.R. Norman (1983, p. 194)). The *aṭṭhakathā*s are traced by the Theravāda tradition to the time of the Buddha, but text-critical scholarship has shown that they are the product of several historical layers of editing, addition, and translation from Pāli into local vernacular languages. This process came to a head with the "school of Buddhaghosa", as Cousins has phrased it (Cousins 2013, p. 390), a project in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. by the Mahāvihāra in the island of Lanka to render the available *aṭṭhakathā* material from Old Sinhalese in Pāli, which was also a process of editing, compilation, redaction, and textual criticism (see von Hinüber 2013). The *aṭṭhakathā*s were so fundamental to the development of the Mahāvihāra, which eventually became the Theravāda of today, that Endo suggests it might be better to refer to the Theravāda as "the Buddhism that Buddhaghosa upheld" (Endo 2013, p. 190).

15 The reason for this five-century margin is because the relative dating for the commentary on the *Apadāna*, the *Visuddhajanavilāsinī*, ranges from 1000 to 1500 C.E. (von Hinüber 2000, p. 149). The *Visuddhajanavilāsinī* is unknown to all previous commentators and is probably the last instance of an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary until the early twentieth century. Even more remarkably, Oskar von Hinüber (following Bechert 1958, p. 20) suggests that it could have been "composed in Southeast Asia" (von Hinüber 2000, p. 147).

16 Giving his commentaries the title of "*aṭṭhakathā*s" is partly a matter of semantics but is not without significance. Indeed, when the Burmese monk Bhaddanta Kumārābhivaṃsa published a *de facto aṭṭhakathā* to the *Therī-apadāna* in 1992, a less provocative title of "*Therī-apadāna-dīpanī*" was chosen by the State Sangha Mahanāyaka Council, even though it is declared triumphantly in the introduction of this text that "with this work, the commentaries of all the fifteen texts of the Khuddaka-nikāya are now complete" (Obhāsabhivaṃsa 2009, p. xvi). Using "*dīpanī*" instead of "*aṭṭhakathā*" is to take much less of a presumptive position vis-à-vis the Pāli textual tradition. I must thank Chris Clark for bringing this text to my attention and sharing with me its introduction.

17 As Sodō Mori (1998) points out, there are at least three forms for the title of this text found in printed editions and manuscripts, with the most common in modern editions being the stem form in the masculine, the *Milindapañha*. Peter Skilling explains how the title *Milindapañhā*, with the long-ā, is most common in the Thai recensions, which could be either nominative, masculine plural or nominative, feminine singular (Skilling 2010, p. 5). Eng Jin Ooi confirms that for the Burmese manuscripts he has surveyed, the title with the long-ā is also found, "roughly" concluding, based on these and two Laotian manuscripts, that "the long 'ā' form is a common feature in the mainland of South-East Asia especially in the Tai speaking region" (Eng Jin Ooi 2021, p. 103). In this paper, I will follow the convention of modern printed editions and use "*Milindapañha*" in the masculine stem form when referring to the root text, but will follow the Mingun Jetavana's lead and use the long-ā form "*Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*" when referring to his commentary. This strategy both respects the convention of philological study while also signalling that there is diversity in the textual recensions and commentarial constellation around the root text. For more on this issue of variations in the spelling of the root text, see Mori (1998, p. 291 fn. 1) and Eng Jin Ooi (2021, pp. 100–5).

18 In his introduction to the *Milindapañā-aṭṭhakathā*, Deshpande translates *naya* as "doctrines" (Deshpande 1999, p. 7). While this rendering gets at part of the way the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept, *naya* is perhaps more accurately translated as "method", or even, "methods of interpretation" (Cone, s.v. *naya*), which captures the fact that the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept to adjudicate between apparently contradictory statements made by the Buddha, as a hermeneutic tool to decide how best to proceed in the present based on the Buddha's intention in the past. It is thus not so much a doctrine as an exegetical tool.

19 *iddhividhañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/dibbasotañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/cetopariyañāṇalābhi* [. . . ] *pubbenivāsañāṇalābhi* [. . . ] *dibbacakkhuñāṇalābhi* [. . . ] *anāgataṃsañāṇalābhi* [. . . ] *yathākammūpagañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/appako va hoti/maggasamaṅgiko pi phalasamaṅgiko pi appako va hoti* (Mil-a 7,$^{7–12}$). Note that all pages and line numbers to the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* refer not to the original 1949 edition in Burmese script, but to the 1999 transliterated edition by Deshpande.

20 This sevenfold enumeration overlaps with but expands on the six higher forms of knowledge (P. *chaḷabhiññā*s) supplied in many authoritative Pāli and Sanskrit accounts of the *abhiññā*s. For instance, the *locus classicus* of the *chaḷabhiññā*s is found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (*Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life*) of the *Dīghanikāya*, where the Buddha begins with the knowledge of the various superpowers (P. *iddhividha-ñāṇa*), then the sphere of the divine ear (P. *dibbasota-dhātu*), the knowledge of others' minds (P. *cetopariya-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of recollecting previous lives (P. *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of the falling away and coming into existence of beings (P. *sattānaṃ cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*), and the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers (P. *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*). Patrick Pranke explains that these *chaḷabhiññā*s can be understood as an "elaboration" of a scheme in the earliest strata of the Pāli canon, the three knowledges (P. *tevijja*), which consists of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, and the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* (Pranke 2004, p. 8). The addition of the knowledge of the future, which is key to the Mingun Jetavana's argument for the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, is perhaps inspired by a reading of the *Paṭṭhāna* (*Conditional Relations*), the final book of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, where the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* is given last in a list of the higher forms of knowledge enumerated according to the strong-dependence condition (P. *upanissāya-paccaya*) (see Paṭṭh II 165,$^{33}$–166,$^{5}$).

21 It is worth noting, as Bhikkhunī Kusuma points out, that "[n]owhere except in the *Cullavagga* is there any indication that the decline of the Buddha's teachings would occur as a result of the institution of the *bhikkhunī* order" (Kusuma 2000, p. 10), while even Buddhaghosa obliquely disagrees in his gloss on this passage, eventually extending the age of the *sāsana* to 5000 years. For his part, Anālayo claims that it is "probable" that this statement "originated as part of the narrative regarding the convocation of the first *saṅgīti*", or mass recitation of the Pāli texts, which was convened because of the anxiety about the future viability of the *sāsana* (Anālayo 2017, p. 11). He goes on to suggest that over "the course of the transmission of the texts", this negative sentiment in regard to the initial establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was "turned into statements made by the Buddha himself" (Anālayo 2017, p. 11).

22 *ayaṃ pana imasmiṃ ca pañhe anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno nāma hoti/ko esa anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ dinnanayo nāma* (Mil-a 195,$^{7–8}$). All the translations from the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* are my own, but I must thank Christoph Emmrich and Bryan Levman for their tireless help in revising my translations. A translation of the section on reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* was also made by Bhikkhu Bodhi as an appendix to his 2010 article, pages 135–42, which I did not use for my initial translation, but found helpful in the places pointed out in these endnotes. I especially found his footnotes helpful in trying to understand some of the more obscure passages.

23 *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ* (Mil-a 195,$^{8–9}$). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 257,$^{7–8}$.

24 *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā* (Mil-a 195,[9–11]). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 255,[19–20].

25 For more on the *garudhamma*s, see Ute Hüsken (2010).

26 Anālayo points out that after comparison with texts from other *vinaya* lineages, this particular *garudhamma* appears to have "gone through a change of wording", especially because the "reference to both communities is not found in all versions", with some extant sources mentioning only the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* (Anālayo 2017, p. 12). The historical layering of these rules is an important point, but not one considered by the Mingun Jetavana when making his argument.

27 *dvinnaṃ vacanānaṃ attho ekenekena vacanena dīpito upasampādetabbamātugāmo yeva hoti* (Mil-a 195,[18–19])

28 *eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādetabbo/eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo ubhatosaṅgena upasampādetabbo ti micchāvādīnaṃ micchāvādadīpanatthaṃ tesaṃ adhippāyaṃ gahetvā anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ matena yadi panāvuso tathāgatena bhaṇitaṃ anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti/ tena hi dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti yaṃ vacanaṃ/ taṃ micchā* (Mil-a 195,[19–26]). This translation was, admittedly, quite difficult, hence I adapted some of my translation according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's work in this instance.

29 *yadi tathāgatena bhaṇitaṃ/ taṃ dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti/ tenahi anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti/ taṃ pi vacanaṃ micchā* (Mil-a 195,[26–30]).

30 *nanu upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampāditena ekena bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādito ubhatosaṅgho paṭisedhito/ upasampādetabba mātugāmaṃ upsampāditena ekena ubhatosaṅghena upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito eko bhikkhusaṅgho paṭisedhito/ iti aññamaññaṃ paṭisedho upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito bhikkhusaṅgho eko/ upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito ubhatosaṅgho eko ti evamayaṃ ubhatokoṭiko pañho* (Mil-a 195,[30]–196,[1]). For this passage too I found Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation very helpful.

31 This second method is called "ordination through eight proclamations (*aṭṭhavācikūpasampadā*)" because the process involved an initial "motion and three proclamations" first by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, followed by one motion and three proclamations by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, making for a total of eight "acts" in the entire process (Bodhi 2010, p. 104).

32 *ubhatokoṭikaṃ pañhaṃ etarahi vissajjetuñceva vibhajjetuñca asakkuṇeyyānaṃ* (Mil-a 196,[1–2]).

33 *tattha vadāma/ anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti etaṃ vacanaṃ bhagavatā bhāsitaṃ/ tañca pana bhagavato vacanaṃ ayaṃ bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvapariccheda* (Mil-a 196,[9–11]).

34 *sikkhamānāya paṭipatti* (Mil-a 196,[12]).

35 Anālayo's point here is that the sixth *garudhamma* is not actually "about dual ordination as such, but much rather about a two-stage procedure in conducting dual ordination (Anālayo 2017, p. 19). He therefore sees the addition of the stipulation that prospective candidates for *upasampadā* first seek permission from a *bhikkhunī* as "an amendment to the basic procedure described in *garudhamma* 6" (Anālayo 2017, p. 19).

36 As Anālayo explains, the idea of certain rules being contingent on conditions is not unprecedented for *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*. Another extenuating circumstance involves a situation where a female candidate cannot safely travel to seek ordination from the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, as stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma*; in such a case, she may send a messenger in her place (Anālayo 2017, p. 20).

37 *ārakā aññena añño/ añño aññena asādhāraṇo/ añño aññena asammisso* (Mil-a 196,[19–20]).

38 *aṭṭha garudhammā bhikkhuniyā anuppannāya bhikkhunīnaṃ mūlapaññattibhāvena paññattā* (Mil-a 197,[12–13]).

39 *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti anupaññattibhāvo* [. . . ] *paññatto* (Mil-a 197,[22–24]).

40 *esā pana anupaññatti pure ceva pacchā ca paññattena paṭikkhepenā pi anuññātenāpi sādhāraṇabhāvaṃ na pāpuṇi* (Mil-a 197,[24–26]). Bhikkhu Bodhi offers the following translation for this crucial sentence: "But this secondary regulation did not reach a condition where it shared [validity] with any prior and subsequent prohibition and allowance that had been laid down" (Bodhi 2010, p. 138). He adds in a footnote to this somewhat cryptic passage that "[t]he purport seems to be that this authorization is valid only as long as the Buddha does not issue another decree that implicitly annuls its validity, such as that stipulating a dual-saṅgha ordination" (Bodhi 2010, pp. 138–39). Taking Bodhi's instincts here further, my interpretation above, made with other biographical information about the Mingun Jetavana's position, is that this supplementary rule, not having been explicitly annulled, is in effect as long as the Buddha's *sāsana* remains, an interpretation dismissed or neglected by localized layers of legalistic interpretation.

41 Anālayo suggests that part of this entrenched interpretation stems from a reading of the *Dīpavaṃsa* in the episode where Mahinda brings Buddhism to the island of Lanka. When the ruler of the island at the time beseeched Mahinda "to grant ordination to the queen and her followers, Mahinda replied that it is not possible for a *bhikkhu* to do so" (Anālayo 2017, p. 22). According to Anālayo, Mahinda's "statement was correct, since *bhikkhunī*s were in existence" back on the South Asian mainland, but it is mistake, claims Anālayo, to assert the relevance of this statement now, since there is currently no extant Theravāda lineage of *bhikkhunī*, at least not until the efforts that began in the 1990s (Anālayo 2017, p. 22).

42 *iti ayameva tena bhagavatā jānatā passatā arahatā sammāsambuddhena anujānito mātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena etarahi evaṃ upasampādetabbo* (Mil-a 197,[26–28]).

43 See, e.g., D I 2,[11]; D II 213,[11–12]; M I 350,[5]; A I 67,[34–68,1]; A II 196,[11–12]; Vin V 1,[2–3], as a small sample of such statements, most of which seem to be found in the first four books of the Suttapiṭaka and the *Parivāra* of the Vinayapiṭaka. I must thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the ubiquity of this phrase in the Pāli canon and making important suggestions to improve my original translation.

44 *bhagavato sabbaṃ kāyakammaṃ ñāṇapubbaṅgamaṃ ñāṇānuparivatti/ atīte aṃse apaṭihatañāṇadassanaṃ/ anāgate aṃse apaṭihatañāṇadassanaṃ/ paccuppanne aṃse apaṭihatañāṇadassanaṃ* (Mil-a 196,[20–22]). This is in fact a slightly condensed quotation from the *Nettippakaraṇa* (Nett 17,[25–31]), a text which Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli argues is not a commentary *per se*, but a sort of guide for would-be commentators (Ñāṇamoli 1977, p. xliv), like the Mingun Jetavana.

45 *bhagavato vacanaṃ atītaṃse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghe abhāvaparicchedaṃ/ anāgataṃse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvaparicchedaṃ/ paccuppannaṃse pi bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvaparicchedaṃ apaṭihatañāṇadassanena sabbaññuñāṇena passitvā va anujānitabbaṃ* (Mil-a 196,[24–28]).

46 *anāgate pī ti bhikkhunīsaṅgho abhāvo bhavissattī ti passatā* (Mil-a 197,[20–21]).

47 *sabbaññutañāṇassa āṇācakkaṃ na pahārayitabbaṃ* (Mil-a 197,[8]).

48 *bhagavato adhippāyaṃ jānantena byattena bhikkhunā paṭibalena saṅgho ñāpetabbo* (Mil-a 197,[29–31]).

49 *bhagavato manorathaṃ jānissāma/bhagavato puṇṇindusaṅkāsamukhaṃ passissāmā ti/ taṃ pi bhikkhunīsāsanaṃ kātukāmena pubbaṅgamena bhikkhunā nāma bhagavato thomite ṭhāne kusalena bhavitabbaṃ ti* (Mil-a 203,[10–13]).

50 The term *buddhamataññū* also appears in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* (Mil-ṭ 15,[13]) when describing the qualities of Nāgasena.

51 Hiroko Kawanami's translation of this passage, taken from page 26 of the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*, runs "I have studied many other religious traditions and examined their religious teachings. So far I think Buddhism is the best and the most valid teaching of all. However, if I ever come across a better religion (than Buddhism) that conveys the ultimate truth, I am open minded enough to become a follower" (Kawanami 2007, p. 231). Eventually Ādiccavaṃsa did disrobe in 1941 and married a lay woman (Tejinda 2017, p. 96), though his reasons for disrobing are unclear to me at present.

52 Myat Kyaw is also mentioned as a leading figure in spreading the Mingun Jetavana's method of meditation to Shan Buddhist communities in the 1930s, with 33 meditation centres in this lineage still active today (Khur-Yearn 2019, p. 333). In an endnote, Jotika Khur-Yearn attributes nine texts to Myat Kyaw, most of which are dedicated to the practice of *vipassanā* (Khur-Yearn 2019, p. 342).

53 Those mentioned as taking part in this conversation include the Pinḥ kan Sayadaw, Ashin Nandamedhā (B. ပိန်းကန် ဆရာတော် အရှင်နန္ဒမေဓာ), the Bāḥ ka rā to ra Sayadaw, Ashin Jāniya (B. ဗားကရာတောရ ဆရာတော် အရှင်ဇာနိယ) and other unnamed monks (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 5).

54 ရေးပြီးသော စာမူများကို [. . . ] လက်နှိပ်စက်နှင့် မိတ္တူကူးပေး၍ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အရပ်ရှိ ပဋ္ဌကအကျော် ဆရာတော်များထံသို့ ပို့ကာထင်မြင်ချက် ရယူခဲ့သည် (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 16).

55 As Ṭhānissaro Bhukkhu explains, the *pakāsaniyā kamma*, which is first attested to when the Buddha censures his cousin, Devadatta, for trying to aggressively take over the leadership of the *saṅgha*, "contains none of the other necessary explanations that would allow for the transaction to become a generalized pattern. In other words, there is no list of the qualities with which the object should be endowed, no description of how he should behave, and no allowance for revoking the transaction. Thus it seems to have been intended as a one-time event and cannot be included in a Community's repertoire of disciplinary measures" (Ṭhānissaro 2013, II:1289).

56 Ādiccavaṃsa's friend and one-time pupil, Shin Ukkaṭṭha (ရှင် ဥက္ကဋ္ဌ Rhaṅ ukkaṭṭha, 1897–1978), who would later be tried for his heterodox views on reincarnation, was also subjected to a *pakāsanīya-kamma*, to which he too wrote a "robust response" called the *Tanpyan Pakāsanīya* (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220). The reason why the *pakāsanīya-kamma* was resorted to was because immediately after the military coup of 1962, the Ne Win regime was not interested in supporting the monastic court system set up by U Nu, meaning that without the means of state enforcement, the monastic hierarchy was forced to resort to this public censure (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, p. 220), which ultimately had no real teeth behind it other than ruining the reputation of the individual so charged in the eyes of the *saṅgha*-faithful.

57 Ashin Tejinda does not translate the full text in his thesis, but offers selected paragraphs meant to highlight the main thrust of Ādiccavaṃsa's argument. According to Ashin Tejinda, this excerpt comes from page 77 in the original 1935 text.

58 Page 72 in the *Bhikkhu-sāsanopadesa*.

59 Ashin Tejinda paraphrases this excerpt from pages 82–84.

60 In this, Ādiccavaṃsa is taking a different approach from some contemporary scholars, who argue that the *garudhamma*s are later interpolations to the Vinayapiṭaka. Hüsken, for example, writes that "it is possible that the compilation of the *garudhamma*s to hand constitutes a later insertion into the Vinaya, which is more recent than the rules corresponding to the *garudhamma*s in the Pācittiya section of the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅgha" (Hüsken 2000, p. 65). For evidence, she points to the "unsystematic order of the eight *garudhamma*s in the *Cullavagga*; the difference in the sequence of *garudhamma*s in the traditions of other Buddhist schools, as well as the parallels both literal and in content in the Pācittiya section of the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga", all of which lead Hüsken to suggest that these *garudhamma*s are the "produce of a process of development" (Hüsken 2000, p. 65). Despite his own text-

critical approach, Ādiccavaṃsa does not question the existence of the *garudhamma*s in the earliest layers of Pāli texts, but instead challenges their elevation to the status of binding rules.

61 Here Ashin Tejinda indicates that he is taking this excerpt from pages 74–75 in the *Bhikkhunī-sāsanopadesa*.

62 Ashin Saraṇa, who has translated part of this document in his New Pilgrim newsletter (161004), gives the full title of this text as "ယခုကာလဝယ် ထေရဝါဒပုဒ္ဓသာသနာတော်၌ ဘိက္ခုနီ ရှိသင့်-မရှိသင့် ပြဆိုရာဖြစ်သော ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း", or "The Document on Resolution of Bhikkhunī(s) Which Explains Whether Bhikkhunī(s) Should Be or Should Not Be [Included] in the Buddha's Dispensation of Theravāda in Present Era". (Saraṇa n.d., p. 9). This first text, published in 2004, should be distinguished from a second text, the *Bhikkhunī-bhāvābhāva-vinicchaya* (*The Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns*), published in 2006 as a formal accounting of the case brought against Saccavādī in the Burmese monastic court system.

63 Ashin Tejinda takes this quote from page 42 of the *Bhikkhun-vinicchaya*.

64 In the second millennium, the schemes found in the Pāli commentaries were reinterpreted or challenged altogether in Burma, with certain groups, sometimes referred to derisively as the "*paramat*s" (from the Pali word, "*paramattha*," meaning "ultimate truth") arguing for an advanced stage of *sāsana* decline, which caused them to deny not only the possibility of enlightenment, but the validity of higher ordination altogether (for more on the *paramat*s, see Michael Mendelson (1975), who Jacques Leider (2004) argues confuses the *paramat*s with similar anti-clerical sects like the Zawti). Because of these views, the *paramat*s became synonymous with heretical ways of thinking, and such movements were alternatively repressed or championed by different Burmese kings.

65 It is important to note that Ādiccavaṃsa is still known today for having published a *Milinda-nissaya*, or interlinear Pali-Burmese bitext that is part translation, part exegesis, in 1916 around the age of 34 and with 14 years in the monkhood (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 61). This bitext is, as far as I can tell, the only *nissaya* proper still in circulation on the *Milindapañha* in Burma.

66 ထို့ကြောင့် ဤ ဘိက္ခုနီ ခန္ဓကဋ္ဌ 'သဟသဿံ'-ဟူသည်မှာ 'တထောင်' ဟု ဘုရားရှင် အရေ အတွက်---မဆိုလို။ စင်စစ်ကား ပရိကပ္ပ ကြဲဆ ဟောကြားခြင်း မျှဖြစ်သည်။ အဓိပ္ပါယ်ကား သူတော် တရားသည် တထောင်ရှည်မည့် အရာ ဖြစ်အံ့ မာတုဂါမတို့ သာသနာတွင် ရဟန်း ပြုခြင်းကြောင့် ယခု ငါးရာ သာ ရှည်တော့မည်၊ ထက်ဝက် ဆုတ်ယုတ်ရာသည် ဟူလိုသတည်း။ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, pp. 255–56).

67 "ဤရဟန်းတို့ကောင်းစွာ ကျင့်ကြံ နေထိုင် ကုန်မူ လောကသည် ရဟန္တာ မ သုဉ်း ဖြစ်ရာသည်" ဟု သုဘဒ်အား ဟောသော စကားမူကား အကျင့်၏ အစွမ်းကို ပြသော စကား ဖြစ်၏ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 231).

68 အကျင့် လျှင် တည်နေကြောင်း ဖြစ်၏၊ ကျင့်ဆောင် လိုက်နာရေး မပျောက်ကွယ် သမျှ သာသနာတော် တည်ထွန်း နေပေလိမ့်မည် (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, p. 232).

69 ထိုသို့ သာသနာ့သက်တမ်းကို အမှန်အကန် သိလာရသည်နှင့်တစ်ဆက်တည်းမှာပင် သူတော်တရား "သဒ္ဓမ္မ" ကို မှန်ကန်စွာ ကျင့်ဆောင်နေသရွေ့ ရဟန္တာလည်း မဆိတ်သုဉ်းနိုင်ကြောင်းကိုပါ တစ်ပါတည်း သိလာကြရပြန်သည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ယခုဘဝ၌ပင် မဂ်ဆိုက်၊ ဖိုလ်ဝင် နိဗ္ဗာန်ကိုမြင်အောင် ပဋိပတ်လုပ်ငန်း လုပ်ဆောင်သူများလည်း ယခုအခါ အားရစရာ မြောက်မြောက်မြားမြားဒ ပေါ်ထွက်လာပေသည် (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, p. 27).

70 Having said that, Ādiccavaṃsa's friend and one-time president of the editing committee for the Sixth Council (1954–1956), Shin Ukkaṭṭha, was not as optimistic. According to Jordt, Shin Ukkaṭṭha "did not accept the so-called paṭipatti sāsana and therefore did not accept the possibility of achieving nibbāna in this life" (Jordt 2007, p. 52).

71 *Ta bhoṅ*s (B. တဘောင်) are defined as "random utterances (of children, actors or madmen) interpreted as prophecies" (MAA, s.v. *ta bhoṅ*).

72 *pañcavassasahassān paṭivedhasaddhammo ṭhassati* (Mil-a 195,$^{2–3}$).

73 According to the stages as given in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, which represents the "most detailed" and "perhaps the latest innovations" of the commentarial scheme of *sāsana* decline, the first aspect of the Buddha's teachings to disappear is attainment (P. *adhigama*), such as the ability to reach *arahant*ship and the other three lower fruits, followed by the disappearance of practice (P. *paṭipatti*), then scriptural learning (P. *pariyatti*), the disappearence of outward signs (P. *liṅga*) of the religion, and culminating with the disappearance of the Buddha's relics (P. *dhātu*) (Endo 2013, p. 129). The author(s) of the *Manorathapūraṇī* explain that by "*adhigama*" they mean the disappearance of "the four *magga*-s, four *phala*-s, four *paṭisambhidā*-s, three *vijjā*-s, and six *abhiññā*-s; when dwindling away, they begin with *paṭisambhidā*-s" (Endo 2013, p. 129). Hence the *sāsana* scheme described by both the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa go against what is proscribed in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, or at least represent a creative rereading.

74 While U Ba Khin's meditation lineage is relatively minor in Burma (but perhaps the world's largest via S.N. Goenka in India), as the first Accountant General of Burma under the U Nu administration, his views could not be so easily dismissed. In fact, Pranke informs us that this idea of a *vimutti khet* "was taken up for consideration by the Sixth Buddhist Synod (1954–1956) which rejected it as contradictory and as lacking textual support" (Pranke 2010, p. 466). He adds that "[s]ubsequent publications by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that discuss the *sāsana*'s lifespan omit reference to th[is] theory", and as a result, the idea has not been "universally accepted" (Pranke 2010, p. 466). This concept was thus widespread enough to warrant such a public and high-profile dismissal.

75 According to Saruya, this Ayemyo Nunnery was established by "a nun from Mawlamyine [. . . ] in 1908", and while it has become a "leading educational center" helping *thilashin*s pass the Pāli exams, the original purpose was for it to act as a training center for meditation (Saruya 2020, p. 165).

[76] In contrast, Martin Seeger explains that there are several cases of *maechi*, the Thai equivalent to *thilashin*s, being recognized as *arahant*s in modern Thai history, some of whom have become the object of devotion for large swaths of the population (see e.g., Seeger 2018, pp. 128–30). This contrast raises the question of what is it about the Thai case that makes such female *arahant*s a possibility, even if unlikely, but which then precludes a similar phenomenon in neighboring Burma? One possible answer might be found in the neoconservative nature of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism when compared to a more modernized, reform-minded Thai Theravāda Buddhism, but another possibility is perhaps suggested by the subtitle of Seeger's (2018) monograph, *Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*. It is possible that the presence of female *arahant*s in Burma is "hidden" insofar as it is not well known enough to be in wide circulation, showing the need for further research on this topic.

[77] *bhante nāgasena, tumhe bhaṇatha: yo gihī arahattaṃ patto dve v' assa gatiyo bhavanti, anaññā: tasmiṃ yeva divase pabbajati vā parinibbāyati vā, na so divaso sakkā atikkametuṃ ti* (Mil 264,[29–31]–265,[1]).

[78] Nirmala Salgado (2013) is another scholar who sees the modern attempt at *bhikkhunī* revival in Theravāda Buddhism as owing much to the creation of a western liberal subject, at least in terms of how scholars have dealt with the subject. Indeed, her intervention is important in trying to "decolonize" the discourse around *bhikkhunī* ordination, and her fieldwork is based extensively on interviews with Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s.

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# Fully Ordained Nuns in Fourteenth-to-Seventeenth Tibetan Hagiographical Narratives

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**Abstract:** Many contemporary efforts have been put to (re-)establish the order of fully ordained nuns in Tibetan Buddhism. Those who are in favor of such practice often refer to premodern Tibetan hagiographies to claim the existence of indigenous fully ordained nuns in the past. A series of female practitioners, indeed, appear as fully ordained nuns in such narratives dating from approximately the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century. Their monastic identities as such, however, are contested by Tibetan Buddhist masters because the methods of their ordinations, seemingly conferred by the male *saṃgha* alone, do not strictly follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition, which is observed by the Tibetan Buddhists. In an effort to investigate as to how these female practitioners were fully ordained and the purposes of composing such narratives about their ordinations, this article revisits relevant hagiographies with particular reference to *The biography of Chokyi Dronma, the Third incarnation of the Wisdom Ḍākinī Sonam Peldren* (*Ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi sku skye gsum pa rje btsun ma chos kyi sgron ma'i rnam thar*) and a detailed exposition of *The biography of Shākya Chokden* (*Shākya mchog ldan gyi rnam thar zhib mo rnam par 'byed pa*). It suggests that depicting these personas as fully ordained nuns serves the purpose of highlighting the hagiography subjects' outstanding spiritual performance, while the recognition of monastic identity as such may not go beyond the context of these writings.

**Keywords:** Tibetan hagiographies; Tibetan women; full female ordination

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## 1. Introduction

Fully ordained nuns (Skt. *bhikṣuṇī*, Tib. *dge slong ma*) serve as an essential organizational constituent to the Buddhist institution from the Buddha's time onwards. The order of fully ordained nuns, however, had not been firmly established when Buddhism was introduced to Tibet. The vast majority of nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist community, therefore, have not historically had access to full ordination, and they could merely be semi-ordained (Tib. *dge tshul ma*) as their possible highest position, while monks have had uninterrupted access to the higher ordination. This phenomenon highlights that the Tibetan nuns receive insufficient recognition as proper members of the Buddhist monastic circles and this restriction to full ordination might hinder them from becoming qualified Buddhist masters (see also Schneider and Price-Wallace in this volume).

This issue has gained special attention from both the Tibetan Buddhist community as well as academia[1]. In an effort to explore possible solutions to (re-)introduce[2] the full female ordination, prior scholarship has done preliminary research on a series of hagiographies, dating from approximately the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century[3]. Such writings indicate that fully ordained nuns were active sometime from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century. Martin (2005) has conducted a study on Machik Ongjo (Ma gcig ong jo; circa twelfth century) and Konchog Tsomo (Dkon mchog gtso mo; u.d.) and asserts that the selected figures received full ordination from their male masters Khyungtsang Repa (Khyung tshang ras pa; 1115–1176) and Je Mikyod Zhab (Rje Mi skyod zhabs; u.d.), respectively. Diemberger (2007) has translated a hagiography devoted to Chokyi Dronma (Chos kyi sgron ma; 1422–1455) and suggests that she was not only fully ordained by her

first master, Bodong Chogle Namgyal (Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal; 1376–1451), but also regarded as a tantric consort (Tib. *phyag rgya ma*) for both Chogle Namgyal and Thangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po; 1385–1464). Price-Wallace (2015), based on contemporary Tibetan scholar Rinchen Ngodrup's work *A New Explanation of the Hundred Controversial Issues Regarding Fully Ordained Nuns: All Wish- fulfilling Treasure, the Beryl Collection* (*Dge slong ma'i gnad brgya pa sngon med legs par bshad pa'i gter dgos 'dod kun 'byung bad'urya'i phung po zhes bya ba bzhugs so*), enumerates a handful of fully ordained nuns together with their bibliographical data. They, however, mainly focus on these female personas as being depicted as fully ordained nuns and pay limited attention to the relevant questions surrounding their ordinations. To be specific, how were these nuns fully ordained? Why are they not widely recognized by Tibetan Buddhists? What are the purposes of composing such narratives? This article will investigate these points and attempts to offer insight into how Tibetan Buddhists historically viewed the issue of full female ordination.

## 2. Buddhist Hagiographies in Premodern Tibetan Context

Hagiographies (Skt. *vimokṣa*, Tib. *rnam par thar pa*) in the Tibetan Buddhist context highlight the doctrinal, contemplative, and social significance of distinguished practitioners by weaving his/her relevant information, either factual or fabricated, into life writings. They are also recognized by scholars as valuable sources for studying Tibetan political history and written traditions of religious communities (Sernesi 2015, pp. 734–35). One of the main doctrinal purposes of hagiographies lies in edification. To be specific, they are supposed to inspire later practitioners to follow virtuous models (Sernesi 2015).

The mainstream of this kind of Buddhist narrative centers on prominent male practitioners that have been discussed at length by previous scholars. For instance, Quintman (2010, 2014) has conducted fundamental research on multiple versions of the Tibetan cultural hero Milarepa's (Mi la ras pa; 1052–1135) life stories and compiles a comprehensive collection of prior versions of Milarepa. Caumanns (2010, 2015) has carried out studies on more comprehensive and detailed hagiographies devoted to an authoritative master of later dates, Shākya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan; 1428–1507). On the contrary, distinguished female practitioners (i.e., Yeshe Tsogyal [Ye shes mtsho rgyal], Machig Labdron [Ma gcig lab sgron], Chokyi Dronma) have received relatively limited scholarly attention (Liang 2020; Allione 2000; Diemberger 2007). There are six texts which detail the full ordination as nuns of individuals or even entire groups—the references are as follows:

*The Short Biography of Machik Ongjo* (*Ma gcig ong jo'i rnam thar zur tsam*; hereafter MRZ): MRZ is collated in the existing Biography of Chakrasamvara Hearing Lineage (Bde mchog snyan brgyud kyi rnam thar skor), a collection of hagiographies of masters in the lineage of the oral transmission of Rechungpa (Ras chung snyan brgyud). Thanks to the colophon, it can be attributed to Rinchen Gyatso (Rin chen rgya mtsho; u.d.) and mainly circulated within the circle of the Marpa Kagyu (Mar pa Bka' brgyud) school, a subdivision of the Kagyu tradition. MRZ highlights Machik Ongjo, a female practitioner as well as a holder of the oral transmission of Rechungpa, and alleges that she was active in the twelfth century. The text details her outstanding spiritual performance and a full ordination conferred by her master, Khyungtsang Repa, who inherited the oral teaching from Rechungpa Dorje Drakpa (Ras chung pa Rdo rje grags pa; 1085–1161). Among other narrative constituents, MRZ distinctively emphasizes the inevitability of Khyungtsang Repa's prophecy about her ordination.

*Addendum to the Sakya Genealogy Marvelous Storehouse* (*Sa skya'i gdung rabs ngo mtshar bang mdzod*; hereafter SGM): This text, a genealogy of the Sakya school that features outstanding Sakya masters' lives and their achievements, was compiled by Ngawang Kunga Sonam (Ngag dbang kun dga' bsod nams; 1597–1659), the twenty-seventh throne holder of the Sakya School. Relevant parts of it praises the fifth of the five Sakya Patriarchs, Drogon Chogyal Phagpa's ('Gro mgon chos rgyal' phags pa; 1235–1280) *Vinaya* practice by asserting that once he conferred ordination to over a hundred monastics, including fully

ordained nuns. This text is originally preserved in Tibetan and its Chinese translation is available (Chen 2005).

*The Biography of the Great Khenpo, the Learned one Rigpa Senge: The Ocean of Precious Merits (Mkhan chen bka' bzhi pa chen po rig pa'i seng ge'i rnam thar pa yon tan rin po che'i rgya mtsho*; hereafter MRR): this text devoted to a revered scholar of Minyak Rigpa Senge[4] (Rig pa seng ge; 1287–1375) was composed by his close disciple Senge Zangpo (Seng ge bzang po; u.d.). Thanks to the colophon, it is considered to be an important historical source concerning the Minyak (Mi nyag) region of the Kham area. This hagiography suggests that a fully ordained nun and several monks dwelled in Rabgang (Rab sgang) monastery in Minyak region, and they nurtured an assembly of fully ordained nuns there. It also records that fully ordained nuns under his supervision practiced meditation and studied Vinaya and other Buddhist texts. Schneider (2012) has cited this text in her article on the issue of fully ordained nuns in Tibetan Buddhism.

*The Biography of Chokyi Dronma: The Third Incarnation of the Wisdom Ḍākinī Sonam Peldren (Ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi sku skye gsum pa rje btsun ma chos kyi sgron ma'i rnam thar*; hereafter CR): This incomplete hagiography is devoted to Chokyi Dronma, and the author and the dating of the text are unknown. It displays her secular and religious life; it also narrates how Chokyi Dronma was fully ordained and implies that she might have been a tantric consort of her master (Diemberger 2007).

*A Detailed Exposition of the Biography of Shākya Chokden* (*Shākya mchog ldan gyi rnam thar zhib mo rnam par 'byed pa*; hereafter SR): This text devoted to Shākya Chokden is composed by Kunga Drolchok (Kun dga' grol mchog; 1507–1566), who was trained under Shākya Chokden's disciple Donyo Druppa (Don yod grub pa; ca. fifteenth century). The chronicling narration details the cult of this eminent master as well as exhibits his life stories in a comprehensive manner, including but not limited to his traveling, teaching, and interaction with his contemporaries. SR displays detailed information about the full female ordination he conducted.

*The History: How the Teachings were Established in the Three Monasteries at Upper and Lower Tsele (Rtse le gong 'og grwa tshang dgon gsum po rnams kyi bstan pa ji ltar btsugs pa'i lo rgyus*; hereafter RBR): this text is a Buddhist temple gazette, composed by Tsele Natsok Rangdröl (Rtse le sna tshogs rang grol; b. 1608) and records the monastics who made contributions to Tsele monastery. It suggests that a nun named Konchog Tsomo, received full ordination from a male master and imparted teachings to hundreds of nuns, and was revered in Dag (Dwags) valley (Martin 2005, p. 73).

## 3. Narrative Models in Hagiographical Context Concerning Full Female Ordination

The six texts listed above share similarities in terms of their narrative models. When mentioning fully ordained nuns in hagiographies, their male masters, usually being representative in their own lineages, were always serving as essential settings of the narration. They initiated the full ordination and served as the main preceptors (*mkhan po*) of the rituals. The female practitioners, on the other hand, were either distinguished in their schools or their names passed over in silence. In MRZ, CR, SR, and RBR, the male masters only ordained one particular female practitioner, respectively, and their ordinations are recorded. In SGM, MR, and MRR, fully ordained nuns appear in the form of groups, and authors of these texts did not spill much ink on them. To figure out the purposes of composing these writings concerning fully ordained nuns but in different narrative models, I will examine the relevant paragraphs of these texts.

| Case(s) | Relevant Male Master(s) | Female Practitioner(s) |
|---|---|---|
| 1st | Khyungtsang Repa (1115–1176) | Machik Ongjo (ca. 12th) |
| 2nd | Chogle Namgyal (1376–1451) | Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455) |
| 3rd | Mikyod Zhab (u.d.) | Konchog Tsomo (u.d.) |
| 4th | Shākya Chokden (1428–1507) | Choedup Palmo Tso (u.d.) |
| 5th | Rigpa Senge (1287–1375) | A group of fully ordained nuns |
| 6th | Drogon Chogyal Phagpa (1235–1280) | A group of nuns including fully ordained ones |

The first example that comes to us is Machik Ongjo[5]. MRZ records that she was accepted as a lay disciple by Khyungtsang Repa and was recognized as a reincarnation of one of Tilopa's (988–1069) *ḍākinī* (Tib. mkha' 'gro ma; Martin 2005, p. 67)[6]. Relevant parts in MRZ depict how Machik Ongjo received her full ordination[7]. She appeared as a fully ordained nun when receiving a secret ear-whispered teaching, oral transmission of Rechungpa, for the second time (Rin chen rgya mtsho 1983, p. 286; Martin 2005, p. 67). The text reads:

> At first, [Machik Ongjo] will be a lay disciple and later she will become a fully ordained nun. Because she is a right vessel, [I] shall bestow her [the *gelongma* vow][8].

The narration sketches Machik Ongjo's transformed religious identities, from a lay disciple with a celebrated secular background to a promising fully ordained nun. Though the text narrates a prophecy about her full ordination, the emphasis of the narrative is on her possession of good qualities as a practitioner and her qualifications to receive higher ordination. Otherwise, the narration about her (promising) ordination is lacking in detail and androcentric. It does not provide a further description of her ordination and how she acted as a fully ordained nun in her later life[9]. The authority is given to Khyungtsang Repa to determine whether to confer the ordination.

The following case is set in the fifteenth century. Chokyi Dronma was the princess of Mangyul Gungthang (Mang yul gung thang)[10] a daughter of King Tri Lhawang Gyaltsen (Khri lha dbang rgyal mtshan; 1404–1464). CR alleges that she was recognized as the incarnation of the deity Vajravārāhī by her masters Chogle Namgyal and Thangtong Gyalpo (Diemberger 2007, p. 338). In the related paragraphs of CR, it suggests that Chokyi Dronma was first a semi-ordained nun and subsequently fully ordained (Diemberger 2007, p. 183). In the ceremony, Chogle Namgyal was the principal officiator (Skt. upādhyāya, Tib. *mkhan po*) and Chökyi Wangchuk (Chos kyi dbang phyug; u.d.) acted as the master of the ceremony (Tib. *las kyi slob dpon*). The text reads:

> In the presence of a monastic assembly of faith who are in the required number and endowed with the [right] qualifications, having become a fully ordained nun substantially, her vase of mind was filled with the precepts of excellent disciplines[11].

Similar to Machik Ongjo's family background, Chokyi Dronma was also from a well-known family and then became a distinguished disciple of authoritative masters. CR, in contrast, provides a more detailed description on her full ordination, and it also refers to her as a fully ordained nun in the later parts of the text with that status serving as an honoured appellation (Diemberger 2007). Such a narrative, however, merely tells she was ordained by an assembly of qualified monastics whose gender were uncertain. Moreover, it highlights the male master's positions in the ceremony as it was led by Chogle Namgyal and another monk Chokyi Wangchuk.

Next example is Konchog Tsomo. RBR records that Konchog Tsomo received full ordination from Mikyod Zhab, and she practiced the monastic disciplines perfectly. In Zhongka (Zhong kha) convent, she imparted the Buddhist teachings to more than a hundred ordained women (Tib. *btsun ma*). Because of her distinguished spiritual practice, she was venerated by the people of Dag valley (Martin 2005, pp. 72–73).

The most detailed example among the six cases is provided by SR in terms of depicting who participated in this ordination and their positions. It records that in 1490 when Shākya Chokden went to Gyama (Rgya ma), he and nine other monks conducted the full ordination of Choedup Palmo Tso (Chos grub dpal mo 'tsho; Kun dga' grol mchog 1974, pp. 164–65):

> Shākya Chokden was the principal officiator. The master of the ceremony was acted by Chennga Drupgyal (Sbyan snga grub rgyal). Jetsun Kunga Gyeltsen (Rje btsun kun dga' rgyal mtshan) acted as the mentor (Tib. *gsang ston*). Je Drak Marwa (Rje brag dmar ba) was the master who bestowed the vow of pure conduct (Tib. *tshangs spyod la nyer gnas kyi sdom pa*). Dungwang Zangba (Drung dbang bzang pa) was the one who managed the time of ceremony (Tib. *dus sgo ba drung*), Choeje Samten (Chos rje bsam gtan pa) was the assistant (Tib. *grogs dan pa*), Dungwang Zangba Choeje Samten was the substitute for the master of the ceremony (Tib. *las grwa'i kha skong byes kyi slob dpon*). The four masters conducted the ordination, and Choedup Palmo Tso received the vows of a fully ordained nun[12].

One of the reasons that SR records detailed information of this ceremony might be that the length and content of the Tibetan hagiographical writings had gradually increased over the centuries (Sernesi 2015, p. 738). Otherwise, the narration of the ceremony is presented in an androcentric way, without mentioning any participation of the female *saṃgha*, which is required according to the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition. Shākya Chokden later supported the validity of this ordination with his own interpretation of *Vinaya*[13]. Again, this act features the male masters' absolute authority over the ordination and the interpretation of the *Vinaya* tradition.

In the last two cases, fully ordained nuns appear as a group. MRR indicates Rigpa Senge had a group of disciples, who were fully ordained nuns in Minyak of the Kham area. The text reads:

> At that time, Darma Gyeltsen (Dar ma rgyal mtshan), Gyalba Pel (Rgyal ba dpal), Shākya Pel (Shākya dpal), Wangyal (Byang rgyal), Kunga Gyeltsen (Kun dga' rgyal mtshan), Rgyal (Bla rgyal), Dawa (Zla ba) and so forth were there. Having shaved, the fully ordained nun Tashi Pel (Bkar shi dpal), as a [female] disciple, appeared at Rabgang (Rab sgang) [monastery], [and] because of this reason, a monastic [community] of fully ordained nuns was also nurtured[14].

Though the text does not assert Tashi Pel participating in the full ordination of nuns, she might have had the role of educating a new female monastic assembly (Tib. *dge slong ma'i dge 'dun*). Later parts of the text suggest that Rigpa Senge was the teacher of an assembly of fully ordained nuns, who studied "A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life" (Bodhicaryāvatāra), observed monastic discipline, and did meditation. Because of the merits of practice as such, he was able to live longer (Seng ge bzang po 1983, p. 61; Price-Wallace 2015, pp. 230–31)[15]. These two paragraphs depicting the activities of fully ordained nuns serve mostly to highlight the spiritual achievements and merits of Rigpa Senge.

The last case is recorded in SGM. One paragraph in this text praises Drogon Chogyal Phagpa's (1235–1280) achievement in *Vinaya* practice by mentioning that he ordained 1425 monastics, including fully ordained monks and nuns, semi-ordained monks and nuns (Chen 2005, p. 150). However, details of the full ordinations of nuns given by Drogon Chogyal Phagpa remain unknown.

Paragraphs extracted from SGM, MRR, and SR feature the achievement of eminent male masters. These narratives mention the existence of fully ordained nuns mainly to glorify their male masters' outstanding spiritual performance.

By examining the three hagiographies featuring female practitioners, namely MRZ, CR, and RBR, I found out that though the writings center on these female personas, and they are alleged to have been fully ordained, the relevant narration about their ordinations is obscure, and their male masters still end up at the center in terms of the instrumental roles they play in their ordinations. Besides, the focus of the narrative is on female practitioners'

possession of good qualities, their qualification to receive higher ordination, and their excellent spiritual achievement afterward. These phenomena imply that full ordinations might have been carried out according to their masters' expectations, and fully ordained nuns facilitate their revered status in their own schools. Such monastic identity is honorific rather than practical because they were acting as leaders of their female peers enjoyed the rare access to full ordination. The methods of their full ordinations might not strictly follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition as this ceremony should be conducted by both male and female monastic assemblies (Tsedroen and Anālayo 2013, p. 761). We could thus infer that these women being able to access to full ordination highlight their distinction in spiritual performance. The purpose of composing the narrations of them being fully ordained nuns is to establish the religious status in their schools. Meanwhile, the religious positions of female disciples are always highlighted by their male masters who possessed the power and authority of schools, and these women inherit parts of the authority because like Machik Ongjo and Chokyi Dronma, they did not only have rare access to full ordination but also became important figures in their respective schools as Machik Ongjo was one of the lineage holders of the oral transmission of Rechungpa and Chokyi Dronma is recognized as the first Samding Dorje Pakmo[16]. When fully ordained nuns appear in hagiographies devoted to male masters, such as in SGM, MR, and SR, relevant descriptions of these nuns serve to underline the masters' greatness in spiritual practice, whereas usually, these females were less famous, and most of their names are passed over in silence.

Additionally, we could observe that from the examples of Machik Ongjo to Choedup Palmo Tso, the descriptions of their ordinations are more detailed, developing from a mere brief sentence to a well-documented narrative displaying who got involved and what their functions were in the ceremony. When it comes to the crucial points, such as whether other fully ordained nuns participated in the ordinations, however, all the authors keep silent. Such silence could have two interpretations. First, these biographies highlight male masters dominating those full female ordinations in order to feature those masters' religious authority. Therefore, who conferred ordinations weighs more than how ordinations were conducted. The other possibility is that the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition requires that the ceremonies (Skt. *karmavastu*, Tib. *las kyi gzhi*), involving more than four people, should be conducted by both male and female monastic assemblies (Shi 1999b, p. 359). However, it is generally believed that the lineage of fully ordained nuns was never introduced to Tibet, indicating there might not have ever been fully ordained nuns who could participate in such rituals. Consequently, the authors of these hagiographies might consciously use ambivalent nouns such as monastic assemblies (Tib. *dge 'dun*), which could refer to both male and female monastic assemblies in order to make such narrations less controversial[17].

## 4. Conclusions

Full female ordination has been unavailable in the Tibetan Buddhist community, and thus the nuns following this tradition are restricted to semi-ordination. Recently, however, Je Khenpo (b. 1966), the spiritual leader of Bhutan bestowed full female ordination to 144 nuns. Whether this practice could (re-)introduce the order of fully ordained nuns to Tibetan Buddhism for good is still to be seen[18]. For this issue, prior scholarship has located a few fourteenth-to-seventeenth-century hagiographical writings. They suggest the existence of fully ordained Tibetan nuns, who were alleged to live in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. The recognition of monastic identities as such, however, is disputed because the method of their ordinations, probably conferred by the assembly of fully ordained monks alone, does not strictly follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition, which is practiced by the Tibetan Buddhists. In an effort to learn why these female practitioners are depicted as fully ordained nuns, I revisited relevant hagiographies with particular reference to *The Biography of Chokyi Dronma* and *A Detailed Exposition of the Biography of Shākya Chokden*. Based on the findings, this paper suggests that the hagiographies, which feature outstanding female practitioners, depict their subjects as fully ordained nuns to

serve the purpose of highlighting their outstanding spiritual achievement. On the other hand, in order to underline male masters' distinguished religious practices, hagiographies devoted to them portray the image of fully ordained nuns. The narrations of these nuns, in turn, are subordinate, and thus, these females' full ordinations are briefly depicted. Besides, the hagiographical writings employ ambivalent expressions to portray the detail of full female ordinations, such as using gender-neutral expressions to refer to who conducted the rituals, most probably for the purpose of making the narration less controversial doctrinally.

In a nutshell, these writings are androcentric by nature and emphasize the eminence of relevant male masters. Although they depict a series of fully ordained nuns, the acceptance of these females as being gelongmas may not go beyond the context of these hagiographies[19]. For those of us interested in how Tibetan hagiographies of male figures influence the literary history of its women, this paper may serve as an example of work and such research can happen on a larger scale through current digital means such as Buddhist Digital Resource Center[20].

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## Notes

1 High-ranking Tibetan masters encourage their nuns to receive higher ordination from Chinese nuns, who preserve the tradition of such ordination. Besides, Sakyadhita, a large-scale international group of Buddhist nuns, organized conferences on this issue. They were held in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Cambodia, Nepal, Taiwan, Malaysia, Mongolia, and Vietnam from 1991 to 2010. See (Schneider 2012). Extant scholarship explores possible solutions to (re-)introduce this lineage to Tibetan Buddhism. One suggestion is to bestow the full ordination by Tibetan monks alone. See (Shi 1999a; Tsedroen and Anālayo 2013; Bodhi 2010; Tsering 2010; Ryōji 2015). Another suggestion is to invite Chinese fully ordained nuns to co-conduct the ordination with Tibetan monks. See (Shi 1999a; Chodron 2010; Sujato 2010).

2 The reason I use (re-)introduce here is because Tibetan Buddhist masters might have conferred full female ordination that was shown in their hagiographies. If they did confer such ceremonies, regardless such practice strictly followed the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition or not, the contemporary effort to establish the order of fully ordained nuns in Tibetan Buddhist community is to reintroduce the full female ordination. Extant scholarship, however, indicates that the order of fully ordained nuns may not have been firmly established in Tibet (Havnevik 1989, p. 45; Skilling 1994, p. 36; Campbell 1996, p. 5). In that case, establishing such a monastic order is to introduce this ritual practice to Tibetan Buddhism.

3 Among the existing textual evidence, examples of fully ordained nuns are mainly found in scriptural texts which date from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. More hagiographies concerning fully ordained nuns might exist, but these exceed the bounds of this paper as this essay specifically focus on the fourteenth-to-seventeenth-century textual sources.

4 Rigpa Senge was one of the five learned scholars of Minyak. The other four are Mase Tönpa (Rma se ston pa; 1317–1383), Gyalwa Rinchen (Rgyal bar in chen; 1328–1386), Chukmo Tönpa (Phyug mo ston pa; 1332–1392), and Jamsar (Byam gsar; 1318–1386).

5 She was born into a wealthy family allegedly belonging to the Gyamo (Rgya mo) clan in Uyuk ('U yug), who owned a great deal of land, livestock, and crops (Allione 2000, p. 296; Martin 2005, p. 66). From early life, although Machik Ongjo held a pessimistic view towards the mundane life, she had great faith in Buddhism. Despite that Machik Ongjo got married, she was tormented by household life and finally renounced the world. See Martin (2005, p. 67).

6 Dākinī is sometimes used interchangeably with the term "yoginī", particularly in the tantric Buddhist context. It means "goddesses with magical abilities". See Nobumi and Jansen (2019, p. 132).

7 Five Tibetan sources surrounding Machik Ongjo exist till date. Among which, four are biographies: MRZ (Anon 1983, pp. 285–88), *The Biography of Machik Ongjo* (Ma gcig ong jo'i rnam thar; MRT; Mkhas btsun bzang po 1973, p. 52), *The Blue Annals* (Roerich 1953,

pp. 443–46) and *Khyngtsangpa's Disciple Machik Ongjo* (Khyung tshang pa'i slob ma ma gcig ong jo; KSM; 'Phrin las rgya mtsho 2009, pp. 359–60). One source, *Tibetan chronicle of Pema Karpo* (*Chos 'byung bstan pa'i pad+ma rgyas pa'i nyin byed*, compiled by Pema Karpo (Padma dkar po) in 1592, just mentions her in a single sentence (Padma dkar po 1968, p. 509). MRZ is probably the earliest one among the four biographies, albeit its compiler and dating remain unknown. It is the most extensive source among the others about Machik Ongjo by providing significant information about her spiritual life. The second source appears in *The Blue Annals*, which was compiled in 1476 by Go Zhonnu Pel (Gzhon nu dpal; 1392–1481). The third one MRT, was written by Trinle Gyatso ('Phrin las rgya mtsho; u.d.) in 1845 and the last Tibetan source, KSM, was composed by a contemporary scholar Khetsun Zangpo (Mkhas btsun bzang po; b. 1920).

8 de yang dang po dge bsnyen phyis dge slong du yong/de snod ldan yin pas byin gsungs so/See Rin chen rgya mtsho (1983, p. 286, l. 5).

9 It is also worthy to note that in a hagiographical reference devoted to Padmasambhava (ca. 8th) depicts his two tantric consorts, Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal; ca. 8th) and Mandarava (ca. 8th) as fully ordained nuns. A tantric consort, however, is supposed to participate in sexual unions, so it might not be possible for her to be a fully ordained nun who would live a celibate life. Liang suggests that the narrative aims at underlining Yeshe Tsogyel and Mandarava's purity that they are free from secular defilements, it therefore, portrays them as fully ordained nuns who possess more merits and independence. See Liang (2020, p. 221). Similar to Machik Ongjo's case, the author of MRZ might also intend to highlight Machik Ongjo's religious purity, just like a fully ordained nun.

10 In southwest Tibet.

11 dad pa'i dge 'dun grangs dang mtshan nyid yongs su rdzogs pa'i dbus su tshigs phyi ma dge slong ma'i dngos por bsgrubs nas lhag pa tshul khrims kyi bslab pas thugs kyi bum pa gang ste/ See (Anon 2018, f.60b, line 2–3).

12 pan chen rin po che'i drung du mkhan po zhus/las kyi slob dpon sbyan snga grub pa'i rgyal po/gsang ston rje btsun kun dga' rgyal mtshan/tshangs spyod nyer gnas kyi slob dpon rje brag dmar ba/ dus sgo ba drung dbang bzang pa/grogs dan pa chos rje bsam gtan pa/las grwa'i kha skong byes kyi slob dpon pa rnam bzhis mdzad nas/dge slong ma'i sdom pa bzhes/See Kun dga' grol mchog (1974, p. 164, l. 5–8).

13 Shākya Chokden validated such ordination because the full ordination of women has two parts: the first is conferred by an assembly of fully ordained nuns, and the second is conducted by an assembly of fully ordained monks, and thus they can be interpreted separately. He further argued that the prerequisites of being a probationary nun (Skt. *śikṣamāṇā*, Tib. *dge slob ma*) and receiving the vows of chastity are necessary when the candidates are ordained by assemblies of both fully ordained monks and fully ordained nuns, but that such practices are not compulsory for ordination by an assembly of fully ordained monks alone. See https://thubtenchodron.org/2006/05/mulasarvastivada-bhikshuni/#rf1-54152 (accessed on 26 July 2022).

14 de dus dar ma rgyal mtshan/rgyal ba dpal/ shākya dpal/ byang rgyal/ kun dga' rgyal mtshan/bla rgyal/zla ba sogs byung zhing spu 'bor nas gdul bya'i yan lag tu dge slong ma bkra shis dpal rab sgang du byung ba la brten nas dge slong ma'i dge 'dun yang bskyangs so/ See Seng ge bzang po (1983, p. 36, l. 4–5).

15 dge slong ma'i dge 'dun brgya phrag mang pos spyod 'jug dang /'dul pa la sogs kyi 'chad nyan dang /sgom sgrub la rtse cig tu gzhol bas sgrub pa'i mchod pas mnyes pa sgrub par byed kyin yod pa/ See Seng ge bzang po (1983, p. 61, l. 5–6).

16 Chokyi Dronma's reincarnation Kunga Zangmo (Kun dga' bzang mo; 1459–1502) initiated an incarnation lineage of the Samding Dorje Pakmo.

17 For male ordination, normally a semi-ordained monk (Tib. *dge tshul*) needs to receive the vows from ten fully ordained monks who have been ordained for at least ten years. In remote areas, however, the minimum number of required monks can be reduced to five. Lachen Gongpa Rabsal (Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal; 825–915), for instance, was ordained by five monks. See Thubten Chodron (2010, pp. 185, 191–92).

18 For more information about this ordination, see https://www.lionsroar.com/women-receive-full-ordination-in-bhutan-for-first-time-in-modern-history/ (accessed on 22 July 2022). Additionally, see a document published by Je Khenpo https://www.facebook.com/bhutantimes1/posts/1904123783106794 (accessed on 21 September 2022).

19 Machik Ongjo's case can support this view because only one hagiography devoted to her mentions that she had received the full ordination, while the other four sources keep silent on this point.

20 The Buddhist Digital Resource Center is a nonprofit organization which aims at preserving and disseminating Buddhist literature to scholars as well as practitioners. Most of their online manuscripts are in Tibetan language. https://www.bdrc.io, accessed on 20 September 2022.

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# The Fragmentary History of Female Monasticism in Thailand: Community Formation and Development of Monastic Rules by Thai *Mae Chi*s

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**Abstract:** A major challenge in the historical study of female monasticism in Thailand is the paucity of texts written by or about Thai Buddhist female practitioners prior to 1950. Biographical and autobiographical texts and other substantial Buddhist texts authored by Thai female practitioners emerged arguably only in the 20th century and are generally relatively rare, with only few notable exceptions. In this paper, I will utilize some of the earliest available Thai texts that allow more detailed insights into female monasticism and soteriological teaching and practice, the creation of female monastic spaces and the interrelationships between male and female monastics. Thus, I will examine sets of monastic training rules that, even though based on Pali canonical precepts and teachings, were created in the early 20th century. In addition to monastic code texts and the narratives of foundation stories, other important sources for my study include the biographies of monastic and female lay practitioners, important benefactors of female monastic communities and prominent male monastic supporters of female monastic and spiritual practice. I will also draw on sermon texts by female and male monastics. Here, I will focus only on the lives of those individuals and histories of female monastic communities that I regard as representative of larger issues, trends and challenges in the history of female monasticism in 20th century Thai Buddhism. Given the scarcity of sources, the present study cannot aspire to provide comprehensive accounts of the history of female monastic communities in Thailand and their interrelationships. Nor will I be able to reconstruct exhaustively the history of their monastic codes of rules. However, based on the sources that are available I will trace the history of attempts to create a blueprint for the organisation of Thai Buddhist female coenobitic monasticism.

**Keywords:** *mae chi*s; Thai female monasticism; *Vinaya*; Thai Theravada Buddhism; Thai Buddhist nunneries; history of Thai Buddhism; cremation volumes; monastic code texts

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## 1. Introduction

In the absence of an officially recognized Theravada order of fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunī*) in Thailand,[1] Thai women have pursued other forms of Buddhist renunciation. *Mae chi*s, whose spiritual practice is the most well-known and widely practised way of female renunciation in Thailand, have existed for at least 400 years. They wear white robes, shave their head and eyebrows, and are also characterized by their practice of keeping the eight or ten Buddhist precepts. Despite their long existence and repeated attempts to gain a clearly defined legal status as monastics, *mae chi*s are still not consistently legally recognized as "ordained persons" (*nak buat*). This is one of the major reasons of why their socio-religious roles, status and identity are blurred and rather varied across the country.[2]

*Mae chi*s' spiritual practices, teachings and interrelationships with monks and laypeople and the way they are venerated or shown respect, in verbal and non-verbal forms, are often characterized by locally divergent forms and patterns. Thus, in Thailand's modern history there have been *mae chi*s who have become the focus of devotional practices as a

consequence of the belief that they have achieved full awakening, as evidenced, for example, by the erection of *stūpa*s for the enshrinement of their relics or the production of medallion amulets with their effigy; there are *mae chi*s who have been highly respected due to their social engagement, alleged possession of supernatural powers or profound Buddhist scholarship (Collins and McDaniel 2010; Cook 2009; Seeger 2009, 2010, 2013, 2018). At the same time, however, scholars have described *mae chi*s collectively as having "a vastly different and immeasurably inferior status when compared with the monkhood" (Kepner 1996, p. 34) or "a social status that is even lower than that of ordinary women." (Tavivat Puntarigvivat 2543, p. 101; all translations from the Thai language are mine, unless otherwise stated. When I cite sources in the Thai language, I provide their year of publication (if known) in the Thai Buddhist calendar and not the Christian calendar). Following established Thai etiquette, Thai monks are addressed, referred to and described with honorific vocabulary that comprises special personal pronouns, classifiers and verbs (for example, for "eating" and "taking a shower"). In contrast to this, the Thai language used when talking with or about *mae chi*s may sometimes contain some special honorific vocabulary to some extent; however, often it does not and is rather a language appropriate for laypeople. Thus, this lack of uniform use of honorific language too reflects the obscure social status of Thai *mae chi*s.[3]

Moreover, whilst it is easy to ascertain the precise numbers of fully ordained Buddhist monks (*bhikkhu*) and male novices (*sāmaṇera*) in Thailand, to find out how many *mae chi*s exist is a much more difficult, if not impossible, task. For at the beginning of each year, the Thai National Office of Buddhism normally publishes the *Basic Data of Buddhism* that contains the precise figures not only of Thai monks and novices but also of Thai male monasteries (*wat*) across the country and abroad.[4] These data are also recurrently published and discussed in Thai newspapers. Thus, according to the National Office of Buddhism, during the year 2018, for example, there were altogether 281,058 fully ordained Theravada monks[5] and 44,430 Theravada novices.[6] The *Basic Data of Buddhism* also provides the number of registered monasteries (*wat*) in Thailand as 40,580 (as at the end of December of 2016). However, as *mae chi*s are not registered with the National Office of Buddhism, the *Basic Data of Buddhism* does not provide equivalent figures for Thai *mae chi*s and the nunneries they live in. What is interesting to note here though is that the *Basic Data of Buddhism* provides the numbers of non-Thai *mae chi*s in the respective years. In the year 2015 for example there were 66 non-Thai *mae chi*s in Thailand. This compares with 795 non-Thai monks in the same year. Therefore, it is not surprising that the numbers of Thai *mae chi*s given in academic studies on Thai Buddhism vary considerably.[7] In 2019 the Thai Mae Chi Institute (*Sathaban Mae Chi Thai*) published statistics according to which 16,446 *mae chi*s were registered with the Institute.[8] However, as it is clear that a significant number of *mae chi*s are not registered with the Institute, the actual number of *mae chi*s must be considerably higher. Based on previous research and surveys it seems reasonable to assume that, at the moment, there are probably around 20,000 but it is unlikely that there are more than 25,000 *mae chi*s in Thailand.[9]

## 2. The Historical Origin of *Mae Chi*s

Furthermore, even though there have been female renunciants who have been highly revered, generally speaking the biographies of individual *mae chi*s and the history of monastic communities of female renunciants are far less well-documented than is the case for monks and male monasteries (Seeger 2018, pp. 49–62). In fact, historians of female monasticism in Thai Buddhism have to cope with a remarkable dearth of historical sources on *mae chi*s' monastic life and spiritual practice. Notably, there are no sources that would allow us to say anything definite about the historical origin of *mae chi*s.

Nonetheless, within Thai Buddhism it has been proposed that Thai *mae chi*s came into existence during the 3rd century BCE. For example, in the foreword of the handbook for the *mae chi*s practising in his monastery Wat Phleng Vipassanā, the abbot Phra Khru Sangwonsamathiwat argued that the first *mae chi*s were ordained by the Buddhist missionaries Soṇa

and Uttara, who are believed to have been sent by the Indian emperor Asoka (3rd century BCE) to spread Buddhism in Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Wat Phleng Vipassanā [no date], [*foreword*]). Phra Khru Sangwon-samathiwat does not provide any sources nor further details for this statement. His argument assumes that Suvaṇṇabhūmi, whose exact location and scope are far from being clear (Prapod Assavavirulhakarn 2010; Revire 2018), was at least partially geographically identical with the current territory of Thailand.

In addition, and in contrast to Western scholarship, which presumes that the *bhikkhunī* order vanished some 1000 years ago (see, e.g., Anālayo 2021, p. 10), Phra Khru Sangwon-samathiwat's statement seems to imply that the order of fully ordained Theravada nuns had already disappeared before the arrival of the missionaries (Wat Phleng Vipassanā [no date], [*foreword*]). This belief may stem from the textbook *Vinayamukha*, which was authored by the influential Thai Buddhist educator and Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Saṅgha Prince Wachirayan (Vajirañāṇavarorasa; 1860–1921). Over the last 100 years, this textbook on monastic discipline has been widely used and become a standard text of *Vinaya* studies in Thai monastic education. In the 3rd volume of *Vinayamukha*, Prince Patriarch Wachirayan argued that the *bhikkhunī*s may have already disappeared during the time of the Buddha (Wachirayan 2538, pp. 237–38). The same argument was also proposed by his successor, Supreme Patriarch Krommaluang Chinawornsiriwat (1859–1937), who famously promulgated in 1928 a still valid decree according to which Thai monks and novices are not allowed to give ordination as *bhikkhunī* (Chinawornsiriwat 2481, pp. 5, 9–10).[10]

However, the views on the disappearance of the Theravada *bhikkhunī*s are divergent in Thai Buddhism (Phongphan Keeratiwasin 2560, p. 166). In the widely circulated and controversial book *Scriptures on the Buddhism of Suvaṇṇabhūmi* (Ratchakawi 2554),[11] the following argument, which seems to suggest that the *bhikkhunī*-order was still in existence in the 3rd century BCE, is presented: the two missionaries Soṇa and Uttara arrived in Suvaṇṇabhūmi "without *bhikkhunī*s, which is the reason why it was not possible to ordain women as *bhikkhunī*s. Instead women were ordained as *mae chi*s … at that time. This was convenient and much easier than to ordain women as *bhikkhunī*s. Ordaining women as *mae chi*s was a substitution for *bhikkhunī*s." (Ratchakawi 2554, 439n1). It was here also reasoned that "for, when ordained as a *bhikkhunī* and then disrobing, this is regarded as a *pārājika* ['expulsion (from the order of fully ordained monastics)'],"[12] which, according to this understanding, would entail the impossibility of a new ordination as *bhikkhunī*; this is different from monks who are able to be re-ordained, if they had left the order in a legally unproblematic way (Kieffer-Pülz 2015–2016, pp. 20–23; Hüsken 1997, pp. 91–92, 472). *Scriptures on the Buddhism of Suvaṇṇabhūmi* provides some further explanations:

> "However, as for *mae chi*s, even though having disrobed or transgressed the monastic rules, *mae chi*s can be re-ordained or receive and adhere to the rules anew. The reason for this is that they have not been ordained in accordance with the *Vinaya* and are therefore not regarded as *bhikkhunī*s in accordance with the *Vinaya* and *saṅghakamma* [legal acts of the *saṅgha*]." (Ratchakawi 2554, 439n1)

Whilst all the earliest Pali accounts of the two Buddhist missionaries do not mention *mae chi*s, the understanding that the first *mae chi*s were ordained by Soṇa and Uttara is probably the result of an unconventional interpretation of a passage in the *Vinaya* commentary *Samantapāsādikā*. Here, the account merely mentions that, after the two missionaries had taught a Pali canonical sermon text, "1500 daughters of good families" (*kuladhītānaṃ diyaḍḍhasahassaṃ*) "went forth" (*pabbajiṃsu*),[13] that is, were ordained. Even though the account is not explicit as to what kind of ordination was performed in this case, the textual context seems to suggest that these were ordinations as *bhikkhunī*s or *sāmaṇerī*s (female novices).

Be that as it may, whilst being historically rather problematic, the above explanations about the historical origin of *mae chi*s try to anchor *mae chi*s in the ordination lineage of Theravada and, by so doing, provide them with legitimacy. In fact, it was even argued that historical "traces" (*rong-roi*) of *mae chi*s can already be found during the time

of the Buddha (Sookson Chandashoto 2549, p. 10; Phongphan Keeratiwasin 2560, p. 75). Referring to the Pali canonical text *Pāsādika-sutta*, the Thai scholar Manop Nakkanrian argues that *mae chi*s came into existence during the time of the Buddha in two forms: those who wear white clothes and practise the eight precepts, including the practice of celibacy (*brahmacāriniyo*), and those who adhere to the five precepts that excludes celibacy (*kāmabhoginiyo*) (Manop Nakkanrian 2545, pp. 96–97). Furthermore, there is also the unspecified belief that, despite the lack of unequivocal sources, *mae chi*s have been in existence since the Sukhothai era (13th–15th century).[14] Here, it must be pointed out that none of these beliefs about the historical origin of the *mae chi*s is widely shared within Thai Buddhism. In fact, it has usually been assumed that the historical origin of *mae chi*s remains unknown.[15] This obscurity about *mae chi*s' historical beginning is a further reason for the complex ambiguities of *mae chi*s' identity.

Even the various explanations for the meaning and etymology of the religious title and appellation "*mae chi*" differ significantly. Whereas the word "*mae*" unambiguously means mother in the Thai language, there are multiple suggestions as to the origin and meaning of the word "*chi*." (Jarin Phanbanyat 2526, p. 71; Manop Nakkanrian 2545, p. 94; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1991, pp. 36–37; de Bernon 1996). Moreover, the way in which *mae chi*s have been referred to and addressed has changed historically and is still not uniform.[16]

### 3. *Mae Chi*s in Early Western Accounts

Accounts by European authors who spent time in Siam (in 1939, the country's name was changed from Siam to Thailand) during the 17th century confirm that Thai *mae chi*s have been in existence for at least 400 years. Indeed, the descriptions in their accounts arguably constitute the earliest more detailed sources on female monasticism in Thai Buddhism.[17] Even though these texts do not provide many details on the inner workings and monastic rules of *mae chi* communities of that time period, they allow us to gain some rudimentary ideas of how female renunciants pursued their spiritual practice in a monastic environment.

According to these accounts, *mae chi*s lived in the vicinity of, or even within, the monasteries of monks and must have spent a significant amount of their time listening to sermons and reciting texts. What can also consistently be noted in these European descriptions is the advanced age of the *mae chi*s. The French missionary Nicolas Gervaise, who spent nearly three years in Siam in the 1680s, for example, notes that women were not allowed to become *mae chi*s "before the age of fifty, so as to avoid all occasion for scandal" ("afin d'éviter toute occasion de scandale") (Gervaise 1688, p. 212).

With regard to the monastic rules *mae chi*s were following, the accounts are less revealing and sometimes even contradictory. The Dutch merchant Joost Schouten, for example, wrote in the 1630s that *mae chi*s were "tied to no rules or prescriptions." (Caron and Schouten 1935, p. 105). Likewise, Jeremias van Vliet, another Dutch merchant, who spent time in Siam during the first half of the 17th century, reported that *mae chi*s "are not . . . subject to any extraordinary rules, and . . . do everything out of religious fervour and free will." (Vliet 1910, p. 77). In the account of the French diplomat Simon de La Loubère, who visited Siam for only four months in the 1680s, however, *mae chi*s are said to be "following in most things the rules of the monks" ("observant en la plupart des choses la Régle [sic] des Talapoins") (La Loubère 1700, p. 342). La Loubère may, however, have mistakenly understood *mae chi*s to be *bhikkhunī*s, and thus assumed that they were following training rules equivalent or similar to those of the *bhikkhu*s.[18] He also reported that, when *mae chi*s have "carnal commerce with men" ("commerce charnel avec les hommes") (La Loubère 1700, p. 359), they received corporal punishment by their parents, in the form of being beaten with a stick ("On les livre à leurs Parents [sic] pour les châtier du baston"). This was a relatively light punishment, when compared with that of monks who were, when discovered to have transgressed the rule of celibacy, "roasted alive over a slow fire."[19]

What has been consistently observed by European eyewitnesses is that the physical closeness between *mae chi*s and monks posed a significant concern.[20] In fact, there are plenty of other premodern and modern sources that show that this physical closeness must have been an enduring major concern in the establishment and organisation of monastic spaces. Thus, the arguably earliest formal rule for *mae chi*s, which is part of rule number 8 of the 10 Saṅgha Rules (*Kot Phra Song*)[21] promulgated during the reign of King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), aims at preventing the occurrence of sexual intercourse (*methunadhamma*) between women and monks. This rule stipulates that *mae chi*s are "without exception [*det khat thi-diau*] forbidden to live in or near a monastery [*ārāma*]."[22] It is, however, not clear how this rule was enforced nor how effective it was. So far, I have not found any sources for other *mae chi* rules from the 19th century.

## 4. The Historical Study of *Mae Chi* Communities

In this paper, I will utilize some of the earliest available Thai texts that allow more detailed insights into female monasticism and soteriological teaching and practice, the creation of female monastic spaces and the interrelationships between male and female monastics. Thus, I will examine sets of monastic training rules that, even though based on Pali canonical precepts and teachings, were created in the early 20th century. In addition to monastic code texts and narratives of foundation stories, other important sources for my study include the biographies of monastic and female lay practitioners, important benefactors of female monastic communities and prominent male monastic supporters of female monastic and spiritual practice.[23] I will also draw on sermon texts by female and male monastics. Here, I will focus only on the lives of those individuals and histories of female monastic communities that I regard as representative of larger issues, trends, and challenges in the history of female monasticism in 20th century Thai Buddhism.

A major challenge in the historical study of female monasticism in Thailand is the paucity of texts written by or about individual female practitioners prior to 1950. As I have shown and discussed elsewhere (Seeger 2018, pp. 9–15, 47–62), biographical and autobiographical texts and other substantial Buddhist texts authored by Thai female practitioners emerged arguably only in the 20th century and are generally relatively rare, with only few notable exceptions. Also, Buddhist texts authored by female practitioners before 1950 mostly contain their interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, but not much, if any, information about female monasticism and the spiritual practice of women.

The earliest nunnery foundations that we have more detailed written sources for took place at the beginning of the 20th century.[24] These foundation stories often seem to be based on oral accounts, are patchy and sometimes contain conflicting or chronologically problematic information (even with regards to essential details).[25] As I will show below, what many of these texts have in common are narratives of charismatic *mae chi*s who, through their devoted Buddhist practice, inspired devout lay people to become benefactors of their newly founded nunneries and/or caused senior monks to support the new monastic community or approve of their foundation.

A further challenge is that the exact dating of the normative and narrative texts I have used for my study is often problematic. Given the scarcity of sources, the present study cannot aspire to provide comprehensive accounts of the history of female monastic communities in Thailand and their interrelationships. Nor will I be able to exhaustively reconstruct the history of their monastic codes of rules. However, based on the sources that are available I will trace the history of attempts to create a blueprint for the organisation of Thai Buddhist female coenobitic monasticism.

In this way, this paper sets out to contribute to our understanding of the formation of monastic communities and the development of monastic code texts by Thai *mae chi*s. In the subsequent sections, I will describe and discuss the foundation, historical development and code texts of some of the arguably most important *mae chi* nunneries in Thai history. This is then followed by case studies of influential practitioners and benefactors of Thai female monasticism.

## 5. The Mae Chi Community of Samnak Chi Prachum Nari

The fragmentary foundation story of the still existing nunnery Prachum Nari in Ratchaburi province is the oldest more detailed account of the beginnings of a Thai *mae chi* monastic community that I have come across during my 18 years of researching the history of female monasticism in Thailand.[26] As I will demonstrate, this account contains several elements that are characteristic of the creation and development of other important *mae chi* nunneries. According to this narrative, in 1902, Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun,[27] together with a group of an unspecified number of other *mae chi*s, was wandering in the province of Ratchaburi as part of their intensive renunciatory practices. Notably, the account uses in this context the Thai phrase "*pak-klot*", which can be translated as "to set up a large umbrella" and implies the practice of meditation under a special umbrella that has a mosquito net attached to it (*klot*). The phrase "*pak-klot*" is typically used in Thai descriptions of the 13 *dhutaṅga* practices of austerity, as practised within the Thai forest tradition. *Pak-klot* is here mentioned as part of the *dhutaṅga* practice number 9, which is called *rukkhamūlikaṅga*, that is "the practice of living at the root of a tree." (See Vism 59–61 and 74–75). From various accounts by or about Thai female practitioners, we can learn, however, that this was far from being a generally accepted practice for renunciant women. Indeed, it was argued that the practice of *dhutaṅga* in the forest "is dangerous for women" or "for young women demeritorious [*pāpa*]." (Seeger 2018, pp. 201, 237–41).

Be that as it may, the reputation of Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun's and her group's strict spiritual practice spread widely. Attracted by this reputation, Yiao Saesow, a former monk, visited Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun and, as a result of a dhammic conversation with her, he must have become deeply impressed by her Buddhist knowledge and spiritual practice. He convinced her to stay in the area and asked a local abbot for permission to convert an old, abandoned monastery, which was located in an overgrown forest and inhabited by wild animals, into a nunnery for the *mae chi*s. The forest was cleared, additional land was purchased for the new *mae chi* nunnery, the restoration of existing monastic buildings was completed and new monastic dwellings were built. Not only did Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun and her group of *mae chi*s take up residence in the monastic setting but Yiao Saesow too, together with his wife and daughter, moved into the nunnery in order to "keep the precepts and practise the *dhamma*" there. From an account written by the nunnery's third head nun in 1975, we learn that the newly erected monastic dwellings were small bamboo constructions with thatched roofs (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518). Various foundation accounts tell us that "many people" decided to become ordained in the nunnery.

Women who intended to become a member of the *mae chi* community had to undergo a qualifying examination during which their knowledge of basic Buddhist texts, both in the Thai and Pali language, and specific Pali canonical teachings were considered. They were tested on:

- the 10 *kammapatha* (courses of action);
- 16 *upakilesa*s (mental defilements);
- deportment.

Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun, together with Yiao Saesow, instructed the *mae chi*s in their community in Buddhist practice and "established a set of rules [*kho katika*] as the way of practice for those who become ordained in the nunnery."[28] This set of rules consists of 33 articles. However, it seems that this monastic code was developed from an earlier set of rules which consisted of a more rudimentary form of the first 22 rules.[29] Even though the more developed 33 rules still appear to be rather simple when compared with the monastic code of *bhikkhu*s, they possess several remarkable similarities to the monastic rules of the Pali *Vinayapiṭaka* and its commentaries. The preamble of the Prachum Nari monastic code, for example, outlines various forms of punishment for the transgression of specific rules, called *daṇḍakamma*. Thus, the transgression of the rules may entail punishment through manual labour, such as cutting grass, moving sand into the nunnery or watering plants. The name *daṇḍakamma* and the physical form of punishment suggest that this practice has

been borrowed from the commentarial texts of the Pali *Vinaya*, where it says that forms of punishment for novices, such as having them carry water, firewood, sand and so forth, are permissible.[30] Thus, *daṇḍakamma* is to be applied when a *mae chi*, for example, "shows excessive greed [*lobha*]", "displays verbal or bodily ruptures of anger [*kodha*]" (article 16) or "without having received permission to do so, removes [the nunnery's] monastic code book . . . from the [assembly] hall" (article 23).

