

Female Sexuality in Thai Discourses about *Maechii* (แม่ชี ‘lay nuns’)

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By examining competing discourses about women who are *maechii* (แม่ชี or ‘lay nuns’) in Buddhist Thai society, this paper demonstrates that, although *maechii* vow to be celibate, social constructions of their role are grounded in sexuality. The discourses examined are those of the Buddhist canon and Sangha (Order of Monkhood), the Thai *Maechii* Institute, the mass media, and the government. The analysis is supplemented with field observations and interviews with monks, *maechii*, and lay persons. Findings suggest that *maechii* comprise an ambiguous category linguistically, Buddhistically, and in terms of their sexuality. Case studies of the founders of nunneries conducted in ChiangMai indicate that *maechii* leaders have been resisting the prevalent views that most *maechii* are social misfits, yet also are capable of undermining monks’ celibacy and, by extension, the larger social order. The analysis contributes to the understanding of the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality in contemporary Thai society.

Introduction

Sexuality is defined by and is reflected in societal forces and discourses that situate a person socially and historically. In Thai society, one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of monks and ‘lay’¹ nuns—hereafter called แม่ชี (*maechii*)²—is that they are celibate. Because of the Precepts they vow to practice, monks and *maechii* are supposed to be able to ignore sexual urges and desire.

This paper seeks to identify prevailing views of *maechii*. It shows how these are centered in notions of female sexuality, and reflect a tradition of interpreting Buddhism in androcentric terms. It argues that what constitutes ‘knowledge’ about *maechii* and about their sexuality depends upon whose view of sexuality is privileged. Finally, it highlights the existence of different kinds of *maechii*, for example, temple maids, meditation masters, recluse, or social workers.

Throughout the analysis, the term ‘discourse’ is used in the way developed by Foucault as explained by his English translator, Sheridan (1980). Accordingly, what is understood as ‘knowledge’ is a function of the social power that lends or denies authority to a speaker or author. That power is shaped by the context and medium in which the view is expressed, as well as by the status of the speaker.³

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The canonical classification of women in Theravada Buddhist society

The canonical classification of a Buddhist society offers a dominant discourse on the position of women in Thai society (Tannenbaum 1999). According to canonical tradition, there are four categories of persons in Theravada Buddhist society (table 1). Men ordained as monks (ภิกษุ *Bhikkhu*) are at the apex, followed by women ordained as monks (ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhuni*). Both are on the top tier to signify that others can make karmic 'merit' (บุญ, or karmic reward for good deeds) by giving to them. Devout lay men (อุบาสก *ubaasok*) and women (อุบาสิกา *ubaasikaa*), ranked in this order, comprise the lower tier who can make merit by giving to monks and ordained nuns (Tambiah 1984: 21).

Leaving aside the question of how to account for non-devotees, there is the oddity that Theravada Buddhist societies (which comprise Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka⁴ and Thailand) have long had no one eligible to fill the category of ordained nun. By 1998, the Theravadin Order of Nuns (*Bhikkhuni*) had had no members for at least the last 700 years (Falk 1980, Luce 1969, as cited in Cook 1981: 22). In fact, when a prominent Thai social critic sought to redress this gap by having his two daughters ordained as female monks in Thailand, the Sangha (order of the monkhood) had the ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhuni* defrocked, and when they resisted, the state imprisoned them. In follow up to this, in 1928, the Supreme Council of the Thai Sangha passed a rule (พ.ร.บ. คณะสงฆ์ พ.ศ. 2484) prohibiting male Thai monks from ordaining nuns. The rule stands to this day, although legal scholars have pointed out that it is unconstitutional because the 1997 National Constitution calls for gender equality (ศูนย์สตรีศึกษา [Women's Studies Center] 2544/2001).

The reasons for the absence of female Theravadin monks are still contested, but point to a gender bias that constructed women as inferior to, but dangerous for, men in the patriarchal society in which the Buddha lived some 2,500 years ago. According to oral traditions that were subsequently recorded in almost every work of the Buddhist canon, the Buddha himself established the order of Buddhist nuns (Horner 1961: 2). But he did so reluctantly and years after he had founded the order of Buddhist monks.⁵ That he may have lacked conviction in the rightfulness of his decision about ordaining women is reflected in the later writings of monks who reported that the Buddha had prophesied the disappearance of true Buddhism within 500 years because of the admission of women into the Order (Pali Vinayapitaka, Cullavagga 10: 1–3, cited in Falk 1980: 219).

Table 1. Hierarchy of persons in the ideal Theravadin Buddhist society.

