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The lay Buddhist gaze and femininity in Thai male monasticism

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ABSTRACT

Effeminate or *kathoey* monks have generated considerable public discourse concerning Thai Buddhist monasticism. Anxieties are heightened when *kathoey* monks are found to be performing feminine gestures and behaviours. These actions are captured in Thai social media, revealing the extent of surveillance surrounding male monastic bodily performance. I label this regulation by Thai Buddhist laity onto male monastics as the Thai Buddhist lay gaze. Using social media analysis, Thai news stories and Thai Buddhist understandings of gender, this article untangles the debate concerning *kathoey* monks within contemporary Thai Buddhist society. I argue that when femininity is seen as attached to worldliness, sexuality and beauty, it is deemed incompatible with monasticism.

KEYWORDS

Thailand; gender; Theravada Buddhism; performance; media; monasticism

Two Buddhist monks enter a shoe section inside a department store in Bangkok's Pinklao area. One of them starts trying on high-heeled ladies' shoes. Another customer in the store, a Thai lay Buddhist, snaps a picture of this behaviour and posts it to her social media account. Her friends comment on this situation and share the picture with their friends on social media, and soon larger Thai media websites start to take notice, like the *Bangkok Post* in English and Kapook! Hilight News in Thai.¹ Kapook's article on this declares that the monks are trying on shoes 'because every temple is a runway' (เพราะทุกวัดคือรันเวย์). It is of course deemed inappropriate by the Thai Buddhist public for monks to have a materialistic lifestyle; however, there is an additional reason this picture has gone viral. The issue of femininity and sexuality is apparent here, with commenters declaring that openly gay monks are appearing more and more in public places. To those inside Thai Buddhist communities, such behaviours indicate problems with worldliness and sexuality, which are linked to femininity. The original poster of this photo on Facebook, Nong, writes that 'These monks just cut their hair and entered the temple. It has not been long since they became close. I think there is definitely a

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¹The *Bangkok Post* summarized this news story on their Facebook page on 2 February 2016, where there are over 1.5k likes, 294 comments and 598 shares. <https://www.facebook.com/bangkokpost/posts/monks-in-high-heelstwo-buddhist-monks-were-photographed-checking-out-womens-shoe/10153658371862713/>. Kapook Hilight's coverage of this story on 1 February 2016 has over 39,000 views. Kapook is a well-recognized Thai media website for news and entertainment. Their title is 'Oh monk! Two monks found in a women's shoe store sitting and trying on high heels' (คุณพระ! หลวงที่ 2 รูปโผล่กลางคกร้านรองเท้าผู้หญิง นั่งลองสั้นสูง). Accessed 10 December 2020. <https://hilight.kapook.com/view/132315>.

secret here’ (เพิ่งปลงผมเข้ากุฏิมาไม่เท่าไรหรอกก็สนิทกันแล้วหรือจะ ขึ้นว่าเรื่องนี้มีอะไรลับคมในเน่นๆ). Another commenter refers to the monks with a female particle as *luang che* (หลวงเจ้) instead of the common way of calling a young male monk, *luang phi* (หลวงพี่), and then asks, ‘did you buy this [high heeled shoe] for yourself?’ (หลวงเจ้แกซื้อใส่เองป่าว). Finally, the most critical comment, from a person named Adesan Man, states that he wanted to ordain his whole life but only did so for three months (one rains retreat) because he saw so many similar problems with the monks in his temple. He then asks, ‘Why do foreign men who are rich ordain to let go of everything but monks in our hometown ordain in order to collect more things?’ (ทำไมพระฝรั่งมาจากคนรวยบวชเพื่ออะไรทุกอย่าง แต่พระบ้านเราคือบวชเพื่อสะสม [ของต่างๆ]).² Comments such as this decry the lack of monks who can follow the rules of asceticism.³ Yet, these monks are especially suspect not just because they are shopping at the mall, but because they are assumed to be a couple, who are buying items associated with femininity, sexuality and worldliness, for themselves.

The regulation of monastic behaviour is a fertile topic in Thai media, and the prominence of social media and smart devices has allowed not only journalists but also regular Thai citizens to catch Buddhist monks at inopportune moments. Through the increased mobility of monks in cities and towns of Thailand as well as the ability to share images, surveillance of the male monastic body has become widespread. This attention is focused on locating transgressions, including monastic bodies in non-monastic spaces, such as the mall, or monastic bodies acting like laity inside the temple through activities such as drinking, gambling, or inviting over women. I label this surveillance the ‘Thai Buddhist lay gaze’, building on seminal ideas from much different contexts: the concept of the male gaze coined by Laura Mulvey (1975) from film studies, and Michel Foucault’s (1977) social theories of panopticism and surveillance.

A particular type of bodily transgression has captured the focus of this gaze and significant media attention in Thailand, and that is the performance of femininity while in the robes. *Kathoey* (กะเทย) is the informal, catch-all Thai word for effeminate male bodies that is used colloquially for the more formal but less descriptive term, the third sex (เพศที่สาม, *phet thi sam*). This category of sex or *phet* (เพศ) in Thai, incorporates sexuality and gender (Jackson and Sullivan, 1999, 5). *Kathoey* have the body of a man, but instead of masculinity, express femininity, and it is believed that this femininity is very difficult to hide. Peter Jackson provides basic information on this gender category within Thai society in his *Male Sexuality in Thailand* (1989). He writes that although *kathoey* are ‘few in number in absolute terms, nearly every provincial centre in Thailand has at least one or two open *kathoey*s or transvestites. These men dress and often live as women and, although derided, are in general not interfered with’ (194). Rosalind Morris (1994, 20) writes that the meaning of this term has varied over time, but in northern Thai origin myths of the Lanna Kingdom it meant ‘neither male nor female, but both: a coherent identity attached to diverse and fluid practices’. The Thai media outlet Sanook also has a dictionary, and their definition of *kathoey* is ‘a person who has both male and

²These comments come from a more detailed article in a Thai news media outlet called *CatDumb*, which features entertainment. The author, Miaw Fin, presents selected comments on this photo from the Facebook page of the original poster. The article is called ‘One pair only! Netizens complain a lot about monk in a picture with iPhone while trying on high heels like he doesn’t care’ (สักคู่ไหมจะ!! ขาวเน็ตสาวซัดซัน ภาพพระสงฆ์ถือสมาร์ทโฟน ลองรองเท้าส้นสูงในร้านแบบไม่แคร์สื่อ). Accessed December 11, 2020. <https://www.catdumb.com/monk-pick-a-shoe-717/>. Posted on February 2, 2016.