Another form of punishment outlined in the Prachum Nari monastic code explains that, if a *mae chi* remains obstinate and is unwilling to accept admonishment, fellow monastics are not permitted to speak or spend time with that *mae chi*. This approach too seems to have been borrowed from the Pali scriptures. Even though neither the name nor the source of this form of punishment are mentioned in the code, it strongly resembles the *brahmadaṇḍa* punishment that the Buddha is reported to have wanted the *saṅgha* to impose on the monk Channa after the Buddha's demise: the monks were not to talk with nor to teach Channa as punishment for Channa's deceit and pride. As a result of having heard the pronouncement of the *brahmadaṇḍa* punishment, Channa felt remorse and achieved full awakening (Freiberger 1996). The most severe form of punishment in the Prachum Nari monastic code entails the banishment from the community (*pabbājanīyakamma*; article 17).

Many of the rules in the monastic code of the Prachum Nari nunnery are concerned with proper speech, comportment, attire and ways of showing respect to more senior members of the monastic community. Notably, in the code of practice there is no mention of the eight or ten Buddhist precepts. Rather, the term "morality" (*sīla*), without being further specified, and the so-called "10 *kammapatha*s" are repeatedly mentioned. The 10 *kammapatha*s occur in the Pali canonical texts in two variants: the wholesome and unwholesome courses of action (*kusala-kammapatha* and *akusala-kammapatha* respectively, see, e.g., M.I.287–288; A.V.275–278). What is interesting here is that in the 10 *kusala-kammapatha*s the abstention from sexual misconduct rather than celibacy is mentioned. The monastic code of Prachum Nari makes clear, however, that abstention from sexual activity is prescribed. In fact, the rules include detailed descriptions of how physical distance between *mae chi*s and men, in particular to monks, must be observed.

Although it is explained that adherence to the rules should be performed in order to bring about concentration and wisdom with the goal of achieving liberation from mental defilements (article 17), it is also clear that many of the prohibitions are to avoid the arising of negative reputation of the community. The rules also aim at the creation of collective harmony and mutual support within the monastic community. Despite its many prohibitions and mechanisms of punishment, in the postface of the monastic code it is explained that

> "this set of rules constitutes a way of right practice [*sammāpaṭipatti*] and does not aim at imposing force on each other . . . Whenever someone transgresses the rules, and realises the mistake, she is to apply punishment [*daṇḍakamma*] by herself. There is no need for someone else to force her to undergo punishment. Once punishment has been self-applied, she steps forward in front of the assembled community and declares her offense."[31]

In 1975, Mae Chi Nuang Sijaemthap, who became the nunnery's third head nun in 1961, wrote an insightful account about the daily monastic routine during the nunnery's early history:

> "At that time . . . the [*mae chi*s] practised strictly in line with the Code of Rules [*kot katika*] and a daily monastic regime [*kitjawat*], such as the chanting of sacred texts [*suat mon*] and paying respect to the Buddha [*wai phra*]. This means that at 8am, [the community of *mae chi*s] would come together to pay respect to the Buddha and recite sacred texts; this would be followed by listening to sermons given by Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun. This would last until after 10 a.m. After having eaten the meal before 12 noon [*ahan phen*], the *mae chi*s would retreat to their individual dwellings in order to develop their meditation practice until 3 p.m., when they would gather again for the evening chanting, which would last until

> after 5 p.m. After that the *mae chi*s would return to their monastic cells [*kuṭī*]. For recently ordained *mae chi*s who had already memorised some texts, there would be another meeting after 7 p.m., during which chanting, meditation and manners would be practised ... This means that until after 9 p.m. chanting would be rehearsed and *dhamma* books would be read out." (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518)

As I will show and discuss below, these regular and extensive oral and aural elements of daily spiritual practice are also characteristic of the monastic regime of other *mae chi* communities.

After Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun passed away in December of 1917,[32] Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana, a relative of Mae Chi Phin, became the new leader of the female monastic community of Prachum Nari. Being a close relative of a royal maid (*khun-thau*) in the household of King Rama V (r. 1868–1910),[33] Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana grew up in the palace where she had the opportunity to practise meditation under the guidance of the high-ranking monk Somdet Phra Mahawirawong (Uan Tisso). Despite Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun's earlier attempt to persuade Jomsap Watthana to join the monastic community of Prachum Nari, only at the age of 50 years was Jomsap Watthana able to leave the palace in order to become a *mae chi* at the nunnery.[34] Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana is described as having been "devoted to the teaching of the Buddhist *dhamma*" and reported as having had a large number of students. In fact, she must have been an inspiring practitioner as, according to the available accounts, all the *mae chi*s of the community unanimously agreed to ask her to become the new head nun even though she had only recently been ordained as a *mae chi*. During Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana's long tenure of more than 40 years as head nun until her death in 1961, people with "faith in her" made land donations to the nunnery in order to erect further monastic buildings. In 1937, a Buddhist school was opened on the nunnery grounds.

What is interesting to note is that during the tenure of Mae Chi Phin Sunthararachun and Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana, the head nuns would give ordination to new members of the monastic community. With the death of Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana in 1961, however, this approach was changed. From then onwards, the abbot of the nearby monastery Wat Mahathat performed the ordinations for new *mae chi*s of the Prachum Nari community.[35] In addition, the nunnery was no longer governed by its head nun, but put under the control of Wat Mahathat. The available accounts do not give any reasons for these significant changes.

Over the years, the Prachum Nari monastic community has developed into a well-known nunnery that has attracted numerous people who intend to become ordained there. It provides Buddhist education that includes the study of the Pali language and Abhidhamma studies. At the same time, it enables its residents to pursue meditation practice. Today, the nunnery comprises some 100 monastic dwellings, a meditation hall, a school and two ponds (Kritsana Raksachom 2561, p. 22) and more than 200 female practitioners practise and study in the nunnery over the course of a calendar year (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, p. 120).

### 6. The Mae Chi Nunnery Sanam Chi

Some more detailed historical data are available on the foundation and development of another remarkable and hugely influential *mae chi* community. The nunnery Sanam Chi in Phetburi province was founded in 1910 on the initiative of Thianseng Saejong, a local merchant. Similar to the foundation of Prachum Nari, the catalyst that led to efforts to build a new monastic space specifically for female practitioners was the inspiring spiritual practice by *mae chi*s.[36] Thianseng successfully convinced the wealthy merchant Em Nerathuek to back this endeavour, both financially and through advocacy. Motivated by his deep interest in Buddhist practice and learning and, with support from "numerous" other merchants, Em embarked on and became the central driving force in this building project. Em was an important benefactor of the adjacent monastery Wat Sanam Phram where he had been a monk for some seven years. He also regularly organised group meetings for the

discussion of Buddhist teaching in his house. Em and his group of merchants not only made donations but also solicited contributions from across 12 Thai provinces for the construction of a "place which is ideal for women who are weary of mundane sense objects [*lokiyarom*] or have strong faith in the Buddhist teaching." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. (ก)). The famous Buddhist author and son of King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868), Prince Wiwitwanpricha (1860–1932), who also supported the funding campaign, named the nunnery "Sanam Chi".

The nunnery was built next to the monastery Wat Sanam Phram, in whose grounds "many" dwellings had been built for *mae chi*s and lay-women so that they could pursue their spiritual practice there. This group of female practitioners used an assembly hall within the monastery for "the study and discussion of the Buddhist teaching." The available monastic space for the growing number of these women had eventually become too small and it was decided to purchase land of more than 11,000 square metres in order to build the *mae chi* nunnery. The 10 monastic dwellings that had been built along the rear wall of the monastery Wat Sanam Phram and inhabited by female practitioners were moved into the grounds of the new nunnery. This major construction work took three years and was completed in 1913. Two years later, Em, together with his wife, also moved into the nunnery, where he lived until his death in 1921.[37]

Em's daughter, Pluean Nerathuek,[38] became the first head nun of the nunnery and developed a "set of regulatory agreements" (*kho kot katika*) that included various "duties of conduct" (*cariyavatta*) (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. (ข)). This set of agreements, which was to serve as a "tool for the removal of mental defilements [*kilesa*]" (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 1), was jointly approved and enacted by the monastic community of Sanam Chi in 1913. Its original version consisted of seven articles but two years later a further 20 articles were added.

Compared with the rules of Prachum Nari, the monastic regulations of Sanam Chi are much more elaborate. Whilst there are significant differences between the monastic codes of Prachum Nari and Sanam Chi, there is no evidence that excludes the possibility that the code of the latter community was influenced by the one developed for the former. In fact, this seems likely given the geographical closeness, the connections these communities must have had and the striking similarities between these two codes. In both code texts, the 16 *upakilesa*s, the 10 *kammapatha*s and the *daṇḍakamma* punishment are of central importance, for example.[39]

Many of the rules of the Sanam Chi monastic code lay down a rigorous admission process that includes a preparatory period of unspecified length during which the ordinand's readiness for monastic life is assessed before ordination can be granted. The monastic code of Sanam Chi also contains a number of lists for the training of decorum and ethical action. The lists are as follows:

- the Five Rules of Proper Behaviour;
- the ten *kammapatha*s;
- the eight or ten precepts;
- the seven *methunasaṃyoga*s [bonds of sexuality].[40]

The text prescribes that *mae chi*s "must constantly scrutinise" (*tong man truat*) their bodily, verbal and mental actions with the help of these lists. If "defect or defilement" (*bok phrong rue sau mong*) is found in relation to one of these rules, *mae chi*s must confess this to a fellow monastic with the following formula: "I want to atone [*chamra*] for my offense and mindfully restrain myself [*samruam ra-wang*] in the future." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 5). In order to clearly determine the scope of the individual rules and also undoubtedly to help the practitioner to mindfully analyse her actions, the rules are explained in some detail, with some of them including the "determining factors" (*ong-tat-sin*) of object, perception, intention, effort and result.[41]

The monastic procedures and formula are undoubtedly borrowed from the Pali *Cullavagga*, in which it is explained how monks confess their transgressions (Ṭhānissaro 2013, p. 477). The monastic code of Sanam Chi also lists numerous other rules and training practices that the monastic is required to follow:

- the 75 *sekhiyavatta*s (training rules of etiquette);
- the four *paccavekkhaṇavidhī*s (ways of consideration);
- as well as various *dhamma* lists from Pali canonical texts:

  the six *sāraṇiyadhamma*s (conditions for conciliation),[42]
  the seven *sappurisadhamma*s (qualities of a good person),[43]
  the sixteen *upakilesa*s.[44]

Interestingly, the compendium also contains a list of 87 rules that were borrowed from "Thailand's most influential manners handbook", *Qualities of a Gentleperson* (*sombat khong phu di*). Written by the aristocrat and educationalist M. R. Pia Malakul (1867–1916), published in 1901 and still in print today, *Qualities of a Gentleperson* shows influences from Victorian England (Jory 2015, pp. 358, 363–64; Jory 2021, pp. 77, 78).

The lists of the Sanam Chi monastic code are to be internalised by memorisation and the practice of mindfulness. Furthermore, the rule compendium stipulates that the nunnery's *mae chi*s "must also pursue the memorisation of texts used for chanting, at least five more lines each day have to be memorised." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 31). Attending the communal chanting twice a day is mandatory. The rule compendium also contains a list of selected verses from the canonical book *Dhammapada*. The resident *mae chi*s "have to" be able to chant these verses as part of monastic rituals. The chanting of these verses, which is to be carried out in both the Pali language and their translations in Thai, "are to be tools for training the mind in accordance with these verses; [this practice] is beneficial for the establishment of mindfulness." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 40). Thus, for the *mae chi*s of Sanam Chi, the practice of chanting Buddhist texts is in line with early Buddhist ideas, which the scholar monk Anālayo describes as follows: "recitation undertaken for its own sake does seem to function as a means of mental development (*bhāvanā*) in a wider sense, and as such could become a tool for progress on the path to liberation." (Anālayo 2007, p. 16).

What is also noteworthy here is that the first verse mentioned in this list[45] is *Dhammapada* verse number 182, which translates from the Pali as "Hard is it to be born a human... Hard is it to gain the opportunity of hearing the Sublime Truth [i.e., the Buddha's teaching], and hard to encounter is the arising of the Buddhas."[46] As I have shown and discussed elsewhere (Seeger 2018, pp. 225–31), this particular verse seems to have been of special importance for the spiritual practice of many *mae chi*s, and a source of their motivation for it.[47] It encapsulates their kammic-cosmic worldview, according to which rebirth as a human being "affords the extremely rare, potentially short-term and thus extraordinarily precious opportunity to escape from the cycle of rebirth" (Seeger 2018, p. 228) and thereby gain liberation from extreme forms of unpleasantness, weariness and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) that constant rebirth into the various planes of existence within the vast Buddhist cosmology entails. As sermon and autobiographical texts by Thai female practitioners of the first half of 20$^{th}$ century show, this worldview is a source for the arising of a sense of dhammic urgency that prompts intensive practice towards the Buddhist soteriological goal of *nibbāna*. Even though these ideas are only hinted at and not elaborated on in the monastic codes of the *mae chi* monastic communities I investigated, it is clear that this kammic-cosmic worldview, together with the derivative dhammic sense of urgency, forms their ideological foundation.

However, as shown above, like the code of Prachum Nari, the Sanam Chi monastic rules have other, non-soteriological, objectives as well. Thus, many of the monastic rules are to shape a distinct monastic identity and differentiate the ordained monastics not only from laypeople outside the community but also from residents who practise spiritually in the nunnery "but do not wear the white [robes]", that is, are not *mae chi*s. In fact, in 1915, only five years after the nunnery's foundation, 11 rules for lay practitioners living inside the nunnery were established, requiring, amongst other things, the adherence to the five or eight precepts "depending on one's commitment" and the study of the *kammapatha*s together with their respective "determining factors."

In 1933 a Foundation for the Sanam Chi nunnery was set up and the nunnery continued to "prosper."[48] Donations from numerous laypersons allowed the nunnery to pursue further building projects. Thus, in the year 1955, the monastic space of the nunnery comprised of a large pond and some 55 buildings. In 1987, the Sanam Chi community had its highest number of female residents: 80 *mae chi*s and 40 women who adhered to the eight precepts but did not shave their hair. However, this number has dropped significantly, for in the year 2017, there were only 23 permanent *mae chi* residents. Over the course of its history, the Sanam Chi nunnery had six head nuns who governed the nunnery. Similar to the Prachum Nari nunnery in Ratchaburi, however, the Sanam Chi nunnery is nowadays solely governed by a monk, as the abbot of Wat Sanam Phram decided not to appoint a nun as head of the *mae chi* community (Kritsana Raksachom 2561, pp. 22–23).

One of the nunnery's most remarkable and influential *mae chi*s is undoubtedly Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot (1935–1986). Being a local, Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot was ordained as a *mae chi* in the nunnery at the tender age of 17. Her preceptor was the high-ranking and well-known abbot of the Bangkok monastery Wat Ratchabophit, Somdet Phra Phutthapaphotjanabodi (Thongjuea Cintākaro).[49] Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot convinced both her parents, her younger brother and one of her two younger sisters to renunciate lay life too. Her mother moved into Sanam Chi nunnery, living in a dwelling that the family had built. Thanks to her outstanding skills as an educator and sermoniser, Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot was celebrated amongst *mae chi*s as a "rising star."[50]

When Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot's preceptor, Somdet Phra Phutthapaphotjanabodi, learned about her firm intent to study the Pali language, he "discussed" this with the then Supreme Patriarch who, as a result, gave permission to *mae chi*s to study the Pali language in accordance with the traditional monastic educational system of Pali studies (*parian tham*). This educational pathway had previously not been available for *mae chi*s. Subsequently, the monastic university Mahamakut enabled *mae chi*s in 1963 to study on the same Pali studies curriculum as the monks. The Sanam Chi nunnery became the first Thai *mae chi* nunnery for the teaching of the Pali language according to this curriculum. Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot herself would become the first Thai *mae chi* to pass a Pali exam in the traditional Pali educational system, in which, hitherto only monks had been able to gain a grade.[51] Moreover, Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot would also become the first Thai *mae chi* to earn a doctorate.[52]

Together with a number of other *mae chi*s from the Sanam Chi nunnery, Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot also belongs to the group of *mae chi*s who founded the national Thai Mae Chi Institute in 1969 (see below). In addition, in the 1970s, together with Mae Chi Prathin Khwan-on, who was also ordained at the Sanam Chi nunnery and would, later in her monastic career, become the president (*prathan*) of the Thai Mae Chi Institute, Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot was instrumental in the founding of an independent *mae chi* community in Ratchaburi province as a branch of the Thai Mae Chi Institute. In 1990, four years after Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot's death, the secondary school Dhammacārinī was founded at this nunnery. Established by *mae chi*s, the Dhammacārinī School is the first-ever of its kind and has provided education to girls who are in difficult life-circumstances and lack educational opportunities.[53]

## 7. Other Mae Chi Monastic Code Texts before 1971

The monastic code developed for the Sanam Chi monastic community is arguably one of, if not the, most influential monastic code text of its kind in Thailand's history of female monasticism. Later code texts, in particular and most significantly, as I will show below, the monastic code text of the Thai Mae Chi Institute, were heavily influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the Sanam Chi rules compendium.

However, there are also code texts that seem to have been developed independently from the Sanam Chi or other related code texts. This, for example, applies to the compendium of rules created for the nunnery Samnak Sa-ngopjit. Samnak Sa-ngopjit was established in 1919, behind the famous monastery Wat Pathumwanaram—today located in one of the central parts of Bangkok—by Mae Chi Sali Thomanakon (1880–1945), who was

ordained as a *mae chi* at the age of 18 in the famous Bangkok monastery Wat Pho (Wat Phra Chetuphon). Mae Chi Sali Thomanakon also founded a nunnery in Ratchaburi province and pursued intensive meditation practice "in valleys" (*tam hup khao*). Even though the written sources on the foundation of the Samnak Sa-ngopjit nunnery and Mae Chi Sali Thomanakon's life are extremely short and scant, it is consistently pointed out that Mae Chi Sali Thomanakon "had a set of rules [*kho katika*] for the strict spiritual practice of the *mae chi* community."[54] Mae Chi Sali Thomanakon's biography and the nunnery's foundation story do not provide any further details on this code. However, it is likely, but not entirely certain, that it is the same (or a slightly different) rule compendium that was published in 1929 and "checked" (*truat*) and approved by the high-ranking and hugely influential monk Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (Jaroen Ñāṇavaro; 1872–1951) (Buddhaghosacariya (Jaroen Ñāṇavaro) 2472), who, as I will show below, played an enormously impactful role in the teaching of female practitioners in monastic learning environments (see also Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2558).

The code consists of the eight precepts, which are also explained in some detail by referring to the "determining factors" (see above),[55] and 36 *vatta*s (duties), which *mae chi*s have to practise mindfully (*samruam*). The *vatta*s are presented in four groups:

1. The "Ten Harmfulness Practices in Relation to Sexuality" (*methunācāra-thot*)[56] which stipulate abstinence from harmful actions and thoughts;
2. The "Seven Harmful Bodily Conducts" (*kāyasamācāra-thot*);
3. The "13 Harmful Verbal Conducts"; and
4. The "Six Harmful Unsuitable Places" (*agocara-thot*), stipulating places where *mae chi*s should not go to, such as shows of entertainment, monastic cells of monks (in the evening, unless really necessary) and liquor shops.

Clearly inspired by the Pali canonical example of the fortnightly recital of the *pāṭimokkha*, the code is read out to the *mae chi* community twice a month:

> "May you all calm your mind and mindfully listen [to these rules] so that spiritual benefit will arise."
>
> The recital ends with the following words:
>
> "If pure [*parisuddha*; with regard to the rules], remain silent, and I will understand that your silence declares your purity."

Even though this set of rules bears a number of similarities with the regulations of the monastic communities of Prachum Nari and Sanam Chi, it significantly differs from them not only in terms of language and how the rules are presented. This code text solely focuses on the individual *mae chi*'s spiritual practice and, unlike the codes of Prachum Nari and Sanam Chi, does not elaborate on how to regulate the internal workings of the monastic community or its relationship with wider society.

Yet another original and remarkable set of rules was developed by Luang Pho Chah Subhaddo (1918–1992), one of the most revered and influential meditation masters of the Thai Forest Tradition. Initially, Luang Pho Chah had had considerable concerns about having monks and *mae chi*s living together in his newly founded monastery Wat Nong Pa Phong and declined many women's requests for ordination (Upalamani 2547, p. 381; Jayasaro 2017, p. 555). He changed his mind, however, due to the determination of a woman whose resolve Luang Pho Chah tested by asking her to practise alone in a thick forest that was believed to be frequented by ghosts (Upalamani 2547, p. 382; Jayasaro 2017, p. 556). This woman was able "'to pass the test' by valiantly overcoming numerous obstacles through her perseverance and firm confidence [*saddhā*] and, by doing so, demonstrate to Luang Pho [Chah] that women too have the ability to be an ordained renunciant [*nak buat*]." (Upalamani 2547, p. 382). As a result, in 1956 Luang Pho Chah established a *mae chi* community in an area separated from the monks' dwellings.

In 1964 Luang Pho Chah laid down a code of rules of practice (*katika kho patibat*) that comprised 15 items. Another six rules were added in 1969. This set of rules, which is to be read out to the *mae chi* community twice a month, is rather simple when compared with the

much more intricate monastic codes discussed above. The rules for the *mae chi* community of Wat Nong Pa Phong are mostly concerned with:

- the organisation of harmonious communal life;
- distancing from men;
- appropriate interaction with other fellow monastics and laypeople.

At the same time, the *mae chi* community of Wat Nong Pa Phong was also shaped by a number of other monastic regulations that were not part of this set:

- There is a probationary period for ordinands, during which the applicant's conduct and deportment would be screened.
- The *mae chi*s were not only required to adhere to the eight precepts, which they received at their ordination.
- They were also expected to follow many of the *dhutaṅga* practices, occasionally also including practising meditation in the forest under an umbrella (see above).

Due to the strict spatial segregation between genders, the *mae chi*s hardly saw Luang Pho Chah. However, his "presence was felt strongly by everyone" (Jayasaro 2017, p. 562), in particular, as there existed the belief that Luang Pho Chah possessed psychic powers that allowed him to be aware of "everything that went on in their lives and minds." (Jayasaro 2017, p. 565). Furthermore, the fact that the formal monastic code does not address what the consequences of transgressions of the rules are seems to have been compensated for by the charisma and authority of Luang Pho Chah, who would have dealt with "problems on a case-by-case basis." (Jayasaro 2017, p. 562). Thus, even though the Wat Nong Pa Phong *mae chi* community was to "govern itself" and had an administrative committee consisting of the head nun and a further four senior *mae chi*s for the purpose of doing so, the *mae chi* community "was ultimately under the authority" (Jayasaro 2017, p. 559) of Luang Pho Chah, who through his "love [*mettā*] and wisdom [*paññā*] was in fact the basic pillar of support in the work of the administrative committee of the *mae chi* nunnery." (Upalamani 2547, p. 385). It is clear that, according to the major biographies of Luang Pho Chah (Upalamani 2547; Jayasaro 2017), his charisma played a significant role for the inner workings and upholding of monastic discipline of the *mae chi* community. This of course raises the interesting question of what happened in this regard after Luang Pho Chah's death in 1992.[57]

## 8. Attempts of Nationwide Standardisation of Female Monastic Practice

An important milestone in the historical development of female monasticism in Thailand is the foundation of the Thai Mae Chi Institute in 1969.[58] The foundation followed discussions amongst a number of *mae chi*s and with senior monks about "unseemly behaviour" by some *mae chi*s, such as begging for money at various important Thai Buddhist sites, and the lack of a uniform "practice and behaviour."[59] Two years after its foundation, the Thai Mae Chi Institute published *Regulations of Practice* (*rabiap patibat*) as

> "it was felt that, in order to achieve unified solidarity [*khwam pen puekphaen*] and progress amongst Thailand's *mae chi*s, all *mae chi*s should have the same rules of practice ... for this reason, the codes of practice [*kho patibat*] from different nunneries have been compiled and developed into one set."[60]

Also in 1971, the Thai Mae Chi Institute published a chanting book for *mae chi*s with more than 70 Pali texts and their translations in Thai, "so that all *mae chi*s follow the same way of chanting." (Jarin Phanbanyat 2555, [*preface*]). Later editions show that the Thai Mae Chi Institute's *Regulations of Practice* was several times reviewed and further amended.[61] Since its first publication in 1971, there have been at least 12 further printings with an overall number of at least 34,000 copies.

There exist numerous obvious similarities between the code text of the Sanam Chi monastic community and the Mae Chi Institute's *Regulations of Practice*. Thus, the *Regulations of Practice* contains all the dhammic lists and the 87 rules borrowed from Pia Malakul's

manners handbook,[62] *Qualities of a Gentleperson*, enumerated in the Sanam Chi code. It also bears a lot of other similarities with the Sanam Chi code in terms of style and also content of the actual monastic rules and its strong emphasis on rote learning and recitation of Pali texts. Even though *Regulations of Practice* does not explicitly mention the Sanam Chi code text as a source, given these many significant similarities between the Institute's rules and those of Sanam Chi and the fact that *mae chi*s involved in the founding of the Institute belonged to the monastic community of Sanam Chi, it seems reasonable to assume that the set of rules developed in the early 1910s by Pluean Nerathuek, the first head nun of Sanam Chi nunnery (see above), has had a major influence on the Thai Mae Chi Institute's code text.

However, in other ways these two code texts also differ significantly from each other. This is of course not surprising, if we consider their differences in terms of context, scope and objectives. Thus, the first two sections of *Regulations of Practice* contain numerous articles that are concerned with the administrative structure and electoral processes of the Institute. In particular the rules concerning the administrative processes and structure seem to have been strongly influenced by the Thai Saṅgha Act, the law that governs the entire male Buddhist monastic community in Thailand.[63] In addition and in contrast to all the other code texts mentioned above, *Regulations of Practice* also contains drawings of how "*mae chi*s dress tidily [*riap roi*]." With its three sections, more than 40 rules, numerous definitions of central terms, dhammic lists and sub-rules, liturgical texts, instructions and regulations regarded as essential for *mae chi*s, *Regulations of Practice* has become the most extensive and intricate code text for female monasticism in Thailand (with the exception, of course, of the Pali *bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha*, which, since 2003, an increasing number of female monastic communities in Thailand adhere to).

Despite its amount of detail and rather high number of printed copies, the *Regulations of Practice* has failed to achieve one of its major objectives: the uniformity of practice amongst all Thai *mae chi*s. In fact, in the 1980s, Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat, who at one point became the vice-president of the Thai Mae Chi Institute,[64] compiled yet another monastic code for Thai *mae chi*s, which carries the title "Mae Chis' Handbook of Rules of Discipline. Thai Script Edition. Easy to Read, Easy to Understand." Due to high demand, this code went through three editions in only three years,[65] consists of 29 articles and lists nine different source texts, one of which is the *Regulations of Practice*. Despite the Thai Mae Chi Institute's attempts to unify monastic practice for *mae chi*s, Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat felt that

> "there still is [a lack of] detail . . . . I have observed *mae chi* ordinations at different places, but they all had different ceremonies [for the ordination procedure]." (Jarin Phanbanyat 2526, pp. 72–73)

Indeed, the respective article (number 25) of the *Regulations of Practice* is scanty and provides little detail on how a *mae chi* ordination is to be performed. In the 1975 edition of *Regulations of Practice*, for example, the rule reads:

> "The ordination needs to take place amongst a group of a complete *saṅgha* of four or more monks, except in places where four monks cannot be found. In these cases, the ordination can be carried out [with the help] of two monks."[66]

In the 2004 edition, it says that

> "For the ordination, which is performed by an abbot who also confirms the ordination in written form, there should be at least five monks and five *mae chi*s (according to what is appropriate)." (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2547, p. 14)

In contrast, on five pages in her *Mae Chis' Handbook of Rules of Discipline*, Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat provides much more detail on how a *mae chi* ordination is to be performed.

Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat's *Mae Chis' Handbook of Rules of Discipline* is not the only monastic code text for *mae chi*s that was developed after the first edition of the Thai Mae Chi Institute's *Regulations of Practice* was published in 1971.[67] Further code texts for specific *mae chi* communities have been published. There are, for example, the *Handbook for*

*Thai Buddhist Mae Chis* published by the monastery Wat Phleng Vipassanā and the *Mae Chis' Rules of Discipline and Various Chanting Texts*. Without making it explicit, both of these codes have, quite obviously, heavily borrowed from Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat's *Mae Chis' Handbook of Rules of Discipline*. Wat Phleng Vipassanā's *Handbook* also contains other texts, such as instructions on meditation,[68] whilst *Mae Chis' Rules of Discipline and Various Chanting Texts* (Liang Siang Jongjaroen [no date]) not only contains chanting texts in Pali and their Thai translations but also two additional rules (article 29 and 30) that seem to reflect the specific requirements of the monastic community that appears to have published this code text. I would not be surprised if a significant number of further code texts for *mae chi*s, in addition to those I have used for this study, published before and after 1971, can be found.[69]

**9. Individual Female Practitioners and Benefactors**

In the following, I will discuss some case studies by drawing on the biographies of individual female practitioners. This approach will allow me to complement and add nuance to what the normative code texts and foundation stories discussed above tell us about the spiritual practices and aspirations within female monasticism of 20th century Thai Buddhism.

**10. The Royal Consort Chao Chom Mom Rajawongse Sadap**

The life of Chao Chom Mom Rajawongse Sadap Ladavalya (1891–1983; short "Chao Chom Sadap"), a minor wife of King Rama V (r. 1868–1910), is unusual in many aspects. I will show below, however, that her spiritual trajectory bears interesting resemblances to those of other women of her time and thus exemplifies what appears to have been wide-spread Buddhist practice, aspiration and ideals of Thai women who intended to pursue more intensive spiritual practices in monastic environments, in particular with increasing age.

Born in 1891, Chao Chom Sadap was a minor wife of King Rama V from 1906 until the King's death in 1910 (and many sources report that she was one of the King's most favoured amongst his more than 140 consorts). Around 1930, one of Chao Chom Sadap's younger brothers was ordained at the prestigious Bangkok monastery Wat Thepsirin for several months. During that time, Chao Chom Sadap had the opportunity to regularly listen to sermons given by the monastery's abbot, Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (Jaroen Ñāṇavaro; short "Somdet Jaroen"), whose sermonising skills, "beautiful sounding" voice[70] and profound knowledge of Buddhist scriptures were highly admired and attracted large numbers of audiences (Seeger 2018, pp. 193–98). There are reports that up to 800 laypeople, many of whom were women, came to his major sermons each time.[71] In fact, the monastery's spacious ordination hall, in which Somdet Jaroen gave these sermons, was so packed that many in the audience had to sit and listen from outside the hall.[72] Listening to Somdet Jaroen's sermons must have had a deep impact on Chao Chom Sadap, as she "placed herself under his spiritual guidance [*fak tua pen luksit*] in order to intensively study the *dhamma* with him."[73]

In 1932, the year the Thai absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional form of government, Chao Chom Sadap moved, as her biographies put it, "from the 'palace' [*wang*] to 'the monastery' [*wat*]" of Wat Khao Bangsai. This monastery is located in the province of Chon Buri and, at that time, offered seclusion (*viveka*) within an expansive forested area. Chao Chom Sadap had a spacious three-storey building built in the precincts of the monastery, only a short walk of some 100 metres from Somdet Jaroen's monastic residence where he would spend time each year. With her death, the building would become the property of the monastery (Phunsaeng Sutabut 2561, pp. 136, 150). Chao Chom Sadap moved to Wat Khao Bangsai with six family members. Other members of the royal family, such as Princess Vapi Busbakara (1891–1982), another student of Somdet Jaroen, and Princess Malitsauwarot, also had buildings erected in the same area. Being now "much closer to Buddhism" (Phunsaeng Sutabut 2561, p. 148), Chao Chom Sadap had "the op-

portunity to constantly study and practise the *dhamma* with the help of Somdet Jaroen." (Phunsaeng Sutabut 2561, p. 34). Chao Chom Sadap is said to have "ceaselessly" pursued mental development (*bhāvanā*) and followed the eight precepts since then for more than 50 years until her death in 1983.[74]

In 1950, at the age of 60, she felt "an urgency to increase the intensity of her spiritual practice as her life entered the final stage." (Phunsaeng Sutabut 2561, p. 174). She decided to shave her hair and put on the white robes and received her ordination as a *mae chi* from the then Supreme Patriarch, Somdet Phra Sangharaja Chao Kromma Luang Vajirananavongs (Prince Chuen Navavongs Sucitto), "in order to even more intensively practise with the aim to purify her mind, following the method of the excellent teaching of the Buddha."[75] For at least the next 20 years she would also pursue her spiritual practice in the nunnery Sa-ngopjit (see above).[76]

In her autobiography, Chao Chom Sadap's niece M.L. Phunsaeng writes about her "valuable experience" of joining the spiritual activities of the *mae chi* community Sa-ngopjit together with her aunt, describing the daily monastic routine:

> "I participated in the activities of adults, many of whom practised the precepts [*sīla*]. There were daily disciplined practices that aim at [the creation of] stillness and orderliness. Each morning from 8–10 a.m., we would assemble at the main hall in order to recite sacred texts as part of the morning chanting, which would be followed by approximately 20–30 min of sitting in meditation. After that there was a discussion about the Buddhist teaching [*dhamma*] or an exchange of ideas about bringing the mind to stillness, which was called 'watching the mind.' After 10 a.m., we would separate up and pursue our individual activities and duties, which also included to have the final meal of the day in one's monastic cell [*kuṭī*] before 12 noon. Afterwards, the practitioners would pursue meditation or study Buddhist texts on their own. . . . From 5 p.m. the [communal] evening chanting took place, and this was followed by the practice of sitting in meditation and the *dhamma* discussion until 7 p.m., when everyone would return to their monastic cells and pursue their own activities . . . " (Phunsaeng (Ladawan) Sutabut 2558, pp. 121–22)

Similar descriptions of daily monastic routine that consists of daily recitations, prolonged meditation exercises and *dhamma* discussions can also be found in many other biographies of female practitioners of that time period (and would still apply to *mae chi* nunneries today; see also above).

"Following ancient palace rules" (*tam rabiap phra ratchathan tae boran*) Chao Chom Sadap ended her ordained life as a *mae chi* in 1963, when the then Thai King, Rama IX (r. 1946–2016), concerned about her safety,[77] asked her to return to the royal palace. Her biographies emphasise though that, despite her lay status, she "continued to strictly" keep the eight precepts and regularly listen to Buddhist sermons.

### 11. The Noblewoman Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri)

Chao Chom Sadap was not the only female practitioner whose spiritual life was deeply impacted and inspired by Somdet Jaroen's teaching; in fact, it appears that Somdet Jaroen must have had a significant number of female students for whom he was a major source of profound Buddhist knowledge.[78] One of Somdet Jaroen's undoubtedly most significant (female) students was the noblewoman Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri; 1882–1944; also known as "Khunying Yai").[79]

From a young age, Khunying Damrongthammasan had a strong interest in the study of the Buddha's teaching. Her biographies describe her as an extraordinarily talented student of Theravada Buddhist scriptures. Thus, she is said to have been able to memorise a large number of canonical texts, both in the Pali language and in Thai translations. Much of her Buddhist knowledge was acquired through listening not only to expositions by monks, but, in particular, Somdet Jaroen's regular sermons and the individual instructions he gave

to her must have had a considerable impact on her understanding of Buddhist doctrine. Regularly listening to her servants reading out Buddhist texts to her also enabled her to develop what was perceived an impressively comprehensive and profound knowledge of Buddhist teaching.

Khunying Damrongthammasan's enormous wealth allowed her to make numerous substantial donations of real estate to specific monastic communities at various places in Thailand. In the 1920s, together with her husband, she built the monastery Wat Thammikaram right next to the beach of the coast of the Gulf of Thailand in the southern town of Prajuap Khiri Khan. At the age of 50/51, once Khunying Damromgthammasan had no longer the obligation to look after her adopted son, she was finally able to realise her long-held wish to become a renunciant.[80] Thus, in 1933, Somdet Jaroen ordained her as a *mae chi* in his monastery Wat Thepsirin in Bangkok. Shortly after her ordination, Khunying Damrongthammasan moved to her monastery Wat Thammikaram, where she then spent most of the time until her death in 1944. Right next to the monastery, she had built six spacious dwellings where she stayed together with other family members, and possibly with fellow female renunciants and servants. Made from teak wood and raised on stilts, these dwellings had verandas and were connected by a bridge.

From interviews with local villagers and her adopted son, we know that Khunying Damrongthammasan pursued an intensive spiritual practice. Thus, it is reported that she led a group of no less than 20 *mae chi*s, and possibly female lay practitioners, in the communal recitation of Buddhist texts (*suat mon*) and daily walking meditation (*doen jong krom*) sessions.[81] It appears that probably most, if not all, of the *mae chi*s who practised with Khunying Damrongthammasan were not local women but came from other parts of the country, presumably from Ratchaburi and Bangkok and possibly from elsewhere. She also pursued intensive sessions of sitting meditation and sometimes spent the nights in a nearby cave.[82] Khunying Damrongthammasan provided the funds with which her servants would purchase food from the local market in order to prepare and donate it to the monks in the adjacent monastery.

Already before her ordination, Khunying Damrongthammasan composed and anonymously published a number of profound Buddhist prose texts that give evidence of her extraordinarily comprehensive and detailed understanding of Pali canonical teachings. These texts were to become hugely influential in Thai Buddhism, having been republished numerous times, been wrongly attributed to one of Thailand's most famous and widely revered monks and still being in print and popular today.[83] After her ordination as a *mae chi*, Khunying Damrongthammasan continued to be literarily active by composing Buddhist poems, which she wrote down on pieces of paper. A local villager reminisced about how, as a young boy, he would pick up these pieces of paper from a basket and read them.[84]

What is also remarkable in Khunying Damrongthammasan's biography is that her status as a renunciant did not prevent her from travelling the country. Quite the opposite, during the last ten years of her life, she travelled to various monastic places where she would exchange Buddhist knowledge with other female practitioners. Thus, in 1941, for example, she spent a year at Wat Khao Bangsai where she discussed the *dhamma* with Chao Chom Sadap. During this time both Chao Chom Sadap and Khunying Damrongthammasan would also listen together to instructions given by Somdet Jaroen.[85] Khunying Damrongthammasan was part of what must have been an informal network of female practitioners who were either ordained as a *mae chi* or practised as lay persons in or near a monastery. Members of this network met at several monasteries across the country in order to exchange Buddhist knowledge and pursue spiritual practice, such as the recitation of Buddhist texts or meditation, together (Seeger 2014).

### 12. Other Important Female Benefactors and Practitioners

One of the most important and generous benefactors of female monasticism in Thailand was Khunnai Kaew Uchuwat (born around 1873; died between 1944–1949). I believe that the following account about Khunnai Kaew exemplifies the motivations for and trajec-

tory of the spiritual practice of many Thai female monastics and female lay practitioners before the 1950s:

> "having [deep] faith in and an inclination to [the Buddhist teaching, Khunnai Kaew] was desirous to study the *dhamma* and also experienced joy in frequent Buddhist practice. She perceived staying in a monastery as effective for spiritual practice. For these reasons she asked for permission to build a dwelling on the monastic ground of the monastery Wat Thepsirin. Once erected this two-storey construction was called 'Building for Wellbeing' [*tuek sabai*] and became a place for her Buddhist practice, pursuit of knowledge and training of tranquillity with the aim to purify the mind. It was built to serve as a refuge until the end of her life. With her death, the building would become the property of the monastery." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 61)

Somdet Jaroen's monastery Wat Thepsirin is not the only monastic space where Khunnai Kaew had a dwelling built for herself. In the nunnery Sala Santisuk, which she built in Bangkok (opposite the central Lumphini Park) in 1943,[86] she also had a house erected for herself "so that it is convenient for me to support and maintain the [monastic] space and community of *mae chi*s, as much as my abilities allow me to do, with the aim of making the *mae chi*s content and enabling them to prosper."[87] In addition, she also had a dwelling built on a mountain slope in the monastery Wat Tham Klaep (also known as Wat Bunthawi; see below) in Phetburi Province "in order to practise calmness" there.[88]

During her stay at Wat Tham Klaep, Khunnai Kaew witnessed some discord amongst the monastic community, as a result of which Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan (1888–1973; ordained as a *mae chi* from 1913 until her death)[89] stepped down from her role as head nun of the local *mae chi* community (which she had held for some 4–5 years) and moved to the nunnery Sanam Chi. Khunnai Kaew must have been deeply impressed with Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan, for when she met Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan again in her dwelling at Wat Thepsirin, probably in the year 1937/38, she successfully persuaded Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan to govern a new nunnery that she was determined to found: "We will pick those who are truly desirous to practise with the aim of overcoming *dukkha* [unsatisfactoriness]."[90] It took Khunnai Kaew some five years to complete the construction of the nunnery Sala Santisuk. In her will of 1943, Khunnai Kaew bequeathed the nunnery's real estate and other real estates to the monastic academy Mahamakut (which only two years later became a university) so that the academy "provides support to women giving them the opportunity to study and practise in the Buddhist religion and thus prosper in perpetuity."[91] In this way, the nunnery was put under the patronage of an educational institution of the male *saṅgha*. As previously agreed, in 1943, Mae Chi Wari became the first head nun of Sala Santisuk and governed the nunnery for the next 25 years. Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan's sermonising skills inspired so much faith in some people that they "built [and donated] many buildings in the nunnery."[92] In its initial phase, the nunnery had been a peaceful place. However, as a result of economic development, factories were erected in its immediate neighbourhood and the noise and pollution caused by the factories made it "difficult for [the *mae chi* community] of Sala Santisuk to find calmness." (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 74). For this reason, the real estate was sold, and in 1967 the nunnery moved to its current location in Nakhon Pathom Province. The construction work on the nunnery's new location was completed at the end of 1968.

Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan, who also served on the Advisory Committee of the Thai Mae Chi Institute, passed away some five years later. As her cremation volume shows, as a result of her spiritual practice, Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan had developed the reputation of a "determined practitioner" and was compared with "a mother who gives birth in the *dhamma*."[93] Several high-ranking monks, two of whom would become supreme patriarchs of Thai Buddhism, gave sermons as part of the funeral ceremonies. Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (Wat Vāsano) of Wat Ratchabophit, who would become the Supreme Patriarch later in that year, for example, said that Mae Chi Wari's life should be "regarded as that of a praiseworthy sage."[94] The textual contributions to her cremation volume, written

by her admirers and students, give evidence for the deep respect they had for Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan as a result of her "faith-inspiring" and "impeccable" spiritual practice. In fact, it was even believed that Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan may have achieved the supramundane, "probably not to be reborn again in the cycle of rebirth."[95]

Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan seems to have been a prolific sermoniser. Thus, it is reported that she gave daily *dhamma* teachings, often lasting until late in the night.[96] Unfortunately, only a small number of her impressive sermons seem to have survived. These are the ones that were committed to writing by one of her *mae chi* students and published in Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan's cremation volume.

Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan (1881–1976), who was "very close" to Khunnai Kaew, was another great benefactor of Thai monastic communities,[97] in particular of the aforementioned monastery Wat Tham Klaep in Phetburi province, where a "large number of Buddhist women [*upāsikā*] were ordained in order to study and practise the *dhamma*."[98] Khunying Bunmi's significant wealth allowed her to make donations for the maintenance of a number of famous Thai hospitals, including the Hospital for the Monastic Community (*Rong Phayaban Song*). She also financed numerous building or restoration projects in at least three monasteries. During the last 30–40 years of her life, Khunying Bunmi "was looking for peacefulness" in Wat Tham Klaep, whose ordination hall had been built by her mother. During a sermon he gave during one of Khunying Bunmi's funeral ceremonies, the high-ranking monk Somdet Phra Ñāṇasaṁvara, who would become the Supreme Patriarch some 13 years later, pointed out that "with increasing age, [Khunying Bunmi's] desire to find peacefulness grew."[99] Thus, her biographer reports that she also intermittently "wore the white robes and was practising the eight precepts [*raksa ubosotsin*]"[100] until her physical constitution would no longer allow her to do so.[101] When approaching her death, she moved into the monastery Wat Tham Klaep where she eventually passed away: "Even when approaching her death, she asked to constantly listen to monks' chanting. She did not ask for anything else, be it medicine or food, as she only wanted to listen to the sound of the monks [reciting Buddhist texts]."[102]

A common pattern in the biographies of the women I investigated for this study is that with increasing age they intensified their spiritual practice by living and practising in or next to a monastic community as a lay practitioner or leading the monastic life of a *mae chi*.[103] The number of precepts followed and status of either a *mae chi* or female lay practitioner would often depend on their familial obligations and/or health. If their financial means would allow them to do so, many of these women built dwellings on or next to monastic ground in order to practise meditation in the tranquillity of the monastery or nunnery.[104]

Noted in many of the biographies I investigated for this article is the importance of the last moment before death, and thus before the next rebirth. In relation to the kammic-cosmic view that *mae chi*s at that time adhered to and gained their spiritual motivation from (Seeger 2018, pp. 225–31),[105] the importance of the last moments before passing away makes perfect sense. During the last few moments of their life, they wanted to allow their mind to easily grasp onto memories of the meritorious deeds (*puñña*) they had performed as their object of awareness, so that this may positively influence the dying process and their next rebirth.[106] I believe that this idea is well expressed in a speech with the title *Amoghajīvita-kathā* ("Speech on a Life that is not Futile/Empty"), which the aforementioned monk Somdet Phra Phutthapaphotjanabodi of Wat Ratchabophit gave at a funeral ceremony for Khunying Bunmi: "That [Khunying Bunmi] passed away in her dwelling in Wat Tham Klaep created huge joy and gladness [*pītipāmojja*] for her, as she was able to see the abundant fruits [of her generous support of the monastic community] in front of her eyes in time before she passed away [*than ta hen kon tai*]."[107]

## 13. Conclusions

*Mae chi*s are often, if not typically, described as following "only" the eight or ten Buddhist precepts.[108] This is then frequently also contrasted with descriptions of monks, who are described as following the 227 monastic rules of the *bhikkhupāṭimokkha*. Admittedly, *mae chi*s themselves may define themselves by, first of all, referring to the eight or ten precepts. After all, the *mae chi* ordination ritual (*phithi buat chi*) includes as an integral part the "receiving of the eight precepts" (*rap sin paet*). Also, in article 4 of the 2012 draft for a national Mae Chi Bill (see below), *mae chi*s are defined as "constantly adhering to [*thue*] the eight precepts of Theravada Buddhism."[109] However, as demonstrated above, from anthropological and historical perspectives, limiting the definitions and descriptions of *mae chi*s to their adherence to the eight or ten precepts is problematic because of various reasons. Most importantly, referring *only* to the eight or ten precepts when describing the spiritual lives of *mae chi*s does not tell us much about their lived realities, the intricate aspects of their coenobitic monastic life and their interrelationships with monks and laypeople and, equally importantly, does not reflect *mae chi*s' own marked attempts to distinguish themselves through their monastic codes and creation of monastic identities separate from lay people residing in their nunnery and laypeople generally.

I am not suggesting here that Thai monastics, whether female or male, strictly follow all their monastic rules. After all, as Langenberg explains, an "uncritical and strict obedience to the letter of monastic law, a *vinaya* fundamentalism if you will, has never been usual in Buddhist monasticism." (Langenberg 2018, p. 17). Thus, contrasting *mae chi*s' spiritual practice to those of monks by referring to the 227 *bhikkhupāṭimokkha* rules is also problematic in that monks may not have rigidly observed or may even have disregarded specific *Vinaya* rules (see, e.g., Terwiel 1976). As it is widely known, there have been many monks in Thailand who, despite the respective *Vinaya* prohibition to do so, handle and possess money on a regular basis. Therefore, the strictness with which individual monks and male monastic communities may follow their monastic rules may vary significantly from case to case. Moreover, some 15 of the 227 rules in the *bhikkhupāṭimokkha* simply are not applicable as they concern the monks' interrelationship with *bhikkhunī*s. Given the historical absence of *bhikkhunī*s, however, these rules have not been, and could not have been, actively practised by Thai monks, at least in their literal meaning (until recently, when perhaps a relatively small number of monks may have started to do so when interacting with members of the recently established *bhikkhunī* communities in various parts of Thailand). Undeniably, and as already repeatedly pointed out by other scholars, the relationship between normative (Pali canonical and post-canonical) texts and actual practices is complex and requires the careful study of individual cases. Thus, whilst not denying these complexities, my point here is that limiting descriptions to the eight or ten precepts without taking into account the many other precepts and monastic rules that *mae chi*s have developed and perceived as normative is problematic. To do so denies female agency and creativity. It also ignores the great synchronic and diachronic diversity of *mae chi*s' monastic organisation and ideals with their interesting and profound itinerant and sedentary forms of monasticism and engagement in practices of renunciation on different levels of rigorousness.

As I have demonstrated in this article, *mae chi*s have also aspired to the practice of numerous other precepts and rules that regulate their individual and communal monastic life. Since 1900, but possibly even (long) before, *mae chi*s have paid a lot of attention to the development, adjustment and refinement of their monastic rules. Also, by stipulating, sometimes rigorous, admission processes, all the code texts discussed above are concerned with the creation of a clear monastic identity, contrasting and distancing *mae chi*s not only from laypeople generally but also from those lay practitioners who may live, either permanently or temporarily, in their monastic spaces and keep the five or eight precepts.

Without further research, we do of course not know how strictly these additional rules and regulations were followed. It also is not clear how rigorously the various forms of punishment for transgressions of rules, as outlined in the code texts examined in this paper,

were implemented. The code texts may have also been perceived as a description of ideal practices and behaviour which only very determined *mae chi*s or *mae chi* communities have consistently followed to the letter.

Here, I do also not want to ignore the fact that *mae chi*s are neither regarded nor treated as fully ordained (as *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s are). They are significantly disadvantaged in various ways when compared to monks and often have to endure hardships and obstacles that monks do not (see, e.g., Seeger 2018, pp. 32–39, 215–46). Depending on the monastery they are living in, *mae chi*s may be required to carry out time-intensive manual work for monks, such as cleaning and cooking.[110] It is clear that, throughout the country, there is a considerable variance in terms of *mae chi*s' status, roles and practice (see, e.g., Seeger 2009) and the workings of their monastic communities. Therefore, I want to argue that we need more historical and ethnographic research into individual female monastic communities in order to gain a better understanding of the complexities and diversities of Thai Buddhist female monasticism (and the same of course also applies to male monasticism).

As shown, the rules of the examined code texts are not only concerned with the spiritual training practice of the individual *mae chi* but many of them also reflect an enduring concern about *mae chi*s' reputation in wider society. Thus, a recurrent major concern noticeable in these monastic codes is to prevent the "arising of bad reputation." However, even though the *Regulations of Practice* contains four articles in the "Punishment Section" (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562b, pp. 32–33), in which the punishment of *daṇḍakamma*, *brahmadaṇḍa* and expulsion from the *mae chi* order are mentioned, the monastic rules of the Thai Mae Chi Institute are not compulsory for all *mae chi*s across the country (Lindberg Falk 2007, p. 233). Thus, the monastic practices and the rigorousness with which *mae chi*s adhere to monastic regulations vary across the country, often quite significantly (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1991, p. 39). It seems that the presence of a charismatic, authoritative, male or female leader, who acts as a strong role model, would often motivate fellow monastics to pursue a stricter adherence to their monastic rules and ideals.

Notably, even though several of the foundation stories discussed above show a significant degree of initial independence, there appears to be a common trajectory in the histories of these nunneries: in terms of administrative supervision and ordination procedures, these communities have gravitated towards institutional subordination to and increasing dependence on often nearby or adjacent male monastic communities. This creation and maintaining of gendered hierarchical relationship to the male *saṅgha* cannot only be observed locally but also on a national level, as reflected in the Thai Mae Chi Institute's *Regulations of Practice*.[111] In fact, drafts[112] for a Mae Chi Bill, which would give all *mae chi*s nationwide a clearly defined legal status, have proposed to formalise this dependency. So far, as mentioned in the introduction of this article, all these attempts for legislation have been unsuccessful. But, if made into legislation, *mae chi*s would then *have to* receive their ordination from a monk appointed by the Thai Saṅgha Supreme Council (Mahatherasamakhom), the highest governing body of the Thai monkhood.[113] Also, according to article 24 of the 2012 draft, the Thai Mae Chi Institute would "have to be under the control and care" (*tong yu phai tai kankamkap du-lae*) of the Thai Saṅgha Supreme Council.[114]

What is also noteworthy about the histories of some of the nunneries discussed in this article is the support they gained from members of royalty or the nobility. In fact, there was a significant number of women from the palace, the nobility and wealthy commoner families who wished to lead the life of a *mae chi* or lay practitioner within a monastic environment. This is clearly in contrast to what appear to be widespread opinions, descriptions and understandings about the social background and status of contemporary *mae chi*s. As Brown notes: "as far as most people know, [*mae chi*s] are simply poor women who have lost in love and have nothing better to do with their lives."[115] This discrepancy requires further historical research into the changes but also continuities of practices, perceptions and attitudes and local divergencies in connection with female renunciation as a *mae chi*.[116]

The, albeit only short, descriptions of the physical monastic environment in the narrative and normative texts I have discussed above also allow some interesting insights into

*mae chi*s' monastic practices and values. In addition to ponds, rudimentary dwellings for permanent monastics and lodging for guests (*akhantuka*), these texts mention or refer to pavilions used for liturgical activities, communal chanting (*sala wai suat mon*) and dhammic discussions (*thammasakatcha*) but no libraries.[117] Furthermore, whilst there are only a few references to writing and written texts, memorisation and communal recitation are frequently mentioned and their importance for monastic practice highlighted. This all reflects the predominately oral world of Thai female monasticism. The importance of these strong oral elements is further corroborated by my study of the biographies of individual Thai female practitioners of the first half of 20th century: the recitation of Buddhist texts was by them perceived and practised as an integral part of their spiritual practice (Seeger 2014, 2018, pp. 181–213). The aforementioned Western visitor of Ayutthaya, Nicolas Gervaise, already noted the importance that the reciting of Buddhist texts must have had for *mae chi*s during the 17th century, when writing that they "demeurent long-temps en priere dans les Temples." (Gervaise 1688, p. 213).

True, within Thai Buddhism more generally, not only the interpretations and explanations of monastic code texts but also sermons addressing monastic and lay communities have to a large extent been authored by male monastics. Whilst Thai Buddhism's monasticism has largely been shaped by monks, female monastics and lay practitioners have also, persistently and creatively, had a significant impact on Thailand's monasticism and thus Buddhism. As shown in this paper, there have been skilled Thai *mae chi*s or female lay practitioners who have produced a significant number of Buddhist pedagogical, sermon[118] and monastic code texts. These texts have been designed with the aim to facilitate and motivate not only soteriological practice but sometimes community building too. In their spiritual activities and texts, these female practitioners have not just echoed the monastic, textual and soteriological practices of monks. Rather, through their creative and sophisticated adoptions and adaptations of Pali canonical monastic rules, soteriological teachings and practices, and community building projects, they have made significant intellectual innovations within Thai Buddhism. Typical for Theravada Buddhism these innovations took place within the conceptual frameworks and conservatism of the traditional interpretations and applications of the Pali canonical and post-canonical teachings and monastic rules. Unfortunately, the scanty sources do not allow us to ascertain whether the female authors of the monastic corpora discussed above developed their monastic code texts directly from the Pali scriptures or from other secondary sources, nor to what extents monks were involved in the development of these texts. As shown above, monks were quite clearly often involved in the production of these texts to some extent; it is also often not clear to which degree and how the different code texts of *mae chi* communities have influenced each other. But be that as it may, the composition and development of these texts demonstrate the advanced understanding of Buddhist teachings and *Vinaya* regulations. Following the Buddha's paradigm in the *Vinaya* texts, the original *mae chi* rules were also expanded and supplemented in response to specific needs and situations.

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## Notes

[1] Since 2001, there have been attempts to establish the *bhikkhunī* order, several *bhikkhunī* communities in Thailand have been created, and there are now probably between 200–300 fully ordained Theravada nuns in Thailand. But neither the Thai *saṅgha* nor the Thai government officially recognise their ordained status as *bhikkhunī* (see, e.g., Seeger [2006] 2008; Ito 2012).

[2] See, e.g., (Parichat Suwannabuppha 2545, pp. 8–14; Lindberg Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018, pp. 54–56, 61–62). See also (Cook 2010; Gosling 1998; Battaglia 2014; Muecke 2004; Tomalin 2006).

[3] For more on these imbalances and inconsistencies, see, e.g., (Seeger 2009, 2018).

[4] For the figures of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 on the official website of the National Office of Buddhism, see: https://www.onab.go.th/th/file/get/type/download/file/20220127815ddeb710d18984571b5ef56f452a08112009.pdf (accessed on 25 October 2022).

[5] https://www.onab.go.th/th/ebook/category/detail/id/1/iid/24 (accessed on 25 October 2022).

[6] See, e.g., https://news.thaipbs.or.th/infographic/227 (accessed on 22 June 2020). See also (Channarong Boonnoon 2551).

[7] Manop Nakkanrian (2545, p. 94) for example gives the figure of 45,000 *mae chi*s. See also (Seeger 2018, p. 256n5) and next endnote.

[8] According to these statistics there were 3989 *mae chi*s in the middle region of Thailand, 1541 in the eastern region, 3739 in the northern region, 2935 in the south and 4242 in the northeastern region (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a). In 2000 there were 3718 *mae chi*s registered with the Thai Mae Chi Institute, in 1999 there were 4057 registered *mae chi*s, and in 1998 there were 2737 *mae chi*s registered (Sookson Chandashoto 2549, p. 17). A more recent survey however shows that the number of *mae chi*s who are registered with the Thai Mae Chi Institute is significantly lower than the figure of 2019. According to data from the Thai Mae Chi Institute, in May 2020 there were 5091 registered *mae chi*s (I thank Mae Chi Kritsana Raksachom for providing me with these figures). This figure seems to be more in line with previous figures as given in (Sookson Chandashoto 2549) and elsewhere. At the moment, I am not able to explain these rather significant differences.

[9] See, e.g., (Sookson Chandashoto 2549, p. 17; Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 2, 22n4; Seeger 2018, 256n5). Parichat Suwannabuppha (2545, p. 19) reports that according to statistics of the information centre of the Thai Education Ministry there were 13,258 *mae chi*s in Thailand in the late 1990s. According to a survey in 1997, there were 14,691 *mae chi*s in Thailand, however only 4521 were registered with the Thai Mae Chi Institute (Cremation Volume of Kanitha Wichiencharoen 2545, p. 159).

[10] Prince Patriarch Wachirayan explained that *bhikkhunī*s are not mentioned in the accounts on the Buddha's passing away (*parinibbāna*), cremation and relics. If there were *bhikkhunī*s, so Prince Patriarch Wachirayan argued, they "probably" would have been present during these important events (Wachirayan 2538, p. 237).

[11] There are at least eight printings of this book, and it has also been made available online. See also (Phacharaphorn Phanomvan 2018).

[12] (Ratchakawi 2554, 439n1). This statement seems to be based on *Samantapāsādikā* I, 63–69.

[13] *Samantapāsādikā* I, 69.

[14] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot 2529, p. 22.

[15] See, e.g., Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot 2529, pp. 22, 111, 116; (Parichat Suwannabuppha 2545, p. 18; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1991, p. 36).

[16] In the *Kot Phra Song* (*Saṅgha Laws*) of Thai King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), *mae chi*s are referred to as "*rup chi*" (รูปชี); in eyewitness accounts of Western visitors of Ayutthaya in the 17th century, they have been referred to as "*nang chi*." In the first monolingual Thai dictionary which was published in 1873 but had already been compiled between 1838 and 1855, there are several ways in which *mae chi*s are referred to: "*chi*" (ชี), "*nang chi*" (นางชี), "*mae chi*" (แม่ชี), "*luang chi*" (หลวงชี) and "*yai chi*" (ยายชี). (see online version of the *Dan Beach Bradley 1873 Thai Dictionary*: http://sealang.net/dictionary/bradley/ (accessed on 24 September 2022). The German explorer Adolf Bastian who visited Siam for almost a year in the first half of the 1860s, mentions *mae chi*s in volume 3 of his *Die Voelker des Oestlichen Asiens* only briefly and refers to them as "Nang Xi" and "Jai Xi," writing that they "sind mehr den Mönchen dienende Laienschwestern als wirkliche Bettelnonnen oder Bhikkhuni." (Bastian 1867, p. 158). *Mae chi*s may also be addressed as or referred to with "*upāsikā*" (female lay follower).

[17] Skilling (1995) provides a useful overview of these early accounts by European travellers.

[18] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Sumon 2529, p. 113.

[19] According to Chula Chakrabongse (2019, p. 105), the death penalty for monks who committed a breach of the rule of celibacy was abolished during the reign of Rama II (r. 1809–1824) who "commuted it to life imprisonment with hard labour which consisted in cutting grass to feed the royal elephants." Writing in the 1860s Bastian (1867, p. 158) reports about the punishment for monks who were discovered to have broken the rule of celibacy: "Jetzt kommt auch bei Mönchen jene grausame Todesart [death by burning: die Strafe des Feuertodes] nicht weiter in Anwendung, und begnügt man sich, sie nach der Degradirung [sic] auszupeitschen."

[20] See also the account by the German explorer Engelbert Kaempfer, who visited Ayutthaya in 1690: "These Nuns [i.e., *mae chi*s, who Kaempfer refers to as 'Nanktsij'] in former times liv'd among the Priests near the Temples, but it having happen'd at a place a league above Judia [Ayutthaya], where the religious of both sexes liv'd promiscuously together in the same village, that several

of the Nuns prov'd with Child, they have since been remov'd from the Temples to particular Houses, the better to keep their Vow of Chastity. The Temple of that Place still bears the Name of Wad Nantsij, or the Temple of Nuns." (Kaempfer 1906, p. 70).

[21] This specific rule was promulgated in 1789. See also (Reynolds 1973, pp. 35–50).

[22] (Wirat and Thirananthangkhun 2546, p. 508). In this monastic law the term "*rup chi*" is used when referring to *mae chi*s (compare with note 16).

[23] The journal "Mae Chi San," produced by the Thai Mae Chi Institute, has also been a valuable source for the study of the history of female monasticism in Thailand.

[24] The *mae chi* nunnery Nekkhamma-phiromsathan at the Bangkok monastery Wat Boromnivas was also founded during the first 10 years of the 20th century. The famous and high-ranking abbot of Wat Boromnivas, Chaokhun Upāli Guṇūpamācariya (Siricando, Jan; 1857–1932), "established a set of agreements/rules [*kho katika*]" for this community in 1909 (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, p. 105). Despite ongoing attempts and impeded by the coronavirus pandemic, I unfortunately have not been able to get hold of a copy of this text so far and thus could not investigate the history of this nunnery in more depth for this paper.

[25] See for example article 33 of the monastic code of Prachum Nari, in which TV and radio are mentioned. As the code text must have been developed before 1908, if not already in 1902, this constitutes an anachronism that indicates that at least parts of the code were added later without have being marked as later additions.

[26] For the following account I depended on (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518; Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, pp. 119–20); Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat [no date], [no page numbers]; (Kritsana Raksachom 2561).

[27] In (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518), her name is given as Phim Sunthararachun. Whilst in the Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat (no date) her first name is written with the ending consonant "ณ" (which would be pronounced/transliterated as a "n"), in (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a) her first name ends with the ending consonant "น" (which would be pronounced/transliterated as a "n"). Her surname is also spelled inconsistently: in the Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat (no date) her surname is spelled as "Suntharachun," whereas in (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518; Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a), the spelling is "Sunthararachun." I believe that the spelling "Sunthararachun" is the correct one.

[28] So far, my attempts to find the original code text have been unsuccessful.

[29] (Nuang Sijaemthap 2518). Similar to the other codes discussed in this article, the different accounts do not allow a reconstruction of the exact stages of development of this code, but it seems safe to assume that the code that consists of the 22 rules is the original code.

[30] *Bhagavatā hi āvaraṇameva daṇḍakammaṃ vuttaṃ. dhammasaṅgāhakattherehi pana aparādhānurūpaṃ udakadāruvālikādīnaṃ āharāpanampi kātabbanti vuttaṃ, tasmā tampi kātabbaṃ* (Sp 1013). It may of course also be possible that this practice was indirectly borrowed from the Pali scriptures, as the authors of the monastic code of the Prachum Nari community could have adopted this idea from, for example, the influential text *Pubbasikkhā-vaṇṇanā*, which was authored by Phra Amarabhirakkhit (Amaro Koet) in 1860 and has become an authoritative text for the monks of the Thai forest tradition (see, e.g., Ṭhānissaro 2013, pp. 17–18; Taylor 1993, pp. 134–36, 303–5). First inscribed on palm-leaf, *Pubbasikkhā-vaṇṇanā* was printed for the first time probably in 1895, when widespread printing in Thailand was still in its infancy.

[31] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat [no date], [no page number].

[32] (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, p. 119; Nuang Sijaemthap 2518). However, the Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat (no date) gives the year 1918 as the year of her death.

[33] Mae Chi Kritsana Raksachom reports that "according to history," Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana was a consort of King Rama V (Kritsana Raksachom 2561, p. 22). However, I have not been able to verify this information. Her name is not mentioned amongst the 152 major and minor wives of King Rama V listed in Wannaphon Bunyasathit 2553 (pp. 293–315).

[34] Unfortunately, the available accounts do not provide more information on exactly why Mae Chi Jomsap Watthana did not become a *mae chi* earlier, despite her seemingly keen interest in Buddhist meditation.

[35] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Phensi (Bunsi) Tiawirat [no date], [no page numbers].

[36] Unfortunately, so far, I have not been able to find more details on these *mae chi*s.

[37] Cremation Volume of Phra Khru Sunthonthammawong 2522, pp. 85–86.

[38] Pluean disrobed, married and took the new surname Thepasit.

[39] It may also, of course, be possible that both codes were developed based on a common source. Further research would be necessary to investigate the possible and likely mutual influences.

[40] A.IV.54–56.

[41] For my translation of the equivalent Thai terms as given in the code, I borrowed these English words from (Ṭhānissaro 2013, p. 29).

[42] D.III.245; A.III.288–9.

[43] D.III.252, 283; A.IV.111.

[44] M.I.36.

[45] As the list does not record the verses in the order in which they occur in Thai versions of the *Dhammapada*, the fact that this particular verse is mentioned first, seems to reflect the significance it had for *mae chi*s' spiritual practice.

[46] *kiccho manussapaṭilābho . . . kicchaṃ saddhammassavanaṃ, kiccho buddhnamuppādo* (Dhp.27; Buddharakkhita 1985, p. 51).

[47] Numerous other primary sources further corroborate the importance of this verse for *mae chi*s' spiritual practice, see, e.g., (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, p. 31); Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Ari Jiraphan 2517, p. (ฝ).

[48] Cremation Volume of Phra Khru Sunthonthammawong 2522, p. 88.

[49] Somdet Phra Phutthapaphotjanabodi (Thongjuea Cintākaro) became abbot of Wat Ratchabophit in 1988.

[50] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot (2529, p. (45)).

[51] Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot managed to pass the sixth Pali grade (Bo. So. 6). See also (Seeger 2018, pp. 222–23; Natthahathai 2552, p. 256; Kritsana and Seeger 2556, pp. 71–72).

[52] Mae Chi Sumon Yu-yot completed her PhD at a university in India (Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Sumon 2529, p. 6).

[53] http://www.buddhistgirl.org/fullprofile.php (accessed on 30 July 2020); (Prathin Khwan-on 2551, p. 13; see also Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 211–18; Brown 2001, pp. 92–105).

[54] Leaflet "A Short History of the Thai Mae Chi Community Sa-ngopjit" [no date]; Cremation Volume of Jan Thomanakon 2508, p. (ค).

[55] The word "*ong-sin*" is used here in contrast to "*ong-tat-sin*" in the code text of the Sanam Chi community.

[56] This term and the following three headings of the *vatta* groups are hybrids of Pali and Thai.

[57] I hope to investigate this question in future research.

[58] For more on the history of the Thai Mae Chi Institute, see (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a); Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Ñāṅī Siriwohan 2520; Cremation Volume of Mae Sumon 2529, pp. 22–41; (Brown 2001; Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 176–78); Cremation Volume of Kanitha Wichiencharoen 2545.

[59] (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562a, p. 35); http://thainunfoundation.com/en/history-thainun (accessed on 18 August 2020).

[60] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Ñāṅī Siriwohan 2520, (*Kham Chi Jaeng* [Explanation] by Mae Chi Chaemjit Klatjai กลัดจ่าย).

[61] I was able to get hold of the editions of the years 2531 (5th printing), 2547 (9th printing) and 2562 (12th printing).

[62] In the *Regulations of Practice*, there were two further rules added to the 87 rules borrowed from *Qualities of a Gentleperson*: rule numbers 88 and 89. These two additional rules are explicitly concerned with monastic life.

[63] On the Thai Saṅgha Acts see, e.g., (Ishii 1986).

[64] I still have not been able to find out more about Mae Chi Jarin Phanbanyat's biography.

[65] For the third edition 5000 copies were printed. Unfortunately, so far, I have not been able to find out how many copies were printed of the first and second edition.

[66] Cremation Volume of Mae Chi Ñāṅī Siriwohan 2520, p. 8; this rule with the same wording can also be found in the 1988 edition which is the fifth edition of the *Regulations of Practice* (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2531, p. 12).

[67] Much more comprehensive research is needed in order to find out how many female monastic communities applied the *Regulations of Practice* or/and developed their own set of rules.

[68] The *Handbook for Thai Buddhist Mae Chis of Wat Phleng Vipassanā* for example contains (Wat Phleng Vipassanā [no date]) a set of rules for all who intend to practise *vipassanā* meditation in the monastery, no matter whether they are fully ordained monastics, novices, or male or female lay-practitioners.

[69] Since at least 1993 there have also been repeated attempts, so far unsuccessful, to gain a clearly defined legal status for Thai *mae chi*s. The draft for a Mae Chi Act (*Rang Phra Ratchabanyat Mae Chi*), which is modelled after the Thai Saṅgha Act of 1962, would centralise Thai *mae chi*s under one nationwide administrative structure. The draft also proposed that the ordination as a *mae chi* would have to be carried out by a monk. For more on these attempts to gain legal recognition and critique of the draft, see (Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 227–35; Brown 2001, pp. 34–36; Sookson Chandashoto 2549, pp. 76–82; Cremation Volume of Kanitha Wichiencharoen 2545, pp. 158–170).

[70] Cremation Volume of Somdet Phra Yanaworodom 2553, p. 42.

[71] See Cremation Volume of Somdet Phra Yanaworodom 2553, p. 11.

[72] Interview on 4 April 2018, eyewitness account from a senior monk who attended these public sermons on numerous occasions.

[73] Cremation Volume of Chao Chom Sadap 2526, p. 11.

[74] (Phunsaeng Sutabut 2561, p. 132). Only when medically required to do so, did she, following the staunch requests by her doctor, eat after noon (and thus follow "only" seven of the eight precepts) in her final year of life (Cremation Volume of Chao Chom Sadap 2526, p. 14).

[75] Cremation Volume of Chao Chom Sadap 2526, p. 12.

[76] Sadap, Chao Chom 2512, p. (ก) in Cremation Volume of Prueksa Nakhasan 2512a.

[77] The biographies tell us that there were concerns about her safety as there were many attempts to steal from rich royal consorts at that time (Cremation Volume of Chao Chom Sadap 2526, p. 13).

[78] See (Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2558; Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2559).

Prueksa Nakhasan (1882–1969) is another remarkable female student of Somdet Jaroen; her life and spiritual practice deserve further research. Prueksa Nakhasan served in the Grand Palace during the reign of King Rama V and was in royal service until approx. 1928 when she decided to "study the *dhamma*." She listened to sermons by Somdet Jaroen in his monastery Wat Thepsirin, as a result of which "faith [*saddhā*] and the determination to lead the Holy Life [*brahmacariya*] arose in her and she became a *mae chi* in the nunnery Sa-ngopjit [see above] behind the Bangkok monastery Wat Pathumwanaram, for her entire life until her death." (Cremation Volume of Prueksa Nakhasan 2512b). As Prueksa Nakhasan died in 1969, she must have spent some 40 years in the white robes of a *mae chi*. Her biographer also tells us that she had been interested in the study of the *dhamma* since a young age: "Even though being in the Grand Palace at the age of 15, she kept the precepts [*raksa sin*] and was always looking for the opportunity to listen to *dhamma* sermons." Similar to many other women of my study, Prueksa Nakhasan made significant donations to Buddhism, such as sponsoring the ordination of novices and monks, donating a car to the aforementioned famous monk Chaokhun Upāli Guṇūpamācariya (see note 24) and donating real estate to important Buddhist monasteries.

[79] For more on Khunying Damrongthammasan's extraordinary life and literary work, see: (Seeger 2015, 2016, 2018, pp. 62–70; Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2556a; Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2556b; Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2559).

[80] Interviews with Khun Prasop Wisetsiri on 24 July 2013 (telephone interview), 12 November 2013 (in person) and 14 November 2013 (in person). Prasop Wisetsiri was the adopted son of Khunying Damrongthammasan.

[81] Interview on 16 June 2019 with a local villager (Prajuap Khiri Khan), who had been living near Wat Thammikaram during the time that Khunying Damrongthammasan was practising there as a *mae chi*.

[82] Interviews with Khun Prasop Wisetsiri on 24 July 2013 (telephone interview), 12 November 2013 (in person) and 14 November 2013 (in person).

[83] See (Seeger 2015; Seeger and Charaschanyawong 2559). See also the documentary film "Lost in the Mists of Time", 2016 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F50Izhd8SUU, accessed on 25 September 2022).

[84] Interview on 16 June 2019 with a local villager (Prajuap Khiri Khan), who was living near Wat Thammikaram during the time that Khunying Damrongthammasan was practising there as a *mae chi*.

[85] Interviews with Khun Prasop Wisetsiri on 24 July 2013 (telephone interview), 12 November 2013 (in person) and 14 November 2013 (in person).

[86] In 1967 the nunnery Sala Santisuk was moved to its current location in Nakhonchaisri District of the Nakhon Pathom Province.

[87] Will of Khunnang Kaew Uchuwat, 22 November 1943 in (Sala Santisuk 2513, pp. 47–48).

[88] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. (ญ).

[89] Mae Chi Wari Jiraphan was ordained as a *mae chi* in the monastery Wat Tham Tako in Lopburi Province.

[90] (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 65); see also Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, pp. (ญ)–(฿).

[91] Will of Khunnang Kaew Uchuwat, 22 November 1943 in (Sala Santisuk 2513, p. 49).

[92] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. 75.

[93] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. (พ).

[94] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. (3).

[95] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. 75.

[96] Cremation Volume of Upāsikā Wari Jiraphan 2517, p. 93.

[97] Another great benefactor of Thai male and female monasticism is the noblewoman Khunying Khueanphetsena (Somjin Unhanand, 1868–1957), whose life is remarkable in several aspects. Khunying Khueanphetsena authored many texts in the literature genre of travelogue (*nirat*) and may have been the first Thai woman to have ever done so. She also authored a poem in the Thai poetical form of *klon* on the famous Pali canonical text *Maṅgala-sutta*. Extremely unusual for a commoner girl of her time, she was able to read "texts of all kinds" (*nangsue thuk chanit*) at the age of five. She built the monastery Wat Khunying and the nunnery Samnak Santutthi, both in Pathum Thani province. Her cremation volume (Cremation Volume of Khunying Khueanphetsena (Somjin Unha-nand) 2500) describes her as an extremely generous woman, who made significant donations to not only various monastic communities but also the Thai Red Cross and the Saṅgha Hospital. Together with Naris Charaschanyawong I intend to discuss Khunying Khueanphetsena's extraordinary life in some more detail in a separate article.

[98] Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, p. (6).

[99] Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, p. 9.

[100] Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, p. (ค).

[101] Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, p. 9.

[102] Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, p. (2).

[103] See also the biography of Khunnai Thang Khotchasut (1858–1944) in Cremation Volume of Khun Mae Thang Khotchasut 2477; (Seeger 2018, pp. 65–67).

[104] More research is needed in order to ascertain how widespread this practice was in Thailand. However, the practice to erect such dwellings on or next to monastic ground in order to get more easily involved in monastic activities, benefit from the monastic

spaces' tranquillity, or be close to a skilled *dhamma* teacher, or as a merit making activity seems to have been particularly popular amongst the female students of Somdet Jaroen.
In addition to the examples given above, the aristocratic woman Chalaem Ratchajinda (1864–1934), who had been a long-term student of Somdet Jaroen and "gained increasingly wide genuine knowledge and insights in accordance with the words of the Buddha [*buddhavacana*]" because of him, had in the monastic ground of Wat Thepsirin a two storey building built (Cremation Volume of Chalaem Ratchajinda 2478, p. (6)).
There is also a letter dated from 28 September 1925 that shows that the two women Nang Ya and Nang Dam (unfortunately, I have so far not been able to gather more information on these two women) "built and repaired" three dwellings on the monastic ground of Wat Thepsirin. This letter concludes as follows: "Now, both of us would like to respectfully donate these three houses to [Somdet Jaroen; at that time he was holding the ecclesiastical title of Chao Khun Satsana-sophon], the head of the monastic community of Wat Thepsirin. For now, we both would like to ask to live in and look after these three buildings for the remainder of our lives. Once our life has come to an end, may the monastic community [*saṅgha*] administer these houses." (letter, 28 September 1925).
See also the biography of Khunnai Thang Kotchasut (1858–1944), who had a long-term dhammic relationship with Khunying Damrongthammasan (Seeger 2018, pp. 65–67) and had a dwelling in front of the Ratchaburi monastery Wat Sattanatpariwat built. There, she pursued "intensive *dhamma* practice." (Cremation Volume of Khun Mae Thang Khotchasut 2477).

105 And I believe that this still is the case for many *mae chi*s.

106 Both Khunying Damrongthammasan and her dhammic friend Khunying Wanna Worawitphisan (1896–1982) died in the presence of monks (Cremation Volume of Khunying Wanna Worawitphisan 2526, 4, 40) and this way of passing away has been perceived as meritorious.

107 Cremation Volume of Khunying Bunmi Pururatcharangsan 2513, 2.

108 Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (1991, p. 36) even writes that *mae chi*s "observe either five or eight precepts."

109 See notes 112, 113 and 114.

110 See, e.g., (Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 113, 117, 175; Laddawan Tamafu 2548, pp. 55–56; Barnes 1996, pp. 267–68). Sanitsuda Ekachai (2001, p. 291) writes that "most [*mae chi*s] . . . are kept down as temple servants with no legal status as religious persons. They also suffer low social status and stereotyping as broken-hearted women or as fleeing something."

111 See, e.g., articles 25 and 41 of the *Regulations of Practice* (Thai Mae Chi Institute 2562b, pp. 21, 28).

112 I am referring here to the drafts of 2005 and 2012. *Mae chi*s have been working on drafts for the bill since at least the 1990s.

113 Here I am referring to article 4 of the 2012 draft (which is, as far as I know, the most recent draft).

114 I thank the Thai Mae Chi Institute for providing me with a copy of the 2012 draft. For more on the various drafts that have been proposed since the 1990s, see (Sookson Chandashoto 2549; Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 227–45; Lindberg Falk and Kawanami 2017–2018, p. 56).

115 (Brown 2001, p. 25). Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (1991, p. 39) writes that *mae chi*s' "lack of self-esteem, coupled with negative social attitudes, have resulted in their extremely low status." See also e.g., (Barnes 1996, pp. 267–68).

