The gender of the sangha and the reform and bureaucratization of Thai Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper casts a gender lens on the history of the Thai Buddhist monkhood and the monastic order, or the *sangha*, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that the historical development of the Thai Buddhist *sangha* has been a gendered process, in which the exclusive maleness of the *sangha* has had to be maintained and reconsolidated over time to keep it a predominantly male domain. This was particularly the case during the period of Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the *sangha*, which is the focus of this paper. In this gendered historical process, women were often constituted as "the other" whose physical embodiment and sexuality came to be increasingly posited as a threat to the purity of the institutionalized *sangha*; therefore, women needed to be kept away from the monastic sphere altogether. This gendered history of the *sangha* has rendered it more difficult for women to pursue a Buddhist monastic vocation.

In the first three and a half years of his reign, King Mongkut or Rama IV (r. 1851–1868), issued no fewer than five royal decrees addressing the problem of sexual misconduct of monks and their relationships with women (*Prachum prakat ratthakan thi 4* [PPRT4], 2004). More decrees on similar matters were to follow as the years wore on. The monarch, who spent twenty-seven years before his accession to the throne as a Buddhist monk and was known for his zealous adherence to scriptural orthodoxy, seemed particularly troubled by this issue. He repeatedly ordered monks and women who engaged in courting or sexual relationships to declare their wrongdoings to the authorities with a promise that

their culpable misconduct would be pardoned. The fact that the monarch had to re-issue orders on the same topic several times points to either the persistence of the problem or the monarch's preoccupation with it, or both.

In one of these decrees issued in 1854, King Mongkut complained about the rampant sexual misconduct and lack of religious faith and discipline among monks and novices of his day. Monks and novices, he said, could commit sexual misconduct because of the ease with which they could meet women. In an attempt to curb the problem, he decreed that male monastics could no longer meet women in their residences (kuti), whether the women were their mothers, sisters, relatives, or others. As for women, he suggested that an announcement be made prohibiting them from entering Buddhist monasteries altogether. Should a woman be found going into a monastery, the police should arrest and fine her an amount of three tamleung.

King Mongkut's concern about the problematic relationships between male monastics and women was not unprecedented. A section of the Ecclesiastical Law (Kot phra song), issued some fifty years earlier by the founder of the Bangkok dynasty, King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), also described rampant sexual relationships between male monks and women, the latter including the traditional form of Buddhist nuns, mae chi (then called rup chi). Apart from imposing stricter rules of conduct on monks, the ecclesiastical law issued by King Rama I also instructed laywomen not to forge intimate relationships with male monks. Masters and parents were exhorted to keep an eye on their female dependents or ordained male relatives in order to prevent them from engaging in sexual relationship. The same law also prohibited mae chi from residing in monastic compounds and nearby areas (Kotmai tra sam duang, 1962: IV, 206–20).

According to the scripturally prescribed discipline for monks, engaging in sexual intercourse constitutes one of the gravest offences and would result in the termination of their monkhood. While an immediate remedy to this problem had been to defrock guilty monks as prescribed in the scriptures, the early decades of the Bangkok dynasty saw the monarchical state trying to impose additional penalties on the perpetrators and their accomplices.
More than that, these state rulers, such as King Rama I and King Mongkut discussed above, tended to consider it part of the solution to keep women out of the sacrosanct monastic space altogether.

In this paper, I discuss the gender aspect of the historical development of the Thai Buddhist monastic order, the sangha. I have argued elsewhere that the gendered historical development of the sangha makes it difficult for women to pursue a Buddhist monastic vocation and to be formally recognized as ordained monastics in the Thai context (Varaporn, 2006). One of the persistent aspects of this gendered historical development is the exclusive maleness of the sangha. Given that the institution of ordaining female monks or phiksuni (Pali: bhikkhuni) had not spread to Southeast Asia before it disappeared from India and Sri Lanka around the eleventh century CE, there is no doubt that the Buddhist monkhood in Thai society has always been a male preserve. However, I argue that although exclusive maleness, or the institutional exclusion of women, has been integral to the Thai Buddhist monkhood from the past to the present, this institutional gender characteristic has not been impervious to disruption and change. Rather, this male exclusiveness of the Thai Buddhist monkhood has needed to be reconstituted and maintained over time for the sangha to remain a predominantly male institution.

This paper focuses on Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the Thai sangha from the second quarter of the nineteenth century until the early decades of the twentieth century. This period of Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization is often considered to be a defining period in the history of Thai Buddhism in many ways (Phaisan, 2003: 13, 17). For one thing, it was a period of dramatic change in the notion of monkhood and monastic practice as a result of increased interconnection between the sangha and the state. This transition was in effect accompanied by enhanced religious authority of the sangha and its members. The transition of monkhood in this period had an inherent gender aspect that helped to intensify the historical gender divide in Buddhist monasticism and reaffirm the exclusive maleness of the sangha.

In discussing the relationship between gender and power, the feminist historian Joan Scott (1988: 45) states that "concepts of power, though they may build on gender, are not always literally
about gender itself." It is also true that concepts and practices of gender may be developed for the purpose of gaining or retaining power, but this purpose may not be consciously or explicitly articulated as such. This gendering process, in which gender is integral to the maintenance of other forms of power, is the case when we consider the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization. As examples from the royal decrees and Ecclesiastical Law cited above show, control over the relationship between women, as a gender category, and the monastic order was one of the key concerns for the institutionalization of Buddhism. In other words, gender was, and still is, implicated in the consolidation of institutional Buddhism and the monastic order. In this process, "women" became progressively constituted as "the other" whose physical embodiment and sexuality came to be increasingly regarded, in formal discourse, as a threat to the purity of the sangha.

In any case, there is no simple dichotomy of gender and Buddhism, for both notions are not discrete and static but have been affected and constantly reshaped by other social forces. Like other countries in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, no other social forces were more domineering for the Thai state, or Siam at that time, than the presence of Western imperialist powers and the threat of being colonized. That Siam was not directly colonized by Western powers is a fact well known. But this does not mean that the kingdom was free from the impact of imperialist expansion. In this light, Buddhism and gender were among the local concepts and practices that were reconsidered and reconfigured as the country entered into a precarious relationship with the West.

