วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต
JOURNAL OF DHAMMA FOR LIFE
ISSN: 2822-048X
https://so08.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/dhammalife/index

Original Research Article DOI: 10.14456/jdl.2025.12

Navigating Possibilities: The Evolving Roles of Buddhist Nuns (Mae Chee) in Contemporary Thailand

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ARTICLE INFO

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Keywords:
Gender Equality; Women Empowerment; Mae Chees; Thai Female Monasticism; Thai Nuns; Theravada Buddhism; Thai Buddhist Nunneries; Thai Buddhism; Religious Feminism; Sustainable Development.

Article history:
Received: 17/02/2025
Revised: 16/03/2025
Accepted: 27/03/2025
Available online: 21/04/2025

ABSTRACT

The changing roles of Buddhist nuns (Mae Chee) in Thailand reflect a significant shift in gender dynamics, religious authority, and societal engagement within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Despite increased participation in education, social services, and digital Dharma dissemination, Mae Chee continue to face institutional marginalization, economic instability, and cultural bias. This study investigates how contemporary Mae Chee navigate these challenges amid broader transformations influenced by modernization and global gender equality discourses. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 45 nuns across diverse settings, including temples, independent nunneries, and those with advanced education, as well as non-participant observation. Thematic analysis revealed nuanced strategies by which Mae Chee assert agency, seek recognition, and contribute to their communities, despite limited institutional support. Findings indicate that although Mae Chee have made significant strides, particularly in education and community service, their formal recognition remains inadequate. All groups of nuns interviewed acknowledged a limited social role, with only a few exceptions involved in impactful initiatives like orphan care. The study highlights three urgent reforms: formal recognition of Mae Chee's

How to Cite:
Beliatte, M. & Yaoping, L.(2025). Navigating Possibilities: The Evolving Roles of Buddhist Nuns (Mae Chee) in Contemporary Thailand. *Journal Dhamma for Life, 31*(2), 166-186.

religious status, sustainable financial support, and intergenerational dialogue to bridge tradition and innovation.

Introduction

The role of nuns in Buddhist communities has long been a subject of discourse, particularly in the context of gender, education, and the evolving practices of Buddhist monasticism. While historically, Buddhist nuns, particularly in Thailand, have been relegated to marginal positions within the religious institution, the past few decades have witnessed profound transformations in their roles, responsibilities, and societal perceptions (Falk, 2007). These changes are not isolated but are reflective of broader global shifts regarding gender equality, the modernization of religious institutions, and the increasing involvement of women in leadership positions within traditionally male-dominated structures (Sue, 2022).

Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand is a deeply entrenched institution that impacts cultural, social, and religious life. Nevertheless, its monastic framework is distinctly gendered, privileging male monks (bhikkhus) and marginalizing female renunciates (Mae Chee). Unlike fully ordained bhikkhunis in Mahayana traditions or specific Theravāda communities like Sri Lanka, Thai Mae Chee hold a transitional position, being neither wholly monastic nor lay (Kabilsingh, 1991; Seeger, 2009). The absence of bhikkhuni ordination in Thai Theravāda Buddhism stems from the belief that the historical female monastic lineage has never existed or it was terminated centuries ago (Tsomo, 2004; Barnes, 2016). Unlike Sri Lanka, where the bhikkhuni order was reestablished in the late 20th century through international ordination efforts (Bartholomeusz, 1994), Thailand's Sangha Council maintains a firm resistance to female ordination (Cook, 2010). Consequently, Mae Chee, women who shave their heads, wear white robes, and follow Eight or Ten Precepts, function as de facto nuns without formal recognition (Lindberg Falk, 2007).

Traditionally, Mae Chee had been designated to supportive functions: managing temples, preparing sustenance for monks, and assisting in ceremonies (Keyes, 1984). Their labor sustains monastic life; nonetheless, they are prohibited from fundamental religious responsibilities, such as chanting at certain gatherings or officiating ceremonies (Seeger, 2009). This gendered division illustrates the broader backdrop of Southeast Asian Buddhist societies, where women's spiritual authority is often constrained (Kawanami, 2013).

In recent decades, Thai Mae Chee have significantly expanded their roles beyond traditional temple duties, demonstrating remarkable adaptability in religious, educational, and social spheres. Many Mae Chee are presently involved in advanced Buddhist studies, attaining proficiency in Pali and Abhidhamma to deepen their understanding of scripture (Mackenzie, 2018), while others take on teaching roles, offering meditation guidance and Dhamma instruction in nunneries and to lay communities (Dhammananda, 2020). This educational development involves a growing number of Mae Chee enrolling in secular universities, so undermining established monastic education models and creating new opportunities for female religious practitioners (Falk, 2019).

Beyond religious instruction, Mae Chee have become vital social service providers, establishing and managing orphanages, educational institutions, and healthcare initiatives, particularly in

underprivileged rural areas (Tomalin, 2021). Their philanthropic initiatives include offering counseling and safe housing for underprivileged women, particularly those who have experienced domestic abuse (Falk, 2007).

Furthermore, during national calamities like floods or the COVID-19 epidemic, Mae Chee have implemented effective charitable activities that remedied substantial shortcomings in state welfare systems (Cook, 2010). The digital age has provided new opportunities for younger Mae Chee, who adeptly utilize social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook to disseminate Dhamma discourses, so reaching global audiences and expanding their impact beyond traditional temple boundaries (Mackenzie, 2018). These online platforms have proven to be invaluable by allowing Mae Chee to circumvent traditional monastic gatekeeping and establish direct connections with lay followers (Tomalin, 2021).

Despite their significant contributions, Mae Chees consistently face substantial structural obstacles that limit their potential. Unlike their male monastic counterparts, Mae Chee do not receive state stipends or consistent lay donations, forcing them to rely on precarious temple patronage or low-wage jobs, leading to persistent economic insecurity (Falk, 2019; Seeger, 2009). The male-dominated monastic hierarchy sustains entrenched gendered power structures, wherein Mae Chees are frequently perceived as subordinates rather than equals, with conservative monks actively resisting reforms that could threaten traditional power dynamics (Kawanami, 2013; Barnes, 2016).