116 Prince Chula Chakrabongse writes that Mom Chao Amphai, a "royal nanny" (*phra phi liang*) of the important Ayutthaya King Phra Narai the Great (r. 1656–1688), "became very strict in her Buddhist [practice] and was ordained as a [*mae*] *chi*. This is the reason why she then became known as Chao Mae Wat Dusit [literally: Royal Mother of the Monastery Wat Dusit]." (Chula Chakrabongse 2541, pp. 40, 74). However, in the English version of the book, which he wrote before the Thai version, Chula Chakrabongse does not mention her ordination as a *mae chi*, but simply writes that she "later became devout and lived near a temple, . . . " (Chula Chakrabongse 2019, p. 46). Unfortunately, Chula Chakrabongse does not provide a source for his statements on Chao Mae Wat Dusit's spiritual life. Even though the sources on Chao Mae Wat Dusit's life are sparse, she is well-known to historians. In her position as "royal nanny" she is reported to have looked after King Phra Narai during his childhood (Pramin Khrueathong 2548). In addition, she was also the mother of the two well-known noble high-ranking officials Phraya Kosalek and Phrayakosapan and is thus believed to also have been a direct ancestor of the first king of the current Chakri dynasty, Rama I (r. 1782–1809).
Of Krom Phra Thephamat, queen of King Phra Phetracha (r. 1688–1703), the successor of Phra Narai, it is also reported that after her husband's death she was ordained as a *mae chi* and took residence near the monastery Wat Dusit (see, e.g., Sookson Chandashoto 2549, p. 11). Another palace woman who is said to have been ordained as a *mae chi* during the Ayutthaya period is Phra Ongchao Kaew, a mistress of Prince Phra Ongchoa Dam, a son of King Phra Phetracha. She is reported to have become ordained during the reign of Ayutthaya King Thaisa (Pumintharacha; r. 1709–1733) and lived with Phra Thephamat at her residence near Wat Dusit (Pawatr Nawamaratana 2552).
Clearly, further research into the biographies of Chao Mae Dusit, Queen Krom Phra Thephamat and Phra Ongchao Kaew is needed in order to explore their spiritual practice and possible ordination as a *mae chi*. This will likely prove difficult given the scarcity of sources on their lives (see Pramin Khrueathong 2548). Another Thai Buddhist female practitioner/monastic whose life deserves more research is Thau Intharasuriya (Nueang Jintakun; 1885–1974); Thau Intharasuriya was a royal nanny (*phra phi liang*) of many members of the Thai royal family including, Kings Rama VIII and Rama IX, and ordained as a *mae chi* twice.

117 See, e.g., Cremation Volume of Phra Khru Sunthonthammawong 2522, p.84. From visits, interviews and pictures I know that many of these nunneries discussed in this article have a library, but most of these libraries seem to be quite modest in their

holdings. The point is, however, that in none of the texts investigated in this article are libraries mentioned. This seems to suggest that, if the nunneries had one, this was not perceived as important enough to warrant comment.

[118] In addition to the texts of this genre that I refer to in this article, in particular the profound prose and poetic *dhamma* texts by Khunying Damrongthammasan (see Damrongthammasan 2559) should be mentioned here, see also the Buddhists texts authored by Upāsikā Anchan Bunnak and Khunying Samli Yamaphaiphongphiphat (1878–1958). Together with my research collaborator on this project, Naris Charaschanyawong, I am in process of writing an article on these women and their literary work.

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*Article*

# The Rise of Vietnamese Nuns: Views from the Buddhist Revival Movement (1931–1945)

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**Abstract:** In this article, with the aim of better understanding the development of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns, the period of the Buddhist revival movement is investigated. This event is considered a turning point for Vietnamese Buddhism. In addition, it will help to shed light on the status of Vietnamese nuns. In this article—which is mainly based on archival documents kept in the National Overseas Archives (the French colonial archives held at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer) and the National Archives Center I, Buddhism periodicals, and memoirs—the status of Vietnamese women during the French colonial period is clarified, as well as the positive effects of the colonial regime in regard to the change in women's perceptions. Then, the differences in the nuns' situation in three regions are analyzed. Finally, an exploration is conducted into the rise of nuns during the revival movement and the emergence of reformist nuns. Indeed, it is reformist nuns that have shaped the image of modern Vietnamese nuns. Moreover, they also created a direction by which the following generations could continue along, as well as playing an important role in the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

**Keywords:** Buddhist revival movement; Buddhist nuns; monastic status; Vietnam

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## 1. Introduction

Unlike its neighboring nations in Southeast Asia (which follow Theravāda Buddhism and there is no presence of Buddhist nuns) there are, in fact, nuns in Vietnamese Buddhism. According to the Most Venerable Thich Tri Quang (Acting Supreme Patriarch of the Patronage Council of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (*Quyền Pháp chủ Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*)), in 2008, the number of Vietnamese nuns was not only larger than that of monks, but many of them were highly educated and increasingly active in various fields[1]. Some famous nuns of the twenty-first century include: Bhikkhunī Tri Hai (1938–2003), renowned in the field of education; Bhikkhunī Nhu Duc (Vien Chieu Zen Monastery, Long Thanh), recognized for her monastery management; and Bhikkhunī Hue Giac (Quan Am Monastery, Bien Hoa), a pioneer in the protection of the ecological environment, and who planted and cared for over 400 hectares of forest. Vietnamese Buddhism includes both Mahāyāna (*Bắc tông* or *Đại thừa* in Vietnamese) and Theravāda (*Nam tông* or *Tiểu thừa*) branches (including Khmer Theravāda and Kinh Theravāda) in its development. Furthermore, from the mid-twentieth century onward, a local branch, known as the Mendicant sect (*hệ phái Khất sĩ*), was also developed. According to the Mahāyāna and Mendicant sects, to become a nun one needs to go through the following stages: the probationary period (two years, the time when a woman takes refuge in the Three Jewels and follows the five precepts); after two years, she accepts ten precepts and becomes a Sāmaṇeri; for the next two years, she studies six rules and becomes a Sikkhamānā. Finally, after these two years, she accepts 348 precepts, thereby becoming a Bhikkhunī. One has to be at least a Sāmaṇeri to be classified as a disciple of the Buddha. By Khmer Theravāda tradition, it has only been monks who could lead religious activities and have their contributions fully recognized. Additionally, the Kinh Theravāda has now ordained women, but they accept just eight precepts, and there is still no full ordination for them. Therefore, in the current

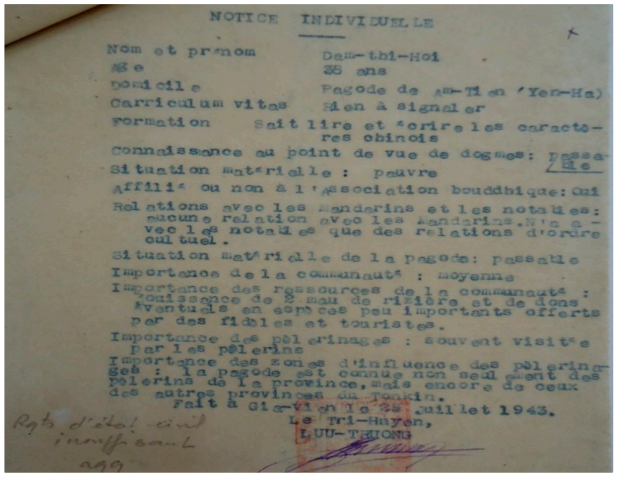
Vietnamese context, nuns are monastic women who are ordained and have received ten or more precepts, according to Mahāyāna and Mendicant traditions[2].

The year 2008 was a significant year for Vietnamese Buddhist nuns, as this is when they established their own organization: the division in charge of nuns (*Phân Ban Ni giới*) under the Central Committee of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (*Ban Tăng sự Trung ương Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*). It is an organization with a clear structure and operating rules that unifies the leadership and management of nuns throughout the country[3]. However, the division is not the first organization of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns. In 1956, nuns had already established an organization in southern Vietnam called the South Vietnam Bhikkhunī Sangha (*Ni bộ Nam Việt* in Vietnamese). It must be stated that this was a notable event in the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Vietnam. Despite this, northern Vietnam is considered to be the cradle of Vietnamese nuns who follow Mahāyāna Buddhism. This rather confusing fact leads to the question: Why? In order to address this question, we must investigate the period of Buddhist revival.

Although several studies have essentially unified viewpoints regarding the beginning of the Vietnamese revival movement—which emerged in the 1920s (Woodside 1976, pp. 192–200; Marr 1981, p. 304; Nguyen 2007; DeVido 2007, pp. 250–69; Ngo 2015)—this is not the case regarding the end of the movement. The Buddhist revival did not really "end" in any of the years 1945, 1951, 1954, 1963, or 1975, which marked key turning points for Vietnam and Vietnamese Buddhism (DeVido 2007, p. 251). However, within the scope of this article, we have only investigated the period from 1931 to 1945 for the following reasons: Firstly, the study of the revival movement is achieved mainly through Buddhology/Buddhist associations, namely, the Cochinchina Buddhist Studies Association (1931, Cochinchina), the Luong Xuyen Buddhist Studies Association (1934, Cochinchina), the Annam Buddhist Studies Association (1932, Annam), and the Tonkin Buddhist Association (1934, Tonkin). These associations were founded in the 1930s, with the first association being the Cochinchina Buddhist Studies Association, which was established in 1931. With the founding of this association, the movement gained legal status (Nguyễn 2008, p. 615). By 1945, when Vietnam gained independence, these associations were either defunct, or had changed their names, as well as their statutes. For example, the Annam Buddhist Association changed its name to the Vietnam Buddhist Association (*Hội Việt Nam Phật học*), and the Tonkin Buddhist Association also changed to the Vietnam Buddhist Association (*Hội Việt Nam Phật giáo)*. Secondly, we surveyed the Buddhist periodicals *Từ Bi Âm* (Sound of Compassion), *Viên Âm* (Sound of Perfection), *Duy Tâm Phật học* (Mind-Only Buddhist Studies), and *Đuốc Tuệ* (Torch of Wisdom), which served as the official organ for the abovementioned associations, as well as the majority of suspended editions in 1945[4].

This article utilizes both Buddhist periodicals—which were established during the revival movement—and archival sources. Their purpose was to shed light on the differences in the nuns' situation between the three regions during the colonial period, as well as to shed light on their voices within the context of the revival movement. Some examples of Buddhist periodicals are *Pháp Âm* (Voice Dharma, 1929), *Phật Hóa Tân Thanh Niên* (1929), *Từ Bi Âm* (1932–1945), *Viên Âm* (1933–1945, 1949–1953), *Duy Tâm Phật Học* (1935–1943), *Đuốc Tuệ* (1935–1945), *Tam Bảo* (The Three Jewels, 1936–1938, Annam), and *Tiếng chuông sớm* (Sound of Early Bell, 1935–1936). By surveying this collection of periodicals, we found 56 articles written by nuns. Regarding archival materials, we consulted the documents at the National Overseas Archives (Aix-en-Provence, France) on the collection of GGI (Gouvernement général d'Indochine) and RSTNF (Résident Supérieur du Tonkin Nouveau Fonds). At the National Archives Center I, Hanoi, we consulted the collection of GGI (Gouvernement général d'Indochine), RST (Résident Supérieur du Tonkin), and MHN (Mairie de Hanoï). At the National Archives Center II (Ho Chi Minh City), we investigated the collection of Goucoch (Gouvernement de Cochinchine). Lastly, at the National Archives Center IV (Da Lat), we focused on the collection of the Central Vietnam governors. Thanks to these archives, we were able to find records of Buddhist associations, pagodas, and surveys on the activities of Buddhist associations. During the survey, we found two

dossiers: 2405 (collection of RSTNF, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, France) and 3722 (collection of MHN, National Archives Center I, Hanoi, Vietnam), which concern nuns in Tonkin. Among them, dossier 2405 is a very important and meaningful record (Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer 1943). Indeed, it mentions *Notices individuelles sur les chefs de pagodes* (individual instructions on the chiefs of pagodas) secretly made in 1943 in the provinces of Tonkin by the French authorities. Each instruction has the following basic information: name; age; address; educational and Buddhist background; membership in the Tonkin Buddhist Association; relationship with officials and relatives; religion; material status; the importance of the monastery; its wealth; the degree of influence of pagodas; and the number of members, i.e., from the abbots to the followers. Underneath each instruction is the signature and seal of the village mayor *lý trưởng*, or district chief *tri huyện*, or French resident *công sứ*. The instruction below [Figure 1] allows us to visualize the specific information that was outlined in the file:


NOTICE INDIVIDUELLE

Nom et prénom Dam-thi-Hoi
Age 36 ans
Domicile Pagode de Am-Tien (Yen-Ha)
Carriculum vitae Rien à signaler
Formation Sait lire et écrire les caractères chinois
Connaissance au point de vue de dogmes: Passable
Situation matérielle : pauvre
Affilié ou non à l'Association bouddhique: Oui
Relations avec les Mandarins et les notables: aucune relation avec les Mandarins. Mais avec les notables que des relations d'ordre cultuel.
Situation matérielle de la pagode: passable
Importance de la communauté : moyenne
Importance des ressources de la communauté : Puissance de 2 mau de rizière et de dons éventuels en espèces peu importants offerts par des fidèles et touristes.
Importance des pèlerinages : souvent visitée par les pèlerins
Importance des zones d'influence des pèlerinages : la pagode est connue non seulement des pèlerins de la province, mais encore de ceux des autres provinces du Tonkin.
Fait à Gia-Vien le 30 juillet 1943.
Le Tri-Huyen,
LUU-THUONG

**Figure 1.** The instruction concerning individual nun Dam Thi Hoi (dossier 2405).

The information regarding the monks and nuns in the provinces, however, was not complete in these archives. For example, the Hai Duong province in *bordereau d'envoie (schedule of sending)*, dated 10 August 1943, mentioned seven individuals, but, in fact, there are no specific instructions pertaining to seven individuals to be found in the dossier. However, by handling the instructions concerning individuals in the archives, we found important information regarding the Tonkin nuns. In addition, we also effectively utilized the memoirs of the nuns at that time, such as the memoir of the nun Dieu Tinh.

This article focuses on nuns that practiced in the Mahāyāna tradition. In the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, Mahāyāna was the earliest (during the second or the third centuries CE) that appeared. The Kinh Theravāda and Mendicants were, in contrast, established relatively late. Kinh Theravāda was founded in Vietnam in 1938 by Hộ Tông (in the name of Lê Văn Giảng), and the Mendicant sect was founded in 1944 in the south by the great patriarch Minh Đăng Quang. We first present Vietnamese women during the French colonial period. This period was chosen as it helps to emphasize new factors in cultural and social life that were brought upon by the colonial regime, and which affected the perception of Vietnamese women. Then, an analysis of the differences in the situations of nuns in the three regions during the French colonial period is performed. Finally, we discuss the rise of reformist nuns within the Buddhist revival movement, during the period 1931–1945.

## 2. Vietnamese Women's Situation during the French Colonial Period (1884–1945)

Prior to the French colonial invasion, Vietnam was a united kingdom with an absolute monarchy, under the rule of the Nguyen emperors. With this ruling system, the emperor was considered the "son of the sky" (*Thiên tử*), who ruled the people on behalf of the heavenly god; he was also the representative of tradition and the spirit of the nation.

The Nguyen dynasty used Confucianism as its ideological foundation, thereby affording Confucianism a profound influence on all aspects of social life. Under the influence of Confucianism, the status of women was considered insignificant (Đặng 2008, p. 28). Indeed, they suffered many injustices due to the concept of "valuing men above women" (*trọng nam khinh nữ*). Dieu Khong, a woman from the Royal family, was reported to have said that "since the [idea of] Confucianism was enthusiastically adopted by people all over our country, women had to restrict themselves to the regulations of the Confucian doctrine, so a woman's duty was only in the family, and [she] would not be expected to know or participate in anything other than that" (Diệu 1935c, p. 40). In her memoirs, the nun Dieu Tinh also mentioned the low status of women on several occasions: "In social life, women sometimes suffer more . . . Becoming a wife, her husband only considers her a housekeeper, a reproductive machine, or a recreational item. Is it not insufferable." (Diệu 1926, p. 5)

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the Dai Nam kingdom of the Nguyen emperors gradually came under the rule of the French colonial empire. After the French attack on the port of Da Nang in 1858, Saigon was occupied in 1859. The South then became a French colony under the name of Cochinchina in 1862. The rest of the territory was divided into Tonkin and Annam under the protectionist regime in 1884 (Brocheux and Hémery 2001, pp. 33–52). The defeat of the Hue dynasty by the French army started the decline of Confucianism and represented the starting point for the entry of Western cultural and ideological factors into Vietnam. These political shifts brought numerous changes in all aspects of the economic and cultural lives of different social classes in Vietnam, including among women.

With the birth of the Franco-Vietnamese education system, education was no longer the sole prerogative of men. The year 1907 marked the first establishment of girl schools. It was a breakthrough, not only in terms of education, but also especially in terms of ideology, which was positively received by the Confucianist Sinic class (who had previously considered educating girls as useless) (Nguyễn 2020, p. 58). At the end of World War I in 1918, schools for girls were available in all three regions of Vietnam. The number of female students continuously increased (Trịnh 2019, pp. 163, 171, 182). From a social perspective, it must be said that female education contributed to changing women's status in society (Nguyễn 2022, p. 36).

The *Quốc Ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese) script also gained popularity during this period (Brocheux and Hémery 2001, pp. 221–25). Indeed, this was one of the "most fundamental legacies" of colonial education. When it was first created in the seventeenth century, this script did not initially extend beyond the scope of evangelism. It was primarily used for educational and teaching purposes during the colonial period that enabled the *Quốc Ngữ* script to gain widespread acceptance with the masses.

The birth and later popularity of the press (especially the Vietnamese-language press) affected Vietnamese perceptions. The first newspaper in *Quốc Ngữ*, called the Gia Dinh newspaper (*Gia Định Báo*), was first established in 1865 in Saigon by the French colonial authority in Cochinchina. Moreover, it was Pétrus Ky, the famous scholar, who then continued the publication. Over time, the number of newspapers in *Quốc Ngữ* increased. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Vietnamese printing press achieved great growth in both the number of its publications and the variety of its content (McHale 2004, pp. 18–19). In particular, other than in the general press, there appeared specialized newspapers for women. In the developmental period of 1930–1935, in all three regions, women's newspapers appeared. Among them, the most famous is the *Phu Nu Tan Van* (News of Women) newspaper. As a weekly newspaper, which existed from 1929 to 1939, it mainly focused on "the masses, dealing with everyday issues" (Huỳnh 2016, p. 223). *Phu Nu Tan Van* was "appreciated by all circles, not only widely popularized in Cochinchina but also received by readers in Tonkin and Annam with much good affection" (Huỳnh 2016, p. 220). It can be said that, thanks to the press, women had access to diverse information, ranging from politics, economy, culture, science, religion, and women's issues.

A significant change in Vietnamese society during the French colonial period was represented by the birth of modern cities and the formation of Western urban lifestyles. Under the influence of French colonial exploitation, urbanization rapidly increased in Vietnam. Hanoi and Hai Phong became first-class cities, similar to Saigon (Brocheux and Hémery 2001, pp. 179–81). These cities quickly became political, economic, and cultural centers with buildings and offices of the colonial government, factories, business properties, shops, and trading units. In the provinces, class-2 and class-3 urban areas and towns appeared. Moreover, Western-style urban life led to new ideas (Thanh and Chân 1997, p. 16).

These factors created great changes in the socio-cultural life of women. In addition to the majority of women living in rural areas—who were still influenced by Confucian thought—a section of women (especially women in urban areas) were able to go to school and access diverse sources of information pertaining to the news. This new situation changed perceptions and thinking.

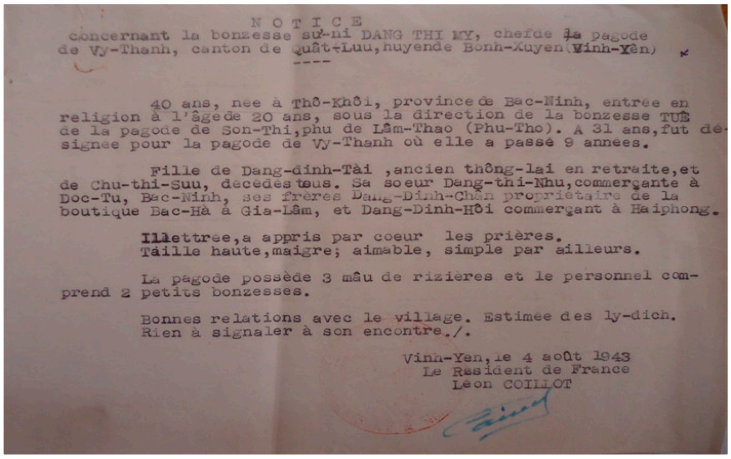
## 3. The Situation of Vietnamese Nuns during the French Colonial Period (1884–1945)

Although Vietnam has a long tradition of bhikkhunīs dating from the twelfth century (DeVido 2007, p. 279), there are significant historical differences between regions. The nuns in the north have a longer history than those in the central and south regions (Nguyễn 2012, p. 813). In the north, not only do nuns have a long tradition, but they also have their own temple. We obtained two archival dossiers and two books on which to base this statement. Dossier 3722—in the collection of MHN, National Archives Center I (Hanoi, Vietnam)—provided information on the status of the Quan Su Temple in 1933[5]. The dossier outlined that, before the temple was ceded to the laypeople, this temple was managed by two nuns, Nguyen Thi Doan and Nguyen Thi Tan (National Archives Center I 1933). This fact was also mentioned by the monk Tri Hai, who initiated the Buddhist revival movement in Tonkin in his *Memoirs of the founding of the Vietnamese Buddhist Association* (*Hồi ký thành lập Hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*) as follows: " . . . occasionally monk Thai Hoa takes me to visit Quan Su Temple, Hanoi. The abbess there at that time was nun Nguyen Thi Doan" (Trí 2016, p. 28). Another archival document, dossier 2405, provided more information about the Tonkin nuns. First, the number of nuns who were abbess of their temple were detailed [Table 1]. The rest of the results are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1.** The number of nuns who were abbess of their temple in Tonkin.

| Province | Number of Abbesses (Out of Total) |
|---|---|
| Hưng Yên | 11/34 |
| Hà Nam | 2/14 |
| Thái Bình | 40/144 |
| Ninh Bình | 18/70 |
| Bắc Ninh | 2/30 |
| Vĩnh Yên | 4/8 |
| Phúc Yên | 0/7 |
| Phú Thọ | 13/26 |
| Quảng Yên | 2/16 |
| Kiến An | 0/6 |
| Thái Nguyên | 0/5 |
| Tuyên Quang | 0 |
| **TOTAL** | **92/360** |

Through the process of researching the instructions of the abbesses in this dossier, we also determined that, other than ordinations of monks, some monastics possessed master nuns [Figure 2]. Below is an example to support this:



NOTICE
concernant la bonzesse sư-ni DANG THI MY, chefde la pagode de Vy-Thanh, canton de Quât-Luu, huyende Binh-Xuyen (Vinh-Yên)

40 ans, nee à Thô-Khôi, province de Bac-Ninh, entree en religion à l'âgede 20 ans, sous la direction de la bonzesse TUÊ de la pagode de Son-Thi, phu de Lâm-Thao (Phu-Tho). A 31 ans, fut designee pour la pagode de Vy-Thanh où elle a passé 9 annees.

Fille de Dang-dinh-Tài, ancien thông-lai en retraite, et de Chu-thi-Suu, decedés tous. Sa soeur Dang-thi-Nhu, commerçante à Doc-Tu, Bac-Ninh, ses freres Dang-Dinh-Chân propriétaire de la boutique Bac-Hà à Gia-Lâm, et Dang-Dinh-Hôi commerçant à Haiphong.

Illettree, a appris par coeur les prières.
Taille haute, maigre; aimable, simple par ailleurs.

La pagode possède 3 mâu de rizières et le personnel comprend 2 petits bonzesses.

Bonnes relations avec le village. Estimee des ly-dich.
Rien à signaler à son encontre./.

Vinh-Yen, le 4 août 1943
Le Résident de France
Leon COILLOT

**Figure 2.** Nun Dang Thi My was a disciple of nun Tue (dossier 2405).

Nun Dang Thi My (born in Tho Khoi, Bac Ninh province) was abbess of Vy Thanh Temple (canton of Quat Luu, Binh Xuyen district, Vinh Yen), and nun Le Thi Lien was the abbess of Thuy Van Temple (Hac Tri district, Phu Tho). There was also a disciple of the master nun, Tue, at the Son Thi Temple (Lam Thao district, Phu Tho province).

From the information provided in the dossier, we determined a basis for the conclusion that, in the Tonkin region during the French colonial period, nunneries (*sơn môn ni*) existed. This observation is also reinforced by the information provided by Nguyen Lang (known by the religious name Thích Nhất Hạnh) in *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận* (History of Buddhism in Vietnam): "In Hanoi, there is a large nunnery in Hang Than street that has been established for many generations; called nunnery Am (*sơn môn Am*) . . . In Ha Dong, in Khoang village, there is another large nunnery called nunnery Khoang (*sơn môn Khoang*). This is also a large patriarchal nunnery (*tổ đình*)" (Nguyễn 2012, p. 813). In addition, Nguyen Lang also noted that these nunneries are training places for nuns. At nunnery Am: "Every year the nuns gather here to study Buddhism in summer, sometimes more than a hundred nuns" (Nguyễn 2012, p. 813). Furthermore, the large nunneries mentioned above, dossier 2405 also demonstrated that some local temples served as training places for monks and nuns. The Phu Vien village Temple (Gia Thuy, Gia Lam, Bac Ninh) "was a school for the training of monks and nuns"[6], or, regarding the Dong Nhan Temple (Dai Trang village, Van Mau, Vo Giang, Bac Ninh), it "was a place of training for monks and nuns little frequented"[7].

During such a long tradition, there were eminent nuns in Tonkin. Nguyen Lang noted that the Venerable Dam Soan (?–1968) was the first nun to be invited to the Hue royal palace in order to teach Dharma to empresses and concubines (Nguyễn 2012, p. 813). Moreover, dossier 2405 tells us about four other nuns, including nun Dam Yen (Bac Ninh), Bui Thi Doai (Thien Phuc Temple, Truc Phe village, Thuong Nong canton, Tam Nong, Phutho), a nun (unnamed) who was the abbess of Chung Quang Temple, and the nun Le Thi Lien (Thuy Van village, Hac Tri, Phu Tho), who all possessed an in-depth understanding of Buddhism.

However, through careful examination of the 92 instructions concerning nuns, we found that—at the Buddhist level—the vast majority were of elementary educational level, and there was even a sizable proportion of nuns who were labeled as being "illiterate" and "knowing the prayers by heart". Therefore, it is not surprising that nun Tâm Nguyệt wrote in *Đuốc Tuệ* in 1937 that nuns could not explain the basic concepts of Buddhism: " . . . If someone asks what the Buddhadharma (*Phật pháp*) is, and what Buddhist practice (*tu hành*) is, only a few people can answer correctly, some even say the Buddhadharma is the Buddhadharma itself, and Buddhist practice means repairing the garden to plant onions

for sale to earn some money" (Tâm 1937, p. 3) ( . . . *"có ai hỏi thế nào là Phật pháp, là tu hành, thật ít có người trả lời đúng được, thậm chí có vị trả lời Phật pháp là Phật pháp chứ là gì, còn tu hành là cốt sửa sang vườn giồng hành cho tốt để bán lấy tiền tiêu"*).

Regarding the education level of the nuns, the results of the survey carried out by the colonial authority in 1943 showed that: 67/92 knew Chinese characters; 5/92 knew *Quốc Ngữ* and Chinese characters; 18/92 were illiterate; and 2/92 were without information.

Generally, a nun had a narrow influence and was confined to a village, mostly having an "insignificant influence in the community" or "non-influence on the believers". The fact that some nuns did not specify their names (along with their influence on the community and followers), leads to strong evidence that the Tonkin nuns lived a quiet life within that period.

There are very few documents concerning nuns in Annam and Cochinchina during, as well as before, the French colonial period. As such, there is very little information regarding nuns in these two regions. In Annam, the book *Lược sử ni giới Bắc tông Việt Nam* (A Brief History of Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhist Nuns) stated that: "In the late nineteenth century, there was no nun temple and [its] own system in Hue, the Nguyen kings established temples in the palace, called king temples, so that women who work in the Royal Household practiced Buddhism, sometimes listening to the sutras. The nuns who have ordained and studied are all dependent on the monks." (Như 2009) The document also records that nun Dien Truong (1863–1925) was the first bhikkhunī of Annam. She came into the temple in 1898 with the Venerable Hai Thuong Cuong Ky in Tu Hieu Temple. In 1910, she was ordained as a bhikkhunī at the Quang Nam transmission ceremony. After the building of Truc Lam Temple, the nun Dien Truong invited the Venerable Giac Tien to be the Abbott of the temple. In addition, she "set up a private nunnery at Truc Lam temple and gathered a number of other nuns to study, such as nun Chon Huong, Dieu Huong, and Giac Hue" (Thích and Hà 2001, p. 436). In 1928, the first nunnery appeared in Hue; i.e., Dieu Vien Temple. This was a temple founded by Ms. Ung Dinh and the nun Dieu Khong (who was not yet ordained at that time). Later, Dieu Huong was invited to be the chairperson.

Particularly in Cochinchina, it is difficult to identify the bhikkhunī who initiated the nun tradition. In the works on the history of Vietnamese Buddhism by Van Thanh, Nguyen Tai Thu did not mention the Vietnamese nuns (Vân 1974; Nguyễn 1988). As an aside, it can be considered that the *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận* (Vietnamese Buddhist History) of Nguyen Lang is the first work that mentions the nuns in Cochinchina. In his work, he introduced three Cochinchina nuns, including Dieu Tinh (1910–1942) (who is an important character that we will describe in greater detail in the next section), Chi Kien (1913–2007), and Dieu Ninh (1914–?). The common factor between them all is that they were all born in the second decades of the twentieth century and were ordained in the 1930s. The book *Lược sử ni giới Bắc tông Việt Nam* (A Brief History of Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhist Nuns) also reported—in addition to the nuns Dieu Tinh and Dieu Ninh—the nuns Dieu Tan (1910–1947), Hong Nga-Dieu Ngoc (1885–1952), and Chon Ngan-Nhu Hoa (1910–1989) (Như 2009). Another common factor between the nuns mentioned in the two works is that they all left home to study with the monks. Nuns Hong Nga-Dieu Ngoc, Hong Khoai-Huu Chi, Hong Tho-Dieu Tinh, Hong Tich-Dieu Kim, Buu Thanh, and Hong Lau-Dieu Tan were all disciples of the Venerable Nhu Hien Chi Thien, also known as the Venerable Phi Lai (Như 2009, pp. 44–45). The nuns Chon Ngan-Nhu Hoa, Chon Niem-Nhu Ngoc, and Chon Vinh-Phuoc Hien were disciples of the Venerable Giac Ngo Chanh Qua (Kim Hue temple, Sa Dec) (Như 2009, p. 64), who was an active monk in the Buddhist revival movement. Although there is no archival material for this, there is the work of Tran Hong Lien, as well as articles in the Buddhist periodicals at that time—which both provide information on the situation of the nuns in many aspects. Tran Hong Lien, in her book *Đạo Phật trong cộng đồng người Việt ở Nam Bộ-Việt Nam từ thế kỷ XVII đến 1975* (Buddhism in the Vietnamese community in Southern Vietnam from the seventeenth century to 1975), wrote: "The number of nuns appeared more and more" (Trần 1995, p. 94). Nun Dieu Tinh, a nun

at the time, further mentioned "a lot of women ordained" (Thích 1935, p. 19). Although the nuns in Cochinchina were "more and more numerous", the reality was that they did not have their own temple, and thus, must have followed the monks. This was reflected by nun Dieu Tinh and Mrs. Tran Nguyen (Louise) in articles published in *Viên Âm* and *Từ Bi Âm* at the time. In *Viên Âm* No. 17, 1935, nun Dieu Tinh wrote: " . . . women ordained a lot, but there was no temple to live in and nuns had to take refuge in monks' temples" (Thích 1935, p. 19). Supporting the statement by Dieu Tinh, Mrs. Tran Nguyen not only detailed the actual situation, but also commented on the consequences of the "living together of monks and nuns", "without any strict separation between monks and nuns, so there are many tragedies of nuns, which serves as a mouthpiece for the worldly people to slander Buddhadharma" (Trần 1936, p. 36). Perhaps such a sentiment was also the reason why nun Huệ Tâm chose to end her life when she was young, even though she had demonstrated full enthusiasm and dedication to the Dharma[8].

In terms of education, the first nun class in Cochinchina was organized by nun Hong Nga-Dieu Ngoc at Giac Hoa Temple in Bac Lieu in 1927. However, this class was only maintained for one year. When reading Dieu Tinh's memoirs, we can imagine the difficulties facing nuns in learning the Buddha's teachings at that time.

Nun Dieu Tinh, whose secular name was Pham Dai Tho, was born in 1910 in a well-to-do Catholic family with seven siblings in Yen Luong Dong village, Hoa Dong Ha canton, Go Cong. When possessed with the desire to live a meaningful life and be helpful to other people, she decided to become a nun. She committed to monasticism with a monk at Tan Lam Temple (Tan Son Nhat, Gia Dinh) at the age of 14, after trying to convince her parents. She thought she could study in peace, but she did not expect to face so "many obstacles". After the daughter of Mrs. *Hội đồng* had fallen in love with her (because the daughter thought Dieu Tinh was a man), a young modern man had also flirted with her. It was unfortunate that she did not meet a good teacher and friend, as her actual teacher "held the broomstick and hit on Dieu Tinh's head" due to the fact that she was boiling water while talking to the other novice. In another instance, the teacher "burned all the sutras I [Dieu Tinh] wrote for a long time and kicked me out immediately" because she prepared the offerings until 2 am and then fell asleep due to being too tired. These matters made it such that the young novice "feared the teacher like a tiger" and "was sad about learning, not knowing whom to learn from" (Diệu 1926).

For the nuns, the monastic life mainly involved "doing good work for the pagoda" (Thích 1933, p. 20). Another source, dating from 1938, recorded that nuns were engaged with "coining and serving tea for the monks, and the nuns also took on very heavy and very hard responsibilities: cooking rice, washing dishes, sweeping the temple, sewing robes for the religious men. In a year with twelve months, in a month with thirty days, in a day with twelve hours, there was not any free time to enter the temple to admire the Buddha's face, not to mention time for study or research . . . " (Như 1938, p. 27). (*sự cạo gió hầu trà cho ông sư, lại còn lãnh lấy cái trách nhiệm rất nặng nề, rất cực nhọc: nào nấu cơm đun nước, nào rửa chén quét chùa, nào khâu quần vá áo cho các ông chúng đạo, một năm mười hai tháng, một tháng ba mươi ngày, một ngày mười hai giờ, tưởng không có chút nào hở tay rảnh việc mà vào chùa cho thấy mặt Phật, có đâu nói đến sự học hỏi nghiên cứu*). Therefore, when compared to what would be their work at home, the duties of nuns did not differ much from the responsibilities of women in society. They were bound to the work of the house, kitchen, and garden. The nuns' monastic life was simply the epitome of women's lives in society. Consequently, the nuns had "the name and image of the monastic people only" (Tâm 1937, p. 3).

With the honor of being the cradle of Vietnamese nuns, nuns in Tonkin—despite their cloistered life and their level of preliminary Buddhism—clearly had more favorable conditions than the nuns in Annam and Cochinchina. The Tonkin nuns had their own temple. Moreover, even large nunneries had nuns who could understand Buddhist dharma, as well as studied Buddhism during the Three-Month Summer Rains Retreat Courses. Due to this, the history of the nuns in the Annam and Cochinchina regions began later. There was no specific temple for nuns. They had to follow male masters and stayed in the monks'

temples. There was no school for nuns to study Buddhism. The key point is that the nuns of the three regions existed separately and had no relationship with each other, except for a few individuals who moved between regions to study Dharma. In addition, their responsibilities were associated with the kitchen and garden.

**4. Buddhist Revival Movement—The Opportunity for Buddhist Nuns to Rise Up**

The Buddhist revival movement was an international movement initiated in India (Nguyễn 2012, p. 531), which then spread to other Asian countries, including Vietnam. Directly influenced by the Chinese Buddhist revival movement, especially from Master Taixu[9], it was initiated in Cochinchina (South Vietnam) by Khanh Hoa and his monastic friends (Nguyen 2007, p. 120), and started in the 1920s. The Buddhist revival movement went through two main phases: the campaigning phase, which featured in the *Quốc Ngữ* newspapers during the 1920s; and the period of revival practice, associated with the Buddhist associations throughout the three regions of Vietnam in the years 1931–1945. The Buddhist revival movement appeared in the context of Vietnamese society during a time when there were also many Western cultural elements coming into competition with traditional ones. It was also during the era of the erosion of Confucianism, the mainstream ideology of the Kings of the Nguyen dynasty, the decline of Buddhism, and the penetration of Western democratic ideas due to the reform activities of progressive patriotic intellectuals, such as: Phan Chau Trinh; Huynh Thuc Khang; Tran Quy Cap; Luong Van Can; the development of modern writing and printing techniques; and the widespread promotion of *Quốc Ngữ*. Therefore, the movement reflected not only a religious character, but also a social character. The different specific action plans of the various associations were aimed at some of the following goals, as explained by Nguyen The Anh: "In general, the leaders of the movement firstly set themselves the goal of interpretation, explanation of the teachings and scriptures in *Quốc Ngữ*, because before there had only been a small number of monks who could understand the Hán (Chinese) Buddhist scriptures, which led to a hindrance of the widespread dissemination of Buddhist teaching. On the other hand, with belief, Buddhism can only be revived when the tranquility is regained, therefore, they demanded the purification of the monastery, establishment of monastic disciplines, and development of modern schools to train a new generation of educated and virtuous monks, capable of taking a spiritual leadership role in a volatile society. Finally, they wished to give Buddhism a systemized organization, allowing this religion to stand firmly to its rival, Christianity, which was regarded as an instrument of colonial authority" (Nguyễn 2008, p. 615). To achieve such goals, the Buddhist Associations published Buddhist periodicals in *Quốc Ngữ*, translated sutras and Buddhist books from Hán to *Quốc Ngữ*, opened Buddhist schools to train talents, taught Dharma, built temples, and organized social charity activities. With these activities, the revival movement provided new ways and opportunities for nuns to raise their voices and express their ideas.

The nuns were no longer quiet, but active. They appeared in Buddhist media where they participated by writing articles and gave Buddhist sermons in public. This was an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. Their doctrinal activities were recorded in the Buddhist journals of the time (including *Từ Bi Âm, Viên Âm, Đuốc Tuệ, Duy Tâm*), as well as the nuns' authorship in the three regions. Nun Dieu Tinh, for example, gave four lectures. The first time was on the occasion of the Congress of Cochinchina Buddhist Studies Association (1935). The second time was on the occasion of the inauguration of Hai An Temple on 30 August 1936. The third time was at Thien Phuoc Temple (Soc Trang), the head office of the Tuong Te Buddhist Association, on the occasion of its inauguration (13 July 1936). The fourth time was at Quoc Cong temple in Hung Yen on the occasion of her trip to the north in 1938. Furthermore, Nun Hue Tam lectured at Dong Quang Temple in 1935 (Tonkin); nun Dieu Vien gave a lecture on the occasion of the inauguration of the Annam Buddhist Studies Association in Da Nang (1936); and nun Tam Nguyet gave a lecture on the anniversary of Buddha's birthday in Quy Nhon (1937).

The frequency of media appearances by nuns is shown in the statistics [Table 2], obtained through articles in the Buddhist periodicals at that time:

**Table 2.** A list of articles by nuns in the main Buddhism periodicals.

| Periodical | Total Number of Articles by Nuns | Authors | Time Appearance |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Từ Bi Âm* (1932–1945, Cochinchina) | 20 | Diệu Tịnh, Huệ Tâm, Diệu Tâm, Diệu Ngôn, Diệu Minh, Như Ý, Diệu Nhựt | 1933–1940 |
| *Duy Tâm Phật học* (1935–1943, Cochinchina) | 4 | Diệu Hữu, Diệu Hường, Diệu Tịnh, Diệu Tánh | 1937–1939 |
| *Viên Âm* (1933–1945, 1949–2953, Annam) | 27 | Diệu Viên, Huệ Tâm, Diệu Không, Diệu Tịnh, Diệu Phước, Diệu Tu, Tâm Nguyệt, Diệu Hồng, Diệu Hòa, Tâm Diệu | 1934–1938 |
| *Đuốc Tuệ* (1935–1945, Tonkin) | 5 | Tâm Nguyệt, Diệu Tịnh, Đàm Như, Đàm Hữu, Đàm Hướng | 1937, 1938, 1944 |

The statistical table shows that the Cochinchina nuns were at the forefront of "showing up" in Buddhist media. The person who started it was nun Dieu Tinh with the article "Complaint of a Buddhist Nun" (*Lời than phiền của một cô vãi*) in *Từ Bi Âm*, No. 27, published on 1 February 1933. The nuns in Annam were next (1934), and the last were the nuns in Tonkin (1937). Nuns from Cochinchina and Annam appear more frequently in the media than those from Tonkin with regard to both the date and the number of articles. The nuns in Cochinchina continuously featured for 9 years in two main journals, and the nuns in Annam continuously featured for 8 years; whereas the nuns of Tonkin only appeared in a scattered manner for 3 years. In this respect, nun Dieu Tinh is the most active. Her name appeared in all four periodicals, from Cochinchina to Tonkin.

Nuns were not only appearing more frequently in the Buddhist press, but they also expressed interest in many issues of Buddhism, from fundamental Dharma-based issues to topical revival issues. In particular, they paid great attention to issues directly related to the nuns at that time. These facts proved that there were nuns who could be qualified, enthusiastic, and responsible. Responsible for their own monastic life, for the Dharma, for the revival career, and for nuns in general. A brief overview of some of the major issues that were of concern to the nuns at that time clearly demonstrates this.

The articles "We should believe in Buddhism, Buddhism is not superstitious" (*Chúng ta nên tín ngưỡng Phật pháp, tín ngưỡng Phật pháp không phải là mê tín*) (Huệ 1935b, pp. 17–31); "Advising people to learn Buddhism" (poetry) (*Khuyên người học đạo*) (Diệu 1935a, pp. 54–55); "How to learn Buddhism" (*Thế nào là học Phật*) (Diệu 1935b, pp. 43–46); and "Buddhism is not in conflict with the present situation" (*Phật giáo không mâu thuẫn đối với cục diện ngày nay* (Diệu 1935d, pp. 12–15) were all articles that had the characteristics of defending Buddhism and referring to the benefits of learning Buddhism. Furthermore, nun Dieu Khong explains the purpose of studying Buddhism: " . . . studying Buddhism is to know one's own mind, to live a perfect life, to work for life, to be useful for life . . . do not have to look for the peaceful and quiet realms to hide" (Diệu 1935b, p. 40). Hue Tam, in the article "We should believe in Buddhism, Buddhism is not superstitious", criticized two misconceptions about Buddhism. The first misconception was the notion that Buddhism is an "ambiguous" religion, whereas the second considers that "Buddhism is a religion that relies on the divines, so it is only worship, so that whenever everyone has difficulties in life or property, then pray for the accident to pass" (Huệ 1935b, p. 21). In order to solve these problems, nun Hue Tam emphasized the good spiritual "values" of Buddhism. Buddhism covers the meaning of "very broad equality", and "Buddhism does not force us to believe without thinking". Buddha taught people to "focus on the mind" (*chú trọng cái tâm*). From the abovementioned Buddhist values, she came to the general conclusion that Buddhism

is not only dedicated to "monks, nuns" and "believers", but it is the fortune of the whole of humanity.

With the articles "The Buddhist Associations should be united" (*Các hội Phật học nên hiệp nhất*) (Huệ 1935a, pp. 4–11), "A few words" (*Đôi lời thỏ thẻ*) (Diệu 1936e, pp. 61–63), and "Buddhism today must have a radical reform" (*Phật học ngày nay phải có sự cải cách triệt để*) (Diệu 1939, p. 527), the nuns responded to the problems of the revival movement. Nun Hue Tam proposed that, in order to render the revival effective, "Buddhist associations should unite" into a "big organization" (*đại tùng lâm*), which meant creating a common institution for Buddhism in the country. Furthermore, this agency would then carry out revival activities in four aspects: distinguishing Buddhism from non-Buddhists; correcting the Sangha; regulating the obligations of the laypeople; and controlling Buddhist propaganda agencies. Supporting this concept, nun Dieu Tanh, in the *Duy Tâm*, also advised on the issue of establishing a "General Buddhist Association" (*Phật giáo Tổng hội*) (Diệu 1939, p. 531). This was a significant and bold idea that referred to a major issue within the revival movement. However, this idea was not feasible due to the fact that Vietnam was divided into three regions (*ba kỳ*). Meanwhile, nun Dieu Tu gently offered her opinion regarding the way Buddhist periodicals worked at that time, and how they should instead be employed. With respect to the Buddhist journals, instead of using the press to "vilify", "reproach", and "reprimand" each other, they should instead affect the image of Buddhism, they should "use gentle words to promote each other", and they should reflect the actions of "forgery monks" (*tà sư*) in order to protect the Dharma.

Another issue of concern to the nuns was found in women's issues concerning Buddhism. Nun Dieu Vien pointed out the "hesitancy" of women regarding Buddhism and explored what could be the likely causes (Diệu 1936f, pp. 11–19). As a result, she introduced "Benefits of Buddhist studies for women" (Diệu 1934, pp. 11–15). Meanwhile, nun Dieu Minh introduced various methods of propagating the Buddhadharma to women of different ages. At a young age, Dharma preachers could use poems and rhyming songs about Buddhism, they could draw Buddhist pictures, and they could collect and translate famous quotes about Buddhist ethics in order to instruct children on how to learn by heart. When they are old, the preachers could guide them to recite the Buddha's name, preach the sutras, the laws of cause and effect, and perform charity work (Diệu 1936a, 1936b, 1936c). Finally, nun Dieu Phuoc advised on the meaning of Buddhist ethical practice for the moral perfection of women in the article "Women and Buddhism" (Diệu 1935e, pp. 23–25): " . . . absorbing the Buddhist morality, then in the family, sisters are good wives, good daughter-in-law, and mothers who have all the virtues; In society, women are selfless who benefit the nation and the people, and strive for a good evolution for society" (Diệu 1935e, p. 23). Along these lines, nun Dieu Phuoc promoted the image of a modern woman who absorbed Western ideas, but still retained the traditional values of Vietnamese women. This is different from the "half-civilized" (*văn minh nửa mùa*) women, imitating the new trend from the West without thinking.

In the Buddhist periodicals, nuns were mostly concerned with nuns' issues. There are eleven articles related to this issue that cover the following aspects: opening a school for nuns, establishing a nunnery, building a nun community, and publishing a Buddhist newspaper dedicated to nuns. The issue of nuns' education was the central issue, thereby attracting the attention of nuns Dieu Tinh[10], Nhu Y (Như 1938, pp. 26–30), Dieu Huong (Diệu 1938a, 1938b), Tam Nguyet (Tâm 1937), Dam Nhu (Đàm 1944c), Dam Huu (Đàm 1944b), and Dam Huong (Đàm 1944a). On discussing this issue, first of all, nun Dieu Tinh emphasized the role of learning in order to enhance education level, and emphasized that, in Dharma practice, for nuns: "Learning is like a torch, only understanding Dharma you know the way to monastic practices" (Thích 1933, p. 19) *(Sự học thức là gậy là đuốc, có thông hiểu mới biết lối tu hành").* Learning and understanding the teachings of Buddha could help them to "propagate the Dharma and do good for being" (*hoằng pháp lợi sinh*) (Diệu 1935f, p. 42) or "help the Sangha to revive the Buddhism" (*giúp ích cho phái tăng già lo việc trùng hưng Phật pháp)* (Thích 1933, p. 22); essentially, that a monastic life was not a wasted life. In

order to achieve this goal, they expressed their wish that the Buddhist Associations open Buddhist schools for nuns. In Cochinchina, nun Dieu Tinh, in as early as 1933, proposed her aspiration that: "Each Venerable monk should focus on the education of our nun sisters to quickly achieve wisdom and virtue" (*mỗi vị cao tăng đại đức nên chú trọng về sự giáo hóa cho chị em chúng tôi mau thành tài đạt đức)* (Thích 1933, p. 22). In Tonkin, in 1937, nun Tam Nguyet (just a Sāmaṇeri at the time) desired to study well. Therefore, she "does not hesitate to write this article, hoping that people [in the Tonkin Buddhist Association] with the heart to think about Buddhist Dharma, Sangha, raise your hands to bring knowledge to our sisters, and please do not be biased, despising our nun sisters" (Tâm 1937, p. 4).

It should be further explained that the "school for nuns", as mentioned by nun Tam Nguyet, was not a traditional school, but a Three-Month Summer Rains Retreat Course[11]. She, instead, referred to opening a modern school for nuns similar to the monk schools. The modern school for monks was opened by the Tonkin Buddhist Association in 1936, with four levels: primary, secondary, university, and college. Monks studied all year with four semesters, including both Buddhist Sutra and non-Buddhist scriptures[12]. In addition, the nuns also encouraged each other on how to "arrange to have time to study" (Đàm 1944c, p. 5).

Whether due to the fervent wishes of the nuns or not, in Cochinchina, there were many monks, such as Giac Ngo Chanh Qua and the Venerable Khanh Hoa (a pioneer of the movement to revive Buddhism in Vietnam), who opened classes for nuns, or allowed nuns to attend certain classes. For example, there was: the Kim Huê Buddhist School for monks and nuns; Phước Huệ home Buddhist school for nuns (opened by Zen Master Giac Ngo Chanh Qua); and the Vĩnh Bửu Buddhist Class for nuns that was opened by Zen Master Khanh Hoa (Như 2009, p. 68). Not only did these institutions rely on venerable monks, but the nuns in Cochinchina also took the initiative in opening the schools. We would like to emphasize the role of nun Dieu Tinh in opening schools for nuns in Cochinchina. Her contribution of teaching and opening schools for nuns can be seen in the statistics below [Table 3][13]:

**Table 3.** A list of Buddhist schools attended by nuns.

| Year | Names of School/Class | Location |
|---|---|---|
| 1933 | Giác Hoàng Buddhist Summer Rains Retreat Course for both monks and nuns. This was the first Buddhist Summer Rains Retreat Course to allow nuns to enroll. Nun Diệu Tịnh was given the post of lecturer. | Giác Hoàng Pagoda (Bà Điểm) |
| 1934 | Home Buddhist Class for Nuns (*Lớp gia giáo* in Vietnamese). Here, nuns studied the Buddhist scriptures in Chinese and basic Buddhist studies. | Hải Ấn Buddhist nuns's Temple (Gia Định) |
| 1934 | *A Three-Month Summer Rains Retreat Course*. Nuns Diệu Tịnh and Như Thanh were teachers. This was the first Buddhist nun school solely organized by nuns. | Thiên Bửu Temple (Lái Thiêu) |
| 1940 | Tân Hòa Home Buddhist School for Nuns, three months. The nuns Diệu Tịnh and Diệu Không were the teachers. | Giác Linh Temple (Tân Hòa, Sa Đéc) |
| 1941 | Linh Phước Home Buddhist School for Nuns opened by nun Diệu Tịnh after having been invited by Mrs. Bang Biện. | Linh Phước Temple (Cai Khoa, Sa Đéc) |

In Tonkin in 1938, save for the Three-Month Summer Rains Retreat Courses, a secondary and primary class for nuns was opened at But Thap Temple (Ninh 2020, p. 207). In Annam, although there were no articles on *Viên Âm* about opening schools for nuns, there were, in fact, schools for nuns that were also established within the framework of a Buddhism revival led by the Annam Buddhist Association. In 1932, the first nun school opened at Tu Dam temple. In 1934, the Dieu Duc nunnery was established as a training and education institution for nuns in Annam (Như 2009, p. 25). Regarding nuns' activities (such as opening schools and building nun temples in Annam) during this time period, it is impossible to overlook the role of the eminent nuns in Hue, especially the Venerable Dieu

Khong (1905–1997), who was of Royal origin. She was adept at Confucianism and Western studies. In addition, she made great contributions to nuns in Annam and helped to build nunneries; she also founded many schools for nuns[14].

According to instances in the Buddhist press, if the nuns in Tonkin were only interested in opening new schools, nuns in Cochinchina were also interested in issues that were both urgent for and oriented toward nuns, such as the construction of a nunnery. This is understandable due to the fact that the nuns in Cochinchina did not have their own temples. Nun Dieu Tinh was a person that had great success in mobilizing the monks to build Từ Hóa nunnery. When discussing the campaign to build Từ Hóa, in the article *Một bức thư dài xin hỏi ý kiến chị em nữ lưu* [*A long letter asking for female sisters' opinions*] published in *Viên Âm*, she wrote: "In the month of April 1935, we personally came together with monk Thích Từ Phong and monk Thích Pháp Ấn, to request the Venerable Master Trang Quản Hưng to apply for the establishment of a nunnery, under the name Từ Hóa Tự, in the village of Tân Sơn Nhì, Dương Hòa Thượng district, in Gia Định . . . This temple was built with the money of the local people and all nuns. The temple, although established, has not yet satisfied our hopes" (Thích 1935, p. 22). In 1935, Dieu Tinh moved the temple to Tân Sơn Nhất and changed its name to Hải Ấn Ni tự. The temple consisted of three compartments and two wings (which were built of brick and roofed with tiles). Furthermore, it was inaugurated on 30 August 1936, the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (Diệu 1936d, p. 44). Although somewhat simple, constructing the temple demonstrated the nun's hearty efforts for their community. It was from this first nunnery that the nuns had their own base from which to practice and study. In addition, it helped overcome the situation of "monks and nuns living together". As such, from this foundation, the nuns continued to build more nunneries.

The issue of building an organization for nuns was also raised. Nun Dieu Tinh was the first and most frequent person to draw attention to this issue. In 1935, on the occasion of the Congress of the Cochinchina Buddhist Studies Association, nun Dieu Tinh called for nuns to "adjust the nuns to be orderly, build a union, then must gather all material resources and human resources to take care of the restoration of the Buddha Dharma . . . " (Diệu 1935f, p. 42). Furthermore, the same year, in *Viên Âm*, in an article addressed to the nuns, she continued to mention the issue of the nuns being able to contact each other in order to form a community of their own: "I wish that the nun sisters studying Buddhism would completely abandon their divisive nature, stop identifying different masters or sects, setting a border between pagodas and temples, which have been a regrettable practice of the elder monks for a long time. From now on, each of the three regions and each province has its own temple for nuns. Moreover, I hope all nuns would learn to love each other, unite their different ideas, follow the same set of rules, and organize a Bhikkhunī Sangha [in which we might] study the scriptures together, strictly adhere to the precepts to maintain the Buddha Dharma in this period of weak Dharma and strong superstition, and thus fulfill our aspirations" (Thích 1935, p. 22). Then, in *Từ Bi Âm*, No. 148, in 1938, she continued to call for "establishing an association of nuns" (Diệu 1938c, pp. 29–33). In *Duy Tâm*, in 1938, Dieu Huong also emphasized the solidarity of the nuns, citing that "the sisters should join the union, separate between nuns and monks, arrange orderly to avoid the harm of disintegration and division" (Diệu 1938a, p. 274).

Cochinchina nuns were pioneers in expressing the voice of Vietnamese nuns in the revival movement. In the press, they mentioned the manifold problems of the nuns, not only in providing a reaction to the conditions of nuns in Cochinchina (which were somewhat unfavorable compared to the Tonkin and the Annam nuns), but also in demonstrating how the nuns in that area were influenced by an open and modern lifestyle under the influence of Western civilization. In the history of Vietnam, Cochinchina is a land where Confucians did not have as profound an influence as in Annam and Tonkin. However, Cochinchina experienced the effect of Western civilization earlier than those in Annam and Tonkin because Cochinchina became a French colony first. Considering the nuns at that time, nun Dieu Tinh was the most eminent. This was not only because of her specific actions, but also because of the issues she initiated that were related to the nuns. Dieu

Tinh was a rare case among the Vietnamese nuns in the 1930s and 1940s of the twentieth century. According to her memoirs, she was born in a Catholic family in Cochinchina, but soon received a French–Vietnamese education where she was literate in both *Quốc Ngữ* and French; as a result, she was familiar with Western culture (Diệu 1926). It was one of the more favorable starting points for her when she committed herself to Buddhism. She possessed a profound awareness of the path of study, as well as the status of nuns. Furthermore, it was the "obstacles" in her monastic life that focused her direct attention on the study of nuns, the construction of nunneries, and the promotion of the issue of solidarity among nuns. Her short life was devoted to her wish to "elevate the status of nuns to the level of monks" (Nguyễn 2012, p. 779). Therefore, she became an example to others, and was often mentioned in the Buddhist press whenever the monks promoted the spiritual practice of the nuns. *Từ Bi Âm* itself also presented a poem to the nuns praising Dieu Tinh, as follows:

> Speech acts must be supreme
> So that in a female body
> Hundred lifetimes forged a sword of wisdom
> One hand opened the door to a life of dust and heat
> Leading three to five groups of religious mates
> Defeating six or seven parts of forgery monks ... (Từ 1935, p. 45)[15]

## 5. Conclusions

The period of French colonial rule (1884–1945), in addition to its negative consequences[16], also brought about positive effects. In particular, these positive effects ranged from the cultural to the ideological, as well as more broadly in terms of knowledge. These factors affected all social classes, including women. The opening of girl schools and opportunities to be exposed to Western European ideological movements changed aspects of social awareness, as well as women's perceptions of their own roles and statuses, thereby raising feminist-based issues. It must be stressed that nuns are a community of Vietnamese women. In a society influenced by Confucianism, their lives at home were associated with the "three followings and four virtues". When they left home, they were influenced by the concept of "regarding monks higher than nuns" (*quý tăng tiện ni*) in the temple. Although the specific situation was not the same in the three regions, in general, the nuns had low status, blurred images, lived quiet and closed lives, and were confined within the monasteries, as well as the villages.

The revival movement emerged, and with it, nuns boldly stepped out from the traditional old and narrow social framework to become reformist nuns. They appeared in the Buddhist media. They preached in public at major ceremonies, such as the congress of the Buddhist Association, the inauguration of temples, the establishment of the Buddhist Association, or on the anniversary of the Buddha's birthday ceremony. Through articles and lectures, they demonstrated a high level of Buddhist studies, reflected on the situation of the nuns, and expressed their wish to have schools for nuns, as well as to have their own temples. They called on nuns to unite in order to build their own union. The key issues of concern were urgent issues that needed to be resolved, but they were also issues that orientated on the development of nuns in the following periods. When comparing the nuns in the three regions, the voices of the nuns in Cochinchina were more vibrant. Among them, the most important character was the nun Dieu Tinh, a young, enthusiastic nun with an established and well-educated background in Buddhism. She was a pioneer who raised her voice, making the case for the rights of nuns. Their achievements created not only a foundation for nuns to continue to rise up in the following periods, but also contributed to solving feminist issues in Vietnamese society in the early decades of the twentieth century.

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## Notes

1 https://thuvienhoasen.org/p80a4699/2/vai-tro-cua-ni-gioi-viet-nam-trong-xa-hoi-hien-nay-thich-tri-quang accessed on 22 November 2022.

2 https://phatgiao.org.vn/ni-gioi-ho-la-ai-d43957.html (accessed on 22 November 2022).

3 http://vinhnghiem.de/news/index.php?nv=news&op=Dieu-le/Noi-qui-Phan-ban-Dac-trach-Ni-gioi-Trung-uong-231 accessed on 7 November 2022.

4 Từ Bi Âm (1932–1945); Viên Âm (1933–1945, 1949–1953); Đuốc Tuệ (1935–1945); Duy Tâm (1935–1943).

5 Head office of the Tonkin Buddhist Association, now it is the head office of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha Central.

6 *La pagode est une école pour la formation des bonzes et bonzesses* in French (Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer 1943).

7 *La pagoda est un lieu de formation des bonzes et bonzesses peu frequentée* in French (Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer 1943).

8 This Buddhist nun was from Tonkin (Northern Vietnam) but in order to learn the Dharma she had to travel to Cochinchina (Sourthern Vietnam) to study with other monks, such as Zen Master Khanh Hoa and Zen Master Huệ Quang. Compared to other Northern Buddhist nuns at that time, she was one of the few who had an academic background before ordination. Coming from a "reputable and wealthy" family, she was educated in *Quốc Ngữ* and French, and spent two years living in China with her family. Because of her good academic background and other personal qualifications, Huệ Tâm progressed very quickly on the path of Buddhist cultivation. Although the number of the articles she produced was not terribly significant, the content clearly shows her high level of knowledge on Buddhism, as well as the awareness of a young nun towards the problem of the revival movement. However, it remains unclear why she chose to end her life by drowning herself at Ngao Châu beach. It is tragic indeed about Huê Tâm. See Ninh (2019, pp. 89–100).

9 Taixu visited Vietnam two times in 1928 and 1940. In addition, his ideas, and the activities of the Chinese Buddhist reform movement were already well-known in Vietnam via Taixu's writings and his disciples' propagation. For more information on the influence of Chinese Master Taixu on Buddhism in Vietnam See (DeVido 2009, pp. 413–58; Nguyen 2007, pp. 127–28).

10 Lời than phiền của một cô vãi (Complaint of a Buddhist Nun). *Từ Bi Âm* 27: 18–23; Nên tổ chức trường Phật học để giáo dục phụ nữ không? (Should a Buddhist school be organized to educate women?). *Từ Bi Âm* 148: 29–33. This article was republished in *Duy Tam* 32: 355–58.

11 For more information on A Three-Month Summer Rains Retreat Course, see (Nguyen 2007, pp. 62–63).

12 For more information on the modern school for monks See (Ninh 2020, pp. 198–217).

13 The list is compiled in the book (Như 2009).

14 For more information on the nun Dieu Khong see (DeVido 2014, pp. 71–82).

15 The poem in Vietnamese "Hành vi ngôn luận hẳn siêu quần/Vì cớ sao mà hiện nữ thân?/Trăm kiếp rèn nên gươm trí huệ/Một tay tháo sổ cũi phong trần/Dắt thêm đạo lữ năm ba lớp/Đánh vỡ tà sư sáu bảy phần . . . ."

16 Territorial unity was broken and traditional cultural values were lost due to the influence of Western civilization. The cooperative character of the Vietnamese villages was gradually eroded and a class of landless and land-poor Vietnamese grew. All armed resistance had been quelled and the infant mortality rate was consistently high. There are a few verses from an anonymous poem in Vietnam about the brutality of French colonialism: Rubber plantations is easy to go, difficult to return/ When you go, you are a strong man, when you come back, you are sallow and thin/ . . . . Rubber trees are green strangly/ Each tree fertilizes a worker's corpse. (Cao su đi dễ khó về/Khi đi trai tráng, khi về bủng beo . . . Cao su xanh tốt lạ đời/Mỗi cây bón một xác người công nhân). For more information on the negavite consequences See (Marr 1981). *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945*: University of California Press: 15–53; See (Brocheux and Hémery 2001). *Indochine la colonisation ambiguë, 1858–1954*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte: 198–199.

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# Female Education in a Chan Public Monastery in China: The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns

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**Abstract:** The Great Chan Monastery of the Golden Mountain (Dajinshan Chansi 大金山禪寺) is a large monastic complex for nuns located in Jiangxi province in southeast China and belonging to the Chan meditation school. The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Jiangxi foxueyuan Dajinshan nizhong xueyuan* 江西佛學院大金山尼眾學院), established at the monastery in 1994, is one of the few institutes for nuns in China to be especially axed on Chan studies and practice. What are the pedagogical goals and agenda of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns? What are the specificities of this academy as compared to other female academies, and to academies for monks? Why do nuns enroll at Dajinshan Buddhist Academy? What does this case study tell us about the gender balance in Chinese Buddhism today? This paper, based on fieldwork, will try to answer these questions by especially considering enrollment and scale, students and personnel, and curricula and schedule of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns.

**Keywords:** Buddhist education; Buddhist academies; foxueyuan 佛学院; Dajinshan 大金山; Buddhist academy for nuns 尼众佛学院

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## 1. Introduction

Although it is difficult to provide accurate estimates, it is widely acknowledged that Buddhism, counting 100 million followers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, represents today the largest and most influential among the five officially recognized religions in the People's Republic of China[1]. Official statistics indicate that in 2018, there were around 222,000 Buddhist clerics and 33,500 Buddhist temples in China, including 28,000 Han Buddhist temples, 3800 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and 1700 Theravāda Buddhist temples[2]. Based on different sources, (Ji 2012)[3] and (Gildow 2016) both arrived at an estimate of about 100,000 monastics for Han Buddhism alone[4], of which in 2016, about 3000 were seminarians in about fifty Buddhist academies (Gildow 2016, pp. 48, 76, 204).

Buddhist academies (*foxueyuan* 佛學院), also referred to as institutes of Buddhist studies or Buddhist seminaries, are higher degree-granting educational institutions annexed to monasteries and convents, where Buddhist courses are complemented by secular studies[5]. Since their appearance in China at the beginning of the twentieth century[6], Buddhist academies have become central monastic institutions, changing in a durable way monastic training and education in general, and the formation of monastic elites in particular. At least seventy-one Buddhist academies were established in the Republican period (1912–1949)[7], and at least thirteen for women (nuns and sometimes also laywomen) between 1924 and 1948[8]. The first educational organization for Buddhist nuns and laywomen was the Wuchang Female Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Wuchang foxueyuan nüzhongyuan* 武昌佛學院女眾院) established by Master Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) in 1924[9].

While Buddhist academies were run as private institutions during the Republican period, since the communist takeover in 1949 and the establishment of the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会, BAC) in 1953, Buddhist monastic education has been subjected to state control. The Buddhist Academy of China (*Zhongguo*

*foxueyuan* 中國佛學院) was the first national-level institution[10] and the only one allowed to exist between its establishment in Beijing in 1956 and its formal closure in 1966. Since its reopening in 1980 following the end of the Cultural Revolution, the number of Buddhist academies has gradually increased, reaching fifty-eight for Han Buddhism alone in 2014 (Ji 2019, appendix 7.1, pp. 200–4). Not only there are many more Buddhist academies today than in the first half of the twentieth century, but they also serve a much smaller monastic population (Gildow 2016, p. 204)[11].

While the majority of Buddhist academies are male-only institutions, there also exist academies with male and female sections (*nüzhongbu* 女眾部), as well as women-only academies. (Yang 2011, chart p. 20) estimated that sixteen female institutions (including both female sections and women-only academies) were established in the country between 1983 and 2005; in 2014, (Ji 2019, p. 186) counted eleven specialized Buddhist academies for women, and fifteen others accepting both men and women[12]. The most illustrious example of an academy with male and female sections is the Minnan Buddhist Academy (*Minnan foxueyuan* 閩南佛學院), which (re)opened in 1985[13], the female branch of which is considered to be the best for nuns in China (Gildow 2016, p. 206). The Buddhist academy of the Xuyun chanlin 虛云禪林, the female sub-temple (*xiayuan* 下院) of the Bailin Chan monastery in Hebei, is an example of a more recently established branch institution, created in 2016[14].

In effect, a rapid survey shows that while a few Buddhist academies for women listed by Ji are not active anymore, new academies were established since 2015. This institutional turnover seems to leave especially unaffected long-established, women-only, provincial-level independent institutions such as the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Sichuan nizhong foxueyuan* 四川尼眾佛學院)[15], the first female academy to have opened after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1983; the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Wutaishan nizhong foxueyuan* 五台山尼众佛学院), established at Pushou monastery in 1992[16]; the Guangdong Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Guangdong foxueyuan nizhong xueyuan* 廣東佛學院尼眾學院, previously called *Guangdong nizhong foxueyuan* 廣東尼眾佛學院), which was created in 1995; and the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Jiangxi foxueyuan Dajinshan nizhong xueyuan* 江西佛學院大金山尼眾學院), established in 1994 and which is the object of this study.

What are the pedagogical goals and agenda of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns[17]? What are the specificities of this academy as compared to other female academies, and to academies for monks?[18] Why do nuns enroll at Dajinshan Buddhist Academy? What does this case study tell us about the gender balance in Chinese Buddhism today? In this paper, based on observations, materials, and interviews from fieldwork, I will try to answer these questions by especially considering enrollment and scale, students and personnel, and curricula and schedule of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns.

I conducted fieldwork at Dajinshan in 2006, 2015, 2016, and 2019, each time residing at the monastery for a period of about ten days. During each of my stays, I followed the monastic community in the daily liturgy and formal meals, participated in different ritual occasions related to the Buddhist and secular calendars, attended classes and meditation sessions, spent time at the retiring house, and visited and resided at the monastery's sub-temples, sometimes also accompanying the current abbess there[19]. During my stays at the monastery, I had both formal conversations and informal talks with the retired and current abbesses, with different nuns holding monastic positions, and with a few lay devotees and local political representatives (most of the longer, formal conversations were recorded)[20].

## 2. The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns

The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns is a women-only institution annexed to the Great Monastery of the Golden Mountain (Dajinshan Chansi 大金山禪寺), a large, public monastery[21] for nuns of the Chan (meditation) school located in southeast

China, near the city of Fuzhou in Jiangxi province. A historical stronghold of Han Buddhism, Jiangxi is the third province for Buddhist sites to population (38.92 per million) according to 2006 estimates (after Fujian and Zhejiang: Ji 2012, p. 17). The monastery and its institute are both independent from any male institution. The monastic community counts a steady average of two hundred nuns, including about a hundred student-nuns.

The Dajinshan monastery was rebuilt by retired abbess Yinkong 印空 (b. 1921), one of the very few Buddhist masters still alive to have entered religion before the 1949 Communist takeover. Starting from 1984, Yinkong rebuilt over ten years the monastery on top of the hill (Jinshan monastery, from the name of the hill on which it seats) where she had received tonsure from a Buddhist nun in 1940 and where she had lived in her youth. In 2000, she began the construction of another monastic complex at the foot of the hill (Dajinshan monastery) in order to expand the premises. Yinkong was herself a teacher before the start of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and the instruction of women, and more generally, the will to provide women with equal opportunities, is a foundational theme of her lifelong activities[22]. She therefore rebuilt Dajinshan monastery as a large, orthodox institution for nuns claiming the same status and legitimacy as the most prestigious male monasteries, and she expressly adopted for it a gender-neutral denomination (*chansi* 禪寺, "Chan monastery") different from the Chinese term referring to small convents or nunneries (*an* 庵)[23]. Large public monasteries such as Dajinshan are less commonly occupied by nuns than small convents in China.

Yinkong regrets that when she was a young novice and nun, female monastics did not have the possibility to practice collective meditation according to the standards and methods of the Chan school, as women were (and are) not allowed to enter the meditation halls of male monasteries, and that no meditation halls especially dedicated to them existed (or were easily accessible) at that time. For this reason, she built at her monastery in 1994 one of the first large meditation halls for nuns in the country[24]. Yinkong later equipped her monastery with an ordination platform, and more recently, she also built a retiring house for aged nuns and the aging parents of Dajinshan's nuns, as a strategy to motivate more women to enter religion and to motivate parents to give their consent.

Although retired abbess Yinkong engaged in nuns' education since the 1940s, the idea of establishing the academy initially came from her Dharma master, the monk Benhuan 本煥 (1907–2012)[25], whose great renown surely helped the monastery to obtain authorization from the Jiangxi Buddhist Association and the provincial Religious and Ethnic Affairs bureau. The "Jiangxi Buddhist Academy for Nuns" (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan* 江西尼眾佛學院), as it was originally called, was the first academy for nuns to be established in Jiangxi province in 1994, and the only one until 2016[26]. Initially located at Jinshan monastery on top of the hill, it was later moved to the larger Dajinshan monastery. As a picture included in the commemorative publication of the first twenty years of the academy shows, Benhuan took part in the academy's inauguration ceremony together with Yicheng 一誠 (1927–2017), another renown Chan monk who was leading at that time the restoration of his lineage temple[27], the Zhenru Monastery on Mount Yunju in Jiangxi, and who was later appointed president of the BAC from 2002 to 2010. Since then, the institute has received the visits of many other prominent Chinese Buddhists and political leaders (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan ershi zhounian yuanqing zhuankan* 2014, pp. 10–21).

The academy is housed and funded by the monastery, and as is often the case, the most important administrative positions of the two institutions overlap: the academy's nominal director (*yuanzhang* 院長) is Yinkong herself, and its vice-director is Dajinshan's current abbess and Yinkong's disciple, Duncheng 頓成 (b. 1966). The funds for the construction of the academy were first provided by the Fu Hui Charity Foundation (*Xianggang Fuhui cishan jijinhui* 香港福慧慈善基金會), a Hong Kong-based Buddhist philanthropic association that especially sponsors higher education[28], and by a few emigrated Buddhist monks such as Jinghai 净海 (b. 1931) (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan ershi zhounian yuanqing zhuankan* 2014, pp. 16, 62). Starting from 2002, thanks to Benhuan's introduction, the construction of the new academy at Dajinshan was sponsored by the Glorisun Group (*Xianggang Xuri jituan*

香港旭日集團) (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan ershi zhounian yuanqing zhuankan* 2014, pp. 1, 62), a well-known Hong Kong jeans company that has financed a great number of Buddhist enterprises in China. As a token of gratitude towards its donor, the main building of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns is called the "building of venerating the rising sun" (*Zunxulou* 尊旭樓).

This teaching building (*jiaoxuelou* 教學樓), which surrounds a verdant central courtyard (Figure 1), includes the students' lodgings, classrooms, offices, a meeting room, a computer room, a hall for the collective recitation of sacred texts (*fatang* 法堂), and a library. There are no sports equipment and no areas for sport, as sport is part neither of the curriculum nor of the leisure activities preconized at the academy. Student-nuns share ten-person dorms equipped with bunk beds, air-conditioning, and heating. These facilities are also to be found in the classrooms, although when I attended classes in a cool month of March in 2019, the heating was off and students were wrapped up in scarves and hats, with blankets on their legs. Most of the classrooms have been recently equipped with blackboards doubled with an electronic screen. Students are only allowed to take hand-notes, however, and they leave all personal belongings, including flasks, outside the classroom. Generally speaking, Dajinshan's rules and way of living are quite austere, and the monthly allowance is especially low (130 *yuan*) if compared to other monasteries. Potential student-nuns often come beforehand and stay at the monastery for a few days (*guadan* 掛單) as temporary residents (*yunshui* 雲水) to make sure that they find the atmosphere and lifestyle suitable for them.

**Figure 1.** The teaching building of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns.

### *2.1. Enrollment and Scale*

As most Buddhist academies in China, the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns does not enroll students every year. It first enrolled every two years between 1994 and 1998 when classes had to be set up, then every three years from 1998 to 2020, a period during which the curriculum consisted of a three-year elementary program (*jichuban* 基礎班), followed by a three-year beginner program (*chujiban* 初級班) and a three-year intermediate program (*zhongjiban* 中級班), plus a final one-year meditation class. The academy then shifted to a biennial enrollment after the course of study was modified in 2019 in order to match the national standard—it now includes, besides two years of preparatory program (*yukeban* 預科班), four years of a bachelor degree program (*benkeban* 本科班) and three years of a master degree program (*yanjiuban* 研究班). This is the same course of study, for example, as the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (Yang 2011, pp. 37, 39).

As for the academy's scale, a chart included in the commemorative publication of the first twenty years of the academy provides precise figures for every year from 1994 to 2013. During this period, the academy enrolled eight promotions[29], with classes counting an average of 32–33 students[30] for a total of 716 student-nuns graduating in the three programs[31], of which 159 student-nuns graduated in the intermediate, final program alone (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan ershi zhounian yuanqing zhuankan* 2014, p. 9). If we double these

numbers to also cover the period 2013–2022, we obtain an estimate of more than 300 student-nuns having obtained their final degree since 1994. This is a rather conservative estimate, as the scale of the academy has grown from an average of 90 student-nuns per year for the period 1994–2013[32] to 136 student-nuns upon my last visit in 2019. Notwithstanding the fact that academies for nuns are in general of a smaller scale than those for monks[33], the present scale of Dajinshan Buddhist academy matches the national average of 140 students (Ji 2019, pp. 186–87). Therefore, the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns can be considered a large female academy[34].

Conditions for applying to the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, according to the 2022 call for applications, are "to love one's country and religion, to comply with the statutes and obey the laws, to have a clean criminal record and an upright moral conduct, to support the Party's leadership and the socialist system, and to have a firm belief"[35]. As is the case for any Buddhist Academy in China, political allegiance and collaboration count as the first requirement. Candidates must be between 18 and 40 years old, and they must have entered religion (i.e., received tonsure) at least one year prior. They must be "fond of practicing and studying, possess a dignified demeanor[36], be in good health, be exempt from any hidden handicap, infectious disease and depressive disorder[37], do not have unhealthy habits nor marital or romantic relationships"[38]. Candidates applying to the preparatory program must possess a junior high-school degree or above (*chuzhong yishang* 初中以上), while those applying to the bachelor degree program must have completed a preparatory program in a Buddhist academy or possess a senior middle-school degree or above (*gaozhong yishang* 高中以上).

Applications must previously be approved by the candidates' public monastery (*kaifang conglin* 開放叢林) or local Buddhist Association. Either a letter of introduction and recommendation from the candidate's local Buddhist Association or Religious Affairs Bureau, or a certificate from the monastery of origin are to be submitted, along with the ordination certificate (for ordained nuns), ID card, and a medical examination form, including positive resistance to type B hepatitis (required since at least 2013) and DNA test (a new 2022 requirement)[39]. More sanitary requirements were also added to the 2022 call for applications as compared to the application of 2020 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic[40]. As is customary in Buddhist academies, candidates meeting all requirements undergo a written and oral admission examination. At Dajinshan, the examination is intended to test their general knowledge, acquaintance with Buddhist liturgy and deportment, and "comprehensive attainments in self-cultivation" (*zonghe suyang* 綜合素養)[41].

The above-mentioned conditions do not differ much from general requirements of male academies, nor from Dajinshan academy's previous calls for applications (2013 and 2020), except on two points. The first difference is the scale of the enrollment, which in 2022 was raised to 45 student-nuns for the preparatory program and 45 for the bachelor degree program, as compared to 40 and 40 for the same programs in 2020. Second, the age limit to be enrolled at the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns was also raised from 35 to 40 since at least 2020, as compared to the 2013 call for applications[42]. Although a general raise in the age limit seems to concern male Buddhist academies as well[43], the current age limit for enrolling at Dajinshan academy is higher than the average for both monks and nuns, judging from a few 2022 calls for applications of other male and female academies for the same programs[44]. This specific choice of Dajinshan academy to raise the scale and the age limit for enrollment can be ascribed to different factors.

First of all, generally speaking, the age for joining the Buddhist monastic order is being increasingly pushed further, since many Chinese enter religion after marrying and bearing a child. Besides disappointment with and failure of marital life (certainly not a new phenomenon), this fact can be ascribed to the state family planning and especially the single-child policy implemented between 1979 and 2015[45], which will have a growing impact for at least another decade[46]. Due to the long-standing importance of the ancestor cult in China, young adults have the moral obligation of bearing an heir who can continue

the family line. This obligation is all the more compelling for single children, and given that candidates to religious life, especially if minor, must obtain from their parents the permission to enter religion—particularly in the case of wealthy and well-educated single children, this permission is often not easily granted.

Second, while the delay of the age for entering religion concerns both male and female candidates to religious life, the latter pay a higher price. The important gender imbalance also caused by the single-child policy (the male marriage population far exceeds the female marriage population in China) entails that the pressure to marry and bear a child is higher on women than on men. Women are also expected to take care of their old parents more than men are. An analogous disadvantage concerns female monastics. Since there are in China fewer higher education institutions for nuns than for monks, the selection to enroll—which is also executed according to the age of the candidates—is harder for nuns. Furthermore, at some Buddhist academies where male and female sections are available, for example, the Fujian Buddhist Academy, age limits for women's enrollment are lower than for men[47], and the curriculum is longer[48].