³For direct quotations from article comments, I have corrected any misspellings so that it is easier to read. These corrections do not affect the translation or meaning.

female sex organs. A person whose mind and behaviour is opposite from their sex' (คนที่มีความ เพศทั้งชายและหญิง คนที่มีจิตใจและกิริยาอาการตรงข้ามกับเพศของตน).⁴ In colloquial usage, *kathoey* are men who act in typically feminine ways and are often assumed to be gay. The topic of *kathoey* monks is a sensitive and complex one within Thai male monasticism, which is discussed by the Thai Buddhist lay public online. Before analysing discourses of femininity and the gaze upon the male monastic body through specific cases in Thailand, I explore broader scholarship on the body and sexuality in Buddhism.

The body and sexuality in Buddhism

This article cannot provide a comprehensive overview of how the body and sexuality is viewed in Buddhism. However, this section highlights important points useful to contextualize the phenomenon of *kathoey* monks in Thailand. I first generally discuss the perceptions of men, women and those in between in relation to masculinity and femininity in early Buddhism, and I then focus on how the performance of gender is constructed within contemporary Thai Buddhism.⁵

Early Buddhism

The Buddha's body itself is important in understanding the construction of the ideal male monastic. John Powers (2009), in his study of Indian Buddhist texts from the fifth century BCE to the eighth century CE, argues that the Buddha's body is not neutral, asexual, or non-gendered. In fact, through a close reading of Buddhist texts, including those from the Pāli canon and other sutras and commentaries written in Pāli and Sanskrit, Powers finds the Buddha's body portrayed as extremely masculine, which produces attraction from women and men. The Buddha is often associated with bulls and stallions, symbols of virility in India. Much of this early Buddhist literature is as concerned with the Buddha's physique as his spiritual attainments, his wisdom power and body power (7). This is for two reasons: first, the Buddha's body and beauty were key features in convincing men and women of his moral and spiritual authority, and second, descriptions of the Buddha's body and sexuality create a picture of the Buddha as a 'real man'. His time spent in the women's quarters with his harem is meant to counteract any suspicions about his sexuality. As Powers writes, 'It is important that when a future Buddha rejects sensuality he does so after fully experiencing all of its purported pleasures' (33). His disciples and followers must be convinced that in renunciation he knows what he has given up.

This focus of the Buddha's masculinity, however, can contribute to women in Buddhism being viewed solely as an instrument to be cast aside in favour of liberation. Alice Collett (2010, 116) notes in her review of Powers' book that women are not only portrayed as consorts and temptresses in the Pāli canon but are also known for their

⁴<https://dictionary.sanook.com/search/dict-th-th-royal-institute/%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%B0%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%97%E0%B8%A2>.

⁵As Nicola Tannenbaum (1999, 249) reminds scholars, attitudes towards sexuality vary across different contexts in Thailand, including class, region and time period. The focus here is on lay Thai Buddhists who view media on Thai news websites regularly. There is no way to know the exact nature of this demographic; however, they all have access to mobile devices and are able to read and write in Thai.

wisdom, skill and ability to maintain abstinence in the face of sexual temptation. Through examining the *sanghādisesa* rules of the Pāli Vinaya, Collett characterizes male sexuality as ‘aggressive, potent, and proactive’, while the female sexuality displayed by female monks is ‘passive and responsive’ (Collett 2014, 65). Although women can reach the highest spiritual achievements, and female monks’ sexuality is not depicted as being as voracious as that of males, femininity is still described as lower in status and more problematic than masculinity. These attitudes towards women are due in part to the belief that rebirth as a female is a consequence of negative karma (Gross 1993), which results in impurity associated with menstruation (Ohnuma 2004, 303). Reiko Ohnuma summarizes the early Buddhist views of the female gender as either being characterized by uncontrollable lust or as nurturing wives and mothers, celebrated for their beauty and fertility (2004, 303). Both of these ideals leave little possibility for monasticism or celibacy in the female body. Through an investigation of early Indian Buddhist literature, Lisa Battaglia finds that ‘only men are allowed to be male, beautiful, and liberated, all at the same time, whereas women must be stripped of their gender, as well as becoming ugly in the process, in the pursuit of liberation’ (2019, 197). Although there is a wide range of representation of women in early Indian Buddhist literature, and female disciples of the Buddha succeeded in attaining enlightenment, this feat clearly faces significant challenges.

Masculinity, by contrast, allows one to be tamed through Buddhist teachings and discipline. In further consideration of Pāli canon literature, Jose Cabezon (2017, 332) argues that male sexuality is defined ‘in terms of the phallus and the act of penetration’. The real man then ‘must have direct, unmediated desire to be the active partner in penetrative sex’ (Cabezon 2017, 431). For monasticism to tame men and send them toward liberation, the desire to penetrate must be transcended. Because of this, males who act in feminine ways do not have anything to tame or transcend in terms of phallic pleasure. And because the focus is almost exclusively on penetration, feminine sexuality and desire is treated with ambivalence. On the one hand it cannot be tamed since there is no penetration to prevent, but on the other it is more difficult to control. As Alice Collett has argued in relation to the Pāli canon, ‘it is not women’s bodies per se that are being conceived as the problem, but rather the adorned and ornamented body (which could be either male or female)’ (Collett 2016, 227).

In Pāli Buddhist literature, effeminate males or a kind of third gender are labelled as *pandaka*. Jose Cabezon defines this category as men ‘who have male organs but deviant desires’ (Cabezon 2017, 417). The term *pandaka* in Pāli literature became a catch-all for a heterogeneous group of characteristics that fell outside the binary gender system (Cabezon 2017, 344). The Buddha forbade most types of *pandaka* from ordaining after a *pandaka* monk asked other men to ‘defile’ him, and the rumour was subsequently spread that all Buddhist monks were *pandaka*. Buddhaghosa sees *pandaka* ‘like prostitutes and coarse young girls, as dominated by lust and longing for friendship with anyone’ (Harvey 2000, 416). In Thai, the word for *pandaka* has become *bantho* (บันฑอ), but the more informal and commonly used term for effeminate monks is *kathoe*.