Monastic status	Hierarchy	
Ordained	ภิกษุ <i>Bhikkhu</i> male monk	Higher
	ภิกษุณี <i>Bhikkhuni</i> nun, female monk	
Lay	อุบาสก <i>ubaasok</i> lay man	Lower
	อุบาสิกา <i>ubaasikaa</i> lay woman	

This canonical perspective is contested by women scholars of Buddhism. The philosopher Suwanna Satha-Anand (1999) argues that the fact that the Buddha ultimately permitted his beloved aunt and other similarly mindful women to be ordained as nuns (ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhu'ni*) is testimony to the influence of the Buddha and his teachings over the social conventions of his time, which by themselves would have precluded the existence of ordained nuns:

As the Buddha finally decided to allow female ordination, he was, in fact, respecting the rights of women to religious practice. Convention was thus overruled in favor of women's rights. (Satha-Anand 1999: 282)

Ordained nuns or female monks ภิกษุณี (Bhikkhu'ni)

Concern that the patriarchal society of his time would not accept an order of female monks being on a par with the order of male monks might underlie the Buddha having required female monks to follow eight special rules (คฤตรรม 8 ประการ the eight *khu'ru'dhamma*) that assured their subordination to male monks. The rules include that male monks may teach female monks, but female monks may not teach male monks; every female monk must treat any male monk or novice as her senior; and female monks may not blame or accuse male monks, although male monks may blame and accuse female monks (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1984b, Cook 1981: 9–10, Falk 1980: 215). In addition, male monks were awarded judicial authority over 'nuns' (Cook 1981: 11, citing Bhagvat 1939: 162), and female monks were required to observe ninety-four more precepts (rules for behaviour) than the 227 required of male monks.⁶

Despite these differences in requirements for male versus female monks, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has argued that 'Buddhism in general and the Buddha in particular were responsible to a large extent for *the uplift* in women's status in general, and that of Indian women in particular' (1984a: 63, emphasis added). She maintains that by upholding the belief that women as well as men can attain nirvana by practicing the teaching of the Buddha, 'Women henceforth could achieve salvation independently of their husbands, even regardless of the propagation of children' (1984a: 70). Suwanna Satha Anand carries the argument further, reasoning that the *khu'ru'dhamma* were necessary to create an environment in which women could pursue their right to seek a spiritual path (1999: 286).

But the subordination of female to male monks that the *khu'ru'thamma* require has not gone unnoticed by today's monks and women in ChiangMai, Thailand. They live in a different time and place than the Buddha's India of 2,500 years ago. During fieldwork in both 1988 and 1999–2000, both monks and 'lay nuns' (*maechii* แมชี) were asked why the Order of Nuns (*Bhikkhu'ni*) had disappeared. Their most common explanations for the demise was that the highly disciplined comportment required of ordained nuns exceeded human tolerance (cf. พัชรภรณ์ แก้วประจักษ์ [Patcharaporn] 2527: 2). Another reason they thought important was that having *maechii* and monks live in the same monastery was dangerously

provocative. For example, a 40-year-old monk at one of the meditation temples in ChiangMai which had some 80 *maechii* said,⁷

The Buddha had far reaching vision. He decided that fully ordained nuns should observe more Precepts than monks in order to control their behaviour—it wasn't because he didn't want them to be ordained. It was because he foresaw that the ordination of women would involve lots of difficulties ... The reason there are no ordained nuns in Thailand is because they have a lot of problems with monks who can't control themselves ... as you can see...

'Lay nuns' or maechii แมชี

To address the gap in the merit-giver space opposite monks at the top of the Buddhist social order, another category has emerged called *chii* ชี (ascetic or religious practitioner), or *maechii* แมชี as it is more commonly used with the prefix *mae* for mother or female. The origin of *maechii* is difficult to trace historically. The earliest record, left by the Frenchman Nicolas S. West, tells us little more than that during Ayudthian times (1569–1767 AD) women who became *maechii* were sufficiently wealthy to be self-supporting as *maechii* (reported in พัชรกรรณ์ แก้วประจักษ์ [Patcharaporn] 2527/1984: 4). This is in contrast to monks who give up all worldly possessions when they become ordained, and then become dependent upon society for their daily necessities like food, medicine, and garments.

Suphaphorn Phumphuang wrote in 1995 that there was no written history of *maechii* until around 1945–1955⁸ (สุภาพร พุ่มพวง [Suphaphorn] 2538/1995). At that time, when women came together to practice the Dharma, they were highly disciplined. Most went to one of three temples in the Central Region of Thailand—at Wat Kamklaen (วัดกำแพง) in Petchaburi, Wat Mahathaat (วัดมหาธาตุ) in Ratchaburi, and at Wat Boworniwetwihan (วัดบวรนิเวศวิหาร) in Bangkok. In 1969, head *maechii* from around the country met in Bangkok, and with the approval of the abbots of Wat Boworniwet and Wat Thepsirintharawaat, and the support of the Supreme Patriarch, established the *Maechii* Institute of Thailand, outside the order of male monks,⁹ but subsequently under the royal patronage of HM the Queen. The purpose of the Institute was to provide standards for *maechii* comportment (particularly to keep them from begging as a means to support themselves) and to provide them with opportunity to gain some knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice. At that time there were some 7,000 *maechii* scattered around the country. The number of *maechii* today is unknown since the registration maintained by the Institute does not include all the *maechii* in the country, and no other agency keeps counts of them.

A *maechii* is a female devotee who shaves her head and brows as a sign of disinterest in her physical attributes, and wears white robes to signify that she is following eight (or 10) Precepts¹⁰ continuously. These are public signs attesting to the death of her worldly, sexual self and the purity of her awareness and celibate self. To become a *maechii* a woman should receive permission from a chief nun or a monk, be listed on a house registration, and have adequate resources to support herself while residing

in a temple.¹¹ It is important to note here that financial security is not required of men who apply to be ordained as monks.