Public perception presents a further issue, since the general populace often views Mae Chee as spiritually "inferior" to monks, despite recognizing their piety and dedication (Lindberg Falk, 2007). Moreover, media portrayals consistently promote reductive perceptions of Mae Chee as passive, devoted individuals, failing to acknowledge their extensive abilities and accomplishments (Tomalin, 2021). The intersection of financial dependence, institutional sexism, and cultural bias poses significant challenges to Mae Chee achieving complete acceptance and equality within Thai Buddhism.

The changing roles of Buddhist nuns (Mae Chee) in Thailand illustrate notable alterations in gender dynamics, religious authority, and societal involvement within Theravāda Buddhism, although these developments are insufficiently recorded and examined. Despite their increasing engagement in education, social services, and digital Dharma dissemination, Mae Chee persistently encounter structural marginalization, encompassing economic instability, institutional discrimination, and cultural prejudice. Although current scholarship emphasizes their historical subjugation, it is imperative to critically analyze how contemporary Mae Chee maneuver and contest these limitations amidst modernity and worldwide gender equality initiatives. The absence of institutional acknowledgment and assistance for their services sustains inequalities within the monastic hierarchy, despite their increasing prominence in both religious and secular domains. A rigorous examination of the current functions of Mae Chee is necessary, assessing their evolving strategies, societal impact, and persistent challenges.

Research Objectives

This research aims to examine the evolving roles of Buddhist nuns in contemporary Thailand by exploring social contexts that have shaped their roles. Through this exploration, the study will examine how education, modern societal norms, and institutional support systems

have contributed to these transformations. Further, this research seeks to understand the perspectives of nuns themselves regarding these changes, their views on their evolving roles, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this transformation.

The study aims to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse in Buddhist gender studies by examining the complex intersection of gender dynamics, religious tradition, and societal change in the context of Thai Buddhism. Through these interconnected objectives, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of both the progress made and the persistent barriers facing Buddhist nuns in contemporary Thailand.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing on a combination of interviews, non-participant observation, and content analysis to gather data on the evolving roles of Buddhist nuns in Thailand. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences, perceptions, and reflections of nuns, providing rich, nuanced insights into the transformation of their roles within Buddhist communities. The research methodology is designed to capture the complexities of social, cultural, and religious dynamics from the perspectives of the nuns themselves (Lim, 2024).

In-depth interviews were conducted with nuns living in various monastic settings in Thailand, particularly in the central region, which includes significant Buddhist temples and nunneries. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in the conversation while ensuring that key research questions were addressed. Interviewees included 45 nuns of different ages, educational backgrounds, and positions within the monastic hierarchy, from newly ordained nuns to highly educated and senior figures in the monastic community. The goal of the interviews was to capture a diverse range of experiences and opinions regarding the evolving role of nuns in contemporary Thai Buddhism.

In addition to interviews, non-participant observation was conducted at 10 nunneries and Buddhist temples in Thailand. The researcher spent time observing the daily lives of the nuns, observing their interactions with laypeople and monks. This ethnographic approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the daily practices, challenges, and experiences of nuns, as well as the broader social dynamics that influence their roles within the monastic community.

In the preliminary analysis process, the nuns were categorized into 3 categories to comparatively examine whether their differences contributed to any distinct evolution. Three categories are nuns in temples with monks as abbot; nuns in an independent nunnery; and educated nuns who had at least a Bachelor's degree or Pali IX.

All the collected data were transcribed and thematically analyzed in relations with the research aim. The thematic analysis of the data revealed several key themes that highlight the changing roles of Buddhist nuns in Thailand.

Concept Of Role And The Role Of Thai Nuns

Definition of Role

The term role has been widely discussed in sociological and organizational studies. According to the Royal Institute Dictionary (2011), a role refers to "acting according to a script,"

implying the performance of prescribed duties, such as those of a parent or teacher. Koprasert Tayakkanon (1999) defines a role as behavior aligned with the rules and regulations of one's duties, while Chanchai Ajinsamacharn (1991) describes it as the execution of tasks within an organization, including the supervision of activities under one's authority.

Phuangphet Surattakawikon (1999) expands on this by proposing three key aspects of roles: Ideal Role which is the socially expected behavior for a given status, serving as a model for how individuals should act, regardless of whether anyone actually fulfills it; Perceived Role which is an individual's personal understanding of their role, shaped by their attitudes, values, and experiences; Actual Role which is the behaviors a person actually performs, influenced by situational factors.

Judson R. Landis (cited in Montree Sirichanchuen, 1997) further explains role as behavior tied to a specific social status, emphasizing that roles emerge from social interaction and expectations. Role theory assumes that (1) roles are learned through socialization, and (2) individuals must recognize their own and others' statuses to guide their actions. Roles can be analyzed from structuralist (fixed societal expectations) and symbolic interactionist (negotiated in social contexts) perspectives.

Montree Sirichanchuen (1997) highlights that roles are culturally and socially constructed, influenced by norms, traditions, and individual personality. Three key observations emerge: Culture and tradition heavily shape role expectations; Socialization teaches individuals their expected roles; Actual role performance varies based on personal and situational factors.

Types of Roles

Jiraphan Kanchanachitra (1979) categorizes roles through two lenses: Social structure – Roles tied to specific positions (e.g., teacher, parent); Behavioral consequences – How individuals enact roles based on learned expectations.

Ratthaya Achanhan (1997) distinguishes between: Ideal (prescribed) role – Societal expectations for a status. Perceived role – Personal beliefs about one's duties. Performed role – Actual behavior, shaped by personal and situational factors.

Factors Affecting Role Performance

Allport (cited in Sathienkong, 2010) identifies four determinants of role performance: Societal expectations – How others expect one to act; Self-expectations – Personal beliefs about one's role; Role acceptance – Whether an individual internalizes societal expectations; Situational constraints – Real-world factors shaping actual behavior.

External influences (Sopha, 2021) include: Socio-cultural factors – Beliefs, urbanization, traditions; Economic factors – Employment policies, resource availability; Political factors – Laws, power structures; Environmental factors – Natural disasters, local conditions.

The Role of Thai Nuns

Sukjai Phutthawises (1984) defines the role of nuns (mae chi) as behavior aligned with Buddhist principles and societal expectations. Historically, Thai nuns have faced mixed perceptions—some see them as devout practitioners, while others associate them with begging

(Sopha On-opas, 2004, p. 2). Despite efforts to revive female monasticism, societal acceptance remains limited (Sopha On-opas, 2004).