Thai Buddhist society

We can see these ideas about femininity and the male monastic body from early Indian Buddhism play out in contemporary Thai Buddhism, where *kathoe* monks have become

a widespread concern. As Charles Keyes notes, the monastic male subject is created through discipline that allows him to transcend natural sexuality. That this discipline is applicable ‘only to males in the Theravadin tradition reflects a religious perspective that views maleness and femaleness very differently’ (1986, 85). The female body itself is problematic because it is considered to create desire in male monks as well as polluting sacred sites through menstrual blood. In northern Thailand women are forbidden entry into several stupas and ordination halls because of local customs tied to the polluting nature of menstruation (Bowie 2011, 113). Despite the challenges of the female body in male monastic spaces, Keyes (1984) has argued that women’s roles in Buddhism as nurturing mothers have given them an important place. However, Monica Lindberg Falk (2007) asserts that women’s roles are always inferior because of the Thai sangha’s refusal to allow the full ordination of women as *bhikkhuni* (พระภิกษุณี). Since 1928, the Sangha Supreme Council has upheld the rule prohibiting male Thai monks from ordaining female monks.⁶

Instead, the traditionally accepted precept nuns in Thailand are called *mae chi* (แม่ชี). It is unknown when exactly this distinct renunciant category emerged; however, the role of *mae chi* clearly fills a need for some kind of higher role than laity within the Buddhist monastic institution for women. Although *mae chi* think of themselves as ordained, they have an ambiguous status from the perspective of the Thai government, which ‘views them as little more than squatters in monasteries’ and sees their role ‘of serving monks as due compensation for the privilege of living on monastery grounds’ (Muecke 2004, 225). Marjorie Muecke (2004, 228) has found that male monks view *mae chi* as sexual and lustful, unless they are elderly, and they constitute a continuous test of male monks’ celibacy, making women’s sexual desire the enemy of the monastic life. The social situations for *mae chi* have been changing recently as they are recognized as saints, receiving support from laity and respect from male monks (Seeger 2018).

Because monasticism is not unambiguously or freely available for women, the institution serves to define the boundaries of masculinity and highlights the gendered nature of attachment. Women are expected to be attached to the secular world as wives and mothers. By ordaining, women are rejecting social norms. They are not praised or valued for the detachment and restraint required for celibacy. In contrast, for a male monk, celibacy ‘may have provided him with an ultimate challenge to show his potential power by achieving full control over his body and sexual desires, exemplifying his masculine identity to the fullest’ (Lindberg Falk 2007, 34). Keyes (1984, 225) argues that although both men and women are viewed as attached to the world, ‘by “nature” males and females are inclined to be attached to the world in different ways’. Keyes continues his argument by characterizing men as having a natural state tending towards immoral acts, such as killing; however, men, as embodied in the monastic figure, have the possibility to transform and discipline themselves. Women, on the other hand, go through no such transformation. Women, especially mothers, are considered to be naturally compassionate life-givers (Keyes 1984, 232). Although women may learn deep Buddhist truths about suffering and impermanence, it remains difficult

⁶I emphasize the male monastic body here because most monastics in Thailand are male. There are about 300,000 male monks compared with just over 200 female monks. Thai female monks ordain in Sri Lanka and have set up several *bhikkhuni* communities in Thailand.

for them to transcend the world in their primary roles as mothers and supporters of the sangha. Thomas Kirsch (1975, 185) concludes that 'women are deemed to be more firmly rooted in their worldly attachments than are men, men are thought to be more ready to give up such attachments', and because they are not accepted as fully ordained monks in Thailand, 'women are thereby religiously disadvantaged' (Kirsch 1985, 309). As Penny Van Esterik (1982, 77) concurs, 'Women are viewed as being more rooted in this world and are the center of household stability'. She continues by saying that because women are society's producers and nurturers, this 'generative capacity is qualitatively opposed to the recluse's goal of non-becoming or extinction' (77). Women are more embedded and dependent in their familial and romantic relationships in a way that men are not. Men are allowed to be detached, they have the opportunity to be good or bad, but they can be independent of the family unit because they are not under the same societal constraints.

I am not so much concerned with motherhood or the polluting nature of menstrual blood in connection with *kathoey*, but how they highlight Buddhist ideas surrounding femininity. *Kathoey*, as biological males, do not menstruate, but they also do not benefit from the maternal qualities of motherhood. Because motherhood is not part of their image, *kathoey* are not seen as people who can nurture Buddhism through their sons, nor are they seen as men who can benefit from the discipline of monasticism. Lacking the positive attachments of mothers, their femininity is criticized for being negatively attached to worldly activities like dancing, partying, looking beautiful and decorating themselves.

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze

The gaze is a helpful theoretical tool to discuss the lay Buddhist view of the male monastic body. The concept has been used in the visual arts fields of art history and film studies. Laura Mulvey (1975) argues in her seminal piece, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', that the controlling gaze in cinema is male, while the object of the gaze is a passive and/or erotic female object, creating the phrase 'male gaze'. Although uses of the gaze refer mostly to desire, like the male gaze towards a female object, or the tourist gaze (Urry 2002) that desires to consume experience outside of everyday life, within Thai Buddhism the gaze is also directed toward the desire to see proper monastic performance and therefore a thriving Buddhism. The gaze 'orders and regulates' relationships with the other, identifying what is out of the ordinary and what is desirable (Urry 2002, 145).

Within Thai Buddhism, the active gaze is directed from the lay Buddhists onto the object of passive male monks, desiring to regulate what seems out of place. Unlike the tourist gaze, which can often find pleasure in the unexpected, the Thai Buddhist lay gaze hopes to find appropriate kinds of difference between the secular lifestyle and the monastic one, and between feminine and masculine behaviours. The Thai Buddhist lay gaze centres on monastic behaviour and comportment, which can be observed visually. This gaze is distant but not detached. Laity, who take part in this surveillance by posting and sharing transgressions witnessed on social media, are heavily invested in Thai Buddhism and concerned about its fate. Their gaze is not neutral but is informed by the lay Buddhists' place within Buddhism, as monetary and material supporters of the monastic institution.