The Thai term for becoming a *maechii* is *บวชชี* *buat chii* or ‘be ordained as an ascetic’. This terminology creates ambiguity because the same term *บวช* is also used to describe women being ordained as a female monks *ภิกษุณี* (*Bhikkhu'ni*), as well as men being ordained as monks. *Maechii* at the Thai *Maechii* Institute take advantage of this ambiguity. They told us in interview¹² that the term *maechii* is ‘made up’ and not the term they would choose for themselves. Rather, one explained,

The correct term should be *นักบวช* (*nakbuad* ‘skilled ordinand’) because *maechii* are ordained so are not lay women. *Maechii* have to comport themselves like ordained persons, they have to keep themselves true to the Precepts, to use good manners: what other ordinands do, *maechii* do.

The Thai government sustains this ambiguity by permitting disagreement among its ministries about the status of *maechii*. The Department of Religion has no place for *maechii* in its structure, and views them as little more than squatters in monasteries. It sees *maechii*’s role of serving male monks as due compensation for the privilege of living on monastery grounds. Therefore it underwrites education for monks, novices and temple boys, but not for *maechii* (นิรมล พงคณาธร [Niramon] 2537/1994) The Ministry of Communications agrees that *maechii* are mere lay women, and therefore requires that they pay transportation fees like other lay persons; monks and novices, in contrast, are exempt from some of these fees and get a 50% discount on the rest of the fees.¹³ The Ministry of the Interior, however, considers the *maechii* as ‘skilled ordinands’ (*นักบวช nakbuad*) and therefore says they, like monks, are not eligible to vote. To help resolve this confusion, the Thai *Maechii* Institute is working to secure government identification cards for *maechii* that would certify their special social and religious status, and include them in the travel privileges that monks enjoy.

What is clear is that *maechii* are situated indeterminately between the merit-givers and merit-seekers, the latter being the laity who by definition do not give others merit in Buddhist society (see table 2). Because they may receive only up to 10 Precepts,¹⁴ *maechii* are not at all of the status of female and male monks who observe 311 and 227 Precepts, respectively. Furthermore, scholars maintain that *maechii* do not constitute a ‘field of merit’ for others as both female and male monks do (ฉัตรสุนาลัย กบิลสิงห์ 2538/1995: 28, Keyes 1984). But, having received eight or 10 Precepts as a *maechii*, the woman does not lead the life of an ordinary lay Buddhist woman. *Maechii* are the only females who are allowed to live in Buddhist monasteries, and they are linguistically referred to by a classifier *รูป* *ruup* that is also used for monks, but not for laity. In addition, we often heard lay people in ChiangMai say that those *maechii* who became skilled in meditation earned merit that in fact extended to their meditation pupils *เอานบุญมาฝาก*. However, most *maechii*’s daily activity typically involves housekeeping and cooking for monks in the monastery, with little time to practice meditation, no less to become advanced in meditation skill.

To the extent that they are clerical, *maechii* should, like female and male monks, be beyond sexuality; that is, they should no longer notice sexual feelings or even the difference between female and male

Her desexed figure, bland visage and uninspired posture impressed the viewer with the loss of her beauty and sexuality.

In the 1980s (Van Esterik 1982; พัชราภรณ์ แก้วประจักษ์ 2527/1984; สุนใจ พุทธิวิเศษ 2527/1984) and 1990s, a popular image of *maechii* prevailed that defined *maechii* as brokenhearted young women, too weak or too ill to bear the stresses of everyday life, or as barely schooled old ladies defamed by lack of family support. That view was still common in 2000. Most of the *maechii* we interviewed said that they had to learn to tolerate this view because they encountered it so often. They were keenly aware that being a *maechii* carried a pejorative image of a socially ineffective woman who by becoming a *maechii*, sought an escape from normal secular life in the humble and marginal role that required her to be asexual and without passion.

However, there are other views, and some lay people focus on characteristics other than sexuality in assessing the place of *maechii* in society. Over the past 20 years, the options for women in Thai society have increased. Lay meditation—often led by women who are highly revered for their expertise in practicing and in teaching it—has become very popular. Thailand's policy-driven socio-economic development of the past 35 years has brought greater availability of different levels of education for women (and men), diversification of the labour market with the expansion of the service sector in which women play a major role, and daughters' increased independence from parental control, as well as from social prescriptions to marry and give birth in her early 20s.

Associated with these changes is a diversity of opinions in secular society about *maechii* and what it means to be a *maechii*. Some interviewees in ChiangMai pointed out that to be a *maechii*, a woman gives up a lot: her home, closeness to family, and sometimes a job, and has to live alone with only rudimentary comforts. People who felt this way respected *maechii* and some supported them with money, food, or care when sick. Others viewed *maechii* as parasites on society, of no benefit and superfluous because monks and novices already meet society's religious needs. People who felt this way often said that because of their simple lives, *maechii* should not ask people for support, but if they do, they are inferior even to lay persons. A third cluster of lay persons looked to the possibility that *maechii* could increase their religious benefit to society by, for example, helping youth practice religion. This cluster thought that working to help monks with cooking, sewing and gardening was useful, but that retreating to meditate was of no benefit to society, and selling things in temples simply because monks asked them to was wrong. Least common, but still expressed, was the view that *maechii* can help people figure their lives out. People who expressed this saw *maechii* as a silent power and wanted them to express their own thoughts openly.¹⁵

Male monk discourse on *maechii*

There is, however, another discourse on *maechii*, one that tends to be expressed by male monks and temple abbots. This view sees *maechii* as

single lay women and therefore as sexual and lustful, at least until they reach old age. Because most *maechii* live in monasteries, they are the women closest to male monks by day and night, and are a constant test of male monks' vows of celibacy. By this view, if a monk fails the test, the seductive nature of women that lurks inside a *maechii* is the cause.