Finally, although the age limit for ordination is the same for men and women (59 years), according to contemporary official regulations, at least two years must separate the tonsure and the complete ordination of female novices (but only one year in the case of male novices), therefore implicitly allowing for their two-year[49] training as a probationer (skr. *śikṣamāṇā*, ch. *shichani* 式叉尼)[50]. Since the dozen monasteries allowed to conduct ordinations in the country every year must respect a maximum quota imposed by the government (usually 350 ordinands for each ordaining monastery), when receivable applications exceed the quota, as is often the case, the selection is performed according to the age and education level of the candidates. In other words, among all receivable applications for ordination, monasteries select the youngest and more educated novices. As a consequence, female novices entering religious life at a relatively advanced age often find themselves unable, first, to enroll at a Buddhist academy, and then, because of their age and lack of a Buddhist degree, also to receive complete ordination, even though they might still be below the ordination age limit[51].

Therefore, Dajinshan academy's recent raise of the enrollments' scale and age limit to 40 years old seems to aim at granting both more women in general, and elder women in particular, the opportunity of being both trained *and* ordained. It is also a strategy for Dajinshan academy to enroll more students in a logic of competition with other female academies in China.

### *2.2. Students and Teachers*

Students come from the whole country to enroll at Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns: a small group of students I spent an afternoon with in July 2015 came from Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangdong, and the Wutaishan region. Some students enroll because it is here that they were accepted after applying to different academies, some others, such as one student from Guangdong I interviewed in 2015[52], chose this academy because of the specialization of its program and despite the fact that there was a Buddhist academy at the very monastery she came from. Indeed, in order to attract student-monastics and to find its place in a context of national diversification and competition (Ji 2019, p. 185), Dajinshan academy puts forward its "distinguishing Chan feature" (*chanzong tese* 禪宗特色; see next section "Curricula and schedule"). Although overseas students are accepted at the academy, they are especially rare.

The Dajinshan monastery also systematically enrolls young novices at the academy regardless of their educational level[53], a proof that occasionally, still in the twenty-first century, women's education continues in the Buddhist monastery. According to the 2019 academic dean (*jiaowuzhang* 教務長), Buddhist knowledge must be imparted to all novices starting from scratch in any case—this is what the preparatory program is designed for[54]. If novices are under 20, which is below the minimum ordination age, they also take, in addition to the ten precepts of the *śrāmaṇerī* (*shaminijie* 沙彌尼戒), the six additional precepts

of the probationer (*shichanijie* 式叉尼戒) bonding them for about two years. Probationers are especially forbidden to eat (and drink tea) after noon, an interdiction that is strictly implemented at Dajinshan. All the probationers of the monastery are students at the academy, and they represent the majority of the students of the preparatory program.

In effect, the training of the student-nuns at the academy, especially if they start as probationers, allows for a sort of "religious formatting" that is quite convenient for the monastery, and more generally for Han institutional Buddhism. First of all, it is in a religious communal lifestyle considered as "orthodox" by Buddhist and political leaders that student-nuns are trained in the first place. Furthermore, only a Buddhist academy degree grants (monks and) nuns the possibility of holding positions (*zhishi* 執事) at monasteries and Buddhist academies in China, including Dajinshan. Finally, nuns who do not transition as probationers face more difficulty learning and assimilating at once a consequent number of *Vinaya* rules (368 precepts for fully ordained nuns according to the Dharmaguptaka tradition followed in China). For this reason, the academy also organizes a separate two-year *Vinaya* class (*jielüban* 戒律版) reserved for fully ordained resident nuns (up to 50 years old) who are over the age to enroll in the standard programs. The *Vinaya* class includes courses on *Vinaya* as well as on basic Buddhist knowledge[55]. A second alternative educational program for nuns who cannot enroll at the academy consists of evening lectures (*fuhuiban* 福慧班) resembling the traditional expounding of *sutras* (*jiangjing* 講經). Differently from other female institutions such as the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy is not open to laywomen.

At the end of their studies, most graduate student-nuns go back to their temple of origin in order to teach and train the community there—this is indeed the main reason why small convents[56] bear the costs and inconveniencies of sending their young recruits to study and practice at a Buddhist academy. In effect, although the academy is free of charge and living expenses are taken care of, and although student-nuns do receive a regular monthly allowance supplemented by offerings from rituals, the temple of origin as well as their families often have to endorse students' out-of-pocket expenses such as cell phone bills, hygiene products, train/airplane tickets, and so forth.

Other graduated students leave in order to specialize, teach, or hold positions at other academies and temples, including Dajinshan's affiliated temples. A few enter Dajinshan's resident monastic community and may also become teachers at its academy. Almost all of the about twenty teacher-nuns (*fashi* 法師) that the Dajinshan academy counted in 2019 had graduated there. This is because when the academy was first established in 1994, it was especially difficult to find nuns holding a Buddhist degree: current abbess Duncheng did not hold any when she began to teach—she had a university degree, however, and this was a rare privilege for a nun at that time—and, more recently, it is difficult to find teacher-nuns specialized in Chan studies and practice, as not many Buddhist academies besides Dajinshan offer this specialization in the country. This is the reason why, especially at the beginning, graduated students were sometimes persuasively retained in order to become teachers at the academy. One of the teachers recalls with humor how, after her graduation, she wished to go perfect her studies at another academy just as some of her classmates, but found herself in a cumbersome situation when she was entrusted with a teaching position. She decided to go on a pilgrimage to Wutaishan in order to make up her mind, but when she returned, everybody was already addressing her as "teacher" (*fashi*)—the monastery had announced her appointment before she could answer the offer![57]

In the period from 1994 to 2013, the staff of the academy included seventeen teacher-nuns,[58] three laymen, and two laywomen, aged 27 to 93 years old, and native of ten different provinces (including northern provinces such as Inner Mongolia, Jilin, and Heilongjiang); their educational level ranged from senior middle-school to doctorate (*Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan ershi zhounian yuanqing zhuankan* 2014, detailed chart p. 17). This is a very different configuration from the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, which at least until 2011 mainly relied on the abbess Rurui to teach its 500–600 students[59], and from the Sichuan

Buddhist Academy for Nuns, where only half of the about thirty teachers are monastics and the rest of them include many university professors (Yang 2011, pp. 37, 39–40). While Buddhist courses are taught by teacher-nuns, laywomen are occasionally invited to teach secular courses such as classical studies (*guoxue* 國學), Chinese painting (*guohua* 國畫), calligraphy, history and geography, and informatics. I met three of these lay teachers across the years. Among them, in 2015, a retired teacher from Shanghai, who was in charge of a two-week course of history and geography at the academy during the summer retreat (*anju* 安居), was letting two willing student-nuns catch up on their exam (*bukao* 補考) one evening in order to allow them to achieve their degree—the academy's standards and expectations are not exceedingly high. Differently from other nationally renowned institutions such as the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns and the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns (see Yang 2011, pp. 28–30, 35–43), Dajinshan academy only offers one kind of curriculum, and no collaboration with local universities has been established so far. Male teachers represent an exception and rather account as "special guests"; this is the case, for example, of a nationally renowned Buddhist layman who occasionally comes to the academy to teach a one-week class, and of officials of the Religious Affairs Bureau who expressly come to teach courses on politics.

### *2.3. Curricula and Schedule*

Although monastic education is not mandatory in China, and although curricula of Buddhist academies are not nationally unified, they must usually include an established proportion of Buddhist knowledge, general culture, knowledge of politics, and supplementary courses such as music and calligraphy (Ji 2019, p. 190). According to the 2011 call for applications of the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, for example, 60% of the imparted courses dealt with Buddhist knowledge (including doctrines and texts of a large array of Buddhist schools) and 40% with secular knowledge (including Classical Chinese, University Chinese, History of Chinese Philosophy, History of Western Philosophy, Psychology, Politics, English and Informatics; Yang 2011, p. 38).

However, the 2015 and 2018 curricula of the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns included no regular courses of general culture strictly speaking, but only Buddhist courses for an average 18 classes[60] per week, and supplementary courses (calligraphy and Chinese painting) for a steady four classes per week. General culture courses such as Classical Studies (*guoxue*) were usually taught by lay teachers on a short-term basis, especially during the summer retreat when the latter have more spare time. Since the standardization of the study program in 2019, a 2-h general culture course has replaced Chinese painting, while the 2-h calligraphy course was maintained. Political courses—in 2019, "The Marxist Perspective on Religion", "The Sinification of Religion", and "Religious Policy and Regulations"—were and are not delivered on a regular basis at Dajinshan academy either, but only when officials of the Jiangxi Religious Education Service (*Jiangxisheng zongjiao yuanxiao jiaoyu fuwu zhongxin* 江西省宗教院校教育服務中心) are dispatched to the monastery. Therefore, the academy seems far from respecting the provision of 70% religious courses, 20% cultural courses, and 10% political courses established by the "Request for Instructions about Opening Religious School" approved by the central government in 1982 (Ji 2019, p. 191)[61].

This is all the more true if we consider that, differently from most Buddhist academies, the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns' weekly schedule also forecasts an average of 13 h of collective religious practice for each promotion[62] besides the strict observance and practice of monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), and on top of the standard and compulsory two daily liturgies (morning and evening) and formal meals, the bimonthly collective recitation of the precepts, and all other ritual events of the religious calendar. In effect, although the monastery has established a philanthropic association and a retiring house, its academy does not put forward the ideal of "serving society" derived from humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) as other Buddhist academies do (see Yang 2011, pp. 26, 30–31, 38). It does, however, explicitly emphasize the importance attributed to

both study and practice (*xuexiu bingzhong* 學修並重) and is apparently not as concerned with one of the major problems of contemporary Buddhist education, that is, academization (*xueshuhua* 學術化) and the ensuing tension between study and practice[63].

Buddhist courses change every year and are predominantly axed on texts, including Mahāyāna fundamental texts and texts of selected Mahāyāna schools, such as the Yogācāra and Tiantai schools. The academy's special focus, however, is on texts associated with the Chan tradition. In 2019, for example, these included the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* (*Weimojiesuo shuo jing* 維摩詰所經, T. 475), the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Liuzu dashi fabao tanjing 六祖大師法寶壇經, T. 2008), and a course on the annalistic biography of Chan master Xuyun 虛雲 (ca. 1864–1959)[64].

Although this is not explicitly emphasized by the academy, texts associated with monastic discipline occupy an equally important part of the curriculum than Chan texts. In 2019, *Vinaya* courses focused on the *Sutra on the bhikṣuṇī Mahāprajāpatī* (*Da'aidao biqiuni jing*大愛道比丘尼經, T. 1478), the *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* (*Sifen biqiuni jieben* 四分比丘尼戒本, T. 1431), the *Commentary on Karman in the Four-Part Vinaya* (*Sifenlü shanbu suiji jiemoshu* 四分律刪補隨機羯磨疏, X. 727), as well as a course dealing with contemporary Chan monastic regulations ("Guiyue shixian 規約實踐": "Monastic regulations in practice"). *Vinaya* courses dealing with monastic precepts are reserved to fully ordained student-nuns of the more advanced promotions. Buddhist non-strictly textual courses in 2019 included Buddhist history and the study of Buddhist paraphernalia (the list of specific 2019 Buddhist courses for the different promotions are detailed in the footnote)[65].

The general culture course "Modern Chinese History" was taught collectively to all classes, just as the course on Chinese calligraphy. An example of a schedule is provided in the chart below (Chart 1).

| Time \ Day | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8:00—8:45 | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* | *Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition* |
| 9:00—9:45 | *Vimalakīrti Sutra* | *Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings* | *The Platform sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* | Calligraphy | Modern Chinese History | Self-study |
| 10:00—10:45 | *Vimalakīrti Sutra* | *Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings* | *The Platform sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* | Calligraphy | Modern Chinese History | Self-study |
| 14:00--14:45 | *The Platform sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* | Collective work | *Vimalakīrti Sutra* | Collective reading of *sutras* | *Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings* | Collective chanting of *sūtras* |
| 15:00--15:45 | *The Platform sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* | Collective work | *Vimalakīrti Sutra* | Collective reading of *sūtras* | *Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings* | Collective chanting of *sūtras* |
| 19:00--19:55 | Self-study | Self-study | Self-study | Self-study | Self-study | Self-study |
| 20:00--21:00 | Meditation | Meditation | Meditation | Meditation | Meditation | Meditation |

**Chart 1.** Schedule for the third-year class of the bachelor degree program (2019).

Collective religious practice for student-nuns of the academy also reflects the "distinguishing Chan feature" put forward by the academy in order to attract student-monastics and find its place in a context of national diversification and competition. Collective religious practice includes, besides 2 h of reading (*dujing* 讀經) and 2 h of chanting (*songjing* 誦經) of *sutras* per week, two training methods specific to the Chan tradition: collective meditation alternating quiet sitting and walking meditation (*paoxiang* 跑香, 6 h per week), and practical, collective work (*chupo* 出坡, 2 h per week), conceived as religious practice amidst movement and everyday activities. This is a peculiar feature of Dajinshan academy as compared to other female academies in China.

Turns of duty for collective work are organized according to the different promotions and include, on a daily basis, working in the kitchen (especially cleaning and cutting vegetables, cooking regular dishes such as steamed bread at breakfast, and hand-washing dishes at the end of the meals including the evening informal meal reserved to laypeople and sick or elder nuns), serving in the refectory, gardening, and cleaning the classrooms. In large public monasteries, these kinds of chores are usually accomplished by laypeople; however, Dajinshan only employs three laypeople for a community of more than 200 nuns. Additional occasional tasks add up: for example, on the occasion of the Tomb Sweeping day (*Qingmingjie* 清明節), student-nuns go patrolling the mountain (*xunshan* 巡山) where the monastery's stupas are located in order to keep visitors' firecrackers from setting the vegetation on fire.

On Saturday afternoon, classes and collective work are replaced by the collective chanting of *sutras* (*songjing* 誦經), as student-nuns of all promotions join the rest of the community in the chanting of the *Sutra of the Fundamental Vows of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha* (*Dizang pusa benyuanjing* 地藏菩薩本願經, T. 412), the Bodhisattva of the underworld. This collective ritual activity represents a source of income for the monastery, since laypeople usually make offerings for the transfer of merit to the deceased. Student-nuns only have classes in the morning also during the summer retreat, when the afternoon is devoted to collective chanting of *sutras* followed by the evening meditation.

The student-nuns of the academy are also on the front line, in terms of both organization and participation, of the numerous events of the annual religious calendar, including, for example, the intensive seven-week winter meditation retreat, the seven-day water-and-land ritual (*shuilu fahui* 水陸法會)[66], and before 2018, the summer camps for laypeople (*xialingying* 夏令營), of which final-year student-nuns were in charge.

It therefore appears that student-nuns at the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns have a very busy schedule. They wake up at 3:30 a.m., the morning liturgy begins at 4:30 a.m., and the first formal meal of the day (breakfast) is at 6 a.m. Morning classes, from 8 a.m. to 10:45 a.m., are followed by the second and last formal meal of the day (lunch) at 11 a.m. After a resting time from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m., afternoon classes are scheduled between 2 and 3:45 p.m., the evening liturgy is at 5 p.m., and in the evening, they accomplish one hour of collective meditation and one hour of individual study before going to bed at 9:45 p.m. No wonder a few of them doze off during the liturgy and the evening meditation!

Student-nuns are also granted some rest, however. There are no classes on Sunday; therefore, after the end of the liturgy and the lunch, the students who are not in charge of the kitchen and refectory can take some free time, and occasionally, the oldest go out to Fuzhou or even Nanchang. Students are also granted two leaves every year: a longer leave in winter after the meditation retreat (at the time of the New Year) and a shorter leave in summer after the summer retreat, for a total of 40 days. They can use this time to return to their temple of origin or, if their tonsure master agrees[67], visit their families or visit other monasteries and sacred sites (*canxue* 參學).

As is the case for all nuns of Dajinshan, the parents and relatives of the student-nuns can find them and stay at the monastery as long as they wish, provided that they get used to the monastery's lifestyle. The atmosphere at the academy is solemn and benevolent at the same time. Students are allowed to use their cell phones only on the weekend, the penalty for violating this rule being the withdrawal of the already maigre monthly allowance—a penalty that works very well, according to the students.

## 3. Concluding Remarks

The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns presents major distinctive features if compared to other large female institutions such as the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns and the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns. A large-scale female academy, it offers relatively spartan facilities and only one regular curriculum that does not include classes for laywomen, nor advanced university-level studies for monastics. Unlike the two

above-mentioned top-ranking institutions, the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns is also not funded by the government, and, maybe because of its non-leading status and relatively off the beaten track position, seems to enjoy more autonomy in the choice of its curricula, including a minor proportion of secular courses and courses on politics. Especially axed on Buddhist courses (mainly *Vinaya* and Chan texts) and practice (Chan collective practice consisting in meditation and chores), the academy relies on graduated nuns for teaching, and it does not train its student-nuns in secular hot topics such as management, foreign languages, physical education, international etiquette, and so forth.

The case study of Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns shows that today in China, observable gender asymmetry can be associated with different causes. The fact that there are fewer nuns, fewer academies for nuns, and fewer teacher-nuns can be especially attributed to the state policy of family planning and the single-child policy, the long-term effects of which are, and will be, observable even after their recent abrogation. Society also exerts on women a higher moral pressure to marry and bear a child, and to take care of their aging parents. Different conditions, such as lower age limits in a context of fewer feminine academies, make it more difficult for women to enroll at Buddhist academies, a disadvantage that seems to be imputable to Buddhist national institutions and that Dajinshan academy has addressed by increasing the age limit for enrolling. A token of the fundamental patriarchal nature of the Chinese Buddhist system, the now-retired abbess Yinkong was denied the final consecration for her monastery: according to a former local political representative[68], after local political authorities had already given their approval, the Buddhist Association took position against her intronization as superior abbot (*fangzhang* 方丈), and the abbot's quarters that already were under construction have remained unused to this day. This situation is very different from the Taoist tradition, where two of the five current Daoist superior abbots (*fangzhang*) are women (Wang 2020, p. 186).

The case of Dajinshan academy also shows that even nominally independent female institutions still depend in many ways on the male *sangha*. For example, Yinkong's master Benhuan helped to obtain political authorizations and financial funds for the academy, and his presence (as well as Yicheng's) at the inaugurating ceremony was considered necessary to legitimize the academy—a female Buddhist master legitimizing a male institution would not be possible due to the eight *gurudharma* rules sanctioning the subordination of the female order to the male one. In the first decade of the academy's activity, when it was particularly difficult to find educated nuns, Benhuan also sent his own lay female disciples to the monastery and academy: current abbess Duncheng, who received tonsure from Yinkong, is one of them. It should be noted that Benhuan always sustained Yinkong's initiatives and actions for the advancement of women.

Notwithstanding the Chan specialization of the Dajinshan academy, the insistence on the study of *Vinaya*, the reintroduction of the probationer stage, and its general austerity and discipline (for example, there are no facilities for sport because it would not be considered decent)[69] show that nuns themselves especially promote orthodoxy based on *Vinaya* as a source of legitimation, because they strive to find their place in a patriarchal Buddhist system (see Bianchi 2022). This does not only concern Dajinshan—other notable examples are Pushou monastery at Wutaishan, the largest female monastery in China, of which the academy is specialized on *Vinaya* studies, and the Fujian Buddhist Academy, where two *Vinaya* programs are preconized only for the women section[70]. These considerations especially concern female academies and curricula as considered in comparison with their male counterparts. More generally, the rigor of the rules is an important factor attracting people to religious life, and monasteries where *Vinaya* is strictly implemented are popular in both China and Taiwan.

However, in contemporary China, as it was already the case during the Republican period (Yuan 2009), independent, women-only institutions such as the Wutaishan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns, and the Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns show that women in general, and female Buddhist monastics

in particular, are not only subordinates to male undertakings but actively display their own agency. In effect, Buddhist education is explicitly conceived at Dajinshan as one of the different resources for fostering the status of nuns. The Jiangxi Dajinshan Buddhist Academy for Nuns aims at providing female monastics with equal opportunities in terms of education, religious practice, and ordination, three aspects that, at the monastery, are interlinked. More pragmatically, alongside the conferral of tonsures[71] and of ordinations, the Buddhist academy also represents for the monastery a device to attract and keep new, young candidates at a time when religious vocations are dropping and the age of monastics is being pushed forward. Finally, it is less easy for female monasteries to find financial funds, and the family network that every student-nun brings to the monastery generates wealth through offerings for rituals and donations, the main source of income for both the monastery and the academy.

To conclude, and somehow unsurprisingly, together with ordination, Buddhist education is one of the main arenas for nuns to obtain recognition in China today—all the more if duly institutionalized.

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### Abbreviations

T = Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大蔵經, Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 (eds), Tokyo, Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

X = Manji Shinsan Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō 卍新纂大日本續藏經, Tokyo, Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989.

## Notes

1 The five officially recognized religions are Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam.

2 See the document "China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief" released by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China in April 2018: http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/ Document/1626734/1626734.htm (accessed 30 January 2019).

3 In the year 2000.

4 This estimate includes monks (*bhikṣus*), nuns (*bhikṣuṇīs*), probationers (*śikṣamāṇās*), and novice monks (*śrāmaṇeras*) and nuns (*śrāmaṇerīs*).

5 For a critical evaluation of concepts and literature on Buddhist education in twentieth-century China, see (Travagnin 2017).

6 According to (Long 2002, p. 188), the first seminary for monastics was established as early as 1903 by monk Liyun at the Kaifu Monastery in Hunan province. The first seminary to be styled *foxueyuan*, however, was the famous Wuchang Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Wuchang foxueyuan* 武昌佛學院) established by Taixu in 1922; on this academy, see (Lai 2017).

7 The list of Buddhist seminaries operating in China between 1912 and 1950 provided by (Holmes Welch 1968, appendix 2, pp. 285–87) does not distinguish seminaries for nuns. On Buddhist education in Republican China, see (Lai 2013).

8 This information is provided by Li Ming in his 2009 MA thesis on *sangha* education during the Republican period ("Minguo shiqi seng jiaoyu yanjiu 民國時期僧教育研究", cited by (Gildow 2016, pp. 32–33)).

9 After closing and reopening, the Wuchang Female Institute of Buddhist Studies became the World Female Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Shijie foxueyuan nüzhongyuan* 世界佛學苑女眾院) in 1931: see (He 1999).

10 The Buddhist Academy of China was run and funded by the State: (Ji 2019, pp. 175–76).

11 According to (Gildow 2016, pp. 42–43), student-monks (*xueseng* 學僧) represented about 3% of China's Han Buddhist monastic population in 2016, which means there are "at least fifteen times more seminarians than during the peak of seminaries during the Republic".

12 According to Gildow's informants, female "branch" seminaries, as other branch seminaries, are mostly or entirely independent from their male counterpart (Gildow 2016, pp. 204–5).

13 The Minnan Buddhist Academy, first established in 1925, was reorganized by Taixu in 1927; it ran until 1939, before closing due to the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

14 I visited this academy in July 2017.

15 On this academy, see (Bianchi 2001, pp. 103–19; Long 2002; Yang 2011, especially pp. 32–49).

16 On this academy, see (Yang 2011, especially pp. 23–31, 39–49). On Pushou monastery, see (Péronnet 2021, 2022).

17 The importance of considering the pedagogical agendas of Buddhist educational enterprises was highlighted by Thomas Borchert in his study of Theravada monastic education in China ("Training Monks or Men: Theravāda Monastic Education, Subnationalism, and the National Sangha of China," Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 28, no. 2, 2005: 241–72; cited in (Lai 2013, p. 171)).

18 For an interesting comparison with a female Daoist academy in contemporary China (the Kundao Academy 坤道學院 at Nanyue Mountain, in Henan province), see (Wang 2020).

19 I wish to express my deepest gratitude to retired abbess Yinkong, current abbess Duncheng, and Dajinshan's whole monastic community for their openness and patience during all these years.

20 All names have been anonymized in this paper, except for those of the retired and current abbesses.

21 Monasteries are considered "large" in China if their community counts at least one hundred monastics. "Public" means that the monastery welcomes itinerant and permanent monastics coming from the whole country (in other words, the residence is not restricted to the abbot's disciples). Moreover, properties of public monasteries belong to the whole Buddhist community (and not to the abbot), and in theory, their abbot is publicly elected (although this is not the case in the majority of public monasteries today, where the abbotship is passed down to the disciples of the retiring abbot).

22 Yinkong was ordained by the Buddhist Chan leader Xuyun 虛雲 (ca. 1864–1959) in 1955 and received Dharma transmission in Xuyun's Linji lineage from monk Benhuan 本煥 (1907–2012) in 1987. On Yinkong and for a bibliography, see (Campo and Despeux forthcoming).

23 Interview with Yinkong conducted in October 2013.

24 Idem.

25 On Yinkong's and Benhuan's Dharma lineage, and on the way this particular form of religious kinship has connected the monastic leaders of the first half of the twentieth century to the senior generation of monks and nuns who first engaged in the Buddhist reconstruction of post-Mao China, see (Campo 2019).

26 In 2016, the Caodong Buddhist Academy (*Caodong foxueyuan* 曹洞佛學院) was established at Baoji Monastery 宝积寺 in Caoshan (Yihuang 宜黃 district of Fuzhou city). See its website http://csbjs.99.com/college (accessed on 11 October 2022).

27 From 1985 to 2005.

28 Fu Hui means "Good Fortune and Windom". See their website http://www.fuhui.org/llearn_e/llearn.htm (accessed on 11 October 2022); see also (Laliberté 2022, p. 171).

29 Years of enrollment are 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2013. After that, the academy enrolled in 2017, 2020, and 2022.

30 Counting from a minimum of 10 student-nuns to a maximum of 50.

31 More precisely, 268 student-nuns in the elementary program, 320 in the beginner program, and 159 in the intermediate program, that is, an average of 90 student-nuns graduating every three years in each of the three programs.

32 There were 99 student-nuns at the academy when I visited in 2015.

33 For the sake of comparison, the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns counted about 60 students in 2011: (Yang 2011, p. 40).

34 The Buddhist Academy for nuns of Pushou monastery at Wutaishan, which is the largest in the country, counted between 500 and 600 student-nuns in 2011, while the Sichuan Buddhist Academy for Nuns counted about 60 student-nuns (Yang 2011, pp. 23, 40).

35 See https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/130930.shtml (accessed on 11 October 2022). The 2020 call for applications (https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/125703.shtml, accessed on 11 October 2022) also included "to have decided on one's own free will and with the consent of one's teachers and seniors".

36 In the 2020 call for applications, this sentence reads "strictly uphold monastic discipline and be familiar with the devotions of the five halls" (*wutang gongke* 五堂功課), that is, the two daily liturgies and formal meals plus one meditation session (https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/125703.shtml, accessed on 11 October 2022).

37 Depressive disorders were not mentioned in the 2020 call for applications.

38 See https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/130930.shtml (accessed on 11 October 2022).

39 The reason for this new requirement is unknown to me. It could be linked to the large genetic database that China is apparently building.

40 Including a green health code and a green State Department Epidemic Prevention and Control Trip Card, the obligation of not having traveled in high-risk areas in the past 14 days, and so forth.

41 See https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/130930.shtml (accessed on 11 October 2022).

42 When I visited in 2015, the oldest nun of the academy was aged 44 (she was born in 1971). The age limit for enrollment was of 30 years old when the academy was first established.

43 If we take as reference the average age limit of 28 years old provided by (Ji 2019, p. 190) for the period 1994–2013 and we compare it to age limits for the bachelor degree program of a few 2022 calls for applications, the required age limit was, for example, 30 years at the Buddhist Academy of China, the most selective in the country, 35 years at the male section of the Minnan Buddhist Academy, and 40 years at the male section of the Fujian Buddhist Academy (*Fujian foxueyuan* 福建佛學院).

44 In 2022 calls for applications, the required age limit was 36 years at the Guangdong Buddhist Academy for Nuns, 38 years at the Jiangsu Buddhist Academy for Nuns (*Jiangsu nizhong foxueyuan* 江蘇尼眾佛學院) and Sichuan Academy for Nuns (*bhikṣunī*s and *śrāmaṇerikā*s), 32 years at the female section of the Putuo Academy for nuns (*Zhongguo foxueyuan Putuoshan xueyuan* 中國佛學院普陀山學院), and 35 years at the female section of the Minnan Buddhist Academy (*Minnan foxueyuan* 閩南佛學院). For a few examples of age limits in 2022 calls for applications of male academies, see note 43.

45 See "Abolishing the One-Child Policy: Stages, Issues and the Political Process" on this (Scharping 2019).

46 We can consider, for example, that a single child born in 1979 turned 43 in 2022.

47 See, for example, the 2022 call for applications of the Fujian Buddhist Academy at https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/130925.shtml (accessed on 11 October 2022).

48 At the Fujian Buddhist Academy, the curriculum for the male section preconizes one year of preparatory program (*yukeban*), two years of specialized secondary program (*zhongzhuanban* 中專班), four years of a bachelor degree program (*benkeban*), and three years of a master degree program (*yanjiuban*). The curriculum for the female section preconizes *two* years of preparatory program, two years of specialized secondary program, four years of a bachelor degree program, two years of a higher *Vinaya* program (*lüxue dazhuanban* 律學大專班), and three years of a *Vinaya* master degree program (*lüxue yanjiusheng ban* 律學研究生班). See https://www.pusa123.com/pusa/news/hdyugao/130925.shtml (accessed on 11 October 2022).

49 Chinese Buddhists do not calculate this duration according to the number of full years, but according to the number of summer retreats one has passed as a novice.

50 The probationer (*shichani* 式叉尼) is an intermediate step between women's novitiate and ordination, which is mentioned in *Vinaya* texts and nowadays making a comeback in Chinese monasteries. See on this (Heirman 2008; Chiu and Heirman 2014; Bianchi 2022).

51 For example, although the age limit for ordination is 59 years, a novice already aged 55, and who was unable to enroll at a Buddhist academy because she entered religion at 36 or 37, will find it difficult to be selected for ordination unless applications received by one of the ordaining monasteries do not exceed the quota allowed.

52 Interview conducted in July 2015.

53 That is, even if they do not possess the minimum junior high-school degree required for the preparatory program, but only an elementary school degree.

54 Interview conducted in March 2019.

55 In 2019, Buddhist courses for the Vinaya class included Shengyan's *Compendium of Vinaya Studies* (*Jielüxue gangyao* 戒律學綱要), *The Commentary on Karman in the Four-Part Vinaya* (*Sifenlü shanbu suiji jiemoshu* 四分律刪補隨機羯磨疏, X. 727), *The Sutra in 42 sections* (*Sishier zhang jing* 四十二章經, T. 784), and a course on the Bodhisattva precepts.

56 That is, counting a dozen resident nuns.

57 Interview conducted in March 2019.

58 The teacher-nuns were almost all graduates of the Dajinshan academy and had received tonsure at Jinshan monastery.

59 Only assisted by two or three teacher-monks and teacher-nuns, at least until 2011: (Yang 2011, pp. 27–28, 39–40).

60 The duration of each class is 45 min.

61 According to the academic dean in 2019, the volume of political courses would have surely increased in the following years (interview conducted in March 2019), but the COVID-19 pandemic apparently contributed to slowing down this development.

62 Making up for an overall agenda of 42 h per week, six days a week from Monday to Saturday. In 2019, student-nuns had three 45-min classes from 8:00 to 10:45 a.m., then two more from 2:00 to 3:45 p.m., plus self-study (*zixi* 自習) and meditation in the evening from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.

63 On this tension, see (Gildow 2016, pp. 89–116; Ji 2019, pp. 195–99).

64 On Xuyun and his annalistic biography, see (Campo 2016). Not only Yinkong's master Benhuan was a disciple of eminent Chan master and Buddhist leader Xuyun, but Yinkong was herself ordained by Xuyun in 1955.

65 Buddhist courses for the preparatory program: *The Sutra in 42 sections* (*Sishier zhang jing* 四十二章經, T. 784), *A Collection of Retribution Stories of the Buddhist Saints* (*Fojiao shengzhong yinyuan ji* 佛教聖眾因緣集), *The Sutra on the bhikṣuṇī Mahāprajāpatī*, and "Study of Buddhist paraphernalia". Buddhist courses for the bachelor degree program, first-year: "History of Buddhism", "Fundamentals of Buddhism", "The annalistic biography of Chan Master Xuyun", *The Lucid Introduction to the One Hundred Dharmas* (*Dasheng baifa mingmenlun* 大乘百法明門論, T. 1614). Buddhist courses for the bachelor degree program, third-year: *The Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition*, *The Vimalakīrti Sutra*, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, and *The Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings* (*Tiantai sijiaoyi* 天台四教儀, T. 1931). Buddhist courses for the master degree program, first year: *The Bhikṣuṇī Precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Tradition*, the *Commentary on Karman in the Four-Part Vinaya*, and "Monastic regulations in practice".

66 On this ritual, see (Stevenson 2001).

67 If, at the academy, student-nuns obey Dajinshan hierarchy, during vacations, they are still under the authority of their tonsure master.

68 Interview conducted in March 2019.

69 On sport activities in Buddhist nunneries, see (Chiu forthcoming; Heirman forthcoming).

70 See also the example of Beijing Tongjiao nunnery 通教寺 restored in 1941 as a renowned and active *Vinaya* nunnery (DeVido 2015, p. 81; cited in (Bianchi 2022)).

71 Although the conferral of tonsure in public monasteries was strictly regulated (and often prohibited) by imperial and Republican Chinese monastic codes, it was and is generally practiced all over China. For this reason, tonsures are only conferred at the smaller Jinshan monastery on top of the hill, while ordinations are conferred at the larger Dajinshan monastery.

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# A Revolution in Red Robes: Tibetan Nuns Obtaining the Doctoral Degree in Buddhist Studies (*Geshema*)

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**Abstract:** In the past, Tibetan nuns had no access to formal monastic education and thus could not obtain the two main diplomas and titles that are common in Tibetan Buddhism: the *khenpo* (*mkhan po*) degree in the more practice-oriented Nyingmapa school and the *geshe* (*dge bshes*) degree in the scholastic curriculum of the Gelukpa school; this essay traces the introduction of the Gelukpa study program in different nunneries based in India and Nepal in recent times; it addresses the question of gender asymmetry by showing the different hurdles that had to be overcome and the solutions, which have been found to allow nuns to become *geshema*s—the female form of *geshe*. Finally, I propose the first glimpse into the impact that the opening of higher Buddhist education to nuns has had and what this means for the future of the position of women in the religious sphere, as well as for Tibetan monasticism more generally.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Buddhist nuns; Tibetan female monasticism; Tibetan Buddhism; monastic education; *geshe* degree; gender asymmetry

> "It is all mainly because of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's vision and his true care and kindness for his womenfolk".
>
> (Rinchen Khandro Choegyal 2016)

## 1. Introduction

In the past, nuns from Tibet had only very few options to obtain training in Buddhist practice and knowledge. In most of the nunneries, they simply learnt how to read the scriptures, which they then had to memorise in order to participate in communal prayers and rituals. Few were also encouraged to go into retreat for meditation, which could last several years; however, higher Buddhist studies, such as philosophy and debate practice, were only taught in a handful of monastic universities belonging to the Gelukpa (dGe lugs pa) school, one of the four main schools of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition,[1] were reserved for monks. Equivalent institutions for nuns did not exist. And even if there were some exceptions, as for example, religious encampments—called *chögar* (*chos sgar*)—where nuns lived and studied alongside monks, these were mainly temporary in nature and mostly located in Eastern Tibet.[2]

In many Tibetan areas, becoming a nun by choice or sending a daughter to the convent was not something as systematic as it was for monks. Therefore, the number of nuns and their institutions in Tibet was—and still is—much smaller than that of monks. There were approximately 5400 monasteries with a little over 500,000 monks before the occupation of Tibet by China in 1951 compared to an estimated number of ca. 27,000 nuns and 700 convents.[3] In terms of proportion of the Tibetan population, it is estimated that between 10 and 12% of the male population became monks[4] and roughly 1% of the female population became nuns. Furthermore, there was an unknown number of nuns who stayed with their families—probably more than monks given the fact that in many regions there were no nunneries at all.[5] Even though the number of female monastics appears small at first look, in comparison with other Buddhist countries, as well as compared with Catholic nuns in France, Tibet was home to one of the largest female monastic communities in the world.[6]

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Since the religious revival in the mid-1980s, following the annexation of Tibet by China (in 1951), the flight of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetans' revered spiritual leader (in 1959), and the religious repression during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), education for nuns has markedly improved. Most nunneries in Tibet and in exile (mainly India and Nepal) have introduced study programs that go largely beyond reading and memorising, and several have adopted Buddhist curriculums that were traditionally taught in monastic universities. Not only that, some nuns have by now completed the entire Buddhist monastic course, thereby earning the highest diplomas and titles, which can be considered equivalent to 'doctoral' certifications in Buddhist philosophy or theology. There are now nuns who carry the title of *khenmo* (*mkhan mo*)[7]—the female form of *khenpo* meaning "professor", "scholar-abbot" or "preceptor"—in the Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) school and the one of *geshema* (*dge bshes ma*)—the female form of *geshe* which translates literally "spiritual friend" (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*) and refers to a "Doctor of traditional Buddhist philosophy." Whereas the former is bestowed after the completion of a course of approximately nine to twelve years, the latter needs a much longer period, twenty years and more; it is the Gelukpa degree and title that will be the main focus of this article.

The path to comparable education with monks was not without its pitfalls for nuns. Their generally accepted low status, the destructions of many if not most nunneries, and the financial burden of reconstruction and the founding of new institutions had to be shouldered before even thinking of how to introduce educational facilities.[8] Last, but not least, nuns faced challenges over hiring appropriate teachers, given the fact that there were none among their own communities and the general shortage of masters after a long period of religious repression. In addition, most monks would rather prefer to teach and stay in their monasteries, given their vow of celibacy.

The following article proposes to look at gender asymmetry in Tibetan monasticism with regard to education; it will trace the long journey that Tibetan nuns had to undertake before being able to take the examination for the highest degree of *geshema*. In doing so, it will shed light on the arduous negotiations that have taken place between the different stakeholders; moreover, it will draw on the sociological profiles of those nuns who have completed their studies, as they come from different countries and regions of the Himalayas that make up the Tibetan cultural area. The aim is to give a first glimpse of the impact that this opening up of Buddhist higher education for women may have on the future of Tibetan monasticism and, more generally, on the position of women in the religious sphere.[9]

## 2. Monastic Education in the Past

If most Tibetan monasteries offered at least a basic education to their novice monks, only a handful of them were specialised in providing higher philosophical studies and the prestigious degrees of either *khenpo* (Skt. *upādhyāya*) or *geshe* (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*). As for the latter, from the Gelukpa school, these were the "three great seats" (*gdan sa gsum*) near Lhasa—the monasteries of Drepung ('Bras spungs), Sera (Se ra) and Ganden (dGa' ldan)—, as well as Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po) in Shigatse and the monasteries of Kumbum (sKu 'bum) and Labrang (bLa brang) in northeastern Tibet, Amdo. Each of them housed several thousand monks, and were accordingly organised into semi-autonomous units called *dratsang* (*grwa tshang*) (Goldstein 2009, pp. 416–17). *Dratsang* can be translated as "college" as their structure resembled that of classic British universities like Oxford (Goldstein 1999, p. 20); hence also my term of "monastic university."[10] Drepung monastery, for example, had four of these "colleges," and Sera three. Not all the monks studying in one of these *dratsang*s were permanent members of the community; some joined from elsewhere, branch monasteries or different institutions, and some even from other Buddhist schools, in order to complete their higher education. Each college was independent from the main monastery, having its own financial resources, officials, teaching program, monks and its own abbot; however, there were times when the monks from different "philosophical colleges" (*mtshan nyid grwa tshang*), and also from various monasteries, came together in order to train and even compete in debate (*rtsod pa*), the main component of the Gelukpa curriculum.

Tibetan monastic education has been compared to Western scholasticism as it is likewise a method of critical thought with its emphasis on interpreting great texts in a coherent system of logic and argumentation.[11] It has its origins in Indian Buddhist monasticism, and particularly the Nālandā tradition, and dates back to the later diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (*phyi dar*), that is, after the tenth century when a renaissance started. At that time, new texts exposing the Mahāyāna tenets were brought from India, translated into Tibetan language and in many cases supplemented with commentaries by Tibetan masters. Over the following centuries, different schools were founded, and of these the Gelukpa was the latest to come to existence, in the early fifteenth century.[12] From the seventeenth century on, and with the aid of Mongol armies, it also became the dominant school in the country, with the Fifth Dalai Lama at its head, followed by successive incarnations.

The method of learning in the Gelukpa school consisted—and still consists—of three main components: memorisation, study, and debate. Students had first to memorise a given text, before getting the necessary explanation from their teacher; they then analysed and discussed the content during debate sessions, which usually took place in the afternoon and sometimes even until late at night. The duration of this curriculum was long, between twenty and twenty-five years and at the end, the candidate could take the examination in order to become a *geshe*, "Doctor of traditional Buddhist philosophy" or "Doctor of theology." However, not many Gelukpa monks completed their studies in the past, not only because it needed perseverance, but also because they had to sustain themselves during all these years, which was difficult for those who had no financial support from their families or sponsors.

As said before, there were no similar monastic universities for nuns in the past. And even in those few institutions where they had access to higher studies, as in the Dragkar Lama's religious encampments, debate practice was not part of their curriculum, contrary to the case of monks. However, we know also that in the mid-11th century, when there were six great monastic centers,[13] nuns and monks used to study together (Josayma 2017, p. 137). According to oral history, the latter were not as good in debating and often failed during competitions. It is said that Chapa Chökyi Senge (Phywa pa chos kyi seng+ge, 1109–1169), one of the earlier philosophers who had an influence on the development of logic in Tibet, thought that the whole situation of monks and nuns studying together was wrong and separated the two communities, thereby improving monastic rules, while cutting nuns off from the learning system (Ra se dkon mchog rgya 'tsho 2003, p. 82). Nevertheless, according to the Tibetan scholar Professor Thubten Phuntsok, from the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, nothing can be found in Chapa Chökyi Senge's collected writings or elsewhere to support this thesis. He thinks moreover that nuns were banned from debate later in history and that the prohibition was probably the work of the Kadampa or Gelukpa school.[14] Be that as it may, the result was that even when nuns had access to higher education, they were barred from an important part of the Gelukpa curriculum.[15]

A lot of changes have taken place in the last fifty years, not only for nuns, but also for monks, who face now fewer hurdles to finance their studies, at least in the Tibetan exile communities in India and Nepal. Monastic education such as we have seen has been developed in many other monasteries and even by Buddhist schools like the Nyingma-pas and Kagyupas that used to have their own scholastic traditions and were, generally speaking, more focused on the practice of meditation; moreover, since a decade or so, this type of traditional education has been introduced to some Tibetan schools for children. Monastic education has thus experienced a very strong institutionalisation in exile, among others thanks to the Dalai Lama, who regularly urges his compatriots in his speeches to deepen their knowledge of Buddhism through study, instead of simply reciting prayers or performing rituals. In particular with regards to nuns, he has actively pushed to improve their educational level in contrast to their lower ordination status, which, as he says, cannot be solved by himself alone, but needs a larger consensus.[16]

I will now take a closer look at how nuns' education has come into focus since the late 1980s. In order to do so, I will draw on the example of Dolma Ling nunnery (sGrol ma gling), the first institute of higher Buddhist studies (*rigs lam slob gnyer khang*) for women; it is located near Dharamsala, a town in Northwestern India, which is also the seat of the Dalai Lama and of the Central Tibetan administration in exile. Most of the data come from my ethnographic work, which I started in 1996 and which I continued during my Ph.D. in the 2000s and later on in 2016–2017 when the first nuns passed their *geshe* degree examination.

## 3. Opening Up Education for Nuns

When Dolma Ling was founded by the Tibetan Nuns Project (*Bod kyi btsun ma'i las 'char*) in the beginning of the 1990s, only a handful of nunneries existed in the Tibetan exile community. Most of them were overcrowded and could not accommodate the many new nuns who had come from Tibet since the end of the 1980s; these were either fleeing the religious repression that had followed the demonstrations in Lhasa or had come from the far eastern part of Tibet in order to get an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Most expressed the wish to stay in exile and to study Buddhist philosophy, which they had not had the opportunity to do in Tibet. Thus, Ms Rinchen Khandro Choegyal, the then president of the Tibetan Women's Association, decided to found the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) as its branch in order to look after the nuns in particular.[17] With the help of the nun Lobsang Dechen and an American Buddhologist, Elizabeth Napper, support was secured from the Department of religion and culture, foreign sponsors, and the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the latter being especially encouraging. The aim was not only to improve the nuns' living conditions but also to develop monastic education for women. "I thought that the nuns need a purpose in life, and it is possible to give them one. Most of them want to study, to know more things, so the key is education," as Ms Rinchen Khandro expressed in an interview in 2001. At approximately the same time, Sakyadhītā ("Daughters of the Buddha"), an international association for Buddhist women, stated a similar goal during its first conference and founding occasion in Bodhgaya, in 1987; His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as the nun Lobsang Dechen having been present.[18]

A first group of about 100 nuns moved to Dolma Ling in 1994, which was still under construction then. During the next years, nuns would study in the morning and early afternoon and participate in the construction work afterwards (Figure 1). Most of them were from Tibet, but some also came from the Indian Himalayas, mainly Ladakh and Spiti, respectively regions with only a few and no nunneries at this time. In the following years, their number expanded dramatically, to a little more than 200 at the beginning of 2000; it has been stable since then, with a proportion of approximately 75% of nuns from Tibet and 25% from India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Some nuns and laywomen from Western and other Asian countries have also joined Dolma Ling to study but usually they stay only for a short time. Since the Tibetan uprising in 2008 and the subsequent closure of the borders between China and India, only very few Tibetans have been able to come to exile and this is also the case for nuns, leaving more places in the convent to those from Himalayan areas. Meanwhile, many have also left the institution since completing their studies, making it possible to recruit around twenty new nuns every year.

**Figure 1.** Nuns from Dolma Ling participated in the construction of their nunnery (1996).

In the beginning, Dolma Ling was envisioned as an eclectic or non-sectarian nunnery and Institute of Buddhist studies.[19] However, the curriculum that was finally implemented is clearly the one from the Gelukpa school, although supplemented by teachings from the three other schools; it follows the model of the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics (*mTshan nyid grwa tshang*), a new monastic centre of learning, which has implemented the traditional education of the "three great seats" while also being innovative in training their monks in order to allow them to adapt to life in modern society.[20]

Because in the early days, most nuns in Dolma Ling were not literate when they arrived, the institute set itself the goal of providing them not only with traditional monastic education, but also with basic secular education.[21] Thus, the curriculum is divided into two parts: (1) secular subjects such as Tibetan language, Tibetan history, social sciences, mathematics and, recently, physical sciences[22] and (2) monastic education. Most courses take place in classrooms, much as in a school, except for the practice of debate, which takes place in the open air. I will come back to this later. After about ten years, the nuns receive a first diploma, called Prajñāpāramitā Buddhist Philosophy (*phar phyin*), which is equivalent to a BA and allows the students who so desire to continue their studies in other Tibetan institutions of higher education order to become, for example, teachers of Tibetan language, English or social sciences. Many nuns excel in the Tibetan language and have found jobs in schools and nunneries alike. Others have decided to work in administration or communication.[23]

At the heart of monastic education is the curriculum of the Gelukpa Buddhist school that leads to the degree and title of *geshe* or "Doctor of traditional Buddhist philosophy." It is based on a set of texts—from the so-called "Five great texts" (*gzhung chen bka' pod lnga*)—gathered in a textbook or written charter (*yig cha*) and organised in a number of topics; these include metaphysics, logic, monastic rules, and, most importantly, philosophy according to the *Mādhyamika* or "Middle Path" system, which goes back to the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna; it is a system of epistemological argumentation. As we have seen, the Gelukpa curriculum has three complementary components—memorisation, study, and debate. In Dolma Ling, it is practised as follows. In the morning, the nuns have Buddhist philosophy classes (among others) during which they read a given text with the teacher who then explains the meaning of the content orally. Most religious texts are written in the so-called "religious language" (*chos skad*) that is difficult to understand even for literate

Tibetans without appropriate formal training. The aim is to train students in Buddhist logic and analytical reasoning by showing them specific examples during these lessons. The same text will then be learnt by heart before being discussed again in class. The memorisation of the key texts is an important part of the study and students must learn thousands of pages before they can excel in debate.[24]

Then, in the afternoon, the actual debate or dialectical session takes place in the debate court (*chos ra*); it relates to the subjects and questions already discussed in class. After a short prayer to Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva associated with wisdom, students form groups of two or three people, and even up to ten or more for beginners; they then distribute the roles: the *defender*(s) (*dam bca' ba*), facing one or more standing *questioner*s (*rigs lam pa*); it is up to the defender, who then takes her seat, to launch the debate by presenting a thesis, which, by definition, must be accurate, that is, corresponds to the Buddhist world view. Her role is to defend it, whatever the cost; this is followed by a preparatory phase, during which the two parties determine the starting point and the terms of the debate. Once the agreement has been reached, the main part of the debate can begin; it is now up to the questioner(s) to find a way to refute her opponent's thesis. To do so, she proceeds by enquiring, formulating her questions in such a way as to force the defender to contradict herself. The latter, for her part, must try to thwart any attempt at attack by choosing the answer that she can defend and that does not contradict the basic thesis, which would lead to defeat.[25]

Every debate is also accompanied by gestures that give it a performative, even theatrical dimension (Figure 2). The standing questioner plays the main role: after each statement, she claps her hands and simultaneously stamps the ground with her left foot. Through body movements and the raising of voice, she not only mobilises her own intellectual abilities, but also tries to destabilise her opponent.

**Figure 2.** Debate training in Dolma Ling.

The practice of debate constitutes the essence of Gelukpa monastic education. In Dolma Ling, the nuns debate for approximately one and a half hours per day, and a little more for the most motivated; this is less than in the male monasteries: in Sera, for example, monks debate up to four hours per day; however, there are also periods when more intense debate sessions take place in Dolma Ling: once a month, an inter-class competition is organised, for which the students prepare for a whole week throughout the day with no

other classes or rituals being held in the meantime. In addition, there is a competition between different nunneries once a year; this kind of event, called "winter debate [of the village Jang]" (*'jang dgun chos*), is a traditional custom in which many monasteries around Lhasa took part.[26] It was introduced into exile nunneries in 1995. Since then, each year, nuns chosen from among ten different institutions located in India and Nepal participate in the event.

Although education at Dolma Ling is diverse and nuns can specialise in many different fields—such as administration, communication or handicrafts—, the practice of debate is highly valued. The students' results are mainly judged by their ability to debate. All those of the same nunnery know the best debaters among them, even though there are generally only very few.

## 4. Seeking Recognition

The Gelukpa curriculum was introduced to Dolma Ling and other nunneries in order to allow nuns to have access to the same scholarship as monks. In order to succeed, it was also necessary that they get the possibility to pass the same diploma leading to the title of *geshe* or "Doctor in traditional Buddhist philosophy." For a long time, those responsible for the Tibetan Nuns Project involved in the process were unsure how to realise this goal. The main concern was one particular part of the curriculum: the *Vinaya* or monastic discipline (see Table 1). Studying the *Prātimokṣa* (Tib. *so so thar pa*) part of the *Vinaya*—the text containing the rules for monastics—requires theoretically that the monk, or in our case the nun, has taken all the precepts, that is, he or she is a *gelong* or a *gelongma* (*dge slong* [*ma*])—the Tibetan equivalent of a *bhikṣu* or a *bhikṣuṇī*. Because full ordination was not conferred on women in Tibet, it was thought nuns could study the *Vinaya* only partly and not in its entirety since ordination functions here as a preliminary and strictly necessary preparation or initiatory process before approaching the *Prātimokṣa*.[27] Not being able to study the monastic discipline as required would mean that nuns would not have completed their curriculum, in contrast to monks; it was a vicious cycle from which there seemed to be no way out.[28] The result was that many nuns, not being able to pursue their studies, began to reorient themselves by going into retreat, starting to teach in schools, or leaving the monastic life altogether.

**Table 1.** The Gelukpa monastic curriculum in Dolma Ling.

| Class | Number of Years |
|---|---|
| Preliminary studies (including *Pramāṇa*; Tib. *tshad ma*) | 4 |
| "Perfection of Wisdom" (Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā*; Tib. *phar phyin*) | 7 |
| "Middle Path" (Skt. *Mādhyamika*; Tib. *dbu ma*) | 3 |
| "Phenomenology" or "meta-doctrine" (Skt. *Abhidharma;* Tib. *mngon pa*) | 3 |
| **"Monastic discipline" (Skt. *Vinaya*; Tib. *'dul ba*)** | 1 |

In 2011, unexpected news came: it was announced that for the first time in history, a nun of the Tibetan tradition would be honoured with the diploma and title of *geshema*; however, Kelsang Wangmo, as she goes by her ordination name, is a German national and had studied at the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics that usually welcomes only monks.[29] As she was not fully ordained either, she was advised to study other texts than the *Prātimokṣa sūtra*, while also being allowed by her teacher to listen to the teachings given to her monk co-students recorded for this purpose. It was a surprise, not only for the Tibetan Nuns Project who had faced this issue for some time, but also for the Tibetan population. The very idea of nuns one day becoming *geshema*s was already accepted at this point with the feminisation of the initial masculine title being used widely. But the fact that the first *geshema* was a foreigner also elicited some criticism, by Tibetan nuns as well as by others.[30]

Following the announcement, the Tibetan Nuns Project started a new campaign directed at some of the great religious masters and the Department for religion and

culture—the official body that manages monasteries and nunneries but not necessarily their study programs—in order to find a solution for the many Tibetan nuns who were waiting to proceed with their studies; it was decided to include the topic to the agenda of the eleventh Tibetan religious conference, which took place in September 2011 (Central Tibetan Administration 2011; Phayul 2011). Whilst only the heads and representatives of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon tradition, which are all male, assemble at these meetings, the Tibetan Nuns Project prepared a written statement in advance explaining its support for nuns to obtain the *geshema* degree.[31] The declaration was read aloud and provoked a discussion on the knowledge level of nuns. Several speakers present pronounced themselves vehemently against a decision to confer the *geshema* title, arguing that nuns only study three out of five courses required by the curriculum. By saying this, they meant that nuns have not studied the entire *Vinaya*, which was indeed true, but also that they have not completed the *Abhidharma* class, which was a major misunderstanding. When Rinchen Khandro Choegyal, director of the TNP, heard about what had happened during the eleventh Tibetan Religious meeting, she got upset. How was such a misunderstanding possible after all these years and discussions with so many religious dignitaries? She first required an answer from some of the *geshe*s with whom she was in contact and who were present at the meeting. She then went directly to Pema Chhinjor, the then Minister of the Department of religion and culture, and a former subordinate when she was the education minister (1995–2001), but also a longtime friend of her family.[32] The latter apologised saying that he did not know exactly about the nuns' learning; they discussed how to bring up the issue again and agreed to organise a further meeting the following year with the heads of the three monastic universities in South India (that is Sera, Ganden, and Drepung), a representative of the Department of religion and culture, and one from the Tibetan Nuns Project. Meanwhile, different nunneries' representatives also assembled to discuss further steps to take.

During the Tibetan New Year festivities in February 2012, some Tibetan nuns were invited to debate in front of the Dalai Lama at the main temple; it is said that His Holiness was delighted to see the nuns' progress in debating and personally asked the Department of religion and culture to push the issue of *geshema* (The Tibet Express 2012; Phayul 2012). One month later, on 8 March 2012, during a meeting with the Department of religion and culture, the Dalai Lama asked to formulate a proposal, which specifies the requirements and modes of examination that nuns should undergo to obtain the title of *geshema*. The Department contacted the Gelukpa council—responsible for all affairs concerning the Gelukpa school—and the *Gandentripa*—head of the Gelukpa school—in order to proceed; however, the latter was not available since he was abroad at that time. He proposed instead to meet and talk about the issue at the beginning of the following month, when he would himself be coming to Dharamsala. Meanwhile, Samdhong Rinpoche, former Chief Minister and a *geshe* himself, also gave his agreement to go ahead and finalise the constitution. Both the *Gandentripa* as well as Samdhong Rinpoche are considered by the Tibetan Nuns Project and the Department of religion and culture to have been very supportive of the issue.

Finally, the Department of religion and culture called a big meeting on 18th and 19th of May 2012 with the objective of reviewing the draft proposal, refining and finally approving it.[33] In attendance and as signatories to the constitution there were representatives of the Tibetan Nuns Project, of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, of the College for Higher Tibetan studies, as well as two senior nuns and a *geshe* professor from each nunnery where the Gelukpa curriculum was introduced (Jangchub Chöling, Khachö Gakyil Ling, Geden Chöling, Jamyang Chöling[34] and, of course, from Dolma Ling). The result is a charter or constitution (*sgrig gzhi*) called "Rules concerning the examinations and acquisition of the title *geshema* for nuns who have accomplished the study of the five great texts in the Tibetan nunneries and academic institutions."[35] The content is presented in eight chapters, five pages long, plus a blank "Certificate of *Geshema* degree" to be signed by the Department of religion and culture and examiners. The constitution stipulates that the length of study has to be at least seventeen years; the minimum percentage to be obtained each year is

75%; and the period of revision and examinations has to last four years. The content of the curriculum and the tests is also fixed,[36] as is the composition of the group of supervisors who preside over the conduct of the examination.[37]

What about the *Vinaya* part of the curriculum, the subject which had been the focus of so many polemics up to then? Geshe Rinchen Ngödrub (*dge bshes* Rin chen dngos grub), a scholar specialising in monastic discipline, who had been teaching in Dolma Ling for several years, proposed to design a new program for this part of the studies. Being one of the defenders of full ordination for nuns and the author of a book based on his many research findings on the subject (See (Ser byes lha rams ngag gi dbang phyug Rin chen dngos grub 2007)), he decided to build up an agenda founded on Indian classical root texts and an auto-commentary (*rang 'grel*) by Śākyaprabha.[38] Unlike so many other texts, the latter had not been further commented by Tibetans until he himself had recently drawn up a commentary in thirty paragraphs. He had already used it as a teaching tool in Dolma Ling and it had been also distributed to all the other nunneries in exile. His proposal was astute: knowing that the Tibetan monastic curriculum draws mostly on commentaries by Tibetan scholars, his suggestion of returning to the original, supposedly more authentic text would probably confer more prestige on the nuns, in the absence of full ordination. He was, of course not the main decision maker, but had consulted several other *Vinaya* scholars, among them Geshe Kesang Damdül (*dge bshes* sKal bzang dgra 'dul) and Jamphel Dragpa ('Jam dpal grags pa) from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics; both appreciated the importance given to Indian scholasticism and confessed to him that they would like to see a similar program in monasteries.[39]

After the Dalai Lama's intercession, an official approval from the big monastic universities in the South of India was deemed to be unnecessary. Likewise, the *Gandentripa* finally agreed by phone; it is interesting to note here that both the Minister of the Department of religion and culture, as well as the head of the Gelukpa school,[40] had been appointed recently, in 2011 and 2009 respectively. Thus, the *geshema* issue was resolved thanks to the Dalai Lama, but also partly after a series of political changes and because of a new generation of monk scholars like Geshe Rinchen Ngödrub.

## 5. Going for Examination

The meeting was a success, and many nuns who had previously "disappeared" returned to their respective nunneries to participate in the project. In 2013, the first round of examinations took place, with the participation of twenty-seven nuns from five different nunneries.[41] In 2016, a total of twenty nuns, including six from Dolma Ling, passed their final exam; some had failed intermediate steps or dropped out altogether.

The final exam was organised in one of the participating nunneries, Geden Chöling, at the beginning of May 2016; it consisted of debate sessions (Figure 3), written examinations—in Buddhist philosophy, but also in Tibetan grammar, history and in Western science—, and the oral defense of an approximately fifty-page-long dissertation on subjects dealt with in the Five Great Treatises—the main corpus of texts studied by Tibetan monastic students—which had to been handed in beforehand. To make these examinations credible in the eyes of the Tibetan population and in particular of the clergy, its organisation was entrusted to the Department of religion and culture, whereas the topics were developed by *geshe*s from the three monastic universities located in southern India. Likewise, the invited auditors came from the "three great seats." Most were quite young graduates themselves and several of them were from the same region in Tibet, Kham, as some of the nuns taking the examination.[42]

**Figure 3.** Debate test during the final exam for the *geshema* degree.

As for the sociological profile of the nuns who passed the final exam: eleven were from Tibet; six came from Tibetan-speaking Indian regions where Tibetan Buddhism is traditionally practiced (one from Spiti, one from Ladakh, two from Zanskar, and two from Kinnaur), two from the Tibetan-speaking enclave of Mustang (Nepal) and one from Bhutan. All come from families with farming or pastoral background, that is, populations who live in the Himalayan countryside where access to education is still very rudimentary, especially for girls. All nuns had also faced many obstacles before being able to study Buddhist philosophy: many had no nunneries in their native regions, which has led them to move—for some of them far away from their original home; a few Tibetans had been banned from staying in a nunnery since the quotas for admission in contemporary Tibet are very restrictive; and most have faced a lack of economic support. Nuns from Dolma Ling were not the only ones who had spent a considerable amount of time building their nunnery. In addition, all have had to carry heavy administrative burdens in their respective institutions, from which monk students are generally exempt. Therefore, most nuns had started their studies at a relatively late age and made frequent temporary interruptions, which explains why this first group of graduate nuns had an average age of about 43 years—the youngest being 36 years and the oldest 50.

The results of the first *geshema* exam were announced in July 2016: all the twenty nuns who participated passed and three of them did so with distinction. The diplomas were awarded in December the same year at an official ceremony that was organised in Drepung monastery in parallel with the celebrations of the 600th anniversary of its founding. The Dalai Lama personally handed the nuns their certificates in the presence of many religious dignitaries, monks and nuns from the various monasteries in the area, as well as representatives of the Tibetan administration in exile (Figure 4). Since the monastic university of Drepung is located in Mundgod, one of the major Tibetan settlements in exile, the organisers of the ceremony have assured a maximum of Tibetans attending the event and thus recognising the nuns' achievements.[43]


**Figure 4.** The graduation ceremony of the first group of *geshema*s (Photo courtesy Olivier Adam).

However, although nuns had now followed a similar curriculum to the monks and a suitable solution was found for the issue of the study of monastic discipline, rumours spread about their *geshe* status being considered as "low" (*chung ba*). In the Tibetan monastic hierarchy, there exists a distinction between four different *geshe* degrees, the highest possible one being the *geshe lharampa* (*dge bshes lha ram pa*); it is awarded by the three great monasteries only to a minority of selected monks after a revision and examination period of six years (instead of four). Furthermore, after their graduation, many monks take up tantric courses in one of the two specialised monastic colleges Gyuto (rGyud stod) and Gyumé (rGyud smad), also reserved for men. In order to allow the nuns to meet as many requirements as possible, the Tibetan Nuns Project, supported by the Dalai lama, negotiated with the former, situated close to Dolma Ling in the valley of Dharamsala, to accept nuns as well; it was finally decided that the most convenient way was to regroup all the *geshema*s in Dolma Ling and to invite teachers from Gyuto in order to instruct them. Thus, a first course of tantric studies was initiated in late 2017 for a duration of one year. Twenty-three *geshema*s took part and received a certificate from the Minister of the Department of religion and culture, Venerable Karma Gelek Yuthok (Karma dge legs g.yu thog), at the beginning of 2019 (Central Tibetan Administration 2019).

Between the years 2017–2019, twenty-three more nuns passed their *geshema* exams with success: six in 2017, ten in 2018, followed by seven in 2019. Because of the Covid pandemic, examinations had to be postponed during the last two years (2021–2022), but have resumed in August 2022.[44]

Dolma Ling has produced this far sixteen *geshema*s. Two of them who have obtained top scores, Tenzin Künsel and Delek Wangmo, were hired as teachers in 2019; they are teaching junior Buddhist philosophy classes and supervise the debate sessions; moreover, they have decided to take responsibility for the many new young nuns from Ladakh, Zanskar, and Nepal, who joined Dolma Ling in the winter of 2022 because of their respective nunneries being emptied after the pandemic; they are preparing them especially in the Tibetan language in order for them to be able to follow the Buddhist philosophy courses. Other *geshema*s have chosen to go into retreat, to work on research projects launched by the Tibetan medical institute and the Central Tibetan Administration, to deepen their knowledge of Western science by taking up courses in the exchange program with the University of Emory, to lead meditation courses for laywomen, or to give tuition for

children during school holidays; it turned out that the new degree has opened up many new possibilities for nuns.

## 6. Female Emancipation and Monastic Education

Even though it might be a little early to draw conclusions on the nuns' change of status after becoming *geshema*s, a few remarks can already be made.

A first point is the reception of these nuns by their families and the society. As soon as the information about the examination results came out, several families of the nuns, especially those from India, set out in order to celebrate the event, even before the official graduation ceremony had taken place; they thus expressed the pride with which they received the news. Families from Tibet were also keen to let their nun members know about the joy they felt for them by congratulating them through social media or sending relatives from India to take part in the celebrations in the respective nunneries, which lasted over several months.[45]

When visiting some of the nunneries involved in the Buddhist philosophy education program during the following years, I have also noticed that these *geshema*s have acquired a new status among their sisters: previously considered simply as elders, they now receive significant respect in their respective institutions. Young nuns treat them with the same reverence as male religious masters, that is, they serve them and bow in front of them—the Tibetan way of showing respect. In the temple of Dolma Ling, *geshema*s now have a special seating arrangement, with higher places than those reserved for the other nuns—even though male teachers are always seated slightly above them; they no longer must participate in menial chores such as cooking or cleaning. By contrast, two of them were elected to the office of disciplinarian (*dge bskos*) and general manager (*phyag mdzod*), the two highest positions generally attributed to nuns in their institutions; the abbot, or in the case of Dolma Ling, the principal, is and has always been a monk or a layman.

Generally speaking, the *geshema*s are also highly valued as teachers by other nunneries and by Tibetan schools, where some have already started to work in recent years; however, for the time being, the watchword is that they have first to serve their original nunneries, which are also very much in need of female teachers.[46] Most importantly, *geshema*s have become role models for young nuns. And they take this very seriously, for example, by regularly addressing the younger generation in order to encourage them in their studies; this is also significant for them, since, as some have pointed out to me, they did not have any examples to follow when they embarked on this type of study.

In recent years, as mentioned above, the curriculum of Gelukpa monastic education has been introduced into many monasteries and nunneries in exile. The same is true for Tibet. In several Gelukpa nunneries in Kham, we can now find nuns who are preparing the *geshema* degree while learning debate.[47] More surprisingly, perhaps, nuns of the Bon tradition, which is distinct from Buddhism but shares many characteristics when it comes to monasticism, were also awarded the *geshema* degree.[48] In October 2018, a ceremony took place in honour of nine Bonpo nuns from the three different regions of Tibet (Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo) who had passed their *geshema* degree at Khyungmo (Khyung mo) nunnery in Thika (Khri ka), Amdo ('Chi med g.yung drung 2018). The initiator and main teacher was Geshe Söpa Gyurme (*dge bshes* bSod pa 'gyur med), who studied at the famous Bonpo monastery of Menri (sMan ri) in India.[49] It is quite possible that he had established a similar curriculum of either nine or thirteen years of study in Bonpo monasteries and nunneries in Tibet.[50] More recently, the only Bonpo nunnery in exile, Ratna Menling (Ratna sman gling), bestowed the *geshema* degree for the first time on five nuns, four from Tibet and one from Dolpo (Nepal) (Central Tibetan Administration 2022). As for those from India, debate was part of their academic program, which covers a total period of eleven years.[51] The *Vinaya* part of the study, which also takes a year, was not contentious, because Bonpo nuns can choose to become fully ordained: they are called *drangsongma* (*drang srong ma*) and follow a total of 360 precepts (Roesler 2015, p. 436).

I already mentioned the *khenmo* degree, which has been awarded to nuns by the Nyingmapa school in Tibet. Contrary to the Gelukpa school, the latter had taken the decision to open education and diplomas to female monastics very early on, at the beginning of the 1990s. The initiative had begun in the religious encampment of Serthar Larung Gar, founded by one of the greatest contemporary lamas and religious revivalists, Khenpo Jigme Phüntsok (mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933–2004). His niece, Mumé Yeshe Tsomo (Mu med ye shes mtsho mo, b. 1966) or Mumtsho, as she is affectionally called by her disciples, was among the first group of nuns to receive the *khenmo* degree. Being the abbess of the Pema Khandro Duling (Padma mkha' 'gro'i 'du gling) nunnery, located inside the religious encampment, and recognised as a living *khandroma* (*mka' 'gro ma*), a female incarnation and saint, she can be considered as one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist nuns of our time (Schneider 2013, pp. 156–61; 2015). Over the years, the academic program for nuns in Larung Gar has been refined and institutionalised, now taking up to fifteen years for "cultural studies" (*rig gnas*; here mainly Tibetan, English and Chinese language) and Buddhist philosophy studies and up to thirty years for those who continue with the tantra section (*rgyud sde*) and oral instructions into the lineage of Longchenpa (kLong chen pa, 1308–1364) (Padma'tsho/Baimacuo, pp. 11–12). In 2021, more than a hundred nuns held the *khenmo* title, a milestone in terms of female monastic education (Ibidem, p. 9). Many of them are now teaching younger nuns in Larung Gar, but also in various other nunneries of eastern Tibet; moreover, nuns have started to participate in research and editing projects, the publication of the *Ḍākinīs Great Dharma Treasury* (*mKha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo*), a collection of fifty-three volumes on Buddhist women from Mahāprajāpatī to Mumtsho, being a major achievement and new endeavour of female scholarship.[52]

A similar development can be observed in at least one other Nyingmapa nunnery in eastern Tibet, Tashi Gönsar (bKra shis dgon gsar), albeit in a more modest way.[53] Since 2011, seven nuns have received the *khenmo* degree; their study program was more informal, based mainly on teachings and initiations given by their lama and different invited religious masters over many years during the bi-annual religious assembly, and a complete course in Tibetan medicine, organised on the premises of the convent; these *khenmo*s are now instructing in a more organised way, i.e., in classes designed for younger nuns. Some are also involved in the teachings during the religious assemblies that several hundred nuns, monks and lay people attend in order to deepen their Buddhist knowledge. Furthermore, several of them are working as doctors in the Tibetan medical clinic, which is run by the nunnery.

Meanwhile, Nyingmapa nuns living in India and Nepal are still waiting to get the official approval to become *khenmo*s. For several years now, many nuns from Tsogyal Shedrupling nunnery (mTso rgyal bshad sgrub gling) in South India and Shugseb (Shug gseb) nunnery in Dharamsala have finished their nine-year course, usually required for monks before taking the final examination; however, nuns have been only given the diploma and title of *lobpön* (*slob dpon*) or "teacher," an inferior qualification and designation. Here too, it seems that because of their lack of full ordination, Nyingmapa dignitaries have so far been hesitant to bestow the degree,[54] but it looks as if there will be an alternative solution in a very short time.[55]

Last but not least, the Sakyapa school in India recently announced the graduation of three nuns as *khenmo*s.[56] The degrees were awarded after ten years of rigorous studies containing in particular the "Eighteen renowned scriptures [of Sakya philosophy]" (*grags chen bco brgyad*) and four years of teaching experience.[57] The decision of bestowing the *khenmo* degree to nuns was taken by a committee of Sakya scholars who consulted with Sakya Tridzin (Sa skya khri 'dzin, b. 1945), 41st throne holder of the Sakyapa school.

## 7. Conclusions

For more than thirty years now, Tibetan nuns in exile have started to engage in higher Buddhist studies previously reserved for monks. The journey to become a *geshema* has been long and full of obstacles; however, there were also many people who helped the nuns,

first and foremost the Dalai Lama and the managers of the Tibetan Nuns Project, but also, of course, many monks who were mobilised as monastic allies. When talking about the new *geshema*s, the Dalai Lama modestly says "that is my small contribution,"[58] thereby indicating how important the establishment of proper education for nuns has also been for him. His continued commitment to nuns' monastic education clearly stands in contrast with his timid support for their full ordination.

The opening up of religious education for nuns has significantly changed the status of women in Tibetan monasticism and Tibetan societies, in Tibet itself, in exile, as well as in the Tibetan-speaking parts of the Himalayas. In the near future, nuns will no longer depend on monks for teaching and administrating their institutions. In the eyes of laypeople, they now deserve more respect, which, in turn, has translated into more social support and esteem than they used to get in the past; moreover, nuns are now able to contribute better to society by teaching, instructing, and also counselling lay people, especially lay women.

In the absence of full ordination, one cannot say that there is parity or equality between monks and nuns, but a great step towards empowerment has been taken. By persevering seriously in their studies, nuns have shown their capacity to engage in the same type of higher Buddhist education as their male counterparts; it will now be up to them to continue and preserve the tradition of Tibetan scholasticism.

The question also remains how important the ordination status actually is in the modern context where degrees are more and more institutionalised. As one of the contemporary scholars of Tibetan religion and culture, Khenpo Tenkyong, reminds us: the most famous *geshe* in Tibetan history was Dromtönpa (whose full name is sBrom ston rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas, 1004–1064)—chief Tibetan disciple of Atiśa (982–1055?) and founder of the Reting (Rwa sgreng) monastery (Gardner 2010)—who was not a monk but a lay devotee (*dge bsnyen pa*; Skt. *upāsaka*), renowned for his teachings on monastic precepts.

Some further challenges always persist, like the fact that nuns are seen as "small" *geshe*s compared to seemingly "full-fledged" monk *geshe*s. Some people continue to propagate malicious gossip, suggesting that nuns might not be as good in debating as monks or that they have not thoroughly understood the content of Buddhist philosophy. Another hurdle is their participation in politics, which, in a cultural system where politics and religion are closely intertwined, was and is always in some regard the prerogative of monks. During the recent 2021 elections in exile, one of the *geshema*s from Dolma Ling, Delek Wangmo, was appointed as election commissioner, the first time that a nun has held such a position (Tenzin Dharpo 2020). However, it seems to me unlikely that a nun will be elected as a parliamentarian in the near future, even though monastics, male and female, have two voices and ten reserved seats to be distributed among the four Buddhist schools and the Bonpos.

Thus, with regard to monastic education, the traditional gender asymmetry is always prevalent, but by tackling unequal access to religious instruction, it is also slowly being dissolved. The success of the first *geshema*s has clearly inspired the other Tibetan Buddhist schools, who, in turn, have been quick to act by also awarding degrees to their nuns.

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## Notes

1 The other three are: the Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa), the Kagyüpa (bKa' rgyud pa), and the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa) schools.

2 In contrast to monasteries (*dgon pa*), most religious encampments only existed for a short time and were then either dissolved or transformed into proper monasteries. Examples of religious encampments which proposed higher Buddhist studies for monks

and nuns were those founded by the Third Dragkar Lama from the Gelukpa school (Schneider 2011) and Adzom Gar (A 'dzom sgar), from the Nyingmapa school, situated in the Tromtar (Trom tar) region of Kham (personal communication from the nun Sherab Wangmo, born 1947). Contemporary religious encampments such as Larung Gar (bLa rung sgar) and Yachen Gar (Ya chen sgar) tend to exist for longer time.

[3] These statistics were issued by the Central Tibetan Administration in exile few years after the flight of the Dalai Lama followed by many Tibetans to South Asia. There exist different estimations of the number of monks and nuns and their institutions (e.g., Goldstein 2009; Jansen 2018; Ryavec and Bowman 2021), but they only refer to Central Tibet, leaving out Tibetan populations living in the two eastern regions of Amdo and Kham.

[4] It must be emphasised that these numbers only represent a very rough estimate. See Goldstein (2009, p. 411); Samuel (1993, pp. 578–82) precises that these number only concern centralised Tibetan areas.

[5] My estimate if we take the 27,000 nuns stated in the statistic of the Central Tibetan Administration for granted; and even more if we add an approximate number of "household" nuns. Ryavec and Bowman (2021, p. 209) suggest a proportion of 6% of the female population, but as already stated, this cannot apply to the whole area populated by Tibetans, especially because nunneries were only very rare in Kham and Amdo (Schneider 2013).

[6] For Thailand, another important Buddhist country, Stanley Tambiah (1976, pp. 266–67) estimates the number of monks as 1–2% of the male population. As for Catholic nuns, Langlois (1984, p. 39) estimates that nearly 1% of the female population were nuns—mostly congregationalists—at the peak in 1880.

[7] For more information on the *khenmo* degree as bestowed mainly in the religious encampment Serthar Larung Gar (gSer thar bLa rung sgar) in Tibet, see Schneider (2013, pp. 153–61), Liang and Taylor (2020) and Padma'tsho/Baimacuo (2021).

[8] Concerning the financing of convents in another context, Zanskar, see Gutschow (2004, pp. 77–122).

[9] In this article, I will not treat the developments among Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

[10] There were no secular universities in traditional Tibet, only public and private schools.

[11] See for instance Dreyfus (2003, pp. 10–13). See also Cabezón (1994, pp. 11, 13) and Kværne (2014, p. 85) for a discussion on scholasticism in Tibet.

[12] There is also the religious tradition of the Bonpo, which even though distinct from Buddhism, has adopted many of its characteristics, especially when it comes to monasticism and education, as we will see later.

[13] Namely, Gadong (dGa' gdong), Kyormolung (sKyor mo lung), Zulphu (Zul phu), Dewachen (bDe ba can), Sangphu (gSang phu) and Gungthang (Gung thang).

[14] Personal information, WeChat discussion August 2019; this thesis is also reported by Dreyfus (2003, p. 6).

[15] It is interesting to remark here that in the contemporary religious encampment of Larung Gar, in Serthar (Eastern Tibet), where nuns are trained alongside monks to become *khenmo*s, the debate part was only introduced into their curriculum in 2014 (and earlier for monks) and into the chart of their examinations in 2017, while the diploma and title itself were awarded since the early 1990s. See Padma'tsho/Baimacuo (2021, p. 16).

[16] For more on Tibetan nuns' ordination and the different debates surrounding it see Mrozik (2009); Schneider (2012) and Price-Wallace and Wu in this volume.

[17] Ms Rinchen Khandro is married to Mr Tenzin Choegyal or Ngari Rinpoche, the youngest brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama; moreover, she served as Minister of Education in the Central Tibetan Administration in exile from 1993 to 2001.

[18] See Karma Lekshe Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1988) for further information. Several international foundations with the aim of supporting Tibetan Buddhist nuns were set up at the same time or shortly after. To name just a few, these are: the Jamyang Foundation, especially reaching to nuns from the Indian Himalayas, founded by Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a Tibetan Buddhist nun from Hawai (and co-founder of Sakyadhītā); the Gaden Choling Foundation from Toronto supporting in particular nuns from Zangksar; and Tsoknyi Humanitarian Foundation taking care of nuns from Nangchen (Tibet).

[19] The eclectic or non-sectarian approach in Tibetan Buddhism was promulgated by religious masters of the nineteenth-century *rimé* movement who wanted to come to an end with sectarian quarrels. In exile, the *rimé* approach is supported by many masters and above all by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama himself.

[20] The Institute for Buddhist Dialectical Studies, also located in Dharamsala, was founded in 1973. For more information on its monastic training, see Lobsang Gyatso (1998) and Kværne (2014).

[21] One idea behind secular education is also that some nuns might not stay nuns all their life and thus might adapt to lay life in future. Even though this has proved to be true, the subject is rarely talked about openly.

[22] Within the framework of the "Mind and Life" exchange program, initiated by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Emory University in the USA, monks and nuns are invited to take part in annual workshops to study sciences for three years. Nuns from different nunneries have been participating in these workshops since 2011. At the end of this training, they receive a diploma.

[23] Dolma Ling has a media centre where two nuns are working full-time and others temporarily.

[24] On the role and value of memorisation in the context of monastic education, see Dreyfus (2003, pp. 91–97).

[25] For studies on debate, see Perdue (1976); Dreyfus (2003); Liberman (2007) and Lempert (2012).

[26] For more information on the traditional "winter debate," see Dreyfus (2003, pp. 234–36) and http://web.archive.org/web/20101203161011/http:/www.qhtb.cn/buddhism/view.jsp?id=171 (accessed on 25 July 2022).

[27] For more information on full ordination in Tibetan Buddhism, see Price-Wallace and Wu in this volume.

[28] For more information on this aspect, see Schneider (2012).

[29] Some more Western nuns have studied in the Institute for Buddhist Dialectical, but up to then, none of them had gone so far in their studies.