Jantana Leelakraiwan et al. (2009) categorize nuns' roles into: Self-development – Meditation, scriptural study; Religious service – Assisting monks, temple upkeep; Social contribution – Teaching, counseling, charity work.

Sukjai Phutthawises (1984) emphasizes their religious roles: Leading ceremonies, teaching morality, fundraising for temples; Social roles: Counseling, educating children, disaster relief.

Challenges

Nuns face structural barriers, including: Lack of legal recognition (Prakong Singhanatnirak, 1973, cited in Prakong Ngamchaiyaphum, 2014); Gender bias in religious institutions (Jantana Leelakraiwan et al., 2009); Limited public opportunities compared to monks (Sopha, 2021).

The concept of role is multifaceted, shaped by societal norms, gender expectations, and individual agency. Thai nuns occupy complex positions—balancing religious devotion with social service while navigating structural limitations. Further research should explore how modernization and feminist movements influence their evolving roles.

Result

Roles of Nuns in Different Institutional Contexts

Nuns in Temples with a Monk as Abbot

Most nuns of this category perceive themselves as "*having no significant social role***"**, staying in temples and doing chores. As one of the informants said "*I don't have any role in the temple or outside, I just practice Buddhism.*" This resonates with many others who uttered the word "*I have no role*" again and again.

Anyhow, some mention **"***small roles***"**, such as conversing with visitors, participating in religious events (e.g., Maghapuja, Visakhapuja), and charity work. Many of them uttered "*we help temple to welcome people*" and "*we help temple to organize activities on special days*".

Moreover, some nuns provide informal support, with laypeople feeling more comfortable speaking with them than monks. As one of the informants stated "*many laypeople especially female devotees have told me that they feel more comfortable to discuss personal issues with Mea Chees than monks*"

It is obvious that there is a lack of societal expectations regarding their role, and some nuns express that they ordained for personal reasons, not to serve society. One of the most uttered phrases was "*I became a Mae Chee to practice Buddhism, so I am not concerned about external matters*." There are several Mae Chees who stated "*we should concentrate on our purpose of ordination, which is, to end the suffering*"

However, they still participate in morning and evening prayers and help prepare the place for ceremonies and clean the places afterwards. Anyhow, this is not seen by most of them as having a role in the temple.

Regarding roles they had in the society they admitted they had limited social engagement. Most report having minimal societal roles. Some assist in charity kitchens or food donations. A few engage in counseling laypeople

According to their experience, the public perception regarding their role have mixed views: some respect nuns, others disregard them. They are seen as approachable compared to monks

Roles the nuns of this category mentioned can be listed as follow:

As Temple Assistance: Cooking and kitchen duties; Preparing food for monks and laypeople; Helping with temple events (festivals, merit-making ceremonies); Assisting elderly or disabled monks; Arranging flowers and decorations for ceremonies.

Roles in Education & Practice: Studying Buddhist scriptures (Pali, Dhamma, Abhidhamma); Applying Buddhist teachings to personal practice; Taking religious examinations.

Spiritual Duties: Leading morning/evening prayers and chanting; Meditation and mindfulness practice: Observing Uposatha (Buddhist holy days); Listening to and giving sermons.

Leadership & Guidance: Mentoring newly ordained nuns; Resolving conflicts among nuns; Supervising Dhamma examinations at schools.

Nuns in Nunneries

It is noteworthy that nuns of this category, play a more active social role, focusing on community development, particularly training children, providing education, and leading Vipassana meditation. One nun who was the leader of a nunnery stated "*We try out best to extend and expand our roles by being useful to the society*." The most of the nunneries organize these activities in their own capacity.

Moreover, some nunneries accept women of all ages and even care for the sick, providing a place of refuge for women. They admit that nunneries operate as a care center for elderly women who has the determination to practice Buddhism in the late period of their lives. A nun who used to be a main administrator of Mahapajapati College mentioned that "*the aim of establishing this university was to open opportunities for young girls who are from poor and rural backgrounds"*

They think that laypeople generally perceive nuns as compassionate and devoted to religious practice, with some believing in their ability to support society. A Mae Chee stated "*Parents of young girls feel safer to send their daughters to attend meditation training programs organized at our nunnery.*" Many nuns mentioned that "*women practitioners feel more comfortable to consult their problems with Mae Chees because they see us as their mothers or sisters*"

Evidently, nuns with formal education believe they are gaining recognition, especially when engaging in activities like disaster relief and local community service. Even though they did not explicitly utter that their main purpose is to gain more social recognition but from what they explained it could be detected that it was indeed a primary motivation. They expect the lay people would recognize their existence, contribution and value.

List of the Roles they perform is as follow:

Convent Responsibilities: Teaching Dhamma, Abhidhamma, and meditation; Training children and lay practitioners; Managing documents and administrative tasks; Growing vegetables and maintaining the nunnery.

Community Engagement: Organizing Buddhist events (Makha Bucha, Visakha Bucha); Leading all-night chanting and meditation sessions; Providing food and support for visitors.

Social Service: Educating children in Buddhism; Offering counseling and moral support; Assisting in disaster relief (e.g., floods).

Highly Educated Nuns

Even though, they are educated surprisingly many still feel they have no clear role in society, though some contribute through education, teaching Dhamma, and social media engagement. An informant stated "*we have to navigate what role we can possibly have in order to contribute to Buddhism and the society.*" Another one added "*after completing education, we don't have many options to take up as the next step.*"

It seems educated nuns work behind the scenes in Buddhist propagation and face challenges due to a lack of legal recognition. "*Mae Chees are not allocated any specific budget from any governmental agency.*" Nuns who completed Pali IX mentioned that they are not receiving monthly income which the monks get after passing Pali IX exam. They are not getting much opportunities to use their knowledge and skills. One Mae Chee expressed "*we do not expect much income but we too have to spend on necessary things. Even though we are capable, we are not invited to teach and preach like the monks.*"

Nuns believe laypeople's perceptions vary greatly, with some respecting them as Buddhist educators and others dismissing their role. One informant said "*we are seen as competent religious personal by some but some still look down on us based on the old image of incompetent old ladies*."