The following discussion is divided into four parts. First is an outline of the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization, describing how Buddhism became an essential cultural marker of the self-civilizing Thai state in its encounter with the West. The second part discusses how the ruling elite reconfigured gender values in society as a means to maintain its status quo in this transitional period. Members of the elite drew on Buddhism as an effective cultural marker to justify their gender values and practice, and to transform these class-specific values into a legitimate representation of Thai culture. In the third part, I outline the
changing notion of monkhood from the popular conception of monastic ordination as a cultural practice (or as a rite of passage for young men) to the rising importance of monkhood as a profession. Here, I point to how gender and other social values of the ruling class found their way into the institution of monkhood. The fourth part discusses the gender implications of the changing notion of monkhood and their impact on the position of women vis-à-vis institutional Buddhism.

Buddhist reform and Buddhist modernity

The rising significance of Buddhism, particularly “rational” Buddhism, as a source of legitimation of temporal ruling power in Thai society can be traced back to the beginning of the Bangkok period in the late eighteenth century or slightly earlier (Reynolds, 1973: vi; Wyatt, 1982; Saichon, 2002). During the reign of King Rama I, the ruling class drew substantially on Buddhism to legitimize the newly founded dynasty and to impose social order at that transitional period. Saichon Satayanurak (2002) describes the type of Buddhism promoted by Bangkok rulers at that time as humanistic and rationalistic, with an increased emphasis on textual knowledge, disenchantment with superstitious beliefs, and confidence in human ability to achieve Buddhist enlightenment. This movement at the beginning of the Bangkok era explains why Buddhism continued to stand as an important ideological foundation for Siam in its encounter with Western imperialist powers later in the nineteenth century.

One of the effects of the earlier revitalization of Buddhism at the beginning of the Bangkok era was the rising significance of monasticism in the eyes of the ruling class. While short-term ordination had been a traditional practice among royal sons, there was a sharp increase in the number of princes who decided to make a long-term profession in the sangha from the first up to the fifth reigns of the Bangkok dynasty (Reynolds, 1973: 66-7). Jackson (1989: 68) argues that this “increased royal interest in Buddhism” was in fact part of the monarchy’s scheme to strengthen and expand the centralization of its power. Evidence of this is the fact that several monks from the royal family were placed in important

Amid the increased royal presence in the sangha, the entrance of one particular prince into monkhood turned the history of Thai Buddhism to a new page. In 1824, a prominent member of the royal family and likely heir to the throne, Prince Mongkut, was ordained as a monk. He remained in the monkhood for more than two and a half decades before leaving the monastic vocation in order to ascend the throne in 1851. From early in his monastic career, he started an orthodox religious movement that would later be described as a Buddhist reform. The legacies of King Mongkut’s reform can be divided into two strands: intellectual and organizational. In intellectual terms, the prince monk further incorporated scientific thinking and rationalism into Buddhist teachings, at the same time demythologizing traditional cosmological belief and its emphasis on otherworldly lives. Also contrary to the royal Buddhist tradition was his de-emphasis of the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, or nippan (Pali: nibbana). In his thinking, nippan was beyond the achievement of ordinary people, and only in extremely rare cases could ordained monks hope to realize this ultimate goal (Phaisan, 2003: 13, 15). In logical terms, the spread of this teaching about the inaccessibility of nippan not only deprived laypeople of the hope to achieve this highest spiritual attainment but also highlighted the significance of the monkhood as the only possible avenue of enlightenment, and therefore the prime source of religious authority.

In organizational terms, the prince-monk Mongkut is remembered for his founding of a new monastic order, the Thammayut. The name of this order, which literally means the order “adhering to the dhamma or doctrine” (Reynolds, 1973: 95; Kirsch 1975: 16), indicates its strong inclination for scriptural orthodoxy. Although relatively small in membership, the Thammayut Order, through its close connections with the monarchy, received special support from the state. Its members rose to important ruling positions within the sangha (Jackson, 1989: 89–90).

The incorporation of the sangha into the state structure became more institutionalized during the following reign of King
Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). A son of King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn, sought to strengthen the monarchical control over the sangha by encouraging his half-brother, Prince Wachirayan (1860–1921), to enter and stay in the monkhood. Prince Wachirayan received his ordination as a monk in 1879 when he was approaching 20 years old, and maintained an active ecclesiastical-cum-bureaucratic career in the sangha for the rest of his life. At a relatively young age, he was promoted to the head of the Thammayut Order and was later appointed as the Prince-Patriarch or the royal supreme leader of the Thai sangha (Reynolds, 1973: 68, fn. 11, 145–6, 151; Jackson, 1989: 66; Phaisan, 2003: 69).

During this period of governmental restructuring and monastic bureaucratization, monks of the Thammayut Order served as important agents of change which culminated in the consolidation of the monarchical state power. Bangkok monks and monks from provincial areas who received their training in Bangkok were instrumental in expanding the centralized sangha administration that paralleled the secular governmental system. They also helped to spread to provincial areas the monastic culture and practice favoured by the royal court and urban elite. In many cases, the sangha's authority and the monastic culture that radiated from Bangkok were in tension with local monastic hierarchies and diverse Buddhist traditions in different parts of the country (Phaisan, 2003: 55–6).

Ecclesiastical education was also crucial for the consolidation of the national sangha, thus the introduction of a uniform curriculum for Buddhist and Pali studies and centrally-managed exams for monks nationwide. In 1902, the first modern law on the administration of the sangha was issued, tightening the state's control over individual monks and monasteries. The ways in which the modern ecclesiastical education and legislation affected monkhood will be discussed below. For now, let us consider how the Buddhist reform was connected to the advent of modernity in Siam.

All the changes outlined above were far from being merely internal affairs of the Thai state. At a personal level, the prince-monk Mongkut was an earnest student of Western languages and scientific knowledge (Reynolds, 1973: 84–5; Reynolds, 2006: 172–
3). His exposure to Western ideas and values was shaped in a large part by equally earnest teachers, the Western Christian missionaries living in Siam. Such exposure to Western thought and cultures was also the case with other members of the Bangkok aristocracy (Reynolds, 2006: Chapters 8 and 9; Loos, 2006). Yet, the ruling class's personal experiences with all things Western were not completely personal but were also in response to the larger global change, namely the ever-greater presence of Westerners and Western powers in Southeast Asia at that time.