[30] Personal communication from Kelsang Wangmo (Kerstin Brummenbaum). For more information on the German *geshema*, see her biography: Siegel (2017).

[31] Since 1963, the heads and representatives of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon tradition meet regularly in order to decide on major issues pertaining to religion.

[32] She and her husband, Ngari Rinpoche, like Pema Chhinjor had been involved in the establishment of the Tibetan Youth Congress, the biggest Tibetan NGO in exile.

[33] Personal communication from Rinchen Khandro (August 2012), which was confirmed by Thupten Tsering, joint secretary at the Department of religion and culture at this time.

[34] In Tibetan, respectively: Byang chub chos gling, mKa' spyod dga' 'khyil gling, dGe ldan chos gling, and 'Jam dbyangs chos gling. For more information on nuns preparing the *geshema* examen in Khachö Gakyil Ling, see Plachta (2016) and Ehm (2020).

[35] In Tibetan: Bod kyi btsun dgon dang slob gnyer khang gi gzhung chen bslab pa mthar son btsun ma rnams la dge bshes ma'i rgyugs sprod dang lag 'khyer 'bul phyogs kyi sgrigs gzhi/.

[36] Up to then, nunneries did not follow exactly the same program as stipulated in the constitution. Thus, the new rules obliged them to adapt some of their courses.

[37] Examinations are organised by turn in the different nunneries and each year during the fifth month (later changed to the eighth month); moreover, they are oral and written with three hours for principal subjects and three hours for secondary subjects, as well as a fifteen-minute test of debate.

[38] Śākyaprabha (8th century) was one of the early translators and commentators on the Buddha's teachings. He was a disciple of Śāntarakṣita, the famous Indian master who ordained the first Tibetan monks, and a crucial link in the *Vinaya* tradition which is followed in Tibet. See Gardner (2019) and URL: http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Shakyaprabha (accessed on 25 March 2022).

[39] Personal communication from Geshe Rinchen Ngödrub (15 August 2012). Interestingly, Georges Dreyfus (2003) questions the relevance of *Vinaya* studies in the monastic curriculum altogether saying that "these texts contribute little to the intellectual qualities most valued by Tibetan scholars" and pointing to the fact that the "actual organisation of the order in Tibet derives not from the *Vinaya* but from the monastic constitution" (*bca' yig*), which gives the rules elaborated by each monastery itself. For more on monastic constitutions, see Jansen (2018).

[40] Moreover, the *Gandentripa*, Thubten Nyima Lungtok Tenzin Norbu, was the very first to hold this position who is ethnically not a Tibetan, but a Ladakhi, even though he did his studies in Tibet and in Tibetan monasteries in exile.

[41] These are the same nunneries as stated above: Jangchub Chöling located in Mundgod, Khachö Gakyil Ling situated in the Katmandu valley and Geden Chöling, Jamyang Chöling and Dolma Ling in the area of Dharamsala.

[42] It might have been either a device used purposedly by the director of TNP who comes originally from Kham herself or because of elderly *geshe*s not willing to participate in the event.

[43] Originally, the graduation ceremony should have taken place in Dharamsala, at the main temple; however, it was decided finally that it would be more suitable to held it in south of India, where more Tibetans would be able to attend.

[44] At the time of finalising this article (August 2022), ninety-three nuns from six nunneries (for the first time, a nun from Changsem Ling [Byang sems gling] in Kinnaur takes part) are passing their *geshema* examen in Geden Choeling nunnery, Dharamsala. Two of the examinators have come from Drepung monastery, two from Ganden monastery and the questions and corrections are dealt by another two *geshe*s from Sera monastery. The Geshema committee comprising two *geshema*s, a nun and a *geshe* teacher from Dolma Ling supervise the whole procedure.

[45] Many photos and congratulations were sent through the social media application WeChat, largely used in China; however, it has been banned in India since June 2020 and can no longer be accessed.

[46] To my knowledge, some *geshema*s are now teaching in Jamyang Choeling nunnery as well.

[47] When visiting Tibet in 2018 and 2019, I saw nuns from Dragkar nunnery and Lamdrak nunnery debating in Kandze (Eastern Tibet); they were then studying the *pharchin* (Perfection of Wisdom) part of the curriculum. I learnt that in Ngaba, Gelukpa nuns are also studying in order to become *geshema*s.

[48] In the past, Bonpo scholars used to join one or other of the Gelukpa monastic universities in order to deepen their knowledge, with some also passing the *geshe* degree. One of them was the eminent Professor Samten Karmay, who later became a researcher at the CNRS in Paris.

[49] Personal communication from Kalsang Norbu Gurung (January 2020). *Geshe* Söpa Gyurme went back to Tibet in the early 2000s.

[50] Personal communication from Kalsang Norbu Gurung (January 2020). According to Chech (1986, p. 11), the curriculum of the Bonpos in Menri monastery lasted eight years in 1986; it has been expanded over time to thirteen years (Ramble 2013, p. 7).

[51] In the nunnery of Ratna Menling, the study program actually covers a total of eleven years, but because this was the first group of nuns to obtain the *geshema* degree, it was decided to expand the first two years (covering the topics of *düdra* [*bsdus grwa*] and *tshema* [*tshad ma*]) to four years. Personal communication from *geshema* Phuntsok Tzulzin (August 2022). See also Central Tibetan Administration (14 March 2022) and https://ybmcs.org/redna-menling-nunnery/ (accessed on 15 July 2022).

[52] Edited by bLa rung ārya tāre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang (2017).

[53] I have been visiting and studying Tashi Gönsar since 1999, initially as part of my Ph.D. (Schneider 2013).

[54] However, opinions are diverging on this matter, some also thinking that the ordination status has nothing to do with academic degrees. Personal communication from Khenpo Tenkyong (August 2022). For instance, in Tibet (Larung Gar and Tashi Gönsar), the lacking *gelongma* status has not been a problem.

[55] Personal communication from Khenpo Tenkyong (March 2022).

[56] See (Tibetan Nuns Project 2022) and (Voice of Tibet 2022); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J57KHRjx0l8 (accessed on 30 July 2022).

[57] Personal communication from Khenpo Yeshe Tsering (August 2022).

[58] Conference given at the Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, 14 September 2016 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFUzfku_nzg (accessed on 30 March 2022)).

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*Article*

# Taiwanese Nuns and Education Issues in Contemporary Taiwan

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**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss the Buddhist educational profile of nuns in contemporary Taiwan by introducing the development of monastic education for women. Taiwanese women's mass ordination created a Buddhist renaissance after postwar Taiwan, a national ordination system based on monastic discipline, as well as the revival of monastic education. Both ordination and monastic education are very strong institutional settings for women's monastic identity. Its findings, firstly, shed light on how the increased opportunities for women's education in Taiwanese Buddhism have continuously attracted young female university students. Secondly, these so-called scholarly nuns come to Buddhist academies as students and eventually become instructors. These scholarly nuns elevate the standards of their Buddhist academies and use their original academic specializations to expand the educational curriculum of their school. The role of scholarly nuns in contemporary Taiwan exemplifies that Buddhism provides educational resources for women, as educational resources enhance women's engagement in Buddhism.

**Keywords:** contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism; nuns; gender; monastic education; *bhikṣuṇī*s' identities

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## 1. Introduction

In 1990 at Colombo University, a Theravāda monk said to his student, a Taiwanese nun named Xing-yan 性嚴, "You must be a very important figure or someone who will hold an important position once you return to Taiwan; otherwise how could you (a nun) study abroad?" She replied, "No, I'm just an ordinary Buddhist teacher. After I return to Taiwan, I won't change to any other position and will continue to teach at my original Buddhist academy. I do appreciate my study here for enriching my pedagogy so as to benefit my students in the future".[1]

The Theravāda monk's question reflects the idea that monastic leadership requires significant education and that most nuns are excluded from this path. In contrast, Taiwanese nuns enjoy advanced Buddhist education both as students and teachers.

In contemporary Taiwan, improvements in Buddhist nuns' education have promoted the profile of Buddhist nuns, increased their social support, and raised their self-esteem (Li 2016; Eichman 2011). The profile of postwar Taiwanese Buddhist nuns has also been the focus of increased scholarly attention. At least 30% received college education before the 1990s (Din 1996; Li 2005), and 70% owned graduate degrees in Taipei as of 2011, endorsing high esteem and social respect for Taiwanese nuns.[2]

Previously, much of the research regarding Taiwanese Buddhist academy education has focused on the history, curriculum, and academic goals (Huang 2008b; Borchert 2017). Moreover, studies tend to be more passive (if not male-centralized) analyses. From a gender studies perspective, I argue that research on Taiwanese monastic education should focus more on how female students, teachers, and faculties are involved in the educational system because the majority members of such Buddhist institutes are women.

## 2. Buddhist Education and Monastic Membership

Monastic education is designed for initiation into collective monastic life within Buddhist communities. Education, discipline, and initiation comprise the "Triple Platform

Ordination" (*santan dajie* 三壇大戒), specifically the initiation of *śrāmaṇera* and *śrāmaṇeri*, *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī*, as well as the receiver of *bodhisattva-śīla*.[3] For the monastic, and at every stage of membership from novice beginner to high-ranking monk, monastics undertake the specific responsibilities and education that correspond to their standing.

In practice, only those receiving full initiation are qualified to engage in certain facets of monastic education, and thus, much is withheld from *śrāmaṇeri* and laypeople. Without the appropriate knowledge, lower-level monastics cannot reprimand more eminent monastics and are disqualified from participating in monastic administration. In other words, the establishment of monastic education not only relates to an efficient ordination system but is also closely tied to monastic hierarchy in defining the obligations and rights of monastic members.

Historically speaking, monastic education has been almost always reserved for male members; thus, those religious women who were well-educated enjoyed privileged status. Contemporary scholars, such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who have been long devoted to promoting women's religious status, tend to emphasize nuns' education (Tsomo 1999). Moreover, the majority of research focusing exclusively on monastic education has taken the role of nuns as Buddhist teachers for granted and even assumed that education empowers women in the religious circle (LeVine and Gellner 2005). The scholarly emphasis on women's monastic education mainly recognizes its role in nuns' full monastic membership. I argue that the more understanding we have of Taiwanese nuns' engagement in education, the greater the chance for establishing a more modern, improved monastic education system for nuns.

Lack of education is usually a source of disadvantage for women in terms of social achievement; such is also the case in religious establishments. There are many cases in which religious orders excluded women from the clerical hierarchy for their illiteracy (Liu and Feng 2019). Ironically, though, religion itself very often offers women greater chances for education outside the public school system. For example, the reason why Buddhist education attracted many Taiwanese women in the 1950s to 1970s was its function as a public-school alternative. It was not until 1968 that the Taiwanese government prolonged compulsory education from six to nine years. Before this, Taiwanese parents with limited resources only invested in their sons' education, and so, the free tuition, room, and board offered by Buddhist institutions provided girls the chance for education.

These relatively small and often temporary Buddhist academies relied heavily on the support of their host monasteries. In return, the Buddhist academies regularly included monastic training in the curriculum and advocated the Dharma lineage inherited from the abbot or abbess of the host monastery. Gradually, regular Buddhist institutes, such as the Yuanguang Buddhist Academy (*Yuanguang foxueyuan* 圓光佛學院), the Fuyan Buddhist Academy (*Fuyan foxueyuan* 福嚴佛學院), the Fo Guang Shan Tsunglin University (*Foguangshan congling xueyuan* 佛光山叢林學院) (hereafter FGS),[4] the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (*Zhonghua foyansuo* 中華佛研所), and the Lotus Buddhist Ashram and Institute of Sino-Buddhist Studies (*Lianhua xuefo yuan, Huafan foxue yanjiusuo* 蓮華學佛園，華梵佛學研究所), emerged (Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies 2002; He 2006). These mainstream Buddhist institutes are open to both monastics and the laity, both male and female, except for the Lotus Buddhist Ashram Institute, which is only for women. Students learn advanced Buddhist training in a place financially and practically independent from the host monasteries. Instead of being part of a Dharma lineage (*famai* 法脈) in which Buddhist knowledge is transmitted from master to disciple, teachers and students become affiliated with each other within a lineage of Buddhist learning (*xuemai* 學脈).

### 3. Buddhist Academies and Nuns in Post-War Taiwan

In Buddhist traditions such as those found in contemporary Taiwan, where the monastic education system is institutionalized like a modern Western education system and where women are able to receive the same education as men, the issue of women's Buddhist education remains quite complicated. Since the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949),

Taiwanese Buddhist circles have emphasized monastic education as a continuation of the Buddhist reforms from the first half of twentieth century China, creating an important context regarding monastic education from this period (Jian 2001; Chan 2005).

Monastic education reform usually emerged as the first immediate strategy for Buddhist communities to resolve crises (Pittman 2001). As the social elite tried to confiscate monastic property to build modern public schools, since the end of the nineteenth century, one of the most influential Buddhist reformers, Master Taixu (1890–1947), urged Buddhist leaders to develop monastic education. He believed that Buddhism was in decline and attributed the crisis to the waning of monks' social status caused by lack of education. More specifically, Taixu urged his fellow Buddhists to devote themselves to more cultural, educational, and charity activities to save Buddhism (Lin 2001). Taixu's introduction of modern institutes of Buddhist learning were extremely important for Buddhist reform efforts. However, his plans only marginally included nuns' education. Though Taixu realized that traditional monasteries could not compete with the modern school system, he ignored the massive participation of women in Buddhist learning (Li 2020, p. 590).

Buddhist educational reforms in post-war Taiwan did not simply imitate those in mainland China but reflected aspects of orthodox Chinese Buddhism in pre-colonial Taiwan. Less than one hundred Chinese monks fled to Taiwan after 1949, but they maintained their dominance within the Buddhist Association of Republic of China (*Zhongguo Fojiao hui* 中國佛教會) (hereafter, BAROC), the only officially recognized national monastic representative organization. This led to a series of movements to purify the influence of Japanese Buddhism in order to restore the orthodox position of Chinese Buddhism (Jones 1999).

Most importantly, BAROC began to educating Taiwanese monks and nuns through the ordination system. The ordination system established and dominated by BAROC was a new invention gradually organized by Venerable Baisheng 白聖 (1904–1989) (Huang 2012). BAROC was a tentative aggregation of monks that had fled from China, including members of different areas and schools. BAROC leaders therefore decided to use canonical texts as the foundation to reestablish the ordination system, which allowed them to disregard problematic regional and sectarian differences. Before Martial Law ended in 1987, only BAROC could bestow ordinations and issue ordination certificates in Taiwan (Li (Forthcoming)).

From 1953 to 1987, the number of female ordinands far surpassed male, being four times more on average (Li 2008a, 2010). Some assistant nuns later became female monastic leaders famous for their oral interpretation of *Vinaya* scriptures during ordination. For example, Ven. Tianyi 天乙 (1924–1976) helped Baisheng in these training programs and was the first female ordination master in Taiwanese history. As a consequence, she became Baisheng's first Dharma heir (*fazi* 法子) (Jianye 1999; Li 2000, 2008b). More significantly, BAROC's reforms, which initially only addressed the full ordination of monks and nuns, caused a surge in popularity for Buddhist institutes and the study of canonical scripture. After the 1990s, most Taiwanese monasteries stopped running their own Buddhist academies. Large-scale Buddhist academies, such as the FGS Buddhist Academies, the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, and the Lotus Buddhist Ashram and Institute of Sino-Buddhist Studies, took their place. These served as the basis for Buddhist universities that were founded later.

To sum up, in post-war Taiwan, Buddhist orders sought to ordain large numbers of women and established educational institutes to target young women and recruit new members (Huang 2008a; Li 2010). Taiwanese Buddhist institutes were usually open to both nuns and laywomen. Most institutes had one small class in each school-year until these students graduated and irregularly reopened the school for another group of students if they needed. In contrast to these small and short-lived institutions, several larger Buddhist orders also ran regular educational institutions, which transformed into Buddhist universities after 2000. Education, ordination, and Buddhist academies would shape the network for Buddhist nuns in Taiwan (Li 2016).

**4. From Scholarly Nuns (學士尼) to Religious Teachers (宗教師)**

In addition to Buddhist monastic education, which served the vehicle of ordination system, Taiwanese Buddhists also paid great attention to attracting young students to Buddhism. As Ven. Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005) pointed out, "To revive Chinese Buddhism, the focus should be placed on the youth, the intelligentsia, and the laity" (Yinshun 1970; Qiu 2000). This vision was reified in the establishment of Buddhist clubs in universities and winter and summer camps for college students. The first Buddhist student club was established under these conditions at National Taiwan University in 1960, and the number of such organizations increased to 73 by 1990 (Shengyan 1990).

Two Buddhist summer camps played pioneering roles in the 1960s and 1970s: that of the FGS order and the Learning Association of Vegetarian and Monastic Discipline (齋戒學會) (hereafter ZJXH) (Huang 2008a). Ven. Cihui 慈惠 and Ven Cijia 慈嘉, two nun disciples of Ven. Xingyun 星雲 who held master degrees from Japanese universities, became instructors at FGS Buddhist camps (Yongdong 2003; Li 2005). The founder of ZJXH, Ven. Chan-Yun 懺雲 (1915–2009), entrusted the Luminary Nunnery to manage female participants. Most of the women subsequently entered the Luminary Nunnery, making it the most famous nunnery of scholarly nuns (Din 1996; Huang 2008a).

The FGS's comprehensive program of Buddhist education aims to achieve their ideal of a Pure Land on earth. Although they attach great importance to classical Buddhist education, they reject sectarianism through their own concept of "establishing a common understanding across the Eight Buddhist schools" (八宗共榮) and put forth a particular style of monastic education, whereby they try to establish a common understanding across various sects (Manyi 2005). Furthermore, they offer students Japanese and English classes as they approach graduation in order to prepare them for an international career. Besides Buddhist academy education, FGS also consistently holds short-term training programs every year to help students refresh practical secular skills and reinvigorate their spiritual practice. The principles of humanistic Buddhism serve as FGS's blueprint for helping nuns develop in all aspects of cultural education and Dharma promotion (Chan 2005; Manyi 2005; Hui Kuan 2008).

The ZJXH summer camp strictly observes sexual segregation and requires all female students to leave Lianyin Temple 蓮因寺, where the camp is regularly held, by 4 p.m. The Lianyin Temple originally cooperates with the Luminary Nunnery (香光寺) and later also with the Yide Nunnery 義德寺 to accommodate female students attending the summer camps (Huang 2008a). Based on the convenient connection, two nunneries recruited many female college students from the summer camps and later developed into their own institutes. Campus Buddhist studies clubs and summer Buddhist camps have attracted so many female college students who then go on to receive tonsure that a special term has been created to refer to these Taiwanese nuns: scholarly nuns (學士尼, literally "nun with a bachelor's degree").[5]

The Luminary Institute aims at providing women Buddhist education and preparing them to serve as teachers in the Buddhist learning programs at the seven nationwide branches of the Luminary Nunnery (Jianye 2000).[6] In addition to traditional Buddhist monastic education, the nun students of the Luminary Institute also receive journalism, editing, and teaching training (Huang 2008b). The aim of the Buddhist education is to prepare students to attend the Luminary Institute and eventually move on to enter their own Buddhist orders (Huang 2008a, pp. 90–91). In a sense, the institute creates a new kind of modern Buddhist teacher rather than traditional masters preaching the Dharma and focusing on particular scriptures.

Income from ceremonial services is an important source of monastic economy, but the Chinese Buddhist modernization movement has viewed ceremonial services as an impediment to progress since the beginning of the 19th century. Those educated Taiwanese nuns receiving scripture-centered studies also follow the negative attitudes towards ceremonial services and ritual performs. As most monasteries and nunneries mainly relied on ceremonial services and are unable to provide academic work for their nuns, a tension between

immerged among monastic members. Those who are reluctant to perform ritual services tend to become "religious teachers", a position rarely seen at most small-scale nunneries.

For the disconnect between the sculptural-studies-centered education and monastic economy, graduating from Buddhist academy means certain kind of unemployment. The graduated nuns need to readjust to the ceremonial services. Even during their school years, these nun students are often accused as being not gregarious and lazy, leading their contemporary leave from their own nunneries to maintain the pace of student life. Therefore, some nuns tried to extend their student status as long as possible, such as keeping on transferring among different institutes to avoid the embarrassing situation after graduation, which created the term "professional students" to refer the phenomena.

Among Taiwanese Buddhist academies, the Luminary Nunnery established by scholarly nuns (more than 75%) also surpassed other Buddhist orders in Taiwan with the number of nuns having doctoral degree (at least 10 by 2000). These doctoral nuns are all scholarly nuns benefited by their bachelor degree in various professions. Their profession may be critical for spreading Dharma in modern society, but they are usually not included in the curriculum of the Buddhist Institute. After graduation, almost all of the nuns now holding these doctoral degrees chose to teach in universities, claiming that their positions there could be more influential than staying in Buddhist institutes. As these Ph.D. *bhikṣuṇī*s are overqualified for general monastic education, instead of dissociating with them, the Luminary Nunnery leaders gradually figured out a strategy to preserve good relationship with these high-profile nuns. The abbess Wuyin 悟因 strongly supported these nuns in their search for advanced study in various fields at colleges and universities across the world. These professional nuns develop their religious career outside monastic circles as university professors and research fellows, while the Luminary Nunnery continues to recognize them as members with a relatively flexible appointment. In this way, this group of nuns has adopted a new identity as religious teachers (宗教師).

Taiwanese nuns who have been educated at Buddhist academies take divergent paths in their practice. On the one hand, some turn towards the development of a modern, professionally certified Buddhism and create *bhikṣuṇī* groups with this goal in mind, such as the Luminary Nun's Organization, an organization concerned with promoting Buddhist education in society. On the other hand, some, such as those at the Nanlin Nun's Center南林尼僧苑), focus on strict observation of the precepts and ascetic practice in an effort to rectify the decline of *Vinaya* (monastic discipline 戒律). Their inward and outward approaches illustrate the two extremes of scholarly nun practice in Taiwan: one ascetic and inward focused and the other progressive and focused on society. On both sides, Buddhist nuns come with specializations in various fields from higher educational institutions and then supplement their study with Buddhist academy education. Interestingly, neither education level nor area of specialization seems to affect the number of nuns who favor ascetic or humanistic Buddhism.

## 5. Nun Teachers and Nuns' Education in Taiwan

The deeper tension between genders in the monastery can be largely attributed to the norms of Buddhist tradition, which promote male leadership in the order. However, the social changes in contemporary Taiwan have compromised male authority in the monastery, where nuns not only outnumber monks but have also surpassed them in terms of education level. The following case focused on Fuyan Academy (福嚴佛學院) demonstrates this reshaping of gender hierarchy and division of labor in Taiwan.

Ven. Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005) established the Fuyan Academy for monks in 1961; however, there were only two male novice students, and the classroom was filled with an audience of nuns. Therefore, the Fuyan Academy changed the system for nuns. In the following decades, Fuyan Academy trained many nun students and teachers in light of Yinshun's style of scriptural studies. Among these nuns, Zhaohui 昭慧 (b. 1957) has been famous for her interpretation of the work of Ven. Yinshun. She continues to be known as a

scholarly nun, having graduated from the Taiwanese Normal University, attended the FGS summer camp, received tonsure, and being devoted to teaching Yinshun's work.

When Ven. Zhenhua 真華 (1922–2021) was appointed as the sixth dean of Fuyan Academy in 1985, he decided to "rectify" the situation by limiting enrollment to only monks, a move that radically altered the situation. Nuns who were students and teachers had to move out and find new lodgings and affiliations. In response, Ven. Zhaohui gathered those nun teachers and graduated students dismissed from the Fuyan Academy and established a new institute for women, the Hongshi Academy (弘誓學院). Ven. Zhaohui, who was at that time serving as a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Hsuan Chang University (玄奘大學), created a joint program for these two institutions. Afterwards, many of her nun students and colleagues attained master degrees in her department (Li 2008b).

In short, though higher levels of education bring Buddhist nuns new social roles, such as instructor in dedicated Buddhist education institutes, they are rarely accepted into the hierarchical power structures of monasteries that remain under the jurisdiction of Buddhist monks. The identity of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan tends to stress their roles as "religious teachers" after they leave the family and serve in other spheres. Their status as "religious teachers" also transitions their career from religious vocation to professional occupation.

After the 1990s, most Taiwanese monasteries stopped running their own Buddhist academies, and many large-scale Buddhist academies appeared on a regular basis. Since 2000, to promote Buddhist education, Taiwanese Buddhists have donated money and resources to establish six Buddhist colleges and universities, including the Huafan College of Technical Science (華梵理工學院), the Medical Colleges of Tsu Chi Ji University (慈濟醫學院), the Nanhua College of Humanities (南華人文學院), Hsuan Chuang University, Foguang University (佛光大學), and the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (*Fagu wenli xueyuan* 法鼓文理學院). Many monks and nuns attend these Buddhist colleges and universities to pursue their Buddhist education rather than Buddhist institutes. Meanwhile, certain well-established Buddhist institutes continue to cooperate with these colleges to promote their education. Even though a greater emphasis is placed on academic achievement through this exchange, ironically, most Buddhist institutes insist more on their scriptural and philosophical approach.

Taiwanese nunneries have gradually created their own features for various religious goals, specifically for Buddhist orders with more than 200 female monastic members. They have tried to distinguish their own monastic education in specific ways. For example, the students and teachers at the Luminary Academy aim for Buddhist social education; the Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist society (靈鳩山佛教基金會) established a museum of world religions to promote interreligious dialogues, and the Buddhist Institute of the Nanlin Nunnery (南林僧苑) offers more specific *Vinaya* education for nuns. Other relatively large Buddhist organizations, such as the FGS monastery and the Sangha University of the Dharma Drum order, gather data on students' post-graduation employment opportunities, which range from classics' translation, digital publication, meditation instructors, and monastic management, among others. These specialized Buddhist academies also advertise new kinds of jobs taken on by students. Most importantly, nuns make up 80% of the monastic order and contribute to more diverse and professional development of Buddhism based on Buddhist learning rather than sectarianism.

According to my previous research, in the 1990s, there were at least 26 Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī*s who received scholarships from the Chinese Buddhist Association for Safeguarding the Sangha (中華佛教護僧協會) to study abroad (as compared to only four Taiwanese *bhikṣu* scholarship recipients); this number does not include nuns who were supported by other monasteries. It is quite common in Taiwan for Buddhist academies to send nuns to study abroad. Some monasteries send monks and nuns to study abroad in order to establish overseas outposts and start local branches of their school. Others allow nuns to use scholarships or family support in order to take leave and study abroad. These nuns gradually become critical personnel in the process of internationalization of Taiwanese Buddhism.

Most of the nuns with a Ph.D. continue to devote themselves to Buddhist education either at their original Buddhist academy or at a Buddhist university. Although Buddhist education in Taiwan was institutionalized in the 2000s, with the establishment of Buddhist universities, large Buddhist academies remain active even to the extent of cooperating with Buddhist universities. Nun students at Buddhist institutes often go on to graduate at Buddhist universities. Most monasteries require tonsured college graduates to go to Buddhist institutes for further education. After the 2000s, the Buddhist education system in Taiwan continued to produce more and more nun teachers who hold doctoral degrees from domestic Buddhist academies and universities. Given that domestic tuition fees are cheaper than those abroad, there are more domestically educated nuns than foreign-educated nuns in Taiwan. In addition, given the high number of graduates, there is fierce competition for employment at Buddhist academies and universities.

These so-called Buddhist universities are unique because they are funded by Buddhist organizations, but on the whole, they are average public universities. They only have a few departments related to Buddhism, so naturally, there is a limit on the number of staff and students in Buddhist studies. In order to meet the requirements of the Ministry of Education, which promotes appointments of staff with a degree gained abroad, educators with foreign degrees are favored, making it harder for nuns with domestic degrees to pursue an academic career. That is not to say that domestically educated nuns are refused teaching positions, only that it is harder for them to attain such positions. More specifically, a fault has emerged between faculty and resources.

Instead of severing ties with their nunneries, these doctoral nuns established their own small institutes and supported their lives by various teaching jobs. They often become part-time teachers at both Buddhist institutes and public schools. As the abbesses of their new nunneries, they enjoy more freedom to arrange their monastic lifestyle, such as to change the designation of their nunneries into "lecture halls" (講堂) to focus on Buddhist teaching program and publication. Like the scholarly nuns who are continuously affiliated with their masters' nunneries, these abbesses who have doctoral degrees and affiliate with other Buddhist academies run various Buddhist classes as well as publish their books and address their small lecture halls or Buddhist abodes as satellite instructors.

Let us now return to Ven. Xinyan of the anecdote that opens this paper. She first studied in Sri Lanka for a year and later obtained a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies in the United Kingdom before returning to Taiwan and assuming the role of provost at her Buddhist institute, Yuanguang Buddhist Academy. She is not a case of a satellite instructor. She has been financially supported throughout by the academy, which seeks to install well-educated nuns in leading positions. Indeed, there have been three other nuns at the academy who have received doctorates abroad in Japan and the United States. All four nuns returned to teach at Yuanguang Academy with a clear mission: to develop the Buddhist educational content and programs at the academy. Xingyan credits the dean for letting her concentrate on her studies and obtain her degree as well as understanding that Taiwan's Buddhist education system is becoming increasingly academic, so there is a need to cultivate qualified teachers.

Today, most of the junior-high-level institutions of the above-mentioned Buddhist academies were converted into preparatory schools for foreign students, with courses offered for the students with respective native languages to learn classic Chinese and Mandarin. In this way, nun teachers and instructors at Buddhist institutes also stimulate the sense of gender equality for foreign monastic students.

## 6. Conclusions

There are few women in the global Buddhist community that have received a Buddhist education, and the level of education that they enjoy is generally not comparable to that of men. If monastic education is compulsory and becomes part of religious life, then it is an invaluable resource for nuns, yet few have been allowed to receive such an education. This is not the case in Taiwan. From doctrine to practice and from self-cultivation to the

cultivation of others, Taiwanese Buddhist nuns can acquire knowledge and skills through education and thus benefit themselves and others. Among the well-known Buddhist nun leaders of modern times, many have received a Buddhist education and are able to spread the Dharma and lead others.

At first, less than 100 Chinese monks came to Taiwan to preserve Chinese Buddhism after 1949. They then went on to reestablish the BAROC to form a new ordination system, opening the door for ordination and monastic education to Taiwanese women. This led to a large influx of women participating in Taiwanese Buddhism. Furthermore, this rare opportunity allowed for the gradual establishment of outstanding Buddhist nuns' groups, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Because of the increased opportunities for women's education, Taiwanese Buddhism continues to attract young female university students, the so-called scholarly nuns, who come to Buddhist academies as students and eventually become instructors. These scholarly nuns elevate the standards of their Buddhist academies and use their original academic specializations to expand the educational curriculum of their schools. That being said, Buddhist academies continue to prioritize a more traditional Buddhist education. Furthermore, the average Buddhist nunnery does not have enough suitable jobs for this supply of scholarly nuns and Ph.D. nuns. As a result, many have relied on their expertise and established separate, specialized Buddhist academies or entered the public education system to teach. The younger generation of Ph.D. nuns has established their own nunneries, where they serve as instructors and teach a Buddhist curriculum.

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## Abbreviation

*T* *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大經. *85 vols, Edited by Junjirō Takakusu* 高楠順次郎 *and Kaigyoku Watanabe* 渡邊海旭. *Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924*–1934.

## Notes

1 I was told of this interaction during my fieldwork when I conducted interviews with the nun teachers at the Yuanguang Buddhist Academy (圓光佛學院) in Taoyuan in April 2022.

2 Lixiang Yao 姚麗香 conducted this investigation with the Taipei Branch of BAROC in November, 2011, preparing for the alms to *saṃgha* (monastic community) in the next 7th lunar month.

3 In the history of Imperial China, the Triple Platform Ordination system is attibuted to Monk Daoxuan (道宣 596–667) who established the Ordination Plateform and the Tang court carried out in 765. Another resource points to the Song court, it is said, the whole system was nationalized in 1009. However, the official ordinaiton system has been supported by the government since the fifth century.

4 The FGS Tsunglin 'University' claims to follow the Buddhist discipline of traditional monasteries, but it was not yet recognized by the government as a university.

5 There was a scandal that happened in 1997, for 129 college girls received tonsure without their parents' agreement and hid at the Zhongtai Chan Monastery (Li 2005). Many Taiwanese criticized the monks of the Zhongtai Chan Monastery abduct these girls, as well as these hypnotized girls unfilial and superstitious. Indeed, the term scholarly nun first appeared in 1987, referring to those college students who received tonsure at the Fragrant Light Nunnery after attending the Buddhist summer camp held by ZJXH. Back to 1969, the FGS Summer camp already converted college girls to enter its order. The phenoma that massive tonsure of college girls at Buddhist summer camps is resulted from the increasing number of the Buddhist Fellowship on campous in the 1960s, strongly supported by the Buddhist circle for including the youth. The phenomenon sparked protests in 1997.

[6] The Luminary Nunnery has established seven branches: Jiayi Huiguan 嘉義會館 in Jiayi City in 1981 (1984); Zichulin Convent 紫竹林精舍 in Kaohsiungin 1984 (1987); Anhui School 安慧學苑 in Jiayi County in 1988 (1988); Dinghui School 定慧學苑 in Miaoli County in 1995 (1995); Yinyi School 印儀學苑 in Taipei in 1997 (1997); Yanghui School 養慧學苑 at Taizhong City in 1998 (1998); and Xiangshan Nunnery 香光山寺 in Taoyuan City in 2003 (2003). The dates shown in the parentheses indicate the year their Buddhist courses began. The reason the majority are named as *xueyuan* 學苑 is to identify the locations as Buddhist educational institutions (Jian 1995).

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# Embodying Legacy by Pursuing Asymmetry: Pushou Temple and Female Monastics' Ordinations in Contemporary China

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on ordination procedures specific to women in Chinese Buddhism, and on the positions adopted by *bhikṣuṇī*s regarding the procedures' asymmetrical nature in contemporary China. Dual ordinations, according to which aspiring *bhikṣuṇī*s must present themselves in front of both an assembly of fully ordained nuns and of monks in order to be "properly" ordained, were restored by Longlian (隆莲 1909–2006) in 1982. *Śikṣamāṇā* ordinations, which postulate that women should train for an additional two years before receiving full ordination when their male counterparts do not have to, have also become increasingly common since the 1980s. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and today, both on-site and online, this paper asks whether asymmetry should be considered similar to subordination with regard to ordination procedures. It looks into Rurui's (如瑞, 1957–) position on the matter, as Longlian's student and one of the most influential bhikṣuṇī of her generation. While recent survey data will be useful in addressing the issue of representation, qualitative data will question the role of vertical networks in perpetuating a teacher's legacy, ultimately leaving us to wonder if asymmetry might not be actively sought after by contemporary Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s in order to improve their status.

**Keywords:** Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s; Buddhist monasticism; Longlian; Tongyuan; Rurui; ordination procedures; dual ordination; *Śikṣamāṇā* ordination; contemporary China

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s[1] often seem to hold a privileged position compared to their counterparts in other Asian countries. This is due to the fact that they have access to full ordination. Working specifically on the largest and most influential *bhikṣuṇī* temple in mainland China, Mount Wutai's Pushou temple (五台山普寿寺), asymmetry—understood here as a dissimilarity in *bhikṣu*s' and *bhikṣuṇī*s' situations—was not a primary concern of mine. Its residents were indeed accomplished, learned, and praised by *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s alike, ostensibly reaching for gender equality through higher education, which at the time did not warrant further investigation. However, they also promoted distinct ordination procedures for female monastics, which called into question that ideal image and prompted me to reexamine asymmetry in the context of Chinese Buddhist ordination procedures. This paper was initially conceived as part of a larger one that would give the reader a comprehensive overview of ordination issues faced by Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s in the course of the 20th century[2]. The first part, which now appears as a separate paper in this Special Issue on "Gender Asymmetry and Nuns' Agency in the Asian Buddhist Traditions", mainly dealt with concerns from the Republican era. It centered on the eminent *bhikṣuṇī* Longlian's (隆莲 1909–2006) role in promoting and passing on what she deemed to be orthodox procedures—however asymmetrical (Bianchi 2022). This paper constitutes a second part that focuses on Longlian's and other masters' legacy in contemporary China. By looking into one of her students from the new generation, Rurui (如瑞, 1957–), who is

currently leading the Pushou temple, I wished to investigate the role of vertical networks in influencing one's position regarding female monastics' ordinations, and to analyze that position.

When dealing with the issue of ordination in Buddhism, one can hardly miss the inherent asymmetry. Even though female Chinese Buddhist monastics have access to full ordination (*juzu jie* 具足戒 or *dajie* 大戒), which is not the case everywhere in Asia, they still have to go through procedures that are different from those undergone by male monastics. Dual ordination (*erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒) is one such procedure. The Vinaya, a body of texts specifically focused on monastic discipline, indeed states that to receive full ordination, a female candidate should present herself in front of an assembly of ten *bhikṣuṇī*s and ten *bhikṣu*s in succession, a rule that does not apply to male candidates (Heirman 2002, pp. 75–79). Dual ordinations were seldom held until very recently, in 1982, when the *bhikṣuṇī* Longlian restored and promoted this procedure, together with her colleague and friend, the *bhikṣuṇī* Tongyuan (通愿 1913–1991)[3]. It has since been included in official regulations in 2000, and is now part of the standardized triple-platform ordination system (*santan dajie* 三坛大戒). This particular system is currently used during officially sanctioned ceremonies, and consists of conferring *śrāmaṇera* or *śrāmaṇerī* (male or female "novices"), full and bodhisattva ordinations at one place and time[4]. What this translates to in the Chinese Buddhist tradition is that both men and women shall first take the ten *śrāmaṇera* or *śrāmaṇerī* precepts (*shami jie* 沙弥戒 or *shamini jie* 沙弥尼戒)[5], then the 250 *bhikṣu* precepts (*biqiu jie* 比丘戒), or 348 *bhikṣuṇī* precepts (*biqiuni jie* 比丘尼戒)[6] according to the dual ordination procedure, and all shall finally take the bodhisattva precepts (*pusa jie* 菩萨戒)[7]. Another procedure that this paper will address is the *Śikṣamāṇā* ordination (*shichani jie* 式叉尼戒)[8], which marks the beginning of a probationary period of two years only applicable to women. This specific period is first mentioned in the *gurudharma*, a set of eight rules specific to women that the Buddha supposedly enacted as a condition to create the *bhikṣuṇī*s' order[9]. The *Śikṣamāṇā* was never a common figure in Chinese Buddhist nunneries until the 20th century (Heirman 2008, pp. 133–34). Although this figure is not yet part of the official system, implementing this two-year extra-study period is slowly becoming customary for Chinese Buddhist nunneries.

Consequently, Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s or aspiring *bhikṣuṇī*s have to answer to both the *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s' communities, take more precepts than their male counterparts, and study longer. These are only some of the forms of asymmetry in Chinese Buddhism. To understand how these asymmetries effect contemporary female Chinese Buddhist monastics, I ask in this paper: What meaning does this term have in this particular context? Why would Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s promote these asymmetrical procedures? Although asymmetry is often considered to be synonymous with inferiority or subordination in patriarchal societies, as evidenced by most cases introduced in this Special Issue, it can also be understood in the literal sense of two things being different from one another, being unequal, or imbalanced. In this paper, I argue that there is indeed asymmetry in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, but that asymmetry can mean something other than subordination when actively sought after by *bhikṣuṇī*s themselves. Longlian's view suggest a different definition of this concept, as her advocating for distinct ordination procedures meant higher status and independence. What is Rurui's relationship with that legacy? How are the lives of contemporary *bhikṣuṇī*s influenced by their positions? The first section of this paper will be devoted to actualizing ordination numbers to give asymmetry a quantitative framework, as well as a qualitative one, and make known one of the crucial challenges faced by Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s in the past few decades. Then, I will dive into the influential role of vertical networks in perpetuating the teachers' views on ordination procedures for female monastics, and specifically examine Rurui's ties to Longlian and Tongyuan. I will finally address Rurui's position on procedures specific to female monastics, such as dual or *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations, and the general model she wishes to set for the next generation of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s.

## 2. Asymmetry in Numbers: A Quantitative Approach to Ordination

Since Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平, 1904–1997) reforms of 1978 (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), Buddhism has slowly been recovering from the eradication period of the Cultural Revolution. Official numbers from 1997 show that there were approximately 70,000 members of the Chinese Buddhist saṅgha at the time, including *bhikṣu*s, *bhikṣuṇī*s, and *śrāmaṇera*/*śrāmaṇerī*, living in 8000 temples, while in 2006 there were 100,000 members of the saṅgha living in 15,000 temples (Ji 2009, pp. 10–12). More recently, in 2012, the Buddhist Association of China (BAC, *Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会) estimated 100,000 Chinese Buddhist saṅgha members in 28,000 temples. In 2014, the former State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA, *Guojia zongjiao shiwuju* 国家宗教事务局) maintained that the Chinese Buddhist clergy amounted to an even lower 72,000 members (Wenzel-Teuber 2015, p. 28), and that the number of Chinese Buddhist sites reached a total of 28,247 in early 2015 (Guojia zongjiao shiwuju 2020)[10]. While these somewhat growing figures indicate some form of revitalization for Chinese Buddhist monasticism since the 1980s, at least concerning the building and rebuilding of Chinese Buddhist sites, they are still far from reaching pre-1949 numbers. As a matter of fact, when comparing official data published by the Buddhist Chinese Association (BCA, *Zhongguo fojiao hui* 中国佛教会)[11] in the 1930s (Welch 1967, pp. 411–20) and by the BAC in 2012, one can see that the saṅgha has only recuperated 13.6% of the numbers reported in the 1930s. However, it must be noted that numbers published by official institutions are more likely to show stagnation than the exponential increase of the Buddhist clergy to promote atheistic values. There even seems to be a decrease in the number of *śrāmaṇera*, and in student enrollment at the Buddhist Institute of China (*Zhongguo foxueyuan* 中国佛学院) since the year 2000 (Gildow 2020, pp. 21–24). Although these numbers testify to some quantitative reality for Chinese Buddhism, as well as signify the goals set by the governing authorities, they still do not include unofficial members of the clergy or unregistered temples, do not set apart *śrāmaṇera*/*śrāmaṇerī* and fully ordained monks and nuns, and do not provide reliable information on the proportion of *śrāmaṇerī* and *bhikṣuṇī*s. Thus, they must be considered relatively inadequate in representing the current development of lived monastic Buddhism, especially that of Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s, in mainland China.

Looking specifically at ordination ceremonies, which resumed at the beginning of the 1980s, can provide a more accurate quantitative medium to visualize gender asymmetry in Chinese Buddhism. The first ordination ceremony of the post-Maoist era was held in early 1981 for forty-seven male candidates. The second one, organized by Longlian according to the dual ordination procedure, was held in early 1982 for nine female candidates (Bianchi 2019, pp. 154–55). Only in 1993 were the ordination procedures standardized by the promulgation of the first "National Administrative Measures for triple-platform ordinations by Chinese Buddhist temples" (*Quanguo hanchuan fojiao siyuan chuanshou santan dajie guanli banfa* 全国汉传佛教寺院传授三坛大戒管理办法). This text initially limited the number of ceremonies to five sessions a year and the number of participants to 200 per session. As the number of ordinations regularly exceeded these limitations in the 1990s, and in an attempt to control its growth (Ji 2009, p. 11; 2012, pp. 14–15), the BAC published new "Administrative measures" in 2000. They not only allowed designated temples to hold five to eight sessions a year and ordain 300 people per session, but also stipulated that from then on dual ordination procedures were to be held for female monastics. Consequently, there seem to have been a general increase in ordination numbers, with an average of 2774 per year between 1994 and 1999, and 4430 between 2000 and 2009 (Wen 2012, p. 38). According to Wen's figures, a total of 60,944 people were ordained between 1994 and 2009, including 21,331 women, *bhikṣuṇī*s thus representing about 35% of these ordinations. At the end of 2011 a new change was made to the "Administrative measures" and the quotas were once again raised. The number of authorized ordination sessions per year was brought to a vague "about ten", and the maximum number of participants per session to 350 (Ji 2012, pp. 14–15). Only two years later, in 2014, did this new attempt at regulation impact the overall number of ordinations. However, there seemed to be a significant increase

in *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations as early as 2012, exceeding 2000 for the first time (see Table 1). Table 1 and Figure 1 both show that 2012 is when the gap between *bhikṣuṇī*s' and *bhikṣu*s' ordinations virtually closed, and the proportion of *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations was highest. No similar bump in numbers is observed for *bhikṣu*s at the time. This might suggest that because female monastics had fewer opportunities to get ordained, they were more likely to take advantage of the hike in quotas. Although there is no significant evolution in the following years, let us note that the highest number of ordinations was in 2018. The sudden drop in 2020 and 2021 should of course be attributed to the COVID 19 pandemic and to the subsequent cancellations of ordinations ceremonies. Finally, and in comparison with the aforementioned 35% of *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations between 1994 and 2009 (Wen 2012, p. 38), numbers from Table 1 allow us to ascertain that there has been a slight increase in the following period, *bhikṣuṇī*s representing 39.31% of the overall ordinations from 2009 to 2021.[12]

**Table 1.** Official ordination numbers per year since 2009 *.

| Year | Total Ordinations | Male Monastics | Female Monastics | Proportion of Female Ordinations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2009 | 3300 | 2100 | 1200 | 36.36% |
| 2010 | 3600 | 2100 | 1500 | 41.67% |
| 2011 | 4500 | 3000 | 1500 | 33.33% |
| 2012 | 4500 | 2400 | 2100 | 46,67% |
| 2013 | 5700 | 3450 | 2250 | 39.47% |
| 2014 | 7350 | 4200 | 3150 | 42.86% |
| 2015 | 7480 | 4550 | 2930 | 39.17% |
| 2016 | 7480 | 4550 | 2930 | 36.81% |
| 2017 | 7450 | 4300 | 3150 | 42.28% |
| 2018 | 8200 | 5200 | 3000 | 36.59% |
| 2019 | 6700 | 4250 | 2450 | 36.57% |
| 2020 | 700 | 700 | 0 | 0.00% |
| 2021 | 3650 | 2050 | 1600 | 43.84% |
| Total | 70,610 | 42,850 | 27,760 | 39,31% |

* Information relating to these ordination ceremonies come from a website listing all triple-platform ordination calls per year in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Chonghe 2022). The total number of people ordained per year in mainland China is reached by adding up the maximum number of candidates allowed per ceremony, according to the BAC's quotas, and excluding ceremonies organized in Taiwan and Hong Kong. These calculations are made assuming that all ceremonies are announced by temples and that all quotas are filled and respected, which is not necessarily the case. Therefore, they are only representative of an ideal situation, and should be taken with caution.

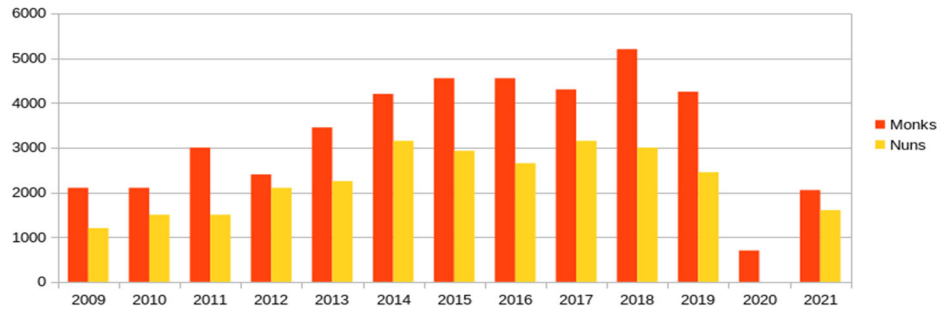


**Figure 1.** Number of male and female monastics' official ordination ceremonies per year since 2009 (source: author).

Since 2011, the ordination quotas have not changed, but looking into the body of the official regulatory texts, one can notice a few new additions. A single sentence was added to the 2019 "Administrative measures" to limit the number of requests for ordination ceremonies from Buddhist associations in provinces, autonomous regions and provincial-level municipalities to one per year. Moreover, and in comparison with those previously

published in 2016, the 2019 "Administrative measures" reassert and accentuate the separation between *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s, and further insist on the necessity of dual ordinations. Indeed, within the first section entitled "General dispositions", article 6 now stipulates that "Conferring *bhikṣuṇī* precepts must always be done according to the dual ordination system, and conferring said precepts should be taking place in a temple for female monastics"[13]. In Section 2 "Requirements and necessary qualifications for temples conferring ordinations", article 1 part 5 also adds that "At the time dual ordination is bestowed, there should be two temples acting as ordination sites, a distinction being made between temples for male and female monastics" (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2019, p. 11)[14]. These additional provisions suggest that dual ordination has not been systematically implemented since it was restored by Longlian in 1982 and included in the official system in 2000 and that when implemented the strict separation between *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s' temples has not always been observed. However, dual ordination is now explicitly stated as such in new announcements, and the ordination sites clearly identified.

Among other things, regulations and standardization of these ceremonies allow us to determine the number of ordinations organized each year, and the potential number of candidates. Looking into these figures also raises another question, that of representation. Indeed, it has to be noted that if there are systematically fewer *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations than *bhikṣu*s', it is primarily because there are fewer *bhikṣuṇī*s to choose from as ordination masters, and fewer temples to appoint as ordination platforms[15]. Consequently, there are fewer ordination ceremonies organized for female monastics than for male ones each year, respectively seven for twelve in 2019, nine for fifteen in 2018, nine for thirteen in 2017 and so on, *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordination sessions generally representing between 35% and 40% of all ordination sessions held per year (Chonghe 2022). This would explain the proportions obtained in Table 1, and raise the following question: would there be more female Buddhist candidates to ordination than male ones given the opportunity? Some scholars argue that the proportion of ordained practicing *bhikṣuṇī*s has remained unchanged since 1993, with 30% of the Chinese Buddhist clergy being *bhikṣuṇī*s (Ji 2009, pp. 10–12). If the pool of female religious specialists is indeed lower, this will account for the lower number of temples and masters to choose from for ordination ceremonies and for lower possibilities to be represented. However, others advise that we take this information with caution. Indeed, according to Gildow (2020), there is an upward trend for *bhikṣu*s to disrobe, which means the proportion of *bhikṣuṇī*s might well be more important than anticipated: there might be as many as 40,000 *bhikṣuṇī*s for 30,000 *bhikṣu*s in mainland China in 2018, as stated by one of his informants (21–24). This surprising information from mainland China might compare to the situation of Buddhism in Taiwan[16], and certainly give a whole new perspective to the representation issue.

### 3. The Teacher's Influence: Continuity through Vertical Networks

At first glance, the Pushou temple does not seem to best exemplify the asymmetrical distribution of opportunities and resources for *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s outlined by these figures. Located on one of China's four sacred Buddhist mountains, Mount Wutai, and established in 1991, this "star" temple (Qin 2000, p. 13) indeed currently hosts the largest community of female monastics in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC)[17]. The number of residents is approximately 600 *bhikṣuṇī*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s-in-training but can reach 800 during the summer retreat (*anju* 安居), considered the busiest time of the year. In 2019, there were exactly 799 people living in the temple at the time of the summer retreat, a number that accounts for permanent residents and those who only join in yearly classes and activities. Moreover, the Mount Wutai Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies (*Zhongguo Wutaishan nizhong foxueyuan* 中国五台山尼众佛学院) created in 1992 within the temple is unsurprisingly the largest Institute for Buddhist Studies (*foxueyuan* 佛学院) in the PRC. It aims at training a generation of female Buddhist leaders in compliance with both the Vinaya regulations and political requirements. The abbess of Pushou temple and president of the Institute, Rurui, is recognized as such a leader by both the government and her

peers[18]. As she occupies high positions within the institutional system, she is particularly well placed to act as a representative of the Chinese Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s' community. In addition to being at the head of the largest Buddhist temple and Institute in the country, she has indeed been sitting as vice-president of the Buddhist Association of Shanxi (*Shanxi sheng fojiao xiehui* 山西省佛教协会) since 1997, and as one of the BAC's vice presidents since 2010. She was also named deputy chief administrator (*fu mishu zhang* 副秘书长) of the BAC in 2002, and acted as deputy director of the Chinese Buddhism Educational Administration and Teaching Methods Committee (*Hanchuan fojiao jiaowu jiaofeng weiyuanhui*汉传佛教教务教风委员会) from 2015 to 2020[19].

However, looking more closely at Rurui's life and influences might help us understand Pushou temple's contribution to the gender asymmetry issue at hand. Born in 1957, Rurui was only ordained after the opening of China in the 1980s like most of her peers from the same generation[20]. Little is known about her early educational background, only that she received a good enough education in her hometown of Taiyuan (太原), Shanxi (山西), that she was able to go to university. She indeed received a university degree in literature from Taiyuan Normal University (*Taiyuan shifan xueyuan* 太原师范学院) before studying Chinese language and literature at Beijing Normal University (*Beijing shifan daxue* 北京师范大学). She then went on to become a school teacher. After meeting with the *bhikṣuṇī* Tongyuan, she switched paths and received tonsure in 1981 at Fahai temple (法海寺), Shanxi. At the same time, she also acted as an assistant for one of the most eminent *bhikṣuṇī*s of the 20th century, Longlian, and followed her to the Aidao nunnery (爱道堂) in Chengdu, Sichuan. In 1984 she received her full ordination at Huayan temple (上华严寺) in Datong (大同), Shanxi, during the second dual ordination ceremony organized in mainland China after the reopening, making her one of the first *bhikṣuṇī*s of the contemporary era to be ordained according to this particular procedure. As Tongyuan acted as the main ordination master (or "master of the precepts" *jieshi* 戒师) in this 1984 ceremony (Wen 1991, p. 33; Li 1992, p. 257), Rurui became her ordination disciple. After receiving ordination, Rurui studied for a few years at the Sichuan Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies (*Sichuan nizhong foxueyuan* 四川尼众佛学院) lead by Longlian. At a later date in the course of the 1980s, she went on to study Vinaya with Tongyuan at the Jixiang hermitage (*Jixiang jingshe* 吉祥精舍) in Shaanxi (陕西).

Rurui later founded Mount Wutai's Pushou temple in 1991 and the Mount Wutai Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies in 1992, at age 34. Although she has received several distinctions over the years, two of them seem worth mentioning as a testament to her official recognition as a Buddhist leader and her promotion of higher education for *bhikṣuṇī*s: she was nominated "Chinese Cultural Personality" (*Zhonghua wenhua renwu* 中华文化人物) in 2016, and received an honorary PhD degree in Buddhist Studies from the Thai Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), in November 2017 (Péronnet 2020, p. 131)[21].

Telling Rurui's life story in such a factual way almost makes her teachers' role seem anecdotal. However, I would argue that it is their particular influence that led her to promote inherently asymmetrical ordination procedures, such as dual and *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations, as the "proper" standard for female monastics. The importance of *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s' networks in building individual trajectories and favoring certain types of practices has long been observed by scholars in Buddhist studies (DeVido 2015; Bianchi 2017; Campo 2019, 2020). It can be correlated to a larger social network approach that "[ . . . ] is grounded in the intuitive notion that the patterning of social ties in which actors are embedded has important consequences for those actors" (Freeman 2004, p. 2). Hierarchical relationships with masters or teachers in particular are at the core of a Buddhist leader's and his or her temple's identity. These vertical Buddhist networks are often centered on or created by eminent charismatic figures, and legitimize monastic communities associated with them by ensuring historical continuity and prestige. Welch addresses this question in his work and maintains that *bhikṣu*s affiliate to these networks through religious "kinship", loyalty to a charismatic figure, or even according to their region of origin (1967, pp. 403–5). Today, however, several other modes of affiliation could be added to that list. Monastic

education, especially within institutes for Buddhist studies, plays a critical role in the construction of networks for *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s in China, creating relationships between students, or between students and teachers. Official Buddhist institutions or associations are also crucial in creating bonds between colleagues and developing affinities between Buddhist executives (DeVido 2015, pp. 79–80; Ashiwa and Wank 2005, p. 222). Other types of affiliation to contemporary Buddhist networks include shared interests or experiences (Schak 2009; Fisher 2014, 2020), membership with an international organization (Wang 2013), social engagement or activism (Huang 2018), and so on.

In Rurui's case, affiliation to Longlian's network is based on loyalty to a charismatic figure and relationship between teacher and student rather than on "kinship" (see Figure 2a). As mentioned earlier, she was Longlian's assistant at the Aidao nunnery in Chengdu after she received tonsure in the early 1980s and studied with her at the Sichuan Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies for a few years, but was never her dharma disciple—only a few students of Longlian were (Bianchi 2017, p. 295). Longlian was the one who restored the dual ordination procedure for *bhikṣuṇī*s in 1982. She also contributed to the development of *śikṣamāṇā* ordination and generally advocated for very rigorous Vinaya practice (Bianchi 2022, pp. 9–10)[22]. Her peers and students were well aware of and shared her positions. Contemporary Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s still refer to her when looking back at the evolution of Vinaya practices and the organization of the female monastic community over the past few decades (Chiu and Heirman 2014, p. 260). It seems that in their work on *gurudharma* rules, Chiu and Heirman have indeed established that "[ . . . ] changes are often the result of a leader's educational influence" (2014, 260), which undoubtedly partially accounts for Rurui's promotion of dual and *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations.

(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 2.** Rurui and her teachers (source: Pushou temple). (**a**) Longlian & Rurui, 1997; (**b**) Rurui, Tongyuan, Miaoyin (妙音, 1957–), 1983, Nanshan temple (五台山南山寺).

However, Longlian was not Rurui's only teacher and did not play a crucial part in the founding of Pushou temple. Tongyuan is the one who did (see Figure 2b). Rurui's affiliation to Tongyuan does not fit within Welch's definition of "kinship" either, even though the temple considers her its founding master. Indeed, Tongyuan applied an ideology throughout her life that was known as the "three no's" (*sanbu* 三不): she decided not to take disciples, not to have her biography written, and not to write texts promoting her interpretation of Buddhist doctrine (Wen 1991, pp. 32–33). She nevertheless trained many female students, including Rurui, at the Jixiang hermitage, an institution she created specifically for the study of Vinaya in the Shaanxi province. Rurui was thus Tongyuan's student, as well as her ordination disciple, and considers herself her heir, although she is not formally recognized as part of her lineage. Tongyuan was close to Longlian and met with her on several occasions over the years, sharing an interest in establishing orthodox procedures and practices for female monastics according to the Chinese Vinaya

(Péronnet 2020, pp. 134–36). As a matter of fact, Longlian trusted her to act as ordination master during the first dual ordination ceremony of the post-Mao era in 1982. Tongyuan then organized the second one in 1984. Her wishes were to "[ . . . ] call upon the whole community of *bhikṣuṇī*s to establish a temple of the ten directions [ . . . ]"[23] in order to properly teach and study the Vinaya, which Rurui explicitly carried out by opening the Vinaya-centered Pushou temple the year of her teacher's passing. The Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*s still revere Tongyuan as the master whose legacy they keep alive. Her relics are kept in a specific hall of the temple, the Hall for Remembering Kindness (*Yi'en tang* 忆恩堂), and her passing is commemorated every year on the twentieth day of the first lunar month. Even more significant is the threefold system implemented by Rurui at Pushou temple: "[ . . . ] Avataṃsaka as lineage, Vinaya as practice, Pure Land as destination [ . . . ]" (*Huayan wei zong, jielü wei xing, jingtu wei gui* 华严为宗，戒律为行，净土为归)[24]. This was passed down from the monk Cizhou (慈舟1877–1957) to Tongyuan, her tonsure disciple, and from Tongyuan to Rurui, providing the temple with a sense of continuity as part of the Huayan school of Buddhism and as a Vinaya center (Wen 1991, p. 32; Yang 2011, p. 24)[25].

To sum up, the priorities Rurui set for Pushou temple and the Mount Wutai Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies can be traced to a large extent to Tongyuan and Longlian's teachings, especially in terms of monastic discipline. Rurui, but also others such as Wanru (万如 1956–), abbess of the Taiping temple (太平寺) in Wenzhou (温州), or Ruyi (如意 1963–), abbess of the Qifu temple (祈福寺) in Chengdu, affiliated to Tongyuan and/or Longlian's networks by becoming their student at either the Sichuan Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies or the Jixiang hermitage. Data collected during fieldwork and gathered by Chiu (2016, 2017), as well as with information found on each of these three institutions' websites, show that they all promote ordination procedures that were not necessarily widespread in 20th century China until the 1980s, such as dual and *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations, which exemplifies the importance of legacy regarding ordination practices. Tongyuan and Longlian's education networks can be further—although partially—exemplified by Figure 3. From online sources, the Buddhist educational background of these *bhikṣuṇī*s has been traced back to either Longlian or Tongyuan. Rurui, Wanru, and Ruyi all appear as part of this network visualization. After ascertaining the influence both eminent masters had in the fields of monastic discipline and education, one can only assume that other *bhikṣuṇī*s connected to their networks might have successfully promoted and implemented the same ordination procedures they did, thus spreading their teachers' views on asymmetry. However, the extent of this phenomenon would certainly need to be researched further. In any case, Rurui followed in her teachers' footsteps, ultimately designing a structure that would be able to carry out their vision and that of their masters before them[26], into the present. Ideas were passed down from one generation to the next, "bridging the gap" (Campo 2019) to constitute a legacy: such is the role of vertical networks. Moreover, the continuity and prestige attached to these networks were one of the ways Rurui could obtain legitimacy, a necessary commodity for Buddhist institutions to survive in post-Mao China. It was legitimacy, as well as Rurui's capacity to access the high spheres, that were crucial in mobilizing the financial, human, and symbolic resources allowing her to provide Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s with a successful working model for "proper" ordination procedures (Péronnet 2021).

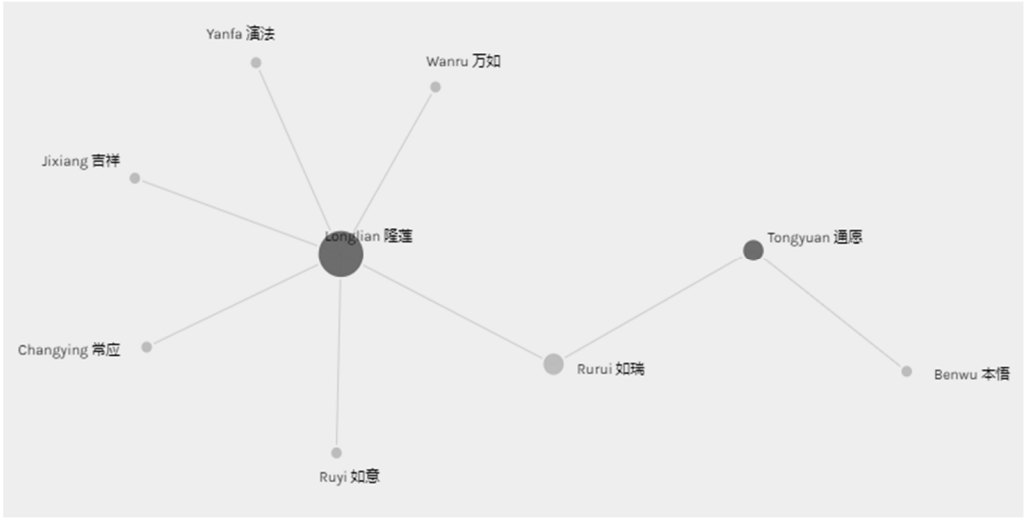


**Figure 3.** Longlian and Tongyuan's educational networks[27] (source: author).

## 4. Advocating for Asymmetrical Ordination Procedures in Contemporary Times

Answering a question I asked about Longlian and Tongyuan's influence on her promotion of Vinaya practices and on her management of Pushou temple, Rurui stated that:

> These two high-merit *bhikṣuṇī*s believed that monastic discipline is at the root of monastics' spiritual development, and that nuns ought to rely on the Buddhist system of receiving nuns' precepts according to the dual ordination procedure. Ven. Tongyuan in particular spent all her life specializing in and spreading monastic discipline, training *Śikṣamāṇā*, bestowing dual ordinations, building a monastic community, and giving lectures about the precepts.
>
> 这两位大德比丘尼都认为戒律是出家修行的根本，比丘尼应依于佛制在二部僧中求受比丘尼戒。特别是通愿老法师，一生专弘戒律，培养式叉尼，传授二部僧戒，建立僧团，演说戒法。[28]

This quote first accentuates Rurui's unique connection to Tongyuan. She, rather than Longlian, is presented as the one who made a great contribution to the field of Vinaya. She is the one whose legacy Rurui keeps alive by reproducing virtually everything she ever accomplished—specializing in the implementation and study of the Vinaya, promoting dual and *śikṣamāṇā* ordination procedures, building Pushou temple, giving lectures on various subjects, including monastic discipline, and so on. This particular quote also mentions Tongyuan and Longlian's role in promoting dual ordination, a procedure that they deemed crucial to monastic discipline and the cultivation of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s (Bianchi 2022, p. 8). Since their time, it has been normalized as the "proper" way to conduct *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations and has officially been included in the standardized triple-platform ordination system in 2000 (Ji 2009, p. 11; Bianchi 2019, p. 157). As Pushou temple is not part of the Buddhist sites authorized to hold ordination ceremonies, Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*s entirely depend on the standardized official system to get ordained and, as such, have no choice but to go along with the dual ordination procedure. Thus, it is worth mentioning that promoting it is not only considered a way to pursue ideals set by Rurui's teachers or necessary in itself to support cultivation but is also in line with official regulations.

Contemporary institutions hail back to historical narratives surrounding dual ordination, and other asymmetrical procedures such as *śikṣamāṇā* ordination. These narratives surprisingly configure asymmetries as what contributes to the distinctive of female monastics. In a comprehensive presentation document drafted by Pushou temple in 2017[29], the section relating to the Institute entitled "student monastics' aptitudes, origins, and admission procedures" (学僧资质、来源及录取方式) presents dual ordination and all ordination requirements specific to female monastics as part of a special request from the Buddha himself, accounting for thorough compliance with these rules:

> [One must] abide by the Buddha's specific requirements for female monastics, that is to undergo two years of studies and training as a *Śikṣamāṇā* before receiving the full ordination, only then can the essence of dual ordination be considered genuine and satisfactory. Consequently, the Institute also attaches importance to the training and education that goes into moving up from *śrāmaṇerī* to *Śikṣamāṇā* to fully ordained nun. [ . . . ] [One] must first study and train in the "pure practice" class for a year, meet every institutional standard and be officially tonsured, before she enters the *śrāmaṇerī* class to study for a year, then the *Śikṣamāṇā* class to study for two years. Only after having followed the six *Śikṣamāṇā* precepts can she receive the dual ordination and formally join the "department of disciplinary studies".
>
> 遵循佛陀对尼众的特别要求，即必须经两年式叉尼学习锻练后再受具戒，才算真正圆满二部僧戒的实质。因此，学院也重视从小众到大尼次第而上的培养与教育。[ . . . ] 先在净行班学习锻练一年，各方面考核合格且正式落发后，再进入沙弥尼班学习一年，之后再入式叉尼班学习两年，式叉尼六法清净后才可受二部僧戒，正式进入戒学部学习。

This text makes it clear that agreeing to be trained as a *Śikṣamāṇā* and going through the dual ordination procedure is necessary for being admitted at the Mount Wutai Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies, thus making it a contractual clause for getting access to higher education. It furthermore suggests that additional years of training and studying are a privilege that has to do with the Buddha's special treatment of female monastics and that distinguishes them from male ones. In any case, differentiating features—or asymmetry—are emphasized. It is what sets *bhikṣuṇī*s apart from *bhikṣu*s to mark them as distinctively pure.

As shown earlier, there seems to be at least another step necessary to the "proper" completion of dual ordination, a step that allows female monastics to study and be trained longer than male monastics. The *śikṣamāṇā* ordination marks the beginning of a two-year probationary period[30] during which the *Śikṣamāṇā* must follow a set of six precepts if she is to claim full ordination. This ordination procedure can be seen as an asymmetrical one mainly because it constitutes an extra step in the *bhikṣuṇī*s' career and has no equivalent for *bhikṣu*s. Following Longlian and Tongyuan's example, Rurui also advocates for this specific procedure and for an extended period of time between the *śikṣamāṇā* and the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. This division was summed up as follows by one of my informants at Pushou temple:

> Actually at that time we are called the female novice [*śrāmaṇerī*] only in the image aspect, in Chinese is "*xintong shamini*" [形同沙弥尼]. [ . . . ] In your appearance you look like a monastic, but actually you haven't taken any precepts [ . . . ]. But after one year, we take the ten precepts of the female monastic. [ . . . ] at that time we are called [ . . . ] "*fatong shamini*" [法同沙弥尼]. In the morning we take the ten precepts of the female monastic and in the afternoon we'll get the "*shichani*" [式叉尼] ceremony [ . . . ]. Actually it happens in one day. [ . . . ] At that time the "*shichani*" they don't know exactly the name of the full "*bhikkhuni*"'s precepts[31], but they have to practice every precepts of "*bhikkhuni*", [they are] actually already in their training program. And the "*shichani*" program will last for two years. If you can observe [the *śikṣamāṇā* precepts] very strictly and purely, then you are qualified to get the full ordination.[32]

The model promoted by the Pushou temple, based on Vinaya texts, thus advises a training period of at least three years before receiving dual ordination. One should first train for year as a *śrāmaṇerī* "in appearance", before receiving both the ten *śrāmaṇerī* precepts and the six *śikṣamāṇā* precepts in one day. Then, the two-year probationary period serves as a way to practice not only the *śikṣamāṇā* precepts, but also the 348 *bhikṣuṇī* precepts that they will later take during full ordination, allowing them to experience and master them beforehand—an opportunity that male monastics do not have. The informant quoted above

indeed considers this particular period to be "very significant training for the future female full ordination", and states that "learning about the spirit of these [*bhikṣuṇī*] precepts [ . . . ] is the main reason for regulating this probationary period. It helps female monastics to practice early and to be familiar with the full monastic's life earlier". In the same way that dual ordination seems to be essential to monastic discipline (Bianchi 2022, p. 12), *śikṣamāṇā* ordination is introduced in the presentation text above as the only way to ensure that dual ordination is "genuine and satisfactory", and in the following quote as necessary to receive "valid" full ordination and be "qualified" as a *bhikṣuṇī*. Raising the question of what needs to be done by female monastics to be qualified enough also raises the very interesting issue of whether a value judgment is sometimes made against *bhikṣu*s' education prior to full ordination, as they do not receive the same drastic training as *bhikṣuṇī*s. Asymmetry, in this particular instance, is not only to be found in the number of training years, but also in the additional knowledge of the Vinaya and esteem that may come from it.

Although Longlian, Tongyuan, and now Rurui have been advocating for this probationary period, it is still not part of the official ordination system and is not mandatory by governmental standards to receive full ordination. Indeed, the necessary two-year interval between *śrāmaṇerī* and *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations—which are conferred the same day—and *bhikṣuṇī* ordination would seem to jeopardize the standardized triple-platform ceremonies that should be held in a reasonable time-frame but in "no less than a month" (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2019, p. 11). However, Longlian devised a system that would complement the official one as a "doctrinally orthodox adaptation to the contemporary institutional environment in which Buddhism finds itself in the PRC" (Péronnet 2020, p. 146). As it has been confirmed to me by several informants, the Pushou temple provides a concrete model for this complementary system: the *śrāmaṇerī* and *śikṣamāṇā* precepts are taken a few years before dual ordination, as prescribed by the Vinaya, and then *śrāmaṇerī* precepts are taken once more during official triple-platform ordination ceremonies. This working solution has led to the probationary period being more widely spread and recognized in mainland China[33]. Although the current "Administrative measures" do not mention the *śikṣamāṇā* ordination explicitly, they nevertheless advise that women should practice and study for two years after being tonsured, in contrast with the one year suggested for men (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2019, p. 12). Moreover, between 2014 and 2021, five calls for dual ordination ceremonies, out of fifty-five, specifically mentioned that female applicants should have taken the *śikṣamāṇā* precepts in order to register. Most of them required applicants to have spent at least two years training at a temple before applying (Chonghe 2022). Although there is still a long way to go before standardization, Chiu and Heirman's research suggests that this practice is now increasingly common in Chinese Buddhist nunneries (Chiu and Heirman 2014, p. 260), and the multiplication of references to the additional two years of training for female monastics indeed testifies to its popularity.

One other step that the Puhsou temple promotes is the bodhisattva ordination. Because of the rigorous discipline of the mind that it requires, it is usually considered to be an advanced step in the monastic career, only found in the Mahāyāna tradition. During the ceremony, the already ordained *bhikṣuṇī* (or *bhikṣu*) takes ten major and forty-eight minor bodhisattva precepts, and sometimes receives incense burns (Chiu 2019, pp. 204–5). Once again, Rurui, and one of her assistants relaying her views, seem to think that this requires strict training:

> [ . . . ] those who have just [ . . . ] received the full ordination shouldn't get the bodhisattva ordination immediately. Because you know, the bodhisattva ordination, especially the female one [ . . . ], is very detailed, much more difficult to observe. So if one doesn't have any basic training, [ . . . ] one tends to make mistakes. So [Rurui] wants the female monastics to lay a very good foundation for the "*bhikkhuni*" education [ . . . ]. Basically, those "*bhikkhuni*" should be educated, should be trained in a very careful way.[34]

According to the above quote, bodhisattva ordination is necessary to receive what is perceived as "proper" Buddhist education and thus become a monastic beyond reproach—

one that can make "no mistake". As these precepts are not, to my knowledge, gender-specific, it also seems particularly odd that my informant would stress their importance for "females" and associate them with "*bhikkhuni*" education, differentiating *bhikṣuṇī*s from *bhikṣu*s even when there is no difference to make. An explanation might lie in the fact that bodhisattva precepts are reputed particularly difficult to observe. As such, *bhikṣuṇī*s who would be willing and able to take them should be recognized as even more worthy, and ultimately be praised as experts in monastic discipline. Rurui's position on the matter, and that of her students, seems to gravitate once more towards providing *bhikṣuṇī*s with a chance to develop their spiritual cultivation and raise their status even further.

As this has proved to be somewhat of a delicate subject to ask about, it is difficult to know to which extent the bodhisattva ordination is first received as part of the triple-platform ordination system and then again later on, just as the *śrāmaṇerī* ordination. However, one other informant in Pushou temple, who in 2019 had just been ordained according to the triple-platform system, assured me that she had not yet taken the bodhisattva precepts. She planned to do it two years later, after studying for some time at the Institute of Buddhist Studies for Nuns, which she said was the expected thing to do. She would then receive bodhisattva ordination a second time, two years after full ordination. Thus, this process of combining Vinaya requirements with official expectations would also seem to apply to bodhisattva ordination, at least in the case of Pushou temple.

After Longlian and Tongyuan's mostly theoretical model, Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*s advocate for separating the different ordination procedures in time, and strive to make it work to complement the standardized system. Rurui, although not as prolific on this topic as her teachers, can be seen as an enforcer of their ideals, effectuating asymmetrical training in Vinaya studies while dealing with the evermore present regulations of monastic development. This distinct rigorous training lead Pushou temple to "establish a model"[35] and be recognized as "an advanced unit and a paragon of Buddhist practice among the PRC's nunneries"[36] (Péronnet 2021, pp. 135–36). By knowingly insisting on the *bhikṣuṇī*s' career being different from that of the *bhikṣu*s, Rurui and her peers give the female monastic community more time to study, cultivate, and perfect themselves. They ultimately position *bhikṣuṇī*s as easily identifiable religious specialists and scholars in possession of enough symbolic and material resources to access higher positions and legitimately act as representatives for the monastic community at large.

## 5. Conclusions: Subordination or Emancipation?

After looking into the asymmetrical aspects of ordination procedures, one can raise the issue that Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s seem to be promoting their subordination to *bhikṣu*s and encouraging gender inequality in an attempt to comply with the Vinaya and the *gurudharma*. The image that Pushou temple shows to the world, all the more visible during public rituals, is that of a temple full of competent, educated *bhikṣuṇī*s who still perpetuate a patriarchal vision of Buddhism through their rigorous approach to monastic discipline. Patriarchy in Buddhism is at least what scholars in gender and feminist studies wrote about at the end of the twentieth century (Gross 1981; Paul 1985; Willis 1985; Harris 1999), and what I first saw when confronted with this particular image. Promoting dual or *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations and, more generally, advocating for distinct procedures and practices for female monastics does seem to be putting them at a disadvantage. The number of opportunities female monastics are presented with, the number of candidates for dual ordination in recent years, the issue of representation, and the number of precepts and training years, certainly attest to the overwhelming presence of asymmetry in Chinese Buddhism.

However, we should move beyond these first impressions to see that the distinction between *bhikṣu*s' and *bhikṣuṇī*s' experiences is not necessarily synonymous with subordination and can be actively sought after. *Bhikṣuṇī*s like Yinkong (印空 1921–) fight for equal opportunities and instruction by offering higher education to *bhikṣuṇī*s, sometimes creating asymmetry of their own by encouraging longer years of study that ultimately allow *bhikṣuṇī*s to be more knowledgeable than *bhikṣu*s (Campo 2020, pp. 264–80; Campo

Forthcoming, p. 13). Advancing *bhikṣuṇī*s' knowledge and status was always the goal behind the creation of the Mount Wutai Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies, but also, perhaps more surprisingly so, behind the promotion of asymmetrical ordination procedures by Rurui and Pushou temple. In doing so, Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*s conform to the standardized ordination system recognized by the state and Vinaya regulations, and therefore are legitimating their place as "properly" ordained interlocutors to the official institutions and to the saṅgha. This "double legitimacy" process participates in them finding their place in Chinese society, improving their image and status, and ultimately seeking positions equivalent to those occupied by *bhikṣu*s. What was passed down to Rurui through Longlian and Tongyuan's networks, what provides Pushou temple with a sense of continuity, is the will to restore a form of orthodoxy for female monastics and, quite paradoxically, to promote *bhikṣuṇī*s as religious specialists and scholars with qualifications equal to or even higher than *bhikṣu*s. Thus, contrary to what one might think at first, and although it does play on asymmetry, the concrete model set up by Longlian, advocated by Tongyuan, and implemented by Rurui, does not aim at perpetuating subordination or a patriarchal view of Buddhism but at elevating, or dare I say emancipating *bhikṣuṇī*s. That is not to say that institutional inferiority does not exist in Chinese Buddhism or that the current system is not informed by a history of gender discrimination, but that one should definitely take into account the various solutions devised to remedy it, besides fighting it head-on. Moreover, *bhikṣuṇī*s are active on several fronts and find additional ways to thrive within this somewhat conservative environment. One such way is higher education. The model they offered, and still offer, is then a dynamic process which aims to find a balance between traditional practices and a modern vision of the position of women in Buddhism.

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## Notes

1 I will use the Sanskrit term "*bhikṣuṇī*s" throughout this paper, to refer to fully-ordained nuns from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, unless indicated otherwise.

2 The original version of this paper was first presented at the "Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education" Conference, which was held in May 2022 at the Università degli Studi di Perugia. It was first drafted as part of collaborative paper entitled "Assessing the Emergence and Impact of Nuns Dual Ordination in New Era China", written together with Ester Bianchi (see her contribution to this Special Issue).

3 On Longlian and Tongyuan, see among others Wen (1991), Li (1992), Qiu (1997), Bianchi (2017), Péronnet (2020).

4 The triple-platform ordination system dates back to the early 17th century and was widespread during the Republican era, before being chosen as the only standardized ordination system in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC). However, this is not the case in Taiwan, and even though the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China has been recommended it since the 1950s, other procedures are still used (Bianchi 2019). Some Taiwanese temples, such as Nanlin nunnery (南林尼僧苑), confer *śrāmaṇera* or *śrāmaṇerī*, full and bodhisattva ordinations on separate occasions.

5 The five basic precepts are as follows: one should abstain from 1. killing other sentient beings, 2. stealing, 3. engaging in sexual activity, 4. lying, 5. consuming alcohol. The five following ones prohibit 6. eating at inappropriate times, 7. using ornaments, perfumes, ointments, 8. watching or engaging in shows, dancing, singing, 9. sleeping on high or luxurious beds, 10. receiving gold and silver.