They claim that government support for nuns as morality teachers in schools was discontinued, limiting their ability to contribute. "*We have to find money for our needs as we are not getting any support or discounts like the monks"* mentioned a nun. Interestingly, some nuns mention that society expects them to serve but does not provide adequate recognition or support. A Mae Chee stated "*people don't invite nuns to perform religious rituals like then invite monks*".

In societal level they engage in community development such as educating children and youth in moral values, providing shelter and guidance for women in need, and organizing social welfare programs.

Though they receive limited formal recognition, some teach in schools or prisons. Some engage in Dhamma propagation through writing/speaking and they assist in funeral rites and charity work

The roles mentioned by Educated Nuns are as follow:

Academic and Teaching Roles: Teaching Pali, Dhamma, and Abhidhamma at universities; Supervising Dhamma exams in schools; Conducting Vipassana meditation retreats.

Temple and Organizational Leadership: Managing temple finances and records; Overseeing construction and temple projects; Representing nuns in Buddhist institutes.

Dhamma Propagation: Posting Dhamma teachings on social media; Leading chanting and meditation sessions; Preaching at Buddhist events.

Daily Contributions in Temple and Community Life

In general, nuns play a vital role in maintaining temple operations, providing essential support in daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and organizing religious festivals. They assist

monks in performing rituals and managing temple events, ensuring that ceremonies run smoothly. In some cases, nuns also take on caregiving roles, looking after elderly monks who require assistance. Their involvement extends to major Buddhist festivals, where they help prepare offerings, guide devotees, and uphold ceremonial traditions, reinforcing their indispensable yet often underrecognized contributions to monastic life.

Many nuns see themselves as helping the temple function, performing tasks such as cleaning, assisting with ceremonies, and supporting monks' activities. However, some nuns believe they have no formal role in the Sangha and that monks do not view them as part of the monastic hierarchy. According to the nuns' perspective some monks acknowledge the contributions of educated nuns, while others see them primarily as temple assistants.

Many nuns describe their role as easing the temple's burden, maintaining temple grounds, and supporting monks. Some nuns, especially those with formal education, teach Buddhist principles to children and laypeople. Nuns are involved in temple ceremonies, merit-making, and other religious functions, although they do not participate in formal monastic rituals.

Overall, nuns' roles in society are highly dependent on their institutional context. Most nuns do not see themselves as having an active role, but some engage in education, charity, and community work. Legal and institutional barriers limit nuns' opportunities to contribute, despite their desire to help society. According to their experience, public perception is mixed, with some laypeople valuing their presence and others dismissing their contributions.

Religious Study and Practice: Commitment to Dhamma, Pali, and Meditation

Education and spiritual practice remain central to many nuns' lives, with a strong emphasis on studying Buddhist scriptures, Pali language, and Abhidhamma philosophy. Some pursue formal religious education by taking Pali examinations, while others dedicate themselves to meditation, chanting, and daily prayers. These practices not only deepen their personal spiritual growth but also equip them to teach and guide others, ensuring the preservation of Buddhist teachings.

Education has emerged as a key pathway to empowerment, enabling nuns to deepen their religious knowledge, teach Dhamma, and engage in social services. Some pursue advanced studies in Pali and Buddhist philosophy, while others focus on meditation or temple management. This diversification of roles, ranging from educators to community leaders, demonstrates their adaptability, though individual paths often depend on personal interests and available opportunities.

Spiritual and practical considerations further shape nuns' experiences. While some prioritize meditation and renunciation, others emphasize active involvement in temple duties and social welfare. Aging nuns, in particular, often see later life as a period for rest and continued spiritual practice, though economic hardships can complicate this ideal.

Over time, Thai nuns have gained more institutional and societal support, with expanded access to education and technology reshaping their practices. However, many still adhere to traditional ways, resisting pressures to modernize. Economic conditions, lay attitudes, and organizations like the Thai Nuns Institute have played pivotal roles in driving, or hindering, change.

Specifically, nuns in Temples with a monk as abbot often engage in personal religious practice such as chanting, meditation, and studying scriptures like the Dhamma, Pali, and Abhidhamma, but primarily for personal spiritual development. Their participation in these practices is usually informal and lacks institutional support or broader teaching responsibilities. While they take religious examinations and may lead group prayers, they tend to view their commitment as inward-focused, emphasizing personal liberation rather than societal engagement. A commonly shared view is, "*we became Mae Chees to practice Buddhism*," highlighting a more passive role in religious propagation.

In contrast, nuns in nunneries demonstrate a more outward-facing application of religious study and practice. They not only study and practice Dhamma, Pali, and meditation but also teach these subjects to children, laypeople, and visiting practitioners. Their religious activities are intertwined with community service, including leading Vipassana meditation sessions and organizing public Dhamma events. Their approach reflects an integrated commitment to both spiritual cultivation and social engagement, often operating independently from monastic male authority.

Highly educated nuns have the most formal religious training and often teach advanced topics like Pali, Abhidhamma, and Vipassana meditation at universities and Buddhist institutions. Despite their qualifications, many feel undervalued and face institutional limitations. Nevertheless, they extend their religious practice into public domains by supervising religious exams, managing religious events, and sharing teachings through digital platforms. Their study and practice are deeply intellectual and expansive, but often disconnected from formal monastic recognition, creating a tension between scholarly competence and institutional exclusion.

Guidance and Governance: Roles in Leadership and Informal Authority

Leadership and mentorship are key aspects of monastic life for senior nuns, who guide newly ordained members, offering advice on religious discipline and communal living. Head nuns often oversee multiple temples, ensuring adherence to monastic guidelines and resolving conflicts within their communities. Their leadership helps maintain order and discipline, fostering a supportive environment for spiritual development.

Nuns also actively participate in religious institutions, supervising examinations, teaching Dhamma classes, and assisting in merit-making ceremonies. Some take on prominent roles in organizing and leading rituals, including candlelight processions and other devotional events. Their involvement in these activities demonstrates their religious knowledge and organizational skills, even if their authority remains secondary to that of monks.

