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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 20th 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 กลัดจาย).

[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)–(ฎ).

[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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