In some indirect way, the presence of Westerners in Siam also affected local monastic affairs, for it provided more reason for King Mongkut to worry about the conduct of monks. In one of the decrees issued in 1853, he declared that misconduct of monks would bring shame to the country in the face of the international community (hai seuam sia phrakiat to ban to meuang ai kap nana prathet). Six years later in 1859, the situation did not seem to have improved, and the monarch felt the need to issue another decree justifying his intervention in monastic affairs. Having described the waywardness of monks, he stated that "should non-Buddhist foreigners living in this capital city see how these monks conduct themselves, they would condemn Thai people of Siam for paying respect to errant persons not at all worthy of veneration." These decreed messages indicate a point in time when local monastic affairs came into contact with global change. The behaviour of individual monks was not perceived as merely internal to the sangha, or the Thai state for that matter. Now, monastic conduct became connected with the image of the kingdom, whose ruling class was increasingly concerned about its standing in the international community.

Tamara Loos (2006: 18–24), in her study of Siam between the 1850s and 1930s, describes the country as undergoing processes that produced an "alternative modernity." This was a type of modernity in which the Thai ruling elite chose to adopt the European form of modernity, but only partially, while effectively maintaining, or in fact strengthening, certain political and religious characteristics beneficial to their class. This development of selective modernity was possible given Siam's specific position of not being directly colonized and yet having fallen inevitably under the threat
of imperialist aggression. Consequently, this alternative modernity involved the strengthening of monarchical power and the integration of Buddhism and the sangha into the building of the Siamese nation-state. In this local form of modernity, there was no fundamental conflict between reformist Buddhism and modernization (Kirsch, 1975: 19, 22). In fact, Buddhism became a key feature of Siam's modernity to the point that it might be called "Buddhist modernity" (Loos, 2006: 22, 94–9). More than ever, Buddhism was used in a relativist fashion as a cultural marker that distinguished the Thai state from the West, and the Thais from their non-Buddhist "others." And there were few other social aspects in which Buddhism was put to work more effectively than the construction of the gender order in society.

Reconfiguring gender

To give a single, coherent and also accurate picture of gender values in Siam in the mid nineteenth century is an unrealistic task. First of all, there was never a singular set of gender values and practices in the society at any given time. In an analysis of the status of Siamese women during this historical period, Junko Koizumi (2000) brings to attention the issue of class difference among women and discusses how the status of a woman was relational, shifting according to the situation and the type of relationship she was dealing with. Apart from this relationality of gender positions, there was also the wider global context to consider. At a time when the political, economic, and social conditions of the country were greatly swayed by Western imperialism and its imposition of change, gender values were in flux.

While there is limited historical evidence revealing how commoners adjusted themselves in terms of gender in response to changing social conditions, the shifting gender values of the ruling class can be traced in their writings. A frequently quoted set of such documents is the collection of royal decrees issued by King Mongkut, some of which have been discussed above. Issued through the seventeen years of his reign, several of these public statements concerned the relationships between women and men in different contexts. At first glance, these decrees might be taken as
emancipatory for women. For example, a few of the decrees unprecedentedly allowed palace women, including the King’s concubines, to resign from their positions at will. A few others introduced the idea of women’s consent to marriage arrangements and prohibition of the sales of wives and children.

However, these written records of the monarch’s gender attitudes have proved to be cryptic and sometimes self-contradictory. Scholars thus have different views about what meanings might be extracted from these documents in terms of the status of women. Koizumi (2000) provides perhaps the most penetrating analysis of King Mongkut’s attitudes towards women as reflected in these decrees. She cogently argues that the decrees did not have the all-positive impact on women as often construed, but were scattered with internal contradictions. She also points out that the king’s “patriarchal and class consciousness” was not far below the surface of these documents (Koizumi, 2000: 256). One of the several manifestations of this consciousness was his revoking of an old law prescribing the distribution of children in the case of divorce. Whereas the old regulation stated that the sons were to follow the mother and the daughters the father, the monarch instead stipulated that for divorced couples of high-ranking officials, the father could solely determine the fate of the children (see Koizumi, 2000: 263).

Another already well-studied case of the elite’s gender perspective in the mid nineteenth century is a piece of writing on polygyny by a prominent Thai aristocrat, Jao Phraya Thiphakorawong. This writing is a part of his book entitled Kitjanukit (Thiphakorawong, 1965), first published in 1867, at a time when print technology was still predominantly in the hands of Western missionaries and the ruling elite (Reynolds, 2006: 56). Reynolds (2006), in his critical reading of this passage on polygyny, calls it “a Thai Buddhist defense of polygamy.” It can be inferred from other parts of Thiphakorawong’s book that this passage was his response to Christian missionaries’ criticisms of polygynous marriage which was common among the Thai male elite at that time.

A point of concern for this paper is how this passage, which is a mere five pages, helped to justify polygynous marriage in Buddhist
terms (for a complete English translation of this text, see Reynolds, 2006: 208–12). Briefly, the text features an interpretation of the Buddhist precept on sexual misconduct that forms one of the five basic precepts for the right livelihood of lay Buddhists.\textsuperscript{14} The writing elaborates on different hypothetical scenarios of non-monogamous sexual relations, and then passes a judgment as to whether or not the men and women involved in each of these scenarios breach the precept.

To defend his proposition that men should be allowed to have several wives and women only one husband, the author built his argument around the idea that women and men had different natures. He cited unsourced “learned authors of the (Pali) commentaries” to support his view that men had the prerogative in sexual relations. He then drew on a fable to prove that women’s nature was so “ruthless” that “If a woman has many husbands, she is likely to kill those whom she does not love” (here I use the English translation by Reynolds, 2006: 208, 209). The author concluded with a statement that although the Buddha commended faithful marital relationships among lay Buddhists and criticized non-monogamous practice as a cause of mental defilement, he did not spell out any prohibition on polygynous practice.

This passage on polygyny is an example of how the elite used Buddhist teachings to support their gender values. To be more specific, it exemplifies how Buddhist tenets were stretched and twisted in the service of maintaining the gender status quo of the male elite. In doing so, the author artfully stated his own assumptions about the different natures of women and men using Buddhist rhetoric. The passage demonstrates how, having arrived at a political and cultural crossroads, the Siamese male ruling elite came to realize that certain aspects of their gender values and practices could no longer be taken for granted and needed to be defended in order to preserve their privileged position, which was in itself profoundly gendered.