Administratively, some nuns handle financial management, record-keeping, and logistical coordination for temple events. Their organizational skills ensure the smooth operation of large-scale ceremonies and daily monastic affairs. However, despite their extensive responsibilities, many nuns operate under the directives of monks and temple authorities, with limited autonomy in decision-making. Some express frustration over having no formal roles, while older nuns, in particular, may feel marginalized due to age or lack of education.

The roles of Thai nuns vary significantly across different institutional contexts, shaped largely by their environment and educational background. Nuns residing in temples led by monks typically occupy subordinate roles, with minimal leadership responsibilities. While some may

offer informal support to newly ordained nuns or help resolve internal conflicts, their guidance is largely limited to within the nun community. Their authority tends to be personal and relational rather than institutional, often relying on the trust they build with laypeople, particularly women, who may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive matters with them than with monks. However, this form of informal guidance rarely translates into recognized leadership, and many of these nuns report feeling invisible or underutilized within temple governance.

By contrast, nuns living in nunneries often take on more pronounced leadership roles. They are responsible for managing the daily operations of the nunnery, overseeing educational programs, and coordinating community activities. In many cases, these nuns serve as spiritual mentors, administrators, and community leaders. Their leadership is not merely symbolic but functionally necessary, especially in nunneries that provide refuge for elderly women or train young girls in religious and moral education. These nuns exhibit a form of grassroots governance, where their authority emerges from lived experience and community trust rather than formal religious hierarchy. They are often seen by laypeople as devoted and capable leaders who play a tangible role in local development and spiritual life.

Highly educated nuns, while possessing the intellectual capacity and formal training to assume leadership, face unique challenges due to their ambiguous institutional standing. Some are entrusted with administrative responsibilities such as managing temple records, overseeing construction projects, or representing nuns in Buddhist institutes. Others lead meditation retreats, supervise religious examinations, or engage in digital Dhamma dissemination. However, despite these contributions, many of them feel sidelined from official leadership positions due to the lack of legal recognition and structural support. Their leadership is often exercised behind the scenes or through alternative platforms like social media, academic institutions, and informal networks. As a result, their authority tends to be situational and context-dependent, reflecting the broader tension between capability and recognition that characterizes the experience of many Mae Chee in contemporary Thailand.

Overall, while all three groups demonstrate some degree of informal authority, it is the nuns in nunneries who exhibit the most consistent and community-acknowledged leadership. Temple-based and highly educated nuns, despite their devotion and qualifications, continue to face constraints rooted in institutional hierarchies and societal perceptions.

Teaching and Community Outreach: Engaging with Laypeople and Society

Beyond temple duties, nuns engage in social service, teaching Buddhist values to children and assisting laypeople in religious practices. Many contribute to community development through charity work, offering support to the underprivileged, including educational programs and disaster relief efforts. Their social engagement bridges the gap between monastic and lay life, reinforcing Buddhism's role in societal welfare.

Nuns living in temples led by monks generally report limited involvement in teaching or societal outreach. Their primary responsibilities are internal, focused on temple maintenance, devotional practice, and assisting monks. While some do participate in organizing merit-making ceremonies or interacting with temple visitors, these are often seen as peripheral and informal roles. A few nuns offer moral support or informal counseling to laywomen, especially those seeking spiritual guidance or personal solace, yet most do not view this as structured outreach.

The repeated expression "*we have no role*" reflects a deep-seated sense of marginalization and lack of societal expectation. Teaching, when it occurs, is usually confined to personal study or internal temple contexts rather than broader public education.

In stark contrast, nuns in nunneries take on a more active and structured approach to teaching and community engagement. Many lead Dhamma and Abhidhamma classes for both children and adult lay practitioners, organize meditation retreats, and participate in moral education initiatives. These nunneries often function as centers of community welfare, hosting cultural events, supporting disaster relief, and providing moral counseling. Their outreach is rooted in a proactive philosophy of service, with nuns explicitly stating their aim to "*be useful to society*." Their interaction with the public is not only more frequent but also more visible and institutionalized, often earning them respect from local communities who view them as compassionate leaders and spiritual guides.

Highly educated nuns also engage in teaching and outreach, albeit often through more formalized or modern platforms. Many serve as educators in Buddhist universities or supervise religious examinations in schools. They also teach meditation, lead retreats, and, increasingly, use social media to share Dhamma teachings and engage with lay followers online. Their outreach tends to blend traditional practice with contemporary tools, reflecting their academic backgrounds and desire to reach broader audiences. However, despite their qualifications, many report frustration at the lack of official recognition and institutional support, particularly following the discontinuation of government programs that once placed them in schools as moral teachers. This disconnect often leaves them in a paradoxical position: capable of profound societal contribution, yet structurally inhibited from fulfilling that potential to the fullest.

In sum, temple-based nuns engage with laypeople primarily in informal and supportive capacities, often under the shadow of monk-led authority. Nuns in nunneries, by contrast, act as independent community educators and welfare providers, playing central roles in public spiritual life. Highly educated nuns contribute through academic and digital outreach, pushing the boundaries of traditional engagement but frequently confronting institutional roadblocks. Each group reflects different modes and limitations of connecting with society, shaped by their environment, resources, and status.

Challenges and Constraints: Institutional Marginalization and Unequal Recognition

Above mentioned themes illustrate the diverse and essential contributions of nuns to Buddhist institutions, spanning religious, educational, and social domains. Yet, they also reveal persistent challenges, including hierarchical dependence and uneven recognition, highlighting the need for greater institutional support and acknowledgment of their vital role in sustaining Thai Buddhism.

The role of Buddhist nuns (Mae Chee) in Thailand has undergone significant transformations, yet perspectives on these changes vary widely. Some nuns view their evolving roles positively, citing increased educational opportunities and greater societal contributions as signs of progress. Others, however, perceive little meaningful change, remaining constrained by traditional limitations, while a few express uncertainties or lack awareness of shifting dynamics altogether. These differing viewpoints highlight the complex and uneven nature of reform within Thai Buddhist monasticism.

Multiple factors influence these role changes, including personal commitment to Buddhist practice, societal attitudes toward nuns, economic conditions, and technological advancements. Self-discipline and spiritual dedication remain central to nuns' identities, but external factors, such as growing lay acceptance and access to digital platforms like YouTube, have expanded their influence. Financial independence, or the lack thereof, also plays a crucial role, as economic struggles often dictate the extent to which nuns can pursue education or engage in religious work.