During the early Buddhist communities, as evidenced in the Pāli canon, the Buddha took the criticisms of laity very seriously, resulting in his forbidding certain colours for monastic robes and requiring monks to wear bathing robes.⁷ A key reason for the Buddha to promulgate monastic rules was to foster faith in laity and protect the faith of already devoted laity. Then, as now, laity do not automatically accept all behaviour of all monks. As Hsiao-Lan Hu writes ‘One does not instantaneously become wholesome and noble simply by joining a monastic order, and therefore a monastic person is not off-limits for criticism’ (Hu 2011, 52). While the Buddhist lay gaze has been an important check on monasticism throughout its history, Thai society has also had an important relationship with visual appearances. Within Thai society, the gaze has been discussed as part of the regime of images; as Peter Jackson writes, ‘... Thai power lies in an intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours, and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life’ (2004, 182). This regime is interested in the context of time and place (*kalathesa* กาลเทศะ), and in the performative character of behaviour and speech in public spaces. One should know the proper ways to perform one’s social roles depending on whom one is talking with and where one is. This aspect of Thai society is heightened in Buddhist contexts, where the time and place usually call for quiet, calmness and appropriate performance of rituals to maintain sacredness.

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze, through the exchange of material and spiritual support, has much at stake in policing monks’ bodies. Lay Buddhists and Buddhist monks have entered into a contract. This contract, existing within the economy of merit, is a major reason why expectations of the laity are so important to monastics. Through their renunciant lifestyles, monks are able to accumulate and give merit to laypeople. Buddhist laypersons engage in donor practices in hope of gaining merit that will have a positive effect on their current situation, as well as the next life, and negate the effects of past evil deeds. Because it is not always easy to judge whether monks are living a pure renunciant lifestyle, they are often evaluated based on appearance. If monks do not look appropriate, the lay person may not be confident in their ability to accumulate and give merit. Although the behaviour of individual monks may be concerning, lay Thai Buddhists often emphasize that they respect the robe, not the individual monk. Despite this sentiment, monastics and laity are still involved in an exchange that requires both parties to fulfil basic duties. Because lay Buddhists offer necessary material items to Buddhist monks, who, in exchange, live a religious and renunciant life, the Thai Buddhist lay gaze praises bodies and activities that conform to the ideal of this lifestyle. However, this gaze also seeks to expose and criticize bodies that contravene the image of an ascetic renunciant. Traits associated with femininity are not included in this image of the ideal monastic figure.

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze judges the performance of monasticism, which includes the performance of gender. It demands male monks avoid seeming too feminine or too much like a layperson. Similar to the idea of panopticism, or ‘all-seeing’, used by Michel Foucault (1977) and originally taken from Jeremy Bentham, the male monk is

⁷Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in his explanation of the monastic code, states that the monastic robes and rains-bathing cloth must be dyed the proper colour before being worn (2013, 467). Monks needed to wear bathing robes so that laypeople did not become attracted to them or believe that they were a group of naked ascetics, instead of Buddhist monks (2013, 227).

always subject to observation, judgment and control. There is no official institution which imposes masculinity on male monastic bodies, just as there is no authority to impute femininity on female bodies. Because of this, gender performance appears to be natural or voluntary. However, the idea of the panopticon complicates this view. Just as women often internalize patriarchy or the male gaze within their consciousness, eventually male monks internalize the Thai Buddhist lay gaze as a form of surveillance. It is this means of surveillance technology which then produces an understanding of proper gendered performance (Threadcraft 2016, 219). Male monastic self-surveillance is a form of monastic discipline, just as the panoptical gaze creates patriarchal discipline for female subjects.

Social media enhances the possibility for surveillance. The ability to take a picture or video from a distance or share a selfie a monk has posted allows Thai Buddhist laity to take on the role of the active gaze and panopticon. While monks may feel comfortable around familiar laity, such as family members or long-time donors and temple volunteers, the ability of anyone to observe and criticize monastic bodily presentation increases anxiety for monks. Michael Chladek (2017-2018) has investigated the ways novice monastics in one northern Thai temple imagine the laity's expectations. Monastics project ideas onto this 'imagined laity', considering what they might think or how they would react to certain behaviour. Chladek argues that this is an important way that monastic communities self-regulate. Appearing tidy and looking neat, Chladek finds, allows monks to serve as a field of merit, which in turn allows laity to feel calm and create their own good merit. Imagining the laity and understanding the surveillance of the Thai Buddhist lay gaze trains monks to comport themselves correctly.

The specific 'imagined laity' of a particular temple community can be internalized for monks in training. However, the Thai Buddhist lay gaze is increasingly scrutinizing monastic presentation on the internet and in public. Below I investigate what happens when monks fail to imagine the Thai Buddhist public correctly and are subject to a critical lay gaze because of performing monasticism in feminine ways.

The effeminate male monastic body

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze indicates that the ideal monastic body, one that would signify a thriving Thai Buddhism with effective merit-making, would be lacking in feminine presentation. Three effeminate male monks have received widespread media attention in the last decade. First, in 2011, during the height of destructive flooding in Bangkok, the Thai media reported on the video of a monk dancing while helping to move people and supplies from flooded areas. This monk was labelled the 'coyote-dancing monk' (พระ ซ่อม เต้น โค โยตี้) because his dancing was deemed feminine and sexualized, similar to the women seen in the 2000 Hollywood film titled *Coyote Ugly* and the table-top dancing style used at this time by young women working along 'Soi Cowboy,' a well-known go-go bar strip in Bangkok. A person within the temple had recorded this monk's behaviour and thought it was inappropriate or strange enough to share online; eventually it reached the level of national news. The surveillance of this monk and the gaze upon his femininity reveals the perspective of the Thai Buddhist lay gaze. Like a panopticon, this gaze is all-seeing and always watching for unacceptable behaviour, however small. The dancing was a problem worthy of national news not just

because the monk was dancing, which is against the basic rules even of a novice monk, but because of the style of dancing.