Local religions and the family structure were the two cultural components of colonized societies that Western imperialist powers were more willing to leave unchanged (despite their criticisms), for these components served as a marker of the native, and therefore primitive, culture (Loos, 2006: 5). In the case of Siam, the local
male elite turned this niche ideological space to their advantage by wedding their gender values to Buddhist rhetoric. This combination was to be expected when we consider the historical significance of Buddhism in Siam’s political and cultural life. In an attempt to maintain their privileged status, the Siamese male elite sought to reconfigure the gender positions of women and men. This reconfiguration was not so much about creating a new gender order. Rather, it involved re-presenting the elite’s gender values, sometimes buttressed with Buddhist tenets, as the normative gender order of Thai culture. A similar process in which the ruling elite turned their class-specific values into a norm also occurred in monastic practice. This will be discussed next.

**The changing notion of monkhood**

In 1858, King Mongkut issued a decree entitled ‘Wrong religious adherence and people with false beliefs’ (*Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit*) (*PPRT4*, 2004: 208–10). It contained a passage describing how typical it was for divorced, widowed, and unmarried women to be attracted to monks who had been ordained for a long time for these well-established monks often possessed ecclesiastical ranks and money earned from their regular allowances as well as ritual performances and sermons. These women, as the decree went on to describe, would try every possible way to seduce the monks in question to leave the monkhood. The monks, who were rather inexperienced in sexual matters, would be driven crazy by their sexual relationships with these women (and would comply with the latter’s demands). King Mongkut stated in this decree that cases of women being attracted to monks, and of disrobed monks taking widowed or unmarried women as their wives, were “common everywhere” (*PPRT4*, 2004: 210). Having expressed obvious discontent about the situation, the monarch declared that “women seeking monks to be their [prospective] husbands, and monks seeking widowed women or spinsters to be their [prospective] wives” would be punished by law (*PPRT4*, 2004: 210). He also prescribed penalties for other monks and laypeople who knew about these relationships but failed to report such cases to the authorities.\(^\text{15}\)
As this passage in the decree dealt with unseemly relationships between monks and women, it also revealed the standard of monkhood that the monarch was trying to foster. According to this royal aspiration, monks were supposed to serve long-term, or better life-long, religious service. These monks might enjoy worldly privileges such as royally endowed ecclesiastical ranks and regular allowances. As such, they were part of the ecclesiastical administrative structure under the king's patronage. They should be skilled in religious rituals and sermons. They might be known to have accumulated wealth gained in return for their religious services, but this went without a note of resentment from the monarch despite the fact that the scripturally based monastic discipline prohibits monks from accumulating personal wealth. In the monarch's view, these model monks were vulnerable to the threat of women, especially those outside proper marital relationship (divorces, widows, and unmarried women). Yet, according to the decree, relationships between monks or former monks and women were not infrequent. This behavior, seriously problematic in the eyes of the monarch, seemed to be tolerated to a certain extent by the wider population, as shown by the mention of monks and laypeople who knew of these relationships but did not report the cases to the authorities.

The above reading of the decree reveals the incongruity between the standard of monkhood aspired to by the monarch and the way in which monkhood was actually practiced on the ground. Careful reading of this decree also points to the selective nature of this standard of monkhood in relation to Buddhist doctrines. While sexual relationships involving male monastics were condemned, as they were meant to be according to doctrinal teachings and the monastic discipline, other practices also antithetical to the goal of spiritual attainment in monkhood, such as accumulation of wealth and attachment to the social prestige of ecclesiastical ranks, were not only tolerated but were constitutive parts of the state-sanctioned ecclesiastical administrative system.

We will consider the state's mechanisms to realize this standard of monkhood below. For now, we can surmise that this elitist concept of monkhood aimed more or less at building a cohort of long-term professional monks under the state-administered
ecclesiastical structure. This process might be described as the professionalization of monkhood. For this monastic professionalizing project, the possibility of acquiring social prestige and wealth provided incentives for men to stay long term in the monastic order. Meanwhile, the relationship between monks and women could only be seen as a disincentive to the monastic professionalization project. The novelty of this attempt to promote long-term professional monkhood will be more evident when we turn now to consider the popular notion of monkhood that was upheld and practiced by the wider population at that time.

The popular notion of monkhood

In their evaluation of monastic practice in provincial areas in a report written in 1900, the monastic authorities from Bangkok were dismayed at the state of monkhood they had witnessed in the southern province of Phuket. A passage in this report quoted in Reynolds (1973: 258) reads:

People here care for books only seriously enough to be able to read, since their intention is to become ordained, nothing more. Only a few know what it means to be well-schooled, as most of the people in those provinces want to take their vows for ordination and leave it at that. Once they have been ordained there is hardly any [interest in] dhamma and the Vinaya, to the extent that they think ordination alone is sufficient to acquire merit.

This passage points to the difference between the conception of proper monkhood upheld by the monastic elite in Bangkok and the popular notion of monkhood practiced in provincial areas.

In the early 1910s, when Prince Wachirayan, then the Prince-Patriarch of the Thai sangha, made excursions to the south and north of the country, he noted the common practice of temporary ordination. He saw that monks in remote areas were in most cases newly ordained. According to his observation, rural men would normally stay in the monkhood for one, two, or at most only a few more years. The Prince-Patriarch also met a number of elderly monks who had been ordained for not very long. During his trips, which had the effect of asserting his authority as the supreme leader of the sangha in remote territories, some monks in those rural areas
tried to avoid him for fear that they might be defrocked because of their lack of doctrinal knowledge or their "incorrect" ordinations according to the Bangkok standard (Wachirayan, 1961 and 1968).

By reading Prince Wachirayan’s record of his excursions, we can easily discern his aspiration to establish a uniform standard of monkhood nationwide. Most of his comments focused on the corporeal practice of monkhood such as the (often unkempt) robing styles of rural monks, their (often rustic and unsynchronized) Pali chanting, their (often poor) maintenance of monastic compounds, their proper or improper mannerisms, and their knowledge of the ecclesiastical administrative networks or the lack of it. At several provincial monasteries, Prince Wachirayan ordered his entourage of Bangkok monks to perform Pali chanting in front of their rural counterparts so that the latter could learn to chant better (Wachirayan, 1961 and 1968).

From Prince Wachirayan’s account, with its focus on outer appearances of monks and monasteries, we learn little about how monasticism was actually practiced in the larger part of the country. To have a clearer picture of the popular conception and practice of monkhood, we have to resort to ethnographic studies of the Buddhist monkhood in Thailand from a later period, mostly the 1960s and 1970s. This seemingly anachronistic approach to the understanding of changes in the notion of monkhood is valid when we consider the fact that changes in the conception and practice of monkhood that resulted from the elite-initiated reform and bureaucratization processes were by no means complete.

