

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

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

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



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## 1. Locating Gender Asymmetry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. The Thorny Issue of Ordination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This volume is a follow-up of a conference on ‘Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns’ Ordination and Education’ held in May 2022 at the University of Perugia. I would like first and foremost to thank Ester Bianchi for hosting and co-organizing the conference with me. After a first stage had taken place in Paris (University of Nanterre) as part of the ANR project SHIFU, headed by Adeline Herrou, in January 2015, Esther Bianchi was as convinced as I was that it would be worthwhile to continue and widen the perspective by integrating even more Asian Buddhist traditions. I am also grateful to the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, who not only sponsored the conference in Perugia, but who kindly allowed us to postpone it several times due to COVID restrictions. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the conference participants and discussants who contributed to the conference and to this volume, bringing up many new ideas, stimulating comments and suggestions.
- <sup>2</sup> Other textualist approaches to the dearth of information on Buddhist nuns can be found, among others, in Schopen ([2012] 2014) and Langenberg (2020).
- <sup>3</sup> For example, in the autobiography of the nun Orgyan Chokyi (1675–1729), it is clearly stated that her master expressly forbade her to write her own life story (Schaeffer 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> In Tibet, nuns who have been ordained after marriage and childbearing are addressed by a particular term: *genchö* (*rgan chos*), literally an “elder” religious person, which is slightly pejorative because it implies a certain degree of impurity.
- <sup>5</sup> These elderly religious women in Mongolia have a similar status to that of the Tibetan *genchö* mentioned above.
- <sup>6</sup> For more on monasticism and kinship, see Herrou and Krauskopff (2009) and Wilson (2013).
- <sup>7</sup> For nuns and the economy of merit, see Gutschow (2004) and Lindberg Falk (2007).
- <sup>8</sup> By the way, in Tibetan Buddhism, many monks also chose not to be fully ordained, leading a monastic life either as *upāsaka* or *śrāmaṇera*.



- <sup>9</sup> To name just a few studies on full ordination, see Li (2000); Seeger (2008); Mohr and Tsedroen (2010); Kawanami (2013); Salgado (2013). On Sakyadhītā, see Tsomo (1988).
- <sup>10</sup> Something similar took place in Tibetan Buddhism after two groups of Karma-Kagyü nuns were fully ordained in Hong Kong, respectively in 1984 and 1987. After their return to India and a long-awaited audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, no solution could be found to integrate those new *bhikṣuṇīs* who had been ordained into a foreign lineage with its own rituals into the Tibetan *saṃgha*. The result is that only one out of the three surviving ethnically Tibetan nuns wished to be considered as a *bhikṣuṇī* (Personal communications August 2012).
- <sup>11</sup> Personal communication with Dhamma Vijaya (February 2022), a Theravāda nun. For more on the Theravāda movement in Nepal, see Gellner and LeVine (2007).

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