Despite progress, nuns continue to face significant challenges. Financial insecurity is pervasive, with many lacking state welfare or stable donations, forcing them to rely on temple patronage or menial labor. Institutional barriers further hinder their recognition, as unclear regulations and monastic hierarchies restrict their autonomy. Internal conflicts, such as jealousy and competition among nuns, also pose obstacles, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and modernization.

Perceptions of change remain divided. Many nuns welcome modernization, believing it brings greater respect and opportunities, while others caution against excessive attachment to worldly developments, fearing a decline in traditional Buddhist values. This tension underscores an ongoing debate: whether adaptation strengthens the Sangha or risks diluting its spiritual foundations.

Challenges persist, particularly in financial stability and institutional recognition. Many nuns struggle to sustain themselves without monastic support, and declining ordination rates raise concerns about their future. In their experience, while some monks advocate for nuns, others reinforce gendered hierarchies, leaving questions about nuns' independence unresolved.

Some nuns report being treated as subordinates or housewives, expected to serve monks rather than function as independent religious figures. Nuns' participation in temple activities often depends on whether monks allow it. Some nuns express frustration at being excluded from key monastic activities, reinforcing their marginal status.

According to nuns' experience some monks acknowledge nuns' contributions and allow them to participate in religious activities. Some has encountered indifferent or dismissive monks as they see nuns as marginal figures, with limited or no role in the Sangha. According to some of the nuns, some monks engage with nuns only when necessary, such as for ceremonies or practical temple work.

All groups of Thai Buddhist nuns, those in monk-led temples, nunneries, and highly educated circles, face systemic barriers, though the nature and visibility of these challenges differ across institutional contexts.

Nuns residing in temples with a monk as abbot encounter some of the most pronounced forms of marginalization. Their roles are largely restricted to support tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for elderly monks. Despite participating in prayers and occasionally assisting with religious events, they are often viewed, and view themselves, as having "no role" beyond personal spiritual practice. This perception stems from a deeply entrenched hierarchical structure where monks hold exclusive authority, and Mae Chee are relegated to subordinate, invisible labor. These nuns often lack access to leadership roles, formal teaching platforms, or recognition within the temple hierarchy. Societal attitudes reinforce this marginalization; while

some laypeople respect their devotion, many see them as peripheral, contributing to their low self-esteem and limited public voice.

Nuns in nunneries, though more active and autonomous, still face institutional neglect, particularly in terms of legal recognition, state funding, and integration into the official Sangha. While they lead educational programs, offer meditation training, and engage in community development, these contributions often occur without consistent financial support or endorsement from religious or governmental institutions. Many nunneries survive on sporadic donations and are led by nuns who juggle spiritual and administrative duties under considerable strain. Despite gaining social respect in some communities, these nuns still struggle against the structural ceiling imposed by a monastic system that does not formally acknowledge their leadership or ordination.

Highly educated nuns, despite their academic credentials and teaching roles, also experience significant constraints. Their expertise in Pali, Abhidhamma, and meditation often earns them informal respect, yet formal opportunities to exercise their knowledge remain scarce. Many lament the discontinuation of government programs that once positioned them as moral educators in schools and prisons. Without official recognition, they frequently work behind the scenes, unable to participate in temple governance or represent themselves in national religious bodies. Moreover, their efforts in Dhamma propagation, through teaching, social media, or public speaking, often go undervalued or are seen as secondary to monastic authority. The contradiction between their qualifications and their lack of recognition reflects a deeper institutional resistance to granting nuns equal standing within Thailand's religious framework.

Across all contexts, the shared thread is one of unequal recognition and structural marginalization. Whether through the lack of ordination rights, exclusion from governance, or limited access to state resources, Mae Chee remain positioned on the periphery of institutional Buddhism. Their diverse roles and evolving contributions are often obscured by rigid patriarchal structures that fail to accommodate their changing identities and aspirations.

Discussion

The Evolving Religious and Social Roles of Thai Nuns

The role of Buddhist nuns has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, shaped by both internal religious developments and broader societal changes. While traditional monastic duties remain central, contemporary nuns now enjoy expanded opportunities for education and personal growth. This evolution has enabled them to contribute meaningfully to society beyond purely religious functions, engaging in educational initiatives, social welfare programs, and community leadership. The digital revolution has further transformed their practice, providing new platforms for Dhamma propagation and global connection. Despite these modernizing influences, many nuns consciously maintain core Buddhist values and practices, demonstrating their ability to adapt while preserving spiritual traditions.

The nuns interviewed expressed mixed opinions regarding the changes in their roles. While many viewed the increasing recognition and education of nuns as a positive development, others felt that it came with challenges, such as the potential for distractions and the difficulties of balancing modernity with traditional practices. Some nuns expressed concerns that the push for equality might dilute the core teachings of Buddhism or distract from spiritual practice.

The role of Buddhist nuns (Mae Chee) in Thailand has evolved significantly, influenced by modern education, social transformation, and global digital connectivity. Traditionally focused on temple service, these roles now encompass teaching, social outreach, and leadership in Buddhist communities. Nuns interviewed for this study described a broad spectrum of responsibilities, from temple maintenance, cooking, cleaning, preparing offerings, to caregiving for elderly monks. As one nun stated, "*We wake before dawn to prepare food for monks, clean the temple, and organize offerings without us, the temple couldn't function*". This corroborates Falk's (2007) view of Mae Chee as the "invisible infrastructure" of Thai Buddhism.

Digital media and globalization have also played a crucial role in shaping their evolving practice. Tomalin (2021) identifies a "digital sangha," where younger nuns utilize social platforms to disseminate teachings and engage with followers. However, the transition has not been seamless; older nuns often resist these changes, fearing the erosion of spiritual authenticity.

Despite growing visibility, Mae Chee still grapple with reconciling their traditional identity with modern roles. As several interviewees noted, engagement in community service, disaster relief, and women's shelters (Mackenzie, 2018) represents both spiritual expression and social necessity. This dual function reinforces their significance in both religious and secular contexts.

Educated nuns in independent nunneries are having most of the various roles despite facing different challenges such as inadequate financial support, legal restrictions, and societal perception.

