

Institution: University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: D26		
Title of case study: Providing religious inspiration for contemporary female practitioners of Thai Buddhism through historical precedent and new pedagogy.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2002-present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Martin Seeger	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Thai Studies	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2004-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Since 2013		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Seeger's research into the historical role of female practitioners in Thai Theravada Buddhism led to the reidentification of the author of a key Buddhist treatise. Previously believed to have been written by a world-famous and highly-revered male monk, Seeger showed that the text was in fact written by a woman. This finding has significant implications for the 94% of Thailand's 69 million strong population who practise Theravada Buddhism. But by challenging traditional assumptions about the contribution of women to religious teaching and practice it has had a particular impact on the female order of <i>mae chis</i>, whose status is contested and marginalised. Seeger and his Thai collaborators have produced popular editions of this and other female-centred texts and used devised theatre performances as an innovative way of engaging audiences with the religious teachings and gender issues which they raise.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Seeger's research explores the biographies, soteriological practice and teaching, and veneration of historical female Buddhist practitioners. His research questions concern access to higher education for Buddhist women and debates surrounding the full ordination of women in Thai Theravada Buddhism. His methods include in-depth interviews with Buddhist monks, intellectuals, social activists and female practitioners, as well as archival research.</p> <p>In Thai Theravada Buddhism, female religious practitioners occupy a marginalised status. There are approximately 20,000 female nuns (<i>mae chis</i>). However, while male monks (<i>bhikkhu</i>) are registered with the state and enjoy social privileges and religious status, <i>mae chis</i> are not recognised in the same way. Seeger's research has investigated the ways in which, despite these disadvantages, women have made important contributions to Thai Buddhist teaching and practice. He has explored institutions perceived to be alternatives to an officially recognised <i>bhikkhuni</i> (fully ordained Theravada nuns) order, whose ordination lineage disappeared from the Theravada Buddhist tradition centuries ago [6]. His examination of texts by and about Thai Buddhist female practitioners has yielded new insights into the complexities of female monasticism, soteriological practice and teaching, and gender relations in modern Thai Buddhism [4].</p> <p>More recently and most significantly, Seeger and independent Thai scholar Naris Charaschanyawong overturned the incorrect authorship attribution of a key Buddhist treatise widely known as <i>Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti</i> (Practice in Perfect Conformity with the Dhamma [Buddha's teaching]), originally printed anonymously between 1932 and 1934. For at least the last twenty-five years this text has been attributed to Luang Pu Man Bhuridatto (1870-1949), one of Thailand's most famous and influential monks, who is revered by many Thai Buddhists as a fully awakened saint and has been recognised by UNESCO as an</p>		

eminent person. The two researchers were able to demonstrate that this treatise was in fact authored by the hitherto little-known devout Buddhist woman Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri, 1882-1944) [5]. Her authorship was initially suspected based on anecdotal evidence such as interviews with her adopted son who saw her composing it. But Seeger and Naris were able to confirm it definitively through archival research, textual analyses, numerous interviews and, most importantly, gaining access to her extremely rare cremation book – a genre of literature unique to Thailand – which included a statement from a famous monk identifying her as the author.

Following this identification, Seeger and Naris published a new edition of *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti*, now with the correct authorial attribution and the new title *Damrong Tham* [1]. Together with other rare texts authored and possibly authored by Khunying Damrongthammasan, *Damrong Tham* presents biographical information, an explanation of the correct authorial attribution and scholarly annotations on the texts. Khunying Damrongthammasan's life and religious scholarship is also the subject of several chapters in [4]. Further research by Seeger and Naris identified additional texts which were probably composed by Khunying Damrongthammasan, although their attribution cannot be proved definitively. These were published as two further edited volumes, *Hat Tham* [2] and *Thong Tham* [3].

Seeger's research also revealed that Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of the editors of a Buddhist newspaper which published some chapters from *Hat Tham* in the late 1930s, observed that the pedagogical value of the text was enhanced by the fact that it read somewhat like watching a play [2]. This finding provided the intellectual underpinning for the use of performances as a route to public engagement with the texts and their content.