In studies of monasticism in Thailand, Buddhism and monkhood are often divided into dichotomous types such as: village Buddhism vs. pristine or doctrinal Buddhism (Tambiah, 1970: 62); village monks vs. monks in urban monasteries (Bunnag, 1973: 49–50); and regional Buddhist traditions vs. modern state Buddhism (Kamala, 1997: 254–6). These dichotomies suggest that village or regional Buddhist traditions represent popular Buddhism that has not been completely overridden by the Buddhist reform initiated from urban areas. Stanley Tambiah, in his ethnographic studies of rural monkhood in the northeast of Thailand in the 1960s, states that while the centralization of sangha administration and the hierarchization of ecclesiastical offices was nationwide in its
“one ought not to exaggerate the relevance of this centralization and hierarchization” for rural monastic communities (1970: 78–9). Barend Terweil (1979 [1975]) tells us that the centralized curriculum of Buddhist studies and exams for monks, which was part of the modernization of the ecclesiastical education started in the 1890s, was but a “recently introduced” activity at the provincial monastery in central Thailand where he conducted his study in the late 1960s. These fragments from ethnographic accounts point to the gradual and incomplete impact of the centralization of the ecclesiastical administration and education, especially in rural areas. This, however, is not to deny the impact of the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization on rural monkhood altogether. Works on urban monks and monasteries such as those of Jane Bunnag (1973) and Richard O’Connor (1978) describe the migration of monks from remote areas to regional urban centres in order to further their ecclesiastical education and pursue their long-term monastic profession. Thus, the monastic bureaucratization did not completely annihilate the popular monastic practice but rather led to the coexistence of the popular and officially-sanctioned notions of monkhood in Thai Buddhism.  

What was the popular notion and practice of monkhood in the past? From anthropological studies of monkhood in Thailand, we gather that the practice of temporary or short-term ordination was prevalent (Tambiah, 1970: 99–102; Keyes, 1986: 69; Bunnag, 1973: 37, 47). Although there were long-term monks, classified by anthropologists as “professional,” “career,” “permanent,” or “experienced” monks (Tambiah, 1968: 58; Bunnag, 1973: 37, 48; Terweil, 1979: 103–4), these long-term monks were in the minority and their prolonged monastic vocation was often not their intention when they were first ordained.

Similarly, men who decided to be ordained out of their own religious piety or desire for spiritual achievement were relatively few in number. Several anthropological studies affirm that young men were often pressured to take ordination by other people, not least their mothers who believed they would receive their share of merit from their sons’ ordination (Terweil, 1979: 101; Keyes, 1986: 88; Tambiah, 1970: 102). In this light, temporary ordination into
monkhood counted as a cultural rather than religious practice. This type of ordination served as a rite of passage that transformed young men from the pre-adult stage into adulthood, or from being raw (dip) to ripe (suk) (Keyes, 1986: 69; Tambiah, 1970: 102; Terweil, 1979: 102).

Contrary to the strict discipline of sexual detachment of the ideal monkhood envisioned by the ruling elite, the popular practice of temporary ordination bore a strong connotation of young men's maturity and marriageability. Keyes observed that men who had been ordained temporarily were “much more desirable as a marriage partner” (1986: 83, 76–7, 88; see also Tambiah, 1970: 99, 144). The popularity of male ordination as a rite of passage and an indicator of men's marriageability can still be traced in a central Thai idiom buat kon biat (literally, “to be ordained before cuddling up”), which playfully suggests that a man spends some time in the monkhood before he gets married.

Kamala Tiyavanich, in a study of forest monks in the first half of the twentieth century, also recounted incidents in which people in provincial areas looked to monks as potential marriage partners for their unmarried daughters or female relatives (1997: 137–8). This was to the abhorrence of the forest monks concerned, for several of these forest monks had by that time gone through the formal ecclesiastical education modeled after the Thammayut orthodox tradition (see Kamala, 1997; Kirsch, 1975: 21).

In popular practice, boys and men may also be ordained for reasons that are not primarily religious. Before the introduction of secular primary education, Buddhist monasteries served as the main provider of literacy education for young men. David Wyatt (1966) affirms that Buddhist monkhood in the past served as “an avenue of social mobility” for Buddhist men through their acquisition of literacy and other traditional knowledge. The growth of secular education in the twentieth century led to a gradual decline in the role of the sangha as a provider of basic education. However, a more advanced educational opportunity opened up for ordained men (Bunnag, 1973: 46–7). In more recent times, this has included the opportunity to complete graduate or postgraduate degrees in Buddhist Studies abroad, especially in India and Sri Lanka.

As for elderly men, particularly those who had lost the support
of their families or who had retired from their career life, the *sangha* provided a refuge and social welfare for their old age (Tambiah, 1970: 99; Bunnag, 1973: 37). Some retiree monks might also find a new position of authority in the monkhood.

In addition, men might decide to be ordained for not-so-noble reasons. Some young men might remain in the monkhood to avoid military conscription (Terweil, 1979: 103). Other reasons for men's ordination are reflected in a rhyme known in central Thailand which includes ordination in order to: fulfill a promise to a god, escape poverty, flee from one's wife, save money, eat better, and join friends in the monasteries (Terweil, 1979: 103).

Another issue to consider regarding the notion of monkhood is the relationship between members of the *sangha* and laypeople. Once ordained, men in the *sangha* enter into a paradoxical relationship with the laity in that they have to depend on the support of laypeople for their livelihood while maintaining the monastic ideal of detachment from the worldly life. As Kirsch puts it, "the monk is dependent on lay support to maintain his separation from society" (1975: 10). This paradox aside, women were, and still are, central to lay support of the *sangha* at the local level, and their roles in maintaining the *sangha* vary. In their culturally prescribed role as mother, women have contributed to maintaining the number of monks, often by encouraging their sons to be ordained, even if temporarily for the purpose of accumulating merit. In the everyday context, there is no doubt that women have been active in providing daily sustenance necessary for the continuity of the *sangha* and its upholding of the monastic practice of living on alms food (Tambiah, 1970: 143–4). Also, women have made up the majority of the congregation at monasteries (Tambiah, 1970: 145–6). As we are about to conclude that laywomen have played active roles in relatively mundane matters such as providing food for monks and attending religious activities, historical evidence also shows that laypeople in influential positions, women included, could in the past voice their opinions effectively in matters pertaining to the *sangha* administration, such as the appointment of the abbot at a local monastery (for examples of this, see Reynolds, 1973: 213–4).