Structural Barriers and Institutional Marginalization

Multiple external forces have contributed to reshaping the experience of Buddhist nuns. Organizations like the Thai Nuns Institute have played pivotal roles in providing structural support, enhancing educational access, and elevating the status of nuns within religious hierarchies. Economic conditions significantly impact their sustainability, as financial constraints often determine the extent of their social engagement. Laypeople's perceptions continue to evolve, with growing appreciation for nuns' contributions, though deep-seated cultural norms still position them as subordinate to monks. The dual forces of digital media and globalization have introduced both opportunities and challenges, enabling wider influence while potentially diluting traditional practices.

Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews reveals the complex and indispensable roles of Thai Mae Chee, while also highlighting systemic constraints. Their contributions span temple maintenance, education, and social services, yet they remain caught between tradition and modernization. This supports Lindberg Falk's (2007) characterization of Mae Chee as the "invisible infrastructure" of Thai Buddhism. Additionally, most of them reported caregiving duties for elderly monks, underscoring their often-unrecognized labor.

Despite measurable progress, nuns confront persistent obstacles in their pursuit of full religious participation. Financial insecurity remains a critical issue, with many lacking reliable support systems and depending on unstable temple patronage. Institutional barriers continue to limit their authority, as some temples restrict their roles to subordinate positions. The declining number of women choosing ordination raises concerns about the future vitality of the nun community. These challenges are compounded by ambiguous regulations regarding their status and varying levels of acceptance across different Buddhist communities.

Thai Mae Chee remain in what Kawanami (2013) calls "pre-ordination limbo," unlike Sri Lankan dasasil matas, who have gained limited ordination rights (Tsomo, 2004). This limbo manifests in financial insecurity, exclusion from leadership, and restricted spiritual authority. These disparities highlight the systemic marginalization embedded in Thai monastic structures.

One of the most significant findings was the historical disparity between the roles and recognition of nuns and monks. Nuns have historically had fewer opportunities for formal education, limited access to temple resources, and have faced societal skepticism about their spiritual abilities. This historical marginalization is a result of both cultural and institutional practices that have favored monks over nuns.

The dynamic between nuns and monks reflects both progress and persistent inequality. While some monks actively support nuns' advancement, others maintain traditional hierarchies that limit nuns' autonomy. This tension manifests in ongoing debates about governance structures, with some advocating for independent nun communities and others preferring continued monastic oversight. The relationship varies significantly by region and tradition, with some Buddhist communities demonstrating greater openness to reform than others.

Public attitudes toward nuns are gradually shifting, particularly regarding educated nuns who assume leadership roles. However, monks continue to receive greater reverence and material support from lay communities. The behavior of individual nuns remains subject to intense scrutiny, as their actions are often seen as reflecting on the entire community. This pressure creates additional challenges for nuns seeking to expand their roles while maintaining community trust.

Education as a Catalyst for Empowerment and Tension

Education was found to be a transformative factor in the lives of many nuns. As more nuns have gained access to higher education, both within Thailand and abroad, they have developed greater intellectual and spiritual capacities. This shift has allowed them to play more significant roles in teaching, community service, and leadership within their monastic communities. Nuns with higher educational qualifications are increasingly seen as leaders and mentors, both within the Sangha and in their lay communities.

Education has emerged as a powerful catalyst for change in nuns' roles and self-perception. Access to higher learning has equipped them with tools for leadership, teaching, and intellectual engagement with Buddhist philosophy. Specialized university programs have created new pathways for personal development and social contribution. However, this educational revolution has also created tension between traditional monastic expectations and modern academic pursuits. Some nuns grapple with balancing scholarly achievements with spiritual obligations, while conservative elements view formal education as potentially disruptive to traditional monastic values.

Educational advancement showed stark generational divides, reflecting Mackenzie's (2018) findings on education as a pathway to empowerment. Social service engagement varied significantly by institutional context: nuns in independent nunneries reported running Dhamma schools, women's shelters, and disaster relief programs, whereas temple-based nuns viewed their community work as incidental rather than structured.

Nuns' roles have evolved in response to the modernization of Buddhist practices in Thailand. The integration of technology, access to media, and new approaches to education and religious outreach have enabled nuns to expand their influence beyond traditional monastic settings. Some nuns are now involved in public service projects, running schools, and engaging with broader social issues, including gender equality and women's rights.

Education has emerged as a central force in transforming the lives of nuns. Younger Mae Chees increasingly pursue both secular and religious education. Specialized institutions like the Thai Nuns Institute and Buddhist universities have created new pathways for engagement, enhancing intellectual depth and spiritual authority. As one nun studying psychology explained, "*I'm studying to better counsel troubled women who come to our nunnery*", aligning with Mackenzie's (2018) analysis of education as empowerment.

However, education also generates friction. Conservative nuns worry that academic achievement detracts from spiritual discipline. A university-educated nun lamented, "*Even though I have completed highest degrees of both university and monastic education, I never get invited to preach or teach at temple functions at my temple*", illustrating Barnes' (2016) notion of "ceremonial subordination."

Nuanced Power Dynamics Between Nuns and Monks

While significant progress has been made, gender inequality remains a persistent issue within Buddhist monasticism. Many nuns still report feeling marginalized or secondary to their male counterparts. Despite this, the research indicates a growing acceptance of the idea that women can contribute meaningfully to religious practice and leadership. However, the traditional gendered structure of the Sangha remains a barrier to full equality.

The relationship between nuns and monks is layered and complex. According to nun's experience, while some monks advocate for greater female participation, others maintain rigid hierarchies. This division influences temple governance and daily operations. In temples with monk leadership, nuns typically perform support roles. In contrast, nunneries allow for more autonomy, yet often lack financial stability and institutional recognition. This corresponds with Falk's (2009) findings.

The nuns interviewed conveyed ambivalence. Some appreciated the protection and resources offered under monastic supervision; others resented the limitations. A nun shared, "*We have to change our attitudes… our efficiency is not suppressed by ourselves, but by the Sangha organization*", pointing to the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that restrict female religious agency.

Moreover, regional variation significantly affects the monk-nun dynamic. Urban centers and progressive temples are more likely to support female ordination or academic endeavors, while rural areas remain more conservative.