3. References to the research

Publications:

1. Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri), *Damrong Tham* (Thammasapa, 2559 [2016]), editors: Martin Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong. [428 pages]
2. Thammakathikajan, *Hat Tham* [Practising the Dhamma] (Thammasapa, 2561 [2018]), editors: Martin Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong. [425 pages]
3. Anonymous, *Thong Tham Nangsue hok lem samai roo. 5* [Thong Tham: Six Dhamma Books from the Reign of King Rama V] (Thammasapa, 2562 [2019]), editors: Martin Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong. [156 pages]
4. Martin Seeger, *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism* (Silkworm Books/NIAS Press, 2018).
5. Martin Seeger, "'The (Dis)appearance of an Author:' Some Observations and Reflections on Authorship in Modern Thai Buddhism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 36/37, 2013/2014 (2015), pp. 499-536.
6. Martin Seeger, "The Bhikkhuni-Ordination Controversy in Thailand," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 29 (2006 [2008]), pp. 155-183.

Funding:

- British Academy, May 2012- June 2013, 'Meditative Experiences, Homiletics, Socio-Religious Statuses, and Gender in Modern Thai Buddhism', (£5,850)
- ASEASUK Research Committee on South East Asian Studies, July 2010 - June 2011, 'Thai Maechis and Access to Higher Monastic Education in Thailand' (£ 2,300)
- ASEASUK Research Committee on South East Asian Studies, May 2008 - January 2009, 'Female Saints in Thai Buddhism' (£ 3,100)

- British Academy, 2007, 'The Revival of the Theravada Nun Order in Thailand: Scriptural Authority and Cultural Resistance' (£ 2,330)

4. Details of the impact

Seeger's findings were disseminated via:

- Publication** of *Damrong Tham* with correct attribution [1], and *Hat Tham* and *Thong Tham* with probable attribution to Khunying Damrongthammasan [2, 3].
- Performances** based on texts [1] and [2].
- Films** of and about the performances and a documentary on the authorship of the texts in [1].

The impacts have been as follows:

Public interest in the authorial reidentification: Seeger's revelation that Khunying Damrongthammasan was the true author of *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* prompted significant interest from the Thai media, Buddhist scholars and the general public. The Thai newspaper *Matichon* (daily circulation 700,000) published a full-page article on the research with the headline 'The ripple in the dhamma: anonymous writer believed to be Luang Pu Man is Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri)' [B]. The significance of [1, 2 and 3] for practising Thai Buddhists is further confirmed by public interest in financing their dissemination. The Thai Foundation Panyaprateep, which supervises a religious school, subsidised the costs of printing and distributing 13,200 copies of the texts, supplemented by over 150 private donations [1, 2, 3]. Seeger and Naris also co-produced a documentary film on the life and work of Khunying Damrongthammasan, *Lost in the Mists of Time*, with the Thai documentary film company Six Fingers. This film was screened by the major national public television broadcaster ThaiPBS on 19 July 2016, one of the most important days in the Thai Buddhist calendar. Its reach was extended via [YouTube](#) (16,500 views) and [Facebook](#) (71,000 views), where numerous positive comments indicate strong engagement.

Thai nuns (mae chis) and other women: Since the presumed author of the major texts in *Damrong Tham* was already considered an awakened being, Seeger and Naris' disclosure of the actual author's identity as female provides justification for women's ability to accede to the highest spiritual plane of nirvana, which is normally considered to be reserved for fully ordained male monks. The publisher of [1] noted that the confirmed authorship 'reminds people that it is not only men that can achieve the supramundane in Buddhism but women also have the same ability to teach the Buddhist teaching and achieve the supramundane' [H]. The reidentification has certainly revealed a potent example of the understanding of the dhamma which a woman can achieve through a combination of scholarship and religious practice. A famous Buddhist author, intellectual and revered monk compared [1 and 2] with a 'bright light' that 'makes us see female practitioners of the dhamma a hundred years ago in a different way' [F]. It thus provides inspiration for women today to practise towards the same achievement. A leading mae chi and committee member of the national Thai Mae Chi Institute remarks that Seeger's discovery 'has been very important and impactful for us mae chis', who 'have become deeply inspired [...] and encouraged in their work for society and want to follow the footsteps of Khunying Damrongthammasan' [E]. Another mae chi and meditation teacher, having viewed one of the performances based on the texts, commented: 'Discovering that this text was really written by a woman has filled my heart with motivation and joy. The more I read about the biography of Khunying Yai, the more impressed I became, and the more it inspired my own spiritual practice' [D].