6 This is according to the *prātimokṣa* of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya is one of three Vinayas still in use today, the one on which the Chinese Buddhist tradition is based. Within this body of texts is the *prātimokṣa*, a set of rules that the Buddha first listed to answer what he considered faults and that now regulate monastic life. About the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya see Lekshe Tsomo (1996); Heirman (2002).

7 There are ten major (*shi chong jie* 十重戒) and forty-eight minor (*sishiba qing jie* 四十八轻戒) bodhisattva precepts, that are only to be found in the Mahāyāna tradition (Chiu 2019, pp. 204–5). These precepts mainly come from an apocryphal text from the 5th century, the Brahmā's net sūtra (*Fanwang jing* 梵网经), and might also be called Brahmā's net precepts (*fanwang jie* 梵网戒) or Mahāyāna precepts (*dasheng jie* 大乘戒). The ten major precepts include the five basic ones, and add that one should abstain from 6. spreading the saṅgha's faults, 7. congratulating oneself or speaking ill about others, 8. being miserly, 9. harboring anger, 10. speaking ill about the Three Jewels. Infringing any of these is a first class infraction (*pārājika*) and will result in the transgressor being expelled from the monastic community (Heirman 2009, p. 83).

8 According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, the *Śikṣamāṇā* has to follow six rules (*liufa* 六法): abstain from 1. engaging in sexual intercourse, 2. stealing, 3. killing other beings, 4. lying about one's spiritual achievements, 5. eating at improper times, 6. drinking alcohol (Heirman 2002, pp. 67–75). Although the *Śikṣamāṇā* only has six rules to follow (as opposed to ten for *śrāmaṇerī*), she also has to learn and observe all the precepts for *bhikṣuṇī*s as per the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, something that was also mentioned to me by one of my informants who had just received the full ordination. Moreover, any transgression during this particular period would mean that the *Śikṣamāṇā* has to start over again, whereas only a confession is required during the novitiate. In that sense, the *Śikṣamāṇā* can be seen as a step forward on the path to nunhood. See Heirman (2008, pp. 133–34), and Chiu and Heirman (2014, pp. 258–60).

9 For a list of these eight fundamental rules, refer to Heirman (2002, pp. 64–65), but also to Schneider (2013) or Wijayaratna (1991) for different formulations. They can also be found directly at the source, in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, by looking under T no.1428, 22: 923a22–b21 on the CBETA website (CBETA 2016). As they validate the subordination of *bhikṣuṇībhikṣuī*s to *bhikṣubhikṣu*s and ratify institutional inequality within Buddhism, they are largely debated today and their authenticity is questioned, especially by Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī*s (Chen 2011).

10 Numbers published in 2015 by the SARA used to appear on a database that listed all officially registered religious sites. Although the SARA was discontinued in 2018, the database could still be accessed up until very recently at the following address: http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjhdcsjbxx/index.jhtml (last accessed on 20 April 2020), but the website is now obsolete.

11 Created in 1929, the BCA was the BAC's predecessor and the most influential Buddhist Association until 1949, when it moved to Taiwan. Its goal is to create a collective identity among Buddhists, and build an official image that satisfies the expectations of modern society. An elitist institution, it has always been a place to produce, distribute, and appropriate symbolic power (Ji 2015).

12 According to personal discussions I have had with other scholars in Buddhist studies, most triple-platform ordination ceremonies would seem to ordain more people than the actual number set by official regulations. We should at least add fifty people to the official quotas per ordination ceremony. Let us take the year 2019—the last year before ordination numbers plummeted due to the COVID 19 pandemic—as an example: taking into account these additional fifty participants per ceremony, *bhikṣu*s' ordinations would amount to 4850, and *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations to 2800, which would bring the total to 7650. There is a difference of almost 1000 people between official numbers and this estimate, which would suggest that the practice of disregarding quotas is still very much alive today, and that the authorities are voluntarily downplaying Buddhist engagement. However, this does not influence the proportion of *bhikṣuṇī*s' ordinations per year.

13 "第六条 传授比丘尼戒一律实行二部僧授戒制度，传授本法尼戒应在尼众寺院进行。" (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2019, p. 11).

14 "第十一条 [ . . . ]（五） 同期传授二部僧戒应有二座寺院作为传戒场所，分别为男众寺院和尼众寺院。" (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2019, p. 11).

15 As of today, temples that want to hold official triple-platform ordination ceremonies have to submit an official request to the local Buddhist Association. Only when their request has been duly examined and approved by the local Religious Affairs Department can they act as ordination platforms. For instance, according to Wen (2012, p. 35) only sixteen temples were approved as ordination platforms in 2009, among which six were temples for *bhikṣuṇī*s. According to my own data, nineteen temples acted as platforms in 2019, among which seven were temples for *bhikṣuṇī*s. The list of all officially sanctioned ordination platforms appears on Chonghe (2022).

16 In Taiwan, women have been ordained in large numbers after the ordination system was established in 1953. Since then, the number of female candidates has systematically been two to three times higher than the number of male ones, and as a consequence *bhikṣuṇī*s represent 75% of the monastic population (Li 2000; DeVido 2010).

17 That is, only when referring to communities of *bhikṣuṇī*s residing within the physical space of the temple. Much larger ones do exist, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, gathered around religious buildings in large camps of makeshift huts. In Yachen Gar for instance, located in the Sichuan province, West of the city of Chengdu, the "monastery" or "camp" hosted around 10,000 Tibetan Buddhist nuns in 2018, according to unofficial figures (Oostveen 2020).

18 Rurui is, in fact, the "supervisor", "administrator" or "head *bhikṣuṇī*" of Pushou temple, from the Chinese term *zhuchi* 住持, literally "dweller and sustainer of the dharma". She is not called a *fangzhang* 方丈 however, a term historically used in Chan Buddhism to refer to the abbot's quarters, and now used to refer to the male head of a monastery. To my knowledge, Longlian was the only *bhikṣuṇī* from the modern and contemporary era to be called a *fangzhang*, even though she wasn't officially one.

19 Rurui's record is available on the BAC's website (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2015b). See also the webpage listing all members of committees for the Ninth Council of the BAC (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2015a).

20 In addition to scientific literature, I have been gathering biographical information about Rurui online on Pushou temple's website (Pushou Temple 2019), or onsite on pamphlets, and caught glimpses of her life during formal and informal interviews.

21 This information was given to me by one of my informants, but can also be found on Pushou temple's official WeChat account as well as on various websites.

22 Both procedures existed in mainland China but were never widespread in nunneries of the Chinese tradition. Dual ordination was first introduced in China in 433 by Sri-Lankan *bhikṣuṇī*s and later promoted by Vinaya specialists, although rarely used in the course of the centuries. Only during the Republican era was it advocated for by eminent Buddhist masters as the only orthodox ordination procedure for *bhikṣuṇī*s, and was restored as such by Longlian in 1982. The *śikṣamāṇā* ordination suffered a similar fate. It is part of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, but historical sources suggest it was never common among Chinese nunneries (Heirman 2008, pp. 133–34). Although not included in the standardized system, *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations have been established by Longlian and her disciples together with dual ordination and is now more widespread than ever.

23 "[ . . . ] 就要号召全体尼众起来建十方道场。". This particular quote is from a speech Tongyuan made to her disciples in 1981, and appears on Pushou temple's website (Pushou Temple 2020). A temple of the ten directions (*shifang conglin* 十方丛林) is a specific category of temple also called "public", usually big in size and belonging to the broader monastic community. The ten directions are the four cardinal directions, the inter-cardinal ones, along with the zenith and the nadir, meaning this particular type of temple would choose the abbot or abbess not from within the lineage or tonsure family but from the outside or from any "direction".

24 A slogan that can be found in several texts about Pushou temple, for instance in Zhou (2012, p. 55), and on Pushou temple's website (Pushou Temple 2020).

25 Cizhou is an eminent *bhikṣu* who was particularly active in the first part of the 20th century, a Vinaya specialist. He took part in a movement to revive Vinaya practices long forgotten in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, including ordination procedures (Campo 2017). However, not much has been written on him, and the reader could refer to his own work (Cizhou 2004).

[26] Longlian's master was Nenghai (能海 1886–1967), and the one who tasked her to restore dual ordination procedures for *bhikṣuṇī*s. Just as Cizhou, he was considered an expert in Vinaya, which he also taught, and advocated for a rigorous approach to monastic discipline. On Nenghai, see Bianchi (2009) and Wen (2003).

[27] This figure was made using Palladio, a web-based visualization tool developed by the Humanities + Design research lab from Stanford University, available at https://hdlab.stanford.edu/palladio/, accessed on 26 July 2022. Data on the educational background of these particular *bhikṣuṇī*s was collected from various websites, from WeChat, from secondary sources, or even from exchanges with other scholars, before being entered into a table.

[28] As Rurui was unavailable at the time of my visit, questions were transmitted to her in writing on 8 August 2019, and she answered in writing as well, on 19 September 2019.

[29] This document is entitled "Pushou temple's 'Three-Plus-One' project" (普寿寺三加一) and lists the specificities of all institutions contributing to this project, namely the Pushou temple, its branch-temple in Taiyuan the Dacheng temple (大乘寺), and the Bodhi Love association (*Puti aixin xiehui* 菩提爱心协会). It was given to me by a Dacheng *bhikṣuṇī* on June 2nd, 2017. About the "Three-Plus-One" project, see Péronnet (2020, pp. 141–42) and Mao (2015).

[30] The *gurudharma* and various Vinaya texts, including the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya observed in mainland China, do mention a study period of two years before a *Śikṣamāṇā* can ask for ordination (Heirman 2008). However, there seems to be no more detailed information on the scheduling of this period, leaving it open to interpretation. When in the field, it has been brought to my attention that Pushou temple *Śikṣamāṇā* would only need to let two Chinese New Years pass, rather than taking the precepts for two whole years from date to date. If one took the *śikṣamāṇā* precepts right before a Chinese New Year, she could theoretically receive full ordination immediately after the second if she was considered to be ready, thus having only trained as a *Śikṣamāṇā* for a little more than a year.

[31] The pali term *bhikkhuni* is used by my informant to refer to fully ordained Chinese Buddhist nuns and their 348 precepts.

[32] This quote has been taken from a formal interview in English with a Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*, recorded on 16 August 2019. I took the liberty of polishing the English and taking out the repetitions, to make the content more accessible to the reader without loosing the original meaning.

[33] However, even now, every nunnery in mainland China has not adopted this probationary period. As one of my informants puts it, "it seems very difficult for a lot of temples and female monastic to [include] this training program, so a lot of temples will ignore this aspect."

[34] This quote has been taken from the same formal interview in English with a Pushou *bhikṣuṇī*, recorded on 16 August 2019, than the aforementioned one. Here, the informant not only gives her own opinion, but as a spokesperson to Rurui, she also wishes to convey her teacher's view on bodhisattva ordination.

[35] "创立风范" (Bei 1994, p. 30).

[36] "全国尼众寺院的先进单位和道风的典范" (Yang 2011, p. 23).

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# Reading Equality into Asymmetry: Dual Ordination in the Eyes of Modern Chinese *Bhikṣuṇī*s

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**Abstract:** The "Dual Ordination" (*erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒) is a *Vinaya*-based ordination procedure introduced to China from Śrī Laṅkā in the fifth century; in the late imperial period it came to be included in the main ordination system. It stipulates that full ordination for nuns is to be carried out first in front of an assembly of *bhikṣuṇī*s and then another assembly of *bhikṣu*s. However, contrary to this stipulation, ordinations have mainly been conferred to women by *bhikṣu*s alone in China since the tenth century. The Dual Ordination procedures became a topic of discussion during the Republic of China (1911–1949) with the result that it was eventually reintroduced on the Mainland at the beginning of the 1980s, mainly due to the efforts of *bhikṣuṇī*s Longlian 隆蓮 (1909–2006) and Tongyuan 通願 (1913–1991). The article traces the roots of the restoration of Dual Ordinations during the Republican era and provides an account of their history since the 1980s. Finally, Longlian's views about *bhikṣuṇī* ordination are discussed. The objective is to probe the historical and ideological context for the reestablishment of this ordination system in modern and contemporary China, which ultimately strengthened the role and position of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s.

**Keywords:** Dual Ordination; *erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒; *bhikṣuṇī* ordination; Longlian 隆蓮; Tongyuan 通願

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> A boat of compassion from the heavenly sea of the Land of the Lion comes from far away to set up the Dual Ordination platform. Strictly purifying the *Vinaya*, the jade flute of the Discipline blows away the dust of defilement.
> 天海慈航 獅子國萬里遠來 建二部戒壇嚴淨毗尼 玉律共調離垢地 (Longlian)

## 1. Introduction

In this couplet, hung in the Tiexiang nunnery 鐵像寺 (Chengdu, Sichuan), Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* Longlian 隆蓮 (1909–2006) describes the event celebrated as the beginning of a proper female monastic lineage in China,[1] i.e., the introduction of the procedures for full ordination from Śrī Laṅkā in the fifth century.[2] The procedure is known as "Dual Ordination" (*erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒), and its origins are traditionally traced back to the very beginnings of the female monastic order (*bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*) at the time of the Buddha. According to the traditional narrative, Buddha Śākyamuni agreed to the requests of his aunt and foster mother Mahāprajāpatī (Ch. Daaidao 大愛道, which, significantly, is reflected in the name of Longlian's other nunnery, Aidao hall 愛道堂) and admitted women into the monastic order, provided that *bhikṣuṇī*s respected the *gurudharma*s (*ba jingfa* 八敬法), eight rules never to be transgressed. These rules, which have been met with a new surge of interest in modern China,[3] were meant to prevent the disappearance of Buddhism from the world after the creation of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* and clearly subjugated *bhikṣuṇī*s to the *bhikṣusaṃgha*.[4] In the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka (*Sifenlü* 四分律: *T* no. 1428), the standard *Vinaya* reference in China since the seventh century, the fourth rule of the *gurudharma*s reads: "After having been trained in the six rules for two years as a probationer (*śikṣamāṇā*), the ordination ceremony of a *bhikṣuṇī* has to be carried out in both *saṃgha*s" (*T* no. 1428: 923b8–10, tr. Heirman 1997, p. 36). The Dual Ordination procedure thus

stipulates that nuns' ordination be divided into two sequential steps, and that it be carried out in succession first in front of an assembly of *bhikṣuṇī*s (fully ordained women) and then of *bhikṣu*s (fully ordained men).[5]

In contemporary China, Dual Ordinations are conferred as part of the "Triple Platform Ordination" (*santan dajie* 三壇大戒), a system which includes the bestowal, in succession and during a unique ordination period, of the ten precepts of the *śrāmaṇera*/*śrāmaṇerikā* (male and female "novices"),[6] of the hundreds of precepts for *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s,[7] and finally of the Bodhisattva precepts.[8] This system was delineated within the Nanshan *Vinaya* tradition (*Nanshan lü* 南山律), which is notably based on the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka, as late as the seventeenth century.[9]

As for the dual procedures for *bhikṣuṇī*s, they were introduced from Śrī Laṅkā in the fifth century but mostly discarded after the Song dynasty (960–1279).[10] At the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Shuyu 書玉, a *Vinaya* master belonging to the same lineage as the masters who conceived the Triple Platform Ordination system, authored the "Dual Ordination Procedures" (*Erbuseng shoujie yishi* 二部僧受戒儀式, *X* no. 1134), inscribing this early procedure for *bhikṣuṇī* full ordination within the major ordination system of late imperial China.[11] In recent years, Shuyu's text has become the principal reference for Dual Ordinations in China again. However, throughout the Qing dynasty and during the Republic of China (1911–1949), ordinations continued to be conferred to the *bhikṣuṇī*s by only ten *bhikṣu* masters, and thus in disregard of the dual procedures. It should be noted that, in contrast to other *Vinaya* traditions, the Chinese tradition considers ordinations carried out by *bhikṣu*s alone to be valid, as both Guṇavarman (Qiunabamo 求那跋摩) (367–431), a *Vinaya* master involved in the first Dual Ordination, and Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), the supposed initiator of the Nanshan *Vinaya* tradition, believed that such ordinations produced a minor offense on the part of the *bhikṣu*s conferring the precepts without invalidating the ordination of the *bhikṣuṇī*s undergoing the procedure.[12]

The eight *gurudharma*s also include a reference to the figure of the *śikṣamāṇā*, the two-year female probationer of whom there exists no male counterpart.[13] *Śikṣamāṇā* ordination is a step eventually leading to full ordination and should be conferred at the minimum age of eighteen. However, as Heirman (2008) has shown, this figure was never common in imperial China. On the other hand, it was discussed and referenced by *Vinaya* masters during the Republican Era, and it has partially been revived since the 1980s both in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and in Taiwan (Heirman and Chiu 2012; Chiu and Heirman 2014).

These rules for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination became a topic of discussion among Buddhist circles during the Republican era, but they were implemented in Taiwan in the 1970s (Li Forthcoming) and in Mainland China only in the 1980s. The latter was mainly due to the efforts of two prominent *bhikṣuṇī*s: the aforementioned Longlian (1909–2006), who was based in Sichuan, and her life-long friend Tongyuan 通願 (1913–1991), from Wutaishan.[14] The first *bhikṣuṇī* ordination after the Cultural Revolution, organized by Longlian and Tongyuan, was conferred according to the Dual Ordination system and was held successively in Chengdu's Tiexiang nunnery and Wenshu temple 文殊院 in 1982. Significantly, the candidates involved were all *śikṣamāṇā*s, as it was also Longlian and Tongyuan's intention to (re-)establish this *Vinaya* figure within contemporary Chinese Buddhism.

After this, Dual Ordinations progressively became the most common procedure for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Mainland China. Since the year 2000, state regulations have clearly stipulated that *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations must follow Dual Ordination procedures. Ordinations conferred by *bhikṣu*s alone have thus become illegal in the PRC (Bianchi 2019). As for the *śikṣamāṇā*, even if it has not become a rule, this figure is nowadays less exceptional than before. Since *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination is to be conferred before the *śikṣamāṇā* one, and since the latter involves a probationary period of two years before full ordination, *śikṣamāṇā*s participating in Triple Platform Ordinations retake the *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts as a renewal. In all cases (a woman living in a nunnery without any formal ordination, a *śrāmaṇerikā* or a

*śikṣamāṇā*), the time a woman spends in a nunnery between tonsure and full ordination is meant to serve as a training period.[15] Finally, today, *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination is mostly bestowed by an *upādhyāyinī* (female master of the discipline),[16] rather than by a *bhikṣu*, as it was a common habit in the past (although there are still cases of male tonsure masters for women).[17]

Nowadays, the theoretical career for a woman wishing to become a *bhikṣuṇī* in Mainland China thus consists of the following steps:[18]

First, going forth (*chujia* 出家, *pravrajyā*): a female candidate must find a nunnery and have her head tonsured by a tonsure master, most often an *upādhyāyinī*; in many cases, she also receives the ten precepts, even if it is not unusual for *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination to take place at the time of full ordination, in which case the ten precepts are only studied beforehand, in preparation for their formal bestowal.[19]

Second, two-year probationary period (optional): upon reaching age eighteen, the female candidate may receive the six *śikṣamāṇā* precepts, which she must observe for two years; transgressions oblige her to start the probationary period over again;[20] this step is preceded by the *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination.

Third, full ordination (*juzujie* 具足戒, *upasaṃpadā*): from age twenty, the candidate can apply for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, which involves the dual procedures and, as part of the Triple Platform Ordination, is preceded by *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination (or its renewal, in the event that the candidate has already received it) and followed by the bestowal of the Bodhisattva precepts (which turns the newly ordained into a 'Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇī*').

In the present article, I will trace the roots of the restoration of Dual Ordinations during the Republican era and provide an account of the early history of these procedures in the PRC. Due to her key role in the process, I will also present Longlian's view about *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Fur the purpose of this study, I refer only to Mainland China (for Taiwan, see Li Forthcoming), from the 1930s to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The contemporary legacy of these ideas and events in the PRC is discussed in Amandine Péronnet's contribution in this Special Issue. My objective is to probe the historical and ideological context in which the Dual Ordination system was revived, in an attempt to explain how its promotion ended up in strengthening the role of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s. As we will see, certain prominent modern Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s (as well as their male masters) affirmed soteriological gender equality, but also embraced forms of gender asymmetry between female and male Buddhist monastics by reviving the eight *gurudharma*s and the Dual Ordination system, which entails an additional probationary step for female monastics and mandates the presence of both orders at the moment of full ordination for nuns. They endorsed this in the name of orthodoxy (*rufa* 如法, lit. "according to the Dharma") and legitimacy (*hefa* 合法, which more closely refers to a legalistic interpretation of the *Vinaya*) so as to comply with the regulations of the monastic protocol as established by the Buddha. Notwithstanding the implied inequality of an asymmetric treatment of male and female monastics, this ultimately served to raise the status and prestige of *bhikṣuṇī*s in the *saṃgha* and in society.

## 2. The Emergence of the Issue of *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination in Republican China

*Bhikṣuṇī* ordination and lineages were a debated topic in China during the 1930s and 1940s (Wen 1991, p. 32). Not only did some of the most prominent male *Vinaya* masters of the era interest themselves in ordination procedures, including Dual Ordinations, but the topic was also addressed by scholar *bhikṣuṇī*s trained in the new female Buddhist Academies which offered modern Buddhist education to lay and monastic women in Republican China.[21] The background against which these discussions took place was provided by some modern trends within Chinese Buddhism, i.e., the development of concerns for gender equality (Kang 2016) and the emergence of a *Vinaya* movement, which claimed disciplinary strictness and often took on a text-oriented approach in the name of orthodoxy (Bianchi 2020). In the following section, I will examine both trends, in an

attempt to illuminate how these two separate approaches contributed to the emergence of the Dual Ordination issue.

### *2.1. Gender Equality and the Foundation of the* Bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*s*

The issue of gender equality was raised by well-educated *bhikṣuṇī*s and laywomen.[22] It was part of a larger movement that was questioning the role and place of women in Chinese society at large, and, as Yuan Yuan has demonstrated in her case study on the female Buddhist Academies of Wuhan, it "fitted into the broader women's liberation discourse and the national modernization project" (Yuan 2009, p. 376). These prominent Buddhist women distanced themselves from traditional Buddhist views on females and claimed a leading role for women in the monastic community as well as in society as a whole. To quote Elise DeVido, "they argued that not only do both women and men possess Buddha nature and can become enlightened, but that females should enjoy equality with males whether in the monastic community or in society at large, and women should be liberated from their constraints" (DeVido 2015, p. 78).

Gender equality in Buddhism was also, and indeed first, backed by certain modern male Buddhists. Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), for instance, the well-known layman who initiated some of the most prominent reforms in the field of Buddhist education and publishing, supported *bhikṣuṇī* education, republished many Buddhist scriptures related to women,[23] and advocated a change in the position and role of women within the Buddhist hierarchy (He 1997, pp. 204–5; Valussi 2019, pp. 160–61). Among the scriptures he rediscovered and distributed was the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" (*Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳, *T* no. 2063), a collection bound to attract much interest within female Buddhist circles as it provided modern *bhikṣuṇī*s with exemplary portraits from the past. Since it also offered details on the history of the foundation and early development of the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*, this collection became an important reference for the *bhikṣuṇī*s wishing to attest to the legitimacy of their monastic status.[24]

Significantly, the reformist *bhikṣu* Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), who like Yang promoted the first female Buddhist Academies, was not an advocate of the monastic choice for women, though he maintained that Buddhism did not discriminate against them—as testified by the many enlightened women mentioned in Buddhist scriptures—and encouraged them to serve the Buddhist cause as lay followers.[25] Taixu addressed the topic in a short article published in 1935 in the Buddhist journal *Haichao yin* 海潮音, which deserves to be quoted here as it offers his view about the establishment of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* in India and about the Buddha's request that *bhikṣuṇī*s respect the eight *gurudharma*s.

Taixu reports some of the complaints he received about the gender inequality embedded among the seven groups of Buddhist disciples (i.e., *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *śrāmaṇera*, *śrāmaṇerikā*, *śikṣamāṇā*, and male and female lay practitioners, respectively *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*). The argument of Taixu's interlocutor is that ancient Christianity was also unequal towards women, but that in modern times, Christians have developed gender equality, while Chinese Buddhism has not yet adjusted to the equity policies of a modern society. As a result, the interlocutor concludes, in the future there will be no more *bhikṣuṇī*s in China. Taixu replies:

> In Buddhism, there is no inequality between laymen and laywomen, *upāsaka*s and *upāsikā*s . . . But within the monastic community, the gap dividing *śrāmaṇerikā*s, *śikṣamāṇā*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s from *śrāmaṇera*s and *bhikṣu*s is no less than the distance between heaven and the abyss. Why so? The original intention of Śākyamuni Buddha while leading the Buddhist *saṃgha* was that no woman should go forth and join the community, so that the *saṃgha* treasure could be upheld with purity and discipline. But the Buddha's aunt, who had great kindness for the Buddha, strongly insisted on going forth. The Buddha resisted steadily but could not stop her requests and finally imposed strict limitations through the eight *gurudharma*s, also adding some 'secret' precepts. Fundamentally, he wanted to make sure that women knew of the difficulties [of going forth] and encourage [their] withdrawal,

> so that his aunt may be the only case capable of becoming a female monastic. This is the reason why, as of today, in Tibet and many other places there are no Buddhist female monastics. . . . As for the *bhikṣuṇī* institution, it is absolutely necessary to be strict, first because what was established by the Buddha cannot be changed, and second because if no woman ever became a *bhikṣuṇī* again, this would be fully in compliance with the Buddha's intention.
>
> 佛教中在家男女之優蒲塞夷，絶無何不平等處 . . . . . 然在出家僧團中之沙彌尼、式叉摩那尼、比丘尼，以視沙彌、比丘，誠不啻天淵之隔。若云何以致此？則釋迦佛原意，住持佛教僧團中，誠不欲有女子出家來加入，以成其純淨律儀之住持僧寶。無如與佛有大恩之姨母强求出家，力拒不絶，乃嚴限制以八敬法且加密戒條，本在令知難而退；或使能出家為尼者，絶無僅有 . . . . . 至比丘尼制則斷斷乎須嚴格，一因佛制不可改，二因若能沒有女人作比丘尼，尤合佛心也。(Taixu 1935)

Taixu's understanding of the story of Mahāprajāpatī is in line with a received tradition, which "tells us that soteriologically women are not inferior to men. Socially and institutionally however they are" (Heirman 2001, p. 284). Taixu seems to blame the Buddha's foster mother for having forced the Buddha into creating a female monastic order, which he would rather have avoided. Finally, Taixu proves to be aware of the absence of a *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* in other Buddhist traditions, including the Tibetan, and seems to wish the same for China.[26] In this light, the strict respect of the eight *gurudharma*s, including the rules regarding *śikṣamāṇā*s and Dual Ordinations, is given as unavoidable.

A different reading of the *gurudharma*s was provided by Hengbao 恒寶, a prominent scholar *bhikṣuṇī* from Wuhan. Hengbao, the founder and abbess of the Wuhan Pure Bodhi Vihāra (Puti jingshe 菩提精舍), published an article in 1937 on "The Buddhist view on women" (*Fojiao nüxing guan* 佛教女性觀) in the "Dedicated Journal for Female Buddhists" (*Fojiao nüzhong zhuankan* 佛教女衆專刊), the first journal for female Buddhists in China (Hengbao 1937, p. 19), in which she explains that the *gurudharma*s were conceived by the Buddha not because of an alleged discrimination against women, but as a response to the social conditions of the time, "for the sake of [dispelling] oppositions and criticism" (Yuan 2009, p. 389).

This single issue of the "Dedicated Journal for Female Buddhists" (the publication was discontinued because of the Japanese occupation) collected a number of essays by Wuhan *bhikṣuṇī*s, some of which address, more or less directly, female ordination. In her article, Hengbao herself recalls the history of the foundation of the female monastic order by the Buddha, revealing her acquaintance with many canonical versions of the event. Instead of only mentioning Mahāprajāpatī's insistence and the Buddha's final surrender, Hengbao enriches her narrative with many details, casting a nuanced, if not positive light on it. In the received narrative, the role of the Buddha's disciple Ānanda is prominent; Hengbao reports Ānanda's mention of the kindness professed by Mahāprajāpatī towards Śākyamuni Buddha, the statement by the Buddha that women can achieve the four fruits of the path (i.e., stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and *arhat*), and the fact that Buddhas in the past had also four assemblies of disciples, i.e., *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*, etc.[27] Hengbao also explains that, according to the *Vinaya* commentary *Shanjian lun* 善見論 (*T* no. 1642),[28] Buddhism will still last one thousand years upon acceptance of the eight *gurudharma*s, instead of only half of its due duration after the creation of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* (Hengbao 1937, pp. 19–20).[29]

As for the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*, the principal source of inspiration for modern *bhikṣuṇī*s was the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s". Changzhen 常真 (1937), for instance, in response to someone asking her information about the "beginning of the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*", cites Jingjian 淨檢 (ca. 292–361), whose biography is the first in the collection. This article, which is relevant for our topic because it treats both *śrāmaṇerikā* and *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations,[30] reports, nearly entirely and verbatim, the words by the Central Asian master Zhishan 智山, who was consulted on ordination matters by Jingjian's own

master Fashi 法始. The master explains that he could not bestow her ordination as he did not have the full texts of the *bhikṣuṇī* rules; however, he continues:

> To become a monastic, a female has the ten precepts, which she may receive from the *bhikṣu*s. At the same time, however, she should rely on a [female] monastic instructor to be trained in the precepts.
>
> 尼有十戒，必從比丘授，同時就要以和尚傳戒為依止。(Changzhen 1937, p. 68)[31]

Jingjian went forth and received the *śrāmaṇerikā* ten precepts together with twenty-four other candidates from Zhishan. Later, a text of rules and procedures for *bhikṣuṇī*s (from the *Vinaya* of the Mahāsānghika) reached China and was translated into Chinese. Thus, in the year 357, Jingjian and four of her fellow sisters received full ordination by the foreign *śramaṇa* Tanmojieduo 曇摩羯多 in Luoyang.

In reporting the case of Jingjian, described as the "first Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*", Changzhen shows acceptance of the validity of *śrāmaṇerikā* and *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations that are only bestowed by *bhikṣu*s, but she also points to the need of an *upādhyāyinī* for training a candidate in the precepts. At the same time, she also mentions that only ordinations conferred by the two assemblies should be considered fully legitimate (Changzhen 1937, p. 68).

Hengbao (1937, p. 20), on the other hand, records the first Dual Ordination, celebrated in the mid fifth century by *bhikṣuṇī*s from Śrī Laṅkā, as the "beginning of the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*".[32] She compares this first "formal" (*zhengshi* 正式) event with cases that occurred during earlier centuries, when Chinese women—such as Apan 阿潘, according to later sources the first female Buddhist monastic in Chinese history[33]—could only engage in monastic life through the practice of taking the three refuges, and could hence not be called *bhikṣuṇī*s. Implicitly, Hengbao also points to the irregularity of the one-*saṃgha* ordinations, such as Jingjian's, that were taking place before the first Dual Ordination.

The two articles by Hengbao and Changzhen show an interest in the origins and history of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* in India and China, as seen through a gender-equality concern and in search of exemplary figures from the past to look up to. The above quoted passages also convey a growing awareness of the legitimate procedures for female ordinations, a topic that was being debated by the most prominent *Vinaya* masters of the era.

### *2.2. The* Vinaya *Movement and* Bhikṣuṇī *Ordination*

The Republican era was also a time of *Vinaya* resurgence (Bianchi and Campo Forthcoming), and many insisted on the establishment of legitimate ordination procedures, i.e., procedures that were believed to have been stipulated and regulated by the Buddha himself in the *Vinaya* literature (Bianchi 2017b, p. 116). The irregularity of the ordination system for female monastics when compared with the requirements set up by the *Vinaya*s appeared evident to the *Vinaya* masters of the era, leading to a rediscovery of Dual Ordinations and, even if only to a minor degree, of the figure of the *śikṣamāṇā*.

For instance, in a lecture focused on monastic precepts, *Vinaya* master Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942) addressed both questions of the legitimacy of the female full ordination processes and of the lack of *śikṣamāṇā*s in Chinese Buddhism. Hongyi notes that the figure of the *śikṣamāṇā* was not known in China during his time, so much so that in the regions north of the Yangtze river, people mistakenly called unmarried Buddhist laywomen by that term. According to *Vinaya* rules, he clarifies, after receiving the ten precepts and at the age of eighteen, a *śrāmaṇerikā* should receive the *dharma* of a *śikṣamāṇā*, which lasts for two years and involves the study of the four *pārājika*s (grave offenses, ultimately corresponding to the first four of the six rules), of the six rules specific to this figure (*liufa* 六法), and of the other *Vinaya* rules and rituals.[34] At the end of the (unbroken) two-year training period, when she turns twenty and reaches the age for full ordination, a *śikṣamāṇā* can receive *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. As for the latter question, Hongyi recognizes that:

> According to the Buddhist system, *bhikṣuṇī* ordination should be taken twice: first, "basic *dharma*" is bestowed by the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*; then, the *bhikṣu saṃgha* is

> invited to bestow formal ordination. The precepts are properly received only at the time of the formal ordination by the *bhikṣu*s. However, this procedure has no longer been applied since the Southern Song dynasty [1127–1279].
>
> 依據佛制，比丘尼戒要重覆受兩次；先依尼僧授本法，後請大僧正授，但正得戒時，是在大僧正授時；此法南宋以後已不能實行了。(Hongyi 1935)

Remarkably, as Birnbaum (Forthcoming) has pointed out, on the same occasion Hongyi also came to question the legitimacy of the ordination lineage of the Chinese *bhikṣusaṃgha*.[35]

It is clear from the above that Hongyi was well aware that in the case of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, the procedures prescribed by the *Vinaya* texts had not been implemented for at least one millennium. To my knowledge, however, he did not try to revive them.[36] The two *Vinaya* masters who played a decisive role in the actual implementation of the Dual Ordination system were Cizhou 慈舟 (1877–1957) and Nenghai 能海 (1886–1967).[37] Both masters planned to revive it, but "failed as conditions were not yet ripe at their time" (Zongxing 2019, p. 74). Their legacy was nevertheless taken over after the Maoist era by their two major female disciples, i.e., Tongyuan and Longlian, respectively.

Among the female disciples of *Vinaya* master Cizhou, *bhikṣuṇī*s Kaihui 開慧 and Shengyu 勝雨, together with Yinhe 印和, spearheaded the restoration of Beijing Tongjiao nunnery 通教寺 in 1941. Tongjiao nunnery, once a Ming dynasty temple, soon became a renowned and active *Vinaya* nunnery under the influence of Cizhou (DeVido 2015, p. 81). There they founded the Bajing Xueyuan 八敬學苑, a Buddhist school for *bhikṣuṇī*s significantly named after the eight *gurudharma*s. Tongyuan, who had received tonsure from master Cizhou in 1941 and had taken up residence in Tongjiao nunnery, was trained in this environment and was greatly influenced by both Cizhou and Kaihui, her principal female master, who was particularly engaged in establishing the Dual Ordination system (Wen 1991, p. 32).

According to his disciple Daoyuan 道源 (1900–1988),[38] Cizhou did confer Dual Ordination twice, in 1947 and 1955, at the Anyang Vihāra 安養精舍 in Beijing.[39] Tongyuan was reportedly involved in one of these events (Zongxing 2019, p. 74). To my knowledge, no other source confirms this information. However, considering the above, it is highly probable that Cizhou trained his female disciples from Tongjiao nunnery, including Tongyuan, for Dual Ordinations, irrespective of whether the ordination had taken place or not. Apparently, Tongyuan's knowledge of the procedures was so profound that Longlian decided to involve her as principal master of the discipline in the ordination she organized at the beginning of the 1980s.

Longlian, on the other hand, was introduced to Dual Ordination procedures by Nenghai. In terms of *Vinaya*, this Sino-Tibetan master referred to the Dharmaguptaka tradition (Bianchi 2021a). He insisted that all his disciples follow the rules equally regardless of their gender. However, at the same time he recognized gender asymmetry and stressed gender separation in his communities.[40] In his words:

> Male and female *saṃgha*s differ in nature and appearance, they differ in mind and action, thus the precepts must also be different. In reality, should there be no difference, then there is actual inequality, preventing us from seeing the great wisdom of the Buddha.
>
> 二部性相不同，心行不同，故戒亦應有別。若無分別，即真不平等，亦不足以見佛之大智慧也。(Zongxing 2019, pp. 74–75)

In his rigorous approach to the *Vinaya*, Nenghai believed that "women should study as *śikṣamāṇā*s and respect the six rules for two years" (有女須正學六法二年持)[41] and, like Cizhou, urged the re-establishment of Dual Ordinations. In 1937, Nenghai was organizing a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Wutai mountains, but he decided to postpone it because, as stated in his "Notes on ordinations" (*Chuanjie tonggao* 傳戒通告), he realized that "conditions for a proper *bhikṣuṇī* ordination were not yet ripe" (Ma 2015, p. 58). As his disciple Renjie 任傑

reported, a few years later, Nenghai expressed his concern about the fact that *bhikṣu*s were unable to instruct *bhikṣuṇī*s after ordination with these words:

> For a *bhikṣu* to bestow ordination to the *bhikṣuṇī*s and fail to instruct his (female) disciples after doing so is contrary to the Buddha's system and does not protect the Dharma.
>
> 比丘 . . . . . 傳比丘尼戒，傳戒後又不能教誡弟子，有違佛制，護法不容！ (Renjie 1987, p. 70)

We can thus infer that at the basis of Nenghai's interest in the Dual Ordination procedures there was both a concern about orthodoxy (compliance with the *Vinaya* scriptures) and a concern for the proper training and education of the *bhikṣuṇī*s once admitted into the *saṃgha*, which could only be carried out by a female master, or *upādhyāyinī*.[42] This process of reinstating the role of the *upādhyāyinī*, who should guide a female monastic for a period from her tonsure to the two years after ordination, was carried on by Longlian and has become a common practice in the present day PRC.

For the purpose of organizing a Dual Ordination, Nenghai invited the *Vinaya* master Guanyi 貫一 (1875–1954), abbot of the Baoguang monastery 寶光寺, to instruct *śrāmaṇerikā*s on the ordination procedures at Tiexiang nunnery in October 1948. Significantly, Nenghai asked Longlian, who at that time was residing at Tiexiang nunnery and had attended Guanyi's lectures, to impart the *śikṣamāṇā* ordination to the resident monastics; since she was monastically too young (she had only been ordained for eight years, instead of the required twelve), however, in the end Guanyi acted as master of the discipline (Qiu 1997, p. 239).[43] For Nenghai, this had to be the first step on the two-year path to full ordination. Longlian was chosen as the principal master for bestowing the precepts at the upcoming ordination ceremony (Dingzhi 1995, p. 37). It was the eve of the foundation of the PRC, and Nenghai's plan failed as the ordination was ultimately not carried out.[44] But he did not give up and tasked Longlian to take care of "resurrecting" (*huifu* 恢复) Dual Ordinations in the new-era China (Qiu 1997, p. 183). Due to historical circumstances, she was not able to do so before the early 1980s.

To sum up, Tongyuan and Longlian were instructed in Dual Ordination procedures by their own masters, both of whom were *Vinaya* experts, well before the two *bhikṣuṇī*s first met in Beijing's Tongjiao nunnery in 1955. That encounter signaled the beginning of their thirty-six-year-long friendship and created suitable conditions for their cooperation in establishing Dual Ordinations after the Maoist era. Through the establishment of legitimate ordination criteria, as well as the foundation of Institutes of Buddhist Studies, Tongyuan and Longlian significantly contributed to the evolution of the role and status of Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī*s in contemporary Mainland China.[45]

### 3. Assessing the Significance of Dual Ordinations in Post-Mao China

As we have seen, the first Dual Ordination of the modern era in Mainland China was organized by Longlian in Chengdu in the year 1982. This ordination involved only nine *śikṣamāṇā*s; in March 1987, twenty more *śikṣamāṇā*s, graduates from the Institute of Studies directed by Longlian at Tiexiang nunnery, took their turn.[46] As for Tongyuan, she organized the second Dual Ordination in 1984 at the Upper Huayan monastery 上華嚴寺, in Datong (Wen 1991, p. 33). Dual Ordination procedures gradually spread and eventually became the only legal system for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the PRC in the year 2000, serving as an integral part of the Triple Platform Ordination system.[47] In this concluding section, I will introduce some of the major aspects of the establishment of Dual Ordinations in the PRC since the 1980s, referring only to the Taiwanese case when it is relevant for the Mainland developments.[48] On the Mainland, the two *bhikṣuṇī*s who succeeded in advocating legitimate female ordination during the Republican era and in implementing them in post-Mao PRC were Tongyuan and Longlian. However, Tongyuan chose to keep a 'low-profile', and we do not have much information about her views. As she refrained from writing about her interpretation of Buddhist doctrines and practices, her opinions about

*bhikṣuṇī* ordination must be inferred from her actions and others' accounts.[49] Longlian, by contrast, was a very influential scholar *bhikṣuṇī* who authored numerous essays and books and frequently gave public talks and interviews; she also played a prominent political role as the first woman to hold a leadership position in the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). For this reason, I will focus mainly on Longlian in the following section.

### *3.1. "Resurrecting" Dual Ordinations in Mainland China*

Longlian was officially assigned the task of organizing the first *bhikṣuṇī* ordination of the new era in 1981, after a ban on ordinations that had lasted twenty-five years.[50] The task included the use of Dual Ordination procedures. This assignment came after she had formally requested to "resurrect" Dual Ordinations at the fourth meeting of the newly restored BAC (December 1980). Along with her renown as a scholar *bhikṣuṇī* and her political influence, Longlian's knowledge of the English language may have influenced the decision to involve her in this task, since, as will be explained below, PRC political authorities also perceived this ceremony as an attempt to re-establish the Sinhalese *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*, an example of the so-called 'Dharma diplomacy', i.e., the use of Buddhism for the development of international relations.

At the BAC meeting, Longlian met Tongyuan for the first time after the Cultural Revolution. She told her friend about her intention to resurrect Dual Ordinations, and the latter fully agreed with the plan (Qiu 1997, p. 174). In 1981, Longlian exchanged letters with Tongyuan, seeking her opinion and discussing the contents of and strategies for the ceremony (Zongxing 2019, p. 74). As a consequence, Tongyuan was appointed main *bhikṣuṇī* master of the discipline (*heshang ni* 和尚尼) at the upcoming ordination. The Dual Ordination ceremony took place in January 1982 in Tiexiang nunnery, where the precepts were conferred by ten *bhikṣuṇī* masters, and in Wenshu temple, where they were conferred by the *bhikṣu* masters.

The ordination announcement, published by the official journal of the BAC in February 1982, deserves to be quoted in full:

> Recently, the Wenshu temple in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, held a Dual Ordination ceremony for female candidates. The Buddhist Association of China has expressed its admiration. According to the Buddhist ordination rules, a female candidate must be ordained by the two assemblies before she can become an orthodox (*rufa*) *bhikṣuṇī*. In China, Dual Ordinations were first celebrated in the mid-fifth century in Nanjing by nineteen *bhikṣuṇī*s from the Kingdom of Ceylon (present-day Śrī Laṅkā) [headed by] Tiposalo (the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" name her Tiesaluo). The Wenshu temple Dual Ordination began on 9 December 1981, when the candidates entered the hall to study the rules and rituals. A total of twenty-one monastics participated in the ordination (including nine candidates and twelve advanced *bhikṣuṇī*s). The *bhikṣu* masters included Kuanlin 寬霖 as "master of the discipline", Xinji 心極 as "master of the formal act", Puchao 普超 as "instructor" and Chuanhua 傳華 and others as "witnesses". The *bhikṣuṇī*s had Tongyuan as "master of the discipline", Longlian as "master of the formal act", Dingjing 定靜 as "instructor" and Guojie 果戒 and others as "witnesses". The ceremony lasted for forty days and was successfully completed on 18 January 1982.
>
> 最近，四川成都文殊院為出家的女衆舉行了一次"二部僧授戒"法會。中國佛協曾致電表示贊嘆。按照佛教授戒法的規定，出家的女衆必須從二部僧授戒後，才能成為如法的比丘尼。我國自公元五世紀中葉師子國 (今斯里蘭卡) 提婆薩羅 (《比丘尼傳》作鐵薩羅) 等十九位比丘尼法師在南京首次實行二部僧授戒。文殊院這次舉行的二部僧授戒法會，從1981年12月9日開始進堂學習律儀。參加受戒的尼衆共21人 (其中新戒9人，增戒12人)。比丘僧由寬霖任得戒師，心極任揭磨師，普超任教授師，傳華等七人任尊證師; 比丘尼僧由通願任得戒師，隆蓮任揭磨師，定靜任教授師，果戒等七人任尊證師。法會歷時40天，至1982年1月18日圓滿結束。 (Fayin 1982, p. 21)

The approval by the BAC and the implication that only Dual Ordinations should be considered fully orthodox and legitimate are both remarkable and suggest decades of germination of these ideas.

The textual reference employed was the aforementioned "Dual Ordination Procedures" written at the beginning of the Qing dynasty by the *Vinaya* master Shuyu (*X* no. 1134). As we have seen, they prescribe Dual Ordinations within the Triple Platform Ordination system. For the occasion, Longlian and Tongyuan adapted the text to a modern context. Longlian even had these procedures translated into English for the Sinhalese nuns that were supposed to participate in the ordination.[51] Significantly, the text employed by Longlian and Tongyuan addressed candidates as *śikṣamāṇā*s (*shichamona* 式叉摩那) throughout the rite, which differs from the canonical version, where the term *śrāmaṇerikā*s is used instead (*X* n. 1134: 731c17).

As a matter of fact, the female candidates involved in this first Dual Ordination (and in the other eight ordination ceremonies organized under the supervision of Longlian) were all *śikṣamāṇā*s.[52] To Longlian, the two-year probationary period as a *śikṣamāṇā* was to be understood as an unrenounceable part of the Dual Ordination process. As noted above, this was the view of her master Nenghai, who instructed her to revive Dual Ordinations by a strict observance of all the rules, including the need for the two-year training period. Longlian had also witnessed the bestowal of the *śikṣamāṇā* ordination to the Tiexiang nunnery *śrāmaṇerikā*s back in 1949, under the supervision of Guanyi and Nenghai himself. As Chiu and Heirman (2014) have already observed, Longlian had a decisive influence on the emergence of the *śikṣamāṇā* stage in Mainland China. Even if this stage has not become compulsory, *bhikṣuṇī* ordination can take place no earlier than after a two-year period of time from one's entrance into the Buddhist order according to contemporary official regulations (while for *śrāmaṇera*s only one year is requested, as there are no male *śikṣamāṇā*s), which implicitly allows for the two-year *śikṣamāṇā* training; accordingly, some *bhikṣuṇī* ordination announcements are explicitly geared to both *śrāmaṇerikā*s and *śikṣamāṇā*s.

As for the 'global' context,[53] it should be clarified that the first Dual Ordination of the modern era was held in Taipei in the year 1970. As Yu-chen Li has shown, this system became a widespread ordination criterion for female monastics in Taiwan after 1976 and soon resulted in the Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī*s' involvement in the international restoration of the *bhikṣuṇī* lineages (Li Forthcoming). At the onset, this seemed to be the case as well in Mainland China, considering that the decision to hold a Dual Ordination ceremony in 1982 was also meant to involve a group of female monastics from Śrī Laṅkā. In an interview, Longlian traced the roots of this plan back to Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976), who during an official visit to the South Asian country—he visited Śrī Laṅkā twice, in 1957 and 1964—discovered that female full ordination had disappeared from Śrī Laṅkā and reportedly decided, along with the local authorities, to re-establish the Sinhalese *bhikkhunī* lineage through the intervention of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s (Chang 2019, p. 159).[54] Longlian first heard of this possibility in 1980, when she received a visit from a China-based professor of Sinhala (Qiu 1997, p. 239). Professor Lawei 拉維 later published an article in Śrī Laṅkā explaining the history of the introduction of Dual Ordination to China through the intervention of Sinhalese monastics and based on the account provided by Longlian of the relevant passages in the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s".[55] Apparently, this article awakened the interest of certain Sinhalese Buddhists. In April 1981, Longlian reportedly met the head of the Ministry of Culture from Śrī Laṅkā in Beijing; on that occasion, it was agreed that candidates from the two countries would be ordained together in Sichuan (Qiu 1997, p. 240). Ultimately, however, the Sinhalese nuns did not attend the Dual Ordination organized at Tiexiang nunnery and Wenshu temple, most likely for political reasons.[56] Nevertheless, the renown of Longlian had already reached far and wide. As a consequence, she was later visited by Karma Tsomo Lekshe, of the Sakyadhita Association of Buddhist Women, who wanted to cooperate with Longlian on an international Dual Ordination ceremony (which also eventually did not happen).[57] As is well known, Sinhalese female monastics, as well as those in other Theravāda countries or in the Tibetan tradition, including Western Buddhist

women, subsequently turned to Korean and Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī*s, or to different procedures disconnected from the Chinese lineage.[58] However, considering some recent moves by the Karmapa and by masters from the Larung gar in Sertar, the 'global' factor may become relevant again in Mainland China, if allowed (or even favored) at a political level.[59]

### *3.2. Improving the* Bhikṣuṇīs*' Status: Dual Ordinations from Longlian's Perspective*

The establishment of "orthodox" (*rufa*) and "legitimate" (*hefa*) *bhikṣuṇī* ordination procedures in China was an aspiration that Longlian cherished throughout her life. Despite this, to my knowledge, Longlian did not publish any writing on the ordination procedures or their meaning in any of her numerous volumes and essays. However, not only did she often talk about Dual Ordinations with her students and in public, she also gave various interviews touching on this topic, which were recorded by journalists or authors[60] or videorecorded to be included in documentary films.[61] On these occasions, Longlian explained her ideas in terms that strike us as both modern and conservative at the same time. On the one hand, she affirmed gender equality on soteriological grounds (women, she claimed, can become Buddha). On the other, she accepted forms of asymmetry in ordination practices. Nevertheless, in her view this was meant to enforce the legitimacy of Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* ordination from the point of view of orthodoxy, thus indicating that she viewed the introduction of Dual Ordination procedures as another way to improve the status of *bhikṣuṇī*s within the *saṃgha* (Qiu 1997, p. 235).

In a series of interviews she gave to Shanshan Qiu 裘山山, the author of her bestselling biography, Longlian expresses her aspiration to re-establish a legitimate *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* and her views on gender equality and asymmetry (Qiu 1997, pp. 284–86).[62] Qiu records an excerpt of an interview, in which she openly asked Longlian about gender equality, stating that in her view there is still an idea of male superiority (*nanzun nübei* 男尊女卑) in Buddhism. Longlian agrees that there is asymmetry in the *Vinaya*, noting as examples ordinations (which must involve both *saṃgha*s for female candidates) and the number of precepts (of which there are ninety-one more precepts in the *Prātimokṣa* for the *bhikṣuṇī*s than in that for the *bhikṣu*s). She then explains that Buddhism teaches the equality of all beings. However, Longlian states, it is not possible to be absolutely equal in this world, where for every person who walks in front or sits in a more elevated seat, there has to be someone else walking behind or sitting lower. In this way, Longlian affirms gender equality in soteriological terms, but allows for the existence and necessity of gender asymmetry in the world we live:

> There is indeed a division between men and women in Buddhism, so that there can be stability within the monastic community. . . . Male supremacy in the secular world is bound to be reflected in the religion.
>
> 佛教中的男女確有一個高下之分，這樣僧團內部才能穩定 . . . . . 俗世間的男尊女卑，必然會反映到宗教中來。

In the same interview Longlian also explains the position of *bhikṣuṇī*s in the *saṃgha* by recalling the narrative of the foundation of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*, an argument which is reminiscent of the ideas expressed by the Wuhan nuns of the Republican era, including the belief that observance of the *gurudharma*s will prevent Buddhism from disappearing from the world:

> In the beginning, Śākyamuni Buddha was reluctant to allow women to go forth. . . . The founder of our *bhikṣuṇī* order, the Buddha's aunt, Mahāprajāpatī, was very determined to go forth. The Buddha said, if you insist on going forth, you must observe the eight *gurudharma*s, namely, to have respect for *bhikṣu*s and to observe eight special precepts. In this way, the Dharma will not be destroyed in the future. In order to go forth, Mahāprajāpatī agreed without hesitation. The Buddha built a temple specifically for Mahāprajāpatī (Daaidao), and this is the origin of the name of our Aidao hall. Since *bhikṣu*s came first and *bhikṣuṇī*s later, some phenomena can be easily explained.

> 當初釋迦牟尼佛是不願意讓女人出家的 ... ... 我們比丘尼的始祖，也就是佛的姨媽大愛道，當初堅決要求出家。佛就說，如果你一定要出家，就必須遵守"八敬法"，即對比丘懷有敬意，遵守八項特殊的戒律。這樣將來才不致毀滅佛法。大愛道為了出家，毫不猶豫地答應了。佛陀就專門為大愛道修建了一座廟，這也就是我們愛道堂名稱的來歷。既然是先有比丘後有比丘尼，有些現象也就好解釋了。 (Qiu 1997, p. 285)

Longlian also addressed the issue of Dual Ordinations during an interview recorded on the occasion of an ordination ceremony in 1994 in Aidao nunnery and included in two documentary films on her life (Aidaotang 2002, 2009). The documentary films also include videos showing images that reference the 1982 ordination held in Wenshu temple and Tiexiang nunnery. The interview is translated in the Appendix 70. To sum up, in the interview Longlian clarifies the following points:

- The presence of a *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* is important to meet the standards of an ideal Buddhist country.
- A female Buddhist wishing to go forth needs to be instructed by an *upādhyāyinī*, who should follow her from tonsure to the period after full ordination.
- Acceptance by an *upādhyāyinī* and by a certain *bhikṣuṇī* community is a fundamental requirement for full ordination to take place, as stated in *Vinaya* texts.[63]
- Dual Ordination procedures are the result of a gradual process. In the beginning, *bhikṣuṇī*s were ordained following the same procedures as male candidates. Later it was decided that female candidates and newly ordained *bhikṣuṇīs* needed to be instructed by other *bhikṣuṇī*s; but since *bhikṣuṇī*s were not acquainted with the outside world, it was deemed necessary to also involve the *bhikṣu* community.
- Formally a female candidate is ordained only after "ascending the ordination platform" (*dengtan* 登壇) of the *bhikṣu*s (a point which was also made by Hongyi), but the preparatory step at the *bhikṣuṇī* platform is equally necessary.
- Ordinations conferred by only one of the two assemblies, though they were historically considered valid, are not fully legitimate.

In line with the views of Nenghai, Longlian believed that the involvement of the *upādhyāyinī* and the other *bhikṣuṇī*s in the various steps of the ordination process was meant to allow female Buddhists to be duly instructed before and after ordination within a system which emphasizes gender separation. As for the going forth rituals, the first documentary film (Aidaotang 2002) features Longlian performing the *pravrajyā* ceremony (from tonsure and wearing of the *kaṣāya* or monastic robe to the bestowal of the *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts), where she acts as *upādhyāyinī*, thus re-establishing the habit that this step should involve a female master (a difference from her own *pravrajyā*). In Dual Ordinations, the reinstatement of the step involving the *bhikṣuṇī*s is deemed necessary in terms of post-ordination training for the newly ordained, while the role of the *bhikṣu* masters in the process, rather than implying an agenda to exert control over the female order, is instead presented as both a consequence of historical circumstances and the result of the Buddha's concern for the *bhikṣuṇī*s' safety, as explained in some passages of the *Vinaya* texts.[64]

Significantly, the later documentary film removes the emphasis placed by Longlian on the non-legitimacy of *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations conducted by *bhikṣu*s (or *bhikṣuṇī*s) alone. In Chinese Buddhism, be it in Mainland China or Taiwan, this was and still is a very sensitive topic. Taken literally, Longlian's statement that "ordinations conferred at only one place should not be considered legitimate" would imply the fundamental illegitimacy of the Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* lineage as a whole. In reality, following the Chinese *Vinaya* tradition, Longlian believed that ordinations conducted by *bhikṣu*s alone could be accepted. As we have seen, this involved only a minor offense by the *bhikṣu*s bestowing ordination, without invalidating the ordination of the *bhikṣuṇī*s. Accordingly, Longlian admits that an ordination held by only the ten *bhikṣu*s "generally counts as ordination".

Comparisons with modern political concepts ("democracy") and to party administration ("preparatory party member") included in the interview (see full translation in

the Appendix 70) reveal the influence of the PRC's ideological atmosphere on Longlian. Her concerns for gender issues as well as for procedures to be traced back to Śākyamuni Buddha, on the other hand, allow us to connect her with the spread of modernist ideas during the Republic of China, ideas which include an emphasis on gender equality and an attempt to retrace 'original' teachings of the Buddha.[65]

## 4. Conclusions

Both the Dual Ordination system and the related figure of the *śikṣamāṇā* are included in the eight *gurudharma*s, which among other rules also state that a *bhikṣuṇī* must pay obeisance to a *bhikṣu* regardless of his age, or that a *bhikṣuṇī* may not admonish a *bhikṣu*, whereas a *bhikṣu* may always do so.[66] Does the (re-)establishment of these procedures in modern China imply a reiteration of the very idea of *bhikṣuṇī*s' subordination to the *bhikṣusaṃgha*?

In my opinion Longlian, the main character in this story—an exceptional *bhikṣuṇī* who managed to cope with modernity while complying with tradition, and who has become a true symbol of gender empowerment within the *saṃgha*[67]—was not attempting to promote gender inequality through the establishment of the (asymmetric) Dual Ordination system and the figure of the *śikṣamāṇā*. Longlian's main concern was to reinstate the dual procedures in order to make the whole ordination system more legitimate and orthodox, which ultimately also resulted in the improvement of the status of *bhikṣuṇī*s within the Buddhist *saṃgha* and society as a whole. Interestingly Longlian, while consistently rejecting views of gender inequality from a soteriological perspective, took from *Vinaya* master Nenghai the idea of the need for gender asymmetry, which is explained as a consequence of historical and social factors. In this light, male masters are involved in the ordination process in order to protect (rather than to control) the *bhikṣuṇī*s, an argument that was made also in the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka.[68]

In a nutshell, I believe that the establishment (or "resurrection", as it is usually termed) of Dual Ordinations in modern China should be seen as the result of a few seemingly unrelated phenomena. First of all, from its onset during the Republican period, the idea of establishing Dual Ordinations was connected with a modern notion of orthodoxy, which was notably searched for in the scriptures, and involved the adoption of a text-oriented approach to Buddhist practices. In the eyes of many modern Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s, this idea was also related to the search for legitimacy of their monastic status, in the wake of modern perspectives on gender equality within the Buddhist community. In later years, a third aspect emerged, as the Dual Ordination system assumed a 'global' dimension and was connected with the re-establishment of the *bhikṣuṇī* order within other Buddhist traditions: phenomena that are integral to a modern interpretation of Buddhism.

To conclude, the asymmetry embedded in the ordination system was endorsed in modern times in the name of legitimacy/orthodoxy, seemingly without advocating ideas of inequality within the *saṃgha*. On the contrary, considering that both *śrāmaṇerikā* and *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations were bestowed by male masters for centuries within Chinese Buddhist monasticism, the involvement of female masters resulted in a form of female empowerment, if not in full-fledged equality.

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## Abbreviations

T *Taishō* 大正 (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tōkyō: 1924–1935).

X *Xuzangjing* 續藏經 (*Dainippon zoku zōkyō* 大日本續藏經. Edited by Maeda Eun 前田慧雲, and Nakano Tatsue 中野達. Kyōto: 1905–1912).[69]

## Appendix A. Longlian Explaining Dual Ordinations in 1994[70]

> Buddhist disciples are called the "disciples of the four assemblies", and are male and female monastics who went forth and male and female lay householders.[71] Ordained male monastics are called *bhikṣu*s and ordained female monastics are called *bhikṣuṇī*s; those who have not yet received complete ordination but have gone forth are *śrāmaṇera*s and, the female ones, *śrāmaṇerikā*s. Thus, in Buddhism "four groups" means *bhikṣu*s, *bhikṣuṇī*s, laymen and laywomen. Only a place where all four assembies of disciples are complete is called a "Middle kingdom" (*Zhongguo* 中國). In Buddhism, the special name "middle kingdom" refers to a place that is the center of Buddhism. So, in order to meet this standard, the presence of all four assemblies of disciples is necessary.[72]
>
> 佛的弟子，稱為四衆弟子。四衆弟子就是出家男女二衆，在家男女二衆。出家的男衆被稱為比丘，女衆就稱為比丘尼。初出家還沒受大戒的，男的稱為沙彌，女的稱為沙彌尼。佛教當中説四衆弟子就是説的，比丘，比丘尼和在家的男居士，女居士。要四衆弟子齊全的地方，才稱為中國。佛教裡面的特殊名字叫中國，它的意思就是説，這個地方是佛教的中心，那麼要夠得上這個標準，就是要四衆弟子齊全。
>
> Ordination procedures have been established gradually. In order to be ordained, *bhikṣu*s have to undergo a "three-times formal act" (*san fan jiemo* 三番羯磨),[73] and *bhikṣuṇī*s also have to follow the same procedures. It is a democratic procedure; i.e., whenever there is a person wishing to become a *bhikṣu* or a *bhikṣuṇī*, it is necessary to select from the monastic community a group of ten high-ranking *bhikṣu*s of great virtue and appropriate monastic age. They are convened in order to hold this particular examination, which is also called the "ritual of ascending the ordination platform" (*dengtan jiemo* 登壇羯磨). A special place shall be provided,[74] since ordination is a high-level and secret assembly that cannot be attended by everybody. On the ordination platform there are ten persons, the "master of the discipline" (*jie heshang* 戒和尚), the "master of the formal act" (*jiemo shi* 羯磨師), the "instructor" (*jiaoshou shi* 教授師), and seven "venerable witnesses" (*zun zheng shi* 尊證師)—"venerable" because they are high-ranking *bhikṣu*s, while "witnesses" expresses their function as "attestors". The union of these ten persons makes it a high-level assembly, a special assembly. Candidates must receive the approval of this assembly to become *bhikṣu*s or *bhikṣuṇī*s. This assembly cannot be attended by anybody else; the attendants of the principal master and all the other attendants (*yinli shi* 引禮師) are not allowed to take part in it. On the platform, there are only the ten masters who hold this important assembly; in addition, the ordination candidates are also there. This assembly is organized in such a strict and secret way.[75]

傳戒的手續是遂步建立的。那麼比丘也要經過三番羯磨傳戒的手續。比丘尼同樣要經過手續。這個手續是一個民主的手續，就是說誰要當比丘或者是比丘尼，都要在僧團當中選出十位地位特別高的，道高德重，戒臘須彌的人，來開這個特別的審查會，這個就是現在所謂的比丘登壇羯磨。這個開會還要有個特殊的地方，是一個高級的秘密會議，不得是全體人都來參加。這個壇上就有十位，包括戒和尚，羯磨師，教授師和七位尊證師。尊就是他有地位，證就是他來證明。這十個人組合起來，它就成了一個高級的會議，特殊的會議。那麼這個新戒要通過允許他成為比丘，要經過這個會議。這個會就是說其他人不能參加。戒和尚帶的侍者和那些引禮師都不能參加這個會。壇上只有這個十師開這個高級會議。另外就是受戒的新戒在裡面。這個會議的組織就是這樣一個比較嚴密而秘密的一種會。

As for *bhikṣuṇī*s, in the very beginning they also followed the same ordination procedures (as male candidates). Later, however, it was said that this was not sufficient, because this way a *bhikṣuṇī* only had male masters: how would a male master ever take care of her? For this reason, it was deemed necessary that *bhikṣuṇī*s be instructed and guided by other *bhikṣuṇī*s. Therefore, whenever a woman wishes to enter the monastic order, she must find another woman who will act as her "master of the discipline" (*upādhyāyinī*). The latter will be responsible for instructing the candidate, so as to establish with her a master-disciple relationship (*shitu guanxi* 師徒關係).[76] But after this rule was established, some new problems arose. I.e., since *bhikṣuṇī*s lived in deep seclusion, rarely came out and thus were not acquainted with the outside world, it happened that throughout history some problems arose in the acceptance of new candidates. Therefore, it was understood that it was not sufficient that one be approved only by ten *bhikṣuṇī*s; instead, it was necessary to also be approved by ten *bhikṣu*s, which added a further step.[77]

那麼比丘尼最初也就是這樣受戒的。後來說不行，這個比丘尼的師父都是男的，哪個去管她呢?所以比丘尼一定要由比丘尼來教導，那麼她要出家的時候，就要找個女的給她當戒和尚，這個戒和尚就要負責教這個新戒，要建立起師徒關係。這個規矩建立之後呢?後來又有問題，就是說，在比丘尼，她都深居簡出，外面多少情況她不熟悉，有時收來的新戒，在這個歷史上就有些問題。所以說光是十個比丘尼通過還不行，還要十個比丘來通過，這就更進一步。

This led to a dual procedure. A *śrāmaṇerikā-śikṣamāṇā* wishing to receive female full ordination, must undergo a first examination on the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination platform; this way she becomes a "fundamental" *bhikṣuṇī*, called a "basic *dharma bhikṣuṇī*" (*benfa ni* 本法尼).[78] This is like a "preparatory *bhikṣuṇī*", in the same sense as the political title of "preparatory party member" (*yubei dangyuan* 預備黨員). But this phase is very short: it is requested that, on that same day, as soon as the basic *dharma* ordination has been conferred among the *bhikṣuṇī*s, female candidates reach the ten *bhikṣu*s' platform in order to receive the precepts for a second time. This is why it is called "ordination by the two assemblies".

所以這就成了兩道手續，一個女的沙彌正學女，要受比丘尼戒，要經過比丘尼的壇上十師開會審查了，才是一個基礎的比丘尼，叫本法尼，像是一個預備比丘尼一樣，就像預備黨員那個意思，但是這個時間很短。它有要求你當天，今天在比丘尼當中，把這個本法尼戒受了，馬上就在這一天之內，要到這個是個比丘壇上十師當中去，重受二道戒。所以就稱為二部僧戒。

Ordinations conferred at only one place should not be considered legitimate. But what if the ceremony was held only by the ten *bhikṣu*s? Is that candidate considered to have been ordained or not? Ordinarily speaking, it should count as ordination. Yet, that *bhikṣuṇī* misses the first step of the procedure, her ordination has not been conducted according to the system established by the Buddha, since the part of the procedure involving the approval by the *bhikṣuṇī* assembly is lacking. This is already illegitimate in itself. The second problem is that

this *bhikṣuṇī* did not find a *bhikṣuṇī* master by whom to be instructed into the precepts. This *bhikṣuṇī* was only ordained by the *bhikṣu*s. Buddhism particularly emphasizes gender differences. Hence, even if she has been ordained, this *bhikṣuṇī* cannot follow a male master of the discipline. Therefore, she needs to have an *upādhyāyinī*; only in this way would she be duly instructed. This newly ordained *bhikṣuṇī*, immediately after ordination, needs to follow that female master, and study with her the three Buddhist teachings [i.e., monastic discipline, meditation and wisdom]. For a male master of the discipline, no matter how knowledgeable and virtuous he may be, it would not be easy to provide that mentorship. Therefore, this is how the system was set up. That is, it is not legitimate to bestow ordination without *bhikṣuṇī* masters.[79] Śākyamuni Buddha said that you must first find an *upādhyāyinī* to admit and instruct you, and that you can only be ordained after the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* has acknowledged you and accepted you to live there.

只有一個地方受都是不合法的。但是呢，只有比丘授呢，這個人算不算得戒呢，照理說應該算得戒，但是她就缺了這第一道手續。沒有依照佛的制度，沒有通過比丘尼的會議，這就是第一個不合法。第二個呢，就是說沒有找到比丘尼給她當師父，給她當戒和尚，她光是在比丘當中受了戒下來。佛教特別是男女有別。那麼她就是受了戒下來，也不能跟到這個男的戒和尚，所以她就必須要有一個女的戒和尚，才算是真正教授她的師父。受了戒之後照說這個新戒，就應該跟到這個女的戒和尚，學這個佛法當中的三學。男的戒和尚，道高德重也不好辦，不能管教。所以這個制度是這樣建立起來的，就是說沒有比丘尼的和尚，而授戒呢，不合法。釋迦佛說的，要先把你的比丘尼和尚找了，承認教你。比丘尼的僧團，承認接納你在那裡住，你才能受戒。

Therefore, ascending the ordination platform in the midst of the *bhikṣuṇī*s is a 'preparatory' step, but a necessary one. Only after ascending the ordination platform in the midst of the *bhikṣu*s is it decided that you have eventually become a *bhikṣuṇī*. However, the master of the discipline will also stress that, as you have been ordained there, after ordination you will have to continue studying the precepts with that *upādhyāyinī*. So, this is how this system was established. It is called Dual Ordination.

所以，比丘尼當中登壇算是一個預備，但是是必要的預備。而比丘當中登壇才算是最後，決定你最後成為比丘尼了。但是戒和尚還是說，你在這裡受了戒，以後還是要去跟著你那個比丘尼的戒和尚學習，所以這個制度是這樣建立起來的，稱為二部僧戒。

## Notes

1 A first draft of this article was presented at the conference "Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education", co-organized by Ester Bianchi and Nicola Schneider (Perugia, 16–17 May 2022). The two articles by Ester Bianchi and Amandine Péronnet in this Special Issue were originally presented together in an attempt to assess gender asymmetry in Chinese monastic Buddhism in modern and contemporary China, with reference to the issue of ordination. In the present paper, Buddhist terminology is given in Sanskrit.

2 According to the biography of Sengguo 僧果, as recorded in the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" (*T* no. 2063: 939c–940a), a mercantile ship arrived in China in 429 with a group of *bhikkhunī*s from Śrī Laṅkā on board. Another group of *bhikkhunī*s reached China later, in 433, creating the quorum necessary for full ordination. More than three-hundred Chinese women were thus ordained (or, in many cases, re-ordained) by the Sinhalese *bhikkhunī*s. Although *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations had already occurred in China before, this was the first Dual Ordination. The re-ordination of more than three hundred *bhikṣuṇī*s through this Dual Ordination ceremony is also mentioned in the biography of Huiguo (ca. 364–433) (*T* no. 2063: 937b18–c7). See Heirman (2001, pp. 275–304), and Zheng (2010).

3 As we will see, *the gurudharma*s were discussed in Buddhist circles during the Republican era. They were also reflected in the name of one of the female Buddhist Academies of Wuhan (Bajing xueshe 八敬學社, mentioned in Yuan 2009, p. 385) and later in Beijing (Tongjiao nunnery 通教寺's Bajing Xueyuan 八敬學苑, which will be addressed below).

4 The eight rules differ partially in the various *Vinaya*s; in the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka, which was adopted by Chinese Buddhists, they are: (1) Even when a *bhikṣuṇī* has been ordained for one hundred years, she must rise up from her seat when

seeing a newly ordained *bhikṣu*, and she must pay obeisance; (2) A *bhikṣuṇī* may not revile a *bhikṣu* saying that he has done something wrong; (3) A *bhikṣuṇī* may not admonish a *bhikṣu*, whereas a *bhikṣu* may admonish a *bhikṣuṇī*; (4) After a woman has been trained as a *śikṣamāṇā* for two years, the ordination ceremony must be carried out in both orders; (5) When a *bhikṣuṇī* has committed a *saṃghāvaśeṣa* offense (an offense that leads to a temporary exclusion), she has to undergo the penance in both orders; (6) Every fortnight, *bhikṣuṇī*s have to ask *bhikṣu*s for instruction; (7) *Bhikṣuṇī*s cannot spend the summer retreat (rainy season) in a place where there are no *bhikṣu*s; (8) At the end of the summer retreat, *bhikṣuṇī*s also have to carry out the *pravāraṇā* ceremony in the *bhikṣu* order. On the history of the beginning of the *bhikṣuṇī* order, see Anālayo (2016, 2019) and, for a different view, von Hinüber (2008); on the narrative of the foundation according to the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka and a comparison with the other available *Vinaya*s, see Heirman (2001, pp. 278–84).

5 On *bhikṣuṇī* ordination procedures according to the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka, see particularly Heirman (2002, vol. 2), and Li (2008). For a critical analysis of historical sources, see Huimin (1999, 2007), Heng-Ching (2000), and Chang (2019). For an overall presentation, see Anālayo (2018).

6 In the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka, the ten precepts of a *śrāmaṇerikā* are the same as those of a *śrāmaṇera* and read as follows: (1) not to kill; (2) not to steal; (3) not to have sexual intercourse; (4) not to lie; (5) not to take intoxicating substances; (6) not to take part in singing, dancing and other amusements; (7) not to use garlands or perfumes; (8) not to sleep on high or broad beds; (9) not to handle silver or gold; (10) not to eat food out of regulated hours. In China, *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination was often bestowed by a *bhikṣu*, whereas according to *Vinaya* rules an *upādhyāyinī* (female master of the discipline) should be involved (Heirman 1997, pp. 43–44). On *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination, see also Heng-Ching (2000, pp. 509–10).

7 The *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka has 250 precepts for *bhikṣu*s and 348 for *bhikṣuṇī*s. For the *Prātimokṣa*, the set of rules for the *bhikṣuṇī*s, refer to Heirman (2002, vol. 2).

8 The Triple Platform Ordination was first conceived by Guxin Ruxin 古心如馨 (1541–1615) and later elaborated by his first- and second-generation disciples Hanyue Fazang 漢月法藏 (1573–1635) and Duti Jianyue 讀體見月 (1601–1679). This was a time of Buddhist resurgence, and ordination reform was conceived in response to a previous ban on Buddhist ordinations (Lepneva 2022, and Wu Forthcoming). On the *Vinaya* movement of the end of the Ming (1368–1644) and beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), see also Liu (2008), Sheng-Yen (1991), and Wu (2008).

9 The Southern Monastery (Nanshan 南山) *Vinaya* lineage is traditionally believed to have been founded by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) and also includes the *Vinaya* masters who elaborated the Triple Platform Ordination and Dual Ordinations in the late imperial period.

10 Dual Ordinations are still mentioned in historical records of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Note that, as reported by Zanning (*T* no. 2126: 238b24-c8), in the year 972, the Song Emperor Taizu 太祖 (r. 960–975) issued a decree prohibiting *bhikṣuṇī*s from going to male monasteries for ordination, implicitly establishing that ordinations could only be bestowed by *bhikṣuṇī* masters. In the "Complete Chronicle of the Buddha and Patriarchs" (*Fozu tong ji* 佛祖統計), however, Zhipan 志磐 (1220–1275) informs us that this prohibition only lasted a few years (*T* no. 2126: 396b4-9). My gratitude to ven. Xianshi 賢世 for pointing me to these canonical texts. On this issue, also see Heng-Ching (2000), and Huimin (2007).

11 Shuyu was a direct disciple of *Vinaya* master Jianyue (see above, note 8), and his book was written on the basis of a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination performed by Jianyue himself in 1667. In the seventeenth century, *Vinaya* master Hongzan 弘贊 (1611–1685), in his *Biqiuni shoujie lu* 比丘尼受戒錄 (*X* no. 1132) also mentions a Dual Ordination that he organized at the request of numerous female candidates from different places (quoted by Heng-Ching 2000, p. 532).

12 Guṇavarman considered one-*saṃgha* ordination to be legitimate in the absence of the proper conditions for Dual Ordinations. In Huiguo's biography he agrees that Chinese women could be ordained in the same way as Mahāprajāpatī, implying that the two situations were comparable because of the absence of *bhikṣuṇī*s; however, he also stated that whenever the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* is established, the Dual Ordination requirements should be respected (*T* no. 2063: 937b27 and 937c2–3, quoted by Heirman 2001, p. 289). Additionally, in the biography of Sengguo, the ordination of Mahāprajāpatī and the five hundred Śākya women is also presented as a precedent for the first Chinese female ordination (*T* no. 2063: 939c14–21, quoted by Heirman 2001, p. 290). Upon the arrival of the Sinhalese *bhikkhunī*s, Guṇavarman approved the Dual Ordination to take place as a way to augment the value of the first ordination and thus without neglecting its legitimacy. Elsewhere Guṇavarman also advanced the idea that ordinations conferred only by *bhikṣu*s produced a (minor) offence on the part of the *bhikṣu*s without impacting on the *bhikṣuṇī* candidates; later, this point was also made by Daoxuan, who settled the issue for the succeeding centuries. Guṇavarman's opinion is recorded in the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*T* no. 2059: 34la28–b7, quoted in Heirman 2011, p. 621 n. 62). Daoxuan reiterates this idea in his commentaries on the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka (*T* no. 1804: 519c–15, quoted in Heirman 2011, p. 621; and *X* no. 728, quoted in Huimin 2007, n. 17). See also Heng-Ching (2000, pp. 522–24).

13 The *śikṣamāṇā* (*shichamona* 式叉摩那, lit. "training oneself", or *zhengxue nü* 正學女, *xuefa nü* 學法女) is a *śrāmaṇerikā* who accepts six precepts for a probationary period of two years. These six precepts map partially onto the ten *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts (see above, note 6) and are: (1) not to have sex; (2) not to steal; (3) not to kill; (4) not to lie; (5) not to consume alcohol; (6) not to eat at improper times. According to Ann Heirman the difference between a *śikṣamāṇā* and a *śrāmaṇerikā* may only be formal, as the admission ceremony for the former is very elaborated, while for the latter no formal act is involved (Heirman 1997, p. 50). Conceived as an evaluation period of the candidate's suitability for full ordination, according to the *Vinaya* of the Sarvāstivāda, the probationary

period was also created to check the possibility of pregnancy in female candidates (Huimin 2007, p. 16; Heirman 2008, p. 108). On *śikṣamāṇā* ordination, see also Heng-Ching (2000, pp. 510–13), and Heirman (1997, pp. 36, n. 14, 45–47).

14 On Longlian, see (Bianchi 2001), Bianchi (2017a), Qiu (1997) and, for a collection of her writings, Wang (2011). On Tongyuan, see Péronnet (2020, pp. 133–35), and Wen (1991). On Longlian and Tongyuan's conjunct roles in the establishment of Dual Ordinations, see also DeVido (2015), and Zongxing (2019).

15 She is termed *xuefa nü* (another name of a *śikṣamāṇā*) or *jinfa nü* 近法女, "female studying/approaching the *dharma*" (Li 2020, p. 601).

16 According to the *Vinaya*, this is a *bhikṣuṇī* who guides and instructs a new candidate from the moment she asks to go forth until two years after ordination (Heirman 1997, p. 44, n. 67).

17 See above, note 6.

18 The present paper is focused on *bhikṣuṇī*s, i.e., fully ordained Buddhist monastics; therefore, I will not discuss the figure of the *caigu* 菜姑 ("vegetarian woman"), i.e., lay Buddhist nuns, or other forms of female Buddhist engagement. On the "vegetarian women", see Ashiwa and Wank (2019); on this and other forms of female Buddhist commitment during the Republican Era, see Li (2020, pp. 591–98). For a woman's monastic career according to the *Vinaya* texts, see Heirman (1997, 34 ff), and Heng-Ching (2000). I am grateful to ven. Guoping 果平 and ven. Hongzhi 弘智 for providing some information and details (WeChat communications, July 2022).

19 The *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka fixes the minimum age for a *śrāmaṇerikā* at twelve.

20 The need to retake the six rules and begin the two-year training all over again in case of violation is a requirement of the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka (Heng-Ching 2000, p. 512). Since the first four rules correspond to the first four *pārājika*s (offenses entailing irreversible loss of monastic status), their transgression leads to permanent exclusion from the *saṃgha*; the extension of the two-year training is meant as a consequence of the transgression of the fifth and sixth rules (eating at the wrong time or drinking alcohol), and to "offences closely linked to the four *pārājika*s" (Heirman 1997, p. 48).