While the popular notion and practice of monkhood outlined
above have continued to exist, the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization gradually brought about a new notion of monkhood, one that would be more in line with the conception of a standardized professional monkhood first introduced by the elite and later popularized among urban middle-class Buddhists.

Professionalizing the monkhood

Historical analyses of the impact of the Buddhist reform led by King Mongkut often point to increased orthodoxy in Thai Buddhism. However, we should also note that this orthodoxy was selective in nature and was informed by King Mongkut's personal outlook, most importantly on gender and class. For gender, we see from examples of the decrees dealing with the relationship between monks and women discussed above how the monarch clearly posited women as a threat to monkhood.

In terms of class, King Mongkut's class-based interest also shaped his conception of the monkhood. A few years after he had left monkhood to become king, he observed with great concern the rising number of senior and learned monks leaving the monkhood to take up positions in his royal government. On the one hand, the monarch was worried that this situation, if allowed to continue, would deprive the sangha of qualified teachers, leading to a decline in ecclesiastical education (Wyatt, 1966: 50). However, in the decree entitled “Monks who will leave the monkhood to enter the government service” (phra song thi ja seuk ma rap ratchakan) issued in 1854 (PPRT4, 2004: 43–4), King Mongkut revealed his class bias. In this decree, the monarch expressed anxiety about the influx of former monks of commoner background into positions of prestige and power in key governmental departments. In his view, these positions should be reserved for well-born men from royal and noble families. As he stated in the decree:

His Majesty wishes to have only men of noble families to fill positions in the Departments of Interior, Defence, and Ports. ... Monastery-dwellers [that is, former monks] should obtain governmental positions only in the Departments of Juries, Scribes, Ecclesiastical Affairs, Royal Pandits, and Ecclesiastical Court [which are of less political significance]. Monastery-dwellers who are not of noble family background may not aspire
to positions in departments other than these five mentioned (PPRT4, 2004: 44).

In this case, while King Mongkut’s effort to promote long-term monkhood can be interpreted as an expression of concern for the welfare of Buddhism, his views and actions concerning the monkhood were also influenced by his desire to maintain the privileged status and political power of the members of his own class.

The dilemma of whether to keep learned monks in long-term religious service or allow them to leave the monkhood and enter government service became less problematic during the following reign, as King Mongkut’s Buddhist reform became effectively schematized and institutionalized by his sons, King Chulalongkorn and Prince Wachirayan. As a result of this progressive monastic bureaucratization scheme, the sangha was turned into a bureaucracy that could offer a career path and prestige for the long-term monks needed to fill new administrative positions in the expanding centralized sangha nationwide.

What were the mechanisms used for the monastic bureaucratization? And what were their impacts on the notion of monkhood? On the one hand, the monastic bureaucratization scheme aimed at tightening the state’s control over monkhood and monastic practice in both organizational and intellectual terms. The organizational control over monkhood was most effectively exerted in the 1902 Sangha Law and subsequent legal codes. Among the areas of control imposed by the central sangha were appointments of preceptors authorized to confer ordinations, qualifications of men to enter the monkhood, construction and classification of monasteries, registration of all monks and novices, and monitoring of individual monks’ mobility (Phaisan, 2003: 59–60). In short, monastic practice became formalized, and much of Buddhist religious and cultural practice became codified by law. Yoneo Ishii sums up the impact of the Sangha Law saying that: “For the monk, ... he could only be recognised as a monk if he submitted to the control of the united sangha organization. For the layman, the consolidation of the sangha meant it became impossible to seek salvation outside this organization” (1986: 51). By implication, the codification of several aspects of monastic practice consolidated the
exclusively male monkhood as a type of personhood that was now placed under rigorous control of the state.

In addition to this was the introduction of an ever more sophisticated ecclesiastical ranking system with well-defined hierarchical honorary positions. Consequently, the power to confer these ranks, which was previously contingent on diverse local practices, became a monopoly of the central sangha (Phaisan, 2003: 62–5). This sophistication of centralized honorary ranks, enhanced with the grand authority of the central sangha, allowed monks to aspire to formal and bureaucratic-like career advancement in the monkhood.

In intellectual terms, the orthodox version of Buddhism promoted by the Thammayut Order became progressively mainstreamed through the modernization of ecclesiastical education, which started in the 1890s. Among important milestones of this modernization process were the introduction of a new Pali language curriculum with a focus on monastic discipline, the improvement of the centralized examination system, the founding of two Buddhist “academies,” and the production of Buddhist standard texts “in print” aiming at improving textual knowledge and the conduct of monks throughout the country according to the Thammayut standard (Reynolds, 1973: Chapter 5). Spiritual practice, such as meditation, was not part of this modernized educational system, for such practice was not measurable by academic exams (Phaisan, 2003: 28–9). In all, the establishment of the nationally coordinated ecclesiastical education and examinations had the effect of homogenizing interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine so that they were in line with the Bangkok-controlled standard (Jackson, 1989: 70), and prioritizing textual knowledge over spiritual practice in formal Buddhist education.

In the next section, we will consider how this Buddhist organizational and intellectual modernization process helped to intensify the gender divide in institutional Buddhism.

**Gender of the sangha and the position of women**

The Buddhist monkhood in Thailand has long been an unmistakably male institution. However, while women might have
been culturally excluded as full members of the *sangha* in the past, the bureaucratization of the *sangha* helped to institutionalize those cultural patterns into a new legally buttressed religious field. In this institutionalized religious field, the exclusion of women became implicitly formalized. And if the monastic bureaucratization strengthened the exclusive maleness of the *sangha* only in an implicit way, a discursive process also took place that effectively underpinned the notion of “woman” as the other against which the purity of the *sangha* and the professionalization of monkhood were measured.