However, when the researcher observed and interviewed these three groups of nuns, it was found that these three groups of nuns were very similar in many aspects, such as their roles, attitudes, and expectations in terms of their own roles and what was expected from the Sangha, the government, and the society. However, nuns in nunneries had freedom to perform various activities without being under the supervision of monks. However, in performing some activities, they still had to invite monks to preside. Nevertheless, the head nuns of nunneries where the

nun was the head nun had a much greater role than the head nuns of monasteries where the monk was the head because the head nun was responsible for everything in the nunnery and the nuns in other nunneries had a greater role in managing the nunneries and taking care of various activities than the nuns in the temples because in the temples, the administrative duties fell into the hands of the abbot who was a monk.

It can be seen that nuns who set up a monastery without a monk as the abbot are not always good because when the researcher observed and personally asked the nunnery head, the nun who was the head of the monastery explained the difficulties in managing the monastery, saying that it was very difficult because when they set up a monastery, they did not receive much support from the Buddhist community like temples. For this reason, it was difficult to find funds to conduct various activities, which was different from nuns who lived in temples with monks as the abbots because they did not have to worry about management and finding supporting factors, which made them feel comfortable and had time to practice Dhamma. This contradicted Folk's observation that the nuns showed an understanding of the advantages of living in a nunnery, such as greater freedom and more time and opportunities to study and meditate (Falk, 2009). Folk spoke about this issue again that, however, in reality, nuns at nunneries had to work quite hard because they could not rely on laypeople as much as monks and nuns at temples could (Falk, 2009).

Shifting Societal Perceptions and Unresolved Contradictions

Although in the past, most researchers have tried to push for nuns to have a greater role in religion, such as the research of Sukjai Phutthawises (1984, p. 38), which found that both nuns and the public strongly agreed that nuns should have a greater role in taking care of temples and religions, and also considered this role as a direct duty that nuns must perform because, in addition to monks, nuns should also help maintain temples or monasteries and help in the propagation of religion, and keep an eye on and prevent other nuns from tarnishing their religion. Although some nuns live in monasteries that are not under the temple, they can still help in this area by joining the Thai Nuns Institute to help propagate religion through various projects organized by the Thai Nuns Institute. However, when interviewing and observing nuns, it was found that the role of nuns in religion is still not prominent enough in society to change the attitudes of monks and Buddhists to give importance to the problems and livelihoods of nuns.

It is seen that the three groups of nuns, despite their different lifestyles and educational levels, face similar obstacles. The first issue that most nuns in the three groups agree is the unclear status of nuns. As Falk (2009) explains, the government supports the monks with free education, free medical care, and free or reduced bus and train fares. The nuns do not receive any support from the government because of their official status as laypeople. However, the same government denies the right to vote in general elections, citing their monastic status and renunciation of worldly affairs.

Public perceptions of Mae Chee are gradually shifting. Educated and socially engaged nuns increasingly gain respect from laypeople. Yet, monks continue to receive more reverence, financial support, and legitimacy. Nuns' behavior is often scrutinized more harshly, reinforcing their vulnerable position within both religious and secular spheres.

Despite changing attitudes, unresolved contradictions remain. Nuns must navigate the paradox of visibility without full recognition. While education and activism have raised their profile, most of highly educated nuns we interviewed feel their credentials are undervalued. This disparity reinforces the symbolic gap between visibility and authority.

Even among independent nunneries, autonomy brings new challenges. The head nun of one such institution described the burden of administration without adequate lay support or state funding. This contradicts Falk's (2009) earlier observation that nunneries offer greater spiritual freedom, illustrating instead the precariousness of self-governance in a male-dominated religious landscape.

Despite these contradictions, research such as Sukjai Phutthawises (1984) shows that both the public and nuns themselves have long supported an expanded religious role for women. However, such roles remain largely aspirational without institutional reforms.

The findings reveal a paradoxical landscape: while nuns have made measurable gains in education, autonomy, and social influence, these advances are undermined by enduring structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Their evolving roles highlight both the possibilities and limitations of religious modernization in contemporary Thailand.

Conclusion

The role and status of nuns are in flux, shaped by societal changes, institutional reforms, and internal struggles for recognition. While there have been notable advancements in education and self-development, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding financial support, institutional acceptance, and social perceptions. The future of nunhood will likely depend on a balance between modernization and the preservation of traditional monastic values, requiring ongoing dialogue and reform within Buddhist institutions and broader society.

All three groups of nuns agreed that nuns had little social role and from interviews and observations, it was found that all three groups of nuns did not attach much importance to social role. Even highly educated nuns admitted that they did not have much social role, except for some nuns who directly benefited society, such as the nuns at the Thammanurak Foundation in Kanchanaburi Province, which is a place that takes care of orphans, both boys and girls.

The findings underscore the urgent need for reforms to align institutional structures with Mae Chee's contributions. Three critical steps emerge: (1) formalizing their status as religious professionals, either through full monastic recognition or civil integration; (2) establishing sustainable financial mechanisms to support their social and educational work; and (3) fostering intergenerational dialogue to bridge traditional and modern approaches. As the data show, Mae Chees are already reshaping Thai Buddhism from within. The question remains whether the broader religious and societal systems will evolve to fully recognize their indispensable role.

The future of Buddhist nuns presents both promising opportunities and significant challenges. Expanded education and institutional support have created unprecedented possibilities for leadership and social impact. However, financial sustainability, traditional resistance, and generational shifts in religious commitment pose ongoing obstacles. The continued vitality of nun communities will likely depend on finding equilibrium between modernization and tradition, as well as developing sustainable support systems that acknowledge their invaluable contributions to Buddhist practice and society at large.

In contemporary Thailand, Mae Chees are navigating a dynamic intersection of tradition and transformation. Their evolving roles, spanning spiritual, educational, and social domains, reflect both increased agency and persistent marginalization. Education and digital tools have empowered many nuns to serve their communities in unprecedented ways, yet institutional barriers continue to limit their religious authority and social recognition. The contradictions they face, between visibility and subordination, autonomy and precarity, underscore the deep entrenchment of gendered hierarchies within Thai Buddhism. Despite growing public respect and internal resilience, meaningful change remains elusive without structural reform. Ultimately, the experiences of Mae Chee illustrate both the potential and the limitations of religious reform in a patriarchal context.

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Funding

"This project is funded by National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT): Contract number N42A660893"