By defining *maechii* as sexual women with the power to undo a male monk's vows of celibacy, contemporary male monks recapitulate an interpretation of gender that is expressed in one of the Buddha's teaching stories. In this story, three women approached the Buddha to tempt him as he sat under a sacred fig tree just before he entered Nirvana. Each woman danced seductively before him. The Buddha resisted their lures and told them to leave him because he had no desire, no unhappiness and no lust—that is, he had become so detached from feelings and passion that he was beyond sexuality. He advised the women to go after men who felt desire. The scholar Isara Chusii said of the story that the three women are a metaphor for defilement or กิเลส (*kilesa*), and that they embodied the devil มาร or Mara, one of the devils who tempted the Buddha (ฉัตร ชุติ 2537/1994). Isara held that impersonating defilement as women makes men who follow the Precepts afraid of women. He pointed out that because male monks adhere to a larger number of Precepts (227) than any other group, they are particularly fearful of women—or of women's passion—because letting themselves be seduced by women would break so many of their vows.

Thus, both ecclesiastical and popular Buddhism view women's sexual desire as the enemy of those seeking to practice the Dharma. Displacing responsibility for male monks' celibacy onto women serves the important social function of preserving male monks' validity as a sphere of merit, which is essential to the order of Thai society. In practice, male monks are not always beyond desire because they are human, and because sexual desire is considered the most difficult kind of passion to ignore. Many cite the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Thai society as evidence of how hard it is for men to ignore sexual desire. The aim of Buddhist practice is to end suffering, and the way to end suffering is to rid oneself of all defilement (กิเลส *kilesa*), which textual Buddhism defines as greed (โลภ *lopha'*), anger (โกรธ *kroot*), and ignorance or delusion (โง่ or หลง). According to popular Buddhism, love (รัก *rak*) is an additional basic type of passion. Popular opinion widely holds that men need sex, lots of it, and they get bored if they have only one partner. Because of the belief that men naturally have great need for sex, the lay public holds monks in particular respect for the degree of their self-discipline and detachment from feelings needed to ignore their sexual needs and be celibate. Such androcentric sentiments about sexuality underlie the belief that because *maechii* are the women who live most closely to male monks, they are responsible for arousing any sexual improprieties among them.

Maechii discourse on *maechii*

Perhaps the most instructive but least known discourse is that expressed by *maechii* themselves. The *maechii* talked with were in temples in

ChiangMai Province, and at the Thai *Maechii* Institute at Wat Boworniwetwihan in Bangkok.¹⁶

Maechii's views of *maechii* are scarcely reported for a variety of reasons. Their discipline-based reticence to say anything about themselves has been compounded by a self-conscious attempt to separate themselves from insinuations about unmonkly behaviour that are sensationalized in the popular press with what seems increasing frequency over the past two or three decades. Some of the now fairly common headlines about male monks' involvement in drug deals, real estate wealth and sexual relationships become scandals sensationalized in the press.

One ongoing scandal involves a hugely popular but controversial abbot. The abbot, Phra Dhammachayo, is famous for having a large lay following from whom he has received billions of Baht and large tracts of real estate. He is infamous for allegations that he used the money for personal ends, and for having made outrageously unorthodox claims about fundamental Buddhist teachings on merit and nirvana. This case is an example of the public furor that threatens the purity of the monkhood. It made many 1999–2000 *maechii* informants intent to avoid a public voice as they worried that their words could be misinterpreted as somehow contributing to the defamation of the monkhood, and they felt it not their place or right to criticize monks.

Maechii informants were also reluctant to talk about sexuality lest they be misread as being interested in it and therefore appearing to break the fourth Precept, which is to abstain from false speech. Some referred to another recent scandal, the Phra Yantra case that involved the discovery that the famous monk had a mistress and a child by her. They said that some *maechii* who had spoken to media representatives about the case had themselves subsequently been maligned in the press for what they had told the media.

Maechii also expressed self-censorship in their relationships with each other. The numbers of *maechii* in any one place (monastery or nunnery) are small, so they watched their own behaviour carefully, and they watched each other, lest any one speak out of turn or in a way that would embarrass them all. Seniority conferred the right to speak to the laity about anything other than Buddhist rituals, meditation, or daily pleasantries. If the head *maechii* did not want to talk, then the others in her monastery or institute did not either.

We were surprised by the *maechii*'s sense of vulnerability to public scorn. They commonly expressed the feeling that society devalued them. Many felt sorry for themselves, saw themselves as having to do hard work and as being allowed to be no more than maidservants to male monks. They often speculated that it was their religious fate that had brought them to this lowly status, that is, that their only option, given the circumstances that had precipitated their having become *maechii*, was to take on this low status role and way of life.

