CONNECTING “INFRASTRUCTURE” AND “SUPERSTRUCTURE”: DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS FAR-REACHING IMPACTS

The Work of 2013/2014 API Fellows

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The Work of the 2013/2014 API Fellows
Buddhist Women As Spiritual Leaders, Ritual Specialists, and Religious Innovators:
Case Studies from Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan

Lai Suat Yan

Introduction

The existence of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination
Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations and the Global Gender Gap Report by
the World Economic Forum indicates the need to address gender inequality in societies across the
world. This paper focusing on the intersection of
religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial
scholarship analyzes how Asian Buddhist women
in Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan have become
agents of social change by claiming their heritage
in religion as spiritual leaders, ritual specialists,
and/or religious innovators rather than only
as supporters or followers of their religious
traditions. This changing identity and roles of
Buddhist women takes place within specific social,
historical, and cultural contexts where women
are educated and well versed in Buddhist history.
Referring to a usable Buddhist past, they question
the culture in which the Buddhist scripture is
interpreted or practiced that has equated the
role of spiritual leadership, ritual specialist, and
religious innovator as the domain of men.

The fieldwork consisting of qualitative data
gathering through interviews, participant
observations, and the gathering of documents
and publications reveals that the contributions
of these Asian Buddhist women are more
outstanding, given their marginalization in the
ecclesiastical authority of their respective countries.
This disadvantaged position of women in relation
to men is reflected in varying degree in other areas,
for example, economic participation and
opportunity, educational attainment, health and
survival, and political empowerment measured
in the Gender Gap Report 2013 in 136 countries
including Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan.

While the field of religion may be more resistant
to change than others, women are able to be fully
ordained as bhikkhuni (female monastic observing
311 precepts) in the Theravada tradition in
Thailand and Indonesia, and as priestess in the
Jodo school or as nuns in the Tendai school
of the Mahayana tradition in Japan, due to the
support of certain monks or priests, and their
ability to attract their own supporters. In the
Thai and Indonesian context, the transnational
dimension of Buddhism has enabled Buddhist
women to travel overseas to be ordained as female
monastics even if they are not officially recognized
by the ecclesiastical authority of the Theravada
"tradition" in their own countries. The contribution
of these remarkable Asian Buddhist women
signifies that Asian women themselves are change
agents in their society as they build a religious
tradition that is more affirmative of women.
This counters one of the dominant tropes of
scholarship that has depicted the homogeneity
of Asian women as victims or as incapable of
contributing to gender justice in Buddhism.

The changing identity and roles of women from
followers to spiritual leaders, ritual specialists
and religious innovators are significant on two
fronts, namely, the fluidity of what it means
to be Asian women and the meaning of Asian
Buddhism which in its myriad forms is a changing
"tradition". In particular, there is a need for
Buddhist institutions to be inclusive of women
and for its practices to also reflect female experiences
and interests.

The paper will first present the case study in the
context of Thailand, followed by Indonesia, and
Japan. It will highlight the similarities that cut
across these three contexts without ignoring the
differences between them. Enabling factors that
facilitate the success of the efforts for women to
be spiritual leaders, ritual specialists, and religious
innovators are embedded in the discussion.

Lessons from Established Bht

One of the founders of the Gotami 3
(Enlightened Experience) School in
Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan.

The Gotami School, the first
female Buddhist religious leaders,
was established in the late
1990s. It has become an
innovative approach to
facilitating the empowerment
and understanding of Buddhist
women. The establishment of
the school was driven by the
efforts of Ven. Dharmasiri, the
first female Buddhist
monastic in Thailand, who
became ordained in 1993.

The school provides a
platform for women to
learn and develop their
understanding of
Buddhism. The curriculum
includes meditation,
philosophy, and
history. The school
also offers opportunities
for women to
participate in
Buddhist
activities and
practices, such as
chanting and
dharma talks.

The school's approach
has been successful in
empowering Buddhist women,
and it has attracted a
growing number of
students. The school has
also helped to
build a sense of
community among
its students, who
share a common
interest in
Buddhism.

The Thai branch of
the school has
been particularly
successful, with
more than 100
students enrolled.

In Indonesia, the
school has
expanded further,
with branches in
several
cities. The
school
provides
opportunities
for women to
perform
rituals,
such as
chanting and
praying.

The success of the
school has
attracted
attention from
other religious
leaders in
Indonesia,
and it has
inspired
the
establishment of
similar
schools
across the
region.

The school's success
has been
supported by
the
development of
a
network
of
women
leaders
in
Indonesia,
who
share a
common
interest in
Buddhism.

The school's
approach
has
been
successful in
empowering Buddhist
women and
developing
their understanding
of
Buddhism.

The school has
expanded to
Indonesia,
where it has
attracted more
than 500
students.

The school
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