Sanitsuda Ekachai columnist for the *Bangkok Post*, commented on the issues raised by the ‘coyote-dancing monk’ for the Thai monastic sangha in her article ‘Bringing things out in the open: Gay monk debate helps reveal a more fundamental problem which is affecting the clergy’ (*Bangkok Post*, 14 January 2012).⁸ She relates that this monk’s provocative dancing caused a public outcry among Thai Buddhists because it reflects the fundamental problem of openly gay monks. The connection between feminine behaviour and sexuality is completely intertwined in this analysis. Sanitsuda believes that feminine gay monks are so common now that it’s ‘no longer shocking to see novices wearing make-up or making feminine gestures in public freely’.

The monk in question, Phra Maha Klairungwas, a senior monk at Wat Bang Bua, outside Bangkok, responded that his dance was a ‘playful attempt to relieve stress during the flood crisis’. Although he characterized his dance as simply playful, Thai society immediately saw this performance, with its sexual gestures, as worthy of a societal outcry on the issue of openly gay monks. Phra Maha Klairungwas was forced to make a formal apology aimed toward all who were offended by his dancing, which was aired on all the major Thai TV networks.⁹ He was also temporarily suspended from his position as temple secretary.

Commentators on his behaviour believed that this display of provocative dancing indicated Buddhism’s deterioration and the degeneration of the monkhood. Many of the commenters on the video clip posted on the media website Sanook called for this monk to disrobe because he broke the seventh precept – to refrain from dancing, singing, music and going to see entertainments. In addition to breaking the precept, commenters also believed that his dancing in the style of a gay, feminine man (*tut ke* ตูดเกอ) was causing the religion to decline and even be destroyed. As one commenter named Rung-tongin stated:

This is a violation of the Vinaya since he is an effeminate man. Effeminate gay men are not allowed to ordain. He must disrobe only. The religion is declining. Don’t use the yellow robe to live [like a gay person] (ศีลธรรมวินัยตั้งแต่เป็นตุ๊ดแล้ว ตูดเกอห้ามบวช ต้องสึกอย่างเดียว ศาสนาเสื่อม อย่างนี้อาจจะสูญพันธุ์อยู่).

Dhamma Vinay commented: ‘Do you know how this monk is causing decline? Because monks like this are not real men’ (รู้ๆทำอะไรเสื่อมยังไง เพราะพวกนี้ไม่ใช่ชายแท้). Thai commenters recommended he become a layperson and develop himself more in his village, or they suspected that he ordained just to make a living.¹⁰ Although a few comments stated that this monk was just having fun, for the most part, Thai observers asserted that he broke an important precept and should disrobe because he represents a decline in the religion due to his feminine behaviour.

The second *kathoe* monk who attracted national attention is Phra Jazz, or Phra Sarawee Panyawiro, who ordained in 2013.¹¹ He was the winner of the 2009 Miss

⁸ Accessed 17 December 2020. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/275055/bringing-things-out-in-the-open>.

⁹ A video of this performance can be seen here: <https://video.sanook.com/player/453995>.

¹⁰ All of the comments can be found below the video clip of this incident from 2012: Accessed 17 December 2020. <https://video.sanook.com/player/453995>.

¹¹ Jazz is a nickname. He was born as Sarawi Natthi.

Tiffany Universe pageant, a beauty contest for *kathoey*.¹² Because Phra Jazz had been such a visible *kathoey*, some believed that it would be impossible for him to ordain. However, Phra Jazz had never completed gender confirmation surgery, so there was no biological impediment to ordination. Phra Jazz was thus considered a ‘normal’ male and it was determined that neither his effeminacy nor sexuality was an obstacle (Cabezón 2017, 532). The abbot of the temple where Phra Jazz ordained, Phra Atuwatee Bhikkhu of Wat Liab, explained the decision to ordain Phra Jazz: ‘[This ordination] is not against the principles of Buddhism. In both mind and body [Phra Jazz] is a full man and he has the determination to ordain’ (ไม่ขัดกับหลักของพระพุทธศาสนา ทั้งสภาพจิตใจและร่างกาย ซึ่งเป็นผู้ชายเต็มตัว และมีความตั้งใจแน่วแน่ที่จะอุปสมบท). The abbot continued that

Importantly, from the physical and mental examination, he is a normal male. There are no characteristics of the third sex, instead there is only a quiet man with a gentle manner. By removing the silicone from his breasts, we could perform the ordination ceremony for him (ที่สำคัญจากการตรวจร่างกายและจิตใจก็เป็นผู้ชายปกติ ไม่มีลักษณะของเพศที่สามเหลืออยู่และเป็นคนค่อนข้างเงียบนิสัยเรียบร้อย โดยได้นำซิลิโคนออกจากหน้าอกแล้ว จึงได้ทำพิธีอุปสมบทให้).

Also important in allowing Phra Jazz to ordain were his motivations. The author from *Post Today* emphasized that Phra Jazz decided to ordain because he has faith in Buddhism, wants to offer merit to his parents, and he intends to be ordained for the rest of his life. The author made sure to point out that ‘there are no other causes or reasons concerning the world’ (ไม่มีสาเหตุหรือเรื่องราวอื่น ๆ เกี่ยวกับทางโลกทั้งสิ้น).¹³ In this discussion of Phra Jazz, all the typical characteristics associated with *kathoey* were refuted. The author of the article as well as the abbot who ordained Phra Jazz instead placed him in the category of a full man with no traces of feminine characteristics left in his body or mind. The ‘coyote-dancing’ monk received criticism because of his feminine dance moves while in the robes. By contrast, Phra Jazz was believed to have ended his *kathoey* characteristics once he had ordained.

A third high-profile *kathoey* monk is Phra George. He defended himself and his choice to ordain as a monk in an interview with Vuthithorn ‘Woody’ Milintachinda, on his popular talk show, *The Woody Show* (วู้ดดี เกิดมากุย). In an intense conversation, Phra George presented arguments for his ordination, despite his effeminate manners, and contended that he is a legitimate monk.¹⁴ Woody surveyed the opinion of monks from across Thailand on the ordination of Phra George, asking ‘is this the most effeminate monk we have ever seen?’ Several of the monks responded that they would not ordain Phra George because the Buddha did not allow a *bantho/pandaka* to be ordained. The opposing monks on Woody’s video stated that if Phra George wanted to be accepted as a monk, he needed to remove his girlish behaviour. It is against the Vinaya to speak in a girlish way to the lay people because monastic speech must be polite and well-mannered. ‘If you want to be ordained, you have to act like a male’, one of the monks stated. They argued that feminine behaviours had no place in the monastic life, and ordaining a

¹²Miss Tiffany has taken place in Pattaya, Thailand, since 1984. The popularity of this contest demonstrates the acceptance of femininity in male bodies in Thai society at large. However, this tolerance does not translate to the male monastic body within Thai Buddhism.