Some, but relatively few *maechii*, became a *maechii* in order to have opportunity to practice the Dharma. These few wanted to live a pure life. They wanted to practice the Dharma until they would get beyond suffering. For example, one 53-year-old who had been a *maechii* for 30 years said,

My younger brother had the opportunity to be a male monk for a long time. I felt he was very content. Then he left the monkhood and got married, and he's been a good head of household. It's like having been a male monk gave him the wisdom to lead a centered life ... I wanted to study more as I'd only had a fourth grade education. But I didn't have the money to study further because we were poor. So I tried to think how can I learn without paying for a formal education? Then I saw that to study Dharma, you don't have to have a text because Dharma is the real truth. I haven't studied the history of the Buddha, Pali, the Dharma, and those things. Instead I've practiced good behaviour [talking, thinking, doing], and practiced walking and sitting meditation. It's not necessary to study the Dharma because what you learn from it you can also learn from living life ... To know the truth you have to know yourself, the knowledge you get from books and others, is not the truth.

Maechii who thought this way eluded public view. Consequently, their dedication was not generally known in society at large.

Some *maechii* were also keen to separate themselves from the occasional women who disguised themselves as *maechii* as a way to earn money. A 20-year-old *maechii* told us¹⁷ that *maechii* get a bad reputation from

the ones who sully religion by going about and begging because they are so poor. There are monks and *maechii* who damage religion by going out and selling things, doing the lottery, fortune telling and things like that. Some *maechii* when they go home take off their robes and work to earn a living, then put the robes back on again when they go back to the temple.

Reports of behaviour such as this prompted the Social Welfare Department to issue the following 'urgent announcement' in the late 1980s.

Maechii are ordinands, they should study and chant and meditate and comport themselves as *maechii*. They should not go begging, that's been illegal since BE 2484 [1941 AD]. If you see any *maechii* begging for whatever purpose, even if to raise money with which to make merit, do let the Department of Social Welfare know.¹⁸

To ensure that *maechii* comport themselves properly, the Thai *Maechii* Institute Foundation (มูลนิธิสถาบันแม่ชีไทย n.d.) issued a restrictive code of conduct for them:

1. แม่ชีไม่ควรกราบ-ไหว้คฤหัสถ์ (เพราะอาณาภาพแห่งศีลที่ปฏิบัติ) ควรจะรับไหว้และอำนวยพรตามสมควร. This means that *maechii* may respond to *wai* [a common gesture of respect] but may initiate *wai* only to monks or the royal family [i.e., *maechii* deserve more respect than, every one except monks and royalty].
2. แม่ชีไม่ควรอุ้มชูเด็กทั้งเล็กและโตไม่ว่าหญิงหรือชาย แม้นกขัณมนารี (ธรรมจารีณี) ก็ต้องจัดต่างหาก. *Maechii* should eat only with other *maechii*, not even with *yokhii* or Brahmin nuns.
3. แม่ชีไม่ควรอุ้มชูเด็กทั้งเล็กและโตไม่ว่าหญิงหรือชาย เพราะมิใช่วิสัยของผู้ทรงศีล. *Maechii* should not carry children whether boy or girl [this is very hard, especially for *maechii* who love children].
4. แม่ชีไม่ควรจ่ายของที่เป็นประเภทอาหารในเวลาวิกาล เพราะมิใช่วิสัยของผู้ทรงศีลที่จะต้องกระทำ. *Maechii* shouldn't go out to buy food at night
5. เวลานั้นรถ นั่งเรือ ควรจะพิจารณาให้มากๆ ไม่สมควรนั่งชิดกับเพศตรงข้าม ควรจะหลีกเลี่ยงมากๆ และในกาลทุกเมื่อก็ควรหลีกเลี่ยง เช่นนั้นเสมอๆ. In public places like on a boat or bus or taxi *maechii* should avoid sitting next to men.

Discourse about *maechii* among *maechii* seems relatively unconcerned about their sexuality. In part this is because, as women, they feel they

should avoid talking about sex, and because as ascetic Buddhists, they should not be interested in sexuality. The few *maechii* informants who were open to talking about sexuality resisted the prevalent notions that *maechii* threatened monks' celibacy. They implicated the human nature (or frailty) of both men and women, of monks and *maechii*, to yield to desire. Their empathy for the human condition contrasted markedly with male monks' tendency to lay fault exclusively with lay women's natural sexuality. When we asked a 53-year-old who had been a practicing *maechii* for 33 years, 'What do you think about women being blamed for sullying the male monkhood' she said:

Why do they have to blame only the women, only one of the two partners? Because if they say that it's only women who drag male monks down, that's not correct. If the monk is the type that has loved many women, raped women, deceived women, I'd say he's no longer a monk. If he were a monk he wouldn't act that way, and when a male monk does take women you can't blame the women [for his misconduct]. He has to take the blame, to look at his own self. Being a woman does not mean a woman can't practice the Dharma. Because in Buddhism there's no difference among people by caste, sex, or any other way. If one sees a difference then it's not true Buddhism.