21 The Wuchang Female Buddhist Institute of Studies (Wuchang foxueyuan nüzhong yuan 武昌佛學院女衆院, renamed in 1931 Shijie foxue yuan nüzhong yuan 世界佛學院女衆院) was founded in 1924 by Taixu 太虛 as part of his Wuchang Buddhist Academy. It was later followed by other similar academies, in Wuhan (e.g., Pure Bodhi Vihāra, founded in 1931, and the Hankou Academy for Nuns at Qiyin nunnery 棲隱寺, in 1948) and throughout the rest of the nation (notably the Academy for Female Buddhists in Fenghua, Zhejiang, and many other locations). See DeVido (2015), and Yuan (2009). On laywomen and *bhikṣuṇī*s during the Republic of China, see also He (1997), and Li (2020).

22 Among the most prominent Buddhist laywomen, who are not dealt with in the present study, was Zhang Ruzhao 張汝釗 (1900–1969), also known as Zhang Shenghui 張聖慧, who wrote many articles on topics related to Buddhism and women in major Buddhist journals (Grant 2017; Yuan 2009, pp. 375–412).

23 In general, these scriptures were revised with a new gender sensibility (Valussi 2019, p. 141). The idea was to demonstrate that Buddhism was already 'modern,' including in terms of gender equality, and thus not to be counted as a reason for China's backwardness.

24 The *Biqiuni zhuan* is a collection of biographies of sixty-five Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s who lived between the years 335 and 516; it is attributed to Baochang 寶唱, who reportedly compiled it in 517 (Liang dynasty). For a translation, see Tsai (1994). On the reprinting of the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" and the publication of its sequel during the Republican era, see Valussi (2019, pp. 160–61).

25 The same opinion was shared by Yinguang 印光 (1862–1940), the famous Pure Land master. See Valussi (2019, pp. 158–60). On Taixu's thoughts on women, see also DeVido (2015, pp. 75–79).

26 On other occasions, Taixu reformulated this concept in a more nuanced way. For instance, in 1930 he stated that "The reason why the Buddha, when he was in the world, [first] did not allow women to go forth, was due to the heavy responsibility attached to that choice and to the difficulties of the Buddhist monastic life; therefore, he did not allow women to do so lightly. Then, when he was approached by women with a sincere and pure mind willing to go forth, the Buddha listened to their request and gave his approval. Thereupon he taught women widely" (當佛在世時，不許女衆出家，其原因以出家之責任繁重，而梵行亦難實修，未便輕許。嗣有出真誠懇切的清淨心來出家者，佛遂聽許，即以廣為化導一切女人, Taixu[1930] 1980). On these passages, see DeVido (2015, pp. 76–77).

27 These details are reported in many of the narrations about the foundation of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha*. See Heirman (2001, pp. 279–82, Table 1 and Table 2).

28 Abbreviated title for *Shanjianlü piposha* 善見律毘婆沙 (*T* no. 1462), a *Vinaya* commentary whose translation is attributed to Saṃghabhadra (488). It was considered a translation of the *Samantapāsādikā* (a commentary attributed to Buddhaghoṣa) throughout the twentieth century. This attribution has since been questioned by scholars (Heirman 2004).

29 Paraphrase of a passage of the *Shanjian lun* (*T* no. 1462: 796c21–23). The different *Vinaya*s offer different interpretations of this prophecy. See Heirman (2001, p. 281, n. 41).

30 Zhu Jingjian 竺淨檢's biography is included in the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" (*T* no. 2063:934c2–935a5, tr. Tsai 1994, 17–21). The lack of *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* involvement in her ordination led to discussions in the mid fourth century, which is also reported in Jingjian's biography. See Heirman (2001, p. 275).

31 The original text in the "Biographies of the *bhikṣuṇī*s" reads: 尼有十戒得從大僧受 。但無和上尼無所依止耳 。撿即剃落從和上受十戒 。同其志者二十四人 (*T* no. 2063: 934c13–15).

32 See above, note 2.

33 Apan is mentioned in the *Dasong sengshilüe* 大宋僧史略 (*T* no. 2126: 237c22–25), the "Song dynasty brief history of the *saṃgha*" by Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001). See Heng-Ching (2000, p. 518).

34 For the six rules, see above, note 13. As for the other requirements of a *śikṣamāṇā*, Hongyi refers to the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka, which mentions that a *śikṣamāṇā* should study all the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts, except for giving food to a *bhikṣuṇī* and receiving food with one's own hands (*T* no. 1428: 924c2–4, quoted by Heirman 1997, p. 48). See also Huimin (2007, n. 24).

35 Birnbaum (Forthcoming) explains that Hongyi questioned the authenticity of his own ordination and, as a consequence, of the whole Chinese *saṃgha*, because of the fracturing of transmission lineages.

36 On the other hand, Hongyi's formulation of the five precepts was likely meant to provide the *caigu*, "vegetarian women", with a Mahāyāna way to be a "five-precept monastic" (Raoul Birnbaum, personal communication, May 2022). On Hongyi and the vegetarian women, see Li (2020, pp. 599–603).

37 On the role of Cizhou and Nenghai in the *Vinaya* movement during the Republic of China, see Bianchi (2017b), and Campo (2017).

38 Daoyuan studied with Cizhou in the 1940s and later became an influential ordination master in Taiwan; he insisted on following text-informed procedures and supported Dual Ordinations. See Li (Forthcoming).

39 See Daoyuan (1982). There is no reference to these two events in the short biography of Cizhou that the same Daoyuan wrote in 1958 (included in Xincheng 2004, pp. 1–6).

40 On Nenghai's views about gender equality/asymmetry, see Wang and Fu (2017).

41 These two lines are taken from Nenghai's "Ode to the liberation precepts of the seven assemblies of disciples" (*qi zhong biejietuojie lüesong* 七衆別解脱戒略頌), included in Nenghai[1936] (Nenghai[1936] 1995, p. 13) and also quoted by Renxiang (1994, p. 34).

42 The above quoted words are reminiscent of the following passage from the *Vinaya*: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* admits many disciples, but does not tell them to study the precepts for two years and does not give them support in two things, then it is a *pācittika* [an offense that needs to be expiated]" (*T* no. 1428: 760a8–b14, translated in Heirman 1997, p. 77). Another reason for the involvement of the *bhikṣuṇīsaṃgha* in the ordination procedure, which nevertheless is not mentioned by Nenghai or Longlian, is the need to ask female candidates intimate questions which it would be embarassed to answer in front of male masters. My gratitude to ven. Shih Heng-Ching 釋恆清 for pointing this out to me (personal communication, August 2022).

43 The *Vinaya* requests a minimum seniority of twelve years for a *bhikṣuṇī* to act as *upādhyāyinī* (Heirman 2002, p. 89). As is noted above (note 6), in China *śrāmaṇerikā* ordination was often bestowed by a *bhikṣu*, whereas according to *Vinaya* rules an *upādhyāyinī* (female master of the discipline) should be involved (Heirman 1997, pp. 43–44). This may explain why, in the 1948 *śikṣamāṇā* ordination at Tiexiang nunnery, the six precepts were ultimately bestowed by Guanyi, a male master.

44 Note that, according to Wang and Fu (2017, pp. 10–11), the ordination did take place.

45 Aside from establishing Dual Ordination procedures in China, a second lifelong cherished goal of Longlian was the creation of a *bhikṣuṇī* college. She had already advanced the formal request in 1980 at the fourth meeting of the BAC. The Sichuan Nuns' Institute for Buddhist Studies (Sichuan nizhong foxueyuan 四川尼衆佛學院) was officially founded in 1983 inside Tiexiang nunnery. In 2007, the Institute was moved out of Tiexiang nunnery: now under the directorship of Ruyi 如意, one of Longlian's closest students, it is presently located in Pengzhou (near Mianzhu). See Bianchi (2001, 2017a). As for the influence of Tongyuan on the establishment of the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns (Zhongguo Wutaishan nizhong foxueyuan 中國五台山尼衆佛學院), see Péronnet (Forthcoming).

46 Longlian organized Dual Ordinations again in 1989, 1991, twice in 1993, in 1995, 1999 and 2003. Notably, in 1993 she served as principal master of the discipline at the grand ordination ceremony at Luoyang Baimasi monastery 白馬寺, where approximately four hundred *bhikṣuṇī*s were ordained.

47 See Bianchi (2019), Chang (2019, p. 159), Wen (2010), and Xuecheng (1997). For the ordination system in Taiwan, see Li (Forthcoming).

48 The Taiwanese case is presented in Yu-chen Li's studies; particularly see Li (Forthcoming).

49 Tongyuan followed the rule of the "three no's" (*sanbu* 三不), i.e., "not to take disciples, not to have her biography written, and not to write texts promoting her interpretation of Buddhist doctrine" (Péronnet Forthcoming).

50 The last *bhikṣuṇī* ordination before the Cultural Revolution was held in 1957 at Baohuashan 寶華山 (Nanjing).

51 I was not able to trace the translation by Longlian. An English version of Shuyu's text was translated and edited by Bhikṣuṇī Thubten and based on the edition by Jinling Buddhist Scriptures Publishing, Nanjing 2013, which was itself based on a privately published edition of the rite from Tongyuan's collection (Thubten Damcho n.d.).

52 Longlian conferred *śikṣamāṇā*s precepts for the last time in 2005, one year before passing away.

53 On this issue, see Bianchi (2019) and Chang (2019). On the modern "revival movement" of *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations in the different *Vinaya* traditions, see Heirman (2011).

54 Quotation from an interview reported by the journal *Zhongguo fojiao* 中國佛教.

55 The article was translated into Chinese and published in *Fayin* 法音. See Lawei (1982). For the introduction of Dual Ordination in fifth century China, see note 2 above.

56 On the eastern wing of Tiexiang nunnery, a two-story building was built as a housing place for foreign monastics. On these events, see Chang (2019, pp. 159–60), and Qiu (1997, p. 241).

57 Karma Tsomo Lekshe (private communication, December 1997).

58 Sinhalese *bhikkhunī*s were fully ordained at the Sakyadhita conference in Bodh Gaya in 1997; once returned to Śrī Laṅkā, they held the first *bhikkhunī* ordination in centuries at a temple in Dambulla in March 1998 (Ashiwa 2015; see also Huimin 1996). On the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order in the Theravāda tradition, see Anālayo (2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2017). See also Anthony Scott's contributions to this Special Issue, and *bhikkhunī* Dhammadinnā's paper poresented at the conference "Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education" (Perugia, 16–17 May 2022).

59 The Karmapa presented a request that Wutaishan Pushou nunnery 普壽寺 *bhikṣuṇī*s bestow ordination on Tibetan nuns in 2015. Pushou nunnery initially responded in a positive way, and an application to be granted permission to ordain Tibetan nuns was presented to the relevant Beijing authorities, but, for 2016, it was not successful. Also Tibetan masters of the Larung gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, in Sertar (Easter Sichuan), expressed the wish for Pushousi to cooperate in the ordination of local Tibetan and Chinese nuns. However, Pushou nunnery has yet to receive permission from the government to bestow ordination to Tibetan nuns within PRC borders (private interview with Rurui 如瑞, August 2016). On the establishment of the *bhikṣuṇī* order in the Tibetan tradition, see Heng-Ching (2000), and Roloff (2020). See also Darcie Price-Wallace's contribution to this Special Issue. On Pushou nunnery, see Amandine Péronnet's contribution to this Special Issue.

60 Noteable examples are an interview given in 1995 by Longlian to the journal *Zhongguo fojiao* (quoted by Chang 2019), or the interviews given to Qiu (1997) for the publication of Longlian's biography. Qiu is a female journalist whose aunt was a lifelong friend of Longlian; her book covers Longlian's whole life and includes many interviews and personal anecdotes.

61 There are two documentary films on Longlian by the same title: "The first *bhikṣuṇī* of modern times" (*Dangdai di yi biqiuni* 當代第一比丘尼, Aidaotang 2002, 2009), the shorter one (approx. 30 min), completed in 2002 while Longlian was still alive, and the longer one (approx. 2 h), prepared for her hundrethhundredth birthday commemoration. Both films include videos showing Longlian during rituals and in her everyday life up to her last public appearances.

62 My gratitude to one of the reviewers for bringing this to my attention. For Qiu's (1997) book, see above, note 60.

63 "Even if she has already been accepted and guided by an *upādhyāyinī* as a *śrāmaṇerikā* and *śikṣamāṇā*, she is expected to officially ask a *bhikṣuṇī* to become her *upādhyāyinī* before full ordination" (*T* no. 1428: 924c4–7, quoted by Heirman 1997, p. 51).

64 As Heirman (2001, p. 284) has noted, the *Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka "not only present[s] women as a dangerous, weakening factor in the community, but also picture[s] them as beings who are themselves more vulnerable to danger than men are;" as a consequence, the eight *gurudharma*s are also presented "as a bridge or a boat to help women to overcome the dangers of the world".

65 On the notions of Buddhist modernisms, see McMahan (2008, 2012). See also Bianchi (2021b, pp. 11–13 and 18, n. 61).

66 See above, note 4.

67 See Bianchi (2017a). See also Fink (2020, 152 ff).

68 See above, note 64.

69 Digital editions by the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.

70 This interview was recorded on the occasion of an ordination ceremony held in 1994, and is included in two documentary films about Longlian's life (Aidaotang 2002, 2009). The first and last paragraphs of the interview are included only in the second documentary film (Aidaotang 2009, m. 1,14ff). The rest of the interview is taken from the first documentary film (Aidaotang 2002, m. 11,55–17,50), as the contents of the second have been slightly modified.

71 The four assemblies or orders (*sizhong* 四衆) that make up the Buddhist community, i.e., *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*.

72 This is probably a reference to Ānanda's statement that all Buddhas of the past had four assemblies of disciples. Here Zhongguo ("Middle country") does not refer to China but to the Indian Majjhimadesa (Sk. Madhyadeśa).

73 A three-times *karman*, also known as *(yibai) sanjiemo* (一白)三羯磨 or *sibai jiemo* 白四羯磨 (Sk. *jñapticaturtha karman*), is a formal act occurring during ordinations and repentance ceremonies, entailing a motion and three propositions or responses. For details see Heirman (2002, vol. I, pp. 75–79).

74 This probably refers to a *sīmā* (*jie* 界), a delimited area where formal acts are carried out.

75 This passage is remarkable because it shows Longlian's views in terms of constructing specialization and establishing authority. *Vinaya* itself is a field which does not include the laity. Here Longlian emphasizes that its exclusive nature is even more evident within the ordination system, which excludes non-ordained monastics and non-specialized monastics, and where authority is set on the basis of monastic age and moral value. My gratitude to one of the reviewers for this suggestion.

[76] As noticed by Robert Miller (e-mail personal communication, 29 August 2022), in this interview excerpt *bhikṣuṇī* Longlian seems to be speaking of a nun's *niśraya* ("support" or "dependence"), i.e., the apprenticeship incumbent on all new monks and nuns as conceived in the *Vinaya*.

[77] It is not clear to what event of the *Vinaya* Longlian is referring to. One possibility is that she does not refer to the time of the Buddha in India, but rather to developments in China. There was indeed at least a moment in Chinese history, during the tenth century, when it was established by the imperial government that *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations could only be bestowed by *bhikṣuṇī*s. See above, note 10.

[78] A *benfa ni* is a female candidate who has only gone through the first step of the Dual Ordination (Heng-Ching 2000, p. 515).

[79] The illegitimacy implied here may refer to the fact that *bhikṣu*s bestowing ordination to female candidates without involving *bhikṣuṇī* masters would commit an offernce.

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# The Fragility of Restoring Full Ordination for Tibetan *Tsunmas* (Nuns)

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**Abstract:** Drawing from interviews with *tsunma*s (Tib. *btsun ma*, nun) living and practicing in Geluk, Kagyu, and Sakya institutions in Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Uttarakhand, India, between March 2017 and February 2019, this case study foregrounds *tsunma*s' heterogenous insights into the most ideal and acceptable ways for restoring *gelongma* (Tib. *dge slong ma*, Skt. *bhikṣunī*, fully ordained nun) vows. I argue that fragility, the quality of being breakable, underlies the history of *gelongma* vows in Tibet. Fragility, however, can also be generative. In this regard, fragility also signifies the possibility of restoring *gelongma* ordination for some *tsunma*s who are interested in receiving *gelongma* vows in India. This article examines Tibetan and Himalayan *tsunma*s' perspectives on the possible ways of restoring *gelongma* ordination for women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Since the lineage of *gelongma*s ceased in Tibet, some *tsunma*s see this fragility as prohibiting restoration of *gelongma* ordination unless there is a way to re-establish these vows through the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the monastic code adopted in Tibet, whereas other *tsunma*s perceive this fragility as an opportunity for other possibilities for *gelongma* vow restoration through innovative ritual practices such as dual-*Vinaya* ordination.

**Keywords:** Buddhist nuns; full ordination; *Vinaya*; gender asymmetry

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## 1. Introduction: Historical Background on the Topic of Full Ordination for *Tsunma*s in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

> *When the recognition of impermanence shakes us into accepting the certain demise of our body, then we really aspire to make the most of our life. The truth of impermanence becomes the wind at our backs, urging us not to squander the precious opportunity we have right now.* (Mingyur Rinpoche 2014, p. 112)

The question of full ordination for Buddhist women spans 2600 years beginning with the Buddha's foster mother Mahāprajāpatī's request for full ordination, a fragile issue even in the earliest canonical narratives. For example, in the chapter on Mahāprajāpatī within the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, one of the Buddha's metaphors for initially rejecting her request to ordain is due to the presumed precariousness that women's ordination may bring upon the tradition:

> Ānanda, it is as follows. For example, a household in which there are many women and few men is easily attacked and overwhelmed by robbers and kidnappers. Likewise, Ānanda, if women go forth into the Dharmavinaya, it will not last long (Roloff 2020, p. 66).

In this canonical narrative, the act of women's ordination potentially renders the entire *Dharmavinaya*, the teachings of the Buddha, fragile, insofar as the Buddha's dispensation will not last quite as long as it would have otherwise. While the Buddha eventually granted Mahāprajāpatī's request, he did so by requiring these women to practice additional preventative measures, the eight *gurudharmas*, which similar to a dam, contains "women's faults" (Roloff 2020, p. 69). The women's acceptance of these eight *gurudharmas* negates the notion of the potentially shortened duration of the Buddha's dispensation although

these rules displace the women's *saṃgha* below the men's, establishing a very stark gendered asymmetry in Buddhist monasticism (Havnevik 1989, pp. 24–27; Gutschow 2004, pp. 169–74; Ngodrup 2007, pp. 152–53, 183–85; Anālayo 2010, pp. 81–82; Hüsken 2010, pp. 144–48; Salgado 2013, pp. 80–81; 2019, p. 5).[1]

According to Shayne Clarke, there are six extant *Vinaya*s belonging to different schools (Clarke 2015, p. 60). Today, only three ordination lineages remain: (1) *Theravāda*, (2) *Dharmaguptaka*, and (3) *Mūlasarvāstivāda* (Clarke 2015, p. 60). Each reflects the gradual emergence and geographical dispersion of the schools where the *Theravāda/Pāli* school remains most prevalent in southeastern Asia including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, the *Dharmaguptaka* endures in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan, and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* continues in Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Tibet (Sujato 2010, p. 36).[2] The *Therāvada/Pāli* lineage of fully ordained women appears to have ceased around the end of the 10th century in Sri Lanka whereas the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* ordination lineages for women possibly never entered Tibet in the 8th century by a dual *saṃgha* ordination but were practiced through a single *saṃgha* (Wijayaratna 2001, pp. 147–48; Price-Wallace 2022, pp. 203–19). Social movements to find ways to restore these full vows for women practicing through these two different ordination lineages have been well-underway for nearly forty years, enabling women seeking full ordination the opportunity to receive these vows through the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, a school considered distinctive from their own *Theravāda* or *Mūlasarvāstivāda* ordination lineages.[3] The differences between these *Vinaya* lineages have become paired with nuances in doctrinal and soteriological paths between the three vehicles of Buddhism, *Theravāda, Mahāyana*, and *Vajrayana*, even though this is more representative of geographic dispersion than of stark differences between the actual guidelines for monastics in the *Vinaya* code itself.

Full ordination for women matters because without these vows, the walls of institutional immobility and gender asymmetry for women within Buddhist monasticism remain. When women cannot receive their full monastic vows, this limits their access to studying the complete Buddhist canon in their tradition, minimizes educational opportunities, and diminishes the possibility to become teachers for other *tsunma*s and the *saṃgha* and/or hold leadership roles in ways they have rarely done previously (Gutschow 2004, pp. 168–97; Gyatso 2010, p. 17; Zangmo 2022; Schneider 2022).

Restarting the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* ordination became a topic of discussion in the 1990s in meetings held by the Central Tibetan Government's Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala, India, and during transnational discussions at Sakyadhita Conferences and the International Congress on Women's Role in the Sangha in Hamburg (hereafter: the Hamburg Conference) in 2007 (Tsomo 1988; Mrozik 2009; Mohr and Tsedroen 2010; Roloff 2020). The Hamburg Conference examined the question of legality, precedent, and social acceptance for giving the *gelongma* vows, but ultimately, no decision was firmly reached.

During the Hamburg Conference, while the Dalai Lama consistently offered his support for Tibetan *tsunma*s to receive their vows outside of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, he noted that a majority of support from senior Tibetan *gelong*s was necessary for re-establishing *gelongma* vows via the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (the 14th Dalai Lama 2010, p. 277). The question remained—which way of re-establishing these vows would be most acceptable? Or, put differently, the least fragile. Why fragile? As the Dalai Lama noted,

> When it comes to re-establishing the Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī ordination, it is extremely important that we avoid a split in the sangha. We need a broad consensus within the Tibetan saṅgha as a whole, and we need to address not only bhikṣuṇī ordination but subsequent issues as well (the 14th Dalai Lama 2010, p. 277).

Feminist scholar and activist, Sara Ahmed says that "the word *fragility* derives from *fraction.* Something is broken. It is in pieces" (Ahmed 2017, p. 180). I read the same concern into the Dalai Lama's statement on two levels. First, the *gelongma* lineage is broken. Second, he is concerned about abating a split, a breakage amongst the *saṃgha.* The Dalai Lama,

living in exile in India, did not want any fracturing amongst the *saṃgha* and presumably the community of Tibetans living abroad.

I argue that the perpetual delay on re-establishing *gelongma* ordination has become a wall or what Ahmed would call, a brick wall, "the institutional walls; those hardenings of histories into barriers in the present" (Ahmed 2017, p. 135). While Ahmed's work speaks specifically to the limitations of diversity policies that aim to address institutional racism and sexism in Australian and British universities, her work on the institutional barriers that sustain immobility and prevent substantial change provides a way for thinking through the metaphorical fires and vases that underlie my interlocutors' concerns with *gelongma* ordination (Ahmed 2017, pp. 174–75). Delaying *gelongma* ordination is an institutional barrier that Tibetan monastic women come up against. It is a wall.

But what is the cost of shattering this wall? While the Dalai Lama is very supportive of finding pathways for *tsunma*s' education and ordination, he is also concerned, as are my interlocutors. The Dalai Lama suggests shattering this institutional wall may mean a split. To address the idea of shattering barriers, Ahmed segues into fragility. Fragility has many nuances that I detail throughout the article. Fragility is a useful interpretive construct for thinking about *gelongma* ordination since the breakage of this *Mūlasarvāstivāda* ordination lineage for women exhibits a "shattering of possibility." This means that its breakability is reflective of its fragility and "what breaks off is on the way to becoming something" (Ahmed 2017, pp. 168, 186). Thus, the question of restoring *gelongma* ordination points to breakability as well as how fragility points to the possibility of something else. Alongside the voices of my interlocutors, I pull in Ahmed's language as an interpretive tool. In addition, inspired by Ahmed, I make use of literary associations and their stories as a way to move between how "a breakage is often accompanied by a story, a story of what breaks when something breaks, or an explanation of what is behind a breakage" (Ahmed 2017, p. 165). In this regard, I take a non-traditional approach to thinking with and through my interlocutors' voices by drawing from a fictional narrative about a Japanese Buddhist nun, a Super Nun. My interlocutors told me stories about breakage, as does the fictional nun, Jiko, and her granddaughter Nao. These stories held alongside each other provide an interpretive lens for possibility in light of the fragility of *gelongma* ordination.

## 2. Re-Establishing the Tradition for Tibetan *Tsunma*s: Lighting a Fire with One Stick

The religious head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje (the 17th Karmapa, hereafter), intends to reinstate *gelongma* (Tib. *dge slong ma*, Skt. *bhikṣuṇī*, fully ordained nun) vows of Tibetan *tsunma*s (*btsun ma*, nun)[4] in his religious lineage in India (Roloff 2020; Karmapa 2022; Price-Wallace 2022).[5] This ordination requires several years to complete and is controversial for several reasons. Presently, *tsunma*s cannot receive their *gelongma* vows through the textual prescriptions of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the only monastic disciplinary code adopted in 8th century Tibet (Tsering 2010, p. 168). These ritual prescriptions require twelve *gelongma*s and ten *gelong*s (*dge slong*, *bhikṣu*) to confer the 364 vows[6] that guide the full extent of monastic women's ethical conduct and practice. Without a continuous *gelongma* lineage in Tibet, re-starting the lineage is like starting a fire with only one stick.

Conflicting opinions about restarting this metaphorical fire hinder consensus among stakeholders. The dominant narrative among conservative Tibetan monastic scholars demands the above prescriptions for the brightest, purest fire, essentially rendering it impossible to light in the absence of full ordination. These arguments hinge on the centrality of transmitting flawless, perfect vows without intermingling different lineages of *Vinaya* (Tsering 2002). Another contemporary monastic *Vinaya* scholar, Geshe Rinchen Ngodrup (2007, p. 9), foregrounds uncommon canonical precedents for bestowing *gelongma* vows by relying only on fully ordained monks for the ritual. This argument draws from exceptional situations in the *Vinaya* but has not garnered social acceptance since it is believed that the monks performing the ritual incur an infraction (Tsering 2010, pp. 168–71; Ngodrup 2007, p. 53).[7] The 70th Je Khenpo, Tulku Jigme Chhodea, of Bhutan, recently lit this metaphorical

*gelongma* fire with one stick. He performed a single *saṃgha* ordination when he gave *gelongma* ordination to more than one-hundred and forty *tsunma*s on 21–23 June 2022 (Zangmo 2022). In his final remarks after the ordination, he told the *tsunma*s that, "Each one of you have received the Bhikṣuṇī ordination need not have any doubt at all about whether you have obtained the vows or not" (Je Khenpo 2022, p. 11). His address speaks to the fact that giving the full ordination through the single *saṃgha* is not the creation of a new ritual practice but adheres to the exceptions in monastic code. As *Vinaya* scholar Clarke notes, because "Vinayas address a large range of exceptional situations," their redactors of *Vinaya*s had to deal both with ideals and deviations (Clarke 2010, p. 232).

Similarly, contemporary Buddhist leaders and *Vinaya* scholars have just as many variable opinions on differentiating between ideal and acceptable practices in the Buddhist community in India. For instance, contemporary *Vinaya* scholars such as Acharya Geshe Tashi Tsering and Geshe Dawa make canonical arguments that a *gelongma saṃgha* is necessary for the vows to be "flawless, perfect" (*nyes med phun tshogs*) according to tradition (Tsering 2010, pp. 175–79; Dawa 1999, pp. 15–17). The *gelongma saṃgha* gives the novice *dge tshul ma*, Skt. *śrāmaṇerikā*) and subsequently, the probationary precepts (*dge slob ma, śiksāmāṇā*), which are observed for two years (Roloff 2020, pp. 194–97). At the time of the full vows, the *gelongma saṃgha* gives the celibacy vows (*tshangs spyod nyer gnas*, *brahmacāryopasthānasaṃvṛti*) on the day of the ordination as delineated in the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination procedures documented in the *Kṣudrakavastu*, which provides the stages for the bestowal of the precepts (Ngodrup 2007, p. 55; Tsering 2002, p. 169; 2010, p. 175; Tsedroen and Anālayo 2013, p. 762; Roloff 2020, pp. 83, 177–272).[8]

However, a more moderate position, such as the Karmapa's, posits a non-traditional approach using two different *Vinaya*s as a way to include both the women and men's *saṃgha*s. On 11 March 2017, the Karmapa initiated an ecumenical ritual with Taiwanese *gelongma*s using the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* to ordain Tibetan and Himalayan *tsunmas*, starting a potentially controversial fire with sticks from two different trees. At that time, Taiwanese fully ordained women administered the novice vows (*dge tshul ma*) to nineteen ordinands. There has been no movement or discussion about the subsequent stages for giving the *gelongma* vows via this dual-*Vinaya* approach, and the Karmapa recently mentioned its continuance during the 8th Arya Kshema in April 2022 when he noted he wished to move forward with this ordination ritual in the future (Karmapa 2022). Is this fragile fire the Karmapa started still burning or will the Je Khenpo's single *saṃgha* ordination provide precedent and support for future *gelongma* ordinations?

**3. Interlude: A Tale for the Time Being**

Nao Yasutani, one of the protagonists in Ruth Ozeki's novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, journals her transformative events stemming from her experiences of sexual violence in high school, her father's attempted suicide, and meeting and staying with her great-grandmother, the nun Jiko. Nao writes:

> Okay, here's what I've decided. I don't mind the risk, because the risk makes it more interesting. And I don't think old Jiko will mind, either, because being a Buddhist, she really understands impermanence and that everything changes and nothing lasts forever. Old Jiko really isn't going to care if her life stories get written or lost, and maybe I've picked up a little of that laissez-faire attitude from her. When the time comes, I can just let it all go (Ozeki 2013, p. 27).

Nao references the risk of writing Jiko's life story, only to have it lost. Nao tries to embrace a similar attitude towards her own writing to mirror Jiko's embodiment of the Buddhist concept of impermanence. Nao, however, vacillates as to whether she "can just let it all go" while also commenting more broadly on sexual violence against women. Nao fears that her reader will toss her journal aside like one more victim. She writes, "What if you just think I'm a jerk and toss me into the garbage, like all those young girls I tell old Jiko about, who get killed by perverts and chopped up and thrown into dumpsters, just because they've made the mistake of dating the wrong guy?" (Ozeki 2013, pp. 26–27). She's

asking, what will you do with her words? What will you do with her and Jiko's stories? What will you do to address the stories of survivors of sexual violence?

Ozeki's novel still haunts me. Even so, I still tell everyone to read it especially because the ending perplexes me. Nao talks to her reader so that you feel like you are with her. I was with Nao. Even now I am with Nao. Nao would appreciate this play on words. She makes a similar joke somewhere in her journal. Nao speaks to me because she threads issues of male power, abuse, sexual violence, and silence on these actions throughout her journal. The pervasive realities of sexual violence fill this fictional sixteen-year-old Japanese girl's journal.

In the novel, I identify with Ruth, the other protagonist, who has found Nao's journal and shares it with the reader. Ruth, in stark contrast to Nao, receives support from men, such as her partner Oliver, who embraces pro-woman values. By pro-woman values, I mean attitudes that reflect a positive, supportive orientation towards women while acknowledging the limitations of sexed binaries and hierarchies pervasive among and within institutional structures more broadly (Langenberg 2018, pp. 1–24; Padma'tsho and Jacoby 2020, pp. 1–19; Price-Wallace 2022, pp. 416–19). Ruth reads Nao's journal to Oliver, who appears clueless about the sexual violence Nao experiences (Ozeki 2013, pp. 293–96).

As Ozeki alternates between Nao's journal and Ruth's reading of fragments of that journal, distinctive images emerge about how women confront sexual violence compared with the male characters who only slowly recognize the ways they failed to address perverse and very real sexually violent experiences. Nao's father says to her, "'I let you down,' he said. 'I was twisted up with my guilt. I wasn't there for you when you really needed me'" (Ozeki 2013, p. 388).

### *3.1. Objectives for the Time Being*

This interlude into *A Tale for the Time Being* may seem tangential, but Ozeki's characters help me think about sexual violence, monastic women, and fragility in Buddhism. On the one hand, Ozeki's characters, like Nao's father, deal with sexual violence with further violence, such as an attempted suicide. This complicates the reader's own affective response regarding the sexual violence Nao experienced in her high school. Who does the reader feel more sympathetic towards? In her exploration of misogyny, philosopher Kate Manne notes, "Many people feel that men are entitled not just to be deemed innocent until proven guilty, but to be deemed innocent, period, regardless of their misdeeds" (Manne 2020, p. 12). Eventually, Ozeki's male characters do come around and acknowledge their own initial obliviousness towards the male hostility women and girls face, which polices and enforces gendered expectations (Manne 2020, p. 10; Tsomo 2019, pp. 304–5). Both Nao's father and Oliver eventually recognize how they let down the women around them by failing to acknowledge systems of abuse and power that harm women. In Ahmed's terms, these men both built and sustained a brick wall, an institutional barrier, that was harmful for all parties.

### *3.2. A Time for Gelongma Ordination*

This article is actually about *tsunma*s, like Jiko, a character who knows how to live with fragility. I see parallels in how Jiko's character lives with fragility and how Ahmed explores fragility's nuances. Ahmed notes, "Fragility: the quality of being breakable. Fragility: when being breakable stops something from happening . . . . A break becomes the realization of a quality assumed to belong to something; breaking as the unfolding of being. And this is difficult: the assumption of fragility can make something fragile" (Ahmed 2017, p. 169).

Like Ahmed, I define fragility as the characteristic of being breakable (Ahmed 2017, pp. 168–69). Breakable implies impermanence, a quality of things not lasting, not durable—fragile. Everything is fragile—some things more or less than others (Ahmed 2017, p. 164). A central Buddhist teaching is that all conditioned things are impermanent, and contemplation on impermanence becomes an antidote to suffering. In the 19th century

Nyingma master and scholar Patrul Rinpoche's well-known "written guide" (Tib. *khrid yig*) on the oral explanation of the Buddhist teachings, he states,

> Whatever is born is impermanent and is bound to die.
>
> Whatever is stored up is impermanent and bound to run out.
>
> Whatever comes together is impermanent and is bound to come apart.
>
> Whatever is built is impermanent and bound to collapse.
>
> Whatever rises up is impermanent and bound to fall down.
>
> So, also, friendship and enmity, fortune and sorrow, good and evil, all the
>
> thoughts that run through your mind—everything is always changing (Patrul Rinpoche 1994, pp. 46–47).

The connection I want to make here is to think about how all conditioned things, like a *gelongma* ordination lineage, are impermanent and therefore fragile—breakable, ever changing. Yet, impermanence is not necessarily a generative positive characteristic in Buddhism; it may also be destructive, degenerative. As Buddhist teacher Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche writes, "The world is impermanent. One day everything we know will be gone. That's simply how it is. Everything ends and ceases to be. Deep down, we know this already; we just don't like to think about it. But in fact, everything changes from one moment to the next" (Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche 2018, p. 23). Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche also speaks to how recognizing impermanence is the foundation for Buddhist practice and therefore generative for a practitioner: "Understanding impermanence is the basis for all that is good, wholesome, joyful, and great. In that way, impermanence is our greatest teacher and our foremost source of inspiration" (Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche 2018, pp. 50, 82). Recognizing the impermanence of phenomena as key for anyone seeking to understand the Dharma suggests that the evolution of impermanence promises the prospect of transforming the practitioner's mind. I see similar parallels between the Buddhist understanding of impermanence and Ahmed's notion of fragility, which she positions as potentially generative. Singer–songwriter Leonard Cohen sings about the generative potential of broken things, "There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in/That's how the light gets in."[9]

I argue that restoring *gelongma* ordination vows via the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* had remained stalled because of the fragility of its *gelongma* lineage, which depends upon (1) a continual *gelongma saṃgha* for giving vows with a *gelong saṃgha* or (2) solely on a *saṃgha* of *gelong*s.[10] Regarding re-establishing *gelongma* ordination, the first option is regarded as something that is broken, such as a lineage, that stops something from happening. Due to the absence of *gelongma*s in Tibet since Buddhism's introduction in the 8th century, the *gelongma* lineage never began in Tibet (the 14th Dalai Lama 1988, p. 44). The second option suggests how "a break becomes the realization of a quality assumed to belong to something" (Ahmed 2017, p. 168). By this, I mean that only relying on the *gelong saṃgha* illustrates how the broken *gelongma* lineage belongs to one *Vinaya* for Tibetan and Himalayan *tsunma*s; thus, one option for its continuance is reliance on what does exist, the *gelong saṃgha.*[11]

A third option entails a dual-*Vinaya* ceremony, which integrates fully ordained women monastics who hold precepts from the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* with *gelong*s ordained via the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya.*[12] Yet, this option implies "the assumption of fragility can make something fragile" because *Vinaya* scholars like Geshe Tashi Tsering question "whether the lineage of Chinese Bhikshunis initially ordained by a group of Sri Lankan Bhikshunis and Bhikshus that remains extant in China is pure and unbroken" (Tsering 2002, p. 171).[13] Since there are doubts among some contemporary *Vinaya* scholars about the viability and continuity of the lineage of fully ordained monastic women under the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, it is also fragile. Therefore, any dual-*Vinaya* ordination by implication rests upon multiple fragilities.

There had been a prolonged silence on any future plans for the Karmapa to resume his initiative for restoring *gelongma* ordination, but he recently suggested he will continue

with the process once travel eases up amid the pandemic (Karmapa 2022).[14] Now, since the Je Khenpo of Bhutan gave the *gelongma* vows, is *gelongma* ordination still fragile? I argue, fragility, still underlies this topic of *gelongma* ordination because the history of *gelongma* ordination has become like a wall, an institutional barrier, and as Ahmed says, "histories that have become hard, histories that leave some more fragile than others" can become a thread for thinking through the things deemed breakable, like a *gelongma* lineage (Ahmed 2017, p. 164). But what are *tsunmas'* perspectives?

Now, I turn to *tsunmas'* responses to questions about *gelongma* ordination to illustrate the fragility of *gelongma* ordination. This case study draws from select interviews with *tsunmas* living and practicing in Sakya, Kagyu, and Geluk institutions in Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Uttarakhand, India, between March 2017 and February 2019. First, through these *tsunmas'* voices, I explore the fragility of the *gelongma* lineage in Tibet. Second, I consider how contemporary *tsunmas'* responses to questions about full ordination illustrate the fragility of restoring *gelongma* ordination in the present. I depart from *tsunmas'* perspectives to think about the 17th Karmapa's perspective on the form and fragility of vows while pondering his erstwhile initiative to introduce *gelongma* ordination in the Tibetan tradition. By way of conclusion, I consider Ahmed's notion of fragility, "when being breakable stops something from happening" (Ahmed 2017, p. 169). I conclude with and think of the fictional *tsunma*, Jiko, with Nao, and my interlocutor Geshema Jigme's advice for dealing with anything broken.

## 4. Fragility of a Tradition: The *Gelongma* Lineage in Tibetan History

In my case study, *tsunmas* living in India narrate the history of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and ordination in Tibet and sometimes they present their own ideal for establishing a *gelongma* lineage as it relates to their knowledge of their community's needs and their understanding of *Vinaya*. Because *tsunma*s do not have *gelongma* ordination, they can only study parts of the *Vinaya* (Schneider 2022). Even though they are not authorized to study *Vinaya*, it still shapes their experience as holders of monastic discipline (Blackburn 2001, p. 11; Langenberg 2018, pp. 17–21). Thus, *tsunma*s still constitute what Anne Blackburn calls textual communities:

> Individuals who think of themselves to at least some degree as a collective, who understand the world and their appropriate place within it in terms significantly influenced by their encounter with a shared set of written texts or oral teachings based on written texts, and who grant special social status to literate interpreters of authoritative written texts (Blackburn 2001, p. 12).

Blackburn takes up the term textual communities as she examines eighteenth-century Lankan Buddhism to illustrate how traditions are dependent on local communities (Blackburn 2001, p. 10). Her work on textual communities helps us think about interpretive authority within textual communities and those who allow for interpretive shifts (Blackburn 2001, p. 12). In the Tibetan context, lineage leaders, "going forth" or novice ordination preceptors, nunnery abbesses and abbots, philosophy teachers, and/or nunnery disciplinarians interpret texts to and for *tsunmas.* While *tsunmas* also study these texts themselves in classes and integrate their understanding through the practice of debate, they inherit interpretations, especially of *Vinaya*. Much like Blackburn's notion of textual communities in Sri Lanka, the *tsunmas* in this case study demonstrate that, "Although members of a given textual community are oriented by and toward shared texts, their interpretations of these texts are not homogenous" (Blackburn 2001, p. 12).

Regarding history, the majority of *tsunmas* in this case study speak generally about the non-existence of *gelongma*s in Tibet because there is no evidence of a lineage of *gelongma*s ordained through *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (Price-Wallace 2017).[15] Löpon Wangmo and Tsunma Tenzin's narratives speak to the fragility of the *gelongma* lineage as being breakable and therefore prohibiting something from happening for its restoration. These *tsunmas'* interest in *gelongma* ordination emerges from a wish for ordination solely through the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya.* Tsunma Sonam Khacho and Tsunma Yangchen perceive the

fragility of the *gelongma* lineage in line with Ahmed's other definition of fragility—"breaking as the unfolding of being," meaning that due to the break, they see other possibilities such as dual-*Vinaya* ordination.

### *4.1. Single Vinaya: Significance of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*

#### 4.1.1. Löpon Wangmo

Löpon Wangmo, the principal of the Sakya nunnery in Uttarkhand, toured me around the campus where nearly sixty *tsunmas* reside for advanced study. Struck by the size of the well-landscaped campus, I marveled at the lush, subtropical foliage underneath the canopy of trees encircling the quadrangle, whose main focal point drew my eye to the main temple. Inside the temple, the golden statue of Shakyamuni Buddha overlooked rows of carpeted benches and reverently awaited the commencement of evening prayers. The ornate red and maroon columns defined the open spaces, and blue ceilings decorated with dharma wheels contrasted with the green-painted walls, off-setting the meticulously detailed images of buddhas, dharma protectors, lineage leaders, sacred sites, and other sources of refuge and religious inspiration. Compared with the other nunneries I had visited in India, this was the largest, most ornate temple set amid a manicured and well cared-for campus.

An hour into our formal interview, I asked Löpon Wangmo, "Would you ever be interested in full ordination?" Löpon Wangmo replied, "Yes, I am. Your question is a direct yes or no question." We both smiled and she replied, "My answer is also direct, 'yes.'"[16] Later in our interview, Löpon Wangmo clarified, "Generally, this *gelongma* ordination is not about interest but about history." She proceeded to tell me the history she inherited, the common narrative among her textual community about the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* as it relates to ordination in Tibet.

I asked, "Why might *tsunmas* want to only ordain under the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and not have an ecumenical ordination that includes fully ordained monastic women under the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*?" Löpon Wangmo explained:

> The Tibetan King, Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde btsan*), invited Khenchen Śāntarakṣita (*mkhan chen zhi ba 'thso*) from Nalandā University in India. Śāntarakṣita believed the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* would be best for Tibetans. He ordained seven monks, and this has been the practice. Later, when Atiśa came to Tibet, he was asked to give ordinations. Since Śāntarakṣita had introduced the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* lineage, Atiśa thought passing a lineage from another tradition would be inconsistent. So, he did not give an ordination because having two different lineages in one country would be confusing. Importing a new tradition would not be a big problem if it is a faultless ordination. Nonetheless, since in Tibet we only have had one tradition from the beginning, I think Tibetan *tsunmas* would love to have ordination through the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*; and they wish for a revival of that *gelongma* lineage. If practices are in one lineage, it would be nice. Sometimes all fruits are mixed and maybe we get a good juice, but if one tradition mixes with another tradition would be a funny flavor, particularly the ceremony chants![17]

Löpon Wangmo's response implies fragility in the sense that something being breakable stops something from happening. One, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* is the only lineage practiced in Tibet. As the Dalai Lama has stated, "Since the journey was very difficult in early times, *bhikṣuṇī*s [*gelongma*s] were not able to come to Tibet" (the 14th Dalai Lama 1988, p. 44). Thus, the lineage broke when *gelongma*s did not travel to Tibet and this stopped the lineage from continuing. Two, Löpon Wangmo considers a second *Vinaya* tradition as potentially problematic due to the mixing of rituals. Where Geshe Tashi Tsering doubted the continuity of the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* lineage for women, Löpon Wangmo accounts for differences in ritual practice. Three, she assumes that *tsunmas* would only want *gelongma* vows from the *Vinaya* most commonly observed among Tibetan monastics. Lastly, she used the Tibetan word for faultless or flawless (*nyes med*) when speaking about other *Vinaya* traditions. Here, this mirrors Ahmed's suggestion that "the assumption of fragility

can make something fragile." Löpon Wangmo presents concern that another tradition's ordination could be with fault, fragile to a degree. Relying on another tradition would thus make restoring vows doubly fragile. According to Löpon Wangmo, these possible paths to restoring *gelongma* ordination render these vows fragile.

#### 4.1.2. Tsunma Tenzin

Tsunma Tenzin, a forty-year-old Geluk *tsunma* from Zangskar, and I met while she attended the Dalai Lama's teachings in Bodh Gaya. Her main responsibilities in her nunnery include teaching the younger *tsunmas.* When I asked about a *gelongma* lineage in Tibet, Tsunma Tenzin said, "There have never been any *gelongma*s in Tibet. Now, we have many *geshemas*, [an advanced degree for *tsunmas* first conferred in 2016], but we do not have *gelongma* ordination. His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] says that he cannot do anything about *gelongma* ordination since it has to do with monastic rules as taught by the Buddha. The *geshema* degree, however, is an academic achievement based upon a curriculum and exams."[18] On the one hand, Tsunma Tenzin speaks about fragility of the *gelongma* institution. On the other hand, recently conferred *geshema* degrees highlight evolving standards of *tsunmas'* education in India.

While she speaks of the fragility of the *gelongma* lineage in Tibet, like Löpon Wangmo, Tsunma Tenzin did not see a dual-Vinaya ordination as viable. She did not reference differing ritual practices but instead emphasized fragile Sino-Tibetan political relations. She said, "We could not take the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* vows mainly because of our nationality. We are Tibetans. I cannot see any other reason. In Tibet, we only have the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* tradition and the Chinese have the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*. Although all the eighteen *nikayas* are Buddhist, but because of politics, the Chinese seem to be our rivals."[19] Later, this led into Tsunma Tenzin and I discussing the Karmapa's plans for a dual-*Vinaya* ordination. She, however, concluded that "since we do not have the twelve *gelongma*s, we cannot do the ordination under the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*."[20] Thus, based on its fragility—its history of brokenness—the *gelongma* ordination cannot be restored, according to both Löpon Wangmo or Tsunma Tenzin.[21] As a point of contrast, Tsunmas Sonam Khacho and Yangchen offer a different perspective on the fragility of *gelongma* ordination and how its breaking could be an unfolding of new possibilities through a dual-*Vinaya* ordination.

### *4.2. Dual-Vinaya: Mūlasarvāstivāda and Dharmaguptaka Vinayas*

#### 4.2.1. Tsunma Sonam Khacho

Tsunma Sonam Khacho's Kagyu nunnery sat atop a very windy road amid the coniferous and oak-tree filled hills where shades of green soften the rocky cliffs dappling northern Himachal Pradesh. Tsunma Sonam Khacho and I had met several times as I frequently visited her nunnery. It was during our third meeting that Tsuma Sonam Khacho, a *gelongma* who received her full vows in Hong Kong in the 1980s, described the challenges her parents encountered when they all came from Tibet to India. She had joined Tsunma Pema's interview and sat listening and sharing her own perspectives. We had not talked much about Tsunma Sonam Khacho's early life, but she said, "no one knew how to communicate with the locals" and "we only had dirty water." [22] She was really young at the time she left Tibet, but vividly remembered, "the water was cleaner in Tibet since it came from the mountains, and we were nomads. The water came from pipes in India."[23]

Tsunma Sonam Khacho did not share many details beyond this narrative about her pre-ordination life, but she did offer her insights into Tibetan history as it relates to restoring *gelongma* ordination at present:

> The *gelongma* lineage declined in Tibet. So, the contemporary issue about *gelongma* ordination raises questions for many people since it is a new and strange phenomenon. If *gelongma*s like us practice according to tradition, gradually people will not complain and the *gelongma* ordination will flourish. On the contrary, if we

> do not practice well, negative attitudes or gossip will spread in the community. That is not a good thing for anyone because it is all negative karma.[24]

Her last sentence is a reference to the ten actions to be avoided such as worthless chatter since it risks causing problems among individuals and community members (Patrul Rinpoche 1994, pp. 108–9). She highlights the fragility of a *gelongma* lineage in a new light—its possibilities. Rather than fragility preventing something from happening, this full ordination did happen for her and seven other *tsunmas* who received their vows via the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* in the 1980s (Havnevik 1989; Price-Wallace 2022).[25] She also spoke in terms of the Dalai Lama and Karmapa's efforts for restoring the *gelongma* lineage. She said, "Individuals like His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] and Gyalwang Karmapa are not just Buddhas, they are omniscient Buddhas who can understand the situations of all three times. Therefore, in my view, they must have had a vision that it is essential to practice *gelongma* vows now for the future of the Buddhist tradition."[26] For Tsunma Sonam Khacho, whose own *gelongma* ordination remains uncommon among Tibetan and Himalayan *tsunmas* in India, this statement not only signals to what she sees as important for the future of Buddhism, but also speaks to how monastic communities regard the authoritative figures heading lineages—as Buddhas. For this reason, the Karmapa's plans for an ecumenical dual-*Vinaya* ceremony coalesces with how she understands the fragility of the tradition. If new possibilities do not unfold from the breakage of the *gelongma* ordination lineage in Tibet, what will become of the Buddhist tradition?

However, she also points to another issue, the fragility of one's own vows and practice. If she and the other *gelongma*s do not practice in an exemplary manner, then the fragility of their own vows impacts the fragility of the tradition as well. Tsunma Sonam Khacho was not the only *tsunma* to express concern about the potential fragility of one's own vows; Tsunmas Yangchen and Pema also express this as well.

#### 4.2.2. Tsunma Yangchen

Tsunma Yangchen, a Kagyu *tsunma* from Kham, had lived in India for twenty years. Her nunnery in the Uttarkhand valley felt like a small, gated community opening up amid surrounding pastureland. When I asked her about receiving *gelongma* ordination, she stated, "First I must focus on observing the vows I have and examine if I would be able to hold more vows well. Once I am confident enough and ready for *gelongma* ordination, I would like to receive it."[27] Her answer reflects her concerns about the fragility of vows rather than an emphasis on the fragility of the tradition. Later, however, Yangchen said, "Taking vows from another tradition [such as the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*] fills the void in our tradition; later we could also promote the vows within our own by the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. I think it is good, and we should try it."[28] Her approach echoes Ahmed's "unfolding of being." She sees the dual-*Vinaya* ordination as the key to transitioning to a future where a dual-*Vinaya gelongma saṃgha* who practice solely by the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* could then ordain other *gelongma*s together with *gelong*s through the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. Tsunma Pema, in contrast, spoke with me not about *gelongma* vows, but about the vitality of one's own vows on the path to liberation.

#### 4.2.3. Tsunma Pema

Tsunma Pema's life story speaks specifically to the fragility of one's own vows and a *tsunma's* concern for practicing "*bodhicitta* (cultivating the mind of enlightenment for the benefit of others) as one cherishes one's own life."[29] Nearing the age of thirty, Tsunma Pema left her mother's house in Bhutan for Siliguri in northeastern India in the middle of night. She made her way by train to southern India where she entered a Nyingma monastery and received her vows from her root lama (Tib. *rtsa ba'i bla ma*), Penor Rinpoche. Eventually, due to health problems associated with the heat, she was moved to Himachal Pradesh to a Kagyu nunnery. The middle of three daughters, Tsunma Pema wanted to ordain for many years, but she waited until her own daughter was old enough to join a boarding school in

Sikkim before she departed for her monastic life. "I had her when I was twenty-three," she explains. While she recounts her mother's sadness and other relatives' surprise about her ordination, there are no undertones of regret when she retells her long-awaited desire to become ordained. Instead, she comments that since coming to India, she has finally had the opportunity to receive teachings from many lamas, "a sign of her great faith," her father says. "I had never heard of Mingyur Rinpoche before now. And now, he is teaching me meditation. And it's true what he says, you should do meditation whether you are walking, cooking, talking. Anything can be meditation."[30]

In a follow-up conversation, Tsunma Pema stated she wished she were a kind-hearted woman who would help all sentient beings in the world. She explained that previously she had "landed in the land of lay women" where she had fun, was crazy, and would "go out and screw up," however, "taking monastic vows helped to find the causes of her problems and learn from her mistakes."[31] Tsunma Pema also reported, "I am praying to the three Triple Gems not to depart from practice and my practice has to improve day by day in my life."[32]

Several months after our initial interviews, Tsunma Pema left her Kagyu monastery for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. She stayed with my family temporarily while a senior *tsunma* helped search for accommodations for Tsunma Pema. According to Tsunma Pema, someone accused her of indiscretions which were "all gossip and lies," she told me. This speaks to the fragility or perceived fragility of a *tsunma*'s vows. From my understanding, she was accused of having a relationship and this accusation alone resulted in her removal from the nunnery. Her vows, even if intact, were fragile-by-association.

After temporarily staying at another nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, she relocated to Bodh Gaya for her preliminary practices (*ngöndro*) including 100,000 physical prostrations while reciting refuge prayers and 100,000 mandala offerings for generating generosity.[33] She resided in Bodh Gaya from September 2018 until March 2020, practicing in the main temple when it opened at 5 a.m. until 11 a.m., followed by lunch and rest at her guesthouse, and then practice again from 3 p.m. until 7 p.m.

She explained in a phone call that due to COVID-19, Bhutan required all monastics who were Bhutanese nationals residing in India to return to Bhutan, but she intends to complete her final stages of *ngöndro* in Bodh Gaya when she is permitted to travel again. While she can practice at home, she is separate from not only the sacred site of the Buddha's enlightenment, but also being in the presence of another Nyingma teacher upon whose instruction she relies. While her family members practice Buddhism, the community of *ngöndro* practitioners at the temple also serve a family-like function where the reciprocity of merit-making appears bi-directional. For instance, at 6 a.m., rotating groups serve *balep* (Tibetan flat bread) and *daal* (Indian lentils mixed with spices) to practitioners while international laity from Nepal, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam walk around to chanting, meditating, or prostrating *tsunma*s and *tsunpa*s, offering candy, packs of cookies, fruit, and water. Those making offerings receive virtuous merit for their generous actions, and those practicing also generate merit by receiving these goods while simultaneously offering prayers and engaging in merit-making practices. Tsunma Pema often invited me to sit on her prostration platform while she took breaks after 1000 prostrations. She peeled her *mausami*, passing me slices of this sweet tangerine-lime like fruit while reminding me of ways I, too, as a lay person could generate merit, not only for my own benefit but also for others.

Presently, Tsunma Pema resides with her family in Bhutan where she spends time knitting intricate patterns and helping maintain the family garden.[34] However, she spends most of her day making Green Tara prayers to alleviate suffering caused by the pandemic. As she wrote on her Facebook page in August 2020, "Pray for my completion of merit and hardship. Purification and compassion for all sentient beings to be pure in mind all around the world."[35] In a way, the fragility of her own vows is tied directly to the responsibility she feels for others. She also posted a photo of herself with the caption, "Myself growing increasingly sad and impatient at the absurdity of this bullshitting samsara!"[36] Her forceful

indictment of the cyclical nature of rebirth speaks to her concern for the well-being of others and her own meditation on impermanence.

During Tsunma Pema's first interview, she told me we would talk about *gelongma* ordination later. She opted to skip the questions and suggested I interview other *tsunmas.* Tsunma Pema and I did not have conflicting interests—it genuinely seemed to be a topic that she chose not to speak on. We never discussed *gelongma* ordination again; Tsunma Pema, however, took on the role of recruiting other *tsunmas* to interview, often translating when I misunderstood or clarifying my English-accented Tibetan for *tsunmas.* She became more than a co-researcher; she is my friend.

I still do not seek her opinion on the topic of *gelongma* ordination even though I have had ample opportunities to do so—between drinking tea at her nunnery, taking her to a dentist, sharing fruit at the Mahabodhi temple, long walks to the commemorated site where the Buddha broke his fast when Sujātā offered him rice milk, and our frequent texts or phone calls every few months. More recently, she offered advice when my husband and daughters had COVID-19, insisting that my daughters attend school only online. She sends images of offerings on Guru Rinpoche Day or selfies while doing *khora* (circumambulating holy sites). Recently, we compared the January snowfall amounts in Thimphu and Chicago through photos and videos. She centers cultivating her practice and guarding the fragility of her own vows. Through our friendship and as I witness her practice, her silence on the topic of *gelongma* ordination makes sense to me.

## 5. When Institutional and Personal Fragility Collide

Tsunma Pema's silence on *gelongma* ordination fades into the background when observing her day-to-day practice. But how do I make sense of the Karmapa's silence on his postponed efforts to restore *gelongma* ordination? I understand the silence as suggestive of the fragility of the institution of Buddhist monasticism and one's own personal vows. As Ahmed says, "What happens to you: we need to handle what we come up against. But what if the handle is what breaks? Fragility: losing the handle. When the jug loses its handle, it becomes useless" (Ahmed 2017, p. 170). This is my projection, my near journaling, my moment of being Nao.

### *5.1. Institutional Fragility and Dōgen's Time-Being*

*Gelongma* ordination is fragile because of its institutional history, a topic the Karmapa has addressed closely and carefully.[37] He ultimately decided that a dual-*Vinaya* approach with a fully ordained women's *saṃgha* would garner the most authentic vows. For instance, on 13 March 2017, during the Annual Nuns Gatheng, he stated,

> Without a *saṃgha* of *bhikṣunī*s, it is very difficult to give proper and authentic vows to individuals in a female body. This is why it is extremely important to reinstitute the community of *bhikṣunī*s. When we look at the ceremonies for the vows that can be taken with a female body—such as a female lay practitioner with precepts, the female who has gone forth, and the novice nun—as they are described in the *Vinaya* (and many of the ceremonies have been translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan), they all state that the *bhikṣunī*s, should bestow the vows that can be given to women. If we seek these authentic true vows, then the *bhikṣunī*s, are key.[38]

While the Karmapa pursued the possibility of restoring *gelongma* ordination through a dual-*Vinaya* approach with fully ordained Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī*s, this process stalled without any discussion from 2017 until 2022.[39]

The Karmapa had difficulties returning to India after traveling to North America in summer 2017 to teach. During this time, he received a foreign passport without returning his Tibetan identity card, which created issues with receiving the necessary visa for re-entry into India. Due to these on-going challenges with the Indian government, the Karmapa was not able to return to his home monastery in India and was not able to attend in-person the annual Kagyu Monlam or the main gathering for *tsunmas* in 2018, 2019, or

2020 (Bagchi 2018; Karmapa 2019). To the best of my knowledge, he remains abroad. I could speculate that his inability to be physically present may be a possible reason that the *gelongma* ordination remains paused. The Karmapa has continued to teach through the COVID-19 pandemic and held the *tsunmas'* gathering online in 2021 and 2022. Therefore, even if the lineage of *gelongma*s "broke" when Buddhist monasticism began in Tibet, the Karmapa initially did not consider the fragility of *gelongma* ordination as preventing its restoration from happening.

Alternatively, does the stalling on this topic signify some sort of 'institutional inertia' on giving *gelongma* vows and restoring its lineage? Arguably, from the 8th century in Tibet until the 21st century in India, there has been a situation of, to borrow Ahmed's phrase, 'institutional inertia' (Ahmed 2017, p. 97). For roughly 1300 years, the *gelongma* lineage has remained non-existent for Tibetan and Himalayan *tsunmas*. While fragility may be one lens to think through such inertia, the notion of time and being offers a poetic, Zen-like lens for rendering understanding. Here, I think about the inseparability of time and being through the characters, Nao and Jiko. They rely on the 13th century Sōtō Zen monk, Eihei Dōgen who explores time and being in his *Shōbōgenzō Uji*:

> An old Buddha said:
>
> For the time being, I stand astride the highest mountain peaks.
>
> For the time being, I move on the deepest depths of the ocean floor.
>
> For the time being, I'm three heads and eight arms.
>
> For the time being, I'm eight feet or sixteen feet.
>
> For the time being, I'm a staff or a whisk.
>
> For the time being, I'm Mr. Chang or Mr. Li.
>
> For the time being, I'm the great earth and heavens above.
>
> The "Time Being" means time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time.
>
> The sixteen-foot golden Buddha-body is time; because it is time, it has time's glorious golden radiance. You must learn to see this glorious radiance in the twelve hours of your day. The [demonic asura with] three heads and eight arms in time; because it is time, it can be in no way different from the twelve hours of your day. Although you never measure the length or brevity of the twelve hours, their swiftness or slowness, you can still call them the twelve hours. As evidence of their going and coming is obvious, you do not come to doubt them. But even though you do not have doubts about them, that is not to say you know them. Since a sentient being's doubtings of the many and various things unknown to him are naturally vague and indefinite, the course his doubtings take will probably not bring them to coincide with this present doubt. Nonetheless, the doubts themselves are, after all, none other than time.
>
> We set the self out in array and make the whole world. We must see all the various things of the whole world as so many times. These things do not get in each other's way. Because of this, there is an arising of the religious mind as the same time and it is the arising of time of the same mind. So it is with practice and attainment of the Way. We set our self in array, and we see that. Such is the fundamental reason of the Way–that our self is time (Roberts 2018, pp. 25–26).[40]

Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* emphasizes the present moment. This text reflects the Buddhadharma for Mahāyāna practitioners like Jiko who teaches Nao. As Nao writes, "Jiko also says that to do zazen is to enter time completely" (Ozeki 2013, p. 183). Dōgen teaches about the nature of delusions regarding time and being, especially when an ordinary person entrapped in dualistic and conceptual thought fails to understand that "the time-being abides in each moment."[41] Dōgen goes on,

> Hence, pine trees are time. So are bamboos. You should not come to understand that time is only flying past. You should not only learn that flying past is the

> virtue inherent in time. If time were to give itself to merely flying past, it would have to leave gaps. You fail to experience the passage of being-time and hear the utterance of its truth, because you learn only that time is something that goes past.
>
> The essential point is: every being in the entire world is each time and [independent] time, even while it makes a continuous series. Inasmuch as they are being-time, they are my being-time (Roberts 2018, p. 27).

Dōgen teaches us to think about the present moment and not the past. This passage is meant to encourage the practitioner to respond in the moment to the needs of each situation removed and unfettered by our ideas and experience (Roberts 2018, p. 114). In this way, Dōgen's lens of the "time-being as moments" helps think through the fragility of *gelongma* ordination from the 8th century to the present day even though the contexts are different. The inertia remains because "all existence is included in each being-time" (Roberts 2018, p. 107). This means that if we know something about one particular time it facilitates recognizing the nature of time, which means "although we may get caught in our ideas about the difficulties, we are still being present as best we can" (Roberts 2018, p. 113).

### *5.2. Holding Contradictions*

In the context of Ozeki's novel, Dōgen acts as an interlocutor for both Jiko and Nao. For purposes of this article, Dōgen's practices and own life narrative are instructive for holding contradictions. In Shinsu Robert's commentary on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō Uji*, she notes "We are so prone to understanding our experience as sequential that we have a difficult time including what we think of as contradictory ideas" (Roberts 2018, p. 114). Dōgen has his own paradoxical record with women, ranging from unconditional support of women to rejection (Arai 1999, pp. 22–23).

Paula Arai's instrumental work on Sōtō Zen nuns not only looks at Dōgen's views and support of women practitioners, but also illustrates how nuns interpret Dōgen's teachings. Dōgen's writings have perplexed scholars since some of his works suggested egalitarian ideals whereas others implied that women did not have the capacity for true enlightenment (Arai 1999, p. 39). Arai argues, however, that the historical record and nuns' present-day reliance upon his teachings indicate his past and present influence upon practitioners despite of the contradictions apparent in one sentence of the *Shukke Kudoku*. This sentence states, "'It is also said that one can attain Buddhahood in a female body, but this is not the Buddhist path of the true tradition of the Buddhist masters'" (Arai 1999, p. 39). Scholars question dating of this text and whether this sentence was edited because it is hard to hold contradictory views of an admirable teacher, scholar, and practitioner.

Even though Dōgen never ordained women, many women chose to transfer into his order because of his emphasis on the equality of female and male practitioners, and his successor (Keizan Jōkin Zenji) continued Dōgen's teachings on equality and ordained many women (Arai 1999, pp. 42–43). Arai and her nun interlocutors challenge interpretations that suggest Dōgen rejected women (Arai 1999, p. 49), but the paradoxes in Dōgen's own narratives and his actions help segue into thinking about the contradictions in the Karmapa's present situation. On the one hand, the Karmapa frequently speaks about gender equality. When we talk about equality of women, he says, it must go beyond addressing institutional inequality as it is not enough to really "empower women" (Karmapa 2015b, Wisdom Podcast). He has also noted that re-establishing *gelongma* ordination will not necessarily bring about gender parity in the same way that women's suffrage or electing a woman president do not truly restore women's rights (Karmapa 2015a, Princeton Talk). Thus, he ponders gender equality and its own paradoxes. While there was a prolonged silence about restoring the *gelongma* vows for five years, the Karmapa has not been silent on the fragility of vows. In 2019, he spoke about his own vows and the way he received them.

*5.3. The Form of Vows and the Karmapa on the Fragility of Vows*

For Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, there are three vows (*sdom pa gsum*)—*prātimokṣa* (*so thar gyi sdom pa*, individual liberation), *bodhisattva* (*byang sems kyi sdom pa*, adherent of enlightenment), and *tantra* (*gsang sngags kyi dam tshig*, esoteric continuum) (Wangyal 1996, pp. VIII–XI; Karthar 2004, pp. 151–80; Sobisch 2002). More importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the *prātimokṣa* vows are key for any vow holder. There are seven categories of vow holders to be distinguished by the person receiving them: fully ordained male monastic (*gelong/dge slong, bhikṣu*), fully ordained female monastic (*gelongma/dge slong ma, bhikṣūnī*), male novice (*getsul/dge tsul, śrāmaṇera*), female novice (*getsulma/dge tsul ma, śrāmaṇerikā*), layman practitioner (*genyen/dge bsnyen, upāsaka*), laywoman practitioner (*genyenma/ dge bsnyen ma, upāsikā*), and female monastic probationer (*gelobma/dge slob ma, śikṣāmanā*) (Kongtrul 2003, p. 88). In Tibetan epistemology, the *prātimokṣa* vows are included under the rubric of the form (*skandha*), albeit as subtle form, and *skandhas* by their nature are impermanent, changing moment to moment (Kongtrul 2003, pp. 85–87).[42] In this regard, the monastic tradition itself holds these *prātimokṣa* vows as fragile. As form, they are a part of our world, the desire realm, this *'jig rten*, this "disintegrating support."[43]

In *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, a translation of three-vow literature composed by Sakya Pandita in the thirteenth century (c. 1232), he draws from the *Abhidharmakośa* which delineates how the *prātimokṣa* vows are considered to be form (Sakya Pandita 2002, pp. 41–80).[44] The verses are as follows:

> From refuge through full monkhood,
> a Disciple's vows last as long as he lives.
> They are lost at death. (2)
>
> The effects of the vows
> manifest in a subsequent lifetime.
> The vows of a bodhisattva, however,
> endure even beyond death. (3)
>
> How so? A vow, Disciples maintain,
> is nonmental [i.e., material] and issues from body and voice;
> since it has form, the vow is relinquished whenever death occurs.
> On this point the *Abhidharmakośa* also teaches: (4)
>
> "The discipline of Individual Liberation is terminated
> by renouncing the training, by dying, by having become a hermaphrodite,
> by severance of the roots of virtue, and by the lapse of night."
> And this statement is authoritative (5).

Verses three and four emphasize the nature of the *prātimokṣa* vows in contrast with the *bodhisattva* vows, which endure beyond death. The *prātimokṣa* vows constitute a material, imperceptible form and do not carry over after death (Sakya Pandita 2002, p. 41).[45]

These conversations on the nature of vows also emerge in conversation with *tsunmas* and in the Karmapa's talks. Sitting in the shade in the back of the Kagyu Monlam pavilion in Bodhgaya, Tsunma Wangmo, a Taiwanese *tsunma* who practiced in the Tibetan tradition and was acting as a translator between Taiwanese, Himalayan, and Tibetan *tsunmas*, said:

> Vows are kind of like a *bum pa* (vase). During ordination, there is something kind of there that has a form, and it will come into this vessel. This is the moment you get the ordination; it means you have it. So, they want to make sure that you really have it exactly . . . All the conditions must be complete. And then, we have to make sure that once the time you get it, time will ripen, and you will remember the time you get it. It is related and everything comes together and the time ripens.[46]

Tsunma Wangmo speaks of time, form, and intention. Regarding time, she considers how the vows arise and the "time ripens." For me, her reflections call to mind Dōgen: "Because of this, there is an arising of the religious mind as the same time and it is the arising of time of the same mind. So it is with practice and attainment of the Way. We set our self in array, and we see that. Such is the fundamental reason of the Way—that our self is time" (Roberts 2018, p. 26; Dōgen 1994).

Tsunma Wangmo also speaks to the ideas of vows as form and intention—mirroring both the *Sautrāntika* and *Mādhyamika* perspectives of these individual liberation vows. The *prātimokṣa* vows yield a complete transformation in the mental continuum (i.e., a form that comes into the vessel) because they consist of the intention at the time when one renounces unwholesome deeds (i.e., all conditions must be complete for it to ripen) (Kongtrul 2003, pp. 85–87). While she does not speak to the fragility of the vows themselves, the Karmapa's own language about his vows implies their fragility. As he stated in his Kagyu Monlam address in 2019:

> In 2002, when I was 16, His Holiness granted me the vow of intermediate ordination. And on the day when he did so, he gave me both the vow of intermediate ordination and getsul at that same time. Our request was only for the intermediate ordination, but he gave me both ordinations. He must have had a special reason for doing so. Though at the time, my thought was to first receive the intermediate ordination and to later receive novice ordination from Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche, His Holiness gave me both. There was some talk within our lineage of the importance of my taking the vows according to our own tradition and that it wouldn't be quite right to do otherwise. But at that time, to be honest, I hadn't studied the Vinaya much. In actuality, the vow of intermediate ordination is not the actual monastic ordination. It is really just permission to wear the robes, the symbol of religious ordination. One sets aside the clothes of a layperson and takes up the symbolic robes of ordination, but it is not actual ordination (Karmapa 2019).

He went on to add:

> After this, much time passed while I was wondering whether I should receive the novice vows according to our Kagyu tradition or not and what to do about full ordination. Further, I also became very busy with the work of Kagyu Monlam. As I studied the Vinaya and my understanding of it gradually increased, I felt like my former way of approaching vows was not quite correct. I thought my previous manner of taking them was not right, and that if I really wanted to receive the vows in a pure way, I should start again from the beginning. Especially, if one wants to receive the vows purely into one's being, one needs stable renunciation and wishing for emancipation in one's being. Without this, it would be difficult to keep the vows in a stable manner. These days, it is as if we were just following the custom of taking monks or nuns vows, but it's actually very rare that one thinks deeply about this and wishes, from the depths of one's being, to ordain. I think many people must be wondering and talking about why I have not taken full ordination by now. From my side, the main thing is that if renunciation and wishing for emancipation has not truly arisen, the novice and full monks' vows will not be based on this ethical conduct that longs for liberation, and it would be difficult for them to result in perfectly pure ethical conduct—though there must be some benefit in holding the vows anyway (Karmapa 2019).

The Karmapa does not speak to the form of the vows but speaks to the necessity of stable renunciation and a longing for liberation as the basis for keeping the vows "in a stable manner." Thus, one's vows are not only fragile but also, possibly, unstable. The Karmapa went on:

> It is difficult to have stable renunciation and a mind with the stable longing for liberation. And without these, it is difficult to hold the vows in a completely pure

> way. So I am trying to develop stable renunciation within my being. I am trying to develop a certain degree of true renunciation—it's difficult to generate a really high level—but if I can develop a certain degree of renunciation, I feel that I will be able to receive the vows of individual liberation in a full and complete way. Then, at the time of death, if I can die with the support of ordination, I feel my mind would be at ease. This is the high hope that I hold for myself and the reason things have been as they are up to now (Karmapa 2019).

Here, the 17th Karmapa speaks of the value of holding monastic ordination vows as a source of ease at the time of death even though these vows as an imperceptible form disintegrate at the moment of death. During this particular talk, the 17th Karmapa implies multiple fragilities that extend beyond vows. The 17th Karmapa spoke of many issues from the difficulties acquiring the proper visa to return to India to the value of meeting with the other figure venerated as an incarnation of the 17th Karmapa, Thaye Dorje, whose recognition has been seen as the source of a potential rift in the Karma Kagyu lineage (Karmapa 2019).[47] As the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje continued:

> Generally, people say that I am Karmapa, a buddha, a bodhisattva. They say what they say, but when I look for myself, all I see is an ordinary being with afflictions and faults, not someone who is free of faults and endowed with all the qualities, as others think. In any case, my wish to benefit the teachings and benefit beings has never waned, and at the very least, I pray that I will be able to benefit the teachings and beings not only in this lifetime but in all my lifetimes (Karmapa 2019).

He went on:

> For a long time, no one has heard much about what I am doing, and there are many rumors and a lot of hearsay about it. We are all the same. No matter who we are, people say all sorts of things about us; they misunderstand or make up things. In my life, this has often happened from the time I was little until now. Such situations happen often to all of us. But the main thing is that because our own minds are not hidden from us, it is important for us to believe in ourselves. For me, as I said before, I intend to continue working for the sake of Buddhism and sentient beings (Karmapa 2019).

The Karmapa's address speaks to the form of vows and the fragilities that form entails. Are these fragilities like the cracks that let the light in?

### *5.4. Personal Fragility and Dōgen on a Critical Instant*

*Prātimkoṣa* vows as form are personally fragile for Buddhist practitioners. More than that as Tsunma Wangmo and the 17th Karmapa both illustrated, the fragility of one's personal vows is also contingent on personal intention and the stability of the mind of renunciation. Dōgen and Nao, again, are helpful to think alongside while pondering personal fragility. Dōgen plays into the narratives Nao writes in her journal. For instance, Nao translates her great uncle's secret French diary from World War Two. Haruki #1, her great uncle, who died in a *kamikaze* mission, writes,

> Dōgen also wrote that a single moment is all we need to establish our human will and attain truth . . . . Both life and death manifest in every moment of existence. Our human body appears and disappears moment by moment, without cease, and this ceaseless arising and passing away is what we experience as time and being. They are not separate. They are one thing, and in even a fraction of a second, we have the opportunity to choose, and to turn the course of our action either toward the attainment of truth or away from it. Each instant is utterly critical to the whole world (Ozeki 2013, p. 324).

Dōgen is helpful to think with here, especially considering not only the links between moments and their perpetual impermanence but also how "each instant is utterly critical." Haruki #1's interpretation of Dōgen signals to the importance of each moment and the

inseparability between time and being and action. Thus, through Dōgen read through Ozeki's characters, what is the course of action when considering the fragility of vows and *gelongma* ordination?

**6. Super Nuns for the Time Being**

Nao's journal tells the life story of her great-grandmother Jiko—a nun, novelist, New Woman of the Taisho era, an anarchist, and a feminist (Ozeki 2013, p. 6). Nao's insights about Jiko's outlook may bring some resolve for the time being:

> I believe that in the deepest places in their hearts, people are violent and take pleasure in hurting each other. Old Jiko and I disagree on this point. She says that according to Buddhist philosophy, my point of view is a delusion and that our original nature is to be kind and good, but honestly I think she's way too optimistic. I happen to know some people, like Reiko, are truly evil, and many of the Great Minds of Western Philosophy back me up on this. But still I'm glad old Jiko believes we're basically good, because it gives me hope, even if I can't believe it myself. Maybe someday I will (Ozeki 2013, p. 181).

Jiko gives Nao hope.

The *tsunmas* at the center of this case study offer a similar hope for other *tsunmas* and the community of lay women they support. Tsunma Nyima Drolkar, the abbess of a Geluk nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, explains her intentions and motivations as a *tsunma*:

> My motivations are for making my monastery a simple monastery because I do not want [the other *tsunmas*] to live as I did before. In the beginning, we woke up at five o'clock in the morning and worked the whole day like laborers. So, we worked with sand and bricks which we all carried on our backs. Now, I wish for the other *tsunmas* to just study. My intentions and motivations are that everybody feels this monastery models good practice and study. That is my dream.[48]

Tsunma Nyima literally and figuratively lays the foundation for the other *tsunmas* in her community. Her motivations draw from her wish to work on behalf of the other *tsunmas.* When I asked, "How do you see yourself and your role in your monastic community?" She noted, "Actually, I am abbess for the nunnery. I am very happy with this role as I like to help others. The young *tsunmas* call me their second mother."[49]

When asked about her responsibilities as a *tsunma*, Geshema Jigme said,

> First our responsibility is to practice the Buddhadharma very deeply much like Jetsun Milarepa. Secondly, we teach *tsunmas* or lay women. I think like that. *Tsunpas* do not need our help since there are so many *geshes* and *khenpos*. We are all the same. All women. That's why we help them. We have more time because we have a simple life. We don't look after parents. Lay people have so many problems. They have to look after their children, spouse, and parents. That's why we teach lay women how to practice Dharma and keep good health.[50]

Broadly, her response reflects her commitments to helping women in her personal, interactional world. She generalizes about "women" whom she sees as similar in their "womanness." Geshema Jigme intends to support the differing needs of monastic and lay women. Her care for them is similar to Jiko's care for Nao. Nao writes:

> By the end of the summer, with Jiko's help, I was getting stronger. Not just strong in my body, but strong in my mind. In my mind, I was becoming a superhero, like Jubei-chan, the Samurai Girl, only I was Nattchan, the Super Nun, with abilities bestowed upon me by Lord Buddha that included battling the waves, even if I always lost, and being able to withstand astonishing amounts of pain and hardship (Ozeki 2013, p. 204).

Nao makes an important point. She, too, lives with fragility—astonishing amounts of pain and hardship, but she is a "Super Nun." In spite of the consequences of Nao's fragility and the fragility of the *gelongma* lineage in Tibetan history, there are plenty of Super Nuns!

Again, Ahmed's position on fragility provides a useful lens:

> Perhaps we need to develop a different orientation to breaking. We can value what is deemed broken; we can appreciate those bodies, those things, that are deemed to have bits and pieces missing. Breaking need not be understood only as the loss of integrity of something, but as the acquisition of something else, whatever else that might be (p. 180).

The *gelongma* ordination lineage is fragile, but we can think about what ordination possibilities may come in due time. Clearly some of those possibilities have come to fruition through the efforts of the Je Khenpo of Bhutan and the more than one-hundred and forty *gelongma*s who received their vows through a single *saṃgha* ordination. Additionally, during the 8th Arya Kshema in April 2022, the 17th Karmapa spoke to his interest in continuing with the process towards *gelongma* ordination (Karmapa 2022).[51] As my interlocutors own daily practices demonstrate, Himalayan and Tibetan *tsunmas* have been *tsunmas* for 1300 years. Whether a *gelongma* lineage emerges from a *gelong*-only or dual-*Vinaya* ceremony remains unclear. The *tsunmas* at the center of this case study have developed different orientations towards the breaking, the fragility of the lineage, but as Geshema Jigme says:

> We Tibetans accept *bhikṣuṇī*s from Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the west. We accept all of them. We are also like them, but why do we not accept our own *tsunmas* as *bhikṣuṇī*s (*gelongma*s)? If Tibetan *tsunmas* become *bhikṣuṇī*s (*gelongma*s) and there are no discussions on it, then that is not a good sign. If we have discussions on it, it shows we are actually focusing on them. If my pen is broken, the majority of people think it is not good because my pen is broken. But I do not think like that. I think that since it is broken, it is a good chance to get a new one! I think like that always![52]

Maybe it's time for new pen, a new *gelongma* lineage. Or, to return to the fire metaphor that I began with—maybe it's time for building fires in new ways. Maybe those fires are being lit by the Je Khenpo of Bhutan. If you prefer to end in song, "Ring the bells that still can ring, Forget your perfect offering, There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all informants involved in the study. Per guidelines of the IRB at Northwestern University, all informants names have been changed for confidentiality and to maintain anonymity.