¹³‘Phra Jazz, Former Miss Tiffany Ordains in Songkhla’ (พระแจ๊ส อดีตมิสทิฟฟานีนบวชแล้วที่สงขลา). 13 May 2013. Accessed 28 December 2020. <https://www.posttoday.com/ent/news/221825>.

¹⁴‘Gay Monk on Woody Talk Show’. 21 April 2014. Accessed 28 May 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ulv5z6Dyfrw>.

kathoey would lessen the faith of the lay people. When contrasting Phra George and Phra Jazz, it seems that Phra George's feminine behaviour was still present as a monk, while Phra Jazz was simply considered to be well-mannered and gentle.

Both Phra Jazz and Phra George had to convince Thai Buddhists that they have not only the anatomically correct body of a man but also the heart-mind (*chit chai* จิตใจ) of a man. If these effeminate monks could remove all feminine manners, as the critical monks on Woody's show suggested, then it would be appropriate for formerly effeminate men to be ordained. The Thai Buddhist lay gaze focuses on this femininity, and by implication of pointing it out, desires its removal. Phra George does not engage in the argument about the possibility of removing femininity or not. He denies the relevance of the Thai Buddhist lay gaze. Instead, he focuses on Buddhist teachings, stating that one's mental condition is what matters most. Phra George states that he has to fight to end his worldly desires and follow the Buddhist path like everyone else. However, the Thai Buddhist lay gaze remains trained on men displaying feminine behaviour within the robes. It is suspicious of former *kathoey* but willing to accept that they can remove femininity, after ordination.

These three monks were figures who appeared on TV and news articles while their feminine pasts and behaviour after ordination were debated. Other monks are surveilled from a further distance, without any possibility of explanation, apology or defence. Below I draw from a selection of articles, from 2013–2020, from Thai media websites, which spotlight the visual nature of the lay Buddhist gaze on feminine behaviour among male monks and the debate surrounding their presence in the monastic institution. These media websites are news sources well known among Thai readers for coverage of politics, economy, religion and entertainment.¹⁵ Articles about *kathoey* monks often contain some explanatory text, but principally feature pictures of monks wearing makeup and face masks, posing in effeminate postures, with hands on lap or curled on their faces, monks embracing one another in a hug, as well as posing with the robes fitted tightly to the chest, which gives an appearance of breasts. The website *Post Today* profiled this issue in July 2013, displaying these pictures of effeminate presenting men in an article titled 'Phra Tut on a rampage! Making love - showing off their beauty for laypeople' (พระตุตอาสาवाद! พลอดรัก-เด็ดฉายอวดโยม).¹⁶ The tags for this article include *phra tut* (พระตุต), *nen tao* (เนนเต๋ว), and the destruction of the religion (*man satsana* มารศาสนา). *Phra tut* is a slang term that evokes the feminine manners of a monk in a derogatory way. Another term is *nen* (for novice monk) *taeo*, referring to a man who appears to be non-masculine and weak.¹⁷ The *Post Today* news team, who assembled these photographs, wrote that every day the phenomenon of *phra tut*, *nen tao* was increasing. The authors went on to describe the beauty details of the pictures of effeminate monks, noting their eyeliner, glossy lips, arched eyebrows, blue contact lenses, details which worsen the faith of Buddhists, and show that the monks are 'not ashamed to take a photo of their beauty contest and don't give a damn about anyone' (ถ่ายรูปโชว์ประชันความงามไม่เกรงหน้าอินทรีหน้าพรหม). The point of showing these images is to illustrate the extent of

¹⁵The websites are *Naeo Na*, TeeNee News, Amarin TV News, *Siam Rat* and *Post Today*. Although not as reputable as *Thai Rat*, they are recognizable websites for reliable news coverage. *Naeo Na* used to be a magazine and covers politics as well as entertainment. TeeNee News and Amarin TV News focus more on entertainment with coverage of general news as well. *Siam Rath* also used to be a magazine and covers a wide range of news in Thailand along with *Post Today*.

¹⁶18 July 2013. Accessed 5 January 2021. <https://www.posttoday.com/politic/report/234978>.

¹⁷*Tut* and *taeo*, are often translated as sissy or queen.

femininity and beautification inside the temple. These kinds of behaviour, displaying an interest in showing off and lustfulness, are deemed disrespectful by the Thai Buddhist lay gaze.

TeeNee News includes articles on viral social media posts within Thai Buddhism as part of its Thai news coverage. One such scandal arose when the Facebook page ‘Red Skull News’ posted pictures of a monk who had fashioned his robe to look like a tight tube-top dress. The three pictures show the monk, with face blurred or with a smiley face emoji covering it, lying in a boat with full view of their legs, walking with their robe only covering the upper thigh, and posing with midriff showing and chest pushed outward. The text of the article describes how the monk

modified the robe into a strapless dress, pulled tight on their flesh, stepped onto the boat and posed in a sexy way. In addition, they also pulled the robe up until it was as short as possible. When the Thai people on the internet (netizens) see this, they feel uncomfortable with this kind of behavior (ตัดแปลงจีวรเป็นชุดเกาะอก คิงรัดแนบเนื้อ ขึ้นเรือโพสท่าแบบเซ็กซี่ แอ้มขัง คิงจีวรขึ้นมาแบบสั้นสุดๆ เห็นแล้วชาวเน็ตรู้สึกไม่สบายใจกับพฤติกรรมเช่นนี้).