When asked 'What do you think about male monks having problems with women?', a younger *maechii*, about 30-years-old and living in a meditation monastery in ChiangMai,¹⁹ responded with empathy for human nature, respect for the Dharma, and a message of gender equity:

If we realize that when a man and woman are near each other, it's natural that something can occur between them because they are both human, even a monk is a person, a *maechii* is a person. When there's a problem usually it's between a male monk and a lay woman. It's rarely ever a monk and a *maechii*, or a *maechii* and a lay man. They are human and can't get beyond their desire. But if you look in terms of he's a monk, then it's wrong of both the monk and the woman. The woman shouldn't get involved with the male monk—she can see he's a monk and therefore should not tempt him. So both parties are at fault. Just putting on a monk's yellow robes or a *maechii*'s white robes does not free you from passion ... If something occurs between them you have to realize that they have demerit from having slept together and that something in their previous lives makes them do it again now.

The picture that emerges from informant *maechii* is that they had to dodge continuous risks of self-defamation with the defence of silence, and that they had to tow a fragile and elusive line between independence from the monkhood and dependence upon it. They sought independence so as not to risk defamation and in order to be able to meditate, chant, and practice the Dharma. At the same time, they were dependent upon monks and the monkhood for their legitimacy as well as for places to live.

Queen Jamathevi: a regional role model for Northern maechii

Maechii in the ChiangMai area have tended to have a regional identity. This was best exemplified in their having a historical heroine: Jamathevi, founding Queen of the Haripunchai Kingdom (now called Lamphun) who lived 645–733 AD (BE 1188–1276). Beyond this, it is difficult to differentiate myth from history in the stories about her. What is accepted as historical fact is that she arrived in Haripunchai with some 500 monks who had been

ordained in the Sri Lankan tradition (that is, as Theravada Buddhists). She is therefore viewed as the one who brought high culture and Theravada Buddhism to the Lanna Kingdom, which is included in what is now Northern Thailand and some surrounding territory (สุทธาวารี สุวรรณพัฒน์ [Sutthawaree] 2525/1982). Legend has it that she was raised in Lopburi (in the Central Region), married royalty, and had twin sons. She left her husband with her young sons and a large entourage and set off for the north. In order to be able to live without her husband, she became a *maechii* for the trip. Her two younger stepsisters took care of her sons, and her soldiers built temples along the way. She defrocked when she became Queen of Haripunchai, but became a *maechii* again in her old age, by which time her sons had become Kings of Lamphun and Lampang. She died while a *maechii*.

Jamathevi is popularly said to have embodied the desired characteristics of women. She is said to have been a woman of ideal beauty, graced with great merit and good fortune, having had a royal husband with whom she bore two future kings. She was a woman who, to be pure, voluntarily sought a life of celibacy, once in her youth to prepare herself to be Queen, and once late in life in preparation for death and the next life. In the northern region of ChiangMai and Lamphun, if not beyond, Jamathevi is portrayed by some *maechii* and many lay persons as the quintessential Buddhist mother and *maechii*.

Relevant here is that the heads of two free-standing *maechii* 'nunneries' in 1988 both called upon the Jamathevi legend to legitimate their autonomy and their powers as meditating *maechii*. One, the Burma-born Mae K (pseudonym), Head of *Maechii* for ChiangMai Province for some 20 years, founded the Jamathevi Treasure Garden Nunnery สวนแก้วจามเทวี. She was a practitioner of mystical meditation, conversing more with spirits and deities than with male monks and scholars. She had had no formal education. While she was a *maechii* at a meditation monastery, she said (interview in 1988) she had had a vision in which she saw a light come from the sky down to water. She went to a pond nearby and dug down where she had seen the light strike. There she found a pair of ancient scissors which, the deities revealed to her, had belonged to Jamathevi. Mae K subsequently found other Jamathevi relics in the area, and had another vision, this one that Jamathevi would come live with her. Shortly thereafter, anonymous donors brought her a portrait of Jamathevi and 14 rai ไร่²⁰ of land. She used the land to set up her nunnery. By 1988 it included a Buddha hall, a large pavilion with two large weaving looms, individual quarters for *maechii*, her own house, the pond where she found the relics, a large subsistence vegetable garden and a flower garden of equal size, and an orchard. The six *maechii* living there were young women who had been orphaned or sick before coming to the Garden.

The other *maechii*, Ajaan P, was from a well-do-do family. She had received a doctoral degree from a university in the United States, and had worked for the US military in Thailand for many years before she was accidentally electrocuted while at work. She said that when she first woke up from the shock, she heard a voice say 'she's dead' and she could see her unconscious body lying still. Then a voice said to her 'Shave your head

and be ordained so you can be born again'. She turned toward the voice and saw a large Buddha image floating. Because of this vision, she became a *maechii* while recuperating from the shock. For this, she said her parents disowned her. However, with the full support of senior abbots of monasteries in ChiangMai, she developed donated land into a home for poor rural women so that they could practice meditation, gain self-confidence, and learn vocational skills. She set high standards for her *maechii*.²¹ She said that every Buddha observance day (which is every 7 or 8 days) they made a triple circumambulation around the Buddha hall and read the 311 Precepts for ordained nuns.

Ajaan P had both vision and visions. In 1988 a rumour circulated among the university community of ChiangMai about her and another *maechii* in her residence. According to the rumor, Ajaan P learned during her meditation that over a thousand years before, she and the other *maechii* had been the wives of Queen Jamathevi's twin sons. In fact, Ajaan P had named her *maechii* residence Thung Siaw, which is the name of the temple where Jamathevi is said to have resided at her death. While she would not speak of a possible relationship with Jamathevi to me, she gave knowing, gratifying smiles when I referred to this story. At a *maechii* ordination witnessed in Thung Siaw, Ajaan P sat alone squarely in front of the Buddha image and altar. Monks were seated along the side walls to her right, and *maechii* along the wall to her left. There was a large picture of a *maechii* to the right of the Buddha altar. She told me that it had been painted by a man who, in a vision he had while meditating, saw Ajaan P as Queen Jamathevi herself.