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## Notes

1 For more on this topic of the first ordination and the potential for decline in different *vinayas*, see Anālayo (2010, pp. 78–97).

2 See other forthcoming articles in this Special Issue for more regional specific historical information: for *Theravāda/Pāli*, see Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā, Scott, Seeger, and Walker; for *Dharmaguptaka*, see Campo, Cho, Bianchi, and Pérronet; for *Mūlasarvāstivāda*, see Bareja-Starzynska, Schneider, and Wu.

[3] For more on the history of *Theravāda/Pāli*, see Seeger and Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā in this Special Issue. Also, see works by Bhikkhunī Kūsuma (2012) and Bhikkhunī Dhammandandā (Kabilsingh 1991), who are two *Theravāda bhikkunī*s who also received their full vows with *Dharmaguptaka* monks. Other additional scholarly works that examine full ordination in the *Theravāda/Pāli* context include (Collins and McDaniel 2010; Battaglia 2015; Kawanami 2007; Mrozik 2009, 2014, 2020; Salgado 2013, 2019; Seeger 2018).

[4] I use the term *tsunma* because it covers all celibate women religious practitioners who hold precepts in the Tibetan tradition, whether these women have postulant (*rab tu byung ma*, Skt. *pravrajitā*), novice (*dge tshul ma*, Skt. *śrāmaṇerikā*), probationary (*dge slob ma*, Skt. *śikṣamāṇā*), or full vows (*dge slong ma*, *bhikṣunī*), and whether or not they don monastic attire, shave their heads, and live in or apart from a monastic community. Yet all these Tibetan terms—*tsunma*, *ani*, *jomo*, *rabjungma*, *getsulma*, *gelobma*, and *gelongma*—are often considered equivalent and interchangeable with the English term nun. Tsunma Tenzin, an interlocutor in Bodh Gaya, used the term *tsunma* in lieu of the more common *ani.* The Tibetan term *btsun* is equivalent to discipline. As Tsunma Tenzin discussed, *btsun ma* refers to women who adhere to discipline. Interview 3F–TT–Bihar—16 March 2018, 20:49–22:44. All interlocutors names are pseudonyms. I do not use the names and exact locations of nunneries for purposes of confidentiality under the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board at Northwestern University. I conducted all interviews on my own in Tibetan, Hindi, and/or English. Dorjee Choephel was instrumental in transcribing interviews, which we subsequently edited together.

[5] The 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje initiated this process on 11–12 March 2017, fieldnotes. Presently, the 17th Karmapa has a court case for spousal support against him amid allegations of sexual assault that emerged in May 2021. According to a *CBC News* article that first published these allegations, Vikki Hui Xin Han is suing for spousal support based upon what "began as a non-consensual sexual encounter [that] evolved into a loving and affectionate relationship" (Proctor 2021). Initially, Han sued for child support but amended her claim for spousal support when the case went to trial (Müller 2021; Burke 2021). Since these allegations postdated all of my fieldwork, I do not know how the *tsunmas* at the center of this study have received this knowledge of the allegations against the Karmapa.

[6] I am using this term vow as it relates to the acceptance of the pledge to not break the precepts (Tib. *bslab pa'i gzhi*, Skt. *śikṣāpada*) that *tsunma*s practice. There are complex linguistic issues on this topic of the Tibetan term *sdom pa*. For more discussion, see Kishino (2004). See also Roloff's (2020) discussion, pp. 281–93, and footnote 71 on p. 308. In terms of the enumeration of the precepts (Tib. *bslab pa'i gzhi*, Skt. *śikṣāpada*), this is by no means fixed, as in Tibetan exegesis or as illustrated in recent scholarship. For more on this topic, see Heckman (2022, chp. 2–3).

[7] Tsering's translation is presumably referring to the Tibetan term, *dag pa*, as does Clarke's (2010, p. 235). Bhikṣuṇī Tsedroen and Bhikkhu Anālayo also suggest that the preceptor giving the vows does not incur a minor fault (*nyes byas*) (Tsedroen and Anālayo 2013, p. 761). The point is that since the preceptor incurs an infraction, the vows are not faultless and perfect. However, the ordinations are still valid. Clarke reiterates this point that there are canonical instances where even slight mishaps or even non-ideal ordinations are still valid (Clarke 2010, pp. 232, 237–38). Thanks to Annie Heckman for thinking this through with me. See also Salgado (2019, pp. 4–8). Salgado discusses the nuances of the precepts and the cultivation of self-discipline by showing the limitations of characterizing *Vinaya* stipulations as rules. For discussions on this topic in a Mahāyana context, see Péronnet (2022).

[8] See Roloff's (2020) text as a reference for the English translation of the ordination procedures for *bhikṣuṇī*s from the *Kṣudrakavastu*.

[9] With gratitude for Professor Richard Kieckhefer making this connection for me during our "works-in-progress" workshop at Northwestern 2/22/22. Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*, 1992 (Cohen 2022).

[10] Though there are other sources, here, I am relying on the 8th Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's commentary (Karmapa 2002) on the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the center of my current research. The full passage is as follows: "In the main regions, the female *saṃgha* requires twelve fully ordained nuns. In the borderlands (remote area), in the case that twelve nuns are not obtained, then six fully ordained nuns are permissible. Even if these numbers are not complete, given with a group of four fully ordained nuns and without making a mistake in the confession in the monastic discipline is to know the essential point described in the full ordination. If these fully ordained nuns are not obtained in the region, it is suitable for the *saṃgha* of fully ordained monks to also bestow the full ordination to women." dge 'dun ma de yang yul dbus su dge slong ma bcu gnyis dang | mtha' 'khob tu bcu gnyis med na dge slong ma drug gi grangs tshang ba'o | grangs de dge ma tshang yang dge slong ma bzhi'i tshogs kyis byin na tshangs spyod nyer gnas 'chogs la nyes byes te | bsnyen rdzogs la gsungs pa'i gnad kyis shes so | dge slong ma de dge ma rnyed na | dge slong pha'i dge 'dun kyis kyang tshangs spyod nyer gnas sbyon du rung ste | .

[11] Tibetan histories detail how the *gelong saṃgha* required reinstatement following Lang Darma's reign, insinuating how the *gelong* ordination lineage is also fragile. Yet, a *gelongma* ordination is a multi-year process with several stages—preventing it from happening from the 8th century to the present moment whereas a *gelong* ordination does not have a probationary stage. Thus, *Vinaya* requirements for the male versus female *saṃgha* create the conditions for differing degrees of fragility between the *gelong* and *gelongma* ordination.

[12] Generally, Mahāyāna practitioners in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan rely on the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* whereas Vajrayāna monastics in Bhutan, India, Mongolia, Nepal, and Tibet rely on the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.

[13] For the perspective on "purity" in the *Dharmaguptaka* lineage, see Bianchi (2022).

14 During the 8th Arya Kshema on 19 April 2022, the 17th Karmapa reasserted his wish to continue this *gelongma* ordination in the future when it was safe after the COVID-19 pandemic.

15 I closely detail several exceptional cases of *gelongma*s in Tibetan history in Chapter 3 of in my dissertation, illustrating how some *tsunma*s speak of these uncommon *gelongma* narratives as possible precedents for restoring ordination.

16 Interview 22F–LWD–UT—28 July 2018, 1:04–1:07.

17 Interview 22F–LWD–UT—28 July 2018.

18 Interview 3F–TT–Bihar—16 March 2018, 6:00–9:00.

19 Interview 3F–TT–Bihar—16 March 2018, 40:00–44:00.

20 Interview 3F–TT–Bihar—16 March 2018, 46:00–48:00.

21 As I discuss in Chapter Four of my dissertation, Löpon Wangmo would like to receive her *gelongma* vows but does not see a viable option. In contrast, Tsunma Tenzin would like to keep perfecting her novice vows and did not express an interest in receiving full vows.

22 Gelongma Sonam Khacho's life story and full ordination are central to my dissertation (Price-Wallace 2022).

23 Interview 8F–GS with TP–HP—24 April 2018, 54:30–58:50.

24 Interview 1F–GS–HP—22 January 2018, 10:40–12:50.

25 Hanna Havnevik's (1989) important ethnography, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norms and Social Reality*, details many important aspects of these *tsunma*s' lives, pp. 90–113.

26 Interview 1F–GS–HP—22 January 2018, 34:41–32.25.

27 Interview 25F–TY–UT—30 July 2018, 18:17–23:50.

28 Interview 25F–TY–UT—30 July 2018, 29:35–31:40.

29 Survey with Pema, 2C, 2 March 2018–Bihar.

30 Interview 8F–TP, informal 22 February 2018, 7 March 2018–Bihar, 24 April 2018–HP, 20 October 2019–Bihar, no recording.

31 Survey with Pema, 2C, 2 March 2018–Bihar. She wrote these answers in English.

32 See note 31 above.

33 *Ngöndro*, meaning 'that which comes first,' is the foundational practice containing essential Buddhist teachings. *Ngöndro* is an essential practice among all the Tibetan Buddhist schools although each has their own variations of the ordinary preliminaries such as the four thoughts that turn the mind and unique preliminaries such as refuge, purification, accumulating merit, and guru yoga. For more on this topic, see Patrul Rinpoche (1994) and Mingyur Rinpoche (2014).

34 Tsunma Pema, WeChat messages, 2020.

35 Tsunma Pema, Facebook post, 21 August 2020. All posts are recorded as she wrote them.

36 See note 35 above.

37 The Karmapa has addressed this topic thoroughly during the 1st, 4th, and 8th Arya Kshema gatherings.

38 The 17th Karmapa, Arya Kshema, Bodh Gaya, India, 15 March 2017, translation by Michele Martin. Field notes, 15 March 2017.

39 He has been exploring this topic since 2015 and made a formal announcement during the Arya Kshema Gathering. For more on this topic, see Roloff (2020, p. 329). See also Bianchi (2022).

40 Roberts draws from Norman Waddell and Masso Abe's translation (Waddell and Abe 2002). For alternative translation, see Dōgen (1994).

41 Welch and Tanahasi's translation.

42 Different philosophical schools assert various positions as to how this "form" is understood. There is also a debate on this topic by Chinese Vinaya scholars. See Newhall (2014).

43 With gratitude to an anonymous reader for her clarifying points on this topic.

44 Sakya Pandita draws directly from the *Abhidharmakośa.* His stance accords within the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* perspective of the Śrāvaka *prātimokṣa* since it is the only one that existed among Tibetan monastics. It is also what he received from his abbot, Śakyaśrībhadra (Sakya Pandita 2002, p. 22). See also note on page 73 of the book.

45 Also see Khenpo Khartar Rinpoche on Karma Chakme, who also delineates how the different schools such as Geluk and Kagyu differ in their understanding of how and when the three vows are received.

46 Collaborative interview completed with Michele Martin. We interviewed Tsunma Wangmo, 6 March 2017, Bodh Gaya, India. Interlocutor's name has been changed for confidentiality.

47 Both wrote letters signaling to aspirations to cease rifts among the Karma Kagyu lineage. For more, see Lefferts (2018).

48 Interview 4F–TND–Bihar—18 March 2018, 12:20–18:24.

49 See note 48 above.

50 Interview 15F–GJ–HP—21 July 2018, 20:10.

[51] For a nearly complete transcript, see the detailed write up from the publicity team of the 8th Arya Kshema who writes, "His Holiness expressed that in the future, when the epidemic has ended and we can once again travel easily, he would like to invite the bhikshuni sangha from another country again to give the novices the nun-in-training vows and then later the bhikshuni ordination. Within the practice lineage of Karma Kamtsang, this topic of bhikshuni ordination was not something he had decided alone, Karmapa clarified. It was a result of several conferences held during the Kagyu Gunchö among the khenpos, geshes, and students. At that time, the khenpos and geshes told him, "You should institute bhikshuni ordination in the Kamtsang Kagyu," and he heeded the requests." (Arya Kshema: Winter Dharma Gathering for Kagyu Nuns 2022).

[52] Interview 15F–GJ–HP—21 July 2018, 1:59–2:02.

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*Article*

# Khmer Nuns and Filial Debts: Buddhist Intersections in Contemporary Cambodia

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**Abstract:** Cambodian Buddhist nuns, including the white-robed *ṭūn jī*, occupy a fraught confluence of competing cultural and religious narratives. Chief among these narratives is gratitude to mothers, among the most powerful structuring forces in Khmer Buddhist culture. By ordaining as nuns, Khmer women break no explicit moral rules, but violate implicit conventions to bear children for their husbands and care for their parents in old age. To explore how this tension plays out in the lives of individual nuns, I draw on public statements and social media posts of two of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia today, Chea Silieng and Heng Kosorl. The two nuns have taken a divergent approach to filial debts, with Silieng emphasizing freedom from her birth family, husband, and children and Kosorl frequently posting about acts of devotion to her parents and grandparents. Both approaches reveal the profoundly gendered dimensions of filial piety and the complex intersection of such narratives with the growing stature of nuns as Buddhist leaders and teachers in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** Cambodian Buddhism; Buddhist nuns; filial piety; gratitude, *ṭūn jī*/*doun chi*; *upāsikā*

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## 1. Introduction: Khmer Nuns, Familial Renunciation, and Filial Gratitude

The imperative of renunciation for seeking ultimate liberation and the importance of filiality for repaying debts to parents have long structured social relationships in Buddhist societies. The usual model, particularly prevalent in Theravada Buddhist cultures, is that sons should repay their debts to their parents through monastic ordination (Kourilsky 2022, p. 165). To demonstrate filial gratitude, especially for one's mother, generations of Southeast Asian men have ordained as novices or monks. As Nancy Eberhardt's fieldwork among Shan Buddhists shows, such ordination ceremonies are as much a rite of passage for the mothers involved as they are for their sons (Eberhardt 2006, pp. 135–41). However, what of mothers and daughters, including those who ordain as nuns? How do they figure into Theravada Buddhist logics around renunciation and repayment?

The situation of Buddhist nuns in Cambodia offers an important test case for these questions. Khmer Buddhist nuns, particularly the white-clad renunciates known as *ṭūn jī*, face a fraught confluence of competing cultural and religious narratives in Cambodian society. As is true elsewhere in Theravada societies across Southeast Asia, gratitude to mothers is among the most powerful structuring forces in Khmer culture. Unexpectedly, however, the societal imperative of women to bear children is left unstated in the traditional didactic poetry that has long reinforced normative gender roles in Cambodian life. These texts call on women to be subservient to their husbands, framing their arguments in Buddhist terms, but say nothing of the value or importance of procreation. While Khmer Buddhist texts make more of the duties of sons to their mothers, particularly the need to temporarily ordain as a monk to repay this maternal debt, the duties of daughters to their parents are scarcely mentioned. By ordaining as nuns, Khmer women break no explicit moral rules, but violate implicit conventions to bear children for their husbands and care for their parents in old age.

This article offers a pair of case studies on two prominent Khmer nuns in order to explore how these tangled issues of motherhood, filiality, and monasticism intersect in the

lives of Cambodian Buddhist women. As a specialist in Buddhist texts, including their written, material, and performative dimensions, my contextualization of Buddhist nuns within Cambodian approaches to gender and gratitude is mostly drawn from Khmer print and manuscript sources, rather than formal ethnography. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to return to Cambodia to conduct field research on Buddhist nuns, so my primary sources for the two cases studies in the second half of the article include public Facebook posts, online articles from Cambodian news organizations, and a video interview posted to a Buddhist social media channel, all dating from the past five years. These online sources open many new windows for appreciating Khmer perspectives on the intersections of female renunciation and filial gratitude in Buddhist contexts.

To explore how the tension between renunciation and filiality plays out in the lives of individual women monastics, I draw on online sources pertaining to two of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia today. The first, Chea Silieng (*Jā Ŝīlieṅ*), age seventy, is a well-known meditation teacher in Battambang province who has attracted hundreds of students, including monks, nuns, and laypeople, to her community set in a series of hillside caverns. While not an active social media user herself, Silieng is a frequent subject of discussion in Cambodian media outlets, and several extensive interviews with her and sermons of her teachings circulate on Facebook and YouTube, two of the leading social media venues among Cambodians today. The second, Heng Kosorl (*Heṅ Kusal*), is in her late twenties and currently studying for her BA from the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is perhaps the most active and popular nun on Cambodian social media, posting pictures, poems, and Dharma reflections to her nearly 5000 followers on Facebook up to several times a day. In the course of my research, I listened to all of Silieng's available online sermons and interviews, transcribing and translating selected portions, and read through the past three years of Kosorl's public-facing Facebook posts, choosing relevant portions to analyze and translate here. In their public presentation, the two nuns have taken a divergent approach to filial debts, with Silieng emphasizing freedom from her birth family, husband, and children and Kosorl frequently posting about acts of devotion to her parents and grandparents. Both approaches reveal the profoundly gendered dimensions of filial piety as well as the complex ways gratitude and renunciation intersect in Khmer culture, particularly in light of the growing stature of nuns as Buddhist leaders and teachers in Cambodia.

## 2. Female Renunciation in Context: Buddhist Nuns in Cambodia

Like other contributions to this Special Issue, I begin with a brief survey of Buddhist nuns in the country this article focuses on, Cambodia. My aim here is to place issues of gender, gratitude, and renunciation within the broader context of female Buddhist monastics in Cambodia. As is true across much of the Buddhist world, Khmer male and female ascetics face grossly asymmetric prospects in terms of ordination, education, and societal recognition. Despite the vigorous presence of nuns in Cambodian Buddhist life, female renunciants figure very little in official discourse in Khmer. Entrenched by explicit cultural logics of patriarchy and misogyny, this silence on nuns effaces their considerable social and religious roles, both within and beyond Cambodia's political borders. The glaring omission of female monastics from most Khmer writing challenges us to look beyond conventional sources.

Despite the dominance of Buddhist discourse in Cambodia, discussions of nuns are only rarely found in stone inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, printed books, newspapers, recorded sermons, and social media posts. Buddhist publishing has burgeoned in Cambodia over the past three decades. This boom includes the reprinting of pre-Khmer Rouge material from the 1920s to the 1970s—initially on the basis of Khmer books stored in Japanese libraries (Harris 2005, p. 206)—as well as a plethora of new writings. Yet, to my knowledge, there are no books entirely focused on nuns in Khmer, and only one short article in *Kambuja Suriyā*, the most prominent academic journal in Cambodia for much of the twentieth century, is devoted to nuns (Gaṅ' Ved 1996). Very few Buddhist books

in Khmer mention the most common terms for eight- and ten-precept nuns, even when discussing the core ordination rites such nuns partake in. These omissions extend to the vernacular manuscript tradition, which primarily represents texts composed between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though as many as 95% percent of Cambodia's manuscripts were lost between 1970 and 1990, the main genres appear to have survived intact (de Bernon et al. 2018, pp. xiii–xxviii). Within this surviving manuscript corpus, nuns are not mentioned in texts on ethics or comportment, nor in sermons or narrative compositions transmitted on palm leaf.

A number of works in English and Japanese over the past quarter-century have advanced our understanding on Cambodian nuns in important ways. The work of Heike Löschmann advocates for specific social programs and policies based on nuns (Löschmann 1995), with a particular emphasis on the work of the Association of Nuns and Laywomen in Cambodia, whose registered members had reached over 6000 by the end of the twentieth century (Löschmann 2000, p. 93). The work of Aing Sokroeun includes a research report on nuns published by the Buddhist Institute in 2006 and a comparative study of Thai and Khmer nuns (Sokroeun 2006). The most detailed and sustained work on Cambodian nuns by a single author is that of Takahashi Miwa, whose articles in Japanese include extensive research into Khmer nuns' motivations for religious life (Takahashi 2006), their liminal status vis à vis monks (Takahashi 2009), their intersections with parent-child relationships in Cambodian culture (Takahashi 2012), and the emergence of nuns as Buddhist teachers (Takahashi 2014). Only one of her works on nuns—a careful study of the roles nuns play in cooking and offering food in Cambodian monasteries—has been published in English (Takahashi 2015, based on Takahashi 2013).

Many recent works on nuns in Cambodia are indebted to Elizabeth Guthrie's essay on the country's long history and contemporary trajectory of Khmer female ascetics (Guthrie 2004). As she points out, Cambodian epigraphy prior to the mid-eighteenth century does include a number of references to Buddhist nuns more generally, starting with mentions of Mahāyāna nuns in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century and ending with the ordination of several nuns recorded in 1747 (Guthrie 2004, pp. 144–46; Jacobsen 2006, p. 18; 2008, p. 81). The word for ordination in Khmer-language epigraphy, *puos* (the root of the Thai and Lao word *buat*), was originally used in reference to Śaiva practices for both men and women (Guthrie 2004, p. 145). In fact, the very earliest dated inscription in Old Khmer, K. 600 from 612 CE, mentions the ordination of a group of women into religious life (Cœdès 1937–1966, II, p. 21). By the fourteenth century, *puos* is clearly linked to Buddhist ordination (Pou 1981, p. 113), and in ordinary use has applied to both monks and nuns up to the present. In recent decades, however, the use of *puos* in reference to nuns has become contentious. Guthrie argues that contemporary attempts to deny the use of the term *puos* to *upāsikā*-status nuns are rooted in modernist reforms of the early twentieth century as well as socialist sangha reforms of the 1980s, both of which tried to limit Cambodian Buddhist practice to a more narrow Pali-based, androcentric model, that sees nuns as extraneous aberrations at best or baleful influences at worst (Guthrie 2004, pp. 146–47).

Even in the early 2020s, accurate statistics on nuns in Cambodia are hard to come by. The Ministry of Cults and Religions tracks the number of monasteries and monks but is silent on the numbers of nuns. According to the latest available figures, there are over 70,000 *bhikkhu* and *sāmaṇera* in Cambodia, around one percent of the male population from a total population of nearly 17 million (Saṃbhī 2018). There are only a few dozen *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in Cambodia, most belonging to an originally Taiwanese temple—known as Dà Bōrě Sì in Chinese, Vatt Paññā Dhaṃ in Khmer, and Mahā Paññā Vihāra in English—on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. This community maintains both Pali-based Theravāda practices and Taiwanese Mahāyāna rites, and is officially recognized by the Dhammayuttikanikāya sect in Cambodia, the smaller of the two main Theravāda sects in the country (Dà bōrě sì jījīn huì 2016). The enthusiasm of the Cambodian Dhammayuttikanikāya toward this *bhikkhunī* community, which now includes women of Khmer as well as Taiwanese descent, is all the more remarkable given the general opposition to higher ordina-

tion for women within the Dhammayuttikanikāya sect in Thailand. A handful of Khmer women have sought *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* ordination in Sri Lanka as well, though they remain unrecognized by the Cambodian Ministry of Cults and Religions and the Sangha Council. A number of them have continued their monastic training in the United States. The energetic work of Marlai Ouch as both an advocate and a scholar has been especially important in drawing attention to this emerging community of Khmer *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in Cambodia and in diaspora communities abroad (Ouch 2020).

The two nuns I focus on in this article are not known as *bhikkhunī* or *sāmaṇerī* but come from the much larger community of nuns typically referred to as *ṭūn jī* or *yāy jī* (often phonetically spelled *doun chi*/*daun chee* or *yeay chi*), who may be eight- or ten-precept *upāsikās*. *Ṭūn* and *yāy* are variant terms for "grandmother", and in this context *jī* means "ascetic" (as in *tā jī*, "grandfather ascetic"). Less common terms in contemporary Khmer include *nāṅ jī* ("young lady asectic") and *m"*è *jī* ("mother ascetic"). The latter term is cognate with *mae chi* (graphically transliterated as *m*è$_1$ *jī*) in Thai. Contrary to a common understanding in Thailand, the word *jī*/*chi* is not derived from Sanskrit but rather from Old Khmer *aji*/*ji*/*jī*, whose original sense was "venerable ancestor" before it came to mean "ascetic" (de Bernon 1996, p. 88). Outside of kinship terms (such as *jī ṭūn*, "grandmother" or "female ancestor", the inverse of *ṭūn jī*), *jī* also appears in Khmer in the word *braḥ jī*, meaning the largest or most venerable (*jī*) Buddha image (*braḥ*) in a temple (de Bernon 1996, 89n7). The terms *ṭūn jī* or *yāy jī* can thus be understood as meaning "venerable grandmother", namely a celibate *upāsikā* who is to be revered on account of her status as an ascetic renunciant.

Despite the etymology suggesting that only elderly women can take on this status, women of any age may ordain as *ṭūn jī*. Ten-precept *ṭūn jī* are expected to wear white robes at all times and shave their heads and eyebrows every two or four weeks; some eight-precept nuns follow a similar practice. As they are often living in monastic settings, I agree with Martin Seeger (personal communication) that the term "lay nun" is not appropriate for *mae chi* in Thailand or *ṭūn jī* in Cambodia, even if their status as white-clad eight- or ten-precept nuns is distinct from *sāmaṇerī, sikkhāmānā*, or *bhikkhunī*.

The number of *ṭūn jī* in Cambodia was estimated at around 3000 in 1995 (Guthrie 2004, p. 147, citing Löschmann 1995, p. 5), 10,000 in 2000 (Löschmann 2000, p. 93), and 20,000 in 2006 (Sokroeun 2006, p. 112). If those numbers have continued to increase to the present, then the number of nuns may be close to half of one percent of the female population, or around half the number of *bhikkhu* and *sāmaṇera*. However, reliable data remain scarce. The government began to track the number of nuns in 2009, though only sporadically, and no further official statistics have been made available (Takahashi 2015, p. 254). Many nuns are unable to read or write, and few have opportunities for formal education in Pali or Buddhist studies (Sokroeun 2006, p. 121). Most are over 50 years of age and are expected to spend considerable time engaged in acts of service for the monasteries where they live, including cooking for the monastic community (Takahashi 2015, pp. 242–45). In this sense, their voluntary labor, remunerated more in merit than in money, echoes a centuries-long tradition of temple servants in Cambodia. Work performed by hereditary slaves and bonded servants through the middle of the nineteenth century (Antelme 2012) is now largely performed by nuns and temple boys (*kmeṅ vatt*). A limited number of temples around the country have formal study and practice programs for *ṭūn jī*; dozens or even more than a hundred nuns may live together permanently in such locations, their numbers swelling during the annual three-month rains retreat. A handful of nuns have become prominent for their prowess in teaching the Dharma or meditation (Kent 2011, pp. 203–5).

The outward success of a few of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia, including the two I focus on in this article, stands in sharp relief to the gender inequities faced by Khmer Buddhist women of all stripes. Additionally, even the most prominent nuns are confronted with a range of challenges that male monastics never have to face. The subject of my first case study, Chea Silieng, was accused of impersonating a *bhikkhunī* and forced

out of her own monastery. As Heng Kosorl, the subject of my second case study, notes, being a nun in Cambodian means having one's very existence constantly challenged:

> In our country, is Buddhism the religion of the state, or is it the religion of men? If you're a man, no matter rich or poor, good or bad, wherever you're from, if you ordain, study, and practice, whether as a lay priest (*ācāry*), white-clad renunciate (*tā jī*), *bhikkhu*, or *sāmaṇera*, everybody will praise you with "Excellent, excellent! (*sādhu sādhu*)." But if you're a woman, they'll only ask you, "Why?"
>
> I began to be afraid of this question. Whenever I went out I'd have to answer it. Even if I just stayed in my room I'd get this question. Imagine if you had to answer the same question two or three times a day for decade, how would you feel?! I'm fed up [mask emoji] and now I'm no longer just afraid of people asking this question but the whole of Facebook! [smiling emoji] No matter what, I'm stressed out to no end on account of this question from those who wonder [smiling emoji]. (Heng Kosorl 2022b, my translation)

For both nuns, the challenges they face as female ascetics in Cambodian society intersect in various ways with the cultural expectations around mothers, daughters, and the bonds of familial gratitude. Before returning to Silieng and Kosorl's distinct perspectives, in the section that follows I turn to the articulation of filial debts in Cambodian Buddhist literature and ritual performance, with an eye to how they impact social expectations placed on Khmer nuns.

### 3. Filial Debts: Gratitude to Parents as a Gendered Construct

Gratitude to parents is a dominant Buddhist teaching across Southeast Asia, one that is constantly invoked as the primary motivation for religious acts of giving, ordination, and the dedication of merit (Kourilsky 2008, 2015, 2022). In Cambodia in particular, books on filial gratitude have proliferated over the past twenty years. Acknowledging moral debts to parents remains a prime subject for Buddhist poetry and sermons. Though filial piety is an important theme in a few early Buddhist texts, including several suttas in the Pali Tipiṭaka, the most important Pali source on this theme in Southeast Asia is the *mātāpitu-upaṭṭhānakathā*, a long chapter from Sirimaṅgala's sixteenth-century commentary on the *Maṅgala-sutta*, the *Maṅgalatthadīpanī* (Kourilsky 2022, p. 159). Repaying debts to parents is also an important theme in the bilingual Pali-vernacular sermon texts composed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Some of these texts, such as *Mātuguṇ sūtr*, emphasize the Buddha's debts to his mother and his repayment of these debts through preaching the Abhidhamma (Walker 2020, pp. 84–85; Kourilsky 2022, p. 164). Others, such as *Supin kumār*, weave a narrative on the importance of ordination for repaying one's mother (Walker 2018a, pp. 1531–77). The traditional meditation texts of the region, largely composed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, detail the ways that certain body-centered contemplative practices can be used to address filial debts to both mothers and fathers (Kourilsky 2015, pp. 579–87; 2022, pp. 165–66; Walker 2022, pp. 67–70).

In Cambodia, the emergence of modern works on filial piety began in the mid-twentieth century with influential books by leading monks such as P"āṅ Khāt"s *Jīvit m"ae* ("A Mother's Life", P"āṅ Khāt' 1964) and Suṅ Ŝīv's *Braḥ ras'* ("Living Deities", Suṅ Ŝīv n.d.). These works provide a modernist take on canonical and commentarial approaches to filial piety, underscoring the efforts undertaken by parents not only in caring for young children but also in preparing them for the new economic order of postcolonial Cambodia. Present-day works in this genre by leading writers such as Buth Savong's *Bāky beca(n) m"è uv* ("Parental Dicta", Buth Savong 2005) and Chhim Bunchha's *Ṭiṅ guṇ tap guṇ niṅ niyamanăy kaṃṇāby* ("Knowing and Repaying Moral Debts, Expressed in Verse", Chhim Bunchha 2009) tend to highlight the emotional dimensions of parental debts. This affective emphasis is developed with particular precision through sung poems, known as *smūtr* or Dharma songs (*dhaŕm*

*pad*), that are recited for funerals, memorial rites, and other Buddhist ceremonies (Walker 2018b, pp. 290–91).

The song *khamā dos aubuk mtāy* ("Asking for Parents' Forgiveness") is typical of this genre:

I now ask your forgiveness
for all I have done to you
and for all my careless words:
O mother, please forgive me!

My debt to you is immense.
I offer my body and speech
and bow in respect to you:
O mother, please forgive me!

I prostrate myself to you
hands raised in prayer, head lowered
to touch your feet, O mother:
Please release me from my faults!

When I was inside your womb
I put you through constant pain,
whether you walked, stood, or sat,
and made you eat simple food.

Salty, spicy, hot, or cold:
these you eschewed for my sake.
You suppressed your desires
to protect me in your womb.

For nearly ten months you toiled,
the pain spreading through your body,
without a moment's relief
to bring you joy, ease, or peace.

I offer you the merit
that may arise from this gift
of the Teaching, so lucid.
Receive it, mother, and rejoice!

I dedicate this merit
to my mother and father.
May the three treasures be theirs
and may they be free from pain. (Walker 2022, pp. 83–84)

This poem makes several key elements of Cambodian Dharma songs on filial debts clear: First, the mother's role is paramount, even though both mother and father are mentioned. The difficulties undertaken in parenting are mapped entirely onto the mother. Second, the language throughout is framed in terms of humble supplication, establishing a strict hierarchy between child and parent. The terms adopted to address and venerate parents in these texts echo those used with monks and buddha images. Third, the child's existence implies an automatic debt to their parents, one that requires an act of ritual repentance. Finally, the ultimate repayment of a filial debt comes through the dedication of merit generated by Buddhist rituals.

These songs form the basis for a new kind of Buddhist sermon in Cambodia, delivered by one or several monks to a group of schoolchildren or novices to spark a deep emotional sense of filial debt and gratitude to parents. In video form, these sermons have become of a fixture of Buddhist social media in Cambodia over the past decade, including those by Saṃ Sār"ūn (Hak Sienghai 2016) and Ṭok Ṭuṃ (Layhong Sabay 2019). The climax of these rituals involves panning shots that show row after row of kids in meditative posture, rocking back and forth and bawling. Close-up shots on particularly tear-stricken faces reinforce the idealized response to such sermons and the songs that anchor them.

These public performances of filial debt have a sharply gendered dimension, in that it is always male monks who are preaching a message of maternal gratitude. The audience receiving the message of filial piety may be adults or children of any gender, and in the contemporary context the imperative to ordain, applicable only to boys, has been broadened to the imperative to be a "grateful child" (*kūn kataññū*), who is a model student and productive citizen, industrious to a fault and obedient to parents, teachers, and the state (Dibb Sau 2009).

This contemporary understanding of the dutiful child and citizen has been gradually replacing an older model that emphasizes markedly different gender roles for men and women. Didactic codes (*cpāp'*) from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries highlight the importance of women submitting to their husbands to maintain marital and social harmony (Jacobsen 2008, pp. 119–23). Such didactic codes rarely mention the role of daughters vis à vis their parents. An important exception is M"iṉ̄ M"ai's *Cpāp' Srī* ("Code for Girls"), penned in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries (Pou 1988, II, pp. 407–8). This text was studied by generations of Khmer elites until the twentieth century, when it reached a wider readership as part of the public-school curriculum. In one influential formulation, M"ai notes that a young woman's duties include caring for her mother, father, and husband, setting up each as one of "Three Hearths":

> Be vigilant, daughter. Keep the Three Hearths so they endure.
>
> They'll maintain your virtue and lift your life to lofty ranks.
>
> They'll bring you great renown, abundant wealth, and all things fine.
>
> The first two hearths are called the legacies of your parents.
>
> Follow the proper path of deference to your guardians.
>
> Strive hard to care for them; give them the food you cherish most,
>
> rather than hoarding it all for yourself—serve them daily.
>
> Endure all their advice, run their errands, or they'll feel hurt.
>
> "Third's the lord of the home, your own husband, to love for good.
>
> Respect him without fail—don't make him feel offended.
>
> Revere him, for you're just a girl; don't claim you're his equal. (Walker 2021, p. 48)

In addition to its explicit patriarchal demands for wives to submit to their husbands, the passage is notable for highlighting the importance of caring for one's parents. No such parallel duties for men appear in M"ai's "Code for Boys" (*cpāp' prus*) or in related didactic literature of the period (Buddhist Institute 1974, pp. 33–43). Daughters were given the special task of caring for their parents, particularly in old age. This arrangement reflects the matrilocal practices of Khmer society since the first millennium of the Common Era, in which the groom would traditionally come live with his bride's family after marriage (Jacobsen 2008, p. 33). It also ties back to the broader value of filial responsibility advocated by the Buddhist songs and sermons discussed above. Though not a homily or a typical religious poem, M"ai's "Code for Girls" is set within an explicitly Buddhist framework. Daughters who succeed in caring for their parents and submitting to their husbands will reap certain karmic benefits:

> Thus goes the Code for Girls, for you, my dear, to learn and guard.
>
> Hold it fast in your mind so that you'll win the joy you seek,

both in this human world and for lives to come in other realms.
Should you vow to become the mother of a future Buddha
your prayers will be fulfilled. You'll gain a trove of vast riches
and the highest renown for many lives, just as you wish. (Walker 2021, p. 52)

Modern poems on gratitude to parents, including Ûṅ Cuṅ's famous *Cpāp' gorab mātāpitā* ("Code for Honoring Parents"), first published in the 1950s and an inspiration for hundreds of similar compositions since, prize the importance of looking after parents, particularly though acts of bodily care such as bathing or providing food (Ûṅ Cuṅ 1967; Chhim Bunchha 2009, p. 117). These acts, implicitly feminized within a Khmer cultural sphere, are thus recast as special duties of grateful Buddhist daughters. To be a good daughter, in this emerging modern conception, means to be an active economic contributor to family and country, a diligent caretaker of one's parents, and a caring mother of one's own children. This last point is almost never spelled out explicitly, but the implicit expectation is that marriage will naturally produce offspring, and that children are necessary to secure caregivers for oneself in old age.

This constellation of religio-cultural forces puts would-be nuns in a difficult position. On the one hand, only ordination and other acts of Buddhist asceticism can truly help and transform one's parents, but this is only ever discussed as a male duty, or more specifically a young male duty, never a female one. On the other hand, daughters are expected to shoulder many of the burdens of caring for aging parents while simultaneously mothering their own children. To renounce family ties as a nun amounts to an abrogation of familial and economic duties in a way that monks are never asked to consider. Indeed, some of the most vocal opponents of *bhikkhunī* ordination among the male sangha, such as San Sochea, are staunch advocates of traditional constructs of filial piety.

Even the most logical natural allies of *upāsikā*-status nuns, namely eight- or ten-precept white-clad "lay monks" known as *tā jī*, have not tried to forge a path out of the thicket of conflicting demands that nuns and would-be nuns find themselves in. A distinctive feature of Khmer Buddhism in the early twenty-first century is the prominence of *upāsaka*-status celibate teachers, rather than *bhikkhu* or *sāmaṇera*, on the popular Buddhist sermon circuit. By far the most influential Buddhist preacher in Cambodia today is a *tā jī* named Buth Savong, along with his younger protégé Kèv Vimutti (Marston 2015, pp. 267–69, 274n14). Adored by Cambodians from across the social hierarchy, their books and public teachings hardly ever speak of *ṭūn jī*, even in writings explicitly about Buddhist women (Buth Savong 2008). In public writings and sermons, they do not treat them as a separate category from other *upāsikā*. Additionally, like most of their fully ordained brethren, they never advocate for the possibility of female higher ordination. Savong and Vimutti are able to be such effective teachers in part because they are not monks and not beholden to the sangha hierarchy. The female voices they champion are those of the five-precept *upāsikā*, especially a growing group of wealthy lay women who are recognized as *mahā-upāsikā* or "great laywomen" through their financial contributions and occasionally for their skill in Dharma teaching. Celibate *upāsikā* with shaved heads rarely figure into this elite group. Excluded from both lay and monastic channels of power and recognition, they must find other avenues to pursue their religious aspirations and resolve the exhortations around debt and gratitude that are at cross-purposes with renunciant life.

## 4. Chea Silieng: Renouncing Family Ties

I now turn to case studies of two monastic *ṭūn jī* who have taken different approaches to resolving this conundrum—common to all Buddhist nuns in Khmer society—of competing cultural narratives around renunciation and filial debts. One such approach is to focus on the freedom to be gained in renouncing family ties altogether. This path is perhaps most prominently embodied by a seventy-year-old nun with the birth name of Chea Silieng. After getting married and giving birth to three children, Silieng received her husband's permission to ordain at age thirty. Silieng studied meditation at a variety of temples

and sacred sites throughout Cambodia before eventually settling on Neang Lem Cave in Battambang province, where she has spent the past ten years. This cave is named for a celebrated female ascetic of the pre-Khmer Rouge period, Neang Lem, who practiced for many years on the famous mountain. When she was cremated against her will during the Khmer Rouge era, local people believed that her powerful spirit came to inhabit the cave. Silieng eventually became known as *lok yāy nāṅ lem*, meaning "Venerable Grandmother of Neang Lem Cave" (Maza and Meta 2017; Mao Voleak 2019).

As a sought-after meditation teacher, Silieng has attracted a plethora of students, including monks, nuns, and ordinary laypeople of all genders, to the series of caverns where she lives. In 2019, she was interviewed by Mao Voleak for *Strī knuṅ braḥ buddhasāsanā*, or "Women in Buddhism", a popular social media channel promoting Cambodian Buddhist teachings from female perspectives, including the voices of Khmer laywomen, *ṭūn jī*, and the emerging *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* communities (Mao Voleak 2022). In narrating her journey of becoming a nun, Silieng describes the sensation of release and freedom she felt during a family dinner, when her husband informed their three children that their mother was going to take the precepts and live in a Buddhist temple. The term Silieng used to describe her experience of this moment is *ruoc khluon*, literally "freed oneself." *Ruoc khluon* typically refers to the experience of being spared from harm or danger. In this case, Silieng adopts it to describe her intense feelings of safety and relief in being freed from familial bonds. She then describes bowing down in thanks to her husband for granting his permission. In narrating this pivotal moment in her life, Silieng simultaneously displays her fealty to traditional gender hierarchies and expresses relief in finally finding freedom from such patriarchal structures.

In subsequent discussions with Mao Voleak, Silieng's husband never surfaces again, though her three children come up occasionally. The progress of letting go of being preoccupied with her children's welfare took longer, but eventually Silieng came to realize that she had fulfilled her obligations to her children by giving birth to them, and that she was fully released from this karmic bind. In her video interview with Voleak, Silieng boldly articulates the terms and consequences of her renunciation:

> I have offered my life, offered my lovely flesh and blood, to the holy religion, until the day I die. I will not turn back, I will not retreat. I do not think about my children's problems anymore. Even when they face difficulties, such as hunger or other hardships, I always tell them in their moments of pain to have forbearance. "You have merit, dear child. Think of your mother's merit, and that will help you find happiness." That's what I say if they face troubles and come complaining to me. (Mao Voleak 2019, 14′29″–14′55″, my translation)

In Silieng's interview and other public teachings, she never discusses the debts of children with regard to their parents. Apart from a brief reference to settling her karmic debt to her children by bringing them into the world, the narrative she weaves is one of continuous release and moving toward her stated goal of nibbāna. In later remarks, she emphasizes her gratitude to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, rather than lingering on the gendered structures of debt and gratitude between parents and children.

Chea Silieng is not without controversy in Cambodia. At various times in her life as a nun, she has worn yellow or purple robes in addition to the customary white robes. These sartorial choices have raised the curiosity and ire of those within and beyond her local community. In the late 2010s, Silieng's religious hermitage, known in Khmer as an *āsram* (from Sanskrit *āśrama*), began an official process to become a monastery or *vatt ārām*. The latter status entails a more official status as well as greater subservience to the ecclesiastical system of governance, in which abbots are subject to supervision by the head monks of districts (*anugaṇ*), provinces (*me gaṇ*), and ultimately the supreme patriarch (*saṅgharāj*) of each sect (Buddhist Institute 1994). While nuns can hold considerable autonomy, including leadership roles, in hermitages, monasteries of the majority Mahānikāya sect must be led by an abbot who becomes part of the national sangha hierarchy. Nuns, in essence, cannot serve as abbesses or leaders of Mahānikāya monasteries in Cambodia. While Silieng

had drawn many monks as her students, in the new social organization of the monastery she would no longer have formal or financial control, and it appears that a power struggle ensued, breaking into national news in late 2021 (Chhom Pisamay 2021). Some monks claimed that Silieng, with her occasional yellow robes, was a fake *bhikkhunī* who stole donations that rightly belonged to the resident monks.

While the details of the current situation are not yet clear, Silieng's fate is similar to many female renunciants across the Theravada world, who are tolerated or even celebrated until they become a perceived threat to male monastic power and financial privilege. Even though women are expected to manage finances with Khmer families, the idea of a nun doing so for a monastery appears to have made her a target, with debates flaring on YouTube and Facebook among her supporters and detractors. By moving beyond the bonds of family into a position of spiritual authority, Silieng was placed in a vulnerable position as the leader of an autonomous hermitage that was rapidly transitioning into a state-supervised monastery. Senior nuns in similar positions of power are the subject of intense scrutiny in Cambodia, and few have survived with their reputations unscathed.

Moving beyond family ties and aspiring to roles of religious leadership can still prove dangerous for nuns in contemporary Cambodian society, as Silieng's uncertain future attests. The gender asymmetry that drives Khmer logics of filiality and renunciation, as explored in the previous section, remains an active force with which Silieng and other female Buddhist leaders must contend. Renouncing the bonds and protection of husbands and other men may offer the clearest path to developing female spiritual authority and fulfilling Buddhist ideals of liberation for women, yet the nuns who choose this route in Cambodia often face considerable difficulties.

## 5. Heng Kosorl: Rebinding Filial Gratitude

Not all Khmer nuns have made the same choices or faced the same challenges as Chea Silieng. Heng Kosorl is a nun in her late twenties who has so far managed to successfully bridge several different Buddhist worlds, including that of her native Cambodia; of Sri Lanka, where she is finishing her Buddhist studies degree in Columbo; and of the English-centered community of international *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇera*. Young, social media–savvy, and hailing from a prominent Buddhist family, Kosorl has carved out a unique place for herself in the Khmer religious landscape.

By positioning herself as a student rather than a teacher, Kosorl's frequent posts are greeted with welcome adoration by her thousands of fans on Facebook (Heng Kosorl 2022a). Her followers regularly comment on her beauty, as they make clear that, despite her shaved head and simple robes, she is still considered exceptionally attractive by Cambodian netizens. Photos of other young nuns from across the Buddhist world are a recurring element on her Facebook page, situating Kosorl within an emergent generation of social-media savvy nuns throughout Asia. In many of her posts, she quotes extensively from male lay teachers, including Buth Savong and his most favored poet, Kuy Sothun, as well as popular monks. Since these teachers never mention nuns directly, and take a generally conservative position on gender roles, the Dharma messages she shares do not generally advocate for improved social conditions or educational opportunities for nuns.

When writing directly to her followers, however, she does speak more candidly about the ideals of female renunciant life as well as the challenges and possibilities inherent in women's lives as Buddhists. Her words are gentle and self-effacing, though with a strong emphasis on the beauty and ease of renunciation. In a widely shared Khmer-language post, she alludes to her popularity in raising the profile of nuns and cautions against those who seek to idolize her:

> Ordaining as a nun (*tūn jī*) isn't a game of sports or the mind. So don't ordain just because you like me, don't ordain just because you like those who like me, don't ordain if you think that renunciants have it easy, don't ordain because you think that ordaining as a nun will make you into someone worthy of veneration... Wearing white is only an external adornment; it doesn't make your mind any

> more pure. Shaving your head won't mark the end of your suffering. . . . Those who have read up to this point will know that I'm no one special. I'm just normal like all the rest, except that I like some unusual things, like shaving my head because I am too lazy to comb my hair, hehe. (Heng Kosorl 2021, my translation)

These and other posts position Kosorl as a bridge between nuns and a broader Khmer public, who are often skeptical of female renunciants. She appears to embrace this role quite eagerly, as few other nuns have garnered such a wide following on Facebook, which is by far the more important social media platform in Cambodia. As discussed earlier in this article, however, she is acutely aware of the special challenges faced by nuns and a confident critic of the patriarchal structures of Khmer Buddhist society.

In her role a young nun in the Cambodian context, Kosorl's position stands out in multiple respects. First, she is from a well-regarded Buddhist family, part of a multigenerational blood lineage of female renunciants. Her maternal grandmother is an eight-precept nun, her mother leads a ten-precept *ṭūn jī* community in Battambang, and a close friend was recently elevated to the status of *mahā-upāsikā*, with the formal title of *gandhameghādevānuraks mahā-upāsikā buddhasāsanūpatthambhak* ("the patron of the Buddhist religion, the great laywoman, protected by the deities of the fragrant clouds") presented to her by Samdech Bour Kry, Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayuttikanikāya sect in Cambodia (Heng Kosorl 2022a). In addition, she is pursuing a path of Buddhist education rarely undertaken by Buddhist nuns in Cambodia. After her mother ordained when Kosorl was nine, she joined her in the monastery at age thirteen, and ordained as a nun once she completed high school. Nearly a decade later, she is finishing her degree in Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka. Lastly, she often uses the term *sīlavatī* (Pali for "female precept-holder") along with *ṭūn jī*. Part of this is practical; as a young woman, it is confusing to be addressed as "grandmother renunciant", the literal sense of *ṭūn jī*. She sometimes goes by "little grandmother renunciant" (*ṭūn jī tūc*), and others will address her in Facebook comments as "little sister, grandmother renunciant" (*ṭūn jī ūn*)—terms that highlight her unusual position as a young nun—but on her social media platform she uses the formal title *sīlavatī*. This connects her to a broader community of Theravada nuns that use this term, both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia.

The most striking feature of Kosorl's social media presence is her constant emphasis on gratitude to parents and grandparents. A recurring theme in the poems and other passages she quotes from Buth Savong and Kuy Sothun is the urgency of fulfilling the duties of filial piety. These quotes often accompany pictures in which Kosorl is conducting memorial rites on behalf of her deceased father, caring for her injured maternal grandmother, bathing her paternal grandmother, or bowing down in respect to her white-clad mother. These very public presentations of how to fulfill debts to ancestors make familial bonds front and center in a nun's life. In sharp contrast to Chea Silieng's journey of cutting off the shackles of family life and motherhood, Kosorl's social media presentation of her life as a nun means honoring and cementing these very bonds through acts of care and Buddhist practice.

In a recent Facebook post, dated 3 August 2022, Kosorl offers a window into the complex contradictions of her life as a nun and daughter. Sharing an explicit video that shows both the anatomical difficulties as well as the emotional peaks and troughs of vaginal childbirth for women, Kosorl adds the following comment:

> Mothers are heroines, mothers are marvels, mothers are truly tremendous. I can never be as tremendous as you all mothers [kissing emoji] since I've asked to be a child forever and will continue to be a *ṭūn jī* like this onward into the future [smiling emoji]. (Heng Kosorl 2022c, my translation)

Kosorl's equation of nunhood with being permanently in the state of a child, never reaching the state of a mother, captures some of the many layers present in her simultaneous advocacy of female renunciation and gratitude to mothers. The ideal of female renunciation, celebrated as the peak of Buddhist life for women, appears to conflict with

the competing ideal of motherhood. Kosorl's delicate balance of advocacy for nuns and respect for the Buddhist establishment is anchored by her chosen role as student and child. As a daughter and devotee of her mother and her elder nuns, Kosorl's constant expression of filial gratitude reinforces her place within a blood family and a lineage of renunciants. At the same time, the celibate life of a nun precludes Kosorl and other childless *ṭūn jī* from becoming those whom she hails as "heroines" (*vīranārī*) and "marvels" (*ascāry*) by dint of the trials of pregnancy and parturition.

## 6. Conclusions

Multiple competing narratives around the ideals of renunciation, familial gratitude, and motherhood impinge on the lives of Khmer nuns today. The range in nuns' approaches to filial debts, as embodied by the examples of Silieng and Kosorl, can be explained through a multiplicity of factors. Some are, of course, quite personal—many Cambodians find teachings on filial piety to be meaningful and comforting, due to the close, emotionally warm relationships they enjoy with their parents and grandparents. Yet, other Cambodians may find cultural norms around filial gratitude to be confusing and even distressing. Other factors are social in nature. Marks of privilege in Cambodia such as high social class, deep social networks, fair complexion, and even conventional beauty can be powerful forces in shaping the experiences and beliefs of individual nuns; these factors alone explain much of the differing trajectories of Silieng and Kosorl. Another social factor is age. While both nuns ordained relatively young, they hail from divergent generations. Chea Silieng is a Khmer Rouge survivor and grew up in a radically different Cambodia than Heng Kosorl, who was born in the late 1990s. Both women attract followers across the age spectrum, but Kosorl much more effectively engages the young, urban, tech-savvy crowd that dominates social media.

A third set of factors connect to the religious teachers venerated by individual nuns. Chea Silieng is intimately tied to the powerful spirit of the pre-war nun who once inhabited the same cave. Along with her singular focus on meditation, this places her in a lineage of independent, reclusive nuns in Cambodia who have defied gender and social norms, often at considerable risk. Heng Kosorl draws from four separate groups of teachers: one, her fellow nuns in Cambodia, including her own relatives; two, her monastic teachers and professors in Sri Lanka; three, her fellow renunciants in the international community of *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī*; and four, the Khmer male lay and monastic teachers whose words on filial debts she regularly invokes. Both her family and the male teachers she quotes orient her practice toward the family bonds that have long shaped Khmer Buddhist practice, while her international experience confers alternative modes of authority. These multiple spheres of belonging help mitigate the fundamental risk of being a prominent nun in Cambodia.

Chea Silieng and Heng Kosorl may also point toward a different future for Khmer nuns that many thought possible in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The official silence on nuns may be thawing. The increasing recognition of nuns by the government and the media, including *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in the Cambodian Dhammayuttikanikāya sect as well as the growing prominence of highly skilled laywoman teachers of Buddhist studies, Pali, and meditation, are gradually making more space for women leaders in Cambodian Buddhism. The complex knot presented by Khmer notions of familial debts remains at the center of how *ṭūn jī* and other nuns articulate their religious vocation and the arcs of their spiritual lives. Some, such as Chea Silieng, are clear that being a nun requires severing these ties for the sake of freedom. Others, such as Heng Kosorl, make honoring such bonds a key part of their Buddhist practice. Either way, the gendered intersection of care, debt, and gratitude remains a central site of negotiation for female ascetics in Cambodia.

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*Article*

# Gender Conflicts in Contemporary Korean Buddhism †

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† This paper was presented at the conference entitled "Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education" organized by Nicola Schneider and Ester Bianchi at the University of Perugia, Italy, and sponsored by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation on 17 May 2022. I thank the participants for their encouragement and Nicola in particular for her useful comments. I would also like to thank Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo for her scholarly advice and assistance, and Yeonwoo Joh for editing this manuscript. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments in improving this article.

**Abstract:** Scholars have observed that Korean Buddhist nuns have a relatively high social status compared to nuns of other Asian countries, much like their sisters in Taiwan. It is a source of great pride for many Korean *bhikṣuṇī*s that their community operates with a high degree of autonomy, bringing them to an almost equal standing with their male counterparts. However, this claim of equal status is challenged once the nuns step outside their own communities and into the hierarchical system of the Order, an institution dominated by male monastics. This paper aims to report on the gender disparity between male monastics and Buddhist women, both nuns and laywomen alike. I will first explore Korean Buddhist nuns' experiences of gender discrimination imposed by the current institutional and cultural practices of the Buddhist Order, and their battles to challenge the legitimacy of this power structure. Next, I will introduce various episodes, including the Buddhist administration's conflict with progressive women's groups, to showcase the gender dynamics and current status of women in Korean Buddhism. Ultimately, my argument is that the conservatism and misogynism of traditional religion continue to influence Korean Buddhism today, despite societal efforts to heighten gender awareness and sensitivity.

**Keywords:** gender; Korean Buddhism; monastic order; constitution; *bhikṣuṇī*; lay women

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to report on the gender disparity of Korean Buddhist women and *bhikṣuṇī*s, with the purpose of exploring future directions by specifying present observable behavior rather than fixating on theory. Up to this point, academic studies on Buddhist women in Korea can be broadly divided into two categories. The first is historical studies. Buddhism has maintained its status as a traditional religion in Korean society for a very long time. Scholars place the establishment of a *bhikṣuṇī* order in Korea around the 4th and 5th centuries, right about the time Buddhism was first transmitted from mainland China. The first Korean *bhikṣuṇī* to appear on record is Lady Sa of Silla. Records also show that a group of monks, including female monastics from Baekje, were dispatched to Japan in the 6th century, playing a major role in spreading Buddhism to Japan. Furthermore, there are numerous mentions of Buddhist women in the *Samguk Yusa* [Memorablilia of the Three Kingdoms], a collection of historical records compiled in 1281. All of these resources point to the fact that the virtuous practice and endeavors of many outstanding *bhikṣuṇī*s and Buddhist women helped maintain the Buddhist tradition throughout Korean history, particularly during the harsh times of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910)[1] up to the present day.

The second (and much more minor) strand of study is critical analysis of contemporary Korean Buddhism from the perspective of gender inequality by means of a women's studies or feminist approach. These works mainly interpret the indicators related to gender

sensitivity obtained through socio-scientific methodologies or feminist perspectives. By incorporating both of these viewpoints, this paper will attempt to analyze some modern incidents related to *bhikṣuṇī* orders from a gender perspective. I will divide these incidents based on two points of scrutiny, the first being the issue between male and female monastics, and the second being the relationship between male monastics and female laypeople. My stance is ultimately to seek a progressive future based firmly on the spirit of fond support.

## 2. Social and Internal Changes in the Modern Period

The status of Buddhism as a traditional religion has undergone many changes in the modern era, both institutionally and culturally. Recent history has turned out to be more tense and dramatic than ever before. It is first and foremost necessary to understand the broader context of the modern history of Korea. The end of the Pacific War and the subsequent retreat of Japanese colonial powers were soon followed by U.S. occupation of South Korea, which was brief, but left a deep and lasting impact on Korea, evident in the westernization of Korean society and its religions. A few years later, the Korean War of 1950 solidified the division between the North and South. The two remain separated to this day, making Korea the last divided country on the planet. Despite this division, South Korea was able to achieve high economic growth and now ranks among the top economic powers in the world. Its rapid industrial growth, also referred to as the 'Miracle of the Han River,' resulted in a remarkably improved economic situation in the 1970s. The religious community also grew along with the increasingly prosperous social foundation. The previously under-resourced *bhikṣuṇī* community gained new vitality in this process, resulting in a dramatic improvement in its material well-being. Individual *bhikṣuṇī*s were able to engage in activities such as receiving higher education and studying abroad, which was previously unimaginable. Their social visibility increased accordingly, with *bhikṣuṇī*s now earning doctorates and professorships and establishing mega temples.

Additionally, in terms of demographics, *bhikṣuṇī*s came to account for almost half of the entire monastic population. Of the 15,000 registered monastics of the Jogye Order, the number of *bhikṣuṇī*s peaked at 7000 (and is currently in decline as of 2023). Above all, in the three areas of renunciation, education, and ordination, *bhikṣuṇī*s adhere to the same regulations as *bhikṣu*s under the management of the Jogye Order (the celibate order), a major Buddhist order to which 90% of Korean monasteries belong. *Bhikṣuṇī*s receive postulant education for about six months these days before becoming *śrāmaṇerī*s (novice nuns). After four more years of mandatory education, they receive ordination and become full-fledged *bhikṣuṇī*s. Since the groundbreaking dual ordination ceremony at Beomeo-sa temple in 1982,[2] *bhikṣuṇī*s have been ordained according to the *bhikṣuṇī* dual ordination procedure of the Single Ordination Platform ceremony conducted by the Jogye Order. After becoming a *bhikṣuṇī*, one can become the leader of a meditation hall or go on to perform social services by being involved in temple operations or missionary work, depending on one's inclination.[3] It is therefore evident that there is an established structure of systematic education and training for *bhikṣuṇī*s formally managed by the Order.

However, although *bhikṣuṇī*s have formed their own independent community of sorts, and can choose to follow their own paths of either education, practice, or missionary work, when joint cooperation between *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s is necessary, *bhikṣuṇī*s often find themselves alienated from the core power and organization of the Jogye Order. Contrary to internal claims and external expectations that Buddhism should actively respond and change to adapt to modern society, the status and awareness of gender equality within the Buddhist community are at a standstill. The reality of this uneven, dormant imbalance within the Order—in which renunciant women not only cannot realize their potential but also must endure constantly being checked and censored—ultimately reduces the vitality of the entire Korean Buddhist community. The path to true religious harmony and coexistence is becoming increasingly dark amid continuous conflict and tension between the sexes.

In this paper, I will first give a brief overview of the history of the *bhikṣuṇī* order in Korea, and then introduce a couple of episodes that demonstrate current gender conflicts.

By analyzing the positions of each party, that is, *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s, as well as their responses to each case, this study aims to shed light on how the gender hierarchy of the modern Korean Buddhist community operates.[4]

**3. First Administrative Position Given to a Nun in 2003**

With an increase in the social visibility of nuns along with external expectations and pressures calling for the social participation of women, a nun was appointed as the first Director of Cultural Affairs of the Jogye Order, Korea's largest Buddhist denomination. A headline from a news article published on 5 March 2003 reads "Nun Appointed as Minister for the First Time in the History of the Jogye Order". The Buddhist Journalist Association responded to this announcement as follows:

> "Ven. Beopjang's appointment of Venerable Takyeon as the Director of Cultural Affairs is a demonstration of his commitment expressed at the '31st Presidential Debate of the Jogye Order,' co-hosted by the Korean Buddhist Journalist Association and the Central Lay Buddhist Association of the Jogye Order on February 14, [2003]. This [choice] to honor his pledge to 'implement policies to raise the status of *bhikṣuṇī*s and appoint nuns to the Department of Cultural Affairs so that they are not left out of administrative affairs' also reflects his resolution for reform. In a country where more than half of all Buddhists are women, and women are becoming more active in all sectors of society, the appointment of a *bhikṣuṇī* to an administrative position is a natural decision in keeping up with the times, and evident of the changes in the Jogye Order, the foremost order of Korean Buddhism".[5]

However, the leading newspaper, *JoongAng Daily*, was less optimistic and expressed their doubts early on. According to them, "The Director of Cultural Affairs is virtually the fourth-highest position in the administrative rank of the Jogye Order. Perhaps for this reason, there were many *bhikṣu*s who objected to Ven. Takyeon's appointment as the Director of Cultural Affairs. In the end, she did not attend her appointment ceremony scheduled for 9 a.m. on March 5, and received her letter of appointment separately around 11:30 am that day. This was an action mindful of such attitudes [toward her appointment]".[6] This ambiguity surrounding Venerable Takyeon's appointment indicates that there was resistance from within, and it can be said that this resistance still remains today.

**4. The Formation of an Anti-Group against the Jogye Order and Its Subsequent Retaliation**

Since 2003, the number of nuns in administrative positions within the Jogye Order has remained unchanged, at just one. The sole difference is that *bhikṣuṇī*s are now only eligible for a position in the Department of Financial Affairs and no longer in the Department of Cultural Affairs, which is higher up in the administrative hierarchy. From this, it seems safe to conclude that the concerns expressed by *JoongAng Daily* have turned out to be true.

In 2011, a coalition of anti-Jogye groups formed under the name 'The Central Council NGO Monitor Group.' It quickly became the central voice of criticism against the Jogye administration.[7] Laywomen's groups in particular led discussions on the Order's misogynistic culture and pointed out the bias in the Order's Constitution. The rules state that all the highest figures of authority, from the Patriarch of the Order to the Heads of Administration, Dharma Propagation, and Monastic Training, should be *bhikṣu*s (male monks) over 50 years old with at least 30 years of monastic experience. Such institutional limitations effectively bar nuns from positions of authority. However, no nuns or monks have directly addressed this issue in the past 20 years, and neither has there been a public inquiry into the matter. This blatant gender discrimination has mainly been pointed out and criticized by lay Buddhist organizations and scholars. Unfortunately, the emergence of such feminist objections has only served to intensify the defensive attitudes of the Jogye Order.

Around the time the Central Council NGO Monitor Group was formed, the Order appointed new leadership by way of indirect election through the votes of the abbots from

24 head temples. During their double term, which spanned 8 years from 2009 to 2017, this administration was in large part responsible for the huge conflict to come, based on chauvinistic male attitudes toward women and the misogynistic culture prevalent in the upper echelons of the Order. Following the end of their second term, a subsequent head was elected with the support of his predecessor, only to retire from his position soon after due to a shocking scandal. When it was leaked that he was planning a separate reform of his own, independent of the previous regime, he was quickly rumored to have sired a child from a *bhikṣuṇī* in the past. Eventually, he was charged with sexual harassment and was forced to resign after less than a year.

If the resignation was purely on account of his sexual misbehavior, preventive measures should have been implemented on an institutional level. However, as this accusation was never proven to be true, the prevailing assumption was that this attack was discreetly orchestrated by the former head, who was unsatisfied with his successor's uncooperative behavior. With the resignation of the new head, all of his supposed faults were brushed under the rug, and with them any opportunities for institutional scrutiny or reform.

From 2017 onwards, the situation quickly worsened. There were signs of oppression across various sectors. First, there was a full-scale suppression of the situation in the media. Sanctions were implemented on two progressive news agencies, and Buddhists and temples alike were made to adhere to the following five prohibitions: banning these agencies' access to temples, withholding newsworthy information from them, refraining from placing advertisements in their newspapers, restricting access to their websites, and forbidding interaction with their journalists. Thus, the war between the Jogye administration and anti-Jogye groups began in earnest. The Order's retaliation against the organized activities of the coalition and women's groups further intensified with the emergence of anti-feminist movements in Korea led by rightist groups. Women's studies scholars point out that this occurred in the mid-2010s, during which time misogynist discourse became more widespread among Korean men through online communities such as *Ilgan Best*.[8] Feminism was reinterpreted as a highly controversial, divisive ideology and disruptive power within political circles, social discourse, religious communities and even among families.

In 2020, something happened that sparked the incentive for change. Ven. Jeongwun, one of the members of the Central Council, wrote a newspaper column criticizing the administrative methods of the Jogye Order. The Order immediately reproached the author and her article, demanding she apologize publicly and repent on grounds of the *Vinaya* (monastic regulations). What was intended as an attempt for communication and constructive criticism was met with a vehement demand for repentance. This hostile response from high-ranking monks toward a nun who was a member of the Central Council, no less, was reminiscent of a regression back to pre-modern society. Under immense pressure, she eventually published a statement of apology in the same newspaper, but the monks did not stop here. At a subsequent Council meeting, a proposal for Ven. Jeongwun's expulsion was added to the agenda. However, the agenda ended up being postponed to the next meeting, possibly because of the attention it garnered from watchful feminists and scholars tensely awaiting the results of the proposal. Although Ven. Jeongwun's case did ultimately blow over, it triggered an openly hostile attitude toward nuns among the monks of the Jogye Council, and their meetings soon became a stage for denouncing the 'rebellious behavior' of female Council members. The undemocratic and tyrannical attitude of the current Jogye Order executives solidified Ven. Jeongwun's case as a testament to the current state of gender inequality in Korean Buddhism, and a foreshadowing of further conflicts to come.

One last incident worth mentioning is the presidential election of the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association held in 2019. The Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association was established with Hyech'un Sunim as its President in 1985, who served two five-year terms from 1985 to 1995 (Cho 2014, p. 128). Although the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association ostensibly belongs to the Jogye Order, it is neither an internal organization or a subgroup of the Order but an arbitrary coalition of Jogye nuns. However, as nuns make up almost half the entire monastic population of Korea, many issues are often discussed within the Association before being reported to

the Jogye Order. For instance, the ten Council members assigned to represent the nuns are selected by the Association and passed on to the executive branch of the Order. It is also noteworthy that the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association conducts their own direct elections, whereas the administrative head of the Jogye Order and all other positions of authority are appointed through indirect elections. The Association can thus be said to constitute an autonomous body of sorts within the Jogye Order.

To return to the subject matter at hand, the presidential election of the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association generated an outpour of both internal and external opinions on *bhikṣuṇī*s and Korean Buddhism as a whole, some critical, some expectational. The following social media post is but one example showcasing the interest of nuns regarding the election. Considering that *bhikṣuṇī*s do not usually reveal their political opinions very often, this data is very valuable, and so I quote a part of it here:

"The *bhikṣuṇī*s of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism have a long history the likes of which cannot be found in any other country of the world, and are equally as active as *bhikṣu*s in our society. There are 6000 *bhikṣuṇī*s today, accounting for half the entire monastic population of the Jogye Order, and since the president of the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association is appointed through a direct election, our organization is more independent and autonomous than any other within the Order. This alone demonstrates the great importance of the status and role of nuns in Korean Buddhism.

However, what is the current reality of the Jogye Order? The *saṃgha* community has collapsed because of the widening wealth gap among monks, and individual competition has become commonplace. Since the Jogye Order is being run unilaterally by monks, the greatest victims of the collapse of the *saṃgha* community are the nuns. As nuns do not have even a single head temple, they are denied the right to vote or be voted for a position of authority in the Jogye Administration that is given to all head temples. Even after the appointment of the 11th president of the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association by means of direct election, and with the 12th presidential election fast approaching, the fact that nuns still lack autonomy, are unable to exercise their own rights, and are used in sectarian politics is something we must reflect upon deeply. [ . . . ] Determined by a majority vote, the direct election system is the essence of public decision-making. The reason disciples pin their hopes on the Association is because our president is appointed through direct elections. In a world in which laypeople and Buddhists alike leave our temples and no longer respect us, fed up with the corruption of the Order and its strife over supremacy, the Association should give proper consideration to what is best for the future of Buddhism. Now is the time for nuns to take initiative and set new coordinates for the Order".

The two main points referred to in this post are, first, according to the Constitution of the Jogye Order, the highest positions of authority are solely reserved for monks, and nuns are denied the opportunity to vote or be voted for those positions of authority; and second, back in 1964, *bhikṣuṇī*s were falsely promised that they would be given one of the 25 head temples after the Buddhist Purification Movement. This so-called Purification Movement, which aimed to oust married monks from Korean monastic communities, occurred during a time in which nuns outnumbered unmarried monks, as most monks had taken spouses towards the end of the Japanese colonial period. Naturally, these nuns were able to play a big role in the movement, and were promised a head temple for their contributions. But in the end, the leaders of the movement never followed through. Today, all 25 head temples belong to monks. As the Head of Administration of the Jogye Order is appointed through an indirect election by the (male) abbots of these temples, nuns are necessarily excluded from this process by default.

Not so long ago, when Korean nuns emerged as a new research topic in Buddhist Studies, scholars considered them to be "a bastion for the future of Korean Buddhism".[9] Although this prediction still stands, it seems that this future is much further away than we initially anticipated. Indeed, there have been more and more concerns that not only is our progress towards the future currently slowing down, but we are in fact stuck repeating the past to the point where our once optimistic future must now be considered uncertain.

### 5. Conflict between Monks and Laywomen Surrounding the Appointment of the President of the Buddhist Women's Development Institute in 2019

Given the authoritarian culture of the mainstream Korean Buddhist community and the mentality of the monks as described above, it was only a matter of time before a conflict arose between monks and laywomen. At the heart of this conflict is the Bureau of Dharma Propagation (BDP), one of the two major divisions of the Jogye Order, and the Buddhist Women's Development Institute (BWDI), the only women's organization in the Order. Since its establishment 21 years ago in the year 2000, the Buddhist Women's Development Institute has grown to become a central organization representing the voices of Korean Buddhist women. It currently has close to 10,000 members and is credited with leading a variety of activities, such as academic research, education programs, environmental programs, and Dharma events. However, a big problem arose in January 2019, right before the election of the BWDI's next president.

The head of the BDP at the time was the abbot of a prominent temple in Seoul, which the presidential candidate of the BWDI frequented with her husband. When this abbot became the subject of a sex and embezzlement scandal, the candidate's spouse, a former judge and lawyer, filed a suit against him for embezzling temple funds. Although this led to the monk's resignation from his position as abbot, he still remained the head of the Bureau of Dharma Propagation. This position is the third highest position in the hierarchy of Jogye authorities, and also serves as the chief director for many lay Buddhist organizations of the Order, including the BWDI. Taking advantage of the fact that the right to convene a board meeting rests with the chief director, the monk refused to convene the board of directors to elect the next BWDI president. When the women were unable to hold a board meeting twice in a row, the board members of the BWDI agreed that it was not right for the monk to intentionally sabotage the candidate based on his personal resentment toward her spouse.

When efforts to communicate with the monk failed, the BWDI organized a full-fledged protest, putting placards outside their building and working to make their case publicly known through all possible venues. When this did not prove effective, the BWDI decided to revise their internal regulations with the help of legal experts so that their elections could be held without the head of the BDP. First of all, the president of the Buddhist Women's Development Institute was delegated to serve as the chief director of the Institute instead of the head of the BDP. They also added two clauses to their regulations, the second being particularly significant in stipulating that, in case of conflict between BWDI regulations and those of the Jogye Order, the BWDI regulations will take precedence. Additionally, citing the fact that the monk was neglecting his duties as the head of the BDP, the board members of the BWDI gathered of their own accord and proceeded to appoint a new president themselves. This decision was of course not approved by the Jogye Order, as the monks believed that giving priority to BWDI regulations over their own was a clear sign of disobedience and rebellion against them.

Because the BWDI is still under the management of the Jogye Order's Bureau of Dharma Propagation, it was obvious from the outset that the Order would not accept the newly appointed president because the elections were held in explicit defiance of their own rules. However, the BWDI had their own reasons for attempting this. During the entire ordeal, the women of the BWDI came to realize that the Bureau of Dharma Propagation was actively trying to sabotage their autonomy. It became known that the Bureau had bribed a nun, even awarding her with a certificate of appointment as the interim director of the BWDI. The Bureau also stormed into the Institute and demanded to have the president's seal and bank book, with a physical fight breaking out in the process. It was also revealed that the Bureau was preparing to pass a new piece of legislation allowing the Bureau to hand-pick the members of the Institute's board of directors.

This was the start of a three-year struggle that extended from the beginning of 2019 to January 2022, during which time the BWDI was not able to appoint a president of their choosing. Although a new head of the BDP was now in place, the conflict showed no signs of resolving itself. The new head tried to persuade and pressure the members of the

Institute into conceding to the Bureau's demands. However, the women of the Institute were now painfully aware of the power dynamics and gender inequality of the Korean Buddhist monastic hierarchy. When they finally refused to accept the Bureau's demands in December 2021, the Bureau subsequently announced that they would henceforth be disowning the BWDI and cutting all existing ties. They announced that the "BWDI is no longer affiliated with the Jogye Order. They cannot use the name Jogye; and those who are affiliated with the BWDI are not allowed to participate in any Jogye activities. It is a harmful organization to the Order and any organizations that cooperate with this organization will be considered harmful as well".

During over two years of conflict and struggle, these laywomen were forced to open their eyes to the reality of male authoritative culture in Korean Buddhism, and what the male Buddhist community thought of women in general. Meanwhile, in this process, another peculiar phenomenon was observed in terms of gender hierarchy. Although the members of the Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Association were favorable towards the laywomen in the beginning, they eventually withdrew their support and even went so far as to replace the monks in reprimanding the laywomen. These nuns were of course pressured into doing so by higher-ranking monks, who gave them a mission to "persuade" the laywomen. Unfortunately, this led the laywomen to distrust not only the monks but the nuns as well. In the end, amidst all this hostility and antagonism, the laywomen of the Institute eventually declared their autonomy, transgressed the Jogye Order, and chose to operate as a nonsectarian women's group independent of any religious order.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined several instances that reveal the internal and external circumstances in which the Korean *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* and female lay Buddhists currently find themselves, as well as the demand for change that arose among them. The conservative strand of traditional Buddhism still dominates Korean Buddhism today. The state of gender imbalance in the current Buddhist community is much more serious than that of Korean society as a whole. Beyond normative male-centric and misogynistic traditional religious culture, Korean Buddhism is currently experiencing a regression of sorts, owing to the serious misogyny and anti-feminism that have been steadily on the rise since 2010.

However, apart from these general societal trends, one major problem that Buddhist women are facing is that they knowingly or unknowingly continue to embody and reproduce this male-centric, authoritative culture. The fact that monks reprimanded laywomen with the phrase "how dare you bodhisattvas … [defy us monks]" during the conflict between the Bureau of Dharma Propagation and the Buddhist Women's Development Institute clearly reveals the underlying power hierarchy at work. More fundamentally, this has to do with the stereotype that interprets and disparages women's religious behavior as superstitious and irrational, prevalent in Korean Buddhism. Language and practices that belittle femininity itself are still being used regularly without any reflection, criticism, consideration, or evaluation of the diversity and context of women's experiences. In turn, women themselves imbibe this tendency, resulting in a vicious cycle of internalized self-hatred and humiliation. It is thus necessary to stop waiting passively for one's religious identity to be confirmed by someone else's authority, especially that of a senior monk. The image typical of female Korean believers, showing absolute respect to male monks regardless of age, can symbolically be found in the following expression, "an old bodhisattva attends to a young monk like a servant, holding his garments and bag behind him". It is this subordinate relationship that perpetuates a culture which unrestrictedly tolerates the arrogance of male monastics.

Furthermore, there are no support groups to help women who want to speak out against these prejudices. The Buddhist Women's Development Institute had to fight a very lonely battle. As the Buddhist community has little experience of social participation, there are not many social groups in the first place. Even the 2017 'Corruption Report' published by the Coalition of Lay Organizations does not contain many references to women's rights.

In particular, there is no clear awareness or will to solve the problem of gender inequality through social and institutional interventions or strategies. It goes without saying that the Jogye Order does not have an official human rights division or a sexual violence counseling center, and neither are the issues of women's rights or sexual violence of great interest to Buddhist political groups. The Order's current legislative system, which allots all positions of high authority exclusively to *bhikṣu*s, simultaneously denying women's rights to participate in religious affairs, is a blatant violation of Article 11 of the Korean Constitution which states that "all citizens shall be equal before the law, and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social or cultural life on account of sex, religion or social status". Yet so far there has been no attempt of a collective organized resistance such as a class action lawsuit against the unconstitutional elements of the Order's regulations.

Furthermore, it is fundamentally impossible for monks and nuns to interact with one another as equals so long as precepts such as the Eight *Garudhamma*s still stand, greatly limiting the social observances and formal procedures a nun can follow.[10] The eight *Garudhamma*, meaning eight "weighty rules", are a list of specific rules included in all the various recensions of *bhikṣuṇī* Vinaya, a collection of monastic regulations. These eight special rules are regarded to have been established with an explicit purpose of subordinating the female ordinant to the *bhikṣu saṃgha* at the time of the ordination by the Buddha himself, which has since been questioned by scholars. These rules set a condition in which female monastics must be deferential and subordinate to *bhikṣu*s and dependent on them. Among these eight rules, perhaps the most harmful and profoundly restrictive in today's society are the last two rules—the seventh, that a nun should never abuse or revile a monk in any way; and the eighth, that it is forbidden for a nun ever to admonish a monk. According to the *Garudhamma*s, merely pointing out a monk's fault would already constitute a violation, necessitating repentance and censure. Therefore, no matter how constructive and reasonable an opinion may be, it will automatically be interpreted as a criticism or a challenge, making it immensely difficult for nuns to even raise any objections. Since precepts like the Eight *Garudhamma*s hinder the very possibility of equal communication between nuns and monks, it presents a very serious regulatory obstacle that should ultimately be abandoned.

Today is the result of yesterday, which will in turn give birth to tomorrow. In order to solve the current dilemma, it is necessary to determine and eliminate the cause of the problem. We can only expect progress when the Buddhist community promotes gender awareness and establishes fair policies across religious, institutional, and social aspects. Only by improving the Buddhist community's sexist and discriminatory culture will female members be able to realize their religious potential and cultivate a positive regard for the religious order to which they belong. We will then be able to collectively move forward and establish a sound Buddhist culture suitable for modern society.

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## Notes

1 For more on Buddhism during the Joseon Dynasty, see Cho (2019).

2 For more on the dual ordination ceremony, see Tsomo (2020).

3 For more on the activities of Korean Buddhist nuns, see Chung (2006); (Wunweol 2006); Cho (2011).

4 Fore more on similar issues of gender in Chinese Buddhism, see Bianchi (2017).

5 http://www.hyunbulnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=185204 (accessed on 22 May 2022).

6 2003.03.06 https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/130691#home (accessed on 22 May 2022).

[7] In 2011, the 'Buddhist Civil Society Network', a coalition of Buddhist civil society organizations based on the two tasks of religious reform and social participation, was established. Half the women among its organizations act as representatives or managers, so they have a high level of feminist awareness. In addition, the 'Central Council NGO Monitor Group' was formed in 2012, led by a women's organization to monitor the activities of the Central Council, the legislative body of the Order". Ok (2013, p. 260).

[8] An internet community that has started around 2010 and quickly became a center of misogynistic comments. Usually called by its acronym of 'Ilbe'.

[9] Ha (1998, p. 15). This volume has contributed to the recent upsurge in interest in the lives of Korean nuns.

[10] Although many people, both scholars and monastics alike, have questioned the propriety of the Eight *garudhamma*s, *bhikṣuṇī*s are still expected to observe these rules in many *saṃghas* around the world, albeit to varying degrees. For more detail on the context and observance of these rules, see Dhammadinnā (2016); Chiu and Ann (2012); Tsedroen and Anālayo (2013). For an analysis of circumstances of how these rules were established at the time of women's acceptance into the saṃgha, see Murcott (2002).

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