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze is focused on gestures appearing feminine, but also on whether Thai monks are wearing the monastic robes appropriately. One of the purposes of the seventy-five training or Sekhiya rules listed in the Vinaya is to ‘prevent *bhikkhus* from wearing their robes in any of the various ways that lay people in those days wore theirs’ (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, 432).¹⁸ However, Thai Buddhist laity rarely connects their gaze with specific rules in Vinaya texts. The netizens who saw this picture simply felt uneasy with this behaviour. When a police officer found this monk’s temple, the abbot explained that the monk had been living there for four years, and there had never been a problem before he posted those pictures of himself in his tight robe. However, when the abbot explained to the offending monk that his behaviour was inappropriate, he ‘understood and realized what he had done and asked to disrobe immediately’ (เข้าใจและรู้ซึ่งถึงสิ่งที่กระทำลงไป จึงได้ขอลาสิกขาทันที).¹⁹ The fifteen commenters on this article were glad this monk has disrobed, calling him *luang che, tut*, wicked (*appri* อับปรีย์), one who is destroying the religion, and addicted to the defilements (*tit kilet* ติดกิเลส), especially the defilement of fashion (*kilet faechan* กิเลสแฟชั่น), and advising him to disrobe and change gender (*pai suek pai plaeng phet* ไปสึกไปแปลงเพศ). These comments reveal that feminine ways of showing off one’s body are associated with attachment to worldly things like fashion, and thus are upsetting to the Thai Buddhist lay gaze.

The Thai news outlet *Naeo Na* uses the phrase ‘*phra tut nen taoe*’ to capture the phenomenon of effeminate monks. Its article begins with a picture of a male monk who has tied his robe in a large bow in the front and is posing with hands on hips as if on the fashion runway.²⁰ *Naeo Na* news was especially concerned, when they wrote this article in May 2018, because while authorities were investigating Wat Saket for

¹⁸Some of the training rules fall in the category of monastic dress and behaviour in inhabited areas. Their purpose is to remind the monk that even ‘the minor details of his behaviour can often make the difference between sparking or killing another person’s interest in the Dhamma’ (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2013, 432).

¹⁹Tee Nee Website. ‘Found *Luang Che* Wearing Strapless Robe Police Raid the Temple Monk Accepts Mistake Before Disrobing’ (เจอแล้ว หลวงเจ จีวรเกาะอก ตำรวจบุกถึงวัด เจ้าตัวก้มหน้ารับ ก่อนสึก). 18 January 2020. Accessed 28 May 2020. tnews.teenee.com/etc/157938.html.

²⁰*Naeo Na* Website. ‘Revealed ‘*phra tut-nen taoe-mi mia*’ are numerous throughout Bangkok and other provinces’ (เผย ‘พระตุต-เนอรวะ-มีเมีย’ ยังมีอีกเพียบทั้งวัดใน กทม.ต่างจังหวัด), 5 June 2018. Accessed 28 May 2020. <https://www.naewna.com/likesara/343373>.

money laundering, they found images of sexual intercourse between a male lay person and a monk at the temple.²¹ This incident, according to *Naeo Na*, shows that gay monks exist in many temples throughout Thailand: ‘temples in both Bangkok and other provinces are like this [have gay monks living there]. When this happens, the problem of sexual addiction is certain to occur’ (ทั้งในวัดพื้นที่กรุงเทพมหานครและต่างจังหวัด เมื่อเป็นเช่นนี้มีปัญหาการเสพติดสังวาสจึงมีเกิดขึ้นอย่างแน่นอน). They also cite Chaturong Jongsa, an independent scholar of Buddhism, who claims that since 2014 the number of monks and novices with feminine or gay behaviour is about ten percent of the total monastic population. The problem, the author believes, lies with the Buddhist families and the abbots of temples, who can clearly see the effeminate behaviour yet still allow these men to ordain.²² The fundamental issue is the behaviour of effeminate male monks, which is assumed will lead to sexual relations in the temple. When males act in feminine ways, they are assumed to be attached to the world, interested in attracting men, and focused on physical beauty. The Thai Buddhist lay gaze would rather see an idealized version of a monk who has undertaken renunciation from such worldly things. Like Phra Jazz, *kathoey* monks can be accepted if they can demonstrate disinterest in outer appearance. Femininity, as identified by the Thai Buddhist lay gaze, does not belong in Thai male monasticism and should be removed. A further investigation of sex, gender and the body in Buddhist literature and contemporary society can help to illuminate the demarcations within Thai Buddhist monasticism and break down the assumptions of the Thai Buddhist lay gaze.

Male and female bodies in comparison

When the Thai Buddhist lay gaze is surveilling feminine behaviour among male monks, perhaps they are thinking of women as ‘quintessentially body-directed’ (Threadcraft 2016, 208). *Kathoey* monks are often criticized for living a life that is overly concerned with their own body and its appearance, overly passionate about sex and other superficial things of the world, supposedly like a woman (Morris 1994, 24).²³ In this way, women become more fully identified with their bodies and experiences than males, whose experiences can be transcended. Leonard Zwilling, in an analysis of the *pandaka* in Pāli literature, argues that the category ‘was considered in some degree to share the behaviour and psychological characteristics of the stereotypical ‘bad’ woman’ (1992, 205), revealing that *pandaka* lack the ability to counteract their passions. This type of femininity is imagined, by the Thai Buddhist lay gaze, to exist within *kathoey* bodies.

These deep-seated ideas within Indian Buddhism can be found in comparing the poems of the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, whose authorship is attributed to female and

²¹In May 2018, the arrest of five monks for alleged temple fund embezzlement in three Bangkok temples (Wat Sam Phraya, Wat Saket and Wat Samphanthawong) caused much media attention. *Bangkok Post*, ‘Buddhist followers cling to their beliefs in wake of temple embezzlement scandal’, 10 June 2018. Accessed 14 June 2018. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1482169/buddhist-followers-cling-to-their-beliefs-in-wake-of-temple-fund-embezzlement>.

²²The exact quote from the article is ‘เมื่อรู้ว่าลูกเป็นคู้ค เป็นคั่ว ก็ไม่ควรส่งมาบวชในพระพุทธศาสนา กระบวนการที่ 2 เจ้าอาวาส และพระอุปัชฌาย์ เมื่อเห็นว่าเป็นคู้ค แต่ขัดใจตน ก็ไม่ควรที่จะให้บวช’, which can be translated as ‘when you [parents] know that your male child has feminine tendencies, you should not send him to ordain in Buddhism. The second step in the process would be the abbot and preceptor. When they see the child clearly has flamboyant characteristics, they should not ordain [the boy]’.