By evoking the image of Queen Jamathevi, the queen who—without a king—brought Buddhism to the North, these two *maechii* attempted to legitimate their spaces for women independently of the order of male monks. Neither had ever married, and both presented themselves as being beyond sexuality. Their appropriating high status cultural and historical identification through their presumed association with Queen Jamathevi was akin to that of spirit mediums (เจ้านาย) with whom I worked earlier. One of the most senior mediums in ChiangMai in the late 1970s gained her status by having it be known that she was intermittently possessed by Mogalaana, an *arahant* (อรหันต์ a perfected person who has entered the path to Nirvana) and the Buddha's left-hand disciple (Muecke 1992, see also Thitsa 1983 and Irvine 1984).

Ten years later, however, both independent residences for *maechii* were no longer functioning. By 1999, Mae K had retired due to old age and was living as a lay woman near her former *maechii* residence which was no longer active. Instead, a monastery across from it housed two *maechii*. Ajaan P's residence for *maechii* was deserted and its rusted gates chain locked. The only nearby villagers we found who would offer an explanation for the closure indicated there had been some controversy about Ajaan P. But at another temple, Wat Panya Wutharaam—another temple where Queen Jamathevi is said to have died—*maechii* told us that Ajaan P had founded three other *maechii* residences, one each in ChiangMai, Lamphun, and Sakon Nakhorn Provinces.²²

These two cases indicate the difficulty women leaders have had in trying

to sustain religious space for themselves and other *maechii* where they were not subordinate to the order of male monks. Both Mae K and Ajaan P offered poor and poorly educated young rural women refuge, livelihood, and guidance in practicing the Dharma. Unfortunately, it was not possible to follow their young *maechii* over time. While the two *maechii* founders of nunneries sought Buddhist integrity and independent authority for themselves, their nunneries and the religious women who resided in them, their success was short-lived. Attempts to provide opportunity to study, practice meditation, and vocational training for disadvantaged and troubled young women elsewhere in the country, particularly in the Central Region, may be taking firmer hold. Several are winning social support both of those who seek spiritual respite for themselves and of the general public (“เรือนแก้ว” 2536, สขใจ 2527).²³ But their life expectancy is as hard to gauge, as is their success in strengthening the social status of *maechii*, or in helping single women (whether never married, divorced or widowed) find agency in their secular and religious lives. What all these examples do show is the resilience and resistance of some contemporary women leaders to the derogatory image of *maechii* as sexual threats to monks and by extension, to the social order.

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Notes

1. ‘Lay’ is in quotation marks to signify that the adjective is contested, a point which is discussed in the text.
2. Buddhist scriptures derive from Pali. For Pali terms, the standard Pali-Roman spelling is used (พระราชาธรรมณี [Phra Rachaworamunii] 2528/1985). For all other terms, the transliteration schema used in Mary Haas’ *Thai-English Student’s Dictionary* (1964) is employed. Tone marks are omitted in both forms of transliteration because they are not available on most standard wordprocessing packages.
3. English language translations commonly used for Thai terms that designate religious status and

roles of women in Buddhism only partially capture the Thai meaning. The lack of conformity between the two languages adds confusion to the ambiguities in Thai that are addressed in this article. The word 'nun' is widely used to signify both ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhu'nii* and แมชี *maechii* despite a major difference in ordination status of the two. Recently (particularly in the last year) the term 'female monk' has been introduced as a preferred alternative to 'nun' to designate ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhu'nii*. The male counterpart is exclusively called 'monk,' although to promote gender equity, the term 'male monk' is used here for the male equivalent พระ *phra*. The term 'ordained nun' is used when citing literature or persons who use that term for ภิกษุณี *Bhikkhu'nii*, otherwise the term 'female monk' is used for women ordained as monks.