Performers and audiences: The Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's observation in the late 1930s that *Hat Tham* read somewhat like watching a play provided the intellectual spur for the development of devised theatre performances based on [1] and [2]. Devised theatre involves performers directly in the production process, taking into account their responses to the text and building their experiences into the performance. It thus offered a way of helping performers and audiences to revise their understanding of Thai Buddhist doctrine and

women's contribution to it. The scripts, production and direction were developed in workshops with Thai academics, students and professional actors under the leadership of Seeger and Naris, and led to the production of performances presenting a female teacher and her pupils learning about and debating the dhamma together. These performances were presented before mostly urban, educated audiences at the Thai Universities Burapha (6 April 2018; over 150 people) and Thammasat (23 June 2019; around 60 people) and the prestigious Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives Foundation in Bangkok (7 April 2018 to around 200 people and 22 June 2019 to over 100). They had an important impact on the female directors and performers. The director of the 2018 performances felt that for the performers, creative engagement with the texts had 'changed their understanding of and developed a more positive view on Buddhism' [I]. The director of the 2019 performances commented that the process of putting together this play, combined with her spiritual practice, was 'the best learning of the Dhamma in [her] entire life'. [J]. The results of post-show questionnaires distributed to the audiences also indicated that 139 out of 234 respondents (i.e. 59%) felt that their understanding of gender in Buddhism had changed as a result of watching the performances. One commented 'I am now more interested in the role of women in both the history and practice of Buddhism' and another that 'it has filled me with sheer joy to see a play made up of women, who communicated the teachings very clearly' [A].

Buddhist pedagogy: Thai Buddhist teaching traditionally focuses on sermons and textual study, while performances are reserved for telling stories of the Buddha. The performances based on Seeger's findings were innovative in using a devised performance, accompanied by music, to explore religious insights, and still more so in centring female characters. As such, they offered an alternative means of engaging with Buddhist teachings, particularly for younger Thai Buddhists who may perceive traditional forms of Buddhist pedagogy as of little relevance to their own religious practice. The success of this approach was confirmed by responses from the performers and audiences. 220 out of 234 respondents (i.e. 94%) strongly agreed that the performing arts was an effective tool for teaching Buddhist doctrine. They commented that the play had enabled them 'to understand Buddhism in a new, positive way', was 'very applicable to the modern era' and had inspired them to read about and study Buddhism further [A, C]. One stated: 'I never thought the Buddha's teaching could be taught through a play. Thank you for showing me that plays can be an effective tool in spreading the dhamma' [A]. These insights were especially important for the Director of the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives Foundation, a centre of Buddhist learning which hosted two of the performances. He commended the originality of the approach, observing that 'we have never offered anything like this before' [G]. Inspired by an initial performance in 2018, the Foundation commissioned Seeger and Naris to develop an ongoing performance programme. Their institutional practice thus changed as a result of their contact with Seeger's research findings. The Director stressed the educational dimension to the productions, arguing that by encouraging people to 'rethink preconceived ideas about gender and specific teachings in Buddhism' the performances become an effective means by which they can achieve their goals [G]. The Foundation also supported Seeger and his team in producing and disseminating [two films](#) based on the performances, which has allowed their research to reach a much wider audience. These films have achieved more than 72,000 views, further demonstrating public interest in this form of Buddhist teaching.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Feedback questionnaires from the four performances, April 2018 and June 2019
- B. Article on Seeger's research in the Thai newspaper *Matichon*, 2 May 2018
- C. Video interviews with audience members from the performance at Buddhadasa Archives, May 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQKcd47uvl0>
- D. Video statements by a *mae chi* and meditation teacher, June 2019: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=452364742214426> (quotation at 00:15:40)
- E. Statement by a committee member of the Thai Mae Chi Institute, 28 December 2019
- F. Statement by a Buddhist author, intellectual and revered monk, April 2018: <https://visalo.org/prefaces/hadDham.html>

- G. Statement by the Director of the Buddhadasa Archives, Bangkok, February 2020
- H. Statement by the owner of the book publishing company, Thammasapa, February 2020
- I. Statement by the director of the 2018 performances, February 2020
- J. Video statement by the director of the 2019 performances, June 2019:
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=612421279265655> (quotation at 01:18:00)