²³Rosalind Morris (1994, 24) notes that *kathoey* are often thought of as dressing up the body as a woman better than women.

male disciples of the Buddha, respectively. In her comparison of the gendered nature of these two texts, Kathryn Blackstone (2013) argues that while female disciples use their bodies to attain Buddhist realizations, male followers use generalizations about human experience to reach their goals. She argues that:

The *therīs* [female disciples] thus personalize the Buddhist lesson in anatomy. The vision of a putrefying corpse is internalized; it is their own bodies that are filled with disgusting substances and their own bodies that will fill the cemeteries. The *theras* [male disciples] abstract this lesson. The disgusting nature of the body is revealed not in images of self, but in images of others, particularly women (69).

An important issue in Buddhism surrounding femininity is that not all bodies are considered uniformly. As Blackstone finds, ‘women are often presented as inherently more physical, that is, as tied more closely to bodily processes than are men; and, concomitantly, women are commonly defined by their sexuality’ (60). This is part of the reason why *kathoey* monks are widely seen as incompatible with the monastic space. Their bodies, although not female, are feminine and thus subject to the same kinds of issues. From these descriptions, masculinity can be transformed, transcended and tamed, while femininity makes this much more challenging.

In the poems of male disciples of the Buddha, the *Theragatha*, death and entrapment follow those who value the body. The female body is subject to these consequences as someone who inherently values the body for its own sake and attempts to lure others towards valuing the bodily form. A woman’s physical form is compared to a hunter’s snare, which an ordinary man would be lured into and thus continue in the cycle of birth and death.

As luring deer with a snare, as fish with a hook, as a monkey with pitch, so they touch; these five strands of sensual pleasures are seen in a woman’s form. Those ordinary individuals who with impassioned minds pursue them [women], fill up the terrible cemetery. They heap up renewed existence. But he who avoids them as one avoids a snake’s head with one’s foot, he being mindful overcomes this attachment to the world (*Theragatha* 454–457, Blackstone 2013, 67).

Women’s bodies are associated with death and rebirth for themselves and the men they ensnare. However, in neither the *Therīgatha* nor the *Theragatha* is the male body referenced as an attractive snare or lethal trap. Instead, women who are attracted to a handsome man use the image to understand the essential transience and impermanence of all phenomenon (Blackstone 2013, 72). Male monks’ bodies are used as vehicles for understanding the doctrine in general but are not seen as a temptation to overcome. This perception about male and female bodies and these bodies’ performances of masculinity and femininity carry over into modern-day Theravada Buddhism. *Kathoey* monks are so problematic for the Thai Buddhist lay gaze because they bring femininity, with all its embodiment and concern for the world of appearances, into the monastic life. Monks such as Phra Jazz, who have been professionally involved in beauty contests, are troubling for Thai Buddhists because it seems the concern for beauty and decoration is difficult to end. Although Phra Jazz is now widely believed to be a monk who has been able to cut ties with femininity, other monks who display actions concerned with this world make the work of taming masculinity more problematic.

Ward Keeler's (2017) analysis of Burmese Buddhism and gender hierarchies bears relevance to the Thai case. He argues that the male Buddhist monk fulfils the highest idealized masculine role because he is autonomous and without attachments. Keeler posits a spectrum within Burmese social hierarchy, ranging from autonomy to attachment, with autonomy coded as male and attachment as female. In Myanmar, idealized masculinity gives men privilege, as in much of the world. This makes men who do not fill their societal expectations seem deficient, because they are not taking advantage of the privilege they were born with. Females, and those who display feminine qualities, are seen as too attached to their relationships to be able to reach the level of autonomy possible for a male. Keeler emphasizes that 'the assumption remains that men incline toward, and are praised for, breaking attachments in favor of their autonomy, whereas women are inclined toward, and are for the most part held to, fostering their attachments, to the diminution of their autonomy' (239).

Women and femininity must exist to fulfil important roles within Buddhism, but these roles are all supportive of the monastic tradition and external to the monastic lifestyle. Women are praised for their positive attachments as mothers and supporters. Feminine bodies are also attached to superficial and worldly things, such as a beautiful or stylish appearance. It is this kind of negative attachment that *kathoey* monks are associated with, which is perceived as detrimental to their ability to live the autonomous and renunciant monastic life.

Conclusion

Why is the male monastic body so regulated? Why is the comportment and gender performance of the monastic body so important to the Thai Buddhist lay gaze? First, the threat of the abnormal male monastic body signals that Thai Buddhism is losing its strength in society. The Thai Buddhist lay gaze favours masculine-presenting male monastic bodies. The majority of monks presenting their gender as masculine would signal the health and thriving nature of Buddhism in Thailand, as indicated by comments about *kathoey* monks, who are believed to be causing degeneration of the religion. Because men are displaying atypical and unacceptable bodily figures and manners, they demonstrate the extent to which Buddhism is failing in the country to tame men, to make them into proper Buddhist subjects. Thai Buddhists are concerned about the efficacy of their merit-making, which takes place through the conduit of the monastic body. If effeminate monastic bodies are assumed to not fully belong in the monastic life, then merit-making potential decreases. While there is anxiety over the state of Buddhism in Thai society, the Thai male monastic body will continue to be regulated through the Thai Buddhist lay gaze, and their gender performance will remain an important site to locate the perceptions of decline within Thai Buddhism.

The Thai Buddhist lay gaze aims to keep the monastic body in check while evaluating the masculinity of the male monastic members. When male monks display feminine behaviour, this is seen to be especially worrying, as the sangha is unable to regulate itself and maintain the demarcations between female and male, femininity and masculinity. *Pandaka* are a troubling in-between category for Buddhist monasticism. They are not seen as complete men but also cannot fulfil the supporting role of women. The Thai Buddhist lay gaze, as seen in the media, has spent much time and effort noting

the prevalence of *kathoey* monks. The conversation around this topic within the Thai Buddhist public sphere frames *kathoey* monks as a problem. Although some monks can convincingly remove their femininity and attachment to beauty, such as Phra Jazz, for the most part, the Thai Buddhist lay gaze looks to police the boundaries of masculinity within the monastic sangha very carefully.

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