4. Sri Lanka is the only Theravada Buddhist country that has a history of ordaining *Bhikkhu'nii* (nuns).
5. English language reports and discussions of the story of how the Buddha was swayed to permit women to be ordained as nuns are given in Chatsumarn 1984b, Cook 1981: 7–8, Falk 1980: 209, Tambiah 1984: 359–360.
6. These extra Precepts are described in the *Bhikkhuni Vibhanga* in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, which defines rules of conduct for *Bhikkhuni*.
7. Interview by Wanida Jiamram, 15 January 2000.
8. I guesstimate the time as 1945–1955 because the author, writing in 1995 referred to 'the time of our grandmothers'.
9. See Cook 1981: 195–225 for a discussion of the Thai *Maechii* Institute Foundation in relation to the Buddhist Sangha, or order of monks.
10. Lay persons usually follow five Precepts or rules of moral conduct: abstain from killing; abstain from stealing; abstain from sexual misconduct; abstain from false speech; and abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness (พระราชวรณีย์ [Phra'rachaworamunii] 2528/1985: 206–207). Lay persons may opt to take eight Precepts on Buddhist observance day (วันพระ) and during wakes. The eight Precepts are the five above plus refrain from eating after noon; refrain from dancing, shows and other forms of entertainment; and refrain from adorning the body. Some *maechii* and all novices (boys) observe 10 Precepts, the last two being to refrain from sleeping on a wide bed with a thick mattress, and refrain from receiving money (Wells 1975: 53, 144).
11. Some 20 years ago, a study of 60 *maechii* in Bangkok reported that their monthly expenses were 100 to 1,000 Baht, and typically were covered by the woman's relatives (แนนนอย บัญจพรต และ นิรมล พงศ์มาธร, 2524/1981).
12. Interview by Wanida Jiamram, 31 October 1999.
13. This information on the variation in transportation fees for monks was provided by an anonymous reviewer.
14. The Thai Nuns' Association estimated that at least 10% of *maechii* take 10 Precepts. The other 90% take either five or eight Precepts. Author's interview at Wat Boworniwet, Bangkok, 7 October 1988.
15. I thank Wanida Jiamram for much of this analysis of lay attitudes about *maechii*.
16. มูลนิธิสถาบันแมชีไทย ในพระบรมราชูปถัมภ์ วัดบวรนิเวศ. I interviewed nuns at the Thai Nuns' Institute in Bangkok in 1988, and Wanida Jiamram, field researcher, interviewed nuns there on 16–17 February 2000.
17. Interview by Wanida Jiamram, 16–17 February 2000.
18. The Thai annual calendar uses the Buddhist Era (BE), which began at the death of the Buddha 543 years before the birth of Christ.
19. Interview by Wanida Jiamram, 6 June 2000.
20. One ไร่ is about two-fifths of an acre.
21. There were 19 *maechii* and 16 *chii phram* at her 21 *rai* (around 8.5 acre) residence for practicing the devout life when I visited in 1988.
22. Interview by Wanida Jiamram, 15 January 2000.
23. For example, three of the expanding number of renowned *maechii* leaders of socially-oriented nunneries are:
 - *Maechii* Sansanee Sathirasut, who once had a successful career in modeling and public relations, has founded learning communities for applying the Dharma to one's life and family called *SathiraDhamma Sathana* [sic] (for the Thai เสถียรธรรมสถาน). Her well-known community service projects include counseling and a home for women who have been sexually abused or who have unplanned pregnancies (นิตยสารสารคดี [Feature Magazine] n.d.; นิตยสารรักลูก [Love Children Magazine] 2538/1995; คุณหญิง [Lady] n.d.; Sanitsuda 1995).

- *Khun Mae* Krathin Kwan-orn founded the tuition-free Thammacarini secondary School โครงการธรรมจารีณี in Ratchaburi Province in 1990 for rural poor girls and *maechii*. They follow eight Precepts while they take regular junior high and high school courses, vocational training, and study Buddhism.
- Maechii KhunYing Kanitha Wichiencharoen, a former lawyer, founded the first college for *maechii* in Thailand in 1999 so that women can study the Dharma just as much as novices and monks can do.

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Résumé

En examinant les discours en concurrence sur les *maechii* (แม่ชี ou «sœurs converses») dans la société bouddhique thaïlandaise, cet article démontre que bien que celles-ci fassent vœu de célibat, les constructions sociales sur leur rôle sont basées sur la sexualité. Les discours examinés sont ceux du canon bouddhique et du Shanga (ordre monacal), de l'Institut thaïlandais *Maechii*, des mass media et du gouvernement. L'analyse est complétée par des observations de terrain et des entretiens avec des moines, des *maechii* et des personnes laïques. Les résultats suggèrent que les *maechii* constituent une catégorie ambiguë du point de vue linguistique, bouddhique, et de celui de leur sexualité. Des études de cas sur les fondatrices des couvents menées à Chiang Mai indiquent que les *maechii* supérieures ont résisté aux

idées répandues selon lesquelles la plupart des *maechii* sont inadaptees socialement, tout en étant cependant capables de saper le célibat des moines et, par extension, l'ordre social lui-même. L'analyse contribue à la compréhension des liens étroits entre le genre et la sexualité dans la société thaïlandaise contemporaine.

Resumen

Examinando discursos contradictorios sobre mujeres que son *maechii* (แม่ชี o 'monjas laicas') en la sociedad budista tailandesa, en este documento se quiere demostrar que, aunque las *maechii* se comprometen a ser célibes, sus roles se interpretan en función de su sexualidad. Se examinaron discursos del canon budista y Sangha (Orden de los monjes), el Instituto Thai Maechii, los medios de comunicación y el gobierno. El análisis se complementa con observaciones de campo y entrevistas realizadas a monjes, *maechii*, y personas laicas. Los resultados sugieren que, lingüística, *budísticamente* y en referencia a su sexualidad, las *maechii* pertenecen a una categoría ambigua. Los estudios prácticos llevados a cabo entre los fundadores de los conventos de monjas en ChiangMai indican que las líderes *maechii* se han resistido a la opinión generalizada de que la mayoría de *maechii* son inadaptables sociales, pero capaces también de socavar el celibato de los monjes y, por extensión, el mayor orden social. El análisis contribuye a comprender la interconexión de géneros y la sexualidad en la sociedad contemporánea tailandesa.