In her discussion of sexuality and the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, Suwanna Satha-Anand (2001) points out that it is one’s entanglement in sex and not women per se that is the obstacle to one’s achievement of enlightenment. Considering this link between sexuality and enlightenment in relation to King Mongkut’s depiction of women as a threat to monkhood discussed above, we can see two points of contradiction. First, we see that the monarch was not concerned as much about the goal of enlightenment, or *nipphan*, as he was about building an institution of long-term professional monkhood. In other words, his concern was more institutional than soteriological. Thus emerged the selective orthodoxy that upheld the strict celibacy rule (or the public appearance of it, as in the strict prohibition of all forms of physical contact between monks and women) while tolerating other forms of worldly attachment. Second, King Mongkut did not make the fine distinction between sexual entanglement and women as the cause of distraction from monkhood. For him, women and sexual entanglement were one and the same. As a result, women in general were strongly positioned as antithetical to the monastic life. Moreover, the thought that women might aspire to religious practice, not to mention living a monastic life, had no place in this discourse that accompanied the institutionalization of Buddhism.

The unfavorable portrayal of women vis-à-vis the monkhood was further developed and institutionalized by Prince Wachirayan. The prince-monk was the author of almost all textbooks that have been designated for use in the centralized ecclesiastical examinations until today (Ishii, 1986: 77). In an example drawn from *Entrance to the Vinaya*, a textbook explaining Buddhist monastic discipline, the
prince gave his interpretation of the different degrees of sexual offences in the monastic life. In his explanation, while lustful outer physical contact with women constitutes a middle-range offence for monks, the same act involving hermaphrodites or male homosexuals is a lighter offence. Yet, the offence is the lightest when the same act involves men and male or female animals (Wachirayan, 1992: 57). This interpretation of the monastic rules is apparently gendered, for it seeks to determine the severity of the offence based neither on the perpetrator's intention nor the nature of the offensive act but on the gender of the other party involved. According to this interpretation, women prove to be most perilous, the most serious threat to the monastic life compared to people of other genders.

How this kind of adverse attitude towards women was instilled into the monastic life can be exemplified in the cautious view towards women held by forest monks. Kamala's book (1997) on forest monks in twentieth century Thailand provides examples of gendered mental constructions by monks. It should first be noted that most of the monks discussed in Kamala's work belonged to the Thammayut Order, and several of them, especially those of the younger generation whose words are quoted below, had received a certain level of formal ecclesiastical education and were familiar with textbooks written by Prince Wachirayan (see Kamala, 1997: 54, 58–9, 60, 62). While Kamala does not make a connection between the monks' ecclesiastical education and their gender attitudes, this association should be borne in mind while reading the monks' accounts.

In Kamala's book, the chapter on "Battling sexual desire" recounts several mental ordeals of monks fighting off "glimpses of women," "thoughts about women," and "encounters with women". As the author states: "Many monks found [sexual] temptation more difficult to resist than hunger, loneliness, and illness. All feared the female power to undermine the rule of celibacy" (Kamala, 1997: 127). In the words of one of the monks: "A woman, more than any force in the world, can easily put a man under her power. ... She can make a man attach to her or destroy him with five weapons: her body, her voice, her smell, her taste, and her touch" (Kamala, 1997: 131). The same monk was quoted as saying: "The worst fear that
any ascetic has is to encounter women... [for women are] worse than a tiger, a bear, or an evil spirit” (Kamala, 1997: 134–5). From this perspective, women are reduced to their mere physical embodiment. More importantly, they are portrayed as the prime hindrance to monks’ spiritual achievement.

This attitude towards women reveals a few facts about the gendering process in the monastic life. First, it reveals how the ideal Buddhist ascetic life, not to mention the administrative organization of the sangha, has been constituted as an exclusively male realm. Second, the exclusive maleness of monkhood needs to be reconstituted and maintained, most importantly by formal and informal discursive means, as in Prince Wachirayan’s authoritative text and the accounts of the forest monks just discussed. Third, in this discursive practice “women” as a gender category are often portrayed as a negative reference, the prime threat to the monastic life from whom monks should dissociate themselves completely in order to maintain their purity.

Another gender implication followed the modernization of ecclesiastical education in which the value of monkhood came to be assessed according to the secular educational model (as in academic exams). As a result, when it came to the long-term monastic vocation, doctrinal study had greater priority over ascetic and spiritual practice as the measurement of religious achievement. Kamala argues the case by distinguishing between what she calls “regional Buddhist traditions” and “modern state Buddhism” (1997: 280). The regional Buddhist traditions, she says, emphasizes ascetic and meditation practice, in which both monastic and lay practitioners, men and women, could take part. Meanwhile, modern state Buddhism emphasizes the study of religious texts that, until recently, has been rather exclusively accessible to male monks and novices. We may then say that the expansion of modern state Buddhism with its emphasis on formal ecclesiastical education did not only shift the course of religious learning in general, but also strengthened the male monopoly of religious learning through the institutionalization of Buddhist education, which was exclusively available to male monastics. By indirectly devaluing traditional forms of religious practice which had been open to women, the growth of modern state Buddhism in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries also widened the gap between male monks as educated religious experts and women as lay adherents to the religion.

Lastly, the limited opportunity for women to participate fully in ascetic practice has also been undermined by the centralized sangha administration. Kamala states that, "Before and beyond Bangkok's influence, women actively participated in their religious communities as skilled meditators, healers, or teachers and were highly respected by local people" (1997: 283). According to her, there were female religious practitioners in the past who wandered the forest in small groups on pilgrimages or practiced meditation in secluded places in the same fashion as forest monks. It was also a common practice that forest monks would allow female practitioners, oftentimes including their mothers, to take to the forest with them along with other male monks and novices (Kamala, 1997: 282). However, when the orthodox Thammayut Order eventually recognized the practice of forest monks in the late 1930s, this recognition did not extend to women practitioners (Kamala, 1997: 286). Monks who allowed women practitioners to join their forest wandering practice were admonished, and the sangha administration “eventually suppressed the custom of female ascetics going wandering or going on almsround” (Kamala, 1997: 286, see also note 66 in chapter 10). This clearly reflects the position of the centralized sangha against women engaging in a religious vocation.

Conclusion

The changes outlined in this paper led to the transformation of the Thai Buddhist monkhood. On the one hand, the monastic bureaucratization resulted in the formalization of monastic ordination and monkhood, which in turn brought the monkhood under the closer control of the state. On the other hand, the introduction of the bureaucratic-like sangha hierarchy and the modernized ecclesiastical education meant that the Thai Buddhist monkhood, now more than ever before, offered the prospect of a long-term career imbued with prestige and authority accessible to the broader male population. This new, professionalized notion of
monkhood necessarily departed from the popular functions of monkhood as a rite of passage, a means to gain merit, a local source of literacy and traditional knowledge, and a refuge for men in old age. This is not to say that this new perception and practice of the monastic career has completely overridden the popular notion of monkhood and monastic ordination altogether. Yet, this structural change of the sangha transformed the Thai Buddhist monkhood into a formal institution, with codified rules and regulations monitored by the secular state.

In this paper, I also argue that the sangha bureaucratization and the consequential professionalization of monkhood have reinforced the exclusion of women from Buddhist monasticism. As seen from the discussion above, women were not only “left out” from the Buddhist modernization project of nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam due to the inherent maleness of the sangha; they were also “actively excluded” in their position as the prime threat to the modernized sangha and professionalized monkhood. At one level, this active gendering process contributed to sustaining the exclusive maleness of the sangha at a time of rapid political and cultural changes. Elsewhere, I also discuss historical and contemporary incidents of women’s ordination that posed a gender challenge to the male religious hegemony, thus illustrating the dialectical relationship between gender and Buddhism in Thai society (Varaporn, 2006). All this underpins the fact that the historical development of Thai Buddhism was by no means gender neutral nor was its development a “natural” process, but was a result of ongoing gendering efforts. Thai Buddhism’s exclusive maleness has, as a consequence, become intrinsic to the Thai Buddhist sangha as an institution and set of practices today.

Notes

1 These include decrees with the following titles: (1) ‘Monks and novices who are in love with women and have committed parachik [Pali: parajika], the gravest violation of the monastic discipline] should ask for pardon and their penalties will be lifted’ (Phiksu samanen rak khrai phuying jon theung pen parachik hai ma lukaethot ja yok thot hai) issued in 1853; (2) ‘Wrong religious adherence and people with false beliefs’ (Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit) issued in 1858; (3)
'A law on monks, novices, and lay monastery-dwellers' (Phraratchabanyat phra song samanen lae sit wat) issued in 1859 and, (4) 'A law instructing monks, novices, and lay monastery-dwellers who have committed misconduct to ask for pardon and their penalties will be lifted' (Phraratchabanyat hai phiks u samanen lae sit wat meau praphreut anajan laew hai ma lukaethot sia ja yok thot hai) issued in 1860. See PPRT4 (2004: 34–5, 208–10, 226, 264–6).
2 A decree entitled 'Prohibition of monks and novices from meeting and talking with women in their residences' (Ham mi hai phiks u samanen khop phuying ma phut thi kutsi) issued in 1854, in PPRT4 (2004: 53–5).
3 It is doubtful if this prohibition against women entering a monastery was actually enforced.
4 The name of the country, Siam, was changed to Thailand in 1939. When writing about the events that took place before 1939, I use “Siam” and “the Thai state” interchangeably.
5 Jackson (2002: 163–6) argues that the practice of Buddhist legitimation of political power can be dated back to the thirteenth-century Sukhothai kingdom.
6 The extent to which this ideal goal of nipphan was prevalent in folk or village Buddhism in the past is disputable. Here, I refer to this Buddhist ideal goal as belonging to the royal Buddhist tradition due to existing records of how several Thai kings in the past expressed their wishes to either achieve nipphan, arrive at the state of Buddha (variously expressed in Thai as phuthaphum or phothiyan), or become a bodhisattva (Thai: phothisat). For further discussion, see Phaisan (2003: 11–8).
7 However, this teaching about the inaccessibility of nipphan did not completely uproot the aspiration to achieve this religious goal among certain groups of Buddhists. This is evident in the existence of forest monks who mainly focus on meditation practice (see Kamala, 1997), and the emergence of a lay meditation movement in the 1950s (see Van Esterik, 1977).
8 The royal-style monastic practice includes, for example, the use of paraphernalia (e.g. fans, clerical-style shoulder bags, cushions, and teapots) by monks, the use of spoons and forks at mealtimes, the prevalent use of clerical vocabulary and specific seating practice, and the prohibition of monks from engaging in manual labor as in the maintenance of their monastic compounds (Phaisan, 2003: 55).
9 A decree entitled 'Prohibition on inviting monks and novices to engage in misconduct' (Ham mai hai chakseu lae chuan phiks u samanen praphreut anajan) issued in 1853, in PPRT4 (2004: 36–7).
10 A decree entitled '[His Majesty is] upholding Buddhism' (Song thamnu bamrung phra phutthasatsana) issued in 1859, in PPRT4 (2004: 235–8).
11 Loos’s (2006) insightful analysis conceives the paradoxical position of Siam from a more complex perspective, considering not only Siam and the West but also Siam’s colonizing relationships with its neighboring states. She thus positions Siam both as “a victim of European imperial aggression and as a colonizing power with imperial ambitions of its own” (2006: 2) especially in its relationship with Muslim states in the south.
The gender of the sangha


13 The book *Kitjanukit* features a rationalistic view of miscellaneous worldly and religious issues, including natural science, geography, cosmology, and comparative religions. The discussion on polygyny comprises a small section in this book.

14 The five precepts include: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no untruthful speech, and no consumption of intoxicants.

15 A decree entitled 'Wrong religious adherence and people with false beliefs' (*Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit*) issued in 1858, in *PPRT4* (2004: 208-10).

16 Forest or wandering monks, although relatively few in number, make up a distinctive type of monkhood. Nevertheless, forest monkhood has also been affected by the centralization of *sangha* administration and education. As a result, the category of forest monks also features internal differences such as between monks with and without formal ecclesiastical education, and between those who keep to the wandering habits and those who have been drawn to *sangha* administrative positions. There are also forest monks who engage in magical practice and those who strictly commit to doctrinal orthodoxy. See Kamala (1997), Taylor (1993), and Tambiah (1984).

17 Wyatt interprets King Mongkut’s discouragement of long-term monks from leaving monkhood as the monarch’s "explicit determination to maintain the old customs" (1966: 51). However, questions remain as to what the contents of these "old customs" were, and how old they actually were.

18 Until as recently as 1997, higher ecclesiastical education was reserved for male monastics only. Prior to 1997, laypeople, including women and the traditional form of monastic women or *mae chi*, were not allowed to enrol in undergraduate and graduate programs at government-sponsored Buddhist universities.

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The gender of the sangha